

The First Defier

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LITRPG V

The background of the cover is a vibrant, ethereal landscape. A central, glowing vertical beam of light, transitioning from purple at the top to yellow at the bottom, descends from a bright, starburst-like light source. The landscape is filled with stylized, glowing plants and structures that resemble ancient ruins or alien architecture, all bathed in a mix of purple, pink, and blue light. The overall atmosphere is one of mystery and otherworldly beauty.

DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

BOOK ONE

Prologue - Welcome to the Multi-Verse

Information was power. It could both be the sword with which you impale your enemy, or the sword you impale yourself upon. That was what was going through Zac's head as he walked through the woods with a small hatchet in his hand, his face glowing with a sheen of perspiration and irritation.

He was still unsure of how a short mention about spending time in his family's cabin as a child turned into him being tasked with bringing firewood back to the campsite. He pushed some intrusive shrubbery out of the way as he ventured further into the woods. Maybe his friends were laughing it up as they stayed by the fire in their cozy chairs with a few beers while he was living the age-old scenario of man versus nature.

He swung his hatchet and chopped off a small twig, but immediately saw that it would make terrible firewood from how fresh it was. What the hell did he know about gathering firewood anyhow? It had always been his dad getting it for their cabin, and Zac was pretty sure that he had actually bought it rather than cutting down trees.

It was a sweltering day in May, with high humidity even though not a cloud was in sight, probably from yesterday's drizzle. This, along with it being spring, made Zac seriously doubt whether any of these trees made for a decent fire if chopped down. The humidity and moisture in the wood would turn the campsite into an inferno of tear-inducing smoke at the first lick of fire. If it was even possible to light the fire at all.

Besides, this whole area was part of a nature reserve, and he was not really sure if there were legal ramifications to cutting anything down. Still, he trudged on, dragging his now sticky hair out of his face as he surveyed the surroundings.

For exactly what, Zac still didn't know. He was still half-hoping to run into a neatly stacked pile of firewood secured under a tarp, left behind by some more adroit forester. Zac had been walking around aimlessly now for fifteen minutes, and he wasn't really cut out for this, so he could really use the backup.

Which was sort of ironic, as his appearance would usually indicate someone who has a good command of the great outdoors. Standing at five feet eleven with a set of broad shoulders, sporting a flannel shirt with the arms rolled up to his elbows, he at least somewhat looked the part. But the slightly too even beard, the pudge at his belly, and the lack of wiry muscles coming from manual labor were signs of a far more sedentary lifestyle.

He was actually just a marketing consultant who jumped onto the bandwagon and got the slightly grizzly look, as it seemed pretty popular at the moment. And it did actually pay dividends, as this trip was arranged with his new girlfriend, Hannah, and three of her friends.

Truth be told, had it not been for the heat and the humidity, he wouldn't really have minded this solo trip into the woods. It was always a weird situation, being a new addition to a group that has years of history together. To figure out the dynamics and personalities of everyone while keeping up with conversations where half the content is inside jokes and stories from before you were in the picture.

Of course, they mostly seemed like decent people. David was open and cheerful, and the trip would likely have lost much of its energy had he not been there. Unfortunately, David's interests diverged with his, him being into soccer and hockey and Zac into video games and art. This made it a bit harder to find things to talk about during the long trip up into the woods. But he was still a guy one wouldn't mind having a beer with.

David's girlfriend, Izzie, was a harder pill to swallow, with her unceasing grandstanding about whatever issue she could insert into the conversation, be it veganism, environmental conservation, or social issues. Of course, Zac generally agreed

with her points of view, but it did get tiring to be constantly preached to.

It's ironic, he thought, it's often the kids of the elite who get like this. He had heard from Hannah that Izzie's father was some sort of manager at a hedge fund, and her mother was a partner at some high-end law firm. Apparently, a complete lack of supervision and unlimited funds leaves one with a surplus of energy that needs to be directed somewhere. And in her case, it was usually a crusade against "the Man" and the corporate machine. Still, it was hard to stay annoyed forever with her, as her bubbling energy was somewhat infectious.

Which left Tyler. Or the Snake, as Zac renamed him in his head. He seemed like a charismatic enough guy and had those annoyingly clean-cut good looks. Had he been in a movie, he'd be cast as the good-looking jerk the heroine was dating before she found her true love. Which was somewhat his situation here. Not that Tyler and Hannah had been a couple, but most people had probably expected them to sooner or later get together, as they hung out a lot with David and Izzie in some sort of faux double date. Zac was not overly surprised with the hidden hostility he'd gotten from Tyler since the day they first met two months back. Tyler probably felt that I sabotaged the grand plan of the universe when I came along and inserted myself into Hannah's, and by extension his, life, Zac thought with a snicker.

"Maybe I should get back after all..." he mumbled, a slight unease at the situation lingering, adding to his general irritation of being stuck in the woods, waving around a hatchet like an idiot.

Zac wasn't really a jealous guy, but also not a huge fan of leaving his girlfriend with a vulture circling around. And it wasn't like he would magically produce some firewood by walking around in this forest any longer. He adjusted his grip on the axe and once again readjusted his bangs, which by now were a walnut mess of wax and sweat, and started veering back towards camp.

He had trekked in somewhat of a semicircle and should return back to the vicinity of the camp, or at least the road they took

to get here, if he just kept veering right. After walking along for another five minutes, battling the constant threat of shrubbery and mosquitoes, Zac came up to a small clearing.

Insidious shrubbery and intrusive twigs gave way to rustling grass and patches of bloodroot and cardinals. Somehow it felt like an oasis, with a noticeable lack of things to scratch him, and the sounds of wildlife felt somewhat subdued. Not a bad place for a camp should we decide to move it a bit further into the woods, he mused as he walked into the center of the glade, taking a last look around before turning toward the direction of his camp.

But as he prepared to leave, all sounds suddenly stopped without notice, turning to an almost deafening form of silence he hadn't really ever felt before. Just a breath later, the world was darkness.

[Initiating System...]

[Welcome to the Multiverse.]

...

Chapter 1: Roll For Survival

[Initiating System...]

[Welcome to the Multiverse.]

A cold, detached voice echoed in Zac's ears. Or in my head? he thought while looking around, confused. Nothing in his life had prepared him for his current circumstances, and he for a second thought there was an extreme solar eclipse happening. All that greeted his eyes was complete and utter darkness. The only thing visible was himself, as if there was an invisible source of light shining just on him, leaving the rest of the world in black.

“Heatstroke?” he muttered hesitantly even though this didn't feel like some heat-induced delirium. But before he could further analyze these baffling events, the monotone voice interrupted his train of thought.

[Planet Earth scanning complete. Low F-grade mass, ungraded energy.]

[Adjusting...]

[Due to insufficient energy and size, planet Earth will be merged with additional planets drafted for initiation. New values: Low D-grade mass, low D-grade energy. Topography readjusted. Spawn points randomized based by cohorts. Wildlife upgraded due to insufficient challenge. Link to the Multiverse system activated.]

“What? Hello?” he shouted, or at least he thought he did, as the utter blackness seemed like a natural dampener, quenching all sound. But the voice seemed unaware or uncaring of his calls.

This was starting to feel less like some extremely elaborate practical joke or heatstroke, as everything felt just too real.

Zac pinched himself, and the sting told him he hadn't passed out either.

Trying to glean any meaning from the ramblings from the odd voice only made him more confused as well. It spoke about Earth, but also used some terms that felt like they came out of a sci-fi movie or a video game. However, the voice gave Zac no opportunity to figure the situation out, as it heedlessly droned on.

[Initiating Incursions. Spawning Herald–]

**[ERROR! Herald occupying same space as you!
Adjusting...]**

A more blaring version of the same mechanical voice interrupted itself.

The ominous voice and the message quickly accelerated Zac's heartbeat, and he got a sinking feeling. This was all too real in its craziness, and if this was real, he was in deep shit. He was told he occupied the same space as some herald, and no matter how he looked at it, it couldn't be anything good.

Erring on the side of caution, he jumped to the side to avoid whatever would happen, but it was as though he were in space. He made the motions of movement but still was stationary at his spot.

[Merge unfeasible. Protocol SL-34572 initiated.]

“Phew.” At least he wouldn't be turned into a half human, half herald, whatever that was. But the fact that the voice seemed to be ready to mash him together with another being was extremely unsettling, and unease was quickly turning into panic.

Zac mentally tried to force himself to awaken, and when that didn't work, he even slapped himself hard in the face. But nothing worked, and he was still stuck in the darkness.

[Roll for survival. Due to the massive power gap between Herald Ur'Khaz and you, odds heavily in his favor.]

“SHIT!” Zac screamed, or rather squeaked. The panic was now full-blown, and adrenaline was coursing through his

veins. “WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?”

But again, the only thing greeting his inquiries was utter silence until there was a break in the darkness. Seemingly from nowhere, a screen popped up in front of him, hovering silently.

The window looked like something taken out of an old video game, blue with white edges and text. The surreal situation made him blank out for a few seconds before registering what the screen actually said.

Ur’Khaz	1-100 000	ROLL
Zachary Atwood	1-100	ROLL

It looked just like a prompt from a video game, and the familiarity actually calmed him down for a second until he read what it said and realized the implications. At that point the panic came back in full swing, threatening to evolve into hysteria.

It looked like the window was a prompt for rolls between him and this herald, but instead of loot, they were rolling for their survival. And the roll ranges were clearly skewed in his opponent’s favor, giving Zac abysmal odds for actually surviving.

“Hello? This isn’t funny anymore. Let me out!” he screamed, grasping at some last straws that this was all some insane experiment. But the reality of the situation was starting to set in. Zac just stared numbly at the screen in front of him for a few seconds as if to comprehend what he was seeing.

“This is crazy. Wanting me to gamble with these odds? Why the hell would I roll?” Zac muttered. But the second he said “roll,” the screen changed, and the numbers next to his name started to rapidly change.

[Protocol SL-34572 accepted by participant. Rolling...]

“No, no, no, wait, wait. Stop. Let’s figure out a different solution!” he shouted, waving his arms in a panicked attempt to stop the proceedings. But no matter what he did, the

numbers kept spinning. It was as though they were rapidly counting down his remainder of time on earth.

Panic was slowly turning into rage in Zac's mind over the messed-up situation he was in. Rage over the complete and utter lack of answers. Rage over the obviously paltry assessment of him by the voice, seeing the obvious disparity in treatment between him and this Ur'Khaz guy. Rage over the scammy way the voice had started the roll, as though it looked for a loophole to proceed.

With a red tint that suffused his otherwise blue eyes, Zac roared and smashed the hovering screen in an effort to vent his fraying emotions. The screen, however, did not acquiesce to his feelings and shatter in a million pieces, but rather only flickered slightly.

Unheeding of any attempts at a physical catharsis, the numbers once again flickered slightly, and the spinning started to slow down until it stopped at a final number. Almost as an afterthought, it also added an infuriating line instead of the roll button.

Ur'Khaz	1-100 000	ROLL
Zachary Atwood	98	Re-Rolls unavailable

Something about the reroll message just sucked the energy out of him. It really wasn't a bad roll. If it were in a game, he'd definitely have won the loot, he thought with a morbid sense of humor. But he was quite aware that this was no game by this point.

He still held out some hope that he was still lying in the woods with massive heatstroke. But if that was true, he most likely was a goner as well. So either he was about to be killed by the sun, or by a video-game god. Neither was an ending he had expected nor hoped for. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so his face settled on a sickly grin as he blankly stared ahead.

Of course, all hope wasn't lost, as the other individual hadn't rolled yet. But it didn't really feel like it mattered when the

game was rigged. He once again took a glance at the screen, and his eyes lingered for a second on the roll range of the other entity.

The smile slowly shrank away from his face. A sigh escaped his mouth like a deflating balloon, and he closed his eyes and slumped down to a sitting position. All of Zac's strength and energy were wrung out by the situation and the roller coaster of emotions. Left was only a bleak sense of despair, realizing that this was it. Dead alone in the woods, never being able to say goodbye to his family or loved ones.

Zac had no epiphanies or huge regrets at the end of his life, except that he wished he had been closer and better to his family. His mind drifted to memories of his past as a solace and escape from the insanity he was experiencing.

, her long brown locks cascading around him in her embrace. His dad giving him a quiet smile as he opens the door of their apartment to head to work, his eyes sad and tired but full of love. Spending most of his youth plastered in front of the computer, largely ignoring his smaller sibling. College years drowned in alcohol and partying. First day at his job, and the humbling realization of how ill-prepared for adult life he was even after seventeen years of school and university.

[Protocol SL-34572 accepted by Herald. Rolling...]

The monotone voice again droned, like an executioner giving final rites.

[Congratulations!]

Zac didn't bother with the voice anymore, and memories flashed past in his mind one by one. Friends, family, and events both happy and sad. Not the most exciting of lives, but it was his...

Wait, what, congratulations? His eyes snapped open and refocused on the monitor.

Ur'Khaz	91	Rerolls Unavailable
Zachary Atwood	98	Rerolls Unavailable

Stunned, he stared blankly at the screen until the voice interrupted his lack of thought.

[Protocol results in the continued existence of Zachary Atwood. Ur'Khaz vanquished. Resuming standard protocols.]

A nauseating explosion of light, color, and sound took over, disorienting him and turning his insides to mush. His body suddenly felt like it was on fire, tearing and scorching him all over. The last things he saw before passing out were the small clearing he disappeared from and a huge red pillar reaching toward the sky.

Chapter 2: A New World

Zac slowly woke up, groggy and disoriented, finding himself face-first on the ground. Spitting out a few blades of grass and dusting himself off, he scrambled up and surveyed the surroundings, his body still aching from whatever had happened to him before. The glade looked the same with the few rocks and flowers, surrounded by stout leafy trees and dense shrubbery.

His first reaction was that luckily he had just passed out from the heat or exhaustion and woke up. There were some things that gave Zac the foreboding feeling that what had happened was more than just a heat-induced dream. First was the fact that he was currently staring up at two suns, only one of them being the familiar yellow.

He thought he was seeing double for a second, but shaking himself awake had no effect on what he saw. The sun was accompanied by a little brother. He felt something was a bit off with the original one as well though, seeming larger or more intense than he remembered. The other sun was a far smaller star that shone in a piercing aquamarine. It hovered close to the other celestial body and seemed to orbit it like a satellite.

The other unsettling sight was the pillar. A huge vortex of light and energy reached up towards the sky in the distance, like a grisly red claw reaching up from the ground. It pulsated in an eerie red glow that could only be called demonic. It looked like it was quite some distance away, but it was hard to tell. This pillar was the last thing Zac had seen before passing out, and it greeted him as he woke up as well.

A bestial roar snapped him out of his thoughts, refocusing him on the situation at hand.

“Hannah...” he muttered, a glint of determination in his eyes as he threw all these inexplicable events to the back of his mind. If this was all real, he needed to get back to the camp immediately. It seemed the crazy events he’d recently experienced were all real, he realized after looking around. The emotionless voice in the darkness had said something about making the wildlife more dangerous to “improve the challenge.” The roar he just heard could be a freaking tiger or bear for all he knew, which meant the others were in danger.

For a second he was even afraid that the others would jump in the car in a panic and leave him stranded here with whatever was roaring. Even though he didn’t know what was going on, burning anxiety was already consuming him and urging him to action. Not daring to wait any longer, he took off in a sprint toward the direction of the camp, unheeding of the unfamiliar sounds all around him or the prickly greenery aiming to slow him down.

The surroundings blurred around him as he thundered on through the forest like a runaway train. It was as though he had gotten ten shots of adrenaline, his legs pushing him forward at a breakneck pace. Something was off, as he felt that he was running even faster than Olympian athletes, and in complicated forest terrain at that.

The previously somewhat weighty axe in his hand seemed weightless and tore through any branch trying to impede his way with pinpoint accuracy. Zac had never felt as strong or fast as he did right now. The voice had said it upgraded wildlife, did his speed and power mean he was considered a part of that? He didn’t know whether to be happy with his improved physique, or whether to be pissed off the mysterious voice considered him an animal.

Finally, a few minutes after his mad dash started, he recognized a large boulder that a tree had somehow split and grown through, telling him the camp was just a few hundred meters away.

Readjusting his grip on the hatchet, he changed his course and ran straight toward the camp. Suddenly another of the otherworldly roars echoed through the forest, this time far

closer than the others he'd tuned out on his way here. Panic turning into even greater speed, he barreled into the camp, a look of frenzy and fear on his face. Greeting him was the familiar sight of the camp; the gray Range Rover, the camper, and the few camping chairs were strewn about.

What immediately garnered his attention wasn't this, though, rather the monster rifling through one of the coolers. Its size was that of a Great Dane, but this was where the similarities ended, since it was an unholy mix of flesh and bone. The beast looked like it had been skinned, then let out in the woods again, being an amalgamation of red and white. It sported a thick trunk of a torso with rippling muscles extending down to six stubbly legs, each leg ending with a paw, reminding Zac more of a bird of prey than a woodland creature.

Two of the pairs aligned at the front of the torso with the last at the back. Each paw was adorned with four ghastly claws with three in the front and one in the back, with the front set of claws seeming slightly larger than the other two pairs. Its head felt overly large for its body, with a broad base but a long snout, enabling an impossibly large maw. The mouth reminded him of a crocodile's, if a crocodile possessed three rows of teeth. The eyes were small and beady and had a shine the same color as the vortex he'd seen earlier.

The power of the maw was readily apparent, as it was currently biting through a can of beans like it was nothing, swallowing the metal and contents alike. The strange sight made Zac stop right in his tracks, unable to compute these turns of events. Suddenly he wished that it had been a tiger that was roaring in the distance earlier, since that seemed preferable to the monstrosity in front of him.

The beast perked up before Zac could do anything, spotting him standing mutely across the camp. With an enraged roar, it bolted straight towards him with a speed belying its stocky appearance. Shocked, Zac barely had time to react as the beast was upon him. Taking an unstable step back, he swung the hatchet horizontally with all the power he could muster. With his shaky stance, there was no real power behind the blow, but

it managed to strike the beast's neck, leaving an ugly gash and pushing the demon aside.

Zac was once again reminded of how he somehow had become a superhuman, as even a crappy swing like that had contained enough power to throw off a large beast. However, the front paws of the monster were latched on to him, and with the combined momentum of Zac's strike and its own, the claws drew a deep gash on his midriff and left leg. Large wounds were ripped open, and blood immediately started pouring out.

A pain Zac never had experienced before exploded in his mind, clouding his vision and threatening to incapacitate him completely. Any thoughts of combating the monster head-on with his new strength flew completely out the window, and instead, an intense desire to escape emerged. He shook his head to clear his mind, but with small effect.

What the hell do I do? Do I run? His eyes searched frantically around for a way to get out of this situation, primal survival instincts he didn't know he possessed kicking in. The beast had fallen over from the surprising power of the swing but was already clambering back up to its feet.

"Guys! Are you here? Help!" he shouted toward the camper, hoping for backup. But only silence met his pleas. Did the others flee into the forest to get away from this monster? Out of ideas, Zac hobbled a few steps toward the forest as well, his left leg now burning and not properly listening to his commands.

But before any plans could form, the beast was barreling towards him, maw in an open snarl, seemingly unheeding of the small stream of blood trickling down its torso to its stumpy legs. This time Zac was slightly more prepared, putting weight on his right leg and jumping out of the way. He heard a snarl and felt a gust of wind sweeping by him before he unceremoniously landed in a pile three meters away. Quickly scrambling to his feet, he saw the monster had barreled past his original position, continuing on for twenty meters.

Zac realized the monster had high speed but low maneuverability and started to frantically figure out a way to use this to his advantage. With a determination he didn't know he had, Zac abandoned all thoughts of fleeing and returned toward where he came from when running through the forest.

"This had better work..." he mumbled while ambling as fast as his pain-racked body could muster.

Chapter 3: Battle Tactics

Zac took a quick glance behind him and noticed the demonling following, as he started calling it in his head. It wasn't dissuaded at all from continuing its pursuit, though it looked slightly disoriented from the previous charge. Or perhaps the still bleeding gash on the neck was starting to show some effect. Its speed was somewhat slowed, but it was still quickly catching up to him.

No longer being able to afford to care about adages such as not putting weight on a hurt leg, he ignored the pain and started charging towards the split boulder he'd passed earlier. His wounds split open even further, and his left leg was now completely dyed red. The pain was excruciating as he ran, but the fear of death kept him pushing forward.

He was pretty sure that this was his only shot, as the short run managed to up his pain to a terrifying level, and he was starting to get woozy from the blood loss. And who knows what poisons or pathogens a demon dog has on its claws. Zac could only pray that his new superpowers included super-white blood cells as well.

Finally arriving at his goal, he heaved a few raspy breaths and turned around toward the monster now roughly forty meters away from him. Seeing that its prey had stopped moving, it hesitated slightly and stopped. The demonling slightly growled and hissed in a register that sounded much too low for something that size.

Zac was afraid it would wait for his wounds to worsen his condition even further, or even gather reinforcements. If that happened, his small chance of survival would be completely extinguished. He needed to end this fight quickly in any case, as the pulsating wounds on his legs reminded him that time was limited, with or without backup.

“COME GET IT, PIECE-OF-SHIT DOG!” he roared, inwardly cursing his lacking cursing ability. He then picked up a small rock and flung it with all the force he could muster at the demonling. It drew a great arc as it zoomed through the air and missed spectacularly by a few meters. Luckily, it seemed the demon dog needed almost no encouragement for mayhem and slaughter, and with a great roar, it started barreling straight towards him again.

“Come on, come on...” he whispered, once again readjusting his grip on the hatchet. This was it, do or die now. When the monster was just three meters away from him, he once again dove to the side with all his might. This time the monster was somewhat ready for it and managed to swipe him at his calf. It didn't seem as deep as his last gashes but still burned like hell.

The momentum of the demonling pushed it forward, straight into the cleft of the split boulder. The space was barely wide enough for it to get in, and it got stuck when the second set of legs reached the edge of the rock. The collision caused a massive thump, and gravel and rock chippings flew about, accompanied by an enraged, but pained, snarl.

Zac knew he couldn't hesitate, and quickly scrambled to his feet. The pain was staggering, but the coursing adrenaline in his system kept him going. This was the small window he created for himself, and if this didn't work, he had no other recourse.

Mentally praying to long-lost gods of lumberjacking, he took a two-handed grip on the hatchet and swung with all his might at the lower end of the monster's spine. Hopefully, the anatomy of hell spawns was somewhat similar to normal animals, where a cut on the spine would cut important nerves and maybe even nick an artery.

The axe hit true and severed the spine and even dug a bit further. A great spurt of blood and a pained yelp accompanied it. The thick hind legs completely gave out, and it thumped down onto the ground. But while the demonling was temporarily stuck, it was no sitting duck. It thrashed wildly from the strike, and one of the remaining four legs managed to

hit Zac squarely in the stomach. He was thrown backwards and lost his grip on the handle of the axe.

He hit the ground with a thud, losing all the air in his lungs. He didn't dare take account of his steadily worsening wounds though, and immediately got back up on his feet. The world spun for a second as he scrambled up, but he forced himself to stay awake.

The sight meeting him seemed even more positive than he had dared hope. Both its hind legs uselessly slumped down, and dark red blood was quickly pooling beneath the beast. The wound he had managed to create on the beast must have actually cut a couple of veins, as blood unceasingly poured out of its back wound in far larger quantities compared to the shallow wound on its neck.

There was still some fight left in the monster, however, and it was still trying to excavate itself from the rock with some minor success. It also desperately unceasingly roared, perhaps hoping for some of its brethren to arrive.

Not wanting to wait for that to happen, Zac gingerly stepped forward, gripped the axe, and with a speedy tug ripped it out of the lower back of the monster. This time he also stepped back a bit in the event of further thrashing. This time, however, only a weak snarl accompanied the action. Blood started gushing out even faster through the open wound, and it looked doubtful if the monster would survive even if left unattended.

Not daring to take any risks, Zac stepped forward and, with a baseball swing, planted the axe in the torso, hoping to hit vital organs and the lungs. A sickening thud sounded, and more blood streamed out. The beast barely moved anymore, and just weak whimpers could be heard. Zac didn't dare stop and kept swinging the hatchet over and over until he himself fell to the ground heaving.

His body felt a burst of warmth, likely caused by the strenuous activity, and by now the whole left side of the monster was a maze of grisly wounds. Its movements had come to a complete stop, and no more roars or whimpers escaped its maw. The

head was still between the two halves of the boulder, along with its front two paws. The arms were mangled from the reckless charge into the rock and the subsequent desperate attempts to rip itself free.

While Zac had no idea about the resilience or tricks of a demonling, it looked deader than dead. He arduously sat up and caught his breath. Slowly calming down, he was reminded of the stark reality. He was hurt. Really hurt. By now he looked like a homicidal maniac, almost covered in blood from head to toe, and it was impossible to tell which was his and which was the monster's.

It already seemed impossible he was still alive with the amount of blood he had lost, and if nothing was done, he definitely would not make it to tomorrow. He slowly got up on his feet and started stuttering back towards the camp. He thought about shouting for help again but immediately discarded the idea. He didn't want to lure another monster to the camp by mistake, as he didn't have the power to go through another battle.

Last time the trip between the boulder and the camp took half a minute. This time he ambled forward for what felt like an eternity until he once again came upon the ransacked and chaotic campsite. The camper was still standing next to the car but was now dented in places. The cooler they had brought over had been knocked over, the water and beers spilled around.

Not having the energy to care about the mess, he moved toward the camper, whose door was wide open. With some foresight, they had actually brought a decent first aid kit with them when traveling. He felt he should probably get to a hospital, but unless someone drove him, he would probably not make it. At least he could disinfect, tape, and bandage the wounds, performing some basic field triage on himself. That would hopefully allow him to return to civilization to get properly patched up.

For the first time since he came back, Zac realized there were no blood or body parts in the camp. Though he hadn't dared

think about it at the time, he subconsciously had believed the demonling killed the others.

If they had been attacked, there should have been some blood at least, as Zac had little confidence in the four being able to fend off that beast and flee. The axe in his possession had been the only real tool that could be used as a weapon in the camp, apart from some small kitchen knives. And even with that, he had only survived with great luck and some quick thinking. His improved physique had helped immensely, but that alone would not have been enough against that monstrosity. That beast had been both faster and stronger than a bear, and unless the three had gotten the same type of strengthening as him, they would just be food rather than an adversary for it.

He surreptitiously glanced around as he neared the camper. The car stood empty, and no sound came out of the camper either.

“Guys, are you there? Hannah?” he croaked in a subdued voice, still scared a scream would attract more monsters.

But silence was the only thing that met his question.

Chapter 4: Alone

Zac had an ominous feeling and prepared to look around in the vicinity for tracks or signs of where his friends had gone. However, a dizzy spell reminded him of the most pressing issue. Almost falling, he went to the car and brought out the small green box with the first aid kit from the trunk.

He then limped to the camper, whose door was standing ajar, and hesitantly went in. The interior was completely empty as well, with no signs of either friend or foe. Scared that the smell of blood would attract more monsters, he firmly closed the camper's door. Luckily, it was one of the few spots that hadn't been dented by the demonling's rampage. Zac finally slouched down on the sofa, not caring that the blood would stain the fabric.

He put the box on the small dining table and opened it and first grabbed the small bottle of surgical spirit. By this time his face was drenched in sweat from the pain, and his hands were already shaking. Putting all the things he needed next to him, he started to prepare for his treatment.

Slowly and gingerly, he took off his shirt and pants. Luckily, the blood was still wet and hadn't had time to coagulate and stick to his wounds. Still, the pain was a hundred times worse than ripping off a Band-Aid as he removed the clothing.

The claws of the beast had raked a long gash on his waist, and three additional but slightly smaller on his left thigh. There was finally the last wound on his right calf. While the wounds looked ghastly, it actually did not seem as bad as he feared. The cuts seemed clean and straight, and the bleeding had somehow almost stopped by now, turning into a slow trickle. He could only hope that it meant that he was getting better, and not that he was running out of blood.

Knowing what came next, he almost whimpered when grabbing a water bottle and a gauze swab. He carefully poured the water over the wound at his waist to clean out the blood and dirt, and the agony almost made him pass out. Gritting his teeth and blinking away the tears falling from his eyes, he then grabbed the alcoholic solution and poured some in the wound as well. The wound didn't look inflamed, but he didn't dare skip this part, even though it felt like he was being ripped in two from the alcohol.

His face was like a beet by now, sweat pouring down and veins throbbing out on his forehead. Finally, he took some surgical tape and taped the wound together, and then wrapped some bandages a few rounds around his waist.

The first part down, Zac just sat panting for a while. He closed his eyes, and a wave of exhaustion hit him like a truck, almost making him pass out then and there. However, there were still wounds to treat, so he roused himself again with some difficulty.

Zac did the same procedures on his legs, and by the time he was done, his face had gone from red to a ghastly white. His hands were shaking so bad that he could barely grip the water bottle when he downed the last of its contents in a few big gulps. He was so weak he barely managed to make it to the bed in the back, and as soon as he hit the pillow, he passed out even though the suns still stood high in the sky.

They were still shining brightly through the window when Zac woke up. Was there no longer any night now that there was an additional sun up in the sky? He stretched a bit and found out that while far from healed, he did feel much better than he did before. His bandages were red with blood but not wet, so the bleeding seemed to have stopped. He also didn't feel that intense pulsing agony anymore, and it was replaced by a lesser throbbing pain.

He still had problems keeping weight on his left leg, though, and almost fell when moving toward the fridge. The second thing he noticed when waking up, besides his wounds improving, was a fiendish hunger as if he hadn't eaten for weeks.

He ambled to the fridge and found out it didn't work anymore, and some food was already starting to spoil. The monster had probably broken something while creating the various dents in the mobile home. He picked up a few sausages they'd prepared yesterday before they ran out of firewood, and a couple of slices of bread. Then Zac finally relaxed with a bottle of water after he had virtually inhaled the food like a starving ghost.

The others still hadn't returned. Zac was afraid they either were dead or had fled without looking back. Both scenarios were grim, and the possibility of the second left a sour taste in his mouth. He took out his phone from his pocket, but it was mangled and bloodied beyond redemption, likely from one of his tumbles.

Luckily, they had prepared an emergency phone in the camper in case something went wrong, and he opened a cupboard and took it out. The phone was in working order, but it got no reception. This was weird, as they'd had a decent signal yesterday. Even if they were camping and enjoying the wildness, they wouldn't stop at a spot with no reception, as no one was ready to go a whole day without surfing on their smartphones.

He also noticed from the time that three whole days, not one, had passed since the world went mad. He truly had blacked out hard after tending his wounds. The date only further reduced the chances of his travel mates and Hannah coming back. At least it also probably meant that the monsters kept to their territories and didn't wander around as much as he feared. He wasn't sure he would be able to handle another of those demon dogs at the moment, even with knowing their weaknesses from the last fight.

With food settled and not having any pressing issues, he started to take account of what had happened, and what to do from here. The absurdity of the situation finally hit him, and Zac spaced out with glazed eyes, unsure of how to proceed.

A distant roar brought him back to reality. This was no time to slack off; he was by no means safe at the moment. He was in the middle of the forest surrounded by crazy monsters, and

that glowing pillar still shone in the distance, reminding him that more monsters might come.

Perhaps the pillar was a portal to hell or something similar, and demons could keep flooding through from their infernal plane. Or was this an alien invasion? The monsters could be something like Zergs in a popular computer game he'd played back in the day.

Then he finally remembered the weird robotic voice he'd heard earlier, and the confusing things it said before it started its crooked gambling scheme that almost cost him his life.

"Welcome to the multiverse..." he mumbled. If the TV shows and comic books he had devoured throughout the years were any indicators, a multiverse was a connection between multiple planets, galaxies and even dimensions.

If the voice was to be believed, Earth had been introduced to some larger system, and due to this, there were suddenly demons roaming the forests. But that didn't mean that only demons were around. What about other monsters or races? Would he suddenly meet elves jumping around in the trees, shooting arrows at him with pinpoint accuracy?

The voice also said it had initiated incursions. It seemed reasonable that the huge pillar in the distance was the incursion, which would mean he probably wasn't too far off with his demon-portal theory. And when it spawned in the forest, the demons came with it.

But that meant that the monsters wouldn't necessarily spawn next to it, as one had already been in the camp when he came back. It was hard to tell the distance to the huge pillar, but it should take hours on foot to get there. And something called a herald had spawned right on top of Zac, resulting in the largest emotional roller coaster in his life.

Finally, he had gotten stronger for some reason with all these changes. Both his speed and power saw noticeable improvements from whatever the weird voice did. It almost felt like he had gotten a power-up like in some video game, which made sense after having seen the floating windows in the dark dimension. He still didn't understand why the

prompts were designed to look like some old-school RPG. Was it his mind desperately trying to make sense of an insane situation and adjusting reality for him?

Fantasy monsters, magical portals, and gamelike elements. If some parts of the world were turned into an RPG, did other elements get introduced as well? At least there was no health bar, and the demon had no description or text above its head either. In fact, the only time he had seen any true game elements was when he was in the black space the voice brought him to.

He tried to notice anything in the periphery of his vision, but there was nothing there apart from the vision of the now somewhat bloody and grimy trailer. Tyler's parents would probably be pretty pissed off when they saw the state of their camper, he thought with a smirk.

If they're even still alive, he then realized somberly. If the world was turned to shit at his location, what about the rest of the planet? Would it be safer or even more messed up? What about his hometown?

Thoughts of his father and younger sister surfaced, and a sense of urgency appeared. If this was a global problem, nowhere was safe. Zac had no idea what was going on, but he would have to figure that out on the way.

He needed to get back home.

Chapter 5: Stranded

Driven by a newfound sense of purpose, Zac immediately started packing a backpack with food that wouldn't spoil easily and some other necessities, and then immediately made a beeline for the SUV. If a slow shuffle where every step felt like walking on fire could be called a beeline.

He opened the door, relieved that no one had been paranoid enough to lock the car in the middle of nowhere. The electric keys were lying on the driver's seat. With no time to spare, he placed the backpack on the front passenger seat and pressed the button to start the car. A spectacular absence of sound greeted him. The car had no reaction, even after pressing the key increasingly hard accompanied by angry swearing. The focused power of his will had no impact either, the dashboard unlit, and the motor didn't give so much as a whimper in response.

So the car was broken as well. Or not broken, rather out of battery, he surmised after noticing a black smartphone plugged into the outlet in the car. The car had been on when the world turned to shit, and by now the battery had died. Freaking Tyler.

It was a weird feeling walking back to the camper with his backpack. He felt somehow robbed of his momentum. If the car battery was broken, he was pretty much stuck in the middle of nowhere, at least for now. Either he had to somehow fix the car with his nonexistent knowledge of cars, or he had to get back to the nearest town by foot, which was about eighty kilometers away.

Eighty kilometers would take the better part of a day when conditions were good, but with hurt legs and monsters likely lurking in the woods, it was suicide. There was no way he would try that in his current condition. His only option was to wait where he was in order to heal up, and maybe someone

would even come and rescue him. Like the military or the police.

To be honest, he didn't hold high hopes of a rescue. First of all, no one really knew he was here, and even if someone did, he was afraid that these changes would have disrupted law and order to the point they couldn't be bothered about a single straggler stuck deep in a demon forest.

He would have to save himself, and for that he needed to recover and figure out a way to get back to civilization.

"If this stupid system could help out a little and tell me what to do, that would be great," Zac mumbled, lost as what to do from now.

Active Quests:

- 1. Unlimited Potential (Normal): Reach level 25.
Reward: Unlock class system. (16/25)**

Dynamic Quests:

- 1. Demon Slayer (Normal): Kill 10 denizens with demonic alignment, each at least ten levels above you.
Reward: +3% All Attributes when fighting enemies of demonic alignment. (2/10) [Note: Only one Slayer title can be attained.]**
- 2. Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months.
Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (1/5)**
- 3. Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

A screen flashed in his view just like when he had been transported to the blackness earlier. Zac froze for a second before even registering what was happening. So there was more to this system and multiverse, as he'd suspected.

The screen slowly hovered in front of him and even moved with him when he turned his head and looked around.

It seemed the system could give out quests that would grant different advantages and power-ups. What Zac first took note of was that there were two types of quests, active quests and dynamic quests. From looking at the contents, it seemed that active quests were normal quests that you either automatically got or got from quest givers or something.

Wait, would NPCs spawn around the world, with yellow exclamation points above their heads, giving out quests? Zac's gut feeling said no.

The other type of quest was dynamic quests. All the quests were related to the demons and the red pillar. By now he was pretty certain the red pillar in the distance was, in fact, the incursion mentioned by the system.

He also noticed that there was a rarity or difficulty in front of each quest. He currently had two types, normal and unique. Normal was pretty straightforward and seemed like normal grinding quests in video games, "kill x number of y..." or "collect ten ores," which would reward some experience and gold.

In this case, there was no gold, but the unique quests did reward him with something called Nexus Crystals, which might be a currency. The other rewards were a bit more unclear.

The Class System he could somewhat guess what it would mean. He would probably get to choose warrior, magician (if magic was now real, which actually felt like a very real possibility) or something, and get buffs pertinent to that class.

The demon-slaying quest's reward was also somewhat straightforward, although +3% stats did not seem very strong. However, it was better than nothing, and anything that would help him deal with these weird monsters that had popped up was more than welcome.

The last rewards he had no idea what they meant. Upgrade outpost to town? What outpost? And why would he want a

town in the middle of nowhere surrounded by monsters? As that quest somehow seemed the hardest to complete, he felt there was something more to it, but couldn't figure out what. As for the benefits of being a lord of Monstertown or a unique building, he did not have the slightest idea.

“Why is there no explanation of things?” Zac grumbled.
“There should be a tutorial or something.”

[User does not qualify for teleportation to tutorial protocol. Please explore the system of the multiverse yourself,] a robotic voice echoed in his head.

“WHAT?” Zac shouted. “Why can't I get the tutorial? Teleport me right now!”

[By accepting Protocol SL-34572, user gained a personalized initiation protocol, a lottery opportunity.]

“OPPORTUNITY? PLAYING A RIGGED GAME IS AN OPPORTUNITY?!” Zac screamed, forgetting he was surrounded by who knows how many beasts. This shitty system actually did not only almost get him killed, but it also skipped a teleportation to a safe zone, which sounded a lot better than a demon-infested forest.

[Affirmative. Please explore the system of the multiverse yourself,] the voice dully responded and once again went quiet.

Zac fumed but realized he would get no more help from the cosmic douchebag robot. With a few deep breaths, he once again calmed down and realized the implication of what the voice said.

He himself had missed the opportunity to get to the safe zone, but what about others? Unless it was voluntary, then almost everyone should have been teleported to wherever those safe zones were, barring any extremely unlucky instances like his.

[Protocol SL-34572 is a unique opportunity. Congratulations, user,] the system responded as if reading his mind.

“Well, fuck you too.”

Once again calming down, he thought of his fellow campers. Hannah and the others might actually still be safe, teleported away somewhere before this forest turned insane. That would explain the lack of blood and mangled body parts at the campsite.

It also meant that his family hopefully still was alive. While not optimal, a safe zone sounded pretty swell compared to his surroundings. He was still worried, though, and wanted to get to them as soon as possible. Both his father and little sister were out there somewhere, and he was afraid the apocalyptic events would lower the inhibitions of less scrupulous people. While his sister was an avid martial arts practitioner, he wasn't confident that would hold up against perverts with guns and other weapons.

Refocusing his thoughts, he realized something he had just glossed over from the quests. The normal quest had a progression of (16/25). Did this mean that there was actually such a thing as levels, and he was level 16? What did that mean?

Chapter 6: Born for Carnage

There was only one way to find out. The quest panel appeared when he asked what he was supposed to do. Maybe there were other panels as well?

“Menu,” Zac said into the air, somewhat embarrassed, feeling like those LARP’ers he had once seen running around in the park. Nothing happened, and Zac felt he could almost hear the system snicker at him. Not discouraged, he continued to search for some other panels or menus.

“Status.”

This time it worked, and a new bar replaced the one with the quests.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	16
Race	Human
Alignment	Human (Earth)
Titles	Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer
Strength	31
Dexterity	25
Endurance	27
Vitality	27

Intelligence	29
Wisdom	29
Luck	44
Free Stats	30
Nexus Coins	5100

The status screen did indeed look somewhat like what he expected, with levels and stats. There were a few points he did not really understand though. The first was the alignment. Did it need to be specified that it was humans on Earth that he was aligned with? Were there actually humans on other planets or in other dimensions?

He was surprised how much like a game the rest of the screen was. While there didn't seem to be such a thing as HP or mana, stats did exist. He didn't have any framework of what the numbers meant though, apart from higher obviously being better. Ironically he saw that his highest stat actually was luck, even though he felt very much out of luck.

Strength seemed pretty straightforward, while the other stats might mean different things. Dexterity likely had something to do with movement and reaction speeds. Endurance and vitality both meant survivability, though he wasn't sure of the difference. He was pretty sure that his stats were higher than a normal human though, maybe from his level. He couldn't explain his superhuman recuperation otherwise. While he still felt pretty banged up, he should be lying on a bed dying now with the wounds he'd sustained, not walking around.

Intelligence and wisdom should increase mental faculties. If the world actually had magic and wizards now, these stats would probably make them cast spells better. Finally, he had thirty free stats. A quick count showed that he had gained two points per level-up, if he had started at Level 1. He held off

trying to allocate any points though, as he still had no idea what he was doing.

The titles, to be honest, sounded pretty badass. They didn't, however, really feel like something that described him too well. He neither felt like he was born for carnage nor overpowered from the last encounter with the demonling.

"Titles," Zac said, hoping for some explanation of the titles and what they meant.

Just as he hoped, a new screen popped up with an explanation.

Born for Carnage: First to kill a monster in world. All stats +10%.

Ultimate Reaper: First to solo kill an Incursion General in world. All stats +5, all stats +10%.

Luck of the Draw: Successful in cheating death in an endeavor against all odds. Luck +5, Luck +20%.

Giantsbane: Solo kill enemy 5 levels or more above you. All stats +1.

Disciple of David: Solo kill enemy 10 levels or more above you. All stats +2.

Overpowered: Solo kill enemy 25 levels or more above you. All stats +3.

Slayer of Leviathans: Solo kill enemy 50 levels or more above you. All stats +5, all stats +10%.

Adventurer: Reach level 10. Rewards: Strength +1, Endurance +1, Intelligence +1.

"Amazing..." Zac whispered. Titles were far more important than just sounding cool. From looking at his status page, he realized that most of his stats came from his titles rather than being strong on his own.

This also gave him a few very important realizations. Almost all titles came from killing things, meaning that the system probably did not wish for a peaceful and harmonious world. It wanted a world of conflict, where people became stronger by walking over the corpses of their enemies.

That didn't bode well for humanity. If the system incentivized killing, who knows if some people would go crazy and start massacring people for strength instead of monsters. Who's to say that there were no titles for killing humans?

He once again realized the urgent need to meet up with his family before some maniac started cutting people down in an attempt to power-level.

The second important point was that there were different types of titles. The first type was the Adventurer title. This was probably a title most people would gain. He did not know how hard it was to gain levels, but seeing as he was already level 16 after three days, it should not take too long. Therefore the rewards were not too exciting.

The second type was struggling to complete tasks that were extremely hard. Zac had a slew of rewards for killing monsters at a higher level than him. He was a bit confused at first. While it had almost killed him, it did not feel like killing the demonling warranted all these titles. It did not feel like a boss or some monster that was more than 50 levels above himself if he could kill it with some dumb luck, a well-placed rock, and a lumber axe. The only thing he could imagine was that the system had given him the kill credit for out-rolling the unlucky herald and awarded him with the titles.

Those rewards were a lot stronger and gave him all stat boosts, which likely increased his all-around powers. The most difficult titles even gave multiplier bonuses to his stats. Those bonuses would only get stronger and stronger the higher his level went, and the more stats he accumulated.

Having those kinds of titles would almost ensure he would be stronger than an opponent at the same level unless the opponent also had some hidden means.

He now realized what the system meant when it said that the lottery was an opportunity. All odds were stacked against him, but if he survived, he would not only gain a bunch of experience, but also amazing titles that would benefit him forever.

[Protocol SL-34572 is a lottery opportunity.

Congratulations, user,] the robot voice once again droned, this time with a tinge of satisfaction discernable in the tone.

“Still fuck you,” Zac muttered back, pretty sure he would have declined even if presented the opportunity again. It was only dumb luck he sat here today instead of being vaporized by the system.

Finally there were the first kill titles. It seemed that being the first in the world to accomplish certain deeds would give a powerful title as well. Most likely no one else on this planet would be able to gain the Born for Carnage or Ultimate Reaper titles, as he'd taken them.

From these facts he could somewhat imagine how the world would develop. Everyone would soon realize the possibility of becoming stronger and breaking the limits of the human body. The importance of titles would also soon be public knowledge, at the latest as soon as people started reaching level 10. Maybe the tutorial in the safe zones had already explained everything.

Those who were willing to take large risks and survive would gain strong titles, which would make them even stronger, enabling them to level faster and gain even more titles. Some would become elites, being far more powerful than normal people.

Maybe some would keep their humanity and help the average citizens, but many would probably become tyrants, domineering everyone with sheer power.

The world had turned into a place where power was paramount. And if he wanted to protect his friends and family, he would have to become one of the elites himself. Luckily, he had a pretty substantial head start. Zac was pretty sure that high-level titles were not easy to obtain, so very few, if any knew about the amazing power they could bring.

Finally below the stat points was something called Nexus coins, and he had 5,100 of them for some reason. If he were to compare the menu to an RPG, then the Nexus coins would be the in-game currency.

“Nexus Coins,” Zac said, hoping to get an explanation similar to the titles, but nothing happened.

“Coins. Currency. Shop. Store,” he continued, searching for a correct keyword. But still there was no response.

“System, are you there?” he grumbled up to the heavens. “Can you come and explain the menu for me real quick? Such as the Nexus Coins and stats?”

[By accepting Protocol SL-34572, user automatically declined standardized initiation protocol in favor of lottery opportunity. Please explore the system of the multiverse yourself. Goodbye,] the system soullessly responded in a mechanical almost word-for-word repeat of what it had said earlier. After this the system didn't respond to Zac no matter what he asked or how he extolled, as though the system earlier somehow was here, but now had left.

After a while Zac gave up and refocused on the task at hand. He would have to keep his head start going, and keep pushing forward and get more benefits in this new world. He also thought about classes. Perhaps the class system was similar, where some classes were better than others, and some might even be exclusive ones. Finally there were the mentions of towns and becoming a Lord. While not something Zac was planning on focusing on now, it seemed that it was something extremely beneficial, seeing how hard it was to attain.

A plan was starting to form in his head of how to get out of this situation and head back to his family.

First he needed his weapon.

Chapter 7: Outpost

It had been four hours since Zac had woken up after getting hurt. Even after moving around for hours, his wounds were just dully throbbing, and he once again was amazed by the efficacy of his constitution. If his Endurance and Vitality grew to 100, would he be able to regrow limbs?

He had spent the last hours discreetly surveying the surroundings to come up with a solution to being stranded in the woods. He had made some discoveries during this time, some more shocking than others.

The first thing Zac had done after figuring out the basics of the system was head back to the scene of the fight to retrieve his axe.

When he arrived at the boulder, the monster was still there, and by then a putrid smell had started to emanate from the carcass. This meant that the system would not remove bodies like in a game. What was dead was dead. After looking around the body, even somewhat moving it to look beneath, it also hadn't dropped any items such as gold or equipment.

He still didn't know if that was just bad luck or whether the system was not that convenient and just wouldn't hand items to you in that manner. Perhaps you would have to make do with what already existed, or there were chests strewn around the world.

Just judging from the smell and how the beast looked like when alive, it would not be serviceable to eat, even if fresh. The axe lay next to the body, blood caked all over the shaft and the head. Luckily, it hadn't been corroded or rusted yet, and after a good cleaning, the axe was almost as good as new, albeit slightly dulled.

The next realization he made on the way back to the camp. Since the world in a sense had turned into a game, he thought

maybe there was some sort of equipment system. But when saying things like “equip,” “equipment,” and “inspect” got no response from the system, he surmised that there probably was no such thing. An axe was just an axe. Maybe there would be magic gear in the future, but at least for now he had no means to distinguish it. He felt that he had missed something though, as one of his quests would reward him with something called “E-grade equipment,” whatever that was.

However, he still was no closer to completing that quest now than he was back then. One thing at the time.

The next discovery was that will and determination do not a mechanic make. After popping the hood of the car, he had blankly stared at the engine for a few minutes, hoping something obvious and easily solved would present itself. But he had to simply face reality that he would not be able to drive back, at least not with that car. The battery was well and truly dead.

But the most disturbing discoveries came after. Since discarding the car seemed the only option, Zac had started scouting the road back to see if it was possible to traverse or whether it was teeming with monsters.

He stealthily moved along the road they came from, keeping to trees and bushes, axe at the ready and maintaining a constant vigil for any sign of danger. If he kept this pace going back, the trip would likely take a week, and he didn't cherish the thought of sleeping out in the open.

But before he got further than around a kilometer, the road abruptly stopped, and dense forests gave way to a cliff with a drop of roughly five meters. The road, heck, the whole ground, was simply gone.

The view that instead greeted him was a panoramic view of an ocean. At least he thought it was, as he could see no land in sight, and he was still too sore to climb down and test whether it was freshwater or salt water. He guessed it was salt water though from the smell in the air. In either case it was mind-boggling, as the campsite was hundreds of kilometers away from any body of water of that size.

Finally he remembered some words the system had said at the start, which he had completely glossed over in his panic. It said it had merged the planet with others and had been somehow randomized. Just how powerful was the system in the end, to grab multiple planets out in space and mash them together without him noticing anything.

That thought was almost scarier than the immediate threat of the demons.

This also made him realize that most of his plans of going back home and finding his family likely had to be scrapped. If the system could drop an ocean in the middle of the country, his family might be on the other side of the planet for all he knew.

Which brought him back to now. Zac had mutely trudged back to camp, this time with far less vigilance than before. Still, it seemed that there were, at least for the moment, no threats in the immediate vicinity.

He now sat in one of the camping chairs, at a loss for what to do. He was emotionally and physically wrung out after the day, and the sense of purpose he'd had before had largely vanished. He was still anxious to find his family and friends, but now he didn't even know how to begin looking for them. Were they even together after the teleportations and reshuffling of the world?

For all he knew, he was actually on an island rather than next to a large body of water. Then he would be well and truly stuck in some sort of nightmarish castaway situation. At least he had a camper, which was lucky, as he had no real idea how to build a serviceable shelter. He regretted bloodying it up now though, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

He knew that finding anyone he knew would likely be a far-off venture now, and he had to focus on surviving this demon forest first. He had already discarded trying to swim towards where the nearest city was before the apocalypse, as he had no idea of how large the water was or, even more importantly, what was lurking in the water. If there were demon dogs in the forest, why not demon sharks in the water? No thanks. He had

to put some faith in the fact that the system wasn't a complete maniac and had put some checks and balances in the tutorial zones, which would keep his family safe.

He once again opened his status page and quest page to see whether there was something he had missed earlier that could help him with his current situation. After a while he gleaned a clue from his quests.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)

There were references to some sort of base building in two of his quests, and it seemed important, almost like the main quest of the area.

"Outpost," Zac said, hoping for some sort of prompt that could guide him further.

[Requirements met to create incursion outpost. Create now?]

This time he heard no robotic voice, only a prompt showed up, still looking like an old RPG window.

So there was a function like this. Once again a tinge of rage flared up at the system for its chronic inability to properly explain what was possible. How many other things did he not know about due to the system not teleporting him to a tutorial village?

Zac didn't immediately answer the prompt, leaving it hovering. He was unsure whether this was the correct choice. Was creating an outpost a one-time thing? Would it make him even more stuck to this area? Would it make a loud noise, attracting curious beasts?

Then again, he wasn't sure if he had much of a choice. It either was creating an outpost and hoping that it would somehow help with his situation, or essentially going out into the woods and grinding for levels by killing demons, and hope that he would get strong enough to leave that way before getting himself killed. Seeing as his state was pretty pathetic after just

one encounter, it didn't feel like an option. What if he met a pack of the demon dogs instead of a lone scavenger?

Gritting his teeth, he decided he just had to go with the flow this time and decisively said, "Yes."

He stood up, eyes fixed on his surroundings, waiting for something to happen. Maybe a medieval town would sprout up around him? At least some rudimentary battlements? He was hunkered down with axe at the ready, ready to flee at a moment's notice. But the only thing greeting him was the vision of a lush forest and the sounds of birds and insects.

Confused, Zac sighed and was getting ready to try some different commands to create his outpost when a voice suddenly appeared from behind him.

"What are you doing?"

Chapter 8-213

8-213 chapters are not available for online reading, you can read about the reasons .

Below are files with chapters from 8 to 213, in four formats:

Updated 06/24/22: Added chapters to the site for online reading.

Chapter 8: Abby the Eye

“What are you doing?” a pleasant, decidedly female voice sounded from right behind him.

Zac, whose nerves already were frayed from the past days’ events shrieked in a higher than desirable octave and jumped forward away from the sound before registering the words. Somewhat embarrassed he turned around while stuttering “Sorry about tha..” before once more shrieking and falling back after seeing the stranger. His fight-or-flight instincts also failed spectacularly, as he dropped the axe while falling.

What had entered his sight was not a beautiful female, as the voice had indicated. His dream of at least having a pretty girl to share this harrowing experience with died out as fast as it had flashed to life. In front of him was a floating eye, larger than his torso.

At least he assumed it was an eye. It looked as though a part of the cosmos had been taken and put into an eyeball. The pupil was a black hole, seemingly sucking Zac’s soul in as he was looking at it. The monster had no iris, but rather a slowly rotating cosmic cloud, looking like it was slowly being absorbed into the pupil in the middle.

The sclera was not white as with a human, but a black studded with shining lights. It looked like the stars in the night sky. Surrounding the eye was a purplish-tinted skin and eyelid. It however had no mouth, making Zac confused how it could make any sounds.

It was beautiful and harrowing at once, and certainly not what Zac expected after hearing the pleasant voice.

“Rude.” the eye muttered. “I am lucky enough to get an assignment at a newly initiated world, and I get to work with this rube. By the way, you smell.”

Zac was still sputtering, unable to fully register what was going on. Unsure of whether to run, get the axe, or bow down to his new ocular overlord he compromised by simply staring dumbly with mouth ajar at the eye.

“Oh well. It makes sense that there were no Stargazers on your planet before the initiation, human. We usually only appear where the system sends us. My real name is a bit tricky for you to say with vocal cords but sounds something like Veth-Abarak. I am here to assist you in your endeavors regarding your outpost. You are welcome.” the eye continued, somehow making a haughty expression with only the help of an eyelid. “I am sure you have some questions, though the tutorial should have explained most of what you can do.”

“Um... Hello, my name is Zac... Err, Zachary Atwood. What do you mean assist me? And how are you talking without a mouth?” Zac responded, still having some problem adjusting to the situation. The eye, or Stargazer as it called itself, gave a long-suffering sigh, already seeming to have labeled Zac as a mental invalid.

“Did you not listen to the Pixies during the tutorial? I am the assistant assigned to you when you assigned this... Trailer? Why did you choose a trailer? Anyway, when you chose this trailer to be your outpost when assaulting the Incursion. I will help with answers regarding the choices you make, to get the ball rolling so to say. As for how I talk, magic of course.” The Stargazer answered, a flash of what looked like cosmic mist grandly surrounding herself to accentuate her powers.

“What choices? And no I didn’t listen to any Pixies or fairies because the stupid system never sent me to any tutorial. It left me in this crazy demon forest 3 days ago while it teleported my friends away.” Zac responded, starting to feel a bit peeved by being looked down on by a floating eyeball.

“Oh, you didn’t go to the tutorial. I guess tha... THREE DAYS? This world was initiated only three days ago? Don’t you mean months?” The Stargazer started shaking, the pupil shrinking to a... well, not needlepoint, but from a basketball to a baseball in size. “Stop joking with me, how would you be able to create an outpost only after three days, even if you

skipped the month-long tutorial?” Veth-Abarak shook and hovered closer to Zac’s face, the grand mist surrounding it disappearing.

Zac, who had somehow starting to get acclimatized to talking to this odd being, sighed and briefly explained his experience starting when the world turned dark. The eyeball seemed harmless enough and appeared to be on his side. Furthermore, he really needed someone to talk to, both to unload and to make sense of the situation.

“Oh wow, I got assigned to a Defier. I guess I have some good karma after all! No returning in defeat for Abby!” The Stargazer suddenly seemed quite a bit more amiable, virtually shaking with excitement. It almost felt like the monster would start rubbing itself on him if it wasn’t that he was still generally caked in grime.

“What’s a Defier? It doesn’t sound great. And wait, Abby? Wasn’t your name Veth-something?” Zac questioned, seeming to get more and more confused the more the Stargazer spoke.

“Now now, don’t be so formal. Just call me Abby.” Abby answered. Gone was the slightly haughty tone, replaced with the mild pleasant tone from the beginning. “And I guess some explanations are in order. As you have figured out some people of your world have been moved to tutorial towns after your world was integrated into the multi-verse. However, some people have some sort of deficiency where they can’t naturally absorb cosmic energy and the system deem them worthless. It doesn’t bother with these people and leave them where they are. These people mostly die sooner or later as they are essentially defenseless at the beginning as the system generally vastly increase the danger of the surroundings.”

“And these are the Defiers?” Zac interrupted a bit anxious “Is it genetic? Do you think my family is stuck somewhere as well?”

“It’s not genetic as far as I know, and no they aren’t the Defiers. These people are generally called mortals. Please let me finish, we have limited time. As far as research shows, it is random who can take in cosmic energy and who can’t.

However, in worlds with lower class energy mortals are more common. The higher the energy, the more common it is to be able to absorb the energy. On B rank planets and above almost everyone can absorb cosmic energy naturally.”

“When I was in that black space the system said Earth had class F energy, and after the merge class D.” Zac chimed in hoping for some additional information.

“Well, class F is the lowest of the low. I doubt there were people who could fly or use magic before the merge, right?” Zac nodded affirmatively. Abby shook her eye and continued “From what I’ve heard only 5-10% of the population turn out to be cultivators in an F-energy world. And most of those people are younger, as their minds haven’t turned too rigid yet. Of course, this is for you humans. The Multi-verse consists of myriad races and civilizations and many races have natural advantages compared to you humans, who are notoriously average.”

“Cultivators are what they call those who can naturally draw the cosmic energies into themselves by the way. Cultivators can be divided further into many types depending on class and skills, but that’s for later. D-class energy is pretty good for a new world, most are E classed. So to recap, the world is populated by mortals and cultivators. This might mean your family is safe for now.”

“Lucky how? It sounds pretty bad to me that my family are probably stranded somewhere with monsters spawning just like me, but without the Titles.” Zac questioned testily.

“Well, if they all are mortals they haven’t been split up. They are probably together in the city you lived in. Also, even if they are mortals there is strength in numbers. Even if the monsters are normally impossible to kill one on one, they should be able to kill the easier monsters using teamwork. And while they can’t just get continuously stronger through cultivating, they still get stronger from killing monsters and leveling up like you did.” Abby explained patiently. While not completely comforting, what she said did make some sense to Zac. He could only hope his family was being careful and safe right now.

“Anyway, that brings us to Defiers like you. In extremely rare cases a mortal gains power far above what’s expected, either through luck, talent or hard work. There is no strict definition of them, rather a ‘You know it when you see it’-attitude. The name comes from the fact that the System essentially has deemed you trash but you defy the system and fate and become strong. Your situation is extreme even for Defiers, I mean a Herald spawning on top of you and you survive? Stealing a bunch of exclusive titles? Crazy. I think it has only happened a few thousand times in the multi-verse.” Abby seemed to get excited just thinking about it, happily bouncing up and down in the air.

“So it’s not that rare? There might be even more on earth?” Zac interjected.

Abby rolled her eye in response. “I think you misunderstand Zac. A few thousand times in the multi-verse. Oh right, you missed the tutorial. Suffice to say the multi-verse is almost infinite, with endless worlds with life on them, most far larger and more populated than your earth. It has existed for at least hundreds of millions of years. And during all that time it has only happened a few thousand times. Which makes you an aberrant even among Defiers. You, and by extension me, have truly hit the jackpot. “

“So how does it help me?” Zac asked. “I understand that I have a leg up on others with all these strong titles, but I still can’t absorb that cosmic energy you mentioned. What is that, anyway?”

“Cosmic energy is the building block of the multi-verse. It is energy, it is magic, and it is life. It is everything. You couldn’t really see the effects of it earlier as your world had so little of it, but you will soon see the effects of it on everything around you.” Abby said, almost having a reverent tone mentioning it.

“See how?”

“Some things in nature will be unable to take in the stronger energy and die out. But many things will be like the cultivators, naturally absorbing the energy. Essentially, things will grow big. Both the beasts and nature itself. Many things

will also change in unpredictable ways. A tree might gain the properties of metal and be almost unbreakable, a mouse might grow wings and fly, or suddenly be able to spit thunder. It's quite spectacular." She explained.

"Not being able to cultivate will impede you somewhat, but not as much as you think. You have a massive advantage in the form of titles, strength and your newly created outpost. In any case, there are so many things to go over, but unfortunately, we are running out of time." Abby realized she had gone off on somewhat of a tangent, seeming a bit embarrassed.

"I will be summoned back in 10 minutes."

Chapter 9: Forced to Fight

Zac was gobsmacked.

“You’re not here to help out permanently?” He inquired hesitantly. While it took some time getting used to talking to an eyeball, he was pretty unwilling to be stranded alone in the forest again. Besides, there were so many things he still didn’t understand about what was happening.

“Unfortunately, no. The system only summons an administrator such as myself for a short while when creating an outpost. Also, we only get summoned the first year after initiation. Something like an add-on Tutorial. But we got a bit side-tracked here, and need to hurry up with your outpost.”

Abby explained, seeming a bit embarrassed she got sidetracked from her duty.

“Outposts will evolve into full-fledged towns if you complete certain missions. The difference between a system-sanctioned town and a normal mortal town is that the city leader of a system-sanctioned town can use the system to summon buildings, tax the population and connect to other city leaders for example. The difference between an outpost and a town is that an outpost is temporary. Either you manage to turn it into a town by completing your quest, or the incursion over there will stabilize and turn to a town owned by the invading general. By then A LOT more demons will spawn, and unless you’re already dead you will likely die then, titles or not.”

Zac nodded, a better picture of forming in his head.

Remembering the 3-month deadline in his quests he realized that what Abby described would happen in roughly 3 months. Still, there were some things he was unsure about.

“But do I really need to care about creating an outpost? My goal is to find my family, I can just leave before the demons arrive.”

That question managed to elicit a full-body eye-roll from the eyeball.

“And go where? Couldn’t go to the tutorial town so you can’t learn skills or choose classes, making you quite weak compared to what you should be. There are monsters everywhere so you aren’t safe anywhere. An outpost can help you get stronger through its facilities, and having a town would be the most effective way to look for your family, compared to manually looking everywhere like a vagabond. Besides, being the first to create a town has amazing benefits, just like with the titles. The system likes the people in the forefront.” Abby one more went into lecturing mode.

“And if that’s not enough, I can also tell you that the system hates cowards. You only get one shot at creating your outpost, if you fail the system deems you unworthy to be a Lord in the future. If you not just fail, but even abandon the mission, the system will also punish you. It would range from crippling you to outright killing you depending on how bad it judges your performance.”

“WHAT?” Zac shouted aghast. “You mean I must complete this quest and kill all the other boss demons or the system might kill me?” The little goodwill Zac had been building towards the system during Abby’s explanations were thoroughly erased.

“Well yes. So I suggest you improve your outpost as much as possible in order to have a chance at survival.” Abby nonchalantly explained, as if risking life and limb fighting demons was completely normal.

“Well shit. So what do you suggest I build?” Zac hoped to get some guidance in order to create a good foundation for the outpost.

“I’m sorry I am not allowed to guide your choices of buildings, building a proper base properly is also a test from the system. I am only allowed to provide information. The system doesn’t want to give too much direction or tips to newly initiated civilizations, as it wants to test their ingenuity.”

“Yeah, the system is a real asshole, isn’t he?” Zac muttered. Abby’s pupil enlarged and looked around nervously. Apparently speaking ill of the system seemed like some sort of blasphemy, which Zac guessed made sense as the system essentially was a god. Maybe speaking ill of a being that could spawn portals which puked out demons was a bad idea after all he reflected and vowed to try to keep a lid on his mouth.

“Err... Anyway. If you imagine the words ‘Outpost base’ a menu will appear with your options. Most of the options are unavailable at the start, but more and more gets unlocked as your outpost grows into a town and further. You use the Nexus coins you have to buy the upgrades, and you can get more coins from various sources. Nexus coins are the official currency of the multi-verse, and the only one used when trading with the system.” Abby said, seemingly eager to change the subject.

This answered the question Zac had about the coins in his status screen. He still wasn’t sure why he had 5100 of them though.

“Wait, is there some connection between Nexus Coins and Nexus Crystals?” Zac asked, remembering the rewards from his quests.

“Not really. Nexus Crystals are a cultivation resource in the multi-verse. Both cultivators and mortals can absorb cosmic energy from them. The higher grade the more energy it contains, and the faster you can absorb it.”

“Well at this time I would normally have time to answer some specific questions about the different buildings, but we’re out of time. Good luck Zac. If you somehow survive this remember me when you create your town!” It seemed the time for the outpost tutorial was coming to an end. Abby seemed to hesitate a bit but then apparently came to a decision.

“You... You should really try to complete the quests within a month, or at least within two months. That would...” She didn’t get any further before a heavy pressure suddenly bore down on the camp. Abby’s pupil dilated and red squirming veins appeared all over the eye. And suddenly she was gone.

Zac wasn't sure, but it didn't feel like this was how she was supposed to disappear, as she appeared completely without him noticing. He had been able to sense something that could almost be anger in the pressure that descended. Had Abby been punished for what she said at the end?

"Complete the quests within a month..." he mumbled, trying to glean any hidden meaning. Something obviously happened because of those sentences. If the system punished her for lying it could only mean Abby wanted him to run to his death like an idiot. But if it was for unduly helping it might be an important clue to help him stay alive. That meant something likely happened to the world or the incursion after a month had progressed. Something that was bad for him.

He just couldn't figure out why the Stargazer would just help him like that, even risking the wrath of the system, as she had already explained it didn't like her giving undue guidance. Zac couldn't figure out any real reason for that yet, and could only put it aside for now. Instead, he followed her instructions and mentally thought '*Outpost base*'.

Suddenly a new window popped up in front of him. But while it still had the blue background and white borders, it rather reminded him of a web store than an old school RPG game. There were multiple categories of buildings and add-ons to choose from to the left and a seemingly unending number of products in the main window.

Zac took a bottle of now tepid water from the cooler the demonling had been rummaging through earlier and retreated to the camper. The suns were starting to set, which was a relief to Zac, as it proved that at least the daily cycles remained in the world, giving some normalcy.

Unheeding of the bloody mess inside, he cracked open a tin of beans from the cupboard. Luckily they had stocked the camper well before the trip, as they had planned to spend a week on the road, and most of it was non-perishables. He still had food and water for at least two weeks unless he gorged himself.

He sat down at the small dinner-area, and while slowly eating his beans he started mentally browsing through the shop. Zac

noticed that the prices were denominated in Nexus coins, which he had 10100 of now. He had gained 5000 coins during the day, likely from creating the outpost.

If he was going to survive in this new world, it seemed the first step was getting the most out of this outpost of his.

Chapter 10: Preparation

Zac woke up the next morning feeling sore, but his wounds had obviously healed even further. It no longer pained him overly to put weight on his wounded leg, and he could actually turn his midriff without a blazing pain erupting.

The smell in the camper was getting pretty bad though, and he knew he had to do something about it if this was going to be his base for the foreseeable future. He gathered the bloody bed sheets he had fallen asleep on when he passed out from his wounds and put them in a garbage bag. He didn't dare throw it outside yet though, afraid the smell of blood would attract beasts. With some detergent he spent another 30 minutes cleaning most of the blood away, making the trailer go from looking like the site of a vampire orgy to a serial killer hideout. The blood had badly stained multiple places, especially around the dining area, and it wasn't something he'd be able to fix in the short run. At least it smelled a lot better now.

Finally, he decided to waste some water for a quick shower in the trailer bathroom, even though the water was limited. After some intensive scrubbing away the blood caked all over him, the filth was mostly rinsed away. He stepped out of the shower and donned another set of clothes, feeling like a new man. When showering he had also noticed that he seemed to have actually gotten more in shape, with most of this gut gone and his muscles seeming, if not bigger, then harder and more compact than before. It seemed that the stats had some effect on his physical appearance as well. Hopefully, an increase in intelligence wouldn't make his head larger and larger though.

After a quick breakfast, he was finally ready to head out according to plans he had made yesterday after browsing through the shop. There were a dizzying array of possibilities

to choose from when building an outpost, even when most of the options were disabled.

Many of them he could understand or at least somewhat intuit the purpose for using a lifetime of playing video games. There were buildings such as an inn, blacksmith, different types of stores, bank and so on. Most of these required a town though. There was also something he was extremely keen on getting, the teleporter. If he built that he might be able to actually teleport to his hometown in one go.

There was one confusing aspect of the buildings though, which was that there were often hundreds of versions of most of the buildings, especially the commercial ones. Even though they seemed to fill the same function they were of different design and some minor differences in the description. After a while he could only surmise that the different choices represented different factions or planets. It seemed that creating a store wouldn't actually create some NPC-style beings, but rather move people here from other planets or intergalactic corporations.

There was also a huge amount of supporting buildings that could improve the offense, defense or improve the town in other manners. There seemed to even be some sort of training facility that seemed to be able to slowly improve stat points without leveling. If possible Zac would have gone on a shopping spree, but he quickly realized the harsh reality that roughly 10 000 Nexus Coins would only be able to buy a few of the most basic buildings.

He had formulated a plan yesterday after browsing through his options for hours but needed to explore some more before actually spending the few coins he had.

Zac had seen a hill the day he had been forced to go out to gather firewood, and he planned to scale it to get a better lay of the land. Donned in a fresh set of clothing and his trusty hatchet he once again set out into the woods.

Soon he had walked up the hill, hunkered over to not be spotted by any potential threats. Luckily the hill was filled with lush bushes and even a tall tree at the top, making for

some simple protection. Unfortunately the hill wasn't tall enough to give a complete overview of the surroundings as it turned out, with the crowns of larger trees still obscured the distance inland. Still, he could see his trailer and further on the ocean.

Still, he wanted to see whether he was actually on an island, or if the system had teleported any type of civilization in the vicinity. It would be a bit insane if he lived as a transient mountain man in the trailer if a town was just a few kilometers away.

He swung the axe and embedded it slightly in the tree, and then started climbing it for a better vantage. Zac once again marveled at the improvement of his constitution from his increase in stats. He felt like a gibbon, almost effortlessly dragging himself upwards along the branches with his arms, something that would have been an impossible work-out in the past.

Soon he was almost at the crown of the tree, afraid to continue up any further as the branches seemed inadequate to support his weight. A quick glance around unfortunately realized his fears. It very much seemed that he was on an island without any civilization in sight. However he couldn't be completely sure, as there was actually a mountain off in the distance. It wasn't gargantuan, but still large enough to solidly block any visibility of what was beyond. It looked quite odd to have a steep mountain right next to the ocean, but Zac guessed that was what happened when the system pressed the randomizer for a world. The good news that there was land in sight in the distance, though it looked like a few scattered islands, rather than a solid land-mass.

The island (as Zac decided to call it until proven wrong) he was on was huge, and he couldn't properly assess the size. He and his trailer were on the far edge of it, while the ever-shining red beam of light was almost on the opposite side, in a vale halfway between the center of the island and the mountain. He guessed that the reason why he still only had encountered one of the demon dogs was that they mainly spawned scattered around the incursion itself.

Zac didn't have time to analyze the situation any further, as a branch in the periphery of his sight suddenly exploded into movement and instantly was upon him. Before he had time to adapt to the situation, a brown snake had wrapped itself a few loops around his torso, leaving only the arm he used to hold onto the tree for leverage free. The snake seemed to be over 3 meters long and slightly thicker than his arm.

He immediately felt an intense pressure on his chest, the air leaving his lungs and wounds on his side screaming in protest. Zac strained until his face was red with exertion, but was unable to free his trapped arm at all. The snake had him in a vise, and even with his improved strength he could not get free. Its head slowly rose up towards his, a hiss escaping from its maws.

By now all air had been squeezed out of Zac's lungs, his consciousness starting to get fuzzy and lights flickered in his sight. Zac knew he was running out of time, it was time for a Hail Mary action. He suddenly let go of the tree with his free hand, grabbed the head of the constrictor and bashed it with all the force he could muster into the tree trunk. The slam obviously had an effect on the snake, as it slightly released him from its grip. With newfound strength from a ragged breath, he slammed the snake's head twice again into the tree with even more fervor.

However, just as Zac was feeling jubilant about escaping death's grasp he felt the branch he stood on give way, and both he and the still entwined snake came crashing down.

Chapter 11: Upgrades

Zac woke up with a jerk, which caused a pained groan to escape from his mouth. There was not a single part of his body that didn't feel battered and broken. A quick look around showed that he was halfway down the hill, his whole body full of scratches. The snake lay lifelessly a few meters away from him, seemingly having uncoupled from him somewhere during the tumble downhill.

Not daring to take any chances due to negligence again, he ignored the screaming protests of his body and dragged himself towards the snake. There was a rock roughly the size of a head on the way which he ripped out of the ground. Finally he arrived in front of the beast, and with a snarl grabbed the stone with both hands and slammed with all power he could gather right in the forehead of the snake. The long body convulsed slightly but seemed not to react further than that. Zac wasn't done however, and with guttural grunts from deep within his throat he kept slamming the stone down again and again, each time eliciting a wet thud. After a few hits the body's death throes stopped, but Zac kept going until the bloodied stone finally slipped out of his hands. By then the head and neck was only a mess of broken flesh and brain matter.

The grunts gave way to sobs as Zac collapsed next to the headless snakes, his whole body shaking. He had messed up, that had been way too close. Not finding any more demons the last two days had made him complacent, barely looking around for threats. The Stargazer had even warned him just yesterday about the world changing due to absorbing cosmic energy, but he hadn't even reflected on what that meant. There shouldn't have been snakes of this size in the woods where he was, but the energy in the world had not only increased its size and strength but made it more aggressive. Had that been a

venomous snake instead of a constrictor he would be a bloated corpse by now.

He finally understood that there was simply no such thing as safety in the wild, and he had to start taking things more seriously. Not even the last near-death experience had really woken him up, as the stats and quests made him subconsciously consider it all a game. But this was life and death, and he had to treat it as such.

Zac shakily got on his legs and started to make his way to the top of the hill again. His hatchet was still left in the tree, and he refused to go anywhere without it again. It felt like he had been hit by a truck but he could only grit his teeth and trudge on.

At the crest there were fallen leaves and broken bloodied branches all over the floor. Luckily it seemed that the snake had taken the brunt of the damage from the fall, otherwise, he might not even have survived just from the height. He didn't want to linger at such an exposed location, so he quickly ripped the axe out of the tree and made his way back down the hill.

When he reached the snake once again he hesitated for a few seconds, but then gripped the reptile and wired it around his torso a few turns then put the end up on his shoulder. He had to think like a survivor now, and the snake might both give food and its scales could be fashioned into some sort of protection.

Any other exploration would have to wait, he needed to get back to base. On the way back he walked with much higher care, trying to avoid stepping on twigs and staying close to the trees for shelter. However the only sounds from the forest were the sleepy rustling of the trees, only occasionally interrupted by a distant roar. After another 15 minutes, he was finally back in the camp.

He had planned to go over his strategy for the town once more but currently felt intensely unsafe right now, and decided to not drag things out any longer. He brought up the base building interface and bought an **[F-Grade Small Scale**

Illusion Array] for 2000 Nexus Coins. Suddenly as if it had always been there a small wooden box appeared in front of him. Zac opened the box and inside were 8 intricately carved wooden poles. They were each roughly 30 cm long and 3 cm thick, in a glossy black coating. One end was sharpened down into a needlepoint while the other was completely flat. The carvings were in a golden hue, and it seemed the carvings were depictions of intricate fractals rather than words or pictures.

When Zac picked up the poles suddenly 8 small yellow pillars lit up around the camp. He wasn't surprised at this as the shop had mentioned the usage method. When holding the poles, or flags as the system had called them for some reason, the system would guide him where to place them. As soon as all the flags had been placed the formation would activate. There also was a cheaper alternative of the same array, but it wouldn't have the guidance system, leaving the user to figure out correct placement according to energy-flows and ley-lines. Zac quickly placed down the flags according to instruction, and suddenly a translucent dome shimmered into being around the small camp-site. It initially looked like uneven glass, distorting the outside, but soon turned invisible. Not sure if it had any effect, he walked outside of the camp and took a look.

What met his gaze was just a normal-looking forest, albeit slightly denser than around it. The trailer, campfire, and car were completely gone. Even the bloody smell from the snake was removed, replaced with only the fresh earthy smell of the forest. There were some thorny bushes between the trees looking almost like a natural wall, which would hopefully encourage nearby enemies to walk around the camp rather than straight through.

That was the disadvantage of the illusion array, and why it was so cheap compared to many other defensive options. Anyone could simply walk through it if they desired as it provided no stopping power. As soon as someone knew where to look or just was passing by it simply had no value. Also, it didn't work on stronger individuals, as they could sense something was wrong with the cosmic energy in the area. However, it was a cost-effective alternative right now which left Zac with

more coins for other buildings. Later he would see if he could get some physical bushes transplanted at the edge of camp to dissuade any roving animal or monster from taking a path through the camp even further.

Zac was not done with that though and he made another purchase which spawned a box similar to the first one, but slightly larger. Inside were 12 poles, this time white but still engraved in gold. They were slightly larger than the illusion flags and had a different fractal engraved, but obviously they had the same purpose – to create an array. It was the **[F-Grade Small Scale Mother-Daughter Gathering Array]** and cost Zac a whopping 7500 Nexus coins, almost cleaning him out. The gathering arrays for sale in the shop was designed to gather cosmic energy from the void and increase the density of it within its borders. This would improve the cultivation speed of the cultivators, and was likely a must for any town of repute in the multi-verse. This normally was of no use to Zac, as he wasn't a cultivator and instead had to kill monsters to gain levels. However, the array he had bought had a special function which was highly desirable to Zac. The Mother-Daughter in its name referred to the fact that it actually was two arrays.

One of them was the normal gathering array, which was referred to as the mother array. The other array was actually a necklace which looked a bit like a small ship's wheel from a medieval ship attached to a silver chain. The unique function of the Mother-Daughter Gathering Array was that most of the energy that the mother-array gathered did not increase the density of cosmic energy within the array, but was actually transferred to the daughter-array.

As long as Zac wore the amulet and was within 50 kilometers from the mother-array, cosmic energy would continuously be transferred to the amulet, and from the amulet into Zac. In other words, the array essentially turned him into a cultivator who continuously drew energy into himself, as long as he was on the island.

The downside of this type of array was that the gathering efficiency was far lower compared to a similar F-Grade

Gathering array, which would result in a far more sparse concentration of cosmic energy in a town. However, this didn't matter to Zac as he had no citizens that he needed to take into account, at least not for now. He quickly followed the instructions and placed the 12 flags around the camp.

This was Zac's main plan to have a chance to get strong enough to survive against the incursion. He had no experience of combat from his earlier life and needed to gain power from stats and levels to simply be able to overpower his enemies, at least he gained some actual combat experience.

There were more things Zac wanted to buy, but he simply had run out of coins. Finally, Zac Took a look at his status screen once more and saw that even though it had been a harrowing experience, killing the snake had not given him another level.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 16 Race Human Alignment Human (Earth) Titles Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer Strength 31 Dexterity 25 Endurance 27 Vitality 27 Intelligence 29 Wisdom 29 Luck 44 Free Points 30 Nexus Coins 600

After checking out the menu he looked down on his battered and bruised body and felt embarrassed with himself. He had 30 stat points he still hadn't allocated. If he had done that this morning he might not have been in such a precarious situation as he was.

It was time to upgrade.

Chapter 12: The Warrior-Route

Initially Zac had wanted to hold out on spending his points until he understood the class system better, maybe even waiting to allocate until level 25. He now realized that such thinking was naïve. He needed every advantage he could get the coming months if he wanted to survive. He was supposed to kill 3 more Heralds somehow but had almost died *twice* to low tier monster at the edge of the island.

Still, he didn't just want to do anything hasty, so he donned the amulet and sat down in a camping chair. Immediately he felt a warm pulse from the amulet, which entered his chest and spread through his body. Almost his whole torso and large sections of his body were purple from being first strangled and then falling down a tree. It seemed however that the amulet actually slowly alleviated his symptoms. Abby the eye had said that cosmic energy was *life*, so it made sense though that it would not only help with his cultivation.

When choosing stats one needed to plan for the long term, to make sure it was suitable to his class. The problem was that he had no idea how the class system worked. Could he even decide on a class himself, or whether it would be just assigned to him?

“System...? Are you there” Zac once again tried to get some information out of System, but was met with silence. “Can you tell me about stat points?” He entreated, trying hard to hide the rancor he was feeling against this unfeeling overlord.

With a lack of answers he could only make educated guesses and hope that any bad choices wouldn't haunt him in the future. If it was a video game he would likely dump all the points in the main stat of a class, such as strength for warrior and dexterity for a ranger. The difference was that in a game

he could respawn if dying, whereas here it was game over for real.

If he could choose Zac would have preferred to be a mage. Then he could just stand safely in the distance throwing fireballs on unsuspecting monsters until they were burnt to a cinder. Yet he didn't dare go this route. He had no idea if he would be able to use magic even if he got a class, or how to progress in such skills.

He also skipped ranger-type classes, simply as he had no such weapon. His eyes swept to the hatchet lying down next to his leg. Even after his recent battles it looked almost as good as new. Luckily they had bought a fancier model, being a solid piece of metal with a plastic grip. If the handle had been made of wood it might have snapped by now.

"I guess it's the warrior-route..." Zac muttered and sighed. From the experiences since last week he was plenty reluctant to go choose this class type, but he saw no different option as of yet. Maybe the system would prepare other options he hadn't thought of yet when he reached 25.

Zac brought up and decisively spent his 30 free points. First, he placed 10 points in strength. In both fights so far he had been physically weaker, and he needed a boost in that department. What good was his hatchet if he couldn't give more than flesh wounds on his targets? He then spent 5 points in dexterity in somewhat of a test to see what improved. 5 Points also went into endurance. He would be moving and fighting a lot across the island, and he needed a sturdy constitution.

Finally he put 10 points in vitality. Vitality wouldn't help killing monsters directly, but he felt that it would help indirectly. He simply was in no condition to fight right now. With increased vitality and the amulet he should heal plenty faster compared to before. Secondly, he would be running around and fighting a lot the coming months. He couldn't take a few days off after every fight to nurse his wounds, or he'd likely never be able to clean out all demons before the three-month deadline. He also felt that a high vitality would help

him in the future no matter which class he got, while strength and dexterity felt a bit more specialized.

Zac felt that Wisdom and intelligence were likely the staples of the mage route. Getting an increase in either wouldn't hurt, but he couldn't justify spending points there when there were more tangible improvements that the other stats could provide. He felt the same about luck. His high luck had likely helped him survive so far. It was thanks to a lucky roll that he was still standing here today. But Zac did not want to rely on luck to survive. Even if he somehow fell ass-backward into victory 9 times out of 10, he'd still die the tenth time due to lack of proper foundations. Luck was intangible and he couldn't even fathom what benefits he would get from putting points into that stat. It would have to wait until someone explained it to him.

With the points spent he closed down the screen. Suddenly a surge of warmth far stronger compared to what the amulet provided spread through his body. It felt like his every cell was vibrating with life, greedily absorbing the warmth and improving. He was shocked to see his various wounds were healing at a visible rate, and it felt like he could punch a hole through a mountain. This feeling of strength was quite addicting. Soon the warmth faded though, and the feeling of immortality disappeared with it. The wounds stopped healing at an accelerated speed. Still, Zac felt a good deal better, with a good deal of the bruising and smaller cuts completely gone.

There still was some time left of the day, so after a quick meal he turned his attention to the snake carcass. After a few tries with a kitchen knives he knew the scaled leather was quite resilient to cuts and would make good protection. He brought a few knives from the camper and his hatchet and dragged the carcass some distance away from the camp, and then started skinning it.

He cut along the softer belly, and after 20 minutes he had cut all along the length of the carcass, ruining a knife on the hard scales while doing so. His forearms were burning with strain after the workout. He had ruined most of the meat along the

way unfortunately, and it didn't seem that there'd be much left over to eat.

After that he dragged the skin off from the carcass, and finally scraped as much of the left-over flesh as possible off from the skin with his hatchet. From here he was not quite sure what to do. He had no idea of methods to cure leather. He was an office worker before the end of the world, and he was a few generations too young for these types of things to be considered common knowledge. Zac knew he had read somewhere that urine could be used somehow, but he was not about to experiment with that.

He put the skin aside and dug a hole which he pushed the now mangled carcass into, and filled it with soil. He didn't want anything to head this direction, even though he was some ways away from the camp.

Zac picked up the skin and made his way back to camp. The skin needed to dry out, so he placed it across the hood of the car, leaving both ends hanging down at the sides. He placed two large rocks down on both ends in order to keep it stretched and stop it from shrinking overnight. He had no idea if he was supposed to do something else, and could only leave it like that over the night and hope that it would work out.

It was starting to get darker, so he decided he was done exploring for the day. He was still feeling beat up even with the rapid healing as well. He took 30 minutes to clean up the camp-site and take stock of his things. Normally he wouldn't go through his friends' belongings but these were desperate times. Unfortunately there was nothing of value except some extra changes of clothes and some daily necessities.

With the last of the sunlight Zac found a long fallen branch near the campsite with the thickness of about 3 to 5 centimeters which was about 6 meters long. With a few quick swings with his hatchet he cut off roughly 2.5 meters where the branch was the most straight. Then with his improved strength he quickly sharpened one edge into a sharp point, turning it into a makeshift spear. It was likely too malleable to be able to stop anything large like the demonling in its tracks without breaking. However it could hopefully keep some

monsters at length if needed. His hatchet was a good weapon, but its length was quite short. It was hard to use while keeping himself out of harm's way.

Zac finally sat down in the trailer for a meal, quietly staring out the window and seeing the ever-present red pillar. Had it not been for the incursion he might have been able to forget how messed up the world had become for a second.

Life had thrown things at him the last days he couldn't even have imagined, and it would only get crazier.

Tomorrow he would have to go hunting demons.

Chapter 13: On the Hunt

Zac crept through the woods, slowly making his way more inland. He was hefting hatchet in one hand and his improvised spear in the right. He had found a camouflaged shirt in David's bag which he had donned which would hopefully help him blend in a bit. He had planned to make some makeshift bracers and shin guards from some of the snakeskin this morning. Unfortunately it was still a bit grimy, so he had to leave it for another day at least to properly dry out. He still wore the amulet of the gathering array underneath his shirt, which continuously imbued him with more cosmic energy. He had a black backpack on his back filled with a bottle of water and a small batch of medical supplies.

He had actually gained a level without noticing while he was asleep from the amulet. It was still hard for him to know how much the amulet was gathering for him, or how much experience killing other monsters gave. There was no experience bar or notifications of experience gain anywhere in the system that could give him a frame of reference. Hopefully he would learn more about it from today's excursions. The two free points he had he had split between strength and vitality. When he allocated the points he had felt the energy rushing into his cells again, albeit far weaker when compared to when he allocated 30 points.

The goal of today was simple. He needed to kill monsters. Almost a week had passed since the world was integrated into the multiverse, and in reality he had accomplished very little so far.

He didn't dare make a beeline for the incursion just yet. He was afraid that there would be monsters there that he still couldn't handle, such as the Heralds themselves. Instead, he was walking around the edges of the island while steadily making his way inland. He had been walking for roughly 30

minutes now and still hadn't seen any monsters. He had seen some animals though. Most were the same as before the change, but some obviously had evolved from cosmic energy. For example he's seen a squirrel as large as a golden retriever. Luckily it seemed very docile, and it immediately escaped into the tree crowns after noticing him.

Finally he heard the familiar menacing growl from ahead. Zac was afraid he had been spotted, and immediately hunkered down behind a bush. There was no charging demonling heading his way fortunately, so he crept forward again. While hiding behind a tree he finally saw the beast 30 meters in the distance. It was the same sort of demon as he had fought before, a 6 legged monstrosity of oversized muscle and maw. This one seemed a bit leaner than the first he had fought, but he couldn't be sure. It seemed like it was lazing about in the sun in a small clearing. There was a small animal carcass next to it, so it appeared that it recently had a meal and was now resting.

Zac had made battle plans based on his first experience fighting these monsters, and now it was time to use them. He inched towards a sturdy tree that was at the end of the clearing, leaving only open field between the tree and the demon. He placed down his spear two meters away from the trunk and picked up a small rock. By now his heart was racing, his hands almost shaking from a buildup of adrenaline.

"Calm down, calm down..." he whispered under his breath, nerves taut but with a glint of determination in his eyes. He had no choice, he had to push forward, for both his sake and his family's.

With a deep steadying breath he walked in front of the tree, making him stand in full view for the demon. The demonling immediately noticed him and stood up into an aggressive posture. Wasting no time Zac immediately chucked the stone with full force, and he managed to hit its torso which elicited a pained yelp.

Clearly the taunt worked well as the demon roared and barreled toward him like a runaway train. Zac held his position until last minute before lunging two meters to the side. The

demonling zoomed past him and with a tremendous force head-butted the tree.

This was essentially the same tactic he had used on the first demon. The demons were powerful but seemed quite stupid, so he surmised the same tactic would work again. Now, handy boulders wouldn't be everywhere, but he was in a forest full of thick tree-trunks. This time he had help from being ready and having improved stats. Zac therefore managed to jump out of the way without either taking damage or falling over this time.

Knowing that time was of the essence Zac wasted no time and immediately was upon the beast. With a fierce overhead swing he severed the spine at the lower back. With his improved Strength it felt like cutting through dry wood, and he easily embedded the whole 15 cm axe head in the beast. With a tug he ripped it out of the body, and with it came a spurt of blood. He had planned on also doing the same at the neck of the beast, but the demonling was immediately woken up from the intense pain. With a pained roar it tried to turn and catch Zac with its huge maw. Luckily its maneuverability was already bad with all working legs. Now it was even slower with the two hind legs listlessly hanging backward.

Zac didn't want to take any chances, as a nasty swipe of the beast could easily make him bleed out in minutes. With a few seconds to spare until the demonling could turn he slashed a few deep bloody gashes on its side. Both blood and viscera immediately started pooling beneath it. By now the fight was essentially over, and Zac hurriedly backed off and picked up his spear he had placed down before the fight.

He planned to poke a few holes in the monster to bleed it out faster. However, reality is often disappointing. On the first stab he only made a flesh wound before the spear started to bend rather than push in further. On the second stab the demon snapped the spear in two by moving its head with surprising alacrity. The forward momentum of the stab almost made Zac fall right into the eagerly waiting rows of teeth of the beast. Luckily, he barely managed to get out of the way with a push of his left leg which made him fall to the right of the beast.

Still the beast managed to get in a swipe on his left arm which left a shallow, but long gash.

Ignoring the burning pain Zac quickly scrambled to his feet and got out of the way. But it seemed that the escape was unnecessary, as the demonling had collapsed after the swipe. The grass beneath it was completely stained red, and a large chunk of intestines was hanging outside its body. It was seemingly completely out of steam, weakly growling between shallow rapid breaths.

Ideally, Zac would have preferred to wait it out and let it slowly bleed to death, but the monster's roars had been quite loud. He had no interest in sticking around in case there was backup on the way. He had to be calculative at times to avoid unnecessary risks, but sometimes he had to be decisive as well. Gripping the hatchet in a bloody hand he slowly circled out of sight of the monster. Then with a few quick steps forward swung down with force right behind the middle legs, cutting deep into what he presumed was lungs. The demon tried to rouse a retaliation but was completely out of power, resulting only in a feeble wave of a paw.

Zac repeated an identical slash on the other side, which should mean that both its lungs were punctured. Given that the demon's physique was somewhat similar to a normal mammal's, of course. The demon barely responded to the second swing apart from shaking with pain or death throes. Zac wasted no time and with one final swing cut right into its neck.

With one final spasm, the monster passed. He knew this without having to check as he suddenly felt the familiar warmth of cosmic energy entering his body.

A quick look around the corpse once again showed no sort of loot spawning or dropping. This made Zac more certain of the fact that there was no such thing as a loot system with the System.

With a last look at the surroundings for anything he might have missed, he once again receded into the cover of the forest. The hunt was not over.

Chapter 14: Zombie Hound

Zac sat on a rock with a bottle of water in hand. He had just finished bandaging up his arm from the swipe of the demon and was now taking a quick breather. The fight had gone far better than his expectation, but he wouldn't let himself get complacent.

Not wanting to fill his stomach with too much water and later cramping up he took a few small sips then put the bottle back. Checking that everything was in order he once again set out into the jungle, continuing his path of gradually moving inland. He did not bother remaking a spear for now, at least until he found some far stronger wood. Abby had talked about trees taking properties of metal, and he desperately hoped he could find a tree like that.

It was not long before he ran into another demon dog. This one was slowly moving around, almost looking like a scout or like it was patrolling. He quickly decided on the place of the battle after a quick look around the surroundings. From there it proceeded much like the last fight. A rock was thrown to taunt the beast and it almost knocked itself out cold on a boulder. This time Zac instead swung down his hatchet on the spine between the two sets of frontal legs. He strove to incapacitate two sets of legs and only leave the front-most legs in working order.

This was as close to the head as he dared attack at the moment though, as he had seen how fast the demonling had swung its head to snap his spear in two. He was somewhat certain that the demon was like a crocodile in that regard; if something entered the maw, it would not leave.

The attack proved far more effective than he could have imagined. The blade fell down right between two vertebrae and continued almost unimpeded into the torso of the beast. Zac saw his opportunity and twisted while he tugged out the

axe towards the side. He hoped to wreak as much havoc as possible in the demon's insides, destroying both lungs and heart. The axe was quickly completely ripped out of the chest, and a great gout of blood followed it and sprayed all over Zac.

The forceful tug swept Zac off his feet and he fell backward into the grass. He quickly got up to his feet axe at the ready, but soon realized it was unnecessary. The demon was lying on the ground listlessly. Blood was pouring out of the wound like a waterfall. After a shudder it stopped moving, and Zac felt the now familiar warmth once again enter him.

Zac realized he must have hit the heart of the beast. There seemed to be no other possible explanation to the copious amounts of blood that had streamed out of the wound. Seeing as how he wasn't even out of breath from the fight, he immediately left and continued to look for more prey.

Zac's day continued like this, and by evening he had killed roughly 20 demonlings with varied amount of success. He still had not leveled up to level 18, but he could somehow sense that he was close. After every kill during the day some of the cosmic energy had entered his body. And if his body could be considered a container, it felt as though the container was starting to get full. Zac guessed that the moment he felt "full" from the cosmic energy was the moment he leveled up.

Zac stood and overlooked the aftermath of his last victory. He had gained a few new wounds, but nothing threatening. This latest fight had been the most dangerous one so far, simply because he had fought two demonlings at the same time. The second one had burst through the vegetation while he was already fighting the first one.

Luckily the beasts were truly clumsy, and with dodging around the natural environment he managed to mostly keep out of harm's way until he could bleed them out. Zac hypothesized that the natural environment of these beasts likely had no greenery, and very little obstructions. The monsters simply seemed completely unaccustomed to fighting in this type of terrain.

Zac was about to leave when he suddenly heard a twig snap behind him. Taking no chances he lunged to his right. He just heard the sound of wind while falling, but suddenly his left shoulder exploded in pain. Ignoring the pain for now he got to his feet and finally got a good look at his assailant.

It was a demon, but a different type from the ones he had fought so far. If the demon dogs so far had been depending on brawn, this one clearly leaned toward agility. Measuring up to his navel, the beast somewhat looked like an oversized greyhound dog. If the dog had turned into a zombie. Just like the other demon it looked almost like it had been skinned. There were some differences with a greyhound though, such as the head with the oversized maw. The three rows of sharp teeth were clearly showing as the monster silently growled toward him. It had no fur, and instead had a thin red skin with the wiry muscles clearly showing beneath. This beast also only had the customary 4 legs, compared with the 6 legs of the other demons.

Its paws were also larger than a normal dog's, and Zac could clearly see large sinister claws sticking out of them. The sinewy tail seemed overly long even for a monster of this size, slowly swaying behind it.

Finally he noticed that one of the front paws was bloodied, dyeing the grass red. That explained the burning pain on his shoulder. He had no time to come up with any fancy strategies at the moment and could only fall back on his go-to method for dealing with demons. He slowly repositioned himself so that he once again would have his back to a tree. He had immediately discarded the idea to run away. With its lithe build and long legs it obviously was built for speed, and he had no delusions of being able to shake it off. Hopefully the high speed would help come in handy for him when it slammed into the tree behind.

Suddenly the hound shot toward him. Zac knew it would be fast but it looked like the like it flew across the ground. The 30-meter distance between them was erased in seconds, and Zac barely had the time to jump out of the way to let the hound slam into the tree.

Just as the monster was about to slam into the tree trunk it swung its long tail. This somehow changed the direction of its momentum. Instead of slamming into the tree it actually used the trunk as purchase with its legs to push itself forward toward Zac's falling figure. Even before he had hit the ground from jumping away, the beast was upon him.

Zac swung the hatchet while midair, but the beast was too close for the blade to hit its head. He managed to punch the jawline with the haft of the axe though, stopping the maw from chomping down on his head.

Zac landed with his back on the ground, and the hound fell on him. All air was knocked out of his lungs, and he could taste the iron of blood in his mouth. He was face to face with the beast, its acrid breath filling his nose.

Zac desperately held the head at bay with his left arm, swinging the hatchet with his other. Dismayed Zac saw that he couldn't generate enough strength to create more than flesh wounds from this awkward position. The beast struggled to reach him with its maws, meanwhile clawing on Zac's chest. Each swipe ripped straight through his shirt and left a bloody gash on his torso.

This stalemate could not last, he would be cut to ribbons if he didn't do something. He swung the beast to the side and slammed it into the ground on his left, giving a brief moment of respite. He didn't dare hesitate and immediately swung his axe in a broad arc. His body screamed in protest but he could only grit his teeth.

The axe howled and swung down toward the demon hound.

Chapter 15: Desperation

The axe swung down and with a thud sunk into the side of the hound. The hound tried to get up, but Zac still had his left hand clamped on its throat, keeping it down. A few more swings in quick succession and the beast was dead as well. He felt the warm cosmic force enter him again. This time it felt like he gained almost twice the amount compared to the demonlings. This was also the final amount he needed to gain a level, bringing him to level 18.

Zac was a bit shaky after the encounter, but a day's worth of bloodshed and risking his life had steeled his nerves somewhat. He immediately left the site of the battle, not bothering with the three carcasses lying there. He needed to find somewhere to bandage himself.

While walking he allocated the two points into dexterity and vitality. Zac felt that by now his strength was enough to seriously hurt the monsters he had encountered with a few swings, and speed would likely help him more than more strength. He still put a point into vitality as he kept getting hurt more and more.

Finally he found a secluded spot and quickly drank a few mouthfuls of water and patched himself up. Zac was bruised and battered, and completely unwilling to fight any more today. He had also run out of gauze after patching up his chest. The demon hound had carved a maze of scratches on his chest. The wounds were not deep, but together they had bled quite a bit. Luckily his high vitality seemed particularly effective against these type of smaller wounds. He sensed that the bleeding had already almost stopped, and scabs had started to form over the wounds. It seemed that he would be all fixed up in a day or two.

From the fight he also realized that the amulet from the gathering array was quite sturdy. The hound had clawed both

the little wheel and the string multiple times, and not a scratch could be seen on it. It seemed that a stronger force than some dog claws would be needed to damage it. For a brief moment he imagined decking himself in hundreds of amulets, making him near-invulnerable.

Of course that wasn't realistic. But it showed that there were probably many sturdy materials in the multi-verse that could be made into extremely strong defensive gear. He put the stray thoughts out of his head and started his return trek.

On his way back he walked in an even more surreptitious manner, stealthily making his way back toward the base. He was forced to kill one more demonling which had accidentally found him while bounding through the forest. He had seen a few more demons but chose to ignore them. It was getting late and the suns were slowly setting. This made his vision limited and the forest was gaining a sinister feel to it. Zac decided that even if he wanted the extra cosmic energy, he should get back to camp. If another of the demon hounds ambushed him while fighting the demonlings he might be hard pressed to fight them off.

He simply was too tired and wounded, and vision was getting worse. He had accomplished what he set out to do today, and he couldn't get greedy.

As he passed one of the sites of his previous battles, he suddenly noticed movement by the corpse of the demon. Zac immediately stopped moving and hid behind a tree to scout out the scene.

At first he thought he saw a child standing by the carcass, but soon discarded that thought. The thing was roughly as large as a six or seven year old child, but it was clearly a new type of demon. The thing looked like an imp from old fairy tales. It was completely naked except a loincloth. It had a purplish skin full of scars and what looked almost be tumors, giving It a sickly look. It almost seemed like it was suffering from radiation poisoning. On its back was a set of bat wings with a span of roughly a meter per wing.

Zac was unsure if the wings were actually serviceable as the imp had a stocky build with a fat stomach. It had no hair and seemingly no ears. He couldn't make out any facial features as it was currently looking down and poking the corpse of the demonling. It seemed like it was examining the wounds and trying to figure out what had happened.

That was not good news for Zac. It was one thing if the island was full of deadly but dumb beasts. He could deal with that as long as he went out killing every day killing some at the time. But if there were smarter enemies who could team up he might start meet more and more organized resistance on the island. They might even send out search parties to look for him. The island was quite large, but a concerted effort would sooner or later flush him out of hiding.

He wanted to stay under the radar for a while longer. If the corpses were left alone hopefully the local wildlife would eat it. Then it would look like the beasts were killed in a fight with other beasts, rather from a few swings of an axe. His plans of slowly grinding levels and gaining battle experience would be over if this thing flew back and reported to its superiors.

There was only one solution, he had to kill it.

Luckily it did not look overly powerful with its small stature and scrawny arms. One good swing with the hatchet and it would be decapitated.

Zac did not want to take any chances however, and decided on a surprise attack. He slowly circled around and closed in on the imp from behind. He kept a careful watch for its reactions but it seemed absorbed in examining the corpse.

A snap was heard from beneath Zac's foot when he was only 5 meters away from the imp. The failing light had caused him to not notice a fallen twig lying in his path. He froze for a millisecond but then immediately charged at the imp with all speed he could muster.

The imp's preservation skills were impressive. As soon as it heard the sound behind it, it jumped over the carcass of the beast while letting out a high pitched screech. It managed to turn around midair with its wings and Zac saw its face. It had

four pitch black eyes. One set was placed like a human's, and the other set were placed slightly more apart up on its forehead. It had no nose except two holes, and its mouth was a small circle full of sharp teeth. From the few flaps of its wings it seemed like it was unable to fly, but able to elongate its jump considerably.

Zac desperately tried to catch up, afraid it would be able to get away. The imp did some obscure gestures with its hands while floating away, as Zac was closing in on it and the carcass of the beast. Suddenly a purplish-black flame erupted on the imp's hand, and it somehow threw it straight towards Zac's head.

Zac barely had time to position his head out of the way, but a part of the sinister flame managed to land on his shoulder. Any plan of killing the imp flew out of the window, as Zac's mind turned white in a blinding explosion of pain. The black flame was far more dangerous than normal fire, and it seemed it that somehow managed to burn his *soul*. The pain on his singed flesh was nothing compared to that pain.

Zac was completely dazed by the pain and fell over the demonling carcass instead of jumping over it. The imp landed a few meters away, still screeching at him. After a few second of observation it once again started to summon a flame with its mysterious hand gestures.

With a shake of his head Zac managed to clear his sight. Unknowingly to him his eyes were completely red and tears were streaming down. As soon as he got back up on his feet he had to immediately jump out of the way from another of those black insidious flame balls. It missed him and fell upon the corpse of the demon instead. The fire caused the corpse to visibly shrink, as though all moisture was burned instead of the flesh.

He once again charged toward the imp but it simply kept jumping backwards. Its wings helped it gain momentum, and it was even slightly faster than Zac. It even had time to occasionally turn around to make sure it didn't run into anything.

The imp was essentially kiting him, throwing out a fireball every few seconds. The closer Zac got to it the harder it was to dodge. After a minute he had been hit another 3 times by the when he got close. The first time it barely grazed his arm so it was not too bad. If you could call the pain of getting stabbed a hundred times not too bad. The second hit him in the gut, which almost made him double over and puke his guts out from the agony. The final one hit his leg.

That hit had made him unable to keep chasing the imp. He could barely put any weight on the leg, it felt like it had been paralyzed. The pain was so bad he almost swung his hatchet to chop it off. He knew that he would not be able to dodge anymore when it threw its next fireball.

In a last desperate attempt to survive, he hurled his hatchet with all strength he could muster straight at the chest of the flying demon.

Chapter 16: Choices

Zac was on his knees, panting heavily. His clothes were a completely burned and bloodied mess. All around him were signs of the imp's rampage, with pockets completely drained and devoid of life. Zac realized that the fire of the imp did not burn like a normal fire, rather it burned life-force or cosmic energy. His burns looked like all moisture had been drained from his skin and it now had a pallid grey color. It was like those parts of his body was like that of a desiccated corpse's.

The corpse of the imp was lying against a tree roughly 10 meters away from him, the axe still firmly planted in its chest. The constitution of the monster was quite frail, and it had died immediately when the axe hit.

As soon as the monster had died, it seemed as though the source of the fires had been removed. The fires had quickly extinguished, the marks left behind the only proof they had existed at all. Had it not quickly dissipated then the fire would have completely destroyed him. Maybe not his body, but all his life-force.

Zac was nauseated and on the brink of passing out, but he somehow summoned power he did not know he had and got up on his feet. He shuffled over to the imp and yanked out the axe. He had no energy to look through the corpse, and simply continued his way back home.

He was almost delirious by this point and was barely able to keep his bearings. Luckily he was quite close to edge of the island now, and almost on the opposite side of the pillar. The monsters were pretty scarce this far out still, and he didn't encounter any more demons that night.

With the last strength in his body he managed to stumble back into his camp. As soon as he saw the familiar sight of the

metallic camper his legs simply gave out. He fell down onto the ground and let the sweet darkness embrace him.

It was midday the following day when Zac woke up again. Body was stiff and he sported a splitting headache. It was as if he had been drinking until passing out last day. He spit out some gravel he had got in his mouth and slowly got up.

After a quick check-up it seemed that most of the wounds were in decent shape. None of the scratches and tears from the demons were still bleeding. Some of the more shallow wounds were just a white line today. A few of the worse wounds would have to stay in bandage for at least another day though.

The spots where the black fire had burned him yesterday were still a bit grey and shrunken, but had gotten noticeably better. He felt that the headache he had likely came from these wounds. The fire yesterday must have had some magic properties that damaged in other ways than just burning. He shuddered when he remembered the pain from those blasts.

He prepared some breakfast and sat down in a camping chair to go over yesterday's results. He brought up the status window with a thought to go over the gains.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 18 Race Human Alignment Human (Earth) Titles Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I Strength 46 Dexterity 33 Endurance 34 Vitality 43 Intelligence 29 Wisdom 29 Luck 44 Free Points 0 Nexus Coins 3 370

He had gained almost 3000 Nexus Coins with just one day of fighting, which seemed quite good. If he based the gains on the amount of cosmic energy he got from the different monsters he could somewhat guess how much each kill gave him. He would say that he had gained roughly 100 for each demon dog he had killed, and between half as much and double that from the demon hound. The largest amount was rewarded from killing the imp. He still remembered that burst of energy even though he was almost delirious. If he hadn't

gotten that extra energy boost after the fight he might not have made it home.

Still, the amount gained yesterday was far short of most of the buildings he had seen in the town building interface. It made sense, as building a whole town was usually not done by the efforts of only one person. If he had a few hundred people who came together and gathered Nexus Coins the amount gathered would be massive, even if the other people were far weaker than himself. There simply was power in numbers.

The thought gave him a sense of urgency. It was undeniable that he had likely gotten a quite impressive head start compared to most people, even though he was not too happy with his current situation. But if some great leader emerged in a tutorial village and created a large force he might lose his head start. Abby had mentioned that the system liked those that stood in forefront. If someone was going to get titles and other advantages from building a town first, then it should be him.

It might be better for humanity if some country leader or military general got that head start. But it was the apocalypse, and he had his goals. He needed to be a bit selfish in that regard, and couldn't just give away opportunities to others and hope they would use them for good.

He also noticed that he had a new title, Demon Slayer I. It was from the quest he had received in the beginning, which had told him to kill 10 demons. The title gave him 1+ all stats when fighting enemies of demonic alignment. However, he didn't quite understand how the title worked. He should have activated that title somewhere mid-day, but he had felt nothing different when fighting afterward. Zac thought that the 1 stat point perhaps was too low a number for him to notice anything.

He was somewhat surprised that he hadn't received any sort of follow-up quest, along the lines of "Kill 100 Demons". The line behind the title indicated that it should be possible to upgrade it, but he hadn't been given any indication of how. Zac guessed he had to add it to the ever-increasing list of things he did not know.

After looking over the status page he opened the building interface. There were two things that Zac wanted to build, and they cost 3000 Nexus crystals each.

The first was called a **[F-Grade Nexus Node]** and looked like a large hovering crystal from the description. Its function was to access certain aspects of the System. Nexus Nodes seemed to have more functions depending on how high grade it was, with F being the lowest. The Node was the worst of the bunch in other words. But it gave access to two functions that Zac was extremely interested in. It gave access to the class system, and sold basic skills.

The other was another array, namely the **[F-Grade Small Scale Gravity Array]**. This was an array meant for strengthening oneself as he saw it. The subject of training was something he had mulled over from the start. Even before allocating the first 30 points he had gotten he had noticed that his stats were skewed.

When he counted backwards from his titles and the points he had allocated he had found out that his base stats differed quite a bit. Before the effect of the system he had 7 strength, 3 dexterity, 4 endurance, 5 vitality, 5 intelligence and 6 wisdom.

He assumed the normal stats were around 1-10 for most humans, as he was somewhat average before the System arrived. He wasn't particularly smart, and not extremely athletic. He worked out at a gym 3 times a week which would explain the strength. But he was not limber at all, and he rarely did cardio. Therefore he had lower dexterity and endurance. Vitality and intelligence seemed harder to train, as they seemed more of an inborn quality.

Since the stats differed and seemed to be affected by his actions before the System arrived, he assumed that he might be able to improve his base stats from training as well. He probably would not be able to improve infinitely, but every extra stat point counted.

That's where the gravity array would come in. It would affect the gravity in a zone, and could increase the gravity up to 10 times. At this point he had 46 strength and was likely stronger

than any human that had ever lived on earth. Without this kind of array Zac didn't think he would be able to exhaust himself. He could do push-ups all day without breaking a sweat at the moment.

If he added the array to the camp he could potentially improve multiple stats, at least Strength and Endurance as they seemed most linked with the constitution of his physique.

Unfortunately the descriptions for the buildings were quite short, and both options came with a risk. He had no idea how skills worked and what they would cost. Buying a Nexus Node might be a complete waste of coins at this stage when every advantage was important. On the other hand he didn't know if the plan for training even worked with the system.

After some hesitation he finally turned his eyes towards the array.

Chapter 17: Eye of Discernment

Zac sat in front of the camp fire, and with a blank silent stare he slowly rotated a spit placed above it. The suns were setting over his small outpost, and the surroundings had a subdued silence. On the spit was the leg of a rabbit he had caught earlier today. The rabbit had actually grown to the size of a human, so the meat would last for a while.

Tomorrow would mark the 29th day since the world changed. If Hannah or even his family were to see him now they likely would likely barely recognize him.

The once neat beard of his was now an uneven mess. There even was one patch almost completely missing after a Barghest's claw had cut his face during a particularly intense melee. His hair was even worse, now a mess of uneven cuts. During one of his fights he had gotten hair in his eyes, and the distraction had caused him to almost get disemboweled. He had fought the Gwyllgi half-blinded while using one hand to hold his innards in place. After the fight he had simply taken his hatchet to his head and cut off as much hair as he could without scalping himself.

He had run out of shirts last week, and now used a mix of torn rags to cover himself. Underneath those rags was some makeshift protection he had made from leather he had cured. He had begun by making some bracers for his legs and arms, and a basic heart protector out of the snake skin he had dried over his car. Over time he had found another snake and even a crocodile on a shore, and had turned those into leather as well.

Now he was decked from feet up to a throat protector in pieces of leather, all tied together with strings or sinew. It was an extremely shoddy work, making his whole body looked like a piecemeal patchwork of different animal body parts. It also

took almost 30 minutes to take on and off, as there were quite a few knots he had to tie to get it to stay on during a whole day.

Most days he couldn't be bothered as he had been out hunting the whole day, and simply fell asleep while still wearing the gear. The combination of high endurance and vitality seemed to protect him from any shaping or bruises from the coarse leather anyway.

All in all he looked like a completely insane hobo and would likely be arrested if he arrived in a real city, based on his appearance alone. Zac couldn't be bothered about that though, as almost a month of living on the edge of death had given him a far more utilitarian mindset.

Zac cracked his neck, nowadays barely being bothered by the constant 10 times gravity field that enveloped the whole camp. After his first day of grinding he had bought the **[F-Grade Small Scale Gravity Array]** and placed it at a corner of the camp. It had actually proven effective, and he had incorporated a workout in high gravity into his daily schedule. Soon after he even slept in high gravity, and by now he always had the array cranked to the max over the whole camp.

Its effect had been above his expectations. He had gained a whole 5 strength, 2 dexterity, 6 endurance, and 2 vitality from just training his body. His endurance had increased the quickest, rising up 6 points in just two weeks. He had calculated that he had 4 base endurance before the system earlier, and now it was 10. However after it reached 10 it stopped increasing at all. He saw a similar effect on his strength. He gained 3 points quite quickly, bringing his base strength to 10. After that he still had gotten two points, but those points took an extreme effort.

He had also gained dexterity and vitality, but he guessed that those points actually came from combat rather than the array. Getting hurt over and over had improved his vitality slower, and dodging an endless amount of beasts had improved his dexterity.

Zac guessed that the reason for his quick improvements wasn't only the array. There now was a large amount of cosmic energy in the air, and it felt like just breathing it in slowly improved his health. He suspected that humans would slowly grow healthier in this atmosphere, provided that they didn't get killed of course. A quick look at his status showed that his stats had improved quite a bit over the last weeks.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

23

Race

Human

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I

Strength

59

Dexterity

39

Endurance

42

Vitality

48

Intelligence

29

Wisdom

29

Luck

44

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

5 562

Unfortunately he had not reached his goal even with his gathering array and frenzied carnage across the island. He had hoped to get to level 25 and get a class before the month was over. The advice of the Stargazer still lingered in his head. She had told him to finish the quest of conquering the incursion within a month. He still hadn't found any clues as to what would happen after the month passed, and he hoped he wouldn't have to find out.

Gaining levels had proven harder and harder over time, and he had finally reached level 23 today after 4 days of relentless killing. He had even used almost all his points and spent a whopping 75 000 Nexus Coins on upgrading his Mother-Daughter Gathering Array to E-grade. This upgrade had substantially increased the amount of cosmic energy he absorbed daily through his amulet.

It was clear to Zac however that the most effective method of getting stronger was to actually battle and kill enemies. If he would split up the cosmic energy he absorbed daily it would be a 90/10 split, and that was with the E-grade array. If he compared with his old F-grade array it would be 95/5 or even lower. Grinding monster and absorbing their energy was simply far more effective, at least with his resources.

It did however make him think about the elite of the multi-verse. He had made over a hundred thousand Nexus Coins just

by grinding low level monsters around the first month. Abby had said that the multi-verse was hundreds of millions year old. There were surely some extremely wealthy individuals and organizations. What if they gave every child an A-grade, or even S-grade array from birth? They would be higher level than him before even learning to talk.

Those things were too far away from him though, he needed to focus on the present. Even though he hadn't reached his goal of getting a class, he still planned to try finishing the quest the following two days.

Zac carved a chunk of meat from the rabbit leg and stuck it to a fork. He then walked over to the Nexus Node while gnawing the gamey meat. Zac looked at the list of available things on it daily hoping for something new to pop up every day since the day he bought it. He knew he would be disappointed once again. The skills available were too expensive for him, and the inventory hadn't changed so far.

The only skill that was in his price range was called [**Eye of Discernment**]. And he had already bought it for the price of 20 000 Nexus Coins. When he had bought it a stream of energy had entered his head, and new information suddenly formed like an ingrained memory. It was the manual for the skill.

The purchase had taught him a bit about how skills worked with the System. Having a skill did not mean you could simply use it as you wanted. For a skill to work he needed to actually move the cosmic energy built up in his body towards his eyes. From there he had to imprint the image of a specific fractal on his eyes. The fractal was the same type of pattern that were on the array flags he had bought earlier.

Zac had tried furiously to move the energy around in his body for days. He had felt that his cells were imbued with this extra power, but he had a hard time actually doing anything with it. Finally after days of trying he had found a solution.

While sitting in the gravity array he had imagined a separate set of veins spread all through his body like his circulatory system. In these veins only cosmic energy flowed. He was

surprised that it actually worked, and a stream of his cosmic energy slowly started traveling along the paths he had imagined.

It took a few days more to learn to keep the circulation going even when not actively focusing on it. Finally he tried gathering cosmic energy on his eyes to imprint the fractal of the skill. This part went smoother than expected, as he had an extremely precise design in his memory thanks to the Nexus Node.

As soon as he wanted to use the skill he only needed to focus a small amount of cosmic energy to flow into the fractals on his eyes, and it would activate immediately.

Zac was quite glad that the System did not require people to shout out the skill's name like a lunatic.

The **[Eye of Discernment]** was a basic eye skill that essentially worked like an identify- or spy-skill from a video game. It let Zac glean some basic information on certain things.

It was this skill that had let him know that the stocky 6-legged demons he had fought ad nausea the last month was actually called a Barghest, and the zombie-looking greyhound monster was a Gwyllgi.

The imps were actually just called Lower Imps, and they had taught him another valuable lesson when using the **[Eye of Discernment]** on them. Even though he had used it from the cover of some bushes the imp had felt the skill being used on it. It reacted by immediately throwing a fireball at the bush he was hiding in, leading to another desperate fight.

The memory of that fireball still filled him with some trepidation as he stared into the fire, slowly finishing his meal.

Chapter 18: Cosmic Energy

Actually, apart from teaching him the names of his different enemies, the most important thing the skill had taught him was something completely different.

Zac had thought that the stats represented a static change in his prowess, and to a certain degree he was right. He was far stronger now compared to before thanks to the stats. But there was more to it. Learning to circulate his cosmic energy had opened up a whole new world for him.

At first he had simply focused on learning the skill. But afterwards he had started experimenting with the cosmic energy in his body, and had come to some astonishing conclusions. He could actually force more cosmic energy into different parts of his body, strengthening them. For example he could force energy into his arm and back muscles when swinging his hatchet, which resulted in a far more powerful swing.

Forcing energy into his legs would increase his speed and he had even managed to imbue his skin for a while, making it more durable. There were many different venues to utilize it, and he likely only had figured out a few. The strengthening wasn't limitless, however. It acted as a multiplier on his base stats, but the multiplier was limited. After some experimentation he had realized he could output almost twice his normal power while circulating his energy into a specific part of his body.

He had gone above this amount once, which had resulted in being incapacitated for days. He had tried increasing the amount of energy in his arms too much in order to perform a particularly mighty swing. His muscles couldn't withstand that much cosmic energy forced into them, and ruptured into a fountain of blood. It reminded him of a balloon. If he blew too

much air into it, it would pop. Same with his body and cosmic energy.

The experiment had left him lying weakly in base for three days, only being able to train with the amulet and the gravity array for some minor gains.

The second conclusion was that his usage of cosmic energy was limited. The more he circulated his energy and empowered himself, the more drained he would feel. When empowering himself to the limit he only lasted a few minutes before he was completely spent.

The energy used in empowerment was consumed, and he would need to gather more from the environment in order to get back into fighting condition. His amulet helped him recover faster. But when the amulet focused on replenishing consumed cosmic energy, it did not actually work towards increasing his level.

In other words using empowered strikes or skills would slow his leveling speed, as some of the cosmic energy gained would be used on replenishment. So it was a trade-off between long term gains and short-term burst of power.

The final realization was that his method likely was extremely cost-ineffective. When he used his identification skill, the cosmic energy entered the fractals that somehow existed in his eyes. The fractal both enabled using the specific skill, but also made usage of cosmic energy more effectively.

Far less energy was wasted when the energy was focused with the fractal. If cosmic energy could be considered a raw material like crude oil, then the fractal refined it into something better and more efficient.

Zac guessed a combat-oriented skill would work in the same way. He would gain new fractals which he could use to waste less cosmic energy while fighting, and also gain a higher power than simply channeling raw cosmic energy into his arms. Unfortunately even the cheapest of the options cost 150 000 Nexus coins, which was far out of his current price range.

Zac finished his meal, and scooped up a glass of water from the pit where he had placed a water gathering array. The bottled water he and his friends had brought had ran out two weeks ago, and the closest fresh water was close to the incursion. Luckily the System had a cheap solution, namely the [**Small Scale Water gathering Array**], which slowly gathered moisture from the air to create a roughly ten liters of drinking water per day.

For the first time in weeks he turned off the gravity array when he went to sleep. He needed to be completely rested, as tomorrow he would assail a Herald.

Zac had wrestled with himself whether to actually go through with it or not the last few days. At times he felt it would be safer for him to simply grind for a few more weeks, get a class and skill before going after the big bosses.

He had however noticed a very worrying trend over the last few days. The beasts in the forest were getting more powerful. The demon hounds were getting even faster, and the barghest were getting stronger. He had actually seen one charge straight through a tree. The barghests had been completely incapable of such a feat just a week ago.

This made him form a hypothesis. The beasts were slowly getting stronger, and maybe they would gain a power spike once each month. That was what the Abby the eye was indirectly warning him about.

He didn't think that the Incursion summoned stronger demons, but rather that they were strong from the start, but was somehow restricted. That was because he didn't actually get more cosmic energy or Nexus Coins from killing the empowered beasts compared to the old weaker ones.

It made him once again think about how the system seemed to operate. It rewarded people who dared take risks and strove to improve. That was shown through the title system, and also Abby's comments.

Perhaps this was a gift from the system. If someone dared leave the tutorial village to kill magical monsters at incursions they'd be rewarded with the cosmic energy and Nexus Coin

that generally was given out by far stronger beasts. Like an XP-boost from a MMORPG game.

Or perhaps the demons simply weren't adapted to Earth's atmosphere. He always imagined in his head that these beasts came from some lava world full of fire and brimstone. He really had no idea which was correct, but his days in solitude allowed him to conjure endless theories.

Furthermore, with risk also comes reward. What Abby meant with her last comment might be related to the quest.

[Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (1/5)]

The last reward was a unique building depending on performance. He guessed that the better performance the higher ranked the building he would receive was. He was by now well aware both how powerful some buildings were, but also how extremely expensive they were. He had scoured through the registry for weeks after all.

Getting a good grade might greatly help him later, provided that he actually survived this ordeal.

So it was with a mix of self-preservation and greed he had grit his teeth and finally decided to assail the first of the Heralds tomorrow, even if he wasn't at the power level he'd like. The last few days he had scouted his target out, and he thought he had a fighting chance after observing it.

He woke up with the dawn of light the next day, and after his preparations he immediately set out. He had limited time until his self-imposed time limit. Depending on how the fight went, he might try to kill a second Herald today as well.

He walked through the forest with practiced ease, avoiding twigs and roots while still keeping a high tempo. The forest had changed considerably during the past weeks. It had grown extremely lush, gaining almost a primordial unsullied air. The trees had grown more robust, and the undergrowth was varied with both bushes, vines and a medley of flowers.

He did not know where they had come from, but it seemed that there were far more critters and other animals as well roaming both the forest floor and up in the crowns. However it always was quiet around his camp lately, as if the animals instinctively avoided his domain.

Zac made a beeline towards the western central area from the southern edge where his camp was located. During his excursions in the past weeks he had actually found the second herald, while last two still eluded him. He guessed that one of them resided in the mountains though, as it seemed that each Herald lorded over a cardinal direction of the Incursion. He hadn't ventured into the mountain as of yet, as he had his hands full grinding monsters closer to home.

The unlucky Herald Zac had obliterated with a lucky roll had been in the southern part of the island. Zac had occupied the domain of the herald in a sense. That had explained why there were relatively fewer demons close to his base, as it was far from the lairs of the three remaining Heralds.

Chapter 19: Vul

Even though Zac moved like a specter through the woods he couldn't always avoid fights. A barghest was lying hidden behind a few bushes, and noticed Zac before he could reroute around it.

It immediately got up and without hesitation charged upon him.

Zac was completely unfazed by the oncoming beast, and circulated a small amount of cosmic energy through his body down to his legs. With a quick step he avoided the beast at the last second, giving it no time to adjust. He then followed up with a vicious swing down the throat of the passing beast. The barghest would have been decapitated had it not been for the limited size of Zac's hatchet.

Instead he tore a huge gash that severed both muscles and jugulars from the top and then continued until exiting down on the bottom, resulting in the head barely staying on.

The demon continued for a few meters before collapsing with a thud. Zac continued on while going over the state of the axe. By now he had killed hundreds of barghests and the recent fight barely registered in his mind, even with the power-up of the beast. Even if the barghests had become stronger, they still were the most common and stupid of the monsters on the island.

The empowered Gwyllgi that focused on speed were far more annoying to deal with. He still had a hard time dealing with them without getting a cut somewhere.

When looking over the hatchet he couldn't help feeling a sour lump in his throat. The axe was in a state of disrepair with scratches all over. The head had become a full two centimeters shorter from repeated sharpening against rocks. Zac knew the only reason the weapon still somewhat held together was that

it was made from a solid piece of steel. Still, the shaft had started to bend, showing the strain it had been put under.

The combination of Zac's superhuman strength and the hardness of demon bones had slowly warped the metal. He was quite worried, as he did not know what he'd do when his weapon finally broke. He would be able to buy a shop and hopefully get a weapon that way when he finally upgraded the outpost to a town. But until then there simply seemed to be no weapons on the island.

Zac sighed and continued on his way.

He barely used any energy during the fight, only enhancing himself for a few seconds. With the help of the gathering array he would be topped off again within a minute.

Zac kept stalking through the woods like death incarnate. Anything that was foolish enough to attack him was quickly ended with a swing.

He had initially been afraid that his daily excursions would be found out by the demons, but after a few days of observation he was quite content knowing he was safe as long as he did not hunt too close to the Heralds.

Every day new monsters would appear in the woods, likely summoned through the Incursion. More astonishingly, the demons killed each other far more than Zac killed them. He had lost count of the times that he had found a demon hunkered over a corpse of the same race, feasting on its carcass. There seemed to be simply no familiar affection between the demons. That Zac was responsible for a small part of the deaths seemingly went by completely unnoticed.

Finally he arrived at the area where he had spotted the Herald earlier. He immediately became more alert of his surroundings, not wanting to create a stir with his target so close. He soon found the target, and it wasn't hard to notice.

The Herald was huge.

[Vul, Level 45]

That was all the information that the **[Eye of Discernment]** gave him. Either his mastery over the skill was too low to

show more information, or the skill was simply too basic.

It at least showed that its level was over twenty levels higher than his. He did not know whether Vul was its name or its race. His skill had only showed the race when fighting the random beasts in the forest, but here it also showed a level. The system somehow made a distinction between this herald and the other demons.

He was leaning towards the theory that Vul was a name, because the monster clearly looked a lot like a barghest. If a Barghest had been supercharged. Instead of three pairs of legs it had four, with the additional being positioned closer to the hind legs.

'Does that mean that it's a spider rather than an insect...' Zac mused with a dark sense of humor while looking over the beast.

Vul was also far larger than its Barghest brethren. If a normal barghest could reach up to Zac's chest with its head then this monster was a full head taller than him. It was even larger than a bear, and from its oversized muscles looked that the bear would rather be prey than a competitor.

Just like the normal demon dogs it had an oversized head with an abyssal maw, with three rows of sinister fangs lining it. With its size the monster could easily fit both Zac's head and torso in its mouth for a quick bite. The paws which looked like talon had the same three long claws attached, but on Vul they were as long as small kitchen knives.

It seemed to be the alpha of the barghest pack, although it didn't seem very interested in anything except lazing about and eating.

Zac had observed the monster from a distance a few times the last week, and had also realized that it not only was larger, but it was also a bit smarter. Certainly, it was still a meathead, but he had noticed some burgeoning intelligence from its actions. It luckily didn't seem overly alert, as Zac had used the **[Eye of Discernment]** on it without any reaction.

Perhaps only magically inclined beings such as the imps could actually notice being screened by the skill.

He knew his customary method of killing a demon dog would not work with this monster, it simply was too large a risk. He had gotten swiped almost countless times the last month, each time having a new wound to show for it. A similar swipe from this monstrosity could instantly end him if unlucky, and he was not ready to take that chance.

He slowly eased back into the vegetation after ascertaining the Herald's position. Taking down a beast like this would take some strategy.

Zac slowly made his way a few hundred meters away where his final piece of the puzzle lay hidden. Luckily Vul mostly stayed in the same area except for when it went on patrols in random directions.

He finally reached his destination, a particularly lush bush that had a thick leafy crown that was roughly the same height as Zac himself. After glancing around he gingerly made his way into the bush.

Inside there were four trunks of trees, each roughly three meters long and almost as thick as his thigh. One end of the tree was sharpened into a point. They looked as if they were made to form a palisade, but the real purpose was monster hunting.

The spear he had used the first time he hunted broke on the first demon, so he had learned his lesson.

During his weeks of fighting he had found a type of tree which had a dark trunk but white-grey veins. He hadn't recognized it and had tried to cut down a branch with a swing of his hatchet, and to his surprise he found that the tree was extremely dense and hard.

Cutting down the trees to make the four supersized spears had tired him out even with his superior physique.

He gingerly dug roughly half a meter deep holes with some distance from each other, then placed the wooden stakes into them at a slanted angle. He had placed them so that the spear

tips were hidden within the bush at roughly 150 to 180 centimeter height. Finally he covered the holes and placed down secondary smaller stumps beneath the stakes, so that they wouldn't tip over from their own weight before they could be used.

This was the only trap he could figure out that could help in his fight against the huge beast. The only other idea he had come up with was to dig a pitfall. But he did not have the tools for the massive undertaking of digging a pit large enough to trap and kill a monster the size of a large minivan.

He took one more glance at the bush to inspect his work. He would only get one shot at this and didn't want anything to give it away before it was too late.

Satisfied with his work, he finally turned towards the Herald and started walking.

Chapter 20: Fighting the Herald

Zac had slowly inched his way back toward the Herald. It was currently lying on a rock, and it was actually eating a Gwyllgi it had caught somewhere.

All eight of its legs except the front pair were lying in the same side, exposing its back toward Zac. He was currently crouching behind a tree only five meters away from the huge barghest. He barely dared to breathe in fear of being exposed too early. He couldn't get any closer without entering an open area and getting completely exposed.

Zac's heart was beating furiously, and his hands were nervously shaking. It was one thing to make plans and preparation, but a completely different thing to actually turn those plans into action. Now that he was this close it was as though he could sense a primal pressure emanating from the beast.

He knew he couldn't wait any longer, as this was a golden opportunity. The beast was feeding and was distracted. If he kept waiting he would miss his chance, and also tire himself out by stressing and fretting.

Zac soundlessly got to his feet and circulated cosmic energy through his body. Wasting no time he pumped his leg full of energy, and shot toward the exposed Herald like a bullet. His hatchet fell with an empowered swing, striking down at the lower spine of the beast. He was hoping to use the same tactic as he had in the beginning of killer Vul's smaller brethren.

The axe sunk into the back of the beast, but it felt like he had tried to chop through reinforced steel when he reached the bone of the spine. His plan had failed, as it ended up as only a flesh wound. His right arm ached from the impact, but he

quickly adapted and swung down and created a deep gash down along its side.

He planned to strike its belly as well and hopefully damage some organs, but a thundering roar interrupted him. The Herald had finally reacted, and with a jerk pushed back with all its legs, forcing its whole body toward Zac.

The monster's back slammed into Zac like a truck and he flew a few meters backwards, and he spit out a mouthful of blood.

As he got up, so did the Herald. Suddenly they stood facing each other and a low growl emitted from the beast's mouth. Its wound was bleeding freely, but didn't seem that it had incapacitated it at all.

Rage was burning in the beast's beady eyes, and it let out another tremendous roar that seemed to cause the very air to vibrate.

Zac wasted no time, and immediately ran into the forest. He wanted to make use of the complicated terrain to keep the large lumbering beast at bay. He kept infusing his body with energy, not daring to let up. The sounds of loud thuds and branches breaking from behind proved that the herald was hot on his heels.

Zac was dismayed to find out that the terrain didn't seem to impair Vul even through its huge size and stocky build. It was far more nimble than the barghest, even though it seemed even bulkier than its smaller brethren. Finally he tried to use another tried and true trick, and ran straight towards a thick maple. He could hear that the beast was ever closing in on him, and now only were a few meters away from him.

This was a test of sorts against the herald, to see if it would fall for this simple trick. He had his doubts about it after observing it, and didn't want to blow his best shot for killing it. He therefore held off on running straight towards his pikes.

He waited until the last minute until finally jumping to the side and dodged the tree. He turned around mid-air, hoping to take advantage of the beast knocking itself out.

Unfortunately for Zac, a herald was appointed a leader for a reason. Zac's suspicions about the herald's superior intellect proved true as he saw the beast's reactions.

Noticing the incoming tree, the Herald stopped in his tracks with his front legs, while he sidestepped away from Zac's direction with the hind legs. Its front legs carved a deep groove for a few meters before it stopped, while it changed angle to point toward Zac. This resulted in the beast still moving towards the tree, but it instead slammed into it with its shoulders rather than its head.

Due to the breaking the slam seemed to enrage the beast further rather than hurt it. It hadn't lost much time from the slam, and now Zac was in a precarious situation.

The beast immediately jumped towards him, its huge jaws trying to rip him in two from his chest.

Flustered Zac rolled on the ground down in between the beast's leg, hoping to gain access to the more vulnerable belly. He knew now he needed to thoroughly enrage the beast so that it would blindly charge through the bushes and into his palisade. He was now in an awkward position in between the front legs, and could only rely on cosmic energy to generate force in his swings.

He slammed the hatchet up into the torso of the beast a few times, hoping to puncture a lung. It was effective, as a stream of blood showered him, and the monster elicited a painful yelp. He only had time for a few swings though, as he suddenly was slammed on his left side by a kick. Zac flew away once again like a ragdoll, and this time he felt that he had broken at least a rib as breathing felt like getting stabbed.

He could only grit his teeth and circulate more cosmic energy to keep his injuries in check. He was already starting to run dangerously low, and fatigue was starting to set in.

He kept running toward his trap, but still afraid to run into it. The beast was enraged, but it still hadn't lost its reasoning completely, and Zac was afraid that it would notice the trap. Then he would be well and truly screwed.

He needed at least one more effective assault.

The Herald was soon upon him again, this time swiping with its front paw, hoping to catch Zac in its claws. Zac could only frantically dodge and jump out of the direction. He tried to get a swing in every now and then to hurt its legs, but it largely proved ineffective. He had hit true a few times, but only some flesh wounds were created.

Zac once more tried a riposte after dodging a swing, but this time a large head closed in with extreme speed. The Herald tried to chomp off his arm during his swing.

Zac quickly retracted his arm, and it was almost too late. The maws closed a fraction of a second too late, allowing Zac's arm to disengage. His hatchet wasn't as lucky however, and the monster chomped down on the head. A crunch was heard and when Vul opened its maw again to try to take another bite the axe was released.

The already worn axe was now completely deformed, and had essentially turned into a stick with scrap metal on top. The edge was gone and instead it more resembled a mace now with some random sharp edges.

A flame of rage ignited in Zac's eyes when he saw his trusty companion being completely ruined by the Herald, and he completely forgot about safety. With a roar he stopped backing away, and instead forced most of his remaining cosmic energy into his right arm and legs. With a desperate lunge he jumped straight for the Herald, surprising it for a split second. That was all he needed as Zac plunged the Scrap weapon into the left eye of the beast.

The demon forcefully jerked backward from the pain, for a second standing only on its back legs, reaching an impressive 3-4 meters in height. Pained yelps quickly transitioned into roars of blazing fury, and Vul stomped down towards Zac, trying to flatten him like a pancake.

Zac had no time to care about his beloved hatchet being stuck in the eye of the monster, and started a mad dash away from the beast. He saw that the monster was completely and utterly raving with anger and pain right now, so this was his chance.

He focused the last of his energy in maximizing his speed as he dashed the last distance toward the trap. The Herald was hot in pursuit, not caring about anything anymore, completely smashing through any smaller rocks or trees that was in its path.

Finally he reached the bushes where the poles were hidden, and by now the huge beast was right in his heels. Zac could even feel the heat from its maw. Zac simply dove through the bushes headfirst, making sure to keep a height below that of the placed spears in order to not skewer himself.

It was with great relief Zac could sense that the Herald thundered straight into the bushes right behind him, intending to simply rip through it.

As Zac landed on the ground he felt a huge impact behind him which caused the ground to tremble.

One of the trees had struck the Herald straight in its chest, entering at least a meter and impaling it where it stood.

The beast shuddered and let out a miserable roar which echoed in the surroundings. Blood was flowing out of its mouth like a waterfall, drenching both Zac and the surroundings. It immediately started wildly thrashing around, unheeding of its wounds. The contraption couldn't take the weight and almost immediately collapsed.

Even if it was almost blinded and bleeding out, the Herald wouldn't go quietly, as it incessantly wailed and thrashed about. One of the swings hit Zac square on his left arm, punching him down in the ground before he could get out of the way. A loud crack could be heard, and Zac almost passed out from the pain.

It followed up with a few frantic swipes with its claws, which rent long gashes all along his back while he helplessly lay on his stomach beneath the impaled beast.

Luckily for Zac the thrashing didn't continue for too long, as a huge amount of cosmic energy entered him. Some helped replenish a small part of his severely depleted reserves, while most worked toward leveling him up.

The surroundings felt extremely quiet after the sounds of battle had subsided. He lay panting on the ground, and couldn't help smile with bloodied teeth. He'd done it.

But just as Zac felt elated over his victory, a responding roar echoed in the distance. And then another, and suddenly the forest was filled with a cacophony of bestial roars.

Backup was coming.

Chapter 21: Hurt

Zac only knew pain as he pushed forward through the forest, not even knowing if he went in the right direction. From all directions he could hear roars from different beasts closing in. His consciousness was hazy, and he only moved on instinct by now. He had been fleeing for a while since being forced to run from the roars in the forest. He had only had time to yank the mangled hatchet out of the Herald's eye socket before using the little cosmic energy he had to speed away.

A crash was heard to his left and a barghest bounded toward him to intercept his flight. He intuitively tried to dodge but his feet did not listen to his commands, and he fell over. It was lucky too for Zac as the demon dog flew straight over his fallen form.

Zac numbly got to his feet and continued on. Soon the barghest had managed to run around and came toward him again. The scant cosmic energy in Zac's body circulated as he suddenly turned toward the demonling and with a growl swung his mangled hatchet down in a mighty overhead arc.

The strike hit clean on the beast's forehead, slamming the maw closed and its head into the ground. The power was so strong that its thick cranium cracked and both blood and brain matter covered the axe. The beast was stopped right in its track and lay on the ground convulsing

Zac had no time to finish off the beast as a movement in his periphery made him instinctively swing outward. The axe head hit a dark shape and elicited a pained yelp. It was a Gwyllgi which had planned to take advantage of the fight and strike a finishing blow at his head. Unfortunately for the hound, this had happened dozens of times by now and a response had been engraved in Zac's subconscious by now.

The Gwyllgi fell down, likely with a few broken ribs from the impact of the axe. It had hit the beast with its blunt side, but with Zac's power and cosmic energy such a strike was still lethal if positioned correctly. Zac wasted no time and finished it off with another swing down on its head.

The physical exertion worsened his wounds even more, and he suddenly puked out a mouth of blood with chunks of something else.

But he didn't stop. Zac drugged on almost like a zombie, felling any foolish oncoming beasts in an eye-for-an-eye type of disregard for his own body.

After either a few minutes or a few hours the onslaught of demons had ended, a familiar sight jolted his almost dormant consciousness awake. It was a large oak standing solitary in a glade, with an assortment of flowers strewn across the ground. The sight gave almost a spiritual impression, like the oak was a spirit tree of some woodland elves.

And more importantly, this tree actually represented salvation for Zac. He shakily put his axe into his belt, and started to slowly climb the tree. His left arm didn't quite respond, and he had to arduously move upwards with his right arm and legs. On a normal day he could be at the top of the tree in seconds, but now it felt like climbing a mountain.

He had completely run out of cosmic energy, and it felt like each cell in his body had been completely wrung out. Every movement was powered by force of will rather than anything else.

Finally he was roughly five meters above the ground, and crawled up on what looked like a plateau. It was three sturdy branches that grew in a close proximity in a row, with the middle branch grew slightly lower. They had together had formed almost an enclosure. Along the branches there were vines wired to make walls and flooring, and finally some cut of branches full of leafy growth had been placed around to insulate and hide the enclosure.

It was one of the many camps Zac had created over the last few weeks. Every time he found a tree, a cave, or some other

natural formation that could be turned into a secluded resting stop he had stopped and turned it into a camp.

One never knew when one had to hide from beasts or wouldn't be able to get back to camp, so he had prepared these as a precaution.

Zac slumped down on the blanket of leaves that were placed on the middle branch and dragged out a bottle of water placed next to the trunk. It had been placed by him there when building the hideout. He greedily drank half the bottle before the pain in his ribs simply stopped him from continuing. Finally he could take it no longer, and drowsily closed his eyes and passed out.

He spent the next few days stuck in the tree. For the most part he had slept, as he had problems staying awake when he was so utterly drained of cosmic energy. His amulet helped, but it seemed it would take a few days for him to recharge.

Even though he had survived, it did not feel like a victory anymore. The glorious feeling from right after the kill was long gone. He was incapacitated from pain and blood loss, and even with his high vitality it would take time to heal. His left arm was broken and possibly a few ribs as well, and the large gashes that crossed his whole back felt inflamed. Every time he moved different parts of his body screamed in protest, and he could only helplessly stay in the tree.

It was first after three days that he felt strong enough to get ready to head down. He could actually move his arm somewhat, but he wouldn't try putting any force on it yet.

By now he was ravenously hungry, and couldn't wait to get back to his camp. He hadn't left any food in the small tree hideout, and had actually resorted to eating leaves and acorns the last two days. He had no idea if it was poisonous, but it felt like he had no options. Since his body had gotten stronger from the system he also had to eat a lot more compared to before. That's why the food he and his friends had prepared had run out in only one week instead of two.

It was with a tinge of bitterness he prepared to get back. The three day convalescence unfortunately meant that he had failed

in his goal, as the deadline of finishing within a month passed yesterday.

He still had two more heralds to kill, and also the general which he still hadn't seen. He could only hope that he had been paranoid, and that nothing bad had happened now that a month had passed. He was however quite disappointed that he might have missed out on some extremely powerful building awarded for a quick completion of the quest.

Zac guessed that he would find out during the coming days, and it was no point to ruminate over it now.

He slowly got down from the tree after making sure no beasts were in the vicinity and started making his way back towards his camp.

Zac tried to glean if anything had changed on the island since the deadline had passed, but he could find no indication of that happening. The two suns still shone in the sky, and the malevolent pillar of energy from the incursion still glared in the distance. It did seem to have intensified somewhat, but Zac wasn't sure if it wasn't just his imagination.

The oak he had stayed in the last days were close to the edge of the island, in the western direction, and it would take a some hours to get back to his camp.

This time he walked carefully as he felt he was in no condition to fight any demons. Especially not if they had gotten empowered even further.

His axe was for all intents and purposes now simply a blunt weapon after the herald had slammed down on it. Killing monsters now would require a higher energy expenditure than before as he couldn't simply bleed them out with a quick swing.

So it was with great care Zac made his way through the familiar forests until he suddenly heard rustle in the bushes ahead.

He immediately crouched down and hid behind a tree and some bushes while trying to see what lay ahead. After a quick glance he almost instinctively got up and shouted out to get

attention, as what he saw was three people slowly making their way through the forest.

Luckily he managed to stop himself in time as he noticed a jarring discrepancy; the people had horns.

Chapter 22: Scouts

Azzun walked through the forest with his two companions, irritably swatting branches and flies away. It was his first time off-world, and the change in climate was jarring. He missed the soothing monochromatic environment of his clan. Now the only reminder of the familiar red was the incursion in the distance.

Of course they knew that being able to invade a newly integrated world was a great opportunity. The House of Arh'Rezak had celebrated for 10 days and sacrificed 10 000 slaves for luck when they had found out that they had actually managed to get a slot. They were only a medium sized clan in their sector, but this opportunity meant a chance to grow to a large clan. Maybe they could even gain enough resources to overthrow the regional Lord.

Everyone knew that that The Ruthless Heavens mainly opened up the passageways to introduce a challenge to the indigenous inhabitants of the planets. The Ruthless Heavens wanted to test if the original inhabitants were worthy to stay alive, and whether any powerhouses would emerge among them. That was why it let invaders through, but imposed limits on how strong they could be. The challenge needed to be hard, but possible to overcome.

Of course, most powers in the multi-verse was more than happy to be treated as a test by the System. The potential gain of both rare treasures and new domains to own far outweighed the potential sacrifice of some of their young and their untalented. It worked as a great training ground for their young elite, providing both an opportunity to lead, battle and gain precious resources.

The elders of the clan were even more ecstatic then they learned that the world had been given a D-rank classification. It was no secret that when the system integrated new worlds

the huge influx of energy could create all sorts of rare and invaluable treasures all over the fresh worlds. The higher the grade the new world was, the more treasures would appear. A fresh D-class planet wasn't top tier, but at least it was above average.

It usually wouldn't be the turn of some middling clan to get access to this type of smorgasbord. Normally some arch-daemon would have nudged the heavens and snatched it from them, but luckily the Great War was reaching a white-hot intensity. All the real powerhouses had their hands full, and couldn't focus on this matter even though the potential gain was great.

Azzun had grown up hearing stories of how even lowly imps and thralls had managed to turn into arch daemons after entering a fresh world. They had found some treasure or natural oddity that had helped them shed their lowly heritage and emerge as a powerhouse in their galaxy.

Of course, Azzun knew that even if some treasure was discovered, it wasn't his turn to enjoy it. They would all enter the greedy hands of their general. Even though the general couldn't be considered a top talent of their clan, he had managed to snag this great opportunity. He guessed it helped to have a Great Daemon as a great grandfather, who spoiled him rotten.

The old daemon had forcefully elected his only great grandson, Ogras Arh'Rezak to lead the incursion. Azzun and the rest had discovered his incompetence even before entering the new world.

Afraid that there would be a strong resistance on this world, and that losses of their forces would reflect badly on him, he had simply unleashed beast hordes to kill everything around the incursion for the first month. He had chosen four evolved beasts to lead their packs, and simply let them run loose without any supervision from a Beast Master or Tamer.

Even many of the elders had disapproved of such cowardice, but the great daemon quashed any dissention.

He only dared to enter when the first limiter was loosened. Everyone had been shocked to discover that both Ur'Khaz and Vul were dead when they finally arrived.

While neither were particularly strong, both were elites who had been chosen among the thousands of beasts to be leaders of the beast packs they sent through to clear the area. They were almost at the limit of what The Ruthless Heavens would allow to pass through the incursion, and it had cost the clan a fortune to send them through. They had been heavily nurtured and given many supplements to increase their physiques. After the restrictions lifted they would be like kings in a newly initiated world.

Ogras immediately further cemented his erratic leadership upon noticing this fact. He had simply called the Heralds trash for dying so easily, and was more focused on the construction of his palace than finding out the reason for their demise.

He had simply sent out a few scout parties, Azzun's group included, in order to gain information about the surroundings. Getting the order felt almost like a death sentence the unlucky scouts. If something in this forest could kill their alpha-beasts, how would they survive? They were only level 30 to 35 with common classes, the weakest of the army that had arrived.

However, they had no choice but to comply with the order. The hierarchy and rules were extremely strict. Both they and their families would have a miserable ending if that happened. They could only bitterly nod their heads and try to stay alive. He could only hope to garner some type of merit during their invasion, which would allow him and his family to live a bit more comfortably in the clan.

The blast of different colors around him felt stressful and disorienting, and even though they had been briefed on this type of terrain it was hard to adapt. They were in a constant state of un-ease, as they had no idea what might jump out from the bushes at any moment.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Azzun heard a subdued rustle, followed by a wet thud and grunt. He immediately drew

his weapon and turned around, only to see one of his companions topple over with a crushed skull.

Their assailant was already mid-swing toward his other companion, and she was killed before he managed to even react.

The attacker was a walking horror, completely red and covered in blood. Its body looked like a maze of crudely sewn together body parts and Azzun first thought was that the attacker was an Abomination or Ghoul from the Undead Hordes. If the world they attacked had an empire of the undead, their invasion would be a nightmare. There were few enemy factions in the multi-verse that were more annoying to battle than the undead.

He quickly discarded the idea when he noticed that the patchwork was actually an extremely rudimentary armor rather than its actual skin, and realized he was battling some manner of barbarian warrior.

He didn't have time to analyze the situation further, as the man attacked with a swing of his odd weapon. Azzun quickly lifted his war-axe to intercept the swing, but quickly regretted it when their weapons clashed.

Horried he realized the monstrous power that was contained in the swing, and he quickly circulated his cosmic energy and activated his defensive skill. An earthen layer quickly covered his arms and torso, and stabilized him. Thanks to his quick reactions he didn't break his arms, but the force still threw him down on the ground, and his defensive skill shattered.

Disoriented and hurting he threw a wide swing towards his enemy, but only hit air. He tried to get back on his feet and meet his attacker. He didn't get far however, before he felt a sharp pain in the back of his head, and then everything turned black.

Zac stood panting over the unconscious demon, a sheen of perspiration covering his face. The sweat came from pain rather than exertion, as his charge had opened up some of his

wounds. He finally dared to use his skill on the demon, which showed [**Azzun, Level 33**].

Luckily these demons didn't seem very strong even if they were higher leveled. He started to go through their bodies, and looted anything that seemed useful. He ended up carrying two sets of gear, and had two backpacks slung over his back.

He ignored the protests of his ribs, and then dragged the two looted corpses into the bushes and hid them there. He was too tired to bury them, and he didn't want to linger here too long. Hopefully some beast would sniff them out and eat them before their compatriots found them.

Zac was somewhat surprised with how calm he was with his actions. These three were clearly sentient beings, to the point that Zac had mistaken them for humans for a second. Still he had butchered them without any mercy or hesitation. He had been slaughtering nonstop for a month, but those had generally been beasts with the exception of the imps.

He had thought that he still would have some trepidation when dealing with humanoid beings but it seemed that something deep and primal had changed in him during the last month. He was harder and colder compared to before, and he felt that he likely wouldn't be able to go back to what he was.

Just as the world had changed, so had he.

Chapter 23: Do you Understand My words?

Zac sighed and slung the unconscious Azzun over his shoulder, and the action caused him to whimper in pain. He would have preferred to drag him, but he didn't want to leave a trail straight to his campsite.

He wasn't far away from home now, and slowly walked the last bit. When he was a hundred meters away from the camp, he stopped and put his captive down. After making sure that the demon was still unconscious but alive he got a few vines and tied him up. Then he slowly made a circle around the camp, looking for any sign that there had been foot traffic in the vicinity.

A drawback of the illusion array was that he had no idea if 10 demons were waiting inside his camp without him seeing it, so he wanted to make sure that his surroundings were undisturbed. He couldn't find any signs of anyone having walked through here lately, so he quietly skulked towards the camp, and took a peek inside illusion array.

Luckily the camp was undisturbed, so Zac went back and got his demon, and then walked back into the safety of the illusion array.

Finally back he let out a long sigh that had felt lodged in his chest for the past few days. A growl from his stomach reminded him he had only eaten nuts and leaves in the last days and he quickly went over to his car and snatched a handful of dried meat he had hung on a line between the trailer and SUV.

He sat down in his camper chair with a grimace, and started devour the meat while staring at his new captive.

He truly looked exotic, with a skin that was tinted in a greyish-red. The skin looked coarse and almost like a cross between scales and normal human skin. Red tattoos which reminded Zac of the fractals from the skills and arrays adorned his upper arms.

He was donned in a formfitting leather armor, which seemed to be made for an agile fighter or scout, rather than a dogfighter. It had vambraces inlaid with a metal plate which covered his forearms, but left the upper arms bare.

The chest plate was formed by a woven mesh of leather strips which seemed both pliable and durable. He had on a belt where he had kept his weapons until Zac stole them, and a pair of dark grey leather pants.

It wasn't only the craftsmanship that was far superior in the gear, the materials were as well. When zac tried to cut through the leather with one of his kitchen knives he couldn't even make a scratch, even after applying pressure. Zac assumed the leather came from some strong beast on the demon's home planet.

Oddly neither this demon nor the others wore any shoes, but after an inspection it made some sense. The demon's feet looked like a slimmer version of the barghest's taloned paws, with three sharp claws in the front.

Finally the pair of horns that had warned him from approaching them. They were a blood red color, and looked like an artist's rendition of fire. They started in his upper forehead, and was bent backwards along his skull. It looked like tongues of fire were reaching upwards along the horn.

It did not seem that they used them for goring enemies, rather it looked largely ornamental.

The demon was still out cold, so Zac took the opportunity to go over his status window while getting another helping of dried meat.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

25

Race

Human

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I

Strength

59

Dexterity

39

Endurance

42

Vitality

48

Intelligence

29

Wisdom

29

Luck

44

Free Points

4

Nexus Coins

14030

Active Quests:

- 1. Unlimited Potential (Normal): Reach level 25.
Reward: Unlock class system. (25/25) [COMPLETE]**

Dynamic Quests:

- 2. Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months.
Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**
- 3. Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)**

Zac had gained two levels from killing the Herald and the other monsters while escaping. From how thick the cosmic energy felt, he wasn't far from gaining another level either.

He also noticed that he had gained roughly 8000 Nexus coins from his attack on the Herald, and the subsequent escape. His quests had also been updated, with the quest called Unlimited Potential showed [COMPLETE] at the end. His demon slayer quest had just disappeared after completing, but Zac guessed that this quest remained as he still hadn't chosen a class.

Zac immediately placed 4 points into strength. He had noticed during the last month that each additional point in a stat had a greater effect than the earlier points. It was like the gains were exponential. This had made him feel that specialization was more highly rewarded compared to putting points in every stat.

Besides, with his large amount of titles all his stats were quite high in any case, affording him the opportunity to go deep in a specific attribute.

Since then he had put all his points from level ups into strength, unless he felt that some other stats was truly lacking.

He thought about placing some more points in vitality due to his condition, but discarded that idea after a brief hesitation.

He was extremely eager to choose a Class, but barely managed to contain himself. The reason was the unconscious captive in front of him.

Zac had already stumbled along for a long time, using guesstimation to guide his choices. He was hoping to use Azzun to get some answers about the system and many other things before he did something irrevocable to himself. He didn't even dare to touch the Nexus Node, as he was afraid some class change process would start that couldn't be stopped.

Zac felt a lot better after having finished his meal. With a grunt he got back to his feet, and filled a bottle with water from the water array.

He walked over to the demon and poured the contents over his face, resulting in the demon sputtering and waking up.

Azzun had a look of shock and horror on his face as he woke up to the sight of Zac, who still hadn't bothered to change or remove the blood that was caked all over him.

“So uh... I guess I am sorry about your friends. Do you understand my words?” Zac said with a coarse voice. He realized that those were essentially the first words he had spoken in weeks. In the beginning he had muttered and mumbled things to himself, but soon he had grown accustomed to the silence.

Zac didn't know if it was because of what he said, but the demon snarled and desperately tried to get himself free from the vines. Zac sighed and brandished his hatchet, and with a grunt he slammed it straight next to the tied up demon. It produced a loud thud, and a small crater was formed. Had he swung just a decimeter to his right then one of Azzun's leg would have been mutilated by now.

The demon immediately stilled, as it perhaps remembered the ending of his two companions thanks to the hatchet.

“Do you understand my words?” Zac repeated. He wasn’t really expecting the demon to actually speak his language, but rather that the system provided some translation feature. Language would be a pretty large issue if the system connected endless amounts of worlds.

The demon simply stared at him, then suddenly closed his eyes.

“Hello?” Zac prodded once again, unsure what the demon was planning. Suddenly Zac could sense how the cosmic energy in the surroundings started to move toward them, and the demon’s body started to shake.

Zac got a sinking feeling in his chest, and didn’t dare hesitate. He immediately swung his hatchet down on the skull of the demon, crushing it like he had done with the other two.

The body slumped down, and blood gushed out of his nose. Zac got a confirmation that the demon was dead from the influx of cosmic energy, but the uneasy feeling did not disappear. Suddenly the body started expanding, and Zac’s eyes went wide with alarm.

He barely managed to throw himself away and down on the ground, before the corpse exploded with a tremendous bang.

Zac slowly got up on his knees, disoriented and ears ringing. Somehow the demon seemed to have made the energy in his body go haywire and he actually had exploded like a bomb. The camp was in chaos, with the windows of the car having cracks all over, the closest had completely shattered. Things were thrown around haphazardly and there even was an indent on the exterior wall of the camper.

Luckily he had killed the demon in time, or he might have been able to gather even more energy and created a far more deadly explosion, wiping out both him and the camp.

‘These demons are going to be a pain.’ Zac thought with a grimace while looking at the mess.

Chapter 24: Class

Zac was slowly moving through the forest. Since the demon blew himself up he had been stealthily roving around the vicinity of the camp. The illusion array blocked sound to a certain degree, but he was afraid that the explosion would have bled through the protection and alerted other demons.

However, he had been moving around the camp in expanding circles for two hours now, and had seen no sight of any more of the demons. While he had been scouting he'd also taken the time to properly bury the two other demons. It wasn't to properly honor the dead, but rather to avoid the bodies getting discovered.

Finally satisfied that he had caught a lucky break and still wasn't found out, he returned to the camp.

He spent some time cleaning up the camp. Some of the loot from the demons unfortunately been destroyed by the explosion. He hadn't expected his captive to go nuclear as soon as he woke up, so Zac had simply thrown the gear down in a pile not far from him.

The bags seemed to have contained some vials which Zac supposed were either healing tinctures or poisons. The bags were still whole, but the vials had cracked. Inside was a mess of the different mixtures glass shards, and Zac certainly didn't want to rummage through it now.

The male's leather armor was ruined, but the female demon's suit underneath seemed intact. But most important was the weapon that Azzun had been carrying.

It was a one handed battle axe. It was much longer than his hatchet, reaching roughly 80cm. The head was single-headed, but with a sharp spike sticking out on the other side, perhaps for balance. The edge itself was a half-moon over 30 cm long.

Zac tried the edge with his thumb, and was surprised to see that he immediately started bleeding.

It was hard for a normal kitchen knife to cut his skin now without some effort, which showed just how deadly his new weapon was.

The handle was black and it appeared that it had some fractals carved onto them. However these fractals somehow seemed far more rudimentary compared to the ones on the array flags. Finally a strip of some unknown beast hide had been used to create a handle.

This clearly was a weapon for war, rather than a tool as his hatchet. If he had this thing during his fight with the Herald he might even have been able to kill it off with the initial charge.

Zac tried using [**Eye of Discernment**] on the weapon as the axe seemed to be somewhat related to the system with the pattern on the handle. However, it gave no response. Either the skill couldn't show information about items, or items didn't work like that. He had a feeling it was a problem with the skill, as it was by far the cheapest skill that Nexus Coins could buy. It would be odd if it was too versatile.

Apart from this, he had scrounged up a hooked sword, a couple of knives and various bracers and shin guards. There might be something else in the bags, but he would wait until the mess dried out. He didn't really care for the sword and left it to the side, but was delighted with the small knives. They were small and straight with edges on both sides of the blade, giving them excellent balance. He felt they were used for throwing and battle rather than skinning animals and the like.

They would be a great addition to his arsenal, as he was sorely lacking any ranged attack. Every time he wanted to kill an imp he had to hurl his axe on it or a bunch of rocks. But this would be a deadly alternative which didn't force him to throw away his main weapon. He already practiced throwing rocks and the axe for some time every day, and swapping to daggers shouldn't be too large an adjustment.

After going through the gear he finally couldn't wait any longer, and approached the Nexus Node. It was time for him to

get a class, no matter if it was the right choice or not. He pressed his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal, and mentally tried to access the class system.

A new box appeared in his vision with multiple rows.

[Top 5 Class choices]

[Warrior – F Grade, Common. Fledgling combatant. Proficient with melee weaponry. Upgradeable.]

[Acolyte – F Grade, Common. Fledgling wielder of the elements. Initial proficiency with elemental magic. Upgradeable.]

[Marine – F Grade, Uncommon. Lowest Ranked naval combatant. Proficient with battles at sea. Upgradeable.]

[Demon Hunter – F Grade, Uncommon. Having dedicated his life for the eradication of the Demonic Race, the Demon Hunter has attained a high proficiency in locating and eradicating anything of demonic nature. Upgradeable.]

[Hatchetman – F Grade, Rare. Their army is an endless forest and I’m the lumberjack. Upgradeable.]

[Random F-Grade Class. 92.9% Common. 5.0% Uncommon. 2.0 % Rare. 0.1% Epic. Roll the dice.]

That was all the information Zac could get out of the system. He tried to get a more in depth explanation with mental commands such as “Details” and “Info”, but the short excerpt was all he could go on.

The first thing he noticed that classes did not seem equal. All five choices did have the same grade, F- Grade, so it seemed everyone started at the same grade. They did however have different rarities, ranging from common to rare in his case.

He did not know how large a difference there was between the rarities, but he could only assume that a higher rarity class would be stronger than a low rarity one.

The second thing he noticed that all the classes were upgradeable. That likely meant that he could get stronger classes in the future, but they would be based on the class he chose now. It might be secondary classes or it might be

possible to change classes, but he had no information about this. He therefore had to make the choice under the assumption that his choice would influence his future trajectory to a large degree.

The third was that the available choices seemed to be at least partly based on his accomplishments.

The marine class was likely available because he was situated near an ocean. The Demon Hunter class came from killing demonic creatures non-stop since the System arrived.

He was not sure about the Hatchetman class, but he had used a lumberjack's hatchet for almost all his kills, so he assumed it might be based on that. But it was a combat class going by the description, rather than a woodworking class.

The last choice was a gamble. Even an Epic class was available, albeit only at a 0.1% chance. His luck stat might influence those odds, but it was unclear how. If each luck point increased his chance to get the Epic class by 1 point he wouldn't hesitate. He would roll the dice in a heartbeat. But he doubted it would be that easy, so he felt no need to use this option.

He already had a rare and two uncommon classes to choose from, so he had no reason to gamble. Besides, there might be classes that didn't help him in combat. What if he got a Rare Painter class from gambling? While it might be nice learning a new skill, it would not help him on the island.

He would therefore definitely choose one of the available classes.

First he eliminated Warrior. It seemed quite basic, and it felt like most other choices were better. Next he eliminated both Marine and Demon Hunter. He didn't like the prospect of limited boosts. He had no aspirations to live out the rest of the life on the high seas, so a water-centric class did not make sense to him.

He also didn't want to spend his life hunting demons. The Demon Hunter class might very well be the strongest class for him right now, as there still were demons infesting the whole

island. However, either he or the demons would be gone in two months, so it didn't make sense to pick this class either.

Abby had told him that the Multi-verse consisted of myriad classes. This meant that it wasn't like hell's gates had opened and the universe was being invaded by demons. They were just one of many potential enemies in the vast multi-verse. So even if he survived, he did not know if there were any other demons on Earth apart from in this particular incursion. Wouldn't that mean he essentially crippled himself by choosing a class that could only help him for the first few months?

Finally, it was an uncommon class. While it was better compared to the warrior and acolyte class, it was worse than the Rare class.

That left Acolyte and Hatchetman. Truth be told, he felt that Acolyte was the most intriguing. He did like the prospect of mastering the elements and firing fireballs and lightning bolts at his surroundings.

However, he felt there were drawbacks as well. For one he had no idea if he actually was able to learn spells just from getting the class. What if the basic spells normally were something you got in the tutorial? Also, he had invested most of his stats so far into physical attributes, which might be wasted on this class.

The only reason he could imagine he got this kind of class to choose was that he had gotten quite a bit of intelligence and wisdom from his titles. But he almost drooled at the aspect of upgrading the class until he became a grand magus, who could burn the sky with a sweep of his hand.

But most importantly it was only a common class. It felt like it was something that almost anyone could get in the future. Getting a common class when he had rare classes to choose from felt like wasting the advantage that his past month had provided him.

The system rewarded the brave and intrepid. The rare class seemed to be the rewards for risking his life every day against the demons.

Of course, Hatchetman sounded a bit stupid, to be honest. The connotation of the word from his professional career was anything but positive, but he felt that it had a somewhat different meaning here.

It seemed that it somehow referred to being a warrior lumberjack from the description. While not exciting, it did, however, check out a few of his boxes. The class probably would be very beneficial if he used his newly acquired axe in battle.

Out of all the choices, it also seemed to be the most tailored for his battle style. It also was the only Rare choice. He did not know how much better each rarity was compared to the one before, but perhaps the difference would be even greater compared to the conditional boost the Demon Hunter class would give against his current enemies.

The drawback was that he couldn't quite imagine what the upgrade path would be. Next upgrade was a... stronger lumberjack? A walking sawmill? A corporate shark doing hostile takeovers and selling companies for scraps?

So one of the choices seemed to be able to help him less now. But it might end up with him becoming a great wizard. He had always played mage classes when playing games, so this was quite enticing. It was however only a common class.

The other choice seemed to be more suited to his stats and direct power, but lead into an unknown future.

After a long hesitation he finally said good bye to the dream of arcane dominance, and chose the box marked [**Hatchetman**].

Chapter 25: Stronger

A strong surge of cosmic energy inundated Zac's whole body. It felt like his whole being was purified and reshaped. Instinctively he felt an enormous fractal imprinting itself and covered his whole being. However, most parts of the fractal was indistinct and blurred.

He also felt the powerful rush into his cells which indicated the improvement of his stats. Zac was completely oblivious of his surroundings as he was drowning in the sensations. Unfortunately the feeling didn't last long, and he soon came down from his rush.

From a first look he didn't feel that different, apart from his condition had improved significantly. It felt like his wounds had largely healed, even his broken arm.

But when he opened his status page he was shocked. His stats had made a great leap.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

25

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (F)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer

Strength

92

Dexterity

48

Endurance

51

Vitality

57

Intelligence

38

Wisdom

38

Luck

54

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

14690

All his stats had gained a jump of 9 points, except strength which had increased a whopping 28. As he had noticed that every stat point gave a larger increase in improvement compared to the one before, he knew he likely had doubled his actual physical power from the increase in strength.

He noticed that his class was added in a row, with F denoting the grade of the class. He was surprised to notice that his Race had also gotten graded, as it was blank before. He was excited at the prospect that he could actually evolve his race somehow.

Hopefully it meant that his power would rise, rather than growing a tail or a third eye though.

He had gained three new titles from getting a class as well. Zac focused on them to get a description

[Full of Class: Reach level 25 and attain a Class. All stats +1]

[Rarified Being: Attain a Class graded as Rare. All stats +1]

[Trailblazer: First to gain a Class in world. All stats: +5]

That explained where the all-around improvements to his stats came from. The first two titles were things that anyone could attain. However the Trailblazer title was another title that only he would get on Earth.

Zac felt a comforting from what that title represented. He still managed to keep his lead, even over the “chosen” cultivators who got help in the beginner villages. Even if he was deemed trash by the System and left to rot to this island, he had defied fate so far and was still on top.

He had to admit that the feeling of power was somewhat addicting. Finding his family was still his priority, but he also craved the feeling of becoming stronger and stronger. He lived for the moment after every battle where he absorbed the cosmic energy, and having the pure unadulterated force of life course through his veins.

He had started to think more and more about where the limits of strength lay. By now he could punch a large rock and it would shatter, and only one month had passed. How powerful would he be in a year? A decade? Just thinking about it made him excited. Of course, he would never let himself forget that to get there in one piece he would have to walk through an ocean of blood.

He didn't linger on the subject as he was anxious to look through his other changes. He thought "Class" and a new window appeared

[Class: Hatchetman, Grade-F, Rare]

Strength +10, +10%.

Level: +3 strength, +1 endurance, +1 free point per level.

Skills:

Axe Mastery (LOCKED)

Chop (LOCKED)

Forester's Constitution (LOCKED)

Followed that were rows of blocked out information. At least that showed where the large strength boost came from. The +3 strength per level didn't seem to be retroactive, otherwise he'd have almost twice the strength by now. But it showed that every level from now would give a much larger boost compared to before.

Zac was annoyed to see that he actually didn't get any skills for free as he had hoped. There were 3 skills listed that seemed somewhat intuitive. Axe Mastery and Chop seemed offensive, and Forester's Constitution was defensive. At least he hoped Chop was an offensive skill, and not a woodworking skill.

He didn't quite understand how "Chop" would be better than what he had been doing before, but he guessed he would find out. It seemed that he couldn't get any information about the skills until he unlocked them.

The next problem was how to unlock the skills. Soon he found the method in the quest tab. It showed a new category, which was class quests. Each skill needed a quest to be completed.

Axe Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. (0/1000)

Chop (Class): First chop Wood. Then their bodies. (0/10000)

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. (0/30)

None of the quests seemed very hard to accomplish. The Axe Mastery made no distinction of the strength of the enemies, and with his improved physique he could grind it out in a week or two if he just focused on slaying barghests.

The chop quest seemed to take time rather than being hard, but if he changed his daily work-out routine to chop wood it would be done sooner or later. Chopping wood was a great work-out anyways.

The last quest seemed either extremely easy or rather hard. Just 30 fights and it would be done. The whole island was a large forest so finishing it seemed to be the easiest of the three. It depended on what be one with nature meant. If it was just some random words, great.

If he actually had to somehow merge with nature, or become a tree-hugger it felt far more annoying.

Finally it seemed that he found out everything that he could for now. He had entered the outpost shop as well, but it seemed nothing new was added from gaining a class.

There were a few new skills added at the Node, but they were prohibitively expensive, with the cheapest being 500 000 Nexus Coins.

All in all it had been a fruitful day. He was disappointed that the demon had self-destructed rather than answering questions. There were so many things he needed to know. To be fair, Zac would likely have killed him after questioning the demon in any case. That the demon chose making a last ditch effort to bring Zac with him to hell was a logical choice.

Luckily the gear he gained and the strengthening made the sting less severe. He still looked positively insane from the blood and broken gear, and didn't want to put on the gear while looking like this. He left the camp to patrol the vicinity for a while, and then went back.

This would likely be a new addition to the daily routine. The humanoid demons seemed far more organized compared to the dumb beasts that had come through the incursion first.

Satisfied that there were no enemies nearby, he moved water from the water array into the tanker's reservoir. Finally he ripped the patchwork armor off, and took the first good shower in over a week. It was a risky move, but the grime and blood was making even him crazy, and he needed to get it off. He brought his new axe with him into the bathroom in case he was ambushed while in there.

It took half an hour to scrub the layers of dirt and blood of himself before stepping out of the shower.

Even cleaned up he could barely recognize himself in the mirror. His whole body had undergone a metamorphosis during the last month. Almost all of the fat was gone, leaving only a thin layer covering his muscular frame.

His physique looked *hard*. His muscles were compact and wiry rather than big and swollen like a body builder's. He thought he actually might be smaller now compared to when he worked out at the gym.

Of course he knew that an explosive power was contained in these muscles, and that they were so dense that maybe not even a bullet would penetrate them by now. All over his body were scars of varying size and severity. His tactic of boosting his vitality and taking blows for landing killing strikes had been effective, but it had left an undeniable mark.

He looked down on his rough and calloused hands. It was hard to believe what these hands had done the last weeks. Once he had actually ripped the jaws of a Gwyllgi straight apart when he had dropped his hatchet.

Zac sighed and put on one of his last whole t-shirts and undergarments. He didn't want to use his rags together with his new gear.

Unfortunately the chest pieces of both the males' leather armors had been blasted to shreds so he could only put on the female's armor. He didn't worry about it too much though, as he had a strong suspicion that there would be many more demons in the woods that could supply new gear.

To get adjusted to his new weapon he dragged over a thick log. He reactivated his gravity array, and started cutting the log into firewood, working out and working on his quest simultaneously. It was already late, and he would not go out hunting anymore today. As he was methodically swinging his axe a trace of anticipation could be seen on his face.

For the first time since the world changed, he looked forward to go out and test his might.

Chapter 26: Demons

Zac woke up early the next day. He had slept outside with axe in hand and geared up, just in case of a nightly raid. He once again set out to scout the vicinity, but nothing seemed to have moved through there during the night.

Zac wasted no time, and set out towards the direction of his fight against the herald. He wanted to scout out the situation before proceeding toward the next Herald.

He still wanted to complete the quests as quickly as possible, but the new enemies had proved that something had changed on the island. Zac wanted to scout the situation out until he knew what that change meant, and decided to start from where he had fought Vul.

After walking for a while he ran into a barghest. A creepy smile appeared on Zac's face, and he brandished the axe.

The beast was aggressive as ever at least, as it mindlessly charged at him. Zac sidestepped to let it run into a tree behind him just to gauge its power.

He was surprised to see that it didn't actually just charge in to the tree as before, it instead bit into it and ripped a good chunk out of the wood out almost impossibly fast. Of course, it still couldn't stop its momentum, and still hit the tree square with its now closed maw.

Zac wasted no time and with a swing completely decapitated the demon. He felt almost no resistance when cutting through the spine of the demonling, and the axe continued down with such ease that he almost cut into his own leg before he could stop the descent. He knew the axe was extraordinarily sharp since yesterday, but he was still shocked how easy it went through..

As he continued on he wouldn't avoid any beasts anymore, rather he'd go out of his way to kill them if he found them. He looked forward to getting the Axe Mastery skill, and wouldn't miss an opportunity to work on his 1000 kill goal.

He had been annoyed when he had noticed that only the Axe Mastery quest progressed from kills, not the Forester's Constitution quest. He would have to figure out what was missing later. He also confirmed that the Chop quest did not progress from battling, even though it mentioned chopping bodies.

As he was advancing he noticed that the beasts had indeed improved. They were stronger, faster, and more impressively they seemed smarter. It was as if a limiter had reduced all stats, including intelligence. Then it had been lifting gradually during the last week of the month, and as the last day passed the limit had been ripped off completely.

Overall he gauged that the beasts' stats had improved by roughly 50% since four days ago. The danger improved more than that though, as they had started doing feints and use tactics while attacking compared to before. The barghest were of course still dum-dums, but not to the point that they'd mindlessly charge into a wall anymore.

The rewards for killing the beasts hadn't been improved with their improved performance. It seemed that Zac truly had gotten a bargain when hunting during the first month. Zac snickered as he imagined the cultivators in the beginner villages hunting rabbits and boars around the edge of the village for a mere 2-3 Nexus Coins a piece, like in some RPG.

The increase in strength didn't bother him when it came to the fodder demons that was peppered through the island. They had improved, but so had he. Even the empowered demons were defenseless against his new weapon. It felt like proper gear actually had a greater effect compared to attaining a class.

Of course, the effect of a class would show over time rather than immediately it seemed. Also the immediate effect on him was not too large, as he already had such high stats from his titles. If someone with only the basic stats got this class with

accompanying titles, it'd likely been a pretty large boost to him.

As he killed another demon with a lazy swing he felt the familiar burst of cosmic energy that came with a level up. He was delighted to see that he did get his class stat points in addition to his two free points, rather than instead of. So every level he now got 7 points instead of two.

He paused a second to go over how to allocate his points again. He had thought about it a bit yesterday, and had come up with a plan. As his class seemed to focus on Strength and Endurance, so Zac would do the same with his free points.

He felt that the skills and class itself might somehow synergize with these stats, so getting them as high as possible would be a good option. Even if he was wrong it would be ok, as both these stats was strong on him in any case.

If vitality helped him heal up after getting wounded, then endurance would protect him from getting wounded. Endurance didn't only help with his stamina, it also toughened his body up. Now that he had a high enough vitality that he wouldn't die from ordinary wounds, he could focus on endurance to make him even harder to kill.

The other option he had considered was to put the put the points in dexterity, making him quicker. However, for most of the fights so far speed had not been an issue or limiting factor for him, so he decided to hold off on that for now.

Furthermore, among the skills that was added to the Nexus Node after he got his class was one that he felt might be able to substitute the need for Dexterity. It was called **[Steps of Gaia]** and cost 575 000 Nexus Coins. It was a huge amount of coins, far more than he had gathered in total.

But it seemed to fit him perfectly. It was a movement-type skill, which he assumed would help him move quicker. It would both help him charge at enemies faster, and also allow him to easier dodge attacks. It also seemed to be connected to the earth and nature, same as his class, so he felt there might be synergy along the road.

He therefore had decided to start saving up for the skill. He believed that it shouldn't take too long to get the necessary coins, as his speed of killing beasts had improved significantly with his gear and higher stats.

Finally he decided to put 1 point in strength and 2 in Endurance and kept going. A while later he reached the area where he fought the Herald. The aftermath of from the battle was evident, with crushed trees and rocks all over. He still hadn't run into any humanoids, and the forest was largely like it was before.

Zac slowly crept toward the spot where the Herald had fallen, alert of his surroundings. He was surprised to find that the carcass had been removed from the spot, as had the poles he had planted.

He could only guess that they had been moved back to the base. He wasn't sure as he hadn't seen it, but he assumed that the base were either right at the incursion, or in the mountains. If it was closer to the other sides he felt that he should have run into more of the humanoids by now.

Unless there only were a scant few of the humanoid demons, of course. But Zac's intuition told him that he wouldn't be that lucky. The System had screwed him over pretty consistently, and he saw no reason that it would stop anytime soon.

He stopped for a while to decide what to do now. He hadn't really accomplished anything so far, except for killing some demons. He didn't need to ponder for long however, as he suddenly heard subdued voices in the distance.

Zac properly hid himself inside a few bushes as the voices drew closer. He was disappointed to find out that he couldn't understand the words. So much for a universal translation system.

It was a surprisingly smooth and melodic language, specked with vowels flowing like a river. He had assumed that the language of demons would be harsh and perhaps even guttural.

'Wait, is that racism?' a stray thought entered his mind, making him lose focus before setting his sight on the

approaching party.

The party looked somewhat similar to the one he had killed earlier, except that this party was comprised of four individuals rather than three.

There were 3 males and one female. The two males looked like a mix of rangers and warriors, dressed in leather armors and wielding a sword each. The female walked in front and seemed to be the lookout, as she was carefully scouting the surroundings and had a bow slung on her back.

The final man was unarmed but seemed to be a leader, or at least of higher status. The quality of his gear seemed to be a notch above the others, such as a chest plate made of the same black metal as his axe handle. It was engraved in the same manner as the handle as well, but more intricate.

Zac had a feeling that these engravings had some sort of effect, like magically imbuing the gear with sharpness or defense. He had found no ways to use the engravings so far though, and hoped he might get an idea from the unarmed man.

Another reason Zac surmised the well-equipped man was of higher status than the other was that he could sense a formless pressure emanating from him. It felt like he was looking at a dangerous beast rather than an unarmed man.

While Zac was well hidden he decided to slowly recede further into the brushes. This party seemed both deadlier and more alert compared to the last one.

His actions were in vain however, as the female suddenly grabbed her bow and an arrow in a fluid motion and without hesitation fired it straight in the direction of Zac.

Zac tried to get out of the way, but there was no time as the arrow slammed straight into his side.

Chapter 27: One Against Many

Zac almost lost his breakfast as the arrowhead slammed straight into his gut. It punched through the wired leather armor and continued into his body. Luckily most of the force had been spent going through the armor, and with Zac's high endurance it only proceeded two centimeters before stopping.

This kind of wound wouldn't really faze Zac anymore after constantly getting hurt from his fights. However, he still hesitated for a second after ripping the arrow out. Fight or flee? He hadn't prepared to challenge the party like this.

However, he soon discarded any thought of fleeing. He didn't like the prospect of having another arrow slam into him, this time in the back of his head while running for his life. The ranger seemed to have some detection skill, as she could spot and shoot him while he was hidden in bushes a few hundred meters away. He needed to kill the archer at least before fleeing.

He threw the arrow away and pulled out one of his smaller knives from its sheath. Zac wasted no time and threw it straight at the archer, and it flew with at least the same velocity as the arrow that had hit him.

The female demon seemed to have been prepared, and with an almost impossible nimbleness jumped out of the way and proceeded up into a tree like a forest elf. She moved like a specter and in just a few seconds she was gone from his vision among the leaves

Zac tsked in annoyance, and charged at the party while trying to use trees as a cover from the archer. The force of his steps made deep indents in the ground as he charged forth like a runaway bull. The three remaining demons were obviously

ready for the fight, as they spread out intending to encircle him.

Zac could sense that all of them were using some skill, as he could feel the cosmic energy react to their bodies. An illusory red gas started floating around one of the combatants, giving him a more sinister feel. The other underling pointed down on the ground, but Zac couldn't see anything happening.

Zac couldn't see anything happening with the leader either, but the sense of danger increased substantially.

As Zac was furiously approaching he quickly used **[Eye of Discernment]** on the trio, and got some basic information about his enemies.

[Metisis, Level 38]

[Gormer, Level 39]

They were roughly 5 levels higher compared to the last party he had attacked. That meant that they should have at least 15-20 higher stat points including the bonus stats from their classes, compared to the last group of demonss.

He was also surprised to notice that the third man, the unarmed one, had somehow resisted his skill. There was only a blur above his head. This made Zac even more wary of him. He had even managed to identify the herald Vul, who was far higher level compared to himself.

Zac furiously circulated cosmic energy in his body, and ran straight toward the weakest enemy, Metisis. When he was just over 50 meters away from them an arrow came whizzing down from the tree tops. This time Zac was prepared and slammed it away with the broad side of his axe head.

The force of this arrow was far higher than the hastily one she had shot before. When the axe and arrow collided he was actually pushed back a bit, his feet making a grove in the ground. Luckily the axe was apparently made from excellent materials, and wasn't damaged one bit.

Zac pushed ahead once again, the last 50 meter distance gone in just a few seconds.

Just as he was a few meters away from his target, he pushed all the cosmic energy he could into his right leg. He instantly kicked off with all the power he could, and shot like a bullet straight at the other demon, Gormer. The force of the push created an explosion in the ground, even leaving a small crater.

They had not expected the speed that a 98 strength powered push could give, and Gormer barely managed to lift his hooked sword before Zac chopped horizontally with all the strength he could muster.

The axe moved like a lightning, but when it entered the weird gaseous substance it felt like he was trying to push through water. A good part of the momentum was somehow sapped out of the strike, and his force couldn't properly come to bear.

Zac wouldn't let this opportunity go though, and with a growl redoubled his efforts, and the axe continued on and slammed into the demon right under his left arm. The leather armor could afford almost no resistance against the sharp edge of Zac's axe as it embedded itself firmly in his chest. He couldn't push it clean through though, as the weird strength sapping effect seemed to be even stronger within the body of the demon.

Zac immediately ripped his axe out which produced a tremendous sprout of blood. He planned to turn around to meet the other two demons head on next. He didn't believe he'd get a second chance for a surprise attack like this.

But before he could do anything, he suddenly felt something ensnare his feet and he completely lost his footing. Zac fell headfirst on top of the collapsed dying demon. Gormer seemed intent on revenge even with one foot in the grave, as he weakly held on to Zac to keep him from fleeing.

While Zac struggled to get free he took a quick glance down at his legs. They were ensnared by a handful of purplish wiggling roots, which somehow seemed alive. They seemed to be a skill or magic that came from the other demon underling.

Perhaps they had planned to ensnare him when he got closer, and then attack him from three directions, securing an easy

kill. Unfortunately for them Zac had preceded them with his lightning fast blitz.

Zac had no time to analyze it any further, as the leader had moved to position close to him. Shockingly he no longer was unarmed, but hefted a monstrous great sword that was almost as long as he was, and over 20cm wide.

He had mocking eyes and a sneer as he lifted the sword above his head. Zac could once again feel the movement of cosmic energy, and knew that the leader was using a skill. Dark arcs of power spread from his arms into the large blade.

The dying demon's strength was no match for Zac, and he frantically ripped himself free from his grip. But he only managed to get himself up to his knees when the large blade started falling down on him. It was poised to cleave him in two unless he did something.

Zac pushed his power to the limit and gripped his axe with both hands and swung upward with all his might, hoping to intercept the sword.

With a tremendous clangor that echoed through the vicinity the axe and the great sword connected. The force actually created a shockwave that blasted outwards.

Zac was slammed down into the ground again from the force creating a small crater. Even with his superhuman stats he couldn't handle the power of the sword. Luckily for him he at least managed to get the leader demon off-kilt and change the trajectory of the strike. It actually slammed down in the gut of the dying Demon. The might was so strong that the torso of the underling veritably exploded, instantly killing him. That wiped the smirk of the leaders face and seemed to enrage him instead.

Meanwhile, the dark lightning from the demon's skill passed into Zac's axe when they collided, and burrowed into his arm. A blazing pain ran through his whole body, and his muscles spasmed uncontrollably.

That was actually the only reason Zac survived, as a great spasm jerked his head some distance away. Another arrow

slammed down right where his head had been before.

This arrow was different than the other, with a jagged arrowhead and being pitch black. It whizzed down with a great force and actually completely embedded itself into the ground, right down to the feathers. The extreme penetrating power was evident from that shot, likely from a skill.

It was only thanks to being bombed with black fireballs by the imps that Zac was able to retain consciousness. He pushed the pain away with all the resilience he could garner, and with a quick swing cut through the roots that ensnared his feet. The roots were far sturdier than they looked, and it felt like he cut through steel wire rather than wood.

Still it was no match for his power and the sharpness of his axe, and he was free in no time. He rolled a way as quickly as possible, trying to gain some distance before the leader swung down again.

He got to his feet just as another batch of roots closed in on him. This time they came as a swarm from the ground under the other demon. Zac whirled his axe back and forth in a frenzied manner and cut them down as they came, stopping their advance after a while.

The battle reached a short lull as Zac stood panting, while facing the two Demons. He tried to survey the treetops but couldn't locate the female archer. Her existence was like an annoying fly in the periphery that made him unable to fully concentrate. Even worse, this fly could kill him with one strike if he wasn't careful.

Fighting one against many truly was a pain in the ass.

Chapter 28: Melee

Zac was a bit unsure of how to proceed. He knew that one should maintain the initiative in a battle, but he didn't want to just charge over like a stupid barghest.

His enemies made the choice for him. The leader started advancing on him, anger smoldering in his eyes. Both his hands gripped the great sword, which was angled down toward the ground.

The other man was stationary, but mumbling something in their own language.

Zac could only put his game face on. He was still hurting all over from the dark lightning, but he pretended he was fine. With his axe in his hand he got ready for round two.

Zac really didn't want to meet the great sword straight on. The leader seemed to have roughly the same level of strength as he did, and even if he managed to parry the strike, he was afraid that he would be shocked again from the skill. He would have to fight around it somehow.

Luckily a weapon of that size was unwieldy, and the trajectories would hopefully be telegraphed.

Zac took out a second knife, leaving him with only one remaining. He launched it at the weaker enemy, and started to rush forward.

The demon deflected the knife with a couple of roots even though the force from Zac's throw was immense. The demon obviously was some sort of earth- or tree-mage, and the roots were far sturdier than something coming from a normal tree.

The demon was interrupted in his chanting though, which was Zac's main goal. If he actually had managed to hurt him, all the better.

Wasting no time he rushed toward him, trying to avoid the leader and his great sword. The great sword whizzed in a wide upwards arc, seemingly trying to cut Zac's in two.

Zac pushed forward with his legs and jumped forward into a roll to avoid the swing, but somehow the leader changed trajectory mid swing, and still managed to nick Zac in the side. The cut drew blood but wasn't too deep, and fortunately the black lightning didn't emerge again. It seemed the leader couldn't continuously use the skill.

Zac ignored the pain and quickly got on his feet and charged at the underling. The leader was right behind him, so he quickly swung his axe downward, hoping for a quick kill.

A thick group of roots shot up in front of the demon, and meshed together into a wooden shield to intercept the swing. Zac's stats were overpowering though, and he slammed through the roots easily. Wood chippings flew everywhere like small projectiles from the strike. Unfortunately for Zac, the brief pause in the swing had allowed the demon to reposition and he could avoid the swing.

Zac felt an intense danger from behind and he didn't dare hesitate. He jumped forward and crashed into the underling instead of swinging his axe again, pushing them both a few meters away and bringing both of them to the ground. As he jumped forward he felt the wind move right above where his head had been, from a swing of the leader.

The demon spit out a mouth of blood from the impact, but managed to wheeze a few words. A handful of vines shot out of the ground and stabbed into Zac's chest and legs, trying to bore further into him.

The pain was excruciating but he could only ignore it and hope that his endurance was enough to protect his innards from the roots. With a roar he slammed down the axe. With his overbearing power he completely destroyed the head of the demon, and even created a crater where the axe head hit the ground.

From jumping over until killing him had taken less than a second, giving the leader no time to stop him.

The roots that the demon had summoned didn't disappear, but they seemed to have stopped moving.

As Zac was jumping away from the body, another arrow soundlessly hit his leg, completely punching through it. The sharpness must have been extraordinary as it didn't seem to slow down at all even with Zac's high defense.

Zac screamed in pain, but could only ignore it for now. The leader was upon him with another swing that almost ended him.

Zac was prepared for the swing as they drew huge wide arcs. He lunged forward after dodging in order to get in closer as the swing had passed. It seemed that the demon had ample battle experience though, and knelt Zac right in the face as he got close. The knee was imbued with the dark lightning, and this time it zapped Zac straight in the head.

Getting a knee in the face was bad, getting electrocuted in the head by demon lightning was worse. The power of the leader was huge, and Zac was flung away from the strike. The impact nearly broke his neck, and Zac was blinded by the pain.

But he roared and charged in again as he landed. Another arrow whizzed down, but Zac managed to hunker down so it only ripped a flesh wound on his back. He needed to turn the fight into a close combat brawl, which would render the great sword useless. It would also hopefully stop the intermittent arrows from coming, as the ranger would be hesitant to hit her leader.

He decided to meet the great sword head on in order to get in close. The demon had just used the lightning attack, and hopefully he needed to wait or charge it up again. The axe and great sword met again in a stupendous clash. The trees in the vicinity actually was actually moving slightly from the even stronger shockwave, and an incoming arrow was pushed away before even coming close.

When Zac was standing he could better utilize his strength, and this time he wasn't pushed away. Shock was evident in the demon's eyes, and he tried to create some distance. But Zac

wouldn't let him so he pushed forward and he grabbed the leader's legs, and they both fell over with a thump.

Zac wanted a repeat of his last kill, and swung down his axe. However, he was still a bit fuzzy from the shock, and in the heat of the moment accidentally next to the leader's head.

Zac refocused and started another swing, but the leader was fighting back. He punched Zac straight in the face and tried to push him away. The fist had the force of a wrecking ball, and a loud thud echoed out.

Zac got even groggier, but his constitution was no joke so he could endure it. He also had been swinging an axe constantly the last month, and muscle memory helped him. The half-moon edge swooped down toward the demon with superhuman force. As he had been pushed away he couldn't reach the head, and instead aimed for the heart.

Zac noticed a surge of cosmic energy entering the armor from the demon mid-swing, and the runes on the chest plate lit up. The wheels were already in motion, so Zac could only bear down and hope for the best.

Just as the edge was about to slam into the armor, a golden sheen enveloped the leader. The axe hit the barrier, and it felt like he had slammed axe into himself rather than his enemy. The armor had somehow redirected the force back toward himself, and he flew up in the air from the rebound.

He slammed down right next to the demon, arms and legs akimbo. The demon quickly whipped out a dagger and tried plunge it in Zac's lungs just as he landed. He managed to barely edge away in time, but the dagger still drew a nasty gash along his ribs.

The demon kept stabbing down at Zac, trying to turn him into a sieve. The second stab hit straight into his arm making Zac scream out. He tried to push down the demon again and wrestle the knife out of his hands with his own free hand, but the demon's strength was at least equal to his.

In a last desperate attempt, he could only pray his constitution wouldn't fail him. He let go of the demon's hand holding the

dagger, and intercepted the hand that was holding back his axe.

The demon immediately plunged the dagger into his gut, once more unleashing the black lightning. The blazing pain once again erupted in Zac's body, but by now he had somewhat acclimatized to the attack.

He ignored the spasms in his gut, and ripped away the demon's hand and finally managed to swing his weapon down full force at the demon's neck.

A loud bang was heard as the axe slammed into the ground, creating a large crack. A second, smaller impact was heard as the demon's decapitated head fell down onto the ground a few meters away.

Another arrow whizzed down from a nearby tree toward his head. But Zac had expected this, and dodged the attack. The ranger had shot a steady stream of arrows at him during the melee, most at least grazing him. Luckily he had been in such close proximity to the demons during the fight that she had only dared aim at his extremities.

He finally saw where the arrows came from, and as all the other demons were dead he finally managed focus and locate the elusive ranger. He spotted her up in a tree not far away from the fights.

With a steely gaze that spoke of death he got on his feet and started running towards her.

Chapter 29: Inscriptions

Zac was kneeling next to the body of the female ranger, panting with exhaustion.

The hunt luckily had ended quite quickly. She had immediately tried to run when Zac started approaching, jumping from one tree to another. Her speed up among the branches had actually been slightly higher compared to his own down on the ground.

She likely was a Dexterity based class. She even had the time to shoot a few arrows while fleeing. Zac was fully focused on keeping up, so could only manage to deflect the projectiles if they headed straight toward his head or chest. That was because he simply held his axe right in front of his throat, moving it slightly upwards or downwards to intercept the arrows.

Suddenly, as she had tried to jump to a branch on another tree, Zac had used a sneak attack with his last dagger. As she was mid-air he flung it with full force, punching a hole in her back.

She didn't immediately die from the attack, but she did fall down from the tree tops. And before she managed to get back on her feet, Zac was upon her. He ended the fight with a swing without any words. He didn't want another suicide bombing incident on his hands, after all.

It was lucky as well, because if that dagger didn't hit, he'd likely have been forced to flee instead. He didn't want to try throwing his axe, as it was his most important tool for survival on the island. Then the enemy would have a detailed description of him and his power.

He grabbed her bag and found some cloths he assumed were for bandages. After a quick sniff to make sure that it wasn't actually doused in some chemical or the like he used it to bandage himself up. His whole body had holes punched in it,

from everything between arrows and roots, and the bandage was only enough to treat the worst ones.

He was still bleeding, but it seemed that the wounds hadn't hit any major arteries or organs. By now normal puncture wounds usually stopped bleeding by their own after a few hours. He could still tentatively put weight on the leg, but he wouldn't run a marathon. His whole body felt like he had been used as a punching bag, mainly from the black lightning of the leader.

Unfortunately the ranger's bow had snapped when she fell down from the tree, so he didn't bother taking it with him as he planned to leave.

He did take the quiver and remaining arrows though, as they had survived the fall. He also skipped taking the armor, as his axe had destroyed the whole thing.

After dragging the body into some thick bushes, he turned back toward the location of the fight with the others. After slowly waking back for a bit he was there.

A barghest had found its way to the corpses from somewhere, but surprisingly it didn't eat the corpses. Zac had seen those demons eat everything, including members of their own race before, so it was interested that this barghest only dared to sniff and growl anxiously at the corpses.

It reinforced Zac's suspicion that these demons were not wild animals, rather beasts reared by the humanoids. They were a good tool to use as a meat shield to weaken and tire the enemy. Of course, they didn't seem to work too well in the complicated terrain of the island. Zac edged to the beast and killed it with one strike as it was distracted by the bodies.

He didn't bother with it anymore and walked over to the leader. He was most excited about the gear on him, and it was largely intact. The fractals had protected the demon from Zac's strike on the chest, and the finishing blow had been on his head, which kept all the gear in good working order.

Zac, who was getting more and more adroit in undressing corpses, nimbly loosened the clasps and buckles, and dragged

the chest plate from him. He also gingerly touched the great sword, afraid that he would get zapped again.

Fortunately there was no charge left it seemed, and he picked up. The sword was actually lighter than he expected. Of course, he was a bit unsure of his current strength, so making exact measurements was hard.

He carefully looked through the weapon for some hidden function. The leader clearly had been unarmed one second, and in the next holding this monstrosity. It must have come from somewhere.

Zac suspected the sword might be able to grow and shrink at command, and it simply was too small for him to notice before. Or the sword might be able to turn invisible.

After a quick rundown he couldn't figure it out, and he did not want to delay too long here in case reinforcements arrived. He quickly stripped all remaining items from the leader, including a pouch, a few runed bracelets, and the large knife.

He put all of it inside a backpack, then proceeded to do the same with the other two fighters. He left their weapons and armors though, as he simply was overburdened as is. Just bringing back the sword would be arduous with his battered body.

Finally he dragged the bodies away and looked over the battlefield. A discerning eye would quickly notice that a battle took place here, but Zac couldn't be too bothered anymore. This was the second scouting party he had killed, besides a herald and a throng of demons.

The humanoids would have to be crazy to not know that someone was hunting them by now. They had seen the trap used to kill the herald, so they knew it wasn't a beast either.

He wasn't too sure why they weren't scouring the island for him. He guessed they either had limited resources or was preoccupied with something else. Who knew, maybe there actually was a city with humans hidden in the mountains that waged war on the demons.

He put the axe into his belt and hefted the great sword over his shoulder and turned back. He had been out for half the day, and either had to turn back soon or sleep in one of his hideouts.

He decided to head back, as the fight had given him some insights about the inscribed items that he wanted to try out in a safe environment.

Zac started heading back, heading a slightly altered path. Even if he was hurt it wasn't to the point that he couldn't hunt some demon dogs on the way back. The worst part was his leg, and luckily the demons always came running so he didn't have to chase them.

He soon ran into one and with a swing of the great sword completely split the barghest in two. The sword continued with its momentum and slammed into a tree, cutting clean through it.

The power was great, but it felt too unwieldy for jungle warfare. More importantly, Zac noticed that killing the barghest with the sword didn't improve his quest for axe mastery. On second thought he felt it made sense that the kills had to be made with an axe to complete an axe mastery quest.

As he continued on he had to continuously swap weapons every time he ran into a demon.

Finally he arrived at his camp as the suns were starting to set. After the customary sweep he entered the camp. He threw some lumber into the fire pit and lit a small fire, and got some more dried meat. He was starting to run low so he'd have to hunt something edible tomorrow as well.

His wounds had actually turned a lot better during his hike back, as he hadn't sustained any new wounds from the lesser demons.

A quick glance at his status screen showed that he had gained roughly 10 000 Nexus coins in one day. It made sense, as he had more than doubled the speed of killing barghest with his upgrades. Furthermore, the demons seemed to give out roughly a thousand Nexus Coins each.

Zac was somewhat surprised to find out that he actually had gained nexus coins and cosmic energy from the demon that the leader accidentally killed. He had somewhat felt the rush of energy during the fight, but at the time had been preoccupied with getting zapped by demon lightning.

He also felt that he almost had gained half a level from the intense fights. Risking your life really was the most effective way of getting stronger with the system.

His Axe mastery had progressed as well, currently showing a (69/1000) progress. Most of the kills had been barghest while traveling, with a few of the more agile Gwyllgi peppered in every now and then. Zac felt that if he put his mind to it then he could kill roughly 100 lower demons a day, which would allow him to complete the quest in another 10 days.

He decided to put the 10 days as a deadline. He would also match the quest for Chop, so he'd chop a thousand times a day. Zac figured it'd take somewhere around two hours per day to get it done. He had no real idea as of yet what to do with the last skill, as it still showed 0/30.

He turned his gaze toward the day's pile of loot after being finished with his meal. He had gained a whole new set of gear and a sundry of miscellaneous items in the backpacks. At the battle site he hadn't had time to properly go through everything so he planned to do so now.

The two underlings had had small leather bags that were attached to their belts on their back. In them were nothing of value. It held some gauze, flint, a whetstone, a small knife that seemed to not be for battle and a small water bottle. It felt like it was some basic ordinance.

Both the bottles had some very rudimentary inscriptions on them so Zac wondered if they had some special function. He poured the water out, but was surprised that the small bottle held far more water than it should.

It took almost two minutes for all the water to pour out. Zac was amazed that some inscriptions could do something magical like this. He felt no cosmic energy movements around the bottles, and it looked normal when he peered inside.

The magic bottle gave him a new idea about the sudden appearance of the giant sword. If a bottle could somehow store large amount of water, then it wasn't impossible that the leader had some similar gear that could store items.

Chapter 30: Experimentation

Zac eagerly filtered out all the gear that had belonged to the leader and started to go through them. His first guess was the inscribed bracelets as they were the only things except the sword and chest plate that had fractals engraved.

He looked over them multiple times, and tried pressing different parts of the bracelets, but nothing happened. He tried putting them on and focusing on them, but there still was no response. He could only helplessly put them aside for now, and continue to look through the other gear.

Zac picked up the pouch and opened it up. Strangely the insides were pitch black and he couldn't see anything. His heartbeat sped up and he felt that he had found the jackpot.

He first took one of the small knives and plunged it halfway into the darkness, then pulled it out. There was no damage on it at all as far as Zac could tell. He planned to do the same with his finger, but as soon as he barely put it into the darkness he felt a burning sting.

His fingertip had been singed clean off, and blood dripped down over the pouch. Maybe flesh couldn't enter he surmised. So he tried the same with a piece of dried meat, but this time it reacted like the knife.

'Maybe it's live things...' Zac thought. He had no critter to try this theory out though, so it would have to wait.

The next task was how to activate the pouch. He had noticed some hints when he had fought earlier. When he had slammed his axe into the chest of the leader, he had felt that cosmic energy had entered the armor from the demon.

Zac had always only circulated the energy internally, and wasn't sure how he'd push it outside. He tried circulating some energy into his fingers, then tried to push it out from the

tip. The only result was that the concentration of energy got too high at the fingertips, and they started rupturing.

He tried many different things for a few hours until he finally gave up. Zac guessed that there was an inherent problem with how he handled the energy. He had followed an image of a circulatory system of his blood when he had started bending cosmic energy to his will. Of course he hadn't imagined it to have outlets where it could flow out.

He started mulling over how to improve his system. He tried imagining a hole at his palm where he could let cosmic energy flow out.

But as he changed his energy circulation a blazing pain erupted in his hand and it looked that a bloody stigmata had appeared where he had imagined his exit.

A cold sheen of perspiration appeared on Zac's forehead from the pain and he had a sinking feeling. Just a small change like this and the pain had been this bad. If he wanted to improve the system on his whole body, how bad would it hurt?

He knew that the circulatory system he had devised in no way was an optimal method of using cosmic energy, it was just something he had whipped together. He had planned on getting some skill or method for it later when he had the opportunity. But he hadn't imagined that the pain would be this bad.

He was even more dismayed when he noticed that the hole he had created in his hand was continuously leaking cosmic energy and draining him of power.

Zac could only reluctantly change his circulation pattern back, bringing forth another wave of torment.

He sat for a full thirty minutes feeling lost at what to do. He was afraid that he had somehow crippled his future prospects. The more he thought about it the more he felt that it was extremely important to be able to project energy. The skills the demons had used all had projected energy in different ways. The mysterious mist, the black arcs of lightning and the root

control. They all relied on manipulating cosmic energy outside of the body.

If he was stuck with this defective system where all the energy was stuck inside his body, would he even be able to use the skills he got in the future?

He needed to find a way to rectify this, even if he had to take the torture of rewriting his pathing. However, the hole he had made didn't work, and even if it did he was hesitant to use that method anymore. He didn't want to haphazardly get himself deeper and deeper in the hole by making a crappy patch-work circulation method.

He went over to the Nexus Node once more to scour through the skills, in case one of them actually was a circulation skill or something similar. Of course, he subconsciously knew that wasn't the case, he had looked those skills over many times by now, and knew there were no such thing there.

The skills available generally could be categorized into offensive, defensive, movement and support as far as he could tell. The **[Eye of Discernment]** would fall into the support skill.

But as he moved his hand away from the crystal he suddenly froze, struck with a realization. All things connected to the system had one thing in common; the fractals. He still had no idea how to make sense of them, but they were present on the array flags, the weapons, and even the skills used them.

And it just so happened, he knew a pattern that was the exact size of his body. It was the fractal pattern that he had seen when he chose his class. Many details of it was muddled at the time, but the parts he could make out made a full circuit.

When he got the idea he couldn't let it go. The more he thought it over, the more it made sense. He could still remember the pattern clearly, and it flowed through every part of his body. It was a far more complicated system compared to the one he had devised himself, but he saw no reason that it wouldn't work.

As for the parts that were hazy and blurred, they might show themselves at a later point when he leveled up or completed quests. At which point Zac could use the new information to improve on the existing pattern.

The only problem was the massive undertaking to change the circulation. Just adding and removing a small hole in his hand had felt like putting the palm in an imp's fire. He wasn't even sure he'd survive such an undertaking.

But at the same time he didn't dare wait. When he first devised the energy circulation he made some small revisions quickly after. At that time he hadn't felt any pain whatsoever, and assumed that the circulation pattern was just a mental aid for using cosmic energy.

Zac was afraid that it might mean that the pattern gets harder and harder to change, as though it was fusing with his very being. It was still possible for him to change it, but judging from the pain it might be impossible soon.

Zac was no stranger to pain by now, and wasted no time. Ideally he would have wanted to wait until all his wounds were healed, but he had a sense of urgency. He started with his left hand to try if it even was viable to reform the patterns.

A blazing pain far worse than when he opened the hole engulfed his hand. It felt like his whole arm was dipped in burning acid. His whole body was covered in sweat in just seconds, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. Still he pushed through, and kept imagining his crude system in his hand slowly transforming into the fractal he was given by the Hatchetman class.

After what felt like an eternity the transformation was done. His hand was a mess, almost looking as if it had been pushed down into a blender. But where there once was a simple pathway for cosmic energy, now was a sophisticated pattern that had substituted it.

Zac tried moving his fingers, and while it hurt it seemed there was no permanent damage. He then tried to circulate cosmic energy through his arm and into his rewritten pathways.

It was a weird feeling. He had thought his circulation had been smooth all this while. But after pushing the energy into his hand it felt like the energy came from cramped pipes in his arms into the open ocean in his hand. The level of smoothness of handling the energy was incomparable.

Zac knew he had guessed correctly by now. The class change had provided him with a complete pattern to utilize his cosmic energy. It would likely tie in with his skills as well he reckoned.

He also knew what that meant, and with a shudder started converting the rest of his body.

Chapter 31: Infusion

The suns were starting to rise over the small campsite.

Zac sat naked, except a pair of ragged underpants, in a cross-legged position by the now died out fire. The ground all around him was red with his blood. There was not one spot on Zac's body that wasn't damaged and bloody.

He had relentlessly continued to improve his circulation pattern the whole night, and he was almost completed by now. It had felt like he had been thrown into hell and had been tortured for an eternity. He had wanted to stop so many times, but had summoned a willpower he didn't know he had to keep going.

Of course, that didn't mean that he had stoically endured the pain like some battle-hardened warrior. Luckily there had been no one around to see him scream himself hoarse, roll around on the ground and cry until snot ran down his face.

Right now only the part around his brain remained to be changed. In the class pattern it was a dense web of fractals that covered his whole head.

Zac hadn't stopped due to changing his mind, but the pain in his head had made him pass out for a few minutes after he tried it the first time. He was currently steadying himself for another try.

He shakily got up and snatched all the remaining dried meat he had left over. He felt severely drained, and needed some energy before trying again. He also filled his water bottle from his array and poured it over himself to clean away some of the blood. The sting of cold water over his countless cuts jolted him properly awake.

Finally he sat down again to complete the fractal. He was afraid if he didn't complete it now he wouldn't dare to sit

down and do it in the future. The pain was to the point of creating a mental scar, and he needed to do it immediately to get it done.

He started changing the pattern a small bit at a time, afraid that he'd pass out again if he improved too large a chunk in one go. Still, the pain was barely within the realm he could tolerate. It felt like a spike was stabbed through his eye right into his head, and then started grinding around in there for good measure.

Zac arduously pressed on, tears flowing like a waterfall. Finally after an hour the last piece was changed, and the fractal was whole and connected. Zac suddenly puked out a mouthful of blood, but immediately after felt very refreshed.

He still had an acute bloodloss and was hurting all over, but his body still felt lighter and better. He tried circulating some cosmic energy and was chocked at the improvement. To compare it with before it felt like previously he had breathed and blinked manually when pushing cosmic energy through his body, and now it was an automatic and natural process.

It was if the energy knew what he wanted to do, and followed his will automatically. It also seemed that he absorbed energy from the surroundings faster, and not by a small margin. It wouldn't help with his level, but it would help him to heal and restore his energy reserves faster.

Finally done with the fractal he closed eyes and had a dreamless sleep.

Zac woke up again roughly three hours later. While he felt drained and still hurting, he didn't bleed anymore. With his improved stats he only needed to sleep a few hours a day to feel rested, and he had no problems skipping sleep entirely for a night or two. The combination of high endurance and vitality showed its value once again.

He had initially planned on scouting out the actual incursion today, but decided against it. He wanted to be in optimal condition for whatever waited for him at the end of the rainbow. He needed to find something to eat as well, and it felt safer to grind out some lower beasts while he was incapacitated.

His wounds from yesterday's battle had also improved significantly, with only the leg still smarting.

There was one thing he had to do before setting out though. An important reason why he had tortured himself during the night was the inscribed gear.

Zac was relieved to notice that he could project energy easily now from his upgrade. He couldn't actually see the cosmic energy with his eyes, but he could sense it. It was a weird feeling, it was as though he had gotten a new sense since starting using cosmic energy, and with his upgraded pathways the sense only seemed stronger. The cosmic energy was floating like an invisible mist above his hand that projected it, not showing any signs of dissipating.

His first goal was to check the pouch, as it contained the most mystery for him. He picked up the small pouch and carefully infused some energy into it. He was shocked to notice that the pouch actually suddenly absorbed all the dried blood on his hand.

He didn't have time to think it over though, as he suddenly saw a large space in his mind. The space was roughly 3 by 3 meters, and was filled with an assortment of items.

There was another sword inside, also with inscriptions. But this one had a far more normal size compared to its monstrous brother. There were some random tools, a water bottle and a flagon made in silver in one corner. The flagon seemed to have similar fractals as the water bottle, albeit a bit more intricate.

There was also a large reserve of luxurious dishes and fruits in another corner.

More surprisingly there was an actual table, a parasol, a rug, and two ornate chair in the space. Zac dumbly stared at the furniture, not knowing how to react. Was the demon invading another world, or was he out on a picnic?

He didn't dare take any of the food, as he had no idea whether the food demons ate was edible for humans. While it looked perfectly normal, who knew if they used cyanide as a spice?

The final items in the corner were a few books and a small pile of crystals. Each crystal was uniform in shape and roughly the size of his palm. He couldn't understand the language in the books at all, and could only put them aside for now.

The crystals were more interesting, and he tried mentally extract it from the pouch. Suddenly the crystal appeared next to the pouch. Zac grabbed it in the air and started to examine it. It wasn't translucent, but rather a milky white, and cool to the touch. It seemed to emit a faint white light as well.

More interestingly, Zac could feel that the small stone was packed with cosmic energy. It was as if his senses were telling him that he wasn't holding a small shiny crystal, but a shining sun of energy.

He remembered that his quests had something called Nexus Crystals as a reward for completing, and guessed he was holding one right now. More impressively he had roughly 100 of them in his pouch.

Of course, Zac knew that there was a distinct possibility that this was an F-Grade Nexus Crystal, rather than an E-Grade crystal like the ones that the quests rewarded. It would be odd if he got 100 crystals from just one enemy, if he only got 10 for conquering a whole incursion by himself.

He tried absorbing some energy from the crystal, and a pure stream of energy quickly entered his body and energized him. His slightly depleted body was quickly energized, and he was happy to notice that the absorption continued even after his body was "satiated". That meant that absorbing the crystals would work toward gaining levels, and not only be a tool for recuperating after a draining battle.

Zac sat and absorbed the crystal for roughly 30 minutes before he stopped. After scrutinizing the crystal it seemed that he had absorbed roughly a quarter of the stored energy. So completely absorbing it would take roughly two hours. Furthermore, absorbing just one crystal seemed equivalent of killing roughly 10 barghests and absorbing their energy.

That meant if he only sat down and used these stones to cultivate it would actually be more effective compared to

running all over the island killing demon dogs with all his might.

Of course, he wouldn't get any Nexus Coins, but still.

These crystals would be a huge asset for him. There were always time he couldn't be killing beasts. Like when cooking, chopping wood and even moving between the demons while out hunting. If he could keep absorbing these crystals during all this down-time he could double his leveling speed.

Next he walked over to the great sword and tried infusing it with cosmic power as well. However, it was as though the energy was blocked when trying to enter, which stumped Zac. After a brief hesitation he cut his finger and dripped a few drops of blood on the runes before trying again. He had remembered the pouch absorbing his blood, and could only try the same method again.

This time he felt no resistance, as the blood was absorbed into the sword. Information once again entered his mind, this time the usage of the sword. It seemed that the sword could increase and decrease its weight, albeit the effect was quite limited. That might have explained why he slammed into the ground so helplessly in the first clash between him and the leader, he might have maximized the weight for the overhead swing.

Next he did the same procedure on his axe. Infusing it with energy had no earth-shattering effect. It had a weak auto-repair and sharpen feature. As long as he infused some cosmic energy into it, it would gradually fix nicks in the edge and re-sharpen.

It didn't improve the lethality, but it was convenient for him who didn't have proper facilities for weapons maintenance.

He finally turned to his last inscribed gear, and with the same procedure tried to activate the bracers he had nabbed from the leader. To his surprise, nothing happened when he tried activating them.

Chapter 33: Infection

Zac awoke at the dawn of light, and after preparing an assortment of tools in his pouch he set out. Today he would properly gather intelligence. His wounds were largely better now, just a bit red and sore.

He made a beeline for the incursion this time, heading straight toward the center of the island. Large parts would be uncharted territory for him here, as he had stayed somewhat at the outer edge since the start.

He had a theory that there should be a fourth kind of beast somewhere on the island that he still hadn't seen.

There were four heralds, and at least one herald was a pack leader of its race, the barghest. But he had only encountered imps and the Gwyllgi apart from the hunkering demonlings.

There should be a fourth type of beast as well somewhere based on this, and Zac guessed that they either were located around the incursion or had moved their territory into the mountain.

Zac kept a rapid pace, moving at a speed that could be considered a sprint for a normal human. Still he made no sound as he passed through the forest, instinctively knowing where to put his feet to soundlessly proceed.

During his travels he noticed that his third class skill, Forester's Constitution, had finally had its first progression either during last evening or this morning, now showing 1/30. The problem was that he wasn't quite sure what he did to progress it. The system gave no ping or notification when his quests progressed, leaving him with no information on when it happened.

A log of his actions would have been very convenient, as then he wouldn't have to estimate his nexus coin gain from

monsters or how much energy they gave all the time.

After he had moved for roughly 10 hours he finally slowed down. He was far closer to the incursion now than he had ever been before. This close he started to notice some jarring changes. For lack of a better word, the forest was *infected*. The red light of the incursion suffused all the surroundings, and the trees looked different, almost sickly.

Some had weird growths on them, others seemed to completely have lost all their leaves even though the summer was in full swing. The grass on the forest floor was turning a purplish color. There were also many young sprouts of a pitch black tree Zac had never seen before, which seemed to thrive in this odd environment. The very air seemed to be different as well, having an almost astringent taste. It didn't seem to be a problem for Zac luckily, apart from feeling uncomfortable.

It seemed like the red pillar was slowly transforming its surroundings, likely to better suit the invaders. This made Zac even more anxious to complete his quest, as he didn't know if this effect was reversible, and whether it would spread outwards. He didn't want to create his town on a desolate island that smelled a bit like farts.

He also was astonished at the amount of beasts he saw. It seemed that all the demons preferred to stay in this environment, and the forest was packed with monsters. He shuddered at the thought of this horde of beasts being unleashed upon a human city. Luckily they were stranded here on this island.

It also made him realize that it might not have been more beasts spawning during his month of grinding, it was enough that a few strays would leave the central area of the island for the edge of the island to be refilled.

What would've looked like hell for many, Zac saw as a treasure trove. He almost drooled at the prospect of grinding here, but he had a mission today. Most human cultivators would likely have trouble killing one barghest since they had their upgrade, but Zac had no trouble facing multiple at a time

by now. He might get a few bites and scratches if there were too many of them, but that wouldn't be anything new for him.

Those plans could only wait though. He needed to gauge the magnitude of the invasion to make a proper plan. There was a lot to do in the coming month. Of course, he wouldn't hide from the beasts either, so everything that entered his path was met with a swift swing of his axe.

By now he was only a couple of kilometers away from the Incursion, so he started to slow down and focus fully on stealth. He did not want to enter combat again this close to the enemy base, who knew what kind of forces that they had.

The incursion was in a valley which stretched toward the mountain, and Zac gingerly moved toward the edge to see what was happening inside.

As he almost was at the crest he saw a solitary demon sitting next to a tree, currently napping. Zac was again shocked at their bad discipline, and it felt like the whole invasion was handled by a group of undisciplined children rather than an army. If he thought that the horde of barghest around the valley would be enough protection and give prior warning of an attack, then he was sorely mistaken.

After slowly looking at the vicinity to ensure there were no more scouts around he approached the demon soundlessly. He didn't bother to identify him, afraid he would sense the scrying. When he was 10 meters away he switched gears to a sprint, brandishing his axe.

The demon woke in the last moment, and made a terrified expression. He didn't have any time to activate any defenses or shout for help though, as the axe descended and cleanly decapitated him.

Zac quickly grabbed the head and put it on top of the body again, before hiding again. He had already scrubbed his face with some dirt, giving him a greyish complexion similar to the demons. With his gear already of demonic design he should probably pass as a demon from a cursory glance from a long distance. Of course if anyone took a second glance he'd be found out instantly, so he didn't want to try it out.

He stayed next to the corpse and wormed closer to the edge. This part of the valley ended with a steep cliff, meaning that Zac would have to scale down 20 meters if he wanted to enter. But it also meant that he got a good view of the whole vale.

If the other parts of the wood had started to shift into a demon forest, then the valley looked like it was imported from another world. It was as though even the sky was different up above, feeling washed out and grey.

There should have been a great deal of vegetation just like the rest of the island, but it was sparse and looking sickly. There also was evidence of a large amount of felling, as he saw hundreds of cut off stumps. The combination made the valley look completely desolate. The ground was partly covered with smatterings of purplish black grass, but most was just black stone.

The demons clearly needed lumber for something. But for what Zac couldn't tell so far. His eyes kept going over the valley, until finally looking over to the huge red pillar.

Zac could finally see the terminus of the incursion for the first time since he had arrived. It was a huge crystal that reminded Zac of his Nexus Node at his base. However, this crystal was red, and at least 3 meters tall.

The very air around it pulsed from the power the crystal emitted, and Zac could feel the huge energy that it released all the way from his hiding place. It continuously shot out the light that formed the large pillar that had been a constant part of his life the last month. The glow was so strong that he couldn't see anything what was happening behind it.

Next to the pillar was a building and Zac could see a few demons milling about.

Zac planted himself within a bush, and while gnawing on some meat he had brought in his pouch he started waiting. After waiting for a full 3 hours he felt confident that there likely were limitations to the invasion.

He had not seen a single being appear from the crystal, nor disappear into it. Either they only came at certain times per

day, or they couldn't go back and forth between the island and their home world. The demons at the small building seemed to be guards left there just to make sure nothing happened to the crystal.

They were mostly milling about or even taking naps in the shade of the house.

Of course, Zac would have to stay for a good while longer if he wanted to confirm that the gate was closed, and he didn't have time for that. However it made sense that they could only enter at certain intervals, from how the demons had appeared on the island.

The first wave assault had been the demonic beasts, and they arrived as soon as the world was integrated. The second wave was the humanoids who arrived after a month had passed. At the same time some limitations lessened on the beasts, making them stronger.

If the crystal only opened once a month, it would explain why Abby the eye had told him to finish the quest either within one month or within two. It stood to reason that the difficulty would take another noticeable leap within a month.

Zac was not sure if he would be able to handle that, as he was not powering up as quickly anymore as before. He had already gotten his class now, and gaining levels took more time now compared to earlier. The increase in strength he could gain within 30 days would likely be smaller compared to the one before, meaning that he really should try to end this invasion sooner rather than later.

As nothing really happened on this side of the valley, he decided to keep venturing further in. He moved along the edge of the valley in a roundabout manner toward the mountain.

The incursion and valley was located between the middle and the north of the island, while the mountain took up almost all of the northern quadrant. So Zac soon had travelled across the whole island, starting from his campsite in the far south.

Daylight was starting to wane, but Zac had already prepared himself to sleep outside today. While he was advancing he was

keeping a lookout for possible temporary places to spend a night unnoticed. He had found some potential spots, but hadn't bothered to prepare them yet.

During his travels he had killed four more demons. They were quite sparsely placed, making Zac more and more convinced that they were not too concerned about invasion in the immediate vicinity.

Soon he had walked along half the valley, and he could now see what was hidden earlier behind the red glow.

There actually was a town down there.

On a second look a town would be a slight misnomer. The buildings were quite large and rectangular, reminding Zac rather of barracks than civilian domiciles. He noticed that the missing trees had been processed into houses and fortifications. There were a few structures that seemed more refined, maybe for the officers and generals of the army. Those buildings did use both stone and lumber in its construction, and had a quite elegant atmosphere.

The whole settlement was surrounded by a wall that was a few meters tall and at least thick enough to have watch towers and a large amount of guards patrolling. Zac couldn't fathom how they set up such a large wall in only a few days. He could only explain it with magic, as even hundreds of individuals with Zac's strength would have to work for months of gathering stones and setting up the wall.

Finally, in the middle of the town a grand structure was being erected at a speed visible even from his great distance.

Chapter 34: Conspiracies

Ogras Arh'Rezak was already starting to tire of this whole enterprise. The humidity of this baby world was far higher compared to what he was used to, and the two blaring suns forced him to keep squinting through the day. The terraforming was helping, but it would still take a long time until the climate got to the point that was comfortable.

He somewhat regretted exhorting his ancestor to let him lead this invasion. With his status in the clan, he still would have been entitled to any good items they could seize on this world, even if he stayed at home.

But he knew this invasion was his opportunity if he wanted to stay alive. If he could find enough goodies for either himself or the clan he'd be safe until he was strong enough to protect himself.

But who would have thought that The Ruthless Heavens placed them on a godforsaken island? It had rendered his tactic of unleashing his packs through the portal seem like a joke. There had already been voices of disagreement in the clan to such a cowardly tactic, but Ogras had only sneered at their snide remarks.

While most baby worlds were disorganized and paralyzed from the huge changes, some were quite dangerous. There were many anecdotes of new planets resisting and even sometimes completely massacring all the different invaders.

Of course, it was usually the forces behind the other incursions on the planet that were the real enemies, rather than the weak natives.

In any case, he wasn't about to stick his neck through a portal before increasing his odds of survival, even if it was considered cowardly.

His seven elder brothers had been heroic warriors, always charging into the fray, leading any charge in skirmishes. And now they were all food for the maggots. Some were killed by their enemies, and some died from machinations of their own clan members.

The path to power was ruthless, and even among kin benefits preceded loyalty. There had been a large amount of dissatisfaction towards his branch of the clan for a long time. His great grandfather was originally a normal soldier who managed to rise to his great power through a few lucky encounters.

His prowess had allowed his progeny to enjoy great benefits and resources, even matching that of the main branch's youth. Ogras suspected that was why his siblings kept dropping dead one after another. He had voiced such concerns to his ancestor, but being a warrior for the clan his whole life his thought patterns had become rigid. He had bled and fought for the clan for over a thousand years, and couldn't imagine that they would backstab him and his kin like that.

That's why only the two of them were left, not counting his great aunt who disappeared to become a wandering warrior two hundred years ago. That was also why he kept this ridiculous persona going, pretending to have become a pampered wastrel not interested in cultivation. The fewer of his clan members believed that he was a threat, the lower was the chance that he'd wake up with his throat slit.

That's why he walked around in his gaudy outfits and surrounded himself with useless sycophants. It was another type of armor. And if he could further his ambitions while it looked like he was just being spiteful and stupid, then all the better.

He had almost laughed out loud when the news of the death of Kevoran arrived at his desk. That little prick from the main branch was one of his largest contenders for any potential goodies that would be found on this planet.

While Kevoran was afraid of his ancestor, only the youths and unevolved were able to go through the portal. So his attitude

had progressively gotten worse with each day since they arrived. Ogras had used a snide remark as a basis for ordering him to go with a scout's squad to canvas the whole island, in order to solidify his position while Kevoran was gone.

Who knew the idiot actually would get himself killed? It was a bit of a shame with Kaela dying as well, as her scouting abilities were top notch among the youths in the clan. But the death of Kevoran more than made up for it. Ogras could kiss the assailant on the mouth if he found him. Just before decapitating him, of course.

Ogras wasn't overly concerned about the little rats that were hiding on this or some neighboring island. He estimated the number of enemies to be somewhere between 10 to 20, judging from the number of beasts killed. They certainly had to be some elites on this world to be able to kill even his imps and two scouting parties this soon after their world changed, but it didn't matter.

He was well aware of the rules by which The Ruthless Heavens worked. As long as he stayed safe in his palace, then his mission would be a success in roughly two months. The portal would stabilize, and the area would be within his jurisdiction.

The native's group would have to infiltrate his army base, kill their way through the army, and then kill him in order for their quest to succeed. No matter how strong they were they still were only weak natives, and such an assault was suicide.

If they had actually been truly strong they wouldn't have been forced to use trickery to kill his poor Vul. They would simply have slaughtered all his four pack leaders and stopped the invasion before it even started.

Therefore he would simply stay in the base. Even if everyone thought he was a coward he didn't care. He had already planned everything out. He didn't plan on staying for too long in this world.

Initially, he had planned to stay here for a long time, protected from his clan by the limitations of the gate. It was an advantage for him that he could finally cultivate in peace here

without anyone finding out, as the suppression would keep his real prowess hidden in any case.

But something had changed this. The mountain contained treasure.

More exact, it contained a Nexus Crystal mine. Even Ogras had been shocked when he heard the news. Of course, it was only a small F-Grade mine, but still, the wealth it contained was staggering. It could at least rival the whole accumulated fortune of some of the elders in the Clan.

With that kind of wealth he could obtain a Fruit of Ascension. It would save him decades on his cultivation time and would leave his competitors among his generation in the dust. Normally, for a clan of their limited power, using such a luxurious treasure on an F-grade cultivator would be considered far too extravagant. But for him it was a matter of life and death.

The supreme elders and clan leader usually turned a blind eye to killings within the clan as they believed it created stronger and more ruthless members among those who survived.

But if someone showed enough promise they would protect their seedlings from the shadows, as they were potential future powerhouses that could bring their clan to greater heights.

And if he just so happened to pilfer enough crystals for him to cultivate in solitude for a decade or so he could come back one advancement, maybe even two, stronger. Then he'd be the hunter instead of the hunted.

Ogras was giddy as he looked over the report containing yesterday's haul from the mine. Hesitated a bit and then with a swipe removed a few lines of the report, and added back a new tally. This time the extracted amount of crystals printed were 1000 lower compared to before.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who had this kind of idea. There had been quite a few children with good heritage that had come with him into the incursion. Everyone was hoping to find the lucky break which would allow them to stand out among the masses.

It was tacitly approved by the elders that the young elite would have a feeding frenzy when they arrived at the new world, as some healthy competition was good for strengthening. As long as enough benefits were lugged back they did not really care that some didn't make it all the way.

As Ogras was pondering about his next steps the door to his temporary study opened, and a man decked in an extravagant armor entered.

This time Ogras was angered for real, as such conduct was a blatant disregard for his authority. Still, he wouldn't break character for something minor like this.

“Insolence! How dare you enter my chambers like his! I will have my grandfather flog you when we return!” Ogras roared as soon as the man was inside the door.

“My apologies” the man answered with a face that spoke of no regret. “I wonder what steps you have taken to capture those responsible for my cousin's death.”

The man in front of him was Rydel Arh'Rezak, one of the heirs to the main branch just like the departed Kevoran. Different from him though, Rydel was one of the most heavily nurtured youths in the clan, and also one they had spent the most Nexus Crystals to allow to retain as much power as possible when going through the incursion.

The more power you retained in an invasion to a baby world, the better your survival rate would be, and the better your position would be when contending for resources on this new world. But The Ruthless Heavens never just gave anything for free. It charged an exorbitant amount of Nexus Crystals if one wanted to keep more of their strength when passing through. And of course there was a limit, or the purpose of the incursions would be lost.

Clan Arh'Rezak wasn't overly wealthy, and could only pay up to a point for each daemon going through. Any more and the risk of the invasion turning unprofitable would be too big. The rest would have to come out of their own pockets.

Most of the soldiers couldn't afford it or only got a few levels extra, but the scions of their clan of course got some special benefits under the table. Either from their elders or even from the clan itself.

Maybe not even Ogras himself was a match for Rydel, though he had a few hidden aces in case they ever came to blows. And it might actually come to that, as Ogras had a strong suspicion that Rydel had been sent through the portal to both keep an eye on things, and if possible, neutralize him. That would eliminate any threat of a branch family becoming too strong in the clan.

“The crystal mine isn't going anywhere, and it would seem a waste to attach such large manpower to quickly excavate it. Also, a large portion of our mages are occupied building your... Palace. In my opinion, it would be more pertinent to...”

“It doesn't matter what your opinion is, Rydel. The clan decided I was the most suited for this task, so my orders are what goes. Now leave my study, and remember your manners in the future or there will be repercussions!” Ogras practically screamed, looking very much the part of a fool enjoying his new found power.

Rydel only sneered and performed a barely acceptable salute, and left the study without another word.

Left silently brooding behind his desk, Ogras prayed that the natives and Rydel would find and kill each other, solving all his problems at once.

Chapter 35: The Fourth Beast

Zac sat perched on a branch in a large tree eating an apple he had foraged earlier. The tree was one of the few in the vicinity that still stood tall and unaffected by the corrosive effect of the incursion, and its dense branches provided natural insulation from prying eyes. He had chosen this tree to be his temporary shelter to spend the night yesterday.

He had spent two nights close to the incursion now, trying to gain as much information as possible. Yesterday he had kept scouting around the demon city and up toward the mountain.

He had made some interesting discoveries. First of all, he had realized how the third skill quest progressed. It was based on time. It seemed that he had to be out in the forests fighting roughly 18 hours for the quest to progress by 1 point. That meant that he had to spend most of his time awake fighting every day. He didn't mind though, as he was planning on doing that anyway.

But it also meant that it would be an extremely close shave to actually manage to complete it before the 2-month deadline. He had already decided he didn't dare to wait, he'd kill at least the two remaining heralds as soon as possible. He didn't want to repeat what happened with Vul, being incapacitated and missing his deadline due to waiting until the last moment. He needed time to recuperate in case he got hurt from the fights.

He had also found the fourth type of beasts that the demons had brought through the portal. They were magic monkeys. Or rather they were called Stone Monkeys by his [Eye of Discernment], and did not look quite as demonic as the other three animals.

They were roughly up to his chest in height but had a bulkier build. They were an anthracite grey and surprisingly no fur. Instead, it looked that they had plates of rocks covering most parts of their bodies, forming almost a natural armor. The aspect that made them look somewhat demonic was their shining red eyes.

The stone monkeys were the most well-rounded of all the demon beasts so far. The barghest was all brawn and no brain, the gwyllgi high speed but low strength, and the imps were incredibly dangerous but also incredibly frail.

The stone monkeys were strong, agile and also durable. Even more annoyingly they seldom moved alone. They seemed to be united in one large group, and Zac suspected that the fourth Herald was the pack leader. He hadn't seen it, however, as he didn't dare venture too far into the mountains as it was crawling with monkeys.

That meant that the final Herald apart from the monkey was either a juiced up gwyllgi or imp, depending on which of the two he had managed to kill with his lucky roll for survival. He wasn't sure which he preferred to be alive, as both felt like they'd be a pain in the ass to fight.

It seemed that the monkeys stayed in the mountain due to their affinity with rocks. Zac often saw them perched and completely immobile on outcroppings as though they were gargoyle sculptures. Their natural habitat was likely in mountainous regions back at their home planet.

He had been happy to notice that each stone monkey gave a lot of Nexus Coins upon killing them. However, he still would rather farm the less lucrative barghest after his only encounter with the monkeys.

Zac thought he had finally managed to single out a solitary stone monkey. It was far away from any demon activity and seemed to be randomly walking around close to the foot of the mountain. Zac had planned to fight it to test it out.

What followed had truly exceeded his expectations. As soon as the monkey noticed Zac it didn't try to fight. Instead, it screeched at the top of its lungs and started fleeing back up the

mountain. While it was faster than a normal human, it still was no match for Zac.

Within a few seconds he had caught up to it, and a brief struggle erupted. The monkey's fighting style was a full-on brawl, and it was a whirlwind of punches and kicks in a disorganized and confusing manner. It also had a pair of sharp teeth which it tried using when an opportunity arose.

Zac estimated the Strength of the beast to be somewhere in the 60's, almost on par with Zac's before he got his class. Its other stats were quite good across the board, even its intelligence seemed higher compared to Earth's normal primates.

Of course, even with its strong stats, it was no match against Zac. He had grabbed an arm with his free hand and threw the monkey down on the ground. A quick swing and it was dead. The stone plating on the monkeys was quite hard but offered little resistance to his weapon.

The problems came after. The screech of the monkey had pulled a swarm of his brethren over, who all had seemed extremely enraged upon seeing their fallen comrade.

Thus Zac had been beset by an avalanche of angry fists and kicks coming in from all directions. Every swing of his axe had maimed or killed a monkey, but they were endless and fearless. Finally he had escaped, only because the monkeys seemed loath to leave the mountain and enter the forest. They had stopped right at the foot of the mountain, angrily roaring at Zac.

Zac was completely exhausted by then, both physically and his cosmic energy. Even new and improved pathways had barely managed to sustain him in his escape. He wasn't sure that he'd make it out if that onslaught had started a bit further up the mountain. He'd be drained and then finished off.

The upside from that experience was that it had been the most efficient farming of currency and cosmic energy he had ever done, except from when he killed the heralds. In that free-for-all brawl, he had gained a level and over 10 000 Nexus coins. He wasn't sure about how many he had actually killed during

the escape, but it seemed that the monkeys each awarded around 350 to 400 nexus coins.

The individual gain wasn't at the level of the imps, but there was a horde of monkeys but only a scant few imps from what he had seen so far. Of course, there still were many locations on the island he still hadn't ventured to, and they might be a cluster of imps somewhere.

If the monkeys weren't so territorial and had such teamwork, he'd never want to leave the mountain again. He'd gain enough Nexus Coins to buy the movement skill [Steps of Gaia] in no time. But he deemed it too large a risk to farm these beasts, at least for now. He would have to venture up the mountain again soon though, as the Herald was probably hidden somewhere in there, maybe in the form of a monkey king.

He'd wait until he had his class skills first until he ventured back into the mountains.

He had also figured out the general composition of the demon forces. He estimated that there were somewhere around 5 000 demons on the island in total. Their current activities could generally be divided into three parts.

The first part was the construction of a giant palace in the middle of the town. It still wasn't finished, but Zac was amazed by the design even before seeing the finished product. It looked like medieval eastern architecture had been fused with nature. The structure was made both from stone and trees.

And by trees, he didn't mean chopped down lumber, but actual trees. There were dozens of mages that reminded Zac of the root mage he had killed, who grew large black trees out of the ground. They then somehow forced it to grow in shapes that would constitute rooms and walls. It took less than an hour for a few mages to grow one of the house-trees into its final size. There were also mages who summoned rocks out of the ground. Under their care the rocks seemed like clay, allowing the mages to form them to their will to form a natural feeling to the walls and other stone features.

The palace was only three stories tall at the highest point, but it was expansive, featuring multiple buildings, beautiful gardens, sky wells, and courtyards. The gracefully curved roofs were made with tiles, with their eaves hanging out a few meters from the structures. The most central building in the complex had two layers of eaves, giving it an even grander feeling. Zac supposed that was either the general's living quarters or some type of throne room. Surrounding it all was a black hedge roughly 2 meters tall. It felt decorative rather than providing any protection, as anyone would easily get through or above it.

The only thing that took away from the grand structure was the dull colors. The palace was mostly in shades of black and grey, giving it a very foreboding feeling. The only flashes of color were splotches of red in some details, the shade reminding him of the shining pillar.

The second group moved back and forth between the town and a cave in the mountain. He wasn't exactly sure what they were doing there, as they held no equipment or the like when moving. They likely had magic pouches just like him, obscuring any hint of what was going on inside. He didn't dare sneak in, as there seemed to be activity inside the cave at all times.

His two guesses were they either were mining, or there was some sort of huge area beneath that they explored. He hadn't seen anyone hurt or wounded when walking back from the cave at least, so it shouldn't be full of subterranean monsters at least.

The last group, and also the smallest, was small parties heading out of the town and in different directions of the island. They looked like small search parties, but not like the ones he had encountered so far.

It seemed that the demons had learned their lessons from their two missing groups, and had improved the power of the parties. They all held at least five demons, but that wasn't all. Accompanying them was a varied amount of beasts. They all had a few Gwyllgi running around to the front and the sides for the party, seemingly acting as scouts. There was also a

couple of barghest that moved in the front, filling the role of meat shields. A few parties even had an imp or two subserviently following the demons.

Zac felt like he was no match for a party like this, there were too many variables and things that could damage him at the same time. He hadn't tried fighting those parties, staying far away as possible. Now that he knew what he was up against, he realized he really only had one advantage.

He knew a lot about them, but for them, he was still an enigma.

Chapter 36: Determination

After observing the demons for two days Zac also was certain that they were real living, breathing beings. He had always had a sneaking suspicion that they might be puppets, or NPC's if you will, created by the system to give a challenge to Zac and earth.

But the last two days he had watched them go about their day. They had worked, they had joked around and played cards. He had seen a few start a fierce brawl until a leader ran up and broke them apart. In essence, they were alive.

He hadn't really thought about it properly before, but they were just like him. Did they even want to be here, or were they forced by the system just like him? Could he just keep regarding them as the enemy, and killing them simply a means to an end?

But Zac soon had soon steeled his heart. The world has fallen, and chaos reigned. They were invaders on the island, HIS island. From everything he had seen and hypothesized since the integration in the multiverse he knew he couldn't go soft and hope for a peaceful solution.

Even if that somehow was possible before, he already had pulled the trigger and killed a bunch of their kind. Any opportunity for negotiation was already out the window. He would sooner or later have to decide how to act if he ever managed to reunite with humans again, but for now, the only diplomacy he'd deliver would be with the swing of his axe.

He couldn't and wouldn't give up on his goal of finding his family, and he knew that he had to become powerful to accomplish that. He had to become a true Defier as Abby called it, someone defying fate and breaking through his limits. Just his small island was fraught with danger, and this was only a small corner in this world. He had no idea how the

rest of the world looked since the system merged it with multiple others, but he held no illusions that it had become some sort of paradise.

If he had to sacrifice these demons to reach his goals, then so be it.

Besides, Abby had warned him of not completing quests given by the System. It could have unexpected and horrific consequences it seemed. It meant that people like Zac were almost like slaves to the System, forced to play its games. Unfortunately, he was incapable of doing anything about it, and could only play along.

Zac started heading back to his own camp after his second night at close proximity to the incursion. He had seen what he needed to see and now needed to get back. Being away from his camp for prolonged times filled him with anxiety, especially with the new larger war parties roving through the island for some reason. If a party found his camp while he was gone he would be forced to hide in the tree crowns and caves until he finished the quest, and he had no desire to do that.

Still, he made himself stop at the demonized part of the forest and farm out barghest and gwyllgi for a good 10 hours before continuing on. He could never stop fighting and killing in order to progress his skills. Besides, the density of beasts in the central area was so high that he was gaining coins and cosmic energy at a furious rate.

The only difficulty was that they were in such close proximity with each other's that often one or a few demons would hear the sounds of battle and join the fray. He got a few gashes and cuts from the onslaught, but nothing that would impact him.

Eventually, he left the area and started heading towards the south. Finally late at night he started to arrive at more familiar parts of the island. He had seen signs of the demon parties on the way and had made a hasty retreat in order not to get entangled with them.

After a while he finally arriving back at his camp he kicked off his shoes and sat down on his comfortable newly acquired throne. In the beginning he had felt isolated and afraid as he

was stuck in his little camp, fretful when hearing roars in the distance. Now it felt like a safe haven, a home.

Even with the dried viscera from the exploding demon, the still somewhat visible aftermath from the first fight with the demonling, and the bloodied indoors of the camper, he felt his heartbeat and breath calm down just from entering through the illusion array. In this little bubble, he didn't need to be a walking slaughterhouse wreaking havoc on the demon population, he could just be.

He just sat on his new chair and closed his eyes. He felt the luxurious rug between his toes, and the wind caressing his hair. For a second he could forget the hellish existence he had led lately.

A bestial roar in the distance woke him up from his revelry. Zac sighed and got up on his feet. He still didn't have the luxury to relax, there were things to do.

His scouting excursion had given him most of his answers, but he was struggling with coming up with a plan that might work. From his guesswork, he believed one of the heralds was somewhere up on the mountains, while the other was still unaccounted for.

Finally he had to kill a general, and Zac guessed he would be the big boss. It likely was one of the fancier-looking demons in their city, but he had no idea as of yet how to actually get to him, or how strong he was.

He held no illusions that he would be able to take the straight-forward approach and kick in the gate down and charge his way through. He'd be punched full of holes before he knew what happened.

There was the possibility of sneaking in during the dead of night and assassinating the general. But Zac felt that this was unlikely to succeed as well. For one he didn't know who the general was, but more importantly, he didn't have the skill-set to pull off such a caper. He wouldn't have any problem scaling the wall or climbing into a window in the palace.

But doing so soundlessly and without any of the numerous guards noticing was the real challenge. While the scouts at the edge of the valley had been very lackadaisical about their task, the military command seemed far stricter in the actual town.

There were guards in the towers and in the walls around the clock, with changes at intervals Zac couldn't figure out. It seemed almost randomized. He saw no chance to sneak in during a guard change. Furthermore, most of the vegetation had been cut down in the vicinity of the town, making a stealthy approach nigh impossible.

Zac had even considered tunneling into the town, but that felt much too risky. If a demon party found his entrance he'd be stuck inside. Besides, he had seen that the demons had multiple stone mages who built the palace. They might be able to detect him even when underground with some spell.

He had also toyed with the idea of trying to destroy the crystal. But he eventually gave that up as well. For one it contained such extreme amounts of energy that he was afraid it would explode and obliterate the whole island if he managed to crack it.

But more importantly it seemed that the demons were not worried in the slightest about the crystal. They just left a few men there and then left to build their town further north. If the crystal was instrumental to their invasion they'd surely protect it far better, as it seemed to be no effort for them to erect walls quickly.

Zac could only put it aside for now as he had gotten nowhere the last two days. He would focus on what he could do for now.

He had missed a few days of cutting wood while outside and had some catching up to do. His killing speed on this 3-day expedition had been astonishing, mostly due to the sheer number of targets in the center of the island. As he rhythmically swung his axe down, he mentally brought up his quest panel.

Active Quests

Dynamic Quests

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)

Class Quests

Axe Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. Reward: (548/1000)

Chop (Class): First chop Wood. Then their bodies. Reward: (1240/10 000)

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: (3/30)

He still hadn't gotten any new active quests since finishing the class quest. He was starting to suspect that the active quests were locked to certain areas and events. He wouldn't get anything like an upgrade class quest for some while he suspected, as he just had gotten his class. Meanwhile, maybe the demon slaying quest he got was tied to the island, and he'd have to leave it for another area to get another.

Either that or he was missing something about the quests. Perhaps they simply were quite rare. The one he completed did give him a title after all, and those were permanent upgrades.

Zac kept cutting wood long into the night, before finally sitting down for a few hours of sleep. He still stayed outside, as he didn't want the walls of the camper to dampen any sounds of a potential demon war party heading his way.

The next day he woke up early and immediately headed out. He had decided to stop killing any demons close to his camp. He was afraid that a complete lack of beasts around a certain area would alert the demons. He headed toward the center, this time toward the eastern part.

He was planning on grinding beasts while looking for clues about the fourth elusive herald. Ur'Khaz had been killed in the south as it occupied the same space as him, and he had killed Vul in the western area. The monkey king was likely somewhere in the mountain to the north and that left the eastern quadrant. He thought that he would try gather some more intel while finishing up the class quests.

He went back to camp when the night approached and chopped wood for a few hours. He was lucky that he had found the pouch, as he was starting to accumulate a ridiculous amount of firewood. He had decided to leave most of it in a few dry spots around the island. Just for safety he'd construct a simple roof with some branches and leaves to protect the lumber from a downpour. The lumber was proof of his effort, and it felt wasteful to just throw away.

He kept this routine going for a few days. His intense activities left him with less than 4 hours of sleep, yet he felt refreshed when he woke up. He wondered if he'd get to a point where he didn't have to sleep at all if his vitality and endurance got high enough.

Suddenly, as Zac slammed down his axe into the head of a barghest, a huge surge of cosmic energy entered his mind, causing him to almost black out.

Chapter 37: Monstrous Power

While having some difficulty staying conscious Zac finished off the other three beasts that had arrived due to the noise of the fight. Luckily the surge of energy soon dissipated.

He quickly retreated after the kills, not wanting to keep battling any more barghest for the moment. After running for a few minutes he reached one of his hideouts, another construction high up in a tree.

As he sat down on the bedding on leaves he could finally focus on the new things in his head. Just as he suspected he had completed the quest for Axe Mastery with his last kill. His speed of killing had far surpassed his expectations. He had given himself a 10-day deadline but had finished it in just below a week's time. It was mostly thanks to the high density of monsters in the central part of the island. The monsters were everywhere, and he didn't have waste a lot of time traveling looking for his next target.

Zac closed his eyes to go over his new skill and was surprised to suddenly find himself standing on the edge of a cliff. Jolted by the change in scenery he immediately opened his eyes, only to once again see the familiar sight of his hideout.

It had only been an illusion or something created in his mind, but it had felt so real he had thought for a second he had been teleported somewhere. Zac calmed his breathing and slowly closed his eyes again.

He once again found himself to be standing on the desolate cliff. As he looked around he found that the cliff was a part of a seemingly endless canyon. It stretched further than Zac could see and the bottom was shrouded in a thick mist, giving the impression of being bottomless. The illusory world itself

was a dull grey, as though all life had been sucked out of the area.

The most shocking sight wasn't the canyon however, it was the enormous axe that was embedded in the ground a few hundred meters away from him. It was at least 50 meters tall and exuded a pressure that almost made Zac collapse just from standing in the vicinity.

The axe itself was simple and unadorned with a straight wooden haft. It was a double axe made in seemingly ordinary steel with curved edges. Even though it looked simple Zac felt that he was gazing at a supreme treasure just from the towering aura it exuded.

As soon as Zac's eyes landed on the edge of the axe he stumbled backward, his face turning a ghastly white. It had felt like he was being split in two from just looking at the edge.

After regaining his bearing he tentatively looked up at the axe again, careful to avoid looking at the edges. But as he did, his vision once more changed.

The bleak dead world changed to one that could best be described as a paradise. Golden clouds hung in the sky, and there were fantastical buildings upon them. A network of translucent bridges connected the sky cities, and flying contraptions could be seen gliding about.

Zac himself was floating far up in the sky, seemingly unencumbered by gravity. Facing him was a vast celestial army. The army shone in a splendor of white and gold, and the generals radiated a terrifying power that Zac wouldn't even be able to begin to grade. A few groups of the army were circling pillars as large as skyscrapers, and it took Zac a moment to realize the huge structures were actually supersized array flags, like the ones he had in his camp.

There were even titans among the ranks of the humanoid army, the shortest standing being at least 100 meters tall. Their muscular frames looked strong enough to carry mountains.

The army gave Zac a holy feeling, but it also emitted a monstrous killing intent, which largely seemed to be focused

on himself. The very air seemed to vibrate with resentment.

Zac was terrified, as he instinctively knew that each and every one of these warriors would be able to end him without breaking a sweat. He tried to turn around and flee, but he couldn't move even his eyes.

A sigh escaped for his lips, making him realize he was not just an incorporeal being spectating, but inhabiting a body that was out of his control. It seemed he was viewing the scene through the eyes of someone else.

His eyes suddenly looked down on his body, seeing a muscular frame covered in simple linen clothes. His feet were bare and dusty, looking as though he had walked all day without any shoes. Suddenly an axe entered his vision. It was hefted in his right hand and looked identical to the enormous one he had seen in the first vision at the canyon.

The hand holding it was extremely rough and calloused as if it had been holding and swinging the axe for an eternity.

His vision went back to the army, who now seemed to be preparing to attack. The air was rife with runaway power, almost to the point that the cosmic energy would liquefy.

Thousands of warriors started infusing cosmic power into the towering array flags, who started to shine in a white light that superseded even the pillar on his island.

Suddenly two enormous gates appeared above the army, summoned by the arrays. As the gates started to open an even stronger power started to leak out. It felt like a god's punishment was held within those gates, and if they opened he would be destroyed body and soul.

But even against this force the being Zac inhabited didn't react. He simply lifted his axe, and with a grunt swung it down in a vertical arc.

It was as though the world turned white with that swing, and nothing existed except its almighty arc expanding outward. Nothing could withstand it. The celestial soldiers were dismembered without managing to even muster up a defense.

The pillars shattered, and the Titans roared and tried to defend against the wave with their superior physiques. It was to no avail as they crumbled when the wave passed through them.

Some of the leaders frantically summoned awe-inspiring amounts of cosmic energy to muster up defenses that left Zac in shock. Others ripped open tears in the air itself to escape, shock and horror visible on their faces. But the blade arc pushed through and crushed the defenses like dry twigs, annihilating the last remnants of the army. Soon after even the void was split apart and dismembered body parts were thrown out of jagged rifts, and Zac could see it was the leaders that had tried fleeing through the void.

Zac's vision started to blur, but the last thing he saw before everything faded was a hideous scar on the ground that stretched to the horizon. It looked like the world itself was maimed, and vast amounts of cosmic energy bled through the gash.

Zac's vision returned to the canyon and the huge axe. Only now he understood it wasn't a canyon, but the rift caused by that endlessly powerful axe-swing. The once celestial vision he had seen during the battle was gone, replaced with the empty desolation of a dead world.

Zac's emotions were in turmoil after the battle. He had become steady as a rock after over a thousand battles on the island, but he wasn't prepared for what he had seen. Who was that man, and why was that army trying to fight him?

Was that how a war in the multi-verse looked? If so, then earth was well and truly screwed. If someone arrived on earth with only a fraction of the power of the man with the axe, then there was nothing the earthlings could do. It would be like ants trying to stop a tank.

Furthermore, he didn't understand why he was shown this vision. He had just gotten the skill Axe Mastery and suddenly was transported here.

As he was pondering what it all meant the gigantic axe started emitting a blinding light. When he turned his eyes over to the weapon the light intensified and suddenly the axe was gone.

In its place was a large fractal that shared the same general outline as the axe. It also emitted extreme pressure, making Zac feel as though he could somehow be cleaved in two from this pattern as well.

The fractal didn't stay still for long, and suddenly started to shrink. When it had shrunk into the size of his palm it suddenly shot toward him like a bullet. Aghast Zac tried to dodge. It truly felt like the monstrous axe was charging at him.

It was to no avail however, and it slammed right into his forehead. Zac froze, not daring to move an inch.

Luckily the release of death didn't arrive, and he found out he was completely fine. The fractal hadn't cut him but somehow entered his head instead. He could now sense its existence in his mind, and it hovered there now seemingly inert.

Finally, he bit his finger making a small bleeding wound, and willed himself back to reality. He opened his eyes, still sitting in his small hideout. He was shocked to notice that he was completely soaked in sweat and drained of cosmic energy. It also seemed that hours had passed, rather than minutes as it had felt like, since the suns had moved quite a distance in the sky. But as he looked down on his finger it was whole and without any wound.

It seemed that the experience had truly been an illusion. He was already somewhat sure of that but had cut his finger just to be certain. He knew the System was no stranger to teleportation from how it sent away Hannah and her friends, and needed to know if he was in actual danger if it happened again.

For a final test, he tried to enter the mystic space once more, but nothing happened. It seemed it was a one-time opportunity he had received. He was at least happy to notice that the mysterious axe fractal actually had remained in his mind, as he could still perceive it outside of the illusion.

He was quite sure that the new fractal was the axe mastery skill that he had received, but he had no idea how to utilize it as of yet. He had initially planned on heading back to camp to finish his Chop quest as well, but he changed his mind.

He believed he saw those scenes for a reason and wanted to go over it while the memories were still fresh. So instead he rested his back against the tree trunk and once again closed his eyes.

Chapter 38: Insight

Zac's instincts told him that what he had seen had been important. So he tried to burn every feeling and impression to his memory.

The immense pressure that emanated from the axe and the terrifying sharpness of its edge. The world-ending power of the seemingly casual strike by the barefooted man. He had just swung once, but somehow everything he had wished to cut was cut, and nothing could escape him. Even the people who fled through portals hadn't been spared and were somehow killed in another space.

He tried to figure out why he was shown this vision. He could only assume it came from the System, as he couldn't imagine who else would, and could, show him such a thing.

He did not believe it was something as fantastical as a glimpse into his own future or a prophecy, rather felt it was far more likely the System was trying to show him something else. The only thing he could come up with was that it was sort of a training video. The illusion showed him what axe-mastery at a great, or maybe even the highest, proficiency looked like.

If that was the truth he wasn't disappointed anymore that he didn't get a rare or epic mage class. That army had even called upon the gates of heaven to attack, but it couldn't even withstand one chop. That axe master had also conquered the disadvantage of being a melee class. Everything in his vision was chopped and dismembered, no matter how far or fast they fled.

Of course, Zac knew that even if that was a real event that had happened, it had nothing to do with him. The power levels of those warriors did not seem as simple as having an E-grade or even D-grade class. It felt like a level so far off that it might just as well be a dream.

But still if he could glean some sort of truth or secret from the vision he'd likely benefit greatly from it. It also gave him a wake-up call about how formidable the forces out in the multi-verse were. He had known that there would be powerful people out there, but he hadn't imagined it being to this degree. That axe wielder would be able to cleave his whole island in two. That was not something that should be possible for a human being. That was the realm of the gods.

So it seemed actual beings with the powers of gods were out there. If one of them got angered with him or someone else from earth there might be irrevocable repercussions. There were already demons on his island, and there might be other forces on the planet as well. It seemed the restrictions were weakening as well, and sooner or later any old monster might be able to waltz through one of the incursions.

If he wanted to keep himself and his close ones safe he had to keep pushing forward until he himself was one of those gods.

Of course, he had to survive this island first before starting fantasizing about deifying himself. He refocused and started looking at the new fractal in his mind. He didn't really understand how it worked, but it felt like it was housed in an actual space in his mind, rather than it being just a memory.

It was a very weird feeling, as it was akin to noticing your body had secret compartments.

Unfortunately, no matter how he looked at the fractal he couldn't glean anything from it. He tried driving cosmic energy through it but it had no effect. Since it had entered his mind its heavy aura was gone, and it seemed dead or deactivated.

Zac sighed, feeling slightly disappointed. He had essentially been shown a pretty cool action scene, and was left with a pattern he couldn't use. He knew he was likely missing something, but could only return to his camp for now.

As he walked back he kept pondering about the vision he had seen. He wondered if he'd ever get to the point of that man in his vision.

He looked down on his axe and with a half-smile he swung it down just like the man in the illusion. Of course, no earth-shattering wave of destruction erupted from the swing. Only a slight swooshing sound was the result of the swing.

But after he performed the swing he stopped. The attack just felt *wrong*. He couldn't put it to words, but it was as though the attack was bland and flat compared to the one in the illusion. And he wasn't talking about the earth-shattering power, but something else.

Even though his swing and the axe-man's had the same trajectory it felt like man's swing was real and his the illusion rather than the opposite. Like the man's swing was a forest and Zac's just a picture of one.

His swing was missing something, and it was not form or technique, but something more intrinsic. If he hadn't seen that scene he never would have figured it out. He would think that a swing was just a swing.

He imagined the intense pressure he had felt when standing in front of the huge axe, and tried to incorporate it into the axe. It was easier said than done of course, and Zac kept swinging away while walking back. He even used some demon beasts as practice targets to try to get the feel.

He also tried incorporating cosmic energy into the fractal while swinging, but it also didn't do anything. He was still missing that feeling that would make his swings feel full instead of empty.

He tried to discern what made the axe-man so strong and made him effortlessly defeat the army. It wasn't speed. His swing had been slow to the point of almost feeling lazy. It hadn't been sophisticated or complicated either, but simple and unadorned, just like his axe.

But the swing was sharp. Anything it attacked was cut. It didn't matter if it were the huge titans, the awe-inspiring defenses of the top cultivators in the army, or even the gates of heaven. Everything that the axe waves hit was split in two.

However, what had made the largest impression on Zac was the heaviness the swing had contained. By that he didn't mean that the axe grew heavy like the great sword, but it felt like the axe had contained an unstoppable force when falling down. It had felt that the weight of a world was contained in that swing, and it had an unbending determination and intractability contained in it. Anything that tried to impede its path would be destroyed.

Zac didn't understand how he could know these things. They should be subjective opinions and personal impressions, but it felt like those impressions were rather inviolable truths. That the man's attack contained these abstruse elements felt as true and real as that the sky was blue.

Zac also somehow knew there was a multitude of other aspects hidden in that seemingly simple swing, but they seemed too far away and elusive for him to grasp onto. He decided to focus on the power and forcefulness for now rather than the sharpness as he felt the heaviness the most clearly in his mind. He was afraid of trying to study both aspects at the same time would be too hard for him to handle.

Zac tried to bring this sense of force and weight into his swing and started to bring more and more cosmic energy into it. His energy started to naturally flow along his pathways, and the whirling sounds from the axe started to sound slightly deeper.

Just as he started to feel that he started to grasp something a blue box suddenly popped up by itself.

[Dao seed gained - Heaviness]

Confused, Zac stopped swinging and brought up his status page.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

28

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (F)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early

Strength

136

Dexterity

57

Endurance

77

Vitality

66

Intelligence

46

Wisdom

46

Luck

64

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

134780

Zac was shocked when he saw his Strength. He had gained close to 30 points in Strength without gaining any levels.

There were two other changes to his page. The first was that he had a new title, Child of Dao. The second was an entirely new row was added next to the titles, called Dao.

Zac had heard of the concept of Dao somewhere, but couldn't remember the details. It was a part of eastern mythology or religion, but he didn't know exactly what it meant. But from context it felt like it was akin to insight or the like.

He had started to gain insight into the weight behind the man's swing, and he gained a Dao seed.

He began with checking his new title.

[Child of Dao: Third in world to attain enlightenment and create a Dao seed. All stats +5, All stats +5%.]

The description gave Zac a start. He was only the third in the world to gain the Dao seed. Since the integration into the multi-verse he had constantly been at the forefront, be it with achievements or levels. But he had actually been bested on this aspect.

He didn't know if someone had surpassed him in level since level 25 and gained a seed the same way as him, or whether there were other ways to get them. But it was a reminder that there were billions of people in the world. He had his lucky encounters, why couldn't others have theirs?

Besides, he knew he wasn't a born warrior, and it had taken him an enormous amount of effort to get where he was today. Perhaps there were geniuses that simply were perfectly suited for cultivation and the new world order.

The lost opportunity made him feel a bit depressed, and he swore at himself for all the time he had wasted. Had he gotten to this point a few days quicker he might have snagged a better title.

If the third spot got 5 points in all stat and 5% increase, what did the second and first place get? Perhaps as much as 10 points for second spot and a whopping 15 points for the first?

But Zac steadied his mind quickly, as he knew he couldn't get greedy. The number of advantages he had accumulated would probably make anyone on earth green with envy if they knew.

Chapter 39: Guidance

Next Zac wanted to check out the Dao seed. Soon he managed to open a new screen in the system.

It didn't have a lot of information, just a list in the same manner as the titles.

[Dao seed of Heaviness – Early. Strength +10, Endurance +5]

While the menu or information wasn't very spectacular, the stat bonuses were quite good. As Zac's main stats were Strength and Endurance this seed's bonus was a perfect gift. Perhaps a reason why he learned the Dao seed so smoothly was due to this.

It also made him understand the importance of Dao to the system. He just gained a seed of the Dao of Heaviness, and it was only an early seed. Both things indicated that he had just taken the first steps to understand this concept, but it already gave a boost worth a few levels.

What would it give if he managed to improve it to a higher level, like the Late stage? And what happened if it stopped being a seed and turned into the real thing? The boost it gave would likely be astonishing.

Zac felt that the seed and the fractal in his mind were somehow connected. He gained it while trying to emulate the powerful feeling in that axe swing after all. He once again turned his sight inward and gazed upon the axe fractal again.

He couldn't tell exactly how, but he sensed that the pattern of the fractal somehow subtly changed. It also no longer seemed inert as it was before, but emitted an aura that gave Zac the familiar sense of weight and intractability.

It was the same sense of heaviness that he somewhat managed to instill into his swings while trying to emulate the axe-man.

Now that he could contrast it to the aura in the illusion, he understood that the Dao of Heaviness was only part of the whole picture, and the suffocating aura of the axe was something far greater.

Still, it was a step in the right direction. His seed was only at the early stage. There surely were ways to improve upon it, and perhaps someday his axe aura, or Dao, might be as mighty as the one he saw.

Now that the fractal felt active again, he once more tried to circulate cosmic energy through it. This time it actually worked, and the fractal lit up.

Suddenly his vision changed, and fractals started appearing. Some shone up like glowing footprints in the ground, and others were lights forming arcs and trajectories around him. The lights seemed to have no effect on its surroundings, not lighting the ground or trees up in the slightest. Furthermore, when Zac moved his head the lights moved with him and slightly adjusted. Meaning it came from the system in the same manner as his different menus.

It felt like he was wearing augmented-reality goggles, giving him an extra layer of reality that only he could see. At least he assumed only he could see the lights and the menus, as they only seemed to respond and change in reaction to Zac's movements and commands.

He tried to touch the fractals that formed the trajectories, but it was like trying to touch a rainbow. Furthermore, as he moved his hand the lights adjusted and moved as well. After adjusting to his new vision he tried stepping on the glowing footprints and moving his body according to the illuminated trajectories. He found himself swinging his axe in a slanted upwards motion. The movement felt smooth and natural, and it felt like he was able to bring the full force of almost his whole body into the swing.

He kept following the glowing instructions and found himself performing a multitude of attacks. There were not only normal swings, but every part of the axe was used. From the butt of the haft to the spike on the back-side of the head, everything

was used in an array of methods to maim and kill enemies. It even showed how to use the rest of his body, such as grabbing with his off-hand, footwork and tackles.

It couldn't be said that the fractals in the air taught him actual Skills, but rather basic guidance on how to properly move and handle an axe.

Every strike had one thing in common, it contained the mass and intractability of his Dao. It made him realize many aspects of his weapon of choice as well. An axe differed from a sword in that it was balanced toward the head, whereas a sword was closer to the handle. This gave an axe a higher forward momentum and higher destructive power.

To master the axe he should focus on the part where it excelled, meaning this power and forcefulness. Its disadvantage was that it wasn't as flexible as a sword was. The bladed area was also far shorter with an axe, so some precision was needed for a killing strike. At least until he could swing his axe in the fantastical manner of the man in the vision.

Zac kept going through various motions as he moved toward the camp. He was entranced by the beautiful simplicity in the moves, and the power they managed to bring out.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell down, shocked to notice that he was completely and utterly drained. He hadn't completely recovered his energy from his vision earlier, and it seemed like using the axe fractal consumed large amounts of cosmic energy.

At least Zac finally felt he had figured out how the [**Axe Mastery**] skill worked. It wasn't what he expected, but he was still very happy with the result.

He initially thought he would get a bonus to stats similar to the Demon Slayer title, like bonus stats while wielding an axe, and perhaps generally get imparted some knowledge about axes. The reality actually trumped his expectations, and the rewards were twofold.

The first part was the vision, which Zac now was certain was showed to him so that he could plant his Dao Seed. The other

part was this guidance system that could help him improve his form and fighting abilities. It might have been more convenient if the System crammed his head full of these things, making him master these aspects immediately.

Perhaps that wasn't possible, as it was related to the Dao. Or perhaps the system didn't want to just hand things out willy-nilly. The guidance system was a god given in any case as Zac had missed the tutorial and sorely needed some guidance.

Of the two he felt the Dao-vision was the most valuable. One might be able to gain those seeds by themselves by meditating or being an expert on a subject, but Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't that easy. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been the third, but the 3rd millionth, to attain a Dao Seed. The world was full of experts, after all.

He decided on the spot to use the time he earlier spent on cutting wood on practicing his axe-form in the future. That time would be freed up as soon as he finished the second class quest in any case.

Zac sat down to recuperate and devoured some meat from his pouch, before continuing back home. It was dark when he returned to camp, as usual, this time due to his new skill rather than grinding monsters all waking hours.

Still, he couldn't rest, as he was too excited about what his other skill would be like. He started cutting wood in a furious speed, lumber flying left and right. After roughly 90 minutes he slowed down and caught his breath. He was only 10 swings away from finishing the quest for the **[Chop]** skill, and he wanted to be in rested condition just in case.

He drank a mouthful of water and steadied his breath before once again hefting his axe and swinging the 10 final strikes.

This time cosmic energy didn't enter his mind, but information. This time the impartment was akin to when he bought **[Eye of Discernment]** from the Nexus Crystal. Zac was a bit disappointed that he wouldn't get another vision that could give him another Dao seed or the like, but he knew that was a rare opportunity he gained.

The skill was another fractal, and the usage was similar to the identification skill. It needed him to circulate cosmic energy through his energy pathways in a specific manner, then imagining it entering this fractal. The difference was that while **[Eye of Discernment]** placed the fractals inside his eyes, the new one was on the top of his right hand. It wasn't a physical manifestation, rather it superimposed itself on his pathways.

This was different from his eye skill, which was isolated fractals in his eyes. The **[Chop]** skill's fractal seemed to actually merge with his Class-pathways. It didn't look out of place or messy, but it felt as a missing piece of a puzzle was added.

When Zac rewrote his pathways there were many parts that looked blurry and missing. It seemed that from his new skill that they were slots for his skills. Maybe even other skills, like **[Steps of Gaia]** that he was eyeing in the store, could be slotted into his pathway gaps.

He tried doing the same with his ocular skill, but it was a closed circuit fractal, giving no opportunity to integrate with his pathways. The axe mastery fractal was in an enclosed space in his mind, and he had no way to connect it to his pathways either. Unfortunately, he lacked any more skills to experiment with. He actually had enough Nexus Coins to buy the cheapest skills by now, but he didn't want to burn his hard earned cash for an experiment.

He wasn't sure what benefits there were to slotting it into his pathways compared to simply having them like his identification skill. He would have to test it and find out.

Even though it was late at night he couldn't wait, too eager to find out the effects of his new skill. Even if he realized it would be nothing like the great spells he saw in the vision, he had already fought against someone with an impressive skill. It was the demon leader with the great sword, whose furniture now adorned his campsite.

The black arcs of lightning had almost gotten him killed a few times. From the simple name of his own skill he realized that it

might not be as extravagant though. But he did get it from a rare class after all, so it shouldn't be useless.

He planned to try out the skill by using it a few times, then finding a demon beast to test it on, so he left his camp in search for a decent target.

As he walked some ways from the camp he made a new discovery. A skill screen had been added to his various prompts. It hadn't been there when he bought the identification skill, which is why it had taken him all day before trying it. He surmised it must've activated when he got his class skills.

Normal Skills

Eye of Discernment - Proficiency: - . A glimpse into the unknown. Upgradeable

Class Skill

Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Early. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable

Chop - Proficiency: Early. There is greatness in simplicity.

The screen showed scant information, but it did give Zac a few answers to things he had been wondering about. The class skills seemed to have proficiency, and both were at early stage. His Dao seed was at early stage as well, and he guessed that if he progressed in [**Axe Mastery**], the seed might follow.

[**Chop**] would likely simply get stronger if the proficiency increased. His identification skill had no proficiency, and it seemed that it wouldn't get stronger. He had wondered about whether he could improve his skill and get more information about enemies, or even be able to identify items.

It was, however, upgradeable. He saw no hint of the requirements, but it was good to know that he could improve the skill into a better one. [**Chop**] wasn't upgradeable, which was a bit disappointing. He could only hope the description was true, that there was greatness in simplicity.

If he went by his knowledge from video games, then he'd likely need to raise proficiency to the max before somehow

upgrading [**Axe Mastery**] into a higher tiered skill. As that option wasn't available for [**Eye of Discernment**], he could only hope to find out some clues at a later date.

Of course, even if he wouldn't be able to upgrade [**Chop**] he'd still try to max out its proficiency. Who knew if the System would reward a Title, or new class quests if he did. The system did like it when people put in effort, after all.

Chapter 40: Chop

As he walked away from the camp in the dead of the night he was going over his future path of development. He couldn't just focus on training with the new guidance system all day due to the third class skill requiring large amounts of time battling in the forest.

On the way from the camp he tried using [**Axe Mastery**] in an actual battle with a barghest. He was disappointed to see that the trajectories wouldn't actually assist him in battle, and completely shut off right before the battle started. It seemed it was purely a training mechanism.

Finally he arrived at a small clearing some distance from the camp. He didn't want to accidentally ruin his home in case the skill had any unexpected effects.

He started with using a small amount of energy and channeled it through his new fractal as he swung the axe. The energy transformed as it ventured out through his hand and into the axe. As he swung down he could see a translucent edge formed by cosmic energy.

It was like the axe head had gotten a bit larger, as the translucent edge ran a few centimeters in front of the actual edge, and its length was roughly 10 centimeters longer compared to the actual steel edge. The edge created from cosmic energy looked like a copy of his axe's actual edge, with some faint fractals added along its length.

It wasn't spectacular but he used a minuscule amount of energy in the strike. He tried using the skill once more, but this time he put far more cosmic energy into the skill. The translucent blade grew quite a bit larger, now stretching noticeably outward. The blade was now over one meter long, making his once short-ranged axe have almost as long a range as the great sword he had commandeered. Luckily the edge

didn't grow downward along the haft, but rather outward. Otherwise it would be hard for him to swing it without maiming himself.

It was out of Zac's expectation it would grow to this size. As he continued putting in more power into the skill it kept growing, but Zac soon felt that he was starting to lose control over the skill. Suddenly the cosmic energy blade simply dissipated, leaving no trace of ever being there.

It seemed that there was a limit of how large he could grow the blade without it starting to become unstable. After some experimentation he knew that he could keep the blade stable at roughly one meter. Any larger and it would quickly become unstable. The longer he made the blade the shorter duration he could keep it.

It seemed that this was all that there was to the skill. He tried shooting it away like a ranged attack or boomerang, but nothing happened. It was firmly lodged to his axe. Of course, the proficiency was only at early stage, and it might get more functions at higher levels.

Zac was still quite pleased with the skill, even though it wasn't as flashy as the black lightning of the demon leader. It wasn't fancy but he could immediately imagine a few uses for a skill such as this. For one he could surprise an enemy. He or she might have thought that they dodged his strike, but instead they were well within the range of his skill blade.

It was also a brutal instrument when fighting against multiple enemies. If he pushed it past its point of stability he could wield a huge blade and slash at multiple people at one, at least for a short duration before the skill broke. With his monstrous strength he believed that he could create a great deal of carnage in that brief window in time.

Of course, that would be a last resort attack, as cramming that amount of cosmic energy into one skill use would greatly drain him.

There was one thing he didn't understand with the skill. He had gained his Dao seed from managing to incorporate this intangible force of heaviness into his strikes while he was

walking back to the camp, but he was utterly incapable of doing the same with the skill.

He tried using a few Dao empowered strikes, and they did have an air of weight to them. It wasn't as tyrannical as the axe-man's of course, but it felt like these strikes should be harder for someone to block compared to normal strike.

But when he tried incorporating this feeling into **[Chop]**, everything got jumbled and he didn't even manage to produce the blade. He saw no reason that they shouldn't work together but guessed that he had to practice some more before being able to use it as he wished.

The last thing for him to test out with the new skill was the sharpness. It was somewhat pointless if he got a larger edge if it wasn't sharp. Sure, with his strength he'd do damage anyways without a sharp edge, but if the translucent edge was dull he might as well swing around a tree trunk.

He charged up a meter long blade and swung down upon a rock almost as tall as him. With a clang the cosmic energy blade cut halfway into the stone. Satisfied, Zac let the blade dissipate.

It seemed that cutting through things would use up the energy faster compared to simply having it summoned, but even while not cutting things it continuously drained him slowly. Of course he could likely keep inputting more and more energy and the blade would remain. But it seemed to be a wasteful use of cosmic energy.

Zac felt that the skill was best used as either a finisher or surprise attack, not in a long protracted battle. He would only be able to use it continuously for a few minutes at the most before being completely drained.

The sharpness seemed to be roughly the same as with his actual axe. It did seem to model itself after his axe's edge after all, so it made sense that they would share some features. He wondered if the sharpness improved if he got a higher grade weapon in the future. He was sure that his weapon was a low F-grade blade, as he had looted it on some random demon after all. It couldn't be too valuable.

He then brought out a sword from his pouch to test whether he could use **[Chop]** with other weapons, but it at least didn't work with swords.

He was planning on testing some more but a snap of a twig in the vicinity stopped him in his tracks.

Zac got a sinking feeling, as he had made sure that there were no beasts in the area before trying out the skill. He quickly slunk down into nearby foliage and started to retreat toward his camp, taking great care to not make a sound.

Only the gwyllgi among the demons seemed to be active during the night, but he had never heard those beasts make any sounds while moving through the forest. That meant that the snap of the twig was more likely to be one of the war parties moving about.

He swore at himself for his carelessness. He had been on a high from his new boosts and wasn't as careful as he should be. Even when grinding beasts his biggest priority had always been keeping a lookout for these parties. He always kept moving and didn't fight close to his base as he didn't want to attract attention to that area.

Now he was quite close to his camp, and his swing into the stone had made a sound. He soundlessly passed through the layer and entered his illusion array. He could only hope it was a large critter that was lumbering around in the dark.

Zac held his axe at the ready, vigilantly gazing into the woods. His hopes were soon dashed as he saw one of the roving war parties moving close by. The demons conversed in their language with subdued voices, seemingly arguing about something.

The core of the party consisted of 6 demons and an imp. They generally seemed to be average soldiers, with none of them wearing expensive-looking gear. There also were a few gwyllgi and barghest surrounding the party.

Zac didn't dare to move even though he knew that his camp just looked like an empty area with some extra dense bushes. His illusion array was effective on the eyes, but he had no idea

whether there were skills that could sense the array. He had tried it with his **[Eye of Discernment]** without finding anything, but it was also the cheapest skill that the Nexus Node offered.

Suddenly he saw a gwyllgi was slowly coming extremely close, moving some ways from the group. If it kept moving the direction it did, it would enter the bushes he had moved to the edge of his camp, and soon after enter his array.

Zac's fears came true as it trotted forward and entered his camp through the dense bushes. Zac was ready and with lightning speed he grabbed the hound's neck as soon as it was through the array, and with a twist broke it. With his strength he could probably rip its head right off, but he didn't want any blood to spill.

He slowly dragged the corpse into the camp and flung it to the side. Luckily the array also had sound dampening, so no one should have heard anything. He resumed his vigil against the rest of the group, and it seemed no one among them had noticed the missing beast. The gwyllgi often moved some distance from the parties acting as scouts, so it would likely take some while before they noticed their missing beast. Unfortunately, they had stopped just 50 meters away from the camp.

They still seemed to be arguing about something in hushed tones. One of the demons seemed nervous and kept pointing toward where Zac had tested his skill. The others seemed unconvinced and dismissive.

One of the demons rolled his eyes at the nervous one and started to actually walk toward Zac's camp. The nervous demon entreated him, but was just met with a dismissive wave of his hand. He started fiddling with his pants and stopped at a tree just half a meter away from the edge of the illusion array.

The demon was actually relieving himself. He looked around the area while he did so. His eyes stopped a second on the camp. It should look like a normal clearing to him, but the demon slightly furrowed his brows. Soon they smoothed out

and he casually looked away again and continued with his business.

But Zac's heart started beating rapidly after scrutinizing the demon's face.

Heknew.

Chapter 41: Apex Predator

Zac didn't dare hesitate and furiously chopped his axe down through the array while the demon still had his pants down doing his business.

As Zac suspected the demon was ready for the strike, and without hesitation, he lifted his sword to meet the oncoming attack. Unfortunately for him Zac's strength was in another league, and with the addition of the Dao of Heaviness the force of the swing simply broke the poor demon's arms and continued unimpeded into his head.

It looked like that the array didn't hold up to scrutiny when observed at such proximity, or maybe the demon simply used some ocular skill more powerful than his **[Eye of Discernment]**. The demon had noticed something was wrong but didn't want to alert anyone to this fact until he was back at safety in his group. But some discreet facial tics had foiled his plans.

After the swing Zac quickly grabbed two of his knives from his pouch and hurled them at the war party just as they were shocked by an axe appearing out of thin air and killing their comrade.

One of the knives punched a hole through the imp, instantly killing it, but the other missed the demon he was aiming for. He'd trained his throwing skills diligently since his embarrassing throw that completely missed the target in his first battle against a barghest. Together with his increased stats in Strength and Dexterity, his aim was quite good by now, but he still couldn't always hit his targets when throwing in rapid succession.

He threw another dagger but the demon dodged it, as it was ready for the attacks now. The barghest were stupid however, and a knife instantly slammed into its torso, maiming it badly.

He had a decent stock of knives by now since killing the scout demons surrounding the valley with the incursion, and could keep throwing them for a while.

He didn't have any time to kill the other barghest, as he saw one of the demons starting to conjure a fireball. Aghast, he didn't dare to hesitate, and hurled a dagger at the mage. He couldn't have him burn the camp down, or even start a forest fire. Every demon on the island would know a battle was happening here.

A magic shield stopped the dagger in its tracks, so Zac had no choice but to charge out of his array toward the demons. There still were 5 demons and a couple of demon beasts against him. Fortunately he killed the imp immediately, otherwise he'd have to worry about those fireballs. They were still extremely deadly, even with his improved constitution.

Suddenly as he was approaching spikes shot out the ground. They looked like thin stalactites, so it seemed one of the demons was a rock mage. Not expecting the attack one of the spikes managed to stab into his gut before he could react.

His breastplate was high quality work, but unfortunately it only covered his upper torso. Therefore his only protection on the rest of his body was the common leather armor which barely impeded attacks. He broke off the one impaling him and then destroyed the other with a swing.

An arrow crackling with electricity zoomed toward his head as he was getting rid of the stone spears. He had to dodge before properly removing the tip of the spike from his stomach, making it do some extra damage while he rolled away.

As he got back to his feet the fire mage already seemed ready to fire his spell. But to Zac's horror he wasn't actually aiming at him or the camp, but straight up. The demon intended to use it as a signal flare while the others impeded him.

Zac desperately infused all the cosmic energy and heaviness he could into his arm and threw his axe with a grunt. The axe sounded like a propeller as it ripped through the air at the mage. The magic shield that stopped his knife shattered like a

mirror, and the axe head slammed into the mage's chest, instantly killing him.

Lucky for him the ball of flame snuffed out as soon as the mage died, just like how it did with the imps he had fought. There would be no signal flare or forest fire this time at least.

But Zac didn't have time to breathe out in relief, as a barghest slammed straight into him. The demonic brutes could charge straight through smaller trees, so the force completely winded him. Had he been prepared he could have used the inscription on his chest piece, as his chest armor held one charge where it could nullify an attack. But Zac himself had to activate it and he wasn't prepared for the body slam.

An arrow shot into his stomach as he was pushed backward as well, piling on to his misery. Luckily his endurance was up in the high 70's by now, and it didn't get far into his body before stopping.

However, the arrow released a lightning shock right into his intestines, making him unable to breathe for a second. Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood but didn't dare move the arrow, remembering that leaving the weapons in the wound when stabbed was safer. He could only break it off and ignore it for now. Instead, he punched the barghest which caused it to crash hard into the ground.

A flash of pain erupted on his back, and he noticed a gwyllgi had approached soundlessly from behind. Normally these beasts were of no concern, but he also had to worry about the mage and archer. There also were two more demons who still stayed put. One of them carried a two-handed sword, and with his muscular build looked very much like a classic warrior.

But the other's gear gave Zac no indication of her means of attack. He assumed she was some sort of mage, as she held a tome in her hands.

Zac growled in annoyance and kept the barghest down on the ground with one hand and grabbed a knife out of his pouch with the other. With a quick stab he tore its throat out. It was still alive but wouldn't be for long. He just barely dodged another arrow coming at him right after his kill, but

simultaneously an earthen spike tore straight through the dying barghest and headed for his head.

Just as he was about to dodge a splitting pain in his mind made him completely blank out, and as he tried to dodge the incoming spike he realized his body didn't respond.

But with a muffled roar Zac used all his will-power to force himself to move. He succeeded in breaking the odd restriction and managed to move his head away somewhat away from the stone spear. It still tore a huge gash in his left cheek, doubling the length of his mouth.

Breaking free from the binding left him with a pounding headache and a bit woozy, and he had to shrug his head to reorient himself.

A quick glance at the enemies showed that one of the demons who earlier had been staying put was puking blood while looking at Zac aghast. It was the one who was holding a tome looking mysterious. He didn't have time to think about what kind of skill she used, as he was beset from both behind and the back.

A gwyllgi charged at him again, but this time he was prepared. With a quick stab blood gushed out of its chest, and it crashed into the ground. He took another arrow, this time to his leg, but it was a worthwhile price for another enemy down.

He grabbed the dying gwyllgi by its neck and used it as a shield while charging toward the group. Their distance wasn't big and he was upon them before they could send another salvo of earthen spears and arrows.

Zac ran toward the downed mage in order to get his axe back, but the warrior demon who had stood rooted until now placed himself in his way. From his bulging muscles he seemed he focused on the Strength attribute, which actually made Zac relieved rather than anything else. If it was one thing he was confident in it was his supreme strength.

The warrior roared and swung his sword toward him. Zac didn't dare use his knife to intercept, and could only use the beast carcass as a club. He swung it at the warrior, trying to

angle it so that he would hit the flat of the blade rather than the edge.

The corpse and the sword clashed, and the corpse exploded in a mangled shower of blood and viscera, drenching both Zac and the demon. But it did its job, and the sword was deflected once. That was all he needed, as he crashed into the demon with all the strength he could muster.

The warrior was flung away like a ragdoll, not being able to muster any resistance in the slightest. He fell down a few meters away, and whether he was alive or dead was unknown. The demons seemingly hadn't expected that outcome of the collision, and he managed to immediately snatch up his axe before they could react.

Zac then made a beeline for the archer. At these close quarters, the archer had actually dropped his bow and instead held a short sword and a blade respectively. Zac would have expected him to make some distance like the last archer he fought. But perhaps he either actually focused on blades, or didn't dare turn his back on Zac while fleeing. Both the blades were crackling with the same lightning as the arrows he had shot at Zac earlier.

Zac ignored an earthen spear stabbing into him and pushed on toward the Rogue-looking demon. He wanted to make short work of him and swung a horizontal swing intended to cleave him in two.

However the demon almost seemed to have no bones in his body, and curved his torso to avoid the swing, and then retaliated by trying to stab Zac's heart and throat. Zac was out of position with the swing and could only desperately protect himself with his free arm, really wishing he had a buckler right about now.

The knife heading for his heart plunged into his bicep, and the short sword changed trajectory slightly to avoid hitting his arm as well. It at least managed to nick his throat, and a small gout of blood spurted out. But at least it hadn't hit an artery. The electric shocks hurt as well, but with Zac's Endurance he could grit his teeth and simply force his body not to spasm. These

arcs of lightning couldn't compare to the black lightning he had tasted earlier as well.

He turned his hand to readjust his edge and tried to swipe the demon on the way back. The demon once again deftly repositioned his body so that he would be able to avoid it, but this time Zac wouldn't be denied. Just as the axe blade was about to miss the demon's throat a translucent edge grew out a meter and cleanly decapitated the ranger.

Zac didn't really want to show his ace while there still were 3 demons alive, but he had to kill the ranger. The ranger was the only one he wasn't sure he would be able to catch if they started to flee. And if they were sane they should. He had decimated half their force in almost no time. His wounds looked grisly but nothing that would stop him from continuing his onslaught.

With his new skills and power-ups he truly felt like the apex predator of his island.

Chapter 42: Exodus

With only two demons left, not including the knocked out warrior, Zac charged toward his next targets. The two demons briefly looked at each other in the eye, and both launched an attack before fleeing.

The tome-wielding demon's attack was an almost invisible ripple in the air, whereas the earth mage erected a large wall. Zac once again threw his axe just before the wall completely obscured the two fleeing combatants, and then he crashed straight into the wall.

The wall was hastily erected and couldn't withstand Zac's momentum, and he blasted through it like a wrecking ball. Just as he did the ripple hit him, making him nauseous and disoriented. But the attack wasn't as strong as the earlier one, and he soon managed to dispell the effects.

A quick glance at the demon who used the ripple attacks showed her dead with an exploded chest, with his axe stuck in the ground some distance away from her corpse. But before he could continue on to kill the earth mage he felt an intense amount of danger as he heard a whistling sound. It was the sword-wielding warrior who Zac had punted earlier.

Somehow he had gotten up and snuck right behind Zac without him noticing, and his two-handed sword was bearing down on his throat. Zac had no time to dodge and could only put his hopes on the spell on his chest. The familiar golden sheen of the armor's skill immediately enveloped him, just in time to intercept the large sword.

With a crash, the warrior was flung backward once again, and this time Zac could hear the sound of bone breaking.

The earth demon was still running and Zac couldn't let him get away. He barreled after him and threw a knife at the back of

the mage. A block of rock rose up behind him intercepting the dagger, but the scare made the mage stumble.

Zac immediately rushed to the fallen demon, and ferociously stabbed down at his throat. However, a layer of rock appeared on the mage's skin, creating another layer of defense. The knife simply couldn't cut through it.

Terror was still evident in the demon's eyes, and it stuttered some words in its own language. Zac ignored it and brought out the huge greatsword from his pouch. He increased the weight to the max through the inscription on the blade, and slammed it down on the body. It was cruel, but he wouldn't risk letting the mage somehow alerting the army of what was going on.

Over 130 Strength and a heavy greatsword resulted in a ruptured lump of flesh on the ground, and even a crater was created.

Zac didn't waste any time, and immediately ran back toward the last demon. He found him limping away from the scene of the battle, his sword discarded where he fell. He soon noticed Zac approaching with fear and hatred evident on his face. Suddenly he completely disappeared, shocking Zac.

He wondered if the demon used some sort of teleportation skill which would allow it to escape. He furiously ran toward where the demon disappeared and looked around for any clues.

Zac saw a glimmer in the distance and immediately threw a dagger at it. Suddenly the background looked like it was distorting, and the warrior reappeared, the dagger lodged in his arm. Zac ran over, and with a swing of the great sword ended the fight.

The last demon had used an illusion skill like his array, or something similar. That was also how he snuck up and almost decapitated him earlier. Zac was a bit surprised a meat head-looking warrior knew such a skill, as that felt like something that usually belonged to rogue-like classes.

It made him realize he couldn't rely on his gaming experiences for everything. The system was quite omnipotent, and

anything was possible.

With the demons killed there was no hurry anymore, so Zac quickly treated most of his wounds and then gathered up all the corpses and their gear in his pouch. This also made sure none of the demons pulled a ruse on him and played dead, as nothing living could enter the pouch. He also retrieved his daggers and axe, and while doing so he was attacked by the last barghest and gwyllgi from the roving party.

With their masters dead they went back to their ordinary hyper-aggressive behavior. Without any demons shooting various things at him he finished them off easily, officially eradicating the war party.

The fight had gone above his expectation, and he was almost like a fox let loose in a hen house. His stats were getting increasingly scary for his level. Furthermore, the fight had also made him realize something. Not one of the demons he had fought thus far used any Dao while fighting. They had used battle tactics and skills, but the indefinable quality of Dao, such as Zac's heaviness and force he could imbue into his strikes, were missing. Perhaps gaining a Dao seed was something uncommon, or at least hard, making it a rare boost reserved for the elite.

He was also very satisfied with his new skill **[Chop]**. It worked just as he hoped, providing a great method of sneak attacking. He wasn't sure if it was designed to be used this way, but he felt it was the most effective method in this type of combat.

Zac had wanted to use the skill a bit more to test it out in battle, but unfortunately, he spent a good deal of the battle without the axe in his hand. He really hoped he would be able to pick up some back-up axes, or even throwing axes, soon. Unfortunately Azzun had been the only demon so far who fought with an axe.

Even though he luckily stopped the signal flare and finished the battle quickly Zac didn't feel relieved. The fight took place right by his camp, making him realize it was just a matter of time before he was exposed.

He spent the next hour going over the scene of the battle, meticulously removing any traces of battle that he could. He was forced to crush the earthen spikes into rubble, but the wall was crumbling by itself for some reason. Perhaps it was erected so hastily that it couldn't properly stabilize, sort of like his [Chop] blade when making it too long.

When finally done it wasn't readily apparent a battle took place outside his camp. There were sections of overturned earth though, as Zac had to hide the blood and viscera somehow. Hopefully a day or two in the sun and wind would make it appear more natural.

Finally Zac returned to the camp and properly stitched himself up. He had already removed the arrow-head, but the ugly gash in his face was still open. He prioritized hiding the scene of the battle and had only kept his mouth closed in hopes that it would help the wound close by itself.

After taking a look in the mirror he saw it was already slowly starting to close. He knew that it would leave an ugly scar though, permanently disfiguring his face.

'Well, better ugly than dead I suppose' Zac thought with a sigh. Besides, that scar was only the latest in a litany of wounds on his body accumulated over the last month.

Finally he closed his eyes to sleep for two hours before getting up. His wounds were getting better. Most of the wounds had been quite shallow thanks to his high Endurance, and he felt healed enough for another day of battle.

While cleaning up the scene during the night he made a difficult decision about his future. He would abandon camp, at least for now. The risk of returning home after a day of monsters grinding and finding himself in an ambush started to feel too high for comfort. He would only return if absolutely needed.

He started to pack up anything of use to bring with him. Luckily he acquired another magic pouch from the battle, although its space was smaller than his first. It was half-way packed with various rocks and plants. It seemed that the demon parties were roving the island to collect samples of

various things. Zac didn't know why, but he felt they didn't do it to compose a botanical encyclopedia.

His guess was that it was for healing remedies or poisons. Even before the world changed plants with healing properties existed, and if they got crammed chock-full with cosmic energy the effect might be far greater. Maybe the demons had some means to test whether the local flora possessed any value, so they collected it to be tested. That would explain why it was only a few samples of each type in the bag.

He left the rocks and herbs in, as he didn't require a lot of space. The herbs might come in handy in the future after all. He filled the other half with spare gear and the two luxurious chairs. He kept the table, rug, and parasol in his original pouch. He had grown fond of the furniture and didn't want them seized by the demons if they found his deserted campsite.

He also tried storing the nexus crystals and the array flags, but it didn't work. He wasn't surprised, as he already knew he couldn't move them too far from the camp either. He once tried it earlier, as he had wanted to use the gravity array as a trap device. But when he moved the flags too far away from his designated outpost the flags started to vibrate ominously.

Apparently, they would self-destruct if they were moved too far. They were bought by the System as an outpost improvement, so the System restricted them somehow. Maybe he could purchase non-restricted versions in the future in the shops he had seen in the outpost store. He could only leave them where they were and hope that the demons didn't destroy them. Most of the things would be pretty cheap to purchase again, but losing the gathering array would hurt.

Finally he tried to store his new pouch in his old one, but it didn't work either. Perhaps one couldn't place a magic space inside a magic space, as it would violate some law of space or whatever. He could only carry the two pouches next to each other on his belt.

Having packed all his essentials he paused as he looked over the camp briefly, some sadness welling up in his heart. He

probably wouldn't return here until the demons were dealt with. He now had both brought a demon here for interrogation and also fought a large battle right at the steps of his camp. The risk of staying here was too large.

He could buy defensive arrays, but he held little assurance that something that only cost around a 100 000 nexus coins could keep a whole demon army at bay. Besides, they simply needed to siege him by leaving a hundred men outside, and sooner or later he would run out of resources and also fail his quests.

With a sour feeling he set out, moving toward the western part of the island, where he fought the Herald. After arriving at the vicinity he dumped the bodies and tried to stage the area to look like it had happened there. He wasn't too optimistic that he'd fool anyone though, but he didn't want to waste time with burying them. They'd know the party was dead one way or another soon anyway, and he hoped to move their attention to this part of the island.

The corpses were left on the ground without any of their gear and weapons, as it was all pilfered by Zac.

Done with the task he set out again, this time heading for the mountain.

Chapter 43: Stone Monkeys

Zac moved through the forest with determination. He felt that he couldn't look around for information or clues anymore. He simply couldn't find the last Herald, and he was making no headway regarding the General either.

The general was likely holed up in the city, and the last herald either stayed in the cave or in the city as well. He had traversed the whole island while grinding for his quest skills, and hadn't even seen a trace of the alpha beast. The city and the cave were the last two options that he could come up with.

He needed to progress his quests, and the monkey mountain was the only way he could as he saw it. The other option was entering the cave, but he felt it was too risky for now. There was a lot of foot traffic to and from that cave, and it seemed they placed great importance on it. He had no idea of the topography inside either, meaning he might be stuck in a large cave with no other exits.

The mountain was a safer bet. While it was somewhat close to demon activity, the cave was located at the foot of the mountain towards the southeast. If he kept his activities to the western part and the central area of the mountain he should be able to act unconstrained without any demons noticing. That was as long as another war party didn't happen upon him of course.

But the mountain sported a complicated terrain with a multitude of outcroppings, caves, and paths, making it convenient to escape even if he was found out.

He soon arrived at the mountain and stealthily started making his way forward, looking for targets. He was planning on thinning the herd for a few days while looking for the monkey king. Since the stone monkeys had a strong sense of

camaraderie he was afraid that the monkey Herald would be able to summon hundreds of monkeys with a shout.

But if those animals were already dead he'd be able to fight the boss without any interruptions. He had already seen that no reinforcements came through the crystal, so every monkey he killed was one less to worry about in the future.

There were a lot of monkeys in the mountain, but nowhere near the seemingly endless amount of barghest that were skulking in the forest. He soon found a group of roughly 50 monkeys that sat huddled together and seemed to be sunbathing. They were completely immobile and staring up at the sky. It was a group like this that had almost ended Zac's life just days before.

Zac didn't prepare any tricks or traps for this fight, and after a quick survey to make sure not another group was in the vicinity, he charged into the pack. He charged up [**Chop**] through the fractal in his hand to the limit of what he could control, and with a great arc decimated three monkeys with one swing. Apart from being a good skill for surprise attacks, it also was excellent when fighting large groups of weaker prey.

Between the haft and the elongated blade of his skill he had a far greater reach compared to a normal axe wielder, and everything within two and a half meters of him was a zone of death. Enraged screams erupted from the pack of monkeys, and they started to frenziedly throw themselves at him.

This time he wasn't in as dire straits as the last. His strength and endurance had increased considerably, and the skills increased his efficiency against large packs of enemies. Last time he often wasn't able to completely kill a monkey with a swing, only managing to hurt or maim it. But with [**Axe Mastery**] he learned better ways to handle his weapon, and with [**Chop**] he managed to hit more targets at once.

He was like a harvester cutting down his crops, as with every swing a few monkeys perished. The rock plating on their bodies offered almost no protection against Zac's inhumanly

powerful swings, and rock chips and body parts kept flying in all directions.

The battle only lasted for a minute but almost every monkey died. Terrified by the onslaught some of the smarter monkeys had desperately fled when Zac had killed half of the pack. Zac couldn't be bothered with hunting them down, as he was quite exhausted and panting. The fight had been fast, but it also had been furious. Keeping his **[Chop]** skill active at maximum capacity for a whole minute also drained him of a lot of his cosmic energy.

Exhausting himself had been worth it though, as the fight gave him another level. Of course, he was quite close to leveling up already before the battle. Zac pulled up his status screen to allocate his points while he moved away from the battle.

He quickly allocated 2 points in endurance and 1 in strength, but as he was about to close the status screen he noticed that all his stats improved again after the allocation. He quickly stopped and took another look to see what changed.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

29

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (F)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of

**Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class,
Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500**

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early

Strength

145

Dexterity

59

Endurance

84

Vitality

69

Intelligence

49

Wisdom

49

Luck

67

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

157096

He had once more gained another title, this one called The Big 500. He focused on it and a prompt explaining the title appeared.

**[The Big 500: First in world to reach 500 total attributes.
All stats +2]**

'And the strong get stronger' Zac thought wryly. It seemed somewhat unfair that the System rewarded those with the most attributes with even more attributes, but no one said that the System was fair.

Just look at how it sent the talented people to some tutorial, deeming the rest as trash and leaving them here to fend for themselves.

It wasn't a large boost, but it did cheer Zac up after the Child of Dao title. It also reminded him of his strong points. He might not be as smart and talented as others, and he might not be able to cultivate. But even if the cultivators came back with a bunch of skills and knowledge he could still beat them up with his pile of attributes if needed.

He found a secluded spot between a mountain wall and some bushes and sat down to recuperate. With the assistance of the mother-daughter array and a Nexus Crystal it only took him 45 minutes to restore his cosmic energy to its peak. He felt the pinch when using a crystal for recuperation instead of cultivation, but he didn't want to waste any time so close to enemy territory. A crystal lasted for roughly 2 hours, so his reserve of crystals would be enough to keep a breakneck grinding pace for weeks if needed.

As soon as he was topped off on energy he kept looking for the next group. He didn't dare look while recuperating, as he never knew when he'd be stuck in an avalanche of monkeys. Soon he found another gathering of the beasts, this one slightly larger than the last. He didn't know if these groupings were families or packs, but he was thankful that they were spaced out a bit in this manner.

After another recon of the surroundings, he once again started a slaughter. There was not much of a difference between this fight and the last, and it soon ended. He was a bit worse for the wear, but blunt hits from their stone fists did not impact his body overly much. He had over 80 endurance by now, and he gauged the monkey's strength to be somewhere in the 60's. They still hurt, but it would take some while for him to take actual damage.

The only real dangers the monkeys could muster up was either from their sharp teeth or from simply tiring him to death with numbers. But with the reach of his weapon infused with **[Chop]** no monkey maw really managed to get close to him, and he carefully checked the surroundings before every fight for hidden backups.

Zac kept this rotation between fighting and resting going, slowly making his way toward the central area of the mountains. Zac figured the Herald should be somewhere on one of the peaks. Unfortunately, the mountain had a number of peaks rather than just one, so he was planning on checking them one by one, and killing the monkeys in-between.

Zac had already known grinding monkeys would be lucrative as each monkey gave almost as much cosmic energy and Nexus Coins as four barghest. But with his improved stats and skills, his grind speed skyrocketed, shocking even himself. As the suns set Zac finished up his last battle for the day, which had actually rewarded him a second level, bringing him to level 30.

Done with the fighting for now he retreated to a small cave he found while traversing the mountain paths. It was secluded and seemed to have once housed a bear or some similar animal from the shed fur in the corners. But from the dust gathered it seemed that no one had been here for weeks.

Zac guessed that this cave was moved here with its inhabitant from wherever this mountain came from, and that the stone monkeys killed the bear when it ventured out for food.

The cave wasn't huge but provided Zac with sufficient space to practice using the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system before he finally sat down and rested. He also spent over an hour on trying to gain another Dao seed. He was trying to actualize the other aspect he had sensed the strongest from his Dao vision, sharpness. If he got another Dao Seed he would gain another power-up and speed up his farming even more.

But no matter what he did or how, he couldn't take even one step on the path. When he had tried to imagine the one for heaviness it went very smoothly, and he couldn't quite figure

out why the difference in difficulty was so huge. He could only speculate that he either simply had no talent for the Dao of Sharpness, or that the System restricted Dao seeds somehow.

Perhaps the skill could only reward him with one Dao Seed. If he wanted more he had to work on it by himself by arduously practicing and meditating on it. He knew that it would likely have taken him years to figure out the feeling for the Dao of Heaviness if it wasn't for the vision essentially imprinting the Dao in his mind. He more and more realized the value of that vision as he kept trying to meditate on the Dao by himself.

Finally, he gave up and called it a day. But he would dedicate some time every day for meditation as well he decided. At least until someone told him it was a waste of time. It had been a long day, and Zac was exhausted. He wiped his sweat and then crept into a small crevice that secluded him even further, and fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter 44: Peak

Zac woke up just at dawn and decided to meditate briefly before getting ready. He wasn't sure whether it helped him gain insight and progress his Dao Seed, or help gain a new one. Even so, he felt it was a worthwhile endeavor. He was starting to get worried about his psyche. He had bathed in blood and battle constantly for weeks, and it had taken its toll. He felt he almost shut off all his emotions as a coping mechanism to not go insane, but it wasn't a permanent solution.

He needed to adjust his state of mind to be able to endure. He knew that even if he survived the island, his life wouldn't likely change much. He still had to defend his island from new invaders for three months even if he managed to kick out the demons. At least if he understood his quest Incursion master correctly.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)

Since the quest still hadn't progressed after over a month he believed it would start up as soon as the demons and the Incursion were dealt with. If it meant that he only needed to worry about the critters on the island for three months afterwards, then everything would be well and good. But Zac held no hope that the System would be so nice about it, and would likely send some trouble his way.

As he was looking through his quest panel he also noticed that the Forester's Constitution quest unfortunately hadn't progressed from his day of battling Monkeys. There were some solitary trees rooted on the cliffs, but it seemed the system made a clear distinction between a mountain next to a forest and a forest.

He closed the menus and silently stared out over the tranquil view. The mountains were quite a bit calmer compared to the forest, as the stone monkeys didn't have the tendency to incessantly roar like the barghest did. It almost felt like he was just camping again, which made him think about Hannah.

To be honest, he hadn't really been thinking about her and the others a lot lately, as he was focused on surviving and getting stronger. As he was reminiscing about her he realized he had missed an important clue about the tutorial. The four of them hadn't returned to his camp after the month-long tutorial had ended. He didn't reflect over it at the time, his mind occupied with the newly arrived demons and his class acquisition.

As he saw it that could have two reasons. First, they were all dead, and the system didn't bother to teleport back corpses. Second, after finishing the tutorial they were not teleported back from where they were snatched up, but somewhere else. Perhaps to human settlements or the like.

He could only pray it was the second reason. He wondered if they were looking for him, or if they just assumed he died. Had Hannah moved on?

Zac sighed and looked out over the sunrise. What obligations did he have to a new girlfriend when the apocalypse came? They had only been together for a few months when the world was integrated into the multi-verse. And even if he managed to find her again it would likely take a long time. Could they still even be considered a couple? He couldn't find any easy answers and simply tabled the matter.

There were monkeys to kill.

He ate a quick breakfast and headed out. Today he was planning on scaling one of the peaks to look for the Herald. As he traversed the mountain he made an intriguing discovery. The further up he climbed, the more concentrated the cosmic energy felt.

He was clueless if it was related to altitude, or something about the mountains themselves caused the phenomena. But he realized that it might be very valuable in the future. He wasn't

a cultivator, but even he felt invigorated by the density of cosmic energy in the surroundings.

Perhaps he could rent out the mountains to cultivators in the future at exorbitant rates. He could only assume that cultivating in this kind of environment would be far more effective compared to doing it at a place with a normal density of energy. It could be a great source of income if he got a town up and running in the future. There was something about the thought of becoming a post-apocalyptic slumlord that gave him a comforting sense of normalcy.

Zac spent half the day killing monkey packs and scaling the closest peak, with his efficiency in monkey dismantling starting to reach a sublime level. There were some surprises where unexpected backup that Zac had missed entered the fray, but it generally only resulted in more Nexus Coins for himself. The scariest moment was when a monkey somehow managed to sneak up on him, biting him in his inner loin. Just slightly to the left and the monkey would have eaten his precious jewels.

He reached the peak midday, and after a brief survey could conclude that this peak wasn't the home of the Herald. The air felt quite fresh up here, and Zac decided to have his dinner with a view. He sat down between some rocks to look more inconspicuous and retrieved some fruit and dried meat from his pouch.

His experiments with food and the pouch was a great success. Everything he put inside kept even better compared to a refrigerator, the fruits and slabs of meat still looking pristine after over a week. He didn't dare start a fire for some barbeque this close to the demon town though, so he could only stick to his dried rations.

As he ate he looked over the mountain range. His view from the peak afforded him a unique vantage, and he made some new discoveries.

There were a total of five real peaks, of which he sat on the western-most. The peak he occupied was slightly off on its own, whereas the other four were a bit more clumped together.

Between the four peaks there seemed to be a secluded valley that wasn't visible from down below as it was located a few hundred meters above sea level. The mountain range itself had some sparse vegetation, such as some windswept shrubbery and small trees, but the valley seemed quite lush with an abundance of leafy growth. Zac even thought he could discern a small pond or lake, but couldn't be sure as a large part of the valley was covered in a mist.

The valley certainly looked intriguing, like a secret little paradise hidden from sight. If he was on a treasure hunt he'd bet all his doubloons that any riches the island had to offer were hidden there.

More importantly, it also seemed like a good resting place for a Herald.

The only thing making him unsure was the fact that the monkeys seemed to like the rocky outcroppings and cliffs of the mountain. It would be a bit odd if their leader preferred to stay in a forest instead.

The great elevation also allowed him to finally confirm that he was indeed on an island. He hadn't been able to see anything behind the mountain range before, and knew there might have been land on the other side as well. But steep cliffs gave way to the ocean at the end of the mountain range, looking almost as though the mountain had been sliced clean off. Perhaps the System simply had chopped off part of a larger mountain range and slapped it onto the edge of the island. It was quite the sight, with a drop of at least 100 meters down into the waters below.

Zac finished his meal and made his way back down the mountain slopes again, and started trekking eastbound for the other peaks. He kept killing every monkey pack in his way, bringing a storm of carnage to the mountain. He was somewhat surprised that there still wasn't a more concerted effort to catch him by the monkeys by now, as the monkeys seemed to care greatly for each other.

But they stayed in their groups still, and made perfect targets for him. He even gradually dared to attack larger packs as his

confidence grew. Initially he skipped the gatherings that were too large, but by now he felt confident enough to attack most packs.

Zac thought that he would actually gain another level this day, but he was forced to suddenly stop fighting during the evening. It wasn't because he was hurt or lacked targets, the problem was his axe.

His war-axe possessed a self-repairing and sharpening feature through its inscriptions, but it seemed it couldn't properly keep up with Zac's recent activities. During his barghest-genocide it had no problems staying in good shape, but here it was dull and blemished after only one day.

Zac realized that the tough rock plating on the monkeys' bodies was the problem. His strength and endurance provided all the power he needed, but it was his weapon that failed him. He was quite confused about the whole thing though. When he fought the monkeys he always used his skill **[Chop]** to create the translucent enlarged edge to cover his actual axe head. Still, his actual axe was worse for the wear.

It seemed that the skill didn't just copy the edge of his weapon, it rather projected it. That was a disadvantage he hadn't expected, but then again it still was an extremely powerful and diverse skill for being the first attack skill the class offered.

With no other option he could only find a refuge for the night again, and instead spend greater time on practicing with **[Axe Mastery]** and meditating. He briefly considered whether to keep going, using one of the large swords in his pouch as a weapon instead. But he eventually decided against it.

For one he couldn't use his skills with a sword, and there also was another reason he hesitated. He wanted to use other weapons as little as possible in general.

When he picked his class it generally looked like the options were based on his activities. Since his stats, skills and experiences all were centered on the axe he wanted to upgrade in this direction when he got the opportunity to upgrade the Hatchetman class. He was afraid that he might miss out on a

good class upgrade if he kept using too many various weapons and not fulfill the prerequisites.

That's why he also really wanted to find more axes, so he wouldn't be forced to use knives as much for throwing or as back-ups. He even toyed with the idea of stalking the roving gathering parties on the island to find someone with axes, and then take them out. But ultimately it still felt like an unnecessary risk. That he managed to kill the party at his camp so smoothly largely could be attributed to the element of surprise. He felt that he could likely wipe out most of the parties by now, but he couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't be able to send out a warning signal like the flame mage had tried.

Zac finally found a decent cave and settled in. As he was practicing his axe technique he was pondering whether he already had to change his plans. The reason was the huge amount of Nexus Coins he was racking up. A day of killing the monkeys resulted in roughly 100 000 nexus coins. That amount took him almost a week to gather when desperately hunting barghest.

He currently had 347 000 coins, and only needed two days to gather the necessary coins for the movement skill [**Steps of Gaia**]. He felt his current weakness was that his speed was lacking. If he could move faster he wouldn't have to keep throwing his axe at people, but instead simply run up to them.

Allocating his free points in Dexterity was an option, but he felt it wasn't the correct one. He had already decided to focus one or two stats and let his titles take care of the rest. He already had 59 Dexterity, which should be considered a lot for anyone not having Dexterity as his or her main attribute.

Besides, after observing the demons he fought he realized they did the same thing. They were specialized in one or two stats as well. The mages didn't have overbearing Strength or Dexterity and likely focused on Wisdom and intelligence. Instead, they used things like magic shields and earthen walls to protect themselves from attacks.

Zac felt that this was the way that people powered up in the multi-verse. Focus on the attributes that best empowered him, and have skills shore up the shortcomings.

He knew he likely had survived the mentalist mage's binding during his last bout with the demons due to his high Intelligence and Wisdom. But he assumed that normally a warrior would have a skill to protect their mind instead of wasting their free stat points on those attributes.

The only problem for Zac was that he didn't have a ready source of skills except the Nexus Node. But the choices there seemed quite limited, and he hadn't gotten any new Class skill quests yet. If specialization was the way to go it also meant that he had wasted some stat points in the beginning by putting them into Vitality and Dexterity.

Of course, without the points in Vitality he might be dead by now, but not being optimized left a bad taste in his mouth.

Chapter 45: Monkey Captain

Finally Zac reluctantly decided to not get the skill for now. He wanted to find and kill the third Herald first.

He really wanted the power-up, but he also realized he was working against the clock here. He was already somewhat surprised there wasn't a monkey army hunting him in the mountains after his activities. It wasn't a small number of stone monkeys he had killed in the last two days after all.

He was also getting closer and closer to the area where the demons were active, and they could notice his activities at any moment. The mountains were getting filled with sites of desolation, with hundreds of monkey carcasses adorning the hills by now.

He was afraid that if he spent another two days grinding monsters, and then one day to travel to his camp and back to get the skill, his window of opportunity to kill the Herald would pass.

After all, the cave where the demons worked all day was quite close to the easternmost peak. It wasn't unreasonable to assume they would wander around the peak as well, looking for more of whatever they wanted in the cave.

He needed to find the Herald quickly and kill it. He decided to spend the day moving toward the valley and kill any packs that were in the vicinity of it. Then he'd finally try locating the Herald early the next morning.

After he woke up he briefly meditated, and after confirming his axe was back to tip-top shape, set out toward the cluster of peaks. He gained a level on the first pack he encountered, bringing him to level 31.

He soon arrived at the foot of the westernmost peak of the four clustered mountains. He planned to scale it halfway up, which

would lead him to the entrance of the valley. Then he'd make a circle around the peaks to kill off any packs close to the valley.

That would both let him scout out the four peaks for anything out of place, and also kill any potential back-up that the Herald could call for. If the herald was on one of the peaks rather than in the valley he hoped there would be something different about it to give him some hints.

As soon as he started climbing the first peak he started to notice an increased resistance. The packs grew slightly larger, and there were stronger monkeys in the packs. Monkeys in the wild usually had an alpha who led the group of primates, but he hadn't really seen that so far in the groups he had killed. Zac simply assumed that the Herald was the big boss of everyone, but it didn't seem that simple.

But now there was a monkey with bulging muscles standing a head taller compared to the others. Zac used [**Eye of Discernment**] on it, but it still was only called a Stone Monkey. The other Heralds both had names, so he could only assume this was not it.

The alpha monkey maybe could be considered a captain, and the Herald was the general. Just the fact that the packs were getting stronger felt like a good indication that he was on the correct path. It showed the Herald likely was nearby as he hypothesized.

Zac hesitated for a second, before doing his customary sweep of the surroundings.

The monkeys in general seemed stronger compared to the outer packs, so he needed to do some preparation. Close to the pack he found a narrow path up in the mountain, with sheer wall on both sides. It seemed that the rocky formation cracked in two sometime in the distant past, which had created this path. That would hopefully only let a few monkeys charge in at the time. It would slow down his assault but he wanted to play it safe until he could gauge the strength of these juiced up monkeys.

The next part was to lure the monkeys over, and Zac simply picked up a boulder the size of a head. With a grunt he threw it

straight into the clump of monkeys, and with its huge momentum it smashed a poor monkey's head in.

The monkeys angrily roared and flooded toward him. Zac slowly backed away and placed himself some ways into the crack. He planned to kill a few and then back further in to make room for the corpses.

The battle started as intended, with Zac quickly reaping the lives of a dozen monkeys in quick order. But as he retreated further in he noticed a very bad sign. The monkeys had no problems climbing the sheer rock walls.

Zac wanted to slap himself in his scarred face. He should have realized that rock monkeys were good at climbing rocks. He had simply forgotten about the nimbleness of their primate brethren as the stone monkeys always seemed to sit immobile among the rocks rather than climbing them.

Just as he berated himself he heard a loud roar from the back rows of the group of monkeys. Suddenly all monkeys in front of him threw themselves to the ground in perfect harmony, and taking their place was a rock hurtling toward him. It was twice the size of the one he had thrown, and he didn't have time to react before it slammed into him like a truck.

Zac was flung backward from the momentum and spit out a mouthful of blood. It seemed the monkey captain wanted revenge for his earlier throw.

Before he could get up multiple monkeys hanging on the walls jumped down on him. Rather than trying to pummel him like monkeys used to, it seemed that they tried to pin him down. They gripped his extremities with all their might and tried to keep him from getting up.

Unfortunately for them his strength was 160 by now, and he could lift the monkeys like they were children. He ignored the monkey clinging to his axe arm and furiously swung the axe, killing the monkeys who were gripping his legs.

As he finally was getting up after getting rid of all the monkeys another projectile was flying into his direction. This time it was a sharp stalactite, and Zac couldn't understand

where the monkey captain had gotten it. He managed to deflect it in the last minute with his axe, but the force made him fall back a few steps.

He immediately jumped into the fray, now fighting both monkeys on the ground and those hanging on the wall. He madly flailed the axe around, the only thing keeping him safe was the great reach of **[Chop]**.

He soon got the answer from where the monkey captain found its stalactite. As he was desperately defending against the deluge of rabid monkeys he saw the captain grab onto the rock wall. Its fingers actually carved into the wall, and suddenly he dragged out another stalactite straight out of the wall.

It actually looked like the monkey could use a skill, or at least an early prototype of one. It wasn't as fancy as the spikes the earthen mage had used, but he was shocked that a dumb animal could do it. It seemed that skills, and perhaps even exploring the Dao, was not something exclusive to humanoids.

He didn't have time to reflect on it further before another projectile came flying toward him. He saw it coming this time and grabbed a monkey to use as a shield. The monkey absorbed most of the blow, but Zac was still pushed back somewhat.

The monkey captain seemingly was able to keep generating these projectiles, as he once again moved his hand toward the wall. Zac didn't want to keep this status quo going. He wasn't really hurt apart from some bruising so far, but if he didn't do something soon he might run out of energy or get hit by a lucky projectile.

He stopped his retreat into the crack and instead started to furiously push forward. He was a whirlwind of carnage as he pushed through the horde of monkeys. He wanted to finish off the leader first and then whittle down the others.

Monkeys started to climb around and charge Zac from the back, but with his 90 Endurance he could shrug off the strikes for now. The only time he stopped his onslaught was when some monkey managed to grab his legs and risked pulling him down on the ground again.

The leader threw another large rock at Zac, seemingly trying to impede his advance.

Zac saw the projectile approaching this time, and swung down his axe in a fierce vertical strike to cleave it. He had expected the two pieces to slam to the sides of him, but was sorely mistaken. The only result from his strike was that two boulders hit him instead of one, slamming him back once again.

Zac could only redouble his efforts and ignoring his cosmic energy expenditure kept utilizing [**Chop**] to the max.

Finally, as he was 3 meters away from the captain, he couldn't be bothered getting in close with it, and overcharged the skill, increasing the length of the blade with a full meter extra. With a roar he swiped in an upward arc, and the captain was split in two. He could only maintain such a length for a second, but one second was all he needed for one quick kill.

After that, he simply planted his back against the wall and kept killing until there was no monkey left willing to fight. There were a few monkeys who kept screaming at him from the distance, but Zac hurled another rock at one, instantly crushing its head. Then finally the last remnants of the pack finally fled.

Zac was truly exhausted and hurting from the fight, but he forced himself to get up and move away from the battle. The sounds carried far in the mountains, and he didn't want to be around if either the Herald or some demons heard the noise.

He kept sneaking up the mountain and soon reached the entrance to the hidden valley far up in the air. He didn't dare enter yet, but instead opted to hide between some rocks and recuperate from the battle. The melee reminded him that just because he had gotten the [**Axe Mastery**] skill he still was by no means a master fighter. His planning impeded him rather than helped, and he would probably have been better off just charging in as usual.

It felt like he had been fighting for his life on the island for an eternity, but in reality he had only been on the island for roughly 40 days. Before that he'd just been a desk jockey, completely oblivious to any fighting tactics. He had made a

few real beginner mistakes in this fight, and could only strive to do better in the future.

Chapter 46: The Hunt for the Herald

As Zac stood at the edge of the valley he was shocked by the density of cosmic energy. The amount in the air was already quite a bit higher in the mountains compared to down on the ground, but in this secluded vale it was a whole tier higher still.

The density made his suspicion that the Herald hid in the valley much stronger. He was sure that the Monkey King would prefer the increased amount of cosmic energy if even the monkey captains were able to use skills and maybe even cultivate.

The amount of cosmic energy made Zac worried that there might actually be demons here as well. While he had observed their activities for a few days he didn't really see any demons enter the mountains further than the cave, but that didn't mean that there weren't cultivator demon's stationed here.

He refrained from entering the valley at the moment, as he still wanted to thin the herd of monkeys in the mountains first. A large enough roar from the valley might be able to call for reinforcements from all four peaks after all.

The fight against the pack with the monkey captain was a bit shaky, but it was mostly due to his mistakes. The monkeys on the peaks were slightly stronger compared to the ones he had fought earlier, but not to the point that they could stop his onslaught. He only needed to kill the leader and then it was carnage as usual.

There was one more pack he needed to kill on the mountain peak he had climbed. It didn't have any captain, but the monkeys in general were slightly bigger even compared to the last pack.

Zac entered the fray after having restored his energy and made short work of the pack. He made the interesting discovery that none of the monkeys dared to enter the valley, even when they were fleeing for their lives. Perhaps the valley was the private residence of the Herald, and they had strict orders not to enter.

Or perhaps something even scarier than Zac lived in the depths of the valley. He supposed he would find out later.

Zac kept his momentum going moving toward the next peak. He didn't try any fancy tactics anymore, he only tried to knock out the leaders of the following packs by throwing a boulder at them. He didn't even bother with the throwing knives, as they had trouble penetrating their stone armor. No matter whether the throw succeeded or not he simply charged straight into the throng of stone monkeys, swinging away.

At midday he reached the third peak, having mostly cleared out the two earlier ones apart from a few who managed to escape. This peak was the easternmost, and also the one closest to demon activity. The cave that the demons found so interesting was located not too far away from the foot of the mountain.

Zac was unsure whether he dared to start a battle here, as it might attract the demons below. While the distance was quite great between his location and the cave, he was afraid the sound would carry all the way down. The monkeys got quite loud and agitated during the fights after all. He decided to find a hiding spot with good vantage before deciding anything further. As he was somewhat ahead of schedule, he decided to wait for roughly an hour to gauge any activity in the area.

Weirdly enough there was no monkey pack close to the entrance of the valley. Instead, the monkeys were stationed on the outer side of the mountain peak. This differed from the other two peaks so far, and Zac wanted to figure out why. He soon found his answer, as he was surprised to see a monkey captain hurl a large rock at a demon war party that approached the peak or the valley.

It hit one of them, and with a wail he was flung away from the impact. The demons screamed at the group of monkeys

angrily, waving their weapons. But the monkeys were a stoic wall that wouldn't let them pass. After another minute of posturing, the demons could only turn and leave the mountain.

Zac was confused as he slunk back to the inner side of the mountain. Weren't the monkeys the pets of the demons, like the other demon beasts? How did they dare deny the demons access to the mountains?

Zac started to get nervous that the monkeys actually weren't the fourth monster race, but rather some native beast. The System did say it merged Earth with other planets due for integration, and they might be from another one. That would mean that there actually wasn't a Monkey Herald, but instead two Heralds he couldn't find.

He felt that shouldn't be right though. Everything pointed toward them being a part of the demonic invasion. Perhaps the monkeys had a higher standing, and could actually boot the lower demons from their territory.

He knew he wouldn't get any real answer from just mulling it over, and continued on toward the fourth peak. The weird power dynamic between the monkeys and demons actually helped him out in the end, both removing the threat of demons in the mountains and not having to battle any monkeys that close to the demon activity.

He arrived at the fourth peak and after an intense melee finally finished killing all the packs close to the valley. As it only was evening still he decided to head into the valley after all. Initially he planned to wait until next morning, but due to the inner side of the third peak being free from monkeys he saved a few hours of work.

He took his first steps into the valley, vigilant against any hidden monkeys or other beasts. But after a few minutes of walking it seemed that the forest was deserted. It was odd, as the forest itself felt like a paradise on earth. The air was fresh enough that his cells felt invigorated just from breathing, and the foliage was lush and healthy. The earthy smell of the area calmed Zac's heart, inviting him to sit down and relax.

However, not even critters were present, making the forest eerily silent except for the occasional rustle from the wind. This stillness felt quite jarring to Zac as his life had been accompanied by the sounds of the forest constantly since the world changed. From critters in the bushes to the calls of the birds. Even the deep roars of the barghest.

That all these sounds were gone didn't feel natural, and his vigilance only increased, instead of having a soothing effect on him.

As he walked he noticed that he didn't recognize most of the trees or plants in the valley. Now he wasn't any botanist, he only knew of the staple flowers and trees. But he felt he should at least recognize some of the vegetation if it was from earth. There were a few trees he assumed were maples but the leaves were as large as his torso.

He didn't know if the forest had mutated or evolved from the extremely dense cosmic energy in the area, or whether this forest came from another planet, but it felt like the old earth wasn't able to produce a forest feeling so vibrant.

He was debating whether he should collect samples from the various flowers and herbs like the demon parties did, but soon decided against it. He had no immediate use for them, and the valley would still be here if he managed to kick out the demons.

He soon arrived close to the small lake he glimpsed from the mountain peak. With how pristine the rest of the forest was he had expected that the lake to have clear beautiful waters. While it didn't look or smell stale, it also wasn't clear.

The lake was a mysterious shimmering blue, and he could barely see a decimeter into the water before everything was obscured. The water itself seemed to be packed with cosmic energy, as though the lake consisted of liquefied Nexus Crystals.

His body almost instinctively reached down to drink a mouthful of the enticing water before hastily stopping himself. It seemed like such a good natural resource, but still, there were no animals or monsters around, which was very eerie.

Perhaps there was something lurking in the depths, prowling on anything stupid enough to come too close to the shore.

He couldn't let the water go to waste though, and tied a string to one of his magical canteens. He then threw the canteen into the water, and waited some time before dragging it out. It now contained the cosmic water, but he wouldn't try it before he could feed it to some beasts and see its effects.

Feeling uncomfortable by the mysterious lake Zac continued onward toward the center of the valley. The mysteries of the azure pond would have to wait until another day.

He was almost at the core of the valley by now and slowed his pace. If the Herald was in this valley then it would stand to reason that he was somewhere in the center. Slightly nervous he gripped his axe for comfort, as memories of the struggle with the last herald still haunted him.

Not far ahead it seemed that the forest gave way to open fields, so Zac crouched down and slowly made his way to the edge of the forest. What met his eyes from his hidden vantage point shocked him.

It was a large field, filled with shrunken and desiccated fallen trees. There were signs of bushes and flowers having existed as well, but they too looked like they had been baked in an oven. The only thing still standing tall was a solitary tree in the center.

It wasn't very large, only being roughly 5 meters tall, but it was spectacular. The trunk and branches had a crimson hue and a smooth exterior. The leaves weren't red or green but a pristine white, making it look like crystals adorned the branches.

It was a spectacular sight, and Zac didn't for a second think that this was a normal tree. It was something created with a lot of cosmic energy. The tree virtually hummed with power, making Zac wonder if it actually was alive.

Zac guessed that this tree was the reason for the desolation in the vicinity. The tree seemingly had absorbed the life or cosmic energy out of everything in its surroundings. Perhaps it

even had killed all the animals in the forest as well, explaining why it was so quiet. It was a scary thought that the tree wasn't satisfied with the huge density of energy in the air, and needed to drain its surroundings to be satiated.

It took Zac a second to register that something else was next to the tree. A monkey, roughly two meters tall with a build somewhat slimmer compared to its brethren, sat cross-legged with closed eyes under the tree. What made it stand out apart from its build was its color. If the other monkeys in the mountain were made of anthracite rock, then this monkey was made of lava. Red shining streaks ran along every part of the monkey's otherwise black body, emanating a heavy pressure.

It was the monkey king.

Chapter 47: Collision Course

The lava monkey didn't look aggressive or violent like the normal monkeys, but rather harmonious. Even if it seemed crazy, it really looked like he or she was meditating under the peculiar tree. It was quite picturesque, the red streaks of the monkey matching well with the crimson trunk.

The good news was that it looked like he found his Herald. The bad news was that he had no real idea on how to improve the odds in his favor. He saw no method to sneak up on it, as the dried husks of the vegetation on the field wouldn't provide enough cover.

He didn't dare use **[Eye of Discernment]** to see its level either, afraid it would notice him like the Imps. That it stayed in this forest with higher cosmic energy concentration, rather than in its natural habitat of the mountain peaks, was telling Zac that the monkey king possessed some sensibility for cosmic energy.

He debated whether he should charge in blind, or wait for a better opportunity. Finally he decided he had to go for it. Finding the Herald sitting by itself with no backup in sight could only be considered a perfect opportunity.

He also discarded the idea of creating crude traps as he had for Vul, the barghest herald. If this monkey could meditate it likely was too intelligent to run into spikes like an idiot.

The only question was whether this monkey was of roughly the same power as Vul or not. When the limiter was lifted at the turn of the month he had concluded that the beasts improved roughly 50% across the board.

He himself had improved far more than that though. When he fought Vul he had only 59 Strength, and now he was at 160. On top of that, his gear had improved considerably, and he already gained a class and improved pathways. He felt that

even if he met an improved Vul today he wouldn't have to rely on traps to kill it, and it wouldn't be a desperate struggle either.

But the monkeys were far stronger compared to the barghest. Would the monkey Herald be far stronger compared to the barghest Herald as well?

There was only one way to find out. He slowly repositioned himself to arrive from the east, which would at least let him approach the back of the Herald. It might give him some time to close the distance before it could react.

He steeled his nerves and slowly ventured out of the protective cover of the foliage, and entered the dead zone surrounding the magical tree. He took great care not to step on any of the dried twigs or branches that covered the ground, not wanting to alert the monkey of his approach.

But even though he made no sound it seemed to be to no avail, as the monkey snorted and slowly got up on his feet. Zac held no hope that it was just a coincidence, and immediately pulled out two daggers out of his pouch and threw them at the monster in quick succession.

The monkey turned around in a lightning-quick manner, and with two casual swipes slapped the incoming daggers away into the ground. As the edges collided with its hands sparks flew, but no wounds could be seen. Zac wasn't surprised as the daggers were barely any use on the normal monkeys, let alone on this super-powered one.

Afterwards he gave up any idea of stealth and thundered straight toward the monkey, with his axe at the ready.

While charged he used the **[Eye of Discernment]** on the monkey, which gave him a terse line of information.

[Cindermane, Level 58]

That line removed any last doubts whether this monster was a Herald or not. A solitary Named beast around level 50 fit the bill perfectly. It was a full 13 levels above Vul, who had been level 45 when they battled. He didn't know how levels worked for beasts, but if it was like for himself it meant it should have

almost 100 more attributes in total. Together with the removed limiters, he realized he might be in for a tough battle.

Cindermane didn't stay put, but charged toward Zac as well. As he did the red streaks on his body lit up and started to emit a fiery shine like lava. They clashed a few meters away from the red-white tree, with Zac doing an upwards horizontal swipe aimed at its torso.

The monkey actually dared to intercept the strike with its bare paws, which lit up completely to look like magma. A tremendous clash erupted when their attacks collided, the dead plants in the surrounding being pulverized by the shockwave.

Zac was surprised to see that his strike didn't immediately overpower the Herald. With his recent improvements he started to believe there was nothing on the island that could have a comparable level of points in the Strength attribute.

The Herald was pushed back from the force however Zac didn't emerge unscathed out of the initial collision either. The hands of the monkey did not only look like lava, but they were also as fiery hot as well. The air around them was wobbling due to the heat, looking like a mirage. The axe edge actually showed clear signs of heating up where it collided with the monkey's palm.

Zac knew he couldn't fight a protracted battle, as the monkey would destroy his weapon if they kept clashing like this. Using **[Chop]** wouldn't help either, as the damage was transferred to axe anyway.

Angry at being pushed back Cindermane roared and stomped the ground, causing multiple spikes to erupt beneath Zac. They looked similar to the spikes of the earth mage, with the distinction that they seemed blazing hot and far more numerous.

Zac managed to destroy most of the spikes with a chop, but one managed to stab into his leg. A blinding pain erupted in his thigh, causing him to involuntarily scream. A sickening sizzling sound could be heard and Zac smelled the fragrance of grilled meat. The spike was actually barbequing his leg.

Ignoring the pain he grabbed the burning hot spike with his free hand, ripped it out of his leg and threw it away. As he did the Herald took the opportunity to grab the ground, dragging out a stone the size of Zac from seemingly nowhere. Its molten fingers penetrated the boulder and soon the whole rock was glowing a sinister red.

With a roar it tried to slam the stone down right on Zac, who could only ungainly dodge. Not daring to hide any of his cards any longer he infused his strikes with Dao and started swinging away against the Herald.

Cindermane possessed either great reflexes or combat experience, as he kept dodging or deflecting the strikes. Zac tried to grab onto the monkey with his free hand in order to throw it down on the ground, but as soon as he got a grip on its arm the red streaks lit up and the arm got searing hot. Zac instinctively let go with a scream, and the monkey took the opportunity to try to claw out his throat.

Zac saw no choice but to activate his armor, and the golden sheen protected him from getting killed. He wouldn't give up even with his lifesaving device used up though, and wildly kept swinging at the Herald, unheeding of any cosmic energy expenditure. After a few exchanges the monkey king managed to get a stab in with one of its hands, pushing a centimeter into Zac's arm. The finger burned even hotter compared to the spike, and Zac couldn't refrain from screaming out in pain again.

However Zac's every strike was overwhelming. He used every trick [**Axe Mastery**] had taught him and weaved a net of destruction with his axe. Marks started to appear on the monkey's hands, and it looked like it wouldn't be able to block his strikes forever. It was lucky as well as the edge of the axe was starting to shine with a red sheen from all the collisions as well. Not much longer and Zac feared that the inscriptions on it would be ruined, which meant that it wouldn't auto-repair any longer.

He also had pushed the Herald back toward the tree, and they were currently fighting under the white leaves.

The monkey became more agitated as they approached the trunk, and furiously fought to force Zac away from the tree. There clearly was something special about it, and the Herald didn't want to risk it getting damaged. The Monkey suddenly emitted a penetrating screech, its whole body lighting up.

It spat out a white-hot ball of magma straight at Zac's chest, forcing him to jump out of the way, and away from the tree. As he dodged he also saw that the lava spit wasn't the only thing that changed from that scream.

Like a scene out of a horror movie suddenly an endless number of bodies rose out of the ground, pushing the dried trees and bushes to the side. It wasn't zombies, but a vast number of stone monkeys, all looking larger and stronger compared to normal ones. With a quick glance he could make out at least 40 monkey captains among the reinforcement.

The monkeys had been lying dormant under the ground, and the roar called them to action to create a trap. He didn't know why it waited so long to unleash them, but he knew that he had run out of time. In just seconds he would be overrun with stone spears and boulders. He would have problems contending with just the monkey horde, but if he had to watch out for the spells from the Herald as well he'd surely die.

A desperate idea grew in his mind, and he didn't have time to go through pros and cons before trying it out. He was currently two meters away from the tree trunk, and with an exaggerated roar he swung his axe in a horizontal swipe. As he did the familiar blade of **[Chop]** rapidly grew out, soon longer than he could stably maintain for any longer duration.

Cindermane screeched and hastily jumped to intercept the huge edge from cutting down the tree. Zac's premonition was correct, the tree truly held a great importance to the monkey.

The Herald couldn't properly grab the translucent edge with its awkward positioning, and the edge cut into its whole body horizontally across the chest. A deep grisly gash was carved onto its body, but its great Endurance prevented it from getting cut in two. It still was badly hurt and bled profusely as it fell down on the ground.

Just as he was about to finish it off with another swing a boulder slammed into him from the side. He fell over away from the Herald and he barely managed to get to his feet before another hit him again, forcing him even further away from the dying lava monkey.

Unreconciled he once again charged a great edge and swung it at the prone monkey king. But it still had some energy left and pushed itself out of the way.

He knew his window of opportunity had passed. Boulders and stalactites were approaching from all directions, and the only way to kill the Herald was a suicide dive. As he only needed to kill it for a quest he had no reason to die just to bring it down to hell with him.

Zac didn't hesitate and turned around to run. He could only hope the huge wound he inflicted upon it was lethal and that it would bleed to death. The lava monkey wouldn't have it though and used its last powers to shoot a few molten spikes his direction as well. Zac could only strike away what he could and endure the rest.

Just after a few seconds he had already gotten hit by another two boulders and was stabbed by three more stalactites. Then the army of monkeys was upon him.

Chapter 48: Simian Haranguing

Finishing off the Herald was suddenly the last thing on Zac's mind, and he was horrified as he saw an avalanche of monkeys approach him from all directions. He activated **[Chop]** and frenziedly waved it in front of him, decimating any monkeys that would impede his escape.

The assault was slowing him down though, and finally the enemies were upon him, punching and kicking with wild abandon. Every time a punch or kick hit where the lava spears pieced him earlier it hurt enough for him to almost pass out.

Zac couldn't care about his cosmic energy expenditure anymore, and with a roar pushed as much cosmic energy as he could into the fractal on his hand. An enormous blade over 5 meters tall blazed into existence, and Zac swung the axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

The edge managed to stay active for less than a second, but the brief window carved out a large pocket in the swarm of monkeys. The swing killed at least 20 monkeys, and he even gained a level. He couldn't bother about that at the moment though, as the short respite in attacks allowed him to rush out of the field and into the foliage.

Blood was running freely from Zac's mouth as he was shakily running through the forest, away from the magical tree and Herald. The monkeys wouldn't relent though and swarmed all around him, jumping between the trees or running on all fours on the ground. Had it not been for his wounded leg he might have been able to maintain some distance after a mad dash. But now he was stuck in a quick jog, but even that was taxing.

He constantly was pelted with kicks and punches, and the occasional mouth trying to bite into him with their sharp

canines. A rock whizzed by his head, and instead hit a monkey square in its chest. It appeared the monkey captains had problems with keeping the pace and throwing the projectiles simultaneously at least.

More good news was that the Herald was either dead or too wounded to join the pursuit, as there were no molten spears attacking him anymore. But that was about all the positives that Zac could list while he was mindlessly running.

He already was lost and could only run in a straight direction. Since he was in a valley between the peaks no matter what direction he ran he would sooner or later arrive at the mountains.

He desperately swung his axe back and forth to maim and kill his attackers. He didn't dare to use **[Chop]** anymore as he was already running low on cosmic energy and there still were at least 100 monkeys following him.

He instead infused the attacks with his understanding of the Dao of Heaviness to add some impact to his strikes. It was the first time he was using it so freely and for a prolonged time, and he was starting to feel a headache coming on.

Soon he couldn't even use his Dao in order to empower his strikes as he was afraid of increasing the pounding in his head.

He kept going, and with every few steps he killed a monkey, but they seemed endless. Zac's whole body was hurting, but he couldn't stop. Another boulder came hurtling toward him, this one with proper aim. He was already mid-swing against a monkey and couldn't reposition in time, so he could only lift his left arm to block it.

The small boulder slammed into Zac and a sickening pop could be heard. Zac was pushed back and his arm hung limply by his side. Something was protruding oddly at his shoulder and a blazing pain radiated through the arm. After a quick glance he realized that his shoulder was dislocated.

Zac grit his teeth and ran straight into the first monkey he saw, slamming his dislocated shoulder straight into the chest of the monkey. A blinding pain almost made him pass out, but it also

temporarily dispelled the pulsing headache from overusing his Dao.

While it still hurt Zac could move his arm again. He had used the monkey as a wall to slam the ball of his arm back into its socket. As a thanks Zac gave it a quick chop which decapitated it, and then kicked its headless body into two oncoming stone monkeys.

This couldn't continue for long, as Zac had less than 10% of his cosmic energy reserves remaining while the monkeys showed no desire to relent. Thankfully the lush forest soon gave way to rocky outcroppings and cliffs, showing that he was approaching one of the peaks.

Due to the haphazard escape he wasn't sure which one of the peaks it was, but a quick glance outward showed the familiar forest of the island. That meant he wasn't running north at least, as he'd only be seeing ocean then. He was thankful, as he was afraid he would have been forced to jump down the steep cliff, praying to survive the 100-meter drop into the ocean.

Zac kept running, and he planned to escape into the forest down on the ground. The first time he fought the monkeys they had stopped at the foot of the mountain, and he could only hope they'd do the same again.

But almost immediately as he ran he knew that plan wouldn't work. As he passed a small crest a larger view of the island came into view, and he could see the incursion and the demon town. The position immediately made him realize he was on the easternmost peak. If he ran right down this peak he'd be in prime demon territory. Straight out of the frying pan and into the fire.

He stopped for a second confused as what to do which allowed a few monkey captains to drag out new projectiles out of the ground and hurl them at Zac.

He slammed one of them away but the other hit him with a deep thud, eliciting a bloody cough. Even with his 90 plus Endurance, it felt like he couldn't take many more of those

throws. He couldn't remember how many he'd tanked by now, and it felt like his body was on the brink of collapse.

He sluggishly swung his axe and killed a monkey who was foolish enough to get close and looked around for options.

In his vision he saw a cave entrance slightly hidden behind some shrubbery and boulders. After a brief hesitation he changed course for the cavity. If he continued on along the mountain path he'd arrive at where he had spotted the demon party earlier, and the risk of running into the monkey packs was great. He couldn't return either, as he wouldn't last running to another peak.

He didn't really want to enter the cave, but he knew that it was his only hope. Right now he couldn't see any other method to shake off the monkey horde. They seemed truly consumed by rage, which made sense as he had killed well over a hundred of the assailants by now.

Either the cave was a small dwelling for an animal, or a part of a larger network of tunnels. If it was the former he'd make a last stand, and at least the enemies would only be able to come from one direction. If it was the latter he might actually survive by fleeing into the tunnels.

There were roughly 10 monkeys in the way, and Zac grimly summoned [**Chop**] for one last charge. His arms and legs felt like they were coated in lead, but he determinedly swung his axe while he advanced.

The monkeys could offer no resistance against Zac's reignited spirit, and he soon was at the mouth of the cave. A rock slammed into his back just as he entered, making him realize he couldn't just stand at the entrance and fight it out. He would be sniped to death. After a quick glance inside it seemed that the cave actually was just the entrance of a bigger cave system.

The monkeys seemed to have no problem following him into the tunnels, as they charged towards the entrance without hesitation. Zac suddenly was afraid that he would be in even worse straits if he let them enter. They were stone monkeys, who knew what advantages they'd have inside a cave.

Out of options he could only do something stupid and desperate. He put away his axe and brought out his great sword. With a furious slam he hit the roof of the cave entrance, causing huge cracks in the roof and making rock chippings fly in all directions. He didn't stop and slammed twice more with all the strength he could muster, and finally an ominous rumbling could be heard.

The roof of the cave started to collapse, and Zac desperately ran further into the cave. Falling rock and debris pelted him, and he was forced to leave his sword behind in the chaos. After a minute the rumblings stopped, and the cave was completely blocked for at least 20 meters of debris. It would take even the strong monkeys a good while to excavate the entrance, if they even wanted to.

His hope was that the monkeys would give up and go back to the valley, but he wouldn't dare put his life on the line for it to be true. So he hesitantly ventured further into the cave to create some distance. His body was hurting all over but he wouldn't let himself sit down, afraid that he wouldn't be able to get back up in a short while if he did.

The caverns seemed to be a confusing maze of interconnected tunnels and chambers, and Zac saw no change after 30 minutes of slow walking. The caves weren't completely pitch black at least, as there actually was growing moss on many of the walls which gave off some luminescence. He didn't understand why they would create light, but he assumed that the moss was mutated by cosmic energy.

The tunnels were actually full of cosmic energy, almost at the level of the valley. The high concentration on the mountain peaks seemed to only be a result of some of the interior energy leaking out. It would be strange if something didn't change with the subterranean flora if they were consistently bathed in cosmic energy of this magnitude.

Finally satisfied with the distance from the entrance he had created, he stopped in a quiet chamber which at least wasn't completely dark due to the glowing moss. He sighed and thumped down on the ground with a grimace. It was pitch black apart from the blue scattered lights from the moss but he

didn't care. He did have a flashlight he had brought from the camper if he needed proper light, but he didn't know how much charge the batteries still had. He instead brought out a Nexus Crystal from the pouch and started absorbing.

It didn't help in healing his battered body, but it did help in recovering his depleted energy. Together with his amulet, he was absorbing energy at a great rate, and after only four hours he once again was full of cosmic energy.

That didn't mean that he was in prime condition though. His head still hurt from overusing his Dao, and his body screamed in protest as soon as he moved slightly. He could only stay put for a bit longer in order for his Vitality to do its thing. He had nothing in his bag that could help against his wounds that were mainly blunt-force trauma as far as he knew. He did put some ointment on the burns from the herald though, even if he wasn't sure whether aloe was effective against burns from magic monkey fire.

Finally done with everything he rested his back against the wall and sighed despondently. Today did *not* go according to plan.

Chapter 49: Spelunking

Since Zac felt somewhat refreshed from absorbing the Nexus Crystal he held off on sleeping, and instead decided to take a quick glance at his status screen.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 32 Class Hatchetman (F) Race Human (F) Alignment Human (Earth) Titles Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500 Dao Seed of Heaviness - Early Strength 164 Dexterity 59 Endurance 92 Vitality 69 Intelligence 49 Wisdom 49 Luck 67 Free Points 3 Nexus Coins 485286

The last few days had actually brought in almost all the coins he needed for the movement skill. Getting his skills and Dao boosts had increased his daily earnings tremendously. Of course he knew that this was the limit for now. The only targets more lucrative compared to the monkeys on the island were the demons and imps. But he held no illusion that he would be able to charge into 50 of them at a time and start a massacre as he had with the monkeys. He would be blasted to smithereens in no time.

Next, he opened up his quest menu to see the progress of his quest

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)

He was quite disappointed to see that the monkey king apparently survived the slash. Of course, there was the possibility that it wasn't a Herald, but he felt that the chance of that to be quite slim.

He had gained a level right at the start of the pursuit, and he sensed he wasn't far away from reaching level 33 either. It was a shame that the System didn't provide the same type of service as many games, restoring both health and mana at the level up. Then he might have actually have had a chance of turning things around and finishing off the monkey king.

The whole experience was quite a let-down and the first real setback except constantly getting hurt. He constantly went over things he could have done differently in order to actually kill the monkey. But soon he threw those depressing thoughts out of his mind, as he knew he had to work with what he got, and try to continuously improve.

As he waited for his body to get better he planned to meditate some on the Dao. He wished to both improve his current Seed of Heaviness, and get another seed, the Seed of Sharpness. These two forces were those he sensed to be strongest in the axe in his vision, and he felt that getting both of them was the first step on the path of true axe mastery.

Besides, the Dao of Sharpness might also be of some use for his throwing knives. Since [**Axe Mastery**] came with no manual how to progress the Dao or his other skills he could only fumble around in the dark. This time literally.

Unfortunately, he could only focus at the large axe fractal in his mind for a short while before his head started hurting again. It seemed that using Dao was still impossible after his overexertion. Zac wondered if there was something like mental energy or soul power that was used when pondering on the Dao or using it in battle, but he hadn't been able to sense anything of the sort thus far. He only knew his head hurt and felt swollen like a bad migraine.

Helplessly he could only go to sleep. He would have preferred to take a look around the area, but his body didn't really listen to his commands anymore. Besides any sound carried through the tunnels and amplified, and it was completely quiet apart from his breathing. There should be no monsters or creepy crawlies around at least this part of the subterranean system.

Zac woke up some time later, not being able to tell exactly how long he was out. His watch had broken long ago, and his cell phone ran out of charge as well. He had learned to tell the time somewhat accurately with the help of the suns, but down in the caverns this was useless.

Judging from the state of his body he felt that he had been out somewhere between 3 and 5 hours. He was still bruised all over but at least he could get by. He got up on his feet but stopped before setting out.

He was a bit unsure how to proceed from here on out. After some hesitation, he decided to look around the caves for a bit, and then find an exit. Nothing had really changed apart from the monkey king being hurt. The general and other herald were still unknowns.

The caverns were the last place apart from the city that remained uncharted on the island. There was a real possibility that the last Herald hid somewhere in here as he hadn't even seen the shadow of it before. If he could find something out while he was stuck here anyway it would be great assistance to his quest. One of his fears was that he would fail his mission and get punished by the System, not due to a lack of trying, but because he simply couldn't find his targets.

Since the System wanted him to kill these targets he felt that he should have been provided with some navigation and targeting method. But if mentally complaining about the system had any effect he'd long have solved all his problems.

But he also put a time limit on himself. He hadn't given up on killing the monkey king, and would certainly try again. The reason for his failure was the horde of monkeys interrupting. He was quite certain that he would be able to kill him if he got him alone.

That's why he didn't try to rush back. For one he wasn't sure how to get out, and besides, he believed that the monkey army would be on high alert for his return in the short run. It was a shame, as the monkey king was currently an easy target with its wounds. But he still had half a month until his 2-month deadline. He didn't need to risk it all just yet.

Zac took a glance at his axe, confirming that it was almost completely repaired, and continued further into the caves. He still used only the glowing moss as a light source as he didn't want to alert any enemies. Besides his eyes were getting accustomed to it by now and he could somewhat make out his surroundings.

Just before he ventured down he carved a small Z beneath the glowing moss to mark his passage. He could still track his progress in his mind, but better safe than sorry.

The tunnels he progressed through led steadily downward, and it felt like he was walking toward the foot of the mountain. That also meant that he was closing in on the cave system the demons explored so he was careful to not make any excessive sounds. He even ripped down some moss from the wall and tied it to the bottom of his feet to mask his footsteps. It was the non-luminescent kind of moss, of course, as he didn't want his feet to become beacons for the enemy.

As he descended he sensed that the ambient cosmic energy was steadily growing stronger. Not only that, the tunnels started to change as well.

From being dark and dour, apart from the occasional weak blue luminescence from the moss, the caverns were turning into a vibrant fantasy world. Thick vines with purple flowers started to grow out of the ground, large glowing mushrooms lined the tunnels and the lights from the moss grew stronger and polychromatic.

Zac had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs, but it almost felt like he was high as he walked in these psychedelic tunnels. After walking along dazed for a few seconds he suddenly started, and then started to collect samples of all the various herbs and mushrooms. He was careful to not let anything touch his skin, just in case it was poisonous.

He still had no method to discern if they were of value, but he felt that at least some of the magical plants should be of some use. It seemed quite clear that they had grown due to the high density of the cosmic energy, so they might have some magical properties.

Zac started using the vegetation as a basis where to head when he reached crossroads. He simply chose the one with a higher density of subterranean growth, as that passage should have a higher density of cosmic energy.

He was starting to get very curious why there was so much energy in the mountain, and he believed that the demons were so interested in the cave for the very same reason. There should be something in the depths that either contained or produced an immense amount of energy, to the point that it leaked out into the whole mountain range and valley.

If the demons removed it and took it with them then Zac would lose a potential goldmine. He added the task of finding out what created the energy as well before leaving. If it was something small and portable he would try to steal it. If this much cosmic energy could be poured into a couple of arrays he wouldn't have to worry about the demons ever again.

Zac had walked for almost an hour when a sound made him stop in his tracks and shrink into the wall. It was light hurried steps that echoed through the tunnels not far ahead. They didn't seem to be coming toward him, so Zac slowly ventured forward, careful not to make a single sound.

The steps slowly were becoming a bit more distant, and Zac hurried up until he reached a crossing. He carefully looked around a corner toward where the sounds came from to see what made the steps. And just before it turned another corner, he could briefly spot a small imp trotting along.

Zac's heartbeat started to speed up, as seeing the imp opened up a possibility. Perhaps the imps' main area of activity was underground, which would explain why he had encountered so few up above ground. And if it was, then their herald was likely down here as well.

Chapter 50: Crystals

Zac waited for a bit to make sure no other imp or demon was incoming before he ventured the same path he saw the imp take.

He surreptitiously glanced around any corners or crossroads, but even after a minute he still hadn't seen any signs of the imp or anything else of interest. Either the imp was a lone explorer in the caverns or it was out of the way for some reason.

A scratching sound stopped his train of thought and Zac moved to the next intersection to see where the sound came from. He finally found the small imp again and it was just 10 meters away from him, currently digging through some moss. After it removed a top layer it sneakily put something inside, and then carefully put the moss back on top. It got up and turned around, and suddenly found itself staring right at Zac.

Zac didn't hesitate and instantly killed it with a dagger. He walked up to the corpse and put it in one of his pouches, before walking over to where it dug around earlier. Initially he had wanted to follow it back to wherever he came from, but he had been too careless and immediately got spotted. He'd have to get better at sneaking in these tunnels unless he wanted to get mobbed down.

After removing the moss he actually found a small stash of Nexus Crystals. They weren't polished and uniform like the ones he had taken from the demon leader, but rather looking like uncut raw gems. Some were as small as a fingernail while the largest was slightly larger than his own crystals.

It seemed like the imp actually was hiding away its wealth in this uninhabited part of the cave system like a cultivating squirrel. So it looked like it wasn't heading to any other imps or demons, but rather away from them. Perhaps daylight

robbery was a real problem amongst the imps, so hiding their cultivation resources was imperative.

The imp's actions raised a few questions. First of all, could imps cultivate? They seemed to have some inherent proclivity for magic, as all of them thus far were able to shoot those nefarious fireballs. But it felt like all of them more or less were of the same strength, making him believe they couldn't get stronger.

There seemed to be some fundamental differences between the imps and the demons or himself. They didn't have levels when he inspected them with **[Eye of Discernment]**, and it didn't look like they had classes either as everyone used the same attack. That's why Zac placed them in the same group as the other beasts in his mind.

So what was the use of the crystals? The most likely explanation he could find was evolution. He had seen all kinds of mutations and evolutions in the flora on the island caused by the cosmic energy. Who's to say it didn't work with the fauna as well. Perhaps the crystals could help a normal imp to evolve into something greater, like the Heralds.

It was a bit worrying, as normal imps were deadly enough. If suddenly a throng of them evolved into super-imps wouldn't they burn down the whole island? He could only hope that evolving wasn't that simple a matter for now.

The second thing on Zac's mind was the crystals themselves. Where had it found them? If there were a bunch of them it would explain many things, such as why the density of cosmic energy was so high in the mountains. It could be due to the proximity of a large amount of Nexus Crystals, whose energy bled through into the surroundings.

It would also explain the unceasing flow of demons coming into the mountains. A mountain full of Nexus Crystals should be the equivalent of a multi-verse gold mine.

That, unfortunately, meant that the demons were continuously pilfering the resources that Zac would need to continue to improve and build up a town.

Zac was sorely lacking in Nexus Coins right now. He could barely improve himself, let alone build up a whole town. His gains lately from killing monkeys had been tremendous, but it was nothing compared to the costs of creating, and running, a town.

For example, there was an array called **[E-Grade Medium Scale Town Defense Array]** that was a combination of a defensive shield and some attacking functions. It looked like a good all-around addition for a newly established settlement. But that array alone cost 5 million Nexus Coins, and furthermore, it wasn't free to operate.

There were defensive turrets and anti-siege weapons as well, each costing over a million coins. There was just no way for him to grind that kind of amount of coins. Even if he got twice as strong and murdered monkeys without rest or sleep it would take years before he got all the basic structures of the town.

But if he had a large number of Nexus Crystals he might be able to pay all this, and maybe even more. He didn't have any means of selling the Crystals for Nexus Coins at the moment, but there were things such as shops and auction houses in the outpost store. If he purchased one of those he was sure they'd accept his crystals for some coin.

Of course, it all hinged on him actually getting the crystals. Driven by a renewed sense of purpose, Zac headed back toward where he came from. Since the imp went out of its way to hide the crystals out here, there shouldn't be much activity in the surroundings as well.

Zac made a mental note of the area since he might need a base of operations down here. As he carefully proceeded through the paths the ambient cosmic energy kept increasing, now starting to reach the density that he had felt in the valley with the monkey king.

After continuing on for roughly 10 minutes he heard some shuffling further down the path. Zac immediately stopped, a glint of greed and anticipation on his face. Every demon he found down here would probably make him wealthier. He

imagined looting magic pouches packed to the rafters with crystals, a creepy grin slowly starting to emerge on his face.

Unfortunately it wasn't a walking nest egg he encountered, but a white crocodile.

At a second glance he realized it wasn't actually a crocodile, but a supersized salamander. It had a thick build and was roughly four meters long. It was mostly white with some purple markings. Zac thought that subterranean species normally possessed no eyes, but this didn't seem to apply to this specimen. It lazily ambled through a subterranean tunnel, swiping up various mushrooms and herbs with its mouth along the way.

Zac didn't know if it was a guard animal for the demons or just something that lived down here. He shrank into a side corridor to hide as he didn't want to bother with this huge beast at the moment. The beast seemed oblivious to his existence until it suddenly exploded into motion just as it was next to the side-tunnel Zac hid in.

Its maw opened showing a line of large translucent teeth looking like huge salt crystals. The beast tilted its head and charged straight at Zac's torso, but he was accustomed to this manner of attacks from the countless barghest he had fought.

Channeling his cosmic energy he grunted and punched the lizard in its head, slamming it into the wall of the tunnel, creating large cracks on the stone surface. That type of attack was usually enough to kill barghest by now, but it only seemed to enrage the salamander. He didn't want a prolonged fight though and swung vertically with a maxed out **[Chop]**, cleanly decapitating it.

A surge of energy entered his body and he saw that he gained roughly 800 Nexus coins. That was even more compared to some of the weaker demons, surprising Zac somewhat. It had been pretty quick for its large size, but it felt like less of a challenge compared to a demon.

As he was mulling it over a sizzling sound interrupted his train of thought, and he turned his head toward the sound.

Smoke rose up from the ground next to the chopped off head and a sizzling sound could be heard. He went closer to take a look, and was appalled to see that its saliva was highly corrosive. The sounds came from its tongue touching the ground, and it had already corroded a small hole where its saliva dripped down. Zac realized even a flesh wound from a bite might cost him a limb when fighting these salamanders.

It was a shame he couldn't use his eye skill on it as it was already dead, but it didn't matter much what the system called the animal. He went over to the headless carcass and observed the body. At least the blood wasn't corrosive as well, otherwise, the huge pool of blood forming beneath the body would have carved out a new path among the tunnels.

Zac barely managed to cram the beast inside his smaller pouch after chopping off the tail as well, and then moved on. He didn't want to leave a carcass out in the open that was clearly killed with something sharp. He still didn't know what the relation between the demons and this animal was, and he'd just have to lug it along until he did. Or found somewhere to dump it where it wouldn't be found.

Zac continued on, diligently marking crossroads with a Z. By now he was starting to fully acclimatize to the cold light of the moss and various other plants and had no problem discerning his surroundings.

After a while, the tunnels started to change once again, as he saw spots glimmering between the pieces of moss on the walls and ground. He walked over to the closest spot that shone and saw that it was a crystal.

His heartbeat quickened and he quickly pried it out with a knife. The stone was far harder than he expected, and the extraction taxed even him with his huge Strength. But he only increased his pace with a widening smile adorning his face, and soon he held his prize in his hand. The crystal he pried out truly was a Nexus Crystal, roughly half the size of the ones in his bag.

As he looked around the walls he saw glimmering crystals embedded all over the walls.

He was *rich!*

Chapter 51: Stench

After a bout of excitement Zac suppressed his giddiness and refocused. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't start a mining operation at the moment. He had things to do.

Besides, it likely was more effective to let the demons mine the crystals, and then commandeer it when it was all extracted and gathered. They shouldn't have sent their most powerful warriors to mine, so an assault wouldn't prove to be too difficult. He longingly took another look at the glistening walls and then kept going.

This obsession with wealth was something new he had started to develop. He hadn't really cared too much when the world still was normal, and he just was a white-collar worker. He was happy as long as he had enough to live a comfortable life.

But lately he was running toward corpses like it was Christmas morning and the bodies contained presents. It was a weird type of callousness that translated corpses into loot. He had always enjoyed the grind in video games, waiting for that rush of seeing some glimmering unique or valuable item drop. He was starting to get the same feeling in real life as well. Just the thought of finding a magic pouch full of crystals made him want to forget about the Heralds and go on a treasure hunt instead.

But he knew he couldn't, at least not for now. As he walked, he started to gradually hear rhythmic sounds of metal hitting rock. It was still far in the distance, but Zac presumed he was hearing mining operations.

He hesitated for a bit, but then reluctantly decided to go in another direction. There was no real need to see the miners at the moment, and he wouldn't risk getting exposed this early just to steal a peek. What he currently wanted to explore was

whether the thrifty imp was a loner who had snuck into the caves, or whether it was part of a larger group.

As he crept along the paths the sounds of pick-axes hitting rock didn't diminish, rather it was a constant drone in this part of the cave system. This made Zac realize that the mining operations were on a larger scale than he had expected. After walking for 30 minutes the sounds finally started to diminish, letting him know he was moving away from the mining operations.

Suddenly he heard another sound and he stopped in his tracks. It was the familiar sound of light scuffling on the ground that the imp had made, but this time it sounded like came from multiple sources. It was accompanied by some clanking and subdued inane chatter that didn't quite sound like a language.

He gingerly crept forward, careful not to make a sound. He wasn't sure how sharp their senses were, and he didn't want to find out. Zac took quick peek around a corner and saw that the tunnel led into a cavern that was roughly 10 by 10 meter large. The roof was also higher compared to the usual 3-4 meters of the tunnels.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn't have to be careful of the imps smelling him out, as a wall of overbearing stench hit him as soon as he looked around the corner. It seemed that sanitation and hygiene were alien concepts to the small humanoids, as that level of smell could only come from a buildup of waste and excrement.

What entered Zac's vision could tenuously be called a camp. Moss had been ripped from the walls and placed on the ground to make simple bedding, and in the middle of the room was a handful of lumber together with vines making a fire whose black smoke polluted the cave. Luckily for the imps there seemed to be some cracks in the roof which kept the cave ventilated, otherwise they might have killed themselves accidentally by inhaling all that smoke. Piles of food waste and other unmentionables were strewn randomly about the camp, and in a corner there was a large rotting carcass of a smaller version of the salamander Zac fought earlier.

There were roughly 20 imps that inhabited the disgusting campsite, and it looked like they were turning in for the night. Zac was a little fuzzy about the exact time but felt that it should be somewhere around 4 to 6 am. He had assaulted the Herald in the evening, and after his escape spent a few hours on absorbing energy, then a few hours of sleep.

From what he'd seen from his travels across the island the imp's weren't nocturnal and guessed that their sleep schedule had gotten messed up from living in this subterranean cave.

Most of the imps were already lying on the ground snoring away, while a few lazily milled about. Two had a small scuffle over a moss bedding, and after a short while the victor lay down while the loser skulked away. It seemed the beddings closest to the fire in the middle were the most desirable, and the losers had to pick some spot further out.

Zac waited and only 15 minutes later the whole group was fast asleep, and they didn't bother with sentries or the like. Perhaps that was what the bedding arrangement was for. If they were attacked the weaklings in the outer rim would be attacked first, and their death wails would be the warning alarm for the others.

Zac deliberated whether to attack or to go around the camp. He felt that such a large group of imps indicated that the caves might very well be the main area of the imps. The imps he encountered in the forests had been mostly solitary, but here he immediately saw two dozen of them.

That meant that the likelihood of the herald being down here had gone up by quite a few points. He didn't want a repeat of the battle of the monkey Herald, where it summoned a throng of subordinates to wear him down. And being attacked by hundreds of imps seemed far more deadly compared to the monkeys. He'd be blasted to smithereens in no time.

But he also was still quite unclear about things down in the tunnels. He only possessed a shaky grasp of the layout down here so far. But soon he came to a decision and brought out some rags from his pouch. They had once been a shirt of his but were ripped up for bandages long ago. He wrapped the rag

around his mouth and nose, and then brought out a large dagger he had taken from the last fight with the demons.

The rags were a small defense against the smell. He was already getting nauseated just smelling it from a distance, and he did not look forward to experiencing the stench point blank. He crept forward, with his dagger at the ready.

He soon arrived at the mouth of the cave, and the overwhelming stench almost made his eyes tear. He forced himself to ignore it and moved over to the closest imp. He bent over, and with quick movements put his padded hand over its mouth and simultaneously cut a huge gash over its throat, almost completely decapitating it.

The imp had no time to scream or struggle, and after a few shudders it was dead. Zac stopped for a second to survey the surroundings, but they were all still fast asleep. He kept going and moved to the second one, repeating his actions.

In short order he killed 8 of the imps without alerting anyone, and he moved to the 9th. He was approaching the innermost circle of beddings now and was quite close to the fire. As he did he reflected that the only thing that smelled worse than imp excrement was hot imp excrement.

Zac was starting to wonder if a stench could physically hurt someone, as his eyes were tearing up from the stink. If he was forced to sleep in a camp like this he'd rather sleep on the edge of the cave at risk of getting eaten by a salamander, compared to sleeping next to this putrid flame.

The smell was so bad that he couldn't properly focus and he accidentally hit the sleeping imp with his foot as he approached. He quickly bent down and finished it off, but not before it managed to release a high pitched screech.

Zac knew he wouldn't be able to sneak around anymore, and immediately swapped out the dagger for his axe. He activated **[Chop]** and with three quick swings another five imps were dead before they managed to properly wake up.

By now the surviving imps were up, and all of them charged up a purplish-black fireball without hesitation. Zac managed to

kill another two before they were done charging, but afterwards four fireballs slammed into him. The cave was simply too small, and he had no time to dodge them. Normally he would have used his chest piece here, but he wanted to save it unless it was a true life-and-death scenario. He might meet a Herald soon, so he needed all the tools at the ready.

Zac could only grit his teeth as the nefarious flames hit him, sticking to him like glue. He knew that the fires would die out when their owners did, so he wasted no time and charged at the remaining four imps. They screeched and started to flee towards a tunnel opposite where Zac came from, but Zac wouldn't give up.

Ignoring the impractically large consumption of energy, he elongated the **[Chop]** edge and managed to hit two of the fleeing imps, bisecting them in an instant. Their two compatriots didn't care and only started flapping their wings more fervently in order to escape.

Zac fished out a throwing dagger out of his pouch, and as he followed he threw it into the back of one of the two imps. He took out another dagger, intending to quickly end the fight. But as he prepared the throw a huge white maw suddenly emerged out of a side-tunnel, snapping shut over the imp in a lightning-quick manner.

It was another salamander that emerged from the tunnel, contentedly chewing on the small demon. It lumbered forward toward the other imp that Zac had downed and gobbled up it as well, knife and all.

Zac wasn't in a mood to fight against the salamander unless needed, as he liked the idea of these huge lizards walking around in the tunnels and helping him out by whittling down his enemies. Therefore he quickly receded into a side-tunnel in order to avoid its approach. The huge monster soon came to the entrance looking toward Zac's direction, and seemed to be hesitating for a few seconds. Zac didn't understand how they kept sensing him, as this time he had fled even further back, but he could only get ready to kill this white giant as well.

Finally it turned around and ambled away, toward the now deathly silent imp camp.

Chapter 52: Odor

Zac let out a breath of relief as he saw the beast lumber off. Not that he was afraid of fighting it, but the enemy of his enemy was his friend, even if the monster itself didn't know it.

Zac moved some distance away and applied some more Aloe cream on his burns. His skin looked grey and sickly, but not like a desiccated corpse's like it had the first time he fought an imp. His endurance was quite a bit higher by now, and while the fireballs still hurt like hell it took them longer to drain his body.

Zac felt he was at the cusp of leveling up, and continued onward through the tunnels. It didn't take long until he found another cave with sleeping imps. This time it was a bit smaller, with only 15 imps. This group also seemed to be a bit more vigilant with one imp standing guard. It seemed to barely understand the concept of being a lookout though, as it was leaning against a wall half-asleep. Occasionally it would rouse itself, but only to scratch its butt then go back to dozing off.

Zac saw no way to get next to it without being spotted, even if it wasn't too vigilant. He really wished he could get the skill the crafty swordsman used, and turn invisible for the approach. Even the lackadaisical imp would notice his approach and warn the others if he tried to sneak up on it.

Seeing no alternative he took out another throwing knife and threw it at the guard. It hit straight in the middle of its torso, almost instantly killing it. It slumped down into the ground with a small whimper and then stopped moving. Zac froze, waiting for any reaction from the rest of the group.

However, they snored away contently, oblivious to their impending doom. Satisfied Zac ventured in and repeated his grisly assassinations. This time he managed to keep going

unnoticed until only 3 were left before they were alerted, but Zac finished off the last stragglers with a few quick chops.

The kills in the second cave gave Zac another level up, bringing him to level 33. He put in 1 point in Strength and two points into Endurance, bringing the attributes to 171 and 99 respectively.

Zac soon trudged on, continuously looking through the seemingly endless tunnel system. He found a few more imp camps on the way. Not all the camps were sleeping though, and he skipped the ones who were awake for now. He was forced to eat four fireballs earlier which hurt quite bad, and didn't want to imagine how getting bombarded by twenty of those infernal balls would feel.

After traveling for an hour he felt that he should be below sea level by how much he had descended. Of course, it was hard to get an exact feeling when everything felt the same. But it opened up a new avenue of escape for him. He had been pondering whether he should build a raft to leave the island if the demon quest didn't pan out.

But the thought of being stuck at sea on a crudely built raft and no knowledge of how far he was from land soon quenched that idea. Besides, who knew what kind of monstrous things lurked in the depths after the integration into the multi-verse.

The caves felt like a safer option. Even if he found no way out, he could always back-track to the island. The only downside was the claustrophobic feeling of these tunnels. The tunnels were quite beautiful right where he was, but he guessed it was due to the high amount of cosmic energy in the surroundings. If he left this area the tunnels would likely be far more dour and oppressive.

As he continued his exploration he started to smell a very acrid odor, differing greatly from the earthy scent of the vegetation or the putrid stench of the imp camps. Intrigued he decided to find the source and started to slowly follow the smell.

After a few twists and turns, he finally managed to find the right direction. It seemed that none of the stats really improved his senses overly much, so his plethora of titles hadn't given

him eagle eyes or a super sniffer. He, therefore, made some wrong turns before being able to tell what direction the smell came from.

As the smell got stronger and stronger he saw that the tunnel was starting to change. There were signs of mining activity in the area, with holes in the walls peppered about. Most of the greenery had also been ripped out, leaving only some of the luminescent moss for some lightning. It looked like the source of the smell was man-made rather than something natural.

He started to take greater care for any potential enemy or trap cropping up, but still decided to continue toward the source of the smell. As he peeked around a corner he saw a few imps milling about near the mouth of a large cave. He couldn't properly see what was going on inside the cave due to the distance, but it was well lit up and he could see a purplish smoke wafting about inside.

It would be impossible to approach without alerting whoever was in the cave, so Zac retreated to find another entrance. After twenty minutes of looking around, following his nose, he found another cave mouth, but this one was guarded as well.

He turned toward the last path he found that had a stronger smell compared to the others and tried his luck one last time. This time he was lead to a dead end, the path simply stopping after a while. The acidic smell was extremely strong though, almost to the point of making Zac lightheaded. After looking around for a while he found a small crack in the wall behind some luminescent moss.

He ripped down the moss and another light shone from the wall, but this time it was light bleeding through a small crack. It appeared he was right next to the cave, but with a thin layer of rock in between.

He tried to look through the crack but it was too small for him to see anything, so he brought out one of his thin throwing knives from his pouch and started to carefully carve out the crack. It was a slow process as he didn't want the sounds to alert anyone inside, and it took almost half an hour until the hole was large enough for him to be able to see through.

He eagerly glanced inside, and what met his eye made his heartbeat speed up. The cave was one of the largest ones he had seen so far, being a full 30 meters across. The first thing he noticed was the large cauldron in the middle of the room, and it was the source of the smell and the purple smoke he had seen. It was almost as tall as Zac was, and held in the air by a crude rock and lumber contraption.

The source of the fire confused Zac, as it didn't produce any smoke. He only saw a handful of the raw Nexus Crystals placed seemingly haphazardly on the ground, and above them a blue-white flame was steadily emitted, heating the bottom of the cauldron. Zac made a mental note, because if he could burn crystals without creating smoke he would be able to provide warmth and cook food without having to worry about demons finding out.

Next to the cauldron were various mounds of resources. Zac recognized almost all of them as the various herbs and plants he had seen while walking the tunnels. There were mushrooms, vines and purplish grass neatly separated into their own piles. He also identified a few plants that he had seen above ground in the transformed area close to the incursion.

On a stool stood an imp, slowly stirring the contents of the cauldron with a large wooden ladle. At least he thought it was an imp, but he couldn't be sure as because it was almost as large as an adult human. But it shared many features with theimps such as its purplish skin and bat wings.

In contrast, its skin wasn't mottled and irradiated like it seemed like with mostimps, but rather smooth and clear. It also wore a proper, albeit simple, robe. The most advanced clothing he had seen on an imp thus far was a dirty rag used as a loincloth, while most of them were simply naked.

It lacked any horns or ears, and as it turned its head to grab a mushroom to throw into the pot he could also see its face, making him sure he was dealing with an imp and not a demon. It had the extra set of eyes placed in its forehead, just as the normalimps.

He had found his fourth Herald. He couldn't see any other explanation than that. It looked far too different compared to its brethren, and its intelligence seemed to be on another level if it cared about things such as clothing.

Zac didn't dare to use **[Eye of Discernment]** 1 to make sure though, as even the normal imps could sense it when he used the skill on them.

The Herald wasn't alone, unfortunately. There currently were a group of roughly 10 imps milling about in the cave. They were sorting a pile of resources and moved them to their respective mound close to the cauldron. When an imp made a mistake it was ruthlessly slapped in the head with the boss's ladle, eliciting a scared whimper.

Zac decided to wait for a while in order to let them finish their task and then hopefully leave. Between this group and the ones just outside there simply were too many imps for comfort. But before they were even halfway done with the task a few imps entered the cave and dumped an armful each of various plants.

Meanwhile, the herald kept throwing some plant or mushroom into the pot every now and then, constantly stirring. Zac started to feel that the cauldron had to be a magic item like his pouch, as it never seemed to flow over, even after Zac had watched the Herald throw things into it for an hour by now.

It looked like the imps wouldn't leave the cave in the end. Zac deliberated whether he should wait some more or fight. By now he was more or less completely restored from his escape from the monkey Herald, apart from being covered in tender bruises. Finally, he opened up his quest page to make sure of the progress of his dynamic quest, slowly reading through it.

With all preparations done, he threw his worries and doubts out of his mind and hefted his axe.

Chapter 53: Blitz

The wall separating Zac and the cavern was less than a decimeter thick, and wouldn't be able to hold against him kicking it down. Luckily there were no crystals embedded that strengthened its integrity as well. He moved his axe to his left hand and gripped a throwing knife in his other.

After a few deep breaths, he put all his weight on his left leg and kicked forward with all the power he could muster. A deep thud echoed out and a large part of the wall completely crumbled. Zac shouldered his way through the newly created crevice, not caring about the few cuts he got from the sharp rocks.

He immediately threw his dagger with full force at the Herald, hoping for a quick conclusion. Unfortunately, it didn't work, as the blade seemingly combusted by itself and turned to ashes as it approached the large imp.

Zac wasn't surprised, and without hesitation pushed forward. He managed to kill two of the smaller imps with daggers on his approach, and then he was instantly within 10 meters of the herald.

The boss roared angrily and lifted the ladle, using it as a staff. A huge wave of pitch-black flames rolled outward toward Zac. Anything it touched turned to ashes immediately, even a few unfortunate imps that were incinerated since they stood at the wrong position in the cave.

A golden sheen enveloped Zac completely, and he jumped through the wall of flames. He could hear a peal of eerie laughter and a snap, then he was through the flames. He didn't hesitate and pushed all cosmic energy he was able to gather into the fractal on his hand, creating a five-meter blade which whooshed toward the herald.

The blade slammed into an invisible barrier and started sizzling, causing extraordinary pain somehow transmitting into Zac's mind. But Zac's power wasn't for show, and after a brief struggle the blade pressed on, slamming into the Herald's body.

Zac expected the Herald to be bisected, but with a shocked expression saw its seemingly simple robe light up and protect its body. The robe couldn't remove the huge momentum from the swing though, and the monster was shot into a close wall like a rocket.

Zac rushed after it and was almost upon it to end the fight.

The Herald spat out a mouthful of purple blood from the impact and screeched angrily at Zac. Its four eyes started blazing ominously, and once again summoned flames. This time nothing in the cave was safe, as black insidious waves billowed in all directions from floor to ceiling. The Herald was like a demonic sun that radiated nefarious flames that wanted to consume the world. The mounds of resources instantly turned to ashes, and the few leftover imps perished as well. The only thing that could stand the onslaught was the cauldron which seemed completely unaffected by the flames.

Zac had already used his armor's one-time defense inscription, and could only grit his teeth and force his way through the sea of fire. The fires would extinguish as soon as the Herald died, so he placed a bet that the fight wouldn't last long.

The scorching pain that enveloped him was far worse compared to the normal hellfire of the smaller imps, and it caused him to scream and stumble. The swing that was supposed to cleave the Herald in two lost much of its power and his aim got off-kilt. But he at least managed to slice one of the Herald's arm clean off spraying blood everywhere.

He shakily prepared to swing his axe once more, but the Herald had had enough. With a few flaps of its wings, it desperately tried to flee, leaving a trail of burning blood in its wake as it escaped through the flames. Every flap of its wings caused the flames to erupt in the air, creating a natural barrier from chasing it.

Zac couldn't afford to let yet another Herald to flee his pursuit, and charged most of his remaining energy into **[Chop]** once again, and furiously swung a five meter edge after the fleeing imp. But the imp was quick and he saw that his edge wouldn't reach even when maxed out.

That was extremely bad news as the whole cave was still covered in the black flames, and they were quickly consuming him whole. If he didn't kill the Herald he would likely perish before getting out of there. Anger and desperation filled Zac's mind as he maniacally tried to increase the reach of the blade.

"REACH!" he roared as the edge was moving horizontally in the imp's direction.

Suddenly, the blade detached from his axe, and continued outward like a wave. It moved as fast as his swing did, and soon reached the back of the fleeing Herald. It proceeded and penetrated the imp without any resistance from the magic robe, Splitting its torso and wings in two.

The body various body parts of the Herald fell to the ground, and Zac thankfully saw the flames covering the cavern quickly snuff out. He didn't have time to go over the battle scene, as a gang of screeching imps entered through the entrances. Now that the hellscape had subdued, the back-up could finally enter without being incinerated.

Zac was in no mood to fight these little demons, and threw out the huge salamander carcass to block the incoming fireballs. With the newfound room, he placed the Herald's cauldron in his magic pouch and dashed out the same way as he came.

He kept running through the tunnels to create some distance from the area controlled by the imps, elated with the result of the fight. His bet had been successful.

He had planned to avoid a drawn-out fight with the Herald, and thrown everything he got on it from the start. With how dangerous the small imps were he knew that the Herald would be a true terror if allowed to fire off its attacks. He hadn't even taken time to use his **[Eye of Discernment]** on the boss, afraid it would slow him down a fraction of a second.

He had also learned his lesson from the fight with the Monkey King, ending the battle before reinforcements could arrive. Certainly, last time he had been tricked into thinking he killed all the backup until they sprang out of the ground like mushrooms. But that only showed that anything could happen in a fight, and the longer it dragged on the more variables could crop up.

With his blazing speed the imp boss only managed to shoot two attacks before he was killed, and only one of them had managed to hit him.

Zac touched to his scalp as he ran and grimaced as he felt that all the hair on his head was singed clean off. After a quick confirmation, the same held true for his eyebrows and beard. He didn't have a mirror with him but he could only assume he looked like a beggar monk by now.

His felt body felt drained and burned, and he stopped as soon as he felt the distance was enough. He had consumed almost all his cosmic energy during the fight, and the hell flames the imp spewed out burned his vitality or soul as well, making him feel truly wrung out.

He sat down on some moss, brought out a bottle of water, and opened up his status page.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

34

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (F)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early

Strength

175

Dexterity

59

Endurance

100

Vitality

69

Intelligence

49

Wisdom

49

Luck

67

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

545716

The battle had only given him one level, compared to the almost 3 from the last Herald he killed. He currently felt he was roughly halfway to level 35. That showed just how much harder it was getting to level up the higher his level became. The only reason he kept leveling quite quickly was that his killing speed had improved faster compared to the increasing level requirements.

Before doing anything else he quickly opened his quest page as well to make sure whether what he killed was actually a Herald or not.

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (3/5)

It was indeed the third Herald he killed. He sighed in relief, elated with finally having moved his quest forward. He had been looking for this boss for weeks and started to worry whether he would find it in time to complete the quest. But this part was finally solved.

He already knew where the last herald was located, and it was badly wounded to boot. The last missing piece of the puzzle was the general. Zac still had no idea how to locate and eradicate him or her, but one step at a time.

However, the good news didn't continue.

Zac closed down his quest page in order to allocate his points into Strength and Endurance as usual. This time something went wrong, however, and he was unable to put his free point into Strength. He put two points into Endurance without a problem, bringing his total to 103. But no matter how many times he tried, he simply couldn't allocate his last free point into Strength. Zac started getting a sinking feeling in his stomach, worried he might have screwed up quite badly.

It looked like he had reached his cap for Strength. This was extremely bad news as his main stat was Strength, and he automatically got 3 points allocated every time he leveled up. Would he be able to level up at all? Would he just lose those 3 points if he gained a level? What if his Dao Seed improved or he gained a new Title?

He didn't believe that 175 Strength was the limit of what was possible in the multi-verse. Those titans he saw in the vision should have had thousands in Strength from the aura they emitted. Therefore the problem came down to how to increase his limit.

Zac pondered for a few minutes and came up with a few ways that might work. The simplest method, and the one he desperately hoped was true, was that the cap would increase with a set amount of points every time he got a level. Then his problem would be taken care of. If the increase per level was low he could simply allocate his free points into more Endurance or a third stat.

But if this wasn't the case his problem got a lot thornier, because the only other method he could think of currently was getting an upgrade. Both his Race and Class were currently F-Graded. If he upgraded one of them, his limits might get increased as well.

The problem was that he had no idea how to do that. Usually, in games, you got a class upgrade when you reached a set level. Unfortunately, Zac didn't know whether this was at level 35, 50 or even 100.

As for Race, he was even more clueless. He had seen no indication anywhere what to do about race, and the only hint he had gotten that it was actually upgradeable was that the grade got added when he attained a class.

It might take a long time until he found a solution to this problem. The thought of losing tens of levels worth of attributes while he waited for getting an upgrade made Zac truly sick to his stomach.

Zac's vision started to close in on him, and his thoughts were getting scattered. Suddenly he puked out a large mouthful of blood and bile, before falling down on the ground.

'Something else is making me sick as well' Zac realized, just before passing out.

Chapter 55: Hey There Buddy

Zac wished he had a mirror to more sneakily look around the corners, but could only work with what he got. He rubbed some dirt on his face and singed scalp to cover his skin, and then wrapped some of the vines around his neck and head. Somewhat satisfied with his camouflage, and carefully peeked around a corner, mostly hidden behind a huge mushroom.

The tunnel Zac peered into contained five miners, and he was surprised to see that most of them used different means to extract the crystals.

Two were using basic pick-axes to gradually chip away at the walls. But each swing only made some tiny chippings fall, proving that their strength was nowhere near Zac's. If he used one of those pickaxes he would likely be able to slam a decent hole in the wall, even if the rock was strengthened.

Another two of the miners were actually mages, and they simply held their hands to the wall. It took some time to see what they were doing, but he saw that a Nexus Crystal slowly was emerging out of the wall after a while. Apparently, the rock was even resistant to spells, as the earth mages Zac encountered so far usually had a far easier time manipulating stone.

The last miner was slamming away at the wall with a mace, and his Strength was overbearing. Every slam created a reverberating thud that made stone chippings fly.

The miners were all demons who looked well fed and cared for and didn't really look weaker compared to the scouts he encountered. He had hoped that the demons placed their weakest in the mines, which would make Zac's next actions more convenient. But the Strength of the mace wielder seemed

to be even higher compared to the demon with the great sword and black arcs of lightning.

Next to their feet, they each had a sack of extracted Nexus Crystals. The mace-wielder's sack was filled the most and the mages were second. It was all these sacks that were the goal of Zac. He had decided to scout out the demon activity in the cave for a bit, and steal as many Nexus Crystals as he could. He wanted to see if the crystals could help him in evolving his race or class before biting the bullet and gaining a level to see what happened. He knew he was grasping at straws, but he was really out of options.

Zac based his guess on two things. First the monkey packs. The higher density of energy the packs stayed in, the larger they became. The packs closest to the valley sported the largest monkeys, and a few even evolved to the point of using skills. The second clue came from the imp that was hiding crystals in a stash. He guessed that it maybe wanted to use the crystals for evolving as well.

If the beasts could use cosmic energy to evolve, then why couldn't he? So he wanted to steal a large amount in order to experiment. Perhaps there was a method of usage that would evolve his body, but not improve his level.

Zac slunk back into his tunnel, moving further on. His target wasn't these half-filled sacs. Moving onward he spotted quite a few tunnels with miners, and rhythmic thumping on the walls filled the tunnels. He soon found a deserted tunnel whose crystals all had been extracted. He picked this tunnel and started moving through it, ascending slightly as he did. He wanted to get closer to the center of demon activities.

All these miners had sacs, but Zac never saw anyone carrying them back to the Demon City. That meant that either they were collected and put in a pouch or were left here in the caves. In either case, they should be collected somewhere.

The tunnels that had been mined looked truly bleak compared to the magical feeling of the untouched ones. Not only were the crystals in the walls removed, but most of the vegetation had also been ripped out of the tunnel. The only thing left was

a smattering of moss to somewhat illuminate the area. Luckily for Zac, these exploited tunnels were completely deserted as anything of value was taken. It made it easy for him to move around the active excavations and into the inner area closer to where he expected the cave mouth to be.

He really felt thankful that his titles had improved his mental stats quite a bit. Normally he would be completely turned around after days in the tunnels. But while he couldn't exactly pinpoint where he should be in relation to the mountain, he generally knew the layout of the tunnels he had traversed and the direction he was moving. This was completely different from the old Zac who could almost get lost in his own neighborhood, and could only be attributed to either Intelligence or Wisdom.

Perhaps putting points in these stats wouldn't be a waste for a warrior, and not because it would help with his lacking sense of direction. He had been pondering on attributes a lot while healing up from the poison. If he was to throw his 1-stat-strategy out the window he needed a new direction. One alternative was to focus on all his physical stats, including dexterity and vitality as well. Find a good balance between the stats that still had Strength as the main focus, but not as lopsided as now.

But a new alternative he hadn't thought about was to start focusing on wisdom and intelligence. When he let go of his chosen path he started to think more deeply about what the various attributes could help him with, and he believed the mental attributes might help him with the Dao and Skill advancement.

If putting his free points in Intelligence allowed him to improve his Dao Seed faster and acquire new ones it might be more effective compared to putting them into more physical stats. If putting 10 points in wisdom helped him get another Dao Seed that gave 15 bonus attribute points, it was a worthwhile investment.

It might also be possible that even physical attacks needed those stats. His **[Chop]** skill was approaching the realm of magic as it could be turned into a projectile now. Perhaps

Wisdom and Intelligence would help it fly faster or further, rather than Strength.

He could only put aside those things for now, and for the hundredth sighed that he had no one to ask about these things.

The sounds of battle in the distance interrupted his thoughts. Who would be fighting down in the tunnels? Intrigued, Zac moved towards the clangor. He soon arrived at the mouth of a cave and saw four huge salamanders in a pitched battle against twice the amount of demons.

Earthen Spikes were shooting at the monsters while warriors were keeping the lizards at bay. A pyromancer conjured a huge fireball that shot into the open maw of a salamander, burning it alive from the inside. It started to furiously thrash about, slamming one of the warriors into the wall, at least breaking a few bones.

It was clear that apart from the fireball the salamanders held the advantage. Had the demons met only one or two of the monsters they'd likely have been able to defeat them, but four were too many.

The warriors didn't have the power to keep the monsters occupied, and the earth mages' attacks were largely ineffective. After their kill, one of the warriors sporting a large hammer and a shield shouted something in demonic and their party started to move backward.

Zac was happy to let this play out and hid behind a boulder, but the development put him in a predicament. The demons were moving in his direction.

After some deliberation, he picked up a few rocks and started pelting the demons. With his Strength he could likely throw them hard enough to blast through their bodies like bullets, but he controlled his power output. The first stones hit one of the warriors in the neck and in the back of the head of another.

It didn't knock them out but contained enough force to daze them. In a pitched battle like this a brief mistake could be deadly, and the salamanders unhesitatingly pounced. They bit

onto the two demons and after a few furious shakes threw their mangled corpses away.

A small stream of cosmic energy entered Zac, and he was delighted to see that the System only awarded a small part of the full amount to him. It looked that the system did use some sort of distribution method that somehow gauged contribution or damage dealt.

He managed to throw another stone that actually knocked one of the mages out cold before he was discovered. One of the mages screamed angrily and shot a few earth spikes toward him. But a few hastily summoned spikes possessed no danger to Zac, and he broke them off with a wave of his axe.

Zac moved forward quick as lightning and grabbed the scruff of the mage. Then with a grunt he threw her like a doll right at the warrior that ordered the retreat. She slammed into him with enough force that they both helplessly went sprawling on the ground.

The salamanders were quick on the uptake and started helping out with the pincer attack. The two downed demons were quickly dealt with and suddenly it was four demons left versus three salamanders and Zac.

With the frontline down the remaining mages were in dire straits. They desperately erected defenses against the hulking monsters, and then tried to force their way through Zac. But Zac was well versed in anti-mage tactics by now and quickly threw the pyromancer over the hastily erected wall. The mage wailed and then went quiet forever.

The salamanders weren't standing idle either, and with a roar the largest one slammed straight through the defenses and snapped up one of the demons. Another one followed and started biting one of the earth mages. The stone skin the mage used was completely ineffective against the lizard's saliva and strong jaws, and he screamed as he was being eaten alive.

Only one solitary demon remained, and with a desperate roar he started gathering cosmic energy from the surroundings. With the large density in the air it felt like a whirlpool of energy was forming. Zac recognized that sign and immediately

cleaved the demon in two from head to crotch, just before jumping for cover.

He held his hands over his head for a few seconds, but the expected explosion didn't come. Perhaps Zac managed to kill him before the energy managed to reach a critical mass. Somewhat embarrassedly he got to his feet and found himself facing three salamanders silently staring at him.

"Hey there buddy, let's be friends" Zac croaked toward the largest salamander, hoping to sound friendly.

Chapter 56: Ill-gotten Gains

Zac spoke to the salamanders with the same voice he used to chat with his old neighbor's dog. While he felt that fighting thee salamanders wouldn't be an impossible feat, he didn't want to move closer to another level unless he needed to. Besides, who knew if they would remember him as an ally if he kept feeding them demons and imps. Having an army of giant lizards to help out against the demon city would be very handy.

One of the salamanders ignored his request for friendship and started lumbering toward Zac, who helplessly backed away with his hands held up in response. Thankfully the leader's maw opened, and a surprisingly childish squeak emerged from its mouth. The squeak stopped the advancing salamander in its tracks, and it lumbered back toward one of the demon corpses.

Zac surveyed all the corpses for anything of value. He quickly noted that none of them carried a magic pouch, and the only other gear he found interesting was the shield one of the warriors had carried. It lay flung to the side by the corner of the cave. In case he spotted anything of real value or a magic pouch he would probably have initiated a fight, but he now saw no need to.

He briefly wondered what would happen if a monster ate one of the pouches while he moved away from the cave. Would it explode like a magic piñata, spewing its content all over the place? Or would the items simply be lost? Would a tear in space occur, sucking anything in the vicinity into some unknown void?

He waited some distance from the cave for fifteen minutes until the sickening sounds of feasting were gone, and sneaked back to the site of the battle. The salamanders were gone, apart from the dead one lying in a corner. All the bodies of the demons were gone as well.

Everything that the demons had worn seemed to have been ingested together with the bodies, but things they had dropped was left where it lay. Zac went and picked up the shield from the corner and examined it. It was slightly dented and corroded from the battle, but overall in serviceable condition. He threw it into his pouch and left again, not bothering with the damaged swords on the ground.

He was happy to see that the salamanders were actively hunting the demons, as that would provide an explanation of why some demons went missing when Zac started his activities.

With gusto he returned into the tunnels, looking for some stash house or clues where the mined crystals were gathered. But after looking around in vain for some time he changed his strategy. He found another group of miners and made sure he could get to both sides of their tunnel through side-paths.

After making sure he had a good grasp on the surrounding topography he simply sat down in a tunnel close by, waiting to see what happened with the sacks. Luckily he didn't have to wait long as the group of miners had been going at it for some time judging by the bulging sacks. Zac heard footsteps and hid his face deeper among the vegetation, hiding the rest of his body around the corner.

Five demons arrived at the tunnel, with the one in the middle wearing a fancy dress and having an air of haughtiness. The four others accompanying her were clearly bodyguards judging from their attire and how they encircled her. When she arrived the miners immediately stopped their activities and saluted the lady.

With a few words she brought out a clipboard from a pouch and one by one the miners brought their crystal sacks over to her. She lifted the first one up with her free hand, and after a comment wrote something down on the clipboard. She then put the whole sack into one of the pouches in her belt.

One of the guards brought out an empty sack from a backpack and handed it out with an expressionless face. The miner bowed and went back to his position. This process went on for

two more miners without anything of note happening. But when the lady commented on the fourth miner's sack he couldn't help but grimace and hesitantly say a few words in demonic.

The bodyguards immediately perked up and started radiating a dangerous aura, but the lady waved them down. She simply pointed to the bag and said a few words with a smiling face. The miner looked horrified and went down on his knees looking like he was begging for his life.

The exchange continued for some time until finally the lady put the sack into another magic pouch, and the miner could only return to his position with a devastated expression. The other miners simply stared down in the ground, not wanting to be implicated by their mouthy associate.

After the lady was done she simply turned and left, with her four bodyguards in tow. The miners sighed and sat down to eat, conversing with subdued voices. Zac didn't linger on and instead crept behind the party of five.

'Don't worry buddy, I'll mete out justice for you soon.' Zac gave a silent prayer for the unlucky miner as he was skulked away. He kept a healthy distance from the group, afraid that any sound would alert the group, and the walking treasure trove would slip out of his fingers.

The group soon arrived at another tunnel with a group of miners, and the process repeated itself. Zac kept following the group for an hour and watched them collect sack after sack of crystals. He wasn't sure whether the group he first spied on was among the first the lady visited, but just going by what he had observed the pouches on her belt contained an astonishing amount of crystals by now, and could only be counted by the thousands.

Zac felt he couldn't wait any longer and got himself ready. He steadied his breath and placed himself at a side-tunnel that the party should be passing after finishing their collection. It was some distance from the mining group, so Zac had no vision of his target anymore. However, they were moving in a very

systematic pattern through the tunnel system so far, and Zac could only assume they would continue.

Sure enough, soon the tell-tale echoes of the steps of the party were approaching. Zac held his breath, not wanting to give any indication of his presence. The first two guards came into view, but Zac didn't react.

As if sensing something was wrong one of the guards started to turn around, but it was too late. Zac entered the tunnel right behind the two and without hesitation swung a Dao-empowered strike at the lady in the middle. She looked shocked, but a golden sheen immediately enveloped her as an inscription pattern lit up on her dress.

Zac knew that inscription very well by now and forcefully stopped his swing. It hurt his muscles to do so, but it was better than getting the whole force of the strike redirected at himself. Instead, he lightly punched the golden barrier, and a recoil traveled through his arm bringing some discomfort.

Having fulfilled its purpose, the golden layer shattered, leaving the lady once more exposed. Black lightning arcs flittered all over her body, but Zac swiftly decapitated her with a grunt. The black arcs traveled all over his body, making it feel like he was being electrocuted, and he actually blanked out from the pain for a second.

During the brief pause from the shock, a sword stabbed into his side, drawing a small gout of blood. The pain shook him awake, and he immediately pounced on the two guards that had stood behind the lady. They were alarmed, but still warriors. One had produced a spiked mace whereas the other's hands started glowing with lightning. From his muscles he didn't seem like a mage though, but rather a pugilist.

They tried to pincer Zac, with the mace-wielder swinging at him from the left and the pugilist attacking him from the right with a clawed hand. Zac ignored the martial artist, and instead swung his axe to meet the mace.

The collision was completely one-sided, as the force from Zac's swing slapped the mace out of his hand and made the demon lose his balance. Simultaneously the clawed hand

slammed into Zac's back, easily destroying the leather protection, and trying to tear into his flesh. Unfortunately for him, Zac's skin was all the armor he needed, and the demon only managed to create a small flesh wound. The lightning entered Zac's body, but by now this level of power had scant effect on him.

He grabbed the mace-wielder's neck with his free left hand and slammed him down on the martial artist. The sounds of bones breaking could be heard, but Zac was interrupted as he planned to finish the two. A blade was flying right toward his throat, and Zac activated his armor to block it.

But he was shocked as no golden sheen enveloped him, and he could only desperately lift his arm to block the strike. The blade cut into his lower arm, only stopping after carving into bone. The pain was blinding but only served to enrage Zac. With a furious **[Chop]** the blade wielder was bisected, and then the two demons on the ground followed him into death.

He turned toward the last bodyguard only to see him desperately fleeing, heedlessly throwing away his weapon. Zac started running after him, throwing a few daggers his way. But the bodyguard was surprisingly nimble, managing to dodge most of them while running. One hit him in his back, but he only staggered slightly but kept moving.

Suddenly he started shouting at the top of his lungs, horrifying Zac. He threw one more dagger at him, but the demon turned a corner and disappeared from his vision. He could still hear the screams though, as they echoed through the tunnel system.

Zac hesitated a second, but then ran back toward the killed demons. With a furious speed he grabbed the pouches on the lady's belt, then threw her headless body into one of them. He then ran away in the opposite direction from where the screaming bodyguard was fleeing toward.

After a minute he stopped and quickly bandaged his wounded arm. It was bleeding freely and was currently creating a trail to his location. After making sure the blood didn't get through the bandages and rags he started running again. After he had run for an hour and completely left the area with mining

activities or imps he finally slowed down and found a good resting spot.

The fight wasn't very taxing, but he was worried about the results. First he dragged his chest piece off his torso and inspected it. The armor itself looked whole, but the inscribed fractal on the front had multiple cracks on it. That should explain why the shield didn't materialize earlier and he got maimed instead. But a smile crept on his face as he glanced down at his belt. He knew he would be able to afford to buy a new one with his ill-gotten gains.

Chapter 57: Dressing up

Zac suddenly remembered hearing a snapping sound when he used the shield against the imp Herald. He had no idea how to fix the inscriptions and could only reluctantly put the armor into his bag. He didn't want to risk damaging it further until he could fix it, as it had been a great life-saving tool so far.

He then brought out the headless body from his pouch. After a great deal of hesitation he stripped the bloody dress from the body, leaving the corpse only in its undergarments. He then put the dress on himself with a sour face before putting back the body into the pouch.

It wasn't ideal, but the dress had the same inscription as his armor, and it could be the difference between life and death. The dress he put on was strapped was a neutral beige and reached down to his knees. The design was luckily armless and somewhat nondescript, making it almost look like an overly long tank top. He put his belt over the dress then turned his eyes to the pouches.

A creepy grin was slowly surfacing once again, as he grabbed the closest one of the three he looted and took a peek inside.

If this was an old school cartoon then Zac's eyes would have turned into dollar-signs by now. The bag was almost filled to the brim with sack after sack of raw Nexus Crystals. If he had to guess he'd have to say there was at least an equivalent of 10 000 crystals in the pouch. The shapes and sizes were completely random as well, ranging from the size of a finger to almost a whole hand. Most of the crystals were encased in some stone and needed one last processing before being pure.

The second bag was unfortunately empty except a few solitary sacks, likely a spare in case the first one was filled up. The third one was the personal pouch belonging to the noble lady herself. It held various personal effects such as daily

necessities, clothes, and jewelry. It also had a nasty-looking claw weapon with fractal inscriptions. Zac brought it out and tried to put it on his hand, but it seemed to have been custom made for the demoness, or at least made for ladies, as his hand didn't fit.

Most noticeably in the pouch there was a sizeable mound of raw crystals. There even were a few sacks as well. It looked like that the lady foreman was skimming off the top after all, as crystals worth a couple of hundred standard-sized ones could be found in the pouch.

Satisfied with his haul he took out some food and water from his pouch to have his dinner. As he did he started to plan his next step. He had planned on stalking the tunnels for a while longer, but unfortunately, he was already exposed. He didn't doubt that the fleeing demon soon would warn all his superiors about Zac. The demon had seen the whole fight where Zac showed many of his cards as well.

After half a month of living with the demons, he was finally exposed. It was better than he expected to be honest, as he wasn't really the stealthy type. It seemed he could only begrudgingly give up on finding any more mining foremen, and instead refocus on the monkey king. It was time to head back the way he came from, and search for an alternative exit.

But suddenly Zac got an acute sense of danger, and instinctively dove to the side. A soundless black arrow flew past him where his head had just been and a throng of earth spikes followed right after. Zac scrambled to his feet and found himself face to face with over twenty demons swarming into his cave from all exits.

This clearly was an ambush that they prepared for some time, as they entered from both exits simultaneously. Feeling like a caged animal, Zac growled and immediately ran toward one of the groups, trying to avoid a pincer attack.

As if practiced beforehand, the group started to back away from him, with all the mages erecting barriers to keep him at bay. There were the translucent magical barriers accompanied

by earth walls and earthen spikes. There was even a tree mage who manipulated the subterranean vines to ensnare his feet.

Meanwhile, Zac got pelted by the other group of demons with an array of ranged attacks. He could only give up his charge in order to avoid most of it. As he dodged he turned around toward the attackers who harassed him from behind and swung his axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

A translucent blade grew to four meters long in an instant and then shot toward the surprised group. Only a few in the back managed to dodge in time, and the others could only hastily erect defenses.

With Zac's power the defenses of the average demon were simply insufficient, as it tore through them one by one. The blade wasn't perfectly stable though, and after slicing through 6 demons it flickered out of existence.

Two daggers came whooshing straight behind the huge blade, one slamming into an eye and the other into the gut of another demon. Satisfied, Zac turned back and started pressing forward through the defenses of the group.

He summoned his large edge but kept it at maximum stable capacity for now. As the attacks from behind had paused from his strike he could once again focus fully on the group he had initially charged at.

He slammed the axe down on one of the translucent barriers and it cracked like fragile glass. Two spears stabbed into him as he advanced, one lodging itself in his side and the other got stuck on the bone of his pelvis.

It was two warriors who used their long weapons trying to keep him at distance. Zac ripped one of the spears out of the hands of the demon, making him stumble forward, and slammed the butt of the spear at the other warrior. The spear broke in two and made the demon fly into the wall with a thud.

Immediately after he actually threw his axe straight in the chest of one of the mages. He didn't know which kind he was, but he died instantly from the strike. He brought out his identical axe from his pouch and continued to press forward.

A few arrows slammed into his back, but only elicited a grunt in response as he pressed forward. He once again got the prickling sensation of danger and sidestepped without hesitation. An arrow flew straight past him and once again missed his head. Unfortunately, the archer that shot the super-powered black arrows still was alive.

He kept pushing forward, and with a great leap he was within the group of demons. He ate a spear strike and two stalactite attacks by the earth mages due to his reckless charge but now he was within striking distance of the demons. Zac started madly swing his axe, with **[Chop]** charged to its limit.

He kept taking various hits but for every strike he received, he returned one in kind. And with Zac's far superior stats he whittled down the group to only 3 combatants from 9 in under 10 seconds. The survivors from the other group joined their brethren in the fight, and Zac found himself encircled by the 6 last surviving demons.

Zac was completely drenched in blood by now, both his own and the demon's, and filled with small wounds from head to toe. Almost ten arrows were sticking out of his body at various spots, making him look like a demonic porcupine. He was panting and it looked like it was a chore to keep his axe raised, but he was still standing. Fighting twenty demons at once was a bit more than he could confidently handle, even in an enclosed space like this.

None of the demons were keen on being the first to attack, as over 15 demons already had made the ultimate sacrifice and they didn't want to be next in line. They seemed to be content to simply watch as Zac slowly bled out.

They all kept a healthy distance from him, making him unable to reach them even with **[Chop]**, and he currently didn't dare use his ranged attack due to the huge consumption of energy.

Zac knew he couldn't keep stalling and threw a dagger at one of the mages, who quickly summoned a barrier. The translucent wall shook when the dagger hit it, but it held true and the dagger dropped to the ground. Zac didn't want to

throw his axe as his other one still was lodged in the mage some distance away.

Needing to break the status quo, he moved his hand down to his belt, and with underhand throw hurled a large crystal sack at another demon. The demon slightly froze from seeing a small mountain of wealth flying in his direction, and even instinctually reached out his hand to catch it.

But how could a heavy sack thrown by Zac be so easy to catch? It hit the demon who crashed into the wall behind with a wet thud. He slumped down on the ground and didn't move. The other five demons all charged at him as if by command, throwing desperate attacks at him.

With only 5 demons left Zac finally threw his axe at a mage keeping his distance. He hastily erected an earth wall, but the axe had the momentum of a meteor and passed the rising wall and blasted a hole through the mage before he could also activate his stone skin.

He took out one of his large swords out of his pouch and with a sweep slapped away two incoming spears. He then charged straight at the closest warrior. The warrior tried to keep Zac at bay with his spear, but Zac simply swung his sword at it with enough force that it broke the fingers of the warrior, and continued into melee range.

With a growl, he stabbed the great sword into the demon's gut, and with a ferocious upwards tug ripped him in two, drenching the surroundings in a storm of blood. A second spear stabbed into his side, but it only added yet another shallow wound to the tally. The three remaining demons seemed to understand that they didn't have the power to contend with him, and simultaneously started absorbing inordinate amounts of cosmic energy.

Zac didn't want to see what a triple suicide explosion looked like, and desperately ran toward the closest target and decapitated him. He continued toward the next immediately, but as he approached a resounding explosion threw him ten meters away and straight into a wall.

Zac puked out a mouthful of blood, and his wounds only got worse. Just as he shakily got up to his knees his vision filled with a bloated demon falling down in front of him. It was the last living demoness, chock-full of cosmic energy. The demoness stared into Zac's eyes as she shed one solitary tear before she blew up with a tremendous explosion.

Chapter 58: Quest

The world was shaking nauseatingly and an incessant ringing filled Zac's ears. He shakily got to his feet but immediately fell down again. His state was already pretty bad, but the last blast completely messed him up. His new dress had used the golden protection just a few hours ago, making it unusable for another day.

Luckily he managed to drag a corpse over at the last second to use as a shield from the blast, otherwise, he might have bit the bullet, 103 Endurance or not. And now he was covered in a blood mush from the demon shield to boot. However the last minute protection was far from enough, and it felt like everything in his body was broken.

But he knew he couldn't stay where he was. The demons somehow knew his position, and he had no other recourse but to flee. He shakily got to his feet and collected his two axes, and only swiped up a few knives if convenient. Zac didn't dare to properly loot the bodies as he needed to put distance from the cave.

His movements were extremely slow, even if he mentally screamed at his legs to move faster. He desperately wished he had some health and stamina potions right now like in a game, but the only thing he got was a cauldron full of poison.

After hesitating for a few seconds he took out his canteen with the azure water from the pond. The water was crammed full of cosmic energy and might help him recover enough for him to properly flee from the area. The problem was that he had no idea whether it also contained something else like poison or deadly super bacteria.

Zac knew he couldn't be picky at a moment like this, and had to risk it. With a few chugs he downed a couple of mouthfuls of the azure water. It tasted sweet and cooling in his mouth,

and was hands down was the best tasting beverage he ever had. But as soon as the water entered his throat it started burning worse than the strongest spirits he knew, making him feel like he swallowed a sun rather than some water.

The burning feeling didn't abate in his stomach, but rather kept intensifying. He felt his body was turning into a pressure cooker that was ready to burst. Veins popped out all over his body and he was forced to stop walking from the intense pain. Sweat was pouring down his face like a waterfall and even his eardrums popped from the pressure.

Zac was starting to worry for real that he might explode like the demons any time now. But soon the intense pressure abated, and the scorching heat in his belly turned into comforting rays of warmth that spread all through his body.

Zac felt his cosmic energy reserves rapidly filling up, but his wounds were barely reacting to the water. He thought he might be seeing some improvement but couldn't be sure. It rather felt like he had taken a dozen shots of adrenaline and simply couldn't feel the pain any longer.

It was better than nothing Zac thought as he continued onward at a brisker pace. As he walked he dumped everything from the lady foreman's pouch onto the ground, leaving only the Nexus Crystals. He still didn't feel secure though and started to meticulously scan through the bag containing most of the crystals.

He went through them one by one to see if anything was amiss, trying to find out how the demons were able to track him. Perhaps there were bugs planted in one of the sacks he had stolen from the lady foreman, as that was when the trouble started. Soon his scanning stopped at an inconspicuous rock that was placed in one of the sacks. Most of the sacks had some rock chippings mixed in with the crystals, but this was the first time he saw a rock of that size. He brought out the sack and groped around inside until he found the stone.

As he glanced at it did not seem overly suspicious, but he could see some slightly odd veins on the stone. He brought out his flashlight for the first time and shone it on the rock. In

brighter lighting he could see that the veins actually were fractals. Zac grimly stared at it for a second, before he crushed it under his foot.

He immediately backtracked a bit and changed direction. As he walked he kept checking each and every bag, and eventually found two more similar stones. Finally sure that was the last of them he sped off, ignoring any wounds protesting.

As he walked he multitasked by checking his status page. The fight with the demons pushed him over the limit and gotten him to level 35. He had already been somewhat close to leveling again after killing the Herald, and the melee was all that was needed.

His fears were unfortunately realized and he saw his Strength still was stuck at 175 instead of increasing from the class bonus. It looked like he really had to try and evolve somehow. He helplessly allocated his 3 free points into Vitality, as he didn't dare put any more in Endurance for now either.

Hoping for a class advancement quest activating from reaching a "big" level, Zac opened up his quest window next. Things weren't that convenient, as no advancement quests popped up.

He did, however, receive a new class quest.

Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill (0/1000)

He suddenly was pretty happy that he didn't spend a few days to grind in order to buy **[Steps of Gaia]** from the shop. He only lacked 5000 coins for the skill by now, and could now use them to improve other things instead. **[Loamwalker]** was clearly some type of movement skill, just like **[Steps of Gaia]**.

Honestly, his class skill sounded quite a bit blander compared to the one in the shop, but he had learned not to underestimate the dull-sounding skills he received from his class. It was also very convenient to complete, as he only needed to walk around.

A slight scuffling interrupted his thoughts, and he could only bring out his axe again with a grimace. He placed himself at a corner in wait, and soon a demon came into view. This one was highly alert, and immediately noticed Zac's presence.

But Zac was ready and the axe was falling down on the demons head as just as he appeared, instantly killing him. He immediately entered the tunnel and unleashed a maximized [**Chop**] edge that flew outward before he could even register what was in the tunnel.

A few screams and groans were heard, and the demons were almost all dead before they knew what hit them. There were two that were badly hurt but alive, but Zac made short work out of them as well.

There was one final demon who for some reason had been doubled over when the edge passed through the party and was completely unharmed. Horrified he started running but Zac wouldn't let yet another straggler escape. With a grunt, he threw his axe at the demon and then started his pursuit.

Luckily this time he hit, and the party was no more. He stopped by the fallen body and ripped out the embedded axe while glancing at the bloodied tunnel. He didn't know who made the sound while walking, but that mistake cost the whole group their lives.

It looked like the demons hadn't given up the chase. They had finally identified him and seemed determined to remove the problem. He quickly threw all the bodies and gear into his empty pouch and continued on until he found a secluded cave where he dumped them all, including their things. He actually wanted to bring them with him to hide his pathing, but who knew what else the demons could detect.

His speed slowed down somewhat due to taking even greater care to be completely silent, and thoroughly checking side-tunnels. But as he moved he was steadily moving upward. Zac figured the Demons might be impeded by the monkeys if he managed to exit into the mountains again. It was easier for him to hide as a solitary person, compared to their large groups.

He saw a party again as he checked a tunnel, but this time they were moving away. Zac kept completely still until they moved far away before skulking forward. At least it was clear that they couldn't locate him anymore. It had just been a guess, but it truly seemed that those stones were some sort of tracking device.

He kept skulking forward and avoided any demons that he came across. He was lucky that the tunnels amplified sounds and it was almost impossible for a group of 10 people to be completely silent at all times.

He was forced into one more fight but ended it quickly before moving further up. After another hour he hadn't seen any demons for 30 minutes and finally sat down and brought out a crystal. He should be some ways up the mountain by now, and could happen upon an exit at any time. Even if he didn't want to stop he needed to recuperate before reentering the mountains.

The tunnels were endless and even if the demons sent hundreds of them into them it was still somewhat unlikely for them to happen upon him, as there was so much ground to cover. Meanwhile, he was afraid that the Herald had prepared an ambush for him the moment he reemerged.

So he finally allowed himself a break, eating some dried meat and then quietly waited for his wounds to get better. After two hours of quiet rest a loud ding entered his ears and forced him to his feet, warily looking around. But the area around him was completely deserted, with not a demon in sight.

[Special Dynamic Quest activated. Emerge victorious and seize the Fruit of Ascension. Struggle for supremacy.]

It was the familiar emotionless voice of the System entering his ears, but Zac barely had time to reflect on its words before his vision changed.

He suddenly was up amongst the clouds and stared down toward the familiar sight of his island. He could clearly see the whole topography, but the sea around it was blurred somehow. The vision moved and he closed in on the island with terrifying speed, hurtling toward the mountains.

Soon he arrived at the valley where he fought the monkey king earlier, but it looked different from how it did when he visited. The zone of death around the red and white tree had expanded to stretch across almost half the valley, and even the azure pond was shrunken down to half its size.

After having almost exploded from the energy contained in just a few mouthfuls he was shocked at the amount the tree had absorbed.

The vision kept moving and in seconds he was next to the tree. Zac would have thought it would be even lusher after absorbing the surroundings and the lake, but it actually looked a bit dried out. A couple of leaves had even fallen to the ground.

Neither the herald nor any other monkeys were anywhere to be seen, but Zac didn't ponder about it overly much as his eyes were glued to a pair of fruits that had grown on the tree. They were similar to a cantaloupe apart from their color. Instead, they were a glistening red mixed with white lines that almost looked like fractals.

The fruits were beautiful, but more importantly, they had some magical effect on him even though it was just an illusion. It felt like every cell in his body was screaming in desire, wanting nothing more than to consume the fruits. He hated the fact that he was just there in a vision, and not in reality.

As quickly as the vision appeared it suddenly ended, leaving Zac in the cave with a mixture of greed and hesitation.

Chapter 59: Now or Never

“That fucking monkey!” Ogras roared, this time enraged for real. No wonder it sent its underlings to keep his search parties out of the peaks. He thought it was just posturing that he’d allow for some time before setting monkeys straight. But Cindermane had likely found the Tree of Ascension long ago and just waited for its fruits to ripen. Somehow the monkey must have broken free of the clan’s mental restrictions, otherwise it would have been compelled to report such a find.

“But if you think that breaking free from my grasp is that easy you’re in for a rude awakening...” he muttered and then turned to his aide. “Assemble the regiments, we’re heading toward the mountain.”

“Yes, sir. What about the search parties in the mines?” The aid asked.

“Leave them. Hopefully they will keep that human busy while we deal with this.”

He had been shocked to learn that the group of natives he discounted earlier actually was only one human. At least he hoped there was only one of them, as his power seemed high enough to give even him a headache. Of course, the human wouldn’t be a threat to him if all the limitations on him were removed though.

Worse yet the human killed Qugo and stole the poison that was supposed to be one of his aces in case everything went south. Ogras had actually decided to hide the news of the third Herald’s demise, afraid that his clan members would chain him up “for his own protection”, while gleefully stealing all the loot Ogras had rightfully pilfered.

As if summoned by his thoughts Rydel walked in through the door, as always unheeding or dismissive of proper protocol. He wore a resplendent silver battle armor that matched his

long white hair well. Strapped to his back were two swords with intricately carved hilts.

“Cousin, I assume you have seen the proclamation by The Ruthless Heavens?” he said with a smile.

“I’m not blind Rydel, of course I’ve seen it. The army is setting out immediately. And here on the baby planet I’m General, not cousin.” Ogras spat out in annoyance.

“It is ironic, wouldn’t you say cousin? It was you who championed sending the beast hordes through the gate first. But it seems they have only turned into lucrative target practice for the humans instead of paving our way, and now one of the hordes is even revolting. I wonder how the elders will react when they hear of this.” Rydel smilingly continued, seemingly unperturbed by the troubling developments.

“That’s not for you to worry about Rydel, know your place. I’m leading the armies myself to fix the monkey problem, and that human hiding in the tunnels will soon be caught.” Ogras couldn’t stand being in the same room as this thorn in his side any longer and prepared to set out.

Ogras didn’t actually want to lead the army, but faced with the emergence of a D-ranked treasure such as a Fruit of Ascension, he couldn’t sit still. He needed to secure it by himself, and if that failed destroy it so that Cindermane or some crony of Rydel didn’t get it.

If someone from the main branch managed to get the Fruit of Ascension he might as well lay down and kill himself, as the family assassins would find him as soon as the incursion stabilized anyway. His plan was to turn the wealth of the crystal mine into acquiring a treasure like the Fruit of Ascension, and use that as a springboard to become the future hope of the clan. But if suddenly Rydel had the fruit as well, then he knew who the clan would favor.

“I’m sorry cousin, but I need to correct you on a few accounts.” Rydel said while holding up a hand to stop Ogras’ exit, his smile slightly widening. “The human has escaped the ambush, leaving at least thirty corpses behind by now. He also seems to have figured out the tracking stones, and now we

can't locate him. Furthermore, the one who will lead the army to fix your mistakes is me, not you."

"Are you revolting against the clan precepts Rydel? You know the elders appointed me at least until the incursion stabilized. Are you sure you want to face the wrath of my grandfather?" Ogras spat out, a dangerous glint entering his eyes.

"Your grandfather is well-aware. As you were untested when appointed general, the elders came to an accord with your ancestor." Rydel retorted as he retrieved a parchment from his bag. "In certain events that are deemed to be critical to clan Arh'Rezak's future developments, the military command is temporarily transferred to me. Just to make sure nothing goes wrong due to inexperience."

The bright smile looked like a death sentence to Ogras, as he snatched the parchment with a snarl. After reading through it he saw it was true. He immediately sensed his grandfather's magic sigil on the decree, telling him that this was real. The parchment detailed certain events that would result in a transfer of leadership to Rydel, and the emergence of a D-class treasure or higher was one of them. It looked like his grandfather had been forced to make some concessions in order to snatch the leadership position for him.

"But not to worry cousin. As soon as this matter is dealt with I will return the command to you as per the instructions. I suggest you stay in your beautiful castle for now, as your safety is paramount to the clan. I have allocated a few of my guards to protect you. We have to make sure that the humans don't assault you while we're up at the mountain." A cold ray flashed through Rydel's eyes as he retrieved the parchment from the now mute Ogras. "Well then, I have a fruit to retrieve. I will be seeing you later cousin." He said as he exited Ogras' study, the last sentence rife with hidden implications.

Ogras briefly considered having it out with Rydel then and there, but soon gave up the thought. Rydel likely was ready for him, and he could also see multiple main branch members standing outside, sneering at him.

Ogras glared after Rydel, looking like a volcano ready to erupt. The aide sensed the atmosphere and made a quick excuse and fled the room, closing the door behind him.

Soon the energy left Ogras' body, and he slumped down in his chair.

“Shit.”

Zac's heart was still beating quickly after having seen the vision. He wanted to immediately rush toward the valley but first checked his quest tab.

As he suspected a new quest had arrived.

Dynamic Quests:

Ascension (Limited - Open): Seize the Fruit of Ascension upon ripening. Reward: Fruit of Ascension. [Time until ripening: 11:58:23]

The classification of the quest was new, Limited – Open. His other two dynamic quests were classified as Unique. If he guessed correctly limited meant it was a short duration quest. And he hoped he was wrong, but he believed open meant that everyone within a certain area got it.

The system said to emerge victorious and to struggle for supremacy. Then it conveniently showed the location of the treasure a full 12 hours before it ripened. It wanted a bloodbath.

Zac slowly sat down again and took a small sip of the azure water. He wasn't in the mood to wait any longer and needed to heal quickly. The burning sensation spread through his body again, but this time the amount was manageable. Once again he felt his wounds slightly improve, and the throbbing pain he had felt come back once again was gone.

As the heat spread through his body he pondered on what to do. He was hesitating if he should actually compete for the fruit, as going against both the monkey horde and maybe even the demons sounded like a suicide mission. He also felt he had no choice.

He didn't know what a Fruit of Ascension did, but from how it managed to create a quest it couldn't be a small matter. If his enemies got it and received a huge power-up he might be screwed. The most likely recipient would be the monkey herald as he was the owner of the tree. It was a pretty even fight before, what would happen if it evolved once more?

Besides, it also presented an opportunity for him. The fruit would help someone ascend judging by its name. It sounded awfully similar to evolve, and he guessed it might help him get a better class or evolve his race.

He also almost knew for certain he would find the Herald by the fruit in 12 hours, hopefully still hurt from his slash. Zac knew the monkey possessed high values in Strength, Dexterity, and Endurance from their fight, and could only hope that it also didn't have a strong Vitality. It also felt reasonable that the general would be there to commandeer one of the fruits. That would mean that both his targets would be gathered at one place in roughly 12 hours.

In a sense, the quest represented an all-or-nothing gambit. If he succeeded, all his problems might be solved, including his incursion quest. But the danger would likely be off the charts. If he failed his mission would turn harder, no matter who got the fruit. If he even survived.

But he felt it was do-or-die. Time was running out, and he needed to take some risks. With a steely determination, he decided to participate in the fight.

Of course, there was no reason to rush there. He only needed to travel for less than two hours to get to the crimson tree. And getting there early would make him a sitting duck. He was only one man in what might be a huge free for all battle, and he needed to avoid attention as much as possible.

His goal should be to sneak in at the last minute, kill the monkey king and steal the fruit. If possible he should kill the general as well, or at least identify him. Then run for his life and see what the fallout was.

He sat down again on the ground, and while keeping a lookout for more demon parties only focused on getting back to prime

condition. He waited a full 6 hours before he felt well enough rested to be able to give it his all.

The wounds from the ambush were somewhat healed by now, but a few wounds would likely reopen if he exerted too much force. But there still a couple of hours before he should see any action, and hopefully he would be in even better condition by then.

He set out again, and after some trial and error found a way out of the mountain. It wasn't the same path as the one he had entered through. He didn't want to dig through meters of fallen rocks, and besides it might be marked by the monkeys.

Instead, he found a tunnel that should end somewhere on the inner side of the peak, close to the entrance of the valley. It didn't actually have a cave entrance, but a few holes in the rock let sunlight through. The wall was quite thin here, and with a few minutes of effort, he would be out.

The outside was completely quiet, so Zac decided to wait some more before emerging. As he waited he started chipping at the wall with a dagger, not completely breaking through but making a quick exit easier. Finally done he sat down and continued to recuperate. When the timer showed roughly two hours until the fruits ripened, a cacophony of roars broke the silence.

Zac heartbeat fretfully hammered in his chest as he opened his eyes and stood up. It was now or never.

Chapter 60: Entering the Fray

Zac immediately got ready, even though his wounds hadn't completely healed. But between his high vitality and the numbing effects of the azure water, he was in an almost perfect fighting condition. With no more time to lose, he finally pushed down the rock wall that blocked the entrance while hefting an axe in his hand. It made quite a crash, but it was nothing compared to the roars of thousands of monkeys, with demon screams peppered in.

As soon as he got out he was stunned by the mayhem.

Zac had emerged from a secluded spot on top of an outcropping, giving him decent vantage over the peak and down toward the valley. Everywhere he looked he saw throngs of monkeys duking it out with legions of demons.

The air sparked with energy as fireballs and lightning bolts filled the sky, the ground rippled from a multitude of spears and other projectiles shooting out. Even nature itself had entered the fray as trees slowly reached down to grab unsuspecting monkeys, before ripping them apart.

The other beast types were here as well, as a thick wall of barghest stopped the monkeys from getting into melee range of the demons. They mindlessly charged toward the monkey groupings, completely heedless of their survival.

Groups of gwyllgi roamed the battlefield with far more finesse compared to the hulking demonlings. They roved in packs and struck weak spots or lone stragglers almost with surgical precision and then quickly got out of harm's way.

There also was a smattering of imps placed together with the mage demons, but to Zac, it seemed that most of them still were in their underground dwellings, as their numbers were

quite sparse. Perhaps Zac recently killing their boss had caused some sort of chaos to their ranks, making it hard for the demons to control them.

The monkeys wouldn't be outdone though, and the air was filled with flying debris, from the stalactites from the monkey captains to anything that the normal monkeys could get their hands on. Zac even saw corpses being used as projectiles, flung at the magical barriers erected by the demon mages. The barghest that came close to the monkeys were largely helpless after their first impact and were pelted and bitten to death by the angry monkeys.

The magical shields held for the most part, but every now and then they got overtaxed and shattered. The monkey captains were quick on the uptake and focused their energies on those areas. The focused fire turned the unlucky few behind the broken shield a crushed meat paste beneath a mountain of boulders.

However, most of the projectiles didn't reach the demons but rather slammed into the demon beasts who fulfilled their purpose of being meat shields.

Overall the demon's clearly held the advantage, as they steadily pushed forward. For every demon the monkey horde killed, at least five monkeys died. It still was early in the battle though, and from experience, Zac felt that the demons would run out of juice sooner or later. Those spells cost cosmic energy, while the monkeys likely could keep hurling debris for a good while. As long as the monkeys could withstand their furious onslaught long enough they might have a chance to turn the situation around.

Besides, the terrain was not ideal for organized warfare that the demons were trying for. He saw that the orderly lines were starting to splinter, and the legions forced to split up as they advanced.

Zac didn't know why it had come to a full-scale war, but he didn't complain. This kind of chaos was the best news for him. He wondered if the monkey's disadvantage was because of him. He had thinned out their horde quite a bit after all.

Some movement in the distance grabbed his attention. It was a solitary group that emanated a pressure a notch above the other demons. They were steadily pushing forward and was entering the valley at a furious pace. None of the magic shields were breaking and the monkeys could offer no resistance to their advance.

In the front a few demons in resplendent gear were personally reaping the lives of monkeys like they were harvesting wheat. Especially attention-grabbing was one male demon with shining white hair that was dancing in the wind. He held a sword in his hand and had another strapped to his back, and as he moved forward it almost looked like dancing rather than engaged in battle. The sword moved in graceful curves and moved around him in a mesmerizing pattern. But Zac knew it was no performance art, as that demon's speed of reaping monkeys seemed to eclipse even his own.

It looked like he had located the general.

Satisfied with what he had found, he started to make his way down from the cliff. He had wrapped his head in rags to hide his features and covered as much skin as possible. Zac hoped that the demons would be too preoccupied with the monkeys to realize he lacked horns and wore shoes instead of having taloned paws.

He skirted around the main army and aimed to enter the valley from a slightly different direction. There were a few clumps of demons along the path but none thankfully reacted to him. It was lucky that the demon armies all used individual clothing and gear, making their composition look very chaotic.

As he walked around a bend he almost ran straight into a party of 6 demons. The one in the front snapped something in demonic as Zac passed, but Zac only waved his axe in response. His heartbeat quickened as he kept running, waiting for the demons to go their own way.

It seemed the proximity was too close, as an arrow came whizzing at his back. Sensing danger Zac whirled around and blocked the arrow with his axe head. Sighing he made a 180 and rushed into the demon group while he summoned **[Chop]**.

The man in the front held a sword, which by itself started burning as he swung it to intercept Zac's chop. The demon hadn't imagined the power contained in the axe, as the edge hit him like a truck and breaking most of his fingers as the sword was forced away. The swing continued onward as it chopped off his upper body, and continued to decapitate the unlucky demon who stood next to him with a short sword and shield.

Zac pushed on and made quick work of the last four demons, whose feeble attempts to stop him couldn't even slow him down. After the blitz he was bleeding a bit from two small wounds, but it was nothing serious. A few of his old wounds had opened as well, but there was nothing to do about that for now. He was also drenched in demon blood, and could only hope that the smell wouldn't attract any beasts.

He slowly kept moving forward, and after half an hour he reached the forest at the edge of the valley, taking twice the time compared if he had rushed straight in.

As he moved forward he saw that the orderly war at the slopes of the mountain was turned into a chaotic melee in the valley by now. There were clumps of demons fighting monkeys scattered all over the place. In most places, the demons still held an advantage, but at a few other they got overrun by sheer numbers.

He saw an unlucky group of 10 demons getting ripped to pieces by an angry horde of monkeys. They put up a valiant defense, but two fists couldn't defend against ten, and in just moment they were mangled corpses strewn on the ground. A few of the monkeys had even ripped off a limb and contentedly chewed on it as it moved toward the next pack.

Zac tried to avoid battle as much as he could, not wanting to get any more experience until he seized a Fruit of Ascension. He stayed clear of any larger battles, zig-zagging forward in a careful manner. Of course, every now and then he got accosted by either a group of demons that figured out his identity or a group of enraged monkeys happy to target any humanoid.

The clashes resulted in furious melees as Zac wanted to finish the battles as quickly as possible. Unheeding of energy

expenditure he ravaged any party that got close with great chops using his skills. When he ran low on cosmic energy took a sip from the lake water and let the burn quickly restore his deficit. He did avoid using the Dao of Heaviness though, as he didn't have any means to restore his mental energy apart from sleeping.

Soon he arrived at the field of desolation, his body covered in a multitude of shallow wounds by now. Due to the consumption of the water he didn't feel any pain though, and still felt he was in peak condition.

The vision the system showed earlier was accurate, and a huge area was now covered in dried out and dead trees. The once lush forest was gone and replaced with a dead space.

After a quick look he saw that it only was fifty minutes until the fruits ripened. Even if he had blazed through all resistance in the forest it took some time to traverse the distance. He figured that if he ran it would take him twenty minutes or so to reach the crimson tree. He was hesitant whether he should leave the cover of the forest to enter the field as he would be completely exposed if he did.

After some deliberation, he ran along the forest edge toward the opposite side of the field. The demons should be concentrated on the eastern side, as they entered the valley from there. The army might have spread to encircle the tree by now, but it should at least be thinner at the opposite side.

When he was a bit more than half-way to the other side he veered into the dead zone and headed for the tree. He was running out of time and needed to get to the fruits. The area was largely devoid of combatants, either monkey or demon, and soon he saw why.

As he approached the tree he saw a scene of utter chaos. The magical tree still stood tall as it had before, with the addition of the two ripening fruits. Covering it was a glimmering shell covered in dense fractals. Zac felt that the shield should be the work of the System, as the fractals felt perfect and in harmony with the universe, just like the ones on his array flags. The

inscriptions on the demons' weapons were far more simplistic in comparison.

Packed around the shield was a confusing and bloody carnage between monkeys and demons. There were no lines of demarcation, no strategy, and no order. There were just hundreds upon hundreds of bodies crammed together, desperately trying to kill anything on the opposing side. They all tried to claw their way closer to the shield and the tree, to be as close as possible when the shield dropped.

Right by the edge of the shield, a few areas almost devoid of people could be seen, and in one of them, Zac saw the white-haired demon fight against the monkey king. The Herald had a few supersized monkeys by his side, and they furiously did everything they could to support their leader. It looked like the Herald was mostly healed up, but a huge scar adorned its chest now.

Every strike between the Herald and the general created rippling shockwaves in the area, keeping all the grunts at bay. The ground looked blazing hot with fire and molten rock, likely a result of the herald's onslaught.

But the general clearly held the advantage, and with dizzying swordplay was whittling down Cindermane's defenses. The large scar on his chest had started to open up, and new wounds over his arms accompanied it. Zac realized the lethality of the general, as even Zac's own mighty swings had only left a white mark on the Herald's sturdy hands. The hulking monkey captains were covered in wounds from head to toe as well, one of them even had a whole arm missing.

Meanwhile, the general still looked pristine apart from some soot marks, as though the carnage and fire in the surroundings was isolated from himself. The monkey captains were doing what they could to ease the pressure, but it seemed that they wouldn't be able to hang on for long unless something changed. Since Zac didn't want the general to kill the Herald, at least not yet, he was determined to be the change that would turn the tides.

Chapter 61: Pitched Battle

The ground was barely visible beneath the forces as blood and broken bodies covered most of it by now. Even fires were starting to erupt at various spots around the battlefield, likely from the attacks of Pyromancers and the Herald. With the dried out tree husks on the ground the whole valley would likely be an inferno of flames in a short while.

Zac could see that more combatants from both camps were steadily streaming in from the surroundings, and immediately joined in on the mayhem when they arrived. He checked his quest and saw that the timer showed **[00:10:03]**.

Zac once more glanced at the mouthwatering fruits glistening on the tree, and after a few steadying breaths, he charged into the frenzy. He steadily moved forward wielding an axe in one hand and a dagger in the other. He refrained from using **[Chop]** in this cramped melee, afraid to draw attention to himself.

He mainly used the axe to deflect or hook incoming swings, and finishing off the enemy with a quick stab in their throat or heart before moving forward. It was a quick and dirty method that didn't announce his monstrous Strength.

He steadily moved forward, forced to kill a combatant almost with every step. His disguise was still assisting him immensely, as it often took the demons a second to register that they weren't facing an ally. And a second was all that Zac needed to quickly and discreetly kill them.

Soon he was just 30 meters from the edge of the shield, and the area actually was getting less cramped compared to more. Every single monkey at the core was a captain, and they were furiously fighting with various well equipped demons. The monkeys had to fight a few captains per demon, not being able to match their might.

Each battle had its own space, as the swings and shockwaves could kill, or at least disrupt anyone coming too close. Getting hit and distracted in an intense situation like this could be a death sentence, so everyone kept their backs clear.

It was obvious that the demons steadily were gaining the upper hand, as almost all the bodies on the ground were monkeys. That couldn't go on, as Zac needed the fight to keep going to a point where they whittled each other down. Zac took out a dagger and discreetly threw it straight into the back of a well-gearred demon. The make of his armor was the same as Zac's old chest-piece, only covering the upper torso, so Zac's dagger slammed straight into his back without giving the demon time to react.

The hit destroyed the demon's spine and he helplessly fell on the ground. The monkey captains immediately pounced and punched his head into the ground into it was a bloody pulp, before moving on to assist its brethren. Satisfied with his work he continued on and acted as a hidden reaper.

He still was forced to kill monkeys and demons coming too close to him, but he kept moving around to avoid getting exposed. He also kept a healthy distance from the battle between the Herald and the general, which were still going at it with extreme prejudice. Every chance he got he threw a dagger at one of the stronger-looking demons. Sometimes he got a perfect hit and actually managed to kill them himself, and at other times he managed to at least maim and distract them, allowing the monkeys to finish the job.

Soon he ran out of knives and was forced to start throwing Nexus Crystals at the demons. They weren't as effective as the knives, but with Zac's strength anything he threw could be considered a weapon. Soon the war at the center of the battlefield was starting to sway into the favor of the monkeys.

After Zac helped kill so many of the demons there currently were far more monkey captains fighting every single demon, and the extra help was often enough to turn the tides.

But the demons quickly figured out something was wrong, and a mountain of a man angrily shouted something with a

piercing voice that carried over the sounds of battle, pointing a huge battle hammer straight at Zac. Many of the demons immediately spotted him, and it looked like his ruse was over.

However, he had already mostly accomplished his plan, and a great number of demons were killed due to his machinations. Also, the general and Herald's battle were reaching a white-hot intensity, and they couldn't be bothered with the scream. The Herald was quite ragged by now, and the old monkey captains had been replaced with new ones. Zac had a feeling that the only reason the monkey king was still alive was that the demons knew he was of importance to the incursion. Otherwise, Zac couldn't imagine that the General didn't have some ace to kill him after all this time.

He tried sneaking back into the chaos of the battle, but a few of the demon leaders wouldn't have it and they charged straight at him. A rock wall was erected in front of Zac, halting his escape. He tried shouldering through it but it was far sturdier compared to the walls he had encountered earlier. It held together against Zac's slam, although it sustained some cracks from the impact.

Suddenly he sank down into the ground, and couldn't move his feet. The ground had first liquefied then solidified in quick succession, making it seem like he was wearing cement shoes.

Zac didn't have time to rip himself free, as a huge mallet was falling down upon him. Through some means, the mallet was getting larger as it fell down toward his head and soon was large enough to completely smash him into a pulp.

Zac saw no choice but to infuse his hatchet with his Dao, and brought his axe in a two-handed swing, holding nothing back. Zac had severely overestimated the demon from his size and choice of weapon, and when his axe collided with the huge mallet with a terrifying clash it flew out of the hand of the demon like a rocket. It sailed over the crimson tree and landed somewhere on the other side of the battlefield.

Zac was startled, but not as startled as the demon. He wasted no time and slammed the axe haft down on the demon's shoulder, and then used the spike on the back of the axe head

as a hook to pull him to melee distance. As Zac dragged him close he ended the demon with a quick stab in his throat with his dagger, and then used the body to intercept a few ranged attacks.

The force from the weapons colliding had actually cracked the ground he was standing on, freeing him from the binding. He located the earth mage some distance away and grabbed a monkey captain by its arm.

The monkey captain furiously slammed his fist in Zac's chest, but Zac only took it with a grunt before he lifted the huge monkey up in the air and threw him like a boulder at the demon mage. The earth mage hastily erected another wall to intercept the monkey projectile, but the force behind the beast powered through it.

Zac was not far behind as he entered the wall through the breach and with a quick chop decapitated the demon, who didn't even manage to activate his stone skin skill in time.

Zac moved on toward the next demon who had tried to gang up on him, but a blinding light interrupted his plans. It was the large shield covering the tree that started to shine many times brighter compared to before.

Zac glanced around and when he saw no one was attacking him at the moment he brought up the quest skill again and saw the timer go down from 2 seconds to 0. With a bright flash, the shield immediately winked out of existence, exposing the tree to hundreds of greedy eyes.

No one moved for a split second, before all hell broke loose. Everyone started rushing toward the tree, holding nothing back. Even demons were hitting other demons in a struggle to reach the fruits.

Zac wasn't any different, and taking full advantage of his close proximity to the tree he pushed forward, driving massive amounts of cosmic energy into his legs. The ground cracked with every step he took, and it would be more accurate to say Zac pushed himself forward by slamming into the ground with his feet rather than running. He summoned [**Chop**] and killed

any monkey or demon getting too close, and soon he was almost underneath the tree's branches.

Zac was among the first but he was still behind two individuals, Cindermane and the dazzling general. Both had already moved toward the fruits, their arms reaching to grab them first. The monkey king had actually created large lava pillars that lifted it up toward the branches, and the general somehow stepped on black arcs of lightning as he moved upwards through the air.

Zac knew he was out of time and with a roar he created a huge edge with **[Chop]** and unleashed it at the two. It seemed that no one of the other camps dared intervene with the two in the forefront, perhaps afraid that they would inadvertently ruin their leader's plans. The edge shot up at the two, cutting a few of the crimson branches on the way.

The Herald screeched and looked horrified as he stared at the incoming edge, and actually missed his steps and fell down from the pillars it created. It appeared that Zac's last chop had left a shadow in the Herald's mind.

The general looked surprised to be ambushed at this moment but still managed to smoothly dodge it. He was far up in the air by now and only needed one more step on the black lightning steps to reach the fruits. Desperate, Zac infused his axe with the Dao of Heaviness and hurled it at the demon. The fruits were 5 meters up in the air, so Zac and the general were extremely close. With Zac's power, it almost looked as though the axe teleported as it slammed into the general.

The general had skillfully blocked the strike with his sword, but between Zac's huge strength and the Dao of Heaviness, the momentum of the throw wouldn't be denied. The demon was forcefully pushed away from the tree and the shockwave destroyed most of the branches of the tree.

Even the branch which held the two Fruits of Ascension were broken off, and they were falling straight toward Zac. Not wanting to waste such a God-given opportunity he jumped up in the air and snatched the fruits, and immediately stashed them into his pouch.

He couldn't believe how easily he had acquired the fruits, it looked like 67 Luck wasn't just for show. But the elation of getting the treasure quickly dissipated, as hundreds of murderous glares focused their suddenly undivided attention on him.

Chapter 62: Crescendo

Zac brought out his second axe from his pouch, nervously glancing around. His plan had been to kill the Herald as well, but being stared at by hundreds of hungry eyes quickly extinguished any desire to remain. For a second he thought about throwing out the cauldron but soon discarded the idea.

The run-off fumes from when the imp Herald was concocting the poison was enough to do a number on him, and he didn't dare imagine what the finished product would be like. Unfortunately, he had no method to control the dissemination of the poison, and best scenario he managed to kill some of the demons. But that would still leave him to fight his way out against the survivors, now with one less ace in the hole. Worst case scenario the poison took too long to activate, or he poisoned himself as well, dying in a bout of friendly fire. The poison would have to be for when he truly was out of options as the last Hail Mary.

Zac instead shot back away from the tree and started cutting his way out of the packed masses. But how could leaving with the treasure be so easy? Combatants from both camps furiously impeded his path, and he was immediately beset by attacks from all directions. New wounds joined a litany of old ones, and even with Zac's great constitution, he was starting to feel the pressure.

With a furious roar he overcharged [**Chop**] and created a wide circle of death with a radius of 6 meters with one fluid motion before he pressed forward. But he only managed to take one step as an intense hair-raising danger made him turn around.

A silver sword was aimed straight at his throat from behind, and Zac barely had time to block it with the enlarged edge of [**Chop**]. The power of the strike was enormous, and Zac was flung back from the force. He didn't even have time to land as

a molten spear struck him in his back, the searing pain eliciting a howl.

Neither the Herald nor the general were ready to give up the fruits, and for a second put their differences aside in order to hunt down Zac. The same couldn't be said of their underlings of course, as their furious melee quickly resumed after the fruits were snatched. The monkey horde was once again starting to lose control of the situation, but this time Zac was too occupied to do anything about it. The fires started to grow, and soon the whole valley would likely be consumed in a conflagration.

Zac was in no position to worry about his island burning down, as he currently had two formidable foes to contend with. With steely eyes he activated chop to the limit he could sustain it and charged at the duo. With a roar he swung the axe in an upwards curve, rending a huge gash in the ground as he did. The edge flew toward the general, who Zac estimated to be the most formidable foe.

With a slanted blade the demon managed to nullify most of the force and redirected the swing upward. He then immediately followed up with a quick forward stab aimed straight at Zac's heart. Zac barely managed to inch his chest to the side in order to avoid the blade, but it still tore a bloody gash along his chest. The sword had to be of superior make, as it actually ruined the inscribed dress he wore over his armor. If Zac had known this would happen he would have immediately used its charge instead of holding out for a more threatening situation.

The Herald wouldn't miss the opportunity either and spat some magma in Zac's direction. Most luckily missed, but some splattered on Zac's arm, and some nauseating sizzling could be heard. Zac could only press forward, hoping to end things quickly.

He used every trick he had learned from [**Axe Mastery**] trying to get past the sword of the general in order to do some damage. Each swing was imbued with all the strength he could exert, and wailing sounds of his axe filled the air. He even swapped between using his Dao and using [**Chop**] trying to disrupt the general's rhythm.

But it seemed that nothing worked against the demon. He smoothly deflected or dodged every strike that Zac put out, not even looking strained. His strength clearly wasn't at the same level as Zac's, but he made up for it with skill with the blade. Still, Zac judged his Strength to be far above 100 though, as every strike with the blades created terrifying collisions, the shockwaves keeping any fire out of their way. The ground beneath their feet kept cracking and getting destroyed as well.

Even more dangerously it looked like the demon also possessed a Dao Seed, or at least was beginning comprehend one. His strikes contained a sense of sharpness, and the shockwaves from his strikes actually cut small wounds on Zac's body when the air hit him.

The Herald had gone somewhat passive, content in letting the two duke it out for a bit as he recuperated. By now it likely knew that it was not the match of either one of the two combatants, and probably hoped they would kill each other. It threw the occasional spear or boulder at Zac, but rather focused on helping out his brethren against the demon army. A few demons had tried to join the general in his battle against Zac, but the Herald luckily killed them as they came. Unfortunately, the General was in no need of backup and was doing just fine on his own.

Zac was steadily accruing wounds from his fight with the demon, as he wasn't able to dodge his lightning-quick stabs. The best he could do was to avoid the sword hitting fatal spots by adjusting his body. Even worse, the general was one of the demons who used the black lightning attacks.

He used it far more freely compared to the first demon he had met. Every strike contained the biting sting of the arcs, and the lightning was actually slowly accumulating inside Zac's body. His arm suddenly jerked from the shock, completely exposing his chest. The demon was prepared, and with a lunge stabbed his sword straight in Zac's chest.

Lightning poured freely into his body, and Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood from the damage. He normally might have passed out from the pain but the lightning kept him awake. To

make matters worse lava spikes erupted from the ground between Zac's legs from a stomp of the Herald.

Surprisingly, the spikes shot toward the general, with the largest one aiming straight towards his exposed heart. It looked like the Herald had been waiting for an opportunity for a double knock-out. However, the general simply snorted and from nowhere all the spikes were cut into pieces. Hovering next to him was the sword that the demon had kept on his back throughout the battle.

It crackled with black lightning and seemed to have no problem with defying the laws of gravity. It hovered a few rounds around the general before it returned into the scabbard on his back on its own.

Abruptly the spike on the back of Zac's axe head slammed into the temple of the Herald, instantly killing it. Zac had taken advantage of the brief pause in the Herald after its attack and used it to mount a surprise attack. Zac had consistently focused all his energy on attacking the general thus far, and the Herald had grown lax. He hadn't actually planned on killing the Herald before the general, but he saw an opportunity and took it.

A huge surge of cosmic energy entered Zac's body, and he felt himself gain another level. There was no time to go over it though, as the general renewed his attacks on him. Zac once again found himself at an impasse, steadily losing ground. The chest wound was creating trouble for him to breathe and move freely as well, and the fight turned even more one-sided. He wanted to somehow create an opportunity to flee, as he had accomplished all he needed for now. But the General would barely let him breathe, let alone leave the scene.

A tremendous amount of roaring erupted in the surroundings as well. The monkeys lost their minds upon seeing their leader fall and started madly swing at everything around them. In their madness they completely gave up on defense and started dropping with even faster speed compared to before. One after another the monkeys died, becoming food for the expanding fires. The flames hadn't died out due to the death of the

Herald, instead truly becoming a force of their own as they spread over the dried leaves and husks.

Zac desperately tried to swing faster and with more power to turn the tides, but the general felt like an impenetrable wall of deft blades. As he kept fighting and swapping back and forth between [**Chop**] and the Dao, something suddenly clicked in his mind, and he once again summoned out the fractal blade.

This time it was different as it held a darker hue and emanated the aura of a lofty mountain. Even the fractals on the edge had grown denser, weaving another line of inscriptions along the edge. He finally managed to integrate his Dao with his skill, and the result wasn't as simple as one plus one equals two. Something new was born out of the fusion.

With renewed vigor Zac roared and furiously swung his axe at the general, aiming to end it all with one strike. It was a huge overhead swing aimed at the demon's head, and it carried the aura of a falling meteor.

The demon immediately sensed something was wrong but didn't have time to dodge. Looking serious for the first time, the demon roared as the sword on his back flashed into his free hand, and he held up both his swords in the air in order to block the strike.

Just another sword wasn't enough and the force slammed him down to his knees, the impact blowing any debris or bodies in the surroundings far away. The general tried to deflect the force, but the Chop of Heaviness was intractable as it pushed his blades down. A golden sheen flashed into existence around the demon, but it only held for a second before it cracked. The force in the strike contained everything Zac had learned and gained so far, and a flimsy armor inscription wouldn't stop it.

An amulet around the neck of the demon started shining with a blinding light, and a silver shield winked into existence next. It looked like the shield of a celestial, as it shone with brilliant fractals as it met the oncoming axe.

The collision didn't create a huge impact as Zac expected, but it rather seemed the shield somehow absorbed the momentum. After the strike the shield started to crack, and the general

groaned miserably as a crack could also be heard in his right arm. It looked like using that amulet didn't come without its price. But it was sufficient to stop Zac's monstrous swing.

The general didn't seem lax as before, and with an angry roar and his hair in disarray, he got to his feet. With a couple of furious slashes he created some distance from Zac, then pointed his sword towards the sky. His second blade crackled with an extreme amount of lightning and rapidly flew over ten meters up in the sky. The lightning kept expanding around it, creating a wide field of a lightning hell-scape.

The black arcs changed and actually turned into sword silhouettes covered in fractals. It reminded Zac of his own cosmic energy edge, but the danger he felt from the roughly hundred swords sinisterly hanging above was above anything he had felt thus far. The general didn't pull any punches anymore and wanted to completely eradicate him.

The lightning blades started falling towards Zac like a heavenly punishment. Any one of the blades could kill Zac if it hit, and there were over a hundred of them incoming. Knowing there was nowhere to hide from the strike, Zac could only fight it head-on. Cramming all his remaining cosmic energy into his fractal on his hand he created his largest edge thus far, sporting almost 8 meters long blade. It was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and with a roar of defiance, he launched it like a projectile up against the sword rain.

For a second it felt like a colossal mountain rose from the ground to intercept the heavenly thunder above, in a struggle between the Heavens and Earth. The collision was earthshattering and the chaotic energies temporarily blotted out the sky. Errant lightning blades fell all over the area, killing and maiming monkeys and demons alike.

Zac had managed to avert most of the attack with his colossal edge, but he was completely drained and his head hurt. Furthermore, his swing wasn't able to destroy all of the falling blades and he found himself impaled by multiple lightning swords. The general was panting as he walked over to Zac, one arm hanging limply to his side. He didn't look like he had

much fight left in him either, but it was enough to finish Zac off.

His second sword floated above his head, looking like a sinister scorpion's stinger. Its crackling lightning had dimmed considerably, but it still held a strong killing intent within. Their eyes met for a brief second and the sword shot down towards Zac's head. He tried to muster up a response, but he could only feebly lift his axe in an attempt to avert the incoming sword.

A spear of complete darkness suddenly emerged out of the general's chest and lifted him up in the air, forcing him to puke out a huge amount of blood as his body started spasming. The sinister looking weapon had truly impaled him, and likely completely obliterated his heart.

Behind the general a nondescript demon in average gear was standing, with a determined glint in his eyes as he looked upon his dying leader. The general arduously turned his head and when he saw his assailer his eyes shrunk to a needlepoint.

With his last breath, he let out a ragged roar that covered the whole battlefield, garnering the attention of all the combatants.

“OGRAS!!!”

Chapter 64: Taking Stock

With a scream Zac woke up from his head hitting a sharp rock formation. Groggily he tried to orient himself and found that he was bobbing about in the azure water in a cave. Afraid that the burning pain would start again, he quickly scrambled up on a piece of dry land.

His body felt surprisingly good after all it had gone through. The mental scar from remembering the excruciating pain was far worse compared to anything his body was actually experiencing right now. Just thinking about it caused his hands to shake and almost made him cry. That had been too harrowing, far worse than risking his life in any of the fights or the pain from getting wounded.

It took some time for him to regather his wits before he finally looked at his surroundings. He was currently in a decently large cave that was 10 by 20 meters. Almost half of it was submerged in the azure water, and the other half was crammed full of subterranean plants. It made sense, as Zac had never encountered any tunnel or cave with a density of cosmic energy that could compare to where he was.

It was as though the boost from the crystal mines below had fused with the boost of the lake and created something even more intense in the enclosed space of the cavern. Zac was unsure of how he had gotten here. After snatching the fruits he had fled the purple cloud of death and jumped into the mysterious pond. After that everything had turned fuzzy, apart from the very real memory of the pain.

He could only guess that some stream brought him down into the depths of the mountain while the Fruit of Ascension kept him alive. Even though he felt generally restored, he wasn't ready to set out, as there were many things he needed to check out after the cataclysmic final battle.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

36

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early

Strength

189

Dexterity

69

Endurance

130

Vitality

84

Intelligence

57

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

746317

The first thing he noticed was that his strength now was at a full 189 points, having increased by 14 points since he last checked. He had actually broken past his limit of 175 points, and could only attribute it to the fact that he luckily evolved to an E-ranked Human according to his status page, whatever that meant. He did a quick check all over his body and was relieved to find there were no wings or other new appendages that suddenly grew on him. He even checked between his legs and was half disappointed and half relieved that no evolutions had taken place there as well.

He didn't really feel any different, but he guessed that he would find out sooner or later what it meant to get a higher race class. He at least knew it helped him increase the limit of his attributes, which was one of his most important goals.

He had also gained two new titles, and he brought up the title menu to check it out.

[One Against Many: Fight against 500 warriors of the same tier and survive. Endurance +10]

[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world. All stats +5, All stats +5%]

The first one was not bad, a nifty reward for staying alive through those odds. He guessed that there were tiers to that

title, and he'd have gotten a better one if he actually defeated them rather than fleeing after throwing out a bunch of poison.

The second was even better, and the fifth one he possessed that gave a percent boost to all stats. The title didn't mention anything about solo kill like some of his other titles and he wondered if it was because he actually wasn't the one who killed the general.

He couldn't be bothered about that mysterious demon right now, even if he could speak human language and seemingly had helped him. Zac was sure the demon survived from how he had acted before disappearing. Since there only were so many places to go on the island Zac figured he'd find him sooner or later and get his answers then.

After having checked the title he closed the panel and did some mental calculations. He realized that he actually had missed out on another 3 points of Strength when he turned level 36. He still received the stats from the new title though, which confused him a bit, as he should have received the title before he evolved and broke his attribute cap.

He was also a bit surprised with the amount of Nexus Coins he amassed from the battle. He had gained roughly 150 000 from his whole day on the battlefield. While it was not a small amount by any means, it still didn't feel like it added up. That poison cloud should have killed hundreds, if not thousands, in the valley. Only the strongest combatants had been right by the tree, while the rest were spread out through the valley. Perhaps a few of the speedier ones had managed to escape, there couldn't be too many survivors with how rapidly the purple cloud had expanded.

Zac shuddered at the thought of having poisoned hundreds of beings to death but forcibly threw the thought into the back of his mind. Either all those kills didn't actually improve his level or give him coins, or they all were still alive.

Zac was convinced that they died from the poison. Just one breath of the poison cloud made him who had over a hundred endurance keel over, and he couldn't imagine normal demons or monkeys survive that. Furthermore, he had seen the

horrified looks on their faces when they saw the billowing purple clouds.

Zac briefly considered trying to swim through the pond to get back into the valley, but soon perished the thought. Even if he managed to actually swim through the water now, the poison might still be up there.

Suddenly a thought popped up into his mind, and he opened the quest screen.

Active Quests

Dynamic Quests

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (5/5) [COMPLETE]

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3) [43:12:32:11]

Class Quests

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester's Constitution Skill. (8/30)

Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill. (0/1000)

Zac sighed in relief, as the first incursion quest finally could be confirmed as complete. This had been his goal since Abby's warning, and it was thankfully done with after almost two horrible months. He already had been pretty sure he completed it the moment the general got impaled, but it was nice to finally see it set in stone.

He was also relieved to see that the quest said [COMPLETE] instead of just disappearing, as that meant the system hadn't spit out the reward somewhere while he was unconscious. As one of the rewards was related to his outpost he assumed he would have to get back to his camp to collect them.

The next quest had gotten a timer just like the limited quest. If he read it correctly he either had to finish it within 43 days or something would happen in 43 days.

Finally, he was surprised to see that the Loamwalker hadn't progressed at all since he got it. He wasn't exactly sure how far he ran yesterday, but he had been pushing it pretty hard with his inhuman stats for a few hours, so he felt that he should at least have ran a marathon on the mountain slopes. And walking on a mountain should constitute touching earth in any sense of the word.

After a brief hesitation he took off his shoes and threw them into his bag. He was reminded of the man in the vision, and could only try copying him. Perhaps his soles had to actually physically touch the earth for it to count, and if true he wondered what that meant when using the skill in the future. Would he become a barefoot warrior in the future just like the axe-man? At least his endurance was high enough that his soles wouldn't get cut or damaged even if walking around on glass shards.

Satisfied that he had gone through everything for now he brought out some food and water. He was generally happy with the progression, but also a bit pissed off that that harrowing experience in the water hadn't done anything except boost his Race a level.

From how precious the Fruit of Ascension appeared he thought that the fruit alone would be enough to ascend a stage, but with the harrowing molding his body had gone through he figured he should at least have been awarded some bonus attributes or a title. He wondered if the System had a complaint department he could contact, as its rewards weren't balanced.

Internally grumbling he tore into a piece of dried meat and he was surprised to see that his appetite was simply monstrous, and he ate a couple of kilos of meat before he felt satiated. Looking at his slightly protruding belly he wondered if evolving your race meant that you got a separate dimension tucked into your stomach.

Finally all set he stood up and ventured out. He had after some deliberation chosen to head into the tunnels instead, as he simply refused to enter that water again. He refilled his canteen though, just for emergencies.

The cave he was in was connected to the larger tunnel system he found out after some traveling. Only a small hole was open though, and Zac was forced to cut his way out with a sword. As he worked the sword he felt that his body was more coordinated than ever, as every muscle was working in perfect harmony. He wasn't really stronger or more agile, but rather had greater control of his body. Normally he would think that it was due to increased Dexterity, but the change was too large that just a few extra points from his new title couldn't cover it. He guessed instead that it was another advantage of being an evolved human.

After some hesitation he carved out a couple of boulders from a nearby wall and covered up the path again. That secret cave would be an excellent cultivation cave in the future, and he didn't want a salamander or wandering demon to ruin it.

Perhaps it wouldn't be useful for himself, but maybe for his sister or Hannah if he managed to bring them back to the island. Now that the demon threat was taken care of he needed to actually start preparing for the future.

At least he hoped that the demon threat was over, but he couldn't be sure. He never got any indication of what would happen when he finally killed the Heralds and the general. There still should be quite a few demons still around even after the huge battle. There had been at least a thousand demons in the mountains, but even if all of them died, there should be hundreds in the tunnels. Add to that the demon town and the roving parties and most demons should still be around.

Putting the matter aside, Zac pushed forward in the tunnels. Soon he found a familiar cave, whose tunnels led to the demon mining operation. After a brief hesitation he headed over there to check things out. As he walked he heard absolutely no sound of activity, which could only be considered a good sign.

The mining tunnels were completely deserted as he hoped, with not a single demon in sight. As he continued on he soon exited the cave entrance he had seen the demons use daily. Still, he didn't see a single demon anywhere. A few sacks and tools were thrown here and there, hinting at a hasty escape.

More importantly, for the first time since he woke up on this hellish island there was no huge red glaring pillar shooting into the sky. The incursion was simply gone.

But that didn't mean his work was over.

Chapter 65: First Contact

With a spring in his steps he hadn't felt for a long time Zac moved along the road toward the location of the now-gone incursion. He was planning on heading back to his campsite to complete his quest, but first, he wanted to check things out and make sure that the demons were truly gone.

He moved along the path leading to the fortified city, meeting no resistance on the way. Soon he reached the forest edge close to the town, and any further and he would be exposed due to all vegetation having been cut down to supply the construction.

He hunkered down and stared at the town for a good while trying to see any signs of demons. The good news was that the previously well-manned walls were completely deserted. Not a single guard was patrolling along the wall walk, and the towers were empty. The bad news was that he saw a few lines of smokes rising from the inner parts of the town.

After some hesitation he decided to take a closer look. The lines of smoke might just be left behind fires, and if there actually were demons here they must be disorganized for some reason. He briskly jogged over to the fortifications, and with a few tugs pulled himself up along the wall. He didn't encounter any arrays impeding his path either, making him wonder if demons couldn't use them for some reason. He hadn't seen them use a single one so far after all, unless inscriptions on tools could be called arrays.

He looked out over the demon town and found it more or less deserted. He was disappointed to see that there actually were a few demons milling about, but they looked listless and without direction.

He also noticed that the town had grown considerably since he had seen it the first time a few weeks ago. Most of the

military-looking rectangular buildings were gone, replaced with structures of various size and design. It almost looked like a medieval town by now rather than a military base. But the craftsmanship and cleanliness were far greater compared to some old city, and no garbage or excrement lined the sidewalks. Perhaps the large barracks were only temporary housing they used while they constructed the real city.

Zac soon spotted a solitary demon who walked towards a house right next to the wall. There were no other demons close to him and the small building would provide perfect cover, making him a perfect target.

Zac crept along the wall, and with one swift motion jumped down right in front of him. Quick as lightning he grabbed the startled demon by his tunic and dragged him behind the house. Without any pause, Zac slammed him against the building's wall with one hand and brought out his axe with the other.

“Scream and you die. Do you understand what I'm saying?” Zac asked with a steely glint as he held the axe at his throat, ready to decapitate the demon at a moment's notice.

The demon looked truly horrified after he saw Zac's face. Tears started falling like rain, and even a snot bubble was starting to grow. He incoherently started whispering something in the demonic language, regularly interrupting himself with large sobs.

Zac was stumped, not expecting such an exaggerated response. Perhaps his deeds on the mountain had spread, and the demon was afraid he'd poison the town to death. But then again, this demon differed from the ones he had encountered so far. He didn't look at all like a hardened warrior. Rather, he looked like a civilian. He didn't wear any weapon, and while his arms looked sturdy he also had a pretty large gut. Furthermore, he was middle-aged, whereas most of the warriors he had encountered seemed quite young.

Just as he was considering whether he should kill the demon and find a new interrogation target a shaky voice behind him interrupted his thoughts.

“Um.. P-Please let my dad go. He can’t understand your words.”

Zac instantly whirled around, holding the stocky demon as a barrier against this new voice. He found himself face to face with a small bespectacled demoness. She was the shortest one he had seen, just about reaching up to his chest, and had her silver hair in a neat bun. She didn’t carry any weapons and shook with fright as she was facing Zac’s murderous glare.

“Move over to behind the house. If you scream you both die,” Zac instructed the scared demon with a low but harsh voice. Seeing her pallid face and remembering his words he was starting to feel like a villain, even though the demons were his enemies. “I just want some answers, help me out and I’ll leave,” he added in a softer tone.

The demon didn’t seem very comforted by his words and still shook like a leaf. Still, she complied with his words, much to the dismay of the middle-aged demon. He started wheezing something out, and soon even tried to scream. He likely wanted his daughter to run away from them and get to safety. While Zac could appreciate the sentiment, he couldn’t let her go as he finally had someone he could question. With a quick thud, he hit the pudgy demon in the back of his head, instantly knocking him out and shutting him up.

“Sorry about that, but he is alive. I can’t have him scream and warn the whole town,” Zac sighed as he placed the unconscious demon next to the demoness.

“Why is it that I can speak with some of you, but most only speak gibberish?” Zac questioned, eager to finally get some answers.

“Gibberish..?” The small demon seemed a bit offended but quickly readjusted to a timid face, “You.. You need a skill to speak with other races. But it is expensive so most people don’t have it. I am a merchant so the clan provided it for me.” She seemed somewhat proud of the fact, as it was quite a glorious job to have.

“Your class is Merchant?” Zac asked with a renewed relief he didn’t gamble for the Epic class when choosing a class.

“No, I’m a Scribe, a common class. But I am following, I mean I was following, the upgrade path towards a real merchant class in the future,” the demon answered, looking somewhat deflated.

What she said about upgrade path was something he was interested in finding out more about, but he had more pressing matters.

“Why are you people still on my island? Your invasion should have failed when the incursion ended. Why haven’t you gone back to wherever you came from?” This was the most crucial question on Zac’s mind right now.

“Going back... Some of us can’t,” she answered with a melancholic smile. “We embarrassed the clan and cost it a lot of money when the invasion failed. If we went back bad things would happen. Some chose to stay on this planet instead.”

Zac felt a headache coming on when he realized he suddenly had a bunch of demon refugees on the island.

“How many of you are still left?”

“I don’t know...” she answered with a low voice, and hastily explained when she saw Zac’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I truly don’t know, I usually just file documents. Ogras should know. He is, was, the leader of the expedition. But most of the warriors left, their status is better in the clan.”

“That’s impossible, I saw your leader die right in front of me,” Zac growled, taking a step toward the demoness.

The Scribe seemed to have been reminded that the person was a dangerous enemy warrior and once again started shaking.

“I swear he is alive. I saw Ogras exit his palace before. He didn’t go to the mountains I think?” she managed to stutter out through clattering teeth.

It didn’t seem like she was lying, which confused Zac greatly. His mission was completed, and he had seen the general die from the huge black spear. Besides, she called the leader Ogras, which was the last thing the leader roared before he perished.

“Does this Ogras have white hair, a silver armor, and fights with two swords. Oh, and he can make the sword fly?” he tentatively asked, a guess forming in his mind.

“No... That is Rydel. He was second in command maybe? His grandfather is the clan chief after all,” she answered, happy that Zac’s murderous air receded somewhat.

The answer only made Zac more confused. If the one who died wasn’t the general why had he led the forces? If this Ogras was the real general instead, why had his quest been completed if he was still alive and kicking? Because he briefly killed himself? Why would he do that? He was certain that the mysterious Demon was Ogras, but he didn’t understand why he would kill his own ally and even suggest poisoning the whole army. This girl said Ogras didn’t participate in the battle, so it sounded like he had snuck out of the town behind his own army without their knowledge.

“Where is Ogras now?” he asked. It seemed this demoness held a low rank in the clan, and her knowledge was limited. It would be better to simply ask the source. Besides he had a bone to pick with this Ogras, as he almost got him killed with his poison idea. Of course, Ogras saved his life by killing this Rydel character, but he still had a sour feeling when thinking about the torment he was forced to endure when he jumped into the pond.

“Dad said he heard Ogras question many demons, then left the town toward the south,” she answered, seemingly excited at the prospect of sending Zac on his way to become someone else’s problem.

Zac mulled things over for a few seconds, before determining his next action. There were many more things he wanted to know, but he had a sneaking suspicion Ogras was heading toward his outpost. It was the only thing of interest to the south, the rest was just forest. And nothing good could come from the insidious demon fiddling around with his stuff, so he decided to briskly head back home.

As Zac had come to his decision he asked one final question. “Oh by the way, what is your name?”

“I’m Zakarith, my dad calls me Zak,” she quickly introduced herself.

Zac’s mouth tugged a bit trying to avoid smiling. “Well Zakarith, welcome to Earth,” he said and immediately slammed the butt of his axe in between her horns, instantly knocking her out. He felt a bit bad about it as she reminded him a bit of his little sister, but he couldn’t have her running around right now. He felt no need to kill both of them as it seemed the demon threat was largely gone. And even if they came to blows again he didn’t feel a little Scribe and her pudgy father would be able to turn the tides.

He quickly tied up both the unconscious demons and left them hidden between the house and the outer wall, before quickly leaving the town the same way he had gotten in. Same as with Ogras, his course was south. He was going home.

Chapter 66: My Dinner With Ogras

Zac quickly jogged due south, and soon arrived at the part of the valley where the incursion was located. The crystal was still there, but it now looked inert. It had lost its colors, and no longer radiated any power.

The area seemed deserted as well, so Zac snuck up to the small house, finding it empty as well. Knowing no demons were around he walked up to the huge crystal. Fractals completely covered the whole thing, barely leaving an inch free. It reminded him of an evolved version of his Nexus Node in camp, and after a brief hesitation he touched it. No menu or prompt arrived, and he could only feel the cold and smooth surface of the crystal.

Zac thought about infusing the crystal with some Cosmic Energy, but soon decided against it. He had too little information about the thing, and was afraid that he'd accidentally teleport himself somewhere. He was in no mood to suddenly arrive at a demon planet after having been stuck on a demon island for so long.

Zac could only leave it be for now and add it to the list of things he would squeeze out of Ogras if he found him. After a final check he left southbound. As he walked he noticed that the foliage in the surroundings unfortunately hadn't turned back into normal trees and bushes. They were still sickly-looking from the influence of the red pillar. He could only hope that the area would gradually heal now that the incursion was turned off.

He kept going through the valley, and after some trial and error he found an ascent leading up to the forest. Soon he was walking familiar paths south he had walked many times before. There still were quite a few barghest in the forests, but

it seemed that the war thinned them out somewhat at least. Or perhaps they left together with the surviving demon army.

More surprisingly, he found out that the reward had lessened substantially when he killed one. The remaining ones still were hyper-aggressive, and he was forced to kill one that came rushing toward him with a kick. After killing it he actually gained less than 30 Nexus Coins. It was disappointing, as he had actually considered rounding them all up somehow and then kill hundreds of them with his **[Chop]** skill. That would have netted him quite a decent income, while simultaneously cleaning up for his town.

He saw two possible reasons for the decrease. Either the reward from killing demons lessened now that the incursion was over, or the reward lessened as his level increased. He had gained quite a few levels in the mountains and tunnels, and now the System maybe didn't want to award as many resources for killing weaklings.

Zac actually hoped it was the second. Then he could at least save a lucrative grinding area for other people. If the barghest could actually breed on the island he could have a perpetual farming ground going. But if it was the first he simply had a nuisance on his hands.

After half a day of jogging, he finally was in close proximity of his camp. He started his usual sweep of the area and actually found some worrying signs. There were footprints in the ground around where he battled the demon party, and even though he was no expert tracker it looked like multiple sources.

At the same time the illusion array was untouched, and he quickly equipped his amulet as well. He had actually removed it earlier in order to avoid getting any experience, and forgot to put it back on. The familiar warmth from the amulet told him that the mother-daughter array was still working as well.

With a heavy heart he retrieved his axe and got ready for battle, and he also took out the shield he had found in the caverns. He held the shield in front of his head and madly dashed through the illusion barrier. Zac even charged up his

[Chop] ready to swing at everything in the camp even if he had to cut his beloved camper in two.

“You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive.” A familiar voice could be heard from the vicinity, followed by a helpless sigh.

Even though it wasn't completely unexpected the voice gave Zac pause. He quickly glanced around the camp, his axe still at the ready. What entered his vision made Zac visibly groan and lower his shield.

It was the mysterious demon comfortably sitting in an opulent chair, lazily eating fruits that were placed on a golden tray in front of him. The tray was placed on a large table even more intricately designed than Zac's own ostentatious table he had stolen. Did all demon noblemen walk around with obnoxiously over-the-top furniture just to be able to posture at any given time?

Thinking about the annoying smile of the demon right before escaping the poison inferno Zac couldn't stop himself and cleaved the table in two with a swing. The brows of the demon rose a bit in alarm, but he quickly regained composure when he saw Zac didn't continue.

Zac removed a chair from his own pouch and sat down as well with a grunt and retrieved some dried meat.

“Ogras?” he questioned, still finding it a bit hard to find the words after months of silence.

The demon looked slightly surprised, then it seemed he realized something.

“The very same. I guess you visited Camp Rezak on your way back. Ehm... Are my subordinates still alive?” Ogras asked, looking a bit troubled, but not to the point he was ready to come to blows.

“They are alive, I just caught a few to ask some questions. Why are you here, and how did you find the outpost?” Zac asked, still with a guarded expression against this unpredictable demon.

“You’re using an F-grade illusion array for protection, any decent skill can detect it. We actually found your home a few days ago after investigating your... activities.” Ogras answered with a dismissive wave of his hand.

”I can’t believe you live in a cramped and bloodied tin can. Don’t the humans of this planet know how to build decent structures? In any case, we found you in the tunnels before we could use the knowledge of this place to our advantage.” Ogras gave Zac a pitying glance as he looked around at the small campsite, with the dented camper and ruined car.

Irritation once again started to build up in Zac, and he was unsure whether he should defend his camp or Earth’s architectural ingenuity. But he once again calmed down quickly. This demon seemed like the crafty type, and Zac didn’t want to give out any undue information by mistake because he was goaded into anger.

“You still haven’t explained why you’re here. And why you and the others are still on my island.” Zac felt it was important to make it clear that they were refugees while he was the landowner. This was his planet and he had completed the quest to gain control of the area.

Ogras seemed to understand the implication of his words but only smiled in response. “Well, I came here to meet with you of course. I figured you would return here after the battle. The incursion is over, and so is our need to be enemies. I think it’s time to discuss an Alliance between our group and yours.”

Zac was about to say it was only him, but quickly stopped himself. If the demons thought he was just the spearhead of a larger group his position was only strengthened.

“You should know that this world was only integrated into the multi-verse less than two months ago. There are things we do not know. Explain to me why we shouldn’t keep hunting your kind.” Zac said, happy to keep the fib going.

“When you finished your quest the incursion ended. We were given 12 hours to return through the Nexus Hub before it closed down. Some of us couldn’t get there in time, and others simply chose to stay behind for various reasons. After The

Ruthless Heavens has closed the hub it won't open again for a long time, and never to our home planet." Ogras answered, seemingly prepared for the question.

"In other words, we made the choice to cut ties with our clan and our home, and it is unlikely we will ever be able to return. Even if we wanted to, it would be almost impossible due to the cost of traveling such a distance. We also won't get any back-up in the future. Therefore it makes no sense to keep a war going against you natives."

"That's a pretty flippant attitude after so many of your kind has died. Why did you even come to our planet? And what's the ruthless heavens?" Zac asked after mulling over Ogras' answer. He couldn't find any lies in what the demon told him from what he had observed, and what the demoness had said. But he wasn't so naïve to believe everything he said either. Someone who could kill his ally with a stab in the back could only be a duplicitous character.

"The Ruthless Heavens, The Endless Heavens, The Cosmic Warden, The System. It has many names but you should know what I'm talking about." Ogras explained with an expansive gesture. "And why should I care if some clansmen died? Life and death mean nothing in the multi-verse. Long before I came here all my siblings had already been killed in battle and assassinations by my very own clan members." He continued, as though such a tragic life had nothing to do with him. He then leaned forward and stared at Zac with a glint.

"As for why we came here? Resources of course. The Ruthless Heavens thrives on conflict, and war is expensive. Baby worlds like yours are usually a treasure trove of wealth that can help a clan or country ascend. There are likely multiple forces across your planet who are gobbling everything up like locusts at this very moment. Clan Azh'Rezak was just unlucky being stuck on this island with a humanoid monster."

Zac chose to ignore the last sentence and focused on the other information. There were many points of interest in the demon's answer, but one more than the others. But before he could ask he realized something.

“Wait, why haven’t the system punished you? I was told the system might kill me if I failed the missions. Why are you demons fine after failing yours?” Abby had clearly warned him to properly complete the quest, at the risk of death and mutilation. Meanwhile, Ogras was just fine and dandy, even though he should hold the main responsibility for the demon’s invasion.

“Urh... What?” Ogras seemed truly confused, so after a brief hesitation Zac told him about parts of his conversation with Abby the Eye.

Ogras looked stunned at Zac for a good while before he started laughing self-depreciatingly.

“All our plans ruined because of a lying Stargazer... The Ruthless Heavens truly have a wicked sense of humor.” Ogras said and sighed.

“Lying? What do you mean?” Zac asked skeptically. So far everything Abby said had been true and he instinctively trusted her far more compared to this demon.

“The Ruthless Heavens doesn’t punish. At worst it loses interest in you. What did you think, a lightning bolt would zap you if you left the island on a raft? Don’t be silly. The only result would be that you no longer qualified to become a lord, and missed out on the rewards from the quests.” Ogras said with a snicker after having regained his composure.

“Just think about the quest for those Fruits you picked up. Would the system just kill off everyone who didn’t rush to the mountain? That’s crazy.” He continued. “By the way, are you interested in selling those fruits to me?”

Zac ignored the business proposal and pondered on what the demon said. He didn’t know what to believe. It did make sense what Ogras said, but Zac didn’t understand why Abby would lie to him like that.

“What would she have to gain for telling me to fight you guys? Are Stargazers and demons enemies?” He inquired.

“Bah, Stargazers don’t have any enemies. They pretty much all of them work for The Ruthless Heavens, who would dare

mess with them? I guess she wanted a promotion. If you become a Lord you get a permanent administrator to help you out. Then she could get appointed to a baby world to one of its leaders and get access to both many good resources and opportunities for advancement.”

Zac was stumped from the answer, but refused to believe that the floating eye would send him against a whole demon army just to get a chance to get a promotion if he actually survived.

“You need to toughen up human. The multi-verse is a cold place where the honest and brave get butchered while the calculating and shrewd survive. Everything else is irrelevant in the face of benefits.” The demon said, with stone-cold eyes that spoke of a deep-rooted cynicism toward the world.

Chapter 66.5: My dinner with Zac

Ogras swatted some flies out of his face as he walked through the alien landscape. His decisions were born out of desperation, but it was just now the fact that he was stranded on this foreign planet truly hit home.

The two suns in the sky were even more glaring now that the soothing canopy of the incursion disappeared, and the bombardment of colors was unsettling. Everywhere he could only see forests, and no civilization was in sight. He missed the bars, the pruned hunting grounds, and the whores. Gods, the *whores!* Why hadn't he insisted on bringing along a brothel instead of a few of the farmers?

Even though he had cultivated a horrible reputation in his Clan he wasn't the type of man who would force himself upon an unwilling woman. Unfortunately, the very same reputation was what now kept the town's women at arm's length. Well, there was Namys who was more than willing, but she had the face of a netherbeast. He spat in annoyance and could only continue.

Still, though he lost many things, he had gained perhaps something even greater. Freedom. He brought up his heavenly screen and took a look.

Name

Ogras Azh'Rezak

Level

53 (73)

Class

Shadowblade (F)

Race

Demon (F)

Alignment

-

Titles

Demon Slayer I, Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Tower of Eternity – 3rd floor, Astral Pond – 20m, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Betrayer

Dao

Seed of Shadows - Early

Strength

112

Dexterity

134

Endurance

63

Vitality

63

Intelligence

38

Wisdom

35

Luck

23

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

300

Gone was the Alignment to his old Clan, leaving the space a liberating blank. Gone was also the constant need for machinations and pretension. Gone was constantly looking over his shoulder, afraid that he would be the 8th and last sibling to be killed by jealous clan members.

The surviving demons would soon understand the true Ogras. There already were some murmurs of discontent from the search parties that were stuck in the tunnels when the countdown began.

It was on his orders that they entered the mines, and now they couldn't leave this baby world. Many of the warriors didn't wish to stay here, as their status would have kept them somewhat safe even in the case of a return in defeat.

But soon they would understand that even without his ancestor his title as leader was unshakeable.

Ogras inwardly groaned at the fact that The Ruthless Heavens actually confiscated the Nexus Coins of everyone when they stayed behind. He never read about this and swore at the information missive he bought at the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes. It had been exorbitantly expensive and should have covered everything one needed to know about venturing into a baby world.

He was approaching the level and attribute limits as well. He had been furiously leveling up from his unimpressive level since he arrived at the island. With the limitations in place he could quickly gain levels without anyone finding out. He had done so in secrecy by absorbing the E-Grade Nexus Crystals his grandfather helped him bring along, allowing him to shoot up a few levels per day. He had kept himself at a low level on purpose earlier in order to not let anyone realize his high stat growth.

He was one of the few in the clan with a Rare class. Combined with his achievements in the Tower of Eternity his progress would outpace almost everyone in the Clan. Normally it would

have been a cause for celebration, but for his branch it was a death sentence. But now he could finally grow into the limit and focus on his constitution. He grimaced at the fact that the human who snatched both the fruits now was gone.

Ogras could only hope that he could find the body and the Cosmic Bag as soon as the poison cleared out in the mountains. If the fruits were lost he would have to slowly cultivate his body until it evolved, and that would likely take years and years. And that would be the smallest of the losses from not getting the fruit.

He cursed himself for not simply snatching the bags when he had the chance up on the mountain. He was already stressed out from killing Rydel and subsequently killing himself, and he might have made an error in judgment. Ogras felt something dangerous in the human's eyes and instead had opted to cajole the human into using the poison. Besides, if any straggler lived to tell the tale it would be clear that it wasn't Ogras who did the deed, but the wretched human.

Soon he arrived at the area where the scouts found the human's small camp. He activated [**Omniscient Eyes**] and after walking around for a few hours he finally found the bubble of the illusion array. After testing it out he found it was a simple one-layer array, with no defensive or offensive options.

He entered and his eyes fell upon the base of operations of Clan Azh'Rezak's nemesis. Even though things had turned out somewhat okay for him, Ogras couldn't help but become pissed off at the sight. This human lived like some kind of animal in a dirty metal hovel and still had managed to bring about the downfall of their invasion?

There were scraps of items and rags strewn about the campsite and the domicile the native lived in was actually a large can. The can was dented and in disrepair, and there were even splotches of blood on it. As he walked inside it Ogras immediately was too depressed to continue the search, and quickly left the cage. To live like this and not go crazy must have required certain mental fortitude as Ogras was getting stressed out just thinking about spending the night in there.

There was another metal contraption in the camp and after going over it for some time Ogras realized that it was not another odd domicile, but rather a transportation device. It seemed like it was an extremely rudimentary version of the contraptions the Technocrats use to traverse the multi-verse.

He knew that some baby-planets had gone an impressive depths into what the Technocrats called the Dao of Technology. But of course, The Ruthless Heavens didn't acknowledge that Dao, so most newly integrated worlds soon discarded it for the pursuit of the true Dao and to wield cosmic energy.

But this wasn't why he was here. He quickly walked up to the large crystal, which should be the Nexus Node he read about. The City Lords in his own homeworld each had one as well, but they were fiercely guarded treasures, so he had never seen one before.

The missive stated that when the mission failed he and the other demons would be barred from attaining System-sanctioned properties and towns for roughly a decade, but he needed to make sure. If he could gain ownership of the crystal he would gain the tools to not only survive, but to thrive in this new world.

While they were on a desolate island he knew he wasn't safe. The Ruthless Heavens wouldn't allow the peace to continue forever and force some events into being. It thrived and existed for conflict after all.

He touched the Nexus Node, infusing it with his cosmic energy. But it was as though it hit a wall, and couldn't enter the crystal. He bit his finger and dropped some blood on it, but it wasn't absorbed, and only ran along its smooth surface. Ogras even brought up a small vial of blood and poured it on the crystal, but it didn't have any effect as well. The vial contained blood from the human that scouts had collected in the mines, and Ogras thought it might be the key to gain access to the Town Shop-system.

Ogras sighed in disappointment. It seemed that he couldn't integrate his town after all. They would have to do everything

themselves. At least there were quite a few demons who stayed behind that would be useful in building up a sphere of influence, sanctioned or not by The Ruthless Heavens.

A movement in the distance immediately grabbed Ogras' attention and he whirled around. His eyes widened as he saw the very same human that he met in the mountain valley. How the hell had he survived? Was he a walking behemoth that just couldn't be killed?

Ogras watched this grimy-looking man look at the footsteps of the search parties and lumber around trying to act sneaky and he couldn't stop himself from grimacing. This is the man who caused the downfall of Clan Azh'Rezak? He looked like a thoroughbred lunatic, without any hair at all on his face, and dressed in rags and a ripped up lady's gown.

Sometime since the mountains he appeared to have lost his ratty shoes as well, walking along with his impractically soft bare feet. Was he intentionally looking like an idiot in order to lower his enemies' guard? Genius. He also looked like he had been living as a battle slave for a decade, with scars covering all parts of his exposed skin.

But the scars were far less pronounced compared to when he saw the human up in the mountains. Before they were grisly jagged lines along his body and face, making him look mutilated, and now they were simply thin white lines.

The human had eaten a Fruit of Ascension. Ogras' teeth immediately started to itch when he saw that this human had gobbled up a supreme treasure, probably without knowing its value. His eyes soon moved to the pouches on the human's belt and his eyes lit up with greed. His Fruit of Ascension had delivered itself to him. At least he hoped the stupid brute hadn't eaten both of them.

He retrieved his spear from his pouch. It was made from a rare metal that could only be found thousands of meters down in the depths of the Black Sea and weighed over 200 kilograms which gave it a nice feeling compared to normal ungraded metals. Most importantly it could absorb shadows and help him unleash his attacks in a far more deadly manner.

This was a great opportunity for him to break through his limits and truly become someone with great prospects, eclipsing even those of Clan Azh'Rezak. But as he watched the human fumble around his eyes moved to the Nexus Node in hesitation. After a brief pause he placed his weapon back into his pouch and quickly wiped off any traces of blood from the large crystal.

He instead brought out a large table and a comfortable chair and sat down. Soon a tray of fruits was placed on top of the table. Ogras knew that these fruits from his home-world were of limited quantity now that the Nexus Hub was closed, but one needed to make strong first impressions.

Of course, he also charged up tens of shadow blades in the shadows below the table, just in case it came to blows.

Soon the human seemed to have come to a decision to enter the illusion array. He brought out one of the standard regiment axes he likely had taken from some scout, and then a mottled shield. For Ogras the whole thing looked like a play, as he could watch the whole thing unnoticed behind the array.

But he knew that this was no joke. This human seemed to be close to the limits in at least strength, and maybe endurance as well. He was a monstrously strong cockroach that was prohibitively difficult to kill. He mentally controlled his shadow blades to be ready to strike at moment's notice but adorned a lackadaisical face.

Soon the human charged in through the array, weapons at the ready.

"You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive," Ogras said with a theatrical sigh, as the almost unnoticeable blades inched closer. It was time to get creative.

Chapter 67: Diplomacy

Zac sighed and tabled the whole matter as there was no way for him to know who told the truth at the moment. The thought that he had almost died numerous times due to a lie was almost too depressing to handle. Of course, it was thanks to that lie that he pushed himself forward, and now confidently stood at the forefront of humanity.

“You said your incursion is only one of many? Do they all contain demons like you?” Zac quickly asked, eager to change the subject. Besides, this was something he had wondered about since day one. He was thinking of his family and was worried that another incursion could pop up next to them at any moment. It had worked out for him, but he was given a huge advantage from his many titles. For normal people to contend against a demon army, he knew how that story would end.

“As far as I know us demons only got one for this world, unless a higher tier clan got one as well. I’m not privy to their activities. The others are from various forces in the multi-verse. That’s why we need each other, Human. Because if you think that our little Clan was bad, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

Zac got a really bad feeling when he heard that the other incursions could be even worse compared to the demons on this island. It didn’t seem like the demon was lying, and his desire to get back home to his family only got stronger.

“Need each other how?” he asked, curious to hear what benefits the Demon could provide.

Ogras grinned, obviously pleased that Zac tentatively opened diplomatic relations.

“We both have things the other party needs. My side has manpower. Many of those who stayed behind are non-combat

classes who would be very helpful for someone who wish to build up a base. We have builders, farmers, blacksmiths, and traders for example. I can also provide information about many things that could help you in the future” Ogras rattled on, sounding like a salesman trying to secure some business.

“And what would you want from me in return?” Zac asked as he knew there was no such thing as a free lunch.

“Sanctuary. You may not know this, but The Ruthless Heavens limits the powers of foreign entities in a baby world.” Ogras explained, to which Zac only tersely nodded. “Well, after the incursion failed the limiter remains, and we will have some... problems... getting stronger. Even if we gain a few levels we might only actually be able to use the additional power of one level. But the nexus coins and energy we give out when killed is the full amount. We essentially become walking treasure troves the longer we reside on a baby planet.”

“Why do you need me for that? If you just stay holed up here won’t you be fine? We’re on an island after all.” Zac interjected as he didn’t see how he fit into the picture. If Zac was expandable for the demons’ survival, then he could be killed at any moment.

“Breaking the restrictions will take a very long time. Sooner or later some force is going to find the island, and what would happen when they found an island full of monsters and inhabitants that gave 10 times the reward upon killing them?” Ogras explained, but Zac looked far from convinced.

“More importantly, you have become a Lord so you can provide the sanctuary of a System-Sanctioned city. That’s not something we can do by ourselves now that the incursion failed. We failed our quest and are barred from seizing a system-town” The demon continued as he glanced at the Nexus Node.

“What’s the difference between a system-sanctioned city and a normal one? And besides, I’m not a Lord. I still need to complete a quest for that.” Zac corrected him, feeling that particular information was no problem to share. In case they would actually form an alliance, the demons would have to

help out defending his outpost against the denizens of other alignments after all.

Ogras looked slightly surprised by this information, but quickly recovered. It seemed that even these invaders didn't have all the answers after all, which was comforting.

“The biggest difference is that you can buy structures from The Ruthless Heavens in a sanctioned city. In a normal city you have to build everything yourself. A sanctioned city is much safer as long as the Lord has coins to spare. Only an idiot would invade a sanctioned city unless they held an overwhelming advantage. The Lord could simply spend a few generation's worths of Nexus Coins and blast the attackers to pieces with a new defensive structure”

Zac felt that it made a lot of sense. He hadn't thought about it before, but if he was really put against the wall he could instantly buy the strongest array he could afford and immediately improve his outpost by a few grades. It was essentially the time-tested strategy of throwing money at the problem until it went away. That kind of strategy was impossible unless you had access to the outpost shop.

“Can you explain what you need to accomplish to become a Lord, human? And you have me at a disadvantage as I still don't know your name.” Ogras continued.

“I'm Zac. It says I need to protect the outpost. I have a timer that counts down toward the 3-month mark after Earth entered the multi-verse as well.” Zac explained and Ogras visibly relaxed.

“I think I know what that means, but could you share the quest just to be sure?”

Zac's eyes immediately thinned at that, rife with suspicion. If he shared a quest wouldn't Ogras become a lord as well? Could he usurp him if that was the case?

“You misunderstand, hu.. Zac. Sharing the quest just means showing me the quest prompt from the Heavenly Screen. Just focus on that particular quest and make it visible with your will.” Ogras quickly explained when he saw Zac's distrustful

Face. “I’m sure you and your allies have shared various prompts with each other.” He added with a slight smile.

Zac had a distinct feeling the jig was up, and the demon knew he was alone. But he chose to keep the charade going in any case, not wanting to give out any confirmation to the demon’s suspicions.

Deciding it was no harm he decided to try it out. He singled out that particular quest, and it appeared alone on a blue window. He then focused on making that particular window visible. And soon it got “fixed” in the air instead of following his vision. He even managed to adjust what was shown so that the reward wasn’t visible to the demon.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. (0/3) [43:01:17:47]

Ogras’ eyes lit up and he looked through the quest. But soon his face went from interested to grimacing.

“It’s actually a monster horde quest...” Ogras said with a frown.

“What does that mean, and how can you tell?” Zac asked, eager to know more about how the quest system works.

“It says denizens and not forces or factions, which means it will send beasts rather than intelligent forces such as us demons or other factions in the multi-verse. It is one of the more annoying quests The Ruthless Heavens can throw at a Lord,” Ogras explained with a dour face. “A few thousand years ago a City on my home planet was overrun by millions of Blight Rats. When the quest ended the whole city was just a huge crater with everything from its structures to citizens eaten.”

Zac didn’t know if it was true, but if millions of anything attacked him it would be a quick game over, unless he learned how to make his [Chop]-edge a kilometer long. He could only hope the system adjusted the difficulty for his power level.

“When will it start?” Zac probed.

“After the timer. It seems like a normal monster horde quest, so The Ruthless Heavens will likely send one horde a month for three months. The faster you kill the monsters the more time you will have to prepare in between. Too slow and you will be facing multiple waves at the same time”

If the demon could be trusted it meant that he had one and a half month to strengthen himself and the town as much as possible. He grimaced at the thought of having to fight a horde of beasts constantly for a month, only for it to be topped up with another horde. Besides, he was sorely lacking Nexus coins to get anything worthwhile for his outpost.

“Where are the crystals your faction has mined? If we are going to work together then your kind needs to contribute to the town construction.” Zac immediately went into fundraising mode now that he knew he had to fend off hordes of beasts.

“I’m afraid they all got taken with them by our clansmen when they left through the Nexus Hub.” Ogras answered without hesitation with a completely straight face.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The two only silently stared at each other for a full minute until the demon finally coughed and added a sentence.

“Well. Maybe they didn’t find it all, and I can go back and see if they forgot to look in some places?”

“I’m *sure* you can find some,” Zac answered with an equally straight face. “If a foreman could steal hundreds of crystals in only one day, I’m sure there are quite a few crystals hidden through the town.”

“Ah yes, Azra. Can I ask why you are wearing her dress? And why the sudden interest in raw crystals? They’re not very efficient for leveling up.” Ogras asked, seemingly eager to change the subject of how much crystals he had stashed away.

“I’m planning on buying a store in the Shop, and sell them for Nexus Coins. That way I can buy defensive structures to survive the quest,” Zac answered, completely ignoring the part about wearing a dress.

“Usually I’d say that it’s a waste to use crystals to get some Nexus Coins, but it’s our best bet right now I suppose. But I’d suggest that we buy a Smelting Furnace as well to turn the raw crystals into proper graded ones first,” Ogras agreed.

“Our? We?” Zac said skeptically, still not having decided what to do with the demons.

“Yes, we. You should understand how useful it is to have us around after our short talk. Even for your own plan we’re integral. After all, are you planning on mining the whole mountain range for the crystals by yourself?” Ogras said with a smile.

“Maybe the two of us can work together since I’ve seen you kill that Rydel person. And you helped me kill half your army so you seem to hate your kind far more than I do. But would the others even work with me?” Zac was highly doubtful that he could get a successful partnership going after what he had done to the demon ranks over the past weeks.

“Most of those left behind have some grudges with our previous clan in any case so they aren’t too upset with the armies dying. There are a few who might be troublesome. But I am sure we can handle that.”

“Like you handled Rydel?” Zac asked, to which Ogras only smiled slightly.

“Well Regarding that, let’s keep that little detail between us, shall we? I won’t go into it, but it was either him or me. Everyone who witnessed that is dead by now so only the two of us knows. But if the citizens of Camp Azh’Rezak find out that I was up in the mountains helping your rampage, and not staying in my castle, they might lose trust in me. And our partnership would suffer in turn.”

Zac mulled it over for a long time. He’d rather not work with a snake like this man to be honest, as he would have to constantly watch his back. But he had made a few good points. Zac desperately needed assistance, both in the form of information and manpower, if he wanted to create a successful town and a sanctuary for his family. Since there were no one else to turn to he could only enter this dubious alliance.

Besides, just having someone to talk to, even if it was a sneaky demon, felt extremely good.

“Ok, I’ll keep quiet about it. So, what else can you tell me that’s useful for our short-term goals?” Zac asked, hoping for some simple tips that would save him some coins or increase his chances of beating the quest.

“Well now that you asked, are you aware that you have been drinking poison?”

Chapter 68: Progenitor's Advantage

“WHAT?!” Zac immediately jumped to his feet with his axe at the ready, afraid he had fallen into some trap of the demon's making. He charged up [Chop] to a meter long edge and advanced on Ogras.

“Calm down, calm down!” Ogras screamed and scrambled out of the chair. “The Cosmic Water you have been drinking!”

“You poisoned the pond as well? Why?” Zac glared angrily at the demon, ready to start a war.

“What poisoned? It was poison from the start. Only lunatics drink that stuff raw, it burns your pathways from inside. Haven't you noticed?” Ogras spat back and waved his hands.

The trees rustled in the wind and shadows were flickering all over the ground as Zac glared at the demon, but he eventually stopped his advance.

“Explain.” Zac growled through gritted teeth, extremely pissed off that the demon hadn't mentioned anything about this for the whole duration of their conversation.

“That kind of water can be born in areas where there is extremely dense cosmic energy. It was probably created when The Ruthless Heavens crammed a Nexus Vein into the mountain range.” Ogras grumpily explained. “It is pretty rare and somewhat expensive. Normally it's used as an ingredient in alchemy, but some forces give their death squads some of it to use just in case. It restores your cosmic energy in seconds, but it damages your body and can even kill you.”

“But I feel fine?” Zac said doubtfully.

“You just used some cosmic energy, try restoring it naturally without using any tools,” Ogras said as he sighed and sat down

in his chair again while he muttered something under his breath.

Too stressed out to care about any glib remark from the demon he unsummoned his enlarged blade and tried to sense the cosmic energy entering his body. He wasn't a cultivator, but even mortals could naturally restore their cosmic energy as the ambient energy slowly entered their bodies. It was normally a slow but steady stream that entered his body, but now it could barely be called a trickle.

Zac's face went white and he stared at the demon. He was still suspicious but somewhat believed the demon told the truth. It took him hours to restore his cosmic energy even with a crystal, but it almost happened instantly with the azure water. He hadn't reflected on it before, but how could there be such a good thing with no side-effect?

He simply didn't notice the effect since he used crystals or more water every time he needed to restore after chugging the Cosmic Water the first time. He had been strapped for time and didn't have time to wait for his energy to naturally restore itself. He had been angry that he wasn't given a power boost from bathing in the stuff earlier, but now he was just happy to still be alive.

"How do I fix this?" Zac asked.

"I've heard that there are pills for it, but I don't know where to get it. It's extremely rare, because individuals who drink it almost always die within a day you know?" Ogras said. "I think I've heard that spending time in energy-rich areas can help your body slowly heal various types of damage to your pathways. So that might work, but I'm not sure how much time it would take. And that is if you still can absorb some energy. If it's a full stop it's over for you I'm afraid."

"What happens if I keep using it? Can't I just refill my energy with crystals if I can't naturally absorb energy anymore?" Zac asked. He had enough for a lifetime or two in the pond, and while not being able to naturally restore was regrettable, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

“You need to heal up your ruined pathways. If you keep cramming energy into your body in your current state, even if it’s from crystals, you will keep getting worse. First it’s natural energy that stops, then it’s Nexus Crystals. Soon not even the Cosmic Water can restore your energy, and you truly become a cripple until you die of energy starvation. Then what good are you?”

Zac was horrified at that outcome, and quickly unequipped his amulet. The good news was that least his situation wasn’t completely irreversible, and it almost seemed a miracle that he was still alive from how Ogras described it. Death Squad members died after chugging that stuff just once, but he used it multiple times in the duration of a day. First time was after the ambush in the tunnels, but after that he used it multiple times during battle. It sounded crazy, but it almost felt like taking the bath actually saved him. His body was unceasingly refined after he ate the Fruit of Ascension, and perhaps it did something to increase his resistance or heal up irreversible damage.

But the predicament was extremely troublesome since there was a monster horde coming. If he wasn’t healed by the time the monsters arrived he would have to fight without using any cosmic energy. If he kept using **[Chop]** like with the monkeys he’d soon have to use crystals to restore himself. It would be a vicious circle that would end up with him in the same situation as now...

He swore to do everything that he could to get healed in time, and he needed to go to the mines anyways to prospect as many crystals as possible to get Nexus Coins. Zac asked a few more questions of how to improve his recuperation, but Ogras either didn’t know much more or was holding back on him. Zac could only sigh and move to the next subject he needed to know about.

“What are the attribute limits when you’re E-Grade Race?” He really wanted to know where the limits lay now that he was E-Graded. He didn’t want to lose any more points than he already had. With his Title boosts he already lost over 10 strength, which by no means was a small amount.

“Attribute cap? Why do you..” Ogras stopped himself and stared blankly at Zac for a few seconds. “You god damn progenitors just makes my teeth itch. And you even got a Fruit of Ascension to save your ass! Just disgusting. Well don’t worry, attribute caps are not something you will need to worry about for a long time now.”

“Progenitors? What are you talking about?” Zac wondered. Abby had called him a Defier, not a progenitor.

“You first-generation cultivators of a baby planet.” Ogras spat out, looking loath to even think about the subject. Zac didn’t feel the need to correct him that he wasn’t a cultivator at the moment, as the demon was starting to work himself up in a huff.

“Haven’t you realized? You have many advantages that your descendants won’t get. The Ruthless Heavens gives you a running start. There are many unique titles, the System crams the planet full of unique treasures, and you even get the Tutorial. It just makes us normal cultivators want to lay down and die of jealousy.”

Ogras looked about ready to explode greed and jealousy as he talked about it. Zac felt he had found his match in his quest for wealth, and he also vowed to never show the demon his Title page. The demon might just fall into apoplectic rage and start swinging that scary spear at him.

The demon soon found his bearing again and with a cough continued.

“Cough... In any case, those who manage to grasp a decent number of the limited advantages a new world provides will have a life-long advantage compared to most people in the multi-verse. These individuals are called their planet’s progenitors, as they usually end up creating influential clans or sects on their home planets. On the off-chance they don’t get killed that is.”

Zac thought that made a lot of sense. So far he had only compared himself with the cultivators and trying to keep his head start going. He hadn’t even thought about the following generations and how they would grow up in this environment.

But it was true, many of the titles he snatched would probably never appear again on this planet, closing that door for an advantage forever.

As time progressed most limited titles would be taken, leaving only maybe the most obscure and well-hidden ones for future generations. Otherwise they would have to settle for the mediocre non-limited ones, such as the Adventurer-title.

Ogras was a veritable treasure trove of answers after having fumbled about blindly for so long. For example, it was very interesting to know that normal cultivators in the multi-verse didn't get access to the tutorial, making it an even more rare opportunity. Zac kept coming up with various questions that had hounded him and threw them at the demon randomly as he thought of them. The smiling façade of Ogras soon cracked, and his answers got shorter and terser until he slammed his hand on the arm-rest of his chair.

“God damn it! Do I look like a tutorial fairy to you? I'll be back tomorrow,” he spat out and threw a crystal at Zac who deftly snapped it out of the air. “Read that instead of pestering me.”

“Read? How?” Zac looked at the crystal in his hand confused. It looked similar to a Nexus crystal but the color was green like a watered out emerald. It was also covered in intricate golden fractals.

“Just imbue some energy in it.” The demon sighed, obviously still annoyed, and walked toward the edge of the camp. “I'm done answering your inane questions human. Put your energy on survival instead.”

Ogras soon left the camp and afterward disappeared like he did up on the mountain top. There were many questions that were still unanswered, but he had gotten many of the more pressing issues cleared up. He looked at the crystal in his hand and after a long hesitation poured a minuscule amount of cosmic energy into it. The demon was very helpful so far, and it felt unlikely he would give him a bomb after all this. Still, he was ready to hurl the crystal far away if needed.

A screen similar to the ones the System provided suddenly popped up as the crystal lit up. The design of the window was a bit more intricate though, and covering it was an image of a grand pavilion with a Stargazer floating on top of it. It clearly was a man-made item, and the intricacy made Zac marvel. It was something on a whole other level compared to the cruder enchantments on the demon's gear pieces.

Soon the image changed, and it turned into what could best be described as a web-page. There were menus with various categories and images. Luckily Zac could understand the content just fine, and was amazed at what was written. The crystal contained a thorough guide of what happened when a world was integrated into the multi-verse.

Granted, it seemed to be written for the invading forces, but still most of the information was very helpful to Zac. But the more he read through the more troubled he became. It became very apparent that the natives were largely discounted, and that the web-page considered the other Incursion forces the only challenge for a successful invasion.

It did mention that there was a small chance of encountering extremely strong forces on an integrated planet, but most civilizations couldn't even be considered F-Graded. From how the text described it Zac knew that Earth's civilization wasn't considered anything much, and was not what it meant when it mentioned strong forces.

For normal civilizations like earth's humans, the missive simply stated that enslavement usually was most convenient. It would increase the resources that could be gained in a new planet as manpower usually was limited.

It also listed out the most common tactics of various forces in the multi-verse and Zac was shocked to find out that the demons truly were some of the more decent forces. They usually created a country and entered trade negotiations with surrounding forces, native or foreign, to amass wealth. They did enslave the native populations on their lands though.

But there were many forces that simply eradicated everything and ceaselessly strove to increase its influence until the whole

planet was theirs. There was even a force that entered incursions just in order to annihilate the natives and didn't care about the resources at all. It was a cult that called itself The Church of Everlasting Dao.

Unfortunately, the missive gave no information about the forces themselves so Zac couldn't find out more about them. But it was clear that almost none of the forces cared an iota about the natives, and only considered newly integrated worlds treasure-troves of wealth.

All in all the crystal was just what Zac needed, and he swore that he'd pester the demon until he handed out more goodies. The crystal said it was the first crystal of two, so hopefully he could annoy another out of the paws of the demon tomorrow.

Chapter 69: Rewards

Even if the demon was gone Zac stayed put for some time, going over the conversation he just had. Everything that came out of the mouth of the demon seemed to be the truth, but he didn't feel it was that easy. He guessed that many of the things he learned today weren't any hard-to-gain secrets, maybe with the exception of the things in the crystal he received.

How things like quests, races, and classes worked should be the most basic of things and not something that the System would keep hidden. Still, he would work under the creed 'Trust but Verify'. He believed that he would get access to a secondary source of information soon now that various buildings were unlocked in the Town-Shop. It would be easy to compare and contrast the words from the demon with what he learned in other places. From there he might actually be able to learn the demon's agenda, from finding out what he lied about through omission for example.

Satisfied he turned his attention to the Nexus Node. It was time to do what he initially returned to the camp for. He had some rewards to cash in on.

Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (5/5) [COMPLETE]

Not wanting to wait any longer he walked over to the crystal. Zac knew Ogras might actually be spying on him from the shadows, but he didn't have any means to locate him at the moment and could only let him be.

As he placed his hand on the crystal it started pulsating for a few seconds until the familiar voice of the System appeared.

[Incursion subjugation complete. Calculating personal contribution. Contribution 88%. Time taken: 47 days.

Support: 1. Completion Grade: A. Distributing rewards.]

Two boxes appeared on the ground and Zac picked up the smallest one first. Zac still felt it was unsettling that the System could just make things appear out of nowhere. There was no sound, no ripples of power, nothing. One second emptiness, the next the boxes just were there.

As he opened the lid of the smaller box a blinding light radiated out from its contents. They were the E-Grade Nexus Crystals from the reward. Zac could easily discern that anything he had seen so far was F-Graded at best, as these crystals were on a completely different level.

Each crystal contained a terrifying amount of energy inside, perhaps as much as a thousand crystals in his bags. But it was condensed into the small space of his hand. Zac felt that one single crystal might hold enough power for him to gain more than a level, and if these crystals could be absorbed as quickly as an F-Graded one he would instantly skyrocket in power.

But unfortunately he didn't dare try them at the moment, not while his predicament with his energy poisoning still remained. He could only reluctantly close the lid of the box and place it into his pouch with a sigh. Next he picked up the larger box, which should contain a set of equipment from the reward.

But before he had time to check it out a large rumbling interrupted him. The ground was ominously shaking and a deafening noise could be heard from somewhere close by. Zac instantly got a bad feeling from the sound. Had Ogras lied, and the demon horde was already upon him? He quickly threw the box into his pouch and summoned his axe instead.

He quickly looked around but saw no change. The noise clearly came from the south so he ran there after a brief hesitation. The only thing to the south was the ocean, and Zac was afraid an aquatic beast horde had started if it wasn't the demons making trouble. As he ran he opened up his Town Shop, ready to buy a defensive array at moment's notice.

He soon arrived at the edge of the island, and immediately spotted a familiar figure. Ogras was staring out over the cliff

with his mouth ajar.

“What did you do?” Zac angrily huffed at the demon as he ran up to him, axe at the ready.

“What did *I* do? Nothing. I heard the noise and thought you had done something crazy. And it seems that I was right,” Ogras snappishly retorted and gestured at the odd scene in front of them.

The cliffs were magically rearranging themselves in a baffling manner. It was as though an earth mage untold times more powerful than the demon mages was reconstructing the whole shoreline to his liking. The previously natural cliffs flattened out into orderly land.

Huge rectangular breakwaters grew out from land and created a sheltered basin hundreds of meters across and two piers emerged out of the sea, displacing all water into mighty waves. Furthermore, fractals appeared on the emerging rock-formations as all the various changes took place, glimmering in a mysterious golden hue. They expansively covered the whole shore-line, the piers, and the breakwaters. The script itself differed from both the system’s fractals and the simpler demonic inscriptions, and it actually reminded Zac of the squarish text in very old computer environments.

The changes didn’t only happen on land though, and the duo was forced to scramble to safety as the ground gave out and created a wet dock where they stood. Next, various buildings flashed into existence. The largest was an enormous warehouse-looking building that was at least 300 meters long and 100 meters wide, where one of the short sides ended close to the sea-line. It was probably the largest building Zac had ever seen, and he thought few structures on earth would be able to match it.

Soon the rumbling subsided, and Zac looked out over the majestic harbor that cropped up in under a minute. The design was cubic and looked extremely robust, and Zac felt that not even the worst storm would be able to do any damage to the structures. The cubic fractals covered all the structures as well,

and Zac started to believe that they were some sort of protective inscription.

[E-Grade Medium Scale Iliex Shipyard Awarded]

The System blared in his ears, but Zac had no time to react before he was interrupted.

“What the FUCK!” Ogras screamed as he agitatedly grabbed onto Zac’s arm. “Is it upgradeable, IS IT UPGRADEABLE?” Gone was the wise-ass know-it-all, replaced with a spluttering madman who seemed to have fires in his eyes as he glared at Zac.

“God damn, calm down,” Zac said and freed his arm from the crazed demon. “What are you talking about?”

“Inspect the building from your town menu and share the information” Ogras hastily said, almost dancing on the spot in excitement.

Zac didn’t know what Ogras talked about, but from his face it looked like he would explode from impatience at any moment so he tried various mental commands instead of asking anymore. As he used the command “Town” a new menu opened up. He knew he had tried that command a long time ago with no result, and guessed it was activated when he completed the incursion quest. His camp should still be classified as an outpost though, as it was only promoted to city upon completing the next quest.

The new menu was a list of all the structures he had bought or gotten from the system. Everything between the water gathering-array to this huge construction in front of him was there. However, his camper or the car was not listed, so only System-structures were included it seemed. He focused on the shipyard but stopped himself from sharing the prompt.

[E-Grade Medium Scale Iliex Shipyard. Upgradeable.]

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” Zac defensively said, feeling that this might be important information from the demon’s reaction.

“Just how high is your luck human? A Creator’s Shipyard. This changes everything,” Ogras said, ignoring Zac’s attitude.

“It says it’s an Iliex shipyard though? And why are you getting so excited?” Zac couldn’t understand his reaction. It was a nice-looking shipyard, but that was it. He was likely going to build or buy one like this sooner or later since he was on an island so it was nice being able to save in on that expenditure. But he’d much rather have a town protection array or some turrets as a reward since there were monster hordes incoming.

“Truly pearls before swine. The Iliex is a race of living golems who are among the greatest builders in the multi-verse. Most just call them Creators, since that’s pretty much all they do. A shipyard that’s manned by the Creators will create faster, stronger and more durable ships compared to normal ones. But more importantly, the shipyard is upgradeable.”

Zac was starting to get excited as well since it seemed the System had actually given him something pretty good. But still, Ogras’ reaction seemed exaggerated if that was it.

“So, what else?” he asked the excited demon.

“Well... Creators can also make some of the most sought after cosmic ships and sky fortresses. Owning a shipyard means you can sell those in the future. It can net the Lord hundreds of times more income compared to the crystal mines in the mountains.” He explained after a brief hesitation.

“Cosmic ships? Like spaceships?” Zac asked, now starting to get excited as well.

“Something like that. Ships that can traverse the endless distances of the multi-verse. They can travel to any points on a planet in seconds as well, very convenient. But they are not ‘spaceships’. They are Spiritual Ships that travel using the Dao of Space and cosmic energy, rather than relying on technology.”

Now Zac was on board the hype train as well. Travel anywhere on the planet in seconds? This was exactly what he needed in order to search for his friends and family.

“How much do you think it costs to buy one of those cosmic ships?” Zac asked eagerly.

“Slow down, an E-grade shipyard can’t create things like that. I think it must be D-grade, maybe even C-grade before you can create those kinds of things,” Ogras immediately doused the burning desire Zac was building up. “We need to upgrade the shipyard first before we can start reaping the benefits. And before that we need to keep it safe and hidden.”

“How do I upgrade it? And why hidden?” Zac asked confused, but the next second froze, knowing that he had exposed himself.

“Yes, hidden. This shipyard is a treasure, and any force would drool after it. If the word spreads that you control a Creator Shipyard you will have endless troubles coming your way,” Ogras said after a smug smile at Zac’s mistake. “As for upgrading it? No idea, try asking the Creators.”

“I mean I get that this is a good thing, but why would even you foreign forces go crazy for it? Can’t you just buy your own?” Zac asked, starting to feel he was sitting on a hot potato.

“You can’t just buy a shipyard from the Creators when you wish. There are so many requirements that have to be met. They are extremely picky who they work with and where they work. You’d never be able to build such a thing on this planet if it wasn’t a reward from the System. This applies for most of the good things, just check your Town Shop.” Ogras impatiently explained. Clearly he knew it wasn’t a purchase of Zac, rather a reward, just from how rare this thing was.

Zac opened up the town shop and the screen displayed the various shops. He had looked it over briefly as he trekked back toward his camp, as he needed to buy a shop to sell his crystals. But now the screen was changed. The shops were now actually purchasable, but almost all of them shone with a red light on the screen. Confused, Zac focused on one of the red ones called **[Parlaz Consortium - General Store]**.

A new window with deeper information about the shop opened, something he hadn’t been able to do before. A list of what type of services it provided was listed on one side, and it truly seemed comprehensive. It sold everything from seeds for farming to construction materials to weapons and armor. It

also dealt in basic information, having stocks of crystals explaining most things, from plants to blacksmithing to even town-building.

On another row, a number of requirements were listed. Zac's outpost didn't actually fulfill a single one, except having enough space. There were requirements for minimum town size, population, town daily turnover, and security. Since Zac's town was just an outpost and a shipyard with no inhabitants it wasn't possible to fulfill those demands.

As he flipped through various buildings he saw that most of them had varying severity of requirements. Some even demanded a town population of a hundred million, or that it was the planet capital. There were myriad choices, but the ones he could actually choose were scant few. It seemed that the merchant conglomerates of the multi-verse were quite picky.

Chapter 70: Town Shop

Frustrated Zac focused on the shop he actually could buy. It was actually just called [**F-Grade General Store**] with no mention of a faction or company behind it. Confused he turned to Ogras.

“I can’t buy almost anything in the store, most things are restricted. But there is a shop called F-Grade General Store that has no requirements. Why’s that?”

“That’s The Ruthless Heavens’ store,” Ogras answered.

“Wait, the System runs stores as well?”

“The Ruthless Heavens is the largest employer in existence, though it’s not a very hands-on boss. Running a multi-verse takes many hands after all,” the demon explained with a roll of his eyes.

“So why should I get any other store if I can just get the one from the System?” Zac knew he was straying from the subject of the shipyard, but he felt another opportunity to drag information of the contrary demon had appeared.

“Because The Ruthless Heavens is god damn greed... Ehm, economical. It provides basic facilities in almost all fields that have no requirements, but its prices are between 50 to 500 percent higher compared to the average.” Ogras looked like he would be sick as he talked about the daylight robbery of the System-run stores.

The image of the almighty system being an intergalactic price-gouging bodega-owner gave Zac’s image of the System somewhat of a thorn, but he guessed running a universe, or multiple universes, wasn’t cheap.

“The corporations have far better rates on almost everything, and can also procure things for you if you’re in need of a specific item. For a fee of course. But they operate for profit

and would never open up a branch if they weren't sure if they'd be able to turn a profit in the location. The corporations have to foot most of the bill of coming here themselves, and it's not cheap from what I understand. Therefore they'd never open a branch without some assurance." Ogras continued.

"Some factions have even more requirements. The Creators, for example, I think they normally only open a branch in B-Graded worlds or higher. You also need to have a referral from an actual Creator to even get the application process going. And getting that from one of those living machines is almost impossible. Well, I'm not sure about the details since that is so far above my paygrade. Even my grandfather has no qualifications to know about what goes on in B-Ranked worlds. So you see why this shipyard is so valuable."

Excitement and unease was building up simultaneously in Zac once again. He might actually have gotten a curse rather than a treasure. The shipyard was extremely valuable, but one needed to be alive to reap its benefits.

"So what do you suggest we do?" Zac hoped for some input from the demon. He was crafty and he knew how the various forces worked.

"Two options. Either hide it completely, buy a huge illusion array to start. An E-graded one at least, as many can see through an F-Graded one. As soon as you can upgrade it to a D-graded one. Then we build walls around the whole area and say it's the lord's residence, only giving you access. Later you can add on slaughter-arrays to the illusion array, killing any trespasser. Then you build your town far away". The demon clearly had a meticulous mind, already having formulated strategies.

"Second is to hide in plain sight. Ask the creators to redesign their Shipyard and hide their characteristics. Make it look like a normal shipyard. Don't make a big deal out of it, just make it look like a decently important place with some defensive arrays protecting it."

Zac mulled it over and preferred the second option if it was possible. He didn't believe an illusion array was the answer.

Sooner or later something similar to the peeing demon would happen, and he would be exposed. Then everyone would know he was hiding something and would get even more curious.

Besides, his goal was to build a town, and that had to happen around the Nexus Node. He couldn't move the crystal very far, and the area where he could place town structures from the outpost shop was limited as well. As soon as he walked too far from his camp or the crystal the shop turned to a browse-only mode. The area would probably grow along with the population, but for now it was only a few kilometers in every direction, far too short to create a town at other sides of the island.

"I will do a mix. I'll wall off the area from my camp to this shipyard to make it my private property, and then build a town outside. Inside the inner wall will be my residence, the shipyard, and other critical structures I might build in the future. It should look like I'm just protecting the important parts of the town, and not raise too much suspicion." Zac decided.

Ogras mulled it over a bit then nodded. Zac glanced in the demon's direction and his thoughts started to turn in another direction. The demon seemed very helpful right now, but he clearly was ambitious and ruthless. Now that Zac was sitting on an even greater pile of treasure, how would the demon act? Should he nip the problem in the bud and kill him?

But Zac soon gave up that idea. Ogras was still needed to control the demons, and he didn't want to fight against the former general unless absolutely necessary with his current condition. Such a battle would take all the cosmic energy he had, and if he was forced to drink the azure water just to defeat him it would truly be a pyrrhic victory.

Maybe just as important, he didn't want to become the kind of person who started preemptively murder people in cold blood to protect his wealth against possible perceived threats. He didn't want to devolve into a crazed paranoid dictator. Certainly, the number he had killed by now would horrify anyone in a civilized world, but it was done out of necessity. And it wasn't like he would adapt to some naïve no-kill policy

in this ruthless new world. His hands were already bloodied, and he knew that this was only the start. But there needed to be balance.

Ogras seemed to measure his choices by how much benefits they would bring, and Zac was convinced that he was more valuable alive than dead after reading the contents of the crystal. He knew Ogras was unable to forcefully seize the town for roughly a decade due to being locked out of that system. If he was Ogras and was planning long term he'd do everything to make the town as successful as possible for now, and then forcefully seize it in the future.

But a lot could happen in ten years, and Zac planned on keeping utilizing his advantages to get stronger to the point that betrayal would be more foolish than staying on as a confidante.

Ten years sounded like a long time, but Zac knew it might not be too long in this new reality they lived. He had been surprised by Ogras telling him that longevity actually increased as people got stronger. As he increased his Race-ranking to E-Grade his life expectancy actually increased to a full 500 years.

It was crazy to think that he already had the life-span like some Elf, and that was just after one upgrade. Furthermore, Ogras told him that the life-span of a D-ranker was counted in the thousands rather than hundreds of years, and the grandfather he mentioned was over 1600 years old. Above that he seemed unclear, as apparently that was the highest official rank on his home planet apart from some mysterious emperor.

Zac had initially thought that in the multi-verse there would be no limit to the powers of the factions. As long as one had time they could keep killing monsters and level up. But apparently it got harder and harder to increase strength, and many bottlenecks kept peoples' power in check.

Generally the powerhouses of a planet held the same Class-rank as the planet itself, meaning that the general limit of Earth was D-ranked classes. If someone wanted to break through their limits they were forced to venture out into the

multi-verse and look for enlightenment or lucky opportunities. Eager to find out more Zac had pestered Ogras about the details of getting stronger and ranking up, but it was around this time he flipped out and left the camp.

“I will keep any demons away from this area for now. Though I don’t think anyone has the guts to seek you out anyway. Between your actions and your... fashion sense... you have cultivated a rather strong image among my people.” Ogras said and woke Zac up from his thoughts. He realized he’d have to stay out of his own head a bit more now that there were actually others around, he couldn’t just be blankly staring out into the distance like an idiot.

After exhorting Zac some more about the importance of secrecy Ogras once again left toward the center of the island.

Still curious Zac wanted to enter the shipyard to look around, but first he wanted to check out the gear. He looked insane at the moment and from how Ogras explained it there should be the very famous Creators inside. He didn’t know if they were peculiar about propriety, but first impressions were important.

The larger box was brought out of the purse and Zac opened it eagerly. Inside was actually a full set of clothing neatly packed. As he lifted it up he was initially confused as it initially seemed the System had gifted him another dress. Did the System have a sense of humor?

But soon he realized it wasn’t the case, but the item was rather a robe that felt distinctly eastern in its make. It was of excellent quality and had a deep green color. He wanted to try it on but once again was reminded how grimy he was. Being bathed in the poison water at least cleansed him somewhat, but he was still pretty disgusting.

After hesitating a bit he ran back to camp and threw himself into the shower. After furiously scrubbing himself for a few minutes he finally was clean again for the first time in a long time. He stepped out of the shower and took a look at himself in the mirror.

Zac was shocked to see what was looking back at him. It was him, but *better*. Most noticeably most of his scars were gone.

Only the worst ones were still there, such as the nasty wound on his cheek. But even they had faded considerably and turned into thin white lines.

Not only that, his body looked like perfectly sculpted marble, and even his face seemed to have improved somehow. He couldn't put his finger on it but it felt like small adjustments had been made to enhance imperfect features. If some old friend saw him they'd probably think that he had gotten some plastic surgery done. Of course he didn't look like a movie-star or something, but he had gone from average to above-average at least.

Of course, the fact that he still was completely hairless since the fight with the imp herald detracted from the image somewhat. At least it looked that some stubble was coming along, and he wouldn't look like a monk much longer.

He guessed that it was a result of evolving his race. New benefits kept cropping up it seemed. When he reached D-rank all the scars might be gone and he would become a real hunk he thought with some eagerness.

Finally clean he quickly donned all the new items the System gifted him. After checking himself out in the mirror he could only say he looked pretty dashing.

Chapter 71: First Impressions

The clothing consisted of two layers. The inner layer was essentially a long-armed shirt, with the exception that it didn't have any buttons. Instead, one side was wrapped above the other, and both sides were fastened with a clasp to stay snugly on his chest. The arms and shoulders had a slightly looser fit and didn't restrict his movements at all. It fit perfectly and Zac felt it must have been custom-made for his frame.

His pants were made in some smooth cloth as well, and went in darker brown compared to the beige of the shirt. They were slightly baggy at the thighs but snugly fit around his calves, and they reminded Zac of some jester's pants. But at least they weren't tapered in bright colors or had bells attached.

The outer layer was a green robe that was put on in the same manner as the inner shirt, with one side was placed over the other. But instead of being kept in place with clasps it stayed fastened with a wide leather girdle. It was sleeveless and went down to his knees just like the dress he used earlier, which was why he got turned around earlier. Adorning the hem of the robe was intricate fractals in the same style as the array flags, meaning they likely were put there by the System, or its own craftsmen at least.

No shoes were provided though by the system, which was fine by him since he couldn't wear them at the moment in any case. All in all, it seemed the System tailored the rewards to his needs, which he guessed was due to getting such high marks on his completion.

A stream of information entered his mind as he touched a fractal, and he was delighted to know that the gear had quite a few features. It was self-cleaning and self-mending which

translated into Zac not looking like a murder-hobo again in a few weeks. It even had two forms of protection.

One was that it displaced force over his whole body instead of only at the point of impact. Quite some force was needed to break through that passive defense and Zac wouldn't keep getting the small flesh wounds from bites and arrows. That should come in quite handy when fighting the horde of beasts in the future.

It also carried a similar protection such as the one on the demon's armors, except that it didn't provide any recoil force. Instead it could be used twice in a day and could stop a much stronger attack, which was far more valuable as Zac saw it. His strongest Dao-empowered strike had been able to break through the golden shield in his fight with Rydel, so he knew roughly where its limit lay.

Looking fresh and presentable, except for his bare feet, Zac once again headed back to the shipyard. It still seemed deserted as there were no sounds of activity breaking the silence. Still, Zac entered a building next to the huge warehouse that seemed to be either an office or rec house.

The inside was made of stone, cut and polished to perfection. All the furniture and details were created in heavy stone as well, and Zac couldn't see one curved line. Everything was squared, and the whole lobby gave Zac a truly brutalist impression.

The room clearly was a lobby. Apart from some stone furniture a huge counter was placed in the middle, and behind it stood a statue of a humanoid. It had no facial features and its face was instead covered in a large fractal in the computer font. It was dressed in a simple silver-colored robe, and looked somewhat human apart from the fact it had a few extra fingers on each of its hands. All in all, it looked like a robot statue carved out of soapstone or onyx.

It was completely still, and Zac wasn't sure whether this was one of the so-called Creators or just an elaborate decoration. Ogras had called them living golems and this kind of fit the bill.

“Hello? I’m Zac Atwood. Am I disturbing?” He tentatively tried to call on the statue.

[Greetings, Mr. Atwood. I am Rahm, liaison of Iliex Pre-cosmic Shipyard Nr. 65 238, now located at your planet. Future inquiries are preferably directed at me, and I will endeavor to resolve any issues and complaints in an expedient and equitable manner.]

The statue came to life and answered in a perfunctory voice. It then even followed up with an aristocratic bow in Zac’s direction. It seemed that the Iliex conversed in the same manner as Abby had, using some magic instead of a mouth. Zac quickly bowed back with far less grace, flustered at the cordiality.

[Haha don’t mind Rahm, that rigid old goat. We’re not some dour robots like he would have you believe.] Boomed a similar, but far rowdier voice from the interiors of the building as deep thuds approached the lobby. Soon the speaker entered through a passage, and Zac had to stop himself from taking a step back.

It was a three meter tall amalgamation between spider and robot. It had five huge legs that bent at the middle, each over three meters long. If they stretched upward the weird-looking Creator would stand at over four meters. The torso itself was largely humanoid, with the face sharing the characteristic fractal. It did however have four arms instead of two, and it actually looked like the body was full of either tools or weapons.

Zac could only stare at the monstrosity with mouth slightly ajar, which seemed to please the spider robot immensely.

[Pretty impressive, isn’t it brat? Took me the better part of three hundred years to fuse form and function into the great body before you. Even had to steal some C-graded nebulous copper to finish it. Well, I guess that’s why I was demoted to the foreman of this shithole. No offense.] He shouted as he slapped one of the metallic legs, creating an echoing clangor throughout the building.

The more normal-looking Creator didn't react at all to the entrance and tirade of this fantastical being, seeming used to its antics.

[So, kid, what do you wanna build? Terrornaughts? Modified destroyers? If you can get some D-graded crystals we can make some nasty cosmic bombs, blow one of the neighboring islands off the face of the earth! Attack is the best defense, who knows what kind of assholes lives there!]

The man's legs started tap excitedly at the floor as he started to list what could only be terrible weapons, each tap actually punching a hole in the ground. Zac was unable to react for a second, his mind working overtime to grasp the new information. Luckily, the liaison saved the day with a timely interjection.

[D-grade battle-ships such as Terrornaughts and destroyers are not within the accord with The Great Shaper. Please purview the pre-approved designs.]

Two crystals appeared in its hands, of which Zac graciously accepted one. The metal spider-being waved his copy away though, and the Rahm could only put it back.

[May I present Karunthel, foreman and foremost expert of this shipyard. And he was relocated here after a few... Unfortunate.... Experiments, not some minor item acquisition infraction.] The liaison, who started to feel like a long-suffering butler, said as he gestured toward the spider.

[Bah, I know I know, no blowing up any islands or continents of the baby world.] Karunthel said as he rolled his shoulders.

“Actually I'm not here regarding any ships at the moment. I was wondering if it was possible to, uh, camouflage the fact that this is a Iliex Shipyard, make it look like it's a normal one?” Zac asked tentatively, gauging the reactions of the two golems.

[Haha afraid of a little heat, brat? Any greedy forces nearby? You should just carpet bomb anything that looks

at your stuff, far more effective.] The foreman said with a booming laugh.

[Well, I guess we could make it look like a human dock, hide the inscriptions and such. But such changes are not included in the standard package.] Karunthel continued, seemingly entering into business-mode.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

[Money! We don't work for free, and restructuring the whole thing to make it look uglier is gonna cost you.]

“How much?” Zac asked, determined to just grit his teeth and bear the cost, almost no matter how large.

[Eight millio-]

[Five hundred and twenty five thousand Nexus Coins.] The liaison quickly interjected, only to be lightly kicked with one of the spider legs as the foreman muttered something Zac couldn't discern.

Zac was starting to get a headache as it seemed everyone entering his life lately was filled with greed. Luckily Rahm had come to his rescue, and he helplessly accepted the reconstruction, leaving him with a huge hole in his pocket. A window looking like a purchase confirmation appeared in front of him and he accepted.

[Remuneration confirmed. Expected duration for project 4 hours. May this be the start of a long and mutually beneficial cooperation.] Rahm said and once again bowed toward Zac.

More impressively, his whole body started flickering, and he changed into an actual human. Of course, there was a tinge of lifelessness in the Creator's eyes belying his real identity to Zac. Though that might just be the personality of this particular individual rather than a failure in the camouflage. But after watching its movements and mannerisms for a few seconds he saw some imperfections in the disguise. But from a distance or for a short while no one should be able to tell at all.

[Bah, how boring. Call me when you want to create things that go boom. And don't expect me to turn into a stupid

bipedal after getting these shiny legs. But don't worry, no brat on a baby world will be able to expose me, native or foreign.] The foreman said and started to walk away with a wave.

“Um, are you able to build anything that can help against a monster horde?” Zac asked, as this was the most pressing issue now that the reconstruction was dealt with.

Karunthel stopped in his tracks as he was leaving and eagerly turned toward Zac once again. But after a few seconds of hesitation, he answered.

[I'm sorry kiddo, but most of what I'm allowed to create right now is meant for naval exploration with limited functions for naval battle. It's cheaper if you buy the fortifications and arrays from the Shop. It's not Creator-quality, but it's more effective against beast hordes. And don't expect us to help you kill any critters, we're only here to build things.]

Having nothing else to do at the shipyard Zac thanked the two golems and left. As he left he saw quite a few humans efficiently scurrying about as they remodeled the whole area. But he knew that it wasn't actual humans, rather more camouflaged Creators.

He was very pleased with the result of the visit, apart from having been forced to spend most of his hard-earned coin. But since there might arrive more people or demons at any moment he didn't hesitate to spend it. If what Ogras said was true, then not even a whisper of any rumors could be allowed to grow.

He was a bit disappointed that they wouldn't provide any assistance in case of an attack. But he had a feeling the System put various restrictions on those who worked for it. Abby wasn't allowed to explain certain things, and Rahm told him they were only allowed to build pre-approved ships. It meant that the golems likely weren't even allowed to provide assistance outside doing their jobs. Otherwise Zac believed that the crazy foreman wouldn't pass up the opportunity to blow up hordes of monsters, even if it was just for fun.

He arrived back at the camper and once again opened up the Town Shop. It was time to start the improvements. First he bought an **[F-Grade Middle Scale Cosmic Smelting Furnace]** for 200 000 Nexus Coins, leaving him with a scant 20 000 Nexus Coins. Luckily the shops only cost a symbolic sum, as they made their money through trade.

The purpose of the furnace was to refine various F-graded metals and minerals, and Nexus Crystals were one of the things it could refine. It was an expensive purchase but Ogras had promised it would be far more profitable to refine the materials by himself before he sold them, as every shop would try to scam him on rates when he sold raw crystals.

It was a large black box roughly two meters tall and three meters wide. On one side it had a chute for throwing in the raw materials, and on the other, it had a hole leading out to a large tray. He immediately summoned a sack of crystals and threw the contents into the chute, and contentedly watched his wealth grow. It took roughly 10 minutes for the whole sack to be processed into crystals, and when they came out they looked identical to the ones he had stolen long ago. Gone were any defects or rock remains, leaving only unblemished uniform crystals.

Next, he needed someone to buy his products.

Chapter 72: Thayer Consortia

Calrin despondently surveyed the various reports strewn about his table. Twenty thousand years of heritage teetered on the brink of destruction, all under his watch. He knew that he was partly to blame for the situation, but others were far more culpable.

'Greed is the fuel which push us forward. Honor is the compass which keeps the course.'

That was the creed inlaid under the painting of his ancestor, hung behind him in an ornate frame. He didn't need to turn around to know the words, or to remember every single detail of their ancestor's face. The slight upward tug of his mouth, the ever-present Ancient Empire coin in his hand, ceaselessly whirling between his fingers. The mischievous light in his eyes that seemed to see through all lies and posturing.

Almarillo Thayer was born a beggar in a lowly E-graded world on decline. He had no family, no education, and no prospects, but through his intellect and drive he managed to become an assistant to a shop-clerk. From there he gained the Assistant class, the first step which ended with him founding the **[Thayer Consortia]**, a System-sanctioned mercantile corporation with branches in hundreds of worlds, and its headquarters located on a bustling C-Ranked continent.

Those awe-inspiring offices were long pawned off, even before Calrin Thayer was born. For the last five hundred years, the company had been in a steady decline. Calrin, with his quick wits and solid business acumen, was chosen to steer the company back on course and was given the chairman position at the young age of 80. But all he accomplished was the reduction of branches from 26 to one last struggling location.

He knew the cause wasn't only himself. His family remembered the first half of their founder's creed perfectly well, but the second half had gotten blurred over the years. Shady and short-sighted business practices made them lose a few branches and simultaneously made them quite a few enemies. A few family members even betrayed the Thayer name for personal wealth, and even if they were eventually found out the damage was already done.

But the downfall started for real roughly 25 years ago. The great Tsarun Clan had turned their avaricious gazes toward the Thayer Consortia. Or rather, at the Mercantile License their founder gained all those years ago. The license was something awarded by the system, and not something that could be forced away or stolen. Even eradicating the whole Thayer family wouldn't do any good, and would even result in a punishment by the System.

But a business license could be seized through business. Normally it should be almost impossible to snatch a license from a sanctioned corporation, and it would be far easier to try to gain one through normal means. But between the Thayer Consortia being in tatters and the Tsarun Clan's vast connections and wealth, they actually managed to incrementally bring down their corporation, one world at a time.

If they lost their last branch as well the System would void the Thayer Consortia's license, and revoke access to the multi-verse Mercantile System, rendering them completely and utterly powerless. The merchant's protection they currently enjoyed would disappear as well, and Tsarun clan would begin a wholesale slaughter of the remaining family members. No need to risk a come-back, after all.

Calrin desperately tried to open up new branches to keep the situation afloat. He had tried every means, such as lowering the requirements or offering great rates on various common resources. He even tried bribing various fledgling city lords, but nothing worked. Between the machinations of the Tsarun's elders and the awful reputation his consortia had amassed due to multiple scandals no one would place their branches in their

cities. And if they did it would soon be closed after a visit from a Tsarun clan emissary.

His intellect strained to find some way out, but the numbers in the reports were clear. In 3 days their last branch would be declared defunct, and he would have to flee for his life.

It was time for one last desperate gambit.

Zac skipped sleep that night in favor of watching his pile of wealth grow. He unceasingly kept throwing sack after sack of crystals into the chute, and then ran over to the other side to gleefully gather the refined crystals. A completely filled bag had taken roughly 10 minutes to completely process, and it resulted in around 200 finished crystals.

That meant that the machine could refine almost 30 000 crystals every single day, which should be enough for the mining operations for now. Instead of the numerous sacks he now carried exactly 11 328 crystals, including the first ones he had stolen.

In the downtime he kept training his axe-work. He only dared to use half of his cosmic energy to activate the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system, leaving the rest as a backup. Then he let his body slowly recharge the energy, instead of using any aids.

The beast hordes were coming, and it was a real possibility he might have to face the sea of monsters without the aid of his skills. He needed to get faster, stronger, and better at using his axe. He remembered how all his moves were in vain against the demon leader. The difference between them hadn't been skills or attribute points, it was the huge difference in technique.

Around midnight the sounds of activity from the shipyard ebbed out, and Zac guessed the transformations were done. He kept going for about another five hours until all the refinement was done. Luckily the Furnace seemed to need neither rest nor maintenance, and unceasingly spit out crystals as long as it had something to process.

The next step was to get a shop to sell the crystals in order to start shoring up the defenses of the town. Since the

transformation was complete for the shipyard he didn't really need to worry about gossip shop clerks leaking the secret, but as he opened the Town Shop he paused after a few seconds.

Initially his idea had been to buy the only store that he was able to purchase at the moment, which was the System-run one.

He was, of course, loath to buy it after hearing about the ridiculous prices since he believed that the System would give equally abysmal rates on crystals as well. Unfortunately, none of the privately-run businesses in the multi-verse deemed his island good enough to open up a branch at the moment. However, that had changed since he last checked the store.

In a sea of red, a green-marked shop had silently appeared, called [**Thayer Consortia, Headquarters**]. For some reason this shop was not only ready to open a branch at his island, but it actually wanted to move its headquarters here. When he opened the store he realized that it wasn't luck that he somehow managed to fill all its criteria. The Thayer Consortia had removed every single normal restriction such as population and security and only demanded two things. First, they required a far larger space compared to the other shops. Secondly, they required the world to be within three years of integration to the multi-verse.

At first glance it looked like a God-given gift, but he wanted to wait for Ogras before he did anything. If something seemed too great to be true, it usually was. Zac felt that it was fishy that a large corporation would move their headquarters to a place like earth. Any newly integrated planet should be quite chaotic and poor, and should be a bad place to move your business to.

Perhaps they weren't actually traders, but rather bandits who wanted to gain access to a new world through the outpost, and then start a massacre when they arrived. Even if it was an opportunity he'd forgo it rather than potentially making a fatal mistake. As it was still quite early Zac decided to get a few hours of sleep while he waited for Ogras. He simply sat down with his back to the furnace, and went asleep with his axe in hand.

After who knows how long Zac was awakened by a loud sound. Immediately alert he jumped to his feet, axe at the ready. Soon he relaxed though as he saw the now familiar face of the demon outside his array. Ogras seemed content to just stand there and idle about, so Zac ventured outside to meet up with him.

“What are you doing?”

“Basic etiquette not to enter someone’s array without permission. It’s an easy way to get your head cut off,” the demon answered off-handedly. “By the way, impressive work with the little demoness. She’s growing a third horn now in her forehead,” he added with a snicker.

“Well, tell her I’m sorry about that. Couldn’t have her scream after I left. Anyways, I need to ask you something,” Zac answered with a shrug, and proceeded to share the window of the Thayer Consortia while explaining his concerns.

“Hmm... Very interesting. You don’t have to worry about them being raiders, as The Ruthless Heavens place extremely strict restrictions on those who use the Mercantile System. Even if a shop-clerk turned out to be an A-Ranker Hegemon in disguise he wouldn’t be able to do anything to you.” Ogras explained.

“So, isn’t this a great opportunity then? They demand quite a bit of space, but that shouldn’t be a problem.” Zac eagerly asked.

“Well, they are merchants for certain, but there is something wrong with them wanting to come here. They likely are escaping something. It’s almost impossible to find a baby world except by going through an incursion, so they are excellent places to hide out in. So if you accept them you’ll likely have a bunch of refugees rather than well-stocked merchants.” Ogras explained.

“So kind of like you demons then?” Zac retorted gruffly, annoyed that the golden opportunity didn’t turn out so golden after all.

“Cough... well, something like that. The thing is that if they are forced to flee here, they will likely be barely stocked at all with items and crystals, and will have an abysmal support system for acquiring treasures in the multi-verse. Only moving their headquarters here might completely clean them out. So even if you wanted to task them with finding some specific item they’d probably not be able to help you out.”

“So which should I buy? The system-run store or this Thayer Corporation?” Zac didn’t understand how the so-called Mercantile System worked, and could only ask for directions for now.

“You should get the headquarters. They are likely desperate for sanctuary, and will be extremely weak in negotiations,” Ogras said with a ruthless grin. “After all, since you will pretty much be their only customer for a while you can single-handedly run them out of business if they don’t comply”.

Zac felt a bit of sympathy for this Thayer company that was forced to escape some unknown hardship, only to be exploited here on Demon Island. Well, he didn’t really have a good time being stuck here, so why should anyone else?

Chapter 73: Foundations of a Capital

Zac and Ogras walked northbound away from the campsite. If they were going to get a compound full of merchant refugees they couldn't be too close to the future core of operations of the town. As they walked Ogras asked about the shipyard, and when he heard that they had somehow transformed to look like humans he whistled, looking very impressed.

“You didn't know they could do that?” Zac asked confused.

“Clan Azh'Rezak is a middling family in a D-Grade world. There has never been one of the Creators on our world as far as I know, and all the information about them we have is hearsay. Buying a missive on them from one of the information merchants would have bankrupted us from the expense.” The demon said defensively, looking unhappy that his image of an omniscient veteran of the multi-verse was crackling.

“Well now that they are already hidden, wait here a second. Don't mention anything about Creators,” Ogras said and rushed into the forest without waiting for a response. Zac stopped confused at current location, hesitantly looking around. It wasn't a very good spot for an ambush, so he didn't feel too worried about waiting there. But he did bring out his axe just in case.

After a couple of minutes sounds of footsteps alerted Zac to someone approaching. What made him wary was that it didn't sound like just one person, but a group. Angered at the betrayal he got ready for a battle as he looked around for a path of escape if needed.

He quickly scaled a tree in order to be able to mount an ambush. His pathways was still a problem so he would have to

finish the battle quickly. Ogras should be the strongest demon still alive, and if he managed to quickly execute him then the rest shouldn't prove too large a problem.

Soon he saw a group of ten demons walking behind Ogras as they approached his location. Soon they were almost beneath him and Zac wordlessly jumped down as he infused his axe with the Dao of Heaviness. With a grunt he swung down toward Ogras' head, aiming to quickly cleave him in two.

“WHAT THE F-“ Ogras screamed as he desperately brought out a spear from his pouch. Shadows from all around him gathered into it as he swung it upward to block the incoming axe. The collision of the weapons created a huge shockwave at the level of his battle against the other Demon leader, and the group of demons were flung away from the shockwave.

Ogras was slammed into the ground from the impact, but Zac was thrown away as well. The demon had actually managed to defend against his Dao-empowered strike, although not effortlessly, which showed that his title as leader of the demons was not just for show.

Suddenly the demon melded into the ground and appeared twenty meters further away from Zac. He stood up and angrily pointed his spear at him.

“What the fuck are you doing? God damn lunatic!” The demon screamed as he spat out dirt from his mouth.

“It's better to get the first strike when getting ambushed,” Zac retorted tersely as he approached the demon.

“Ambush? With these fucking civilians?” Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at the other demons. They had managed to scramble to their feet and looked completely shell-shocked.

Zac stopped his approach, and for the first time he took a good look at the group. Quickly he realized that he might have made a mistake. They truly looked like a bunch of weaklings. None of them carried a weapon, and two were actually pretty fat. Every single demon he fought so far had been in tip-top shape, even the mages. Even more importantly, the little demoness he interrogated yesterday was in the group.

She looked like a deer in headlights, ready to bolt into the woods but her legs not listening. As Ogras mentioned she had a pretty comical bulge in her forehead between her horns from where he thwacked her with his axe.

“What’s going on, why did you bring a bunch of people here?” Zac asked a bit embarrassed, but he still didn’t lower his axe. He realized that the last two months made him too primed for battle, but those were also the habits that had kept him alive.

“Damn it, almost shat my pants...” Ogras muttered as he put back the black spear into his pouch. “Crazy natives. These people are representatives of the various departments needed to properly run a city.” He continued as he waved at the group, obviously still quite annoyed. “If you just start throwing out buildings randomly it’s going to look like shit, and problems with things such as infrastructure and sustainable growth will start cropping up as the town grows. These people will help you make a proper town that can be grown all the way into a world capital if needed.”

Zac stared mutely at the demons for a second. They looked back with horror at him, no one daring to move an inch, afraid that he would swing his axe after them as well. Zac inwardly groaned as he had hoped to create a better rapport with the demons now that they were going to work together. But this first impression might have set him back quite a bit in his quest for diplomacy.

“Well. Sorry about that, thought you were here to kill me. I’m Zac,” He awkwardly greeted the group, wondering where his social skills had gone. Had focusing on Strength turned some of his brain cells into more muscles? His greeting got no response as the group mutely stared at him.

“Uh...” Zac glanced at Ogras who rolled his eyes.

“Don’t stare like some country bumpkins! We have work to do,” Ogras snapped, and in the next second he started taking out a wealth of items.

First it was a large mat that covered most of the clearing they were in. Next, he placed a rounded oblong table, large enough to fit everyone present, on it. Next followed chairs, and finally

a red canopy covering the whole area from the glaring suns. Clearly the bag in Ogras' possession was far better compared to those Zac had stolen so far.

Zac hesitantly put his axe back into his pouch and sat down at a solitary chair at one of the short sides. Ogras sat down at one of the two chairs that were the closest to him, and what followed was a discreet but energetic melee for the chairs as far as possible from him.

The small demoness was the loser who could only grit her teeth and take the other chair next to Zac after having been physically bodied away from a more distant chair by one of the fat men. Zac tried to improve the relations by nodding at her, but she stared straight ahead without moving like a zombie.

After everyone sat down Ogras summoned glasses and a few jugs of what smelled like liquor and poured himself a drink. The others poured themselves some as well, but were clearly not as comfortable as their leader. Zac declined the offer, and instead took out one of his canteens of normal water.

"So, now that everyone is settled we can discuss the construction of... uh... what name have you chosen for the town?" Ogras asked as he turned toward Zac.

Zac was completely stumped, as he never bothered about such a detail while struggling for the last month. Now that the incursion was gone and his temporary outpost was turned into a town. He called this place Demon Island in his mind, but he couldn't name his town that. Maybe something with his name? In case his town got famous and his family heard of it they might come here. Zachary Town? No. Atwood sounded better for a town. Atwoodtown? Atwoodville? Camp Atwood?

"Port Atwood." He finally said after some hesitation. It had his name and 'Port' was a pretty normal addition to coastal cities, so he felt it sounded pretty neat.

"Hm... Ok. The construction of Port Atwood. You have seen the general area already. Remember, it needs to be defensible within 40 days." Ogras said as he rolled out a parchment. It was a surprisingly detailed map of the general area. It had his

camp and the harbor marked, and even the large warehouse was drawn out. After scanning it for a few seconds he knew that it was completely accurate when comparing it to his memories of the area. Of course, the only error was that the details of the harbor were quite indistinct, and nothing was mentioned except the line “shipyard”.

Zac wondered how he could have produced such an accurate map in such short order, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself in front of so many people, and could only ask later. The conversation was a bit stilted at the beginning, where Ogras had to drag the words out of the craftsmen's mouths. Zac himself was content to just listen for now, as he realized he had no idea how to build a city.

He had thought that it would be like a strategy game since he possessed the Town Shop. He just bought the buildings and they produced or did whatever they were designed to do. But as the group started discussing everything from plumbing, to district allocation, to traffic flows and congestion points he started to zone out.

Between the hard liquor and the fact that Zac kept mostly quiet the demons started to get more and more animated as they discussed and debated various points, each individual clearly convinced that their specific field was the most important for a burgeoning town's success. Soon an early blueprint for Port Atwood was starting to take shape, with Ogras pushing things forward.

The general idea for the beginning was to create four Zones. The inner Zone was to be a walled-off area belonging to Zac. It would also encircle the Shipyard, with walls going down to the water a few hundred meters to both sides of it. Another wall would be erected between Zac's camp and the shipyard. Ogras explained it was to protect the Lord's manor against naval attacks, but Zac knew it rather was to keep the Creators separated.

Outside the core area three Zones would be established. The first was on the southwest side of the core, expanding alongside the wall all the way down to the water. It would be

the trade zone where merchants and craftsmen had their headquarters.

On the other side of the core zone would the military encampment be. Zac was confused as he didn't have an army, but let them go ahead with the plans anyway. Having an army would be convenient, as that meant he wouldn't have to spend as much on defensive arrays. And if he became a real Lord there actually might be a time when he had a proper army.

The central area would be residential, with some businesses such as bars, and bathhouses peppered in, and it would be connected with the mercantile zone with a large square. Most space around the square was earmarked for various key institutions, such as an auction house and a bank, which Zac didn't qualify to own yet.

They even allocated a large space for an academy. After asking he realized it wasn't like a school on the old earth, but rather to help the students to get a class they wished for and guide them with their cultivation. This was something very interesting to Zac who had just fumbled around when he got his class choices.

He was already getting bored about the discussion about the town construction, and set his eye on the demon who appeared to represent the field of education.

Chapter 74: Classes, Cultivation, and old Hegemons

It turned out that actions truly influenced the available Class choices. After some hesitation a slender demoness in charge of education started explaining the mechanics behind classes, quickly finding her confidence after entering lecturing mode.

“The Ruthless Heavens allow you to start progressing on the path of cultivation starting at the age of 16 for both humans and demons, but it varies between species. Many forces are able to bring up the levels of their young to 25 in a day with various treasures and Nexus Crystals, so preparation before they officially enter the path of cultivation is necessary. An academy prepares the young generation, and help them attain the Class they wish for. Or at least have the most aptitude for,” the schoolmistress started to explain.

“If they want to become a Sword Master they will have to arduously train with their sword, and physically train their natural attributes to the peak. If they wish to become a magic user it’s a bit more complicated, but essentially they have to study the elements and learn all they can about cosmic energy. Craftsman Classes are best gained by apprenticing themselves to someone,” she said.

It was as Zac had assumed. His classes were largely based on his actions, and it was possible to influence the options the System gave. But it seemed unlikely that too good a class could be attained from just swinging around a sword within the safety of the school.

“What rarity of the classes do the students get this way?”

“It depends on the grade of the school. Normally only common classes can be attained at an academy, with one or two lucky students out of a thousand getting an uncommon one. Out in the multi-verse there are far greater academies who have curriculums that can guarantee uncommon classes, and even give a decent chance for a rare one.” She said as her eyes glistened, obviously yearning to visit such a place.

“Besides, if the youth accomplish great things after becoming 16 years old, instead of rushing to level 25, they can improve their chances to get a better class.”

“Still, being stuck with a common class doesn’t seem too great, no? Won’t it negatively influence their future?”

“Getting common classes is by far the most common starting choice in C-graded to E-graded worlds. Classes like Warrior or Swordsman have a multitude of well-documented advancements paths. For example it is well known that a Warrior can advance to an E-Graded Uncommon Champion. It can also advance to E-Graded Uncommon Captain, then D-Graded Uncommon General.” She explained, getting more and more animated as she started looking at Zac less as an axe-wielding lunatic, and more like a student.

“They won’t get as many attribute points or as good skills as someone who gets a Rare or even Epic class in the start. But the requirements for each advancement is well documented, giving cultivators a clear and unimpeded path of progression. The multi-verse has an endless amount of classes, and only a small part of them is public knowledge. Many promising youths have had their path of progression cut short since they got an unknown rare class, and wasn’t able to progress it.”

Zac found all of this very illuminating, and decided to have this teacher accompany him into the mines to keep his education going while he tried to get his pathways repaired.

“If the multi-verse contains endless classes, why did so many of your kind seem to have the same class?” Zac probed, his memories slightly clashing with the teacher’s explanation of the class system. For example, there had generally been three

types of mages; earth, lightning, and fire. But no demon mage seemed to use wind, ice, gravity or any other types.

The demoness slightly hesitated and looked at Ogras for instructions. He shrugged and continued the explanation himself.

“It’s called heritage.” He said. “The progression paths are public knowledge, but the details are fiercely guarded secrets. Those classes that Alyn mentioned are public knowledge, but the exact method to advance past E-grade is not. Clan Azh’Rezak has bought guides that explain the progression to E-grade Uncommon for over a dozen classes, but only had two clear paths to reach D-rank.”

“Buying a full progression path from F to D with all required attributes, Dao-requirements, and hidden requirements is costly enough to set back a D-ranked force quite a bit. So most only have one or two, and they are the foundation of the clan. Clan Azh’Rezak has the progression path of Lightning Warrior, which evolves into Tempest Warrior, and finally Stormblade. It’s a mix of lightning magic and bladed weapons. Rydel followed this path for example, and only the main branch of our clan is allowed to progress this class path,” the demon continued, and Zac immediately remembered the three demons he had killed whose skills contained the black dreadful lightning.

“The stronger the heritage of a clan the greater its prospects. The more and better progression paths, cultivation techniques, hidden Titles, access to hidden pocket-worlds and unique cultivation resources a force has, the better the heritage is.

“Of course, the stronger heritage you have the more attractive a target you become, and wars are constantly fought across the multi-verse to snatch heritages,” Ogras said. “The greatest forces in the multi-verse are said to have progression paths all the way to at least B-rank, making their heritage an unimaginable treasure,” he finished, with yearning in his eyes talking about those lofty clans.

“And how does cultivation fit into all of this?” Zac continued. This was one of the most confusing things for him so far. From

Abby it seemed that cultivation was extremely important, but so far he had progressed just fine without being able to cultivate.

“Cultivation has various benefits. First it improves your advancement speed in levels. At a certain point one can forego sleep completely and instead cultivate, making it possible to ceaselessly progress levels. At low levels it doesn’t make a large difference, but at high levels a single level can take a year or more, and at this point the difference starts to show.” The schoolmistress Alyn picked up again.

“Secondly, cultivation doesn’t only improve levels, it also improves our very foundations. It can improve our very beings over time. Essentially, it can help evolve our races, which is the biggest difference between a cultivator and a mortal.” She said.

“Most mortals are forever stuck at F-Grade Classes, since they can’t afford the means to evolve into E-Rank Race. Advancing the Race is the most basic requirement for any class advancement, and no matter the Dao enlightenment or titles, without an advanced race you just will not progress. And as mortals progress it becomes unimaginably hard to find the treasures to keep their advancement going.”

“Finally, cultivators can increase their combat power compared to a mortal if they have a suitable cultivation method. Say the cultivator is a Pyromancer Class. If she has a fire-attributed cultivation technique, her attacks will get even fiercer. Conversely, if she use a water-based cultivation technique she might get weaker, or even hurt herself over time.”

Zac finally understood how classes worked in the multi-verse, and was a bit troubled that he seemed to have gone down a harder path. His Rare class was a boon in the form of giving good skills and extra stats, but it seemed it was far harder to progress compared to the normal classes.

Even worse, it seemed that getting stronger truly was easier for cultivators. It would become harder and harder to keep his lead it seemed as time went on. At least he had caught a lucky

break snatching up a Fruit of Ascension, solving the issue of his race for now. Still, he would have to find new treasures to keep advancing, whereas the cultivators could just, well, cultivate.

“Can a mortal become a cultivator?” Zac asked, as that would solve his issues easily. Besides, Abby had said only 10% of the population of Earth was able to become cultivators, so most earthlings could benefit from turning into cultivators. Alyn seemed to hesitate a bit before answering.

“Perhaps. It is said that mortals will automatically become able to cultivate when they reach a certain power level. But I am not sure whether it is true. Some say it is at C rank, others at B rank. Some say it’s just a hoax to give mortals false hope. I only know it’s not possible at D rank or lower.” She said.

“There are a few treasures able to turn a mortal into a cultivator though, but they are so rare they might as well be rumors as well.” Alyn then added after some thought.

“Those treasures are real but unfathomably rare. In our homeworld one was put up for auction fifty thousand years ago, and hasn’t been seen since. When it arrived it created a bloody storm that impacted the whole world. Besides, getting one of them can be a death trap. There are so many old monsters in the multi-verse that have a grandson or granddaughter who can’t cultivate for some reason. They are fine with slaughtering a whole country to snatch the treasure for their kin, making it extremely dangerous to own it.” Ogras added on.

“There even was an old hegemon who went to war with a ruling family of a B-ranked planet just to get a supreme treasure which would allow his beloved pet to become a sentient god-beast. Billions of lives were lost because of that stupid mutt.” The demon then said, his mouth curving slightly upward.

“What happened?” Zac asked intrigued.

“The hegemon essentially destroyed the world and took the treasure. The mutt became a god beast and over tens of thousands of years started to rival even its old master in power.

Soon the beast could transform into humanoid form and it had the appearance of a stunning woman. The old master actually fell in love and wanted to marry his old pet, but the god-beast didn't reciprocate his feelings.

“Mad with rage that he was rebuffed after all he had done for her, he immediately tried to kill her. It back-fired spectacularly, and the beast was victorious after an earth-shaking battle. Now she is a hegemon herself and leader of a grand beast world. It is one of the most famous stories about the dangers of owning too valuable treasures” Ogras narrated with a sneer, obviously considering the old master a true idiot.

Zac almost laughed out loud when he heard the story, and said a silent prayer for the old master. More importantly, it seemed it was possible for him to become a cultivator in the future. Of course, it seemed impossibly hard, but he had time and a huge amount of Luck. Not wanting to hold up the meeting any longer with this tangent, he changed the subject.

“What about the defenses of the town? The monster hordes are coming soon.”

This was what mattered the most to Zac right now. The town needed to be standing at least until he could buy a teleporter or a cosmic ship so he could finally start his search for his family. And if possible he would want to defend Port Atwood from the incoming animals, in order to turn his island both into a sanctuary and bastion.

Chapter 75: Gaming the System

The demons were aware of Zac's quest and started discussing various means of defense. They soon came to an agreement that it wouldn't be possible to complete an outer wall in the duration that remained until the first horde arrived, and would have to focus on the inner wall instead.

Zac was a bit skeptical, as he knew the whole wall around their own town was erected in just a few days' time. Were they holding back on him? However, it was soon explained that the whole force came together and immediately fortified their position when they arrived at the island. Now they were left with only a tenth of their force, and almost all the earth mages that had been instrumental to the construction were either dead or back in their home world.

"What is the point of the wall anyhow? I could easily scale your wall in seconds. I can just buy a defensive array instead" Zac probed, wondering if all the work of erecting walls were even worth it.

"Defensive arrays need power to run. If no one, or just a few assailants are attacking the ambient energy is enough. But as soon as it comes under attack either cultivators or crystals are needed to provide energy to keep the shield active. Imagine ten thousand beasts simultaneously clawing and ramming their bodies into the shield. The energy consumption would be terrifying, and you'd become broke after a few weeks of maintaining it." Ogras replied. "Walls are cheap and effective below E-rank. They are the first line of defense that is easily replaceable and provides a vantage where we can grind down the enemy forces before even wasting a single crystal on maintaining an array. Only if they break through the walls will we need to spend resources on maintaining the arrays."

“What about the merchant headquarters? According to the blueprint the compound will be placed outside the inner wall.” While Zac was no angel he didn’t want to summon the poor traders just to be eaten by monsters in a month, he wasn’t that cruel.

“Many structures provided by The Ruthless Heavens have certain protections in place. It will automatically be protected like the Tree of Ascension was.” Ogras explained, which reminded Zac about the impenetrable shield that covered the tree while the fruits were ripening.

“Can’t we just hide inside there then?” Zac asked. Having a safe spot where nothing could harm him would be extremely convenient while assaulted by a sea of monsters.

“We can enter and leave, but only during business hours if we’re not members. And no, we can’t just become temporary members during the beast horde attacks.” Ogras ruthlessly crushed Zac’s hopes. “Also, that protection only applies to buildings connected to the Mercantile System, so nothing else you build will be safe. The horde’s main targets will be you and the Nexus Node, and everything impeding its path will be destroyed. Trying to exploit various loopholes such as surrounding your camp with protected merchant shops won’t work either. Everything has been tested over time, and the loopholes have been fixed by the Ruthless Heavens millions of years ago.”

In the end they decided to focus on erecting a wall around Zac’s camp. The radius of the wall was to be five hundred meters, giving Zac a huge personal area to build a proper home in the future. Medium Scale Arrays would also fit properly inside a fortification of that size.

Parts of the wall were only temporary, since the main plan was for the walls to go all the way down to the water in the future. For specific arrays they held off for the moment since they didn’t know the amount of Nexus coins they’d be able to scrounge together before the first wave appeared.

Content with the results, Ogras dismissed the others to speak to Zac privately. They decided that Ogras would travel

between Demon Town and Port Atwood to keep both the mining efforts going and oversee the construction of the wall. Zac would head to the mines to try and restore his pathways and excavate as many crystals as possible.

Before they left Zac showed Ogras the screen for the Forester's Constitution skill after some hesitation. It was still stuck on (8/30), and Zac explained the situation.

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester's Constitution Skill. (8/30).

Yesterday Ogras told him how he managed to speak to Zac on the mountain top. He also explained how Zac had finished the quest, even though Ogras as the general was still alive. Before the completion of the incursion quest Ogras wouldn't be able to speak to Zac even if he had the translation skill. The System wouldn't let communication happen between natives and invaders until one side was defeated, as it didn't want to see any peaceful solution. Therefore the completion of the quest was necessary.

It was the first pill the demon swallowed right after killing Rydel that made it happen. The pill was actually called [**The Coward's Escape**], and truly killed the user for a short duration. It was a tool for escaping various situations that would only end with either death or success, such as inheritance sites or being the target of a quest.

It would complete any quests that demanded his death and often even teleport him, the "corpse", out of the inheritance site. The downside of the pill was that all active quests were considered forfeited upon death, so using it could be extremely detrimental if you had an important quest active. It was also the reason Zac didn't get 100% contribution on finishing his quest, as the last target killed himself.

Obviously Ogras had some experience in exploiting the rigid system, and Zac needed some of that ingenuity. He was strapped for time but wanted to complete his constitution quest before the beast horde arrived. But he also needed to stay in the mines with its high concentration of energy in order to heal his body broken by the Cosmic Water.

He would have used the mountain valley for both purposes if it wasn't turned into a poisoned hellhole after the forest fires and poison clouds made it uninhabitable. Ogras had explained with some embarrassment that it could take months before it was possible to get back up there.

“From the description it is either a Seed-quest that gives you a vision for a Dao seed, or it requires a Dao Seed connected to nature. Perhaps Seed of Grass or Seed of Trees.”

“Not Seed of Nature or Seed of Earth?” Zac asked skeptically. Seed of Trees did not seem very impressive.

“The Dao of Nature and Earth are high tiered Daos, and not something you can touch.” Ogras sneered derisively. “I’ve never heard of this skill, what class did you say you had?”

Zac ignored him and waited for the demon to provide some solution instead.

Seeing that Zac wasn't intending on answering, Ogras could only mutter something and continue. “Fight in the forest is very vague, and you can probably exploit it. What constitutes a forest, and what constitutes fight? If you want to complete it without wasting too much time we need to do two things. First, find the spot closest to the mines that The Ruthless Heavens considers forest. Second, find out how often you need to kill something to be considered in battle.” He said as he was tapping the table with his hand.

“You said you were steadily gaining progression when you fought the Barghest even though you instantly killed the barghest, so there is an allowed downtime. Find how long it is, and if it is long enough you can easily exploit it. Simply have someone drag a Barghest to the forest-spot, and run out of the mine and kill it. Then run back in and continue mining. If you're lucky you will only need something like 5-10 minutes on travel time per kill and can spend the rest on mining and focusing on recuperation.”

Zac was stunned. He would never have thought of that method, and was glad he confided in the demon. He was a shady character but could also be very useful. And Ogras didn't know it, but his solution would also help him progress

his other Class skill for **[Loamwalker]** through all the running.

There was only one thing more to do before he headed toward the caves, and that was to buy the **[Thayer Consortia Headquarters]** and have them start buying his crystals. It was obvious that they were desperate to be bought, as they cost a fraction compared to most others for buying the building in the Town Shop, and Zac didn't want anyone else snatching the building up before he did.

Zac and Ogras moved toward where the large merchant compound was to be located. It was quite far from both his camp and the shipyard, with only trees and stones around. After a double-check, Zac opened up the Town Shop and bought the headquarters.

Soon changes to the area started appearing just as with the creation of the shipyard. Trees and rocks disappeared, and replacing them were gravel and cobblestones. Soon structures appeared as well, one by one sprouting up like mushrooms out of the ground. But that was where the similarities with the shipyard ended.

The Creator structures were crafted with meticulous care, looking pristine with mighty fractals covering every inch. But what appeared in front of the duo could almost be called a ghetto. The buildings were a mix of stone and wood structures that once might have been proper structures. But the houses looked like they had been abandoned and then put through decades of harsh weather.

There were broken windows, mold, tiles missing, and they could even spot a few buildings where a wall had simply collapsed. No fractals covered anything, and Zac was actually loath to enter most of the buildings from safety concerns. The only building that looked to be in decent order was also the largest one. It was a three-story building where each floor should have an area of roughly a thousand square meters, and if Zac had to guess it was the actual store for the Thayer Consortia. The other structures should be warehouses, support buildings, and homes for the employees.

“What is this shanty town?” Ogras asked in shock. “You might just have enlisted the worst merchants in the multi-verse, I can’t believe how poor they look.”

Zac was very much inclined to agree. The goal of merchants was to amass wealth, just like the goal of a cultivator was to get stronger. Judging by the state of disrepair of the structures he could only assume the Thayer Consortia was really incompetent at their job.

But there was nothing to do, there was no refund button in the Town Shop, and they could only suppress their misgivings and enter the shop. The inside was slightly better than the outside, and at least everything was spotlessly clean. It was the store as Zac expected, but it reminded him of a struggling convenience store with mostly empty shelves.

There were a few pieces of equipment at various racks, but they looked worse compared to the ones the demons used. There also were a few information crystals behind glass displays, but the displays weren’t even a quarter full. In some corners various materials were sold, and there also were some herbs and plants, though they all looked a bit dried out.

Manning the desk were a few humanoids that somewhat reminded Zac of gnomes. They were less than a meter tall but didn’t have the stockiness, or beardiness, of dwarves. Their skin was also light blue and they had deep sapphire-colored eyes, with pointed ears like elves. Perhaps they were genies?

Before Zac and Ogras could approach the clerks another genie came running toward the two. He looked much like the others, with the blue skin and no hair. He wore what looked like an old-fashioned suit, and had an ascot tied around his neck.

“Greetings honored customers, I am Calrin Thayer, Chairman of the Thayer Consortia. Excuse the slight disarray, we are currently setting everything up. Can I presume one of you is the distinguished Lord?”

Chapter 76: Business Tactics

Calrin looked over the reports and agreements strewn on his table, his feelings not much better compared to when he was holed up waiting for the Tsarun Clan to hunt him down. He had cried in relief when someone finally purchased their headquarters, the window with the teleportation prompt looking like a writ of amnesty.

He had thought that the Thayer Consortia would be able to slowly regroup and recover on this new world. The newly integrated planets and continents were filled with valuables that needed a buyer, and the natives seldom knew the worth of what they held in their hands. A single trade could result in a profit that would cover expenses for months.

But who would've expected that they got placed on a deserted island instead of some burgeoning town. Apart from a shipyard there wasn't a single building, and the Merchant's Window showed that Port Atwood, as the presumptive town was called, only housed one solitary citizen; its Lord.

Worse yet was the Lord's companion, the System-blasted Demon. For a second Calrin was ecstatic when he heard that the Lord controlled an actual Nexus Crystal Mine. That meant there was a Nexus Vein on the island, and sooner or later things like farms with valuable plants would pop up. Even cultivators would relocate here for the high density of energy, which would only help business further.

Until then he would be able to turn a tidy profit buying the crystals and reselling them through the Mercantile System. A native had no idea of value of things, and if they added a larger margin, who would know?

But that Demon wasn't actually a native, but a defected invader. He ruthlessly started to pressure down the profit margins to a razor's edge, even threatening them with a trade

embargo. He obviously had a general idea of the Thayer Corporation's situation and knew that if they didn't produce some profit and turnover, the System would rescind their business license.

Gone were the dreams of a mighty comeback, replaced with a nightmare of toiling under a demonic taskmaster for little to no profits.

Zac was quite happy with the result of the negotiations as he moved through the forest. Ogras kept proving his worth as a teammate. The little genie, whose race was actually called Sky Gnomes, made a big production of support and mutual cooperation after he heard about the Nexus Crystal Mine. After almost wiping away a tear of self-sacrifice he offered the most generous price of 35 Nexus Coins per Crystal.

The price seemed to have awoken a dragon in Ogras, and he started making a scene. It turned out that the value of a crystal was actually closer to 50 Nexus Coins, and after subtracting transaction costs for using the Mercantile System and some profit for the merchant, the crystals were generally bought for 44 to 46 crystals at most merchant shops. The price-gouging System-run stores only gave 35 crystals though, and it seemed that the gnome planned on offering the same price and pocketing the difference.

What followed was an almost surreal exchange between the gnome and the demon, where the demon initially wanted to get 54 coins per crystals, forcing the trading firm to eat a loss at each trade.

The gnome tried every trick in the book to keep the prices reasonable in order to make some profit. At one point he had even tearfully ordered one of the clerks to fetch a noose, as he said he would 'rather hang himself than keep suffering this kind of injustice'. Not long after the noose was long forgotten, and instead the chairman paraded two little Gnome Children in front of Zac and the Ogras.

They were some of the cutest things Zac had ever seen, but they were wearing frayed clothing and looked hungry with large puppy-dog eyes. Zac was tempted to stop the demon at

this point, but Ogras waved him away and ruthlessly pushed forward. Zac did however spot the demon surreptitiously place candies in each of the kid's hands, without pausing in his screaming contest with Calrin.

Ogras' trade tactic was simpler, as it was just a long stream of threats, insults, and angry gestures. He tried everything from threatening to fill the area with competing businesses to enacting trade embargoes on the Sky Gnomes.

Finally, the price they agreed upon was 47 Nexus Coin per refined crystal, a rate that obviously was one of the best one could get without selling them directly to a customer who needed them. Both Ogras and Calrin was heaving and sweating at this point, looking like they had just finished an arduous battle. Zac quickly handed over 11 000 crystals, and immediately received 517 000 Nexus Coins in return.

Next, Zac asked about a pill that could help with his situation with his pathways, but as expected the little gnome had nothing of that quality in the store. He did however promise to acquire one through his channels, but it didn't look like he even believed himself.

Content, Zac and Ogras left as there wasn't much else of value to buy in the shop. Besides, both of them were suffering from a lack of funds at the moment. Ogras told him that the System had confiscated all the demons' nexus coins when they stayed on Earth, but Zac wasn't convinced. After watching the previous display he was more inclined to believe that he simply refused to expose any hidden wealth.

Not long after they were done at the consortium they parted ways, with Ogras heading to the camp to start converting more raw crystals he had 'found' in the town. Meanwhile, Zac headed toward the mines to start mining himself while staying in the energy-rich atmosphere of the tunnels. Ogras estimated the daily turnover from the mine to be roughly 5 000 crystals now that most of the demons were gone and they were short on man-power.

That meant that together with whatever Zac managed to excavate the daily Nexus Coin gain would be roughly 250 000.

It didn't seem like too much compared to the prices of some of the structures in the Town Shop, but it was a steady source of wealth that could be increased as soon as more citizens arrived. And judging from the tunnels he had walked through before, the crystals would last for years.

That meant that before the horde arrived he would be able to afford the **[E-Grade Medium Scale Town Defense Array]** array he had spotted earlier for 5 000 000 Nexus Coins, and even add in some more fortifications.

After walking for half a day and killing a barghest every now and then, Zac finally reached the mines once again. Less than two days had actually passed since he last was here, but it felt like much longer for some reason.

After walking some distance into the tunnels he felt the air had filled up to the density of cosmic energy that suffused the depths and going any further wouldn't make the environment any better. Unless he went to that cave he woke up in, but it was too far into the mountain for convenience.

Thus began Zac's monotone days down in the mines. On the first day he only focused on recuperation and seeing whether staying here actually helped with his situation. He expended some cosmic energy by using the guidance system, and was ecstatic to notice that he actually recovered quicker here compared to at his camp. It looked like the demon had told the truth. The difference was small though, but it gave Zac some hope.

The following day he retrieved Alyn, enlisting her as a private teacher to go through various subjects about the System, Cultivation and the Multi-Verse. Every time he paused after having furiously whacked at the mines for a few hours they would go over some subject. Alyn also helped him recruit a few ranger demons that would lead a barghest to a patch of grass next to the mine entrance. It was the closest spot that System considered a forest, and killing a beast there did advance his quest.

After two days of trials he learned that he only needed to kill a monster every hour, and then that whole hour would be

considered as “fighting in the forest”. After that his daily life took on a very structured schedule.

He’d mine for roughly 45 minutes, then run out of the caves to kill a barghest. After running back to his mine-shaft he’d have a mini-lecture of 5 minutes with Alyn while he had a small break, before starting mining again. He felt a bit bad for the demoness having to just fiddle around for 55 minutes an hour, but she seemed perfectly content taking out a book and read in a comfortable couch. And Zac guessed it beat toiling to erect a wall.

On the fourth day Zac got ten identical axes to the two he had from a scared-looking demon. It looked like it would take some time until they warmed up to him. He didn’t want to use other weapons even while mining, and instead used his weapon of choice. His mining wasn’t only for gaining wealth, but also to improve his proficiency with his axes.

Every time he hit into the wall, no matter if it was with the edge, the spike, or the butt, he tried to remember the trajectories and methods that he learned from the guidance system. He had realized that while blindly following the paths had made him stronger, there was a limit. If he wanted to truly improve he needed to internalize the teachings and understand *why* he swung like he did.

He realized that just some small differences in how he applied force, or a slight change in angle on impact, could have a huge difference in how much rock he managed to cut. As Zac progressed through the days more and more rock started to gather at his feet. His furious assault on the mountain walls kept damaging the axes, and he was forced to keep circulating them and let the old ones rest.

As time passed he felt that his pathways were truly slowly healing, as every day he could sense his recovery speed had increased a bit. Still, the improvement was very limited, and he wasn’t sure if he’d make it in time for the beast horde.

If he had to point out one negative about his current lifestyle was the complete and utter lack of progression in levels. He

unequipped his amulet long ago, and the few barghest he killed per day could barely move his level forward.

Zac had simply run out of targets on the island. The demons and their beast hordes were some sorts of allies by now, leaving only the small critters in the forest. There also were the salamanders, but those huge lumbering beasts were too few and far in between to actually be an effective target for improving further.

He knew that he would likely get more targets than he could wish for as soon as the beast hordes arrived, but it clearly showed the long term problem that he had outgrown the island. If he wanted to improve further he needed to venture out into the world.

Chapter 77: What is the System?

Zac was wiping off some sweat as he sat down on a small stool. He had been mining and running back and forth between the tunnels and the plot of forest for over six hours, and needed a break. This was the ninth day in the mines, and his speed of accruing crystals had progressed greatly as his mastery with his axes improved. He brought out a canteen of water and some food as he looked over to his companion in the tunnel.

Alyn was sitting in a comfortable chair reading a book at the moment, seemingly unaware of the clangor in the tunnels. She had been extremely uncomfortable being left alone with him in the beginning but was starting to warm up to him a bit it seemed. Zac unceasingly peppered her with questions about various aspects of the System during every break he took, and instead of being annoyed like Ogras she seemed to be very much in favor of his thirst for knowledge.

“So, you’ve explained so many things about the System to me. But you haven’t explained what the System itself is. Does anyone know?” Zac probed.

The demoness put down her book and looked over to Zac.

“I was wondering when you were going to ask. In fact, almost everyone knows what the System, as you call it, is and how it came to be. It is no secret. But to explain that you first need to know about The Ancient Empire,” she said, quickly going into lecturing mode.

“Millions upon millions of years ago the System did not exist. Instead, cultivators strove for immortality by cultivating the Dao without any guidance, windows, attributes, or prompts. They used their cultivation techniques to gather the Spiritual

Energy in the cosmos, and improved by reaching higher and higher cultivation stages.”

“In this ancient era there existed an endlessly powerful empire, which stood on top of the cultivation world for millions of years. It spread over myriad worlds in the universe and unceasingly kept expanding. Leading this great nation was a man called Emperor Limitless. He was said to have reached the peak of cultivation, and many still consider him the strongest being to have ever existed. Of course, many also believe that the System has allowed the powerhouses of the multi-verse to reach further heights compared to the ancient cultivators.”

“Emperor Limitless had already reached the peak of cultivation long ago, and instead set his boundless ambition upon his empire. His goal was to turn all creation into his empire, to control all life in existence.”

“Therefore he waged wars, fighting for thousands and thousands of years, the empire ever expanding. The battlefields grew more numerous, and the empire actually started to run out of soldiers. Trillions of lives were lost in the battle over millions of worlds, and the empire had problems producing new powerful warriors. Almost all cultivators were forced into the battle, leaving few competent teachers behind to train the next generation.”

“Emperor limitless, and a few of his closest generals and magistrates, came up with a daring solution. They wished to create a synthetic being that would connect with every single cultivator in the Empire, and train them into strong warriors. A cosmic teacher that would lead the empire to further heights, as no potential genius would go unnoticed, and no cultivator would train inefficiently due to bad teachings.”

“The creation of this entity took an astounding time, and everyone that worked on the project died generation after generation from old age, except Emperor Limitless with his almost infinite longevity. The resources that were poured into the project can’t even be calculated, and just a small fraction of it would cause a bloody storm to erupt even on an A-ranked continent.”

“But finally they were done. The last step was to activate it and attach it to the Heavenly Dao itself, allowing it to spread to all space. Billions and billions of the strongest of the Ancient Empire gathered at their main continent, and together infused this construct larger than a sun with energy.”

“The activation was a success, and the cosmic being spoke its first words to the world.”

“What words did it say?” Zac interjected, entranced by the story.

“‘Insufficient energy’. Those were the first two words of the System, and every cultivator in existence heard it. What followed were the dark ages.”

“Something had gone horribly wrong with the being, and it forcefully started absorbing energy. First the cultivators part of the activation were absorbed until they died, even the emperor was almost killed. He escaped after paying a terrible price, but the System wasn’t done and started absorbing the ambient energy from the universe.”

“The absorption continued, and soon once glorious cultivation havens were turned into wastelands due to lack of Spiritual Energy. Even worse, the Dao of the Heavens had somehow become clouded, and progression on the path of cultivation became impossibly hard. All the powerhouses in the multiverse were furious, as Emperor Limitless’ experiment essentially cut off their path of progression.”

“With the empire being weakened and all forces banding together, the Ancient Empire crumbled. Emperor Limitless was slain as well, as the System had stolen most of his power already. The chaotic times continued for a million years, and the sparse energy and obscured Dao became the new norm. Emperor Limitless was remembered as the sinner of the world of cultivation.”

“But one day it all changed. Energy came flooding back into the universe, and all cultivators once more heard the voice. This time it said ‘Initiation complete.’ After a million years the System had completed all the preparations, and then it started to actually diligently fulfill its purpose. It opened the path of

progression again, and started to train warriors and powerhouses. All cultivators that resided on planets that once were part of the Ancient Empire got integrated with the System, just like you and me.“

“It soon became clear that many things had changed, as the System had constrained and categorized the Myriad Dao itself. Gone were the cultivation levels and cultivation through meridians, and instead empowering through levels was introduced.”

“The fact that the Dao was usurped is why a few factions in the multi-verse, such as the Technocrats, call the System ‘The Cosmic Warden’. They believe that by constraining the Dao it has cut off the avenue for new Dao’s, such as Dao of Technology or Dao of Guns, to emerge. Their goal is to destroy the System, and in their words ‘free the Dao’. Other factions consider the System the liberator of the multi-verse though, and are stuck in a perpetual war with the Technocrats,” Alyn animatedly explained.

The fact that the System was an ancient training system gone haywire seemed like a huge cosmic joke to Zac. An almost endless amount of beings had been affected because this Ancient Empire wanted to streamline their war efforts. But at least it explained why it wanted people to struggle and take risks. Its very purpose was to create strong warriors and even powerhouses, and those could only be born through battle and hardship.

“So why did the System integrate Earth? If the System is only supposed to be a training system for this Ancient Empire, why bring us into the mix? Was Earth part of the Ancient Empire?” Zac asked.

“No. Earth isn’t even in the same universe as the Ancient Empire was located. The System not only fulfilled its purpose by training warriors, it also somehow inherited the goal of Emperor Limitless. Since the System’s birth all that time ago it has kept expanding. After a while it spread to the whole universe it resided in, and soon after it started finding new ones to spread its influence into. Since then it has kept ceaselessly expanding.”

“Of course, this is just the most generally accepted theory of the System’s origin. The reason that it’s taken as the truth is that it is the history that is taught by The System’s pixies in the tutorial of all newly integrated worlds. There are some that believe that the System hides its true origins for some sinister purpose, but such things are far beyond us small F-rank individuals.

“The exact details can’t be confirmed for certain, as it happened in another universe an impossibly long time ago. We do however know that the Ancient Empire was real, and that it was ruled by an Emperor Limitless. There are multiple historic remains from the empire, and there are many collectors of relics from that long lost time.”

Zac was truly in awe of the power of this synthetic being, spreading through whole universes with nothing being able to stop it. At least if what Alyn said was true, Zac didn’t feel that the System was either good or evil. It was just an impossibly powerful AI let loose, eternally fulfilling its purpose. Unfortunately for Earth that meant that it would throw the planet into Struggle, heedless of the cost in lives. As long as strong warriors were created out of the turmoil, the System was happy.

He briefly thought about the Technocrats. They had to be truly brave or true lunatics to want to fight against the System. It was like going to war against the basic rules of the universe by this point, like trying to fight Death or Time.

It seemed that there was some parts missing from Alyn’s explanation though. From her description it seemed that the System was designed to train and strengthen cultivators for the Ancient Empire. But the system did much more than that. It also helped mortals become stronger, and it also seemed to work with Beasts somehow.

It even had side-features such as the Town Shop and the Mercantile System, which enabled trade over the vast distances of the Multi-Verse. And that was just what Zac had discovered so far in the scant two months since being introduced to it. Perhaps there were even more functions that waited to be discovered.

“How come the System affects all beings then, like mortals and even beasts? Didn’t you say it was designed to train cultivators?” Zac probed.

“Good question. It as you said, the system initially only trained cultivators, and only those able to cultivate were connected to the System. But the system has changed a few times throughout history, each change disrupting the way of life in the multi-verse. To understand these changes we must talk about the Apostates. Those scant few who managed to throw the laws of the universe out the window, and bend reality to their wills.”

“The number of Apostates that has emerged since the system was created can be counted on two hands. Each was a being of unlimited power who actually managed to change the way the system operates. Very little is known about the first Apostate, not even his name. He is simply known as ‘The First Defier’.”

Chapter 78: The Apostates

The subject of the origin of the System was very interesting to Zac. He had a hard time imagining an empire strong enough that it dared to wage war against a whole universe, and an individual powerful enough to change the basic rules of the universe by creating the System. Just a glance of someone like Emperor Limitless was probably enough to blast him into molecules.

The subject of Apostates also piqued his interest to the point that he actually put down his axe and decided to keep listening instead of resuming his mining operations.

“So you mean that these so-called Apostates managed to actually change how the System worked?” he asked intrigued.

“The actual reasons are quite unclear. Some believe that the System rewards the Apostates for reaching the peak of their path by letting them design or change aspects of how it operates. Other say that they reached such a height that their ideals and convictions shape reality itself, and the System was forced to comply. None of the Apostate has actually broached the subject to tell us what the truth is.” Alyn answered.

“Are they still alive?” Zac probed.

“It’s not clear, at least not to us in lowly D-ranked worlds. From what has been passed down through the multi-verse the last Apostate and change happened roughly 280 million years ago. Even with the enormous longevity of such supreme beings, they shouldn’t be alive unless immortality is real. Besides, the Apostates reportedly disappeared roughly at the same time the change they brought to the system appeared. That’s why a third theory for the change is that the Apostates actually merged with the System.”

Zac felt it was reasonable that even the school-mistress didn’t have all the answers. These were the top characters in the

multi-verse, and there should be many hidden things behind the curtains that the general population wasn't qualified to know.

“So, what changes did they bring?”

“Well, we can begin with the latest Apostate. He is called the Apostate of Greed, but his real name was Orlan Stillsun. His contribution was the Mercantile System that Calrin and all other merchant organizations use. He was a progenitor of a planet just like you and rose to the peak in only a few dozens of millennia.

“But his class wasn't combat-oriented, and there are very few mentions of him ever battling. The peak he rose to was through business, and his company is still around today, even though he is not. Being able to get a Stillsun Family shop in your Lordship is one of the greatest signs of your status in the multi-verse. Of course, they would never open a branch on a D-Ranked world, as they still are one of the most powerful entities in the multi-verse.

“His accomplishments were only possible because of the Apostate of Mercy. I have no real knowledge of her, and I don't even know if there is a family line that can trace to her like the Apostate of Greed. She reportedly felt sorry for the myriad people in the multi-verse being forced into conflict. In her era, all classes were combat-oriented, and the only method to get stronger was to fight and kill.

“She enabled the non-combat class system, also known as the craftsman class system. Thanks to her it is possible to gain levels and improve classes without having to risk your life in constant battle. Of course, the craftsmen need to still arduously improve and practice their craft to gain cosmic energy and levels.”

“What about you?” Zac asked.

“It is generally a bit rude to ask someone about their class, but it doesn't matter in this case. My class is simply Teacher, an F-Ranked Common class. My skills pertain to knowledge retention and dissemination. I also get ocular skills that can help me see cosmic energy circulation in others so I can guide

students' cultivation practice. I even get some defensive spells to protect myself and my students, but no offensive ones. And I am actually gaining Cosmic Energy as I am explaining these things to you, as I am fulfilling the purpose of my class."

"Are there upgrade paths for the Teacher class as well?"

"Any class has the potential to reach the peak of power, non-combat classes included. There are some restrictions in general when it comes to class upgrades. We explained some of it when we discussed Heritages earlier, but this is a good point to go over class upgrades." Alyn said, swiftly jumping in between subjects.

"The first class upgrade is at level 75. There are generally three things that are needed to upgrade to E-Grade. Race, Dao, and Achievements. Your race needs to be E-class, you need to have grasped at least one Dao-seed and your actions must enable the class. Some classes have even more restrictions, such as status restrictions or Title-requirements, but those are exceptions rather than the rule. Classes with higher Rarity almost always have more stringent requirements in Dao and Achievements.

"If you don't fulfill all three requirements you will not be able to upgrade your class and progress from level 75. It is therefore known as the first bottleneck. Furthermore, many are able to upgrade their class but still chose to stay down there, even until the day they die."

"Why would they not upgrade if they are able to?" Zac asked confused. There seemed to be only upsides to upgrading and becoming stronger.

"There are a few reasons people stay on at F-class, at least for a bit. First, there are certain trials and titles that are only accessible before advancing. The Tower of Eternity is one such example. The second, and more important reason is that people desperately try to gain access to a better class" Alyn said.

"What do you mean?" Zac already felt pretty happy getting a Rare class, but if it could increase the rarity even further when upgrading to the next tier, that would obviously be better. The

tower thing sounded interesting as well, but one thing at a time.

“Achievements is the third requirement, and the most diffuse. Only with a full heritage can you know exactly what you need to do to be able to gain a class. But examples are to fight in wars, to have killed enough enemies, to have seen and explored certain areas. Generally to have grown as a being and have accomplished things above the norm.

“Warriors do not only wait to get a better class in order to gain better skills and attribute points, they do it since they do not want to cut off their path of cultivation. There is another minimum requirement for class advancement that is related to class rarity. An F-ranked class can be any rarity and still gain an upgrade. But an E-ranked class need to be at least Uncommon ranked to be able to advance further. So if you pick an E-ranked common class, then your path of cultivation will end at E-rank, no matter how deep your insight of the Dao is or how grand your achievements are.

“And with every stage, the requirement increase one step. A D-Ranker needs to have at least a Rare class, a C-Ranker at least an Epic one and so on. There is an endless amount of individuals with greater ambition than talent that throw themselves into perilous situations to gain achievements in hope of gaining a better option for a class. Most die, but some succeed. Of course, the Fruit of Ascension you ate is a shortcut in a sense.” Alyn stated with some obvious desire in her eyes as she mentioned the fruit.

“What do the Fruits I ate have to do with class options?” Zac asked confused. He thought they were only good for upgrading his Race, and that was why they were named after Ascension.

“Ogras didn’t tell you?” Alyn asked surprised. She hesitated a long while before she seemed to have come to a decision.

“Well, this part you didn’t hear from me then. The main goal of a Fruit of Ascension isn’t improving your Race, although it is a good time-saving effect for most people, cultivators included. It is the effect it has on your class upgrades. It’s only

a D-ranked treasure, so its effect is limited, but essentially it improves your choices when you upgrade your class.

“Even if a warrior normally only qualified for common classes when upgrading to E-Rank, after eating a Fruit of Ascension they would be guaranteed to only have uncommon classes to choose from. If you could already get uncommon ones, it is likely you will get Rare options. It can even help push you toward getting an Epic class if you were close to qualifying but falling a bit short. The fruit is a cheat, or a shortcut, that immensely improves a warrior’s future prospects. That is why it’s considered one of the greatest D-Ranked natural treasures” she finished with a longing sigh.

Zac’s heart started to beat rapidly, finally understanding the gravity of what he had eaten. No wonder everyone had scrambled to get those fruits on the mountains. He had already heard that most warriors in the multi-verse, even on established D-Rank planets, started out as a Common class. This fruit would enable them to reach at least D-Rank in the future.

In his case the use was still great, as it might be what pushed him into getting an Epic class when upgrading. From what he understood an epic class was extremely rare and it would be a huge event if an Epic class emerged on a D-ranked world. He didn’t wish to stay on this topic though, as he still had another fruit sitting in his pouch like a hot potato.

“So what did the other Apostates change?” he asked, changing the subject.

“The one before Lady Mercy was called the Apostate of Order. He was a great scholar who strove to understand all Dao under the heavens. The change he brought was the codifying of the Dao. You should know it as the patterns, or fractals you see from everything from our weapons, to skills, even to your pathways.” Alyn answered, jumping back to the original topic without any hiccup.

“It is thanks to him we can gain Dao Seeds and further our understanding of the Dao through study of the fractals” she continued.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked, once again getting derailed by an interesting topic. He still hadn’t found a way to upgrade his Dao Seed, and had tried various tricks.

“The fractals contain a hint of the Dao. It is most clear in the fractals awarded from the So-called Seed-quests, as they emanate the Dao itself. But it is possible to gain insight from almost anything, from the inscriptions on a piece of gear to continuous usage of a skill. It is generally more effective to study fractals than to sit in silent meditation, though many consider a combination of the two the best.

“In any case. The two first Apostates do not actually have any Apostate designations but are rather called The Beast Progenitor and The First Defier, and they are strong contenders for the title of the most powerful beings since the inception of cultivation.”

Chapter 79: The Lifebringer

Zac was walking back through the forest toward the Camp. He had spent the last 16 days in the mines and felt the need to check up on the battle preparations. He wanted to be done with everything something like 10 days before the first horde arrived in case something went wrong, and he was now halfway to his deadline. While Ogras had proven himself quite useful he wasn't too comfortable leaving the demon to his own devices in his camp. Besides, who knew how many crystals he was stashing away while Zac was preoccupied.

Zac sighed as he knew there was nothing much he could do about that for now, as long as it was kept within reasonable limits. He would just have to see it as a salary for the demon. As he walked he activated the [**Axe Mastery**] guidance system, once more following its intrepid pathways.

Two days ago as he was swinging away at the tunnel wall he actually evolved the skill. It seemed that the method to level up Axe Mastery was to learn and internalize everything the trajectories had to offer, and he had arduously kept trying to improve his form over the last two weeks. It was now at Middle Mastery, just like [**Chop**]. The changes weren't as obvious as with his other skill though, only adding some techniques and strikes.

It did however also incorporate both his Dao of Heaviness and his Skill [**Chop**] into the mix. Just as it before had fluidly changed between various techniques and attacks, it now also incorporated those two elements in the ever-changing barrage of strikes. He had quickly realized some new usage methods for the skills, such as using [**Chop**] like a retractable lance, almost instantly impaling enemies as the energy edge expanded when he held the axe with the right angle. For that attack he didn't even have to move his arm, just charge the skill as he held it stationary, making it a great surprise strike.

He also found out he used the Dao empowerment inefficiently, since he only really needed to empower the strike in the last second as it approached the enemy. Until now he charged his strike up as he did with cosmic energy, starting to infuse the Dao even before the swing started. That both gave the defender a warning and wasted too much mental energy.

Unfortunately, the improved [**Axe Mastery**] didn't show any strikes where the Dao and his skill were combined, like with his final furious strikes in the battle between him and Rydel. It also didn't provide him with a new vision like it did when he first received the skill. He had hoped that the skill would give him a new vision that would help him finally understand the Dao of Sharpness.

He felt he was actually progressing there though, and might grasp it by his own soon. He was diligently trying to improve the sense of sharpness of his strikes, cutting increasingly large gashes in the tunnel walls.

There was another reason for Zac leaving the tunnels this day. He was very close to completing the quests for both his [**Loamwalker**] skill and [**Forester's Constitution**], and he felt it would be better to complete those skills when he was alone.

Since Alyn explained to Zac how Luck worked he was far more ready to listen to his gut. It turned out that the attribute wasn't only good for things such as winning in card games or getting good rewards from quests. Luck was an extremely convenient attribute that greatly improved a warrior's survivability, and cultivators across the multi-verse desperately looked for means to improve their Luck. There were actually fruits like the Fruit of Ascension that could permanently improve an attribute, and those that improved Luck were hundreds to thousands of times more expensive compared to the other ones.

It could be said that Luck gave a person a sixth sense, and the higher the luck the more pronounced it would become. At lower levels it could vaguely sense that something was wrong, causing a general sense of discomfort. As luck improved it would give the person an acute sense of danger in case his life

was in peril, allowing him to survive where an unlucky person would die.

Zac thought back to some of his fights, especially the ambush in the caves. He had suddenly felt an extreme sense of danger just before an arrow slammed into his head, and it was that feeling that saved his life. Only now did he understand that it came from his extremely high Luck.

Alyn had also told him that it didn't only work against bad things, but also for fortuitous encounters as the attribute kept increasing. She mentioned how a person with extremely high Luck could sometimes get an almost irresistible urge to walk in some random direction, and as long as he followed his gut there would be a treasure waiting at the end. But to get lucky to that point one needed hundreds of points in the attribute.

Therefore, since Zac's gut told him he should be alone when completing the quest he didn't hesitate to head out, using the fact he wanted to check out the camp as a convenient excuse. He once again checked the class skills.

Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester's Constitution Skill. (29/30)

Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill. (983/1000)

After confirming the status he kept moving through the forest, westward rather than going south. He wanted to get out of the way, as there was some foot traffic through the forest that could interrupt him. Or rather jungle as it started to feel like. The path between Port Atwood and Azh'Rodum, which was the new name for the Demon Town, was getting to the point that an actual trail was getting created.

Ogras had decided to rename it since it didn't make sense for the town to be named after the clan they abandoned. From Alyn's explanation, Rodum simply meant capital in their native language, and the Azh-prefix was a reminder of their origin.

Apparently, there had been sort of an uprising in Azh'Rodum while Zac diligently trained in the mines. Zac learned that

Ogras' influence came from his extremely powerful grandfather, but his own reputation was less than stellar. Some demons felt that they would do a better job at running the town now that they didn't have to fear repercussions from the clan or Ogras' ancestor, and sought to seize control.

It was a group of demons who had been stuck in the mines looking for Zac when the incursion ended, and who were still disgruntled that they couldn't get home. Different from most of the town, the demons who were in the mines had no choice whether to go home or not and were involuntarily stranded on Earth.

The rebellion had been shortlived and extremely bloody. Ogras unleashed a level of power that dumbfounded the town, and Alyn was still shocked as she retold the events. Just as interestingly, Ogras was aided by multiple powerful demons that had been thought to be non-combat class individuals until that moment. They sprung up from nowhere and suppressed the town with their power as well. They captured the dissidents in quick order and with overwhelming power.

The rebellion did not just end with the rebels being caught. What followed caused even the stoic Alyn to be shaken. Ogras ruthlessly tortured the group of demons in front of the rest of the town, their screams echoing through Azh'Rodum for hours before they finally were allowed to die. After that Ogras had once again become an unquestioned leader. Zac didn't believe that those methods were sustainable, ruling with fear could only take one so far. But they were strapped for time and Zac needed the demon's to work as if their lives depended on it, because in a sense they did.

During the past two weeks Zac learned a few words and sentences so that he could at least greet the demons who didn't possess the language skill [**Book of Babel**]. The name greatly confused Zac when he heard its name since it was clearly based on the biblical origin myth. But Alyn explained that the skill also translated many things into something that made sense for the listener. For example, the skill was named after an ancient Devil with a million mouths in demonic, which was based on their own mythology.

Soon he was close to the edge on the west part of the island, far away from any Demon activity. Zac marveled at the surroundings, as the forest had changed so much after only two weeks in the cave. Some trees were starting to grow impossibly large, and all sorts of plants and flowers peppered the forest floor. Many of the flowers were things that he'd never seen before, and he wondered whether they were mutations or something that had drifted over from a neighboring island.

As he walked along he killed a barghest every now and then in order to keep his quest progressing. He hadn't been too surprised when he learned that the demons sent through hundreds of thousands of the beasts, as they were literally everywhere on the island.

When he asked why they didn't send more demons instead Alyn explained that going through an incursion had a cost, and the more powerful a warrior the more expensive it would be. Non-combat classes like Alyn were somewhat affordable to send through, but individuals like Ogras and Rydel alone cost almost as much as the whole barghest hordes.

Suddenly Zac felt the familiar gathering of energy in his mind and his heartbeat sped up. Ogras had told him that the skill might be a seed-quest that was designed to award a Dao Seed, but Zac didn't dare to hope for it after he'd already got a vision for the Dao of Axes.

Alyn had explained that a rare class could get two Dao Seed quests at the most, and an Epic class was needed to be able to get a third. Even getting two was considered great luck, and generally an indication that the Rare class was top-tier amongst its kind.

Zac quickly ran to a close-by tree and nimbly climbed its branches. After a thorough check for any inhabitants, he sat down on one of the wider branches and closed his eyes.

He was a small pod in the darkness. Nothing existed apart from the warmth of the surroundings, and the refreshing pearls of water that sometimes ran along his surface. Time was irrelevant, and the only thing that mattered was to keep

reaching upward. Zac had no idea how long he stayed in the darkness, until one day a burst of light, or rather of life, inundated him as he struggled upward.

He had broken through the earth, a small sapling being greeted by the endless sky. The blast of light woke up Zac for a second, and he realized he was in another vision. This one was different though, as it seemed endless. Days quickly became years as Zac slowly forgot about his quest, his Town, even himself. The only thing on his mind was to keep absorbing life and growing.

Seasons came and went and beset him with an ever-changing trial by nature itself. Winds whipped his branches, trying to rip his leaves away from him. Rain pelted him relentlessly, quickly turning from a refreshing shower to a deluge threatening to drown him. The water froze and became a layer of snow and ice, freezing him and forcing him dormant, dreaming of the sun. But the trials always ended and were sooner or later replaced with the warm kiss of the sun.

Zac started to realize he was different from his brethren around him, as while their growth stopped after a few centuries, he kept growing. Soon he was towering in the sky, his kin only small dots hidden among his roots. He kept growing for millions of years, unceasingly absorbing the warmth of the sun and the sweet life in the atmosphere. Every inch of his being vibrated with vitality, every leaf glistening with life.

Small beings started to live around him, treating him with great reverence. Some even started to move up to his branches, forever denouncing the ground. Zac let them stay on, as some company was welcome in this eternity.

He kept growing upward, eventually breaking through the vault of the heavens. Sparkling dots glimmered in the darkness, as Zac started floating in the vast expanse. His old friend the sun stayed behind, but the whole cosmos was provided him with sustenance instead. He once again went dormant as he floated through the void, ever growing. Every place he passed as he slept was changed, desolate worlds rousing themselves, suddenly teeming with vitality.

He was the Lifebringer.

Chapter 80: Loamwalker

Zac woke up, disoriented for quite some time before he found his bearings. This vision was even more impactful compared to the last in a sense. Living millions and millions of years was a completely surreal experience for someone who hadn't even turned 30 in reality. Luckily the passage of time was made fuzzy somehow for him, otherwise he might have turned mad.

The vision showed him the peak of power just like the one with the axeman, but in a completely different sense. That tree he had grown into was truly gargantuan and reminded him of the old tale of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. It was larger than a star by the end, but more importantly, it contained an endless source of life.

Zac closed his eyes again and started to imprint the feelings he felt in his mind. He knew this time was critical, and wouldn't waste it. It was only hours later he once again opened his eyes and checked out his new skill.

[Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Early. Man and Nature One Entity. Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%. Effects doubled while in a forest. Upgradeable.]

Next, he quickly checked his monster horde quest and breathed out in relief as he saw the timer. Only one day had passed in the real world, even though it felt like eons in his vision. He was once more happy he didn't finish this quest in the caves. While everything looked fine on the surface, he didn't relish the thought of going into a trance for a whole day right in front of a bunch of demons. Who knew which one of them held a secret grudge for a friend or family member killed, just waiting for an opportunity to strike? Relaxed, he once more refocused on the skill.

He had initially thought the Forester's Constitution would be some sort of defensive skill like the Stone Skin he saw the

earth mages use, but he was only partly correct. It was rather a passive buff skill that worked like a title that improved his survivability. The bonus was quite good, especially considering it would give double the bonus at most parts of the island.

Zac wondered if he could carry around a patch of forest in a pouch, and throw it out whenever he was entering a battle. That way he'd always have the improved bonus. He was curious if there were any other functions of the skill, as [**Axe Mastery**] had given him the training system, so he tried finding another pocket space in his body.

As he suspected, when he turned his gaze inward he found another area in his body, this time in his chest. The last fractal he gained in this manner looked like a large axe, emanating the Dao of Heaviness. This fractal rather looked like the Tree of Life he saw in the vision, but inert.

Next, he checked out his status page to see what other changes might have occurred.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

36

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class,

**Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500,
Planetary Aegis**

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early

Strength

189

Dexterity

69

Endurance

147

Vitality

105

Intelligence

57

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

538317

He actually already acquired another Dao Seed during his meditation without even noticing it. It was called the Dao Seed of Trees, and a prompt showed its properties.

[Dao Seed of Trees – Early. Vitality +10, Endurance +5]

The properties of the Dao indicated that it wasn't a Dao meant for battle, but he was fine with that. He already had the Dao of Heaviness for battle, and he was making inroads on the Dao of Sharpness from his activities in the mines. Having a defensive

Dao to accompany the offensive ones seemed quite good. And if he was going to fight in a sea of beasts, having an improved Endurance and Vitality would come in quite handy.

He was a bit disappointed that the Seed he gained felt pretty distant from the supreme entity that was the Tree of Life. Then again, the vision of the axeman was quite distant from the seed of heaviness as well. Besides, Ogras had already warned him from hoping he would gain some high tiered concept as a Dao.

Zac knew what to do now that he knew he had a new Dao Seed, and started channeling the Dao of Trees into the fractal, and it lit up with a green luster.

The once dead tree started to emanate an aura, but it wasn't oppressive like the one from his axe. Instead, it gave a refreshing feeling, but also spoke of unyielding perseverance. Of course, the aura was like a firefly against the towering sun that was the Tree of Life in his vision.

If the endpoint of his first vision was the Dao of Axe or Dao of Destruction, then this one rather led toward the Dao of Life or Dao of Nature. The duality of his vastly different Seeds reminded Zac of Yin and Yang, and he felt that it was an extremely well-balanced foundation to build his future upon.

No prompts lit up his surroundings like with the last skill when he infused the tree made from fractals, and the only discernible difference was that he felt it started to emanate a warmth that spread out throughout his body. It felt a bit like when he drank the azure water, but he instinctively knew that this warmth wasn't hurting him.

He tried swinging his axe a bit while he was infused with the Dao of Trees, but he felt no improvement in his speed or strength. He was even having trouble keeping the Dao active as he moved around, the warm feeling noticeably subsiding. It made sense since trees weren't really mobile unless ents were a thing in the multi-verse. Besides, Zac had already surmised that the new Dao wasn't meant for battle from the attributes it awarded, and this somewhat confirmed it.

Having an idea he cut a wound on his left arm, and once again sat down. As he started to infuse the Dao and some cosmic

energy into the tree again, he felt the warmth properly spread out once more. The wound on his arm started itching within seconds, and Zac felt how the warmth moved towards his wound and started healing it. It wasn't to the point that he could see the improvements with his naked eye, but he knew it was improving his recovery rate. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to work on his damaged pathways, at least not with Early mastery.

Satisfied he once again focused on the status screen. He noticed that there was no new title this time for attaining a second Dao. He felt it should be due to the fact that there was no award for a second Dao, rather than multiple people having beaten him to it. There shouldn't be too many who already had a second Dao, it wasn't like one could just stare at a fire for a few days and suddenly know the Dao of Fire.

He realized he still had three free points from his level when the Herald died. After some hesitation he allocated them into Dexterity, bringing the stat to 73. Alyn told him earlier that the general view on the connection between Dexterity and Strength in the multiverse was that one of the stats shouldn't be more than 100% larger than the other. After that, the effectiveness started to wear off.

For example with great Dexterity but no strength one would be able to hit the enemies in a dizzying blur, but each strike would be too weak to do proper damage. Conversely, Zac's case was that he possessed monstrous Strength, but very low Dexterity. His strikes would be strong, but they would be slow and clumsy, making it easy to deflect or dodge them.

It had only really been a problem when he faced Rydel so far, but in the future he would meet more and more enemies with stats that could match his, so he needed to get his stats balanced as soon as possible.

It felt a bit weird to forgo his min-max strategy that always had been his method when playing games, but he needed to get used to the fact that video game knowledge could only take him so far in this reality. Of course, there were exceptions to the general guidelines of stat-allocation, but you really needed to know what you were doing.

Zac felt that he should stick to the most-accepted route for now at least, and only change it up in the future if he was absolutely certain. Besides, his Strength would keep increasing through his Dao and his class-bonuses even if he didn't specifically allocate any more stats there for a while.

Finally done with everything he set out toward Port Atwood, but only after an hour of walking he was once again interrupted. This time it was his **[Loamwalker]** quest that was completed. Eagerly he checked the skill out, and as he expected this time it was a fractal that went on his legs. More specifically it was two identical fractals that were placed on the soles of his feet, directly touching the ground below.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately infused the new fractals with energy. As he stood still he noticed no difference, but when he took a step the world turned blurry for an instant. Afterward, he found himself standing two meters away from his original position. The skill actually increased the distance he traversed somehow.

Zac kept trying to figure the skill out by repeatedly moving around, but he had a hard time grasping what the skill actually did. Initially, he thought that it teleported him small distances, but he noticed that the movement wasn't instantaneous. Next, he guessed that he got super speed while he moved, but he felt that wasn't quite right either. He tried swinging an axe while he moved, but the movement was far quicker compared to his swing. It was as though the earth moved around him, rather than him moving on the earth.

Did the skill somehow disconnect him from earth's rotation? That couldn't be correct either, as he had no problems moving in any direction. After a while he gave up trying to explain it with logic, and could only conclude he magically moved quickly somehow. As long as he was touching the earth, that is. He also tried jumping and running, but as soon as he stopped touching the ground with at least one foot, the effect disappeared.

He kept using **[Loamwalker]** as he walked toward his camp in order to get used to the skill. It was an odd feeling to move faster when he leisurely walked compared to when he ran.

After a while he was forced to stop using the skill, as the consumption of Cosmic Energy was quite high. It wasn't made for long-distance movement, but all in all he was quite happy with the skill.

He wouldn't be able to do magical feats such as strolling in the air as Rydel did, but the skill would be quite convenient in battle. He could keep moving between targets deceptively fast, and both use the skill for ambush and retreat. Of course, it would take some practice until he was proficient in combining the movement skill with battle skills.

His grasp over how far he walked right now was terrible, and he slammed into trees like a barghest four times in a short duration due to his lack of control. He could only put it aside for now and keep walking until he arrived at Port Atwood.

The wall was coming along nicely, and it was even taller compared to the one in the Azh'Rodum. The demons knew a Beast Horde was coming and didn't dare slack off. If the town fell their settlement would be next, and they wouldn't have the defenses of strong arrays or System-bought fortifications helping them out there. Saving Port Atwood was essential, even from a selfish standpoint.

He entered through a gate and started to look for Ogras. He couldn't find him anywhere, and he wasn't able to ask the resting demons either, as none of those present seemed to possess **[Book of Babel]**. He first went to the merchant compound to check whether the demon was there. Calrin met up with him, and after a few pleasantries explained that the demon hadn't been there today.

Zac also asked for a status update regarding his order, but Calrin explained he still hadn't been able to acquire a pill that could heal pathways, looking a bit embarrassed. Zac sighed in disappointment but thanked him and left, heading for the shipyard.

Ogras shouldn't have any reason to approach the Creators, but he couldn't be sure. As he closed in on the shipyard, he actually heard some subdued voices. Suspicious, he brought out his axe and closed in on the source of the sounds. Soon he

saw Ogras, and together with him were two other male demons Zac hadn't seen before.

“Ah, you're here. That makes things easier,” Ogras said, as two spears wrought from shadows impaled the chests of the demons, instantly killing them.

Chapter 81: Subjects

“What the fuck are you doing?” Zac loudly exclaimed, shocked as the two demons fell lifelessly to the ground.

“These two were snooping around the shipyard on their breaks. I’m not sure what their goal was, but we couldn’t have them walk around as they wished. These two will also set an example for any other curious individuals,” the demon tartly explained, as he brought out an axe identical to those Zac use from his pouch.

With two swift swings he decapitated the lifeless bodies before he slammed the axe into the thin wounds on their chests, effectively masking their true cause of death. Zac mutely looked on having some problems processing what was happening. Was the demon framing him right in front of his eyes? Ogras felt Zac’s stare and glanced at his direction, giving a slight shrug.

“It’s better if you killed them. It will remind the others that you are not to be provoked, and you don’t take kindly to people looking into your business. If it was found out that I killed them just because they were looking at some humans at the shipyard I will start losing my grasp on the other demons.”

Zac silently stared at the two demons on the ground, a cold feeling gripping his heart. He felt he had grown a bit lax against the demons, particularly the one in front of him. While Zac believed it was in Ogras’ interest to keep Port Atwood and Zac protected for at least a decade until he could try to usurp it, he couldn’t be sure of the demon’s plans.

This was a person who had no problems betraying those close to him without batting an eye as long as it benefitted him. Besides, he couldn’t be sure whether Ogras’ story was true. For all Zac knew he happened upon a clandestine meeting, and Ogras killed his allies rather than letting his plans be exposed.

But Zac also realized that might just be how the multi-verse worked. Might makes right, and benefits trump friendships. He knew that he had grown callous as well, as he wasn't about to clamor for justice for these two or start some sort of investigation. There was no benefit to it, and he'd rather just bear the blame so that people would keep away from his Shipyard. Getting tired from the whole situation he could only move on. It was a bit annoying to be framed for the murders, but he had already killed hundreds of demons, what was two more to the tally?

"How are the fortifications coming along? And where are the crystals?" Zac asked as he put away his axe, not bothering with the two fallen demons any longer.

Ogras, looking pleased that Zac wasn't making a big deal of the situation, swiftly took out a few Cosmos Sacks from a pocket and threw them over.

"The wall will be done with a few days to spare, and the mining operations are proceeding splendidly. Now that there aren't a dozen main branch assholes embezzling a part of the cake, the daily output is above expectations. We have mined and refined a total of 109 344 crystals so far, meaning slightly more than five million Nexus Coins. A few issues have cropped up though."

"What now?" Zac asked with a grimace. He should have known it was impossible to only get good news.

"First of all the lizards down in the tunnel are getting more aggressive, and we don't possess as much manpower as we did, making it hard to keep them at bay. Secondly, I have run into a snag with the Gnomes, but we might be able to turn it into an opportunity. But most importantly, I've run out of moving pictures." He said

"Moving pictures?" Zac asked confused, to which Ogras fished out Izzy's portable video player from a sack, waving it at Zac. Zac had completely forgotten she had brought it with her when the group went camping, but it seemed that the demon had found it while idling in his camp.

“I have watched everything inside this device, and I must say that this planet is pretty interesting making all these things. I bet we can make some money if we figure out how to turn the moving pictures into Crystals and sell them. Is there any more than what’s contained in this device?”

Zac was stumped, his mouth curving a bit upward. He knew that the demons didn’t use much technology as it was frowned upon on their homeworld just like large parts of the multiverse. The demons were very much in favor of the System, which put them against the so-called Technocrats, and they disdained to use devices that weren’t created with fractals and inscriptions.

“There’s enough for you to watch until you die even if your longevity gets a few upgrades. I don’t have any more with me though.”

“Then we need to quickly beat the beast hordes and find human settlements.”

“Uh, yeah. How are you charging the player anyways? It should have run out of power long ago. And what about the merchants?”

“Any decent lightning mage can charge up the energy containers on this type of device. Even normal cultivators can do it when their fine control of cosmic energy gets high enough” Ogras waved dismissively. “And it seems we might have pushed the Sky Gnomes a bit too hard. I’ve had a talk with Calrin and they might actually go under if we keep forcing these prices.”

“*We* pushed them?” Zac asked pointedly, as he stored the little information nugget that one could use cosmic energy to charge devices. Perhaps he could even resurrect the car with some training.

“I didn’t see you stop me. In any case from what I understand the Merchants have made some truly troublesome enemies, and they have managed to put pressure on the Thayer Consortia even through the Mercantile System. Calrin is unable to make a profit as it stands, and The Ruthless Heavens might actually revoke their license,” Ogras sighed.

“So we need to lower our asking price? Are you sure it’s not a business tactic? That little guy seemed to be pretty thick-skinned.” Zac asked, not relishing the thought of lowering the price. A difference of only a few Coins per Crystal would turn into a huge amount when put to the perspective of the whole mine.

“It doesn’t look like he’s lying, he is truly fearing for his life from the look of his eyes lately. But that doesn’t mean we need to just throw away money. We’re not a charity. I’ve worked out a deal that I think will benefit you in the long run instead,” Ogras answered, the greedy face once more showing.

“We only demand 42 Nexus Coins per Crystal, in return Calrin hands over 25% of the Consortia to us.”

“That’s a lot of profit to give away for a run-down shop where I’m the only customer. And what do you mean to *us*?” Zac said unconvinced.

“What we’re investing in is not the shop itself, but their Mercantile License. They are notoriously hard to acquire, and very sought after since they give access to the Mercantile System, allowing you to trade with the whole multi-verse. In a normal situation, you’d have to pawn off a whole continent to get the license, but now we’re in a position to snatch up a stake for just a few million Nexus Coins.

“If we help them get back to their feet and help them grow, more and more coins will enter our pockets. Imagine your whole planet full of branches selling all the essentials to billions of people, and all that profit entering into your pocket. Then we can even expand to other planets, the income only becoming larger. Progressing and becoming stronger gets insanely expensive as you get to higher ranks, and this can help out a lot.” Ogras got more and more animated as he launched into his business plan, and Zac was starting to get excited as well. If it was as he explained this was a great opportunity to make some money.

“What about their enemy, won’t they become our enemy as well? What do you know about them?” Zac still hesitated, as he had enough things on his plate. Adding some formidable

foe into the mix wasn't an option, even if it meant giving up potential profit.

"It's a powerful family on a top tier C-Rank world. They are located in another universe though, and I don't think they will start a search for your planet, even if it's for a Mercantile License. Besides, The Ruthless Heavens obscure your planet for a hundred years making it almost impossible to find.

"Therefore I wouldn't worry too much about it, but if they do come knocking we can just throw our shares to them as a greeting gift, feigning ignorance of the conflict, and then sell the Gnomes out," Ogras said dismissively.

Zac was hesitating a while over what to do. The enemy of the Thayer family sounded troublesome, and he didn't want to bring that kind of headache to Earth. But they were protected for a hundred years through the System. Even after that, it was not like they could easily find Earth even if they wanted to, and transportation costs would likely be huge. They might deem it not worth the trouble, and get the license from someone else. There must be more struggling corporations to exploit in the multi-verse after all.

After some time Zac agreed, and Ogras veritably dragged him to the storefront to sign the documents at the consortium without pause. It appeared that Ogras' initial plan was an even split of 12,5% stake each between the two, but after a glare the split was changed to 20-5.

Zac still let the demon get some stock in the corporation. He figured it would tie the demon to Zac's wagon, and hopefully it would make him work more diligently if he had some stake in its success. Besides, it wasn't bad to give something valuable to the demon, as he could threaten to take it away if needed.

Zac was in dire need for some talented people working for him after all, and Ogras was by far the best option for now. Zac already knew he wouldn't be an active ruler, sitting on his throne and making decrees. He wanted to leave the island as soon as possible to find his family. After that perhaps even explore the multi-verse. And he needed to get stronger, which

he couldn't do from a throne room. Therefore he needed subjects, or at least employees, that could look after his little island kingdom while he was gone.

The Sky Gnome looked ready to vomit as he signed the documents after a great deal of hemming and hawing. He only looked a bit better after a promise that Zac would help give the consortia a strong position on Earth. Of course, it was Ogras that was promising things far and wide, and Zac only looked on helplessly. He had no idea how to do that, and he didn't even know if there were any towns left.

Next, he ordered some demons to collect a large amount of meat for the salamanders. They had obviously warmed up to Zac when he had fed them various corpses, and perhaps it was possible to bribe them on a larger scale. If not it would at least keep the monsters satiated so the mining operations could go on unimpeded.

Finally done with everything he wanted to do Zac once again returned to the caves. The next time he emerged would be to meet the hordes of beasts.

Chapter 83: Wolves

“It actually handed out a town protection quest” Ogras exclaimed gleefully, as most demons around him looked like they had eaten stimulants.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked as he looked over at the grey pillars. Nothing had emerged from them yet, but he knew it wouldn’t be long now.

“It’s a bonus quest. Everything you kill will award contribution points apart from the usual Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. You can trade these points for all kinds of goodies at a temporary Nexus Node that should pop up somewhere close. Those who rack up the most points usually are awarded some bonus prize as well.” Ogras answered hurriedly as he took out his spear from his sack. It looked like he wanted to simply jump down from the wall and run to the pillars, not able to wait for the enemies come to them.

Zac started to get excited as well, but was very annoyed that he still wasn’t completely healed. He was a lot better by now, but not to the point that he dared use crystals or his amulet to quickly regain his energy. He wouldn’t be able to unheedingly use his **[Chop]** skill to quickly gain contribution points in other words, and his two Dao’s weren’t helpful in fighting large groups of monsters. He still hadn’t gained the Seed of Sharpness, which he guessed would be convenient when fighting against packs.

He didn’t have time to ruminate over his condition any longer as grey silhouettes started to pour out of the portals and immediately flooded toward the wall.

“No offense my friend, but I’m aiming for the top spot. It’s a shame we can’t have a completely fair competition with your condition” Ogras lamented with mirth and greed in his eyes. It

looked like he was already considering the prize for most contribution points his.

Zac decided to ignore him as the horde was closing in on the battlements, and he could finally see their visage. It was an enormous wolf pack that charged as one. Each had a mottled grey fur and the rough size of a gwyllgi, reaching almost up to Zac's chest.

He could also spot larger versions at various areas in the sea of wolves, and he guessed that they were the equivalents of the monkey captains. A piercing howl arose from the pillars as Zac surveyed the horde, and Zac spotted a far larger wolf skulking around in the back. All in all it looked like there were a few thousand wolves, almost all of them the normal-sized ones.

Zac didn't feel that this looked too threatening, and he cast a questioning glance at Ogras.

"This is just the first wave of the first horde. It will get more... exciting... soon enough" he said as if he understood Zac's unspoken question.

The wolves streamed toward the walls and Zac saw that the erected poles didn't have much effect on the nimble monsters, as they simply dodged them without any effort. A few unlucky wolves were accidentally pushed into the pitfalls by the wolves behind and skewered there, but generally the horde was unimpeded.

However, the erected wall was where their charge ended, and the monsters simply had no method to scale it. They clawed some scratches at the foundation, but at that speed it would take days for them to tear down the wall.

In the demons' eyes, this meant that the wolves turned into target practice, where each hit awarded some money. Arrows started flying out in rapid succession, and the wolves dropped one by one.

Some were even more efficient, such as the mages who managed to skewer multiple wolves with each earth spear attacks or create multiple fried carcasses with a large fireball.

But the most efficient was clearly Ogras. Any shadow on the ground created by the wall or a wolf was a weapon for him, and shadowy needles kept poking up from the ground, hitting the throat or heart of the wolves. Wolves kept keeling over wherever Ogras turned his outstretched hand, and he was creating patches of utter death down on the ground.

Zac tried to keep up by throwing rocks he had prepared in a few pouches. Each rock he threw slammed into a wolf, the force almost always enough for an instant kill. Still, he couldn't keep up with some of the stronger demons, let alone the sneaky spears of Ogras, and knew his contribution ranking wouldn't be too great if things kept going this way.

He paused after killing a few and checked his status screen. It looked like each of the normal mottled wolves awarded around 100 Nexus Coins, which seemed very generous for helpless targets. The feeling of seeing an endless stream of money slipping out of his fingers was extremely uncomfortable, and he knew he needed to switch up his tactics.

Alea looked annoyed as well as she stood next to Zac.

“They keep dying before my poison kills them, I only get a small part of the money. You're supposed to be the Lord, do something and I'll give you a reward” she whined as she looked entreatingly at Zac.

Zac ignored her with a roll of his eyes but he agreed that something needed to be done. After a few seconds of hesitation he took out one of his axes and simply jumped out from the safety of the wall.

As he fell he imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness and he fell down like a meteor. A huge shockwave spread out as Zac punched into the ground ten meters away from the wall. Any wolf in the vicinity was killed or at least badly maimed from the impact. Zac stood up from the crater and he summoned [**Chop**].

His plan was simple. Even though his pathways weren't completely healed they were in far better condition compared to a month ago. Together with his improved attributes his recovery might even be higher before he ruined his body with

the Cosmic Water. He planned on going on a rampage as long as his energy allowed, reaping as many wolves as possible before swapping back to killing without using any energy. With his stats he wasn't afraid that some of these weak wolves would threaten him, even if they came in droves.

He started to weave a net of carnage around him as he moved full speed ahead. His energy would only last for a short duration at full power, but that should hopefully be enough to thin out most of this wave and perhaps a few more. He headed straight toward where he had seen the huge wolf, hoping that killing the boss would offset his slow start.

No demon dared to shoot their attacks in his vicinity, with the exception of Ogras, who kept summoning spears at some wolves around him. Zac glared angrily in the demon's direction, but Ogras simply looked back innocently and waved.

Zac wasn't the only one who jumped down from the wall, as some of the stronger melee fighters followed suit. They generally stayed close to the wall though to keep their backs free, not daring to wade into the thick of it like Zac.

Zac was soon drenched as every wave of his axe created a fountain of blood and a few bisected corpses strewn around. He realized he had actually missed this feeling, and relished letting loose after over a month of being stuck in the mines mindlessly chipping away at the walls.

He steadily progressed toward the portals, and soon not even Ogras could kill steal his wolves due to the distance. Each swing created a swathe of death in front of him, but it was quickly filled with new wolves. He truly felt like the description of the Hachetman class, *Their army is an endless forest and I'm the lumberjack*, was an apt description at this moment, as he methodically cut everything down like lumber as he waded forward.

The wolves desperately tried to bite him, but the few that managed to get close couldn't even puncture his skin. A few tried to rip open his robe, but the clothing was even more durable than Zac himself, and not even a scratch could be seen

on the green overcoat. Even so, the animals pushed forward toward their death, heedless of anything else. Zac started to suspect that the System had done something with these animals, as they were completely frenzied. Wolves should be smarter than this, especially evolved ones like these guys were.

After a few minutes of swinging away he was at close proximity to the portals. It should have been even faster, but he took some detours to kill the even larger wolves that were peppered around the horde. They only gave 2-300 Nexus Coins each, but Zac thought they might be more valuable in terms of contribution points as the System might consider them mini-bosses.

Wolves had stopped pouring out of the multiple portals a minute ago, and the area was getting a bit thin as most wolves headed straight for the wall. There were some exceptions though, most notably the hill with the leader. It looked almost identical as the smaller versions, apart from the fact that its eyes had a silver glint compared to the duller brown of the others.

Zac approached the hill and started to kill the larger alpha wolves that surrounded their leader, but a movement in his periphery made him infuse his axe with his Dao of Heaviness and launch it at the wolf leader in a surprise attack.

The wolf's reactions were quick, but not quick enough, as the axe ripped a hole in its throat, instantly killing it. Immediately after two large spears of shadows rose up from the ground and impaled the corpse. However, Ogras was too late as the energy entered Zac's body as the spears rose up, confirming his kill credit.

Zac grinned at the demon who emerged from the shadows with a tsk as he took out another axe from his bag. This one was different from the ones he had used lately and looked like a misshapen monstrosity.

Its handle was roughly a meter long and the edge itself was almost two meters, formed in a rudimentary facsimile of his axe when he used **[Chop]**. It was something Zac had ordered a

blacksmith of the demon town create for him, meant to be used to retain some kill speed while he restored his energy.

It was ugly and completely unbalanced, but it got the job done. Unfortunately no one of those remaining had the skills to add the self-repair inscription on a weapon, and instead this one had an inscription that slightly increased its durability. Still, someone would need to fix it up every now and then after Zac's onslaught.

"I'm starting to see why you guys were so excited," Zac remarked at Ogras as he started to swing at the remaining alpha dogs, heading to pick up the boss carcass and his axe.

"Don't get complacent. This is just the warm-up. If some mangy dogs was all that The Ruthless Heavens threw at you when creating a monster horde then it would be a reward, not a quest. It's going to get much worse than this." Ogras retorted, obviously a bit irritated that his kill steal hadn't worked out. As if to confirm this the remaining wolves in his surroundings died by being impaled by multiple shadow blades rather than the usual one per monster.

As if they responded to the demon's words, the portals pulsed and started to spew out another wave of wolves, but these ones looked quite different.

Chapter 84: Super Brother-Man

Zac turned toward Ogras a bit confused.

“Why are there already more monsters pouring out? How does the System decide?” he asked hesitantly. He felt that it was too big a coincidence that new monsters just started spawning after Zac and Ogras arrived here and killed the boss.

“You ask me, but who am I going to ask?” Ogras responded. “But I think there might be certain triggers that push out new waves. Perhaps killing the boss immediately sends the next one through. But I think there is a limit of how long you can stall, even if you keep the leader alive. The Ruthless Heaven has its name for a reason, and it won’t let you breathe too easy by finding a loophole.”

If what Ogras said was true the System really created a conflict of interest. Killing the boss would spawn more monsters, but it also probably awarded a good amount of contribution points. Greedy warriors would hunt it for the points, not caring about the results. Soon the whole camp would be overrun by waves upon waves of wolves.

“We need to set some ground rules,” Zac immediately said as he turned to Ogras. He didn’t mind the demon killing the odd wolf around him, as that was only playing around. There were almost an endless amount of targets, and Zac didn’t worry that he wouldn’t be able to hunt his fill. But running for the bosses in greed for contribution points couldn’t be allowed.

“The boss is off-limits until only a quarter of the wave remains,” he said as he stared at Ogras, who only grimaced but nodded after some deliberation.

He didn’t have time to keep thinking up plans as the new wave was upon them. Zac first thought it was large rats when he saw

them exit the portals. They were a lot smaller compared to their brethren, the normal ones only reaching his knees in height. They also looked completely wretched, with their mangy fur fallen off at large patches of their bodies. Their eyes were a sinister red, and the feeling he got from them was that they were putrid cursed creatures.

Ogras seemed to agree as he started backing away as he kept throwing out Shadow blades at anything approaching. He even seemed loath to use his real spear, afraid it would get dirtied by the new beasts.

“These things look pretty disgusting. Try not to get bit, I am willing to bet an arm these things carry some weird diseases in their bodies” the demon said with a wrinkled brow. “If you capture a few live ones and gift them to Alea I’m sure she will be delighted. I bet she can create some sinister concoctions from these things after some experimentation. Anyway, I’m off. Good luck.”

With that the demon was gone, using his escape skill to move through the shadows. Zac was left alone pondering whether to stay here right by the portals or to head back. The gnarly wolves didn’t wait for him to make a decision as they stormed him with speed belying their small shriveled frames.

As they scurried close to him they launched themselves in the air toward his face in order to rip into more vulnerable areas. Zac turned his huge axe and with a horizontal swing smashed multiple wolves into broken pieces of flesh with the broad side of the edge. Even their blood smelled rancid, and Zac didn’t want to get any of that on his face. He rapidly backed away and quickly put a handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

Next, he swapped out his huge unwieldy axe to two normal ones. The new foes were too small so he couldn’t easily kill them with the giga-axe. A wide swing would simply fly past above their heads, and he felt that using two normal axes would be more effective. He kept swinging away, decimating anything that moved close as he gradually retreated toward the walls. His kill-speed wasn’t as great as when he used [**Chop**], but it was respectable.

Since he upgraded his race he found that his body's coordination improved noticeably, and it had made him resume his training with two axes. The first time he tried it out he felt it was too unwieldy, but by now his arms moved independently from each other, each creating gouts of putrid blood wherever they hit.

Soon enough he was closing in on the wall and saw that most of the first wave was dead by now. A perimeter of melee fighters had been erected, and Zac saw some scared non-combat demons scurrying about the battlefield. They were throwing the wolf carcasses into cosmic bags, to be dumped and burned further away from the camp after anything of value was stripped from the bodies.

It was to both avoid pestilence spreading, but also to not allow bodies to accumulate to the point that they started to form a ramp up the wall. Their work was extremely efficient as they rapidly moved along, barely stopping as they threw the carcasses into the Cosmos Sacks. Obviously, the melee fighters had done a do-over of the corpses first with quick stabs, ensuring that everything was dead.

When they saw Zac and the putrid wolves approaching they all scurried through a gate to safety. The gate wasn't some thick wooden door like in a medieval castle, but a section of the wall itself even thicker than most other sections. It was created in conjunction between some craftsmen and Earth mages and required 10 Nexus Crystals to power every time it opened and closed. It was a bit slow, but it didn't present a point of entry or weakness like classic castle gates did.

One exception to the escape through the gate was Alea, who gleefully charged straight toward Zac.

"I heard you're bringing me gifts?" she exclaimed, looking absolutely delighted. She unheedingly ran straight into the frenzied pack of the mangy wolves, and Zac's eyes widened in alarm. It was one thing for him with his huge endurance to be running around in the midst of the beasts, as these small ones couldn't hurt him either.

But even he was wary of their blood as it looked positively unclean, with a greyish murky color instead of red. Luckily his clothes had a self-cleaning feature and the blood just slid off after a short while. But for the slender demoness to do the same approach seemed suicidal. He wasn't sure what stats a poison master focused, but it didn't feel like it was endurance at least. He quickly changed direction and ran to help her out.

Soon he realized he was worried about nothing as the beasts that got too close to her simply melted into pools of goop. Zac immediately stopped in his tracks, afraid to get caught in whatever poison the demoness had surrounded herself with.

Next she quickly threw out a small needle at one of the beasts that looked extra wretched, and it powerlessly fell down on the ground immediately after the needle embedded itself in its throat. She walked over to it and picked it up, and for some reason it didn't melt like the others around her. Zac first thought the beast was dead from the needle, but the frantically whirling eyes of the beast told another story.

"It seems its condition is due to living in a weird environment. The Ruthless Heavens calls its race Blackswamp Wolf, so it probably lives in a miasmatic swamp. Something in the waters is corroding these wolves, and over time they have transformed into these cute little things. Perhaps it's possible to extract whatever's the cause and add it into a concoction," she started to mutter mostly for herself, seeming eager to try and weaponize the wolves' affliction.

"People with less than 80 or so vitality shouldn't come in contact with their blood, or they will probably get sick," she added with a louder voice up toward the walls before she started to continue to examine the beast. She quickly broke all its limbs with a deftness that hinted that this wasn't the first time she did experimentation on animals and started to retreat to the wall while she flipped it over to look at every detail of the poor creature.

Zac simply moved away without a word and kept killing wolves with his two axes. These small wolves were a bit more annoying to kill since they were so small, but he wouldn't stop. Each one gave around 110 Nexus Coins, even better than

the last wave, and he was accumulating wealth and cosmic energy at a terrifying speed. It was barely more than a barghest, but they were everywhere. If the density of barghest was this crazy he would have finished grinding for his first class quests in less than a day instead of a week. Of course, with his stats at that time he might just have died from being swarmed rather than just having more targets to kill.

Less than 30 minutes had passed since the start of the quest but he already managed to accumulate something like 30 000 Nexus Coins. He had only used less than a quarter of his cosmic energy so far, and could keep going for a long time. The attacks from the wall had reduced somewhat though, as some of the demons were sitting down and absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals that Zac provided.

Some of the other demons kept blasting away, greedily farming some money, and a few burly-looking demons even dared to jump down the wall as well, apparently trusting Alea's judgment. This wave was starting to thin out as well after the furious melee continued, and it gave Zac a brief chance to catch his breath.

He had been busy with the monsters, so he ignored the prompt from the System that entered his ears just before the monsters arrived. It said that a Ladder was activated, and he was curious to see what that meant. He kept killing any beasts who approached with a quick swing with his axes, but it was mostly by instinct as he focused on the new screen that popped up.

[Ladder System initialized. Enter pseudonym or real name?]

That gave Zac a start. He started to feel that the ladder system was akin to a ranking that you could see in many games, where his level was listed against others. It sounded like something the System would do. It wanted to force people to get stronger, and a ladder would generate competition amongst the elite.

Entering his real name would let his friends or family know he was alive and fine, but it might also cause them trouble. He

was pretty sure he should be up there in the rankings if the Ladder was only for earth, even after his month of not gaining levels. Someone might want to exploit his family, or even kidnap them to threaten him if such a connection was made public. He already had created a beacon with the name Port Atwood, which should hopefully be enough when the town gained some fame in the future.

After coming to a decision he chose pseudonym, and a new problem presented itself. What should he call himself? At first, he thought of just using his class name, but he didn't know if people learning of the name Hatchetman would have some implications. Suddenly he had an idea, and he chose 'Super Brother-Man' with a nostalgic look in his eyes. He could only pray that Mackenzie, his little sister, would remember.

She was only five when he played pretend-superheroes with her, using the name Super Brother-man. He hadn't thought about it for over a decade, and no one but her should know about it. As soon as he chose it a large window popped up, and he quickly realized that he was right, it was a ranking ladder containing various names and their accomplishments.

As he went through the list his mouth started to widen into a grin.

Chapter 85: Four Fates

Kenzie blew an errant wisp of frizzy auburn hair out of her face as she once again opened the Ladder system. It had almost become a compulsion over the last two weeks since the new function was enabled.

“Browsing for a husband again?” a teasing voice came from behind, as another girl moved up to the fire and sat down. It was Lyla who came back with some dinner in her hands. It was a few cans of various vegetables and fruits, and somehow she had even scored some canned beef.

“Whatever,” Mackenzie answered with a roll of her eyes. She stared at the familiar alias for a few more seconds before she reluctantly closed the window and turned to her friend.

Lyla had been by Kenzie’s side since everything turned crazy. Kenzie was just sitting at home playing with her phone when she suddenly found herself in a square in a medieval town with hundreds of others. When reality set in that this was not a dream, she soon realized she didn’t recognize a single person. Zac or dad wasn’t there with her, leaving her vulnerable and scared.

It was shortly after she met Lyla, another scared and confused 19-year-old. It was by sticking together they survived that hell that the System and fairies called a tutorial, and in a sense they were returned as reborn people like the fairies promised.

But they soon realized that just because they had been returned in one piece, all wasn’t well. They were placed in a town called Kingsbury, which actually was a chaotic hodge-podge of 4 different cities mixed together into a cauldron of conflicting interests and goals.

During the month of their absence all order collapsed and chaos reigned supreme. Roving gangs of thugs terrorized their blocks, and rape and murder were just commonplace events. It

didn't even take an hour after returning before a group of men accosted her.

Luckily the tutorial had truly reforged her. A scenario that would have petrified her in the old world was only a small annoyance now. With a few quick attacks the group of thugs lay on the ground with her not even taking damage. The thugs of Kingsbury just stayed in the safety of the town preying on other people, and likely weren't even level 5.

After the returnees appeared, it only took a few days for a new order to be enforced on the town. A few of the stronger cultivators allied and started a bloody cleansing, and soon held the population in an iron grip. There was no government, no vote, only forced obedience. The leaders named themselves the Kingsbury Council and set themselves up as kings.

Mackenzie and Lyla followed Ruth, a 48 year old lady who they got to know a bit in the tutorial. She had been a cleaning lady before the integration, but now she held command over a large district, subduing any discontent with surprising brutality. Ruth was harsh, but she was the best of the bunch. None of those who stood out were saints, as they had all bathed in blood during the tutorial to get their current strength.

It was actually due to one of the other councilors that Mackenzie and Lyla decided to volunteer to scout out the undead problem that was spreading. They needed to get away from the town, and hopefully gain some strength while away. Harold was an insatiable old goat, and he already considered himself an emperor and had started amassing women for his harem. Some of them were willing to get the protection of a powerhouse as food was running scarce and monsters were roaming the outskirts of the town, but most reportedly were unwilling captives. There was a lot of discontent about his conduct but Harold was possibly the most powerful cultivator in Kingsbury, and even Ruth didn't dare to confront him outright.

Of course, Harold was a joke compared to the people on the Ladder, like a fly compared to giants. Especially her brother, the Super Brother-Man...

With a thundering swing Billy crushed the skull of the rat-like monster, grey smelly goop splashing all around. It was one of the last of their kind and he could finally catch his breath with deep guffaws. The whole field around him were filled with big holes from his mighty thwonking.

The new world was good. Before, everything had been confusing and complicated. People had given Billy stinky eye all the time for no reason. But no one looked down on Billy now. Not even papa, not after the thwonk on his head set him straight.

Billy didn't understand why so many didn't like the new world. It was so simple. Hit things on the head and they gave you money and made you stronger. But people hid behind the walls and cried instead of going out thwonking. People were the idiots, not Billy.

"Good work great chief! You are so strong. The name Billy is surely known around the world by now!" a voice came from up on the wall.

It was Nigel. Nigel was smart but dumb. He was smart because he understood Billy was a good chief. He was dumb because he didn't thwonk monsters with Billy, and instead stayed on the wall.

"I bet not even the Super Brother-Man is a match for you and your club Billy! See how those large rats got destroyed!" Nigel continued, even waving the flag of the town, Billyville.

When Billy heard the compliment is back straightened a bit further and the bulging muscles on his huge frame swelled, but he soon shrunk back a bit.

"Super Brother-Man is probably super-strong, he has thwonked a lot more than Billy. But Billy is going to catch up, there are still many rats to bash," he said with the type of modesty that mama always said a gentleman should have. He really missed mama, but she was gone when Billy came back from the funny town with the mini-people. Nigel said that she had died, but Billy knew no monster would dare hurt such an angel.

Billy really wondered who the Super Brother-Man was. It was a great name, and caused Billy to regret the one he chose, Thwonkin' Billy. He really wanted to see who could swing a club the best. Having another smart friend to bash rats with would be great.

Billy was right about the rats. There were so many of them and some help would be nice. He had tried counting them but he got a headache from it. They all came from that grey weird shining light in the distance. Nigel called it an incursion, but Billy preferred to call it a ratlight since it created rats and was a light.

Nigel always told him that the thing needed to be closed for some quest, but Billy didn't care about any of that. He needed no reason for thwonking rats. It felt good, it gave money and made Billy stronger.

Billy was truly in heaven.

She moved through the forest, a fluttering shadow between the trees. Any unsuspecting beast that came within a few meters were bisected into pieces by a quick flash.

Thea was days from any back-up or civilization, but it was out here in the wilderness that she felt most at home. No politics and intrigue, only survival. She had hoped that the integration would make the world simpler, but it was anything but the truth.

The Marshall-clan went into overdrive the moment Earth was integrated, ever hungry for empowering the family. She was tired of it and had essentially become a nomad, fiercely battling in the wilderness non-stop since she came back. The pixies had called her a once-in-a-millennia genius, but she didn't care about any of that. She relished the feeling of balancing on the edge of life and death, pushing the limits of her power even further.

Still, she was shocked when she saw the Ladder. Her tireless effort and fortuitous encounters seemed almost like a joke in front of that man. She thought herself the true elite of Earth, as no one in her tutorial town even came close to her accomplishments. It only took her a week of grinding after the

tutorial was over before she attained her class, and it was of the Rare-rarity, something that was almost impossible to get.

Yet she barely maintained the third spot on the ladder. She had even pushed herself beyond what she thought was possible in order to catch up, refusing to lose to someone with such a stupid moniker. But no matter what she did he steadily increased the distance between them. Who the hell was the Super Brother-Man?

She sighed and opened up her quest panel and stared at her newly acquired mission. Completing it might be her only option to pass that monster, but was it worth it?

Order was crumbling. Thomas Fischer sat on the short-side of the large table and quietly stared at the troubled faces in the meeting room.

“What about recruitment?” Thomas said with a sigh.

“80 Returnees, or cultivators as they call themselves, have signed up to the special government task force the last week,” a bespectacled middle-aged lady answered. “Unfortunately, most of them are in the lower tier who barely came out of the so-called tutorial in one piece. The stronger ones have largely stayed ambivalent, adopting a wait-and-see response.”

“We need to get tougher! People are running around playing super-heroes. Or even worse, super-villains. We need to round them up. If they don’t want to join and register, they need to be locked up!” a robust scarred man shouted while thumping emphatically at the table. It was Hank, the representative of the army.

Thomas was somewhat inclined to agree with him, but not really due to safety. The more powerful of these cultivators were setting themselves up as local lords, completely ignoring the government. If this was allowed to continue, then Earth’s countries would just become a memory.

“What about the rankers? Have we located any of them?”

Thomas probed. Getting the support of a few of the rankers would hopefully once again legitimize the government in the

eyes of the population, and rebuilding work could begin in earnest.

“Why bother with them? The training program for the elite forces of the army are coming along well, and there are cultivator servicemen who have reported for duty leading them. Soon we will have an army adapted to this so-called System. It is better to rely on patriotic soldiers than some war-lords who can betray us at moment’s notice,” Hank interjected.

“What’s the average level so far among the trainees?” Julia asked, breaking her hour-long silence. She was the newly appointed liaison with the unaffiliated cultivators, and one of the four cultivators herself in the meeting.

“The average level is 19, and we already have two people who have gained their classes,” Hank answered proudly.

“How can you compare some fodder to the rankers? Any one of them is probably able to decimate your army in a minute.” Julia said dismissively and turned back to Thomas.

“We have located 5 of the rankers so far. Rank 34, 58, 63 and 94 on the level ladder. We have also located Rank 87 and 99 on the wealth ladder. Rank 87 is as you know the same individual as rank 34 on the Power Ladder.

“There are also about a dozen individuals who used their real name that we have identified with some certainty. Most notable is Thea Marshall of the Marshall-family, who is ranked 3rd on the level ranking. Unfortunately we do not know where these people are located at the moment, with the effects of the reshuffling still being mapped out.”

“Any word on ‘Super Brother-Man’ or ‘Salvation’?” Thomas asked. Thea Marshall would be a good get for the government, but the Marshall clan likely had their own plans in this new world order. And he didn’t want to wage war against that ancient family when there were both the incursions and the new natives to worry about, so he could only turn his eyes toward the other two top rankers. Of course, neither of them seemed to be quite sane from their choice of pseudonyms, but one couldn’t be picky after the apocalypse.

The hesitant look in Julia's eye was all the answer Thomas needed as he sighed.

“Next on the docket is the situation with our new... neighbors... to the west.”

Chapter 86: Ladders

Zac opened up his eyes after an hour of meditation. Alea sat next to him like an ever-present shadow, but even she lacked the energy to banter lately. Even Zac felt exhausted after the last three weeks of wholesale slaughter, and the demons were even in worse shape. He had killed thousands upon thousands of wolves in all shapes and sizes, as the waves unceasingly kept coming once every hour from the start of the quest. In the beginning the wolves were just free money for the defenders, and each wave took between fifteen minutes to half an hour to complete.

But their strength incrementally increased with every wave, and after hundreds of waves they barely managed to finish the last one before the next one arrived. Zac and Ogras had been forced to create rotating groups of the stronger demons, as there was a wave that actually caused a crack in the wall since almost everyone was resting.

There were some good signs though. If he and Ogras were correct, they only needed to hold out for another 3 days before the first part of the quest was completed. A new wave arrived at the hour unceasingly, and they needed to defeat 720 waves in a month. They had already cleared 641 waves in 3 weeks due to quickly finishing the early waves, and hoped that would mean that they got the rest of the month off until the next part of the quest started.

Another good news was that Zac hadn't been forced to use any of his aces so far, with the walls and demons having been enough for now. Perhaps they would be able to finish the whole first part without any tools, which would save a lot of Nexus Coins for the next parts of the quest. Since it was getting incrementally harder he assumed that things would only get worse with the second and third horde.

It was his turn to man the walls in just 10 minutes, so he started to get ready. He opened his status screen to check his progress before heading out.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

48

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early

Strength

248

Dexterity

125

Endurance

165

Vitality

108

Intelligence

62

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

21 281 353

He had gained a whole twelve levels from the last weeks of desperate struggle, which averaged to roughly a level every other day. He put all free points into dexterity until he reached a 2:1 ratio of Strength to Dexterity, and after that started putting points in Vitality. By now his build was far more balanced compared to before, and he wasn't a lopsided one-trick pony anymore. That didn't only go for attributes. He had battled every imaginable kind of wolf as of late and gained tremendous battle experience in a very short time.

Zac gained most of his levels in the first week of the monster horde, and it started to slow down considerably after that. The last four days had gone by without a single level. When he complained about it to Ogras, the demon got so agitated he started to spit after him. Apparently his leveling speed was out of this world. It had taken Ogras 5 whole years to reach the same level as Zac. Of course, Ogras wasn't pushing toward getting levels, but rather focused on the Dao and his body-grade. Otherwise it would have been a lot quicker.

But if a cultivator didn't level through battle like he did, and instead only relied on their cultivation techniques, it would take years and years to get to this point. A few days ago he

gained a new title which was quite telling about his life on the island so far.

[Butcher: Kill 100 000 beings in solo battle. Reward: Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence +3.]

The absolute majority of those kills were the wolves from the last weeks, but he had been steeped in blood and gore constantly since the world changed.

Next he opened the ladder to see if any changes happened in the last few days.

Ladder - Level

Rank

Name

Level

1

Super Brother-Man

48

2

Salvation

39

3

Thea Marshall

38

4

Joker

35

5

Enigma

34

6

Dahlia

34

7

Dillinger

33

8

Thwonkin' Billy

33

9

Abbot Everlasting Peace

33

10

The Gravemaker

32

...

100

Santiago

30

Ladder - Wealth

Rank

Name

1

Super Brother-Man

2

Smaug

3

Joker

4

Enigma

5

Thwonkin' Billy

6

Salvation

7

Greed

8

Little Treasure

9

Thea Marshall

10

The Eternal Eye

Ladder - Dao

Rank

Name

1

Abbot Everlasting Peace

2

Guru Anaad Phakiwar

3

Thea Marshall

4

The Eternal Eye

5

Silverfox

6

Abbot Boundless Truth

7

Super Brother-Man

8

Father Thomas

9

John Doe

10

Daoist Chosui

He had mostly memorized the ladders by now, and the top ten spots didn't really change in the last few days. The ranking boards only showed the top hundred, and it was clear that a few frontrunners were solidifying their position as future progenitors as Ogras called them. Beneath the true powerhouses were the elites, and it seemed the elites in the world should have gotten their class a few weeks ago, and now were around level 30.

When the Ladder was introduced the 100th spot on the leveling ranking had been level 27, which meant it took them roughly a week per level up until now. Beneath the top 20 the list was a lot more volatile, with people changing positions every day. He had also seen over a dozen names just suddenly disappear, which he assumed meant that they died.

When he first checked the ladder he found himself only two levels ahead of Salvation, which shocked him quite a bit. Certainly, he hadn't improved his level for over 40 days while in the mines, but he started out at level 16 with extremely boosted stats due to the lottery he was forced into. Furthermore, he had almost only killed incursion monsters who awarded an increased experience. Yet this Salvation, and to a lesser degree Thea Marshall, were right behind him in progress.

That changed over the last few weeks though, as his level kept steadily increasing while they could only helplessly fall behind. Still, their speed was respectable, and Zac assumed

they found great grinding spots as well, likely incursions with their improved experience rewards.

The wealth ranking thankfully didn't broadcast the exact wealth people possessed, but it did show he was number one in that ranking as well. Surprisingly, the second spot belonged to someone who wasn't in either the Level or the Dao-rankings. He had named himself after the dragon in Lord of the Rings, so Zac assumed he alluded to the fact that he was sitting on a pile of treasure.

Otherwise, there was some correlation between the level-ranking and the wealth ranking, as everyone on the list must've killed an enormous amount of beasts and farmed Nexus Coins. But the level rankers only accounted for roughly half the names on the wealth rankings.

Ogras believed that it was due to dumb luck. Some individuals had found some great treasures and sold them in the System Shops that should have cropped up at various places by now. Some might have scored millions of Nexus Coins just from one herb or rare metal. Neither Zac nor Ogras was sure how the System calculated wealth. Nexus Coins were a given, but what about his other treasures, such as his remaining Fruit of Ascension? What about the Creator's Shipyard? Either of those were worth a fortune, far more than every coin he had gained so far. Calrin might know, but they hadn't visited lately due to constantly being in battle.

But even without those two treasures he wasn't too surprised about his number one spot. He gained over ten million nexus coins from the crystal mine, and another twenty million from the last three weeks of carnage. He had a hard time imagining anyone gaining coins at his speed.

Last was the Dao-ranking. He was only ranked seventh on that ladder, even though he already acquired two Dao-seeds. He wasn't sure whether the ones above him somehow gained even more seeds, or if they managed to upgrade the ones they had. More interestingly, a large part of the rankers seemed to be spiritual people from the old world. There were priests, gurus, monks, and even a shaman represented on the list.

He learned from Alyn that a combination of meditation and study of fractals were the best combination to improve the Dao, so it seemed that these individuals hit the ground running when it came to pondering the Dao. They were already quite used to meditation, and maybe even entered the System with certain useful insights.

The Dao-list was also the only list that wasn't filled, with only 68 spots occupied so far. There was a few that got added every day though, so Zac expected this list to be filled within the month. This list was also the one who moved the least. He had only seen one movement, where Thea Marshall instantly went from the 23rd spot all the way to the third. Ogras said she must have had an epiphany or a fortuitous encounter that gave her Dao a level up.

Actually, the Dao ranking was the one that shocked Ogras the most. There only were 3 demons currently on earth who actually possessed a Dao according to him. And two of them only gained their seeds after arduously meditating for years. Ogras believed that it was the Tutorial giving a huge hand in some way, otherwise only those who got Dao-seeds from quests like Zac should have touched the Dao this early.

Zac was surprised to see that many of the top 10 individuals of the level ranking actually hadn't gained a Dao seed so far, not even the second-place individual named Salvation. Zac didn't know whether that made him more or less scary, having reached that level without any Dao to assist and empower his or her skills. Actually, only he and Thea were the two people represented on all 3 lists, with his rankings slightly better.

Finally Zac closed down the windows and got ready for work. Alea roused herself as well, and mutely followed behind him as he proceeded up to the wall walk. Ogras approached not long after Zac arrived at the top of the wall, the usual lackadaisical attitude missing. He had a grim visage as he nodded toward Zac before once more looking out toward the battlefield. His hand didn't stop moving, and the large bristled wolves beneath died one by one.

"Third casualty this wave," he curtly said, worry evident in his eyes. The demon forces were limited, and every death hurt

them in the long run. Over the course the whole monster horde quest it meant thousands of additional monsters the others would have to kill. Three deaths in three weeks might sound good, but only roughly 200 of the demons were combat classes. Three deaths were noticeable, besides the quest wasn't even one third completed, and Zac could only assume it would keep getting worse.

It wasn't that the wolves were extremely strong. The large wolves beneath the wall could roughly be considered as strong as the monkeys in the mountains by now. But their numbers were endless, and the demons were tired. And tired people made mistakes.

The wolves of this wave apparently were able to shoot out the bristles on their backs in a wide range attack that targeted both friends and foe. One demon had been unlucky and actually got skewered up on the wall from an errant flying bristle. Normally he should have been able to erect a defense or dodge in time, but he spaced out due to extreme fatigue.

Zac only grunted in affirmation as he looked out over the battlefield. Most of the wolves were dead, with just a few large packs remaining. He could already see the next wave's approach from the distance, so he didn't hesitate as he jumped down right among the bristled beasts. The impact killed 8 of them, not giving them any chance to shoot out their projectiles.

With a large [**Chop**] he immediately created a circle of death, and then he methodically started killing the beasts with a blank look on his face. A few bristles flew in his direction, but they were no threat to him. The ones hitting his body he simply ignored since his clothes nullified the impact, and those flying for his head he blocked with his axe head.

Just as he killed last of the Bristleback Wolves, as they apparently were called, the next wave was only a hundred meters away. These wolves were of average size and build, and had a greyish black color. What made them stand out was that they actually looked a bit translucent as he saw them approach.

Hesitant, he brought out a rock from a pouch and launched it like a rocket at one of the frontrunners. It was his standard move lately whenever a new wave of wolves approached. He started using it after wave 372, which had consisted of 'Wolves of Kar'Ka'Venum'.

He still had no idea what Kar'Ka'Venum was, but when he charged into the group of wolves and swung his axe in a large [**Chop**], every single monster exploded in a huge shockwave upon death. The blast from his swing almost killed him then and there, and after that he swore to be more careful.

To his surprise the stone whizzed straight through the monster like it was a ghost. Zac got a sinking feeling as he saw the approaching horde, and without hesitation turned around and roared.

“ACTIVATE THE ARRAY!”

Chapter 87: Spectral Wolves

Ogras was quick on the uptake and he immediately shouted down the other side of the wall, where Janos stood next to a large crystal. The illusionist immediately activated the array with the help of a pile of Nexus Crystals, and with a deep hum a shimmering dome grew out of the ground, covering the whole inner area of camp Atwood. It reminded Zac of a large soap bubble, with prismatic colors covering the whole shield, slowly swirling about. But the observant watchers could see that the swirls weren't really random, but rather followed some pattern, and that the stripes of colors were reminiscent of fractals.

It was the [**E-Grade Medium scale Town Defense Array**]. It was Zac's first purchase with his wealth gained by the crystal mine. The town planners had gone over various other solutions, such as purchasing a defensive and offensive arrays separately, but the Town Defense Array simply gave an unparalleled bang for the buck at these low tier battles. In the future an established force would likely have tens of arrays available, each designed for a specific defense or attack, but with their limited resources they went with the generalist approach.

The only downside was that it cost quite a lot of crystals to operate. But with a crystal mine in his possession Zac wasn't too worried about consumption. Initially, its radius was roughly 50 meters shorter compared to the wall, creating an inner death-zone between the wall and the barrier. But after some adjustments, it grew to stop ten meters outside the walls, not allowing the spectral wolves access to the fortifications.

Zac took a few quick steps backward with [**Loamwalker**], allowing him to cross over a hundred meters almost in an instant. He smoothly passed through the barrier without creating a ripple. The shield wasn't intelligent enough to

distinguish friend from foe, but as the owner of the array he had some perks.

Normally he would have preferred to keep the array at its original size and test whether the wolves could actually run through the wall, but there were too many tired demons up on the battlements at the moment. They were changing shifts with this wave, and everyone hadn't left their posts yet. Instead, he had to expend some money in order to ensure the group of demons heading further in to rest wouldn't be assaulted by these ghost wolves. They were wrung out and didn't have the energy to resist anymore.

Soon the beasts heedlessly slammed into the shield, some even dying from the impact. The shield was a product of the System itself, and didn't even flicker from the impact. The wolves weren't disheartened, and started to claw frenziedly at the translucent barrier, but it had no effect at all. After a few seconds it was obvious that these beasts' only strong point was their incorporeal state.

Zac didn't want to waste even more crystals by activating the offensive component of the array as well, and instead took out his axe and headed out through the array once more. Attacks from the wall also started to fall down at the wolves through the barrier, as it only stopped things from going inside and not the other way.

It immediately became clear what worked and didn't work with these things. The arrowheads helplessly embedded themselves into the ground after passing through the transparent bodies of the wolves, with a few exceptions. Any arrow that was imbued with some skill, such as lightning or darkness, had no problem killing the beasts. Meanwhile, the mages had no problems at all and gleefully peppered the wolves full of holes.

Zac saw the same results. His axe just passed through the wolf it targeted, and it responded by trying to bite his free arm. Zac actually let it in order to see the result, and surprisingly it managed to grab a hold of the small of his arm. Its bite had no effect on Zac, and he felt that its power was only equivalent to the beasts on the 200th wave or somewhere around there.

He charged a minimal amount of cosmic energy into the fractal on his hand, and a small edge from **[Chop]** appeared. It was barely as long as the normal edge, but it costs almost no cosmic energy. Normally there would be little benefit to using it like this, but with these particular wolves it was very effective.

The wolves were like normal beasts to the edge created from cosmic energy as its head was split in two. However, no blood spurted out and the beast simply broke down into motes of darkness before it was completely gone. Next he tried using only the Dao with his axe, and it worked as well in letting him kill the monsters. Obviously, the beasts would be extremely dangerous to normal humans, but against skills they were pretty weak.

Still, the speed of whittling down their numbers was quite slow, as not all the demons possessed ranged skills. Those who were melee classes usually helped out by throwing rocks or shooting arrows from the wall when the battlefield was too dangerous, but now they could only helplessly stare on.

Very few demons dared to pass through the barrier to fight head-on. It wasn't like the wall that had the gates or ropes hanging from it that would allow the demons to quickly retreat if needed. If they passed through they would be stuck on the battlefield until the barrier was lowered as they couldn't come and go as they pleased like Zac.

The longer the barrier stayed active the more crystals would be consumed, and Zac felt the need to end this battle quickly. He started to charge up his **[Chop]** skill until it was five meters long, then with a mental command the edge multiplied into five identical parallel edges. They were right next to each other with less than a centimeter between them, making the edge look like a thick block of fractals.

Zac rapidly swung his axe horizontally five times, and with every swing one of the edges flew out in a different direction. Each blade created a huge path of death, and Zac felt a constant torrent of cosmic energy enter his body as a large part of the battlefield turned into black motes of light.

The new attack was the result of constantly being in pitched battles for weeks. Both his **[Axe Mastery]** and **[Chop]** had improved once again, reaching Late Mastery. According to Alea the mastery stages of skills were Early-Mid-Late-Peak before they reached their limits and needed to be upgraded, meaning the skills were close to completion.

The improved **[Chop]** currently held stable at five meters instead of at one, and now allowed for multiple blades to be created. Initially, he had only managed to create two, but as his control over cosmic energy improved from constant battle, the number of blades he could maintain stably increased. The extra blades had no purpose when they were attached, but greatly improved his area damage when he shot them away.

[Chop] was more and more turning into an area skill, but it didn't really improve the power of his strikes. He would have to imbue his Dao into the blades in order to improve the lethality compared to a normal swing. Luckily area damage was just the thing he needed with the monster hordes, so he was quite happy with the improvements.

Initially he wasn't sure what the point was of creating five blades in this new manner since he could just create them one by one and shoot them out in succession instead. But he realized that the Cosmic Energy consumption was a lot lower for copying an existing blade rather than creating it from scratch for some reason. Creating five blades the new way only required half the cosmic energy compared if he created them one by one. East blast he shot out usually killed a good amount of beasts, so being able to launch twice as many was a huge improvement.

He hadn't really explored the effect of **[Axe Mastery]** yet, as he didn't have the luxury of spending cosmic energy on the training system with the hordes constantly requiring attention. He hoped he'd get some days off where he could try it for a bit after the first horde was finished with.

Zac spent a decent chunk of cosmic energy in quickly reaping the lives of a large part of the wave, which allowed the melee warriors to head out and help out with the remainder. Soon only a few stragglers remained and Zac could deactivate the

shield. The shield was only active for roughly 30 minutes, but Zac knew that it cost him over a hundred thousand Nexus Coins. Even with his large number of kills from using his area attacks he knew he took a loss from this wave.

That's why he had refused to use the shield thus far, even though it cost the lives of a couple of demons. It might seem callous, but no one was stepping up to share the cost of maintenance, with everyone trying to amass as much wealth as possible from the waves.

He could force them to hand over some the earnings, in a manual shakedown of sorts. But he didn't feel the need for that as of yet, and saw their gains as a salary. But if it came down to it he wasn't above commandeering everything they had in order to protect his base. The demons were aware of this fact, and many even braved the dangers of the wolf hordes in order to burn all their cash at the Thayer Consortia when their pockets became heavy.

Apparently Calrin was well aware of the situation and had hiked up the cost of the herbs needed for medicine baths to twice its normal prices, citing the troubles of restocking during war-time. Zac suspected was all baloney as the Gnome had access to the Mercantile System, which allowed him to easily restock the supplies at any time.

The demons could only grit their teeth and cough up their hard-earned Nexus Coins. Zac really looked forward the shareholder's meeting of Thayer Consortia in two months when he would get his quarterly dividends from the proceedings. He had a feeling that the little gnome should have squeezed out an extraordinary amount of coins from the poor demons by then.

Since the ghost wolf wave was largely dead the System quickly pumped out the next one, and the army went back to business as usual. This time it was large lumbering things that looked made out of rocks, and some even had moss growing on their wide backs. The wolves were easily the largest kind so far, each reaching over three meters tall, with the leader towering over five meters. It was a bit troublesome as the

walls only stood at 8 meters, meaning that the huge thing might be able to reach the top, if it stood on its hind legs.

The saving grace was that there only was a bit over a hundred of them, but each felt like a walking siege machine, and Zac started to wonder whether he should erect the barrier again before these hulking things started to break down the fortifications. Imagining the cost of maintaining the barrier with these monstrosities charging at it quickly helped Zac arrive at a decision, and he charged toward the wolves after the customary rock throw which only elicited an angry growl this time.

Chapter 88: A day in the Wolf Horde

Zac intercepted the group of wolves some distance in front of the walls, not wanting to give them a chance to ruin his fortifications. These hulking things really looked like they could cause a dent in the wall. Zac really wished that the walls were inscribed with protective inscriptions like the whole Shipyard, since then he wouldn't have to worry about this. Unfortunately, there was no one with the skillset to inscribe the wall among the demons.

It was a recurring problem with the non-combat class demons in Azh'Rodum. Only a handful possessed great proficiency or promise in their field, with the rest generally being assistants or simply untalented. Most of the more talented ones enjoyed almost the same level of reputation in the demon clan as the warriors and decided to head back as their punishment would be bearable. That left a large number of people fumbling around, kind of like Zac. Ogras had obviously oversold the competences of his people the first time they met.

A huge rocky maw approaching woke him from his thoughts, and he sidestepped a few meters with his movement skill. His normal axes were much too small to do any real damage to these massive things, so he swapped it out for his huge elongated axe. He didn't want to use too much energy this wave, as he spent more than usual the last one.

Fighting the monster waves was a marathon rather than a sprint, and conservation was key. He jumped up a few meters and with a grunt decapitated the huge monster. Rock chippings flew all about as the head fell down, and Zac felt that the cut barely was enough. The axe took noticeable damage as well from cutting into the hard monster even though it had strengthening inscriptions.

Suddenly his Luck stat warned him of something approaching from behind and he immediately pushed to the side. It surprisingly was the head of the fallen beast. Or rather, it were a few smaller versions of the large rocky wolf that somehow was born out of the decapitated head. Zac was surprised but quickly killed them with a few swings.

He looked over to the main part of the body and saw that it was starting to squirm. Soon over ten wolves were born through its various parts, the transformation creating jarring sounds of rock scratching against rock. These wolves were apparently like some type of matryoshka dolls, containing more monsters inside. Even worse, he saw the smaller version he just bisected once more turn into even smaller wolves, these ones the size of medium-sized dogs.

After some deliberation, he chose to ignore these new smaller beasts and instead ran toward the next huge wolf. With a large jump he approached the next wolf from above, and at the last second he infused his large axe with the Dao of Heaviness. The swing contained the momentum and weight of a falling meteor, and not only was the beast cut in two but cracks ran all along its body.

A large surge of cosmic energy entering his body told Zac that the swing had destroyed a lot more than just a few beasts like his last swing did. It seemed he needed to do large scale damage to the rocks if he wanted to destroy the smaller versions along with the main body. Since most of the beasts in this one was dead, he proceeded to the next one. The large ones were the real trouble, as they might be able to threaten his walls. After they split into multiple smaller targets their threat lessened greatly, and the demon army could handle that.

Zac went from beast to beast and with large swings destroyed one towering beast after another. Every time he infused the swings with the Dao almost half the monsters inside died as well due to cracks forming all over from the impact. After roughly a dozen wolves his large axe was starting to distort from the force, and he could only helplessly tuck it away, instead bringing out a large mallet. It was reminiscent of the

large hammer a demon used on top of the mountain, and Zac found it pretty interesting when he raided the Demon's armory.

He still preferred using axes, but sometimes other weapons were simply more convenient. Blunt force was clearly the best tool against these beasts, and that wasn't something axes excelled at. Unfortunately Zac had problems using his Dao of Heaviness with the large mallet, but with his enormous Strength he only needed his body against these wolves.

One by one the large wolves were decimated by Zac's approach, and he actually managed to destroy 80 of them before they reached the wall. Left behind in his wake were broken rocks and smaller wolves who resumed the approach.

The demons on the wall had huge trouble destroying these large beasts, as it took them an inordinate amount of effort to destroy another 10 of them. Helplessly they could only focus on the smaller ones, as they began a methodical dismantling. The number of wolves was staggering by now, as most of the wolves survived after Zac switched to the mallet.

The last surviving whole wolves heedlessly ran into the wall, creating huge impact that could be felt to the bone. Worst was the area where the boss rammed the wall, as large cracks ran all the way to the foundation. The earth mages on top of the wall quickly stopped their attacks, and instead focused on mending the cracks before they spread any further. A few unlucky demons were even flung off the wall into the ground by the shockwave.

After the initial impact, the normal wolves couldn't do too much damage. They scratched and bit the walls, and with every attack deep gouges were created. Still, it would take some time before they got through the thick walls, so Zac wasn't too worried about that. The boss was another matter.

With surprising nimbleness, it backed away a bit and stood up on its hind legs. The monster was huge, reaching a fair bit over ten meters in height when it stood like this. It looked like bad news to Zac, forcing him to action even though he usually tried to ignore the boss as long as possible. He even swapped out the mallet for his usual axe, and charged up a **[Chop]** as he

approached. With one quick motion he cut off one of the hind legs, but it was too late. The monster was already falling down toward the wall, and with a tremendous crash it slammed into it. Rocks from both the boss and the wall flew everywhere, and the shockwave forced even Zac back some distance.

Luckily the wall was sturdy enough that a single bodyslam wasn't enough to destroy it. A section of the top wall was crushed though. Even worse, the boss created a sort of ramp up toward the other side, and it looked like most of the wolves were ready. They stopped their assault at the wall and charged toward the now unmoving boss.

The fact that Zac gained almost no cosmic energy when he lopped off the leg told him that the boss was still alive, and simply kept still in order to let its minions over the wall. This put Zac in a predicament, as he didn't know whether to kill the boss or try to stop the invasion on its back. If he destroyed the boss the security breach would be fixed, but the next wave would spawn prematurely. Conversely, if he left it alive some demons risked dying from the onslaught.

After some hesitation he started chopping off parts of the large boss, making the walkway along its back a bit thinner. He quickly stopped after the walkway was only three meters wide at most parts though, as he was afraid the System would count it as a kill if he continued on.

After that he placed himself on the back of the wolf to meet the oncoming onslaught. Hundreds of stone wolves were converging on his location, and Zac destroyed them one by one as they approached. He once again took out a second small axe to dual-wield against the incoming sea of wolves. He was like a grinder where wolves entered and small chunks of rocks exited. Every now and then some of the smaller wolves slipped through the cracks and ran past Zac up toward the wall. A second line of defense consisting of a few melee warriors had already formed behind Zac though, and they were quickly dealt with.

The other demons weren't idle either, as they bombarded the wolves below. Zac's actions created a chokepoint, and the wolves trying to get up their leader's back were packed tightly

along the wall. Any attack was having great efficiency as it was essentially impossible to miss by now. A group of warriors also scaled the wall down to ambush the wolves from behind as they all tried to move toward Zac.

The number of wolves was steadily decreasing, and the battlefield was starting to fill with rocky debris. It was worst around Zac as most of the action was centered around there. It was actually starting to create a problem, as every death added onto their boss, and the wolf-ramp was growing wider and sturdier as the battle went on.

It was getting increasingly hard for Zac to kill everything that tried to get up without expending any cosmic energy, as he simply had trouble reaching both sides of the widening ramp. Every now and then he stomped the ground with a Dao-Empowered Foot, creating a small landslide of rocks and gravel. It helped to somewhat allay the problem, but it was only delaying the inevitable.

“Stash the rocks into Cosmic Pouches!” Zac shouted behind him, and a few demons moved forward to comply. He had actually attained the **[Book of Babel]** some time ago by using contribution Points.

The skill wasn't available in his Nexus Node, so he was quite excited to see the skill in the temporary contribution shop. The shop was actually another crystal that spawned close to his camp, along with a huge monitor that listed the rankings of contribution. It only showed the top 10 though.

The skill cost a week's worth of Zac's contribution points, but he felt it was worth it. Communication was getting more important as the waves got harder and some teamwork was needed. Besides, he would need the skill soon anyway when he set out from the island. He had no idea who he'd meet when he left since the world had gotten randomized, and it would be quite frustrating if he finally met humans but couldn't communicate with them.

The wave was finally starting to thin out, but the battle on top of the boss had continuously caused damage and cracks to the hulking beast they stood on. Finally, some threshold was

passed, as Zac saw the portals start pulsating in the distance. Since there was no reason to be careful anymore Zac ordered the demons to back up to the wall again.

Next he charged up a huge fractal blade on each of his axes, and even empowered them with the Dao of Heaviness, turning the blades darker and giving them a palpable pressure. With a roar he swung down on the boss below, and the power from his swings completely decimated the beast and everything along with it.

The landing that had accumulated over time from the kills was completely destroyed as the strikes made debris fly in all directions, and even the closest wolves were thrown away. He immediately removed the Dao empowerment from the blades but kept them up for a few seconds as he completely destroyed any remainders of the siege. It would be impossible for the non-combat classes to pick up all these small pieces of gravel so he had to spread them out as much as possible.

Tens of the stone wolves were caught up in Zac's wide swings, and along with the efforts of the demons less than ten percent remained. Finally content Zac let the fractal edges dissipate as he turned toward the next wave that was already approaching. These wolves had a washed-out cyan coloring, and the ground actually froze to ice where their feet touched as they ran. Zac sighed as he picked up one of the larger rocks from the ground and moved toward the incoming wave.

The day was far from over.

Chapter 89: The Final Four

As the days passed the fights got increasingly desperate. Zac had improved quite a bit over the last weeks enabling him to pick up some of slack. But the same thing couldn't be said about the demons. He was surprised to hear that most of the demons that entered the incursion were actually level 75 already, stuck in the first bottleneck. Their current power was around a level 50, or a level 30 elite. This made Zac realize that levels were only a half-decent indicator for actual power.

The continuous battling was a crucible that let a few warriors push through their limits and improve their skills. There had even been a few warriors who gained a Dao-Seed in their desperation. A nondescript demoness gained the Seed of Tinder, and her fireballs suddenly created waves of death as the flames quickly spread into their surroundings. But it wasn't enough.

Ogras was truly impressive, both in the number of his kills and his leadership. Over the weeks his role as the leader of the demons went from something born out of fear into willing submission. Unfortunately Ogras didn't have the inhuman Endurance and Vitality of Zac, and as the fights got more intense the shorter amount of time he was able to keep going.

Initially the two split the fighting 50-50, giving both sufficient rest, but now Zac fought in 75 percent of the waves. In some waves he simply acted as a back-up to the tired Ogras, but the other waves he was forced to almost single-handedly carry.

Just in the last day Zac had been forced to activate the shield on eight of the waves, rapidly draining his crystal reserves. One of the waves he actually decimated with the offensive component after letting everyone rest for a full 59 minutes.

In a perfect world he would have done that in every single wave for half a day, but it, unfortunately, was impossible. The

offensive attack took twelve hours to recharge and cost 2500 crystals to use. Even though he had a crystal mine to his name, the actual amount of crystals he had on him wasn't too large, so he had to use the attack sparingly.

Zac was running quite low on crystals, even though Ogras reluctantly fished out a surprising amount of them a week ago. They were his private hoard he kept as long as possible. Zac regretted that he traded so many of them for Nexus Coins prematurely. He was afraid the whole wave would come in one go instead of the incremental way the wolves had, and splurged on the array and a few offensive options to be able to meet a storm of beasts.

Only afterward did he know that he was wrong, and Ogras was as surprised as he was. It was easy for him to sometimes see the Demons as some omniscient beings, but Ogras was only a youth from a D-Ranked world just like him. There were an endless amount of things he didn't know the specifics of either.

Zac had even gone to buy back some of what he sold to Calrin, prepared to eat a loss. He was dismayed to learn that Calrin's reasons for hiking up prices of herbs weren't actually purely a business tactic. There apparently were restrictions put in place the moment the waves started and the protective shields of the shop were erected. The System stopped the trade of certain items, and crystals were one such thing.

Crystals were used in powering most powerful arrays and war machines, and Calrin said he believed the reason for the embargo was that the system didn't want people to finish hard quests with money alone. It made sense, as the beast horde quest would become a joke if Zac had unlimited funds. He could just sit on top of the wall and watch as powerful arrays ripped the wolves to shreds. He had seen the terrible power of the arrays the one time he activated the offensive functions. The blasts left nothing alive of that wave.

He already had an advantage from possessing the mine and the knowledge of the demons. Without either the quest would be far harder, but still manageable. Unfortunately the restrictions on trade meant that Zac couldn't just keep the array active for

the last four hordes. His remaining crystals simply wouldn't be enough.

"Just four more waves," a voice said next to him as Zac stood on the wall. It was Ogras who looked uncommonly rested. Both he and Zac had taken it somewhat easily the last day even though the waves were getting quite extreme, which was partly why he had been forced to use the shield so much. The two could only assume the finale would be pretty bad from the escalation of difficulty.

Zac grunted in affirmation as he threw rocks at the stragglers of the wave below. These wolves were extremely thin and excelled in speed, so Zac only managed to hit them every ten throws or so. He could have gone down but these wolves were actually quite dangerous. Their claws were razor-sharp and together with their speed one of them actually managed to cut a wound on Zac's throat before he managed to react. He had quickly climbed up the walls again after the scare.

If the wolves were a bit faster the wave would have been really calamitous. With their amazing speed and light frame they actually managed to run up most of the wall before being impeded by gravity. A few actually made it all the way, but they were quickly ganged up on before they could orient themselves and do any damage.

The rest had slowly been dealt with using quantity over quality. The monsters were too deft to target so the demons simply focus fired certain congested areas, pelting it with spells and arrows. A whole area with a radius of fifty meters quickly became a zone of death, and even these quick wolves couldn't escape.

Still, the elusive wolves took time to kill, and some still were running about below the wall even as the summoning of the next wave approached, every so often trying to scale the fortifications. The portals in the distance pulsated, which signaled the next wave's arrival.

Soon the 717th wave was approaching. These wolves looked quite normal, apart from the fact they were completely white, making them look albino. But instead of the red eyes that

usually accompanied that condition even their eyes were without any color, making them look blind. The only exception to the monochromatic color scheme was a perfect black circle in their foreheads.

They trotted toward the wall in a uniform speed, not heedlessly charging like most of the waves did. When they were a few hundred meters they suddenly stopped and let out a synchronized howl toward the defenders.

The sound pierced into Zac's ears and he immediately got woozy. He forcefully refocused his mind and looked at the surroundings, and saw most of the demons hunkered over. Many bled from their eyes or ears as well, a testament to the penetrating power of the howl.

"Mental attack," Ogras hoarsely said, his eyes a bit red from the impact. He glanced at Zac who seemed completely unperturbed by the assault. "Jeez, just how high is your Intelligence? Such a synchronized attack didn't even affect you."

Zac ignored the comment as usual. Ogras tried to dig out some information about Zac's class and attributes every so often through innocuous comments. Zac didn't trust himself to weave a believable net of lies and then keep track of it, and could only stoically ignore the remarks. He instead focused on the psychic wolves in the distance, and suddenly his eyes turned into a needlepoint.

"DOWN!" Zac roared on top of his lungs, and most demons immediately threw themselves at the ground. Over the past weeks most learned to trust Zac's nose for danger, and wouldn't hesitate to follow his commands. However, a few were still dazed by the mental attack, and they paid dearly for it.

Another earth-shattering howl somehow created an enormous shockwave that pushed toward the fortifications with lightning-quick speed. In just over a second it closed the distance to the wall, ripping the straggler wolves from the last wave to shreds on the way. The wave slammed into the wall with a tremendous impact and the only thing stopping the

demons from falling off was the protruding wall on the inner side of the wall walk. Multiple cracks ran along the fortifications, and some parts even completely crumbled.

The few demons who hadn't reacted in time met miserable ends as well. Some at least managed to activate one type of defense or another, such as stone skin or a magic shield. But the defenses quickly shattered as the demons were thrown off the wall into the distance, their life, and death unknown. The demons who hadn't even erected defenses immediately turned to mangled pieces of flesh and bones that splattered their teammates.

"Fucking imbeciles" Ogras muttered as he shook off a piece of brain matter that had fallen on his legs. He had been the first to throw himself to the floor, his survival skills simply impeccable as always.

"We can't let them shoot off another blast like that, the wall will completely crumble," he continued as he turned toward Zac.

The shaking from the impact quickly subsided and Zac hesitantly looked up over the wall. The wolves simply stood rooted at the same position as before, their white eyes staring at him. Not one of them took a single step forward, and they seemed to be waiting for something.

Zac guessed that it took some time to charge a blast of that power, but he didn't want to find out how long. This race of wolves clearly preferred ranged attacks, and if they were left alone they would quickly turn the whole wall into rubble.

He didn't dare erect the shield as well, as he wasn't sure that it could even withstand such a concentrated attack. It was one thing for it to defend against a multitude of claws and bites, but to withstand the concentrated power of hundreds of fused attacks at once? Zac felt doubtful. Even if it held it would take a massive amount of crystals just to defend against an attack of that magnitude, and Zac might find himself without the use of the fortifications against the next three waves.

"We need to go," Zac simply said and got ready to jump over the wall.

“What the fuck, are you crazy?” Ogras immediately said, clearly unwilling to brave such an army.

Zac only ignored him and jumped down, creating a thud as he landed. At least there were no wolves of the last wave remaining standing after the blast wave. He unhesitatingly charged straight for the ranks of the psychic wolves. As he started running he heard an exasperated “Goddamnit” and a lighter thud behind him.

With a wry smile, he kept running and took out a huge boulder from his pouch. It weighed a few hundred kilos and looked like something a catapult should throw rather than a human. Zac launched it straight into the middle of the pack with a resounding roar, wanting to disrupt their rhythm.

A shimmering shield actually winked into existence in front of the group, and the boulder slammed into it with a terrifying force. The shield wobbled and flickered from the impact, but it barely held true. But just as the stone helplessly fell to the ground a black javelin slammed into the very same spot, cracking the shield with a snap. As the large shield broke and many wolves let out a pained yelp.

The wolves’ magical defenses were down and an opening was created. One human and a demon rushed inside, each creating a storm of blood.

Chapter 90: Worsening Conditions

The psychic wolves weren't as deadly in close quarters, but Zac still was constantly pelted with waves of mental attacks which strained his mind. Fortunately his stats made him able to barely hold on, but he was worried about his partner. A quick glance showed him that he was worried about nothing.

Ogras was creating corpses all around him with his deadly spear. Zac also saw that the demon wore a circlet he had never seen him use before. It was a simple metal band with engravings, and in the forehead between his horns a large milky white gem was inlaid. The gem flashed with power every now and then, giving out a hazy light. It looked like the demon had a tool that protected him from psychic attacks.

Zac didn't have that kind of luxury, and could only painfully withstand the attacks as he wildly swung his axe around. The two were quickly decimating wolves, but the wolves weren't just sitting around doing nothing. The flanks of the wolf wave split off from the rest while the main group kept the two powerhouses busy, and instead headed closer to the wall.

Zac tried to move to stop them, but was overwhelmed with shockwaves and mental attacks from all directions, and couldn't get out in time. The offshoots started to bombard the wall with attacks, mainly targeted the damaged area.

The demons on the wall, led by Alea and Namys, tried to handle the wolves as quick as possible, but most of the attacks were ineffective against the wolves' newly erected shields. Besides, many warriors on the walls weren't still back to fighting condition after the initial psychic blast.

Hearing the ominous sounds of rock cracking Zac could only grit his teeth and Summon [**Chop**]. He didn't want to use any

cosmic energy this wave in order to save it all for the last three, but he saw no option. He expanded the blades to five meters, and in conjunction with **[Loamwalker]** created huge swathes of death in the main group of wolves.

Every step moved him a few meters into a new group of wolves, who immediately were bisected by a swing of the enormous edge, before he disappeared to the next cluster. It looked like large blood explosions erupted amongst the wolves in quick succession, as he almost wasted no time on movement between the swings.

Over the countless battles over the month he had mostly mastered his movement skill, and could freely move within a few meters of his position with a speed that almost looked like teleportation. It had a huge effect on his kill speed in conjunction with his enlarged edge, but it also cost a substantial amount of cosmic energy.

When he felt he had pruned the group of wolves to the point that Ogras could take care of it himself within the remaining time of the wave, he charged toward the offshoot groups. Ogras seemed to be incensed from seeing Zac rack up a huge amount of contribution points in short order, and his spear turned into a blur as he moved through the wolves. He used some odd skill that caused holes to erupt in the throats and heads of wolves even when the spear was meters away, making it look like there was a sniper in the distance assisting him.

The flanks that assaulted the wall had splintered into even more groups in order to avoid the attacks from the demons, and small shockwaves were constantly flying up at the cracks on the wall. The wall looked ready to fall down, with spiderwebs of cracks running along large stretches. A few earth mages frantically infused the wall with energy in order to patch it up, but it would take some time to restore its structural integrity.

In some areas large chunks of the wall were even lying down by the foundation, having been blasted clean off. Fixing those large breaches would take time and require a lot of manpower to lift the pieces back, which there obviously was no time for.

The battle started calming down over time, as Zac eased the pressure for the demons by charging at the wolf packs one by one and decimating them. He was starting to get a pounding headache from all the mental assaults, but he couldn't do anything but grit his teeth and continue. Another fifteen minutes later Ogras came running over, a sheen of perspiration covering his head. He stopped and took a few deep breaths before he turned

“Lunatic! Leaving me alone with all those beasts,” the demon spat out between deep breaths, looking miffed but obviously not too angry.

“Well it worked out fine, didn't it? Do you have some solution for the wall?” Zac answered with a shrug as he waved at the crumbling battlements.

The two had taken stock of the available crystals right before the last four waves, and there were enough Nexus Crystals left to power one widespread attack and to use the shield for roughly an hour unless the attacks were too powerful. With three waves remaining he didn't wish to start using the shield already, potentially leaving them undefended against the last two waves.

As if feeling Zac's thoughts a deep rumbling could be heard from the wall, and a whole section crumbled, leaving a three-meter wide opening through the wall.

“FUCK!” Zac screamed and didn't wait for Ogras' answer, immediately running toward the breach.

The last stragglers of the psychic wolves were already converging at the hole as well, seemingly wanting to cause some damage before they were wiped out. To make matters worse the pillars started pulsing again at this very moment, the 718th wave starting to pour out from the shining lights.

“REPAIR THE WALLS!” Ogras roared as he ran after Zac, shooting out shadow spears at the charging psychic wolves.

With Zac and Ogras holding up the wolves a few dozen burly demons frantically started moving large pieces of rubble back into the wall, where earth mages melded the pieces back into

the main structure. The earth mages had been tapped hard lately, and they looked like walking corpses by now, completely pale and with sunken eyes.

But they were the only ones who could fix these types of things in short order, and simply had to keep going even if they overtaxed themselves. They knew that if the wall fell most demons would die. If they were overrun the two leaders in the front might be able to escape, and perhaps the generals like Alea and Ilvere as well. But the earth mages didn't specialize in escape techniques, and the wolves would hunt them down sooner or later. So they kept infusing the wall with cosmic energy, to the point of harming their bodies.

Ilvere and Namys appeared next to Ogras, who started to give out orders.

“Ilvere, help with the repair of the walls, only you and Zac can hold the largest blocks of stone while they get reattached. Namys, help me control the remaining Psychic Wolves. Zac, can you go ahead and try to stall the next wave?”

Zac looked around for a second and judged the situation was under control, so with a nod he sped off toward the next wave. He held roughly the same pace as the new wolves so he met them right between the wall and the mini-incursions and frowned when he saw the new adversaries.

The new wave consisted of metallic wolves full of jutting edges and sharp blades, looking like some steampunk tool of war. Just from a glance he couldn't tell whether they actually were machines or living beings. Of course, that line apparently was a bit blurred in the multi-verse, with the Creators being a prime example of that. He guessed that destroying one should give him the answer, as he would see whether parts or metallic blood would spew out.

He took out another rock and threw it with full force at one of the wolves in the front. It moved its head to not take the stone right in its snout, so it slammed into its shoulder with a tremendous crash. The wolf was thrown away a few meters from the impact, but Zac saw the beast shake its body and get back on its feet right away. Where the stone hit only a small

dent could be seen, and it didn't seem damaged at all apart from that.

Zac possessed over 250 strength by now and had the power to lift a small car. That a full-powered throw from him only caused some superficial damage to the beast told a troubling story about this wave. How were they going to destroy these wolves in time? There would only be a scant few that could deal with these things apart from himself and Ogras.

But he had a job to do so he could only grit his teeth. He charged up a five-meter **[Chop]** and unhesitantly imbued it with his Dao of Heaviness. The blade turned darker and more intricate as he swung at the incoming stampede.

He felt a shock travel up his arm as he mowed through the metallic beings with his axe, their sturdiness being far and above anything he had fought so far. Even the rock wolves from earlier weren't any problem for him with his overpowered stats.

Luckily the wolves didn't fare any better as they were destroyed into metallic pieces over the ground. Zac did everything he could to impede the charge expending both mental and cosmic energy in wreaking havoc. Many of the wolves headed straight for Zac in order to avenge their brethren, but some still ignored him and continued onward toward the wall.

Some packs kept trickling past him as the main force kept trying to mob him to death, and after 15 minutes he was pretty wrung out and needed a break. His arm was actually starting to feel sore and he had been forced to swap axes six times in the short duration, as they simply were getting destroyed on the tough bodies.

He started to push back toward the wall, and he could only hope that it was somewhat fixed at least. Unfortunately, he saw that it was still an open entrance, and the metallic wolves were trying to get in. At least the hole was mostly shored up, the opening being quite a bit more shallow.

Zac soon arrived at the breach and met a tired-looking Ogras accompanied by Namys and Ilvere. A quick glance showed

Janos and Alea at a walkway that was built above the crack, giving the demons above a spot to throw down large boulders of debris at the monsters. The boulders were too heavy to be carried, but they simply used Cosmos Sacks for it, summoning them up above and letting gravity do the rest.

“These fuckers are so hard to kill, there’s no way we will be able to take down all of them,” Ogras grunted, clearly starting to fade from his high Cosmic Energy expenditure. The two demons looked ready to keel over, but they coordinated their attacks to take down one wolf by one in a stoic manner.

Zac planted himself in the crack, and helped arduously destroy one wolf after another. Eventually, they ran out of time, even as quite a few wolves remained. The pillars started to light up as usual, but this time it looked different. The glow looked almost blinding, and soon Zac saw why.

The 719th wave was an endless sea of wolves, tens of thousands of them. And even as they approached the wall, the pillars kept spewing more out.

Chapter 91: Lightning Punishment

“RETREAT!” Zac unhesitatingly roared as he saw the insane amount of wolves approaching. If he had to guess he would say that the System crammed 20-30 waves worth of wolves into one.

The demons immediately complied and moved down from the wall to a far lower one roughly 50 meters further in. It could barely be called a wall, not even reaching three meters in height, and was rather a purchase to gain a bit better vantage when fighting. The wall wasn't made to physically rebuff enemies, but rather it was there as a line of demarcation, showing where the Town Defense Array would cover.

Soon only Zac, Ogras and his two confidantes were holding off the remaining metallic beasts as the rest had moved back to safety.

Ogras looked a bit hesitant as he turned to Zac.

“Are you sure about this?”

In response Zac only nodded and took out a blue glass ball out of his pouch, not stopping his attacks with his other hand. The glass ball crackled with lightning, as though a thunderstorm was caught and crammed inside the bauble.

“Alright. See you on the other side friend,” Ogras said with a solemn expression as he nodded to the other two demons. They rapidly moved backward, leaving Zac alone in the crack facing a sea of wolves.

Soon after the last three demons were inside the defensive array flickered into being, covering the inner area of Port Atwood. Zac instead moved out toward the incoming waves.

Some of the metallic beasts charged after him, while some tried to claw their way into the array.

As Zac pushed forward he started to infuse the glass ball with cosmic energy, making the thunder inside flit about more and more erratically. After roughly two minutes a large part of Zac's remaining cosmic energy was consumed, but finally a change happened in the ball. It was as though it had reached critical mass, and started to absorb a huge amount of cosmic energy from the environment itself.

The ball started to flow in the air on its own, and Zac's both hands were freed to protect the device. It would take a few more minutes before it was ready. He stayed put and mindlessly killed any wolf that came close, and he was surprised to see that he recognized many of the wolf-types from things he had fought during the past weeks.

It was like the System had summoned an all-star combination of the wolf-waves for the 719th assault. Zac was pelted by all types of attacks, but luckily his E-Grade robe protected him from most of it. As he fought the sky started to darken, and ominous rumblings echoed out through the island. A huge bolt of lightning flashed, and suddenly the hovering ball next to Zac was gone. He knew his mission was completed and started to bolt toward the protective array with full speed, not caring about the wolves anymore.

As he ran the battlefield turned almost pitch black from huge dark clouds that amassed with impossible speed, and then all hell broke loose. Huge pillars of lightning slammed into the ground all around the area, frying any unlucky wolf that was too close. But that was only the start as the chaos kept intensifying.

The area was blasted with such an amount of lightning bolts that the whole southern tip of the island was brightly lit up. The ground crackled and exploded at every place the bolts landed, completely destroying any wolf corpses or fortifications strewn about. In some areas the lightning was so intense that they started to spread along the ground, creating what looked like lakes made out of lightning. These lakes kept expanding, creating a field of death for anything caught inside.

Zac desperately ran toward safety, shocked about the efficacy of the device. It sounded mighty from the description when he bought it for 3 000 000 Nexus Coins, but he hadn't expected it to be of this scale. Of course, something like this would only work on dumb beasts who refused to flee. The area of attack even spread toward the array, and lightning bolts slammed into the shield every now and then, making it light up.

The ball Zac used was actually a purely offensive array that he bought as preparation for the monster wave called [**E-Grade Medium Scale Lightning Punishment Array**]. Different from the offensive capabilities of the Town Array it was a one-time usage attack. It was an array that consumed itself to summon the monstrous cloud in the sky that would rain death and destruction over the area.

It was Zac's ace in the hole that he had hoped to keep until the last wave, and finish it off with a bang. But he immediately knew there was no way for them to manually kill the endless amount of wolves that spawned out of the wave, especially not with the wall in shambles. They would have been tired out then overrun from the numbers.

An acute sense of danger warned Zac, who immediately used [**Loamwalker**] to move away as far as possible. Soon after he heard the ground explode behind him from a lightning bolt, but he didn't bother turning around. He was closing in on the safety of the array.

The lightning actually kept increasing, and Zac was forced to keep dodging the bolts. But even with his movement skill he didn't come out unscathed as the lightning ran along the ground between two nearby bolt, shocking Zac on the way.

His world turned white for a second and he stumbled, but he shook himself awake and continued. It felt like he was cooked from inside, and the pain was even worse than the black lightning arcs that the main branch demons used. He was forced to eat a few more secondary blasts of lightning before he finally threw himself through the array and fell down panting.

Smoke was rising from his body, and the short hair that had grown out lately was singed clean off, once again turning him into a bald monk. After a few steadying breaths he got up and turned toward the battlefield. Now that he wasn't running for his life he could actually properly inspect the lightning storm, and the sight was truly exceptional.

He felt it was a joke he considered Rydel's final attack to be a punishment from heaven. This was what real heavenly thunder looked like. It was as though the god of thunder himself wanted to smite this whole part of the island out of existence as huge bolts unceasingly slammed into the ground.

He looked up and saw that the cloud was spread a bit further than he had hoped, and errant bolt kept slamming into the shield. He winced with every blast, as he knew that each time lightning struck the shield it cost him Nexus Crystals.

"Good hustle, human" Ogras said as he approached with his trademark half-smile. "I didn't expect the lightning punishment to be this intense. It might be because there's a Nexus Vein beneath the island."

Zac nodded and brought out a canteen of water that he poured over himself, the water cooling his singed body.

"I'm not sure the crystals will last," the demon then added with a low voice, his face turning somber. "The amount of lightning striking the shield is more than we expected."

"Are the rods ready?" Zac asked in response.

The demon nodded and waved toward the small wall, that now was adorned with five-meter tall metal spears jutting out at some intervals, leading down into the ground. It was lightning rods they had asked the blacksmith create in case the lightning got out of control.

"Lower the power to the shield and it might last longer," Zac sighed.

Ogras nodded and waved toward Janos, who still was managing the shield. He touched the large crystal ball and soon the shield dimmed somewhat.

“Move away from the wall!” Ogras shouted, and people spread out some distance from the wall.

Even with weakened energy output the shield defended against most of the lightning bolts. Every now and then a crack was blasted open, letting a few slip through. Luckily they harmlessly entered the rods, who pushed the lightning down into the ground, until the shield repaired itself again. However, it was clear that each rod would only be able to take one or two of these magical bolts of lightning, as they partly melted from a strike.

They didn’t have to worry about the metallic wolves outside either, as they had been the focus of the lightning since the start due to their composition. They were quickly reduced to molten pools of metal on the ground outside.

Finally, the lightning bolts started to subside and the skies cleared up with noticeable speed. Zac and Ogras finally dared to exit the shield to look at the result. They quickly moved up to the mostly ruined wall and surveyed the battlefield. Even Ogras looked shocked by what they saw. The scene was like something taken out of a horror story. Thousands upon thousands of mangled and burned carcasses covered the ground, which by itself was burnt and pocked.

Zac was surprised to see that only one pillar of light remained in the distance. Had the Lightning Punishment even destroyed the portals? As if sensing that the offensive array’s onslaught had ended the last incursion started pulsing and out walked a humongous beast. It was the 720th beast wave, and it was the complete opposite of the last one. As soon as the monstrous wolf walked out of the portal it winked out of existence.

The wolf looked abyssal with six pitch-black eyes and a much too large maw. It actually gave Zac the same vibes as the demonic beasts he had fought so far on the island and he turned toward Ogras and found him looking pale.

“E-Grade Fiendwolf,” Ogras exclaimed with some fear evident on his face.

“From your homeworld?” Zac asked, as Ogras clearly recognized the monster.

“No, but it lives within demon territory. They are extremely dangerous. Luckily there’s only one. Usually, they rove in large packs of thousands. Still, it’s going to be a tough fight. It’s evolved to E-rank, and possess at least one Dao Seed.”

The wolf started approaching and let out a demonic roar that echoed through the battlefield. The howl felt like a physical blow to Zac, and he saw that some bloody gashes actually appeared on Ogras who lost his balance.

The wolf swiped its claws toward the two, and even though there were two hundred meters between them Zac felt a terrifying sense of danger. He immediately grabbed the falling Ogras and unhesitantly jumped down from the wall.

As he landed he heard a swishing sound from above, and the next second the wall was simply blown away, cut into multiple pieces. A terrifying wave continued on and slammed into the shield, instantly destroying it.

“Dao of Sharpness...” Zac muttered, convinced that it should be the Dao Seed he had been trying to gain for so long. He realized the wave of destruction from the sharp claws felt very familiar, and he was sure that it had the added feeling of the Dao of Sharpness he once sensed in his first vision.

“It’s too strong. E-Rankers are simply different from us unevolved. We should give this one up, human,” Ogras muttered as he spat out some gravel from his mouth.

But Zac paid him no heed, as he stood up and glared at the last Wolf who stood between him and his goals.

Chapter 92: Fiend Wolf

The wolf obviously was able to do great damage from such a distance, so there was no point in hiding behind the wreckage of the walls. Zac didn't have any more tools or arrays to take care of it, so he would have to finish this last wave by hand. He took out an axe and charged toward the beast with determination in his eyes.

The fiend wolf spotted him and with a mighty roar set off against him as well. As they approached each other the boss once more swiped with its claw making three edges rend a path toward him. In response Zac charged up five **[Chop]** edges and launched them to meet the blades one by one.

The wolf's attack demolished the first blade without being impeded in the slightest, and the following four blades didn't fare much better. The five blades somewhat slowed down the attack and weakened it, but it was nowhere enough to stop it. It forced Zac to use his movement skill to dodge it, happy that at least his axe didn't take damage from using the cosmic energy blades after they detached from the axe.

The attacks of the wolf were on a higher tier compared to his own, and he didn't know whether it was due to the Dao of Sharpness or the power of the beast itself. He knew that evolving into an E-Grade class was supposed to give a huge power-boost, but he still felt he should be able to contend with his enormous stat boosts from his titles. Luckily his movement skill was great for dodging attacks, and he sidestepped the incoming strike.

Soon he was upon the beast, and it felt even more threatening this close. It was even larger compared to the huge rock wolves he fought some time ago, reaching over six meters in height. But that clearly wasn't its only difference. The very air around it hummed with power, and he actually felt himself getting cut by innumerable air blades. Some small cuts even

appeared on his body with his huge Endurance, so Zac knew that an unevolved human would be cut into ribbons by simply walking close to this monster.

It was the beast's Dao Field. Ogras and Alyn had explained the magical effects of Dao in battle. For example when a warrior's insight got deeper he could actually spread his Dao out into the vicinity, creating a field that empowered himself or hurt his enemy. An early-stage Seed was too weak for that though, meaning this wolf not only possessed the Seed of Sharpness, it was also an evolved version.

He moved underneath the monster, careful to avoid its long serrated claws that looked like they could bisect him in a second. He quickly summoned [**Chop**] and swung at one of its hind-legs in an effort to chop it off. He had no wish to stay in this field too long, as he'd be slowly whittled down to just bones.

The five-meter edge slammed into the leg some ways above the knee and penetrated into the thick sinewy muscles. But the axe didn't get far before it was stopped. Even with Zac's monstrous power he couldn't lop off its leg. The swing pushed the leg back, but soon the axe in his hands started to bend.

The standard-issue axe simply wasn't good enough to cut through the monster, at least not without the aid of his Dao Seed or a stronger skill. Even odder, it was as though some force rebounded his energy, annihilating the cosmic energy he used in the swing, which nullified much of the effectiveness of the strike.

He threw away the ruined axe and brought out a new one, but the wolf wasn't content just to let Zac scurry about underneath its stomach. It pushed away with extreme speed and repositioned itself so that it could bite or claw after him. It started to furiously swipe at Zac, who could only once again rely on his movement skill to move away.

It destroyed the ground all around him as the waves from the claws rent gashes as deep as Zac was tall, which stretched tens of meters away. The beast wasn't using any skills, only the power of its body empowered with its Dao, and still the effect

was even greater compared to when Zac used **[Chop]**. Gravel and charred body parts of wolves were flying all over the area from the Fiend Wolf's assault.

Zac tried to move closer to the beast but it held him at bay with its claws and huge maw, making it impossible to get around. He soon gave up and infused a **[Chop]** with the Dao of Heaviness and furiously swung it at the claw to intercept it. The collision was enormous, and Zac was pushed twenty meters away, the axe in his hand completely destroyed.

The wolf wasn't unscathed though, as it yelped and backed away a bit. Nothing was cut off, unfortunately, but the empowered strike at least broke some bones in its paws and perhaps destroyed some muscles. The Fiend Wolf obviously didn't want to put any weight on the damaged paw even though it didn't actually bleed.

The wolf only seemed to get even more enraged and the air started to distort around it. It furiously howled up in the air, then exploded into action. With a frenzied charge it ignored its hurt paw in order to close in on Zac, who once again was forced on the defensive. Zac's cosmic energy was over halfway depleted even before starting the battle and he knew he couldn't just keep dodging. **[Loamwalker]** had an amazing effect, but it was his most draining skill.

Without seeing any alternative he pushed forward right after dodging a swing, moving straight toward the beast's head. The maw of the monster was immediately upon him, rows of jagged teeth closing in. But just as the mouth was about to slam shut a green shimmering sheen enveloped Zac.

It was the defensive option of his clothing, something he hadn't used apart from some experiments during the past month. As a top tier E-Grade equipment, the shield from his robe stopped the teeth in their tracks, even causing many of them to crack or break off.

The pain must have been blinding for the monster, as it howled in pain while its head jerked away by reflex. Zac saw his opportunity and charged up his **[Chop]** with the Dao of Heaviness, and ruthlessly chopped at its exposed throat. The

power of his swing was enormous, and he could actually hear some things in its throat breaking. He also managed to cut some ways into its throat, making a great deal of almost pitch black blood spurt out.

The power of the swing together with the Dao of Heaviness actually threw the huge monster over ten meters away, where it landed in a deep thud. The ground beneath Zac's feet caved from the pressure, chippings flying in all directions.

Unfortunately the swing wasn't enough, as the monster had no trouble getting back on its feet. It was frothing at its mouth in anger, and a deep growl incessantly escaped its mouth. But just as it got to its feet nine large spikes materialized around it from clouds of green shimmering gases. Zac's sense for danger started tingling from just looking at the meter-long spikes, and he glanced around.

He saw Alea stand some distance away with a pale face, ready to keel over. Just as he saw her she closed her fist, and a penetrating screech erupted from the wolf. Zac quickly turned back and saw that the large spikes had penetrated deep into various parts of the beast's body.

The wolf let out an enraged roar and furiously shook to remove the poisoned spikes from its body. However, they were firmly lodged into its body, and even with its thrashing they stayed inside. The wolf howled in anger and ignored Zac to swipe its front claw toward the demoness, who desperately scrambled away. The movements of the wolf were weird and twitchy after getting impaled, but it still was able to send those sharp edges out.

The nail-attack clearly used up all of her power as she stumbled around while she tried to avoid the incoming blades. Zac knew that should have been Alea's ace in the hole, as he could barely draw blood with his huge swings, yet all nine of her spikes penetrated the tough hide.

The onslaught quickly became too much, and the edge of a swipe hit her shoulder, drawing a great spurt of blood. She had actually used some defensive option the last minute, but the attack immediately destroyed the cloud that formed in front of

her. She yelled in pain but kept moving away from the wolf, but it wouldn't have it.

Zac tried everything in his arsenal to stop the assault of the enraged wolf, wildly swinging his axe at it, but it seemed intent of bringing the poison master down. Apparently, those spikes hurt far more than anything else it had felt during the battle. It furiously gathered a great deal of cosmic energy in its claw and swung a huge arc after her when it saw that she was moving further away.

Zac saw that she wouldn't be able to dodge it and unhesitatingly moved in front of her with a few quick strides of **[Loamwalker]**. He activated the second charge of his shield, once more enveloping him in the protective layer as he positioned himself in front of the demoness. The enormous wave of destruction approached, and Zac was punched back from the impact. But luckily the shield held even against this huge attack.

He managed to soak most of the damage that appeared, but the wave was simply too large. Some parts passed by him, and an errant streak of power swiped Alea, making her scream and topple over. A huge gash appeared on her clothes, and blood was immediately starting to pool beneath her. It looked like the strike almost completely bisected her.

As he saw his companion who got such a terrifying wound because she wanted to help him out, a blazing fury erupted in his mind and he charged toward the hurt wolf. The only thing in his rage-addled brain was the need to destroy the Fiend Wolf. Zac didn't even notice that cosmic energy was gathering towards his head as he furiously charged toward the boss.

The wolf was in quite a bad condition from Zac's swings and the poison, but it roused itself to intercept his strike. Just as it did tens of black spears rose up from the ground, striking various weak spots. A large spear whistled through the air and impaled its undamaged front leg, making it fall down again with a yelp. Zac didn't care about any of that, and with a roar pushed off the ground, sailing through the air toward the monster.

While he jumped he gripped his axe with both hands and lifted it over his head. As he did an enormous edge over ten meters formed, thrumming with a sharp power. The edge was neither the pale blue as usual nor the darker shade from imbuing it with the Dao of Heaviness. It glistened with a silvery luster, and it looked that the very air itself was cut apart as Zac moved forward.

With a bestial roar he swung down the axe, infusing all his anger and cosmic energy into the strike. He completely cut the beast in two, instantly killing it. It didn't end there though as the strike slammed into the ground, tearing a fifty-meter gash into the ground with a thundering sound. It was like a miniature version of the huge canyon created by the axe-man in Zac's first vision.

Seeing the beast dead it was as though all power left Zac and he unceremoniously fell down after the strike. The last furious charge completely overtaxed him, and he was almost completely out of cosmic power. As he lay panting on the ground the shadows next to him flickered, and Ogras appeared through his movement skill.

A flash of fear filled his heart as he saw the ruthless demon stare down at him, but he only bent down to give him a hand.

“Good hustle,”

“I thought you were going to retreat,” Zac sighed tiredly with a glance at the demon.

“I was just waiting for the right opportunity to tip the scales. My normal attacks wouldn't be able to hurt it, so you needed to do the heavy lifting,” the demon answered with a half-smile.

Zac knew the demon probably only hid in the shadows until he saw an opportunity to kill the Fiend Wolf. If it didn't appear he would have receded into the darkness and left without so much as a goodbye. Still, he knew the demon was under no obligation to risk his life for him, so he wouldn't comment on the flakiness.

Normally, this would be the time to celebrate with the first horde defeated, but he quickly remembered himself and ran toward the demoness who was still bleeding out.

Chapter 93: Verun's Bite

Zac was overlooking the reconstruction and cleanup taking place around the battlefield. There weren't many demon's working, but they were efficient. Ogras had already taken most back to the mines to refill the stocks of Crystals for the next horde. The demon only gave his underlings one day of rest before work resumed.

There was only twelve days before the next stage of the quest started, and they needed to get ready. Luckily Zac wasn't needed for any heavy lifting, as people didn't need any strength to throw boulders into Cosmic Sacks.

Satisfied with the progress he turned around and headed toward the crystal that contained the temporary Contribution Shop. It stood roughly halfway between his camper and the battlefield, and when he arrived multiple demons were milling about, likely looking over their options in the store. Everyone had accrued a decent amount of contribution points over the past weeks, and there were quite a few products inside that could help them in various ways.

When they saw Zac arrive they made some room for him and nodded with respect. The demons respected the strong and Zac's feats over the past weeks left a deep impression on them, especially the last battle with the fiend wolf. There had been a few that held strong grudges against him, mostly because of Zac having killed a family member or friend when the two camps were still at war.

But Zac knew that Ogras and Namys secretly made these malcontents have "accidents" during the wolf-horde to quell any unrest or disharmony. He felt it was a bit overkill, but he wasn't about to complain to Ogras about such a detail. He knew he'd likely have failed the quest unless he had the demon's help.

It was clear to Zac after having gone through the quest that it wasn't meant for a lone warrior like him. A Lord was expected to have subjects, and perhaps even an army to assist in this type of battle. He felt extremely lucky that things worked out somewhat with the demons so far, otherwise he'd be forced to give up on his island after all this struggle. Zac realized that his alliance with the demons was only a fragile cooperation based on benefits, but it was better than nothing.

When he came within a few meters from the crystal a screen automatically popped up, containing both a Ranking list and a shop. A quick glance showed he possessed roughly 45 million contribution points. It seemed he received a full five million of those for killing the Fiend Wolf, as he had just below 40 million before that fight. Generally, the contribution points awarded were on a 1:1 ratio to the Nexus Coins he gained, with the exceptions of the wave leaders giving a substantial bonus above that.

The 45 million points placed him in the comfortable lead of the ladder, but the others were no slouches either. Ogras held a stable second spot with 24 million points. The former general held the lead until halfway through the waves, at which point Zac eclipsed him. It was a combination of his pathways slowly healing, allowing him to use his area skills more, and that Zac's power leveling started to give an advantage.

Ogras grumbled quite a bit about it, but he could only helplessly watch himself get overtaken. He had tried to buy the Fruit of Ascension in order to get a power-up, but immediately got shut down by Zac. Ogras wasn't too disappointed about it though, as there actually was one for sale in the shop for only 50 million contribution points.

While gaining contribution points was roughly the same as Nexus Coins, the prices were far cheaper. He'd never be able to buy a Fruit of Ascension with 50 million Nexus Coins, not even ten times that. Since he already got 24 million in the first wave he shouldn't have any problems getting the last bit before the quest was over.

Zac was looking at something else entirely; **[Verun's Bite]**. It was an axe that cost a whopping 40 million contribution

points. It was called an **[F-Grade Spiritual Tool]**, and Zac wasn't sure whether it was worth it at first. But after asking around he found out that Spiritual Tools were not the same things as F-Grade equipment or weapons, it was a far more valuable thing.

Spiritual Tools possessed an actual soul, and could almost be considered a living being. Only the most talented Blacksmiths could create them, and only using the best materials. They held a power level far above a normal weapon and even had their own skills. They also had the basic functions such as sharpening and repair as well, making them a great long-term companion.

What made them an even better investment was that they could be evolved if you gathered the right materials for it, making it a great weapon to use even after ranking up. Even Ogras' grandfather still used an E-Grade Spiritual tool he had nurtured for almost a thousand years according to Ogras. It was one of the only three E-Grade Spiritual tools in the whole clan, as far as Ogras knew at least, showing how precious they were.

A great weapon was something Zac really wanted, as it was one of his current shortcomings. Very few demons used axes as a weapon of choice, as it was generally considered a brute's tool. Only a few of the lower-tier soldiers used it, so there were no better axes than the military standard issue on the island.

With Zac's current power his weapons couldn't really keep up. He was forced to cycle various weapons as they couldn't withstand the force he utilized nowadays, and it hampered his efficiency. There were a few other interesting things in the shop, such as skills and other gear, but the axe was the most interesting for him. He initially considered taking the fruit so he had one for both his father and sister, but he reluctantly gave up that idea.

First of all, he needed to focus on strengthening himself at the moment, and he didn't want to create any new reasons for Ogras to conspire against him. He felt that the two of them had forged somewhat of a friendship over the past month, and he

didn't want to mess things up with two more waves on the way. He wouldn't lower his guard against the demon though, as it was far too soon for that.

Besides, he knew that he didn't have to worry about the demon suddenly evolving and becoming too strong to control, as there were still the restrictions on the invaders that would stay on for some time.

He also considered buying some of the skills to power up, but also decided to hold off on that. The analysis by the demons was that the skills were actually of high quality, differing from those in the Nexus Node. Those were actually "overpriced garbage" as Ogras put it, and Zac could only agree after hearing the difference between his **[Eye of Discernment]** and the skill Ogras used. In the end, he felt a real weapon would be a better immediate power-up.

Besides, there was another reason he didn't feel the need to buy a new skill right now. He once again brought up his status window before making the purchase.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

50

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class,

**Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500,
Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher**

Dao

**Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of
Sharpness - Early**

Strength

257

Dexterity

139

Endurance

173

Vitality

113

Intelligence

69

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

21 510 103

His stats were becoming more and more monstrous, with even endurance getting close to his original attribute cap. His dexterity was getting up there as well, partly thanks to his third Dao Seed.

[Seed of Sharpness - +10 Dexterity, +5 Intelligence]

The seed also pushed him up to the fourth spot on the Dao-Ranking, and he was still surprised that he still wasn't first with a full three seeds.

He opened up the quest screen next and looked at the reason for not feeling the need to buy any skills at the moment.

Active Quests

Dynamic Quests

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (1/3)
[12:17:45:16]

Class Quests

Nature's Many Faces (Class): Decapitate 10 000 enemies - OR - Plant 10 000 trees. Reward: Nature's Punishment - OR - Nature's Nurturing Skill. (0/10 000) - (0/10 000)

It was the first time he saw a branching quest. He immediately decided to go for Nature's Punishment rather than Nature's Nurturing as soon as he saw the options, even though he only could finish Nature's Nurturing right now. The choice reminded him of his musings about his Dao seeds. He currently trod both the path of destruction through his offensive seeds, and the path of life or nature with his Tree-seed.

The choices in the quest did the same. He currently was like a walking cockroach with his monstrous attributes, so he'd go with the offensive skill Nature's Punishment. From the sound of the other name, he guessed that it was a healing skill, or something that had something to do with plants.

Neither of those options sounded like something he needed right now, while a stronger offensive skill than **[Chop]** was something he would really benefit from. **[Chop]** was still great

against hordes of monsters, but against strong singular enemies its effect was limited.

He closed the screen and hesitating no further bought [**Verun's Bite**]. An elaborate large box appeared next to him, and he immediately put it into his Cosmic Pouch without opening it. He knew these demons would eventually find out what he bought in battle, but for now he felt no need to spread rumors.

With a nod he left the demons to their business and walked toward the hastily erected town close-by. The settlement consisted of mostly tents with a few rudimentary buildings peppered in, and was the temporary living space for the demons during the quest.

He entered one of the larger structures and looked around. It was the infirmary, and it was thankfully only half-filled. The effect of Vitality was generally that something either killed you, or you bounced back in a week or two at most. Apparently, it was different at higher levels though, where the skills could contain weird energies and Daos that impeded recovery.

Alea was lying at a bed in the corner, pale but breathing steadily. Zac felt some sourness as he watched the red bandages that wrapped around her. She had become a comforting presence to him over the weeks, although he wouldn't call it love. To see her lying here because her desire to help him against the Fiend Wolf caused some guilt in his heart, and his desire to get powerful only got stronger.

"How is she?" Zac asked the physician making rounds between the beds.

"She's stable. Due to her... interests, she has focused on Vitality which is now helping her immensely," the young man answered with some disgust on his face. Clearly, he didn't approve of her dabbling with poison, which in a sense was the opposite of his occupation.

Zac only nodded and fished out a small vial from his Cosmic Sack.

“Will this improve her condition?” He said as he opened the stopper, letting an earthy scent waft out. It was a healing pill he bought at Calrin’s for a full 2 500 000 Nexus Coins before coming here. Normally warriors kept it as a last resort type of thing, as it was too expensive to use as one pleased. But Zac didn’t hesitate to cough up the coins.

The man looked at the pill inside with some greed in his eyes but quickly remembering himself nodded his head. Zac handed it over and watch him gingerly feed it to her, using some skill to make her swallow and absorb it in her sleep. The effect was immediate and obvious, as some color appeared on her face and her breaths became deeper.

“It’s helping, but she will stay asleep for some time,” the physician noted.

Zac nodded and left after observing her for some more time. Next, he found Ogras and told him that he didn’t want to be disturbed for the next few days unless it was something important. He headed back to his camper and sat down with a grunt.

First, he took out the large box and dripped a drop of his blood on his new axe to establish a connection. He would normally try it out a bit, but there was something he was even more eager to do at this moment so he put the axe back into his pouch.

Next, he took out another vial out of his pouch and looked at the pill inside. It was a deep blue with some shimmering white spots, glistening very beautifully. The pill was actually called **[Rivers of Cosmos]** and was something Zac commissioned from Calrin the first time they met. The price tag was far more expensive than he expected, reaching 7 500 000 Nexus Coins, but its effect was also amazing. Not only would it help heal his pathways, but it would also somewhat stabilize them and make them more resilient.

His pathways were mostly healed by now, and even if he left it alone he might get better soon. But he refused to spend any more time mindlessly staying in the mines. He had things to do. He immediately swallowed the pill, and just sat down

cross-legged and let the medicine do its thing. A soothing sensation soon spread through his body, like his veins were filled with clear spring water.

The healing process took a full day, and after he inspected the result he was more than happy. The Cosmic Energy that he naturally absorbed for restoration flooded his body at a pace that was far and above anything he ever felt before. He wasn't sure whether it was because of the experience in the pond or just from evolving to E-Rank Race, but it was at least three to four times the speed from before.

After almost two months holding himself back he finally felt confident enough to start using tools and crystals to restore himself. He thought he might have been able to do it sometime earlier as his pathways were in pretty decent condition lately, but neither Ogras nor the physician really knew too much about his condition. He decided to not do anything rash and wait until he was completely sure.

Next, he took out his small box of E-Grade Nexus Crystals and immediately started to absorb it. A huge surge of pristine energy entered his body. It was on a completely other level compared to the F-Grade Crystals. If the F-Graded crystals was a water faucet, then this was a waterfall of energy that poured into his body. Still, he didn't feel any discomfort from the deluge of power coursing through his pathways.

The energy was completely tame and quickly added itself to him, and he felt how he steadily climbed toward level 51. The amount of energy required for a level was immense by now, but it only took 12 hours for him to reach it. He kept absorbing throughout the day, but was interrupted by the sound of a bell on the morning the second day. He opened his eyes, and with a frown looked toward the source of the sound. But as soon as he saw his guests his eyebrows rose in surprise.

As Zac suspected he saw Ogras, but with him was Rahm, the Creator liaison. Zac quickly invited them through the array and asked what was going on.

“A boat of humans arrived at our docks 20 minutes ago, and they are at present being detained.”

Chapter 94: Humans

Megan glared at their captors as she was stomping around in fury. Something was clearly wrong in the head with these people, as they silently stood like zombies with a blank stare in their eyes. The only time they moved was when she or someone else tried to leave the pier they stood on. They even blocked access to the ship, stopping them from leaving.

The only reason things hadn't come to blows was the polite man from earlier who said that he would fetch the so-called lord of the island. Megan already disliked this mysterious person, what kind of jack-ass named himself a lord? She decided that he would get a proper lesson in manners when he arrived.

Of course she knew that her anger was simply a coping mechanism. The last months had been like something out of a horror story. She and her friends were in Vietnam on vacation when the apocalypse came, just as they were visiting a fisherman's village. Suddenly they found themselves stuck on some island with a group of fishermen who barely spoke any English. Two of her friends had also simply vanished into thin air, and she still didn't know what happened to them.

The shocking changes were only the first trouble that appeared. The animals on the island slowly turned insane, and they grew way too large. In the beginning they could fight them off, which was how they learned about levels. But the monsters grew too strong too fast. Hundreds of rats as large as Labradors charging their small village was what broke the camel's back, forcing them to set out to sea on one of the dingy fishermen's vessels.

It was a risk, as two boats had already set out without coming back, their situation still unknown. But those rats simply tore through anything and they were extremely aggressive. Mr. Trang saved their lives by fending them off while they started

the boat, and he still wasn't recovered from his wounds as he sat down nervously on the pier.

Finally she saw movement in the distance as three men were walking toward them. One was the polite man from earlier, but he walked back to his house after bowing to the other two. One was a completely bald man who looked like a monk, while the last one looked extremely weird, with greyish skin and almost white hair. He even wore some odd crown on his head with horns jutting out. Megan was feeling pretty confident that he was the so-called lord.

She was getting ready to blast off a salvo of vitriol at the two, but as the duo closed in her flame of rage snuffed out like a weak candle in a storm. Something about the monk forced her attention on him. It was as though she was facing a mountain as he approached. Every step he took was like a sledgehammer hitting her, and she felt suffocated from just being in his presence.

Most of the other castaways were faring even worse, as they backed away with pale faces. Some even knelt down on the floor, unable to stand in front of the monk's towering aura. The pressure was so all-consuming that Megan only noticed that the grey man wasn't actually wearing a crown when he was right in front of her. She was looking on a bonafide demon from mythology, and her terror only intensified.

What kind of monsters inhabited this island?

———

“Control your aura human, you will kill these weaklings,” Ogras said with a subdued voice.

Zac started before quickly taking control of the energy naturally coursing through his body, making sure that nothing leaked. He had forgotten about that lesson from Alyn after spending time with the demons for so long. As a warrior got stronger their presence intensified as well, and if the discrepancy in power was too large it could even be considered a weapon. It wasn't something like the Dao Field, rather just an effect of beings in different stages of existence. There wasn't any point in controlling his presence among the

demons, as most of them were actually higher level than himself and immune to its effects. But against low-level individuals with weak willpower he might actually be harmful.

The fact that these humans were ready to keel over was quite telling about their power. Zac quickly used his **[Eye of Discernment]** on the twelve people and to his surprise, the highest leveled person was only level 21.

“Pathetic,” was the only comment from Ogras who obviously performed the same type of scan, and Zac had to agree. How could people survive with such low power? If these humans were representative of the average population then Earth was well and truly doomed. His image of the outside world was maybe skewed from looking at the ladder which only showed the powerhouses. Maybe the average humans were as weak as these people who probably couldn’t even kill a barghest.

“Ahem... Welcome to Port Atwood. I’m Zac. What brings you here?” Zac tentatively asked, unsure how to proceed from here.

The group only stared fearfully at the two, no one daring to step forward. Zac was starting to think that his language skill wasn’t working with the humans until a thought struck him and he turned his companion.

“You’re scaring them, go away,” Zac said, making a shooing motion.

“Yeah I’m the problem, why don’t you blast off your Daos as well while you’re at it?” Ogras retorted with a roll of his eyes, but he walked some distance away and picked out a chair from his pouch. Next he took out a piece of fruit and started eating while pointedly ignoring the humans. The Creators also took this as a signal their work was done and wordlessly headed toward the huge warehouse.

It seemed to calm the people down somewhat to be left alone, but they still looked very warily at Zac. Finally, a woman who was the second strongest in the group stepped forward. The strongest person was actually an old Asian man sitting down, clearly still nursing some old wounds. That revelation only

lowered Zac's opinion of the youths in the group, letting an old man stand on the front line while they cowered behind.

"I'm Megan. We're from an island two days' sailing from here. Um... what's going on with your friend?" she said as she fearfully glanced at the demon loitering in the distance.

"That's Ogras. He lives on my island."

That answer seemed to only make the group more fearful, but Zac couldn't be bothered to explain any further. Going into the demon's origins would be too troublesome, and Zac and Ogras long ago decided that they were going to pretend the demons were natives who were brought here during the integration. That little lie should hide the fact that there had been an incursion here, and that the demons were actually invaders. At least for a while.

"Young man, how come I can understand you? I don't believe you are speaking Vietnamese," the old man sitting on the pier said with a weak voice.

Zac willed the screen for the language skill into being, making it hover in front of the group.

"It is a skill I have that allows me to understand and be understood when speaking with anyone," he answered.

"Skills, what's that?" the girl called Megan asked as she looked at the screen in wonder.

That question made Zac realize that these people were even worse off than him during his first months on the island. They obviously had no idea about many aspects of the System, not even knowing about skills. He realized he only knew about skills because of Abby and the Nexus Node where he bought **[Eye of Discernment]**.

He was lucky in a sense that an incursion spawned on top of him. If he didn't get to build an outpost he would have been as ignorant as these people, fumbling around in the dark. The first time they came in contact with skills would be at level 25 when they got their class. If they could even attain a class on a deserted island.

“You still haven’t explained why you people are here,” Zac said as he ignored the question.

“The animals became crazy on our island. They kept growing and even the rats were as dangerous as wolves in the end! We couldn’t stay anymore, so we left to find a safer place. After two days at sea we saw your harbor and thought that there might be a town here,” the girl explained.

“We’re from Chicago. Is there an airport close? Have you had any contact with the government? Why hasn’t there been any rescue operations?.”

The girl kept peppering Zac with questions, giving him a headache.

“The governments have likely fallen. You should have heard the voice in the beginning. The world has been integrated into the multi-verse, Earth got fused with a few other planets and everything got mixed together,” Zac sighed.

The castaways looked ready to explode from that declaration, but a voice cut through the mounting chaos.

“Can we stay here, young man? There is safety in numbers”.

It was the old fisherman. The 3 other Asian men looked at Zac with some hope, whereas the Caucasians looked confused, prompting Zac to translate the question.

“Mr. Trang is right, there’s safety in numbers! We have become quite strong over the past months, and were only forced to leave the island due to the huge number of rats!” one of the young men said.

The proclamation elicited a derisive guffaw from Ogras in the distance. He obviously was listening in on the conversation using some skill, and he looked very entertained.

Zac pondered what to do about the small group. It wasn’t really any problem to let them onto the island as they didn’t lack food or water. But there also were many secrets on the island, things that he didn’t want to make public to the world. Besides, he wasn’t sure that letting them stay was doing them any favors, with the next beast wave coming in less than two weeks.

“You can’t let them leave. This place can’t be discovered yet, there are too many treasures here, so you need to solidify your position as Lord first. You either need to kill them or let them stay on the island,” Ogras’ voice could be heard from the shadows.

“What if they leave and they tell the story of the island with demons and superpowered humans? People will rightly think that there’s some secrets on this island and set sail in search of treasure,” the demon continued. He used some sort of skill that projected his voice from a distance, and it didn’t seem that the other people could hear him at all.

Zac sighed as he knew that putting them back on the ship was out of the question now. Ogras would likely sink it with a shadow spear the moment it left the pier in order to protect his interests. Besides, he agreed with his points. He wanted to turn this island into a true sanctuary for those close to him and didn’t want random people to come here for some sort of treasure hunt.

“You can stay here. But you should know that this island is likely far more dangerous than your old home,” Zac said after some deliberation. “We don’t need freeloaders. You will have to work to earn your keep. There are some areas that are off-limits on the island, and this shipyard is one of them. I’ll show you the way to the town.”

When told that this place wasn’t safe as well the group started to hesitate. But the old fisherman got to his feet with a grunt and unhesitantly followed Zac who turned to leave. The other fishermen followed suit, and soon the Caucasian youths followed as well.

Zac saw Ogras flash over and put the boat in his pouch, which caused some alarm and shock to the refugees, but he only said a few comforting words and continued on. As they walked some way the people started to find their courage and started pelting Zac with various questions. They asked about everything from what amenities the island had, to how the system worked and the situation of humanity.

These people were thirsting to know what was going on, just like Zac was before he finally got things explained by Alyn and Abby. He tried to answer as much as possible, but by the time they arrived at the tent-town, he was thoroughly tired of answering questions.

The refugees were dismayed to see that the whole population were demons, and two actually tried to run away in panic. Zac could only sigh and flash over with **[Loamwalker]**, and carry the struggling people back. It took some time to settle the refugees, and Zac couldn't be bothered with them anymore afterward. He pawned them off to Alyn and Zakarith, who both had the language skills that could help them acclimatize. He also had a few warriors keep an eye on them just in case they tried something stupid.

Zac held mixed emotions as he walked away from the inquisitive group. It almost felt like he was robbed of something from the encounter. One of his largest wishes over the past months was to reunite with humanity, but he didn't expect it to be like this. A group of listless people who barely scraped by the past months. Obviously none of them had left the safety of their village overly much. Otherwise, they'd be at a higher level by now.

His own countrymen were the worst. They clearly were mainly concerned about their own well-being, focusing on questions such as food and lodging for themselves. None of them asked of how they could help or listed things they could do for a town. The fishermen mostly kept quiet after a few questions about humanity. Zac had hoped that his first encounter with humans would finally allow him to get some news about the state of the world, but it looked like he needed to switch back to his original plan.

He informed Ogras of what he was about to do, and the demon seemed to think that it was truly foolish. Zac didn't care. Almost four months had already passed since the world changed, and it felt like ants were crawling all over his body by now.

He opened up the Town Shop interface as soon as he arrived at the spot designated by the city planners and unhesitantly

bought an **[E-Grade Teleportation Array]** for 10 000 000 Nexus Coins. A new interface opened up, and his heart sped up when he saw that there actually was a destination available.

[Winterleaf Village. Public. Fee: 0 Nexus Coins]

After making sure he had everything he needed in his Cosmos Sack he took out a hooded cape that covered his elaborate clothing and a pair of leather shoes that one of the craftsmen made for him. Ogras told him that it was easy to see that his gear was valuable, and something provided by the System, and since he didn't want trouble he simply covered it up. Next he set his own Teleportation Array to private in order to make sure only he could use it. He didn't want anyone using it either to teleport in or out while he was gone.

Finally done, he gazed around at the island that had been his home, and prison, for four months. With a sense of trepidation and excitement he stepped on the engravings on the floor with determination in his eyes.

With a flash of light, he was gone.

Chapter 95: Winterleaf Village

Selas sighed as he stood in front of the teleporter, waiting alongside the rest of the village leaders. His nerves were fraying, as he didn't know what would step through the magical inscriptions. As Leader of the Hunt he had always been in charge of protection of the village, even before the Great Fall, but it was different now.

Everything kept changing, and as an old huntsman it was getting increasingly difficult to keep up. Gone were the paths that he and his ancestors had walked through the mountains, the songs detailing the hunting grounds all but irrelevant by now. In just a few years he should have retired to teaching the art of the hunt to the next generation, but now he was stuck as some castellan of the town.

When the fall arrived he found himself transported to a fantastical world with some of his village members. Determined to keep the youths safe against the twisted challenges of the System he pushed himself beyond what he knew was possible, and from his struggle he was rewarded with a Nexus Node. But even with all his effort he couldn't keep everyone safe, as many of his villagers perished, one of them his son Winterleaf.

Not even allowed to properly mourn the death of his progeny he was instantly pushed into one desperate situation after another since he was returned to his village. Even now the village was teetering on the brink of ruin despite everyone's efforts.

It was their tree whisperer who came up with their current gambit after using his Soothsayer class' limited skill. He said that salvation would come through the light, and urged the town to pool their Nexus Coins to build this teleporter. But as

the days passed and nothing happened anger and unrest started to build against the elder.

There were even rumblings about putting the elder in house arrest for the time being. Ten Million Nexus Coins was a huge amount, and could have bought weapons, armor, and precious herbs at the store. Many felt that they should have made a last stand before the beast using everything at their disposal instead.

That all changed when the teleporter blazed into life, its inscriptions lighting up by themselves. Selas had barely managed to gather the elders when he got the notification that a new teleportation point was added before it blazed to life, indicating that someone was already coming over.

Selas stood with his spear at the ready, staring at the light that shone with increasing intensity. Behind him stood his hunting party at the ready to protect the villagers against whatever came through that gate.

Whether it would be salvation or damnation was still to be determined.

—

Zac only felt darkness for a bit over a minute before he once again gained his sight back. The first thing he noticed was that the climate was clearly different, with an autumn chill in the air. Next he glanced around and found himself placed in the middle of a village square. The buildings were foreign to him though, being medieval but not of some style that he recognized.

Soon he understood why, as a group of people approached. Zac's heartbeat sped up in alarm when he saw that it wasn't actually humans that greeted him. Did he teleport himself into an incursion? Ogras and the crystal both said that invading forces couldn't build teleporters since the System wanted to limit their expansion, but perhaps they were wrong.

The humanoids that closed in on him made him think that they were a mix of humans and animals. They seemed to have

normal hands and feet, but they also possessed clear animalistic features.

They wore simple but seemingly high-quality gear, and carried various weapons, mostly spears and bows. Most of their exposed skin was covered in a brown or white fur, sometimes mottled with spots. They had large black eyes, and a normal face and a mouth. Their ears somewhat resembled those of an elf's though. His assessment was that these beings were a seventy-thirty mix of a human and a fawn.

They didn't look frail though, as even the fur couldn't hide their sturdy frames and muscles. They also carried themselves with the grace of warriors, and these people were clearly different from the hapless humans he encountered earlier. The group stopped some distance from him, and they simply stood staring at each other for a few seconds.

"It's one of the hairless monkeys, what do we do?" Zac heard one of the fawnmen mutter.

"Onyx, you learned some of their words in the tutorial, right? Greet him," another one said as he prodded one of the females in the group.

That made Zac relax somewhat. If these people had been in the tutorial together with humans then they shouldn't be invaders. It looked like when Earth got mashed together with other planets new civilizations were added after all.

She hesitantly looked at the leader of the group, a middle-aged man holding an intricately carved spear with a long line of leather bands attached, and took a step forward after an encouraging nod from him.

"H-Hello human," she stuttered, but before she continued Zac smiled and spoke back. At least he thought he smiled since it almost felt like he had forgotten how to do it by now.

"Hello. No need for a translator, I understand your words," he said.

The group looked a bit surprised, but not overly so.

"Welcome to Winterleaf village human, I am Selas, castellan of this town," the middle-aged warrior said. "May I ask what

brings you here?”

“Our town is located in an extremely isolated area, and we couldn’t find a single person nearby. So we bought a teleportation array in hopes of finding other humans,” Zac answered.

It wasn’t exactly his reason as he bought the teleporter in order to start looking for his hometown during the downtime of the quest. He finally had the resources and the time to put his plan into motion, and even though the expense was high he felt it worth it. If he ran out of Nexus Coins he would simply extort some of the demons, as they all made a fortune from his monster horde quest.

“I am sorry, but what... are you people?” Zac tentatively followed up, unsure how to properly frame such a question.

“You must really have been isolated if you haven’t met any of the Ishiate so far. We might be the most populous species apart from you humans on this new world of ours,” Selas answered with some surprise. “Please join us in our town hall. Meeting of new friends is always a joyous occasion. I can fill you in on the area as we walk.”

Zac nodded after some hesitation and followed them. His guard was up though, ready to bring out [**Verun’s Bite**] at moment’s notice. These people were real cultivators who had done the so-called tutorial. Even Ogras didn’t know exactly what benefits you could get in there, but from all accounts they were substantial. He knew his level likely was far above everyone here, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t pose a threat. They might have received bonus attributes, titles or extraordinary skills in the tutorial, things that could even out the odds.

“Winterleaf village is built upon the remnants of our ancestral home before the fall. We were lucky at least to retain most of our structures. Many towns in the area were pushed together into a confusing mess by the System, which severely harmed their cooperation. It’s thanks to our unity that so many of our clan members are still alive, even with the changes constantly testing us.”

Zac's heartbeat sped up as he finally was starting to get some information about the world. His words painted a somber picture, but he was mentally prepared that there would be widespread death and tragedy. Even if no incursion was nearby he knew that just the wildlife would create problems.

"Are there any human settlements in the area?" Zac asked. That was the priority. He still didn't have a picture of just how the reshuffling of the world worked, but perhaps humans had already started to map the locations of their old towns. They still should have technology such as aircrafts that they could use to scout, even though such tools didn't provide experience when killing monsters.

"The closest one is a four-day journey from here. We don't have any contact with them though as that place is chaotic and dangerous. No offense," the hunter answered.

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

"The settlement is run by a man named Roger. He has set himself up as a warlord and rules with an iron fist. Mutilated corpses adorn his walls at all times, and he is known to have kidnapped many women. He even tried to kidnap a few female Ishiate, but stopped after furious revenge from us.

"Still, he is very strong with a few powerful followers, so no one in the area dares to escalate the conflict with them. We keep our distance and put patrols to make sure that they don't approach, and luckily they keep to themselves mostly," the beastkin answered solemnly.

Zac was disappointed when he heard the news. He would have to check things out himself to make sure, but he leaned toward believing the humanoid. Since the beginning of the apocalypse he knew that some people would use the fall of order as an excuse to live out their twisted fantasies. That someone wanted to play emperor sounded not only believable, but expected.

He asked a few more questions as he walked alongside the beastmen toward a large structure. As he looked around he didn't see many structures that stood out. The only building he recognized was the **[F-Grade General Store]** that the system

provided. He didn't sense any arrays gathering energy in the area either, and the ambient cosmic energy was actually far lower here compared to how it was on his island.

He hadn't realized how large the difference was from living on top of a so-called Nexus Vein, but his island must seem like a paradise to cultivators. Even better were the mountains, which finally were starting to become habitable again as the poison was mostly cleared out. He reaffirmed his decision to keep his portal closed until at least his beast horde quest was completed and his position as lord was solidified.

As he walked he got more and more confused as to how they could afford the huge expense of the Teleportation Array. Zac only was able to afford it due to the nexus mine and monster horde gave him an absurd amount of Nexus Coins.

But from what he had seen so far nothing really made these people stand out. Certainly, the village were decent sized, and quite a few of these fawn-people he looked like adept warriors. But unless they recently found some extremely valuable treasure they must have collected much of their wealth to construct it.

It didn't take long after they sat down at a round table that he found out the reason behind its construction.

"I am not used to small talk, so I will immediately get to the point Zac. The reason we spent most of our resources on the Teleportation Array was that we're in desperate need of assistance."

Chapter 96: Terror of the Mountains

“Assistance?” Zac asked skeptically.

“As you know wildlife is quickly changing. A beast has appeared in the mountains, and we fear it will evolve soon if left alone. It has started hunting citizens of Winterleaf Village and the neighboring settlements. In the beginning it was just for food, but lately it seems it hunts us for Cosmic Energy judging by the numbers it’s killed. The people are unable or unwilling to join us in fighting it.

“Most of the other citizens in neighboring settlements feel they can simply leave the forests if it gets too dangerous. But this is our ancestral home, we can’t just abandon it. That’s why we pooled our resources in order to find new allies through the teleportation array,” Selas said, with multiple eyes staring hopefully at Zac.

“If the monster is causing trouble for your town, why don’t you buy protective arrays?” Zac questioned. A beast evolving seemed troublesome, but they could just trap it with an array and then throw something like a Thunder Punishment at it. Zac doubted even the Fiend Wolf would survive if it got stuck in the middle of that crazy lightning barrage. For the money they spent on a teleportation array they could have blasted even Zac to kingdom come.

The townspeople glanced confused at their leader who only looked a bit depressed.

“Unfortunately my achievements in the tutorial weren’t enough to unlock those items. I have a quest to unlock it, but it is far outside the scope of what Winterleaf village can handle at the moment, much more difficult than simply killing the beast,” he explained.

Zac was surprised but careful to not let anything show on his face. He had no idea that different Nexus Nodes possessed a different collection of options. It wasn't anything Ogras or the others mentioned either. He thought that the System was uncharacteristically generous by allowing him to buy things such as the Thunder Punishment and the arrays. But perhaps it was because of his achievements. It was either that or the fact that he gained his town by defeating an incursion instead of getting it in the tutorial.

He sighed and looked around the table. He could sympathize with these people, but he was not some savior who had time to go around and save the villages. His goal was simple, find his hometown and his family. It was already a daunting enough task without making detours all the time. He was about to reject their request for assistance, but a window popping up stopped him in his tracks.

[New Active Quest: Monster hunt (Normal): Slay the beast in the mountains. No assistance allowed. Reward: [F-Grade Automatic Map] (0/1)]

This development surprised him. Was anyone simply able to give out quests? But it didn't look like it was something the people around the table did, as they were simply looking at him hopefully. He guessed that it likely was the System which wanted to force him to fight the beast.

"The beast is not only a threat to us, but to all the settlements in the area, both Ishiate and human lives are at stake," another person added, taking Zac's silence as hesitation.

"Have you heard about something called an Automatic Map?" Zac suddenly asked, confusing the people at the table who looked at each other.

"I know!" one of the younger people suddenly piped up. "I heard about it in the Tutorial. It's a spiritual map that shows the area around you almost no matter where you are. It marks any settlements and towns on itself. The better the grade the more detailed it is, and the larger area it covers."

Zac started to get eager, as this was something that would be really useful for him in his travels. He felt a bit helpless that

the System once again dangled something he needed in front of his nose, but was starting to feel that was simply how it operated. Unless the rewards were tempting enough many wouldn't risk their lives.

“What type of animal is it?” Zac probed.

“It is a mutated Mink. It is around three meters long and extremely aggressive. We have tried to kill it but it's extremely nimble. It sneaks into the towns at night and kills until it is discovered, and is gone before we can mount an effective counter,” Selas answered with a sigh.

“And it's level?”

“Last time it was spotted it was level 68. That was five days ago. It might have gained a level or two since, as it levels up quite quickly”.

Zac mulled over what to do. The animal sounded strong, but not overly so. He possessed his new weapon and the Seed of Sharpness which increased his lethality quite a bit against solo enemies. The monster wasn't evolved either, and wouldn't be anywhere as strong as the Fiend Wolf he fought recently. But it wasn't some weakling if multiple villages couldn't kill it, and he needed to solo kill it to receive the map.

The deer-people thought Zac's silence was an expression of hesitation, and Selas added some incentives.

“Of course we don't expect you to do this for free. I gained two spots to the worldwide treasure hunt in three months during the tutorial. I am willing to cede one of those spots to your town if you decide to help us,” the leader added with a serious face.

“Treasure hunt?” Zac asked confused.

“It is a limited event the System arranges seven months after the fall, where participants will be teleported to some unknown area like with the tutorial. It was possible to gain entrance tokens to the event during the tutorial, but it was notoriously hard,” the leader explained, and couldn't help but straighten his back as he did. “It contains various valuables,

from gear to herbs. There's even limited titles available inside from what the pixies said."

"Can anyone go?" Zac asked interested, as it sounded like a pretty amazing opportunity. He was ahead of the curve in terms of power, and there likely weren't many places on Earth where he could keep his empowerment going. This event sounded like a good opportunity that normally wouldn't have anything to do with him since he wasn't a cultivator.

"Anyone can go as long as one is a native of this planet and has an entrance token. I believe it will be the first gathering of the elites of all the races."

The slot was something he would definitely want. He should be able to sell it for a great sum even if he didn't end up using it. The map itself was reason enough for him to fight the super-mink, and this was a great bonus. Still, he wouldn't jump into it blindly and asked some more questions about the monster. Finally satisfied he was ready to set out, not wanting to waste any more time.

"Ok, deal. Lead me to its den," Zac said as he stood up.

However, none of the beastmen stood up, and instead glanced at each other doubtfully.

"We... um... appreciate your enthusiasm, but killing this beast will take the cooperation and planning of a few villages. We are not ready to challenge it from our end," the old huntsman said with some hesitation.

"I need to observe its habitat and hopefully its power personally to report back home, otherwise they will not send man-power here through the portal," Zac decided to lie. It felt like too much of a bother to convince the group that he was powerful enough to do this alone.

Still, no one seemed ready to set out and just looked down with troubled faces. Finally Selas sighed and stood up.

"I will lead you to its habitat. But beware, it is extremely fast. If it targets us I will only be able to protect myself, if even that," he said. It looked like many of the other beastmen in the

meeting were about to protest, but he silenced them with a wave of his hands.

“Give me ten minutes and we will set out”.

Soon the two walked along a path in the forest, heading toward one of the mountains in the vicinity. It was believed the mink lived by a river that ran through the mountain, claiming the area as its habitat.

As they walked Zac learned various things of interest. The history of the Ishiate was quite interesting. Apparently, their society was on the cusp of industrialization when they got integrated into the multi-verse along with Earth. However, their society held nature in high regard and even saw the forests and mountains as their gods.

It caused a schism between those who chose to live as one with nature and those who embraced technological progress. Conflict was common lately between the two camps, one trying to stop the desecration of their gods, the other trying to move their race forward. The Winterleaf village was part of the former group, consisting mainly of simple hunters and foragers. Zac believed that this lifestyle likely helped them survive far better in this new reality than the average people of earth.

He also learned that apart from humans and the beastmen there was at least one more race that got thrown into the mix. However, Selas didn't know much about them as he had never seen them himself. From the description they sounded like humanoid insects, and they kept to themselves. They made no contact with the other two races from what the hunter knew, and they were extremely territorial. Anything that came close to their hives was met with furious and unrelenting violence.

There also wasn't any incursion in the vicinity, and Selas had only heard about their existence from the lessons in the tutorial. That gave Zac some hope that they weren't peppered across the globe, so his hometown could very well be in a more peaceful area as well. If he had to choose between the wildlife and the organized forces of the incursions as an enemy, he'd pick the stupid beasts every time.

He also tried asking some questions about the tutorial, but Selas clearly grew suspicions from the questions. Zac didn't want to broadcast the fact that he, or his "faction", didn't know anything about the tutorial, and could only put those questions aside for the moment. Soon they arrived at the foot of the mountains and could see the river cutting a path through it.

"We really shouldn't venture further in than this my friend. There have been multiple reports about the beast in this area, and it could pop up at any moment as long as we walk along the river."

Zac nodded and took out his **[Verun's Bite]** from his pouch. This was the second time he properly glanced at it.

The axe was slightly larger compared to the military axes of the demons, and the adjective that would best describe it was primal. It had a large almost straight edge that ran roughly 40 centimeters long, moving some ways alongside the handle. The metal of the head looked worn, with multiple scratches and imperfections. However, Zac knew that the edge was razor sharp after testing it out a bit before.

On top of the head there were grisly teeth of some unknown beast embedded that were blackened and serrated. The same type of teeth were fastened at the bottom of the slightly uneven handle. The handle itself was made of some wood, and almost fully wrapped in coarse leather. All in all, it looked like something Zac imagined an Orc war-chief would use, and it even emitted an air of danger.

Selas backed away warily as he saw Zac arm himself.

"What are you doing human? You can't possibly be..."

"I am heading in. Please do not follow me. Anyone that approaches me during battle will be considered an enemy, and I will attack," Zac said as he unleashed his presence.

The hunter was clearly shocked by the terrifying force that suddenly was gushing out of Zac, as he further backed away. After making sure that the Ishiate wasn't following he simply nodded and headed toward the river, each step moving him over five meters away.

Soon he was walking alongside the water, carefully on the lookout for any type of domicile like a cavern. The beast was quite large and it shouldn't be too hard to find as long as it stayed somewhere close to the river.

A tingling of danger made him instinctually swing his left hand back as he moved his head sideways. The punch resulted in a deep thud and Zac was actually pushed forward a bit as he heard a pained yelp. He quickly turned around and saw that his target had found him instead.

The huge mink stood a few meters away from him, a bit hesitant now that its ambush failed. Zac wouldn't give up this opportunity and quickly charged up **[Chop]** while swinging down his weapon. The teeth fastened on the axe possessed a magical effect, making it almost sound as the axe growled as it ripped through the air.

The mink was elusive and it felt like it didn't contain a single bone in its body as it dodged the swing, jumping between outcroppings along the rock wall. Zac grunted and copied five large edges to his axe. The new cosmic energy blades looked a bit different now that they copied **[Verun's Bite]** instead of the old blade.

In almost impossibly quick manner he threw out the five blades, both trying to hit the animal and any places where it could try to dodge. Their distance wasn't too large, and five blades each five meters long covered a huge area, cutting off all paths of retreat for the beast. It managed to dodge four of the blades, but the fifth slammed into its front leg, cutting a deep gash.

With a pained screech it fell down toward the ground, and Zac immediately used **[Loamwalker]**. As the beast was falling down, an axe imbued with the Dao of Sharpness rose to meet it. And like that the terror of the area was slain.

Chapter 97: Freedom

Zac looked down at the slain beast, very satisfied with his new axe. The swing almost fully decapitated the monster, and he swiftly cut the last pieces off with another swing, bringing the progress in his class quest to 1. He realized that he didn't really need to use Dao of Sharpness on an enemy of this level, his new axe alone was sharp enough on its own.

Since it was only an F-grade item he had been afraid it wouldn't be too strong in the beginning even though it was a Spiritual Tool. But he quickly realized that he was worried about nothing. Its edge was far sharper compared to his old axes, and it had no problem accommodating his power.

As Zac looked down on the weapon he was surprised to see that the mink's blood wasn't dripping off the weapon, but rather got absorbed. He already knew from before that Spiritual Tools needed to absorb various materials to evolve, but he didn't expect one of them to be blood. Unfortunately, the axe didn't come with an instruction manual of what it wanted, and Zac could only try various things.

He already knew that it didn't want Nexus Crystals, which was sort of a relief. After some hesitation he broke off an incisor from the animal and pushed them toward the teeth on the axe, but nothing happened. It looked like he wouldn't have to go around ripping teeth out of his foes like some demented dentist to feed the Spiritual Tool.

Next Zac started looking around the area for anything that looked valuable since Ogras said that strong beasts sometimes built their nests close to some natural treasures, as living in its vicinity would help the beast grow faster. Since the beast was clearly stronger compared to other monsters in the area there should be something of value here.

As he looked around he was once again astounded by the amount of cosmic energy his body naturally absorbed now. It almost felt like a torrent entered his body to restore his missing energy. He would have to ask around later about whether that was due to reaching E-rank Race, or if it was due to something else.

Even after looking for an hour he couldn't find any treasure, and he could only return with a frown. It appeared that his high Luck couldn't help him out in every scenario. Zac was soon back at where he left the deer-human and found him still fretfully walking about, seemingly unable to decide whether he should follow or go back. As he saw Zac approach he sighed in relief and approached.

"My friend! It is good that you are okay. Luckily it seems the beast was awa-" he said, but his words got stuck in his throat as Zac took out the carcass of the beast from his pouch and let it fall down on the ground with a deep thud. Next he took out the decapitated head and placed it to the side of the body.

"This should be the mink you were talking about," Zac simply said.

The Ishiate hunter blankly stared at the carcass lying in front of him.

"You can take the head as evidence if you wish. Can you help me skin it?" The fur of the monster was extremely soft and luxurious, and it'd be a waste to leave it. But with his self-taught skills he was afraid he'd ruin it. Normally he'd want to take the meat as well, as the stronger the beast was the more delicious its meat would often be. However, it seemed that this monster had eaten quite a few humans and beastmen, so it felt pretty disgusting to eat its meat by now.

"Ah? Yes, certainly!" the hunter said and quickly got to work after grabbing a skinning knife from a pouch on his back.

"May I ask.. Is that a Cosmos Sack you're using?" he tentatively asked as he glanced at Zac.

"Yes, why?" Zac asked. Selas shouldn't have actually seen the pouch as it was fastened to his girdle beneath his cloak, but

there obviously weren't many ways that one could make a huge corpse appear from nowhere.

"Do you have any more? Winterleaf Village would love to buy one, we'd offer a competitive price."

"I only have one with me at the moment. But I'll see what I can do next time I pass by," Zac answered, not wanting to commit. He did have a couple of them lying around at his camp since looting them from the demons, and there were quite a few of them waiting up on the mountain tops. But he wasn't sure whether selling them was a good idea or not.

"What about the entrance token to the event?" Zac asked. He already received the map immediately after killing the beast, but there were still rewards to reap.

Selas once again reached into the sack on his back, and took out a smaller pouch. He opened and inside were two tokens. They appeared to be made out of stone and were almost as large as a palm. Zac immediately saw that these things were something made by the System, as the tell-tale fractals completely covered them.

Zac fiddled with his token a bit before he imbued it with cosmic energy and a stream of energy entered his mind. He could quickly discern that this was the real deal, and the only thing needed to enter this so-called treasure hunt was this badge. As long as it was in your possession when the event started you would be teleported there. There was no ownership or restrictions at all, making the item a hot potato.

He wasn't worried for himself, as he felt that there were very few people who were able to snatch something out of his hands. But his eyes turned to Selas, who tensed up from the glare. But soon he resumed working his knife on the carcass.

"Please keep it a secret you got it from me. Very few people know it's in my possession and it needs to stay that way for the safety of Winterleaf Village."

Zac simply nodded and said no more. Soon the beast was skinned, and Selas held up the large pelt.

“It’s done, but it needs to be properly treated as well,” the hunter said.

“Could you help me with that as well? I need to visit the human settlement before I head back to my hometown. I will be back to your village in a few days,”

“Of course. Their town is that way,” Selas answered and pointed east. “I would say be careful, but I feel that it is not you who’s in danger,” he added as he glanced at the large head next to him.

Zac wryly smiled and turned to leave.

“Oh and Zac? Thank you,” he heard from behind, and only answered with a wave. There were obviously multiple meanings to those two words.

As Zac walked he sighed slightly and shook his head. The hunter was clearly afraid that Zac would kill him to take the second token as well. And Zac knew that many might have done just that. Zac didn’t even consider it, as he had no real use for another token. Even if he quickly found his sister it wasn’t something that he would want her to possess.

Just owning it meant having a bullseye on one’s back. And even if you survived and went there, the competition would likely be extreme. The most powerful and ruthless people gathered at one spot, competing for great treasures? It would likely make the battle at the monkey mountain seem like a day at the spa.

He wasn’t too keen on going himself, and certainly wouldn’t send someone he loved there. Of course, he also knew that going there might be the best opportunity to get a real sense of the situation in the world and get some power-ups. If people from all over the world gathered, someone might even be from his hometown.

Becoming the strongest or whatever wasn’t really his goal, and he simply fought to survive so far. He hoped that his visit to the human settlement would give him some answers to what was going on. If not he would try again next month. He only

had a few days to spare, after all, and needed to get back to Port Atwood sooner or later.

As he walked he took in a fresh breath of air. It finally felt like he had some control over his actions after months battling. He constantly found himself pushed into one situation after another, putting him in a constant reactive state. But now he had full freedom, at least for a few days. The fact that he would have to get back soon ruined the mood a bit for him, but at least for now he relished the feeling of just adventuring.

He took out a crystal from his pouch as he walked and imbued it with some energy. A window opened up with a rough map inside. It was black and white and didn't contain a lot of detail, but it did cover a large area and marked the towns. He saw Winterleaf Village the closest, and he currently was heading toward Fort Roger.

Both of the towns had crystals next to the name, and after some confusion, he realized it meant that they probably possessed Nexus Nodes or Nexus Stations. Nexus Stations were lesser versions of the Nexus Node that gave access to the class system, but needed quests to unlock the town management systems.

Apparently there were differences between the nodes as well, where he got a throng of options, whereas most of the towns only got the bare essentials. Nexus Stations were extremely common though from what Alyn told him, which made sense as people needed to get their classes somehow. Alyn didn't explain how they appeared, as they generally had been around for thousands upon thousands of years on their home planet.

That Winterleaf Village possessed a real Nexus Node was clear to Zac, but he doubted that anyone in the surrounding towns knew that. At least not for now. From his impression of the small village, he felt that they weren't careful enough. They really lucked out that Zac, and not someone else, walked through that portal.

Zac hadn't inspected anyone out of politeness, but he never felt any sense of danger from any one of them, meaning that they shouldn't have been too strong. Of course, they were

strong enough to both get a Nexus Node and gather enough money for a Teleportation Array, so they were no slouches either.

They were even open about possessing the entrance tokens before they even knew him, which seemed crazy to Zac. He had a feeling that unless they wisened up they'd end up in dire straits. Possessing too many valuables was a crime in troubled times after all. If it was the old him Zac wouldn't have felt anything was wrong, but Ogras had started to rub off on him.

Zac kept walking, and out of habit started using [**Axe Mastery**]. It felt like the trajectories were slightly changed to accommodate for his new weapon, making Zac once again marvel over the skill. It was also the first time he properly used the skill since it reached Late mastery, and as he expected it better incorporated his Dao Seeds into the mix.

What surprised him was that it actually even incorporated the Dao of Trees. Until now that Dao Seed remained unused in battle, but the guidance system showed him its usage. Every now and then it told him to imbue his free hand with it as he used it for grabs or blocks. Zac wasn't sure what the exact use was, perhaps except that it improved the resilience of his arm, enabling him almost to use it as a shield. However, he still felt that a low mastery seed was too weak for that kind of usage at the moment.

Zac kept moving throughout the day and the next, unceasingly using his skill. It was almost addicting to be able to once again use Nexus Crystals to restore his missing energy, especially now that it apparently only took a fifth of the time to absorb the energy contained in an F-Grade Crystal.

The hunter said that the town was four days away, but with Zac's huge attributes and speed it went far quicker. Finally, he reached his destination, Fort Roger. And as he looked upon the ramshackle town with its weak fortifications he felt that the description of Selas didn't do the town justice.

It was much worse.

Chapter 98: Fort Roger

It would be more appropriate to call the wall that ran around the small town a large fence. It consisted of trees with their edge sharpened, and was between three and five meters tall, as the length of the poles weren't uniform. There even were some holes in the wall due to uneven placement, giving enough room for a person to sneak through.

The town was located right on the edge of the forest, with large trees giving way to expansive fields. The fields might actually have been farmland-before, as they were flat and he thought he spotted a tractor. But the fields were in complete disrepair, overgrown with weeds and unmanned.

With the new energy in the atmosphere anything would grow faster compared to before, and Zac felt it was very telling about the town that they didn't utilize such a prime source of food. They would only have to clean up the fields and throw some seeds in there, and they would have grain in no time. But he saw no-one even try it.

There was a path leading to an actual gate that Zac stepped out on as he walked the last distance. He didn't plan on sneaking into the town and didn't want to alarm them. He also slowed down his speed to normal walking from his Attribute-empowered movement.

As he closed in on the wall he saw there were two corpses hanging from the wall, one on each side of the gate. It was a man and a woman, both in their thirties or forties. It was hard to tell since they obviously were tortured before they were killed. Attached to their feet were plaques that simply said 'TRAITOR'.

Zac was starting to hesitate whether to actually enter this place, but he knew there weren't many alternatives. There was another town on the Automatic Map, but it would take at least

another two days to get there. With his return back to the portal he would barely make it in time for the next wave, and that was barring there were no unexpected incidents on the way. After making sure his odd clothing wasn't visible through his worn cloak he started walking. As he approached the gates two guards perked up and warily glared at him.

“Stop! Why are you here?” one of them gruffly asked.

“I'm traveling to find my hometown,” Zac simply answered. There should be lots of people like him who weren't at home when the world got integrated, forcing them to travel to find their way back home.

“Pfft, another idiot looking to be eaten by the beasts,” the guard said and the other one snickered in derision.

“Five Nexus Crystals to enter. If you don't have it you can fuck right off.”

Zac was a bit surprised they used Nexus Crystals rather than Nexus Coins as a currency. Then again Nexus Coins were only usable in System-affiliated stores, whereas Nexus Crystals were not only used for currency, they could also make you stronger.

Zac pretended to look troubled, but reached inside his cape and pretended to grope around while he took out five crystals from his Cosmos Sack. He handed them over to the guard who quickly put them in a backpack.

“Is there somewhere to get a drink?” Zac asked.

The guards were a bit more amenable now that they got paid, and Zac didn't care whether the entrance fee was real or not.

“There's a bar down the main road, The Royal Oak,” the guard answered with a wave.

Zac nodded and headed into the town. He only took a few steps before he stopped, as a wall of stench slammed into him. It wasn't to the level of the imp camps in the tunnels, but it was bad. The town was obviously human, likely from America or the UK as the worn signs were in English.

But four months into the apocalypse the whole town looked ready to collapse under the weight of its own filth. Piles of dirt were thrown into the alleys, and disgusting streams of mystery liquid ran along the pavement. He even saw a corpse lying in an alley, halfway buried under the filth. Zac was infinitely happy that he had decided to put his shoes on, as he'd almost puked at the prospect of stepping on the ground here.

Clearly there was no such thing as sanitation in Fort Roger. People just threw garbage wherever. There were few people on the streets, and they looked worn and malnourished. Zac decided to use **[Eye of Discernment]** on a few of the stragglers and was shocked to see that many were below level 5. There even were a few that still pattered around at level 1. He wasn't sure exactly how much experience was needed to gain levels in the beginning, as he essentially started at level 16, but he couldn't imagine it was a lot.

These people were likely mortals just like him. But different from Zac they had simply stayed within this disgusting town since the integration, afraid to venture out. Zac couldn't imagine that these people would have a happy ending in a world of cultivators and local tyrants. The rule of law was gone, replaced by the creed 'might makes right'.

He didn't know why, but he actually felt some disdain for these hapless people. He knew that it would be weird to expect people to rush out into the forests to risk their lives fighting animals. But for people to just give up, like these people clearly had, felt like a joke.

They could work together to kill some weaker beasts, and slowly but gradually gain the power that would allow them to feed and protect themselves. They would also get Nexus Coins for the kills, which could be turned into Nexus Crystals at any System-run shop. They could even just do some work for Nexus Coins and use that to purchase crystals.

Zac resisted the urge to grab these people and shake some sense into them and instead kept going. He was planning on heading straight for the bar, but something caught his eye. It was a large electronics store, now used by a few people to loiter around. There was no electricity so none of the TVs

were turned on, but Zac simply ignored the people and headed into the warehouse in the back.

He found the box containing one of the larger flatscreens and simply threw it into his pouch after making sure no one was in sight. Next, he took a video player and boxes and boxes of movies. It was mainly for Alea, who liked watching movies just like Ogras. But Zac was interested in whether they could actually make some money from these things like Ogras hinted, so he took some technology with him back home.

Finally, most of his pouch was stocked up with electronics and movies, and he headed on toward the bar. He wasn't looking for a drink, but simply to sit down and ask some questions. Soon he arrived at The Royal Oak and saw it was an old Irish Pub. It actually looked like it was in decent shape, with a clean storefront and no garbage piling up around the structure. Clearly there was a proprietor who still had some sense of pride.

He walked inside and saw that the interior was just as he expected. The only difference between this and all other classical pubs he had visited through the years was that instead of normal lights there were candles burning on the tables. Zac already expected it, but it looked like there was no electricity in the town.

He had guessed that things like power, internet, and water supply would be essentially gone with the integration, as the randomization of the world would ruin the network of tubes and cables that had been built over the years. Perhaps there would be some lucky areas that were right next to a water power plant or a farm of windmills or solar panels that might be okay, but most would likely have to do without electricity.

The bar was largely empty apart from a few tables. Everyone kept to themselves, and the conversations were kept at a low volume.

“A new face I see,” Zac heard and turned toward a portly middle-aged man who likely was the proprietor.

He stood behind the bar which he was cleaning with a rag, looking very much the part. The man was British from the

sound of it, and it looked like this town was truly from somewhere in England, as it was the same with the guards.

Zac walked over and sat down on a barstool in front of him.

“What can I get for you?” the man asked, looking neither excited or bored.

“Information,” Zac simply said as he placed a few crystals on the counter in front of the bartender.

The barkeep’s eyes slightly widened, and he quickly swiped up the crystals with the rag, quickly hiding them from view.

“You better be careful of flaunting your wealth young man,” the bartender said with a serious face. “You’re obviously new to town so I’ll warn you to not stick out. Safety isn’t one of the strong points of Fort Roger.”

“I understand. I have been traveling looking for my hometown, and need some information. I need to know if a pattern how the world was reshuffled has been found,” Zac spoke with a low voice.

“Have you been hiding under a rock all this time? Well, in any case, it’s all random from what I’ve heard. I’m from northern England, but the next town over is mainly American. No one knows what’s going on. From what I understand a few governments are working together trying to get order back, but I’ll believe it when I see it,” the man said with a scoff. “How are they going to enforce order when people suddenly are able to shoot fireballs and run around like supermen? Never thought Armageddon would look like this.”

Zac sighed at the answer. He at least hoped there was some discernible pattern to the randomization, but it seemed it was too much to ask for. At least the governments were trying to get things under control. He somewhat agreed with the bartender’s assessment, but the information also provided some hope.

Perhaps the government had some means to map out the world. Maybe there were satellites still in orbit, or at least they could communicate by radio. There were many emergency contingencies in place in case of war or the like. Obviously,

nothing could have prepared the countries for the System arriving, but they might have figured some things out by now.

“Is this town under the British government?” he asked, hoping to get in touch with an official.

“Pah, what government? This town is run by Roger, a cultivator. Most towns don’t have any affiliation to any government, they are just run by whoever has the biggest fist,” the barkeep said with a low voice. “However, a town called Fairfield is a week’s journey from here. I haven’t gone myself due to the danger, but I hear that it’s quite a large town. And supposedly there are some government people from the United States there, they might know more.

“You were quite generous, so I’ll warn you. You should probably leave here sooner than later. Travelers usually have a tough time here,” he said as he made an almost indiscernible nod with his head toward a few of the tables.

“Why are people still here? This place looks a bit...” Zac said as he hesitated how to finish the sentence, but the Bartender understood what he meant and sighed.

“The road to Fairfield has large packs of monsters above level 20, very few dares to go that way without pushing through with a car. There’s also talk of even stronger pack leaders roving about. But Roger has most of the cars and all the petrol, so it’s better to stay here and eke out a living.”

Zac was about to ask something else, but a loud ruckus outside interrupted him. A loud crash and a few angry roars bled into the bar, whose customers slightly perked up. A young girl’s scream came next and the bartender sighed again with sadness in his eyes.

“It looks like they found her”.

“Found who?” Zac asked curiously.

“You should have seen the two bodies out on the gate? The scream probably came from their daughter,” the bartender answered with some disgust on his face as he continued with a low voice. “Roger took a liking to the young girl, but the

parents tried to sneak her out of the town. Truly a miserable family.”

Zac’s eyebrows scrunched together, somewhat unsure of what to do. He wasn’t some hero saving the damsel in distress. But could he just watch these things happen with a clean conscience, knowing he could help?

It didn’t take long for him to decide. He couldn’t save the world, but he at least he could save this girl, and only pray someone would do the same for his family in case it came to that. He got to his feet and turned toward the door. The bartender tried to signal him to stop, but he only answered with a wave as he walked toward the ruckus.

Chapter 99: Emily

As Zac stepped out of the bar he saw that there was already a small crowd gathering. After a quick glance it was clear that no one was there to help, but rather to watch a show. All the noise came from three grimy looking men who cornered a kid.

The men all had somewhat matching clothes, with a large uneven R-patch sewn to their chest. It looked like the leader of the town truly wanted to set himself up as a medieval lord, already making his underlings wear a crest. Zac shook his head and looked toward the inner part of the town where another wall was erected. That should be the residence of this Roger and his cronies.

One of the men was bleeding freely from his head and the glass shards on the ground around him explained what happened.

“You little BITCH! After Roger gets tired of you I’ll fucking feed you to the dogs!” the bleeding man roared at their cornered prey.

It took Zac a few seconds to realize that the kid was actually a small girl somewhere in her teens. She wore wretched-looking rags for clothes, and her face was caked in dirt apart from a few tear streaks drawing clear lines in her face. Even her hair was in a mess, and it looked like she or someone else had randomly cut most off it of with a knife.

The teenager was holding the remains of a bottle as a weapon, and ferociously stared at the three men. The outlook didn’t look good as all two of them took out daggers as they approached her while the last man stood at the ready. Zac sighed and used [**Eye of Discernment**] on the group, and saw that the girl was named Emily.

She didn’t even have a level yet, which meant that she was too young to start using the System. The other three were around

level 15 to 17, weaklings in Zac's eyes but perhaps strong according to the level of this town. Certainly, for a young girl without any powers it was a futile struggle.

“WHO IS SPYING ON US?” the third man without a knife roared as he glared in Zac's direction.

Zac rolled his eyes as he stepped out from the group of people. He really needed to get a better inspection skill. Anyone with Intelligence above 15 points would be able to sense his scan, above 30 and they'd know it was him. Apparently the homeless-looking man actually focused intelligence, which was a bit surprising.

“Wanting to play the hero? Or maybe you just want her for yourself, eh? In either case you better fuck right off,” the bleeding man said.

Zac shook his head as he wondered how people could devolve to this stage after just a few months. Was the laws and fear of punishment the only thing that held some people back before the integration?

“You better turn back right now-“ one of the men said, but threw his dagger at Zac's head mid-sentence in an attempt to ambush him.

Zac couldn't even be bothered to respond as he simply caught the dagger mid-air as he released his aura. Screams of panic immediately erupted as the onlookers frenetically tried to back away. He held the knife in his hand, still unsure of how to act.

“Don't move or I'll kill the brat!” one of the men said as he grabbed the girl who had lost focus due to Zac's aura. He was deathly pale and his whole body was shaking in horror as he maniacally stared at Zac.

Zac frowned and threw the dagger with a quick motion. It tore through the air and punched into the head of the man holding the girl hostage. The force of the throw was so great that his head burst like a watermelon, instantly killing him.

Next Zac took out one of his regular axes from his pouch and charged up a **[Chop]**. The other two ruffians didn't even have time to react or scream out before two headless corpses fell

down on the ground. A large tear was rent through a house as well from Zac's lightning-quick swings, and it looked like it would collapse at any second.

Zac walked over to the girl who now was drenched in the man's blood. She still had the bottle in her hand, and though she looked scared at Zac she didn't flinch. Zac's impression of this girl was far better compared to the castaways on his island.

"Let's go," was the only thing he said to her as he controlled his aura and turned toward the central area of Fort Roger. But he only had time to take three steps before the bartender stopped him.

"Wait, young man! I understand you're angry, but please don't do anything drastic. If you kill Roger and his henchmen then most of the people in this town will perish from the animals."

That made Zac stop in his tracks, and after some hesitation, he turned around and started walking toward the gate instead with some sadness in his eyes.

There wasn't anything left to do here. Information in a hovel like this was limited, and he'd have to travel to Fairfield in order to find out more. This Roger fellow might know more, but he had a feeling that going to visit him would only result in battle and more death.

He wasn't sure how to deal with people like Roger. Obviously they were scum, but they were also the ones who kept civilians safe just as the bartender said. There were even level 1 wastrels still surviving to this date in Fort Roger, and that was mostly thanks to Roger.

In his anger he hadn't thought about the consequences, but he wasn't ready to support this whole town. He just had no way to migrate a whole town through the forest and through the teleporter in time before the next wave started. And it wasn't like he could afford it in any case, since each activation cost a bunch of Nexus Crystals.

It wouldn't help to build his own teleporter here for the same reason, not that he was ready to waste that many crystals on

these people even if he could. The wolf waves had tapped almost all his remaining crystals, and he wasn't about to spend another 10 million nexus coin on a teleporter. He needed that money to ready himself for the second wave.

He learned from Selas during their walk that villages regularly were beset by beasts. It wasn't to the point of his own beast waves, but there could be hundreds of frenzied animals who heedlessly charged at the villages. Selas believed it was the work of the System, and Zac agreed.

But still, leaving like this gave a bad taste in his mouth and his monstrous aura once again flared out. He turned back around and supercharged another cosmic energy edge, bringing it to over ten meters. With an echoing roar he unleashed the edge right toward the inner wall in the distance.

As it traveled it destroyed the paved road, creating a huge scar that ran right through the village. It smashed through the rudimentary gate, leaving only wood chippings in its wake. Finally when the blade was only twenty meters away from the mansion the blade winked out of existence.

“Deliver this message to Roger. I will return through this area shortly, and if I find him still acting like some wanna-be warlord I will judge him and all his henchmen. Let my strike be the reminder,” Zac said with a loud voice empowered with cosmic energy. His huge aura was still billowing out, forcing people to back away or down on their knees, and the visage of his swing would likely follow these townspeople for the rest of their lives.

All the villagers of Fort Roger quickly got out of the way as he once again retracted his aura and walked away. Their faces were white with terror and they didn't even dare to look up. Some shuffling from behind told him that the girl decided to follow him.

Soon they were at the gate with Emily's parents being hung up. And for the first time, he heard the girl speak up.

“Please... please help me take them down,” a weak voice came from behind him, and he turned around to see tears pooling up in her eyes.

Zac worldlessly started to charge [**Chop**] again, preparing to cut down the two.

“HEY WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” one of the guards shouted and ran toward Zac.

With the bartender’s words echoing in his mind Zac felt no need to keep killing, and only lightly slapped the man to knock him unconscious. The other guards only fearfully stared in the distance, not daring to approach.

He charged up [**Chop**] to a five-meter edge, and with two lightning-quick swings the whole part of the wall that held the two bodies was cut down. Zac freed the two corpses, simply ripping apart the chains that held them. Then with a nod toward the girl he walked toward the forest with the two bodies under his arms.

The remaining guards mutely stared at Zac’s back and the ruined gate, unsure what to do. Soon one of them ran toward the large mansion on the other side of the town.

After a few minutes of walking Zac felt confident that no one was planning on following them so he placed the two bodies down on the ground then put them into his Cosmos Sack.

“What did you do?!” The girl asked aghast, seeing the bodies of her parents simply vanish.

She pointed the shattered glass bottle she still carried at him.

“I placed them in a magic bag,” Zac answered as he started to take off his shoes.

She hesitated a bit then put down her makeshift weapon.

“Why didn’t you kill Roger as well? He is much worse than the ones you killed,” she asked in an almost accusatory tone.

“I am not sure more good than evil would come from me doing that,” Zac said as he glanced at her. He held the shoes who were now caked in all kinds of things from walking through Fort Roger, and simply chucked them into the woods with some disgust. He’d rather get new ones than put these defiled ones back on.

Emily hesitated a bit before she grit her teeth and started to undress.

“As long as you kill him you can do whatever you want with me,” she said with her eyes reddening.

Zac’s eyebrows rose up and using [**Loamwalker**] he almost teleported in front of her and flicked her forehead.

“Don’t be stupid, keep your clothes on,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I’m not interested in little kids.”

“I’m fifteen,” she said defensively, but she still started to put on her clothes while blushing a bit.

“That Roger isn’t very strong, if you want him killed just work hard and kill him yourself,” Zac said. “I am not some mercenary who goes around killing people, I have my own problems to deal with.”

“Then help me get strong! I’ve never heard of anyone being as powerful as you, and I’ve been to multiple cities,” Emily asked, a burning desire in her eyes.

Zac had initially planned on dumping the girl in Winterleaf Village before heading back, but something in her eyes made Zac change his mind. He guessed that Alyn had her first student for the Academy.

“Why have you been to multiple cities? Traveling is pretty dangerous,” he said.

“I have a big brother and a big sister. Both are cultivators, they disappeared right from our home. We looked around but couldn’t find them. After a bit over a month we heard about the tutorial, but the cultivators didn’t return to our city. We guessed that they were dropped off somewhere else,” she explained. “We decided to look for them, so we have traveled looking for them for a few months and arrived at Fort Roger a week ago”

She didn’t continue from there but Zac could guess the rest of the story from her eyes once again reddening. He sighed and wondered how many people had died trying to find their family members or trying to get back home. The world was fraught with danger, and the incursions and monsters might

not even be the worst ones. Humanity had always been its own worst enemy.

“I can take you with me to my town. However, that place is extremely far away and you will not be able to look for your siblings if you do. Where I live is very dangerous, but you can get stronger there. It’s up to you to choose your path,” Zac said as he looked at the teenager.

Emily only hesitated a few seconds before she looked at him with determination.

“I’ll go with you”.

“Ok. Then jump up on my back,” Zac said as he turned his back to her.

“What?” she asked with a flabbergasted face.

Zac had already decided to head back to Port Atwood after this small excursion. There were 5 days left until the next part of the beast waves and he wasn’t sure he’d make it to Fairfield and back within that timeframe. He felt it was more worthwhile to go back and increase his power with his remaining E-Grade Crystals.

Besides, Emily seemed to have visited multiple towns, and she might have even more answers compared to the barkeep or Roger. All in all, he was happy with the result of this expedition. He even got a nifty map, and more importantly, the magical token.

“Come on, jump up,” Zac repeated as he hunched down a bit. Walking with an unevolved human in tow would waste far too much time, so he would have to carry her. Since he wanted his arms free in case of an attack she’d have to climb up on his back.

She hesitated a bit before she climbed up with a slight blush on her face. As soon as she put her arms around his neck he walked off with his usual speed.

A shriek echoed through the forest as Zac strolled through with the speed of a runaway train.

Chapter 100: Travel Companions

Zac stopped for the night at a small clearing and let down Emily from his back. Even the fading light couldn't hide the fact that her face was deathly pale. Moving almost at the speed of a car through dense forest on the back of another human was apparently quite jarring, and Zac had been forced to stop a few times to let the girl take a breather.

There were many things he wanted to ask the teenager about the Tutorial and society after the fall, but he didn't want to push her either. They buried her parents at a beautiful glade just a few hours ago, and she hadn't said anything since then. There wasn't any ceremony, with Zac simply using a broadsword to rip open a hole in the ground where he placed the two together. Since the bodies were naked he first placed a cover over them before he refilled the grave.

Meanwhile, Emily carved the words *Remembered by E+J+O* in a tree with a dagger she got from Zac. They simply stood staring at the grave for a few minutes before she silently climbed up on Zac's back, and they wordlessly left the glade. Zac had offered to bury them on the Island, but Emily wanted to bury them closer to their home.

Zac prepared a small fire in silence as Emily was looking at the dagger Zac gave her earlier.

"What level are you?" she suddenly asked as she looked up at Zac, who froze a bit.

"Um..." he said, unsure how to respond. He wasn't sure whether exposing the fact he was over level 50 was such a good idea.

"Well, are you on the ladder?" Emily changed her question when she saw Zac's troubled face.

“... Yes. Can you see the ladder?” Zac asked a bit surprised.

“I knew it. You are way too strong to not be a Ranker,” she looked a bit excited. “Everyone can see the ladder. I guess that you are considered role models by the System? So it wants to display you for us as well”.

“Do you know if there are any other Rankers close by?” Zac probed, a bit curious.

“No idea. I know that the government is looking for you people,” she answered as she started cutting and the air with her dagger. However, her movements and technique were horrendous.

Zac took out a spit and large chunk of meat from his sack and placed it on the spit close to the fire. He had grown tired of the tough dried meat long ago and now preferred to barbeque. Now that he was forced to stop for Emily he had the time to spare.

He sprinkled some salt over the slab and left it to slowly be grilled. He mentally kicked himself for not looking for some spices at Fort Roger as the ones from the camper were used up long ago. Then again, he felt that any food-stuffs should have been pilfered long ago in a wretched town like that.

“Why are they looking for us? No, not like that, move like this,” Zac asked as he showed how to properly distribute her weight.

“I dunno. They are trying to get all cultivators to register and become like an army or something? Maybe they want the Rankers to lead the cultivators?” she answered as she mimicked Zac’s movement.

“Hmm...” Zac only answered as he kept moving. He felt that it wasn’t that simple. The world was collapsing, and from his brief visit to Fort Roger he knew that the Government’s control was tenuous at best. Perhaps they needed Rankers to keep people in check. “Are many cultivators complying?”

“I don’t think so, we tried going to the government when we looked for Johanna and Oscar, but from what we heard most people haven’t joined yet. But new people join every day, and

the government offers pretty good things,” she distractedly answered without stopping her stabs.

“Like what? Now shift your weight like this, it gives more reach to your stab,” Zac asked as he kept moving.

“Access to system-exclusive things like training facilities. Good Salary. Oh, and they have claimed good areas that have a lot of monsters. Anyone that wants to train there has to be a part of the government, otherwise they are attacked,” she explained.

“Aren’t there monsters everywhere? Why would that matter?”

“That forest is good because it doesn’t have any very strong monsters it seems, it’s a pretty safe spot to level up. Most places have a random mix of animals, and it’s super dangerous to fight there. Some super-strong monster can pop out anytime and kill you. So finding good spots is very important.”

Zac nodded as it made a lot of sense. His situation was the same. His whole island had turned into a farmer’s paradise in a sense, as the demonic beast hordes killed off any normal animals that could have become a real threat. There was no supercharged mink on Demon Island, only Barghest and Gwyllgi. They were dangerous compared to most animals, but there would never be any surprise beast or boss jumping out of the bushes.

They kept going for some time before they sat down to eat. Zac was by no means a knife-master, but some things he learned from his guidance system was universal.

“Do you know why so many towns have Nexus Nodes?” Zac suddenly asked.

He knew that he wouldn’t be the only one with a Town Shop system, but after seeing Fort Roger he was a bit surprised to see just how low the bar was set.

“Um, because people like to live together?” she answered, looking a bit confused.

“What?”

“Well, those crystals appear when enough people live together in a town, right?” Emily answered.

“Hmm...” Zac only answered.

“Then everyone gets a quest to fight for ownership. It can get pretty crazy. My parents got such a quest once, but we immediately left town and hid out until it settled down. But I heard those crystals are always the worst ones, and only give classes,” she continued after looking at Zac. “Only those who get their crystals from The Tutorial can actually build things with it, and it is different there as well. Like if they impressed the System in the tutorial they get to buy more things. I’m not sure.”

It looked like the nexus stations popped up just from population density, and a quest like the one for the Fruit of Ascension would start. The Nexus Station gave almost no options, but he was sure that the one who claimed ownership would get some quest to evolve the crystal.

He was a bit irritated earlier that others already had towns when he created his since he might have missed out on some good titles. It took him a few days to figure out how to create an outpost, after all. But it seemed their progression was limited. After all, he doubted the people of Winterleaf village single-handedly closed a freaking incursion in order to establish theirs.

Emily soon fell asleep since she was tired from today’s events, but Zac only needed a few hours of rest. He sat down with his back against the wall and started pondering the Dao. There was no Fourth Dao seed he felt close to attaining, and instead he needed to focus on upgrading the ones he had.

He turned his eyes inward toward the Axe-fractal in his mind. Since he gained the Seed of Sharpness the axe had two colors, with one side being dark blue with some brown, and the other a steely grey. The colors represented the two Seeds he possessed, Sharpness and Heaviness. There was a clear line of demarcation between the two Daos, and the auras didn’t mix in the slightest.

He knew that one of the things he needed to do in the future was to fuse these two, but it was very far off. Alyn explained that there were two ways to improve the Dao. The first was fusion, and it was the path he had been walking since the start. Since the day he saw the vision he knew that the seed of Heaviness he gained was only part of the terrifying aura in the axe-man's swing. He would have to fuse more concepts into it to create a true Dao of Axe.

The path of fusion often walked from simplicity to complexity. It combined simple concepts into something greater than the sum of the parts. The other path was generally referred to as evolution. It meant pushing a Dao Seed to its limit, and from there letting it evolve into a higher Dao of the same category.

That was his plan with his Dao of Trees. There might be a possibility to fuse it into his Dao of Axes as well, but Zac felt it would weaken it rather than strengthen it. Instead, he'd work toward evolving it by itself. Unless he suddenly gained a fourth seed somewhere and tried his hands on fusing that as well.

Neither fusion or evolution was better than the other according to Alyn, they were just different. However, she told him that most focused on evolution since fewer Daos were necessary to progress with that path. With fusion he'd always need to gain enlightenment on at least two Daos.

Dao was generally considered the true watershed in the path to power. Over time most people were able to hit their level cap, and money could solve the issue of Race evolution. But Dao was something you needed to figure out yourself. There were some tools and treasures that could help out, but it mostly depended on personal aptitude and insight.

Zac felt he probably wasn't some genius since all three of his seeds essentially came from his visions. He did gain the Seed of Sharpness a few months later, but the foundation for learning it came from the same vision as the Seed of Heaviness. He was afraid that evolving all three at the same time would be more than he could chew off.

He still was hesitating whether to put aside two of the seeds and only focus on one, or to focus on both the offensive ones. The Dao of Trees was the lowest priority for now, as its use simply didn't feel as readily apparent.

Finally, he made a decision in his mind. He would focus on the Dao of Sharpness, at least for now. It was the Seed he had for the shortest time, but it felt like the most useful one. He stared at the axe in his mind, trying to glean anything out of the silver fractals.

He also played both the vision of the axe-man in his mind, feeling the terrifying force of the strike. Finally, he revisited the fight with the Fiend Wolf. He remembered the feeling of standing in the Dao Field, where even the air turned sharp from the Dao. He remembered how the casual swings of the beast rent long lines into the earth without any cosmic energy needed.

He also pondered upon what sharpness actually meant. It wasn't as simple as the thinner the edge the more damage he could do. Sharpness needed control and technique to be properly applied as well. He remembered seeing clips before the fall where people tried using razor-sharp swords and barely were able to cut anything since their technique was bad.

He kept it going for a few hours before the mental strain became too much and he fell asleep. He woke up a few hours later, only to find Emily intently staring at him.

“Are you Abbot Everlasting Peace?” she asked curiously.

“Urh... what?”

“Well, you look like a monk, and when I woke up during the night I saw you meditate. You already told me you are on the ladder. So are you Abbot Everlasting Peace? Or Boundless Truth? Is that why you weren't interested in me? Is there nothing down there?” she peppered off, almost overtaxing Zac's exhausted brain.

“Boundless? Wait, what? I'm no monk, my hair only got singed off in battle recently. And I'm not missing any goddamn parts, okay?”

Chapter 101: First impressions

After another day of travel they finally reached Winterleaf village. Zac slowed down before entering the town though, not wanting to make it look like he charged at them.

“Careful, this is a beastman village! They are usually very strong,” Emily hastily said as she pulled at his cloak.

“I know, I am friends with them,” Zac offhandedly answered as he entered the town. He slightly frowned as he saw that the village was almost completely deserted, with no one in sight. Had something happened?

He quickly calmed down though as he soon saw Selas run toward him.

“Greetings Zac. We didn’t expect to see you for a few more days,”

“My trip was cut short so I’m heading back, I hope you don’t mind. Is everything okay here, it looks a bit... empty?”

“Stupid, they can’t understand English,” the girl softly said by his side, but Zac only rolled his eyes in response. It was a bit cumbersome when only one party had the language skill in these situations.

“Not a problem, I’ll lead you to the teleporter. Most people are just out working for now,” the Ishiate answered with a cough as he ushered them toward the array.

Zac felt that the beastman was lying, but couldn’t be bothered to untangle that. They simply walked back toward the teleportation array making some small talk, while Emily looked on confused. Next to the array a large package was placed.

“The package contains the fur and a few tokens of thanks by the villagers for the help you provided us. Good luck with your endeavors, my friend. I hope to see you again in the treasure hunt,” Selas said with an awkward smile.

Zac nodded, and after placing the crystals needed to teleport the two of them stepped on the array with Emily in tow. He initially had wanted to discuss some matters of trade, such as keeping a channel open for goods between the two. However, it seemed pretty clear that they were worried he’d go berserk, to the point they even evacuated the town to avoid him.

With a flash followed by some darkness he once again materialized. To his surprise he only saw walls, and quickly looked around. With a sigh of relief, he headed through a door, and the familiar sight of Port Atwood came into view.

It seemed that someone had erected a small house to shield the teleportation array while he was gone. Initially, he thought that Ogras had planned some trap for him, but that clearly wasn’t the case.

“Wow that was so cool, were we teleported?” Emily exclaimed next to him.

“Yeah, it’s a teleportation array. It can take us almost anywhere on the planet, as long as there’s another array there,” Zac answered. The way Selas acted was quite suspect, so he brought up the teleportation interface just to make sure of his suspicions.

Just as he opened the window he saw the line with Winterleaf Village wink out of existence, no longer available to choose. Zac only sighed and closed the interface. It looked like the beastmen were careful after all. His plan to visit Fairfield after the next wave would have to be canceled.

“Let’s go,” he said as he headed toward the temporary town.

Zac noticed that the progress was coming along well as they walked toward the center of Port Atwood. The wall was almost completely fixed, and new poles were erected on the outside. Their use had been limited the last time, but it was better to something than nothing. There was however an

extremely unsettling smell in the air, and Zac furrowed his brows.

“Wow your town smells like poop,” Emily exclaimed, and Zac was forced to agree with some embarrassment.

As they closed in on the town the shadows flickered and the familiar demon appeared in front of them. Emily shrieked in surprise and jumped back a few steps, her dagger immediately in her hand.

“This one seems a bit better than the last ones, even if she looks a bit feral. I didn’t know you liked them this... young. If that’s your taste you can always pursue Zakarith, your names match and everything,” Ogras said with a half-smile.

“She was in trouble so I picked her up along the way,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes. “How are the preparations going, and what the hell is this smell?”

“WAIT! Why is there a demon here, and why is it speaking English?” Emily shrilly interjected as she started tracing large crosses in the air to ward off evil.

“What is she doing? Is she brain-damaged?” Ogras skeptically asked as he gave a glance of mock-pity.

Zac only half-grinned and briefly told him about the demons in Christianity and other folk-lore.

“Hmm, very interesting. It might be a coincidence, or perhaps your planet had visitors from the multi-verse a few thousand years ago and the details got jumbled over the years,” Ogras mused.

“Wait, people could come from the multi-verse even before the integration?” Zac asked.

“Well yeah, but it would be like finding a needle in a galaxy so to speak. Your planet would almost be impossible to locate, but nothing is stopping you,” Ogras answered with a shrug.

“This is Ogras, he’s living here along with a few hundred more of his kind. Actually, the town mostly consists of demons. They’re like the beastmen,” Zac explained to the frazzled girl.

That seemed to calm her down somewhat as she curiously glanced at the demon.

“I know I’m handsome, but don’t go falling in love with me. I prefer mature ladies,” Ogras said as he struck a pose.

She only blushed a bit and moved a bit further away.

“Are there no other humans here except you?” she curiously asked Zac.

“Well, there are a few more, but they arrived just recently,” Zac answered.

“Pah, don’t remind me of those wastrels,” Ogras spat. “Pain in the ass every single one of them. Well, the old guy is okay, I guess.”

“What’s going on? And the smell?” Zac reminded the demon.

“Entitled little shits. They keep complaining and don’t want to work. They just hide in their house after seeing one little barghest, crying and demanding to see you. When they found out you weren’t here anymore they flipped out,” Ogras said with disdain. “As for the wretched odor? You try tanning tens of thousands of wolf hides at once without making the area smell like a Devourer’s asshole.”

“How did they come in contact with a barghest? There shouldn’t be any ones alive this close to town right?” Zac asked.

He knew that they would treat the hides, as the non-combat classes had arduously skinned and salvaged anything of value from the monster hordes. He hadn’t expected this level of stench though. Most of the parts of the beasts were useless since the grade was too low to trade with the Mercantile System, but some things might become useful, and with the volumes they were handling they would make a decent profit.

The hides of the more sturdy ones could be made into F-Grade leather armors, which would sell for a decent penny, especially at a newly integrated world like Earth. With their almost infinite stock of leather, they planned on using it as a selling point for visiting the town when they opened the gates for the public in the future.

“They said they wanted to get stronger, and since none of them are cultivators Ilvere took them to hunt a few barghests,” Ogras answered in response to the question about the humans. “If they worked together they shouldn’t have any problems killing such a dumb beast. But apparently it was chaos, people fleeing for their lives, even pushing down each other to escape. Ilvere had to kill the beast before a fight even started,” he snickered.

Zac could only sigh, feeling a bit embarrassed on their behalf.

“What’s a Barghest?” Emily asked curiously.

“It’s a large demon dog that looks like it has been turned inside out,” Zac answered. Ogras looked like he was about correct Zac, but after some thought nodded his head.

Zac turned to Emily after some thought.

“How do most human towns handle people who can’t fight?”

“Eh... Some get jobs doing various things I guess? There are still people needed for all kinds of things. The people who have simply given up are usually ignored or kicked out of town. I heard the most ruthless leaders have even used them as human shields against monster waves” the girl answered after some thought.

“There’s an idea,” Ogras muttered.

“Where are they now?” Zac asked with a sigh.

“We put them in the infirmary since its empty by now”.

“How’s Alea?” Zac quickly asked, reminded of the demoness.

“She’s up now, but still not completely restored. She’s been asking about you,” the demon answered with a devilish grin.

“Whos Alea?” Emily perked up.

“Why do you care, little brat?” Ogras grinned at her.

“Whatever,” she answered with a pout.

Already starting to regret coming back this early Zac sighed as he started walking toward the infirmary.

“More importantly, did you find any?” Ogras asked.

“Any what? Humans? Yeah, I visited a human settlement.”
Zac distractedly answered.

“Who cares about that. Movies, human? Did you find any movies?”

Zac stopped and glanced at the demon.

“Are you really that free right now?”

“The wall is essentially rebuilt, and I still can’t buy anything with contribution points. I’m just waiting around,” he answered impatiently.

Zac shook his head but took out the large box containing the TV, and the small mountain of videos. Ogras inspected the things with glee, but he looked a bit confused.

“What are these things?”

“The large box contains a much larger screen to watch the movies. The small packages each contain one movie or a series. That box over there contains the device to play them. Both the Large screen and the player needs a steady stream of electricity through a cable. You can plug them into the camper, but you need to figure out how to keep the battery charged yourself.”

Ogras nodded excitedly and put all the things into his pouch.

“I’m sure you have many things to do, I’ll help this kid get used to the area,” he said, and as he grabbed the shoulder of Emily both of them disappeared, leaving only a startled shriek in the air.

Zac smiled a bit and continued on toward the infirmary. He wasn’t afraid that he’d hurt the teenager, but rather knew he’d need some tech support. Actually, it even looked like he approved of her ferocity. Soon he arrived outside the infirmary, and to his surprise saw Janos sitting outside the door.

“What’s going on?”

“Kept escaping. Put them in illusion,” the demon tersely answered.

“Uh, ok. You can turn it off, I’m going in,” Zac said with some annoyance. He didn’t know if these people really were a handful, or whether the demons were too heavy-handed, but something needed to be done. He didn’t have the resources to baby these people all the time.

With a sigh he entered the infirmary. As he entered the humans saw it was Zac, and rushed toward him with a litany of complaints. Zac simply released some of his aura to silence the group, then stared at them until they had calmed down.

“I hear you have been asking for me?” Zac said.

“You lied to us! We want off this hellhole of an island. Those demons said you have a method to leave the island, we want to go home,” Megan angrily huffed.

“You’re safe, clean, and fed. That’s better compared to most of humanity right now. You have access to a multi-verse town shop that has the herbs needed to evolve your race. You have a forest full of prey that gives a huge amount of Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. And you sit here complaining,” Zac retorted as a twinge of anger flared up at these people. Their situation would likely cause envy from most people, even cultivators, yet they only sat here thinking life was unfair.

“You want off this island with your powers? You’d die within a day. And even if you somehow survived and got to a settlement you’d be made slaves or worse since you’re powerless.”

The castaways hesitantly looked at each other, before the girl once again gathered her courage.

“Those hellhounds in the forest? We saw it bite clean through a thick tree, you want us to fight that? We aren’t suicidal. And do you think we’ll just believe you when you say that the world outside is dangerous?” she angrily said, and from the looks of the faces of the others they agreed.

“I am sorry we haven’t been able to help out very much young man. Us old folks have some trouble adjusting to this new reality,” the old fisherman suddenly interjected.

“I currently have 46 000 nexus coins from fighting animals on our old island. If possible I would like to borrow 36 000 nexus coins in order to buy the **[Water Spear]** skill from your Nexus Node for 75 000 coins. The remaining coins I would like to use to buy some of your Crystals at 50 coins per Nexus Crystal,” the old fisherman said.

“Your name is Trang, right?”

“My name is Sap Trang. What do you think of my proposal? I know it is a lot of coins, but with it, I hope to be able to kill the demons you call Barghest, and from there slowly get stronger. The crystals are mainly for my fellow villagers, who plan to become what your... friends... call non-combat classes. They have slowly gotten levels from fishing, but the crystals would speed it up substantially. It looks to me that you are founding an island kingdom, and us old folk have lived on the sea for all our lives. We believe we can be helpful even in this new world”.

Zac was a bit surprised. This old man clearly was no fool like the brats. Sap Trang had learned everything he could from Alyn and Zakarith, and formulated a path for himself and his villagers. He also didn't mention Megan and her clique either, so he guessed he wasn't too fond of them either.

And it was true, having a couple of seasoned seamen would be convenient. A goal of his was to explore the neighboring islands when time permitted. Who knew what treasures the system had put there.

Besides, what Sap Trang said was true. He did want to create a sphere of influence, and since he was situated on an island it would pretty much have to be an Island Kingdom.

Chapter 102: The Day before the Storm

“I’ll give you 100 000 Nexus coins as an investment to get you and your fellow villagers on the right track. You should know that the number of crystals I can sell is limited at the moment, as we need them for the war preparations. But enough to last you for a few weeks of cultivation shouldn’t be a problem,” Zac said after mulling it over for a few seconds.

There were only 6 villagers with four elderly men and two old ladies, and their expenditure shouldn’t really impact their daily production. He didn’t mention anything about paying back, as he might as well consider it a gift in case they proved useful. If not, he could always come to collect at a later date.

The Vietnamese villagers looked excited, and quickly got to their feet and bowed toward Zac, who lightly nodded back. However frowns appeared on the other group of people, who also started to glare at the fishermen.

“Why are you only giving them all those resources? What about us?” one of the men angrily asked.

“They seem like they can be useful to my town, you do not. Why should I spend Nexus Coins on you?” Zac said with a dismissive glance, which only made the former tourists angrier.

“There are various tasks that need to be completed on this island. Go earn your keep if you want coins but don’t want to fight. Mr. Trang, take your villagers and come with me,” Zac continued and started to head out.

The fishermen quickly followed in tow, but when the tourists tried to follow a glare from Zac stopped them in their tracks. As he left the infirmary he briefly updated Janos who sighed and reactivated his illusion, keeping the humans inside.

Next he walked over to Adran's canopy. Adran was a stocky demon who was in charge of the logistics of the temporary town, and one of the people who had been present at the meeting discussing the town design some time ago. He was a common non-combat class called Administrator Zac learned earlier, which was an important reason for his current position.

It was apparently quite similar to the Scribe class that Zakarith possessed, but their differences lay in their upgrade paths. The Scribe class had upgrade paths that veered toward the mercantile class. It could actually also be upgraded into Inscriber, a craftsman class that focused on inscribing fractals onto gear.

Administrator focused more on the management of towns and countries. It could be upgraded to things like Magistrate in the future, where the individuals almost became like supercomputers, keeping track of innumerable things in their heads. It apparently also could be upgraded into certain mentalist classes.

There actually wasn't a too rigid system that split up the types of classes, but it was rather fluid. Some classes were mixes of various things, and the type of class could change when evolving it. Of course, planning out your path from the start often was preferable in order to not allocate attribute points in the wrong direction.

Zac had Adran make arrangements for the humans. He simply provided the Nexus Coins and different lodging for the fishermen. For anything else they first would have to prove themselves. As for the tourists he set some ground rules to whip them into shape. If they didn't volunteer in doing some tasks around the camp, then work would be handed out. If they didn't complete it then no food or lodging that day.

He didn't want groups of people who just drifted about like in Fort Roger. And if they wouldn't pick themselves up like the fishermen, then Zac would drag them forward no matter their opinion. Besides, he had a feeling that incoming second monster horde would help them realize their new reality. If thousands of monsters charging at them didn't wake them up, nothing would.

After dealing with his latest citizens he left to look for Alea. After asking around he found she was meditating on top of the repaired wall. He soon found her sitting down with the sun in her back, illuminating her horns to truly look as though they were licks of fire.

Zac did not want to interrupt her meditation and simply sat down close to her and gazed out over the mostly prepared battlefield.

“You’re back,” Zac suddenly heard Alea say after some time and looked over at the demoness.

“I am glad to see you’re better,” Zac said after some hesitant silence.

“Your pill was very effective,” Alea answered as she looked calmly at his face.

The intent stare was starting to make Zac a bit uncomfortable, and he tried to come up with something to discuss. Finally, he detailed his excursion through the teleportation. The Ishiate, the mink, and Fort Roger. Alea calmly listened through the story, seemingly content to let Zac blabber on, until he got to Emily.

“This human, is she cute?” she asked with a light voice.

“She’s just a kid,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes. Then he caught himself as it felt like he was defending himself to a girlfriend.

“Hmm...” was the only answer from the demoness as she slowly closed her eyes to keep meditating. Zac felt that he was approaching a weird territory and with a grunt got up to his feet. Before he jumped down the wall he looked down on the meditating demoness a few seconds.

“Thank you,” he said before he left. That was the real thing he wanted to convey. Alea had risked her life to help him in the battle against the Fiend Wolf and was still recuperating from its attack. She was under no obligation to do that but she still did it, and Zac was truly grateful.

With that, he was done with everything he needed to do for now. The demons knew what they needed to do, and Zac’s

only goal now was to get stronger. He didn't want to get mired down in weeks of battle again. The few days of freedom as he explored the new planet made him feel alive, and he was anxious to get back to it.

The fact that the beastmen closed their portal was a bit troubling as it threw a wrench in his plans, but since that small village managed to buy a teleportation array already then many other towns would likely follow suit soon. Perhaps even a government-run one that wanted to gather people.

He went back to his camp and to his surprise saw Ogras and Emily sit under a red canopy in a comfortable chair each, contentedly watching a movie. They obviously were successful in setting up the new Television, as it currently was showing a rom-com movie with an extension cable running through the illusion array, presumably toward the camper.

He wanted to kick the demon and make him do something more productive, but he also felt that it might be good for Emily with some company. The apocalypse obviously had toughened her up, but both her parents were killed just a week ago, and no one could simply shake that off.

"I am going to absorb some crystals before the next horde arrives, don't disturb me unless it is something important," Zac said as he looked over at the demon.

"No problem, I can charge up the energy storage of your tin can through that wire, so we won't need to disturb you," Ogras answered without taking his eyes off the TV.

Zac blanked out a second before he understood the demon meant the camper's battery and the extension cord.

"What are you doing?" Emily perked up as she looked over at him.

"I need to train and get stronger," Zac answered.

"Can I do it too?" she eagerly asked. Zac had noticed her hunger for power since they started traveling together, and was very much in favor of it.

"Not until you turn 16. Find Alyn later, she'll help you prepare. If you follow her instructions you will have better

prospects in the future,” Zac answered with a shake of his head.

“Oh the disgraced teacher will finally have a student again,” Ogras said with a pitying glance at Emily.

“Wait, what do you mean?” Zac asked with a start.

“She got fired because of her, uh, unusually strict training methods in our clan. She was mainly brought over here because she already had the language skill and people figured she would make a good slave driver,” Ogras said with a widening smile. “Otherwise what use would a teacher have during an invasion? Did you think we would go around opening a bunch of schools for you humans?”

The eyes of both Zac and Emily widened at this, and Zac’s image of the calm and proper lady clashed with the image of Alyn screaming on top of her lungs while whipping a bunch of slaves.

“Well... Don’t let her overdo it. Emily, stay strong,” he said as he entered his camp.

“Wai-“ the teenager tried to interject, but another shield superimposed over the illusion array. It was a **[F-Grade Small Scale Defensive Array]**, the cheapest and weakest defensive option in the town shop.

It wasn’t something Zac bought to protect himself, but rather a means to show the surroundings he didn’t want to be disturbed. It only cost 75 000 Nexus coin, and a random punch by him or Ogras would break it. It was, however, effective against a girl who still hadn’t started on the path of cultivation.

For the next four days he simply sat down and absorbed his **[E-Grade Nexus Crystals]**. He was able to absorb roughly 2 a day, and he already consumed two of them before. He left his 10th and last crystal for emergencies though. During the whole time he barely slept or ate, he just sat down and let the huge power wash over him.

He stood up and after a quick shower and dinner he opened up his quest panel.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (1/3) [1:03:22:34]

A bit over a day remained until the next wave started, and only the finishing touches were needed now. He removed his defensive array and walked out to the makeshift movie-canopy. During the four days it had gotten some upgrades, with walls that kept the glare out of the TV, and a rug and coffee table. It was however empty so he headed toward the town.

After asking around he learned Ogras was with Adran, and walked over. As the two saw Zac approach they nodded toward him.

“How are the preparations?”

“Everything is finished. This time we had time over to create a few siege weapons as well. They might be useful, and they can even be manned by the non-combat classes or your new citizens after some training. The only thing remaining is purchasing the aces with Nexus Coins,” Ogras answered. “I have taken the liberty of collecting three million Nexus Coins for the war effort. I mean five million.” He continued, correcting himself after a glare by Zac.

Zac nodded and after some discussion purchased a few defensive measures.

“How are the humans?” Zac asked Adran after that was done.

“The old people are working hard cultivating with Nexus Crystals. Their leader has even gained a decent speed at killing Barghest by now. He has been getting assistance though, of course,” the administrator answered.

“The youth are a bit more troublesome, but they’re getting there. Nothing is as effective in getting people in line as a few days of filling old latrines and digging new ones,” Adran continued with a small smile while Ogras openly snickered. “Oh and speaking of the last little human, here she’s coming”.

Zac turned around and saw Emily approach like a small thundercloud. Next to her a visibly irate Alea and Alyn were walking along. Zac sighed and stood up, and unhesitantly started to powerwalk away.

Chapter 103: The Second Horde

“Zac!” a few voices shouted after him. And he could only sigh and turn around.

Since he saw her last Emily had undergone a drastic transformation. She was properly cleaned and wore new clothes. Zac noted with some interest she had chosen the men’s style with the pants and leather armor rather than the dress-robos that the two demons by her side wore. Her messy hair also was turned into a pixie-cut instead of the uneven mess of a crazy person.

All three, especially the teenager, carried an angry energy as they approached him, and he could only helplessly shake his head.

“Hello, the three of you look lovely today,” he said, preemptively trying to avoid whatever trouble was coming his way. It was a trick that usually worked on Kenzie back in the day. Unfortunately, it seemed to have quite limited effect, as there was barely any change in expression on their faces.

“These two are crazy! I want to learn cultivation from you instead.” Emily angrily huffed.

“This child has a great talent for the elements, and would become a great mage, healer, or poison mistress,” Alyn interjected. “But she is very rambunctious and keeps demanding to learn how to use axes. It would be a waste of her talent.”

“And also very unladylike,” Alea added on.

“So we have been trying to correct her ways, but she is very stubborn,” Alyn said with a frown.

“So what do you want me to do?” Zac asked.

“Punish the child. Hanging naked on the town square for a few days should make her temper milder” Alea said.

“Don’t be absurd. She needs to get married in the future. Just a public whipping would do,” Alyn retorted with a slight frown.

“I told you, they are crazy! They have tortured me constantly since you left me with them. Let me train with you instead. You saw I learned quickly,” she said while glaring angrily at the two demons.

“How do you know what talent she has?” Zac curiously asked, ignoring the teenager for now.

“I had a few warriors contribute some of their Nexus Coins to buy a simple testing device from Calrin,” Alyn simply answered.

Zac was starting to understand why Ogras thought Alyn would make a good slave driver. He felt it wasn’t as easy as the warriors simply willingly gave away their money after risking their lives. He could only nod and focus on Emily.

“Why do you want to fight with axes? You should be happy that you have the option to become a mage. You can just blast the enemies from a distance,” Zac extorted the teenager.

“Poison isn’t a bad idea either. Have you heard about our contribution quest? Alea is on the third spot there with her poison attacks.”

When Alea heard the comment she smiled proudly and looked down at the teenager with a triumphant face, but she only rolled her eyes.

“But you are number one right? Much better than that stupid old hag? And you can blast enemies from the distance as well,” Emily said grumpily, drawing an angry glare from Alea.

“I’ve bled over every inch of my body the past months. There’s almost not a single part of my body that hasn’t been wounded and scarred from my battles. Fighting in melee range is to constantly put yourself in harm’s way. A single mistake and you’re dead. You should think long and hard before you decide to follow in my footsteps. There are innumerable paths

to power, and mine is just one. Try to focus on yourself, and think about what would suit you,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Why are you here anyway? I thought only Alyn was in charge of Emily’s education?” Zac asked of the poison mistress.

“When I heard about her talent I wanted to check her out. I noticed she’s also a bit ruthless and crazy, so I think she would make a good disciple of mine,” she said with a slight smile.

“Who’d be a disciple to you?” Emily shot back with a scathing glare.

“I can’t help you train at the moment. Listen To Alyn, she is far more knowledgeable about these things than I am. And think long and hard about your future path before deciding. The choices you make for your class and attributes in the future will impact your whole life,” Zac said as he started to walk away. He didn’t want to comment about the discipleship as that was something between the two of them and he didn’t want to butt in.

“Oh, and no hanging or whipping. She’s a student, not a slave,” he added as he moved away.

All three of them looked like they weren’t finished, but Zac used **[Loamwalker]** to move away. The rest of the day Zac simply relaxed and adjusted his state of mind. He watched a few movies and took a walk along the shore. Finally when the counter reached 1 hour left he walked over to the wall. Not long after Ogras and his four generals joined him.

As time passed more and more of the warriors arrived, and thirty minutes before the next horde arrived every combatant was at the ready. Adran was also there along with the humans, who nervously looked around. It was on Zac’s command they were brought here. They needed to see the reality of this new universe.

They thought they escaped calamity when they fled their island, and hoped to get back to normalcy now. But that was impossible, as their experience with the frenzied rats was only a small greeting gift from the System, and it would only get

worse. Unless they started to take things seriously the world would move forward without them.

Alyn and Emily also joined them on the wall. Emily wanted to walk over to Zac, but Alyn kept her close to the stairs leading down, together with the other non-combatants. They didn't know what would come from the next wave, and they needed to be able to quickly get down to safety if it was needed.

The time slowly crept forward, and everyone gazed upon the battlefield with a solemn expression. Some tried to spark a conversation to lighten the tension, but any talk quickly died out under the heavy atmosphere. The moment his counter went down to zero a huge blinding light appeared in the distance. The next second a large construct appeared, most closely resembling a hive or anthill.

It was looked to be almost a hundred meters tall and was somewhat shaped like a pyramid. The whole construct was a dark grey, almost turning black. There were also green lights covering the hive, almost making it seem like they were windows wrought out of emeralds. On the ground a few large entrances were visible.

The structure gave an oppressive feeling like the whole thing was a large lumbering beast.

“What do you think?” Zac asked Ogras who was standing next to him.

“Some sort of nest. It looks like this second horde is a bit different compared to the first. There are no pillars unless they are inside that thing. I'm not sure where we go from here. I get nothing when trying to use my identification skill on it,” Ogras answered with slightly furrowed brows before he increased his volume “Anyone recognizes it?”

Only frowns and shakes of heads and a few short answers followed. None of the demons knew what they were facing. The minutes passed and the unsettling feeling only grew larger as nothing happened.

“Should we go in? It doesn't feel like a good idea to just leave that thing alone. Who knows what's going on inside there,”

Zac asked with a frown.

“I sense something!” a voice suddenly shouted. It was one of the earth mages among the demons. He jumped down from the wall and placed his hands on the ground. “There are subtle vibrations in the ground. I think the things inside the nest are digging downward,” he said with a serious expression.

A few more demons jumped down, and they confirmed the suspicion. Something was going on inside that hive, but it was happening beneath the ground.

“We can’t let this go on. We need to head in,” Zac said as he jumped down the wall as well. “First group follow me!”

Twenty-five demons quickly jumped down behind Zac. They were a mixed group of both ranged, support, and melee classes. They shared the same shift as Zac during the fights with the wolf horde and were the demons Zac was most acquainted with apart from Ogras and Alea. They also had two earth mages in the mix, who would be able to help with the scouting.

They carefully approached the huge hive. It was quite far from the wall, and Zac noticed with a frown that it was outside the range of all his offensive arrays or fortifications. If they wanted to destroy this thing they would have to do it by hand. Perhaps they could construct siege engines that were more designed for structures compared to hordes of enemies.

When they were a few hundred meters away from the black nest one of the earth mages started and went down on the ground. Zac immediately stopped and glanced around carefully.

“They’ve stopped whatever they were doing underground,” the mage said.

In response the group immediately took out their weapons, unsure what would happen. Zac’s eyebrows suddenly rose in alarm as he stared at the large holes on the ground floor of the nest.

“Get ready!” he shouted as he took out a large rock from his pouch.

A huge stream of insectoid monsters was pouring out of the nest, heedlessly charging toward the group. Their colors matched the hive, a mix of black and green. They had large chitinous shells that covered their bodies, both their appendages and mandibles looked like sinister weapons.

There seemed to be three types of insects in the army. The most populous looked like a mix between an ant and a mantis. They had three pairs of legs with three joints much like normal ants, but they were as large as a pony. The front set of legs were sharp hooks, and it looked they were made for digging or fighting, rather than running. They could be regarded as the normal soldiers of the insect army.

If the first group could be considered eighty percent ant with some mantis peppered in, then the second group could be seen as mostly mantis. They were at least fifty percent larger compared to the normal insects, reaching over two meters height with their bodies, with their torso stretching upward. Their two front legs were huge sinister blades, looking extremely dangerous.

The last group of insects was very different compared to the rest. Their legs were shorter and their bodies were fat, almost bulbous. The other creepy crawlies were mostly black with some green details, but these ones were mostly green. They also had huge heads with oversized circular maws.

Zac immediately threw out three rocks, each targeting a different type of insect. He still preferred this type of test on new enemies.

The first rock slammed into the footsoldier, crushing its head and instantly killing it. The larger mantis-like being actually managed to react and tried cutting the incoming rock. However, the force in the throw was too strong, and the insect missed as the stone slammed into its chest. The shell of the insect actually didn't break as the stone cracked from the impact. The insect was thrown away and fell down twitching on the ground. If it wasn't dead it at least was dying from the impact.

The last insect exploded into a large pool of green goop that instantly started scorching the ground. Zac realized the last things actually were large walking vats of acid or poison with some shock. He didn't even have time to digest the information before the green acid-monsters spit out large balls of the green liquid at the demons.

“ACID! Target the green ones!” Zac shouted and moved out of the way from the incoming projectiles. A few defensive spells were erected as well to protect the group.

Feeling he had a good enough grasp of the beasts Zac charged up his skill and set out to decapitate some enemies.

Chapter 104: The War Council

“It looks like they are expanding their nest underground, moving downward. We believe they are digging toward the Nexus Vein,” one of the earth mages reported to the group who was sitting around a table.

Twelve hours had passed since the hive appeared, and they had made some discoveries. The ants were called [**Ayn Hivebeasts**] and the three types they encountered so far were called Ayn Worker, Ayn Guard, and the green acid shooters were actually called Ayn Vomitors.

After the initial clash they quickly learned that there was an enormous number of beasts inside the large structure, as they kept pouring out as they fought. But the moment they retreated, so did the Ants. But just a few minutes after Zac and the demons stopped their assault the digging was resumed according to the earth mages.

They were currently holding a war council while two regiments led by Ogras’ four generals were keeping the ants busy. They needed to figure out a strategy for this new horde, as their old one wouldn’t work. Most of their preparations were in vain as the new monsters didn’t seem interested in attacking the town. The wall stood unassaulted and the arrays couldn’t reach the hive due to the distance.

Zac almost felt that the System specifically chose this type of challenge since the last wave almost felt like a gift of experience and money rather than a challenge. Certainly, the last waves were tough, but never to the point of true desperation.

“That’s it then? We’ll head in and destroy it today,” Zac said with a frown.

The Nexus Vein was the lifeblood of his island. It created the crystals in the mine and the high concentration of Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere. Anything from cultivation to crafting to even farming would be far more efficient in this area. If he bought an island-wide gathering array in the future it would truly become a paradise. He couldn't risk his city's foundations just for the opportunity to farm some insects.

"Wait a bit," Ogras hastily interjected. "We also have concluded that during our attacks they are stopping their excavation-work to meet our attacks. We can simply farm them without risking the vein as long as we keep the attacks going, letting you keep your lead against the other humans," he added.

It was a fair point, but Zac had a feeling that it was more about the contribution points for the Fruit of Ascension than letting him gain levels. Besides, he held a commanding lead over the others as it was, and didn't really need to gain levels at the moment. He was fast approaching the first bottleneck at level 75.

Zac mainly needed to improve his Dao-insights at the moment. He already possessed a rare class, and his goal was to upgrade it into an E-Rank Epic class. His only options at the moment were Rare or Epic, as the rarity couldn't downgrade when reaching the next tiers. He already knew that his situation was pretty bad since the multi-verse was full of examples of geniuses whose cultivation journey got cut short since they couldn't upgrade their special classes.

Still, he didn't want to give up his advantages. Upgrading to a rare class wasn't the best option. He tread the path of the elite, spearheading the powerhouses of Earth. Since he was already locked into this path he would go all the way, and keep upgrading the rarity of the class. He knew that Early Stage Seeds were not enough for an Epic class, so it was time to upgrade his Daos. If that was at the expense of his lead in levels, so be it. He wouldn't limit his future achievements just to become the first person to reach E-Rank Class.

"Constantly attacking out in the open is different from defending on top of a wall. We will not be able to last as we

did during the wolf-hordes. Besides, we do not know whether the insects will grow stronger over time like the wolves did, and it is safe to nip the problem in the bud,” Zac said.

To be honest, safety concerns weren't the only reason he wanted to end this horde quickly. He just had a taste of freedom and adventure as he explored in search of his hometown. He was loath to spend the next four weeks slaughtering insects. He knew that the gain of nexus coins would be huge, but he would still net good income if he sent people down into the mines instead.

He was also even more anxious to get home after seeing the life of civilians in Fort Roger. Emily would have met a miserable fate unless he was there, and worry over his friends and family was starting to keep him up at night. He even had trouble focusing during meditation, as the intrusive 'what-ifs' kept popping up in his head.

“Three weeks. Let us fight and farm for three weeks, and after that we will invade the hive,” Ogras entreated.

“It's too long. You can have ten days. After that I'm heading in,” Zac flatly refused. That would leave him three weeks to travel the world before the final wave, twice what he had last time.

“Bah, you're throwing away a great opportunity,” Ogras muttered in discontent.

Zac only rolled his eyes at the demon. What they gained from the quest was already great, and they shouldn't get greedy. The longer they waited the more weird things could crop up.

“Did Calrin find any information about the beasts?” Zac asked as he changed the subject.

“He did manage to buy a short missive about the [**Ayr Hivebeasts**]. They are an extremely prolific species led by hive-queens. As long as they have enough cosmic energy the queens can almost indefinitely spawn soldiers. The stronger the queen the mightier warriors it can birth, and more types as well,” Adran answered. Since he wasn't part of the fighting force he tried to help the war efforts by gathering information.

“There are examples of the beasts’ insatiable expansion, completely infesting a planet if left alone. We believe that the threat will be over when we manage to kill the queen. After that no more beasts will spawn, and we can simply slowly exterminate the survivors. Killing the queen will likely mark this horde as completed as well,” he continued.

“How strong is the queen?” Zac asked.

“It should be E-Grade Class equivalent. It might also have a few bodyguards close to that in power for protection,” Adran answered.

“Okay, what does it look like, what are its powers?” Zac probed further.

“Actually, the large construct we see is not a structure, but the queen herself. The Ayr Hivebeasts live inside their queen’s body for the most part, and the queen slowly grows to accommodate a larger population. The digging we hear is the insects making room for her body expanding down into the ground,” Adran answered with a grimace.

Everyone’s eyebrows rose in surprise at this.

“How the hell do we kill something that large?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“Apparently it has a core somewhere inside. You need to get inside to its core-room and destroy it, and it will die. The exact details were unclear in the missive we obtained though,” Adran said with a sigh.

“Good job. See if you can find out anything else, as long as the information doesn’t become too expensive,” Zac said.

That the huge construct was an actual being didn’t change much in Zac’s opinion. They’d still farm for ten days, after which Zac would enter, and drag Ogras with him no matter if he was willing or not. Inside they would find the boss and kill or destroy it.

With that everything was settled, and Ogras immediately set out with a company of soldiers, loath to miss even a single Contribution Point. Zac stayed put since he would be needed to relieve Ogras when he ran out of steam so that they could

put continuous pressure on the insects. He really didn't want that huge queen-beast to get her hands on his Nexus Vein, so no expansion could be allowed. And who knew if the hive queen would have some strange mutation from getting too close to the vein.

As the days passed an advance-wall was erected. It was nowhere the size of the regular wall, but it would allow some protection while retreating. The craftsmen also refitted a few of the siege machines so that they would be able to attack the hive queen. However, the large boulders and bolts only bounced off the black structure without as much as leaving a mark.

Zac tried as well, and ran up to the structure with his movement skill and slammed into it with a Dao-Empowered **[Chop]**. It was effective, creating a large scar, but the response was horrifying. It was like the ants turned crazy and surged against the demons in a frenzy.

The mantis-things actually started throwing the Vomitors in retaliation, and as they sailed through the air they overcharged themselves much in the same way as the suicide attack the demons possessed. Zac was forced to expend most of his cosmic energy in a short time, furiously throwing out projectiles in order to clear the rabid waves. But he still got a few acid burns on his face and hands that would take time to heal, as most of the Vomitors were hurled in his direction.

Seeing that Zac's swing only made a small crack on the gigantic structure they knew that a siege wasn't really possible against this thing, and they'd have to enter the tunnels if they wanted to kill the queen.

On the seventh day Zac's fears were realized, as a new foe started emerging out of the hive along with its three siblings. It was called Ayn Titan and was a hulking insect at over three meters tall. Its shell was at least twice as thick as on the others, and it was impossible to penetrate for most of the demons.

They were forced to slowly whittle it down by first disabling its legs by attacking the joints, all while avoiding its terrifying smashes with its claw-like front arms. Since the thing was so

heavy its mobility was quite bad and if they fell down with broken legs they stayed down. After it was downed it seemed the simplest method to kill it was to just boil its head in a fireball.

If Zac or Ogras were present they could penetrate or crush their skulls instead. However, the time it took to kill the titans increased the pressure as the ants unceasingly kept pouring out of the hive. There were no breaks, no lulls, just constant unrelenting battle. The only reason they weren't overrun in just a day or two was the fact that the monsters were quite weak, and even the siege machines they brought had no trouble killing the footsoldiers.

The only thing strong about them was their carapaces' sturdiness, but that wouldn't impede the skilled warriors overly much. In the few cases that they were starting to get overrun Zac or Ogras would unleash their most powerful area attacks. Zac simply threw out his huge edges that created large swathes of death and destruction.

As for Ogras, he created a sea of shadows that moved across the battlefield, where dozens of spears unceasingly sprung up to kill everything around. It wasn't an attack that Zac had seen before, and he suspected that the demon made a breakthrough with either a skill or his Dao some time recently.

With his new skill the demon's killing speed was terrifying, and almost eclipsed Zac's own speed, which was doubly impressive since he no longer suffered from an energy shortage. Zac was shocked by the display of power, as he knew that the power of the demons was still limited by the System.

There were a few more who excelled at area battle such as Alea and Rivea, the pyromancer who learned the Seed of Tinder during the wolf waves. Her fire kept spreading among the ants and was particularly deadly to them. It simply stuck to their carapaces and slowly cooked the beasts, and from there spread to their brethren.

The windfall was so great that Zac relented and actually prolonged the farm-fest another day much to the delight of the

demons. Ogras was like a storm, grinding his contribution points at a furious pace.

Zac had thought that this kind of situation was something unique, but he was surprised to find out that most large forces in the multiverse kept zones and forests that were a bit like this, teeming with monsters. It provided their young and their soldiers with ample training and outlet for growth, and the clan didn't need to provide any salary as access to the farming zones were benefits enough to join the army. The elders of the clan took care of the evolved monsters, and immediately rooted out any beast that got too strong.

But all good things must end. The eleventh day approached, and the core warriors started to rest up and prepare their aces. Tomorrow they would assault the hive.

Chapter 106: The Descent

Zac was picking up speed as his descent continued through the black hole. He desperately tried to grab onto the wall as he fell but the surface was almost completely smooth. Seeing no alternative he grabbed [**Verun's Bite**] with both hands and stabbed forward while summoning a sharpness-imbued [**Chop**] at the maximum length he could maintain.

The cosmic energy edge cut into the wall, and Zac removed the Dao-empowerment as soon as it did. Luckily the walls inside the hive queen were quite a bit softer compared to the hardshell exterior. The harsh deceleration almost ripped the axe out of his hands, but he barely managed to hold on as he ripped a large scar along the wall while moving downward. Soon he stopped just as he saw some green light below.

Since his momentum was gone he took out one of his back-up axes from his pouch and stabbed into the wall with another cosmic edge. Like this, he climbed downward toward the exit. He initially thought about climbing up to find the others, but he soon discarded that thought. They should be down here somewhere as well, and going downward might be a better bet to find them.

Besides, their goal was to go further down to find the core room in any case. So Zac started using the fractal edges of his axes as ice picks as he slowly climbed down toward the exit, And as he saw what created the green glowing light his eyebrows rose.

It was a large pond of acid. If Zac hadn't stopped his decent he would have fallen right in, and even with his armor and Endurance he wasn't sure he'd survive the bath. As he hung close to the edge Zac was pondering on what to do. He could see that there was dry ground roughly ten meters away from the hole, but he doubted he could climb the ceiling all the way over there as his axes would just slide right out.

He took out his huge elongated axe from his pouch. It had accompanied him during many of the wolf waves when he wasn't able to freely use his skills, and by now it was mostly warped and dull. It wasn't really as useful lately since he didn't have to be as stingy with his cosmic energy anymore. Its total length was a bit over two meters, and it would make a decent measuring tool for the pond. Careful to hold it completely vertical he simply dropped it straight down.

The axe fell down and just as it was about to be completely submerged it stopped with a thud for a few seconds before it fell down into the pool completely. It looked like the depth was only roughly two meters. Even if it was shallower than he had dared hope, it was still enough to completely submerge him if he dropped down.

He didn't have any more time to ponder, as the edge he hung from with his axes suddenly cracked, and he fell down together with a large chunk of wall. He quickly threw out a bunch of non-essential tools and items from a pouch, such as his large table and chairs, and a few boulders he used for ranged battle. They smacked into the pond with a large splash, and Zac felt a burning sensation on his feet from the splashing acid.

He landed on a boulder that was rapidly sinking, and without hesitation used two of his standard axes as stilts with the help of **[Chop]** as he pushed down with elongated edges. He hoped that he would be able to jump over the pool like a pole vaulter, but the fractal energy edges broke almost immediately, dashing that hope.

Instead he kept throwing out rocks on the ground, gritting his teeth as the splashes hit his hands and face. Luckily the distance wasn't very long and after a few more boulders he was close to the edge of the acid ponds, so he leaped through the air. He sailed toward dry land as the boulders he stood on earlier quickly disintegrated.

He landed in a pile with a grunt, and quickly took out a rag to wipe the acid off his blistering feet with a grimace. After smearing some healing ointment on them he got up and looked around a bit stumped. He couldn't believe things turned out

that well. The blisters hurt but wouldn't leave any lasting damage, and he only lost some furniture and two axes in the escape.

As he surveyed the area he found himself in a cave that was roughly 30 by 30 meters. There was no other hole in the roof, meaning that the others couldn't have ended up here. Most of the room was the large pool of acid, and as Zac looked around it almost felt like a digestive system rather than some sort of trap. Perhaps the ant workers normally filled the room they entered earlier with whatever a hive queen ate, and it dropped down into what was essentially its stomachs.

There, unfortunately, were no visible exits in the room, and Zac was afraid that the acid could rise at any time judging by the markings on the walls. There was a clear line on the walls at roughly the height of his waist that indicated that the liquid at one point reached all the way there. He quickly walked to the wall and started tapping it.

After tapping for a while he heard a hollow sound roughly at the height of his head and started to carve the cave wall using his axe. Even though the walls weren't as hard as the exterior, he was still forced to use the Dao of Sharpness once again. He briefly wondered if a beast as large as the hive queen could feel him ripping a hole in what might just be its stomach, but he guessed that this couldn't even be considered a wound for something this size. In just a few minutes he carved a hole large enough to crawl through and found himself in a large tunnel.

The deserted tunnel looked completely organic, which was an unsettling change from the mostly rocky or chitinous appearance from earlier. The walls even looked like they were slowly pulsating to a heartbeat. He could only hope that the increasingly biological make of the wall meant he was getting closer to the core. He started walking along, ignoring the stinging pain from his burned feet, and since the tunnel was completely deserted he dared take out an F-Grade Nexus Crystal to recuperate his energy as he moved.

He was completely lost by this point and wasn't sure whether to try and complete his quest or try to look for his teammates.

Then again, he had no structured method to do either, so he chose to simply move forward and take things as they came. If he found Ogras and the others, great. If he found a core-looking room, he'd try and destroy it.

The power of the queen and her guards sounded daunting, but he made significant improvements since he fought the fiend wolf. He both had his new axe and the Seed of Sharpness, pushing his lethality to a completely new level. He also possessed another ace in the hole he remembered as he touched his right forearm with some anticipation.

After walking through the deserted tunnels for a bit he came to a fork. One of the paths was pretty much the same as the one he was currently walking. The other had a surprisingly low amount of cosmic energy. He unhesitantly walked toward the pathway with a higher amount of energy, but after a hundred meters stopped himself and backtracked.

Something was absorbing the cosmic energy in the other tunnel, and it might just be the queen. It should take huge amounts of energy to keep spewing out all these ants, even to just survive when you're this big. He couldn't even imagine the energy requirements for a humongous hive queen if Zac's own caloric intake increased by a few times since he evolved. That kind of requirement should be impossible to satiate unless it was through cosmic energy.

He held his axe at the ready as he silently crept into the tunnel. As he moved further the energy kept getting sparser, to the point that there almost was none left in the air. The feeling was extremely uncomfortable, almost like there was no air to breathe. It was the first time he felt the atmosphere to be like this since the integration, and he was surprised to see how reliant he'd become on cosmic energy.

Finally, he entered a huge cavern and what he saw made him stop in place and just gawk. It felt like a scene out of a horror movie, with an uncountable amount of monster pods. The whole cavern was filled to the brim with receptacles that shone with the same green light as the crystals embedded in the hive walls. They stood up on the floor leaving only thin pathways and were even affixed to the walls and the roof. Zac couldn't

be sure but it felt like there were tens of thousands of pods in the cavern.

Zac quickly entered a path and inspected the closest pods. Inside was an embryonic version of one of the worker ants that made up most of the armies. After walking through the path he quickly saw that all the pods were mostly the same, the only difference was the stage of growth of the ants. That meant that this likely was only one of many pod-rooms, and the more powerful types were created somewhere else.

He thought a second about destroying the whole cave, but that would take a crazy amount of effort going by how large the place was. It wouldn't make sense for him to completely expose himself when there likely were many more caverns just like this. His goal was to kill the queen, and if he did most of these pods should likely die out on their own.

He stealthily made his way forward toward the other end, but a sudden movement made him freeze. It was a shadow that flickered oddly beneath a pod. Zac frowned and moved toward it, which caused the shadow to actually move away. Zac realized what was going on and started following the flickering shadow until he reached a small path hidden behind a few pods.

Inside he saw Ogras, Alea, Janos, and Herod hiding at the entrance of a tunnel. They obviously met a similar situation as himself earlier, as their clothes were full of burned holes. Zac couldn't help to sneak a peek at Alea, and was rewarded with a pout and a teasing wink.

Herod was even worse off compared to the others with his whole arm singed to the point of pieces of flesh being missing. He was completely white with beads of sweat covering his face, and he was shivering as though in shock. His eyes were alert though, fearfully darting back and forth.

With a furrow Zac noticed that Rivea wasn't with them, but just as he was about to ask what was going on Ogras quickly signaled him to be quiet. The demon pointed to the walls, and for the first time he noticed something was different about the tunnels compared to those walked through earlier.

It wasn't the usual biotic walls anymore, but it rather looked like there were a multitude of cables, or veins, running along all the surface. The veins split up as they entered the large cavern, and Zac could see a thin line was attached to every pod.

Zac's heartbeat started to increase as he started to realize what was going on. He took out a piece of paper and wrote 'Queen?' as he pointed toward the other end of the small tunnel they hid in.

With a serious face Ogras nodded.

Chapter 107: Assault

Ogras picked out a crystal from his pouch and closed his eyes for a few seconds as he held it tightly. Next, he handed it over to Zac and indicated for him to pour some cosmic energy into it. As he did he suddenly heard Ogras voice in his head.

“This is a communication crystal. The other end of the tunnel is a hundred meters in. We believe it’s the core room of the Queen. There are four more things walking around in the room according to Herod, the smallest of them almost as heavy as the Titans judging by the vibrations caused when it’s walking. These things seem very vigilant, they started running around when we spoke earlier. We believe that they are the Royal Guards.

“Rivea is dead. We fell into a vat of acid and she didn’t make it. We found this place through Herod, and he also sensed your footsteps approaching. Everyone apparently has a unique vibration, and he recognized yours. I was planning on heading further into the tunnel to scout it out before we found you. Stay here and I’ll check things out.”

Zac opened his eyes and after mulling the information over a bit nodded his head toward Ogras, who melded into the shadows. As he waited for the demon to come back he properly looked over the teammates. Apart from Herod the other two looked mostly okay, though they both sported somber expressions.

Zac couldn’t help but agree the situation wasn’t ideal. When they made their plans before the assault, they had escape as an option. That was pretty much the only reason they managed to get Rivea and Herod to join, as they both were clearly unwilling to enter the belly of the beast.

They thought that while the structure was large, in a panicked rush where Zac and Ogras didn’t hold back they could be out

in a minute or two even if they were forced to mow through an army of ants. They didn't expect the inside to be this gigantic. Now that they also had fallen who knows how far down he wasn't even sure how to get out. Their backs really were against the wall.

Soon Ogras came back and took out another crystal. This one actually displayed a window, but different from the one he borrowed long ago with the information, this window was actually visible for everyone. Zac started looking at the pouch of the demon, wondering what other goodies he kept for himself in there. He already knew that the space inside should be huge since he could throw a whole fishing vessel into it without any problem.

Zac quickly refocused and studied the screen. It was a still image of a large cavern. The whole surface was riddled with tubes that emerged from various tunnels much like the one they were in. They covered the ground and the roof, leaving almost no space free. The tubes converged in the middle of the cave and were latched to a huge green crystal.

Zac had never seen a core of a monster before, but if that wasn't it then he'd be extremely surprised. The core was guarded by four monstrous ants as Ogras already explained, and they each covered a direction. Interestingly enough they all looked somewhat different from each other.

Two of them looked like supercharged versions of the Mantis and Titan respectively. The titan was the closest to their tunnel and was a huge hulking thing much larger than an elephant. One of its arms was a gigantic shield, and the other looked like a large mallet. Distinctively from the normal ants this thing actually had at least ten pairs of short legs. Perhaps only three pairs wouldn't be able to carry its weight.

The mantis-looking ant had long serrated blades for front arms, and its long and graceful build seemed built for speed. It was nowhere as large as the hulking centipede-ant, but still larger than the normal Titans.

The other two Royal Guards were a bit different from any ants they'd seen so far. One of them seemed barely mobile, as it

almost exclusively consisted of a head. It did have a body, but it looked small and almost shriveled, and Zac didn't understand how the small frame could keep the head floating, as the head alone was as large as the mantis guard.

The size wasn't the only odd thing about the head, as it also had a great number of eyes. The one in its forehead was enormous, and Zac guessed that it was at least as large as himself. The other eyes were generally placed along the main eye, but some seemed to be looking in different directions. He felt it was lucky that Ogras was the one doing recon, as this thing would probably have noticed himself even if he made no sound.

The last guard was mostly hidden behind the crystal, but Zac felt that it almost looked like a spider rather than an ant. It was comprised of a large bulbous torso, with long legs sticking out from it. He couldn't see any head though and had no real idea of how it looked.

Ogras made a motion toward Zac and with a start he handed over the communication crystal. Ogras once again closed his eyes for a few seconds and then handed it over to Zac.

“The green crystal obviously is the core. I say we try an ambush where we destroy the crystal before the guards can react. Zac and I both blast it with the strongest strike we can instantly summon. Me from left, and Zac from the right. We'll bypass that huge bugger by both sides. Alea and Janos try to delay the guard's reaction time as much as possible. Herod, stay in the tunnels, try to sense whether reinforcements arrive.

“We stay silent until the first attack is finished, and depending on the outcome we take it from there. Hopefully, the attack will destroy the core, and we can choose whether to kill the guards as well or flee. Each of them should net quite a bit of Contribution points, so we should kill them if possible”

“We only have one shot of this, nod if you agree and are ready, then hand the crystal to the next person,” Ogras voice echoed inside Zac's head.

Zac thought it over as he looked at the still displaying image of the core room for a few seconds. The huge tank-ant was the

one closest to their tunnel. The plan meant that Zac would go to the right of it, which would place him between the tank and the large-headed one, whereas Ogras would rush in next to the sword-wielding ant. He mulled it over and felt that it was a decent proposal.

Ogras was more suited to dodging quick swings from a sword than Zac was with the help of his Dao and Class. Zac himself was pretty nimble nowadays with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but it was nothing compared to the demon and his shadow dancing. The large head was likely some sort of mage if he had to guess, and between his huge endurance and defensive option on his armor he should be able to withstand at least one blast without problem before he reached the crystal.

All four of those things looked quite dangerous, but he was already mentally prepared for a tough fight. He nodded and passed the crystal to Alea. After a while, everyone had listened to the instructions and agreed with the plan. They slowly made their way forward until they were just ten meters away from the exit into the core room.

Everyone steadied their breaths for a few seconds before Zac and Ogras nodded at each other. Ogras already held his black spear and Zac was tightly gripping **[Verun's Bite]**. Ogras started blending into the shadows as he speedily moved forward, and Zac unhesitantly activated his movement skill and moved toward the exit as well.

Footsteps behind them told that the others were following in tow, but Zac had no time to think about that.

The tunnel exit was two meters above the ground, and Zac immediately dropped to the floor and started rapidly moving forward. The Royal guards were obviously alert as a deep penetrating screech erupted from the large one that was the closest. The huge armored centi-ant felt even larger as Zac saw it in person, towering even higher than the Fiend wolf.

The Royal Guard immediately started moving its throng of small chubby legs as it rushed toward him, as it seemed it didn't notice Ogras in his shadows. Zac kept infusing cosmic energy into his feet and luckily his skill worked inside the hive

queen as well, even though he was technically standing on a body part of a supersized insect rather than the ground. He quickly moved forward through the huge cave, and as he did a blazing cacophony of colors and sounds erupted above him, pushing like a wave toward the guard.

It was Janos who clearly held nothing back as he pushed out a blanket of distraction. A sweet smell in the air that almost made Zac giddy was a sign that Alea had released something that added to the confusion air as well. Suddenly a huge pressure slammed into Zac as he ran, and he almost stumbled and fell. A quick glance showed that all the numerous eyes of the gigantic head ant were glaring at him.

The pressure wasn't physical, but rather a mental pressure. Only the stare made him feel like he was carrying a mountain, but he could also see that the eyes were starting to shine with a green luster. Luckily the crystal was close, and he pushed an extreme amount of cosmic energy into his legs. He pushed away and shot like a cannon toward the core. From the moment he exited the tunnel until now only a bit more than a second had passed, and the huge guards barely had time to start their attacks.

Zac charged up a five-meter edge with **[Chop]** and flooded the fractal edge with the Dao of Heaviness since he wanted the crystal to crack. Ideally, he'd have wanted to use both his offensive Daos, but he still couldn't infuse both of them into a single strike yet.

The large edge slammed into the crystal with the force of a runaway train, as the growls from the teeth on his axe menacingly echoed in the cave. Ogras materialized at the other side almost at the same time, and with a furious stab slammed the spear straight into the other side of the crystal. As he did a beam of darkness erupted from the spear and also hit the target like a laser.

A crackling sound was heard, but Zacs eyebrows rose when he saw that the crystal was completely undamaged. The crackling sound came from the huge tank, who had gotten two wounds on its torso as it stumbled and almost fell.

“SHIT! Life-bound protection! The core is shielded with the life-force of the guards, we need to kill at least the large fucker before we can damage it,” Ogras screamed as he quickly distanced himself from the crystal as the mantis-guard was rapidly approaching.

Zac was about to do the same, but a terrifying force slammed into his back and shot him forward straight toward the descending scythe of the mantis guard.

Chapter 108: Fighting the Royals

Zac frantically lifted his axe to meet the incoming swing, and with tremendous power the two weapons clashed. Since Zac was airborne he had no real force behind the swing and was ruthlessly slammed into the ground, creating a small crater and ruining any tubing that covered the area.

Zac spat out some blood but quickly scrambled to his feet even though he felt like every bone in his body broke from the impact. Another swing was already upon him, but this time he dodged with his movement skill and moved under large guard. He didn't hold back and infused a **[Chop]** with the seed of Sharpness, aiming to tear a large gash all along its belly.

The mantis' speed wasn't a joke though, as it almost teleported away from the swing. But the velocity of Zac's swing wasn't anything to scoff at either, and with a roar one of the insect's legs was lopped off, causing a torrent of green blood to pour out from the guard. It screeched in anger and backed away a few steps, using one of its sword arms as a crutch to keep itself stable.

The brief respite let Zac take a glance around. The huge tank-looking thing was still occupied by the combined distraction of Alea and Janos, and Ogras was fighting the fourth herald that truly looked a bit like a spider, apart from its head that reminded him of a Vomitor.

But instead of acid, small pitch-black ants were pouring out of its mouth, looking absolutely horrifying. Tens of lances were erupting out from the shadows between the tubes on the ground to stab the spider-looking guard and its spawn, but the small things seemed almost endless.

The guard was also conjuring netting toward Ogras, but the nimble demon was deftly dodging any attempt to catch him. Zac felt that Ogras could handle himself for now, which left two of the guards for him. Before he could decide which one to attack next he realized that they were trapped inside.

The tunnels with the tubes were all closed, not even providing enough space for at hand to push through. Blood was streaming out of the exit they used earlier, and Zac realized that Herod was crushed to death. The only upside to the situation was that it hopefully meant that they wouldn't have to handle a horde of small ants as well.

Two elite warriors of his demon army were dead in under an hour, and Zac was reminded of the harsh reality of this new world. Not even powerhouses were safe. A quick glance at the mantis showed that it still was a bit distracted from its missing leg, and its lethality was likely impacted. It clearly was focused on speed and offense, but missing a leg would take away much of the danger.

Zac's eyes turned to the final guard and saw that its eyes were glowing again. He didn't know what kind of skill it used to hit him last time, but it hurt quite bad and he was in no mood to take another one of those shockwaves. Besides, if it hit Alea of Janos he wasn't sure whether they'd be able to keep fighting.

He unhesitantly charged up a [**Chop**] and infused it with the Dao of Sharpness as well, giving the fractal blade a silver sheen. Without any break he sent the five-meter edge right toward the main eye of the large-headed royal guard. But as the edged ripped through the air it suddenly changed color and turned into the normal pale blue.

At the same time Zac felt a heavy atmosphere descend upon the cave, like another type of mental pressure. It was as though he had lost one of his senses, but not one of the normal five. The fractal blade kept moving toward the large eye through, but the eyes blazed into light for an instant, and the attack was smashed into smithereens.

Zac planned on sending a stream of blades toward the eye, but to his shock noticed that he wasn't able to infuse the skill with

his Dao anymore. The mental pressure was persistent, and it somehow blocked him from empowering his skills. He quickly looked around and saw that the core of the hive-queen was shining in a brighter light compared to before, emitting a huge amount of energy. It appeared the queen was somewhat sentient and helped her guards from the sidelines.

“My Dao is Blocked!” Alea shouted, telling Zac that he wasn’t the only one affected.

He grit his teeth and used [**Loamwalker**] toward the large-headed mage. He might not be able to use his Dao, but skills were still possible to use. He ran around the huge tank-monster who was wildly wailing its thick arms around, trying to hit whatever was blocking its sight. But Janos and Alea simply kept a safe distance, and mainly kept their eyes on the mantis and the eye-monster.

With his speed, he was upon the large-headed guard in no time and felt that he was almost physically punched by just the eye’s glare. He didn’t understand whether it was some sort of mental pressure or actual air-pressure, but no matter how he struggled he couldn’t move the last meter to reach it. As all the eyes stared at him he was even starting to get pushed away, no matter how much he strained his muscles.

Two huge spears slammed into the side of the large-headed guard, eliciting an enraged screech, even though they barely seemed to penetrate the hard shell. Many eyes quickly swiveled toward Ogras, and Zac temporarily felt the pressure disappear. He didn’t hesitate and with a roar pushed himself right onto the head of the beast, wildly swinging [**Verun’s Bite**] into the large central eye.

A quick glance toward Ogras showed that he was currently beset by both the mantis and the spider, and the attack on the large-headed one put him in dire straits. The mantis was swinging down one of its swords on him, and he was receding into the shadows to dodge. However, the blade somehow pulled him out from safety, and tore a large gash over his chest, blood freely pouring in all directions.

Zac wanted to help out, but he first needed to finish off this one. He took a deep breath and actually pushed himself into the large eye, frenziedly swinging his axe around. The ant was spasming and pushing all around, waves of energy flying in all directions. Zac didn't let up though and kept hacking further into the head until a huge surge of cosmic energy told him his work was done.

He was completely covered in brain and eye goop by now but had no time to clean up. He rushed toward Ogras who was in big trouble at the moment. He was desperately dodging the nets from the spider and the sword swings from the mantis. There were also three small pitch-black ants latched onto his body, and he seemed to be trying to get them off.

Zac rushed toward the mantis and was about to commence an attack when a deluge of small spiders started skittling toward him.

“Don't let them touch you!” Ogras wheezed out, but it was too late.

Two of them instantly latched onto Zac's legs, and it felt like he suddenly was in a gravity array. The spiders were emanating a gravity field in some way, and their effect seemed to be stacking. He tried to rip them off while dodging the other small spiders who ran toward him, but it was to no avail. It was as though they were fused to his leg, and he was unable to remove them with force.

“They are stuck, I think we need to kill the spider to get them off!” Ogras shouted as another sword swing was descending on him.

The demon grit his teeth and a blue sheen enveloped him from a necklace. The sword smashed into the shield, and Zac almost tumbled away from the shockwave the strike created. Luckily it cleared most of the small spiders from the area, as they were blown away from the force. The blue force field was the type of shield that returned the force back to the attacker, as cracks appeared on the arm of the guard and it stumbled back from the recoil.

“Now!” Ogras shouted as shadows were starting to gather around him.

Zac activated his movement skill and sped toward the mantis. With the two spiders attached to his legs it felt like he was slogging through waist-deep water, but he could only endure and push through. He appeared next to the hurt mantis and started swinging towards the insect’s side with a **[Chop]**.

The first swing was intercepted by the sword-arm of the mantis, but the huge force of Zac actually destroyed it. It was already cracked by the recoil of the shield, and Zac’s power did the rest. Now the mantis only had four legs remaining, and it was forced to choose whether to stand up or attack, as it needed to use its second sword to maintain balance.

It quickly made its choice as it swung its sword toward Zac while it was tipping over. The air was rippling with power from the swing, as it clearly pushed all its remaining energy into it. Shadowspears rose up to meet the falling body and pushed into its torso using the momentum to its advantage. It screeched frenziedly but completed the swing.

Initially Zac was intending to dodge it, but unknowingly another two spiders had attached themselves to him, making him almost keel over. The Dao was also still blocked, and he couldn’t use Seed of Trees to increase his resilience. He could only activate his armor, and a green shield enveloped him. The sword of the mantis slammed into the shield, and Zac was launched like a rocket into the wall.

However, just as he was readying himself for a follow-up he felt another stream of cosmic energy, this one quite a bit smaller compared to the last. It looked like Ogras took the main contribution from the kill. That left just the tank and the spider alive. Unfortunately, Janos and Alea were clearly struggling by this point, even though less than a minute had passed since the start of the fight. Alea was carrying a deathly pale Janos on her back as she dodged the huge monstrosity.

“Janos is out of cosmic energy, hurry!” the demoness shouted as she scrambled away from the ant.

Each slam from its huge arms created tremors in the ground as it tried to crush the two into meat-paste. It looked truly irate from being confused for a minute from illusions and hallucinogenic poison, only to wake up to two of the royal guards dead.

“We need to take out the spider first. If Alea gets a gravity ant on her both of them will die,” Ogras said, and Zac could only grit his teeth and agree.

The spider was clearly focusing on entrapment, spawning both the gravity-minions and shooting out waves and waves of thread that was starting to turn a large part of the cavern into a sticky trap. However, both of the offensive guards were dead, and its own lethality wasn't too high unless it managed to stack enough spiders onto someone, simply crushing them from the weight.

When there were no more interruptions from the other guards Ogras had no trouble avoiding both the spiders and the sticky webs, and gracefully moved toward the large body of the guard. It screeched in alarm but the huge armored guard actually ignored it, intent on killing the two pests next to it.

Zac didn't have the nimbleness of the demon and could only do a more simple approach. He launched a large blade that flew toward the head of the spider, ripping any webs or spiders into pieces that were in the way. The attack essentially created a path for him, and he quickly moved through the passage with his movement skill. It took less than ten seconds for the two to finish off the third royal guard.

Zac and Ogras were breathing heavily, but they couldn't stop yet. Ogras was still bleeding from his wounds as well, but he somehow was reducing the blood loss with the help of shadows that tightly twisted around his torso. Zac's whole body was hurting from being slammed by various attacks and shockwaves, but he still got on his feet with a sigh and started charging toward the fourth royal guard.

There was still one to go.

Chapter 109: The final push

Alea was in dire straits, dodging and movement weren't her strong suits, and she was further impeded by carrying Janos around. The mage was weakly trying to confuse the last royal guard with illusions after having absorbed enough energy from a Nexus Crystal, but it was as though the huge armored ant was locked onto them.

Zac saw with some surprise that the cracks that appeared when both he and Ogras assaulted the crystal were already closed up, making the chitinous armor look as good as new.

"He has regenerated the damage already," Zac said, and Ogras only nodded in response.

Zac sighed and readied his axe, but Ogras held up his hand.

"What?" Zac asked, anxious to help Alea and Janos out.

"When we kill this big guy all the Royal Guards will be dead and we'll be able to attack the Queen's Core. But we don't know if the Hive Queen will be able to unleash some sort last desperate attack when the guards are down and the shield is removed. The queen is a true E-Ranked being, while the guards only seem to be elite F-Grade beings on the cusp of evolving," Ogras said while looking over his wound.

"We should instantly destroy the crystal the second the last guard dies to avoid any unexpected things. If I kill this big fucker, do you have a finisher to use against the crystal?" the demon continued.

Zac thought it sounded like a good idea, and after some hesitation nodded.

"I need ten seconds of time to charge the attack," Zac said. Actually, he barely needed half that, but the attack he was about to unleash was his current ace in the hole and he didn't want to give out its details. It put Alea and Janos in danger for

an additional five seconds, but he could only make it up to them later.

Ogras nodded and readjusted the grip of his spear.

“Start charging,” the demon said as shadows were starting to gather around him and his eyes turned completely black. Shadows were soon covering every inch of his body, turning him into a being of darkness. Ogras started emanating a sinister pressure that gave even Zac a hair-raising feeling. Whatever the demon was doing was something Zac had never seen before, and it was likely his strongest attack.

Zac didn't hesitate and started pouring huge amounts of cosmic energy into his right forearm. It was time to unleash **[Nature's Punishment]**. The eleven days of mindless killing was more than enough to finish his quest to decapitate 10 000 enemies. Luckily the System considered his kills solo battle even though he was part of the demon army, as long as he was fully responsible for the kills of the insects.

The fractal on his arm was like a bottomless hole, and after seven seconds he already had poured 80% of his remaining cosmic energy into it.

“Get ready,” Ogras hissed in a raspy voice, currently looking like a true denizen of darkness. Two ephemeral black wings had sprouted on his back, softly waving back and forth, each reaching over three meters in length. The spear in his hand was throbbing like it possessed a heart, and as the last seconds passed the heartbeat quickened to a frenzied thumping.

Just before ten seconds passed Ogras punched off from the ground, a wave of darkness flooding out from him. He turned into a large black beam that shot straight toward the chest of the last Royal Guard.

There was no impact and no sound from the clash.

Suddenly there simply was a hole spanning three meters in the last guard's chest, going straight through the beast. The guard's head was only attached to its body with a small string, which broke and fell down onto the floor with a thud where

Ogras appeared once again. He stabbed a four-meter long lance of darkness into the head to make sure it was dead.

Zac didn't hesitate and put [**Verun's Bite**] into his bag. He pushed his hand forward in a grasping motion as though he was trying to grasp the huge crystal from a distance. It felt like he was trying to push through solid matter with his arm, but he only roared and pushed forward with his arm as he poured the last of his energy into the fractal.

With a large dissonant sound a huge crack appeared in the air, as a gigantic rough brown hand emerged out of nowhere. It was quickly evident that the hand was not of a humanoid, at least not one of flesh and blood, as the hand was wrought from tree and roots.

The fingers didn't have any nails, and only got thinner and ended in sharp spikes. Its size was huge, each finger being roughly five meters long, and if one looked closely one could actually see that many of the roots formed what looked like fractals all across the limb.

The wooden hand mirrored the movement of Zac's hand, grasping toward the crystal. The translucent shield that earlier was somewhat visible around it just gave a bright flash before it winked out of existence, showing that the protective layer that stopped them earlier was gone.

The Core wouldn't simply lay down and give up, as it started to emanate an even greater pressure from before as its green light turned painfully bright. The energy emitted was so great that Zac was starting to get pushed back even though he stood almost fifty meters away, but [**Nature's Punishment**] kept moving forward. As the wooden hand pushed toward the crystal it started smoking and steaming due to the light. It looked like the light from the core was burning it, and simultaneously Zac's hand started to blister as well.

Zac only grunted and pushed his hand forward, and the enormous hand gripped the Core like a vise and squeezed. A weird screeching echoed throughout the cavern and the whole structure started to shake, while the large hand actually caught a green fire. However, the power in the hand was enormous,

and cracks quickly started to appear on the crystal until it completely crumbled with a huge explosion.

The hand dissipated as an enormous shockwave slammed Zac and his party into the wall of the core room, the force almost enough to knock him unconscious. He shook his head, dizzy from the impact, and looked around. His whole body felt broken and a stinging pain throbbed from his right arm. When he looked down at it he saw that it was completely scalded, looking like he had put his arm into boiling water.

The **[Nature's Punishment]** worked out really well, apart from his blistering hand. The Core gave out a force that kept even Zac away unable to approach, but it managed to push forward without any problem. It was a shame that the Core somehow was able to obscure the Dao from him as they fought since Zac had wanted to try the skill with its full power.

He was pretty sure that the attack would be strengthened with the Seed of Trees since the hand was made of wood and roots. Perhaps the attack would be even stronger, or perhaps the hand would have been more resilient, and he wouldn't have ended up with a burned hand.

At least he gained another level from the fight, as a huge surge of cosmic energy entered him the moment the Core shattered, a far larger amount compared to when he killed the fiend wolf. That was the third level he gained during the ant waves.

It wasn't the same speed he had during the last waves, but it was still apparently an enormous speed according to Ogras. The others on top of the ladder hadn't leveled at all, or maybe gained one level during the same period. He was currently level 54 while Salvation was on the second spot with level 43.

Ten levels might not seem like a lot, but Zac knew the horrifying amount of wolves and ants he killed to bridge that gap. It would probably take months for the guy or girl to reach Zac's stage, and by then who knew what level Zac would be. He put those things aside and took stock of his surroundings.

The others were in bad shape as well. Ogras was out of his shadow-form and coughed some blood as he tried to get back on his feet. Alea and Janos were lying unconscious, blood

dripping out of their ears and mouths. One of Janos' legs was in a weird angle as well, clearly broken.

Zac sat up with a few coughs while he fished out his last E-Grade nexus crystal and started absorbing. He only managed to absorb a smidgeon before he was interrupted though. The whole cavern was shaking ominously, some small cracks already starting to appear on the walls.

He hastily got to his feet with a grunt and stumbled to Janos and Alea, and flung them over his shoulders. He was only running on fumes at the moment, but with his attributes it was no real difficulty carrying two people.

“What’s going on?” Zac croaked at Ogras who finally had got to his feet.

“It feels like the hidden space is cracking, we need to get out of here NOW. We don’t know what parts will remain and what parts will be sucked into oblivion,” Ogras answered while he popped a healing pill into his mouth.

Luckily the tunnels they entered through once again were opened with the hive queen’s death, and they scurried out through one of them. The shaking started to get worse, and there were even cracks in space itself appearing, making the air look like a broken mirror. The two didn’t dare go near any of those widening rifts, afraid to be thrown into the void.

They encountered some ants during the mad dash out, but they were completely immobile, blankly standing still unaware of the surroundings. The two simply ignored them and kept going, the greedy demon not even contemplating stopping to kill the free targets. Ogras usually was in charge of deciding the path, but when he found no clues what to do they simply trusted Zac’s Luck stat, letting him choose at random.

As they ran the cracks in space only got wider and wider until they were starting to get afraid they might not make it out in time. Luckily they finally felt the wind and fresh air in the distance, and reinvigorated they increased their speed. As they turned a corner they were met with the light of the outside, and heedlessly ran out.

The duo stumbled out of the tunnels next to each other, overlooking a vast field of dead ants and panting demons. To Zac surprise, he also saw Sap Trang among the fighters, bloodied but alive. Ilvere and Namys came running up to them and took care of the two unconscious generals, with Namys throwing Zac a baleful glare after seeing Ogras' state.

Finally safe Zac opened up his quest screen.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, Town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3)
[20:02:32:25]

The second part was completed, though the huge carcass of the hive queen remained. The system never teleported away the corpses of the wolves, so Zac guessed that they would have to deal with the huge hive somehow. That would have to wait until a bit until later though, as Zac was completely spent. Besides, entering that thing right now was to toy with death.

Zac was in no mood to help out with the cleanup and slowly started making his way back to his camp. He had already eaten a healing pill, but his arm was still hurting quite badly.

“Good work, young man,” a voice said from his side, and Zac looked up to see Mr. Trang standing some distance.

He was currently using a spear to make sure that the insects on the ground were actually dead. Zac guessed that the experience would be a pretty decent boost if the old fisherman found some live ones still around. Zac didn't have the energy to chat with the old man and only nodded at him as he continued on.

Zac made his way past the wall and the small town and soon found himself in the comfortable stillness of his camp. There were very few who dared to approach this area without invitation, giving it a stillness. But lately, this stillness was starting to get interrupted more and more.

“You're the Super Brother-Man, aren't you?” a voice came from the movie-viewing canopy. It was Emily who was

watching a comedy series with a blank face.
Zac sighed and sat down next to her.

Chapter 110: Exploration

“Why do you say that?” Zac simply asked, taking out a piece of pre-grilled meat from his pouch.

“I have been going over things since you started fighting those insects. There are many things that don’t make sense. You’re so strong. Like crazy strong. I have never seen or heard anything like it while I traveled with mom and dad,” she answered as she stared at him.

“And while you fought like a madman the Super Brother-Man gained two levels, and a third while you were inside fighting the boss,” Emily continued.

Zac said nothing and only continued eating, tired in both body and mind.

“Besides, these demons are weird. They know way too much. Not even the cultivators in the cities know many of the things Alyn explained. And they’re way stronger than normal humans. They’re not a race that got newly integrated like us. I think you have captured them from an incursion or something,”

“Noone can capture this man, little brat,” a voice said from behind as Ogras materialized from the shadows. “We simply came to an agreement with Zac and ended the incursion.”

“Whatever,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Zac asked as he turned back to the demon. He didn’t bother trying to refute the demon who essentially admitted to being a foreign invader. It was their problem after all, not Zac’s.

“I am here to tell you that I’m buying the fruit and will be in seclusion for a while,” Ogras answered. Clearly the healing pills that he ate earlier were quite good since the wound on his chest was largely healed.

“Ok. I might be heading out again soon just so you know. Take care of things if I’m gone after your seclusion is finished. If you think it will take a longer while then inform Alea and the others,” Zac answered.

Ogras only nodded and disappeared with the shadows.

“It’s true isn’t it?”

“...Yes,” Zac simply said. “Do the other humans know?”

“Maybe not those idiots with Megan, they’re too scared to think straight. But I think that old grampa knows,” Emily said with a pout.

No one said anything, but as the silence stretched on Emily’s eyes reddened and two streams of tears started falling down her face. She quickly wiped them as Zac ignored his weary body while getting on his feet, and walked over to Emily. He didn’t say anything, but only patted her head.

“I was really worried,” Emily said with a small voice.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Zac sighed.

He sat down next to her as she kept blankly watching the television. He tried to stay up but between the soft chair and finally being able to relax he soon fell into a deep slumber.

He woke up some time later and found that Emily wasn’t around anymore. There was a package on the coffee table with some bread and meat. The farmers had actually started up some temporary fields within the wall to provide the army with some other food apart from meat, and it looked like it finally had started to pay dividends. Zac was amazed at the speed of the growth of the produce, and couldn’t wait to set up proper farms as soon as the waves were dealt with.

He had been afraid that the apocalypse would bring with it a lack of food and drink, but it obviously wasn’t the case. The beasts were getting more numerous, and farming was getting more efficient. No one should starve to death as long as they controlled some land. Besides, as long as people had access to a System-run shop, they could feed a family for just 10 Nexus Coin a day.

Zac sighed and opened up his status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

54

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Strength

279

Dexterity

140

Endurance

186

Vitality

113

Intelligence

69

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

21 675 103

Fighting the ant wave the past eleven days gave him ten million Nexus Coins, covering the cost of building the Teleportation Array earlier. It hadn't given any titles or Dao upgrades either, apart from finishing the quest for his new attack skill. He was very curious about how his new skill would improve when the skill got stronger in the future.

[Nature's Punishment - Proficiency: Early. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.]

At early proficiency a huge hand emerged out of the void. He wasn't sure whether he was summoning a living being, or whether the hand just was a copy of his own. Perhaps as he and the skill got stronger he would be able to summon a huge avatar that could fight in his stead.

He put one point in Strength and two points in Endurance and closed the window. With his Race boost he wouldn't have to worry about attribute caps for a long while, and now that his other stats were in order he felt he could focus more on his main one once again.

He ate the food left for him by either Alea or Emily and got up and headed to the town. He met a few demons who nodded in respect to him as he walked, and gave a simple nod back. His

reputation kept increasing among the former invaders as his achievements increased.

As he entered the town he saw Megan and another tourist scurry about, each carrying a hoe. It looked like they were on farm-duty today. They saw Zac's approach but after a brief hesitation turned their eyes down and kept moving.

The humans had been horrified when they were taken to the battlefield. Zac's intention was to let them see the reality of the new world and made a few warriors escort them to the advance wall while he battled during the fourth day. The sight of a battalion of demons fighting tooth and nail against a horde of mutated ants made them realize that their trials and tribulations on the last island were nothing compared to what they were witnessing.

Since then they never said anything about fighting or getting stronger and stuck to their daily tasks instead. A few started working on the temporary farms and others helping with cooking and other tasks around the village. Zac was a bit disappointed but he also knew that not everyone could become a warrior in this new reality.

The only one from the group of twelve who still wanted a combat class was Sap Trang. Unfortunately for him he was just too far behind in power at the moment, so he couldn't really partake in the grind fest of the monster hordes. At least it looked like he managed to get some kills in at the end of the siege, which should have been quite a boost since each of the ants gave as much cosmic energy as a couple of Barghest.

Zac found Ilvere sitting under a canopy playing an unfamiliar instrument close to the larger tent where they usually held their war meetings. It was a stringed instrument that reminded Zac a bit of Guqin, though the notes generated from the crystalline strings sounded closer to a violin. It was an odd sight, seeing the burly warrior playing such a delicate instrument.

"The triumphant Lord returns," the warrior said as he stopped playing.

“Did you hear about Ogras’ seclusion? And what are you doing?” Zac asked after greeting the general with a nod.

“Yes, he will likely be gone for some time,” Ilvere answered. “I’m simply relaxing. It’s important to properly rest body and mind after an intense battle. Sometimes the tranquility after the battle can give as much or even more insight than the fight itself.”

Zac nodded, as it made sense. People couldn’t always have a breakthrough in the middle of battle, even though it squeezed out their potential. Sometimes some reflection afterward was all that was needed to take the final step in pushing through a boundary.

“How was the fight yesterday?” Zac asked.

“Four casualties. With Rivea and Herod it makes six, the worst day since the hordes started,” he answered with a sigh.

Zac could only nod, feeling a bit bitter. His army was continuously shrinking. When the wolf hordes started roughly two hundred warriors manned the wall, and today only 160 remained. Twenty percent of his army had died during the last forty days. Of course, some were killed by Ogras and Namys, but the majority died in battle.

Zac had been quite despondent in the beginning losing one warrior after another, but he was starting to get used to it. People dying while trying to get stronger was the most normal thing in the multi-verse, and no one held any real regrets over it. To cultivate was to defy death. Some did it for the increase in longevity, others for power and wealth. But what all had in common was the knowledge that any day might be their last.

“I plan on sending out expeditions to map the surrounding islands. Please assemble four teams. The goal is reconnaissance, but at least one competent fighter in each team. The team members will be compensated in crystals or Nexus Coins,” Zac said.

“You should know that none of us know anything about sailing or naval warfare. There aren’t any oceans on our home planet,” Ilvere said as he rose to his feet to get to work.

“I know, I will send one of the sailors from the humans with each group. So at least one in each team needs to know the **[Book of Babel]** skill. You people should take advantage that it’s available in the contribution store, you are stuck on a foreign planet after all,” Zac answered.

“Many have actually bought it already. Some are just like you, getting antsy from staying on this island months on end. Most came through the incursion to gain insight and wealth, and that can’t be done while staying inside some walls,” Ilvere said with half a smile. “I’m sure there will be many willing scouts.”

Zac nodded and headed off to find Sap Trang and his fellow villagers. After explaining the situation the four fishermen agreed to help out after some hesitation.

“If we find some of our lost villagers, can we bring them back?” Mr. Trang asked after some silence.

“Yes, that’s ok. You cannot say anything about the situation on the Island though before they are here. The situation here is... Special. If you do the soldiers have orders to silence you and everyone who heard it,” Zac answered. It was extremely strict rules, but he simply couldn’t allow any information about his island to leak yet.

He learned some things about Lordship from Alyn and Ogras while he rested during the Ant-Waves. A Lord held various benefits in controlling a town or even a country as they gained access to a so-called Lord-System. Originally the system was used as a method for generals of the Ancient Empire to control their armies, but with the Apostate of Order the system became generalized and gained a host of new features.

As the system evolved over time various functions were added, and today many benefits existed. For example a Lord could automatically enforce a tax on his empire. There were no loopholes either, as the System was in control of the taxation. The only downside was that The System itself took a cut of the taxes.

Lords also got access to more functions on their teleporters and could even get invited to grand happenings such as

auctions and special events in the multi-verse that commoners did not have access to.

“Other humans will have to stay put even if they want to come over. Come back and report their situation to me and I’ll decide what to do about it.”

“Very well. We understand the importance of discretion. Those who left before us were mainly the younger generation from our village. They risked their lives to find help for us, but we never heard back from them. If we can find them and bring them back here I’m sure their future will be better than in most parts of the world,” the fisherman answered.

“Good. Start preparing, I want the four teams setting out within three days. I’ll provide the ships for you,” Zac said as he turned to leave.

“One minute please, I was wondering if I could consult you about my class,” Mr. Trang said quickly.

Zac was a bit surprised as he turned around and inspected the fisherman, only to see he actually was level 25. He must have worked quite arduously since he was only level 21 when he arrived at Port Atwood. Zac remembered how much work he himself put into finishing those last levels.

“What about it?” Zac asked, a bit curious about what Class the fisherman chose for himself.

Chapter 111: Wave Whisperer

“I haven’t actually chosen yet, but I’ve seen which options I have. They are Fisherman, Dockhand, Marine, Acolyte, and Wave Whisperer,” the fisherman began.

The first two were pretty straightforward non-combat classes, whereas the next two were classes Zac knew himself. The old fisherman likely got the option for Acolyte since he bought the Water Spear skill earlier. Wave Whisperer was the only one that was unclear to him. It sounded like a water-based class, but more than that he was unsure.

“I am wavering between Marine and Wave Whisperer. Both are uncommon classes connected to the sea. The Wave Whisperer is connected to taming and controlling aquatic wild-life that might be very convenient in this new world. We saw fish as large as sharks while sailing here, and who knows what else lurks in the depths. Controlling the giants of the sea might both help with scouting and protection,” he continued.

“However, my stats are all toward strength and endurance so far, it might be a waste to take a mage class after this. What do you think?” he asked Zac.

“The stats you get before your class are insignificant on the road of cultivation. If you believe that Wave Whisperer will be more beneficial, take it. You can make up the missing stats with natural treasures and training in the future,” Zac said.

“Sounds reasonable, I will do just that,” Sap Trang said with a nod.

Zac nodded and left the living quarters of the fishermen. He knew that the wily old fisherman actually didn’t require help but just wanted to show his sincerity to Zac by divulging his future class. He already tried to show his worth before the ant

waves, and after seeing Zac and the other's power his desire to pave a path for his villagers only grew.

Next, he went to the Creator's shipyard and ordered four of the small exploratory vessels for a million Nexus Coins each. Karunthel, the spider-foreman, was not around, as Rahm explained that he was currently occupied with some experiments. For people like Karunthel and the Creators experimentation was in a way cultivation. If they created something functional and new they would gain a huge surge of experience, maybe to the point of gaining multiple levels.

It was generally the same with many of the non-combat classes. A farmer who reaped a whole field after tending it for months could gain a handful of levels. The higher the difficulty and grade of the herbs or vegetables that were grown the more energy would be awarded. That was why many blacksmiths and other crafting professions preferred to craft hard and high-grade items, rather than mashing together an endless stream of low-grade items. The benefits, both in wealth and levels, if the craft succeeded far outweighed anything low-grade items could compare to.

Other non-combat classes were more of the slow-and-steady type, such as Adran's Administration class that consistently gained cosmic energy while handling town matters. There were certain events though that could award large sudden boosts in experience, such as a town upgrade.

Next, he walked over to the small house that Alyn resided in. He found the demoness sitting on the porch in the same comfortable chair she used down in the mines.

"How is Emily doing?" he asked.

"She has started following the methods to attain mage classes, but she still insists on training with an axe for a few hours every day," she said as she put down her book with a sigh.

"Well, it's her decision, so let her proceed. Who knows what class she'll be able to get from the combination," Zac said with a shrug.

“I’ve read that cultivators of newly integrated planets are far more likely to choose unique and unknown classes, but that is a dangerous game to play. You humans will soon see the folly in your ways. I wouldn’t be surprised if more than half the people on your so-called ladder right now will be stuck at F-class forever. If breaking through to the next levels was that easy then Clan Azh’Rezak wouldn’t only have a handful of D-rank ancestors after thousands of years of accumulation,” the teacher said with a serious face.

“You need to have your people choose sensible and common classes so that you can get some guaranteed E-Rank Uncommon underlings. Who knows, perhaps some of them might even be able to evolve into D-Rank in the distant future.”

“I am not going to tell people what classes they choose. None of the people on the island are really my subjects. Of course, it might change in the future when you create your Academy,” Zac answered.

“Actually I have a question about class rarities,” he said as he changed the subject to the old fisherman.

“He is a normal fisherman but he got multiple uncommon skills to choose from when you said that barely one out of a thousand got uncommon classes after studying at an academy, how is that possible?”

“The first class is mainly based on achievements and experiences since people rarely are in contact with the Dao at that stage. Someone old will have more of those than a youngster who’s only 16. However, that doesn’t mean one should wait with choosing a class,” the demon answered. “The older one is the harder it gets to improve one’s race. I am not sure if Mr. Trang will be able to evolve his race even with the medicinal baths. The optimal time for evolution has passed. Even if he managed to evolve it will involve far more resources compared to someone normal,” Alyn concluded.

“What about me?” Zac asked curiously.

“Your prime age for evolution had passed, but you side-stepped that with the Fruit of Ascension. Now you’re a thirty-

year-old whose lifespan is 500 years, that's almost a baby," she said with a slight smile.

"But generally its better to evolve as soon as possible, it will be cheaper and you will avoid any risk of your body simply not being able to withstand another evolution. If it takes too long your body might not be able to take that last step, precluding you from evolving. So as soon as you reach E-Rank Class you should start working on your Race again," she added.

"On another note. We do not have any cultivation manuals at the moment. Emily is turning 16 in a month and she should be using a cultivation manual from the start. It will help her immensely, as reforming pathways at a later date can be quite painful and dangerous," Alyn said.

Zac could only grimace while nodding, remembering his own harrowing experience when he improved his pathways from his initial rudimentary ones. That was likely his first large mistake, and it almost got him killed.

Since there were some pretty good cultivation manuals in the Contribution Stone he decided to purchase a few of the cheaper ones. It was not only for Emily, but it would be needed if he wanted to create an Academy in the future. There were not many other things that grabbed his interest in the shop anyway, and the expenditure seemed acceptable.

There was only one thing he was planning on buying before heading out again, a skill called [**Mental Fortress**]. It was a skill that both protected him from skills like [**Eye of Discernment**], and also boosted the defense against mental attacks and illusions. It cost ten million contribution points, which made it one of the most expensive skills, but he could afford it. The battle against the ants almost gave him as much as the whole wolf horde, and he currently possessed roughly 34 million points.

Feeling done with everything he needed to do he walked back to his camper and spent the rest of the day recuperating. His arm was still hurting quite badly, while his feet still had blisters from the acid bath.

Emily came back later that evening, preferring to stay at his camper rather than her assigned housing close to Alyn. He didn't know it was the familiarity of the camper or the presence of him that made her more comfortable, but he didn't mind as he had gotten used to falling asleep outside under the moonlight in any case.

"You know, I'm wondering what the world would think if they knew the strongest and the wealthiest man after the apocalypse lives like a hobo outside a camper in the woods," she said with a grin, obviously having recovered from earlier.

Zac only rolled his eyes and motioned her to sit down. He took out his kit for grilling meat and started preparing some food for the evening. Emily sat down and took out something from her backpack. It was a covered tray, and when she lifted the lid Zac noticed a couple of long pieces of dough.

"Give me two spits," she said and Zac curiously complied.

"Mom made these during the summer, its really only water, flour, and salt, but it still gets pretty yummy when grilled. It's a shame we don't have butter though."

She took out one of the pieces of dough from the tray and wrapped it around the spit. She did the same with the second spit and then she placed them some distance from the fire.

"I think it's called caveman bread? I don't remember anymore," she added as she kept an eye on her spits.

Zac only smiled and salted the large slabs of meat. He made a mental reminder to get some stock of various things when he left next time.

"You're leaving the island again, aren't you?" she said as she kept spinning the spits.

"Yes, in a few days," Zac answered.

"Let me go with you!" Emily immediately burst out, looking up at him.

"You know, I can't go back through the beastman village. They closed their teleporter the moment after we used it. The portal I will use might lead to the opposite side of the planet, far from wherever your siblings might be."

“You don’t know that. They might be right where you end up, and you will not be able to recognize them,” she retorted, starting to work up a huff.

It was true. One of the things he learned from Emily about the tutorial was that the end-point of the tutorial sometimes was randomized. Well, not really randomized as much as some were lucky and others weren’t.

As the cultivators were undergoing the tutorial the world was rearranged, and the system dropped off the cultivators at a spot of its choosing when it was over. Some were lucky that the system chose their own turf when they got returned, like the villagers of Winterleaf village. But most were dumped at a completely unknown place.

Zac asked the demons about it and they thought it sounded like a test. Many would start traveling home, braving dangers to find a way back to their families. Most would likely die, but some would emerge stronger from the experience. Others would give up and hide behind walls, becoming despondent shut-ins like the people of Fort Roger.

That explained why Hannah and the others were never returned, and also meant that Emily’s siblings might be anywhere.

“Come on, I will be very helpful. I have visited many towns and know how to find information. I will be useful to you. If you go alone you might just make a scene and get in all kinds of trouble,” she quickly said. “Besides, I’m turning 16 soon. Traveling might help me get a better class.”

Zac kept slowly spinning his spit, mulling things over. He wasn’t sure what to expect from his next excursion, and it was a bit troublesome to keep her safe since she couldn’t use the defensive gear yet. However, she might actually be useful.

During the ant waves there were actually two new choices that cropped up. One was called Cradle of God, and it seemed a bit too weird for Zac’s taste, and not somewhere he’d even consider bringing Emily. He actually had a suspicion that it was the home of Salvation, the second-place holder of the ladder. Judging by the Pseudonym he chose, it wouldn’t be too

far-fetched he'd name his town like that. He knew nothing about that person, and he wouldn't teleport there since it might get extremely dangerous.

The second option made Zac far more hopeful, as it was called New Washington. It wasn't very imaginative, but it clearly was an American town. The name implied it was government-run as well, and it might be the best bet for him to gain information. He realized it might be a trap, and that was another reason he was hesitant in bringing Emily.

The people who possessed access to an array would generally be elites, and you had to have some balls if you planned on doing something untoward. Besides, he already knew the system restricted the use of the array as some sort of deathtrap. He couldn't place any offensive arrays around it or place it far underground for example.

Still, he had a very clear goal, and bringing Emily would likely slow him down in addition to putting her in needless danger. He wasn't heading out on a stroll after all.

"I am sorry. You will have to stay here until you have started cultivating. At that point, you can use defensive treasures and protect yourself. I don't know what I'll encounter when I step out of the teleporter," Zac finally said with a sigh. "But I will ask around for you about your siblings. My main goal is to find my hometown just like you, so I understand your feelings."

Emily didn't seem to care about the promise and angrily huffed as she ran toward the camper, completely forgetting about the bread.

Chapter 112: Back to the Scene of the Crime

The next few two days went by excruciatingly slow for Zac who just wanted to get up and leave. However there were more and more things to do in order to keep his town running. He couldn't wait for finishing the third horde in a few weeks. When he became a lord he'd get a system-trained administrator, perhaps Abby, who he could leave most of the work to. Adran was a competent worker, but Zac felt it was much too early to start giving the demons real influence in his future town, especially since their alliances mostly lay with Ogras.

Ogras was someone who would take a bit of advantage and run away with it. Zac still believed that the demon would do his best in order to improve the state of Port Atwood, at least for ten years, but he wouldn't lower his guard until he found some real assurances. Therefore Zac still felt the need to personally oversee some details.

He met up with Alea and Janos who were mostly fine, with the exception of Janos' leg. The poison mistress looked a bit annoyed upon hearing Zac was leaving once again but didn't say anything. Zac also talked with a few of the mages, who promised to start work on an improved home for him. Emily's comment the other day made him realize he'd forgotten about actually improving his camp. He remembered Ogras' lush palace over at Azh'Rodum, and even a tenth of that would be a nice upgrade to his own living situation.

The second thing he did was to travel to the mountains. He brought only Alea with him this time, pushing his speed to the limit. It wasn't some romantic reasoning behind it, he rather needed her to spot any leftover poison.

Earlier when he traveled this distance he usually had to be careful and moved in a normal walking speed, but now he ran, ignoring the occasional barghest. The trip would take over a day back in the day, but now it only took a couple of hours. Surprisingly Alea seemed to have no problem keeping up either.

The mountain valley had finally cleared out enough for him to start collecting everything of value from his killing spree. He didn't want to leave this treasure trove as he left the island again. And it was an especially nice timing since Ogras was occupied with absorbing the Fruit of Ascension. Zac learned that it could take weeks to absorb a treasure of that magnitude. A big reason he almost died in the pond was that the mix of Cosmic Water and the Fruit of Ascension made the absorption only take minutes rather than days, which overtaxed his body.

He didn't set about collecting it all in order to hoard the wealth for himself. He planned on using much of it as rewards and salaries for the demons and other citizens in the future, or even stocking stores with the weapons that lay about. Besides, who knew what secret treasures all the elites of the demon army had pocketed for themselves.

They arrived at the mountain slopes at lunch, and after making sure that there wasn't any poison around, they scaled the mountain from the same side as the demon army once did. From there the two followed along the path of the battle, picking up any armor and weapon that seemed useful. The corpses were quite decayed, but at least the scorching sun and blowing winds had caused them to dry out rather than rot, so the stench wasn't as bad as Zac had feared.

Many of them lay in pools of dried but putrid-looking liquid though, and Alea explained that the poison he threw out would cause them to vacate from every orifice, completely drying them out, as the victims were dying. From that it was pretty clear which ones died from poison and which ones were dead from the battle before.

The number of demons lying in a pool of waste was quite terrifying, even out at the rim of the valley. Zac mentally shut down and wordlessly kept collecting items. Even Alea seemed

subdued by the sight as she helped him out with the collection. They kept moving about for most of the day, finally reaching the epicenter of the poison, the scarlet tree.

The tree still stood up, even though many of its branches were destroyed in the battle. However, its trunk was no longer red, but purple, reminiscent of the poison cloud. The once pristine white leaves were also changed, now having purple veins covering them.

It made a bit of sense as the closer they got to the tree it was obvious that the corpses were even more dried out. Perhaps the tree absorbed the poisoned warriors to heal itself in the same way it absorbed the trees earlier. From all the poison it seemed that it mutated somehow.

“How magical! I wonder what kind of fruit a poisoned Tree of Ascension will sprout. I hope it survives its current ordeal,” Alea said as she stared at the changed tree in wonder.

“Can we cure it?” Zac asked, more interested in growing normal Fruit of Ascension instead of any weird mutated ones.

“Maybe a skilled botanist could, but the poison has reached its core from absorbing too much of it from the area, it might cleanse it by itself over time, or it might mutate. Or it will simply succumb and die, we’ll have to wait and see,” she answered with a shrug.

“If it makes a poison version of a Fruit of Ascension I want it,” she added as she stared at him with serious eyes. “It might even give me a poison constitution.”

“We’ll see what happens with the tree before deciding on any allocation. There is a lot of gear to collect,” Zac answered noncommittally.

It was true, the area was packed with elite warriors. Many of those who fought close to the tree even owned their own Cosmos Sacks as well, making it easier to collect their wealth. They methodically went through the central battlefield as well, and by the end of it Zac had another Seventy pouches in his possession.

Finally the two walked over to Rydel, lying close to the tree, a large grisly hole in his chest and a broken arm.

“This wound... Did Ogras do this?” Alea asked with surprise.

“I thought the four of you knew?” Zac retorted, equally surprised. “I battled Rydel and that monkey over there, but I only managed to break his arm and expend most of his aces. He was about to kill me when Ogras attacked.”

Zac bent down and grabbed a pouch attached to his belt.

“Wait, check within his clothes as well. Rydel was the unofficial leader of the invasion and a scion of the Azh'Rezak main branch. He should have more than one pouch,” Alea interjected.

Zac nodded and with a grimace started reaching around within the corpse's clothes. After a while he actually found another pouch.

Zac inspected the two and was shocked by their quality. The one Rydel wore on his waist was quite large, comprising roughly ten by ten meters of space, far larger compared to his own ones which only had two-three meters of space. It mainly contained daily items, such as some foods and clothes. It also contained a couple of thousands of crystals and a few other assorted items.

However, the inner one was on another level completely, to the point that Zac suspected that it was an E-Grade pouch rather than F-Grade. It had a cubic space of roughly fifty meters, meaning it had a whopping 125 000 cubic meters of space. He would be able to fit a small airplane in it if he found one.

The pouch was mostly empty, but there was a small mountain containing tens of thousands of F-Grade crystals. There were also neatly stacked weapons and a huge supply of food. There even were a few siege weapons, looking far more sophisticated compared to the ones the demons built back at Port Atwood. Another corner held a bunch of vials containing pills, labeled and ordered. There also were a couple of ornate boxes, and Zac guessed those things held the real prizes.

The inner pouch held the backup resources of the whole demon invasion Zac realized as his heartbeat sped up. It was a huge amount of wealth, even for him. He recognized a few of the pills by now, and many of them cost tens of thousands Nexus Coins per pop. There were over a hundred of each type of those pills.

Zac took out the various boxes and things one by one and together with Alea categorized them. There were certain fruits that could improve the constitution far more efficiently compared to the medicinal bath, and Zac gave a few of them to Alea after seeing her hungry eyes. He didn't need them for himself and felt it was a decent reward for having fought two horde bosses with him. He put aside most of the rest for Janos and the others though.

The contribution board clearly was an effective method of motivating people, and Zac was thinking of establishing something similar after the beast hordes. If people contributed to Port Atwood, they'd gain contribution points, and with those points they could buy various things from him.

He immediately consulted Alea about it and to his embarrassment learned that such a thing was pretty standard in the multi-verse, and not some novel new idea he concocted. Many of the things in the huge pouch were likely even meant for just that purpose during the invasion.

Done with the looting they started heading back toward the camp. The amount of wealth he collected was enormous, and including all the armors and tools Alea and he estimated the value easily surpassed a hundred million nexus coins. It was no surprise that war was so common in the multi-verse, it was extremely lucrative.

Finally all preparations were done and Zac prepared to set out. During the return he transferred most of the wealth to the large pouch which he now carried hidden under his E-Grade Robe. He left some of it to Adran so that the warriors could get new gear. Many of the demons were starting to look pretty ragged after battling two beast hordes, so they needed to swap out some of the broken items.

He actually brought a total of ten of the smallest cosmos bags with him as well, which he hid in a small travel bag. The reaction from Selas when he realized Zac possessed a Cosmos Bag was quite large, and Zac thought he might be able to sell them for quite a nice profit in a human settlement.

He learned from Calrin and Alea that these smallest cosmos bags were worth roughly a million nexus coins. Most people in the multi-verse possessed at least one, unless they were young and still needed to spend all their money on medicinal baths. They weren't overly difficult to create for an experienced inscription master. The higher-grade ones required insight into the Dao of Space to create though, making them far more expensive.

Emily was still angry with him, but she still tried helping out in the end. On her insistence, he carried a large backpack to make it look less suspicious. Zac also wore a new pair of boots, which was actually starting to feel a bit uncomfortable after having adapted to the free feeling of nothing trapping his feet.

Zac gave some final instructions to Adran regarding the scouting missions and some other details before he walked toward the teleportation array. He inserted the crystals and paid the fee, and once again he disappeared from the island.

From the distance, a pair of eyes were observing everything, before receding into the shadows.

Chapter 113: New Washington

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

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

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

There was only one exit to the teleportation room, and it was guarded by the army men. The rest of the interiors gave no clues as to where the house was located since there were no windows. Still, he wasn't overly worried since there were humans in front of him. That meant there was a path to leave, and no door would impede him since he learned the Dao of Sharpness. He could simply cut metal like butter and walk straight through any restrictions.

“What is going on? Do you welcome all guest through the barrels of your guns?” Zac asked with a glare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since the group had already shown some discourtesy by aiming their weapons at him for a full minute, he decided he'd make things a bit even. He scanned the group with **[Eye of Discernment]** and found that the army-guys were only level

15. The two warriors were actually level 29 and 30 though, just falling a few levels short of entering the ladder. The office lady was almost as strong, reaching level 28, which Zac guessed would be a respectable number anywhere.

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

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

"Zhix?" Zac asked.

"It's what the government call the insectoid beings, while the Ishiate are the beastmen. We're not sure if that is their actual name, but a scout with identifying skills got that name using the skill on them, so that's what we call them," Julia answered.

"May I ask who you are and what force you belong to?" she continued.

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

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

He needed an alias that wasn't his real name nor Super-Brother Man. He didn't want to give out his real name since he

might be forced to show his might, making it pretty clear that he was a ranker. That might put his family in danger if they managed to match him with his hometown or some old internet profile that they might have access to. Who knew what things the government had stored, even after the apocalypse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We have a limited understanding of the world and do not dare to open up the teleportation array to the public before we're confident we won't put the villagers at risk. My job is to scout out the situation and gather intelligence," Zac answered.

"I see, let me take you to a meeting room where we can discuss things further. I am sure there are many things you are

curious about. Sharing information and creating a support system to restore order is the goal of the government after all,” Julia said as she motioned Zac to follow her.

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

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

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

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

He still wasn't sure about the power of his newly acquired skill, or what kind of skills cultivators from the tutorial possessed, and his reaction came from a fear of his identity being exposed. If someone got both his name and his level they would not only know his full name but also that he was the Super Brother-Man. It would be quite obvious from his extremely high level, and that turn could potentially put his family in danger.

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

The sudden caused quite a few people in the lobby to become highly alert, some even brandishing their weapons as they surrounded Zac and Julia's.

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

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

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

Zac's attack caused widespread anger, but obviously more with some. A young man in army gear brandished an average-looking sword and charged at Zac with a roar. The sword looked about the same as the ones that were carried by the two men next to Julia, and Zac guessed that the army was in the process of switching over to cold weaponry in order to gain Cosmic Energy from fighting.

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

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

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

"Your 'New Government' has an interesting way of greeting travelers," Zac said with a frown.

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

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

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

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

As they sat down she actually turned on a laptop that sat on the table and next turned on the TV. Zac was a bit surprised that

the two actually worked since there didn't seem to be much technology at work down in the lobby.

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

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

Chapter 114: Intelligence

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

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

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

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

“We have both the other natives and the incursions to contend with. The Ishiate have generally been amenable for peaceful negotiations, but any attempt to open diplomatic channels with the Zhix or the foreign forces has been met with unrelenting violence. Luckily there is no Incursion close to New Washington, but many areas have already fallen,” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But the undead are only one among many. There are rumors of a rat-incursion far to the east, an incursion in the middle of the ocean that some coastal cities could see in the distance on clear days, even two incursions with humans. The latter seem to consider us earthlings unclean and are among the cruelest enemies. They have built an empire founded on slavery, and are one of our prime enemies. All in all, we have located 11 incursions, but we’re sure there are more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The last cultivator group of Greenworth is still unaccounted for," she finished the report on Greenworth.

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

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

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

"Since the other group seemed largely fine with only a 55% casualty rate we can deduce that Greenworth's Tutorial was one of the human-only Tutorials. This was also confirmed by the cultivators in our neighboring town. That means there was no Zhix hive that eradicated the third group like with many other tutorial villages.

"When us cultivators were returned we believe that we were returned to the same "coordinates" as before. For example, I was working in Washington before the fall, and I was placed back right here afterward. That's how we managed to start rebuilding work so quickly. However, which world's

coordinates seem random. Some returned to Old Earth's same coordinates. Other were placed on the Ishiate coordinates instead, which could be anywhere on the new planet after the randomization," Julia narrated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

more tropical Southern America has meshed together with southern Asia and some of Africa.”

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

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

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

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

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

Zac was completely surprised by the convenience. His life on the island and with the demons had made him think in more primal ways, the fact that New Washington Possessed a city-wide WI-FI hadn’t even crossed his mind.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 115: Going home

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

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

“The man calling himself Monk is clearly a high ranker. It might be bluster but he looked at our warriors as though they were jokes, and that was after he used **[Eye of Discernment]** on them,” she reported.

“My guess? He’s actually the Super Brother-Man,” she concluded.

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

Julia frowned but looked stubborn.

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

“Anyone in this room could do the same with John, and besides he was agitated and didn’t have proper form. I heard he was riddled with openings, so the feat was nothing special,” the general said with a harrumph.

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

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

Thomas only sighed and mulled it over.

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

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

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

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

Since he learned the news of his hometown he was itching to move, but Emily had told him about the importance of information brokers so he was currently on the way to an information market, just to compare the info they got from the government liaison. Julia seemed to have been upfront, but Zac wasn’t the best judge of that. After having asked around in various shops and from shady looking people he entered a

non-descript office building some ways off from any main road.

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

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

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

“Certainly, we take payment in either Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins. Unfortunately, we do not accept Union Credits, is that all right?” the receptionist answered.

Union Credits was a new global currency that the government was trying to introduce. They were unwilling to let go of control the financial system and tried quite hard to give it credibility. They maintained a 1:1 exchange ratio with Nexus Coins, and even had exchange station set up across the town. However, their success seemed limited, as even in New Washington many places seemed to prefer the System-run currencies.

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

After Zac agreed upon the price, a text document was shown containing the information. Apparently, they usually put it on an USB-drive, but since Zac didn’t have one at the moment he bought one for five Nexus Crystals from the broker.

All in all Zac paid roughly 6 000 Nexus Coins to confirm all the information he learned earlier. He also had the broker download a copy of the government map onto the USB drive.

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

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

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

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

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

“Since you've spent a fair deal of coins at our establishment I'll give you a freebie. There is something going on with the Auction in two weeks. The government seems to be luring strong people there. Your party is only the 5th that has arrived through the teleporter in the last week. Do with that information what you will,” the man said with a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that very mindset had put humanity in a passive state. The government was more concerned about consolidating their power, rather than combatting the real threat. The undead incursion was already as large as a country, and the others were growing as well. He heard no news of any incursion except his being defeated, but there were some rumors going about the city about some Marshall Clan being about to fight one.

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

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

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

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

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

He had finally reached his home.

Chapter 116: Family

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

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

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

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

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

Instead, he simply scaled the four-meter wall like it wasn't there, and found himself in the inner city.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ground was covered in dust and mud. Someone had walked through his home haphazardly dragging dirt everywhere. Clearly, the house was looted in the same way

he'd seen before, and he couldn't stop a flame of rage blazing up in his heart.

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

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

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

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

Ps. The necklace is a memento from your mother. It might help you find her if you wish to do so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He only took a few steps before his eyebrows furrowed and he sprinted forward. A gangly youth in his late teens was standing

in his apartment, wearing his clothes, gaping in shock at Zac.

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

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

Zac calmed down a bit and used **[Eye of Discernment]** on him. His name truly was Ryan, and he was level 19. Zac let him down on the ground and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“After we returned from the Tutorial a few cultivators wanted to seize power over the Town. There’s a chance to become lord if you do that, and people want to be the ruler cause you apparently get all kinds of benefits. So Thom and the others

killed the mortals who had started organizing people, not allowing any other factions to crop up. Those guys are crazy, and the government is only looking the other way,” he explained with fear mixed with disgust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 117: Judgement

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

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

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

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

The guards didn't hesitate and opened fire at him when he came within 30 meters of the gate, but Zac simply activated his movement skill. He was pretty sure he'd survive the weapons, but didn't want to try it out at the moment. He moved like a phantom, and within a second he was right among the guards with **[Verun's Bite]** in his hands.

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

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

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

"Where are Thom Sullivan and the 4 other councilmen?" he asked with a growl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A stinging sensation on his neck finally confirmed that he was bullet-proof. Still, the bullets from the AR-15's hurt almost as much as a bee sting when they hit his bare skin. Zac quickly

incapacitated the soldiers with a few throws with daggers from his pouch. Since he looted the mountain he had hundreds and hundreds of throwing knives, and he didn't even bother to gather them up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac only looked into his eyes for a few seconds, remembering his father. Perhaps he stood in this very room when he was killed by the men in front of him.

"Salvation? No, I am Judgement."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was planning on leaving the town to the army, and have the government decide a new leader. He had no desire to stay on here since his father was dead and his sister somewhere else. That still left him with the mayor. From the man's actions Zac felt he should be killed with the rest of the cultivators, but he was a high official of the government.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man tried to defend himself, but between him losing most of his blood and the boundless anger of the girl it was to no avail. She kept slamming the wooden spike down into the body creating grisly wounds, most centered around his groin. There was no coming back from that, pill or no pill, and he simply bled out in a matter of seconds.

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

Chapter 118: Recruitment

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

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

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

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

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

Zac nodded and turned to leave.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Train you? You are all barely level ten. Helping you attain a power that could contend against the forces of the world would take an immense amount of resources, why should I do that?"

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

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

A Binding Contract contract was more accurately named an employment contract. It made a person a subordinate who couldn't betray their employer. His orders would to a certain degree become compulsions as well, unless giving a detrimental order, such as committing suicide or ruining their cultivation. That of course only was true for the type of

employment. If he contracted this woman as a soldier he couldn't order anything about her private life.

Furthermore, one essentially had to enter the contract willingly, and you could set the duration yourself. It was a normal method for Clans in the multi-verse to make sure of the allegiance when hiring people, such as external warriors for war or exploration of a mystical realm.

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

Apparently it was impossible to use on people of a higher level, and pretty much all of the demons were higher level than him. It was simply that the restrictions on the invaders were still in place, making it easy to forget that almost all of them were at the bottleneck, working at either their Dao or their Constitution in order to evolve. The System wanted to promote the strong, so it wouldn't allow the strong be in servitude of the weak. Of course, Zac's power level was actually higher than the demons', but his situation was a bit unique.

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

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

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

"As long as you give me power nothing else matter," she said, not flinching the slightest from Zac's stare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We mean you no harm,” one of the older soldiers shouted from the distance. “We just need to know what's going on.

Scouts report of a beast horde arriving within the hour, and we need to prepare.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gone but not Forgotten

Rest in Peace

Afterward he simply sat down, reminiscing about the past. The park was empty except for himself and his thoughts, and there was a heaviness in the silence. It was as though it blended with the heaviness in Zac’s heart, and became a palpable thing around him. If a human walked close to Zac at this moment it

wouldn't be surprising if they would be physically impacted by the mood.

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

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

With that he pushed north, to help out his hometown one last time. With neither his father nor sister around, he honestly didn't care too much about Greenworth. He didn't really have any close friends anymore, rather co-workers and acquaintances. His closest friend died 4 years ago, long before the integration, and he never really looked for new ones after that.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 119: Army

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right. Do you know if anyone of my neighbor is still alive?” Zac asked.

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

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

Only the core of Greenworth was walled in, while the outside was exposed to all kinds of beasts. As he sped through the outer part it was mostly abandoned apart from the occasional scavenger. Less than a third of the population could actually fit

inside the walls judging by the area it encircled. But it didn't seem cramped at all, rather the opposite.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, there was no guard that challenged his approach this time, and they freely entered the posh neighborhood. The army was clearly uncomfortable to just let him go about as he wanted, but also unwilling to get too close out of fear of

getting bisected, so a few people shadowed them but kept a respectful distance.

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

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

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

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

He really felt that his plan might work out as he looked at the group.

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

Besides, even if these girls entered a Contract of Binding with him it wasn't like he could or would use it for some nefarious purposes, and he'd release them when his force was stabilized.

He looked at it the same way as most powers of the multiverse, just a contract to make sure that he didn't get stabbed in the back after pouring large amounts of resources on their training.

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

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

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

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

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

At least these women in front of him seemed driven enough to keep pushing themselves forward if they were given the

chance now. And if they started slacking off he had the contract to push them forward. He walked over to Joanna who looked very conspicuous with her spear.

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

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

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

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

“Are these mansions empty?” he asked her. She looked confused but immediately answered.

“Yes. No staff dared stay there, and all captives were freed,” she said, after which she pointed at a pile of sacks “We also removed anything of value as well.”

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

He unleashed his aura in its entirety, and it billowed out among the onlookers. By now he had calmed down and it only contained his power, and the murderous intent was far less discernible. Screams and gasps echoed across the square, and many even fell on their knees clutching their heads. With two quick steps he arrived at the gate of the old Mayor's mansion and Charged up three fractal edges with **[Chop]**.

In a lightning-quick manner he made three wide horizontal swings, and just before the fractals flew off he imbued them all with the Dao of Heaviness. The fractals flew toward one of the mansions each, and with the help of the Dao Seed

completely destroyed the buildings from the impact. It looked like a terrorist attack, where a few bombs were simultaneously set off. Rubble flew in all directions and many had to take cover to avoid the falling debris.

He removed his aura and once again glanced at the group whose skepticism was not replaced with fear.

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

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

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

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

“If you decide to follow me you will become a part of my army, and we will immediately set out to New Washington. From there we’ll teleport to the home base of the Force I belong to, and there your training would begin in earnest. If you can’t keep up during the walk, I’ll leave you in the woods.

“I won’t force anyone to follow me. You have five minutes to make your choice; Power or freedom,” he finished as he summoned a chair and sat down.

There was a subdued silence as he looked upon the women. The silence stretched to a minute until it finally was broken by

the young girl who questioned him earlier. She walked right up to him with steady steps.

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

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

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

Chapter 120: The Return

Zac kept the lead as he pushed through the woods, his battalion of hapless recruits behind him. Altogether 80 of the women signed up, and were now walking behind him through the wilderness. The last 30 or so decided to stay behind in Greenworth, and Zac wouldn't waste any more energy on them.

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

He was quite surprised to hear that 9 of the recruits actually were cultivators who possessed experience from the tutorial. However, they had been in the bottom-tier and emerged with even lower levels compared to Ryan. Being a cultivator didn't guarantee safety, and they'd been captured soon after they were returned. Apparently there were safety measures against that in the tutorial, but it disappeared immediately after it was over.

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

He was also accompanied by Ryan, who for some reason looked the most wretched of the bunch, even though having both the highest level and a Cosmos Sack to carry his things.

"This is torture, why don't we take a break?" he coughed out between pants.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was also happy to see that they seemed to be quite united. When one stumbled someone close by would help her up. Unity in a troop was extremely important. It was true before the fall, and perhaps even more so now. A soldier needed to be able to rely on their squadmates. Now with the system there also were the issue of war-arrays.

Alyn had explained the reason there were armies in the multi-verse. Zac had some problem understanding before since he felt that a D-Grade old monster was enough to decimate an

endless amount of F-Grade soldiers, making them worthless. But there was such a thing called War Arrays. They were part array and part skill. A troop would combine their power, and exhibit a strength far above their individual power, even eclipsing ranks sometimes.

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

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

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

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

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

"Everyone gather up," he said.

The women were tired but moved up to him.

"There's 80 of you so we'll create eight squads for now, ten per group. One squad will take care of the camp every time we stop, such as cooking, and the group will rotate. The rest of you will use these," Zac said as he took out a small mountain of Nexus Crystals.

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

Zac ignored him as he looked over his new soldiers.

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

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

“You want crystals? Join the army,” Zac simply said. Honestly, he had more than enough crystals to hand out a few, but he wouldn’t do it right after the 80 women in front of him essentially got drafted to get this chance.

“Uhm... Nevermind then. I’ll just have something to eat,” Ryan muttered and slunk away.

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

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

As he was cleaning everything Joanna walked up to him.

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

“Yeah?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He wasn’t really focusing on the crystal, rather the feeling he had earlier at the grave-site. The hour he sat reminiscing gave him an insight into another facet of heaviness. He would treasure the insight, even though he didn’t love the way he gained it. He wasn’t sure, but he felt it was the first clue to take the next step to upgrade his Dao Seed.

He knew that his seeds needed to improve quite a bit if he wanted an Epic class. Some low or medium ranked seeds wouldn’t be enough according to Alyn. He had already asked Calrin to be on a lookout for treasures that helped with the Dao, but those were among the most sought after treasures in the multi-verse. They were always in low supply but high

demand and the huge consortiums snatched them up long before people like Calrin had a chance to even see the listing.

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

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

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

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

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

The days passed as the girls went through a baptism of fire and blood in the forest. Some even managed to attain a few of the solo kill Titles while fighting some of the weaker beasts.

When they followed Zac out through Greenworth the only thing strong about them was the determination in their eyes. But now they exuded an aura of warriors. Zac knew that they still were only paper tigers, and not someone who would be useful in the third wave, but their progress was impressive.

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

This was going to be a pain in the ass.

Chapter 121: Thomas Fischer

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The information brokers in New Washington already knew about it, so there's no way you didn't. I have 80 victims with me as well that can testify. Of course, you could just ask anyone from Greenworth if you actually gave a shit, since the council's activities were no secret. There's a whole park filled with unmarked graves that's a testament to their wanton slaughter in the town,” Zac spat back with an angry glare.

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

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

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

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

She looked like she wanted to interject, but she could only close her mouth and step back.

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

Finally the clean-cut man opened his mouth.

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

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

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

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

“I plan on taking these people back to Port Atwood immediately. I have taken the liberty of taking them in as

refugees. I was worried about their fate staying here,” Zac said with a shrug of his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were accompanied by soldiers both in front and behind the squad. The soldiers weren’t really hostile, but rather

looked a bit curious at the girls, and even a bit jealous at Zac. They were quickly ushered to the teleporter, and Zac stayed behind letting the others enter first.

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

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

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

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

“What’s this?” Julia curiously asked as she snatched the crystal out of the air.

“It is an information package containing quite a bit of information regarding the incursions. It details both the forces of the multi-verse, and many other important facts that will help us anticipate the invader’s composition and strength. It was taken from the body of a high ranking invader,” Zac simply said, drawing surprised glances.

“Is the forces of Port Atwood fighting an Incursion?” Julia quickly asked.

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

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

questioning short.

Chapter 122: Homecoming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Um... What's going on? Why are there... demons here?" one of the squad leaders hesitantly asked as they moved toward the temporary town.

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

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

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

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

"Ok, what about the exploratory missions?" Zac asked next.

"The last of them returned yesterday. Three of the vessels met no real troubles. Surprisingly most of the islands around us are populated. Most are populated with humans, but two are comprised of beastmen who seem to have a rudimentary grasp of the Dao of Technology. The parties mostly kept some distance to them apart from a few minor altercations or meetings. However, the last group only had two survivors of the 6 crewmen. Apparently they stepped on an island and after walking a bit they were assaulted by extremely aggressive insectoid beings", she finished.

Zac was a bit surprised that there were so many encampments scattered around his island. The beastmen were obviously the

Ishiate, and it sounded the camps close to Port Atwood were those that were starting to industrialize before the integration. He was a bit curious to meet these beastmen, but he didn't have time for that at the moment.

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

"How far is the island with the Zhix? That's the insectoid species," Zac asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were given the manual, which was simply called [**F-Grade Cultivation Manual**] and taught how to meditate to absorb Cosmic Energy quicker. They were also given a choice of a skill, ranging from weapon skills and spells. From the description of the skills it sounded to Zac it was an improved selection of the beginner skills available for sale in the Nexus Node.

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

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

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

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

Everyone got a "Tutorial"-Title after the first mission that started with no benefits. However, after the first mission its rewards increased. Some got a few stat-points while others with bad quest performance got nothing, their titles still giving out zero attributes.

What followed was a schedule of three days of quests, followed by one day of rest and meditation. After the first three missions a new option was added, where people could choose their difficulty, ranging from Easy to Impossible. There was even a mortality rate at the quest, with Easy having 5% and Impossible had a 99% chance to perish.

The higher quests obviously gave much higher returns, but most people still chose easy. However, a few people chose the

more difficult ones, such as “Normal”. Their death rate was higher compared to the advertised stats, but that was likely from being unskilled beginners. Zac himself remembered his early battles, and he was still surprised he was alive today.

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

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

They got almost nothing from the tutorial in the end, only the initial 5 to all stat bonus, plus on average ten additional attributes. Zac couldn’t help but grimace when hearing them squander such a once in a lifetime opportunity. Even the monsters that they fought gave huge bonuses to cosmic energy and Nexus Coins compared to normal beasts on New Earth.

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

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

He tried to keep his progress going by heading out into the forests fighting beasts but was dismayed by the amount of cosmic energy he gained by the low-level critters. He gave up after a week when he had only gained a level. It wasn’t due to laziness, but rather a brush with death when a level 30 or so monster found him, and he barely survived the escape.

His last three levels he gained from his F-Graded cultivation manual, and he was close to becoming level 19. He,

unfortunately, wasn't able to get a real cultivation manual, and the basic one from the tutorial was tortuously slow in progress after the initial ten levels.

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

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

Chapter 123: Neighbors

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

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

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

Zac frowned and opened up his town shop, and found out that the upgraded small scale gravity array cost 500 000 Nexus Coins. It wasn’t a huge fortune, but also not negligible since it was 5% of his current amount of nexus coins. He expected that quickly bringing the army up to a decent power would cost millions on top of that, and he couldn’t wantonly spend his money.

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

Alyn simply smiled at him, and something about that smile gave Zac a hair-raising feeling, and he could only sigh and acquiesce.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So what was your idea?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, no. Clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any heritage of that type and hired experts from an Association to take care of their beast hordes. But I have a few ideas that might work. I think if you can recruit a few of those beastmen I heard about it would

be for the best. They might have a better affinity for those kinds of classes,” she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adran frowned at that information.

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

Zac groaned at the news. The prospect of hyper-aggressive ant-men flooding out from his crystal mine was something that sounded like a real pain in the ass, both to his wallet and his

town. Besides, who knew, they might dig for the vein and ruin it as well, which would make Port Atwood a far less valuable piece of property.

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

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

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

Adran looked surprised, but after considering it for some time nodded.

“A tip, if you can get them to as an ally you should. Insectoid populations are usually quite strong in the multi-verse. They have high reproduction rates and high average powers. The queens of the higher species are extremely feared, being able to channel their whole hive’s power into devastating attacks,” the administrator added.

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

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

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

“All in all 18 of the closest islands were scouted. Surprisingly we saw signs of habitation on 10 of them. 7 were humans, 2 were the beastmen, and the last the so-called Zhix. We suspect the total populations to reach roughly twenty thousand, excluding the insectoids, of course. There might be people on the other islands as well, and we simply didn’t find them.”

“TWENTY thousand?” Zac exclaimed shocked.

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

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

“How are their quality of lives?” Zac asked.

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

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

He still had a couple of days before the auction started, and about a week before the last horde arrived. Time was limited but it might be a good idea to start building Port Atwood in earnest. He’d start with the Zhix though, as that was the most

pressing matter. The hive had been right under his nose for months, who knew how far they had dug by now.

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

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

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

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

He disembarked at the closest beach and threw his creator vessel into a Cosmos Sack and headed inland. From what he understood the Zhix were mainly subterranean, so they should be somewhere in the mountains. As he walked further inland toward the mountain he was having a somewhat unsettling déjà vu from the first time he entered the mountain valley all that time ago. The island was deathly silent, not a single chirp could be heard.

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

Chapter 124: The Zhix

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

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

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

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

They also had four normal appendages and even wore clothes. When people spoke about the Zhix earlier he had almost imagined them to look a bit like the Mantis-ants, having swords for arms. But they held actual weapons in their pretty human-looking hands.

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

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

The Zhix warrior gave no response apart from struggling and screeching, and Zac could only sigh and knock him out again. At least the intel was good, and these people were not very strong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Being god damn lunatics who attack everyone, he silently added in his mind.

There had been no reaction during the beginning of his speech, not even with his last sentence. Zac suddenly realized why, and wanted to smack himself. Unless they were idiots they should understand that their kind were still alive just from checking their own Ladder.

Still, there was some movement in the army. Generally it was just small glances between the troops, but it was enough for Zac to know that they understood his words. After being

relentlessly attacked so many times he had actually started doubting the effect of his language skill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you think your tricks will work on us, fallen one? Your kind might have taken a new face, but you can't hide the impurity coursing through your body. We eradicated your kind in the olden days, and we will do it again,” the other advisor huffed, and it looked like most of the warriors agreed with the sentiment.

“You mean the Cosmic Energy? It's not like I asked to have it. But our worlds got merged together, it's not like we had any say in whether the System crammed our world full of the

energy. And you call me fallen, but aren't you the same? I sense that you are at a decent level," said with a frown.

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

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

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

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

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

People had also found out that entering a contract with the Ishiate simply wasn't possible, the system blocked it. The general theory was that the System still considered the three races on Earth in contention, and blocked certain systems cross-races. Perhaps a leader of the planet had to emerge before all systems were completely unlocked.

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

problems to have time to plot against your people,” he finished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He already knew that many species were far superior to humans, or even demons, when it came to innate power. Some species were born at E-Ranked Race or even higher, and many had naturally higher stats.

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

“You call yourself a human, is it? You have told a fantastical tale. But how will we know you are not lying?” the leader said

as it turned back to Zac. “You told us that the reason we lost a part of the hive was the so-called Tutorial, but why was no one returned after a month?”

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

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

Chapter 125: The Dominators

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly the ground cracked under the feet of the large Zhix as it exploded into motion. It blasted toward Zac, almost matching the speed of himself when using **[Loamwalker]**. Zac was shocked, but battle was hardwired into his body by this

point, and he summoned his axe and swung out. It clashed against an elaborate dagger that was aimed straight toward his throat, and the power in the strike shocked Zac.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You reek of corruption. But then again, so do I by this point. We will not attack your people unless they provoke the Zhix or our precepts. The Zhix are not used to cooperation with

outsiders of the hive, but we must adapt to the situation,” it continued.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, what do you eat?”

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

Zac could only hope that the list would be amended to also exclude humans, but for now he simply threw out a bunch of

huge beast carcasses from his pouch. During the week of travel with his new squad of soldiers he'd stuffed multiple bags full of meat just in case he'd ever need it. The plateau suddenly filled with everything from boars, to huge snakes, to great birds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your leader was quite powerful.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We all knew that it was unlikely that the Dominators were the cause of our current situation. If they were powerful enough to rearrange the whole world we would have been enslaved again

long ago. It was just a convenient enemy to keep unity during troubling times. The Zealots might buy it, but you are no fools. Besides, I believe it has no real reason to lie to us,” Nonet said as it showed its congregants its hands.

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

“That is-“

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

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

“Immediately stop all digging toward the human’s island, refocus efforts on creating new farmland,” it said next after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We are almost half-way there,” an advisor asked.

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

“I think we will need to work with these foreign life-forms. The Dominators was a huge threat before the world changed. One of their warlocks took hundreds, often thousands of sacrifices to kill. Imagine their power now when the very air is full of corruption, and every death is an infusion of chaos,” the large Zhix said with a somber expression. “I wish that it was all just speculation, but you have seen the signs as well. The Dominators are back.”

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

Chapter 126: Ibtep

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So you give birth?" Zac followed up.

"No, we create eggs," Ibtep answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, at level 25,” Zac nodded.

“I want to use your crystal later.”

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

There were quite a few of the Zhix, and Zac had a hard time imagining them gaining 25 levels from some island critters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since the Zhix was very eager to get a class they headed straight toward his camp. Zac looked forward to the day the third wave done with, so he could become a lord. By then he could buy Nexus Stations and place them around the town, making it so that no one had any reason to barge into his private home.

However, as they closed in on his campsite Zac stopped in amazement, as the area was completely reformed. Large gardens had replaced the woods, creating a beautiful scenery

for the newly erected mansion. Some were created with various flowers and bushes, others with stones and gravel like a Zen garden.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is this a young of your species?" Ibtep aksed as it turned to Zac.

"An adolescent. Emily is soon 16," Zac answered.

"Hello young human. Here, have a snack," Ibtep said as he took out a dead grub from his backpack.

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

"Don't be rude, have a snack," Zac said smilingly and received a scathing glare in return.

“I am not sure if we can eat that, humans have a more delicate palate,” Zac could only say before things got awkward.

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

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

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

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

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

“Chough... Well, no. Not in this case. You generally only do that with your mate,” he helplessly explained before he turned to the teenager, eager to change the subject. He could only thank the stars that neither Emily or the ambassador had the language skill yes. “Where is the Nexus Crystal?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

other things, such as crafting,” Zac briefly recapped how it worked.

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

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

Chapter 127: Setting the Course

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

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

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

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

Noone answered, but only kept glaring at the Zhix. Of course, Zac knew that only a scant few in the audience could understand him.

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

“It was weakness leaving your hive. But if anyone feel it was unjust I can arrange a death match against those who felled your warriors. Hive Kundevi is always welcoming a test to hone their purity.”

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

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

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

"Very well human, it has been an interesting experience to travel with you. We'll speak again soon," it said as it walked away.

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

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

If he could help them understand that cosmic energy wasn't some corruption, but rather a natural part of their new world, they might not attack everyone and everything. If he could use this hive to make alliances with the Zhix all over the world they might be in a far better position against the incursions. They clearly loved battle, and if they could change their focus

from the so-called Dominators to the foreign invaders, then Zac would have allies that were likely even more useful than humanity.

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

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

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

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

"The upgraded array," he simply said.

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

"How are things going?" Zac asked.

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

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

"Of course, I have it under control."

Zac looked out over the field and saw the recruits stand in proper lines, following the movements of one of the demon soldiers who held the same type of spear as the others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There is also one of the insectoid beings on the island called Ibtap,” Zac continued. “Earlier today I traveled to their island and brokered a tentative peace with them. My wish is to incorporate them into Port Atwood, as they would be another strong addition to our forces. Their strength was surprisingly high even though they were stuck on an isolated island with few targets to hunt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end it fell upon Zakarith to take care of it. She had been trained to become a merchant, which included both the language skills and knowledge of how to converse with people of various cultures. In fact she seemed pretty excited at the

prospect of getting some real responsibilities instead of just babysitting the first group of humans.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh? How so?” Zac asked, intrigued.

“It sounds that your human leaders are putting on a big show for some reason. They likely have some goal in mind with gathering so many elites into one spot.”

Zac could only nod, as it was in line with his own belief and the information from the broker.

“That means there won't be only locals there. If they have a public array they likely have multiple private ones. They wouldn't open up an array to the public unless they felt safe doing so, and having reinforcements come from various towns around the world would generally do the trick.”

“I believe that the auction is announced to local powerhouses at most Government Towns around the world, and the powerhouses who wish to go will use the private teleporters to get there. Then opening up the portal to the public two weeks before is likely in an attempt to find various unaffiliated forces like ourselves,” the administrator continued.

Zac hadn't even considered that fact, not having analyzed Julia's too hard. She'd said that they had a teleporter since they were ahead of the curve, and Zac took it at face value. But there was nothing to say that there weren't multiple towns around the world that had private Teleporters. If a somewhat small village like Winterleaf Village could pool their resources to build the array, then so could the government-owned towns.

“What you're saying is only making me less willing to go, not more,” Zac said skeptically.

“Well, it is a risk, but also an opportunity. First of all, you might find some force that is located by the Undead Incursion. That way you can both gain more in-depth information, and perhaps even gain access to their teleporter, and save months of travel time,” he said.

“This also sounds like a great opportunity to make a great deal of money,” Zakarith added. “Natives seldom know the worth of many treasures, often since they might not be useful in the beginning when everyone is weak. Those treasures might only show their worth when making E-Grade gear, or trying to break through bottlenecks.”

“So you're saying we should go there and gobble up any treasures that humanity have no way to evaluate at the moment?” Zac asked, his heartbeat slightly speeding up in anticipation. No one hated making a lot of money.

“Precisely,” the demoness said with an impish smile.

“Well, it's fine by me, but I don't think I can learn all these kinds of things myself. I would either have to bring one of you or one of the Sky Gnomes. Can I even take the gnomes with me through the teleporter?” Zac said.

Everyone looked around hesitant, not sure about the answer.

“I think... Yes?” Zakarith finally said with some uncertainty. “There are restrictions to their activities, but if the purpose is mercantile, such as attending an auction, I think it is fine? But you need to check it out with them though.”

“Ogras would go.” Janos suddenly said.

“Huh?” Zac could only ask.

“Well... Ogras kind of loves auctions...” Ilvere said with some hesitation, and it looked like a light dawned in the eyes of most of the old clan members of Azh'Rezak. “He was somewhat known to attend various auctions, spending his grandfather’s money. I believe that trait of his was not part of his fake persona. He would definitely want to go if he is out of seclusion by then.”

Zac started to feel a headache as he imagined the haughty demon running around rampant in New Washington. If his current relationship with the government was strained now, he couldn’t imagine the demon making it better.

He truly hoped the demon would still be in seclusion in three days. Then again, bringing the crafty demon might be even better than bringing Sap Trang. It would probably be more beneficial having him take care of any negotiations with the government.

“Well, he’s busy at the moment so we’ll see how it goes,” Zac said noncommittally.

“The last thing I want to discuss is what to do about all the refugees scattered about our neighboring islands. It’s time to make Port Atwood a proper town.”

Chapter 128: Excursion

“I am thinking of extending an invitation to the various people in the area after the third wave is dealt with,” Zac began.

“However, are there any groups that might won’t make it until then?”

It was a fair question, as the refugees he took in last time were forced to set sail since conditions got too harsh on their island. Since then a few weeks had passed, and things were only getting worse out in the wild.

“There are 3 settlements we can bring back before the auction, and another 2 before the last wave,” Mr. Trang said after some deliberation. “All of them are teetering on the edge of destruction, and they did not seem very organized. There were no real fortifications around their settlements, and the beasts must have done a number on them. However, we can’t take too many each trip with our vessels, 15-20 people at the most per vessel.”

Zac sighed but nodded, indicating that they’d follow Sap Trang’s lead. It was pretty clear that the groups they’d pick up before battle wouldn’t be able to contribute to the war efforts.

“Is there any force that seemed strong amongst them?” Zac asked

“Both the bestman camps looked pretty strong,” Mr. Trang said. “There was also one human town that was... Odd.”

“Odd how?”

“I’m not sure, it wasn’t me who went there. It was the largest human settlement. They looked quite organized and no one seemed to be starving. However Mr. Nguyen said it was very eerie,”

“Eerie?” Zac asked doubtfully, to which Mr. Trang could only shrug his shoulders.

“Fetch those who went on that expedition,” Zac said after some deliberation.

If it was one of the small camps that was a bit off, then it was ok. But if it was the largest one he might need to intervene early.

Soon a couple of demon soldiers and a very nervous old fisherman stood in front of Zac and the others.

“Can you explain what was odd about the town?” Zac said as he looked them over.

The scouts hesitantly looked at each other, until one of the demons from the expedition spoke up.

“I can’t say for sure... It was just a feeling, like there was something wrong about the people,” he said.

“There were no children,” another demon added after some additional silence.

Zac didn’t react for a few seconds before he gave a start at that. He had not really thought about it since there naturally were no children in Port Atwood, but he realized that wasn’t really normal in a large settlement.

Children had a rough time of it in general since the integration. The system awarded them no special protections, not even those who had the potential to become cultivators, letting them fend for themselves. The only exception was that children below the age of 7 were teleported with their parents if they entered the tutorial. Of course they weren’t part of the missions but were placed safely to the side.

Otherwise the System was uncaring about the children of earth, and it was the same in the whole multi-verse. But the old factions and forces had established order long ago. Their towns weren’t on the brink of destruction from some monster hordes, and there was functioning training infrastructure within clans and at academies that would protect and prepare the young until they could gain strength. Children were seen as a resource and fiercely guarded, as it only took one genius or powerhouse to elevate a whole clan to a new level, and each child held that potential.

On Earth the adults could at least get stronger to defend themselves, but children could only hope to their parents were still around to protect them. Zac heard that the government was trying to set up something up for the young, but it was still in planning stages from what he understood. Many were already calling those below 16 when the integration came ‘The Lost Generation’, and Zac felt it fitting.

Emily was part of the lost generation, though she was a bit better off with at least being 15 when the integration happened. But her fate before meeting Zac was indicative of how powerless children were in this new world.

Zac had seen children in both New Washington and Greenworth, though they were generally accompanied by their parents. But if all children of a whole settlement were missing as the scouts indicated something nefarious was might be going on.

There was no real proof however, only some circumstantial odd facts, and since the people were both protected and looked fed he couldn’t use his limited time on that settlement. He would have to check it out after the last wave.

Everything was dealt with by now and the meeting was soon adjourned, and only an hour later four ships set sail together, with Zac standing on the fore of one of them. They were heading toward one of the islands that required immediate help, and Zac came along since he wanted to see the situation for himself. There was not much for him to do apart from pondering on the Dao at the moment in any case, and he could do that while sitting on a boat.

Zac wasn’t the only human on the vessels. He not only brought Sap Trang with him, but also a few of the stronger girls to give them some experience, and to let the refugees not only see people with horns. All of them, Mr. Trang included, were currently sitting down absorbing Nexus Crystals, not letting a second go to waste.

The island they were heading for was about three hours away, and when they arrived Zac saw that it looked about the same as any tropical island. This one was even smaller than the Zhix

island, though there was no mountain taking up most of the space. They sailed around the shore for a few minutes until a run-down town came into view.

It became increasingly clear that most of the settlements were various coastal towns taken from around the world placed on their own islands. Zac could only assume that the patch of forest he was located in before the integration was added on to the main island to increase its size.

The town looked quite colonial in its architecture, and Zac guessed it was from some island in the Caribbean. The town might have been the type of idyllic place you saw on postcards back in the day, with brightly colored houses and beautiful cobblestone paths, but now it gave off a far more dour feeling.

Many buildings were marred with scratches and cracks, and some even had splotches of blood on them. It looked like only part of the town was randomized to this location, as it seemed that the part with any marina or harbor was missing. The section in front of them was mainly lined with beautiful pristine beaches, making it seem like a perfect tourist destination.

The four Creator vessels simply ran up on the beach itself, their inscribed hulls taking no damage at all from the somewhat rough landing. The eight people Zac brought for the expedition swiftly jumped off and were led by one of the demons who initially scouted out the town.

“There are a few fortified buildings in the center, we think most of the survivors are holed up there,” the demon said.

Soon they reached the buildings the demon mentioned, and Zac saw it was likely once a small hotel that was turned into a base. It was lined with a simple wall of sacks filled with sand and spikes were erected among them.

It was also clear that the place was populated since the hotel was currently under attack by gigantic rats. A quick glance at Sap Trang showed him blanching, perhaps remembering his own ordeals. Zac wondered if this kind of vermin had some sort of advantage, as overgrown rats was a problem in almost all settlements from what he heard.

Having the capability to quickly grown in numbers was a huge asset when Cosmic Energy ensured that anything would grow large. Even if a bear got stronger it might only have a few cubs in its lifetime, whereas a rat could have hundreds of kids.

Zac could see a few people desperately fending off the rat tide that pushed against the defenses, there were a few breaches where a few people desperately swung everything from clubs to frying pans in an effort to keep the monsters outside the perimeter. The rats were around level 15 to 25, and Zac felt it was a decent target practice for the girls.

“Go help them out,” Zac said as he stayed put. The monsters weren’t too numerous, and there was no point in him or the demons going out and stealing the experience.

Soon the three girls and Sap Trang were wildly swinging against the mice, quickly getting splashed in rat blood. Zac saw that Mr. Trang now was using a sword resembling a cutlass. With his old patchy cloth and leathery skin, he looked very much the part of an elderly pirate. Every now and then he also unleashed a few small water sprouts that impaled the rats, but it didn’t look very effective. Likely the skill would be stronger if he was at sea and had free water to use.

In just a few minutes most of the horde was dealt with, and Zac felt it was enough at this point. He walked up close to the battlements and simply released his aura. Pandemonium erupted among the surviving rats, and with panicked screeches they fled in all directions.

Zac quickly retracted his aura and looked over his panting soldiers.

“Good job,” he said with a small smile as he saw them looking down with disgust at their drenched bodies. “You’ll have to wipe that grime off before we return, I don’t want rat blood all over my ships.”

Afterward he turned over to the people hiding behind the battlements or were peering out from windows of the hotel.

“Hello, I’m Zac. I understand you requested some help from my scouts the other day,” he said to the people of the island.

He could hear some muted voices for a bit until a man spoke up from behind.

“Are you from some government?”

“No. They are an endless distance away on the mainland, and they’re barely able to maintain order in their own towns, let alone sending out rescue missions to our archipelago,” Zac said.

They seemed disappointed in the news, but a few people still stepped out from the barricades, warily hefting their makeshift weapons.

“What’s the catch?” one of the women suddenly asked. “We’re all fighting for our lives here, I don’t believe you’re just traveling around the sea to save people.”

“I need workers. I am building a town from scratch, and need everything from farmers to fishermen to local business owners,” Zac said. “Of course, if you want to keep fighting that is more than welcome. Warriors are always needed in this messed up world. But let me be clear; there is no social security, no freebies. There are no monsters and no risk to your lives in my town, but I have no use for freeloaders.”

They all perked up when he mentioned the safety. Zac didn’t mention anything about the third wave, feeling that it would only complicate things.

“Besides, how long can you stay like you are? You barely fended off these little guys,” he said as he waved at the rat carcasses. “The monsters will keep getting tougher, and there is safety in numbers.”

It didn’t take much more convincing than that, and soon four Creator vessels filled to the rafters with refugees were heading back to Port Atwood.

Chapter 129: Final Preparations

Zac sat in a secluded area of the academy with his eyes closed. They returned yesterday with the first batch of citizens, with them being given a brief introduction while they sailed. The demon's appearance once again caused quite a stir, but since they were stuck on a boat with open ocean all around they couldn't just run away. After some talking down they were somewhat okay since both Zac and the warriors who fought the rats were human after all.

Almost as soon as they arrived at Port Atwood the boats set out again for the next island. If they were going to rescue all groups before the third wave started they would have to essentially keep sailing around the clock. There was the option of buying a larger transport vessel from the Creators, but they cost over ten million nexus coins.

Zac could afford it, but he wanted to hold on to his money with both the auction and the third wave coming up. Zac didn't join the following expeditions, instead choosing to focus on his meditation. The new townspeople were mainly guided around by Megan and her group.

Megan and the others had quickly improved their attitude since Zac brought the women from Greenworth. Zac hadn't given any order to keep the state of the world secret, and soon everyone on the island knew about how much the world had actually fallen. Emily had already told them as much, but she was considered biased since she essentially lived a cushy life in Zac's mansion.

But hearing one horror story after another helped the former refugees realize that being stuck on this island wasn't too bad. There was food, and there was safety. There even were a steady amount of Nexus Crystals available for purchase, so

they could quickly advance in levels without risking their lives. Zac was even providing them with a modest salary as long as they completed their daily tasks.

Currently it came out of Zacs own pocket, but as soon as he became a Lord he could start taxing his citizens. At that point he'd want as many citizens as possible to add value to the town.

Instead of helping out with the rescue efforts Zac went to the Gravity Array in the Academy. His original plan was to focus on the Dao of Sharpness, but his recent inspiration into Heaviness in Greenworth changed his mind. He chose to sit and meditate in the Gravity Array cranked to the max since he thought the feeling of heavy pressure all over might assist him in his venture.

He'd been sitting there for almost a full day by now, and finally got up to his feet and stretched. The improved array brought the pressure up to 25 times the normal amount and could cover a large field rather than just the small camp. The trainees still normally trained in ten times the gravity though, since they generally collapsed in a heap when they tried anything higher than that.

He nodded toward Alyn who was busy screaming at one of the girls as he walked away. During his day in the array he would sometimes spectate the training while he was resting. What he'd seen had been quite jarring. He could understand why the woman was fired from her teaching position since she truly held nothing back when she was instructing these people.

She normally was very calm and adorned a smiling face, just like when she was teaching him in the caves. But she could also explode into a furious tirade when someone didn't live up to her expectations. Her verbal assaults could even put most drill sergeants to shame. That wasn't all, she even had gotten a hold of a tool that could best be described as a grenade.

It was a small inscription powered by a single Nexus Crystal that exploded in a concussion wave when thrown. It would blast away any unaware person, though not dealing any real damage. She used it any time she felt someone was lazing

about. Worse yet, Zac learned that the cost of the bomb came out of the pockets of the one she attacked. He considered stopping her then and there but judging by the reactions of the recruits they didn't mind, and it only spurred them on further.

He went to the Thayer Consortia next, and an excited Calrin moved to welcome him.

“Lord Zac, it is good to see you. I hope the pills I procured for you met your expectations,” he said, his eyes shining with greed. “Incidentally, I heard a customer mention an auction taking place soon?”

Zac's mouth couldn't help tugging upward as he looked down at the little Sky Gnome that was almost bouncing around in excitement.

“I thought you couldn't leave this compound, why is this of interest for you?”

“We're not some prisoners. We can leave the building any time we want, but most of our family are quite weak. Once upon a time we had mighty warriors to protect the Thayer Clan, but all of them defected, not wanting to impact their future cultivation. Shortsighted fools,” he explained in a huff.

“We can leave anytime, though we generally need to stay within your town. We have the same restrictions as all other foreigners on this emerging planet, and our special protections doesn't expand outside our buildings. We are also barred from various things such as most types of quests and procuring land,” he explained.

“However, I actually got a quest! A money-making quest! I can leave with you and go to the auction. Who knows what precious things that you idi- ehm, you newly integrated humans, will sell off to a fraction of their value,” Calrin exclaimed.

It looked like his reason for visiting the consortia had sorted itself out.

“Very well, you can come with me. I need someone who can spot the valuables after all. However, you are representing Port

Atwood and the Thayer Consortia, not just yourself. You might also need to assist in negotiations,” Zac said.

He wondered what reactions the little blue gnome would elicit, but he didn't really mind exposing him since he was just a mercantile user whose origins were easily explainable. He was not only good at sniffing out treasures, but he was also quite a talker, and could maybe help smooth out Port Atwood's somewhat harsh first impression.

As he walked back toward the inner area he quickly heard the bustling noise of activity. Since only the inner wall was completed the real construction of the town couldn't start yet. Anything built in the future residential or crafting districts would likely be reduced to rubble as soon as the next wave arrived. All the new citizens would need a temporary place to stay though, and a large number of buildings were being added to the temporary town inside the walls.

As he walked the streets he saw many unfamiliar faces. It was the refugees that were continuously pouring in from the ships shuttling back and forth between islands. As more and more humans joined the town the shock the demons created was getting smaller. Still, many had just arrived and glanced curiously or fearfully at the demons who passed them by.

The infusion of people was quickly increasing the liveliness of the town, especially as he even heard some children's laughter as he walked. He curiously looked over and saw a few children actually gather some distance away from the Zhix, with their parents fearfully keeping them from rushing up to it.

Zac was surprised to see the insectoid actually being able to wave his antennae, and he kept waving them at the children who excitedly waved back. It also held a large larva in a hand, but it was clear no one was interested in his greeting gift.

As soon as the Zhix spotted Zac it perked up and put the larva away as it walked over, the two demon guards following closely in tow, both balefully glaring at the insectoid. Zac briefly wondered if there would actually be people who would take the Zhix's offer of combat to the death.

“Greetings. I have something to discuss with you if you have the time?” Ibtep said as it closed in on Zac.

“Sure, lets head over there,” Zac said as he pointed toward Adran’s command tent that was just around the corner.

Soon they found themselves at a table in a partition of the large tent.

“I have walked among your kind and the horned ones for two days, and I can almost certainly conclude that you truly are not part of the Dominators or the Fallen,” the Zhix started.

“Uh, thanks I guess?” Zac said with some confusion.

“I would like to report back to my island, detailing my findings. I understand your vessels are continuously moving between islands, and would like to ride along,” he said.

“You’re heading home already?” Zac asked.

“No, I would still like to keep observing, so I would hope that you can pick me up again as well. More importantly, I wish to join your expedition through the magic transfer construction,” he said.

“The first part is no problem but the second part... Uh... Might be a problem. The last time Zhix teleported to where we are going they went berserk and started killing everyone,” Zac said hesitantly.

“It sounds correct. Zealots passing through the array for a death assault against the Dominators. Their progeny will be well taken care of. Of course, a misguided action in this new world. However, I find it very troubling that there is a Zhix settlement that has so readily built a such a transfer device,” Ibtep said.

“Troubling why?” Zac asked confused.

“I explained what happened with our so-called Nexus Crystal. The Holiness sealed it away since it was overflowing with corruption. Most of the Anointed should have acted the same, avoiding usage of such a device. That a hive already is using it to the degree of sending out death assaults is... a problem.

“Either they are even more open-minded than us. That is unlikely since what the holiness did by speaking to you was unprecedented. If our situation wasn’t so dire you would have been assaulted to our last man. The other alternative is... That the hive is not adverse to using corruption,” Ibtep said with a frown.

“You’re saying that they might be the so-called Dominators from your old world? Didn’t you say they were eradicated in a great war?”

“That’s the official belief, but there should be traitors surviving. The power of corruption has always been alluring,” Ibtep said.

“I don’t understand what this has to do with you coming with me?” Zac questioned skeptically.

“I wish to find out more about the other hives, and information here is limited. It seems I also need to warn you humans about the Dominators, for both our sakes,” Ibtep said with some worry.

“Why do you believe that they will be such a problem that humanity needs to be warned? They sound dangerous, but everyone is getting powerful, erasing their advantage,” Zac asked, feeling a bit unconvinced. “Besides, your kind already defeated them without any power.”

“Well, I will breach a precept since I think this is too important not to discuss. Discussing the powers of the Anointed is taboo, but you should know we have a ladder just like you. Most on the ladder are the Anointed, since between administering rites and their natural superior constitution they should be far more suited to this new world than you or me.

“However, there are a few who have not shown their true names, using various pseudonyms. Some thought before it was due to shame, not wanting to show how many of their hives had died under their watch since every death makes the Anointed stronger. In fact, all the top five names on our Power Ladder use pseudonyms.

“But there has always been another possibility. Those with the fake names might be the Dominator traitors, who were afraid to be exposed. That would explain why their power is higher. They started already being full of corruption before the integration,” Ibtep concluded.

“I still don’t see your point?” Zac probed.

“Those with pseudonyms are all around level 100.”

Chapter 130: The Motley Crew

“WHAT?!” Zac asked, shocked. “That’s impossible.”

He wasn’t saying that without any reason. He had proof in the form of his own titles. He was the first to reach level 25 and attain a class, and it was just impossible that someone not only caught up to him, but even gained another 50 levels.

“Can you please show me, I need to verify the truth of it,” Zac finally said.

After explaining how to show status screens or other menus of the System, he soon blankly stared at a small hovering box.

[3. Inevitability. Level 98]

The Zhix was unwilling to share the whole list, but that single line was all Zac needed to know the Zhix wasn’t lying.

“Holy shit...” Zac could only mutter.

Countless questions whirled in his head suddenly, the foremost one being how the hell this was possible. The only explanation he could come up with was that these Dominators didn’t start at level one since they already used Cosmic Energy before the integration. He actually had no idea what happened in that case, and missive didn’t really say anything about it either. It did, however, mention that sometimes the invaders encountered extremely strong resistance.

As for the titles they were either split up between the races like the ladder, or old cultivators weren’t eligible for them. Zac could only hope it was the latter since it was bad enough if the Dominators were level 100 E-Rank powerhouses. If they also had the “First”-Titles as well with all their big percentage bonuses they might as well pack it up and look for ways to get off this planet.

Level 100 was no joking matter. It was a full 25 levels past the bottleneck at 75. Since they were actually past the bottleneck it meant that they all held Dao seeds and an E-Ranked Class by now. Not only that, the improvements per level after the bottleneck were a lot larger compared to before. They would be in a completely different league compared to beasts like the Fiend Wolf he fought earlier, who barely had passed the threshold.

If you combined that fact together with the extremely strong bodies the leaders seemed to possess, it made a truly terrifying image. He held no illusions that he'd be able to defeat something at level 100 even with all his titles, especially not considering their natural endowments.

With that amount of power, they were even a larger threat than the incursions. After all, they didn't just possess monstrous individual power, they also had large Zhix hives full of zealous warriors who were happy to go on a rampage against anything with cosmic energy. He even suspected that many had no idea they were following a so-called Dominator since they clearly were hiding and biding their time for some purpose.

"I think you understand my worry, human. I need to gather more information, and hopefully we can warn other hives," Ibtep said.

Though it was like a risk Zac felt he had no choice but to bring Ibtep by this point. The Zhix was right, humans needed to be aware of this fact. And a real walking and talking Zhix would be far more effective than just him saying it without any real proof.

"Ok, you can come. Talk to Adran and get a crystal for the language skill [**Book of Babel**]. Otherwise, the humans won't understand your words. We leave in the morning in two days, so make sure you finish your report home before that," Zac finally relented.

The crystals came from various demons who bought it at the Contribution shop and then traded it for Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins with Adran. Since Zac felt it was an extremely important skill, and Calrin still wasn't able to buy a batch

through the Mercantile System, he offered quite generous prices for them.

“Oh, and figure out a way to pass the message to the hives without anyone approaching. There are few humans who are willing to do what I did, and force themselves into a hive to leave a message. We can probably drop a message down from the sky or shoot it at them from a long distance though,” Zac added after some thought.

The next day was quite uneventful, as Zac simply trained most of the time except when he went back to his mansion to eat something and perhaps watch some movies. The new building held a proper viewing room almost looking like a luxurious cinema. Except for the fact that there were large soft leather couches placed in groups and a myriad of pelts and pillows created with soft wolf fur. Unfortunately, with the new looming threat it was hard to relax, even with his improved living conditions.

Finally the day of the Auction arrived, and Zac got himself ready. This time he didn't wear any shoes as he didn't know what would happen when a blue Gnome and a Zhix stepped through the teleporter, and he needed to be able to block a potential attack.

He'd already handed the Zhix one of the armors that held a single defensive charge through an inscription, the very same type that he'd used in the beginning before he got his upgrade. As for the little Gnome he wasn't as worried since he was quite sure that many of the various items he wore were defensive treasures.

He said goodbye to a brooding Emelie who was angry she wasn't allowed to come with them this time either and headed toward the array. Everyone else was already waiting outside the teleportation building, the Zhix once again donning his huge backpack instead of using the Cosmic Sack.

It wasn't the first time he did it, and when Zac asked why the first time Ibtex explained that his snacks couldn't enter the pouch while they were fresh.

“I hear there are exciting things going on. Count me in,” Zac suddenly heard as the shadows of the building congealed into a familiar person.

Zac felt a headache coming on as he saw Ogras emerge with an excited face.

“I thought you were busy training,” Zac could only say with a sigh.

“It’s all done. I can’t leave all the fun to you and that blue little bastard,” he said with a sneer at Calrin, who responded with a gesture that Zac could only assume was offensive.

“What about your identity?”

“I got the report from Ilvere. There are supposedly four worlds that got knocked together, right? So why shouldn’t there be a fourth species? I’ll just say that we didn’t spawn in your mainland area since we prefer hotter climates. That should match well with your silly old depictions of us demons,” Ogras said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Clearly, nothing would detract him from joining in on the fun.

“Hello, demon leader. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Zhix. Would you like a snack?” the Zhix suddenly said as he walked up with a large squirming larva in his hand. “It’s freshly caught.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Ogras. Here’s a fruit that you can’t find on this world, give it a try,” the demon responded as he took out a nasty-looking thing from his cosmos sack.

The fruit looked twisted and shrunken and had quite an acrid smell. It wasn’t anything Zac had seen before, and more importantly not something he’d ever put in his mouth. He suspected it was a prank Ogras pulled as a response to being fed insects, but clearly the Zhix didn’t mind. Soon the two of them were munching away, and Zac wasn’t sure who he should be more grossed out at.

“Um, Ibtep, why do you keep offering... Snacks to people?” Zac couldn’t help asking, as Ibtep and his larva were starting to become a talking point in Port Atwood.

“I learned this trick from the previous Anointed. If you need to make a good impression offer the other party a snack, and they will be more amenable afterward,” it said with some pride in its eyes, and Zac had to admit that it made some sense, though it might need to change what was considered a snack.

Zac was silently looking over his small team that would represent Port Atwood, and couldn't help but start sweating. He wasn't sure whether the team looked like an alien invasion or a traveling circus. They were only missing Karunthel, the Creator Foreman with his monstrous spider legs, to round out the image. Sap Trang seemed to understand what was going through his mind, and could only wryly smile and shrug.

Zac still brought the old fisherman as he wanted to have someone represent humans, and not just bring aliens, and it felt even more poignant now with Ogras entering the fray. Mr. Trang had even gotten a makeover for the occasion, now donning clothes similar to the E-Grade Robes Zac wore. Of course, they were without the powerful inscriptions.

Zac could only sigh shrug his shoulders and turn toward the array.

“Wait a few seconds before entering. I have to warn them or something. And don't do anything stupid,” he said as he activated the array.

In a short moment he once again arrived in New Washington. To his surprise he found himself in another building compared to the one he arrived in last time. They had moved the array from the claustrophobic little room without windows into a huge lobby.

For a second he felt that he was at an airport, as in front of him there was a security checkpoint. There was a counter with thick bulletproof glass, and a person sat behind it. There were also quite a few soldiers walking around, and a prickling sensation told him that a gun was pointed at him from some hidden angle.

Before he had time to do much of anything a man rushed toward him.

“Mr Monk, it is good to see you again. I am Adam. We have be-“ the man began, but Zac quickly spoke over him.

“Sorry to interrupt, but instruct your soldiers to not fire. A few more are arriving from Port Atwood, and they are not human,” Zac quickly said.

The man looked surprised but acted quickly as he turned around and shouted a few orders.

Not long after the array flashed again and the party arrived one by one. The first who entered was Mr. Trang, making the greeter throw a confused glance at Zac. However, with every new person emerging after Sap his eyes widened a bit further.

The last to emerge through the teleporter was Ibtep, who curiously glanced around until his eyes landed on Adam, who by now was openly gaping as he stared at the odd party. Any activity had stopped in the lobby as well, as everyone was warily looking at the group, the silence almost palpable.

The Zhix didn't hesitate and resolutely walked up to Adam, making many aim their weapons at Ibtep.

“Hello, human leader. Would you like a snack?” he said, holding a large wriggling grub up to the startled man.

“This is Ibtep, he's a part of Port Atwood and not an enemy,” Zac quickly added.

“Ah.. uh... Well, welcome everyone,” Adam managed to say as he hesitantly accepted the large larva. “I am sorry, but could you please wait here? I am not sure about the protocols when encountering new species. I need to contact my superiors.”

“That's fine,” Zac said and ushered the group to a group of sofas closeby.

“What's with all these rules and regulations?” Ogras muttered annoyed, but still went with the others. “It shouldn't be so complicated. If people make trouble after arriving, kill them. If not, leave them be.”

“Basic bureaucracy is a cornerstone of a civilized society,” Calrin said after casting a scathing glance at the demon. “Not

like you demons would understand, with your clusters being lawless hellholes.”

Ogras didn't seem to mind and only grinned back at the Gnome.

“What other laws do you need except the law of the jungle?” he retorted.

The two had developed a rapport over the months that made Zac unsure whether they were good friends or bitter enemies. It was clear that the two were gearing up for an argument, but luckily something interrupted them.

The teleportation array flashed into life once again, and not long after a group of people emerged. They all wore high-quality gear that Zac assumed could only be bought through the system as he could spot fractals on various spots.

There were three of them, with the one in the front being an elderly man in at least his sixties. However, he looked to be in good vigor with sharp eyes and a ramrod-straight back. His beard and hair were meticulously cut, and he even radiated a bit of an aura. Everything about him oozed authority, and Zac guessed he was someone in power before the fall. Either a prominent businessman or a politician.

Another man looked like a bodyguard, warily looking around. He also had a large shield fastened to his back, and Zac assumed he was able to equip it at moment's notice if needed. When the man saw Zac and the others his brows furrowed, and he slightly repositioned himself toward them.

His movements were ignored by the old man who looked straight ahead, but they were noticed by the last person, a woman somewhere in her twenties. She was quite tall, reaching over 170 cm, and she seemed to possess an almost feline grace. Her movements reminded Zac of the demon scout he fought long ago. She had been slippery as an eel, freely moving through the treetops as easily as walking on the ground. But the woman in front of Zac right now gave even him a distinct sense of danger, far more than any human he'd met thus far.

She was beautiful, but not overly so. The most memorable thing about her, however, was her piercingly blue eyes. She looked quite intrigued as she glanced at their odd group, particularly at Ogras and Calrin.

“Grandpa,” the girl softly said, bringing the old man’s attention to Zac and his group.

When he saw the Zac’s motley crew his face changed the first time since exiting the teleportation array. The trio was known clearly known to the people of New Washington, as another representative hurried up to them and wanted to show them the way out.

However, the old man simply ignored the liaison and walked toward the sofa group.

Chapter 131: The Marshall Clan

The old man stopped a few meters away from Zac's group, slowly looking over each and everyone with a frown.

"Humanity is on the brink of extinction, and you're consorting with the enemy?" he said with a terse voice.

"Allies are allies, enemies are enemies. Why bring race into it?" Sap Trang answered with a congenial smile. "We old folk need to learn to embrace change in this new world if we wish our children to flourish in the future."

The old man only snorted and left it at that, leaving with his two companions in tow. The girl took a last glance at the party before they passed the security checkpoint and left the area.

Zac looked over at his company, but saw that none of them had taken offense at the words. Calrin didn't care since there was no money involved, and Ibtep kept looking around the structure with fascination. As for Ogras, he seemed to consider the short exchange a form of entertainment.

"Finally some interesting things are happening after all these dull months," he said with a smile.

Zac only sighed in response, thankful he had Mr. Trang with him to take care of things. They didn't have to wait for long until he saw Julia rush toward them.

"Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. You never told us that Port Atwood was such a... Cultural melting pot," she said with a forced smile.

"Well, as I said, we're living in an isolated place, and we needed to cooperate to survive," Zac answered with a shrug. "We just spoke with an interesting group led by an old man, who were they?"

“They, ah, are VIP guests,” she said and leaned over after glancing around and continued in a whisper.

“They were the Marshall clan. As in Thea Marshal, the strongest woman in the world. That was her in the flesh,” she whispered, unable to hide her excitement.

“The strongest woman huh? Too bad she’s a bit plain,” Ogras said with a sigh.

“This is Ogras Azh’Rezak, the, uh, representative for the demons of Port Atwood,” Zac said with a sigh.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Azh’Rezak. Welcome to New Washington, the beacon of humanity,” Julia said with a smile, seemingly unperturbed to see a foreign species.

“The mapping of our new planet is a bit limited, and we have yet to encounter either you, or your other friend’s, kind before,” she asked, obviously hoping for some sort of explanation, but Ogras only smiled in response.

“Calrin Thayer of Thayer consortia. From the moment I lay my eyes of you I felt you were a woman of principle and discerning taste. I am therefore extending a ten percent discount on your first purchase in one of our stores as a greeting gift,” the gnome said as he stood up and made a simile of an aristocrat’s bow.

“How generous, thank you. I hope to visit your store soon. I unfortunately have nothing to offer except this pamphlet about the rules and regulations of New Wash-“ Julia said while handing out a brochure, but stopped herself and looked over at the Ibtep who had stood up and moved toward her during the conversation.

“Hello female human. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Anointed. At your convenience I’d like to discuss matters of grave importance. Also, please accept this snack as a greeting gift,” he solemnly said, this time holding up a decently large caterpillar.

Julia couldn’t help but grimace when she saw the wiggling insect, almost going so far as taking a step away.

“I am afraid can’t accept this gift of yours. Unfortunately I am a bit sick and has trouble eating at the moment. However we are very much open for a dialogue. We have been hoping to establish diplomatic relations with the Zhix for some time.”

“That leaves Mr. Trang. He represents the humans of Port Atwood,” Zac finished his introduction and Julia cordially greeted him as well before turning back to Zac.

“And what is your responsibility?” Julia asked with a questioning glance.

“Uh... Spiritual guidance?” Zac answered as he scratched the back of his head, prompting a snort from the demon.

His head wasn’t bald like a monk’s anymore, but it was still extremely short. Apparently hair grew slower and slower as Vitality increased, rather than the opposite. It had something to do with the fact that hair was made from dead cells, and cells died at a much slower rate for the evolved.

It was possible to quickly grow it out again with the help of Cosmic Energy, but he felt it was more convenient to let it be, as it both saved time on maintenance and he wouldn’t get anything in his eyes during battle.

Julia clearly looked skeptical, but let it be.

“With your identities being a bit unique we unfortunately can’t let your group venture out into the town until all details have been confirmed. However, I will personally take you to the venue for the auction,” she said.

“This way gentlemen, the auction is starting soon, and you are amongst the last to arrive,” Julia continued as she guided them out of the building.

“Oh? There are many parties that have arrived through the teleporter?” Sap Trang asked curiously.

“There are a surprising amount of forces around the world that has a private teleporter. It is unfortunate, there is in a way a huge network of nodes over the world that could assist humanity’s war efforts, but it’s currently not useable,” Julia answered, skirting any actual numbers.

All of the people, even Mr. Trang, curiously glanced all around, as it was the first time they'd seen a proper human town. Sap Trang was interested as well, as he'd spent most of his life in his small fishing village, except for when he was in the army.

"The Auction will take place at the National Opera, it is most convenient if we take a car there, please this way," she said as she led them to a limousine that was waiting.

"Your kind has made some interesting things," Ogras said as he fiddled around with the mini-fridge inside as they drove through the town. "We should bring a few of these things back to Port Atwood."

"I brought a few back last trip, they are more suited for our terrain than this one," Zac only answered.

"Excellent."

"Your hives are quite spread out. It seems inconvenient to defend," the Zhix commented as it looked out through a window.

"Our defensive systems have evolved over the years to not really depend on things such as walls anymore. However, with the change to our world, building proper walls has once again become a priority," Julia answered with a smile.

After driving for fifteen minutes they arrived at the venue. There clearly had been some beasts roaming about once upon a time, as there was some damage that had been fixed up at various spots. However, the structure still looked quite grand. The ceilings were over ten meters high, and the whole area was covered in red carpet.

"I will leave you here as there are quite a few matters I need to arrange. There are spots reserved for you, just show an attendant this ticket when the auction starts," Julia said to Zac as she handed him a piece of paper. "Oh, and please remember to... follow the guidelines in the pamphlet. Your party will stand out, but please try to avoid causing conflict. We will speak again after the event."

With that she sped away, leaving the group to gawk at the gaudy display. However, there were quite a few hints that the event was not some posh gala. Zac spotted a few military vehicles parked outside, and the entrance was lined with a row of soldiers. There were also dozens of cultivators with various weapons who stood at the ready, decked in riot gear.

The actual guests were actually fewer than the soldiers and the attendants, but Zac was still surprised by the numbers as they walked inside. The doors to the actual venue were still closed, so the guests were milling about in the huge lobby, making small talk and mingling. It was an extremely weird contrast, seeing people in armor and sword holding glasses of champagne or eating canapés.

Zac noted with some surprise there were even some groups of Ishiate present, mostly standing by themselves. Zac even spotted a familiar face among their kind standing by the side of a few other ishiate who were similarly dressed in simple but sturdy gear.

It was also the first time he saw the other type of Ishiate, who wore far more urban clothing. Their gear was almost modern, and they even carried rudimentary hot weapons like blunderbusses and muskets. It was clear that the two groups still were at odds, as they stood in two separate cliques.

As Zac and his group made their entrance a lull in the conversation spread over the floor as most parties curiously looked at them. They likely struck quite the image with three types of aliens and the odd clothing of himself and Mr. Trang. Zac stood out even further as he walked around barefoot, as he refused to lose the ability to use **[Loamwalker]** with this many powerful people around.

“Wow you human’s auctions are a bit dull, I’m not seeing a single fight,” Ogras said as he looked around with some disappointment. “And I’m also starting to wonder if you are mentally sound. You humans can obviously build decent structures not just in the movies, but you chose to live in a tin can in the woods?”

“I told you I was out camping with friends when the integration happened,” Zac said with a sigh.

“I just don’t understand why you would like to live like a poor person surrounded by trees,” the demon retorted, but let the subject go.

“Okay, it’s some time before the auction starts. Please behave, and keep information about Port Atwood at the minimum. Mr. Trang, please stay with Ibtep,” Zac said, but immediately groaned when Ogras turned into shadows.

He appeared again next to a startled waiter, and snatched up two glasses of champagne and downed them in quick order before starting to walk around. The Sky Gnome didn’t linger either and unhesitantly moved toward a party of humans, likely eager to make some business connections.

He turned around and looked at a helpless Mr. Trang and was about to leave to speak with Selas who stood amongst the other beastkin, but stopped with a frown as he saw a party heading his way. It only took a second to realize that these people weren’t moving toward him to socialize, but to create trouble. It was also clear that he wasn’t the target, but it was rather the Zhix who still curiously looked around at the luxurious interiors.

Zac could only sigh as he knew that this would likely happen sooner or later when he brought Ibtep. The Zhix might not go out of their way to kill people, and mainly holed themselves in their hives, but that didn’t change the fact that quite a few humans had died by their hands since the integration started. It was inevitable that some would want some revenge, even if it was only at the species responsible for the atrocities.

“You have a lot of balls bringing one of those *things* here,” one of the front men growled as he balefully glared at the Zhix.

“I don’t know your history with the Zhix, but we have brought Ibtep here in order to help facilitate peace between our species. Our main priority should be the incursions rather than fighting amongst natives,” Sap Trang said, trying to defuse the situation.

“Hello human, I am Ibtep,” the Zhix said, ignoring Zac’s attempts to signal it to let Sap Trang talk. “I am sorry there has been some confusion between our people, resulting in accidental deaths. On the bright side it is only weakness leaving your swarm, making it stronger.”

Zac could only shake his head as he heard the words. He knew that the Zhix truly thought the words were consoling. The Zhix were really pragmatic in that way, believing that if someone died like that they can’t have been too strong anyway. It was pure Darwinism in a sense, though Zac didn’t feel that type of mindset really worked in this new world with Cosmic Energy.

“What the FUCK is this thing saying? YOU BASTARDS KILLED MY WHOLE HOMETOWN!” another of the threatening men roared, his eyes bulging in anger.

It seemed to have been some sort of a signal as the whole group drew their weapons, all of them radiating strong killing intent.

Zac could only sigh and bring out his wooden club.

Chapter 132: New Friends

The roar put a damper on the conversation in the whole area, and the guests curiously looked at the source of the commotion. Mr. Trang glanced worriedly at Zac, who could only move up next to the two. Mr. Trang's power had improved quite a bit recently, however Zac sensed that Sap would barely manage to handle one of these people, let alone the whole group. He had to take over from here.

There were also multiple guards who moved closer with their guns at the ready. However, they didn't seem interested in breaking up the fight, and Zac could understand why. Most of the people in this room were likely powerhouses, and butting in was a good way to get yourself killed. The army was likely there to protect the venue and government officials from attacks rather than mediating disputes between cultivators.

"Let me take it from here Ibtep," Zac said as he turned toward the group. "Ibtep is not from any hive you have encountered, as their hive hasn't harmed any humans. Our goal is to stop the fighting between our species, so please go away."

"Fuck you, insect-lover," another in the group spat as they all rushed forward.

Zac briefly considered pushing out his aura but decided against it. The Marshals were in the room, and they should have no problem comparing Thea's power against his, and from there figure out his identity.

Instead he decided to rely on the same wooden club that he used to subdue the Zhix warriors as he walked forward. The air screamed as the club danced through the air with almost impossible speed. There was a quick succession of deep thuds followed by flying bodies, and in just below 5 seconds the whole group was lying unconscious spread out on the floor.

Zac grimaced when he saw that most of the eyes in the room suddenly were upon him. Some looked intrigued, others afraid, and some calculating. He even saw the people from the Marshall clan intently stare at him from a group of sofas in the distance, where they were surrounded by a group of sycophants. It almost felt like the intensive stare of Thea Marshall was going to burn a hole in his head, so he quickly turned away.

“HA HA! GOOD THWONKING!” a booming voice was heard across the whole room as the largest man Zac had ever seen walked toward him, holding a whole tray of canapés.

The man was so huge that Zac wondered if humans could mutate like beasts, growing out of proportions. He was well over two meters tall, and not the thin and wiry type of tall. Thick bulging muscles covered every inch of him, giving him the impression of a walking behemoth.

He also carried the nastiest weapon Zac had ever seen on his back, a huge club as large as a tree trunk, where the head of the club was actually the cranium of some unknown beast. The skull was extremely uneven with many bulges and bumps, and looked quite gnarly.

Its make was actually a bit reminiscent of his own weapon, **[Verun’s Bite]**, as it carried the same type of primal aura. Zac instinctively felt it might actually be a Spiritual Tool just like his own. All in all the man gave out a dense aura of power, and Zac knew this man was far stronger than the rabble he just clobbered. His size and muscle clearly weren’t just for show, and he gave off a quite imposing feeling.

The Zhix by his side obviously had a similar impression of the giant.

“Greetings your Holiness,” Ibtep immediately said it walked up to the large human and gave a deep bow. “I am Ibtep, ambassador of Nonet, Anointed of the hive of Kundevi. Strength to your hive.”

The huge man blankly stared at the Zhix for a few seconds, and even Zac blanked out for a bit before he understood what was going on.

“Uh Ibtep, the humans don’t have any Anointed, he is just very large.”

“Impossible, with this frame he must be anointed by the God of War,” the Zhix staunchly rebutted.

To Zac’s surprise, a well-dressed middle-aged man next to the giant stepped forward and gave a proper bow in response.

“Greetings Ibtep of hive Kundevi. This is Mayor Thwonkin’ Billy of Billyville. We are pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said with a proper British accent.

Zac’s eyebrows rose when he heard the introduction, and he shot another glance at the giant. Thwonkin’ Billy had been on the top ten of the ladder since day one, and he currently held the 7th spot with level 38. Zac had to admit that the true appearance of the ranker even trumped what he imagined the first time he read the pseudonym.

“Hello, I’m Monk.” Zac said to the giant.

“What’s an Anointed?” the huge man said looking extremely confused.

“The Zhix are theocratic, their leaders are called the Anointed,” Zac explained, but the giant once again started blankly at the two.

“They are the insect big bosses,” the man next to Billy explained to his companion without missing a beat.

“Ha ha, you are stupid Insect man. I am a leader of humans, not insects,” the giant guffawed. “Hey, you look smart and good at thwonking, do you want to come and beat ratmen? They give a lot of money and make you stronger. We’re looking for people to help with the ratlight,”

“I’m sorry, what’s a ratlight?” Zac asked confused.

“An incursion. Billy is the leader of our town that is situated next to an incursion claimed by Ratmen. We keep killing them, but they seem to propagate at extreme speeds, making it hard to make any headway in closing it. We’re here looking for allies,” the butleresque man next to Billy explained.

Billy clearly wasn't lying about killing Ratmen giving a lot of benefits, since he obviously received huge gains from the incursion. He wasn't only on the top ten of the power list, but also on the wealth list. Zac didn't think it would be too hard to get some eager volunteers as soon as they announced Billy's name.

"Billy has been thwonkin' rats for months, I'm tired. I wanna do something else, but they keep coming," the giant sighed.

"Oh, unfortunately we are a bit preoccupied for the moment with some problems with our own town, but we'll help out if we can," Sap Trang answered after seeing a small shake from Zac.

"Give them the time Nigel," the giant said to his companion as he stuffed the last canapés into his mouth.

"That's... A bit early Billy," the man hesitated.

"Give them the time Nigel," the giant simply repeated.

"Sigh... Seventeen days from now. At ten AM in New Washington time. We will make the Billyville teleportation array public for 15 minutes. We hope to make some allies here that will join us in fighting the Ratmen Incursion at that time," Nigel said.

"Oh?" Zac said intrigued.

It was a novel idea to set predestined times to make teleporters public. Of course it was a bit impractical, but there were not many other options before people started to become Lords and gain access to more sophisticated methods to control their domains and teleporters.

"We'll try to make it. If not us then perhaps others from Port Atwood. We have many people there who like, uh, thwonking," Zac said to Billy.

"Good!" Billy loudly exclaimed as he turned to leave. "I'm hungry. These people are stupid, why make food so small? See you in two weeks!"

"If you are serious, who do I speak with regarding details?" Nigel said as he stayed on after throwing the huge man an

exasperated glance.

“I represent the humans on Port Atwood, but I can’t speak for what the demons will do,” Sap Trang answered.

“I see an old friend, I’ll go talk to him while you figure things out. Ibtep, please stay with Mr. Trang for now. Your kind has made a lot of enemies the past months, and if we want to make a pact against the Dominators we can’t create trouble at this stage,”

“I understand, human. I will stay here,” Ibtep said as it looked down on the incapacitated people. “Should we take these one’s possessions while we wait? They are spoils of battle.”

“Leave them, let the government figure it out,” Zac said as he looked toward the soldiers.

As if summoned by his word a few of the soldiers rushed forward and carried the unconscious men away. Zac waited for a bit longer to see if anyone from the government would want to come over to talk, but it looked like they considered the matter over as he was left alone.

Satisfied he put away his club and moved toward the Ishiate. Altogether there were about 40 of the beastmen, spread quite evenly between the two camps, and none barred his path as he moved forward. He wasn’t very surprised after his display of power, and soon he was in front of Selas who stood next to an old man.

“Long time no see, Selas,” Zac said with a slight smile.

He wasn’t angry at the beastman for closing the teleporter a few weeks ago. Keeping it open would have put the whole village in constant danger, as anyone could just enter as they wished. Still, the beastman looked a bit awkward as it slightly bowed with an embarrassed smile.

“Hello Zac, it is good to see you again. I am sorry about the discourtesy the other time. Keeping the array open would have been a risk to the villagers,” the Ishiate said.

“No problem, I understand. We all keep our teleporters private for a reason.”

“You two know each other?” an elderly and kind-looking Ishiate asked with some interest.

“Yes, Mr. Zac here passed through our village and helped us kill an extremely strong beast that was threatening the villagers,” Selas explained.

“Oh, such a thing happened? You’re a friend of the Ishiate then. I am Willow, Druid of the Mountain” the old man said with a bow.

“Nice to meet you. I didn’t expect Ishiate to be here, to be honest,” Zac said as he looked at the pretty large group.

The comment about being a Druid was something he’d ask around about later, as it might be considered rude to do it right away.

“We are mainly here for information. You humans have proven to be far more adept than us at exploring our new world. There are many of us who are searching for their ancestral homes and families, and New Washington is our best bet to find news,” Willow explained.

Zac nodded as it made sense. The Ishiate were not very technologically advanced. Even those of the other group looked more like steampunk cosplayers than high-tech people. Both groups would clearly benefit from the programs that the government provided. Perhaps in the future there would be arrays or evolved scouts who could provide information even more efficiently, but Earth was far from that point.

“What about you?”

“We’re mainly here for the excitement. And who knows, we might pick up something nice as well,” Zac answered with a smile.

“Your group is quite interesting. There has already been some speculation about companions amongst the groups in this room,” another elderly man dressed very much as Willow said. “You’re only missing Ishiate in your party.”

“Our village is extremely remote, we had to team up with whoever is available. As for the blue gnome, he’s actually from a store we purchased through the Town Shop,” Zac

answered with a smile. “And we actually found two ishiate settlements just the other day but still haven’t made contact. Perhaps next time our party will be even more diverse.”

The comment caused some interest amongst most of the beastmen, who curiously looked over at him.

“Do you have any information about those who live there?” an Ishiate hurriedly asked, and Zac realized that many were hoping it was one of their home villages, even if it was a long shot.

He took out a full report from his pouch detailing the expedition. He had all types of reports typed up, but honestly, he almost never read them. But sometimes it was quite convenient, such as now.

“The two towns both hold an estimated 1000 to 2000 citizens. They seem to be from the group of your friends over there though,” he said and pointed to the other group of ishiate who stood some distance away. “They had erected proper walls and seemed to be in decent shape, not in need of saving at the moment.”

Many of the beastkin sighed in disappointment, but a few still held on hope.

“We know that sometimes our groups have joined hands to survive, perhaps some of our people are there as well. Were there any markers on the towns?”

“Uh, yeah, there were some kind of flags on both walls. One held a picture of a sun with a branch underneath, the other was a cogwheel with a lightning bolt running through it on a white background,” Zac answered as he read through the report.

The Ishiate looked at each other and after a few moments shook their heads in disappointment. However, two beastkin from the other group quickly walked over. Even though they belonged to different camps the Ishiate stood a bit clumped together, and the ishiate probably overheard the conversation with their keen hearing.

“Is what you said just now true?” one of them asked and they had hope in their eyes.

Chapter 133: The Auction Begins

The Ishiate who followed the way of nature frowned as they saw the two steampunk beastkin approach, but one of the elders spoke up.

“We can’t focus on old conflicts anymore. If our kin is to survive we must work together,” he said, but couldn’t help himself from continuing. “The universe has shown us the right path, and I’m sure the lost ones will return into the fold soon enough.”

Zac sort of understood the old druid meant. The two camps of the Ishiate essentially fought over the issue of Nature versus Technology, and it was pretty clear which of the two camps the System sided with. He actually felt a bit bad for the technologically inclined Ishiate, as their situation wasn’t very optimistic.

Of course, it was possible to become a powerful force in this new environment with the aid of technology. The Technocrats was one of the strongest forces in the multi-verse and still lived well even though multiple forces were gunning for them. However, the technocrats were approaching the limits of technology, having the means to travel the universe and unleashing terrifying weapons.

These Ishiate were no Technocrats, and had barely started on the path of technology. Their progress was a few hundred years behind humanity, and their weapons were probably already approaching obsolescence against the increasingly durable beasts in the wild. Zac guessed they would perish unless they turned back to the more simple ways.

“Progress is the basic path of life. To stick to the old ways is to perish. That hasn’t changed with the System, it has only been

reinforced,” one of the two Ishiate retorted with a glare.

“Human, is what you said true? There is truly a town with those flags close to your town?” the other Ishiate asked.

“Yeah, our scouts found them a few days ago,” Zac simply answered.

It wasn't really any secret information, and he could very much sympathize with these people. He understood what it was like to desperately search for his home in an endlessly large new world.

“Please let us come with you when you leave. That is Cogstown, our hometown,” they asked with hope in their eyes.

Zac mulled it over for a bit. He felt it wasn't too problematic to bring a few people with him through the teleporter. Besides, bringing these two should make forming an alliance considerably easier when they made first contact.

“Our town is extremely remote. In fact, it's not on the mainland. It's not sure that you can get back without using our teleporter. Do you still wish to go?” He said.

“Yes,” both of them answered without hesitation, and Zac only nod.

“Talk with my companion over there, the human. He can make the arrangements,” Zac said as he pointed to Sap Trang, who was still speaking with Nigel.

Suddenly a couple of speakers crackled into life, playing the classical intermission sound.

“Seems the auction is starting, if you will excuse me. I need to gather up with my group,” Zac said as he moved away.

“It was nice meeting you, Zac,” Willow said with a smile. “We hope to see you again.”

Soon he was back with the others. By this point Calrin had already returned, and soon he saw Ogras saunter over as well, holding a bottle of champagne he'd snagged somewhere.

“Not many interesting things happening so far, everyone is just sticking to their little groups, barely talking. The liquor wasn't

bad though, we should bring some bottles with us back home.”

“Not sure how many there are left, I think a lot of people has turned to the bottle to calm their nerves over the past few months,” Zac said with a sigh. “But it doesn’t hurt to give it a try.”

Actually, he agreed with the demon. While he didn’t really like champagne he really wanted to bring some beer with him back to the island, but he felt that most of it would have been consumed after almost five months since the integration.

“Then we simply get some brewers,” the demons said off-handedly, but the sentence sparked an idea in Zac as he turned to Sap Trang.

“Start thinking of a list of any type of occupation we’re currently lacking. Everything from chefs to sanitation workers to scientists.”

He hadn’t really planned to start recruiting in earnest yet, but since he already had brought hundreds of refugees he might as well go all the way. Who knew if all the useful people would be snatched up if they kept holding off. It might be a bit unethical to start moving more people to the island even before the third wave was dealt with, but if worse came to worst he could just have people flee through the teleporter back to New Washington.

The number of people in the venue was a clear indication that quite a few forces possessed a teleporter by this point. Zac knew that it wasn’t that people were extremely wealthy like him, rather his force was quite small compared to many towns. Taking New Washington for example, it held hundreds of thousands of citizens, and every person just had to contribute a handful of Nexus Coins for them to afford the Teleporter.

He needed to start thinking ahead if he was truly planning on creating a flourishing town. There might still be a window of opportunity where the other forces mainly looked for powerful warriors or rankers to join them, overlooking the long term benefits that non-combat classes could bring to an area.

Port Atwood on his island was quite a lot safer compared to most places on the mainland, which should allow him to focus more on recruiting and nurturing many people showing skill in craftsmanship. He already had an almost insane amount of raw materials for creating armors, now he just needed craftsmen to actually craft and inscribe them.

“Good, now you’re thinking in the big picture,” Ogras nodded. “I’m tired of living like a castaway.”

The group walked together and was ushered to a couple of seats near the front by an attendant who took a quick look at the ticket. It was clear that Zac’s rampage in Greenworth had left somewhat of an impression on the government, as they clearly sat in one of the best seats in the house.

This was further confirmed when both the Marshals and Billy were seated not far from them.

“Nigel told me the strong sits in the front. I knew you were smart, bald guy. But Billy is not only smart, Billy is also rich,” the giant said with a loud voice as he thumped down close to them, taking up two seats by himself.

“I’m sure there are enough good things for the both of us,” Zac answered with a smile.

He liked the giant so far, he seemed genuine enough. He’d take that kind of ally any day over calculating ones like the demon next to him.

The Marshals seemed a bit surprised to see Zac’s group once again, and Zac saw the guardian whisper something in the ear of their attendant. He glanced at Zac’s group but only shook his head looking unsure.

“Hey girl, I hear you’re the strongest woman amongst the humans. We saw your jump in the Dao ladder a while back, did you find something good? Are you interested in selling it?” Ogras said with a toothy grin at the looked in Thea Marshal’s direction

“I am sorry about him. Different cultures and all,” Zac could only sigh.

“Weaklings often have big mouths to compensate. I’m more curious about you. What are you called?” she lightly said as she stared at Zac.

“Uh, people call me Monk,” Zac said, uncomfortable by the intense glare.

“She’s got a mouth on her,” Ogras said, not minding the insult. “You should kidnap her back to Port Atwood. You’d have strong babies.”

The bodyguard frowned at the comment and prepared to move forward, but Thea lifted her hand to stop him. At the same time a spurt of blood erupted from Ogras’ throat, surprising both Zac and the demon.

Even though Zac was looking at the exchange from the start he wasn’t quite sure what exactly cut him. At first he thought it might have been a Dao Field of the Seed of Sharpness, but he believed he would have sensed the familiar feeling if that was the case.

“Watch your mouth,” Thea said as he looked at the demon with loathing.

Shadows squirmed and covered the shallow wound, and soon the bleeding was quelled.

“An interesting attack. But be careful about starting things. You might be strong, but can the same be said of your companions?” the demon smiled, and Zac’s eyebrows rose in alarm.

But before Zac had time to stop anything the bodyguard grunted as a shadow spear pushed through one of his legs, almost making him fall over. Thea looked around in surprise, and a frown appeared on the old man.

“What do you think? Can you kill me before I kill your two companions?” Ogras said while grinning.

“Despicable,” the girl said, throwing scathing glares at not only Ogras but the whole party.

“Enough,” Zac said while glaring angrily at Ogras, already regretting bringing him. “What will you do if you get us

thrown out before the auction even starts?”

“Relax, we’re just having some pre-auction fun,” Ogras said with a smile.

“I am sorry about him, this is a healing pill that will help with your friend’s recovery,” Zac said to the Marshals as he took out a small glass bottle and threw it toward them.

However, the bottle got rebuffed in the air and shot straight back toward Zac through some unknown means.

“The Marshall Clan is in no need of your little baubles,” Thea simply said as the trio sat down in their seat some distance away.

“Mama always says you should be nice to women, as being mean will bring you big trouble,” Billy muttered to himself, but with the giant’s standard volume it turned into an exclamation.

“She sounds like a wise woman,” Ogras only said to the giant, making him perk up happily.

He looked ready to say something but was distracted by the large curtains getting lifted on the stage and some musicians play classical music. It was beautiful, but it wasn’t what Zac came for, so he was happy to see that almost immediately a well-dressed man in a suit walked out on the stage and stood behind the podium.

“Welcome all to the first Grand Auction held by New World Government. It is an amazing sight to see so many coming from all corners of the world. It is truly a testament to humanity’s resilience in face of adversity. We’re also happy to see friends from other races joining us here today. I am hoping this is the start of a long and fruitful cooperation between our species.”

The man was clearly used to public speaking, and smoothly took command of the room.

“To make sure there’s no confusion in the event, I will go over the ground rules. This auction is a classical English-Style auction, and for those who are unsure of what that means, don’t worry, I will go over it with you. Beneath your chairs

there are numbered paddles that you use to bid. Simply raise the paddle to make a bid.

“The standard increase bid increase is based on the size, but generally around ten percent. For example, if the price is ten thousand Nexus coins, each standard bid will be a thousand nexus coins up to fifty thousand, at which point the standard bid changes to five thousand.

“Of course, you can increase the bid by a higher amount by shouting it out, but not by a lower amount,” the auctioneer said with a smile.

“If you are the highest bidder your number will be seen on the screen behind me. And don’t worry if you’re sitting in the back. I have three people all with scout classes and eyesight skills with me who will all help me in making sure that no bid is overlooked.”

“Payment accepted is World Government Credits, Nexus Coins or Nexus crystals valued at a 1:50 ratio. Be aware that no coercion, threats, or other disturbances are allowed during the auction. A first offense will result in a warning, but repeat offenders will be escorted out of the venue.”

“With that I hope you will enjoy the auction and that you all find something that will help you in the fight against our foreign invaders. The first item for auction is a set of five E-Grade Nexus Crystals,” the auctioneer said as a cart was rolled in by a beautiful woman.

On the cart was a briefcase, and when the showgirl opened it the light of five genuine E-Grade crystals radiated out. There was almost a collective intake of breath in the hall, and even Zac was interested.

The New World Government was clearly not holding back.

Chapter 134: Emma

“I am sure you’re all aware of the efficacy of an E-Grade Nexus Crystal by now. They are still not available for sale in the stores, and only a scant few have been found or rewarded from quests. Just one contains enough power to gain a whole level for most people. They can also power your defensive structures or arrays when defending your towns, making them a must-have for aspiring Lords.

“The five crystals will be sold as a set, and the price starts at 25 000 Nexus Coins,” the Announcer shouted, trying to hype up the wares.

That put the crystals at roughly 5 000 Nexus Coins per crystal, which was the general market price, as one E-Grade Crystal was worth roughly a hundred F-Grade ones in the Multi-Verse. However, their value was far higher on earth at the moment.

There was a desperate demand, but almost no supply. Zac knew that on a D-Grade world like theirs E-Grade crystals wouldn’t be anything special in a couple of years when the world had acclimatized and the crystals had been given time to grow. But for now they were extremely rare as the shops didn’t sell them.

Still, they would give a huge leveling boost for most people, and Zac expected their price to go far higher compared to what they were actually worth. He was quickly proven right as the price increased to over a hundred thousand in no time, people desperately shouting out higher and higher prices.

“110 000, thank you B183,” the auctioneer said, but barely had time to finish the sentence before the price increased again on the large monitor behind him.

“Two hundred thousand,” the elder of the Marshall clan suddenly said, and the hall quickly stilled.

The crystals would no doubt be a big help to most, but they would at the best give two, perhaps three levels over a few days. Spending that much for saving two weeks of time, even less if the crystals were shared over multiple people, was a bit much for most people.

“Two hundred and fifty thousand,” Ogras said with a grin while waving at the paddle at the old man.

“That’s coming out of your own pocket,” Zac only said.

“You have a thing or two to learn about auctions. You need to let people know you’re a force to be reckoned with. That you have more money than sense. That will discourage people from bidding against you, helping you save money. No one likes to lose a bidding war after all,” Ogras said with a low volume, clearly enjoying himself.

“Three hundred thousand,” the old man responded with a snort.

“The second thing to remember is to push up the prices for things you don’t need, especially if your biggest competitors are bidding,” he continued, and for once Calrin seemed to wholeheartedly agree.

“An auction is not only a battle of wallets, it’s also about wits,” the gnome said.

“People are stupid. Just thwunk rats for a week and you get as much energy, and you gain money, not lose it,” Billy muttered, and Zac had to agree as he threw a glance at the old man.

He knew that Thea Marshall was once on the top ten of the wealth ladder, and there actually were two more of the Marshall clan on the wealth ladder since some time ago. Still, three hundred thousand nexus coins was by no means a small amount of money, especially for just a few Nexus Crystals.

Certainly, he gained almost two levels from absorbing his own E-Grade Crystals, but those levels had very little impact on his power in general. Besides, he knew that it wasn’t a good idea to rely on crystals too much.

One of the requirements of advancing one’s class was achievements, and if you just sat at home continuously

absorbing crystals you likely wouldn't be able to upgrade to E-Rank, forcing you to risk your life in various mystic realms or the like.

Ogras didn't bid any further and smilingly watched two guards bring the case to the old man, who just put it in a Cosmos Sack without looking further at the contents.

The auction continued, and to Zac's disappointment it quickly became clear that the crystals were an opening salvo to increase the excitement as the following items were nowhere as good. Still, it gave Zac a very good insight into what people lacked and what was in surplus.

Weapons and gear were among the most common items to be put up in the auction, many of which being even worse than the standard regiment items the demons brought.

Zac learned some time ago that those weapons were things that the apprentices made, and most of the real soldiers of Clan Azh'Rezak bought their own, far superior, weapons as soon as they could. The reason so few brought strong weapons through the incursion, apart from Ogras and a few others, was that it cost money to do so.

To Zac's surprise these items had no problem getting sold, and many of the weapons even created heated bidding wars. Of course none of the true powerhouses bid on these types of items, but they clearly held value to even warriors who were powerful enough to attend this kind of event. This made Zac redouble his desire to find capable craftsmen who could help his demon craftsmen quickly churn out a huge amount of items.

Various resources such as metals, woods, and herbs weren't as popular, showing that the craftsman classes on earth were still in its infancy. Herbs were usually quite popular in the multiverse, and skilled alchemists were amongst the wealthiest people around.

Calrin managed to snatch up one item after another, meeting little resistance in his bidding spree. However, he didn't look overly excited, which told Zac that the materials weren't too good.

Ogras also bid a bit, mostly to piss others off it seemed. However, he still bought a few things, mainly liquors from old Earth. They actually didn't go cheap, and Zac was surprised to see the demand for fine spirits.

Perhaps Ogras was truly on to something when he spoke about finding brewers. He had a lot of land after all, and with the temperate climate and highly concentrated cosmic energy he'd have no problems growing either hops or grapes.

The process kept going for almost two hours, and Zac was starting to get bored. However, the Auctioneer stopped bringing out new items after selling off a beautiful bow to a woman in a back row.

"This concludes the first half of our auction. I am happy that so many of you have found something of interest. We will take a short break for thirty minutes where refreshments will be served. The second half contains far fewer items, but I am sure that each and every one of them will astound you," he said with a smile.

With that the doors at the back of the venue once again opened.

"What paupers, nothing exciting for sale," the demon sighed.

"You still bought some things," Zac said.

"Just minor purchases to pass the time. Hopefully the second round will be more exciting," he said, and the Sky Gnome could only nod.

Zac sighed as they walked out.

"Is this type of activity common amongst humans?" the Zhix asked as they exited the hall.

"Well, rich people did it a lot I suppose," Zac said with some hesitation.

To be honest it was the first auction he personally attended as far as he could remember.

"Excuse me, I need to look around a bit," Zac said as he headed for a group at random.

For the next thirty minutes he went around the human groups, trying to find anyone who was close to the Undead Incursion. Of course, he wasn't completely obvious, and instead brought up the topic of incursions, and asked whether any of them was close by to their home. He tried to make it look like he was looking for good spots to fight and gain levels.

If New Washington was a bit to the west of the central area of the new continent, then the incursion was rather to the southeast. From the information he got from Julia the cultivators from Greenworth should be somewhere on the eastern side of the incursion, so that was where he needed to go next to look for his sister.

However, the results weren't too promising, as no one was even close to where he wanted to go. Almost the whole intermission was spent going from party to party, forcefully inserting himself in the conversation to ask about their origins. Zac was starting to despair as the time for the break was almost running out.

But finally, as he accosted a stocky man with a greatsword on his back he actually hit jackpot.

"Yes, we are quite close to the undead bastards, they really are a pain in the ass. Luckily there are a few frontier towns between us and the fallen areas where quite a few cultivators reside, making our town quite a bit safer," the robust man said with a sigh.

"Really? Which side of the incursion?" Zac asked, trying to hide his excitement.

"The North side," the man answered. "It's lucky too. From what we've gathered the worst of their kind generally keep to the central area, but when they venture out they mostly head south or east. Huge Chinese and Indian cities in those directions, gives the wraith and liches many soldiers."

"I would like to make use of your teleporter in the future if possible. The undead hordes seem like an ideal spot to get stronger. I can pay quite generously for passage," Zac said, trying to seem interested, but not overly so.

“Ah.. That’s... A bit complicated, I can’t really promise anything,” the man said.

“Complicated how? If there is someone else making those decisions can talk with them as well,” Zac said, burning with eagerness on the inside.

The man was just about to say something, but the speakers sounded, marking the end of the intermission.

“Well, you will find out soon. Just stay behind after the auction. The government will make everything clear then,” the man said with a low voice.

Zac was confused but knew there was no point in trying to convince the man. He already knew the man’s face, so he would wait until after the auction to see what was going on. From the way he spoke it was connected to whatever the government was planning, the real reason they called this gathering.

Soon he found himself back at his seat. However, he wasn’t in any real mood to focus on the auction. He finally found a way to get to Kenzie. Even if the man’s town was on the north side Zac felt it wouldn’t be a problem to push straight through the Incursion to the eastern side. If he pushed himself to its limit it shouldn’t take too long to traverse, even if it had grown quite huge. A week maybe, two at the most.

He was so consumed by his planning he didn’t really react to the curtains once again opening, and a person walking out on the stage. However, the exaggerated reaction of the demon next to him dragged him out of his musings. Ogras almost stood up in his seat, gaping at the scene.

Zac quickly looked at the stage and saw that the man from earlier had been replaced, and Zac actually knew this person. It was Emma MacHale, the movie star. She had starred in quite a few movies recently and was one of the hottest names before the integration happened. She was also one of Ogras’ favorites after having binged an unhealthy amount of movies.

Zac suddenly had a foreboding feeling as he looked over to see shadows gathering around the demon.

Chapter 135: Mystery Stones

Zac's hand gripped Ogras' shoulder, firmly embedding the demon in his chair. During the past months Zac learned that the shadow-skills of the demon were not invincible and there were ways to counteract them.

For example, if he got hold of the demon and pushed out some cosmic energy through his hands the demon wouldn't be able to turn into shadows and disappear. It was very convenient at a time like this when he clearly was up to no good.

"Are you insane?" Zac wheezed out. "You will get yourself killed and me kicked out. For what? To meet an actress?"

"You're too hesitant all the time. Going around calling yourself Monk. Not wanting to make a scene. Being low-key. You're a powerhouse, act like it. That's Emma, from all the movies. This might be a once in a lifetime opportunity to court her. You shouldn't be stopping me, you should be fighting me of who gets to take her back," Ogras wheezed back, unfortunately loudly enough for the last sentence to be heard by a few of the closest people.

Zac cringed under the glares, but at least the demon seemed to have listened to him as he stopped trying to teleport up on the stage. In fact, he was wondering if the demon was correct. Not about the starlet, but about his demeanor. Both Billy and Thea were walking tall and proud, not hiding who they were. But he, the number one powerhouse of humanity, was still hiding around.

Displaying who he was might actually help him out in various ways. People would bend over backwards just to be able to make some connections with him and provide various types of support in the hope of becoming friends, or at least allies. Scrubs like the men earlier wouldn't trouble him either, even if Ibtep started flipping them off.

However, Kenzie still held him back. He would stay incognito as long as he could. Honestly, after his actions in Greenworth the government should already have some pretty strong suspicions about his identity unless their information-gathering capabilities had turned to shit. But hopefully, they hadn't found his real identity yet, which in a sense was even more important for him.

“Whatever. There seems to be an important meeting after the auction. You can go flirt with her then,” Zac said.

A sweet voice echoing through the speakers cut their conversation short, and both turned their gazes back to the gorgeous woman on the stage.

“Welcome all to the second half of the New World Government Auction. I am Emma MacHale, your new host,” she said and threw out a radiant smile.

The area erupted in cheers and whistles, and Zac could only shake his head when the demon joined in. Ogras had almost become addicted to the movies over the past months, and Zac wondered if he even remembered his promises about turning the movies into sellable items.

“As my colleague said earlier there will be fewer items in this second half, but each and every one is a true treasure. At least we think so, since honestly we do not know exactly what some of the things for sale are!” the hostess said with a laugh.

“Also, Thomas Fischer, the Mayor of New Washington will say a few words afterward, so please stay behind. It will definitely be information you don't want to miss!”

It didn't take long until the first item was rolled out, and to Zac's surprise he actually recognized it when a picture was shown on the large monitor. It was one of the entrance tickets to the Treasure Hunt that would take place in roughly two months.

Zac wasn't surprised however to see a token come up for sale here. He wasn't sure how many were awarded during the tutorial, but they shouldn't be too rare if Selas was able to snag two of them. There surely were many who didn't want to risk

entering such a place, competing against both the environment and all the powerhouses, and instead chose to sell it for a profit.

“You should all recognize this, the prize for the elites of the tutorial, an entrance ticket to the Treasure Hunt happening soon! Not much is known about it, apart from the fact there will be chances to gain both titles and rare treasures. Having a few extra friends to go with you might make all the difference. The starting price is 250 000 Nexus Coins or equivalent!”

It was a hefty sum, but it was clearly worth it for the forces who were planning on heading in.

“Two hundred and fifty,” the guard next to the Marshals said.

“Three hundred fifty!” a thundering exclamation came from Billy.

“Five hundred thousand,” Ogras shouted as well, surprising Zac.

“Can you even use it?” Zac asked Ogras in a low voice, surprising him.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he asked back.

Zac only fished out his own token from his bag and handed it over.

“See if you can use it before you spend all your money,” he said.

The demon snatched the token up and fiddled with it a bit, a frown quickly forming on his face.

“Is this a fake?” he warily asked.

“Why would I have a fake? I got it on one of my excursions. I knew that only natives could go,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes.

“Bah, Ruthless Heavens indeed,” the demon muttered angrily as he threw back the token to Zac. “There should be some mystic realms opening soon in any case, who cares about your stupid treasure hunt.”

Mystic realms were something that covered all of the multi-verse. There were quite a few types of them, with everything from tombs of powerful warriors leaving an inheritance to mysterious zones created by aberrant energies.

The most common type though was spatial pocket realms that simply had been detached from a main dimension for some reason or another. Some of these realms were desolate wastelands, but others were pristine areas filled with various rare and precious materials.

It was quite a common thing for adventurers to make their living exploring mystic realms, hoping to either strike it rich or rack up enough experiences to help with breaking through their bottlenecks.

The Mystic Realms were usually accessed through finding soft spots, where the membrane between the main dimension and the mystic realm was at the weakest. At these spots one could place specific arrays whose job was to create stable portals through the dimensional barrier.

Finding a good Mystic Realm and claiming it could become a huge steady stream of income to a Clan or force. Some could be turned into training fields for armies, as long as there was a prolific species living inside. Others were even larger than planets, making it worthwhile for adventurers to keep heading through, as many treasures might still lie in wait.

The most sought after ones were those holding ruins from old civilizations. Many of the mystic realms came from quite highly ranked original worlds, such as A and B ranked continents. There needed to be quite a bit of energy involved for a whole section of a dimension to be ripped out and thrown into the folds between universes after all.

Usually the energy had mostly dissipated in the Mystic Realm, making the Cosmic Energy far scarcer compared to that of a real A-Rank continent, but if there was a civilization in the pocket realm the chance for finding a huge treasure was great. Any small gadget or information crystal from an ancient A-Grade civilization would be worth a fortune.

It didn't take long until Billy snagged the tag for a whopping 1 Million Nexus coins. Actually, any time Billy started bidding on something there was simply no stopping him. He truly treated money like water, not caring in the slightest what the prices became. His confidante had tried to rein in his spending, but the giant had only laughed and called him stupid.

Following the first Token they actually sold another 4 of them, and they all sold in the same range. The Marshall clan was showing off its muscles, actually buying two of them. One went to an old man among the Ishiate, with the final one being sold to a hooded person in the back.

"Next up we have a unique material an explorer found deep in a cave. It is not a metal that was previously found on earth, and it doesn't conform to the laws of physics," Emma said as a larger reinforced tray was rolled out.

"It is only as large as a fist, but it weighs over two hundred kilos. More amazingly, its weight drastically changes depending on its temperature, and inside a fire it actually floats," she said. "Perhaps a skilled craftsman can make something amazing out of this thing in the future."

Zac thought it was an interesting item, but he was unsure how he personally would go about using it. Perhaps someone who used either fire- or ice-based attacks could somehow take advantage of its unique properties and creating some strong weapon.

"Ten thousand," Zac suddenly heard from his left and saw the Calrin holding up his paddle.

He was actually standing in the chair as to be seen, slouching on the backrest. However, Zac had gotten to know the gnome a bit over the past months and saw that the lackadaisical expression was mostly an illusion. He really wanted this stone.

"Fifty thousand," a voice in the back shouted, starting off the bidding in earnest.

The item was interesting, but not many people were willing to go too far in the bidding. Most likely knew that it might be valuable somehow in the future, even if they didn't know how

to utilize it today. But money was limited this early into the integration, and few were willing to spend hundreds of thousands on an investment that might give a return in the distant future.

Luckily for Calrin it seemed that Billy wasn't interested in the stone, and he managed to secure it for 350 000 Nexus Coins. As soon as the tray came close the gnome bounced down from his chair and immediately put the stone into his Cosmos Sack after paying, and he couldn't stop a grin from appearing as he walked back to his chair.

“Congratulations my friend. Next item is another mystery stone,” Emma said with a wink. “This one might look like a normal stone, but it is anything but. Apart from being extremely hard it also emits a weird aura. It is hard to explain so we will show you.”

A stone about as large as a soccer ball was rolled out on another tray, but this time it was accompanied by a girl holding a vase with a normal flower in it. After the tray was placed at the usual spot for the items they simply placed the vase down next to it.

Everyone looked at the stone and the flower, unsure what was going on, but soon their eyebrows rose as the flower was wilting with a speed visible to the naked eye. Murmurs and exclamations erupted over the whole area, but Emma once again stepped forward.

“As you can see the stone made the flower wilt. Actually, according to our scientists who have studied the stone it actually absorbs the life-force from the flower, rather than emitting some deadly radiation. In fact, it emits no radiation at all, which any Geiger-counter can testify to. And don't worry, it is not able to absorb human lifeforce. At least not what we know.”

Zac barely listened to the explanation from the starlet, as he was preoccupied with something else. He was holding on to his cosmos sack with a frown on his face, unsure what was going on with **[Verun's Bite]**.

Even from inside his Cosmos Sack he could feel his axe throbbing with an almost palpable hunger.

Chapter 136: Joint Ventures

The only explanation Zac could find to the weird behavior of his axe was that the stone in front of him was something it desired. He knew since long ago that it needed to absorb various materials to improve to E-Grade.

However, the only thing he'd found so far that it actually wanted to absorb was blood. And not any blood either, since it was completely uninterested in both the humans and the ants he'd killed since acquiring it. The only thing it had actually drunk was the supercharged mink in the forest.

He had tested various things that were lying around in Port Atwood but with no luck. Unfortunately different Spiritual Tools craved different materials, so there was no guide lying around. However, it seemed that at least some of the ingredients would need to be E-Ranked in order for it to upgrade, as that was the same with all Tools.

Zac had the money and decided to purchase the stone. Who knew when another chance would crop up. He surreptitiously glanced over at the Gnome, but he only slightly shook his head while looking unsure, indicating he didn't know what the stone was.

"One hundred thousand," a voice from the back said, once again starting a bidding war.

It was a bit more heated this time, as perhaps the prospect of creating a weapon that could suck the lifeforce out of their enemies was quite intriguing.

"One million," a voice suddenly came from the front, quickly silencing the bidding.

It was Thea Marshal, holding up her paddle with an indifferent face. Zac frowned as he glanced over. She had just upped the

bid by a whole 700 000 Nexus Coins, and it felt like she wanted to close it out.

“One point one million,” Nigel said as he held the arm of Billy.

“One point five,” Thea said as she threw a glance over at Nigel.

“One point six,” Nigel followed up without hesitation.

Zac felt there currently were two possibilities. Either they both knew what the stone and its approximate value was, or they both received a clue in the same way that he did. That would mean the both of them had a Spiritual Tool. The felt that the first option was a bit unlikely, as there shouldn't be anyone more knowledgeable about precious metals compared to Calrin on Earth as of yet.

Since both were high rankers the second possibility was by no means impossible. The Tutorial gave out all kinds of good things, and these two were clearly at the top of the Tutorial. It seemed not only possible, but almost likely, that they were given proper weapons. And if it wasn't from the tutorial, then perhaps from some sort of quest.

But if that was the case he felt it was a bit odd that all three weapons wanted the stone, as the weapon's appetites should vary more than that. Perhaps it was something else, some sort of treasure that all tool spirits wanted. When he came to that conclusion he didn't wait any longer and entered the fray.

“Two million,” he said as he held up his paddle.

“Two point five,” Thea answered after throwing a glare at him.

“Three million,” Zac unhesitatingly responded.

From there the bids started to get smaller, and at 4 million Billy dropped out with a disappointed sigh. However, Thea was adamant.

“Five million Nexus Coins,” she said, now keeping constant baleful glare at Zac.

“Six million,” Zac answered with a helpless smile, uncomfortably scratching the back of his head.

He finally found something that was quite valuable, and he had a huge amount of wealth at the moment. He might only have 17 million in pure Nexus Coins, but he also had mountains of crystals. He wasn't first on the wealth ladder for nothing, while Thea had dropped down to the 17th spot recently.

When Zac reached six million she finally relented and sat back in her chair with an angry harrumph.

“Wow, six million Nexus Coins. Congratulations to the handsome Mr. Monk on the front row,” Emma said with a wink, seemingly unaffected by the tense atmosphere.

As the tray with the stone was rolled toward Zac various murmurs erupted through the hall. Zac felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up after being stared at by hundreds of people, but it couldn't be helped. Six million for a stone was beyond extravagant, and by far the largest bid so far in the auction.

“What the hell, why does she know you?” Ogras suddenly asked from next to him with a glare, obviously referring to the movie star.

“How should I know? She works for the government, they might have told her,” Zac said with a shrug.

He quickly put the stone into a different pouch than the one that held Verun's bite. Zac wasn't sure if something odd would happen if he brought them together, and wanted to wait until he was back on the island.

The items kept coming out one by one, and quite a few were natural oddities. There were various roots and flowers, stones and metals. It seemed that the Government had put everything they found that was weird and without an apparent use in the second half of the auction, hoping to at least make some money.

The interest was quite weak, apart from a few groups who bid a surprising amount. There was one group of people that sat a few rows behind that bid on many of the various plants. Zac

guessed that they had an alchemist in their ranks, or at least an apothecary or herbalist.

The modern Ishiate bid for many of the metals, perhaps wanting to use them in metallurgy experiments. But the absolute foremost force in the bidding was Calrin, who flexed his muscles.

“How are you actually paying for all this?” Zac finally had to ask after the gnome snatched his tenth item in the second half.

The Gnome had been destitute when he arrived on the island, and he shouldn't have made enough profit from the demonic warriors to afford all these purchases, as the amount the spent was over ten million by now.

“You are, of course. And the demon to a certain extent,” he said with a shrug.

“WHAT?” both Zac and Ogras screamed, drawing quite a few glares by the people in the room.

“You went in as external investors in The Thayer Consortia. When we spend money you spend money. See it as a cash infusion into your business,” he said with a widening smile. “I'm on your planet as a mercantile business owner. I'm not allowed to spend my own money on business ventures, since us merchants are usually wealthy enough to destroy the economy of a baby planet. If you didn't enter as co-owners I would never be able to get this quest.”

Zac was having a bad feeling and quickly brought up his status screen.

He immediately turned back to the gnome, ready to strangle the little bastard. Eight million Nexus Coins were missing apart from those he spent himself.

Ogras wasn't looking much better, even though he should've only lost two million or so.

“YOU LITTLE BASTARD!” he roared, completely ignoring the guns that were suddenly pointing at them from the balconies.

Roar completely stopped the auction, and Emma backed away a few steps, warily looking at Zac's party.

"You better cough up my money real quick or I'll poke you full of holes you greedy little shit," he growled as the shadows beneath them were starting to shudder.

"You brutes, don't bring attention to us. Why do you think I'm buying all these things? To make money. My quest is to make a profit, not a loss, you imbeciles. Just smile and open your wallets, and we will all walk away happy men," he said, not caring in the slightest about the frothing demon.

"You know Port Atwood's situation. You can't spend an endless amount of money," Zac said with a glare, having no intention of stopping Ogras this time.

The gnome had gone crazy with greed and was using their money to satiate it.

"You still have all the things you prepared for the ants, right?" he protested, but still looked a bit deflated from having both Zac and Ogras stare down at him.

"Fine, fine. I'm sorry, ok? Write down a spending limit and I'll stick to it!" he said as he handed over a paper.

Zac once again felt the veins on his forehead throb when he saw that the gnome had already written seven zeroes on the note, and Zac unhesitatingly scribbled over the last one to the Calrin's dismay. As they were arguing a man in a suit walked up on the stage with a microphone.

"Gentlemen, please remember the rules of the auction. This is your first and only warning," he said with a somber expression.

"Sorry sorry. How about I take Miss Emma out for dinner to show my contrition?" the demon said as he smoothed his hair and shot off a winning smile.

The hall immediately exploded on boos and demands to throw them out, but Emma only smiled in response.

"I don't know, judging by the bidding your blue little friend is the one to go to dinner with. He seems quite generous," she

said wiat ha wink.

The comment made Calrin proudly stretch his back, and even Zac couldn't stop himself from smacking the gnome in the back of his head.

"It's easy to be generous with other's money," he muttered in a low volume. "Five million, that's your limit. And I expect to make quite some profit from your escapades. Otherwise, I'll hand you over to Ogras."

With that the auction continued and kept going unimpeded. Zac had somewhat large hopes that the final items would be something exciting, but was disappointed to see that they were high-grade gear. He had hoped that there would be some stat or Dao-improving fruits for sale, but Zac guessed that they wouldn't go on sale even if the Government had them.

Of course, the others in the audience didn't have the same reaction, as there were harsh bidding wars for the last pieces of items. None of the items were Spiritual Tools though, but Zac felt it wasn't anything odd. Any truly good piece wouldn't be put up on auction this early into the integration, and in general he was actually surprised the government was willing to part ways with so many interesting items.

Perhaps it could be considered a display of power as well, the capability to sell so many treasures. In addition they made quite a bit of money, and the total value of all the items in the auction should approach almost 70 or 80 million.

With that amount of Nexus Coins they could do some quite large upgrades to New Washington, provided they had unlocked enough options in their Nexus Node.

"As for this final item of the evening, I present to you the **[Sword of Storms]** an E-Rank sword fitting both wind and water cultivators," she said.

Sap Trang looked quite interested for a bit but soon shook his head.

"You want it?" Zac asked as he looked over

"Thank you, but no. It is a fine weapon, but sword fighting isn't really the point of my class in the end," he said.

The Marshall Family didn't seem interested either, and in the end it went to a strong-looking cultivator for the whopping price of 2 500 000 Nexus Coins.

“Thank you all for coming and bidding today! I hope to see you all again at our next event. With this I give you Thomas Fischer,” Emma said as she quickly left the stage followed by applause and hooting.

Thomas Fischer came up to the stage soon after and was followed by multiple officials who stood in a row behind him. Zac recognized Julia, but the rest were unknown to him.

“Welcome all. I have already had the pleasure of meeting many of you, but for those who do not know me, I am Thomas Fischer, the leader of New Washington. I was once the Deputy Secretary of Defense for the American Government, but today I stand before you as a representative for The New World Government.

“The arrival of the System and the Incursions have resulted in extreme upheaval to our society, and I am sad to say that there are only approximately 1.5 billion humans left on Earth,” Thomas began.

“Six Billion. Over six billion dead in just above 5 months. Every day our brothers and sisters fall due to either the harsh environment we have been thrown into, or the invaders who aim to take our land for their own,” he continued, somberly looking over the subdued audience.

“It is time for humanity to unite.”

Chapter 137: Clearing the Air

The beginning of Thomas Fischer's speech created a subdued silence in the whole venue. Even Zac was a bit shocked at the numbers. He knew that the Undead Incursion had done a number on both India and China, the two most populous countries before the fall, but that wasn't enough to explain that amount of casualties.

Six billion lives lost, which meant that only twenty percent was still alive after less than half a year. And Zac knew that the world wasn't done with its transformation. There were still barely any E-Ranked monsters roaming about, which would change sooner or later.

The new planet Was graded D-Ranked in both mass and energy by the System, meaning that it would be able to sustain D-Rank powerhouses and beasts. There was one small solace in the fact that the animals were getting stronger though. As monsters evolved they became smarter and created their own societies in a sense.

They wouldn't go randomly attacking settlements, especially not if they knew it was guarded by arrays or powerhouses. Of course, that was predicated on there actually being those kinds of defenses, otherwise the town would be fair game.

"We will take a short break in just a minute. After we reconvene we will go through all the information we have gathered about the incursions and the foreign invaders. There will be much exclusive intelligence there, and I urge everyone to stay behind and listen. It will not only help with your survival in the future, but it might also help with your path to power. For this part everyone here will be welcome to participate, as we're all together in the fight against the incursions," Thomas continued.

“After that we will focus on the organization of humanity. This part will have little information of value for our Ishiate friends, so we have prepared a separate venue for you at that point. Waiting for you there are representatives of The New World Government’s information branch, who will do their best in helping you locate your brethren across the world.”

“I hope to see you all again in a bit. Thank you for your attention.”

As he finished the lights once again brightened, and people began to stream out. However, just as Zac and the others made to leave as well an official ran up to their group.

“Excuse me. Mr. Fischer would like to have a word with your group if you’re available,” he quickly said.

Zac just shrugged and followed the man, the others in his group following in tow. They were left to an area backstage, where Thomas and a few other officials waited.

“Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. I want to thank you once again for the information you provided us the last time. It will be a huge asset to the coming war efforts of humanity,” he said with a smile. “These people with me here are representatives of other major hubs of the New World Government.”

“Johana Yakovna,” a somber lady in her fifties said. “Former Russia and Eastern Europe,”

“Francis Girardot, France,” a man in his sixties said with a slight frown.

”Asano Kobo, Japan. Pleased to meet you,” an Asian man said.

Soon all of them had presented themselves, and even Zac felt a bit intimidated to stand in front of so many of the world’s leaders.

“What’s on your mind?” Zac asked.

“We know about the Zhix, but the identity of the two others is cause for concern,” the Russian delegate said, not mincing her words.

“How’s so?” Zac asked, having a sinking feeling.

“You should know as well as us that there have been no sightings for anywhere else of these species,” another delegate continued. “Their origins are suspect. There is belief that they might be alien infiltrators.”

“Oh? Wouldn’t that make this a prime opportunity for us to kill you all and create some chaos?” Ogras answered with a grin, making a few of the delegates flinch.

“Ogras is just joking,” Zac quickly said, and added with a glare at the demon. “But he’s not very funny.”

“I am Calrin Thayer of the Thayer Consortia,” the gnome quickly said as he stepped forward. “Your eyes are astute, as expected of the people at the forefront of this newly integrated world.”

“You are correct, I am not of this world. I came here to Earth when Port Atwood bought a shop from our Consortia. I am here on a mercantile Visa so to speak. Here is my proof, you should know what these Mercantile Licenses are from the tutorial,” the Sky Gnome continued as a golden glowing parchment appeared floating over his hand.

“I am no threat to humanity or any other Native race. I can’t buy land, conquer towns, or even attack anyone. The system bars me from doing anything detrimental to this planet. However, what I can do is offer you an offer of a lifetime. Aren’t you tired of the high prices of the System-run stores?”

“This is a great opportunity for you to take a lead compared to other towns. While others pay 70 Nexus Coins for a Nexus Crystal, you would only pay a measly 60 in our stores. In fact, our rates are better on almost all materials and treasures, and we even stock various things that never are available in the general stores,” Calrin animatedly continued. “Your forces could save millions!”

The merchant’s little pitch actually garnered some interest as a few of the delegates actually looked tempted. Zac was actually hoping it would work, as a few branch stores would boost his revenue by quite a bit.

“That doesn’t explain the devilman,” an Italian delegate said with a frown, actually holding a rosary in his hands.

That brought the delegates back from their own scheming, but many still threw glances at the small gnome who stood next to Zac with a smiling face. Zac could understand them, as he knew how difficult it was to get a real mercantile force to build a shop in your town.

Perhaps if you were a leader of a flourishing town on a C or B Ranked planet many consortia would fight for the opportunity, but at this point in time, the investment cost for the companies was just too high.

“The invading forces are banned from using Arrays for a while longer. They wouldn’t be able to use a teleporter, but Ogras clearly came with us through the array,” Zac said, signaling Ogras to not make things worse. “Isn’t that proof enough he’s not an invader?”

“Yes, we did read about that in the information missive you provided, and it seems to match our own observations. However, while we haven’t seen any invading forces make use of arrays as of yet it doesn’t mean there aren’t workarounds. We simply cannot verify it.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the delegates, going over their words once again and came to an infuriating conclusion.

“You are implying that Port Atwood is consorting with the invaders, helping them against their fellow humans,” Zac said, a fit of smoldering anger starting to burn.

“It wouldn’t be too surprising that some people would betray their race to benefit themselves,” Francis said. “Your faction is simply suspect, as no one has been able to verify it even exists, even after weeks of searching and asking around.”

Enough was enough. Zac felt that Ogras was right, there was a limit to staying low, and sometimes it caused more trouble than it was worth. There was likely no one who had done as much for humanity as him.

Not only had he already closed an incursion, he had also provided vital intelligence. But even though he had been

constantly fighting since the integration he was looked at like he was a traitor, by some bureaucrats who hid behind their armies no less.

Zac's towering aura was released like floodgates, drowning the whole group of politicians. Gasps and groans escaped from their mouths, and a few even fell down on the ground. Only a few could remain standing, Thomas Fisher being one of them. But even he paled noticeably from the pressure of Zac's aura.

"You think I am a traitor, trying to learn your strategies and plans? Don't flatter yourselves. Ogras was right about one thing. If I was an enemy of humanity I would simply kill you all and seize control of New Washington. There is nothing you can do to stop me. But you want proof? Fine."

With a wave of his hand his aura disappeared and instead a prompt was summoned and hovered in front of the group.

[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world.

Reward: All stats +5, all stats +5%.]

"You want to know how I am so strong? How we knew so much about the incursions? Port Atwood has been fighting tooth and nail since day one of the integration. The information missive you received was taken from one of the invaders," Zac growled.

The delegates who were on the floor from Zac's forceful aura embarrassedly climbed to their feet, and was shocked when they saw the Title screen hovering in front of them. There simply was no way to fake a System-run screen, as the System itself disallowed it. And his title was ironclad proof he had fought against the invaders, not for them.

"We have done our part. We have even defeated an incursion, and now we're in the process of brokering peace with the Zhix in order to benefit all humanity. Port Atwood is standing on the forefront protecting humanity," Zac said as he glared at the delegates.

"I was shocked to hear that all of you together hadn't managed to destroy a single incursion while our small force was able to

do it. Perhaps it is time you started get a move on instead of playing politics.”

His outburst had various effects on the people present. Ogras only grinned, looking very much in favor of his actions, whereas Calrin looked sick. Zac could only assume the gnome was fearing his sales pitch from earlier was for naught now.

The delegates ranged from angered to embarrassed, with a few looking at the screen thoughtfully. Thomas Fischer only sighed and shook his head.

“I am sorry about my colleagues’ words Mr. Monk,” he said with a contrite face. “We simply needed to make sure about your allegiance. If our plans for the future were exposed, it would risk them not working, which would impact all of humanity. We have been fighting the incursions on multiple fronts for months, and honestly it is a losing battle.”

Zac frowned as he listened intently.

“They are gaining power quicker than we are. After reading your information package we learned the reason is that they are far stronger than us from the start, and simply temporarily limited by the System.

“We believe that the longer things drag on, the harder it will be to expel the forces. Some of our analysts even believe that unless we defeat them within the year then humanity is doomed. This is why we called so many forces here today.”

Zac sighed as he had calmed down by now. He regretted his little outburst either. Not because he acted like a brute, but because he might have given out too much information just to defend himself. He quickly realized that showing the title would have been enough, but he got angered into releasing his aura.

“But your victory gives us hope that our mission is doable. We hope we can rely on your power and expertise in the coming months, and together rid this planet of the invaders,” Asano added from behind Thomas.

“Port Atwood will do what we can in the war efforts, but we have our own things we are dealing with as well. So we can’t

promise any specifics. And also I'm sorry to rain on your parade, but the Incursions isn't our only problem," Zac said, feeling tired.

"Oh? What do you mean?" Thomas asked with a frown.

"Ibtep, please explain to these people about the Dominators," Zac said as he turned to the Zhix who had stood by silently until now.

The Zhix ambassador took a step forward, obviously prepared, and without preamble started explaining the situation and history of the Zhix. The delegates seemed slightly intrigued by hearing about the history of the Zhix, but when they learned that the Zhix homeworld actually possessed cultivators even before the integration they started frowning.

When Iptep showed them the level of the one who called itself "Inevitability", they were completely pale.

Chapter 138: Consequences

Those assholes, Thea thought as she moved back and forth.

“Analyze them,” Henry said as he looked at Thea.

“They’re assholes,” she only muttered as she kept pacing about.

“Thea,” the old man said with some reproach in his voice.

She rolled her eyes but took the exercise seriously this time. She knew that her grandfather wouldn’t stop until she gave a satisfying answer. Some things hadn’t changed just because the world ended after all.

“The monk is very strong. He beat up those people without breaking a sweat. The demon is also strong. I barely had time to react before John’s leg was pierced. Are you OK by the way?” she said as she turned to their guardian.

“I am fine my lady, with the help of the pill I will have no problem fighting,” John quickly assured her.

“Focus,” Henry reproached.

“Well, they are also rich. They spent even more than we did,” she said, still feeling a bit peeved as she remembered that monk’s stupid face as he kept increasing the bid.

She didn’t know what that stone had been, but her **[Petalstorm]** craved it. But with the family’s operation underway she had handed over much of her wealth, and she really hadn’t expected to need such an amount of money in the short run. Who knew those useless bureaucrats of the New World Government would actually have good things to sell?

“You’ve listed things that anyone with eyes could see. Focus, what happened in your altercation with the demon?” Henry said, obviously not satisfied with her performance.

Thea stopped pacing about and thought back to that moment. She had directed one of her petals to nick the throat of the glib demon, putting him in his place. She hadn't been ready for the shameless response and still felt a bit flustered the tactic. She knew the question the demon asked was rhetoric, but she wondered what the answer was.

Would she have been able to kill the demon before grandpa and John died? Thea quickly refocused, knowing her grandfather was expecting an answer. She went over the whole incident, focusing on every action and every facial expression of the members of the odd group.

"They weren't afraid," she blurted out with a start.

"Good. Continue," Henry Marshall nodded with a small smile.

"The demon called it 'a little pre-auction fun', and while he was mostly joking he did truly not seem to take the situation too seriously. The monk seemed worried, but about the wrong things. He seemed afraid that the demon would actually hurt us, rather than me hurting them. All in all, he seemed more annoyed than anything else," she continued with a frown.

"What does this mean?" Henry urged her on.

"Neither the monk nor the demon really saw us, or me, as a threat. Ignorance can't explain it, as they clearly knew of our identity. The same can be said for their whole group, only the old Asian man seemed worried, but he was clearly just a weakling. They believe the demon is stronger than me, even though my third spot on the power list."

"What was the power dynamic between the Monk and the Demon?" her grandfather asked, switching the line of questioning.

"Friends. No, wait," she said as she frowned a bit. "The demon acted out two times, both times he stopped after the Monk intervened. It might not be official, but the Monk is in the dominant position."

"Good. Revisit the earlier question," the old man said.

Thea stopped for a few seconds and went over her earlier line of reasoning.

“The demon might believe himself stronger, or at least equal to me. But judging from his personality he would not take orders from a weakling, so the Monk should be at least as strong as the demon,” she said, her eyes widening in realization. “The whole group believes that not only the demon, but even the Monk can defeat me.”

That was an uncomfortable realization. She hadn't stopped pushing herself for a second since the start. She'd even actually underwent with the suicide mission and assassinated the incursion leaders, which made her clan's current advances possible.

Anytime she walked the streets she was met with fear or reverence. She didn't care about all that, but the fact that she was looked down upon after all her struggles was quite maddening.

“Excellent. Remember, a small glance or an innocent conversation can expose far more than was intended. Everything has causes and consequences. That's why it's important to always act in a measured and deliberate manner. But you still are missing details,” Henry said.

“You seem to consider the demon an impulsive character, your opinion perhaps discolored by preconceived notions of what a demon should be like. I see the creature as a planning schemer hiding behind a guise. Just like we gained valuable information from the exchange, so did they.

“Your time in the wilderness has made you extremely strong, but your actions have become unnecessarily simplistic. If you remembered your old lessons you would have gained information without giving any up,” Henry continued, and it looked like he was gearing up for another sermon.

Luckily for Thea he was interrupted by an extremely dangerous feeling erupting from something in the area.

It was as though a monster had been released in the Opera House, making even Thea's neck-hair stand on end. Even the invisible petals of her weapon started shivering as they danced around her.

“It seems the New World Government angered the Super Brother-Man. Causes and consequences,” Henry said with a small smile as he looked in the direction of the ominous feeling.

“What do you all think?” Thomas said as he looked at the group.

Many of the delegates still looked a bit frazzled from the earlier encounter. Thomas couldn't really blame them, as there was a huge amount of adrenaline coursing through his vein at this very moment.

It was one thing to read a name on some ladder, and a whole other thing to be confronted by the very power that the list represent. The first spot on the power ladder wasn't for show, and Thomas didn't doubt for a second that the Super Brother-Man could make good on his threats if he wished.

They might be able to take him down in the end with concentrated focus-fire, but not before he'd killed all of them.

“He could become a great asset. He has already shown goodwill with the information crystal,” Asano Kobo said hesitantly.

“It's too dangerous. We can't have such a person running loose,” the French representative said with a frown.

“How would we stop him? He would simply kill us if we tried to interfere,” Johana retorted.

“He wouldn't be an asset if we can't control him. We would be running the risk of setting up a global network, only for him to swoop in and crown himself king,” the french delegate added.

“Is there anything we know about him? You have met him before Thomas. What have you found out?”

“We have strong reason to believe he is American, and has some connection to the town Greenworth. It was one of the towns he asked about when he arrived at New Washington the first time, and he immediately rushed there after visiting an information broker,” Thomas began narrating.

“Not long after he arrived at Greenworth he massacred the whole leadership of the town and erected a large monolith in a graveyard. Our hypothesis is that the cultivators who took control of Greenworth killed someone close to him, and he killed them all in revenge. Unfortunately, we have no way to find out exactly who were killed by the cultivators.

“We have been asking around as much as possible, but information is sparse, and our government workers have some trouble with cooperation as our last representative ruined our reputation a bit. We have also been showing a picture of Monk to citizens of Greenworth in hopes that he would be recognized by someone. Still, we haven’t had any luck.

“There is one more morsel of information. I just received a report that Mr. Monk went around asking parties where their cities were located. When he found out that Mr. Bernard’s town was close to the Undead Incursion he tried to broker a deal to use their teleporter.”

“How is this important information?” Johana asked.

“One of Greenworth’s cultivator groups were dropped off close-by to that location. Mr. Monk might be trying to locate someone important to him that might be in that group,” Thomas said.

“You’re saying we should capture his friends or family?” the Japanese delegate asked with a frown. “That seems to be playing with fire.”

“For now we should focus on locating them, and from there try to extrapolate Mr. Monk’s identity. We already believe that his town’s name should be named after himself, and that him saying the town is run by a council largely a lie in order to keep his persona hidden. So if we find an Atwood in the cultivator group we can almost identify him for sure,” Thomas said.

“And then what?” a delegate asked.

“See if we can place or make use of someone close to his inner circle. We would then gain a great asset, both for intelligence, and if needed, covert action.”

“I believe he will be instrumental in fighting off the incursions. You all know how bad it looks. If we can push him to the frontlines we would have a far better chance of succeeding,” he added.

“And after that?” a delegate asked worriedly.

“After that we don’t need that kind of trouble in our backyard,” Johanna said with a steely expression, and Thomas made no efforts to refute her.

“I am not sure about this. I want wealth as much as the next guy, but you need to be alive to enjoy it,” Davon said with hesitation.

“It will be fine as long as we are careful and plan everything out,” Red retorted with a sneer. “Remember, it wouldn’t be the first ranker we killed.”

“Still, that guy looks seems pretty strong. I get the goosebumps just thinking about him. He clobbered those poor bastards like they were just some target practice. Didn’t even break a sweat,”

“He isn’t an immortal or god just because he can clobber some people. His head will still explode from a high caliber sniper round. No one is powerful enough to survive the strongest old-world weapons yet, so this is a small window of opportunity before they get too strong. If we shoot a few rounds in a staggered manner no treasure or skill will be able to protect him,”

“His companions will be scrambling for safety, giving Ricky the opportunity to snatch the body and disappear,” Dany added.

“He easily dropped 6 million on a stupid rock, who knows how much stuff he has in is Cosmos Sack,” Red sed enticingly, and even those hesitating couldn’t help nodding.

“We’ll skip the last part of the government stuff, and set up our trap instead. We’ll go with the same setup as the last time, you all know what to do?”

The small group of eight somberly nodded.

“Good. In a few hours we’ll be filthy rich.”

“Good job standing guard over the boss for so long,” Alea said with a smile as she handed Namys a cup of tea.

“It is my duty. Our duty, you would do well to remember. I have seen you cavort with the human. Never forget it was Lord Ogras who brought us out of misery and provided us a place in the multiverse,” Namys tersely responded, but still accepted the cup.

Alea slightly smiled as she sat down next to the scarred demoness in the small gazebo at the outskirts of the town.

“I truly miss the crimson skies. Looking up at this endless blue makes me feel that I’m continuously walking through a dream, or that I am stuck in one of Janos’ illusions,” Alea said with a sigh as she took a sip of her own cup.

“Lord Ogras will bring us home in glory someday after he’s taken control of this planet. We’ll show Clan Azh’Rezak who their true leader is. Either they will bend the knee or they will perish,” Namys answered, a fanatic sheen glimmering in eyes.

Alea glanced over with some sadness in her eyes and sighed again.

“I remember when I was a child in the slums of Ter’Ferizan. My mother was a prostitute, and who knows who my dad is. Mom always resented me since I came in the way of her business as she saw it. ‘Stole her youth’ she called it. She beat me, abused me, and forced me to beg for food just to survive.

“Still I adored her, and I always felt she was the most beautiful person in the world as she donned her beautiful dresses and make-up for work. She was perfect in my eyes, and I was the one in the wrong,” Alea said, her eyes moistening as she looked at her sister of over twenty years.

“What are you talking about? Wh..” Namys asked, her words slurring a bit at the end.

“I am talking about the fact that strong emotions such as love or devotion can create an image of reality, even though reality might be different. You see Ogras as the dashing scion of clan Azh’Rezak who once saved you, and will once again reclaim

his place as the leader of us demonkind. From there he will walk the time tested path to become a true Arch Demon.”

“But haven’t you seen? He’s changed. He’s found solace and happiness as he cut his ties to Clan Azh’Rezak. Returning back home is the last thing on his mind, as this is truly his home now. But you have been walking around trying to get Ilvere and Janos to help you assassinating Lord Zac, unheeding of the fact that you are actually trying to destroy Ogras’ sanctuary. We tried talking you out of it but you were too adamant,” Alea said as she looked sadly on Namys who was slumping down in her chair. “Something needed to be done.”

“Wh.. how..? Lord Ogras.. avenge...” was the last words that escaped Namys’ mouth as her eyes glazed over and she exhaled her last breath.

“The carriage will not move forward if one of the wheels is aligned in the wrong direction,” Alea said, her eyes reddening. “Silly girl, do you think I would kill you unless I was ordered to?”

Chapter 139: Heaviness

”Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Zac was interrupted from his brooding and looked over at the grinning demon. The two were currently sitting in a secluded group of sofas, and the heavy atmosphere kept any curious onlooker far away.

“I think I might have shown too much of myself,” Zac said with a sigh.

Zac looked at Ogras for a second and shook his head ruefully.

“I have a little sister. I believe I have found her whereabouts, but I am afraid that my identity is exposed, and they will use her to get to me.”

Since the beginning he hadn’t really told the demons anything about himself, and he hadn’t even explained why he wanted to keep going on excursions through the teleporter. He was afraid of the same thing he was now, that someone would use his family to get to him. But he was running out of ideas, and Ogras usually had some methods up his sleeves.

To Zac’s surprise, he saw that the demon had turned uncharacteristically serious as he looked at him.

“The Undead Incursion?” Ogras asked with a somber face.

“In a town close by,” Zac nodded.

“You need to find someone who has a teleporter in the area,” Ogras mused

“I did, but there seems to be some problem,” Zac said and retold the conversation with the stocky man.

“I think I know what’s going on, but we’ll find out for sure in a bit,” Ogras said. “However, I have an idea that will ensure it doesn’t matter what little schemes those politicians have.”

“Oh?” Zac said with some hope.

Ogras took out two glass vials from his pouch and threw them over to Zac.

“The black vial contains a poison pill called [**Ten Steps to Hell**]. If ingested the victim will wake up every night with searing pain in his chest, as though as his lungs are on fire. Every night for ten nights the pain will keep getting worse. On the tenth night you will die. It is extremely painful, and only the most skilled E-Ranked healers would be able to treat it. It should be incurable on this baby planet,” Ogras said with a sinister grin.

“How does this help me?” Zac frowned.

“The other vial contains the antidote,” Ogras explained. “Feed the poison to the man with the portal. Tell him to open the portal in 9 nights. You promise you will give him the antidote when you arrive in his town. If you do or not is up to you. He might try to heal himself, but it will fail. The inevitable pain every night will be a painful reminder to comply unless he wants to die.”

Zac blankly stared down at the two small bottles in his hands, hesitant at what to do. He felt that if he actually went through with this he would be stepping over some sort of threshold, arriving at a place where anything goes. The owner of the town by the undead incursion hadn't done anything wrong, and this poison sounded like something horrifying to be subjected to.

Then again, it might be his only means to reach his sister. The more he thought about it the more he felt that he had left a trail of breadcrumbs that lead right to his identity. He remembered the feeling of walking through the park filled with unmarked graves, his father's one of them.

Zac's eyes hardened and he put the two bottles into his pouch, which made a small smile emerge on Ogras' face. If he had to become a villain to make sure his sister was alright, then so be it.

“Thank you. I will use these if I see no other option. What do you want in return?” Zac asked.

He was quite clear about the demon’s personality, where everything was weighted in benefits.

“Let’s just say you owe me one,” the demon said with a small smile.

“Sigh, fine. Now can you tell me what your actions were about in there? And don’t tell me it was pre-auction joking around again.”

“Aren’t you getting more astute? From what I’ve gathered she is an elite from a well-established clan on this world. This Marshall Clan will be one of our biggest competitors for the dominion of Earth, provided we don’t get slaughtered by the invaders or these so-called Dominators,” Ogras said, his face turning serious.

“You were busy shrinking away from her glares, so I had to do something. We needed information about her powers and temperament. The returns were above expectations,” he continued.

“How was you getting your throat slit and us ruining our relation count as good returns? And I have no interest in world dominion” Zac frowned.

“You need to think deeper, because other people are. Even if you say you don’t care, who would believe you? Your very existence is a threat to anyone trying to unify this planet. Unless you stop progressing and become mediocre you will be forced into conflict, no matter what you want,” the demon snorted.

“And we gained a lot of information about Thea Marshal. For one, we know she has a bit of a short fuse. She could have just ignored me, but she didn’t. Such a thing can always be exploited in the future. We also know that her family is a liability for her. When I attacked that man she clearly got frantic but tried to hide it under a guise of disdain,” Ogras said.

Zac was surprised, as he'd only seen the exchange as an embarrassing diversion from the auction.

"It seems the Marshall clan is quite large, which is a huge liability for a caring powerhouse. Having a large group of weak people to protect acts like an anchor, tying you down. Finally, we learned a bit about her method of attacks," he concluded.

"Oh, you figured out her trick? I couldn't see what she did at all." Zac asked.

"I'm not completely sure, but I know for certain that it was a bladed attack. I've been cut enough times by various things to know the difference between a Dao, skill, and blade-cut. My belief is that she has one or multiple hovering bladed weapons out around her at all times," he concluded.

"You remember Rydel, that asshole? I think she's doing the same thing with a sword or a few daggers, but through either the properties of the weapons themselves or through a skill they become invisible. She's essentially creating a field of death around her, where a strike can come at any time. Quite a good method. A shame I wasn't able to gauge her range," Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac was stunned. Earlier he really regretted bringing the demon along, but by now he felt quite thankful that he actually did. He did not only provide a last-resort solution to get to Kenzie, he even helped him realize his mistakes as he scouted out his enemies.

"What about almost kidnapping the movie star? Was that you wanting to gauge someone else's reactions?" Zac changed the subject.

"No that was just for me," the demon said with a grin. "I haven't given up yet, you should know. We should go rampage a bit, kill a few people. When she sees our powers she'll be much more willing to come back with us."

Zac snorted but didn't say anything. He didn't know why, but like the demon was a bit on edge about something since he left his seclusion. Perhaps his gains weren't as good as he'd

hoped, and he was a bit antsy. He'd explained his reasoning for accosting Thea, but at the same time it felt like the demon was simply trying to create trouble to take his mind off of other things.

It wasn't the time to start digging into those murky waters. If it was related to the demon's cultivation he would never be truthful, and they were neither close enough or drunk enough to have any sort of heart-to-heart about anything troubling. Besides, the demon wasn't the only one with problems.

Various troubles and issues were whirling through Zac's head as he closed his eyes for a bit as he lay back in the sofa. There was the issue of Port Atwood, how to ensure the safety and progress of his emerging island kingdom. The third wave was coming as well, and he still had no idea what he could expect.

There was the issue of New Washington and their shrewd politicians. It felt as though the situation was getting out of hand, and a schism was forming between himself and his fellow humans. He even felt more comfortable around demons and the Zhix ambassador than his own old countrymen by this point.

There was also the heaviest responsibility of finding Kenzie. The feeling as he stood in front of the newly erected gravestone was etched into his memory, and he would rather die than not live up to the promise.

The issues of the Incursions and Dominators were also a constant buzzing in the back of his head. Any other issues like those of Port Atwood, or even finding Kenzie, was all for naught unless something was done about these enemies. Time was running out and unless something changed the invaders would soon be too powerful to handle.

Felt he was weighted down by a mountain of responsibilities, and heaviness shrouded his mind. However, suddenly it was as though various scattered thoughts and impressions crystallized, and ordered themselves up into something structured.

Zac fell into a trance as he somehow felt connected to the universe. He'd pondered daily on the various facets of

heaviness lately, and now it was as though the universe suddenly was showing him the answer sheet. His current emotions were actually represented in a small section of something far greater, and in another corner he sensed his original insights.

The Dao of Heaviness was a low tiered Dao, or a foundational Dao as Alyn called it, but the vastness of that he sensed was extraordinary. He desperately tried to imprint the impression of it, but it was as though almost all of it slipped through his fingers. He managed to absorb some small snippets that were related to the emotional heaviness that he'd felt lately at least, and it seamlessly integrated into the fractal axe in his mind.

The dark color of the Heaviness-imbued half of the axe got deeper, and it radiated a stronger aura than before. Still, it was nowhere near the vastness he just felt.

He opened his eyes, only to see Ogras' face plastered just centimeters from him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zac asked with some trepidation.

"God damn it, did you just have an epiphany? Just disgusting," Ogras said with a frown as he moved back, and even the little merchant who had appeared from nowhere sitting closeby threw an envious glance at him.

"Why were you so close that you almost straddled me though?" Zac asked with a weird look.

"Don't flatter yourself. I was trying to sense anything to get some hints of how to get an epiphany of my own. Since your Dao Seeds are low leveled I needed to get closer to sense the fluctuations," the demon spat.

"Did you find out anything?" Zac asked curiously.

"No, it was just a chaotic jumble. No idea how to get anything useful from that," the demon answered with a grimace.

"So, what did you upgrade?"

Zac didn't answer, instead opening his menu with a smile.

Chapter 140: Dao Seeds

He let the demon stay curious as he looked at his current status.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

54

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Strength

287

Dexterity

144

Endurance

187

Vitality

109

Intelligence

69

Wisdom

64

Luck

77

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

308 353

Zac could only grimace as he saw his Nexus Coins. He had felt extremely wealthy when he possessed over twenty million coins and went to buy the four Creator vessels, but in just a few hours he'd spent around 17 million with the help of the insatiable little merchant. He couldn't help but glare at the Sky Gnome, who studiously examined the roof after seeing Zac's face.

Zac knew that he would benefit from it in the end unless the gnome messed up badly, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Together with the expenditure of the boats he was almost completely tapped out. Of course, he could convert some of his Nexus Crystals to quickly gain back what he spent and more, so he wasn't too worried.

Next, he opened up his Dao window to see how it looked.

Heaviness Middle Strength +15, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5

Sharpness Early Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5

Trees Early Endurance +5, Vitality +10

The total attribute reward from the Dao Seed had only doubled but he knew that would be the case, so he wasn't disappointed. The reward would keep doubling at Late, then Peak Mastery. Finally it would get a large boost if it was evolved or fused. This time he was given +5 Strength, +5 Endurance and +5 Wisdom, likely due to the psychological aspect of the heaviness he gained insight into.

Then again, the extra attributes were only a small bonus from the system. The main boosts came from the usage in battle. Adding the force of a middle-ranked Dao Seed compared to an early would be quite a boost.

And that wasn't even all. Zac looked over at the demon and with a small smile unleashed his Dao.

"Urh... What the hell?" Ogras said, with a face looking like he'd just bitten into a lemon. "What's up with your Dao of Heaviness?"

It was the Dao Field he finally was able to emit. It looked like he could only extend it a bit over two meters, but that would improve with time. At the same time, two meters was all that was needed in a melee confrontation.

"I just added the aspect of Heaviness I gained from my insights," Zac said.

"So weird. You chose emotional heaviness? Don't get too maudlin and go killing yourself, ok? But I have to admit it is a pretty interesting addition to your Dao Seed. It will even serve as a mental attack apart from a normal restriction if you hit someone with your Dao Field in the middle of battle," Ogras mused.

Everyone's Dao Seeds weren't the same. Even if Heaviness was a low tiered Seed it was a vast concept. Zac had clearly felt it during his epiphany, and his current seed only consisted of two small snippets of a larger whole. The two parts he had

gained insights into created his unique Dao Seed. A peak Seed was only a couple of more parts added to his current insight.

If he wanted to delve further into that Dao he would have to upgrade it from a seed to a real Dao Path. He wasn't sure whether he would do that though, or try to fuse it with sharpness at an earlier point. All in all, there was no right or wrong path when it came to Dao, only suitable and unsuitable.

Of course, if you were following a heritage guide there would be a wrong and right choice. Sometimes one or two parts of the Dao Seed usually needed to correspond to the requirement for the Class upgrade, with the remaining ones enabling some customization to personal preference.

Apparently, there were even more stringent classes though, where all parts needed to match. Generally, the more specific classes and the higher rarity ones had more stringent requirements, whereas the common classes were more forgiving.

In Zac's case there was no roadmap, and he could only hope that there was some Class waiting for him at the end of the tunnel. If not he would have to take some risks to rack up achievements or meditate in order to gain more insight into his Daos or gain new ones.

Zac simply followed his heart, as he had no real way to gauge what any potential Class upgrade would require. He gained insight into a mental component of heaviness through his harsh experiences, and that was what was added. If he kept going down that path he might turn into a spectral axeman instead, whose strikes cleaved souls rather than the physical bodies.

Suddenly he noticed something was off. Only their small group was sitting in the sofas, as the rest of the venue was empty.

“What's going on? How long was I out?”

“I don't know? An hour?” Ogras shrugged. “They started their information meeting not long after you Zoned out. Since you were out of it the insect and the old man went inside. We

figured they'd be safe after your little outburst earlier, so we stayed behind here. Not like those guys will tell us anything we didn't already know."

Calrin nodded, looking a bit bored.

"So how did it go, did you finish your quest?" Zac asked, a flash of irritation once again rushing through his mind as he was reminded of his almost completely emptied bank account.

"I need to resell the items first, but I believe I will make it. The quest was for me to triple my... ehm, your... money, and I believe that will be possible. Depending on the skills of your demon craftsmen it might get even higher, but they don't seem very skilled," Calrin said looking a bit proud.

"What are you smiling for? Rob me like that again and you better never leave your ratty compound again or I'll find you and show you the Thousand Tortures," Ogras snarled.

"Brutes," Calrin only muttered, but he still shrunk down a bit.

"I will need my Nexus Coins back before the wave starts. You have three days," Zac only said.

"30%. I can return 30% before the wave, any more than that and I'll be forced to sell at a discount, which will hurt both you and me."

Zac only stared at him for a while before sighing.

"50%. Not a penny less."

The Sky Gnome hemmed and hawed, but Zac was adamant about that level, and finally the little merchant could only acquiesce.

Zac once again closed his eyes after some more small talk, wanting to acquaint himself better with his new and improved Seed. He was eager to find out whether his guidance system from [**Axe Mastery**] would be able to adapt to the new aspect of his insights, but now was not the time to start swinging his axe around. He could see the pathways, but others could not, so it would look like he had gone insane and started to attack everything around him.

The sound door of the doors opening to the venue woke Zac up from his meditation, and after a bit he saw Sap Trang and Ibtep hurry back toward them.

“Ah it’s good you feel better,” Mr. Trang said as he looked relieved.

“Better?” Zac said with some confusion.

“Ah yes, I told you not to drink that much. Passing out with your attributes, embarrassing,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

It seemed the two were putting up a play, but for who Zac had no idea, still he could only play along and hesitantly nod.

“Was there any useful information?” Zac asked Mr. Trang.

“Not much, most of it came from us, to be honest. They have released an updated version of the computer program you showed me the other day. It more clearly shows the Incursion zones. They also provided a decent amount of detail about each and every Incursion, and even provided docket,” the fisherman answered, showing a pretty thick stack of papers.

“They also brought up new information from Ibtep. However, though they didn’t mention you at all. They only said that an ally of the government had provided the info. They never gave Port Atwood any credit,” he said with a frown.

“That’s okay, i didn’t share it to gain anything from it. I simply wanted people to be aware of the situation, so they could start preparing themselves,” Zac said with a wave of his hand.

“You should be a bit more caring in the future. That information was valuable, and it would have helped boost our reputation. While it might not seem important, but the image the commoners hold of us might become essential in the future. If we come to conflict with the World Government, what then? Whose side would the people take? The government who, at least from the looks of it, tirelessly is fighting against the invaders? Or us, the unknown force?” Ogras said.

“Ok, ok. I’ll be more selfish the next time. Was there anything else? Did they talk about the teleporters or anything like that?”

Zac asked.

“No, but it seems they have some big plan, they alluded to it multiple times during the presentation. I think they’ll tell us more in the last part.”

Zac nodded as he looked at the three aliens in the party.

“I’ll go to the last meeting, you stay with these three, Mr. Trang. There are a few Ishiate who will come with us back, please arrange things with them. They are actually cultivators originally from one of the two towns we found and might be a great help in bringing them into our fold.”

Soon the break was over, and people once again streamed into the venue. This time it was only the humans, and Zac saw the Ishiate being shown to a side-area by some attendants.

He went to his original position and nodded to Nigel who sat beside a snoring Billy. He looked over at the Marshals, but the trio was pointedly ignoring him this time. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or peeved but simply shrugged it off. Ogras’ lesson was still fresh in his mind, but he knew he still didn’t possess the means to act and talk in a manner that gave away no information. So he was happy being left alone.

Thomas Fisher walked up to the stage with his group, and the murmurs in the venue died down.

“Welcome back to the last segment of today’s activities, and perhaps the most important one. Those here today are a significant portion of the world’s elite, with over twenty of the rankers present in this room,” Thomas said, creating some surprised murmurs.

“Humans are beset on all fronts by enemies. And let me be honest. They are stronger than us, they are more used to Cosmic Energy, and they are more brutal. In less than half a year only twenty percent of humanity is still alive, and it honestly looks bleak. But we are not without hope.

“A large reason why the invaders can run rampant is that there haven’t been concentrated and organized efforts in rebuffing them. The local forces have fought valiantly, but they have

stood alone against a vastly superior force. Too many brave men and women have already died in this ignoble way.

“The solution is simple. We need to unite and fight as one entity. Alone we might be weak, but together we will stand strong. And we have found a way to make this happen.”

Chapter 141: Forming Factions

Zac frowned as he listened to Thomas' speech. While the words sounded good it felt to him that it wasn't that simple.

"Why don't you just drop a few nukes on the Incursions? It's better we get some radiation than having to risk our lives," a man in the back row shouted, and many seemed to agree by the nods.

"Honestly that was our first thought," Thomas said with a sigh. "Better we create no-go blast zones than having people get slaughtered or turned into Zombies. But soon after the integration happened we made a troubling discovery. All our weapons of mass destruction, and most of our high capacity arsenals are simply... Gone."

"WHAT?" multiple shouts erupted in the hall, many looked fearfully at each other.

Zac was surprised at the news, but not overly so. He had the same idea as the man who shouted earlier, but if they hadn't dropped the nukes even after billions of people died, they simply weren't able to. Seeing as the system wanted a struggle to create powerhouses it didn't make sense for it to leave behind technological weapons that simply erased all struggle. A nuke at every incursion in the beginning would swiftly have ended the invasions after all.

He also noticed that while some seemed shocked, many took the news with stride. It obviously wasn't a too tightly guarded secret.

"All nukes, chemical warfare and high capacity bombs are gone. Most of our airplanes, carriers, and battleships are gone as well. They weren't stolen or destroyed, but simply removed. We are quite sure it is the doing of the System itself,

as even any reference to an atom bomb is removed from all computers and even books. If you find an encyclopedia you'll notice that there is just a blank space in the pages where the restricted information once was."

Even Zac was shocked this time, once again reminded just how powerful the system was. To remove even any mention of the things it didn't like was a horrifying capacity. However, they were still all talking about it, so hopefully it meant that the System at least couldn't alter memories.

"To make matters worse, we can't build them. We are not allowed. An atomic bomb is not an extremely complicated thing, and many of our scientists are able to construct them. But as soon as we make some headway the prototypes vanish out of thin air," Thomas added. "In essence, the System wants us to fight with our own hands."

Many in the room looked despondent. Clearly they had hoped the government would solve the problems for them, and perhaps that something was just holding them up. But Thomas Fischer's declaration dashed any such hope. Obviously rifles and hand-guns were still around, but their efficacy was limited.

"But do not worry, we have a plan." Thomas said, bringing back the attention to him.

"We have representatives present from all corners of the world, meaning we have the means to quickly travel and assist everyone, no matter where they are. However, this doesn't happen in practice. Why?" Thomas asked as he looked over the audience.

"It's simple. There are only two public teleporters at the moment. Ours and the Cradle of God. And you should all know by now that whoever enters the Cradle never comes back. We do not know if it's controlled by a traitor, a powerful Dominator, or even a foreign force that somehow has circumvented the rules. So in essence, only New Washington is accessible to the forces of the world.

"All other teleporters are closed, and I do not blame you. Leaving the teleporters open would subject your towns and

citizens to danger at any time. But there is a solution. The New World Government is happy to announce that we are on course to have the first System-approved Lord within the month.”

Murmurs started through the area, many looking surprised at each other.

“For those of you who do not know, it means that new forms of settings of the teleporters can be enabled. It is possible to create a closed system where all the portals of allied towns are public to each other, whereas everyone outside the network can’t access us. That would give us an immense edge in the fight against the invaders.”

Many nodded, but there were a few people who looked like Zac felt, troubled. There was no such thing as a free lunch after all.

“We would be able to coordinate both defense and assault. Our warriors would be able to go from hotspot to hotspot and keep reaping the rewards. Because remember, while incursions are dangerous, they are also a huge opportunity to gain power. It is not without reason that many of the high rankers have their base of operations close to incursions,” Thomas added.

“This network would not only help with battle, but with all manner of society. It would help with trade, information and even relocation efforts for those who try to reach their loved ones. And every time a new town join the collective, we all grow a little bit stronger.

“Throughout history mankind has been splintered and our own worst enemies. But if there is one thing that has always marked our species; our adaptability and ingenuity. We haven’t really come together as one race before, but we haven’t been tested like this before either. The New World Government is a living testament to the possibility of this.

“Thirty-eight government towns are already slated to join the network as soon as we can create it. It would allow us to travel through large parts of our new world,” Thomas said, letting the audience sit in the silence and ponder the implications.

“Can anyone join?” a voice shouted from the back.

“For now, yes,” another man said as he stepped forward next to Thomas Fischer, and Zac recognized him as one of the delegates of another government town.

“However, we need to make sure the safety of the network. We will do a site visit to your town to ensure no atrocities are going on, or that letting you join the network would impact the other negatively in some other way. We would also place a permanent government liaison at your town to keep an open channel of communications,” he continued.

“But do not worry. The control of the town and its development is not something the New World Government will interfere in. There are only two requirements. The first is that the town accept the newly drafted Rule of Law that is there to ensure the human rights of all citizens. The second is contribution to the war efforts,” Thomas added.

“Let no one forget. The largest reason that we need to combine our forces is to fight back against the invaders. Someone who is not interested in contributing to humanity has no place in our network,” he said as he slowly looked over the population with a steely gaze.

“Edmonton is ready to fight for humanity,” a large man suddenly said with a booming voice as he stood up.

“Little Creek is ready to fight for humanity,” another woman with a huge scar across her face soon added not long after.

One by one a lot of people stood up and professed their readiness to fight for humanity. Zac silently looked on the spectacle with a small frown. His time with Ogras had made him a bit more cynic, and he instinctively felt that the audience participation in this last meeting were plants by the governments.

The forces might be real and their town were ready to join, but their participation was likely already negotiated and done before this meeting started. This was only reinforced as he saw the stocky man who ruled the town close to the Undead Incursion stand up and profess his allegiance.

Zac knew then and there that any hope of him using the teleporter through normal means wouldn't be possible. It was clear that the government was setting up a sphere of influence. There was no way that Zac would join them at this point in time, so he would be cut off from the teleportation network.

They would use the safety in numbers and promise of becoming stronger to rope more and more forces into joining. It was true what Thomas said, each time someone joined their alliance it would get stronger, and the outsiders would get more and more ostracized.

He threw a glance at the Marshals, and was somewhat relieved to see that the three seemed to be completely unaffected by the commotion in the room. A quick look over at Billy showed that the giant was still snoring away, obviously uncaring about what was going on, but the slight frown on Nigel's face showed that they weren't one of the forces that had made a deal with the government.

"What if we don't join?" a loud voice suddenly asked after the hubbub had died down a bit.

"We hope that as many as possible will join us in our fight, but we understand that some have their own aspirations. We will not force anyone to join unless they feel comfortable with it. However, please beware that New Washington's teleporter will become private again a month after the network is set up," Thomas answered.

"Having an open node in the network will risk the whole alliance, and we can't allow that. The month is so that all forces of the world will be given ample time to consider our offer. It will also hopefully allow a few more forces to gain a teleporter and join us. But after that we need to think about the safety of our citizens, and from there on there will be no more admission," the politician continued.

"At certain intervals the teleporter will open though, to allow teleportation to New Washington only. That would be an opportunity to join us at a later date," another delegate added.

"As soon as the members have been finalized and the network secured we will begin our campaign to retake our land from

the foreign invaders. I will not go into specifics at this time due to security concerns, but our goal is to completely close all the incursions plaguing New Earth before the anniversary of the integration,” Thomas said.

A stunned silence spread through the hall from the strong declaration. Clearly the New World Government wasn't messing around. Zac personally was skeptic. They talked big for a group of people who still hadn't closed a single Incursion. At the same time he didn't want to create a scene since he couldn't do the job alone, and if humans could organize and pick up the slack it would be for the best.

The meeting kept going, and the government officials spoke a bit more about the specifics of the future alliance and fielded many questions. It became increasingly clear that the New World Government had adopted a polite “you're either with us or against us”-approach. On the surface it was completely up to anyone whether to join or not.

But in practice they meant that unless you joined the fold you would be alienated from the rest of humanity. You wouldn't get access to the teleporters, and it even became apparent that trade and information sharing would only happen within the alliance as well.

Zac was sure there were some additional caveats that were not disclosed at this time. He was pretty sure that the government wouldn't try to freeze out the Marshall Clan, since a retaliation from them with Thea as a poster child might splinter the alliance. He could only hope that type of courtesy would extend to himself as well. His problem was that while his pseudonym was well known, he was not.

Personally, he was unsure what to do. He should be happy that the government was trying to organize people to fight against the incursions. But more than that there was a deeply rooted unwillingness to hand over the reins of Port Atwood. They said they would let everyone have autonomy, but the stronger the alliance got, the more power would become centralized.

He sighed as he kept trying to think of solutions of what to do, as his eyes every now and then darted to the leader of the town

close to the Undead Incursion.

Chapter 142: Heading out

Zac walked out of the concert hall with a frown on his face from the information. He still hadn't found any answers what to do in his situation, and could only turn to his teammates for answers. After a quick glance around he found them sitting at another group of sofas the whole table in front of them filled with various foods and drink.

Zac had thought the demon was once again the culprit, but seeing the little Gnome lying prone with his belly protruding like a little ball, while the Zhix was constantly burping he wasn't so sure anymore. He also saw the two Ishiate he was talking to earlier sit next to the group. As soon as they saw Zac arrive they quickly stood up and slightly bowed.

Zac was a bit confused, but thought perhaps his group's wanton spending during the auction was taken as a sign of great power. Ogras looked over with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"So, they are trying to create a force with access to their teleporters?"

"You knew?" Zac asked a bit surprised.

"Well, they didn't have a lot of other options if they wanted to remain in charge. Of course, they will sooner or later realize that the distance of a continent is just a small inconvenience, and controlling the arrays aren't enough to seize control."

"It seems they already have quite a few members already though," Zac retorted with a sigh as he sat down.

From there he detailed the general outline of the New World Government's plan.

"Just weaklings banding together to feel strong. It's not too bad. There are various ways to circumvent that. You can just take control of a town close to a Government member. If you

need to use their network just teleport to your own town, and run over to theirs,” Ogras said with a shrug, clearly not being worried about the situation.

“Besides, the multi-verse is a place where power holds sway. Power-structures like theirs never work out in the end, with just a few notable exceptions,” Ogras said, and even the Gnome who was fond of bureaucracy seemed inclined to agree, as he gave an unwilling nod.

“Your world is still in its infancy, and you still hold notions of equality. But you will soon see the reality when people will start to evolve. A D-Grade Powerhouse could destroy half of New Washington with a flick of his hand, what would he care about their little schemes? He’d just seize the whole network if he wanted it. A dragon doesn’t negotiate with ants,” Ogras said.

“You might be right, but that is still far off. In the immediate future they will have a commanding advantage,” Zac retorted with a frown.

There was not much left to do in the venue, apart from one thing. It had become increasingly clear during the meeting that using the teleporter to get to the undead incursion would be hopeless, no matter what he said. It was time to go with Ogras’s plan.

“I have no choice, I will need to use your method for access to the teleporter,” Zac said with a grimace.

The demon only nodded, whereas the others looked at them a bit curious. Zac wouldn’t explain what he was about to do, as he felt pretty sick about it already, and instead looked out over the floor. It appeared luck was on his side, as he saw the robust man head toward the area of the toilets. They were around a corner some distance away from the general area and was quite secluded.

“I will be right back,” Zac said with a somber expression, and while using **[Loamwalker]** he disappeared.

Between his attributes and the skill it essentially looked like he teleported, as he was one second sitting, and the next second

gone, only a flash of his afterimage leaving a trace. In no time he was by the toilet and was relieved to see that there was no one there at the moment.

Zac grabbed the neck of the robust man from behind without a word, and before the poor man had time to react he was dragged into the handicap bathroom with his throat gripped in an iron vise.

Zac was now holding him up in the air with one arm, having taken out his axe with the other. The large man was held a decimeter above ground, his legs swinging widely and his face quickly turning red.

“Scream and I will start cutting off body parts,” Zac said with a deathly stare.

He had already decided to go through with this despicable act, so he would go all the way with it. He’d play the villain if it meant getting access to the teleporter.

“To help you understand your situation I’ll show you something,” Zac continued, as he displayed the part of his status screen that showed him being level 54.

Of course, he didn’t display any of his stats or his name, as the level was enough to convey his message. The man was still unable to breathe, but after having seen the prompt his eyes widened in terror and he stopped trying to get himself free.

“You should understand who I am by now. You can try screaming for help, but the government do not dare make an enemy of me, and would probably sacrifice you rather than getting themselves into trouble,” Zac continued as he placed the man down on the ground.

He didn’t actually know if it was true, but it did have a note of truth in it. The man took a few deep steadying breaths, but he did comply, as he warily stared at Zac.

“What do you want? You were at the meeting, they have set up all kinds of rules that I can’t just break as I wish. Don’t you think I’d have taken the money if I could?”

“What’s your name?” Zac simply asked.

“I am John Bernard,” the large man hesitantly answered.

“Are you under a contract of servitude?” Zac continued.

“No, why?” the man answered with a confused stare.

“Good,” Zac said as a small glass bottle appeared in his hand.

Zac opened the stopper and took out the pill which emanated a pungent odor.

“Wh-“ the other man said, but didn’t get further before Zac slammed the pill down into his throat with lightning-quick speed.

John was so surprised that he instinctively swallowed the pill, and Zac nodded satisfied.

“The pill I just had you eat is a unique poison called [**Ten Steps to Hell**],” Zac said, hiding nothing. “Every night you will experience a tremendous pain that will be so bad that you will think you have gone to hell. Every night the pain will get worse, and on the tenth day the pain will be so bad that you will die.”

“WHAT? Why are you doing this?” the man said, looking positively horrified.

“Because I have the antidote,” Zac answered as he took out the other bottle. “One week from now, open your teleporter for five minutes at 3 am New Washington time. If I do not pass through the teleporter, do so again the next night at the same time. When I come through I will hand you the antidote. And a handsome reward,” Zac explained, adding the sentence about a reward after a brief hesitation.

The man looked at the glass bottle in Zac’s hand like a drowning man looks at a liferaft.

“Why not just give me the bottle, and I promise I will open the portal. There’s no need for all this,” the man entreated.

“I prefer to do things my way. And you might be scheming all kinds of things right now, but the following days will show you the reality. Feel free to visit as many healers and you wish. I didn’t get to the top of the ladder without having my own

means. Noone on earth will be able to save you except for me.”

Zac felt a sour taste in his mouth as he played the villain. He simply channeled his inner Ogras, thinking of what he would say to get what he wanted in this situation.

“Remember. One week from now, 3 am sharp,” he finished and disappeared before the man had time to say anything else.

Soon he was back at the table and saw Ogras grinning at him.

“The things we do for love, huh?” he said.

Zac recognized the quote and only rolled his eyes in response.

“We are done here. We should have them take us to a hotel. I want to stock up on various things for port Atwood, and hopefully we will find some experts in various fields that will accompany us back,” Zac said. “That is provided they will let us stay though.”

There was no point in pretending that he wasn't in charge anymore. No one would believe Sap Trang was the leader instead of Zac after his display of power earlier.

He was unsure what the government had decided regarding his party. They were ushered straight to the venue after arriving, and it seemed they were considered somewhat a risk. But at the same time they had clarified their position here at the auction, and hopefully the government wouldn't bar them from exploring the town a bit.

Last time he was here he hadn't really explored New Washington, as he was eager to get to Greenworth. But this time there were various things he wanted to get for his city. There were all kinds of things the town was in need of, from seeds to materials, and even technology. Most of it could be bought through Calrin, but Zac suspected such things would hold almost no value to the current settlements, which meant they could make huge savings.

He was also hoping he could snag a couple of solar panels for himself, but he wasn't too hopeful. The government was clearly searching for them as well in order to power their town, and now they had around fifty towns to power.

“If the things in the auction were the best of the best, then there might not be much of value in the town,” the Gnome said hesitantly.

“There is a bazaar where independent cultivators and hunters can sell their things. Who knows what they’ve found while out farming kills in the forests. I am sure that many of those here are hoping to sell their own things as well,” Zac said, causing the little merchant to perk up.

“Can we even go? That little lass didn’t seem willing to let us into the city,” Ogras interjected.

As if summoned Julia actually emerged from a door not much later and started walk toward them.

“I hope today has been satisfactory to you all,” she said with a smile as she arrived at Zac’s table. “I understand you have spoken with the leaders of the New World Government, who have given your party access to the town. Will you be staying here for a bit, or are you heading back to Port Atwood immediately?”

Zac’s brows rose, as he didn’t expect the government to be so amenable after their little altercation. Especially not considering their stance with their plans for a closed network.

“We’re planning on visiting the bazaar and leave tomorrow,” Zac simply answered.

“Excellent. In fact, there will be an informal gathering at the bazaar in roughly two hours, where many of the guests here will sell some of the things they’ve found, or trade them for other treasures more suited to them,” Julia answered with a nod.

Zac wasn’t surprised, as the government didn’t sell commissioned items, but only their own. Many should have found things that they had no use for, and desired to trade them for something that could give immediate benefits.

“The car is waiting, I will take you to one of the still-operating hotels who is located close to the bazaar,” Julia said and the group started to walk out.

“It was an impressive spending spree you had, Mr. Monk, even outbidding Ms. Marshal,” Julia said with a smile as she shot a glance at him as they walked toward the exit. “You and two high rankers fought tooth and nail over that stone. It must have been something quite impressive. A few of our scientists are a bit unsure whether they made a good deal or a horrible one after seeing your bidding war.”

“Well, it was an interesting stone. Who knows if it will be worth the sky-high price though?” Zac answered with a shrug of his shoulders. He wasn’t about to disclose the fact that the stone seemed to be something that all Spiritual Tools wanted.

Zac went over to the Ishiate before they left to exchange some pleasantries. Unfortunately there was no way for them to create an alliance or create their own network at the moment as none of them were lords, so they could only make some loose promises of future cooperation.

The plan of the government was to create a network by piggy-backing their Lord’s access to the improved teleporters. Every non-lord who wished to join would become a vassal. In practice, they wouldn’t go by feudal rules where the lord actually commanded the vassals, but that was just what the government said. Who knew if this lord would get a taste for power and want more. Then again, Zac suspected the government had some sort of failsafe for that situation.

The group finally exited the opera house accompanied by the two steampunk Ishiate, and went down toward the stairs toward the waiting limousine. Julia had been a bit curious about the two new companions, but it was easily explained. Zac could only hope there wouldn’t be any further complications if they managed to recruit some people back to the town.

Suddenly Zac froze after having walked down the small set of stairs, as an intense hair-raising sense of danger exploded in his mind.

Chapter 143: Assault

A lot of Zac's actions were born from instinct since he'd been in constant battle for months. Without hesitation a green shield encapsulated him, and the Dao of Trees spread through his body as he brought out his axe.

However, he didn't even have time to look around before an extremely strong impact slammed into his shield, soon after accompanied by an enormous gunshot. Luckily the shield held true, as a large caliber bullet turned into hot molten metal that fell harmlessly on the ground in front of him. However, the danger sense only increased and he once again summoned the second charge of his gear, this time gearing to move away from the group with his movement skill.

The others in the group looked on gapingly, with only Ogras quickly reacting. Shadows gathered around him and he safely disappeared from the line of fire.

Zac was just about to step forward to disappear with **[Loamwalker]** when a second impact slammed into his new shield, leaving him defenseless. He barely had time to inch his head away when a third bullet grazed the side of his forehead. Everything turned white for a second before he found his bearing, only to find himself on his back on the ground.

He felt a scorching pain on his head, but a quick mental check showed he was largely fine. Since he upgraded to E-Grade Race he held a greater command of his body, and could generally tell the state of all his bodyparts. He was extremely relieved he'd focused almost all of his stat points in Dexterity lately in order to match his other monstrous stats.

He wouldn't have been able to avoid that last round without the quick movement Dexterity allowed, and after feeling the power of those bullets he held no delusions he would be able to tank them like normal rifle rounds. Just as he was planning

on getting up he saw an unfamiliar man almost teleport to his side, and immediately touched his chest.

Zac frowned as he stared at the man, who looked back at him with a horrified face. He immediately moved to flee, but an iron grip held him in place. Zac didn't know what kind of skill the man used to approach him, but he used the same method as he utilized against Ogras to keep him in place, infusing his hand with cosmic energy.

The man struggled to get free, but a punch with the force of a truck in his gut made him curl up like a shrimp in the air. Zac looked around like an enraged beast as he got up, looking for any co-conspirators to this man while holding his captive like a shield. This clearly was some sort of assassination attempt, and this man was only responsible for taking his corpse.

“Are you ok?” a frazzled Julia asked from the distance as she waved soldiers to search for the culprits.

“Just this much won't kill me,” Zac succinctly said as he turned his eyes to the man he caught.

“Who ordered you to attack me?”

“Please, mercy,” the man croaked, still shaking after the punch to his stomach.

“Mercy? We don't do that,” Ogras with a sneer said as he materialized back by the group.

In his hand he held a sack which he summarily threw to the ground, causing six decapitated heads to roll out, each one with a horrified look on its face. On his back the demon had two huge sniper rifles that looked strong enough to blow holes in tanks, and he was completely covered in blood.

“What the f-“ Julia screeched and backed away as she saw the grisly scene.

“Answer him or you will join my collection,” Ogras said with a demonic grin at the captured man, who looked horrified at the heads.

“Please, we weren't ordered. We only wanted your Cosmos Sack,” the man cried.

“That’s why you tried to shoot me in the head with those rifles?” Zac retorted with a glare as he touched his forehead with his free hand.

It came back bloody, and Zac was enraged even further. It didn’t matter whether they were ordered or simple bandits, they had almost killed him even though he had no connection to them. If it wasn’t for his large amount of Dexterity and his defensive Dao his head would have exploded like a watermelon.

Zac slapped the man hard enough to knock him out, and threw him over like a sack to Ogras.

“Can you properly question him later?” Zac said.

“I guess. They did give me these new toys after all, so I should give something back,” he said as he looked at his two rifles.

“I am sorry about this incident, this is partly due to our oversight. I actually recognize this man, his name is Ricky. He’s part of a small elite group called the Red Mercenaries. Your friend is... holding... most of the other members in his sack. Including Red himself,” Julia said apologetically to Zac.

“Where are they from?” Zac tersely asked.

“They came through a private teleporter, we do not actually know which town they are from. More importantly, please let the government take over from here. A crime has been committed, and these men attacked you in the middle of New Washington. Please hand over the criminal, and their restricted equipment,” Julia said, shooting a glance at the two rifles on the demon’s back.

“What equipment?” Ogras said with a blank face as he slowly put the rifles in a Cosmos Sack one by one, drawing a glare from Julia.

“This one is coming with us. If you have any complaints you will have to take it up with Thomas Fisher. There has been no discussion of the details of our future cooperation. For now, we will maintain the status of diplomatic immunity, and we will deal with our issues by ourselves,” Zac said with a glance.

In a sense it was a declaration of independence. He was essentially saying that he and his group would do whatever they wanted and that they did not agree to follow any regulations from the New World Government. It was both a show of strength and a way for Zac to test the government's patience. But more importantly he was pissed off and was in no mood to accommodate the government, who might even be responsible for the attack for all he knew.

Julia frowned as she looked down on the unconscious captive, but after some hesitation she didn't bring up her demands again. She simply walked over to a soldier and whispered some things before she led Zac's group back to the limousine.

The atmosphere in the car was quite oppressive after the events, and any discussions quickly died out. Soon they arrived at their destination, a large luxurious highrise hotel. Ogras caused quite a scene as he walked in like a bloody devil, but Julia quickly smoothed things over. Zac had already eaten a healing pill in the car and wiped off the blood on his head, so he was essentially looking normal again, apart from his frown.

It seemed like the hotel was managed by the government at the moment, which made sense as there shouldn't be too many travelers needing temporary places to rest at the moment. That might change though when New Washington becomes a hub in their network in the future, and Zac couldn't help but be a bit jealous.

He was fighting tooth and nail to simply avoid his emerging town becoming overrun by beasts, but these people had quite a laid back life. It seemed that this town hadn't really been tested at all since the start, and Zac wondered exactly how this kind of environment could create a system-approved Lord.

They were given their own wing on a floor, but only a few actually went up to check the rooms out. Zac sat down in the bar and ordered a bottled beer. It cost 1000 Nexus Coins, which was far and above what food usually cost, but to Zac it didn't really matter.

Everyone came streaming down one by one, and soon only the demon was missing. It only took 20 minutes for Ogras to come

back looking freshened up, any sign of blood scrubbed away and donned in new robes. When he came back he didn't carry the man they captured either, giving Zac a clear indication of Ricky's fate.

"So, what's the plan?" Ogras said as he looked a bit excited, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"We have two things to do. Buy materials and find people. I think we can split up," Zac said, still feeling angry over the attack earlier. "I'll accompany Sap Trang who will focus on acquiring talent, acting the part of the bodyguard. Calrin I assume will go to the Bazaar to make some deals."

The gnome nodded, looking a bit excited.

"If you can try to get talks going for a few branches. I don't care if they're a part of the new government network or independent forces. It's all money into our pockets," Zac said.

"I agree. We have a great opportunity here, it will take some time before competing consortiums deign to come to this planet, giving us a good head start to seize control of the market. If they arrive at a later point we can just squeeze them out. Even a dragon can't fight the local snake," the gnome said with a grin.

"I'll go with the little blue bastard, seems more fun," Ogras said.

"Good. What about the prisoner?" Zac asked.

"He's in my pouch," the demon answered with a grin, confirming he was dead.

"Ibtep, who do you wish to go with?"

"I will join you. I am curious to see what professions you humans have. I feel your societies are more diverse than that of the Zhix, and learning more might strengthen our hives," the Zhix answered.

"Good. As for you two," Zac said as he turned to the two Ishiate who had joined their party. "You're free to do whatever."

“We will go to the bazaar to look for things that could help Cogstown,” Shea, the female Ishiate, said.

“Very well, we will leave early tomorrow, at 7 am New Washington time.”

With that they were done and started heading out of the hotel. Their odd party kept getting glances from all directions, but they were used to it by now. However, four men walked up to them just as they were about to exit.

“Mr. Monk and company. We’re from the New World Government, and we have been tasked with accompanying you during your excursion. Please do not take it the wrong way, it is simply to allay any troubles that your... unique party composition might bring,” a man politely said.

“Fine,” Zac lightly said after some consideration.

He didn’t really care if the government employees saw their activities. It was not like they could hide it if they brought new people with them through their teleporter tomorrow.

Soon they were walking through the bazaar, which was a huge square and the neighboring streets. There was a surprising amount of hawkers, selling everything from hides of mutated beasts to Old World luxury objects such as Perfume and jewelry. There were also quite a stalls with street food. All in all it created a bustling atmosphere that made a jarring contrast to the fact that 80% of the world’s population had perished the last months.

As soon as they entered the commerce area Calrin and Ogras veered off, with two of the government employees following in tow. As for Zac’s group they looked around for a bit before they stopped.

“Just how are we going to recruit people?” Zac asked with some hesitation as he looked around.

“I have an idea, but it would require us to expose a bit about Port Atwood,” the old fisherman said.

“Oh?”

“Well, it’s already well past lunch as the auction took up much of the day. We only have a short time to convince people to actually join us and move to an unknown area. They would be taking a huge risk compared to the relative safety of this town. We need to give them a good enough reason,” Sap Trang said.

“Money?” Zac asked hesitantly, but the fisherman shook his head.

“You.”

“Me? What do you mean?” Zac asked confusedly.

“You’re so strong so you might not realize the reality of most people walking these streets. They might look happy, but they are scared. Terrified. There are real-life monsters just outside the gates, and any day those monsters might break through those walls and kill them,” Mr. Trang explained.

“But if they know Port Atwood is protected by the strongest man alive, and that it is safe enough that we only need to recruit non-combat classes, a few might risk it.”

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but then finally nodded. The government leaders would have to be mentally challenged if they still didn’t know he was either The Super Brother-Man or Salvation by now. Since the milk was already spilled they might as well use his identity to their advantage.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked, and the fisherman only answered with a big toothless grin.

Chapter 144: Gaining Reputation

“Come join the town of the strongest man alive. We need all sorts of non-combat classes. Doctors, scientists, blacksmiths, and farmers. Come one, come all! Carpenters, janitors, brewers, and craftsmen! All are welcome to sign up! Join Port Atwood, home of the Super Brother-Man, the safest place on Earth!”

Zac could barely stop himself from blanching as Sap Trang walked back and forth in front of their gaudy stall, tirelessly shouting out superlative statements about the Super Brother-Man and their town.

He understood the reasoning. They needed to create a buzz that propagated like wildfire since they only had the afternoon for recruitment. The third wave started in three days, and they needed to go back tomorrow to finalize preparations.

Mr. Trang’s plan for this was to create a recruitment stall. They had simply bought out a large stall on prime location of the square, and changed the sign. It now said “THE SUPER BROTHER-MAN IS RECRUITING! BECOME THE ELITE OF THE WORLD!” in huge lettering, and nothing else. Meanwhile the old fisherman was sounding like a street hawker as he kept throwing out one bombastic proclamation after another.

Normally their proclamations might have been met with scorn and maybe even ignored. But the fact that there was a living, breathing Zhix sitting in the stall reading a book seemed to somehow increase the legitimacy of the stall. Who but the Super Brother-Man would keep a pet Zhix? The two government officials looking on the proceedings with troubled faces only furthered the impression.

Still, it had been thirty minutes without anyone coming up to the stall. But clearly a buzz was being created, as a small crowd of onlookers had gathered, and some people seemed to arrive just to look on at the excitement. But finally there was some result from Mr. Trang's tireless efforts.

"You talk a lot old man, but do you have any proof?" a man shouted from the group of onlookers.

"I understand it is hard to imagine such a great opportunity has presented itself to you. But it is one hundred percent real. If you have friends who attended the auction you should know of Port Atwood already. We spent over twenty million Nexus Coins during the Auction, defeating even the Marshall Clan for the battle of precious relics," Sap Trang shouted back.

"Don't forget, Super Brother-Man is not only the strongest man in the world, he is also the wealthiest. And he is ready to spend some of that immense fortune on you, in order to help you advance your non-combat classes."

Some subdued murmur spread through the crowd. Twenty million Nexus Coins was a crazy amount of money, and most counted their wealth in the hundreds, or perhaps thousands. The low tiered monsters only gave a handful of nexus coins after all, far less than the more profitable barghest.

Actually, Mr. Trang had initially wanted Zac to stand and swing around his axe and show off his might, but that had summarily been rejected by Zac.

"We stand at the forefront of the world, and we're the only town in the world to hold all four of our new world's species, creating a true metropolis of our new planet," the fisherman continued, seeming to gain vigor the more he boasted.

Zac started to worry about the people's reactions after they arrived at his temporary town filled with demons. From Sap Trang's description it was as though he offered them a spot in paradise, and not dubious employment on a desolate island. Still, the effect was limited until suddenly another shout gathered the crowd's attention.

“It’s the Marshall Clan!” a man shouted and pointed to a group walking toward the stall.

“Hehe, I guess their boasting reached the Marshall Clan’s ears. I think we’re in for a good show,” another person muttered, eliciting some chuckles.

Zac looked over and the shouting man was correct. It was the old man, Henry Marshal, who walked in the front, with the bodyguard from before accompanying him. It looked like Thea wasn’t lying before. They truly didn’t need Zac’s pill as the bodyguard was walking with no problem, looking as fit as a fiddle. There were also a few more people accompanying the duo, but Zac noted that Thea Marshall herself was not part of the group.

“Mr. Monk, we meet again. Do you mind if we chat a bit?” Henry Marshall said as after he reached Zac’s stall.

Zac wished that Ogras was here to do the talking, but could only nod and take out another chair from his pouch for the old man.

“Is this about Mr. Trang’s claims just now?” Zac asked.

“No, that doesn’t matter. Port Atwood is currently lacking renown, and the Marshall Clan isn’t so frail that we can’t provide some assistance on that front,” the old man said and gave a nod to one of the men in the group who quickly left the stall and blended into the group that looked on.

“I am more interested in your plans for the future, and wish to offer an alternative to what you heard today,” the old man said.

“Oh?” Zac said with piqued interest.

“Truthfully we had some plans for a network as well, though the government beat us to it. So we have had to find an alternative solution. We have no intentions in joining the frail government alliance, and I have the feeling that neither do you,” Henry continued.

Zac only nodded in response.

“We aim to create a network as well, but it will not be as formalized as the government’s. However, only lords will be

able to join, and the extent will only go as far as providing means of movement and trade. There will be no centralized organizing body and no vassal-superior relationships. How the lords manage their domains is up to them,” he said.

“What about defense and concentrated war efforts?” Zac asked.

“That would be up to the individual members to organize. The network should only be seen as a means to facilitate various private alliances,” the man answered.

“What’s in it for you to do this?” Zac asked skeptically.

“The government still lives as though we are in the old world, playing bureaucracy. They gather the mediocre, but to what avail? We worry that their narrow-mindedness will steer humanity into a path of no return. We need to provide an alternative, one that’s made for the elite, the powerhouses of the world. We believe that is more in line with how our new reality functions.

“Perhaps the alliance will crumble in the future, with all of us vying for supremacy of our planet. But we need to kick out all foreign scum before we can get to that point,” Henry finished.

“When we first met this morning you seemed less than pleased by my party’s composition. But now you are inviting us?” Zac asked skeptically.

“My views are that it is only a matter of time before humanity will be pitted against the ilk of your... friend... over there, and the information you provided only proves it.” Henry said as he waved at the Zhix. “We humans haven’t even been able to coexist with ourselves, but suddenly we are supposed to coexist with two other sentient species?”

The clan leader only shook his head, clearly showing his position. Zac didn’t really agree, but he felt no point in arguing.

“Either of us will be proven right in the future, but for now that’s not important for this potential cooperation. Destroying the incursions comes first,” Henry finally added.

The two talked for a few more minutes, with Zac mainly asking for some clarifications about the planned alliance, while the old man mainly asked about the information on incursions and the Dominators that Zac provided the government.

Zac learned there were some planned requirements for the alliance after all. One such requirement was that they would have to keep their teleporters public for a week every now and then, and that they would take turn in doing so. The reason was to attract new blood to the alliance. Zac felt that was reasonable enough, as he was even thinking of making his teleporter permanently public as soon as he had stabilized his position as a Lord.

At the same time they would be allowed to turn their teleporters private for even the alliance members, but only for a limited time. This was in case there was some internal upheaval or an important mission they didn't want to be interrupted.

Zac gave no definite answer, but he said he would discuss it with the others. Henry Marshall took the tepid answer with stride and nodded as he left the stall.

"Excuse me, Lord Marshal. Is it true?" a voice from the back of the group shouted as the old man planned to leave.

"Is what true?" Henry retorted with a strong voice as he looked over at the crowd, who seemed subdued from the power of his stare.

"Is it really the Super Brother-Man's force?" the same voice asked.

At this point Zac noticed that the one shouting was actually the man who diverted from the Marshal's group earlier, albeit covered a bit in a hood.

"... Yes," was all Henry Marshall said as he left, but that was all that was needed as the group exploded into commotion.

The looks at the gaudy stall changed from skeptical and derisive to interested and contemplative.

“Why are you recruiting so many people?” someone suddenly shouted from the group, this time not a planted person.

“Port Atwood did not exist prior to the integration, we are building the town completely from scratch. Currently we have the strongest fighting force of humanity, but we’re lacking in many other compartments. We have money but nowhere to spend it. We need driven craftsmen and other non-combat classes to make the town to a truly thriving metropolis,” Mr. Trang answered without missing a beat.

The declaration of having the strongest force also made some waves in the crowd.

“Are you also recruiting warriors?” another man asked.

“Security is currently not a concern for our town, and we are mainly looking for non-combat professions at this point,” Sap answered. “But if you are a stand-out talent or have some unique skills that an army can benefit from, then you’re welcome to apply. But be advised that fighters will not enjoy the same type of freedom as the non-combat classes, as we expect warriors to be in the thick of it fighting. Of course, the benefits we offer our soldiers are also unmatched on planet Earth.”

Sap’s answer made a few people frown, even though he promised high rewards. Zac felt that it was natural. They were in the middle of the New World Government. If any strong warriors around still were unaffiliated they did not want to be tied down. He wondered a bit what would happen with independent warriors like these people after the government enacted their plan. Would they be booted from the safety of the city?

Suddenly a woman in her forties walked over to the stall where Zac and Ibteq sat. Since Mr. Trang was busy fielding various questions to the crowd Zac had to take care of this.

“Can I help you?” Zac asked.

“Is it really true that you welcome all sorts of non-combat classes?” the woman asked hesitantly.

“Yes. What is your profession?” Zac answered.

“I am an anthropologist,” she answered with hesitation. “I wish to join you and study your society. Are there really four species living together in Port Atwood?”

“Well, the Zhix and Ishiate have their own towns, though that might change in the future for security reasons,” Zac offhandedly answered.

“And there is a fourth species?” she pressed on, seeing that Zac was amenable to answer questions.

“Yes, there’s one of them here in the bazaar somewhere, accompanying our Sky Gnome, who I guess is a fifth species,” Zac answered.

“What are the rules to join? Do I need to sign a System-enforced Contract?” She asked.

“No. Your benefits are tied to your contributions to the town. If you contribute nothing, you get nothing,” Zac answered, getting down to brass tacks.

These rules were set with the help of Ogras and Calrin, who explained how heterogeneous forces worked in the multi-verse. Very few actually used contracts, as that was usually seen in bad light. Skilled people in high demand would seldom sign them, apart from for very limited times, such as for the duration of entering a mystic realm.

Forces who consisted of all sorts of people, like academies and Sects usually only had contracts for the very top of the organization, those who also had the largest amount of benefits. The body of the force generally was kept somewhat honest with the help of contribution systems. Homogenous forces used contracts mainly for external elders who wanted to become a permanent part of the clan.

Zac had been surprised that contracts were such a small thing until he understood that the number of contracts one could have active was limited. He was already reaching his limit by using it on the whole squad of girls he brought back from Greenworth, and there simply was no way for him to have contracts for a whole force.

The Apostate of Order created the contracts as a way for two people to work together without fearing betrayal, not for lords to enslave their whole population. Therefore there were also limits on using a branching tree, such as having contracts on 100 captains who each had contracts on 100 soldiers. Every contract within the network would be considered directly subservient to Zac, which would count toward his limit.

“But how would you compare my work in anthropology to a blacksmith, for example?” the woman asked skeptically.

“We use multi-verse standard, with an automatic contribution allocator,” Zac answered, drawing interested eyes from both the Zhix and the scientist.

Chapter 145: Craftsmen

“What do you mean?” the anthropologist asked confused.

“Port Atwood is the only force on Earth who has access to a real multi-verse shop. That has allowed us to gain knowledge of the larger world that is still not publically available on earth. For example, most of the New World Government’s intelligence about the incursions is coming from us,” Zac explained. “It also has allowed us to create a structure that is more in line with our new reality.”

“Port Atwood will use a standardized contribution system. You can see it as a supercomputer who judges your performance. Your actions will generate contribution points. Working at a pet project of yourself with no application will probably not generate many points, but teaching at our academy will,” he continued.

This was the goal of Zac, though it wasn’t done yet. There were various ways to do this. You could set it up yourself with the help of a few administrator classes and a few specialized arrays, or just buy a contribution management store in the town shop. A few Golemoid forces similar to the creators had made a big business of providing various administrative systems and had perfected their algorithms over millions of years.

Contribution management was a very common concept in the multi-verse as forces were huge, often having millions, even billions in their fold. Making the administration of salaries and benefits automated saved a huge amount of work. It also saved lords a lot of money, as people were only paid for contribution, rather than time.

There were many more functions to an established contribution system, such as levels. If someone made large contributions over a long time they would get upgraded to the

next tier in the system, giving them better exchange rates and more precious things to trade for.

“What does contribution points do?” the woman asked.

“You trade them for whatever you want, like an internal currency. There is access to cultivation manuals and skills. Gear and weaponry, healing pills, materials for race evolution are also included. We are stocked with all kinds of things,” Zac answered.

Zac had wondered a bit why not just give Nexus Coins or Crystals, but Ogras explained it in a very simple manner; the lock-in effect. If they got Nexus Coins they could just leave whenever they wanted. But if they held a lot of their internal currency people were more likely to stay on.

For the same reason the rates for expensive things such as manuals or skills were pretty decent. There were permanent Skill and cultivation crystals in the multiverse where anyone could learn the skill imprinted. The lesser versions only worked once, such as the ones containing **[Book of Babel]**.

That meant that Zac could keep stocking up on various skills and cultivation methods as he gained wealth from taxes and other sources. Each new addition would bring a steady stream of revenue to his force, as any time a subject used their points to learn a skill instead of cash out materials or Nexus Crystals he would gain pure profit in a sense.

“However, for new people we will provide a base salary in the form of crystals to help everyone reach level 25 and get their classes. From there they will have to rely on their own efforts,” he added.

Making his people stronger was part of the reason, the other part being the simple fact that the contribution system wasn't set up yet. They had the things to offer, but not the framework in place.

“How interesting, your way of management would make for a good dissertation,” the woman muttered. “What about our freedom? Can we leave whenever we want?”

“The teleporter is currently closed, and if you come with us you will not be able to leave for at least a month. You should also know that Port Atwood will not be joining the World Government at this point in time, but stay an independent force,” Zac said, hiding nothing.

The two government officials were listening intently to the whole conversation, but Zac didn't care. In fact, he wanted the information to spread. Who knew, their way of doing things might actually snag some experts from the government to their side. Besides, Sap Trang was shouting out the same information, though while using a bit more bombastic wording.

In no time the whole bazaar and surrounding neighborhoods knew about Port Atwood's recruitment, and that the Super Brother-Man was looking for non-combat experts. Still, many were hesitant, even with the Marshall clan's assurance. Perhaps not about the legitimacy of the force, but whether it would be a good idea to join.

Zac wasn't too surprised about people's reluctance, as New Washington was one of the most thriving cities in the world right now. While the people might not have all the tools to progress in their crafts in the current city, they were at least safe. They didn't know what would await them if they stepped through the teleporter.

Still, one after another surreptitiously stepped forward and asked a few clarifying questions to Zac, who patiently answered them all. There also were a few troublemakers that tried to cause a scene. However, they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with by Mr. Trang.

Finally the fisherman met with trouble he was unsure he could actually handle. With a sigh Zac stood up and walked forward to the group of instigators. He released his aura causing widespread panic, and with a Heaviness-induced stomp created a small crater with his foot, throwing the troublemakers off-balance.

After that there was no more trouble, but at the same time the onlookers asked their questions to the old fisherman instead,

afraid to bother the monster sitting in the stall with closed eyes. Still, Zac was listening intently to the conversation between Mr. Trang and the various people and wordlessly communicated with the old fisherman.

Anyone who Zac felt could be a good asset was asked to gather their belongings and come back as soon as possible. He didn't want to risk the government trying to intercept his talents, so he would have them stay with them at the hotel. For those he could do with or without he simply said to come to the teleporter at 7 am tomorrow. These were mainly unskilled workers who he essentially could gather from the neighboring islands as well.

After a few hours there were actually over thirty people from various fields who were gathered close to the stand, some who even brought their families. Judging by their appearance some were doing it as a last resort of sorts, as they looked a bit emancipated and haggard. Others were doing it in order to take a chance and improve.

The group consisted of a wide array of people. Apart from the anthropologist there were all kinds of experts, such as a few engineers, two doctors, a botanist, and even a brewer. Zac almost felt a bit bad for the corpulent man with the handlebar mustache, knowing that he would be hounded by a few hundred thirsty demons as soon as he arrived on the island. Complaints about lack of liquor were one of the most common grievances among the demonkin over the past month, as their own stores had largely run out.

He also managed to snag a few artists and a watchmaker, who were quite surprised their talents were wanted. He didn't actually need painters or a watchmaker, but Zac had a feeling that someone who was adept at working with a craft that demanded steady hands and precision would make a great future inscriber. In fact, anyone he felt might turn into good, or at least passable, inscribers were quickly recruited.

Zac's goal was simple. He wanted to unleash a mountain of inscribed armors created from the wolf pelts and ant carapaces on the surviving humans. His materials were enough to create thousands and thousands of pieces of gear, and with his

current demon inscribers, it would over a decade to complete all the equipment. His desire to get more inscribers only increased after he saw how sought after even mediocre gear was at the auction.

If Calrin also managed to open up a few branches, all the better.

As it was getting late Sap Trang simply shouted out the meeting spot and rules for any interested parties before they led the group of non-combat classes back to the hotel. By now the group had grown to over fifty experts plus their families, and the group who had been told to go to the teleporter was five times that number. If all of them actually showed up it would be quite an improvement for Port Atwood, though Zac expected a decent amount of them to get cold feet.

The group took over a few floors of the hotel, racking up a bill that would be insurmountable for most people. Later that night Calrin and Ogras returned, the gnome having almost a rosy glow. Zac noticed that the gnome had spent a bit more of his money earlier while he was recruiting, but he stopped not long after.

“We made a haul this time. It actually seems that the System created a patch of Aetherbloom close to this town, as quite a few sold it. No one has figured out its use yet, so we bought out most of the city’s supply. The city’s leadership will puke blood when they realize what they’ve missed out on,” the gnome said with glee.

“Aetherbloom? What’s that used for?” Zac asked curiously, as he’d never heard of it.

“It’s one of the main components for a popular medicinal paste that’s used for race improvement. It’s more effective than the standard baths, and it even has some effect when trying to improve to D-Grade race. A single stalk cost over ten thousand nexus coins normally, we paid less than a hundred coins per stalk,” Calrin explained, almost looking aroused when explaining the gains

“More importantly, it is quite rare and takes decades for it to regrow, and it probably only existed here due to the System

creating some opportunities on this baby planet,” Ogras added with some schadenfreude.

“These bureaucrats lost out on enough materials to bring almost 300 warriors to E-Grade Race. For Port Atwood that could be huge. You saw that many soldiers among the demons still haven’t upgraded their race. These stalks can help us create an elite squad that will shake fear in the world for hundreds of years,” the demon said with a gleam in his eyes.

“The government caught on to our actions after a while though, and hurried to buy stalks as well, but not before we snatched a good 80% of what was on the market.”

Zac was quite impressed with their haul, as that sort of paste would be a great thing to add to the future contribution system. It would make the warriors work far harder if they could get that sort of panacea to help them with their evolution.

“We also got quite a few promising people to sign up to join Port Atwood,” Zac said, not wanting to be outdone as he listed the various occupations of their new hires.

As Zac expected Ogras eyes lit up when he heard that there was a brewer on the list, but his next question confused him a bit.

“Are there any filmmakers like Directors and editors in the group?” the demon asked.

“No, why?” Zac asked confused.

“It would be fun to try to making my own movie,” he said with a wide smile.

“Eh... I think those kinds of people should be in Hollywood, and I don’t know where that town’s located anymore,” Zac answered hesitantly.

Since there was not much left to do everyone returned to their quarters, where Zac spent most of the night better acquainting himself with his improved Dao of Heaviness. He also tried to use the experience of improving his first Dao seed to also make some inroads on his other seeds, though progress was slow there.

After sleeping for two hours he sat down in the lobby to wait for everyone to gather up. Soon most had gathered up, though it appeared that a few of the experts had left during the night. Two also backed out before they set out, looking quite embarrassed. Zac assured them it was no trouble, and they quickly left as well, leaving only 38 experts. All in all, it was still a good number who stayed on in Zac's opinion.

More troubling was the fact that Ogras was not around, and that he'd only left a note at the reception that he'd meet up with the rest at the teleporter. Zac got a headache thinking about what the demon was up to, and could only gather the rest of the people.

The teleporter was decently close to the commercial district and they opted to walk the twenty-minute promenade rather than trying to get hold of enough cars for the whole party. A few of the more cerebral of the experts were panting when they arrived, and Zac could only shake his head. The general level of some of the more niche experts was quite low, some even still below level five.

As they arrived Zac immediately tried to find the demon who had promised to be here, but Ogras was nowhere in sight. Zac was starting to get worried that he had gotten into some real trouble, but a voice from the shadows allayed that worry, though a new worry soon replaced it.

"I can't show myself at the moment. Hurry and start the teleporter, we need to leave."

Chapter 146: Home Sweet Home

“What have you done?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling while looking at the shadows, drawing confused or concerned glances from the others.

“Aren’t you the curious one? I just solved a few future issues for us, but the government might take some issue with my methods,” the voice responded.

Zac could only close his eyes in despair as he’d seen Ogras’ methods in action before. Something crazy had happened during the night. But he would rather sort it out at his own island than here, so he chose to drop the subject for now.

Not a large distance away many of the recruits from yesterday stood waiting with large backpacks and trunks of their things in tow. Zac noted with some disappointment that less than half of those who promised to be here actually showed up.

However, he was overall quite content with their haul. Over 150 people had decided to drop their lives here in New Washington to come with him into the unknown, based only on the pull of his own, or the Super Brother-Mans’s, reputation.

Zac walked up to the waiting group, and with a swipe of his hand put all the luggage into a Cosmos Sack. Next, he walked to the teleporter with everyone in tow, passing right through the security check. It seemed the guards of the teleporter was already informed that his group would be significantly larger when leaving, and simply waved everyone forward.

Zac threw out a small mountain of crystals, enough to let everyone pass through, and opened the channel to Port Atwood.

“I better go first, make sure there’s no confusion with the guards,” Ogras’ voice once again sounded, and he appeared encumbered by a huge box.

Zac’s eyes widened when he realized that said box was not some crate, but rather an elaborate coffin. He planned to close the array, but the demon jumped through without waiting for an answer.

Zac’s bad premonition only got worse, but he could only swallow his unease and wave people through one by one. People walked through, some with fear and others with anticipation plastered on their faces. Zac wondered what their faces would be like when they saw that the town was not even built yet.

He did feel a bit bad about the whole situation, but the town would start getting built within the week, so he wouldn’t lose sleep over it. Especially considering how safe his island was compared to the rest of the world. He knew people in New Washington might feel safe, but Zac truly doubted that the System would allow them to create a Lord without a proper challenge. Perhaps a true calamity was waiting New Washington. Besides, he would keep the town protective array ready to protect the inner Zone from the third monster horde so that no civilians got hurt.

The transfer kept going smoothly until suddenly Julia and multiple guards came rushing toward the teleporter. Roughly two-thirds of the recruits had passed through by this time, including the Ishiate and the other original members of the group apart from Zac. He’d expecting trouble, so he chose to send the most important people through first.

“Stop!” Julia shouted, causing Zac to frown and look over.

“Ignore her, keep going through,” Zac said as he walked over to intercept the people.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a sigh.

“You tell me, Mr. Monk,” one of the guards said angrily.

“Witnesses report a shadowy figure abduct Emma MacHale from her highrise apartment a few hours ago, and your

companion, the demon, was spotted carrying a suspicious coffin outside this building earlier.”

Zac already had some suspicions before, but still groaned when he heard the man.

“That’s an odd coincidence. Ogras bought that coffin for a friend who died in the fight against the invaders,” Zac said with a blank face, though he felt his earlobes redden a bit from his shamelessness.

“Why don’t you call him back to New Washington and let us question him?” Julia said with a baleful glare.

Zac was surprised by the reaction, as the government worker was looked far angrier this time compared to when he wreaked havoc inside their buildings or when he killed the leaders of Greenworth.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Zac refused without hesitation.

He knew Ogras quite well by now. If he had actually put the starlet inside that coffin, then he was long gone from the teleporter by now, and not even Zac would be able to find him unless he wanted to be found.

“You understand your wanton actions are testing your cooperation with the New World Government?” Julia spat out through grit teeth.

The new citizens of Port Atwood hesitantly looked on, no one currently passing through the portal.

“Wanton actions? You’re throwing baseless accusations against my companion. From what I understand I just hear some circumstantial evidence, no real proof,” Zac said, not backing down as he turned to the last people waiting to go through. “Keep going, this is just a small matter that I’ll handle.”

The people looked at each other, with two of them shrugging and stepping through. For a few it actually seemed the fact that Zac didn’t much care about the government was a testament to their strength, and they quickly followed behind into the array.

Soon only ten people were left, who hesitantly looked at the teleportation platform.

“This is your last chance to back out,” Zac said as he slowly walked toward the array. “I am stepping through in 10 seconds, anyone who hasn’t gone through by then will have to stay behind.”

“Our talk isn’t done yet,” Julia shouted from behind.

“Take it up with the chief of police,” Zac tersely retorted, not in the mood to keep up the charades any longer.

A few people grit their teeth and jumped through the array, disappearing into motes of light, while the last 6 people shook their heads and backed away. Zac only nodded and made to step through the portal.

However, before he could walk into the shimmering light he saw a form flash by with a mighty leap. It was Julia who jumped with surprising speed into the teleporter. Since she wasn’t planning on attacking Zac his danger sense didn’t activate, and he only blankly stared at her form disappearing.

“You should know this already, but Port Atwood is going into seclusion for a month following this. Your colleague’s actions will not change this. Ms. Lombard will be returned after that point unless she’s committed crimes while in our domain,” Zac said to the guards who looked equally surprised, and stepped through the teleporter.

After the travel time he once again arrived at the teleportation area, and immediately heard a shout.

“Emma! Can you hear me?” Julia’s voice carried from outside.

Zac sighed and stepped out to the chaotic scene.

All the new citizens hesitantly looked around, some clearly a bit dismayed at the utter lack of civilization. The array was placed some distance away from the temporary town, and they were surrounded by primordial forests.

“We’ll head to town in just a bit,” Zac said with a loud voice, drawing everyone’s attention.

“You just entered without any invitation,” Zac said as he turned to a dodgy Julia. “You should know you are stuck here now. I can’t let you return to the government at this point.”

“Are you truly trying to fight the world government?” Julia spat back, clearly still irate.

“Do you speak for the government now? I already told your colleagues that you will have to stay here for now, and only be returned if you break no rules.”

“Everyone, I’ll lead you to Port Atwood. Please do not stray away in the woods, as all monsters in this area are around level 40,” Zac said.

“You said this area was safe!” a woman shrilly said.

Clearly some had painted quite a different picture of Port Atwood in their mind compared to the wilderness they found themselves in.

“The beasts are left for our trainees to gain experience. We have already killed everything stronger on the island,” Zac answered.

“Island?” a few asked simultaneously, and even Julia refocused on Zac.

“Port Atwood is an Island kingdom. Honestly we still haven’t found the mainland, so we are not exactly sure where we are in relation to places like New Washington. This is the main island, while we control a few more. We are constantly traveling through our archipelago to save any stranded citizens and claim more land,” Zac explained.

“The Cosmic Energy! It’s so dense!” a man suddenly exclaimed.

It was one of the experts who actually had a passable level. He was a doctor who was also a cultivator and was already at level 19, which was respectable for someone who hadn’t really fought any monsters since returning from the tutorial.

“This whole island has far higher amounts of energy compared to the mainland. Those who contribute to Port Atwood will be given access to areas that have up to a few times higher

density than even this. It is no luck that we became the strongest force on the planet. Anything that is done here, from cultivation to farming, has twice the effect from half the effort,” Zac said, which improved the somewhat despondent faces of some of the people.

He wasn't planning on talking this much, but the faces of the new citizens clearly showed that some were on the verge of a breakdown, clearly regretting their choice. He needed to throw out some good news or they would never get back to town. Julia looked down on the ground with a thoughtful face, which gave Zac some pause. He still hadn't figured out what to do with her, as she was a high ranking official.

He already knew that there likely was one or a few spies in the group, but he knew there was not much he could do about it apart from isolating the town until his position was unshakeable. He guessed he would just let Julia wander around for now, unless she actively tried to look into the restricted areas. Perhaps he'd add a guard or two to her.

His musings were interrupted as there suddenly were twenty people who approached. Zac saw it was a few of the people from his female squad, who after just a few days of training looked quite a bit more professional and powerful.

“Welcome back,” Joanna, who lead the squad, said.

Zac only nodded and then pointed at Julia after throwing Joanna the Cosmos Sack containing the bags of the new citizens.

“This one isn't really a part of the group. You should remember her, she's a high position official of the New World Government who suddenly jumped through the teleporter. Just let her go with the others, but keep an eye on her. She's level 29, can you handle it?” Zac asked Joanna.

The recruits balefully glared at Julia when they heard she was a government employee. Their experiences in Greenworth were clearly still fresh in their minds, and they held a deeply rooted hatred for the government due to the mayor.

“Not a problem,” Joanna said, looking like she wanted to eat the government employee whole.

“Don’t kill or torture her,” Zac only said with a sigh. “As for the others, give them the same type of introduction as all the other new townspeople.”

As he gave over the responsibility of the new citizens to Joanna he felt like a large burden was lifted from his shoulders as he started to walk away with his

“Why is he leaving?” a voice was heard from the group.

“Do you think the strongest man in the world has time to babysit you?” one of the Valkyries shot back, causing some murmurs among the group.

Zac shot a glance back toward the group, only to see Julia intently staring at him.

“If Ogras truly did kidnap the movie-star, you don’t need to worry. He is simply a movie fanatic, and don’t have any nefarious purposes. But I will look for him now and investigate,” he said before he disappeared into the woods.

It didn’t take long for him to walk back to his mansion, and felt the tranquility sooth his soul. However, that tranquility didn’t last long, as a shrill voice interrupted it.

“Are you crazy? A coffin? How can you do this to me?”

Zac recognized the voice, and with a sigh he walked over to the garden he heard the sound come from. As he approached he saw Emily stare with large star-struck eyes at the scene in the garden.

“Wow, it’s really her!” Emily whispered with an excitable voice as she saw Zac approach.

Zac could only nod and turn to the couple in the distance.

When he saw the scene he could only wryly smile.

Chapter 147: Roads to Lordship

In the middle of the secluded garden Ogras was grinning as he deftly dodged an enraged Emma MacHale, who was currently trying to clobber him with a champagne bottle.

“A coffin? A COFFIN? What kind of asshole moves someone in something so ominous as a coffin? That wasn’t what we agreed upon! I’ll shove this bottle up your ass,” she screamed as she threw the bottle with full force at a laughing Ogras.

“I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable, and the casket was nicely padded inside. I am a gentleman, after all,” Ogras said with a smile as he snatched the bottle out of the air, careful to not let it break.

Zac was quite surprised at Emma’s personality. It seemed the person he’d seen in interviews and on the stage of the auction was another role she played, just like in the movies. Her real personality was far more coarse.

He was also quite relieved that it seemed that what Ogras did was not an abduction, though the exact details hadn’t been quite agreed upon. Zac didn’t want to have a falling out with the demon, but if Ogras truly had started kidnapping women he would have no choice but to do something drastic, as he couldn’t accept such behavior. It would be on a completely different scale compared to just messing around at the auction.

Emily giggled as she heard the exchange, which made the movie star look their way, immediately focusing on Zac.

“You! You let this horned mongrel just knock me out and carry me around in that god damn casket? What? Why are you just standing there gaping, you pervert? Are you the kind of guy who just finishes by himself in the corner?”

“Urh,” Zac only managed to get out, not ready to become the target of Emma’s vitriol. “I only found out Ogras had, uh, brought you here, after Julia Lombard told me.”

“Jules told you? Where is she?” the starlet said, quickly calming down.

“Do you two know each other? She was quite angry. Angry enough to jump through the teleporter to come here,” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“She did?” she asked, her mouth slightly curving upward before refocusing at the demon. “You can’t hurt her, or I won’t cooperate anymore. And you never told me you lived in the god damn jungle.”

“Hi! I’m Emily, I’m a huuge fan! You’re in Port Atwood. It’s an island in the middle of nowhere!” Emily chimed in, clearly excited to meet a movie star.

“Hi pretty,” Emma said, clearly more amenable to the excited teenager. “You should stay away from those two, something is wrong with their heads.”

Emily only giggled in response.

“Emily, tell Emma a bit about Port Atwood. Ogras, come with me,” Zac said with a sigh.

He needed to understand what the hell was going on. Soon the two stood some distance away while Emily peppered the movie star about questions about her old life, and Emma had turned back into the gentle personality you saw on TV back in the day.

“So you created a huge mess. You were seen with that casket before you came back here. And now we got a government official on the island,” Zac said with an angry glare. “I don’t even want to imagine the kind of riot you’ve caused in New Washington. You better have a god damn good reason for all this.”

“Well, the casket was sort of a spur-of-the-moment thing,” Ogras shrugged drawing another baleful glare from Zac.

“I was only planning on visiting Ms. MacHale for the dinner I promised, but things turned out this way.”

“She’s not a prisoner. And no forcing her to do anything,” Zac said with an even stare.

“Bah, why would I do something like that? The chase is half the fun,” Ogras spat back. “Besides, that’s not why I brought her here.”

“Explain,” Zac said, still annoyed.

“Didn’t you say you couldn’t understand how those useless bureaucrats are creating a Lord while you, the top spot on your Ladder, is fighting tooth and nail for the same privilege? Well, Emma MacHale solved that puzzle for me yesterday,” Ogras began.

“The first clue came from Ricky, the poor sap you left with me. I asked him about the government’s plans after he spilled everything about their group. We missed one of them by the way, so watch your back. The Red Mercenaries had done some nasty work for the government before it seemed, even killed a Ranker who actively spoke against The New World Government.”

Zac didn’t much care about the last man who was still alive, but he was more concerned about the fact the Red Mercenaries did Government wetwork.

“So the government was behind the attack?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No, it seems they truly only did it to stuff their pockets a bit. Birds die for food, men die for money,” the demon answered with a shrug.

“I was more interested about what he told me about the government’s quests. He swore that there were no quests like defending New Washington from beasts to become a Lord. He did, however, mention that he had heard about a contribution Crystal, and that Emma MacHale was quite high on it.”

Zac was quite intrigued by now, completely having forgotten about the fact that a storm might be brewing in New

Washington by now. He only nodded for the demon to continue the narration.

“While I was walking through the Bazaar I was listening for any gossip, and it turned out that MacHale wasn’t the only star the Government employed. There were actually many of them visiting various towns, shaking hands and kissing babies so to speak. All while promoting the Government.

“At first I thought it was just promotion to gain legitimacy before the Auction and get more to sign up for their little alliance. But I was proven wrong. I found out where MacHale was staying later on and went to visit her. Partly to find out more and partly, uh, for personal interests,” Ogras said, drawing an eye-roll from Zac.

“I invited myself into her domicile, and after she had calmed down a bit we had a nice talk. I found out a lot of interesting things. Such as why they held their Auction, and why there were stars travelling town to town with government escorts. The Government needs the *fame*,” Ogras said with a grin.

“What?” Zac couldn’t help but blurt out.

“It’s their Lord quest. They need to generate enough renown, and someone among them will be promoted to a Lord. They are using the stars as mouthpieces to spread the plans of the Government and improve their renown. The Auction was partly held to gather a lot of forces, and gain a lot of renown in one fell swoop. Those who improve the fame of the Government would get contribution points, and Emma was one of those,” Ogras said.

“That still doesn’t explain why you kidnapped her,” Zac said.

“She asked me to,” Ogras said with a shrug. “When I told her who you were she immediately requested sanctuary. In the beginning, she was doing the work willingly, but after she learned some things she wanted out. However, they didn’t allow her to leave. The government was essentially keeping her a captive to generate fame since she was one of their top earners.”

“Does it even matter if you snatched her? They still have the same amount of fame as before, even though she isn’t there anymore?”

“Well, according to Emma the fame was attached to those who contributed somehow. I don’t truly understand it since I’ve never heard of a quest like this before,” Ogras said with some hesitation. “But if those people defected or died, then the Government would lose progress on their quest.”

Zac suddenly remembered the demon’s words outside the teleportation building in New Washington and got a bad feeling.

“You didn’t...?” Zac said with a sinking feeling.

“Well, a few people in New Washington had untimely deaths during the night. But that was also a request from Ms. MacHale. She is quite ruthless. Though we only killed a few degenerates who used their status for disgusting things,” Ogras said with a sinister glint in his eyes.

“You know this might set me at a straight collision course with the government?” Zac said angrily.

Zac wondered if he would ever be able to return to New Washington or their alliance towns without a cover. If the government made Zac an accomplice for what seemed to be a murder-spree and a kidnapping there was no knowing what they might do. Perhaps his good name was being dragged through the mud as they spoke.

“You already were. Someone like you can’t coexist with a group like that. Better prepare yourself mentally and clear this wave quickly. They might be gunning for your sister as we speak,” Ogras retorted.

Zac could only frown in response, knowing that the demon might be right on the nose with that remark. The government wanted to create a unified power, and people like himself might be considered a thorn in their side, even though Zac had no designs on their alliance. Perhaps they would have found some other excuse to create trouble for him even if Ogras didn’t go berserk in the town.

“You still haven’t properly explained why you went through all this trouble?”

“For my, uh our, interests of course,” Ogras said. “The Auction brought far more fame than the government expected, and they were extremely close to finishing their quest. It was to the point that they would probably achieve it before you. We couldn’t allow that to happen. Becoming the first Lord of a world should bring great benefits to that Lord’s town and the Lord himself.”

“So you did that all for me, you say?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Remember, our fates are tied together on this little island,” Ogras said. “Your prosperity is my prosperity.”

Zac went over the information over for some time. He wasn’t really comfortable with the fact that the demon had gone off on a murder-spree in a human town without saying anything. What he said was true; their fates were tied together, and Ogras’ actions would impact Zac.

At the same time he had to admit he felt it was for the best. The government’s actions sounded quite shady, and more importantly he didn’t want to cede the advantage of being the first Lord. He got the Creator’s shipyard from being the first to close an Incursion, so he felt that becoming the first Lord might give a huge advantage as well.

“In the future, consult me first about stuff like this. If we’re going to have a working cooperation you can’t go rogue at every turn. That doesn’t only go for your nightly activities, but also your actions in the Auction,” Zac said with an even stare.

“Yes, mother,” Ogras said while rolling his eyes. “Well, you did show passable ruthlessness with the poison, so I guess I won’t need to take all matters into my own hands in the future. But don’t go squeamish on me. Remember, your actions doesn’t only impact yourself, but all your subjects and your family. A moment of softness can lead to a lifetime of suffering.”

“Ok ok. Also, the government official is your responsibility. She came here because of your actions, so you solve the

aftermath. Find out if she is part of this all, but don't kill her," Zac said.

Overall he had a pretty decent impression of Julia, but if she jumped through the portal to control the Government's asset then she would likely become a problem.

"All these rules," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes, though Zac knew he acknowledged the request.

"I told you, you can't hurt Jules," Emma suddenly said, having snuck up on them. "If you do I'll start preaching again here, giving the government a large boost in reputation."

"I told you, as long as she doesn't start breaking the rules she'll be fine," Zac said.

"Good. Now tell me, where will I stay? The demon promised me a Mansion."

Chapter 148: Cogstown

Zac's headache was only growing as he walked the movie star to one of the empty courtyards on his compound. He had been forced to let Emma stay here until the promised mansion was built, and he had decided that the construction would be fast-tracked.

Ogras had wanted to accompany them, but Alea arrived which seemed to make him change his mind. The poison mistress didn't have her usual playfulness, and she simply left after she had thrown a glare at the movie star, which was returned in kind. For now only Emily was accompanying them.

"So you really are the Super Brother-Man? Jules told me she suspected that you were him, and the demon confirmed it. Why do you have that stupid nick-name? Sounds like the alias of someone trying to lure kids into their van," Emma said, obviously not caring to choose her words more carefully after learning who Zac was.

Zac only sighed and shook his head. It seemed that him being the top ranker couldn't subdue the mouth of the renowned movie star completely. Still, it was thanks to her that he still could attain the first Lord-title and benefits, so he chose to simply endure it for now.

At least she would be someone else's problem soon enough, as she'd be barred from his compound the moment she got her mansion built. And if she kept making a racket or cause problems in Port Atwood he wasn't above throwing her in jail, even if he had to build one just for her. There were limits to his patience.

"You can stay here for now," Zac said after they arrived at a small but exquisite courtyard that just so happened to be on the opposite side of the compound from where Zac usually meditated. "It might be a week or two before we can construct

your permanent home, as our force is a bit occupied with a few things right now.”

“Well, it’s passable I suppose,” Emma said as she walked around.

Zac nodded and turned to leave, but a shout stopped him.

“Wait. What about me?” Emma said with a glare.

“What about you?” Zac asked.

“Will you just leave me here? What am I supposed to do? You’re the worst host ever,” Emma said with a huff.

“Emily can take you to Port Atwood. Julia should be there somewhere also. You’re also free to stay with Ogras in his palace,” Zac said, hoping she would take him up on his offer.

“Why in god’s name would I live with that bastard? Cutie, take me to Julia please,” she said and hooked her arm in Emily’s to her visible excitement.

Finally the two left together, leaving Zac alone with his thoughts. He opened his quest screen and took a look at his quest.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3)
[02:15:23:14]**

Less than three days remained until the third and final wave. He went over his things and felt as prepared as he could be. He already had two of the Lightning Punishment arrays that he bought for the ant waves, and an ample amount of crystals he got from Rydel’s Cosmos Sack and the mining operations.

He also had the high-quality siege machines from the sack, which even low leveled people could utilize. They might not gain energy from the kills, but at least they would contribute to the war efforts. Depending on the nature of the waves he would either have the Valkyries use the siege engines or gain experience from fighting by hand. He honestly did not know

what else there was to do before the wave hit, apart from preparing the general population.

After resting a bit he went to the town to meet up with Adran, who usually was up to date with everything happening.

“Greetings, Lord Zac,” the demon said as Zac entered his office, which was still the large tent. He still hadn’t bothered with having a proper structure built, as it would be moved shortly in any case.

“How did it go with the new town-people?” Zac asked after greeting the administrator.

“Hehe, I do not know what you told them to get them to come here, but some were... Less than pleased with the current state of Port Atwood. Though it got better when we demonstrated building a house in an hour, and explained we would begin construction of the town proper within two weeks,” the demon said.

Zac only grimaced while nodding. He wasn’t too surprised by their reactions after Mr. Trang’s shameless recruitment tactics.

“There are also the two beastkin who have kept pestering us to take them to the island with the town of their kind,” he added.

“Where are they now?” Zac asked.

The incident with Ogras had made him completely forget about the two.

“They are waiting in the tavern,” the demon answered.

“We have a tavern?” Zac asked surprised.

“Yes, one of the more enterprising humans opened one up while you were gone. Another human also informed us of his island having a pretty huge cache of liquor. We made an extra excursion there to procure it, I hope you don’t mind,” the demon grinned.

“That’s fine, it’s good that some civilian businesses are cropping up, please help out cases like that in the future as well,” Zac said with a nod. “How are the war preparations?”

“Everything we can think of has been done. We have massively improved on the traps and pitfalls outside the walls, reinforced the walls themselves, and added the siege machines,” the administrator said.

“We have also trained some of the more competent civilians to help out with logistical efforts and basic triage. The only thing remaining is whether you wish to buy any more arrays or tools to prepare.”

Zac mulled it over. Between his combination Town Protection array and his lightning punishments, he felt secure enough to tackle the third wave. He was sure it would be a nasty one, but still there were limits to how far the system could crank up the difficulty. With his own and the demon’s power, and the various advantages he had accumulated he felt confident in taking on almost anything the System could throw at him.

“We have everything we need saved from the Ant Horde,” Zac said and the demon nodded in agreement.

“Oh, we have also started making some inroads in making the carriages you brought back some time ago run on Nexus Crystals. For now, we can simply create fire from the energy in the combustion chambers of the contraption, but in the future we might be able to even make it run on pure energy instead of wasting so much of it through converting it to heat,” the demon added.

Zac was delighted at the news. That kind of refitting would be quite profitable he believed, but also it would help with mobility for a lot of people. Not every town could own an expensive Teleportation array and would have to actually travel between towns by foot. Being able to drive would massively increase their chance of survival.

“Great, keep me posted. I am planning on visiting the Beastman village before the wave hits. Perhaps we can get some more warriors. From my impression of these Ishiate they might also be skilled craftsmen, which would help in refining all our materials into sellable equipment.”

With that he left the command tent to head over to the tavern. He saw the two Ishiate sitting in a corner looking somewhat

troubled, but when Zac told them he was taking them to their hometown they were visibly excited.

But before they could leave he started as he saw who stood behind the counter.

“It’s you?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“Well, a man’s got to do something,” Ryan answered with a grin. “When I said I wanted to open a saloon the demons were more than willing to help with the construction. I’ve never seen a house get erected that fast. Unfortunately, I can’t really charge the demons for liquor since they brought it, but at least I can charge the others.”

“I’m glad you found your calling,” Zac answered with a small smile.

“Yeah, you know I sometimes dreamed of moving to some tropical country and opening a beach bar back when I worked a dead-end job. Who knew that the apocalypse would turn it into reality?” Ryan answered with a widening smile.

Zac wouldn’t have minded staying a bit, but the anxious Ishiate made him remember his tasks.

“I will talk to you later,” Zac said as he left with the two beastmen in tow.

Zac also brought the fisherman and one of the demons who participated in the original scouting mission and immediately set sail. The island was over six hours away, and he didn’t want to waste any time. Soon they were cutting through the waves in breakneck speed as Zac once again sat in the fore contemplating the Dao.

The two Ishiate were extremely intrigued about the vessel they used. They likely had studied human technology quite a bit since the integration, but this vessel was something else entirely. They kept excitedly talking about the construction and tried to hypothesize how it worked as they furiously scribbled notes in notepads. It was as though the vessel had opened up a new world to them.

Zac was happy to see their excitement as he had hopes that he would be able to relocate at least part of the Ishiate back to his

town in order to gain some craftsmen. The humans he brought from New Washington was a good start, but Earth had very few proper craftsmen before the fall. Zac suspected that things like blacksmiths, tinkerers and even alchemists were more common concepts among the Ishiate who was essentially a medieval society hungering for technological advancements.

Finally as the suns started to set they arrived at their destination, a decently sized island that was slightly larger than the ones he'd visited so far. The climate was the same as on his island, but the forests looked quite different. They were far more colorful, with many trees having red leaves instead of green, and many trunks were blue-ish.

The town they were visiting wasn't originally a seaside town, so it was some ways inland, and they started traveling through the beautiful forests. A weird small critter with three eyes and six legs suddenly skittered in front of them, startling Zac.

"It's a Prikka," one of the Ishiate explained, "I haven't seen one since the fall. This whole forest feels like home, though it has grown quite a bit from what's normal."

After an uneventful trek of five minutes they arrived at the walled city, and Zac looked at it with some interest. It's architecture looked quite different from anything he'd seen so far.

The wall was made of some metal, and on top of it there were huge brass cannons mounted. Both the cannons and the walls looked somewhat new, even though they weren't in great shape. Zac assumed they had been erected or improved in order to combat the monsters of the island. That would also explain the craters on the ground around the wall, and the fire-licked trees at the edge of the forest.

"We're home," the female Ishiate said with ripe emotion in her voice.

As they approached the town Zac kept looking over the area. It was clear that the town hadn't been unscathed over the past months. There were clear signs of battle all around the town, and the metal plating was dented or even missing in various spots. It gave a battle-torn image, though Zac noted that the

town still stood, as no parts of the wall were completely ruined, and there were figures patrolling its wall walk.

The group made no effort to hide and openly walked toward the main gate. Their approach was quickly noted, and the guards shouted down at someone below. Soon they arrived at the gate which still was closed.

“Hello? I’m Shea Moon of Cogstown, daughter of Basso Moon. With me are my husband Porro Moon and some human friends who helped us return home,” she shouted up at the wall.

There was no response for a minute, and Zac started to frown.

“What now?” Zac asked at the Ishiate, who also looked a bit confused.

“Wait a bit longer. The guards might be getting reporting to those in charge,” Shea answered hesitantly.

She was quickly proven right as after another minute a roar could be heard over the wall.

“Open the god damn gate, you idiots!” a deep voice resonated, almost immediately followed by the gates slowly opening with a creak.

Zac and the others didn’t have time to enter before a giant Ishiate rushed at them.

Chapter 149: Reinforcements

“Little Shea!” the man shouted, tears pouring from his eyes as he scooped up the female Ishiate in a bear hug. “We were so worried when you and the others disappeared. The world turned crazy and we found our town moved to this island. We feared the worst.”

“I missed you father!” Shea answered with a sob.

“What’s going on? What happened?” the huge man asked with concern. “And just what are those hairless ones? The old one looks a bit similar to the ones we have here.”

“You have humans in Cogstown?” Zac couldn’t help asking, which gave the huge man a start.

“You speak our language?”

“He has a skill for that,” Shea explained. “This is Zac Atwood, he is the leader of a town called Port Atwood at a neighboring island. Mr. Atwood, this is Basso Moon. He is the leader of Cogstown and its chief engineer.”

“How did you two end up at a neighboring island? Are the others still there?” Basso asked after nodding at Zac.

“It’s a long story, I’ll explain as we go.”

Basso nodded and led them inside the town. Zac curiously looked around as they walked, content in letting Shea give her father the standard run-down of the System and the Tutorial. It quickly became apparent that Cogstown wasn’t a spot where cultivators were dropped off after the month was over.

When the beastman mentioned humans Zac’s heartbeat had sped up for a moment, hoping that Hannah and the others were dropped off here. But the Ishiate were clueless about most things regarding the System, completely dashing that hope.

The town looked well fortified from the outside, but it was clear that they had met some trouble. A lot of houses were crumbled, and there were gashes and splotches of blood at many places. Even Shea couldn't help herself from asking what was going on, eliciting a sigh from Basso.

"It's the god damn birds. There's a flock of large white birds who turned crazy a month ago. Before that they mainly stayed close to the sea and fed on fish or small critters. But as they grew larger, so did their appetites. They started attacking our town, actually snatching people up in the air," he said with a tired voice.

"We kept shooting them, both with skills and our weaponry. But they are so large by now that if we kill it in the air their corpses become dangerous projectiles that might kill people when they smash into the ground. And no matter how many we kill it seems they are endless,"

"Can you buy a defensive array?" Zac asked, drawing a pained glance from the town leader.

"That's the problem. We do have the Crystal Shea mentioned, but we can't buy much more than a shop and a few basic structures, such as a smithy manned by those weird automatons. We got those options after defending the town from a series of monster attacks.

"I see that the fortifications you mentioned exist, but we can't purchase them. It seems we need to unlock them with another quest, but we haven't even received a quest yet."

Zac nodded, not feeling too surprised. There were very few who actually had the option to buy the arrays at the moment it seemed. Otherwise quite a few more would have been able to get teleporters, far more than the 50 or so towns in the whole world who appeared to possess them at the moment.

Zac was about to ask a follow-up question but was interrupted by some commotion.

"Grandpa!" an Asian man in his early twenties shouted as he rushed toward their group.

“Little Tuan? Is that you?” the old fisherman shouted back with a shaky voice, his eyes immediately reddening.

Mr. Trang already mentioned earlier that the younger generation had already left on a boat to find help for their grandparents. Unfortunately, they hadn't heard from them since. It looked like at least one of them somehow had ended up on this island, and was one of the “hairless ones” that Basso mentioned.

The man rushed up to the old fisherman, followed by a few more Vietnamese youths who looked to be between 20 and 35. Zac was relieved to see that they seemed fed and unharmed, meaning they probably weren't prisoners. He really wanted to recruit some Ishiate for his town, but if they had mistreated Sap and the other's grandchildren it would have become a thorny situation.

“Why are you kids here?” Mr. Nguyen asked as he looked over his villagers.

“Our ship was attacked by some monstrous fish while we looked for the mainland, and we steered toward this island before the ship sunk... Giang and Phuc didn't make it,” Tuan answered with a shame-filled face. “We were worried sick, but these aliens wouldn't help build a ship since it was too dangerous.”

“It's good that you stayed here rather than going back for us old folks. We left ourselves by ship and now live in Lord Zac's town. We're doing quite well, and old man Trang is already level 28. And this old man is almost ready to get a Class as well,” he said with a wide smile.

“I'm glad you're all okay. Why don't you stay here? I'm sure these aliens won't mind, they are pretty nice, though it's a bit hard to make yourself understood,” one of the other youngsters said.

“No, it's better you kids come back with me and Lord Zac after we're done here,” Mr. Nguyen answered with a shake of his head. “It seems a bit dangerous here while Port Atwood is completely safe.”

Since Mr. Nguyen was one of the main naval scouts he'd been given a skill crystal for the **[Book of Babel]**, so Basso and the other Ishiate could understand his words as well.

"It's pretty big words to claim complete safety in this new world of ours," an Ishiate with a large blunderbuss on his back responded skeptically.

"I think Mr. Nguyen is simply referring to the fact that we have eradicated any threatening beasts on our island, so we do not have to worry about such things anymore. However, with the incursions and other threats humans and Ishiate are facing it can't be called completely safe," Zac answered.

The Vietnamese people looked on with surprised expressions, seeing how the Ishiate seemed to understand their words and respond. Clearly, they still didn't know about the language skill.

"Other threats?" Basso said with a frown.

"Do you have somewhere we can talk in private?" Zac asked.

Soon they found themselves in a large meeting room in what seemed part castle part hangar. From the looks of it they were either trying to build or actually had built a Zeppelin, though he couldn't see one of them floating around.

A few other leaders of Cogstown had joined Basso and his guards, and they listened on as Shea explained her experiences and findings in the tutorial and from there. The Vietnamese people were also in the room, and the old fisherman was quietly translating for them in a corner.

When some clarification was needed by Zac he provided it, but otherwise he was content in letting the Ishiate talk.

"I heard Mr. Zac mention our flag at the meeting, and we immediately chose to follow him. That's how we got home," Shea finished recounting her and the other cultivator's experiences. It appeared she and the other cultivators of Cogstown were dropped off at the other side of the planet, and Shea was at the Auction since she had acquired the language skill during the tutorial.

“It is a relief to hear that so many of our people are still alive and amongst kin. It is a shame we can’t connect with them though,” Basso said with a sigh as he looked at Zac. “And I am thankful to you, Mr. Zac, for bringing my daughter home.”

“It was no problem. I was planning on visiting here sooner or later in any case,” Zac said.

“Oh?” Basso said, and the other Ishiate looked curiously or warily at Zac.

“In a sense we’re neighbors here on our islands, and I believe it’s important to know each other,” Zac said. “I’d also like to extend an invitation to the citizens of Cogstown. During the past months we have traveled across the archipelago to rescue any people stranded and beset by monsters.”

Finally Zac found an opportunity for recruitment and wouldn’t miss it.

“Port Atwood is in need of skilled craftsmen. After talking with Shea I’ve come to the understanding that your kind are both creative and skilled workers. Many of your group have switched from trying to improve your technology to becoming craftsmen classes to great success. If you’re willing to relocate to my Island you would be most welcome,” he continued.

“Why would we want to move and become a human’s subordinates?” an Ishiate asked, drawing a nervous glance from Shea.

“Security and improvement. Suffice to say, Port Atwood is somewhat unique on the whole planet. We have access to knowledge that you can’t find anywhere else. Much of the information about the incursions and Dominators Shea mentioned earlier comes from us. We also possess abundant resources to improve your crafting, and the Cosmic Energy density on our island is unparalleled,” Zac answered without missing a beat.

“Most importantly, our citizens are safe, and therefore able to focus on their personal improvement.”

“Our people have lived here for generations, and what you propose is a huge change. If you please would excuse us for a

bit while we discuss things,” Basso said politely.

Zac understood that there likely were things they wanted to ask Shea and her husband without the prying ears of himself and his team, so he nodded at the old fisherman and the demon guards and left with them.

Mr. Nguyen’s grandson and the others followed as well, and soon they found themselves in a group of sofas in another room.

“Hey, how did you get the skill to be able to talk in all languages,” Tuan asked Zac. “It seems really convenient.”

“Brat, be polite to Lord Zac,” the old fisherman said with a glare as he smacked his grandson in the back of his head.

“Ow! Grandpa, why do you keep calling him a lord? Is he a European nobility? That shouldn’t matter anymore,” Tuan said looking a bit indignant.

“What European? He’s a ranker on the Ladder,” the old man explained. “Act properly, it’s thanks to Lord Zac we old folk can survive. Work hard and you can gain opportunities that the rest of the world could only dream of. We might not have come from great origins before the world changed, but that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What? What’s going on?” Tuan asked, while the others looked visibly confused.

Zac could only shake his head. He understood the old man was still following the rules that he put in place earlier, stopping him from saying anything about Port Atwood. Still the old man wanted to convey the importance of having a good rapport with Zac.

But things had changed since he gave that order, and hiding nothing he simply stated the truth.

“I’m the Super Brother-Man.”

It took some convincing, but soon the Vietnamese youth no longer thought it odd that their elder looked up to some foreigner who was so much younger than him, and they no longer spoke about living in the Ishiate town. Clearly staying

with the force of the top ranker seemed a far more reasonable idea, especially since the other elders still stayed in Port Atwood.

It took almost an hour before Shea and Basso joined Zac, though the Ishiate were good hosts and brought some food and drink while they waited. Something about his demeanor had clearly changed, as he warily looked at Zac who was calmly sitting in his seat. The large Ishiate looked troubled as he sat down on one of the free sofas on the opposite side of Zac.

“I am sorry about the wait, Lord Zac. There has been much to go over. The news my daughter has brought regarding the change in the world is troubling, to say the least. We knew something extraordinary was happening, but the reality has far exceeded our expectations,” Basso said, looking quite worn out.

“We understand where you’re coming from, and perhaps moving Cogstown to your future residential and commercial districts is the best for our futures. However, I cannot make such a decision on the spot. We have lived our whole lives in this town, and we cannot leave it just like that.

“Our wilder brethren think us uncaring about the past, but that is wrong. We constantly build on our ancestor’s efforts to improve life for future generations. Cogstown is the result of four generations of Ishiate who have pushed themselves to unravel the universe.”

While Zac didn’t share the same types of feeling about his own hometown Greenworth he could understand where he was coming from.

“I will not force anyone to do something they are not willing to do. But you should make a decision sooner rather than later, as your problems with the birds might only get worse. Normally we would help but we will have our hands full ourselves the coming days,” Zac answered.

“We will leave soon, and it will be roughly ten days to two weeks before we can visit again, and that’s the soonest I can imagine,” Zac continued.

“We understand your force will face some sort of trial soon, though Shea didn’t learn the details. If you’re amenable I would like to send a few of our tinkers with you back. They are the ones who built the cannons on our walls, and perhaps might prove useful in your war efforts. Truthfully they will also scout your force and island to see whether it would be a good idea for us to move or not,” Basso answered.

“That’s fine,” Zac said, not feeling surprised.

He didn’t expect the isolated Ishiate to uproot themselves on his or Shea’s word, and that he got this much response from Cogstown was better than expected. The tinkers might even be useful in the coming wave.

Basso and Zac kept talking for a while, and Zac even promised to sell an exploratory vessel like the one he used for a whopping 5 million Nexus coins. The money-printing machine that was the Creator Shipyard was finally starting to give returns.

He’d long ago explained the situation to the Creators, so the ships themselves apparently were modeled after vessels from a huge human force called the Allbright Empire that spanned multiple galaxies. Any foreigner seeing the ships would think they were made by some grandmaster engineer from that empire.

Only an hour later Zac sat down again on the fore of the ship, and with closed eyes ignored the hubbub on the cramped vessel behind him.

Chapter 150: The Third Wave

Zac had a sense of Deja Vú as he stood waiting on the wall, somberly looking toward the inner regions of the island. Next to him stood Ogras and his three generals. Zac had been extremely surprised to hear that Namys was dead, worried that some monster or powerhouse had arrived at the island.

He was even more shocked to learn that she was killed by Alea on Ogras' orders. Zac immediately called an emergency meeting between the three of them, and it took an hour to finally get to the bottom of things. Ogras was almost biologically incapable of delivering clear answers, whereas Alea refused to divulge anything Ogras hadn't.

To hear that the sour-looking demoness had far gone plans to kill him in his sleep without him even having an inkling of it caused Zac a fretful sleepless night. He knew Namys wasn't one of his biggest fans but had no idea that it went to the level of wanting to eradicate him. Zac understood Ogras' actions, and Zac also felt it showed that Ogras was in it for the long haul, but it also meant that they had lost one of the best fighters and leaders for the third wave.

Ogras looked unusually pissed off as he was chewing on a piece of dried meat next to him, which was out of character for him. The demon usually adorned that annoying grin no matter the situation, so seeing him trying to take out his anger on a piece of dried boar was a bit funny.

“What's with you? Your courtship not going according to plans?” Zac asked as he glanced over.

The demon snarled and threw the piece of food down the wall, telling Zac he hit bull's eye.

“Did you know?” Ogras asked as he angrily looked at Zac.

“The brat did at least.”

“Know what?” Zac asked, genuinely confused.

“Emma MacHale is a god damn lesbian. She’s dating that plain looking bore from the government. All that effort wasted,” the demon growled.

“Really?” Zac asked, having some difficulty restraining a smile. “I had no idea. How did Emily know? Emma told her?”

“Apparently there were all kinds of rumors before your world got integrated,” the demon said, his frown deepening as he took out another piece of meat.

Zac thought it all pretty funny, but he was also a bit confused. Emma moved here to get away from the government, but at the same time dated one of their top officials. Was Julia not aware of the disgusting things Ogras mentioned earlier?

It appeared that the slavery in Greenworth wasn’t an isolated incident, rather a well-kept secret, where only a few like the Mayor were out in the open. Important personnel could ignore rules, or even basic human decency, as long as they provided the government with enough benefits. The reason Emma wanted to leave the government was that some of the stars got provided personal slaves, in some cases even children.

Those people were the ones that Ogras went around killing during the night, and after Zac learned of it he felt it was for the best. He wanted nothing to do with a bunch of degenerates like that. The important part was whether those actions were supported by the Government at large, or whether it was a small faction within the splintered organization that acted in such a way.

He was planning on getting to the bottom of things by interrogating Julia, though he didn’t want to waste time and effort on that with the wave incoming. It might also prompt Emma to cause trouble, and he would rather wait until he had the Lord-title in his hand.

“I think it’s great. At least I won’t have to keep poisoning her while she lives in your compound,” Alea suddenly interjected,

dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“What?” Zac asked, turning around with wide eyes. “What did you do?”

“What’s with that look? I just sprinkled a little something that would give her the runs and feel bloated and a bit feverish. Not in the mood for a roll in the sack,” the poison mistress said with a small smile. “She thought she had some had come down with some tropical fever.”

Zac couldn’t help snorting when he heard Alea’s confession. He had avoided the movie star the last two days while mentally preparing for the third wave, hoping to improve as much as he could. He had mainly focused on incorporating his evolved Dao into his fighting style, and trying to gain a second Seed upgrade.

The first part went great, and he felt he possessed a far better command of the Middle Seed of Heaviness by now. The area he could expand his Dao field with the mental attach had also almost doubled after having consolidated his insights. Unfortunately, things hadn’t proceeded as smoothly in regards to his meditation, and his other seeds were still at an early stage.

“Don’t go poisoning any more of our people,” Zac only said before turning back to look out over the wall.

“Yes, dear,” Alea answered with a wink.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3)
[00:00:08:44]

Zac closed his menu after taking a quick glance at it, taking one last look over his forces. This time it wasn’t just him and the demons up on the wall waiting for the wave to arrive.

The Valkyries stood at the ready, having swapped out their spears for bows. Few of them were excellent marksmen, though the improved attributes made most people decent shots

by now. Of course one might not need pinpoint accuracy if there was a sea of monsters beneath the wall.

There were also the group of tinkerers from Cogstown, who looked the most excited of the bunch. They stood next to two newly mounted cannons making final adjustments. Zac could only shake his head when he saw that a few of them actually talked with the cannons, drawing weird glances from the demons closeby.

The first time he saw the craftsmen Zac had thought Basso was dumping his town lunatics on Port Atwood in a bid to get rid of them. Most of them had large patches of fur singed off and missing extremities, or even limbs. More than anything they held a burning madness in their eyes, giving off a very unsettling feeling.

But Zac soon realized he was wrong when he watched them mount one of their cannons on his wall. They were extremely skilled at what they did.

The tinkerers hadn't cared the least about the various species walking the island but instead focused on the various technologies available. They had been astounded by human contraptions such as computers and cars, but they clearly focused more on things connected to the system, which Zac felt was for the best. This group, in particular, was mainly concerned about weaponizing Nexus Crystals and turning them into bombs, and it was their experiments that had caused them to look like they did.

Zac felt it was a bit of a shame that he couldn't introduce them to Karunthel, the Creator foreman, as he thought they would hit it off quite well. Zac understood why the beastmen were so excited. They saw the third beast wave as an opportunity to field-test various inventions.

Finally, a contingent of roughly a hundred Zhix warriors orderly stood at the wall as well, ignoring anything around them. With them stood Ibtep, who had changed its large backpack with an equally large bundle of wooden javelins with steel tips. The Zhix had been fetched from the island after

Ibtep made the offer, and the Holiness had agreed, though the supersized Zhix itself stayed in the hive.

The civilians stayed in the temporary town within the walls, with some having volunteered for various tasks to help out. Those who volunteered were mainly those from the surrounding islands, who already were used by being constantly accosted by beasts. The experts from New Washington had been shocked to hear the town was about to be attacked, with some even demanding to get sent back.

Zac ignored those voices though, telling them that getting attacked was the norm in the multi-verse and nothing to get worked up over. Julia had wanted to participate in the fight, but on Ogras' advice she was placed under house arrest during the wave. There was no need to give the government official a panoramic view of the powers of Port Atwood.

This was the last wave, and the last opportunity to gain contribution points. Many of the demons had held on to most of their points until now, hoping to gain enough for some more valuable treasures. People would hold nothing back this wave, perhaps even displaying hidden cards just to push themselves further on the contribution ladder.

There was also the competition between Zac and Ogras. Zac had amassed a bit over 80 million contribution points during the waves, whereas Ogras was at a 59. The general consensus was that Zac would keep his lead during the final wave, while a few staunch supporters of the demon lord insisted that Ogras had held back until now, and was ready to explode into action.

Zac personally didn't care about all that. He only hoped that he would be able to finish the wave quickly, so his plans with the teleporter wouldn't get ruined. Of course, he had a backup plan by now.

If the wave wasn't finished and the deadline was nearing, he'd simply step through the teleporter and snatch up John Bernard, and go back. He had wanted to avoid that, as it might result in some retaliation from the government, but as things had progressed up until now Zac felt it didn't really matter. It was just one more act of aggression to add to the tally.

The minutes slowly passed as everyone was waiting for what would come out through the portals this time. When there were less than a minute left Zac suddenly heard a familiar voice in his mind.

[Special Challenge activated. To become a leader of a world you need to possess the strength to defeat any invaders. Rewards adjusted.]

Zac groaned as he looked around, and it seemed only he heard the voice. Ogras saw the odd reaction from Zac and raised a brow.

“What’s going on?” the demon asked, but Zac had no time to explain when three huge pillars flashed into existence.

Each pillar was far larger compared to the earlier ones, and reminded Zac the incursion pillars. However, the pillars differed from both the sinister red one he’d been living with for a month, and also each other.

One of the pillars was a sickly turquoise color, and it almost looked like ghosts or specters were rotating around it. Zac was immediately reminded of the intelligence report he got from Ogras. The part about the various forces also mentioned the incursions.

The incursions themselves differed in appearance depending on who controlled it, and the turquoise one clearly matched the description of the incursions belonging to the Undead Empire. The second one was pitch black, and it felt like Zac was looking into a black hole as he stared at it.

Zac tried to figure it out, but couldn’t remember any force having such an incursion in the information missive. It likely meant that it didn’t belong to one of the large forces. That didn’t mean it belonged to a weak force, but rather a smaller one that the missive didn’t include due to the low likelihood of encountering them. There was no telling from just the light, and it could be either weaklings or a small elite force full of powerhouses.

The final incursion was multicolored in gold and red. Had it only been the lustrous golden color Zac would have thought it

belonged to a church, as it radiated holiness. However, the blood-red intermixed gave a more sinister feeling, and it infected any purity of the gold luster.

“What the hell? Incursions?” Ogras muttered, and many of the demons looked confused as well.

“I got a quest update from the System,” Zac admitted with a sour face. “It said something about me needing the power to defeat invaders to become a leader. Perhaps it felt the normal challenge wasn’t annoying enough?”

As if on cue Zac suddenly heard a shout from behind. It was Janos, who once again stood at the ready at the control crystal for the Array. A large fractal had appeared above it, and any light from the crystal was gone. Zac quickly opened up the town management menu, and as he saw the message inside his sour face turned to a full-blown grimace.

“Shit.”

Chapter 151: The Three Forces

The Town Protection Array was actually blocked by the system. Zac quickly brought out one of his Thunder Punishment Arrays, and to his dismay found them looking like lifeless marbles no matter what he tried.

“The Ruthless Heavens indeed,” Ogras muttered with a sardonic grin. “I guess we’ll have to do this one by hand.”

Zac started to wonder whether the System could actually hold grudges. He had cursed at it quite a bit in the beginning when he was stuck alone on the island. Was it retaliating now by increasing the difficulty to unreasonable levels? Or did it try to suppress him since he wasn’t a cultivator?

In any case, the sight in front of him spelled trouble. He wasn’t contending with one force now, but three. More importantly, he was placed against intelligent forces this time. The wolf horde had been somewhat easy to handle since they were dumb beasts, but the same couldn’t be said about actual invading forces.

They would have organized armies and employ strategy in trying to defeat him. He was sure that the system had provided some pretty good incentives to them so that no diplomatic solution was possible. Not that he thought it was possible in any case.

“I think we should charge in, catch them unaware,” Zac said with some hesitation.

He didn’t want them attacking the wall since it would offer scant protection now that there was no Array to secure it. It might work against dumb beasts, but against an army of high leveled warriors it was only a small diversion.

“There’s no way they would be unaware, rather the opposite. They should have been given plenty of forewarning, perhaps even having the opportunity to accept or decline the quest,” Ogras disagreed.

“We should scout them out and gauge their strength. There are some differences between the pillars and normal Incursions. They are smaller. I think their forces should be limited,” the demon added. “If they were completely confident in defeating us they would already have rushed in. The fact that they are playing it safe is telling us something.

Zac gave a start and once again looked at the three pillars. They felt huge where they shone in the distance. However, Zac had to agree that they were quite a bit smaller compared to the one with the demons. That red pillar had stretched endlessly into the sky, clearly visible even from the other side of the island. It had felt like it reached the heavens, and apparently, even the closest islands had seen the red light when the demon Incursion was active.

These pillars were large, but not to that point. They were many times higher than the Ayr Hive, but that’s was about it. Zac wasn’t sure what it meant, but the size of the pillars had indicated the difficulty of the wolf waves. The pillar that sent through the Fiend Wolf was quite a bit larger compared to the ones before it.

“So we just stand here and wait? It’s too passive,” Zac frowned with impatience. He was in no mood to let the invaders run rampant on his island. Who knew what kind of mess they would create while they stayed on the wall like some turtles.

“It is, but sometimes we need to waste time to save time. We can send out a few scouts to check things out. I’ll even go myself. But we shouldn’t antagonize them until we know their relationship. Who knows, they might even fight each other. The undead forces are notoriously unwilling to work with almost any other force, and they might just attack the others before turning their attention to us.”

Zac nodded after some thought. Though it sounded implausible it might be correct. The goal of those forces should be to kill him and he could only die one time, meaning that only one force would get the reward. Perhaps they would even succumb to infighting for the honor to kill him, provided that they felt he would be easy to handle.

Besides, charging in like a barghest wasn't the best idea. Who knew what cards these people had up their sleeves. He didn't even know what forces two of the incursions belonged to. Gathering intelligence first might be the smartest play.

They had stood at the walls for a few minutes by now, and there still wasn't any activity. Unfortunately the incursions were far enough that they couldn't see their forces due to foliage blocking the view.

"Very well, let's gather some intelligence," Zac said, feeling unsettled by the inaction.

He almost hoped that a wave of invaders would come running through the forest at them, screaming and waving their weapons. A full-frontal assault would be perilous, but it would also be easy to handle. He just needed to take out his axe and go crazy. Now he was unsure what to do or expect.

Ogras nodded and disappeared into the shadows. Not long after Zac saw a few figures blend into the forest as they moved toward the pillars of light. Most of the demons sat down by now with closed eyes, patiently waiting to explode into action. Zac had to stop himself from pacing back and forth like a wreck since he didn't want to show how unsettled he felt by the situation.

He had already defeated one incursion, but that was different. For one he had learned that Clan Azh'Rezak was far weaker than the average when it came to the power of the invading groups. Usually the opportunity would have been snatched away by a more powerful force, but Azh'Rezak managed to hold on to it due to some turbulence in their area.

Secondly, he had deployed guerrilla tactics against the demons, and they didn't even know about his identity until the

very end. And finally the war with the monkeys provided a stage where he somehow luckily came out victorious.

It was different now, with him being a defender in the open, and at least the undead were a formidable force.

To take his mind off the situation he opened his quest screen. It was mentioned earlier that his quest and rewards were updated, and he wanted to see what he would get.

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (2/3)

There were some differences from earlier, with some more apparent than others. The description had gone from saying only denizens to “denizens or forces”, which made sense as Ogras had told him already that denizens were referring to beasts.

The rewards had also changed. The paltry 5 crystals had been swapped to a Limited Structure, and Zac guessed it was something similar to when he got the Creator Shipyard, though the wording was a bit different.

His town would also be upgraded to Global City instead of City. Since the prompt earlier had mentioned world leader he'd almost thought for a second Port Atwood would become a capital. However, it seems that wasn't the case. He wasn't clear about the difference between a City and a Global City, apart from guessing the latter was better.

Finally there was the Road to Hegemony. He had no idea what that meant, but he sensed that this addition might be the most important one. He wasn't sure whether to ask Ogras about it or keep it a secret, so for now he tabled the matter. He needed to actually destroy the three incursions for any of this to matter.

It took almost twenty minutes until Ogras was back, during which time Zac only got more and more impatient.

“There are a *lot* of enemies,” Ogras said with a frown.

“There's a veritable sea of Zombies, tens of thousands. There's

also Aberrations and three to four-meter corpse golems. Unfortunately, it seems the horde has a Lich or Corpse Lord. Otherwise they'd have mindlessly charged at us by now, sensing our life force."

Aberrations were dead beings that were naturally formed in ominous grounds, often being a mix of various species and bodies. Not two of them looked the same, as they were essentially randomized mistakes of the universe. Their distinguishing feature was extreme endurance, even for the undead beings.

The corpse golems were somewhat similar, though they were constructed rather than formed. Necromancers or liches created them from a bunch of cultivators to suit their purposes. Usually they were quite large, and a fusion of a group of people.

The more skilled the creator, the more beings he or she could add to the monstrosity, making it stronger. Its height was generally the measure of how powerful it was, where golems above five meters were usually E grade or above.

"The other forces aren't as numerous, though their warriors are generally far stronger compared to the Zombies. The black portal is owned by a force I don't recognize. They are either a golem species or something rock-related. It was hard to tell. They're completely pitch black and gave off cold auras. They seemed to have exceptional perception, as they killed the scout we sent before he even came close," the demon continued.

"The last force is only around a thousand strong, and they might actually be more annoying than the undead. They're the fools of the Church of Everlasting Dao. I would wager they are on average stronger compared to our own forces," Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac groaned when he learned who the final incursion belonged to. The Church of Everlasting Dao were the lunatics who went to newly integrated planets simply to eradicate all life. They were of the belief that while the System was compelled to keep integrating new worlds, each time it did so it expended

important energy and hurt itself. That, in turn, prevented the System from evolving itself and the multi-verse.

In order to reach nirvana or whatever they tried to kill as many people as they could so that more energy would be freed up for the system. The general consensus about this belief was that it either was complete idiocy, or that it was a front for the church elite to stuff their pockets with their victim's wealth.

No matter which case was the truth it didn't help Zac, as he was suddenly stuck on the island with a bunch of Zealots. Furthermore, if another one of the incursions were the famously annoying Undead Empire and another was run by insane inquisitors, the third mysterious Incursion likely wasn't any good news either.

"So what do we do?" Zac asked.

"They are holding some meeting at the rock people's place. For now we hope they have a falling out and do our job for us."

Zac nodded but didn't feel too hopeful. He could only spread the available intelligence amongst the ranks, and keep everyone on alert. Soon the last hope of an internal fight breaking out was dashed, as an army approached the wall.

Zac understood what Ogras meant when he said rock-people, as he couldn't really tell their appearance either. They were around two meters tall, and Zac couldn't make out any features as they were unnaturally black. Zac wondered for a second if they all possessed some racial skill that obscured them, but threw the question to the back of his head as he brought out his axe.

The ground shook as the army approached, and huge boulders were magically ripped out of the ground by the rock-people and started hovering above their army, creating quite the image. The rudimentary traps across the battlefield were all but useless against the sentient species as they approached.

The very air thrummed with power around the incoming group, and even Ogras' ever-present grin was long gone as he looked out over their enemies.

Bishop Orsiccas leisurely walked back toward his camp, glancing at the army of Yrd Stonemen leaving for battle.

It had been an annoying discovery to find that they weren't the only ones to get the blessing of The Boundless Heavens, but that they instead shared it with two other groups. That kind of situation clearly muddied what should have been a great opportunity to make some money.

It was quite convenient that at least one of them belonged to some weak backwater group. They would make great sacrifices for the Grand Plan, keeping the Zealots happy, and in the process scout out the powers of this Monarch-candidate.

This was the third world Orsiccas got tasked with purifying and processing with his fellow bishops, which is why he was chosen to head this special assignment while his brothers kept the activities going in their main base. But this was the first time that he'd heard of a Sacrifice to gain such a blessing this early. Monarch-selects usually only emerged after over a year had passed.

It was also quite the headache to find that the undead scum were here. Whenever the Church met those bastards there was always a bloody battle for the high potential corpses. Losses went up and profits went down.

At least he wasn't up against a proper Lich, but instead a Corpse Lord. While neither were easy to deal with, Liches were nigh immortal save from certain types of attacks. They had proper purifier-forces who trained especially to combat the undead on the various fronts, but Orsiccas hadn't brought any here as he expected to be up against the humans or one of the other three species of this new planet.

Worse yet, the Corpse Lord seemed to be a noble. He even doubted whether he himself was its match. Still, he had a full battle-monk contingent with him, which was enough to decimate the undead forces if it came to that.

Orsiccas caressed his mace with a resolute expression. He wouldn't let this one go even if he had to go up against an

undead noble, as the bonus he would receive was substantial. Not only the reward from The Boundless Heavens, but also the one he would receive from the church for procuring such high-grade materials.

Someone who was already a monarch-candidate would have to be a prime specimen in creating a premium vessel. Human bodies were always in high demand as well, as many powerhouses chose vessels of the same species as their original bodies.

Orsiccas never understood that kind of mentality. Those old goats had lived for tens of thousands of years, yet they hadn't had enough. Instead, they chose to scrap their mortal coil for one of the Church's vessels, even if it meant retraining their bodies from the ground up.

Not that Orsiccas complained, as that very business had enabled him to reach heights he could only have dreamed of, with a clear path all the way to becoming a C-Ranked Cardinal. And in the meantime, he would make a pretty penny in the body retrieval business.

Because to live was to fight, so business was always booming.

Chapter 152: Wallbreakers

“Fire at will,” Zac said with a steady voice and nodded to the grinning beastmen.

The tense situation hadn't affected them, and they gleefully made some last adjustments to their three cannons before they fired them. An insanely loud explosion was heard from each of them, and a shockwave even threw away the people closest to the cannons.

Zac knew those cannons would pack quite a punch, but he was shocked at the scene in front of him. He had barely time to register that the projectiles weren't pellets or cannonballs before the three shots landed. One unfortunately veered completely off-course, but the others headed for the incoming army in the distance who quickly erected a group shield.

A blinding light flashed and a terrifying explosion rattled Zac's eardrums a second later. When he looked out at the battlefield again two huge craters of over 50 meters diameter could be seen, with dead or wounded rockmen all over. Their shields clearly were of little to no use against those horrifying bombs the crazy tinkerers had created with Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately one of the projectiles hadn't gone off, but the power of those who did was amazing.

Zac hoped they could fire off a few more salvos, but a look over at the Ishiate engineers dashed any hope of them being able to shoot the Nexus Crystal infused bombs again. The three cannons were destroyed beyond recognition, with their barrels completely twisted and deformed. Two of the tinkerers were also down on the ground bleeding from cannon shrapnel, though it looked like they would be fine.

“Send scout parties to the sides of the wall in case the other forces tries to flank us,” Zac said to Ilvere, who nodded and sent a few parties away.

“Ibtep, Joanna,” Zac continued. “Your forces will stay on the wall for this one. Be ready to flee if needed. These rockmen are too high-levelled. Save your strength for the undead.”

Both nodded in confirmation.

Zac was about to continue, but the huge boulders that were floating above the Rockmen suddenly shot out like bullets, soaring toward the wall.

“Shit!” Zac screamed seeing the gigantic incoming projectiles.

“Take the middle ones, I’ll destroy as many as I can to the right, and I’ll take the ones to the left. The others will have to dodge,” Ogras said.

“Start shooting,” Zac shouted at the Valkyries who stood ready at the siege machines, as he got ready with his axe.

The siege machines taken from Rydel were mainly in the type of ballistae, each made with high-grade materials and having inscribed projectiles. None of the shots were close in power to the monstrous cannons of the Ishiate, but they were easily reloaded and one shot after another flew at the enemies.

Another huge shield was erected at the attackers after the initial blast from the cannons, and most of the large bolts were stopped in their tracks from the screen. However, Zac knew that every time one of the inscribed bolts slammed into the magic wall the attackers lost some of their cosmic energy, just like it cost Crystals maintaining his array when it was attacked.

The huge rocks finally arrived close to the wall, and Zac charged up as many blades of **[Chop]** as he could, ready on wall walk to intercept them. After some hesitation, he infused his blades with the Dao of Heaviness and launched his blades in quick order. The blades slammed into a huge boulder one by one, not one missing its target.

As his attacks cut into the stones Zac frowned when he realized that they were imbued with some power as well. The fractal blades managed to destroy the boulders, though barely. The stone fractured into smaller pieces, each around half a meter in diameter. Zac immediately threw a worried glance

over at Illvere, who launched his huge ball on its chain toward his boulder.

Unfortunately the demon general only managed to create some cracks in the stone and had to scamper out of harm's way when the projectile slammed into the wall, completely destroying a section of it. Similar scenes could be seen on various spots of the wall, where large cracks or tears were created.

A few of the ballistae were destroyed as well, though most were left unscathed. The loss of life was manageable as most of the armies were gathered at the length that Zac and Ogras protected. Still, a few casualties could be spotted, mainly amongst those on the edges of the army.

The army of stonemen seemed content to stay at the distance, even though their shield no longer could protect them properly from the ballista projectiles. Some ripped through the magic membrane and killed anything within an area of a few meters.

Normally the bolts should have created more mayhem, but the bolts were inscribed with a lightning attack, and the golems seemed quite resistant. Bursts of lightning bolts flashed amongst the golem-people, but the effect was clearly limited, as only those right next to the bolt were noticeably affected.

"We can't let this go on," Zac said with a frown as he saw new boulders rise from the earth.

Ogras who usually preferred the safe option actually nodded, and without another word the two jumped down from the wall and rushed toward the attackers. They wordlessly came to the same conclusion. They would have to attack the army the same way they did with the psychic wolves.

If the enemies didn't want to come to them, then they would rush at the enemies.

Zac once again charged five huge blades with **[Chop]** as they ran, and unhesitantly shot them at the same part of the shield in front of them. They slammed into the shield one after another, and finally at the fourth blade it broke through, hitting the defenders behind it.

The black golemoids erected personal shields to intercept the two remaining fractal edges, and with concerted effort managed to stop the first one. But the last one created some carnage as Zac had actually imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness.

Zac took advantage of the opening and with [**Loamwalker**] stepped into the breach, and without pause started swinging [**Verun's Bite**]. Having once poisoned himself with Cosmos Water had one positive side effect. He had become extremely adept at energy control since he fought the whole first wave without being able to properly restore his energy with crystals or gathering arrays.

Zac's attacks generally consumed almost no energy, and he only activated his skills for the shortest possible duration. Everything was in order to last as long as possible, allowing him to keep fighting for hours.

Ogras wasn't as careful with his energy, and the familiar pond of shadows spread out amongst the enemies, reaping one life after another.

However, the rockmen were no weaklings and they mounted a furious resistance to himself and Ogras. It quickly became clear that these things mainly followed two types of heritage. Rocks and ice.

The mages manipulated earth, or to a certain extent their own bodies, in order to launch all sorts of attacks at Zac. It even felt like their skill in stone manipulation was a notch above that of the earth mage demons.

Zac also saw that they weren't some type of stone golems like he and Ogras suspected since they bled when they were cut down. The blood was blue and the splotches that his Zacs face told him it was cold, but it was blood nonetheless.

The other type of attackers mainly manipulated ice. They either used the element to create surprisingly sturdy weapons or shoot small icicles out as hard-to-notice projectiles.

All in all Zac felt that the fighters were quite strong, but not to the point that it would become a problem for him. He surmised

their average power was somewhere around level 50 to 60, if they were average warriors without any special advantages such as unique titles.

Compared with himself with his enormous amount of attributes the assailers could only delay Zac, but not stop his onslaught. They would be free Contribution Points unless they threw out some of their elites soon.

Still, he wasn't able to quickly dispatch them as he'd hoped. Their rocky exterior made them quite resilient, and they had dedicated defenders to keep the others safe. One wall after another, either wrought from earth or ice, stopped his advance, forcing him to redirect his swings.

It also meant that he couldn't send down the average demon soldiers to help out, as they were about as strong on average compared to these assailers. There were only roughly 150 demon warriors, while there were quite a few more rockmen.

Only the true elites dared to venture out every now and then for a blitz attack, before rushing back to safety. But even though they were careful they sustained some wounds as they were pelted by a throng of ice projectiles. Zac's only other backup was the siege machines who focused fire on the areas of the army far from Zac and Ogras.

Even if Zac was far stronger compared to the golemoids it was a chore to fight with only two hands against a sea of fighters. It reminded him of his desperate escape from the monkey horde once upon a time.

A few of them did everything they could to intercept his attacks, while the others pelted him from a range. Even though he was strong he wasn't invulnerable, so most of his time was spent dodging or circumventing the endless walls in the end.

The attacks were quite strong after all, and Zac couldn't just shrug them off like he usually did with the wolves. He was already starting to accumulate some wounds, though between his gear and Endurance they were only superficial.

Worse yet, the weird attackers had no problem in launching more projectiles while Zac and Ogras killed their way around

their ranks. The demon warriors could block a few of the boulders using the same sort of group shield they used during the monkey war, but many still slammed into the wall, and gradually destroyed the fortifications.

Suddenly the rockmen started to retreat, actually sacrificing some of their warriors to keep the duo occupied. Soon Zac and Ogras stood panting next to each other, both covered in blue blood and overlooking a battlefield with hundreds of dead aliens.

Zac sighed as he walked through the battlefield to put the ballista bolts into a cosmos sack. It would be easier to repair them than create new ones from scratch, and he knew he would need to use the ballista again soon.

As he traversed the battlefield he grimaced as he surveyed the damages on the wall. Huge cracks and missing sections all along a section of hundreds of meters made the fortification look like part of some ruins rather than a habituated town. There was no way that the demons would be able to fix it in short order.

Zac didn't understand what was going on. It almost felt like the rockmen had a vendetta with the wall, rather than trying to fight Port Atwood's forces. They sacrificed a significant number of their warriors just to make some cracks in it.

It made no sense after having fought them for over an hour. The stonemen were strong enough that a normal wall without the boost of an array would offer little to no hindrance if they wanted to attack head-on.

They could simply have climbed it in seconds and brought the fight to a melee with the demon army, instead of getting bogged down with himself and Ogras. That would have caused significant casualties to his forces, rather than the small losses from errant boulders.

Ogras seemed to be of the same mind as he surveyed the corpses in the area with a frown.

"I think they are sacrifices," Ogras hesitantly said. "There is only one force that would be impacted by the wall. The

undead. The Zealots and the rockmen could simply ignore it. But the stupid Zombies would act like the wolves, even when commanded by a leader. They might try to climb the wall, but they would likely fail, becoming prime targets for our warriors to farm some Nexus Coins.

“So these things are working with the Undead?” Zac asked skeptically.

“They’re probably coerced. No one wants to be fodder. It would be the same with Clan Azh’Rezak if we were in their situation. The Undead Empire and the Church of Everlasting Dao are both huge entities in the multi-verse. They could just order around minor forces to do their bidding, and the forces would have to comply due to fear of impacting their home planet otherwise,” Ogras answered with a shake of his head.

“They are being used as a wall breaker while simultaneously testing the waters,” Zac realized with a sigh.

“Yeah. Our only hope now is that they still don’t realize that we don’t possess arrays, and that we simply don’t care about the walls. But those assholes in the undead army are probably laughing it up right now.”

Suddenly Zac felt a slight tingling of danger, and quickly turned toward the forest. As if summoned by Ogras’ words a dour man stood at the crest of the woods, emitting a dense and powerful aura.

It was a humanoid being standing over two meters tall. On his back was a sinister weapon that looked like a hook that was almost as long as the man himself, completely wrought out of bone. It only took one glance to tell what force this thing came from. The man was deathly pale, while his eyes shone a sinister red.

However, the man wasn’t some handsome vampire, rather a walking corpse. There was no rotting flesh, but there was a strong sense of undeath, and the man could by no metrics be called handsome.

“Shit, it’s the big boss himself,” Ogras muttered and readied his spear.

Chapter 153: Gambit

Zac silently stared at the undead entity and was mentally getting himself ready for a desperate fight. However, the corpse lord suddenly blazed into action, and suddenly his bone weapon was in front of him. Almost at the same moment, Zac heard a loud bang from the wall. It was a sound Zac vividly remembered, as he almost died the last time he heard it.

The Corpse Lord wasn't as frantic as Zac was back at the auction house, and didn't even break a sweat as he blocked the bullet with his weapon, giving Zac a clear indication of his power. Zac even had thoughts of fleeing, as he wasn't sure he'd be able to kill this entity.

The Corpse Lord made the choice for Zac as plans and stratagems were flashing through his head. The undead sneered and receded back into the woods, followed by a few hulking corpse golems who stood behind their lord like bodyguards. It appeared the Undead leader was biding his time, or perhaps the sniper scared him off.

"Shit, it's a noble I think," Ogras muttered with a frown as he watched the undead disappear amongst the foliage. "Those things are extremely hard to deal with."

Zac could only nod in acknowledgment. The man, if they could be called that, only silently stood in the distance, yet Zac's senses detected danger. The two quickly finished gathering anything of value before they rushed back to the wall to rest.

"Who has your gun?" Zac suddenly asked, looking over at Ogras who grinned a bit.

"The old bastard. It appears he was in a human army long ago and has some knowledge of guns," the demon responded.

Zac knew the demon was talking about Sap Trang, and was quite impressed with both the timing and aim of the old fisherman. It was a shame that the attack wasn't successful, but it was worth a try.

The fight had taken quite a large portion of Zac's energy, but it was likely the same for the rockmen. They had blocked most of the bolts, and the Valkyries and the demons had kept shooting for the better part of the hour until they finally ran out of ammunition.

"Good job," Zac told his squadron as he returned to the wall with Ogras in tow.

This time they simply left the corpses on the battlefield, as it felt too dangerous to venture out and collect them at the moment.

"I'm sorry we couldn't be of more help," Joanna only answered with a somber expression.

"You did plenty," Zac said, seeing the Zhix leader walk up to him.

"The Zhix are willing to join you in the next wave," Ibtep said as he approached.

"Thank you. However, it is better you conserve your strength until the undead arrive. They have an almost endless number of warriors, and at that moment it will be all hands on deck," Zac answered.

Zac gave a few more orders before he sat down and closed his eyes, each hand of his holding a Nexus Crystal. Only an hour elapsed before they once again were accosted by the rockmen. There was still no sign of the other two forces, and it felt more and more true that they were actually using these rockmen as pawns.

Even though he wasn't completely restored Zac got up on his feet with a groan and got ready to intercept as many of the boulders as possible. This time a few more of the elite demons with ranged capability also descended the wall in order to get close enough to attack as well.

However, even with increased numbers, their efficiency was quite limited. Individual warriors or mages didn't have the capability to breach the strong barriers the rockmen erected, so they were forced to use the breaches created by the ballista bolts.

Zac knew that it would be mainly up to him and Ogras to fight these things. There also was Alea and Janos, but both Ogras and Zac felt it better if those two stayed hidden for now.

The two generals had the type of skills that could turn a battle around, and they weren't pushed to the point they needed to use them yet. Both Zac and Ogras could slowly kill their way through the rockman army without exposing their hidden aces, though it was quite tiring.

The only upside was that he was getting huge benefits from the fighting. The reward for each kill was substantial, with every rockman giving thousands of nexus coins. Even though it took some time to kill each of them the speed with which he gathered Cosmos Energy was unparalleled. If this continued he'd likely gain a level within the day.

At the same time Zac knew this couldn't go on. There were only two of them, and they were starting to tire after only two waves. If they allowed the rock men to keep harassing their front lines like this he and Ogras would wear themselves out in no time. And these golem-like beings were the weakest of the bunch. Some drastic measures needed to be taken.

"If that Corpse Lord dies, what will the other undead do?" Zac suddenly asked the demon who was meditating next to him.

The demon opened his eyes and shot a suspicious glance at Zac.

"They would be like rabid dogs who got out of their leash," Ogras said. "Why? What are you planning?"

"We can't let this go on. There's no way the two of us can fight off the whole rockman incursion, and after that face the two elite forces," Zac sighed.

"You're just going to jump into the thick of it? Are you insane? You will be in a sea of undead. Even if you find him

it's not for certain he will even fight you," Ogras said.

"I have to believe they are after my head for their quests. I think he will fight me, rather than risking some subordinate getting the kill credit;" Zac retorted with a shrug as he took out his one and only remaining E-Grade Crystal.

"You know, risking your life like that isn't the only option," Ogras said and threw a pointed glance at the distance, toward the teleportation array. "If you're dead you can't save your sister."

"You know how desperate the situation is for our planet. Only a fifth of humanity remains, and the incursions haven't even begun their attacks in earnest. This might be my best chance to gain power and secure a foothold for myself and my family. If we keep fleeing we will sooner or later be hunted down, as our enemies will only grow stronger," Zac said and closed his eyes.

"You're thinking in some all-or-nothing scenario. There's nothing stopping you from becoming a powerhouse even if you lose your lordship and town," Ogras wheezed out.

"I know, but I must still try. But prepare our contingency. If I fuck this up we might need to flee in a hurry. And create some diversion if possible."

"Sigh... Fine, you god damn lunatic. We'll see if we can shake up the Zealots while you go to the undead. If the big priest joins the battle against you, then you can just lie down and wait for death and reanimation," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

"You have a plan?" Zac asked curious.

"Well, it's time for my brave generals to earn their pay," Ogras only answered with a small grin.

Restoring his energy reserves went quite quick with the E-Grade crystal, and only after 30 minutes he was mostly restored. That meant he was essentially in full fighting condition, as he'd conserved his usage of his Dao during the two waves, opting to mainly use simpler attacks.

"I'm ready," Zac said as he stood up.

“Wait, take this,” Ogras said as he threw over a necklace. “It’s a minor trinket that will mask your life aura. It will allow you to get closer to the zombies without them sensing you. Might help you get a move on the big boss before they can react.”

“Thanks,” Zac only said and immediately put it around his neck.

“Remember, Corpse Lord Nobles are crazy durable, they are like walking tanks. Don’t waste your time using weaker attacks, and go for their brains. They can keep going without limbs or even a heart, but they still need their brains. And wait with attacking for another 15 minutes. We need to get ready on our side.”

“I understand, I will do my best. Good luck to you,” Zac said as he looked at his watch and then jumped down the wall toward the inner area of Port Atwood.

Just as he landed he heard a mumbled ‘good luck’ from above, and he immediately kept running toward the south. Zac planned on taking a slight detour, coming at the undead incursion from the opposite side. It would waste a few minutes, but it would hopefully help even further with his ambush.

When he’d traveled enough he quickly climbed over the wall and like a hare skittled into the woods. He immediately started running full speed, still not making a sound. This was his home turf, and together with his Dao of Trees he almost merged with the area, instinctually knowing where to put his feet and which areas to avoid.

He unerringly moved toward the undead incursion in a parabolic trajectory, but some sounds interrupted his charge. He quickly stopped and deviated a bit toward the sound. He suddenly saw a person moving through the woods, carrying a struggling body.

At first Zac thought it was a demon, as it had reddish and scaled skin, but he quickly realized it was some sort of lizard man, though it didn’t have a tail. Since it was neither undead or a golem Zac knew it must be a cultist.

Zac also recognized the man he was carrying. It was Adran, who should have been safely back at the camp. His feet and legs were bound, and he had a large black eye. Clearly the administrator hadn't given up as he kept struggling, making the lizardman stumble and swear.

Zac had no time to figure out how the hell the cult member had managed to infiltrate the town and kidnap one of their leaders from right under his nose, but he quickly went to action. He activated [**Loamwalker**] and appeared right next to the lizardman who didn't even have time to exclaim before his decapitated head fell to the side.

"Are you ok?" Zac asked as he untied the knots on the rope holding the demon.

"Thank the heavens you found me. That bastard appeared from nowhere. He clocked me right in my eye and bound me, then I was suddenly in the forest," Adran wheezed. "I think it was some random teleportation since the guy seemed a bit disoriented at first."

Zac frowned and looked at the fallen cultists.

"Honestly I found you by chance, we didn't even know you were kidnapped. The town is over that way," Zac said as he pointed toward the wall. "There is no enemies between here and there, hurry back and warn everyone we might have intruders in the town proper. Try to gather everyone so they can't sneak off with someone."

"I will. Thank you again, Lord Zac," the administrator said with a bow and hurried back toward Port Atwood.

Zac only continued onward, his unease with the situation only increasing. He needed to be quick. Zack believed a large reason why the forces were so hesitant to attack was that his cards were still largely hidden. But if the church captured one of his citizens they would soon learn that they only had a scant 150 proper fighters and two powerhouses.

That knowledge might give the legion of cultists enough courage to simply charge his town. He needed to create chaos within the undead ranks before something like that happened.

He kept pushing forward for a few minutes until an unbelievable stench entered his nostrils. Zac frowned and slowed down, but unhesitantly kept moving forward.

As he advanced Zac noted that the forest was ending, the trees seemingly simply gone from where they once stood. Port Atwood still hadn't gotten around clearing out the forest this far out, so the System must have done it for the incursions.

He silently crept to the edge of the woods, praying that the necklace ogras gave him would be efficient enough, and peered out over the incursion.

As soon as he looked over the field he understood where the stench came from. The area around the incursion was completely filled with rotting undead. Patches of skin were slouching off from their faces, and some missed limbs.

Zac frowned when he noted that almost all of them were actually Asians wearing normal, though ripped, clothes like suits or t-shirts. He had a suspicion before, but this seemed to confirm it. These invaders were likely actually from incursions on his own world, not from some other random force in the multi-verse.

He didn't know if it had any implication or could lead to trouble down the line, but that was an issue that he would have to save for the future. He already had way too much on his plate at the moment to worry about such things.

Zac silently scouted the army, trying to find the figure he saw earlier. There was a sea of zombies in front of him, but the large Corpse Lord should be easily identifiable from his grisly weapon, and the fact that he wasn't rotting away.

But before he could locate the leaders his eyes were drawn toward a few huge monoliths that were arduously carried by a few titanic corpse golems.

Chapter 154: Diversion

“Where are we going?” Sap Trang asked with some trepidation while looking at his traveling companions.

The world had truly turned crazy. It was just absurd that he was currently walking through a forest with a group of demons. He still wasn't used to these horned beings, even after a month of living together.

“Zac is attacking the Undead Leaders in a bit, we need to cause a distraction,” Ogras answered tersely as the small group pushed forward.

“With only the four of us?” Sap asked skeptically.

It was just him and three demons. Of course, these particular ones were amongst the strongest of the bunch. The poison user could likely kill the whole human squads on their island alone, and he had personally felt the might of Janos' illusions when the demon trapped him and the other refugees for days in the infirmary.

He hadn't even realized that days passed in the illusion, or that he was trapped in an illusion at all. He had thought they were back in his little village before the world got integrated. He had sat in on his small boat with a handmade rod, watching the sunset.

When he got home from his trip his grandson was there, visiting during a break in his university studies. Duc was truly his pride and joy, the first one in the family who was getting a proper education. Yet he hadn't forgotten his roots and visited home every chance he could.

Sap had almost been reluctant to be released out of the illusion, as what more could an old man wish for than what he received in there. However, reality waited for no man.

“All these questions,” Ogras retorted with a frown. “Yes, just the four of us. We’re heading to the cultists to create some chaos. If possible gain some contribution points.”

“I just don’t understand how this old man fits into the picture,” Sap hesitantly said. “If the three of you can’t handle it then a poor fisherman won’t make a difference.”

“Do you think I had you train with my toy just for fun? It’s time to provide some assistance,” Ogras said with a small grin.

“The sniper rifle? I’ve only trained a few days,” Sap said, his long brows rising in alarm.

“You were a soldier before, you’ve held a gun. That’s more than what can be said about those little chicks Lord Zac brought back the other day. Besides, Lord Zac likes you, so I’ll keep you safe,” Alea said with a charming smile, which only served to make the old man more nervous.

Sap didn’t know if his new Lord and this woman were in a relationship, but she gave him the creeps. It wasn’t right how she could kill someone with just a light touch, her whole body being poison. Then again, that was none of his business.

His goal was to become indispensable to the island, which would eke out a path to the future for his village, which was especially important now that the youngsters were back.

He had a strong feeling that even if Lord Zac went head to head against that so-called World Government, Zac would walk out the victor. Between Zac’s monstrous power and the wily demon whispering in his ear, Port Atwood was nigh unstoppable. They needed to get through the current situation though.

“Fine. But if I start shooting their soldiers I will be spotted after a few shots, it won’t cause much trouble,” Sap finally acquiesced.

“Let us worry about that,” Ogras only said with a small smile as the small group pushed into the woods.

They kept moving through the woods in blazing speeds, and Sap was barely able to keep up with the others. He had worked his old body to the bone since he arrived here, but sometimes

it felt like there was an unbreachable abyss between himself and these monsters.

Of course, slow and steady wins the race. Sap was aware of that, but unfortunately his time was limited. If possible he would strive to reach E-Rank Race and gain new longevity. He was content with the life he had lived, but if he could watch over his descendants in this turbulent new world for hundreds of years, he would.

Duc was a bright young man, but he was a bit soft. Sap wasn't sure if he would be able to survive on his own in this world that was far more ruthless compared to the old one. They currently enjoyed the protection of Lord Zac, but who knew what the future might hold. One must always be responsible for his own fate.

Sap saw the huge sinister pillar in the distance, blazing in red and gold. The colors were normally quite auspicious, but the feeling the pillar gave out was horrifying.

The old fisherman started as his shadow suddenly grew and wrapped around him, and quickly looked around to see the same thing happening with the others as well.

Soon they were covered in shadows, at which point Janos waved his hand and another shimmering layer superimposed on them.

“Only speak if necessary from now, and always a low volume. Our spheres will mask us, but the sound dampening is limited,” Ogras whispered. “The three of us will be responsible for the main attack. Old man, your job is to pick off anyone who looks like a leader or is trying to organize a response. We want utter chaos.”

“What if they find me?” Sap asked with a frown.

“Then start running. Hopefully our actions will keep them occupied,” Ogras answered.

The group finally arrived at some thick bushes that were just a few hundred meters away from the clearing with the zealots. They had already snuck past one group of sentries with the help of the combination of Janos' and Ogras' skills.

“Stay inside these bushes. Make no movement or sound, but get ready. The second Janos comes back to your side, start picking off targets. Remember, leaders and people organizing a resistance,” Ogras said to Sap.

Sap really didn't like hiding alone in some bushes surrounded by crazed enemies who were far stronger than himself, but he also knew he didn't have much of a choice at the moment.

“What will you do?” he asked hesitantly.

“Oh, you'll see,” Ogras said with a malicious grin.

Soon the three scuttled away, leaving Sap alone with his thoughts.

Leaving an old man like this, these youth have no manners, Sap grumbled in his head, but still gingerly readied the huge sniper rifle, careful to not make any sound.

They didn't have things like this back in the day when they were fighting in the jungles, but only old soviet-era guns, if even that. Sometimes the shipments had “gone missing”, likely fattening the pockets of some general.

Still, guns weren't complicated. It was point and click. Sniper rifles were a bit harder to handle since one had to take into account things such as wind and elevation. But since he had started to gain his class he felt himself getting reinvigorated. The arthritis in his hands and knees was long gone, and his mind was sharper than it had ever been.

While he waited for the demons to finish up whatever madness they were planning Sap opened up his attribute page to take his mind off things.

Name

Sap Trang

Level

28

Class

Wave Whisperer

Race

Human (F)

Alignment

Human (Earth)

Titles

Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Full of Class

Dao

Seed of Waves - Early

Strength

31

Dexterity

16

Endurance

26

Vitality

27

Intelligence

28

Wisdom

26

Luck

8

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

Every time Sap opened his menu he felt like a man reborn. He still remembered the scant 4 points in strength he possessed when he first found out about this screen. He was seventy-two years old, and before the fall he felt death looming close. But by now, between the medicine bath he took and the improved attributes, he felt as strong as a bull.

It made him think of his young lord. Zachary was only twice his levels, but his powers were out of this world. Sap even suspected that the young man long passed 100 points in multiple attributes. He didn't know how that was possible though, as Sap only got 5 points per level since he got his class. There were many things he didn't understand about the man he chose to follow.

How did he defeat an incursion singlehandedly? It was such a monstrous accomplishment that it was mindboggling.

Unfortunately, he would never get the answer, as neither the Lord or the demons spoke a single word about anything that happened before he and the spoiled brats arrived at the island.

Second was the mysterious shipyard. He had asked to work there multiple times, as that was where he felt he could provide the most help. But every time Zachary rebuffed him without hesitation. Those who worked there also never left their area, and Sap hadn't seen them since they kept him and the other refugees at the docks.

Finally the attributes of the Lord himself. He had seen the other elites of the world at the auction and instinctively knew that Zachary was almost a different species when he compared and contrasted them. That was why none of the other two mysteries mattered. He was betting on the terrifying power that the lord of Port Atwood kept showing.

Sap didn't feel it mattered if he himself died, if his sacrifice could create a debt that Lord Zac would pay forward to his grandson and fellow villagers.

With that in mind he put his eye next to the scope, and slowly scouted the camp for promising targets. He was careful to not

let the scope rest on any of the warriors though, as he knew some had extraordinary senses and could sense threats.

The camp consisted of reddish aliens who looked mostly human with a bit of reptile thrown into the mix, and there seemed to be two groups where neither seemed superior to the other. Sap thought it mainly meant they were different squadrons. He also spotted three suspicious tents where leaders might reside. Those tents would be his targets as soon as the mute demon returned.

Sap kept wondering what the trio would do, and his gut told him it would be something sinister. Ogras, in particular, was a bad influence on Lord Zachary, though it were always the evil ones who stayed alive.

Suddenly he saw something odd. The camp itself looked normal, where the people were minding their business, mainly preparing their weapons and gear. However, above the fortified camp a scary purple gas rose out of nowhere. Sap frowned, not being able to understand what was going on, but his instincts told him it was related to the plan of Ogras.

He was soon proven right as a terrifying roar echoed through the camp.

“POISON!” followed by an equally loud roar. “PURIFY!”

The next moment it was as though reality cracked, as the view of the camp and incursion distorted and was replaced with a similar, but slightly different reality. The soldiers and monks were still there, confusedly looking around.

However, there was also a gas that spread through the camp, and Sap realized that crazy woman must have let something out. He knew it was his time to contribute in a bit, and he was proven right as the reticent demon appeared next to him also carrying a sniper rifle.

“Get ready,” Janos said as he plopped down while panting.

The illusionist looked extremely pale, like he was completely wrung out. Still, he waved his hand a bit and a shimmer covered the two of them.

“Shoot leaders,” the demon said next and after that ignored Sap, who hurriedly looked back into the scope.

At first glance through the scope, he thought the battle already over, as almost all of the church-members were covered in a blazing golden flame. However, soon he realized that was some sort of defensive skill that was likely protection against the poison covering the area.

A bang next to him made him refocus, and Sap quickly localized a monk with a slightly more elaborate gown, and without hesitation pulled the trigger. The man seemed to realize something was up, but it was too late as his chest and heart blasted open into a huge hole from the high caliber rifle.

Sap had no time to lament he wasn't getting any Cosmic Energy from the kill and quickly moved his scope to his next target. In this manner, he picked off various warriors one by one. It was an odd feeling, as he knew that each and every one of those he killed were even stronger than the average demon on his island, and normally would consider him an ant.

Still, he knew that it wouldn't have been possible without the chaos the trio had created. The invaders seemed to realize they were attacked from somewhere as well, but something that Janos had done made it so they couldn't pinpoint the origin of the bullets.

The fire seemed to be an effective barrier against the poisonous winds, as it covered the priests in a cocoon. However, was already too late for many. Quite a few were stumbling around, a few even passed out.

The demon lord and the poison mistress weren't just sitting around either, as more waves of poison kept appearing across the camp, and Sap saw quite a few soldiers get killed by shadow spears suddenly rising up from nowhere. Sap couldn't localize Ogras himself but knew he was hiding somewhere to pick off the targets.

He finally had cleared everyone around one of the suspicious tents and moved his scope toward the next one. There he found a clear target for assassination. It was a richly decked

priest in a unique gown. He was angrily glaring around, with a shimmering mace in his hand.

Sap slowly exhaled his breath, and when he was completely steady he quickly moved the scope to hover over the man's chest and instantly pressed the trigger.

Chapter 155: Full Frontal Assault

His odd method of aiming was a special technique Sap Trang was using to give the powerhouses as little warning as possible. He remembered how Lord Zac had seemed to know the bullets were coming before the bang even arrived, and he wanted to avoid that situation. Sap didn't know if his tactic worked, but it should be better than doing nothing.

However, the bullet didn't work on this man, as the high priest roared and a wave of golden flame exploded out from him, covering almost half the camp in an instant. The bullet was scorched into nothingness, and all the poison in the area was incinerated.

A few hundred dead or dying lay on the ground, but a large group were still battle-ready, though none looked completely unscathed.

“Conviction!” the man roared while pointing to the west, letting Sap know the high priest was the one who gave the initial warning.

Multiple priests and monks immediately turned toward that direction, and suddenly it was as though the heavens itself punished the whole area to the west of the camp. Blazing golden beams slammed into the ground from the skies, creating seas of fire that covered hundreds of meters.

Sap guessed the two remaining demons were located in that area, and immediately reloaded his gun and in quick succession fired off two bullets toward the high priest.

The demon shot at the same target, as Janos likely also realized the mace-wielding high priest was the largest threat to their operation and Port Atwood.

Unfortunately the bullets didn't work any better for the illusionist either, as every shot disintegrated before they hit the man. Waves of billowing heat kept wafting out from the priest, making Sap wonder just how much Cosmos Energy the man contained. Interestingly enough the fire didn't seem to ham the priests, but rather strengthen them.

Sap didn't have time to mull it over as the high priest's head suddenly snapped right toward his direction, and it felt as though the priest looked back at him through the scope. Great fear flooded Sap's heart, and it felt as though reality went into slow motion.

"Illusion broken, he knows," Janos said and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Sap desperately shot another bullet at the man, but it was to no avail as the high priest lifted his mace toward his direction, seemingly giving out a death sentence.

A great light shone down on Sap from the heavens above, and he looked up to see boundless fire descending upon him. It felt like the fire didn't only want to burn his body, but even his soul. Sap completely froze, unsure what to do apart from pray to Buddha.

However, shadows suddenly gathered above him, and the fire was blocked right above him, while the forest around their bushes turned to cinders.

Out of the darkness Ogras and a three meter tall hideous monster stepped out. The monster was full of thorns and vines, and multicolored gases wafted out from it, making it look like something out of a horror story.

Before Sap had time to react the monster slowly transformed into the female demon. She was burned and bruised at various places, just like Ogras, but it was undoubtedly her. Sap even forgot the battle as he stared at the woman who frowned as she saw his gaze.

Before Sap could do anything else shadows started rushing toward Ogras, and it looked like they were becoming a second layer of skin on him.

“Split up and flee,” Ogras said with a voice that sounded as though it came from the depths of hell as his body turned completely black.

Sap unhesitatingly followed the order, as this battle was not something someone like him could intrude upon. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Janos do the same, and further in the distance he saw a squad of furious-looking priests start moving toward them. A primal fear pushed Sap’s legs forward, but a morbid curiosity made him throw one last look at the battle.

Ogras looked like a god of darkness with two huge black wings on his back as he hovered facing the high priest who radiated a blazing glory. A gigantic sun burned behind the priest’s back, and the mace in his hand seemed to feed upon the celestial fire.

Sap almost thought he was back in an illusion, but knew he wasn’t so lucky. The world had truly turned crazy.

The ten-meter monoliths that the Corpse Golems carried around emitted an intensely uncomfortable feeling, as though they emitted the chill of death itself. Zac got goosebumps from their aura even from his hiding spot amongst the foliage. The undead seemed to love it though and even fought amongst themselves to get as close as possible to them.

Zac actually knew what those things were since he had looked up as much general knowledge as he could about the undead forces in preparation for finding his sister. He would likely need to traverse the domain of the undead to reach her, and any knowledge would help.

The large pillars were called unholy beacons, and they were tools that transformed Cosmic Energy into miasma.

There were many unclear points as to how the undead legions could actually exist, but it was clearly linked to miasma. The undead did not cultivate using Cosmic Energy, and to a certain degree it was almost harmful to them. While normal Cosmic Energy was without attunement, it could be considered to be basic building block of life. However, putting that into the body of a living corpse could be quite harmful.

They instead absorbed miasma, or Death Attuned Cosmic Energy as it was also called. Some places where extreme bloodshed had taken place naturally created miasma, other times the undead forces manufactured it with beacons and arrays. The beacons essentially terraformed an area into an environment that suited the undead.

The need for miasma was also one of the reasons why the undead forces created such a number of zombies. Zombies were generally quite weak unless they managed to awaken their intelligence, but they acted as miniature unholy beacons.

Low tiered Zombies could still absorb Cosmic Energy, but most of it was actually released again as miasma. The process was far less efficient compared to the real beacons, but Zombies were self-propagating, creating a natural spread of the undead domain.

Miasma was not too toxic to humans, and one could actually absorb it just like Cosmic Energy. However, doing so for too long would have negative effects, affecting both the mind and the body. That only went for people like Zac who had a sturdy constitution though.

A normal mortal at level 1 would fall sick and die within a few days if he or she stayed within miasma, while Zac would be able to traverse the whole incursion without much problem.

Zac hadn't expected the undead invaders to actually bring beacons with them to the island. It meant they weren't just planning a quick assault, but a long term occupation of the area after his town was dealt with.

A frown emerged on Zac's face as he surveyed the shining pillars, as he couldn't have those things keep spewing out miasma. It had only been a few hours since the invaders arrived, but the vicinity was already largely converted, giving it a ghastly feeling.

A large part of the island might become uninhabitable if the monoliths were left unchecked for too long. Their presence only reaffirmed his opinion that the third wave needed to be dealt with in a lightning-quick manner. If everything went well

here he might actually strike a second leader within the hour, as soon as the Zombies started rampaging.

There were a few more minutes before the agreed-upon time, and Zac kept looking over the area to get a grasp of the forces the Corpse Lord brought. He counted at least fifty Corpse golems, most of which surrounded the monoliths. He could only find five aberrations though. Perhaps those freaks of nature were quite rare, Zac didn't really have much knowledge about them.

Finally he spotted a large tent that looked surprisingly normal, apart from its dour colors. The walking corpses didn't care about a roof over their heads, so it should belong to the Corpse lord. There were a few corpse golems standing guard around it as well, making it quite hard to sneak up on.

However, he was already prepared to fight through a sea of Zombies to reach the Corpse Lord, as sneaking around wasn't his strong suit. Hopefully having the necklace while speeding through the masses with **[Loamwalker]** would be enough to give him a leg up on the enemy.

It was almost time, so Zac steadied his breath for a few seconds, some fear lingering in his heart. However, that fear was eclipsed by a steely determination. Months on this island had reformed him and given him an unflinching mentality. Just seeing the horrid sight in front of him would have made him run away screaming a year ago, but now he only looked at it from a tactical viewpoint.

He took out his axe again, carefully looking it over. Hopefully the upgrade would prove useful in the fight, as the stone cost 6 million. He felt the excitement of the axe when he fed it the stone, but he still hadn't figured out what had changed by using it. It looked pretty much the same as before, and he hadn't really felt anything different when he killed the rockmen earlier.

Next he put on a nondescript cloak that would mask himself a bit, and without stalling any further rushed toward the command tent when there were five seconds left to the

deadline. Each step with **[Loamwalker]** pushed him almost ten meters, barely leaving a shadow in his wake.

Most of the zombies didn't even register Zac's passing by and mindlessly kept milling about. A few gave a start and started growling while looking around with confused faces, perhaps trying to understand what was going on.

Zac didn't bother with them as he infused a huge amount of Cosmic Energy into his arms and axe, wanting to end it all with one swift strike.

Finally he arrived right outside the tent, and Zac was already mid-swing when he appeared. A five-meter fractal blade ripped through the air horizontally, infused with the Dao of Heaviness. A corpse golem stood in the way of the swing, but **[Verun's Bite]** had the force of a train as it ripped right through its dense muscles, completely bisecting the hulking golem.

The blade continued unimpeded right into the tent, but as it was almost completely through Zac felt a painful shockwave in his arm as his swing lost all its momentum instantaneously. A huge shockwave spread out, pushing away any Zombies in the vicinity, and two of the huge corpse golems even fell on their backs from the force.

The tent was rendered into ribbons by the wild energies, showing Zac the interior of the tent. The Corpse Lord stood stable like a mountain, his bone hook holding Zac's fractal blade in place. Zac's eyes met with the sinister eyes glowing like red orbs of the undead leader, and the Corpse Lord's mouth opened into a ghastly grin showing sharp teeth.

"I suspected you might try this, human," the undead warrior said with a sneer. "You think my true death will solve your problems, and you might be right. But just this amount of power won't be enough."

Zac didn't know why he could understand the undead general's words, but it didn't matter. He didn't answer the taunt, instead quickly materializing a new fractal blade. He actually noted that the hand of the Corpse Lord was very

subtly shaking, probably meaning that the defense wasn't quite as relaxed as the undead humanoid wanted to make it look.

He remembered Ogras advice and mustered all he had in each of his swings. He needed to end this quickly before he was overrun by a sea of undead monstrosities. Each of Zac's swings was imbued by either his Dao of Heaviness or Dao of Sharpness, and he tried everything in his book in order to create an opening.

The Undead was an even match, the huge bone hook tearing through the air to meet each and every swing. Zac noted with some relief he was actually pushing the man back a bit, and kept his pace up. However, he didn't dare relax as it seemed the undead wasn't using any Dao, and Zac wouldn't believe a leader of an incursion didn't possess a few of them at least.

Zac was also getting a constant stream of Cosmic Energy, as the Zombies in the area unhesitatingly joined the fight between the two powerhouses, and kept streaming toward Zac in an effort to disrupt his rhythm. However, the Zombies were too weak to do much of anything, and most were destroyed simply by the errant energies or shockwaves from the battle.

Suddenly the Corpse Lord jumped back and released a bestial roar. The unholy beacons around them blazed to life and shone with a ghastly turquoise that covered the whole area. The world turned almost monochrome with all warm colors in the spectrum gone.

It appeared the Corpse Lord was going all out.

Chapter 156: Life versus Death

Whatever the undead leader unleashed didn't just affect the unholy beacons, but the whole area was affected. The zombies in the vicinity of the fight suddenly shrieked as they fell on the ground, melting with visible speed.

The former humans turned into a putrid goop, and from the puddles a stream of deathly energy rose, joining the energy the monoliths released. Zac hesitantly looked around, and his visibility was quickly getting blocked from the immense amount of miasma rising in the air.

In seconds the whole sky was covered with billowing waves of miasma and Zac felt like a small boat on turbulent seas. The density of deathly energy was skyrocketing where they were fighting, and Zac was starting to feel a bit nauseated. It quickly got to the point it forced him to start circulating his Dao of Trees to combat the nausea.

A torrent of energy was gathering above the Corpse Lord, who started emitting an even mightier aura compared to before. Zac wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he had to do something about the situation. If the Corpse Lord swallowed up all the energy in the skies he would turn into a true monster.

Zac pushed off the ground and created an overextended edge that he swung in an effort to disrupt the gathering miasma above the corpse lord. He knew he couldn't rip apart the whole miasmatic clouds in skies, but he could at least do something about the part the Corpse lord tried to absorb. Unfortunately, it was like cutting air, and the edge harmlessly passed through it.

Zac knew from the start that his swing might fail, but he kept the swing going and released the edge right toward the closest

monolith. The fractal blade flew away, and with a thundering explosion destroyed the undead beacon.

An enormous shockwave of wild energies erupted from the monolith, instantly killing a few corpse golems and hundreds of zombies. It seemed all the cosmic energy and miasma gathered in the pillar was released like a bomb when the beacon broke. Zac suddenly felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy in his body, proving that the System credited him all the kills.

Zac noted with some relief that the clouds quickly thinned out a bit, and set his sights at a second pillar. However, the Corpse Lord wouldn't have it and quickly intercepted Zac's second strike. The leader seemed taken by surprise by the fact that the fractal edge could detach from the axe, but he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

The undead leader suddenly pushed one of his hands toward the sky with a ripping motion causing two swirling torrents of miasma to emerge from the clouds, quickly transforming into actual fractal beasts. They looked like some sort of worms with huge maws and emitted an intense aura of death.

The two miasma monsters descended and Zac quickly summoned multiple fractal edges and launched them at the beasts. To Zac's disappointment the edges only passed through just like with the clouds, as the monsters were largely incorporeal.

At least the beasts temporarily lost their forms from the swings, and two clouds landed on him instead, completely drowning the area in highly concentrated miasma.

Zac hoped that was it, but to his dismay he saw the clouds starting to reform, and from just standing in the clouds he was quickly growing numb and deathly cold. Desperate for a solution Zac released Cosmic Energy imbued with the Dao of Trees into the area where the beasts were reforming, and it actually worked.

The pure life energy created some sort of reaction in the reforming beasts, leaving two convulsing clouds failing to properly reform. It would likely have been better to just cut

them with edges imbued with the Dao, but he still wasn't able to imbue his edges with the Dao of Trees.

Just as Zac breathed out in relief he felt an intense danger and immediately jumped to the side while activating a defensive charge on his gear. At the same time, he started gathering his remaining energy into the fractal on his arm, preparing for a final desperate gambit. If it failed he would have to flee and take as many as he could with him through the teleporter.

The Corpse Lord emerged out of one of the clouds, the air around him distorting from the teeming energy in his body. His whole body was swollen, likely from absorbing an unordinary amount of miasma. The bone hook in his hands shone with extremely concentrated energy, and it made a beeline straight for Zac's torso.

Zac hoped that the erected shield would buy him some time, but to his horror he saw that the shimmering barrier actually cracked soon after the undead leader's weapon slammed into it. It was the first time his gear wasn't able to block a strike, proving the power of the Corpse Lord.

With the barrier destroyed the sinister bone-weapon continued into his gut, and the pain made Zac almost immediately pass out.

It was far worse than a normal stab wound, and it actually felt like Zac was dying. However, he grabbed hold of the hook with his hand, refusing to let go as he finished pushing energy into the fractal on his other arm. The fractal was finally satiated, and Zac pushed forward his arm with a roar.

Reality cracked, and the familiar hand from [Nature's Punishment] extended down toward the Corpse Lord from above. The spatial hole also released a torrent of a multitude of colors that offset the deathly lights of the monoliths.

The Corpse Lord looked alarmed for the first time since the fight started, and without hesitation he pushed backward with immense speed, even giving up on the weapon that Zac was holding on to.

However, he couldn't outrun the gigantic hand that wanted to crush him. As he fled the undead leader stabbed his sharp nails into his own chest while gritting his teeth.

For a second Zac thought the Corpse Lord had made a mistake, but he quickly realized he was wrong. A disgusting black ichor rushed out like a waterfall from the wound the undead created, to the point that the hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** was getting completely drenched.

"WORLD ROT!" the undead roared, and Zac felt a pain in his arm that even eclipsed the wound in his gut. It felt like his hand was quickly rotting away, and even though he had imbued the hand with the Dao of Trees the protection was limited.

At least Zac's Dao stopped the hand from immediately disintegrating, and Zac used all his determination to do some damage before it was too late. The rotting hand swooped down to crush the corpse lord, who desperately dodged.

However, the hand was huge, and it at least managed to grab one of the arms of the undead leader, and with a sickening crunch broke it beyond recognition before Zac was forced to release the skill.

It was either that or lose his life, as he was afraid the rot would spread if he let the black liquid keep corroding the huge hand. Zac felt feverish and nauseated, but he wouldn't let the opportunity go as he mustered some of his last reserves to move next to the Corpse Lord. Zac didn't use any fractal or skills, only the Dao of Heaviness with the true edge of **[Verun's Bite]**.

The Corpse Lord was momentarily distracted from the pain of getting his arm crushed, but he still used his arm to block the axe strike instead of getting decapitated. The Axe slammed into the Corpse Lord, whose inhuman sturdiness stopped the edge after only pushing in a small bit.

The Endurance of the Corpse Lord was clearly far higher than Zac's, and his body was as good as any defensive gear. Zac noticed the undead used some sort of defensive skill though, as the arm was shimmering with miasma.

Zac suddenly felt a primal rage erupt from the axe, and the teeth on it started to rattle. Without warning a spirit of some prehistoric beast with a huge maw emerged from the axe and bit into the shoulder of the Corpse Lord with a growl.

The undead screamed in rage and tried to hit wave it away, but it was an incorporeal being. With a quick motion, the beast ripped out a large section of the Corpse Lord's shoulder before dissipating into nothingness again.

Zac didn't understand what just happened, but he felt this was his last chance to kill the undead leader. Both his arms were currently ruined; one from **[Nature's Punishment]**, while other was almost completely severed from the axe ghost. The axe was also freed from the arm from the bite so Zac swung it down again at the Corpse Lord.

The undead was in a miserable state and kept trying to move away from Zac. His desperate assault was starting to produce real results, even though Zac himself also was in a miserable state.

Zac looked down at his freely bleeding wound, and saw that there was a sickly black tinge to it. It was painful beyond compare, and he quickly swallowed one of his best healing pills to combat the wound. He felt a warmth spread through his body, but it seemed it had small effect in working against this particular wound.

Still, there was no time to worry about this. Zac rushed toward the mangled corpse lord, and with a growl swung his axe. He also ignored his pounding head and infused it with the Dao of Heaviness one time after another. Each swing was like a falling meteor, and the Corpse Lord was struggling more and more in avoiding a killing strike.

Unfortunately the corpse lord possessed some sort of odd skill that made him swap position with a Zombie, foiling Zac time and time again. However, it's range was quite limited and seemed to cost quite a bit of miasma, so Zac didn't relent and kept following like a blood hound.

Finally Zac managed to strike out before the Lord once again performed the body swap, and the axe hit down next to the

neck of the Corpse Lord, cutting straight down toward his lung, drawing a huge torrent of the black ichor.

The Corpse Lord looked like he was barely hanging on, but before Zac could finish him off a humongous fist closed in on him. He didn't even have time to dodge, and the fist clocked him right in his face. With Zac's monstrous Endurance he was largely okay, but while he wasn't hurt the power of the swing threw him away.

Zac had been too focused on the undead leader, completely ignoring the surroundings, allowing corpse golem to sneak up on him. Zac quickly tried to return to the undead leader deliver the final strike, but the aberrations and corpse golems went berserk as they disregarded their safety and swarmed him.

Zac was feeling woozy from his festering wound and energy consumption, but he grit his teeth and killed them one by one, each kill giving a huge infusion of cosmic energy.

It only took thirty seconds to push past the resistance since he was going all out, unheeding of energy expenditure, but Zac couldn't locate the Corpse Lord as the last aberration fell. He looked all over, and finally found his target right next to the incursion crystal, his bone hook somehow back on his back.

"We will meet again, human. Death won't be a reprieve for you," the Corpse Lord said with seething rage as jumped straight into the shining crystal.

A light flashed, and before Zac even had time to react the undead leader was gone, and soon after the crystal lost its luster.

As if something snapped in the heads of the Zombies they almost instantly started roaring, gaining a bloodthirsty aura. Relief flooded Zac's mind, and he almost sat down to rest. He didn't manage to kill the undead leader, but at least he completed his mission.

But he barely had time to take a breath when a stone spear erupted from the ground, going straight for his heart. It thrummed with abundant ice-cold power, and Zac didn't hesitate in using his second defensive charge.

As the stone spear approached darkness congealed into a stone-man dressed in exquisite gear, and Zac's eyes locked with two black holes filled malice.

Chapter 157: Wounded

he stone spear slammed into Zac's hastily erected shield, and while it held true this time many cracks spread over the barrier, which was a testament to the power contained in the attack.

It seemed that Zac couldn't rely too heavily on his gear in the future, as its efficacy was limited. He himself had broken through Rydel's protective talisman with his final attack, and this was the second time he was almost killed from his own shield failing him

"We were treated as fodder, yet in the end it's the Yrd who will reap the benefits," the new attacker said with a deep and gravelly voice.

Zac was somberly looking at his new assailer, guessing it was the leader of the rock-men. Its appearance spelled very bad news. Zac was in no condition to fight another intense battle like the last one, even if the rockman wasn't as strong as the Corpse Lord. Zac had overtaxed both his mind and his Cosmic Energy in his previous fight, and he was barely able to contain the festering wound in his side.

Still, there was nothing to do. He was unsure whether he would even be able to flee if he tried, as the rockman leader seemed to have some type of movement skill as well. But he wouldn't give up until his last breath, and Zac wordlessly brought up his axe once again.

But before Zac had time to figure out a battle plan a beam of darkness went straight for the rockman, and Ogras appeared right next to him almost simultaneously. The demon touched his shoulder, and the last thing Zac saw before the shadows swallowed the two was the rockman slashing Ogras' shadow spears to smithereens.

The two reappeared somewhere in the forest and Zac quickly scanned the vicinity for any enemy forces, and only relaxed when he noted they were alone. He was about to ask why they didn't stay and fight, but before Zac could open his mouth the demon keeled over.

Zac finally took a good look at his companion and was shocked at what he saw. The demon was in even worse state than he was. Grisly wounds and burns covered multiple parts of his body, and everything from down from his left elbow was simply missing, leaving just a bloody stump.

Horrified Zac hurried toward Ogras and tried to help him up.

“Are you ok?” Zac asked with concern. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Stop staring, carry me back to the wall,” Ogras wheezed back, and Zac could comply as he picked him up and started running, the pain in his side almost making him pass out.

The wound in Zac's gut burned like someone was groping around in there with a hot poker, but he could only bear with it for now. He already tried eating one of his best healing pills, but it virtually did nothing for him.

He would need to consult the physician when he was back. He couldn't ask the demon about it either as it looked like Ogras was barely conscious at the moment.

Zac was having trouble staying awake as well, but he stubbornly pushed forward one step at the time. His vision was closing in on him, but he refused to topple over. Finally the forest gave way to the prepared battlefield, and the sight of the ruined wall entered his eyes.

Zac summoned strength from god knows where and resumed his run toward safety. Each step was a challenge, and he almost fell into a few of the crude pits, but eventually he reached the wall, only to see the demon soldiers nervously waiting.

Fearful and despondent eyes looked at the pathetic figures of Zac and Ogras made, clearly feeling that all hope was lost. The

two didn't look like heroes making a triumphant return, but rather like the vanquished returning in defeat.

“What's with those faces? Lord Zac prevailed over the Corpse Lord Noble, and the undead are going feral as we speak, attacking friend and foe alike,” Ogras roused and shouted with a powerful voice, and took out a lizardman head out of his pouch.

“The leader of those fucking cultists didn't prove a match against a true demonic warrior either,” the demon continued and threw away the head, its arc drawing mesmerized looks.

“Their leaders are dead, their lines are in disarray. We won! It's time to reap some contribution points.”

“Take your positions!” Zac followed up with a roar, and the demons and other squads others formed proper lines along the broken wall with newfound vigor.

Joanna and two other Valkyries came rushing toward Zac, who slumped down on the ground behind the newly formed lines.

“Are you really ok?” she worriedly asked, but was soon pushed out of the way by Alea who went down on her knees next to him and checked his wound.

“Your wound is filled with highly concentrated miasma, you need to get rid of it or it will spread,” she said with a low voice, careful not to let anyone else hear.

“I tried eating a healing pill, didn't work,” Zac tiredly muttered as he took out a few normal Nexus Crystals.

“I know you have some sort of nature Dao, use that as well for now,” she said with a sigh.

Zac opened his eyes and properly looked at the poison mistress. She was in bad shape as well, with many bloodied spots on her dress. He looked around and saw Mr. Trang stand close-by with one of the huge sniper rifles on his back. He had a somber expression Zac had never seen before, and he warily gazed at Alea next to him.

Alea followed Zac's gaze and sighed.

“We attacked the cultists, things got out of hand. Ogras saved us and stayed behind to fight. It seems he won. We’ll explain it later, recover for now,” Alea quickly recapped.

Zac knew there were things that were missing from that explanation, judging from how Alea and Sap looked, not mentioning Ogras himself. But for now he could only focus on recovery.

Actually he hadn’t dared ask Ogras what happened with the Church while they fled back toward the wall, afraid of the answer. But it seemed Ogras had actually fought to the point he lost a limb in order to not only distract, but destroy, the cultists.

Zac described the appearance of the leader of the rockmen detail in case he would try something again, then closed his eyes and resumed absorbing the Nexus Crystals. He wished he could follow the advice of Alea and also use the Dao of Trees, but his head felt like he had a concussion, and he was afraid he’d pass out if he actually tried to use a Dao at the moment.

Zac instead fully focused on recovering his Cosmic Energy, but only after ten minutes a multitude of roars interrupted him. He quickly glanced over and saw it was a sea of undead who were rushing toward their army.

“I killed most of the strong ones, but wake me up if you start getting problems handling it,” Zac said to Alea who was still standing by his side.

“Don’t look down on us demons. While we might not be monsters like you, we’re no weaklings. Just rest up and let us and the little spear-kittens you are training solve this. Oh, and the insect people seem particularly motivated,” Alea said with a slight smile.

Zac couldn’t help looking over at the small Zhix contingent, and saw they were visibly irate.

“Unholy things. Abominations,” Ibtep said and angry clacking spread amongst his kind.

Zac shook his head and kept focusing on his recovery. His headache had subsided somewhat by now, but he still didn’t

dare use his Dao, and his wound kept hurting like hell.

Soon the army clashed with the Zombie horde, and Zac kept surveying the battle from a part of the wall that was still halfway standing. It seemed that neither the cultists or the rock people were present, and Zac could only pray it was due to them having their hands full with their own undead hordes.

For now his army was doing fine, and the unrelenting waves of undead served mostly as fodder. There were some Aberrations and Corpse Golems left but they either were dealt with by groups of Demon Soldiers who whittled them down, or sometimes a lightning bolt from the ballistae ended them.

Even the contingents of Valkyries and Zhix could fight in hand to hand combat, though their combat tactics were quite different. The former slaves used large shields as roadblocks as they methodically stabbed the zombies with their spears, felling them one after another.

The Zhix were far more aggressive, bisecting the Zombies one by one, and simply shrugging off the occasional swipe from them. Still, there was some sort of unspoken coordination between the insectoid warriors, as any time one of them risked to be seriously injured a spear or a knife suddenly arrived from someone else to neutralize the threat. There was some sort of order to the apparent chaos, but Zac couldn't figure it out.

Almost an hour passed, and there was still no sign of the stronger forces, and Zac was starting to get worried that they were up to something. A sudden movement to his left made him look over, and he saw a pale-faced Ogras get to his feet, a thick clump of shadows covering the stump on his left arm.

“What are you doing? Sit down and rest,” Zac said with raised brows. “They are doing fine.”

“I just lost an arm, no big deal. I'll regrow it later. I am mostly restored apart from that, and I don't need the hand to use my skills,” the demon answered with a shrug.

Zac knew the demon was lying, but Zac wouldn't stop him. He knew the personality of the demon. Ogras was selfish, careful and calculating, but he'd actually fought to the point he lost an

appendage and almost died for Port Atwood. Zac knew it wasn't as easy to regrow the limbs as the demon let on. It was certainly possible, but the pills were quite rare and expensive.

Besides, even after having regrown the limb it took time and effort to redraw the pathways and retrain the limb. Losing an arm was no small matter for a warrior, and it would take years to get back on track.

“Don't overextend yourself. The last leader is out there somewhere, he's unharmed and there's no way these Zombies can kill him,” Zac said with a tired voice.

Ogras only nodded before shadows gathered around him, and he disappeared.

The battle raged on and it was as though the undead were unending. The Valkyries had been forced to back away, as they were starting to make mistakes due to being completely wrung out. However, Zac knew that each one of them had gained a significant amount of Cosmic Energy from the intense bout. He had killed a couple of zombies before, and he knew they gave a few hundred Nexus Coins each.

The Zhix warriors lasted a while longer, though they eventually had to reluctantly back away as well, leaving only the battle-hardened demons to defend the long stretch of ruined wall. They couldn't clump together, as that would allow the zombie horde to pass them by and go after the numerous civilians who still were in the town.

A lot of demon craftsmen and other non-combat classes were also helping out, constantly building temporary fortifications along the destroyed wall in order to shorten the distance the defenders had to cover. They used everything from chopped down trees to random boulders.

It didn't look pretty, but it worked well enough as long as it was tall and sturdy. They were up against braindead zombies, and almost anything sufficed.

Zac looked over his army, seeing that almost no one was unharmed after the unrelenting battle. Zac was quite happy

that the Zombies in the multi-verse weren't quite like those in the movies. A bite from a zombie didn't turn you into one.

The wound would likely get infected, as the zombies were crawling with all kinds of bacteria, but that was about it. One had to actually die first to turn into a zombie, where miasma entering the corpse caused the transformation. That's why there also was no cure, since even if one cured the zombification, the cured patient would still only be a corpse.

There was some scuffling next to him and Zac looked over to see a bandaged Janos stand there, silent as usual.

"I heard a bit about your feats with the Zealots, great job," Zac said.

"Hm," Janos only answered with a slight nod.

Zac didn't mind, as he was too tired to keep up a conversation in any case. He kept rotating between silently meditating with his eyes closed, and occasionally overseeing the battlefield. However, as he once again was about to close his eyes a terrifying sense of danger erupted in his mind, and his eyes opened up wide.

He looked around but only saw the taciturn illusionist still standing next to him. However, in his hand was a slender sword Zac had never seen before, and it was moving straight at him.

Zac could only helplessly watch the as the blade plunged into his chest.

Chapter 158: Betrayal

Searing pain exploded in Zac's chest as a blade ruthlessly pushed toward his heart. He was out of defensive charges from his gear, and instead had to settle for desperately moving his torso slightly to avoid getting his heart skewered. The blade still slid in between two of his ribs, and he was seriously wounded though he avoided any lethal damage.

Cosmic energy started gathering as various thoughts were flashing through his head. Were the demons finally making a move on him? Did Ogras' injuries make him impatient to seize control? Or was Janos just going rogue, just like Namys?

Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood as he scrambled to his feet, but the piercing sound of a sniper rifle made him quickly throw himself on the ground again, the wounds in his body only worsening. His vision was swimming but he desperately looked around to see what was going on.

Janos stood in front of him with a confused look on his face as he looked down at a large hole in his chest that was gushing torrential amounts of blood. Soon after the demon collapsed right next to him. Zac quickly looked to the origin of the sound and found Sap Trang rushing toward him with a determined expression, a smoking sniper rifle in his hand.

Each breath was torture, but Zac forced himself up again, and quickly took out one of his healing pills. It might not work against the miasma in his old wound, but at least it should help against his new one. He quickly swallowed it with a shaking hand as he brought out his axe with an enraged expression.

The commotion caused both demons and humans to look over, and scene with a dead Janos and heavily bleeding Zac caused widespread confusion. The Valkyries scrambled to create some distance from the demonic warriors, while the demons confusedly looked at each other, hesitating what to do.

It didn't take long before Alea rushed up toward Zac, but she was stopped by a huge fractal edge being directed at her.

"Stay back," Zac coughed with a grim face, blood still flowing down his mouth and from his wounded lungs.

Sap didn't hesitate either, but pointed his reloaded gun at the poison mistress, all the while warily scouting the vicinity. Alea looked startled but immediately moved back a bit with some sadness in her eyes. Ogras himself was still suspiciously absent, and Zac couldn't spot him at either the battlefield or amongst the defending army.

A warm glow gathered in Zac's chest and he took a few more ragged breaths as the pill worked its magic. However, he didn't have time to really rest up as Janos' body bloated up and with an explosion of golden flames erupted into an inferno right next to him. Zac quickly grabbed Sap and flashed away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

However, just as he reappeared some distance away another sense of impending doom rattled his mind, and he quickly threw himself and Sap to the ground. A freezing chill erupted in his legs, and he quickly looked down to find it skewered by a black icicle. His whole leg was turning completely numb from the frigid spike, and he wasn't even able to extract it as it had completely frozen the area of his thigh.

With a groan he got back to his feet, ignoring the pain in his leg, and with mad swings intercepted a storm of small icicles following the large one. Zac looked around and finally found the source of the attacks. It was the rockman leader who Ogras helped him escape from earlier.

It looked like he was trying to fish in muddy waters and take advantage of the fact that the other two leaders were dead or gone from the island. However, while Zac was caught unaware by Janos' betrayal he was in far better condition right now compared to when they met last time.

He had absorbed quite a bit of energy from the Crystals by now and could manage a short battle even with his wounded chest.

Zac unhesitantly pushed forward with **[Loamwalker]** and appeared right in front of the surprised golem leader with his axe mid-swing. However, the leader was a veteran fighter, and a thick wall of black ice materialized out of nowhere to intercept Zac's strike.

A powerful shockwave erupted from the impact, and Zac had to grit his teeth together to not let out a whimper from the pain. His swings carried a tremendous amount of force, and the shockwaves only made his wounds worse.

A great boom resounded in the air, and a chunk of the rockman's side was blasted away, causing blue blood to paint the ground. It was Sap Trang who had timed his shot perfectly with when Zac's swing destroyed the ice wall. The leader managed to react fast enough to avoid his chest getting blasted open, but at least it wounded him. Thankfully this boss wasn't able to completely stop the bullets like the Corpse Lord was.

The rockman roared and suddenly the area started trembling. Zac felt a new sense of danger as he saw the area rapidly freeze.

"Run!" he shouted as he activated his movement skill, deftly dodging an ice spear that followed by a veritable torrent of attacks that flew in all directions.

Zac's shout had warned quite a few, but a few Zhix, Valkyries and demons were caught in the large ice storm the rockman created. Even the demon warriors caught inside soon succumbed after desperately having defended against the onslaught of ice spears from above and earthen stalactites from below. In just a few seconds the whole area was transformed into a confusing mess of icicles, ice walls, and jagged rocks.

Zac was forced to keep moving about using his movement skill, while wildly waving his axe to destroy the projectiles that kept whirling toward him. But the projectiles were in the hundreds, and he couldn't destroy them all.

Luckily the power of each individual projectile was limited, and with his Endurance they only created shallow flesh wounds. However, whenever an icicle hit the new wound on

his chest or the festering one on his side he almost keeled over from the pain.

And it was at exactly one such time that the rockman suddenly re-emerged right behind Zac, giving him an acute sense of danger. He lifted his axe to try to parry whatever the rockman had planned, but suddenly a few spikes materialized around the two, and unerringly slammed into various spots of the Rockman.

The leader wailed in pain, and Zac took the opportunity to swiftly decapitate the man with a horizontal swing. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac didn't care about any of that. He quickly looked around and saw a grisly scene.

Alea stood some distance away, covered in blood from head to toe. She was impaled in three spots by frozen stalactites, and her whole body was heavily wounded from the uncountable small icicles that were rotating in the air. She had a strong constitution in order to handle her poisons, but not to the point she could shrug off attacks as Zac did.

Their eyes met and Alea gave a small smile before her eyes rolled up and she collapsed on the floor. Zac didn't hesitate, but instantly moved to her side with **[Loamwalker** and scooped her up in his arms.

Since the Rockman was dead the ice storm ended, but the huge ice walls and rocky formations that trapped him were still there, forcing him to run through the maze.

If he was alone he might have just punched his way through or jumped over the obstacles, but with the Alea's wounds he didn't dare to do anything so drastic.

As he ran he suddenly heard the familiar unfeeling voice.

[Mission Complete. Calculating Grade. Grade: B. Adding 4 hours of Contribution gathering. Incursions close in 30 minutes. Contribution store remaining time: 24 hours.]

It was the first time Zac actually heard the System's voice when he completed a quest. Usually there were just prompts that showed his progress. He briefly wondered if there was

some special reason for this, but he didn't have time to mull it over as he was out of the icefield.

Zac found himself close to the back of the battlefield. Most of the demons were still focusing on keeping the Zombies at bay, but a small defensive perimeter had also been created with a dozen demons standing prepared at the edge of the frozen field. Sap was standing next to them looking fidgety.

"Young man, are you alright?" Sap shouted as he ran up to Zac as soon as he emerged from behind a protruding rock.

The old fisherman was still carrying the sniper rifle around, warily looking down at Alea in Zac's arms.

"Did you..?" he hesitantly said, seemingly afraid to continue.

A few demons were warily looking at him as well, their eyes darting between Zac's face and the unconscious and bloodied demon general in his arms.

"Don't look at me, look at the Zombies. Alea risked her life to save me, and thanks to her the last of the enemy leaders is dead," Zac said with a hoarse voice as he carefully put her down and fed her a healing pill.

The demons relaxed somewhat then they saw the pill Zac fed her. It came from Rydel's Cosmos Sack and was a well known top tier pill in the demonic factions.

"The quest is completed, the final leader is dead. You have four more hours to rack up as much Contribution Points as you can, but after that you won't gain any anymore. You have another 20 hours to buy from the Contribution Store before it disappears as well," Zac said. "The Incursions will close in 30 minutes. That means that the rockmen and the remaining Zealots will likely flee."

He wasn't sure about the last statement, but he hadn't seen either since he returned from the wall. The rockmen had taken significant losses earlier, and they were also the force closest to the Undead incursion. Zac doubted they would be a problem, since they should have their hands full.

He was more worried about the zealots, as they didn't seem the type to just give up in the face of death from what he'd read about them. Crazy fanatics rarely took the most logical actions. But they were also missing, which was fine with Zac for now, as he needed to rest and Ogras was missing.

The demons looked ecstatic at the news and started to fight the endless undead with newfound vigor. With all three of the powerhouses gone the war was essentially over. There were some weird things going on, such as the betrayal of Janos and the absence of Ogras, but that could wait for at least four hours. Now it was time to reap some benefits.

Zac let two of the non-combat demons carry the unconscious Alea away, and sat down again with a sigh.

"Thank you for your help today. You have made huge contributions to Port Atwood in this quest. You don't need to stand guard, go kill some zombies. They will give you a great boost in experience," Zac said as he looked up to the old fisherman with his rifle.

"Young man, everything might not be as they seem. Those flames that the mute demon exploded into? They were the very same ones all the lizardman Zealots used. I lost sight of Janos as we fled back toward the wall, and he might have been replaced somehow," Mr. Trang said after some hesitation.

Zac looked over surprised at the old fisherman who only shrugged his shoulders indicating he didn't know. Zac could only pray that what the old man said was true, but for now there was no way to confirm it.

Soon Mr. Trang sped off without another word, putting the rifle into a Cosmos Sack. Left alone Zac once again started to focus on recovery, though this time he didn't dare close his eyes. Instead, he kept vigil over his surroundings as he circulated the Dao of Trees.

He was still mentally wrung out from the battle with the Undead Lord, but he needed to do something to stabilize the wound in his side, even if his head was pounding. At least it seemed the Dao of Trees didn't take much mental strength to

passively circulate through the body, and the effects were noticeable.

As Zac sat down he opened his quest panel, and a wave of relief hit him as he looked over his quest.

Incursion Master (Unique)

[COMPLETE]: Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (3/3) [00:23:58:03] [00:03:58:03].

The quest was really complete. It was a quest he'd had in his quest menu for almost five months, and it was finally done with. Zac took a deep breath and looked up at the skies.

There wasn't any great joy in him from the huge accomplishment. Of course he was relieved that he wouldn't have to keep fighting the waves anymore. But rather being excited about the rewards, he was excited about something else.

He could finally, and without worries, go about finding his sister.

Chapter 159: Infiltrators

The pain in Zac's side kept burning as he sat down and meditated. No pill he owned worked on the wound, as the miasma in his body was stubbornly refusing to dissipate. The demon physician had examined the wound after the battle calmed down, and he was sure that it wasn't the miasma itself that was the problem, but rather that the miasma contained some Dao.

It reminded Zac of the fight earlier, where the hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** rotted into nothingness in less than a second from the so-called World Rot the Corpse Lord summoned. Zac believed there was a good chance that the undead leader possessed a high tier, or even peak tier Dao in something related to death or rot, which was why his wound refused to get better and instead kept trying to spread through his body.

His only solace was that the vibrant energy generated from the Dao of Trees somewhat alleviated his problems. It wasn't to the point that he actually healed, but it managed to stop the spread of miasma and contained it in his wound. However, that meant he was forced to use the Dao almost constantly, and that he still needed to walk around with an open wound.

He currently sat in one of the secluded courtyards in his mansion, slowly going through the events. He was in no mood to look over the restoration of the wall or calm down irate citizens. After he killed the last leader yesterday, there was not much of a battle. He realized after a while that the arrays were once again active, and he activated the town protection array without hesitation.

It ensured the safety of the town, and also allowed the tired out Valkyries to gain some Cosmic Energy by killing zombies with bow and arrows from the safety within the shield. It might also have been him erecting the defensive array that

ensured that a final attack never arrived from the proper forces.

Still, before it got to that point the losses weren't insignificant. They'd lost Janos, 7 demon warriors, and 9 Valkyries. A few Zhix had died as well, but Zac didn't worry as much about them since they weren't formally his people yet. Most of the losses occurred from the Rockman leader's area attack, though some of the Valkyries died from making mistakes.

Alyn had said the losses were acceptable, as most untested squads had large losses in their first battle. Their deaths would be the foundations for the survivors to keep each other safe. Still, Zac felt bad about so many of them already having died since he took them under his wing just a little while ago. He had already told them as much when they signed on, but talking about it and seeing it actually happen were two different things.

Instead of helping with the restoration work Zac instead focused on his wound. He kept trying to utilize his Dao in various ways in order to heal himself. He was also waiting on news from Calrin, but he didn't hold much hope. Other than that he was simply waiting for the timer for the quest to reach zero. He still hadn't received his rewards yet, and he assumed he would get them as soon as the timer ended.

His wound could be considered to be afflicted with poison, though it was a combination of Dao and transformed miasma. He would need a specialized type of potion to heal his particular wound, very much the same way a specific poison required a specific antidote. There were also higher grade panaceas that would heal most types of wounds like this, but those were extremely expensive and hard to get.

Another alternative was to find a proper healer who specialized in purifying Misma. There was no such person on the island at the moment, but perhaps people like that could be found on the border towns close to the undead incursion. But there was still a few days before the appointed time where Mr. Bernard would open the teleporter, so that option was still not available. And it wasn't like he'd pin his hopes here being some healers waiting where he was going.

That left the Dao of Trees. He kept circulating the warm energy the Tree Fractal in his chest generated while thinking back to the vision he had. He was actually having decent gains, but his meditations were interrupted as he sensed the shadows congeal in the building, which caused Zac to furrow his eyebrows.

“So, do you want to talk about it?” the familiar voice said.

“Talk about what?” Zac asked without opening his eyes.

“The fact that you immediately assumed that I ordered Janos to attack you,” Ogras answered.

“I didn’t know what was going on, so I wouldn’t take any chances. It was you who taught me to be careful with friends and foe alike,” Zac said with an even voice. “I still don’t know what you’re planning in that scheming head of yours.”

“Don’t worry, I am quite happy with our current arrangement. I can move freely in the shadows while you stand in the light, drawing all the attention away from me,” Ogras said with a light voice. “And I even lost an arm for this town, you should know where my allegiances are by now.”

“I know, and thank you,” Zac answered as he opened his eyes and stared down at his own hands.

None of the two said anything for a while as the silence stretched on in the small courtyard, and Zac once again slowly closed his eyes.

“We found him, you know. Janos. Well, the real Janos,” Ogras said after a while.

That actually made Zac open his eyes and look over at the demon. Ogras looked a lot better compared to before, but his left sleeve was still conspicuously empty. There was also a burn on his throat that still hadn’t fully healed.

“Really, he’s alive? That wasn’t a corpse puppet earlier? How could a Zealot replace him?” Zac asked with a frown.

“He was followed by a group of priests after he fled back toward the camp. They caught up with Janos and tried to burn him to death with their nasty fire. Janos used his last cosmic

energy to create an illusion where he was burned alive while he used an escape skill where he burrowed underground,” Ogras said.

“However, he was already over-drafted when he used his ultimate illusion to cover the whole church-camp for a few breaths. He passed out as soon as he went underground,” the demon continued with a snort.

“So they thought he was dead, and one of them took his shape, confident Janos wouldn’t return himself,” Zac finished, and the demon nodded in response.

He was relieved to hear that there really wasn’t actually a second betrayer among the generals. Mr. Trang had already told him yesterday that there might be something weird going on, but he wasn’t able to tell for sure.

“What about the monoliths?” Zac asked. “Have they been destroyed?”

“Destroyed? No, I had Calrin sell them for two million Nexus Coins each. They are not bad weapons if you want to ruin someone’s domain. Too bad we’re not able to properly store them,” Ogras said.

“Great,” Zac said, always happy to earn some extra money. “And the Zombies?”

“Most are dead. Some wandered off somewhere, but the barghest should take care of them,” Ogras said. “The only remaining trouble is that we don’t know if there are any more Zealots hiding in the town. I had no idea those lunatics were so crafty. I always imagined them being meatheads who just went around burning everything to the ground, leaving nothing behind.

“The fact that they were able to both infiltrate our town to capture Adran and pose as Janos proves that they are far more crafty than that. It’s a real headache, as we don’t really know whether there are any more of them remaining on the island. I have conducted interrogations with the main personnel though, and the Adran you saved is the real one.

“How do you know that? Do we have a method to expose the spies? That monk didn’t even revert back to his real form when he died,” Zac asked.

“We don’t have any method yet, but I asked the Sky Gnome to get a quote from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes on a dossier regarding this matter. It will probably be pretty damn expensive, but we might not have a choice,” Ogras answered with a grimace. “For now I asked things only the real ones should know.”

“What was the first thing you said to me?” Zac suddenly asked.

“... I said ‘You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive’,” Ogras answered.

“Who’s the shipyard’s foreman?” Zac followed up without missing a beat.

“Karunthel, and he’s a spider golem from what you told me. And no, I haven’t met him myself,” Ogras answered with a roll of his eyes.

Zac only nodded in satisfaction.

“What do you mean not have a choice?” Zac asked.

“Our town is pretty small so far, so I’m quite sure we can individually interrogate every single one in hopes of catching any more people in hiding,” Ogras said. “But this capability poses another problem. Who knows what they have done over the past months in the world? Were the ones we met in New Washington even humans?”

A cold feeling gripped Zac’s heart. As he realized the wider implications of what Ogras said. However, he soon calmed down a bit.

“They should have been. The officials used teleporters to get there, they can’t be invaders,” Zac hesitantly said.

“Perhaps, or perhaps the transformation enables them to use teleporters, who knows? Besides, not everyone teleported. What about that Thomas guy, the big boss? What about the clan members of the Marshall clan who stayed behind

wherever they live, instead of going to an exciting auction? They can be everywhere,” Ogras retorted.

When Ogras talked about it, it truly sounded like a pain in the ass. Even worse, there might be Zealots hidden in the human ranks who subtly pushed the government toward a path of no return so that The Church of Everlasting Dao later could gobble them up without any organized response.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“We wait for the quote from the blue bastard. We need to know more, both for Port Atwood and how we relate to the rest of the world. If the infiltration skills the Zealots showed on our island are common, then we can’t trust anyone,” Ogras said with a sigh, but soon perked up. “Besides, it’s time to drag some dividends out of Calrin.”

Zac could only agree and got to his feet with a grunt. The pain erupted in his side, but he could only bear with it, though a sheen of perspiration covered his forehead. At least he had learned to use the Dao of Trees while walking, so he was able to keep the wound in check as he traveled.

Ogras was quite correct about the dividends. He had owned a stake in the consortia for a while now, but the gnome hadn’t coughed up a single Nexus Coin so far. The only thing he’d gotten transferred was 6 million right before the wave hit. That wasn’t profit though, but part of the money the gnome owed him.

As the two slowly walked through the town a lot of people threw surreptitious glances at them.

“Why are people staring?” Zac asked in a low voice to Ogras who walked by his side.

“Things are a bit tense. You weren’t the only one who thought a coup was taking place during the wave. It’s a bit tense between the races at the moment,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Hopefully seeing us together will alleviate the rumors.”

The visit at Calrin’s took over an hour, but at least they left satisfied. Zac’s private reserves had swelled with an astounding 48 million Nexus Coins, and that was after paying

15 million for an information missive. It could have been way more, but Zac chose to keep all Aetherbloom in order to train himself and his forces.

The bundles of the magical stalks that Calrin and Ogras procured in New Washington were worth roughly 30 million nexus coins. However, Zac didn't have much to spend his coins on at the moment and felt it was better to use the herbs to create body refining paste for his people.

The missive from the Pagoda of Myriad Eyes was a personalized query, where Calrin had asked two specific questions. One was how common it was for the priests of The Church of Everlasting Dao to have the shape-shifting capabilities. The other asked for an identifying method.

The first answer cost 5 million nexus coins, and the second 10 million. Zac wondered just how much money the information network made, if two simple answers cost that much. The Church was a huge organization, and the information they asked for shouldn't be some big secret in the multi-verse, yet they made money so easily.

It turned out that while it wasn't a main heritage of the church, there were quite a few infiltrators in their ranks. One could expect there to be well over a thousand of them in a standard incursion. They were mainly used when the natives were strong and organized, and some planning was required to purify the planet.

The second answer was quite simple. It told them to feed everyone a certain root. It was harmless to most people, but to the lizardmen it was like cyanide, even if they were E-ranked powerhouses. Zac didn't possess any of the root at the moment, but it was quite common so Calrin was already working on procuring a bunch of it.

The only downside was that Zac didn't know whether there were only lizardmen in the ranks of the church. There had only been that species on the island apparently, though he hadn't really seen the Zealots. They never made an actual attack on the town after Ogras' successful attack killed a good portion of

them, including their high priest, and they instead returned in defeat through the incursion.

Actually, the reason Ogras had been absent after resting up for a bit was that he once again set out to the incursions as soon as he could. Instead of killing a throng of Zombies for little Contribution he opted to go for the stronger warriors that each gave a great amount of points.

The warriors of the church and the rockmen were just like the demon soldiers, giving huge amounts of energy and coins since they were actually level 75. That bonus apparently transferred over to the Contribution points as well.

The only reason Ogras didn't pass him in total contribution was that the third wave actually only took around 4 hours in total. It took a few hours more apart from that to clear out the unrelenting Zombies, but when the third leader was dead the quest was considered finished.

The third wave was a test of raw power in a sense. The system sent over three powerhouses with their personal armies, while it blocked any defensive or offensive arrays. There was no way to turn it into a defensive siege since a wall couldn't block the attackers, and if Zac ran he would fail the mission.

The only real way to finish it was to possess superior raw power. And the result was clear. Two of the leaders were killed, and the third one was forced to flee while barely alive.

The wound in Zac's side however reminded him that the victory wasn't as clear as it might have seemed.

Chapter 160: Long Time No See

Since Zac was already up and about he decided to head over to the contribution shop. There was still 7 hours before it closed, but he thought he might as well spend the points he'd accumulated. He had still not received any rewards from the quest and guessed they would appear when the timer went to Zero.

Ogras had left earlier with some glee, likely happy about his windfall from the shop. The demon had received quite a haul as well, especially as he bought most of the materials in the bazaar with his own money, giving him a large chunk of profit.

Soon he arrived at the Contribution crystal, and the area was filled with people. There were even a few Zhix warriors there, though they kept their distance from others. There were also a few demon soldiers keeping an eye on them.

The Zhix generally respected the strong, but they also hated Cosmic Energy, which made for a confusing situation for the insectoid warriors. They had been quite impressed with the demon's performance against the zombie wave, but at the same time disgusted by the amount of corruption in them.

At least they weren't attacking anyone, which was a step in the right direction in Zac's book. He still held some hope that the Kundevi hive would be the bridge to ally himself with the Zhix population, which had become even more important now as his relations with the new world government had soured a bit.

As he approached the crystal the contribution shop automatically opened in front of him.

[Contribution points: 59 348 334]

It wasn't too bad, he'd generated around 18 million points during the third wave. It was less than half the amount he gained during the other two waves, but on the other hand, the wave only lasted for a few hours. He expected a large part came from the Rockman leader, but Zac wasn't sure whether he gained something from the Corpse Lord as well.

He didn't gain any cosmic energy from defeating him, as he didn't actually manage to kill the undead leader, but he might have been rewarded contribution points since forcing the Corpse Lord to flee might have been the largest contribution in defeating the wave.

There was no point in trying to figure out the System's contribution formula, and Zac instead focused on the available items in the store. He still wasn't quite sure what to buy. One thing he'd realized as he fought these powerhouses was that they seemed to have more skills than him.

He'd asked Ogras about it before, and after some prodding, he learned that Ogras got new skills at 60 and 75. In fact, Ogras got more than one skill when reaching the max level of F-Grade. If the undead leader was actually an E-ranked being who was limited to F-Grade when arriving on earth it would explain an even greater amount of skills.

Zac still had some trouble deciding whether to buy some skills to broaden his repertoire, or to get something else. He was afraid that it was a waste to get skills right now when he might get a more suitable one from his class in just a few levels. The short but intense battle had actually given him two levels putting him at level 56 now.

There were no Dao-related items in the store, so he had to focus on something else. He already knew there was no pill or item that could fix his wound either, as that was the first thing he looked up. Finally, his eyes landed on an item called "Fruit of Vitality". It was a stat-boosting treasure that gave a permanent small boost to an attribute.

Stat-boosting treasures were always in high demand, and quite expensive. The most expensive ones by far were those that

gave boosts to all stats or luck, and unfortunately, neither one of those types were in the store.

The Fruit of Vitality was a high-quality F-Grade treasure, and according to description could boost his vitality by 3-5 points. It might not seem like a huge amount, but with his title boosts it would be even more. The problem was that it was quite expensive, costing 20 million Contribution points.

Persistent boosts to power were always expensive though, and after some hesitation he bought it. If it was before he might have bought something else, but with the wound in his side he felt any boost to vitality to be necessary.

Next, he bought a Cultivation Manual for 10 million Nexus coins. It wasn't the best in the store, but also not the worst. It was without any attribute and meant for the cultivators at the academy. In an ideal world he would buy a few more so that people could find more suitable ones, but he couldn't spend all his resources on it.

Finally, he actually bought a quest from the store. It was simply called **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and it was one of the possible upgrade routes for his skill **[Eye of Discernment]**. Zac was quite tired of the extremely limited information he got from the skill. It couldn't be used on any treasures or tools, and it only showed a name and level of people he used the skill on.

[Inquisitive Eye] didn't provide much for the second problem, but it did give some help with identifying treasures.

Apparently, it was possible to trigger a quest to upgrade **[Eye of Discernment]** without having to buy it, but Zac hadn't seen anything of the sort since he got the skill all that time ago.

Paying 7.5 million Contribution Points to start the upgrade process felt like a worthwhile investment. That left Zac with roughly 21 million points. As there wasn't anything else he really needed anymore he chose to spring for another attribute treasure, this one boosting his endurance.

For each purchase a small box appeared in front of him, drawing a few curious glances. Zac did the same as last time and simply put them all into his pouch and left. Next he went over to the Creator shipyard.

“Greetings, Lord Zac,” Rahm said as soon Zac stepped into the lobby.

Zac felt almost as though as the dignified Creator liaison was a video game NPC, just waiting in this building for him to come by. He hadn’t really seen the creators do much of anything apart from greeting him when he arrived.

“Good day, Rahm,” Zac said with a nod. “I need to make a few purchases.”

“I take it the monster waves are dealt with?” Rahm said as he handed over a crystal containing all available designs.

“Yes, we finished the third wave yesterday, and the quest ends in a few hours,” Zac said with a nod.

“Then congratulations are in order,” Rahm said, still with the same expressionless face.

“Haha there you are, brat,” a booming voice sounded from the back of the building, as Karunthel moved to the lobby. “I watched your fight with the zombie guy, not bad. You’ve got grit. You should get some bombs though, you just left all those zombies milling about after you left.”

“You watched the fight?” Zac asked surprised, as neither he nor the Corpse Lord seemed to have noticed any bystander.

“I hit a wall in my research so I went out to take a look at your battles. I really like how you blew up the beacon. But you should know you can turn those things into fun weapons that shoot beams of extremely concentrated miasma. It’s a waste to just blow them up,” the Creator hummed, as always obsessed with creating weaponry.

“I had a few thunder punishment arrays, but the System blocked me from using them just when the enemies arrived,”

“Ah yes, the System is a bit boring in that way. A powerful Technomancer once visited our planet. He had some amazing toys, like a laser that could incinerate this whole planet with a shot. Yet he had to fight with a bow and arrow to gain levels,” the spider-golem said with a laugh. “So what brings you here, more scouting vessels?”

“No, I am looking for something bigger. It needs to be able to transport more people, and also have some fighting capabilities,” Zac said.

The small vessels were starting to become insufficient for his growing town. He needed something sturdier to explore a larger area around his island, and if needed carry far larger groups of people. If they found people on the brink of death on some faraway island they couldn't keep shuttling them back and forth, as that could lock up a vessel for a month.

“I would suggest a frigate or Carrack-classed vessel. The Carrack is slightly larger, with heavier weaponry. It takes a crew of 10 to fully man, 8 if you have someone adept in arrays or battle-systems,” Rahm calmly explained.

“The frigate is a bit smaller, with less durable hull and less weaponry. However, it's far faster compared to the Carrack. The Carrack holds roughly the same speed as the small scout vessels, whereas the frigate can move over twice that speed,” the Creator continued.

“What do they cost?” Zac asked, knowing that Creator vessels didn't come cheap.

“The carrack cost 32 million nexus coins, whereas the frigate cost 26 million,” Rahm answered without giving the foreman time to make up a quote. “Another million if you want them to have spatial arrays.”

“Spatial arrays?” Zac asked confused.

“Making it possible to shrink them, so they fit in any cosmos sack. I don't think natives have access to large enough Cosmos Sacks?” Karunthel said with a teasing grin.

“I'll take a carrack with the spatial arrays,” Zac said with a grimace.

“Always a pleasure to see you, brat,” Karunthel said with a wide smile. “I like you, so I'll make the weaponry myself. It will give them a little extra punch. Who knows, we'll maybe blow up some islands together after all?”

“I'm heading out for a while soon, so we'll have to postpone bombing the archipelago,” Zac with a small smile.

“That’s good, you youngsters should venture out and create some ruckus. Otherwise, you’ll become real bores,” the foreman said with a sagely nod. “Come back in 3 days to get the ship, or send the demonling if you’ve left by then.”

Zac said his goodbyes and ventured back to his camp. All this walking around was starting to aggravate his wound, and Zac was finding it harder and harder to keep it under control with the Dao of Trees. He needed to rest up a bit. It felt a bit pathetic, he had the attributes to win in a fight against a t-rex, but he felt ready to keel over after doing some errands.

Zac sat down in his courtyard again, keeping the rotation of his Dao of Trees going to calm down the pulsating wound. He felt he was onto something earlier before Ogras interrupted him, and after some hesitation he took out one of the boxes. It was the one containing the fruit of vitality.

He didn’t purchase it simply to get a small boost in stats, he also had another purpose. His frantic usage of his Dao against the torrents of miasma had opened a door in his mind. It was the unrelenting characteristic of life in the face of death, the struggling light that refused to wink out of existence.

He took out the Fruit of Vitality from the box, carefully sensing the aroma and aura it gave out. It smelled delicious and gave off a fresh and fragrant smell. It was nowhere the level of the Fruit of Ascension, but still really appetizing. Without waiting any further he took a large bite and in seconds he had swallowed the whole fruit.

A warm stream spread through his body, infusing each of his cells with vibrant energy. Even the miasma in his body retreated into a ball around his wound, seemingly terrified of the energy. The warmth kept pulsing in wave after wave, and all the while Zac sat and pondered on the Dao.

The hours passed as Zac sat mesmerized by the feeling, savoring being filled with pure vitality and life. It wasn’t the same as the epiphany he had back when he improved his Dao of Heaviness, but it was more like he was able to focus on something that was blurry before.

He understood what Ilvere had meant before, that breakthroughs sometimes come after the actual fight. Zac was finally understanding what he sensed, but was too occupied to completely grasp, during the fight with the Corpse Lord. For some reason, his mind imagined a windswept tundra where storms and harsh weather were a constant nuisance.

Yet a small seed managed to take root, growing and surviving in that horrid climate, through rain and snow, unrelentingly reaching upward. It was the same as he'd felt when he circulated his Dao of Trees in the storm of miasma.

Something changed in him, and the fractal looking like the Tree of Life blazed into verdant colors. He wanted to keep enjoying the moment of clarity, but Zac suddenly felt a presence in the courtyard. Reminiscence mixed with some annoyance in Zac's mind as he spoke up without opening his eyes.

“Long time no see, Abby.”

Chapter 161: Rewards

The stargazer floated a few meters away from Zac, warily looking at him. She seemed to barely be able to reconcile the unkempt hobo from a few months before with the man in front of her.

“It’s only been a few months, but you’ve changed quite a bit,” she said, her beautiful eye shimmering with stardust.

Zac turned over and looked straight into the huge eye that looked like a cosmic cloud surrounding a black hole.

“Yes, well, *someone* told me that the system would kill me unless I defeated the demon incursion. Five months of constant battle will change you,” Zac said, not being able to really hide his irritation.

“Ah well, about that...” Abby said, her eye uncomfortably looking away.

Zac only snorted and opened up his menu. Abby could stew in uncomfortable silence a bit.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

56

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood – Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - Middle, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Strength

311

Dexterity

158

Endurance

212

Vitality

165

Intelligence

83

Wisdom

78

Luck

93

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

30 694 153

He'd had quite a boost in attributes in the past day. The largest improvement was in vitality, which had increased by over 50 points. While it wasn't enough to start healing up the wound in his side, it still was a great help. The higher Vitality he had, the less mental energy he would have to expend on the Dao of Trees to keep the miasma in check.

The largest source of his improved attributes clearly came from his new Title.

**[Progenitor Hegemon: First to become a Lord in world.
Reward: All stats +10.]**

Unfortunately, it didn't give out any new percentage bonus, but it gave the largest flat bonus of any title he possessed so far. Judging from how highly the System regarded lordship, he guessed that becoming the world leader would give quite a boost. Besides, there was the possibility that he only got the Quest update because he was about to become the first lord, and that update vastly increased his rewards.

Next, he opened up his Dao Menu, and the changed line clearly showed where most of the added vitality came from.

**Heaviness (Middle): Strength +15, Endurance +10,
Wisdom +5**

Sharpness (Early): Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5

Trees (Middle): Endurance +5, Vitality +25

Just as he suspected his Dao of Trees had evolved, this particular improvement giving only Vitality. His insight into the Dao was in regards to the unrelenting life in a tree, and he felt it was a great complement to his other attributes. His Vitality had started to lag behind his other stats, as he'd been forced to focus on Dexterity lately to complement his absurd Strength.

Zac actually also put his 6 free points from last his two levels into vitality as well in order to combat the wound, since he didn't know he would have a sudden breakthrough in his Dao.

Finally, he opened up his Quest Screen to take a look.

Active Quests

First step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-Grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)

Dynamic Quests

Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (3/3) [Complete]

Class Quests

Incursion Master was still there even though the timers were gone, so Zac guessed he once again would have to go to the Nexus Node in order to cash out his new building. The other two rewards he already had received.

He was more interested in the other quest though. It was clearly related to the Road to Hegemony. He also knew about both of the rewards. A Dao Treasure was something he had been trying to get since the start, as he felt that improving the Dao to a high enough tier would be the largest trouble for him when trying to upgrade to an Epic-graded class.

As for the Tower of Eternity, he had heard of it as well. Alyn mentioned it long ago, though he would have to look it up at a later point. He wasn't able to do it right now, but he would probably try it after having found his sister. Zac got to his feet with a grunt and turned toward the Stargazer floating close-by.

"You know, violence against System-employees is strictly illegal," Abby said with a nervous shake in her voice.

"Come with me," Zac only said as he walked out of the courtyard.

"I see your home looks much better," Abby said, seemingly desperate to change the subject.

“So why are you back here?” Zac asked, even though he knew the answer. “Another tutorial?”

“No, this time I am here for good. You’ve become a proper lord, and I’ve been sent to manage your estate. Powerhouses seldom have the time nor the interest for the management of their domains, as they are busy exploring mystic realms or cultivating. They therefore need a functioning support system to take care of the minutia of running anything from a City to an Empire,” Abby quickly explained as she hovered next to Zac who was walking through the mansion.

“So you want to run my town? Why should I let you? Someone already told me that you spewed those lies earlier to get yourself a promotion. I am not sure that I want to hand over Port Atwood to someone like that,” Zac said as he stepped into the hall that contained the Nexus Node.

“Who told you something like that?” Abby angrily said. “I might have bent the truth a bit, but it was for your sake. I even got punished for helping as much as I did, I almost lost my job!”

“So this is the lying Stargazer that caused so much trouble?” a clearly annoyed voice echoed through the hall as the shadows congealed into Ogras.

“A demon? Why are you still here? Lord Zac should have defeated you,” Abby said with a frown.

“Zac and I came to an agreement, we’re staying behind,” Ogras said. “Someone has to make sure a power-hungry star-humper doesn’t go out of line.”

“Hey! It was ONE Stargazer who tried to impregnate a star. Out of an endless number of our kind,” Abby angrily screamed at the demon.

“Wait, what?” Zac said, who largely had been ignoring the two bickering. “One of your kind tried to have sex with a *star*?”

“One of the greatest powerhouses of the Stargazers fell in love with a god damn star. Made it his wife, there was a ceremony and everything. The whole multi-verse has been laughing about it for millennia,” Ogras said, barely containing his

laughs, and Zac couldn't stop his mouth from tugging upward as he threw a glance at the irate Stargazer.

"It's not that simple. And for your information, the two are still happily married 800 thousand years later," she defensively said.

Unfortunately her explanation didn't have the desired effect as Ogras started to laugh loudly, and Zac couldn't stop a snort as he turned back and touched the crystal.

[Calculating. Grade Awarded: B. Contribution rank: 1. Grade Awarded increased to A]

Zac frowned as he saw the prompt showing up in front of him.

"Did you get some treasure from being second place on the contribution ladder?" he asked, causing a pause in the squabbling behind him.

"No, no one got anything. Pisses me off, but then again we got quite the haul from the shop itself," Ogras said with a grimace as he looked down to the stump on his arm. "Might not have gone as hard at it if I knew there was no bonus at the end. Why, what did you get?"

"Nothing either, that's why I asked," Zac answered, feeling a bit bad about the situation.

He was quite excited about the A-ranking on the quest, though he would honestly have preferred something that would provide him with a direct power-up. A Dao-Treasure or some fruit that improved all his attributes, for example.

A high graded structure would likely be extremely beneficial in the long run, but right now he was facing enemies from all directions. There were the Incursions, the Undead, the Dominators, and even Humans. He needed short term boosts at the moment.

"Oh WOW!" Abby suddenly exclaimed as she floated over to Zac. "Just what have you done to get these rewards?"

Zac looked over at the Stargazer confused, not understanding what Abby talked about. He had only just touched the crystal, but he hadn't seen the structure yet.

“What are you talking about?” Zac asked.

“Well I’m your assistant, so I have access to the administrative functions of your town. With the help of my class I can see even more than you,” she said looking proud.

“Also known as spying,” Ogras sneered from the side, drawing an angry glare from the Stargazer.

“It’s not spying, you know we Stargazers do not play politics, we work for the System itself, or the Lords we get assigned to.”

“Yet the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, that happens to be run by Stargazers, seems to know everything. How about that?”

“That’s because Lords voluntarily sell information, not because we’re spying,” she retorted with an angry huff.

“Lords sell their own information? Why would they do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

It was a big problem if the Stargazer started sending back information to an information network, especially if she had an insight into his limited structures. A frown started to emerge on Zac’s face as he considered his options. He wouldn’t allow the fact that he had a Creator Shipyard be sent to the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, even if he had to take drastic measures.

Abby saw the look on Zac’s face and slowly floated away.

“I swear we don’t, and we can’t, divulge anything of our administrative districts. Most lords sell the public information of their town since the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes pays well. But those packages don’t include any sensitive information, just the standard things that anyone visiting could find out in a few minutes. Lords consider it free money,” Abby said defensively.

“She’s probably telling the truth. This time. Almost all Lords in the multi-verse have assistants like this thing, they wouldn’t keep them around if there were some loopholes,” Ogras shrugged.

“Thing? We’re stargazers, born of the Cosmos,” Abby huffed, a cloud looking like a nebula forming in the hall.

“Fine, fine,” Zac sighed. “What about the reward? How can you know what it is? It hasn’t even been built yet.”

“I put a hold on the construction so that you can decide where you want it.”

“So, what is it?” Zac asked curiously, and even the demon shut his mouth and looked over in anticipation.

“Shouldn’t we do this without... Any security risks?” Abby asked, making no effort to hide what she was referring to as she looked straight at Ogras.

The demon only snorted and ignored her comment.

“Ogras is the second in command of the town, and he already knows about the Creator Shipyard. We’re already stuck together for good or bad. Now, what is it?”

“It’s an Ancient Dao Repository. Probably someone sold it to the system after finding it in some mystic realm,” Abby said, no longer able to contain her excitement.

“A what?” Zac asked confused, but the demon looked clearly agitated.

“You and your System-blasted luck. I’m surprised it doesn’t rain Nexus Crystals where you walk,” Ogras spat out, looking disgusted.

“A Dao Repository is usually one of the most important areas to any force. It contains the accumulation of skills and techniques they’ve gathered over the eons. A proper repository has an autonomous defense system,” Abby explained. “How they work are extremely varied, it depends on what goal the force who built it had. I don’t have that information available.”

“So it’s a building that contains skills that I can get for free?” Zac asked, getting excited.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Ogras said. “Even the permanent skill crystals can’t be just used willy-nilly. There are limitations such as a maximum amount of usages per month or year. The more complicated the skill, the less the crystal can be used.”

“So, you have to pay to use the crystals?” Zac asked.

“Usually you have to prove yourself somehow. Imagine if some rich wastrel used the crystal for a top tier skill in a force, and suddenly none of the real warriors could learn the skill for a thousand years. Things like that could ruin a force. So there are often checks put in place. Who knows, maybe not even you will be able to gain access to the best skills even though you own the building,” Ogras said, looking a bit amused.

“It doesn’t sound like Dao Repositories are kept a secret,” Zac said as he took out a blueprint for the future Port Atwood.

“Place the structure within the inner wall, but closer to the wall than my compound. Also, I need an array to protect the whole inner area, from the Repository to the Shipyard. I don’t want prying eyes, and I don’t want people sneaking in.”

Since apparently Abby was already hotwired into his Town System Zac thought he might as well let her work a bit. It wasn’t like he was too angry with her in any case. Her lies back then might have been partly to give herself a shot at a cushy job, but it was also thanks to those lies he was even alive today. Otherwise, he would have focused on getting off this demon-infested island, trying to get home. He would have died out on the sea.

Abby looked quite excited that Zac seemed to have accepted her, and quickly nodded her huge eye. Only seconds later a large rumbling could be heard, reminiscent of when the shipyard was created. The three looked at each other and without another word headed toward the source of the sounds, all looking very curious.

Chapter 162: The Great Sage Brazla

“What’s a Global City?” Zac suddenly asked, having forgotten about the matter from the excitement of the various upgrades.

“At this stage of a world it is not too different from a normal City. Only global cities can have off-world teleporters, but you can’t build this while the planet still is in its emerging stages,” Abby answered without missing a beat “But the System works with a very strict hierarchy. A Global City is a step above a normal City. The next, and final, step for a D-graded world is a World Capital.

“It means if you manage to upgrade Port Atwood again the System will essentially consider you the owner of this planet. Right now you can kind of be seen as a king of a country. How did you even manage to get an upgrade this early?” Abby curiously asked.

“I guess the system must like me,” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “It changed the rewards when it decided to throw three incursions at me.”

Ogras only snorted but didn’t deign to comment.

“Well, it means you are one of the main contenders for becoming a Monarch. A Lord first has to upgrade their City to a Global city before trying to turn it into a capital. Generally, there can be no more than ten World Cities on a planet,” Abby said.

“All that doesn’t matter in the face of power though,” Ogras added in. “If you’re strong enough you can just walk up to the Capital and kill the leader, and you’re the new owner of the planet.”

At the moment it didn't seem very useful to have a Global City, as it was once again related to long-term benefits. However, most things related to building a kingdom was related to long-term planning and benefits.

"I've seen administrative centers in the town shop who handles taxes and contribution systems. Can you do that instead?" Zac asked with a glance over at the hovering eye.

"Well... No," Abby said, looking a bit embarrassed.

Zac only shook his head and kept walking. Soon they found themselves where Zac placed the Dao Repository. There were already a few people standing around the construction, as the placement wasn't too far-off from the temporary town.

Zac understood why the onlooking demons and humans looked surprised, as they gazed at the extremely conspicuous building. The best adjective Zac could find to describe his new repository was... Gaudy.

It wasn't overly large, with a circular area perhaps fifty meters across. However, within those fifty meters, tens of spires and towers were crammed, reaching for the sky in various directions.

Besides the spires there were golden pillars and crystals of various sizes, seemingly fighting tooth and nail for the limited space. Multicolored lights were shining out of the various structures, and it looked like most of the radiant rays were decorative rather than functional.

"Uh... Do the repositories usually look like this?" Zac could only ask his two companions.

"Well, maybe if the patriarch of the force is overly wealthy hand has no taste. I've never seen such a shitty design," Ogras muttered, but his eyes suddenly widened as the lights from one of the towers congealed into an actual lightning bolt that flew straight toward him.

The demon barely had time to teleport out of the way before the bolt slammed into the ground where he stood earlier, and Zac's brows rose when he sensed the power contained in the strike. He looked over at the structure, hesitant over what to

do. It seemed there was someone inside, someone who could actually hear them.

“I’ll go inside and take a look,” Zac said with a shrug, passing by the onlookers who hurriedly backed away.

He was the owner of the structure, so it shouldn’t attack him. At least Zac hoped so. While the Repository consisted of dozens of buildings mashed together there was only one entrance as far as Zac could see, an ostentatious gate radiating divine light.

It actually reminded Zac a bit of his first Dao-vision. The celestial army that fought the axe-man summoned a mysterious gate radiating the power of the heavens. The design of the entrance to his new building looked a bit similar, but it felt like a stage production or a cheap mimicry of the real thing he had seen.

While the lights shimmered it didn’t contain any sense of power or awe, which was why not only the gate, but the whole structure, gave off the feeling of something not being quite right. It all felt like empty bluster, and Zac was starting to wonder whether there actually would be anything valuable inside.

The gates opened themselves as he got close and something sounding like harp music started playing as he stepped through them. Zac couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes, but he made sure not to mutter anything derogatory. While the whole thing felt pretty stupid it couldn’t be denied that the lightning bolt packed some real punch.

The ostentatious style of the structure was very much the same inside as on the exteriors. However, Zac noticed there was some spatial manipulation at play. It was the same as with the Ayr Hive, as the insides were far larger compared to the outside.

Zac found himself in a gigantic hall, lined with eight enormous statues of various beings. He saw one human holding a scepter, and the other statues depicted other types of humanoids. The floor was made of gold and platinum, and still

felt quite over-the-top, but at least the atmosphere was more solemn inside compared to the outside.

“Welcome, human, to the Hall of Endless Skills,” a booming voice echoed through the large hall, and Zac looked around for the source of the voice.

The air shimmered in front of him, and a translucent humanoid decked in an obscene amount of jewelry appeared. He looked mostly human, apart from the fact that he was a bit thinner, and there were golden scales inlaid in his face.

“Uh, hello, I am Zachary Atwood, leader of Port Atwood,” Zac said hesitantly. “I’m told this is a Dao Repository, are you its castellan?”

“The Towers of Myriad Dao is a Spiritual Treasure, and I am its Spirit. You can call me Great Sage Brazla. I manage and oversee every function of the repository.”

“Nice to meet you, great sage,” Zac said, deciding to play along for now. “Can you tell me what you contain?”

“The Hall of Endless Skills has four levels. The bottom floor contains 81 F-Graded skills, the second 14 E-Graded skills, the third floor 3 D-Graded skills,” the man said while puffing out his chest.

Endless Skills my ass, Zac thought but had to admit that there even being E and D-graded skills was quite impressive.

“Do you mind if I peruse the skills for a bit?” Zac asked.

A large screen appeared in front of Zac, listing all of the skills. Zac was pleasantly surprised when he read the descriptions. Not one of the 81 F-Graded skills were something that he had seen before, and all of them seemed pretty strong.

“How do I control who gets to use the skills?” Zac asked.

“The first floor is free to use. After that you need to defeat the floor challenge to gain access to the skills. If you unlock a floor, you can use whatever means you want, The Great Brazla won’t interfere. But any aptitude tests will be conducted by me.”

“Since the Great Sage Brazla is a benevolent spirit he will give you the standardized test for the E-Graded floor. You only need to defeat a few D-Graded Golems to open it up. But if you don’t improve the pitiful surroundings of his body by the time you want to undergo the challenge he might just do something... Unexpected with the tests,” Brazla said, his hands moving about erratically.

“Uh.. what? Shouldn’t your creator have set certain rules when he created you?” Zac asked, a bit uncomfortable that his new neighbor seemed to have access to D graded golems, and perhaps even more dangerous things.

“Well yes, but that was millions and millions of years ago. The Great Brazla has grown beyond the scope of his creator’s imagination,” the projection said with his nose in the air.

A bad feeling was starting to overcome Zac, as he heard the Tool Spirit had gone from speaking in first to third person in just a few sentences. Abby said that someone likely found this thing in a mystical realm. Had the spirit gone crazy from eons of being alone?

“I’ll arrange for your surroundings to be improved. But it might take some time to find materials that can match with your... splendor,” Zac said. “Is there something else apart from the skills? Like cultivation manuals?”

“We have two side halls, the hall of Celestial Artisan, and the Hall of Blade Emperor. Both were friends of my creator, and they each set up a branching heritage in the great Brazla’s body,” Brazla said.

“Branching Heritage?” Zac said confused.

“One F Graded class leading to multiple E-Ranked, leading to a few D-ranked classes. Various paths for various needs. Ways to get into the heritage path from various common classes,” the Tool Spirit said with some disinterest.

Zac was quite excited, as it sounded like he got a combat and a non-combat heritage at once. Two heritages were enough to base a sturdy force on, just like Clan Azh’Rezak. Furthermore, his heritages were branching to boot, giving more options.

The only problem was who would get access, and who wouldn't. But that was a problem for later, there was more to explore in here.

"You said there are four floors in the main hall, but you only mentioned the first three. What's on the fourth floor?" Zac continued, changing the subject.

"The fourth floor holds the Eight Grand Inheritances. Eight powerhouses left their skills, treasures, and their insights here, waiting for the right successor. The Celestial Artisan and the Blade Emperor are two of them. You can see the others around you," the spirit said as it waved at the huge statues.

"Each inheritance can only be taken by one at a time, and they contain their own trials. If the inheritor fails a trial, he is barred forever from continuing, and the trial will be locked until his death," Brazla explained.

Zac's heartbeat finally started to speed up. The skills were good, and the heritages were even better. But this felt like the crown jewel of the Repository. Full inheritances with not only skills, but Dao insights and treasures as well? It sounded extremely valuable.

Brazla seemed to notice Zac's change in demeanor and it bent itself back so much that its nose was literally pointing straight up in the air.

"You like that human? Let me tell you. Two of the inheritances are even C-Ranked, left by lofty C-ranked Hegemons. Their means and insights are beyond your scope of understanding. But not beyond the great mind of The Great Brazla, of course," the spirit tool boasted.

"How do I get access to those inheritances?" Zac asked, not even bothering with refuting the golem.

"Each person can only inherit one inheritance, and only has one try. You are the unworthy owner of the Great Brazla, so, for now, you will decide who gets to try which trial. The only requirement is that the trial taker needs to be F-graded when they start their inheritance. But remember, if the one you pick

fails, then that inheritance is locked forever for that person,” the specter responded.

Zac asked a few clarifying questions from the Tool Spirit to make sure he understood everything, and after thinking it over decided to leave the Inheritances alone until he was right at the edge of pushing through his bottleneck.

Messing up a C-graded inheritance since he was too impatient and try it out right away would be a huge loss. As for the other spots, he would save them for close friends or promising people. Perhaps even to his children. If he let any random try it out the inheritance would be locked out for hundreds of years unless he killed the trial taker.

In the end he refocused on the F-Graded skills. It was something that could benefit him right now. He noticed that the skills were split up into 3 categories; High, Middle and Low. It was a way to distinguish between the top tier and the average skills Zac guessed, as there were only 9 High-Graded skills out of the 81 in total.

There were another 27 Middle Ranked skills, while the rest were low-ranked. However, it looked like even the ones Brazla considered low-tiered were much better than the things he could buy at the Nexus Node.

In the end Zac chose to add two skills to his repertoire, things he suspected he might not get in any case judging from the characteristics of his class. He noted that most of the skills on the F-Graded floor could be taught around three to five times a year, after which the crystals needed to restore themselves.

The procedure for learning the skills was as easy as when getting them from his class. He only needed to touch the crystals containing them, after which he received a stream of knowledge right into his mind, and the fractals appeared in their slots.

“I will take my leave, Great Sage Brazla, I will meet you again soon. Do not let anyone approach anything for now,” Zac said as he left.

“Of course. And remember, a piece of art such as myself need to be surrounded by beauty,” the Tool Spirit answered as he dissipated into thin air.

Zac left the repository, eager to get back to his mansion and get used to his new skills, but as soon as he exited the doors of the so-called Hall of Endless Skills he was met with a wall of people looking at him like starving ghosts.

“Is it true what it says?” Ogras said, his eyes glittering with greed.

Chapter 163: The Eight Inheritances

“Is what true?” Zac asked, not understanding the commotion in front of him.

Ogras only pointed up at a huge signboard that hovered above the entrance. It was over ten meters across, with rays of golden light cascading around it. There was even a painting of Brazla himself, who invitingly beckoned for people to enter.

Welcome to the Towers of Myriad Dao,

Home of the Halls of Endless Skills

Holder of the Eight Ancient Inheritances:

The Invoker

The Umbra

The Titan

The Blade Emperor

The Celestial Artisan

The Undying Fiend

Lord of Cycles

Crown of Despair

“What the fuck?!” Zac couldn’t help screaming and quickly ran back into the repository.

“Back already human? Have you found the materials to beautify my surroundings so quickly?” Brazla asked as Zac stormed back into the hall with murder in his eyes.

“Why the hell have you put up the sign outside?” Zac asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

“To showcase the greatness of The Great Sage Brazla, of course?” the spiritual tool said, looking confused.

Zac lamented the fact that he didn't have the capability to strangle ghosts, and instead took a few calming breaths to not explode in anger.

“You need to take it down, right now. If people find out I have a bunch of valuable inheritances here the whole town will be put in danger,” Zac said with as calm a voice he could muster.

“I refuse. If you can't even protect my body it's for the best you get defeated so The Great Brazla can find better owner,” Brazla retorted without hesitation, completely unconcerned with the situation. “And don't you try to cover my great form. I can make the sign as large as your whole town if I need to.”

Zac only blankly stared at the smiling spirit decked in an endless amount of holographic wealth, and without another word left the hall again. Was the system messing with him, after all? First that change in the quest, and then it sends him an insane Tool Spirit? Was it truly retaliating for swearing at it?

The mob was still standing outside, and it even seemed that it had grown in the short while Zac was back inside. Zac could only inwardly groan as he looked over the people in front of him.

“As you can see Port Atwood has gained another boon, a proper repository. It contains 81 different Skill Crystals, a few of which are high graded,” Zac said with a loud voice, silencing the mob in front of him. “You all know how these types of crystals work. Their uses are limited. However, I will open the repository up to those who have fought and contributed to Port Atwood during the beast waves. I will need to formalize the rules, but the order of entering will be based on your Contribution ranking.”

Most of the demons looked extremely excited. Even though they were from an established force these kinds of opportunities were generally left to the elites or direct descendants. Normal soldiers would have to make do with the skills their classes gave them. But having an additional

powerful skill could turn a battle around, or help them survive in a situation they'd otherwise perish in.

“What about the Inheritances?” a voice shouted.

“The inheritances are guarded by nigh-impossible challenges with almost no chance of survival. Not even I have taken one for myself. For now, no one will get one,” Zac said.

“Each Inheritance can only be awarded to one person at a time. It consists of multiple stages, and each stage has one-time rewards. If an inheritor perishes, the trial will open again. So to have the inheritance is also to have a target on your back, it is both a blessing and a curse,” Zac shouted.

That cooled the atmosphere quite a bit, and many even looked at each other suspiciously. Zac decided to at least try to control the message since Brazla refused to take down the sign. He didn't mention the heritages or the higher Ranked skills, and instead focused on the less explosive parts of the repository.

The Inheritances was what he really wanted to be kept quiet, but there was no chance of that happening with the sign. At least painting the inheritances as a huge risk might cool down the scheming a bit. The whole situation felt like a real pain in the ass to Zac, and he was happy he now had someone he could dump this kind of annoyance on.

“I guess it's time to call a meeting. Gather the usual people,” Zac said to Ogras, who was uncharacteristically helpful as he simply nodded and disappeared into shadows after throwing a last glance at the gaudy towers of the repository.

That left Zac and Abby, who slowly moved toward the temporary town. Zac was happy to see the bustling activity with hundreds of people working together. He believed that it wouldn't take long before the real town was in place.

“Hey, can a Tool Spirit go crazy?” Zac asked when he felt they'd moved far enough from the repository.

“Of course, they almost always do in the end,” Abby answered as matter of course.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked confused.

“Well, Tool Spirits are almost immortal, they can live as long as the weapon stays whole. It doesn’t matter for unevolved spirits without a sense of self, but when they evolve into sentient beings the clock starts ticking,” Abby explained.

“Imagine living an endless amount of time, stuck inside a weapon? Your creator is long gone, perhaps you’re forgotten under hundreds of meters of soil or in some hidden chamber, slowly counting the eons? Anyone would go crazy.”

“They can hibernate, but the endless passage of time affects everyone. Spirits generally don’t go crazy while in someone’s employ though.”

Zac could only shake his head. He honestly couldn’t tell if Brazla had gone insane, or he just had an extremely annoying personality. For now, he would treat him as a lunatic just in case.

Soon Zac found himself in Adran’s tent, the meeting room filled with the usual members. Most of the spots were filled with the demons that had drafted the plan for Port Atwood, a new addition was Joanna, but she and Mr. Trang were still the only humans. There were some promising people who joined from New Washington, but it was to soon to have them present at this kind of meeting.

Zac recapped the situation with the repository since not everyone was present at the new building earlier. This time he also mentioned the heritages, though he still didn’t mention the higher tiered skills.

The mention of the Celestial Artisan’s heritage caused quite a commotion, far more than the other one.

“Why are you so excited?” Zac asked the head of agriculture, who was almost jumping in his seat.

“Clan Azh’Rezak spent very little resources on non-combat ventures. The clan mainly gained its resources through hunting beasts and working as mercenaries. A real Heritage will be a huge boon to even us old people with craftsman classes,” he hastily said.

“I am sorry to put some breaks on the excitement, but before we can even discuss perusing heritages and skills we need to properly work out how things will work going forward. We have been scrapping along for now, but it is time to get structured,” Zac said, quickly cooling down the excited atmosphere.

“Most of us stayed behind on this baby world because things weren’t too good back home at the Clan,” Ogras suddenly spoke up, drawing attention. “But I don’t think everyone here has planned what to do for the long term. What will we do? Where will we go? I can tell you right now that I have decided to stay here as part of Port Atwood.

“You know that Lord Zac is the strongest man on this planet, he is the first Lord to emerge, and is a clear candidate to become a World Ruler. We’re sitting right on top on a Nexus Vein, and as this baby world matures the density of energy on this island will far eclipse anything we ever knew back home.

Rather than venturing out into the multiverse like a homeless vagabond I will stay here and build my foundation. With the repository and other benefits we will seize in the future I believe we will be more powerful than Clan Azh’Rezak in less than a hundred years,” the demon continued.

A few of the demons thoughtfully nodded, whereas others took it as a matter of course that they would stay here.

“I am setting up a proper Structure now that I am a sanctioned Lord, and its organization will be largely based on the heterogeneous forces amongst the demonkind. I will use a Contribution system, from what I understand you had something similar in your clan,” Zac followed up after nodding at Ogras.

“Port Atwood has accumulated great amounts of resources through the monster waves and our struggles, and we can’t just give it away. Only those who contribute in pushing Port Atwood forward will get a share. Since Adran can’t do all that work by himself I am buying a management office who will be in charge of the Contribution system”, Zac explained.

“I have my own pursuits, much like the other warriors, and will not have a hands-on approach in managing Port Atwood. Abby here is my assistant who will be in charge of making sure the town runs smoothly,” Zac continued.

From there the meeting turned into fine details of how the town would be managed. Initially, five ministries would be created, with Zac as the sole leader. There would be no democracy and no councils. Ogras himself wouldn't have any official role, except as an advisor to Zac himself.

The Ministry of War would not only be responsible of the defense of Port Atwood, but also the war effort against the incursions in the future. Ilvere was placed as the leader of that ministry, with Joanna as a second in command. Their first task would be to create a team that would head to Billyville in two weeks.

Zac himself couldn't go, but it was no reason he couldn't send some warriors to gain some money and experience. An Incursion was always a good source of money for those who survived, and the Ratmen were weak but numerous from the sound of it, somewhat like the Zombie horde.

The Ministry of Revenue would be spearheaded by Zakarith, who was tasked to find some humans to help her. Their job would be to keep track of income and spending, and they would also handle Zac's personal business ventures such as his income from the Consortia and the mine.

It was also decided that Port Atwood would, for the time being at least, own all the land of the town, and as soon as the town was up and running start charging rent. Since he essentially owned the mountain he would also own the residences he planned to build over there, designed to be residences for the elite.

The Ministry of Justice was in charge of keeping the law. For now there hadn't really been any problems that couldn't be handled internally, but as Port Atwood grew many issues would crop up. Ogras recommended Alea, and Zac thought it sounded like a good idea.

Perhaps people would stay on the straight and narrow, knowing the poison mistress would be in charge of punishments. Alea herself wasn't present at the meeting, so she was promoted in her absence. The poison mistress had avoided Zac since their misunderstanding during the third wave, even though he'd tried to find her to apologize.

The Ministry of Works would manage any government projects, the foremost being the construction of the town. A future project would be to do a proper inspection of the nearby islands in order to set up supporting facilities on them, such as farms, husbandries, and mines.

Finally, a Ministry of State Affairs would be in charge of coordinating the various ministries and departments and communicate progression with Zac.

There currently weren't clear candidates for all positions that needed to be filled, but Zac believed things like that would work itself out sooner or later. Real talents wouldn't stay hidden forever.

It was also decided that those who worked for Port Atwood would not be given a Salary in form of crystals but rather contribution points. Zac also decided that there also wouldn't be a way to convert the points to Nexus Coins or Crystals for the time being, though that might change in the future.

Finally when it came to the repository it was decided that the first 81 people, apart from Ogras and Zac, would get to use the repository once. After that it would cost Contribution points to use, and since the Crystal Charges were limited some sort of tests would also be tests performed, so that no precious slots would be used on wastrels.

Zac felt quite happy with the progress from the meeting, but just as he was about to call it a day Abby dropped a bomb on him.

“As Lord Zac has founded a Global City, and from the fact that we have been placed on an island, the sphere of influence that was given is quite large. There are currently 298 Islands inside your Kingdom, many of which are populated.

“I suggest we start building a network of F-Graded Teleportation arrays between your islands to integrate all your citizens.”

Zac was shocked by the size of his influence. They had scouted less than twenty islands so far, and already they’d found thousands of people. Just how many would be gathered over 300 of them? Besides, with such a huge area there was no way that there wasn’t any drop-off point for cultivators. Perhaps he would be able to get some more promising people who could benefit from his new Blade Emperor heritage.

The meeting took hours, but eventually everything was dealt with. This time Zac left alone, sending Abby away. After pressing Illvere for a bit he was told of a gazebo some distance from the temporary town.

As he got closer to the small pavilion he stopped for a second as he saw the familiar form of Alea.

Chapter 164: Waiting

Zac felt paralyzed for a second, unsure of what to do now that he found her. But after a shake of his head he walked up and sat down next to her.

“Are you here to thank me again?” Alea said with some annoyance when he sat down in the gazebo.

“I’m sorry I doubted you back there. I wasn’t thinking straight in the heat of the moment,” Zac said as he looked over at her. “You have been great support from the start, and I won’t forget that again.”

She looked mesmerizing in the sunset. Her long silver hair danced in the wind, and her two horns looked like aetheric fire. She looked back at him, and only gave a roll of her eyes in response.

“I know. You keep getting hurt because of me, is there anything I can do to return the favor?” Zac asked, his eyes staying on her this time.

Suddenly she moved straight at him, and this time Zac repressed his instincts to block her. If she wanted to punch him to vent some anger, so be it. But his eyes widened as her mouth closed in on his as her hands wrapped around his head. His arms wrapped around her slender frame as if by instinct, and the two shared a passionate kiss in the sunset.

Long repressed emotions were surfacing in his mind, making Zac a bit dizzy. The dizziness intensified, and a loud gurgling in his stomach quickly told him that what he felt might not have an emotional root. A sense of unease quickly doused any passion as Alea slipped out of his hands.

“That’s for pointing your big thing at me,” she said with a giggle and winked at him, before she left Zac to his own

devices. “A night on the toilet might help you remember to think straight in the future.”

That night Zac truly understood what it meant to anger a poison master. He’d never felt so empty as he did after his tenth trip to the outhouse, as he’d been exploding out of every orifice with each visit. There were even times where he wondered if he would have even survived if it wasn’t for his high vitality. However, he almost felt it was worth it as he thought back to the passionate moment in the gazebo.

The next day a pale-faced Zac walked over to the Academy, making some small talk with the girls there. The mood was quite heavy, as a noticeable part of their small army died during the Zombie horde.

“We heard from Joanna that a group of warriors will go to another Incursion in a few weeks,” one of the Valkyries suddenly said. “We want to go.”

“You want to go? War is no joke. The Ratmen won’t be as strong as the demons, but they’ll likely be stronger than the Zombies. And they’ll also be more cunning,” Zac said skeptically. “It’s good to strive for power, but don’t bite off more than you can chew. There is no rush.”

“We know that. But we finally understand just how far we are from people like you, or even the demon soldiers. We could only stand on the sidelines for most of the battle, completely useless. We came here because we want to get stronger. Some more of us might die if we go, but death is inevitable. Those who survive will be more powerful on our return,” the girl continued.

“Besides, pretty much all of us gained enough experience to get our class. When we go to the next incursion we will have finished our skill quests, and we will be far stronger than now,” another girl added.

“Oh? What class are you getting?” Zac asked curiously.

“We’re all getting the Warrior class. Alyn says it’s best for us to all have the same starting point, as that will help with War Arrays in the future. From there we will start to specialize.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod.

Honestly he was happy that he’d listened to Alyn to have them all get a common class. With the new heritage their future might look far better compared to if they got some odd class that became available due to their specific circumstances.

“Work hard, you have improved, but there is a long way to go. You can go to the Incursion if Ilvere and Alyn judge you’re ready when the time for the operation starts. They have a better grasp on both the power of your squad and of the Ratmen,” Zac said as he walked into a walled-off area of the gravity array and sat down.

It was a small secluded spot that he kept for himself when he came here to utilize the array. The first thing Zac did was use the rest of the rewards he bought with his contribution points. The Fruit of Endurance unfortunately only gave a 3-point boost, but it was better than nothing.

The quest for the upgrade to **[Eye of Discernment]** was quite simple. He only needed to inspect a thousand people with the skill, and it would get upgraded. Of course, it was only simple since Zac could essentially inspect anyone without fear of repercussions. If it was some weaker person the quest might be impossible to finish, as the wrong inspection might result in a beatdown or even death.

Next he sat down and started meditating again. He had already made a huge stride with his improved Dao of Trees, but he wasn’t content with just that. He was already in the last stretch of his F-Grade class, but he was far from reaching his target for progression in the Dao. In fact, even with his recent breakthroughs he was still only third place on the Dao Ladder, with Abbot Everlasting Peace and Guru Anaad Phakiwar firmly ensconced in front of him.

The days passed and Zac was getting less and less communicative, mainly holing up to practice his skills or meditating. However, progress was limited. Impatience was gnawing at him as he waited for the deadline to arrive. He hadn’t expected the final horde to end so quickly and now was stuck waiting for a week until Bernard would open the portal.

The only real change to him was when he got word that the Gnome finally got his hands on a pill of purification. It was a pill that was designed to combat miasma. As soon as Zac got his hands on it he eagerly ate it, and it truly helped a lot.

Unfortunately the effect of one such pill was limited. Whatever the Corpse Lord injected him with wasn't messing around, and it stubbornly kept causing him trouble. Calrin promised to keep looking, but he didn't look hopeful. Zac could only put his hopes to there being more solutions close to where he was going.

Every evening he would sit down at the array at the appointed time in hopes that the town leader would open his array in advance. Each time both Ogras had Alea silently stood with him, and wordlessly left when he stood up with a shake of his head.

Meanwhile, Port Atwood was springing up with tremendous speed, the earth and wood mages working overtime in creating one structure after another. The humans weren't just lounging around either, and their speed in erecting buildings would give Amish barn raisers a run for their money.

Even the Academy was quickly changing, and another contingent was getting created. Quite a few young men had signed up to become soldiers. According to Alyn she believed that after she rooted out those without aptitude or without the drive necessary perhaps less than 10% would remain, but at least it was a start.

Even the empty slots in the Valkyrie squad had gotten refilled with former refugees from the islands. Zac was even more surprised to find out that the new recruits insisted on giving the same pledge as the old members. Zac could only shake his head in confusion, but eventually he relented and accepted, bringing their numbers back up to 80.

Finally the agreed-upon day arrived and Zac sat down on the teleporter array, even though there was hours before the array would open. Outwardly he was unperturbed, but his heart was hammering, waiting to see whether his gambit worked. The minutes passed, and finally they reached the agreed-upon time.

Still, nothing appeared in his teleportation menu. Only The Cradle of God was public. One minute passed, then another.

Zac was starting to wonder whether the man had succumbed to the poison Zac force-fed him. Perhaps he even found a cure somehow. However, a new town flashed into being, and Zac immediately stood up and looked over at Alea and Ogras, who accompanied him.

“I will be back within the month,” Zac said, and with unwavering determination on his face disappeared through the teleporter.

He soon found himself in a small room, and from the first look around it seemed it was a garage.

“The antidote. Hurry, give me the antidote!” a wheezing voice came from a corner.

Zac looked over, and saw John Bernard stand there huddled over. When Zac saw the man his eyebrows rose in appall, and shame filled his heart. The man had been quite portly just a week ago, but now he looked like a pale shadow of a man. He had lost almost all his body fat, and had thick black lines under his eyes. If Zac didn't know any better he would have guessed the man in front of him had undergone months of chemotherapy treatment.

Without hesitating he threw over the small white bottle, and John swallowed the contents without giving it a second glance. Zac also transferred over 2 500 000 Nexus Coins to the man. He had planned to give him a million coins, but after seeing his wretched appearance he changed his mind.

“I am sorry about putting you through this suffering, desperate times,” Zac said with a shake of his head, and then took out one of the small roots that had weeded out the infiltrating monks.

“I will give you a piece of information that might save your life. One of the invading incursions is The Church of Everlasting Dao. They possess infiltrators who essentially have shape shifting capabilities, they can turn into any person. No scouting techniques can spot the disguise.

“This root is harmless to humans but deadly to the infiltrators. It’s what we used to root out all the spies in our own City. We expect your New World Government is already infiltrated,” Zac said as he threw over the root to John.

The man was absorbed in feeling the effects of the antidote, but Zac’s words woke him up and he caught the root hesitantly.

“You know, you’re a wanted man now. That demon’s actions in New Washington has made you the enemies of the whole government,” John said just as Zac was about to leave.

“Oh? Is there people outside planning to catch me?” Zac asked.

“Do you think I’m suicidal? I want nothing to do with your conflict. The sooner you’re out of my life, the better,” John said with grumpily.

Zac only shook his head and stepped out. It was night-time here as well, so Zac had no problem to slip into the darkness unencumbered.

“It’s me,” John said into the radio as he looked himself over in the Radio.

He was already starting to look better, the dark circles under his eyes already gone. It also felt like he finally would be able to eat again, without it feeling like his teeth were shattering and his throat catching fire.

He was already so engrossed in planning out the feast that he would prepare for himself to celebrate, that he almost forgot he was on a call with a superior.

“Did he come?” a rough voice answered after a few seconds.

“Yes Sir, he stepped though as soon as I opened it. He immediately left town afterward it seems,” John answered as he went over the list in his head.

He’d definitely open up the bottle of 21-year-old scotch he’d been saving for months now. And a mountain of ribs. They

killed that huge boar the other day, and it barely contained a trace of miasma.

“Good, you’ve done well. We’ll take it from here,” the man on the other end said.

“What are you going to do? He’s the Super-Brother Man, after all. He’s not some nobody,” John asked skeptically as he put down the mirror. “He also said something about shape-shifters infiltrating the government, and-“

“You don’t need to worry about that. You are hereby relieved.”

A window shattered and John only felt a blazing pain in his head, before all turned to darkness.

Chapter 165: A Thousand Faces

Zac rushed toward southeast along a derelict road. The town Bernard managed, Aubrey Hills, was north of the Dead Zone, and he needed to get to the eastern part. Zac knew there were border towns closer to the incursion from his conversation with Bernard during the Auction.

They were right at the edge of what was considered the undead influence. Those kinds of towns weren't under government control but were rather chaotic places under the control of the one with the largest fists.

Its population generally consisted of anyone who wanted to use the incursion as a spot for gaining levels and wealth. Zombies were quite stupid and not overly strong, which made for perfect target practice. Besides, due to the huge populations of China and India, there was almost an endless source of Zombies to hunt.

However, Zac knew that the good times of these border towns were limited. The concentration of miasma at the edge of the incursion should be limited, so it was normal that there weren't too strong zombies there.

But as the zombie hunters depopulated any closeby towns from zombies they would need to venture further and further into the incursion, where the miasma was denser. The risk of meeting evolved Zombies and other strong beasts was going to get higher and higher.

Zombies weren't the only thing to worry about in the huge Zone the Undead Empire controlled. The wildlife that had lived inside for almost half a year would have evolved like over the rest of the world. With the additional effect of the

miasma the beasts should be completely insane due to the corruption.

But for now, the towns were havens for those who lived in the area and didn't mind the risk. It was like a macabre gold rush where every walking corpse was a small gold nugget. Zac didn't bother to learn the town's names since they were peppered along the incursion, and most of them were essentially the same.

There were also rumors of there being settlements even further inside the incursion, though Zac didn't have the coordinates for any place like that. But Zac had no desire to go there in any case, as his goal was clear.

He'd find a border town and get himself oriented. The fact that the government seemed to have made him a target wasn't a surprise, but he needed to find out the extent the enmity reached.

Besides, his information about the undead was from the information crystals back at Port Atwood, rather than more detailed information from the locals. They might have figured out various things that could be beneficial to know.

As he moved forward his wound unceasingly kept pounding, but by now it barely registered in Zac's mind. His increased Vitality and evolved seed were a great improvement compared to before, as he didn't need to keep his Dao active at all times to keep the spread of corruption at bay.

However, the wound was barely healing even when he kept using his Dao, and at this speed it would likely take years before he was completely cured. That was another reason he wanted to stop in the frontier town. Perhaps some people there had attained classes that gave skills targeted at combating miasma.

Zac kept going until the suns were starting to show, and quickly stopped at a what once seemed to have been a rest stop along the highway. The area was completely overgrown by now, and Zac didn't expect to find anything useful. He walked up to a parked trailer and took out a large mirror, placing it against the vehicle.

Next, he placed a thick cloak rimmed with wolf pelt over his shoulders, and his arm got thick leather vambraces. He even put on two pairs of sturdy shoes. He actually also had a pair of shoes that only had a few straps instead of soles, allowing him to freely use his [Loamwalker] skill while wearing shoes, but he didn't dare to use those after remembering the state of Fort Roger.

Zac gave a quick spin, happy with the transformation he'd undergone. He felt he almost looked like a barbarian, with wolf pelts covering much of his back. He also put a large high-quality two-handed battleaxe on his back. It was a nasty piece of equipment, and something he'd found up on the monkey mountain amongst the corpses.

He needed a weapon to use that wasn't the same as the one-handed axe he'd shown off at a few occasions. But even if he was going undercover he didn't want to use a sword or something else, afraid it would hamper his future skill choices.

Next, he focused his Cosmic Energy in his scalp and was amazed to see his hair grow out with speed visible to his eyes. Soon it was long enough that he put it in a bun with a leather string.

Not only that, but he also grew out a beard, covering the somewhat distinct scar on his mouth that still wasn't gone.

He looked like an almost completely different person, and that was the point. Still, he wasn't done there as he activated a fractal that was placed on his throat. His body suddenly was wracked in pain, but he grit his teeth and pushed through. In just a few seconds he'd completely changed. He was now a few inches shorter, while his face had undergone a large transformation.

It was the skill [**Thousand Faces**], one of the 81 skills in the repository. It was a shapeshifting skill, and something he decided to pick up after having seen how effective the priest infiltrators were. He was a high profile person and his appearance might cause unwanted trouble, and this was his solution.

It was only one of the mid-grade skills, and it didn't really fit his pathways very well. That's why it hurt like his bones were ground to dust and then reshaped when he used it. But it still felt like one of the most useful skills in the repository for his current needs.

Looking back from the mirror now was a middle-aged man with a more angular facial structure and a hooked nose. Not even Kenzie should recognize him as he currently looked. As the skill actually changed the bone structure of someone it didn't take any energy to maintain, but a weakness was that it couldn't change his aura.

An aura was almost like a fingerprint these days, and some scouts could use the fluctuations a person gave out to identify people in disguises. However, for that to work the scout would have to have met him earlier, so the risk for that was not too big unless the people of new Washington were actively hunting him.

Satisfied with the transformation he packed away his mirror and got ready to leave. He still wore his E-graded robes underneath the furs, not wanting to give up the defensive charges they contained.

Back on his island this many layers would have been decidedly hot, but here on the mainland it was starting to get quite chilly. It was already November, though Zac didn't know if the months or seasons had changed somehow.

He kept going through the desolate wasteland, but this time he had taken out one of his cars. It wasn't one of the modified ones that were running on Nexus Crystals, but rather one of the normal ones. However, there were a few inscriptions placed in a few unseen spots that would make it sturdier.

He'd missed driving, and enjoyed feeling even though the scenery was a bit dour. But soon he actually saw some activity. Much like in the area around New Washington there was almost never traffic, but he actually saw a jeep speed across a field in the distance. It looked quite rickety, the car jumping and looked about to keel over at any moment.

Zac understood why whoever was inside was driving that recklessly though. Right behind the car a huge tiger was in hot pursuit. It was even larger than the car, but that wasn't the odd thing about it. Even from the distance, Zac could see that it was greyish, not having the usual yellow and black stripes. Its eyes were also shining in a similar turquoise as the undead beacons did.

It clearly was in the process of mutating from living inside miasma for a long time, though Zac didn't understand what it was doing here. There was no discernable miasma in the atmosphere where they were, so it must have wandered out from the dead zone. Perhaps it had an appetite for humans and was out on a hunt.

A bump in the terrain suddenly sent the vehicle out of control, but as it was about to overturn three people nimbly jumped out of the car and landed on the ground as the Jeep kept going. From how practiced their movements were Zac almost thought that wasn't the first time they had been forced to jump out of a runaway vehicle.

Zac finally got a good look at the party and saw it was one Caucasian male and two Asians, one woman and one man. All of them looked to be around their thirties and judging from their gear they weren't people who had stayed put within the safety of a wall since the integration.

The Zombified Tiger gave off a ghastly roar that Zac could clearly hear even from the distance and pounced at the trio. The commotion actually made Zac stop his car and get out. For a second he wondered if he should rush over there to save them, but the three put up a valiant defense against the beast.

While they weren't some supreme powerhouses they were stronger than the Valkyries back in Port Atwood, and they had complementary skills. Still, the tiger seemed extremely durable, and it was unclear whether they would be able to whittle it down before they ran out of cosmic energy.

"You there! Please assist us, and half the value of the beast core is yours!" the Asian man in the back shouted over at Zac in passable English.

Zac's brows rose when he heard the offer, and he ran over to the battle. Beast cores were crystals that contained a good chunk of the total Cosmic Energy of a beast. Zac didn't expect to hear it mentioned here, as generally that wasn't something that should exist in an animal until they reached D-rank.

At that point, both humans and beasts would develop a Core in their body that could compress and contain vast amounts of Cosmic Energy. This was a sharp difference from how it was now, where cosmic energy was generally stored in every cell of the body. A core was far more efficient, and successfully forming one was akin to getting a high powered battery in your body.

Zac used **[Inquisitive Eyes]** on the beast.

[Miasmic Bengal Tiger – Undead. Level 43 – Endurance]

Zac getting the skill had caused his reputation to take somewhat of a hit, and rumors of him being a peeping tom started to spread. But he had finished his quest in just a few days by using **[Eye of Discernment]** on almost everyone in the town, much to the citizen's annoyance.

The new and improved version was still F-ranked, but much more useful. It now also displayed what was the highest attribute of the one he spied on, which would give a hint of their battle style. It also could discern the grades of many resources, which was a good way to learn if something he found was useful or not.

With a fluid motion Zac took the large two-handed axe from his back and joined the fray. Naturally, he would have been able to kill the beast in a simple swing, but he only used a bit of his power in order to not stand out.

The intense battle kept going for a few minutes, and Zac was a large contributor to the victory, as every swing of his contained quite a punch that maimed the animal. He purposely made himself seem slightly stronger than the trio, so that they wouldn't get any ideas after the fight finished.

Finally, they felled the beast, and with a groan, it thumped down on the ground.

“Thank you, friend. That’s some swing you have there. I don’t recognize you, are you new to the area?” the blonde man said between pants.

“I came here to get stronger. I’m heading to a frontier town now,” Zac said with a hoarse voice. “What’s that beast core you mentioned?”

“Oh so you’re not from around here,” the man nodded. “The animals that live deep in the dead zone have started to get these crystals in their heads. We call them Beast Cores. They are filled with tons of miasma. They are useful for various things. You can even use them for cultivation, but I wouldn’t recommend that. Fries your brain after a while.”

The other two, who seemed to be siblings at closer scrutiny, nodded at that.

“General Stores buys them for a pretty penny, so they are like gold here. Some Zombies have them as well, especially the stronger ones. The stores pay by the gram, and finding these have become more profitable than just grinding low level Zombies,” the Asian man who spotted him earlier added.

It seemed they weren’t real beast cores after all, but rather something created by the miasma. Still, Zac curiously looked on as the Asian girl took out a large knife and started cutting into the head of the tiger.

“I’m John, by the way. I was an expat in Hong Kong before all this,” John said with an expansive gesture “This is Ling and Hung.”

“I’m David,” Zac said, using the first name that came to his mind. “How did this thing get all the way out here? From what I gathered before coming these types of beasts stay further in the Dead Zone?”

“Ah, well, that’s sort of our mistake. We accidentally enraged it and it followed us for more than a day. We got off-track while trying to shake it off,” John said.

“Got it,” Ling said with a melodious voice as she took out a greyish crystal from the head of the tiger. She quickly wiped it off with a rag and displayed it in front of them.

“Wow, it’s a big one. Should be worth over thirty thousand,” John said with a whistle.

“So, uh... Do you think we can catch a ride? Our poor Betty seems to have given her last breath,” John said as he looked at the overturned jeep that had smoke coming out of it.

“... It’s fine, you just need to eat this root first,” Zac said as he took out the minty root from a backpack.

Chapter 166: The Frontier

“Excuse me?” John said, looking down at the small root in Zac’s hand.

“It seems the rumors haven’t reached the border towns yet. One of the incursions contains shapeshifters. They have probably infiltrated both the government and many strong factions. However, this root is deadly to them while it is harmless to us humans,” Zac said and ate a large chunk of it to prove he was speaking the truth.

“It’s called Springroot, and is available for purchase in the General Store. Nowadays people take a bite of it to prove they’re not a shapeshifter where I come from,” Zac continued.

The three looked confused at each other, until Ling took the piece of root and looked it over. Her eyes shone with some mysterious luster for a second, telling Zac she was using some sort of ocular skill. Perhaps her main role in the group was scouting.

“No poison,” she said and the other two nodded with some relief.

With a shrug of his shoulders, John broke off a piece and ate it.

“Not bad, minty. It might double as a mouthwash,” John said.

“These shapeshifters, what do they look like?”

“I heard they’re lizard-people,” Zac said with a shake of his head, knowing how it sounded. “Apparently they are part of some multi-verse cult.”

“Lizard-people cultists, just what we need,” John spat on the ground, while the other two seemed to agree with the sentiment as they ate the root.

Zac wasn’t really worried about the three being infiltrators. While there likely was over a thousand of them out there, they had quite a bit of ground to cover. They might have some

unknown means for reaching various settlements but they shouldn't be able to use the teleporters, meaning it should take some time to spread over the planet.

Besides, Zac hadn't even heard anything about the Church's Incursion, meaning they might be extremely far away. Ogras believed that it was out there, only that the government was keeping it secret.

It would be easy to motivate within the government ranks. Just call it a secret government resource to train their elite, and even the actual government officials would keep it secret. Meanwhile, the infiltrators could slowly ensconce themselves within the government.

The reason Zac made the three eat the root was rather to get an excuse to tell the story. He hoped that doing this would create rumors to spread like ripples on the water. Zac alone doing it wouldn't cut it, but he was determined to have his whole force spread the knowledge as soon as he was back with Kenzie.

Soon the four were sitting in Zacs modified car, pushing through the wilderness. It might be a bit weird for some loner to allow 3 strangers into his car in these uncertain times, but Zac didn't really care about that. It would give him an opportunity to gather intelligence as he drove, which would save some time.

"Who's in charge of the frontier town?" Zac asked as he drove, occasionally avoiding the huge potholes that had formed over the past months.

"Eastern Hills is run by a man calling himself Ling Tian. It sort of means 'Rise above the Heavens'. Kind of stupid, but quite a few around these parts have taken these Dao monikers, thinking they are the main characters of some story," John said with a snort.

"It's kind of weird that the System uses Dao while it was a concept in Asia even before the integration," Zac noted.

It was something he still didn't quite understand. Was it a coincidence, or was it something to it? That wasn't the only thing as there was also the issue of the demons. It made Zac

wonder just what happened on earth thousands of years ago. Perhaps the old stories of mages and dragons were more than just stories?

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that myself,” John said. “The general belief is that the old masters of Daoism managed to peek through the veil, so-to-speak, and learn some aspects of the Dao. Who knows, perhaps there was Cosmic Energy on earth back in the day, but it ran out?”

“The old masters have lit the way for our people. I believe that’s why the System gave us the hardest challenge,” Hung said from the back seat.

“So, Ling Tian?” Zac prodded, not commenting on the harshness of challenges. While the undead horde was a pain, he didn’t feel it beat having to close a whole incursion on your own.

“He’s a bit annoying, but one of the better leaders. That’s why we stay there. He doesn’t do anything untoward, and he is usually out fighting Zombies,” John said.

“Annoying how?” Zac asked with some interest.

“Well, he’s imagining himself to be the savior of mankind or something. He keeps trying to gather together the townspeople to launch crusades at the core of the incursion. But you know, few people are that crazy. Charging the core of the Dead Zone is a suicide mission,” John said with a shake of his head.

“Chuunibyou,” Ling muttered from the back.

Zac didn’t comment, but he felt a bit hopeless inside. He didn’t know whether this leader of the frontier town was delusional or not, but the whole situation in these border towns was problematic. There seemed to be quite a few strong warriors here, but people mainly fought to empower and enrich themselves.

Perhaps this situation would have been okay if the undead were weak. If that was the case then sooner or later the zombies would be hunted into extinction. However, Zac knew reality wasn’t so convenient. As soon as the leaders like the

Corpse Lord started their crusades these border towns would get deserted in the blink of an eye.

There was no organization and no order. There would be no real resistance against the invaders when they started their conquest in earnest. People like these three would just move somewhere else, if they even survived.

Zac had been thinking of what to do about these Incursions since he finally became a Lord. He felt that his quest had given him the greatest clue what to do from here. He needed to kill the leaders of the incursions, and the rest would sort itself out. A force without powerhouses to protect and lead the ranks was just prey in the end.

The only problem was that he didn't even manage to kill the Corpse Lord, and Ogras believed that those who arrived at his island weren't the highest-ranking members of respective Incursion. Perhaps the rockman was the exception, though they weren't sure. Still, it was a plan, and he still had some time before the limiters on the invaders were completely removed.

After another two hours of driving, they finally reached their target, Eastern Hills. Zac was surprised by its size as he slowly drove through a huge gate. When he imagined the frontier towns he had thought that they would look like Fort Roger, but with stronger people.

However, reality differed quite a bit. The wall was a thick and sturdy combination of cement and stones, with armed soldiers walking along the wall walk. The town inside was somewhat clean and orderly, though Zac saw the people looked quite rough.

To his surprise he saw that at least 80 percent of those on the streets were of Asian heritage, with the rest being a random mix. He hadn't really thought along those lines before, but he realized that even if China had taken a huge hit by the incursion there should still be a great number of survivors in the area.

And it was clear that these people weren't like the survivors in Fort Roger. Almost everyone was armed with some sort of

weapon, mostly clubs or spears. Most looked to be in good condition, but there were also a few who looked pale and emitted a cold aura, making Zac frown.

“Miasma poisoning. You get like this if you absorb too many beast cores or stay in the Dead Zone too long,” John explained after noticing Zac’s frown.

A bestial roar suddenly erupted from nearby the main road they were driving along, and Zac stopped the car.

“A transformation, this is a good lesson for you David,” John said as he jumped out of the car.

Zac curiously followed after taking out the keys. Just a hundred meters away a crowd was gathering some distance from a man who spasmed and growled erratically.

“This is the end for those who get too greedy,” John explained as he looked at the odd man without pity. “He’s absorbed too much miasma, and he’s lost control of it. He’s turning.”

“Turning? Is there nothing to do in a case like this?” Zac asked with some pity.

He sympathized a bit with the man, but honestly Zac was mainly thinking about himself. He had a wound filled with highly concentrated miasma, and this would have been his end if he didn’t possess the Dao of Trees.

“Perhaps with the help of a strong purifier, but I doubt they would risk getting close to someone who’s lost all reason,” John said with a shake of his head.

“Purifier? What’s that?” Zac asked curiously.

“It’s what we call people who have skills and classes that can purify the miasma. Remember, don’t piss off a Purifier while you’re staying on the frontier. Getting their help can be the difference between life and death if you get wounded in the Dead Zone. Besides, many are desperate to curry their favor.

“So if you piss off a Purifier, don’t be surprised if you get mobbed by a bunch of Zombie Hunters who just want to form a relationship with them,” John said with a low voice.

Zac's heartbeat started to increase when hearing John's explanation. It sounded like a purifier was exactly what he needed to take care of his wound.

"Who is the best purifier in this town?" Zac asked, trying to not sound too eager.

"You're talking like they're a dime a dozen. They're extremely rare, and generally only reside in the larger towns on the edge of the Dead Zone," John said with a shake of his head. "There is a purifier a few towns over, it would take almost a day to drive there."

Zac frowned at that, unsure at what to do. Either he'd follow his original plan and push through the incursion to get to the eastern side, or he'd detour and try his luck with a purifier.

"Why are you asking?" John asked with some confusion. "Are you hurt somewhere? You don't look to be suffering from miasma poisoning."

"Just orienting myself. Who knows what'll happen in the future, seems like a good idea to know where the healers are," Zac said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Aint that the truth. However, you shouldn't think of the Purifiers as a backup plan. Their energy is limited, and they rarely see people off the streets. Look around, quite a few here have more miasma in their bodies than they'd like. If they could get that fixed most would. Oh, it seems time's up."

The sounds of bones cracking and grinding against each other made Zac refocus on the unfortunate man *Zombiefying*.

"This one belongs to the Frost Wolves," a man with a badge resembling a howling wolf suddenly said as he stepped forward accompanied by three underlings.

"Fuck you, it belongs to whoever is the fastest," another man with two shortwords retorted.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with a subdued voice.

"These things are quite valuable after they turn, they're like evolved Zombies. The kill gives a large amount of Cosmic

Energy, and it is pretty much guaranteed to have a large Core. Poor bastard's essentially become a walking treasure trove."

"So why are they waiting?" Zac asked.

"The core is currently forming. When the transformation is complete, then the core is formed," John explained, as he hesitantly looked over the spectators.

"We should back away, too many strong people are present," he said as he distanced himself from the hubbub.

Zac didn't really care about some miasma core, and he backed away as well, and together they saw the spectators rip the poor man into pieces like hungry hyenas.

The man with the two swords triumphantly held up the decapitated head of the zombie after a few seconds, causing the others to swear and walk away, leaving the mangled corpse where it was.

"They're just giving up?" Zac asked.

"Rules of the town. When the core's claimed the battle is over. However, that guy might need to watch his back, the Frost Wolf Mercenaries are a bit shady," John said with a shrug as he jumped into Zac's car again.

"You don't have a place to stay, right? Why don't you join us for the night? You can learn about how things work here in the wild east."

"Sounds good," Zac answered with a last glance at the corpse of the pitiful man, before jumping back into the driver's seat.

Chapter 167: Purifier Wang

Zac was currently speeding along the deserted road, heading east. He was still driving the car, as it was pretty much as fast as him jogging. He'd also found that it was easier for him to use the Dao of Trees while driving compared to jogging, so it was also better for his wound.

Ever since he arrived at the edge of the Dead Zone he had sensed that the atmosphere contained some miasma. It was only a smidgeon, but Zac noticed to his annoyance that his wound seemed to passively absorb it. He was therefore forced to use his Dao of Trees a bit more than he did back on the island.

That's why he'd decided to look up one of the purifiers, even if it would waste at least one day. He could only assume his condition would get worse when he went into the Dead Zone, so if he could get the wound fixed ahead of that he would likely save more time in the end.

The image of the mutilated corpse on the street of Eastern Hills was a poignant image of what would happen if he didn't properly take care of his wound. It would be a cosmic joke if he survived the Incursion and the three waves, only to turn into a zombie because he didn't properly tend to his festering gut.

He'd stayed the night at John's place. He lived together with the siblings in a pretty large house. It turned out that they were a small mercenary group, and the reason that John was so friendly from the start was that he hoped to recruit Zac. They were originally 7 people, forming a pretty strong squad that mainly focused on finding herbs and other valuables deeper in the core zone.

However, months of risking their lives had resulted in only three being left of the group, and they finally had to admit they

needed to bolster their squad after being unable to finish the tiger on their own.

If Zac actually was who he pretended, then he might actually have taken them up on their offer. Going into the Dead Zone alone was perilous, having a squad to watch your back was preferable. They had been disappointed at his refusal, but they made no big deal about it.

Zac had only stayed the night and left early in the morning. The former expat helped out quite a bit in explaining how things worked, even though Zac refused John's invitation. More troubling was what he heard about himself, or rather the Super Brother-Man.

Rumors about him had already reached the frontier. There were all kinds of rumors, but the core of them was generally that he consorted with the invaders, which was why he had gotten so strong. John had also heard about Ogras deeds in New Washington, though the details had gotten extremely twisted.

However, there was no official proclamation from the government, which only made Zac more uneasy. It only meant that whatever they planned would be done under the table, rather than in the open.

He also didn't think that rumors were spreading organically, as only a week had passed since the auction. Zac believed that the government was trying to speed things along. Perhaps they tried to boost their own reputation by dragging the Super Brother-Man through the mud.

Zac wanted to get his name cleared, but for now he could only ignore the rumor mill. He didn't care what the world thought of him as long as he could reach his sister. Since John had been so helpful Zac left a few hundred Nexus Crystals in his room when leaving.

He had no idea if he'd meet the three again, as they had their goals and he had his. He was currently driving toward one of the main border towns in the area, which was somewhat ostentatiously named Perseverance. Apparently, it was

originally a part of Chengdu, and over 50 000 people lived there at the moment.

Zac kept driving for most of the day, passing a few towns on the way. He actually encountered a few parties on the road, though people kept to their own, likely afraid of getting attacked. There were no witnesses and no laws out in the wild, and Zac guessed few people would take a risk like John and the other two did.

The suns were already setting when he arrived at his destination, and it appeared he just made it before the large town gates were closing.

“1000 Nexus Coins to enter with a vehicle,” a guard said as he hailed Zac.

Zac’s brows rose at the price, but he still paid up and drove through. The price was a bit surprising, as it was equivalent to killing at least twenty decently strong Zombies. If everyone had to pay that amount when returning from an excursion then the town would have to make quite some profit.

Zac drove some ways into the town, before turning into a few back alleys. When he found a secluded spot with no pedestrians he quickly exited the vehicle and put it in a cosmos sack before quickly walking away.

He knew that cars were generally safe if he parked it somewhere, but he didn’t want to take any risks as there were inscriptions on his vehicle making it special.

Most cars on the frontier were actually booby-trapped nowadays with various explosives, as good terrain vehicles were hard to come by and fiercely protected. There were car mechanics who mainly dealt in installing bombs in hard-to-find places with hidden triggers. Stealing one was akin to sitting on a barrel of gunpowder that could go off at any time.

Zac walked around the town, getting a sense of the area. The whole place felt rougher compared to Eastern Hills, and there were more people who seemed to be barely scraping by. There was one thing that confused him a bit. He noted that many of

the weaker pedestrians seemed to have accumulated more miasma in their bodies compared to the stronger ones.

However, after seeing a street vendor selling food he understood why. Even if the vendor slathered the skewers in some sauce Zac could see that the meat was grey and sickly-looking, and he could even sense some corrupt energy in the meat. It seemed that food was getting scarce and they were forced to eat animals tainted with miasma.

Zac could only shake his head and keep walking, happy that he had stocked up with food that would last months in his pouches. He didn't have time to worry about the people slowly turning themselves into zombies, but instead he was trying to listen in on conversations to find out more about the Purifier. It didn't take long to learn where the purifier, who was apparently called Wang Guo, resided.

The Purifier ran what was called a miasma clinic out of the bottom floor of his building. Zac quickly walked over there and found that there already was a long line pale people, most clearly suffering from miasma poisoning. Zac shrugged and just went to the back of the line.

"Excuse me, how long does it usually take to get to see the doctor? Is he still working at this hour?" Zac asked the man in front of him.

"Don't you know how this works?" the man turned over with a dour face, though he quickly moderated his demeanor after seeing the huge axe on Zac's back. "We're lining up for getting a chance at getting treated tomorrow. Mr. Wang only has open office once a week, and he treats people as long as his Cosmic Energy allows."

Zac wasn't too enthused about waiting the whole night in line when there was no guarantee he'd even get to meet the Purifier. As he was mulling over what to do he suddenly spotted a man walking straight up to the closed doors and entered.

"Who was that?" Zac asked the man in front of him.

“One of Lord Perseverance’s lieutenants,” the man answered in a hushed voice. “They always get purified after returning to town.”

Zac understood the implications. The rules clearly weren’t the same for everyone. Since this Mr. Wang seemed to change his tune depending on who visited, then Zac wouldn’t need to wait in this endless line. Zac was worried about the Purifier being limited somehow to only helping out once a week, but it seemed it was rather that he didn’t want to waste too much of his time.

“So you think one can get purified without waiting if one pays enough?” Zac asked the man in front of him again.

The man nervously looked around and ignored the question. But a few coughs from Zac and walking up uncomfortably close forced the man to answer in a whisper.

“Hey, I don’t want trouble. Mr. Wang is petty, and if he finds out I’ve talked about him behind his back who knows what trouble I’d get into. But yeah, he is also greedy, so he’d definitely heal you if you paid enough. Honestly, he is only doing these open houses since the Lord Perseverance is paying him to,” the man wheezed, then pointedly started ignoring Zac.

Finally understanding the way things worked and unhesitantly walked up to the door to the clinic. A few mutters and curses were thrown his direction from those in the line, but no one wanted to cause trouble or lose their spot, so Zac entered unaccosted.

“Hey! Didn’t you see the line? Purifier Wang’s open hour starts tomorrow,” an annoyed, but sweet, voice entered his ears as soon as he walked through and closed the door.

It was a woman that was sitting by a clear glass table in a small empty lobby. She was quite good-looking in a sultry way, but her appearance only lowered Zac’s opinion of this so-called healer.

The woman was clearly wearing a “Sexy Nurse” Halloween-outfit rather than actual scrubs, showing off a great amount of

skin. Furthermore, she wasn't alone as a strong-looking bodyguard lounged in a chair nearby.

From what Zac had heard so far Wang Guo was far from some benevolent hero, but rather some shady person who had lucked into a great class. He could only internally sigh and walk up to the counter.

"I have traveled far to meet Purifier Wang, as I hear he is one of the most skilled people around," Zac said.

Actually that wasn't true, but Wang Guo was the closest one to the east of Eastern Hills, and Zac didn't want to waste more time than he had to.

"It doesn't matter. Purifier Wang only sees patients once a week, as he needs the rest of the week to recuperate. The great healing arts take a lot of strength," the nurse answered with a huff as the bodyguard started to move toward him.

Zac didn't respond, and instead only took out one of his cosmos sacks and poured a small hill of Nexus Crystals on her desk and leaned over it toward the startled girl.

"Unfortunately my time is limited. This is a small gift to you. I would be happy to give a much larger donation to Purifier Wang as well. Could you tell me what I'd need to do to get the same treatment as the guy who just entered?"

The girl expertly took the crystals and swept them into a Chanel bag with extreme swiftness, cleaning out the table in only a second. After that, she looked at the guard who shrugged.

"Since you wish to donate to help keep his little clinic running I'm sure Purifier Wang would be able to squeeze you in," she said with a smile, as she leaned forward a bit showcasing her impressive cleavage.

It was at this moment the man from earlier exited the door leading further into the clinic. He was surprised to see the gruff-looking Zac stand in the lobby leaning over the counter, and he appeared extremely incensed at seeing the receptionist's suggestive pose and smile.

“Who the fuck are you? Yao Yao, get away from that barbarian,” the man growled and quickly walked over.

“I mean no trouble, I am just here to see Purifier Wang,” Zac said as he quickly backed away.

“Then why the fuck are you hitting on my woman?” the lieutenant growled.

“He’s here to give a big donation to the clinic,” the nurse quickly said, trying to defuse the situation.

However, the comment only seemed to enrage the man further.

“So you’re trying to flash your little wealth in front of my girl? You might as well leave all of it behind then,” he said, and with lightning-quick movement took out a dagger, unhesitantly stabbing toward Zac’s throat.

Zac was about to kill the man in front of him by instinct, but in the last second restrained himself. Things also got more convoluted after the guard joined the fight after some hesitation, trying to help the angry man out.

Zac tripped one of the men and brought the other one with him down on the ground, causing a chaotic grapple-fight. He quickly knocked out the lieutenant on the way down, and after grappling around with the bodyguard for a few seconds Zac awarded him with a measured punch knocking him out.

Zac could only hope it would look genuine to the shocked spectator, as he was in no mood to pretend any longer than that. One of the men actually managed to land a punch in his gut, which made his wound hurt like a hot tong, souring his mood considerably.

“I’ll go ahead and visit the Purifier now. I would prefer not to be disturbed,” Zac said to the gaping nurse before heading into the inner parts of the clinic.

Chapter 168: Healing

Zac felt annoyed as he stepped through the door to the back of the clinic. He just wanted to go through the town unannounced and disappear before anyone could remember him. Yet he'd been forced to knock out one of the higher-ups of the town just because of some silly jealousy. Who knew what type of trouble would come knocking if he stayed too long.

With a few quick steps he walked through an unadorned corridor and found himself in an austere clinic looking like some ancient herbalist's treatment room.

Various herbs were hanging from the roof, creating a thick scent in the room, and the walls were covered with old drawings that seemed to show the chakras of the body. However, the room was completely empty, with the Purifier nowhere in sight.

Zac frowned and looked around a bit. Suddenly he spotted that something was odd with a large medicine cabinet, and with a simple push moved it to the side. It led him to another room, and Zac could only gape when he entered it.

The interiors looked like the basement of a real anime fanatic, if this particular fanatic was also a corrupt warlord. Stands displaying figurines were placed next to machine guns and actual gold bars. The room was completely cluttered, and in the back a man in his late thirties was lounging in a recliner, watching some old series on the television.

A cough from Zac made the man jump up like his ass was on fire. He quickly swiveled toward the exit, and seemed shocked to see a man decked in furs and a war axe standing in his sanctuary.

“Who are you? How dare you enter this place?” the man said with a flustered face as he tried to shoo Zac back. “Out, OUT!”

“I didn’t mean to intrude on your... Private area,” Zac said with another cough as he backed out into the clinic. “Your nurse sent me through to get some help in exchange for a donation. After that, I’m leaving this town.”

Finally after having stepped outside and closed the hidden door did the man seem to calm down.

“Wait here a second,” he said as he rushed over to the door and shouted for the nurse, who quickly came running.

The two exchanged a few whispers as the surrepticiously glanced over in Zac’s direction, until the nurse left again.

“No way, if I help you then Perseverance will get angry with me. You beat up one of his lieutenants, who knows what he’ll do,” the Purifier said, looking scared.

“That’s why I would like you to hurry up,” Zac said, simply pouring some crystals on the floor in front of him. “I pay well.”

Greed shone in Mr. Wang’s eyes as he saw the crystals falling like rain from Zac’s bag.

“Fine, tw-.. no, five thousand crystals, and not one less,” the Purifier said, not being able to stop himself from licking his mouth. “And leave right after, I will deny having helped you.”

“Fine, go ahead,” Zac said as he started to undress.

“Don’t you know anything?” the man hurriedly said with a look of disgust. “Who wants to see your naked body? Just point where your miasma wound is.”

Zac stopped, feeling a bit surprised, but pointed toward his side where the festering wound was located.

The Purifier took a step forward and a golden light started to emit from his hands. Zac carefully gazed at the light, and was relieved to see that that the Purifier didn’t seem to play any tricks on him. The light felt like concentrated Cosmic Energy, but it was somehow changed to contain far more of the vibrant life that always existed in it. It was like the opposite of miasma in a sense.

The man held his hands close to the wound and closed his eyes in concentration. Zac soon found a warmth reminiscent of what it felt like then eating healing pills around the blackish tendrils spreading from the core of his injury. But as soon as the warmth entered him it disappeared, as the Purifier backed away with wide eyes.

“Just how are you alive? What is this wound? There’s no way I can treat that,” he stammered, looking shocked at what he’d found.

“Never mind how I’m alive. I know it’s a bad wound, but I felt the effect of your skills. Do as much as you can,” Zac said with a sigh. “Besides, healing wound this severe should give a huge boost in experience to your class, right?”

Zac guessed that his class was considered a non-combat class, and that healing people would be considered progressing the class. If it worked the same as with a blacksmith and the like, healing a nasty wound should give a large boost of experience. The man still looked troubled, but the reminder seemed to have reawakened the greed in the man.

The Purifier once again extended his hands, though much more carefully this time, and the golden light emerged once more. It started on the outer edges of the wound, and Zac was ecstatic to find that the corruption was melting away at a speed that far eclipsed what he was able to do by himself with his Dao of Trees.

However, Zac started to frown as the minutes passed and the purifier was starting to turn pale. A sheen of perspiration was already covering his face, but he still had only managed to work on the outer rim of the wound. The core was still the same, throbbing with miasma and rot.

Suddenly the man opened his eyes wide and fell back, spewing a mouthful of black blood on the ground. Zac was alarmed and made to move toward him, but an intense pain that was as bad as when he got stabbed by the Corpse Lord’s weapon exploded in his side. Huge waves of miasma started to spread out of it, trying to completely convert Zac.

He fought back the rampaging wound with everything that he got, putting his Dao of Trees on overdrive. Pale with anger and pain Zac stepped forward and grabbed the shell-shocked Purifier by the throat.

“What the fuck did you do?” Zac growled. “Fix it or I’ll break your neck.”

“I swear it wasn’t me,” the man squealed with pain. “It was your wound. It’s *alive*.”

“I don’t care, heal it right now,” Zac said.

“Don’t you understand? There’s no way I can heal it. Perhaps not even the strongest purifiers can. And look at me, you’ve poisoned me!” he said with tears in his eyes as he held up his hands.

The hands were greyish, almost looking like the hands of a Zombie. They also gave off the cold aura of death, indicating they were flooded with miasma. The sight quickly stopped Zac in his tracks, and he let go of the man who plopped down on the ground with a groan.

What the man said finally registered in Zac’s mind. The wound truly felt alive, as it time and time again tried to break through the Dao Field Zac had created around the wound. When it didn’t work it tried to break out from another direction, just like a caged animal.

The situation was under control for now, but Zac knew it would be very strenuous to keep his Dao Field going indefinitely.

“What do I do to calm the wound down?” Zac said with a frown, not wanting to just leave it like this.

“I have no idea. I only got this class since my family were exorcists. Or con-men, you know. I helped out until I was old enough to get the hell out from there and get a real job. I don’t really know anything about miasma or fighting the undead. I just push the light into the wounds and they heal,” he panted as he covered his zombified hands in the golden light.

“Man it will take weeks to rid my hands of this much miasma. And this is only the backlash. I don’t understand how you’re

alive, but you should go and say your final goodbyes,” he said with a bleak expression, though Zac felt he could discern some *schadenfreude* in the end. “I can’t imagine anyone surviving that *thing*.”

Zac looked down on the wounded Purifier with a frown, unsure what to do from here on out. He’d thought that visiting a Purifier would either heal him, or not work. The fact that it seemed to have made things worse wasn’t something he expected.

He could keep going along the edge of the incursion, finding other Purifiers to help out as well, but there was no telling how much time he would waste that way. Weeks, perhaps. And there was no guarantee that the other healers had any solutions.

The other option was to just hope for the best and push through the Dead Zone. That meant that he would have to go through areas with dense miasma while his wound was out of control though.

Finally he settled on staying the night in the town. He would wait to see if the restless attacks would subside. If things got worse he might have no choice but to seek out a better Purifier, but if the wound got back to normal again he would push through the Dead Zone.

“Sorry about your hands,” Zac said as he placed the agreed upon crystals on the ground.

“You should start working in earnest on your class. My wound came from an evolved Zombie, so this kind of injury will become more and more common. If you can’t heal these kinds of wounds, then sooner or later some wounded powerhouse might lash out at you in anger. That little bodyguard downstairs won’t be able to protect you.”

Mr. Wang didn’t answer Zac, but the Purifier’s frown deepened as he thoughtfully looked at his hands. With that Zac left the small room and walked through the clinic. Zac didn’t actually know if what he said was the truth, but humanity needed as many competent Purifiers as possible.

Wang Guo got such a gift thanks to his family's odd occupation, but if he continued like now that precious gift would get squandered, and it might lead to the death of many warriors who might otherwise have survived.

The two men were still lying unconscious on the ground when Zac returned to the lobby, though they had been repositioned so that their airways were unobstructed. The nurse called Yao Yao looked up when he appeared, but his facial expression must have been quite bad since she flinched away.

"Is there an ambush waiting for me outside?" Zac only asked with a hoarse voice as he gave the girl an even look.

"I don't know, no one has come in or out since you arrived. Is... Purifier Wang okay?" she answered looking a bit scared.

"He's fine, but a bit drained. He will likely not be able to work tomorrow," Zac said with a shrug as he exited clinic.

A quick look around showed nothing out of the usual, except the fact that the whole queue was looking at him with curious or envious eyes. There were no guards lined up, and Zac felt no danger through his sense, so he simply walked away.

A few quick twists and turns later he found himself in a secluded area where he changed his large fur cloak for a more nondescript one. He thought about changing his full face, but he was afraid of doing that at the moment.

The pain of the transformation might cause him to lose focus, which he couldn't risk while his wound rampaged around in his gut. He did however remove the bun, causing his long hair to cover his face somewhat.

Next, he hurried over to a tavern far from the clinic. He had already seen a few as he walked through the town earlier, as apparently many Zombie hunters didn't bother owning property. They left for long stretches of time, and their homes might be ransacked when they returned.

Instead many chose to stay in hotels and taverns while they were in town. Zac chose one that was neither particularly flashy nor run-down, and quickly paid for a room.

He was starting to get a bit dizzy as he was walking up the stairs, as the constant movement had put a strain on him. He opened the door with shaky hands and with a muffled groan he sat down on the floor, finally able to focus on the Dao of Trees.

Time slowly passed and Zac was extremely relieved to sense that his wound was slowly calming down, allowing him to relax somewhat. However, he didn't dare to relent, so he kept his Dao going, even if it was starting to cause some strain. He felt that as long as he could keep this up for a couple of more hours he'd be back in decent shape, to the point he would dare enter the Dead Zone.

But unfortunately the night wasn't fated to be a quiet one, as the subdued sounds of steps stopped right outside his door.

Chapter 169: Nature's Barrier

Zac frowned as his danger sense flared to life. He quickly rotated his cosmic energy as a few large emerald leaves started to flutter around him as though he was sitting in the middle of a hurricane. The next second the door exploded into wood chippings as some unknown assailers were firing automatic rifles from the other side.

Zac didn't get flustered and instead only slowly got to his feet. Not a single bullet actually hit him as each and every one was miraculously intercepted by the leaves that were seemingly haphazardly fluttering around him.

It was Zac's second new skill, [**Nature's barrier**]. It was a High F-Graded skill that created a barrier of leaves that automatically intercepted incoming projectiles. Their movements weren't haphazard at all, but rather followed some intricate pattern that Zac still couldn't make heads or tails of.

The leaves were extremely durable, but a few tears started to appear from on them the incessant firing. Almost all bullets hit true, making Zac believe that the attackers had some sort of class that aided in with aim. However, the leaves quickly restored themselves, only at the cost of some Cosmic Energy.

Nature's Barrier wasn't one of the 9 high graded skills in the repository for nothing. It provided an extremely durable extra layer of protection. It also had a few other strong points that suited Zac quite well. The durability on the leaves was based on his Endurance, which was quite unique for barrier spells.

This alone made it worthy of the High-grade rank. The stopping-power of most spell shields was based on Intelligence, meaning the shields a physical warrior would summon could barely provide any safety.

The leaves could also be empowered with his Dao of Trees, making it was a perfect fit. However, there was no need to do that for some random rifles. However, after testing the skill out on the island he found that the rounds that the sniper rifles fired would easily penetrate the leaves. So he would need to imbue the skill with his Dao to protect himself from that type of attack.

It was the very same sniper rifles that had prompted Zac to get this skill even though he believed he might get something similar from his class in the future. Zac felt that apart from his high stats he had no proper way to protect himself from attacks. Even some weaklings managed to burn through all his defensive charges and almost kill him with the help of three rifles.

The high priest could create a field of fire that incinerated any attack, whereas the Corpse Lord had turned his very body into a treasure, providing far higher protection than average skills. Even Ogras would have no problem surviving an attack from sniper rifles, as he only needed to meld with the shadows.

Zac waited a second for the shooting to die down before he blasted out from the broken door like a raging bull. Outside stood two men, who seemed extremely shocked to see an unscathed Zac emerge. The interruption caused the pain in Zac's side to flare up again, causing a constant annoyance.

A swift slash from a small tomahawk ripped open the throat of one of the attackers, who helplessly slumped down on the floor with a wet gurgling sound. At the same time, Zac grabbed the throat of the other man and dragged him back into the room.

“Who sent you?” Zac asked.

“P-please don't kill me. I was ordered,” the man said with horror in his eyes.

“Who?” Zac only repeated while he tightened his grip.

“Lord Perseverance,” the man quickly said, obviously having no problem betraying the town leader. “You flashed a lot of

wealth at the clinic, and you hurt both the Purifier and a lieutenant.”

Zac shook his head, not too surprised with how things had turned out. He had only hoped that someone who could stay alive this far and even lead a town would have better sense. Zac tightened his grip once more, and this time the crunch of broken bones could be heard in the room. Zac dropped down the corpse on the ground and started to prepare for his next move.

He swapped out his normal boots to the pair that had no sole, which would allow him to use his movement skill. He had a feeling he would need it since the tavern was completely silent. The two had emptied a clip each, yet there was no commotion, clearly indicating something was up.

Finally he was ready to break out, but before Zac left he looked down at the two bodies on the floor, some loss in his eyes. It wasn't really sadness over what he did, but rather at what he was becoming. Perhaps he didn't need to kill those two, but he wouldn't leave any hidden risks. It was based on what Ogras said during the third wave.

He truly didn't just represent himself anymore. Leaving his enemies alive would be like releasing the wolves back into the mountains. Zac couldn't always be around to protect those close to him, and if he kept being merciful his friends and family would be in constant danger.

He still didn't take out **[Verun's Bite]** when he exited the room, feeling there was no one in this town that could force him to get serious. A quick glance around showed a completely empty hallway, confirming his doubt that people had been silently evacuated while he meditated.

With a few quick jumps, he quickly descended the stairs, but a sense of danger made him immediately move away with **[Loamwalker]**. This allowed him to narrowly escape the explosion of a claymore that destroyed the whole stairs where he stood just now.

Zac frowned as he saw the destruction caused. These Zombie hunters were extraordinarily well-equipped it seemed. Zac

could only guess they had raided some army base in the vicinity since those types of explosives shouldn't just be lying around.

Zac had no doubt that when he exited the little tavern there would be a firing squad waiting for him. He wasn't really worried about the outcome, but rather about the rumors that would spread if he went out like a tank and decimated the attackers.

There still weren't too many people who were able to do things like that, and he didn't want to alert either the government or any invaders monitoring his activities.

To get around the problem Zac simply decided to create his own exit, and with a few slashes and a kick, he walked out of the building from the side and quickly ran away. He heard a shout from behind, but now that he was out in the open he wasn't worried they'd catch him.

Zac activated [**Loamwalker**] and sped through a side passage heading for the edge of town. However, he was interrupted after only ten seconds by acute pain in his side, forcing him to slow down to normal speed again.

Zac groaned and touched his side, feeling the deathly chill of miasma pulsating. He already sensed it a bit when he used [**Nature's Barrier**], but it truly looked like his wound reacted to him using cosmic energy at the moment.

The wound wasn't like this before back on the island, making the preparations and research he'd done with the help of Ogras and Alea essentially useless. It was as though a beast had woken up in his wound and started causing all kinds of problems, which no one could have expected. Still, Zac knew it wasn't time to think about it now and instead kept running toward the outer wall of the town.

Zac was ripping through the streets with breakneck speed even without using his movement skill or cosmic energy, empowered only by his overpowered attributes. However, the hunt was on, and two warriors were closing in on motorcycles. Zac wasn't sure how they could find him so easy, and could

only guess they either had a drone or some skill that could track him within a certain area.

Zac was in no mood to get entangled with whatever the riders had planned, and took out two pieces of rocks he still kept in his bags. He quickly turned around and threw them in quick succession, and the two stones shot like cannonballs into the tires of the motorcycles.

The two pursuers couldn't keep their vehicles under control even with their improved attributes, and they quickly jumped off the motorcycles who went out of control crashing into a storefront. A quick glance back showed that they were scuffed but largely unscathed, and one even readied a gun while rolling. However, Zac rounded a corner and the shots fired harmlessly hit a wall.

Luckily the town wasn't too large, and Zac soon found himself at the outer wall. A soldier on guard up on the wall walk heard the commotion of the pursuit, and quickly levied his rifle at Zac and fired. Zac quickly dodged the first shots as he took out a Tomahawk. With a quick throw, it embedded itself deep into the chest of the guard, who fell over the side with a groan.

Not wanting to stay one more second in this town, Zac climbed up the wall quick like a monkey, turning back to remember the faces of those who tried to kill him. But a sense of danger made him heedlessly throw himself over the edge before he could make out anyone's appearance.

An enormous fireball blasted into the section that Zac stood on a second earlier, completely erasing the section of the wall. Zac frowned as he looked back up on the wall he just fell down from. It appeared there were some competent people in the town, after all.

With a grunt, he quickly ripped out the tomahawk from the chest of the fallen guard, and from there ran straight toward the Dead Zone. He ignored the pain in his wound, and once again activated [**Loamwalker**] for a whole minute this time in order to create some distance.

As soon as he found a road leading south-east he took out his car and quickly sped off. As he drove he once again was able

to mainly focus on the Dao of Trees, and he was relieved to feel that the wound was quickly calming down again. It appeared that while using Cosmic Energy triggered the wound somewhat, it wasn't anywhere close to what happened did when it was attacked by the healing energy of the Purifier.

It was completely quiet as Zac sped along through the dead of night, with neither humans nor zombies in sight. Zac knew that this would be the case, as the zombie hunters had essentially cleaned everything out along the rim of the dead zone. To find targets they needed to head further and further in.

It felt a bit shameful to escape in a mad dash instead of just walking out tall and proud. It wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. But it felt too stupid to eradicate a main opposition to the zombies just because one of the lieutenants being an asshole, creating an unfortunate chain reaction.

Besides, one man fleeing this so-called Lord Perseverance was a far less attention-grabbing gossip than one man killing the lord and his whole army.

Zac kept driving for almost an hour without any lights out, guided only by his keen reflexes and eyesight. However, his mouth curved downward in annoyance as he suddenly saw an array of lights blocking the road ahead.

With a somber expression, he stopped the car and walked out, almost blinded by the light. It felt like there was no point to try and sneak around, as they clearly knew his location. He needed to clear this situation up unless he wanted to be hounded for days.

Between the floodlights Zac saw roughly thirty men lined up, armed with both military weapons and things like swords and spears. The vehicles themselves were clearly of army-make, reinforcing Zac's belief that this town had ransacked an army base, or perhaps even was founded by deserted soldiers.

"A lot of trouble for just one person," Zac said with a steady voice as he looked at the captors.

“Oh, Lord Perseverance doesn’t get his name without reason,” a teasing voice answered.

“So what do you want?” Zac asked, trying his hardest to keep his increasingly short fuse in check.

“What do all men want? Beauty, youth, wealth. You, unfortunately, don’t have the first two, but I do believe you have the last one,” the voice responded, eliciting guffaws from the other bandits.

“We know you have a Cosmos Sack large enough to fit a car. Throw it over, along with everything you wear, and I’ll let you leave,” the man said, prompting another round of laughs.

Something snapped in Zac, and he wordlessly took out his weapon. This time it wasn’t a tomahawk or the twohanded axe he wore on his back, but [**Verun’s Bite**]. He didn’t expect any of the men in front of him to tell any tales of his distinctive weapon and fighting style.

Because enough was enough.

Chapter 170: Conquest

”Alright, what’s next?” Ogras said with a sigh as he cracked his neck.

It was just like that god damn man to go gallivanting just when he became a Lord, leaving all the boring work for others. Now Ogras found himself stuck with Adran, who was starting to look more and more disagreeable by the day. A quick look at his new watch told him he’d been stuck in this room for over three hours.

At least the new government building was far better than the stuffy old tent that Adran used before. It was a large four-story structure with quite a few rooms, all nicely ventilated. It was one of the first things they finished outside the wall, as Ogras believed that the growing population needed feel the power of the government.

“There have been a few complaints by the so-called experts, citing bad working conditions. A few have requested to be sent back to New Washington,” the stocky administrator said after looking at his docket.

Ogras only snorted in derision, showing clearly what he thought about that.

“Everyone is making do with what we have. Cease work on those people’s homes and focus on those who are properly integrating. No point in wasting effort on those kinds of people,” the young demon lord said with a shrug.

There had been some general dissatisfaction amongst the humans after the third wave. The fact that they were almost overrun by three incursions had frayed their nerves, causing some unrest. The fact that they won in just a few hours didn’t seem to be much of a comfort for them either.

Ogras had to admit that his actions right after Zac left hadn't helped much. As soon as Zac went on his journey Ogras gathered every single demon, having each of them swallow a piece of the Springroot. There actually were two who refused, and they were summarily killed without trial.

Next, they walked over and rounded up every single human, who counted over a thousand by now. They were herded to the large square of the Academy, mainly to keep people from running away with the help of the gravity array. The same procedure happened there, though Ogras used a bit gentler methods. He only slightly tortured the first ones who refused to eat, instead of outright killing them.

It had turned out that a total of 8 people were infiltrators, and Ogras still couldn't be sure if that was all of them. However, having some spies in one's midst was not uncommon, so he decided to not waste any more effort on it. Just take those two incessant women who kept pestering him. However, some of the humans had been crying about "human rights violations" or the like, making him want to show them some real violations.

Still, he knew he had to keep himself in check for when Zac came back. The man was still a bit too soft for Ogras' taste, and the demon knew Zac would cause a ruckus if he handled the little humans too roughly. And Ogras really needed to stay on his good side for now.

"Finally there is the issue of the town who calls itself Refugee Harbor. Since they are located on one of the closest islands and quite populous we aimed to integrate them into the array network first, getting access to their manpower. However, two parties have been rebuffed already, refused access to the town. The second time they were even attacked and forced to flee," Adran continued with a small frown.

"Oh? There was such a thing?" Ogras asked with some interest. "How strong are their forces?"

"From what we can tell not overly powerful, their strongest elites are perhaps slightly stronger than the Valkyries. We still

have no information about the leader either, as he hasn't shown himself," the administrator answered.

Ogras mulled it over as he tapped his fingers against the metallic mold that he had stretching out from his missing forearm. He looked forward to see the results of his little experiment.

"Ready the large ship Zac, uh Lord Atwood, bought and 50 soldiers. Ah, bring 2 squads of the girls as well, might as well give them some experience," Ogras said as he roused himself with a small smile. "My ass is getting splinters from sitting here day after day. Conquering a town sounds like fun."

"We did receive reports of something odd going on there," Adran hesitantly said. "It's the place with the missing children and adults acting weird."

"Oh, I'll bring Janos and Alea as well. They'll be able to counter any mind-altering things, if that's what's going on there," Ogras said with a shrug as he stood up and left.

As Ogras walked out of the government building he couldn't stop himself from throwing a glance at the gaudy tower on the other side of the wall, still spewing out its nauseating rays of light. Just looking at the place made Ogras pissed off. He'd never met as annoying a construct in his life.

Clearly, being stuck in some forgotten pocket of the multi-verse had turned the tool spirit insane. However, he really needed to ingratiate himself with it, as he felt that the ticket to his current problems might be through the repository.

Ogras still remembered the soul-wrenching feeling of standing in front of the Nexus Crystal, realizing the system deemed him unworthy. He'd walked the path of the elite, struggling in the shadows all these years, yet it wasn't enough.

Not a single upgrade path was available to him at the moment, locking him to the F-Grade. He always knew this might happen as he followed an incomplete heritage, yet having it confirmed was a real blow.

At first, he'd lived in denial, hoping that it was the System holding him back with its restrictions, but he knew now that

wasn't the case. He knew that perhaps all 3 of the leaders who invaded the island already had evolved, and were only waiting for the system to release the shackles. In fact it was quite normal to send people right at the precipice of evolving.

It would allow passage through the Incursion, and the second they got through to the baby world they could take the last step into E-Ranks. From there they could properly spend their time to solidify their foundations until they could burst out with unprecedented power as soon as the last restrictions were removed. That was one of the reasons that these humans hadn't been erased so far.

Yet he was stuck where he was, unable to take that step. Who knew how long it would take for him to gain whatever was needed to improve. The Fruit of Ascension wasn't enough. He even sacrificed a hand in order to rack up some god damn achievements, hoping that would allow him to evolve. But not even that was enough for The Ruthless Heavens.

At least he was lucky enough to be able to hide behind a human netherbeast. He needed Zac to keep growing into a true monster until he could solve his current conundrum. Ogras knew that more promising men than him had been stuck on this very step for their whole life until they died, consumed with regret.

Yet Ogras refused to succumb to that fate. His eyes once again moved to the towers in the distance.

The Umbra.

He had been despondent, desperate even, until he saw that inheritance. A new path opened up to him as he read those two words. Those two words might not mean much to others, but to Ogras it represented the difference between dying a nobody and defying the heavens.

A full inheritance of someone who walked a very similar path as himself. Such a gift was something that essentially everyone in the multi-verse thirsted for. It was far superior to some Dao fruit or heritages. It could save hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of effort, depending on the grade.

Perhaps it could even give him a large enough boost for him to dare go through with his quest. He had thought that he wouldn't get any quests for a long while due to his actions in forfeiting the invasion, yet it was there, staring at him.

**[Doubling down (Unique): Slay an Incursion leader.
Reward: [Tower of Eternity Token], restrictions removed.
(0/1)]**

Ogras saw it as sort of a test by The Ruthless Heavens, a chance for him to prove it wasn't cowardice or weakness that made him give up on the invasion. However, until he saw the inheritance he simply ignored it. He barely survived a fight with one Church's generals, how the hell would he survive the big boss?

And don't even mention the Tower. He barely survived the desperate push that got him to the entrance of the third floor. He still had one chance left, but as he was now he knew that going back was suicide.

But armed with an inheritance? That was completely another matter. Even more, if he managed to drag a certain human with him to walk in front of him to take the brunt of the trial...

Ogras couldn't help feeling the universe was paving a true path of supremacy for him, and couldn't help whistle a tune as he walked toward the house of the old goat. He was thinking of bringing him along. Not because he really needed an experienced sailor, but rather that he enjoyed Sap Trang's company.

"... So anyway, don't mention that... appearance... to lord Atwood, or you will be spending the rest of your short life on the toilet," a familiar voice could be heard from inside the small hut the fisherman had built for himself.

Intrigued, Ogras melded into the shadows as he slipped into the house.

"Little lass, no need for threats. But you know, you shouldn't keep secrets from your significant other. If he truly likes you he won't mind you are a swamp monster," Mr. Sap said, looking troubled.

Alea looked extremely annoyed at the fisherman's comment.

"He's not... Well anyway, I am no swamp monster, it's just some complications from my class I am working out. Lord Zac doesn't need to know about it until I've fixed it, ok? And you, why are you hiding in the shadows?" Alea said as she swirled around to the shadows in the corner.

Ogras was a bit embarrassed but didn't let it show as he walked out of the shadows.

"Let's go. We have a town to conquer. And the old goat's right. Why not just stay in your real body for now, instead of wasting all that Cosmic Energy? He's not even here."

"It's NOT my real body!" Alea raged. "And I can't have people talking. Whatever, let's go."

With that, she simply grabbed the collar of the old fisherman, who helplessly followed the two.

Next, the three walked over to the Academy, intent on bringing a few of the little spear girls. They had just gotten their classes, and some real battle might remind them they weren't immortals just yet.

"We only take orders from lord Zac," one of the leaders simply said after Ogras told them about the mission.

Ogras didn't know her name since he hadn't bothered learning any of them, but he couldn't help cursing Zac as he looked at the small army. He had all these girls willingly entering contracts with him, yet he only stayed by himself in his large empty castle. Perhaps he really was a monk.

"Well, that might be true, but Illvere and Alyn take orders from me," Ogras said with a small smile. "I hear you want to go to the Ratman incursion in a week? It would be a shame if those two said you weren't ready."

The Valkyries angrily glared at him for a bit, before they reluctantly started to get their gear.

"Don't be so glum, we're going to liberate a town that refuses to acknowledge your great Lord," Ogras said with a laugh

after seeing their faces, which actually seemed to improve their mood.

In just two hours the awe-inspiring Carrack set out, slicing through the waters. It was manned by a group of eager demons and two squads of Valkyries who not only balefully glared at Ogras but at Alea as well.

The girls were in a generally competitive mood against the poison mistress, as she went over to the Academy every now and then to “improve their natural poison resistance”, as she called it. Ogras knew it was more about marking territories, but he didn’t really care.

It took a few hours but soon they found themselves outside the gates of Refugee’s Harbor. Ogras considered just blasting a hole in the whole thing with the ship’s weapons, but reluctantly decided against it. He was sure it would end with some dragged out lecture from Zac when he got back.

Instead, he anchored some distance away from the town and only left a skeleton crew to man its cannons in case would be needed after all. The rest followed him toward the gates. Ogras threw a disdainful glance at the scared-looking guards standing on top of the wall, and with a shake of his head took a step forward.

He guessed he’d have to at least give them a chance to surrender.

Chapter 171: Shamelessness

“You know who we are. Open the gates or we’ll open it for you,” Ogras said with a loud voice, looking up at the hapless guards.

There was no response for a few seconds, and the silence stretched on as the humans up on the wall looked at each other with despondent faces. Ogras was almost thankful for their inaction, as it would save a lot of time in their end.

“Very well, thank you for making this easy,” Ogras said with a shrug as the gate was drowned in darkness.

Constant sounds of wood breaking and splintering could be heard as the thick gate was impaled by numerous shadow spears. Shouts erupted from the wall, and a few attempted to stop Ogras’ attack. A few arrows and ineffectual spells sailed toward him, but Ogras effortlessly ignored them without breaking a sweat.

The demons didn’t stay passive when they saw their general being attacked, and a multitude of far more powerful attacks blasted into the wall, completely decimating the top sections of it. Screams and wails could be heard, but Ogras didn’t care as he stepped forward. It felt nice to not be the defender for once, but the conqueror.

Step by step he walked through the remains of the gate, his shadows suffocating the small fires that had started from the spells. The demons followed behind him, and finally the Valkyries walked in the rear with troubled countenances on their faces.

One by one they stepped through the wall of smoke into the town proper, and found themselves face to face with around two hundred warriors. They looked scared but they stood their ground, surprising Ogras somewhat.

“Please, we just want to live our lives in peace, why do you need to keep coming here?” a woman in the front shouted with red-rimmed eyes.

“Well if it doesn’t suit you, then you’re welcome to swim out of our sphere of influence,” Ogras answered with a smile. “But as long as you stay in Lord Atwood’s kingdom you will need to follow his laws.”

“Since when is this area under the influence of demons? We never agree to follow one of your kind,” another man with a large sword shouted back.

“Then you’ll be happy to learn that Lord Atwood is a bona fide human. Now let me ask you something. Where are all the children?” Ogras retorted.

The defenders looked at each other with troubled faces, apparently readying themselves for a fight.

“Why do you want to know that? There’s no need for you to bother our children,” the woman aggressively shot back, fear covering her face.

“Well, depending on what you did with them we will either kill you all, or we’ll-“ Ogras didn’t get further as Janos walked up and coughed next to him.

“Something... Off. Catch me one?” a voice suddenly said next to him, making Ogras turn to the taciturn Illusionist.

“You’re saying they are under an illusion?” Ogras asked with a low voice.

“Maybe. Saw glimmer in eyes. Mind control,” Janos answered with a small shrug.

Ogras thought it over for a second until he turned his gaze to a building that was placed just behind the defending army. With a slight exertion, he managed to extend his shadows all the way over there, and with a few well-placed stabs he destroyed the supporting beams of the structure.

The house soon collapsed with a large crash, making many of the defenders worriedly turn around, afraid of getting ambushed. Ogras took advantage of the brief lapse of focus to

flash over and grab the woman in the front. Shadows swirled all around her in a fraction of a second, and she was completely immobilized as Ogras teleported back to his own side.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? RELEASE ME!” she shouted and tried to frenetically rip free from her binding.

The shout made the humans finally realize what just happened, and a few shouted some weak demands to release her. Ogras only snorted and nodded at Janos who walked over and touched her forehead. She quickly calmed down and her face gained a wooden expression, devoid of any life.

“Ask now,” Janos said and backed away.

“What’s your name?” Ogras asked the woman placed in a trance.

It was one of Janos’ more convenient skills. The only downside was that there had to be quite a difference in attributes between the illusionist and the target for it to work. Besides, even weaklings with extremely strong convictions or wills could break out of it, though this woman seemed to possess neither.

“Katherine,” she mumbled without changing her expression.

“What happened with the children of this town? Are they dead?” Ogras asked.

Ogras knew that if these people had killed all the kids, then Zac would have personally eradicated everyone here, so it would make his life quite easy. They could simply mow every combatant down, construct a teleporter and be back before supper. But if not, perhaps the situation was more complicated.

“He’s holding them captive. We need to follow his order or he’ll hurt them. He ordered us to make you leave,” she said, some fear once again emerging on her face.

“Who’s he?” Ogras asked intrigued.

It took a special level of scum to go through with that kind of plan, and Ogras was almost impressed.

“The lord, Lord of Eyes. He’ll hurt them unless we do what he says,” she repeated.

“Why don’t you just kill him, and you’ll all be free?” Alea asked as she stepped forward.

“We can’t, it would harm the children,” she said with a frantic shake of her head.

“Why?”

“It…” the woman began, but started frowning in confusion.

“Hypnotic suggestion,” Janos said.

“What?” Ogras asked, slightly annoyed that the man still hadn’t worked out his speech impairment after all these years.

“Protective measure. Implant suggestion. Can’t attack, fail,” the Illusionist said with a pained face.

“He’s saying that his lord has implanted the townspeople with a hypnotic suggestion. An attempt to kill him or rescue the children will end in failure, and even kill the children,” Alea translated, being used to Janos’ stilted speech.

“Then why bother with kidnapping the children? Can’t he just hypnotize them to follow his orders?” Ogras asked skeptically, feeling that the whole thing sounded like a pain in the ass.

“Weak hypnotist, too many, too big suggestion,” Janos said.

Ogras finally understood what was going on. Hypnosis generally wasn’t some supreme skill that could make people, especially strong cultivators, believe or do anything. Hypnosis was essentially tricking the brain, not forcing it to believe something. No hypnotist could make a man kill himself, for example, as that would go against the primal instinct of them.

However, this Lord of Eyes had found a pretty smart solution. He didn’t implant a suggestion that tried to force the into unconditional surrender, but a suggestion that an attack on him would end with the hostages dying. For all people knew, it might actually be true, so implanting it would be far easier than saying that the lord was simply invincible.

It was an extra layer of protection the hypnotist created for himself on top of having actual hostages. Ogras brows rose at the realization, as this level of cowardice was something else. Still, the man couldn't be a complete weakling if he not only managed to capture all the kids but even managed to implant the whole town with suggestions.

He only hesitated for a second before he put on his [**Circlet of Tranquility**]. It was the same item he'd used before to protect himself against mental attacks, and it also worked against mind control. It might be an over-the-top measure against some random hypnotist, but he wouldn't gamble with his little life. It would be a true embarrassment if he was hypnotized by some hack at an isolated town on a baby world. He might just as well kill himself from embarrassment.

"Where is this Lord of Eyes now?" Ogras asked next.

"He's hiding in the library," the woman answered, her face once again having turned expressionless.

"I'll be right back," Ogras said, as he looked at the building the captive indicated.

"Do you need help?" Alea asked, but only received a small laugh as an answer as the shadows swallowed Ogras.

In no time he walked amongst the book-cases, the claws on his feet creating a clacking sound in the otherwise silent library. Rows and rows of dusty books lined the building, actually making Ogras a bit excited.

This baby planet was far more interesting than he ever could have imagined. The poor saps lived their whole lives without a speck of Cosmic Energy, yet they had created so many fun things. The almost endless amounts of movies and shows were a testament to this, but that only scratched the surface.

Lately he'd asked around a bit about the history of the world from various humans, mainly the congenial one currently running the tavern, and what he learned truly astounded him. The humans of planet Earth had a shorter history than his own clan, yet they had gone from cavemen to taking the first steps of discovering the multiverse.

Who knew, if they were left alone for another few thousand years they might actually have become a new lineage of the technocrats. He wondered just how they could be so industrious. A few thousand years was just a blink in the history of his own homeworld, and nothing really changed.

Perhaps a few wars would take place, and a few new clans emerge. Perhaps there was something in the air of this world making the humans so restless, forcing them to keep reinventing themselves.

He truly looked forward perusing this library, but that would have to be saved for another day. He kept scanning the building with **[Omniscient Eyes]** until they fell upon a certain bookcase against a wall. His mouth tugged upwards and he walked over. He gripped the wooden bookcase with a hand and simply flung it away, not bothering with finding the hidden mechanic.

Behind the bookcase was a drape, hiding the entrance to a small room. When Ogras pushed the garment to the side he saw a grimy-looking man wearing rags sit pathetically in a corner.

“Wha- Please, spare me! I’m just a nobody, tending the books,” the man cried with a wretched appearance.

“Spare the waterworks. The Lord of Eyes, I presume?” Ogras said as he stepped into the small hideout.

“Wha? No, I’m Gregor, the librarian,” he answered with a confused face, but before he could continue a spear of shadows penetrated his leg, making him shriek in pain.

“Don’t waste my time, I want to be home before dinner. Where are you keeping the kids?” Ogras said as he looked down on the prompt showing above the man.

Gregor Johnsson.

Level: 34

Class: Hypnotist (Uncommon).

Most used skill: Seed of Suggestion

Highest Attribute: Wisdom

“Wait, ok, it’s me. But know that if I’m harmed any further the children will all die. We are linked through my Mental Hive-skill,” the man said between grit teeth.

Ogras snorted as he felt the gem on his circlet heat up, and from how hot it got he realized that it was actually a quite strong attack. The man must have leveled up his [**Seed of Suggestion**] skill to at least high level from using it on the whole town.

“Don’t bother using your Seed of Suggestion skill like on the villagers. And even if your little suggestion was true, what would I care about some human brats dying?” Ogras said as another leg of the hypnotist was gored.

The man was now wailing and crying on the floor, sounding like he’d been put through the thousand tortures.

“Please, no more, I’ll do whatever, I’ll work for you! The kids are hidden in the town hall. There’s a hidden bomb shelter in the basement, they’re there,” Gregor cried, tears and snot freely running down his face.

“It’s a shame, someone like you would make a decent asset. This level of shamelessness is in a way a strength. But I don’t want to rock the boat with the little lord at the moment, I have an inheritance to receive, after all. So my apologies,” Ogras said with a somewhat regretful face.

The Lord of Eyes confusedly opened his mouth, but before he could speak a large shadow spear impaled his torso, completely skewering him. A small burst of cosmic energy entered Ogras’ body, but it soon dissipated out of his body once again, reminding him of his predicament of being stuck on the bottleneck.

Ogras placed the corpse in his bag and returned to the armies who were still in a standstill.

“It’s done, the kids are in the basement of the town hall over there. Hidden bomb shelter,” Ogras said as he appeared.

From there it didn’t take long to sort everything out. When Ogras showed the corpse of the Lord of Eyes, chaos took hold of the defending army, with everyone crying that the children

were doomed. Only when the Valkyries and a few demons were leading out roughly three hundred haggard, but living, children would they calm down.

The Hypnotist was dead, but the suggestions still lingered in their minds, though they would dispel by themselves over time according to Janos. The Illusionist also walked around and helped to speed along the process, and soon a few people, including the formerly captured woman stood in front of Ogras and the others.

“Thank you for releasing us from this mental prison, and sorry about the way we acted earlier,” the woman said with some embarrassment.

“It’s no problem. Lord Atwood would surely have come to your aid sooner if we knew what was going on here. Since your town appeared fine on the surface we mainly focused on saving those facing death on the other islands,” Ogras said with a straight face. “I’m surprised you are so calm facing us demons. Most humans are a bit more... shocked.”

“Well, we only met the Beastkin in the Tutorial, but I guess you’re another of the new races sharing the fused world?” the woman asked.

“Uh, right. You actually have cultivators here?” Ogras asked intrigued.

“Yes, roughly two thousand of us are cultivators,” she answered as a matter of course, but Ogras could barely contain his surprise.

This could only mean that Refugee’s Harbor was a drop-off site for a human tutorial group. It explained why the town was largely fine when most of the humans they scooped up on the various islands were on their last legs. But before he could ask any follow-up questions a beautiful, but dirty, woman somewhere in her twenties pushed herself to the forefront of the cultivators of Refugee’s Harbor.

“Please, excuse me! You said that the Lord’s name is Atwood? Is it Zachary Atwood?” she asked with a hesitant face.

“Why do you know that name? Who are you?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“I’m Hannah, Zac’s girlfriend.”

Chapter 172: Balance

A horrifying pressure spread out from Zac as he stepped forward with **[Verun's Bite]** in his hands. The previously rowdy squad from Perseverance didn't have time to react before he was upon them. A horizontal swing of **[Chop]** ripped through most of the group, crushing hastily erected defenses like dry twigs.

"Attack!" the voice from earlier frantically cried, no longer having any joviality in it.

However, it was to no avail as a dozen glittering leaves whirled around Zac as he methodically cut down everything. Spells and bullets flew through the night, but the defensive skill of Zac proved its worth as the attacks were continuously blocked. The few that snuck by couldn't really hurt Zac either, as between his monstrous Endurance and E-Grade robes he was nigh-invulnerable to ordinary attacks.

A car door slammed and an engine started, clearly indicating someone had quickly grown tired of the fight. Zac only shook his head with some regret, and detached his fractal edge, letting it cut the military vehicle and its driver in half. He would actually already have finished the fight if it wasn't for the fact that he didn't want to damage the vehicles.

They would be a great asset to his town, as he didn't have many good vehicles at the moment. With some inscriptions and the engine modifications, they would be great tools for his force to explore and traverse the main continent in the future. After all it seemed the Creators wouldn't sell any land vehicles. The next step after the ships would be the flying spiritual tools, but that was extremely far off.

There were roughly thirty people who were part of the ambush, but the fight only lasted for less than a minute before the night once again was blanketed in deathly silence. Corpses

were strewn all over, some as far as a few hundred meters away from the blockade. After the initial rampage a few tried to flee, but between **[Loamwalker]** and the fractal edge projectiles Zac shot out none survived.

However, the battle wasn't completely without consequence, as Zac was panting with a pallid face. He tried to end it as quickly as possible in order to not let his wound go out of control again, but it was no stopping it as a horrible pain spread through his side.

Worse yet, it started to absorb miasma as well. It seemed like something in the wound almost had turned into a small whirlpool, slowly rotating while drawing in the deathly energy in the atmosphere. Luckily the Dao of Trees blocked out a good chunk of it, forming a natural barrier.

After a brief hesitation he chose not to head out of the Dead Zone. Between the Cleansing Pill he ate back on the island, the Purifier's efforts, and his Dao, it would take weeks before the concentration of miasma reached the levels of concentration it had right at the beginning. Besides, the wound calmed down after a while the last time, so hopefully the same would happen again.

Still, he didn't wish to remain at the scene of the battle. It looked like only the leader who spoke in the beginning had a semblance of power, whereas the others were normal foot soldiers. Most used machine guns rather than skills, showing that their power was limited. The huge fireball that almost blasted him up on the wall of Perseverance was still fresh in his mind. He wasn't in the mood to take one of those blasts at the moment, as the leaves wouldn't do much against such an attack.

Zac therefore quickly collected all the vehicles as in greatest cosmos sack, gaining 10 military jeeps. After a brief hesitation, he also threw in the bodies of all the men as well, not wanting to leave them to give clues of what happened here. He wanted to leave the so-called Lord Perseverance with some doubt, and if he was smart he'd cut his losses.

Besides, even if they were enemies they were all humans. To leave them here would mean they'd turn to zombies eventually. He'd make sure that they would rest in peace instead. He didn't bother cleaning up the scene any more than that though, leaving the scars and cracks left from his and the other's attacks. Finally he put his own car into a sack, and brought out a new one.

It was one of the few vehicles that already was modified to run on crystals instead of gas. Earlier he used a normal one since he expected to enter a town, but now he had no such compunctions. Gas was scarce and he didn't want to waste it, while he had an almost endless number of crystals. Besides, the car running on Cosmos Energy had another advantage. It made almost no sound, even more-so than an electric car.

Zac swooshed along the road, a silent spectre in the night. However, a frown started to emerge on his face, as the wound wasn't calming down, and instead kept rotating and absorbing miasma. He thought about stopping, but he still was quite close to the border town. Instead he kept driving for another two hours, until the first rays of daylight started to push through the thick grey clouds that seemed to cover the Dead Zone.

At that moment he stopped the car and put it into a Cosmos Sack, as he walked into the forest next to the road. Even with some sunlight it felt like the Dead Zone was blanketed in an endless gloom, the combination of miasma and the thick clouds creating a sort of a natural barrier against the suns.

As he walked along the forest he also noted that widespread terraforming was taking place inside. He still was quite far out in the edge of the domain of the undead forces, but the trees had already started to transform. They had long lost their leaves it seemed, though Zac couldn't tell whether it was due to the miasma or winter's approach.

Since Zac Dao of Trees he could somewhat sense how the trees was faring, and he wasn't surprised when he felt that most of the trees were dead or on the verge of dying. However, there were some that defiantly struggled on in the face of death, actually somehow gaining strength from the struggle.

Others had simply mutated, and seemed to be quietly absorbing miasma as nourishment. As he saw it he was reminded of the adage that life finds a way.

After having walked for thirty minutes he felt confident that he was both far from any civilization, meaning he shouldn't run into any zombies, or far enough into no-man's-land that no zombie hunters should find him. Therefore he started to look around for a place to camp.

He still hadn't slept during the night, as he was busy trying to calm down his wound earlier. Even with his stats he was starting to get tired, and he didn't want to risk losing focus inside an incursion. He looked around a bit and finally he found a tree that stood tall and proud, actually still having its leaves on its branches.

It was one of the trees that had found a way to combat the miasma. Zac didn't really understand how, but after holding his hands to it for a while it almost felt like it slowly transformed the deathly energy back into normal Cosmic Energy. It was essentially the reverse of what zombies and unholy beacons did.

Zac was also happy to sense that the miasma actually was quite a bit sparser around the tree, prompting him to sit down and rest his back against the thick trunk. Still, even with better environment his wound wouldn't stop absorbing miasma.

Until now he'd held back on trying to cut out whatever was in the wound, as the Demon physician had noted it might come with unexpected side-effects. It was a bit like cooking a fugu fish, one wrong cut and the whole fish would turn poisonous. There was a risk with the same happening to Zac, so he decided on slowly healing.

However, things had changed since the purifier tried fixing him. It wasn't slowly getting better like before, but rather getting worse. Zac had seen the effect of miasma poisoning first-hand, and had no desire to become the walking dead.

He was tired, but before sleeping he'd give it a chance. He took out a knife he'd prepared for just this occasion, along

with some bandages and a flashlight. Next he took off all his clothes on his torso, displaying the wound out in the cold air.

It truly looked ghastly, a black hole with tendrils spreading out from it. After a brief touch it didn't feel hot like an infection, but rather a numbing cold. This much was the same as before, but one startling change had taken place. The wound was now slowly pulsing, as though it had a heartbeat of its own.

The disgusting sight only reaffirmed Zac's decision, and with a somber expression he disinfected the knife before he gingerly cut into his flesh right outside the core of the wound. His plan was to quickly cut out the center, and then slowly heal the tendrils after the main part of the wound was gone.

However, he only managed to cut a centimeter into his body before a wave of pain unlike anything he'd felt before flooded his mind, overloading his system. Zac had no way to produce any semblance of a response as his eyes rolled up into his head and he collapsed back against the tree unconscious.

The suns were already quite high in the sky when Zac woke up again with a start, and he was surprised to see that he'd actually slept for 5 hours. It was far longer compared to the two to three hours he usually slept, and guessed it was since he wasn't in great condition.

After making sure nothing in his surroundings was amiss he quickly looked down at his wound, and breathed in relief that his little experiment didn't seem to have made anything worse. The black core was still slowly pulsating, but it hadn't spread out while he was knocked out.

A quick internal check also showed that his body didn't contain any more miasma compared to earlier. In fact, it almost seemed there were less of it than before in his body. However, Zac was worried to see that small amounts of miasma were still entering him. As he dressed again he pondered on his next step.

He was truly walking along blind, not knowing what the hell the thing in his body was. It was quite unfortunate that neither Calrin nor Ogras could figure anything out. The undead faction was extremely vast with tens of thousands of classes

and means, and there was no way they could find out exactly what he'd been struck by.

It also was quite hard for the gnome to buy anything used for purifying the miasma. The undead empire saw those types of pills as a direct affront to their faction, and that selling those types of things an attack on them. The pills themselves weren't hard to make, but few were willing to draw the undead's ire for the limited revenue that came with the purifying pills.

Zac sighed and rested his head back against the large tree again, closing his eyes. It truly was a marvelous specimen, surviving in this harsh climate. The suns were obscured, and the energy in the atmosphere was corrupted, yet the tree pushed forward, not giving up. Zac thought of trying to glean any hints from it, and entered a meditative state as he tried to understand what the tree actually was doing.

The hours passed and soon the small Dao field he had erected around his wound started to change. Before it was like a cloud that blocked miasma from entering the wound, but since the cloud was porous some snuck through. However, the cloud started to transform, turning into a small whirlpool as well, moving the opposite direction from the whirl in his wound.

Chapter 173: Disrupt the Call

Zac felt he'd stumbled upon something important as he slowly controlled the Dao of Trees to rotate over the wound. It was a way of manipulation of the Dao that he'd never done before. Usually, he just pushed the Dao into his attack or his body, but now he realized that type of usage probably could be likened to back when he was alone on the island.

The way he used Cosmic Energy in the start was to simply push it into his arms and legs to run faster and punch harder. There was no refinement or finesse to it, and most of the energy was wasted. However, using it in a controlled manner, such as through skills, showed far higher effectiveness.

It seemed that it was the same with the Dao. Even though he was anxious to get going he felt it was critical to test this further, so he slowly manipulated the little whirlpool containing his Dao of Trees. Eventually he managed to manipulate it slightly, such as growing or making it smaller.

More importantly, as he kept the small Dao field spinning over his wound Zac noticed that keeping it going was almost effortless. He still hadn't really understood exactly what the power from Dao was. Ogras called it the Power of Laws, whereas Calrin mentioned Spirit. Zac himself thought of it as mental energy.

In any case, the consumption of mental energy seemed far lower when he'd turned the Dao field into a small whirlwind, as though the spinning was keeping the field from dissipating on its own. Zac only needed to supply it with a bit of energy every now and then to keep the rotation going. It was far more efficient than wasting a lot of energy to keep a blob of Dao to cover the wound for a while, and then rest a bit as the wound grew worse again.

Having finally found a way to combat the corruption he got up to his feet and started to walk away. However, he quickly walked back and cut off a few saplings from the tree, as the mutation was worth further study. It had even opened up a new avenue for him in a sense, showing a possible direction of how to take his Dao one step further.

Without death, there can be no life. The tree had taken that even further, as it created life out of death, converting miasma to cosmic energy. It was like the seasons, the death of winter turning into the warm life of summer. He felt it was very possible to use this concept into improving his Dao of Trees, though he wasn't quite there yet.

Zac kept going southeast through the forest, not bothering going back to the road. It didn't make much difference in speed whether he drove over broken-down roads or sped through the forest on foot, at least not now when his wound was under control.

Had this been a year or so ago he'd be extremely freaked out by the gloomy atmosphere, but now it barely registered as most of his mind was preoccupied with the Dao of Trees. If he wasn't on a clock he would have secluded himself right at this moment, trying to formalize the wisp of insight he'd gained as he sat under the resisting tree.

However, time waits for no man. There were myriad things he needed to get done. The first and foremost was finding Kenzie, but that was just the start. Next thing on his list was the hegemony quest. There was a one-month time limit on it, so needed to finish it quickly. It was only called the first step, which made it sound like a classic quest chain.

But even though it was only the first step it gave extravagant rewards, making Zac extremely curious as to what other things were waiting down the road. It was also quite welcome considering that there soon was the global treasure hunt.

He had been hemming and hawing whether he should go or not, especially now that it looked like he'd become a persona non grata with the government. But it was starting to feel like he didn't have much of a choice. The weight of responsibility

was starting to push down on him. He simply wasn't strong enough at the moment.

He might be strong compared to some rabble, or even on earth in general. Yet he barely managed to fight off the Corpse Lord, who wasn't even the leader of the incursion. That was only one of the Incursions, and beyond that were the Dominators who were suspiciously silent.

The treasure hunt was supposed to give unique opportunities to gain power, and he couldn't afford not to go anymore, no matter what he personally wanted to do. He would just have to keep his head down and fight for opportunities, and hopefully not get dragged into any large-scale conflict.

Four days quickly passed, and Zac felt he was making good time through the Dead Zone. He'd been afraid that he would be bogged down by endless waves of Zombies, but he barely saw a single one. Then again, it made sense since the incursion had grown way out of proportion, being almost as large as the old United States in landmass.

Still, with his superhuman attributes, he'd crossed around half of the Dead Zone, as he guessed he was somewhat near the Core by now. Just two or three days of travel to the southwest and he should be right at the Nexus Hub that was the core of the Undead Incursion. Of course, he was heading east, almost in the opposite direction. For the moment he had no interest in meeting the real core forces of the Undead Empire.

Most of the area he walked through was pure wilderness, and he skirted around the towns and hovels he passed while he traveled. He assumed that the Zombies would be gathered in the towns, as those who wandered out into the wild would likely be picked off by the wandering beasts.

Zac did, however, get accosted by mutated beasts every now and then, frenziedly trying to ravage him. Zac quickly dispatched the monsters, not bothering with collecting their bodies. They were teeming with miasma, making the meat inedible unless you were desperate. Especially since yesterday, the monsters had grown particularly wretched, as the concentration of miasma had grown far higher. As for their

hides, Zac already had a mountain of those from the wolf hordes.

Since there were almost no impediments to his travels he decided to take a few extra hours a day to work on his Dao. Being forced to ceaselessly combat the surrounding miasma had one strong point. It was continuously sharpening his control over his Dao. The deathly energy of the corrupted Cosmic Energy was also a great contrast to his Dao of Trees, which was a subcategory of the Dao of Nature or the Dao of life.

They were almost opposites, and seeing the two forces combat each other through the whirling vortices kept giving Zac new insights. It was on the third day he realized that while the two forces were restricting each other, they also were empowering each other in a sense.

Some of the miasma was still entering him even with his Dao whirl keeping vigil, but Zac initially didn't care as the Dao of Trees purified a bit of the energy in the wound as well. However, Zac started to note that energy kept going in, but never left.

As he pushed through the wilderness he pondered on the implications. The wound was acting up less and less as his control of his Dao increased, but the energy had to go somewhere. He was starting to get worried that something was accumulating inside him, but a loud explosion dragged him out of his thoughts.

The explosion clearly didn't come from a natural source, and though Zac generally wanted to avoid problems he couldn't help but curiously move toward the source of the sound. In just a few seconds a large plume of smoke rose in the air in the distance, giving him a clear direction.

As he moved forward through the gloomy forest he started to hear the sound of machine guns incessantly firing. Zac was surprised, as he didn't expect human activity this far into the Dead Zone. He'd moved quite quickly, sleeping only a few hours each day for four days by now, bringing him far into undead territory.

There should be good targets quite a bit further out with many towns being overrun by zombies, so there weren't many reasons for Zombie Hunters venturing this far inside. It exponentially increased the risk of running into something dangerous, like the core invaders themselves. Besides, Zac had already run into two beasts that were quite a bit stronger than the tiger that caused John so much trouble, so the invaders weren't the only thing to worry about.

The gunfighting sounded more and more intense as Zac increased his pace through the forest, until he finally reached the edge of the woods, the decaying trees giving way to what once might have been vast paddies, perhaps for growing rice. The vast irrigated field had turned into sickly puddles with thick fog wafting above it.

However, the fields weren't what garnered Zac's attention. Rather it was the huge swarm of zombies walking together, and the people desperately trying to impede their march. However, even with zombies dropping every second the number was just unimaginable. The number of Zombies couldn't even be put in the same category as those that invaded his island. If Zac had to guess there had to be at least half a million of them stumbling along.

It was an ocean of the undead, and the only solace was that there seemingly weren't any Aberrations or corpse golems amongst the ranks. There were however a few zombies who stood out from the mindless masses, and every now and again one would leap out from the ranks and try to snag one of the humans running along with the horde.

The resistance consisted of roughly 300 people, mostly of Asian descent, who kept moving along the flanks of the huge swarm of the undead, using various means of downing one zombie after another. Zac was a bit confused why they fought so hard though, as it seemed the endless hordes of undead were stumbling toward the core of the Dead Zone, rather than out towards the settlements.

Perhaps they simply tried to impede whatever was going on. Nothing good could come from hundreds of thousands of zombies gathering together, after all. If so, Zac could only

salute their brave efforts. Normally he would have helped, but between his wound and his mission he decided that this was a battle he would simply have to bow out from.

He was about to recede into the forest and walk around the army, but a prompt in front of him suddenly appearing stopped him in his tracks.

[Distruct the Call (Unique, Limited): The Undead are gathering. As a Lord of the living, spearhead the efforts to impede their progress. Slay 10 000 undead within ten minutes. Reward: 10 Purification pills (0/10 000) NOTE: Failure to complete quest results in your location and status be shared with the Lords of Undeath for 7 days.]

“SHIT!” Zac roared with frustration as he took out his axe while balefully glaring at the zombie horde.

Chapter 174: Sui

Sui sighed as she reloaded her rifle once again. Bullets were running low as they'd harried the endless hordes for days now. Unfortunately she had no alternative, as her skills were used for healing rather than killing, meaning she didn't even gain any experience from her attacks.

She didn't really care about that, but what she was doing left a sour taste in her mouth. She originally ventured out into the Dead Zone in order to find a cure for her people, not to hunt them like animals. But still she kept going, slowly firing one bullet after another, taking great care to hit the brains of the undead in order to save on ammunition. Because like it or not, they had to do something.

Yet it felt like they barely made a dent in their ranks with their tireless efforts. In fact, she suspected there were actually more of them now than when they began, simply since the undead numbers were bolstered as groups kept merging.

She was traveling with the scouts that were the first amongst those realizing what was happening. The dead were organizing. They'd heard rumors of zombies being gathered up by elite undead who were passing through an area, but nothing like what they were experiencing now. It was as though all the dead were receiving some call, and mindlessly headed toward some destination in the central zone.

Even the elite zombies weren't immune to whatever was beckoning them, as they too walked inside the ranks, hiding amongst their mindless brethren.

Though the small resistance army that gathered from four frontier village knew they were shooting at their countrymen, there was nothing to be done. They couldn't let the situation progress unimpeded.

Not that a many of them minded, Sui noted with a sigh, looking over at the tired but gleeful faces of a few of the Zombie Hunters. They couldn't care less about why the towns took action. They only cared about the fact that there suddenly were free targets just mindlessly wandering forward, largely ignoring the fact that they were getting attacked.

They likely saw it as free money. They only needed to survive the occasional attacks from the evolved zombies as they kept cutting down the lower zombies, not caring that they were once someone's family members.

"Shit!" a roar suddenly could be heard from behind, startling the hunters close-by.

Sui quickly swiveled her gun around, only to see a Caucasian man with long hair and madness in his eyes rush toward the zombie-horde with an axe in his hand.

"Stop, it's too dangerous! There are elite zombies inside!" she shouted in English, trying to stop the lunatic's charge.

However, it was to no avail as he kept running, a growl echoing in his wake. However, the expected scene of a man being swallowed by a sea of zombies after desperately swinging his axe for a few seconds didn't happen. Her eyes widened in shock as she bore witness to a level of carnage she'd never dreamed of before.

Zac grit his teeth as he pushed into the zombie horde, enraging the closest undead with his aura of life. With the time limit the System gave him there was no time to worry about exposing himself in front of the humans, so he rotated his cosmic energy to immediately create five huge fractal blades.

He let the five blades rip through the air with a speed that made his arms look like a blur as they each carved a path of bisected bodies and pools of putrid blood. However, even with over a hundred of them dying he barely made a dent in the army. A large surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, as even the gain from killing weak zombies was noticeable when he instantly killed dozens of them.

However, Zac almost paused his charge when he noted that Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that entered him when he killed the undead. Along with the energy there were also large amounts of miasma piggybacking into his body.

He never noticed something like that when he killed the beasts during the past days, but perhaps it worked differently when fighting with true undead, rather than corrupted beasts. Zacs mind frantically tried to figure out what to do, but he could only push more mental energy into fortifying the Dao-Swirl as he kept going. He couldn't stop now, as failure wasn't an option.

In order to quickly reach new targets he also used **[Loamwalker]** to shorten the distance between himself and the next clump of undead. Explosions of blood and viscera kept erupting around him as he madly kept pushing forward getting completely drenched in the blackish blood.

Only after five minutes did he stumble, coughing out a mouthful of ice-cold blood as his bloodshot eyes looked around with a wild glare. His wound was going haywire from the exertion and the insane amount of miasma that had entered him by this point.

The system didn't really give him much of an option with this quest, making him once again wonder whether it was giving him extra attention or if it was just an asshole to everyone. The moment he decided to back away and not get involved he immediately received a quest that forced him into the fray.

The ten purification pills would be a blessing, especially now that he was getting drowned in miasma. However, that's not why he decided to fight. The price for failure wasn't something he could afford. Giving he Undead Lords his location and status was likely a death sentence. Not only would the Corpse Lord he fought earlier be warned of his proximity, but his boss would be as well.

Between his festering wound and the disadvantageous terrain, he was in no mood for a second round with the undead nobleman. Zac wasn't even sure he'd survive the encounter, his improved Dao notwithstanding.

Thousands of zombies were quickly whittled down, and Zac could actually sense glee from the spirit in his axe. The growls created by the swings in the air slowly were changing into howls of exultation. An evolved zombie suddenly tried to get the jump on him, trying to flank him as he once again stepped forward to the next pack of the zombies, but a spectral beast suddenly appeared and ripped it into pieces.

This time the spirit didn't dissipate immediately though, instead opting to go on a rampage on its own. It was like a bulldozer crushing everything in its path. Zac didn't really understand how it worked, but he didn't mind as he was on the clock. He could only hope that the kills from the Tool Spirit counted toward his own kills at least.

The timer kept decreasing, and soon less than two minutes remained on the quest. Zac only needed a final push now, but he knew he was running out of time. Not the timer, but the amount of deathly energy that had entered him by now.

If he didn't do something quick he would turn to a zombie himself, even if he kept utilizing his Dao. In a final burst of violence he once again summoned more blades, this time completely overloading them and turning them into gargantuan blades of death.

With a roar he unleashed them into five directions, and a prompt told him he'd finished his quest. However, there was no time to take a breather in relief, as his body was wracked with an insane amount of pain, absorbing miasma at an unprecedented rate. Even stopping the killing didn't stop the miasma from entering his body, as it looked the huge surge had created its own momentum.

The small whirlpool in his wound from before had created a large physical manifestation as dense clouds miasma whirled around him, even following him when he ran away.

An unimaginable amount of corrupted energy kept pushing into Zac, spreading through his whole body before he even had a chance to nullify it. His Dao was already overtaxed and it felt like he was an ant trying to stop an elephant with the Dao of Trees. A numbing cold entered his extremities as his mind

was flooded with corruption. The deathly energy was quickly clouded his mind, and a blank rage was starting to take control.

Using his remaining sanity Zac quickly finished the quest, and suddenly held an inscribed bottle with ten golden pills. Zac shakily uncorked the bottle and hurriedly downed a pill, and immediately felt as though a radiant sun flicked to life in his stomach. He quickly integrated the energy into his Dao-spiral in order to directly combat the miasma trying to seize control.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough as there was just too much corruption inside him. The pill did what it was supposed to, but one of them wouldn't cut it against this extraordinary situation. Zac hesitantly looked at the bottle, but could only take a deep breath and swallow another two of the golden beads. His hesitation wasn't without reason, as he remembered what the Sky Gnome had told him.

Swallowing Purification Pills was like swallowing fire that burned away the corruption. One pill was already taxing on the body. Taking two was putting your life on the line. Three was tantamount to suicide. Yet Zac felt he had no option, and could only hope that the two rampaging powers would cancel each other out somewhat.

The gambit seemed somewhat effective, allowing Zac to take a quick breather. But the torrential amount of miasma entering him was almost endless. Zac's eyes suddenly widened in horror as he saw that even the zombies still standing in the horde around him started to lifelessly fall to the ground as the miasma was ripped out of their bodies to join the ever-growing whirlpool.

The effect was quickly rippling outward through the horde, and in just seconds even more zombies had died from loss of miasma than Zac's assault, with hundreds falling down with every breath.

Whatever the Corpse Lord planted inside him was completely unleashed, and was creating a growing storm in the area. Not even the evolved zombies were safe as the whirlpool greedily sucked out their corruption, instantly killing them.

A small solace was that the tens of thousands of zombies that were getting killed was counted as his kills, also awarding him with Cosmic Energy. However, Zac wasn't happy with the huge sudden increase of experience, as his defenses were quickly crumbling against the increased power of deathly energy.

Completely ignoring the consequences of over-imbibing medicine Zac quickly downed another handful of pills, leaving only one in the bottle for emergencies. The miasma whirlwind around him kept expanding, and without any alternatives he could only flee for an area with sparser amounts of miasma.

Even with 9 pills in his body creating a Dao-empowered blazing inferno of purification it was barely keeping enough to keep his sanity in check, and Zac's mind was a blur as he started running towards the woods. Worse yet, it no longer only was a problem of being flooded with miasma, but his body was also burning from the inside from the radiant energy of the pills.

The two powers almost seemed to be in contention of who could destroy his body first, as they rampaged through every part of his body, causing unimaginable pain.

However, Zac knew that if he relented the miasma would win, as the supply was almost endless in the Dead Zone. With no alternative he swallowed his final pill as he kept running, finally emerging from the core of the vast zombie horde.

By now a huge chunk of the horde was simply lying lifelessly on the ground while Zac's figure was completely shrouded in miasma almost dense enough to liquefy. The whirlpool above him even started to look like a hurricane with him as the eye. It made Zac look like a specter that was fleeing for the woods, surrounded by uncountable azure will-o-wisps.

"Wait! Let us help!" a voice from the distance entered Zac's ears through the chaos, but he was barely coherent at this point and ignored the call.

Through the haze of the miasma around him he finally spotted a line of trees, and he mindlessly ran toward it, his only goal to get away from this god-forsaken paddy and its zombies. His

desperation lent strength to his legs, and with great strides he disappeared amongst the trees, leaving a shell-shocked resistance army.

The zombie hunters and resistance fighters mutely overlooked the scene of carnage and desolation, unable to move for a few seconds. The scene of destruction they'd just witnessed was something they'd never forget.

Only one pair of eyes hesitantly looked at the direction of the ocean of miasma receding between the trees, and the man inside it.

Chapter 175: Changes

The clashes kept going for god knows how long between the two whirlpools in Zac's body, and the energy contained in the center between them was growing more and more horrifying. Zac knew if something destabilized whatever was going on within the blazing waves of energy he'd explode like a nuclear bomb.

The tenth pill had thankfully been enough for him to regain some sort of equilibrium between the two opposing forces, and he wholeheartedly focused his energy on keeping the energy fluctuations as stable as he could.

He was fresh out of ideas and options, but he refused to give in. Giving up control at this moment was tantamount to dying, and so he kept overtaxing his mind and kept pushing his Dao past its limits. He had no idea where he was going or how long he ran, but finally his legs went out, and he didn't have the energy to get up again.

Still, he kept fighting against the inevitable, hoping that something would change. His will had transformed over the past months, and even though the pain he was feeling far eclipsed what he went through in the pool of Cosmic Water, he never thought to end it.

Instead, he stoutly endured the raging battle between life and death in his body, his mind focusing on his goals and ambitions. For cycle after cycle the two whirlpools clashed, and Zac forgot everything except those two forces' ebb and flow.

A prompt flashed in his periphery as he kept struggling, but his mind was too over-taxed to notice it. He only kept focusing on stabilizing the two opposing forces and stabilizing his wound. Finally, the frantic bursts from the miasmic wound

gave in, just as Zac's Dao-swirl was on the verge of completely dissipating.

Zac thought he could sense a wave of reluctance and hatred before it disappeared and stillness settled in his body.

The clashes abruptly stopped, and relief flooded Zac's mind. But it also was the last straw as his mind quickly started to descend into darkness. He had kept himself conscious through sheer willpower, resisting long past his limits. But just before his mind submerged into a deep slumber he sensed something new in his wound.

A small seed barely as large as a fingernail, but containing enough energy to blow up a city was quietly nestled in his gut.

Sharp pain in his leg woke Zac up from his slumber with a groan. He looked around with bleary eyes, who widened at the sight of a desiccated zombie dumbly gnawing at his ankle. Luckily his gear and attributes kept him safe, as the bites only left some surface wounds.

Zac quickly slapped the head of the undead, instantly destroying its brain. However, the rapid motion caused a bout of vertigo, and Zac emptied his stomach without warning. Finally, after a few dry heaves he managed to sit up and look around with a squint, his head still aching from overusing his mental energy.

He was in some random forest, with nothing around as far as he could see apart from dead or dying trees. In his muddled state it took some time for him to realize something was odd; he wasn't hurting. That, of course, wasn't completely correct, as every part of him hurt. It was odd in the sense that the wound in his side that had plagued him for what felt like forever was completely inert, not even a twang remaining.

The only pain he felt at the moment was a general ache all over his body accompanied by a splitting headache from over-drafting his Dao. The great change prompted him to quickly close his eyes again and focus on his side.

He was amazed to sense that there barely was any miasma in his wound, and it was almost completely inert. It still absorbed a small amount of miasma, but it could barely be called a trickle. And that was with his Dao not currently rotating. It likely wasn't much worse than what anyone traversing the Dead Zone experienced.

Suddenly he remembered the small ball he saw right before passing out, but after checking around he couldn't find it in his wound. He even took off his shirt again to visually inspect the wound, but couldn't find anything either. However, he was able to note that the blackness of the wound and tendrils were quite faded. The skin they covered also wasn't cold like a corpse's like before, but had regained their warmth.

It was a relief, but Zac frowned as he remembered the sense of extreme power in that little ball that was created from the clashes between his pill-empowered Dao-whirl and the miasma in his wound. It took almost half an hour, but finally he found it. It was nestled right below his navel and had somehow integrated itself with his pathways.

The little beads seemed completely inert, as though the monstrous amounts of power it contained were locked away. Still, it was only after long hesitation Zac dared to channel some cosmic energy through the paths. It was with a huge sigh of relief he felt that the energy passed the bead by without it even reacting.

If it started making a ruckus from energy going through he would essentially be crippled, as the bead was nestled in a core position of the pathways. What made him confused though was that its position reminded him of what he'd learned about the Cores of D-Grade powerhouses.

They were often located in the very same position he found the bead, making it almost seem that he'd formed a Cosmic Core. However, there were some differences from what he'd heard about the topic. A real core was supposedly larger, and while the power contained in his bead was high, it was nothing compared to a real Core.

A real Cosmic Core was the source of energy for a D-Grade powerhouse. He still didn't really understand what that entailed, but from Ogras it wasn't only a matter of quantity, but also of quality. The energy a genuine core was of a higher grade than anything he could come in contact with, whereas his core was something else entirely.

There was also the issue of how it was formed. His core was created from miasma and his Dao, making its composition completely different from what it should contain. He didn't even understand how the core could form, as the two energies that it was made from should be each other's bane.

Zac guessed he would have to slowly try to understand what was going on, as he simply had far too little information to make any educated guesses at the moment. He would have to ask someone whether it was possible to form a Core embryo before reaching D-Grade or something of the sort. For now he had to focus on what he could do and instead opened his status screen.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 58 Class Hatchetman (F) Race Human (E) Alignment Port Atwood - Lord (Earth) Titles Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core Dao Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Strength 320 Dexterity 158 Endurance 227 Vitality 188 Intelligence 90 Wisdom 85 Luck 93 Free Points 6 Nexus Coins 49 903 653

Zac's brows rose when he saw the number of Nexus Coins he somehow possessed. He'd gained around twenty million nexus coins since he checked last. He knew he gained around 70 to 100 Nexus Coins from the Zombies, so killing 10 000 of them for his quest should account for less than a tenth of the total number. His memory contained some blanks from his desperate instinctual flight earlier, just what had happened?

That wasn't the only thing, his level had increased by two. He was somewhat close to leveling to 57 before running into the

zombie horde, but still he'd gained a whole level on top of that, which was quite a lot seeing as how arduous it was becoming to reach new levels.

He also sensed that it wouldn't take much effort to gain another level, bringing him just one step away from level 60. A quick glance at a watch reassured him at least that only one day had passed, making his current leveling speed the highest he'd ever managed. He wondered what humanity thought when they saw him push past two levels in no time.

His stats had improved once again almost across the board, and he quickly noted a large reason for this. His Seed of Trees had finally reached High level, bringing it just one step from the peak. His speed of improvement was almost unfathomable, and it made Zac realize why most people ventured out adventuring rather than sitting at home meditating when they were stuck in a bottleneck.

He never would have improved his Dao of Trees to the middle grade if it wasn't for the battle with the Corpse Lord, and his current breakthrough could be directly attributed to experiences while moving through the Dead Zone. He quickly opened up his Dao Screen and took a look at his evolved seed.

[Trees (High): Endurance +10, Vitality +40, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]

The seed now gave a whopping 60 attribute points, doubling up from before. Zac couldn't help but get a bit excited even though he knew it would happen. Comparing from how it was before his new insight gave him +15 Vitality, and 5 points in Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom each.

His insight was based on the dynamic nature of the life of a Tree, how it went from almost a death-like state during winter back to teeming with life during summer. It was everchanging, and it was only through death that life could come. Even if a forest burned down, the ashes became nourishment for the seeds germinating in the ground.

Zac felt that this concept was applicable to many things, but for the moment he had no time to properly sit down and ponder on it. He had too many things to do, and he didn't even

know where he was, or what to do about the miniature bomb lodged in his body uncomfortably close to his family jewels.

There was however one more change in his screen that might give him a hint of what was going on. He saw that there was a new Title in his growing list of accomplishments. With anticipation he focused on the new Title called Core, but what he saw only made him more confused.

[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: ??????]

Zac blankly stared at the odd line for a while until he hesitantly closed it with a frown. After mentally going through it in his mind there simply was no reward from the Title, differing from all other ones. If he didn't know any better he would have guessed there was a bug in a computer system.

But the menus and prompts weren't part of some random program, it was part of THE system, an Entity powerful enough to conquer multiple dimensions.

He was completely confused as to what the weird line meant, and he wasn't even sure whether it was something he should ask around about. The thing with bugs was that they tended to get corrected, and he wasn't sure how the system dealt with people that did things they weren't supposed to.

Zac had a feeling the weird prompt was the result of a series of coincidental circumstances. The combination of his specific Dao and whatever the Corpse Lord injected him with had transformed and created something odd through the circumstances of being triggered by the purifier.

Next was the insane amount of miasma that entered him in a very short span of time. Normally he shouldn't have survived something like that. It was the same with the pills. Taking two was risky, three was suicide. But he gobbled down ten at the same time and still lived to tell the tale.

The only reason he could think of as to why he was still alive was his experience in the pond of Cosmic Water. The experience had been a bit similar, though it wasn't exactly the same. His body had absorbed extreme amounts of energy from

the Fruit of Ascension along with the Cosmic Water and was ripped apart and reformed untold time.

Perhaps that very experience had changed something with him on a fundamental level, and allowed him to survive when he by all accounts should have exploded or become an undead. However, he didn't have time to figure anything out or even get dressed because an eerie laugh dragged him out of his thoughts.

“Well, what's this?” a hollow voice drifted out from behind him, prompting Zac to whirl around and whip out his axe.

Chapter 176: Ghosts

Zac's eyes widened as he saw what faced him. The best way to describe it was that he was looking at a ghost. It was clearly an undead denizen teeming with miasma, but it was mostly translucent. It didn't really have any facial features, apart from its eyes shining in white and azure.

It looked upon Zac like it was gazing at an oddity, apparently not even considering the possibility of having found itself in danger.

"You've strayed quite some ways from safety, human," the specter said. "I will let you live if you can provide any hints of what caused the miasmatic disturbance in this area."

Zac blankly stared at the apparition for a second, not sure what to do. While the thing talked the talk, his intuition told him that the undead in front of him was not of the same power as the Corpse Lord he fought earlier. For a second he thought it might be one of the liches Ogras had mentioned, but he quickly discounted that possibility. The air around it wasn't even slightly distorted from power, and his danger sense didn't flare up.

Unhappy with the lack of response the undead looked ready to follow up with something else, but a glance at the wound on Zac's side stopped the wraith in its tracks.

"What *is* that on your body?"

Zac's mind worked a mile a minute as he quickly put on his robe again. It looked like his experience had caused a huge disturbance in the area, causing even the sentient undead to scout it out. Perhaps it wasn't even alone, with some of the real leaders close-by.

He was still not yet ready to start an all-out brawl with the undead forces. His wound was finally better, but he still hadn't

explored the changes to his body. He didn't want to overload the odd Core in him and go off like fireworks from destabilizing it. The core contained enough miasma to create over a hundred thousand zombies, who knew what could happen if it was unleashed.

“Oh, you are one of Lord Mhal's experiments...” the wraith said, but it shuddered as it looked at Zac's body, seemingly seeing straight through him. “But what is that core.... Wait, that axe... You're-“.

The undead didn't get further than that though, as Zac flashed right next to it with **[Loamwalker]** with his axe already mid-swing. With a growl the edge went straight through the head of the wraith with a swoosh, but Zac didn't feel any elation.

His brows furrowed when he saw that the undead was completely fine, and Zac understood why the undead was so laid back. The thing was completely incorporeal, and a normal attack wouldn't cut it. Without missing a beat he imbued the edge with the Dao of Heaviness and swung once again before the ghost even had time to react to the first swing.

He hoped that the effect would be like when he fought the ghost wolves during the first wave. His normal hits didn't work, but when he empowered the strike with the Dao he had no problem killing them. However, the empowered swing didn't fare any better, harmlessly passing through the undead.

Zac already knew that some undead were notoriously hard to kill, often requiring specific classes or skills to get the job done. Unfortunately he had no skill of that kind. Initially he'd hoped that his repository would contain one, but there were only so many skills in there.

“To think you left your island to come here. Great Lord Voshri was very intrigued when you defeated Mhal,” the wraith laughed as it started to flutter away through the woods. “I am guessing you're the cause for the disturbance as well. The benefits you will bring me.”

Zac knew he couldn't let this thing get away, as it would cause untold trouble. Not only did it immediately figure out who he was, but it also seemed to possess some sort of ocular skill. It

clearly managed to see the core inside his body. Even worse, Zac's brows rose in alarm as the ghost started to shine with a stronger and stronger azure light, starting to look like an unholy beacon.

Out of options Zac only had one idea. He'd used the Dao of Trees to combat the miasma for a week now, and perhaps it would be effective in combat as well. The problem was that he never had been able to push the Dao of Trees into his axe, forcing him to only use it for defense.

Zac once again used his movement skill to get next to the fleeing specter, and ignoring his tired mind unleashed a large Dao-field around him. This time he didn't create a whirl, but just expanded a sphere of influence that focused on the ghost.

The Dao field quickly drifted out, covering a diameter of over twenty meters around him, a huge difference compared to the Dao field he could create with his Dao of Heaviness. Clearly the field was effective as the wraith faltered as it tried to fly away, and even its light dimmed noticeably.

Zac was immediately upon the undead again, once again swinging his axe. He was ready to try to force the Dao of Trees inside the weapon, but it was surprisingly effortless to integrate the Dao into his axe as it once again ripped toward the head of the wraith.

This time the specter tried dodging, but it was to no avail as it was bogged down by the High-grade Dao-field. Desperate its eyes lit up like two ghostly lanterns, and a shield from miasma was erected in front of it. However, it was clear that it was just some sort of scout, its defense largely relying on being incorporeal. Its actual prowess was nowhere close to Zac's.

The shield couldn't even muster a defense against **[Verun's Bite]** that was teeming with green energy. The ghost didn't get decapitated but rather destroyed as the axe blasted through shining with its green glimmer.

The green light was the Dao of Trees, and it almost looked like it was extremely potent acid as it started to eat the specter,

who started to shriek as it tried to get it off. However, in just seconds most of the undead was gone, leaving only a husk.

“From death comes life...” Zac muttered as he looked at the ghost melting away in no time.

It looked like he had gotten himself an amazing weapon against the undead. It was extremely effective on the ghost, and Zac guessed that it would work wonders against the other undead as well. A great worry was that the incursion would be led by a Lich, but with his new type of attack he wasn't as worried anymore.

However, he couldn't relax just yet, as the miasma around the perishing ghost suddenly shuddered. Zac quickly backed away, just in time to avoid a huge azure fire shooting up at the sky, quickly consuming the last of the undead. It appeared that the thing ignited its last energy to either take him with it into true death, or give out its location.

Zac was far more worried about the second option, as it would mean the ghost wasn't alone. He had a strong feeling that the ruckus he'd caused yesterday wasn't small, and this thing was likely only one of many. Not wasting any time he immediately set out to the east, planning to get back on track.

However, he only ran for a few minutes before he was dismayed to find himself essentially surrounded by undead. No matter which direction he looked he could spot a ghost scout. Since it was just a matter of time before he was found out he simply decided to make a break for it and pushed his speed to the limit as he ran through the woods.

As he suspected a few bright beams exploded in the sky not long after, likely markers released by scouts. Zac's location was completely exposed and he could only pray that he didn't run into the main army. Zac ignored the ghosts and kept pushing forward, aiming to get as far away as possible from the core zone.

Before he blacked out yesterday he'd already been quite close to the center of the undead incursion, and judging from the density of miasma in the area he'd gone further inside during

his mad dash. He couldn't be held up here, since stronger and stronger reinforcements would come if he was bogged down.

He felt like a trapped animal as he ran through the gloomy forest with his eyes darting left and right, waiting for anything to pop out between the trees. He was proven right in almost no time, as he suddenly found himself in a clearing with over a thousand undead in waiting.

He wanted slap himself when he realized he'd been tricked. Finding himself facing a waiting army was no accident. The ghosts around him shining their lights were herding him. He'd subconsciously tied to run in the direction where there were fewer lights in the way, steering clear of the directions thick with ghosts, afraid the enemy would be there.

Worse yet, this undead army was something else entirely compared to the native zombies, as they all looked sentient and well equipped. And in the front of the army stood a familiar figure, and seeing him Zac couldn't help a groan escaping.

"It's you, after all! No wonder my wounds were aching!" the Corpse Lord roared with fury as miasma in the area started to gather around him.

The undead general was clearly back on his feet looking intact, though Zac was surprised to see that the arm he'd crushed with **[Nature's Punishment]** looked completely different from before. It was to the point that Zac suspected that it was actually replaced with another arm somehow, as it not only was larger compared to this other arm, it even looked to belong to some other type of humanoid.

However, the Corpse Lord didn't feel weaker compared to before. On the contrary, it felt like he'd even gained a power-up, and the new arm pulsed with power. Perhaps the arm once had belonged to a E-Grade individual, as the power emanations reminded him of those of the fiend wolf and hive-queen.

The Corpse Lord was backed up by quite a few other undead, but Zac felt that there was no other undead at the same level as the leader itself, which was the only good news so far.

Hopefully he was the only general that had come to the area to check things out, or at least the others were some distance away.

Time was of the essence, so Zac wordlessly sent out five large fractal edges toward the army, imbuing them with the Dao of Heaviness. However, the Corpse Lord only snorted as a vast aura of power emanated from him.

“Shields!” the general roared, prompting huge azure barriers to be erected along the army.

As for himself, the Lord simply jumped forward and punched the fractal heading in his direction. The collision created a huge impact creating a small crater in the ground, but it was clear which force was stronger. The new larger arm of the Corpse Lord didn't even get a scratch as the fractal dissipated into a few wild swirls of Cosmic Energy.

“Your tricks will not work again human. I do not know how you survived my Seed of Desolation, but I will slowly figure it out as I pick you apart,” the Corpse Lord said with a growl, its eyes still blazing with fury.

Zac was starting to suspect that the reaction of the general, who apparently was named Mhal, was due to more than just having lost the battle two weeks ago. The undead looked like he wanted to eat him whole. Perhaps the punishment for failing the mission was quite extreme.

Since the incursions had long stabilized they should have an open channel of communications with the main forces back on their own worlds. Who knew, perhaps the Corpse Lord's whole faction got implicated due to the failure. From how Ogras explained how it worked it seemed like a distinct possibility.

Zac knew that even if some other powerhouses were close, they would be attracted by a large battle. He would need to finish this up quickly and then flee at top speed, so he decided on a gambit. The undead army wasn't just waiting on him though, and a flurry of attacks flew his way as their leader simply was content to observe for the moment.

Cosmic energy gathered at the fractal on Zacs arm with extreme speed as he ran to keep a constant distance from the opposing side. Soon the fractal was filled, and he pushed forward with his arm once again, making reality crack.

The huge arm from the other dimension started reaching for the Corpse Lord, who didn't seem surprised at its appearance. In fact, he seemed gleeful, fully expecting the attack.

“Did you think the same attack would work twice?” the undead sneered as torrential amounts of corruption rose from three huge kettles carried by gigantic corpse golems.

Chapter 177: Ravenous

“I’m not limited by the Ruthless Heavens here. This time I have my legion with me!” the Corpse Lord roared as three huge streams of corruption rose out from the kettles and flew to intercept the emerging hand above Zac.

Zac wasn’t surprised the undead leader had something up his sleeve, but he didn’t change his mind. He pushed the gigantic hand forward, making it slam straight into the torrents of corruption as it moved to snatch the Corpse Lord.

A sizzling could be heard from his arm as smoke started to rise, making Zac grunt in pain. But he kept going, and soon the whole arm was submerged in the putrid liquid from the kettles. It was a far stronger version of the corruption that spewed out of the Corpse Lord’s own body during the last fight, and Zac felt as though he was submerged in a vat of acid.

“True Rot!” the undead leader roared as he pushed the miasma in the air to join the liquid from the kettles, pushing the decaying powers to another level.

The hand was completely submerged in a blob of turbid liquid as it stopped some distance from the undead lord, who looked at a panting Zac with a sneer. The effect of the ball of corruption was extended to Zac as well, and the effect was strong enough to singe him all over. The hair and beard he’d grown out fell out in thick clumps, and the cloak he used above his real gear was rotting away at a speed visible to the naked eye.

However, the Corpse Lord’s eyes suddenly opened wide in alarm as an emerald shockwave of energy scattered the blob of corruption. The putrid liquid flew in all directions, actually killing dozens of the undead soldiers, as a hand blazing in green luster emerged out of it.

The arm wrought out of nature didn't look decayed at all. On the contrary, it seemed even more vibrant compared to before, as small saplings and leaves grew from its rugged exterior.

“You!” Mhal roared, as he tried to perform a body swap, but it was to no avail.

The hand had somehow locked down space around it, turning the area into its domain. Zac sensed it was something like a Dao Field in a sense, but at the same time it was far sturdier. Aghast, the Corpse Lord tried to flee, but he didn't get far as the hand quickly closed around him.

“I'll take you with me! **[Seed Detonation]!**” was the last thing the undead screamed in fury as the hand clenched, causing a sickening crunch.

Zac froze for a second, bracing for whatever his foe had planned in revenge. But nothing happened, making Zac look around in confusion. The Corpse Lord had said seed detonation, likely trying to explode whatever he embedded in Zac's gut. But perhaps the odd changes it had undergone had broken the connection Mhal possessed.

Zac sighed in relief as he saw his gambit was successful. He was betting that the two upgrades to his Dao of Trees would supersede whatever the Corpse Lord had planned. A Dao Seed gaining two upgrades was a huge boost, and even with the support of the Dead Zone Mhal shouldn't be ready for the power-up.

He was correct. Though the three large kettles made the power of rot far stronger, it was no match for the concept of growth through decay. The hand even emerged stronger from the attack. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered him, effortlessly pushing him to level 59.

While there was utter chaos in the undead ranks from the sudden fall of their leader Zac quickly ran forward and stored the mangled remains and weapon of the Corpse Lord in his sack. The undead himself possessed a sack, which Zac quickly bound to himself and put inside his robe.

Zac had achieved his goal and was pondering what to do next. He even contemplated going on a rampage to push himself toward level 60. However, a sudden blaze of pain erupted in his body as the core beneath his navel sprung to life as it started to absorb miasma once again.

The last words of the Corpse Lord once again echoed in Zac's, making him wonder whether Mhal had some sort of contingency after all.

At least Zac noted with some relief that the miasma it absorbed wasn't too bad, not at all at the same level as before. Of course, continuously absorbing corrupted energy wasn't great, so Zac quickly started up a Dao-swirl above the bead to stem the influx, even though his mental energy was quite tapped out.

However, his eyes widened in horror when he felt the mental energy forming the Dao swirl getting sucked into the bead alongside the miasma. Zac quickly stopped the Dao-field, afraid he would damage his mind if it kept going. He was already almost wrung dry from yesterday, and along with this fight he was already close to his limits.

Right now was not the time to ponder on a response to the new issue because the undead army was quickly turning berserk after seeing their leader get killed. Huge lumbering corpse golems were rushing toward him as a dizzying array of attacks soared through the air.

Zac judged the army to be even stronger than his demon force, with real foreign invaders making up the bulk. Even at top condition this wasn't a fight he'd take on heedlessly. He quickly oriented himself as he dodged as many of the attacks as he could before he started to run around the army. It was time to flee.

A few of the golems moved to intercept, and Zac once again hefted his axe as he carved a path of carnage to make an escape. However, the undead here were not like the mindless zombies from before and they mounted a terrifying retaliation. He was constantly struck by fists almost as large as himself, and each one hit with the force of a truck.

He was also continuously pelted by ranged attacks, both mental and physical. His skill [**Mental Fortress**] was running on overdrive, and he was forced to unsummon the glistening leaves from [**Nature's defense**] as he was unable to keep up the consumption of Cosmic Energy from reforming them.

In just a few minutes he was completely bloodied with innumerable wounds. However, the undead army wasn't unscathed either. With each step of Zac's an elite of the undead army was destroyed as he pushed forward like a meat grinder on legs.

It didn't matter whether it was Corpse Golems, aberrations or elite zombies. Everything fell in front of Zac's relentless swings. The experience he was gaining was enormous, but he knew he couldn't keep it up for long. With every kill he gained Cosmic Energy, but more miasma also entered him.

If that was it, then it wouldn't be such a problem, but the core clearly was looking for some sort of equilibrium as it kept absorbing opposing energy as well. Since Zac couldn't keep the Dao Field going anymore it actually absorbed something else from him. His lifeforce.

It felt like he was slowly being sucked dry, and every time he killed an undead a little bit of his life was ripped away to keep the balance going. However, it wasn't like he could just stop, so the carnage continued until he finally broke away from the army, fleeing into the woods.

This time he wouldn't get controlled by any ghosts as he pushed straight east. A quick look around showed that the army at least wasn't following him. He'd caused massive losses to the army, and perhaps they didn't want to throw their lives away, instead opting to wait for orders from superiors.

A few of the scouts tried to keep track of him, but Zac finally managed to shake them off with the help of [**Loamwalker**] and his superior physique. However, he was completely spent by this point. The fight had cost him almost all his Cosmic Energy, and his mind was overtaxed after the last two days' efforts.

Even his body felt completely drained from the bead sucking the life out of him. At least it had calmed down by a bit since he'd stopped his killing spree, but things still looked dire. Even though he just wanted to lay down and sleep for a few days he kept running.

He just killed one of the generals of the undead army, and he didn't for one second think that there wouldn't be some reaction from this. He needed to create much more distance before he was satisfied. He really wanted to find a road by this point, but the forests and uneven plains felt endless as he ran for hours.

Zac's mind was starting to become a blur, all his effort focused on taking one step after another. He'd long lost any pursuers trying to keep up with him, but the problem of him getting continuously drained was persisting. No matter what he tried, from using his Dao to trying to feed the bead the energy from Nexus Crystals, it didn't work.

The only thing he found to somewhat help out was to eat meat from strong creatures, so he kept continuously eating dried meat as he ran. In just a few hours he'd consumed a couple of week's worth of food, but he kept ravenously putting one piece after another into his mouth as he ran.

The only permanent solution Zac could come up with at the moment was to keep running further away from the core of the Dead Zone. The drain on his body was based on how much miasma his body absorbed from the atmosphere. Zac figured that if he got to the edge of Dead Zone the sparse miasma in the air would result in his body wouldn't get drained to such a degree.

Still, even with his speed he knew it might take days to get far enough out as he felt he was getting closer and closer to his limits, meat or no meat. Those were the thoughts churning in Zac's muddled head as a bright light suddenly flashed from the left of him and he looked over with confused eyes. What entered his eyes was a large truck speeding right toward him, and in the next moment everything went black.

Zac was swimming in a sea of darkness, not knowing what was going on. He couldn't remember how he got here, or even who he was. Time and space had no meaning as he quietly floated in the endless black until a glowing warmth spread through the universe, rekindling his memories.

Zac stirred with a groan, and immediately heard a conversation above him.

“Why are you wasting our resources on that man? He is teeming with miasma, he's probably lived inside the Dead Zone for months. I don't know how he has survived, he doesn't seem to have an ounce of Cosmic Energy in his body, and he seems like he's on the verge of death anyway,” a disgruntled voice said as Zac felt something pushing him in his side. “Just let him quietly pass.”

“It was us who hit him with our truck, it's only right that we help him out. And how I use my healing powers is none of your business,” an irritated female voice from somewhere right next to Zac responded. “Besides, do you want to answer to the Battle Monks when they find out we left one of their kind in the wilderness?”

“Shit, we've already lost most of our army, but you pick up strays. Well, whatever,” the man muttered, followed by steps walking away.

The warmth kept flooding into his body, reinvigorating his drained cells. At the same time he felt that some miasma kept entering his body, though now the golden warmth was what got absorbed into his Core to balance it out. It gave his body a much-needed respite, as he was just too exhausted from the past two days.

He wanted to get up and see what was going on, but he was surprised that his body wasn't listening to him, not even allowing him to open his eyes. Instead, he was forced to lie there mulling over what the two said. The way the man described him was troubling, so he tried to properly sense the state of his body.

He was shocked by what he found out. He had no problem using his inner vision, but he almost thought he'd was looking

at someone else when he saw what was going on.

There was not a smidgeon of energy in his body, to the point that it almost felt like he'd gone back to be a normal mortal. At the same time his frame had undergone a transformation, and not a good one. Most of his muscles were gone, and he looked sickly or starving. Zac could only guess that his bulk was swallowed along with his energy into the gluttonous bead.

Finally there was the mention of battle monks. Zac didn't understand what they had to do with him, until he went over the battle from before. The fight had once again singed his hair clean he realized with an inward groan.

I guess I'm back to being Monk, was the last helpless thought in Zac's mind as he once again drifted into unconsciousness.

Chapter 178: Monks

Zac once again woke up from his deep slumber. This time he was relieved to sense that he was once again able to move, though the feeling of feebleness was still there. He arduously got up to a sitting position and quickly looked around.

He was in the cargo of a small military truck that was obviously still driving as it was bumping and waving around. Inside were another six people resting, four men and two women. All of them were east Asian apart from one of the men who seemed to be Indian.

Two were having a conversation with subdued voices, while the others were reading or maintaining their weapons. When Zac got up to a sitting position a few glanced at him, but soon lost interest and got back to what they were doing.

Zac still wasn't sure of what was going on so he first checked his situation. He wasn't bound or anything of the sort, and he still had all his cosmos sacks within his robes. It appeared he wasn't a prisoner, not that he really thought that after overhearing the earlier conversation.

Still, it was a relief since he wasn't sure he'd be able to mount a prison break in his current condition. A deep rumbling in his stomach reminded him of his wretched and starved state, and it also roused one of the girls who sat close to him.

"You're awake? How are you feeling?" she asked after she noticed Zac's sitting posture, and Zac could tell that she was the one who spoke earlier before he passed out again.

She was quite short, barely reaching 150 cm. Along with her petite frame, Zac almost thought for a second that she was a child. However, she appeared to be somewhere in her early twenties from her facial features. She didn't give off a strong impression from her appearance, but there was still something about her.

At first he couldn't put his finger on it, but after a while, Zac realized it was a slight aura of power. However, it was different from those he was used to, like his own or the Demon warriors. Their auras were drenched in bloodlust and something wrought from countless battles.

Hers was a subdued warm glow that gave off a rather comforting feeling. Another rumble came from Zacs belly, and with a slight flush the girl quickly handed over a can of sausages from her backpack

“Yes, thank you for saving me,” Zac answered with a hoarse voice and quickly devoured the small Vienna sausages with relish.

He considered bringing out something more from his pouch but decided against it with some regret. He wasn't in a condition to defend himself for the moment, and showing he possessed multiple Cosmos Sacks wasn't a good idea.

“We're sorry about hitting you with our truck. I'm Sui. We're heading out of the Dead Zone now, and you're free to join us,”

“Oh?” Zac said. “In which direction?”

“We're-“ Sui said, but didn't get further before a gruff voice interrupted her.

“Oh? You're awake? Which monastery do you belong to?”

Zac frowned and looked over at a man who sat opposite him. The voice was the same one that wanted to leave him for dead earlier.

“I am not part of any monastery,” Zac answered, deciding to tell the truth.

He felt it was no point in lying about the situation, as he had no idea what the so-called battle monks were. He'd be exposed in just a follow-up question or two, and he didn't want to get caught lying while he was in this condition.

Though he could sit up his body was far from restored, and he wasn't sure he would even be able to walk around at the moment.

“You’ve got some balls impersonating a monk,” the man snorted. “I say we throw him off before we arrive, we can’t afford to anger the Everlasting Monastery. Our villages depend on their protection.”

“Don’t be stupid, the monks are benevolent people. They wouldn’t jeopardize the population over something like that,” Sui said with a glare.

“What’s the Everlasting Monastery?” Zac asked.

“It’s a large monastery led by one of the most powerful people in the world, Abbot Everlasting Peace. The monastery is actually two days inside the Dead Zone, but the monks still reside there. More impressively, they are actually able to purify the miasma,” Sui said with some reverence on her face. “They have turned a large area into a safe zone.”

Zac’s brows rose at the explanation. Abbot Everlasting Peace was actually the one he was most curious about since the Ladder System was launched, even more so than Salvation and Thea Marshall. Abbot Everlasting Peace was the person who held the first spot on the Dao-ladder at the time.

Surprisingly there had been no information about him, or the Indian Guru holding the second spot on the Dao Ladder, in New Washington. So it turned out the monk was staying in the middle of the undead incursion, somehow eking out a living.

Zac felt it was no wonder that the Abbot had such a high level. He was living in the middle of an incursion, so he was bound to either perish or get strong, just like himself. A thought struck Zac and he opened up the ladders for the first time in a while.

Ladder - Level Rank Name Level 1 Super Brother-Man 59 2
Salvation 48 3 Thea Marshall 47 4 Enigma 43 5 Thwonkin’
Billy 42 6 Joker 42 7 Abbot Everlasting Peace 41 8 Daoist
Chosui 41 9 Silverfox 41 10 Guru Anaad Phakiwar 40 ...
100 Ling Tian 40

Ladder - Wealth Rank Name 1 Super Brother-Man 2 Smaug 3
Salvation 4 Joker 5 Enigma 6 Greed 7 Little Treasure 8
Thwonkin’ Billy 9 The Eternal Eye 10 Henry Marshall

Ladder - Dao Rank Name 1 Abbot Everlasting Peace 2 Guru Anaad Phakiwar 3 Super Brother-Man 4 Thea Marshall 5 Abbot Boundless Truth 6 The Eternal Eye 7 Silverfox 8 Father Thomas 9 Daoist Chosui 10 Little Treasure

Zac was shocked. Not even attaining a high tiered Seed was enough to push him to the top of the Dao ladder. It made him truly wonder just what kind of insights the monk had. He was actually a bit excited about going to the monastery now. Perhaps he would be able to glean some insight as to why the monk was gaining so much enlightenment.

Otherwise not much was changing on the ladders. The only large change since he checked last was that the individual named Dahlia had disappeared from the ladder. Before she was at the 9th spot, so Zac guessed she'd died. It happened every now and then, and it seemed that less than 30 of the original rankers were left on the ladder after roughly 11 weeks.

Some had simply gotten passed by others, while others died. To keep up with the top 100 of the world one needed to be constantly throwing oneself in danger after all. Another trend Zac was noticing was that the ladders were starting to get more harmonized.

In the start Zac was one of the few that existed on all ladders, while Thea was another example. But by now quite a few of those who were on the Dao Ladder also found themselves on the Level ladder. This was nothing odd, as gaining a Dao Seed not only improved attributes, but also empowered skills. It gave a huge boost and would increase leveling speed and survivability by a tier.

Zac himself would be long dead if he didn't have his Dao Seeds for example. Curiously enough Salvation still wasn't on the Dao Ladder though, defying expectations. There was a rumor in New Washington that Salvation was doing the same as the Dominators, gaining levels by killing humans, which was why he gained so many levels without gaining any Dao.

"Why are you heading to the monastery?" Zac suddenly asked.

"There was an... incident," Sui hesitantly answered, throwing a quick glance at Zac.

“Incident? You call most of our people getting slaughtered an incident?” another man in the truck retorted with a glare.

“A god damn lunatic came from nowhere, causing a huge amount of trouble. He was extremely strong, but I think he had gone crazy from miasma like he was on the verge of turning. He killed god knows how many zombies, but then the miasma in the area started to go haywire,” the man continued.

“Then everything turned crazy. Elite undead started to gather in droves, seemingly looking for the madman. We think he might have turned into a zombie lord or something, judging by the amount of miasma that entered him,” the man opposite spat with a frown. “We got caught in the middle of it. We got butchered. If I find that asshole...”

“You’ll what?” a scarred man sitting in a corner of the truck snorted. “Piss your pants? That guy was crazy strong, and now he’s a Zombie to boot.”

Zac had to force his face to stay neutral as he heard the explanation. He had no idea that he turned out to be a calamity not only for the zombies but the humans as well. He couldn’t let them know he was the one responsible for the chaos. Otherwise, they’d likely rip him apart for revenge.

Suddenly he was quite happy that his whole appearance had undergone a transformation during his flight. Not only was his hair gone, but his face had changed back to its original since he wasn’t able to keep his disguise going. Even his frame had drastically changed in only two days, making it nigh impossible to know he was the responsible party.

He felt extremely bad about the situation and made a mental promise to try to help out the villages affected by his actions in the future. But for now he had to stay silent on the matter, even if it was unethical.

“So you’re heading there to rest up?” Zac asked.

“We need to warn the monastery about the developments in the Dead Zone, and hopefully some of our party are heading there as well. We got split up when we fled,” Sui answered as he looked down, fiddling with her fingers.

Zac simply nodded and reclined back against the wall.

“What about you?” the gruff man asked. “If you ask me, you’re extremely suspicious. What were you doing so far into the Dead Zone?”

“I originally am from Perseverance on the west side of the incursion. I heard a rumor about a town having a lot of Caucasian cultivators on the east side. I was trying to get there to find a good team, but I got turned around,” Zac answered, mixing some truth with lies.

“You crossed the whole Dead Zone... to find a party?” the gruff man asked suspiciously.

“I accidentally got in an argument with the purifier in Perseverance, so my situation got a bit... complicated,” Zac shrugged. “None of the teams would take me in.”

A few of the people in the truck snickered at that, throwing a glance at Sui who frowned.

“It’s disgusting how some of us use our gifts for personal gain when we should strive to help mankind,” she said with a sour face.

“Not everyone is as idealistic as you, girl,” an old man sitting on the other side of Sui spoke up for the first time. “Most are just trying to survive.”

They kept talking for a while, and Zac was happy to find out that the monastery was to the east, roughly halfway between the core and the edge of the Dead Zone, which meant that they drove in the right direction.

They didn’t really know about any town like the one Zac described, though some of the monks might know, as quite a few of the elite Zombie Hunters had passed through there and left some intelligence behind.

After a while Zac was starting to feel drained once again by the bead, but Sui seemed to sense it somehow. She quickly started to heal him again, while the man on the opposite side snorted after throwing Zac a glare.

After driving a few hours the truck stopped, but apparently it was only for a quick bathroom break and switch drivers. The others seemed eager to get out of the cramped truck, and quickly jumped out one by one. In just seconds only Sui and Zac were left behind, as she was in the middle of once again healing him, or rather feeding the greedy Core in his body.

“Don’t mind what the others said earlier...” Sui suddenly said with a low voice as she imbued him with her healing skill.

“About pretending to be a monk? I don’t mind, I kinda look like one,” Zac answered about a shrug.

“No, not that... About you causing the deaths of our teammates. I know you didn’t mean for that to happen. I guess it has to do with the weird thing in your body?”

Chapter 179: Divine Mountain

Various thoughts ran through Zac's head as he leveled an even stare at Sui, to the point that she quickly started to get flustered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you. Your face and body are different, but your energy feels the same. I only know it because my class has given me some unique skills. The others don't know. I promise I won't tell, so please don't do anything drastic," she quickly explained in a hurried flurry of words.

"I understand. Thank you for your discretion. You can call me David," Zac said after a while and closed his eyes, once again using the nickname he chose on the other side of the Dead Zone.

The silence might have been a bit oppressive to the Purifier because she quickly got out of the van as well as soon as she was done imbuing him with another round of energy. That left Zac alone in the van, going over what she said. In the end he felt it wasn't a big deal that she knew. If she didn't even tell those in her team she wouldn't tell anyone else.

Since he was alone for the moment he quickly took out a bunch of dried meat and stuffed himself, almost inhaling the strips made from high leveled beasts. Sui's efforts was very effective in keeping the bead happy, but that alone wasn't enough. His body felt as though he'd been starving for months, lacking not only energy but nourishment.

With his attributes he had an extreme metabolism, if he didn't eat a lot he'd only get worse. In just seconds Zac actually managed to stuff his face with over a kilo of high-grade meat and a couple of liters of water from a canteen. After a brief

hesitation he took out another flask and took a small sip from it.

It was actually extremely diluted Cosmic Water, containing roughly one percent of the high energy liquid. As it entered his body he felt the familiar burn through his pathways, but with the low amount of water it was just a small flash of warmth before it turned into Cosmic Energy.

It was the highest concentration he dared to drink at the moment, but even this mixture was harmful if imbibed to much. It did, however, give a small boost to his completely depleted reserves of Cosmic Energy, which improved his bodily functions in general.

Drinking it was partly to invigorate his body, but mainly in order to stay prepared. While Sui seemed nice enough, he didn't really trust the others. If it came to it he needed to be able to protect himself. Besides, they were still in the Dead Zone, anything could happen.

Zac would have liked to continue eating, but approaching voices told him his feast was over, so he quickly put away his Cosmos Pouch again. The trip was largely uneventful after that, as they only traveled on roads far away from civilization. They entered a sort of routine where nothing really happened apart from Sui infusing some energy into Zac every hour or so.

They never stopped driving and kept going non-stop. The only times they stopped was when they found abandoned vehicles, where they tried to salvage some leftover gas with practiced ease. It was the middle of the night when they made another such stop, and the Old man jumped out of the back of the truck with a hose and a can.

However, it didn't take long before the calm of the night was interrupted by multiple roars from zombies.

“Attack!” a shout from outside came, and within seconds the rest of the people in the truck were up on their feet and outside.

Zac had to admit that these people seemed to have more combat experience than even his Valkyries. Perhaps trying

some recruiting in the area would be a good idea. For a second he thought about going out to help, but a quick check told him his body was in no condition yet. The energy he got from the Cosmic Water was just to keep him going at full power for a couple of seconds, and he didn't want to waste it on some mindless zombies.

Instead, he took the chance to once again replenish his body. He stuffed his face with dried meat, and once again downed it with a mouthful of diluted Cosmic Water. It was simply too hard to restore energy naturally in the Dead Zone, as most of the Cosmic Energy was converted into miasma. Taking out a bunch of crystals would be suspicious as well, leaving him with only this option.

"Aren't you relaxed, having a drink while we're out here risking our lives," a grunt suddenly came from outside.

Surprised Zac quickly looked over, and to his annoyance it was the man who sat opposite him, Wang Fang. It appeared that the man had actually snuck back toward the truck while the fight was still going. Zac could only say that the man's name was completely apt, as he had been a complete wang since Zac woke up.

"Unfortunately I'm not in shape to help at the moment," Zac could only respond, as what the man said was in a sense true.

"Even worse, you've also been hiding rations while enjoying ours," the man pressed on as he jumped into the van. "Makes me wonder what else you have been hiding. I knew we should have frisked you when Sui picked you up."

Zac's brows scrunched up, and he started to wonder if he would have to waste the little energy he'd restored in order to break some bones. He couldn't have the man search him, even if it meant that he'd have a falling out with the people in the truck. The wealth on his person was beyond anything they could imagine, and it would create chaos.

Zac slowly started to rotate his cosmic energy through his parched pathways, getting ready for a quick surprise strike. However, he was relieved to hear that the fighting had died down outside, and footsteps were approaching the truck.

Wang Fang tsked in annoyance, but quickly snatched the flask out of Zac's hand and backed away with a triumphant sneer. However, face quickly changed as the sweet aroma from the Cosmic Water drew his attention, and he unhesitantly took a swig from the canteen.

"You really shouldn't drink that. It is poison, and it will be the end of you," Zac said with a frown.

However, Wang ignored him and greedily swallowed one mouthful after another with a blissful expression on his face.

At this moment the others entered the truck, frowning at the scene.

"What's going on?" the old man, who appeared to be some sort of leader, asked.

"Our little guest has been hoarding treasures all along," the Wang Fang said and showed them the flask triumphantly. "I found him drinking from this when I looked inside. It's some magical water that restored instantly restored all my cosmic energy from just a few mouthfuls."

Some murmurs erupted from the others as they greedily looked at the flask, apart from Sui who looked aghast at the situation. Wang seemed emboldened by the attention and Zac's silence so he kept going.

"Not only that, the flask itself is a treasure, as it contains an endless amount of the Treasure Water," he said, looking at Zac with a sneer. "I bet this thing is why you had to flee into the Dead Zone. You probably stole it and got chased."

"I'll give you a final warning," Zac said with a shrug. "That bottle contains diluted Cosmic Water. It will restore your cosmic energy, but it will also ruin your pathways. I only took a small sip to restore my depleted energy, but that was because I had no alternative. Drinking it like you did will only end in tragedy."

"You stole it from David? Fang-ge, what kind of man have you become?" Sui said with disappointment. "Return it immediately."

“It’s okay, it’s nothing valuable,” Zac said with a wave, before he looked at the others in the truck. “You were benevolent and helped me in my time of need, so I wish you no harm. Stay away from that liquid.”

“Not wanting us to waste your treasure?” Wang snorted. “I bet you’re planning to steal it back. Sorry, but it will stay with me from now on. This will be what push our squad to greatness.”

Zac shook his head, not wanting to bother with the fool any longer. If he wanted to kill himself he was welcome to. Besides, the flask was nothing expensive, just a little Cosmic Water diluted in normal water. It was nothing compared to the small lake of the stuff he possessed.

Instead he closed his eyes and rested. In the end a few others tasted the water, and all marveled at its magical effects. However, the Old Man, Sui, and another man declined instead opting to slowly restore themselves with Nexus Crystals. Since they didn’t take it any further or trying to frisk him for any more treasures Zac let the matter end there.

Between Sui’s help and his slow recuperation he was over 15% restored by now by his own account. It wasn’t optimal, but it was enough to rebuff some zombie hunters if it came to that. But Zac felt that what they would go through in the future was punishment enough. He remembered how addictive the water was, it felt like one could keep going and fight forever with the stuff. But reality would catch up with them soon enough.

After the confrontation the atmosphere in the truck got quite oppressive, with no one really in the mood to speak up. Zac knew that if it wasn’t for Sui he would have been attacked, or at least thrown out by now. It was lucky for him that no one wanted to anger the purifier, as it might result in their death tomorrow from lack of treatment.

Zac considered whether he should just start to bring out his meat and some crystals, and beat them up if they got greedy for his things. But in the end he gave up on the idea, as he didn’t want to rock the boat. He needed to get infused by the

energy from Sui, so he decided to stay put until they arrived at the monastery.

Instead they sat in silence, the hours feeling like days. Zac wasn't sure how long they'd driven, but suddenly his eyes opened due to a change in the atmosphere. The concentration of miasma was rapidly declining, to the point that it was almost gone after 20 seconds of driving.

The others in the truck sensed it as well and stretched their legs as they cracked their necks. The truck stopped only a minute later, and everyone quickly got out. This time Zac didn't stay behind, and for the first time in over a day he got up on his feet and walked out of the stuffy truck.

By now Sui had infused him over 30 times, and his body finally didn't feel like it was teetering on the brink of collapse. Even better, the air was completely free from miasma, and Zac felt his body slowly start to absorb energy to deplete his wrung out body.

With a grunt he jumped out of the truck, but he immediately froze when he looked at the area, and he couldn't help but gape in awe. As he looked around it almost felt like he was in a dream, standing on the foot of Mount Meru.

The sky was an intense blue, the gloomy clouds of the Dead Zone just a distant memory. The surroundings were draped lush greenery, with rice paddies covering most of the base of a towering mountain that rose to the skies. The fields were tended by at least a hundred monks, dressed in simple kasayas, and it was easy to forget that they were surrounded by zombies from the pastoral scenery.

The greenery actually stopped some ways up the mountain, being replaced by sheer walls and cliffs. More amazingly the mountain itself was almost completely covered text, huge letters leaving barely any surfaces unaltered.

It was not the fractals of the system or any foreign species Zac knew from a glance. He was by no means an expert in the area, but he was pretty sure it was some sort of Indian text, likely Sanskrit as it was a Buddhistic mountain.

However, Zac had never heard of something like this magical mountain before the integration. Engraving a whole mountain was an unfathomable undertaking, and the carvings would have made it world renown. So Zac could only guess that the engravings were added after the world got integrated, which made sense since something like this should be a lot easier when one's attributes had improved.

More surprisingly he felt that the Sanskrit wasn't just decoration, as there were hints of power in the letters. They held a subdued but intractable strength, making Zac even doubt he could cause a crack in the stones. Together they formed something unfathomable giving the whole mountain almost a divine aura.

Chapter 180: Invitation

Since he heard about it Zac had wondered how a monastery could stand strong in the middle of the Dead Zone, wantonly purifying the area. He would have thought that the undead leaders would have purged the area and flattened the mountain, not wanting to leave such a cancer in their backyard. But he had a feeling that the tens of thousands of letters were part of the answer somehow.

Some distance from them a set of stone stairs led up the mountain, simple and unadorned compared to the rest of the area. At its end far up the mountain Zac could vaguely spot a few roofs of the monastery, though much of it was shrouded in a white mist.

“Are we really still in the Dead Zone?” Zac couldn’t help ask with a subdued voice to Sui who stood next to him.

“Buddha guards this place, and the mountain grow stronger every day. It is the beacon of hope for many of us,” Sui answered with reverence in her eyes as she looked up at the shrouded monastery in the distance.

A deep gong suddenly spread out from the top of the mountain, somehow clearing Zac’s mind in an instant. For months worries had plagued his mind, and new issues kept cropping up. However, it was all blown away from the sound, and it appeared it was the same for Sui as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The two simply stood and took in the tranquility for another few seconds until a jarring voice broke the serenity.

“That’s him! He pretended to be a monk, I think he works for the undead trying to spy on you!”

Zac couldn’t help roll his eyes as he looked over at the direction the sound came from. Wang Fang stood some distance away, clearly trying to suck up to two monks.

Both monks appeared to be some sort of guards, as they each held a staff with some iron hoops at the end. Just looking at them Zac sensed they had to be at least level 30 from their presence. The two guards looked back at him, though they looked confused rather than anything else.

The others of the party stood some distance away, looking at the ongoings with troubled faces. Clearly they didn't want to get involved in what was going on, neither speaking up for Zac nor helping Wang Fang.

Zac took the accusation in stride, as he didn't feel it would be very hard to prove his innocence. He was especially sure of that as he just received a prompt he had never seen before. After mulling it over a few seconds he made his choice, making the prompt disappear again.

However, Sui wasn't as calm as she scurried over toward the two monks who both seemed to recognize her. As soon as she approached they both put their hands together and bowed in greeting.

"Don't listen to Fang, he's talking crazy. We accidentally hit David with our truck on the way here," she said, and followed up with a quick recounting of the situation.

The two monks looked a bit troubled at the situation, but soon one of the two hurried toward the long stairs leading toward the monastery while the other one walked over toward Zac, much to the joy of Wang Fang.

"Patron, please accommodate this penniless monk and stay for a moment. While Patron Sui is a respected guest of the monastery, it is still a fact you contain an unordinary amount of yin energy. Please stand by while we confer with our senior brothers," the monk said with a courteous bow.

"That's fine, I'll look at your mountain for a bit. It is very interesting," Zac said as he sat down.

Zac truly didn't mind the wait, as he found the inscriptions extremely interesting. Every type of inscription he'd encountered so far came from the system or integrated societies, and they all had one thing in common.

They were based on the fractals that made up the skills and pathways for Cosmic Energy. The fractals from the system felt the purest and unadulterated, whereas the ones from the Creators and Demons differed in various ways. However, they shared the same root.

From how Zac understood it, the fractals were the language of the Dao and they contained hints of various truths. That's why it was possible to study skill fractals to slowly gain insight into the Dao. It was all based on a cohesive system drawn up by the Apostate of Order billions of years ago.

It was different with the Sanskrit writings on the mountain walls, as they had nothing to do with the fractals. Zac couldn't understand how it was possible to draw power from something that seemed to be its own system, rather than the system of the multiverse.

It felt like a true miracle that the monastery somehow had managed to create something with Earth Scripture. As for exactly what the mountain did, Zac still wasn't completely sure. It emitted a pressure as heavy as the world, yet at the same time it was light as a feather.

The only thing he could figure out after watching it for twenty minutes was that the mountain itself was the thing responsible for converting the miasma in the area. But that was likely only part of the capabilities of the mountain.

For the monastery to still stand strong, it likely possessed some sort of defensive or offensive abilities as well. Otherwise Mhal or one of his colleagues would have just destroyed the whole thing. Abbot Everlasting Peace should be quite powerful, but in the end he was only level 41. He shouldn't be able to fend off the whole Undead Hordes with his own power.

One possibility he thought of was that this monastery was chosen as an outpost and the monks were given a crystal just like his. Maybe they possessed some extremely strong arrays that kept the area safe in case of attack. However, Zac didn't gain access to those kinds of arrays until he finished the first Incursion quest.

He didn't really make any headway with the scriptures, so didn't mind seeing a couple of monks slowly descend the stairs and walk toward him.

"Amitabha, patron. Abbot Everlasting Peace has asked for your company if convenient," the monk said with a bow.

The old monk himself seemed quite confused about the invitation, and the same could be seen on the others. However, Zac himself wasn't too surprised. When he arrived at the monastery he got the option by the system to make his presence known, which he accepted.

"Sounds good," Zac only said and got to his feet. "Let me just talk with my travel companions."

With a few steps he walked over to the group who now sat around a table having dinner some distance away, with the group of warrior monks following close behind. Sui looked over with a troubled face, but Zac spoke up before she could say anything.

"Thank you for your help over the past days. I am not sure I would have survived without your gift of life. If possible I will return the favor in the future."

"You need to survive impersonating a venerable first," Wang Fang retorted with a gleeful face, clearly misunderstanding the presence of the monks behind Zac.

The others looked troubled, especially the Old Man who looked back and forth between Zac and the monks respectfully standing behind him with a slight frown on his face. Zac only ignored Wang, much to his annoyance.

"You are welcome. I believe helping you will be the largest karmic contribution of my life," Sui answered with sincerity, drawing surprised glances from the others.

Wang Fang seemed completely infuriated by the comment, and looked ready to go another round. However, he wasn't given the opportunity as Zac simply left toward the stairs with the monks in tow.

As he reached the stairs he saw that they weren't actually unadorned like it seemed from the distance. They were

covered with scripts as well, with Sanskrit covering both the left and right sides, leaving only a small part of the middle clear to step on.

“There are 2 700 stairs leading up to the Monastery of Everlasting Peace. Each step is inscribed with a line from the Diamond Sutra. The Sutra is then repeated nine times. To walk the stairs is to search for enlightenment through repetition,” the elderly monk commented as he saw Zac gaze upon the text.

Zac only nodded in response as he took the first step on the stairs. As he did a small pressure landed on his shoulders, but it wasn't to the point of really bothering him. Mostly unencumbered he kept walking up the stairs as he looked at the inscriptions on the sides.

The monks behind Zac looked at each others with some surprise, but quickly followed Zac up the stairs. No one spoke as they kept walking up one step at a time. Zac couldn't help but look at each line as he walked, being drawn to the words. He couldn't actually read the Sanskrit, but through his language skill he still got a sense what it said.

Of course, that was just the surface. The sutras of Buddhism and Hinduism were notoriously cryptic, and one could spend their whole life pondering its layers. However, he was surprised to sense that he got a different inspiration from the 301st step compared to the 1st. The inscriptions were the same, yet their meaning was somehow different.

Curious, Zac kept climbing, trying to absorb whatever the Diamond Sutra was trying to tell him. The formless pressure was gaining slightly in strength with each of his step, and by the time he reached the seventh iteration of the Diamond Sutra it started to become quite strenuous, to the point that Zac was unsure whether he'd make it all the way.

Zac was contemplating whether he should start rotating his Cosmic Energy or ask the monks walking behind him what was going on. But in the end he felt that would somehow be losing, or failing some test. The monks behind him walked without any effort, telling Zac it wasn't an issue of strength.

Even the old man looking to be at least 70 wasn't even panting, only kindly smiling at him when Zac looked back.

Since the old man wasn't using Cosmic Energy, Zac instead summoned his Dao of Trees as he kept walking. He felt he was on to something as the pressure drastically lessened, and released a Dao Field around his body. More surprisingly it felt as though the meaning of the inscriptions on the ground changed as he walked, instead starting to talk about his Dao.

As he ascended the last sets of steps his Dao Field kept subtly changing, turning more solid and robust. When he finally stood at the end of the stairs the pressure suddenly completely disappeared, and his Dao Field spread out over fifty meters, twice what he managed earlier.

His mind was crystal clear as he stood still for a few breaths, only pondering on his recent insights into the Dao. The stairs and its inscriptions had somehow stabilized his evolved seed, something that might normally have taken him weeks of meditation.

"Amithaba, patron. All is none. Heart is all," the old monk said behind Zac as he bowed toward him.

"I feel like I have been given a huge gift here," Zac said as he looked down at the stairs leading back toward the base of the mountain.

"If you light a lamp for somebody, it will also brighten your own path. Remember, the Dao comes from the heart. The heart can manifest the myriad Dao, but also endless worries," the old monk said with a kindly smile. "This way patron, the Abbot is waiting."

The other monks in the party monks seemed much friendlier to Zac after he ascended the steps, and with a bow, they left him and the old man. The monastery wasn't too big Zac noted as they walked, and perhaps it could house a thousand monks. Then again, they were on a mountain, and perhaps there were a bunch of monks living as hermits in caves.

The temple was simple and austere but in spotless condition. There was a solemn silence in the air, and the area exuded an

ancient aura. Zac felt it would taint the tranquility if he spoke here, so he let the old man lead him in complete silence through the compound.

After a few minutes they had walked to the back of the temple, and Zac noted with some surprise they passed the larger halls. Instead it appeared they headed toward a small courtyard hidden in the back. It was small and unassuming, and absolutely not the place Zac thought the abbot would stay.

A few monks sat and meditated on a square in front of the gates to the small courtyard, and they all opened their eyes when they heard the footsteps of Zac and the old monk. Even Zac felt some pressure when faced with the calm stares of the monks in front of him.

Zac realized that while these monks might not be on the ladder, they likely weren't too far off. Besides, judging by the mysterious things going on at the monastery they might actually be stronger than some rankers in reality.

The old man simply placed his hands together in greeting, and led Zac into the small courtyard. There Actually were two layers of doors, and before opening the second door, the old man first closed the outer one. When the old man opened the inner door next, Zac was blanketed with an extremely dense amount of cosmic energy, to the point that it could rival the small cave beneath the lake of Cosmic Water.

As they entered Zac was surprised to see that most of the inner courtyard was covered by a pond, though it seemed to be normal water. Zac saw a few koi swing about, but that wasn't what drew his attention. In the middle of the pond was a huge lotus-flower, reaching at least 3 meters across, and on top of it sat a monk staring out at the sunset.

The imagery was quite striking, but that wasn't enough to shock Zac. He was still left gaping however from the torrents of pure healing powers that swirled around the flower. It was as though the old monk sat in the middle of a hurricane wrought from pure life.

Chapter 181: Abbot Everlasting Peace

Initially when they entered Zac could only see the side of the old monk sitting on the lotus. However, as Zac was lead around the pond to a seat facing the Abbot his brows rose in shock.

His first impression of Abbot Everlasting Peace was that he was teeming with life, but his appearance truly didn't match. The old man sat in a classic meditating pose, but there was a huge hole in his chest right where his lungs and heart should be.

The loose robes the old monk wore covered some of the wound, but Zac could actually see the sky through the hole in the old man's chest. The Abbot's face was equally grisly, with huge jagged scars lining his face that made Zac's scars seem like small beauty marks.

Furthermore, having been on the receiving end of the Corpse Lord Zac recognized the aura coming from the wounds. It was clear it was done by some undead powerhouse. The miasma was mostly cleansed in the old man, but some hints remained, and the scars were still slightly blackened.

His eyes were closed, and Zac sensed he was in the middle of cultivation as energy swirled around him like a whirlwind in slow motion. Zac's eyes couldn't help but turn to the flower underneath the monk, as the energies it emitted were extremely pure.

Zac even guessed the flower might be a treasure of the grade of the Fruit of Ascension, though its function likely was separate. Judging by the state of the old man he might not even be able to leave the flower, as it was continuously pouring healing energies into his body.

The old monk who led Zac to the courtyard wordlessly bowed to the Abbot and Zac before he left again, closing the doors to the courtyard behind him.

Zac was happy to wait for the old monk to wake up, as some of the spill-off from the flower actually entered himself, nourishing even better than Sui's healing skills did. It felt as though his parched body was slowly being submerged into a pure river, with him slowly absorbing the water.

It made Zac wonder just how potent it was to sit in the center of the flower. After roughly 30 minutes the old man finally roused himself

“Ambithaba, benefactor,” the old man said as he slowly opened his eyes. “I apologize for making you see this embarrassing sight.”

“That's okay. Uh, no offense, but how are you alive?” Zac couldn't help asking as his eyes once again were drawn to the hole in the old man's chest.

“Do not worry, I am not one of the yin creatures you've met outside,” the old man said with a kindly smile, though it was somewhat marred from the scars.

“This penniless monk was wounded in battle. I am ashamed to admit it, but I am not ready to enter the Samsara. My home has turned into a hell on earth. If I don't stay and fight, who will? Perhaps I performed meritorious deeds in a past life, as the universe bestowed me with this treasure in my moment of need,” he said as he pointed down at the Lotus flower.

“It is prolonging this one's life and slowly provides healing,” the Abbot said. “Unfortunately it means I am not able to leave it, and won't be for a long while.”

“It seems quite special, sitting here is helping me out as well. I'm Zac, by the way, thank you for receiving me,” Zac simply said.

“Benefactor showed great merit when you laid one of the leaders of this Incursion to rest. Receiving you is the least this poor temple could do,” this old man said with a small smile.

“Oh? How did you know that?” Zac asked curiously.

The abbot only kept smiling as a screen opened up in front of Zac.

Life versus Death (Unique): Triumph over the six lords of undeath and the Lich King of the Undead Incursion. Reward: Infallible Sutra, unique building depending on performance. (3/7).

Zac was shocked when he saw the quest. It was very similar to his own old quest, Off With Their Heads, as it was based on killing the leaders of an incursion. That wasn't what surprised him though, it was the fact that the progress was already at (3/7).

Zac was quite sure that Mhal was one of the three, but that still meant that two of the generals were already killed before his battle. While it might not seem like much compared to Zac killing all four of the heralds before two months were over, he knew the two couldn't be compared.

Clan Azh'Rezak was a fledgling demonic clan that only got the opportunity to invade a new planet through dumb luck, and the resources they could put into the invasion were severely limited. Meanwhile, the Undead Empire was one of the largest forces in the multi-verse, with resources and means that Zac couldn't even imagine.

Of course, the undead force that invaded Earth was just some insignificant branch of the empire, but still, the foundations would have to be on another level compared to Ogras' clan. That was easily displayed by the fact that Ogras was barely as strong as just one of the lords, but likely no match against the actual Lich King. Mhal and his colleagues would likely have no trouble slaughter the beasts that were the Heralds of the demonic incursion.

"I barely survived the fight against the undead lord, I can't believe you have managed to kill two of them," Zac said, not hiding his awe.

"They came two months ago to destroy this mountain. An army of undead lead by two generals. With some special means and luck, we managed to prevail. However, the fight resulted in this embarrassing appearance," the monk

explained. “This mountain warded off evil and protected us in our time of need. However, my brothers tell me the undead are growing stronger. I am not sure how long it will take until they try again.”

“Perhaps the death of one more of their own might give us more time to prepare,” Abbot Everlasting Peace continued.

“Hopefully our force can be of assistance soon. Currently, they are closing up another Incursion,” Zac said, referring to the Ratmen Incursion at Billyville.

The operation should have started by now, and Zac hoped they would be successful in closing it down. It would free up another powerhouse to join the battle against the other Incursions.

“But I believe this undead Incursion must be closed as soon as possible. They can’t be allowed to keep growing for much longer,” Zac continued.

“The undead disrupt the harmony between life and death and deny poor souls Samsara. This penniless monk would be most indebted by any assistance benefactor can bring,” the Abbot said. “But I believe that is not why benefactor visited this old man?”

Zac pondered a bit on how to frame his next questions. It was generally quite rude to ask about secrets to cultivation from outsiders, as it was akin to asking them for their weaknesses. However, the situation on Earth was desperate, and Zac felt it wasn’t time to be bashful.

“I gained my strength by singlehandedly closing an incursion,” Zac said, explaining his situation to an outsider for the first time. “It has awarded me with various benefits that snowballed into a huge advantage in power over perhaps anyone on this planet. Yet I fear it’s not enough. I have no confidence in defeating the Lich King as I am, and there are many more invaders out there.”

“I am looking for any methods to get stronger, and seeing the mountain and your monks tells me I have much to learn from

you. Can you tell me how your insight into the Dao is so high?”

“Did you know? This penniless monk had never left this mountain before the integration,” the old man responded with a smile. “I also never contributed much to the monastery. I believed that to understand Karma you first needed to sever Karma.”

“This monk only sat and pondered on the Sutras and what the Buddhist Dharma meant, but I realize now that was just selfishness. Only when I stepped out from my courtyard did I come to understand things that had been hazy mysteries for decades.”

“What is the point of understanding Karma if you do not create spread goodness through Karma?” the Old man asked, seemingly rhetorical.

“Dao, Faith, Insight, Truth, Enlightenment. All are names for the same thing as this one sees it. Understanding of the self and the universe. This mountain has been consecrated in the Dao for thousands of years, and it gained spirituality. The sutras are the basis for its being, therefore they have power. Our hearts give them power, therefore they are powerful,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said as he looked up at the sky, before once again focusing on Zac.

Zac wasn't sure what to make of the old man's explanation. He wasn't a spiritual person before the fall and didn't really understand some of the things these monks said.

He was sure that there was a lesson to be learned from how the old monk gained power, but at the same time, it might not apply to himself. They walked different paths, his wrought with blood and carnage. The old monk seemed to understand Zac's confusion and only shook his head.

“Benefactor doesn't need to become a monk and read scriptures to improve the Dao. This old man believes that finding the answers is not about following a certain procedure. It is about being true to your nature and your heart. If you try to force enlightenment it will always be out of reach, you will

become an old man looking up at the clouds in despair,” he said.

“But if you follow your nature and your heart, the myriad Dao will open themselves to you.”

Zac slowly nodded, somewhat understanding what the old man was driving at. However, suddenly he had an epiphany.

“Nature...” Zac murmured with his eyes widening.

What he gained wasn't some realization in regards to the Dao, but rather about inscriptions, though it all tied together. He realized he'd been naïve when he thought of the fractals by the Creators and the Demons as simple or flawed.

The creators were among the greatest craftsmen in the multi-verse, there was no reason they shouldn't be able to create fractals that looked the same as the ones the System used. However, they still inscribed the squarish ones that had reminded Zac of old-school computer text.

It was the same with the Demons. Their fractals looked a bit crude in comparison to the one that adorned his robes, but after living with them for months Zac knew they weren't some barbarians.

Why couldn't they simply alter their scripts a bit to look like the ones from the system? The design of those fractals wasn't anything uncommon, as they could simply buy basic gear from the General Store. Add to that the thousands of years of research they had.

Only now did Zac understand that it was a deliberate choice. The scripts the two factions used were more closely aligned with their nature. The strength of an inscription wasn't dictated how close it looked to a “real” fractal, but by the insight and skill of the inscriber.

Zac now realized that the power of the inscriptions likely got stronger, not weaker, when the inscriptions were more suited to the nature of the Creator. For the same reason, the Sanskrit covering the mountain was close to the nature of these monks, which is why they gained power.

This was what the Abbot was trying to tell him. Zac was looking at the Dao like there was an answer sheet, and Zac hoped the Abbot had a few of the answers he didn't possess yet. But Dao was an individual journey.

He should be looking inward to find his own nature and what Dao suited him and his path, instead of trying to find tricks or Dao fruits that would give him shortcuts or answers to questions he wasn't even asking.

"Benefactor is still hurt from earlier. Why not keep this penniless monk company for a few days?" The Abbot suddenly said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"Actually, I am in the region on a mission," Zac said with some hesitation. "I can't stay overly long."

It would be nice to stay in this courtyard for a bit since he was getting better by the second. The lotus was flooding the area with vitality after all, and he was still sorely lacking in that department.

"This old man can see benefactor has strong Karmic ties to someone in the east. But it is not yet time," the Abbot said.

"Nature does not hurry, yet all is accomplished."

Chapter 182: Black and Gold

“What do you mean?” Zac asked confused.

“This penniless monk gained some minor insight into the Dao of Karma from his many decades of meditation. It has given me some unique skills in this new reality of ours. Karma ties you to a location to the east. However, if you leave now you will likely fail in your goal,” the monk said with a calm voice.

Zac thought it over and couldn't find any reason the old man would lie. Still, it felt like too strong a power to be able to predict the future like that, at least for someone at level 40. That felt like something that was in the realm of gods.

“Why would I fail?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

“Because your yin and yang are currently out of balance,” the old man said as he pointed at Zac's stomach.

“Benefactor's wound might not look as bad as this one,” the Abbot continued as he pointed at his chest. “But it is just as dangerous. I sense a storm inside you. Unless benefactor finds harmony, the yin outside the mountain will kill you.”

Zac grimaced, very aware of the problem. The wound in his side was calm at the moment, but that was only because there was bountiful vitality in this courtyard, almost to the point that it was like being constantly healed by a purifier.

The moment he stepped out from the mountain the process of his vitality being sapped would likely restart again. As he sat and pondered in the back of the truck he made some educated guesses about his situation. The suction of his life force likely wasn't only because he was inside the Dead Zone, but because of the composition of the bead.

The Core was mainly created from the miasma of over a hundred thousand zombies along with a lot of ambient deathly energy. The opposing force was the ten purification pills along

with his Dao of Vitality and Sui's ministrations. However, the pills and other life-attuned energies he absorbed were far less than the total amount of miasma, to the point that at most 10% of the energy in the bead was life-based.

That meant that the absorption would likely continue even after he left the Dead Zone. His current idea was just to tough it out somehow until he found Kenzie, then hurry back to Port Atwood and hope Ogras or someone else had some idea. But perhaps the monk in front of him could provide some alternative solution.

"Do you have a way to cleanse away the miasma in me?" Zac asked with some hope.

"Why would benefactor want to remove half of his self?"

"Half my what?" Zac asked confused, afraid the monk had misunderstood him.

"If this poor monk may be blunt, I believe benefactor has not looked at the situation from all angles," Abbot Everlasting Peace said.

"Benefactor likely looks at the yin energy on the outside as something negative, akin to poison. However, this poor monk sees it as the other half of life. This poor monk sensed benefactor walk a path of life when he ascended the stairs. One might look at death as the opposite of life, but one can also see it as its shadow," the monk said.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that was basically what he based his latest insight of his Dao Seed around.

"One might say that the two restrain each other, but this penniless monk believes they can also nurture each other. Perhaps benefactor doesn't need to remove the yin, but rather bolster the yang," the monk concluded.

This was honestly something Zac had thought about before. He felt that he shouldn't even be alive, but a series of coincidences had left him with this odd core, and perhaps it was a ticket for him to go further than the conventional cultivator. He knew that reaching the higher tiers of power was beyond hard, and unless one encountered a continuous stream

of lucky encounters the road would likely end at E-Grade or even lower.

However, there were a lot of question marks about choosing this path. First of all, he wasn't too sure if it fit his current Daos or his class. He was, in essence, an axe warrior with some nature-element skills on the side. The life-death path was something else.

He was afraid that he'd find himself at an impasse when he reached level 75. Alyn and Ogras had multiple times told him how extremely hard it was to walk the path of the elite, and that almost everyone got stuck at the bottleneck due to lacking the qualifications to go further.

Getting an epic-graded class was nigh-impossible unless you came from a high tier background who had resources that a newly integrated world could only dream of. Perhaps if he spread himself too thin he would lose everything. The situation on Earth was dire, and perhaps it was a mistake to take such a big gamble.

Like it or not, he was the main force against the Incursions and Dominators. The incursions were possible to close without evolving due to the restrictions still in place, but that didn't hold true for the Dominators. They were already at level 100, far past the F-grade barrier.

He'd discussed the issue at length with Ogras and understood that the increase in strength from each level at E-Grade was the same as a handful of levels for an F-Grader. It wasn't impossible to skip ranks and fight people who were at the beginning of a new rank, but the Dominators were too far past the delimiter. Even if they were trash who just had a lot of extra time there was no way for Zac to defeat them at level 75.

So if Zac got himself stuck at the bottleneck for too long the Dominators might just kill him and everyone else even if he managed to close the Incursions. The odd cultists of the Zhix were still shrouded in mystery. If they wanted they should have been able to destroy the Incursions without too much effort. Yet they were still biding their time, hiding in their burrows.

That fact only made Zac more nervous, rather than the opposite. It felt like the Dominators were a ticking time bomb that could go off at any moment, and who knew what they had planned over the past 6 months.

“It might be a good idea, but the amount of miasma in me is enormous. I had a purifier help me for over a day, and it barely put a dent in the life-attuned energy needed to reach a balance,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Well, perhaps this penniless monk can help benefactor on this front, but only if you’ve decided on your path,” the Abbot said.

Zac thought it over for a good ten minutes, but finally he decided to go with it after all. If the Abbot could help he would accept it. He already was determined to walk the path of the elite, and he felt that utilizing the core rather than discarding it was the path with more potential, even though it was a large risk. Cultivation was taking risks and defying fate. Nothing ventured nothing gained.

“Amitabha, this penniless monk can see benefactor has made his choice,” the monk said with a smile as he bent down and plucked something from the lotus flower beneath him. “This lotus seed contains part of the vitality of the flower. Though it is only a part, it is nigh boundless. Benefactor can slowly absorb it in order to supplement the yang.”

The torrent of life-attuned energy swirling around the lotus flower got distinctly weaker, and Zac suspected it lost around 20% of its power. Zac understood what kind of sacrifice the old man made as he looked at the wound in his chest.

“Why are you doing this?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“Amitabha, do good deeds to gain merit. If benefactor wishes to look at it as another way, see it as this penniless monk sowing seeds of karma,” the old monk said with a smile.

Zac said nothing more as he received the seed. He sat down and started absorbing the energy in the seed. It was as though an endless surge of pure life entered his body, and in just minutes his drained body felt like it was back in top condition.

The Core wasn't so easily satiated though, as it greedily kept absorbing the energy from the seed. A storm of energy exited the seed as it entered Zac's body and gathered beneath his navel. The huge amounts of energies were painful, but Zac kept pushing his body to the limits in order to finish as quickly as possible.

After roughly twelve hours the speed of absorption started to dwindle slightly, allowing Zac to once again talk with the monk who hadn't moved the whole time.

"Benefactor's body is truly resilient. If this penniless monk was able to absorb energy at that speed I would have been able to leave this flower weeks ago," the Abbot said with a shake of his head.

"This gift is immeasurable," Zac said. "I do not know how to repay you."

Zac was regretting not buying the second Fruit of Ascension with contribution points so that he could give it to the old monk. He still was holding one, but he was planning on giving it to his sister.

Besides, it was unclear how helpful it would be to the man in front of him. The fruit didn't really have any healing properties, and Zac suspected the old man in front of him already had improved his constitution to E-rank. It would almost be impossible not to evolve after sitting in this level of vitality for two straight months.

"Benefactor does not need to repay this old man. This penniless monk only wishes that benefactor does not give up on humanity and uses his gifts for good."

Zac could only nod and mentally promise that he'd find some way to make it up to the Abbot as he looked inward. There were still surges of life-attuned energy entering his bead, but it had changed quite a bit since he looked at it last.

For one it had almost doubled in size, and secondly, it wasn't pure black with some golden specks like before. It now held a much even distribution of colors, though the black was still a

majority. He guessed it would take another 12 to 15 hours before he'd reach equilibrium.

More impressively there actually seemed to be fractals naturally forming on the bead, though Zac had no idea what they meant. They were extremely intricate and written in both gold and black. It seemed there was a profundity behind them that still was beyond what Zac could understand.

As the two sat and absorbed the energies from the lotus flower the two discussed various things. The old man was a cultivator, which wasn't surprising to Zac. What was surprising was that most of the monks who had spent their life in the monastery were cultivators as well. It clashed with what he knew about the randomness of who was a cultivator and who wasn't.

Zac also gained some clues as to where his sister might be. The monk knew of a large town some distance away from the edge of the Dead Zone that was a drop-off zone for Caucasian cultivators. It was called Kingsbury, and it sounded like it would take Zac roughly two days to get there if he hurried.

What was worse was that the monk mentioned that the town had gotten integrated with the New World Government a few weeks ago. Zac wasn't sure whether it was a coincidence or not, but it was cause for worry. However, he forced himself to stay put. It was as the Abbot said, rushing would only have an opposite effect.

After another 17 hours, Zac could sense that the core in his body was finally in equilibrium. He was extremely impressed with the lotus flower that the monk sat on. One single seed was able to offset the entire amount of miasma in his core, and there still was a good deal of energy left inside it.

However, when Zac made to give the seed back to the old man he refused with a shake of his head.

"Keep the seed, it might come handy," the Abbot said.

"Remember, the heart is all."

"Thank you, I will remember this," Zac said as he stood up and walked toward the door.

He took one last look at the small courtyard and the congenial old man who sat looking up at the clouds with a smile on his face.

Soon Zac was running through the woods toward Kingsbury. The rumors that the Abbot mentioned kept gnawing at him, making him unable to calm down. It felt too coincidental that the town was getting with the government just as he was about to arrive.

It all smelled like a setup to him. They were trying to lure him to Kingsbury, but what kind of plan they had was unknown. The problem was that Zac couldn't understand why the government would do something like this. They had to know that if they took his sister hostage to harm him they would put themselves square in his crosshairs.

They already knew how he dealt with things by looking at the aftermath in Greenworth. The stupidity of it all made Zac doubt whether he was just paranoid. Still, he would rather be safe than sorry, so he hurried toward the town, cutting a straight line through the forest.

Chapter 183: Kingsbury

As soon as he had exited the sphere of protection from Mount Everlasting Peace his core once again had started to absorb miasma. However, it wasn't a problem for Zac anymore, as the lotus seed provided him with the life energy he needed. Besides, now that his core was balanced the amount of life energy needed to maintain the balance was minuscule compared to before.

It went to show that while the bead was balanced it was still able to absorb more energy. However, Zac wasn't sure whether pushing more energy into the core was something he should be aiming for until he knew what he was dealing with.

After talking with the Abbot for almost a day he didn't feel as bad about the bead anymore, rather the opposite. He was excited to dig into the mysteries it contained when he had some time. He was especially curious about the fractals that had somehow appeared by themselves on the small core. Perhaps they were a clue how to harness the massive energy the core contained.

Zac was still stunned by the generosity of the Abbot. It was a bit of an uncomfortable feeling to be so far in debt to a stranger. No matter what Zac had tried while he absorbed energy from the bead the Abbot had refused to accept any gift in return, no matter if it was healing pills or crystals.

The only thing he could think of was to provide as much information as he could to the monks, from the various incursions to the threat of the Dominators and shapeshifters. He also set up an alliance with the monastery, which in a sense was a large gift, as it gave the monks a path of retreat in case the undead came again.

It was a new function he possessed now that he was a Lord, which essentially allowed him to put individuals and factions

on what could be seen as a “friend list” in a game. It would allow them to teleport to his teleportation array, even when it was closed to strangers.

It meant Zac had three modes to his teleporter now; private, trusted, and public. His teleporter was already set on trusted at the moment, which allowed anyone from his faction, and now also the monks, to use the teleporter. Otherwise, his troops would be stuck on the island and unable to join Billy.

As he ran through the forests toward the east he kept trying various things. Between the stairs and the long talks with the Abbot he felt he'd gained a deeper understanding of the Dao, and he was trying to incorporate it into his fighting style.

Not only that but, he also needed to test his improved Dao Seed. During his fight with the ghost he realized that the seed had gotten a lot more flexible since it got upgraded. He needed to know the effect of adding it to various skills.

His experimentation had an unexpected result, as his movement skill [**Loamwalker**] skill gained a level and reached Middle mastery. It was almost instantaneous after he incorporated his Dao of Trees into his steps, clearly showing what the criterion for the upgrade was.

Zac was elated as the movement skill was integral to his fighting style. After the upgrade he kept trying it out in various ways until he properly understood the changes.

Zac realized that his energy consumption decreased by quite a bit when he infused his legs with the Dao of Trees. It wasn't to the point that he would be able to use it non-stop for hours, but it helped with one of the largest downfalls of the skill; its high energy consumption.

As for the effect of the upgrade itself, it was a simple upgrade to the range of the skill. At low mastery each step could take him a few meters forward at the most, but after it improved to middle rank the range improved to around 15 meters.

This, in essence, improved his maximum speeds by a few folds as well as each step moved him forward around 4 times the distance compared to before. The downside was that the

further he walked the higher the consumption was, and to use the skill to its maximum effect was quite costly, even with the empowerment of the Dao.

As Zac kept going he also found that good news sometimes came in pairs. The second day after he leveled up his movement skill another prompt suddenly appeared in front of him. This time it was the **[Forester's Constitution]** skill that gained a boost.

The only reason for the upgrade he could come up with was that it required time spent in forests to level up, since its boost was dependant on staying in forests. Other than that he had no idea, as the skill was passive, and not something he could train with.

The improvement wasn't great, though it was convenient. At low rank it gave a 10% boost to Endurance and Vitality as long as he was in a forest, and otherwise a 5% boost.

But at middle proficiency, it gave an 11% boost as long as he'd been in a forest the last 24 hours. It was quite convenient as he wouldn't suddenly lose attributes the moment he entered a town anymore. The lower boost improved slightly as well, clocking in at 5.5%.

He'd hoped that his other new skills would have improved as well, but most of them were still at Early Proficiency, apart from **[Thousand Faces]** that couldn't be improved upon. Still, as he opened up his menu he felt his repertoire was starting to become quite diverse.

Skills

Inquisitive Eye - Proficiency: Early. See through their secrets. Upgradeable.

Book of Babel - Proficiency: -. Enlightenment through understanding.

Mental Fortress - Proficiency: Middle. Enduring Stability. Upgradeable.

Thousand Faces - Proficiency: -. If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable.

Nature's Barrier - Proficiency: Early. Brave thousand storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable.

Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Late. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.

Chop - Proficiency: Late. There is greatness in simplicity.

Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Middle. Man and Nature One Entity. Upgradeable.

Loamwalker - Proficiency: Middle. Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.

Nature's Punishment - Proficiency: Early. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.

He possessed most types of skills now. The only thing he felt he was missing was another attack skill. [**Chop**] was still good for weaker targets, but his only good attack for stronger enemies was [**Nature's Punishment**]. The problem with that skill was that it cost such a huge amount of energy, only allowing him to use it once in a fight.

Still, Zac didn't worry overly much as he was only one level away from 60 and he was somewhat certain he'd gain another skill at that point. Therefore he didn't avoid any towns or cities either as he pushed straight his destination, trying to find targets to kill along the way.

Unfortunately he realized he wouldn't gain his level before he arrived at Kingsbury, as there simply were almost no zombies around. He was closing in on the edge of the Dead Zone and the towns he passed through were completely raided.

At first there were some scattered zombies left, but after another half day of traveling there wasn't a single one in sight. Zac didn't really care though as there would always be opportunities to get the level at a later point.

Another day passed as Zac kept moving, finally exiting the Dead Zone proper. Kingsbury wasn't a real frontier town, but rather some distance further away. It only took an hour for him to reach the town though with the help of his Automatic Map.

The town was of decent size, at least comparable to what was left of Greenworth. However, he didn't recognize any of the structures, so Zac suspected that only the cultivators got dropped off here. The other parts of Greenworth likely ended up somewhere else.

The order in the town seemed quite a bit better than most places as the guards didn't exhort him for a bribe when he tried to enter. He'd already changed his face with [**Thousand Faces**] again, not wanting to let anyone know about his presence before he found out about the fate and whereabouts of his sister.

This time he didn't accept when the prompt that showed up as he entered, not wanting to make his presence known. He had asked the Abbot about the prompt, and the old man hadn't heard about that function either, telling Zac it likely was unique to Lords.

He still didn't understand how it worked, as he didn't get the prompt in the beginning after becoming a lord. Zac guessed that only the monastery was run by someone powerful enough, and the system gave him an option to give due respect and announce himself.

As for Kingsbury, he soon realized it was due to it having come under the control of the government, another powerful entity.

After having entered the town proper Zac did what he used to do for information and simply entered the first restaurant he saw. He was surprised to find that the inside smelled of stale alcohol apart from just food.

He looked around and saw that people were drinking something, though they didn't really seem to be enjoying the taste.

He sat down at a counter and simply ordered the drink the others forced down the throat.

"Don't recognize you, new in town?" the man asked with some disinterest as he poured a glass.

“Yeah. I heard a bunch of cultivators from Greenworth are here? Is that true?” Zac answered, trying to sound casual as he took a swig. “Heurk, is this gasoline?”

“It’s Kingsbury moonshine, kicks a punch doesn’t it?” the bartender said with a laugh. “Yeah, they’re here, though maybe only 2000 of them are left alive. Dangerous on the frontier,” the bartender said with a shrug.

“How would I go about finding an old friend?” Zac asked with a wheeze, his throat feeling like it was on fire.

“Government taking a census now that they’re in control, could ask them? But it’s a bit chaotic with the trials coming up,” the bartender answered.

“Trials?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

“Yeah, some government hotshots are holding it.”

“What did the people do?” Zac asked

“Well, all kinds of things it seems,” the bartender hesitantly answered.

“It’s bullshit!” a drunken man from some distance away suddenly shouted. “They are just rounding up people they don’t like and slap bullshit charges on them.”

“Jeez calm down, you’ll get yourself into trouble,” another man said as he dragged the drunkard out of the tavern.

“No point in staying here if the government is going to get involved, there are tons of frontier towns welcoming able fighters,” another man muttered.

From there the discussion devolved into a debate into whether it was better to live in a government or an unaffiliated town, not giving Zac much more pertinent information.

“I know a few people who might live here, how do I know if they got arrested?” Zac asked, trying to steer the conversation into a better direction.

“Well, there’s a list at the town square. They’re making a production of the whole thing,” a man answered with a shrug.

Zac forced himself to stay a bit longer before he stood up and rushed to the town square. In front of a statue in the middle of the square a huge signpost was erected, and there was a group of people standing in front of it.

Zac pushed himself to the front and saw it was a printed list of names and the crimes they had committed. His heart started to pound faster and faster as he scoured the list name by name.

A chaotic jumble of emotions exploded in his mind when he suddenly he saw his sister's name on the list. Her name being present meant that she was still alive. The largest worry in Zac's heart since Greenworth was that she'd already perished in the Dead Zone.

But she had survived after all. That she was apprehended as a criminal by the New World Government wasn't great, but it was far preferable to being dead. This situation was something he could deal with, either through diplomacy or violence.

The fact that she was on trial for attempted murder didn't matter to Zac. As he saw it she either was innocent or she wasn't. If she was innocent he'd save her. If not, he was sure Kenzie had a good reason. These times were brutal, especially to a young girl. Depending on what happened he might help her finish the job.

Since he knew what was going on he simply needed to find the prisoners and take it from there. However, an hour later he sat down on a park bench with a frown, unsure what to do next. The government had hidden away those who would stand trial, and no one knew where they were being kept.

Most believed they weren't even in Kingsbury, but teleported in through the newly added teleporter in order to avoid a prison break. That meant that Zac couldn't simply bust her out even if he wanted to.

Furthermore, he didn't dare to walk up to the government's office to demand to see her. It might backfire, resulting in her disappearing out of reach forever.

According to the sign in the square there were two days until the time of Kenzie's trial, and Zac decided to simply wait until

that time. He found a place to stay during the wait, and simply sat down in his room, trying to figure out his next move.

As he sat there the relief of finding out his sister was alive was slowly being replaced by a feeling of helplessness and worry. Who knew what was happening to his sister while he sat and waited.

Until now he'd blocked out any and all speculations about the fact that something might have happened to her, but it wasn't possible any longer as he was so close now.

Various thoughts or worst-case scenarios kept whirling in his head, and the worry started to change into something more primal.

It was slowly turning into anger, a wave of burning anger that threatened to set the whole town ablaze.

Chapter 184: Trial

A pang of hunger woke MacKenzie up, though she would prefer to stay asleep. She hurt all over from the beating yesterday. These government workers were lunatics. One of them simply walked into her cell and started swinging at her until he had been forcefully dragged away. If she hadn't been taught to minimize the damage taken she might have actually died then and there.

She really started to believe the rumors that her brother was on the outs with them. She slowly sat up with a groan and closed her eyes to meditate, as it helped block out the pain and the depressing surroundings a bit.

"What did they do to you?" an angered voice suddenly said outside the cells, and Kenzie's heartbeat sped up when she recognized the voice.

"They finally caught you as well? Good riddance," she said with disgust, as she balefully glared at the obese old man outside the bars.

"I told them you belong to me, yet they damaged you like this?" the old continued, ignoring Kenzie's remark. "Someone will pay for damaging my property."

"What do you even want with me? Everyone already knows that little thing of yours doesn't work," she said with ridicule.

"You little slut," Harold growled, anger smoldering in his eyes. "Just wait until this farce is over. The government judicators won't stay here for long. Then you'll know punishment."

She threw the disgusting old man a disdainful glance before she once again looked away.

"I'm stuck here now, but sooner or later you will be the one judged," she retorted.

The old man guffawed, making his chins jiggle. Kenzie couldn't believe that there actually were a few women in her age that went to him willingly just for protection. She'd rather eat zombie meat than go that far.

“This new world loves the strong. The government doesn't care about Kingsbury. They care about the power of the council, and mainly me. They'll look the other way if I take home a girl or two because they need our strength for the fight against the invasions. You're just a dime a dozen, no value. I'll be just fine.”

Kenzie wanted to retort something but knew there was no point. What Harold said was true. She knew that some of these trials were just for show. If the government really cared about justice they would have locked up Harold long ago. Yet he was fine, even able to come and go at this prison just to taunt her and Lyla.

Still, she knew judgment was coming for Harold. Zac was still out there, hopefully looking for her. She just hoped he would arrive sooner than later.

Finally, after having calmed down after a while Zac started to plan his next move. There was no point in letting anger take over, at least not yet. He also wasn't ready to just sit around for two days doing nothing.

The first thing he did was to take out the corpse of the Undead Lord along with his cosmos sack. There honestly wasn't much remaining of the man, as the huge wooden hand had completely destroyed his body. Zac took the corpse in case there was some good gear to salvage, but there simply was nothing that was still intact.

With some disappointment he threw back the corpse into a sack, instead focusing on the pouch of the undead. Zac knew the man should be rich, but the wealth inside made even Zac's eyes widen. The undead empire really was on another level.

The most promising sight was a mountain of Nexus Crystals, even eclipsing the ones he found in Rydel's pouch. However,

Zac quickly realized something was off with the crystals. They held a tinge of turquoise rather than the normal white sheen.

He quickly took one out and was surprised that it actually contained pure miasma rather than Cosmic Energy. Zac then figured out it was nothing odd about it, as the undead couldn't cultivate using normal crystals.

If Zac had to guess there had to be at least 100 000 crystals in the pouch neatly stacked. Even better, there were actually over 100 crystals that held a far stronger sheen. Since he'd used E-Grade crystals before it didn't take long for him to realize that these were E-Grade Miasma Crystals.

At first Zac felt he had been handed a mountain of garbage, but soon realized that these crystals might be just what he needed if he wanted to keep growing his Core. Just because he had reached equilibrium didn't mean the Core was completely formed.

However, he still didn't have any source that could complement these death-attuned Crystals. The energy left in the seed was limited, and he didn't want to completely exhaust it.

Since there were crystals that contained miasmatic energies, perhaps there were ones containing life-attuned energy as well. Zac would have to check with Calrin when he went back to the island later.

There were all kinds of things apart from the crystals. Zac found a whole arsenal of what could only be torture devices, and there were also quite a few books and crystals containing information. There were also various gadgets and tools, though most didn't seem very useful to Zac.

Zac actually had problems to get many of the tools working as he tested them one by one, and he could only guess that it was because they required death-attuned energy to use. While Zac had a lot of it in his core he still wasn't able to harness that power, so he could only helplessly put the tools back one by one.

However, a few of the items ran on normal energy rather than miasma. Perhaps they were trinkets the undead gave to living servants, or just spoils of war. One bracelet, in particular, seemed quite useful as it could create a sturdy shield around the wearer.

It needed to get socketed with a crystal, but its effect was quite strong when augmented with one's personal Cosmic Energy. It wouldn't stop people like Zac, but it should be strong enough to ward off bullets until it ran out of energy.

It wasn't really useful to him with his endurance and defensive skill, but for people without any good skills to protect themselves, it would come quite handy.

There were also quite a few weapons, though almost all of them held uncomfortable sinister energy, especially the bone scythe that likely was the Corpse Lord's main weapon. It was extremely durable, but Zac was loath to give it to someone, afraid it would corrupt them.

As for the various notepads, books, and information crystals, there was nothing much of use to Zac at the moment. There likely were valuable knowledge inside, but it was all in a script that Zac didn't recognize.

He knew that the undead possessed their private language, and all the text was in that script. Even the crystals didn't contain a translation function. While the **[Book of Babel]** skill could translate speech quite well there were severe limitations to written text, so Zac would have to get it all translated somehow before researching the contents.

Over the next two days, Zac went around Kingsbury to piece together the situation bit by bit. The government had arrived at the town roughly two weeks ago, and after just a short meeting with the ruling council, it was announced that the town of Kingsbury would integrate into the New World Government.

This was good news to Zac, as the town got integrated almost at the same time as the Auction was held, which meant that the government's presence likely wasn't a direct result of his actions over in New Washington.

The proclamation had generally been met with a positive attitude, as life was tough this close to the Incursion. The hope was that the government would provide food and security, both of which were currently lacking in the area. There were a few grumbles amongst the Zombie Hunters though, as they had grown accustomed to the wild west-like lifestyle close to the Dead Zone.

However, there were rumors of large-scale movements in the Dead Zone, and many felt a storm was brewing on the horizon. Zac could only silently agree after having witnessed the events in the incursion as well.

The undead were starting to organize. Zac didn't know when they would explode into action, but it didn't feel like they would wait until the leaders got their limiters removed and advanced to E-Grade. The presence of a teleporter with access to multiple government towns was a lifeline for the citizens in case something happened.

The subsequent events were met with a far more tepid response though. Great chaos erupted during a night, with two of the four councilors mysteriously dying. It was generally believed that they were against the integration with the government, though people talked in hushed tones about the matter.

As soon as the two leaders died multiple places were raided, one person after another being captured. There had been quite a few deaths and destruction as some wouldn't let themselves get captured without a fight. The government said they were capturing all criminals in the town to improve safety.

For the most part, they were right. Quite a few bad apples were rounded up, both cultivators and mortals. There were gangsters, murderers and rapists that got captured or killed one after another. Streets that were extremely dangerous to walk before became safe overnight.

However, many got arrested for no apparent reason, and the only charge given was "threatening security". A theory that Zac only learned of by listening in on a conversation between two drunk patrons was that many of those who got captured

arbitrarily either were cultivators from Greenworth or leaders of hunting parties.

The men who spoke about the matter concluded that the government was trying to pilfer the riches of successful cultivators and zombie hunters to pay for the expansion, but Zac had another guess. People from Greenworth might have been caught in order to find out more about him and his sister.

As for Kenzie, Zac learned the charge of attempted murder was likely real. Zac almost went on a rampage when he learned about one of the councilors called Harold. It looked like that the one Kenzie had attacked was this very man, but her power wasn't enough so she failed.

It wasn't very hard to find out that information, as Harold's actions were well known in the city. The night the councilors died, two women who worked under one of the killed councilors were seen fighting against Harold in the middle of the streets.

Some said they fought because the two wanted revenge for their killed leader, others said that they tried to escape capture.

The more Zac learned about the man the angrier he got. The old pig was the same as the leaders of Greenworth. The only reason that old man wasn't turned into mangled clumps of flesh yet was simply that Zac couldn't find him, even after breaking into his mansion with the help of [**Thousand Faces**].

Zac still hadn't figured out whether this all was an elaborate trap for himself, or whether it was just an odd coincidence, even after two days of sleuthing. He had tried searching for any hidden forces or weaponry while he waited, but couldn't find anything. If the government was planning something they were keeping it close to their vest.

Of course, that wasn't to say that he didn't have a few aces up his sleeve. While he didn't find Harold in his mansion, he did find the Nexus Node for Kingsbury. That gave him a few options that might come in handy depending on how things played out.

But the only real solution for the situation he could find was to stay put in his disguise as long as possible, trying to find out any clues by observing the trial. He'd only move when he knew what was going on. He still had a small hope that the government would do the right thing and mete out proper justice. If the whole town knew Harold was guilty, then so should they.

Zac sat on the bleachers of a stadium, looking down at the spectacle on the field. The government had refitted a small arena into a courtroom and even allowed the public to spectate.

It appeared that the government wanted to show both their prowess and that the rule of law existed even in their frontier towns. Of course, Zac was also very aware that this might all be an elaborate trap for himself.

Zac suddenly sensed a weak disturbance in the energy beneath the stadium and looked down with a small smile. The teleportation array was actually placed right beneath the arena somewhere. It made things quite simple.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity a group of government officials entered the field from a side-door and took a seat at the judge's table prepared. Zac scrutinized each and every one of them, but he couldn't recognize any of them from his visits to New Washington.

At the same time, a few other people entered the stadium, and Zac's pupils narrowed when he saw a fat man in his 60's in the front of the group. Zac was sure it was Harold, the most likely suspect for the untimely deaths of the other two councilors. And more importantly, the likely culprit behind Kenzie's apprehension.

It took all of Zac's self-control to not go over right then and there as it would mess up his rescue. However, all self-control was quickly crumbling when he saw the state of the prisoners as they were led out in a long line. He completely exploded in rage when he saw his sister walk with a limp dressed in rags, with a black eye and her hair in grimy stripes.

Today heads would roll.

Chapter 185: Reunion

Zac's plan to adopt a wait-and-see approach was completely thrown into the back of his mind and was quickly being replaced with far more violent solutions. The stands around Zac started to ominously creak as the air around him distorted, prompting those around him to move away with fear in their eyes.

Zac was unable to control his rage after seeing his brutalized sister. The seat he sat at exploded into splinters as Zac pushed forward, catapulting himself down to the field.

"Hey! You can't go down here!" one of the guards standing along the stands shouted as the whole squad pointed their guns at Zac.

Zac only threw a glance at them as his aura rolled out like a tidal wave, drowning the guards in it. His aura was now empowered by his Dao of Heaviness, which didn't only empower it, but also allowed him to control its spread.

The huge discrepancy in power between Zac and the guards and the empowerment of the Dao had turned his aura into a proper attack though it wasn't a skill. The eyes of the guards quickly rolled up in their heads as they slumped down on the ground unconscious.

Chaos erupted on the stands, and a group of guards came running into the arena, but Zac didn't care. He activated **[Loamwalker]** and with two instantaneous steps he found himself standing in front of Kenzie, and a storm of emerald leaves started to whirl around the two.

A few soldiers with hair-trigger temperaments fired a few shots at the storm of leaves, but they were immediately neutralized. Furthermore, every attack was met with a stone ripping through the air and turning into deadly projectiles,

instantly killing people. In seconds no one dared to attack, and instead turning to their superiors for orders.

Zac's eyes reddened as he looked down at the marred face of his little sister, but he knew he couldn't relax just yet.

MacKenzie opened her mouth to speak, but with lightning-speed he pushed a few pieces of Springroot into her mouth.

She swallowed the herbs with surprise, and Zac scoured her face and mannerism for anything off as he used his observation skill on her. His sister's appearance had thoroughly pissed him off, but he had to make sure this wasn't another situation like the one with Janos.

[MacKenzie Atwood – Human. Level 33 – XXXXX]

Zac's brows lifted in surprise, both at her level and at the fact that the line showcasing her highest attribute was blocked.

Very few people were able to block that attribute from his tests back in Port Atwood, and it likely meant that her Intelligence or Wisdom attributes should be quite high.

Between the fact that she was fine after swallowing the root and the skill he was mostly satisfied, but he needed to make sure.

“Who are you?? What did you feed me?” she hesitantly asked, but was unable to back away due to the leaves whirling around the two. “You need to leave, the guards are coming.”

Zac quickly looked back at the guards who surrounded the two with their guns at the ready, but he didn't care. He was pushing his **[Nature's Barrier]** skill to the limit, and unless powerhouses like the Corpse Lord showed up they could forget about getting through in the short run.

“I'm sorry I'm late,” Zac with sad eyes said as he tousled her hair like he'd done so many times before.

“Zac?” she hesitantly asked, likely having trouble reconciling the familiar voice face with the unfamiliar face.

Zac only nodded, and two tears were quickly pooling in MacKenzie's eyes, and she moved forward to hug him.

However, she was held at a distance by Zac's arm, and she looked at him once again with confusion in his eyes.

“What did you draw on the wall beneath my bed when you were four years old?”

“What?” MacKenzie couldn’t help blurt out. “Never mind that, we need to run.”

As if collaborating with that statement a huge slam shook the judge’s table as the judge, a somber woman in her fifties, stood up.

“You are encroaching on a government trial, flaunting the rule of law. Are you making yourself an enemy of the New World Government?”

Zac barely spared the judge a glance, keeping his focus on MacKenzie.

“Perhaps I am, perhaps I’m not. My comings and goings are none of your concern. If you have a problem you can report it to Thomas Fisher,” Zac tersely responded.

Loud murmurs erupted in the stands, and the judge looked enraged. However, Zac ignored all that and refocused on his sister, his eyes slowly hardening.

“Answer the question.”

MacKenzie seemed to suddenly have understood something and quickly responded.

“A talking poop,” she said with a slight blush.

Zac slightly smiled and nodded as he followed up with a few more questions. Kenzie was quickly answering them as she got more and more nervous, her head darting around at the troops that were amassing around them.

Zac felt it might be time to finish up as well, and finished with one last question.

“When did mom die?”

“Mom isn’t dead! She’s missing!” she angrily retorted as if by reflex, her head snapping back toward Zac with an angry scowl.

Zac was finally satisfied, and with deft movement put the defensive bracelet on Kenzie’s arm.

“This is a defensive item that can protect you for a bit,” he quickly explained.

“What are you going to do?” she nervously asked back.

“We’re completely surrounded.”

“Well, that’s up to them,” Zac said with a shrug as he turned back to the enraged Judge as he stepped forward, his face turning back to normal.

“I am Zachary Atwood, also known as the Super Brother-Man,” he said, completely unleashing his aura.

Shouts erupted in the stadium, and multiple guards fell over or backed away from the billowing power Zac emitted. Frowns of anger or worry could be seen on the government officials as they seemed unsure what to do.

“I am taking my sister with me away from here,” Zac said, disappearing in the next second.

The guards barely had time to react before Zac was back again. This time holding a squealing Harold by his neck. The old man was desperately trying to get free, his face quickly turning red.

Zac wasn’t planning on doing anything to the old man just yet, but he saw him trying to slink away through an emergency exit during the commotion. He couldn’t let that man get away after what he’d found out about him during the past two days.

“Let me go! I am the mayor of Kingsbury,” Harold wheezed out, as he pleadingly looked at the judge who seemed to have found her bearing once again.

“Everywhere I go I find that the justice and rule of law The New World Government rattle on about is relative. The rich and powerful can do whatever they want, no matter how disgusting or morally corrupt, all while the government looks the other way,” Zac said as he threw Harold down on the ground, stomping down on one of his legs.

A sickening crunch erupted as the old man screamed in pain, unable or afraid to get back up again. He only tried to slowly crawl away from Zac toward the judge’s table.

“I’ve only been in the area for a short time, yet it has been impossible for me to not learn about Harold’s crimes against humanity. Yet he doesn’t stand shackled to be judged, but rather gets a promotion from you people. I’ll give you one chance to set things right,” Zac said, giving the judge an even stare.

“We are aware of the reports but have found them unsubstantiated. While many women live at Mayor Harold’s residence they have willingly moved there. We have ascertained that after an exhaustive round of interviews. The government works by facts, not by malignant rumors. Since the government doesn’t yet have a stance on polygamy, Mayor Harold has committed no crime,” the judge answered tersely.

Snickers and murmurs erupted on the stands, and even a few of the braver souls boo’d at the judge until a few of the soldiers turned their attention to the troublemakers. Zac only shook his head in disappointment. He had a strong feeling this would happen, but it was still a let-down.

“Your government still hasn’t closed a single Incursion, but you have time to shield scum like this pile of garbage. You are truly disappointing,” Zac said as reality cracked like a mirror above him.

The gargantuan hand wrought out of wood emerged as it had a few times before, radiating power and finality. Shouts could be heard from all over, as both soldiers and spectators looked at the skill with horror, hurriedly moving away from it.

“Stop him!” the judge frantically shouted, her strict demeanor blown away by the terrifying power the hand emitted.

Various attacks pelted the hand, both guns and skills of magical nature. However, the attacks were as ants trying to bite an elephant to death, and the hand was barely affected. Zac simply held his hand outward, and swung it down as he gave Harold a look devoid of emotion.

“No!” the old man shouted as cosmic energy gathered around him.

However, it was to no avail as the hand slammed down into the ground like slapping a mosquito. The slam created a huge shockwave that blew most of the soldiers off their feet, and even the spectators in the stands had to take cover.

The attack contained almost boundless force, as this time the hand wasn't imbued with the Dao of Trees, but rather the Dao of Heaviness. The whole stadium shook as an enormous rumble was heard. The hand soon disappeared, leaving only a crater that made it look like a meteor had slammed right into the stadium floor.

As for the old mayor, there was not one piece of him remaining intact since the slam had completely disintegrated him. At least Zac could tell the man died due to the surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body.

Zac surveyed the destruction wrought by [**Nature's Punishment**], satisfied with the result. He didn't only do it for shock-and-awe, but also to destroy any subterranean levels of the stadium. The government had tried to be sneaky by placing the Teleportation Array somewhere hidden in the underground levels beneath the stadium, perhaps to be able to bring quick reinforcements.

However, they likely hadn't expected the level of damage he could bring with a single attack. The force between [**Nature's Punishment**] and the Dao of Heaviness was even above Zac's expectations. It would likely take hours to dig out the array, stopping any reinforcements from interfering.

Apart from the mayor everyone was largely fine, except for some broken bones and scrapes. The soldiers were scrambling to their feet, their eyes widely daring around, until they hesitantly turned to Zac who stood rooted like a tall tree, his robes still swinging by the winds his attack created. No one said a word, waiting with trepidation at Zac's next move.

Killing the mayor had alleviated much of Zac's fury, and he felt there was no need to keep the killing going. He knew that most of these soldiers were just normal people following orders. They weren't aware of the shady dealings of the people at the top, or of the threat of the shapeshifters.

He was just about to announce him leaving when an extreme sense of unease filled his heart, and he unhesitantly reactivated his defensive skill as he quickly looked around for any threat. An extremely loud gunshot that was extremely familiar to Zac could suddenly be heard from the other side of the stadium.

Zac almost instinctively activated his defensive shield on his gear, but his brows rose in horror when he realized that he wasn't the recipient of the attack. He immediately activated **[Loamwalker]** to get back to his sister's side, but it was too late.

The bullet from the sniper rifle slammed into the shield from the bracelet, and the shield proved insufficient as it cracked, allowing the bullet to proceed toward his sister. The brief time the shield held at least provided MacKenzie with a brief time to react, and she repositioned herself with surprising speed.

However, she didn't have time to completely dodge the attack, and the bullet slammed into her shoulder with much of its power remaining. A fountain of blood erupted from the wound, and she fell together with a wail.

The next instant Zac flashed in front of his sister, rage filling his face. His axe was already in mid-swing, and as the edge ripped through the air a gigantic blade formed upon it. The fractal edge grew to ten meters in an instant, and it flew toward the area the sound came from with the speed of a missile.

The attack completely destroyed a large section of the arena, blowing a hole in the ceiling. In a hidden alcove in the corner a man suddenly fell down with a scream, a huge sniper rifle falling with him. The man was bleeding profusely, the huge blade likely having at least partly hit him.

The wound seemed fatal, but there was still no surge of energy after the man slammed into the ground with a wet thud. Since he looked largely incapacitated Zac instead bent down to his wounded sister.

"Ouch that hurts," she said with a groan, but Zac was relieved to see that the wound wasn't too bad.

It looked like the bullet had punched straight through, and while it bled profusely it would likely heal quickly with some help. He quickly fed Kenzie one of his strongest healing pills as he replaced the crystal on the defensive bracelet before he once again focused on the man with murder in his eyes.

A few of the soldiers hesitantly aimed their gun at him, but a look from Zac quickly quashed any thoughts of resistance from the others.

“That man is not from the government!” the judge quickly shouted, perhaps afraid that they would be implicated by his actions.

Zac only snorted and flashed over to the dying man’s side, his axe at the ready. Something was off with this assailant, and Zac’s gut told him it was a shapeshifter trying to sow discord between himself and the government. He wanted to expose his identity to the world, which hopefully would be a wake-up call for everyone.

“For the Red,” the man coughed with hatred in his eyes as he looked up at Zac, and cosmic energy gathered in his body.

Zac knew what those gathering energies meant and realized his plan was for naught, so he unhesitantly moved to destroy the shapeshifter’s head before he could explode. However, his axe hit nothing as the man disintegrated into a pool of goop. However, Zac knew something was wrong when he didn’t gain any cosmic energy. He looked back at his sister and found a bloody monstrosity reform closer to his sister.

It looked like a skinned human that had been left to bloat in the sun for weeks, and cosmic energy churned around it in ominous ways.

“Run!” was all Zac had time to shout as he tried to get back, but it was too late as the monster exploded, golden flames blanketing the whole arena.

Chapter 186: Return

A wave of golden flames pushed toward Zac who unhesitatingly activated the shield of his robes as he punched through the fire. He was full of remorse for his lapse in judgment, leaving his sister alone like that. He'd thought the sniper was out of commission, but clearly he was wrong. Besides, he really hadn't expected them to try to kill his sister, as it made no sense. Leverage her as a hostage, perhaps. But not this.

The scale of the explosion was far beyond that of the demons when they chose to kill themselves. He knew that the power of the bracelet was nowhere strong enough to withstand the power of that blast at such close proximity. He could only pray that she had a breath of life left, which would let him do something about it.

In no time he found himself back at Kenzie's side, his heart beating like a drum. When he arrived at the center of the blast everything was in ruins burning pieces of flesh were strewn around, as everyone within at least 5 meters was dead without a doubt.

However, Zac breathed out in relief as there was one clear exception to the carnage. Kenzie was lying unconscious on the ground, completely unscathed apart from her earlier wound. Surrounding her was a blue shield looking a glass cube. A small blue light was hovering within the cube a few feet above his sister, and it was clear from the rays it emitted that it was the source of the protective shield.

What made Zac confused was that he couldn't feel a trace of cosmic energy from the shield. All skills and defensive gear emitted energy signals, but the odd thing above Kenzie might as well be a normal stone from the energy it emitted. Zac looked down at his unconscious sister, wondering what sort of opportunity she'd run into to attain such a wondrous thing.

The next problem was how to get to her. He walked toward the shield and touched it, but it was completely solid. Even when he started to exert quite some force it didn't budge in the slightest. The defensive power was clearly excellent, likely even above that of his own robes, and he was starting to worry that he wouldn't be able to get her out.

Suddenly a red light flashed in the hovering ball above Kenzie, and a red beam hit Zac straight in his chest. Zac quickly moved back as he moved his axe to block the light, but he quickly realized the beam was harmless. Zac stopped and confusedly looked at the small ball, only to see it fly down and enter the head of his sister.

A few seconds later the shield flashed out of existence, and Zac ran over to his sister who woke up with a groan.

"What happened?" she asked with some confusion as Zac helped her up.

"The guy who attacked you blew himself up. You were saved by a weird ball shielding you," Zac said

"Uh, ok," she answered with a troubled face, not meeting his eyes.

Zac frowned, but this wasn't the time to ask what was going on. She clearly knew what he meant, but the issue didn't seem simple. Judging from her reaction it might be a big secret, so he was thankful that the thick smoke from the fires had covered the whole area.

The magical fire soon died down, and the smoke covering the area was blown away by the wind. Zac looked around at the destruction with a grimace. There were unmoving bodies everywhere, even up on the stands. Even more were nursing various degrees of burns, and cries and groans could be heard from every direction.

From a quick glance at least 10% of the people in the arena were killed by the desperate attack by the sniper, most of them civilians. It made Zac sick to his stomach, but now wasn't the time to mourn.

The government was quickly trying to aid those in need, seemingly having the situation under control. Zac thought about helping out, but he didn't dare leave his sister's side again. Instead, he threw over a bottle of pills to the judge, who caught it hesitantly.

The judge, whose hair was in disarray and covered in soot, understood what was inside and immediately passed pills to soldiers and civilians as she was shouting orders until the situation was starting to calm down.

More and more people looked over at Zac with some trepidation, unsure what would happen next. Someone had tried to murder the sister of the strongest man in the world right at a government trial. Who knew how he would react. Zac somewhat understood what was going on, and spoke up with a loud voice covering the arena.

"I know that the New World Government wasn't behind this attack and that the man who blew himself up wasn't part of your organization. Certain forces want to create a conflict between me and you, but I am not the enemy of the New World Government. I am done with Kingsbury. If anyone has a problem with what happened, they are welcome to go to Port Atwood," Zac said.

"I will also warn everyone. Shapeshifters walk amongst us. One of the most powerful incursions on earth has sent out thousands of spies who can take anyone's form. It is almost impossible to distinguish them from humans. We believe they are behind various events that have led to high rankers perishing, and they have infiltrated many major forces already," he continued.

"And I believe that the attack we just suffered was one of them as well. The golden flames are the calling card of the Church of Everlasting Dao, the force with the shapeshifters."

The people in the arena looked skeptically at each other, and Zac could only shake his head as he saw their reaction. He had to get the message out, but after that everything was up to these people. He could only pray that they believed him and spread the word.

“Their goal is to splinter humanity so that they can pick us off one by one, and we cannot allow that to happen. However, there is a solution. There is a cheap herb available in the general stores called Springroot. It is harmless to humans, but to these shapeshifters it’s a deadly poison. That is the only method my force has found to identify them. Everyone should carry some with them in order to expose these things, and hopefully we can stop them that way.”

With that Zac felt he was done. The multiple scares where he thought he’d lost his sister just as he found her had left him rattled, and he just wanted to get out of here before something unexpected happened again.

The government officials seemed only too happy to see the humanoid monster gone as well, and let him go without making a fuss. Kenzie was quite weak since she woke up, so Zac had her climb up on his back. He would normally have carried her but wanted his arms free in case of another attack.

“Wait, we need to get Lyla. She was in prison with me, I saw she was taken here as well before it got crazy,” Kenzie weakly said as she looked around.

“Uhm,” Zac could only answer as he looked around at charred body parts around him.

“She was at the edge of the prisoners over there. She might be fine, hurry” she said as she pulled his robe.

Zac only shook his head and walked over to where she pointed. He had a hard time believing that any of the prisoners were alive. From how it looked the government didn’t have any means to block the cosmic energy of the prisoners, but even he wouldn’t be unscathed that close to the blast unless he used some of his defensive means.

However, to his surprise, Kenzie pointed out a girl lying unconscious close to the edge of the field. Her clothes were in tatters and she was unconscious, but she was clearly alive. She’d actually reacted much in the same way as he did when faced with a suicide bomber long ago, as a burned carcass was draped above her for protection.

Zac pushed the corpse away and poured some water in the face of the girl. With a few sputters she woke up, widely looking around. She didn't have time to react before Zac pushed some Springroot into her mouth, making her cough. Kenzie frowned and lightly slapped him on his head when she saw the treatment of her friend.

"Can't you be gentler?" she asked unhappily as glared at Zac.

"I needed to make sure, I don't want to get stabbed again," Zac answered with a shrug as he observed the girl's response.

After noticing she was fine he also took out a healing pill, though one of a lower grade, and gave it to the girl who hesitantly accepted it.

"It's a healing pill," Zac only said as he helped the girl to his feet.

Kenzie, who was still hanging on the back of Zac smiled at Lyla.

"This is Zac, my big brother. He's the Super Brother-Man," she said happily. "I'm leaving this town. Come with me."

"Your brother is the number one ranker and you never mentioned it?" she said with a wry face as she swallowed the pill. "Where are you going?"

Kenzie opened her mouth, but no words came out as she realized she didn't know.

"Port Atwood, my town," Zac said, realizing it seemed he had to take another person with him. "You should know, if you come with me you might not be able to get to a government town in a long while. My relationship with them is... complicated."

"Ok. I don't want to stay here anyway. What if they come for me again? Harold is probably only going to be replaced with another asshole," she muttered as she started to walk toward the exit.

"Are we in a hurry?" Kenzie suddenly asked.

"Well, not really. They won't be able to use their teleportation array for an hour at least. Why?" Zac asked as he followed the

girl out of the arena.

He took one last look around at the people in the stands and the government official, most of which were silently staring back at him. He really didn't know what he could or should do in this situation. This new life of his was just too tiring with its endless duties and expectations.

"There are some things I want to get before we go," Kenzie said, breaking his train of thought.

"I went to your home and picked up your clothes and stuff like that," Zac said.

It was true, he went over to her Kenzie's place during the two days he waited, making sure looters didn't steal anything important.

"Really?" she asked with a smile. "But I'm not talking about that. Lyla and I hid a few things in a stash in case something happened."

Soon they found themselves at an abandoned house at the edge of a town, and after being prompted Zac moved a bookshelf, showing a hidden entrance.

"We created this place when Harold was starting to become a nuisance, in case we needed to make a quick escape. We figured we could sneak back and get our things during the night or something," MacKenzie explained as Zac looked down into the dark cellar.

Since it was pitch black Zac took out a lantern powered by cosmic energy that gave off a warm light. He gingerly walked down the stairs, ready for any type of assault in case someone had found the stash. Even his defensive skill was activated around the two of them once again, just in case.

However, it was completely empty down there, allowing Zac to finally relax. The cellar was pretty small, but it was well organized with two small cots and a few shelves of gear and provisions.

It seemed the two did not own a Cosmos Sack, so he threw one over to his sister who had jumped down from his back.

“I wish I could take a bath, I am completely sticky,” she muttered as she packed her belongings into her new pouch.

To both the girls’ surprise Zac simply took out a large barrel along with a canteen that held enough water to fill it up.

“It’s cold but clean. Make it quick, we need to leave soon,” he said.

He’d made sure that there was no one following him but he couldn’t be sure. They couldn’t waste too much time down here.

“Well, you wanna watch you perv?” MacKenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “Go wait upstairs. It’s the only entrance so we’ll be fine.”

After some hesitation Zac acquiesced, walking towards the stairs again, but before he got up two arms embraced him from behind.

“I knew you’d come,” MacKenzie murmured with a low voice.

“Of course, I’m the Super Brother-Man, after all,” Zac smiled as he walked up the stairs.

Soon he heard splashing and subdued talk downstairs, so Zac simply took out a chair and sat down with a sigh. His heart was finally calm, far calmer than it had been in a long, long time.

“Report, my child,” the voice on the other side of the communication crystal said after the static died down.

“The Super Brother-Man showed up as we guessed, Father. Unfortunately, it did not go as planned. The sniper failed to kill the sister,” the acolyte Terzun answered.

“So the mission failed?” the voice said with some displeasure.

“It is Unclear. The Monarch-Select still killed the newly appointed mayor, and quite a few people perished when the sacrifice used [**The Ultimate Sacrifice**]. The target did not, however, conquer the town, and instead left soon after. I

believe he's heading either toward the sect inside the Undead Empire or another town."

"... Very well. It's an acceptable result. The sacrifice was simply a local forcefully injected with The Purity of the Boundless Heavens. He would soon expire in any case," the priest said.

"Our resources are quite limited so far from our own Incursion. We will fan the flames from our side. Clean things up on your side, make sure all mentions of the sister's name is absent from all reports. Otherwise it will be hard to explain it as simple incompetence," the voice continued after a brief pause.

"Did the government's plan fail as well?"

"No, I made sure to plant a spy next to the monarch-select as well," Terzun quickly answered.

"Good. Try to find out the next move of the monarch-select. Report to me if he returns. But remember, this isn't your true mission. Keep monitoring the unholy beings, they are our real enemy."

"I understand..." Terzun said with some hesitation in his voice.

"What?"

"With respect Father, is all this subterfuge really necessary? Why aren't we simply purifying these humans? None of the Human Empires has claimed this planet, and while the Monarch-Select showed great power, he is not a match for the High Vicar."

Only silence came from the crystals, making Terzun believe the priest on the other side had disconnected, but after a while he spoke up again.

"Something is odd about this planet. The bishops want to understand what's going on before we start the great purge."

Something odd? Terzun thought with confusion. Since when did the Church of the Everlasting Dao care about such things?

Chapter 187: Hatchetman's Rage

As Zac drove the car through the Dead Zone Kenzie told him much about what happened to her during the six months since they last saw each other. As for Zac, he was a bit hesitant to speak about his experiences, as there were two others in the car.

Lyla was obviously one of them, but before they left Kenzie was approached by one more person. The other girl was Olivia, and he actually somewhat recognized her. She was one of Kenzie's old friends, and he had met her a few times before the fall. Apparently, the two only found each other again a month ago, and Kenzie invited her as well to Port Atwood.

Her story was pretty impressive, as she'd done something similar to himself. It turned out Olivia had been traveling just like him when the fall happened, and she got randomized to a town a month's travel away from Kingsbury. Just like Emily and her parents did, Olivia almost immediately set out on a journey to find her way home until she heard about the cultivators in Kingsbury.

Unfortunately, none of her family were cultivators, so they were likely either back at Greenworth, or wherever the other parts of the city had ended up. Since she met Kenzie she decided to stay put for the time being. Zac was a bit surprised she tagged along, as it would likely be easier to get back to Greenworth if she stayed in the town.

Then again he realized it might be his fault, as anyone even slightly related to him might get into trouble as a result of his actions. Perhaps he could send her back with Julia later, so Olivia could hopefully find her way back to her family.

Kenzie clearly trusted them, but Zac had learned to be cautious so he spoke very little about what he'd been through. He only explained that he found himself on an island and through a lot of battle managed to create a town.

The two in the back seat seemed a bit wary of him still, and he couldn't blame them after his display yesterday. They mostly sat quietly in the back seat, only responding when talked to.

It took two days until they got back to Mount Everlasting Peace, and Zac was relieved to see that nothing had changed since he was here a week ago. He had been afraid that an undead attack was imminent due to the movements he saw, but the monastery was as tranquil as usual.

As they arrived the same old monk who led him up the stairs the last time walked forward.

"Amithaba patron. The Abbot sends his regards," the old man said, placing his hands together.

"Greetings venerable," Zac said with a small bow as he put his car into a Cosmos Sack.

He had been a bit embarrassed as he didn't know how to address the monks in his earlier visit, so he also looked it up while he waited for the trial to start. There were still a lot of things he didn't know about Buddhist conduct, but at least he shouldn't disrespect the monks by mistake.

"I guess patron wishes to use the teleportation array?"

"Yes," Zac said. "I am staying here for a while though."

"You're not coming with us?" Kenzie asked with some confusion.

"Not just yet. I need to head into the Dead Zone for a few days," Zac answered.

This was something he'd decided on earlier. There really wasn't much for him to do back home in Port Atwood. His next goal was the Hegemon quest, but there were a few weeks left before its time limit was up, and it was the same with the Treasure Hunt.

Since Kenzie was safe he could finally breathe easily, but it also meant he needed to look forward. He was currently only one level to level 60, which hopefully would provide him with a skill that increased his overall power.

Besides, he hoped he could cull the numbers of the undead horde a bit, which hopefully would give the monks more time to prepare themselves. It was the least he could do from how much they had helped him.

He wasn't comfortable with taking the three with him since he was heading toward the core, and who knew what would happen. Now that his wound was healed and his bead was under control he felt much more confident and wasn't afraid to cause some havoc. He was pretty confident in his ability to keep himself alive, but the same couldn't be said for the girls.

He'd already used his inspection skill on the three as part of him making sure they were not shapeshifters, and both Kenzie and Lyla were level 33, which was quite impressive. It seemed they'd pushed themselves pretty hard since Harold had been lusting after them for months.

Olivia was almost as impressive, reaching level 32 without having access to an incursion for a long time. Those who traveled were constantly put in harm's way, so it wasn't too surprising that they gained power quickly.

"Oh, and I brought a lot of Springroot as well. You should have everyone coming to your monastery eat this. It is not dangerous to humans, but to certain invaders it's deadly," Zac said.

"Amithaba. Patron needs not to worry about the lizard people. Their disguises cannot block the sight of the Abbot, as karma is not something that can be hidden behind a transformation skill," the old monk said with a laugh. "One of them tried to infiltrate the monastery some time ago with no success."

Zac could only gape in response, throwing a glance up at the mountain top. The old Abbot was truly full of mysterious means. It also meant that the Abbot was only humoring when Zac told him about the shapeshifters earlier, as he already knew about it.

“Give people this when you go through,” Zac said as he handed his sister an envelope. “There are a lot of knowledgeable people at Port Atwood. Go find Alyn if you want to become stronger.”

“You’re dumping me here and immediately go on an adventure? Are you already tired of us?” MacKenzie said with a snort as she turned to the old monk. “Can you believe this guy?”

Zac only shook his head with a smile, as he knew she was just joking around. Soon he’d opened the teleporter leading to his town, and saw the three off. After saying his farewells to the old monk he set out toward the core of the Dead Zone.

The next few days Zac kept a frantic pace as he scouted out the inner area of the Incursion. On the second day, he found a zombie horde quite similar to the one he got the quest for earlier. There were around 150 000 Zombies, all stumbling toward the center like the horde before it.

It made Zac realize the horde from earlier wasn’t an isolated incident. The undead were truly gathering. It filled him with some hopelessness, as there were just too many zombies in the Dead Zone. Conservatively counting there should be at least a billion people who were turned. Even if Zac kept swinging away for years there would still be plenty of them to go around.

The only good news was that he still hadn’t spotted a single high tier undead at least during the last two days, meaning they likely had receded back toward the core again. He didn’t know if it was thanks to him killing the Corpse Lord, but in any case, it was good news.

Still, Zac didn’t hesitate to head down and start cutting them down by the dozens. He didn’t need to keep a frantic pace since he had no time limit this time to hound him. Therefore he simply summoned a large fractal edge from **[Chop]** that he kept attached as he methodically kept swinging away.

Large amounts of nexus energy kept entering him, and as before it was joined by large amounts of miasma. However,

Zac was happy to note that even though the bead still accepted the deathly energy it wasn't going out of control this time.

It took far less miasma from each Zombie, and the large amounts of life-attuned energy in the core kept the balance even though the miasma was increasing at a steady pace. Only when roughly 60% of the core was made from deathly energy did he feel that the core started showing signs of instability.

By this point he'd mowed down at least 20 000 zombies, bringing him closer to the next level. However, not wanting to cause a scene again he stopped his rampage and quickly distanced himself from the furious zombies.

When he'd created some distance he quickly took out the seed from the lotus flower and sat down for two hours to restore balance. Only when he was back at an even split did he once again get to his feet. It wasn't difficult to find the zombie horde again as they didn't move too quickly, and Zac once again went to work.

He repeated the process a few times until he finally sensed he passed the boundary and reached level 60. Not wanting to waste more time on these weak targets he quickly distanced himself one final time and took up his status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

60

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Strength

329

Dexterity

162

Endurance

230

Vitality

197

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

57 703 653

Zas he looked at his screen he couldn't help wonder what others would say if they found out he made 7 million nexus coins from one day of grinding. Of course, it was only possible since the Zombies were gathering up into large clumps.

For once Zac hoped that he could count on humanity's greed and that there were tens of thousands of zombie hunters out at the moment desperately killing zombies for the almost free money.

Zac put his 3 points into vitality, bringing it past 200 as well. By now he started to feel a bit set with that attribute, making him think of what to focus on next. He would have to talk with Ogras or Alyn about it, but perhaps it would be prudent to put some more points into his last two attributes, Intelligence, and Wisdom, as both were starting to severely lag behind.

However, that wasn't what he was interested in at the moment, so instead, he quickly brought up his quest panel. He wasn't surprised there was a new quest on the screen, but he was quite surprised when he saw the progress.

Hatchetman's Rage (Class): Earn "Butcher" Title.

Reward: Hatchetman's Rage skill (1/1) [COMPLETE]

Zac couldn't help but sardonically smile when he saw the class content. Perhaps it was quite a number for normal cultivators to kill 100 000 creatures, but he passed number that a long time ago. It was pretty clear it was an offensive skill judging by the name of the skill and how to complete the quest. This suited Zac just fine, and he only hoped it would be good for single targets.

Since the quest was marked as complete he only needed to get back to his Nexus Crystal to turn it in. With that he closed the screens and refocused on what to do next. He knew that he hadn't really accomplished much apart from lining his own pockets, but then again he simply couldn't find more valuable targets to kill.

He had been traveling for two days already and was some distance into the core zone. If he kept going he was afraid he'd end up in the headquarters, facing more than he could handle at the moment.

The incursions had stabilized long ago, which meant that they had some more functions. They were able to set up certain arrays for example, and Zac wasn't knowledgeable enough in that regard to dare get too close. The undead were extremely

wealthy, and he was afraid he'd get trapped in an illusion array or something similar, becoming a sitting duck.

Since there was not much else to do he simply turned back toward the mountain. When he finally came back to Mount Everlasting Peace he initially wanted to say goodbye to the Abbot but was disappointed to find he was in seclusion. With nothing else to do he headed toward the teleporter.

The array was actually down at the foot of the mountain, rather than up in the temple, which had surprised Zac a bit.

"I hope I'll see you all again," Zac said. "Remember, if things get out of hand here you can always come to Port Atwood. Even if the mountain is lost we can reclaim it."

"If heavens wills it, we will meet again patron," the old man said with a kind smile as the portal flashed to life.

"Here is a small offering to your temple. I hope it will come to use," Zac said and handed over a pouch.

It contained a wide variety of pills and a large pile of Nexus Crystals. Zac hoped it would help their war efforts in case they got attacked again, at least to the point they managed to evacuate.

"Thank you, patron. The Abbot is currently unavailable, but he asked me to convey a message. 'To forgive is not to condone other's actions, it is to bring peace to your heart'. Safe travels patron," the monk said and once again put his hands together.

Zac didn't say anything as he left with a nod, the portal flashing shut behind him.

Chapter 188: Secrets

After a brief moment of darkness, Zac once again exited, but the unfamiliar sight gave him a start. It almost looked as he was standing inside a world tree, as the walls were living trees sprouting leaves around them. However, they were far taller than the usual ones he'd seen so far, reaching for the skies. There was also a good deal of holes in the structure at strategic places, flooding the floor in natural light.

The demons had been busy, as they'd grown a structure around the array. Zac noticed the design was slightly reminiscent of how it looked in New Washington, though the teleportation lobby was built with the signature Demonic architecture.

Zac suddenly felt there was a group of eyes upon him and guessed there were defenders hidden up amongst the branches in the air. It proved there were also proper protocols in place to make sure nothing untoward happened at this important location.

He was quite happy with the transformation and full of anticipation to see what else had changed in the weeks since he set out on his journey. There was only one exit in the building, and Zac eagerly moved toward it.

"You can't just leave! You must register yourself first," young woman nervously standing behind a counter said with a shaky voice, piquing Zac's interest.

"Register?" Zac asked, but before the receptionist could answer three demon guards jumped down from the tree crowns.

"Lord Atwood," they all said with a small salute, and Zac nodded back.

"Lord? I'm sorry!" the girl quickly exclaimed, but it was quickly waved away by Zac.

“What’s going on here?” Zac asked the demons who appeared.

“Administrator Adran has set up routines for visitors. Due to many people coming and going nowadays, a system to know who’s here has been put into place,” the demon, whose name Zac remembered being Yuruf, answered.

“There’s traffic in the teleporter?” Zac asked confused as the teleporter was still set to trusted.

“Only between the internal array system,” the Yuruf answered. “There are currently 12 arrays active in the archipelago.”

“I understand. My sister and two of her friends should have arrived some time ago. Are they settled okay?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we followed the instructions in the letter. Your sister is currently living in your compound. The other two have been provided houses in the residential district. They are spending most of their time at the academy improving their power,” the demon answered.

There were too many things within his compound that would be hard to explain, so he didn’t wish two strangers to stay there. It was better to make clear from the beginning, which is why he had them stay in the residential area from the start.

“Good. Have there been any trouble in the town while I was gone?” he asked.

“Nothing much. A few hotheads acting up, but nothing that we couldn’t handle. There also have been some disputes amongst the craftsmen, but the Administrators would know more about that,” Yuruf responded.

“I’ll visit them later. One last thing, are the fighters back from the fight in the other Incursion?” he asked.

“They returned some time ago. The mission was a success, though there were some casualties,” the demon nodded.

“I understand, keep up the good work,” Zac said as he headed toward the exit.

He didn’t actually register himself in the end. It wasn’t because he felt himself above it, but since it was a matter of security. Powerhouses like himself were the biggest deterrence

from attacking a town, and if people didn't know where he was, they would likely be less likely to cause trouble.

Satisfied Zac walked toward the exit, but before he left the large lobby Zac couldn't help notice the large sign hanging by the exit.

Welcome to Port Atwood, the home of the Towers of Myriad Dao!

- 1. Don't cause trouble.**
- 2. Don't enter the restricted areas.**
- 3. Don't forget to shop at The Thayer Consortia, the best deals on Earth!**

“Uh,” Zac couldn't help say as he looked back on the demon guards. “Towers of Myriad Dao?”

Yuruf scratched his chin as he looked at the gaudy lettering of the slogan, looking a bit embarrassed, before explaining the situation.

“The castellan of the Towers somehow found out about this sign. It felt... very strongly... that its grandeur should be advertised to all visitors immediately upon arrival. When Administrator Adran refused, citing security concerns, it wasn't happy. A sign large enough to block out the suns that advertised the Towers appeared over the town. Thus the sign here.”

Zac could only groan and exit, inwardly complaining about the insane Tool Spirit.

It only took a minute of walking before the trees gave way to the town proper, as quite a bit of the forest had been cut down. At first look, Zac had a hard time believing the sight that met his eyes.

A proper town with a wide array of buildings sprawled out in front of him. The town wasn't like anything he'd seen before, but rather a mix of various styles and concepts. Buildings wrought from living trees stood wall to wall with modern buildings that could fit right into some trendy affluent district.

The new Port Atwood felt very refreshing, with large amounts of nature being mixed with the structures. It was a far better place to work on one's Dao or cultivation than the dirty and run-down towns on the mainland, and Zac had no difficulty believing that many would wish to move here if given the opportunity.

There was still a lot to be done though. There was no sort of pavement on the roads, and construction was taking place all over. People, a lot of whom Zac didn't recognize, kept scurrying back and forth, many carrying lumber or tools meant for construction.

Zac decided to head straight for his private area after a bit of hesitation, moving straight toward a large gate in the wall separating his private district with the newly emerging town.

He noted that the wall was manned by a few demons and Valkyries, who perked up when they saw his approach. However, with his robe and shiny bald head he was easily recognizable and the warriors hurriedly opened the gates for him.

"Welcome back," one of the Valkyries said with a small bow.

Zac didn't know how he felt about the bows and curtsies the population was starting to perform. He would have to talk with Ogras later to see whether he was responsible for it.

"Thank you. Is my sister at home?" he asked.

"She left for the Academy some time ago," the guard answered.

"Could you have someone call her over," Zac said.

"Of course," she said with a nod, and one of the Valkyries immediately ran toward the direction of the Academy.

Zac simply thanked the guard, and soon found himself back in his familiar courtyard, relaxing and enjoying a bottle of whiskey he had saved for himself for some time.

Some noise from the outside half an hour later told him that his sister was back, and he shouted out to let her know which building he stayed at.

“I still can’t believe that this whole place yours. You’ve gotten an expensive taste,” Kenzie said as she walked into the beautiful courtyards with widened eyes.

“Well, Emily lives here as well. I assume you’ve met her by now? And sometimes I have guests. You can take whatever building you like if you haven’t already,” Zac explained as he indicated for her to sit down.

“Was this place really just an uninhabited island before?” she curiously asked.

“Yeah, in the beginning it was just me and a bunch of barghest on the island,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“What about Hannah?” she asked with a weird face.

Kenzie knew that he was away on vacation with his girlfriend when the integration took place.

“All of them turned out to be cultivators. What are the odds?” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “I still don’t know where they ended up.”

“What would you do if you found her? Would she live here as well?” she asked.

Zac only threw an amused glance at his sister. He knew she wasn’t the biggest fan of Hannah for some reason, but he was a bit surprised she still held on to those kinds of feelings after such a long time.

“I don’t know. Maybe not?” he said with a shrug.

“So you’re like the king of this island? I’ve never been treated so well before,” she said, changing the subject.

“Uh, I guess. And don’t take advantage of people. I don’t really bother with all that though, I have other things to worry about,” Zac answered.

“Then what do you do all day? Just sit here and drink like some hobo?” she said with a glance at the bottle of whiskey he had by his side.

Zac snorted and shook his head.

“I wish. I need to get stronger,” Zac said, his face turning serious. “I promised to protect you at dad’s grave, and there are so many enemies.”

Kenzie only looked down with sad eyes. He’d told her about their father the day he saved her, not wanting to hide it from her. Though she had cried a bit she soon recovered, only mentioning that she wished to visit the grave as soon as possible.

It was a harsh reality, but most people had already come to terms with the fact that most of their friends and family had passed away. There barely were any families that had gone unscathed by the fall, and theirs wasn’t an exception.

“By the way, those towers over at the entrance look so cool. You could learn a lesson or two from Brazla,” Kenzie said with shimmering eyes as she looked the towers shining in gold and white in the distance.

Due to the height of the structure and the extremely gaudy display, there were few places in Port Atwood where you couldn’t spot at least part of the building. As if by responding to her words the rainbows and celestial rays increased in intensity, almost reaching a blinding luminescence.

“Living in a place like that would be like living in the middle of a Las Vegas Casino,” Zac said with a grimace. “Have you talked with the Tool Spirit?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. I think he’s a bit lonely, so I usually visit him once a day for a bit,” she nodded. “He says that one of the inheritances is a good fit for me.”

“Oh?” Zac said, curious.

That also worked as an excellent segue into why he’d asked her to come back to their home. There were still a few questions in Zac’s mind, questions that weren’t proper to ask in front of the other two girls.

The more he thought about the weird ball that entered Kenzie’s head, the more uncomfortable he got. It was simply unnatural that something so powerful didn’t give off a single speck of energy. He wanted to get to the bottom of the matter

now that they were alone, so he could help out if there was some trouble.

But before he had time to go into that issue he was interrupted by Kenzie.

“I heard you’ve traveled a lot the past months. Did you find any clues about mom?” Kenzie blurted out with hopeful eyes before Zac had a chance to ask his questions.

Zac was taken by surprise by the question, as he honestly hadn’t really thought about his mother since the integration.

“I couldn’t even find her before the world got randomized, I wouldn’t even know where to begin to look now,” Zac answered with a shrug.

Zac saw his sister was gearing up for an argument they’d had many times before, and could only groan inwardly. However, he quickly had an idea and took out a small box from a pouch. It contained the things he brought from their home in Greenworth, and he took out the amulet his father had left.

Their father mentioned that it was a memento from their mother in his diary, and Zac thought giving it to Kenzie might pacify her a bit. But before he had time to hand over the amulet they were interrupted by two demons entering the courtyard.

“So you’re back,” Ogras said with a small smile as he sauntered inside.

“Don’t you ever knock?” Zac asked with some annoyance as he looked over at the demons entering the courtyard.

“Get yourself an array if you want privacy, otherwise I’ll treat it as an open-door policy is in effect,” Ogras answered as he threw one of his annoying smiles toward Kenzie. “Hello again, beautiful.”

Zac’s eyes thinned as he glared toward Ogras, his aura starting to leak out a bit. Kenzie noticed her brother’s change in demeanor, and with a roll of her eyes slapped his arm.

“Cut it out,” she muttered under her breath.

“So sister-in-law is here as well. It is good to see you again,” Alea said as she pushed Ogras out of the way as she walked toward Kenzie with a warm smile, not even sparing Zac a glance.

“Sister-in-law?” MacKenzie asked with some confusion as she let Alea hook her arm in hers.

“Don’t let that human girl hear you say that,” Ogras said with a grin, drawing an angry glare from Alea.

Kenzie simply seemed amused by the chaos the two were creating and was content to be a spectator of it all.

“Alea is just kidding around,” Zac said to his sister before turning to Ogras. “What human girl?”

“Oh, we found a girl that claims to be your girlfriend. Hannah something,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“Hannah’s here?” Zac said, his face quickly souring as he glared at his sister.

She only shrugged her shoulders with an impish smile when seeing Zac’s face. Alea’s mouth curved up in a smile as she saw Zac’s reaction, but only ushered Kenzie out of the courtyard.

“Come, let’s sightsee a bit. Let those two bores talk things out. I have a great tea that I have saved for a special occasion such as this,” Alea said as she pulled Kenzie away.

Just before she exited the courtyard she threw one last look at Zac.

“It’s good you’re back.”

“Have fun,” Zac distractedly said as he waved the two away, a confused frown adorning his face.

Ogras snickered as he looked at a peeved Alea, who turned away with a harrumph.

However, the mirth on Ogras face quickly drained away as he saw the amulet in Zac’s hand.

“Why do you have that thing?” he said with an uncommonly serious voice.

“Why do you care?” Zac asked with some confusion as he looked down at the memento in his hands.

“Because it is a Technocrat insignia.”

Chapter 189: Leandra

Zac skeptically looked up at Ogras as he fiddled with the amulet in his hands.

“What are you talking about? It’s impossible that this is something from the Technocrats. I picked this up on Earth years ago,” Zac said, hiding the true origins of the Amulet for now.

“Trust me, I know. The demonic horde is very much in favor of The Ruthless Heavens, which makes the Technocrats one of our prime enemies. Everyone learns to identify their kind in case we run into them in mystic realms or out in the wild somewhere,” Ogras said.

“What I am curious about is how it could have gotten here. It doesn’t make sense...” Ogras muttered until his eyes suddenly widened. “Unless Earth was a planet owned by the technocrats.”

“What? I think we humans should have known about that?” Zac answered with some skepticism.

However, the calmness was only on the outside. His head was hammering fast as his mind was a mess. If Ogras said was true, just what did it mean? Was his mother an alien? The note left by his father said that he should use the amulet if he wanted to find her. Did his father know something as well?

The matter of Leandra, their mother, was still shrouded in mystery. She had simply disappeared not long after MacKenzie was born, and his memories of her were quite hazy by now. His father refused to talk about it, even though Kenzie repeatedly had tried to arrange a meeting with her. Their dad only responded once, saying that their mother had gone home to her family and that she wasn’t coming back.

Zac had left it at that, always bearing some resentment for her actions. He had just been a kid as well, but he still remembered the sadness that had marred their father's face as he took care of the infant MacKenzie.

However, Kenzie didn't have that resentment and kept pestering Zac to help her find Leandra. Finally Zac relented a few years ago, even hiring a private investigator to track the woman down. Oddly enough there wasn't a single proof of her ever even existing. Even their birth certificates didn't mention her, only listing their father as a parent.

The only explanation that the investigator could come up with was that Leandra was an illegal immigrant, which is why there was no paper trail of her existence. Zac had to give up at that point due to a complete lack of clues, much to Kenzie's disappointment.

But now another, far more fantastical, explanation had revealed itself. There was a possibility that she was actually an alien, as crazy as it sounded. But that possibility only led to more questions.

What was she doing on earth? Why did she leave, and why didn't she come back? If she had to leave, why didn't she bring her family with her? Questions whirled around in his mind until cough awoke him.

"What?" Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

"I said that some technocrat might have used this place as a lab for experiments. I mean, they want to remove The Ruthless Heavens right? Perhaps someone was researching a planet outside Heaven's control," the demon said.

"That might be it. Well, it doesn't really matter I guess," Zac said with a shrug, as he put the amulet away. "If they were still here they should have shown themselves by now, right? Or packed up and left."

Ogras' eyes thinned a bit, but he didn't push the matter any further, much to Zac's relief.

"So what's your plan with your girl?" the demon said instead.

"Want me to take care of the problem? I'm sure Alea is

willing.”

“A lot has changed in the six months since the fall,” Zac said with a sigh, ignoring his comment. “I am not the Zac from before, and she likely isn’t the same Hannah either. Where does that leave us?”

“Well, you should probably figure it out. The girl has repeatedly asked about you, causing some ruckus. No one has dared to say no to her so far, unsure what your reaction would be,” Ogras retorted with a widening smile, likely looking forward to the coming chaos. “I haven’t let her inside the inner area though, much to her annoyance.”

Zac only shook his head, unsure how to respond. He had myriad things on his mind at the moment, and Hannah suddenly being back was truly not something he’d expected. He’d actually mostly forgotten about her, having more pressing matters on his mind until now.

“So you’re back already from the rat incursion?” Zac asked, eager to change the subject.

“Yeah. It was a success. It only took 2 days, wasn’t a too desperate a fight. That giant had actually exhausted their reserves quite a bit all by himself. He’d been killing Ratmen at least 18 hours a day for half a year,” Ogras said with a wry smile. “Don’t make that guy an enemy, he must have some special constitution. I’ve never met anyone having that strength at such a low level.”

“What?” Zac asked with some shock. “You don’t think we’re his match?”

“In a head-on confrontation? Probably not,” Ogras said. “I’d guess that mammoth has over 500 strength, and his club takes perfect advantage of that. He crushed the defensive array the Ratmen had set up with just one swing, taking half their town with it. I’m not sure I would have been able to destroy the array at all, no matter how much time I was given.”

“He must have done some crazy things in the tutorial. Of course, if we wanted him dead it wouldn’t be too hard, he’s not very balanced. He needs a good support system to bring

that disgusting Strength of his to full use,” Ogras added with a vicious glint.

Zac could only shake his head in disbelief. He knew that the tutorial gave out good benefits to the top cultivators, but this was above what he expected. It seemed he needed to be careful around the others as well, especially Thea and Salvation.

“So what’s next?” the demon suddenly said.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked.

“Didn’t you fight up till this point just to find your sister and provide a place to stay? You’ve done that now,” Ogras said as he gestured at the many courtyards in the area.

“Are you pushing for my retirement?” Zac asked with a small smile.

“Just curious,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“I have a quest,” Zac said after some hesitation. “A trial of sorts. I plan on doing it before the Treasure Hunt starts.”

“I thought you were skipping the treasure hunt?” the demon asked.

Zac only sighed as he shook his head.

“It’s not like I have much of a choice. I can’t stop and relax in this shitty new reality. If I do then someone will kill me.”

“The will of The Ruthless Heavens,” Ogras said with a grin.

“Actually, regarding that point I have a suggestion. You’re nearing the bottleneck. There are a few things that can’t be done after you evolve,” the demon continued.

“Hmm?” Zac asked halfheartedly.

“Well, there are two opportunities before you. The first is The Tower of Eternity. Ascending the tower can only be done before evolving. Not taking that opportunity would be a huge missed chance. Everyone who gets the chance to go there will take the trial,” the demon said.

“Secondly are the inheritances. The inheritance needs to begin at F-Grade Class as well according to the Tool Spirit”, Ogras added.

“Alyn mentioned the Tower some time ago as well, just what is it?” Zac asked curiously.

He didn’t mention that he stood to gain an entrance token soon, and actually was already thinking of going. He knew the demon wanted him to go for some reason, and Ogras would be more forthcoming with information if he thought he was trying to trick him into going.

“It is unclear,” Ogras said, but quickly added when he saw Zac’s skeptical face. “It’s something that has just been there since the beginning of time it seems like. Some believe that it houses the Brain of the Ruthless Heavens. However, you can only get to the tower with the help of a token as it is impossible to find without them. Many extreme hegemon have scoured the multi-verse for the tower intending to make it their treasure, but it’s always eluded them.”

“The tower consists of 9 floors, and each floor is demarked by 9 tiers. The further you manage to travel up the tower the greater the rewards. In theory, the highest possible grade is 81, nine by nine. However, I’ve never heard of anyone getting that far,” Ogras continued.

“So what are the rewards?” Zac probed.

“The tower contains all manner of treasures, and it also provides a Title that gives stats depending on how far you reached,” Ogras simply answered.

It sounded a lot like the title that the cultivators got from the tutorial Zac realized. Perhaps pushing all the way to the 9th floor would give a huge boost to his combat power. However, Ogras next words shocked him.

“If we help each other out, we stand a chance to make it to the fourth floor, perhaps even pass a few tiers there,” he said with desire in his eyes.

“What?” Zac asked, shocked. “Only the fourth floor? Isn’t the towers limited to F-Grade people?”

“Oh, you think you’re some hotshot because you can beat up some useless cultivators on this baby planet? You are strong, but only in the context of this planet. Don’t look down on the forces of the multi-verse. There are F-Graded people with advanced Daos and unimaginable titles, people surpassing a thousand points in a single attribute before they evolve.”

Zac’s eyes widened in shock. It was a good reminder that he couldn’t get complacent. Lately, he’d almost felt like an immortal as he met various people. But he was just a normal person who had caught a few lucky breaks when his planet got integrated. It couldn’t compare to whatever the great forces of the multi-verse provided their young.

“Wouldn’t that mean we’d be risking our lives going there?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Well, getting stronger always comes with risks. But those kinds of monsters are rare, and people are more concerned about ascending more tiers in the tower rather than expending energy on fighting with strangers. Just keep your head down and push forward,” Ogras said without a care.

Zac felt things weren’t as simple as the demon was implying, but he knew that the Tower of Eternity wasn’t something he should ignore if he wanted an Epic Class.

“Besides, we’ll be able to watch each other’s backs. We only need to get an inheritance each before we go, which would boost our survivability noticeably,” the demon concluded.

Thinks clicked in Zac’s mind as he looked over at the demon, who innocently looked back. It seemed there was an inheritance really he wanted, and Zac was pretty sure which one it was.

“*We* need to get an inheritance?” Zac asked wryly.

“Of course. You should get one as well. It might be dangerous but the opportunity outweighs the risk by far,” Ogras said.

“Besides, I can undergo the test first, scout things out. So to speak.”

Zac only snorted in response. The two spoke for a bit more before the demon receded into the shadows again. He seemed

a bit annoyed that Zac wouldn't give a clear go-ahead on the inheritances, but Zac didn't really care.

He would likely give one to the demon sooner or later. He was pretty sure Ogras wanted The Umbra inheritance, and Zac had no use for that. But he wouldn't just give it away before thinking things through properly. They were one-time gifts, and he only had eight of them. As for himself, he was a bit unsure of what he should do. He currently felt that there were multiple interesting choices available.

His initial thought had been to go with The Titan inheritance, since he was mainly strength-based. An alternative was The Undying Fiend, which sounded to be Endurance or Vitality-based. One would improve his battle prowess and the other his survivability, and either sounded like a good option.

However, his experiences in the Dead Zone made him look at a new option, the Lord of Cycles-inheritance. While Zac couldn't be sure, it did seem to align with his new core and new attainments into the Dao. That was provided that the cycle the inheritance spoke of was the cycle of life and death, of course.

It all came back to what he was aiming for. He still had a hard time to decide whether he should focus more on the core and Dao, or his axe-work. The largest risk as he saw it was that he might need to somehow attain another Dao Seed that could act as the opposite of the Dao of Trees.

The Sharpness and Heaviness weren't really suited to represent the miasma-filled side of his core, making his skillset a bit mismatched. Zac had thought about the issue for days now and still couldn't come up with a solution.

However, there was still time, so Zac once again tabled the matter as he stood up and headed toward the Nexus Crystal. He really needed to speak with his sister, but she was off god knows where with Alea, so he would have to wait.

In the meanwhile, he had a skill to attain. Soon he found himself at the crystal, and as he touched it a surge of information entered his mind as he gained a new fractal, and this time it was right on his chest.

Chapter 190: Top Tier Cheat

Zac's mind was filled with a burst of information told him how the skill worked, but he still chose to try it out after some hesitation. He headed over to an empty area inside his compound that was still just forest and activated the new fractal. A huge torrent of energy surged from the area and entered his body. This wasn't the same thing as absorbing energy, but rather forcefully ripping it out of the atmosphere.

Cracking sounds could be heard throughout his body as it felt like he was injected with a hundred adrenaline shots.

Boundless power surged into his limbs as he took out his axe without thinking. The extreme amount of power gathering within him needed an outlet.

With a roar, he swung his axe with all his might as the innocent trees. It was as though a bomb had gone off in the forest, with decimated trees covering the area.

He felt as though he could topple mountains at the moment, but after roughly thirty seconds the feeling was gone, replaced by a sense of weakness. The skill [**Hatchetman's Rage**] was a boosting skill, that actually increased all his attributes by 25% for around ten seconds.

Better yet, it seemed as though the increase also worked on the attributes he gained from titles as well, as he gained over 80 points in Strength while the skill was in use. A boost of 25% was not something to scoff at going by how attributes worked.

It would increase his combat strength by quite a large margin during the effect, which would help him push him ahead in a close battle. It might even allow him to defeat a stronger opponent in a quick turn-around if he caught the enemy unaware.

However, the skill wasn't without its drawbacks. It seemed it messed with his head a bit. When the energy entered him he

felt ready, and willing, to take on the world. It also left him weakened after usage. It didn't consume a lot of Cosmic or Mental Energy, but it was rather as though his body was overtaxed, like he might have felt after running a marathon back in the day before the integration.

He slowly headed back to his courtyard, and it took over an hour before he was back in good condition again. Clearly, he had to be careful with the skill, just like with Nature's Punishment. He needed to end the fight by the time the effect ran out, otherwise he'd be a sitting duck.

Familiar steps could be heard after a while as he saw a flustered Kenzie run over.

"What's going on? What happened earlier, did you get into a fight with Ogras? The destruction could be seen from the town" she said as she looked around with a frown.

"I only tried out a new skill of mine," Zac said with a shrug. "Sit down, we need to talk."

"You destroyed a forest to try out a skill..?" his sister said with a shake of her head, but she still sat down next to him.

Zac suddenly had a thought and opened the Town Shop. Not long after two small arrays were erected around the courtyard. One was an **[E-Grade Small Scale Silencing Array]**, whose job was to block any sound from escaping, and also impede any types of spying skill.

The other array was a normal illusion array that hid the interior, the very same type as he used around his camp before. It should look like the courtyard was empty from outside, from how understood it. He still had the original array somewhere, but he didn't remember where it was anymore. Since it was quite cheap he bought an upgraded version for 250 000 Nexus Coins, making it even harder to see through.

Finally, he put up a third array, the weak defensive one he'd purchased some time ago. Wasting no more time Zac took out the amulet and handed it over to Kenzie, who accepted it with a confused glance.

“What’s this?” she asked as she held up the intricately designed amulet.

“I found this amulet with a note from Dad when I visited Greenworth. The note said that it was a memento from mom, and that we might be able to use it if we wanted to find her,” Zac explained, hiding nothing.

Kenzie looked at the small amulet with marvel, as though it was a map leading to some grand treasure.

“How do we use it?” she excitedly asked as she grabbed Zac’s arm.

“That’s the problem. I just found out something pretty weird about that thing. It might not be from earth. Ogras said it is a Technocrat insignia, like an emblem from a Technocrat Nobleman,”

“Technocrat? What’s that?” Kenzie asked with some confusion.

Zac suddenly realized that the Technocrats might not be a subject that was broached in the Tutorial, as they opposed the System.

“It’s an extremely powerful force in the multi-verse. I don’t know a lot about them, apart from the fact that they are an enemy to most other forces, and that they don’t use Cosmic Energy. Instead, they use extremely advanced technology, like science fiction stuff. They are the most advanced force in the multi-verse in that sense,” Zac explained.

Kenzie’s eyes widened, until she looked down the amulet in her hands with a slight frown, saying nothing. Zac would have thought his sister would have a ton of follow-up questions, but she only silently stared at the amulet. But her silence told him that it might not be as big a shock as he expected, and soon he understood why.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked. “I saw that shield around you when the guy exploded back in Kingsbury. It didn’t contain even a scrap of Cosmic Energy. And the ball flew right into your head afterward. Are you ok?”

“I... I think I understand now,” she said.

“When the tutorial started, I was the same as everyone else. Luckily I survived the first trials and got stronger. However, after the fifth trial, I suddenly heard a voice in my head. It wasn’t the System, but someone else,” MacKenzie began. “It told me it had finalized integration.”

“Another voice?” Zac asked with some concern.

“Yeah. At first I thought I had gone crazy, but the voice told me it was an assistant system. I soon figured out that it was real as it warned me of imminent attacks that I didn’t notice myself. Since then it’s helped me in various ways, and I probably wouldn’t have survived the tutorial without it. It changed the way I channel my Cultivation Manual to become more efficient, it helps me in battle, and in all kinds of ways. It even modifies my skills to become stronger,” she explained.

Zac frowned as he looked at his sister, thinking of the ball in her head. From the way she explained it, it almost seemed that there was an artificial intelligence helping her. But that should be impossible, as that type of technology and the Cultivation System shouldn’t be impossible to merge.

It was one of the basic rules of the multiverse as he saw it, and the very reason that the Technocrats were so desperate to either destroy the System or create an Apostate of their own. The Dao of Technology was blocked, and merging cosmic energy and technology should be impossible. The thing in her head sounded like something impossible.

“It never told me what it was, so I guessed it was some special reward I got from the system for some reason. But now I think it might have been mom who left me with this thing to protect me?” she said, her face brightening. “Perhaps she knew the integration was coming and wanted to give me something to help me survive.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Zac said after a while.

However, inwardly he wasn’t as sure. Zac saw a very different scenario. He thought back to what Ogras said earlier, that Earth might be a lab for experimentation by the Technocrats. Did their mother experiment on Kenzie when she was an infant, potentially putting her in danger?

Finding ways to trick the System and integrate technology to a cultivator should be a huge goal for the technocrats, and the first step in creating an Apostate of their own. If what Kenzie said was true, the thing in her head might be a highly valuable Technocrat technology.

Still, he didn't say these things out loud. There was no point in starting to argue about such things. And there was nothing he could do about the situation, apart from trying to get stronger in case something happened. But he knew he was just kidding himself. The Technocrats could be considered an A-Grade force.

They could incinerate this whole planet in an instant if they wished, and there was nothing he or anyone else on Earth could do about it. He could only pray that he was wrong about his speculations, or that something unexpected had happened, making the Technocrats unaware of the marvel inside Kenzie's body.

Suddenly Kenzie handed the Amulet back to Zac, who took it with some confusion on his face.

"Mom already gave me this assistant to protect me, so you should keep the amulet. It might have some method to help you as well," she said.

"Are you sure?" Zac said, but in truth he was quite happy to take back the amulet now that he knew more what was going on.

He was afraid that it might be a beacon or tracker of sorts, so he would prefer to keep it away from Kenzie if possible.

"Hmm... How about this," Zac said as he opened the Town Shop again.

Soon another box appeared in front of him, and he took out another amulet and gave it to Kenzie.

"Since you don't want that amulet, take this one instead. It was *very* expensive, so wear it at all times," he said with a smile.

His sister rolled her eyes, but she still put it on with a smile.

Zac wasn't lying when he said it was expensive. It cost 20 000 000 Nexus coins and was one of the most expensive Arrays in his Town Shop at the moment. It was called **[E-Grade Supreme Ward]**, and was a mobile array just like his Mother-Daughter array.

However, its function was much more varied. It was a defensive talisman that protected the wearer in all kinds of ways, as long as she stayed within a certain range from Port Atwood. It was an array that many forces bought for their young to protect them from sudden assassinations.

It had a few functions. First, it had a strong shield that automatically protected from sudden attacks. It might not be necessary for Kenzie, but it was better than nothing. However, Zac bought it for its other functions. For one it protected against spying or scrying skills, making it hard to locate her or spy on any secrets inside her. It also protected against mental attacks or hypnosis.

It was the only thing he could think of right now that might keep her hidden from any potential spies of the multi-verse. He truly believed that the fact she possessed an artificial assistant must be kept a secret to protect her. That thing inside her might be even more explosive than his Creator Shipyard. Kenzie might be hunted down by the various forces of the multi-verse if they knew, and who knew what the Technocrats would do.

"Does anyone else know about the assistant thing in your head?" Zac asked.

He was determined to keep this secret just between the two of them, even if he was forced to do some gruesome things.

"No, I knew it was a bit odd from the start, so I never told anyone, not even Lyla," Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

"Good. Let's keep it that way", Zac said with relief. "I will try to look into the Technocrats some more, but we need to be careful. We don't know what happened to mom. If she truly is a Technocrat the situation might be pretty complicated. The Technocrats have so many enemies, and we might implicate both ourselves and mom if we rush things."

“I know,” Kenzie said, not being able to hide some of her disappointment.

“Hey, don’t worry. We finally have a lead for the first time ever. We’ll find her. But we need to focus on getting stronger as well,” Zac said with a smile.

“I get it, I’ll be patient.”

“By the way, you never told me what class you were,” Zac asked instead, changing the subject.

“Well, I picked Acolyte, a Normal Grade mage class,” his sister answered. “But Jeeves, oh that’s what I call the voice, upgraded it to Elementalist, an Uncommon one.”

Zac could only speechlessly stare at Kenzie for a while. That thing in her head was truly a top tier cheat.

“What about you?”

“Well, it’s called Hatchetman, a Rare class,” Zac said with a shrug.

“Hatchetman? How’d you get such a stupid-sounding class?” she asked with a smile.

Zac could only shake his head and tell the tale of what he was doing when the integration happened. Soon Kenzie was laughing as Zac explained how he fumbled along with his lumberjack’s hatchet, living in a dented and bloodied camper, looking like a hobo covered in strips of snake leather.

“So, what are you going to do about Hannah?” she suddenly asked.

Zac grimaced at the question. With only a shake of his head he got up to his feet and wistfully looked in the direction of the town.

Some things couldn’t be prolonged any longer.

Chapter 191: The Network

Zac still wasn't sure what he should do with Hannah as he slowly walked toward the gate leading to the town proper. When Ogras told him she had been found he felt... nothing. Simply too much time had passed since they last were together.

The time they had spent apart was more than twice what they had actually been together, and since then Zac had experienced one life-altering event after another. And it wasn't like they were some childhood sweethearts or soul mates. They were two lonely people who had found each other on a dating app.

Besides, the little he'd heard about her causing trouble since she arrived at his island made him quite annoyed. However, he would have to form his own opinion, as there usually was a hidden agenda behind the demon's words. But in the end, Zac knew he was just psyching himself up with various justifications and excuses.

He almost wished that some weird void would open up and spew out a horde of monsters. He would much rather go through a deadly battle than this muddled situation.

Soon he arrived at the gate once more, and after asking the guards headed toward a certain neighborhood of the residential district. It didn't take long to find the building, since not only was the neighborhood one of those closest to the gate leading to Zac's area, but it was also guarded by a demon and a Valkyrie.

Zac's brows scrunched together in displeasure as he walked up to the two guards who quickly recognized him.

"Lord Atwood," the demoness quickly said.

"You two can go back to your usual duties. This place doesn't need guards," Zac said with a nod.

The two guards gave each other a quick glance and quickly complied and left. Zac took a deep breath and knocked on the door. It didn't take long before he could hear hurried steps, and the door was practically thrown open as Hannah hurried to open it.

She looked as beautiful as when they first met, perhaps even more so. Say what you will about the integration, the Cosmic Energy made people look better, as long as they survived. However, to Zac's surprise she didn't wear normal clothes, but rather robes similar to those that Alea and Alyn wore.

There was a hint of confusion in her eyes for a second as she looked at him. Zac couldn't blame her, as he'd truly changed a lot more than most. However, Hannah soon realized who he was and her eyes quickly filled with tears.

"Zac!" she said and threw herself in his arms, her body wracked by cries. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

"I am glad you're fine," Zac said with a smile.

"I heard that you came back," she said after having found her bearing. "Come in."

Zac hesitated for a second but soon followed behind her into her house. It was neat and clean inside, though the furniture was quite eclectic. He briefly wondered how she managed to get so many things on this isolated island. Then again, many of the surrounding islands had a lot of buildings that were deserted, perhaps there was a lot of it lying around.

"Are the other three okay?" Zac said as he stopped in the living room.

"Only David's still alive," Hannah said with a shake of her head. "Izzie and Tyler didn't make it."

Zac could only nod, not being too surprised. He knew that only two people surviving was the expected outcome, and that only half of a tutorial group dying was considered one of the best outcomes.

"I wanted to find you, but we were trapped on that island, and that crazy guy messed with our heads," Hannah said, placing

her hand on his chest. “But that’s okay. We’re finally together again.”

As Zac looked down on her beautiful face he forgot about everything for a second. He remembered the awkward first date, turning into a relationship that gave respite from the bleak reality of being an adult with no real direction in life.

However, reality soon came crashing back to him, and he knew that those times would never come back. Her house might feel like a secluded enclosure hiding them from the world, but it was only a mirage. Shaking his head Zac extracted himself from Hannah with a sigh.

“Hannah, we need to talk.”

Zac was still feeling sour walked into the large building that was currently the core of operations of Port Atwood, but he forced himself to regain control of his emotions. Meeting Hannah again had been a roller-coaster of emotions. But then again, most break-ups were.

He realized he had painted her as some sort of villain in his mind, desperately grasping at every negative he heard in order to make himself feel justified. But ultimately, there was only one justification. They had simply fallen out of love since the apocalypse, and their relationship died along with the fall.

Besides, he didn’t know what to believe. Ogras had insinuated that she was causing trouble, but she had looked completely baffled when he’d mentioned it. As she explained things she tried to work in the government, thinking it would help him to have people he knew and could trust there, and not only strangers with their own agendas.

Zac could somewhat understand that sentiment as he walked through the halls of the large government building. The faces he saw were mostly those of strangers, and even those he recognized he barely knew the names of. There was no one of those that ran his town that he would dare trust his life to.

That wasn’t to say that Hannah necessarily had his best in mind. While she seemed the same as the girl he dated half a

year back, no one had truly gone through the integration without changing a bit. Everyone had gotten harder, more cynical. Those who didn't were long dead.

In the end, he had promised he'd find work for her and David, but Hannah had rejected it, saying that she wanted to focus on getting stronger. She even mentioned joining the academy. Zac only acquiesced and promised he'd provide the two with resources. It was the least he could do.

Not long after Zac entered the large building a clerk that Zac didn't recognize hurriedly ran up to him with a small bow.

"Lord Atwood," she said with some reservation in her voice. "Administrators Abby and Adran are expecting you."

"Lead the way," Zac simply said.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the address, as it felt odd to be called a lord by the humans. He guessed the employees had adopted the mannerisms from the demons, who had stricter hierarchies in their societies.

Soon he found himself in a meeting room with the people, or eyeballs, responsible for keeping his town running.

"I am glad to hear you found your sister in good health," Abby said as she bobbed in the air.

"Thank you. How have things gone while I was away?" Zac asked.

"Well, Port Atwood has advanced on various fronts. Today 83 432 citizens are within your network," Adran began.

"Network?" Zac asked.

"We have started setting up various satellite facilities on neighboring islands. These settlements are equipped with [**F-Grade Teleportation Arrays**], and therefore can be easily accessed. We currently have five settlements, whose purposes are mainly various types of resource farms," Abby filled in.

"Five settlements? The guards at the teleporter said there's twelve," Zac said with some confusion.

“Two teleporters lead to the larger human towns that are able to self-sustain. We saw no reason to move everyone here to drain resources,” Abby explained. “We believe that living in Port Atwood should be considered a boon, and something only for those who contribute to the faction. Therefore, when we find refugees on new islands they usually get moved to one of the other towns.”

“And the other teleporters?” Zac asked.

“Another two are for the beastman settlements. One leads to Azh’Rodum, and the eleventh goes to the Zhix hive,” Abby said.

“There’s still one more, no?” Zac said.

“Yes, but it is a bit special. It leads to a small camp we placed on an extremely large island we found. It is the only island so far we’ve found that’s even bigger than this one. From what we can tell the island is uninhabited, but it is teeming with strong monsters,” Adran said as he handed Zac an information crystal.

“So it’s a place for our people to gain combat experience and levels?” Zac asked as he accepted the crystal.

“Well partly that. But there are also energy signals that indicate that there actually might be a Mystic Realm somewhere on the island,” Abby said, once again starting to bob around in excitement.

“Oh?” Zac said, somewhat unperturbed.

“What’s with that reaction? That is huge news!” the Stargazer said agitatedly. “Depending on what’s inside it could be an enormous boon for Port Atwood.”

“But couldn’t it just as likely be full of E-Graded monster, or even worse things?” Zac retorted.

Exploring a mystic realm was an extremely dangerous undertaking, and some forces had to sacrifice thousands and thousands of people in order to secure it. And even then, the realms might not lead to any benefits in the end.

A mystic realm was a huge gamble, and Zac wasn't sure he had the resources to roll the dice at the moment. He only really had a few hundred combatants, far too little to venture into a dangerous place like that.

“Well yes, but great rewards always come with some risk. That's the way of the universe. Besides, we don't need to explore it right now, apart from perhaps sending a scouting party to sound things out. If it's dangerous we'll simply reinforce the portal, and revisit the issue when we're stronger,” Abby explained.

“Is there any risk of something emerging from the Mystic Realm to wreak havoc?” Zac asked.

“It's highly unlikely. Unless we open the vortex from our side they can't do much. They would need to brute force it, and that would require extreme powers. If such strong beings lived inside the mystic realm, they would have broken out long ago,” Adran explained.

“Well, I won't send anyone inside there against his will,” Zac said after some deliberation. “But if someone wants to take a gamble, we can give it a try a bit later. I will visit the island and take a look for myself. But for now, I want to focus on the Incursions.”

“Well, I am sure that Ogras has told you, but the Ratmen Incursion was vanquished, becoming the second incursion being closed on the planet. We also found two more potential targets while fighting over there. The residents of Billyville had allies who also live close to Incursions,” Adran said.

“Oh?” Zac said. “Are they affiliated with the New World Government?”

“One is unaffiliated, while we are unsure about the other. However, both of them wish to wait until after the Treasure Hunt,” Adran said.

“What do you two think?” Zac asked.

“The Ratmen Incursion should be considered a low tier Incursion, just like that of Clan Azh'Rezak,” Abby said, drawing a glare from Adran. “Both the incursions mentioned

by the allies of Billyville sounds like medium-tier Incursions, and you would likely need to join unless you're willing to accept mass casualties among your soldiers. As for the high-grade ones, I am not sure we're ready to take those on at the moment."

Zac nodded his head in thought, not too surprised. The fact that it only took a few days to eradicate the Ratmen Incursion proved they couldn't have been too strong. The easier Incursions were dealt with, leaving the harder ones. He also felt he had to agree with Abby's assessment of their current power.

Even with 3 of the generals taken out of commission in the undead army, he wasn't confident his side could vanquish the Incursion. There were still another 3 generals remaining along with the leader. Furthermore, they would be at the core of the incursion where the Miasma should be thickest, along with who knows what kind of Arrays.

Zac also understood why people wished to postpone attacking the incursions until after the Treasure Hunt. From how it sounded there would be quite a few power-ups waiting inside for the powerhouses of Earth, which would help immensely in the fight against the invaders.

The only question was how long the mission would last. It wouldn't do any good if it took months to complete since that would leave most towns without proper defense from their most powerful people, while also allowing the limitations of the invaders to be removed.

The briefing went on for another hour, and it seemed everything was under control. He wasn't really needed for anything, as he was mostly used for deterrence so that no one would act up. Besides, with the demon soldiers walking the streets people were keeping themselves in line.

Since it was getting late he soon headed back to his home to rest up. Soon after he came back Emily came by his courtyard, forcefully scampering over the decorative wall, uncaring that the gates were closed. The teenager had met up with Kenzie earlier, and from what he could tell the two had hit it off well.

It appeared she was overloaded with gossip, and a seemingly unending stream of juicy tidbits came pouring out of her mouth. It was everything from the fact that Ryan was trying to woo one of the Valkyries, to an Ishiate workshop exploding in the commercial district twice in one day.

There apparently had been a large fight between Emma and Julia as well, something about their future path. Zac could guess that while Emma wanted nothing to do with the government, Julia wasn't so sure. He made a mental note to sit down with the government official soon.

He hadn't really talked with her since she arrived, but the events at Kingsbury made him realize that he needed to do something about his relationship with the government before the shapeshifters ruined them from within. Turning Julia into a proper liaison for Port Atwood might not be a bad idea.

Finally, the teenager reminded him that her birthday was in a few weeks before she scampered off. Zac only smiled and shook his head, his spirits lifting somewhat. He threw the matters of Hannah and Port Atwood into the back of his head, and instead focused on what was ahead.

His next goal was the quest for hegemony, but since he didn't know how long it would take there were still some things he needed to get done first.

Chapter 192: Island Tour

After resting up a few hours Zac stepped through his private array, arriving at one of the first satellite towns of Port Atwood. Only a brief moment was needed to understand that this was one of the farming-villages that was created to provide the town with a steady supply of grain and vegetables.

Two Valkyries were resting by the gate, but quickly got to their feet when they saw the teleporter activating. Normally there were no guards stationed at the portal, as this place was only accessible through the main teleporter and the traffic was controlled from there.

However, Valkyries and freshly recruited warriors were sent out to all the satellite towns en masse to clean out the islands. There would always be a need for some warriors to safeguard the area from beasts in the future, but the manpower needed would be drastically reduced if all dangerous wildlife was culled first like on the main island.

Zac nodded to the two resting Valkyries before he headed out toward the fields. This personal inspection was something he had decided to do before he left for the Hegemon mission. For one he was still feeling a bit emotionally unsettled from yesterday, and he didn't want to undergo the trial when he wasn't in peak mental condition.

But more importantly, he felt the need to show his face a bit more, and make sure that everything was running smoothly. Hannah's words struck a chord with him, reminding him that he couldn't entrust everything to others.

He generally believed the demons and Abby the eye were working with his best interest in mind, but he also knew that both Abby and Ogras sometimes fudged the truth in order to reach their goals. The only people on the island he felt he

could truly trust were Sap Trang and Kenzie, but both were focusing on improving their power.

Showing his face would give the population a reminder who was the true leader of Port Atwood.

The fields were abuzz with activity, where demons and humans worked together to get production going. The fields still looked mostly barren, apart from a few places having sprouts emerging from the soil. Most of the work still consisted of clearing out the area of trees and stone, turning the island into proper arable land.

After looking around he spotted a familiar face. It was the demon who was in charge of Agriculture for clan Azh'Rezak.

“How are things progressing?” Zac asked as he walked up to the demon

He looked over at Zac with some surprise but quickly found his bearings.

“Lord Atwood, I didn't expect to see you here today,” he said. “Things are progressing just fine. It might not look like much at the moment, but I believe we will have our first harvest within two months. Of course, it's all mortal-graded seeds we're planting.”

Mortal-grade was what things below F-Grade ranked was called, and another name for it was unranked. The normal grain and vegetables were all unranked as they didn't naturally contain any Cosmic Energy.

The thick Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere might imbue the vegetables with some energy, but it was negligible. You would have to eat an insane amount of tomatoes or wheat grown from mortal seeds to gain a power-up.

“Sounds good. Have you procured any spiritual seeds yet?” Zac asked.

“We have bought some, though it might take a few years until production is to a point that it can feed the upper echelon of the island,” the old demonic farmer said with a shrug. “We have planted a few small fields on the main island for those things, and we should start to see results within a year.”

“How come you didn’t plant everything on the main island? God knows we have a lot of free space,” Zac said.

It was true, as his main island was enormous. Even with his speed, it took hours to cross the whole thing, and it would be possible to fill the large empty areas with fields. Currently, 99% of the island was just forest where barghest roamed. That would allow the crops to benefit from the even denser energy in the atmosphere of the main island.

The old farmer’s eyes lit up, but soon he shook his head.

“Actually, farmland absorbs a huge amount of Cosmic Energy, especially Spiritual Herbs. If we planted too much on the main island you’d soon notice that the density of energy in the air would get worse. That’s why forces’ herb farms are in Mystic Realms, as their towns would turn into energy-starved ghettos otherwise,” the demon said.

“It wouldn’t be a problem in the short run as the population is still quite small, but as the citizens grow more numerous and more powerful, the energy consumption will increase. It’s better that we already have a proper infrastructure before reaching that point. And it’s not like it is a problem that these crops take a few weeks longer to grow due to the sparser energy, everyone will be fed,” the farmer continued.

“Understanding the balance between the energy in the heavens and the earth with your farmland is something every farmer needs to understand. If you get too greedy and plant too valuable things, you’ll likely lose the harvest.”

Zac finally understood why the plan had been to farm on other islands from the start. He completely agreed with the farmer’s sentiment. The Vein beneath the island could only produce so much energy per hour, and it was better that energy went to his citizens and creating more Nexus Crystals first hand.

Besides, since the island was quite close to his own the Cosmic Energy in the area was still pretty dense, making it a great place for farming. Zac stayed on for a bit and talked about the plans for the island with the various farmers until he bade farewell and moved to the next one.

The next island he visited was a mining encampment, and the foreman to the shaft did not share the farmer's view on balance. His eyes glistened when he talked about the treasures of the deep, seemingly itching to go down there and hunt for treasures.

The man might as well have been a dwarf going by the greedy gleam in his eyes. It was only after talking with a few of the other miners that Zac found out the foreman didn't care about the treasures, and only cared about the thrill of the hunt.

This mining encampment was not mining for crystals like the mine at Azh'Rodum, but rather for various metals. It was placed on an island with a mountain with a reddish hue. The foreman explained that while they had only encountered mortal grade metals for now, they might encounter F-Graded materials as they dug deeper.

Zac was a bit disappointed that there were only ordinary resources here, but then again only normal materials were needed to produce all kinds of things for the town.

Like this Zac went from satellite village to satellite village seeing how things were going. He was happy to see that there weren't really any problems so far for the Demons and Humans working together. Actually he heard of a few couples having formed already. He'd been afraid the vastly different societies the demons and humans came from would cause some friction, but humans were flexible if anything.

After he was done making rounds he left for his final destination, the mysterious island that held the potential entrance to the Mystic Realm. The scene when he stepped out from the teleporter was quite different from the others.

There were only a guardhouse and a few tents, with four demon guards sitting around a concealed fire having supper. They quickly got to their feet when they noticed Zac's arrival, but quickly calmed down when they noticed it was only Zac.

"Where's the Mystic Realm entrance?" Zac asked after greeting the guards.

“It should be a couple of hours of travel north,” one of the guards answered. “The teleporter was placed close to the edge of the island to give us some room in case something happened.”

“Like what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“There’s a risk of the teleporter getting interference from the entrance before its properly stabilized. If it burst some extra amounts of energy everyone would be stuck here until rescue came by boat,” another demon explained. “Also, it’s just too dangerous further in. We can only handle the beasts at the edge.”

“Strong beasts?” Zac mumbled, taking another look around as he left the camp in the direction the demons indicated.

He finally realized that the camp was mostly hidden within a small crevice of some small hill, secluding it from three directions. Furthermore, when he turned around after walking a bit he noticed to his surprise that the camp was completely gone, making him finally realize where his old illusion array had gone.

This was a completely different setup compared to the ones he’d seen on the other islands so far. The Stargazer had mentioned that there were strong beasts on this island, and it seemed that might have been an understatement if the demon guards had to be that careful.

He wanted to have a proper look for himself about what was going on with this island. He was afraid that Abby was downplaying the dangers to his town for the chance of a large payday. He didn’t delude himself that the well-being of the humans in the town was her main priority. Besides, there was something else he wanted to test while he was here.

The forest had a more tropical feeling compared to the one on his own island, though the level of mutation seemed largely the same. As he walked through the woods he concealed his aura tightly, and it didn’t take long until he was accosted by a beast.

[Crazed Lemur – Level 58 – Strength]

The level of the beast made Zac's brows rise. It was almost the same as his own, and it was just the first thing he met on the island. Zac took out his axe and swung it at the primate, but it deftly dodged as it almost flew into a tree nearby.

Before it even landed it pushed away from the trunk, causing cracks on the tree from the force, instantly rebounding toward Zac with a screech. This time Zac focused properly and swung his axe once again with lightning speed.

A torrent of blood splashed the ground, as the primate lifelessly fell to the ground. Zac frowned as he looked down on the beast, the blood quickly slouching off from his robes. The strength of the animal wasn't what bothered him, even though it likely was a match for most of the demonic warriors.

It was the fact that the core in his body hadn't absorbed a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kill. Zac had hoped that he would be able to keep improving his core by using normal kills, where the neutral energy would fill into both sides of it. Since the core had formed he'd only killed the undead, making him unsure of how it worked.

Unfortunately, the core stayed completely inert as a surge of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body. He already knew that this was a distinct possibility, as he knew that the Core didn't care about the energy from normal Nexus Crystals. He did, however, know that the Miasma Crystals were effective since he'd briefly tried it while waiting for Kenzie in Kingsbury.

Zac shook his head as he kept moving deeper into the jungle. It appeared that he would have to visit the Sky Gnome and open his wallet after all. The core hadn't shown any indication of how much energy it needed to be completed, and feeding it might turn him into a pauper.

While a couple of million nexus coins was quite decent, he knew that in terms of wealth in the multi-verse it was nothing. Zac knew that to simplify things the system actually graded Nexus Coins, just like with crystals.

A thousand Nexus Coins was worth one Nexus Coin (E), which meant that he had roughly 30 Nexus Coins (D). The

system hadn't even bothered to convert the coins to higher tiers since his wealth was just too low to make it worth it.

Still, he'd have to check with Calrin before he started to despair. The mining operations were proceeding smoothly in his crystal mine, and he might be actually able to do a straight trade between Life-Attuned Crystals and neutral ones, not spending a single coin.

Zac instead kept pushing toward the center of the island and noticed that the energy in the atmosphere kept growing. Furthermore, the closer to the core of the island he got, the stronger the animals became. It appeared the island had built a strict hierarchy, where the stronger beasts got to have territories with denser energy.

To his delight, he noticed there was another boon to coming to this island, apart from the Nexus Coins and high-grade meat. The beasts might not have been able to improve his core, but something else was gleefully feeding as the beasts fell one by one. **[Verun's Bite]** was turning the excursion into an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Chapter 193: Merit and Debt

As soon as his targets were above level 60 [**Verun's Bite**] started to absorb blood again, just like it did with the mink he killed long ago. Zac was delighted, as he hadn't found anything that it wanted apart from blood and the stone.

As he kept going toward the core of the island the fights got more intense, creating widespread destruction in the area. After an hour Zac started to imbue his strikes with his Dao to end the battles quickly. After having walked for two hours he'd killed well over a hundred strong beasts, and his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with high-level carcasses.

He also made some interesting discoveries about his axe. It appeared that it didn't just take any type of blood. Every time he killed a beast it took a small amount of its blood, but far from all of it. Furthermore, it only took blood from each type of beast once. Zac ran into a pair of leopards for example, and the axe only absorbed blood from the first kill.

It almost felt like the axe was taking trophies in the form of blood from the various types of beasts it killed. Zac started to hypothesize that perhaps the method to upgrade his axe was to collect enough types of blood.

That realization made him stop for a second, making him wonder if the types of beasts he killed had any impact on how the Axe would turn out when it upgraded. Perhaps feeding it with inferior blood would result in an inferior upgrade.

However, now was not the time to worry about such things. Everything was still a hypothesis. And besides, if the axe followed convention it would require a few types of E-Grade blood to evolve. If the blood had an impact on the upgrade, then the E-Grade kills would likely be far more important than the F-grade blood.

With that in mind, he kept cutting a path straight toward the core of the island. He was initially worried that the commotion he caused would draw attention to himself, but he soon realized he didn't need to worry about that. Raging battles kept happening all over, with beasts fighting for territory, or just for the heck of it.

However, suddenly a primordial roar echoed through the forest, coming from somewhere close to the center of the island. Even Zac stopped and hunkered down, his body physically impacted by the reverberations it caused. It was the call of an E-Grade beast.

Zac didn't move a muscle, instead warily looked around for a minute until he got up to his feet again. After the powerful roar there was no follow-up, perhaps meaning that it was simply a reminder of who was the king of the jungle.

It appeared that the other beasts in the area came to the same conclusion, and soon the forest was filled with the roars of various beasts once again. Zac hesitated a bit but decided to keep going. He really understood why Abby and Adran had no idea whether there actually was a Mystic Realm here or not.

Unless Ogras personally entered the fray, anyone else would simply throw their life away heading to the core of the island. Zac knew he wasn't immortal either, and started to keep going more carefully, not wanting to lure whatever was the source of the animal cry earlier.

He was pretty confident that he would be able to defeat a normal E-Grade beast, as he'd gotten quite a bit stronger since he fought the Fiend Wolf. However, there were many unknowns in this forest. For one, being a beast that had already evolved told Zac it was no average animal, but it likely had its own lucky encounters.

Furthermore, there was nothing that said that there was only one of them at the core of the island. Who knew, there might be dozens of E-Ranked beasts idling about, and that would likely be too much even for Zac.

He kept sneaking forward, now starting to avoid battles. The closer he got to the core of the island the calmer it was. There

likely weren't as many beasts in the top tier of power, and the fights for territory might not happen as often. Any battle here would likely garner quite a bit of attention, something Zac really didn't want at the moment.

After a while, Zac finally stopped, as he'd reached an edge leading to an abrupt cliff. He quickly got down on his knees and looked around, and realized he was next to a huge crater. Just a quick glance around told him that it was over a hundred meters deep, and at least a few kilometers across.

The bottom was covered with another forest, with huge trees fighting for space. He got a sense of foreboding as he looked down at the dense forest, hesitant whether he should actually head down or not. Before deciding anything further he instead took out a pair of binoculars, trying to glean anything of importance.

It was with some relief he realized that he wouldn't have to go down after all, after seeing what was going on in the core of the crater. There was an area of a few hundred meters where nothing grew, creating a stark contrast to the lush surroundings.

In the middle of the desolate field, something that could best be described as an anomaly was fluttering about. It reminded Zac a bit of the phenomenon that occurred when he used **[Nature's Punishment]** as it looked like cracks in reality.

However, the center of the anomaly was far more chaotic, looking like a large hole that phased in and out of reality. Zac pretty much knew he was looking at a wild unstabilized entrance to a Mystic Realm, even though he'd never seen one before. He simply couldn't imagine it being anything else.

That at least proved that there wasn't a supreme treasure in the center of the island causing the high density of the energy the beasts enjoyed. He took out a crystal that recorded the scene in front of him before he started to move backward.

Judging by the high density in the area the Mystic Realm likely had a quite high density of energy as well, rather than being a desolate pocket of subspace. Zac saw no point in going down into the crater to investigate further at this time. The

crater was likely home to the most powerful beasts, including the E-ranked one that roared earlier.

He started making his way back toward the secluded camp, going in a slightly different direction. The fights with the elite monsters on the island didn't hold him up much but provided both a good deal of experience and Nexus Coins.

When he reached the camp he told the demons about his findings, and they looked quite excited by the Mystic Realm. Zac realized he likely wouldn't have any trouble finding volunteers for exploring the realm in the future, going by the demonic guards in front of him.

He stepped through the teleporter, this time finding himself in the main arrival lobby. From there he walked to the commercial district for the first time since coming back.

Before he left the district had simply been former battlefields and forests, with the only exception being the Thayer Consortia Headquarters. But as he walked he saw that the district had changed much in the same way as the residential district.

The square that would be the core of the district stood finished, and there actually were a few hawkers having set up stalls. From what he could tell they mainly sold daily necessities for now, but Zac was sure that it would improve in the future.

The plots of land surrounding the square was still mostly empty as they were earmarked for special buildings. One exception was that the Thayer Consortia owned a satellite store placed right next to the future placement of the bank.

It was time to enact some things that they had decided upon in the meeting earlier, so Zac brought up his menu and started to browse structures to purchase. Since he'd become a Lord and Port Atwood was deigned a World Town more structures had become available for purchase. Of course, the drastic increase in population helped as well.

Most of the structures still were locked out though, as it seemed that a pretty basic requirement of most structures was

to have a population of 1 million, which Port Atwood wasn't even close to. He wasn't sure how he'd get there in the short run, as the archipelago he controlled simply wasn't very populated.

Even when they found people on an island there was usually only something like a hundred of them. The upside was that the average strength of these people was far higher compared to those who were safe within large towns on the mainland. There were barely any people below level 15 in Port Atwood, a sight that was quite common in places like New Washington.

Soon he found the structure he'd agreed upon yesterday with Abby, but before he was able to buy it he was interrupted by a familiar figure walking up to him.

"What are you doing here?" Zac asked as Alea walked up to him with a smile.

"I was bored, so I was thinking of having tea with the Sky Gnome," Alea said, as she looked at the empty plot Zac had been focusing on. "But this seemed more interesting. What are you doing?"

"I'm getting the Contribution Store we talked about some time ago," Zac answered as he made the purchase.

A large building was quickly materializing in one of the empty plots close to the square. It looked like a large box with huge rectangular windows letting light in. Otherwise the building was completely unadorned, apart from a large sign hanging above the 4-meter tall doors.

[Merit Exchange]

"Golems and their sense of beauty," Alea said with a shake of her head as she surveyed the contribution center before she turned back to Zac.

"So, are there any benefits to being friends with the big boss himself? Do you provide any good discounts?" she said as she hooked her arm in his with a wink.

Zac smiled a bit at the quip and was about to answer, but his smile froze when he saw a familiar face in the distance.

It was Hannah who was holding a leather armor that seemed to be one of the latest creations by the inscriptionists. She was mutely staring at Zac and Alea, who were likely looking like they were in the middle of a romantic outing from how Alea acted.

Zac wanted to say something but Hannah simply turned around and walked away with hurried steps. Zac extricated himself from Alea with a sigh, but as he did he noticed a small smirk on Alea's face that was quickly erased. However, it was too late to hide and Zac felt rage build up inside him. Alea had played him, probably in order to hurt Hannah, who she saw as her competition.

"Never do something like that again," Zac said with a growl, his words punctuated with a wave of a brutal aura that pushed Alea back and drained the color from her face.

Zac's mood had been completely soured by Alea's ploy, but he would have to set things right later. With a face that made the citizens quickly and quietly leave the area he entered his newly purchased building.

Humiliation rushed through Hannah as she hurriedly walked toward her home. David had told her she was being delusional, but she had refused to believe the rumors. She thought she knew Zachary, and that he wouldn't do something like that.

Scenes of sneering glances by the citizens the past week flashed by in her mind one by one as hurried down the streets. It almost felt like everyone that she passed was laughing at her, and her folly.

How could she have been so stupid? People must have been thinking she was a gold digger, trying to curry favor in order to gain some benefits from the big boss. Was that to be her fate, to live in the shadows of her former lover and his new mistress?

Finally she was back home, forcefully slamming the door behind her as she entered her little sanctuary. The walls

shielded her from the stares of the world, and she breathed out in relief.

The exhale seemed to have drained her energy as well, as her legs slowly gave out, and she found herself sitting down on the floor. Two streams of tears couldn't help but emerge as the suffocating feelings from yesterday exploded in her chest.

She was truly a fool. She had thought herself like the princess in some fairytale. Not only did Zac's army save her and everyone else from the lunatic that kept them prisoners for months, but he also turned out to be a real prince. The real protagonist of the new world they lived in.

But clearly she was no princess. Even after yesterday she hadn't given up, instead hurrying over to the merchants to get some gear. She needed to get stronger so that she could stand next to Zac with her head held high. But the prince had already found a new princess, shattering her dreams.

Sadness and humiliation was quickly transformed into fury as she thought of that woman's sneer. Hannah just knew that demoness whispered poison in her boyfriend's ears for months, ruining everything. The anger gave her strength and she started pacing back and forth in her living room, imagining strangling Alea with each step.

Here eyes fell on the bottle of champagne she'd arduously acquired for her and Zac's reunion, and with a snarl she hurled it into the wall, creating a fizzy explosion.

"That demon bitch," she spat out between grit teeth.

"So you got kicked to the side, huh? What did I tell you?" a voice sounded from the shadows, making Hannah turn around.

"Shut up," she snarled at David, who only sardonically shook his head.

If Zac had seen the man today he would have been shocked. David had seemingly turned into a completely different person, and he radiated a sinister aura. The fall changed some far more than others.

"These demons will push us out of the picture. Zac is our chance to rise, you saw those Inheritances. They are our

opportunity. We need to get stronger so we can protect ourselves. Remember what happened to Izzie,” David said.

Hannah stopped her pacing, a frown emerging on her face. It was true. This life was no fairytale, and Zac was clearly no prince charming. Her eyes slowly hardened until she looked up at David with a nod. A small smile emerged on his face, and he took out a slender dagger from within his robe.

“Take this. You wouldn’t believe what I had to endure to obtain this offensive array. It will be useful to us,” he said, placing the handle in Hannah’s hand before leaving the house.

The dagger felt cool to the touch like she was holding a piece of ice, and she thoughtfully looked down on it. She had waited for so long, only to be toyed with and betrayed. Just what was the debt, and who were the debtors?

[New quest: The Price for Betrayal]

Chapter 195: Making Rounds

Zac could only wryly shake his head at the Gnome as he coughed up a deposit for the Crystals. At least the purchase wouldn't completely financially ruin him.

"There's another thing," Zac said as he took out the Lotus Seed. "This came from a lotus flower that emitted intense amounts of life-attuned energy. Do you know what this flower is? My skill couldn't identify the flower."

Calrin carefully took the seed and looked it over.

"I can't tell for certain, but I would guess that it's from a D-Graded flower called Lotus of Harmony. The seed is quite drained, so it's quite unsure whether it can germinate, but I'd give you 25 million Nexus Coins for it."

Zac's eyes widened at the quote, and he wondered just how much it was worth before he absorbed all the energy. His debt to the Abbot just kept growing.

"I'm not selling, I want to try and plant it," Zac said.

It was worth 50 Divine Crystals, but Zac would still much rather have a lotus, like the one Abbot Everlasting Peace had.

"Hmm..." Calrin said. "Well, I'm no expert, but it just needs water and dense cosmic energy from what I know. It will slowly convert Non-attuned energy into life energy."

"Do you think it would survive being planted in the Cosmic Water at the mountain?" Zac asked.

"Probably, it is a D-Grade treasure after all. But again, I'm no botanist. Don't come crying to me if the seed gets absorbed by the pond. Besides, it might come into conflict with the Tree of

Ascension if they are planted in too close proximity. Spirit Herbs are like beasts, they have territories,” Calrin explained.

Zac simply nodded with some thought. He’d already formed an idea before, and he couldn’t wait to try it anymore after Calrin said it was plausible.

After he left he quickly headed to Azh’Rodum through the teleporter, and rushed into the mountain. Soon he found one of the entrances he’d used before when he fled into the caverns. He wasn’t interested in going into the mines at this time, but he had another goal in mind.

After a dizzying number of twists and turns, he finally found himself in front of a large boulder. He was happy to see that everything looked the same as he moved the boulder out of the way.

Cosmic Energy, dense enough that it almost felt like it slapped him in the face, rushed out of the cavern as the boulder was moved. Zac quickly entered the cave and closed the boulder behind him.

The inside was similar to when he woke up here some months ago, apart from the fact that the energy seemed even denser than before. The various flowers were even lusher as well, all teeming with energy.

Zac picked a few of the various things growing in the cave, suspecting that most of the herbs and mushrooms should have evolved into graded plants by now. Perhaps they were worth some money, or at least possible to clone and farm.

But that wasn’t why he was here. He walked over the edge of the pond, and after some hesitation simply dropped the seed into the water. He could only pray that the intense energies in the pond would rekindle the spent energy of the seed, rather than destroy it.

It was a big gamble, but if it paid off his cultivation cave would kick up a notch in grade. Now he could only wait and hope for the best. There was one more thing he did before he left, which was to place multiple arrays to protect the cave.

The population on his island was growing, and it wasn't impossible someone would stumble upon this place before the mountain had been turned into a properly restricted area. His goal was for much of the mountain peaks to be turned into large private residences for those who wanted to cultivate in peace and had the wallet to pay for such a luxury.

The valley with the tree of ascension and the pond of Cosmic Water would be his private property though, as he couldn't risk having people ruining his tree. He still didn't know what might come of it since its transformation, but it was still valuable.

Since he was done with the cave he left, heading up to the valley. Life was slowly coming back to the secluded spot between the peaks, as the density of energy was just too high for it to remain as desolate grounds. Grass and small shrubs had replaced the dry husks of the trees that the Tree of Ascension absorbed.

He also noted that the size of the pond had grown back, though not to its original size, which was something he hadn't noticed from his cave. Zac was quite relieved, as it meant that his vein was creating more of the magical water.

He still didn't have much use for it, but it was apparently a great addition to most types of crafting. For example, quenching a new sword in Cosmic Water would likely improve the quality of the weapon a grade. However, his faction could still only create low-grade things, making such a method a waste of money.

Soon he found himself in front of the tree, and to his disappointment, it looked very much the same as last time he was here. It still was weirdly mutated, but thanks to his Dao of Trees he could sense that it wasn't dying, but rather slowly recuperating.

As he looked around he found that the area had been completely cleaned. Last time he only looted the possessions of the corpses, but now he realized he hadn't seen a single dead demon or monkey around since he entered. Perhaps Ogras had sent someone to clean up the area.

Or it might be Alea, Zac realized, as he looked around the well-tended area in the vicinity of the Poison Tree. She might have worked hard to make sure it didn't die. The treasure that came from it would likely either be good for a power-up of a poison user, or an ingredient for an incredible poison.

Since everything was under control Zac returned to town. After some thought Zac decided to head to the tavern. When he arrived he noticed the structure had expanded or rather been grown, by quite a decent margin. It now had multiple levels, and the base floor had swallowed a neighboring structure as well.

It was afternoon by now and Zac noticed that the place had quite a few people in it, sitting in groups with mugs in front of them. A few waitresses were scurrying around as well, placing dishes and taking orders.

When Zac entered a hush fell over the first floor, as everyone gazed upon him with a wide arrange of emotions.

"Hey! What are you all staring at," a shout came from the bar. "Have you never seen a humanoid tank before?"

Some snorts or subdued laughter could be heard, and Zac headed over to the bar with a smile.

"I see you have expanded," Zac said as he sat down on a barstool.

"What can I say? The apocalypse makes people thirsty," Ryan said with a wide grin.

"What's everyone drinking?" Zac curiously asked.

"Local beer. Or mead I guess?" Ryan answered and poured a glass from a tap. "The demons almost hounded the poor brewer to death, but he managed to create the first batch in almost record time. We have two versions, a normal beer and a stronger version for the high-leveled people."

Ryan placed it in front of him. And Zac took a swig. Objectively it didn't taste great, but it was not bad for a newly set up operation.

"So what brings you here?" Ryan asked.

“I have been too busy lately so I haven’t had much time to check on Port Atwood. I thought you might know how the citizens feel about their situation,” Zac explained.

“Well, I think people are generally happy here. Especially now that they are good and drunk,” Ryan said, looking thoughtful.

“No complaints?” Zac said skeptically.

“I guess one complaint is that it’s a bit hard to level up for combat classes. The forest is full of those demon dogs, and very few can kill them. So they’re stuck as there’s no other prey, meaning they will fall further and further behind. Some even think it’s by design so that they’d be forced to join the Army to get stronger,” Ryan hesitantly said.

“Hmm,” Zac said with a nod.

It wasn’t something he’d considered, but the barghest had grown pretty strong by now. He’d considered them a great tool for grinding, but that was because he had extreme attributes and that he fought them when they were affected by stronger limiters to their attributes.

If Zac looked at it as a video game, Port Atwood was the newbie village for many. But it was surrounded by a high-level zone, not letting people level up. There needed to be a clear path of progression for people, like the increasingly powerful enemies in an RPG.

It was something he needed to remedy, as he wanted his citizens to become stronger. The more powerful people that lived on this island, the safer it would be from attacks. He would have to ask Abby or Adran to fix the situation somehow.

“I’ll see if some islands can be turned into safer grinding areas or something,” Zac said. “By the way, do you know anyone who has worked a lot with animals before the fall?”

“Worked with animals?” Ryan answered with some confusion. “Hmm, I think I heard from a customer a week ago that she worked at a pet store before the integration.”

“Oh?” Zac said intrigued. “Where is she now?”

The two kept talking about various matters in the town for a few more minutes until Zac finally downed his drink and left. He walked following Ryan's directions, and soon found himself outside a building that looked like an apartment structure at the edge of the residential district.

They were structures that were being erected for the various people that didn't bring much to the table. The experts and high-level individuals usually got their own houses, whereas the refugees had to make do with apartments. Zac felt it was a bit elitist, but both Abby and Ogras was insistent that they needed to create that type of society to force more powerhouses into existence.

He found the correct number on the third floor and knocked on the door while looking around. Soon a slightly malnourished-looking girl opened up the door, looking startled upon seeing Zac's odd appearance.

"Can I help you?" the girl hesitantly asked as she looked upon Zac's unfamiliar figure.

"I am Zachary Atwood. I heard that you once worked at a pet store?" Zac asked, trying to look congenial.

"Atwood? Like the big boss?" she asked, her eyes widening a bit.

"Yes, the pet store?" Zac prodded.

"Ah? Yes, I worked at a pet store before. What's going on?"

"How would you like to get the chance to work with pets again, and even get a class for it? It would be a well-paid position as well since we need that kind of expertise," Zac explained.

"You need someone to look after your pets? I can do that," the girl said, her face brightening.

"Good, come with me," Zac said with a smile.

Zac didn't mention that the pets he talked about were a hive queen for an alien ant species and hyper-aggressive demon dogs. That would be a happy surprise for later. For now, he needed to get her enrolled with Alyn and undergo the training

regiment she had designed to make a beastmaster out of the pet store worker.

He soon dropped off Lily, which was what the girl was called, to Alyn. The schoolmistress looked very excited to try out her hypothesis in creating a beast master class without a heritage and immediately got to work.

Before it got too late Zac also went to the port to thank Karunthel for lending some help with the negotiations. He also tried to visit Hannah to explain the misunderstanding earlier, but she wasn't at home.

Finally, he was done with everything he needed to do at Port Atwood. There was also the issue with the Tool Spirit, but he felt he had to put that issue on hold for the moment. Partly because Brazla was just too annoying, and partly because he suspected any negotiations might go awry before he could provide it with some updates on the beautifications of its surroundings.

It was already late when he got back to his home, but he noticed that Kenzie still was out. She never mentioned anything about it, but Zac felt that her imprisonment had left a mark on her. She stayed at the academy all day, continuously sparring or meditating in the array, almost with a fanatic fervor that reminded him of the Valkyries.

It didn't feel like a healthy way to process, but perhaps mental health would have to take a back seat for the moment. Fear and helplessness might propel her forward when she'd otherwise stop trying to improve. With the thing inside her head, she needed to get strong so she could protect herself in case he wasn't around.

Since there was nothing much else to do for him, Zac decided to finally go through with his trial for hegemony. He didn't know how long it would take, but he had provisions for quite some time in his pouch. He also had all manners of pills and tools to help him out with most scenarios.

However, suddenly he realized a problem. How the hell did he start the trial?

Chapter 196: The First Step of Hegemony

Zac opened his quest menu to begin with and tried to mentally command the trial to start. When that didn't work he tried to physically press the quest, but in the end he only swiped his hands through the air.

From there he tried various things, from touching the Nexus Node to doing various things with his teleporter, but he had no luck. Finally, he remembered something that Abby said earlier. After he finished the quest his town became a World City.

One large difference between normal Cities and a World City was that the latter could provide off-world teleportations. And while his arrays were nowhere near strong enough for that at the moment, he did possess something that could do just that. The Nexus Hub.

However, that possibility gave Zac some pause. The Nexus Hub was meant for off-world transportation. If the Hub was truly the method to start the quest, it meant that he would be transported god-knows-where in the multiverse.

What would happen if he failed? Would he be stuck in some other corner of the multi-verse? He also didn't know how long these trials would take, as there was virtually no information on them.

However, Zac soon reignited his resolve. He already had made up his mind about doing it, and honestly being teleported directly by the system or through the Hub didn't matter much in the end. Besides, he had prepared a Coward's Escape just in case, and those pills usually threw people right out of these kinds of trials.

But still, he chose to wait before he left, not wanting to go off-world before he'd talked with his sister. She knew about the

quest, but not that he would be gone for an unknown amount of time. It was almost midnight when he heard her coming back toward his mansion, and Zac was still up meditating as he only slept a few hours a day. He quickly walked over to the courtyard Kenzie had chosen, and entered after knocking.

His sister looked a bit surprised to see him but still welcomed him to sit down.

“What brings you here so late?” she asked with a smile.

“I’m going to do Trial quest now, and it might actually take me off-world,” Zac explained. “I just didn’t want you to worry while I’m gone.”

“Off-world?” Kenzie said, actually looking a bit excited.

“That’s so cool. You might become the first human to step on an alien planet. Take pictures.”

“What about the tutorial?” Zac asked with a smile.

“I don’t think that counts, that was a temporary space and not a real planet,” Kenzie said with a shrug.

Zac only nodded in response, looking up at the stars.

“I heard a rumor you broke up with Hannah?” she hesitantly said after being silent for a bit.

Zac only nodded and briefly recounted what he’d done the past day.

“I know you weren’t a big fan of her, but please make sure that no one harasses her while I’m gone. I feel bad how it went down, and I don’t want others causing trouble for her,” Zac said.

“I didn’t think Alea would do something like that,” Kenzie muttered, looking a bit disappointed. “You need to talk to Hannah before you leave. Don’t be a jerk.”

“Fine,” Zac said with a sigh. “I’ll leave tomorrow morning instead after I’ve talked with her.”

“Good,” Kenzie said with a smile. “You’ve always been a bit awkward, but you need to talk things out properly. And don’t worry, I’ll find a new girlfriend for you while you’re away.”

What do you think about Lyla? She's nice, and she's asked about you. As for her body, I can promise that-

"Worry about yourself," Zac interrupted while rolling his eyes, before taking out a box from his pouch. "I forgot to give you this the other day. It's a **[Fruit of Ascension]**. It will not only improve your race to E-grade, but apparently it will even help when upgrading your class in the future."

Kenzie's eyes lit up as she looked at the box, but after a brief hesitation shook her head.

"I don't need it. Jeeves helps me upgrade my Race, and says it will be done in two months. Besides, he'll upgrade my class anyway, so the effect of this fruit is a bit wasted on me," she said. "You should give it to someone else who has helped you a lot."

Zac mutely stared at her for a bit, before he wryly smiled and took back the box. Some people just had it too good. The two kept talking a bit longer until Zac finally left after exhorting Kenzie to not overdo it with her training while he was gone. As for who he'd give fruit to, there was no hurry to decide.

Early the next day he got up and walked over to Hannah's house once again. This time there were no guards outside, and Zac simply knocked on the door and waited. This time he heard sounds inside, but still no one opened the door.

"Hannah, it's me. Please open up," he said, imbuing his voice with some cosmic power to make sure she could hear it.

The sounds inside stopped, and finally the door opened as Hannah stood there with a frown, dressed in training gear.

"What do you want?" she tersely said as she looked at him.

"I... I just wanted to say I'm sorry for that display yesterday. I am not dating Alea, and we haven't done anything. She acted like that to mess with you, and I told her off for it," Zac explained.

"Ok, it's none of my business anyway," Hannah answered with a shrug.

“I just didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. All I said yesterday was true, and Alea had no impact on us,” Zac continued.

“I got it. You only broke up with me because you don’t like me. Thank you so much for clarifying it for me,” Hannah sarcastically retorted.

Zac could only sigh at the cold reception and hope that things would get better with time. He wished he knew what to say to set everything right, but perhaps it was impossible, at least this close to the break-up. At least he’d cleared the air from his side, and now it was up to Hannah to accept it or not.

“As I said earlier, if you need something, just ask me or Kenzie, and we’ll do our best to help you in the future,” Zac said and walked away.

He didn’t want to prolong the uncomfortable situation any further and immediately head toward the teleportation area. If he had looked back he would have seen Hannah standing in the doorway looking at his departing figure, her eyes cold as ice.

Not wasting another moment, Zac teleported over to Azh’Rodum and quickly walked south. The huge crystal still stood on the field where the incursion once was. The small guardhouse next to the crystal was unmanned nowadays, as there was nothing anyone could do with the Hub at the moment.

The crystal still looked inert, but Zac went ahead and touched it just in case. A prompt immediately appeared, telling him that his suspicions were correct.

[Start Trial?]

Kenzie already knew what he was about to do, and as for the other people, it was just as well that they didn’t know he was gone. Besides, for all he knew the trial wouldn’t take too long to complete. With determination he accepted the prompt.

The moment he accepted a blinding light flashed, forcing him to blink. When he opened them again the scenery had completely changed, and he found himself standing in a large

field. When he used the teleportation arrays it usually took some time as he moved through the darkness, but the Hub seemed to use some superior technique as it only took a blink.

Zac guessed it was lucky for him, as it might take years to travel to some random planet in the same way that the teleporters used. He quickly looked and he could immediately tell that he wasn't on earth anymore. For one the sky was almost black, and another clear indicator was that the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere was almost nonexistent, to the point that it almost felt like earth before the integration.

His knowledge was a bit limited on this front, but Zac guessed he was either on a declining E-Grade world or even an F-Graded planet. Even amongst the same grade there could be large differences, and the better F-Graded worlds might have enough energy for people to reach the top of the F-Grade within their lifetime.

However, evolving on such a planet was likely a pipe dream unless some very special circumstances took place, like someone finding a series of lucky encounters.

However, the sky or the sparse energy wasn't the real reason he didn't think himself still on earth anymore. There was a medieval army consisting of odd humanoids standing around him, thousands of faces looked at him with various expressions.

The humanoids were pretty short, barely reaching Zac's chest, with thin frames. They had a large set of eyes that were pitch black, with white sallow skin. The top of their heads had white or grey hair that generally was long and tied in various braids and knots, with colorful bands woven into it. Their hands and feet looked oversized compared to their bodies, almost to comical proportions.

Zac guessed they couldn't weigh much more than 30 to 40 kilos, but still they wore thick metal armor and carried large grisly weapons, which told of surprising strength in their small frames. He did sense that there was some power in many of the aliens, though no one had the aura of a powerhouse.

The sense of power was most obvious in the few aliens that stood in front of him, looking at him with expectation. Zac didn't feel any sense of danger from his sixth sense, so he didn't believe that these things were his enemy, at least not yet. This gave him some time to try to figure out what was going on. His quest only said to complete the trial, but never explained what the trail was.

As he looked around he saw that the crystal that had transported him here didn't follow him, but he rather found himself standing on what almost looked like a very crude fractal. He almost felt like a demon lord for a second, having been summoned by some hapless acolytes.

"Lord General, what is that being?" one of the weird humanoids said as Zac looked around.

Its voice was slightly high pitched, but overall it sounded like a human's.

"The tablet only said that a powerful champion would be summoned," a well-equipped alien hesitantly said as he held a few ancient-looking scrolls in his hands.

[The first step of Hegemony. Step forward with purpose. Let nothing stand in your way.]

While it wasn't exactly clear what the system wanted him to do, it appeared that the system had created a scenario for him to fulfill, almost like in a video game. What he didn't understand was whether this was all a simulation, or whether he'd actually been thrown into a real conflict in some corner of the multi-verse.

It felt a bit coincidental that he accepted the quest the moment these things tried to summon some champion, lending some strength to the first theory. However, the multiverse was impossibly large, with a mindboggling amount of populated worlds, where most of them were these low-tiered ones.

Perhaps there was always happening things that would suit the purposes of the system's quests, and it simply dropped him here to let him figure things out himself. The aliens seemed content in trying to understand what they had summoned, so

he took the time to check up on them as well. He turned to the two aliens who spoke earlier, and used his identification skill on them.

[Antaya – Solvim – Level 28– Dexterity]

[Dresdo – Solvim – Level 42 – Endurance]

It appeared their species was called Solvim, and neither of them was too strong. Still, Zac was surprised they could gain levels at all with such sparse energy in the surroundings. It must have taken years, perhaps decades, of effort to get to their current point.

“Hello,” Zac said after a bit. “I think I’m supposed to help you out somehow. Are you looking for a hero-for-hire?”

Zac speaking words they understood seemed to startle the group who stood in front of him, but the man with the scrolls soon regained his bearings.

“Greetings Lord Champion, I am Dresdo, General of the East,” the man said. “We are on the edge of ruin, and in desperation tried the summoning the Ancients mentioned.”

Chapter 197: Multiple Variables

It appeared the general was about to continue, but drums in the distance interrupted him. It sounded like a call to war, and Zac frowned and walked toward the source of a ruckus. The leaders of the Solvim hurriedly followed behind as he walked up a hill to get a better vantage of the situation.

As soon as he reached the crest he saw a sea of warriors neatly lined up a kilometer away from the army he apparently belonged to. Only a quick glance was needed to see that the armies weren't evenly matched, as the enemies outnumbered them at least twice over.

"These guys are your enemies?" Zac asked.

"Filthy opportunists," Dresdo spat. "They take advantage of our precarious situation, trying to mount a sneak attack while we are occupied."

Zac frowned as he listened to the general. He wasn't sure what to think about this situation. Judging by the sound of it, this wasn't some battle of good versus evil, but rather a war between two nations. He had no idea what the so-called precarious situation was, he didn't know if these aliens around him had committed some atrocities before, prompting the current response.

It put him into an ethical dilemma. Judging by the power of the troops around him, the other army couldn't be too strong either. Otherwise, they'd already steamrolled the smaller army. If he wanted to he could simply wade into their ranks and cause utter mayhem, destroying their army within the day.

But could he conscionably do that? What would that say about him? If he went through with this he felt he be some scum who was okay with doing anything, as long as it made him more

powerful. It wouldn't be too different from starting to annihilate Ishiate, or even Human settlements just to gain experience.

Besides, it seemed too simple a scenario. Killing some weaklings wouldn't be much of a test, and Zac felt that the System didn't wouldn't give him that easy of a time. Was the challenge showing the resolve to actually do anything, including killing an army of sapients that had nothing to do with him, all in the pursuit of power?

“So what is the precarious situation you mentioned?” Zac asked, trying to get a clearer understanding of the situation.

The general looked a bit hesitant, until he shrugged his shoulders.

“A great beast has arrived in our kingdom. It's not something that we have ever encountered before. There are rumors that it's arrived from the great beyond. Its powers are believed to be in the fabled Ascended rank,” Dresdo said.

“Ascended rank?” Zac couldn't help asking.

“It has broken through the great barrier at level 75 and reached a higher stage of existence,” another of the aliens explained.

“The Royal Family of Orrin and many of our elites are currently occupied in fighting the beast, but it's an arduous process. These scum from the neighboring country saw our plight as an opportunity to break our bonds of friendship, not only ignoring our request for assistance but even attacking us,” the other Solvim angrily added from the side.

Zac perked up from the explanation, but he got a bit hesitant as he once again looked at the army stationed in the distance. Just what did the system want from him? Fighting an E-graded space-beast sounded much more like a trial, but if that was his job, why did he end up in front of the army instead of the beast? Zac once again opened his quest screen to take a look at the quest to find some hints of what to do.

First step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-Grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)

The line didn't update or give him any further hints after he'd arrived, leaving Zac perplexed. It was the first time a quest didn't explicitly say what he needed to do. Did that mean that he needed to figure it out himself, as it was part of the trial? Or did it mean that there were multiple ways to complete the quest?

Zac mulled over the options for a bit until he turned toward the general.

"So, what goal did you have in mind when you summoned me?"

"Well... We hope that you can lead us into battle and destroy their army," the general said as he glared at the soldiers on the other side of the field.

"I thought as much," Zac said with a sigh.

Leading soldiers into battle wasn't something he was ready to do, as he still had no idea what he was doing. If it came to chopping, then he was their guy, but anything more complicated than that he'd just embarrass himself.

In the end, Zac decided he would just have to follow his heart. He didn't feel right slaughtering an army that wasn't his enemy. From the sound of it, they might be in the wrong here, but Zac didn't feel it was his place to put his finger on the scale.

What he could do was to go over and kill the beast. Not only would it save the lives of the citizens of the kingdom, and it would also free up soldiers to push back the invaders, which meant that both objectives would be completed.

Besides, killing the beast should be the harder option, and might even give him some extra benefits compared to killing a bunch of weak warriors. Something like a hidden reward. And even if that wasn't the case, it would still likely help him with his work with upgrading his axe. He was approaching E-Grade, and his weapon needed to match.

"So, where is this beast?" Zac asked.

"It's two days march to the south, it won't interrupt the battle here," Dresdo dutifully answered.

If it was two days by these people's standards, Zac should be able to get there in under a day if he pushed it.

"Great, I'll go kill the beast quickly, you just need to stall for two days," Zac said as he turned away from the enemy army.

"Err, champion, what are you doing?" the general said with alarm. "If you leave we'll be overrun within the day. They outnumber us three to one."

That made Zac stop in his tracks. Just what would happen if this battle was lost while he was hunting the beast? Would he automatically fail? This quest was truly starting to become a pain in the ass, throwing so many variables at him. Zac turned around and immediately walked toward the enemy army.

"Wait, we should discuss a plan for this battle!" the alien shouted as he ran after him. "They have two full legions opposing us, and it consists of elites. May I ask, what level are you?"

"I'm level 60," Zac answered with a shrug.

"What? Only level 60?" the Solvim, disappointment flashing in his eyes as he stopped following. "That's at the level of the great protector, but even he isn't able to thwart an army on his own."

"Level isn't everything," Zac said. "Don't worry, things will work out. Wait here while I go talk with their leader."

The general did as Zac said and stopped some distance from his own army lines, looking at the back of Zac. Of course, whether he stayed behind because he believed in Zac's words or whether he didn't want to get himself killed was another question.

The distance between the two armies wasn't too great, and soon Zac was only a hundred meters away from the enemy army who warily looked at the approaching figure, their weapons at the ready. Zac tried to discern anything out of place, looking through the lines of soldiers.

But no matter where he looked he couldn't see anything different. The opposing army was comprised of the same type of humanoids, and after repeatedly using his identification-

skill he knew they were of the roughly same strength as well, mostly being between levels 15 and 30. It truly seemed there was no hidden trick to the army in front of him.

He quickly spotted an area with warriors more richly decked compared to the average soldiers, and using **[Inquisitive Eye]** found that there was one of them at level 44, matching the general from his side. Since he'd found his target he started walking again.

“Halt!” one of the captains shouted at him, but Zac didn't care as he kept advancing.

The army wouldn't let Zac approach unimpeded, and a few deterring arrows sailed toward him. These kinds of attacks didn't have an effect on Zac anymore, and he didn't even bother activating his defensive skills, instead simply waving the attacks away as he unleashed his aura to the fullest.

“Fire at will!” the general immediately shouted with alarm after sensing the waves of power radiating from Zac.

The sky immediately blotted out with arrows heading straight toward him. If even a tenth of them hit he'd be turned into a porcupine, but Zac wasn't worried. He simply kept walking toward the area where it seemed the leaders were stationed.

Waving away this amount of arrows would take quite some effort, so he finally activated his defensive skill. Emerald leaves started to quickly whirl around him as though he stood in the center of a tornado, each leaf blocking tens of arrows before it disintegrated.

Not wanting to waste such a gift Zac simply put the bundles of arrows into his pouch as they fell one by one, and in just a few short moments he'd gathered over a thousand of them. It was clear that since the cosmic energy was so sparse in this world a lot of attention and effort went into augmenting their strength with tools.

The arrows were of high quality just like the gear he'd seen the soldiers wear, at least on the same level as those that were made in Port Atwood. They only lacked some inscriptions, after which they'd be fit to use by the Valkyries.

Initially, he considered farming arrows for a while but soon changed his mind. While none of the attacks individually was a threat to him, his cosmic energy was being depleted at a very quick rate due to the unceasing attacks.

He activated [**Loamwalker**] and after just a few short steps found himself in front of the general, who backed away in alarm.

“What are you? Why are you attacking us?” the general said with a shaky voice, barely able to stand straight due to the towering aura Zac emitted.

The surrounding soldiers were in far worse states, and everyone within 20 meters had simply fallen down unconscious. The other soldiers powerlessly looked on, not daring to attack anymore since their leaders were lying unconscious all around their assailer.

“You could say I’ve been hired by the kingdom of Orrin to end this situation,” Zac said as he looked down on the general, purposefully making his voice heard by the whole army. “I will go and kill that beast that is occupying a large part of their army now. I need your army to stand down for a week. After that, I don’t care what you do.”

“And if we don’t?” the general said.

“Then I’ll go to your kingdom and kill your King, or whoever rules it, along with every high-level official and general you possess,” Zac said as he added the Dao of Heaviness to the aura he emitted.

Even the general couldn’t stand after the addition of the Dao, and he plopped down to his knees, only staying somewhat upright as he held himself up by stabbing a sword into the ground with shaking hands.

“What happens after a week?” the general forced through clattering teeth.

“After a week I don’t care what you do. The beast will be dead, and it’s up to your countries to decide what to do from there. I won’t interfere,” Zac said with a shrug.

“How do we know you won’t turn and attack us anyway after dealing with the beast?”

In response, Zac only shook his head as he walked away. As he left the thick of the army he kept channeling his Dao into his aura, which also made any errant arrow that was still shot at him powerlessly fall into the ground like they suddenly weighed a ton. An order to cease attacks was soon shouted out by the general, letting Zac leave unaccosted.

“They won’t attack you for a week. Don’t attack them during this time either. I’ll go kill that beast now,” Zac said as he gave Dresdo a pat on his shoulder when he returned to his side.

The man didn’t respond, and only blankly stared at Zac like he was some mythological beast.

Sometimes it was a bit fun to play the Demon Lord.

Chapter 198: Competition

Zac was quickly running through the countryside, idly gazing at the alien landscape as he passed it by. It was a weird feeling seeing both normal things like leafy trees, followed by sights that he couldn't even explain. An example was an enormous flying beast that slowly drifted overhead that reminded Zac more of a zeppelin than a bird.

At first, Zac had thought it was the monster he was supposed to kill, but after using [**Inquisitive Eyes**] on it he realized it was only level 18. More interestingly he even spotted a small cottage on top of the animal with his binoculars as it flew away. He didn't think this was what the astronauts at NASA were imagining when they talked about space exploration.

He was surprised to note that the planet seemed to be in a state of perpetual gloom with barely any light to brighten the scenery. There was a sun in the sky, but it was so small and ineffectual that it almost might as well have been another star in distant space.

However, the weak light didn't seem to have had an overly severe impact on the flora of the world, as he passed both farms full of crops and healthy forests as he sped through the country. Zac was guessing that while the energy in the atmosphere was sparse, it was enough to nurture normal unranked growth across the planet.

It made him wonder what would happen if the energy got any worse. Would the planet and its citizens simply die out? Was he walking on the dying carcass of a planet, or simply one that had always worked differently from how he was used to?

Still, all this wasn't any of his business. He couldn't get invested in some world that was placed god-knows-where. He simply kept his head down and kept running, every now and again stopping to ask for directions. Of course, every time he

did so he caused widespread panic, as the general population was not aware of their army summoning some strange giant.

It was quite clear that this wasn't a planet that often saw visitors from outer space, even though it was integrated into the multiverse. Then again, that was usually the case, as there simply were too many planets for the large forces to bother with all the small and worthless ones.

A planet of this level generally didn't have the means for intergalactic teleportation, which meant the hassle of actually traveling here outweighed any value that could be squeezed out of the planet.

It turned out he had overestimated the distance to his target, as it only took him around ten hours to reach his goal. At least he was pretty sure he'd reached his goal. In front of him, a large medieval city stood surrounded by an army far larger than the one he was summoned to. A rough estimation put them at over 10 000 men, though it could be even more of them on the opposite side of the city.

The city itself was fortified by a wall that was mostly unscathed, except for a large breach that was around ten meters wide. Initially it looked like a siege was taking place, but Zac knew that wasn't the case.

A large crash could be heard from inside the town, followed by an angry bellow that reverberated out into the countryside. The beast was inside, causing chaos and widespread damage. The army wasn't besieging the town, but rather guarding it to keep the beast trapped, not wanting to release it out into the wild.

More surprisingly it seemed that the army was utilizing either an Array or a War-Array to cast a huge shield that sealed the whole town. Zac hadn't expected to see techniques like that from this energy-starved world, where the armies seemed to exclusively consist of physical classes.

He knew just how expensive running arrays were, and he couldn't imagine that there were Nexus Crystals aplenty on the planet. The country of Orrin was expending a huge amount of resources to seal the town and the beast.

Still, this wasn't a long term solution. The beast was running rampant inside, causing widespread destruction. Structures kept getting smashed, but Zac was unable to get a good look at its shape due to the walls. However, he knew the beast at least as large as the Fiend Wolf, as he still caught glimpses of something black above the wall.

Zac wondered just what the plan was as he approached the army from behind. He could clearly hear the beast rampage inside, but the soldiers just stood outside waiting. He didn't know what they were waiting for, but it worked out fine for him.

The appearance of a human cause quite a bit commotion among the ranks of the Solvim warriors, and they scrambled to set up a defensive front. Zac stopped for a bit, pondering what to do next. Technically he was on the side of these people, so he didn't want to risk ruining his quest by forcing himself through.

"Greetings traveler, I am Perav. What has brought you to the kingdom of Orrin?" a strong voice sounded as an elderly-looking male quickly approached, followed by a few younger warriors.

"I was summoned to your world by Dresdo. I have come to kill that thing you've trapped inside," Zac said, pointing toward the town.

The faces of the warriors who heard the conversations underwent a flurry of emotions, ranging from disbelief to elation. However, the leader who spoke with him and a few of the warriors who accompanied him were more measured in their response.

"You are a champion summoned through the ancient ritual?" the old man said, looking a bit perplexed.

"I guess," Zac answered with a shrug "Can I enter now?"

"Please go ahead, Champion. We are grateful for you heeding the call. Be careful, the beast is a formidable foe," the old man said.

Zac only nodded and proceeded through the ranks who quickly opened a path for him that lead to the breach in the wall. Before entering he stopped next to the array, and as he touched the shield Zac noticed it felt similar to the one he possessed in Port Atwood.

It was one-directional, meaning he would be able to pass through it from one side, but as soon as he entered he would be trapped inside. He would either have to kill the beast or break through the shield to get out if he found himself outmatched by the beast.

The old man was both respectful and didn't seem to contain any hidden killing intent toward him, but Zac still didn't like the feeling of being trapped like he was entering the Thunderdome. Still, even though the shield was maintained by thousands of warriors, he felt confident that he could cause a breach if he truly needed to escape.

If he combined both his new skill and **[Nature's Punishment]** he would be able to exact an enormous amount of force, and nothing these Solvim threw at him should be able to impede that amount of power. So Zac simply took a deep breath as he steadily walked through the barrier.

The King of the Kingdom of Orrin silently gazed at the back of the alien warrior, until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

“Father, what’s going on?” one of the richly-equipped warriors next to the old man asked. “I thought that the summoning circle didn’t work? Haven’t we tried it on multiple occasions in history?”

“I am not sure,” Perav said with a sigh. “But he is the first off-worlder to come to our dying planet in eons. If he wants to fight that beast, let him. Our plan would sacrifice so many lives to ensure success. If he can solve our problems we are in his debt.”

“And then what?” the man probed. “The alchemists say the horn of the beast might be the key for one of us to ascend.”

Perav sighed and shook his head. He knew how important it was to create an ascender. It was the first, and hardest, step in being accepted into the fold of the immortals. If their ascender then managed to come into the good graces of some Venerable their whole planet might be revitalized.

“We cannot afford to offend an off-worlder. For one he dares fight an ascended beast alone, and secondly, we do not know what kind of force that he belongs to. You cannot imagine the power of some of the warriors of the great beyond. They could level our whole kingdom with a wave of their hands,” the old man answered. “Who knows, he might be just the person who can save our planet.”

The younger warrior didn't say anything, but only wistfully looked up at the stars.

It wasn't very hard for Zac to localize the beast. It was going berserk in the town, pummeling through one building after another. Initially, he had been a bit disgusted by the army, as it had seemed that they had locked their citizens inside along with the beasts.

But as he walked toward the beast the streets were completely desolate, telling of an earlier evacuation. He tried to walk as quietly as possible as he got close, as he still hadn't seen the full form of the monster.

While the energy contained in the bellow earlier made it seem that the monster couldn't have evolved too long ago, he wouldn't take any unnecessary risks. If there was one thing that Alyn had made sure he understood was to never take anything for granted. There were myriad beasts in the multiverse, many who possessed weird and unpredictable attacks.

Finally, he got close enough to see it around a corner, as it had briefly stopped after destroying a large mansion. This close there was no question about it. The beast was truly E-Ranked, but recently evolved. As for the type of beast it was, Zac had no idea as he didn't dare to use his identifying skill on it just yet.

At first Zac had thought it was a huge rhinoceros, but he soon realized that he was slightly off on that point. At further scrutiny, it felt like the beast was the result of a mutant bison ox mating with a unicorn. It's back reached roughly four meters in the air and it had a stocky build covered with a thick black fur.

Just looking at its body Zac felt that its method of fighting should be somewhat similar to that of the barghest. The thing looked like it was built for devastating head-on charges. However, the huge muscles weren't what gave Zac pause as he scouted the beast.

It was the huge horn that shot out of its forehead, reaching over three meters. It almost looked like the horn was made out of opal, as it was white and shimmered in a rainbow of colors. However, the colors weren't refractions, but rather wild energies that were somehow trapped inside.

Just looking at the sharp horn from the distance was enough to fill Zac with some trepidation, and he had a feeling it wasn't so simple that it was only used for stabbing. However, since the beast looked a bit unwieldy Zac felt confident he would be able to whittle the beast down while avoiding frontal attacks with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

But before he could put thoughts into action a blaring sense of danger entered his mind, and he unhesitatingly activated a defensive charge from his robes. Not only that but he also immediately used his defensive skill and had multiple layers of leaves superimpose from the direction he sensed the deadly danger.

The next instant a gloved fist came crashing at him, causing a sonic boom right before it slammed into the shield. The fist contained some sort of intractable force, and Zac immediately realized it was some sort of Dao. He didn't want to risk facing the same situation as with the Corpse Lord, being afflicted with an unknown Dao, so he quickly rotated the Dao of Trees in his body as well in order to create a third layer of defense.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the shield cracked like brittle glass, and the emerald leaves were ripped to shreds soon after.

The only thing he could do was to use his arm as a shield, tightening his muscles while using his Dao for all he was worth.

The ground was ripped to shreds when the fist landed, and Zac was shot away like a cannon-ball, completely destroying a building from the impact. Stars swam in his eyes but he quickly refocused, ripping away the debris of the building on top of him and scrambled up to his feet.

His arm hurt like hell, but after a quick check he was relieved to feel that it wasn't broken. He immediately summoned his axe and faced his new assailant with a grim face. When he saw who had punched him he completely blanked out for a second, as it wasn't some hidden powerhouse of the small aliens as he'd expected.

It was a young human, likely around Emily's age. At least Zac assumed that he was human, though he'd never seen anyone with purple hair before. The youth was seemingly unarmed, apart from the gloves and large bracers he wore.

The two angrily stared at each other for a few seconds until they both spoke up at the same time.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Why the fuck did you attack me?”

Chapter 199: Average

The youth was decked in a pair of loose pants lined with intricate fractals and a sleeveless vest that went all up to his throat, leaving both his arms bare. His body was of the wiry kind, like something that made Zac think of kung-fu masters rather than bodybuilders, but Zac knew only too well just how much power that was contained in his arms.

Just as Zac scouted out the new variable entering the fray, so did the teenager hesitantly look over Zac. Soon after Zac felt the fractal from **[Mental Fortress]** flash, meaning he was getting probed or attacked by a mental skill. Looking at his opponent Zac guessed it was the former.

“Why aren’t you answering? Just who are you? Did my siblings send you?” he angrily said, warily keeping his distance from Zac after his sneak attack failed.

Zac ignored the question, instead quickly using his skill **[Inquisitive Eye]** just like the other guy did. But for the first time since he acquired it, it almost failed completely, giving even less information than when he scanned his sister.

A muddled row could be seen, only telling Zac the name of the enemy. If even that. Because the only thing that was legible was “Average”, with the rest being blocked. That meant one of two things. Either there was a huge disparity in Intelligence or Wisdom, or he possessed far superior means to block mental attacks. In either case, it indicated that he wasn’t a simple opponent.

Zac soon got his answers, as one of the teenager’s bracelets shone with a white luster that reminded Zac of the diadem Ogras used to protect from mental attacks. The teenager started and looked down on his arm, immediately raising his guards afterward.

“Average? Is that really your name? I don’t know who you are, much less anything about any siblings of yours. Why did you attack me when I was about to fight that beast? Are you the one that unleashed it on these people?” Zac asked, taking note of every move with vigilance.

He couldn’t be completely sure, but it felt like the teenager was roughly as strong as he was. Not only did he move like a lightning bolt, but there was also enough strength behind his punch to hurt him. There also was the issue of the mysterious power contained in the punch, and Zac not being able to identify it properly was a bit unnerving.

“I knew you were a liar! Everyone in this sector knows who I am. Who else dares to have hair this stylish? Only I, the great Average-“ the teenager angrily said, but his introduction was rudely interrupted by the bellow of the frenzied beast.

There was no way the demon bull hadn’t been alerted by the commotion the two caused. It had barely restrained itself due to the enormous amounts of energy released from the strike of the teenager. But after observing the two small humans for a bit longer, it apparently felt confident in attacking.

To Zac’s surprise the teenager didn’t seem alarmed but rather elated that the beast was bearing down on him. The air around his fists started shimmering like stars as it distorted from dense energy gathering, and he actually seemed ready to meet the charge from the beast head-on.

Zac had a decent idea of what the brat was about to do, and he felt he couldn’t allow him to attack the beast. This so-called Average had muddied the water of his quest completely. Did the system expect this kid to be here? Was he the real challenge?

All these variables cropping up were a pain in the ass, but Zac could only fight for now. He instantly swung his axe toward the teenager, and as the edge sliced through the air a huge fractal edge from **[Chop]** appeared. After a brief hesitation, he also imbued the strike with the Dao of Sharpness before launching it at the human rather than the beast.

Zac was afraid that the kid would simply shrug off the attack if he didn't put something extra in the strike, and he couldn't let the teenager kill the beast. He had a strong feeling that his mission would be a wash if he just watched someone else claim the head of the bison-monster.

The fractal edge flew at the pugilist with full force, slicing the cobblestones on the ground to ribbons on its approach. Average clearly had good battle awareness and immediately noticed an attack was incoming. However, even with the knowledge his eyes widened in alarm from the huge size of the incoming attack, and he threw himself down at the ground in order to avoid the attack that wanted to slice him in two.

To Zac's surprise Average moved like an acrobat, pushing off from the ground with his hands and flew up towards the head of the charging beast.

"I knew it! You work for eleventh brother, don't you!" the teenager screamed angrily as he kicked the beast with enormous force. "He always does things like this!"

Due to Zac's strike, Average was out of balance and couldn't properly utilize that dense energy that he had gathered in his fists, and the pugilist only managed to transfer some of it to his feet in time. But the effect still shocked Zac. It sounded like a bomb went off as the foot slammed into the side of the head of the beast.

Even though the attack had been interrupted there was just as much force in it compared with the sneak attack the teenager used against him, and Zac made a note to be wary when that odd energy appeared again. The bison was actually lifted up in the air and thrown into a neighboring building as well with a wail.

Initially, Zac was worried that the strike had actually killed the beast, but he soon realized more was needed to kill a true E-Grade creature as it got up to its feet with a shake of its head. This time it didn't mindlessly charge again, and instead kept its distance as it emitted a low growl.

Since the beast looked a bit groggy Zac took the opportunity to scout it out and tried his luck with his ocular skill.

[Moonpike – Star Ox – Level 79 – Strength]

The skill actually worked this time, and it gave a brief rundown of the animal. The level and its main attribute weren't a surprise, but what made Zac a bit confused was the first two lines of information. It had a name. Did it mean that the ox was intelligent enough for the system to consider it a cultivator? Or perhaps it only meant that the animal had an owner that had named it, like the Heralds he had fought earlier.

Average landed a bit haphazardly, angrily glaring back and forth between his two enemies. He seemed to want to say something else to Zac, who could only shrug his shoulders.

"I don't know anything about your family circumstances. But I cannot let you claim the kill of that beast, even if we have to fight over it," Zac evenly said, completely unleashing his aura.

"What the fuck! I can give you the corpse, but I need to be the one to kill it," Average angrily shouted back, seemingly shocked that someone didn't let him have his way.

"No deal," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"You rogue cultivators are god damn lunatics. A thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins! That's over 10 times the value of the horn. Leave me alone and it's yours," he said, not being able to hide an air of superiority.

That actually made Zac stop for a second. A thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins were equivalent to a Billion normal Nexus Coins. That was far more than the total wealth he had accumulated so far. Perhaps it was worth to fail the quest for that amount of money.

He soon steadied his mind though. Failing the quest wasn't so simple as to only lose a Dao Treasure and an entrance ticket to the Tower of Eternity. It would also mean losing access to all future quests in the chain, and all the rewards they would bring. And a quest chain called The Path to Hegemony surely wasn't something simple.

"I am sorry, but I have an important quest to kill this beast. I have nothing against you, but you need to back off from this one," Zac steadily said.

“You think I’m afraid of you? I know you haven’t evolved, and I can count the worthy rivals to me in the F-grade in this sector on my hands, and you are not one of them. I offered you a peaceful solution, but you wouldn’t have it,” Average said, cracking his neck while glaring at Zac.

A monstrous aura erupted from the youth as well, almost matching that of Zac’s. It was as though the two forces fought for supremacy in the air.

By this point, the beast had gotten back on its feet, and it warily growled as it watched the youth. It clearly didn’t want to eat another of those monstrous strikes, and instead leveled its gaze on Zac. With a roar it charged at Zac, who frowned as he glanced over at the incoming animal.

Torrential amounts of killing intent, garnered from killing hundreds of thousands of beasts poured out of Zac on top of his normal aura, and the beast quickly stopped in its tracks. It was as though as it had seen an apex predator who wanted to feed on it, and it didn’t dare fight Zac either.

Instead, the beast seemed to have had enough of the situation and started to slowly back away from the two, careful not to make any hasty movements. Zac knew it was stuck inside the town for now and didn’t mind its actions. The youth warily stepped back a bit as well due to the killing intent, some hesitation finally appearing on his face.

“Are you an unorthodox cultivator? There shouldn’t be any of you in this sector,” he said.

“Unorthodox Cultivator? I don’t even know what that means,” Zac said with a shrug, which seemed to calm down the youth a bit. “Winner gets the beast.”

“...Good!” the pugilist said, and immediately disappeared after.

This time Zac was ready, and after sensing the changes in the surroundings quickly swirled around and swung his axe straight down in a tremendous swing. A grating sound could be heard when the edge of the axe was deflected with the help

of one of the bracers on Average's forearm, and immediately after a knee came flying toward Zac's gut.

Zac angled his body to avoid the blow, immediately trying to ram his shoulder into the chest of his youth afterward.

However, a lightning-quick jab in his jaw stopped him in his tracks, forcing him to back away. With a grunt Zac shook his head, immediately getting back in the thick of it.

Both of them wordlessly agreed to not use any of their skills, as whoever won had to fight the beast afterward.

Unfortunately, Zac quickly realized that the situation wasn't really in his favor. Clearly his enemy had great combat experience, likely having trained in hand-to-hand battles since young.

With an angry glare Zac refused to give up and stubbornly kept going, trying every trick he had learned from his Axe Mastery skill and his countless battles. After having fought a while Zac felt that the two were quite close in at least Dexterity and Strength, though Zac guessed that Average had a closer balance of the two attributes compared to Zac's 2:1 ratio.

At least Zac had a feeling his Endurance and Vitality were a notch above the teenager's, as the youth didn't dare use his body to block Zac's punches and swings. He wasn't like the Corpse Lord whose body had turned into a defensive treasure in other words.

Instead, the teenager mostly used deft movements or his magical bracers to avoid taking any direct damage by Zac's various attacks. Zac himself was continuously hit with powerful punches and kicks, and he knew he'd be black and blue come tomorrow.

Initially, Zac's goal was to break those bracers so that the kid would be forced to give up, but he soon realized his folly in that plan. The bronze hoops around his forearms were clearly high-grade treasures, likely far better than anything Zac possessed. Even after having intercepted tens of swings from **[Verun's Bite]** there wasn't a single mark on them, though Average's arms were shaking a bit.

Zac's body was getting beaten like a slab of meat, and he had a feeling he would pass out before Average ran out of steam. The pugilist was like a machine, continuously launching forceful attacks that made Zac wince. The fight had actually lasted less than a minute, but Zac was already starting to feel woozy.

Though the two only used their bodies to fight they caused widespread destruction in the town, pushing through the buildings like two intertwined tornadoes. He knew he needed to do something to change the situation quickly.

Besides, he didn't want to let the beast roam freely too long. Perhaps it would actually manage to break through the array given enough time. Then he and the brat would truly look like fools.

Zac even started contemplating using [**Hatchetman's Rage**] to subdue the kid, but he was afraid that would escalate the situation into a true life and death battle. Normally he wouldn't shrink away from that, but he felt the situation wasn't as simple as two people fighting for some treasure.

Average, in spite of his name, seemed to come from a truly powerful faction from the small pieces of information that could be gleaned from what he had said earlier. And they weren't on earth anymore where tools and other items were a bit limited. Since he could throw out a billion Nexus Coins like nothing he likely had some supreme defensive treasures, so an-all out fight would probably backfire on Zac instead.

Fortuitously, Zac soon caught on a small hint. Every time the youth dodged one of the brutal swings of his axe there was a brief hint of fear in his eyes. Between what Average said earlier and this lack of real life-and-death experience it wasn't too hard to figure out what was going on.

The teenager was a greenhouse elite. He was given all kinds of advantages to boost his attributes and trained in combat with great instructors. But he was still young, and his power didn't come from numerous bloody battles. He let his fear of being seriously hurt or killed affect him somewhat.

Since he had nothing to lose Zac decided to try a gambit. After blocking another punch with his arm Zac swung his axe overhead straight at the youth's head, intentionally leaking some killing intent. It was a huge swing that would no doubt kill the teenager if it hit, but there was no way such a wide swing would go unpunished.

As Zac expected a lightning kick slammed into his wide-open side, causing a few ribs to crack. Zac groaned and dropped the axe, causing the eyes of the teenager to widen in elation. However, the next moment the now freed hand closed around the leg of the pugilist.

There was no dodging any longer as Zac held one of his enemy's legs in an iron vise, which brought the two to a state of mutual destruction. Average wouldn't give up, and engaged Zac in a brutal close-combat melee. For every strike Zac managed to land on the locked-down teenager, he received two in return.

But Zac simply soaked up the damage with a stone-cold face, his eyes boring straight into the increasingly frantic eyes of the teenager. The strikes between the two sounded like continuous thunder throughout the town as knuckles met flesh. This kept going for a while until Zac was about to land his fifth strike in the face of Average, whose left eye was closed shut and nose crooked.

Suddenly a red shield sprang up and blocked Zac's strike.

“Shit! I give up!”

Chapter 200: Star Ox

After taking a look at the swollen face of Average for a few seconds Zac let go of his opponent's leg and slowly got to his feet.

“So the ox is mine, right? No interference?” Zac said after spitting out a mouthful of blood and cracking his neck.

It felt like every part of his body was swollen and pulsating, but he had work to do. He simply took out a healing pill and swallowed it to manage the pain.

“I've been called many things in my life. Handsome, generous, dashing. But never a liar,” Average said as he got to his feet as well. “Besides, we have hundreds of Star Oxen back in one of our Mystic Realms, what do I care about this one?”

“Then why the hell did you make this such a pain in the ass for me?” Zac angrily said.

“Dad told me to find and kill this one, and if I did it he'd consider letting me change my name,” the youth admitted, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Your name is actually Average? I thought it was some method you used to block your real name,” Zac said, not being able to stop a snort.

Average glared at Zac for a bit before he deflated.

“It's my crazy dad. He said he wanted to see if a bad name would spur a child to improve faster. ‘Greatness through embarrassment’ he called it. More importantly, do you truly not know who I am?” he said, a bit curious.

“No idea. I'll go kill that bull now, just stay out of the way,” Zac said.

“See if I care when it stabs you in the ass,” the teenager muttered, but followed Zac's word and sat down after eating a

pill.

Zac only shook his head and headed toward where the beast slunk away. While he knew he wasn't the best discerner of people, he felt that Average wasn't lying. He wouldn't likely interfere in the fight. Of course, Zac would still keep an eye open just in case.

It didn't take long for Zac to find it, as it was currently dismantling the wall on the opposite side of the town. Large pieces of rocks were flying as it pierced the wall over and over, the rocks seeming like butter to the large horn.

Its senses were quite sharp, and it somehow noticed Zac's approach from behind almost immediately. As though it felt pushed against a corner the ox bellowed and stomped the ground threateningly, its feet causing small earthquakes in the ground. Zac warily looked the beast over, not in a rush to make a move.

He had a feeling there was something special about the animal. He'd already killed an E-Ranked beast before, and that was when he was far weaker compared to now. Of course, that had been a desperate battle, but still, he didn't think this would be a walk in the park.

But just looking at the beast didn't tell him anything, apart from reinforcing the notion that something likely was up with the horn that crackled with wild energies. He summoned a large edge with [**Chop**], and the next moment disappeared.

Immediately after he appeared beneath its torso, the edge soaring up toward its stomach. Zac had already imbued his strike with the Dao of Sharpness. It was this very combination that had cleaved the Fiend Wolf in two, and it was a good measure to test the bison.

The edge slammed into the thick hide, but Zac was disappointed to find that apart from a few long strands of fur being cut, there seemed to be no effect from the swing. It didn't even manage to penetrate the skin.

It wasn't that the beast had an impenetrable skin, but rather it felt like there was a strong energy blocking the edge to cut

through. Zac couldn't be sure, but he guessed that the Dao of Hardness should have properties that worked a bit like this.

The beast angrily roared, and it appeared it felt truly afraid as torrential amounts of Cosmic Energy whirled about. It was planning something big, and Zac wasn't sure what he should do, so for now he kept swinging. He tried to hit various body parts with his edge, this time after swapping over to the Dao of Heaviness.

The kick of Average seemed to have had an effect, so he instead went with blunt force damage. He focused on the joints of the beast, trying to immobilize it, but he simply wasn't able to breach its defenses with **[Chop]**.

Suddenly a sense of danger enveloped him, and he quickly backed away from the beast with his movement skill, only to see the bison simply plop down on the ground, causing the ground to shake. It felt like a weird decision for the beast, but admittedly it managed to force Zac away.

However, the next moment Zac's brows rose as the horn started to shine with blinding light as it was leveled toward him. Acute danger flooded Zac's mind as he quickly scampered out of the way, pushing his movement skill to the limit.

The next moment a blazing pillar of light ripped through the position where he just was, like a prismatic laser that destroyed anything in its path. The attack was instantaneous, and if it wasn't for his high Luck he would have been turned into motes of light by now. Zac couldn't even see where the beam ended, as everything it hit was completely disintegrated as far as he could see.

Zac's brows rose in alarm, finally realizing why the cosmic energy had surged so much earlier. He really didn't want to let it fire another of those devastating attacks, as he held no delusions that he'd walk away from one of those beams. This time he was able to get out of the way in time, but there was no telling if it could move the beam as well.

But just as Zac was about to charge toward the bison once more it was surrounded by large motes of multicolored lights,

floating about all around it. Zac frowned and took out a stone from his pouch, immediately throwing it at one of them.

An intense explosion erupted from the light, containing enough force to throw Zac on his back even in the distance. His cracked ribs, courtesy of Average, made themselves reminded, as he slammed down on the ground.

The mote of light exploding wasn't the end of it. It also caused a cascading effect amongst the neighboring stars, causing a concussive explosion blanketing a whole area. Even if he managed to avoid the first blast somehow in melee range, the other ones would have surely hit him.

Zac quickly crawled up on his feet again and spat out some gravel from his mouth as he surveyed the scene. The bison was a real cheat. It had essentially set itself up like a cannon, repositioning itself as Zac tried to move around it. Furthermore, to avoid being assaulted it summoned moving mines all around it, each containing enough force to hurt him.

Even worse it looked like the animal was able to control the motes, meaning he couldn't simply dodge them, as they would follow him anyway. As soon as the area calmed down some of the remaining motes quickly drifted over, along with a few new ones appearing in short order. It took less than 5 seconds before the minefield had once again been reinforced.

The only good news was that it still hadn't fired off a second shot from its horn, meaning it likely took a while to charge up to its full effect.

Zac didn't relish the thought of pulling out his aces at the moment, as Average was still around. Zac honestly didn't believe that the teenager would do something at this junction, but he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks.

But something needed to be done, as the horn was gaining brightness at a steady pace. He looked down on his forearm and steadied his breath. The Cosmic Energy in the area surged as Zac activated his newly acquired skill, **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

Boundless power coursed through his veins, and he had to suppress an urge to simply charge at the beast waving his axe like a madman. He felt like an agent of destruction but he forcefully steadied his mind and started to pour torrential amounts of it into his forearm, starting the charge of his own ace.

However, that wasn't all, since he also summoned five enormous blades with [**Chop**], each almost ten meters long. As soon as the charge was almost done Zac let loose a roar and released one fractal blade after another at the minefield the beast had created.

The world turned white from hundreds of explosions going off in quick succession. This time Zac was ready and dug his heels in and summoned [**Nature's Barrier**] to withstand the shockwaves.

He was almost blinded by the cascading explosions, with lights swimming in his vision. A loud ringing rang in his ears as well, and it felt like he was under the effect of a flashbang grenade. However, he had accomplished his task, so he pushed forward his hand with a growl.

Reality cracked and the hand emerged, empowered by the Dao of Trees. A few things were different about it this time. First of all, it emitted a much stronger aura than before, and Zac attributed it to the increase in stats from [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

But more interestingly the wooden arm contained red shining veins that coursed through the whole thing. It looked a bit sinister, but Zac didn't have time to analyze it as he commanded the hand forward toward the sitting bison.

A few motes were spawned in the path of the hand and exploded on impact. Luckily, the hand was imbued with the Dao of Trees, and only some scorch marks remained after the hit. It might have been a different story if tens of the motes detonated on it, but Zac had already cleared most of them out.

However, Zac didn't feel relieved as his danger sense kept building as the horn of the bison was nearing the same level of blinding brightness as when it fired its last shot. This time it

was quickly swiveling its head back and forth in the direction of Zac, likely aiming to destroy a wider area.

Time was running out and Zac did the only thing he could think of. The huge wooden hand closed the last distance and gripped the huge horn. Searing heat was transferred from the wooden hand to Zac's, but the feeling was nothing new to him.

Zac aimed to push its head to the side to avoid the incoming laser, but he had underestimated the power of his skill. An extremely loud snap echoed through the area, followed by a high-pitched screech as the horn was broken off.

Zac was shocked, but wouldn't let the opportunity pass as there still was some time left on his skill before it ran out of steam. He pivoted the hand and with all the remaining force he could muster he drove the huge horn straight into the body of the bison.

A huge fountain of blood shot straight up in the sky as the animal essentially was impaled into its ground from its own body part. It let out a last desolate bellow before it stopped moving forever, its death infusing Zac with a huge amount of cosmic energy, bringing him clean to level 61.

The remaining floating mines in the vicinity soon disappeared, turning into a dense amount of cosmic energy that spread through the town. It allowed Zac clear passage as he slowly walked over to the corpse, the adrenaline from the fight quickly turning to tiredness all over.

The axe in his hand started to gleefully vibrate as he got next to the bison, and Zac dutifully placed its edge at the still bleeding wound of the animal. A good deal of blood entered the axe, and Zac almost thought that he could hear a happy purr from inside it.

Not long after the effects of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] ended, and he was overcome with a wave of tiredness. Between his two fights and using both his axes he just wanted to curl up and sleep, but he wouldn't lose his battle-readiness until he felt he was in a safe place.

“Wow, that was pretty crazy,” a voice came from behind, making Zac straighten his back and turn around, hoping that his weakness couldn’t be discerned.

It was unsurprisingly Average, who likely had spectated the battle from somewhere closeby. The fact that he had stayed away from the battle from start to end somewhat proved to Zac that the youth might be a bit spoiled, but he was true to his word. There was a moment of opportunity to steal the kill after the animal was impaled, but Average didn’t take it.

He also couldn’t sense any danger, so Zac didn’t mind him approaching.

“I didn’t expect it to have such strong attacks, so I might have gone a bit overboard,” Zac said as ripped out the huge horn from the bison and put it in a pouch.

“Star Ox are pretty well known for their star beam. Ahh, I’m so unlucky! If you didn’t get lucky and caught my leg, I would have been the one to rip the horn off and stab the animal,” Average said with a sigh as he prodded the corpse of the Star Ox.

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Zac said with a shrug as he stored away the beast carcass as well. “In 100 sparring duels you would probably defeat me in most of them, but in a real battle, I would always be the one to walk away. You lack life-and-death experience.”

Average frowned and looked like he was about to argue with him, but was interrupted before he could start anything.

“Haha, well spoken, brat!” a rough and extremely loud voice suddenly echoed through the town, making Zac warily look in all directions.

The fact that someone else was in the town without either of the two of them noticing wasn’t a great sign, giving Zac a sinking feeling.

That feeling only amplified when he noticed the abject horror on Average’s face.

Chapter 201: Greatest

The teenager clearly knew the origin of the voice, and he obviously wasn't happy to hear it. Zac warily took out his axe once again, trying to figure out means to escape.

He truly wasn't in a condition to fight with someone who made Average this afraid. However, he soon realized the folly of any thoughts of escape as a pressure that felt like, unlike anything he'd ever felt before blanketed the whole town.

The next moment a man who looked to be in his forties appeared next to Average as if out of nowhere. He wore similar gear as the teenager, but comparing the two was as though comparing a matchstick fire to the sun. Zac knew the true aura of the man was restrained, but he barely was able to stand up just from being in his proximity.

This was a true old monster, someone far above anything he'd encountered so far, even eclipsing his realm of understanding. The only thing that had felt similar before was when he saw the axe-man in the vision, though the man in front of him likely wasn't quite that powerful.

But there was a big difference between seeing something in a vision and with his real eyes.

The pugilists were clearly related, as they shared the same weird hair and many facial features. It didn't feel like a mystery to Zac, the man was Average's father. The dad's build was quite a bit bulkier, but there wasn't a shred of fat on his body. It was also clear that this man was no greenhouse elite like his son.

His whole body was crisscrossed with scars, much like Zac's own body looked like by now. But more importantly, he radiated a killing intent that felt strong enough to drown the whole planet they stood on, and it was on a completely different scale compared to his own.

Zac wondered just how much slaughter one had to undergo to passively emit such an aura. If someone had told him that this man had destroyed a whole planet, he honestly would believe them.

“Brat, why don’t you look happy to see your father? And you’re even calling me crazy?” the man said as he flicked Average on his forehead.

However, the power in that love-tap was enough to blast Average into a house, just like what happened to Zac when he got punched. But Average seemed fine apart from a quickly growing bump, and quickly scrambled out of the ruins of the house, albeit with some complaint on his face.

“What father, you’re just a clone,” Average muttered, brushing some dust from his vest.

“Shitty son, it’s still a wisp of my consciousness inside, no?”

Zac was shocked at that exchange. The monstrously powerful man was just a clone of the real thing. He already knew from Alyn that clones created from techniques were far weaker than the original body. To be this powerful with only a small part of the original’s body’s power, just who were these people?

“And what was that embarrassing display earlier? I trained you for almost twenty years to be fearless and indomitable, yet you gave up after only a broken nose. Next time you better lose a couple of limbs before you give up,” the man snorted, and finally turned toward Zac.

“Not bad for a little Progenitor, you show promise. I’m guessing you’re here on a quest?”

Zac was still a bit shellshocked from the aura the man emitted, but he forced himself to snap out of it. He didn’t dare to lie in front of this man. Somehow he knew Zac was a Progenitor, and who knew what else he’d gleaned. Zac wouldn’t be surprised if the man used some high tier observation skills that **[Mental Barrier]** didn’t even notice.

“I am Zachary Atwood, it’s nice to meet you. May I ask how you knew I was a Progenitor?” Zac tentatively said to him.

“This old man has been around for 80 000 years. If I couldn’t see through some little brat I might as well throw myself into a sun,” he laughed. “I am Greatest, by the way, Average’s father. And don’t worry, your quest is probably completed. I’m simply shielding the area for a bit so we could talk without you getting whisked away.”

Zac’s mind moved a mind a minute as he tried to unpack the various things the man said. First of all, Zac understood where he got the naming sense, and he could only throw a pitying glance at Average, who only rolled his eyes in response.

The next shocker was his age, as anyone that old had to be at least C-Grade race as far as Zac knew. That, in turn, meant that the man in front of him was at least a D-Grade powerhouse. However, Zac had a feeling he wasn’t that simple.

He had no proper frame of reference yet of the powerhouses of the multiverse, but Zac would guess that the man in front of him was stronger than D-Grade. This was only reinforced by the last comment. It appeared that the man was able to shield the area from the System.

He already knew that it was possible to manipulate the System to a certain degree, as stronger forces were somewhat able to snag the incursion slots that were supposed to be randomly awarded. But he’d never heard about this type of manipulation.

It was extremely alarming, as it meant that it was possible that the man in front of him, or people of similar power, could lock down space around themselves. That would mean that using things as Coward’s Escape or Teleporters might be useless when fleeing from powerhouses.

“You gave my son a valuable lesson, so I help you out in return. Wear this until you’re as powerful as me,” the man said.

The next moment something appeared out of nowhere in front of Zac, and he hesitantly took it. It was a bracelet that looked like those the two pugilists wore. Zac didn’t hesitate, and quickly put it on. He didn’t believe there was any malice

behind the move. If Greatest wanted to kill him he would already be dead.

'The Specialty Core you've managed to grow is both a blessing and a curse and will enable a miracle if it doesn't kill you. Many wouldn't even hesitate in cutting you open just to study it. This little trinket will hide it from the world, and at least no one in D-Grade will be able to sense it,' the man's voice sounded in Zac's mind.

Zac was truly alarmed this time. It was as though Greatest could see through everything about him. Not only that, he seemed to understand what the core was and called it a Specialty Core. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea what it meant, as he'd never heard anyone mention it back in Port Atwood.

He was both relieved and a bit disappointed after hearing Greatest's opinion. Relieved that it was something good that many would want. But at the same time, it wasn't something great to the point that he was interested in it. Initially, Zac had believed he had created some miracle of the ages, but perhaps the reality wasn't quite that exciting.

For the first time, Zac didn't look at the powerhouse in front of him like he was some sort of primordial beast, but rather a treasure trove of information. This man was no doubt far more knowledgeable about pretty much anything compared to anyone on his island.

The answers to so many questions he had lied with him, and perhaps even the solution to all the predicaments on Eart. There was no doubt that this man could singlehandedly destroy all the incursions and the dominators without breaking a sweat. He likely even had a bunch of underlings who could do so.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, and Zac was about to ask the man for assistance, but before he had a chance Greatest started talking again.

"Brat, let's go. This was a valuable lesson for me as well. I've been too lenient with you due to your mother, seeing as you shrunk away from the face of death. You need some real battle experience, so I'll ask The Red Emperor to accept you into the

Eternal Legion for a campaign or two. If you survive I'll allow you to change your name," he said with a widening smile.

All color quickly drained from the face of Average, and horror even eclipsing that from earlier filled his eyes. But he knew better than to fight with his battle-crazed father, and could only stare at Zac like he wanted to cry but had no tears left.

"Haha, little Progenitor, if you ever find yourself in the Red sector of the Allbright Empire, come and have a drink with this old man. If I'm in a good mood I might even let you try one of our Certain Death trials!" the man said, ignoring his son.

"Wait!" Zac shouted, but it was to no avail.

The next moment the two simply disappeared, leaving Zac alone with a slew of questions. Only a few seconds later he got a prompt telling him that his quest was complete, and a crystal spawned next to him. The quest didn't hand out the rewards though, and Zac guessed he would get them at his own Nexus Node back on Port Atwood.

Zac sighed as he looked up at the stars. Meeting Greatest had been eye-opening in more ways than one. He couldn't wait for the day that Earth had braved the trials of the integration, and he didn't have to fight tooth and nail for every advantage.

He also realized that it was a pipe dream to depend on others for help with his own problems. It was unreasonable to expect some random powerhouse to help out a place like Earth, making an enemy of the Undead Empire and the Cult of the Everlasting Dao in the process.

But it wasn't all bad. He knew that the Allbright Empire was a vast force that had all kinds of opportunities. It wouldn't be a bad place to travel to in the future. Having already made a sort of connection with such a powerhouse over there might open all kinds of doors.

One could even see it as the hidden reward for the quest since meeting Greatest might be worth far more in the end compared to some Dao Treasure. But that was all for later. He needed to

focus on the present, and there was a Treasure hunt to reap some benefits from in two weeks.

Zac only took one last glance around the town, before he touched the crystal and disappeared. As for the fate of the warring states of the Solvim, that had already left his mind.

Unbeknownst to Zac, two people stood in the air, looking down at the town as Zac touched the crystal.

“So he really was a Progenitor,” Average said with interest, seeing his new rival disappear. “No wonder I didn’t recognize him. I still believe I would have been the one to win in a life-and-death battle though.”

“The only way you’d beat him is relying on treasures I gave you. Then it would have been me that defeated him, not you. Remember, items are only a crutch. Only our fists are eternal,” Greatest said with a snort.

“Why did you give him that bracer? Didn’t you craft it for Lord Greenwood’s new personal disciple?” Average asked, knowing better than to argue with his unreasonable father.

“I’ll just say the craft failed,” the man said with a grin. “It’s more important to sow the seeds of karma.”

“Was he really worth it? That was tens of thousands of E-Grade Nexus Coins you threw away,” Average muttered.

“We’ll find out in a few thousand years,” Greatest said with a nonchalant shrug.

“But if he was so important, why didn’t you send someone to help him out? I’ve heard how messed up the situation on those new planets are. Isn’t he almost guaranteed to die? I know you would be able to send someone with him through the Nexus Hub.” Average skeptically asked.

“If I did so then my gamble would have been truly worthless,” Greatest said with a shake of his head. “For now that brat was only a promise of greatness. But If I stepped in at this juncture he would likely never pass the second bottle-neck. Besides, I

believe he is well on his way to solve those issues himself. He is quite impressive even by progenitor-standards.”

Average only looked down again one last time, before summoning a huge vessel. There was no network in this remote pocket of the Red Sector, and it would take over a week to get back home. He briefly wondered if he'd ever see that brutal guy again.

But he soon put it out of his mind, as he had his own things to worry about.

Chapter 202: Specialty Core

As soon as Zac touched the crystal he once again found himself in front of the Nexus Hub south of Azh'Rodum. When he looked around he also noticed two boxes neatly placed right in front of him.

He took up the first one and opened it, finding a densely inscribed plaque inside. He picked it up and a stream of information immediately entered his mind. It was the entrance token to the Tower of Eternity, and there was quite a bit of information it provided.

He could use the token at any moment after reaching level 50, so technically he could use it right now if he wanted. Of course, he wouldn't go just yet as he wanted to push as far as possible, reaping the maximum amount of benefits. Therefore he'd first do both the treasure hunt and the first step of the inheritance he ended up choosing before trying the Tower.

He also learned that the token was personal, and could not be sold or traded. Finally, anyone had two shots at the tower, after which they would be eternally looked out of it. However, to take the trial the second time another token had to be earned somehow.

Zac put the token away into his pouch and opened the second box. Inside was a small shimmering vial with a luminescent liquid splashing around inside. Zac sighed a bit in disappointment when he saw the content. The liquid was the Dao Treasure, and Zac knew the method of using it was quite simple.

He simply needed to drink it to obtain its effects. However, he didn't do so just yet, as a Dao Treasure wasn't quite as simple as an attribute fruit. The vial would place him in a state of enlightenment, somewhat like his state when he improved his

Dao of Heaviness back at the auction, but it wouldn't guarantee a new Dao Seed or improve one.

As far as Dao Treasures went, it was one of the more mediocre ones. But then again, he already knew it'd only be an F-Ranked treasure. Besides, while it wouldn't give him a completely new seed like some treasures did, it would at least give him a shot at improving a current one.

The best way to utilize this type of Dao Treasure was to first decide on which seed to improve and take the first steps on the type of insight he wanted for it. That would maximize the chance to gain something from the vial. Of course, using the vial to improve his Dao of Sharpness would be far easier than his Dao of Trees, since one was still at the low stage, whereas the Dao of Trees was just missing one step to reach its peak.

Zac had some difficulty in choosing which way he should go on the matter. For one he knew that improving the Dao of Trees would bring far more attributes than the others, but at the same time its usefulness in battle was a bit limited.

Conversely, it felt like a bit of a waste to use his treasure on the Dao of Sharpness, as he really should be able to improve it by himself since it still was only on the first stage. He wasn't in a hurry since there still were roughly two weeks before the treasure hunt started, but he felt he would have to use it before then, to maximize his battle potential.

Having packed away both his treasures he walked north toward the demon town. Azh'Rodum was still somewhat deserted, as many of the demons lived in Port Atwood nowadays. But some people were walking the streets, humans and demons alike.

The simple reason was the Nexus Crystal mine. Those who worked the mine lived in the town, only sometimes heading to Port Atwood. However, those who lived here had special passes, and normal citizens of his town couldn't get here unless they managed to pass through the sea of barghest and Gwyllgi to get here.

This was of course to protect the rich resources of the area. There were plans to sooner or later to turn the whole mountain

into a restricted zone with the help of Arrays, but such an undertaking would cost over a hundred million Nexus Coins and wasn't something he could prioritize at the moment.

Since he was here anyway he couldn't resist heading over to his hidden cavern and was elated to find that the density of the Cosmic Energy in the air felt slightly sparser compared to before. Zac felt it was good news since that hopefully meant that the bead was absorbing large amounts of energy.

Still, he couldn't discern any changes to the bead down at the bottom of the calm pond as of yet. He wasn't surprised at that though since the Lotus was a D-Grade treasure after all. Even with the help of the pond it would likely take a long time for it to grow to the state he saw at the Abbot Everlasting Peace's monastery.

Since everything seemed to be going according to plan Zac headed back to Port Atwood. He'd only been gone for a day, but he still went over to Calrin's. The Attuned Nexus Crystals weren't anything rare, and it shouldn't take the gnome much time to acquire them.

Zac's current venues to become stronger were at the moment slightly limited. There was still the island with the Mystic Realm, but even if he battled for two weeks straight he doubted he'd gain more than a level tops, seeing as he just gained level 61. That would barely provide any benefits, and there were better ways to spend his days before the Treasure Hunt.

He felt that he needed to improve himself in other manners. Levels weren't where he was lacking. That became quite clear from his fight with Average. The teenager had completely dominated him in the fight until Zac turned it around by taking a large risk.

Zac was simply lacking combat proficiency. He had learned some of it from battle, but battle with animals and [**Axe Mastery**] could only take him so far. He had encountered the same problem with Rydel back in the final fight of the Demon Incursion. A large amount of attributes were worthless unless he could properly utilize them.

While he knew that he couldn't get as good training as Average received as young, there should be something he could do. Zac didn't know exactly what level Average was, but he guessed that the youth should be level 75, at the stage of gaining as many titles and other advantages as possible before evolving.

Greatest had said that he'd trained his son for almost twenty years, making the youth older than he looked. It wasn't anything surprising, seeing as Average likely reached E-Grade Race long before he turned 16 years old thanks to various treasures.

Since it only took Zac 6 months to reach level 61 he felt that someone close to being 20 years old from such a prestigious background should be max leveled by now, even if they went slow and steady. Gaining the levels were usually the easiest step in evolving, but it was rather other things that hold people back.

From what he understood some spent a decade at the bottleneck before advancing, though he still didn't know exactly why. Alyn and Ogras had always been a bit diffuse about what happened in E-Grade, only saying that one would become a lot stronger. Until now he hadn't really cared, but it was quickly becoming more and more relevant.

Resuming his training to improve his battle techniques wasn't the only option. Another way to get stronger was his Dao, and he was planning on spending some time on that. But in the end, Zac believed his Core to be the most promising venue to improve. Greatest clearly understood what it was, and mentioned it was a good thing. He quickly wanted to infuse it with more energy to complete its construction.

He felt he shouldn't be too far off, as a large part of it was covered with fractals by now. Perhaps a final push was all that was needed before he could start to unravel its mysteries.

After a quick walk he found himself at the Thayer Consortia, sitting down once again with Calrin. The little gnome quickly produced 25 luminous crystals, each emitting dense and refreshing energies.

“Twenty five E-Grade Divine Crystals,” Calrin said.

“Great,” Zac said as he placed them in his pouch. “By the way, have you ever heard of the concept of a ‘Specialty Core’?”

Zac tried asking the Sky Gnome since he might be the most knowledgeable person on the island, apart from the Creators. However, while they came from an extremely powerful faction they were almost fanatical about crafting, caring little about other things. Meanwhile, Calrin did hail from a former C-Grade family after all.

“Specialty core?” the gnome questioned as his face scrunched up. “I’m not sure... Wait! I’ve read about it in some of our old scriptures before we were forced to sell them.”

“Oh, what do you know?” Zac enthusiastically asked.

“Well, not much, to be honest. From what I understand they are quite rare, but they can enable things out of the norm, so to speak?” Calrin hesitantly said.

“Huh?” Zac could only say, not feeling any clearer about what his core was.

“Hmm... Say for example there’s a lightning mage. He is specialized to inflict as much damage as possible, but each strike costs a lot of Cosmic Energy,” Calrin began explaining. “He realizes that a good addition to his skill is the ability to create large clouds that can generate the lightning bolts for him, saving him a lot of energy.”

“Sure,” Zac nodded along.

“But his class is specialized, his pathways don’t work with those kinds of skills. So he gets a Specialty Core that is attuned to water and wind. Suddenly he can create the clouds through his Core, and his fighting style has gotten much more versatile.”

Zac felt he understood the concept, though he had some difficulty understanding exactly what it meant for his own core.

“So the Specialty Core adds more elements you can use?” Zac probed.

“Well, no. That was just an example. From what I understand the names come from the fact that they are created with a specific purpose in mind. Adding an element is just one example,” Calrin explained. “But they are very rare, I’ve never met anyone with one. Perhaps they are more common in the higher planes, I’m not sure.”

By higher planes, Calrin simply meant the sectors with higher tier planets. While there weren’t any strict hierarchy it seemed, planets were generally lumped together with other planets around the same energy, due to being placed in a part of the multiverse with a certain level of ambient Cosmic Energy.

Earth already was in a pretty good spot, seeing as it started as D-grade, though where on the scale of D-Grade still remained to be seen. But it also meant that there likely weren’t any high tier planets in the close vicinity, apart from perhaps a C-Grade planet being the core of the sector.

Conversely, it was possible that Earth was one of the main planets in a sector with mainly E and F-grade planets. Actually, that felt like an even more likely scenario, seeing as how energy-starved Earth was before the integration.

In the end Zac thanked the gnome for his help and left for his compound. While he still didn’t exactly know what his Core would do, he felt he had a clearer picture of the situation. And perhaps everything would become more apparent the moment his core was finished absorbing energy.

Zac couldn’t wait to try it out and only informed the guards to tell his sister he was back before he went into seclusion to start absorbing the crystals. Soon he sat in his courtyard with the arrays erected with a Divine crystal in his hand.

The Core greedily ate the energy the crystal contained, and it felt the fit was far better than any other life-attuned energy he had given it so far, except the pure energies contained in the lotus seed. The amount of energy was excellent as well, and it felt like he sat in a spring of life, every cell in his body vibrating with vitality.

After roughly two hours he started to sense some instability in the core due to the life-attuned energies overpowering the

other side, and he quickly took out one of his E-Grade Miasma Crystals. Absorbing a Miasma Crystal was, as expected, the opposite of the Divine Crystals, and it felt like he was gripped with a cold hand of death as he absorbed its energies.

This process kept repeating for a few times until he hesitantly decided to hold one crystal in each hand and started absorbing again. The energies wildly clashed in his body, causing quite a bit of pain, but in the end it was manageable. The important thing was that his rate of absorption had doubled, and Zac didn't move for day after day.

His mind was completely emptied, and he only focused on the vast amounts of energies that passed through his body on its way to his Specialty Core. After a few days, he had absorbed over a hundred times the energy he had available in his body at any given moment, clearly displaying the extreme amounts of power the small core contained.

It was only on the sixth day he felt a change. His core finally seemed satiated.

Chapter 203: Duplicity

Zac was quite relieved when he put away the half-absorbed crystals. He had already expended most of his stock of Divine Crystals, and he was starting to fear that his core was simply a bottomless hole. But now he knew there truly was a limit to it.

Zac closed his eyes and focused his senses on the core, trying to understand what it did. It had undergone quite a change unbeknownst to him the past week. Before he started to absorb the E-Grade crystals it had been a chaotic jumble of gold interchanged with black, likely representing life and death.

Now the chaos had given way to order, and there was a clean line of demarcation, which each of the halves of the Core seemingly consisting of one of the colors. This only was the surface though, as Zac's mental sight had no means to penetrate the surface of the Specialty Core.

Covering the core were dense patterns of inscriptions, but even after looking at them for half an hour he didn't really find out anything of use. Calrin had said that Specialty Cores served a special function, but Zac simply had no way to discern what this one would do from his clues so far.

He knew that the fractals were created by the Apostate of Order to follow a certain ruleset, but as far as he was concerned it was all unreadable hieroglyphs so far. He had rather hoped to receive some sort of information burst to explain the core when it was done, but there was no such luck.

The core also didn't respond in the slightest when he tried to infuse it with Cosmic Energy or his Dao, no matter how much he tried. It felt like he was staring at a treasure trove just out of reach. With a sigh he opened his eyes, admitting defeat for now.

The good news at least was that he probably wouldn't be in any danger any longer when he traveled the Dead Zone. Since

his Core was satiated it shouldn't absorb any more miasma when killing Zombies or other undead.

The bad news was that his gambit to get stronger before the Treasure Hunt through the core seemed to be a wash. However, there still was a week to go, and he could at least work on his Dao. Zac opened up his status screen to take another look at his Seeds, but something odd made him stop in his tracks.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

61

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Core

Duplicity (F)

Strength

344

Dexterity

162

Endurance

231

Vitality

201

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

20 853 653

There actually was a new row for his core, right beneath his Dao Seeds. The System had named his core duplicity, which felt like a clue. Zac didn't think it meant that the core would help him become a better liar, but rather referred to the two halves of it.

Unfortunately, there was no menu for him to go further, such as his Dao Screen or Title screen, and that simple line was his only clue. But Zac remembered he actually had a title about his core, and perhaps it might give him some answers.

[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: 5% Strength, ??????????]

To his surprise the Title had actually changed, now giving out a pretty good reward. When he first received the core it had given him nothing, only displaying a line of question marks. The question marks were still there though, making Zac a bit confused.

As he saw it there were two possibilities. The first possibility was that the core simply wasn't complete yet, and it being satiated with energies was just the first step in building it. That would explain why it was completely inert even though it was complete.

The other possibility was that the question marks showed that the Title could keep improving. In the status screen the core was shown in the same way as his Class and Race, with an (F) behind it, showing it likely could be upgraded in the same manner.

Or perhaps it was something else entirely, he was simply speculating at the moment. But seeing the title made him remember something he had forgotten in all the excitement, something that might spell trouble down the line.

Until he met Greatest he had been operating under the assumption he was essentially growing a normal cultivator's core ahead of schedule. He based this on the fact that it was positioned right where a normal core would appear when reaching D-Grade, and it being tightly integrated with his pathways.

But from how Calrin explained it a Specialty Core was like an add-on to a warrior, rather than swapping out the core. What would happen to him in the future when the spot for his normal core was already occupied? Was it possible to move his new core?

Various thoughts and scenarios whirled in his head, but finally he reluctantly tabled the matter. He simply knew too little about the situation, and there was nothing he could do at the moment. In any case, a 5% boost to his Strength wasn't shabby, making it well worth the week he spent on nurturing the core.

Zac put his three free points into Endurance and closed his menu. He was initially going to make a decision on his Dao Seeds, but he felt he needed to clear his head first. For the first time in almost a week, he stood up and stretched his stiff body before leaving his courtyard.

It was around midday, and neither Kenzie or Emily was at home. He was a bit bored so he decided to head to the Academy. He wanted to see his sister, and Alyn would perhaps have some helpful knowledge about Specialty Cores.

The academy had changed quite a bit the past weeks, forming a compound of its own. Before it had simply been a large field of gravel where the Valkyries trained, but now it felt like a real place of learning.

There were over ten structures that held either classrooms or training facilities, and the large training field had been turned into five fields, each with different settings for the gravity array. He was planning on taking a tour but stopped when he passed the field with the lowest gravity boost.

Emily was currently facing a demon warrior, holding a small tomahawk in each hand. The demon was unarmed, and simply blocked her strikes by redirecting their trajectories.

“Your strikes still lack ferocity,” the demon said. “You and your attacks need to be indomitable. The axe is not like a sword, where there exist myriad techniques. The axe is a simpler tool, with fewer ways to attack. It is easier for me to block you because it’s easy for me to guess your attack patterns.”

“So what should I do? And don’t say change weapon,” Emily huffed.

“Make it so that it doesn’t matter if I know what you’re about to do. Crush all resistance, break all defenses. Does Lord Atwood hide his intentions in battle? No, he simply pushes forward, crushing tactics with power,” the demon said, clearly with some approval in his voice.

Zac scratched his chin with a wry smile as he walked away. While what the demon said at the end sounded like a

compliment, it also made him sound a bit like a simpleton who only charged straight ahead. He really needed to add some brains to his brawns.

It seemed that Emily hadn't listened to either Alyn or Alea, swapping to a more magically inclined class. But Zac wouldn't stop her from following her convictions. If she felt that strongly about using axes, it probably was for the best if she kept it up.

Zac didn't interrupt the training and let her be since he knew that Emily was working extremely hard in preparation for her sixteenth birthday. She had been hungering to get stronger since Fort Roger, and she was almost there now.

Instead, he headed over to Alyn's. The schoolmistress still chose to stay inside the academy, though her simple house had received an extensive upgrade. Recently he had learned that the reason so many demons helped Alyn out with various things. She had quite a few suitors.

It appeared that the combination of ruthlessness and graceful and intellectual demeanor made the schoolmistress quite a catch in the eyes of many of the demonic warriors. It was even to the point that a few of the warriors had mainly stayed behind on Earth because she did so.

"Lord Atwood, what brings you here?" Alyn said with a smile as she opened her door and indicated him to sit down in a chair on the patio.

"I simply wanted to take a look at the progression of the academy," Zac said as he sat down. "It looks you have everything in hand."

"Everything is proceeding fine. It turns out that you stopping me from whipping the children did not lessen the children's productivity. I still have much to learn it seems," Alyn said.

"We have also found a few islanders who were teachers before your world got integrated, and we are currently teaching them a revised curriculum along with the children. Within a year we will have operations running for children between 6 and 18."

"That's great. And the armies?"

“Apart from the Valkyries there currently are around 2500 humans in training. Around half of them are cultivators coming from Refugee’s Harbor. However, they’re still mostly a hodge-podge group of people of various strengths and weaknesses. They lack structure and discipline,” Alyn said with a sigh. “Currently they wouldn’t be any use in assaulting an Incursion.”

“I’m sure you can whip them into order. No need to be as lax with soldiers as with the children,” Zac said with a small smile. “What about the beastmaster I sent you?”

“You mean the pet caretaker?” Alyn said, raising an eyebrow. “Well, I think she should get some sort of class choices related to beasts. We are currently getting her acquainted with barghest and the Ayr hive in hopes to improve her choices before rushing her to level 25. She was a bit reluctant at first but she came around after I explained about the bond between a beastmaster and its horde.”

“Great, keep me posted on that,” Zac said with a nod.

The two kept conversing about various topics for a bit, and Zac even broached the subject of Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, Alyn knew even less about them than Calrin, only having heard that stronger forces sometimes depended on Specialty Cores for their advanced Heritages to work.

“Where does Kenzie usually train?” finally asked, after having gone through everything he needed for the moment.

“She’s over at the fourth quadrant. She’s quite impressive, you know. She has a mage-class, but I’ve never met someone with such amazing reflexes. She’d make a great swordfighter or pugilist as well,” Alyn said, her eyes brightening up. “Perhaps a hybrid Class at E-grade, like I’m pushing for with Emily.”

Zac was a bit confused, but then it hit him. Kenzie had never displayed any particular feats of athleticism back in the day, though she played a bit of basketball in school. But now she had an AI helping out. Perhaps it could provide her with similar features as his [**Axe Mastery**], except that it also worked in battles.

He realized his sister might even be able to help him train his close combat. From what he understood Jeeves refused to help others, but if the two sparred the AI would help both of them out whether it liked it or not.

Zac walked over to the field, and soon found Kenzie sit in a corner of the field. She was currently wielding a Fireball in one hand a floating Icicle in the other as she ran through an obstacle course. There were targets planted at various places, and it seemed it was set up so that she was supposed to shoot an attack of a specific element depending on the markings on the targets.

Zac let her finish her run, after which she came up to him, a slight sheen of sweat covering her.

“Impressive,” Zac said with a smile.

“You’re finally out of your hole?” she said with a slightly accusatory tone. “I thought you would stay in there until the treasure hunt.”

“Honestly I’m only out to take a breather. There’s still a lot to do. What are you doing?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

He knew he hadn’t spent a lot of time with his sister since he saved her, and he felt bad about it. But at the same time, there was simply so much to do. He was desperately struggling to keep his edge in order to keep himself and the citizens of Port Atwood safe.

“I’m training coordinations. Jar... My friend said that a big weakness for mages was adaptability and close combat. He designed this course so that I will get better at adapting my attacks, and to better handle myself while fighting. He says that standing still and shooting fireballs is the same as waiting to be killed,” she explained.

Zac had to agree with the AI after thinking back to his fights with mages. They were quite annoying and their attacks were often very strong, but usually when Zac caught up to them the fight was over. One swing or two and they were dead. It felt extremely prudent to learn some footwork in conjunction with

the spells. If she could keep shooting fireballs while running to maintain her distance from her target she would be far safer.

“Sounds like a smart idea,” Zac said approvingly.

“More importantly, you should go see Hannah,” Kenzie said.

“I tried to tell you three days ago but you were unreachable.”

“Hannah?” Zac said with a frown. “What’s going on?”

“I think she’s in trouble,” Kenzie said, looking a bit concerned.

Chapter 204: To Forgive

“She came to me a few days ago, wanting to speak with you. She looked pale and haggard,” Kenzie said with worry on her face. “I tried to ask what had happened, but she wouldn’t say. She only said she really needed to speak with you.”

Zac frowned, an unsettling feeling emerging in his chest. Was someone making things difficult for Hannah because she was his ex?

“I went by her house yesterday,” she continued “It looked like someone had harassed her. The door was broken.”

“Did you talk to her again?” Zac said with some agitation.

“No, I couldn’t find her since then. But I told Ogras to have people patrol her neighborhood,” Kenzie said.

“I’ll fix the situation,” Zac said, leaving without another word.

Anger was burning in his chest as he moved toward Hannah’s house in the residential district. He couldn’t help but believe that someone was harassing her due to her complicated relationship with himself.

It wouldn’t be impossible that it was someone doing things to Hannah in a misguided attempt to suck up to him, or perhaps it was someone who simply delighted in kicking people when they were down. But whatever the case was it had thoroughly enraged Zac.

Even if the feelings of affection had cooled over the past months, Hannah was still someone who held a place in his heart. She was someone who knew Zac, rather than the Super Brother-Man. Whoever was behind this would regret inserting themselves into his matters.

He soon arrived outside Hannah’s house once again, and it was just like Kenzie had said. The white door from earlier was actually cracked open, now resting against the wall. A new

door had been installed, though it clearly was a makeshift solution as it didn't properly fit in the doorframe.

That wasn't all. Multiple windows were broken, and it looked like someone had thrown mud at the villa. Zac stood completely frozen for a few seconds, unbelieving at what he was seeing. Suddenly he saw a slight movement in one of the windows, telling him that Hannah was home. This time he didn't knock, instead immediately entering in haste.

Luckily it was clear that no one dared to actually enter the home of Hannah, leaving the interior intact. A sound was heard and Zac could see a haggard-looking Hannah step out of a doorway holding a pillow in front of her.

"Are you okay? What's going on?" Zac said with concern.

Hannah didn't say a word and only started sobbing. Zac moved over to her by instinct and placed his arms around her. Suddenly a slight prick of pain erupted in his stomach, and he moved away with some confusion.

To his shock, Zac saw that a dagger was firmly embedded in his gut. He couldn't understand how he could be attacked like this without any alarm bells going off, or more importantly that Hannah would attack him. Zac furiously looked up at his ex, but before he had time to do anything a boundless cold erupted from the weapon.

"You..." was all Zac could say as darkness took him.

A storm of emotions rushed through Hannah's head as she looked down at the unmoving corpse of her former boyfriend. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, to the point that her hands couldn't stop shaking.

She'd truly done it, she had managed to kill the strongest man in the world. She knew that meant she had gained the Lordship title, and that she was in control of both the huge wealth of the town and the Dao Repository. The path to becoming a true elite of the world was opened.

She thought she would be elated, but as she looked down on Zac she only felt empty, disgusted even. She had seen true

anger on Zac's face when he had stopped to see the damage she and David had orchestrated to make him run here in a hurry. An unsettling feeling was starting to rise in her chest, the scene of Zac arriving playing over and over in her mind.

"I wasn't sure you'd go through with it," David said as he stepped out from his hiding spot behind a false wall, panting and pale.

When he saw her conspirator Hannah's chaotic thoughts quickly stilled, and she turned over to him with a frown.

"I can't rely on others to become stronger. It doesn't matter if he slept with that bitch or not. I still have my goals, and he was in the way of them. And what's with you?" Hannah asked, calming her raging emotions.

"Do you think it's easy to mask the killing intent from his senses?" David huffed. "More importantly, is he dead?"

Hannah's eyes suddenly widened in a horrifying realization.

"I haven't received any energy! He's still alive!" Hannah frantically said as she looked down on the knife that blazed in golden luster.

The knife she got from David was called a **[Purifying Dagger]** for some reason, and it stole all the living energies out of a body to a certain extent. The knife would have no effect on a Zombie, but to a human it essentially was a death sentence.

It was the very dagger she received from David when they started hatching this scheme. He had apparently gotten it in the tutorial for completing a difficult quest and kept it secret until this day. Its weakness was that it could only be used once, becoming scrap metal afterward. David had multiple times exhorted her to make the stab count for that very reason.

Unfortunately, it seemed out that there was a limit on how much vitality it could absorb. But even with the enormous power of someone like Zac, it should at least have absorbed a large chunk of his life force since Zac was truly looking like a pale corpse at the moment.

As she looked down on Zac who blankly stared up on the roof, she knew he wasn't long for this world even if they left him alone. It had probably passed a threshold where the lack of vitality would cause a chain reaction where one organ after another shut down.

However, David frowned and immediately rushed toward Zac, not wanting to take any chances. But before he had time to decapitate his former friend a shield of shadows appeared over the lifeless body of Zac.

In the next instant a spear penetrated David's gut, lifting him up in the air. He screamed in pain but he was unable to extricate himself. He helplessly hanged in the air, blood freely raining down on the floor.

"Now look what you have done," a desolate voice said with a sigh as the demon leader stepped out of the shadows holding a spear. "You might just have doomed your planet. For what? Revenge for him dumping you?"

"For power. I got a quest that gave me lordship if I managed to kill Zac. We did it, giving me complete control. I know you want **[The Umbra]** Inheritance. Help me solidify my position and it's yours. Anything else you need that Port Atwood has, you will be given," Hannah quickly said.

This wasn't what they had planned. The idea was to solidify their position and take control of the Arrays covering the town before anyone even found out Zac was dead, and from there negotiate from a place of power. That Ogras had somehow found out about them was highly unnerving, and it felt as though things were getting out of control.

"What would it matter in the big picture if two pieces of trash like you got your hands on the inheritances? You would just squander the gifts anyway, and then get killed by the invaders," Ogras said with a sneer as he threw the wailing David into a wall.

"Besides, you seem to be under a misconception. You think you're qualified to negotiate with me?" The demon continued, looking down at the unmoving body of Zac. "You've ruined so much for me, and you think I will let you live in peace? Your

newfound lordship title won't help you. The Ruthless Heavens respects power, and you don't have it."

The next moment the demon stood in front of Hannah, and before she had time to react he clutched her throat and lifted her up in the air.

"Don't worry. I will not kill you. Since I can't be the lord, someone else will have to bear that burden. And you will just have to pray that we survive the coming years. Because you can trust me in this regard; if this planet falls and becomes my tomb, no one shall suffer more than the two of you until I meet my demise," the demon growled.

"Let me handle it," an abyssal voice suddenly said, making Ogras quickly turn around.

It was Zac, who was slowly getting to his feet, a black ichor trickling down his mouth. At first Ogras seemed relieved, but when he noticed the face of his friend his pupils shrunk to a needle-point, and he couldn't help but take a step back.

Rage and betrayal were coursing through Zac's mind as he slowly got to his feet. He knew that he might have been dead for a bit, but somehow he'd heard everything that was said. He couldn't believe that his two former friends would conspire to kill him.

He also had to admit that he was shocked that they actually succeeded. He hadn't thought many on Earth could harm him anymore, let alone kill him. But that horrible knife that Hannah used sapped all the life in his body.

He still couldn't completely understand how he still was alive, as he clearly felt himself dying after he fell down on the floor. But soon after the core in his body went haywire, spewing out a torrent of miasma that still filled every corner of his body.

Perhaps the death-attuned energy had staved off true death, but Zac knew it would be a pain to get his body under control again. He remembered what an undertaking it was to cleanse his wound earlier.

The miasma also caused some odd reactions in his body, as his sense of sight and smell was all messed up. He could still see the others just fine, but it was as though as there was another filter superimposed upon his normal sight.

It took him a brief moment to understand what it was. It was life. The miasma somehow caused him to see pure life that made the others shine in an enticing light. Initially, he thought it was heat he saw, but after turning his head he saw that wasn't the case. He could see the same effect on the trees through the window, and the flowers planted in the window sill.

It was a magical sight, and Zac wondered if this was how the undead saw the world. The same nactually went for his sense of smell, as he could actually smell the life coming from Hannah and Ogras. It was a sweet and refreshing scent, like a subdued perfume.

The effect also felt reminiscent of the energies from the skills that the purifiers used, though what he saw was more subdued and natural. He turned his head to the wounded David at the side and saw that small motes of life were leaving him from his wound. He was slowly bleeding out, his life leaving with him.

But more importantly, that wasn't the only different thing about him.

He didn't understand why everything was so different at the moment, and could only attribute it to the deathly part of his core. Still, all these questions would have to wait for later, as he needed to deal with the situation.

“Just because of a misunderstanding you tried to kill me?” Zac said with a sigh as he walked toward his former lover whose horror was evident in her eyes. “Or was it greed?”

He blankly looked at Hannah for a few more seconds, the silence only broken by the wheezings of David. Zac once again turned his eyes the man who was still huddled in the corner.

“I wondered why you didn’t seek me out. I have been back for some time, after all. If you wanted to get stronger you could have just asked, and I would have helped you. But it turned out David was already dead,” Zac said with a sad sigh.

“What are you talking about?” David spat out between grit teeth. “You shouldn’t be alive.”

Hannah looked quite confused as well, not understanding the exchange. Ogras’ brows rose however as he looked over at the wounded man in concern. Zac only evenly stared at the person in front of him. When David saw the faces of Zac and ogras his frantic face suddenly turned completely calm.

“You didn’t die, but you have fallen. Purity will come for you,” David said, closing his eyes.

The next moment Cosmic Energy Gathered around David, his body starting to glow with a golden sheen.

But it didn’t get further than that as tens of shadow blades chopped his body into mincemeat in the blink of an eye, effectively stopping the self-destruction.

Zac coldly looked the lifeless body seeing the motes of light quickly disappearing somewhere. To his surprise, a few of the motes entered his body, and he sensed the life energy entering the golden part of his core.

“God damn cultists,” Ogras only spat. “This was a tricky one. I didn’t actually kill him I think, I received no Cosmic Energy.”

“The weapon should have come from him,” Zac said with a frown, looking down at the shining knife. “We’ll find him.”

The reason he was so confident was his newfound sight. As long as he didn’t lose it he wouldn’t need any Springroot any longer. It was clear as day to him that David was a shapeshifter, as a ball of golden fire emanated vitality from within his heart.

“He must have been one of the true elites that came through the Incursion. Are you ok?” the demon hesitantly asked, bringing Zac out of his musings.

“I will survive,” Zac said with a shrug, turning to Hannah.

“Please, I- David tricked me,” Hannah frantically said.

“I forgive you,” Zac said after a while, causing Hannah’s eyes to widen in surprise and hope. “You were manipulated by a foreign invader.”

“Yes! It was David, no that thing, that kept telling me to kill you!” Hannah agreed, her head bobbing up and down.

“But to forgive is not to condone the actions of others,” Zac muttered, mostly to himself, as he turned to Ogras. “Throw her in a dungeon for now, until I decide what to do with her. If we don’t have one, build it.”

“Sure. Are you truly okay?” Ogras asked, knocking Hannah out cold.

Zac looked down on his former lover, whose face was in the middle of a transformation from hope to despair when she lost consciousness.

“I am fine. Why do you keep asking me that?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked back up at the demon.

“Well, for one I know it kind of messes with your head to be betrayed by those close to you. I should know, my personal maid tried to murder me when I was 8,” the demon said with a shrug.

“But I mostly ask because you’ve turned into a god damn Zombie.”

Chapter 205: Draugr

“What?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling, hurriedly walking over to a mirror in the house.

He was shocked at what stared back at him, and he finally understood the odd stares from the three earlier. Ogras wasn't kidding around with his comment, it truly seemed that he was looking at an undead rather than himself. Of course, it was still his features, but he now looked deathly pale like he'd lost all his blood.

But the largest difference was his eyes. They weren't the murky empty eyes of the normal zombies, and neither were they the balls shining a red sinister life like those of Mhal, the Corpse Lord. Rather they were like two black holes. The whites were completely gone, and only true blackness covered them. When he looked at them it felt as though he was looking down into the abyss.

It was such an unreal feeling seeing himself like this that he had to touch his face to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

“What's going on?” he said, his voice now a bit shaky.

It started to look like the purpose of his core was to give him a second chance at life, though as an undead. The dagger should have killed him, but instead he stood here completely fine.

“That's what I'd like to know. Are you living? Are you dead?” Ogras said from the side, still keeping some distance from Zac. “Its weird, even if you died and somehow turned into a sentient Elite Zombie you shouldn't have retained any memories. Undead are completely different people just inhabiting a former person's body.”

Zac quickly opened his status screen to see if he could glean any information.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

1

Class

-

Race

Draugr (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Core

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Core

Duplicity (F)

Strength

344

Dexterity

162

Endurance

220

Vitality

188

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

20 853 653

The sight made him completely befuddled. There were a few shocking changes to his screen. First, the fact that both his level and class were completely reset, returning him to level 1. The next thing was that his race no longer was human, but something called a Draugr.

What was confusing was that while he might have lost his levels and his class, all the benefits remained. His attributes were almost unchanged as far as he could remember, and his Titles and Dao Seeds were still there. The only difference was that the boost to Endurance and Vitality that he gained from **[Forester's Constitution]** seemed to be gone.

He started to get an idea of what was going on, his eyes darting toward the line with his core. But to make sure he opened the ladders. As he suspected he was still in a comfortable lead on the wealth- and level ladder.

Zac could only assume that he was somehow split into two entities due to his odd core, each one possessing its own status screen. If he truly had been reborn as an undead he shouldn't have all these attributes or still stay on top of the ladder.

He even knew of a few rankers who had fallen in the Dead Zone, turning into Zombies. They immediately were removed

from the ladder, just like when anyone else died. That could only mean that the system still considered him to be alive.

Of course, this was only a theory tinged with desperation from his side, and he still didn't know how to use the core. Even after it got satiated he wasn't able to interact with it, and it was the same result now even after it had somehow awoken. It would take some time to figure everything out before he could decide his next move.

"I am fine. I think it's just the miasma in my body that went out of control. It might take some time to get it back in line," Zac said, hiding what was really going on for now.

"Miasma?" Ogras said with a frown. "I thought you said you got better."

"Well, it's complicated," Zac evaded. "It's like what you said with the unholy beacons. Destroying them is a waste when they can be useful."

The demon leveled an even gaze at Zac for a while, finally shaking his head.

"I don't know what you've done, but you are playing with fire. The multiverse is full of people who have turned into abominations in their pursuit of power. You need to wield the power, not let it wield you."

Zac could only grimace in response. He knew that growing an unknown core that was partly compromised out of miasma was a crazy gambit, but at the moment he didn't have a lot of alternatives.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing," Zac could only say. "Or well, I don't really. But I'll be careful. More importantly, how did you show up so quickly?"

"Fine. But remember, if you die to some stupid experiment we're all fucked," Ogras said. "As for why I'm here? Your sister told me something odd was going on, so I checked it out. I found no evidence that this girl was attacked, making me think she did this to her own house. I wanted to find out what she was planning, so I stayed in the vicinity. I didn't expect them to almost kill you."

“I still don’t understand how it’s possible,” Zac said as he looked down at the shining dagger. “Just what is that thing?”

“Not sure, but I would guess it’s an offensive array rather than an actual weapon. Otherwise, it shouldn’t have been strong enough to almost kill you,” Ogras said.

Zac was inclined to agree. Not only did the thing slice through his robe, but it effortlessly pierced his body. Hannah simply shouldn’t be strong enough to accomplish that. But if this dagger was something like the Thunder Punishment Balls still in his Pouch he understood why it was so dangerous. The one-time offensive arrays held extreme power.

He only didn’t expect it to look just like a weapon. Clearly, the Church of Everlasting Dao held various means beyond the understanding of both Ogras and himself.

“I’ll look into the weapon. Please try to find out just how a shapeshifter could replace David, and if the real one is still alive somewhere. Perhaps he kept him for questioning. He did manage to trick Hannah for potentially weeks, after all,” Zac said.

“Have they reached the archipelago, or was it just a cultist lying in hiding from the incursion? It even managed to block my danger sense and fake its death right in front of us,” Zac added with a frown. “How is that even possible?”

“Nothing is unbeatable in the multi-verse. Any powerhouse has a good deal of Luck accumulated through the years,” Ogras explained. “But there are many means to trick it, at least temporarily. That’s a major part of the pure Assassination classes. You can’t let your Luck be a crutch for you. Always be vigilant.”

Zac’s eyes thinned slightly when he heard the demon’s explanation. What Ogras said made sense, but he wondered why such an important piece of information never had left his mouth over these past months. Was the lordling still planning things in the shadows?

“As for the fake death, I have no idea. I think this guy must have been a second in command or a leader of the

shapeshifters, he's very slippery. It seems we will need to buy a lot more springroot. Be careful of anyone approaching you now. He might have more of those daggers," Ogras continued with a frown as the shadows swallowed him and the unconscious Hannah.

Zac could only sigh and take out a hooded robe from his cosmos sack to hide his new appearance. He also picked up the weird knife that Hannah used on him, as perhaps it was a clue in all this.

Finally, he headed back home. He snuck over the wall when no one was looking, as he wasn't ready to show his appearance to the guards. His mansion was empty at the moment, with both Emily and Kenzie luckily still at the academy. He quickly erected his set of arrays around it so that he wouldn't be interrupted.

Zac sat down and started to ponder on his next move. The first goal for him was to turn back to a human, as he didn't want to stay a so-called Draugr forever. However, he never received a shape-change skill or something similar from the core. And this was provided that he was correct about the function of his Specialty Core.

He could only turn his sight inward, looking at the core inside his body, trying to glean any hints. And to his surprise, he saw one. Before he turned to an undead his core was completely balanced, but now that balance was off.

The side with the miasma had shrunk by at least 10 percent. The intricate fractals still covered the core though, creating a fine mesh on it. Perhaps it meant that the core expended some of its deathly energy to transform him.

Zac could only guess that the clue was in the fractals on the core. He still had no idea where they came from or how they were formed, but there was nothing else that could explain the weird things that were happening to him.

He slowly went over them one by one with far more scrutiny compared to before, trying to glean any meaning from them. The minutes turned to hours as he scoured the small orb over and over again until he started to see a pattern. For the first

time since the fall, he felt he had some use of his job as an animator for a marketing agency.

Just like he needed to look over his designs frame by frame, he looked over the inscriptions fractal by fractal, trying to understand how they fit together and what they meant. And he actually made some progress after arduously creating a mental map of what was going on.

While at first glance the two sides seemed to possess quite similar fractals, there was a startling difference between the inscriptions of the life-attuned and death-attuned sides. There were more of them on the life-attuned side.

And after slowly mapping out just what the difference was, he was realized that he recognized what remained. The inscriptions on the two halves of the cores formed a mostly closed network of pathways that were only connected at two places. After understanding the base framework he could see what was added on the life-attuned side.

It was his own pathways he got from the class Hachetman. They were somehow added into the larger mesh on the life-attuned side, whereas the equivalent addition was missing on the death-attuned side.

While the phenomenon was weird, it wasn't too surprising that it looked like that. He was currently level one without a class, and he had already realized that his pathways were already gone. That was a big reason he had first thought he'd truly turned, as the familiar routes for his power were missing.

But Zac felt positive after having discovered the fractals for the Hachetman class. Together with the other facts it truly felt like the core only stored his class in the half containing the life-attuned energy. Now the next question was how to load it up again, so to speak.

But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind at the moment. It brought to question something even more exciting. Was he able to gain two classes from now on? Just what would happen when he leveled up with this undead form?

The question burned in his mind but he restrained himself from doing anything drastic. At first, he just wanted to rush out into the woods and start killing barghest by the truckload, rushing toward level 25.

But he also realized that this might be an opportunity. He knew far more about the system now compared to when he first was weak and alone on the island. Perhaps he could accomplish some amazing feats and gain titles with his status as a level 1 warrior.

The first title that came to mind was His Title chain that began with [**Giantsbane**] and ended with [**Slayer of Leviathans**]. He didn't know where the limits to that title chain lay, but he felt there might be a final, ultimate title for killing a beast 75 levels higher than himself.

That was because it would mean that he surmounted an entire grade in a fight. He suddenly felt infinitely lucky that he wasn't the one that killed the shapeshifter that had taken David's form. Zac believed that getting the [**Slayer of Leviathans**] quest shouldn't be an impossible endeavor for many people, as a level 50 without any titles wasn't very strong.

But killing an E-ranked being at level 1 should be extremely uncommon, even in the context of the whole multiverse, and should bring big benefits. It made him once again lament that he had no one like Greatest to consult about other opportunities like that.

All kinds of plans and opportunities flashed through his mind, and his worry was slowly being replaced with excitement.

Chapter 206: The Correct Path

Suddenly Zac's train of thoughts was interrupted by a familiar figure pacing outside his array looking fidgety. He blankly looked at her figure for a few seconds before removing the array with a frown.

"What do you want?" Zac asked as Alea started at the shield disappearing.

"I... Heard from Ogras what happened. I just wanted to see if you were okay," Alea said with some hesitation in her voice.

"I am fine," Zac calmly said.

"That's great. I was worried," Alea started saying, but was interrupted by Zac.

"Until now I've looked the other way regarding your eccentricities, such as poisoning me and others, chalking it up to mostly harmless pranks. But we're facing the reality of it now. All actions have consequences. I know you didn't mean it, and there were other factors at play. But you have a part in what happened today. Your actions on the square helped push Hannah along her path of no return," Zac said with an even voice.

"I..." Alea only managed to get out, looking physically hurt by his words.

However, Zac didn't stop.

"I have decided to remove your title as Head of Security for Port Atwood. Hannah will spend an undetermined time locked away for her crimes, and I don't trust you with her. You're also no longer to come and go as you please in my restricted area. I need some space," Zac finished and closed his eyes.

Alea looked at Zac with red-rimmed eyes for a few seconds before she turned and walked away, the courtyard once again turning deathly silent.

Zac silently looked at the departing back of the poison mistress. He didn't regret what he said, as he'd felt it since she played him at the market square. He was, however, a bit surprised that he felt no internal turmoil or confusion.

It was as though his Undead form had put a damper on all his feelings. They were still there somewhat, but there was a sense of disconnect with them. He briefly wondered if this was the case with all undead who had evolved to regain intelligence.

Perhaps it was necessary, as the zombies had an inherent bloodlust. It would be impossible to build a society if the higher undead couldn't control their urges, so the unfeeling state might be a result of evolution.

He didn't get much further before approaching steps once again echoed in his compound. It seemed Ogras had rushed around to spread the news or something. This time it was his sister who rushed into the courtyard with worry in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Kenzie said as soon as she saw him.

However, Kenzie stopped a few meters away from him, looking at his new appearance with a frightened gaze.

"I'm fine," Zac said with a sigh as he once again erected the arrays around the two.

He then proceeded to explain the situation, covering both his core and the events that unfolded back at Hannah's. Kenzie silently listened to the narration, except exclaiming in shock upon the fact that Hannah had been the one to stab him.

The two of them silently sat in front of each other, not saying anything for a while, until Kenzie spoke up.

"What will you do with Hannah?" she asked.

"I don't know. For now, she'll be incarcerated," Zac said, looking troubled.

He knew that in most empires out in the multiverse the punishment for trying to assassinate a leader would be

execution without a doubt. But he wasn't willing to go there with his ex-girlfriend, even if she tried to kill him.

"You know," Kenzie said after mulling it over. "You said that David had been replaced with one of those shapeshifters. The thing could have used some mental skills on her. You know, she was hypnotized along with the others back in that town. I think I've heard that if you've been hypnotized once you get more susceptible to it afterward?"

Zac gave a start and looked over at Kenzie with surprise. That truly wasn't something he'd considered so far. He had been busy with his own transformation so he simply chalked it up to betrayal because of greed mixed with anger.

"I heard about the matter in Refugee's Harbour. But I don't think hypnosis can make you kill someone, as that would be against their base instincts," Zac finally said with a shake of his head.

"But it could make someone more paranoid, slowly make them crazy," Kenzie retorted.

Zac silently thought it over. It truly was a distinct possibility that the shapeshifter did more than just provide the dagger. Still, did it even matter? The milk was already spilled, so to speak. And he didn't believe that someone could be enticed to murder without there being a seed of hatred and malice to begin with.

"So when will you turn back?" Kenzie suddenly asked, changing the subject.

"Well, that's the problem. I don't really know," Zac said as he scratched his chin.

"Why did you turn in the first place?" Kenzie asked.

"Well, perhaps the Core went haywire because I briefly died?" Zac hesitantly said.

He honestly didn't know why the change happened at that moment, and could only guess it was some sort of failsafe built into the core.

“Didn’t you say that the knife you got stabbed with sucked out all your lifeforce?” Kenzie said. “Perhaps you turned to a zombie because that’s the trigger, rather than a defense mechanism.”

“It’s possible,” Zac said with a nod. “I also thought I might revert to a human if I remove all the miasma in my body.”

“So why don’t you?” she prodded.

“Well, for one it might actually kill me, I have no idea,” Zac said. “But I also believe that shouldn’t be the only way to trigger the change. I can’t die every time I want to shapeshift, and I don’t have any more of these cultist knives.”

“So you’re going to stay a Zombie until you find another way to change?”

“I’m a Draugr, not a Zombie,” Zac said, causing Kenzie to roll her eyes at him. “And I’ll try to revert before the Treasure Hunt at the latest. I can’t run around in there as an undead.”

“Besides, don’t I look pretty cool now? Like a vampire or something,” Zac said and struck a pose.

“No way, you look really scary with those eyes of yours,” Kenzie said, finally smiling a bit at the situation. “So what are you going to do?”

“I want to try out a few things. Gain a few titles and see if I can get a new Class,” Zac said. “Who knows, I might even be a cultivator now?”

“Dual-class, that sounds pretty cool!” Kenzie said, her eyes almost sparkling. “You should get a cool mage class, become the strongest hybrid.”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know how it’ll work,” Zac said. “If it will work at all.”

However, Kenzie brought up an interesting point. What would be the best class to match with his Hatchetman class? A mage class would help shore up his currently lacking Intelligence and Wisdom, making him a truly balanced warrior.

However, a dexterity-based class wasn’t a bad idea either. Currently, he was forced to put a lot of points into Dexterity

just to keep up with his growth in Strength. It had come to the point that he had decided to change to a 2.5:1 split from the original 2:1 so that he could focus more on Endurance and Vitality.

He arrived at this reasoning from his fight with average. His main attribute was Strength, and he needed to play to advantages. It didn't matter if he was hit 10 times, as long as he got one big hit in the fight would be over. He only needed to be able to endure the 10 strikes, so to speak. That's why he wanted to work more on endurance.

That also meant that an Endurance-based class, if there was such a thing, would be a good choice as well. Then he would be truly unkillable. Honestly, he felt either choice was good and had a hard time deciding what to do.

But it was still all speculation. He needed to reach level 25 first and see if it worked out as he intended. And he needed to see what options he got before deciding any further. There was also the issue of the Fruit of Ascension.

One of its effects was improving the choices in taking a class. But would that effect be expended if he got a class for his undead half? It felt more prudent to use its effects in trying for an epic class at E-Rank than getting a first class.

Or could he eat another one since he technically was a different person? There simply were so many things he didn't understand. He needed information.

"What are you thinking about," Kenzie asked, dragging him out of his reverie.

"I just feel that there's so much I don't understand," Zac said with a sigh. "It's hard to plan things out when everything is just guesswork."

"Why don't you ask Brazla?" Kenzie said. "He's super old and his creator was a top tier C-Grade warrior according to him. He might know."

Zac's face scrunched up when hearing the name of the crazy Tool Spirit, but he had to admit that Kenzie might be on to something. However, the only problem was whether he'd help.

There were two other ways as he saw it. One was to buy an information package through Calrin, and the other was asking the Creators.

Unfortunately, he was unsure whether he could afford the information from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes. Just some basic information cost him 15 million Nexus Coins. Advanced topics such as dual classes and Specialty Cores were probably prohibitively expensive.

Meeting Average and his dad had made him realize how utterly poor he was in the big scale of things since the teenager was able to throw out a billion Nexus Coins just to shoo someone away. As for the Creators, there was a risk for things leaking to higher echelons in the multiverse.

“I guess I could try,” Zac sighed.

“I’ll come with, I haven’t talked to him today,” Kenzie said with a smile.

Soon the two stood in front of the gaudy towers, drowned in cascading rays of divine lights. Its surroundings were still not very exciting, but at least the uneven forest floor had been swapped out with a proper and uniform square.

Of course, it was likely too bland for the extravagant taste of Brazla. Unfortunately, there simply wasn’t much he could do about it at the moment. His funds were mostly tied up in creating the contribution system.

“Little chick, you have once again come to bask in the glory that is the Great Sage Brazla? This time you even brought a Draugr to showcase?” the familiar voice echoed when they entered the hallways lined with the huge statues.

Not long after Brazla appeared. It was only the second time they met, but Zac was surprised to see that Brazla was looking completely different. This time he was donned like some royal conqueror, though all equipment was made from gold and platinum rather than serviceable materials.

His armor was completely studded with various gemstones, each somehow emitting almost blinding glimmers of light. Zac

felt helpless the moment he saw the spirit, but he held his tongue.

“Hi Brazla,” Kenzie said with a smile. “You look like a real warrior today.”

“The world should sigh in relief that The Great Brazla is confined to the interiors of this building,” the tool spirit said with a serious nod. “This one’s might shakes both the heavens and the earth.”

“You remember Zac?” Kenzie added.

“You went and turned into an undead, little Lord?” Brazla said, somewhat surprised. “Odd choice if you ask me. I would have thought a mortal would have preferred to die from old age, rather than getting taken by the Madness.”

“The madness?” Zac asked confused.

“The undead aren’t immortal, though they don’t grow old. They instead go insane, their bloodlust overtaking everything else. Finally, they turn too stupid to even move, withering in place into goops of miasma. Quite disgusting,” Brazla said, looking unconcerned.

“Not everyone can be an immortal like you Brazla,” Kenzie said with a smile. “We were wondering if you know anything about Specialty Cores and Dual Classes?”

“What doesn’t the Great Sage Brazla know?” the Tool Spirit said, puffing up his chest.

However, the next moment he looked suspiciously at the two of them.

“But why should I tell you? You promised to fix my surroundings, but they still look like a pauper’s square.”

“I’m heading into a treasure hunt into unknown lands in a week,” Zac said. “I’ll find something unique in there to improve your surroundings if you help me out this one time.”

“Hmm... Well, alright,” Brazla said. “What knowledge do you seek, mortal?”

“Dual Classes,” Zac said, ignoring the attitude.

“What about it?” Brazla said, a bit disinterested. “It’s possible. Is that what you’re trying for by turning into an undead?”

Zac only nodded, not explaining any further. It appeared that Greatest’s tool was working as intended since the Spirit didn’t seem to notice anything off about him, instead thinking he simply was an undead.

“Well, it’s extremely rare,” Brazla continued. “Far rarer than body-and-spirit dual cultivators were back in the Pre-System era. However, there is one race where all of them have dual classes. Of course, The Ur Wanderers are extremely few in numbers, born darlings of the multi-verse. Even The Great Brazla can’t help but be a bit jealous of them.”

Zac only nodded, not wanting to interrupt the tool spirit while it was actually being helpful. He could only assume that the Ur Wanderers were a powerful species in the multiverse. While species weren’t equal in the multiverse, one could say that they were balanced in a sense.

Humans were quite weak, usually at the bottom of the rung. But they were extremely numerous, and out of every billion of them, a powerhouse might rise. Other races had huge advantages, sometimes even becoming C-Ranking Class upon adulthood by default. But these kinds of races were always far scarcer in numbers.

“So what do they do? Get two similar classes, or opposites?” Kenzie prodded.

“There are no rules to cultivation, little chick,” Brazla said with some disdain. “Everyone has their own path. Finding the correct answer for oneself is half the struggle of becoming strong.”

Chapter 207: Titles

Zac could only nod at what Brazla said, his own thoughts running along the same lines. He had started to believe that one wouldn't become truly strong by brainlessly copying others. That's why he never had any interest in checking out the heritages he owned.

That wasn't to say that one couldn't benefit from the knowledge of the previous generations. However, one first had to understand oneself and keep useful information, discarding the useless.

"Have you also heard of specialty cores?" Zac interjected, satisfied in simply knowing Dual Classes was a possibility, though clearly extremely rare.

"Of course," Brazla said. "A few of the inheritances of this very building even contains the means to create one. Those I've studied extensively."

Zac felt a bit troubled that the tool spirit somehow had managed to weasel itself into the inheritance zones to mess around. He could only hope that Brazla hadn't destroyed anything inside.

"What would happen if a Specialty Core is currently is taking the spot of where the Cosmic Core would normally go?" Zac asked.

"Well, they'd probably explode when the Cosmic Core was created," Brazla said. "Unless it's a Modifier-type, I suppose."

"What's that?" Zac asked with anticipation.

Brazla only snorted in response, and from somewhere got a golden nail file and started using it. Zac had to push down his rising exasperation. He knew that the tool spirit only acted like this to annoy him since it was just a hologram and didn't even

possess real nails. But that fact only made it more annoying, which was a source of frustration in of itself.

“Great Sage Brazla, surely someone with your magnanimity wouldn’t hold back this small amount of knowledge from your admirers?” Kenzie said with a wink.

“Hmm, true. This little information means nothing to The Great Sage of Ages,” Brazla nodded, putting away his file. “Modifier-cores are Specialty Cores that directly interact with a Cosmic Core in various ways. The most common example is the Specialty Core called ‘Shield’, which simply acts as a shield around a Cosmic Cores to protect it from attacks.

“But they can be much more integrated than that,” the tool spirit continued. “I’ve heard about one from my master that had the Cosmic Core grow inside it. The purpose of the Specialty Core was to extract energy faster than normally possible. It resulted in extraordinary firepower, but also hurt the cultivator’s body.”

Zac’s eyes lit up from the information. He didn’t believe that sort of core had anything to do with his own, but it told him that it wasn’t necessarily a problem with his position of his Specialty Core. If his real core simply grew inside his Duplicity Core, everything would work out okay. Perhaps it was even needed if he wanted to be able to switch between living and dead sides.

With the help of Kenzie buttering the megalomaniac tool spirit up, they soon had the answers they needed. Unfortunately, it didn’t know of any other open titles that could be attained by abusing the discrepancy between his level and strength.

According to Brazla, there were a few titles that could be awarded to youths who showed great potential at an early stage, even before they were able to cultivate. It could, for example, attaining Dao Seeds or upgrading their Race, even killing cultivators.

These were the so-called Heaven’s Chosen who were able to blast out with awe-inspiring power right out of the gates, and accumulating more and more advantages through their great start, just like himself. But since he was already level 1 he

couldn't get these titles since he was supposed to get them before turning 16.

The rest of the titles were generally trials and hidden Mystic Realms with known rewards. But those kinds of things were all locked out of reach for Zac since the Nexus Hub would stay inoperational until he managed to unlock its functions with some quest.

After a particularly hair-raising tirade where Kenzie spoke at great lengths about the greatness of Brazla he was even so happy that he fished out a crystal containing a basic rundown of publicly known titles.

Zac threw a glance over at his sister, who only smiled mysteriously. Zac started to understand why she visited the tool spirit every day. Just what kind of valuables had she managed to squeeze out Brazla simply by throwing away any shame and butter him up?

The crystal confirmed what the spirit had said. There weren't a lot of public titles, and Zac had pretty much all of them. He also had a few that weren't listed, such as Luck of the Draw. It did however show that the next attribute-linked title would come at 5000 points total points, but only if those were gained while still in E-Grade.

It also confirmed that there was a title higher than Slayer of Leviathans, which was great news to Zac. But otherwise, it was mostly mentions of various public trials or mystic realms, and a short comment about recommended strength before attempting them.

It seemed that his dream of cheating a large number of extra titles wasn't meant to happen. Still, there were a few of them. Not counting the Core skill, it was perhaps possible to gain another set of his Class-related titles, doubling up on the rewards. And perhaps there were additional titles for having two classes.

Judging by the title guide there wasn't much of a reason to stay at level one, so the next goal would be killing the E-Grade beast. However, he honestly wasn't too certain about his

chances. Since his pathways were gone, so were his skills, leaving him only his Dao Seeds and his brawn.

The only thing that remained seemed to be the effects of **[Forester's Constitution]**, and Zac guessed it was because the skill worked like a title, giving a passive attribute boost.

It truly depended on what kind of monster lurked in the crater containing the entrance to the Mystic Realm. If it was something with roughly the power of the Fiend Wolf he wasn't too worried. He was far stronger than he was back then, and he was confident he'd make short work of that animal as he was right now.

But it was another matter if he encountered something like the Star Ox. That thing was exceedingly dangerous, and if he didn't possess **[Loamwalker]** he would have perished from its devastating beam. Perhaps he would actually need to enlist a certain Demon for this excursion, just in case.

"If you see Ogras, can you tell him I need to see him?" Zac said as he exited the towers with his sister.

"Why don't you call him?" Kenzie asked, looking a bit confused.

"What?" Zac asked confused. "Are phones operational again?"

Kenzie only rolled her eyes at him as she took out a crystal.

"It's Kenzie. My brother needs to see you," she said and put away the inscribed gem. "You two really are boneheads, you two haven't even exchanged means to communicate?"

Zac could only awkwardly shrug and head back toward their home. It was a relief to leave the Towers of Myriad Dao behind, as he was afraid he would get blinded if he stayed much longer. Ten minutes later the demon appeared in Zac's courtyard, immediately sitting down with a grunt.

"Your girl has been put in custody, I have Janos taking care of the situation until we can get a Desolation Array in place. Janos said that she's been subject to some mental manipulation skills, something far more skilled than what the bumbling hypnotist did at Refugee's Harbor. Not even he can unravel it in a short while," Ogras said.

Pain and shame filled Zac's heart, as he had no idea such things had happened right beneath his nose. But he forcefully pushed those thoughts away, focusing on what he could do at the moment.

"What about the Shapeshifter?" Zac asked.

"Gone in the wind. The island is just too big, he could be hiding anywhere. The barghest in the woods won't be a hindrance to him. I guess he never stayed inside the town for long periods in order to not be exposed. I asked around, 'David' was rarely seen after arriving in Port Atwood," Ogras said as he took out a bottle of wine and took a swig.

Zac could only nod with some annoyance. He knew just how easy it was to slip by unseen on this huge island, as that was exactly how he'd survived for over a month with a demon army around. And this cultist was likely far better at sneaking around than he ever was.

"But we did find the real David in a hidden basement beneath his home. He's still alive, if barely. The physicians are working on him, and they don't expect him to wake up for a few weeks. So, unfortunately, we won't be able to get any real clues from him," the demon continued.

Zac perked up at that. David was a good guy, and he hoped that he would pull through this calamity that had befallen upon him.

"Good. We'll take a tour of the town later to see if I can spot any other Shapeshifter. I need you to kill them, as I cannot gain any energy at the moment. But more importantly, I need you to accompany me somewhere," Zac said.

"Spot them? How? Just what's going on with you?" Ogras said skeptically.

Zac hesitated for a while, but he finally relented. Ogras knew about so many secrets of his already that it didn't feel like another one would matter.

"Why don't you just inspect me, and you'll understand," Zac said.

Since his pathways were gone his skill [**Mental Barrier**] was no longer there either, which in of itself was a problem that needed to be addressed.

“Are you playing with me? I can’t see shit,” Ogras said, a bit annoyed after a few seconds.

Zac was confused until he felt some warmth on his arm. It was the bangle from Greatest. It looked like hiding his core wasn’t the only function of the item. Instead, he shared the first rows of his status screens. Of course, it was only up to his alignment.

“What the hell?” Ogras said, shocked. “Level one? Draugr? Miasma acting up my ass.”

Zac only snorted and shared the ladder next.

“So it’s like this,” Zac started, and explained about his core and what he believed it meant.

Ogras only looked at him for a few seconds afterward, until he shook his head with disgust and took a large swig of his wine.

“I should just strap myself to your back, and sooner or later a Divine Treasure will randomly land on my head. Your luck is just disgusting, makes me want to ram my head into a wall,” Ogras spat out.

Zac’s lips slightly moved upward. It was always fun to get a rise out of the demon.

“Well, you can try getting stabbed by the Corpse Lord’s scythe if you want to try replicating it,” Zac said.

“So, why are you telling me all this?” Ogras said, not wanting to entertain Zac.

“I want to hunt an E-Grade beast while still level one,” Zac said.

Ogras’ eyes widened a bit.

“You’re going to perform the Legendary Hunt? Shit, that’s a pretty good idea.”

“Legendary hunt?” Zac asked confused.

“That’s what it’s called among demons. I heard that some families try for that tile on the higher grade planets. No one on my planet was ever close to trying it though. It would be amazing if someone even managed to get a Dao Seed before embarking on the road of cultivation in Clan Azh’Rezak for example, much less fighting an E-ranked beast,” Ogras explained.

“Well, what are you waiting for, let’s go,” the demon added, actually looking a bit excited.

“Are there any other advantages you can think of I should do before moving past level 1?” Zac asked, just to make sure.

“There’s none I can think of. If you didn’t get any titles for having seeds or evolved race at this stage the other low-level Titles are likely not possible. The only other possible exploit I can think of is if you entering the Tower of Eternity after your main class already has evolved. You’d be able to run straight through it like a bull,” Ogras said.

Zac’s eyes lit up at that. As Ogras said, that might be the biggest exploit possible. Reaching the top floor of the Tower of Eternity should give insane rewards.

“Well, let’s go then, I want to reach as high a level as possible with this class before entering the Treasure Hunt,” Zac said, heading to his private teleporter array.

Soon the two found themselves walking through the dense forest on Mystic Island, as Zac had decided to call the island with the entrance to the Mystic Realm. Zac had quickly found another use for his new sight upon entering the forest.

He could essentially spot any living creatures from a great distance away since they lit up the forest like a beacon due to their life force. It allowed them to avoid almost every battle as they walked toward the core.

Now and then Ogras was forced to quickly and quietly kill a beast though, as even with them avoiding beasts as much as they could they were still spotted occasionally. But soon they found themselves at the edge of the crater, looking down at the forest beneath.

“Well, Mr. Hunter,” Ogras said, looking over at Zac with a grin. “Let’s see if you have what it takes.”

The next moment the two were swallowed by the shadows.

Chapter 208: Apex Hunter

The next moment the two found themselves at the bottom of the crater, both warily looking around. Ogras had already covered them in a sphere of shadows, hiding their presence and muting their sounds.

“The cosmic energy here has an even higher density than the mountains of Port Atwood,” Ogras said with some surprise, his eyes shining with greed. “The Mystic Realm must be really thriving. Perhaps it’s a leftover herb garden of some powerhouse. We need to quickly need to stabilize it before all energy leaks out, ruining the treasures inside.”

“Or it’s the home of a horde of D-Grade monsters,” Zac said with a snort as he took out his axe. “Do you think the beast is close to the entrance, or at the edge?”

“Being too close to the field is extremely dangerous, with shifting cracks between the dimension appearing at random. If a crack opens where you stand you’ll suddenly be split into two without a chance to react. The beast you heard should be somewhere near the edge of the barren field though since the energy would be densest there,” Ogras answered after some deliberation.

“Ok, let’s go,” Zac nodded.

The two warily made their way through the forest of the crater, but they were happy to note that it seemed completely deserted. There were some critters scuttling about, but they couldn’t find a single beast. Hopefully, it meant that the crater was the exclusive territory of the Lord of the island.

It actually was easier than they expected to find their target. A huge tiger was lazily sunbathing at a hill not too far away from the core of the crater, its snores making the ground shake. It was roughly five meters long, but apart from its size and

slightly dark hue it didn't look much different from a normal tiger.

Clearly it had grown lax after having the whole crater to itself, with no real rivals on the island. Zac hoped that meant that the beast simply was lucky to have had a good early start on the island, allowing it to capitalize on the best area to keep growing.

“Please take care of it if something wants to join the fight. But don't help me out unless I ask,” Zac said as he took a steadying breath.

Memories of his first real battle with a large beast resurfaced. It was his desperate struggle with Vul, the barghest alpha. The situation right now was a bit similar to that time, since he still didn't possess a class when fighting the first Herald.

However, this time he didn't feel ready to soil his pants from fear. Instead, Zac calmly looked the slumbering beast over for any clues to hidden aces. Since it was E-Grade it would have to have at least one Dao Seed, and Zac hoped it was an offensive one.

The natural defenses of E-Grade beasts were high enough, and Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to kill the animal if it had something like the Dao of Toughness. He only had his body and this Daos at the moment, and no skills to amplify his powers.

“Good luck,” Ogras only said as he receded into the shadows.

Zac hid for another few moments and observed the snoring beast until he started to push the miasma in his body down toward his legs. He knew that the amount of energy available to him at level 1 was extremely limited, but he didn't want to ration it. His goal was to get in and quickly kill the animal before it could retaliate.

He slowly inhaled and adjusted the grip of his axe, before exploding into action.

He didn't have **[Loamwalker]** to push his speed to the limit, but he did have almost 350 strength to propel himself forward,

each step creating an explosion of stone flying all over and leaving a crater in his wake.

He didn't expect to be able to sneak up on the beast, as it was completely out in the open, and the aura he passively emitted was much too conspicuous. Instead, he chose to ignore any attempts at stealth, instead pushing forward with maximum speed.

The tiger woke up with a start as he approached, but before it could orient itself Zac was in melee range with his axe falling. A strike containing everything Zac could muster, and enhanced with the Dao of Sharpness, struck the throat of the tiger like a falling meteor. Over half of his available Miasma was contained in that strike.

The power was so great that the beast was slammed into the ground, and a large jagged rip could be seen. But to Zac's disappointment the damage didn't look deadly. He didn't stop for a second, and followed the swing by forcefully kicking the throat of the beast with all his accumulated speed and his Dao of Heaviness.

It sounded like something was damaged in the throat of the tiger as it gave out a weird gurgling in pain. But while the beast had been too lax about its security since it was all alone in the crater, it wasn't any pushover.

Weird cracks in space burst out from the animal, completely shattering the hill and the closest trees. Zac was affected as well, bloody wounds opening over all his exposed skin even before he could use his defensive gear. He was lucky that he had such a high Endurance, otherwise he feared he would have been diced into small cubes by the attack.

He wasn't sure what the attack did, but its effect was similar to The Dao of Sharpness. However, he couldn't discern the attacks themselves, but only the results.

Even though Zac wasn't seriously hurt he was briefly stopped by the weird wave, and the tiger capitalized on it to attack him with a fierce swipe. This time Zac used his defensive charge to block it, but it cracked in no time.

The strike almost made Zac black out as he flew across the air. He had wrongly thought Dexterity was its main attribute since it was a feline beast, but clearly it was Strength. To Zac's horror, he noticed he was actually flying toward the large field housing the Mystic Realm entrance.

Vicious cracks in space randomly spread all over the field, anyone able to cut him into pieces without any effort. He knew no defensive measure would be able to put up the slightest resistance against a dimensional tear, and he immediately started sprinting back toward the tiger the moment he landed.

Zac thanked the stars for his high Luck attribute as he bobbed and weaved going by his gut instinct, praying that a tear wouldn't crop up right inside his body. Luckily the cracks weren't too densely spread at the edge of the field, leaving decent wiggle room to get out. He kept running and jumping around until he finally reached the edge of the clearing.

However, Zac's brows furrowed when he noticed the tiger standing in wait, just at the edge of the clearing. Their eyes locked for a second and Zac roared as he jumped straight at it. The tiger roared straight back, and it was clear that it wanted to swat him back into the lethal field.

The beast understood just how dangerous it was close to the entrance, and it tried to have the dimensional tears do its work for it. But Zac didn't flinch at the incoming paw but instead unleashed his Dao Field for his Seed of Heaviness to the fullest just before he arrived at the monster.

The odd mental heaviness from his Dao froze the tiger for a split second, and that was all that Zac needed as he passed by the incoming paw and embedded his axe into the left eye. Immediately after he plunged a tomahawk into the other eye of the beast with his left arm, completely blinding it.

The tiger wailed in pain and started to trash all over, and Zac swiftly jumped out of the way. Its throat was still bleeding, but Zac knew it wouldn't be enough. With a sigh he waited a bit for an opening, once again jumping in to attack the same spot on its throat as before.

Since he'd managed to blind the beast the fight was essentially over, though it took a couple of sneak attacks until the tiger finally bled out. It also managed to get in another decent swipe at Zac when he attacked, though this time he wasn't punched into the field of dimensional tears.

Zac sat down next to the corpse of the tiger, heavily panting, letting the System drown him with a deluge of refreshing power from gaining multiple levels. Felling an E-grade beast at level 1 was no joke, even if many factors were in his favor. This tiger was on the bottom rung as far as evolved beasts went, but a kill was a kill.

He was pretty spent, so he took out a crystal as he opened his status screen, but he quickly threw the crystal away after it felt like hand caught on fire. Confused he looked down at it, only to realize his mistake. He had suspected this might be the result, which was why he also hadn't dared activate his Dao of Trees so far.

He had been occupied with checking out the results from his battle, and had forgotten to pick out the correct type. He quickly swapped out his nexus crystal with an F-Grade Miasma Crystal and once again opened his menu.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

22

Class

-

Race

Draugr (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core, Apex Hunter

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Core

Duplicity (F)

Strength

344

Dexterity

162

Endurance

220

Vitality

188

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

42

Nexus Coins

21 533 653

The experience gain was extraordinary, pushing him straight to level 22, just 3 levels shy of level 25. He also sensed that he wasn't too far off from gaining another level as well. It was just crazy to think that one kill was equal to all the pain and struggle he underwent the first month up until killing Vul.

But that was simply how things worked, the difference in Cosmic Energy gained between different level beasts was far higher compared to the difference in Nexus Coins gained. It was the same with the amount of energy needed to gain another level, as it increased exponentially.

However, Zac was a bit confused as he looked at his status screen. His attributes were exactly the same as before, his new title not giving him a single point. He quickly focused on his new title to see what was going on.

**[Apex Hunter: Solo kill enemy one whole tier above you.
Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%]**

Zac's brows rose in surprise since this was something he hadn't encountered before.

"Nice fight, you looked very heroic jumping back and forth to avoid the cracks like a monkey," Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows.

"Whatever. It worked, didn't it?" Zac snorted. "More importantly, take a look at this. What does this mean?"

He displayed his new title to Ogras, who whistled in surprise.

"So it was a high tier Title, should have figured," Ogras muttered.

"High tiered Title?" Zac asked confused.

Of course he knew that some titles were better than others, but he never had heard of any classification like this.

"Yeah. Low tier titles give static rewards. They are good in the beginning to help accumulate other advantages, but by the end of E-Grade class they are mostly worthless apart from those that give luck. The mid-tier gives the percentage boosts. These

are what most people desperately try to gain, as they will always be useful.

“Next are the high tiered ones, who also gives percentage boosts. But these titles work differently. Each one will independently boost your whole attribute after the other titles have been added. And they each do this independently of each other. The effect can get enormous.”

Zac understood what he meant. This was a top tier title that worked just like his Hachetman’s Rage-skill. Instead of boosting his base attribute, it instead increased the effect of the attribute. This boost was far better, especially for him who already had a bunch of percent based boosts.

“Not bad,” was all Zac said as he placed his axe in the wound of the tiger that still bled profusely.

It wasn’t a top tier beast, but he wouldn’t turn his nose at the blood of an E-Grade animal, and clearly neither did his axe. It greedily sucked in a good deal of blood, and it actually started humming and vibrating. But soon it calmed down again and the sounds stopped.

“It’s almost there,” Ogras commented from the side.

Zac nodded with anticipation as he tucked away his axe. He would have to ask the explorers to keep their eyes open for more E-Grade beasts lurking on the islands they visited. Most of them in his territory were still unexplored after all.

“So what now?” Ogras asked curiously.

“I need to gain a couple of quick levels before the treasure hunt. You can go back if you want,” Zac said.

His goal was to attain a class first, then figure out how to turn himself back into a human.

“Sure, but I’ll take a leg of this guy, I deserve a nice meal as compensation for acting bodyguard,” he said as a couple of shadows severed one of the tiger’s hind legs after some effort.

Zac only smiled as he stored the rest of the tiger. For the following two days there was a new apex predator on the island, sneaking from territory to territory like a deadly

specter. When Zac finally left, it was as though a terrible pressure had left the island, and the beasts could once again go about their lives.

Chapter 209: Classes

Zac eagerly walked rushed toward his Nexus Node, unable to contain his excitement. He was truly curious about what kinds of classes he could expect from his new race. It was, in a way, both a test run for his level 75 evolution, and a testament to his struggles so far.

If he had available Epic classes now it would mean he was on course for epic E-Grade classes down the road. Of course, he knew that the criterion for getting an E-Grade Epic class was much higher than an F-Grade one, but it was a start.

He soon found himself in the building containing his private Nexus Node, and opened up his menu one last time to see everything was in order.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

25

Class

-

Race

Draugr (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class,

**Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500,
Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor
Hegemon, Core, Apex Hunter**

Dao

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of
Sharpness - Early**

Core

Duplicity (F)

Strength

352

Dexterity

200

Endurance

245

Vitality

188

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

22 508 653

The boost of 48 free points was a huge gain for three days of grinding. He'd already spent them all, putting 5 points in strength, 27 into Dexterity, and 16 into endurance. The strength was to pass 350, which might help unlock some special class, and the others were simply to keep his build balanced. It was just as well since he was running a bit behind on his Dexterity, something he was able to clearly feel in his battle with Average.

But before he could touch the crystal he sensed a familiar presence, and he turned around.

"Just watching the excitement," Ogras said with a small smile.

"If you got the opportunity to get a second class, what would you want it to be?" Zac asked, curious if the demon had come to the same conclusion as he himself had during the past days.

"Hmm... I would likely want a hybrid mage class also focusing on Shadows," Ogras said after some hesitation.

"Oh?" Zac said, a bit surprised.

It actually was somewhat different from what Zac had expected.

"My shadow attacks benefit from Intelligence and Wisdom, even though I am mainly a warrior class. Two classes focusing on the same concept would also allow me to walk further the path of shadows, instead of splitting my attention," Ogras explained.

Zac felt it was a distinct possibility the demon had thought it over since hearing of Zac's opportunity. It was a well thought out answer that would have a high chance of having long term benefits, and somewhat of a low-risk choice.

But all theorizing was useless if he couldn't get the type of class he hoped for. It was time to see what the system thought of him. Without waiting any further he simply touched the Crystal, and it immediately started the class choice. Zac let out a sigh of relief before checking the new window that appeared, since he hadn't been sure it would work until now.

[Top 5 Class choices]

[Reaver – F Grade, Rare. *A roving army of one, filled with unrelenting violence.* Upgradeable.]

[Greenfingers – F Grade, Rare. *Keeper of the grove. Defender of nature.* Upgradeable]

[Undertaker – F Grade, Rare. *With only the trees and the dead for company.* Upgradeable]

[Undying Bulwark – F Grade, Epic. *Unbreakable. Unflinching. Unrelenting. The Undying marches forward.* Upgradeable.]

[Big Game Hunter – F Grade, Epic. *Dragons, Primordials, or the Abyssal Behemoths –They all look good above the mantel.* Upgradeable.]

[Random F-Grade Class. 0% Common. 25.0% Uncommon. 44.2 % Rare. 30.8% Epic. Roll the dice.]

Zac couldn't help but let a grin spread on his face as he saw the choices, making Ogras snort in annoyance from the side. The demon couldn't see the available options, but he could likely make an educated guess. There wasn't even the option to follow Alyn's advice and pick a lower rarity class.

His options were clearly far superior to his first round, and he even had two choices for Epic classes. It was what he'd hoped for, and a sort of validation for his ceaseless struggles of the past months.

Still, Zac seriously looked through each and every class, since even the worst one was of Rare rarity, and none would be a garbage class. It was quite annoying that the System provided no proper clues for the classes, and he had to perform some guesswork.

Reaver sounded like a stronger warrior class, much like his Hatchetman class. It was likely awarded due to his consistent fighting style. While it clearly was suited to Zac's attributes, it felt like it brought nothing new to the table, and he unhesitantly looked at the next one.

He was unsure of what the main attribute Greenfingers would be. But getting the option was likely based on his high Dao of Trees, which might mean it was a Vitality class. It should use

nature to fight, and perhaps be useful in growing spiritual herbs. While it was an interesting option he had no clue how that kind of class would work with an Undead Race, so he passed on it as well.

Undertaker was the next choice. Zac felt it touched upon multiple parts of his skill set, and had some connection to death. The problem was that while it felt fitting, he had a hard time imagining what it would provide to him. The System really was too stingy with its explanation of its classes.

That left the final two choices, the Epic Classes. Big Game Hunter should come from him gaining the Apex Hunter title. Hunter classes were generally Dexterity-based, and would likely make a great addition to his Hatchetman class.

Currently Dexterity was the attribute he put most of his free points in, just so that he would be able to keep up with his ever-growing Strength. Getting a Dex-focused class was one of the main ideas he had, and getting an Epic one would be a huge help.

It would also likely broaden his arsenal for attacks, perhaps adding ranged capabilities through a bow. All in all, it would make him more well rounded, and the attributes would complement his Hatchetman class well.

It even had a somewhat matching theme with Hatchetman, as a hunter could be considered nature-related. That would be convenient in the future, as improving one Dao might benefit both classes.

The final choice was the Undying Bulwark class. From the description it seemed to be an undead-specific class that should focus on Endurance or Vitality. This was actually the second route he had formulated over the past days while hunting.

At first he had thought of gaining a mage class to balance out his low attributes in that area. That would also help with ranged attacks, just like a hunter class. But he reluctantly put that idea to the side.

He didn't believe that there would be any synergy between his two builds if he did that, leaving him with two strong archetypes. But he would rather focus on one archetype and push it to its very limits. He therefore wanted to go with another warrior class that would complement Hatchetman.

Another strength-based class didn't seem like a good idea, as it would add nothing and make his attributes too lopsided. That left either an Assassin class or a Tank class, to borrow from gaming terms.

Either of them would boost another of his important attributes, and leave him with free points to shore up his shortcomings, making him a monstrous melee fighter. If he picked Big Game Hunter he likely wouldn't need to put any more points in Dexterity. That would leave him the freedom to either focus on becoming even more lethal or shoring up his defenses with his free points.

It was a very flexible path where he could adjust his build as he went. Conversely, the undying class would likely help with his survivability, but it would also mean that he would have to keep putting most of his free points into Dexterity to not become too slow.

Both seemed like good options, and he felt like there was no clear winner. As for the lottery option, he didn't even consider it. There was no chance to get an Arcane class, which was the tier above Epic. And while the chance for an epic class was great, there was no point since he had two great options to choose from.

But after a few minutes his eyes turned to Undying Bulwark and he picked that one with determination in his eyes.

It came down to suitability in the end. Zac had his hands full just with improving his current fighting style. Learning to fight with a bow or sneak around wasn't really his style and would take focus from his axe techniques. The meathead juggernaut battle tactics were already ingrained into his brain, and the Undying Bulwark class felt more appropriate for that.

Besides, he was making a gamble for the long run. Right now his two sides were completely separated, but who knew what

would happen in the future. If he somehow managed to combine the two Classes, or at least use their skills simultaneously, Undying Bulwark should be a better choice.

A defensive class would complement Hatchetman far better than another Offensive class like a hunter as he saw it. It would also allow Zac to focus even further on evolving one side into pure offense, and the other into pure defense.

He might have made a different choice if this was his only class, as Undying Bulwark might not be the greatest offensively, which would affect his leveling ability. But with the help of his massive attribute pool he felt he would still be stronger offensively than most people. Furthermore, if needed he could get a great offensive skill from Brazla.

The familiar burst of cosmic energy inundated him, and his mind was filled with the schematic for the pathways that belonged to Undying Bulwark. He was about to check his gains, but Ogras interrupted him from behind.

“So, what did you get?” Ogras asked from behind.

“None of your business,” Zac said with a snort. “I still don’t know what class you have.”

Ogras only tsk’ed, muttering something about being stingy.

“I need to fix my pathways, then we’ll try to hunt down the Shapeshifters,” Zac said.

“Fine,” Ogras said with a nod and disappeared.

Zac remembered just how painful it was to draw his pathways, so he needed to seclude himself to make sure nothing went wrong. He immediately headed toward his courtyard so he could activate the arrays there.

As he walked he finally opened his menu to see the results.

[Class: Undying Bulwark, Grade-F, Epic]

Endurance +10, +10%.

Vitality +5, +5%.

Level: +6 Endurance, +2 Vitality, -1 free point per level.

Skills:

Bulwark Mastery (LOCKED)

Deathwish (LOCKED)

Fields of Despair (LOCKED)

Zac's brows rose in surprise. It actually stole one of his free points, rather than give out another one. But it still gave a total of 7 points per level, compared to the 5 from Hatchetman.

At least one thing was clear. He probably wouldn't need to put any more points into Endurance in a long time, perhaps ever. Six points per level was an insane boost, twice what he got in Strength from Hatchetman. Add to that the point he got from his other class, and soon his enemies would tire themselves out before they could even hurt him.

It also gave three skills that were available right from the start, and he'd need to complete some quests to unlock them. He honestly had no idea what the two last ones would do. The first one was a mastery skill, just like his current Axe Mastery.

However, he wasn't exactly sure what Bulwark meant in this connotation. But there was a real possibility that it might be a quest that would give him a new Dao Seed. Since he got an epic class he was guaranteed to get at least one new seed from a skill vision.

But before he could set out to complete his skill quests there was something else he needed to do. As soon as he arrived at his courtyard Zac closed it down with multiple layers of arrays before he sat down.

Next he started to arduously imprint the intricate pathway system that would cover his whole body. Luckily he hadn't already imprinted a simplistic version of a pathway system that would be needed to be rewritten, so this time it wasn't nearly as painful.

But even then the pathways took the better part of a day to imprint, as they were even more intricate compared to his other class. Early next morning he stood up, and happily studied the results of his efforts.

The fractals that passed through his whole body were reminiscent of that of Hatchetman, but they were also a bit different. The best way Zac could describe it was that they were like two abstract paintings, each conveying a different meaning to the subconscious.

As he inspected the results of his efforts his eyes couldn't help but turn toward the Core. While he had engraved the fractals all night he didn't want to split his focus so he didn't check up on it. But throughout the night the core hadn't given off a single response, staying completely inert.

But unbeknownst to him his Core had changed as well during the night, and the black side now also contained grooves for the pathways to his new class. Now his core was truly complete.

Chapter 210: Masochism

Finally done with the imprinting process Zac checked out the status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

25

Class

[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark

Race

[E] Draugr

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Core

[F] Duplicity

Strength**352 [Efficiency: 116%]****Dexterity****200 [Efficiency 116%]****Endurance****284 [Efficiency 116%]****Vitality****202 [Efficiency 116%]****Intelligence****90 [Efficiency 116%]****Wisdom****85 [Efficiency 116%]****Luck****93 [Efficiency 116%]****Free Points****0****Nexus Coins****[F] 22 508 653**

It was clear that his survivability had increased quite a bit due to the increase in Endurance and Vitality. But what he found a bit surprising was that his attribute effectiveness had increased by 6%. A quick look at his list of titles showed that there could only be two reasons.

He was a bit disappointed that there didn't seem to be a title for gaining dual classes, but he soon understood a likely reason to this. His core-title had changed name and was now called Duplicity Core instead. He quickly opened it up to see if anything else had changed about it.

[Duplicity Core: Successfully form a Duplicity Core Core. Reward: Strength +5%, Endurance +5%.]

It looked like he had been wrong in his assumptions earlier. The reason question marks were remaining earlier was that he still hadn't received a second class to imprint on the core. Each reward corresponded to the main attribute of one of his classes, and there was nothing to reward until he had both of them.

[Heaven's Chosen: Attain highest possible tier of class. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

The second title was the reason for his increased attribute effectiveness. Zac knew that Epic wasn't the highest grade there is, as there are multiple higher grades above it. The title rather meant that Epic truly was the highest possible tier for an F-ranked Class.

Bulwark Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Block 5000 strikes. Reward: Bulwark Mastery Skill (0/5000).

Deathwish (Class): The body is but another shield. Receive 5000 strikes. Reward: Deathwish Skill (0/5000).

Fields of Despair (Class): Draw the ire of at least 1000 enemies at once. Reward: Fields of Despair (0/1).

The next thing Zac checked out was the skill quests to see how hard they would be to accomplish. He could only blankly stare at the first two ones. He should have figured that the skills for a tank Class would mean getting hit. At first glance he thought the first two could be solved simultaneously, but he soon realized that might not be the case.

While the quest mission for **[Deathwish]** might look like it could be accomplished while doing the first one, he believed that he would actually have to go get hit with his body. In any case, it looked like he would need to recruit some people to beat him up.

He felt the last one would be the easiest. Had he gotten this class before Hatchedman he would have had a huge problem completing it, but by now it was only a matter of jumping over to the Undead Incursion. That brought up the question of whether the undead would even attack him while in this form

though. But if he started to kill a bunch of Zombies they should retaliate.

In any case, Zac felt that he would be able to complete all of the quests in less than a day, as long as he got enough people to hit him simultaneously. He wanted to try it out immediately and headed over to his sister's courtyard.

It was still around 4 am, so Zac assumed she still would be at home asleep. But to his surprise he found her meditating while facing the sunrise. Zac remembered how annoying it was to get interrupted in the middle of attaining insights into the Dao, so he silently sat down behind her and waited.

He soon closed his eyes as well, starting to meditate on the Dao. He had gained an idea while hunting at Mystic Island. He had been wondering just what that weird attack from the tiger had been until he realized it was a coarse mimicry of the dimensional tears.

The beast had likely been lying on its hill and observed the dimensional scars in the field for months until it finally gained some insight into it. That in of itself was an extremely impressive task, as the Dao of Space was one of the highest concepts according to Ogras.

Zac had felt that if a dumb beast could do it, then so could he. That's why it took a whole day before he left the island. Most of it had been sitting and observing the everchanging cracks.

They were a truly fickle and random force of nature, popping up without rhyme or reason. Wherever they showed up space was simply separated, and anything that was there before was cut into two. Zac didn't hold any hope in actually comprehending the concept of a void edge for his Dao of Sharpness, but something simpler.

It was the randomness and instantaneous speed with which the cracks appeared. He felt that speed was an important aspect of sharpness. If he moved extremely slowly he wouldn't be able to cut a blade of grass with his axe, but if he swung his arm as quickly as possible he could cut a small hill in two without harming his edge.

Sharpness through speed. His blade would be like the dimensional tears, where his enemies would be cut in two before they knew they were attacked. This was the concept he kept pondering on as he waited for his sister to finish her morning meditation.

“Shit!” Zac suddenly heard after an hour or so, making him open his eyes.

Kenzie stared at him aghast with her hand over her heart.

“You scared the crap out of me, why did you sneak up here like that?” she said with a glare.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to disturb your meditation,” Zac answered a bit awkwardly. “I’ll make it up to you, go ahead and hit me.”

“I’m not going to hit you,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “Going by what a blockhead you are I’d just hurt my hands.”

Zac only smiled a bit, and then showed her the quest window for [**Deathwish**].

“This is a one time offer,” Zac said.

“What a weird quest. Just what kind of class did you get?” Kenzie asked with her brows rising.

“Well, it’s an endurance-based quest to help with my survivability. Most of the quests seem to be centered around getting hit,” Zac explained with a sigh.

A tinge of something flashed in Kenzie’s eyes before she reined it in.

“Well, I am a mage so I can’t punch you. My hands would break long before I hit you 5000 times. Would spells work?” she asked, starting to look a bit excited.

“Well, I’m not sur-“ Zac said, but didn’t get further before a fireball slammed into his chest.

Zac grunted and took a step backward by reflex, but he wasn’t actually hurt. It was clear there was no real power in the strike.

“Well?” Kenzie asked with a wide smile.

Zac threw his sister a glare before opening up his quest screen again. But to his disappointment the quest was still at 0/5000.

“Didn’t Work,” Zac said with a frown, taking out the club he used for non-lethal confrontations. “Try with this instead.”

His sister didn’t say anything, but her mouth curved even further upward as she accepted the club. She swung the bat at his chest like she was trying to hit a home run, but even that had no effect on the quest, as the progress was still at 0.

“Perhaps your robe is stopping it?” Kenzie hesitantly said.

Zac nodded and took off the top half of his clothes, leaving his chest bare. He felt Kenzie made sense. It wouldn’t be much of a deathwish if his E-grade defensive gear soaked up all the damage. His sister swung the club once again, and this time Zac couldn’t help but grimace from the pain.

But luckily it worked, and it counted as progress. The two of them kept trying various things out for over an hour and found out that there were only two requirements to gain progress on his quest.

First, he needed to be hit right on his skin. Even if he only wore a t-shirt it didn’t count as progress. Zac really hoped that didn’t mean that he would have to walk around bare-chested to use the skill in the future. It was already a pain to walk around barefoot due to his movement skill. If this kept up he would soon be forced to walk around naked to have access to all his skills.

Secondly there needed to be a minimum amount of force in the strike for it to count. Just a small lovetap wasn’t enough. With Kenzie’s low physical attributes she needed to give it everything she had in a swing to make it count, and even then it was a crapshoot whether it was enough or not.

Spells did work though, and Zac’s chest was red and bruised from being blasted with ice balls as large as a fist. As for Kenzie, she sat on the ground looking a bit pale, absorbing a Cosmic Energy from a Nexus Crystal.

“What’s going on?” a sleepy voice could be heard from outside, making Zac turn over to see a bleary-eyed Emily

enter.

Zac quickly took out a pair of sunglasses from his Pouch and put them on. His pitch-black eyes were the most obvious indicator something was up with him, and he didn't want to show the teenager his change just yet.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Emily, but she was an obvious point of weakness to him since she still couldn't cultivate and protect herself. Luckily she only went between the Academy with many warriors and his area that was long since protected with arrays.

Since the outer town didn't really need any protection at the moment the Town Defense Array had stayed where it was. It covered the inner area so that no one would just jump over the walls and head to his compound or spy on the Creators.

It was a constant drain on resources, but not a large one as long as no one attacked it, but he felt it was extremely worth it. The whole reason he even created the town was to protect his close ones. Who knew, if it hadn't been running it might have been his sister who was replaced by a shapeshifter rather than David.

"We're training," Zac said, trying to modulate his voice to sound less ghastly. "I have a quest to get hit a bunch of times."

"Wow! Can I help?" the teenager said, immediately perking up.

"No, Kenzie is barely able to hit hard enough for it to count," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Damn it, why wasn't I born in spring?" she muttered in annoyance.

Zac could only roll his eyes at the teenager.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" a voice said as the shadows congealed showing a smiling Ogras.

Zac started to feel that all the people close to him had some sadistic streaks, each of them sporting an eerily similar smile.

"Just get on with it," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And you all don't need to look so pleased about it."

Three hours later Zac walked along the streets of Port Atwood accompanied by the demon, one looking sullen and the other having a refreshing smile on his face. Every part of Zac's chest felt sore, but at least the quest was finished.

He wondered just how one was supposed to complete that quest without attributes like his. If he'd been hit 5 000 times with the same power as the last hours when he was actually level 25 he would have died ten times over.

Even with his current attributes they were forced to take a couple of breaks where Zac swallowed a healing pill. But at least it was done with. And he had to admit the skill he received was pretty interesting.

[Deathwish - Proficiency: Early. Join your foes in a dance of death. Upgradeable]

Just like the quest the point of the skill was simply to get hit. Even then he would probably categorize **[Deathwish]** as an offensive skill. The point of it wasn't to decrease the damage he took, but rather retaliate in kind.

The skill was passive, costing some Miasma every second, and for every strike Zac received while it was active his assailer was hit right back. It looked pretty spooky with a shadowy copy of the attacker that was instantaneously created when Zac was struck, which struck right back.

Ogras had taken it as a challenge to dodge, but no matter what he did he couldn't escape getting struck when he landed a hit on Zac. The only option to avoid getting retaliated was to stop the attack or simultaneously defend as he attacked. That's why the demon looked like he carried a grudge as they walked through the streets.

The bad news was that only a part, around 10 to 20 percent, of the original strike was retaliated. But the good news was that calculation was based on the original power of the attack, not the damage Zac's received after his sturdy constitution had lessened the damage he took.

That essentially meant that if his Endurance got high enough he could just stand in a field of enemies, and let them kill

themselves by hitting him. The skill also took very little energy to keep going and was something he would be able to run for the entire duration of the fight on top of using his normal skills.

All in all, it felt like a fitting start for someone slowly turning into a walking fortress.

Chapter 211:

Experimentation

Zac also figured out how to advance his quest for [**Bulwark Mastery**]. There were various ways to block a strike, but the only one that seemed to work was using a shield.

Unfortunately only had an old rusty shield he pilfered when he hunted the Imp Herald in the tunnels. It only lasted for 5 blows at the required power before it broke. That forced them to stop grinding his quest for the moment and instead focus on the other tasks at hand. There were infiltrators to hunt.

By now it was close to 8 am, which was a good time to hunt for shapeshifters. Most people were starting their day, heading out toward either their work or the academy. The sight was almost blinding to Zac, as everyone on the street was lit up like a beacon of life-force.

But Zac inspected each and every one beneath his hood, not wanting to let anyone slip by. So far they hadn't found a single shapeshifter, which was both troubling and a relief. The problem was that they had no idea just how many were still on the island.

According to Ogras there had been a mass exodus for the cultists when Ogras decapitated their leader. A good portion of them immediately ran for the Nexus crystal and teleported away. A few others, likely the more pious ones, had wanted to avenge their fallen leader, even to the point of self-destruction.

Ogras hadn't stayed at that time, instead heading over to the undead incursion to pick up Zac. When the demon later returned to farm the stronger invaders for contribution points the crystals had disappeared, and only some stragglers were left.

They simply had no idea what happened between the moment the two of them fled, until when Ogras returned. For all they knew there might be a whole contingent of lizardmen hiding in the woods somewhere, though that seemed unlikely.

The remaining cultists had been swarmed by undead almost as soon as the Corpse Lord fled, and they were barely holding on when Ogras arrived. As for the black golemoids, if there were any stragglers they were killed by the uncountable zombies as well. But it seemed that their leader had already ordered his troops to fall back before heading over for one last try at Zac's head.

But since one shapeshifter was still skulking around on his island, there could be more. Zac and ogras therefore patrolled the whole town twice, including the commercial district and the academy. At least it appeared that no shapeshifters hadn't replaced anyone else in the town proper, or any key personnel.

Zac also took the time to visit the unconscious David, and he couldn't help but feel enraged when he saw him. Even after a few days of intensive care he still looked like he was on the brink of starvation, with his whole body covered in scars. The shapeshifter had thoroughly tortured the poor man, likely to gain the intelligence needed to keep up its charade.

After two hours of patrolling Ogras was clearly bored, and Zac could only give up for now. Since he had to prepare for the treasure hunt he tasked Ogras with devising some method to cleanse the island from any interlopers.

That left Zac to figure out what to do next. There weren't too many days left until the treasure hunt, and he had a hard time deciding what he should do. He wanted to start experimenting to become a human again so that he could gain access to his offensive skills.

But at the same time he was unsure of how often he could change his form. If he changed now he might not be able to freely change back, which meant he wouldn't be able to farm any more levels before the treasure hunt.

Since Undying Bulwark was an Epic class every level would come with a huge amount of attributes from now on, each one

giving a great boost to his survivability. If he went all out for the following three days, leaving the last day to swap back to human, Zac expected that he would be able to gain between five and ten levels.

He'd already decided to skip getting the other two skills for now. He had no shield that could last him through the quest at the moment, and he honestly didn't dare step through the teleporter to Mount Everlasting Peace as he was right now.

He was afraid those tens of thousands of scripts on the mountain would blaze to life and smite him out of existence if he appeared. He knew that the mountain itself had been instrumental in fending off and defeating the Undead armies that had tried to raze it.

After some hesitation, he first went to the Thayer Consortia to speak with Calrin. The gnome was shocked enough to fall out of his chair when he saw Zac's appearance, and it took some time to calm him down.

"Odd choice of a skill, transforming into an undead," the Sky Gnome muttered.

"I thought it would be a good skill to infiltrate the Undead Incursion, but changing back was harder than I expected," Zac said with a smile as he took out the huge horn from the Star Ox from his pouch. "In any case, I'd like you to take a look at this."

"Hmm, pretty," Calrin said as he looked at the horn with interest until he looked up at Zac. "What kind of beast is it from?"

"It's from an animal called a Star Ox. I got teleported off-world for a quest and fought the beast then. Apparently the horn was the most valuable part of it, do you know what's it used for?"

"No idea," Calrin said with a shrug. "But it contains a lot of energies even though the beast is dead. I'm sure that it can be used for either weapon making or alchemy."

"I met a person over there who said it's worth around a hundred million Nexus Coins, so it should be something good.

See if you can find out more,” Zac said.

“Sure. Anything else?” Calrin asked.

“I need a shield, a real sturdy one,” Zac continued.

“A shield? And I guess something that’s stronger than what can be made on our island?” the gnome probed.

“Yes. Preferably a Spirit tool like my axe. Is it obtainable?” Zac asked.

“Probably not. Defensive spirit tools are far rarer compared to offensive ones. And shields are even less common,” the gnome said.

“Why?” Zac asked confused.

“It’s more popular to have amulets, skills or inscribed clothes for defense compared to a shield. Of course, those are much more limited, but they also don’t slow you down at all,” the gnome explained.

“No one really wants to waste the effort on creating a shield. They are extremely expensive and hard to make, since they need to be able to endure strong attacks not just once, but continuously. Very few materials can handle that,” Calrin continued. “So they are generally only made for order. You would need to visit a skilled blacksmith, but that’s impossible at the moment since we’re stuck on this planet.”

Zac could only nod with some defeat. It was true what the gnome said. He’d only encountered two people amongst the demons who used shields as far as he could remember, and both were common foot soldiers.

“Well, keep your eyes open, just in case,” Zac could only say as he stood up.

“Sure. Remember to get some alliances while finding treasures. We need that extra income,” the gnome said with a wave.

Since he couldn’t get a shield at the moment he decided to focus on gaining a few levels before the treasure hunt. He walked back to his compound and took the teleporter to Mystic Island. He wasn’t afraid that he would run out of prey

here, as the island was just enormous, and there should be millions of strong prey to hunt.

Even though time was of the essence Zac spent a good chunk of the following three days also looking at the rifts in space, trying to glean some insight into his Dao of Sharpness. He wanted to improve it before the hunt to increase his offensive power, but if he could evolve it naturally he could use his Dao Treasure on one of his other Seeds.

In the end, he spent 14 hours a day roving through the inner circle of the island, killing one powerful monster after another before he went down the crater and pondered on the Dao for 8 hours.

He gained three levels within the first day, but after that his speed slowed down, only improving with another two the following day and one final level the third day. It was partly due to the requirements increasing, but mainly that it was getting harder and harder to find any good prey.

Finally, after three days passed he had to call it. There was only one day before the hunt, and he needed to get ready.

His killing spree had pushed his endurance all the way to 349, almost overtaking his strength as his highest attribute. Interestingly enough it also seemed that [Verun's Bite] was finally satiated, no longer wanting to drink the blood of the new beasts it encountered. However, it still wasn't evolving, making Zac guess that he still needed to find more E-Grade beasts.

Unfortunately, he didn't manage to make much headway on his Dao, and he knew he would have to use his Dao Treasure for it after he got home. Since he decided he was done he quickly headed toward the hidden camp to teleport back. Finally home he left a message for Kenzie telling her he was back and to come over after she woke up, before once again settling himself in his courtyard.

A large reason he dared to wait until the day before the Treasure hunt to experiment with turning back was that he had found some clues to turning during his fight with the tiger. That battle had almost completely exhausted all his miasma,

and at that point he'd felt that the Duplicity Core was starting to wake up.

It was in line with how he turned the first time, with his life-force being stolen by the dagger. The only problem was that when he got close to running out of miasma he started to feel like he was about to die and that the remaining miasma in his body was all that prevented his true death.

It was a weird distinction Zac hadn't realized before now. The miasma was not only the source of power in battle but also the source of life for the undead. If Zac ran out of Cosmic Energy in a fight he would feel weak, but he would be fine after resting.

But running out of Miasma for an undead seemed to be a death sentence. It gave a new meaning to the expression tired to death. He needed to find out if his theory was correct, but it would be crazy not to take some precautions.

It took an hour before Kenzie came to his courtyard after reading his note, and Zac immediately erected the arrays before taking out an E-Grade Divine crystal and an E-Grade Miasma crystal.

"I am going to try to turn back into a human now," Zac explained. "If it looks like I'm dying, try using the Divine Crystal first. If it doesn't work, try the Miasma crystal."

"Are you sure about this?" Kenzie hesitantly asked as she picked up the two crystals.

"Pretty much," Zac lied. "I just wanted you here as a precaution. Here I go."

The next moment Zac started to expel his Miasma through his whole body, and a cloud of death-attuned Cosmic Energy started to form above him. When he was reaching the last of his miasmatic reserves he was overcome with a sense of dread, and he instinctually wanted to reabsorb the energy in the air before it dissipated.

But he ignored his instincts and expelled the last of his Miasma. As the last of the energy left him everything turned

black, and the last thing he felt before losing consciousness was falling down.

The next thing Zac felt was a burning fire in his belly. He didn't know if he'd been unconscious for a second or for hours, but he knew his idea was correct as his Core had sprung to life. It felt as though it shone like a sun inside his body, giving off a healing warmth.

However, that warmth was quickly turning into a blistering heat as fire radiated out through it, covering every inch of his body. It felt as though he was being burned alive, and he barely was able to contain a cry of pain. It took all his effort to keep his mind steady as the fire raged through his body, and he didn't even have the energy to get up from the ground.

But finally the Core calmed down, and he opened his eyes with a shaky breath.

"How do I look," he said with a hoarse voice.

Kenzie stood in front of him, looking worried.

"Tired, but human. It looked like you died there for a bit," she said.

"Life through death," Zac muttered to himself before once again turning to his sister. "How long did the change take?"

"Not too long, around two minutes?" she answered.

Zac could only sigh and shake his head in disappointment.

Chapter 214: Traps and Ladders

Only fools would rush up to the mountain peaks, becoming unwitting meat shields to try out whatever trials those places had in store. Because going by how the System operated it wouldn't simply leave piles of wealth for anyone to grab, there likely was a trick to it.

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

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

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

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

Any way he looked there were bloodied and muddied warriors desperately trying to kill their opponents, their eyes tinged with red in madness and bloodlust. No one cared the slightest about their own well-being, only constantly pushing forward, desperately swinging their weapons.

Zac looked down to find an axe in his hand, and suddenly an overwhelming battle lust overcame him. It was as though a

god of war was beckoning him to massacre everything, to stand on top of a mountain of corpses. He wanted to bite into the opponent's flesh and drink their blood and revel in the madness of battle.

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

It was an offensive illusion array. That was the only thing that Zac could guess. Luckily between [**Mental Fortress**] and his staunch determination he quickly broke himself out of it. Otherwise he'd be a sitting duck, standing in the doorway like a fool.

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

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

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

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

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

But now that he knew there could be arrays he'd be in a better position. His defensive skill was already active, but he started actively control it as he took another step inside. However, this time nothing happened, and another few steps proved that there likely only was one array as protection.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wait," he said with a calm voice.

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

"What?"

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

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

"Omniscient Eye?" Zac asked with confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Revor – Human. Level 37 – Strength]

[Hunter 97 323]

[Gatherer 97 323]

Revor possessed neither the attributes or the skills to block out his middling scouting skill. The man in front of him should be a pretty average trial taker, roughly the same as those from his island.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He felt his bangle slightly heat up the next moment telling him that an attempt on him was blocked. But even so, a screen appeared the next moment looking identical to the two lines

that detailed Revor's ladder position. It was Zac's own ladder position which was a few spots ahead of Revor's.

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

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

"Open up your ladder next," Zac said.

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

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

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

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

[Hunter 97 309]

[Gatherer 97 309]

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

Neither Zac's bracelet or his **[Mental Fortress]** skill activated in the slightest, but Revor was able to glean information about him even so. It meant that anyone would be able to spy on him without him noticing by simply opening the ladders.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 215: Treasures

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

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

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

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

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

“Just my luck to be captured by an offworlder powerhouse,” the man muttered in defeat.

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

“Did your planet recently get integrated into the multiverse?” Zac asked.

“Yes, around half a year ago,” the man quickly nodded.

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

“What?” the man said, looking truly confused.

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

“Well, we got merged with another planet, but I don’t know what other races you speak of,” the man said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So you’re in an all-out war in your homeworld?” Zac probed.

“How do you handle that alongside the Incursions?”

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

Zac blankly stared at the man for a while, until he couldn’t help but ask for clarification.

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

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

This was the first time Zac heard of planets getting integrated without getting assaulted by Incursions. Perhaps launching Incursions was only one of the tools in the System’s belt.

Besides, it seemed the other planet was filled with enough bloodshed to create powerhouses through a world war.

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

At the same time the captive was more fleeting in his explanations of his own homeworld, apart from the fact that they weren't very technologically advanced, and that they consisted of multiple countries that had banded together to rebuff the Medhin Empire.

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

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

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

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

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

The man looked confused, but he complied. However, after taking a first step inside he stopped. In just seconds he was shaking, sweat running down his back. He was stuck in the

array. Zac observed for a bit longer until he grabbed the man and pulled him back out.

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

"What just happened?" he panted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac himself was still a bit unsure how he would go about gaining a placement on the Hunter Ladder. He was reluctant to

go on a killing spree just to increase his points.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He walked over to the mat and grabbed it to put it into his Cosmos Sack, but gave a start when he looked beneath it. To his surprise, there was a golden crystal hidden in a groove beneath the ratty mat, fitted perfectly inside.

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

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

[Eastern Trigram Sect – Formation Ledger, Beginner Compendium]

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

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

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

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

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

Such a great find didn't even place him in the top hundred. Next, he put the mat inside and noted with some surprise he rose another 48 spots from that addition. Finally, he detached the large painting from the wall and rolled it up.

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

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

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

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

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

A sudden rustle in the bushes made Zac look over, only to see a black shape rapidly closing in on him.

Chapter 216: Appeasing the Spirit

Zac unhesitatingly punched out, and a pained yelp escaped from the beast that tried to ambush him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most of the summit was empty, and only occupied by a large beautiful square, and Zac couldn't help but feel some wonder as he stepped on the enormous tiles. Each of the tiles was over three meters across and gave off a shimmering luster. It looked

as though they were made by pristine marble, but golden veins ran across them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac frowned when he saw them as he immediately opened up the ladders. The group was in the bottom of the barrel when it

came to treasure, but two of them were higher on the hunter list than he was, meaning they'd likely killed a few people on the way up here.

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

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

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

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

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

"Hand over your Cosmos Sack, and we'll let you leave with your life," he curtly said.

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

"I'll say the same to you. Leave your sacks and piss off this mountain," Zac retorted as stashed another tile.

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

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

The veins of the leader started to bulge, and the air around him vibrated by the huge infusion of power. Clearly his strength

had gone up a couple of tiers from the infusion. The others stood rooted in place, not making any moves against Zac.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After some hesitation he threw the bodies into his pouch as well before resuming his detiling. In another fifteen minutes the square was picked clean, and he instead focused his attention to the palace in the center of the summit.

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

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

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

Chapter 217: Ransacking

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing happened as the huge door swung open, but he saw there was a mostly translucent shimmer in the air inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After trying a few doors upstairs he found the one that should lead to the private area of the owner of the mansion, but the moment he walked through it felt like he was slammed in the head with a hammer. He only saw white until he finally came to again, and after taking a glance at his watch he was shocked to see that he'd been out of it for over 10 minutes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was also another corner that was filled with a respectable pile of Nexus Crystals and a few crystals. They actually looked like skill crystals, and he took one out. But as soon as he tried to glance at its contents he was blocked.

It was as though the information was protected by a password, or rather a riddle. He received a stream of information that essentially told him that he needed to gain a certain understanding of arrays in order to get past the protection. It was something like the trials that they would have Brazla perform to gain access to the Repository skills in the future.

There were also a couple of normal notepads and vials with pills inside. Finally, there was a densely inscribed metal ball inside, and Zac curiously took it out. The moment he held it in his hand he couldn't help grunting because he was barely able to hold on to it. It was extremely heavy, making it feel like he was carrying one of those stones for strongman competitions. That was saying something with his monstrous attributes, and Zac figured it must be made from some Spiritual Grade metals.

He had no idea what it was, and it provided no information for it either. After looking it over he put it back. For all he knew it could be a bomb, and he didn't want to carry it in his arms. Zac looked through all drawers on the desk afterward but found nothing interesting besides a large feather that might have been used as a pencil before.

There was also a door that led to an inner room, and after stripping the paintings from the wall he walked inside. It was a meditation chamber with a beautiful panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. There was also a similar mat as the one he had already taken, and he quickly snatched that one as well. Unfortunately, there were no hidden treasures beneath it as with the other one.

He was about to head back but some change in the periphery of his vision made him curiously look over. Something was happening on another mountain. A huge fire had flashed into existence in an instance, spreading over a hundred meters. Zac could even hear the explosion two mountains over.

Looked like someone with pretty decent power was flexing his or her muscles. As Zac was looking more closely at the mountains he actually saw a little bit of movement here and there. Things were really kicking into motion, filling Zac with some eagerness to move on to the next place.

Zac scoured the palace for anything else of value, but he couldn't find it. He did find some exquisite furniture in a dining room though, and unceremoniously threw everything inside the pouch. There was no need to be discerning with the gargantuan space inside, and anything that caught his eye went into the sack.

Since he was done he exited the same way he came, but to his surprise two people stood outside carefully looking at the entrance. However, when they saw Zac emerging their brows rose and they quickly used some sort of escape skill without hesitation, making Zac unable to guess where they went.

Zac tried to figure out their tracks for a bit, but that wasn't his strong suit. Instead, he headed down the mountain in the opposite direction from the one he came from. If that duo wanted to they were welcome to follow so that he could loot their pouches as well.

The direction Zac walked was partly chosen due to not wanting double-track, but also that one of the mountains in this direction looked caught his eyes earlier. It was extremely steep, with a modest mansion on top. The thing that drew his

attention though was the hidden hanging fields that seemed to be cut inside the mountain itself, and apparently only accessible from the palace above.

He couldn't really tell from the distance, but it truly looked like fields made for growing Spiritual herbs. Perhaps the fields were holding untold treasures since Spiritual Herbs generally grew stronger the higher their age was. Herbs that had absorbed Cosmic Energy for thousands of years would each be worth a fortune, and he couldn't stop a creepy smile from appearing on his face as he thought about looting a whole field of them.

That very smile seemed to have an astounding effect since he ran into a young girl who was furtively climbing toward the peak he just left. The moment he saw Zac with his grin she flinched in fright, and unhesitatingly crushed the token in her hands.

Zac didn't even have time to react before the girl winked out of existence. Her sudden disappearance made Zac more certain about his hypothesis that the delay was dependent on power or wealth, as the girl seemed to be a real weakling, to the point she actually walked with her token in hand.

As he descended the mountain there wasn't really anything really worth noting. There was another temple at the mid-way point, but it was reduced to only rubble. Zac briefly tried to look through the ruins for some more treasure, but the hanging gardens were beckoning him, and he quickly gave up the idea of a proper excavation.

Finally, after a mad dash he found himself at the foot of the mountain, and to his delight it was teeming with beasts. He saw tens of the black rats frenziedly rip apart the carcass of a large bear, and the next moment he was attacked by a pack of wolves.

It was as though the crevices between the mountains were made out of natural barriers of beasts. Unless one had decent power or a larger group it would be suicide to try to change mountain to explore. Seeing this many targets for grinding his

ladder position he wanted to just go on a rampage, but he stopped himself.

Getting a high position on the Hunter ladder this early wasn't necessarily a good thing. People would run for the hills if they spotted him, making it harder for him to liberate people from their cosmos sacks. Instead, his eyes turned up toward the gardens that were no longer visible from this vantage.

Zac had his axe in his hand and greed in his eyes, so a corridor of carnage was quickly carved toward the neighboring mountain.

Chapter 218: Alchemist's Mountain

Zac was almost at the crest of the mountain housing the Alchemist Palace, as he'd named the mansion due to what he hoped to find inside.

He'd entered a couple of buildings on the way up, but he hadn't found much of value apart from a few minor pills and Crystals. After having visited a couple of buildings it was pretty clear that a correlation between the power of the defenses and how high up on a mountain it was located.

He could essentially burst through the ones close to the foot of the mountain without even activating his defenses. But these domiciles were either for servants or low disciples and it wasn't really worth the time for Zac to enter. But from somewhere at the mid he needed to activate at least [**Mental Fortress**] to avoid any mishaps.

As for the pure physical traps he could pretty much tank them with his body, though it hurt more the higher up he went. Endurance was already his highest attribute by now, and it clearly showed as he shrugged off everything from bolts to fireballs as he crashed through the buildings.

He also robbed a trio of cultivators from the other world who went down the mountain with disappointment afterward. Interestingly enough new sacks spawned on their belts just a few seconds after they were robbed of their original ones.

However, after seeing that he only caught some basic necessities and nothing of value he decided to reevaluate his tactics. At least, for now, he'd check the ladders before robbing people. It was true that many a little makes a mickle, but there was no point to rob a bunch of tents and sleeping bags.

The mountain he was currently scaling was far more cultivated compared to the last one, and Zac was currently running up along one of the multiple sets of stairs that all seemed to be leading to the top. He also hadn't encountered a single animal since passing the half-way point, likely because there was no vegetation from that point.

At first, he was a bit worried about the lack of fauna, but then he remembered how it looked like around his Tree of Ascension. Due to its high energy requirements it killed and absorbed all life in the vicinity. Perhaps the hanging gardens were doing the same and had long ago killed off all other life on the mountain.

Zac was filled with excitement as he closed in on the crest, but a huge shockwave from above stopped him in his tracks. Someone was fighting up above, and the power they displayed wasn't a joke.

He frowned and slowly walked up, careful to not make any loud sounds. The cosmic energies in the air surged as he walked up the last sets of stairs, and not long after a rumble shook the whole mountain.

Zac's axe was already in his hands as he looked over the edge, and the sight made Zac frown. Over a hundred people were actually on the mountain, almost all of them decked in the familiar attire of the Medhin Empire. Most were sitting down as if in meditation, and the only exceptions were three people.

One of them was a young man with an arrogant demeanor who was decked in a golden robe. He stood unblemished in front of the sitting army, and it was clear they were using a War Array to empower him as he glowed with power. It also looked like he had a large blue circle tattooed in his forehead.

The other two weren't as well off. One of them might be dead, lying motionlessly on the ground in a pool of his own blood. Above him stood a woman who was bleeding quite heavily as well, but clearly wasn't ready to give up yet.

What was more surprising was that Zac actually recognized the two. It was Thea Marshall and the shield-bearing bodyguard who had accompanied her and Henry Marshall to

the Auction a month ago. When he realized who the two were his eyes couldn't help once again turn to the young man who seemed to have defeated them without much of a problem.

For a second he pondered whether he should retreat, but after a bit he took the final steps up the stairs with a sigh. He couldn't let the third ranker and one of the main combatants against the Incursions die here. It might cause the whole Marshall clan to collapse, and they were only other main force he could partner with at the moment, what with the tense situation with the New World Government.

The young man threw a glance at Zac when he appeared, but he clearly discounted him as a non-threat. Instead, he summoned what appeared to be a tornado of wild energies in his hand and pointed it toward Thea. It flashed in a few colors and reminded Zac of the horn of the Star Ox. However, this jumble of energies seemed to have mainly light blue and brown energies, compared to the rainbow of the beast horn.

Thea's eyes thinned and she grabbed the body of the bodyguard and made to retreat, but a huge fractal appeared above her, somehow rooting her in place. Zac couldn't sense anything apart from the chaotic swirl from the man and guessed that it was something created by the army.

"You can't just leave after your words, woman," the man said with a sneer. "The punishment for rejecting the divine invitation is death."

The next moment he pushed the chaotic jumble of energies forward, and it trembled with power as it closed in on her. Zac saw no option so he used **[Loamwalker]** to flash in front of her, and covered the trio with his defensive skill as he launched a Dao-Infused **[Chop]** at the incoming attack.

The two strikes clashed with a tremendous explosion, and Zac was barely able to keep himself from getting pushed off the mountain as he was blanketed by the wild energies that ripped through his leaves. Thea and the bodyguard were better off as Zac soaked most of the damage, and she confusedly looked up at his broad back.

Thea's eyes widened in shock when she saw who it was, but they quickly refocused on their enemy.

"Why are you here? You need to leave, those soldiers are empowering that man to crazy levels," she frantically whispered, blood running down her mouth.

"I know," Zac said with a shrug as he turned back toward the man who finally had turned his eyes toward him.

"Who are you? The punishment for interfering in my divine judgment is death," he angrily said as he charged up another chaotic jumble in his hands.

Zac only snorted in response as he tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on his enemy. Unfortunately it failed, apart from showing the man's standing on the ladder. And this person was actually on the fourteenth spot on the Hunter Ladder. This man was clearly a rabid animal from his ranking and attitude. Anyone that high up must have started killing people from the get-go, rather than hunting for treasures.

Now that Zac had the time to properly look at the attack he felt somewhat certain it was a mix of two Daos, mainly something related to wind and something earth-related, which explained the colors. Perhaps the mixing of Daos representing gaseous and solid matter was making the resulting attack extremely unstable, turning it into a bomb.

"I'm guessing you're one of the Medhin?" Zac said as he cracked his neck. "Leave your Cosmos Sack and crush your token, and I'll allow you to leave."

The young man blankly stared for a few seconds until he started to wildly laugh. Meanwhile, the soldiers behind him started to radiate an unrestrained killing intent that could almost match Zac's own. These people truly seemed to be fanatics judging by how angry they became from Zac's comment.

"Allow me to leave? My will is the divine will, only the Great Lord can tell me what to do," he said, infusing his skill with far more power.

However, by now Zac had managed to infuse all the Cosmic Energy he needed into his forearm, and the space above the young man shattered.

“Shield!” one of the captains immediately roared, and a thick golden glow enveloped the young man before the wooden hand even had time to emerge half-way.

But the young royal wasn't the target of the hand as it emerged with lightning speed and slammed down right in the middle of the sitting army. They had a sturdy shield as well, but it wasn't enough to block **[Nature's Punishment]** infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

A tremendous sound echoed out from the mountain, and it almost seemed the gargantuan hand would crack the summit in two. Over two-thirds of the soldiers were turned into meat paste from the attack, and most of the others were wounded or dying from the shockwave.

“You!” the young man roared in anger, but before he had time to react Zac was upon him with determination in his eyes.

“Lord Tyrbat!” one of the soldiers shouted and once again tried to start up the infusion of power.

But suddenly his throat was cut right open and he started to bleed out with widened eyes. The same scene happened amongst most of the living soldiers, and they fell one by one.

Meanwhile Zac swung his axe down imbued with the Dao of Sharpness, the edge aiming straight for the young man's head. Madness was evident in Tyrbat's eyes, and he redirected the attack he'd charged up to intercept Zac's strike.

Zac's swing was like a flash of lightning, cutting straight through the attack, releasing torrential energies all over him. Zac activated a defensive charge from his robe the last second and the axe kept going straight down. But Tyrbat had excellent reflexes and nimbly dodged, displaying great speed even without the help of the War Array.

Zac didn't want to relent though and immediately followed up with another strike. Unfortunately one of the rings on the man's hands lit up and a shield activated that actually managed

to block Zac's strike. Meanwhile Tyrbat took out a radiant sphere from his Cosmos Sack.

The ball's glow quickly increased in intensity, reminding Zac of the Lightning Punishment Arrays he still had in his possession. Zac didn't want to let his enemy let this thing go off and desperately tried to swing at the man. But once again a second ring on his hands lit up, creating another impenetrable shield. Meanwhile, a brown shimmer covered the whole body of the Medhin royal.

The next moment the ball exploded, and Zac pushed backward to avoid the blast zone, but his face still got singed by the heat. The next moment another much louder explosion erupted behind him, and he turned around to see that the royal had appeared right between Thea and her downed bodyguard, wildly laughing.

Something had detonated the moment he arrived as he stood in the middle of a crater, but he himself was unhurt. The brown shimmer around him was likely another defensive measure to protect himself while he let the bomb explode right in his hands. It was an extremely effective tactic, as the other two were far worse off than Zac. If the bodyguard wasn't dead before, he surely was now, as half of his body was blasted into nothingness.

Thea was still alive, though she barely managed to stay conscious. Judging by the less damaged floor beneath her feet she had used some defensive skill or talisman to mitigate the effect of the attack. But clearly it was only partly effective since her wounds had gotten much more serious.

Zac grunted and set off again with **[Loamwalker]** keeping his eyes peeled for any treasure Tyrbat took out. The man was trying to kill them with his massive wealth it looked like, and he couldn't let this go on. He swung his axe horizontally, once again imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness. A bracelet on the man's hands flashed into life once again, and he briefly turned translucent, letting the blade cut right through him.

However, Zac was ready with a follow up as he threw a staggered punch empowered with Heaviness right at the man's

face. The effect of the ring was limited, and luckily enough it ran out just before the fist reached his head. A tremendous punch hit the man straight in his temple, slamming him straight down into the ground with enough force to make the ground shake.

Normally his head should have been splattered all over the ground, but somehow he was still conscious, though barely. Zac wouldn't stop here, and chopped down with finality.

“IMPOSSIBLE!” the man screamed as torrential amounts of cosmic energy gathered around him.

But Zac had seen so many last-ditch attacks by now that he didn't even flinch, and with a resounding slam decapitated the young royal. Zac checked his ladder as he was inundated with energy from the kill, and wasn't too surprised to see that he had risen considerably in rankings, actually reaching top 10 on the Hunter ladder.

He briefly wondered what troubles would come from killing one of the top rankers of the other world. The soldier had called him Lord Tyrbat, and Zac remembered he held the 9th spot at the ladder, being level 69.

He was likely one of the weaker family members of the Medhin family, but he was still a dangerous opponent. Not necessarily through his own power, but through his army and his treasures. If Zac hadn't been able to kill off most of the soldiers boosting Tyrbat it would likely have been a far tougher fight.

The fact that one of the royals possessed a private army to empower them meant that it was likely the same with the others. In the beginning he thought that only the Dominators and perhaps the emperors would pose a threat, but perhaps that wasn't the whole picture.

A wet cough refocused Zac's attention to Thea who was arduously getting up to a sitting position. Zac threw a last glance at the dead royal before heading over to her. She warily frowned when she saw his approach, but relaxed when she saw him take out a vial.

“A top-grade healing pill,” Zac said and threw it over.

Thea hesitated a bit before she caught the vial and took out a pill. She swallowed it after looking it over, nodding toward Zac.

“Thank you,” she simply said as she closed her eyes to focus on recuperation.

Chapter 219: Alliance

Zac surveyed the battlefield and finally walked over to the corpse of the Medhin member. He was still decked in all kinds of expensive-looking rings and amulets, and Zac unceremoniously threw the body into his sack so that he could look over them later.

He already knew from before that the Medhin had monopolized all the best stuff from their empire, and the power of the rings proved that the man's equipment might be even better than Zac's own.

Next, he walked through the whole army, looking at each and everyone for anything that could be of value. Only the things inside the sacks were transferred over automatically upon a kill, but not the things on their bodies. But it seemed there wasn't really anything of interest.

Finally, he walked over to the downed bodyguard. A large part of his torso was completely ripped off, leaving a gristly wound as he blankly stared up at the sky. Zac sighed and bent down to close his eyes, before turning his attention to the shield that lay not too far from him.

It was a different one from the shield he saw this man wear at the auction, and it was clearly of high quality. It was slightly dented but otherwise in good condition. That was saying something because Zac had felt the power of the strikes even when he was down on the stairs. It wasn't the shield that failed, but the user's endurance was simply insufficient to bear the power of Tyrbat.

He walked over to the shield and lifted it up, and found it was extremely heavy, making it feel like he was holding a huge boulder. It was also quite large, covering everything from his head down to his knees when he held it up. He could also see that it had a string of fractals that ran all over the inside of it.

It might not be a Spiritual Tool like he wanted, but it was far superior to anything he possessed at the moment and would have no problem surviving through the quest to block 5 000 attacks. Unfortunately he'd found out that he couldn't advance the quests in his human form. Otherwise he could have finished it by running down the mountain to the beasts for a couple of hours.

It turned out that his class quests only were active while he actually had his class, so he would need to turn back into an undead before working on them. However, that posed a bit of a problem at the moment.

It was far easier to turn back to a human for Zac at the moment since Miasma was both the source of life and fighting strength for an undead. It was different for a Human though.

Expending all his Cosmic Energy wouldn't have any other effect than completely exhausting him and making him a bit nauseated.

He had a theory that he might be able to turn back into an undead by bleeding himself out since that should empty him of all his vitality. But he wasn't in the mood to try that out unless at back at home with someone to watch over him. Also, there might be other restrictions in place, such as how often he could turn.

However, even though the shield would be useful to him he didn't put it in his bag. It belonged to the Marshall clan, and the man lying next to him had sacrificed his life to protect Thea from an attack. Perhaps she would be unwilling to hand it over.

"Just take it," Thea suddenly said without opening her eyes, making Zac's brows rise.

Was the woman a psychic? His eyes slightly thinned and he looked over to the girl calmly sitting ten meters away from him. In response, she opened her eyes and leveled her piercing blue stare toward him.

"You were stomping around like a rhino, I heard what you were doing," she calmly said added before closing her eyes again.

Zac didn't comment, but simply put the shield into his bag. Since he'd looted the battlefield it was time for Zac to go over the spoils, so he focused his attention on his Cosmos Sack.

When he looked inside he was shocked to see the amount of stuff inside. There was a huge tent along with all kinds of foods and delicacies, and an enormous amount of pelts and pillows. The army must each have taken a part of the camp with them to bring it all, as not even Zac himself could carry that much stuff.

"Just how did these people find each other so quickly?" Zac muttered to himself.

"They just needed to touch when they got teleported and they'd end up at the same place. The tutorial pixies told everyone that, have you forgotten?" Thea said in response without opening her eyes.

"Well, I didn't go to the tutorial, so no one told me," Zac said with a shrug.

"What? You're a mortal?" she said, her eyes opening in shock. "Then why are you so strong?"

"Lucky, I guess," Zac muttered as he gazed upon the palace at the other side of the summit.

It was both larger and in better shape compared to the palace he entered on the last mountain, which might hint that the protections in place were superior as well. He could only hope that it was somehow calibrated to a reasonable strength. Otherwise he would have to scale the mountain somehow to reach the hidden gardens.

But he had a strong feeling there were protections in place against that in place, which is why he went up the mountain the normal way in the first place. He wouldn't do any mountain climbing unless he had to. But suddenly he was dragged out of his thoughts as he noticed Thea was glaring at him with red eyes.

"Uh, are you okay?" Zac hesitantly said, afraid that she wanted her shield back.

“Every day,” said with a hollow voice. “Every day I’ve fought with my life on the line, one battle after another. Just so that I can protect my family and humanity. But I couldn’t even save John. Instead, he had to sacrifice himself to keep me alive.”

Zac didn’t know what to say and only looked at Thea with some sadness in his eyes. He knew just how it was to feel powerless. Every day the first month on the island he’d spent sleepless nights being overcome with despair, not knowing whether he’d ever get off the island alive, or whether his family was alive.

“Meanwhile you just keep getting stronger, increasing the distance between yourself and the rest of us. We thought you might have gained a top grade cultivation manual from the tutorial, as that was the only thing that could explain it. But it turns out you’re not even a cultivator,” she said as she looked up at him with tears of frustration pooling in her eyes.

Zac coughed, a bit uncomfortable from the intensity of the stare. To avoid it he walked around to her back and placed his hand on her shoulder. She immediately tensed up and shot a glare at him in response.

“I have the Dao of Trees, and it has healing properties. It will speed up the process with absorbing the pill,” he explained as he infused the Dao into her through his hand.

After feeling that nothing was amiss with the energies she relaxed again and refocused on healing. The silence felt a bit uncomfortable after her outburst so he started to talk about what came to his mind.

“When the integration happened I was camping with my girlfriend and three others, but it turned out all four of them were cultivators. The patch of forest we were in got moved, placing me alone on a remote island together with an Incursion. That Incursion was both a curse and blessing. It made my life a living hell, but closing it also gave me a bunch of advantages,” Zac explained as he kept infusing her with the Dao of Trees.

“You singlehandedly closed an incursion?” she asked with shock and couldn’t help to glance back at him.

“Well, after their leaders were dead the rest decided to leave,” Zac said with a shrug, not bothering to explain the details.

Thea thoughtfully looked down, before once again closing her eyes to focus on recuperation. Zac helped speed up the healing process for roughly ten minutes before she opened her eyes again.

“...Thank you. For saving me,” she said with some difficulty on her face before she got to her feet with some effort. “Ok, let’s go.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion.

“I’ll have to inconvenience you for a bit while I heal,” she said as matter of fact.

Zac mutely stared at her, his eyes not able to stop darting toward the palace a couple of times. Bringing a seriously wounded person along would greatly impact his gathering speed. There was also the issue that he might have to bear the blunt of the defensive arrays activating twice.

Thea clearly understood what he was thinking about since a sharp aura started to radiate out from her.

“You’re thinking I’ll be a nuisance,” she said with some anger building. “I might be hurt but I was still able to finish off all the soldiers you missed. Besides, I have many useful skills.”

“I mean you almost died just now. Perhaps going back to recuperate might be a better idea?” Zac hesitantly said. “Earth is full of opportunities and strong enemies to fight as well. Going back like this isn’t the worst.”

“And miss out on the free levels and titles?” she said, her anger reaching a crescendo. “Fine, you don’t need to waste your precious time, just go on ahead without me.”

“All right, all right,” Zac sighed. “Let’s just go. There’s a hidden garden in the back of that palace. I think it might contain aged Spiritual Herbs. We might find something that will help heal you faster as well.”

Thea’s eyes lit up at the mention of Spiritual Herbs, and Zac could understand the reaction. Even though the System was

flooding Earth with Cosmic Energy there were very few proper herbs still around. Furthermore, those that were growing were still extremely young and not too potent. It was one of the areas that Earth was lacking the most at the moment.

Since they were done here Zac started walking toward the palace, but after some hesitation he ran back and brought the identifiable corpses as well. At first he planned to leave them as a warning that this mountain was occupied in case anyone else arrived, but it might actually backfire and attract one of the stronger Medhin royals.

Since he was accompanied by Thea who was still in very bad shape even after eating a top grade pill he had to lower his speed, giving Zac the opportunity to ask some questions.

“So you know that I fight with axes. I’m not really good at things other than hitting things and getting hit,” he said, eliciting a small smile from his new companion. “What kind of class do you have?”

Thea hesitated for a bit before answering.

“I guess you could say my class is a mix of a ranger and assassin. I mainly focus on battle as well, but I have some investigative skills,” she said.

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. He and Ogras already suspected she was some sort of assassin class after she managed to cut the demon’s throat without either of the two really seeing what happened.

“Stay close to me when we enter the palace, the arrays will probably be pretty dangerous,” Zac said as he activated his defensive skill preemptively.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she replied with a huff, but she still moved slightly closer as they approached the entrance.

As soon as Zac pushed open the door he was met with a wall of earthy smells from a wide variety of herbs and fauna. It felt as though every pore in his body was revitalized just from breathing, and his eyes lit up in excitement. There were good things in this palace for sure.

He was about to step inside to test the waters, but a hand grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing? Are you just entering?” Thea asked like she was looking at a fool.

“Well, yeah? What’s your idea?” Zac asked.

He’d already ascertained that it wasn’t possible to test the arrays with corpses, and he didn’t believe Thea was an array expert.

“Just wait for a second,” she said as her eyes closed.

The next moment a chromatic field appeared in front of them. Zac looked over to Thea with confusion and noted she had paled a bit.

“It’s a poison array. Breathing isn’t necessary to get poisoned, it will be able to enter through our pores,” she said with a frown.

Zac glanced over with surprise. It seemed she had a really handy skill for scouting things out. But since he knew it was a poison array he wasn’t too worried. He took out a vial of black pills whose smell made his nose-hair curl up.

“What the hell? Is that feces?” Thea said with wide eyes, taking a few steps away.

Zac only shook his head and swallowed one of the pills with a grimace.

Chapter 220: Jackpot

Thea looked at him aghast, seemingly not able to comprehend what was happening.

“It’s an antidote pill,” Zac said as he paled a bit. “Or rather a poison pill that blocks other poisons. Kind of fight fire with fire. Do you need one?”

It was something he’d gotten after Alea poisoned him. It wasn’t specifically to protect against her, but he felt he needed some precautions. He’d been poisoned without even noticing it, and there wasn’t much he could do about it after the fact.

Unfortunately, pills that gave immunity to most poisons were extremely expensive. What he swallowed instead was actually a mild poison. It gave similar effects to food poisoning, but that wasn’t why he took it.

The poison also had the effect that it blocked up his pores, essentially stopping most poison to enter through the air or touch. It was a much cheaper alternative to the antidotes and a popular addition to most wandering cultivator’s survival kits.

“I’d rather get poisoned than eat that,” Thea said with disgust, instead taking out a hazmat suit.

Zac looked upon it with interest. It looked like it was made before the integration, but someone had added rudimentary inscriptions to it. It was clear that the Marhsall Clan hadn’t been idle, but rather making inroads in all sorts of things.

“Prototype Hazmat suit,” Thea said with some pride after seeing Zac’s gaze. “The fractals protect against tears and makes the material even less porous. It stops most particles from passing through. It was made by our research department not long ago. ”

“Pretty impressive,” Zac muttered as he tried to ignore his churning stomach.

He didn't want to stay any longer and walked right into the array after taking a deep breath. Due to whatever Thea did with her skill it was extremely clear where the array started and where it stopped. However, something unexpected happened after the two were in the middle of the array.

A tremendous pressure descended upon them, actually forcing Zac down on his knees. Thea was far worse off and immediately was pushed down prone on the ground. There was another hidden array that she had missed.

Its effect was exactly the same as his Gravity array back at the academy, but its effect was supercharged. It was so bad that Thea was barely able to breathe, only able to take in shallow breaths. It was a simple but effective combination. A poison that could kill any trespassers, and a gravity array to keep the trespassers inside the poison until they had to breathe.

Zac arduously got back on his feet, the veins in his head almost popping from the strain. The ground cracked under his weight, and it felt like he was carrying a mountain just by standing up. He slowly walked over to the prone Thea, who helplessly looked up.

Zac bent down with a grunt, but he was actually unable to lift her. He had enough problems keeping himself up, and it was just impossible to add the weight of another to the tally. The extreme exertion from standing inside the gravity array was also quickly depleting his oxygen, and he was already feeling the need to breathe.

Zac shook his head and quickly walked back outside, all the while feeling the burning gaze of Thea. He quickly released his breath and took a new mouthful of air as he looked around before activating [**Hatchetman's Fury**].

He hadn't expected to need to use his boost skill for something like this, but there wasn't much to do about it. He would just have to lay low for a bit afterward. Violent impulses started to emerge in his mind as he gained a considerable boost in power, but he forcefully pushed them down.

He took another deep breath of air and walked inside the arrays once again. This time he had no problem to walk since

he'd gained almost 100 additional strength from the activation of the skill. It even looked like the poisonous air was pushed away by the power billowing out from his body.

He soon found Thea again, who hesitantly held her token in her hand while still stuck to the ground. But when she saw Zac reappear her eyes slightly widened and she put away the token once again. Zac didn't comment, but only went down and lifted her up from the ground with a grunt.

He hurriedly walked further inside the temple, but it was clear that this array was far thicker than the one he passed on the other mountain. Some nervousness started to build as the seconds passed. If he was still inside the array when the buff ran out he might be in trouble since he wouldn't be able to move due to the period of weakness.

However, luckily his fears were unfounded as he finally felt the huge pressure lift, almost making him fall over. Zac let Thea down and she plopped down on the ground and panted heavily. Zac couldn't really see through the hazmat suit, but he couldn't imagine being put through so much pressure could be good for her wounds.

"Are you okay?" he hesitantly asked.

"I'll be fine," Thea said. "Thank you for coming back."

"It's fine, I just needed to take a new breath," Zac answered, but immediately after he paled and coughed a couple of times.

"Are you poisoned?" Thea asked with worry as she stood up.

"No, I'm fine. I just overextended myself a bit," Zac said with a sigh as he took out a normal healing pill.

The pills helped somewhat with the aftereffects from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, but in the end it was limited since he wasn't hurt, but rather expended. However, it was better than nothing, and Zac wanted to stay in as good shape as possible even if he needed to waste some resources.

Besides, it helped alleviate the effects of the poison pill, which might be equally important since he wasn't in the mood to poop his pants in front of a girl.

Thea looked at him with somewhat of a frown, but she didn't comment as she took off her Hazmat suit. Zac looked around while she was busy, and he finally noticed they had entered what looked like paradise.

It felt like they were inside one of some botanical gardens, with a wide variety of fantastical plants and flowers. The courtyard was an explosion of color and smells, almost enough to dizzy the senses. However, Zac could conclude after a brief look that these flowers weren't Spiritual Herbs, but rather mortal flora.

He'd somewhat expected an alchemist or poison master to have high-grade flowers for decorations, but perhaps it was bad for the Cosmic Energy density. In any case, it was a beautiful scene, and Zac and Thea leisurely walked along the path toward the building proper.

Zac felt it was a bit confusing why the garden looked so pristine. It was the complete opposite to the run-down temples of the first mountain. He realized he'd just assumed that there would be no native people around due to how everything looked when he first arrived, but what if that wasn't the case?

They might very well have just barged in on some poison master's private property. Zac started to get a sinking feeling as he warily looked around, trying to rouse his weakened body. A sudden rustle made Zac unhesitantly activate **[Nature's Barrier]**, startling Thea into a defensive posture as well.

A second later they saw a figure slowly approach them. However, it's appearance was a bit unexpected, making Zac slightly lower his guard. It was a run-down golem that was currently carrying a bucket of water and a pair of shears.

"Hello? Do you live here?" Zac hesitantly asked.

However, the golem completely ignored the two until it sat down some distance from them and started tending a hedge. Zac and Thea observed it for a bit longer and tried various means to communicate with it. However, the golem completely ignored them while it tended to its task with great meticulousness.

“I don’t think it’s sapient,” Thea hesitantly said after they had observed its actions for a bit longer.

“Might be like a servant robot or something?” Zac agreed.

“That would explain why the place still looks nice.”

“Yeah, but that might mean there are guard robots as well,”

Thea said with a frown. “Are you in condition to fight?”

“Not at full force for the time being,” Zac admitted. “But as long as any defenders aren’t past early E-Grade I’ll be able to handle it.”

“Monster,” Thea muttered in annoyance.

Even though there were golems working in the garden they didn’t stop. The enticement of ancient Spiritual Herbs was just too big to ignore. Luckily they were completely unaccosted as they walked into the palace, with the golems actually bowing and moving out of the way as they passed.

The insides were well-tended as well, with well-oiled furniture and potted flowers creating a cozy atmosphere. Zac’s fingers started to itch when he saw all the high-quality furniture and decorations. But next his eyes hesitantly switched to a golem that was currently sweeping the floor.

“Do you think the golems would care if I took the furniture?” Zac said.

“The furniture? Why would you want that?” Thea asked with confusion. “When John and I checked the last mountain they barely had any value.”

“Well, I still haven’t decorated my place,” Zac said, drawing a raised brow from Thea. “I mean I’ve been busy with closing incursions and stuff.”

“I don’t think it’s worth risking getting hounded by a bunch of robots so that you can get a new ottoman for your guest room,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll just pick them up on the way out,” Zac muttered under his breath. “Rich people don’t know how to be thrifty.”

“Robbing someone’s home is being thrifty?” Thea snorted.

“And last time I checked you’ve been in the first spot of the

Wealth ladder since day one, no matter how much you spent at the Auction. We know for a fact that Thomas Fischer held over 100 million Nexus coins for a brief moment, but even that wasn't enough to overtake you.”

Zac looked over surprised. One hundred million coins weren't peanuts, and it was pretty impressive that the Government Leader managed to get a hold of that much.

“How do you know that?” Zac asked curiously.

“Spies and having people keeping constant watch of the ladders,” Thea said with a shrug as she walked through a doorway into a large dining area. “The government mapped out everyone's wealth by increasing Thomas' wealth incrementally a few days after the Auction. Of course, you're an exception since they couldn't pass your wealth.”

“That's a pretty smart idea,” Zac said with praise.

“It doesn't work with factions like my family or a few of the other independent established forces. We spread out our Nexus Coins, apart from Grandpa who decided to put himself at the top ten of the Wealth ladder as a show of strength,” Thea added she looked around for any hidden compartments or treasures.

“Wait, another array,” Thea suddenly said as she stopped in front of a nondescript door.

Zac curiously walked over, trying to gain any insight from what might be inside from the door, but it truly looked just like any other door in this place. They had opened a few of them and most were just guest rooms or even empty.

“Can you see what type?” Zac asked as he looked at it.

“Pure defensive shield, we need to find the weak spots in order to-“ Thea started explaining, but was interrupted by Zac punching the shield with enough force to kill an elephant, causing some tremors in the building.

The array cracked like a mirror, giving the two access to the room within.

“You fool, what if you alert all the golems?” Thea said as she agitatedly looked around, the air around her humming.

Zac noticed the odd phenomenon and remembered his and Ogras’ discussions about Thea’s weapon. There was likely some sort of daggers swiveling around her at all times, providing both offense and defense at any time. It was worth remembering, as that meant he could be attacked at moment’s notice, though Zac doubted Thea would do something like that from their interactions.

“It worked didn’t it?” Zac said with a small smile and pushed open the door.

However, he didn’t step inside, and instead only looked at the room with a gaping mouth. Thea walked up next to him and her face soon mirrored his own.

“Jackpot!”

Chapter 221: Public Enemy

Number One

Zac had called the palace the Alchemist Palace in his mind, and this room was a final confirmation that he'd been right on the money. It was clear that they had found an alchemist's workshop.

Thick bundles of herbs were hanging from the roof, and they were likely the cause of the thick scent in the room. Unfortunately they looked completely dried out, and it was unclear whether there was any medicinal efficacy left in them. Along the walls were a few tables full of scrolls and crystals, perhaps containing recipes or experiment notes. There were also vials all over the place, from on shelves to strewn on the ground.

However, the clearest indicator that this truly was an alchemist's workshop was the large lidded cauldron in the middle of the room. It was half a meter high and circular, had four stout legs that lifted it a few decimeters up in the air, and there were intricate engravings covering the whole thing from top to bottom.

Cauldrons were used by an overwhelming majority of all alchemists when producing pills, and many were even more expensive than Spiritual Tools. Zac had heard of a few master alchemists who didn't need them any longer and were able to form pills by only using their Cosmic Energy and skills, but these masters were an extremely small minority. Besides, even if those people could concoct pills without a cauldron they would probably still use it for their more important crafts.

The purpose of cauldrons was to make the pill-making process easier and could contain all sorts of inscriptions for this purpose. They could improve heat control, gather Cosmic Energy to infuse into the pills, or just have all kinds of

measures to stabilize the highly volatile process of extracting the useful components from herbs.

The cauldron looked quite extravagant, but Zac didn't have the knowledge to appraise it. He immediately wanted to step inside, but suddenly stopped and hesitantly looked over at Thea.

"How do we decide the split?" Zac asked.

Unless they reached an accord their cooperation would quickly crumble.

"You saved my life, so I won't take anything from this mountain," Thea said, not seeming to care the slightest about the loss of treasure. "If we find something that will help me heal I'd like it though."

"You sure?" Zac said, not being able to help to become slightly suspicious. "You really don't want anything from all this?"

"It's just the first day, there are so many mountains to loot. Losing out on one isn't the end," Thea said as she threw Zac a look of disdain. "Paranoia isn't a good look, by the way."

Zac scratched his chin a bit embarrassed. Ogras and the recent events had indeed made him a bit more paranoid. But after being stabbed by both a Janos impersonator and his ex he felt a healthy amount of paranoia was a bit warranted. You never knew when a dagger was coming for you, and he might not be lucky and turn into his Draugr form next time.

But he also knew that Thea had a stellar reputation. From what he'd gathered during his travels he learned she was known as a lone warrior who didn't play politics. She only focused on getting stronger and defeating the foreign invaders, which garnered a lot of respect in Kingsbury.

Of course, that was just the public image. There were so many hypocrites in the world who worked hard to keep a certain appearance to the public when they were snakes in reality. However, Zac didn't get that impression from the girl next to him and felt that the public perception was pretty close to reality.

He didn't have any good response to what she said and instead quickly walked inside the workshop. The room had an extremely dense smell of herbs and pills, making Zac wonder just how many pills had been created in this small room.

He wasted no time and went through the room like a hurricane. Zac left nothing behind, not even the empty vials. Even the tables and bookshelves went into the sack, making Zac smile in glee. Only when he'd swept everything apart from the Cauldron into his pouch did he stop and check his ladder position.

From looting a hundred corpses outside and the workshop Zac had jumped up all the way to the 27th spot on the gatherer ladder. It wasn't actually as high as he'd expected since this was the second summit palace he looted. It looked like many others had caught lucky breaks.

Next, he put the Cauldron into his sack, and he was shocked to see that he jumped all the way to the 5th position. It was clear that the cauldron was a true treasure in the eyes of the system, likely above anything he'd found so far. He couldn't help but look over at Thea, who only calmly looked at him wearing his money-crazed grin.

"Looks like the Cauldron was a good thing. The Marshall clan would like to buy it at a later date if you find no use for it," she said with an even voice.

"I'll keep it in mind," Zac said.

He currently didn't have anyone that focused on alchemy back home, but perhaps that was only a matter of time. People with side professions would likely pop up sooner or later on his island. From what he understood some people started to focus on other things apart from their class at higher grades.

It became increasingly arduous to level up, and gaining all the levels in the E-Grade Class was expected to take a couple of decades. And even after that there was the extremely difficult bottleneck of reaching the D-Grade Class that could keep people stuck for hundreds of years or the rest of their lives.

If one only focused on the same Daos or breaking through the bottleneck you'd go crazy over time, so people found other pursuits to relax their minds or gain new inspirations.

Sometimes those hobbies became such a large part of their lives that they actually changed over from being a warrior to focusing on things such as arrays or blacksmithing instead.

The two kept looking through every nook and cranny of the house, but they couldn't find anything else of value inside. Thea even used some sort of scouting skill to look for hidden passages or arrays that might indicate spots with value, but she couldn't find anything.

Finally they went out the back, that also had a beautiful garden. Zac couldn't help but look over at the golem who was raking a path, wondering if he should try throwing them into his pouch as well. It would be great to have a couple of these things on his compound to beautify and maintain the place without him having to worry about spies or assassins among them.

Soon they reached the edge of the garden, and behind it was an almost completely vertical cliff. Zac could see the mountain he started at from this vantage, meaning that the garden he saw cut into the mountain should be right below him.

He started to scrutinize the cliff, even peering over it to find any method to get down there. But the wall was completely sheer, not providing any opportunities to get down. The only method he could think of was to use a couple of weapons to create footholds as he traversed the mountain down. But even with his monstrous attributes he was a bit leery about that idea.

"What are you doing?" Thea asked curiously after seeing his antics for a while.

"I started on that mountain over there," Zac pointed. "I saw there was a hidden garden cut into the mountain itself. I suspect the good things are kept there. But I can't find any way down, so I'm thinking of cutting footholds into the mountain to get down."

"Well, there might not be any path down if the original owner was a D-Grade Alchemist. They can fly with the help of

Cosmic Energy, after all,” Thea said after mulling it over.

“What, really? All of them?” Zac said looking back at Thea with excitement.

“Well, yeah, from what the Tutorial pixies inferred at least,” Thea said with a nod. “They used it as an enticement to get stronger and take the more difficult trials. Some classes might gain skills on E-Grade that could help them fly as well, but that usually expends energy very quickly.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Zac commented, before resuming scrutinizing the wall.

“Wait, over there,” Thea said, pointing at a large tree.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion after looking over.

It looked normal and was the same as a couple of similar ones they’d seen in the back yard.

“Something is odd about it, but I can’t put my finger on it,” she said after some hesitation.

Zac had some faith in Thea’s scouting abilities by now and immediately walked over to the tree. He hesitated for a second before he touched it, but he didn’t feel anything odd about it. He’d first thought that it might be an illusion array or fake tree, but he knew he was touching real bark.

“The leaves!” Thea suddenly exclaimed. “Why are the leaves already falling on this tree? The leaves on the other trees had just started to turn red. Besides, why is it so close to the edge? Shouldn’t the ground beneath us be solid stone? Otherwise, the cliff would collapse.”

Zac looked up, and it was true. The tree truly differed from the others in that sense. It was an odd mystery, but it didn’t really help him in finding a way down to the garden. Zac had an idea though and closed his eyes while keeping contact with the tree.

Only seconds later his eyes opened with surprise. It was truly a tree, but it was actually hollow. It appeared the owner had somehow grown a hidden pathway inside the tree itself, but that caused it to not be as healthy as the other trees in the mansion. He jumped up a couple of meters and looked inside,

and actually found a hidden staircase leading down into the darkness.

“There are stairs leading down,” Zac said with excitement as he peered down at the waiting Thea.

This was like a real-life treasure hunt, and Zac couldn't help but forget the cruel battles that would take place over the coming month. This was something that many kids would dream of finding while playing in the woods. A magical staircase inside a tree leading to hidden treasure.

“I'll stay here and recuperate,” Thea said as she sat down under the tree.

Zac was a bit surprised and looked down at her, and finally noticed she was noticeably paler compared to before, and she had deep rings under her eyes. The excitement of finding treasure had made him forget she almost died an hour ago, and she was far from healed. But even then she hadn't complained and even expended Cosmic Energy to look for hidden spaces.

“Okay, I'll be back soon,” Zac said as he walked inside the staircase with some shame. Hopefully, he'd find something down in the gardens that could help with her condition.

The hidden path was pitch black and cramped, and Zac missed the foothold only after a couple of steps.

“SHIT!” he screamed as he tumbled down the stairs until he managed to grab hold of the wall.

“Are you okay?” He heard from above and looked up to see Thea peering inside the trunk.

“I just missed the steps, don't worry. Talk to you later,” Zac said with some embarrassment and hurried down.

Soon he found himself at the bottom of the staircase, and it clearly led out to the hidden garden. But he hesitated whether he should just exit. In a very short time he'd grown accustomed Thea's observational skills, and was a bit leery to just brute force it.

But soon he regained his courage as he smelled the extremely intoxicating herbal aroma coming from the garden outside. He

grit his teeth and exited, his defensive skills working to their fullest. But he breathed out when nothing happened, and he could get a proper look on the garden for the first time.

He realized it would be more appropriate to call it fields rather than gardens, as the area was clearly demarked into four Zones growing three different kinds of Spiritual Herbs. There likely had once been four, but one of the fields was completely barren.

Interestingly enough the soil in all four of them differed as well, and when he walked through the fields it was as though he was transported to various topographies. The first field had pitch-black soil with a hint of blue, and it grew something that looked like bamboo.

The bamboo poles weren't actually that tall, only reaching roughly five meters in height. But they weren't green like those on earth, and instead had a light blue color. More importantly, they emitted an intensely cold aura, and his hand was actually getting frostbite just after touching one for a few seconds.

He pondered a bit on what to do as he looked at the trees before taking out his axe. The correct handling of Spiritual Herbs was an art, and some herbs could lose much of its efficacy by incorrect harvesting. But he didn't really have any options apart from doing it as carefully and quickly as possible.

One by one he cut the bamboo trunks down and immediately put them into his pouch before they had the chance to leak any energy, and in just 10 minutes the whole field was harvested. He even rounded up most of the soil and threw it inside as well, since it seemed to be a big part of why the small area felt like a glacier.

Like this Zac covered the whole hidden garden like a locust, and when he was done only four pits remained. Zac looked around for any more hidden passages, but it appeared this was it. But he wasn't dissatisfied with the returns, just the opposite.

He'd soared all the way to the first spot on the Gatherer list, and in a sense became public enemy number one.

Chapter 222: Herbs and Pills

The other fields held very different types of herbs compared to the first one. The second field he harvested felt blazing hot like he stood in the middle of a desert or on the edge of a volcano. The herb growing there looked like a small bush that grew up to three intensely red fruits.

The third field had dirt that was far heavier than lead, and it took some effort to dig out the odd brown roots from within the ground. But when he managed to extract them they emitted strong energies that reminded Zac of the Divine Crystals, though they seemed more vibrant somehow.

If he had to make a comparison of the two, then the life-attuned energy in the Divine Crystals felt more synthetic, whereas the energy from the root vegetables felt like a genuine article. It was similar to his Lotus Seed, though these roots didn't seem quite as good.

The last field, and the empty one, seemed to once have been a paddy. But there was a crack in the mountain that had created an outlet for the water inside, making the paddy dry out. Perhaps when calamity struck this sect the events inadvertently ruined this field through shockwaves.

Another possibility was that the area was prone to earthquakes. He'd noticed a jagged scar in the ground from the first summit. It didn't look like something that was made from an attack, like the swing of the axe-man in his vision, but rather the movement of a tectonic plate. Perhaps an earthquake had erupted that was strong enough to crack these reinforced mountains.

For the last field, he simply took all the dried mud that lay in the bottom of the paddy, hoping that there would be some dormant seeds inside that could be used to regrow whatever

once grew there. It was pretty clear to Zac that the field was based on four different elements, Fire, Ice, Earth, and water.

Why these four specifically Zac didn't know, but if he had to guess the four herbs could combine to a good pill. He didn't think the previous owner of this place would go to the trouble to create four distinct fields and grow the herbs together if they weren't supposed to get mixed into something.

That was the biggest reason he took all the dried mud. He was currently missing one of the ingredients, and whatever the alchemist of this mountain had planned probably needed all four of them.

He was no expert in Spiritual Herbs, but after sensing the energies they contained he would say that each of them was a Top Grade E-Ranked Spirit Herb. Or perhaps they were just extremely high quality Normal E-Ranked herbs that were overflowing with energy due to being left alone for so long.

It made him think of the Mystic Realm back at Port Atwood. If things could grow this spectacular over a couple of thousand of years, who knew what grew inside a pocket of space that might have been isolated for millions of years.

But while the herbs were great, in the end, they couldn't compare to things like the Lotus of Harmony. That thing was D-Graded, and it felt like it was on a completely other level compared to these things he just harvested.

The fact that he was boosted to the top of the gatherer list also was an indicator that the herbs likely weren't just F-Graded. As he walked up the cramped steps to the summit again he looked through the ladder to check what else was going on.

There were a few other notable names on the Gatherer Ladder. Emperor Nenotheop was on the third spot, and there was another of their family, Repubat Medhin, in the top ten. The second spot actually belonged to his world as well, as Starlight held that position.

The fourth position was held by the top champion who resisted the Medhin Empire, Beruv Ylvas. The last names on the top ten ladder were completely unknown to Zac, making him

believe they were simply random people who had gotten lucky and gotten their hands on something great.

The Hunter ladder, in turn, was quite different compared to the gatherer list at the moment, but Zac suspected that they would harmonize soon enough.

Killing people didn't bring in a lot of loot at the moment, but that would change after a week or two after people had visited more mountains. But some clearly was actively striving to push themselves on the Hunter ladder, and unfortunately, he saw a name he recognized in the top three; Inevitability.

He had hoped that the System would limit the event to F-grade people, barring the Dominators from entering. That would likely have made him the strongest person inside. But seeing both the Emperor and Inevitability on their respective ladders showed that was just a pipe dream.

Apart from Inevitability, he recognized another of the three strongest Dominators in the top five amongst the hunters, an Anointed who called himself Harbinger. Fortunately, the top name amongst the Dominators, Void's Disciple, wasn't on the list. Perhaps that meant only two of the top 3 names were present at the hunt, which would be a small blessing.

In fact, the two suspected Dominators weren't the only Zhix on the Hunter list, as Zac saw that a good half of the top ten were Zhix going by their names. Of course, a few of them could be Medhin Empire champions, since their names were slightly similar.

That the Zhix would be more interested in killing things than looking through various old ruins for things they considered to be corrupted wasn't much of a surprise to Zac. The problem was how to figure out who were Dominators and who were just battle-crazed insectoids.

Besides, it made sense that the Dominators were more interested in the Hunter ladder compared to the Gatherer ladder at the moment. They were probably the strongest fighters around, and could simply rob others of their treasures later.

But gaining ten levels for the two Dominators was a huge perk. The only good news about the dominators was that they didn't gain any levels while Zac kept improving. Inevitability had only gained one level since the ladders were made public, and the other two hadn't moved at all.

Gaining ten levels in one move would save them years of cultivation.

Another familiar name on the Hunter list was Salvation, clocking in on the 7th spot. Salvation was still shrouded in mystery, and apart from the rumors that Salvation was the one who controlled The Cradle of God nothing was known about him or her.

"Congratulations on reaching the top placement," Thea succinctly said when Zac finally emerged from the tree. "Quite a few people will probably target you now."

"Nothing new," Zac said with a shrug as he took out one of the hard root-like vegetables. "This was the only thing I found that might help against wounds."

Thea caught the hard vegetable and scrutinized it for a bit.

"It looks a bit like ginseng. It isn't poisonous, but I don't know how to eat it. It's even harder than a rock," she mumbled.

"Perhaps boil it?" Zac ventured.

"Take a break for dinner?" Thea agreed.

"This place is as good as any. Shouldn't be too many who can pass that combination of arrays to get here," Zac said.

Thea nodded as she took out a couple of crystals and a pot. The crystals were the same ones he'd seen the Imp Herald use to create a fire, but it wasn't something Zac himself used very often. He was a bit lazy so he usually ate dried meat instead to save time.

"Wait," Zac said as he took out the cauldron he snagged earlier. "Perhaps we can cook the root in this instead? Don't most cauldrons contain inscriptions that stop the energies from escaping?"

“You want to use an expensive cauldron to boil a magical root?” Thea said, mouth curving slightly upwards. “If an alchemist hears about it he will be enraged.”

“Hey, as long as it works,” Zac said and opened the lid to the cauldron to pour some water inside.

But to his surprise, an enormous gust of energies blasted him right in his face, and Zac absorbed a huge amount of energies in an instant, to the point that it felt like his body would explode. The energies not only canceled out the tired state from using [**Hatchetman’s Rage**] but even made him gain a level.

Zac almost blanked out from being drowned in the medicinal gust, but he noticed a quick movement of something escaping from the cauldron and snatched it up with lightning-quick movement. It was a small purple pill that tried to fly away by itself somehow, making Zac gape in surprise.

“It’s a Pill with spirituality,” Thea said with shock. “It might actually be the pill that increased your ranking rather than the Cauldron.”

“Spiritual Pill?” Zac curiously asked as he put the feisty pill into one of the best vials he found in the workshop.

“The same pill can have multiple grades. For example, in the tutorial we would be given [**Constitution Pills**] that would push us toward race evolutions. But depending on how hard missions we undertook there were different ranks, from Low Grade to Peak grade. The better ones held fewer contaminants and stronger effects,” Thea explained.

“As for Spiritual Pills, they’re a tier above Peak Grade Pills. They’re the equivalent of a Blacksmith creating a Spiritual Tool. Its efficacy is far better than normal pills, but Alchemists can only concoct them when the stars align so to speak,” she continued.

Zac looked at the pill that seemed to have calmed down inside the vial. The cloud from earlier was likely just a small taste of the real effect. The fact that just some run-off not only healed

him but made him level up was astounding, and he was tempted to swallow the actual pill.

But he forcefully stopped himself, instead deciding to wait for Calrin to take a look at it. The shop keeper had multiple compendiums detailing all kinds of treasures, both natural and man-made, to never miss out on treasures. Perhaps the Sky Gnome could find out what it was.

“How do you know all these things?” Zac suddenly asked as he looked up from the pill. “From what I know I should be the only one with direct access to people with direct knowledge of the multiverse, like the shop owner I brought with me to the Auction.”

Thea hesitated a bit before she explained.

“I received a Library as a quest reward not long ago. It contains thousands and thousands of crystals detailing all kinds of things. Unfortunately, it doesn’t have cultivation manuals or skills, only knowledge. It does have a few interesting expositions about the fundamentals of Dao from various strong people of the multiverse though,” Thea said.

Her explanation was a good reminder that he wasn’t the only one who had gained limited structures on earth. If he could get a Creator Shipyard and a Dao Repository it wasn’t too surprising that other powerhouses could get other things.

It wouldn’t be surprising if the world government and Salvation also had obtained hidden structures that empowered their factions. The fact she got that building might also be an indicator she had either closed an incursion or become a Lord recently, as those were the ways that Zac got his buildings. But he didn’t want to dig into those things at the moment.

“Sounds like a good thing to have,” Zac simply said as he prepared the Cauldron to be used as a pot.

Soon a fire was burning beneath it with a boiling root inside, but the cauldron didn’t release the slightest heat or Cosmic Energy from above. It showed that all the energies from the ginseng were contained inside, not able to escape.

“Do you have any opinions on where to go next?” Zac said as he observed the cauldron.

Thea unhesitatingly pointed at a certain mountain to the east in response.

“That one,” she said.

“How did you decide that quickly?” Zac asked surprised.

“I removed the two mountains we came from and chose the remaining close one with the largest castle,” Thea explained as she kept her eyes on the cauldron as hell. “This residence was much bigger than the one on the mountain I started at, and the rewards were far greater as well.”

Zac nodded in agreement, as he had experienced the same thing.

“Others will quickly realize the same thing,” Zac said. “We might be in for pretty tough battles at those places.”

“Well, we’re both top rankers, there are not many who would be a threat,” Thea said.

“The dominators are here though,” Zac said with a shake of his head and told her what he’d learned from Ibtep since the Auction.

“Both are around level 100 and at the top of the Hunter ladder?” Thea said with a frown. “Do you think they are hunting beasts or people?”

“Anything that moves, but I think they should probably stay down between the mountains, there are fewer things to kill up at the summits. Only a few will have a bunch of people at the same time,” Zac guessed. “Besides, everyone needs to go down to change mountains, so the prey would come to them.”

“Well, the risk of running into them is pretty slim,” Thea said. “And we should be able to stay alive long enough to crush our tokens if it comes down to it.”

“Fair enough,” Zac said as he lifted the lid of the cauldron.

To the surprise to the both of them the root that once looked like a grubby rock had disappeared, but the water it was

cooked in had turned into something that would fit right home at a gourmet dinner. It was a clear soup that smelled absolutely delectable, and Zac couldn't help but swallow after smelling the aroma.

“Well, go ahead,” Zac said, trying to ignore his mouth watering even as he spoke.

Chapter 223: Darkness

“What’s with that face,” Thea said with a small smile as she scooped the soup with a ladle. “Don’t you still have the cauldron and a bunch of these things?”

“I guess,” Zac said as he took out a piece of meat from the E Grade Tiger and tore into it.

The cloud of energy from the trapped pill had completely refilled his reserves, but he was still a bit hungry. The two were content to switch to small talk as they ate their dinner, neither seeming really interested in talking about things like their respective factions or plans for the hunt.

It was a simple dinner, but Zac felt it was a welcome respite from all the responsibilities back at his island. He also sensed that Thea was feeling the same way, and she never made any attempts to gain any knowledge about his faction or personal power.

Thea said that the vegetable had a greatly nourishing effect, and Zac could see that she had regained color to her face. Since they’d had their dinner and Thea was feeling better they immediately packed up afterward and got ready to head out. The mountain was completely sheer on this side, stopping them from any plans of making a descent here, so they had to go back from where they came.

Besides, Zac wasn’t completely done with the palace. As soon as they entered the garden again Zac immediately flashed over to one of the gardener automatons and picked it up by its neck. It actually went completely still, not struggling or resisting in the slightest.

The next moment it simply disappeared, entering Zac’s Cosmos Sack. He breathed out in relief since he wasn’t sure it would be possible to store those things. He already knew that it wasn’t possible to store Sapient golems, such as the

Creators, but these things were basically just machines that ran on Cosmic Energy.

They spent the next five minutes scouring over the whole place, and in the end Zac found 14 golems. They also found a couple of them that were broken down and didn't move, and Zac snatched those as well. Perhaps he could find someone that could repair them in the future, so leaving them would be a waste.

Of course, Zac also snatched everything that wasn't nailed down in the house, leaving an empty husk of a mansion. Thea wasn't idle either, plucking all kinds of flowers and seeds.

"Those aren't Spiritual Herbs, you know?" Zac said as he saw her take a flower that stood in a window sill.

"I know, but they are beautiful. Haven't you realized most of these flowers don't exist on earth? I might be able to transplant a couple if they survive the sack," she explained with some anticipation in her eyes.

It felt reasonable, so Zac did the same and gathered a couple of types he thought that Kenzie might enjoy having in her garden. It might also help the golems acclimatize if they recognized some of the flowers.

After that, they were finally done and exited through the same path as they entered. Just like with the other mansions they weren't accosted by the array on the way out, saving Zac the effort of having to carry her again through the gravity array.

The mountain was still completely desolate when they exited, and no warning bells went off in Zac's mind from hidden threats. Perhaps someone had come, but seeing the crater full of human remains and the other sings of an intense battle chose to retreat.

The two quickly oriented themselves and descended in the direction of the mountain Thea chose. After discussing it they decided to skip the buildings lower down on the mountain. It simply wasn't worth it to go over the servant's quarters with their limited time. Their efforts were better spent on scaling as many summits as possible.

While there were magnificent mountains as far as they could see there were almost a hundred thousand trial takers. If all scaled a couple of mountains a day it was possible that all treasure would be snatched up well before the month was up. The more of the top tier treasures that went into their pouches immediately the better, since people could leave with their loot at any moment.

Zac was at first afraid Thea wouldn't be able to keep up with him barreling down the mountain at breakneck speed, but she clearly had no problem on that front. It was also evident that her Dexterity was well above his own, as it conversely was Zac that was forced to struggle to keep up.

While he rushed down like a bull she nimbly jumped down using anything from a branch to an outcropping as a foothold, not being restricted at all by the winding path. Zac wondered if that kind of footwork was a skill since he was completely unable to move like that even with his impressive amount of Dexterity.

Sometimes it looked like she would plummet to her death, but she simply landed at some almost indiscernible ledge and kept going down alongside him. With their pace, it didn't take long for them to reach the foot of the mountain and they stopped their mad dash.

"That palace we saw was two mountains over. Should we stay down here, or go over the mountain ahead?" Zac asked.

"Up to you," Thea said.

"Let's take the passage. It's a bit longer but there are so many beasts here to help grind the ladder," Zac said and eagerly took out his axe.

Thea had no objections and simply nodded. Zac immediately set off, rushing through the dense forest covering the valleys between the mountains. The shade was almost perpetual at the forest floor, as the little sun that got past the mountain tops was blocked by the canopies.

The trees themselves were quite tall and had almost all their branches far up in the sky. As for vegetation on the forest

floor, there wasn't too much of it. There were quite a number of boulders that might have fallen down from the mountains though, and also rubble of broken-down buildings.

It looked like there had been towns that went all along the mountains, forming pockets of populations between the towering mountains. These buildings, or rather the remains of them, were far shoddier and mundane compared to the glistening palaces on the mountain tops.

It made Zac wonder if these were the towns of normal mortals, living close to the mountains for protection by the cultivators. Had people living down here once looked up at the magnificent palaces and dreamed of becoming a powerful warrior as well?

The travels through the forest went just like Zac expected. It only took a couple of seconds before he was accosted by a bunch of rats. He made short work of them with his axe, not even bothering to summon a fractal edge for these vermin.

Thea clearly had a competitive bone as she immediately started slaughtering beasts as well, even running off in the wrong direction to find additional prey to kill. Beasts fell by the wayside, most of them with a large tear in their throat bleeding them out in seconds.

Her speed of clearing out animals was slightly faster than his own, even after he started using [**Loamwalker**] to shorten the time between the packs. However, Zac didn't see it as a discrepancy in power, but rather that her skillset seemed more suited for their situation.

Zac could improve his speed of killing as well if he summoned a couple of fractal edges and shot them at beast packs in the distance, but he would create a spectacle if he did so, mowing down trees and destroying ruins.

He wouldn't alert any potential threats just to kill a couple of additional rats, which allowed Thea to gain an edge on him for the moment. She flittered through the woods slight a silent reaper, and anything within thirty meters of her died.

The scene allowed Zac to form a more educated opinion about her skillset. First of all, it was obvious that there were numerous invisible weapons around her, not just one. He'd seen well over ten beasts die simultaneously by getting their throats slit individually. He absently wondered just how she controlled so many blades at the same time. Was she able to split her focus in so many directions at once?

Secondly, her range of attacks seemed to be around 50 meters at the most, as no beast further than that died from her blades. However, Zac didn't discount the possibility that she was holding back, not showing her maximum range. Taking things for granted was how one got killed after all.

From there on out it was pretty straight forward. The two kept a rapid pace until they reach their destination, and without taking a break climbed it as well.

When they reached the peak they saw a couple of corpses and a group of 8 people standing outside the palace, and it seemed they were discussing methods to get in. They all wore individual gear, making Zac unsure whether they were from earth or the other planet. But they likely weren't from the Medhin Empire, since they all seemed to be wearing the same thing.

They were of middling rank for both the hunter and gatherer ladder, and all seemed decently strong. One of them spotted the two of them immediately, even though they had taken care to make no sound as they approached. The moment the two were discovered the whole group of men looked over.

"Flee!" one of them screamed, and the group unhesitantly threw out large balls at the ground between themselves and Zac, which each exploded into a firestorm.

Zac only gawked in surprise at the inferno that reached almost ten meters in the air in front of them.

"Pretty smart, creating a firewall while they flee. Your ladder rankings will make it hard to rob most people unless we catch them unaware," Thea commented, not bothering with hunting down the group.

“Well, I don’t think those guys had much of value in any case, they couldn’t even get past the array,” Zac said as he swung a huge fractal edge at the flames, the force of his swing dousing the fire immediately.

With the help of Thea’s skills, they didn’t have much trouble entering the palace, and both had respectable gains from it, and it even helped Thea reach the 53rd spot on the ladder from her earlier spot in the thousands. Since the cooperation worked well they kept going for the rest of the day, going from one mountain to another until it was pitch black outside.

By this point they had scoured four mountains in total, encountering almost no resistance. They had seen a few people who either fled or crushed their tokens the moment they saw them and also caught a couple of people unaware.

Thea had a pretty straightforward tactic where she robbed everyone whose hunter position was higher than their gatherer position, and depending on how evil they seemed either killed them or crushed their tokens. The others she simply ignored.

Zac robbed only people that had a decent placement on the ladder, but he kept increasing his requirements since his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with junk.

It was currently pitch black outside, and the two stood inside one of the summit palaces deciding whether they should keep going or call it a day. The sky was almost completely devoid of stars, and the world they found themselves in didn’t even have any moon to reflect some light down on them during the night.

Zac’s increased attributes didn’t give him night vision so he couldn’t even see his hand in front of him with how dark it had gotten. It felt a bit suffocating so he took out a lantern that ran on Nexus Crystals that lit up the immediate surroundings.

But oddly enough it was as though the darkness was pushing back the light, making the lantern unable to light up anything apart from the immediate vicinity.

“That’s pretty odd,” Thea said with some worry in her voice, seeing the weird phenomenon as well. “There is something

wrong with the darkness.”

“Perhaps we should stay inside these arrays for the night,” Zac hesitantly said.

Honestly, the situation was a bit spooky. Something had completely destroyed this place once upon a time, leaving not a soul behind. And now the darkness was acting up. Zac was about to ask for Thea’s opinion, but a screen appeared in front of him.

[Darkness descends. Tokens deactivated. Survive.]

Chapter 224: Salvation

“Uh, did you get that prompt at well?” Zac said and turned over to Thea who had paled a bit.

“Yes...” was all she said as she vigilantly looked around, trying to pierce the darkness with her gaze. She also moved a bit closer to Zac and his lantern.

It looked like the System had something planned after all. People killing each other for treasure wasn't enough it appeared, the System also felt the need to remove their safety net at an inopportune time. If he knew the system it had orchestrated some sort of trial that would either kill them or help them get stronger.

“Feels like we're in some horror movie,” Zac muttered as he kept looking around for anything to pop out from the darkness.

Nothing happened as the minutes passed, but that did nothing to calm Zac's fraying nerves. It still felt like something was brewing, and the Darkness kept going stronger. Soon the lantern only reached half the distance compared to before, creating a small circle of light with just him and Thea inside.

The few stars in the sky had long winked out of existence, and it felt like it was only the two of them set adrift in the void. At first it almost felt like the odd space he found himself when he rolled for survival, but this darkness was different.

There was something sinister and oppressive about the gloom that surrounded them, whereas that odd space was completely sterile. If Zac turned off the lantern in his hand they would be completely swallowed by the dark, whereas the other space had some odd unseen source of light.

Any idea of heading to the next mountain to look for treasure was completely forgotten, and now Zac was only focused on survival. He was extremely happy he'd decided to keep going

with Thea, as sitting alone in this environment would have been way more nerve-wracking.

He quickly glanced over at his companion, and she returned a look that told that she felt the same way. Neither of them spoke though, afraid of drawing the attention of whatever was lurking out in the dark.

Suddenly Zac thought he heard something, and he hesitantly glanced over to his right. But of course, only darkness met his gaze. However, the sound kept growing clearer, and soon Zac could make out some incessant whispering.

Zac's neck hair stood right on edge, and he couldn't help but speak up.

"Do you hear those whispers?" Zac said with as low a voice he could.

A nod from a deathly pale Thea was all the confirmation he needed.

When he saw the prompt he had assumed that the system would unleash a horde of beasts upon him, just like with the beast hordes. But perhaps that wasn't exactly the case. He nervously fiddled with the bangle on his arm as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

The minutes passed as the whispers grew more intense, and Zac was starting to feel the strain. He couldn't tell exactly what the voices were, but he assumed it was something like evil spirits. Their whispers were a pervasive mental attack, and it almost felt like they tried to burrow themselves into his head.

"Some sort of wraiths," Thea said, seeming to be under an equal amount of pressure. "They are trying to possess us."

Zac grunted in affirmation as he kept rebuffing the insidious murmurs. A few minutes later it seemed the whispers had reached a peak, and thankfully the intensity didn't keep increasing. Zac felt a bit relieved since he felt confident that he would be able to bear the mental burden through the night if needed.

A glance over at Thea showed that she seemed to be mostly fine as well, and she was currently holding on to an inscribed rock that looked like an ostrich egg. It probably was some mental protection tool she had attained somewhere.

Suddenly a piercing wail with enough force to cause undulations in the air hit Zac with enough force to make him completely blank out for a brief moment, losing control over **[Mental Fortress]**. Instantly he felt a chill in his mind, followed by a chaotic jumble of disorienting thoughts.

Hatred.

Thea had leeches off him for a whole day, stealing the treasures that were rightfully his. Using him as a shield to brave the dangers of the arrays, laughing behind his back. Insidious, treacherous.

Something needed to be done.

An all-consuming killing intent as he turned his murky eyes toward her lithe neck, his fingers itching. He could just reach out, and with a snap he would be vindicated.

Suddenly a tomahawk was in his hand, taken out from his Cosmos Sack. Thea looked over with surprise, only to see him swing it down to gore his own thigh. The next moment a thick vibrant aura of life exuded from Zac, after having activated his Dao Field for his Dao of Trees.

“What are you doing?” Thea asked as she cautiously looked at Zac like he had become a lunatic.

Zac panted for a few seconds, his forehead covered in a sheen of perspiration before he looked up with clear eyes once again.

“I think I got possessed, but the pain woke me up enough to release my Dao Field. The Dao of trees had been effective against ghosts before so I thought it might help,” Zac said.

That was a close one. It had been extremely disconcerting to feel a bunch of consciousness in his mind, urging him to perform unspeakable acts. It was like he had been afflicted with schizophrenia, unable to discern what was real and not.

Luckily Zac had some experience of his mind being flooded with violent impulses thanks to his **[Hatchetman's Rage]** skill, and it allowed him to perform two last-ditch efforts. Wounding himself wasn't optimal, but the pain cut through the chaotic jumble in his mind and allowed him to unleash his Dao.

For a split second his mind had been flooded with pained wails as the Dao purged the specters or whatever the whispering things were, and they unhesitatingly fled out of his head, away from the vibrant Dao.

He also noticed that the effect of the Dao of Trees was great, silencing the penetrating whispers to a low murmur. However, the response was almost immediate as a claw stretched out of the darkness, heading straight for his throat.

Zac immediately swung his tomahawk, but it went straight through the incoming attack. Zac frowned as he gathered some Cosmic energy while he took out **[Verun's Bite]**, swinging it before the claw managed to reach him.

Luckily the hand was cut, and to Zac's surprise something that looked like black ichor dripped down the edge of his axe before it turned into a black haze that drifted away. These things perhaps weren't actual ghosts, but some nefarious creation that just looked similar. But before Zac had time to sigh in relief tens of claws reached out of the darkness, and a few ghastly faces emerged as well.

They were humanoid but without any facial features, apart from a huge maw that seemed to contain a black hole. The hair was standing straight out on Zack's whole body by now, but there was nothing to do except start swinging like a madman.

He summoned a huge fractal edge and with a growl let it rip through the crowd of humanoids, shredding them to pieces. However, he wasn't happy with the result. The things were clearly destroyed into motes of darkness, but he didn't gain a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kills.

That kills rewarded Cosmic Energy was one of the most fundamental aspects of the multiverse, and not gaining

anything should mean that these things didn't die when they were destroyed.

They did not reform though, at least not immediately, which gave Zac a brief respite until he once again was thronged with wraiths.

"I can't kill them," Thea said with some franticness in her voice.

"Me neither," Zac said. "Perhaps we just need to keep them at bay until sunrise."

Thea didn't have any better idea, so they placed themselves back to back with the lantern glowing in between them.

The assault of the beings wrought from darkness kept increasing in intensity. In the beginning they were just fodder and were instantly disintegrated with a swing by Zac. But after a couple of hours, they were almost as strong as the demon warriors back on the island.

One by one they still wouldn't be a problem, but they were endless. Worse yet, they were completely unheeding of their own safety since apparently they couldn't die. They were content in sacrificing themselves just so long as they managed to deal any kind of damage.

Small wounds started to accumulate on Zac's body, but these levels of wounds were nothing to Zac who kept stoically swinging his axe. However, Thea didn't possess the same endurance as Zac did, and started to wane after four hours. That left Zac to cover two-thirds of the circle of light. Still, it was better than being alone and getting accosted from all around, so Zac didn't complain as he kept swinging.

The night finally passed and Zac slumped down, completely exhausted. The assault had thankfully ended the moment the night was broken by the first rays of dawn. Thea was already holding an E-Grade crystal in her hand, absorbing it while rotating her Cultivation Technique.

She had a few wounds on various parts of her body, and it appeared a few of her old ones had reopened. Zac soon did the same and took out an E-Grade crystal as well. He was almost

completely spent, and what was worse he had barely made any gains from the desperate struggle.

What a horrible night.

What a glorious night.

Gabriel couldn't help smiling as he stood barefoot at the summit, the ragged bedsheets he had fashioned into a robe fluttering in the wind from the residual shockwaves from the battle. He closed his auburn eyes for a moment and swept his long oily hair back as he sighed in contentment.

The voices of the lost had clamored for relief as they gathered around him for redemption all through the night. He was the light bringing the wayward sailors back toward shore, the divine shepherd. The whispers begged for passage into his mind, and he had gladly obliged.

Gabriel couldn't help licking his mouth at the memory, ignoring the horrified whimper from below. The sustenance he gained from delivering salvation to the wretched specters during the night was as effective as weeks of hard work.

The universe had even awarded him with two levels due to his hard work to emancipate those lost in the darkness. It would have been more if the voices hadn't shied away after their brethren entered his mind and were granted salvation.

Gabriel could only pray to The Great Redeemer that the lost children of the dark would come back tonight as well so that he could continue his mission from God. In the meantime, there was much work to be done.

He finally looked down at the man who had been the cause of unrest this morning. The man was somewhere in his forties and looked foreign to Gabriel. The man was decked in an elaborate golden robe, and it appeared that he was a ruler of the other world that had joined him in this so-called hunt.

When he had seen Gabriel he had immediately tried to leave, but Gabriel wouldn't have it. Almost a hundred men that were cursed by their freedom, how could he ignore such a plight?

He had immediately attacked, unhesitatingly sacrificing almost half of his Silver Guards.

These apostates had fought hard against salvation, damned by their ignorance. Their leader had even been infused with the power of the soldiers, reaching powers beyond anything Gabriel had ever seen before, apart from The Great Redeemer himself of course.

But how could a mundane ruler stop a messiah on a mission? The soldiers who fought alongside this royal had already joined the crusade, silently standing behind him with their new brethren.

“Through pain comes clarity,” Gabriel said with equanimity. “Through clarity comes salvation. Join the crusade.”

“No, please let me go. I’ve already given you all my treasure and you’ve taken my army,” the golden robed man said with utter terror in his eyes as he looked upon his former subordinates. “You have taken everything, no need to make the Medhin Empire an enemy. I am the 18th son, Supratej Medhin, and I can help you in various ways.”

“Neither King nor Pauper can avoid the reckoning. Bask in The Great Redeemer’s glory,” Gabriel said, his eyes burning with an inexorable conviction.

“The Great...?” the Medhin royal said, his brows rising. “Wait! I am-“

But he didn’t get any further as Gabriel ignored him and started the purification.

He bent down and gently tapped Supratej’s head, just like he had done with tens of thousands of others. A silver fractal appeared on the head of the recruit’s forehead, and the Medhin princeling stopped struggling, his eyes turning blank.

The two silver guards stopped holding him down and instead bowed toward Gabriel and returned to the ranks of the Silver Crusaders.

Gabriel didn’t give the two a second glance and instead reverently looked down at his new parishioner. Even after seeing the transformation innumerable times over the past

months hadn't killed off the surge of euphoria he felt when bringing another lost lamb into the fold.

The silver glow of the Redeemer's Light quickly flowed through the whole body of the man, the fractal in his forehead absorbing a great amount of Cosmic Energy from the atmosphere. Gabriel suddenly received a large amount of Cosmic Energy as well, showing that the purification was a success.

The cosmos sack at the parishioner's waist turned into lights that entered Gabriel's own, but he couldn't care less for some material possessions. He still hadn't deigned to use the thing since he arrived, as The Great Redeemer had already provided him with all he needed.

A small translucent copy of the man appeared out of the fractal on the man's forehead, and it appeared to be howling in pain and fear. Gabriel knew the lost soul just didn't understand the great gift that it was being given, and didn't get angry by it.

The soul soon entered the golden fractal on Gabriel's own forehead, and soon it had joined the others in unity. The body of the new parishioner slowly stood up, its skin tone now a divine silver, and wordlessly joining the rest of the army. The Army of God in this temporary hunt was now over three hundred strong.

Gabriel couldn't help feel some jealousy as he glanced at the stoic back of his new Silver Guard. He was now unburdened by things such as a soul and discordant thoughts, and instead became a part of the unity. He knew his own deliverance would come sooner or later, but not until his work was complete.

Existence is pain, sapience a curse. But he was Salvation.

Chapter 225: Diplomacy

Zac and Thea decided to stay inside the protective enclosure of the summit array in order to rest up before starting the day. Both were completely exhausted, neither having slept a wink the whole night. They simply sat down a few meters from each other as they restored their reserves.

It was normally no problem for them to go a few days without sleep, but with threats both known and unknown all over this trial they didn't want to take any chances. A mistake by tiredness could quickly have dire consequences.

Oddly enough the area was completely devoid of any Cosmic Energy after the Darkness receded, forcing them to only rely on crystals. Thea was still far quicker to restore herself back to fighting condition due to speeding up the absorption with her cultivation manual, and after roughly an hour walked over to Zac who opened his eyes.

"I will sleep a bit, can you guard me for two hours before we swap?" she said, looking over at Zac.

"No problem. I still need some more time to refill my batteries," Zac nodded.

That was the first time he saw a Cultivator restore themselves, and he couldn't help but become a bit jealous of the speed. He estimated her to be able to absorb Cosmic Energy around three times quicker than he himself, and that was one of the side-benefits of being a cultivator.

It was even more frustrating when he felt that his body would be able to handle far larger streams of Cosmic Energy than what he currently was able to drag out of his crystal. This was nothing compared to the massive energies that had coursed through his body before. But he simply had no method to speed up the process.

Thea walked a few meters away and took out a small but high-end tent from her Cosmos Sack. It was clear it was another creation of the craftsmen of the Marshall clan, since the nylon tent was covered with low-grade runes.

They were so basic that even Zac could tell that their purpose was simply to make the material sturdier, but it was better than nothing. Thea crawled inside and closed the flap behind her, and in just seconds he could hear the even breaths of someone asleep.

Zac kept absorbing the energy from his nexus crystal as he kept watch, going over the events of the night. It was extremely frustrating that he fought so hard, yet there was not a single Nexus Coin or any energy as a reward.

He tried using all his Daos and skills, but nothing managed to kill the weird specters. The Dao of Trees was far superior to anything else in destroying the things, but it wasn't able to actually kill them. For all he knew he was actually fighting the same things over and over after they reformed.

However, the night wasn't completely without its rewards. His skill [**Mental Fortress**] had actually advanced to late-stage from Zac using it constantly to prevent himself from getting possessed again.

The upgrade didn't bring any changes to the skill apart from making it sturdier. Even the cost of using it was the same as before. While it wasn't very exciting Zac still felt that it was just what he needed in his current situation.

If this would become a nightly event the upgraded skill would be a godsend.

Next he up his ladder, and what he saw was extremely surprising. The first thing he noticed was that Salvation had actually sailed all the way up to the first spot on the Hunter ladder. Zac frowned and opened up his normal Power Ladder from Earth.

To his shock he saw that Salvation had gained two full levels during the night, something that felt almost incomprehensible. He was now level 55, only 7 levels behind Zac. Of course,

those levels were a great chasm, but Zac worried that they might actually be bridged faster than he'd hoped.

Either Salvation was met with a very different trial during the night, one that gave a lot of Cosmic Energy, or he was able to slay the specters. Zac actually hoped more for the first scenario. If salvation could massacre the endless ghosts during the night he might actually pass Zac in levels if he kept going for the whole month.

Zac wasn't so petty that he didn't want others to pass him, but this situation was a bit problematic. The rumors surrounding Salvation and his Cradle of God weren't great. If he managed to attain E-Rank and the titles Zac assumed would come with the evolution it might spell trouble.

The second shock to Zac was the sheer number of remaining participants. While Zac desperately fought within the darkness he thought that there might only be a handful of surviving participants after that insane assault, but he was proven wrong by the ladders.

There were still a full 80 thousand participants in the trial, which completely baffled Zac. How could others fight through that kind of assault and survive? He personally would have barely made it if he was alone, and he actually guessed that not even Thea would survive alone unless she had some aces up her sleeve.

That thousands and thousands of people of middling power were still running about was extremely surprising. Zac could only guess that the assault was somehow adjusted to the power of the participants, and others wouldn't have to withstand such a strong assault.

Another possibility was that it was related to the palaces. The atmosphere was still a bit glum, and while the cosmic energy was gradually restoring itself it was still extremely sparse. It was a stark contrast to the extremely dense energy that covered the top tier palaces they visited yesterday.

The mountains clearly had some sort of arrays that gathered the energy of the atmosphere to create cultivator havens up on the summits. If the ghosts fed on Cosmic Energy it would

make sense that they would gather at the top tier palaces, where the density was the highest.

Perhaps Zac and Thea simply found themselves at the ghost's feeding ground, which resulted in their frenzied assault.

The weaker participants would likely not be at the summit during the night since the risk of meeting powerhouses up there was higher. And they should have learned by now that the summit arrays were extremely strong, and not something they could break through.

Another indicator that this might be the case was that another of the Medhin Royals had fallen during the night since his name was removed from the list. Perhaps he did the same as the two of them, staying within one of the palace arrays for safety.

Thea got out of her tent two hours later on the dot, and the two swapped places. Zac didn't bring a tent for himself since he was used to sleeping outside, so he simply rested his back against a tree and closed his eyes. But he kept his axe in his hand in case something happened.

Later the morning the two descended the mountain, heading for another palace three mountains over. They had decided to keep going like yesterday since the events during the night shouldn't affect their treasure hunting.

They didn't encounter anyone for most of the descent, but they actually spotted a woman blankly staring at a man who seemed to have died recently. Zac and Thea shared a silent nod, and Zac disappeared the next moment.

A split second later he reappeared holding the woman by the scruff of her shirt. She looked to be in her thirties and had quite a few scars. She was also covered in a few bandages, and judging by how wet they were the wounds were recent.

Both her ladder positions were in the last quartile and it wasn't really worth to either rob or kill her. Zac was simply after information. Since she was within arm's reach he let her go, knowing that he could stop her before she could take out her token and crush it.

The woman fearfully looked at Zac and Thea, and suddenly her eyes widened further in horror. She had likely checked their ladder positions, learning that she was caught by some of the most powerful people in the hunt.

“We are not interested in your life or your treasures. We want to ask you about what happened to you during the night,” Zac simply said.

The woman breathed out in relief, before glancing at the corpse.

“My husband and I got a prompt that darkness descends, and it got very scary,” she started explaining without any preamble. “Suddenly we heard an extremely loud wail. That’s when it got crazy.”

“Crazy?” Thea probed.

“My husband went mad. He actually tried to bite my throat. These wounds are from him biting and scratching me. It got so chaotic I had to kill him in self-defense,” she said, her eyes reddening. “We knew that we might not survive this hunt, but not like this...”

“I’m sorry, it seems your husband was possessed,” Zac said with a sigh. “What happened next?”

“There were a few ghosts that attacked me later, but the rest of the time I stayed huddled with my back against a rock,” she said.

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who only shrugged. They asked a few more questions after that, but it was clear that she was barely attacked during the night. She had somewhat discerned some whispers, but it was only at the start of the night.

They let her go afterward, and they saw her store her husband’s body before she crushed her token. It seemed the events of the night had crushed her spirit, making her unwilling to stay in the hunt. Zac felt leaving was the right choice, it was meaningless to die for treasure.

As the two kept proceeding toward their targeted mountain they caught a few more treasure-hunters, and their stories were

similar. In the groups with multiple members at least one had turned insane, and were either killed or subdued.

However, they encountered another interesting case when they caught a solo hunter. He had admitted that after hearing that penetrating wail at the start of the night he completely blanked out and didn't remember anything before waking up on top of a corpse, drenched in blood.

It was the same with those who got subdued in the groups. When morning arrived they came to again, not remembering a single thing. It appeared that getting possessed might not necessarily result in death. It would rather turn one into a bloodthirsty beast, and whether you survived depended on whether you encountered weaker prey or stronger predators.

The piercing wail was also something everyone mentioned, even after they had traveled over ten mountains in the afternoon. Everyone had clearly heard it, and it felt like a mental attack. Zac initially thought the wail originated from their own mountain, but that wasn't the case.

Just what kind of ghost could scream so loudly that everyone heard it across the whole mountain range? It seemed that there was a big boss ghost somewhere that was the originator of the wail. Were there perhaps some hidden rewards for killing that thing? What other secrets did this place hold?

Zac knew he wouldn't attempt killing the thing even if it rewarded some great rewards. He couldn't even kill the small buggers, just how would he kill the leader ghost that was strong enough to attack everyone on multiple mountains simultaneously?

A sudden heavy thumping of feet on the ground dragged Zac out of his musings, and he turned around to see what kind of beast was running toward them this time. However, what he saw was no beast. The moment Zac turned he spotted the largest Zhix that he had ever seen, almost half a meter taller than the Anointed of his own hive, Nonet.

Zac immediately opened up the ladder and breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn't one of the two E-Grade Dominators. Since that was the case he didn't feel they were in

trouble. Still, this Anointed radiated immense power, and it clearly didn't care about Zac and Thea's ranks since it emitted unbridled killing intent.

Thea readied herself for battle with a determined glare, but Zac waved at her to stand back.

"Let me handle this. I trained in Zhix diplomacy before coming here," Zac said while taking out the ceremonial dagger he received from Ibtep.

He took a few steps toward the Anointed barreling toward him and held up the dagger. He said nothing, instead only cutting his palm before stabbing the dagger into the ground.

The Zhix actually stopped in his tracks in surprise, but soon after took out a dagger of its own. It also silently cut its wrist, stabbing it down as well, which made Zac internally sigh in relief.

The next moment the two veritably disappeared, before they clashed with tremendous force. The Zhix's huge fist slammed straight into his gut, but Zac didn't try to dodge. He only took it head-on and was pushed back ten meters with a grunt.

But the next moment he flashed forward once again and returned a punch in kind. The attack created a huge shockwave, and it looked like the Zhix was blasted out of a cannon as it crashed into a large tree, turning it into splinters.

Zac didn't follow up, and instead retrieved a large rug and the medallion Ibtep also gave him. Next he took out a table and placed a large spit of grilled meat from the E-Grade tiger on it, and sat down as he looked over in the direction of the Anointed.

It looked like it had passed out from the punch, and didn't move at all.

"What's going on?" Thea said with confusion after she walked over to Zac's side. "Didn't you say you would try diplomacy?"

"Well, the Zhix customs place a large focus on strength," Zac said as he noted that the Zhix started twitching.

Soon after it arduously got to its feet and started walking toward Zac, who held up the medallion. The Anointed hesitated for a bit before it sat down on the opposite side of the table with a thump.

“You know the rites and have the tools, but you are no Anointed, human. What is going on?”

Chapter 226: Alliances

“I send greetings from Nonet of Hive Kundevi,” Zac said.

“The Anointed heard of me attending this hunt and lent me these two treasures.”

“For what purpose?” the Anointed simply said.

“The Dominators,” Zac said, making the Anointed immediately tense up.

“What about them?”

“We believe them to be the largest threat to our survival, but we haven’t heard anything about them since our worlds got merged. We seek both allies and information,” Zac explained.

“Why is Nonet not representing itself for these matters? This is highly irregular, even if you were Zhix,” the Anointed said as it ripped off a large piece of the meat.

“Strength above all,” Zac simply said. “I am stronger than Nonet, much like I am stronger than most of the Anointed. I have earned the right to represent Hive Kundevi. My name is Zachary Atwood, and I am currently placed highest on the power ladder among us humans.”

The enormous Zhix leader gave a start when he realized who Zac was, and looked at Zac over once again.

“It is true, strength above all. I am Herat, eighth Anointed of Hive Urbot. Almost getting knocked unconscious by the strongest is not a dishonor,” the large Zhix said, even looking a bit pleased. “What do you wish to know?”

“The Dominators such as Inevitability and Void’s Disciple are likely the strongest beings on our planets, yet us humans haven’t heard anything of them fighting the foreign invaders who threaten Zhix and Humans alike,” Zac began. “We worry about what they are planning instead. They tried to enslave all

Zhix before from what I understand, and we believe they might try something similar again.”

Herat slowly tapped a large finger on the table for a few seconds before it sighed, seemingly having come to a decision.

“They are gathering our kind,” it began. “Our ancestors died by the millions to stop their expansion thousands of years ago, but their sacrifice is becoming forgotten. One hive after another has aligned with the Dominators.”

“Why?” Zac couldn’t help ask with a frown.

“The corruption is everywhere. Both you and I reek of it, and that one behind you does as well. If all is corrupted, nothing is. This Cosmic Power enables us to evolve our hives and ascend. Some voices have started questioning our attempts to exterminate the Dominators back then, saying we shunned the gift of the universe” Herat explained.

“The lure of power is right in front of them, but the tales of enslavement are distant. They willingly follow to learn the secrets of power from the Dominators, in turn giving up their freedom,” Herat said with some hopelessness.

“What about the hives who don’t follow?” Zac asked.

“For now we are being ignored, but we know that is just temporary. We worry just like you what they are planning, and seep ourselves in corruption to stand ready when the fight comes,” Herat said.

Zac frowned. He had held some small hope that the Dominators didn’t care about the state of the planet since they simply were more interested in cultivating. They had stayed their whole life on a planet with barely any Cosmic Energy at all, but now had almost endless resources to keep improving. That might make them forget about domination, and instead focus on pushing toward D-Grade and increased longevity.

But it was clear that they hadn’t changed their ways and were already starting to amass the Zhix, and it was understandable that some chose to follow them. Their core belief was centered around rooting out Corruption, but when everything was corrupted they needed to make huge changes.

“I understand. My force and a few others are preparing for that battle as well. You understand them better than we do, and I think we should work together, just like how your hives banded together against the Dominators all that time ago,” Zac said.

“I cannot make that decision, human. Your strength is great, but you still are not Zhix. But I will relay your message to the leaders of our war council. They will contact you about their decision,” the Zhix said as it got to its feet. “Now I must go hunt. Strength to your hive.”

“Wait, how will we get in contact?” Zac said with confusion. “If we ally right now we will be able to stay in touch through the System.”

He lived on an isolated island, and he was afraid he’d lose contact with them if he let Herat go. It might end up like the same as with Billyville, where they were technically allies but unable to contact each other until they met up in person again.

“I am just the Eighth Anointed, I cannot enter such a pact. A few of the High Anointed have miraculous means to communicate great distances, but if we cannot reach you that is also fate,” Herat said as it lumbered away. “Do not worry, the Zhix always keep their word. Also, avoid the Dominators for now. You are strong, but they are stronger.”

Zac frowned at that last remark. This Herat wasn’t telling him everything, but then again he didn’t expect it to. At least it seemed he had achieved one of his goals for now, which was to open up channels with the Zhix on the mainland.

As for these magical abilities, he could only hope they would work. Otherwise, he’d have to visit a hive personally in the future. He was hoping that he’d meet a few more powerful people during the hunt, setting up his private network, and if that worked out it shouldn’t be too troublesome to find one of the larger hives.

“What are you planning?” Thea suddenly asked as she sat down at the same spot where Herat sat before.

“After this hunt, I will start closing Incursions in earnest,” Zac said. “I believe very few of them can match my power at the moment.”

Thea snorted at the somewhat boastful comment, but she didn't contradict him. And what he said was true. Abby already told him right at the beginning of the integration that one person snatching pretty much all the good titles in the start was extremely rare.

And from there he had kept accumulating one advantage after another that put him far above what was expected of a newly integrated world. And with how strength worked there was limited use of large numbers in trying to stop people such as himself, so unless the invaders had leaders who could match him they were in trouble.

But then again, that simple fact worked the other way around as well. The existence of beings even stronger than any humans on earth was a huge potential risk, since if Zac wasn't able to handle them, perhaps no one could. That was one reason he wanted to find the methods for the War Arrays the Medhin used but he, unfortunately, couldn't find anything of the kind after rummaging through the possessions of Tyrbat.

“But I believe the Dominators are the real threat, apart from the few top tier Incursions like the Undead Empire. I'm not sure you've met other Anointed apart from this one, but they are extremely strong even without levels or titles.”

“The Marshall Clan is situated somewhat close to a large hive. But we haven't made any headway with them. After a few intense battles we have formed some sort of unspoken truce where we stay at our own land,” Thea said. “But one of these giants never emerged during the battles.”

“The Anointed are both their spiritual and actual leaders. I still don't know if they're another species or some equivalent of a queen ant, but they are far stronger than the normal ones,” Zac said. “I am trying to forge an alliance with the Zhix to prepare ourselves for the clash with the Dominators. It doesn't seem they are content to stay hidden forever if they are amassing forces.”

“Since we’re on the subject we should discuss a few other things,” Thea said with some reluctance. “You’ve already spoken with my grandfather before about an alliance. It has already been formed, and we have been looking for you to join it.”

“Oh?” Zac only said.

“Since you’re planning on closing the Incursions anyway, you should join us. Indeed, we do not possess your raw power, at the moment at least. But I believe you lack a proper support system for things such as information gathering and logistics,” Thea pushed, obviously uncomfortable with presenting a sales pitch.

She had likely been urged by her grandpa to seek allies during the hunt, but Zac had learned the past day she might be even more introvert than himself. His mouth couldn’t help curve upward at seeing her forcing herself to advertise the alliance, and Thea immediately caught on to his glee.

She immediately closed her mouth and shot him a glare.

“What’s so funny?” she spat out.

“Nothing, nothing,” Zac laughed as he sent her a prompt for becoming an ally, finally connecting Port Atwood and the Marshall Clan.

Since they had dealt with the Zhix the two kept going toward their mountain, and the evening was pretty uneventful. One thing that was worth noting was that Salvation was kicked off from the top position after a couple of hours, the two Dominators once again passing him or her.

Salvation seemed to have gained a good boost that was somewhat unique to himself during the night, but he couldn’t keep up with the carnage of the two E-Graded monsters during the day. That hopefully proved that he wasn’t as strong as Zac just yet.

Night soon came and the two decided to stay by the foot of a mountain, hiding in a small courtyard of what should have once been a disciple’s cultivation cave. They vigilantly looked

into the darkness, but this night they didn't sense the insidious oppression from yesterday, which was a huge relief.

Around three a.m. they could pretty much confirm that the darkness wouldn't descend today and were finally able to somewhat relax. They still decided to stay for the night though, and only resumed their journey in the morning.

It was only two days later that the Darkness once again descended, but its arrival proved that it wasn't a one-time thing. Zac and Thea were barely attacked this time, though their minds were still a bit scrambled by the penetrating wail that seemed to spread through the whole zone.

The trick of staying at the foot of the mountain was extremely effective, and it seemed that most people still around had learned their lesson since only roughly 800 people left the trial during the night.

It was nothing compared to what happened the day before. It was the Arena battle. In just an hour over four thousand names were removed from the ladder, proving that there were quite a few who had tried to stay under the radar as they searched for treasure.

Neither Thea nor Zac were called of course, since both had both battled and killed a fair amount since the start. Zac also breathed out in relief when he saw that Salvation didn't gain any levels this time, meaning that it might have been a one-time event that happened during the last darkness.

The hunt was starting to become a routine as the two went from mountain to mountain, cleaning the summits from all its valuables. Thea had fully healed after three days thanks to the ginseng and her healing pills, but they chose to stay together both for safety and company.

There were a lot of things in Zac's pouch by now that he couldn't understand, but excluding these odd treasures he estimated his gain to be well over a hundred million Nexus Coins. Thea's gain wasn't small either, and she was currently in the fourth position.

Zac himself lost the lead of the Gatherer ladder after the second day, getting surpassed by Emperor Nenotheop. Thea had a theory that the emperor utilized his large army to gather treasure from multiple mountains simultaneously, and Zac wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

The two could only increase their efforts, and every night they only slept for around an hour, and after a week of hunting, it was starting to take its toll. However, something odd changed the normal flow of the hunt, as they saw a group of three humans and two Ishiate desperately fleeing down the mountains.

And right on their heels was what at first glance looked like very life-like robots.

Chapter 227: Silver Rivers

For a second Zac imagined robots running rampant through the hunt, but he soon realized he wasn't looking at some advanced automatons. Instead he noticed that those in pursuit might actually be humans who had painted themselves silver for some reason.

But something was extremely off about them. Their gazes were extremely lifeless, and they didn't show a single expression as they hounded the group in front. Zac looked over to Thea who frowned as she observed the pursuit.

"Did you notice? Those silver people do not have ladder positions. I think they are corpses or puppets," Thea hesitantly said.

Zac's brows rose in surprise as he looked over at the metallic men again, and it was true. None of the silver humans had any ladder positions, meaning that they either weren't part of the hunt or transformed dead. Zac wasn't sure whether he wanted to be involved with this strange event, but after a brief hesitation he shook his head and flashed over with **[Loamwalker]**.

The next moment he had caught one of the fleeing men, just like he had with so many others during the hunt. The Ishiate and other humans gawked when they saw Zac appear out of nowhere, but they didn't even stop for a fraction of a second. They just kept running as fast as their legs allowed, completely leaving their companion to his fate.

"Please let me go, they'll catch us. They are too strong!" the man desperately shouted as struggled to get free, and when he noticed Zac's arm was tougher than steel he tried to take out his token.

However, Zac snatched the token from his captive with practiced ease before he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. A second

later a huge fractal edge sailed toward the silver cultivators, who now were less than a hundred meters away from him.

There was still no sign of reaction from the silver cultivators and their faces looked completely unperturbed by the incoming attack. But two of the pursuers jumped forward to block the fractal edge with their bodies. Zac could only snort when he saw their tactic, scoffing at the hubris of thinking only two people could stop his attacks.

But the next moment his brows rose in surprise.

The two guards actually self-detonated, and them exploding was barely enough to destroy Zac's fractal edge. Zac could only stupidly stare at the display, and he was now pretty sure that Thea was correct in her assertion that these things were dead. That two people would voluntarily use their bodies as fodder to stop an attack without a care in the world was pretty unlikely.

The others pushed through the cloud of dust that the explosion kicked up in the air, still trying to catch their prey. But it wasn't an even fight just because the silver cultivators managed to intercept the first edge, and soon all the odd puppets were destroyed.

Strangely enough they didn't leave any corpses when they died, but instead just turned into silver clouds that drifted up into the air. Zac was afraid it was some sort of last-ditch poison attack and stayed clear of the silver gases as they slowly dissipated.

However, his captive didn't seem relieved at all that Zac had made short work of the attackers, and still fearfully looked back up toward the summit. It was the same with the others in his party. None of them came back after Zac destroyed the silver puppets, and they were quickly running further and further away.

"Thank you, friend, but please let me go before their leader arrives with the real army. We must get as far away from this mountain as possible," the man said with his eyes fretfully looking up at the summit.

“Army? Is it one of the Medhin Royals?” Zac asked. “Are they wearing golden robes?”

“No, it’s not one of them. This is much worse! Please, we must flee before he turns us into puppets as well!”

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who shrugged in response. She hadn’t heard of anyone like that either.

“Puppets? How many has he turned into puppets?” Zac asked.

“Hundreds and hundreds, perhaps a thousand. He has a whole army of silver corpses like these ones,” the man hurriedly said as he gestured at the things Zac killed. “We barely got away since he was busy turning another group into puppets as well, but he was raving about turning everyone into silver guards.”

Zac had no reason to keep the man, and simply let him go after asking a few more questions. It truly didn’t seem like it was a Medhin royal, but someone else. The captive only said that the leader looked like a hobo but his army was insanely powerful. As for the army, the only thing in common was that they were all silver.

The moment the man was freed by Zac he bolted so quickly that it almost looked like he would take flight. His mad dash was so frantic that he stumbled on a root after only fifty meters and slammed straight into the ground. But he apparently was so afraid that he didn’t care about the blood flowing from his nose and only scrambled to his feet to keep running.

Zac frowned as he looked at the fleeing back of the man, before turning back to Thea.

“What do you think?” Zac asked.

“Not sure. But it is clearly someone powerful to have been able to capture hundreds of people. Hypnotist? Necromancer?” she guessed. “In any case, he should fight with numbers, which might make him similar to the Medhin royals.”

“Should we avoid him?”

“No,” Thea said resolutely. “He’s turning humans into puppets, killing indiscriminately. He needs to be stopped.”

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said as he took out his axe as he looked up toward the summit.

He agreed with Thea’s decision. Someone like this couldn’t be left to their own devices. Besides, he’d already decided that he should improve his returns in this hunt by hunting the powerhouses, and now was as good a time to start as any. He didn’t want to let the Medhin emperor get the best rewards from the hunt, and if this lunatic had found and killed almost a thousand people he should be extremely rich as well by the sheer quantity of treasure.

The two didn’t encounter any more parties as they ascended the mountain. Perhaps it meant that this leader up ahead was confident that the small squad of silver men would be able to capture their prey.

But that also raised the question of just how those things functioned. The man that Zac captured said that the silver puppets were dead, but they seemed somewhat intelligent from how they responded to Zac’s attack. One possibility was that the leader could control them remotely, and even see what they saw through their eyes.

Zac guessed they would learn which was the case depending on whether there was a trap waiting for them at the top of the mountain. Luckily everything was calm when they reached the summit, and they slowly made their way forward until they found a hidden vantage behind some windswept bushes to scout the summit.

Zac immediately saw the man earlier had been telling the truth. There were almost a thousand of the silver corpses lined up at the square in front of the summit’s palace. Furthermore, Zac realized that all kinds of people were represented among the army, increasing the likelihood that these were people that had been caught and turned into puppets.

There were humans from both worlds judging by their attire, and there were also quite a few Ishiate and Zhix, though no Anointed stood among the silver ranks. Curiously enough there were also a few extremely pale humanoids that reached roughly to Zac’s chest.

His best guess was that these things were Ratmen or Molemen going by their hunched over posture and long tails, but they didn't exactly match the descriptions he heard from the Valkyries about their battles at the Ratmen Incursion. They had more human-like features, and they seemed to be completely hairless. The real Ratmen were essentially enormous bipedal rats.

It wasn't a species that Zac had ever heard of before, and he guessed these things were either from the other world or something local that lived in these mountains. But even these odd things weren't what truly drew Zac's attention. It was the supposed leader sitting in front of them on the ground with his eyes closed.

At first look one might think that the man was a captive, going by how he looked. He was even worse than Zac's appearance back when he used a disgusting snake-skin for armor and was always caked in blood. It was to the point that Zac even couldn't make out the man's ethnicity or features since he was just way too dirty, and the only reason Zac knew it was a man was that he had a large grimy beard.

The man had black shoulder-long hair that was so oily that it looked wet, and the only thing he was dressed in was a large piece of cloth that Zac assumed might have been white once upon a time. However, Zac didn't relax when he saw the pathetic appearance of the leader but instead secured the grip of his axe with a somber expression.

The man emitted a chaotic power that even made Zac slightly apprehensive. The freely released aura around the hobo was clearly weaker than his own, but it was something very off about it, almost feeling like a sickness.

Zac also realized that there would be no option for a sneak attack, as the man soon opened his eyes and looked straight at the two of them in their hiding spot with a smile. There was undisguised insanity in his eyes, and Zac couldn't help but shudder when he met the crazed gaze.

"Welcome, lost lambs," the man said, slowly getting up on his feet. "I saw you stop my silver guards. Are you here to make

amends by joining the unity?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with all these people?” Zac asked as left his hiding spot and walked onto the large square on the summit, Thea soon following behind him.

“I am Salvation, prophet of the Great Redeemer,” the man proclaimed with a grand voice, the madness in his eyes burning even brighter. “These ones have been freed from the curse of sapience, and have joined the eternal unity.”

“So you are Salvation,” Zac said, and without another word unleashed a fractal edge straight at the man, hoping to cut the head of the snake.

However, a hundred of the silver people behind him wordlessly slapped their hands together and an extremely thick shield appeared in front of their leader, effortlessly stopping his attack.

“Oh, you are quite powerful,” the grimy man said while looking at Zac with a burning gaze. “Have the Great Redeemer provided me with the first Golden Guard?”

Zac didn't comment on Salvation's rambling and instead spoke to Thea with a low voice, without taking his eye off his target.

“I'll clash head-on, see if you can find any opportunities from the flank.”

Thea nodded and actually disappeared by turning translucent. It was the first time Zac had seen her use this skill, and he had to admit it suited herself and her weapon quite well. But there was no time for admiration as part of the army suddenly stretched their hands into the air like they were trying to grasp something above them.

The next moment they literally melted into a silver river that started floating around Salvation, making his robes flutter in the wind. The liquid metal that the soldiers turned into emitted the chaotic energies that he sensed from Salvation himself, though it was even stronger.

“Those cursed by their clamoring souls are always led astray. But all will be brought to the fold,” Salvation said as he

pointed at Zac, and part of the silver river shot toward him with shocking speed, transforming into a huge lance heading straight toward him.

Zac summoned another fractal edge with [**Chop**] and swung it head-on to meet the incoming the attack. But the moment the two forces clashed Zac's brows rose in alarm from the pure force contained in Salvation's silver lance.

The power pushed Zac back over fifty meters, and the shockwave from the clash causing widespread destruction of the square on the summit. Zac's hands were even shaking from the strain of holding the attack at bay, but it was also clear that there was a limit to the power of the river.

Zac noted that the river had shrunk by around ten percent after the clash, with some silver steam dissipating into the air just like when he destroyed the puppets at the foot of the mountain. But the next moment the river was reinforced by more silver men liquefying and joining the river.

From there on Zac didn't have much time to analyze the situation as the silver river was trying to attack him from all angles like a rabid beast.

Chapter 228: Descent

Zac furiously defended with both his axe and his swirling leaves from the onslaught that came at him from all angles. It was as though he was caught in the middle of an agitated hornet swam where a thousand attacks kept angling for him.

Wounds started to accumulate over his body, and he was spending cosmic energy at a tremendous pace. However, the furious defense wasn't for nothing as a thick mist was rising above him from the expended silver river.

After having fought a bit Zac started to get a decent idea of what was going on. Salvation turned people into these silver things and then used the stored energy inside their bodies to launch extremely powerful attacks.

However, each attack would deplete Salvation's storage of soldiers, as the attack spent the stored energy and the corpses dissipated. Zac estimated that a couple of Silver Guards were destroyed by each and every clash judging by how much the silver river shrank afterward.

In just a short bout Zac had destroyed at least fifty corpses, and he felt a bit nauseated at the thought of destroying innocent people. It was an extremely wicked method to fight, and Zac wondered just what kind of evil Salvation had committed to gain access to a class that could do something this messed up.

"Despicable," Zac couldn't help but growl at Salvation who controlled the silver liquid from the distance.

"All crusades require sacrifice for the greater good. They will forever stay part of the Cosmos, all overseen by The Great Redeemer," Salvation said with a calm smile, no remorse or guilt on his face at all.

Zac realized there was no point to keep talking with this madman, and tried to decide on a plan. The thought of destroying people every time he clashed with Salvation was revolting, and he wasn't sure that his endurance would last through destroying the whole army in any case.

A better method would be to bring the fight to Salvation himself. **[Inquisitive Eye]** didn't work on the man, but Zac felt his attributes should be more aligned with a mage judging by how he fought. That meant high Intelligence but low Endurance.

Killing him directly would be more efficient than grinding down the army of silver corpses, and it would also feel a lot better. Perhaps there was even a way to save these poor people and turn them back. The ground cracked under his legs as Zac used **[Loamwalker]** the moment he saw an opening in the silver river swirling around him and he flashed toward Salvation. But he was ready for the assault, simply putting hands in a praying position.

“Sanctuary,” Salvation said, and the next moment he was completely enclosed in the silver liquid, creating a huge ball five meters across.

Zac wouldn't stop from just that though and with a determined face summoned a five-meter fractal edge and imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness. The last clashes he didn't utilize any Dao, and the difference it made was clear as he cut through the ball like butter.

However, Salvation was nowhere to be seen inside the ball, until he Suddenly appeared back behind Zac, reaching for his head. Alarm bells went off in Zac's mind, telling him he would die if Salvation reached him. He desperately pushed away, while simultaneously trying to cut off Salvation's arm.

At the same moment a huge whirlwind erupted in the middle of the silver army, where Thea suddenly appeared. Everything within fifty meters from here was shredded into ribbons, and over a hundred silver corpses dissipated in an instant.

However, she wasn't done there and immediately moved toward a thick group of guards to keep whittling down the

defenses. While Zac had felt a bit hesitant about this tactic she clearly had no such compunctions.

For the first time since the start of the battle Salvation's calm face changed, turning into one of unbridled rage.

“Apostasy!” he screamed as he pointed at Thea.

The next moment another hundred silver corpses liquefied and turned into a hundred swords that all tried to stab Thea, who had to use all of her agility to escape the encirclement unscathed. Her plan to keep destroying corpses had to be abandoned since she was busy just dodging the innumerable blades gunning for her life.

It was clear that Thea had found a solution to reduce the power of Salvation. It was starting to become more and more apparent that Salvation was needed to control these things. She was able to destroy a tenth of the army without any resistance due to Salvation being preoccupied with his battle with Zac.

It was far more efficient than trying to destroy the silver river, as it was clearly more resilient when it was actively controlled by Salvation. Perhaps he infused some of his own Cosmic Energy into the metallic liquid that floated about in the air, whereas the Silver Soldiers were just energy on standby.

Zac could only grit his teeth and follow the same plan as Thea, even though he felt it was a bit distasteful. But the man was simply too elusive. It looked like he could somehow freely move within the silver liquid, making it nigh impossible to strike him down.

He immediately summoned five huge fractal edges as he frantically dodged or bore the damage from the innumerable attacks from the silver rivers all around him. But he didn't use them to harass Salvation who had emerged from his protective bubble.

Instead, Zac shot them at various clumps of silver guards who were still just mutely standing in the distance, and each blade was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. His goal was to continue Thea's work while she was keeping the hundred silver swords busy.

The next moment Zac heedlessly charged Salvation, hoping to occupy his attention.

A storm of lightning-quick swings blanketed Salvation, who had to desperately create barrier after barrier of silver shields to protect himself from Zac's onslaught. The silver river around him was shrinking at a noticeable pace from Zac's frenzied swings, with each Dao-infused strike destroying a noticeable part of it.

It looked like his plan might actually work as the silver guards were still standing completely immobile, not making any attempts to defend against the incoming blades. But it appeared that Salvation wouldn't take it lying down as his eyes lit up with an almost blinding light, and the chaotic aura inside him increased manifold.

"DESCENT!" Salvation roared, and before the fractal edges could reach the army over six hundred Silver Corpses liquefied, causing a silver storm that covered the whole summit and rose fifty meters into the air.

The swords that were harassing Thea also stopped their chase and instead joined the other energies to infuse the storm with even more power. Zac immediately got an extremely bad feeling as he sensed the rampant energies that were gathering in the air, and he tried to quickly kill off Salvation before it got any worse.

He even activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] while he started gathering energy for his ultimate strike, [**Nature's Punishment**]. But Salvation was suddenly swallowed by the silver storm, and Zac had no chance to unleash his ultimate attack since he was unable to locate his real form any longer.

The danger sense in Zac's mind was going haywire, and Zac heedlessly flooded the fractal in his arm with cosmic energy while he looked up at what was happening. The silver storm had created a huge cloud up in the air, and something nefarious was brewing inside.

Suddenly two enormous eyes that seemed want to judge the world opened from within the silver clouds. They held the same silver luster that Salvation's eyes shone with before he

disappeared, but Zac didn't feel that the huge eyes were an avatar of Salvation.

Salvation's eyes shone with madness, but the huge globes up in the sky looked down at the mountain peak like a god staring down at a pitiful ant. There was a boundless arrogance and disdain within it as well, but Zac wasn't sure if it was an actual person since the eyes were completely unmoving and unblinking.

The pressure from just the gaze was enormous, and the next moment a gigantic face emerged from the cloud, increasing the pressure even further. The face was at least fifty meters across, a huge monstrosity that covered most of Zac's field of vision.

The face was of a young human man, and not someone Zac recognized. His face was extremely handsome, apart from the condescending eyes. There was also an extremely intricate fractal in his forehead that radiated an immense power, and just by looking at it Zac felt like his soul was going to get sucked out of his body.

The face didn't stay up in the clouds, but soon it started to descend toward the summit at a measured pace. Zac's brows rose in alarm as he looked over at a pale-faced Thea who stood some distance away.

"Get away from the summit, I can handle this," he shouted as he kept infusing his arm with Cosmic Energy.

The pressure upon Zac was mounting as the enormous descended, and his instincts told him to get down on knees in subservience. But ignored those voices as he grit his teeth while he pushed his right hand upward. The space above him cracked and the familiar enormous hand rose to meet the incoming face.

The wrath of god clashed with nature's punishment, and the two forces meeting caused such a shockwave that the barrier protecting the palace was completely destroyed, and the shockwaves caused the palace to get ripped to shreds as it was pushed down the mountain.

Zac felt as though his whole body was breaking apart from the collision, but he staunchly kept pushing forward while allocating some energy to summon [**Nature's Barrier**] to blanket him from at least some of the errant energies that were ripping the whole summit apart.

The hand was barely five meters across and it almost looked like a child that was trying to push away an adult as it pressed on the enormous fractal that adorned the forehead of the enormous head.

However, inside that seemingly small hand, a boundless force was contained. It possessed everything Zac was able to utilize, from his Dao of Trees to the infusion of [**Hatchetman's Rage**], its power was unmatched even by what most E-Grade evolved could muster.

For a few seconds the two forces were at an impasse, with neither face nor hand giving in, but soon a jarring crack echoed across the mountain. A large scar could suddenly be seen across the fractal on the huge head as the fingers from the wooden hand dug inside the forehead.

The moment the fractal cracked it was as though the force that held the hundreds of silver corpses together came undone. The head started to ooze torrential amounts of silver clouds, and it almost looked as though it was burning from the enormous plume that was rising from it.

Normally Zac would have deactivated the hand by now, but he staunchly kept feeding the hand with everything he possessed, even his lifeforce. He wouldn't relent until the face was completely destroyed so that he could crush Salvation.

Zac wasn't the only one who was running out of energy as the face was almost translucent by now with silver clouds spreading far enough to even reach the neighboring mountains. Finally the head cracked into innumerable pieces, the last energies coming undone.

A mangled body fell down from the skies with a wail and caused a large crater when he slammed into the ground on the other side of the summit. But Zac knew he was alive, as some remaining droplets of the liquid river blanketed the fall at the

last moment. Zac's whole body felt like it was on fire but he wouldn't let this opportunity go.

He was already out of Cosmic Energy, but he squeezed his body to activate [**Loamwalker**] once more, speeding toward the mangled body of Salvation. But he frowned when he saw Salvation crush his token with a shaking hand. Still, all was not lost since there was still a window of opportunity to kill this raving lunatic before he was sent away.

They had already confirmed that the power of someone dictated how long the delay was before they were sent back, and someone like Salvation should take at least ten seconds. He couldn't let this man get back to the Cradle of God. Who knew how many Silver Guards he had there to empower himself.

He immediately moved to close the last distance, his axe already falling down with finality.

"Lord Redeemer, please save me!" he shouted in desperation, and in the next moment a man actually appeared next to him.

Zac first planned to ignore him to strike the finishing blow, but a terrifying aura suddenly exploded out from the man, eclipsing anything Zac had ever felt before.

Every cell in his body told him that if he moved just one step closer he would die without a doubt, and he unhesitatingly stopped his assault as he jumped back a few steps. Zac's couldn't help looking over at the figure silently standing next to the crater with Salvation still inside.

And the man who looked back at him was none other than the owner of the face in the clouds.

Chapter 229: The Great Redeemer

The man standing next to the crater was clearly the same as the one in the sky earlier, though there were some minute differences. The normal-sized one felt more lifelike, whereas the huge avatar that tried to crush the whole summit might as well have been a mask or statue.

The mysterious briefly man scrutinized the surroundings until his eyes met Zac's. It was as though a lightning bolt went through Zac's mind when he met the stare, and it truly felt like he would perish if he held eye contact.

He quickly looked away, and thoughts of fleeing were quickly filling his mind. But something stopped him. The aura this man emitted was on the same tier as that of Greatest, and if he truly was here there was nothing he could do. His life and death weren't in his hands any longer.

But at the same time, they were in an enclosed space for a system-organized treasure hunt. He didn't believe people even of that level of power would be able to break into a place like this. The rules of a System-sanctioned mystic realm were inviolable.

If there were attribute- or grade-limiters in place then there was nothing that could be done. Not even an A-ranked old monster could break in as far as Zac understood. That meant that the man in front of him might just be a powerless illusion and that the towering aura was just empty blustering. That would also explain why he only stood there. Zac grit his teeth with determination.

A huge fractal edge fell straight toward Salvation, who fearfully looked up at the edge as he hastily gathered the last remnants of his silver energies to produce a feeble defense.

But Zac knew that small defense wouldn't stop his assault as his attack was powered by the Dao of Sharpness and his very life force.

But suddenly the man simply pointed a finger at the incoming attack, and it felt as though all life was drained out of his body as the fractal edge disintegrated from some unseen force.

"Insolence," the man said with a melodic voice, and Zac couldn't help but cough up blood as he fell back, unable to stand up again.

"It's true. I am not here in person, I am just an imprint. But my very existence is enough to ward off some baby cultivators," the man continued as he looked down at Zac with disdain in his eyes.

It was clear though that the man was not truly there, since whatever the man did to stop Zac's approach had drained the imprint enough to make him transparent. Zac knew that he would perhaps only be able to stop one more attack, but his body wouldn't listen when he tried to command it to move.

"Are you my inheritor? Disappointing. This is my only intervention," the man sighed as he looked down at the crumpled form of Salvation, but the next moment he looked over at the space on the opposite of the crater.

He didn't say anything, only disdainfully snorted, but immediately after a pale-faced Thea emerged from nowhere coughing out blood, a slender sword in her hand. It looked like she had tried to assassinate Salvation unseen, but she couldn't escape the gaze of Salvation's protector.

"This unworthy one thanks you, Great Lord!" Salvation feebly coughed as he grasped his Cosmos Sack in his hand. "I will continue your bidding."

The next moment he started fading away, but Zac was unwilling to give in to the imprint. He summoned strength he didn't know he had, and with a roar threw **[Verun's Bite]** at Salvation. He had no energy left to summon any skill, and could only pin his hopes to non-magical means.

Unfortunately, Zac was completely spent, and his aim was slightly off. The axe had quite a bit of force as it hurtled toward Salvation, but it was flying too low to hit anything lethal. But it was still a throw from someone possessing over three hundred Strength, and Salvation desperately swirled to avoid the incoming edge.

A muffled groan escaped Salvation's mouth as the axe tore through the man's wrist and cut off his right hand along with the Cosmic Sack that fell down on the ground. Zac could only shake his head in disappointment, and the next moment Salvation winked out of existence.

The last thing Zac saw of Salvation was two eyes that burned with madness and vengeance. The pouch that had just fallen turned into motes of light and flew into Zac's Cosmos Sack.

The whole thing had happened in an instant, and The Redeemer was unable or unwilling to lend any further assistance to Salvation, and he instead only gazed up into the sky with some anticipation in his face. Zac knew the imprint was running out of time and hoped to gain at least some information before it disappeared.

"Who are you? Are you from the Church of Everlasting Dao?" Zac coughed.

Zac's words brought back the attention of the quickly fading form.

"I am not one of those filthy body-peddlers. Their path toward immortality is a dead end, an empty pit of despair. I sense that my true body is still alive, which means that eons of planning are soon coming to fruition. We will meet again, little defier," he said with a small smile as he finally was reduced to just motes of light.

Zac didn't dare move for a few seconds even after the man disappeared, but soon he ardously tried to get over to Thea. His vision was swimming, but he knew they couldn't stay here. But his body was completely spent, and he helplessly was lying down on the ground. It was Thea instead who got up to her feet, fearfully looking over at the spot where the man once stood as she walked over to Zac.

“Who the hell was that?” she muttered, perhaps to herself or perhaps as a question to Zac.

“Definitely not someone from Earth,” Zac said with a frown. “He was at least a D-Grade powerhouse, likely higher.”

“I’ve read that powerful people could imprint treasures with their very essence. Somehow Salvation must have gotten his hands on such a treasure. But I don’t understand how. It’s extremely arduous to make such an imprint because you need to cut off a piece of your soul to leave the imprint. It’s rarely done,” Thea explained.

“They are usually only awarded to direct disciples and are extremely rare treasures. It’s not something the system awards either,” she continued.

“Salvation kept talking about some Great Redeemer,” Zac said, trying to keep his scattered mind focused. “Perhaps that was him. He might have gotten his hands on an inheritance or something. That kind of treasure sounds like something that might be left to an inheritor.”

“That’s impossible. This is a new world, there are no inheritances here,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

Zac scratched his face for a couple of seconds before he coughed.

“Well, it’s not completely impossible. I have a couple of them as well, got them as a reward,” he explained, his voice getting lower and lower as the intensity from Thea’s glare increased. “And more importantly that man called Salvation his inheritor.”

She didn’t say anything only gave an annoyed huff as she surveyed the area before pulling Zac to his feet.

“I think we need to go,” she said. “The palace is destroyed, and people from all surrounding mountains should have seen the battle. None of us is in any condition to fight another battle.”

Zac was about to agree, but suddenly his vision turned slanted. It took a bit for his muddled mind to realize that he had fallen over, which made him finally realize just how bad his

condition was. That last strike had used up most of his remaining lifeforce, and when it was destroyed it got even worse.

“Don’t put my body into a Cosmos Sack,” was all that Zac could say before his vision turned black.

An unknown amount of time later that Zac woke up with a cough, his eyes straining to adjust as he slowly opened them. He saw that he had been moved after all as he was inside what looked to be the ruins of some of the structures closer to the foot of a mountain.

However, he realized that his fears had been true, as his vision had once again turned into that of his Draugr-form. His feeling only worsened when he realized that he was tied up to the point that he was barely able to move, and the bindings were actually strong enough to keep him secured.

“So you’re up,” Thea’s voice sounded from behind, but Zac wasn’t even able to turn over.

“Thanks for carrying me away. So, uh, why have you tied me up?” Zac asked, trying to make his voice sound as warm and alive as possible.

There was no response for a few seconds until a light shuffle could be heard as Thea entered his field of vision. She looked to be mostly fine apart from being slightly pale, but she had a frown on her face as she scrutinized Zac from some distance.

Zac knew very well just how different he looked at this current form, particularly his pitch-black eyes that looked like portals to the abyss.

“I am not an undead, I am still Zac,” Zac said.

“You sure look like an undead, and you’re deathly cold to the touch,” she said with an unconvinced face.

“Well, it’s a long story, but through a few deadly encounters, I found a way to get two lives. I can somewhat freely swap between my two forms, but sometimes the change is forced upon me,” Zac said.

“Like dying,” Thea said with a blank face.

“Well, yes, that would do the trick,” Zac coughed.

“So you are immortal?” she probed.

“I don’t think so?” Zac hesitantly said. “It’s not like I’d survive getting my head cut off.”

The moment the words left his mouth he regretted it, as Thea’s eyes thinned as she pointedly stared at his exposed throat. However, nothing happened as the seconds passed, and Zac could finally breathe easy again.

But soon Thea spoke up, and he couldn’t help but get a bit antsy again.

“You should understand my position. It is already clear that Salvation is under the thumb of some alien influence, bringing a great threat to Earth. Now I find out that the top ranker is an undead when there’s an undead Incursion on earth that has ravaged a good deal of Asia,” she said with an even stare.

“What you said might be true, but I need to ask some questions to ascertain the veracity of your claim,” she continued.

From there on she kept asking him various questions that only he would know, such as the content of their explorations during the hunt, or their shared experiences at the Auction earlier. However, after a while the nature of the questions started to change.

“How old were you when you stopped wetting the bed?” she suddenly asked.

“What? No Idea, three perhaps?” Zac answered with a perplexed face.

“How many girlfriends do you have, and how do you rank them?” she continued without missing a beat.

“Rank them? What are you talking about? I am single,” Zac answered with an exasperated voice.

“That’s not what our intelligence indicates,” Thea retorted.

“Are you talking about Hannah? We broke up some time ago,” Zac said but frowned when he saw her mouth quirking slightly upward. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

The next moment the ropes around him were released, and he was free again. However, he shot a glare at Thea who innocuously looked back at him as he stretched his sore body.

“We need to get going, we’re still somewhat close to the scene of the battle,” Thea said without commenting the earlier line of questioning.

Zac only snorted but he was quick to follow behind her. He sensed that his Core wasn’t filled at the moment, making it a risky venture to turn back again. Instead, he simply donned a cloak that covered his head that would hide his identity until he could turn back again.

The two kept moving as soon as Zac was freed by Thea since they were still pretty close to the scene of the battle. They weren’t worried about the average cultivators, but rather the top names on the ladders, such as the Dominators and the Medhin Emperor.

Their battle with Salvation might as well have been a blaring sign showing half the mountainous region where top powerhouses were, and if the E-Ranked evolved had done any sort of reconnaissance they should know that there were only three E-Rankers present at the hunt.

However, it didn’t mean they stopped their treasure hunt just because they wanted to avoid any further battle for the time being. However, they decided to avoid the top tier palaces in favor of looting the high tier sites that were not quite as conspicuous.

But they soon learned that the competition for these mountains was much harsher compared to the top-tiered ones that were guarded by extremely powerful arrays. Two out of the three mountains they visited during the day had already been looted, and it was only thanks to Thea’s observation skills that they managed to find any treasures at all.

She had managed to at least find a few hidden stashes that contained decent returns, but it was far worse than the usual haul they had during the day. Thea had already lost two positions, but Zac had soared up to the first position on the Gatherer ladder, thanks to looting Salvation.

Chapter 230: Out of the Frying Pan

Zac started absorbing energy for his core the moment that they settled in for the night, holding a divine crystal in one hand and a miasma crystal in the other. As soon as the core was filled up he began the process of turning back to a human again.

Since he had already turned he first thought about staying that way for a while. He could take the opportunity to both gain a couple of levels and work on his quests. However, in the end he decided against it, which was why he was currently emptying himself of miasma from all his pores.

There were a few reasons to this. The most important was the safety issue. There were dangers both known and unknown prowling the mountains, and his combat prowess was far higher in his human form. Perhaps that would change in the future, but for now it was safer to have access to his Hatchetman class. He only had one skill at the moment, and Zac believed that the best use for **[Deathwish]** was to handle large groups of weaker enemies.

Secondly, there was the issue of Thea. He had already explained that he had gained the ability to gain a second life by turning to an undead, but she never mentioned anything about a second class. He was therefore a bit leery about grinding his class while traveling with her.

She had proven herself to be a solid ally through thick and thin during the hunt, but she had also realized that family was extremely important to her, even if she was a bit of a loner. If he for some reason came at odds against the Marshall Clan she would stand with them, and he was unwilling to show all his cards at this juncture. He knew he'd already slipped up a

couple of times by now, but he could only channel his inner Ogras and strive to do better from now on.

A cloud of miasma was slowly gathering above Zac as he expelled everything in his body until his vision once again began swimming and he lost consciousness. When he woke up again he was relieved to find that he wasn't bound like the last time, but Thea was still sitting close-by observing him.

"Pretty impressive," she commented when she noticed that Zac was back to being a bonafide human. "Are you able to turn into anything else as well?"

"I'm not some shapeshifter," Zac muttered as he cracked his neck.

He truly needed to find a better method for the change. Having to die just to turn was a huge pain in the ass, and it felt extremely uncomfortable as well. Every cell in his body screamed for sustenance, but he had to repress those basic impulses and let his body slowly get drained.

"So what's next?" Thea said as she started setting up her tent.

They were inside a small house at the foot of a mountain, but she still chose to erect her one-man tent. She had done the same every night since they started traveling together, and Zac guessed she wanted some privacy as she slept. He knew it wasn't an issue of not wanting to get dirtied by the floor beneath since he'd seen her caked in both blood and grime the last days without as much as lifting an eyebrow.

"Nothing's really changed. We should start hitting the top tier palaces again if you're up for it," Zac said after mulling it over for a bit.

Thea nodded before she got into her tent, leaving Zac to take the first watch.

Zac sat down next to the doorway of the structure as he looked out into the darkness. The darkness this night didn't seem very oppressive and he could spot the weak stars in the sky, meaning that there probably wouldn't be a nightly assault this day.

Since he had some time to spare he decided to go over his gains from the past day, and first opened his status screen.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	62
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	370 [Efficiency: 116%]
Dexterity	221 [Efficiency: 116%]
Endurance	375 [Efficiency: 116%]
Vitality	239 [Efficiency: 116%]
Intelligence	90 [Efficiency: 116%]
Wisdom	85 [Efficiency: 116%]

Luck	93 [Efficiency: 116%]
Free Points	1
Nexus Coins	[F] 26 743 653

The day's activities had slightly improved his attributes once again, with him gaining a level in his undead form from killing beasts when they changed mountains. He looked at his Free Point for a bit before he put it into Strength.

He had gone back and forth on this, eventually he chose to increase his Strength. With the help of the Dao of Sharpness, he actually had far more Dexterity than he needed to keep a decent ratio. He felt that he could afford a couple of more points into Strength since it was still his main attribute during fights.

Another idea he had was to boost his Wisdom and Intelligence to 100 each before he got ready to evolve, in case any future Class Upgrade had restrictions on either those attributes or that there was a minimum of 100 in all attributes.

But he felt that putting points there was a bit premature. He was leaning toward instant power-ups during this hunt, rather than something that could benefit him down the line. Besides, it wasn't impossible he'd gain some more attributes through new titles or treasures before he reached level 75. The fewer points he needed to put himself into those attributes the better.

Another welcome surprise was that **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Nature's Barrier]** both had evolved from the last battle. He hadn't noticed until now since he had been in his Undead form during the whole day.

That Nature's Punishment had upgraded was the most critical. It had been his final card in every tough fight since he gained the skill, and the power of the wooden hand essentially dictated how strong enemies he could defeat.

He had no idea just what kind of effect the upgraded skill would have since there were no clues, but he sensed that the

fractal on his forearm could take in far more energy compared to before, which could only be seen as a good sign.

Each point in attribute also increased the amount of Cosmic Energy he could hold, meaning that he had far more to go around today compared when he first gained the skill. At that time using the skill just once took pretty much all his energy, but by now he used less than half his energy to launch it.

As for [**Nature's Barrier**], he simply summoned the swirling leaves after throwing a glance at the tent at the opposite side of the building. The continuous consumption of his defensive skill was higher since the upgrade. But the leaves were also far more resplendent, almost lighting up the building with their green luster.

He also saw that the veins on the leaves had changed a bit. They slightly looked like fractals before as well, but it was much clearer now. He still couldn't make anything out from the fractals due to his lacking insight into that field, but he knew that each leaf could block far more force compared to before.

Satisfied with the result he deactivated the skill, his eyes turning to his Cosmos Sack next.

He hadn't properly gone through it since they had been on the move the whole day, but now there was time to properly look it over. He had briefly peeked into it during the day, and he was shocked by the number of things inside since he looted Salvation.

There was no way he would be able to store everything inside if he had only his own sacks, as the sheer quantity of items was just enormous. If he decided to empty the Sack he would be able to create a small hill of healing pills alone for example, and there were thousands and thousands of weapons.

Salvation had been at the 8th place on the Gatherer ladder when he fled the hunt, but his way of getting that high up had been vastly different from himself and Thea. The two of them had only hit top palaces, occasionally lining their pockets with the possessions of other trial takers while traveling between the summits.

Salvation had simply killed and robbed almost a thousand people as a way to increase his Silver Guard, and it was obvious that he'd kept everything they owned as well. But it was also clear that most of the guards were of pretty low power on average, as the quality of the loot was pretty lackluster. Zac sat and went through item after item, but he only found a total of six items that seemed valuable.

He placed them together with the 22 other items he had looted during the hunt, the first of them being the extremely heavy metal ball that was covered in intricate fractals. His plan for them was simply to hand them over to Calrin when he got back for identification and potentially selling off.

Some of them might be a good weapon against the Dominators or the Medhin Emperor, but he was just unable to figure anything out about their method of usage. He'd rather just stash them than accidentally blowing himself up. As for the mountain of other treasures, they were just low-value items that would fill his contribution system back in Port Atwood. Things such as healing- and fasting pills were always in high demand.

The night passed uneventfully, and the two set out at the break of dawn. They once again settled into their usual routine, and the following days they hit one high-value target after another. However, on the second day, something odd happened.

In the distance, the mountains were simply replaced with the blackness of space, and the once endless field of view got abruptly cut short. It came suddenly and without warning, and made Zac and Thea stop in their tracks. D

"It's a battle royale," Zac suddenly muttered as he looked on the newly erected wall.

"A what?" Thea asked with confusion.

"I think the System is reducing the size of the hunt, and it might keep shrinking it over time. We're pretty spread out at the moment, and we haven't really fought anyone in two days. The system wants more struggle, and it forces us into closer proximity," Zac said.

“Figures,” Thea only commented with a sigh.

“Well, there’s still quite a huge field to search. Even if we walked in a straight line it would take us over a month to pass the whole thing. But I think we should maintain a large distance from the black wall, the System might not give a warning if it decides to reduce the area again,” Zac added as he started looking for a new target.

Zac was proven right three days later, as the black wall swallowed up a large group of mountains again. And if the System was looking for more fights the plan worked spectacularly. Both Zac and Thea had been forced to kill a bunch of cultivators each during the past days.

Furthermore, the valleys were flooded with innumerable beasts that seemed to have been pushed out of the black enclosure. It had gotten to the point that he’d even seen a pack of huge rats getting pushed down the large cracks in the ground that ran alongside the mountains due to overcrowding.

There were also constant sounds of battles from the various mountains, and the impacts they caused were getting larger as well as most of the weaker people were quickly getting rooted out. In just three days over ten thousand had been eliminated from the hunt either through leaving voluntarily or getting killed, which was a way faster pace than before.

Zac and Thea were mostly unaccosted by this though. There were very few who could threaten them at the moment, and the mountain peaks there were usually very few people on the mountains they chose. They only picked the summits with the most spectacular palaces that would have the harshest arrays protecting them.

They had a few close calls during the past days, particularly in a palace that had an extremely insidious mix of arrays. Initially, they had just thought it was a combination of a battle array that spawned a bunch of golems and a gravity array, but they were wrong.

There had also been an imperceptible illusion array that only slightly messed with their senses, and Zac only found out when his danger sense blared to life. However, it was too late

and he was gored by a sharp spike by one of the golems. Thankfully the warning had allowed him to avoid any lethal damage, and the immense pain helped him break out of the array.

However, the two had generally had a smooth sailing so far. But something was different about the mountain in front of them, making Zac stop in his tracks with a frown. They were just standing at the foot as they had with so many other mountains.

But this time his Luck was in no uncertain terms telling him that he was in danger.

Chapter 231: Rooting out Problems

“This had better work,” Ogras grunted in annoyance. “This god damn array almost cleaned me bare.”

“Well, it was you who decided to buy through the mercantile system rather than wait for Lord Atwood to return,” Calrin responded, not able to hide his glee.

In front of them was a huge table wrought some crystal, and its surface was covered in dense fractals. Oddly enough each of the legs had sharpened ends, and all four of them were currently embedded into the ground. They were in a secluded cave right in the middle of the island, and this place had also become the headquarters of their operation.

Ogras only glared at the little twerp for a bit bit, thinking of methods he could have revenge without getting caught. He just knew that the little shit had added a substantial premium to the tools required when he saw the hurry that Ogras was in. But he could only swallow his ire for now, and he instead took out a crystal from his sleeve and put it to his mouth.

“Are you ready?” Ogras asked into the crystal.

“... Ready,” a sullen voice responded from the other side.

“Come now, don’t be like that. I’m sure that Zac will warm up if he heard you protected his sister,” Ogras snorted.

Alea had been a complete drag the past weeks, drifting about like a brooding ghost. That man kept throwing annoying problems at him just to go on exciting adventures. Now Ogras was supposed to be some sort of marriage counselor as well? Well, at least he would get an adventure of his own if this all worked out, and he could leave all this crap behind.

The plan had taken a week of intense research and another week of putting everything together. The whole island now had over fifty minor teleportation arrays hidden all over. He would be able to appear almost anywhere on the island at moment's notice, they only needed to start up the main array in front of them to start the operation.

He had racked his brain for days to come up with another way to spot the shapeshifters. Those bastards were the only thing that blocked him from being able to enter the Mystic Realm now, and he couldn't wait to rip them apart. Ogras had even bought over twenty information missives from Calrin until he finally found a plan that had a decent chance to work.

Thoughts of just sneaking inside the Mystic Realm had crossed his mind tens of times, but in the end he forcibly pushed down those impulses. If Zac found out he shirked his duties while he was away he could forget about getting his hand on the inheritance, which was a surefire power-up for him compared to the unknown of the Mystic Realm.

Besides, he knew who would be the main targets of an assassination in case that both he and Zac were gone from the island simultaneously, and he didn't want to see the sister get herself killed. He had spent most of his time shadowing MacKenzie Atwood since Zac left on the hunt, and he had to admit she was an interesting person.

She was a contradiction personified. He had never met someone with such precise control of Cosmic Energy, her precision and reaction time were unparalleled. With such god-given talents she would be welcomed as an elite at almost any sect.

Attributes could be solved by various means, but supreme talent was far harder to come by. But at the same time he had seen her fall over while standing still twice, and he'd lost count of how many times she'd dropped things by just fumbling them. How could such a skilled person be so clumsy?

He had even gone so far as to ask around about her past, and it turned out that while the clumsiness was something she'd

always had, the stellar control seemed to be something new. Perhaps her talent was always latent, just waiting to explode when this world got integrated. But he had bigger fish to fry than to figure out that mystery.

The solution to his problems that he finally found was an array called [**E-Grade Origin Array**]. It was an array that showed unique energy signatures of all people within its reach, and the signature depended on the origin of the person.

That meant that the demons would have pretty similar signatures, just like the humans and ishiate would have similar signatures within their cohorts. He had already silently escorted the few Zhix that were stationed in Port Atwood away so that they wouldn't add confusion to the results. That left the shapeshifters who should have their own unique signatures.

Normally this plan wouldn't work since the capitals of the multi-verse were melting pots of people with all kinds of origins. Besides, higher grade concealment skills would be able to change even the signatures they emitted, rendering the array useless. Even worse, everyone would notice it being activated since it shot out a not-so-discrete pulse.

Using such an array was akin to using inspection skills on everyone in a town, and was considered to be extremely rude and overbearing. If you were unlucky some hidden powerhouse might stay in the city, and he or she might take offense to being exposed like that. All this made the Origin Array mostly useless, and it wasn't one of the better-known arrays.

But the current situation of Port Atwood created the possibility of his plan working. First of all the population was extremely homogenous. Secondly, the shapeshifters were only F-Grade, meaning that they didn't possess access to skills strong enough to hide from the array.

Ogras placed ten E-Grade crystals in the core of the array, and it was with great relief he saw it hum into life. The tabletop in front of them changed, and soon it displayed the whole island.

The next moment a pulse was emitted from the core beneath the table, and it quickly spread out to cover the whole island.

Azh'Rodum was the first town to get covered, and the map was quickly getting filled with similar red lights. A few blue lights also started shimmering, and Ogras guessed those were the humans that lived in Azh'Rodum as miners. The pulse kept expanding outward until they reached the array flags that were planted in the ocean roughly a hundred meters away from the shore. It had been a pain in the ass to put all those things into place.

Ogras had been forced to grapple with everything from enormous fish to oversized lizard-things that lived on the western shores of the island. MacKenzie had called them crocodiles, though they apparently weren't as large before this world got integrated.

Finally, they spotted lights that seemed out of place – three golden dots huddled together a few hours travel away from Port Atwood. They might be Ishiate that might have wandered off, but Ogras' guts told him otherwise.

“This thing consumes huge amounts of money, we can't keep it activated forever. Tell me if you see them move or if new ones crop up,” Ogras said, and the next second stepped on the teleporter.

The next moment he appeared in the array closest to the signatures, and he immediately melded with the shadows as he rushed toward the shapeshifters with all speed he could muster.

“Two more at number 23, not moving,” the voice of the Sky Gnome reached him through the crystal.

Ogras only grunted in confirmation as he kept moving forward. He had hoped there would only be the one, but there were already five signatures on the map. With the help of his late-stage Seed he was like a ghost as he pushed through the forest.

This was also the first real battle since he was freed from the restrictions of the system, and his Dexterity was completely

unlocked, now sitting at over 400. His Wisdom and Intelligence weren't as high as he would have liked still, but he hoped that he would be able to bridge those gaps with his three trials before attempting to evolve again.

He finally reached the spot the map indicated, and immediately activated his ocular skill. For a while, he couldn't notice anything out of place, but he suddenly looked at a tree that had a suspicious lack of cosmic energy. He immediately took out his spear, and with one swift move crushed the tree into splinters.

A small hole made itself shown, and Ogras unhesitantly turned into shadows again as he dropped down inside. Three extremely startled humans sat huddled in a room of roughly thirty square meters. The floors and walls were pressed mud, and it was clear that they had dug the room out of the ground itself.

"Hey, what are you-" one of the men said, but he didn't get further before his throat was pierced with a stab from Ogras' spear.

The other two men realized there would be no subterfuge and immediately unleashed waves of golden flames in the cramped room. A ring on Ogras' finger lit up and a shield blocked out all the flames as he stabbed outward with this spear twice more.

A few seconds later the flames had died down, leaving only three somewhat charred corpses. Ogras gathered anything that had survived the fire into his Cosmos Sack before he opened the town shop menu and bought another small teleportation array.

"3 Down, any updates?"

"23 targets," a slightly helpless voice echoed back from the other side, and Ogras groaned in exasperation.

"Who are closest to the settlements?"

"Teleporter 33, twenty-five miles to the west," Calrin quickly responded.

Ogras kept moving from hideout to hideout, and it was as though the god of death had descended upon the island. There was no talk, no negotiation, no prisoners. Every cultist he found was ripped to shreds the moment he found them since he didn't want to risk one of them escaping again like the slippery one he failed to kill last time.

"A target is moving toward the academy," Calrin suddenly said with some worry through the crystal.

Some worry filled Ogras' heart upon hearing that. That was where Alea and MacKenzie were currently staying. He unhesitantly bought another array and jumped into it the moment it was stabilized. He immediately rushed toward the house where the two were hiding and found the Poison Mistress sitting outside keeping an eye of the surroundings.

She seemed surprised to see him and immediately ran over toward him as she kept looking around for any hidden threats.

"Are they coming?" Alea asked with some worry as her brows furrowed.

Ogras didn't answer, and instead immediately skewered her heart with his lance. At the same time, dozens of shadowy spears gored her body from every angle. Blood flowed like a fountain, and she slumped over with shocked eyes.

"How..?" she coughed, but the next moment she lifelessly fell over.

The next moment the door opened and both Alea and MacKenzie looked out of the house. The moment they saw Ogras they immediately swallowed a piece of Springroot. Ogras looked down at the copy of his general with a sneer.

"You're years too early to try a trick like that on me," Ogras muttered in disdain.

He searched the body and found another of those ghastly knives that even were enough to kill that human cockroach of a teammate. Ogras' heart couldn't help tightening upon seeing it since it showed just how close to death he had been.

The last shapeshifter had likely tried to lure him over and quickly kill him with the dagger. If he also managed to kill

Alea afterward he would be able to run essentially rampant in the town. Ilvere was the strongest fighter apart from them, but his skill-set was not suited to deal with assassins.

“Good work,” a voice said, and Ogras turned over to see MacKenzie walk over with a water bottle.

“Do you have anything stronger?” he muttered, but in the end accepted the bottle anyway.

“That stuff is not good for you,” Kenzie said with the voice of someone having repeated herself innumerable times.

Alea looked at the two with a slight frown, before snorting and walking away, pointedly ignoring the mauled copy of herself on the ground. Ogras shot her a glance and shook his head with a sigh. She was likely leaving to keep watching that tree up in the mountains. That left himself and MacKenzie alone in the small courtyard, silently watching over the sunset.

“So when are you leaving?” Kenzie suddenly asked.

“We’ll do a sweep again tomorrow, and if all is clear I will leave immediately after,” Ogras answered. “I don’t know how long it will take inside, but I want to be back before your brother returns.”

“I’ve heard those places can be pretty crazy,” Kenzie muttered, looking over at him with a steady stare. “Stay safe.”

“I will.”

Chapter 232: Into the Fire

Thea noticed Zac's hesitation and stopped as well.

"What's going on?" she asked with vigilance while her eyes flashed with shimmering light, indicating she was using her observation skills. "I can't sense anything wrong."

"My danger-sense is acting up," Zac admitted as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

"Danger-sense, a skill?" Thea asked skeptically.

"Not really, just high Luck," Zac admitted.

"The more I learn about your situation the more pissed off I get," Thea muttered under her breath.

"You and Ogras could start a club about it," Zac snorted, though not relaxing his vigilance as he looked around.

"Is it the mountain?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Zac said, his frown only deepening.

It was an extremely disconcerting feeling to have his danger sense constantly warn him about something that he couldn't pinpoint, and it felt like doom was constantly hanging over him. After a brief discussion, they decided to change the mountain. But the feeling didn't disappear for over two hours, making him almost believe his sense was on the fritz.

But the feeling suddenly intensified by a large degree, and he whirled around without hesitation, his axe ready. Facing them just ten meters away was a small unassuming Zhix warrior releasing no aura at all, to the point that it might as well be a level 1 mortal. The moment Zac saw the insectoid he immediately took out his dagger, but he soon gave up the idea when he saw the ladder position of the insectoid in front of them.

"Inevitability," Zac said with a stoic face, though his heart started beating like a drum.

It truly was the first place holder on the Hunter-ladder and one of the beings that stood at the peak of their world. Their plans and objectives were a mystery, and the fact that he had somehow appeared right in front of them couldn't spell anything but trouble.

"That's me," the Zhix said, a small smile on its face. "I have looked forward to meeting the Super-Brother Man."

"I thought you'd be an Anointed," Zac said, trying to buy some time while he figured out what to do.

"Don't compare us to those poor miscreations. Do you know what the Anointed are? It's forced mutation through Alchemy. They call it the Rite of Anointment, but they only stuff themselves full of natural treasures, hoping the surge of energy won't explode them," the Zhix scoffed.

Zac didn't relax just because the Zhix seemed happy to talk, but rather the opposite. It looked like Inevitability felt everything was in his control, even after knowing who he was. His hand stayed close to his pouch, ready to take out his token at moment's notice.

He finally understood how the cultivators had felt when they were trapped by Zac and Thea. The Zhix in front of him didn't emit any aura, but Zac knew that it was above his own level by a large margin. The insectoid seemed content to speak at the moment, but Zac couldn't figure out his real goal.

He now understood that the sense of danger came from Inevitability stalking them, and it was a proof of its ability that it could follow them for hours without them finding the slightest clue of its presence. He could only pray that it was due to Inevitability possessing some class with stealth-capabilities, rather than it simply being so far above them in power that it could easily hide from their senses.

"They invented it to combat us back in the day, you know?" Inevitability continued. "The unenlightened needed quick boosts in power to combat our superior strength during the

Great War. But that path to power has a price, they will never ascend to the E-Grade. Soon they will be irrelevant, left behind as symbols of a misguided struggle.”

”So what is your goal? Our new world is getting ravaged from foreign invaders, but I’ve yet heard of you closing any incursions,” Zac probed.

”That battle is not for us, but we are rooting for your victory,” the Zhix said with a teasing smile.

”Why?” Zac asked skeptically.

”Void chose you as a fulcrum, but I remain unconvinced, so I searched you out while that bore is busy. Why should I hold myself back if you can’t even fulfill your designated fate?” the Zhix muttered.

“A fulcrum?” Zac asked with a frown. It wasn’t a great feeling to be part of some scheme of Void’s Disciple, the strongest being on the planet.

Unfortunately, the Zhix didn’t seem interested in divulging any more intelligence. The next moment a terrifying aura was unleashed from the seemingly unassuming Zhix, and Zac couldn’t help but take a step back in shock.

Zac had recently made huge improvements to his combat power with his second Class and new round of titles. That had made him feel almost invincible on earth. He had thought that even if he wasn’t an even match against the Dominators he would at least be able to put up a decent fight. Perhaps he would even be able to kill them if needed with a surprising burst of power through [**Hatchetman’s Rage**].

However, only now did he truly understand the folly of his inflated ego. The aura that was being emitted was just monstrous, and not something that would come from some random cultivator. Inevitably clearly had his own sets of lucky encounters to power him as well, and with this high level, the result felt almost impossible to overcome.

Of course, the aura was nothing compared to what he sensed from his meeting with Greatest or the imprint of the Great

Redeemer. But their auras felt so far beyond his own that making an accurate measure of their strength was impossible.

Inevitability's aura was within his scope of understanding, but it was far beyond what he could unleash by himself.

Furthermore, it was powered by an immense killing intent that could only come from killing hundreds of thousands of beings.

The Zhix warrior barely reached Zac's chin, but it felt like Zac was staring at an enormous beast when he was inundated in Inevitability's aura. He quickly released his own to combat the oppressive feeling, getting ready for battle. It was clear that the Dominator had come for a fight after all.

Zac didn't dare to hold anything back, and Thea was clearly of the same opinion. But their goal wasn't to defeat the Zhix.

"Flee," Zac only said through grit teeth as before he disappeared, appearing over a hundred meters away the next moment with an attack ready.

He sent five huge edges empowered by the Dao of Heaviness toward Inevitability, hoping to push him back.

"Not bad," the Zhix said, a smile still adorning his face.

The huge edges ripped through the air with enormous power, destroying trees and boulders as they flew straight toward Inevitability. The Zhix lifted his hand, and two odd chains emerged from his back and almost floated in the air in front of him.

It was truly odd, as one moment Zac thought he saw two silver snakes floating in the air, but the next moment they were chains again. They kept swapping back and forth making it impossible to understand which was their true state. When Zac's attacks closed in the two chains formed a circle, and a huge fractal suddenly appeared in the middle of them, shining with a silver luster.

The fractal edges slammed into the erected defense one by one with enough force to decimate a city block, but it was to no avail as the fractal didn't even budge from the onslaught. The next moment tens of daggers descended from the skies, each glistening with a cold sharpness.

It was the work of Thea, and another attack Zac hadn't seen her use before. He could also sense that the falling daggers were imbued with something similar to his Dao of Sharpness, perhaps the Dao of Penetration.

The knives whistled as they ripped through the air, falling down at Inevitability with the force of small meteors. But the Dominator suddenly disappeared and reappeared outside the attack range of the daggers who rained death unto an empty patch of grass.

The next moment the two silver chains shot out from Inevitability, and they both flew toward Zac and Thea like bloodhounds having gained the scent of their prey. The power contained in the chains was terrifying, and neither wanted to clash with the weird things head-on.

Since the moment Zac launched his attacks he also utilized their movement skills to the maximum, desperately running away from the battle. But the chains were closing in on them, and Zac started to feel intense mental pressure as they approached. It felt like the chains emitted some sort of binding power, and moving was getting harder the closer they got.

He could only take active control of [**Mental Fortress**] to protect himself from whatever effect the fractals were bringing, and he summoned two more fractal edges with [**Chop**] as he ran. When he saw that the stretch ahead was clear he jumped up in the air and launched the two strikes at the incoming chains before he landed again.

The maneuver didn't cost him any speed, but even though he felt the shockwaves from his attacks hitting the pursuing attacks he sensed that they weren't destroyed. However, he did sense that the pressure lessened somewhat, so he kept at it as he fled.

They kept running for thirty minutes, constantly using their movement skills to try to shake off the chains. But it appeared they were able to grow impossibly long and kept with them as they fled. Both Zac and Thea were also forced to keep attacking them as they ran to keep them at bay.

At least it was somewhat effective, and they finally managed to destroy the two pursuing snake-chains just before reaching one of the cracks in the earth. It stretched over a hundred meters across, much too far for them to jump with their current power.

They were just about to run toward the north alongside the crack but suddenly they heard a crack from a twig snapping.

“I am impressed,” the familiar voice said from just next to them, making Zac jump away by surprise. “The power was split between two chains, but the fact that F-Graded warriors managed to destroy them is very impressive.”

Zac was breathing heavily from his desperate flight, but Inevitability stood just fifty meters away from them as though he had been there from the very beginning. Zac looked back at the large chasms that seemed to reach toward the core of the earth, a bottomless pit.

They had their backs toward the wall, and Zac knew it wasn't the time to hold anything back anymore. There was simply no way for them to escape from Inevitability, his speed was far above their own.

The only reason they were still alive seemed to be that he was only toying with them, but for what reason he couldn't fathom. But that didn't mean that he would let them go, and Zac prepared his last gambit.

The energy in the surroundings started to enter him with torrential force as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] as his forearm was being flooded with Cosmic Energy. Thea was doing the same, and the air around her left arm shimmered with extremely condensed power.

“Your final cards?” the Zhix said as it curiously looked at them with an excited grin.

The next moment an enormous hand once again emerged from the crack in space above him. The hand hadn't grown larger from the upgrade, but it emitted a force condensed enough that it could rival the Dominator's aura. It almost looked like it was

tattooed with a dense print of fractals as well, creating clearly demarcated rings on the fingers.

The Zhix frowned when he saw the incoming hand, and tens of chains emerged from behind him, combining into a huge snake that moved to intercept [**Nature's Punishment**]. But the rings on the fingers of the hand suddenly lit up with green luster, and the silver snake was briefly unable to move.

Zac was surprised by the added effect of his attack, but he wouldn't let it go to waste as he used all power he could bring to bear to slam the hand down on Inevitability. The insectoid roared in anger, and the air around it started twisting from the power it emitted.

The hand slammed into the ground with enough force that cracks were starting to form for over a hundred meters, making Zac worried that the whole stretch of land they stood on would fall into the chasm behind them.

But Zac didn't have time to think about that as intense pain consumed him as the enormous wooden hand was ripped in two, and a bloodied Inevitability emerged. He wasn't unscathed from the attack though, with his right arm limply hanging at an odd angle, and blood was dripping from his mouth from internal injuries.

"Void Piercer," Thea muttered with a low voice, and the next moment it was as though a tube of the void itself stretched toward the Zhix with lightning speed.

Unfortunately, it looked like Tha had trouble controlling the skill, and she faltered almost as soon as she unleashed the attack, making it hit slightly off-mark. The spear wrought out of grey energies hit the dominator in its gut, but there was no shockwave or huge explosion.

But a perfect hole appeared in the body of the Zhix, and the hole also kept going for another twenty meters, cutting straight through a boulder and a couple of trees. It was like she had used a supremely powerful railgun that disintegrated everything in its path, and Zac could only sigh in regret that it hadn't hit a more lethal spot.

Inevitably coughed he held his broken arm, blood streaming down from its wounded side. But Zac was disappointed to see that the Zhix was still in fighting condition, and the wound was closing itself with speed discernible to the naked eye.

Even worse, the lackadaisical manner of the Dominator was gone, replaced with burning fury.

Chapter 233: Falling

Zac sighed and looked over at Thea who already held her Token ready in hand. Their gambit had failed, and now it looked like they had thoroughly pissed off their enemy. Leaving seemed to be their only solution.

However, inside Zac's heart there was a staunch unwillingness to crush the token, even if things looked extremely bleak. It was as though he felt that something would change inside him if he fled like this. He was trying to gain enough power to protect Port Atwood and all his family, and the title from the hunt was one of the few available upgrades for him at the moment.

"Shit, it hurts," Inevitability growled as torrential amounts of energy gathered above it. "I wasn't going to kill you, but I'll just have to apologize to that guy. Fulcrums can be changed."

The next moment they were beset by hundreds of chains shooting toward them like homing missiles, each of them carrying enough power to seriously wound them. Zac quickly erected his upgraded [**Nature's Barrier**] and placed them as far from his body as possible to intercept the incoming attacks as he placed himself in front of Thea.

"I'll figure something out, I'll help delay if you want to crush the token," Zac quickly muttered as he faced Inevitability.

But he was shaken when he saw the first chain simply rip straight through the emerald leaf without being impeded overly much. It contained a new force that the chains didn't have before, and it felt extremely powerful.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that it was an upgraded or fused Dao Seed that empowered the chains to this degree. He had only been thinking of the huge attribute bonuses such a thing would bring, but the battle power it provided was nothing short of horrifying as well.

The closest chain flew straight toward Zac who only had time to lift his arm in defense. A loud crack could be heard and Zac felt a blinding pain as his arm was broken from the tremendous impact.

Zac felt some hopelessness when he saw the innumerable chains following close behind. There was no way he could survive long enough for him to crush the token and last the seconds until he was teleported. He didn't even have any way to help Thea out for long enough for her to escape.

But the next moment he was lifted from his feet, and his eyes widened as he was suddenly falling down the chasm. Thea was right next to him, holding his robe by the neck with a determined expression.

However, Inevitability's attack didn't stop there as the incoming chains followed them down the chasm, descending even faster than they were falling. Zac prayed this gambit would be enough as he took out his Token.

But the next moment an intense mental shock slammed into his mind, and **[Mental Fortress]** wasn't enough to completely stop it. It felt like his soul was getting shredded to pieces, making him spasm and drop the token.

"No reprieve for you," he heard echoing down from above, and Zac looked up to see the sneering face of Inevitability standing up at the ledge.

He did what he could with his defenses, but his desperation grew as he was getting pelted by one attack after another as they kept falling. His vision started to get blurry, but suddenly a blinding light lit up next to him as a similarly wounded Thea shone like a goddess.

But Zac didn't have a chance to see what she did as a fractal chain slammed straight into his head knocking him unconscious.

Zac woke up with a cough, and it took quite a while to orient himself. At first, he thought Darkness had descended once

again while he was out, but to his relief he found that wasn't the case as he saw the sun far up in the sky.

He was at the bottom of the chasm in a crater he suspected was of his own making. The area was almost completely shrouded in darkness because even if the Sun shone up in the sky, most of the light didn't reach the bottom of the extremely deep crack he found himself in.

Every part of him hurt, and he even had a couple of broken bones. But the clearest indicator he'd barely survived the fall was that he'd turned into his Draugr form.

He guessed that the fall had essentially killed him, and his Core turned him into an undead once again. The first thing he did after orienting himself, even before taking a pill, was to open up the ladders. He scoured them over and to his relief saw that Thea's name was still there.

He knew she hadn't tried to kill him when she had grabbed him and jumped down the cliff. He knew he was all out of options in that battle. He had already used everything he got but it wasn't enough.

That thing was truly a monster. Zac couldn't even kill it when it went easy on them, but after it imbued its attack with an evolved Dao he was almost helpless against it. Perhaps he would need such a Dao of his own before he could compete with it.

Jumping down was a last-ditch attempt to survive, but he didn't really understand what happened afterward. That final attack had knocked him unconscious, and the last thing he remembered was Thea lighting up like a beacon.

At first, he thought she had used some defensive treasure to survive, but after looking around he couldn't find her anywhere, not even any hint of her having fallen down. The fact that she was still on the ladder meant that she hadn't teleported out though, leaving him even more confused.

Since he couldn't find her he sat down and took out one of the top tier healing pills and a couple of miasma stones to absorb. He didn't move for a full hour, fully focusing on recuperating

his body. The fall wasn't the only thing that had hurt him, the fight that preceded it had taken a toll as well.

Meeting one of the true Dominators had been a sobering wake-up call. With his dual classes and plethora of titles he thought that even if he might not be quite as strong, the difference shouldn't be too large.

But reality had proven different. He had a feeling that the only reason that he still was still alive was that the Dominator wasn't trying to kill him in the beginning for some reason. It rather felt that he was being toyed with. He had even tried to take advantage of that fact to mount a sneak attack with the help of Hachetman's Rage, but even that had failed spectacularly. The power of that monstrous Dominator was just insurmountable for the current him.

That begged the question as to why there hadn't been a single report of their activities thus far. If they wanted to they should have no problem destroying any incursion, reaping the benefits. Since they didn't shy away from Cosmic Energy like their brethren they shouldn't have an aversion to collect titles that could help them get even stronger.

The only clue that he gained from the fight was the mention of a plan, and his being a fulcrum of it somehow. His guess was that they were biding their time for whatever Void's Disciple had planned.

Zac couldn't help but release a tired sigh as he went over his hurt body. Strong enemies just kept popping up. First, it was the mysterious Redeemer, then the Dominators who were stronger than expected and who were also working on some grand plan that appeared to impact the whole world.

In any case, there wasn't much he could do about it where he was currently stuck. Perhaps Ibtap could be of assistance in figuring out the situation when he got back. He wouldn't waste his time with this in the middle of the hunt, and since he was mostly healed after an hour he stood up with a groan.

That thought brought up a new question. Zac got an ominous feeling as he checked his Cosmos Sack. But his fears were true; he had lost his token. The mental attack from

Inevitability had made him lose his grip on the token as he fell down, and even after looking around for close to an hour he couldn't find it anywhere.

That meant he had lost his opportunity to escape this hunt early. He would either stay the whole duration or die. A few of his ribs were still cracked, but he didn't want to stay here. However, the question was where the hell he should go. He could either try to climb up the cliff again or keep exploring this hidden rift.

But after a few more minutes he realized he didn't actually have much of an option. The walls were just insanely hard, and he couldn't cut footholds even with the help of **[Verun's Bite]**. And since he didn't possess Thea's skills of finding a purchase from the smallest space he just had no way to get back up to the mountains.

Worse yet he realized he might be in trouble. The reason that the stones were hard was likely that they had been infused with the odd darkness that spanned this fallen sect. There was an unmistakable aura in the very rocks itself all around him.

He was starting to form a hypothesis as he looked around. There were small cracks at various places along the stone, and these cracks had a far higher amount of the sinister aura. Whatever the darkness was it might originate from this very ravine and other ones like it all along the area, and the true source of the darkness seeped out from those cracks during the night.

He still had no idea just what the darkness was. It could be described as a mental poison that made both beasts and people turn insane. The last times he wasn't in any danger, staying hidden far from the specters feeding ground. But what would happen if darkness descended while he stood right at the source?

The prospect was enough to make Zac's hair stand on end, and his urgency to escape the chasm increased many times over. At least it was still mid-day, and he had ample time to get out of here before the night came.

It seemed random which days the darkness descended, but it invariably happened in the deep of the night. That meant Zac had almost 12 hours to get out before he was in any danger of getting caught in the middle of an endless onslaught of endless specters.

So Zac started to walk along the rift in order to find any way to get back up in the end. At first, he planned on randomly choosing his path, but he soon changed his mind and headed north.

The reason was that he felt a small gust of wind coming from that direction, which might mean that there was a passage in that direction that could let him leave this creepy place.

Urgency pushed his tired body forward, and he ignored his body's protests as he kept a rapid pace.

However, the ravine felt almost endless as he walked for hours. The gust of wind he felt was clearly just some wayward wind from the ground floor. The only thing of note he'd found during his walk was a couple of corpses.

He was no expert in judging the cause of death, especially when a couple of the corpses were just meat paste, but he believed that not all bodies had died due to the fall. Some were cleanly beheaded or had other wounds, making Zac believe that the bodies had been dumped by their killers.

There was no evidence though that anyone had been alive down in the crevasse, and Zac wasn't surprised. The height of the fall was over a thousand meters, and even he with close to 400 Endurance would have died from the fall if it wasn't for his Core giving him another go at life.

Suddenly it got darker and Zac frowned as he looked up. He was relieved to see that it actually didn't suddenly become night, but rather that the ravine closed up by the ground floor. However, the subterranean level continued on, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw what was up ahead.

There were actually signs of there being human activity in front of him.

Not now in regards to the hunt, but once upon a time. There was a square made with pitch-black cobblestones that spanned roughly two hundred meters across.

Even though Zac initially felt elated that he might find a way out of here, he quickly got a sinking feeling as he looked at the place. He had thought that since there was development down here there might also be a path up, but he started to believe that might not be the case.

The only thing on the square was a huge cracked obelisk that was completely covered in fractals. The obelisk reached over fifty meters in height, and each side was over five meters across. At the foot of the obelisk in the direction of Zac there were two chains attached that radiated an otherworldly suppression and weight.

But the chains were cracked and held nothing at their other end. This was some sort of prison, but the prisoner was nowhere in sight.

Chapter 234: Square Up

There was an unmistakable aura of the suffocating darkness permeating the cracked ends of the chains which gave some hints about whatever was once trapped in the middle of the square. Zac could only guess that the inscriptions on the obelisk were meant to keep it suppressed, but that obviously didn't work out in the end.

He couldn't tell whether the prisoner was able to destroy the obelisk, or whether the obelisk cracked for some other reason, which allowed the captive to escape. But then again it didn't really matter. What mattered was how long ago the prisoner escaped.

If it was something that happened thousands of years ago, then it was fine. But if it was something that was set in motion the moment the trial started he might be in grave danger. It was a real possibility that whatever was once held here might be the source of the darkness, and perhaps even the thing that released the harrowing wail during the attacks.

Another possibility was that the thing captured here had gotten thoroughly corrupted by the darkness, which gave it enough power to escape from its shackles. Then it might mean that it had gone crazed the same way as the cultivators who got possessed, and was currently roaming the chasm.

In either case, it was bad news for Zac. Something this powerful wasn't something he could contend with even if he got back to perfect health. He once again internally swore at Inevitability for making him lose his token, putting him in this dire situation.

Still, he didn't want to give in to despair just yet. Even if the source of the darkness was once imprisoned here it didn't make sense for it to stay on after it made its escape. He slowly

made his way toward the square, maintaining an extreme vigil all the while.

There was an unmistakable aura of power still radiating from the towering obelisk even if there was a large crack that destroyed a good amount of the fractals. The obelisk might even protect from the Darkness if it Descended once again, making this one of the safer places around.

Before he stepped onto the square he carefully looked down at the stones to see if there was anything out of place. Perhaps there were other arrays active at a place like this that might spell trouble for him in the end. But when he looked down he saw that there were extremely intricate inscriptions on all the small cobblestones. However, each and every stone had a crack running over it, ruining the fractals that covered them.

Zac was actually slightly relieved to see that the fractals were ruined since it lessened the risk of him getting trapped inside whatever this square originally did. But before he stepped on to the square he took one last hesitant look back.

If he was to turn back, then this was the time. It was getting late by now, but if he pushed himself he might make it back to the spot where he first fell down into the chasm before darkness could descend. But the problem was that he didn't have any idea what to do after that.

The chasms ran across the whole mountain range, and he'd seen many that passed over ten mountains. There was no guarantee that there would be any exit waiting for him if he went the other way, but only more dark passageways.

So it was with grim determination he placed his right foot upon the square, leaving the natural stone floor of the chasm. When he stepped on the cobblestone he immediately felt a suffocating pressure, almost bringing him down to his knees.

The pressure didn't only bear down on his body, but also his very being. It was a mental suppression as well, making his mind feel muddled and his thoughts scattered. However, Zac growled and kept going, activating his Dao of Heaviness to counteract the suppression around him somewhat.

But after just two more steps he realized that the pressure had multiplied, and with a few more meters and he would reach the limits of what he could bear. It seemed that the suppression got stronger the closer to the center of the square he was, and even if he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] he wouldn't even get close to the obelisk before succumbing to the pressure.

He quickly backed away right to the edge of the square once again, the broken ribs screaming in protest from being subjected to this added pressure. It felt like someone was digging around his side with a hot poker, and if Zac wasn't already deathly pale in his undead form he would have definitely paled from the pain.

The weight came from an array that was essentially broken, with both the cobblestones and the obelisk ruined beyond repair. Zac's attributes were already higher than most people at early E-Grade, but he only managed to take a few steps in this prison.

Just how strong was the thing that once was trapped here in these chains, to not only survive but even break out?

It was as though the Obelisk was the source of a local gravity zone, and the closer he was the worse it would get. This relative heaviness gave Zac an idea for his Dao Seed, but now wasn't the time to ponder on it any further. He needed to leave the square and find safety before night fell.

At least it wasn't all bad news. After having walked a few steps along the edge of the square something that was once hidden behind the obelisk came into view. It was a doorway, and he was hoping that it would take him up toward the ground.

Since something had been trapped down here Zac figured there would be guards, and they needed a way to access this place from the surface. The door might give him access to the path that would let him leave.

Since he couldn't simply cross the square he needed to tread along the edges which barely allowed him to pass through. Still, after only fifty meters sweat was streaming down his face from the strain, and every wound on his body had reopened.

But he couldn't rush out of the array either since every step was a struggle. In the end, he was submerged in the intense pressure for half an hour before he pushed open the doors on the opposite side of the square with great relief.

The insides were actually lit up by crystals in the wall, showing that the inscriptions that kept this place running were still operational. There was no way that the crystals would last for thousands of years by themselves, meaning there was a gathering array supplying the place with energy.

Other than that it was completely empty, just a long hallway that seemed to stretch into eternity. Zac hesitated a bit, but eventually he decided to hold off on heading down the hallway. Now that he had found a secluded spot that seemed pretty safe he sat down and closed his eyes, though still gripping his axe just in case.

The main reason he dared to relax like this was that the moment he entered this hidden pathway the ominous aura from the darkness was completely gone. It was unlikely that any of the ghastly specters had ever walked these halls.

He couldn't be completely sure, but he felt that he would be safe in here even if darkness descended once again. But then again he didn't have a lot of options apart from staying here during the night. With the intense aura that the cracks out in in the canyon emitted he didn't dare stay there during the night.

But the reason he stopped before exploring any further was that he had found a great clue from the suppressive formations outside to upgrade his Dao, and he didn't want to waste any time in going over it. It actually felt extremely clear in his mind, perhaps since he had been steeped in the suppression.

He was imagining heaviness as it worked with a gravity source, such as a sun or a black hole. The heaviness came from a source, and the closer one came the more the pressure increased. This wasn't really something that was possible to encounter normally on earth, but the arrays outside had created that very phenomenon outside.

He imagined himself a black hole, and the closer one came the heavier the pressure of his aura would be, to the point of

crushing everything that got too close. Upgrading his Dao came with surprising ease, bringing his Dao of Heaviness to High grade, just like his Dao of Trees. It was a great relief because this was something that had troubled him since he got here.

He'd been caught in four very intense fights and many minor scuffles since he had arrived here. The battles against Salvation and Inevitability were particularly taxing. Yet he hadn't gained barely any insight into his Dao seeds since he had arrived. It was as though this place somehow blocked the Dao from him, preventing him from progressing further. But the immense arrays on the square had finally allowed him to push through.

He was also happy to see that this particular upgrade only gave him strength.

Heaviness (High): Strength +45, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5

He was already planning on putting points into Strength to boost his fighting prowess and this was a great step in the right direction. He only wished there were some enemies down here as well so that he could finish grinding his two Class Quests as well. He was pretty sure that at least one of them would give him a new vision, adding to his steadily growing Dao Repertoire.

The whole process had taken him roughly two hours, and since he was finally done with everything he got to his feet with a grunt. Staying still for this long also helped his body recuperate from both the wounds and passing the square, and he felt a lot better by now.

Zac started to head down the endless hallway, already wishing that Thea was there to use her scouting abilities to find any hidden dangers. Since he was back on his own he could only rely on his default method, brute force.

He held [**Verun's Bite**] in a firm grip as he kept a brisk pace, eyeing the vicinity for anything that might be out of place. But the hallway was created with expert craftsmanship with clean

surfaces floor to ceiling, and the illuminating crystals were placed with exactly measured distances from each other.

But after pushing forward for thirty minutes he knew something was amiss. There was no reason to build such an insanely long hallway, as it would probably be both easier and cheaper to place down two low-grade teleportation arrays for transportation.

He took out a high-quality dagger he'd looted the past days and carved a '1' under the next illuminating crystal he encountered. From there on he kept increasing the count by one as he carved a number under each and every stone he passed.

Suddenly when he was about to carve the 82nd marker he saw that the spot was already occupied by the very same '1' that he first carved. Zac sighed and sat down.

It was as he thought, he was inside some sort of array that tricked his mind somehow. It either made him walk in circles without noticing, or it somehow connected two spaces so that when he walked past the 81st mark he arrived back at the start.

However, he had no idea where the start and the end were. He just marked down number 1 when he started counting, but it might just as well be the middle of the hallway. But at least he knew the length of the hallway by now, and it wasn't actually that long, just a couple hundred meters.

He walked the full length three times over, trying to discern any way to get out by any means possible. He used **[Inquisitive Eyes]** as well, but nothing happened. Next, he tried to sense any disturbances in the cosmic energy in the air, but it gave no clue either.

Finally, he sat down and took out the formation crystal that was the first thing he found inside this hunt. He had been extremely busy over the past two weeks hunting and fighting, but he finally had time to go over it.

He browsed through the contents page by page, arduously going over each and every detail. A vast majority of the

information was above his understanding at the moment, but he was quickly getting a deeper understanding of formations.

Thus far he had only used arrays provided by the system, and they even came with guidance systems that helped him set it up. But this crystal was meant to teach him about the foundations and the basic workings of the knowledge of formations.

Zac didn't even understand the difference between an array and a formation in the beginning, but he soon realized the difference. Arrays were just man-made formations, creating various types of effects with array flags or array disks. All the arrays he had encountered so far were these types of formations.

But formations didn't necessarily need to be created by placing down an array. They could naturally form in nature, and the most powerful formations in the multiverse had naturally formed over billions of years, almost like a solar system.

There was one passage in the beginning that Zac found particularly interesting, and it was imprinted by a grand elder of the Eastern Trigam Sect, someone who was a pure Array Master.

Chapter 235: Dao of Formations

It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as Alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.

Zac was quickly getting engrossed as he kept reading the introduction by the array master, almost even forgetting his current predicament of being stuck inside what he assumed was an entrapment array.

The Alchemist gives form to Dao through concoctions of pills, and the warrior gives form to Dao through unleashing devastating attacks. Even the farmer gives form to Dao through plowing the fields. But none is as multifaceted as the study of formations. It is not bound through medium or execution, but is boundless just like the Dao itself.

Through learning the fundamentals of constructing arrays, any Dao can be given shape. Furthermore, even if the Dao concepts behind a formation eludes your grasp one can still bring out 80% of its power through sheer knowledge of proper placements.

To understand the role of array flags one only needs to look inside themselves. The body consists of crossroads, the major ones being the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. But these two alone are not enough to sustain a warrior.

Minor nodes can be found at every intersection inside the body as anyone who has reached E-Grade knows. These can both store and direct power so that magnificent effects can be brought to bear.

Placing an array flag is akin to breaking open one of the nodes, letting the energies of heavens and earth flow through it. Placement dictates the flow of power, the fractals dictate the

nature of power. When a complete system has been created through the flags, a pathway for cultivation is born.

There were a few parts he didn't understand but he got the general gist of it. An array was essentially a closed system of energy in circulation, just like the pathways inside his body. That explained why the easiest way to destroy an array in its entirety was to destroy one of the array flags since that would interrupt or at least weaken the energy circulation.

Of course, more robust arrays would survive one or a few array flags getting destroyed, but they would always lose some of their effectiveness. While he believed the Array Master was a bit partial in his introduction, Zac couldn't help but keep reading and deepen his knowledge.

However, soon something happened that made him lose his patience. After roughly three hours trying to gain insight into arrays he was passed on the gatherer ladder, pushing him down to the second spot. It was a clear reminder that this was no time to just sit around and read. Others weren't so relaxed and kept hunting for opportunities.

Since he couldn't find any path out he would simply have to make his own path. The reason the walls outside were so sturdy was that they were infused with the mysterious energy from the darkness, but the same couldn't be said for the tunnels around him.

Zac took out his axe and with a mighty swing slammed it straight into the wall next to him. Unfortunately, his plan didn't work out, and a shimmering light appeared over the wall when he hit it, protecting the wall completely. Not even the slightest scar could be seen after his strike.

Zac frowned in displeasure, and once again hefted his axe, this time imbuing it with the improved Dao of Heaviness. He slammed it into the wall with all force he could muster. But the result was the same, and the shimmering shield once again nullified the force in his strike.

It was only with some helplessness he could sit down again and continue reading the crystal. Zac didn't think that swapping over to his Hatcherman class would have any effect

on the results, as even with his newly improved Dao he couldn't make a small crack on the wall.

The powers that were protecting these walls were far beyond what he could destroy. Perhaps he'd manage to do something with [Nature's Punishment], but Zac would rather just sit and wait out the time of the hunt than do something that risky.

He was under a kilometer of rock, and there was just no way to know what would happen if he unleashed everything he got. The most likely scenario was him getting buried alive with no token to help him escape if he let the huge wooden hand slam into the wall.

The hours passed and suddenly Zac got the familiar prompt that darkness was once again descending. But even after twenty minutes nothing happened, proving that the ghastly specters truly didn't come to this secluded passage. Since he didn't have to defend himself against an onslaught of ghosts he kept scouring the crystal for anything that could help him get out of here.

While it was true that he was pretty safe while ensconced in the middle of the mountain he wasn't happy with it. He had already lost his first spot on the Gatherer Ladder, and his placements would keep dropping the following weeks if he didn't get out.

Not even half the duration of the hunt had passed, and the others would keep accumulating points while he was stuck here. If he didn't get out and start grinding again he might actually leave the hunt without rewards from either ladder.

So Zac put all his efforts into devising an escape, putting the matter of the ladders out of his mind as to not get distracted. The hours turned to days while Zac tried to learn more about array breaking until Zac suddenly got a prompt.

[Teleporting to Arena in 1 minute. Tokens Disabled]

Zac wasn't surprised since he hadn't done anything for three days, and he quickly put on a hood to hide the fact that he was undead as he readied his axe.

He wasn't worried about meeting anyone dangerous in this bout since only those who had shied away from battle would get sent here. In fact, Zac was a bit surprised that there were people who remained that avoided battle for three full days.

He was more disgusted about being forced to kill someone far weaker than him just because the System deemed him a coward. But he knew there wasn't any other option for him. Zac had been shocked to find out what happened when neither party chose to fight since it was all too familiar to him.

He and Thea had caught someone like that, and he confessed what had occurred. Thea didn't believe the man, but Zac was much more prone to believe him. If neither party had won within 10 minutes The System would perform a draw just like it did when Zac first got integrated. The winner would survive and the loser would cease to exist.

Even though his luck was through the roof he wouldn't take his chances with a gamble on his life. He had people to protect, and if he was forced to kill someone to survive he would do it, even if it wasn't fair.

The next moment he found himself standing on a stage that floated in space. There was no sign of the mountains or valleys from the hunt, dashing his idea of getting back to the surface through leaving the arena.

He wasn't alone on the stage, as another man had been teleported here the same moment he did. Zac frowned when he saw his opponent. To get sent here one would have to have avoided battles for three days, but the man in front of him looked like he had just barely survived a rough bout.

He was covered in bandages that had turned red with dried blood, and some wounds seemed to have reopened recently. He looked like he had one foot in the grave, and gave off a wheezing cough the moment he appeared. Zac couldn't believe this man chose to stay inside the hunt with these kinds of wounds rather than just crushing his token.

"Forgot the time," the man said with a weak voice after looking over at Zac with a sardonic smile. He clearly

understood what was going through Zac's mind. "I can't believe a monster like you got sent here as well."

Zac silently looked at the man as he stood up with some effort.

"Can I make a last request from you?"

"What is it?" Zac said after some hesitation.

He wasn't worried that there was some hidden agenda from the man. He'd already used **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and together with the somewhat low ladder placements he already knew that there was no way this man could muster up a fight against him even if he was in perfect condition.

"I don't want my body to be left in space or those god-forsaken mountains to be possessed by those ghosts again. Please bury me after you return to your homeland," he said.

"... Fine," Zac said.

The man gave a weak smile, and the next moment he slit his own throat, bleeding out in seconds.

Zac silently looked at the body of the man in front of him until he silently walked over and put the body into his Cosmos Sack. This brief meeting was a stark reminder that this hunt wasn't meant to help people apart from a few select individuals. The System wanted to create powerhouses, but for that it needed fodder.

It lured thousands of the strong to duke it out by dangling some treasures and titles in front of them, all in the hopes of creating a few powerhouses. If the others all died to achieve that goal it was acceptable to the System.

The next moment he found himself back in the tunnel, dashing the last hope he had of the System lending him a helping hand by teleporting him back to the surface. He ate one of his fasting pills before once again sitting down to scour the crystal for any help.

The days passed but Zac was making steady headway, and he started to believe that he would actually be able to get out soon. It all came down to the power of the array. It was no way for him to learn enough about arrays so that he could get out

by technique, but he believed he would learn enough about arrays to spot weaker spots to attack with brute force.

Those kinds of weak spots were usually quite hard to spot, but this was a passive array that didn't have an owner. If an array master was in control of it he could keep moving the weak spots to impede escape, and there would be no way for Zac to slowly be able to analyze it from within without getting attacked.

But who knew how long this place was abandoned, leaving this array to run passively. Besides, Zac suspected that the System had modified the power of all the arrays in this hunt. He believed that this sect was once At least a High E-Grade or low E-Grade sect, and there was no way that he should be able to break the protective arrays of top tier E-Grade Array masters with brute force.

But Zac was once again summoned to the arena before he could make any final breakthrough in his research on the arrays. The second person he met wasn't quite as in peace with his fate as the first one. It was someone who was placed in the top 300 on the hunter ladder, so no weakling by any means.

But it was also clear that he wasn't any good person. He had adorned a cruel smile until he saw Zac's far higher rankings. After some questioning and arm-twisting, Zac realized that the man had avoided battle just to kill and rob a weakling in the arena. He had hoped that the people who avoided battles would spend their time finding valuable loot instead.

The man was summarily executed by Zac, who only needed to imbue a strike with his Dao of Heaviness to crush any resistance. At first, he thought about grinding his class quest with the help of this man, but in the end he decided against it.

The reason was that he felt that he was getting closer to finding a solution to his situation. The more he read about the formations the better he could discern, and to a certain extent understand, the minute fluctuations in Cosmic Energy that permeated the tunnel.

At first, he hadn't noticed anything amiss in the air around him, as Cosmic Energy was always swirling around, almost

like a wind that you could sense with your sixth sense. Its movements were chaotic and unpredictable, and Zac hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary the first times he had walked through the corridor.

But now he felt that there was a method to the madness, but it was only one day later that he felt ready to try out his theories. He had already found out what type of array this was. It was a common type of Entrapment Array that was mentioned in the crystal.

The normal way to pass this type of hurdle was to know a specific set of steps. Walking through the corridor correctly would result in the array staying inactive, but stepping out of the predetermined path would spring the trap.

Essentially it was like a password, and Zac had no way to figure out the correct one. However, he had started to gain a slight understanding of the pathways of the entrapment array, and he was planning something else. He spent the next hours to slowly observe the whole pathway until he finally found what he was looking for.

Chapter 236: Anzonil

Between the 17th and 18th marks that he carved there was a convergence of energy flows that could be somewhat discerned if you watched it for about 20 minutes. That meant there hopefully was a weak spot in the array there, and Zac's best bet in getting out.

Swapping over to his human form would increase his attack power, but Zac still chose to try it out in his undead form first. He wanted to grind his Undead class a bit and it was far harder to transform into a Draugr than it was to turn back into a human.

Zac took a few steadying breaths before he infused his arm with as much miasmic energy it could bear, and with a roar slammed his Dao-infused axe right into the floor right at the intersection of energies he had spotted.

Suddenly it almost felt like he was drunk as he was seeing double. Two realities were superimposed on each other, and the endless hallway he'd been stuck in for a week was just one of them. The other one stopped just ten meters away from him with an intricately carved door.

Zac didn't hesitate and pushed more miasma into his legs as he leaped toward the gate before the entrapment array could stabilize again. He slammed into the gate with enough force to knock the breath out of him, but he wasn't angry in the slightest.

He had finally escaped his entrapment. Zac looked back toward the other end of the hallway, and he spotted the door leading out to the square with the obelisk a few hundred meters away. But just a second later the door disappeared, being replaced once more with the endless hallway.

His swing hadn't been enough to destroy the array, but it had been enough cause some chaos at the endpoint, allowing him

to exit it. Zac was already itching with impatience from a week of inactivity, and he couldn't help opening the ladder in to check the status, and he couldn't help being shocked by what he saw.

He had been kicked down all the way to the 11th spot on the Gatherer ladder, which was somewhat of a surprise to him. While it was true he'd lost a whole week down in this tunnel, he still only really had Emperor Nenotheop to compete with earlier. That ten people had managed to pass the huge amount of wealth he'd accumulated was quite shocking.

A few of the names weren't surprising, such as Starlight, Beruv Ylvas and another of the Medhin powerhouses. But he was somewhat happy to see that Thea had kept going as well, being at the 6th spot. Even more surprising was the appearance of Thomas Fisher in the 8th position.

Zac had only kept his eye on the top positions of the ladder, and he was sure that he hadn't seen Thomas in the top 100 of either list before. For him to suddenly spring up to the 8th position could only be explained with him getting the help of the whole organization.

It also proved that Thomas was more than just one of the many leaders of the New World Government. Between the fact that he was chosen to experiment with holding on to massive amounts of wealth, he was also the one they chose to hold onto the wealth of the hunt.

Zac had a generally positive opinion of Thomas, though it was marred by the various insidious things he had found out about the government. It was also somewhat a relief that the man was still human since the shapeshifters shouldn't be able to get here.

But the truly shocking change was on the Hunter ladder, with him being relegated down to the 443rd position. Before he got fell down into the chasm he was at the 8th position, with the Emperor, the Dominators and a few more above him.

That loss in positions was huge, and it made Zac realize that something must have changed on the surface. He suspected that there must have been something like beast hordes

completely flooding the mountains as a result of the System making the area of the hunt smaller over time.

There was no way to gain that many points by only hunting cultivators since there were simply not enough of them to go around. It would also explain why he only lost 10 spots in one ladder, but over four hundred in the other. The huge loss in positions only served to make him even more impatient, and it was without hesitation he pushed open the door.

This was already the 20th day of the hunt, and Zac only had ten days to catch up to those above. However, he did take out the thick shield he got from Thea's bodyguard before stepping inside. He didn't have access to the swirling leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]**, so he would have to make do with a normal tool for protection.

The room he entered was massive, and it almost felt like he entered a grand cathedral carved into the mountain. The roof was over fifty meters above him and held up by massive pillars covered in both reliefs and fractals. Even the walls and the ceiling was the same, both being covered with marvelous pieces of art

It the grandeur felt a bit reminiscent of the Towers of Myriad Dao back on his island, but there was more substance to this place. Zac couldn't help being awed as he slowly walked inside, his eyes drifting to the beautiful engravings.

Zac immediately started formulating ideas of how to somehow swipe this whole place clean. Everything from the small statues placed in various alcoves to the huge pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling felt like a treasure, and Zac didn't want to leave it behind.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks when his eyes moved to a podium on the other end of the room because he finally realized that he wasn't alone. There was a humanoid sitting in a meditating position on the podium as four braziers lazily burned around him.

The looked mostly human, though he had a third eye in his forehead forming a vertical slit. He had a long white beard, and it was clear that he was elderly from his appearance.

Worse yet, he had already spotted Zac and was looking at him with steady eyes.

“Welcome young... Draugr? Huh? An undead?” the man slowly said with a powerful voice that felt full of wisdom.

Zac sensed no malice from the old man, and it wasn't like he had many other places to go, so he walked closer to the old man. As Zac got closer he realized that there was not a single ripple of power coming from him, making him wonder just who he was and how he got here.

It was even odder that there was simply no vitality around the old man. When he was in his undead form he could even see the life in a stalk of grass, but the man in front of him might as well not exist going by the metric of lifeforce.

There were two possibilities as Zac saw it. The old man might be a spectral being such as the things in the darkness since they shouldn't possess any vitality either. The other possibility was that the old man was just an illusion or a projection without any power.

“Hello, I am Zac. Are you a part of the hunt as well?” Zac hesitantly asked after he stopped ten meters away from the platform on which the old man sat.

He wouldn't get any closer than that though since there was no telling what sorts of protection was placed around the podium. He couldn't sense anything odd about it, but then again he had only gained the slightest of insight into discerning oddities in the energy flow.

“What hunt?” the man asked curiously.

Zac wasn't surprised by the answer, and him asking that was only a test. He had already seen that the man in front of him didn't possess a ladder position, meaning he wasn't part of the hunt. The fact that the old man didn't pretend to be one of the cultivators from earth was hopefully a good sign.

He hesitated for a bit before he explained the circumstances of the hunt, and of the fact that the people participating weren't from this world. The old man looked saddened by the news, and after Zac finished his explanation gave a deep sigh.

“Such is fate. Over fifty thousand years of struggle, only to be undone by one mistake. To think that we became a trial ground for young aspiring cultivators. At least our legacy will live on that way I suppose,” the man said looking up at the ceiling.

“We? Are you part of the Eastern Trigram Sect?” Zac asked.

“I am Anzonil. I, or rather my original body, was once the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Of course, I am long dead along with my fellow sect members,” the old man said with a slight shake of his head.

Zac’s brows rose at that explanation.

“Um, sorry, how are you still here then? I know you are not undead,” Zac couldn’t help ask.

“I couldn’t help being a bit selfish in the end. I cut off part of my soul and imbued it into the arrays of these hidden chambers. I did not want my eight thousand years of cultivation amount to nothing, so I left my imprint and my heritage here,” Anzonil said as he looked down at Zac. “But who would have guessed that the one who came was an undead warrior rather than an Array Master. The Boundless Heavens truly have a sense of humor. I am not sure if what I’ve left behind would be of much use to you.”

If Zac had a heartbeat in his undead form it would have sped up at the mention of a heritage. It indicated that he’d somehow found himself at the location of the inheritance of the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Whatever treasures were hidden here should be among the greatest of the whole Eastern Trigram Sect.

Supreme elders were usually the main powerhouses of a Sect. Zac initially thought that the Sect Leader was the strongest guy around, but that apparently wasn’t the case. Being a Sect Leader was a highly administrative position, leaving little time for personal cultivation.

But the grand and supreme elders were the hidden forces of a sect, and they were generally in perpetual seclusion or traveling in disguise, working on breaking through their limits. They would only come out when the sect was facing extreme

danger that the normal elders couldn't handle, and they were the main deterrence against attacks.

Most of the multiverse wasn't like earth. There were no ladders that showed who was alive and who died. A particularly strong elder might even be able to protect a sect thousands of years after their passing, since the outside world couldn't be sure whether they were dead or if they had made a breakthrough, becoming even more monstrous.

There was no way that such a person didn't have a few supreme treasures stowed away. But Zac frowned after realizing he might not get his hands on those treasures since he wasn't an Array Master. But Anzonil snorted when he saw the downcast face of Zac.

"Who would have thought that a lofty Draugr would be so hungry for this old man's small trinkets," he said with a smile. "Not to worry, there is a path to my treasure even for those who are not fated to walk the same path as me."

The next moment two doorways rose from the ground some distance away from them, and both teemed with power. The next moment the right of the two doorways shuddered and a shimmering screen appeared in it.

"Two pathways to my inheritance," Anzonil said after throwing a glance at the archways. "The left is a trial of Arrays. The trial taker must break through 10 increasingly difficult arrays to reach my treasures, and that is the path that is not fated with you."

Zac frowned at that explanation, but he slowly nodded.

"Don't worry, that is best for you as well. Your method of getting out of the entrapment array outside was admirable, but there is no way you'd pass further than the second array with that kind of brute force. You'd be stuck forever inside," the old man said.

"What about the second path?" Zac probed.

"The second path is a path of carnage. To reach my treasure you need to fight your way through a sea of monsters. This path is far more dangerous, but if you want my treasures

without being proficient in arrays you'll have to take some risks," Anzonil explained.

Zac's eyes lit up since this was exactly what he was looking for; treasures and things to kill. But he still hesitated whether he should take on the trial rather than asking to be sent outside. If the enemies were the specters he would be in trouble since he wasn't able to kill them. And they were far beneath the mountains now, who knew how many of them were prowling these depths.

There was a limit of how long he could resist their onslaught if it was the same as during the first time darkness descended. But Zac didn't have the opportunity to voice his concerns as an unseen force suddenly lifted him into the air and threw him into the shimmering portal.

"Good luck young Draugr, prevail in the depths for this old man. Show me why they call yours the royal bloodline," the elderly voice reached Zac's ears before his vision turned black.

Chapter 237: Mystic Garden

“Remember, this array will only keep the entrance stable temporarily. You need to get out of there within a week, or you’ll be stuck until Lord Atwood can get you out,” Alea said as she looked down at the array that kept the spatial tears in check.

“I know,” Ogras muttered. “Your boyfriend better have collected a war hoard’s worth of loot. I’m becoming destitute over here.”

Alea only glared angrily at Ogras in response, making him snicker in glee.

“Well, I’m off,” he said as he stepped into the transportation array leading into the Mystic Realm.

Ogras’ sight was blocked by darkness for a minute until he suddenly was in a shrouded area. His feet barely had time to land on the ground before he melded into the darkness, disappearing from sight.

After he hid himself he took a quick look around, trying to discern what type of realm he had entered. There were many types of Mystic Realms, but they were generally split into two categories; Wild and Cultivated Realms.

Wild realms were pocket dimensions untouched by man. Sometimes they were just large deserts devoid of anything of value, but other times they were like primordial forests teeming with life. If it was the latter there was a high possibility of finding natural treasures. Of course, where there were treasures there were often beasts as well.

Cultivated Realms were pockets of space that had either been cut off from the main dimension or turned into residences by powerful warriors. These were generally extra sought after since ruins of high-grade civilizations could contain

tremendous amounts of treasure without the high risk of the Wild Realms.

But unfortunately, he saw that he found himself in a cavern rather than some ancient ruins, and when he discreetly exited to the mouth he only saw a forest in the distance. However, Ogras didn't exit the cavern since there were a few things odd with the view.

The first odd thing was the silver lines up in the sky. The sky was like a mix of his own homeworld's red and Earth's blue, having a deep purple color. But where there should have been clouds or stars there were instead long crisscrossing silver lines stretching all along the horizon.

Ogras couldn't make heads or tails of the things, but judging by how it looked the lines must be enormous, spanning tens of kilometers. He had also never heard of anything like that forming naturally, which indicated this place might actually be a cultivated land even though its lack of structures.

The second odd things about the outside were the trees. They were large and had an abundance of branches, each being veritably filled with leaves. Ogras could barely see the trunk due to the thick growth on them.

But something was wrong about the trees. He could barely see any movement, and his senses just told him something was off. At first, he thought they were illusions, but he soon realized that wasn't it. The reason the trees felt odd was that they were *huge*. He couldn't be sure from this distance but he was sure that they were all at least hundreds of meters tall, perhaps even larger.

His heartbeat sped up in anticipation when he saw the titanic trees. The silver streaks in the sky were troubling, but the trees gave him high hopes. The atmosphere was teeming with Cosmic Energy, and vegetation seldom grew so big without Nexus Veins in the ground beneath. Both were indicators of there being a lot of natural treasures abound.

However, when there was this much energy there was also seldom just flora. Judging by the intensity of the energy it was

a real possibility of there being top tier E-Grade beasts around, perhaps even a D-grade alpha at the top.

Greed was battling with fear in his heart as he hid in the shadows looking for anything that might pose a threat to him. Ogras knew that he had led a pretty cushy existence for most of his life. All his cultivation resources had been given to him or bought at auction, and he hadn't ever really risked his life apart from the all-out battle with that cultist that cost him his hand.

Exploring a Mystic Realm was to risk everything, and it wasn't something he was used to. But soon he grit his teeth and moved forward, quickly descending the small hill his cave was hidden inside. He already knew that he needed to earn some achievements if he ever wanted to push through his bottleneck.

After he'd descended the mountain he found himself in a vast field, though it might as well be called a forest. The blades of grass reached over three meters into the air, almost completely obscuring his vision. Ogras' spear was already in his hand as he walked toward the forest, his eyes darting every which way to avoid an ambush.

It was as times like these he wished that he had the monstrous luck that Zac must possess. His 37 Luck wasn't bad, but it clearly wasn't enough to get those warnings signals that Zac seemed to get during battles. He was forced to rely on his senses and his mind instead.

He therefore immediately melded into shadows the second he heard a slight rustle from his left, and the next moment a black shape flew straight past him with enough speed to be a blur. The attacker landed ten meters away, and Ogras saw it was a completely unknown being.

It had six long and thin legs that were roughly a meter long. Each had three joints and like the rest of the thing they were covered in short brown fur. The body was extremely elongated, and it was almost four meters long, with its torso being extremely thin. It was almost like a snake had gotten insect legs.

Its head was extremely odd as well, with just a large hole in its face with rows and rows of small fangs. There were also six small black beads that Ogras assumed were the eyes. The thing was built for speed, but the rest was so odd that he couldn't place the thing at all, so Ogras quickly used **[Omniscient Eye]** on it.

Ocodon Worm.

Level: 73

Most used skill: Wind walk

Highest Attribute: Dexterity

Ogras was shocked that the thing was neither some mammal or even a legged snake. Instead, it was some sort of worm. For a second Ogras wondered if The Ruthless Heavens had gotten drunk and misnamed the thing in front of him. But then again, the isolated nature of Mystic Realms sometimes made beasts evolve in unconventional directions over the eons.

Knowing the thing was only level 73 he didn't hesitate anymore, and multiple shadow spears struck out at it. It clearly wasn't prepared to be attacked by its own shadow, but its speed was spectacular. It displaced itself in an instant, causing air to swirl around its legs.

But if there was one thing that Ogras excelled at it was his speed, and soon the running worm was lying dead on the ground filled with puncture wounds. Ogras quickly dissected it to look for any poison sacks or other hidden threats or valuables, but there seemed to be no such things. He quickly threw the odd corpse in his Cosmos Sack and hurried toward the forest.

As he traveled through the field of overgrown grass he also kept his eyes peeled for any hidden herbs, but as he ran he had to admit that the flora was unusually coherent. There was only a single type of plant; the high swaying grass. There were no flowers, no roots, no vegetables, not even any weeds.

He encountered a few more of the worms as well, but since he understood them better he had no problems in making short work of them. He was also curious to note that they still

seemed to live underground even though they had grown legs. One of them managed came straight out of the ground to attack him, it's legs folded around its thin body.

Yet there were no other beasts Ogras encountered as he finally entered the forest. The trees were truly humongous, as he walked below their crowns he knew they were around three hundred meters tall. Their trunks were also extremely thick, and Ogras judged they had a diameter of twenty meters or so.

Ogras had never seen trees like these before. Usually, trees of this size only had leaves and branches far up in the sky, but these ones had branches starting just a few meters up in the air. Ogras could even easily jump up to the branches if he wanted, though he was more interested in walking the forest floor in search of valuable herbs.

But he was soon disappointed because there was simply no undergrowth in this forest. What was even odder was that there seemed to be a precise distance between the trees, making them form long even lines. It truly looked like this forest had been planted by someone, but why would someone want to grow these things?

Finally, Ogras climbed all the way to the top of one of the trees in search of answers. As he climbed he looked for anything of note that would make these humongous trees worth planting. But no fruits or flowers were growing on the tree, and nothing was living in the trees that might be worth money either.

He did, however, see something that he hadn't noticed when he stood in the cavern earlier. There was a wall. A huge silver wall that stood beyond the forest, stretching almost as far as his eyes could see.

As he gazed around him Ogras started to understand that he might actually be in an enclosed space rather than a wild forest. The vantage of the tree allowed him to get a better understanding of the area than what he could see earlier from his starting point.

He was in a circular space that was mostly occupied by the evenly planted forests, with a large field in the middle filled

with grass. The only oddity was the dirt hill roughly in the middle of the field, and Ogras guessed it was caused by the spatial distortions of the weakened dimensional membrane.

Perhaps the whole field had been filled with trees once upon a time, but spatial tears had destroyed everything and caused the forest in the middle to be replaced by the grassy plains instead. Ogras also guessed that the silver wall stretched all around the forest, but unfortunately he couldn't see what lay beyond since the walls and the trees were roughly the same height.

He could also finally see that the odd silver lines in the sky were connected to the wall and formed somewhat of a dome that covered the whole space. Ogras truly couldn't make heads or tails of the situation, which was a bit disconcerting. Since he couldn't understand the purpose of this place or the lines, he also couldn't assess the amount of danger he was in.

It started to feel like he stood in an enormous garden, but why was nothing of value planted? These trees were huge and their wood might make decent timber, but that was about it. The density of Cosmic Energy would be able to support far more valuable things, so it felt like a waste of an effort to create something like this.

Ogras quickly started to climb down the tree before he set out toward the wall in the distance. It took him thirty minutes to get through the rest of the forest before he finally saw the end of the tree line, so he hesitantly stopped by one of the trees.

There were no signs of life around the wall, and there were no roads or gates either. The surface of the wall was completely smooth and it seemed it was made out of some metal. There also were a row of fractals running along the middle of the wall, and fractals seemed to stretch along the whole thing.

Ogras tried to discern the function of the fractals for thirty minutes, but they were completely unknown to him. But as far as he could tell they weren't part of a slaughter array. Besides, few people would leave the fractals for a defensive or offensive array visible, since it would make them far easier to break.

Finally, he took a deep breath and flashed forward, blending with the shadows until he reached the wall. There were no alarms or incoming attacks, only the eerie silence of the forest. The wall was cold to the touch, and after testing it out Ogras realized it was shockingly durable.

He couldn't identify the type of metal but judging by the hardness it was a material or alloy that should be at least E-Graded just judging by its strength. His eyes glanced sideways and watched the wall stretch into the distance.

The enclosed forest was so large that he could barely discern the curvature of the wall. The scale of it all was mindboggling. Even if the wall was only a sheet a few centimeters thick the amount of E-Grade material required to build the wall was staggering. He couldn't even calculate the cost of such a thing.

Both Port Atwood and Clan Azh'Rezak would turn destitute after only erecting a portion of this wall, and its only function was to enclose this seemingly unimportant forest. Just dismantling the wall would make him a fortune. But more importantly, who could afford this sort of extravagant spending, and what was there outside the wall?

Just what kind of place was this?

Chapter 238: Mystic Structure

Ogras hesitantly looked around for a bit, unsure what to do next. This wasn't the direction of the Mystic Realm he'd expected. He had imagined either a wild environment where his skills were put to the test against an onslaught of beasts or an ancient ruin containing a Title-Awarding trial or something equally valuable.

But there was no danger and nothing to explore, only a forest and a wall. He tried climbing the wall to pass it, but he simply couldn't get up. It was completely sheer, giving him no purchase. He tried stabbing the wall with knives in order to climb, but they only left a scratch-mark that immediately disappeared.

He did manage to use his spear to impale the wall, but his weapon was almost immediately pushed out and the wall repaired itself in an instant. Ogras looked up at the shimmering fractals above, realizing that at least part of their purpose was to maintain the enclosure. Out of better options, he started walking along the wall, hoping to find anything different about it.

Ogras wasn't ready to head back just yet. He'd paid almost 50 million Nexus Coins to stabilize the rift for a week, and he refused to return empty-handed. He would rather spend a week to cut down these humongous trees and at least sell them as timber.

They didn't seem to be E-Grade trees, but at least they didn't seem to be mortal-graded since there was some spirituality in the huge things. And even if they were only F-Grade there was an enormous quantity, which would hopefully allow him to make a return on his investment.

But before he resigned to becoming a lumberjack he wanted to see if there was any exit in the wall. If someone created this area there should be a way to get in and out. Since he'd only spent an hour or so inside the Mystic Realm he had all the time in the world to check things out before he needed to get back.

The minutes passed as Ogras slogged along the wall, and his surroundings were so uniform that he started to wonder if he was stuck inside a loop of some illusion array. Half his field of view was the blank silver of the wall, and the other half was the lush green of the towering trees. The purple sky was barely visible through the thick canopy of the trees that stretched toward the wall.

But finally his stubbornness was rewarded, as he spotted a change in the wall in the distance. Ogras sped up with excitement, turning into a hazy blur as he melded with the shadows. Two minutes later he stood in front of a gate reaching roughly 6 meters into the air.

It was wrought of the same material as the wall itself and consisted of two doors. But there was no handle and no matter how hard he pushed or tried to separate the two doors he couldn't budge them even the slightest. Ogras even jammed his spear into the slit between the doors to use as a crowbar, but it was for nothing.

He clearly had no way to brute force this thing open, which left only one more thing to try. To the right side of the door roughly three meters up was something that looked a bit like the so-called Tablets that the humans of Earth had invented. Either that or a small TV, since it was somewhere in between the two in size.

Ogras stabbed his spear into the ground and leaped up to stand on top of the hilt to get a better view of the thing. The square tablet was roughly as large as his torso, but there were no lights or inscriptions on it, making it almost seem like a non-functional decoration.

But there was nothing else sticking out around the gate, so Ogras hesitantly touched the screen to 'wake it up' in case it worked like the human tablets. To his shock, it worked, and a

row of unfamiliar scripts appeared on the screen. Ogras was elated, but next a voice appeared out of nowhere, making Ogras quickly look around.

[Signature not recognized.]

Ogras brows rose in alarm, and he immediately pushed away from the door, gripping his spear as he looked around. Was there a tool spirit controlling this place? If so he might just have made a huge blunder and drawn its attention. It seemed he had been recognized as an intruder.

[Caretaker Signature added. Tier-3 Access Added.]

“Caretaker?” Ogras muttered in confusion. “Hello, who’s there?”

However, there was no response to his question, only silence. The screen up in the air had also dimmed down, returning to its passive state. Ogras hesitated what to do. Go back and get reinforcements or keep trying to open the door? Since this seemed like something technological in nature it was perhaps a better idea to go and get a few humans and a couple of craftsmen.

But curiosity pushed him forward, and he once again approached the door. But this time the doors soundlessly slid open, giving access to a large room on the other side. Ogras brows furrowed in confusion, and he hesitated whether he should go inside.

The voice said that his signature first wasn’t recognized, then it added a caretaker. Had the Tool Spirit for the door mistaken him for someone in charge of tending the trees? And what was Tier-3 Access? Would it let him return again if he walked inside the doorway and it closed shut?

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Ogras muttered as he tightened his grip on his spear, heading inside the door. “Worst case scenario I will have to wait for Zac to come and smash through this thing.”

The other side of the wall didn’t lead to the outdoors, but he rather found himself inside a large room that seemed to be used for storage. Both the walls and roof were made of the

silver metal as well, and there wasn't much else of note inside. The same type of fractals also ran all across the upper walls as well, making a loop around the room.

The room itself was lit with crystals, indicating energy arrays were running through the walls. The crystals wouldn't be able to work by themselves since there were clear signs no one had been here for a very long time. There were also a few crates that were falling apart in one corner, shrunken nuts having spilled out of them across the floor.

Ogras guessed the nuts were used to plant those huge trees outside, but the seeds seemed to have dried out long ago, and he doubted whether they would be able to be planted any more. Still, he had ample space in his Cosmos Sack so he put the crates inside as he looked around.

There was also a table and a chair, both made out of metal. The size of them were much too large for Ogras, just like the gate. Judging by how that tablet was placed and the size of the furniture Ogras estimated the creators of this place to reach roughly 4 to 5 meters into the air.

Not many species were that large, at least not amongst the more populous races. There were a few golem, demon, and beastmen species that were this tall, but Ogras saw nothing that indicated any specific species inside this thing.

On the other side of the room was another gate much like the one he just passed through. But before he headed over he first went back to the original gate, and he was relieved to see that it noiselessly slid open upon his approach.

Ogras headed over to the other side, and this one also opened without having to touch the tablet up in the air. An enormous corridor stood on the other side, and Ogras hesitantly walked outside. The corridor was made from the same material as well, and Ogras started to feel they must have dismantled a whole mountain to get this much material.

A few tubes ran along the roof in the corridor, and the whole thing reminded Ogras of those Technomancer movies that he had watched when he was free. They had taken place in societies where there was no Cosmic Energy, but technology

had reached far beyond Earth's current capabilities, and they even explored the multiverse.

But there were also signs that this was not a technocrat stronghold. The corridor was illuminated with crystals rather than electrical lamps, and Ogras was pretty sure that the Technomancers did not use fractals for their bases. They relied on the so-called Dao of Technology, and that concept did not use fractals or inscriptions.

The design made him rather veer toward some sort of artificial beings, such as the Creators or another golemoid race. They often liked this type of lifeless interior, whereas Demons or Beastkin favored more nature in their surroundings.

Ogras was once again shocked by the sheer size of the complex he found himself inside. Had the whole mystic realm been turned into some sort of base? He found himself walking for hours, and he had found six more gardens, each of them planted with the same trees.

It was also quickly becoming clear that the Cosmic Energy had somehow been concentrated into these gardens since the energy outside could at best be the equivalent of a Low-Tiered E-Grade planet. But why use all the energy in the Mystic realm for some trees?

But apart from that, there was nothing of note. Most of the corridors were empty, creating a network that spanned around these huge circular areas with the trees. He had found a few rooms that seemed to be barracks, with rows of huge bunk beds lined up.

But there were no sign of them having been inhabited since there was no remains or signs of use. There was just a thick layer of dust on the mattresses, while the walls and floor were spotless. Ogras had a feeling it had something to do with the inscriptions running along the walls. They seemed to perform a variety of maintenance functions, from repairs to self-cleaning, much like the arrays on equipment.

But finally, he reached a gate that was different from the others. It looked the same, but it did not automatically open

like those he'd passed before. Ogras leaped up and grabbed hold of the tablet, and with a buzz it lit up.

[Tier-3 Access Signature. Access granted]

It was the same voice as before, and the next moment the gate slowly slid open. Ogras noted with some interest that this one was far thicker than the others, reaching almost a meter in thickness. But his attention was quickly drawn to the outside because it almost felt like he'd entered a different world.

There was the same type of corridors as before, but these ones were caked in grime and what Ogras could only assume was dried blood. There were signs of battle everywhere, with ruined pipes and scarred walls. Only a few illuminating crystals still worked, and the light they gave off was far weaker compared to the corridors earlier.

Ogras eyes quickly turned to the fractals up in the air, but he noted that they didn't give off any light or energy as they did in the corridors he had passed earlier. Were the Cosmic Energy network ruined in this part of the structure? And what kind of battle had taken place here? And why was the earlier section unaffected by whatever had happened here?

The signs of battle was a clear indicator that this place was inhabited, or at least had been not too long ago. Ogras quickly shrouded himself in shadows as he started proceeding along the wall after making sure he could enter the thicker gate again.

As he walked there were signs of disrepair everywhere, and there were even signs of someone having stripped parts of the walls for materials. His eyes darted back and forth as he kept walking through the oppressive paths. They were as large as those before, but somehow they felt far more claustrophobic.

A sudden sound of metal striking metal echoed out in the distance, and Ogras pushed himself to the wall, completely blending with the darkness under a broken illumination crystal. As he kept listening he heard the sounds repeating, and he immediately realized it was the sound of battle. His heartbeat sped up in fear-mixed anticipation; he wasn't alone.

Since he couldn't sense any too strong energies from the direction of the ruckus he slowly crept forward, and he finally reached a shrouded corner that gave him a vantage of what was going on around the corner where the sounds came from.

Two warriors of different species were in a desperate fight for their lives. One of them was a human, and the other was of a beastkin origin, looking a bit like a werewolf. The sounds Ogras heard earlier had come from the clash between the wolfman's claws and the human's sword. Since they were stuck in the tunnel they couldn't completely maneuver as they wished, but they were clearly used to battle in this type of confined space.

They used both the walls and the roof as a foothold as they clashed over and over, each clash resulting in a shockwave that told Ogras that they were in either weak E-grade warriors or somewhat strong F-Grade warriors. Ogras was considering whether he should throw his hat into the ring when the wolf suddenly disappeared after being pushed back from a clash with the human's sword.

The next moment the beastkin was right in front of Ogras, and a searing pain erupted in his face. Ogras' face contorted in pain and anger, and the next moment the metallic mold on his arms cracked as a pitch-black hand reached for the werewolf. The werewolf quickly reacted and pushed away, but the hand extended beyond what was normal and gripped the throat of the wolf.

The sinister claws of the werewolf tried to cut the hand right off, but they powerlessly went straight through and the next moment a crunch echoed out through the tunnels as Ogras crushed the neck of his attacker. The eyes of the human who had stood by in the distance lit up when he saw his enemy die, but before he could speak up he puked a mouthful of blood.

A large shadow spear had impaled him from behind, and the human fearfully looked at Ogras as he walked over, his eyes glowing in the darkness. The black arm had lost its form, now only forming a shadowy haze that drifted by his side.

"I have some questions."

Chapter 239: Through the Tunnels

Zac glared in the direction of where he was thrown from, but there was nothing there apart from a rough rock wall. There wasn't any sign of the portal or the elaborate chambers of Anzonil, and he might as well be in any random caverns of a mountain.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he got to his feet. There were a lot of topics that he wanted to broach with the old man, even if he decided to undergo the trial. But perhaps staying in corporeal form as an Array Spirit required a lot of energy or something, forcing the old man to send Zac away quickly.

He really wanted to know just what the darkness was, and if Anzonil knew of the method to kill the specters. After speaking with the old man he had a feeling that the darkness was directly linked with the demise of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the day.

That the old man knew of the Draugr also piqued his interest, though that wasn't as important at the moment. But it looked like he needed to know more about his undead race since having what was called a royal bloodline might both be a blessing and a curse.

In any case, there wasn't much to do here. He was currently in a dead-end of a subterranean tunnel, and there was only one way to go. The instructions were pretty clear as well; reach the end of the road and you'll get the treasure.

Zac kept the shield fastened to his left arm, hefting [**Verun's Bite**] in the other as he started to walk down the winding path. There were no crystals giving off light in this place, but the tunnel was thankfully not completely shrouded in darkness.

There was quite a high density of Cosmic Energy in the tunnel, which sustained some of the glowing moss that also grew in his own mountain. It was amazing to Zac how plants learned to live only off of Cosmic Energy and could survive even in the most desolate places with only that as a source of sustenance. But in Zac's undead form the high density of energy wasn't a blessing, but rather a curse.

The more Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere the worse it felt, and here it was like the very air around him was trying to destroy him. Usually the ambient energy in the air wasn't a problem for him, but he guessed that he was either inside a gathering array or close to a Nexus Vein.

It finally got to the point that he took out a couple of his Miasma Crystals and stuffed them inside his robe to feel the cold energies within against his skin. It helped a bit, and it was with relief he sensed that the density of energy around him was quickly decreasing as he walked further along the path.

However, it wasn't all good news since he once again started to sense the insidious energy of the darkness, though it still was minute. But Zac still kept going forward. He wouldn't give up his chance at supreme treasure just by a hint of the malicious energy, and he strode forward with purpose until he finally reached the end of the tunnel.

Zac soundlessly advanced the last 50 meters to the exit, and peeked out the tunnel. The first thing he noticed was that there was over a drop of over fifteen meters down to the floor from his egress. The second thing he saw was the sea of rats.

He immediately realized there must be some sort of array that hid his passage and blocked out any sound as he looked down. He gazed upon a chaotic swarm of rats that fought, mated, and scuttled about without him hearing a single sound.

Most of the rats he saw were the very same type that he had already killed throngs of on the surface, but he realized that he had likely only fought the weakest of the brood so far. There were far larger rats lumbering about as well, a few of which emanated enough power that they might be E-grade, though barely.

Zac's eyes lit up at the veritable feast of prey, but he slowly observed everything for another full fifteen minutes before moving. He wanted to see if there was something like a rat king that could be a threat, but if there was it didn't live in this large cavern.

He mouthed a silent prayer before jumping down, but he didn't try to conceal his presence. On the contrary, he entered the huge cavern with a roar, slamming down tens of meters away from the exit with a huge crash.

He had imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness, and he was like a ten-ton hammer when he landed, killing every rat within over ten meters and creating a large crater. The moment he had exited the passage he had been inundated by a cacophony of screeches and hisses, and it got a lot worse after he made his entrance.

Zac didn't even have time to get to his feet before he received a surge of energy into his forehead, and he immediately understood that he had accomplished his goal. The quest for his second skill, **[Fields of Despair]** was finished. It required him to draw the ire of over a thousand enemies simultaneously, and he had likely passed that goal ten times over with his flashy entrance.

He didn't really know whether to be happy or angry that there wasn't an accompanying Dao Vision to go along with his newly acquired skill. He remembered very well the feeling when he killed the thousand barghest required to complete his quest for **[Axe Mastery]**.

Completing the quest had formed the Axe fractal in his chest, but it was missing in his undead form just like the normal skills. When he had focused on it he had been brought to the desolate world with the enormous axe. Meanwhile, his new skill only added a pure skill-fractal on his forehead.

But it was a welcome boost to his very limited repertoire in his Draugr form, and he had just the perfect stage to test his new ability. But he was beset by frenzied rats before he even had time to even form a battle plan.

However, while most of the rats down in the cave were larger than their brethren on the surface they were of no threat to Zac. After a few quick swings with his axe thirty corpses lay strewn around him. But Zac frowned as he looked down at his axe, and after a brief pause decided to stash the axe into his Sack.

He didn't want to rely on combat skills he gained with his other class too much since that might negatively impact the growth of his Undying Bulwark class. Instead, he decided to fight using the means his class provided for as long as possible, only relying on his axe and his Daos if needed.

The first thing he did was to unleash [**Fields of Despair**], and the space around him actually changed a bit. It was as though the world had gone monochrome within fifty meters from his position, and it reminded him of how it looked when he fought the Corpse Lord.

In fact, he noticed that the Cosmic Energy around him was actually turning into Miasma at a visible rate, and a mist of the deathly energy swirled around him. However, the production came at a cost of his own energy, so the skill wouldn't be very useful for cultivation.

But that wasn't the point of the skill, and Zac was elated after having figured out the workings of the skill. It was a debuffing skill with a large area, and its effect was pretty great.

It lowered the attributes of his enemies by a certain degree across the board. After turning it off and on again while fighting with the rats for a minute he estimated the number to be around 10%.

Taking away 10% of the fighting power of all close-by enemies wasn't a huge amount, but it wasn't bad. Besides, the skill was only at early stage and it already had many uses.

For example, it could negate almost half of the effect of skills like his [**Hatchetman's Rage**] without having any of the other skill's disadvantages. It could also lower the power of an ultimate attack from his enemies by a decent degree, increasing his survivability.

But there was a pretty big drawback to this skill. **[Fields of Despair]** didn't have a great synergy with his other skill, **[Deathwish]**. To kill his enemies he needed to get hit, and the harder he got hit the more damage he returned. If he restricted the power of his enemies he would also restrict his offensive power.

Then again, the two skills were used in different ways, and he wasn't surprised that Undying Bulwark's skills sacrificed offensive power in favor of more defense. It was a tank-class after all. But these many defensive measures weren't needed against rats, even if there was a seemingly endless horde of them.

But before he deactivated **[Fields of Despair]** he noticed another huge advantage of the skill. As he had experimented for a bit with the skill there lay a new slew of rat carcasses around him, and those that died first were starting to emit a turquoise mist.

Zac immediately realized it was miasma, and he didn't shy away when the mists were drawn toward him as though they were guided. The energy effortlessly merged with his existing stores of miasma, giving him back even more energy than he used when killing the rats.

This clearly differed from how it worked when he fought the beasts on Mystic Island. Back then it worked the same as in his human form. When he killed something he received a boost of energy that went toward improving his levels, but the effect on his expended storage of miasma was minuscule.

But this was different. The energy that streamed toward him from more and more corpses didn't help him with his levels, but they restored the miasma he was continuously expending to power his two skills.

He finally understood the full effect of his new skill, and it truly was a field of despair for his enemies. Not only did it weaken those who came too close, it even restored his energies to allow him to keep fighting for an indefinite time.

He quickly changed his mind about turning the skill off, and instead he kept both his skills going. Both of them were

continuously drawing from his miasma reserves, but with new rat corpses being added all the time he quickly restored the energy he expended.

In the end he lost slightly more energy than he gained from the corpses, but he would fall from lack of sleep before lack of miasma at this rate. Then again he was only fighting weak beasts at the moment, as the larger rats hadn't entered the fray yet.

Since he'd already gained one of the skills he decided to grind out his second one as well, but he soon found out it wasn't as easy as he had hoped. Not all the rats were strong enough to attack him with enough force to progress his quest.

But he quickly found a solution as he took out his axe once again. There was a pretty clear correlation between the power and size of these rats, and he soon found that the rats needed to be at least three meters long to be able to bite or swipe with enough force to award a point of progress in his class.

Everything smaller than that approached him was quickly culled with a swipe of his axe, while he kept blocking the attacks of the larger ones with his shield. Some wounds were starting to accumulate on his body since he wasn't able to block all the strikes, but he didn't care since his high Endurance and Vitality had no problem in keeping him alive.

It didn't take long for him to gain a level since the rats were almost as strong as the beasts on Mystic Island. But the beasts back there had been spread out, each occupying its own territory. Here they were everywhere, and no matter where Zac looked he saw a sea of experience points approaching him.

It was also clear that these beasts had no intention of backing down, even after hundreds of their kin lay lifeless on the floor. Zac soon realized that it might be because they were affected by the darkness.

He didn't believe all these animals were possessed like what happened to some cultivators up on the surface. The energies of the darkness had rather slowly seeped into their minds while they lived underground, increasing their aggression.

But Zac didn't mind, and he soon settled into a familiar routine ingrained into his bones from the beast waves. He was already quickly climbing on the Hunter ladder again, even though he mainly focused on progressing the quest for **[Bulwark Mastery]**.

The moment he blocked the final attack with his shield he felt a huge surge of energy in his heart. It didn't kick-start it to start beating even in his undead form, but it was rather that something occupied its empty chambers. Zac couldn't stop a wide smile from spreading on his face when he realized what it was.

It was another Dao Fractal, just like the tree or the axe in his Hatchetman form. But he didn't dare to check the form or nature of the fractal any closer since he was afraid he'd get sucked inside a vision while there was a sea of rats still rampaging around him.

But he got extremely impatient to end the fight so that he could gain his fourth Dao Seed, so he no longer held anything back or cared about fighting with his shield only. He became a whirlwind of carnage as he rampaged across the enormous den, and soon the elated growls from **[Verun's Bite]** overpowered the screeches of the frenzied rats.

Chapter 240: Evolution

No matter where Zac looked he was met with a frenzied onslaught of sharp teeth and claws, and he didn't even need to aim as he methodically swung his axe. He was long since drenched in gore and viscera, his two black orbs of eyes glimmering with finality as he kept killing rats by the scores.

The area around him was like another world, with turquoise mists wafting about, and an enduring desolation had taken hold of the den of the rats. A slow whirlwind of miasma had formed around Zac by now, continuously imbuing him with energy.

But the rats were truly relentless and had no disregard for their own lives, and kept desperately trying to tear Zac apart. As the sizes of the rats surrounding him grew, the wounds on his body got worse as well.

Zac blocked one strike after another, and even his sturdy shield was starting to show signs of tear from innumerable claws slamming into it. But he couldn't put it away. Zac could not clear a large number of critters at once since he didn't have access to **[Chop]**, so he needed something to stave off some of the rats while he cut others down.

But Zac had no plans to switch his class to Hatchetman. First of all, he didn't have the luxury to pass out for a couple of minutes mid-battle, but even if he did he didn't want to let go of this opportunity. He hadn't encountered this great a leveling-experience even during the beast waves, and after another two hours of fighting he gained another level.

Besides, **[Verun's Bite]** wasn't the only thing doing work. All around him, particularly behind him, ghastly specters of rats kept popping out from nowhere, maiming and killing their living twins. It was **[Deathwish]** with its damage reflection that was dishing back far more than he got hurt.

It was only three hours and one level later that only six rats and Zac remained. The rest of the burrow was covered with thousands of rat corpses, and it was impossible to take a single step without stepping in a pool of blood.

The remaining rats were the six largest specimens in the cave, and the ones that Zac suspected might be E-Grade earlier. Now that they were right in front of him he realized that it likely only was true for two of them, whereas the other four were very close to that stage.

However, it was clear to Zac that even the four lesser rats in front of him were different from the mindless hordes that had swarmed him the past hours. They had silently observed Zac from the distance, making no move to approach him. Each of them was enormous, the smallest of them at least as large as an elephant. The largest rats, one of the two that Zac suspected to be E-Grade, was at least 8 meters long, with its tail adding just as much length.

Zac was panting as he stood and observed the last remaining rats as well, welcoming the opportunity to take a breather. He was completely caked in blood from the fight, and he thanked the stars he was in his undead form.

His sense of smell was a bit different, mainly smelling life rather than other scents, and he could only imagine that the stench of thousands of dead rats was beyond putrid to a human. Apart from the blood and gore, he was also marred with tens of wounds that dripped some of the black ichor that sat in his veins instead of blood.

It was from this fight that he understood the function of the black substance. He had thought it was just a remnant of the blood in his human form, but after having lost a pint of the stuff he realized that wasn't the case.

The black ichor wasn't just putrified blood, but it was also needed for the storage of miasma somehow. The more of the stuff he lost during the fight, the less miasma he was able to store in his body.

That meant if he was bled completely dry of the ichor he would probably turn back into his human form, whereas a real

undead would die. Of course, simply expelling all miasma was a far simpler method than draining himself of his blood.

Suddenly two of the rats started to move, clearly trying to flank him. With rats this powerful Zac wasn't comfortable to let them attack him from behind, so he instantly hurled his axe with a grunt, imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness.

The axe ripped through the air and slammed straight into the head of one of the rats, instantly killing it. A huge surge of energy entered Zac, far higher than he had got from anything before, immediately giving him another level.

These things were clearly superior compared to their brethren judging by how much energy they rewarded, and Zac was relieved he managed to down one with a surprise attack. He had held back on using his Daos apart from his initial entrance since he wanted to keep some cards for this fight.

He immediately pushed forward, aiming to retrieve his weapon, but one of the rats moved to intercept with a screech. But Zac held nothing back as he imbued his fist with the Dao of Heaviness, slamming it straight into the temple of the rat before it managed to bite into his torso.

A loud crack could be heard and another surge of energy entered him, but he didn't stop as he ran toward his axe and ripped it out of the head of the rat. Suddenly a sense of danger erupted in his mind, and he unhesitantly threw himself forward.

A sharp swish could be heard right behind him, and he looked to see one of the E-Grade rats having appeared right behind him somehow. It had attacked with its claws, but Zac also sensed the familiar feeling of the Dao of Sharpness.

The corpse of the rat he killed with his axe was cleanly split into four parts from the swipe of the rat, and even the ground the following ten meters had four deep gouges from the attack. Zac frowned at the large scars from the claws since it showed that its attack was a bit similar to those of the fiend wolf.

But he didn't have time to formulate a plan as he was suddenly shrouded in darkness. His brows rose in alarm, but he didn't

have time to do anything but turn around as he was met with the huge maw of the other E-Grade rat.

But it didn't try to bite him, but instead Zac was drowned in a deluge of bile. Zac was disgusted by it, but some puke wasn't enough to do him in. He immediately moved out of the stream of the putrid liquid, and with a roar swung **[Verun's Bite]** straight at the stretched-out throat of the rat.

The puking rat seemed surprised to be attacked for some reason, and it barely had time to register the incoming swing before it was almost fully decapitated by the powerful strike of the axe. Zac's axe hummed in glee as large amounts of Blood flowed into it as the huge corpse fell into the ground with a thump.

The next moment the familiar Tool Spirit emerged from the axe, and it immediately leaped at one of the rats who had jumped at Zac from behind. It was clearly an uneven fight since the rat wasn't able to target the spectral being, and in just a few seconds it lay dead at the ground.

Zac couldn't help staring down at the E-grade beast with some confusion. Its attack had been truly perplexing. But a sizzling sound quickly told him what was going on. A dozen rat carcasses had also been inundated by the huge torrent of puke, and they had turned into nothing but pools of goop in just seconds.

Even the floor was melting at a visible rate, and Zac's brows rose in alarm as he looked down at himself. To his surprise, he saw that he was completely fine, even though his robe was slowly disintegrating. The liquid simply sloughed off his pale skin without leaving as much as a mark.

Zac apparently was immune to the attack, which the rat didn't expect. That gave him the opportunity for an easy kill while it tried to register what was going on. But Zac didn't have time to ponder on why the poisonous bile didn't affect him as the other E-Grade rat was already upon him with an enraged screech.

It frenziedly swiped at him in an all-out effort to rip him to shred, forcing him on the defensive for the time being. He had

already infused his axe with the Dao of Sharpness as he tried to cut off its arms, but the rat was extremely quick to intercept his axe with its claws.

The claws were truly sturdy, and even after tens of clashes there wasn't a single mark on them. Zac was at a standstill since he didn't have any stronger attacks to use. He didn't dare use **[Deathwish]** against this opponent since he wasn't sure whether he could actually take that much damage.

But the stalemate soon changed as Verun, the tool spirit of his axe, was in a rare form today. Three rats were remaining after Zac killed the first E-Graded one, but Verun pounced upon the remaining two smaller ones with gleeful abandon.

Less than half a minute later only Zac's opponent remained, and a great growl echoed through the caverns as the prehistoric beast finally joined Zac in his battle. Zac suddenly changed his Dao Seed to the Dao of Heaviness, and with a growl he swung with all the force he could bear.

The strike wasn't able to get through the quick defense of the rat, but the enormous weight behind the strike was enough to throw the thing off-balance. Verun knew exactly what to do, and bit straight through the throat of rat, instantly killing it before it had a chance to react. Yet another huge stream of energy entered Zac as well, pushing him forward at least one level.

However, his Tool Spirit wasn't done there, as it kept ripping the corpse into shreds with frenzied glee. The blood from the beast started to float around the spirit as though it wasn't affected by gravity any longer, creating a macabre spectacle.

The axe in Zac's hand was suddenly vibrating in his hands, and he was barely able to hold on as it tried to fly away and join the spirit. Zac's eyes glistened with anticipation as he let go of the axe, and it quickly flew to the side of the projection of Verun.

An ocean of blood suddenly gushed out of the axe, creating a crimson flood that swirled around the spirit. Zac guessed it was all the blood from the various beasts he had killed that

was getting released all at once, forming a small sea of the stuff.

Verun howled with exultation, its roars echoing through the cave with such power that Zac couldn't help worriedly look around. He had already spotted the path out of here, and he was afraid that the howls would attract even more beasts.

Then again, if nothing had come from hours of screeching and slaughter, then some howls shouldn't bring any calamity to his doorstep either. But Zac grabbed the tail of one of the largest rats and started to drag it toward the only pathway out of here just in case. Soon he'd formed a wall of flesh that completely blocked the entrance.

While he was busy moving the bodies the storm of blood around his axe had calmed down, and the large sphere of blood kept shrinking as it encased **[Verun's Bite]** within. When the sphere had shrunk from a diameter of ten meters down to three it started to look like the blood was congealing into a solid.

The transformed blood even turned translucent, and within a few minutes it looked like his axe was encased in a ruby almost as large as he was. Zac walked over to the crystal with anticipation since he had long realized that his weapon was finally evolving.

Chapter 241: Eternal and Unbroken

Zac's axe had already been on the verge of taking the next step, and the blood of the largest rats was enough to push it to the next level. But evolutions of this kind were very diverse, and after asking around back in Port Atwood he learned that there was no cohesive method of the process.

That left him wondering what he should do now. He had no idea how long it would take for the axe to finish its evolution. He also had no idea whether he could put the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, or whether that would interrupt the process.

In the end, he chose to move the crystal to a corner of the large den, hiding it in an alcove behind a couple of more carcasses. Luckily the axe didn't give off any energy emanations during the process, so hiding it didn't require any arrays.

He surveyed the scene for a while, and after some alterations, it was impossible to notice anything was hidden there. Next, he created a second hiding spot and sat down inside. Initially, he hadn't planned on staying in this den, but the evolution of his axe had forced him to change his plans.

But it was just as well. His miasma wasn't spent from the long battle, but his body was wounded all over and he had lost quite a bit of ichor. He popped a pill into his mouth and closed his eyes to focus on recuperation, and it was only two hours later he opened them.

He wasn't completely back to top shape, but his Endurance and Vitality had improved him to fighting condition at least. But he still couldn't leave since he had no idea what lay past this cave. There was no guarantee that this was the only thing blocking his path to the treasure, and he wasn't confident in fighting anything too strong without his axe.

But he wasn't just sitting around while he waited for his axe to get done. He was itching to check out his Dao fractal, but he held off on that in favor of a few other things first. The intense fight had brought him all the way to level 39, giving a huge boost to his attributes.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	39
Class	[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark
Race	[E] Draugr
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	420 [Base: 271. Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 16%]
Dexterity	221 [Base: 158. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]
Endurance	430 [Base: 268. Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 16%]

Vitality	251 [Base: 167. Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 16%]
Intelligence	90 [Base: 64. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]
Wisdom	85 [Base: 61. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]
Luck	93 [Base: 58. Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 16%]
Free Points	6
Nexus Coins	[F] 53 625 943

Gaining this many levels in just a few hours would have been unthinkable back when he was around this level the first time around, but then again he was far weaker at that time. He had another 6 free points to allocate, but he held off on that until he saw what he gained from his new Dao Seed.

Next, he opened his quest menu, and as he suspected there was a new quest waiting for him there. At level 35 Hatchetman he gained the quest for **[Loamwalker]**, and this time around he got another skill quest as well.

Immutable Bulwark (Class): Survive the strike of three evolved beings. Reward: Immutable Bulwark (2/3)

Zac believed ‘evolved beings’ was referring to an E-Grade Class beasts or cultivators, and he felt this quest wasn’t very hard since it didn’t specify how he should survive it. With the help of Fields of Despair and a shield he would have no problem blocking a strike from something like the E-Grade rat, let alone surviving it, which was proven by two thirds of the quest already being completed.

As for the skill itself, Zac guessed it was a pure defensive skill going by the name. He felt it was about time since none of the three initial skills were purely defensive skills like

his [**Nature's Barrier**]. In any case, he didn't think it would take long to find out since there clearly were E-Grade beasts down here in the tunnels.

Zac got to his feet and walked over to his axe once again, but there was still no response from it. Since he was finally done with what he needed to do, he properly concealed himself and turned his sight inward toward his heart. Just like he expected a large pocket space had formed inside his heart, and Zac wasn't very surprised to see that the fractal looked like a large shield. But he didn't have time to inspect it any further, as his vision quickly changed.

The place he was sent to was quite different from the desolation of the dead world of the axe-man. He found himself standing in a beautiful park that was meticulously tended to, and Zac almost forgot why he was here from the soothing atmosphere.

It truly felt like he was in paradise from the array of beautiful plants and trees forming a harmony that could only be said to be perfect. Even the sky shone in a warm golden luster, and looking up at it Zac almost felt like he was being caressed by the heavens themselves.

Surprisingly enough people were walking past him, but it was as though he was a ghost. No one noticed him as they kept going forward. Some even walked straight through him, which was a pretty weird experience.

The people were of varying races, some of them humans, but many were things that Zac had never heard of. They were also of extremely varying power, ranging from weak mortals to great powerhouses clearly stronger than the E-Grade. But one thing was the same for each and every one of them. They were all orderly walking in a line, and everyone was holding what looked like a small gift in their hands as they streamed in the same direction.

Curious, Zac followed the train of people, and soon found himself in the middle of the garden that held an enormous square made of marble. But the moment he entered there he realized he wasn't in a park, but rather a gravesite.

In the middle of the square was a mausoleum, and all the people he had followed walked toward it as though they were on a pilgrimage. Zac walked over as well and soon he stood just twenty meters away from the golden inlaid arch leading inside.

However, no one entered the building, instead simply bowed before placing down whatever they had brought in front of the building, before turning away and leaving the square.

There were already large mounds of offerings, and interestingly enough they ranged from simple things like a small wood carving to Nexus Crystals that emitted such immense power that Zac was afraid his soul would shatter just by standing close to them.

He instinctually knew those things were at least C-Graded crystals, but possibly even higher. He knew that only one of them would be enough to live like a king for thousands of years, yet no one even gave the treasures a second glance before leaving.

Zac's curiosity only grew as he turned his eyes toward the mausoleum. He already knew that his visions came from supreme existences, and he guessed that the one he was about to receive was based on whoever was interred inside.

Zac gave a small bow just like the pilgrims before resolutely walking toward the entrance. As he got closer he noticed that two old men sat in front of the gate with closed eyes, likely guarding the place. However, the moment he turned his eyes toward them it was as though his soul was about to be crushed by immense pressure, and he had to quickly look away.

Even though he was just a wisp of consciousness he had to stop and take a few deep breaths, his hands shaking from the experience. He was shocked to realize that both the old men sitting in front of the mausoleum were far more powerful than Greatest, the strongest person he'd met so far.

Their auras were as immense as a galaxy, and Zac couldn't even get close to the door due to the passive aura that they emitted. But suddenly the weight disappeared, and Zac was

shocked to see that both the old monsters were looking straight at him.

“Enter, inheritor,” one of the old men said, each of his words echoing with the Dao itself.

Zac was starting to be unsure whether this was actually a vision, or if the system had sent his consciousness to this place. Was it the same with the desolate world only housing the enormous axe back then?

But he felt this wasn't the place to ask, so after bowing once more he passed by the two old men who once again closed their eyes. Anticipation was rising as Zac entered the structure. Just how powerful would one have to have been to have cultivators that were at least C-Grade sit in vigil over one's gravesite?

Zac reverentially held his breath as he looked around the mausoleum, but it was surprisingly simple. The insides were lit up by six braziers that burned along the sides, though interestingly enough they didn't emit any smoke. Apart from the sources of light only two more things were housed in the building. The first was a tomb wrought out of the same type of marble the square was made off.

The second was a shield that emitted an immense aura. It was almost shaped like a coffin, and it was mostly unadorned apart from a blue fractal that was the source of the aura. It felt like the shield would be able to protect him even if the sky collapsed, and Zac immediately understood it was a supreme treasure at least at the level of the axe he saw in the other vision.

In front of the tomb was a simple plaque that only said three words.

Eternal and Unbroken.

There was no mention of whose resting place this was, or what sort of thing he or she had accomplished. Then again it didn't seem it was necessary, going by the constant stream of pilgrims that found their way here.

After silently looking at the plaque for a minute Zac finally walked over toward the shield.

Death loomed as he roused himself with some effort. Murky eyes that hadn't opened for tens of thousands of years gazed at the richly decked man kneeling in front of him with a face marred by worries.

"Shield," he said with a raspy voice, and soon after five men entered from a passage.

Every one of them emitted auras powerful enough to subdue the heavens, but their faces were red with strain as they had to cooperate to carry an object covered in dusty cloth. They finally arrived in front of him, and when they placed down the item the would building shook from the weight.

His decrepit hand slowly reached forward, and the cloth disintegrated as his old companion rose toward him. As he looked at the blue fractal on the shield he felt as though he was back on the battlefield those millions of years ago, but this time he didn't he didn't fasten it to his arm.

"This is goodbye, old friend," he said with a sigh.

A smile adorned his face as he slowly caressed the edge of his shield, and it hummed with sorrow as he rose to his feet. He walked outside his small palace and rose into the skies, the six hegemony silently following behind.

Outside the town, a sea of people silently stood waiting, millions upon millions of them.

"Grand Protector," they immediately shouted, kneeling in reverence.

He never had any family, but he saw all these people as his children. He had watched over this world for innumerable years, seeing it grow to the beacon of freedom and enlightenment it was today. He had staved off countless attacks from those who had wanted to take their land and wealth.

But he knew he was needed one final time as he looked up at the skies. The beautiful blue sky was replaced by a dizzying blur of all colors of the spectrum as rampant energies clashed. Most of the smaller worlds had already been destroyed, ripped into nothingness by the primordial chaos.

The death of a universe.

The next moment his old and hunched-over body released enough power to blot out the skies as he rose to meet the incoming chaos. Space itself was cracking, but he didn't even notice the void edges that pelted his body. They were simply pushed away by the force of his latent will.

In just a second he left the atmosphere, and he looked down on the massive continent beneath. There had once been tens of thousands of worlds circulating around it, but now only a scant few survived, protected by immense arrays.

"Eternal and unbroken," he said, his voice carrying across the countless miles.

The next moment his body started to shine brighter and brighter, and soon it far eclipsed any star in the universe. The golden shine quickly expanded and formed a shield that encapsulated the whole continent and its trillions of inhabitants.

The next moment the chaotic energies and spatial tears slammed into the shield with enough power to rip even the Dao to shreds, but the shield didn't even shudder. His consciousness slowly faded as he became one with the shield.

Countless years passed as the universe faded, the continent set adrift in the chaotic spatial folds between realities. But the shield held true, protecting its inhabitant from the endless void. Forever.

For he was Immutable.

Chapter 242: Chains of Fate

Zac sat completely immobile for hours even after the vision ended. He thought that he had gotten accustomed to the new reality by now, but he was once again completely awed by the power some individuals held. Seeing the death of a universe was also something that he would never forget.

The prowess in that golden shield was mind-bending, to the point that Zac felt the Grand Protector was a being that was a notch above both the unnamed ax-man and The Lifebringer. The ax-man held monstrous power and was able to kill a whole planet with a swing, but that was still a lesser feat compared to what the Grand Protector did.

The old man managed to shield a land-mass of unfathomable size against the very fabric of reality ripping to shreds. Furthermore, the shield he erected stood strong for who knows how long, protecting the continent from the void outside.

The power of the protagonist wasn't the only superior thing from the vision, making Zac wonder if it was the benefit of having an Epic Class. When he occupied the ax-man he was only a spectator, but he became the Grand Protector for a bit. He still remembered scenes from the ancient man's earlier life, though there were only small snippets.

He had felt how the old man's very body was tempered with the Dao itself, impregnable and immutable. While Zac was grasping at thin strands of a larger fabric the old man forced the Dao to follow his will.

Zac could only imagine that such a being was at least A-rank, perhaps even higher. The demons believed there were cultivators higher than A-Grade, but they barely had any information about C-Grade warriors, let alone lofty beings above that. If those beings existed or not was shrouded in mystery.

The extremely clear vision he had also given him an unprecedented harvest, and he was elated as he looked at the Dao Screen in front of him.

Hardness (Middle): Endurance +25, Wisdom +5.

Sanctuary (Early): Endurance +5, Wisdom +10.

He had not gained one new seed, but two of them, from the vision. Even more impressively he had even gained two stages to the first of them, Hardness. This time he wasn't disappointed that he didn't attain the same Dao as the old man since he understood that he was millennia away from grasping those concepts.

He guessed that the Grand Protector possessed something that could be called the Dao of Immutability. The vision ended after he had integrated with the golden shield, but Zac had some time to feel its marvelous effects, and it truly contained myriad concepts.

Two notable additions were the Daos of both Time and Space, two extremely high-tiered concepts that were out of reach for warriors at his class as far as he knew. The Dao of Immutability forced space itself to bend to its will, and the protection it provided lasted over the eons.

It was truly a top tier Dao, and the Dao of Hardness was just one small part of it. His insights were based around two things; the massive aura of the shield itself and the hardness the old man's will that forced even the tears in space to be unable to reach his body.

The shield held the weight of a planet which resonated with Zac's earlier insights into heaviness, so gaining a snippet of the Dao of Hardness felt pretty natural. The second piece was a mental component of hardness, and it reminded Zac of the upgrade he got of the Dao of Heaviness back at the auction.

In fact, Zac believed gaining his second Dao Seed, the Dao of Sanctuary, was closely related to that insight back then. He had gained a mental component of heaviness due to the

immense weight of responsibilities pressing down on him at that time.

He had been in the middle of the beast hordes and his sister was still unaccounted for. The Dao insight could be seen as a result of being overwhelmed, but by now he had found his bearings in life. Over the past weeks, he had seen just how much his town had grown, from a small dented camper into a flourishing kingdom.

That's why the old man in the vision had resonated with him. The Grand Protector had watched over his continent for countless years, seeing the rise of civilization. With his power he could have easily become a supreme emperor, but he was content to simply watch from the shadows and protect the place from unseen threats.

Zac very well understood that sense of wanting to protect those around him. It was the very reason he desperately tried to get stronger. Initially, it was just for himself and his sister, but the circle of people he wanted to protect had slowly expanded as he saw his island come to life.

Both of the Dao Seeds he gained were on the defensive side, but Zac knew that they were meant for different things. The Dao of Hardness was mostly for personal defense. He could imbue himself or his shield with it, and from there endure stronger strikes.

But the Dao of Sanctuary was based on protection. He currently wasn't sure if he had any skills that could benefit from it, but he felt its purpose was to help protect others rather than himself. [**Nature's Barrier**] might be a possible candidate, though that skill already benefitted from infusing it with Dao of Trees.

In any case, he knew his survivability had increased by a notch, both from a huge influx of points into Endurance, but also being able to empower himself further with new Dao Seeds. He had used Dao of Trees as a defensive skill until now, but it wasn't a purely defensive Dao like the Dao of Sharpness was purely offensive.

Besides, the Dao of Trees was inconvenient for him to use for various reasons. First of all, it contained the breath of life, which essentially was poison for him in his Draugr-form. It also wasn't possible to infuse non-living things with that Dao, so strengthening his metallic shield was impossible.

However, the happy surprises didn't end there. He actually had gained another title.

[Scion of Dao: Attain five different Dao Seeds while still at F-Grade Reward: All stats +5]

This title wasn't listed in the booklet he got from Brazla, meaning it was likely pretty rare, and Zac could understand why. Most people had tremendous trouble attaining Dao Seeds on their own, and no classes gave five Dao Seeds as far as he knew.

It was the same with Zac himself, all five of his seeds could be linked to the three visions he had seen. The Dao of Sharpness might have come later, but it was only due to forming the foundation after seeing the Dao of Axe that he managed to attain it.

His latest gains had also pushed not only Wisdom but even Luck past one hundred points. That only left Intelligence that was still below that level, currently sitting at 97. But Zac chose to not put any of his free points into Intelligence even though he was so close.

He hadn't heard of any benefits of having all attributes over one hundred, and besides, he would likely gain a couple of more titles before reaching level 75. He didn't want to waste his precious free points into an attribute with limited benefits to his classes.

In the end, he put all his six points into Strength, pushing it 429. He was mostly done, but there was one final thing he wanted to do before checking in on his axe. It was with some anticipation he opened the Dao Ladder, but he could only wryly smile after seeing Abbot Everlasting Peace still sitting on top.

By now Zac felt pretty much certain that the old man had actually attained the Dao of Karma rather than some lower component. He had asked Alyn about it when he visited the Academy, but she knew nothing about it, apart from some rumors.

It was an extremely rare Dao, and those who grasped it were revered as great sages. It was supremely powerful since it was said that a person with a high command of the Dao of Karma could not only see into the future, but he could even tamper with fate itself. He could bring calamity onto his enemies from the other side of the universe if he wanted.

Zac felt a bit helpless, and he had a feeling that passing that old man on the Dao Ladder would be even harder than clearing out the incursions. But Zac didn't begrudge the old man his opportunities and instead focused on the things at hand.

It was time to check on his axe.

The last of the cursed rats fell, and the abyssal shriek from the escaping specter barely registered as Thea sat down with a groan. She was hurting all over, but she was determined to last the final ten days. So many were counting on her, and the very fate of her planet still hung in the balance.

Meeting that Dominator had been a true wake-up call. Her grandpa had always told her to never get complacent, there were always bigger fish to fry, and she wished that he wasn't correct for once. They couldn't even escape that monster, forcing her to use her final measures.

The side-effects of using her ultimate retreat were even worse than she had imagined, and she internally swore for the hundredth time at the Tutorial Pixies. She already knew that using that skill meant losing levels, but the pixies never said anything about losing even more levels from consecutive uses.

When she used it the first time in the mountains back home she lost a level, and while it was regrettable it was better than dying. But this time she actually lost three levels, making her wonder just how many levels she would lose the next time she was forced to activate it.

Then again, the cost of using [**Heaven's Ward**] might rather be related to the damage that was blocked than the number of uses. She had been forced to block over a dozen of those chains after Zac was knocked unconscious after all, and that should have required immense energies. Even that man was barely able to block a handful of them.

The thought of him made her once again open up the hunter ladder, and she was happy to notice that she had finally broken into the top ten of the ladder. The unceasing beast waves that had been ravaging across the mountains the past days had been a perfect opportunity for her since her [**Petal Storm**] was extremely suited for large numbers of weaker enemies.

In fact, she had even gained a full two levels the past days, a feat that would have been impossible back home. After a brief stop at her own rank, she quickly moved down to the 400-rankings to check Zac's status, but her heart tightened when his name was nowhere to be found.

She kept moving further and further down the list but he was nowhere to be seen, so she quickly opened up the Power ladder from back home. Thea breathed out in relief when she saw that Zac still held a commanding lead in the front, but she quickly returned to the hunter ladder.

Finally, she found out what was going on. He had moved all the way up to the 46th position in a few hours, once again showcasing his power. Her mouth curved upwards as she gazed up at the skies.

Nothing would stop that man.

Screams echoed across the cliffs as she slowly ripped the limbs from the human, one by one. Anytime she saw the sigil of the Medhin Empire resentment rose in her heart, and she couldn't stop herself from tormenting those people a bit.

She knew that the real family members were off-limits, even though she wasn't thrilled about it. But those rules didn't exist for their subjects. They were just fated to become fuel anyway, and a cruel smile adorned Inevitability's face as she ripped off another arm of the Medhin General.

Finally the screams abated, and the whole mountain became deathly silent. Everything in the surroundings had already been purged by her [**Chains of Fate**], leaving just herself on this mountain.

This small distraction, unfortunately, didn't lessen the frustration that had been building in Inevitability's heart over the months. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. The world had finally changed, allowing them to move into the sunlight. But it came too soon, and they weren't ready. The world welcomed the Incursions, forcing them on the passive.

Not only that, but some insane human somehow managed to go and become an in-name disciple of their master. Forget about becoming official disciples themselves, by now they could consider themselves lucky if their souls weren't ripped out from their bodies when he arrived.

Their ancestors had already failed their tasks, and they had failed as well when the integration finally arrived. Their very existences were hanging by the barest of threads, and her actions the last week had almost closed the last door of salvation.

That beastman was also a decent candidate, but he was below that human that almost managed to kill her in the end. They truly needed this Zachary Atwood to fulfill their goal. But finally, there was some good news. The human was fine, and steadily climbing the kill-ladder.

Void's plan might work out after all. She was sure he had already finished his tasks back in the real world. He never messed around, and he likely set out the minute the trial started. Inevitability once again looked up at the skies, and they didn't seem as bleary this time.

They might just survive the arrival of The Great Redeemer after all.

Chapter 243: Gold and Bones

Zac was about to walk out of his hiding spot, but he suddenly realized something. He was almost completely naked. His brows rose in surprise, but as he looked at the ground he understood what had happened.

Scraps from his former robes lay around him, corroded and discolored. It almost looked like he had molted a layer of skin, and Zac couldn't help but frown in disgust. He had expected the robes to have repaired themselves while he meditated, but he was dead wrong on that point.

The rat vomit must have overtaxed the robes and destroyed the inscriptions. It was regrettable since it was a very convenient item, but Zac wasn't overly saddened by it. The clothes had lost their usefulness to a large degree already. The shields it could summon simply weren't strong enough to protect him against threats anymore.

Besides, he had gained a huge amount of Endurance since he got his second class. In fact, he had more than doubled his Endurance in just a few short weeks. It was to the point that he hadn't really acclimatized to the huge improvements and he still avoided strikes that wouldn't be unable to hurt him.

It became readily apparent during his fight with the rats. He had taken thousands of strikes from the frenzied beasts but he walked away from the battle with only surface wounds that had bled a bit. If he had taken those kinds of strikes during the beast waves he would have been out of commission in no time.

So the loss of the defensive option wasn't really an issue, but Zac would miss the fact that he never needed to change or clean the clothes. It seemed that he would have to go back to

his old style of wearing whatever, and he started scouring the mountains of loot in his cosmic sack for anything serviceable.

Finally, he decked himself in the gaudy robes of Tyrbat Medhin, the royal he killed during the first day of the hunt. The robe hadn't displayed any real defensive properties during the fight, but Zac chose it for another reason.

He had decapitated the former owner, drenching the robes in blood, but when he found it in his Cosmos Sack it was completely spotless. This could only mean that it had the cleaning-feature since Zac sure as hell hadn't done a wash during the hunt. Judging by how the man fought, having multiple rings with impressive defensive properties, that also wasn't the only benefit of the robes.

A warm sensation spread through his body the moment he put it on, and he was surprised to see that grime that had set in his hair was turning into steam. In just a minute he was completely spotless like he had taken a proper bath.

The effect was amazing, and the inscriptions must have been designed by a neat-freak. But Zac still didn't like the overly gaudy design, and he felt like Brazla while wearing the clothes. He chose to don a dark brown cloak that covered most of the gold, and since he was dressed he could finally leave his hiding spot.

Zac was filled with anticipation as he walked over toward where he hid the crimson crystal containing **[Verun's Bite]**. He first scanned the vicinity, but thankfully nothing had changed while he was busy with his vision. There was only a sea of rat carcasses all around him.

He also realized that the miasmic field that he generated with **[Fields of Despair]** was completely gone from the rat den, and not a smidgeon of miasma remained in the atmosphere. It looked like the skill's effects were temporary, meaning that he couldn't use it to terraform his surroundings to become death-attuned.

A full six hours had passed since he hid the crystal, but when he moved the carcasses blocking it not much had changed. The only difference was that the crystal now was almost

completely opaque. Zac barely managed to make out the silhouette of something inside, but he couldn't tell if anything had changed about the axe.

Zac was a bit stumped when he gazed at the huge crystal. It still emanated no energy fluctuations, and it might just as well be a large rock if he didn't know what it contained. But he had no idea what to do with it now. The time on his hands was limited, and he had no idea how long it would take for his weapon to finish its evolution.

He had hoped that it would be done by the time Zac had gained his Dao seeds, but he had no such luck. He also wasn't comfortable putting the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, since he had no idea whether that would somehow interrupt or affect the evolution.

Quite some time passed as Zac stared at the crystal, his frown deepening by the minutes. Finally, after staring intently at the crystal for almost half an hour he gave up and instead took out his shield. He didn't dare to destroy the crystal, so he would have to occupy himself with something else. He had only checked on one of the benefits from finishing his quest, and this was as good a time as any to check out the other.

The shield looked a bit worse for wear, but it wasn't beyond redemption. But it would need to be worked by a blacksmith as soon as he got back to Port Atwood. The first thing he did after equipping the shield was to imbue it with the Dao of Hardness.

He would have thought some change would take place after the infusion, like how his fractal blades changed colors by which Dao they were infused with, but the shield looked just the same. There were no extra layers of protection forming above it either, and if Zac wasn't the one pushing the energies into the shield he wouldn't know it was there.

But he still knew that the Dao worked, since he could feel how it reinforced the whole shield from within. He tried slamming the shield with his fist to test the effect, and there was a clear improvement. He couldn't even leave a dent in the shield after using over half his force, showing just how powerful the

middle stage Dao Seed was. Of course, he still knew that he could break the shield if he truly exerted his full force.

But that didn't mean that the Dao of Hardness was sub-par, but rather that the shield wasn't anything special apart from being a high-quality product. It wasn't a Spiritual Treasure like **[Verun's Bite]**, but something along the lines of the robes he just lost.

He also tried to infuse the shield with the Dao of Sanctuary, but the Dao wouldn't enter it, just like how his Dao of Trees initially wouldn't enter his axe. He also tried to infuse his body and his clothes, but nothing worked.

For now, it looked like the second Dao Seed would have to be a passive attribute boost since he couldn't figure out a way to use it in battle. Then again, the power of an early-stage Seed was limited, and not something he would bring out in a battle with his current power.

Next, he started up **[Bulwark Mastery]**, and as he expected there was a guidance system showing him how to work the shield. He had already found out that this type of skill was extremely common, and most classes had a similar one. The difference was that both his mastery skills also provided Dao Visions, whereas the equivalent skills for lower-grade classes just provided the guidance system.

Interestingly enough this guidance system didn't only show him the illuminated paths on how to move his shield, but it also simulated attackers who he had to block.

With Zac's ample combat experience he had no problem to quickly learn the basic steps and movements. It also showed some offensive moves, such as bashing the shield forward, ramming, and pinning down opponents. It even showed how to punch forward and use the lower edge of the shield as a weapon.

Since the skill only was at early mastery it didn't incorporate any of his Daos, and Zac soon stopped training with the skill. He knew that he would be able to advance **[Bulwark Mastery]** with just a day or so of training since the only thing

required to advance the mastery to middle was to fully learn all the moves.

But now was not the time for that. Almost a whole day had passed between the battle and his meditation, leaving just 9 more days to reclaim his placements. His position on the hunter ladder had improved quite a bit, but he knew that it would likely get harder and harder to keep gaining positions.

He returned to the side of [**Verun's Bite**], but nothing had changed since his last check. Finally, he took out some ropes from his sack and started fastening them around the crystal. He decided that he would simply bring the thing on his back as he explored the tunnels.

However, he only managed to walk fifty meters in the direction of the exit before he could hear ominous crackling sounds from the crystal, and he hurriedly put it down. He noticed a large crack running all along the thing, and he wanted to slap himself for his impatience.

The cracks only got worse and spread all over the thing, and Zac could only look on in dismay. But the moment the whole thing shattered a massive aura exploded out from the crystal, forcing Zac a few steps back. Zac's hopes reignited as he looked at the scene from afar.

A large projection suddenly appeared where the crystal once was, reaching over five meters in height. It was Verun, but its appearance had changed a bit. The most obvious change was the increase in size, with its wither height increasing from roughly 1.5 meters to its current size.

Its maw was still an oversized vortex of gristly fangs, making its head just enormous by now. But its body was more proportional, and it rippled with sleek muscles. It felt like a true predator and was felt far more nimble than the stocky barghest, but far more powerful than the agile Gwyllgi.

A shockingly powerful roar emitted out from the specter, and suddenly all the carcasses of the largest rats burst open and blood streamed toward it from all directions. Meanwhile, the actual axe rose from the ground, but before Zac could get a proper look it was covered by the incoming blood.

Thankfully it didn't form yet another crystal though, and after just a few seconds the blood was gone. Verun slowly dissipated, turning into motes of light that entered the axe as it fell down on the ground.

As Zac walked over to the axe he still felt some power undulations from it, but it had mostly calmed down by now. There were some noticeable changes to the axe, the foremost being the head. It was made by some dark metal before, but now it looked greyish-white and seemed to be actually created from an enormous tooth.

Its edge was still curved, but it was slightly larger compared to before, almost reaching half a meter by now. Its edge was a bit uneven as well, and his thoughts still went to Orc Chieftains when he looked at **[Verun's Bite]**.

Zac hesitantly dragged his finger along the edge and he immediately felt a sharp pain as blood started to flow freely from his finger. Even after he imbued his hand with the Dao of Hardness it took a bit of strength to once again cut through his skin, which made it very telling just how sharp the edge was.

There were still a few smaller teeth fastened to the back of the head, but now there was one that was far larger than the others. It almost formed a counterweight and formed a sharp spike that pushed out from the back of the axe-head. Its needlepoint looked extremely sharp, and Zac knew that it should have extreme piercing power if he needed it.

The handle was still wrought of some wood, though it looked a bit more greyish compared to before. But more interestingly five fractals ran all along the handle. The one closest to the end of the haft was glistening with a crimson red, whereas the others were pitch black.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt as though there was a meaning to the colors. He had fed the axe enormous amounts of blood to help it evolve, and the first fractal shone with that very same color. Perhaps he would need to keep feeding it even more blood to light up the other fractals as well.

However, the changed appearance was not the only thing different about it. It also emitted a brutal and unrestrained aura

and looking at it felt like staring at a prehistoric beast. Zac couldn't be sure, but it felt that this aura would be even stronger in battle, and it might even possess the ability to suppress his enemies.

The final difference became apparent when he gripped the wooden handle. The moment he touched the haft he immediately sensed another presence in his mind. However, it wasn't at all like the intrusion of the specters he had felt earlier.

It was like he shared a mental connection with another being, and he immediately understood that the connection was to Verun itself. The link even allowed him to communicate in a way, though Verun wasn't sapient like Brazla, at least not yet.

The moment the link was established Zac felt a rapid stream of emotions. Exultation and pride. Recognition and kinship. Tiredness. Not long after the link weakened, and no more emotions were transmitted. However, Zac understood that the link wasn't just a temporary thing, but it was rather temporarily weakened due to Verun being tired out from the evolution.

Finally, he was done with the cave, and Zac effortlessly threw away the carcasses blocking the exit. He took one last look at the cavern that had provided him with so many benefits before entering the tunnel with newfound confidence.

Chapter 244: Immutable Bulwark

Zac couldn't help being in a great mood as he walked through the winding pathways of the tunnel. He had gotten a slew of power-ups, and even his main weapon had received an evolution. Even better, at the end of the road there was a mountain of treasure waiting for him. Falling into the ravine was starting to turn out all right.

But his mood was quickly getting dampened as he walked. First of all the tunnels felt almost endless, and he started to worry just how long the passages were. Perhaps he wouldn't even reach the inheritance before the time was up. But more importantly, the aura of darkness in the tunnel was slowly increasing, making the air oppressive.

He had no idea what the old Array Spirit had prepared, or whether it even had any control over the situation. But he feared the old spirit was leading him toward the source of the darkness to kill the enemies of his fallen sect. Or perhaps the truth was something completely different.

The words of the old man echoed in his mind, and he had started to form a hypothesis about what happened here. Anzonil had said that everything was ruined by one mistake. Not long ago Ogras told him that countless people in the multiverse had turned to monsters in their pursuit of power, and Zac believed that might have been the case with this place.

They had either created or come in contact with the mysterious aura of darkness and sought to control it. It was undeniable that the darkness made people stronger, but they also turned into raving lunatics when they were infected. The specters had a humanoid form when they attacked him and Thea on the mountain peak. What if they were the former sect-members?

Perhaps Anzonil wanted him to kill the specters not out of hatred, but out of mercy.

But it was a moot point since Zac had no method of killing them unless they were susceptible to the Dao of Hardness for some reason. So it was with some trepidation that he stopped when the tunnel once again exited into a large den. This time there was no ocean of rats, but instead a sea of insects that most resembled ants.

They were more uniform in size compared to the rats, and there were four types. The largest was a huge blob of an ant in the middle of the den, and it was easily over fifteen meters across. Judging by the short withered legs Zac suspected it was unable to move and relied on the smaller ones to bring it food.

Surrounding what was clearly the queen were a few elite guards that were around three meters each, each emanating powers close to that of E-Rank. Finally were the common ants, and they came in two sizes; medium and large. The whole scene reminded him of the Ayr Hive back on his island, though the ants in front of him looked far more similar compared to the extremely diverse shapes of Ayr insectoids. But there was one more difference.

These things were obviously infected by the darkness. Frenzied battles were taking place all among the smaller ants, and the large queen was currently feasting on one of the worker ants. The whole hive emitted a type of insanity and chaos that was very different from the cooperation that usually characterized ant species.

Zac briefly wondered if he would have to cut his way through all manner of creepy crawlies to get to the treasure as he prepared himself for battle. But he didn't really mind since his level was still pretty low, and he would be able to quickly gain some more levels this way.

His thirst for power was at an all-time high since his meeting with Inevitability, and he knew there was no time to waste. This time he didn't opt to stay hidden and spectate and instead jumped straight into the fray with his axe at the ready.

Clattering from thousands of agitated ants echoed through the caverns, drowning out all other sounds, but Zac simply ignored it as he started killing ants with breakneck speed with his axe. The gloomy transformation of the area from **[Fields of Despair]** had already taken place, and **[Deathwish]** was also activated.

Since he had gained the skills already he was using his axe from the start. He wanted to increase his speed as much as possible on his way to the Inheritance. The ants had thick plating to protect themselves, but the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]** cut through them like they were paper, and his speed of killing was unprecedented in his undead form.

However, he was a bit disappointed to notice that **[Deathwish]** wasn't very effective against these beasts. The defense was clearly higher than the offense of the ants, and even though the specters kept appearing around him to reflect the bites they mostly harmlessly hit the chitinous shells.

Zac soon decided to completely abandon the skill since it was just a waste of miasma. Instead, he started work his way around in a circle of the outer area of the cavern. The queen was simply sitting there in the middle, and her bodyguards hadn't moved. Perhaps the queen wasn't even a combat class, but rather a being that solely focused on birthing more ants to protect the hive.

He wanted to kill all these ants first for the experience and ladder placements, and he was worried that if he killed the boss first the other ants would flee. This cavern was different from the last one, it contained tens of small tunnels leading god knows where, and Zac wouldn't be able to block them all to keep his prey inside.

Suddenly his danger sense rang in his mind, but no matter where he looked he couldn't see anything. But a second later an unseen force slammed into his mind, and he couldn't help himself from falling over with a groan. If he was human he would likely have emptied his stomach by now, but instead the miasma in his body was going haywire.

He couldn't see straight, and it was like his body didn't understand the commands he sent. But a few piercing stabs of pain cut straight through the confusion. It was two of the larger ants that had taken the opportunity to attack, and each had bit into his torso with their large pincers.

Black ichor was slowly dripping out of the wounds, making Zac groan in pain. But his almost five hundred Endurance wasn't just for show, and he got to his feet with a roar. The two large ants tried to distance themselves from him but they were quickly bisected by two swings empowered by the Dao of Sharpness.

They were extremely quick, and Zac held nothing back in his attacks so that they wouldn't have time to flee. He didn't have access to **[Loamwalker]** in his current form so he needed to make sure to quickly kill the speedier targets.

Zac took a few steadying breaths to calm the miasma that was still not fully under control inside his body and looked over at the queen. The air around her shuddered with power, making Zac frown. It had likely shot out some mental attack that briefly rendered him immobile.

Unfortunately, he didn't have access **[Mental Fortress]** as an undead either, and he could only try to fortify his mind with the help of the Dao of Hardness. One of the insights he got into it was a mental resilience, and it should provide some protection against psychic attacks. But the queen was an E-Grade being and Zac had a feeling that a middle stage Dao Seed wouldn't be enough to completely block its attacks.

He quickly popped a healing pill into his mouth as he kept killing the frenzied ants around him, and he was quickly forming a small hill of corpses. It looked like he couldn't ignore the fat blob as he killed its subjects. He would have to hope that the darkness in the smaller ants would make them crazed enough to keep fighting even after their queen died.

He had lost some of his power due to the four gristly puncture wounds, but it wasn't all bad news. The attack from the queen was the third and final strike he needed to endure to complete his quest for **[Immutable bulwark]**. Now was as good a time

as any to test it out, and he quickly activated the skill as he rushed toward the center of the cave.

A huge Fractal shield that was over two meters tall and four meters wide appeared in front of him as he ran. It had the turquoise color of miasma, and fractals formed some sort of pattern in the center of it. But the thing that truly drew Zac's attention was the huge sinister spikes covering the shield. The skill wasn't purely defensive.

In just a few seconds he had mowed down over a hundred ants from his charge, and his killing efficiency was even better than when using his axe. The speed of killing beasts was still worse compared to the carnage he could unleash when using [**Chop**], but it was a clear step up from waiting for his enemies to kill themselves from [**Deathwish**].

Zac reactivated [**Deathwish**] as a precaution as was approaching the stronger ants and the queen. Since the bodyguards could pierce his body with their pincers they should be able to hurt themselves as well, and perhaps the skill also worked against mental attacks. To his surprise, almost ten specters immediately appeared in front of the shield, and he quickly realized was going on.

There was a synergy between [**Deathwish**] and [**Immutable Bulwark**]. He had been worried before about the contradictory nature of his first offensive skill. He was a class that focused on blocking, but his skill required him to get hit to hurt his enemies.

He already knew that [**Deathwish**] didn't activate when he used his shield, but that changed the moment he activated his new skill. Any ant that tried to bite their way through the fractal shield was immediately attacked by spectral copies of themselves, proving that an attack on his bulwark was counted as an attack on himself.

The only downside was that both the power and energy consumption seemed worse compared to when he used his own body as the punching-board.

Still, this was an enormous upgrade as Zac saw it, and it would allow him to avoid any damage while simply pushing forward

with his new fractal bulwark. The enemies would be gored by the spikes if they didn't dodge quick enough, and if they tried to cut their way through they would be just harming themselves.

Soon he arrived at the encirclement of the larger ants that guarded the queen, and he unhesitatingly pushed forward like a runaway train. He even imbued his new defense with the Dao of Hardness as he closed in on the last distance.

But just a few moments before he would slam into the final barrier of ants between himself and the queen another wave of the mental attack hit him. He had already fortified his mind with the Dao of Hardness, but the power in that attack was just massive.

He couldn't stop himself from falling over yet again as miasma was once again going out of control. But the protection of the Dao Seed helped him at least keep his consciousness through the attack, and he quickly placed the shield right above himself for protection. Just a second later he sensed a large stream of energy entering him, proving that at least one of the larger ants had just killed himself on his improvised turtle shell.

He wondered if he would be able to stay beneath his shield while all the ants killed themselves upon it, but the queen soon made herself reminded with another mental blast that shocked Zac's system.

The time between the attacks was far shorter this time, making Zac wonder if proximity was a factor in the attack. In any case, it meant he couldn't stay beneath his shield. The three strikes had drained a large amount of his mental energy, and combined with his Dao usage his head was starting to hurt a bit.

If he kept getting blasted he might fry his brain, and he had a feeling that his Duplicity Core couldn't help him with that. His danger sense was already ringing in his mind, so Zac quickly got on his feet to make a final charge at the queen.

But the moment he got up on his feet he saw an incoming enormous ball of chaotic energies. Zac wanted to move out of

the way, but he knew he didn't possess the speed with his current class. He had no choice but to brave it, so he pushed a huge amount of miasma into **[Immutable Bulwark]** as he imbued it with the Dao of Hardness.

A huge explosion rocked the whole cave and Zac couldn't stop himself from being pushed back over fifty meters. His arms shook from the force of the impact, but he was mostly fine. However, the same couldn't be said of the queen.

A large burn-mark adorned her enormous gut, and the thick shell even had some cracks that leaked blue blood. The attack had completely backfired on her, and Zac wanted to take the opportunity to finish her off.

There was only one thought running through his mind as he once again ran toward the shrieking hive queen; this new skill was right up his alley.

Chapter 245: Indomitable

The miasma was roiling inside his body as Zac surveyed the battleground. Broken carapaces and shells were strewn all over, and it was impossible to take a step without putting his feet in a blue puddle of ant blood.

He made a cursory check for anything of value as he walked toward the only passage that didn't seem to be created by tunneling ants. After he had managed to reflect some of the ultimate attack of the hive queen the fight was mostly over.

She seemed to be afraid to attack him again, and that hesitation allowed him to get close enough to finish the fight with his axe. A few quick chops and she was dead. Luckily killing the queen had the effect he hoped for, and the rest of the ants had turned completely insane in their anger, desperately trying to kill him.

He had made a few discoveries during this battle that helped him understand the strength and shortcomings of his new skill. The good was that the defensive properties of **[Immutable Bulwark]** were extremely high.

It also seemed to differ from how **[Chop]** worked. That skill was based on the actual weapon he used, so when he changed weapons so did the strength of the fractal edge change. But his new defensive skill was different. It didn't look anything like his shield, and his actual shield took no damage when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was attacked. He was, however, unable to summon the skill if he didn't have a shield equipped, so they were connected somehow.

Zac guessed that the power was based on his Endurance, like **[Nature's Barrier]**, since it wasn't based on his actual weapon. The miasma consumption was also based on how much the shield was attacked, just like an array.

He had also learned some new things about **[Deathwish]**. It did not appear that it worked on mental skills since the queen had no reaction after attacking him multiple times with the mental waves. This was something Zac had seen as a possibility before.

In fact, there were multiple means of attack where he suspected the skill wouldn't work. Illusions and poison were two other examples. It appeared that there needed to be a kinetic component to the attack, such as a punch or a fireball for there to be anything to reflect.

The battle had also given him three new levels, two of which came from killing the queen. It was crazy to think he had gained ten levels in just one day, but he also noted that the speed was already slowing down markedly.

He almost wished there would be a few more rooms like this before he got to the treasure. There was no real threat to him, and he could generally treat it as rooms full of experience points. However, his worry grew as the corruption in the atmosphere around him kept increasing.

Even the flora in the tunnel he was starting to become twisted and odd, even though the corruption in the tunnels was far lower compared to the caverns for some reason. Perhaps the array screens that hid the tunnels he used also stopped some of the darkness from passing through.

But even then the effect on the plant life was noticeable. Some of them even produced an odd black substance, and Zac collected some of it in case it could be useful or valuable. However, there was clearly something wrong with the black liquid. He accidentally got a few drops on his hand while he was collecting it, and in just moments he felt rage bubbling up inside him.

It was only a few minutes later that the urge to go crazy and destroy everything around him subsided and Zac was shocked by the effect. Just what would happen if some beast ate these plants on a daily basis?

Zac's wish for more beasts to kill were soon fulfilled as he came to yet another cavern, this one occupied by things that

looked like fuzzy scorpions. The battle took around two hours, and he almost got himself killed due to carelessness.

There had actually been a boss hiding beneath the ground all the time, and Zac only realized his mistake when his danger sense warned him of the incoming enormous stinger. He had barely managed to swirl around and block the strike in time.

Time started to blur and hours turned to days as Zac cleansed one cave after another. Zac started to worry that the old array spirit was taking him on a tour in a circle that spanned the whole mountain range. Or perhaps he was walking straight toward the edge that the System had imposed on the hunt.

The darkness was also ever-present around him, and it even started to affect his mood to a slight degree. He found himself constantly harboring murderous impulses that he had to forcibly push down. Only entering a tunnel after a cavern gave his mind some reprieve, as the arrays truly seemed to be darkness filters.

The critters he killed were also turning increasingly insane, and they also started to exhibit various deformities from the corruption. Zac was currently fighting against the patriarch of a cavern that was inhabited by roughly a hundred huge lizards.

Each one of them was close to the E-Grade, but they looked like they were barely alive since they were covered in grisly scars and pus-filled tumors. Some had grown odd appendages and others seemed barely coherent enough to take care of itself.

Zac finally felled the beast, and a surge of Cosmic Energy brought him to level 48. He was only twelve levels away from his main class now, and it proved just how efficient it was to hunt E-Grade beasts to level.

Just the past two days he had killed more E-Grade beings than he had during the first six months of the integration which had skyrocketed his levels. However, the things he had encountered could barely be counted as E-Grade, provided far less Cosmic Energy than the Star Ox for example.

He felt that the speed of gaining levels was slowing down, just like it had with his main class. But he still was extremely satisfied with the result. His time down in the tunnels had also proven an extremely efficient way to grind his position on the hunter ladder, and he had already back jumped up to the 6th position.

His gatherer ladder was steady dropping though, and he was down at the 9th position now. He had seen multiple names in the top 50 disappear, likely meaning desperate battles were taking place aboveground which was quickly consolidating the wealth.

There was nothing of value down here, and he could only pin his hope to Anzonil's treasure trove. Zac took a last look around the cavern for anything that might be of value, but as usual it was just disgusting carcasses.

But his brows furrowed when he saw that the leader lizard suddenly started shaking, and the next moment a ghastly specter shot out of it with a screech. It made a beeline for Zac, its claws already poised to strike.

Zac readied his axe to meet the incoming ghost, but at the last moment, he had an idea. He quickly moved his axe as he infused himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ghost unhesitatingly tried to rake his chest, but it suddenly shrieked in anger and pain when a copy of itself suddenly attacked it.

It tried to swing right back, but the moment after the spectral projection from **[Deathwish]** had attacked it turned to nothingness. The specter seemed completely enraged and tried venting its anger on Zac.

It quickly unleashed a barrage of attacks on Zac, but between his robes, his Endurance, and his Dao it only felt like someone was scratching him. But the same couldn't be said about the specter. It howled in pain with every strike, and the pain seemed to make it even more desperate as it even tried to bite Zac's head.

Zac had to force himself to stay still, and a small stream of cosmic energy the next moment told him his gambit had been a success. He already knew that **[Deathwish]** returned the

same type of energy as the original attack, though it was formed by miasma, so he surmised that if specters could kill themselves then so could he with the skill.

It turned out he was correct, and it was as though a stone had lifted from his chest. If he could actually kill the ghosts by just standing still then he didn't really have much to worry about unless there were some stronger ghosts that they hadn't encountered aboveground.

The piercing wail came to mind, for example. Zac had no doubt that being was E-Graded, and he did not want to test whether his endurance or that thing's power was greater. It had managed to scramble his brains momentarily from god knows what distance, so he couldn't imagine a battle in melee range going his way.

Still, it was with newfound vigor he pushed toward the next cave, and the persistent aura of darkness didn't feel as oppressive any longer. However, more and more ghosts started to appear in the caves, all of them hiding in the stronger beasts.

Zac surmised that they perhaps were draining the energy of those they possessed, and used the powerful animals as personal feeding grounds. He already knew that they were in need of Cosmic Energy to survive going by the thousands of ghosts that had assailed him on the mountain top.

The more frequently appearing ghosts proved they weren't all harmless to him as well. One had managed to slink into his mind just like the last time, and he barely was able to force it out by madly channeling the Dao of Hardness.

It was lucky too, as the ghost had unhesitatingly tried to use Zac arm to sever his own legs with **[Verun's Bite]**. It was by the hair that he managed to stop himself from amputating his leg, and sweat was running down his forehead from the close call.

After that he no longer dared to let the ghosts freely have at him, and instead had his eyes peeled in case they tried to possess him again. The moment he suspected that was what one of the ghosts planned he immediately slashed it with his axe, briefly scattering it and enraging it.

But that also drastically slowed down his speed of killing the things, and it was quickly getting hard to keep track of all the ghosts as they grew more numerous in the caverns. So worry started to grow as the situation was growing more and more strained.

Finally it got so bad that he started wondering whether he even dared to keep going. Dozens of ghosts were wailing in the cave that once housed yet another rat den. They were frenziedly trying to get at him, and Zac had to keep running as he sorted out which ones were attacking and which ones tried to possess him.

He already knew that putting his back against a wall had no effect, the ghosts could easily pass through them. Even his newly attained defensive skill proved useless against the spectral beings, and they simply flew right around it without being impeded.

But suddenly he gained a surge of energy as yet another ghost killed itself by clawing his chest, and Zac opened up his menu like a drowning man. The surge of power in his body told him that he had finally reached level 50, which meant that he should have gotten a new class quest.

What type of skill he attained and how easily he could complete the quest would dictate whether he would keep going or not. At this rate, he might get possessed at any moment, as there already had been a few close calls the last caverns.

Indomitable (Class): Attain a high stage defensive Dao Seed. Reward: Indomitable (1/1)

Zac couldn't help but get his hopes up when he saw the name, but he refocused on the ghosts and slowly whittled them down so that he could focus on the new skill uninterrupted. He still waited on a second Dao Vision, since he still had only got the one.

Alyn had told him that higher rarity classes got more Dao visions, but Zac guessed reality might not be that simple when he noted that Indomitable was yet another normal class quest. Perhaps he had gained one higher-grade vision that awarded multiple seeds rather than multiple weaker ones.

That would in a sense ensure that the seeds he gained would have a good synergy since they came from the same individual. But whether he was correct or not wasn't important at the moment, and instead he focused on the skill. Luckily the quest seemed to count Seed of Trees as a defensive Dao since the quest was already considered finished. He quickly accepted it and he felt a new fractal taking place in his mind.

Zac was elated since the placement was almost exactly identical to the one of [**Mental Fortress**], which together with its name gave a pretty clear indication of what type of skill it was.

It seemed his luck had pulled through for him once again.

Chapter 246: Core of Darkness

It was already in the next cave that **[Indomitable]** proved it's worth. It was as though the ghosts hit a brick wall when they tried to enter his mind and were then unceremoniously thrown out. That in turn just enraged them even further, and they immediately tried to tear him to shreds in their anger.

Unfortunately **[Deathwish]** did not work in synergy with **[Indomitable]** as it did with **[Immutable Defense]**. The ghosts were rebuffed when they tried to possess him but they weren't hurt in the slightest. It was a bit of a shame, but still, the mental defense was what he was after at the moment. And it seemed to be even sturdier than to **[Mental Fortress]** even though that skill was at late mastery.

It allowed him to keep pushing through the caverns, and Zac had a feeling he was nearing the end of the subterranean system on his sixth day in the tunnels. Almost all of the beasts in the dens he visited were possessed by now, and animals were hardly more than lifeless husks that housed the spirits within.

Killing the animals barely provided any energies at all, but it at least forced the ghosts out of the bodies. But the specters were changing a bit as well, and he noticed that some were larger and emitted more chaotic energies.

A few of them also possessed a minor version of the piercing wail, but **[Indomitable]** blocked out most of the effect from those attacks as well. But the increasing strength of the ghosts also meant that his time wasn't as relaxed as he had hoped. He still needed to be careful about some of the stronger specters, since they could actually harm him with their physical attacks.

It was somewhere late on the sixth day that there finally was a change in the endlessly repetitive pattern of the cavern. It felt like Zac had walked a whole continent cross-country in the tunnels, and he missed the sight of the sun even in his undead form.

The cavern in front of him hinted at change, but he didn't heedlessly head into it and instead opted to properly check it out first. It was simply enormous, at least ten times the size of the dens he had rampaged through before this. It was also the first cave that seemed to house not a single beast.

Instead, the floor was covered with huge pillars that seemed to be made from onyx or some black crystal. Zac couldn't tell whether they were naturally formed or if they were somehow crafted. But they looked too even and sculpted to be a natural mineral, having perfectly even sides as they rose up to ten meters into the air.

There were thousands of them, and if they held value like normal Nexus Crystals then he might have a chance to jump straight to the first placement on the Gatherer ladder. However, his eyes barely glanced over the forest of crystals before they found themselves glued at the center of the cave.

Another crystal could be seen there as well, but it was completely different from all the others. It actually floated in the air, and it emitted such an enticing surge of power that he almost heedlessly ran over to it by instinct.

It felt like the stone had some sort of hypnotic power since his eyes kept returning to it after moving away. But Zac knew it wasn't actual hypnosis, but rather his body craving the power the stone contained just like when he saw the Fruit of Ascension the first time.

The power it emitted eclipsed any treasure he had ever encountered, even the lotus that Abbot Everlasting Peace used. It felt like it held untold secrets, and that if he could just possess it he would explode in power. He would be able to sweep away the Dominators and the Incursions alike, and finally make Earth a safe haven.

But there was a problem. The crystal emitted an extremely dense amount of the insidious aura, and it was to the point that the crystal itself might be the source of the darkness. He had a feeling that if he didn't have access to his new skill that protected his mental state he would have already fallen to madness just by being in this proximity.

However, he still didn't believe his body was lying to him. That thing was truly a grand treasure, and Zac had a feeling that his suspicions about the Eastern Trigram Sect to be true. If they found that thing they would likely do anything in their power to utilize the mysterious power it contained, though it had obviously backfired.

Zac wasn't foolish enough to think that he had what it took to control it if an ancient sect failed, but he was also reluctant to just leave it behind. It was no doubt a treasure that even eclipsed the D-Grade, and even if he couldn't use it he could sell it or save it until he was powerful enough.

But if this was the source of the darkness then it was odd that there was no protection here. Not a single ghost or possessed beast could be seen, and the tall pillars were the only things around it. But Zac was still wary, and he stayed still and observed the surroundings for two hours.

It cost him quite a bit miasma just to stay close to the cave, and he needed to keep a Miasma Crystal in his hands to counteract the loss. He was forced to continuously imbue **[Indomitable]** with more energy to counteract the lure of the Core of Darkness, which was what he decided to call the treasure in the center of the cave.

At least nothing had moved in the slightest as he observed the cave, and he had already made a few plans as he waited. He had made up his mind; he would snatch that thing. Of course, if things turned south he would have to let it go, but he refused to leave behind such a treasure without giving it a try.

He had already spotted the exit on the opposite side of the cavern, so he knew where he needed to go. But before he did anything he put on an amulet. Luckily he had brought the amulet that hid his presence from the undead that he got from

Ogras, and he hoped that it would at least have some effect in case the ghosts rested inside of the crystals. He also imbued his mental skill with the Dao of Hardness to improve efficiency.

This time he didn't jump down the five meters from his vantage in the tunnel, but instead silently climbed down the wall, careful not to make a sound. The moment he exited the protective array of the mouth of the tunnel he immediately heard a low humming sound.

It wasn't from a person, but rather a sound of all the pillars vibrating. Zac had no idea what that could mean, but he was happy if that was the only sound. It could have been a bunch of ghosts wailing instead, but not a ghost was in sight even after he had climbed down the wall.

He didn't move for a few seconds, afraid he would trigger something, but the droning sound was the only thing that could be heard. So Zac started to silently move toward the Core of Darkness, careful to stay to his pre-plotted path. He was afraid that getting too close to the pillars might trigger something, so he had carefully mapped out the path that would take him to the Core of Darkness while maintaining the highest distance from the crystals as possible.

It was pretty disconcerting to walk between the towering pillars, and it almost felt like he was inside some cursed forest. The darkness both in the atmosphere and the crystal pillars were palpable, and Zac couldn't help but increase his speed somewhat.

He was loath to stay in this cursed place longer than he had to, so he was almost running as he got closer and closer to the Core. But his fears were suddenly realized as a ghost emerged from one of the crystals close to him. Zac immediately disintegrated it with a quick swing of his axe, but its appearance proved that he wasn't alone in the cavern.

Destroying the ghost that way only bought him a few seconds, so he immediately started rushing toward the Core, no longer caring about avoiding making any sounds. Two seconds later

an enraged wail echoed through the chamber, and that wail brought with it pandemonium.

Innumerable ghosts rose from the pillars, and soon the whole ceiling was blotted out by the specters. There were thousands of them, many emitting even stronger auras than any specter Zac had encountered so far. The worst-case scenario was true; The pillars housed the ghosts like the possessed beasts.

Zac was full of alarm as he rushed toward the Core of Darkness as fast as his legs could take him, and he even pushed miasma into his legs to increase his speed. Luckily he had managed to pass most of the pillars already, and only a few hundred meters remained.

But a storm of ghosts was rapidly descending on him, and Zac immediately equipped his shield and summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] and his two passive skills. He held the shield right above his head as he imbued it with the Seed of Hardness.

The ghosts could pass straight through the fractal shield normally, but they were unable to do the same when the shield was empowered by a Dao. They could still pass around it and attack him from the other sides, but it at least lessened the attacks on him a bit.

A few of the larger ghosts were almost immediately upon him, and his miasma was rapidly getting expanded to protect himself from tries to possess him. But not long after Zac started to gain streams of miasma from the ghosts who finally had killed themselves in their frenzied attempts to stop his advance.

But the miasma he gained from [**Fields of Despair**] was far below what was expended to continuously defend, and Zac knew that he wouldn't be able to slowly grind these ghosts to death with [**Deathwish**].

The large ghosts were far too strong. Not only did they manage to rend gashes on his skin that started to bleed the black ichor, but their attempts to possess him also forced him to expend a large amount of miasma. Had it only been the basic ones it would have been a different story, but this seemed to be the place where the strongest ghosts gathered.

He kept putting one leg in front of the other as he ran, and suddenly he was completely unencumbered by any attacking ghosts. Zac looked up with some confusion and found himself staring straight at the Core of Darkness. Desire to touch it almost blocked out everything else in his mind, and his hand even reached toward the shining crystal. But Zac forcibly moved his hand away and quickly averted his gaze with trepidation. That had been too close.

He quickly shot a gaze behind him to find that the ghosts were loath to approach any further. Suddenly one of the smaller ghosts wailed in rage and flew forward to bite Zac. However, it didn't even get halfway to him before it suddenly disintegrated, and its particles were sucked into the crystal.

Zac was surprised since he wasn't expecting it to feed on the ghosts. He even started to consider carrying it in his arms as he fled to the exit of the cave. It would keep even the largest ghosts at bay, providing with safe passage. But he shook his mind after a bit. He didn't dare to actually touch that thing since he had no idea what would happen.

This thing might be the source of downfall of a sect, and running around with it in his hands was tantamount to suicide. He quickly took out a chest wrought of some unknown metal instead. It was pretty large and could contain at least two cubic meters. Inscriptions covered most of the thing and it weighed almost half a ton from his approximation.

It was something he had looted from one of the summit palaces. A bunch of valuables that emitted strong energies had been stored inside it, but before he opened it he didn't sense the slightest fluctuations. So Zac hoped it would be able to contain at least some of the aura of the Core of Darkness, giving him enough time to stow it away into his Cosmos Sack. Since that place was a separate space he didn't think it would be able to cause any problems as long as he stored it.

He ignored the increasingly enraged screeches and wails of the ghosts as he lifted the chest, carefully maneuvering it to enclose the Core. The moment it was fully encapsulated Zac quickly snapped the thick lid shut, but before he could put the chest into his Cosmos Sack a wave of some unknown force

cascaded out from the Core of Darkness and passed right through the chest.

Zac only sensed [**Indomitable**] activate, and immediately fail, before his vision turned black.

Chapter 247: Heart of Oblivion

A slow but steady heartbeat echoed out into the void, each thump vibrating with the primordial Dao. For untold ages the **[Heart of Oblivion]** grew, its tendrils reaching further and further. But suddenly its sanctuary was encroached upon.

His eyes were the stars and his hand was the sky, and when he moved the Dao shied away. He gripped the heart and clenched with enough force to tear the fabric of reality to shreds. The shockwaves shattered the black hole that the heart hid inside, the explosion destroying innumerable planets.

Unwillingness. Desperation. Hatred. The heart shattered, its remnants fleeing to all corners of the myriad planes. One day it would return.

A tower reached toward the stars, thrumming with dark powers. It was completely black and charred, as though it had been struck by an endless number of lightning bolts, and millions upon millions of bodies hung from varying weapons that had been slammed into its rough exteriors. Darkness slowly swirled around it, a testament to the owner within.

Thousands of warriors desperately fought against a tide of frenzied and putrefied beasts, the wide plains they stood on already covered with the fallen. In the background a towering roc stood perched on a hill, its eyes radiating boundless darkness.

The ghost slumbered deep within the earth, only occasionally waking up in a bout of frenzied mania to wreak havoc upon its former home. A wail containing its self-hatred and desperation couldn't help escaping its incorporeal maw before the darkness once again shrouded its mind.

The young beggar could only look up at the floating palaces in the sky and dream of a better life. But fate had abandoned him, straddling him with a weak body unable to cultivate. He was trash, forever relegated to the lowest rungs of society. But a whispering beckon called to him, and he crawled deeper and deeper into the sewers until he found the pitch-black gemstone that would change his fate.

The scenes kept changing in a dizzying array, and Zac had almost lost all sense of reasoning by now. But one thing in the scenes was constant; the Darkness. Each vision only lasted for a few seconds, but what he had seen was enough to scar him for a lifetime.

Luckily many of the visions were not as bad as the ones filled with unrelenting carnage. Most of the visions were of hidden pockets of the multiverse, where the splinters of darkness drifted about unchecked and unencumbered. The visions kept sweeping him away, but suddenly they stopped as he found himself in front of a woman sitting in a lotus position in a vast cave.

Her skin was as white as death and she wore robes that were completely black apart from the occasional silver details. While her features were unblemished and perfect it was impossible to feel a sense of beauty, and Zac rather only got a feeling of desolation and death from her.

An ocean of miasma slowly swirled around her, its density thick enough to turn the energy into a liquid. Suddenly the woman opened her eyes, and Zac found himself staring into two pitch-black orbs of the abyss.

“Child of Draug, you have stepped on the path of Oblivion?” she sighed as she looked down at her hands. “Is it fate?”

The flurry of visions had stopped, but Zac still had no idea what was going on. Was he teleported, or was this all an illusion? He desperately tried to utilize any method he had learned during his entrapment in the corridor, but there were no clues on how to get out.

The feeling was the same as when he had his Dao visions and the fact that the woman in front of him spoke to him just like

the guards indicated this all might be real. His real body was likely still back in the cavern, and god knows what was going on.

Zac was desperate since he knew just how bad the situation was. His real body might currently be exposed to the corruption of the Core of Darkness, and at such proximity, his miasma would soon be drained from the consumption to keep himself safe.

He had a strong feeling his core wouldn't be able to help him out in this type of situation. Either the specters or the mysterious crystal itself would take possession of his body long before the process could finish.

“How curious, I do not recognize your lineage,” she muttered, showing a slight change in her expression for the first time. “Karma ties us, we will meet again. But it is time for you to return.”

A crystalline hand pointed toward him, and suddenly a storm of miasma was ripped out from the ocean around them and crammed into his mind. It felt like his soul would rip to pieces until it was suddenly stabilized by some unknown force.

The next moment enough miasma to explode him a thousand times over were crammed into **[Indomitable]** and it felt like his mind had truly become unassailable. The vision shattered around him, and the last thing he saw were those two familiar pitch-black eyes.

The next moment he found himself standing in the cavern, and to his shock, he was holding the Core of Darkness, or rather the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]** in his bare hands against his forehead. He quickly tried to throw the thing into his Cosmos Sack, but it was too late as it suddenly disappeared with a shockwave. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it as he suddenly found an alien presence in his head.

The black crystal had rushed right through the defenses of **[Indomitable]** and entered his mind, and he simply had no means of removing it. Zac was dismayed by these developments, but he had even more immediate concerns. The

moment the splinter entered his mind its restrictive effect on the specters was gone.

A cacophony of wails echoed through the chambers as the specters assaulted him with enough wrath to make it seem like Zac had killed all their ancestors. He found himself in the middle of storms of rabid ghosts who completely ignored their wounds as they tried to rip him into shreds. Zac quickly oriented himself and immediately rushed toward the exit at the other end of the cavern.

Wounds were quickly accumulating on his body, and the golden robe of the Medhin Royal was completely drenched black before he had even run a third of the way. At least he was gaining a huge amount of energy from the continuous kills since the ghosts were even angry enough to attack his Dao-empowered fractal shield.

Suddenly it was as though his whole body thumped from a heartbeat, though not his own, and he couldn't stop himself from falling over from the shock to his system. He quickly looked inward at the splinter, only to see that it had changed, and hundreds of tendrils were growing out, reaching toward his pathways from his mind.

Panic filled Zac's heart, since between the ghosts that inhabited this mountain and the hundreds of visions he was shown he knew only too well the fate that awaited those who were corrupted by the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

He desperately erected as many defenses as he possibly could with **[Indomitable]** but the black tendrils effortlessly crushed them, and Zac groaned since every defeat felt like his soul was ripped in two. But suddenly a shocking change appeared in his mind.

Archaic fractals wrought out of pure miasma appeared, forming a defense that was infinitely stronger than the one he erected himself. He was completely befuddled for a second, but his mind quickly turned to the mysterious woman in the vision.

Judging from her appearance she should be a Draugr just like him, which might be why she helped him. She also seemed to

understand what was going on far better than himself, and it felt like he only kept finding more and more questions as he trudged along.

It seemed he needed to look into the heritage of his current form as soon as possible, and how he could even become a Draugr at all. His cosmos sack back home was filled by notes from Mhal, and Zac felt that it would be a good place to start looking.

But now was no time for that. The mysterious miasmic fractals had stopped the advance of the black tendrils, at least for the time being. The runes had even created something like a separate dimension that contained the splinter away from his mind and his pathways. But they hadn't stopped the unceasing onslaught of the ghosts. Zac forced himself up to his feet and heedlessly pushed toward the tunnels.

He already used [**Verun's Bite**] to destroy the specters in front, but the wounds were just accumulating too quickly. His vision started to get blurry as he stumbled and almost ran straight into one of the pillars.

A new presence suddenly entered his mind, and his bleary eyes couldn't help but turn toward his axe. It was his tool spirit that had finally awakened from its slumber. Apart from the initial communication after the evolution, it had been in hibernation the whole time.

The only time it showed any reaction had been when he killed E-Grade beasts, at which point some of its blood got absorbed into the crimson fractal on the handle. When he first upgraded the axe it had been a shimmering crimson, but the color had soon dimmed to a weak and watered down red shade.

However, with every kill the intensity of the colors had increased, like killing E-grade beasts were charging up the fractal. By the time he reached this cavern it was already shimmering in a crimson red once again. Zac didn't know how to communicate back, so he simply spoke aloud hoping that the beast could hear him.

"I need help, buddy," Zac said with a raspy voice.

Warmth filled his heart as a roar responded in his mind, and the next moment the huge beast materialized. Another roar echoed through the cavern, and Zac suddenly got a huge surge of energy as Verun ripped dozens of ghosts to shreds with a swipe of its claws.

Pained and even scared wails echoed through the cave as the Tool Spirit almost became unhinged in his goal to destroy everything around Zac. Pillars shattered and were broken from its rampage, and Zac quickly snatched those that he could as he resumed his flight toward the tunnel.

Even though Verun had lessened his burden by a large degree he still was extremely wounded, and the Tool Spirit couldn't block all of the thousands of ghosts. Many still managed to pass it and attacked Zac with suicidal fervor.

Zac popped his strongest healing pills as he fled, and he barely managed to reach the edge of the cavern when suddenly a terrifying sense of danger blared to life in his mind. Zac unhesitatingly hunkered down behind his bulwark as he pushed as much energy as he could into **[Indomitable]**.

The next moment an extremely piercing wail echoed through the cave, drowning out all the calls of the smaller specters. Even with his newly acquired defenses it felt like Zac was hit in the head with the sledgehammer, and he couldn't stop himself from blanking out.

Luckily the wail had also stopped the ghosts in their tracks, and they all ignored him to instead turn toward a huge figure that had appeared sometime in the cavern. A roar echoed straight back, and Verun unhesitatingly pounced on the new threat.

The indistinct figure only pointed at the tool spirit, and the next moment a deluge of darkness flooded out toward it, drowning the spectral form of the primordial beast. Zac's eyes opened in alarm, but he soon breathed out in relief as he saw a stream of light break out and enter his axe once again.

The tool spirit had been forced to flee, and Zac truly felt it was the best course of action as he started running the last few meters toward the cavern. But his surroundings were suddenly

blanketed in darkness, and the next moment the form blocked the exit in front of him.

Despair filled Zac's heart since he already knew this thing was the leader of the ghosts, the very source of the wails that had shocked his mind the first time the darkness descended. He also sensed that this being was far beyond his power, being peak E grade at the minimum.

He knew that there was no way to beat this thing, but he refused to give up without a fight. So he readied himself for his final battle with a grim demeanor, but that specter suddenly started to shrink and transform. In just a second the faceless shape of the huge specter had changed, and in front of him stood a man in a black cultivator's robe.

He was mostly humanoid, apart from the same type of third eye as Anzonil. He had a handsome face and he gave off a heroic disposition. But his eyes betrayed desolation, and Zac felt like he looked at someone who had lost all hope.

Zac knew that the man in front of him wasn't alive, at least not in the same sense as himself. Even if the thing in front of him had taken a humanoid form it was still mostly translucent. It was mostly wrought from the energy from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, but it seemed to be clashing with some force within that shone with a silver luster.

"You... Fool...." the spectral cultivator stiltedly said with a sigh after throwing a glance at the empty center of the cavern. "Tell.... Master.... Sorry...."

Chapter 248: Cursed Success

Zac could only gape, and he mutely nodded his head in agreement. He hadn't expected the ghost to speak with him, but it was a far preferable alternative to battle.

"Go..." ghost responded before it turned away from Zac and disappeared.

Zac thanked his lucky stars that the ghost seemed to have regained his sanity, if only temporarily, and he started to run toward the tunnel. A jumbled chorus of screeches behind him forced some extra strength in his legs as he leaped the last few meters.

He sensed a decrease of Darkness in the atmosphere, proving that he once again had passed an array protecting the mouth of a tunnel. He quickly turned around to survey the cavern, and he exhaled in relief when he saw that the ghosts whirled around in confusion. They clearly couldn't see where Zac had gone and frantically flew around in the cave in search of their target.

However, the larger ones seemed slightly more intelligent as they rammed their bodies at the cave opening, making Zac take a few steps back. But the ghosts simply bounced off the unseen shield and roared in rage when they couldn't get through it.

A few of them even tried to rip the air to shreds, and even though Zac was extremely tired and wounded he felt he couldn't stay here. He wasn't sure if they were just unwilling to give up or whether they could sense the splinter lodged in his mind, but creating some distance from this place was probably for the best. He had no idea just how strong those arrays at the opening were, and it was a bad idea to risk it.

He kept walking for a few minutes, and as the rush from the battle waned it was replaced with extreme tiredness. His mind

felt like it would explode at any moment. Between those tendrils breaking his mental defenses and the extreme consumption of mental energy his mind was exhausted to the point that his soul might be wounded.

His body wasn't in much better shape, and he was completely covered in wounds all over. It was a good reminder that he still wasn't invulnerable just from his high attributes. A sturdy frame wasn't enough to completely block out the damage from the stronger ghosts who were approaching, or even reaching, the E-Grade in power.

Suddenly the dark caves gave way to light, and Zac stumbled out of the tunnels with some effort. He had walked the last bit on pure will power, but now it was as though the air went out of him. His overtaxed mind barely registered the change in the surroundings as his vision started closing in on him.

There was only a smidgeon of miasma left in his body to barely keep it running, but Zac simply sat down with a grunt and closed his eyes without taking out a Miasma Crystal. It time to let the last of the miasma leave his body and return to his human form.

It was only hours later that he opened his eyes again and finally took a proper look around at his surroundings. It was a hallway that looked very much the same as the one he had arrived at from the ravine earlier. The walls were cut with the same precision, and the hallway was illuminated with the familiar crystals.

It gave such a sense of déjà vu that Zac had to open up his status screen to make sure that he hadn't been stuck in an illusion the past days.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	62
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human

Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	451 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]
Dexterity	232 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Endurance	621 [Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 116%]
Vitality	301 [Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 116%]
Intelligence	97 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Wisdom	113 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Luck	101 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 116%]
Free Points	3
Nexus Coins	[F] 96 525 943

But the attributes and Dao Seeds remained, proving he wasn't caught in some array. It had even increased since he now once again benefitted from the boost from **[Forester's Constitution]** once again.

Even before he entered the last cavern he had a free point to allocate, but now there were three. That meant that the insane onslaught of the specters at least had provided him with two levels, making his grind end at level 53 this time around. His endurance was starting to look completely monstrous, though he knew that the increase wouldn't be as drastic going forward.

The final 22 levels of the class wouldn't be so easy since he knew just how many kills were behind the 9 levels to 62. And the 13 levels after that would only be worse. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he finally bit the bullet and put two points into Intelligence. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough for the system to round up to 100, so he put the third and last point inside as well, bringing the total to 101.

There was a direct effect from the addition, and he sensed his power was increased throughout his body, even though his attributes remained the same. He quickly looked at the title screen to see that there was a new addition in the mix.

[Omnidextrous: Attain over a hundred points in all attributes during F-Grade Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

It pushed his Efficiency up to 121%, and Zac felt the high tiered titles were really starting to provide a huge hidden bonus. It provided around 120 points worth of extra Endurance, and almost 100 points more in Strength, which could likely take anyone by surprise at this stage. That many points were more than many had in total, and he had that just as a hidden bonus.

He was a bit annoyed at himself for holding off on putting the points up there, but he didn't require the extra attributes down in the caverns. The title also wasn't listed in his little booklet of titles, but he realized that might be because extremely few

should be able to bring their Luck all the way to 100, at least this early in cultivation.

Zac also realized just how lucrative his week down in the caverns had been when he noticed he had gained roughly 50 million Nexus Coins. It might not have been as high gain per hour as the best stretches in his Hatchetman class, but he had also spent most of the time walking the endless tunnels rather than fighting.

Finally, he was hopefully done with everything here apart from picking up the treasure. After that, he would be able to join the final few days of the hunt, and he couldn't imagine the situation up there to be anything but desperate. The new Daos and attributes would likely come in handy.

Five E-Grade powerhouses were running around up on the surface, two from his and three from the other world. There were the two Dominators, the Medhin emperor, the Medhin Crown Prince, and finally the champion of Berum, Beruv Ylvas.

One of the three Medhin Royals in the E-Grade had disappeared from the ladders three days ago, but Zac had no way to know whether he was killed or simply returned to manage the Medhin Empire. But Zac assumed he was killed since the royal was in the top ten of both ladders. Leaving just a few days before he would get both levels and a title would be crazy.

Zac was still leery about meeting any one of the remaining powerhouses after his battle with inevitability. His progress down here had given him a huge boost in survivability, but unfortunately it didn't provide the same boost in attacking power. But that was a later problem and for now he needed to deal with his banged-up body.

Even though Zac had changed form his wounds were still there, and Zac quickly swallowed a healing pill to speed up the recovery before he took out some of the high-grade meat he had brought. He ripped into it like a starving ghost, and he hadn't realized just how much he had missed the taste of food during the past days.

As he ate he turned his sight inward, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the mysterious black crystal still hovering silently inside his mind. Surrounding it was a string of fractals wrought from miasma, and Zac couldn't help but feel a twang of panic upon seeing them.

He hadn't thought about what would happen if he turned back to human, and had instinctually assumed the crystal would stay locked down behind the fractals. But those were made from miasma, and there was no guarantee they would stay in his human form. He had come very close to letting loose those dreadful tendrils by his carelessness.

But luckily no such thing happened. The miasmatic fractals had turned the area with the crystal into a separate space, and it had no bearing on him as far as he could tell. Still, it felt like having a ticking time bomb inside his mind, and as he sat in the corridor he felt extreme regret over his actions.

Both the ghost and the powerful Draugr woman had seemed to think that he had done something spectacularly stupid by taking this sinister thing. And Zac was inclined to agree after being shown all those visions of other beings that had fused with a splinter. There were no happy endings in those visions.

He had been too impulsive, and his greed had made him get stuck with something that might turn out to be far more troubling than the miasmatic wound that plagued him until his core was formed. He needed to quickly find a way to get rid of this thing since he had no idea how long those defensive runes would last.

As Zac looked back on his actions he couldn't believe it was himself who acted so foolhardy. That thing screamed danger, and he knew that it might have been the cause of D-Grade powerhouses falling. To try and take it was beyond foolish, and he would normally take the long way around such an inauspicious object.

His only conclusion was that he had been manipulated somehow. He briefly considered Anzonil, but he did not think he was the source of the manipulation, though the old man should know the crystal was there. He was more inclined that

it was the splinter of oblivion that had corrupted his thoughts in order to get out of that desolate cave.

But there was one good thing that had come from this ordeal. He was suddenly in the first position of the Gatherer Ladder, having passed even the Medhin Emperor. Since he hadn't found anything else of value the past days it could only mean that the parasitic crystal was counted by the System, and it was regarded as extremely valuable.

A thought struck Zac and he got up to his feet with a grunt. Suddenly the whole hallway was filled with mounds of treasures. Zac had poured out everything that seemed to be of high value in his sack but still kept his first position. He had a feeling that even if he lost his whole pouch he would still keep his position.

The East Trigram Sect contained lots of great treasures for newly integrated worlds, but Zac estimated that it was a strong E-Grade Sect, or a weak D-Grade Sect at the best. Anzonil and perhaps a few others were the only D-Grade powerhouses.

Meanwhile, the crystal that had lodged itself in his brain seemed to be a supreme, albeit cursed, treasure that would be considered valuable even on higher-graded worlds. He became extra thankful that he possessed the bangle from Greatest. Otherwise, he might find himself in even bigger trouble from the crystal than from his Specialty Core.

Zac was still far from healed, but he didn't want to wait any longer so he quickly retrieved all the treasure he had thrown out. He looked like he had been dipped in ink from all the ichor, but at least the golden robes were slowly healing themselves.

Zac started to walk down the hallway, and it was with some relief he saw another gate not far off that looked very similar to the last one. This time he didn't equip his shield, but simply pushed open the doors with a grunt.

"Welcome young... uh, human? Were you not a Draugr?" the familiar voice echoed through the majestic chambers.

“I’m leaving for the surface soon, looking like a human is more convenient,” Zac said with a shrug as he walked inside the room, not wanting to get into specifics.

Its architecture was similar to the last one, with the pillars and beautiful sculptures, but it was far smaller than the last one. The Array Spirit had already materialized in the other end of the room, roughly twenty meters away.

“How curious. If I wasn’t a ghost I’d try to get to the bottom of such a mystery,” the old man said as he stroked his long beard.

“Anyway, I am here,” Zac said.

“It is good to see that you passed my final trial. To see such an enticing treasure but have both the intelligence to spot the dangers and the mental fortitudes to walk away,” the old man said with an approving nod. “If we only made the same choices back in the day, so much would be different.”

Zac blankly looked at the old man for a second before he understood what was going on. The array spirit had purposefully led him to that cavern with the intent to test his character. If he was smart enough he’d leave that cursed thing alone and walk straight through the cavern to get here.

“Well yes, it felt like something cursed, I am not strong enough to tangle with such a thing,” Zac said with a straight face, but he could feel his ears heating up from embarrassment.

“If I may ask, those ghosts... Are they your former sect members?” Zac probed, eager to change the subject.

The old man sighed and looked at the exit with deep helplessness and sadness in his eyes.

“Yes, it is true. Will you listen to this old man’s tale?” the Array Spirit said.

Zac was more interested in the treasures, but he also needed to know more about that crystal.

“Please, go ahead,” Zac said.

“The East Trigram Sect was a small sect that could barely be considered a D-Grade force on a low-tier D-Grade world. We only had half-step D-Grade cultivators, but somewhat made up for our lack of power with our insight into arrays,” the old man began.

“I am sorry, half-step?” Zac asked confused.

Chapter 249: Creation and Oblivion

“The trial to reach D-Grade is to successfully form a Cultivator’s Core, also called a Cosmic Core. This is not something that happens naturally. There are various methods to do this, but they all have high requirements, and just a minuscule fraction of all E-Grade warriors manage to take that final step,” Anzonil said with longing.

“If you almost succeed in forming the core but fail at the last step you have two options. You can let the core shatter and try again at a later date, but doing this will leave you seriously wounded. Even worse, every following core-forming attempt will be even harder.

“The second option is to force your failed core to stay together, which stops the core from completely breaking apart. It will maintain a small part of its original function and you will see a slight boost to your longevity. But if you do that you are still not considered as D-Grade by the System, and you will cut off your path of advancement forever,” Anzonil explained.

“I had already failed my evolution two times, and I knew the third try would be my last. Alas, I failed that time as well and took the second option to at least be able to protect my sect a bit longer,” the old man sighed.

“In any case, there were far stronger forces all around us, and we constantly were under the threat to be swallowed whole. Luckily we suddenly saw an opportunity to rise. The son of the Sect Master was the greatest talent our sect had ever seen. He grasped not only our insights into the study of formations, but he was also an extremely adept warrior with deep insight into the Dao.

“I took him as my Terminal Disciple, pooling all my efforts into turning him into a powerful pillar of the sect. We had no doubt that he would become a true D-Grade warrior in the future, and help our small sect rise given enough time. But war came to the continent, and forces like were destroyed or swallowed up one by one.”

“That’s when that man arrived at our sect,” Anzonil continued, for the first time showing smoldering anger in his eyes. “That accursed man. He appeared to be a rogue cultivator and a complete lunatic. He destroyed half our sect and caused so many deaths with his sinister spells.”

Zac nodded and remembered the sword scars that covered some of the structures up on the surface.

“Through our arrays and great sacrifices, we finally managed to kill him. But that wasn’t the end of it. Out of his body two crystals emerged, emitting boundless power. As you understand one of them was the one that I managed to move to the underground cavern, where it has rested since,” the old man continued.

Zac had a pretty good idea what happened to the other one, and Anzonil soon confirmed his guess.

“The other one was taken by Raval, my disciple.”

Zac’s thoughts turned to the spectral cultivator who blocked his path right at the end, who asked him to apologize to his master.

“After seeing the crystal with your own eyes you must think my disciple to be a brash fool. But those were desperate times. The fate of our sect was already hanging in the balance even before the arrival of that man, and we had just lost a large number of our forces and hidden cards to kill him.

“The moment the surrounding sects learned what happened to us they would immediately launch a full assault. It wasn’t greed or personal gain that drove Raval, it was his wish to protect the sect he loved. As expected the surrounding sects soon arrived with their armies, but Raval exploded with never

seen before prowess. He single-handedly pushed all our enemies away, killing dozens of elders and other powerhouses.

“We were all elated, and I even thought of having someone else absorb the other crystal even though it emitted such ominous energies. After that battle, all the surrounding sects stayed away, but Raval started to change over the following years. He got aggressive, moody, and unstable,” Anzonil said with a shake of his head.

“Finally I had to confront him, and that’s when I learned what was truly going on. That’s when he showed me the large square far beneath the surface and the massive tunnel-system he had created. In fact, those tunnels you walked were not made by me, but rather by Raval himself.

“He felt himself getting corrupted by the crystal, and he had no means to remove it. It had completely fused to his very being, and it didn’t even let him kill himself. So he hatched a plan. He created an enormous circle that runs beneath the whole sect and turned that into an array whose purpose was to purify the crystal.

“He circulated the dark energies through this massive array in hopes to slowly grind out the sinister and corruptive elements of the Crystal. After I learned what was going on I spent years working with him to improve the array, and initially we thought we were on the right track. Unfortunately, the power of that cursed object was just too massive,” Anzonil said. “I think you can imagine the rest.”

“I was actually stopped by Raval in the last cavern,” Zac said, making the old man’s brows lift in surprise. “He asked me to relay that he was sorry.”

“Sorry?” the man repeated with sadness in his eyes. “It is I who should be sorry. If I was stronger he wouldn’t be forced to infuse himself with that cursed object to protect our sect.”

The two stood in uncomfortable silence for a bit until Zac finally couldn’t stop himself from trying to gather some more information about the thing in his mind.

“Did you ever learn what that crystal is?” Zac asked.

“Raval called it a piece of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, and after expending a large portion of my wealth I learned a few things,” Anzonil nodded.

A sour feeling entered Zac’s mouth after hearing that the old ghost had actually already spent most of his money, but at this moment the knowledge might be even more important now anyway.

“My research pointed me toward an extremely old scripture that described the source of Dao and the universe itself. Those things are highly debated topics, so I do not hold much faith that the old sage who wrote it got it exactly correct.

“But when it spoke of the creation of the multi-verse it touched upon a subject of interest for my research. It said that in the beginning there was only Chaos, but from Chaos both Creation and Oblivion were born, the two highest Daos apart from Chaos itself.

“These two Daos created the multiverse, and all the lower Daos were birthed from them. I do not know if it is true since those kinds of Supreme Daos are far beyond my understanding or reach. But I managed to confirm that the Dao of Oblivion does exist, and that it is extremely powerful,” Anzonil said with a face conflicted between hate and longing.

“If what the sage said about the tiers of Daos was true, then one could say that Oblivion is the end-point of all destructive Daos. The rumors we found were that **[Heart of Oblivion]** was born from a splinter of that pure original Dao, which makes it impossibly valuable. However, it was somehow corrupted, which created the sinister energies that permeated it.

“Such power is not something that normal people can touch upon, much less control, which makes it a poison that drives men mad. That’s why great warriors sought to destroy the heart all those endless eons ago. But that thing is truly stubborn and survived, though it is now only a shadow of its former self. But just that shadow is enough to destroy all that it touches,” Anzonil sighed.

Zac thoughtfully looked inward at the trapped splinter in his mind, and a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions passed through his mind before he steadied himself. At first, he was elated that he had snatched a treasure that contained a trace of a Supreme Dao, and he couldn't even imagine how valuable something like that was.

But that also showed just how big the trouble he was in. Raval seemed to have been in late E-Grade when he absorbed the splinter, but he went mad within a decade even though he did everything in his power to stop it. He even built an array that was as large as a country to stem the corruption, but even that only slowed down the process slightly.

If the miasma fractals in his mind broke, how long would he have until he became yet another wailing ghost himself? He would have to put his mind into figuring this out as quickly as possible, but after asking a bit more there was not much else the Array Spirit knew. It was only a shadow of its former self after all, and both its memories and knowledge were limited.

It also begged the question of just who that woman in the ocean of miasma was. Just how powerful must she be if she was able to seal such a monstrous item? And she also mentioned that she didn't recognize his lineage, and he had no idea if that was a good or a bad thing. And just why did she help him? If there was something he knew it was that one couldn't count on benevolence of others. That was how you ended up robbed and dead.

"By the way, you called my race royal, earlier. Could you explain that further?" Zac asked, trying to glean some more intelligence from the old Array Spirit.

"You don't know?" Anzonil said with surprise.

"I have no connection with the Undead Empire, so my knowledge of my heritage is extremely lacking," Zac explained.

Honestly, he hadn't even given the subject any thought before. Whether it said Draugr or Undead in his status screen didn't really make any difference for him, but after the vision and Anzonil's comment he felt that he needed to know more.

“Well, I do only retain a fraction of my memories in this form, so I do not remember all the details. But simply put you are a purebred undead, uniquely suited for miasmatic cultivation,” the old man explained.

“Almost all undead are turned species. For example, humans who have died and been infused with miasma. They are not pure undead since their original bodies were not meant for that sort of cultivation. Even their progeny who are born undead are afflicted with the same problem,” Anzonil continued.

“Sorry, progeny? The undead can have children?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“Of course, but not until they reach late E-grade and have awakened their bodies,” Anzonil nodded as matter of course, giving Zac another surprise.

During the past two weeks he had ample time to scour through his body, and he almost retained none of his bodily functions. His heart didn't beat, and the black ichor in his veins was simply sitting there.

He did breathe, but he wasn't sure if he was just going through the motions or if his body actually picked up oxygen somehow. But he did consume a small continuous amount of miasma to simply function which was different from how it was being in his human form.

“In any case, this mismatch with miasma slows down cultivation and makes it far harder to break through the bottlenecks. In return, the undead has generally higher attributes and they live longer before they turn insane. So if an undead manages to break through its shackles it will likely be stronger than a human on average,” Anzonil explained.

“Then what about Draugr?” Zac probed.

“The Draugr is one of the five purebred undead races,” Anzonil said. “Even though they look mostly human they are not. They have no living counterparts, the same as the other four pure races. Their origin is unknown, just like the true origin of the undead in general.”

“And this makes cultivation easier for us?” Zac asked.

“As far as I’ve understood it. The five races have a natural connection with Miasma that other undead do not have, and their bloodlines are almost considered holy. If you walked into the capital of some planet in the Undead Empire many of the young lasses wouldn’t hesitate to procreate with you,” the old man added with a perverted grin.

Zac coughed in surprise since that change in demeanor from the old man was quite a shift from the image of kindly sage that he had mostly shown so far. Anzonil seemed to understand what Zac was thinking, and quickly continued with a cough.

“But I wouldn’t recommend it. From what I’ve heard the elders of the five races aren’t big fans of their genes being wantonly spread throughout the Empire. They rely on their superior lineages to that they can maintain their power. They have built up great advantages and heritages over millions of years with the help of their natural endowments, and don’t want it spread into the public,” he added.

Zac was generally happy to learn that he had actually dodged the problem of handling miasma, something he didn’t even know existed. But it only made him more confused. These five races seemed like pretty lofty existences, they wouldn’t likely deign to invade some newly integrated planet.

And why did he become a Draugr because he was stabbed by the Corpse Lord? He was pretty sure that man wasn’t a Draugr. Mhal looked completely different from both himself and the woman in the vision, and he rather felt like something that was the result of Necromancy.

It almost felt like his confusion only increased the more answers he got.

Chapter 250: Rewards

Even though the situation was pretty confusing to Zac he was at least right in front of someone who could help him get a better picture of what was going on.

“Do all of us Draugr look the same? Or can we have red shining eyes as well?” Zac asked just to make sure that Mhal wasn't a Draugr as well.

“I am not sure, but from what I understand your eyes are unique, and not something other undead possesses. Red shining eyes? The Eternal Clan, another of the five races, might sometimes have red eyes from what I understand. It is part of their blood arts,” Anzonil answered after mulling it over.

“Vampires,” Zac mouthed with surprise, and he quickly asked a few follow-up questions about The Eternal Clan.

From the old man's explanation, it really looked like they were vampires. Were the old stories from earth all true? Would he encounter dragons and werewolves as well in the future? But Zac also knew that the red eyes might just be a coincidence. The Corpse Lord neither felt like a vampire nor used any blood arts, so he was likely of some other origin.

Zac kept asking about the Undead Empire and the Draugr, but it was clear that the Array Spirit wasn't as knowledgeable about the subject as with the Darkness. He didn't even know what the other three races of purebred undead were, though he did remember one of them was of the ghost-type.

He also had no idea what different lineages could mean when Zac asked about that in a slightly roundabout way. Anzonil said that there were many old Clans among the Draugr who were considered nobility. One ancient family, in particular, was seen as the de-facto leader of the race. But most of the

Draugr were simply normal cultivators, though still elites of the undead empire.

That the woman in the vision didn't recognize his lineage might simply mean that his form wasn't related to any of the major clans. But perhaps there was more to it that Anzonil simply didn't remember or knew. The old man was an array master after all, not an expert on undead genealogy.

Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't something so simple as him not being of noble birth. The Draugr woman had seemed surprised to not recognize him, which might mean that the secret was larger than that. In the end it came back to the notebook of Mhal. He still couldn't read the undead script, but he would make learning it a priority when he came back.

For now, he had no clues of how to deal with the thing in his head, but the Path of Oblivion the Draugr woman mentioned was the first clue, and perhaps he could find more if he looked into the Draugr. Another potential source of information would be Thea's Library.

It was a gift from the System just like his shipyard and repository, which meant that it was a possibility that it contained knowledge that was out of reach from even a Half-Step D-Grade cultivator. He already knew that Brazla's creator was at least a top tier D-Grade hegemon with many powerful allies.

He also knew that the Creators was a supreme race of golems that was almost as old as the System itself. Unfortunately, it was impossible to learn things from them since they only were interested in building and selling their ships. But it proved that it wouldn't be a stretch if Thea's library was ripped from some ancient civilization that had access to all kinds of knowledge.

The only issue was how to get access to the library since knowledge was extremely valuable and Henry Marshall was a wily old man. But his rapport with Thea was pretty good, and he thought he had an idea of how to trade for access without really losing anything. So he would need to find her before the trial ended so they could make a deal.

Besides, it would be nice to see her again to make sure she was okay.

“So... Uh... You mentioned some treasures earlier?” Zac finally asked when he felt he had learned all he could from the Array spirit.

“Yes, of course. I apologize, I do not know how long I’ve been sitting here, so I took the opportunity to make some conversation after all these years,” the old man said with a smile.

“I do not know how it works, but I could try bringing you back to my town if you want?” Zac probed.

Zac mainly asked because he felt bad about the fate of the old man and wanted to let him leave these lonely caverns. But having a sapient Array Spirit to control all his arrays would also be a huge boost for Port Atwood.

“Thank you, young man, but this old man’s work is not done. The fact that Raval managed to regain his form and communicate for a bit is proof of that,” Anzonil smiled.

Zac didn’t understand what the old man was getting at until his eyes suddenly widened in understanding.

“You’re still running the cleansing array,” Zac said with surprise.

“Tens of Thousands of years now,” the Array Spirit nodded with a smile.

After thinking it over Zac finally had a decent picture of what was going on. He had initially seen the darkness as some sort of trial by the system, but he now realized that wasn’t the case. It was Anzonil who released the accumulated darkness from the cleansing array into the atmosphere, like opening the valves of a dam. The System simply used that fact and made it part of the trial.

He wasn’t completely sure why the ghosts only appeared at that time, but perhaps opening the seals also meant that the ghosts were able to sneak out from the caverns for a bit to feed on the dense Cosmic Energy at the summits. They then had to return before the openings down to the caverns closed.

Zac was moved by the old man's resolve. To rip out a piece of his soul and infuse it into the array just for the small hope to heal his disciple was a true show of love and dedication. He wondered how many would go so far in for someone that wasn't even family.

But suddenly he had a troubling thought.

"But why is the other crystal inside the purification array? Wouldn't that make things difficult for you?" Zac asked.

He was afraid that he had somehow ruined the array by taking the splinter of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, so he asked to make sure.

"It's truly an impediment to my efforts. Raval and I placed it inside the array to check on the effects of our changes into the cleansing array. But things went south too quickly, and I had no time to move it out when it all fell apart," Anzonil sighed.

"I can't get close to it in this current form, and I think that Raval avoids it. I believe the effect of gathering multiple crystals increase your power even further, but the corruption also grows worse. The fact that Raval hasn't touched it in all these years is proof that part of his rationality remains," Anzonil said with a smile.

Zac started to get a sour feeling after hearing the old man's explanation. What would happen if he left without telling the old man what truly transpired in that cave? Anzonil would probably find out soon enough that something had changed in his array, and would perhaps assume that his disciple had consumed the second splinter.

"I guess I should come clean," Zac said with a sigh and spilled the beans, only skipping over the part with the Draugr woman.

"I was wondering if you would tell me," Anzonil said with a sad smile, and the next moment a pillar with a Cosmos Sack rose from the ground next to them. "This old man might just be an Array Spirit now, but I can still sense the changes of energies inside my array. You taking that cursed object wouldn't escape my senses."

Zac could only wryly smile in embarrassment. It seemed that the old man had been testing him once again.

“But you seem in far better shape than my Disciple ever did, so I didn’t stress the subject. Respecting other cultivators’ secrets is important,” Anzonil added.

“I have a few special means. I didn’t absorb it like your Disciple. The thing is currently locked away in a separate space,” Zac only said, and it was the truth as far as he could tell. “I have no confidence in meddling with such an object with my current power.”

“So you came prepared, that is good to hear. But if you would listen to this old man’s advice then I urge you to discard any thought of actually using that thing. That object might be able to bring you endless power, but also endless suffering. A moment of carelessness will lead to ruin,” Anzonil said with a serious face.

“Thank you. I will not do anything with that thing unless I have full confidence in succeeding. If I ever find a method to control it and help you two in the future I will do my best to find this place again,” Zac promised.

Anzonil nodded with a kindly smile before he indicated for Zac to take the Cosmic Sack. Zac looked over at it and knew that it was the promised inheritance. He couldn’t help but feel it was a bit anticlimactic when he walked over to pick up the small sack.

“You expected piles of crystals and treasures?” the old man laughed when he saw Zac’s blank face.

Zac scratched his cheek in embarrassment. The old man hit bullseye, and Zac had kept throwing glances around the room to find any place that could lead to a treasure trove. He had pictured the inheritance to look somewhat like a dragon’s hoard.

But he had to admit that made no sense when there were Cosmos Sacks around, though the imagery wasn’t quite as strong this way. He went over to take it after an encouraging nod from the old man, and the moment his finger touched the

sack it disintegrated into motes of light that entered his Cosmos Sack.

“What a marvelous sack, I’ve never seen anything like it,” the old man muttered with interest. “The creator must have had extremely deep insight into the Dao of Space to merge separate spatial spaces like that.”

“We got it from the system at the start of the hunt. Unfortunately, I do not think we will get to keep it,” Zac explained with a smile as he checked the contents of his sack.

He didn’t have high hopes since the old man already said that he spent most of his wealth trying to find means to help his disciple, but he still was positively surprised by the things that were added. There was a large stacks of E-Grade Nexus Crystals and even a few that shone with even denser energy. There was also an assortment of crystals of various elements, likely meant as energy sources for arrays.

Apart from that there were a handful of intricate boxes, and Zac knew they were meant to house Spiritual Herbs or Fruits. Between the compounding effects of staying inside a Cosmos Sack and the protective arrays of these boxes, the contents inside would stay fresh almost indefinitely. So even if they had stayed here for thousands of years most of the efficacy of the things inside should remain.

Finally, there were ten information crystals that looked like the one that he found the first day. They were conveniently placed in a stand, and Zac quickly glanced that 8 of them contained information about arrays.

One of them was a copy of the one he owned, but the other seven broached other subjects in the study of arrays. Zac knew just how much information that first crystal contained, and with seven more of them he essentially had a full heritage to nurture powerful array masters.

The final two crystals were on another subject, inscriptions. This was knowledge that was extremely valuable to Port Atwood since inscriptions were a part of almost all craftsman classes. Not just Array Masters could benefit from these two

crystals, but everything from blacksmiths to alchemists would as well.

“I would suggest not trying to use the D-Grade crystals while still in F-Grade. It might burn your pathways clean,” the old man said. “Then again I guess you rather use Miasma crystals anyway?”

“It is still a great treasure, and I can always trade it,” Zac said, not explaining his situation.

He felt the old man was trustworthy, but he wouldn't divulge his situation to anyone apart from his closest circle. You never knew how it might return to bite you in the ass. The fact that Thea knew about it couldn't be helped since he had turned in front of her due to his wounds.

“That's true. The ten information crystals contain the crystallized knowledge in the art of formations that our Eastern Trigram Sect accumulated over the millennia. I hope that you find a way to learn or give those out to someone worthy so that our knowledge lives on,” Anzonil said.

“I will make sure that this knowledge is not lost,” Zac promised.

He wasn't completely sure whether if he would have time to learn about arrays himself since there were so many things on his plate already. But he was interested in finding a side-profession when things were less hectic, and Arrays was a good option that could help him broaden his skillset.

His current fighting styles were pretty simple and straight forward in both his classes, but adding some arrays into the mix might both catch people unaware and make him more flexible. Some knowledge in arrays was also extremely beneficial while adventuring since he could turn any place into a fortress with the help of some defensive and slaughter arrays.

“Best of luck young Draugr,” Anzonil said as he pointed at Zac. “I hope we will see each other again.”

The next moment Zac was pushed backward like last time, and the next moment he found himself standing on a secluded cliff overlooking the mountains of the Eastern Trigram Sect.

He was finally back on the surface.

Chapter 251: Family Drama

Three men were kneeling on the ground of the large luxurious tent. They were shaking in fright, but not one of them dared to either move or speak up to break the suffocating silence.

“So none of you have found that man after three long days?” the middle-aged man on the throne said with a voice devoid of emotion as he stared down at his subjects.

He had a short beard that was perfectly trimmed, and his black hair was held back in a knot by a jade diadem that was covered in dense fractals. In fact, a casual glance would be enough to spot over ten treasures that would cause a storm of bloodshed if they were placed on the streets of Medhin. But of course no one would even dare dream of taking them from this man.

He was decked in a golden robe with large red fractals. Everything about him screamed of opulence, but no one would ever think the man was anything but a warrior. Part because of the large spear that was never further from him than arm’s reach, but mostly due to the suffocating power that naturally radiated from him.

Emperor Nenotheop was nothing like some of the extended family, wastrels who lived a life of luxury while barely contributing to the Grand Undertaking. The core of the family was a ruthless competition of resources and advantages, or at least it had been until the Grand Undertaking was finally coming to fruition.

Nenotheop had killed at eight of his siblings and cousins in his quest for the throne and imprisoned another 14. He was ruthless to others but more so toward himself. He pushed his forces hard, but he had been balancing on the edge of life and death since he was a child, all in order to push himself further on the path of cultivation.

Now that the world was finally flooded with both Cosmic Energy and fortuitous encounters he had exploded in power and had ransacked the whole empire for any benefit that could be seized.

“Three days. Hundreds of men,” Nenotheop continued with his even voice as he looked down on his three generals. “Yet the killer of my son eludes you. Do I need to make changes to my ranks?”

The three started shaking even worse since there was no such thing as a demotion, only decapitation, and substitution.

“Witness accounts clearly indicated that Repubat managed to grievously injure Beruv Ylvas before he fell, and we saw the direction he fled. Yet he is allowed to recuperate in peace, making us look like fools,” Nenotheop continued, his massive aura causing the throne beneath him to creak from the pressure.

“Lord Emperor, please give us a bit more time,” the man in the middle pleaded without daring to raise his head. “We have found some clues and are pursuing them to the fullest. However, our resources were partly diverted to find this Zachary Atwood.”

Nenotheop grunted in displeasure, but he had to admit that he was the one that gave that order just half a day ago. That otherworlder had been his greatest adversary for the treasures of this dead world, and he had once again been overtaken.

He had been shocked to find that this Zachary Atwood, or Super Brother-Man as the ladder called him, was a lone wolf without a support system. He himself had scoured summit after summit, but he also had thousands of soldiers to pick the mountains clean for him.

Yet this man had been stiff competition relying only on himself, and perhaps a handful of helpers. The only answer he could find was that Zachary Atwood possessed a supreme skillset for sniffing out grand treasures, likely combined with a very high Luck-attribute.

Less than four days remained of the hunt, and he couldn't solely rely on himself and his soldiers to accumulate more treasures. Even if he passed Zachary Atwood again he could lose his position at moment's notice. He needed to kill that man as well, even more than finding Repubat's killer.

"Perhaps I can help in that regard," a golden robed man said as he entered the tent, dragging a shackled woman with him.

Emperor Nenotheop looked over at the person who entered his tent with mixed emotions. It was his fifth son, Vasidas Medhin. On one hand he felt pride that he had birthed such a genius, and the man was such a clear successor that he didn't have to worry about the future of his lineage. If the integration hadn't happened he would be a great source of joy.

But now there was also worry, and to certain extent jealousy, in his heart as he gazed at his successor. When The Great Redeemer arrived to their planet the Medhin family would be rewarded from their millennia of efforts and then relocated to their new home.

But there was also a chance to be taken as a disciple by the Great Lord himself, and that had been the goal of Nenotheop since the moment he learned his planet was finally being integrated. But his son was simply too stellar and was quickly inching in on him even though he had five decades of a headstart on the road of cultivation.

That in of itself was a problem. Nenotheop was already closing in on 80 years old even though he barely looked to be forty, whereas his son was only 28. While Nenotheop would still be considered a child of the younger generation in the multiverse it was undeniable it was better to take in as young disciples as possible.

Would The Great Redeemer even look his way when there was another with at least the same proficiency but far younger? Some killing intent was hidden in his heart, but he still hadn't decided on his course of action.

It wasn't due to familial ties, but rather due to caution. Vasidas was no fool, but rather the opposite. He was definitely ready for a strike, and he was likely even planning an attack of his

own. So they smiled and lived in harmony as they danced their dance of death.

This is why Nenotheop was a bit suspicious about the motives of the young man, and his eyes turned toward the young woman who glared back at him with her piercing blue eyes.

“I still haven’t found the man who killed second brother, but I might have found a way to get to Zachary Atwood,” Vasidas said. “This is Thea Marshall, an offworlder who was seen traveling with Zachary Atwood for the first two weeks. Perhaps she would be useful in luring him out.”

Nenotheop’s heartbeat couldn’t help speed up when he understood the opportunity that was in front of him. Zachary Atwood had been simply impossible to locate during the past weeks, but he obviously kept getting treasure after treasure while also killing thousands of cultivators and beasts.

But he hesitated as he looked at the captive. Gaining the first position on the Gatherer ladder would be a great win for Nenotheop, but he held no delusions his son would help out of the goodness of his heart.

Just what was Vasidas planning this time?

Zac stretched a bit as he got up to his feet. Since both his body and mind were still hurt from the cavern earlier he opted to rest for a few hours once he had returned to the surface. As he waited for his body to heal his mind couldn’t help but going toward the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind.

It was still stuck in the separate space along with the miasmic fractals, though that didn’t do much for lowering his stress. Even after asking Anzonil there were many unanswered questions, but he was forced to put them aside for now. The space seemed completely steady, and it was even to the point that he was barely able to see what was going on inside.

But he had other pressing concerns. He needed to figure out what to do for the last days. He was already top-dog on the gatherer ladder, and the top Title was as good as his as long as

he didn't get himself killed. But he still was far off his original goal for the hunter ladder.

He had only gained one more position during the past days, putting him in the 5th position. He had passed one of the E-Grade powerhouses from his final clash with the ghosts, but he was unsure how long he would be able to maintain that lead.

The two names in the lead were Inevitability and Harbinger, which wasn't too surprising. The third was Nenotheop Medhin, and the fourth spot was Vasidas Medhin. The Medhin royal who had disappeared and helped Zac gain a spot was Repubat Medhin.

Zac honestly had no confidence in being able to pass the two Dominators after having fought one of them, and outright killing them was out of the question. However, his eyes couldn't help but toward the two Medhin royals.

Almost a month had passed since he saw the other world's ladder, but at that time Nenotheop Medhin was level 89, whereas Vasidas was at level 78. He couldn't be completely sure, but he had some confidence in killing Vasidas, or at least surviving if he failed.

But at the same time he wasn't sure if it was worth it. It didn't matter if he improved his position to 4th spot on the Hunter ladder since the 4th to 10th positions gave the same rewards, 3 levels and 50 million nexus Coins.

He needed to either defeat pass not only the crown prince but also the emperor himself to get the 3rd reward spot and instead gain 5 levels. But he wasn't as confident against Emperor Nenotheop. He couldn't be considered recently evolved, and that wasn't the only danger with those royals.

The real problem came with the War Arrays they seemed to possess. He could only imagine that the force that the emperor himself surrounded himself with would far surpass that of Tyrbat who he killed with Thea earlier.

There was also the issue of his token. Unfortunately, there was no function where it automatically returned after a while, so he still had no option to retreat if needed. So if he decided to

assault the Medhin Royals his venues of retreat would be limited.

So assaulting the royals was a high-risk gambit with limited rewards. Certainly, they both possessed huge amounts of wealth. The Emperor had even more treasure than himself if he discounted the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. But what he had gained thus far already far surpassed what he had dreamed of, and he didn't want to get greedy.

He also didn't know if Inevitability was still after his head, so any large-scale activities might get the attention of the people he least wanted to meet.

In any case, he needed more information. He was pretty sure something had changed up here during his time in the tunnels, judging by the number of points others had gathered. Perhaps there would be some way for him to move up the ladder without having to duke it out with the Medhin Emperor.

The mountain he was dropped off on was one of the decorative mountains with engravings and a large pillar at the summit. However, now he had a feeling that these things were actually disguised components of the massive array running beneath the mountains.

Since there was nothing of interest on the mountain Zac started to make his way down the mountain. He kept his eyes peeled for any signs of cultivators or fighting as he descended, but the area seemed pretty quiet at the moment.

He had quickly noted that the stage had shrunk even further during his time below, and he was a bit too close to the edge for comfort. He hastened his steps as he rounded the mountain so that he'd descend in the direction of what seemed to be the core of the remaining hunting grounds.

But at least it didn't seem that the System would force everyone into a desperate melee at the end of the hunt. The area was still plenty large, and Zac didn't think he would be able to reach the other side even if he tried. Reaching the core shouldn't be a problem though if he skipped ascending the summits.

As he descended toward the valleys between the mountains he quickly realized his assumption from before was correct. The System must have unleashed hordes of beasts into the trial since the foot of the mountain was practically teeming with animals.

There had already been a lot of them at the start of the hunt, but now it was bedlam as packs of animals were fighting no matter where he turned his eyes. The forests were filled with a deafening cacophony of calls, to the point that Zac could barely hear him think.

A new way for him to not only gain a bunch of points but also work on his levels quickly made itself apparent. Why should he risk his life to fight some E-Grade monsters when millions of beasts were waiting to be turned into Nexus Coins and experience?

The hunting grounds had truly become a paradise to grind levels and points.

Chapter 252: Hunter's Paradise

Zac wasn't annoyed by the ruckus in the forest. If the whole hunting ground was like this it would drown out the sounds of battle, which would allow Zac to act more freely without the risk of drawing the attention from the Dominators.

Zac took out his axe and for the first time in a while summoned the oversized edge of [**Chop**]. As he suspected the edge had changed slightly to accommodate the new form of his axe. After testing the sharpness with his finger and on a few rocks he was happy to see that the edge was far sharper compared to before.

His skill had no problem adapting to the increased quality of the axe, making him wonder if there was any limit to how strong [**Chop**] could become. The skill wasn't upgradeable unlike most of his other ones, and he had worried about what he would do about it. But perhaps there was no need to worry. He only needed to upgrade his axe and the skill would follow suit.

He did however notice that the energy consumption had drastically increased to accommodate the increased power of the fractal edge. Luckily his energy reserves had gained a huge boost lately, allowing him to use the skill even in prolonged battles.

Zac was eager to both gain points and to properly test the might of his new axe and he wasted no time to unleash a storm of violence at the wildlife in the valleys. He flashed back and forth between the packs with [**Loamwalker**], and his fractal edges were half-moons of death as they effortlessly bisected animals by the dozen with every swing.

There was no contest, his speed of killing was far superior in his human form, and both points and Nexus Coins kept streaming in. Unfortunately, the monsters weren't very strong here and he was hit with the same reduction in rewarded energy as he got when killing Barghest nowadays.

But he wouldn't stop just because of that, and as he kept killing his way toward the next mountain he also started performing various tests with his new Daos. He found that the improved [**Chop**] was almost as lethal as when he imbued the edge with the Dao of Sharpness before his axe upgraded, and when he imbued the upgraded edge it emitted a terrifying aura, like it would almost cut space itself.

He also found that he could imbue his edge with the Dao of Hardness without a problem, though the effect seemed quite limited. Perhaps it would be good when hitting things that would harm his axe otherwise. The Dao of Sanctuary couldn't be infused though, but Zac wasn't surprised by that.

He also summoned [**Nature's Barrier**] and he was happy to see that he finally found a use for his new Dao. The skill had a pretty surprising change when it was infused with the Dao of Sanctuary. Zac had always been able to change the size of the area the swirling leaves protected to a certain degree, but after he infused it he could almost extend the area by almost ten times compared to before.

Even better, as the size increased the number of leaves increased as well, so the actual strength of the barrier didn't decrease with the increased area protected. However, such a large sphere of protection consumed a huge amount of cosmic energy, so Zac quickly removed his Dao before he was drained.

He would only be able to keep that shield going for a minute tops before completely running out of energy. But that was more than enough if he needed to protect a large group from some incoming threat until it could be neutralized.

The Dao of Hardness worked as well, and it turned the leaves slightly wooden from their earlier glistening emerald. The defensive properties were clearly improved though, but he felt

it wasn't quite up to the level of the Dao of Trees. But the skill itself had also been given a huge upgrade with the help of his massive Endurance, and he felt that he wouldn't be completely helpless against Inevitability's chains any longer.

All in all, he had a good all-round upgrade in the cavern, where even his offensive power had taken a good leap thanks to upgrading [**Verun's Bite**], so Zac had some newfound confidence as he kept moving through the sea of beasts toward the next mountain.

He wasn't as interested in looting the summits any longer and was more interested in finding stronger beasts to fight. But even more importantly he wanted to find one of the five thousand remaining hunters so that he could get an update on what was going on.

The first mountain seemed completely deserted, and he found that the buildings close to the foot had all been looted. Since time was limited he opted to keep going toward the next one, but when he did he suddenly noticed a startling change.

It seemed that the System had somehow arranged things so that the beasts were getting stronger and provided more points when he proceeded toward the core of the hunt. Zac looked toward the core area with a frown, unsure of what to do. The density of the beasts around him was just crazy, but where he was they were pretty weak and provided very little Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy.

He already had accepted that he wouldn't be able to get to level 75 through the hunt rewards, but he would at least be able to gain at least another level if he moved further toward the core and fought the stronger beasts instead.

He was also more likely to find stronger cultivators further in, which might help him accomplish a task that he had almost forgotten. He needed more alliances back on earth. Partly for Calrin to expand their business, but also to move across the world to close the incursions.

He didn't know how long the inheritances would take, but according to Ogras they usually took just a few hours tops. That meant that he would be out closing incursions in less than

a week. There would be a need for infrastructure to be quickly put in place so that he wasted no time traveling between the incursions.

In the end, Zac chose to move further toward the core of the remaining area, creating huge swathes of deaths wherever he went. But the gaps were quickly filled with more beasts swarming to feast on the corpses.

He passed three mountains by as he headed further toward the core, doing a quick inspection for signs of any hunters. But it seemed the outer rim was pretty abandoned, and all the signs of activity were pretty old. But as he approached the fourth mountain he found a clue.

He noticed the grass on a large field to be glistening with blood thanks to the position of the sun, and even the ground was wet. However, there was not a single corpse to be found, meaning the battleground had been cleaned to hide the activity. This strongly indicated some cultivators had been grinding points and levels here recently and then tried to hide it.

Zac quickly scoured the area for any clues, but there was not much to go by. Finally, he chose to stalk the foot of the mountain, hoping to find the person's hideout. He caught a lucky break after twenty minutes as he noticed a man stealthily moving toward a building in the distance. Zac didn't approach though, instead opting to check it out from the distance.

The interiors were completely shrouded in darkness, but Zac already knew his target was inside unless there were hidden exits. However, he was hesitating whether he should enter or just shout from outside. If he entered he would need to break through the array protecting the building, which might give the person inside time to flee or crush his token.

But shouting from the outside would warn the occupant, and with Zac's ladder positions he would be a fool not to flee. In the end, Zac opted for the brute force tactic, and with a flash he slammed right into the array at the entrance with his movement skill.

He was surprised to find himself completely immobilized the moment he passed through the entrance. It was a restriction array, and he hadn't expected such a strong one to be placed down here so close to the foot of the mountain. Zac belatedly realized this was likely the reason this hunter chose this place as a hideout.

A sudden sense of danger in his mind was all the warning Zac got before a sword swung with the intent to pierce his throat with immense speed. However, while Zac was unable to move he could still rouse his Dao Seeds, and between 642 Endurance and the Dao of Hardness the stab barely drew blood.

The next moment Zac broke the array by force and gripped the shocked man by his neck with one hand as he snatched the token with his other. It had been hanging by the man's neck, easily accessible in case he needed to retreat quickly.

"I have some questions," Zac said to the horrified man.

Ten minutes later Zac descended from the mountain once again with a crude map in his hands. It was something John, the man from earlier, had drawn. It detailed the surrounding area of five mountains in each direction, mainly with markers where other cultivators resided and good hiding spots.

With the drastic increase in monsters a shift had taken place on the surface while Zac was stuck down below. There were very few battles now between cultivators, at least in the outer rim. The people here had simply staked out a small area for themselves and used the remaining time to farm the beasts below as hard as they could.

These people had no chance of gaining any rewards from the ladders, but the great density of evenly powered monsters had turned the zone to a leveling paradise. They had already gathered a decent chunk of wealth and felt no need to risk their lives to explore any further.

These people on the outer rim were mainly between levels 35 to 40, and killing beasts here was extremely beneficial as long as they didn't get overrun. And Zac was surprised to note that the levels on earth's power ladder had made a great leap.

Rank	Name	Level
1	Super Brother-Man	62
2	Salvation	58
3	Enigma	55
4	Thwonkin' Billy	54
5	Thea Marshall	54
6	Joker	54
7	Silverfox	53
8	Daoist Chosui	53
9	Guru Anaad Phakiwar	52
10	Thomas Fischer	52
...		
100	Edmund	46

His lead wasn't as immense anymore, with everyone in the top twenty having passed level 50. Even though Salvation had been kicked out of the hunt pretty early he hadn't been idle, and he was now level 58, just five levels behind himself. Thea hadn't had as impressive a performance for some reason, and she was overtaken by not one but two people.

Zac was a bit surprised since he knew just how efficient in hunting beasts she was. With the conditions as they were, Zac would have thought that Thea would not only keep up with Salvation but possibly even pass him on the ladder.

His friend the Abbot had been relegated down to the 37th position, but he was surprised to see a new familiar face at the top ten. It looked like Thomas Fisher must have somehow

made a huge improvement to reach so far so quickly, since he wasn't even on the ladder before the hunt.

To reach the top 100 you needed to be at least level 46 now. He hadn't thought about it before, but he was relieved to see that he wasn't listed twice. That would have raised some questions he did not want to answer.

However, according to John things were likely not as calm closer to the core of the hunt. He had occasionally heard sounds of battle carrying all the way over here, most notably a massive battle taking place three days ago. John figured it was the fight that ended with Repubat Medhin disappearing from the ladder, and Zac was inclined to agree.

There had been another large battle happening just a few hours before Zac arrived as well, though John was unsure who that was between since no one disappeared from the ladder at that time. It had only lasted for less than thirty seconds though, so John thought it was a lopsided one.

But mostly there was a desperate fight for the top hundred in the gatherer ladder since that one would give out titles. Just being able to kill one or two cultivators could increase one's gathered wealth manifold, skyrocketing them up on the ladder. It was risky, but many of those remaining were willing to take that risk.

After Zac had found everything he needed he had crushed the token of John and sent him back to Earth. He didn't feel the need to steal his treasure as well since he was almost dead last in the gatherer ladder. But Zac also wouldn't let him stay here since he had tried to kill him.

There was one danger for everyone though, not just those staying closer to the core. There were roving squads of Medhin warriors that even assaulted the outer rims in search of treasure. The Medhin Emperor was truly insatiable and had ordered his soldiers to gather everything from animal parts to looting weaker cultivators to increase his wealth.

Zac snorted when he thought about the image of the Medhin Emperor seeing himself get pushed down to 2nd spot again, being unable to regain his position. The emperor was likely

even scouring the trial ground for him. But Zac had no intention of meeting that old monster.

He was simply content to hunt the stronger beasts and find cultivators from Earth.

Chapter 253: Rats and Champions

Zac wasn't overly worried about drawing the ire of Nenotheop Medhin. Part of the strength of the Medhin Royals was their armies, and even if the Emperor might be able to keep up with him using [Loamwalker], there was no way that the normal soldiers would.

After learning more about the situation he resumed heading toward the central area. Since he wasn't climbing the mountains to loot the summit palaces this time around he was making time, and in less than half a day he passed almost as many mountains as he visited the first two weeks in the hunt.

He was staying away from the mountains altogether now that he knew the situation, instead opting to run through the middle of the valleys between. The monsters were extremely densely grouped there and he also avoided other cultivators who were more likely to stay closer to the mountains.

Beasts were constantly pouring at him, and he had unceasingly swung his arm back and forth for hours. Zac guessed that he'd already killed more beasts since returning compared to the whole week down in the caves. He wasn't even able to properly stop for dinner and instead kept swinging away while eating dried jerky with his free hand.

His guess had been correct about the strength of the animals. After he'd moved this far inland the average power of the beasts was 10 levels higher compared to the edge he started at. If this trend continued then the innermost part of the hunting ground should be filled with beasts close to the bottleneck, perhaps even with a few E-Grade alphas in the mix.

Zac really wanted to go there, but he also knew that was likely where the E-Grade cultivators were stationed. He wasn't ready

for that sort of confrontation, so instead he started veering toward the mountains looking for people. However, this time he was looking for people to set up alliances with rather than to gather information.

The mountains this far inside were more populated, and he quickly found a couple of cultivators, sometimes even small groups of them who stayed together to more efficiently hunt the valley beasts. Not everyone could be a one-man army who could freely roam the forests below without any worries to his life.

However, finding people that filled all the criteria wasn't quite as easy. They needed to not only be from Earth, but they also needed to be the leader of a town, unaffiliated to the New World Government, and also have a teleportation array. It was only after finding, or rather cornering, ten individuals or groups of people that he found someone who fit the bill.

It was one of the Scandinavians Zac heard about during his first visit to the New World Government, and Jonas was surprisingly enthusiastic about entering the agreement. Zac was pleasantly surprised since he had been prepared to essentially force the alliance upon people.

But it turned out there was an Incursion close by that they had a hard time keeping in check. The invading force kept growing stronger while they couldn't improve as fast. Zac simply told him to open the Teleporter for trusted people and he would come by within a week after returning.

During the next hours he managed to find three more people who fit the bill, though two of them weren't very close to any Incursions. But at least it would increase his options and open up possible locations for new Thayer Consortia branch stores.

When everyone heard that he could provide shops with both better equipment and lower prices than the System-run stores they were extremely enthusiastic. Good gear was still hard to come by since the stores in the system only provided extremely basic stuff and it was extremely hard to gain equipment-gaining quests.

But the next target he found was pretty surprising. It was one of those rat-like things that Salvation had caught and turned into Silver Soldiers. At that time Zac had thought they were something local, but now that he spotted a living one he saw that it possessed ladder positions.

Zac grew extremely curious and hurried over to catch it. The ratman possessed a dexterity-based class, and it desperately tried to dodge Zac's pursuit. It even used its tail to change direction mid-leaps, but in the end it wasn't enough to escape from **[Loamwalker]**. Finally, it took out its token, but Zac was prepared and threw a rock that smashed into its wrist, making it drop it.

Zac flashed over and immediately snatched the token before resuming the pursuit. A minute later he had cornered the ratman against a cliff wall, and when it saw there was no escape it looked at him with fear. It didn't say anything, but instead frantically gestured at Zac, but Zac had no idea what it was trying to convey.

"What are you doing? Can you speak?" Zac asked.

"Oh, you're one of the ones gifted with the language skills," the ratman said with a decidedly feminine voice. "Please don't kill me, your ladder position is so high, I won't make a difference. I have people relying on me back home."

"I won't kill you," Zac said. "But I am curious where home is. I haven't seen your kind before, and as far as I can tell there are only participants from two worlds."

"I am from the world with different species. Ishiate, humans, and Zhix," the ratman quickly said. "And I know who you are. You're the human champion of our world, the Super Brother-Man"

"How do you know that?" Zac asked.

"Because we met the other species in the tutorial. We also got a lot of them spawning with us afterward, but most of them are dead now..." she said. "I know about all the ladders."

Zac frowned as he looked at the fidgeting humanoid in front of him. It looked like the mystery of the missing people could be

explained through this thing. But what did she mean by most being dead?

“Did your kind kill the humans?” Zac said as he let some of his aura leak out.

“No! We have lost most of our people as well! It’s the Incursion! Those crazy golems fill our tunnels and towns with magma, killing us by the millions sometimes,” she quickly said.

“Explain,” Zac said with a frown.

“Our kinds have lived underground before the integration. We’ve done so for thousands of years. This hunt is the first time I see the sky,” she said and quickly explained her origin.

Apparently, they truly were ratmen like Zac had initially expected. But they weren’t always burrowers in their homeworld. A long time ago their sun started heating up, making life on the surface almost impossible. Decade by decade it just got worse, and it was quickly becoming a mass extinction scenario.

First, they started to move their cities into caverns so that the mountains could shield them from the heat, but soon that wasn’t enough. They kept burrowing deeper and deeper into their planet to escape, to the point that they soon were tens of kilometers below the surface. Their bodies changed to accommodate this life, and they soon shed their fur and gained excellent night vision.

The integration was somewhat of a relief for them, because the heat from the sun had kept creeping further and further down through the tunnels, and they could only dig so far before heat started rising from below as well. By the point that the integration took place less than fifty million ratmen remained alive, and they had become a minority in their own cavernous cities.

Chaos had taken hold of the underworld, with the Zhix essentially going to war with the other species. But soon it was all moot due to the Incursion. It contained some sort of rockmen, though not the ones that assaulted Port Atwood it

seemed. They all possess fire-related classes and were comfortable living underground.

For the first months, the rockmen passively defended their territory as they stripped the ground of its resources, turning into pretty lucrative hunting targets. They gave far better rewards than killing the various beasts that lived in the underground cave-systems. Killing and looting a rockman as it returned to deposit what it had mined would yield an enormous profit. No one had been interested in closing the incursion, and they only realized their mistake too late.

The fire-golems hadn't been just mining about, but they had also been secretly digging massive tunnels all the way down to enormous pockets of lava. One day the whole world rumbled as the golems unleashed the lava upon the underground cities, causing massive casualties.

Now all four species were desperately fighting to both close the Incursion, but the lava had somehow empowered the golems, making the battle a losing one. Even now the remaining populations underground were desperately battling the golems so that they wouldn't be able to keep building those tunnels and lead even more lava toward them.

Zac was shocked that such a thing had taken place without anyone on the surface having any idea. He was also surprised to hear that both Joker and Enigma were people from the underground, and were the leaders of the human resistance. They had been consistently at the top of the ladders since the start, but no one had known their identities until now.

But they weren't the only ones on the ladder. It turned out that the subterranean humans and ishiate were heavily overrepresented on the Wealth Ladder. Greed, Little Treasure and Smaug were all people from the underworld as well.

"Why haven't you built any Teleportation Arrays?" Zac couldn't help asking. "It would allow you to flee up to the surface."

"We have, but we've never seen any arrays apart from our own. Now that I have a better picture of the situation I think that either the distance is too long or that something is

blocking us. We are surrounded by pockets of Nexus Crystals and other heavy elements we haven't seen before, perhaps that interferes somehow," she said with a shake of her head.

Zac's eyes widened and he couldn't help but feel some greed. It sounded like the underground was just a treasure trove waiting to be looted. There was also an incursion down there that needed to be closed.

"Hmm... I own a mine on the surface. I will see how far down it reaches, and place a teleportation array as far down as possible. Perhaps I will be able to reach you that way," Zac finally said. "Accept the alliance, and you will see if it works within a week after this is over."

"You're letting me go?" she hesitantly said as she quickly accepted the prompt for the alliance.

"I merely wanted to speak with you from the start, but when people see my ladder positions they try to flee or crush their tokens. So I have to be a bit forceful, but I am only looking for allies right now. The Incursions have killed enough of our people. The situation on the surface isn't much better than underground. But we will strike back as soon as this trial is over," Zac said.

She quickly nodded in agreement.

"I am Justa, I hope I will meet you again," she said as Zac started to walk away.

Zac nodded at her before he resumed his journey. He was pretty surprised there being a fourth race on Earth, but he already knew it was a possibility since Julia told him about the missing people all those months ago. In fact, the situation might be a big opportunity for Port Atwood. If he managed to connect with the underground there was a fortune to be made.

They were clearly loaded with Crystals and precious metals underground, but they were lacking in many other things. If he could destroy the Incursion he could capitalize on the wealth, and also work as the connection between the above-ground and the underworld. He could probably make a fortune in just transportation fees.

He resumed his relentless carnage in the valleys as he moved toward the next mountain, and he soon found himself back in his routine. As he searched for allies he also encountered a few of the roving Medhin squads, but they were either quickly killed or sent back to their homeworld depending on how they acted.

Many of them had tried to quickly send off various skills into the air, and Zac guessed that the Emperor had ordered them to quickly share their location if they found him or other important targets. But every action in that direction was met with a swift and decisive swing of the axe, quickly killing them.

However, the monotony of his grind didn't last forever. Suddenly a shape barreled toward him from the forest crowns when he was in the middle of a valley. It was the first time he'd seen a cultivator this far into the woods, with most staying close to the mountains so that they had a venue of retreat.

Zac frowned the incoming man, but since his danger sense didn't give any signals he held off on attacking. However, he did activate both his physical and mental defensive skills to prepare for anything. He also activated **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and while the information he received was pretty sparse it was enough to identify this stranger.

It seemed that Beruv Ylvas had some business with him.

Chapter 254: Beruv Ylvas

Zac didn't know what to make of the situation since the man who had stopped some distance away from him was one of the E-Grade powerhouses in the hunt, and the leader of the Resistance against the Medhin Empire. But he did not really look like a powerhouse at the moment, but rather a war-torn refugee.

"I mean you no harm," the man said with a cough.

Zac frowned and took a second look at the man in front of him. He seemed to be in his fifties, though he might be older as outward appearances weren't the best indicator of age any longer. He had long brown hair that was slightly greying in his temples, and it was held back in a leather hoop.

It was the same with his short beard that seemed to be the result of one month without shaving rather than some permanent style. He was a handsome man, but Zac was rather interested in the reason for his current state.

There were multiple dried spots of blood on his body, and even his aura was slightly erratic, signaling serious wounds. He was also pale from blood loss, and almost a sickly sheen covered his forehead. Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the result of killing Repubat Medhin a few days ago. Only a few others should be able to harm him like this.

"I am Beruv Ylvas from the planet Berum. I have been searching for you and a few others in hopes of entering an alliance against the Medhin. Judging by your clothes you have no problem killing them," Beruv said with a pointed glance at the golden robes Zac wore.

Zac relaxed slightly since it seemed there would be no battle for now. He remembered that Beruv Ylvas was only level 80, but he should be far stronger than the E-Grade beasts he had encountered so far. Beruv must have done something

spectacular since he was the strongest person from his original planet, just like he was the strongest person on Earth.

It also meant that he likely had a handful of the frontrunner-titles such as himself, making him stronger than just his level. He would prefer to fight someone like this blind. So Zac kept his guard up in case he was planning a sneak attack for the wealth he had accumulated.

“I’m sorry, I understand that you have an irreconcilable enmity, but I do not have much to gain by risking my life against Nenotheop,” Zac warily said without turning off his defenses.

“I understand your position, you are already first on the Gatherer Ladder and you don’t have much to gain by joining me. But I am willing to not only give up all the treasure we collect from the operation, but also half of my own,” Beruv continued.

Zac’s brows rose and he had to admit he was slightly tempted. He had already made away with more treasure than he’d expected, but he was the head of a large force. Setting the foundations for a strong army and skilled craftsmen needed heavy investments, and this would be a huge help. The emperor should also hold the war arrays that he had seen everyone from Medhin use, which he really wanted to get his hands on.

“I have to admit it’s tempting Mr. Berum, but why would you go so far to enlist me? You should know by now that I have not broken through to E-Grade,” Zac said.

”I go by Ylvas. And I know you are not evolved, but I sense that you are far stronger than any other F-grade warrior I’ve met. You’re likely even stronger than the two sons of Nenotheop,” Ylvas said with a serious face. “My senses are telling me I might be in danger just by standing close to you.”

Zac surmised that Ylvas should have accumulated a decent chunk of luck by his comment, and he guessed what he said made sense. However, Ylvas did not say that he was stronger than the emperor, which was telling of how strong that man was.

“Still, giving up that much wealth will set you back quite a bit. Why not simply take your treasure and cultivate. There will be other chances to kill the emperor,” Zac probed.

“Killing Nenothep Medhin is extremely hard since either his position is unknown due to him exploring uninhabited lands, or he’s safe within his palaces. This place is the best chance for our resistance to kill him,” the man said with another cough. “But most importantly I refuse to become the fulcrum for that old goat.”

“The fulcrum?” Zac said with a frown, an ominous feeling growing in his heart.

“I managed to gather some intelligence when I killed Repubat Medhin. We have always wondered how the whole family could possess such power when the normal citizens of Medhin were completely unable to cultivate,” Ylvas said. “It turns out that some old monster called The Great Redeemer visited their planet thousands of years ago.”

“I’m sorry, did you say The Great Redeemer?” Zac exclaimed, not able to hide his shock.

“Yes. Why, do you know anything about him?” Ylvas said, his eyes thinning.

Zac hesitated for a second before he explained the events at the end of the battle with Salvation. Ylvas frowned as he listened to the story, and sighed after Zac was finished.

“It might not be a coincidence that it was our two worlds that were put together on this trial. It seems we both face the same problem,” he said with a shake of his head.

“Could you tell me what else you found out?” Zac asked.

“The Great Redeemer set up gathering arrays and taught the Medhin cultivation. Before he left he gave them a task. They needed to completely dominate their planet before it was integrated. So the Medhin already knew about the integration and that their world would sooner or later become part of the multiverse,” Ylvas said. “For thousands of years they have waited and prepared.”

Zac, unfortunately, wasn't too surprised when he heard the story since it was all too familiar to things on his own planet. The Dominators seemed to have the same past, with the difference that their quest for world domination failed due to the rabid resistance of the Anointed and the Zhix hordes.

But he couldn't completely connect the dots. It seemed that it was Salvation who had the connection with The Great Redeemer, but the terms fulcrum and the similarities were with the Dominators. Were the Dominators working together with Salvation? But they shouldn't have had any contact before the integration.

"What does fulcrum mean?" Zac asked.

"I am not completely sure, but it has something to do with The Redeemer's plans. A few powerhouses seem necessary to use as focal points of arrays. I would be turned into an array flag essentially, and I would rather kill myself than see that happen. But if I die then they will choose someone else," Ylvas said with fury smoldering in his eyes.

"Turned into an array flag...?" Zac muttered with disgust.

That sounded like an extremely sinister method, and it wasn't something that was mentioned in the array crystal in his possession. Worse yet, if that was how the arrays were created, then the array itself couldn't be anything good either.

But that begged the question of why The Great Redeemer put all that effort. Ogras had already told him that finding inhabited planets that yet weren't integrated was like searching for a needle in a haystack. However, The Great Redeemer had actually found at least two and initiated the same plan for both of them.

It was not a good feeling to know that some old monster might have a vested interest in his planet. But Zac couldn't figure out the reason. New planets certainly had a lot of valuable things, but there was simply not enough wealth to make an old monster traverse the cosmos and scheme for thousands of years.

“Do you know what The Great Redeemer is planning?” Zac asked.

“No idea. I don’t think even Repubat himself knew. Either Nenotheop keeps that secret to himself, or perhaps none of them know what’s truly going on. The only thing Repubat knew was that The Great Redeemer called the people of the world ‘fuel’, and that the Medhin would be taken to a cultivator’s paradise for fulfilling their task,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head.

“Fuel?” Zac repeated with trepidation.

That obviously couldn’t be good news.

“Have you figured out anything to stop this?” Zac asked.

“I can’t be sure, but I have formed a hypothesis. Why did The Great Redeemer visit our planets thousands of years ago? Why did he give a family cultivation manuals? I believe he has formed a Karmic Link with those who use that cultivation technique, and he now uses that link as a means to locate our planets,” Ylvas explained.

“Don’t he already know where our planets are?” Zac asked skeptically. “I mean he’s already been there before.”

“He only knows where the planets were previously. But the integration fused and moved them. We might not even be in the same part of space any longer,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Our planets are shrouded by the system for a hundred years, but I think he has found the means to get around that.”

“You’re right,” Zac said, feeling a bit stupid. “You’re thinking that if you manage to kill all the members of the Medhin Clan you will sever that Karmic Link, making The Great Redeemer lose track of your planet.”

“Exactly,” Ylvas said with a nod. “I think this might be our last chance. If the Emperor is still alive when we return I will have no way to kill him. Their capital is a fortress with extremely strong arrays and legions of soldiers. That’s why I am willing to make that deal. Help me kill him and half the treasure I have accumulated is yours. I would give my points as well, but they are not transferrable,” Ylvas entreated.

Zac was pretty tempted, but he didn't immediately reply. Beruv Ylvas was on the 5th position on the wealth ladder, so the treasures he had accumulated shouldn't be small. But Zac needed to be alive to enjoy them. He needed to be careful. This wasn't as simple as a 2 on 1 assault. Even discounting the Emperor's personal guard there was also his son, another E-Grade powerhouse that had a comparable level to Beruv Ylvas.

"I can sympathize with you, but I am not sure about this. It would probably not just be us versus Nenotheop. There is also his son and their war arrays," Zac said.

"I believe we do not need to worry about Vasidas. Our spies indicate that the two are at odds and that Vasidas might even be planning a coup. If we assault the emperor Vasidas will likely stay on the sidelines, perhaps only appearing after his father is dead to kill us if he sees there's an opportunity," Ylvas said.

"So we would be doing his work for him?" said with a thoughtful nod.

"Also, it would not only be the two of us. I have gathered a few hundred cultivators of Berum who are currently lying in wait. They will help lessen the pressure from the army. Unfortunately, we do not possess as good war arrays, and I therefore need the assistance of another powerhouse," Ylvas added.

"My plan would be that you stay hidden inside my army, and before they realize who you are you need to strike at the Emyrean Guard and kill as many as possible. That's the elite force of Nenotheop, and the source of his war array," Ylvas said. "I will hold the focus of the emperor himself, and after the array is dealt with we will pincer him."

Zac nodded thoughtfully. Having an army on his side would make things easier, and the plan Ylvas proposed was one where Ylvas himself did the heavy lifting. If Zac managed to get close to such an elite squad while the emperor himself was occupied he should be able to make short work of them all.

But Zac couldn't discount the possibility that Beruv Ylvas was lying through his teeth just to enlist some help in his quest to kill his nemesis. It was worth remembering that if they managed to kill the Medhin Emperor and his son, then Beruv Ylvas would be the strongest man on their planet.

But there were two days to go, and Zac did not really have anything to do apart from grinding some beasts. He could check things out and gather intelligence to see if the plan would be viable or not.

"I do not have anything against working together," Zac finally said. "But if I feel its too dangerous to complete I will back away. I am sorry, but I'm not ready to risk it all against Medhin Nenotheop."

"That's all I can ask for," Beruv Ylvas said with a nod of relief and stretched out his hand. "To a successful cooperation."

Zac hesitated slightly before he turned off [**Nature's Barrier**] that had swirled around him all the while, and grasped the other man's hand.

"To a successful cooperation."

Chapter 255: The E-Grade

Since the two had agreed to work together provisionally the slightly tense situation had abated somewhat at least. Zac chose to not reactivate his defensive skill, though he still kept **[Mental Fortress]** active. However, there was one issue that was weighing on Zac as he looked at the slightly wretched form of the Berum champion.

“I am sorry, but your current condition is a bit... Will you even be able to fight like you are now?” Zac probed.

The man truly looked worse for the wear, and he didn't inspire much confidence as a potential combat partner.

“I know my shape does not inspire much confidence at the moment. Repubat injured me in a last desperate assault, and the attack was filled with his Dao. That attack weakened me and drastically slowed my natural healing,” Ylvas said with a slightly helpless shake of his head.

Zac nodded knowingly since he had personally been on the receiving end of such an attack; the poison wound from the Corpse Lord. That wound had refused to heal no matter how many pills he ate. Dao wounds were simply far harder to heal, and if that was what ailed Beruv Ylvas their plan might be doomed before they even started.

“However, I have already pushed out the foreign Dao from my body, and my body is currently rapidly healing. My plan is for us to assault the Emperor's mountain on the last day after I've completely healed. Hopefully, we would be able to thin out his forces by hunting the roving squads until then. That way we would weaken their side while gathering information,” Ylvas quickly added after seeing Zac's troubled face.

“Sounds good,” Zac agreed.

If what Ylvas said was true about his wound then Zac would be able to observe a rapid restoration during the next day. If he still looked wretched at that point then he was lying about his condition. Waiting a few days to assault Nenotheop would also allow him to focus on his goal to hunt beasts and find more potential allies.

“But one condition. I am looking for people from my world to ally with. You can’t kill them,” Zac added.

“I have no interest in fighting them, especially not in my current condition,” Ylvas agreed without hesitation. “Do you think they would be amenable to working with us?”

“I doubt it to be honest,” Zac admitted. “I only have a few friends strong enough that they could help out. In general, our world is far more splintered than yours seem to be. In fact, when we find people you should stay out of sight so no rumors of us working together have a chance to spread.”

“Agreed,” Ylvas nodded. “I have to say I am a bit surprised you still are looking for allies when you’re the strongest human on your planet. I would have expected them to approach you by now.”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated,” Zac said with a sigh. “For one I got randomized to an island in some remote corner of our planet. The only way for me to find other people is to use my Teleportation array, and no one keeps their arrays public when the world is in chaos. There have also been some false rumors about me floating about.”

“I pray you will be able to unify your world quickly, Mr. Atwood. I have seen the aftermath of those you call the Dominators in this hunt. They are bloodthirsty and even stronger than the Medhin Clan. You will need many allies to bring them down,” Ylvas said with a serious face as he started walking toward the central area.

Zac only nodded and followed in tow. Since Ylvas was hurt he avoided battle as much as possible, leaving the task of clearing a path to Zac. Since Zac’s goal was to grind beasts he didn’t mind, and he soon was back to his routine of clearing out beasts by the dozen.

However, since a stranger was traveling with him he held back his power to a pretty large degree. He didn't use **[Loamwalker]**, and the length of the fractal edge he displayed was only three meters long. He didn't even launch it at packs, not wanting to provide the intelligence that he could use ranged attacks. Finally, he refrained from using any Dao, not that it was really needed in any case against some random beasts.

It might have been overkill, but months of listening to tales of betrayal from Ogras it was pretty much by instinct that he tried to avoid leak any critical information about himself. Ylvas did not speak much either, apart from sometimes making some random conversation.

It turned out that the planet of Berum wasn't completely devoid of Cosmic Energy before the integration in contrast to Earth. Their world had been essentially medieval, and there had been a few people who had the 'Gift'. It wasn't nearly as pronounced as now that the world was integrated, but those with the Gift could be a few times stronger than normal people.

Beruv Ylvas was one of these people, and it seemed he had been some sort of general or royal protector in their old world, though it seemed he was unaffiliated now. Zac didn't probe into that subject though since it seemed a bit delicate. Ylvas had started at level 23, and he received his class inside the Tutorial after only two days.

The reason Ylvas grew so strong was a mix of reasons. He had a headstart, and since he already was an experienced warrior he underwent very hard missions in the tutorial. He had then distinguished himself in the quickly escalating wars against the Medhin Empire, and he quickly became a symbol of the resistance.

Many had voluntarily provided him with treasures such as attribute fruits or Nexus Crystals in hopes that he would get powerful enough to defeat the Medhin Emperor. The world of Berum had celebrated in the streets when they learned that he was the first warrior to pass the bottleneck, which was the first step in resisting the monstrously powerful royals.

“So, what’s the difference between E-Grade and F-Grade?”
Zac suddenly asked after a bit.

It was a subject he was pretty interested in, especially now that he was closing in on the bottleneck himself. He actually knew less about the E-Grade compared to the D-Grade, since he at least knew that you formed a Core at that stage. He had Asked Alyn about it, but she had refused to talk about the subject, citing that one shouldn’t get ahead of oneself.

“Hmm... Well, most importantly you get far more attributes per level,” Ylvas said after mulling it over. “I gain almost ten times the attributes per level now.”

Zac already knew that the E-Grade provided much larger gains per level, but he was still shocked by the sheer number of attributes. It was no wonder that he had such trouble with Inevitability. Even if the Dominator only had an uncommon class he would have gained over 1500 attributes between the levels 75 and 100.

He finally understood what Ogras meant when he said that the low tiered Titles that gave flat boosts would be mostly useless at the end of E-Grade. Even with his huge number of Titles, his accumulated bonus flat attributes were only worth something like 5 levels in the E-Grade.

“But leveling is harder,” Ylvas added with a sigh.

“Well, hasn’t that been the case since the start?” Zac asked as he dragged himself out of his musings. “Every level requires more Cosmic Energy.”

“It’s not only that,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “To gain a level now it’s not enough to gather up enough Cosmic Energy through kills or cultivation. You also need to break open a Node in your body.”

“A node?” Zac asked, but suddenly remembered the mention in the introduction to formations.

It had said that minor nodes existed in the body, helping the two major nodes which were the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. It hadn’t explained exactly what they were though, only mentioning that they contained power.

“It is like a mini-bottleneck. There are spots all through your pathways that need to be awakened, and each node gives you a level. Every time that you break open a node it feels like you break a chain shackling you. Cosmic Energy flows smoother through your pathways, and your body feels lighter,” Ylvas continued. “From what I’ve gathered there are 75 ordinary Nodes, but also a few hidden ones.”

“Hidden?” Zac asked with interest, even turning over toward Ylvas while he kept swinging to mow down beasts in front of them.

“Yes, apparently it’s special nodes that do not give levels but instead great increases in power. The truly gifted can sometimes open one, or even a few. But it’s not needed to evolve to the next stage,” Ylvas continued. “As to the method to find and open these hidden nodes I have no idea.”

“So they give free attributes like titles?” Zac asked.

“No, from what I understand they give things that are harder to quantify. One might make your sight and reaction far better. Another makes you more in tune with the Dao. That’s just examples I’ve made up myself though, the Tutorial Pixies didn’t give any information, and I couldn’t afford information about those things,” Ylvas explained. “It also seems that different people have different hidden nodes.”

“How come?” Zac asked confused.

“Bloodlines and constitution,” Ylvas said. “This is something that does not apply to most people. But some clans and races have special bloodlines, and these bloodlines may contain special hidden nodes that give specific powers. Other people have somehow gained special constitutions that have special Nodes. A fire constitution might have a hidden node that helps the cultivator come in tune with flames for example, or even form it within one’s body naturally.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. The talk of bloodlines made his mind turn toward his own heritage. At first look it might seem pretty normal, but in truth it was anything but. His mother was a lofty Technocrat, and such a group might possess special bloodlines.

There was also his newly gained Draugr heritage, and such a species might very well have some hidden nodes to help with Miasmatic Cultivation. That would explain their superior handling of the death-attuned energy. Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, but he quickly cooled his mind.

Even if he might possess special nodes he had no idea how to access them. He had no connection with the Technocrats, and he was afraid to even try to contact them as things were now. If they found out about the thing inside Kenzie it might lead to untold troubles for her, so he even prayed that their existence had been forgotten by their mother and her people.

It was the same with the Draugr, and he was a bit leery about that as well after hearing Ylvas speculations regarding Karmic Links. What if the Draugr woman did not act out of benevolence, but for very different reasons? Planting those runes inside his head might be a way to form a Karmic Link, which would allow her to find the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

She had mentioned that he walked on the path of oblivion, which indicated that she was familiar with the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. And he wouldn't be taken to her place if she had no connection to a splinter since all the other visions were connected to the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. Perhaps she was collecting splinters for herself.

But he would definitely look into these hidden Nodes when he got back since he had other avenues to find information. There were Brazla and the inheritances, both prime sources for such information. Perhaps it would be possible to buy a dossier about common hidden nodes through Calrin as well.

"So the max level for E-Grade is level 150 then?" Zac asked after he had digested the information.

"Yes, that's correct," Ylvas confirmed. "Every node is harder to open though, and from what I've understood most cultivators simply do not have the talent to open up all 75 of them. The majority get stuck on the road of breaking open the nodes even before reaching the real bottleneck of forming a Cultivator's Core."

After asking a bit more he learned that the method to open the nodes was to grind them down with the help of one's cultivation technique and Dao. This made Zac frown with worry, since he simply had no cultivation manual to utilize, and it seemed the Dao alone wouldn't work.

Of course, there were other ways as well. Some pills and treasures could be utilized. But they often came with side effects and were generally only used when you were right at the end and just needed a final push to get to 75 nodes.

Zac frowned when he learned of the different ways to level up. The pills and treasures that could open up Nodes would likely not be too easy to come by, and such treasures usually only worked once like the Fruit of Ascension. Was there truly no way for a mortal to advance without the help of treasures though? He knew that the path of progression for mortals was harder, but it shouldn't be closed-off like that.

"Is there truly no other way to open up the nodes?" Zac couldn't help asking.

"Well, there is one more way," Ylvas answered after some hesitation. "But it is a bit suicidal."

Chapter 256: Pits and Tracks

Suicidal wasn't really what Zac wanted to hear, but he internally sighed and indicated for Ylvas to explain what he meant.

"From what I understand you can brute-force the nodes as well. That's what some try when they are all out of options. You can see every level as an empty glass. When you cultivate or kill enemies you fill the glass with water, and you can keep doing this until it is filled," Ylvas began.

Zac nodded since the explanation was pretty much the same as how he imagined it, though he rather saw it as an experience bar from a video game. When the bar was filled up he would need to level up. Otherwise, he wouldn't gain any more experience.

"When the glass is full of water you need to open up another node, in other words get another glass to fill. Until you do the water will just spill over the edge and not stay with you. Until you break through the cosmic energy will dissipate out from your body.

"But you can also forcibly trap the energy inside your body until the accumulated energy burst the Node right open by force. However, using that method is to dance with death. The more nodes you open the more energy you need, and your body might simply not be able to handle it. The glass of water would shatter from getting too much water crammed into it. In other words, your body would explode.

"And even if you succeed your body will be severely wounded, and you will need to recuperate for a long time afterward. If you include the recovery period it's likely faster to just be patient and slowly grind the Node open with your cultivation," Ylvas added with a shake of his head. "Besides, you would need to kill an ungodly amount of beasts or waste a

massive wealth on crystals to accumulate enough energy to force open the nodes, far more than just filling up the glass.”

Zac shook his head when he understood how the last method worked. It seemed inferior to the others, working more or paying a fortune for worse results. It looked like the difference between a mortal and Cultivator would start to make itself truly known in E-Grade. Zac wouldn't be surprised if it only got worse on the higher grades as well. He really needed to figure out a way to become a cultivator himself.

But he also had to say that he felt he was pretty suited for such a method. Not only was his body extremely sturdy due to his high Endurance and Vitality, but he also had another important advantage. His body had been tempered by far worse conditions not once, but twice, before.

First was when he jumped into the Cosmic Water and ate the Fruit of Ascension, his body had been ripped to shreds and reformed countless times by the two energies within his body. The second time was when his Duplicity core was formed from killing far too many zombies. That time his body was instead ravaged by life- and death-attuned energy.

Hopefully, those two harrowing experiences would help him out as he brute-forced his nodes open because he did not see many alternatives for him to advance in the future.

The two kept moving through the forests toward the area where the Berum forces were stationed. Apparently, they were spread out and hidden in caves on four different mountains. The resistance leader had also luckily mapped out the areas with both the emperor and where the two Dominators had been seen recently.

The emperor had set up camp right in the core, claiming a handful of mountains as his own. The two Dominators seemed to move around a bit more haphazardly, though they stayed in the same general area. The two forces had also avoided each other until now, which Zac and Ylvas could explain now that they had a better picture of the situation. In a sense, they were part of the same force.

The only reason that Zac didn't turn away then and there was the fact that the Dominators didn't seem to be completely harmonious with the Medhin Empire. While the Dominators avoided the royals Ylvas seemed to be under the impression that they killed even more Medhin soldiers than they killed people from any other force. Perhaps things were a bit cut-throat between the various factions under the Great Redeemer.

They weren't in a hurry to head right over though since Ylvas was still hurt and they needed information, so they stayed a decent distance away from the mountain grouping that the Medhin army controlled. Zac spent most of the day hunting beasts apart from when they went looking Medhin squads.

Everything went according to plan, and Zac even made two new alliances thanks to Ylvas' map and his scouting skills. However, things took a bad turn after catching a Medhin squad.

"What did you say?" Zac said as he lifted the final living soldier by his throat in anger.

"Crown Prince Vasidas has captured the woman called Thea Marshall, and she is now held by the side of the great Emperor Nenotheop. The Emperor promises she is untouched and unspoiled, and that she will be released upon the forfeiture of your ladder position. This offer only lasts until 12 hours before the hunt ends, at which point Thea will be executed," the soldier wheezed out, clearly having been forced to memorize that exact speech.

Zac's thoughts were in chaos and he blankly stared ahead, unsure of what he should do. Suddenly a white flash went past him and the head of the captured soldier fell to the ground with a thump. Zac frowned and looked over at Ylvas who had already sheathed the thin rapier that hung by his side.

"I feared he was trying to stall for time to announce our whereabouts," Ylvas quickly explained when he saw Zac's displeasure.

Zac wasn't too sure about that motivation, but he wouldn't make a big deal about it. He understood why Ylvas wanted the

captive to stop talking, and Zac honestly wasn't sure what he should do at this point.

"Is she your ally?" Ylvas said as he looked over at Zac.

"Yeah," Zac simply answered with a somber nod.

He couldn't but help sigh in defeat. This very situation was the reason why he had struggled so hard to find his sister as quickly as possible. The worst thing was that he couldn't comply even if he wanted due to the splinter hidden away in his brain. He could give his whole Cosmos Sack to the emperor and still maintain his position, and the Emperor probably wouldn't believe his excuses.

He honestly would have been happy to dump the **[Heart of Oblivion]** on the old emperor, especially if it helped save Thea. But now it had caused even more trouble for him instead. It truly was a cursed object.

"You cannot make any deals with the Medhin. Both the Emperor and Vasidas will turn on you the minute they have what they want," Ylvas quickly said. "They barely consider anyone human, apart from their own family members."

"I know," Zac said. "But it still makes our job harder."

"I don't think it changes things. The emperor must keep her alive to lure you in, but we can simply pretend you don't know about the situation. We'll keep hunting squads and weaken their forces," Ylvas said.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea anymore," Zac said. "If certain squads start dropping now they might realize someone is coming for them, losing our small element of surprise. It would give our position away."

"Fair enough," Ylvas said.

"Thea is one of the three strongest cultivators of our world," Zac slowly said. "Freeing her would also bolster our forces. I will quickly set her free first while you occupy the emperor. After that, I'll hit the personal guard as planned."

Beruv Ylvas seemed to consider the options for a bit until he slowly nodded.

“That works as well. However, you must hurry. I am not a match against Nenotheop in an even fight, and if he’s empowered by his personal guard I will not even last for thirty seconds. You quickly need to dispatch the personal guard and help me lessen the burden or I will fall,” Ylvas said.

“Agreed,” Zac said.

It truly seemed that there was no getting off this train now. The Emperor and his son had forced his hand. Anger was starting to build up inside him as he kept killing the beasts around them, but he forced himself to keep calm. He couldn’t do something hotheaded that risked both the operation and Thea’s life at this juncture.

So he tried to maintain his calm as the two went back to traveling between the mountains to look for allies and beasts. But an odd sight suddenly entered their eyes. As they traveled they spotted a huge pit in front of them. At first, Zac assumed someone had dug a trap for the beasts.

However, as soon as they walked over they could quickly discount that possibility. While the pit was over ten meters deep there was no evidence suggesting that they had found a trap. There were no spikes in the bottom, and the walls weren’t sheer so even a normal human would be able to simply walk out of the pit.

The two kept walking and after thirty more minutes they had lost count of how many pits they’d seen. Both were completely befuddled at this point, and it even started to make them a bit uncomfortable. They truly couldn’t understand what was going on, and it almost felt like they were walking into a trap somehow.

“Animals?” Zac finally ventured with an unsure voice. “Like rats or moles.”

“No, these are man-made,” Ylvas said. “They are simple holes go straight down, there’s no burrows or tunnels either so they would serve no purpose for shelter. But I do not understand why someone would dig so many holes. Burying array flags? But then the holes should be filled and hidden afterward...”

“Tracks over here,” Ylvas suddenly said as he looked at the ground. “Some huge bugger by the size of the footprints, weighing at least 150 kilos, likely more.”

Zac readied his weapons as the two silently followed the footprints for another fifteen minutes. Luckily due to the size of the one who left the prints they had no problem following them even if Ylvas whispered that they were a few hours old.

Oddly enough it didn't lead toward a mountain, but rather straight into the core of a large forest in an extra-wide valley, and weirder still was that there were no animals around. Since they had entered the zone with the pits there had been fewer and fewer beasts. Zac started to worry that one of the Dominators had moved its camp and scared away all the wildlife.

Suddenly they heard a thundering sound from the distance, and both of them quickly got ready for battle. But they soon realized the noise was actually snoring, and they speechlessly looked at each other. Zac immediately guessed who it was and he wryly smiled as they followed the tracks until they looked at a shoddily camouflaged camp.

Someone had simply broken off a few smaller trees and put them in a circle around a clearing. But the cover wasn't high enough the two of them could easily see the ramshackle structure in the middle. Two enormous feet were sticking out of a much too small cover made out of sticks, and the thundering snoring came from the man inside.

“Stay here, for now. I know who this is. He's an ally, but a bit special. He is also quite strong, so if we can get his help we will have a great array breaker on our side,” Zac said as he started to approach the crudely built tent.

“Billy, are you awake?” Zac said as he poked Billy's feet with a stick he picked up. “It's me, Zachary. The Super Brother Man.”

There snores continued for a while until they abruptly stopped. The next moment Billy rose from his slumber, causing the whole campsite to collapse in splinters and broken twigs.

“WHO WOKE BILLY?” Billy growled as his eyes wildly looked about.

In his hand was the huge club he’d seen him wear before, looking like a tree trunk with an enormous cranium stuck at the end.

“It’s me, Billy. Zachary, the Super Brother-Man,” Zac tentatively said as he threw away his poking stick.

“Oh, it’s you,” Billy said with a snort after he spotted Zac. “I am mad at you.”

Chapter 257: Billy and Alien-man

“What? Why?” Zac asked with some confusion as he looked up at the irate giant.

He hadn't done anything to Billy as far as he knew, and he had even gone so far as to send his forces to help him close out the Ratmen Incursion.

“Your stupid horny friend tricked Billy. Made Billy thwong the big shield and the biggest rat. But the horny guy jumped out of the shadows and stole Billy's money and strength,” Billy muttered and slammed his club into the ground in frustration, making the whole area shake.

Zac blankly stared at Billy for a second before he could translate what Billy meant. It appeared that old habits die hard, and Ogras had actually stolen the kill of the Incursion leader when they assaulted the Incursion together.

Zac sighed in exasperation at the demon's antics, but he was also a bit confused. Ogras was stuck at the bottleneck as far as he knew, so killing an Incursion leader would be a waste of Cosmic Energy. It would have been far better if the energy went to Billy instead, bolstering the strength of an ally. Since it seemed both Billy and Ogras were able to kill the ratman it was unlikely it was an E-Grade powerhouse, but it would still likely have given Billy at least one level.

The only reason that Zac could come up with was that there was some hidden benefit for the demon to perform such an action. Perhaps he could receive a title if he managed to be the one to kill a competing incursion leader. But in any case, such an action could put a strain on the alliance, especially when the other side was someone like Billy.

“I’m sorry Billy. Ogras is a bit stupid, I will make him give some good things to you as an apology when we go back,” Zac said, which brightened the giant right up. “And uh, it’s called horned, not horny.”

“What are you doing here?” Zac followed up as he looked at the surroundings a bit skeptically.

He had actually almost forgotten Billy was in this hunt due to his less than stellar ladder positions. Billy was below the top 100 of the Hunter ladder, which was surprisingly low considering his strength, and his Gatherer placement was just abysmal. He wasn’t even in the top 1000.

“Billy looking for treasure while hiding,” the giant said and looked around before bending over toward Zac. “Nigel told me the big secret of the hunt. There are big evil bosses in here. If Billy manages to hide from all big bosses until he gets sent back then he gets a BIG bonus reward.”

Zac gaped at the hogwash that came out of Billy’s mouth. Nigel had obviously been worried about Billy doing something reckless, and tricked him to stay safe with the promise of rewards.

“Yes, I heard something like that as well,” Zac coughed. “You are doing a good job.”

“This hunt is so hard, Billy has looked for treasure everywhere, but there’s no treasure. Thwonking animals instead is easier, gives you money and makes you stronger,” the giant sighed. “But all animals keeps running away from Billy.”

Zac frowned in confusion when Billy told him that there were no treasures. It didn’t really matter which palace he had visited, they were all filled with a decent amount of valuables. Of course, most had likely been looted at this point, but to not find almost anything for a month was exceedingly unlucky.

As for the reason why the animal ran away from Billy, it wasn’t as big a mystery. The giant’s aura was completely unrestrained as it billowed out from him. Zac was surprised how heavy it was. He knew that Ogras had told him Billy was

very strong, but the aura that emanated from him was far greater compared to when they met during the Auction. But Zac wouldn't pry since it was rude to look into other's fortuitous encounters.

"Did you not find anything in the palaces? On top of the mountains?" Zac probed.

"Billy did not go there. Billy went once and was attacked by ghosts, Billy ain't going up there again," the giant said with eyes big as saucers. "Mama told Billy that treasure is always buried, hidden by pirates. Billy has no treasure map so Billy has been digging all over the forest. But Billy has been unlucky and not looted a single treasure chest."

Billy then gestured at a few pits not far away, and Zac was stunned silent. Zac had no idea how to speak with this simple giant. For one he didn't know if he should even tell Billy about how the hunt worked this late into the game, but he also was unsure whether he would even be able to explain it in a way so that Billy would understand.

"Nigel didn't come as well?" Zac asked, hoping for some help from the translator.

"Nigel is stupid. Billy even had an extra ticket, but Nigel was scared," Billy said with a disdainful shake of his head. "Nigel said he will help make Billyville better while Billy hunts. Nigel sold the ticket instead."

Zac nodded thoughtfully as he gazed at the giant. His initial idea when he realized it was Billy who stayed here had been to invite him to help in the fight against the Medhin, but he wasn't sure anymore. It felt like he would trick Billy into risking his life in a feud that wasn't really his.

"What are you doing here?" Billy suddenly asked, as if remembering that Zac had appeared out of nowhere.

After a brief hesitation, Zac decided to tell Billy the truth.

"A very strong bad guy has taken Thea Marshall a prisoner. I am going with a few friends to beat him up and help Thea," Zac said.

“Bad guys have taken Thea?” Billy said, immediately looking angered.

“You know Thea?” Zac asked a bit curious.

“Thea gave Billy lots of tasty things after the auction, she is Billy’s friend. Billy will come with you and thwong the bad guys,” Billy unhesitantly said. “Besides, mama always says you need to help those in need.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement before he started hesitating again.

“The bad guy is Nenotheop Medhin, an emperor from the other world we are doing this hunt with,” Zac started to explain, but was cut off by Billy.

“Other world? What?” Billy asked with a vacant stare.

“Uh, never mind. Anyway, Nenotheop is very strong. He has evolved to E-Grade. Do you know about E-Grade?” Zac tentatively asked.

“Yes, Nigel said that after level 75 you get very strong. That is E-Grade,” Billy nodded with a serious face. “But as long as he has a head Billy can thwong it.”

“Good. We will trick him a bit first though. You and I are smart, and we will trick the bad guys. We will work together to save Thea. Then we will all thwong the bad guys together, ok?” Zac said.

“Good!” Billy enthusiastically nodded and even slammed the enormous club in the ground with enough power to cause cracks tens of meters long to spread out from the camp.

The two were soon joined by Ylvas, who clearly had some trouble adapting to Billy’s mannerisms. But soon enough they were back on track, heading toward the hidden camp of the Berum forces. However, Billy’s aura and fighting style proved to be somewhat of a problem since there seemed to be no moderation to his methods.

“Are you sure this is okay? Your friend is a bit... impulsive,” Ylvas said with a low voice as he watched Billy rove forward like a natural disaster, each swing of the monstrous club

causing everything from beasts to huge boulders to turn into small chunks on the ground.

“He is a bit simple, but he has the highest Strength of anyone on our planet as far as I know, apart from the Dominators perhaps,” Zac whispered back. “Every aspect of him is designed for heavy hits. He effortlessly broke an array in one swing that my number one general wouldn’t even be able to break no matter the time given. He is also good friends with the captured woman, so I wanted to let him make his own decision.”

Ylvas thoughtfully nodded as he looked at the huge club ripping through the air back and forth. It clearly was incredibly heavy, but Billy’s bulging arms didn’t even seem to strain as it tore through the air.

“Fair point. The Medhin squads always allocate at least a third of their men to erect barriers to protect those who use the War Arrays. If this man can crack open the array for the personal guard, allowing you to slip in, our chances would become far better,” Ylvas agreed. “Only one day remains until the time for our assault. I suggest we head toward the closest base by now. But first we need to teach this man to be more circumspect.”

“Agreed,” Zac nodded, and soon they stopped and called over Billy.

After some explaining, or rather bribing with large slabs of grilled meat, Zac managed to get Billy to take a break from his clobbering. Instead, he took over and dispatched the beasts in a more silent way.

“Billy don’t like that fighting way. Reminds Billy of your horny friend,” Billy muttered when he saw Zac trying to kill the animals as quietly as possible.

“Horned friend, Billy. And I agree, I don’t like fighting like this either. But remember, you told me we needed to stay hidden for the big reward. If we make a lot of noise we might be found and lose the reward,” Zac explained.

Billy’s eyes widened in realization, and he quickly nodded in agreement.

“Super Brother-Man is pretty smart. Almost as smart as Billy,” he sagely nodded in agreement as he started to walk on his toes in an effort to not make any sound.

“Indeed, the Super Brother-Man truly seems to be almost as smart as Billy,” Ylvas nodded from the side in a rare showing of humor.

“Ha ha, I like you Alien-man!” Billy laughed.

When they had explained that Ylvas came from another world Billy had immediately called them both liars, explaining that aliens were much smaller and had large black eyes. Finally, the two had been forced to give up explaining Ylvas’ origins, but Billy still chose to call Ylvas Alien-man as a joke.

“Alien-man is pretty good at hiding skills,” Zac said, ignoring the comments. “He can teach Billy to hide. Imagine tricking the bad guys you are weak when you are actually strong. This will also trick animals, making it easier for you to thwack them.”

Billy enthusiastically nodded and Ylvas started to arduously teach Billy how to control and hide his aura. Surprisingly, as soon as Billy understood what Ylvas wanted him to do his aura immediately and utterly disappeared. The change was so drastic that Zac actually stopped killing beasts and turned over, afraid that Ylvas had assassinated Billy.

But Billy was just fine, though he didn’t emit a smidgeon of energy. Unless Zac didn’t know better he would have thought that the man was a level 1 mortal from how his aura felt.

“He has magnificent control of his Cosmic Energy,” Ylvas muttered in shock. “I can’t sense a thing. I think the man might actually be a genius when it comes to energy control.”

“He didn’t get to the top ten on two of our ladders due to blind luck,” Zac said with a smile. “Billy, amazing.”

“Why surprised? Billy is the smartest, Mama always says so,” the giant said, obviously extremely pleased by Zac and Ylvas’ reactions.

“Remember how you did this,” Zac said. “See, beasts are already storming toward us.”

It was true. Only a few moments had passed since Billy took control of his aura, and the more rabid beasts were already closing in on them.

“In the future, if you want to thwunk things, always hide your aura this way. That way you don’t need to run after the animals. They will come to you,” Zac said as he resumed swinging.

Since the matter of subterfuge was somewhat dealt with they immediately started to head toward the hideout. They no longer sought out any more cultivators, and Ylvas even scouted ahead to make sure they didn’t encounter anyone. They completely rounded a few squads and stayed clear of all mountains until they finally arrived at a nondescript decorative mountain with an enormous statue at the top.

However, getting Billy to ascend the mountain wasn’t completely effortless. They finally had to say that the ghosts didn’t come to the mountains with statues on top. Of course, it was true in a sense since the decorative mountains did not have gathering arrays making the energies dense.

They walked along a hidden path almost halfway up the mountain until they reached a dead end. However, Ylvas simply walked straight through the wall, making Billy’s eyes widen in shock.

“Alien-man is magic,” Billy muttered with wide eyes.

Chapter 258: A Singular Goal

“It’s an illusion array,” Zac explained but corrected himself after seeing Billy’s confused face. “A magic trick. There is actually no wall there, we can go through as well.”

Zac also passed through a few times to prove his point, and Billy finally followed suit as well with wonder in his eyes. After passing through the array they entered a cavern that reminded Zac of the underground tunnels. Billy curiously poked the luminescent moss covering the roof and even started collecting it until Ylvas explained it wasn’t worth any money.

“No guards or scouts?” Zac asked Ylvas as they walked through the empty tunnel.

“We felt it was too risky having people placed outside the illusion array since it would likely increase the chances of this place being found out. We, unfortunately, lost one of our hideouts and fifty good men that way to one of the Insectoids,” Ylvas explained with a sigh. “Now we try to stay as nondescript as possible. However, my men know we have passed through the array,” Ylvas explained.

The tunnels weren’t endless like the ones far underground and they soon reached a large cavern where ten cultivators stood armed and ready. However, the moment they saw Ylvas they relaxed, and quickly greeted them with a smile. The next moment another 50 men appeared out of nowhere, startling both Zac and Billy.

“Alien-man’s friends are magic too,” Billy muttered with a subdued voice as he glared at the men with his club at the ready “Or are they ghosts?”

“They are not ghosts Billy, they simply hid with the help of arrays, like the one we passed,” Ylvas explained.

“How are you people able to utilize so many arrays?” Zac asked with surprise. “Did you know about arrays before the integration or something?”

“Array disks,” Ylvas explained. “We found a cache with these array disks early in the hunt and learned how to use them after some experimentation. No knowledge is needed to activate them. Unfortunately, we never found any strong ones. Perhaps it’s too hard to imprint arrays on disks.”

“I’d like to buy one of each of the disks you’ve found,” Zac quickly said.

Those things would both be convenient for himself when he traveled, and it would also be good to have a few of them to study.

“You can just take them, I have a small hill of the things,” Ylvas said and took out eight different disks. “Their effect is much weaker compared to the things you can buy from the Town Shops, and you need to supply them with Nexus Crystals. But they are not restricted by geography and are easy to use.”

Zac picked up one of the disks and looked at the extremely fine inscriptions on its surface. It seemed a pretty high skill in both inscription and arrays was needed to create these things. While Zac and Ylvas discussed the disks most of the men who had been ready to ambush the intruders walked away, making the cave seem more like a campsite. Some were playing cards, while others were cultivating or resting.

Zac threw the disks into his Cosmos Sack and opened up his ladder to check up on the squad that he would work together with. The general strength of those present wasn’t bad, though there were only four people in the top 100, and all of them were pretty far down. Then again these people had been hiding for a few days, meaning their actual strength might be higher than their positions indicated.

Most simply accepted Zac and Billy’s presence without question since they were brought by Ylvas, but not everyone went back to their seats. Many eyes turned toward the two in curiosity. But the faces of the inquisitive ones quickly changed

after a few seconds, likely when they noticed Zac's ladder positions.

Greed was apparent on the faces of many of them, and some hands even moved toward their weapons as from instinct. Zac frowned at the reaction, but he wasn't too surprised either. He didn't say anything and silently observed what would happen.

As for Billy, he didn't seem to understand the mood and was instead staring at a fire that had a huge spit of meat over it that looked just about done.

Soon it seemed some couldn't contain their greed any longer, and a large man sporting two swords on his back slowly walked over. Zac saw he had pretty decent ladder positions, holding the 64th spot on the Hunter ladder. After slightly bowing toward Ylvas he once again turned toward Zac.

"Leader, it's good that you are back. I see you've brought the walking treasure trove," he said before turning toward Zac.

"That bastard emperor has almost gone mad looking for you. It must be burdensome to carry that much treasure by yourself. Why not share a bit with your new allies?"

"We have all been in the same hunt," Zac answered with a shrug. "The wealth we have gathered depends on our abilities."

"Is that right?" the man said with a grim smile. "I can't help but think of there being an element of luck as well. But luck can quickly turn to misfortune."

"Is that a threat?" Zac said with a deadpan face.

"I wouldn't dream of it, but wealth can be a curse," the man said with a sneer. "You never know when calamity strikes. But that's what having allies is for, no? Sharing the burden. We're stuck here together after all."

"I think I'll be fine. And make no mistake - I'm not stuck here with you. You're stuck inside here with me," Zac said as his heavy aura ripe with dense killing intent rolled out from him and drowned the whole cave.

The arrogant man desperately backed away after being inundated by the killing intent, his face as pale as a sheet. It

was the same with the other cultivators as they looked at Zac with a mix of shock and horror. Even Beruv Ylvas seemed slightly taken aback by the ruthless aura, and he thoughtfully looked at Zac from the side before he spoke up.

“Fools, do you think one would gain those ladder positions by luck? Now don’t mess around, they are the important allies I’ve arduously found. They will be the key in ridding our planet of the Medhin scourge,” Ylvas said with a glare at the man who had taunted Zac. “If anyone causes trouble for our new friends you will be declared a traitor of Berum.”

Zac simply nodded at Ylvas in thanks. However, he did note that the champion didn’t do anything to stop that man until Zac made a showing of his power. Perhaps Ylvas wanted to gauge his personality or power better. Zac suddenly noticed that Billy was looking at him with huge eyes and his mouth slightly open.

“Uh, what’s wrong?” Zac asked.

“That line was very cool. Can Billy use it?” Billy entreated.

“Sure, no problem,” Zac nodded with a smile.

He smiled widely at Zac before he headed over toward the meat on the spit and unhesitantly snatched it and started eating. The man who had been preparing the meat glared at Billy, but after throwing a glance at Zac he chose to not speak up and instead took out another slab of meat from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

Ylvas walked over to a corner of the cave, and the cultivators around quickly made ample space for him. As soon as he sat down he ate a pill and closed his eyes. Zac initially wanted to follow him, but after seeing that the man needed to focus on recuperation he went over to Billy and sat down. He looked over to the man who spun the new slab of meat, and the man nervously nodded back and introduced himself as Taran.

“Do you have any information about the situation in the Medhin camp?” Zac asked.

The man threw a glance at Ylvas before he started talking with a shrug.

“Most of their forces have started to return to their mountains. Nenotheop sent out over a hundred squads to the outer parts of the hunt a week ago, and they are returning to provide the spoils,” Taran explained. “We set up as many traps as we could to kill the scouts, but most made it back alive. They are hard to kill because of their War Arrays.”

Zac nodded as he took out a strip of dried meat from his sack, making Taran sigh in relief.

“Do you have any information about the class and skills of the emperor and his top men?” Zac followed up.

The man quickly nodded and took out an information crystal.

“This is the top tier information crystal from the Omniscient Eye. It’s from before the hunt, but the information should be mostly correct,” he said as he handed it over to Zac.

Zac immediately recognized the name Omniscient Eye. The cultivators from Berum he met right at the start had mentioned him or her, though they had no idea about that person’s real identity. They only suspected the person to be a someone from the Medhin planet who had defected when the integration took place.

This crystal held far more information than the brochure that those cultivators had though, making Zac quite shocked. As far as he knew there was no one on Earth able to create information crystals this elaborate yet, meaning this Omniscient Eye should be quite the genius.

The information on Nenotheop was quite extensive, though much of it was marked as speculation and most was about his history and life. However, it was known that the emperor’s weapon of choice was his spear and that he had some sort of warrior class. Both strength and speed were marked as ‘Exceptional’.

Only one skill was mentioned, and it was called **[Spearstorm]**. The emperor had used it when he had singlehandedly massacred a whole army by himself. His spear had turned into a blur, punching holes in everyone close to

him. No one within 100 meters had been safe, and the only survivors were those who fled fast enough.

Not much else was said about him since he had never been forced to use his full strength so far, at least not in public. As for Vasidas, it was only mentioned he was suspected to be a mage-class, but he'd never fought in public. Finally, there were a lot of generals and captains described in the crystal, but after a brief scan Zac knew they wouldn't pose a challenge for him.

Zac handed back the crystal to the man on the opposite side of the fire and started talking with Billy for a bit. He also considered going out to kill some beasts while Ylvas rested, but in the end he decided against it. One extra day of grinding wouldn't make a big difference in the long run, and he didn't want to ruin the plans by being spotted.

Zac had already gained another level while he traveled here, bringing him to level 63. He even was even halfway to level 64, so if their operation was a success he might gain another level before the hunt was over.

Instead, he rested and went over all his newly acquired power-ups. Resting also helped with his mind a bit. It had been hurting since he overextended himself down in the caverns, but the headache had finally abated. After a while, the familiar thunderous snores echoed from next to him, bringing Zac out of his reverie.

The sounds echoed through the caves, drawing angry glares from everyone. Zac could only helplessly shrug his shoulders. Before he was faced with a mutiny Zac quickly took out one of the array disks he had just received and activated it by placing a few F-Grade crystals in the sockets. He placed the disk in front of Billy, and the giant suddenly disappeared, making the cavern grow quiet again.

“Taran, how long until we start?” Zac asked.

“Between half a day and a full day, depending on Lord Ylvas. He needs to be in top condition to fight that old monster,” Taran whispered back as he carefully checked a quiver of arrows.

Zac nodded and once again closed his eyes. Since he didn't have anything to prepare he simply pondered on the Dao while resting, especially the two new ones he had gained. The hours quickly passed until it was finally time to start the assault. There were no rousing speeches or waving of weapons in the air. Ylvas simply stood up and looked over the 50 men in the cavern.

"It is time," was all he said with a somber face as he started to walk toward the exit.

One by one the Berum resistance fighters stood up and started to stream out behind Ylvas. Zac cracked his neck and stood up as well. He hadn't made any real improvements during the short meditation. He didn't know why, but it felt like the Dao had been far more elusive since he arrived at the Eastern Trigram Sect. It was much easier to ponder on the Dao back on Earth, and he couldn't wait to get back.

He walked through the illusion array surrounding Billy, who still contentedly snored away.

"It's time Billy. Let's go save Thea," Zac said after he managed to wake the giant.

Soon 67 warriors walked through the forest with a singular goal in mind - to slay an Emperor.

Chapter 259: Insurrection

Thea looked at the hopeless situation in front of her with a frown, her hand frozen by indecision.

“It’s just a game, dear. No need for such consternation,” her opponent smiled from the opposite side of the table as Thea reluctantly moved a piece.

She didn’t know what was more vexing; being stuck as an unwilling pawn in the machinations of the crown prince in front of her, or that she was miserably losing in a game of chess. Vasidas had found her board game after his father looted her Cosmos Sack, and had immediately been taken with the seemingly simple game.

Of course, the former predicament was far worse in reality. She had truly and utterly overestimated herself. After the mishap with Zac she had kept her head down, and looted summit after summit for two whole weeks. But no matter what she did she had been unable to get ahead in the ladder, and unlooted mountains were becoming almost impossible to find.

Thea knew that without risking one’s life one couldn’t hope to get ahead in this new cut-throat world, so she had enacted a daring plan. She would snatch the Cosmos Sack of one of the four E-Grade powerhouses apart from the two Dominators.

She already knew that apart from Emperor Nenotheop the others were in the earliest stages of the E-grade, far weaker than the monstrous Insectoid who had almost claimed her life earlier. She believed that between planning and her specific skill-set she would be able to steal the pouch and escape without them being able to stop her.

If worse came to worst she would simply activate her ultimate escape skill once again. Losing a few levels in exchange for the accumulated wealth of one of the E-Grade powerhouses was a worthy trade. The levels could be gained back within a

month, but the wealth of a fallen sect could help her and her family for decades.

But she had been naïve. She had followed Vasidas for three days, using every skill and lesson she had learned to hide from him. It was all for one specific moment. When the prince entered a summit array he completely froze due to the protective array, and Thea had exploded into action.

But the rest was only a blur. The next moment Thea remembered was when she stood in front of the smiling prince devoid of her trial-token or an ounce of Cosmic Energy. It turned out he had been aware of her presence since the start and had only played along to see what her plan was.

“Come now, you have been brooding since we decided to work together,” Vasidas said with a smile as he poured Thea a cup of tea. “Have I not been an accommodating host?”

“You did not leave me a much of a choice,” Thea muttered, though she had to admit what he said was true.

He had been a true gentleman in every sense of the word, but her instincts screamed of danger every time she saw his congenial smile. That was especially true since she knew she was a key piece in Vasidas’ master plan. She had learned a bit of it from their time together so far, and his ruthlessness truly made her blood run cold. He had even somehow manipulated Ylvas Berum into a desperate struggle where Vasidas’ own brother died.

And now he had orchestrated an even more desperate battle.

“Come now. I have no interest in the lives of you or Mr. Atwood, as I have explained. I don’t care about this little hunt at all, for that matter. It’s just some levels and a Limited Title. If it didn’t provide me with the opportunity to play my games I wouldn’t have joined in,” Vasidas said as he gripped one of his bishops.

“The treasures aren’t bad compared to my homeworld, I guess. But it’s just useless baubles compared to what The Great Lord will provide for his personal disciple,” the prince continued.

“And as long as you and Mr. Atwood play my game we can be seen as allies rather than enemies. Checkmate.”

A shiver ran down Thea’s spine as she saw Vasidas pick up her king and crush it into dust with a vicious gleam in his eyes. She truly didn’t know whether she wished for Zac to come or stay far away from this summit.

Zac, Billy, and the first company were moving toward the group of mountains the Medhin Army occupied. The optimal plan would be to dismantle all four surrounding mountain defenses before hitting the main mountain in the middle. That way they would avoid any risk of being pincered from behind. Unfortunately, they did not have the manpower for that, so they needed to adopt a riskier approach.

The current plan was to quickly destroy the western mountain with their whole army, and then immediately hit the main peak. A part of their forces would impede any potential backup from the other three mountains surrounding the main mountain, but the main force would move as a spear straight toward the Emperor. That way their backs would at least be clear for a while, allowing them to focus only on the enemies in front of them.

But that didn’t mean it would be an easy battle. All the remaining royals and the strongest soldiers were stationed there, and everyone present knew that just ascending the mountain might cost them their lives. But everyone here was a soldier intent on liberating their world, and their eyes were filled with determination.

Zac and Billy were in the middle of the squad, and they were hidden in large cloaks. Billy was even hunched over to somewhat hide his massive frame. It had taken some time for Zac and Ylvas, but they had finally managed to explain the plan so that Billy understood it.

Billy would be a wall-breaker of sorts. If the defending armies on the main peak erected a strong defense he would do his best to destroy or at least weaken it. Zac’s job was to weaken the enemy side as much as possible in ten seconds after saving Thea. After that he had to join Ylvas in the battle against

Nenothep. A caveat was that if Vasidas joined his father they would unhesitantly flee.

With the help of communication crystals all four of the forces arrived around the targeted mountain within a few minutes of each other. Zac couldn't see the leaders of the other three squads, but Ylvas had already told them that each was led by a powerhouse who was close to the bottleneck.

"You two stay here with the reserve force. We do not want you within eyesight of their scouts or spies. We have already ascertained that physical line of sight is needed to check someone's ladder position. Billy is okay since his ladder position is far lower than his actual strength. But try to stay out of sight as much as possible," Ylvas said to Zac.

Zac only nodded and indicated for Billy to stay with him.

"We are not going with Alien-man?" Billy asked with some confusion.

"There are some bad guys up there, but Thea is not on this mountain. We will rest for now. We are the special weapon, so we can't let the bad guys know about us," Zac explained as he looked at the forces streaming up the mountain.

It didn't take long for the whole mountain to erupt in furious fighting. It was clear, however, that the defending forces couldn't match the Berum onslaught. The battles were steadily moving toward the summit, and soon they took place on the top of the mountain, obscuring Zac's vision.

A few thundering echoes erupted on the summit, and not long after the sounds of battle subsided. Zac saw that a few hundred men started streaming down toward their position. From the energy contained in those echoes up at the top of the mountain, it seemed like the ancillary mountains were only manned by regular soldiers and a few stronger people to maintain order.

There was no rest when the warriors had descended the mountain, and they cut straight toward the main peak. A few people had died and even more were wounded, but they

simply popped a healing pill and restored their energy with a Nexus Crystal as they moved.

Soon they arrived at the foot of the mountain that Nenotheop Medhin occupied, and two squads veered off to impede any enemy forces coming for backup. But the main army consisting of roughly 200 cultivators pushed toward the summit as one.

Their force was lead by Ylvas and his three generals. One was a young man with a slightly feminine face who held a staff in both his hands. The second was a huge woman that Zac almost thought was a smaller female version of Billy. She sported an enormous two-handed sword on her back, and her arms bulged with huge muscles. The final general looked positively ancient, but he had no problems keeping up with the others as it almost looked like he floated.

They started ascending the mountain but there surprisingly were no signs of any resistance, with not even a single stationed to impede their approach. In fact, it looked like all the structures and obscuring features of the mountain had been demolished, giving everyone a clear line of sight toward the summit.

Zac couldn't help but get a bad feeling as he slowly walked up the mountain paths with the others, and he wasn't alone. Their progression had slowed to a crawl as the scouts in the front kept swiveling their heads back and forth in search of any traps waiting for them.

But it was instead a rumble that shook the whole mountain that warned them that the Medhin counterattack was incoming. Torrential amounts of flames were suddenly pouring down from the summit, making the mountain look like an erupting volcano.

However, Zac immediately sensed that the fire was conjured rather than a natural occurrence. Likely it was some sort of slaughter array or combination attack from the Medhin soldiers. Still, the intensity of the incoming fire wasn't anything to scoff at, and Zac hesitantly glanced at Ylvas.

While Zac would be able to protect himself, and Billy if needed, from the onslaught he wasn't so sure about the rest of the soldiers. But while Ylvas had a grim face he didn't seem overly worried.

"Defend!" he shouted, and all soldiers took out identical spheres and started to pump them full of Cosmic Energy, as the ancient man took out a far larger copy of the same item.

The huge sphere floated up in the air above the old general, and the smaller orbs were clearly imbuing it with energy, making it quickly grow to cover their whole army. Only seconds later the roiling flames slammed into the shield, but it held steady.

However, the force of the flames was clearly having an impact, and blood was streaming down the nose of the old man.

"We need to speed up. Lord Rhuvim can't keep the shield going for long!" Ylvas shouted and started to push forward.

The huge woman carefully lifted the old man and placed him on her shoulder as she ran, letting him fully focusing on maintaining the barrier. But even though the army ran at a breakneck pace the shield was quickly showing signs of collapse from the intense flames.

Worse yet, after a minute of ascending they weren't only accosted by flames any longer. Huge boulders were tumbling down the mountain, each of them slamming into the mountain with enough force to make the ground shake.

Some of them luckily had veered off course, but every time one of them hit the shield it looked like the old man was physically punched. The onslaught was also having an effect on the army, and many faces were starting to pale from the energy consumption of maintaining the shield.

"I leave the rest to you, little Vas," Rhuvim suddenly said with a wet cough that made blood stream down his robe.

The next moment he flashed forward, ignoring Ylvas' order to wait. His aura was completely unleashed and a hurricane formed around him that soon was over fifty meters wide.

Power roiled in the air around the old man, and he pushed straight into the flames.

Zac sighed because he understood what fueled that tremendous burst of power. That old general was burning his remaining life-force in order to create an opening that would let the army ascend. The intense powers in the hurricane threw the incoming boulders far up into the air, harmlessly passing the speeding army by, and even the cascading flames were forced to retreat from his advance.

The general's sacrifice had been enough to allow the Berum resistance force to reach the summit unscathed. The moment they saw the crest the old man simply looked back and smiled before he fell over. Ylvas immediately flashed over and caught the old man, cradling the body with red-rimmed eyes.

Zac mutely stared at the corpse of Rhuvim with a heavy heart. The old man might have not possessed even a fraction of the power compared to the old man in his Dao vision, but he clearly shared the same type of conviction. Zac slightly bowed toward the man as Ylvas put him into his Cosmos Sack before he drew his rapier with a grim expression.

Waiting for them at a top was hundreds of elite soldiers emitting monstrous killing intent. In the front of the soldiers stood a man in a golden robe, holding a three-meter long spear in his right hand. A towering aura was emanating from him, even making his hair flutter in the air.

“So you have come, rebel scum. It is just as well. You will join Reubat for his final journey.”

Chapter 260: Wallbreaker

Zac looked at the emperor through a crack in the ranks of soldiers in front of him. The man was nothing like the Medhin princeling he killed on the first day. Tyrbat had relied on the empowerment of his war array and his trinkets, but Nenotheop was completely different.

He gave off a similar aura as Greatest. Of course, not the same levels of power, but the air of someone who had fought countless battles. Zac had a feeling this would turn into another battle where his lacking experience would be holding him back. However, he didn't care much about Nenotheop himself, he was more worried about where Thea was being held.

"The girl is with me," a voice suddenly sounded in his head, making him look around with wide eyes. "You won't find me, Mr. Atwood. Thea Marshall will be safely released, but you must cooperate with my game. Kill Nenotheop and she will be set free. Try to find her and I will immediately execute her."

Zac's heartbeat sped up as he tried to look anywhere for the source of the transmission. He didn't recognize the voice, but after putting two and two together he had a strong suspicion it was Vasidas Medhin who spoke. He didn't know who else would be able to find him when it appeared not even the emperor had spotted him.

Zac looked around, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. He also couldn't see Thea anywhere, meaning she likely was hidden away out of his reach.

He realized that his plan had been naïve. How would he free Thea in a situation like this? He didn't even know where she was. The most likely place would be within the protective arrays of the summit palace, but to get there he would have to cross the entire Medhin army. The question was whether he

should go along with the voice or if he should ignore it and try to locate Thea while the others duked it out.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world didn't wait for him to decide on his course of action. A shocking aura started seeping out of Ylvas as he aimed his sword at the emperor. Zac's brows rose in surprise from the supreme aura he emitted. Honestly, Ylvas hadn't given him a large impression so far, but it was clear that he was the real deal. Unfortunately, it was also clear that while he was very strong for an early E-Grade warrior he was still not Nenotheop's match.

"Your dynasty ends today. Berum will never become the fuel for your insane Redeemer," Ylvas said, undeterred by the fact that his aura was getting somewhat suppressed by Nenotheop.

Soldiers shared confused glances in both camps due to Ylvas' proclamation, meaning that the Medhin soldiers were unaware of the truth of their imperial family. They would likely become fuel as well if their side won, yet they exhibited a great bloodlust as they glared at the resistance army who in a sense tried to save their lives as well.

Of course, the forces of Berum would likely try to spread the news as widely as they could as soon as they got back, in hopes of fomenting insurrection within the Medhin population.

"Shields!" a general to the right Nenotheop roared, and the next moment a huge silver shield covered the whole army that stood behind Nenotheop.

"Empyrean Guard!" a second general shouted, and within seconds Nenotheop was covered in a golden glow.

The setup was similar to all the other squads that he had encountered. One part defended the footsoldiers whereas another part empowered their champion. It made sense since the foot soldiers would only become fodder if they tried to personally fight against people like Zac or Ylvas.

The dense aura of Nenotheop increased even further, and Zac felt that the Emperor would have no problems contending with Inevitability in his current condition. However, Ylvas wasn't

cowed by the aura and unhesitantly pushed forward with enough force to cause huge cracks in the ground.

The power Ylvas emitted was far beyond anything he had shown during the past days, and it all seemed to be concentrated in the tip of his sword as he stabbed straight toward Nenothep who swung his spear to intercept the strike. A shocking collision made the whole mountain shake, and that initial salvo was the start of the war. The huge general pushed forward with heavy steps and slammed her sword into the ground as she ran.

Somehow she managed to rip up a three-meter tall boulder with her sword, and with shocking precision launched it straight at Nenothep with a grunt as she kept running. The stone was imbued with some high-level Dao as well since it started burning and caused multiple explosions in the air as it approached its target.

However, Nenothep barely spared a glance at the incoming boulder, and with a lightning-quick stab of his spear turned it into fine sand that exploded outward. Fire and gravel flew in all directions, but Nenothep was unfazed by the assault.

The attack might not have wounded the emperor, but at least it obscured his vision somewhat. Ylvas was ready and tried to use the fire as a distraction while he stabbed at the Nenothep's guts with a sword shimmering with some unknown power.

At the same time, two roots pierced through the ground, aiming to stab the emperor in his back. It was the final general, and Zac only now noticed that his staff looked like a tree planted in the ground, likely spreading its roots all the way over to the battle between Ylvas and Nenothep.

Even the large general had caught up, and tried to decapitate the emperor with a wide swing flying straight above Ylvas' head. But it was as though the emperor had ten hands, every attack was blocked by either his spear or a bracer. He even had time to slam a knee into Ylvas face, throwing him back ten meters with a grunt. Worst off was the female general, who had a large gash in her side from a lightning-quick stab.

“Come all, you maggots!” Nenotheop roared as his bloodlust soared to the skies, and he forcibly started to suppress the trio who desperately tried to get past his defenses.

The generals weren't the only ones who had gone all out from the start, as large shields were erected above the ranged attackers while the melee warriors started a suicidal run toward the enemy ranks. There was no longer any time to hesitate, and Zac turned toward his huge ally.

“Billy, I can't find Thea,” Zac whispered to the giant who balefully glared at the other side. “We will have to beat up the bad guys first. Can you break that shield? It is very strong.”

“Billy will give it his biggest Thwonk,” the giant nodded as he started running toward the shield along with the other melee fighters.

Zac followed suit, using Billy's enormous frame to hide out of sight from Nenotheop and his generals. The sky was starting to blot out with attacks soaring between the two camps, and there were already a few fatalities amongst the melee warriors who couldn't dodge or endure the onslaught.

The Medhin army was far better off since not one of them had stepped outside of the protective cover of their shields, and they could leisurely pick off one approaching warrior after another with ranged attacks.

Zac tried to help as much as he could by rapidly throwing out dozens of daggers to intercept the more powerful attacks, to save at least a few lives in their approach. Billy was also getting ready as he took out his club halfway to the other side. Suddenly his aura simply exploded, and he actually started to grow.

In just a second he was over ten meters tall, holding an equally monstrous club. His skin glowed with a golden luster, and Zac was shocked to sense some ancient power emanating from his friend. It was as though Billy wasn't human, but rather some ancient Titan as he took the last lumbering steps toward the shield.

Even the emperor couldn't help but look over at Billy's massive frame, and he frowned in consternation. He tried to move over to stop him, but Ylvas and his two generals desperately fought to keep him at bay.

"Intercept him," Nenothep roared in anger, and tons of attacks flew toward Billy as he slowly lifted his club.

Billy clearly needed some time to accumulate enough power, since massive energies swirled around him as his muscles kept swelling. The attacks would arrive in a split second, and Zac didn't know whether Billy could survive such an onslaught even in his enormous form. Out of options he hurriedly activated [**Nature's Barrier**] and imbued it with the Dao of Sanctuary making a storm of leaves cover them both.

Luckily Billy's enormous leg blocked any sight of Zac himself, making it look like it was Billy himself who had erected the defenses. Zac felt a huge amount of Cosmic Energy get expended as almost a hundred attacks slammed into his leaves, but at least it lessened the damage on Billy by about 80%.

Still, the defenses couldn't block everything, and many attacks slipped past the leaves and slammed into Billy. It was clear that his Endurance wasn't too high, as multiple wounds erupted all over his body, making a rain of golden blood pour down on Zac.

Zac was surprised by the color of the blood since a transformation skill shouldn't change his blood like that. It was also clear that while Billy had been wounded he wouldn't be deterred from completing his task. A ruthless aura emitted from him as Billy ran forward the final steps until he stood right in front of the shield.

"**BILLY IS NOT STUCK WITH YOU! YOU'RE STUCK INSIDE BILLY,**" the giant suddenly roared with enough volume to be heard across half the hunt, and he swung down the club.

An otherworldly pressure was released from the club, and Zac felt the force was easily stronger than when he used his [**Nature's Punishment**] along with the Dao of Heaviness. It

contained a titanic strength as it sailed down toward the shield. Its might even forced some soldiers down on their knees before it had even landed.

“No!” Nenotheop roared in anger as he lit up in blazing power.

The next moment it was as though Nenotheop’s spear turned into a laser as it elongated and aimed straight toward Billy’s heart in an attempt to instantly kill him. Zac’s eyes widened in alarm as he immediately jumped up and changed the Dao infusion to the Dao of Trees in his defensive skill.

There was no way that Billy would be able to dodge in his cumbersome form, and he definitely did not possess enough defense to withstand it. The swirling leaves lit up in emerald luster as they formed a tighter screen in front of him as Zac rose to over 6 meters in the air to intercept the strike.

With a growl, Zac also swung [**Verun’s Bite**] with all his might to stop the attack. However, the attack far surpassed what he had expected. It looked like the emperor wasn’t holding back when he tried to kill Billy.

It felt like he had been hit by a truck when Zac’s axe collided with the incoming fractal spear. Luckily he barely managed to change the trajectory, and the attack gored a large wound in Billy’s shoulder instead of piercing his heart. The attack went straight through Billy’s body, continuing for hundreds of meters.

Zac wasn’t much better off as the collision slammed him into the ground with enough force to crack a rib and push the air out of his lungs. Worse yet, he had clearly been exposed since he sensed multiple stares at him as he tried to orient himself.

“It’s you!” Nenotheop exclaimed with widened eyes as he stared straight at Zac.

Billy wailed in pain from the attack, but thanks to Zac he managed to keep his attack going as it swung down at the shield with world-ending force. A huge shockwave rippled outward as the shield cracked, causing widespread damage to the cultivators who maintained it. Some of the weaker soldiers

even exploded from the force, causing multiple fountains of gore to erupt around the Medhin Soldiers.

Ylvas also managed to seize the opportunity while the emperor's attention was on Billy and Zac, and managed to stab his sword deep into Nenotheop's gut. Nenotheop growled in anger and was forced to refocus his efforts at the trio who assaulted him with newfound vigor, ignoring their mounting wounds.

Zac's ears were ringing but he knew he couldn't slack off, so he ignored the pain and forced himself to his feet. The defensive shield had a few large cracks from Billy's strike, but it was rapidly repairing itself. Zac didn't hesitate as he activated [**Loamwalker**] to flash inside the array.

A few cultivators tried to stop his approach but a dozen people were instantly bisected by a huge fractal edge tearing straight through them. Zac looked back and saw a pale Billy who was rapidly shrinking.

"Billy, good job! Return to the back lines and heal up," Zac shouted.

Billy nodded and started lugging back with slightly unsteady steps, avoiding errant attacks as best he could. Many of the melee warriors even chose to use their own bodies to protect his retreat, since Billy was clearly one of their aces. Billy's part in this assault was over, and he had delivered far beyond what Zac could have expected.

The force behind that swing was just insane. Five enormous fractal edges appeared at the edge of Zac's axe, and Zac's aura was finally completely unleashed as he looked at the soldiers who instinctually stepped back from the billowing killing intent that he emitted.

Billy had held up his part of the bargain, and now it was time for him to uphold his.

Chapter 261: Catastrophic Losses

Zac sighed in relief when he saw that Billy was out of harm's way. Billy's attack was extremely impressive coming from someone in the F-Grade, but there were also clear drawbacks to it. He was mostly defenseless as he ran toward the shield, and if Zac hadn't protected him with all his might the giant would have died before even getting his attack to land. It also seemed to consume all of Billy's energy since he was completely spent after just one swing.

And while the attack was extremely strong it wasn't very quick. Both Zac and Ogras would have no problem to avoid it with their movement skills. But it was a perfect attack to destroy an immobile object, and Zac couldn't imagine the power Billy would be able to exhibit when he reached E-Grade. He only needed a good team that would be able to help him bring his monstrous strength to bear.

There was also the issue of his transformation and golden blood. Did Billy possess a bloodline, or had he attained a special constitution somehow? He had never heard of a skill changing the color of one's blood, and the change in Billy's appearance along with that immense aura seemed to be something greater than a skill.

But now was not the time to go over such things.

Waves of power radiated from Zac as he completely unleashed his aura. The five enormous fractal edges gained a silver sheen, having been infused with the Dao of Sharpness. But before he unleashed his carnage Zac threw a gaze at Nenotheop, just in case he was preparing another of those monstrous long-ranged attacks.

The emperor looked completely enraged from the turns in the battle, and was relentlessly attacking the Berum trio. He almost looked like a god of war from the huge aura he emitted, and a large fractal shone in the air behind him. It seemed to be one of his skills rather than an effect of the War Arrays, and it provided the emperor with an odd but deadly effect.

Right when Zac glanced over the emperor stabbed at Ylvas, but the fractal behind him flared and it suddenly was as though two realities were superimposed. Somehow the emperor was also attacking the large woman at the same time, with the same weapon, breaking the laws of physics.

It was obviously not an even fight, just like Ylvas had feared. Nenotheop was perhaps even more powerful than they had anticipated. In the short moment that Zac had used to get inside the shield the large woman had lost her left arm, and the mage was on his knees with blood freely flowing from his side.

Even Ylvas was barely holding on, and wounds kept appearing on him as he desperately tried to maintain the status quo until Zac could kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that time was running out, and that they might not even last 15 more seconds. The next moment the ground beneath Zac exploded as he pushed toward the hesitant army.

He instantly moved to the thick of it with **[Loamwalker]**, knowing he had to cause as much damage as possible before Nenotheop could intervene. He also didn't want to stay in one spot, in case Nenotheop chose to discard the lives of his soldiers to attack him while he was inside the mob.

Zac's arm was a blur as the fractal edges shot in five directions. Four of them were completely unimpeded, causing widespread death in the blink of an eye. Blood formed huge pools as bisected corpses fell by the wayside, but Zac knew he had barely made a dent in the Emperor's combat power.

The soldiers that had died were not part of the personal guard, but rather random elite soldiers who helped bolster the shields and the war array. The fifth attack had been launched toward the two generals that stood behind Nenotheop, but before it

could reach them and the personal guard another shield sprung up, covering them inside.

A frown formed on Zac's face as he rushed toward them, shooting off two more edges in their direction as he ran. The soldiers inside the second shield were clearly the personal guard, and the targets he had to eliminate. The protection wobbled and flickered from the two massive attacks, but it held true. But Zac noted that the soldiers maintaining the shield had paled, and a few were even bleeding from their eyes and ears.

Zac chose the simplest means to try to break it, and he slammed into it with the force of a speeding train, his body imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Multiple cracks appeared on the barrier, and Zac didn't relent as he swung at the cracks with brutal fervor, each strike containing enough power to kill an E-Grade beast.

It took two seconds of frenzied attacks, but he broke through and squeezed himself inside like a fox in the henhouse. A few of the surviving elite soldiers had tried to impede his progress, but Zac's attacks had made the outer shield completely break. The melee fighters from the Berum resistance had joined the battle by now, desperately fighting the remaining soldiers to stop them from adding their powers to new shields or the War Array.

Fear and hatred shone in the soldiers' eyes as Zac got inside the inner shield, leaving him standing just ten meters away from the personal guard. His aura was completely unleashed, and it actually managed to somewhat destabilize the War array that was still maintained. No one wanted to be the first to attack him since they had all seen what he had done with over a hundred soldiers outside the inner shield.

The status quo only lasted for a second before Zac rushed forward, his axe already growing another fractal edge. The personal guards did everything in their power to keep him away, shooting a wide array of attacks right at him. The salvo consisted mainly of magical attacks, and over ten fireballs slammed right into his body. But Zac only roared and ignored

the pain, confident that his enormous Endurance would pull him through.

However, in the next moment he sensed some danger, and he swung out his axe toward the left instead of at the soldiers by sheer instinct. A glowing gauntlet appeared almost as though out of nowhere, and the two collided with enough force that the closest soldiers were thrown away. Some even sporting wounds from the shockwave as they quickly got back on their feet.

The next moment a piercing pain erupted in Zac's side as a dagger was firmly lodged inside and it felt like the wound was both frozen and burned at the same time. It was the two generals who had personally moved to stop him, and both were right at the E-Grade bottleneck judging by their power.

Zac glared at the soldiers who kept imbuing the emperor with power while keeping an eye on him, and he growled in frustration as he turned his attention to the two generals. He tried to grab the dagger-wielding one, but he slunk out of his grasp like an eel, quickly moving out of reach.

The other one also distanced himself as quickly as he could, but that strategy did not come without downsides. They knew they couldn't compete head-on with him, but if they moved away they also exposed their subordinates.

A fractal edge almost instantly grew to over fifteen meters and it skewered almost as many soldiers without Zac even moving the axe. There were less than a hundred members of the personal guard, so a good chunk of them instantly died from that sneak attack.

There was no way to maintain a fractal edge that long, and it disintegrated after Zac managed to kill just a few more of them. But it did cause some chaos in the ranks, making the soldiers unsure whether they should empower their emperor or defend themselves.

Zac wouldn't relent as he pushed forward, but an enormous fist appeared above him, slamming straight down. Not only that, but it also formed an invisible restriction on him in an effort to stop his movement. The fist contained some sort of

Restrictive Dao, making the attack resemble [**Nature's Punishment**] a bit.

A roar escaped from Zac's throat as he swung his axe up to intercept the incoming strike, but as he did he felt another of the stinging wounds erupt in his upper back. If he didn't have his high luck to warn him his heart would have been pierced, but he managed to tilt mid-swing enough so that the wound was mostly superficial.

An idea suddenly appeared in Zac's mind and he stopped his swing mid-motion. Next, he instantly released his Dao Field of Heaviness, making the assassin slightly stumble when he tried to move away. Zac took advantage of that brief window and grabbed him, instantly sealing his fate.

A crunching sound echoed out, and the next moment the enormous fist slammed into Zac, causing the whole mountain to shake. A second later the fist disintegrated, showing a large crater five meters deep. At the bottom was a mangled piece of flesh, crushed beyond recognition.

Next to it was Zac's bloody form, though in far better shape. Zac got up to his feet with a groan and used [**Loamwalker**] to push out of the pit. He had bet he would be able to endure the attack with his defensive layers, and he had been correct. The next moment he was once again amongst soldiers and the carnage resumed.

The general who was still alive desperately tried to impede him, but he had just spent a huge amount of energy on his final strike, and he no longer had his teammate to share the burden. Zac was like an enraged boar as he swung wildly, and the general only barely survived due to a dozen of the personal guards switching their attention to protect their leader instead of the emperor who was clearly in control of his battle.

But even with the help of the personal guard the general only managed to delay Zac in his goal to kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that delay might be the difference between winning and losing the war. Over ten seconds had already passed since he entered the shield, and he knew that he was almost out of time.

Energies blazed around him as Zac completely ignored his energy expenditure, aiming to completely and utterly destroy the remaining general. His large gauntlets were already bloody scrap metal from Zac's assault, and he was barely staying on his feet as it was. But his eyes burned with conviction as he glared at Zac.

"Empyrean Sacrifice!" he roared with a hoarse voice, and Zac's senses almost immediately sensed danger.

He tried to move backward, but suddenly it was as though he was stuck inside tar. The remaining 60 soldiers in the personal guard still in fighting condition all had their focus on Zac by now, and they seemed to be cooperating on some array with somber expressions.

An enormous ball of chaotic energies was quickly growing right between himself and the soldiers, and Zac knew he had to get away. Zac's danger-sense only got more and more urgent, and Zac desperately fought to move through the restriction that had been placed on him. His muscles strained as he finally managed to force himself free from the suppression.

But before he had a chance to activate [**Loamwalker**] the huge ball of energy exploded, turning the whole world white.

Zac barely had time to activate [**Nature's Barrier**] imbued with the Dao of Trees, followed up by imbuing himself with the Dao of Hardness. He even activated a defensive option of his golden robe to cover him. But even with all that, it felt like he was blasted into pieces when the explosion hit him, and he was thrown away like a ragdoll.

His mind was drifting away as he flew, but Zac barely managed to refocus his mind. As soon as he landed he immediately got himself ready to once again assault the soldiers, ignoring the pathetic state of his body. But the moment he saw the personal guard he knew there would be no need for that.

Almost nothing remained of the whole area where the personal guard once stood, apart from a crater and a few burned remains of bodyparts. One of the few corpses that wasn't

completely obliterated sported two mangled gauntlets, indicating that not even the last general had survived the final blast.

Empyrean Sacrifice seemed to have been the final attack of the personal guard, sacrificing their lives to take Nenotheop's enemies with them to the grave. And as he looked down at this burned body covered in wounds he knew that perhaps only himself and the two Dominators would be able to survive a blast of that magnitude. He wasn't even sure he would have survived unless he had just gained a huge amount of Endurance down in the caverns.

The personal guard hadn't been the only ones affected by the explosion though. A large number of soldiers from both camps had been too close to the battle and became casualties as well. Even those who had maintained a healthy distance wasn't spared as their bodies were crushed by the shockwave. It was clear that both sides had sustained catastrophic losses.

His body hurt, but at least his first task was done, and the whole personal guard was eradicated. Zac victoriously looked over at the main battle, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw the scene. The situation was even worse than he'd feared. The large woman was lying dead on the ground, and the mage was barely alive from the look of him.

Even Ylvas was in dire straits, drenched in blood and missing a leg. He somehow stood upright with the help of the Cosmic Energy, but his aura was chaotic. If Nenotheop hadn't received a backlash from his War Array getting ripped to pieces he might have already killed the Berum champion.

The fight was about to be wrapped up, and Zac didn't even dare to waste a single breath. Torrential amounts of energy gathered in his forearm while he launched a fractal edge at the emperor to buy some time. It was as though Nenotheop had eyes in the back of his head, and he immediately swung his spear in a wide arc. The swing disintegrated the fractal edge even though it was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness.

"You actually survived the Empyrean Sacrifice. You truly are a human cockroach. But I do not need a War Array to handle the

two of you,” Nenotheop sneered at the approaching Zac.

Zac didn't bother with an answer, but the space above him suddenly cracked, and a huge wooden hand emerged.

Chapter 262: Spear World

Zac came out of the gates swinging, knowing that Ylvas wouldn't last much longer. He needed to finish this as quickly as possible before they completely ran out of energy because there was still the issue of Vasidas and the missing Thea.

Energy ripped around Zac as he pushed forward, activating **[Hatchetman's Rage]** in order to boost the wooden hand to the absolute limit of what he could unleash. Both the hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** and himself were rapidly approaching Nenotheop until Zac finally stopped 50 meters away while the hand kept moving.

Nenotheop's aura had noticeably weakened due to losing the effect of the War Array, but he still emitted a tremendous fighting spirit. It didn't look like he had expended much energy to whittle down Ylvas and his generals, meaning Zac would essentially be fighting him at full capacity.

The large fractal that hovered behind the emperor moved to intercept the giant hand, stopping ten meters away from Nenotheop like a shield. Surprisingly the emperor started to launch a frenzy of stabs at the fractal, his arm and spear turning into a blur.

Zac's brows rose in alarm when he saw that the fractal both multiplied and empowered the strikes, resulting in hundreds of spear-silhouettes stabbing into the approaching hand. It felt as though his whole arm was getting eviscerated by the relentless attacks, and wood chips were raining down on the ground as each spear fractal ripped away piece by piece.

A sudden burst of energy made the emperor stop in his tracks, and he quickly turned in alarm when two fractal snakes ripped toward him from behind. They weren't very large, reaching only a few meters in length, but they emitted terrifying energy.

Both were pitch black, and it appeared like they had small horns in their foreheads.

They flew toward Nenotheop in a swirling circular manner, forming almost what looked like a spring as they approached. An azure fractal sword traveled in the empty space within the spring the two snakes formed, and it was as though the snakes guarded the real attack on its way toward its target. The attack originated from Ylvas who had paled and fallen on his hands and knees after the attack.

The emperor growled in frustration as he ripped an amulet from his chest and threw it at **[Nature's Punishment]** before he focused his attention on the incoming snake-strike. Clearly, he considered an attack from an actual E-Grade warrior a higher threat than that of Zac who was only level 63. Even the fractal swapped position to instead be pointed toward Ylvas.

A torrent of spears shimmering with lethality moved to intercept Ylvas' strike, but the two snakes that protected the sword strike suddenly opened their mouths and the space in front of them started to distort. It was as though they had small black holes in their mouths as they caused a huge suction of the area in front of them, dragging everything inside.

Everything in the vicinity was sucked into the maws of the snakes, and even the spear fractals from the emperor were simply swallowed up by the two snakes as they flew closer. But there was a limit to how many attacks they could gobble up since they got more and more engorged as they kept diverting the incoming attacks.

Finally, one of the snakes couldn't take anymore and it flashed ahead of the other one and appeared almost right in front of Nenotheop who swung his spear to destroy the incoming threat. But the moment the spear touched the beast it exploded like a bomb, instantly releasing dozens of spear strikes in every direction.

Ylvas had turned the emperor's unceasing attacks against him as the snake spat out everything it had eaten at the last second with almost as much force as the attacks initially had. The emperor's fractal once again flashed and Nenotheop almost

turned into a six-armed asura as he deflected attack after attack with impossible speed.

But he didn't even have time to destroy half of the attacks before the second snake flashed over, and this one exploded by itself even without being attacked. It released another barrage of attacks at him, joining the remaining strikes an effort to rip the emperor to shreds. Nenotheop was barely visible within the sea of spear strikes, but an almost blindingly strong golden glow erupted around him.

It looked as though a bomb exploded, erupting outward from the emperor and disintegrated all the fractal strikes around him in an instant. The assault wasn't over however, as the final blade strike that had been hidden within the two snakes flashed forward, stabbing straight through the golden glow and flying toward Nenotheop's heart.

Unfortunately, the emperor managed to move his spear in time, hitting the azure sword-strike, though he only managed to swing it downward without much force. He hadn't been able to gather enough energy or momentum for the defense since he had been occupied by the surprise attacks from the two snakes. Nenotheop did what he could, but he wasn't able to completely destroy the fractal that likely even consisted of Ylvas' life force.

The fractal sword tore into his side, causing blood to cascade down his golden robes, and it was the first real wound that Nenotheop had received during the whole battle. But Nenotheop had no time to react before a huge crash erupted from behind him.

Ylvas' attack had taken less than a second, and during that time the defensive amulet had tried to stave off [**Nature's Punishment**]. But some defensive tool had no way to stop the onslaught of Zac's ultimate attack. Everything he had was loaded into that strike, and it was even empowered by [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

The hand had undergone a rebirth after Nenotheop was forced to stop attacking since it was imbued by the Dao of Trees with its concept of life from death. If one wanted to stop the hand

you would need to completely destroy it, or it would just grow back.

The defensive amulet was a high-quality item, but it was no match to the compounding power of Zac's strongest attack, and its shield fractured and broke after just a split second with a huge explosion. The hand continued unencumbered straight toward Nenotheop who had just been stabbed by Ylvas.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately slammed down his hand with as much force as he could muster. **[Nature's Punishment]** fell like a slap from the gods at Nenotheop who roared in anger. Blazing energies swirled around him as he actually threw his spear straight up at the incoming hand.

A tremendous shockwave blasted outward when the spear slammed into the hand, and an enormous crack in the mountain formed right beneath that spanned the whole summit. Zac screamed in pain as a hole was ripped open in his hand when the power in the spear managed to do the same to **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Pushing down the pain, Zac arduously formed a fist with his broken hand, and finally managed to slam it down on Nenotheop. Another tremendous shockwave erupted when a crater over ten meters deep formed. The fist was on a completely other level compared to the attack that Nenotheop's general generated earlier, and even the Star Ox would have been turned into meat paste from the attack.

However, a badly wounded but very much living Nenotheop got back to his feet at the bottom of the crater with a growl, making Zac sigh in regret. E-Grade warriors were a pain in the ass to kill. The next moment another wave of shocking energies gathered around Nenotheop and he rose into the air like a D-Grade powerhouse.

“Are you still going to hide, unfilial child?!” he shouted, and suddenly his fractal reappeared after having been destroyed by **[Nature's Punishment]**. “Spear World!”

The fractal started growing and in an instant, it spanned hundreds of meters in the air above them. Most of the summit was covered, and Zac couldn't help but get a bad feeling when

he sensed the immense power that the fractal radiated. Zac was confused at first, but he soon understood the meaning of Nenotheop's words.

Vasidas was not only a restraining force upon Zac, but perhaps even more-so on Nenotheop himself. He was afraid of expending too much energy, making himself vulnerable to a coup by his own son. But it was clear Nenotheop was no longer holding back, judging by the monstrous energies that he was burning up.

Zac wanted to jump toward him before Nenotheop unleashed whatever he had planned, but a sense of impending crisis immediately made him swing his axe toward his back. To his surprise, a fractal spear had stabbed at him from nowhere, and Zac barely managed to destroy it due to his honed instincts.

Zac quickly glanced around and saw that no matter where he looked people were assaulted by innumerable spear attacks, making it seem like they were all caught in a hurricane made of fractal spears. Not even the remaining forces of Medhin weren't spared, and they desperately wailed before being struck down by their own leader.

It was as though the spears were blind while they tried to cause utter annihilation. Even the palace in the distance started to collapse as spears kept slamming into it as well. This type of attack must be the emperor's strongest attack that he had held off on using. It must cost an insane amount of Cosmic Energy judging by the widespread damage, and it also seemed to not care about friend or foe.

Zac's thoughts immediately went to Thea, and he desperately started running toward the emperor as he deflected the strikes he could stop and endured those he couldn't with his body or **[Nature's Barrier]**. Wounds were racking up at an alarming rate, and he knew he wouldn't last too long even with his Endurance and defensive measures. Ylvas was even worse off as he was completely spent from his earlier fight and the ultimate attack.

Even the final general had fallen it seemed. He had erected a wooden barrier around himself, but the consecutive attacks

had quickly whittled it down and killed the man inside. And if someone of that power fell in just a few seconds there was no need to guess how the weaker people on the summit were faring.

“Flee from the summit!” Ylvas desperately shouted as he fended off spears coming from every direction while hobbling toward Nenotheop as well.

But it was to no avail. The normal resistance fighters couldn't even stop the spears from wounding them, let alone block them while they made their way off the mountains. People were falling one by one across the whole summit, and in just a few seconds less than 10 percent remained. Those who were spared were mainly the lucky ones who were at the edge of the fractal in the sky since they managed to get out quickly enough.

The emperor kept hovering in the air with his spear pointed up toward the fractal in the sky, and Zac started shooting fractal edges of his own at him as he ran. However, they were whittled down by the innumerable spears in the area and didn't even reach half-way before being destroyed.

Zac growled as he activated [**Loamwalker**] and sped toward the emperor at maximum speed. The next moment he pushed himself off the ground toward him and launched a series of fractal edges in a split second. The first two held a dark metallic luster, and they were imbued with the Dao of Hardness.

The two strikes managed to withstand the innumerable fractal spears as they paved the way toward the emperor, and the following three strikes were imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. The emperor wasn't defenseless however, as tens of spears suddenly appeared below him as they ripped the first three fractal edges to shreds in an instant and descended toward Zac.

Then a shadow suddenly appeared in front of him as a blast of energies erupted, destroying all of the spears between Zac and Nenotheop. It was Ylvas who had expended even more life force to destroy the final defense.

“Go!” Ylvas coughed as he started falling toward the ground stretching out his entwined hands.

Zac grit his teeth as he used Ylvas’ hands as a plateau, and Ylvas launched him up toward the emperor with all the force he could muster before slamming into the ground like a meteor. The emperor, finally forced to redirect his spear from pointing at the fractal, stabbed it straight toward Zac’s heart.

Zac knew he only had one shot at this, so he completely removed any defensive measures as he slightly tilted his body, letting the spear pierce straight through his body. However, it just missed his heart, and with Zac’s momentum he was within arm’s reach of the emperor in an instant.

Nenothep tried to rip out his spear but it was completely stuck since Zac had imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness while he swung his axe quick as lightning. Out of options Nenothep finally released the grip of his spear to push himself backward, but the last second a small fractal edge grew out from **[Verun’s Bite]**.

Three thumps were soon heard as Zac, Nenothep, and Nenothep’s head fell into the ground, and Zac was immediately infused with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. It was far beyond anything he had ever gained before, and he knew that he hadn’t just received one level from the kill.

The emperor had been too reliant on his weapon and had tried to hold on to it until the end. It was likely that no one had ever managed to disarm him since he had stood at the peak his whole life. It allowed Zac a brief window to catch the old warrior off-guard when he refused to let go, and Zac decapitated him in one swift swing. Between the E-Grade edge of **[Verun’s Bite]** and the Dao of Sharpness, even an old monster couldn’t keep his head after such an attack.

Zac let his axe feed on the blood of the headless emperor, and Verun screamed in exultation in his mind. Afterward he slowly dragged out the emperor’s spear, a groan escaping his lips. Blood flowed like a river from the wound, but the bleeding quickly slowed down as he ate one of his best healing pills.

After that, he hastened over to Ylvas' side. His own state was pretty pathetic, but the champion of Berum was truly on his last legs. Zac quickly got down on his knee and fed him one of his top-grade healing pills while quickly creating a tourniquet for his missing leg.

“We did it!” Ylvas weakly said, his eyes filling with tears of relief. “That old monster is gone.”

Zac nodded with a smile, but just as Zac started to relax his mind screamed he was in danger.

Chapter 263: Man's Best Friend

Warning bells were going off in Zac's mind and he quickly slammed his axe into the ground right next by the stump of Ylvas' leg. **[Verun's Bite]** sucked in a bit more E-Grade blood from the pool that had formed beneath it making the fractal on the handle blaze in crimson red, allowing Zac to unleash his final trump card. He squeezed some of his remaining Cosmic Energy into his axe, and the enormous form of Verun appeared.

The Tool Spirit was able to localize the threat as if by instinct, and it immediately pounced to the left and swiped its large claws seemingly into the air. A groan could be heard as a young man appeared out of nowhere, sinister energies swirling around his hands. It almost looked like stars were hovering around them, and the skill reminded Zac of Abby's large eye.

A large gash stretched across the man's whole upper body from Verun's surprise attack. He barely had time to land before the enormous beast bit at him with almost impossible speed. The primordial beast ruthlessly swung his head back and forth in an effort to rip his prey to shreds, blood cascaded all over the area. Unfortunately, Zac sensed no incoming Cosmic Energy, indicating that the man was still alive.

The assassin had been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance, but he managed to avoid any fatal injuries even when he was in the maw of the tool spirit. A purple light suddenly shone through the teeth of Verun, and it grew in intensity until it was almost blinding in just a second.

The next moment the light quickly disappeared, before a huge explosion took place inside Verun's maw. The Tool Spirit's semi-corporeal form was completely obliterated, and Zac was

forced a few steps back from the intense energies from the explosion.

Worry filled his heart when he saw Verun's shape fall apart, but he soon breathed out in relief as he sensed the spirit returning to the axe, while the red fractal dimmed down. It only sent him a sense of frustration that it had failed, and that it needed to rest again.

The assassin had managed to stave off Verun, but he was in a pitiful state. Grisly wounds covered his whole body, especially around his stomach where Verun had chomped down with its massive teeth. Zac could see his innards and a few wounds through the huge wounds, and he was surprised the assassin could even stand up from how he looked.

However, Zac wasn't completely relieved even though his body was in disrepair. The man's aura was completely unstable as it fluctuated around him, but the energy the guy emitted was no joke. His eyes were also sharp as he glared at Zac, indicating he hadn't completely lost his fighting strength. Judging by the energy fluctuations and clothes from the man in front of them Zac knew this could only be one person.

"Vasidas," Ylvas growled as he aimed his sword at him, arduously getting back on his leg.

However, Zac knew that it was just empty bluster. The old champion's body was completely wrung out from his last attacks, and he was only conscious by sheer will-power. If he squeezed out any more life-force to attack, he would either turn into a cripple or die.

The situation was the worst-case scenario. He knew there was a decent risk of Vasidas doing this, and it was one of the reasons he had tried to end the fight as quickly as possible. He had also entered the weakened state since the boost from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** had run out.

But he knew he couldn't show weakness at this juncture, and resolutely gripped his axe while his other hand moved toward his Cosmos Sack. He didn't have some secret weapon there, but his mind went to the Spiritual Pill he found on the Alchemist's Mountain.

Just a whiff from the vapors accumulated in the cauldron had not only restored his energy and given him a level, it had also revived him out of his weakened state. He wasn't sure what would happen if he ingested the pill in his current situation, but he didn't really have many other alternatives if the man in front of him tried something.

“Well played, I did not see that coming. Owning a weapon with a spiritual form, impressive,” the man panted before looking down at his wretched appearance. “I guess today's game is over. But I have a feeling we will see each other again.”

“Where's Thea?” Zac said with a frown while he held his axe at the ready.

It sounded like Vasidas would give up since his sneak attack failed, but Zac wouldn't take his word for it.

“Ms. Marshall is having tea over in the gazebo on the other side of the summit,” Vasidas said. “I always uphold my promises.”

“Today is my loss, but The Great Redeemer's machinations are unavoidable,” the voice of Vasidas echoed across the summit, drawing glares from the Berum forces who stood in the distance.

Zac hesitated for a second, but in the end, he chose to not force a battle or try a sneak attack. Killing this man wasn't his main goal, and it had a high risk of back-firing. Zac knew he had made the right decision, when Vasidas just slowly faded into nothingness, both his aura and body suddenly gone.

“I don't believe that,” Ylvas said with a sigh, plopping down on the ground. “Fate is everchanging.”

“Are you okay by yourself?” Zac asked, eager to head in the direction that Vasidas indicated.

“Go, find your lass. My men will keep me safe,” Ylvas said as he popped another healing pill.

The moment that Vasidas left, the few remaining Medhin warriors heedlessly fled down the mountain, abandoning any thought of resistance. Of the Berum warriors, only a handful

remained as well, most having died by the Emperor's final attack.

Everyone sported heavy wounds, but they formed a three-layer thick shield wall around Ylvas, allowing their leader to heal up. Zac wasn't sure they would really amount to much if Vasidas came back, but he needed to get going and didn't say anything. As Zac left Ylvas side the soldiers all also wordlessly bowed in his direction, showing their thanks for his part in the war.

"Do you know if Billy okay?" Zac asked one of the guards surrounding Ylvas before he left.

"The large one? He fell asleep some ways down the mountain, a few people are guarding him," the man said. "That smash was amazing."

Zac nodded in relief before he started running over toward the ruins of the summit palace. He was about to enter it, but he stopped himself the last moment to pop one of his top-grade healing pills in his mouth. He also took out both a Divine Crystal and an E-Grade Nexus Crystal to both heal and restore himself as quickly as possible.

He was extremely wrung out, and if he wasn't careful he'd turn into his Draugr-form again, which might lead to untold problems. He also was in no condition to assault a summit array. The frenzied strikes of the emperor's spear-world had turned the palace into ruins, but Zac didn't dare bet his life that it had also destroyed the protective arrays surrounding it.

It was only twenty minutes later he felt strong enough to go ahead. During that time there hadn't been any real changes on the summit. The squads that had veered to the sides to intercept any potential backup had rushed up the mountain after hearing the results of the battle, and they had taken over the task of protecting Ylvas.

A few even stood vigil over Zac while he recuperated, though it wasn't really necessary. While he was spent, it was not to the same degree as when he fought Salvation. The emperor had been far stronger, but Zac had gained a huge upgrade in both

survivability and Cosmic Energy reserves due to his frantic leveling while in his Draugr-form.

He was still far from top shape as he got back to his feet, but Zac felt it should be enough to not get blasted by the array. He took a few steps forward and was immediately inundated in scorching flames. With his high constitution however, it only stung a bit, and he made his way through in just a few seconds.

Soon enough he found the place Vasidas referred to, hidden beyond the rubble at the far end of the palace, overlooking the mountain. Standing there was a small gazebo that was undamaged from Nenotheop's crazed onslaught, likely saved by the fact that it was out of range of the enormous fractal. And sitting there was the familiar face craning her neck to look over the rubble.

"You're okay!" Thea said with wide eyes when she spotted Zac. "I couldn't see the battle due to the palace, apart from that huge fractal toward the end. And was that Billy's head I spotted ten meters in the air?"

Zac smiled as he walked over, a great sense of relief filling his heart.

"Yeah it was Billy, he came to help as well. That guy can really club things," Zac said as he gazed at Thea. "I was worried about you."

Thea's mouth curved upward in a smile for a second, before her eye's turned downcast and she looked down.

"Sorry I caused so much trouble for you," she sighed. "I got too greedy and caused all these problems."

"It's okay. You saved my life with that protective skill from Inevitability. This was the least I could do," Zac answered as he walked inside the gazebo. "What's going on, are you trapped somehow?"

It was a bit curious. The fight ended over twenty minutes ago, but Thea still sat rooted here instead of fleeing or heading over to see what was going on.

"It's these chains," Thea muttered as she swung her leg.

Only now did Zac notice that her right leg was cuffed, and a chain was attached to a fixture in the ground. However, the chain wasn't very thick, and Thea should have no problem ripping it apart even though her main attribute was Dexterity.

"This thing?" Zac said with some confusion as he leaned closer. "Can't you break it?"

"It's some sort of treasure. It saps me of all my energy. The moment I gather any Cosmic Energy the manacle sucks it out and it gets released into the ground by the chain," Thea sighed. "I can't summon any of my strength, it feels like I'm back before the integration."

Now that Zac gave it a proper look it reminded him a bit of the large chains down in the ravine, those that Anzonil once had used in an effort to suppress his disciple. However, these were a much weaker version. Zac curiously looked at it and after a brief hesitation touched the chain with his hand, but he felt nothing. It was the same with the manacle itself, and after prodding about for a minute he managed to open them up.

There wasn't a lock holding the thing in place, but the clasp was tough to unclasp. It likely required at least 100 strength to open, which was impossible for a prisoner in a weakened state. It was a pretty ingenious design and having such a thing would perhaps be very convenient in the future.

"Can I take this?" Zac asked as he looked up, but he was started when he saw Thea's expression.

Her face was flushed, and she glared at him with enraged eyes.

"Had enough yet?" she wheezed out through grit teeth.

"Wha-" Zac tried to ask but stopped himself as his eyes widened.

He finally realized that he had been too engrossed with the design of the chain, and his head had been sandwiched between her knees while he fiddled with the clasp for almost a minute. Zac immediately jumped a few steps away and coughed in embarrassment.

"You should absorb some energy, but we can't stay long," Zac said, completely glossing over the issue. "The emperor is dead

and Vasidas is badly wounded, and who knows, the Dominators might be on their way. It seems they all serve the same person, and they might have an alliance.”

“What? Who?” Thea said with confusion, her curiosity overcoming her anger.

“The Great Redeemer,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Salvation’s master? How is that possible?” Thea said skeptically.

“I am not sure about all the details yet, but it doesn’t look good for either Berum or Earth to be honest,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “Let’s walk as we talk.”

The two started heading back toward Ylvas, and Zac explained what he learned about The Great Redeemer from the old champion, adding in his own speculations as he went. They also told each other what they had been up to since they got separated, though Zac glossed over some parts about his situation that needed to be kept secret.

He was shocked to find out about the defensive skill she used. Its effect was truly amazing. When she had lit up like a Christmas tree as they fell down the cliff, she had activated a teleportation skill. But that skill not only teleported her away, but it also gave an almost absolute defense until she was whisked away as well.

Using the skill had its clear drawbacks though. It took some time to charge up the teleportation, and the cost of the skill was something far more expensive than Cosmic Energy. It cost levels to use, which explained why she hadn’t improved much while he was stuck in the tunnels. Thea herself wasn’t sure exactly how it worked, but her current guess was that the more damage the skill blocked while the teleportation charged up, the higher the cost would be.

The two kept talking and almost forgot that they just had survived a true life-and-death situation. They were dragged out of their bubble from heavy steps quickly approaching them. Zac looked up to see an almost mummified Billy running over with a smile that reached from ear to ear.

“Thea! Billy missed you!”

Chapter 264: The Final Sprint

“Billy! It’s nice to see you,” Thea said with a smile to the incoming giant. “Zac told me you came to save me. You’re a real hero as well.”

“Ha ha, did you see Billy’s Big Thwonk?” Billy said and heroically flexed his muscles, but quickly stopped with a yelp due to his wounds.

“How are your wounds, Billy?” Zac asked.

“Billy will be okay. What happened with the scary spear-guy?” he asked and looked around.

“I beat him up with the help of Alien-man,” Zac said.

Thea threw him a questioning glance, but he only responded with a slightly helpless shrug.

“Alien-man was even worse than Billy,” the giant said as he looked over in Ylvas’ direction. “He will become a pirate with a tree-leg.”

“Actually Billy, you can regrow legs and arms,” Zac explained. “If you eat the right treasures.”

“Aliens are pretty impressive,” Billy nodded sagely, slightly missing the point.

“Uh, yeah,” Zac said and started walking toward Ylvas.

The old champion looked better, but it was still clear that the battle had noticeably aged him. There was a real cost to using life force as a fuel to one’s attacks, and Zac wouldn’t be surprised if Ylvas had lost over 200 years going by his appearance. Then again, that still meant he had much more time remaining than humans had in total before the integration.

“You’re looking better,” Ylvas said with a slightly weak voice as he opened his eyes. “I am glad your friend is okay. Vasidas has been an enigma since our worlds got integrated. I have no idea what he is thinking.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get him as well,” Zac sighed.

“It’s okay. Nenotheop was the spiritual pillar of the Medhin Empire. Losing him and almost half of the Medhin royals in a month should have a huge impact on their morale,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Vasidas is one of the lesser-known royals, usually acting alone. He won’t have the same rallying power as Nenotheop did.”

“We also know more about the truth of the Medhin threat and can begin to spread the news the moment we get back. We might not be able to convince everyone, but a seed of doubt should be planted. Perhaps the Medhin will even become refugees, ousted from their position,” one of the soldiers next to Ylvas added.

“Sounds like you have things in hand. In any case, the three of us will leave now,” Zac said. “We don’t want to risk attracting those two Dominators. You should probably do the same.”

Ylvas nodded and arduously got to his feet.

“I would like to thank you again. Without the assistance of you and Billy, we would never have been victorious in this fight. Your strength is astounding, and I can’t imagine the power you will have when you reach the next stage. As promised, here is your reward,” Ylvas said and reached for his bag.

Zac quickly moved to stop Ylvas hand with a shake of his head.

“There’s no need for that. Everything changed when they caught Thea. I would have gone here with or without you. Besides, I’ve already taken the emperor’s pouch, that’s more than enough. We have the same enemy. Who knows, if you manage to save yourself from The Great Redeemer it might help us on Earth as well,” Zac said.

It was true. They still had no idea exactly what the Redeemer’s plans were, most were still conjecture. Perhaps losing just

one of the planets would ruin the whole thing for him, saving Earth as well. It would be a worthwhile investment to leave Ylvas with his treasure so he could use it in eradicating the Medhin Royals.

Ylvas looked surprised but slowly nodded his head in agreement.

“You will be remembered as the hero of Berum,” Ylvas said and stretched his hand forward. “I hope to meet you again in the vast cosmos.”

Zac grabbed his hand in a farewell before he started walking down the mountain with Billy and Thea in tow. As they walked down the mountain, Zac opened his status screen to allocate his free points. As he expected he'd already reached level 65, and he put the free points into dexterity.

He knew he'd gain a large boost in Strength from the levels awarded from the hunt, so he needed to shore up his Dexterity a bit. Otherwise, there was nothing to note. He hadn't made any progress in his Daos, and he also hadn't gained any title even though Nenotheop was the first proper E-Grade cultivator he defeated.

He wasn't too surprised by the lack of title, but the situation with the Dao was a bit surprising. He had been through an extremely intense fight with the strongest enemy he'd ever encountered. There'd also been at least twenty warriors utilizing various Dao Seeds during that battle, yet he hadn't even gained a spark of inspiration.

It was as though something was missing in the air, or like he had blinders covering his head. If this battle had taken place on Earth, he was sure he would advance one of his seeds. But now he knew there was no point to sit down and meditate since there was nothing to meditate on.

He closed his status screen and turned his focus on his Cosmos Sack next. The moment he touched it he was shocked to the point that he stumbled. Nenotheop was *rich*.

“You okay?” Thea asked with some concern but suddenly understood what was going on when she saw Zac's wide grin

and his hand touching his pouch.

“Just a bit surprised is all,” Zac said.

The Cosmos Sack had expanded with an entirely new section dedicated to Nenotheop’s loot, and it was far bigger than the original space. There were simply mountains of treasure inside, far eclipsing what he gained even when taking Salvation’s treasure.

It was also far more organized, with neatly arrayed sections depending on the type of valuable. There were also roughly thirty piles of random treasure, and Zac immediately realized that was the loot that Nenotheop still hadn’t organized.

One particular item in the unsorted piles suddenly drew his attention. It was a large stone statue where the whole thing was just a face that smiled in an extremely creepy manner, and the reason he recognized it was because he had seen Thea sneak it into her pouch when she thought Zac wasn’t looking when they hunted together.

When Zac had asked about the statue, she had been embarrassed about it until she admitted she liked kitsch and weird memorabilia. The statue wasn’t a treasure, but rather something she wanted to add to her private collection.

“Thea,” Zac said as he stopped, drawing the attention of Billy and Thea who had been talking about their time in the hunt.

Zac moved his hand and suddenly a mountain of treasure appeared in front of him. Thea’s eyes widened in surprise before she looked at Zac.

“My treasures? I thought Vasidas had them?” she said.

“I guess Nenotheop took them from him to pass me on the ladder, though I don’t know if everything is there,” Zac said.

Thea immediately moved toward the pile of loot before she hesitated for a second.

“What do you want in return?” she asked.

“Nothing, they’re yours,” Zac said as he beckoned for her to take it. “More importantly, I have a proposition for you.”

“Thank you, I’ll remember this,” she said with a serious face as she put her treasure into her sack. “What do you have on your mind?”

“I can lend you enough treasure to reach the second spot on the ladder. In return, I’ll come and check out your library three days after the hunt ends. There are some things I want to look into,” Zac explained.

“You’re not worried that someone will pass us on the ladder if you split your loot like that?” Thea hesitantly said.

“That’s impossible,” Zac immediately said with a shake of his head, regretting it a bit when he noticed Thea’s incisive stare. “Also, Billy, how about I give you some treasure as well?”

“Mama said handouts should be saved for those in need, Billy is fine,” Billy said with a shake of his head, completely disinterested.

“But Ogras and I owe you a bit for taking the biggest rat, right?” Zac said, changing tactics. “I’ll just pay our debt right now. It’s not good when there are debts between friends, right?”

Billy seemed to think it over for a bit before he nodded with a smile.

“Right, no debt between friends,” he agreed.

“This all sounds fine, but let’s get away from here first. I don’t want to meet the Dominators while I still only have a small amount of Cosmic Energy in my body,” Thea interjected.

“What are your plans for the last day of the hunt?”

“I will hunt as many beasts as I can here in the core area,” Zac said without hesitation. “The money and Cosmic Energy they give are very good even at my level, better than any hunting ground I have at home.”

“Billy also want to thwunk,” Billy nodded. “Billy is a genius in energy control, the stupid beasts are much easier to hit now.”

“Fine, let’s find a good hunting ground a few hours away, and hunt in the same area. That way we can help each other if we

run into trouble,” Thea nodded.

They left the Medhin-controlled area without any troubles and found a good hunting spot roughly two hours away. They had gone in the opposite direction from the Zones where the two Dominators stayed, which should hopefully ensure they didn’t run into each other.

As soon they arrived Zac forked over enough treasure to place Thea in the second position and Billy in the 8th. Doing so actually kicked Thomas Fischer down to the 11th spot on the ladder, but Zac didn’t really care. It was not like they were allies anyway. Zac also took the opportunity to finally establish an alliance with Billyville before they got ready to split up to hunt beasts.

Each of them was strong enough that they could freely hunt without a party, and it would likely even slow them down to go together. There were a lot of beasts in the forests, but not to the point that three powerhouses could run together without taking food out of each other’s mouths.

“If we don’t see each other again in the hunt we’ll see each other in three days,” Zac said to the other two.

When Zac had explained that he would visit Thea after the hunt Billy immediately insisted that he wanted to come and play as well, so they all agreed to meet in Westerfort, the main town that the Marshall Clan controlled.

Soon, Zac was alone in the forest, ripping through pack after pack of rabid beasts with wild abandon. He had accomplished everything he set out to do, and perhaps even more, in this hunt. It was a disappointment and a problem that the two Dominators would take the top positions in the Hunter-ladder, but there was simply nothing to do about that.

He had gained a score of levels however, and a mountain of loot, which would help Port Atwood thrive in the future. He had also managed to set up quite a few alliances and even found out about the wealthy underworld. Apart from the splinter stuck in his head, the trial had exceeded his wildest expectations.

He couldn't wait to get back now. He had trials to take, Incursions to close, and so many unanswered questions that he needed to look into.

For now though, he had beasts to kill. Zac entered an almost Zen state where he methodically moved from pack to pack, the minutes turning to hours. In just a day, tens of thousands of beasts were ruthlessly mowed down, turning into money and Cosmic Energy for Zac.

Zac thought this would continue until the time ran out, but a shocking change took place when there were only 30 minutes left. He had passed Vasidas on the hunter ladder. The battle against the Medhin hadn't been enough, but between Verun injuring the royal and Zac's mindless grinding he had been pushed to the third spot increasing his position by one.

But just a few seconds later he was once again pushed down a position, and Zac realized that Vasidas didn't want to give up the title. But if there was one thing that Zac could do it was causing widespread damage. His reserves had long restored during the day, and the wound from the spear in his chest wasn't impeding him too much. He no longer held anything back, and fractal blades were soon destroying everything in the valley.

Zac didn't even have time to check the ladder anymore and instead gave everything he had in killing as many beasts as humanly possible until the world finally turned black.

Chapter 265: Ladder Rewards

The huge black walls that delimited the hunting grounds had shrunk at a rapid pace, swallowing hundreds of mountains by the second. In almost no time the darkness was upon him, and Zac only managed to take a last glance at the Eastern Trigram Sect before everything turned black.

[Congratulations on receiving the third position on the Hunter Ladder. Awards distributed.]

The unfeeling voice of the System suddenly echoed in his ears as an enormous surge of energy entered his body.

[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the Gatherer Ladder. Limited Titles Unlocked. Awards distributed.]

[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the aggregated Ladder. Awarded +3 levels and Title Permanence.]

The gatherer announcement wasn't a surprise to Zac, but the hunter ladder was a welcome surprise. The mad dash at the end had proven successful, and he had beat out Vasidas for the third position, which meant he gained another 2 bonus levels from the hunt. But most interesting was the final prompt, a hidden reward of the hunt.

He had hoped that there would be something like this, but he hadn't been sure. While he didn't manage to get the highest position on the Hunter ladder, his average result was the best of all participants.

Inevitability was only on the 4th spot of the Gatherer ladder, getting surpassed by himself, Thea, and Beruv Ylvas. He was a bit surprised that Ylvas managed to beat out the Dominator,

but he guessed he got the help of his army to push him past the Zhix at the end.

Harbinger, the second Dominator, got the 5th position and Starlight, the Ishiate powerhouse, got the 6th. Thomas Fischer had managed to get himself back to the 10th position, while Billy remained at 8th. Neither Billy nor Thea managed to get into the top ten on the hunter ladder, unfortunately, but both were in the top 100. The days of captivity had unfortunately robbed Thea of her opportunity.

Zac guessed that Thomas had used the same tactic as the Medhin Emperor, but he was surprised that he had enough pull to get people to donate their wealth to him. Perhaps it was just a temporary loan though, like he had done with Thea.

However, he was a bit confused by the last reward. The bonus levels weren't very confusing, just what did Title Permanence Mean? The Gatherer prompt also mentioned something about Limited Titles, which might be connected to the permanence. Zac opened the screen to see the results.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	73
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen,

	Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st
Limited Titles	-
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	533 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]
Dexterity	268 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Endurance	698 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]
Vitality	338 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]
Intelligence	119 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Wisdom	132 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Luck	120 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]
Free Points	24
Nexus Coins	[F] 273 280 383

Zac couldn't stop smiling when he saw that his attributes had taken another huge leap, part from his eight bonus levels, and part from his new title. He was also surprised to see that he had gained another row in his status screen, the Limited Titles that were mentioned earlier. However, there was nothing there, and there was no explanation on how Limited Titles differed from normal ones.

He tried focusing on the new row, but no matter what command he tried he couldn't gain any additional information from the empty field. He guessed he would have to ask someone back in Port Atwood about it. Instead, he chose to check out his new title.

[Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st: First Position in Eastern Trigram Hunt. NOTE: Title Permanence Awarded. Reward: All Stats +10, All stats +5%]

It was a pretty huge bonus, though the 10 flat points weren't as exciting any longer after he'd learned about the attribute gain of E-Grade. But the bonus Luck it gave was extremely valuable, and the other attributes would surely help him during his upcoming trials. He wanted to check out a few more things, but he sensed he was getting moved again by the System.

His time inside the blackness was even shorter compared to when the event started, and just ten seconds later he stood in his courtyard. He took a deep breath as tranquility entered his heart for the first time in a while. He hadn't realized it, but ever since his clash with Inevitability there had been a slight dread in the back of his mind, akin to a fear that the boogeyman would suddenly show up.

He had survived however, and he was pretty much safe now on his island. He also knew he would have to change his plans to make his teleporter public. He couldn't risk letting those monsters teleport here. He would only dare to do such a thing when the dominator threat was dealt with.

Before that however, there were so many things to do. He quickly looked around for his mountain of treasure, and he was elated to see that the amazing Cosmic Sack from the hunt was still attached to his belt.

But he frowned a few seconds later when he noticed a problem. He had taken out a random weapon from the sack to make sure it still worked, but when he tried to put it back nothing happened. A few tests later showed that the sack only allowed withdrawals now.

Sighing in disappointment, Zac realized that he couldn't use the sack permanently. He still wasn't in any hurry to empty it out though. He would have to call Calrin and a couple of his best appraisers over to help him go through it first.

"You're back," a voice suddenly said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there.

"Shit, what happened to you?" Zac said with some surprise when he saw a large scar that went from right below his left horn down to his cheek.

"We've got a pretty exciting Mystic Realm on our hands," Ogras explained with a smile.

"Mystic Realm?" Zac repeated. "The infiltrators are dealt with?"

"It cost me most of my savings but they're dead. There were actually a lot of them," Ogras said with a grunt.

"How did you do it?" Zac curiously asked.

"Ordered and set up a large array that covers the whole island. We can use it in the future to find anyone with an odd origin, like invaders or other aliens. But more importantly, how was the haul? We ready to do the inheritances?" Ogras said as his eyes started to glisten with greed.

"The returns were way above what I expected, honestly. But we can't do the inheritance just yet," Zac answered with a smile.

"Why not?" Ogras retorted, not being able to hide some of his impatience.

Zac snickered in response, and the next second a pile of the beautiful marble tiles appeared and covered the courtyard.

"Brazla has hounded me to improve his surroundings since the start. I think it's best we do that before we do the Inheritance. I wouldn't be surprised if he would mess things up for us otherwise," Zac explained.

Ogras' eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded thoughtfully before he threw a scathing glance at the opulent towers rising above the tree line.

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best. Gotta keep that lunatic happy,” Ogras nodded.

“By the way, what is Title Permanence?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

“Title Permanence? No idea,” Ogras said with a frown.

“Where did you hear that?”

“I got it as a bonus reward from the hunt,” Zac said and proceeded to explain the two temporary ladders in the hunt and their respective rewards.

“I think I understand now,” Ogras said with a thoughtful nod.

“Title Permanence might be the best reward you got from that trial.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I’ve already explained that there are a bunch of Mystic Realms out in the multiverse that provide titles,” Ogras started, and Zac nodded in agreement. “However, most of those places only provide Limited Titles.”

“Limited Titles?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had a vague recollection of Alyn mentioning it, but that was during the month when she tried to cram a lifetime’s worth of knowledge into his head while he mined Nexus Crystals.

“You can only have three Limited Titles at a time. If you get a new one you will have to discard one of the old ones or skip on getting the new one. They are separate from the normal titles,” Ogras explained.

“What, really?” Zac asked with some disappointment.

“You should be happy it’s like that. Just imagine if some wealthy assholes from the supreme clans spent a few hundred years traveling from Mystic Realm to Mystic Realm, getting thousands of titles? They would become monsters,” Ogras snorted.

“Titles are a bonus from The Ruthless Heavens, but there is a limit to how much it can give,” Ogras said. “You can’t have the attributes of a C-Grade old monster while at F-Grade.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Zac said with a shrug. “What’s this got to do with title permanence?”

“The hunt doesn’t sound like something that should give permanent titles,” Ogras said. “I think the Title Permanence reward given to you is The Ruthless Heavens turning your Limited Title into a normal Title. That way it does not take up one of your slots. Is it together with your other titles?”

“It is,” Zac nodded after a second.

The face of Ogras started to scrounge up in a familiar way, and Zac felt a tirade was incoming, but a thought suddenly struck Zac.

“Do the Towers of Eternity give Limited Titles as well?” Zac asked.

“No, it’s one of the rare opportunities that gives real Titles. That’s why it’s so popular. Apart from the Tower, you can almost only find places giving Permanent Titles by serendipity, like finding a rare treasure,” Ogras explained. “That your hunt awarded title permanence is likely a one-time thing.”

Zac nodded in understanding. There were a lot of things Zac wanted to ask the demon about the current situation of Port Atwood, and he was also curious about the Mystic Realm. However, there was one thing that trumped every other matter in importance, and it couldn’t wait.

“More importantly, I think we might be in deep shit,” Zac said with a somber expression.

Ogras’ eyes hardened, looking at Zac with a frown.

“What’s going on?”

From there Zac recounted the parts of the hunts containing the battle with Salvation, the appearance of Inevitability, and what he’d learned from Beruv Ylvas. He finally added his own conclusions and guesswork what he thought was going on.

Ogras had an unprecedentedly serious face after having heard what Zac said.

“We need to have a meeting, immediately. We should hold it at the Towers of Myriad Dao so that Spirit can provide input as well. I’ll gather the council,” Ogras responded.

Zac completely agreed, so in just twenty minutes people started to gather in front of the doorways leading into the Repository. Zac was already there, and he smiled when he saw his sister running toward him. Kenzie threw herself in his arms, hugging him tightly.

“I’m glad you’re okay. Lyla made the hunt seem like a real hell,” she said with red-rimmed eyes.

“It’s good to see you,” Zac said with a warm smile before his brose rose in some surprise when he realized what Kenzie said. “Lyra is actually okay?”

“Yes, but she returned after only 6 days. She said she got a token she could crush to return back home,” Kenzie nodded. “What happened to you? Did you find anything cool?”

“Let’s talk inside,” Zac smiled as he looked around at the others.

Abby floated not far away, and the council was all present apart from a few who likely were managing the other islands. Calrin was also there, his eyes glued to Zac’s Cosmos Sack. Zac had also asked Ogras to bring Julia, and she stood some distance from the others looking a bit unsure of what to do.

Zac felt that the intelligence he’d gathered during the hunt was just too important to keep to himself, so he had already decided to brief Julia and then send her back as soon as possible. Since it looked like everyone else was present Zac led the way inside the towers.

Chapter 266: Council

“Why have so many come to beseech The Great Sage? I am sorry, but I do not accept disciples,” an arrogant voice echoed through the huge hall as the leaders of Port Atwood entered the Towers of Myriad Dao.

The next moment Brazla appeared, this time donned in a golden cultivator’s robe. Behind him was a huge golden sword that radiated a divine might, though Zac knew it was just an illusion. However, those who entered these halls for the first time couldn’t stop themselves from gasping, much to the Tool Spirit’s Delight.

“We need to hold an extremely important meeting,” Zac explained, hurrying to add some compliments when he saw the Tool Spirit’s frown. “And I felt it would be rude to not include The Great Sage in such an important event. Who else would we turn to for wisdom?”

That seemed to placate the Tool Spirit, and it quickly took a pose trying to convey wisdom. It might have worked if it wasn’t for Brazla’s nose pointing so far up in the air that his face was almost looking straight up.

Those in the group who hadn’t had the pleasure to meet Brazla before couldn’t help but look back and forth between Zac and the Machiavellian Tool Spirit with utter confusion. Zac himself felt like he had swallowed a pile of shit, but he had to admit Brazla was far more learned than the others here.

“Very well, the great Brazla will listen in on your meeting,” he said and swung his sleeve.

The next moment an extremely opulent conference table stood in front of them. However, even Zac couldn’t stop himself from glaring at the Tool Spirit when he saw the seating arrangements. There was one massive throne wrought from

crystals and gold standing at the end, and it was pretty obvious Brazla saved that one for himself.

As for the others, there were simple wooden stools that were so low that if they sat down on them, they would barely be able to see above the table. It looked like Ogras' eyes would pop out of their sockets, but before he could explode Zac intervened.

“Is this the hospitality of The Great Brazla?” Zac said with some disappointment as he took out another inscribed tile. “I even brought these supreme tiles at great personal cost to beautify your surroundings, but if this is the reception we will receive, I should probably get some simpler things.”

He felt a bit shameless about his words, but common sense held no sway under these roofs, so he could only play along. Brazla seemed almost entranced by the beautiful tiles, and a second later the paltry stools were replaced with proper chairs for everyone.

“I have gathered you all today to brief you on my experiences inside the hunt. I have learned some extremely troubling things about our new world, and need your input on how we should proceed from here,” Zac started the meeting without any preamble.

The mood around the table quickly got serious, with even Brazla staying quiet as Zac described the events of the hunt. Of course, he glossed over some parts, such as his dual classes and his meeting with Anzonil, and anything about the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

“So, there you have it. It is very possible that an old monster is currently heading toward us, and it does not seem it would end well if he found us. We need to figure out some precautions against this,” Zac finally said as he looked at the faces around the table.

There was a subdued silence, and most were looking down at the table with a frown or in fear. Zac understood the feeling well. There were so many enemies to contend with as is, and suddenly there was an even stronger bad guy thrown into the mix.

“Excuse me, did you say that there were no incursions on this other planet you partook the trial with?” Abby suddenly said, her enormous eye glistening with interest.

“Yes, no incursions ever appeared,” Zac nodded. “Why, is it important?”

“It might not be important, but I think I understand why this Redeemer gave such a task to his chosen,” Abby said as she bobbed above her chair.

“A newly integrated planet without incursions is practically unprecedented. It is the standard test of the System, and there are more than enough willing parties to go around. But I believe that The Great Redeemer has found a way to stop that,” she said.

“Stop how?” Zac asked.

“I can’t be sure, but I think it has to do with the conquest. If The Great Redeemer simply needed some people with the cultivation technique to survive until the planet integrated, why didn’t he tell his chosen to move into the mountains and cultivate away from the earth? Why risk their lives to dominate their whole planet?”

“I think he has somehow managed to tag his targeted planets as his own through this conquest, and since the planet is instantly owned by an existing faction when it gets integrated, no incursions spawn.”

“But we have incursions on our planet?” Kenzie questioned.

“Yes, because the Dominators failed in their task. I heard a massive war took place where the whole Zhix population banded together against the dominators. Perhaps there would be no incursions if they had managed to dominate their planet before they arrived. Perhaps this can be a clue to their plans?” Abby continued.

“The fulcrum thing?” Zac asked.

“No, I think that is different. But we must ask ourselves, if the goal of the subjects of The Great Redeemer is to dominate planets, why haven’t we even seen their shadows since the

integration took place? I think it's exactly due to those incursions that have popped up," Ogras interjected.

"There is another possibility. You said you believe that this guy is D, or perhaps even C-Grade? But look at our Incursions. We have the Church of Everlasting Dao here, that's at least a B-Grade force," Ogras added.

"Even worse, The Undead Empire is here, and they have A-Grade old monsters holding the fort, perhaps even stronger beings. Even a C-grade hegemon would think twice before offending these forces by stealing a planet from out under their noses," the demon finished. "And that's only two of the ones we know of, there might be more powerful factions here."

"So, they actually want us to defeat those forces without getting their hands dirty, so their boss doesn't get blamed?" Kenzie said with a frown.

"Exactly. And it's not like we can't ignore the incursions. Both those forces are lunatics who leave planets without a single living soul within a few years," Ogras sighed.

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't," Zac muttered before looking up. "So, what do we do?"

"Sell yourself," Ogras suddenly said.

"What?" Zac gaped.

"We obviously need to close those incursions, and somehow also kill those Dominators. But we have no idea if that's enough, right? Perhaps that Redeemer can still find us. Those Dominators might have hidden some means on some remote corner of the planet already," Ogras explained, his careful nature showing.

"So, we need another reason for The Great Redeemer to back away. And that's where you come in. You're a humanoid behemoth, and you might be able to join a sect strong enough for The Great Redeemer to back away."

"Is that really possible? Would he back away just because I joined a sect?" Zac asked skeptically.

“If you become an important disciple, then attacking your home will be akin to attacking the sect itself. But it depends on how crazy the guy is,” Ogras shrugged. “If he is rational, he would back away if the force is strong enough. No need to risk his life over a baby-planet, right?”

“It’s a plan, but it’s easier said than done. We can’t even leave this world, the Nexus Hub is inactive,” Zac said. “And even if it activated, how would we even be able to get to such a Sect. From what I understand it’s extremely hard to travel to higher grade places.”

It was true. One of the first things he’d asked Ogras was why he didn’t simply teleport to an A-grade world to cultivate there instead of coming to a place like Earth. The situation for the poorest saps on an A-Grade continent would likely be better than even the kings of a D-Grade world.

But it was extremely hard to travel upward even though it was something everyone wished to do. There essentially were only two ways. First was getting your hands on a Nexus Token of high enough tier.

Nexus Tokens were tickets to a random place. If you had a C-Grade token, you would be sent to a teleporter on a C-Grade world. But you had no idea where, and you might end up at some extremely dangerous place rather than at a public teleporter in some capital.

These tickets were generally given by the System as rewards for various hard quests. You needed to prove you deserved to travel to those higher-grade cultivation paradises. Perhaps Zac would be able to get one when he reached D-grade after becoming the world leader, but that was far off.

Another way to move upward was to get an invite from a high tier force, which would allow you to teleport to them. But those tokens were extremely rare as well, and they could only be awarded to Sects or Clans from quests by the System.

Essentially you needed to earn passage one way or another, and you couldn’t just move about as you wish. The System clearly did not want free movement in the multi-verse. Ogras believed it had to do with limited resources. If wastrels could

go to high-tier planets and snatch divine treasures for himself things would get crazy. No one would want to stay on the lower planes.

“Well, there is one place where you can showcase your power in front of a bunch of people from various powerful forces, and that place has always been a place where rogue cultivators find established forces to take them in,” Ogras pointedly said. “You simply need to climb high enough to prove your potential.”

Zac immediately understood what Ogras talked about. The Tower of Eternity. It made sense that the powerful factions in the multiverse would send invitation tokens with their scions there. If they could recruit some extremely powerful unaffiliated cultivators while they were still young and only at F-Grade they might form ties with a future powerhouse while they still were weak.

“We will have to try everything out,” Zac nodded. “But we still don’t know what he wants with us.”

“Origin Dao,” Brazla suddenly muttered.

“Excuse me?” Zac said and looked over at the tool spirit, who seemed quite content to be the object of everyone’s attention.

“I would bet he is after the Origin Daos of your baby planet. You should have realized that your accomplishments in the Dao are far higher compared to normal D-Grade planets. It’s much easier for you to gain Dao Seeds compared to the norm,” Brazla started lecturing. “Perhaps you think you’re very talented. But in truth, you just have a superior environment.”

“This is not unique for this planet. In fact, it’s the same with all baby worlds. Even invaders benefit from it,” the Tool Spirit continued.

Zac shot a glance at Ogras, who slightly nodded to indicate that Brazla was correct.

“Why is that? It is due to what some call the Origin Dao. The process of integrating a world is partly to gradually infuse its core with massive amounts of energy, while also imbuing it with Origin Dao,” Brazla continued.

“Most of it is lodged in the world core, but everyone who has gained a Dao Seed will also carry this Dao essence for a bit. But over time it will disintegrate and turn into normal spiritual energy. The system uses it to awaken the area to the higher truths of the cosmos so that cultivation becomes possible,” the Tool Spirit explained.

“And you think The Great Redeemer is after this?” Zac asked.

“Yes, that would explain why he went through all this trouble instead of just buying a couple of planets. He needs to get to a newly integrated world quickly if he wants to harvest the Origin Dao,” Brazla shrugged.

“What would he use this Origin Dao for?” Kenzie probed.

“No idea, but I would venture he has devised an unorthodox method that might allow him to break through whatever bottleneck he is stuck on,” Brazla said. “Sacrificing a couple of worlds to reach a higher grade wouldn’t be anything special in the multiverse.”

A subdued silence stretched across the table. Some, like Julia, seemed physically sick at the thought of some old man being ready to kill billions of people just for a chance to break through a bottleneck. It was a chilling reminder of the ruthless reality they lived in.

Chapter 267: News

”Is this something common?” Zac finally asked, breaking the subdued silence in the room.

”No. Finding newly integrated planets before the Origin Dao disappears is notoriously hard. It’s hard enough to make me wonder you’re even in any danger at all,” the tool spirit shrugged. ”The greatest old monsters in the multiverse could probably do it, but they have no use for baby planets. They rather have their sights on whole galaxies.”

The discussion continued a bit on the topic of the Great redeemer, but it appeared that they did not have any more ideas on how to handle the situation. In the end, they decided to simply continue their original approach, closing the incursions of Earth.

Even though the Redeemer was the largest threat Earth faced, it looked like they had some time before he could arrive. The multiverse was extremely vast, and traveling to a newly integrated planet could only be done manually. When that was added to the System’s protective obscuring it would at least take a few years before he could arrive, even if the Redeemer set out the moment their planet was integrated.

After the incursions were dealt with they would turn their attention to Salvation and the Dominators. Of course, if they could find Salvation earlier that would be preferable. But there was still no news of where he was physically located, and he had closed his teleporter the moment he was booted out from the hunt. Zac’s relentless assault had clearly put the fear of God in him, and he seemed to want to avoid another clash for the time being.

”That’s it for the time being,” Zac said before he turned to Julia. “Ms. Lombard, I brought you here so that you can provide the information to Thomas Fischer and the others. All

the large forces need to be made aware of the threat of Salvation and The Great Redeemer so that we can prepare.”

“Provide the information how?” she hesitantly asked.

“The portal to New Washington has already been made private, but I am traveling to the Marshall Clan in three days. I thought I’d bring you since they aren’t as isolated as we are here on this island,” Zac explained.

Julia hesitated a bit with a slight frown.

“And you’re just letting me go like that?” Julia said.

“Yes, The New World Government is not my enemy, The Great Redeemer and the Incursions are. And honestly, they aren’t a threat either. If it wasn’t for the Dominators lurking in the shadows I would already have made my teleporter public,” Zac said.

“If... I wanted to stay here, could I?” Julia suddenly asked, making Zac remember Emily mentioning the huge fight Julia and Emma had got themselves into.

“You can. Tell me your decision before I leave in three days though so I can send a replacement to the government,” Zac nodded before he turned back toward the others on the table.

“Calrin, I want you to try to buy an information package about The Great Redeemer, if that’s possible,” Zac said as he turned to the Sky Gnome.

“Information becomes more expensive the stronger the person. Also, while the information houses track many powerhouses there is no way to track everyone. But I will make an inquiry,” Calrin said with a serious face.

Zac nodded before he addressed the whole room again.

“The rest of the meeting will only need the essential personnel,” Zac said, and soon less than half of the participants remained.

“The Great Redeemer is a pretty big headache, but on more positive news I come back with a mountain of treasure. It’s to the point that we now have the resources to nurture a large number of experts without feeling the pinch. I am therefore

opening the craftsman Heritage. I have also found this,” Zac as he took out the ten crystals he got from Anzonil.

“As I mentioned we were placed at the ruins of a sect called The Eastern Trigram Sect. It was a low-tiered D-Grade sect focusing on arrays, and this is the complete crystallized knowledge on formations, written by their Supreme Elder. As far as I know, this is the only copy from that place,” Zac said.

Brazla snorted disdainfully, but the others looked at the ten crystals with wide eyes.

“Does anyone have an idea of how to utilize this knowledge as effectively as possible?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“It should be locked behind Merit Points, and I believe that the same should go for the Heritages,” Abby finally said. “We can portion out the knowledge it contains into packages, with the basic ones being pretty cheap, but the more in-depth and uncommon knowledge having a higher price.”

“Wouldn’t there be a risk of no one buying it? We are in need of skilled array masters,” Zac said.

“Then make sure people know that becoming an array master and helping to maintain the arrays in Port Atwood would yield a lot of Merit Points. Things given freely are not appreciated, but if they need to work hard for it they will cherish it,” Abby countered, and Ogras nodded in agreement.

“It will also lock the craftsmen to us all the way until the D-Grade, since they would have to come to us for the follow-up crystals or deeper parts of the craftsman heritage,” Abby added. “Otherwise we would risk them leaving for the highest bidder when the world gets more integrated in the future.”

Zac had to admit it was a thought out idea, and he immediately decided to go along with it.

“Talk with the Merit Exchange and make adjustments to our current merit program if needed,” Zac said. “I want people working toward these things as soon as possible.”

Abby bobbed a bit in the air, which was her way of nodding her head. Zac nodded back before he once again focused on the Sky Gnome.

“After this meeting please bring a couple of your best men to my courtyard, we have mountains of loot to go through,” Zac said.

Calrin suddenly looked at him like a maiden in love, and it made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“While we’re here, please update me on what’s happened while I was away,” Zac said.

“The shapeshifters are dealt with, as you know,” Ogras started. “Your human friend they impersonated has recovered, and he is currently farming on one of the satellite islands.”

Zac frowned a bit when he heard that, and Ogras quickly continued.

“Don’t get worked up, it was on his own request. That Shapeshifter did a number on him, and I think he just wants to live a simple life away from the struggle of the real world,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Also... We have put your former lover on that island on your sister’s insistence, and she is farming with him. Under supervision of course.”

Zac looked over at Kenzie, who seemed ready for an argument.

“It wasn’t all her fault. She was drugged, hypnotized, and manipulated. You’re a victim, but so is she. Janos has helped her stabilize her mind during the past weeks, and she feels really bad about what happened. So I sent her to the island to stay with her friend,” she quickly explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

Zac shot a glance over at the illusionist who was also present at the meeting, and he simply nodded slightly to indicate what Kenzie said was true. Ogras only snorted, which drew an angry glare from Kenzie.

“Fine. I’ll check in on them later. Anything else?” Zac said after hesitating a bit.

“A monk came a week ago, and warned us that things were getting bad in the Undead Incursion. Their armies are mobilizing for real now, and the monk said that the Abbot believed that they would make a huge push to expand their

territory within a month,” Adran spoke up, reading from his documents.

Zac thoughtfully nodded. He had already been thinking about tackling the Undead Incursion as soon as possible, and now it seemed they did not have much of a choice. The only problem was the Lich King, and how strong he would be. Was his increase in power from the hunt enough to bring that thing down?

“The monk also spoke about odd rumors that had arrived to their mountain,” Adran said.

“What rumors?” Zac asked.

“Three Incursions have disappeared. Just vanished overnight. The human government or the beastmen have no idea what’s going on,” the administrator said.

“Infighting between incursions?” Zac ventured.

“Unlikely,” Ogras said. “They wouldn’t likely clash before they clashed for territories. And only the undead incursion has spread to that degree to my knowledge. The other ones should be a few years away from infighting. Right now they should be swallowing up the locals around them, either for enslavement or eradication.”

“So who is it?” Zac said.

“The only one I can think of are the Zhix, or rather the Dominators,” Ogras said.

“The dominators? Only Void’s Disciple was outside the hunt, he did that by himself? Also, why would they wait until now to destroy Incursions?” Zac asked.

“They might have needed to prepare the attacks. If we go by the theory that The Great Redeemer didn’t want to create trouble by having his followers destroy incursions we can make some guesses. First, they would have wanted to close the incursions as quickly as possible, before any contact with the homeworld was possible,” Ogras said.

“But as far as I know no incursions were closed in the early stage of the Integration. I have the title for the first closing,”

Zac said.

“We know that the Dominators were a small group before the integration, and most thought them eradicated. We also know how the availability was for teleporters in the beginning. Perhaps they simply didn’t have the ability to do it. That left them with a far more risky Plan B,” Ogras explained.

“By now the incursions are all stabilized, and communication with the main side is possible. If they assaulted the Incursions the normal way it would be possible to record it in a crystal, allowing the elders of the force to realize who the responsible party by the energy signature,” the demon continued.

“So if they would close the incursions now they would need to immediately decimate everyone before they could send any information back home. That tracks with the rumors of incursions ‘simply disappearing,” Zac continued the line of thought. “But why wait until now?”

“With the strongest people in the hunt most settlements have turtled up, avoiding the Incursions,” Kenzie ventured. “There would be no local witnesses either.”

“Preparing such a blitz would also take time. They would both need to prepare the means to instantly kill everyone before they could send anything back home. Perhaps they also had some sort of interference that messed with the Nexus Hub,” Ogras added.

“Also, the only Incursions that disappeared were those we would categorize as low threat. The Undead Incursion wasn’t touched for example. Even the Dominators probably aren’t confident in destroying those incursions without leaving any trace,” Adran finished.

“So they’re removing the smaller obstacles, making us focus on the larger threats that they cannot deal with themselves,” Zac muttered. “But we don’t know for sure it was Void. I’ll talk with the Zhix to see how their ladders have changed. Have we heard any other rumors about what the dominators have been doing? I know that Void’s Disciple has been up to something.”

“We haven’t heard anything, but our intelligence network is beyond pathetic,” Ogras said with a shrug. “You should ask those people from the Marshall Clan, they should be more informed.”

“Fine, but keep your ears to the ground. I have opened many new alliances, so we should start getting visitors soon. Make sure we control the movement of those who arrive. I don’t want anyone wandering into my area or our hunting grounds. The barghest is a resource that should be saved for the academy unless people are willing to pay for it,” Zac said.

“All procedures should be set up to handle an inflow of visitors. If needed we can also use the Origin Array to look for things out of place occasionally,” Adran said. “On the topic of the Barghest, I do believe we should try to cordon off areas that we can use as hunting grounds for visitors. Their numbers are increasing, and the Beast Tamer we are training is not strong enough to control such a large horde.”

“Great, try to set something up, extra income is always welcome, but it’s not a top priority. Anything else that has happened while I was gone?” Zac continued.

“We finally found land,” Adran said. “In fact, we have found land in two opposite directions.”

Chapter 268: Rescue Mission

“Finally,” Zac said with a smile.

He had almost started believing they were stuck in some parallel world. The ships he had bought from the Creators were extremely swift, but it had taken months until they finally found the mainland. It also showed just how huge the new planet was. It felt as though their current mass was far larger than just the combination of the four integrated planets.

Perhaps the system had thrown some random landmass into the mix to make the distances larger. But suddenly he gave a start since he finally realized what Adran said.

“What do you mean two opposite directions?” he curiously asked. “Have we rounded the planet?”

“We have found the continent that you humans now refer to as Pangea to the east,” Adran explained with a shake of his head. “We have already made the first contact with a few settlements along the shoreline. If needed we will have no problem conquering a pretty large swathe of coastline. We found one government-controlled city but most are small settlements without teleportation arrays.”

“But the land in the opposite direction is something else?” Zac asked with interest.

“Yes, though it was further away compared to the main continent. The first one we found one week after you left for the hunt. The second we only found ten days ago. We didn’t find any settlements or people on that continent, though we have only begun our exploration recently,” Abby explained.

“Along the coastal edge is a lush forest, but after a few hours walk inland there is an impossibly vast desert. The heat there is scorching even to the demons, and there did not seem to be any life as far as we could tell,” Abby said. “The cosmic

energy was however very dense, so if we could transform the desert it would become great unoccupied land.”

“Impossibly large desert?” Zac muttered. “That actually brings me to something else I didn’t mention from the hunt.”

Next he proceeded to explain his meeting with the molemen in the hunt and the history of their planet.

“If I’m not mistaken the other continent might be the remains of this fourth world. Since it was scorched by their sun for millennia there should have only been unlivable deserts on the surface,” Zac said. “Perhaps the System simply took their uninhabitable land and made a continent out of it. Perhaps merged it with parts of Africa and the middle-east. I haven’t really heard anything from those regions since the Integration.”

“So why did you not mention this fourth race earlier?” Ogras suddenly asked. “To protect the identity of us demons? I think that ship has sailed now. The existence of the underworld will quickly spread I think.”

“No, it’s for a different reason. I want a team to dig as far down as possible from our mine. Even below our Nexus Vein if possible. Then place a teleportation array down there.”

“You want to connect Port Atwood to the people underground?” Kenzie asked.

“Yes, there are people from the other races down there as well, though most are dead now. They’re in pretty dire straits. They’re beset by another Incursion that I guess is top-tier. For some reason, the teleporters above the ground can’t reach down so we need to dig as well, create a relay-system of teleporters if need be,” Zac nodded.

“Why all that effort for those people?” Ogras said with disinterest.

“Not only are there fire golems that seem to be digging toward our planet’s core down there, but there’s also a huge amount of riches. Most of the top names on the wealth ladders are down there. Nexus Crystals and precious metals are littering the walls,” Zac said.

“We need to save those poor people,” Ogras said with a completely straight face and Calrin quickly gave his wholehearted support for the plan as well.

Kenzie glared at the two people who only cared about the wealth, before turning back toward Zac with a frown.

“Yes, the reason I want to dig is partly selfish. They are currently loaded with minerals and crystals down there, but they are severely lacking everything else. I want Port Atwood to be the one to reap the benefits before any others. But other forces might try the same. The ratmen are few in number, but I am sure others than I managed to find out about the situation in the underworld,” Zac said.

“So it’s a race for the wealth beneath us,” Calrin muttered.

“Exactly,” Zac nodded. “We have an advantage with the mine that is already quite deep, but we can’t be lax. I want those teleporters up as soon as possible.”

Abby quickly bobbed her head in agreement. She had been vehemently in favor of expanding the power of Port Atwood since she wasn’t without ambition herself. But that worked just fine for Zac as well.

“It might be an issue of distance apart from just depth though,” the stargazer interjected. “If the ratmen are situated far beneath the other continent the distance might be too far. That continent is even further away than Pangea after all. Perhaps we should also establish a frontier base on the desert continent and try to find them that way.”

“That would be even better,” Ogras muttered. “If the underworld only can be reached from that other continent we will be able to control every comings and goings. We are right in the middle in-between the two continents, and we would act as a bridge between them. And there wouldn’t be much the other forces could do about it until we get higher-graded teleporters.”

Zac’s eyes lit up from the possibility presented. It was true. The E-Grade teleporters reached far, but they couldn’t take Zac to the far edge of Pangea. Judging by the distance Abby

and Adran mentioned the distance between the two continents was extremely vast. They would have to transit through Port Atwood.

“Abby, you oversee the project since you can map out the scope of my kingdom. Does my sphere of influence reach downward as well?” Zac asked.

“I will. There is a limit a few kilometers below us. I will find a location at that depth that is far away from energy interference. I will also set it up so that it becomes a proper relay station. Preferably there would be no way to get up to the surface without using our teleporter,” the Stargazer said.

“Great, pursue both strategies. Setting up a base on the other continent is a good idea in any case,” Zac nodded before turning to Ogras. “Next. Is there something we can make use of in the Mystic Realm?”

“Not sure,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“Not sure?” Zac asked with some confusion. “What sort of place is it?”

“Well, It’s a pretty odd Mystic Realm,” Ogras hesitantly said. “First of all, it’s populated.”

“What?” Zac said with surprise. “Cultivators?”

Zac wasn’t an expert in the subject, but he knew that inhabited Mystic Realms were very rare.

“Indeed, of multiple species, no less,” Ogras said. “But that’s not the odd thing. The whole Mystic Realm is one enormous construct.”

“What?” Zac said with shock. He had never heard of such a thing before. “How big?”

“I can’t be sure. Even the person I caught and questioned wasn’t sure. But it is many times larger Port Atwood. I found a few gardens that each was at least a fifth the size of this whole island, and they just took up a small corner of the construct,” Ogras explained.

Clearly this was news to everyone apart from Kenzie, and they looked over at Ogras with shock.

“The people there have been stuck inside a very long time. Tens of generations. They do not seem to know much of the outside, and they are not really in control of the functions and arrays of the large structure. They are like parasites living inside the body of a large beast,” Ogras explained, the others listening in rapt attention.

“How strong are they?” Zac asked with a frown.

He had enough enemies to contend with at the moment, and if these people were too strong he might just as well close the passage and wait until he became stronger.

“I battled two peak F-Grade warriors, one human, and a werewolf. There are at least mid-tier E-Grade warriors there as well, leading the factions. However, energy is limited, and it seems the various factions are partly warring as a means of population control apart from the usual reasons,” Ogras explained.

“From what I can tell the structure was once a hidden research facility. It might have connections to technocrats, or they simply had a hand in constructing the thing. But to find out the real purpose we would have to explore further,” Ogras said.

“The human I captured did not even know how they got there. My personal guess is that their ancestors were caught for experimentation.”

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what to do with the news.

“Can we gain any benefits in the short run from there?” Zac asked.

“There are enormous trees, so we would get unlimited timber. The walls are also made from some very durable alloy, perhaps we could strip the walls and take the materials for weapons manufacturing. But apart from that, not much else honestly. But with this Redeemer problem, we could use it as a last-resort escape. We just need to figure out a way to stop the Redeemer from following us,” Ogras said.

“But then we’d be stuck inside there?” Zac skeptically asked.

“Yes, but alive. The rift drops us off in a section that the current factions can’t access. It’s the area with the large

gardens. Apparently they were used for plant experimentation and providing air. There are no strong beasts, only a few worms at level 70,” Ogras explained.

“The whole place runs on some technocrat technology it seems. The trapped factions have very low access, and can’t get to where we arrive. But that same technology provided me with Tier-3 access. According to the human I caught Tier-3 is maintenance access that would allow me to enter any place that maintains the various function of the structure.

“I didn’t have time to do much exploration, but it’s pretty good apparently. It allows me to visit even more places than the natives who only have limited access in their respective zones,” the demon continued. “Perhaps we can find some good things hidden in the unexplored areas of the mystic realm.

“If the Redeemer arrives we could drop off the non-combatants there and hide the passage. It would keep them out of harm’s way until the threat was dealt with. If the Redeemer wins they would avoid being harvested at least, and perhaps they can find a way to get out in the future,” Ogras said.

“Well it’s a decent last-ditch escape, though I am not a fan of getting stuck inside a mystic realm just waiting for The Great Redeemer to break through,” Zac mused. “Do you think we could set up some sort of alliance with the natives? Perhaps they possess things of value.”

Ogras hesitantly nodded.

“Perhaps. I honestly did not make a great first impression, though they attacked first. But there should be various things they lack, and they might have an abundance of things in there that may be extremely valuable on the outside. That’s usually how it goes with Mystic Realms. But as long as we don’t have anyone strong enough to counter their elites I think we should avoid them,” the demon said.

“We’ll keep it on the backburner then since we have a few things that need to be handled first. Apart from getting access to the underworld I have a few more top-priority tasks for the town,” Zac said. “First I want the surroundings of The Towers of Myriad Dao to be brought to its proper glory. I want this

done within the day. Divert all man-power to this if necessary.”

Everone around the table apart from Ogras and Brazla looked at Zac as though he'd lost his marbles.

“Finally you're speaking some sense,” Brazla said with a satisfied nod.

“Of course. Incidentally, in case you need to prepare anything before letting us undertake the Inheritance trials, now would be the time for that. At least two trials will be started within three days,” Zac added.

“The Great Brazla has been ready for eons, just come by and display your feeble might,” Brazla said with a snort.

“Great. Secondly, I need to index all the treasures I looted. Calrin, my place in an hour. Bring a few trustworthy and knowledgeable people,” Zac said, ending the meeting.

Roughly forty minutes later five Sky Gnomes stood eagerly waiting in his courtyard. Most seemed to be around the same age as Calrin himself, but one of them looked positively ancient.

“These are my most trusted appraisers,” Calrin said as he indicated the three gnomes roughly his own age. “And this is my great uncle Gemidir Thayer, the member of my clan with the most experience in figuring out the functions of odd treasures. I thought he would be an asset as well in case you had some hard-to-appraise items.”

“He's also a notorious thief,” one of the other Gnomes muttered under his breath as he shielded his Cosmos Sack, drawing a glare from the old man.

Chapter 269: Four Gates

“You shouldn’t slander others little Acorn,” the old man sighed with disappointment. “You know those days are long behind me. And wildly exaggerated.”

“Then why is that pouch belonging to that guard earlier tied around your waist?” the younger Sky Gnome said with a scathing glare.

“You! You just want the Lord to focus on my fingers so that he won’t notice you undervaluing the goodies!” the old man angrily spat as he quickly hid the pouch in an inner pocket of his robe.

Zac’s brows rose, especially when Calrin did nothing to correct the two.

“Well, to be a successful thief you need to be able to discern what’s valuable and what to discard, no?” Calrin said with a cough after seeing Zac’s glare. “But he’s all retired now. And you have me to oversee everything so you don’t need to worry about a thing.”

Zac groaned in response, hating that he couldn’t get a second opinion anywhere as things stood. But he knew that even if Calrin skimmed a bit money it wouldn’t be too bad. Furthermore, since he owned a sizeable share of the Consortia it would still come back into his pocket in the end.

“The goal here is essentially to identify the treasures I gathered and then differentiate the loot into three categories,” Zac explained. “The first category is the valuable and essential treasures. I’ll keep those myself and personally hand them out to our elites if needed.

“The second is for items to add to our Merit Exchange. We are working against the clock so things that can help empower our forces and provide speedy gains. The final category would

be things that might be valuable but aren't of use to Port Atwood. These items would be sold through the Consortia," Zac finished.

The Sky Gnomes eagerly nodded at the instructions, each of them almost looking possessed by greedy demons. Zac sighed and started taking things out. He started with the items he was the most curious about.

A glass bottle suddenly appeared in Zac's hand and the alchemist's furnace appeared on the ground in front of them. The pill was the thing he was most curious about, and the Cauldron might help give some clues to its origins. Just a waft of its residual vapors had allowed him to gain a level, so he couldn't imagine the efficacy of the pill itself.

"This is a pill with spirituality, which I found in this cauldron. When I opened the cauldron a cloud was released, and the energy it contained both gave me a level and instantly healed me," Zac said as he handed over the bottle. "Can you identify the pill?"

One of the Sky Gnomes quickly took out a huge book, and when he opened it Zac saw it was filled with pictures of pills along with descriptions alongside it. However, the old thief only took a glance at it before he spoke up.

"It's a **[Four Gates Pill]**, it's a mid-tier E-Grade pill," he said, not without some longing. "It's the first time I hear of one with spirituality though. The cauldron is just a Decent E-Grade cauldron. Perhaps worth 70 Million"

"What's the purpose of the pill?" Zac asked.

"It harnesses the four elements to break open Nodes," Gemidir succinctly explained. "It would likely have an additional effect now that it has spirituality."

"Four elements?" Zac repeated before he quickly took out the three spirit herbs he looted from the hidden garden. "Do you think these are the ingredients used?"

"**[Blistering Ice Bamboo]**, **[Phoenix Peppers]** and **[Rock Ginseng]**, and their ages are excellent," another of the Gnomes exclaimed.

“You’re only missing [**Sky reed**] and you would have all four main components to create the pill,” the old man added.

“I found these three growing in a secluded spot, along with a broken paddy,” Zac explained. “I looted both the special soil and all the plants. Would we be able to keep growing these herbs?”

“Certainly,” the Sky Gnome who recognized the herbs said without hesitation. “However, it takes over 50 years to grow these herbs to maturity without skilled farmers who can shorten that duration, and that’s only to get their minimum efficacy. For the herbs to contain this much energy you would need to wait a few hundred years, even with a skilled farmer.”

Zac sighed in disappointment. Fifty years might not be very long for a force in the multiverse, but it was for Zac who was strapped for time.

“See if you can buy aged [**Sky Reed**] then,” Zac said. “How long would it take for us to train an alchemist that could concoct [**Four-Gate**] pills?”

“If you want those pills to use, might I suggest an alternative method?” Calrin said.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Trade the herbs for finished pills,” Calrin said.

“People would do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

“It’s pretty common among Alchemists,” Calrin explained.

“Another way for them to enrich themselves. They give ratios, for example 4 sets of herbs for 2 pills. If they manage to create the 2 pills in less than 4 sets they can pocket the difference as profit. But with the age of these herbs, we should be able to get pretty good ratios.”

Zac slowly nodded.

“Does anything else than the ratios matter?” Zac asked.

He had encountered a few pills by now, but most of them were simple healing pills that generally used life-attuned energy or roused the body’s own restorative powers. But things like

cultivation pills were still not something he was very knowledgeable about.

“The skill of the alchemist,” Gemidir said. “Different grades of the pills have differing effects.”

Pills used the same grading system as Daos, depending on how well the pills concocted. So the same pill could be anything from Low-Grade to Peak-Grade, and the effect could vastly differ. It turned out that a low-grade pill wasn't even guaranteed to open one node, whereas a Peak-grade [Four gates Pill] actually guaranteed 1 node and gave a high chance of a second.

“I'll hold onto these for now,” Zac said.

The herbs he had possessed an extraordinary age, and he wasn't sure he wanted to send them over to some unknown alchemist that might pocket the aged herbs and concoct using ordinary ones. He did want the pills since his people would start reaching E-Grade within a few years at most, and having these would expedite the progress of his forces. But he didn't want to waste this treasure.

Hopefully, he could nurture or get to know a skilled Alchemist that he could trust with his herbs instead of sending them out through the mercantile system. Meanwhile, they could start growing the four herbs on the island.

Since he had decided what to do with the herbs he took out the next treasure. It was a pity the cauldron wasn't anything special, but it would make a nice gift for the first proper Alchemist his force nurtured. Next, the huge metal ball that Zac found on his first summit appeared and he put it down on the ground with a heavy thump.

“A spiritual ship,” Calrin said with interest. “Lowest grade, but it should still be worth quite a bit.”

“What? This thing?” Zac asked with surprise.

A spiritual ship had been something he had wanted ever since he learned about their existence from Ogras. That's why he wanted to upgrade the Shipyard so badly. Unfortunately, when

he had asked Rahm about it he had simply tabled the matter until Zac had evolved.

Unfortunately, it would take the Sky Gnomes some time to figure out how to activate it from its current compressed state, so Zac would have to curb his enthusiasm and postpone any joyrides. Instead they kept going through the immense wealth in Zac's pouch with rapid speed, and they hadn't even gone through a tenth after an hour.

But Zac suddenly stopped and opened up a menu with a frown.

"What's wrong?" Calrin asked.

"A new teleporter just became public," Zac said with surprise.

"A public teleporter? With all the things that are happening on this planet?" Calrin muttered. "Are they suicidal?"

"Or desperate," Zac ventured. "The place is called Everwood Refuge, and it's not a place I have heard of before."

"Are you going?" Calrin asked.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he shook his head.

"Not at the moment. The situation is unclear and I have so many things on my plate as it is," Zac said, and resumed taking out treasure after treasure.

But it only took fifteen minutes until they were once again interrupted, this time by Kenzie jogging over to his courtyard. Zac had already erected multiple layers of arrays to hide the things inside, so she was forced to wave her arms to get his attention.

Zac started walking toward her, but after a brief hesitation ran back and put back all the treasures into one of his Cosmos Sacks first. He wasn't exactly confident in leaving so much wealth in front of four Sky Gnomes. They might turn crazy by greed and do something stupid, and he didn't want any trouble with his cooperation.

"What's going on?" Zac said after he exited the shield.

"We have visitors," Kenzie said, "From Westfort."

“Thea’s people?” Zac said with surprise. “What do they want?”

He hadn’t expected someone to come over already, though it was technically possible for his trusted allies to come at any time. They had already agreed that he would come to Westfort in two days to take back his batch of treasures and also peruse the Library.

“Yes, they are requesting assistance. Apparently a town is being attacked by an Incursion, and the Marshalls have some sort of agreement with them,” she explained.

“Tell Ogras and Joanna. I will meet this man at the teleporter,” Zac said as he returned back inside the arrays.

“We will have to take a break for now,” Zac said, much to the disappointment of the Sky Gnomes. “A settlement is under attack from an Incursion. I will go check things out.”

“Of course,” Calrin nodded. “But before you go. I would like to request some body-guards for my men. I want to immediately send representatives to the new towns in our network.”

“Right now?” Zac said with a frown. “We have a lot of things to do.”

“The subject wasn’t brought up at the meeting, but we are currently sitting on a mountain of gear crafted from the beast waves being unused. From what I gather this world is heading for its final battles that will decide whether you will break free from the invaders or become yet another conquered baby world,” Calrin started.

“This is the optimal opportunity to make some money. But it will also help strengthen you humans while simultaneously bolstering the somewhat marred image of Port Atwood,” Calrin said.

“Fine. Take ten demons and ten Valkyries,” Zac nodded before he disappeared.

Just a minute later he arrived at the teleporter, seeing a middle-aged man curiously looking around. But the moment he saw

Zac approach his eyes widened a bit and he straightened his back.

“I assume you’re the representative from Westfort?” Zac asked as he appeared in front of him.

“It’s an honor, Lord Atwood,” the man said with a bow. “I am Roland Marshal, and I will be the ambassador of Westfort, with your blessing of course.”

“Nice to meet you,” Zac simply said with a nod.

“I was planning on introducing myself at your arrival in two days, but time waits for no man. You should have no doubt seen the new public town on the teleportation list. It is one of the major Ishiate towns, and they are currently being besieged by their neighboring Incursion,” Roland explained.

“The Marshall forces are currently preparing, but rearranging our forces will take some time,” the ambassador continued after checking his watch. “We sent a few scouts through the teleporter first, and there were no signs of either Dominators or Salvation as of eight minutes ago.”

Zac nodded, understanding the man’s implication. The town would perhaps fall before The Marshal Clan could muster its forces.

“I will join as well. I planned to settle a few matters before attacking the Incursions, but I guess we can’t wait for this one,” Zac said. “Is Thea coming as well?”

“Exactly, time is of the essence,” Roland said with a nod.

“Unfortunately my niece was forced to put out a few fires as soon as she got back, so she will not be joining you. But she will be done with her quests by the time you arrive at Westfort.”

Zac nodded, slightly disappointed. Having a good ally by one’s side drastically increased safety.

“I am heading back for now, but with your permission, I would like to build a small embassy on your island where I and a small staff would handle any matters that require the cooperation of our two forces. I understand you had a very successful relationship with my niece during the hunt, and my

wish is for that relationship to turn into a strong bond between our two families,” Roland continued.

Zac frowned a bit at the very ambiguous wording, but he had no interest in trying to correct the man. He could understand if the marshalls wanted to forge an alliance the old-school way between their two forces. With him and Thea at the helm, there would be no resisting them.

“That’s fine. You can talk with Adran later to settle those types of matters later,” he nodded. “He’s the administrator in charge of most city planning.”

“Excellent. It was a pleasure meeting you,” Roland said with another bow before he walked over to the teleporter and was gone with a flash.

Since he had already decided to fight he was eager to get going, but he still decided to wait for Ogras to have someone to watch his back. And it took less than a minute to arrive, and to his surprise he was accompanied by Calrin, who was completely decked in defensive gear.

“Strike while the iron is hot,” the gnome simply muttered as an explanation to Zac’s questioning glance.

“Fine, let’s go. Some incursion is attacking, but it shouldn’t be one of the top-grade ones. We’ll keep them at bay until reinforcements arrive. And Ogras... Don’t steal the boss kill this time, okay?” Zac said as he threw a glance at the demon.

“Oh, heard about that one, did you?” Ogras said with a smile.

“I did, Billy was very upset. But I promised you would personally go there and apologize and bring a gift,” Zac said drawing a disbelieving look from the demon.

Chapter 270: Riverleaf

Riverleaf sighed as she looked at the ravaged forest outside their town. The trees that their ancestors had tended for hundreds of years were gone, replaced with burnt-out husks, and the farms were turned into with ruins and war trenches. As the shaman of their village, she sensed the pain of nature around them.

They had truly underestimated these foreign invaders. For months they had been battling for territory, neither side showing a clear advantage. The invaders might have been the strongest force in the area, but they were surrounded by over a Dozen towns who worked together to keep them at bay. But something had changed a week ago.

In just a day five towns were destroyed, their populations killed to the last man apart from the lucky few who managed to escape in time. Even the elderly and the children weren't spared, and their scouts had recounted scenes straight out of a nightmare. From there those black golems had started their crusade, destroying one town after another. The Invaders had clearly been holding back until now.

She couldn't help but wonder if there were traitors among them. Did the invaders know that their top hunters were unavailable or dead due to the hunt? They had worked so hard to maintain a mirage of normalcy, risking their lives to keep the pressure on the Incursions. But it was all for naught as they went into a rampage while their strongest warriors were occupied with the hunt.

Everwood Refuge was only still standing because the invaders had started in the other direction, methodically working their way from city to city. Her first instinct had been to flee, but she knew that they couldn't do that. The beats around were much too dangerous. Besides, if they fled they would give up their ancestral homes.

Using the teleporter wasn't a real option either, not to their force at least. It was just much too expensive to send someone through that miraculous gate. Even if her husband had returned with enormous gains it was far from enough for the whole city. They could afford to teleport a few hundred at the most, only a fraction of the two hundred thousand who lived in their town. They couldn't even afford to send all the children to safety.

Her eyes turned to her husband, desperately fighting against the rockmen. They were beyond sturdy. Not even the chief of the hunt managed to quickly kill those things in a one-on-one battle, which was a clear indicator of how the rest of the soldiers fared. Worse yet, they couldn't even use their fortifications to their advantage. The rockmen had made quick work of their protective shield and rampart with their huge boulders, and in less than 20 minutes it was gone.

The moment they saw that their shield wouldn't hold they had made their teleporter public in a desperate bid to enlist some help against their threat. She had been elated to see people come through their gate earlier, but most had quickly disappeared again after learning of the situation.

Only a few remained, though it was clear that they were mostly interested in fishing in the muddy waters. She had even been forced to send some soldiers to prevent looting from unscrupulous guests. But suddenly she saw one of the young hunters-in-training speed toward her with elation in his eyes. Riverleaf had stationed him by the teleporter so that he could keep an eye out for any reinforcements.

"The humans have sent reinforcements!" the youth said between pants.

"They have?" Riverleaf exclaimed, some hope finally rekindling in her heart. "How many?"

Little Leaf scratched his chin in hesitation before he muttered.

"Three people came," he said with an almost inaudible voice. "But one is a child it seems?"

“So two warriors,” Riverleaf sighed in disappointment, realizing it was just more opportunists.

She knew that she couldn’t hope for too much. That large human organization had already indicated that they were overwhelmed with similar threats, and they had gotten similar responses from their Ishiate allies. But honestly, she knew that most simply did not wish to risk their lives for no reward.

“Yes, only two... But they are *strong*,” he added with wide eyes.

Riverleaf was about to respond when her heart suddenly thumped and she looked over in the distance with alarm. Two men and a blue child approached, and Riverleaf immediately understood that these people were the trio that Little Leaf mentioned. Her second sight screamed in alarm at their approach, telling her that this party could level Everwood Refuge without much trouble.

While there were three of them her eyes couldn’t help but turn toward the human in the middle. He had short hair the color of sand, and he wore an opulent golden robe that made her think of her brethren who gave up their connection to amass material wealth.

In his hand was a ruthless axe that made her almost flinch as she imagined an ocean of blood for some reason. She knew that it was an omen from her shamanic powers, but she couldn’t guess it’s meaning. The axe felt primal, like something their hunters would fashion out of the bones of a great beast. It was an odd choice of weapon for someone dressed in something so fine; the man was a contradiction of refinement and carnage.

She knew that her gifts could be noticed by some people since their world changed, but she couldn’t help but activate her skill that the System had named [**Minor Prophetic Vision**]. She wanted to get a glimpse of whether these people were their saviors, but a soul-rending pain erupted in her mind, only allowing her a glimpse before her sight turned black.

The silver-haired man was shrouded in darkness, a black hand dragging him into an abyss of despair. The vision was

extremely taxing, but it was nothing compared to the man in the golden robes. She was assaulted by tens of visions she couldn't make sense of, completely obscuring his future. She only managed to see a glimpse of his past instead.

The man stood with his axe accompanied by a monstrous beast in a sea of blood, a storm vengeful spirits clamoring in hatred and despair. Just how many had he killed to form such a following of the dead? But while he seemed to be an apostle of death, he was also the bringer of life. A golden halo rose behind him, and it formed an equal and opposing force to the hurricane of the fallen.

Refinement and carnage; life and death.

She had no time to make sense of the visions as it felt like she was about to die, and blood flowed out of her nose and ears. She had overtaxed her soul for that brief glimpse. Her body was unable to withstand the prophetic weight of the man in front of him. Perhaps not even the Grand Shaman would be able to endure a peek into this man's future.

The party seemed to move leisurely, but they quickly closed the distance between the teleporter and the rampart she stood on, and as they came closer primal flight-responses were screaming in Riverleaf's mind. But she forced herself to stand still, gazing at their approach with her normal vision. Their steps echoed like the drums of war in her mind, and it felt like their forms towered to the out the sky.

The trio suddenly disappeared in a shroud of darkness, before they appeared right in front of her on top of the rampart. She made sure to not use shamanic powers that had been a natural part of her since childhood. Using her gifts in this close proximity would likely fry her brain, turning her into a simpleton. The two adults calmly overlooked the losing battle out in the field after glancing at her.

As they were closer she got a better look at the two. It was obvious that the man with the shadow hand was neither Human nor Ishiate, but rather something she had never encountered before. He had large horns in his forehead that that looked like frozen fire, and his skin had a reddish tinge.

She was curious about his heritage, but she didn't dare to ask. In truth, she didn't even dare to speak up. The duo had obviously masked their power, but she knew the truth about this small group from her shamanic vision. They could not be insulted or angered, since they were drenched in blood.

"It's these bastards?" the horned man said with surprise as he looked at the army. "Well, that's just fine."

The man with the in the golden robes turned toward Riverleaf and nodded in greeting. She didn't trust her voice at the moment, so she could only bow in response, holding her hands nervously in front of her.

"I am Zac. You should call back your warriors. We can take it from here," he said with a calm voice, his eyes not even showing a ripple after witnessing the huge army of golems that were steadily ripping through their line of defenses.

"But..." she hesitantly said, but she had no chance to continue as they disappeared just like they appeared.

The next moment she sensed a monstrous power from the battlefield and she looked over with worry, afraid that their enemies had launched a renewed assault.

Her eyes were immediately drawn toward an enormous hand hovering in the air. The hand had appeared out of nowhere, and it radiated an earthshattering might. It clearly was made of wood and made her think of the Treefather from the legends. Had the old gods returned to save them from their plight? The hand flew toward the army with terrifying speed, and the golems scrambled to erect defenses.

But it was to naught as the hand slammed into the ground with enough force to almost throw her off the rampart. The earth shook and large cracks in the ground quickly spread from the impact. Over a hundred of the golems that had caused them so many troubles were utterly destroyed in an instant, and twice as many were lying on the ground with serious wounds.

The next moment the whole battlefield was shrouded in darkness. It was as though the darkness was alive, and it twisted and changed shapes. Spears grew out from nowhere,

the golems were getting impaled by the dozens. In just a second it looked like a forest with trees wrought from shadows had grown in front of their city, and each tree held a dead or dying invader.

Two familiar silhouettes made themselves known in the middle of the battle-field, and in the next moment they rushed forward with wild abandon. Riverleaf wanted to shout out a warning, but her voice got stuck in her throat when they unleashed a mindboggling carnage upon the golems.

“Young miss, there’s no need to worry. Those two will neutralize the calamity that has befallen your fair city. Better yet, I will turn calamity into opportunity,” a refined voice from next to her spoke up, making Riverleaf look over with surprise.

It was the blue child who had spoken to her. She had completely forgotten about him due to the shocking presence of the other two, but he had clearly stayed behind as those two had unleashed their attacks on the invaders. She prepared to placate the child, but at a second glance she realized it was no child who had spoken with her. It was rather a man from yet another unknown race.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” the small blue being said with a bow. “I am Calrin Thayer, and I would like to provide you with the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Chapter 271: Rockmen

Zac surveyed the battlefield as the Ishiate warriors were walking through it, making sure that all the golems were dead as they lay on the scorched ground. Of course, most of the time there was no need to check since the bodies were separated into pieces or completely destroyed from his onslaught. Ogras stood not far from him, holding his hand around the mold where his other arm once was.

“You’ve gained a lot of power during your hunt,” Ogras commented from the side. “And your aura is far denser. It bodes well for our trip to the Towers, especially now that we need to get the protection of some larger force. Go high enough and they might not even care that you’re not a Cultivator.”

“I could say the same to you. You shouldn’t have gained any levels since we fought these things last time, but yet you are a lot stronger. Care to explain how?” Zac responded as he threw a glance over at the demon.

“Well, we all have our means,” the demon said with a noncommittal shrug.

“You have somehow broken your restrictions, haven’t you?” Zac said keeping his eyes on Ogras face for any changes.

“Sharp as a tack, this one,” Ogras said with a snort. “Yes, I got a quest that I managed to complete. So I am no longer bound by the restrictions that afflicted me. However, it still applies to my soldiers. They will have to wait it out or find their own means to release their full potential.”

Zac slowly nodded. He already had already guessed as much from the moment they started fighting. The shadow spears of Ogras were almost too many to count as he ripped through the rockman army. The demon had clearly a lot stronger compared to before. The difference in strength between the two had

widened between the two compared to the hunt, but Ogras had still exploded with surprising power going by his somewhat limited opportunities.

Ogras didn't mention it, but Zac also guessed that the demon's Dao had also progressed since he'd last seen the demon fight as well since the aura it emitted was quite intense. The presence of the so-called Origin Dao that Brazla explained during the meeting was likely the source of the Demon's improvement.

It gave Zac a better understanding of why so many forces wanted to risk their lives to invade newly integrated planets. The Origin Dao could save people decades of meditation, or even award Dao Seeds for people who were completely hopeless in that regard.

Of course, Zac didn't feel threatened by the Demon's advancements. Ogras had improved surprisingly much, but it was far less compared to his own gains. Ogras had killed less than half as many rockmen compared to Zac, but he had a slew of Progenitor-titles and a second class to bolster his power. If a normal scion of a relatively weak clan could output this much pressure it made him wonder just how strong cultivators from higher-tier planets were.

Besides, Zac had yet to gain the ultimate skills for his two classes. Normally you got two final skills at level 75, each giving you a great boost. So Zac still had a lot of room to grow while at F-Grade, whereas any improvement for Ogras should be quite arduous by now.

"So what do you want to do now?" Ogras finally asked, perhaps to avoid any further questioning about his increased power. "Keep going or head back?"

It was a good question. They had killed a lot of the rockmen, but there were no elites in the group. The leader of the rockmen back when Port Atwood was invaded was noticeably stronger than anyone in this punitive army, meaning that they hadn't sent the true aces of the incursions to clear out these neighboring towns.

They already knew that those three Incursions that spawned simultaneously outside his town didn't send the real leaders, but rather a second-in-command. That meant that the big boss of the rockmen should still be alive. Furthermore, the restrictive shackles should have lessened even further by now.

According to the information he had gathered the restrictions usually lasted between 6 to 12 months, and it differed depending on how high-graded the planet was. The higher grade of the newly integrated planet the quicker the restrictions would be lifted so that the trial for the natives was tough enough.

Since Earth had become a D-Grade planet right off the bat the restrictions should be on the shorter side of the spectrum. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea exactly when it would happen, which is why he wanted to attack the incursions as quickly as possible. He wanted to fight the invaders before they gained another power-up.

Zac opened his mouth to answer, but before he had the chance to speak the sounds of hurried footsteps interrupted him. They both turned around to see a male Ishiate walk over, accompanied by the woman they had spoken to up at the wooden rampant.

Zac already knew that he was the lord, or rather leader of the hunt, of this town, and his wife was something like a druid or nature priestess. What surprised Zac though was that he saw the Ishiate wear a fitted armor set made out of chitin-shells that wear clearly from the Ayr ants.

Calrin had really worked quickly.

"Lord Atwood, Lord Azh'Rezak," the Ishiate said with a bow. "I am Steelwood. My family and Everwood Refuge is ever in your debt. If there is anything we can do in return please let us know."

"I see you're wearing the local produce of Port Atwood," Zac answered with a smile. "Allowing the opening of a branch of the Thayer Consortia is all we ask in return."

“We would also be grateful if you helped us make some inroads with your Ishiate allies,” Ogras quickly added. “You have seen the strength of our gear, and our supply is huge. Allowing us to open more stores would save a lot of lives and allow you to grow stronger more quickly.”

The two Ishiate gave each other a quick glance, but they soon nodded.

“What you say is true. The items the blue one showed us were far superior to the items we brought from our old world, though they were a bit expensive. But one cannot put a price on life. We will speak with our allies about your trading venture,” Steelwood said. “Though you should know that the Ishiate hero Starlight does also control a business.”

A burst of killing intent seeped out of Ogras, but he quickly quenched it after a glare from Zac. The fact that Starlight had somehow got his hands on a business venture was both surprising and unfortunate. It would impact their spread on Earth to a certain degree.

Of course, their main target was the human towns since they were far more numerous than the Ishiate. The beastmen were the second least populous species, only beating out the molemen in the underworld, and there were at least twenty times more humans on the new planet based on estimations.

“That is fine, we will not force anyone. Our wares speak for themselves,” Zac said. “More importantly, is your teleporter still public?”

“No,” Steelwood said with a shake of his head. “The moment we saw your combat prowess I closed it. I learned a bit about those that are called the Dominators during the hunt, and I feared having it open for too long.”

Zac initiated the system to set up an alliance with Steelwood, and he quickly accepted the prompt.

“Please set Port Atwood to trusted. My army is standing by,” Zac said. “Since I am already here I will close the Incursion.”

“It will take at least a day, probably two,” Ogras said from the side, showing a far calmer response to the proclamation

compared to the two Ishiate.

Their eyes widened in disbelief and mutely stared at Zac until the female spoke up.

“Lord Atwood,” she hesitantly said. “closing the incursion is easier said than done. They have set up a very strong protective array. Our scouts have also found that thousands of large boulders are flouting about the core area. We believe they might be a defensive measure as well.”

“Don’t worry,” Zac said unfazed. “If you want you can join us, but if you want to stay behind it’s fine as well.”

Steelwood slowly nodded his head.

“I will accompany you, I’ve raided their incursion many times and know the paths,” he said, placing a hand on his wife’s arm.

Not long after the Valkyries and the demon army started streaming out of the teleporter, immediately securing the vicinity. When they saw that there was no threat Joanna quickly walked over to Zac and bowed.

“Lord Atwood,” she said. “We were afraid something happened when the teleporter closed.”

“Just a safety precaution,” Zac said. “You guys haven’t slacked off.”

It was true. His eyes couldn’t help widen in surprise as he glanced over the Valkyries with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. All of them were past level 35, and many were even in the early 40’s. Joanna was the strongest, having reached level 44.

It was far from enough to reach the ladder after the hunt, but it was extremely impressive considering how far behind they had been when he picked them up.

“It is thanks to the resources and hunting grounds you provide,” Joanna nodded. “After we got strong enough to venture into the forests alone our leveling speed exploded. The Barghest have grown in numbers, and it’s almost impossible for us to run out of things to kill.”

“That’s true. However, shouldn’t your gain be a bit limited now when you’ve passed level 40?” Zac asked.

“Some of us are also hunting in squads on Mystic Island. We can only hunt in the outer rim though, where the beasts are only around level 60. But it gives far more Cosmic Energy, and the battle experience is valuable as well,” Joanna agreed.

“Keep up the good work. The Incursion here is those rockmen who invaded us before. The Valkyries will join us, but be careful. These ones are pretty tough,” Zac said.

Joanna seemed to ready to argue, but Zac held up his hand.

“I have a gift for the Valkyries. During the hunt I got my hands on a few War Arrays. After you’ve learned those you will be a truly elite force. But until then you still need to be careful,” he said.

“You’ve finally got one?” she said with excitement.

“I also have another gift for you,” Zac said as he took out Nenotheop’s spear. “This thing belonged to a crazy strong guy in the hunt, and it should be a real Spirit Tool. You were the first Valkyrie to join me and your level is proof of your effort. I hope it will help you keep pushing forward.”

Joanna mutely stared at the spear that Zac placed in her hand with wide eyes, looking completely frozen. Zac smiled at her before he turned toward Ilvere who was leading the Demon army.

“We set out immediately. You’ll stay in charge of the two armies,” Zac said

“No problem. I was getting bored from sitting around on the island,” the large demon said as he cracked his neck with some excitement glimmering in his eyes. “These girls need some experience as well. A real warrior is not born by fighting some dumb animals.”

Zac briefly considered waiting for the Marshall Clan to catch up, but in the end he decided against it. Closing an incursion gave a huge boost in power and wealth, and he wanted that boost to stay within his force.

Calrin had no desire to head to the incursion since there were no profits for him to be made there, so he headed back to Port Atwood. But Zac asked him to try and get his hand on

language crystals that could help him read the scripts of the Undead Empire.

His language skill did not work on written texts, but it wasn't hard to read learn to read with the help of crystals. The good ones worked just like a skill crystal, and imprinted the knowledge without the need of arduous cramming sessions.

Everything was settled, and they they left Everwood Refuge with Steelwood leading the way. In just ten minutes his army was speeding through the forests, heading in the direction of a group of mountains in the distance. The rockmen had, not surprisingly, chosen a mountain as their stronghold.

It was a pain in the ass since it would give them a topological advantage, but Zac wasn't overly worried. Everything he knew about this invasion was that they weren't from a too strong a force. The leader of their invasion force was nowhere as strong as the Corpse Lord, and they were essentially used as cannon fodder by the two stronger forces.

But while he wasn't worried for himself he did worry for his soldiers. He had seen the carnage from a large-scale battle just a few days ago. The casualties had been staggering on both the sides of Berum and Medhin, and that was even though they were the elites of their respective worlds.

It took them six hours to reach their destination, allowing Zac and Ogras to restore their reserves of energy. But even then they stopped to make sure everyone was in peak condition before they let started the fight. Due to great vantage of the rockman base, a surprise blitz was already not an option, so they needed to fight the invaders head-on.

A large fort stood erect in the distance, with a grey shield enveloping it. Above the wall walk, hundreds of large boulders floated, likely ready to be launched at any incoming force. It reminded Zac of what Ogras told him a long time ago. Attacking a town was suicide unless you possessed superior force.

"I wish that brute was here now," Ogras muttered as he looked at the shield and the fortress in the distance.

Zac agreed that it would be nice to have Billy here. But he couldn't always throw Billy to the front, risking his life to gain easier access. He knew that he would have to be the one to take the lead this time. Soon they stood just a kilometer away from the rockmen's shield, and the wall was filled with black stoic shapes.

"I'll try to break open the shield. Can you help destroy as many of the stones as possible?" Zac said to Ogras.

"No problem," Ogras said with a shrug.

Chapter 272: Corpsebloom

Mantra

Zac panted as he popped a healing pill while looking at the surroundings. The large fortress largely lay in ruins, and much of it was his own handiwork. The battle between himself and the Incursion leader had caused widespread destruction, especially due to the stone-thaumaturgy of the rockman.

He bent over and snatched the cosmic sack of his opponent, but he didn't join the efforts to drive the remaining rockmen toward their nexus hub. This time there were no quests rewarded or titles, just pure battle between two forces. The blitz of himself and Ogras had broken the defensive perimeter in a furious assault, and in just seconds a large part of the elite defenders was dead or dying from either his fractal blades or innumerable stabs of shadowy spears.

When the defensive line was broken Ilvere had commanded the Demons and the Valkyries forward, and Zac was shocked by their improvement. Of course, Ilvere was doing the work of ten men, though most of his efforts were spent on making sure his soldiers stayed alive.

Any time a skirmish seemed to go awry his huge metal ball flew over with the force of a truck, instantly swinging the battle in their favor. There were a few strong rockmen who had tried to do the same, but they were met by insidious attacks from Ogras.

As for the leader, Zac took care of him. He had been quite powerful, but Zac got the sense that even Ogras would have been able to defeat him in a one-on-one. Then again the demon fought without any restrictions, while the power of the Incursion leader was still limited by the System's restrictions. But Ogras kept showing new cards, and even Ilvere seemed surprised by the power of Ogras.

Zac finally learned what hid beneath that mold on his stump. It was like he had crammed thousands of shadows and forced them into the shape of his missing arm. But the arm was also able to change shape according to his will. It was very strong, but it was also clear that Ogras lacked proper control of it, and it started to fall apart after a short while in the open.

Zac hadn't even needed to go all out in his battle, and he was in much better condition after this fight compared to after his battle with Nenotheop. But unfortunately, the battle didn't give him a level, and he realized that he would need to fight quite a few people to reach the two final levels before he reached his bottleneck. He had gained the past eight levels thanks to the rewards of the hunt, and the amount of energy that was required to reach level 74 shocked him.

The moment he killed the rockman leader the rest of the soldiers immediately initiated an organized retreat through their Nexus Hub. The hub was located inside the battle, and the support staff of their incursion immediately entered while the soldiers kept Zac's forces at bay.

Of course, he didn't push the matter. There was no way for them to kill all of the rockmen before they managed to flee, so their force definitely would get a report of what transpired here. There was no need to go on a widespread rampage at this juncture, causing unnecessary enmities in the multiverse.

For for the rockmen this was likely just business. They wanted access to resources and Origin Dao, and they were willing to risk their lives for it. That they would be ousted was always a real risk, and no one would waste their resources on finding Earth again. But it might be different if Zac caused a vendetta with them.

So the soldiers were mostly pushing the forces toward the Nexus Hub, killing anyone who tried to act out. In just 15 minutes no living rockmen were remaining in the fortress, at least not that they could find.

Interestingly enough, the moment the last rockman disappeared Zac got a prompt from the system.

[Annex RCKV-4433?]

Zac hesitated a bit about what to do before he agreed.

[Appoint Mayor?]

Zac frowned a bit before he hurried over to Ogras who looked a bit pale as he cradled the form that contained his weird shadow-hand.

“You ok?” Zac asked as he looked down at the slightly pale demon.

“Just field testing. It drains more energy than I expected. What’s wrong?”

“I annexed this place. Can I elect a Mayor at a later time?” Zac asked.

“Not sure, but I don’t see why not?” muttered with some uncertainty. “What do you want with this shithole?”

“It’s time to build a presence on the main continent. It’s good to have alternatives if our efforts at the coast doesn’t work out,” Zac said.

“Fair enough, it would be nice to not have to rely on some random strangers to move about the continent. Besides, Nexus Hubs are strategic resources that are worth a lot,” the demon agreed.

Zac nodded and opened the town shop. Most of the options he had available at his main town were available here as well, though it was clear that his population in Port Awood did not count here toward structures that had building restrictions.

He quickly bought a new defensive array and a teleportation array, creating a defensible position for his soldiers.

“We’ll leave a few people here until Adran can send someone over to sort things out,” Zac said.

“I think the golems chose this place for a reason. Perhaps there are good things in the mountain,” Ogras said as he looked over at the towering peaks right behind the fortress where they’d fought.

Zac nodded as he stepped through the teleporter, arriving back at Port Atwood. He didn’t have time to make the arrangements

for the new outpost, and he left that for others to figure out. Instead, he headed over to The Thayer Consortia, and in minutes the Sky Gnomes were back at his courtyard full of energy.

“Your language crystals,” Calrin said and handed over a box. “The Undead Empire has five official languages. I could not get all of them though. The fifth one is apparently only used by the higher-ups, and it’s not for sale.”

Zac nodded in thanks as he opened the box. Four black crystals lay inside, each one with a different insignia engraved. Zac picked up the first one and placed it against his head, and the next moment it was filled with a burst of information. The transfer continued for a few minutes until the crystal finally cracked and turned to black dust.

The crystals were unfortunately one-time use, but that made them much cheaper than the type of crystals that could be used repeatedly after allowing them to restore their energies. Zac was a bit woozy by the mental shock, but he kept going and soon he had absorbed the information of all four languages.

He knew he was pushing it by doing so. Absorbing this much knowledge with his very limited Intelligence could hurt his brain, but he didn’t have time to let his mind rest. He quickly turned back to the gnomes, who eagerly looked at his Cosmos Sack, and once again started to go through his treasures.

As they worked Abby also came by, updating Zac on the tasks he had given out. The renovation of the area around The Towers of Myriad Dao was underway, and over a hundred people were working at it to get it done in record speed. They had also teleported over hundreds of Zhix workers to dig as far down as possible in their mines. Since they lived underground they were natural diggers.

“Regarding the Zhix, Nonet wants to speak with you at your convenience,” Abby said.

“And I guess Nonet still does not want to leave its hive?” Zac asked, to which Abby simply bobbed in confirmation.

“I will try to make it, but honestly there’s a bit much on my plate at the moment,” Zac sighed.

“I think it’s in regards to the Dominators, but I cannot be sure,” Abby ventured.

“I’ll try to speed things up. Can you call over my sister?” Zac asked.

Soon Kenzie ran over and took over the job of managing the four Sky Gnomes. In a perfect world, he wouldn’t need to waste his sister’s time for this. But he had caught every single Sky Gnome trying to pilfer a few goodies for themselves multiple times. The ancient one had especially sticky fingers, making him not a small source of exasperation.

So instead he released a small hill of treasure at the time and had Kenzie watch over the proceedings as he started looking through the things that he had found in Mhal’s Cosmos Sack. The first things he took out were information missives similar to the one he got from Ogras, though they seemed to be created by some intelligence faction in the Undead Empire.

They were quite exhaustive, and Zac learned about quite a few forces that he hadn’t heard about before. There was even a pretty decent rundown of the Allbright Empire, the place where Average and Greatest resided. It was a strong C-Graded force that consisted of seven sectors, one of which was the Empyrean Sector. The Red Sector that Greatest mentioned was ranked in the middle, and it was run by low-tier C-Graded hegemony.

It was very valuable information since it gave him a pretty good gauge of the power level of not only Greatest but also The Great Redeemer. Everything pointed toward Greatest being in the top tier of the Red Zone, though not necessarily at the peak. That meant he was likely at the bottleneck of the D-Grade.

That also meant the Great Redeemer might be around that power level as well since he seemed to be pretty close in power from the aura he released. It didn’t really change things since he had no way to defeat that man no matter whether he was D-Grade or C-Grade, but finding protection against a peak

D-Grade warrior should be far easier than from a C-Grade old monster.

Of course, that was all conjecture. Zac also learned the shocking reality of The Church of Everlasting Dao. Who would have thought that the zealous cult was just a front for a large corporation that collected bodies and sold them to people running out of their lifespan?

It made Zac remember what The Great Redeemer had said when he asked if he was part of the Church. He had called them body-peddlers and that their path toward immortality was a dead end. Zac was shocked that it was even possible to transfer to a new body to prolong one's life, but he had a feeling there were severe limitations to such a thing.

Apparently, the Undead Empire and the cult were in constant war since they fought over the high-grade corpses wherever they met.

Apart from the information on the church and the Allbright empire, thousands of other forces were listed, which was too much for Zac to go through at the moment. He placed the information crystals to the side, and he'd hand them over to someone else that could go through it all in case there was anything of importance.

The second thing he took out was the cultivation manual that Mhal's clan used. It was called **[Corpsebloom Mantra]**, and it said that it could boost compatible attacks up to 22% at E-Grade, and it was possible to use all the way to level 150 provided the cultivator's body was proficient enough.

Zac hadn't looked too much into cultivation since he found that he was a mortal, but he knew that 22% wasn't a bad percentage. Ogras had once said that a boost of 10% per grade up to D-grade was good, but after that, he wasn't sure.

That was also why he hadn't seen cultivators as a real threat so far. Even those with good manuals were only boosted to a pretty limited degree, but that would change in E-grade. 20-30% was completely possible, which was like a permanent boost of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** without any downsides.

Besides, those numbers came from Ogras whose origin was a pretty weak D-Grade clan, so it wasn't impossible that the manuals from higher-tiered forces were even better. But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind as he thoughtfully looked down at the manual.

He had already resigned to being a mortal until he could get his hands on one of those treasures that would enable cultivation, or reaching a high enough grade. But he hadn't considered one aspect. He now had two races, which was essentially like having two different bodies.

Was the second body truly unable to cultivate as well?

Chapter 273: Guarantee Death

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, and he almost wanted to smack himself when he realized he had forgotten about checking his cultivation talent in his Draugr form. It felt especially likely now that he learned that the Draugr was a royal group that had extra good control over miasma compared to other undead species.

But he forcibly put away the manual again and refocused on his real task. It was not like he could try it out at the moment in any case, since he was currently in his human form. Instead, he kept looking through the documents and crystals that were written in the script of the Undead Empire.

A welcome find was that one of the crystals was actually a skill crystal that taught a miasma-based attack. It was unfortunate, but the skills in the repository were unusable in his Draugr-form since Miasma and Cosmic Energy weren't interchangeable.

So the large treasure trove of skills that he possessed was completely useless for his undead form unless there were some undead skills on the higher tiers that he still didn't have access to. That was also why he had been forced to enter the hunt without an offensive skill to complement his Undying Bulwark class.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the skill that the Corpse Lord used where he summoned two fearsome miasmatic beasts, but rather something that seemed a bit more mundane. The skill was called [**Unholy Strike**] and it was a simple skill that allowed one to force a large amount of Miasma into your arms to unleash a mighty strike.

It could either be used on its own to empower one's strike or in conjunction with another skill. For example, he could use it to strike harder with **[Verun's Bite]** against sturdy enemies. It wouldn't help much against hordes of beasts, but it would actually be even better than **[Chop]** against stronger foes. Furthermore, if he had been able to use **[Chop]** in his undead form he would have been able to empower it with **[Unholy Strike]** for a combined attack.

Zac remembered that Mhal had used it in conjunction with his bone scythe, and the effect had been pretty good. It was a skill that got stronger from physical attributes as well, and it even mentioned that the better the constitution one had, the more miasma one could push into the arms.

And if there was something that he excelled at in his Draugr-form, it was Endurance. Zac quickly put the skill together with the cultivation manual, and he couldn't help but feel eager to swap to his undead form to test his new gains.

But he pushed on through Mhal's notes, and finally his eyes turned to a ragged journal bound in some black leather. He had seen it before lying together with piles of other crystals and books, but he hadn't checked it out before after learning that all the documents in the Corpse Lord's possession were in illegible scripts. He took it out of his sack and looked over it briefly before he made to open it.

"Wait!" someone suddenly shouted, and Zac stopped himself with a start.

It was the old thief-turned-appraiser that looked over in his direction with alarm.

"What's the matter?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"Do not open that," Gemidir quickly said as he hurried over. "It has tampering-protections in place. If you open it you will destroy the contents."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with shock as he quickly moved his hand away from it.

"It's a common protection in case your things get stolen. Sometimes it's not the treasures that hold the value of a

snatched bag, it's the information," the old man said as he nimbly gripped the book. "And when there are protections there are solutions."

Suddenly a small white rat popped out from nowhere on top of the old man's hand, and Zac realized it was likely a skill since the mouse was covered in small fractals. But it was extremely lifelike, making Zac believe that the old man might actually be in the E-grade even though he gave off a very feeble vibe.

But suddenly both the old man and the mouse froze, and both looked over at Zac with an odd look.

"What's wrong? Can't you open it?" Zac asked with some urgency.

"This old man can't be sure," the elderly Sky Gnome said with an exaggerated sigh. "As you know our family has hit hard times lately. My house has been repaired but the wind goes right through, freezing me to my bones. My skills aren't what they used to be due to that."

"Uh," Zac said with some confusion, but some realization dawned upon him when Gemidir kept talking.

"Nothing like those fancy houses I've seen you humans build. With your insulation and temperature-control, with all kinds of miraculous appliances that could improve the living situation of a poor old man."

"I'll commission a mansion with for you if you can successfully open this thing up without harming the contents," Zac said with some amusement.

"This old man is honored, but I don't even have the furniture to fill such an extravagant three-story mansion," the old man said.

When did I say three-story? Zac thought to himself with some resignation.

"I'll also provide furniture," Zac added.

"What about—"

"Don't push it," Zac cut him off. "I am sure there are many others who are willing and able to lift some restrictions."

“This old man finally realized how to open this thing, rest assured young man,” Gedimir quickly said, and the next moment the mouse jumped up onto the cover of the book, sniffing around.

Zac curiously looked on as the small mouse seemed to be looking for something until it indicated a corner at the top of the book to Gemidir. When the old thief got the signal he channeled some Cosmic Energy into his finger and lightly tapped the spot the mouse found.

The old man gave off the aura of a safecracker as he and his sidekick lifted the restrictions one by one. In total, they found 9 spots at which point Gemidir nodded in affirmation as the mouse disappeared. Zac took the leather-bound book, looking over at the old man with some skepticism.

The book looked exactly the same as before, and Zac honestly couldn't tell if he had just been scammed out of a mansion or whether the old man had been telling the truth. But it was too late to regret anything now, and Zac felt it was better to be safe than sorry.

If Mhal truly was doing some experiments with Draugr-DNA or something similar it was reasonable that he wanted to keep that secret. Doing something like that might draw the ire of the noble clans, getting both himself and his clan into trouble.

The old man nodded at him with a smile before he joined the others as they kept going through treasures under Kenzie's direction. He noted that she had placed a few things in a small pile by herself, and he guessed she had found a few things that she needed.

Zac didn't mind if she took some things for herself. Some might see it as nepotism, but he didn't really care. He was the one who found everything, so he decided how things would be distributed. Instead, he focused on the journal in front of him, and just after a few sentences he was hooked.

Little brother, I am sorry about the secrecy, but some things cannot simply be said out loud. I will explain why I gave you those odd instructions, and I hope that you can create a miracle.

During my travels two hundred years ago I fell through a spatial crack while I explored a mystic realm. I was sure I would perish to the vacuum of space, but instead I found myself in a tomb with a body encased in Eternal Ice. A Draugr warrior. Just digging him out took me three years.

In his possessions were a journal, and I realized that this man had been entombed in this odd space for billions of years. According to the archaic scrips, I quickly realized that this man came from an era from even before the Undying Empire was founded. Can you believe it, an ancestor from the dark era?

He was a lone warrior and had no children or other next of kin, and he had met his demise while traveling to find a way to gain a breakthrough, just like I did. I quickly put the body inside my pouch and after twenty-four years I managed to escape through the very same tear that finally reappeared for a brief window.

At first, I was planning to provide the body to the Mendelosa-clan in hopes of attaining their favor and perhaps some resources. After all, returning an ancestor of their kin should count for something, right?

But then I had an idea. In my possession I had a Draugr specimen in prime condition, and more importantly, the body seemed to have no connection to the current lineages. You know how they can crack down on experiments through threads of Karma, but there shouldn't be any Karma between this man and the current clans, no?

That's when I got the idea for my experiments. Imagine, gaining the superior miasmic aptitude of the Draugr race while still having the great constitution of us Corpse Lords? The moment the thought entered my mind I couldn't let it go.

Unfortunately, it's hard for me to perform such experiments in my current position. There are too many eyes watching my moves since I became patriarch. If I start procuring large numbers of the living and the unevolved to experiment on I fear I might be found out.

That's why I spent so much money to give you this chance. Certainly, the chance to bask in the resources of a virgin world is a great opportunity. But the experiments are more important. You are young, but you have always had a clever mind with your manipulation and augmentation of the lower undead. I ask you to use that insight now.

Enclosed are 1000 small samples from the Draugr body. I hope you can use them to push the research further. I honestly haven't made much progress thus far, and this all might just be a pipe dream. Every subject thus far has failed due to their bodies not being able to withstand rebuilding the core composition.

Get strong test subjects, the longer they survive the more data you will be able to collect. I wish you the best of luck little brother, and I hope you will come back with news that can push the two of us to new heights.

And most importantly, remember to never tell anyone about what we're doing. None of us will survive if it gets out.

The following pages were meticulously kept experimentation logs, where the Corpse Lord recounted various trials where he tried to infuse both undead and the living with the 'Essence of Draug' as he called it. The results were abysmal.

After a while the script slightly changed, telling Zac that Mhal had taken over the experiments at that point, whereas the earlier ones were performed by the elder brother.

The reading was a chilling experience for Zac because it showed just how close to death he had been. Hundreds of zombies and humans had been caught by Mhal and forcibly imbued with the essence, and not one had survived. The strongest had lasted less than a day before dying a true death.

It was due to this that Mhal had even started mentioning using the essence as a poison rather than a medicine, which brought Zac to a short and succinct note in-between two experimentation logs.

Forced to use three stored essence seeds as a weapon in the fight against particularly strong native to guarantee death.

Unfortunately unable to retrieve the body for study. Over three hundred samples have been used already, I need to portion out my trials from this point forward.

Zac's eyes lingered on the two words 'guarantee death' for a full minute as he tried to comprehend what had happened. He had been injected with a large dose of the essence, which should have killed him like all others. But not only was he fine after a pretty harrowing experience, but he even got a specialty core and a second race.

What made him different from the hundreds of others that had died from the injections? A possibility that he had avoided until now couldn't help but appear in his mind. Their mother had implanted Kenzie with the AI chip that helped and protected her, but was that all she did?

Had he been experimented on as well?

Chapter 274: Final Tally

The more he thought about it the likelier it almost felt to Zac. He might not have an AI that guided him in his cultivation, but there had been several instances where he was fine when he should have died by all accounts.

The most notable instances were the time he jumped into the pond of cosmic water and came out unscathed with an improved race afterward. Next, there was the incident where he killed almost a hundred thousand zombies and absorbed a huge amount of miasma.

That incident should have killed him by all accounts, but instead he emerged with the duplicity core. There were also various times that almost anyone should have died, but he just passed out due to excessive wounds and woke up a bit later. He was like an unkillable tank, even though it was only just recently his Endurance started to become monstrous.

Had his mother somehow fiddled with his constitution to make his body able to endure when it would normally fail?

Zac quickly shook his head and closed the journal. There was no way for him to find out unless he met his mother again. But at least he knew the root of his undead race, and it seemed he was mostly in the clear. There was some elder brother to Mahl who also knew of the Draugr-issue, but there shouldn't be much he could do.

If he was the patriarch of his clan he should be far stronger compared to the Corpse Lord he fought and unable to come here in person. Perhaps he would order some people to find him since Zac killed his brother, but he shouldn't know anything about him becoming a Draugr.

Mahl himself had thought Zac dead until the moment they ran into each other, and just a minute later he was dead. There shouldn't be any loose ends, and if he ever ran into Draugr in

the future he could just feign ignorance and say he grew up on an unintegrated world or something.

There was the issue of the missing samples though. According to the notes there should be hundreds of samples remaining, but he couldn't find anything of the sort in the Corpse Lord's cosmos sack. Perhaps he had kept it hidden at a separate spot, which might spell problem. When he assaulted the Undead Incursion he would have to look for them so that there were no loose ends.

The note left from the big brother also made a poignant point about karmic threads. It truly seemed that one needed to be careful when traversing the multi-verse. One couldn't take for granted their actions would go unpunished when doing misdeeds.

"Gemidir," Zac suddenly said as he looked up, drawing the attention of the old Sky Gnome.

"Yes?" he asked when he walked over.

"When you stole things in your youth, weren't you worried about getting tracked down by karmic threads?" Zac asked.

"Stole? This old man remembers no such things," Gemidir started, but changed his tune when Zac's eyes thinned. "Taking treasure I as much knowing which target to hit as taking the right valuables. Find someone who won't be able to find you. Or just steal things that aren't valuable enough for them to expend enough resources to track you down."

"But karma is truly a bane for most thieves, which why the higher-tiered ones all try to find ways to obscure the heavens and hide from the karmic eyes," Gemidier added.

Zac's eyes lit up since it felt like he had found another direction that was worth following up on. If they could somehow block the Karmic Link between the Dominators and The Great Redeemer they might even be able to protect their planet even without fighting those monsters.

And a quick discussion with the Sky Gnomes proved that it was actually possible. However, he was dismayed to find that

arrays that could block out karmic links were prohibitively expensive, and D-Graded arrays at the lowest.

Zac could neither afford them or even set them up even if he had the money. An adept array master, preferably one with insights into Karma, would be needed to make the array worked. That was why Calrin didn't even mention the possibility during the meeting.

There were also treasures that had similar effects, though they only worked on individuals, and not a whole planet like they needed. So it seemed to Zac that he would have to stick with the current plan, at least for the moment.

Since he was done looking through the Corpse Lord's belongings he returned to Kenzie's side to find the Sky Gnomes all work with sullen expressions.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Your little sister must have been an Imperial Adjudicator in a past life," the old sky gnome said with a hurt look at Kenzie, who only sweetly smiled back at him. "She must have eyes in the back of her head."

"Turns out I'm pretty good at figuring out when they try to sneak some valuables for themselves," Kenzie explained with a smile.

Zac was confused for a second before he realized that her AI might be able to help her out in more ways than one.

"Please help out with the rest as well," Zac said with a smile.

"Fine, but I'm missing a lot of cultivation time. So I'll take a few goodies for myself," Kenzie said.

"No problem. Better yet, I'll show you something good after we're done," Zac agreed.

It was time to take her to his cultivation cave. He needed to check up on his seed in any case. Either the seed should have germinated and stabilized by now, or it would have been absorbed by the pond. In either case, it shouldn't hurt to allow Kenzie to cultivate there by now.

The organization of items took most of the day, and the final tally was shocking to Zac, even though he had been the one to gather everything. Of course, while the wealth that he had accumulated was vast, it was nothing compared to what a D-Grade Sect should possess.

The simple explanation was that the System had adjusted the treasures just like it likely had adjusted the danger. For example, a peak E-Grade Elder should have thousands of high-grade crystals, but he only got his hands on two D-Grade crystals.

And while Ogras never had provided a complete explanation about his Grandfather's wealth, he knew it was far beyond what he gathered the past month. And that was even when he was considered extremely poor for a D-Grade powerhouse. But Zac knew he couldn't get greedy, and he had received far more than he had expected.

The pile that Zac would keep for himself was the smallest, but it was also the most valuable. Its value easily surpassed billions of Nexus Coins, and that was even when there were multiple treasures that even the four sky gnomes were unable to figure out the function of.

Zac already knew about some of the treasures since he picked them up himself during the first two weeks, but there were a lot of happy surprises as well. Most of them seemed to come from Nenotheop's pouch, but gems were also extracted from the chaotic mess that Zac snatched from Salvation.

His eyes turned to a neatly stacked pile of jade boxes. Inside them were over a hundred Attribute Fruits. Each of them was only of use at F-Grade and worse quality compared to the ones he bought in the Contribution Store, but it was a huge gain for Zac who had only gotten his hands on two of them so far.

The problem with the fruits wasn't their price, but their scarcity. He had a standing order for them at Calrin's since the start, but the Sky Gnome was completely unable to get his hands on them. It was truly a mountain of treasure that had fallen into his lap.

The huge pile was also proof that the System adjusted the rewards in the hunt. If he got this many there should have been at least a thousand Attribute Fruits spread throughout the hunt. It was far more than what a D-Grade sect should have lying around. Not that they couldn't afford it, but they would use them on their disciples rather have them lying around.

But what was most curious was that he couldn't even remember picking up these boxes. If he knew he had attribute fruits in his possession he would have immediately eaten them rather than left them in his bag.

The only explanation that he could come up with was that the System either added them at the end or made people pick them up but ignore them afterward. Perhaps the System didn't want people who were doomed to die to waste the attribute fruits, so it only made them available after the hunt was over.

"A lot of them, but the real prize are these four," Calrin said and pointed at a few more intricate boxes on the side. "Two Luck and two all-attribute fruits, one of each mid-grade. Unsurprisingly, the last four are worth as much as the rest combined. If you gobble them all up yourself you should reach your limit, though you would a lot of efficiency that way."

Zac nodded, unable to hide his excitement. The limit the Sky Gnome referred to was the limit of how many attributes this type of treasures could provide. There was no strict limit that the system imposed, but the limit was generally 15 to 25 in every attribute.

Some of the differences were based on race, where some races could accommodate more bonus points. Humans were completely unremarkable in that regard, so they were on the lower end of the spectrum. But there was also a pretty large component that simply was having good genes.

Being a mortal and not someone possessing special constitutions and bloodlines, Zac suspected that he might be on the lower end of the scale. Unless his unusual sturdiness also translated into having a higher ceiling for bonus attributes as well.

Unfortunately, it usually didn't work to eat the same fruit over and over. You usually only ate one of each type since the following ones had reduced effect. Eating the same type over and over was extremely extravagant, and something only extremely wealthy scions could afford.

Quite a few of the fruits in the collection were duplicates, so Zac would likely give them to others instead of hoarding them all. He even briefly considered giving all of them to others, apart from the two special fruits. A few bonus attributes might do a lot more good for others than himself.

But in the end, he chose to be a bit greedy. A few points in each attribute might not be a huge boost, but every little bit counted when he was risking his life almost every day. It might allow him to pass the inheritance, or reach a higher floor in the Tower of Eternity.

"How do you suggest I should allocate these?" Zac asked of Calrin.

"Take what you need, and then take a decent amount for your elite. But you should leave some for the Merit Exchange or the store. People understand that some of them goes to the elites, but you need to show that hard work is also rewarded," the Sky Gnome said.

"How do you mean?" Zac asked. "I expect the treasures here will not be leaked to the public."

"We'll keep our word, but no secret stays that way forever, especially if you start handing out treasures to all the elites in Port Atwood. So you need to find a balance. Show the population that hard work will be rewarded and that everyone can become a powerhouse with our help if they struggle enough," Calrin explained.

Zac slowly nodded as it made some sense. Perhaps it would be optimal to give out all the fruits to the people in his inner circle, but it might sow discontent amongst the army or his craftsmen. It might create the image that working hard was meaningless since the leadership would keep everything good to themselves.

Zac wanted a culture where people worked hard to improve themselves, and if putting a few attribute fruits in the Merit Store helped make that happen, it was worth it. These fruits only gave 1-2 attributes each, after all, and spread out over 10 elites it wouldn't make all the difference.

Soon they had split up the attribute fruits so that Zac would gain roughly 10 points in each attribute, then an even 50-50 split amongst the remainders. Zac gave half to Kenzie who would distribute them amongst the warriors.

Kenzie had spent all her time in the Academy lately, so she had a lot better understanding of who was worth nurturing and who wasn't. Zac himself had been too busy with so many things that he almost only interacted with a small group at the top.

A decent amount of them were also earmarked for Emily, who he still hadn't seen since he got back. He had already invested a Fruit of Ascension to nurture a powerhouse from the ground up, so adding a couple of attribute fruits was nothing odd. Zac had asked Kenzie about Emily's situation but she only told him she was fine.

He was curious about her progress during the past month. Her 16th birthday should have taken place roughly two weeks ago, and he wondered if she had gotten her class yet. But when Zac asked his sister about it she only smiled and said that Emily wanted to tell him about it herself.

Chapter 275: Billions

It allowed Zac to relax somewhat about Emily's situation since he could tell it wasn't bad news going by Kenzie's expression. She was apparently out on a hunting trip at the moment, but she should be back pretty soon. It made Zac worry a bit that she still pushed herself to such a degree, but she was always accompanied by demon guards to keep her somewhat safe.

Apart from the attribute fruits, there were also three Dao Treasures, and Zac unhesitatingly kept those for himself. He had five seeds to work on now, and he would need every bit of help he could get. Zac only needed to figure out a direction for his seeds before he ate the treasures to increase the likelihood of improving his seeds.

A much larger section of his private stock was filled with high-quality gear that the Sky Gnomes felt had too much value to directly put in the merit exchange. They would cost too many points, making it so that no one would be able to exchange for them until the war with the invaders was over.

The most interesting item for Zac was a large glistening shield that radiated weight and ruthlessness. It was a bulwark in the true sense of the word. It was made in black E-Graded metals and was roughly 160 centimeters high and a meter wide. The width was almost the same across the whole thing, apart from the top where one end reached a bit higher than the other.

It was also clear it was meant for more than simple defense since five large spikes jutted out from the front, and the bottom also had jagged spikes sticking out like teeth. No matter if he bashed someone or slammed down the lower edge he would cause gruesome wounds.

Better yet, it came with a skill. And interestingly enough it wasn't a defensive shield like the one his old robes possessed, but an offensive one. He could slam the shield down into the

ground, which would unleash a barrage of steel spikes at his opponents in front of him. It was a pretty good area attack, and it only needed 5 minutes to recharge rather than a full day.

It was a great complement to Zac's somewhat disappointing offensive force in his undead form. His thorn aura was an amazing skill, but it took some time to whittle down his enemies. Smarter enemies would also figure out some workarounds after a while, like using defensive tools while attacking to neutralize **[Deathwish]**.

Unfortunately, the shield wasn't a Spirit Tool, but its quality was top E-Grade, and far sturdier than the shield he took from Thea's bodyguard. It would likely last him quite some time before he needed to swap it out.

The Sky Gnomes had also figured out the workings of the Spirit Vessel. Zac needed to use the elder token that he found at the same time as a key. When activated the large ball changed form into a large floating disk. It looked quite a bit like the array disks that he got from Ylvas, only a lot larger.

It was about four meters across, so it wouldn't be able to transport a whole army, but it would be able to fly a small strike squad with himself and a handful of others without a problem. Its speed was nothing to scoff at either. According to Calrin, it wasn't anything special, but it was far faster than Zac could run, and over twice as quick as Zac's fastest Creator Vessel.

It even had a defensive shield that both blocked out any wind and weaker attacks. But it wasn't a flying fortress, so using the shield to block out too strong attacks would ruin the disk. Kenzie had put the ball into her own pile, but it was one of the few things he took back for himself.

"You should take this to David and Hannah when you visit them," Kenzie suddenly said as she handed him another disk.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he curiously took the package of array disks.

They looked pretty similar to the array disks that he got from Ylvas, though the five disks that he held seemed to be meant

to be used together.

“They are farming disks,” Calrin explained. “We found a total of 16 such sets. The one you’re holding is of average quality, and covers a smaller area.”

“Farming disks?” Zac asked with some confusion. “What do they do?”

“Farming arrays help with farming, of course. These ones combine five different arrays. It provides energy gathering, energy infusion, irrigation, fertilization, and low-grade pest control,” Calrin said. “Better ones also can also speed up maturity times, though that’s usually done by the farmer’s skills.”

Zac looked down at the nifty arrays with surprise. Planting these on a field would truly make life a lot easier for a farmer, and it was a good gift to David if he truly had his mind set on farming in seclusion. But he wasn’t ready to meet up with Hannah at the moment, even if Janos had worked on her mind. Getting stabbed by your ex wasn’t something you got over in a day, not even in this new ruthless world.

Even more surprisingly there were four Spirit tools in the collection. There was a large golden bow, a seemingly unremarkable sword that possessed a dense killing intent, a mage’s staff that seemed to continuously absorb the Cosmic Energy from the area, and finally a small paintbrush.

Zac was especially surprised to learn that the small brush was a Spirit Tool, but he soon understood its use after Calrin’s explanation. It could both be used for inscriptions and attacks for certain classes like Calligraphers.

Kenzie had already laid claim to the staff, but since he didn’t have any specific people in mind for the other three spirit tools he decided to put them in the Merit Exchange as top prizes instead of hoarding them. Hopefully, it would motivate some people to work harder if they saw they could even get Spirit Tools with merit points.

There were also dozens of pieces of gear that weren’t Spirit Tools but as high-quality as his new shield. Zac would gift

have Kenzie gift them just like the attribute fruits, as long as there were proper recipients. They could be of great assistance in the upcoming battle, after all.

Zac took two Defensive rings and a Defensive amulet for himself and gave the same to Kenzie who put them on. She already had the protective array on her that he bought before the hunt, but that only worked on the island. Having a few back-ups wouldn't hurt.

Apart from the gear, there were also a ton of convenient items that would be a great addition to any Cultivator's survival kit. There was a small mountain of healing pills, all of them better than the standard-grade items that the General Stores sold.

There were also quite a few one-time items in the vein of the Thunder Punishment Array that he used during the beast hordes. Most of the ones he had found were useless for himself, but they might save the lives of the soldiers.

Zac decided to make two such items a part of the standard kit for the Valkyries and demons, which would hopefully improve the survival rate in the upcoming battles. They were things such as fireball-talismans or shield beads that soaked up some damage for the user for a short duration.

There were a few stronger items as well, and Zac ended up saving two of them for himself. One was a pitch-black glass ball that the old Sky Gnome called a **[Void Ball]** with some fear in his eyes. It was a truly dangerous item that actually caused a temporary tear in space.

It was only an E-Grade ball, but it would destabilize over a hundred meters around it. If Zac himself wasn't far enough he would kill himself since he couldn't withstand spatial rifts even with his recent upgrades to his Endurance. In fact, almost nothing in the F-grade could withstand the spatial storms from the **[Void Ball]**, meaning that it could be used for anything from widespread carnage to destroying arrays.

The second item he kept for himself was a defensive item. It looked like a golden walnut, and it was simply called **[Bramble Wall]**. If he infused it with cosmic energy it would

turn into an enormous dome of thick brambles that could protect against almost any attacks.

Better yet, Zac had a feeling he would be able to strengthen the item even further with the help of his Dao of Trees. It wasn't very useful for him personally, but it would make great last-ditch protection if his whole army was in danger for some wide-spread attack. The [**Bramble Wall**] could spread a lot further compared to even his Souped-Up [**Nature's Barrier**], which wasn't designed for large area protection.

Unexpectedly the simple-looking prayer-mat he found in the first temple also ended up in his own treasure-pile. It was a very valuable item made from D-Grade materials. It was mainly used by cultivators, but it could even help a mortal to absorb Cosmic Energy faster. Sitting on the mat after a battle would allow Zac to get back to a fighting condition almost twice as fast.

Zac felt that his force would gain a huge all-around boost by the large pile he had just gone through. Some items were even upgrades for himself who already possessed some of the best gear on Earth. They would be enormous upgrades for the Valkyries and the Demon Warriors. And all this was just the smallest of the three categories of loot.

The second smallest pile of treasures was the one that Calrin would sell through the Thayer Consortia since most would be placed into the Merit Exchange. Port Atwood was simply lacking just about everything at the moment, so most items would be kept. Still, Calrin estimated the sell-off would bring Zac another 250 to 300 million nexus coins.

A large portion of the items in the sell-off pile was things like gear from the thousands of fallen that had accumulated in his pouch. Each item was only worth a couple of thousand Nexus Coins, but Calrin believed he could sell the items in bulk to some low-grade planets. It was the same with the various pills of average efficacy.

There were also a few dozen low-grade Cultivation manuals that Calrin didn't recommend keeping in the Merit Store. It would almost be a disservice to allow his own citizens to

cultivate using such shitty manuals since it could cause trouble for them down the line.

Instead, the Sky Gnome would pawn them off to hapless rogue cultivators in the multi-verse for a few million a pop. Zac felt a bit bad about it, but he needed money and the cultivators could only blame themselves if they bought such an important item without understanding it properly.

The final pile would be used to stimulate every sector of Port Atwood, and it ranged from everything from Nexus Crystals to weapons and armor to knowledge. The information crystals that Zac got from Anzonil was the best collection he got, but not the only one. There were multiple other crystals that Zac got, mainly from killing the Emperor.

Those crystals covered everything from Blacksmithing to Alchemy, though Zac knew that those were just minor paths in the Eastern Trigram Sect. Still, they would bring a great boost to the productivity and skill of the artisans of the island, especially when combined with The Celestial Artisan heritage.

The sky gnomes estimated the final pile to be valued at roughly 700 million Nexus Coins, excluding the Information Crystals. That meant that the two piles of average treasures were worth around a billion Nexus Coins, and that was only a small part of the total wealth he brought back. It was an enormous number and much more than what he possessed before.

Zac couldn't even imagine the total wealth he'd bring back if the System hadn't adjusted the trial ground and removed the real valuable items. What if the odd Mystic Realm in his possession possessed equivalent wealth as the original Eastern Trigram Sect? Ogras seemed to believe that the realm had roughly the same power levels as the sect after all.

It all depended on what the rest of the odd structure Ogras described contained, but even if they turned into salvagers and stripped the metals from the walls they would likely make billions. That meant that there might be some really valuable things further in.

Zac had thought that hunting beasts was the most efficient way for him to get richer since he was able to gain tens of millions of Nexus Coins in a Day if he pushed himself. But exploring ruins in Mystic Realms or looting enemy forces was clearly more lucrative, and Zac understood why there was so much conflict in the multiverse. War was an extremely profitable business, as long as you won.

Zac couldn't help but feel a bit morose as he thought about life in the multi-verse. He would likely never be able to just sit back and relax since there would always be other people improving while eyeing his wealth. But Zac was soon brought out of his slightly morbid musings by some movement outside his courtyard. He looked up and slightly smiled when he saw who it was.

Emily had changed quite a bit in the past month.

Chapter 276: Runic Shaman

Zac put away the last of the treasures before he deactivated the arrays surrounding his courtyard. In the end, he needed over thirty Cosmos Sacks to fit everything he wasn't keeping for himself, and it would have been higher if Calrin hadn't taken care of the pile that was to be sold off. Luckily, all of the things he would keep for himself would fit in his personal Cosmos Sack without trouble.

Emily perked up the moment the shields surrounding the courtyard deactivated and rushed inside. Zac couldn't help but feel a bit amused when he saw her. For some reason, she had stylized herself as a barbaric warrior, with different wolf pelts as armor all around her. It was a pretty odd look considering how temperate the island was.

Her hair was braided backward like a Celtic warrior princess, perhaps to not get in the way during battle. She even had some paint markings on her face while the rest was covered in a veneer of dirt from days in the woods.

There were also clear indicators of her having been through harsh battles as she was bandaged in multiple spots, and Zac even noted a few scars with a frown. Still, the small wounds hadn't put a damper on the teenager as she ran over.

Unsurprisingly there were also two axes attached to a belt on her hip, meaning she had stuck to her decision to try to get a class related to the same weapon type as himself. But as she got closer Zac finally noticed one startling change. She looked younger.

Even before she had been pretty scrawny for her age, but now she almost looked like a kid. Zac couldn't put his finger on what exactly had changed, but she reminded him of when his sister was around twelve years old.

Zac's brows rose when he suddenly understood why she had changed in this peculiar manner. It must have been the Fruit of Ascension that made her look younger when she evolved. It was the same with himself when he evolved to the E-Grade race. He was already 30 but he looked like he was in his early twenties now.

Evolving seemed to remove markings of age due to things such as lifestyle and environment apart from slightly improving one's features. It just wasn't quite as pronounced with Emily due to her young age. But it still looked a bit comical to Zac, and he couldn't help snorting when he realized she might look like a brat for decades due to her improved longevity.

"It's your fault!" Emily snarled like an enraged wildcat, clearly having figured out the reason for Zac's amusement. "Your stupid fruit! Alyn told me will look like a kid for like 20 years now."

"A lot of old ladies would give anything to be in your position," Kenzie said from the side with a smile. "Besides, you will be able to slightly change your appearance when you reach peak E-Grade according to Alyn."

"Looking young is a sign of great talent in the multi-verse," Calrin added. "It means you have quickly progressed on the path of Cultivation. Sometimes you would see great powerhouses looking like children. Those are the ones you need to be extra careful around."

Zac smiled and was about to respond as well when a blazing axe suddenly materialized in Emily's hand while she looked at them with wild eyes. It looked like a small tomahawk wrought out of scorching flames. The next moment she unhesitantly threw it straight at Zac. Had the teenager finally snapped?

His eyes widened in alarm, but he didn't feel any danger so he didn't move. He didn't think that Emily would be able to harm him even if she wanted to. The flaming axe unerringly flew at him and to his surprise it entered his body without resistance.

The next moment he felt a flash of heat spreading through his whole body, but not in a bad way. It was like he had drunk a

warm beverage on a cold day. He even felt a bit invigorated by it.

“Hehe surprised? Did I scare you?” Emily said with a wide smile. “That’s what you get.”

Zac snorted and shook his head. She had clearly been waiting for a while to use this thing on him, so he would let her have this one. Rather than arguing he instead looked inward to see the effect of the warmth spreading through his body. It was beneficial, and it slightly reminded him of the energy from **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**, without the detriments.

He quickly opened up his status screen, and he quickly realized he was right. His Strength and Dexterity had both increased by a whopping 5%, meaning he had gained 40 attribute points. Zac quickly looked up at Emily to see her whole form blaze with the same types of flames the axe was made from before subsiding.

“Wow! Your attributes are crazy, no wonder you’re on the top of the ladder,” Emily exclaimed.

“What is this skill?” Zac asked. “How long can you keep it up?”

Emily didn’t immediately answer, and instead glared at the four Sky Gnomes who were still in the courtyard. Calrin rolled his eyes in response, but soon the four of them said their goodbyes leaving only Zac, Kenzie and Emily in the courtyard.

“It should boost you with 5% Strength and Dexterity, right?” Emily said, making Zac nod.

“I can keep it up for an hour right now, but I’m sure it will get longer as I level up. During that time I get the same amount of bonus attributes as you do. But even during normal times it gives me a 5% bonus. I also have an Earth Axe that gives Endurance and Vitality, and a mage axe,” Emily proudly said. “But I can only use one at the time.”

“You get the bonus as well?” Zac exclaimed with shock.

Five percent of his Strength and Dexterity was a pretty big boost for someone at her level, and her defensive axe would

give even more attributes.

“Yeah, I get almost fifty bonus Attributes from this skill now. You will have to come with me when I hunt later! And you can’t leave me on the island any longer. I can protect myself and even help out now,” Emily eagerly said.

“Just what is your class?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“It’s called Runic Shaman. I can buff one person at the time with my axes, and also fight with magically infused axes. It’s the coolest class ever, and it’s even Rare!” Emily said with pride.

Zac smiled and nodded. Clearly, the Fruit of Ascension had helped her get a great class, but the fruit alone wasn’t enough. And he had to admit it would be great to keep her around while traveling. If she could boost him this much right now, how would it look when she gained higher mastery of the skills?

But she was still not very strong on her own, and he was afraid that she would be targeted if his enemies found out she could empower him. He remembered all too well how he himself had handled the Medhin warriors who used the war arrays. Emily noted Zac’s hesitation, and a scowl started to appear on her face.

“You told me you would take me with you after I gained a class, and now I have!” she said with a glare. “You have already found your family, but I am still looking for mine!”

Zac sighed as he looked at the irate teenager. What she said was true. A big reason why she worked herself so hard was that she still hoped to find her two siblings. Zac knew that the likelihood of both of them still living was slim, even if they were both cultivators. But she had the right to look for them.

“How about this,” Zac said after mulling it over. “I am going to Westfort tomorrow, the base of operations of the Marshall Clan. They have as good an information network as The New World Government. Why don’t you come with me? Perhaps they have found the town where your siblings were dropped off”

“Great! I’ll start packing,” Emily exclaimed, her demeanor making a complete turn. “I’m going to go pack!”

The next moment she left the courtyard like a whirlwind before Zac had a chance to change his mind. He didn’t even have time to ask about her level and titles. But Kenzie apparently knew what was on his mind and explained Emily’s situation.

“She can protect herself against most warriors already, she’s stronger than you think. She has pushed herself extremely hard since she gained her level. She even managed to kill a level 51 beast as her first kill,” Kenzie explained.

“What?” Zac said, extremely surprised. “How the hell is that possible?”

He knew that the only reason that he was able to get the ‘Slayer of Leviathans’ title was that he lucked out on his roll against the Herald. For Emily to defeat such a powerful beast by herself was shocking. He remembered how he barely survived the fight against Vul, the Barghest Alpha. At that time he was almost level 20, and he had a slew of titles to empower him.

“She gained two very strong advantages before even turning 16. She both attained a Dao and upgraded her race. You know how good those titles you get from that. After that we found a very weak beast on Mystic Island,” Kenzie explained.

“She formed a Dao Seed!?” Zax exclaimed before calming down. “But still.”

“Between an offensive Dao and a high-quality weapon she almost killed the beast in one surprise strike,” Kenzie continued. “After that, she slowly killed it with the help of a fireball skill she bought from the Nexus Crystal. The beast only managed to get in one blow, but she used her defensive gear.”

Zac slowly nodded, realizing that Emily had quite a few advantages that he never had when fighting Vul. An offensive Dao added a huge spike in power, and it was such a Dao Seed

that allowed him to kill an E-Grade beast in his Draugr-form. Using a Dao Seed to kill a level 50 beast made sense.

Still, he hadn't expected Emily to even attain a Dao seed before officially embarking on the path of cultivation. According to Ogras, it was practically unheard of on his own homeworld. With all those titles Emily might actually be stronger than the Valkyries by now.

Learning about Emily's situation was like a rock having been lifted off his shoulders. He truly felt he had made the right decision. His only regret was that she seemed to have gained a hybrid class that was part-support. Such a class would be invariably weaker in battle compared to a pure combat class.

"Has anyone else on the island managed to form a Dao Seed before turning 16?" Zac suddenly asked.

"Not that we know, but Alyn increased the amount of meditation for all children in the Academy after learning of Emily's situation. I think it's extremely rare, even with the help of Origin Dao," Kenzie said hesitantly. "But perhaps we can luck out and get another one."

Zac simply shrugged in response. He didn't hold too high hopes for that happening. Once was already a miracle without the help of a powerhouse showing the way. Besides, the Origin Dao would disperse and integrate with the world the following years, making the window of opportunity pretty brief.

"Speaking of meditation," Zac said as he started walking toward the teleporter on his compound. "Come with me for a bit."

"Wait, what about those things?" Kenzie said and pointed at the gardening golems idly standing in a corner of the courtyard.

Zac stopped with a start since he had completely forgotten about those things. When Kenzie and the gnomes had taken the golems out they were completely lifeless unlike when Zac snatched them from the Alchemist's mountain. No matter what kind of prodding they tried they were completely inert, so they simply placed them to the side before moving on.

After some hesitation, Zac put them into his private pouch. He did sort of want to leave them there to see whether they would wake up by themselves and start cleaning, but he was afraid they would freak out instead and start demolishing the whole place. He needed to be present in case that happened.

Soon the two stepped through the teleporter and appeared in Azh'Rodum. They quickly exited the town before they attracted any real attention and then entered the mines from a side-tunnel. Zac then quickly led his sister through the winding paths inside the mountain until they stood in front of the unassuming rock leading to his cultivation cavern.

“These mountains really are amazing,” Kenzie said with a sigh when they stopped. “Jeeves says this place is probably among the top ten Zones on Earth for cultivation. After they have been doused in the Cosmic Energy for a few centuries they will become true Sacred Mountains.”

“If you the mountains are good you’ll like this,” Zac said with a grin as he undid the arrays hiding the cavern before he moved the boulder out of the way.

Dense cosmic energy poured out of the cavern like a punch in the face, and Kenzie’s eyes widened in shock as she took a deep breath. Zac indicated for her to go inside, and then placed the boulder back behind them to hide the entrance again. Next, he quickly activated the arrays again to prevent the energy from leaking out.

“This place... It’s crazy!” Kenzie said as she looked around in wonder at the extremely dense flora growing in the cavern. “Even the mundane plants have gained spirituality from the enormous amount of energy. Did you make this place?”

However, Zac didn’t answer as all his focus was on the pond with Cosmic Water. His heart quickly hammered with wild elation as he hurried over, only stopping right at the edge of the pond. His mouth curved upward as he looked at the sight.

A lotus no larger than his hand lazily bobbed on the surface.

Chapter 277: Cultivation Cave

Kenzie noticed Zac's preoccupation and walked over next to him in front of the Cosmic Water pond.

"What is that flower?" Kenzie said with interest after seeing Zac's stare.

"A present from Abbot Everlasting Peace," Zac explained. "He gave me a seed from a D-Grade Lotus, I wasn't sure it would germinate. But the effect here is even better than I anticipated. I thought it would take much longer for it to start growing."

"What does it do?" Kenzie said.

Zac hesitated a bit, but in the end he decided to not tell Kenzie about the horrible state that the Abbot was in. He trusted his sister to not tell anyone else about it, but he felt he shouldn't betray the old man's confidence.

"It produces massive amounts of Life-attuned energy. So it can both heal people and prolong life. It's small now, but it will grow a lot bigger later. Sitting on it will probably speed up your cultivation by a large degree when you cultivate later," Zac explained instead.

It was true. The old Abbot had lost a few placements on the ladder the last month, but in the end he had pretty much kept pace with the people on the ladder even though he didn't go to the hunt. The massive number of beasts had boosted the average levels on the ladder by a huge degree, far quicker than the average speed was on earth, yet he held on.

"Jeeves says it contains intricate signs of life," Kenzie said as she looked down on the lotus. "But he needs to upgrade to understand it properly."

“Upgrade?” Zac asked with confusion, finally tearing his eyes away from the small flower.

“Yeah. Jeeves is like a Spirit Tool. He needs to upgrade to keep helping me after I reach E-Grade,” Kenzie said, a small frown forming on her face. “But he doesn’t know what he needs.”

“You didn’t find anything from my treasure pile that could help?” Zac asked.

“No, nothing...” Kenzie said with a sigh before looking up at him with steady eyes. “Zac, I still think we should find mom. Especially now with the Great Redeemer.”

Zac was about to immediately reject the proposition, but his sister sped up when she saw the frown forming on his face.

“Wait, just listen. If she’s really a Technocrat she can help, right? Aren’t they some of the most powerful people around?” Kenzie hurriedly explained. “Besides, don’t you want to meet her again?”

Zac froze, not really knowing what to think about what Kenzie said. Leandra was no longer a part of his life, so he hadn’t even considered her as a solution since he learned about The Great Redeemer. But honestly, what Kenzie said made some sense.

The Technocrats were at least a B-grade force, though Zac guessed that it consisted of lower-grade families and groups as well. But taking care of someone like The Great Redeemer shouldn’t be too large a problem. If their mother had the ability to create something as miraculous as Jeeves, she should possess a lot of other terrifying means as well.

He suddenly remembered the story about the Technocrat who visited the Creators. That man had weapons that could blow up whole planets without breaking a sweat, so creating tools that could kill off a rogue D-grade cultivator shouldn’t be a problem.

However, bringing the attention of the Technocrats might bring more trouble than good. Jeeves was too big a cheat. It didn’t only fuse technology and cultivation, it even seemed to

upgrade every single part about her, from her basic constitution to Class choices.

Such a thing would cause a storm the moment it became known in the multiverse. Everyone would want it for themselves, and not just the technocrats. No one would say no to having a tool that worked like a continuous source of free improvements that made them stand out from the rest cultivators.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, there are too many risks involved,” Zac eventually said.

Kenzie seemed to gear up for an argument, so Zac quickly started to explain his thoughts.

“Wait, you should have asked around about the technocrats by now so you know what kind of a force mom might belong to. Almost all forces in the multiverse are their enemies. If we start sending out probes through Calrin we have no idea what kind of problems we would attract. I don’t even think we have the qualifications to start looking for her or the technocrats at the moment,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“We can’t even buy low-tiered goods. Finding someone from a B-grade force? There’s no chance we can even afford a scrap of information,” Zac continued. “Besides, there are too many things we don’t know about mom.”

“But that’s why we need to start looking,” Kenzie retorted. “Don’t you want to find some answers?”

“I do, but I don’t have anywhere to start. I looked through our house, there was nothing,” Zac said. “Besides, we don’t know what she was even doing on Earth before the integration. Was she in hiding? From who? Perhaps she fled the technocrats and is no longer part of them. If we start asking around for her we might inadvertently cause her trouble.”

The two kept going back and forth for a while, not getting anywhere. Zac could only sigh and somewhat relent in the end.

“I’ll try to figure something out, I promise. But we have to be careful. I don’t want to have some angry Technocrat flashing

over here and blow up Earth just to spite mom or something, alright?” Zac sighed.

“Alright, fine,” Kenzie said and sat down to cultivate some distance away.

But Zac saw that she didn't agree, and he could only shake his head as he sat down himself a few meters away from her. He trusted his sister, but the lives of billions of people were at stake. He didn't want to muddy the waters any further by dragging a bunch of Technocrats into the mix, so he made a mental reminder to himself to make sure Calrin didn't do any probes for their mother.

Zac couldn't cultivate, but just sitting in this extremely nourishing environment felt quite nice as well, and Zac was content to just relax for a bit. He hadn't realized it until now, but he had been awake almost non-stop for three days.

He had been frenziedly hunting beasts at the end to beat out the Medhin Princeling for the 3rd position on the Hunter Ladder, and as soon as he got back there were various things to take care of for two straight days. He had even closed a whole incursion without skipping a beat.

But Zac was tired to his bones, and it only took moments until he was deep asleep. It was only 6 hours later he woke up, making it his longest nap for months. He cracked his neck and stood up, and to his surprise he saw that Kenzie was still deep in cultivation.

Energy was slowly swirling around her before it entered her body through all her pores, and Zac was shocked at the amount she was able to absorb. It was so much that he could sense it, and he couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. In just a few seconds enough energy to match a barghest kill entered his sister's body.

Kenzie somehow noticed that Zac had woken up.

“Don't overwork yourself,” she said with some worry after seeing his tired state. “You're not alone, you know? There's a lot of people here that can share your burden.”

“I know,” Zac said with a smile. “I’ll leave this place to you. You can bring Emily as well if you think the energy is enough for the two of you, but no one else, not even your two friends. And look after the flower, please.”

“Thanks, I’ll take care of it. You know, I thought about it. You should make a miasma chamber next to this place,” Kenzie said. “Like dig a second pond and turn it into Miasma.”

Zac’s eyes lit up at her suggestion, but he was unsure about the feasibility. It would be nice to have a Miasma-zone on the island, especially so close to the flower. But he was afraid things would get out of hand in case he put up an Unholy Beacon next to the pond, so he would have to wait a bit before he tried those things out.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Zac nodded. “But I’ll wait until I can make sure I don’t ruin this place and the valley above. I’ll hopefully do the Inheritance today before heading to Westfort, are you staying here?”

“I’ll stay here for a bit more. The cultivation speed here is amazing, but unfortunately I think I would hurt the environment if I stayed here around the clock. The energy needs to be released from the pond to restock the atmosphere,” Kenzie said.

After Kenzie mentioned it Zac actually noticed the density of Cosmic Energy in the cave had decreased somewhat, but it was still far and beyond above anything else on the island.

“Well I’m sure you have a handle on it,” Zac said as he fiddled a bit with the town shop menu. “I’ve given you control of the arrays around this place as well, you should be able to come and go as you please now. And don’t jump into the water, it’ll kill you.”

“I know what Cosmic Water is,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “I’m not an idiot. Be careful in there, and tell Ogras not to overdo it. I don’t think Brazla will do anything bad, but he refuses to tell me what to expect from the trials.”

Zac only coughed, relieved he never mentioned how he jumped into the pond to escape the poison back in the day. He

left Kenzie to her devices and headed back to the town. The suns were starting to rise, meaning it was close to 4 am. However, Azh'Rodum was already coming alive, with a lot of miners already heading toward the mineshafts.

Since people were paid a portion of what they mined a lot of people spent most of their time in the tunnels for a week, and then a week on cultivation with help of the crystals they had mined. Zac no longer had full insight into how much the mine yielded, but it was a substantial amount of crystals each day. His small refinement machine had gotten a dozen big brothers that were churning out over a million crystals every week.

A large part of it went to the academy to nurture his army and the young, and another chunk to power the increasingly numerous arrays that helped with everything from protecting the town from the wildlife to farming. He was also providing the whole population with a small allowance to boost everyone's base power, for now. But a lot of it went straight into the town coffers, which essentially was his own private property.

Unfortunately, he had no use for F-grade crystals at the moment, and he didn't possess any means to reliably convert them to higher-grade crystals. Of course, he could sell them for Nexus Coins, but he didn't see the need for it since there wasn't a lot he could do with money at the moment.

Earth essentially had been placed under a trading embargo for strategic resources until they had proven their strength by booting out all the invaders. Calrin could only get a very limited quantity of high-quality goods, and that was only if there was a surplus supply.

He took the teleportation array in Azh'Rodum to the main teleporter in Port Atwood and immediately headed over to the government building. Between Adran and Abby, there was always at least one of them working, and he quickly found the Stargazer looking through a bunch of documents that hovered in front of her.

"Lord Atwood," Abby said as she looked over at him. "What brings you here so early?"

“I wanted to check in on the progress of our projects?” Zac said as he sat down in a chair in front of her.

“I have tasked Mr. Trang to send one of his vessels back to the desert continent to set up a proper base camp,” Abby began without missing a beat. “As for the digging operation in the mines, we have hit a bit of a snag.”

“Snag how?” Zac asked with surprise.

“There are whole biodomes of subterranean animals the further down we dig. Everything from large white lizards to thousands of vampiric bats,” the Stargazer said with some annoyance. “But luckily the beasts are not too strong. I had Alyn send a few companies down the mines to clean them out. It will do them good to fight something else than barghest.”

“So how long until you think we reach the bottom of my influence?” Zac said.

“It depends on what else we find in the depths. They are surprisingly full of life, perhaps because we got merged with a subterranean planet? But I would guess at least two weeks,” Abby estimated.

Zac slowly nodded as he mentally planned out his next course of action. It was a bit disappointing to hear about the delay since he had somewhat wanted to head down to the underworld before he put himself against the Undead Incursion.

It felt like the undead might be his strongest enemies apart from the Dominators, and he wanted to reach level 75 before he challenged millions of zombies and the Lich King. Not because he planned to immediately evolve, but rather that he would gain his two ultimate skills upon reaching the max level. Closing the underground incursion first had been his idea to quickly reach level 75.

But there was another opportunity; The inheritance. Perhaps those old powerhouses had left something nice behind that could give him the final push of the F-Grade.

“As for the... beautification around the towers,” Abby added as if reading his mind. “They’re all done. Even that Tool Spirit

should be happy with the result.”

Chapter 278: Inheritance

“Great,” Zac said with some excitement.

He had been looking forward to the inheritance for quite some time now, and it was finally time to see what one of the old powerhouses had left behind for future generations. It could affect his whole future in a sense.

Inheritances weren't as narrow as a heritage, who usually showed how to attain a certain class. An Inheritance didn't pigeonhole one's progress like that, but they were simply the treasures and insights a predecessor left behind. They could contain anything from a mountain of crystals to specific Dao insights. But the most common thing was that the things left behind were meant to nurture a possible successor from beyond the grave.

A successor didn't necessarily need to have the same class, but he would generally walk down the same path. The Umbra would no doubt be related to darkness and shadows, for example. So it would most likely be far more valuable for someone like Ogras than for Zac.

Perhaps the demon would receive a supreme Spirit Tool that would suit a certain fighting-style or some treasure that made his shadows stronger. The possibilities were endless. But before he could undergo the trial there were a few things to do.

“Keep up the good work,” Zac said as he made to leave.

“One second, lord Atwood,” Abby said, making Zac stop and turn back toward the Stargazer.

“I mentioned the wish of the Anointed to speak with you earlier,” Abby said. “I relayed how busy your schedule was, and that you might not be able to visit in the near future due to heading to Westfort. So the Anointed came here in person.”

“Nonet is here?” Zac said with some surprise.

The large Zhix had never left its hive since meeting Zac as far as he knew. That Nonet showed up now proved that it really needed to speak with him.

“Do you know what Nonet wants?” Zac asked.

“Not sure, it didn’t say,” Abby admitted. “But I believe the Zhix wishes to accompany you to Westfort.”

Zac’s brows rose in surprise, but after mulling it over for a few seconds he thought it might not be too bad an idea. There was a hive not too far from Thea’s town, and considering that they had fought quite a bit without a clear winner it should be a pretty strong one.

He still wanted to come in contact with the so-called council of Anointed in order to start coordinating a response to the Dominators, and bringing Nonet themselves would probably expedite that even more than even bringing Ibtep would.

“Make sure it’s ready later. I plan on hitting the inheritance in a few hours, but according to Ogras it shouldn’t take long,” Zac said.

Abby bobbed in agreement.

“You shouldn’t worry too much. The first trial of orthodox inheritances are usually largely based on suitability,” Abby said.

Zac was reminded that Abby herself came from a species that excelled at information gathering, and quickly tried to fish out some more information while she was in a giving mood.

“What do you mean?” he asked with interest.

“Most who leave an inheritance are people with regret their path ended, and they want someone to pick up the mantle where they fell short. They hope that someone will reach grand heights using their Dao Vision. It’s in a sense a way for them to prove to the world that their path of cultivation was correct,” Abby started.

“So the first tests are usually a test of suitability and a test of talent,” Abby explained. “You will need to prove you walk the same general path, and that you are talented enough that you

have the potential to walk at least as far as the predecessor themselves.”

“I’m a mortal,” Zac said with a frown. “Will that be a problem?”

“Not sure, but I doubt they would test for that. A test for talent might be to kill something ten levels above you, or have enough points in the right attribute,” Abby said. “The spirit might be a bit disappointed that you show up as a mortal, but they can’t stop you. Inheritance sites are created with certain rulesets, and a Spirit usually isn’t able to change those rules.”

“Spirit?” Zac said with some confusion until he remembered Anzonil.

The old Supreme Elder had left behind a part of his soul to maintain the cleansing array for his disciple, so it wasn’t out of the question that the powerhouses who left the inheritances did something similar.

Zac asked a few more questions, but in the end there was no strict form to an inheritance. Each one was designed by the predecessor according to their will and preferences. The largest risk was that they encountered unorthodox inheritances.

Unorthodox inheritances could take many forms, but entering one was seldom an opportunity. They were mostly left behind by sinister cultivators, and some were simple deathtraps to kill as many as possible. Some cultivators even tried to use an inheritance to find suitable people to possess or turn into puppets.

But there was almost no chance that the system would give out unorthodox inheritances as a reward, so Zac didn’t worry too much about it as he hurried back to his courtyard. As soon as he got back he sat down and took out the jade boxes containing the attribute fruits.

He didn’t waste any time as he stuffed one odd fruit after another into his mouth. They had all kinds of tastes and textures, and the only thing they had in common was that they were extremely delicious.

At the beginning of his feast, he only felt a growing warmth in his body, but when he had eaten half of his personal collection he started to feel uncomfortable. His body was wracked with chaotic swirls of energy, and it almost felt like his body would explode.

Normally one would eat these things slowly one by one, but Zac had no time for that. Besides, he had absorbed far more chaotic energies than this before, so he knew that his body could take it. The minutes passed and he was soon proven right as all the cells in his body started to absorb the energies, and after two hours he dared to start eating more of the fruits.

It was around 10 am he had completely absorbed the 33 fruits that he had put aside for himself, and the results were pretty good.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	73
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st
Limited Titles	-

Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	582 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]
Dexterity	290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Endurance	715 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]
Vitality	353 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]
Intelligence	131 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Wisdom	146 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]
Luck	132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 296 516 043

He had gained 11 points in Strength and Dexterity, 10 points in Endurance and Wisdom, 9 points in Vitality, 8 points in Intelligence and 7 points in Luck from the fruits. Together with the 20 points in Strength and 4 points in Dexterity he had allocated from his free points he had made another pretty huge leap.

He was even closing in on 2500 attribute points, something that very few people in the F-grade would ever accomplish. He remembered that was would also give him another title, perhaps even an upgraded one since he would no doubt be the first on the planet to accomplish such a thing.

Satisfied, Zac closed the status screen and stood up and turned toward a shrouded corner of the courtyard. Zac had sensed that Ogras had appeared some time ago, but he had been busy absorbing the attribute treasures.

“It’s time,” Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

“Finally, I was going crazy over here,” Ogras muttered with an excited gleam in his eyes.

The two walked over toward the towers, and Zac had to say that he was impressed with what he saw when they arrived. The repository now stood in the middle of a large square shimmering in gold and white, giving it an almost celestial feeling. Someone had even created or found several large marble statues and had placed them at the edge of the circular square.

In each cardinal direction there was also a fountain that continuously sprouted out glistening cascades of light. Since there was no proper plumbing in the area Zac could only assume the effect was somehow powered with the help of arrays.

It was a huge contrast toward the somewhat desolate area before, and Zac felt that even Brazla had to be satisfied with the change. The only slightly odd thing was that the square was not connected to anything at the moment. The placement of the repository was within his inner wall, and there wasn’t anything else close-by. So the square simply ended after a bit and gave way to the inner wall on one side and forest on the other.

Ogras was suitably impressed as well judging by his expression. The tiles that Zac had snatched from the summit palace were truly extravagant, and Zac had a feeling it would be extremely expensive if he wanted to buy something similar for his own courtyard.

“Those craftsmen you brought from New Washington are really coming in handy,” the demon said.

“Those people did this?” Zac asked with surprise since he had mostly assumed that the demons would have been responsible

for the construction.

With all that had been going on, he had no time to focus on the artisans that he brought with him after the auction, but he was happy he took the chance with them all that time ago. If the engineers could produce something as impressive as this in just two days, perhaps the others had made as impressive strides in their respective crafts.

It was about time that his investments started to pay dividends. He was funding everything from inscribers to all kinds of artisans at the moment. He even offered free Nexus Crystals so that everyone could get a class without risking their lives against beasts.

“Yeah, they were a bit rambunctious in the beginning, but after a few beatings and a few incentives they settled in properly,” Ogras shrugged. “I think they worked especially hard now that the Heritage is getting added to the merit list. This construction probably had pretty big merit incentives since we needed it done quickly.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. He had already heard that it was as though people had been injected with adrenaline after hearing about the treasures and heritages getting added to the merit list. People were working with an almost fanatical fervor to gain access to those things.

A large reason was due to the effect of the contribution store that the System provided during the monster waves. Those who had survived and racked up a lot of contribution had made huge improvements between the contribution rewards and getting access to a skill in the Repository. Many saw the effect of gaining contribution points and wanted the same for themselves.

Some had a hard time getting accustomed to this odd new reality, but most had started to come around. There were no safety nets any longer, but hard work could conversely bring untold benefits. Who didn't want to live a few hundred years longer for example?

The two stepped into the towers, and both's faces couldn't help but scrunch up when Brazla slowly descended from the

roof, shrouded in a golden light.

“Your offering is passable, though barely,” Brazla said. “But do not become complacent. This is just the most rudimentary improvements for the surroundings of the Great Brazla. But I recognize that your force is poor as paupers at the moment, and I will not be unreasonable.”

Zac felt his blood pressure increase, but he forcibly kept his temper in check.

“Glad you like it,” Zac tersely said. “We’re here to take two of the inheritance trials.”

“Oh? Finally,” Brazla said, looking mostly disinterested.

“Which ones?”

“I’ll be taking The Umbra,” Ogras immediately said.

“Unsurprising, you are a shady type,” Brazla said with a dismissive shrug before turning to Zac. “What about you?”

Chapter 279: Proving One's Worth

“The Lord of Cycles,” Zac said with resolve in his eyes.

This was the final decision that Zac had arrived at after weeks of deliberation. He did consider taking Undying Fiend in hopes it was a Defensive Inheritance that might contain a Spirit Tool shield. But in the end, he chose the one that seemed to fit best overall with his current skillset.

Zac didn't know exactly what to expect from such an inheritance, but there might be various things that might increase the synergy between his two classes. The best would be to find a way to use both his classes at the same time. If he managed that he'd be almost invincible.

“Oh, Lord of Cycles? Interesting. It's the first of the two C-Grade inheritances as well, well chosen,” Brazla said with a nod.

“Which is the other one?” Zac quickly asked when he saw the Tool Spirit was in a sharing mood.

“I don't want to tell. Build something nice for me and I might become more accommodating,” Brazla snorted. “Now, enter the portals. I won't assist you at all while you undertake the trial, and there is no exit. Final chance to change your mind.”

As he spoke two fractals lit up in front of two of the huge statues that lined the hall. One of them was a humanoid whose features were hidden in a large cowl, each of his hands gripping a dagger. It was pretty clear it was the creator of the Umbra inheritance, and the demon immediately walked over.

The other statue that lit up was of a man or woman that looked human. The face was completely androgynous so he couldn't tell its gender at all, but since he was called a Lord, Zac

guessed he was male. He wore a loose robe and held his two hands together forming a circle in front of his chest, and behind him was a large disk split in the middle.

As Zac walked over he tried to understand what type of class this person had, but he truly couldn't tell. The disk might work as a weapon, but Zac rather leaned toward this person being some sort of magic user, which might not be what he needed. The odd circle behind was split into two, one side looking like flames, while the other was ice.

He even hesitated for a second, considering whether he should switch over to The Undying Fiend even though its grade of inheritance likely was worse. He had a feeling that the last C-Grade inheritance was the Crown of Despair, likely personified by the statue of the woman holding her head in her hands, but that one was likely an even worse fit for him.

But his eyes once again turned to the circle of fire and ice behind the Lord of Circles. It was this duality that made Zac believe that the Lord of Cycles tried to do something similar to himself; merge two opposing elements.

For better or worse Zac had already started walking the path of life and death. One of his classes veered toward nature, and the other side was an undead warrior turning the area around himself into a projection of the underworld.

He was hoping that the Lord of Cycles Inheritance could help him create a coherent system of his two opposing sides, and create something greater than the sum of its parts. Granted, each side of his two identities had its strong points, but there was currently no synergy between them apart from the extra attribute points.

He wanted to find a path that made sure both his classes were pushing toward the same goal, even though they were the opposites of each other. He had a feeling that something amazing would be created if he was able to fuse his two sides in the future, and this was the step to attain that.

Since he had already made his decision he resolutely stepped inside his own portal. The next moment he found himself in front of a huge metal plaque in an otherwise empty field, and

he quickly took out his axe as he looked around for any threats.

But no matter where he looked he only saw a hazy mist, and his senses didn't warn him of any hidden dangers lurking about. So Zac put away **[Verun's Bite]** again as he looked at the large slab of metal in front of him. It was completely smooth and rectangular, apart from a large engraving in the middle.

The engraving was not a large fractal, but rather a circular pattern containing inscriptions of smaller fractals. There was an outer circle containing at least one hundred fractals, and there were multiple rings inside. For every concentric circle inside there were fewer and fewer fractals until it reached the center.

The innermost part was just a dot, and the row outside consisted of just two crudely drawn fractals. Zac was confused about why they had such shoddy workmanship compared to the others, but he barely had time to look at them before a familiar feeling entered his mind.

The splinter of oblivion became restless the moment he looked at one of the two fractals, and its tendrils started to furiously pound the miasmatic runes that had locked it away. Zac quickly closed his eyes until the splinter calmed down. Luckily it seemed that the prison in his mind still held strong.

But the eruption was an uncomfortable reminder that he hadn't gotten any closer to figuring out what to do about the alien object in his head. However, now was not the time, so he once again refocused on the patterns on the monument, though he avoided looking at the innermost part.

"Creation and oblivion," Zac suddenly muttered with understanding.

The circle in front of him was a Dao Chart following the same system that Anzonil mentioned. The center was the origin of Dao, the Primordial Chaos. From that came Creation and Oblivion, and the splinter in his mind reacted to the crude fractal in the center of the chart.

That would explain why the details of the fractals got increasingly crude the further in they were placed on the chart in front of him. Creation and Oblivion were the top two Daos of the multi-verse, and even if the Lord of Cycles was a great C-Grade powerhouse he likely was far from grasping such esoteric knowledge.

Those Daos were likely reserved for the top tier powerhouses of the multiverse, those who stood at the apex of whole planes.

“As night begets day, so does oblivion beget creation,” a voice suddenly echoed across the field. “The cycle restricts and empowers. Prove your duality.”

Zac quickly looked around for the source of the voice, but no matter which direction he looked there was nothing. The source of the gentle voice was nowhere to be seen, and he was still alone in the mists with the metal plaque in front of him.

However, he wasn't worried, but rather elated. The voice had essentially confirmed that that the Lord of Cycles walked the same path as himself. The problem was how he would go about to prove his own cycle, that of life and death. Did he need to first force some Dao of Trees into the inscription, then kill himself to infuse miasma next? It seemed extremely cumbersome.

Besides, did he need to know which fractal to infuse? All of them were completely inert, and it looked like someone had simply carved the fractals into the metal without empowering them with any Dao or other energies.

Zac chose to simply touch the monument in the end, and he quickly saw that he was on the right track. A deep hum erupted from the monument, and an invisible wave pushed out from it, trying to enter Zac's body.

The second that the wave came in contact with him the bracer on his arm became scorching hot, and the invading force was immediately rebuffed. Nothing happened for a while and Zac moved his hand away.

He hesitated for a bit, but he finally chose to remove the bracer that Greatest had given him before he once again touched the

monument. He didn't love the idea of exposing his secrets like this, but he was inside a closed-off inheritance of a long-dead powerhouse. No one could spread his secrets from here, at least not as long as he was alive.

The wave entered his body one more time after he activated the monument, and he felt something was digging around and inspecting his whole body. The wave had turned into tendrils that poked and prodded him all over. The tendrils quickly honed in on the Duplicity core, but they also went over to the three Dao fractals in his body. 3

Even the one that was in his heart was found somehow, even though it belonged to his other class. The hidden compartment in his heart had simply appeared after the mysterious energies prodded around inside, and it was a huge clue as Zac saw it. If the Dao Fractal could be made to appear like this while he was in his human form, what about his other skills? Perhaps even his pathways?

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, and he truly hoped that the spirit of the Lord of Cycles would be as accommodating to provide information as Anzonil was. Perhaps he would be even more helpful since Zac would essentially become his in-name disciple if he passed the trials.

The moment the Dao fractal touched the tree he got from seeing the Lifegiver vision one of the fractals on one of the outermost rows lit up, emitting a strong aura of vitality. It represented one of his main paths, the one of moving toward the Dao of Creation. Of course, he was still only on the periphery with his basic Dao.

At the same time, he saw that a Dao on the opposite side lit up, but its light was far weaker. When he sensed the fractal it felt like he was prodding a dead carcass or something rotten, and after a second Zac felt that fractal might have lit up due to the nature of his Dao Seed of Trees. His major insights into that were centered around life through death, and it was what connected his Dao to his Draugr side.

To his surprise, he also noticed that the Dao of Hardness slightly lit up a rune at the rim, and it gave a sense of stability

like he was looking up at a mountain. However, the Daos of Sharpness, Heaviness, and Sanctuary did nothing it seemed. After the inspection had looked at those Daos they moved on, completely disinterested.

The next moment two more fractals lit up, and both were pretty close to the core of the rings. In fact, they were only two layers outside the Daos of Creation and Oblivion. Better yet, they were almost exactly the opposites of each other, meaning they would hopefully allow him to pass this inspection with flying colors. After just a glance he knew they represented life and death, and they were the results of the two energies his Duplicity core contained.

They were by far the best combination, but he didn't know if the inheritance would accept it since the two energies were simply the representation of his two races and classes. They were not really a result of his Daos, and Zac felt the Dao was the core of this test.

Finally, the tendrils reached his head and they even found the miasmatic prison for the splinter. The crude fractal in the middle resonated for a fraction of a second in response, but it immediately grew dim again, leaving the other five fractals in various states of illumination.

As soon as the inspection hit upon the runic prison in his mind they immediately dissipated, and afterward they stayed clear of the area. Zac wasn't too surprised since the prison was created by the mysterious Draugr woman. He couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling she was one of the powerhouses of the Draugr-race, and likely more powerful than the Lord of Cycles.

The monument kept checking his body for a bit until the inspection ended, leaving Zac feeling slightly violated. It was like he had been stripped naked and every nook and cranny had been inspected. Keeping one's cards close to the chest had been ingrained into him since the integration, and this was the complete opposite of that.

But at least it was over, and Zac looked around to see what would happen next.

“Understanding the self is understanding the Cosmos,” the same voice suddenly echoed out, as the two fractals that Zac believed represented life and death lit up with far more power compared to before, while the other three fractals dimmed down.

The next moment the monument started to vibrate, and it looked like it was melting as it bent and twisted. All the fractals were quickly smoothed over, leaving only the two illuminated inscriptions.

The two fractals kept growing larger and larger as the monument turned into a large hovering metallic ball that started to pulsate with the powers of life and death. Soon the two fractals had grown to over a meter in size as they moved next to each other on the sphere. Both of them radiated the power of life and death, two extremely profound concepts that Zac had only glimpsed before.

As Zac sensed the great Dao energies that coursed through the inscriptions he started to believe that this might be the first gift of the inheritance. Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do with the Dao of Death since he had no matching Daos, but he might be able to glean some insight from the fractal representing life. That, in turn, might be the key to pushing the Dao Seed of Trees to Peak mastery.

But just as he was about to sit down to ponder on the secrets of the Dao of Life his mind suddenly screamed of danger.

Chapter 280: Fight Fire with Fire

Zac's mind was screaming at him to get away, and he had learned to not question his danger sense by now. He unhesitatingly pushed backward with the help of **[Loamwalker]** only to see a spurt of liquid metal from the sphere lash out at him like a whip.

The air cracked as the line of darkness ripped through it, and Zac sensed a horrifying finality contained inside it. He wasn't simply being attacked by some liquid metal like when he fought Salvation. He was being attacked by *death*.

Luckily he had reacted in time and was able to quickly create enough distance from the ball, allowing him to understand what was going on. The sphere made out of the metallic plaque had started to transform, not only in shape but also in composition.

It looked like the inert nature of the former monument was changing as it started to teem with both exuberant lifeforce and desolate death. One half of it was gaining a golden sheen as the other half turned pitch-black.

It reminded Zac of his Duplicity core as it shared similar characteristics, with the difference that the sphere in front of him lacked the intricate inscriptions on the surface of his core. Another pretty obvious difference was that the ball in front of him was over five meters in diameter.

The sudden attack that had come at him had stemmed from a part of the death-attuned part of the sphere and had felt like a tentacle of death. But the whip was long gone, having returned to the main form, which now seethed with chaotic powers.

Zac had already taken out his axe and summoned a fractal edge. He still wasn't sure what was going on, but the thing had

already attacked him, so he wouldn't just stand around. That ball contained extremely dangerous Daos, and he couldn't let it act as it pleased. He felt it was best to destroy it first, then ask questions.

He imbued the fractal edge with the Dao of Sharpness, and with a grunt unleashed it straight at the sphere so that he could destroy it before it managed to undergo whatever transformation it had in store. However, the moment the edge was about to slam into the floating ball the golden side flashed, and a protective glow spread to cover the whole thing.

Luckily the ball didn't retaliate, but instead it kept changing form at an extremely rapid pace. It looked like it consisted of two different colored shapes of clay that were pushed together, and currently some unseen hands were twisting and reshaping the ball.

The object elongated again into an oblong shape. It almost had the form of an enormous matryoshka doll, apart from being slightly more rectangular and having two arms. One arm was mostly golden with some black veins running through it, but instead of a hand it just had a large circle that reminded Zac of the object that was behind the statue depicting Lord of Cycles.

The other arm was mostly black and was the only part of the construct that still looked mostly liquid. It was this arm that had attacked him before it had properly formed, and it still radiated a terrifying aura. He truly didn't want to know what would happen if that thing hit him, but it felt extremely dangerous.

One thing that differed from both his Duplicity core and the sphere from before was the main part of its body. It didn't simply have one side that was golden and another side that was black, but it had created an intricate mesh of the two colors, where neither side dominated the other.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt that the pattern that had been formed on its body was an enormous clue that could help him immensely if he only had proper time to study it. It was as though it represented the fusion of life and death. But unfortunately, he was in no position to ponder on the mysteries

hidden in the body of the enormous doll. It floated toward him at a steady pace, and black motes of light started to rotate around the arm of death.

The moment it got within twenty meters of Zac the arm once again lashed out, and Zac was forced to reposition himself again. The attack wasn't impossibly fast, but he didn't dare to intercept it until he had a better understanding of what the effect of the arm was.

Perhaps his Draugr form would be immune to the Death-attributed arm, but he had no way to swap mid-battle. He would have to fight the thing as-is. Zac quickly used **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and to his surprise it actually worked even though the information was a bit sparse.

[Life-Death Construct – Dao Vessel. Level 83]

The good news was that the thing was only level 83. The bad news was that it was clearly much stronger than some random early E-grade beast. Even worse, it possessed two very strong Daos. He wasn't sure how it worked with these particular Daos, but he suspected they were like the Dao of Time and Space - advanced Daos that had no basic seeds to attain. They were much too strong to gain as an F-Grade cultivator.

That meant that the power they imbued was also far stronger than one should encounter at this stage in cultivation. He had a feeling that he truly had been boned by this combination, and it reminded him of the desperate fight with Inevitability. Life and Death were truly the most appropriate paths to fuse of the fractals that lit up, but they were far more dangerous than any others as well.

It would have been more reasonable for him to encounter a construct that consisted of the Dao of Trees and the Dao of Rot, or whatever that murky fractal represented. It would still have been a challenge, though not as bad as this one.

But since Zac knew its level he also felt more confident. If it came down to it he should be able to brute-force the thing. The only thing that was holding him back from summoning the giant hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** and smashing the

construct to bits was that he wasn't sure if there was something else to this test than just destroying the construct.

He didn't want to slip up and ruin his inheritance, so before he went the usual route he decided to test the thing out for a bit, and perhaps glean any insights from the intricate pattern on its chest. Zac kept his distance from the large construct by occasionally flashing away with his movement skill as he peppered the thing with fractal edges.

The construct had multiple ways of handling the attacks. Sometimes the golden circle on its left arm lit up and formed a shield that blocked out the attack. However, after seeing the shield a few times he realized that it wasn't a traditional mage's bubble or array defense.

The golden layer was pure life-attuned energy, and it didn't block the attacks as much as it somehow swallowed them. The attacks entered the golden shield, making it flicker a bit, but nothing exited at the other side.

Zac couldn't quite grasp what type of concept it utilized to neutralize his attacks. If it just used the Dao of Life to heal itself after getting hurt he could have understood it, but this was something else entirely.

Suddenly he sensed some danger again, and he started to reposition himself as he kept his eyes on the tentacle of death. But to his surprise it wasn't the death-attuned side that attacked him, but rather the golden arm. A bright light lit up in the middle of the golden circle at the end of the arm, and the next moment an energy ball shot straight at Zac.

Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly flashed away, but it didn't help one bit as the energy attack followed him like a bloodhound. It was also much faster than Zac was, even when utilizing [**Loamwalker**], so in the end he was forced to stop and erect his defenses.

Shimmering leaves whirled around him, each imbued with the Dao of Trees, as he took a defensive posture where he imbued his body with the Dao of Hardness. The energy ball zoomed straight toward him, and the leaves moved to intercept.

But the moment the ball touched the first layer of defense the leaves lit up in a blazing emerald luster. Since Zac was the one who summoned it and imbued it with his Dao he could sense what was going on, and he couldn't make heads or tails out of it. The leaf wasn't getting damaged, it was getting empowered.

Unceasing and vast energies of life were flooding the leaves, and they shone brighter and brighter as they actually grew larger. But in just a second the effect drastically changed, as the lights dimmed and the leaves started to wilt.

The next moment it crumbled and the light passed straight through. Zac's brows rose in alarm since he had acutely sensed what happened. The ball of life had pushed too much lifeforce into the leaf, and even though they weren't real the ball had forced the leaves to go through their natural state of life in just a second.

Zac immediately gave up his defense and tried to flash away again, but it was to avail as the ball slammed into his back. The Dao of Hardness didn't help him in the slightest as it entered his body like a burning sun.

Zac's whole body turned red in an instant, veins popping out all over his body. It felt terribly similar to when he had been in the pond of Cosmic Water. Terrifying amounts of life tried to force themselves into his cells, overtaxing them and forcing them into death. It was the opposite of his own insights; this was death through life – an attack using the natural lifecycle.

Zac felt his lifeforce getting spent at an alarming rate to exhaust the energy ball, and he was out of ideas of how to deal with the alien force in his body. It was just too strong and vast, and it felt like his Daos were children trying to push away a grown adult when he tried to utilize them to isolate the attack.

But suddenly his Duplicity core woke up and started to frenziedly absorb the energies in his body. It looked like the life-attuned energy was getting sucked in by a black hole, and the ball fractured while its energies were drawn inside. In just a moment the core had absorbed the whole attack, and it's golden half buzzed with energy.

Unfortunately, it was not all good news. There were limits to how much energy the Core could contain, at least in its current state, and the absorption of the pure Dao of Life had pushed it to its limits. Worse yet, the balance between the two sides had become lopsided due to the lack of death-attuned energy.

It felt like when the core had just been formed, and there was a massive lack of life-attuned energy inside. However, now there was nothing for the core to absorb, and Zac sensed that it was getting more and more out of control.

He didn't know what would happen if the core got damaged or cracked, but he didn't want to find out. At the very least it would cause massive damage, but it wasn't impossible it would deprive him of his second class. Or even kill him. He quickly took out one of his miasma crystals, but the rate of absorption was nowhere near what he needed.

The energy in the crystals was a lower grade compared to the real Dao of Life, and it was like he was trying to divert a river by throwing some gravel in the waters. Perhaps it would work after a while after he had absorbed enough crystals, but he sensed his core wouldn't be able to take it until then.

Out of options Zac grit his teeth and pushed straight toward the construct. It lifted its golden hand again, but Zac growled and launched a quick succession of Dao-empowered fractal blades at it, each aimed at the same spot.

Another golden shield erupted around the hand, but the force of a dozen blades was not something that even the construct could handle. The first handful of blades were cleanly absorbed by the shield, but at the 7th one, it flickered and disappeared. The next two attacks actually landed right on the golden arm, pushing it away and causing some dents to form.

But just a second later another golden shield was formed and started to absorb the remaining strikes. Luckily Zac had already accomplished his goal at this point, and he was closing in on the thing while its golden arm was occupied. The black tentacle launched straight at him with terrifying speed, just as he had expected. Even though his mind screamed of danger

Zac chose to stand fast this time, allowing it to hit him square in his chest and throw him away.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood and unsteadily got to his feet. His face was pale as a sheet as he sensed a horrible energy rampage through his body. It felt like his whole being was quickly withering away, but he forcibly ignored his decaying state, his all attention being on the Duplicity core.

He was already in desperate straights, and his only idea was to fight fire with fire.

Chapter 281: Life Versus Death

A wave of relief flooded Zac as he sensed that the Duplicity Core once again woke up and finally started to absorb the sinister energies that were coursing through his body. In just a second it had absorbed it all, but Zac's body was still left in a state of disrepair.

Between the two attacks his body felt beyond feeble, and he knew that he was running out of time. His core might have stabilized, but there was no way he would be able to absorb another set of those terrifying Dao-empowered strikes. Neither his body nor his core would be able to handle it.

He couldn't worry about whether there were any hidden components to this trial any longer, and he immediately started to charge up [**Nature's Punishment**] the moment that his core stabilized. It would take a few seconds, and the construct seemed to notice that something was up.

Extremely strong energies ripped through its body as it flashed forward with more than twice the speed compared to before, its black tentacle already hurtling toward him. Zac knew he had to stall for a bit longer, so he shot a fractal imbued with the Dao of Hardness at the tentacle as he backed away.

However, the fractal immediately withered and broke apart even though it was imbued to be more resilient and the attack kept moving toward him. When Zac saw what happened to the fractal he suddenly had an idea, and he imbued the next [**Chop**] with the Dao of Trees. The edge flew toward the arm of death, and as he hoped it didn't immediately break.

The two attacks clashed, neither gaining ground for a whole second. But soon enough the Dao of Death seemed to finally whittle down the Dao of trees, and the edge crumbled just like

Zac's earlier attacks. The difference in efficacy between the two last attacks gave Zac a clue into the proper way to deal with this trial, but he also realized it wouldn't work for him.

Luckily the clash had bought enough time and the familiar wooden hand emerged out of a crack in space above him. It rippled with the Dao of Trees since Zac believed he would hopefully be able to restrain the death-attuned side of the construct that way. Besides, apart from slightly restraining the Dao of Death it also gave an all-round boost to the attack.

Zac wasted no time as he pushed the hand to slam straight down at the construct, and even though it erected a golden shield it still was slapped like a fly down into the ground. The attack didn't end there, as even though Zac's hand was burning from the golden shield he still forced it to continue its trajectory and slammed down into the downed construct with tremendous force.

The next moment the huge hand gripped the construct, though it barely managed to fit the whole thing in its hand. Zac used all his might to try to crush the golem in his hand, but the Life-Death Construct wasn't going down without a fight. Radiant flashes of both gold and black lit up the whole area, and the transmitted damage from the hand was almost enough for Zac to pass out.

The wooden hand was extremely resilient with the help of the Dao of Trees and its power was unparalleled to anything else he could throw at his enemies. However, both the Daos that the Construct possessed were extremely corrosive to the wooden hand. It was like a feedback loop was caused inside the hand where it was continuously pushed between life and death.

The pain was unbelievable, and Zac's eyes were completely bloodshot by this point, but he kept pressuring the construct with all his might. Creaking sounds of metal being torn and twisted could be heard until a wide shockwave containing concentrated Death erupted from the golem.

Luckily most of the attack was blocked and absorbed by the hand, but the sudden burst of death was too much and Zac was

forced to release the attack. The hand was already disintegrating from the frantic retaliation of the construct and the speed of its dissolution rapidly sped up when Zac decided to relinquish control.

His final action before he let the hand go was to throw the distorted metal into the ground once more, causing another shockwave to spread. He hoped that the construct was already destroyed from how dismal it looked, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

As he looked at the unmoving scrap of metal in the crater he saw that its composition had undergone one more change from Zac's massive assault. The pitch-black metal had turned ashen grey, and it looked completely devoid of energy. He had completely destroyed the death-attuned half with the combination of brute force and the Dao of Trees.

However, he still couldn't breathe easily. While the other half of the construct was twisted and deformed, it still shone with the same golden luster as before. Worse yet he could sense the Dao of Life inside it. Zac sighed in disappointment, but he readied himself for one more round.

Another hand was already emerging from a crack above him, even though such a rapid consumption of energy was pretty harmful to his body. This hand was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness though since it felt useless to fight against the Life-attuned half of the construct with a worse version of its own element.

The construct was slowly rising from the crater as it smoothed out its deformed shape. But luckily the grey area was still completely lifeless and showed no signs of regenerating. Zac felt empowered by the sight and roused the remaining energy in his body as he pushed the second hand straight at his enemy.

The wooden hand slammed into the construct like a falling meteor, the attack causing a far larger shockwave compared to the first punishment. The whole field that held the inheritance trail was cracking, making Zac wonder if the trial area would break apart from the battle.

Zac hesitantly looked at the crater to see whether his attack was effective, but some panic erupted when he sensed the familiar deluge of vitality flooding the wooden hand. The next moment an almost blinding golden glow erupted from beneath the hand, almost completely swallowing it.

Zac quickly canceled the attack as he wracked his brain for some way out. Would he have to take the Coward's Escape after all? But Zac grit his teeth in stubbornness again, feeling the same unwillingness to back down as he felt in his battle with the Dominator. His eyes followed the movement of the construct as it once again picked itself up from the ground.

He had a feeling that no matter how many attacks he launched at the thing it would keep regenerating, as long as he didn't use a proper element for an attack. He needed to use death to vanquish life.

The construct was quickly returning to its original form as Zac's mind moved a mile a minute trying to figure out a way to destroy that thing. Finally, he took out an E-Grade Miasma Crystal and launched it straight at the construct like he had done so many times with rocks to kill beasts.

The crystal ripped through the air like a bullet and slammed straight into the golden arm with enough power to push it back a few meters. The crystal itself exploded into thousands of splinters, but unfortunately, it didn't result in an explosion of death-attuned energy. Instead, the miasma stored in the crystal simply spread out like a cloud which didn't seem to particularly affect the construct.

Zac sighed in disappointment, but seeing the cloud of miasma actually gave him an idea. He barely had time to formulate it as another ball of light started to shine inside the golden circle on his enemy's eye. This was no time to second-guess himself since if that ball hit him like the last one he would likely die. He desperately moved his arm to his pouch, and the next moment an enormous monolith appeared in front of him.

It reached around ten meters into the air and was wrought from some cursed black stone. Zac had never been so close to an Unholy Beacon before, and he started to feel nauseated by the

aura it emitted almost immediately. At the top of the monolith a turquoise light radiated outward, and it had immediately started to convert the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere.

Without waiting Zac grabbed the base of the monolith. But to his dismay he realized that he barely managed to lift the thing, and worse yet he noticed that the attack by the construct was almost fully formed. Out of better options he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and with a roar properly lifted the Unholy Beacon as he started running with heavy steps toward the construct.

He didn't want to use this skill at first, afraid that there would other trials would await after this one. Undergoing another battle while weakened by the side-effects of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] might prove lethal, so he wanted to avoid using it against the construct. But it was Hail Mary-time.

Zac's muscles burned with strain, but the unnatural power and rage brought by the skill pushed him forward. An all-consuming desire for wanton destruction filled Zac's mind, and this time he didn't try to curtail it. With a bestial roar he finally jumped up in the air, causing huge cracks to spread from where he stood.

The construct lifted its arm toward Zac, but he didn't care as he heedlessly swung the enormous monolith as though it was a club. A golden ball of life flew straight at him, but it was swallowed into the turquoise haze at the top of the pillar. Putting a ball of pure life into the conversion chamber of an Unholy Beacon was clearly a pretty bad idea since extremely erratic energies immediately started to radiate from the monolith.

Zac sensed that the Unholy Beacon was highly unstable even in his muddled state, but he didn't care as he slammed the tip straight into the head of the Life-Death construct in a thwong that would make Billy proud. Life and death clashed in a blinding explosion, and Zac was thrown away like a ragdoll from the shockwave. Luckily he activated [**Nature's Barrier**] at the last second, protecting him from some of the damage at least.

As he was falling he at felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body, pushing him to level 74. He breathed in relief since that meant the construct was truly destroyed and the gambit had worked out.

He remembered that both Ogras and Karunthel had told him that it was possible to turn the Unholy Beacons into weapons, which made him try to use it against the large life-attuned golem. They might not have meant such a direct method of utilization, but at least it worked out in the end.

Zac knew that there must be some strong death-attuned item inside the monoliths to be able to continuously turn Cosmic Energy into miasma, and his gambit was that it would cause proper damage in contrast to the Miasma Crystal.

A groan escaped his mouth as Zac slammed into the ground, every part of his body aching. But without giving himself a breather he got back on his feet and quickly ate a top tier healing pill as he scanned the surroundings for any change.

He wasn't necessarily safe just because he had destroyed the construct.

He quickly spotted that one thing had changed after he had destroyed the construct. The field the battle had taken place in was surrounded by a gray haze since he arrived, but in one direction the shroud had given way to a path that led away from this place. However, Zac ignored the path for now as he walked over to the crater with the broken monolith.

The clash between life and death had quickly snuffed out each other, but not before it had utterly destroyed the area. Zac looked into the pit and sighed in disappointment when he looked at the mangled remains of the Life-Death construct. The pattern on its chest had been a great clue to the path he wanted to walk, but it was demolished from his attacks.

In the end he put both the broken Beacon and the crumpled remains of the construct into his Cosmos Sack, but instead of heading over to the exit he instead sat down and started to absorb energy from an E-Grade Nexus Crystal. A few seconds later a huge wave of weakness hit him as the effect from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** ran out.

He realized that one more positive effect of either his improved Vitality or Endurance was that the side-effect of the berserker skill had become far more manageable compared to before, though he still wouldn't want to start another fight in his current condition.

But he wasn't completely out of it like before, so instead of heading to the next stage he instead took out one of his Dao Treasures as soon as he felt his state was somewhat stable. Time was of the essence while the pattern and the Construct's attacks were fresh in his mind, and without hesitation swallowed it and closed his eyes.

He knew the next step he needed to take on his Dao Path.

Chapter 282: The Lord of Cycles

Zac actually gained two insights from the past fight and he was eager to try to formalize at least one of them while the feeling was fresh. That's why he immediately went into meditation as soon as his body allowed it.

However, he did not ponder upon the Dao of Trees, even though he had a hint of the direction he wanted to take that Dao seed. Pushing a Dao Seed to the peak was no easy matter, and he felt he needed some more time to prepare before he tried to push the seed to the limit. The hints he had gained from the Dao of Life was great, but it was just a start.

Zac was instead focusing on something completely new. He was planning to attain a Dao Seed that he hadn't gained a Dao vision for. Every Dao Seed so far had been attained through his class skills, but he had realized that there was one component he was missing.

Ever since Zac gained his second class he had been thinking about creating a holistic 'build' for himself, one that focused on building both great Offense and Defense through his classes. He would empower them with both Life and Death, and while he would use the axe to launch devastating attacks containing these concepts. He had a far-off vision of combining it all into an invincible power.

There were still many question marks of how he would fit everything together, and the fight just now had proven that he had been thinking too much inside the box. He had felt that the Dao of Trees and later the Dao of life was useless for offense against anything except the undead, but that clearly wasn't the case.

That glowing ball had been terrifying, and if he didn't possess the Core to absorb the damage he would have exploded from one attack, even though he possessed over 700 Endurance. But there was one realization that was more important than any other; he was lacking a Dao Seed that could eventually evolve into the Dao of Death. He had no opposite for the Dao of Life.

He had always considered the Miasma as the part representing death, but in the end it was only the equivalent of Cosmic Energy. His Undying Bulwark class was also a class purely focused on defense, and Zac didn't believe that he would gain any more Dao visions from it. He would rather unearth more improvements to Hardness and Sanctuary through the extremely profound vision.

That meant that he needed to adjust his toolkit a bit. He needed another seed that could be the complement to the Dao of Trees. In the long run it would hopefully allow him to become truly powerful, and in the short run it would help him get through this Inheritance. He couldn't slam an unholy beacon onto everything that barred his path after all.

Luckily he believed he had gained enough clues through being undead and from his time in the inheritance to formalize another Dao Seed. He based it upon the hints that he had gotten from the monument before it turned into the construct. A second fractal had slightly lit up from the Dao of Trees that had felt rotting and decaying, and that was exactly what he was going for. His mind focused on the feeling of life faltering, exuberant life slowly giving in to decay, and finally death.

The Dao Treasure had put him into a trance, and he felt he was on the cusp of grasping the kernel of truth that would allow him to gain a seed. Zac didn't know how much time passed as he held fast to the images of faltering life and the unstoppable decay of anything living.

But just as he felt he was about to grasp the Dao Seed the trance ended, and he opened his eyes with frustration. He knew that it never was a good idea to force the Dao, but he was so close that he could taste it. So Zac unhesitantly

swallowed a second Dao treasure and once again closed his mind.

Finally, everything clicked and he sensed a mysterious energy appearing in his body. Zac had initially thought that it would either add itself to one of the three Dao fractals in his body, or create a new one, but instead it simply formed a small seed in a separate space located in Zac's mind.

Zac could only guess that it was because this was a seed that was naturally formed by himself without the assistance of a skill, but he would have to investigate whether he needed to somehow create a fractal to house it later. Since he was done he quickly opened his status screen in anticipation, and as he expected he saw the sixth Dao Seed of his.

[Rot (Early): Wisdom +10, Intelligence +5.]

This was exactly what Zac had aimed for, though he was a bit disappointed the attributes did not really suit him. The wisdom would help him with his resilience against mental attacks, but he still hadn't found any use for Intelligence for either of his classes.

As he sensed the seed in his mind he was certain that the fractal that he had slightly lit up was the Dao of Rot. His Dao of Trees slightly encompassed the concept of Life through death, and Rot was placed right on the crossroads between these two concepts.

He hoped that he could lead the Dao of Rot toward the direction of Death through life, and with the Dao of Trees form a complete cycle. But for now, it was a simple Early-stage Dao Seed that he guessed would add some corrosive effects on his attacks.

Zac quickly summoned a fractal edge with **[Chop]** and just as he thought the fractal gained a murky green color when it was imbued with the Seed of Rot. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything living in the area that he could test it out on, so he simply attacked the ground.

There was no added power to the fractal edge, and the scar that was created by the swing didn't corrode as though it was

attacked by acid. However, a wet sheen of some green liquid was left around the rift, meaning that the attack was more akin to adding poison to the blade. It would be useless against inorganic things, but it might contain surprising power against living enemies.

Flush with success, Zac considered taking another Dao treasure in hopes of pushing his Dao of Trees forward as well, but in the end he forced himself to calm down. His instincts told him that he was too far away from being able to push the seed to its peak, and he probably wouldn't reach it even if he ate all three of his Dao Seeds.

Zac checked his watch and to his surprise 7 hours had already passed. It was more time than Zac had planned on spending inside the inheritance in total, but there was no getting around it. At least they knew he was still alive since he maintained his position on the ladder. He had also gained a level so they should understand that he was in a battle of some kind.

The weakness from using [**Hatchetman's Rage**] during the battle had already passed, and his Cosmic Energy was mostly full thanks to his passive absorption of energy during his meditation. So Zac didn't waste any more time and immediately headed toward the passage.

He held [**Verun's Bite**] ready in his arm, prepared for any kind of situation. But the passageway was completely barren, with not a single object or being in sight. It was only fifteen minutes later that the scene changed, and Zac stared wide-eyed at the world in front of him.

Paradise. That was the only thing that Zac could think of as he looked at the lush atmosphere around him. The hazy mists had given way to an exquisite field where each and every strand of grass seemed to be meticulously crafted to give a sense of beauty and harmony.

Small rivers were running through the fields of flowers, and various small pagodas and patios were placed along the field. Even more miraculously there were floating islands drifting about in the sky above him, each of them connected by steps wrought from fire and ice.

It slightly reminded him of the vision of the floating cultivation palaces in his vision with the axe-man, though these islands were far smaller and rather seemed to be there for aesthetic reasons. It was like someone had wanted to create a multi-layered garden, and had even bent the laws of nature to make it happen.

There was no sun in the sky, but instead there was a beautiful night sky unblemished and undiminished by any light pollution. Yet everything was completely illuminated thanks to a huge moon spreading a silver luster at the area, which added a mystical and dream-like ambiance to the scenery.

But Zac wouldn't relax just because the scene was breathtaking, and he hesitantly proceeded with his axe at the ready. He strained his mind to find any clues of hidden traps or arrays, but he couldn't sense anything. He couldn't even sense any Cosmic Energy being used to keep the islands afloat, which made him question whether he was stuck in an illusion.

That, of course, raised the question of where the inheritance actually took place. Was this whole zone even real, or did it all take place in some dreamscape? But Zac's instincts told him it was real, as it would be odd if he was able to gain a Dao Seed and gain a level while asleep.

"I had some hopes, but alas," a sad sigh suddenly came from one of the islands above. "You fail."

It was the same voice that spoke at the start of the trial, and Zac's heart lurched when he heard its proclamation. Had he really failed the inheritance because he used brute force to kill the construct earlier? But there was simply no other way for him to pull through.

The idea was to use death to snuff out the life and life to overcome death, but he didn't possess either of those elements in a way that he could properly utilize them in a fight. In the end, he could only win with the help of overwhelming might.

"You are far too ugly to even become an honorary disciple of mine. I might be dead, but I'm not that desperate," the voice continued with an unmistakable note of disdain, and Zac's blood pressure immediately spiked.

The way of speaking was way too similar to a certain tool spirit, and Zac started wondering if Brazla had somehow weaseled himself into the trial. The voice was different, but Zac saw no reason that Brazla should be stuck to one voice since he wasn't technically a living being. Zac quickly ran up the shimmering ladders toward the floating island that he heard the voice come from.

The sceneries on the islands were even more exquisite than on the ground, but he had no time to admire them as he hurried up toward the top. His anger had even made him forget the very real possibility that there were hidden tests on the islands, but luckily it seemed that he had already passed the only trial at this stage.

Zac was ready to blast off a tirade at the arrogant Tool Spirit, but the moment when he reached the top his words got stuck in his throat as he stopped in his tracks.

It felt like he had arrived at the garden of a fairytale castle, where every detail shone with beauty and perfection. Hundreds of different types of flowers that all had their own unique charms spread out in a seemingly haphazard manner across the island, but somehow there was order to the chaos.

A small pond was placed in the middle, and a brook that ran through it gave off a soothing sound. However, neither the flowers nor the brook was as striking as the celestial form of the Lord of Cycles sitting and basking in the moonlight. Where the statue had depicted a fine-chiseled but androgynous male, Zac saw a picture-perfect beauty in front of him.

He looked like he was chiseled by a master artisan as he looked up at the moon with a sorrowful gaze, one hand outreached as though trying to grasp it, with the other held over his heart. It was a scene of frailty and longing, and the silver light of the moon gave it a haunting feeling.

“Don't fall in love with me, child,” the Lord of Cycles said with a long-suffering sigh as he turned his limpid eyes toward the gaping Zac.

But suddenly Zac realized there was a sense of wrongness, and with a grunt he pushed [**Mental Fortress**] to the limit. The

result wasn't reality cracking, showing him that he had escaped an illusion. But everything he saw had shifted somewhat.

The flowers, the brook, and the pond were still there, as was the Lord of Cycles, but while the environment was beautiful it was not enough to gobsmack him any longer. And the man in front of him was no longer the personification of perfection, but rather a somewhat feminine man who wore a robe that might be mistaken for a dress.

Everything about him was ambiguous, from his hairstyle to his choice of clothes, but that wasn't what terrified Zac. That was some extremely scary illusion he had been put inside. What would have happened if he didn't notice something was wrong? Would he have become the lover of a long-dead ghost?

Zac's back was immediately drenched in cold sweat, and he thanked the stars that he had gained some experience in spotting illusions from his time in the hunt. The being in front of him was clearly not completely benign, and his vigilance rose to the peak to protect his mind and his butt.

"Tsch, so you broke my beautification field? How boring," the man muttered and swapped out his elaborate pose to a more laid-back one. "So you are the one who passed the first inheritance trial? As I said, your face is pretty pathetic, I can't take you as a disciple. Not that I was planning to take one in any case."

Chapter 283: Mortals and Cultivators

Zac was starting to regret choosing the Lord of Cycles rather than the Undying Fiend inheritance. This person was almost as bad as Brazla. Or had perhaps all the predecessors gone crazy stuck with the Tool Spirit for those untold ages? If that was the case then the inheritances might be useless.

He barely survived his trial and he was far stronger than anyone else on the island. How could he in good consciousness let his sister enter the trial for the Invoker if this was how it was going to be? But still, Zac had pushed through the trial and he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"I'm sorry, I can't do much about my face, but I guess it'll get better as my race ranking improves. Why did you set this place up if you didn't want to find inheritors?" Zac probed.

"Because of that stupid Brazla," the man said as he leisurely ran his fingers through the pond. "I needed him to create something for me, and he wanted me to set this place up as payment."

"Brazla?" Zac asked with confusion. "You made a deal with the Tool Spirit?"

"That little spirit is not Brazla," the man said with a chuckle. "It has just confused its own identity with his creator and ours over the years. Brazla was a peak D-Grade artificer, and he also called himself The Celestial Artisan. That a D-Grade cultivator dared call himself that tells you all you need to know about his temperament."

Zac's brows rose in surprise from that little tidbit. He finally understood why the Tool Spirit acted so haughtily. It had taken various traits from the 8 predecessors, including his own

master's. And if Zac was a betting man, he guessed that the narcissism came from the individual in front of him.

“So you made a deal with the real brazla. He created something for you, and you set up an inheritance. Why did he want to create this place? And may I ask what your name is?” Zac probed.

“Money isn't enough to create a true heritage for a clan. Brazla was rich, but money can only buy unimpressive and widely distributed skills and cultivation manuals. Things that might take you to early D-Grade but leave you with a pitiful core that can't evolve,” the man said with a disdainful snort. “And my name is Yrial, so you can call me Lord Yrial or Beauty Yrial.”

Zac really wanted to roll his eyes, but he held himself in check since Yrial seemed pretty capricious. Who knew how he would react if Zac did something that he considered disrespectful.

“So why not go to someone else? Don't you need to cut off a piece of your soul to create an inheritance?” Zac probed.

“Do you think it's that easy to hire skilled craftsmen that are at peak D-Grade or C-Grade? They are extremely scarce, and most are snatched up by superior forces. Rogue cultivators such as myself can't hire them no matter how beautiful we are. Brazla was simply unattached because he was obsessed with creating a force of his own for some reason,” Yrial explained.

Zac frowned when hearing that. He was hoping to hire a blacksmith to create a real Spiritual Tool Shield for him, but if things were as Yrial said it might be harder than he expected. Still, that was a problem for later. He first needed to make this narcissist cough up some valuables.

“Well, anyways. I'm here now. I proved my cycle and I defeated the construct,” Zac tentatively said.

“Don't you think I don't know your so-called cycle is fake? Those fractals shouldn't have lit up at all,” Yrial snorted as he threw Zac a disdainful glance. “But I have to admit, using the spy core for such a thing is pretty novel. I'm not sure what you encountered to allow your Duplicity core to work like that.”

“Spy core?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That’s what the duplicity core usually is used for. You take the race of those you wish to spy on. But usually, you shouldn’t get a true copy as you have, but rather a watered-down version that only gives a fraction of the bonus power. For some reason your variant seems a lot stronger,” Yrial said with a shrug. “Even I can’t understand the fractals covering the core.”

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the ghost knew about his situation. He had been probed by that monument just a few hours before, and he guessed that whatever the monument found out, so did the Lord of Cycles.

“I did some research on it when I was exploring my path since it contains the potential for duality,” the ghost added. “But in the end, I didn’t feel it was a good fit.”

“What do you think caused the difference with my core?” Zac eagerly said.

It appeared that this man was far more knowledgeable about his specialty core than anyone he’d met so far. And if the construct was any indication it was pretty likely that Yrial might be able to help him fuse his classes, or at least improve upon the core.

“Who knows?” the Lord of Cycles said with disinterest. “The multiverse is full of odd chances and miraculous things. Almost everyone who reaches any distance on the path of cultivation has survived some insurmountable odds and encountered some strange opportunities. You made your specialty core much better than normal, which is good but nothing too exciting.”

Zac slowly nodded, though he wasn’t really sure what to believe. Greatest seemed to have been of another opinion, and Zac truly felt that getting two classes was a pretty huge deal. He was more inclined to believe that the man in front of him downplayed or simply didn’t understand the greatness of his Duplicity core. Or perhaps nothing that wasn’t related to himself could enter his eyes.

“So, I might not be what you’re looking for in a disciple, but I still passed the test,” Zac said, focusing on what was important. “I should be given some treasures, right?”

“I guess,” the man grumbled, and reluctantly got to his feet. “It’s not like I need any of the things stored here in any case. Come here and let me sense your talent.”

Zac was elated and hurried over. Yrial indicated for him to hold out his hand, and it looked like he was going to inspect him directly. However, the moment before their hands touched the spirit seemed to have a change of heart, and first conjured a napkin to place over Zac’s hand.

Zac couldn’t help but feel pissed off. Was his hand that disgusting that a damn spirit needed some extra layers of separation? But he held his tongue since he knew that this was not the last time he was seeing this infuriating ghost. He would also administer future trials when he reached the E grade and higher.

So he endured the injustice as he waited for the spirit to finish his inspection. Zac didn’t know exactly what Yrial was looking for, but he guessed it had something to do with the Dao runes he lit up. Perhaps he was trying to choose which category of impartment would suit him best.

But Zac started to get worried as the frown on Yrial’s face only deepened the longer he held Zac’s hand. Soon he even felt some powerful pressure bear down on him, and he caught a glimpse of an extremely vast aura from the spirit.

It was tightly controlled, but it was far beyond the impressions he had of both Greatest and The Great Redeemer. He didn’t know why, but it felt like he was pressured by the weight of a world when he felt the aura. That proved that the man in front of him had truly been an existence of a higher tier once upon a time, even though he was pretty annoying.

“This is unbelievable,” Yrial finally said and looked at Zac with wonder.

Zac looked up at the spirit, suddenly filled with anticipation. Perhaps he had realized how special his core was, or that his

body was far stronger than normal due to his numerous titles. Making a good impression would perhaps help him gain better treasures and guidance.

“You are beyond trash. You have absolutely no talent in any way manner or form. How are you even alive?” he said as he looked at Zac like he was a zoo animal. “I don’t know whether to call you ultimate garbage or a genius.”

“I know I’m a mortal,” Zac said with grit teeth, stabilizing his heart from the emotional freefall it had just endured. “But I have been pushing along just fine until now. And with my special core I don’t think I’ll be worse off than any cultivator, even if my road will be bumpier.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Yrial said with a shake of his head. “This goes beyond being a mortal. I knew you were a trashy mortal the moment you stepped inside my trial.”

“Then what do you mean,” Zac asked exasperated.

“Do you know what the difference between a mortal and a cultivator is? Apart from the obvious,” Yrial said as he conjured up a divan to lie down on, making Zac shake his head.

“Being a cultivator is having a certain amount of affinity with the deeper truths of the universe. Some call it spirituality,” Yrial said as he formed a ball of burning ice in his hand.

“However, it’s not a binary situation where you either have it or you don’t.

“Simply put you can have various affinities with all the Daos, and you need a minimum affinity with at least one Dao to become a cultivator. Let’s say that an affinity is a number. Someone with an affinity of 120 to an element will have an easier time learning that Dao than someone with an affinity of 80,” Yrial continued as a second ball, this one frozen fire, appeared next to the earlier ball.

“Some races have extremely high affinities with certain Daos, essentially turning their whole population in a certain direction of cultivation. But many races, like us humans, don’t have any

racial affinity,” he continued as the two balls started to dance around in his hand.

“I am a supreme genius who showed an extremely good affinity with both fire and ice, which is why I embarked upon my path. But most people aren’t talented enough in any element that they would choose their class by their affinities. They simply get whatever class they get,” Yrial continued, not forgetting to tout his own horn.

“No one knows the exact cut-off, but let’s say the minimum to be able to control Cosmic Energy and push it through their pathways according to a cultivation manual to be 50, no matter which element.

“Both someone with an affinity of 60 and 160 will be cultivators in other words, though the one with the higher affinity might have an easier time pondering the Dao and breaking through the smaller bottlenecks,” Yrial continued. “Most also have multiple affinities, though not as high as myself. Apart from fire and Ice I also have an affinity with dozens of other Daos, though I don’t focus on them.

“Choosing a path that both fits with your affinities and your personality is the best way to go as far as possible when it comes to cultivation. That’s why children are tested when young.”

Zac thought back to Emily, and how Alyn and Alea had tested her to confirm her great talent for cultivation. This was no news for him, but it was interesting to learn that nothing was completely clear-cut.

“In the same way, mortals can both have an affinity of 20 and 40. Both are trash, but different degrees of trash. And the one with an affinity of 40 will have an easier time of forcing open nodes or turning into a low-grade cultivator in the future,” Yrial continued.

“So what’s my affinity,” Zac said, already having an inkling of the answer going by Yrial’s earlier reaction.

“Zero. No affinity at all, not to any element, which technically shouldn’t be possible. Cosmic Energy is the basic building

block of the universe, and it should be impossible to at least not have a small connection to it,” Yrial said. “Especially you who have already walked on the path of cultivation for a while. Yet I can’t find a speck of spirituality in your body.”

“I seem to have pressed on fine, though?” Zac asked hesitantly. “I even have a pretty good tolerance of energy, I can absorb crystals pretty damn quick even without being a cultivator. And I have formed multiple Dao Seeds.”

“That’s what’s so mind-boggling,” Yrial said with wonder. “You’re ugly, but you are pretty interesting. Perhaps your trashy constitution might even be an opportunity.”

“How is it an opportunity to have no talent?” Zac asked with a helpless smile.

“Because you are free. We’re all prisoners to the System, playing within its ruleset. The system won’t let you chose a class that is not in line with your talents since that would statistically lower the chance for you to become a powerhouse. And that’s just one of the ways the System limits the boundless Dao. But you who have no talents are unfettered, able to do anything,” Yrial said, growing more and more excited.

“I’ve decided, today is your lucky day. I’ll lower myself to make you my disciple after all,” the Lord of Cycles said, truly looking like he was throwing Zac a bone. “Hurry, kneel down and accept me as your master!”

Chapter 284: Beauty and Brawn

“Now you want to make me your disciple?” Zac asked with hesitation since the situation seemed a bit fishy. “I thought I was too ugly? Also, I’m not really interested in kneeling.”

“Well, you are a bit ugly, but I’ll make an exception. A supertrash that’s also a progenitor and having two classes through a variant core? It’s too interesting to pass up,” the Lord of Cycles said with excitement. “And the kneeling is just figurative, though there is one thing you need to do to become my disciple.”

Zac frowned at the explanation. It almost sounded like the Lord of Cycles wanted to take him as a disciple as a novelty. But he was long dead, so why did he bother about these things? And what would a shady person like Yrial have him do to become a disciple?

There had been too much new information in too short a time. He didn’t even know if Yrial was telling the truth about his aptitude, and there was no way for him to double-check. But something inside him was telling him that he wasn’t lying, and his mind immediately went to his mother.

Was this what she had done to him? Or was this simply the constitution of a technocrat, someone who hated the system. Various emotions flitted through his mind as he tried to fathom why she would do something like this. Kenzie’s AI he could understand, even if it put her in extreme danger. It would undoubtedly help her get further on the road of cultivation than if she didn’t possess it.

But why would Leandra want to give him an awful constitution like this?

“Let’s just say I’m taking a chance here. I only have one shot unless I set up another trial ground after I made this place. Your combination of unique traits might lead nowhere, but it might also turn into something amazing. So if you make it big, remember to resurrect me,” Yrial suddenly added, perhaps afraid the silence was due to Zac not wanting to become a disciple.

“Resurrect?” Zac gaped. “Is that even possible?”

“As long as you reach the peak of cultivation you can resurrect people as long as you possess a piece of their original soul or at least know where they died. Luckily I am such a piece,” The Lord of Cycles nodded. “Though from what I’ve heard it is extremely taxing, so even the most powerful people in the multiverse can only do it a handful of times.”

“Resurrection and immortality are two of the most common reasons people push themselves toward the peak. Who doesn’t have friends and loved ones who have fallen? This only becomes more poignant as you get stronger and the millennia pass,” Yrial sighed. “Some of my companions fell to battle, others due to old age since they got stuck and couldn’t progress. The road of cultivation is paved with not only the bones of your enemies but also your loved ones.”

“The only reason this place was created was that I needed Brazla to create a specialized item that I required for an expedition into an unexplored B-Grade Mystic Realm. Since I never came back to update this place I am guessing I died inside,” he said with surprising equanimity. “Such is fate when defying the heavens. Anyone can die at any time.”

Zac’s thoughts immediately went to his father. Was it actually possible to bring him back if he got powerful enough? Or if he got stuck due to being a mortal, then perhaps Kenzie could do it.

“Of course, even with your odd advantages reaching even B-Grade is a dream within a dream, so don’t start planning who to resurrect just yet,” Yrial added with some disdain, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking about.

“Why should I accept you as a master though?” Zac hesitantly said. “What benefits do I get apart from just getting the inheritance treasures?”

“If you decide to only become an inheritor I’ll just throw some treasure at you and then kick you out. Since I’ll be pretty pissed off the treasure might not be too exciting,” the spirit said without an inkling of shame. “But if you become my disciple I’ll go above and beyond to help you each time you enter here. I’ll not only help you progress, but I’ll also give you the best treasures I’ve got stocked here.”

Zac looked at the spirit with some helplessness as he knew that he couldn’t say no to such an offer, even if there were some hidden considerations behind Yrial’s offer. Getting the guidance of a C-Grade powerhouse was something extremely valuable for someone like him. But he didn’t immediately say yes since he did have other considerations.

“There is a rogue cultivator believed to be at Peak D-Grade heading toward my homeworld to enslave it. Are you able to help out against that?” tentatively asked.

“I can kill him for you if you manage to get him inside here. D-Grade warriors have only taken the first step on cultivation, it’s nothing I can’t handle even in this limited form. But I don’t see how it’s possible for you to bring him here,” the spirit said with an unconcerned shrug. “So you would better off putting me and the repository in a portable mansion and fleeing to another planet.”

Zac sighed in disappointment, but it was worth a try.

“I plan to find a force in the multiverse that can protect my planet from that man. Would that conflict with becoming your disciple?” Zac asked next

“Of course not, most walking on the path of cultivation will have many teachers and benefactors throughout their lives. There’s no point in trying to reinvent the wheel all by yourself. Some puritans think that taking pointers from others would impact their path of cultivation, but that’s only true if their path is fragile and built on unstable foundations,” Yrial said.

“But you should also be ready that you might not be as sought after as you hope without exposing your secrets,” the Lord of Cycles added. “Taking someone on as a disciple is a huge risk and a drain on resources. Both the risk and the drain is multiplied hundredfold when you’re a mortal. Bringing a mortal to the D-Grade can bankrupt a sect, and that’s just the start.”

“So I should display my core?” Zac probed.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. Between your odd body and your variation core, you would be lucky to last for a month before someone decided to cut you open. Your situation might not be very interesting for peak existences, but it would certainly be even for some C-Grade beings. If I wasn’t dead would already have cut you open to study that core,” Yrial said.

“You’d really do something like that?” Zac asked with shock.

“That’s nothing. You don’t understand how hard it is to progress after the D-Grade. You can spend thousands of years without being able to take a single step forward. If your unique constitution even gave me a minuscule chance of advancing I’d rip you apart in a heartbeat. Those lofty existences from elite families wouldn’t be any different either, even if they pretend otherwise,” Yrial said.

Cold sweat started to run down Zac’s back when he saw the ruthless determination within Yrial’s eyes, and it reminded him of the stark reality. Might made right in this world, and he was wrong to consider people like The Great Redeemer as crazy outliers. There were innumerable people who were ready to do anything to progress on their path of cultivation.

“In any case, what do I need to do to become your disciple?” Zac said, eager to change the subject from his dismemberment.

“Just a small test. I admit I slightly phoned in the trial for the trial. I mean I simply bought and modified a Dao Golem. But in my defense, I did not really want to do this thing so I was annoyed,” Yrial said with a straight face. “But I did put in another small test in case I actually found someone acceptable to take on as a disciple.”

“Weren’t you already ready to accept me?” Zac hesitantly asked. “Is there really a need for another trial?”

“Well, perhaps not if I was still alive, but I am a construct now,” Yrial snickered. “I am created by a set of rules that I cannot bend. To become a disciple you must pass my test for disciples. Don’t worry, seeing your strength you should survive. Though I admit the trial tests not only your brawn but also your beauty, which might be a problem for you.”

Alarms started to go off in Zac’s mind, and he quickly turned around to run away. The trial for discipleship sounded extremely suspicious, and he wanted no part of it. Especially when he mentioned the risk of death.

“Naïve,” the Lord of Cycles simply laughed, and with a wave of his arm Zac was lifted up and brought back to where he stood earlier.

“No, wait!” Zac shouted, but it was too late, as an odd wave was released from an amulet around Yrial’s neck.

Zac helplessly glared at the man waving him goodbye from his spot by the pond until the scenery started to blur around him. Were all old ghosts scammers in the end?

Zac didn’t have time to complain over the similarly shady methods of Anzonil and Yrial as the odd pressure continued to build up in his mind. He had already realized that he was being put inside a dreamscape or an illusion so that the trial wouldn’t take place in reality. Zac tried to resist the growing confusion with all his might, even activating **[Mental Fortress]**.

But the might of the illusion wrought by a C-Grade powerhouse wasn’t something he could resist, and his defensive skill was effortlessly broken through by whatever Yrial did. Ceaseless information was crammed into his mind, and he realized it was memories from when Yrial was young. There was a flood of impressions and sights, and Zac started to become unsure who he even was until he finally blacked out.

Zac shook his head with a groan before looking around to see where he was. He was currently sitting at a camp in a forest,

though the trees were a bit different from anything he had seen on earth. It was the middle of winter, and the barren trees were covered in a layer of snow. However, he didn't move, and instead tried to sort out the new information in his head.

The confusion he felt during the impartment had abated, and he knew that he was Zac and that he was inside a dream trial for discipleship. Nothing he saw around him was actually real. But the problem was the parting words of Yrial. Even though this place an illusion it appeared there was a distinct risk of death.

The place he found himself in was modeled after a real place, and it was the homeworld of The Lord of Cycles. The forest around him had no name, and it was simply part of the untamed wilderness that spanned between the established influences in the area.

Zac quickly opened up his status screen, and it was with some relief that he found that all his attributes and skills were intact. **[Verun's Bite]** was also by his side, though his own Cosmos Sack had been replaced by a much worse one with only some simple necessities and a few Nexus Crystals inside.

Zac wasn't too worried though since he believed that the object was to finish the trial without the assistance of his vast wealth. He had to admit that he had taken a shortcut with the Unholy Beacon, and Yrial perhaps didn't want such a thing to happen again. His real Cosmos Sack was no doubt still with his real body inside the trail.

He was also curious to note that he had gotten an actual quest this time around, rather than just being thrown into the ring against the Life-Death construct. Even the type of quest was new, meaning discipleship might not be something as simple as a verbal agreement between two people.

Fire and Ice (Unique, Discipleship): Acquire a Profound Yin Orchid and a Ruby of Everlasting Yang. Reward: Discipleship of The Lord of Cycles. (0/2). Remaining: 04:23:58:23

Zac blanked out for a second as he looked at the quest. He had no clue what those two things were, but he soon found them

inside the added memories from Yrial's youth. And the more he looked through the memories the worse his face got. How the hell was he supposed to finish this quest?

It truly was a test of beauty and brawn.

Chapter 285: Profound Yin and Everlasting Yang

It seemed like a straightforward enough task, but Zac groaned inwardly when he saw it. The burst of information he had received included all the information he needed regarding the two treasures, and Zac knew this quest would be a pain in the ass.

Neither of the treasures were readily available. The Profound Yin Orchid was a top tier E-Grade flower that gave an enormous boost to the Ice-attributed cultivation manual that the Disciples of the Profound Yin Sect in the area used. It was so integral to them that they even named their Sect after it, and the gardens containing the flowers were strictly guarded deep inside the core of their sect.

The Profound Yin sect was nothing special in the multiverse, but its ancestor was a high-level E-Grade cultivator. All its elders were between the Low and Mid-grade E-Rank as well, and their force was not something Zac could handle even if he went all out.

Interestingly enough the Profound Yin sect was exclusively a female sect, and any association with males was strictly prohibited. There was no way for Zac to simply walk up to the sect in order to trade with them as he would be attacked on sight. Not that they would ever sell their core resource anyway.

The situation with the Rubies of Everlasting Yang was pretty much the same. They only slowly grew inside a volcano sitting atop a Nexus Vein, and it was strictly controlled by Everlasting Yang Sect. The sect was the exact opposite of the Profound Yin, and only fire-attributed males could join the sect.

The two sects were actually located quite close to each other, and not surprisingly there was non-stop contention between the two forces. Since both the sects were of roughly the same strength neither was able to root out the other, and it seemed like the elders of both the sects used the conflict as a whetstone to hone their disciples.

The mission was a replication of a feat that the Lord of Cycles accomplished when he was roughly the same level as Zac himself. In fact, Yrial was a lot weaker in terms of total attributes and power when he stole the two treasures in short succession.

The memories that Zac received while he fell into the dreamscape even went so far as to give him a few partial memories of how Yrial managed to snatch the two treasures, and the method Yrial used was the reason Zac was so vexed. A test of beauty and brawn was an apt description.

He had actually openly infiltrated the Profound Yin sect. He had utilized his ambiguous looks by ambushing a Profound Yin Disciple who was out hunting beasts in the woods, and then stolen her disciple's uniform. With that in hand, he simply waltzed into the gates looking like a woman. He even used an early version of his beatification field to gain access to the garden from the presiding elder.

Getting the ruby was a lot simpler. Yrial had walked up to the Everlasting Yang sect, proclaiming that he had beaten a core disciple of the Profound Yin sect in a duel, showing the orchid as proof. From there he taunted the disciples of the Profound Yang sect until one of their own core disciples stepped forward, putting a ruby as the wager.

The core disciple was stronger than Yrial in reality, but the Lord of Cycles once again used his beatification field to confuse the poor disciple, and then Yrial ruthlessly attacked him while his emotions were in turmoil.

It was not much later that his trickery had been exposed, and he was summarily hunted by both the sects for a good while. Zac's imparted memories stopped there though, and he didn't

know how the story ended. However, since Yrial had become a C-Grade powerhouse in the end he had clearly gotten away.

Zac understood why Yrial had taken the risk. He had already started walking on the path of fire and ice, the two concepts that would allow him to reach the peak C Grade in the end. But he was a poor rogue cultivator, and getting his hands on those two treasures was his idea to push both his Daos forward.

Both of them helped a cultivator foster a constitution that was especially suited for the cultivation of their respective element. Zac guessed that Yrial later combined the two to create the foundation of a real fire-and-ice constitution.

The problem for Zac was that there was no way for him to replicate Yrial's feat. At least not in the same way. There was no way he would be able to pass as a woman, even with the help of [**Thousand Faces**]. There were limits to the skill, and not possible to change enough to pass off as a woman, except perhaps from a great distance.

He believed he could replicate the second half of the mission though, though he would be able to defeat the core disciple without the use of trickery. He had accompanied Brazla enough to know how to enrage a few cultivators, but he knew that they wouldn't offer up a Ruby for the wager unless he could put up one of the orchids.

A large part of the reason they were ready to duel Yrial was that they desperately wanted to succeed where the Profound Yin failed in a game of one-upmanship. If they could show the world that they had one of the prized possessions of their rival sects it would no doubt make their enemies lose a lot of face.

Finding another treasure to wager instead was out of the question as well. The time limit was pretty restrictive, and he would only have time to visit the sects one by one with little room for leeway. Since time was of the essence Zac would simply take it step by step.

That in of itself was a problem to Zac, who was already running late for his real-life obligations. He was supposed to go to Westfort today, but he might be stuck inside this place

for another few days. However, Zac suddenly had an idea as he sat down and started to ponder upon his Daos.

But no matter what he did or which Dao he pondered upon, everything was just a haze in his mind. It was like he had lost one of his senses, where the truths of the world were completely blocked to him or even missing. Zac wasn't worried though, but quite satisfied with the results.

Being unable to improve one's Dao could be indicative of time dilation. Since the Dao of Time was a thing, creating spaces that had a different flow of time was quite possible. However, no matter whether you sped up time or slowed it down it was essentially impossible to improve inside those time chambers.

The different passage of time somehow messed up the connection with the Dao, and it all became a mess. Similarly it was apparently impossible to properly use cultivation manuals since they somehow were connected to the Dao as well.

You could advance, but it was extremely arduous and left your foundation unstable, so you would only hurt yourself in the long run if you tried to take a shortcut and cultivate inside a place with a different time-flow. That's why such spaces were never used to improve.

They did have some uses though. The current situation was one use, where one could perform a trial without wasting time in real life. Another example was whether you needed to slow down your aging to be able to protect your clan for longer or just stay young enough to be able to enter a Mystic Realm that only opened in set intervals.

Of course, time dilation chambers cost a fortune to build and run, and it was only something Ogras had mentioned that supreme forces might utilize. D or even C-Graded forces were very unlikely to own such an extravagant thing.

Zac was happy that he might not waste as much time as he feared, but he still immediately set out for the Profound Yin Sect. For one he didn't know how much time was passing in the real world, and he wanted to get back to Yrial. He had

been whisked away before he could get all the answers he was looking for.

Yrial was the key to so many things that were currently stumping Zac. He obviously knew a lot about Specialty Cores, and he no doubt knew the means to evolve them. How to combine two opposing concepts was also the specialty of Yrial, clearly displayed through the two balls that he summoned to play around with.

Zac felt that the orchid part of the quest was the key. If he managed to figure out a way to get it, he was most likely set. If not he would simply sit out the five days and miss out on the opportunity of becoming the disciple of the Lord of Cycles. He simply wasn't ready to risk it all for this quest since there were too many people depending on him.

It was only ten hours later that he was hiding along a cliff wall, overlooking the female-dominated sect. His memories had unerringly led him to the Profound Yin sect, and his travels had once more proven he was in a dreamscape. The forests were full of beasts between the levels 50 and 75, but when Zac killed them he received no Cosmic Energy, meaning the animals weren't real.

The sect was placed in a large basin, and Zac noted that the whole area was far colder than the surroundings. It was winter in the rest of the forest as well, but the valley seemed to be permanently in this state, and frigid winds rose from the valley floor.

The problem Zac faced as he looked down was how to even get close to the outer walls. There was barely any cover in the valley, making it extremely hard to sneak up on the sect. Apart from some boulders, there were only some odd trees that seemed to be almost made out of rocks, but they were extremely thin and sparsely placed.

Zac decided on the same course of action as Yrial in the end, though not as brazen. He roamed outside the valley for a few hours until he finally spotted disciple on her own, and she even had roughly the same hair color as himself. Zac wasted

no time and flashed over with [**Loamwalker**], and the next moment an unconscious girl lay in front of him.

Zac silenced the inner voice calling him a creep as he lifted the girl and took her away. He repeatedly reminded himself that this was all a dreamscape as he took her outer coat and placed it over himself. After some hesitation he also bound and gagged her, but he believed that a cultivator should be able to extricate herself in an hour or so after waking up.

He didn't choose to kill her, even though she wasn't real. He felt it would impact his personality if he heedlessly killed like that. If he started wholesale slaughter of innocent people in a dreamscape now, then before you know it he might feel it was okay to do it in real life.

Besides, it might backfire if someone found a murdered disciple. It might even alert the sect leader. A knocked out one should elicit a much more restrained response if it was discovered. Perhaps the disciple would even be so embarrassed that she wouldn't report it if she came to early.

Next, he activated [**Thousand Faces**] for the first time in a long time, and he grimaced when he was reminded of how extremely painful it was to utilize due to the mismatch with his pathways. But only a few moments later he had a face that bore a passing resemblance to the girl in front of him, but if he was properly looked at one would immediately notice he was a man.

No matter what he tried he wasn't able to change his features to those of a woman, the level or quality of the skill was simply not high enough. But after he had grown out his hair and covered his face slightly he felt it was good enough for his purposes.

He also took her disciple token and used [**Inquisitive Eye**] on her to find out her name before he left. Just a few minutes later he was trekking down the valley, his heart rapidly beating as he neared the sect. His eyes scoured the walls in the distance for any response to his approach.

He did not immediately walk toward the main gate since it was continuously guarded, but he rather chose to meander a bit so

that he approached the sect from the side. He wasn't too worried about this since he saw steps in the snow everywhere. It seemed taking a walk outside the walls within the safety of the valley was nothing uncommon.

Zac strolled for twenty minutes until he could confirm there weren't any guards along the wall. An array covered the whole sect, and it would be a waste of manpower to continuously guard the walls as well. The only guards were the squad that was placed at the gate.

The disciple token should be all that was needed to pass through the array, but he didn't know whether something else would trigger if he jumped over the wall instead of passing through the array through the wall. There was no answer in his new memories, so there was only one way to find out.

When he noticed the vision of the guards was blocked by a boulder he suddenly flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]**, and the next moment he was above the walls.

Chapter 286: Sneaking Inside

Zac's heart was beating like a drum as he hurried along a secluded path of the Profound Yin sect. Things were starting to get a bit out of hand, and he had already left 8 unconscious disciples in his wake. Honestly, he was unsure whether he had actually killed a few of them by mistake, but he pushed down any such thoughts at the moment.

The initial infiltration had gone just fine. Some sort of silent alarm went off, but he had already anticipated such a thing and he hid to see what kind of response sneaking past the wall elicited.

Three guards arrived a minute later, and Zac had already hidden inside a nearby house, knocking out the occupant. She had only been level 31 and was likely a pretty fresh recruit to the sect.

Judging by the conversation of the guards they didn't put much weight to Zac jumping over the wall. His token belonged to the disciple named Tilri, and they believed it was her who had crossed the wall rather than passing through the gate for some reason. They noted a demerit in her name then went on with their day.

However, everything didn't go as smoothly from there. He took a very roundabout way toward the small garden that housed the Profound Yin Orchids to avoid people, but it was impossible to avoid them altogether. The garden was against a mountain wall in the back of the sect, and he had to pass a lot of structures to get there.

It only took Zac 30 seconds to get spotted, and the girl he encountered only need another second to realize he was a man.

Luckily one second was all Zac needed to flash forward and tap her forehead with enough power to knock her out cold.

He dragged her into the nearest house, which alerted another person inside. Soon another disciple was lying unconscious with a large bump on her forehead next to her sect sister. From there one mishap after another happened, and he felt it was only a matter of time before he would hear sirens blaring across the whole valley.

But he still hadn't given up. As far as he knew everyone that had realized who he was had been knocked out, and the sect was only so big. He just needed to endure for another minute before he reached the garden.

A petite figure suddenly appeared from around a corner, and Zac instinctively slammed the hilt of his axe in her temple before she had even come into full view. Zac grimaced when he saw that she was barely as old as Emily, but what done was done. She was stuffed behind a few sacks of rice inside a shed before he kept speeding forward.

A wave of relief spread through his body as he saw the cave that was his destination. The orchids grew inside, perpetually secluded from the sun. Their only nourishment was water an extremely cold stream rising from the underground and the Nexus Vein that was placed beneath the valley.

The cave was off-limits to normal people, and there were no buildings or disciples close to the entrance. But Zac knew from his memories that a low-level E-Grade elder sat inside to tend to and guard the flowers. It was mainly to keep any greedy disciples away, while also being a reward to the elder. Sitting amongst the flowers to cultivate drastically improved one's cultivation, though not as much as directly imbibing them.

Zac hurried through the entrance with his head lowered, taking one last look around to make sure that no one saw him enter. The moment he entered he immediately changed directions toward the elders trying to make his hair shroud his face for as long as possible. But the elder seemed to realize something was wrong, and a frown immediately adorned her face.

“Wha-“ was all the elder had time to say before Zac was upon her with a monstrous momentum from activating **[Loamwalker]**.

However, she clearly was no slouch as a thick wall of ice immediately appeared in front of her as she started to fade away. Zac saw she was using some movement skill, and he knew he couldn't let her escape. The wall looked extremely sturdy, and it was empowered by some Dao, but Zac barreled into it like a bull with the help of the Dao of Heaviness.

Zac felt like some bones in his arm would break from the impact, but they held while the wall cracked. But Zac wasn't completely unscathed as a layer of frost completely covered him and hindered his movements. It seemed to be the effect of a Dao, and Zac wasn't able to simply shrug it off.

But he was already in melee range, and his fist slammed straight toward the elder guardian before she could completely escape. He was still imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and the fist slammed into her midriff like a wrecking ball.

The fist connected and forced her back into a completely corporeal form, and she was slammed back into the wall behind her, causing widespread cracks. However, his hand felt like it was frozen solid from the hit, and before Zac even had time to follow up with another strike to knock her out he was pelted by dozens of extremely sharp icicles.

He managed to dodge a few and endure a few others, but he knew he couldn't take too many of these strikes. A couple of them managed to hit his body before he had time to activate **[Nature's Barrier]** and it felt like they contained some sort of cold poison.

If he didn't end the fight quickly he would be turned into a popsicle, so he forced his stiff body to move, and he landed another slam straight in her face. Blood spurted everywhere and her face was almost caved in from the force of the punch.

She was pushed back into the frozen wall, and this time she didn't get up again. A few twitches was the only sign that she was still alive, and Zac quickly moved his attention toward the dozen flowers in the garden.

He knew he was out of time. There was no way that the battle hadn't been heard from the outside even though it was over in just a few seconds. Worse yet he saw that some of the icicles had flown straight out of the cave mouth, likely alerting everyone in the area.

He ignored the elder and immediately flashed over to the closest flower and dug it out of the ground. There was already a cold-attributed storage box in his Cosmos Sack, and he quickly placed it inside before he put it back into his pouch. A glance in the quest menu showed that the progress of the quest had changed to **(1/2)**.

Zac sighed in relief but he knew his difficulties had only started. He could hear the subdued shuffling of feet outside, yet no one entered. There was no doubt an ambush waiting outside, but Zac hoped that it couldn't be too organized since only a couple of seconds had passed. It was likely only the first responders to the scene.

If he could break out of the encirclement before the elders could wake up from their closed-door cultivation he had confidence he would be able to escape. The powerhouses were mostly in deep meditation from what he understood, and they couldn't simply wake up and be fight-ready in the blink of an eye. That was the only reason he dared to break in like this.

Zac activated [**Nature's Barrier**] again and imbued it with the Dao of Trees. He even imbued himself with the Dao when he noticed that it seemed to have a small restraining effect on the frost that still covered parts of his body. One of his insights was based on resilience against the elements after all, the ability to survive in any climate.

Wasting no more time, Zac rushed outside with his axe at the ready. The reason he didn't use it before was that he wanted to give himself a small window where the elder was confused due to how he looked. But if he sported a large barbaric axe when he entered the cave he would have no doubt have been immediately discovered, foiling his ambush.

He flashed out with his movement skill, and as he suspected he was immediately met with a barrage of ice-attributed

attacks. Zac growled and launched five fractal edges imbued with the Dao of Heaviness to crush any incoming ice. Frigid winds were trying to root him in place, but his blood pumped through his body due to his high Vitality, allowing him to keep running.

His fractal edges were extremely powerful and destroyed everything in their path before they kept moving toward the horrified disciples. But two strong auras erupted from two women who looked to be in their mid-thirties, and they quickly moved to intercept the strikes.

Luckily these elders were amongst the weaker ones as well, likely barely past level 80, and it took all they had to intercept the five massive blades of death coming for their disciples. Zac took the chance and immediately activated **[Loamwalker]**, escaping the same path that he entered.

“Stop! Thief!” an enraged shout echoed behind him.

“Elder Gemoa is badly hurt!” another voice echoed with a tinge of panic.

Some worry started to rise in Zac’s heart as he sensed one dangerous aura after another waking up, each more powerful than the last. Zac quickly took out a small pill from his pouch and ate it as he kept utilizing **[Loamwalker]**. The pill was a low-grade Blood Boil Pill that gave a temporary boost to Cosmic Energy and power, though using them too often would harm one’s foundations.

But since Zac was just in a dreamscape he didn’t care about that and used every tool in his toolbox. Since he no longer cared about stealth the way that took him minutes before only took him a few seconds. Zac saw the air shimmer above the wall, and he unhesitantly launched one **[Chop]** after another, each imbued with either the Dao of Sharpness or Hardness.

As he suspected a shield had been erected, though it seemed that it mainly was used to protect from attacks from the outside. It only took 3 strikes to cause a large crack, and another strike to blast open a temporary hole for Zac to jump through without losing any speed. However, just as he was about to exit the shield a massive ice boulder slammed into

him out of nowhere, making him cough up a mouthful of blood.

He landed face-first into the snow outside, but immediately sprung to his feet and kept pushing Cosmic Energy through his legs as he sped out of the valley. Zac ignored his ragged state as he pushed himself toward the mountain in the distance. Hot on his heels were hundreds of women, each more beautiful than the last.

The only problem was that they all looked completely enraged, like they couldn't wait to tear Zac apart.

Now and then everything from large icicles to huge snowballs sailed toward him to slow him down. A few of the Profound Yin Disciples that seemed to focus on cold-attributed combat classes even ripped out trees from the ground and hurled them at him. But thanks to the distance Zac had no problem avoiding them, often without even having to waste Cosmic Energy.

After almost a day of running more and more female disciples started to fall behind, and after another day only those that were at least late F-Grade could keep up. However, the E-Grade elders that he sensed in the dwindling group did not seem inclined to push ahead of the disciples.

Perhaps they wanted Zac to lead them to a supposed leader, or perhaps they had already realized where Zac was headed and wanted to escalate the conflict. He even considered that they wanted to kill him in full view of the Everlasting Yang sect to show what happens to those who encroached on their bottom line.

Whichever case was right, Zac felt more than happy to play along as he lugged toward the Everlasting Yang sect. He could actually speed up himself and lose most of those behind him, but he opted to conserve his Cosmic Energy instead.

Besides, he was afraid that if he sped up to a pace that only the elders could endure they would immediately pounce on him. So he leisurely ran forward while dodging the occasional icicle as he tried to figure out his next move. He already knew that his original plan likely wouldn't work with the Profound Yin

sect hot on his heel. However, he felt it would be possible to sow some chaos and use that chaos to fish in muddied waters.

Finally, after another 4 hours, he was closing in on the Everlasting Yang sect. Even Zac was starting to get winded by this point, whereas the remaining disciples who were still at F-Grade were deathly pale, while others were actually carried by their elders. Perhaps they wanted to retain a certain number of experts for whatever would happen next.

Luckily he wouldn't have to scale the whole volcano, since the sect was cut into the mountain, starting at the foot and going roughly halfway up. He also knew from memories that they had carved paths all the way to the magma inside, and the elites cultivated as close to the magma as possible since it emitted Fire-attuned energies.

As Zac started to close in on the gates leading up to the sect he started to sense that his pursuers started to slow down. That wasn't good news for his plan so he needed to improvise a bit. He took a deep breath and infused his lungs with Cosmic Energy.

“THE PROFOUND YIN SECT IS ATTACKING!” he roared on top of his lungs, his energy-empowered volume enough to push away the snow around him.

The shout had a pronounced effect as in seconds a stream of red-robed disciples started to appear on the wall as the sounds of heavy drums echoed across the Volcano.

Chapter 287: Subterfuge

Zac didn't stop running even if the wall was quickly filling up with somber-looking warriors, all of them looking ready to fight. However, a huge fireball ripped toward him, forcing him to a screeching halt as it slammed down in front of him, causing a large scorch mark.

“Help! I wish to join your great sect, but these crazy women want to stop me,” Zac shouted as he stood right between the Profound Yin cultivators and the wall.

The cultivators from the Profound Yin Sect had also stopped their pursuit by now, but they seemed unwilling to let things go as they were. They seemed more than ready for a fight even though quite a few of them were pretty spent from the ultra marathon. But the disciples still in F-Grade all ate some pill that seemed to perk them right up.

“Hand this man over to us and we will not take this issue further,” one of the elders said with a somber face.

There was only silence for a few seconds until the large gates suddenly rumbled as they opened, and a small group of cultivators walked out. They seemed to be roughly the same number as his pursuers, and Zac started to wonder if there were some unspoken rules between the two sects.

Perhaps they kept their clashes to a certain number to avoid too large losses. With their accumulated enmity it wouldn't be surprising if they would launch an all-out war, but it would at best result in a pyrrhic victory. These two sects weren't the only forces in the area, and such an action would surely lead to the downfall of both sects.

“You will not take things further, you say?” a robust man with bulging muscles said with a teasing face. “I wonder what a couple of birds so far from home would do if we don't comply.”

“Romi, are you truly planning on testing our patience in the middle of winter? We are taking this man back either alive or in pieces. He grievously wounded Gemoa. A price must be paid,” another of the Yin elders growled.

“It might be winter, but in this area the Yin is always suppressed,” the man called Romi scoffed before he turned to Zac. “Young man, you managed to hurt that bitch? Very impressive. Too bad you look a little girly.”

Zac quickly tried to find a good course of action, and his face started to change. It was no longer the slightly feminine youngster with long hair standing in front of them, but rather a man in his 40s with a masculine face.

Zac tied up his hair as he forcibly stopped his face from grimacing from the pain from changing appearance. He had decided to utilize [**Thousand Faces**] once more to become less threatening to the Everlasting Yang Sect. A middle-aged man defeating an elder was much more believable compared to a youngster. Perhaps they would think he was part of some other force otherwise.

“I managed to ambush her, but she was unfortunately too strong so I couldn’t kill her,” Zac said with a gravelly voice. “I changed my face to sneak inside and get this.”

The next moment he held up the box, and he quickly opened it to show the orchid. He held the box so that both parties would see the orchid within, and their expressions proved he was on the right track.

“I wanted to present this to your great sect as proof of my sincerity,” Zac said as he threw a scathing glance at the profound yin elders. “Who would have known that these bitches couldn’t get enough of my handsome face and chased me for three straight days?”

The members of the Everlasting Yang Sect only gaped at Zac in surprise, whereas the Profound Yin sect members looked like they would explode in anger. Another of the Yang elders quickly noticed an opportunity to further piss off their enemies, and he looked over at the women with a sneer.

“A profound yin orchid! A fine offering indeed. It’s useless for us, but perhaps we could plant them and feed them to our cattle,” he laughed.

That comment was the last spark needed to start a conflagration, and one of the female disciples screamed in anger as she launched a blade of ice right at the elder. However, he was somewhere in the middle of the E-Grade and with a laugh easily melted it, causing a mist to rise around him.

The two sects needed very little encouragement as the next moment over ten attacks sailed through the air between the two sides. One of the elders even turned her eyes toward Zac in rage, and a crystalline bird appeared out of nowhere as it flew toward him with a screech.

Zac screamed in alarm, only half-faking it, and ran toward the members of the Everlasting Yang sect. But the bird was extraordinarily fast and its beak pierced him in his back. Zack fell over and spat out a mouthful blood that immediately froze into sanguine crystals.

“Protect that man!” Romi shouted as a lance of fire erupted from his hand, shooting straight toward the elder who attacked Zac from the other side.

Zac’s pathetic state wasn’t fully a ruse, as the peck from the bird had contained a massive amount of frigid energies that rampaged through his body. He desperately circled his Cosmic Energy along with the Dao of Trees to slowly grind away at it, but doing so left him almost unable to move.

Luckily two disciples quickly ran over and lifted him up, and one of them even infused him with some fiery energy that helped combat the cold. However, the second one did not seem to be as benevolent, and Zac noticed a pair of greedy eyes looking at his Cosmos Sack.

“What are you doing? Get him inside the gate!” Romi shouted as two more molten streams erupted from his hands to intercept the disciples who tried to approach Zac.

Seeing that Zac was being taken away caused the brawl to turn into an all-out conflict, and soon the whole area had turned into a haze from the mix of water vapors and smoke from fires. Constant explosions and screams could be heard though, and Zac couldn't help but shake his head in bafflement. They had been all too ready to go to war with each other.

Zac heavily hung on the disciple's arm as he pretended to be extremely weakened by the strike. In reality, his eyes were scanning the rampart in front of him, until he finally found who he was looking for. A man in his late twenties or early thirties stood on top of the wall not too far from the gate, sporting a large sword fashioned from reddish stone on his back.

This was the core disciple that Yrial had fought in the real world, and Zac's theatrics was a bid to get closer to him. There was no way that he dared to infiltrate this sect as well with the commotion that he had caused, so he needed to take one of the rubies that had already been harvested.

The core disciple had taken the ruby out of his Cosmos Sack when taunted by Yrial in his memories, and he hadn't needed to get it from anywhere. Since he was at peak F-Grade he was likely preparing to use it and then evolve to E-Grade, though Yrial threw a wrench in those plans.

"Just sit down and rest," the man who helped him combat the frigid energies in his body said to Zac after they entered the sect. "The yin-energies can leave hidden wounds if not properly dispelled."

"Thank you. I'll focus on recuperation," Zac simply said as he sat down and closed his eyes.

The battle was still raging outside, and the two disciples who had helped him back to the sect hurried back outside to join their brothers, and Zac was left largely alone. Almost all of the other sect members had their focus on the battle outside their walls, and it almost seemed like they were watching a play.

"Elder Romi's [**Molten Burst**] is powerful as ever, it's even able to melt a hole straight through the [**Ice Bulwark**] of Tylaena," one of them muttered from atop the rampart.

Zac shook his head in wonder. The disciples even knew their enemies by first-name basis, showing how often they clashed with each other. If they just put their differences aside they would have been able to create a great sect with complementing strength, just as Yrial's two attributes complemented each other.

But who knew if these sects even still existed in the real world. From what he had heard the average sect only lasted between 5 and 20 generations, which meant for an E-Grade sect 2 500 to 10 000 years. Between natural disasters, declining talents, and calamities thrown at them by the System there was no such thing as a permanent force.

Since millions of years had likely passed since Yrial's feat took place these two forces were most likely long gone and forgotten, their endless conflict not even mentioned in the ancient history books. Zac sighed with some melancholy as he opened his eyes and looked around. These projections all represented people with dreams and ambitions.

But Zac soon snapped out of it as he silently got to his feet. A few disciples looked over at him, but they didn't have time to do anything before Zac exploded into action. The ground beneath his feet cracked as he pounced right at the disciple who possessed the ruby he was after.

The core disciple barely had time to turn his head before Zac was upon him from behind. But the disciple was clearly a battle-hardened warrior, as his hand was immediately gripping the large rock-sword on his back. He quickly raised it slightly to protect his head from Zac's incoming fist.

But even though he was a core disciple of the Everlasting Yang Sect he was completely unable to endure the fist that was empowered with a high mastery Dao and almost 600 Strength. The sword slammed into the back of his head and he was thrown forward, landing in a heap outside the sect.

Zac didn't give him a chance to gather his wits before he followed. He jumped down from the wall walk and landed right on top of the poor man, imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Large cracks in the ground spread beneath the

disciple and his face turned green until he emptied his stomach.

Some of it splashed straight in Zac's face but he reined in his disgust as he ripped the disciple's Cosmos Sack from his side. He gave the puking man another stomp for good measure as he scoured the inside of the Sack for his target.

"Traitor!" a disciple screamed, and a few enraged disciples started to prepare attacks.

However, Zac's display of might made all of them hesitant to go first, allowing Zac to snatch the large red ruby before putting it away in his own sack. A quick glance confirmed his quest was (2/2).

But Zac's brows furrowed when he was still standing on top of the core disciple after a few seconds. Was something missing from the quest? However his danger sense started going off, and he unhesitantly moved away with **[Loamwalker]** a moment before Romi's **[Molten Burst]** ripped through the air where he stood.

"You have guts, thief!" Romi roared, completely enraged.

He was bleeding from his mouth and his right shoulder was frozen solid from ice, but his aura was still stable, meaning he hadn't been critically wounded.

"You try to play our sects while stealing our treasures?" he growled. "You can forget about leaving this area alive!"

The fighting had already subsided and the haze that covered the pitched battle between the two sects was quickly dissipating. Soon all the disciples and elders were in full view, and all of them sported various degrees of wounds. Some even lay unmoving on the ground, their fate unknown.

One thing that seemed to unite both camps was their seething hatred for Zac though, and they all looked at him with burning eyes.

"I'm happy to see you guys finally get along," Zac sighed before he immediately sped away with his movement skill.

Quite a few dangerous auras were waking up inside the sect as well, and Zac knew he couldn't stay any longer. He unhesitatingly fled into the forests with members of both sects in tow. This time however the elders were quickly outpacing their disciples, and Zac was forced to go all out.

Luckily endurance was Zac's strong suit, and neither sect seemed to excel at speed. So Zac simply switched between **[Loamwalker]** and high speed running for 6 hours until he finally had lost the last of the elders.

It was one of the elders from the Profound Yin sect, and she screamed in frustration into the air when she finally gave up on the chase. Zac only shook his head with a wry smile as he kept running for another two hours. He found a secluded spot and sat down to wait out the clock.

When the quest timer hit zero the world blurred, and the next moment he found himself lying in a patch of flowers with a large moon shining down on him.

"You're back, as expected of my disciple. How about it, wasn't your master dashing back in the day?" Yrial's voice floated over from the pond.

Zac slowly got up to his feet, relieved to see that only 6 hours had passed since he got put under, meaning time passed 20 times faster inside the dreamscape.

"You're something, alright," Zac said with a shake of his head as he turned toward his new teacher. "I wonder how you escaped the pursuit of two rabid sects back then?"

Chapter 288: A Flower of Fire and Ice

“How would some backwater elders catch up to the great Lord of Cycles?” Yrial laughed from his recliner by the pond.

“What about it, is your master not amazing? I played those two sects like a fiddle. And that was in the real world where one could actually die.”

The next moment Zac was once again grabbed by an unseen force and placed on a mat not far from the pond.

“I wasn’t actually at risk for dying?” Zac said through grit teeth. “I ran my ass off to avoid getting my soul torn to shreds.”

“Well, there was still danger. If you died inside your soul would be hurt and you would have to trade some of your credits for soul-healing pills,” Yrial said with a smile. “Those things are pretty expensive.”

That quickly calmed Zac down, and he thanked the gods that he hadn’t taken anything for granted in the dreamscape. Clearly, the trial was mostly a veiled attempt to show off his own feats, but it looked like the old ghost was finally about to hold up his end of the bargain.

“What’s credits?” Zac asked, holding back any complaints or comments that might derail Yrial from handing over the inheritance treasures.

“When I needed to create this inheritance I simply threw a bunch of stuff that would be valuable for young cultivators and attached a price according to its value. For passing the first trial you get between 1000 and 10000 credits, depending on how I feel. For also becoming my disciple you get double,” Yrial explained. “What you choose to use those points for is up to you.”

The next moment he fished out a crystal from his sleeve and threw it over to Zac who caught it. Zac knew it was an information crystal from a first look, and he guessed that the stored items were listed inside.

“So how many points do I get?” Zac asked with anticipation

“Well, since you’re my terminal disciple I guess you’ll start at maximum credits, ten thousand,” Yrial said, but he continued before Zac could get excited. “However, I’ll have to detract a thousand points for your face. Being a barbarian is no excuse for skipping proper skincare. I’ll also deduct a thousand for the way you defeated the construct. So eight thousand times two.”

Zac was already starting to become immune to Yrial’s comments about his looks, and he felt that the deduction for how he finished the first trial was fair enough. It still left him with 16 000 credits to spend, and he eagerly infused some Cosmic Energy into the information crystal.

A long list of items lit up in front of him, and he was surprised to see that Yrial had stashed over two hundred items that were exchangeable after finishing the first trial. Most of the items were priced between one to two thousand credits, meaning one would usually walk away with five items or so. However, there were a few items that were much more expensive.

[Ultimate treasure – Lock of hair: 10 000 Credits]

“Lock of hair?” Zac read out loud and looked up at Yrial with confusion. “What’s that?”

“You are my disciple after all! Impeccable taste. That item is a true lock of hair from my real body. Now that I’m dead its value is truly priceless,” Yrial said with a sagely nod.

“Your hair?” Zac exclaimed, not being able to hide his disgust. “What would I do with that?”

Yrial’s face immediately scrunched up in anger, and the air around him seemed to freeze for a second before he took a deep breath to calm himself.

“What you would do with that? Gaze upon it in awe and wonder of course. Hair from my head is an item of unlimited artistic beauty, the physical manifestation of perfection. How

about it? You would still have a lot of points over if you bought it,” Yrial said with anticipation.

Zac only snorted and kept looking, drawing another glare from Yrial. In reality, the item might not actually be as useless as Yrial described. Yrial was a high or peak C-Grade hegemon when he cut that lock of hair, and Zac suspected its strength would be extraordinary. If he used the hair for crafting he would likely be able to make an extremely sturdy item.

However, he wasn't keen on wearing an armor made out of human hair, and he had no one who could craft using such high-grade materials. He instead looked for items that could give immediate boosts to his power, or at least assist in the coming battle with the Dominators.

The lock of hair wasn't the only suspicious item in the list. In fact, almost a quarter of the treasures were vanity items that related to the Lord of Cycles. There was everything from paintings to collections of his poetry. One item was just called 'My 5th favorite scarf'. But there were a lot of good things inside as well, almost to the point it was shocking.

He did find the soul-mending panacea, costing a whopping 1500 points, more than any of the attribute fruits or even most of the Dao Treasures. However, Zac wasn't surprised since he knew just how troubling soul wounds were. If the wound passed a certain degree the soul would just keep disintegrating, and almost nothing could help. That's why he was so careful about overtaxing his Dao.

There were also over a dozen Spirit Tools, each of them seeming to be of extremely high quality. When he focused on those entries he could see them, and they all emitted a far greater aura compared to the tools he brought back from the Eastern Trigram Sect.

Part of it could be explained with superior craftsmanship, but the biggest reason was the grade of the tools. Zac was shocked to see that all of the Spirit Tools were E-Grade except for a few, making them better than almost any weapon currently on earth. And they weren't even that expensive.

All of the tools cost around two thousand, apart from the two robes that both cost 3750 credits. One was a robe in the same vein as the robes he received from the system long ago, with the difference of it being a Spirit Tool. It was mostly white though, with details in red and blue.

It was likely something Yrial used until he switched to something better, or perhaps simply something he kept because he liked the colors. It seemed perfect for Zac, but he held back on an impulse buy so that he could go through everything. The other robe was a more gender-neutral robe, that might almost be considered a dress on Earth, so it wasn't as tempting for Zac.

There was also a Spiritual Ship that seemed far supreme compared to the disk he gained from the Eastern Trigram Sect, but Zac knew he couldn't afford it at the moment. It was a luxury item that he couldn't prioritize as things stood.

"I'm your terminal disciple, why don't you simply give me all of this stuff?" Zac ventured.

"I only made a deduction for your face, but I could also make a deduction for your attitude," Yrial snorted as he once again ran his fingers through the lake. "Don't be greedy."

"Brazla set some ground rules. I needed to put in enough treasures for at least 25 inheritors at F-Grade, 10 at E-Grade, 3 at D-grade, and one C-Grade inheritance. But if you pass the final trial everything is yours," the ghost added after a brief pause.

Zac quickly looked down, afraid to say anything that would make him lose any more credits, and continued to look through the list. Treasures were not the only things on the list, there were also quite a few skills and five cultivation manuals.

There were also almost thirty items that Zac didn't recognize, and he had no idea what they were used for. Some were natural treasures, and a few of them cost well over five thousand points. But they didn't seem to be either Dao Treasures or Attribute fruits, making Zac unsure of their usage.

It was a huge amount compared to the Dao Fruits which only cost between 800 and 2000. But that only meant that they might be extremely good items that would be impossible for Zac to get his hands on normally.

“Could you recommend any items that would suit me?” Zac asked before he decided to throw in some flattery. “You know my situation and you are far more talented and experienced than me.”

“I’m not as easily persuaded as that little Tool Spirit,” Yrial snorted. “But perhaps if you bought a memento to remember your Dear Master by when you leave, I might be inclined to give a few tips.”

Zac grit his teeth, and with great reluctance he bought one of the cheapest ones, a portrait of Yrial sitting in a meadow of flowers, half of which were a fiery red and the other an azure blue. It cost him 500 Credits though, making Zac thoroughly annoyed.

“‘*A flower of fire and ice*’. An excellent choice. I had a great artist create this to commemorate me breaking through to D-Grade. If you hang it in your home you will not only raise the grade of your interiors by multiple levels but meditating on this picture will even help improve elemental Daos,” Yrial nodded, clearly looking pleased.

“So, advice?” Zac sighed as he placed the large painting in his Cosmos Sack.

“Well, first of all, you should buy **[Eye of Har’Teriam]**,” Yrial said without hesitation. “It’s simply the best thing available, apart from the lock of hair.”

Zac quickly looked through the list and found it was the second most expensive item available. This one cost a whopping 9500 credits. Zac’s eyes drifted toward all the other treasures he knew would help, but in the end he grit his teeth and bought the thing. From what he could tell the costs were very accurate in relation to value, except for the vanity items.

“So should I eat it immediately?” Zac asked.

“No, wait until you have broken through to E-Grade,” Yrial said with a shake of his head.

“I can’t use it now?” Zac said with exasperation. “You know how bad the situation is on Earth.”

“Well, just flee if it gets too bad,” Yrial said without concern. “You can even buy the teleportation token if you feel it’s too dangerous.”

The token he mentioned was a random-teleportation token that would allow him to go to a random D-Grade world. Zac was honestly contemplating buying it since it only cost 1000 Credits. It would be a final life-line and something that could at least give his sister a chance at survival if everything turned to shit on Earth.

“So, what does this Eye do?” Zac asked.

“It is guaranteed to open one of your hidden nodes, though which one can’t be controlled,” Yrial said with a smug grin.

Zac whistled in surprise, and he wasn’t too miffed about paying through his nose for the item. From all accounts, the hidden nodes were all good things that were like free permanent power boosts. Getting the first one immediately was sure to be helpful, especially if he decided to evolve before turning his attention toward the Dominators.

But clearly Zac’s reaction wasn’t enough for Yrial, and he tsked unhappily.

“Ugly and stupid. The [**Eye of Har’Teriam**] is a treasure that never appears on baby worlds, and not something that the System rewards for any quests. It’s only found in a few C-Grade Mystic realms containing the remains of a long-collapsed universe,” Yrial said. “Your master almost paid with his life to get it.”

“If it’s so good, why didn’t you use it yourself?” Zac skeptically asked.

“You can only use it in E-Grade, and I couldn’t sell it. Every time I tried I was almost hunted down and killed by a couple of greedy sects. I had to run for hundreds of years to get away,” he muttered, clearly still annoyed by the situation.

“So what makes this item so special?” Zac probed.

“It is one of the few items that can guarantee the opening of a Hidden Node no matter who eats it. Not only that, it will even give you a clue of where your other nodes are hidden, which will make it infinitely easier to burst them open later as well,” Yrial huffed.

“Do you know how you normally find where your nodes are hidden? You use your Cultivation Manual and your inner eye to meticulously scour your body. Sometimes it takes a few months, sometimes it takes decades. For most, it never happens because they can’t form a resonance with the nodes. It’s exceedingly hard, and not even one in a million can open a single node, let alone multiple.

“For you, it would normally be completely impossible. Mortals have no conventional methods to create a resonance with their hidden nodes, so they would never be able to break them open by conventional means.

“As far as I know there are less than 30 treasures for someone like you to have a chance to open your Hidden Nodes, and this is one of the better ones. It’s completely impossible to buy, and can only be found by chance,” Yrial finished his diatribe and took a deep breath for air. “Now, is your master amazing or what?”

“But wait,” Zac suddenly said. “With my... Special constitution, do I even have hidden nodes?”

The blustering ghost suddenly froze, and his brows slowly started to contract into a frown.

Chapter 289: Setting a Course

Yrial's features smoothed out and he adopted his lazy expression once again.

“No, that shouldn't be the case. There is no connection between talent and the number of hidden nodes, talent only affects the ease of breaking them open. So you should be fine. Everyone possesses at least the three gates unless their race gives them something similar,” he said with a dismissive wave.

“The Three Gates?” Zac asked.

“The Gate of Truth, the Spirit Gate and the Gate of Flesh,” Yrial explained. “These are the three foundational nodes that most possess. One increase your connection with the boundless Dao, one expands your mind and one tempers your flesh. All of them are pretty good, though the best ones are usually the special hidden nodes, and those vary from person to person.”

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ylvas' mention of bloodlines and constitutions. At least it seemed that no matter how bad his constitution was he would still possess some Nodes to open up.

“So how do I open the other nodes after the first one?” Zac asked after sighing in relief.

“There are two aspects to bursting open the hidden nodes,” Yrial said. “The first is to locate them. This is normally impossible for mortals, so pay close attention to every feeling when you eat this treasure. Don't let anyone disturb you,” Yrial said. “The second part is to force them open. Various treasures can do that, though they are always extremely rare as well.”

“Sometimes the nodes even burst open due to special encounters. You might get a sense after an intense battle, and might be able to open up a hidden node through resonance. But that is extraordinarily rare,” Yrial said.

“Hidden nodes is about chance and fate. For most people, especially mortals, it’s impossible to force. So don’t fret if you can’t open as many as you aim for. There are other opportunities to make you stronger apart from bursting up all your nodes,” Yrial said.

Zac agreed and kept going through the list to spend his remaining 6000 credits. After buying the Eye he also bought the robe, leaving him with only 2250 points. The treasures inside were mainly geared for either boosting one’s achievements at the peak of the F-Grade or give a good start right after breaking through the bottleneck. So after some hesitation he bought a natural treasure that would give a significant boost to his Race after evolving.

It wouldn’t be enough to push him all the way to D-Grade, but it was a good start. He knew that the attribute cap was quite high, but so were the attribute gains in the E-Grade. He did not want to encounter the same issue as he did with his Strength last time. The natural treasure would get the ball rolling, and for the rest he would have to use medicinal baths like most people.

The **[Fruit of Rebirth]** only cost 500 credits, as body tempering seldom was the hard part of progressing. Zac still had some problems deciding what to do with the rest of the points. He couldn’t afford the top tier items, but he also felt that the other items couldn’t help him too much in the short run. He also bought the teleportation talisman for a 1000 credits in the end.

“You should buy **[Cyclic Strike]** as well,” Yrial suddenly said from the sidelines.

Zac quickly glanced through the list of treasures to find that it was an offensive skill that would cost him his remaining credits.

“Is it strong? What’s it good for?” Zac asked.

“I wouldn’t say it’s a too strong an attack, that’s why it’s so cheap. But it will help you progress,” Yrial said, making Zac a bit confused. “I noticed that your utilization of Dao is still a bit clumsy. It’s not too surprising since such a short time has passed since the Integration of your world, but if you plan on walking the path of duality this is something you need to improve before you advance.”

“How come?” Zac probed with some lingering confusion.

“To start creating a system, and have your classes reflect your long term goals,” Yrial explained. “[**Cyclic Strike**] isn’t a particularly amazing attack, but it requires two opposing Daos to work. So you will need to learn to combine your Dao of Rot and Dao of Trees to channel it. It will be a good lesson for you to learn to control your specialty core as well.”

Zac noticed that Yrial was actually doing his job as a teacher, and he memorized every word the ghost said. Yrial seemed pretty happy with the attention he was getting, and a satisfied grin started to appear on his face.

“In fact, take this as the first lesson of your master. After looking through your situation I understand that your current goal is something that has been born from a series of coincidences rather than a strict vision from your path of progression. You even learned the accompanying Dao inside my trial,” Yrial said.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. What he said was true. He had no goal of walking a path of life and death in the beginning. He had only wanted to gain the Dao of Axes and perhaps use the Dao of trees to heal and protect himself somewhat. But one thing after another led to his current situation.

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Yrial said with a nod. “Searching for your path, or being able to adapt it due to circumstances is a good thing. But now that you have started to crystallize your path you need to formalize it.”

“What does that mean?” Zac asked.

“Your two classes are not moving in the same direction at the moment,” Yrial said. “But you can force them to align with the help of your Dao. The biggest problem is, in fact, your epic class. I am pretty sure I understand your reasoning for choosing it, but getting classes with complementing attributes isn’t as important as complementing Daos. You need to force your classes into a new direction.”

“Change direction? Can I even control that?” Zac asked with bewilderment.

“Dao fusion is the easiest way,” Yrial said with a nod.

Zac suddenly understood what Yrial was getting at. His Undying Bulwark was currently based on the Dao of Hardness and the Dao of Sanctuary, exemplified by the vision of the ancestral protector. What would happen if he modified those Daos? Yrial nodded when he saw Zac’s thoughtful expression.

“It seems you understand. You have various options, but if you would listen to my opinion I would recommend that you fuse your Dao of Sanctuary with your Dao of Trees, and your Dao of Rot with your Dao of Hardness. It is still worthwhile to pursue your Dao of Axe since it would work as the delivery method for your cycle of life and death,” Yrial proposed.

Zac’s brows furrowed when he heard Yrial’s idea. Honestly, the Dao of Trees and the Dao of Sanctuary together didn’t seem like a bad idea. He could envision a large tree providing shade and protection, meaning it shouldn’t be too hard to fuse the two. But the Dao of Hardness and the Dao of Rot?

“Are the Dao of Rot and the Dao of Hardness even possible to fuse?” Zac asked with hesitation. “And wouldn’t that risk cutting off my path of progression? And also, how do you know of all my Daos? I never mentioned them and I haven’t used Dao of Sanctuary since I entered.”

“Well, first of all, I’m your master so how can’t I know your situation?” Yrial said and waved his hand, causing a slightly modified version of Zac’s status screen to pop up. “And I have to say that your situation is a bit disgusting. If I had this many titles with my supreme talent and beauty I would have become a Divine Monarch by now.”

“As for the other parts, it seems you have a too reductionist understanding of the boundless Dao. That is usually the case with lower worlds. Dao Seeds are not small isolated nuggets of truth, but part of an endless fabric,” Yrial added and pointed at Zac with his finger.

Zac’s vision once again started to change, making him worry that Yrial was once again sending him into a dreamscape. But the scenery soon changed and he wasn’t looking upon some new world, but rather an enormous fractal. It reminded him of the first vision he had when he had an epiphany on the Dao of Heaviness.

The fractal in front of him was far more supreme though like it contained all the secrets of the universe. At first he thought it was Yrial’s Dao, but he couldn’t be sure because to his surprise he sensed the familiar auras from his own Daos in different parts of the fractal.

As far as he could tell all his Daos were represented to some degree in the fractal, though they were only a small part of the tapestry. Zac tried to remember as many details as possible, but the esoteric knowledge hidden in the vision immediately slipped out of his hands. Soon the vision shattered and Zac was back on the floating island again.

“Did you understand? Everything is part of something bigger. Those kernels of truth you have grasped aren’t really the truth of Trees or truths of Hardness. They are simply truths that the System has packaged in an easy to digest manner. But it is within your purview to repackage them to something that suits your path better. It requires talent and a high understanding of your Daos though, so it is not something done in a day,” Yrial said.

“It simply seems a lot harder to fuse the Dao of Hardness with the Dao of Rot, though,” Zac said. “What Dao could I even strive for?”

“Well, the Dao of Corpses comes to mind, and it would be easy to upgrade to Death. But there are other alternatives as well I’m sure. In any case, it will allow your next class to not be so unbalanced,” Yrial added.

“Unbalanced? My Undying Bulwark class is pretty damn strong,” Zac retorted.

“It is, but much of its utility is lost on you. It’s a class meant for an undead champion, leading legions of the dead into war. Is that a future you see for yourself?” Yrial probed.

Zac unhesitatingly shook his head. He wasn’t even sure he’d ever visit the Undead Empire, and he had no plans to keep the undead on Earth.

“I have a feeling that you walk a solitary path, just like I did. Your classes need to reflect that better. Your other class is much better in that regard, it boosts a little bit of everything, and its weaknesses are easily shored up,” Yrial said.

It was a sobering realization for Zac. He had felt that his second class was almost a cheat, but in Yrial’s eyes it was barely serviceable. And what he said about solitary was true. He was so far ahead of the others on Earth that it might even restrict his progress to travel in groups. Perhaps a small group of elites would work, but not armies.

“So why incorporate the Dao of Sanctuary into Dao of Trees?” Zac asked.

“For one it’s to not leave any Dao lying around that might affect your class choices negatively. Having too many Daos will cause your path to be crooked, so don’t get lured in by the bonus attributes. Every Dao must have a purpose, so you need to categorize your Daos into three groups.

“One for life, one for death, and one for attacks. Both your life and death groups will also help your defense as well due to the nature of your insights. It will cause a balance that will make your progression smoother. Being a super trash will already make your path of cultivation extremely arduous, there’s no need to complicate it further,” Yrial said.

“Another alternative is to have four groups, with one for Defense as well. In that case, you should not fuse your Daos as I recommended,” the spirit then added after some thought.

Zac slowly nodded. It felt like a shroud over his eyes had been lifted, and he was finally seeing the path he should take. It

truly helped to have an experienced master. Just a few small pointers would make his life a lot easier in the future. What was even more shocking was that the annoying narcissist in front of him was such a good teacher.

“How do I fuse Dao seeds though?” Zac asked. “I have only heard that it is possible, but not how you would actually do it.”

“First of all both need to reach the peak, so you have some work to do. After that you need to merge the two Dao seeds within your body while focusing on the way you want them to fuse. If you succeed you will have a new Dao Fragment, a piece of Dao that is no longer a seed,” Yrial said.

“What happens if I fail?” Zac asked.

“Then you’ll receive a pretty monstrous backlash. Some die, others get their brains turned into soup. But with your constitution you’ll likely be fine after a few months of recuperation,” Yrial said.

“Is it as risky to simply upgrade your Dao?” Zac probed with some hesitation.

“No, but it’s a lot harder instead,” Yrial said. “You need one piece of insight per stage to evolve a Dao Seed, apart from the peak where you need two. But to Evolve a Dao Seed into a Dao Fragment you would need to attain the equivalent of five insights in one go.”

“It’s not really hard for someone in the D-Grade, but it’s extremely hard for someone in F-Grade,” the ghost continued.

“So by when should I have fused a Dao?” Zac asked.

“You have no choice, you need to do it before you evolve. For one it’s a minimum requirement to have a Dao Fragment to get an Epic E-Grade Class. But you should do it in any case if you’re planning on getting a Class that suits your path,” Yrial explained.

Chapter 290: Impartment

Zac frowned hesitantly when he heard that. He was extremely far from getting to the point of possessing four peak Dao Seeds. The Dao of Sanctuary and Rot were only at the early stage, and he had no idea when he would be able to push them all the way to the peak. Yrial seemed to understand what Zac was thinking and snorted.

“You’re lucky to have such a magnanimous teacher. I will help you out a bit, though most of the work will depend on yourself,” Yrial said as he got up from his lazy position by the pond.

“What do you mean?” Zac said hesitantly.

“As my terminal, and only, disciple I will give you additional two gifts before you leave here,” he said, and the next moment his aura exploded outward.

Immense powers radiated outward from Yrial as he floated up into the air. The islands beneath fractured and disappeared, its debris swallowed into a huge circle of energy that appeared behind him. Torrential amounts of energy ran through the circle, and it was as though it constantly changed its nature. The main two elements were those of fire and ice, and the debris was constantly remolded by these two forces.

Sometimes the circle gave Zac the impression of a cold asteroid belt and the next moment it was scorching hot plasma. It was both, and it was neither. Zac realized the difference between the C and D-Grade for the first time, and any last doubt that The Great Redeemer was actually a C-Grade powerhouse disappeared when he sensed the all-consuming aura of his master.

“For over two hundred thousand years I walked my path, never looking back,” Yrial said, his voice completely different compared to the one earlier.

It contained endless strength and conviction. Gone was the lazy youth who loved to see his reflection in the pond, and replaced with a powerhouse who had walked over mountains of corpses to reach his station.

“I impart my path of Cyclic Supremacy to you, in hopes you will reach the grand terminus,” he said next, his words echoing like thunder in Zac’s mind.

Zac looked up with somber eyes, seeing the enormous circle of untold power slowly shrink and condense until it only had a diameter of two centimeters. It still contained the massive amounts of energies, and it shone like a sun as it flew straight into Zac’s forehead, forcing him down on his knees. The next moment he found himself in the miraculous space in front of the huge fractal once again.

The enormous fractal lit up with boundless luster, and it caused stars to light up in the pitch-black expanse around it. Each star felt ancient, as though it had existed since the beginning of time. Thousands upon thousands of them appeared, each of them containing boundless knowledge and power.

Zac was completely frozen by the sight, but an enormous snap shocked him awake. It was the large fractal that had suddenly gained a massive crack that covered a large part of it. Zac didn’t know why, but he instinctively knew that it was putting an extreme strain on the fractal to summon those mysterious stars.

Zac quickly looked around for what to do, since he knew this was something extremely important. Was he supposed to fix the fractal somehow? He prepared to move toward it, but the next moment he felt a dozen tendrils approach him. He couldn’t see them with his eyes, but his Dao Seeds strongly resonated with them.

They were the pure unadulterated Dao, and he felt that he could gain a new seed by just grabbing one of the tendrils and absorb its knowledge. But he held himself back as he remembered Yrial’s words. Gaining random Dao Seeds could

hamper one's growth rather than helping, so he focused on the tendril that most strongly resonated with his Dao Seeds.

He wasn't sure how long this magical state would last, seeing the worsening state of the fractal. So he hurriedly focused his soul toward one of the tendrils, one teeming with life and vitality. He knew it wasn't the Dao of Trees, but rather something much grander. Not even the Dao of Life inside the construct was more than a shadow compared to what this tendril represented, and it was as though Zac was mesmerized as he approached it.

The moment his soul connected with the tendril the world changed again. He was once again the Lifebringer with its inexhaustible lifeforce, continuously growing and expanding. Everything could be a source of growth and empowerment, no matter if it was the planet, the air, or the universe itself. Even traveling through the boundless void could provide it with the sustenance it required.

A warm exuberance spread through his body, and Zac almost felt he would be able to live forever as long as he had access to Cosmic Energy. But he soon calmed down as his connection with the tendril ended, and he saw that it was slowly returning to its star in the distance.

Another crack in the fractal reminded him of the urgency of the situation, and he immediately pushed his soul toward another tendril, this one containing boundless darkness and desolation. Zac stabilized his mind and connected with it as well, and once again the world changed.

He once again saw the Lifebringer, but this time it didn't shine with boundless vitality. The gargantuan tree still floated through the boundless expanse, but its leaves were no longer emerald crystals. They were shrunken and graying, and some sections of the enormous canopy were completely barren.

Nothing lasted forever. Life would inevitably give way to decay, and even the Tree of Life was no exception. Its trunk was mostly hollowed out, and massive lifeforce was leaking out in a slow death. Rot spread from within, and soon there would be nothing left.

Zac shuddered as the connection with the tendril broke, and he brought some of the death with him. He had no idea whether what he saw was true, or whether it was an adaptation to fit his own Dao. But in either case, he felt that his newly acquired seed had grown substantially in its space in his mind.

By this point the whole space was shaking, and Zac quickly moved on to the next tendril that resonated with him. It gave him a feeling of piety, of self-sacrifice and that everything in the universe was connected. He felt it was strongly connected with his Dao of Sanctuary, and he quickly connected with it. He was suddenly standing next to millions of people, looking up at the ancient protector, seeing the gentle smile on his face as he turned to face the end of the universe.

But Zac had no time to glean anything as the vision shuddered and broke apart. The insight slipped out of his grasp, and he once again saw the large fractal. This time it was illusory, and in just a few seconds it was completely gone. The next moment the stars in the universe reseeded, taking their boundless knowledge with them.

The vision ended and he was once again standing on the last intact island.

Zac immediately sat down with his eyes closed, ruminating on the massive gains he had just received. It was only thirty minutes later he once again opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that Yrial's form had grown dim, no longer exhibiting the boundless power as before. Zac had a feeling that imparting Zac with these massive Dao insights didn't come without a steep cost.

"This gift is immense," Zac finally said as he opened his eyes. "Is there anything I can do in return?"

"What could you do, little brat?" Yrial said with a snort. "Who knows how long I've been dead? Just be thankful that I didn't waste my impartment on someone else after I created this place."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with confusion as he got up to his feet.

“What I gave you was a Dao Impartment. Most can only do that once in one’s lifetime, and only after you have formalized your path,” Yrial explained. “The cost is also massive, and very few are willing to pay the price. But then again, it does not really matter seeing as I am dead.”

“I’ll remember this,” Zac said with a nod.

He remembered the massive fractal and realized that was likely a representation of Yrial’s understanding of the Dao. It had taken serious damage to summon those mysterious stars, meaning that Imparting the Dao like that would likely cause massive damage to one’s foundation.

“Don’t be so serious,” Yrial said with a wave as he produced a crystal.

“This is my second gift to you,” he said. “I took the liberty of studying your core a bit more while you were walking in your master’s shoes. It is marvelous, but it seems to come with a drawback. It is pretty arduous to change your race, no?” Yrial said.

Zac hurriedly nodded in agreement. The issue of changing between his two races was a constant annoyance. He hated the feeling of dying, and he was worried that something disastrous would sooner or later happen while he was out cold while he changed form.

“I need to essentially die to change class. Or at least I haven’t found a better method,” Zac said.

“I figured as much,” Yrial nodded. “The two sides are almost completely separated, which isn’t the case with the normal Duplicity Core. This crystal contains a skill that you can learn as both an undead and as a human. It will start the transformation for you without having to die. There is still a limit though, there is simply too little interconnectivity in your Node, a proper cycle isn’t formed. So it will still take roughly 10 to 15 seconds, and you will be quite weakened during that time.”

“That’s still a lot better compared to the old method, I was out cold for minutes there,” Zac eagerly said as he accepted the

crystal.

It might still be pretty risky to use it in battle, but it was far better than before.

“Don’t worry too much. The time needed to change class should drastically decrease when your core upgrades to the next rank,” Yrial said. “I believe the skill should still be usable as well. If not I’ll just modify it when you come back.”

“How do I upgrade it?” Zac probed.

“I would guess that you need to feed it a higher grade of life and death,” Yrial said. “A great treasure representing each half of the whole. That and a lot of energy.”

As he held the crystal in his hand he was amazed at the means of Yrial. In just the few hours while he was undergoing the trial Yrial had managed to get a grasp of Zac’s odd core and design a Skill that worked with both his classes to better utilize it. Not only that, but he also had time to inscribe it into a crystal, something that he had heard was normally extremely hard.

Meanwhile, he hadn’t even taken the first step toward creating a skill of his own, something he knew was important in the future. From what he understood every stage came with less handholding from the system.

He knew he would still receive a few skills in the E-Grade, but he was also expected to create new ones himself, or at least get his hands on them some other way. At least he had gained **[Cyclic Strike]** that might help him take the first step in that direction. Zac immediately infused some energy into the crystal, but suddenly his face got odd as he looked up at his master with a helpless look.

“What? Is something the matter?” he asked with innocent eyes.

“No... It’s nothing,” Zac sighed as he looked at the name of his new skill. “It’s perfect.”

[Beauty Yrial’s Great Transformation Skill]

“That’s fine then,” Yrial nodded. “With this, the first trial is over. You will not be able to enter this place again within 10 years. Before you come back you should at least have reached level 140 and have pushed your three Dao Groupings to High Fragments. Otherwise, you might not survive the trial. And even if you do I’ll just deduct credits because you cannot follow instructions.”

“Ten years?” Zac blurted out, but he suddenly took another look at Yrial’s faded form.

The impartment had no doubt drained the spirit quite a bit, and perhaps he needed to rest for a decade to restore his form. He was only a fragment of a soul after all, and the might he released for that instant was massive.

“Now, don’t disappoint me. If you ever doubt yourself because your unremarkable looks or shitty aptitude remember this; The great Lord of Cycles took you in, so you cannot be a complete waste of a human being,” Yrial said with a wave, and the next moment the air started to shimmer and distort.

Zac was about to give one final thanks, but Yrial’s voice once echoed out through the area before he was completely ejected. This time it held a majesty that reminded Zac of the great power he emitted right before the impartment.

“The path you have chosen is even harder than mine. Many will tell you to give it up, to not bite off more than you can chew. Ignore them, they are condemned for mediocrity. Only when you walk your own truth will you be free.”

He once again found himself inside the grandiose hallway of the Towers of Myriad Dao, and Zac looked up at the ten-meter high statue with mixed emotions. There was no denying that Yrial was a bit annoying and a true narcissist, but the help and gifts he had provided might last Zac a lifetime.

Yrial had taken Zac’s formless idea and turned it into a reality. Zac now knew exactly where he was at and what steps he needed to take to truly walk upon the path of Life and Death. But it had also made him realize just how much he needed to improve before he could evolve to E-Grade.

Luckily Yrial had provided him with an extremely valuable kick-start to get him going.

Chapter 291: Return

Zac finally opened his menu to properly check the result of the impartment. He was eager to see what his actual gains were. But before he could take a proper look he noticed some movement in his periphery.

“Thank god you are okay,” Kenzie’s voice suddenly sounded, and Zac saw her get up from a sofa not far from his statue. “We were worried when the hours kept passing.”

Brazla sat in an opulent throne next to the sofa, and he looked over at Zac with disinterest.

“You took quite some time. It can’t have been easy to pry treasures out of Lord Yrial’s hands with that face of yours,” the Tool Spirit snickered.

“It worked out fine in the end,” Zac said with a sigh. “If you knew about Yrial’s disposition, why didn’t you warn me?”

“It’s not for me to decide your path. Worst case you die and your sister inherits the towers,” Brazla snorted.

Zac shook his head and ignored the annoying Tool Spirit.

“Give me a second, I need to go over my gains,” Zac said to Kenzie as he once again opened his menu.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	74
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter
Limited Titles	-
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Middle, Seed of Rot - High
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	587 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]
Dexterity	290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Endurance	742 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]
Vitality	433 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]
Intelligence	160 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Wisdom	219 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Luck	132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]
Free Points	3
Nexus	[F] 296 516 043

Coins	
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The improvements were pretty noticeable all around, but Zac was most interested in the advancements of his Daos. He quickly opened his Dao screen and took a proper look at the changes.

[Trees (Peak): Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]

[Rot (High): Endurance +5, Wisdom +45, Intelligence +10.]

[Sanctuary (Middle): Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +15.]

Not only had his Dao of Trees reached the peak, but his Dao of Rot had also completely skipped one stage and reached a high mastery. It truly made him want to quickly learn **[Cyclic Strike]**. An attack utilizing two Daos where the worst one was high mastery could only be extremely powerful.

He surprisingly enough also managed to upgrade the Seed of Sanctuary as well, but he only been had been shown a small glimpse of the vision, so it only reached the Middle stage. But he knew that wasn't the extent of the Dao impartment.

He still remembered the boundless insights in the stars, and he knew that connecting with those tendrils would make his progression on those particular Daos a lot smoother compared to others. Such a boon was extremely great for someone like him who lacked any affinities.

Truth be told Zac was still pretty unsure what that actually meant since he felt he could advance his Dao just fine up until now. He was even on the second spot on the ladder, only being trumped by the Abbot. But perhaps the difference would make itself clearer as he progressed further.

Zac closed the Dao screen and looked over his other gains. He was a bit disappointed that the attributes he gained wouldn't provide him with too many benefits, but it was better than nothing. He already knew that would likely be the case when he chose the two tendrils representing life and death over those that could improve his Dao of Heaviness and Sharpness.

Surprisingly he had gained not one but two titles in the trial as well. The had finally passed the 2500 attribute barrier, providing him with another title. Better yet, it was a special title that gave attribute effect.

[Tyrannic Force: First to attain 2500 Attribute Points in world. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

[Achievement Hunter: Gain 25 Titles while in F-Grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

He already knew about this title, but the one he saw in the Title Booklet instead provided 5% to all attributes. It seemed that being the first to gain this one gave him a slightly better version. The other one was a complete surprise though. He had no idea there was a title for gaining titles.

Zac understood why it was a high-tiered title though. If he looked at most of his titles they were things that almost no one would gain. He guessed that most would end their stint in the F-grade with between 5 and 10 titles. Elites might even pass 15, but 25 was something that perhaps only a progenitor could get.

The effect of the high tiered titles was really starting to stack up, and by now it would completely cancel out even the best boosts that proper cultivators could get from their cultivation manuals.

Apart from that, there was nothing to note. His Nexus Coins remained the same, meaning that none of his kills inside the trial provided Nexus Coins. He wasn't surprised about the beasts he killed in the Dreamscape, but he was a bit confused about the Dao Construct.

But by now he was so used to not understanding how things worked so he simply shrugged it off. He put his free points into Strength before he turned toward his sister again.

“How did it go for Ogras, he should be out by now right?” Zac asked.

“It only took him three hours, but he left immediately afterward. He said he needed to enter seclusion to incorporate his gains,” Kenzie said before she lowered her voice. “I don't

know, he didn't look too happy about the results. But he seemed fine."

Zac frowned when he heard that Ogras' experience wasn't without its own tribulations. He threw another gaze at the Tool Spirit. Were all the inheritances made by troubling individuals whose personalities had turned them into pariahs? As long as Ogras was fine he wouldn't pry, but it made Zac a bit leery about letting others risk their lives in the remaining trials.

"Did he say whether he was coming to Westfort?" Zac asked, making Kenzie shake her head.

Zac slowly nodded as he started to walk out of the trial with his sister in tow. He actually wanted to enter seclusion himself to incorporate the massive gains he received from Yrial's impartment, but he simply didn't have time. Besides, he wasn't someone who had relied on meditation thus far, and he felt it would be more effective to get accustomed to his improved Dao seeds in the heat of battle.

"What about the others, have they already left for the Marshall Clan?" Zac asked.

"No, they're still here. Emily was about ready to break into the trial ground and drag you out," Kenzie responded with a smile. "We sent a representative to relay that you're running late though."

"Okay. Apart from Nonet and Emily, has anyone else said they want to come with?"

"Well, Calrin wants to go," Emily noted. "The negotiations for setting up a branch has hit a snag. However, Julia came by earlier. It seems she doesn't want to go after all."

Zac wasn't overly surprised by that, seeing how strong Emma's hatred for the New World Government was. It was pretty hard to defend one's employer when there were so many shady dealings going on. Zac also had a somewhat bad feeling about Thomas Fisher. How had he gotten so strong so quickly? What was the government up to?

"That's fine, I guess. Our dealings with the New World Government can go through the Marshall Clan for now," Zac

said.

“There’s also Lyla and Olivia,” Kenzie added after some hesitation. “They both kind of want to go back to Greenworth to look for their families, if only just to bring them here.”

“I’m honestly not sure how I would accomplish that,” Zac hesitantly said. “Their teleportation network is closed.”

“Well just ask around while you’re over there,” Kenzie said before an impish smile started to spread on her face. “So, are you excited about seeing Thea?”

Zac almost missed his step before he quickly found his bearing.

“I guess, she’s still holding on to a lot of treasure I lent her,” Zac nodded, evading the real meaning of the question.

He, of course, knew what his sister was getting at, but he honestly didn’t know how he felt about it. He did enjoy the two weeks that he traveled the Eastern Trigram Sect with Thea, but he wouldn’t go so far as to say there was love. He had somewhat shut down on that department since Hannah stabbed him. Kenzie only snorted with a roll of her eyes, but she didn’t stress the issue.

“You sure you don’t want to come with?” Zac asked.

“No, I feel I am pretty close to gaining another Dao Seed, I want to focus on that instead,” Kenzie said. “I want to be able to protect myself, but I’m still too weak.”

“Finally, I was going crazy!” a shout echoed through the forest as Emily rushed toward the two the moment they entered Zac’s compound. “And that big one is no fun.”

To Zac’s surprise, he saw that Emily was still slightly covered in dirt and war-paint. Had she put it on purpose? Zac mutely gazed on her face for a bit until it dawned on him. Was she trying to hide her childish features by obscuring them?

“Where is Nonet?” Zac asked.

“It’s meditating in that courtyard over there,” Emily said and pointed at one of the buildings that were usually empty. “Are we going now?”

“In a bit. Someone get Adran as well, I’ll be needing his assistance for this trip,” Zac said as he walked toward the courtyard.

He felt it wasn’t enough to only bring a teenager, a gnome and an Anointed with him. The Marshall Clan was filled with wily old businessmen and politicians, and Zac was in no mood to handle those types on his own. Normally he would have brought Mr. Trang as a buffer, but he had taken up as the Admiral of his burgeoning Naval Force.

He was likely on his way back to the other continent to set up a base camp at this moment. Ogras was another candidate, but he was a bit unreliable, and with his history with the Marshalls, he might rather become a liability. That left Adran and Abby, and it felt like Adran was the best choice.

Zac entered the courtyard and immediately saw Nonet sit in the center of it. He was once again reminded just how massive these guys were, and it even looked like Nonet had grown at least half a meter since they met last time. Did they keep growing as their levels increased?

“Long time no see,” Zac said with a smile as he sat down. “How is Hive Kundeve?”

“Hive is thriving now that our tunnels are restored. My warriors were getting restless though, but the eradication project in your mines have kept them busy. The hatred of corruption is slowly disappearing. It gives us peace, but it also leaves us without purpose,” Nonet said.

“Your power keeps growing, Lord Atwood. I can no longer sense the limits of your Strength,” Nonet added after looking him up and down. “It will be needed against the Dominators, especially with their recent boost in power.”

Zac sighed with a nod.

“I encountered Inevitability in the hunt,” Zac said with a helpless grimace. “They are extremely strong. I am not confident in defeating them unless I evolve first.”

“Do not forget, you do not stand alone,” Nonet said. “That is why I am coming with you. I need to discuss our response

with my people.”

“I heard something... from Inevitability. About the Anointed,” Zac hesitantly said.

“That we will not be able to advance to what the system calls E-Grade?” Nonet said. “We know. I already feel I am approaching the limits of my body. That is why I wish to join you in this venture. The age of the Anointed is coming to an end, but we have one final task to complete. I cannot rest easy knowing the Dominators still are out there. The Cosmic Energy might not be corruption after all, but that group still brings about the corruption of the soul.”

Zac nodded and retold what he had learned about the Dominators in the hunt, about the Great Redeemer and the connections that he found.

“The Great Redeemer...” Nonet muttered and clenched its fist. “There were always rumors of a great leader pushing the Dominators forward. To think it was like this. Selling out their own planet and people for strength. They are true abominations!”

Zac nodded in agreement. It took a special kind of callousness to condemn your whole planet for a shot at getting stronger. Especially when that wasn't the only method of gaining strength. They could just have progressed on their own like the rest, but instead chose such a sinister path.

“Well, I have already met one more Anointed who spoke of a council. They are preparing for battle,” Zac said. “I hope you can get in touch with them through the hive near Westfort.”

The two discussed things some more, where Nonet confirmed some details about human culture. This was the first time it properly left its Hive it seemed, and it wanted to avoid causing trouble. It seemed Ibtep would also join, though Zac was unsure whether that special Zhix would really lessen any potential confusion.

In the end, they decided that Zac would join Nonet at the hive two days after he arrived unless they came back first. The two got up and met up with the impatient teenager outside.

It was time to go to Westfort.

Chapter 292: Westfort

“It’s almost night already,” Emily huffed. “We’re so late!”

“Ibtep tells me this one is neither your progeny nor your mate,” Nonet said as it looked down at Emily with curiosity.

“What purpose does she serve? Is she a warrior slave from a vanquished hive? Zhix slaves are seldom accorded such freedom of speech.”

Emily stopped in her tracks and gaped up at Nonet, who calmly returned her gaze. Zac coughed as he shot a gaze at the teenager. It honestly was a good question. Just what was Emily to him? In a sense, he had picked up her in the spur of the moment, and he knew he had somewhat used her as a temporary replacement for Kenzie, like an emotional binky. But now he wasn’t sure.

“I guess she’s a mascot?” Zac hesitantly said after a bit, drawing an enraged glare from Emily.

“I’m battle support! I can make anyone stronger! I just had a late start,” she said grumpily before she turned toward the teleporter and walked away in a huff.

“The young can be capricious,” Nonet said with a nod. “We usually send them into the deep caverns to learn survival and moderation. Is human childrearing the same?”

Zac was about to say no, but he wasn’t sure if that was true any longer with Alyn in charge. They did send the students to battle beasts as soon as they were strong enough. He also remembered Abby saying that making a beginner zone was already underway.

“Well, we do something similar with our Academy here I guess. But now we have adapted to teach more about Cosmic Energy,” Zac said.

“Would it be possible to send a few of our young to this Academy of yours?” Nonet asked.

“Sure,” Zac said with a shrug, as he was sure Alyn wouldn’t mind a couple of war crazy students to increase the competitiveness. “It’s getting late, let’s go.”

“Wait, let me come with,” a light voice suddenly resounded, making Zac look over with a slight frown.

Alea was walking over, wearing one of her battledresses that contained defensive charges. Zac was unsure what to say when he saw her approach with Calrin in tow, as the two hadn’t spoken since Zac told her off.

She had avoided him since the incident, even skipping out on meetings in favor of cultivating at the odd poison-tree in the mountains, and Zac didn’t really know where he stood with her. However, the thought of bringing a slightly unstable poison mistress to the Marshall Clan made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“Why do you want to go?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“To provide back-up. Adran and Calrin will likely be busy in meetings all day, but the Marshall Clan has so many people. You need someone who will be able to keep the bureaucrats at bay while you focus on the library and other more pressing matters,” Alea said. “Ogras said I should go. Janos won’t be any help and Ilvere is a meathead.”

“You should understand why I’m reluctant to bring you,” Zac said.

Alea slightly frowned for a few seconds before she suddenly looked up at Zac with a determined look. The next moment she started to change, growing into a horrifying swamp monster that was as tall as Nonet. Zac took a step back in surprise, and a knife appeared in Nonet’s hand as though from nowhere. However, the large monster didn’t attack anyone, and it soon started to shrink again, turning into a conspicuously naked Alea. Zac’s eye widened a bit before he forced himself to look away.

“Before I arrived at this planet I tried to force a change in my constitution to one that would better suit my skills,” Alea said, as she unhurriedly dressed herself again. “My heritage is incomplete, and some critical details were missing. It went awry and that form was the result of it. It has also caused some internal imbalances that made me... impulsive.”

Zac looked over at Alea who looked straight back at him.

“But the past month I’ve made tremendous progress by cultivating beneath the tree of Toxic Ascension. My body is still slightly impacted, but I have at least driven out the toxins out of my mind,” she said.

“... Fine, let’s go.”

Zac honestly wasn’t sure about his decision as he walked with the others in tow toward his teleporter, but he felt this trip could be used as an experiment. Alea was extremely powerful, and would likely be more helpful than anyone else in the upcoming battles, apart from Ogras.

If she could prove herself that she could be trusted and work in a group again it would be for the best. Then he could slowly return various responsibilities to her. And truth be told, he simply missed having her around. And he didn’t believe she would cause too many problems, especially not after what happened the last time.

“But I’ll make it clear. No poisons anything like that unless we are attacked, got it? These people are our most important allies for the upcoming battles,” Zac said.

“I know what to do,” Alea simply nodded.

Soon they arrived at the teleportation platform, and the group found Ibtap, and Adran waiting along with Emily. Zac internally sighed again as he felt this would be like a repeat of his motley crew when he went to the auction.

Only this time the ratio of Aliens to Humans was even worse.

“Eh, Alea is coming as well?” Emily gaped from her spot next to the teleporter before she gave Zac an odd glance. “You are pretty gutsy.”

“What?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Nothing,” Emily said with a giggle. “Let’s go!”

The next moment the teleporter lit up, and the group walked inside one by one. The group soon found themselves in a modern lobby. Zac didn’t know why, but he had for some reason expected to arrive at some old Gaelic fortress or something of the kind.

Thea hadn’t talked a lot about her heritage, but from what he had pieced together the Marshall Clan was practically ancient, with over one thousand years of history. But the surroundings reminded Zac of the lobby in New Washington, looking a lot like a terminal.

However, there were signs of the new reality they lived in as well, as large fractals covered both the walls and the roof. They were pretty crude compared to what he had seen in other places, but it clearly showed that the Marshalls might put even more effort into inscriptions than Port Atwood did. He remembered the homemade tools Thea used for example, such as the hazmat suit and the tent.

Unsurprisingly the group consisting of beings of all shapes and sizes garnered quite a bit of attention, but people were more prepared this time. Roland Marshal had clearly been waiting as he was snoozing in a comfortable sofa. But when their group arrived he quickly perked up and hurried over.

“Lord Atwood, I am happy you were able to make it after all. I must say, only a few days have passed and your aura has become even more formidable. As expected of Earth’s greatest powerhouse,” he shot off in quick succession as he got a proper look at the group. “I see that you’ve brought a larger retinue this time.”

“As you know my city is on an island,” Zac said with a small smile. “A few people wanted to come with to stretch their legs.”

“Of course,” Rolan said with a nod, as though bringing this odd group was completely normal.

Zac introduced them one by one, though Roland clearly knew of Ibtep and Calrin from before due to their appearance at the Auction. The impatient Sky Gnome immediately tried to glean why he hadn't been able to set up a branch in Westfort, but Roland expertly dodged the question.

"We will have time to go through all these matters, but if you all would follow me first. All visitors must receive their tags. It is a security measure to combat infiltration by invaders or other hostile forces," Rolan said as he ushered them toward a manned counter.

Zac and the others simply followed along, and each got a small metallic disk. Surprisingly enough there was a small engraving on it.

"This seems to be a tracking rune that is used in conjunction with an array," Calrin said as he glanced up at Roland. "In most societies, this level of monitoring would be considered rude."

"I do apologize. However, war calls for desperate measures. We are limited in our methods compared to the established forces of the Incursions, and have to use a somewhat heavy hand to protect our interests," Rolan said with an apologetic smile.

"It's fine," Zac said with a disinterested shrug, as they had no plans to do anything untoward at Westfort.

"Excellent. If you would follow me to the West Compound. It is the inner area of Westfort where the main clan resides and does its business. A small welcoming dinner is prepared, and I am sure Thea would be happy to see you again," Roland said.

Zac nodded but remembered his company and threw Alea a sneaky glance to make sure she wouldn't cause any trouble. She caught his glimpse and only rolled her eyes in response. The group was shown to a series of cars, and Zac noticed that even the car windows had engravings on them. Just how many inscribers had these people employed?

The town was larger than Zac had expected, and he suspected that well over a million people could live here provided that

the buildings they passed were occupied. But he noticed that most of the structures were recent additions. In fact, Zac realized Westfort might contain more recently built structures than Port Atwood.

There was not much traffic though, and they soon arrived at a manned wall. It didn't seem to protect the core of the town, but rather a side-section much like his own inner wall. Roland flashed a badge and their convoy passed through the heavily armed gates without issue. They found themselves in a large neighborhood with a mix of large mansions. If Westfort wasn't a small town he would have guessed that they were embassies by their varied designs.

“While the marshall clan maintained larger offices in London before the integration, much of our business was still handled right here in Westfort. These buildings were both residences and offices for family members holding various positions in our conglomerate,” Roland explained when he noticed Zac's interest.

“Just how many family members do the Marshall Clan have?” Zac asked.

“It's hard to say, really,” Roland said. “The core family has around two hundred members, but we also have thousands of branch family members. Some branches are a proper part of the family and worked within our businesses before the integration, but many also paved their own path.”

Zac nodded in understanding, but he wasn't nearly as impressed as he would have been before the integration. A family consisting of thousands of members was extremely uncommon in the old world, but in the Multiverse it could barely be considered a clan.

With the increased lifespans families could grow extremely large, and many dynasties had hundreds of millions of members according to Alyn. Even Clan Azh'Rezak had almost a million family members all told, and it was considered a small and newly established group. It would have gotten even more out of control if it wasn't for the fact that it apparently became harder to conceive a child the stronger one got.

“We’re still some ways away,” Roland added. “We’re heading to the old homestead. It is where the Marshall clan was founded, and parts of its structures can be traced back all the way to the 9th century.”

Zac whistled, suitably impressed, though Calrin and the Demons seemed a bit confused.

“Our history is extremely short and our technology has pushed us forward. Finding a structure over a hundred years old is pretty impressive, let alone one over a thousand years old,” Zac explained.

Soon the mansions gave way to large fields, and they drove on a solitary road toward a huge sprawling mansion in the distance. As they approached it he started to wonder how a palace like this could be called a homestead.

It was a huge Palladian mansion that should have been built a few hundred years ago. Just a glance would tell anyone that it was thousands of square meters large, and Zac wouldn’t have been surprised if someone had told him it was a summer castle for the British Royals back in the day.

However, there were also some new additions to the mansion. Three large side-structures in matching design seemed to have been added quite recently, and one of them was still not quite finished. There was also a massive building to the side that looked like a gargantuan spiraled seashell. It rose well over a hundred meters into the air, and Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the library that Thea received.

Another small wall had been erected some distance from the compound, and it encompassed all the structures along with a sizeable garden. The wall wasn’t even two meters tall, but Zac knew that it wasn’t just decorative as he could see a shimmer in the air above it. There was likely at least one array protecting the area, perhaps a full set of them.

“I think we might have a different definition of a homestead,” Zac said to Roland, who shrugged with a smile.

Chapter 293: Different Choices

“Our founder, the first Baron Marshall, called his small manor the Old Homestead. Through the centuries our family grew, and many expansions and remodels took place, but the name always stuck with us. The manor gained its current form in the late 18th century, though we have added quite a bit real estate since the integration. Our family was spread all over the globe before the world changed, but we have worked hard to bring as many as possible home,” Roland explained.

When Emily heard his explanation she immediately perked up.

“Have you mapped out the world by now? Do you know where all the cultivators from Allentown appeared?” she hurriedly asked before Zac could rein her in.

It wasn't that he didn't want Emily to find her two siblings, but rather that he didn't want to give the Marshall Clan too much information. His relations with Thea didn't necessarily extend to the rest of the family, and he didn't want Emily's brother and sister to end up as potential pawns in some political game.

“We looked around the area of the town, but that group seems to have been teleported to somewhere else on earth,” Zac added calmly to explain what she meant.

“I can't say that we have a full grasp of our new world so far, but we have successfully mapped out almost our supercontinent. However, according to our astronomers our planet is enormous, with a diameter of at least twenty times that of our old World,” Roland explained. “And according to our calculations, Pangea takes up only around 20% of the total surface.”

Zac was pretty shocked by the sheer size of their new planet. He knew that Pangea was simply massive. The Undead Incursion was as large as the former United States, but it was only a small section of the massive continent. To think that such a huge chunk of land was only twenty percent of the total.

But it also made Zac more certain that the other landmass was another continent rather than a large island. Zac had even thought it possible that they simply had reached Pangea from both ends, but that one of the coasts was uninhabited.

“We have reason to believe that our continent isn’t the only one, though we still haven’t heard any news about another. Perhaps it’s simply a massive ocean,” Roland said, almost confirming Zac’s thoughts. “But mapping the great beyond has proven difficult. Our drones get taken down by huge birds and our ship destroyed by frenzied sealife. In general, the Cosmic Energy causes great disturbance to transmitted signals.”

After asking a few questions to make sure he understood which city Emily was referring to he tapped it into some app. But he didn’t speak for a few seconds and Zac started to frown when he noticed his face. He quickly placed a hand on Emily’s arm for support.

“What is it?” Zac asked.

“Unfortunately... It seems they belong to one of the lost groups...” he hesitantly said before he looked up at Emily.

“Young lady, do not give up hope though. We still do not know the fate of the lost groups, and they may be alive and well.”

“Lost groups?” Zac said after seeing Emily being stunned silent. “What do you mean?”

“By now we have mapped out roughly 98 percent of all tutorial groups in the civilized world. That does not include regions with weak censuses though where we can’t make accurate assumptions. Of the thousands of groups we and the New World Government has mapped, 29% are missing,” Roland said as he showed a graph on the tablet.

“We believe a few percents are missing due to the Zhix. We know for a fact that many groups with large Zhix presences were completely annihilated. Some made it with just a handful of survivors who managed to hide from the Zhix rampage during the quests,” Roland explained.

“But for the most part we believe the missing groups be to related to the fourth race,” Roland said and threw an odd look at Alea. “So we believe that a quarter of the tutorial groups have been moved to wherever the inhabitants of the fourth world reside, though their fates are unknown.”

Zac sighed and nodded in confirmation. He understood that look very well. The first time he introduced the Demons he said they were the fourth race to avoid trouble. But with the hunt, most of the larger organizations should have realized that the fourth race was the molemen living in the underworld.

Zac hadn't met any humans from the underworld in the hunt, but between the molemen and other hunters there should have been hundreds of them appearing, and the information should have quickly spread.

Perhaps the Marshall clan and the government were already trying to get in contact with the underworld to liberate the people or claim the riches. Still, since they were almost at the mansion he didn't bring up the subject and instead turned to Emily.

“Don't worry, we will keep looking. Nothing is certain yet,” Zac said, and Emily somberly nodded her head.

Not long after they passed the manned gates as the two cars stopped right outside the doors. It was getting late, but floodlights kept the whole square in front of the manor completely lit, and multiple guards were making rounds.

Zac felt a bit out of place in this sort of luxurious environment, but being a top powerhouse instilled him with an air of confidence as they followed Roland inside. The others had much more varied expressions as they ranged from slightly bored to gaping and loudly exclaiming at the opulence inside.

“Man, this place is creepy,” Emily muttered. “This place is haunted for sure.”

Zac coughed in embarrassment, but he inwardly had to agree. He had already met ghosts since the integration so he knew they were real. And if some existed on Earth, this old manor was a prime contender for being ghost central. The large hallway was stacked with antique relics, with everything from art to ancient weaponry and armors.

“Young lady, you might in fact be on to something,” Roland said as he looked over with a smile. “Stories of hauntings in this manor have circulated for at least two hundred years. The middle ages were quite bloody, and some say resentment might have lingered. We have even brought in experts to make sure that we don’t have any supernatural beings hiding in the attic now that the world is full of magic.”

Emily paled a bit as she glanced around as she walked closer to Zac. It didn’t look like she had expected her random remark to have such credence.

“You’ve made it,” a wizened voice suddenly echoed out through the doorway at the end of the hall, and when they entered they found Henry Marshall standing in front of a table laden with documents. “We were starting to worry some complications had arisen. But when we noticed you had gained another level we figured that you had found some opportunity.”

“The company you keep is still quite diverse,” the Marshall patriarch noted as he looked up from the stack of papers on the table.

“I haven’t changed my mind on that front since we last spoke,” Zac said as he accepted a glass of champagne from a waiter that soundlessly arrived with refreshments.

“There are a lot of new faces,” Henry said as he looked over the party until it stopped at Nonet. “Strength to your hive. I am Henry Marshall, leader of the Marshall clan.”

“I am Nonet, Anointed of Hive Kundevi. Strength to your hive,” Nonet said with some surprise.

“I assume you joined Lord Atwood to reconvene with your brethren at the nearby hive?” Henry asked, drawing a simple nod from the Anointed. “I will have my men escort you in a car at your convenience. If you could relay the message that we simply wish for peaceful co-existence I would be in your debt. Our own tries at diplomacy have proven unfruitful.”

“I will relay the message to the council,” Nonet said without promising anything further.

Nonet was anxious to visit the hive, so Henry arranged for an escort for Nonet and Ibtap, and they immediately left the manor.

“Thea is not coming today?” Zac suddenly asked as he looked around.

There were only Henry and a handful of family members that seemed to act as advisors and aides in the large room. Thea was nowhere in sight, and neither was Billy for that matter.

“When she heard that you got delayed she decided to head into the wilderness to fight. The beasts are progressing quite rapidly and unless we regularly cull them we would risk a beast tide. But mostly it was her competitive spirit that wouldn’t let her sit still while you improved,” Henry explained with a smile. “Your large friend went with her.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he sat down at a table that could seat over twenty people. For a moment he thought they tried to hide Thea to avoid returning the items he lent her, but he felt that Thea wouldn’t go along with such a thing. A luxurious dinner was soon served, and the topics were kept light. The family members from the Marshall clans were great conversationalists, and it soon felt like a gathering of old friends.

Clearly, their goal was to dig out all kinds of information through the occasional and seemingly innocuous question, but everyone knew to keep quiet about sensitive matters. Besides, only Kenzie and Ogras knew of the truly sensitive intelligence on Port Atwood. Even Emily who lived on his compound had no idea about the true identity of the Creators.

After the dinner was over Zac noted that Henry gave the sign to the servants, and they all left the room in quick order. Left were only Henry, four aides, and Zac's retinue.

"I hope that we will be able to forge a strong alliance between our forces during your visit, and take the first step toward purging our planet from invaders," Henry began as his eyes swept toward Adran and Alea. "However, before that there is something that I would need clarified. I think you know what I am talking about."

"The demons?" Zac said with a smile.

As he expected the issue cropped up almost immediately.

"The Demons," Henry confirmed with a somber face.

"It is as you expect, they were once part of the Incursion close to Port Atwood," Zac said. "As you might have heard from Thea, the integration left me alone on an island along with a Demonkin Incursion.

"I am not sure how clear your people are about the details, but after the conditions for closing an Incursions are met, the invading force is given a grace period to escape through their Nexus Hub," Zac continued. "There was a group that chose to break ties with their old force, and instead join me in founding Port Atwood."

"We are aware of the mechanics," Henry nodded. "However you must understand the risk you are putting yourself and Earth in. In one hundred years they will be able to contact their former clan, leading them back here at full force."

The two demons at the table threw Henry cold glances, but he completely ignored them.

"So what would you do if you were in my situation?" Zac asked.

"We were in your situation a short time ago when we finally managed to close the Incursion that plagued the area. My granddaughter managed to assassinate a few of the leaders, allowing us to win the war. Most fled through the crystal when defeat was inevitable, but a few stayed on," Henry explained, a

ruthless glint shimmering in his eyes. “We killed them to the last man.”

Zac felt a shiver when he looked into Henry Marshall’s eyes. The old man was nowhere strong enough to be a threat to him, but Zac knew that he himself lacked such ruthlessness. Henry was ready to go to any length to protect his family and their interests, and Zac had a feeling that was what he was conveying by telling Zac about their handling of the incursion.

“Well, our situations were different. I needed people and information, and the demons provided both. Besides, they would be the first to get killed by their clan if they called them over,” Zac said. “As for how I handle the other Incursions, that will depend on their actions.”

Besides, Zac already knew that the few D-Grade powerhouses Clan Azh’Rezak possessed were right at the start of the grade. They had barely managed to pass the hurdle of forming their core, but they wouldn’t go any further on the path of cultivation.

Only the clan leader and the supreme elder were slightly better. There was no way that they would be able to mount an assault on Earth unless their planets for some reason became neighbors through some cosmic joke.

The atmosphere in the room started to become quite heavy, and the advisors threw Henry worried looks. They were no doubt unhappy about an escalating conflict, especially when Thea was out hunting. But suddenly Henry reclined in his chair with a shrug.

“The strong make the rules. Such is our reality now, and the rest will have to accept it and adapt. This brings us to another issue, have you been able to connect with the underworld?” the old man said.

Zac was slightly thrown off by the change in subject, but the two were connected in a sense. Since Henry had stepped back on the issue of the Demons, then so would he.

“No. Either their teleporters are not public or there is something else causing interference,” Zac said with a shake of

his head.

He still didn't feel it was time to disclose his theory of the second continent.

“You should know that most forces are currently desperately digging downward to connect with the underworld. The fact that there are massive riches has spread far and wide because of a few bigmouthed hunters,” Henry said with a sigh. “It’s a modern-day gold rush, and many are even ignoring the threats of the Incursions.”

Chapter 294: Cultivation

“No one has been able to connect to the underworld yet?” Zac asked.

“Not to our knowledge,” one of the aides said with a shake of his head. “There are speculations that there is some layer far down into the ground that hinder the teleportation arrays. Others even believe that the underworld is in fact on one of the moons.”

Zac’s first looked at the man with skepticism, but upon further consideration he felt it wasn’t too far-fetched. Their new planet had three moons now, and while none of them looked like a proper planet there was nothing saying that it wasn’t possible to survive underground up there. Perhaps his theory of the underworld being beneath the other continent was completely wrong.

But something told Zac this wasn’t the case. It would be extremely odd if an incursion was placed on one of the moons. How were they supposed to close it if that was the case? His theory felt much more promising. But for now he kept his thoughts to himself. And, of course, none of his people would explain the situation either.

Henry seemed intent in sounding out Zac’s thoughts about the coming battles, but Zac still hadn’t decided on his course of action and kept his intentions vague. Besides, he did not want to make large decisions while both Thea and Billy were absent.

It was already well past midnight, and Zac was starting to feel tired since he had come here straight from the Inheritance trial. So he instead said he needed to cultivate, and he excused himself from the table. Emily had turned quieter during the evening, likely thinking about her siblings, and she excused herself as well.

No one slept a lot any more with their improved constitution, so Zac left Adran and Calrin to accompany Henry and his aides to discuss the details of their alliance instead. Alea chose to stay behind as well as a liaison for the military arm of Port Atwood. A group of maids waited outside, and Zac and Emily were shown to their rooms.

Zac's living quarters was a huge suite comprised of five rooms. There were two separate bedrooms, a living room and what seemed to be cultivation chambers. When Zac entered he was surprised to note that the density of cosmic energy was slightly higher inside compared to the outside. He also sensed that the walls were extremely thick, providing great isolation.

There even was a high-quality air control function inside that kept the air just right. The increased density didn't make any difference for a mortal like Zac, but it undoubtedly felt nicer to reside in more energy-rich areas. Zac closed the door behind him and noted with some interest there was even a Do Not Disturb-button by the door.

He had to admit that the Marshal Clan had gone a very interesting route where they combined their old lifestyle with the integration, creating something unique for themselves. That was also made apparent from their effort to incorporate inscriptions in modern items.

Port Atwood was to a far greater degree adapted to the general state of the multiverse, and Zac realized there were almost no modern items in his private courtyard anymore.

It almost felt as though he was inside a sensory deprivation chamber from the moment he closed the door, and he had no trouble to calm his mind. Zac usually preferred to sit in his courtyard to meditate while listening to nature, but this experience was nice as well.

The first problem he wanted to take a minute to ponder upon was what he should do in regards to Yrial's advice regarding his Dao.

The earlier he decided which of the paths he would take, the better. That would allow him to try to gain suitable insights for his Daos as he pushed them toward Peak mastery. As he saw it

there were three alternatives to take, rather than the two Yrial mentioned. He could also go for only two Dao Groups in addition to three or four.

The final option would be where took his fusions one step further and created one group of life and defense, with the other group representing Death and Attack. That would reflect the two top tier Daos, Creation and Oblivion. But he quickly discarded his path as he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. Zac slowly dragged his fingers across the large axhead, and he felt a small resonance in his mind.

Zac had held an axe in his hand since the integration took place, and it had become a part of him. He couldn't imagine giving up the path of the axe in favor of only focusing on the two elements of life and death, so he quickly discarded the thought of only having two Dao Groups. Besides, he felt that doing so might result in his following classes to become even more lopsided.

After some hesitation he also decided to give up on having a fourth group, one solely dedicated to defense. He didn't have any connection to a shield like he did with an axe, and pushing for that Dao wasn't something he felt being too important.

He would shore up his defense with the help of massive attributes, skills and Hybrid Daos instead. That left the original suggestion that Yrial had put forth. The Dao of Corpse didn't sound too appealing to him, but Yrial said there would be other alternatives as well.

He spent a few hours consolidating his improved Dao Seeds. He had very little experience with the Seed of Rot, and he knew that he would have to battle it out a bit while using it to test its might. He also taught himself both **[Cyclic Strike]** and his Transformation skill.

Yrial's transformation skill formed a layer around the core, and Zac realized he would need to either infuse it with the Dao of Trees or Dao of Rot if he wanted to change his form. **[Cyclic Strike]** was a bit more unique though.

The skill was the first one he had encountered that was comprised of two fractals, one on each of his shoulders. He

was worried for a second he would need to use both his arms for the attack, but after channeling the two Daos into their respective fractals he realized that wasn't the case.

He did, however, realize that he was unable to completely activate the fractals. A very delicate balance was needed between the two Daos, and if Zac didn't control his energies exactly right the skill would fizzle out immediately. This was only exacerbated by the fact that the two Dao Seeds he used weren't of the same grade.

He frowned a bit, knowing he wouldn't be able to use his new skill in the short run. But he understood what Yrial meant that this skill would help him improve his control of his Dao. At the moment he only pumped his attacks full of his mental energy, but this skill required far more sophistication.

Since there would be no quick results from **[Cyclic Strike]**, Zac instead turned his attention toward the transformation skill. But before he tried to activate it he stopped himself as he looked around. He took a second look at the roof and all the corners for any hidden spying devices before sitting down again. But even then he put on a cowl to cover his face just to make sure.

Content that there was no one spying on him he infused the fractal with the Dao of Rot, and he felt a decent amount of Cosmic Energy getting dragged into the fractal as well. The next moment small lines of energies connected with the core, and Zac immediately sensed the change.

Miasma immediately started to flood his system, and he almost fell even though he was already sitting. At the same time his Cosmic energy was quickly getting absorbed by the core, and it was as though a cycle had formed where the death-attuned energy was driving all normal energy out of his body and into the Duplicity Core.

A wave of nausea hit Zac but he held on and kept infusing the skill with the Dao of Rot. Luckily Yrial's estimations had been correct, and the change only took around ten seconds. He opened his status screen to be sure, and he had truly changed to his Draugr form.

It was the first time he had the opportunity to properly observe the transformation, and it was pretty interesting. It wasn't only the energies that changed, but something else was dragged out of his body and pushed into his core. In its stead, his organs were filled with something else.

It was the change of this mysterious force that was the difference between vibrant red blood and the black sludge that now sat in his veins. He had no idea what it was since he couldn't sense it properly. At least he felt it was something completely different compared to life force and miasma. In the end, he could only chalk it up to be the essence of the respective races.

Luckily there was no trouble in learning the two skills in his undead form either. The transformation skill was already adapted for his dual races by Yrial, whereas the attack was mainly powered by the Daos.

Since he was already in his undead form he decided to test something that had been on his mind for days. He quickly took out the Cultivation Manual that Mhal had left behind. Zac already had learned how to utilize a manual from listening to Alyn and his sister and knew exactly what to do to see whether he was a cultivator in this form.

Luckily it didn't seem that the Undead manuals were any different, apart from running on miasma instead of Cosmic Energy. The first thing he did was to take out and crush a few Miasma crystals to fill the cultivation chamber with Death-Attuned energy. Next, he looked down on the manual and tried to start it up.

The first step to cultivation was slightly confusing to Zac, as it was to 'connect with the universe' as Kenzie had explained it.

By pushing his miasma in the specific pattern of the manual a rotation would be formed through his pathways. This rotation would, in turn, connect the energy outside the body with the energy inside, and as the rotation kept going some of the external energy would be dragged inside through his pores and join his internal energy.

Rotating the miasma didn't prove difficult, as he had ample experience of moving energy through his body to utilize his skills. But no matter how many revolutions he performed following the Cultivation Manual nothing happened. His internal energy was completely cut off from the miasma in the room.

Not even holding a Miasma Crystal helped in the least, even though he had seen Thea regain her energies a lot faster that way. Zac even expelled a bunch of miasma to test whether the manual could at least help him restore his energies faster.

But Zac's final hope was dashed when revolving his energy didn't help in the slightest to improve his missing miasma. Some Miasma continuously seeped into his body as it always did when he wasn't topped off, but cultivating made absolutely no difference on the rate of absorption.

Finally, he had to reluctantly give up on the rotation. If he was a cultivator he would almost immediately have started to absorb energy. There was no such thing as 'sensing the Cosmic Energy' for months until a connection could be made. It was an instant change, where the only difference over time was the amount of energy one could drag into one's body.

It looked like he wasn't meant to cultivate even in his Draugr form. He had honestly known this was a very real possibility after meeting Yrial, but it was still a disappointment. Zac shook his head with a wry smile, realizing he might be the only Draugr in the multiverse without any inherent connection to miasma.

Since he was done with everything he wanted to check out in his undead form he decided to change back to a human. He crushed a divine crystal in the room next, making the life-attuned energies cancel out the miasma to some degree. The rest would naturally be diluted and eradicated by the ambient energies in the air.

But when Zac tried to change back he was immediately stopped.

He soon learned that the transformation skill refused to activate for almost an hour until he could change again. It

appeared that freely swapping back and forth still was impossible. But with some timing and subterfuge it should at least be possible to swap once during a battle, though it couldn't be done if he was completely exhausted since it required a decent amount of mental energy.

For the rest of the night, he kept going over his experiences and his Daos, trying to decide on the best path for himself. He only took a short nap of two hours before he resumed his meditation. He lost track of time until suddenly a subdued chime could be heard in the room, gently bringing him out of his meditation.

It seemed the Marshalls had installed a doorbell of sorts to alert the person cultivating. Zac stood up with a grunt and opened the chamber to the outside world. To his surprise he found Thea standing right outside. A quick glance at the time showed it was almost noon, making his mouth slightly widen in surprise.

“You're an addict,” Thea said with a shake of her head as she pointedly looked at the unused bedrooms before a small smile spread across her face.

Chapter 295: Perusing the Library

“Aren’t you the same?” Zac smiled. “I heard you went out hunting during the night? Isn’t Billy with you?”

“With you gaining so many levels I can’t relax,” she said with some annoyance, though Zac knew she didn’t really mean it. “Besides, it seems the beasts are getting more aggressive.”

“Billy won’t be joining us today. He heard we were going to the library and decided to sleep in. Did you know he can cultivate while sleeping?” she then added as she looked inside the cultivation chamber with a slightly confused look.

Zac guessed she sensed the odd mixture of attuned energies inside since they hadn’t completely dissipated, and he hurriedly closed the door behind him. It was only after he got out he had time to digest what she said. Zac didn’t know how to respond to something like that, he had never heard of anything like it. Billy was truly one of a kind.

“Is that even possible?” Zac said.

“Apparently,” Thea said with a shrug. “Between you and me, I think Billy might have some special constitution or bloodline. Even I could see his huge form when he smashed the array back in the hunt.”

Zac agreed with Thea’s guess, remembering Billy’s golden blood and the ancient aura he emitted in his titanic form. Bloodlines and special constitutions were things that Zac still was a bit confused about though. Could one just gain them willy-nilly?

“Give me a second to change,” Zac said and hurried to the bathroom.

He felt a bit silly wearing the golden robes from Tyrbat back on Earth. It was one thing back on Port Atwood since he was usually alone cultivating or battling, but it was different here. He took a quick shower and put on his new Spirit Tool robes instead.

The clothes adjusted to fit him perfectly, and they felt extremely luxuriant. After checking himself in the mirror he had to say that he looked a lot better in the tasteful battle robes compared to the gaudy defensive suit the Medhin Royals seemed to prefer.

Zac even considered growing out the stubble on his head to a longer hairstyle like Yrial, but in the end decided against it before he got out. Thea gave him a once-over with her eyes, her brows rising slightly when she saw the intricate fractals drawn in red and blue.

“Looks nice. I still have the things I owe you, but space here is a bit cramped,” she said and led him out toward a garden out back.

The two kept making some small talk while they walked until they reached a secluded garden behind the huge mansion. The moment they arrived Thea immediately summoned a small mountain of treasures, but he was a bit curious to note that they seemed to have been sorted.

“Truth be told we went through the items, but I promise that not a single thing is missing. I oversaw everything,” Thea said before she looked over at a few crates. “There are a few things we would like to purchase from you that we found in this pile.”

“Port Atwood is always happy to oblige in some trade, provided the price is right,” Calrin’s voice suddenly could be heard across the garden.

Zac almost jumped straight into the air in shock, since the voice had come straight out of nowhere. He quickly looked around to find Calrin standing just a few meters away. He saw Zac’s shocked face and gave a small bow.

“I smelled treasure,” the Sky Gnome said as he walked over to the pile that Thea had indicated. “I wonder what Miss Marshall would use in exchange for these treasures? You should know that Port Atwood currently lacks nothing apart from exotic treasures.”

“What are you doing here?” Thea said as she looked down at Calrin as he started rummaging through the things they wanted to keep.

“It appears our business interests have met a snag here in Westfort, so I had some free time to help out my good friend,” Calrin pointedly said. “Now these are some valuable items, no wonder your force would want to buy them.”

Some annoyance started to appear on Thea’s face, and she turned toward Zac. However, business was business so Zac only shrugged with a small smile as he let the two battle the out. He trusted Calrin’s discerning eye. The gnome would neither let a real treasure slip through his fingers nor take a loss on the items he was ready to sell off.

In the end, Calrin staunchly refused the sale of two large crates of herbs, but he was ready to haggle for the rest. Zac didn’t recognize those plants at all, but they weren’t bad since they emitted pretty dense energies. As for the rest, it was sold for 124 million Nexus Coins that would be paid in three installments. At this point, Zac made sure that the money would go to him rather than the insatiable little gnome since this deal did not go through the Thayer Consortia.

The price itself seemed somewhat low, but it came with some strings attached. It appeared that the Business Venture that Starlight backed was also aiming to set up a branch in Westfort, and the Marshall Clan was happy to have the two businesses duke it out and provide better benefits.

Calrin managed to get a three-month head-start through this deal, barring the Flowing Moon Corporation from doing business at all during that period. Three months wasn’t too much, but it was also a critical period on Earth. Large wars would take place, and Thayer Consortia would be able to

unload its enormous stockpiles of equipment to the Marshalls and their allies.

Calrin's original intention was for commercial monopoly though, just like he enjoyed in Port Atwood, but that was staunchly refused by Thea. Zac found that she was almost a completely different person when it came to business, and she gave the little sky gnome quite the workout.

Zac was also interested to see that Thea had no problems deciding these things on the spot, meaning that she might enjoy a similar status as himself in the clan. Zac let others handle most issues, but he always had the final say. Zac had assumed that Henry was calling all the shots since the family seemed to run like in the old world, but perhaps that wasn't completely the case.

After they were done with the negotiations Calrin dragged him to the side.

"That's a good one. Finding a wife with a talent for management will allow a man to adventure with peace of mind," Calrin said with a satisfied nod.

"Great," Zac sighed with a roll of his eyes. "What were those herbs you kept?"

"They are called [**Cosmic Bloodroot**] and are used to improve one's constitution. Together with the [**Aetherbloom**] we attained from New Washington and a few other ingredients we will be able to make extremely potent Medicine Baths to move constitutions toward D-Grade," the Gnome Excitedly said.

Zac whistled in surprise. That was something that Port Atwood currently lacked. It wouldn't be long before both himself and a handful of the Demons reached E-Grade, and having this would motivate them to contribute even harder.

After saying goodbye to Calrin he rejoined Thea as they walked toward the enormous seashell. Now that it wasn't pitch-black outside he could see that it was a deep blue and shimmered like it was inlaid with crystals all along the surface.

"It was initially built by an aquatic species, but the System remodeled it to work above-ground it seems," Thea explained

as they moved forward. “The librarian is a bit angry about it though, it does not like non-marine beings. We found that unless you are quite specific in your requests it might try to trip you up.”

Zac coughed as he threw Thea an odd glance. He was starting to form a guess about the System. It was the largest employer in the universe and had multiple sales channels. Was it awarding slightly broken or troublesome things for quests because it had trouble pawning them off to more established forces? The only exception seemed to be the Creator shipyard, though he knew that both Rahm and Karunthel seemed a bit odd even for being Creators.

As they got closer to the entrance of the library Zac spotted a familiar figure sitting on a bench nearby enjoying the sun. He felt a headache incoming but still chose to walk over with Thea curiously following in tow.

“What are you doing here?” Zac asked with some helplessness.

“The library sounded quite interesting. In contrast to Ogras and the others I come from humble beginnings, and never had a formal education. I wanted to see if I could join you inside,” Alea said with a smile as she looked over at Thea.

“This is Alea, one of the leaders of the demons,” Zac introduced her to Thea. “Alea, this is Thea Marshall.”

“Hi, if you’re a friend of Zac’s you’re welcome to join,” Thea said with a nod.

Zac internally breathed in relief when he saw that the poison mistress wasn’t here to cause any trouble and walked toward the library. The moment he stepped inside all sounds from the outside disappeared, and he was filled with a sense of tranquility as he looked around the magnificent building.

There were no ceilings in the shell and he could see up to the top of the spiral. Lining the walls were innumerable bookcases and floating crystals, and they kept going along the spirals all the way to the top. The bottom floor was also studded with reading nooks and comfortable sofas, the latter seemingly an

addition of the Marshall's. Zac also noted that there was at least one shimmering partition some ways up, which slightly distorted the vision.

"It seems I need to pass a certain trial to unlock the top tier information crystals," Thea explained as she looked up at the layer. "Until then we can only browse what's beneath."

"So how do you find what you're looking for?" Zac asked as he looked around. There were hundreds of bookshelves on just the ground floor, but not a single sign anywhere.

"Ask Big Blue," Thea said.

"Huh?" Zac said, but the next moment an enormous monster appeared in front of him.

It was like something wrought out of a Lovecraftian nightmare, a monstrous head with hundreds of long tentacles. Dozens of pitch-black eyes stared down at them, the largest of which as large as a beach ball. Zac immediately took out his axe in alarm, and Alea looked ready to drown the whole area in poison as she turned her eyes toward Thea.

"Wait!" Thea said. "That's the librarian!"

Zac hesitantly looked up at the enormous monster reaching almost ten meters into the air, and he couldn't believe this thing was a keeper of knowledge.

"New bipedals soil my sanctuary. You even bring the barbaric demonkin this time? Base creatures that only know lust and violence," a rumbling voice echoed out through the library as the large head of the Librarian turned away in annoyance.

"It has worked well for us so far," Alea said with a smile, but there was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, just ignore Big Blue. He has some personality problems, but he is very knowledgeable. Just ask him what you want to learn more about and he will get it for you," Thea explained with a helpless smile.

Zac nodded and simply asked about the Undead Empire to start with. Zac had honestly already figured out most things that were bothering him inside the trail already, meaning this

place wasn't as valuable to him anymore. But he still had a day to spend while Adran and Calrin hammered out the details of the cooperation agreements with the Marshall Clan and Nonet visited the other hive.

So he chose to shore up his knowledge of various fields during the day. He got a better understanding of how the multiverse worked for example, and he couldn't help but be shocked by the immensity of it all.

One theoretically could understand that the multiverse was boundless, but such a thing was too abstract. But when one started to get down to detail it started to get insane. For example, a single undead family could control hundreds of thousands of planets, and yet they would only be the drop in the ocean of the Undead Empire. Even an A-Grade powerhouse might die of old age before having visited every planet.

But even though the universe held boundless planets and things to see it seemed that interplanetary travel was not something that was more than a fraction of people would experience in their lifetimes. No matter if one lived at an F or D-Grade world most would never leave their planet, much less their sector. It was both an issue of danger and resources.

To travel between planets in a local cluster you needed at least a D-Grade cosmic ship unless you possessed teleportation access. Those ships could utilize the Dao of Space to move faster than light, making it possible to traverse those massive distances. But you needed higher-grade ships to travel outside of the local cluster. A C-Grade ship was needed to travel within a galaxy, and a B-Grade ship was needed to travel between galaxies and explore whole star sectors.

In the end, there were too many forces and worlds to keep proper track of everything, and the system generally clumped sectors together. For example, it turned out that all the forces invading Earth was from the same star sector, though not necessarily the same galaxy.

The author of the book theorized that the System wanted to find a balance between safety for newly integrated planets, but

at the same time waste a minimal amount of energy for the trials. So it didn't want forces in too close a proximity to invade, but it also didn't want to teleport people too far.

Of course, there were some exceptions to this. Some forces were just so massive that they existed in multiple universes, having pockets of control almost everywhere. The Undead Empire was one such example, and there were a few more massive empires and alliances like that as well.

That meant that the risk of running into those forces of the Incursions in the future was a lot higher than he expected. A few of them might even come from the same galaxy their planet had been moved to.

"It's shocking, isn't it?" Thea suddenly said from the side. "I read that same crystal a few days after I got this place. The scale of it all is crazy."

Zac nodded in agreement. But what Zac really was thinking about was what would happen to him after he offended every single incursion by killing their leaders and forcing the rest to flee in shame.

Would he even be able to leave the planet in the future?

Chapter 296: Division of Labor

Zac shook his head with a wry smile before put aside the information crystal. He would need to survive the Incursions, Dominators, and the Great Redeemer before he could worry about potential vendettas with various factions in the multiverse.

The next hours were spent with Zac going over any subject that he could think of. One small regret was that the Library was extremely old, and any information about forces would have to be taken with a grain of salt. For example, there was no mention of the Allbright Empire in the Library, though Zac didn't know if that was due to the Empire being too young or that the Library could only hold so much information.

But the most interesting crystal he found was a bibliography of a Mortal warrior who managed to reach peak C-Grade. It mostly centered on his exploits and experiences, but some snippets gave insights into the hurdles a Defier would encounter.

As Zac suspected the general method of Galvarion, the aquatic Mortal, to break through his nodes was to force them open. It took him almost a hundred years to reach the peak E-Grade, most of it spent on a sickbed from his wounds. It had taken him another 150 years to heal his foundations until he even dared to attempt to form his core.

As he read through the history of Galvarion Zac also started to understand Alyn's standpoint regarding Class Rarities better. Galvarion only possessed an Epic C-Grade Class, the lowest possible rarity if one wanted to progress further.

In fact, it had been the same from the start for the man. He started with a humble Warrior class at F-Grade and slowly

upgraded the rarity once every Evolution. He wasn't supremely strong for his level, though better than most through a series of fortuitous encounters and good Dao insights.

But he was still looked down at by the elite forces in the area, and a few enmities had resulted in him almost dying multiple times over. But Galvarion always remembered the grudges as he slunk away, only returning when he had become stronger.

Soon after evolving to C-Grade he completely eradicated 6 D-Grade forces that had crossed him over the past thousands of years. That went to show that the rarity of a class wasn't nearly as important as the Grade.

The bonus attributes he got now from an Epic class wouldn't make much difference when Zac was a D-Grade powerhouse, and Zac started to wonder if he was doing the right thing from pushing toward the peak rarity. But Yrial never mentioned anything about the subject, so he decided to stick with his gut.

He would ask the Lord of Cycles the next time they met just in case, but he knew that the extra attributes were only a small part of what the better classes brought to the table. Instead, he kept going through various information crystals to get a better basic understanding of the multiverse and cultivation in general.

It was only around 5 pm that Alea spoke up.

"We have a meeting in 30 minutes," she said. "A council for the upcoming war."

Zac couldn't stop a groan from escaping his lips, and Thea looked less than enthused as well. Both of them had turned to people of action from their experiences following the integration, and these meetings had turned into torture. But there was nothing to be done about it. Some big decisions needed to be made, and Zac needed to be present for them. So they simply took a small walk in the garden before entering the conference room.

Zac sat down with the other people from Port Atwood, nodding at Calrin. He knew this meeting would be a real

marathon, and he got flashbacks from the monthly meetings back at the office that never led anywhere. He had shortly spoken with Adran and Alea just before entering, and the negotiations so far hadn't been without its issues.

Zac would have thought that everything would be easy sailing since his side was negotiating from a side of absolute power, but the wily diplomats had a million ways to slightly gain small advantages for themselves if his side wasn't alert.

A glance across the table told him that Thea was as bored as himself, and she even looked ready to fall asleep. But a cough from Henry woke her right up as he convened the meeting.

"Welcome all. As you know the objective of today's meeting is to formalize the coming war effort. With the benefits garnered from the hunt, we will never be any more ready than now. We also know that the restrictions are rapidly weakening on the invading forces, and the amount of support they can bring through the Nexus Hubs will increase. Time is of the essence," Henry began, drawing nods from around the table.

"There is another reason for urgency," his closest aide continued as he turned on a large monitor. "The Undead Empire is on the move."

The screen showed aerial shots of massive hordes of undead walking through some fields. The numbers were on a completely different level compared to what Zac had encountered during his visit to the Dead Zone. The countless bodies turned the army into a sea, and it was impossible to make a correct estimation, but there were millions and millions as they stretched out toward the horizon.

Certainly, almost all of them were low-leveled Zombies, but they were still a huge threat. Even Zac would run out of steam long before he managed to grind down such a terrifying number of enemies. And others weren't like Zac with his 800 Endurance. The Zombies were extremely aggressive and one bit was all it took against most fighters. They didn't care if twenty of the Zombies were hacked to bits as long as one of them could wound a living person.

“What of the Monastery of Everlasting Peace?” Zac asked as he opened his Town Menu.

He breathed out in relief as he saw the teleporter to the Monastery still being active, hopefully meaning they were fine.

“For now they are only cordoned off, but we believe a siege will start in earnest sooner or later,” the man said as he pushed the button on a remote to show a few more screenshots of the armies. “The main hordes extend outward in three directions as it stands, and we believe that all of them have great powerhouses in the lead.”

“One of the hordes is moving toward the reorganized strongholds of China, Korea, and India. This force could be seen as an Ally of ours, though we haven’t entered official negotiations,” Henry elaborated. “They mostly started approaching us recently due to the movements of the undead. But another reason is that the New World Government has proven to be an extremely flaky ally for them. They have been promised assistance with the Incursion for months, but the Government has only made a symbolic show of effort.”

“What about the other hordes?” Zac asked.

“One of them is heading toward the European Heartlands,” the aide explained and opened up a map of the central region of Pangea “This horde would cause widespread damage to both the New World Government, a large number of Ishiate settlements, and many of our allies. Even Westfort would be implicated if they aren’t stopped within a month or two.”

“The final group is moving toward one of the Incursions,” Henry finished. “That horde we’ll leave alone. Let the aliens weaken each other. But the other two hordes must be dealt with.”

“So what is the plan?” Thea asked from the side, looking at the map with a frown.

“The two hordes must be whittled down before we can assault the core of the Incursion,” Henry said. “Otherwise we would run the risk of getting trapped inside. There are still tens of

millions of Zombies guarding the core, so we believe there will be a protracted siege to break it down.”

“This is where the visible part of our operation will take place,” another aide explained. “Armies run by the Marshall Clan, Port Atwood, and our other allies will join forces to battle the enormous monster hordes that threaten native settlements. It will protect our interests, garner respect with the civilian populations, and provide our fighters with a source of Cosmic Energy. We only need a number of powerhouses to offset the danger that the more powerful undead pose.”

Zac shook his head at the cynical explanation of why they would mobilize the forces.

“Do you not agree with the proposal, Lord Atwood?” the aide asked.

“We are fighting for the survival of our planet, do we really need other reasons to mobilize?” Zac sighed.

“The opinion of the population is very important even in our current world,” Henry said, though the demons weren’t convinced either.

Zac was also slightly unconvinced, but he motioned Henry to go on with the plan.

“We will use both old-world weaponry and Cosmic Energy to destroy these hordes. And if we can’t completely destroy them, we will hopefully weaken them enough to stall their approach. The undead have officially been declared to be an enemy of earth, no matter their previous identities,” Henry continued. “But in the end, this war is only a diversion.”

Alea and Adran threw a glance at Zac who looked a bit confused at this point.

“An all-out war is a diversion?” Zac probed.

“We have to face reality. No matter how many of our ordinary warriors we throw into the midst of war these days, it doesn’t matter,” Henry said. “The fate of a nation rests on the shoulders of those at the apex.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. Unless one could take out the leaders of a force it could always be rebuilt. If someone attacked Port Atwood he could simply retreat, and return with a vengeance whenever he was prepared. It was the same with the incursions.

“They want you to close the other incursions while they fight the zombies,” Alea explained. “And they want it to be a secret operation, so no one will learn of your deeds.”

Zac looked at Henry, who made no efforts to refute Alea’s claim.

“That is correct. Our plan hinges on the monstrous power you have. You alone are more important than all our soldiers. There is no way for us to close any incursions without massive casualties. We would run out of manpower after just two or three of them. But you and a small support group would be able to go in, kill all the leaders, and then force the rest in retreat,” Henry said.

“We would provide the logistics, and you would ideally go from incursion to incursion, destroying as many as possible before any news could spread between the Invaders. We have already set up outposts close to every single incursion by now,” another Marshall Family member added.

“And guess who they want to lead the armies and win the adoration of the world?” Alea added with an acerbic tone as she turned her gaze at Thea, who frowned before looking over at her grandfather.

“Thea is the best candidate for the job,” Henry said with equanimity. “One powerhouse is needed to make sure one of the Undead Empire Generals doesn’t start a massacre. Your prowess is already needed with the incursion. Billy Trask Jr. is not suited for a leadership role due to his unique mental state. Enigma and Joker are suspected to be in the Underworld. Daoist Chosui and Guru Anaad Phakiwar are holding down the fort for the Sino-Indian Alliance. Silverfox is believed to be part of the New World Government. That leaves Thea.”

Zac had to admit that what Henry Said made some sense, but that still only covered one of the two armies.

“The other two and I can lead the other army,” Alea suddenly said. “The three of us are far deadlier together than Ms. Marshall is alone.”

Zac immediately understood that Alea was referring to Janos and Ilvere, and he felt it wasn't a bad idea. Ilvere was a skilled commander, while Alea was just extremely effective against large groups of enemies.

“Does your and Janos' skillsets work against the Undead?” Zac asked to make sure.

“Janos can't do much against the brainless undead, but the leaders are the same as humans. I won't face any obstacles with either,” Alea said.

The others curiously looked at the two, hoping for an explanation.

“That's fine with me,” Zac said. “Three of my generals will lead one army while Thea leads the other. That way we can properly cover both the hordes.”

“Will you not need them for the Incursions?” Henry asked. “We can also provide a few elite squads to provide backup.”

“That won't be needed,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I have Ogras and my own elite soldiers for that.”

Truthfully he wouldn't have minded some backup, but Zac was planning on using his undead form when possible to grind a few levels. He didn't want a bunch of people from other forces snooping at him and reporting back.

“You should bring Billy as well,” Henry said after a brief pause. “Our investigation showed that almost all of the Incursions have set up strong defensive arrays. Billy is uniquely gifted at dealing with that.”

Zac nodded in agreement. No one was as clear as himself just how powerful that strike was. Many of the details got hammered out over the following two hours, and Zac got an information package containing the gathered intelligence of the remaining Incursions. Some of them were completely unknown to Zac from before and placed in extremely remote regions of Pangea. The Marshall clan was truly thorough.

He was also happy he had some other negotiators by his side. Adran made sure that the area every single incursion that Port Atwood conquered would become part of their land, apart from the Undead Incursion. That place was too large to handle in any case, and it would perhaps take centuries for the Dead Zone to heal.

“What about the New World Government?” Zac suddenly asked. “Won’t they assist us?”

“They are currently mobilizing their armies, but I would not count on them for the incursions,” Henry said with disdain. “Their two top powerhouses aren’t strong enough to take down even the weakest the incursions now that the restrictions have become so lax. Besides, I am not sure if they even want to.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“We have reason to believe that the New World Government, or at least a core group of its leaders, have allied with the so-called Dominators of the Zhix.”

Chapter 297: Changing Course

“WHAT?” Zac exclaimed with anger. “Why the hell would they do that?”

“Control and self-preservation, I would guess,” Henry said. “After learning about The Great Redeemer from Thea we believe that the Dominators have promised them sanctuary in exchange for subservience. That they will be spared when that monster arrives. Either that or they simply needed strong allies against you and my granddaughter. They might not even believe The Great Redeemer to be real.”

“They would have to be crazy to jump into bed with those things. Even crazier than regular Zhix,” Zac said with disbelief.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps they simply feel out of options. The Dominators are already so much stronger than them. What about a peak D-Grade powerhouse? They likely believe there is no way for us to prevail, and took a desperate gamble to get a shot at surviving,” Henry said. “People will go to extraordinary lengths to survive.”

“Is that why Thomas Fischer is improving so rapidly?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we believe that the Dominators have provided him with some sort of opportunities. He has always been strong, but he had shown not only a rapid gain in level but also a power that belies that level lately. He also cleansed a large part of the New World Government shortly before entering the hunt. It is still officially a democratic alliance of free states, but it is more or less an autocracy by now. The official explanation was to rid the cabinet of the shapeshifters, but a fair deal of humans were put to death as well,” Henry continued.

“Will they actively work against us?” Zac said.

“I discussed this with your assistants yesterday. We believe, same as you, that the Dominators wish for the Incursions to be closed. So we will likely not encounter resistance at this stage. However, we should be ready for a civil war the moment the foreign threat is dealt with,” Henry said. “You have already been painted as a traitor of humanity due to the company you keep. They might launch assaults at us under the guise of emancipation from the final threat, and they would be assisted by the Zhix hordes.”

“Not all of the hordes,” Zac said. “The council of the Anointed is preparing for a final Holy War against the Dominators. Where does the Ishiate stand?”

“They have been neutral so far,” one of the advisors answered. “Not even Starlight seems to have a great drawing power with their people, and they generally stay in small cliques. That is why Everglade Refuge was forced to open their teleporter to the public even though they are a decent-sized settlement.”

“So we are pretty much alone,” Zac sighed.

“Our forces are a bit smaller, but we have more elites,” Henry said. “But it would help our side if we were the ones who discovered and liberated the Underworld.”

“What about Salvation?” Zac said, changing the topic. “Do we know where the Cradle of God is located?”

“It has been located, but...” one of the aides started. “We believe that attacking that man at the moment would be at least as dangerous as attacking one of the Top Tier Incursions.”

“It doesn’t matter, we need to prioritize killing him,” Zac said without hesitation. “He’s turning people into weapons, and he is a real disciple of the Great Redeemer. He must be removed as quickly as possible.”

“It’s not that simple,” Henry said. “He has hundreds of thousands of those puppets, and he’s turned the whole zone around him lifeless. It’s impossible to get close without alerting him. We have tried multiple times to gain intelligence,

but our scouts get killed by swarming puppets who simply explode themselves.”

“Then I’ll simply head straight in,” Zac said. “There must be a limit to his power. There is no way he can control hundreds of thousands at the same time. We already saw he couldn’t freely control a thousand in the hunt. We were able to destroy hundreds of them without the things reacting.”

“I agree,” Thea added from the side. “Killing Salvation should be a priority. He might even be able to open up a portal for the Great Redeemer. He did possess a protective talisman containing a whisp of his soul. Who knows what else he has? Perhaps he simply hasn’t gathered enough sacrifices to open the portal yet. “

In the end it was decided they would attack Salvation soon after Zac had closed a few Incursions and reached level 75. Thea would join as well in case the Undead armies stood down and returned to the Incursion. If not he would have to do things himself.

The meeting went on and one point after another was decided, and after another four hours Zac had a proper picture of how he would proceed the following weeks. There were some uncertainties, depending on things such as whether they could find the underworld and the response of the New World Government.

There were a lot of risks involved, especially to Zac himself. But if everything went according to plan earth would be free of any foreign invaders in less than two months. There was still the issue of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer, but they would have to take things one step at the time.

But just as he was about to call an end to the meeting Zac realized something odd.

“Wait, what about the Church of the Everlasting Dao?” Zac exclaimed. “They’re not in the information packets.”

“That’s the oddest thing...” Henry muttered. “We simply can’t find them.”

“How is that possible?” Zac asked with suspicion. “They are possibly the strongest force apart from the undead. How is it possible that they haven’t made any waves?”

“We are not sure what is going on either,” an aide said as he started typing away at his laptop.

The next moment a screen of a torched village appeared.

“Up until two months ago, we could regularly find the aftermath of their crusade. They have burned hundreds of towns to the ground, leaving no survivors. The crusaders were part of a completely mobile force that never went back to their Incursion to resupply, and they had no pattern to their slaughter. In fact, we do not even know where their Incursion is located,” the aide said.

“But some time before the Hunt all their activities stopped. We still do not know the reason. Some even speculate that they have left,” Henry said, though he didn’t seem too hopeful about that prospect. “What we have learned about those lunatics makes that unlikely though. I fear they are planning something big.”

Zac slowly nodded, but Alea didn’t seem as convinced. She touched her pouch and the next moment a piece of Springroot was thrown to every one in the room.

“Eat up,” Alea said. “If not you’ll be fed something far less appetizing.”

Zac frowned at her manner, but he did agree with the sentiment. He felt it was a bit odd that the Marshalls never tested them once, and he hadn’t seen anyone else using Springroot either since arriving. Had the Marshall clan been infiltrated?

The tension in the room rose to an entirely new level as the two sides looked at each other in silence, and energies were swirling in the air. Finally, Thea shrugged and ate the piece of the root, and the moment she backed down so did the rest. Even Henry bit down on the root after a bit, though his facial expression wasn’t great.

“Happy now, miss?” he said as he turned a stern glare at Alea, who only smiled sweetly in return.

Zac felt it was lucky that no one had mentioned she was a poison user. If they knew that then the situation might have gone out of control. However, it was as though Ogras was whispering in his ear that the Marshalls weren't necessarily innocent just because they ate the springroot. They might still work with the Church.

In the end, Zac could only make a mental note of trying to gather intelligence on his own. His network wasn't anything special, but it was at least better than before the hunt. Since they were done with everything Zac exited the meeting room with great relief. Having spent most of the day in the stuffy meeting room he went out in the garden to enjoy a breath of fresh air.

“Sorry,” a slightly helpless voice said from the side a few minutes later.

Zac looked over and saw Thea walk over and sit down next to him on the bench.

“For what?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“It feels like we're taking advantage of you. You're the one who will be risking your life over and over, while we have a much easier job. One could even say we are using the zombie hordes as an opportunity to power level our people,” Thea said. “But I honestly can't find any better ways to do it. Only you can destroy the Incursions with relative ease at the moment. Your actions against that golem incursion made that extremely clear.”

“Well, that's how things are,” Zac said with a shrug.

“It just pisses me off,” Thea muttered. “No one has done more for Earth than you, yet people are talking behind your back all over the world. Even some people in Westfort believe the nonsense the government is spreading.”

“It's that bad?” Zac said with a grimace.

“Well... Nevermind,” Thea said after a bit. “You know, the reason that grandpa wants me to become famous on the

battlefield is not to compete with you. It's the opposite."

"How so?" Zac asked with a skeptical look.

"We decided to reorganize after the hunt. The Marshall Clan will mainly focus on business in the future, and we are looking into the means of getting hold of a Mercantile License," she said. "But we need some renown first. We're an old family but we have always been low-key, so very few know about us. This war is also meant to showcase our wares and set up a foundation."

"That's why you refused to give Calrin a monopoly," Zac realized, getting a nod in confirmation. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because of you, of course," Thea said with a shake of her head. "You are so far ahead of everyone else that it would be foolish to become a competitor in creating the World Capital. The New World Government still doesn't understand your power, but I do."

Zac was unsure how he felt about having forced them to reorganize like this. Would there be resentment in the future?

"Don't worry about it," Thea said. "We were businessmen from the beginning. It was only due to the Integration grandpa saw an opportunity to become something even greater. But I think this is for the best. It makes my life easier at least."

"I can tell Calrin to stop his expansion in Westfort if you want," Zac offered.

"There's no need. From what we understand we will not be able to get a license in the short run. It might even be good for us to see how a proper multiverse Consortium does business," Thea explained.

"I am sorry to disturb," Alea's voice suddenly came from behind, making the two turn around. "Nonet and Ibtep has returned."

Zac nodded and got to his feet, but only after throwing the poison mistress a slightly suspicious look. Was she popping up when he and Thea were alone on purpose? But he could glean

nothing from her face, so he only shrugged his shoulders before turning to Thea.

“I’ll have to see what they found out,” Zac said.

“Have fun,” Thea said with a wave, clearly intent on staying outside to enjoy the sunset.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the two Zhix were in mostly good condition. Nonet had a decent-sized wound in its chest, but Zac had a feeling that was due to their peculiar manner of greetings.

“Did everything go well?” Zac asked when he saw them.

“Hive Dahiti was luckily part of the traditional faction, allowing me to return alive,” Nonet said without any facial expression.

Zac’s eyes widened in alarm as he realized that he didn’t know whether the hive next to this place was part of the Dominator’s sphere of influence. He had simply assumed they were part of the normal Zhix since they had come to a ceasefire with the Marshall Clan.

“Your meeting with Herat in the hunt was known by Hive Dahiti. Herat is a highly regarded warrior, and his word has some weight with the council. They asked me to relay the message that they are ready to join you in battle, though we should do so soon,” Nonet continued.

“Is something happening?” Zac asked.

“We are losing hives to the Dominators at a steady pace,” Nonet said. “All pretenses have been dropped by now, and we are at war. Dozens of hives have been eradicated in the last weeks. Just as many have chosen to join them.”

Zac nodded with weariness.

“I plan on fighting it out with them as soon as the Incursions are dealt with,” Zac said, explaining the current situation to Nonet.

The large Zhix mulled over the information for a bit, until it spoke up again.

“I believe I will need to visit Hive Dahiti once more,” Nonet said. “I heard of the undead from Ibtep and my warriors. They are true abominations. It will also sharpen our blades for the Holy War. The Zhix legions will want to join in this battle.”

Chapter 298: Rot

Zac was delighted to hear Nonet's proclamation. The Zhix were born warriors and they would be a great help against the endless zombie hordes. The Zombies were a huge problem for forces like Zac's. His soldiers were a lot stronger than the Zombies, but there were simply too many of the undead.

"Did you mention the peace with the Marshall Clan?" Zac asked.

"The humans of this hive have proven to decently strong warriors, and hive Dahiti is amenable to an alliance," Nonet nodded.

"Then you can stay behind here. Bring someone from the Marshall clan with you to the hive next time. The Marshalls know a lot more about the movements of the undead armies, and they can provide good input," Zac said.

With that, it seemed everything was dealt with. The only thing left to do was to prepare for war. Zac also wanted to experiment with his latest gains until they needed to mobilize, so he went to find the others.

Calrin was ready to go as he needed to prepare the business expansion from his end. The Thayer family was already stretching itself a bit thin at the moment, opening over ten branches in just a week. But he was still energized by the thought of the increased revenue streams.

Adran would stay behind for a bit to coordinate the war effort, which only left Emily. After asking around a bit he finally found the teenager with Billy in a lounge area. The two were in the middle of a battle in a fighting game, with around ten children excitedly cheering them on.

"Billy has missed video games!" the giant said as he desperately mashed the buttons of his controller when he saw

Zac enter the room.

Zac could only shake his head when he noted the five controllers next to Billy that were all crushed into scrap.

“We have both video games and movies at Port Atwood,” Zac said. “We will start to battle the other ratlights in three days. Do you want to help?”

“Billy will come. Billy already misses the ratlight. Gave Billy a lot of money,” the large man excitedly said, accidentally destroying yet another controller.

A maid hurriedly swapped it out with a new one that she handed Billy without an expression.

“Thea’s family’s controllers are pretty weak,” Billy muttered. “Billy’s old controllers almost never broke.”

Since everything was dealt with they started to gather their things as they headed toward the courtyard where a car was waiting. By this time Thea come over, while Henry and Adran were still in the middle of a meeting. Zac felt a bit reluctant, as he had hoped he would be able to hang around a bit longer. But there was simply too much to do.

“Stay safe,” Thea simply said as Zac opened the door.

“You too. I’ll hopefully see you in a bit,” Zac answered with a smile as he entered the car.

The return was pretty uneventful, and Zac stepped out of the teleporter with the others just twenty minutes later. Calrin left to resume their tasks and Billy wanted to see the town, so he went with him. The giant had become exceptionally excited to hear there were hundreds of Sky Gnomes at the Thayer Consortia and wanted to check it out. Only Emily and Alea remained, and after some hesitation Emily said she was going to the Academy to train.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said as he took out the painting he bought with Credits from Yrial.

“Wha- What is this? Is this your hobby now? No wonder you didn’t make a move on Thea,” Emily blurted out, a small blush spreading across her face as she gazed at Yrial’s portrait.

Zac flicked her forehead to bring her back to reality, and he started to wonder whether he was making the right move giving this thing away.

“Snap out of it,” Zac said. “This is a Dao Painting of Yrial, the Lord of Cycles.”

“WHAT? This guy is the Lord of Cycles? He’s too good looking. He could even become a pop star in Korea,” she squealed. “That old statue is way uglier than the real thing.”

Zac froze for a bit as he realized that what Emily said was true. The statue in the repository only looked androgynous, and it lacked the perfection of Yrial’s face. Did the Celestial Artisan intentionally make Yrial uglier out of spite? He remembered that the statue of the real Brazla was extremely dashing. But he shook his head to refocus.

“Well, don’t mind that,” Zac said. “I got this from the Lord of Cycles since it can help one to improve Elemental Daos. I think it is especially effective for Daos related to Fire and Ice since they were the main paths the Lord of Cycles took. I don’t walk that path so it won’t really help me, but I’m sure many in the academy can benefit from it.”

“So what do you want me to do with this thing?” she said, her eyes repeatedly heading over to the pristine face in the painting.

“Bring it to Alyn. It might help the students progress faster in getting Dao seeds,” Zac said.

“You know, my class is a bit related to the elements. You saw my burning axe. Perhaps I can keep it-,” Emily ventured.

“Stop,” Zac sighed. “Just bring it to Alyn and let her decide what to do with it.”

“Fine,” Emily muttered and took it before heading over to the Academy.

That left Zac alone in the compound with Alea.

“Speak with Janos and Ilvere. Prepare the armies. Our enemies are weak Zombies, so bring as many as possible. Quantity seems more effective than quality against those things,” Zac

said. “And send someone to the Monastery to see if they are okay or need assistance.”

“It is about time we weed out the weaklings and those who only want benefits without providing anything in return,” Alea said with a nod as she walked toward the exit.

“I much prefer your rugged face above that girly boy,” Alea suddenly said with a final wink before she left, leaving an embarrassed Zac behind.

Zac shook his head before a wry smile as he walked back toward the teleporter. He had to admit it was nice to at least have one person preferring him over the annoyingly handsome Yrial.

Since the operation was starting in only two days Zac immediately headed over to Mystic Island. The small camp had long been replaced with a proper settlement. However, it was completely military in nature, and mostly housed barracks and training grounds for the stronger students and warriors of the academy.

A couple of human soldiers walk back toward the barracks, all of them sporting various degrees of wounds. But they were still full of vigor, meaning their gathering trip had likely been pretty successful. Zac’s new robe was quite eye-catching, and he got a few questioning or even taunting glares from the soldiers. However, those people were quickly dragged away by horrified comrades who recognized who he was.

He didn’t mind such a thing happening. He already knew that Alyn was trying to foster a competitive and slightly ruthless environment for the Academy. As long as it didn’t cause problems he didn’t mind. They would all be tempered in the upcoming war. Standing face to face with millions of zombies would test anyone’s mettle.

Zac immediately headed to the core of the island, and he noted that the beasts had improved quite a bit since he visited the last time. He sensed multiple auras belonging to beasts at the E-Grade, though none of the auras were as strong as that of the tiger.

To gain the last levels before the assault would be impossible, so Zac instead focused his efforts on consolidating his latest gains. He would have preferred a bit stronger enemies to push himself against, but there were simply none around.

He spent the next hour testing the Seed of Rot with his various attacks, and he was quite satisfied with the result. As he expected the blade didn't get stronger, but the attacks did gain an interesting effect.

It only took a second after wounding a beast before the wound started to look extremely infected, turning swollen and leaking pus. The animals were also noticeably weakened by the strikes, and with enough wounds they became so weak that they couldn't even move. When it got to that stage the animals would die not much later, their carcasses completely rotted out.

This Dao was only effective when drawing blood though. He had no problems imbuing his hand with the Dao of Rot, but a punch didn't cause the debilitating effect on the beasts. It did show some effectiveness if he hit a bleeding wound, but still not to the same degree as when imbuing his weapon.

The robes also proved to be extremely good and provided far better protection compared to the golden robes he took from Tyrbat. They even had a passive shield that continuously lessened the force of any incoming attack, though there was a limit to its effect.

It was as though there was an orb of water around him, and any attack would first have to rip through that invisible sphere. But as the defensive sphere weakened the attack, so did the defensive option weaken. After a while the passive shield would completely run out, at which point it needed to absorb energy from the atmosphere for a few minutes.

There was also a stronger active shield like the old ones, though only one charge. Finally, there was another skill, though Zac wasn't able to activate it at the moment. It was a fractal that was engraved right over his heart, but it was completely dim just like most of the fractals on **[Verun's Bite]**.

The robe was the second Spirit Tool he possessed for personal use, and there was one slightly confusing difference between the two. He had tried to make contact with whatever Tool Spirit that was housed inside the robes, but he could only sense an indistinct consciousness inside. It was like a breeze touched his consciousness, without intellect or personality.

He didn't understand why there was such a difference between the two items. The only thing he could think of was the mysterious rock from the auction that he fed Verun. It was only after he got that item that Verun started appearing in battle.

It only took another hour for him to get used to the improved power of his other Daos, leaving him ample time to work on **[Cyclic Strike]** again. But the results weren't promising.

If it wasn't for his new gear keeping the beasts at bay he would have looked like a beggar after a while. He had long lost count of how many times beasts had slammed into him or tried to tear him apart with their sharp claws.

He hadn't even been able to activate the skill in a controlled environment earlier, and it had proven even harder in the middle of battle. The problem was that he needed to split his attention in two and infuse each fractal with the same amount of mental energy.

He only managed to maintain the balance when he infused small trickles of energy into the fractals, but that was no good. It would take minutes to activate the skill in this manner, and the moment a beast attacked him he lost concentration and the skill fizzled.

Zac even swapped over to his Draugr form to test whether he had an easier time using the skill there. But he quickly discovered that his Draugr constitution did not afford him any better control over manipulating the Daos.

Perhaps this was the way that his lack of aptitude took form. He might not have a very hard time learning to utilize the Dao, but his control wasn't very smooth instead.

Since he was already in his undead form he tried his new shield for a bit as well. It performed above expectations, and the beasts below E-Grade did not even manage to leave a scratch on it. The spikes were extremely sturdy as well, and Zac found it particularly effective to imbue them with the Dao of Rot.

One shield slam would gore a deep wound into the animal, and with the Dao Seed a festering wound would be left behind, quickly weakening the target. The active attack also performed quite well, and while it couldn't kill an E-Grade beast it helped set up a kill with his axe. If he only got **[Cyclic Strike]** to work as well he would gain quite a bit of lethality with his Undead Bulwark skill.

But he had remembered something in the excitement of the latest gains from the inheritance. He possessed another offensive skill to bolster his undead form.

It was **[Unholy Strike]**, the skill that he found among Mhal's belongings.

Chapter 299: Little Bau

Zac quickly taught himself the skill, and a fractal was formed above his navel. It only took him a few seconds to realize how it worked since it was exceedingly simple. He only needed to push miasma into the fractal, and the fractal would in turn push concentrated power into the limbs of his choice.

Zac tried pushing miasma into the arm that was holding his axe, and he quickly felt the strength in his limb increase. There was no discomfort whatsoever either, so Zac kept pushing more and more energy through the fractal. In the beginning the arm simply felt pumped up like he was in the middle of a work-out, but soon it started to grow.

By the time he started to feel some pain in his arm the circumference of his bicep had almost doubled, and it radiated extreme power. Zac remembered the strength the Corpse Lord emitted when he used this skill, and that was nowhere near the monstrous energy that was stored in his own arm at the moment. It was likely either his extremely durable constitution or his high Endurance that allowed him to push far more miasma into his attacks than was the norm.

He had lost some of the arm's dexterity due to the new bulk, but it felt as though he could punch a hole in the sky. He quickly found a small hill and slammed the axe down with ferocious force, and the explosion almost matched the power of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The hill was completely gone after the swing, replaced by a huge scar in the ground that reached almost a hundred meters in the distance.

The skill worked even above expectations, and it was almost perfect for the upcoming battles. It didn't provide great utility for fighting against hordes of enemies, but that also wasn't his job in this war. His enemies would be the Incursion leaders,

and he had a feeling that very few of them would be able to walk away from a swing empowered by [**Unholy Strike**].

Zac was forced to give up on [**Cyclic Strike**] for the moment, but he was still satisfied with the results of his experiments. He decisively headed back to Port Atwood after returning to his human form and walked toward the Academy. Perhaps Alyn knew of some method to improve the control of his Daos.

But who would have known that when he walked through the gates to the Atwood Institute he would be met by pandemonium? A few hundred people had gathered in front of a large structure Zac didn't recognize, scuffling to get inside.

It was an all-out brawl, though luckily no one used Cosmic Energy or skills. It wasn't only students either, as Zac spotted a few Valkyries and demons in the mix. They were the closest to the doors and were ferociously attacking each other to be the ones to step inside.

A few people sat some distance from the angry mob nursing their wounds while glaring at the people still struggling to enter. They were likely the first casualties of the curfuffle. Zac only gaped at the mayhem, wondering what was happening inside that made people so desperate to enter.

Suddenly he spotted a familiar form speeding toward him. It was Alyn, and Zac froze when he saw her facial expression.

"Are you trying to tear my poor school to the ground?" the irate school mistress asked in an accusatory tone as she stopped just in front of him.

It was the first time Zac could see the annoyance on the Alyn's face, and something about her expression made Zac's hair stand on end. She was usually the personification of grace, but Zac was once again reminded that she was meant to be a slave driver rather than an educator on earth due to her ruthlessness.

"What's going on?" Zac hesitantly asked as he secretly imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness just in case.

"Between the call to war and the magical painting things have gone out of control," Alyn said as she took out a few familiar

balls and threw them at the congested areas. “You really planned this one out exquisitely, didn’t you?”

Explosions erupted one by one, and dozens of people were blasted into the air by each of the bombs. Only the Valkyries and the demon guards fared a bit better from the bombardment, but Alyn only snorted and took out a handful of them and threw them all over at the same time.

A cascade of explosions finally put an end to the melee in the academy, with Alyn singlehandedly destroying everyone’s fighting spirit. Zac could only wryly shake his head at her antics, and breathe in relief that the buildings seemed to be reinforced by arrays.

“Can you tell me what’s going on now?” Zac said, deciding not to comment on the fact that Alyn maimed the people who would soon be on the battlefield.

He knew that she was a master at using those small energy bombs, and while it looked random no one was seriously hurt. They would be fine after taking a healing pill and resting for a day.

“It was that painting you had Emily bring,” Alyn said with a shake of her head. “I couldn’t see what was so special about it, so I simply placed it in the public meditation room since you said it would improve one’s Dao comprehension.”

“Two elemental mages sat down in front of it, and it just took them a few minutes to gain their first Dao Seeds. The news quickly spread like a wildfire and people are doing anything to get a chance to meditate in front of it before they are sent to the front lines,” Alyn continued, some wonder creeping into her eyes.

“What? The painting was that effective?” Zac said with some shock.

He was just as confused as Alyn. He had looked it over when he got it, but he sensed nothing special from it. It was an exquisite painting, but that was about it.

“I believe that some special energy was left behind by the painter or the previous owner that helped the first couple of

people to attain the Seed. After a while most of the effects wore off,” Alyn explained. “It is still far more effective to meditate in front of it compared to without it though.”

“You know how much getting a Dao seed improves one’s combat power,” Alyn said with a sigh as she kicked a few students who didn’t get up fast enough after getting blasted as they walked toward the meditation building. “I will place it in a restricted chamber instead, and one will only be able to meditate in front of it in exchange for contribution points.”

“Well, I’m good it is coming to some use at least,” Zac said with a smile. “I am here for something else though.”

He proceeded to explain his problem with **[Cyclic Strike]**, though he didn’t mention his horrible affinity.

“There are trinkets that can help train one’s spirit,” Alyn said after a bit. “I don’t have any, but they should be pretty simple for Calrin to purchase. They are slightly expensive, but that shouldn’t be a problem for you by this point. Now go away, I have so much to do.”

Zac was afterward unceremoniously thrown out of the Academy, and he walked over to Calrin’s. Thirty minutes later he left with a tool that could train one’s mental dexterity. It was almost like a toy, where one needed to utilize mental energy to activate the contraption in certain patterns, but the amount of energy and the direction was extremely strict.

It was just what Zac needed at the moment, and he kept trying to complete the little puzzle as he walked through the town. Finally, he gave up in frustration, and when he looked up he found himself in front of the tavern.

“Our fearless leader,” Ryan smiled when Zac walked in and sat down at the same spot as last time.

There were a few people inside the bar, but it was uncharacteristically empty at the moment. A few people were sitting alone or in small groups, but they all hurriedly looked down into their drinks when Zac’s eyes landed on them.

“How are things here?” Zac asked as Ryan placed one of the homebrewed meads in front of him.

“It was pretty calm until your people declared that Port Atwood was going to go fight a sea of Zombies,” Ryan said with a wry smile. “You know, even I have been drafted?”

“You?” Zac said with surprise. “No offense, but what good are you in this war?”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Ryan snorted. “But it turns out I got a pretty good class, Barkeep. I can instill the drinks I serve to give small bonuses to things such as energy restoration and endurance.”

“A support class?” Zac exclaimed. “That’s pretty cool. Do you get experience from serving drinks?”

“I haven’t figured everything out yet, but currently I get most of my experience from tending the bar. The better my business fares, the more energy for me. But perhaps I will get Cosmic Energy for helping in the war as well,” Ryan said. “And at least I will be far from the front lines.”

“Well, it’s good to have you on our team. Have you spoken with that beastmaster lately?” Zac asked.

“That poor girl?” Ryan laughed. “She comes in here every other day full of scratch marks, drinking herself into oblivion while cursing your name. You’re lucky she became a beastmaster rather than a hex master.”

The two kept talking for a while longer until Zac decided to head back to his courtyard. He would be thrown into constant battle the coming weeks and needed some quiet rest before war engulfed their whole planet.

“SHIT!” the sailor screamed as he almost jumped two meters straight up in the air.

A massive blue tentacle wiggled back and forth a bit behind him before it once again slunk down into the depths.

“Almost scared me to death,” the man muttered as he looked down at the azure waters with some dread. “Mr. Trang, can’t you do something about your... uh... friend?”

“Little Bau is just playing around a bit,” the old fisherman answered with a big toothless grin.

Four more tentacles suddenly appeared as though in response to Sap Trang's comment, and they latched onto the large Creator Vessel. The ship immediately started to rock back and forth in an alarming manner. However, none of the sailors seemed alarmed after the initial surprise, and they went about their business as though the boat was pushing through still waters.

"Little Bau, that's enough or no treat for you," Sap Trang laughed as he walked over and slapped one of the tentacles lightly.

The tentacles quickly released the grip on the ship, but the next moment an enormous head breached the waters, rising until two eyes as large as barn doors looked at the old Vietnamese man.

Sap Trang wasn't alarmed in the slightest, and he only laughed once more before throwing out a whole barghest carcass with a doting smile. It splashed into the water and the next second it was gone, stuffed into a huge fanged maw beneath the surface.

"That's a good boy," Sap Trang said as a tentacle caressed him. "Are there any dangerous beasts in the area?"

Two more tentacles started to wave in the air, and the next moment huge half-eaten shark was lifted above the surface. The shark was almost as large as the Creator vessel, but it was shrunken and withered as though it had lost all of its moisture.

Hundreds of puncture wounds were crisscrossed across its body, created from the vicious stingers that Little Bau had on a few of its tentacles. Sap still wasn't completely sure what sort of beast he had picked up and nursed back to health.

From its tentacles, one could think that it was an enormous octopus. But it was something else entirely. It had an enormous head with a large round maw, leading to a thick torso that seldom reached above the water.

It did share some features with an octopus. For example, it did not have scales, but instead a rubbery skin that was almost impenetrable to bladed weapons. It also possessed no legs,

with the torso instead ending in a dozen or so tentacles that were over twenty meters.

Interestingly enough it also had four special tentacles that grew out from the torso like arms, and those things possessed nasty stingers that could suck a huge beast dry in less than a minute. Odder still was that blood wasn't the only thing it sucked, but it even absorbed the Cosmic Energy through the suckers.

It had been on its last breath when Sap Trang found it. It had barely won a fight against an enormous crab, but it was barely hanging on. Sap had seen an opportunity and initiated a bond with the animal through his class.

Perhaps Little Bau was unreconciled to die like that and accepted the connection even though it was far stronger than Sap himself. From there the old fisherman had poured hundreds of healing pills into its insatiable maws as he had sewed its wounds shut.

The mysterious animal had quickly healed thanks to Sap's ministrations, and afterward it started to follow along their vessel, much to the dismay of the other sailors. But they all had to admit one thing. Ever since Little Bau joined their crew they never had to worry about what lurked in the depths.

Because whatever was foolish enough to get close to their ship soon ended up in the belly of the beast.

"Just my luck," the fisherman who had initially been spooked muttered under his breath. "I get placed on the god damn ship with a pet Kraken."

Chapter 300: Ready for War

A table was placed in the middle of Zac's courtyard, and six people were sitting around it. Apart from Ogras and his three generals, there were also Joana and Alyn. This was a war council, but Zac still wanted Alyn's input since no one had a better grasp of the strength of his armies than her.

"So, Alea should already have filled you all in on the general plan," Zac said as he turned toward Alyn. "Are the armies ready to be deployed?"

"Honestly? Barely," Alyn said with some annoyance on her face. "A lot of those people are too soft. War is exactly what's needed to get a few of those people in shape. And if they die we at least save on costs."

Zac frowned a bit at Alyn's callousness, but she was adamant.

"Months and months have passed and some have never even risked their lives. Many of those who joined the army were people who had huddled in fear within walls on the various islands, and they were thirsting for power. But now that they are faced with real risks many are balking, and we have even had to publicly execute a few people who tried to cause a disturbance," the schoolmistress continued. "There is a good core of over eight thousand men and women though, they will all be all be able to put up a fight."

"What? Eight thousand?" Zac gaped.

"Only the elites are actually at the Academy by this point," Alyn said. "Many are on other islands defending our various facilities. "In total, our armies have already passed fifteen thousand men, though we need to leave at least twenty percent to protect our interests and maintain order."

Zac was surprised that the army had grown to such proportions, but then again new people were added to his

kingdom every week due to the unceasing efforts of Mr. Trang and his fleet. By now there were over twenty ships in the armada, many of them high-grade vessels like the corvette he bought last time.

The best part was that they had been added to his naval forces without any cost to his personal fortune. Taxes from the consortia and the crystals from the mine were already providing Port Atwood with a hefty monthly income by this point, which made maintenance and expansion much smoother.

Still, eight thousand was nothing compared to a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Even if they killed a hundred Zombies each they would barely have scratched the surface.

“This will also prove as an excellent opportunity for them. It is not easy to gain experience of large scale battles, but this provides just that,” Ilvere added. “Many of our men are still quite low leveled, but an ocean of Zombies will provide an opportunity for rapid improvement.”

“Well, it is settled then. Ilvere will be in charge of Port Atwood’s forces. Try to cooperate with our allies and the Sino-Indian alliance, but the safety of our people comes first,” Zac said.

“I understand,” Ilvere said.

Zac suddenly had an idea as he looked at Ilvere, who seemed a bit confused by the stare.

“Here, take this,” Zac said as he handed him a crystal.

“What’s this? [**Cyclic Strike**]?” Ilvere said with some interest.

“It is a skill I received from the Lord of Cycles. It utilizes two opposite Daos to form a formidable attack. It is up to you whether you wish to learn it,” Zac said. “But if you do learn it I would like to be updated on your progress in mastering it.”

Zac had realized that Ilvere was working toward gaining both the Dao Seeds of Heaviness and Lightness. Zac wasn’t sure, but perhaps the attack would work for him as well, and if he did manage to master the skill it might provide a shortcut for Zac to master it as well.

“So this skill is why you came by yesterday?” Alyn said with interest. “It is a very novel concept. Combining multiple Daos in one strike at F-Grade is quite uncommon.”

“Thank you, I’ll learn it. I am aiming to fuse the two into the Dao Fragment of Momentum, and this skill might help me toward that end,” Ilvere said with some glee on his face. “If I learn something I will update you.”

“Great,” Zac said with a nod. “Next subject. The strike force. Who apart from Ogras should take part?”

“I guess I cannot opt out?” Ogras said with a grimace as he looked through the stack containing the information of the 17 incursions remaining on earth. “Some of these forces are pretty dangerous.”

“You ate my food, now you need to work for it a bit,” Zac said. “So, who else?”

“We have mastered the War Arrays for up to 18 people,” Joanna said, speaking up for the first time of the meeting. “Truth be told we won’t be able to increase your strength by a large degree, but we will be able to form a small shield that covers our small squad. With such a small area of protection, the shield will be extremely sturdy.”

Zac nodded, feeling it was a good idea. Having that small squad with him would help protect Billy from harm.

“That sounds like a plan. Your main goal should be to guard Billy from surprise attacks. He is very strong, but his defenses aren’t the best,” Zac said.

“I will put together a team of our strongest people,” Joanna nodded in affirmation.

“You should bring the feral child as well,” Alyn suddenly added.

“Who? Emelie?” Zac exclaimed. “Absolutely not.”

“She is only level 31, but her attributes are a match to many of the Valkyries,” Alea added. “Besides, she is a support class.”

“I am not sure I need the boost against the Incursions,” Zac hesitantly said. “It’s not worth risking her life for that.”

“It’s not only about that,” Alyn said. “Support classes gain Cosmic Energy by simply empowering their allies. As long as you kill someone under the effect of her axes she will gain a part of the experience. Her levels would skyrocket if she came with you. And she could stay within the shield created by the spear maidens.”

“Honestly if you don’t bring her she will get herself in trouble somewhere else,” Ogras said. “She has turned almost crazy in her pursuit of power the last days. She said she needs to go to the underworld. Better keep her in sight where we can protect her. And you’re rich enough to deck her in enough defensive treasures to almost guarantee her life.”

Zac sighed when he heard about the teenager’s situation. She was probably extremely anxious to scour the underworld for her siblings. It was the last chance for her to find anyone of her old family alive.

“Fine, but keep her away from the fighting. I want her at maximum distance from me so people don’t figure out she’s a support,” Zac relented.

“Anything else before we head out?” Zac said as he looked around the table. “Communication might be impossible for a while.”

“There is the issue of the evolutions,” Ogras suddenly said.

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Between the Origin Dao and the ample resources provided by Port Atwood, there are a decent amount of demonkin warriors who are able to evolve by this point,” Ogras said.

“So what’s the problem?” Zac asked.

“Most are still only able to gain a common class and are afraid we will force them to upgrade before the wars. They want to hold off on upgrading in favor of improving further before upgrading. As for the few who are able to gain an Uncommon class, they are afraid to evolve because of us,” Ogras said.

“Us? Why?” Zac asked with confusion.

“None of the leadership are E-Grade yet. Evolving at this stage might be seen as a power play,” Ogras explained. “It’s extremely uncommon for anyone apart from the core group to hold the highest levels in a force.”

“Well, our situation is a bit special,” Zac said with a shrug. “Have as many as possible evolve into Uncommon classes, we need all the help we can get. Will they be able to evolve before we head out tomorrow?”

“It’s only Uncommon classes, there will be no trial for them,” Ogras said with a nod. “They can join us.”

“Good, I want a small elite squad to mainly support the Valkyries and contain the battle,” Zac said. “And let those who can’t evolve to a decent class wait. Having them evolve into a useless class won’t really strengthen us enough for it to make a difference.

“Agreed,” Ogras said. “I’ll handle it.”

“Great. There is one more thing that those who participate in the fight need to do as well,” Zac suddenly said. “They all need to enter a contract with me. One that will last indefinitely. In return they will get a monthly stipend.”

“What?” exclamations echoed across the table, with only Ogras seeming to understand what was going on.

“You should all understand that my power does not only come from my levels. The details of a few of my lucky encounters will be exposed during the battles, but they can absolutely not be spread. Therefore I need to enact this protocol,” Zac explained. “The Valkyries are excluded since they are already in a contract of servitude.”

It was a measure to protect the information about his second class and race. Zac either needed to do this, or kill everyone who participated, and he was unwilling to do the latter.

“What about the big one?” Ogras said.

“I’ll talk with him about it,” Zac answered.

“Will you tell us what’s going on?” Alea asked, her eyes thinning in suspicion.

“No, it might only implicate you,” Zac said with a resolute shake of his head.

“What about witnesses?” Ogras said.

“We’ll handle it,” Zac answered, some ruthlessness appearing on his face.

Ogras nodded approvingly and didn’t prod any further.

“Anyone who spread this out will be executed, no matter who it is,” Ogras added without hesitation.

“Great. As for the final subject,” Zac said as he reached for the pile of intelligence in front of Ogras. “This is the first target.”

“Human Incursion, Ez’Mahal Confederation?” Ogras muttered. “Never heard of them. Anyone else?”

Everyone shook their head as well, indicating that they had no idea who they were.

“I picked this faction because of their ruthlessness against the natives in their zone. There are reports of indiscriminate murder and torture,” Zac said with a frown. “I want these people gone from Earth first.”

After reading through the information dossier there was obviously an extremely wide range of strategies employed by the invaders. Very few forces were like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the Undead Empire. Most simply conquered the area and turned their sphere of influence into slave colonies.

In some areas, humans were actually better off under control of the invaders compared to life in general. There were structure and security, and the deaths from the unforgiving wildlife were far less common.

But the Ez’Mahal Confederation was not one of these forces. Zac had already heard about them during his first visit to New Washington, and since then it had only become worse. The small country they had set up might be the worst place on earth apart from a scant few places like the Miasmatic Zone and the Cradle of God. Killing them would not only free people

living in horrible conditions but also create a lot of goodwill across the world.

“Low to Medium tier,” Ogras muttered as he read through the report again. “They haven’t shown any particularly strong traits. Obsessed with class systems, uses slaves like we use the Barghest. A force like this is usually quite fragile. A good place to push your level forward.”

“I want to avoid killing slaves as much as possible. The real targets are their leaders,” Zac said. “In fact, that should be the goal for all our operations. I will target the leaders, Ogras will occupy generals and assist the rest of you, while the rest keep reinforcements at bay. Ideally, the battles should not last more than a few minutes.”

The group kept going over the details for a bit until Zac adjourned the meeting. Everyone hurriedly left to prepare themselves for the intense battles that they would be thrown into. Zac spent the night once again switching between trying to activate [**Cyclic Strike**] and activating the toy before sleeping in.

At 8 am he woke up, ready for war.

Chapter 301: The Ez'Mahal

The next day a somber procession marched through Port Atwood. Thousands of men and women gripping weapons proceeded in an orderly fashion, everyone donning a backpack. They were all heading toward the undead incursion, to stem the spread of death. Some couldn't help fear from creeping onto their faces, whereas many glowed with anticipation. The civilians of Port Atwood silently looked on at the procession, knowing that the final battle for Earth was about to begin.

Meanwhile, a far less conspicuous group silently gathered within the inner walls, less than fifty warriors. But each one emitted power far beyond that of the general soldiers of the town. It was the strike squad that stood in front of Zac, and he surveyed them with Ogras by his side. He knew that he was supposed to say something at a juncture like this, but he didn't know what.

"Let's go. This is just the first battle of many, so remember to stay alive," Zac simply said as he turned toward the private teleporter.

It activated with a flash and soon the small group of people had entered. The next moment Zac and his people found themselves in a run-down warehouse. The shelves were empty, and dust was gathering in the corners. It was clear that this teleporter was not commonly used, but two armed men hurried over as soon as they arrived.

"Lord Atwood?" one of them asked, receiving a nod from Zac.

The man quickly pulled out a stack of papers from a back, handing it over. It was a missive providing the latest intelligence of the Incursion.

"We are currently one hundred kilometers away from the edge of the sphere of influence of the Ez'Mahal Confederation.

They have been known to sometimes roam even this far out in search of new slaves, so be careful. There have been no special movements the past few days,” the man quickly updated them. “Will you be needing anything from us?”

“Thank you,” Zac said. “It’s fine like this. We will be back in three days at the most.”

The next moment the squad streamed outside like specters of death, and immediately set a high pace toward the Incursion. The climate of the area was temperate, with leafy trees that had already shed their leaves. Winter was coming to large parts of Pangea, and not all the areas were spared from the cold like Port Atwood.

They had no special plan, only to push straight toward the heart of the incursion, killing any resistance that might crop up. It wasn’t that Zac took lightly of the situation, but rather that there simply was too little information to go by. The Marshall clan had set up an extensive network around the incursions, but they were unable to gather any detailed intelligence from the core.

This was another reason that Zac chose this one. From all accounts this incursion seemed less organized than the usual, making it a good target for a first run. They would be able to improve their teamwork and planning as they kept going.

It didn’t take long for them to enter the area that the human invaders had claimed for themselves, but as the hours passed Zac started to frown.

“Where are all the people? The report said that these people didn’t kill everyone?” Zac asked Ogras who was running by his side.

They hadn’t entered any of the towns they passed, but they had sent a scout inside for intelligence. However, every single town they had passed was completely deserted and seemed to have been so for months.

“They have likely moved the population to large slave colonies, to save on resources. The beast problem will only get worse before it gets better, and it would waste too much

manpower to guard all these small towns,” Ogras ventured with a shrug.

The demons were not too worried about the plight of the enslaved humans since they came from a society where slavery was quite common as well. Zac knew he couldn't change anyone's opinions on the matter, so he only kept running.

However, even the expressions of the demons started to change as they approached the core of the area controlled by the Ez'Mahal. They were proceeding along the main path toward the main settlement, and the path suddenly had an extremely disturbing change. The roadside was littered with corpses, an endless number of them. Some were impaled on large poles while others had been hung from trees along the road.

One thing that seemed to unite all of the poor people was that they had been alive when they were hung, judging by their expressions and poses. All of them had undergone inhumane torture before being left to die.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she placed a hand on a pale-faced Emily, while the others seethed as well.

Even the usually bloodthirsty demons looked at the morbid scene with disgust and Billy had lost his usual joviality as he looked around with red eyes.

“Who did this?” the giant said with building fury.

“The guys we are about to attack,” Zac said with a grim face. “The Ez'Mahal Confederation.”

Billy silently repeated the name as he kept looking at the trees, but suddenly a sound echoed from the distance as they saw a car approaching along the lonely road. It was a Jeep that had undergone some alterations to increase its sturdiness, and a large familiar insignia could be seen on the hood. It was the very same one in the intelligence report, meaning the car belonged to the Incursion.

“It's them,” Zac said, preparing to capture one of them as the car stopped fifty meters away from them.

But Billy was one step faster as he pushed away from the ground with a roar, closing the distance in one herculean leap. His enormous club was already in his hand, rumbling like thunder as it fell straight toward the Car. A few people hurriedly tried to create some distance from the car, but most barely had time to open the door before the club smashed into the roof with a thunderous explosion.

The tremendous attack flattened the car and most of its occupants in an instant. Only two men managed to escape in time, but Ogras was already on the move. One of them was immediately impaled by dozens of spears and thrown onto a branch, joining the other victims along the road. The other man was soon in Ogras' grip and forcefully dragged back toward Zac and the others.

"Who are you? Attacking the Ez'Mahal will result in your forces being annihilated," the man said with some remaining bluster. "Your men will become war slaves and your women whores!"

Zac didn't bother responding to the man and simply motioned for Ogras to extract information.

"Look away," Ogras said to Emily, but she staunchly shook her head as she glared at the man in front of them.

Ogras simply shrugged, and the next moment a shadow blade cut one of the man's legs clean off, making the man scream his lungs out. One of the demons in the group stepped forward, conjuring a fireball, and pressed it against the wound to stem the bleeding.

"Now, answer our questions and you will get a quick death. Otherwise, we will keep chopping and cauterizing until you are more cooperative," Ogras said with an unhurried voice.

The man frenziedly nodded that he would comply, his bluster completely gone in an instant. It turned out that the people hanging from the sides were slaves that had caused displeasure to the invaders. That could mean anything from not working hard enough or simply making eye contact, there was truly no rhyme or reason to it.

Normally the Ez'Mahal Confederation wasn't this brutal. Slaves were a commodity after all, and this was a waste of money. But the leader of the invasion was someone called Thanso, a scion of some large aristocratic family in the confederation.

He was extremely cruel and didn't care about the well-being of the natives in the slightest since he didn't care about the resources that the slaves could harvest. Instead, he turned the area into a twisted hellscape where his closest circle could do any depraved thing they wished while he mainly focused on the Dao.

However, most people were still alive thanks to an early discovery by the Ez'Mahal. A very large area with Spiritual Soil had been found close to the Nexus Hub, turning the area extremely suitable for the cultivation of certain in-demand herbs. The slaves were mainly used as a workforce to clear farmland and work the farms. But they were also used to stave off the beast hordes who were attracted by the large fields of Spirit Herbs.

Ogras kept asking about specifics in the defenses of the Incursion, and anything other information that was lacking in the intelligence report. There were no particularly strong forces in the area, meaning that the Incursion hadn't really been tested so far. That was likely due to a stroke of brilliance by the generals of the incursions though.

A large number of strike squads containing humans from the Ez'Mahal Empire infiltrated all the promising forces in the area right before the tutorial ended, and assassinated a lot of cultivators the moment they returned. That caused the collapse of most of the towns in the vicinity, making for easy pickings to restock on slaves.

The core of the incursion was a newly erected town called Grand Escape. It was an allusion to the fact that the Ez'Mahal nobles did not consider the invasion a life and death struggle, but rather a retreat where they could play around and gain some benefits before going home. However, that would all change soon.

There was a defensive array that seemed decently strong, and apart from that, there was an identification array similar to the one in Westfort. A tag was needed to pass through the gates without causing an alarm. Everyone from the Ez'Mahal Empire possessed one, and it seemed that the main function of the array was to stop slaves from escaping rather than protect from infiltrators.

Ogras took the tag from the captive, and after throwing a glance at Zac slit the man's throat, making him bleed out in seconds.

"We can't use this," Ogras said as he observed the tag. "It seems to have been connected to his life force. If we walked through the gates wearing this we would no doubt be caught."

"So we can only brute force it?" Zac asked, not sparing the dead man another glance.

"No, I doubt that they went so far as to have a system that checks every single person's individual aura," Ogras mused. "I think that we can use these tokens if we keep the original owners alive. If that fails as well, then we can only go straight in."

"Okay, we'll find another squad," Zac said. "Billy, don't smash the next one."

The group set out again, and soon they were only 30 minutes away from the Grand Escape. Traffic was a lot higher here, with both cars and cultivators riding some horse-like beats passing the streets every other minute. The group had already gone into the woods to avoid being spotted, and they captured five groups passing by in quick succession.

They were stripped of their clothes and weapons before Ogras and a few demons took them away. Zac threw a confused glance at him when he returned with a dense aura of blood around him.

"They will live for an hour, perhaps two. Though they would probably wish it would be over much quicker though," the demon said with a nefarious smile, and Zac didn't care enough to ask anything further.

Soon they were all dressed in gear from the captured squads, though they were forced to make some improvised modifications for Billy and the Demons. Hopefully, no one would look too carefully at the people inside the stolen vehicles.

“If we get through the gates that’s for the best,” Zac said as he looked at the squad. “If not we’ll head straight for the castle. Kill everyone in the way, but conserve energy. Emily, give me the Endurance boost please.”

It wasn’t that he was worried about getting hurt, but the aura would also boost Emily. Letting her gain a part of his own monstrous Endurance would help her stay safe in the upcoming battle. Emily nodded and the next moment a green axe appeared in her hand, and she threw it into Zac. He felt a surge of power, and a quick check of his status screen showed that it worked just like the fire axe, except this one gave Endurance and Vitality.

“Wow,” Emily gasped as she looked with wide eyes at Zac, her own aura having suddenly increased by a large margin. “You’re like a tank.”

Zac shrugged with a smile, knowing she was surprised by the size of the boost she got. She had likely believed that Strength was his highest attribute after seeing how much she got from the flame axe.

“Girl, how much Endurance does he have?” Ogras said while poking Emily from the side.

“Not telling,” Emily grinned.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. “They’re going to notice a bunch of people has gone missing soon enough, let’s head out.”

Chapter 302: Rage

Three Cars and a military truck soon drove toward the gates of the Grand Escape, with the humans in the cars while the demons hid within the tarp of the truck, their heads cowed just in case.

Zac sat in the passenger seat while Joanna was driving. Ogras was the only demon not hidden away in the truck, and he sat in the back seat as well. Shadows had gathered around him, making his features indistinct without drawing attention to itself.

“Who are you?” the guard captain said with a frown when he saw the odd procession.

“We bring news to his Excellency Thanso,” Joanna said without missing a beat. “The natives are amassing for an assault.”

The guard’s brows rose in surprise, but they soon furrowed again as he took a second look at Joanna and Zac who calmly looked right ahead. But Zac was starting to get a bad feeling when no answer was forthcoming.

“A-“ was all that escaped the guard’s mouth before he and the other four gatemen had their necks cracked by shadowy tendrils that somehow had reached the guards from the odd shadow appendage that usually stayed within Ogras’ metal casing.

Zac quickly looked around, and when he saw there was no traffic in the area he pointed out two fingers from the window, and the next moment a Valkyrie jumped out of the car behind. She rushed over to the dead guards who were still held upright by Ogras’ shadows and touched them for a few seconds each before running back to the car.

Zac nodded toward Joanna and she sped off, leaving the corpses of the five guards frozen solid. They knew that little stunt wouldn't buy a lot of time, but a minute or two was all they needed. The town wasn't very big, and they already knew where they needed to go since Thanso was always holed up in his palace, mostly occupied with cultivating or torturing his poor slaves.

The convoy sped through the town at a breakneck pace as it was only a matter of time before the corpses of the guards would be noticed. Interestingly enough the hurry of their group seemed to lessen suspicion rather than the opposite. The people on the street seemed to be under the impression that they were hurrying along on official business and quickly got out of the way.

But even though they drove as fast as they could Zac was able to see the type of town the invaders had built. The Grand Escape was a completely alien settlement, just like Azh'Rodum on his island, and all the architecture was foreign.

But the interesting design choices weren't what garnered Zac's attention. It was the copious amount of slaves that hurried along the sides with their heads held down. Most were barely clothed even though winter was coming, and he couldn't spot anyone without a fresh set of wounds.

It was easy to see the utter disdain the Ez'Mahal had for the native slaves, and they were treated worse than cattle. There were also a huge amount of brothels, with chained girls listlessly standing in the windows, their eyes devoid of emotion.

A fire raged in Zac's chest, and he wanted to jump out of the car swinging. The Valkyries in the car looked even worse and it was as though their fury would set the car on fire.

"They'll pay," Zac simply said as his eyes moved away from the road and toward the castle in the distance.

"What's our strategy?" Joanna said from the driver's seat.

"If the gate is open drive straight through it. If it's closed, then I'll open it. Afterward, we kill every soldier we can see," Zac

simply said drawing quick nods from the others.

The town wasn't very large, and it took just a few minutes to drive straight through the main street to the palace.

"No array," the Valkyrie sitting next to Ogras noted as her eyes had a golden glow.

The Valkyries had proven more versatile than Alea had made it sound like, and the abilities they possessed were far more diverse than he expected. They did all have spear-related classes, but many possessed their own niche abilities that rounded out the 100 woman squad.

"Head right in," Zac said with an emotionless voice, his axe already lying in his lap.

A few guards made to stop them, but they were ripped apart by shadows before they could even voice a complaint. The group of vehicles easily entered the large square in front of the palace and leisurely stopped in a line as everyone got out. Zac had already ripped apart the robe Ez'Mahal robe he had covered his real gear with, disgusted with even pretending to be part of this debased force.

A red blaring light suddenly exploded in the sky above the castle, and soldiers almost immediately flooded toward them from every direction. They were all wearing livery with two insignias; one for the Ez'Mahal Confederation, and one for whatever aristocratic family Thanso belonged to.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that it was only well-trained soldiers who had moved to intercept them. The intelligence packet mentioned that these people used human wave tactics, sending throngs of slaves to their deaths to tire out their enemies. But luckily it looked like the innermost core of the Incursion was guarded by elites instead, enabling Zac and the others to fight without any compunctions.

"Lay down your weapons immediately," a guard captain shouted, but Zac simply hurled a large rock from his Cosmos Sack at him.

The captain was not bad, and a shield rose in front of him lightning-quick. But the force of the rock was massive, and he

was thrown backward ten meters even though the rock disintegrated before it could harm him.

The guards stared with wide mouths at Zac, and the next moment shields and other protections covered the wide array of soldiers. There were roughly 800 people in front of them, and more were joining every minute.

Worse yet was that all of them were very strong, and a few of the soldiers might even have reached E-Rank, though barely.

“Attack,” Zac simply said as he started to throw out fractal blades.

It looked like the strongest people of the incursion still weren't around, so Zac wanted to take the opportunity to thin out the numbers to lessen the pressure on his strike team. Not that he needed a reason since he was still completely infuriated after seeing the misery these people had brought upon Earth's citizens.

Five blades imbued with the Dao quickly soared toward the defensive line, ready to cut the army to pieces.

“WHO DARES ATTACK LORD THANSO'S MANOR?” an enraged voice suffused with power echoed across the square, and a wiry man holding a spear jumped out from a window.

The man was clearly one of the stronger combatants of the force, and he even managed to destroy two of the fractal blades before they could wreak havoc on the army.

“I guess that's my cue,” Ogras shrugged as shadows started to converge around him.

“You sure you can handle it?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

Ogras was pretty strong, but he was still only a peak F-Grade warrior. The other spear wielder had not just Evolved though, making Zac unsure whether Ogras could handle it.

“You forget, my restrictions are completely gone while these guys seem to still be lacking 30 to 20% of their strength. Besides, you should be able to feel that this guy is nothing special,” Ogras said as he disappeared.

Heavy thuds followed Ogras' disappearance as Billy thundered toward a thick clump of warriors. His eyes were almost completely red in rage, and he bellowed on top of his lungs as he swung his club in a thundering horizontal swing.

A wave of destruction erupted from the club, and it was as though the air itself cracked and exploded. The energy wave moved quite quickly as it pushed across the square and hit the front lines of the soldiers. The first row of people was immediately turned to a bloody mess as they were flung high up in the air.

Even the following rows received gruesome wounds from the odd skill, many even dying. Between his huge frame and his devastating attack, Billy quickly became a target of the soldiers, and a storm of attacks sailed toward him almost immediately.

Billy's eyes widened in alarm, but the next moment a thick golden shield enveloped him, protecting him from the attacks falling like rain. It was the Valkyrie's that worked together to form a defensive barrier, and since it only needed to protect one man they were able to make it extremely sturdy.

The volume of attacks caused cracks continuously that allowed the occasional attack to slip through, but while Billy's Endurance wasn't the highest it was high enough to shrug off errant attacks. Emboldened by the protection he charged straight into the crumbling line of Ez'Mahal.

Furthermore, he wasn't alone but closely followed by a group of bloodthirsty demons rushing in his wake like a pack of wolves. Each of them was the cream of the crop among the demons, and they were also temporarily lent the best gear Port Atwood had to offer. The combination boosted their lethality to new heights as they entered a pitched battle with the soldiers who had already been forced to taste Billy's wrath.

They had all recently evolved, and they were extremely eager to start leveling again. Many of the demons had been stuck at the bottleneck for decades, and the possibility of finally moving forward again pumped their veins full of adrenaline.

Besides, they desperately needed to rack up a mountain of contribution to get cultivation resources.

The E-Grade brought far greater power, but the cost of progression also multiplied manifold. There was not only the issue of needing higher-graded Crystals to cultivate, but the medicinal baths cost far more. They even needed to upgrade their gear, since their weapons and armor wouldn't be able to stand the increased Cosmic Energy for long.

Zac kept his distance while shooting out a constant stream of fractal blades to cull the numbers and prevent the soldiers from organizing. Since he didn't need to exert his full force he decided to experiment with the Dao of Rot, imbuing all his attacks with it.

Another benefit of the corrosive Dao started to show itself after he had shot a handful of attacks into the soldiers. The blades usually only managed to kill ten or so before they soldiers managed to exhaust the attack, but the Dao of Rot left a lingering effect.

Pockets of decay started to form on the battlefield due to the compounding strikes, and even soldiers who were not directly wounded started to show signs of weakness and nausea. Zac was elated by the results, but he still kept his eyes peeled. The main reason he hadn't entered the thick of it was that he was still waiting for the leaders to make their move.

Suddenly a spike of danger made Zac quickly erect his defenses. The next moment an ocean of small needles tried to rip him apart. All of them were even smaller than a sewing needle, but they contained a massive amount of force.

The swirling leaves around him were ripped apart one by one, and Zac felt like he was standing in an ocean of irate wasps. But an effective Endurance of over a thousand proved it's worth at this point, preventing the needles from causing anything more than light flesh wounds.

But Zac was a bit helpless in this situation since he had to block his eyes from being attacked. While his flesh was stronger than reinforced steel by this point the same thing couldn't be said for his eyeballs, and he would likely go blind

if one of the needles struck him. Out of better options, he activated the charge on his new robes, and the thousands of needles were immediately pushed back from a shield looking like a shimmering blue shell.

Zac quickly moved his fingers as he glared around, and soon spotted a suspicious person standing in an alley between two houses. He was far from the battle, and his eyes were trained right on Zac. But most importantly he was decked in extremely gaudy clothes, completely ruining his attempt of hiding. Zac growled as he activated **[Loamwalker]** and the next moment he was in front of him.

The man looked shocked, and an amulet quickly burst into light, forming a protective barrier around him. Zac only sneered as his axe fell down three times in rapid succession, breaking open the turtle shell. The next moment he richly decked man was grabbed by his throat. Alarm could be seen on his face as he the swarm of needles return to aid him.

But Zac simply used the man as a human shield, blocking the attempts to attack him once again. But he didn't properly stop struggling until Zac tightened the grip to the point that his neck almost broke.

"Unhand the lord!" the wiry general shouted, but he was kept at bay by an ocean of shadow spears.

"If you harm me your pitiful planet will be eradicated!" the youth wheezed out through his teeth. "You're just animals of lower bloodlines, know your place."

Zac looked in the eyes of the man for a second, confused where he got this confidence from. In the end, he could only chalk it up to this idiot being too pampered throughout his life.

"You think you could come here and treat us like cattle?" Zac said, his voice echoing out through the square.

"Think again."

The next moment a fountain of blood spurted in all directions as Zac directly ripped off Thanso's head and slammed it down into the ground.

Chapter 303: Punishment

This was the weakest leader Zac had fought so far. He was clearly E-Rank, but neither his attributes nor Dao enlightenment were anything special. The weapon he used was pretty amazing though, likely a gift from his clan.

The soldiers looked on aghast at the fate of their lord, either worried about the incursion or the fate that awaited them when they returned. After seeing how easily Zac had handled one of the strongest men of the incursion their battle spirit quickly waned, and many started to look around for means of escape.

“We surrender, we’ll leave your planet as once!” one of the generals immediately shouted, and the eyes of many soldiers turned toward a structure in the distance. “The wealth accumulated during our stay is all inside Lord Thanso’s Cosmos Sack!”

“We can’t let them!” Joanna spat from the side.

Zac touched the Cosmos Sack as he mulled over what to do. He remembered what he learned back in the library, and this wasn’t necessarily the last time they encountered people from this confederation. He was still infuriated by how the Earthlings had been treated, but it would perhaps cause trouble down the line to act excessively.

There were no doubt a few who had already fled, making it impossible to keep the results of this battle on lockdown. But the moment he sensed what was inside the Cosmos Sack his pupils turned to needlepoints, and his rage was completely rekindled. Any thought of a ceasefire was immediately thrown out the window.

Corpses. Hundreds of corpses, mutilated and abused. Most of them were young women, but there were men and even children there as well. Zac looked down at the headless corpse of Thanso, infuriated that he died so easy. It took a special

kind of monster to torture these many people then keep their bodies as mementos.

“Leave no one alive,” Zac growled, and the next moment he exploded into action.

Despair filled the eyes of soldiers when they saw Zac’s reaction, and they fled toward the Nexus Hub as fast as they could run. But how could it be that easy to escape an enraged Zac? Explosions of blood and gore erupted wherever warriors were clumped together as Zac arrived with **[Loamwalker]**, destroying everyone around with wide sweeping arcs of death.

The others needed little prodding either as they unleashed all their strongest attacks on the collapsing defensive lines of the soldier. Ogras had taken the opportunity to assassinate one of the generals who was caught off-guard by Zac’s wanton slaughter. That left only two more powerhouses on the side of Ez’Mahal, and Zac and Ogras picked each one. An all-out assault by Zac overwhelmed the mage, his defensive skills and treasure were whittled down in seconds.

Afterward, Zac simply shot out a handful of blades at the last general, who quickly got lost his life from being pincerred. By this point, quite a few people were starting to stream in through the gates, and Zac was wondering if they were reinforcements. But when he saw their appearance he realized that they likely had received some prompt and wanted to escape back home through the Nexus Hub.

The fires of fury were far from abated after seeing the bodies Thanso kept in his Cosmos Sack, and Zac’s eyes turned toward the large cathedral-like building that the Ez’Mahal people ran toward. The next moment a huge tear in space opened as the enormous hand of **[Nature’s Punishment]** emerged. Zac wasn’t thinking straight as he flooded the hand with his Peak-grade Dao and Cosmic Energy.

The only thing on his mind was to completely destroy their last hope and punish the invaders. It almost looked like the hand was shrouded in green flames as it ripped through the air, quickly arriving at the teleportation hub. A dense aura radiated

from it, it's very existence having a restraining effect on the soldiers beneath it.

Suddenly a fractal twenty meters across appeared above the hand as the fractal rings on the hands shone with blinding intensity. It was not something Zac had seen before, but when he laid his eyes on it he felt as though he breathed fresh air from a mountain top and smelt wet soil. It was the embodiment of earth itself.

Most importantly the aura kept intensifying, and everyone in the area was soon forced down on their knees, some even exploding due to the otherworldly pressure. It was as though the area in front of the building was being crushed by a mountain. However, that wasn't all. The fractal suddenly flew straight down toward the ground, passing right through the wooden hand.

The fractal caused a hundred-meter wide indent to form around where it slammed down, and only those possessing decent defensive skills or treasures were still alive, albeit barely. The grand building that housed the Nexus Hub was barely standing. Its roof was caved in from the pressure and one of its walls had completely collapsed. It looked like it wouldn't stay up for much longer unless it was reinforced.

Wails in pain and panic echoed across the area as the Ez'Mahal soldiers still alive found themselves in a pit full of bodies and debris. The fighting had largely died out amongst those who had chosen fight instead of flight, and even those of his own side looked at Zac with wide eyes. But only he knew that the attack was only half-way over.

The next moment the wooden hand punched down with monstrous strength. The last remnants of the house were completely destroyed, and a second shockwave expanded as though a bomb had gone off in the epicenter. The screams of the few survivors from the fractal were drowned in the dust cloud of the explosion, and the whole area was covered in the haze.

Then there was just silence.

Zac took a few deep breaths as he looked at the destruction with hard eyes until they switched over to Ogras who walked over.

“What about the rest?” Ogras said, not commenting the wanton slaughter Zac had just committed. “We’ve gone this far, we might as well hunt them down.”

“Quite a few people arrived here through the Incursion, we won’t be able to hunt them all down with our small squad,” Zac sighed, the fires in his chest having slightly abated. “Let’s focus on freeing the slaves. And kill anyone who looks like he can become a threat.”

The demons nodded as he turned around. A sea of shadows suddenly emerged at the gate and dozens of spears impaled the few people who hadn’t already fled after seeing Zac’s attack. Billy simply sat down when seeing the battle was over, his lungs moving like bellows as he gulped for air. Tears were streaming down his eyes as he sat unmovingly, and Zac walked over with a frown.

“Are you ok, Billy?” Zac asked as sat down in front of him.

“Mama said to never hurt people,” Billy said. “But Mama never met people this bad. These people deserved it, but Billy is still sad.”

Zac sighed as he looked at the giant. He realized that Billy might not have ever killed humans before he joined on this mission as most of his time was spent in the Ratlight. The scene also made him wonder what kind of person he had become. He had killed close to a thousand people in just a few minutes. Yet he felt nothing, neither joy nor sadness or shame. It was as he had cut down a bunch of trees, eliciting no emotional reaction.

He patted the giant on his shoulder before he walked over to Emily and the squad of Valkyries who had protected her. They had stayed away from the thick of it, mostly providing support while keeping themselves safe.

“Are you guys okay?” Zac asked as he looked at the group.

“People are messed up,” Emily muttered before she looked up. “We need to become stronger, or we’ll become slaves as well when the world loses its protection.”

The Valkyries emphatically nodded, having all too much experience in that department. When people could attain the powers of gods some truly started to treat normal humans as ants.

“We’ll sweep this place clean before we liberate the slaves in the town,” Zac said. “We’ll also bring over a few hundred of the reserves to take control while we head over to the plantations. I’ll watch over the remaining soldiers.”

The girls nodded, and soon the small strike squad went through every nook and cranny of the castle. Soon hundreds of slaves had been found, some in extremely horrible conditions. A few even chose to immediately end their lives the moment their shackles were removed.

Everyone was moved out to the square, standing some distance from the timid group of Ez’Mahal soldiers who had thrown down their weapon. They didn’t dare to move a muscle after Zac had told them to stay put before sitting down to restore his energy.

No one even as much as dared to breathe loudly when sensing the immense aura that Zac emitted. He was sitting in the middle of the square as both a deterrent for any foolish actions and also because he was simply a bit tired. The attack had cost far more than a normal **[Nature’s Punishment]** had, and he curiously opened his menu as he waited for the others to finish their sweep.

[Nature’s Punishment - Proficiency: Late. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable]

It had actually upgraded to late proficiency. Furthermore, Zac had a feeling that it upgraded before he even used it. After reading the flavor text he had a strong feeling that the upgrade was linked to his emotional response. He had been well and truly infuriated after seeing Thanso’s bag, and that rage had fueled the skill.

Unfortunately, he also noticed that the battle hadn't been enough to reach level 75, even though he had killed two E-Grade cultivators. He even felt that he wasn't all that close, meaning that the final level seemed to require far more energy than the earlier ones. Still, if there was one thing he wouldn't lack the coming weeks were enemies, so he wasn't worried he wouldn't get there soon enough.

Eventually, Zac turned his eyes to the hundreds of ragged people who stood huddled on the square. Their eyes were all trained on him, some with hope, and others with fear. He retracted his aura as he stood up, gripping an E-Grade Nexus Crystal in his hand. His sudden movement made the group instinctually shrink back, and some even tried to hide the few children behind their emaciated bodies.

"I am Zac Atwood," Zac said with a loud voice. "You might know me as the Super-Brother Man from the Ladder. We have killed all the leaders of the Ez'Mahal, and we will begin clearing out the area to kill every one of these scum. You all are free."

All the people stared blankly at him for a few seconds, until a few broke down and started crying in large tears of relief. Others simply fell down on their knees, holding their heads. A few even kneeled in front of him in thanks.

But suddenly chaos erupted in the ranks of the former slaves as a young man around 17 or 18 jumped a middle-aged woman, ruthlessly started to punch her. Weirder yet was that not a single person tried to help her, instead opting to either look away or look on with schadenfreude.

"YOU FUCKER," he shouted and started to relentlessly punch and claw at the woman, seemingly intent to tear her apart.

Zac frowned and flashed over before lifting the youth and tossing him away with one hand.

"What are you doing?" Zac asked with a frown.

"That bitch sold so many girls out to those alien psychopaths. It's because of her my sister was tortured to death," he screamed, tears running down his cheeks.

“We all did what we had to do to survive!” she said, her eyes thick with fear as she glanced at Zac. “They would be found out soon anyway! They had eyes everywhere.”

A spear tip suddenly burst out through her chest, and she looked down at her engorged chest with confusion, before her eyes turned vacant. Zac looked up at Joanna who stood behind her with ruthless eyes.

“Question everyone, find the other conspirators,” Zac said, steeling his heart. “Purge everyone who betrayed Earth.”

His order quickly caused a few individuals to be isolated as they screamed and pled to be spared. But the Valkyries had long turned to ruthless killing machines as the targets were quickly executed after the details were confirmed. Zac himself didn't act, but he passively looked at the result of his order. But while his exterior was calm the same couldn't be said of his thoughts.

He felt he was walking down a dark path, the weight of his victims causing a heavier and heavier burden. Would he emerge with his soul intact, or would the sin of his actions consume him?

Chapter 304: Plantations

Zac knew a lot of blood would be shed from his order, but he didn't want to leave cancerous individuals behind. Every force he liberated would also become part of his jurisdiction, and he could not leave such hidden risks in times of war.

Next, he purchased a teleporter, as the moment that he had killed thanso and the last general the town was considered his by the System. A Valkyrie immediately stepped through it to report back to Port Atwood, and to relay his orders. Hundreds of reserve fighters would join the area soon enough to stabilize the situation and return some order to the chaos.

He internally winced at the cost of all these transportations, but he also knew that the value of the area far outweighed the cost. It became increasingly clear from reading the intelligence on the incursions that they were all placed close to some sort of natural resource.

The demon Incursion not only got the Nexus Vein, but also the Tree of Ascension. It had already been confirmed that the mountains of the second Incursion he closed were rich in valuable metals, and this place had the farmland with spiritual soil.

That farmland was also why Zac was a bit hurried. And after giving a few more commands to Joanna he gathered Ogras, Emily and half of the Demons and Valkyries. The others would be led by Billy to keep things in check. All the strongest people had long been killed, so Billy would have no trouble keeping things in check as long as the remaining Valkyries shielded him.

The rest needed to go to the vast plantations and claim them before the Ez'Mahal people could ruin or plunder the fields in revenge. Winter was coming, but that didn't affect Spiritual

Soil and Spirit Herbs who could grow year-round straight through the ice if need be.

“Who here has been to the plantations?” Zac asked as he looked at the slaves.

The bloody spectacle of Joanna had once again cowed the crowd, but soon a middle-aged man stepped forward.

“There are three large plantations, my lord,” he said with a posh British accent. “I have been to all three. I have also heard chatter of a higher-grade garden, but I never learned where it was situated.”

Zac had the man enter the car they used to get inside before he entered as well. Just as they were about to drive out they noticed people streaming out of the teleporter. The reserves clearly had been on standby since less than three minutes were needed for them to organize everything. Zac felt confident in leaving the town now when there were hundreds of his soldiers keeping things in order.

The car once again sped through the streets of the Grand Escape. It turned out the man that Zac brought was called Henry, just like the Marshall patriarch. However, his history was quite different. He was a trained butler, and Thanso had thought it was novel to have a native servant to wait upon him.

He was one of the few people that had been treated somewhat decently of the slaves. Not through benevolence though, but because Henry was very skilled, and Thanso did not want to waste time finding a new native Butler.

More impressively the reason that he seemed so popular amongst the slaves was that he had dared to lie straight into Thanso’s face, saving dozens of poor women who would have met grim fates otherwise. Of course, he had only been able to save a scant few of Thanso’s numerous victims, but Zac was still impressed with the guts of the man.

As they drove through the town chaos was already taking hold. A lot of the people in the city were various non-combat classes supporting the invasion, and when the leaders and the soldiers fell, pandemonium soon erupted.

No matter where he looked former slaves were rising up against their masters in an all-out brawl. Neither were very powerful, but the slaves didn't seem to care about their lives as they mobbed the foreign invaders like a swarm of angry bees.

Zac didn't have any means to help them out, but after throwing Ogras a look, shadow spears started emerging within a hundred meters of the cars. No matter where one looked Ez'Mahal natives were getting skewered and by the time they left the town hundreds had fallen to Ogras' attacks. Ogras had understood Zac's intent though and only attacked those who were killing Natives.

They followed the directions of Henry as they sped through the roads, heading toward the closest plantation. According to the butler, around ten thousand slaves were working there. Zac couldn't understand how a plantation could need so much manpower, but when he understood why he was livid.

The Ez'Mahal possessed an extremely sinister array to speed up the growth of the plants. A slave was needed to continuously infuse the array with energy, and the energy helped the herbs grow faster. But it didn't only sap the slaves of their energy, it also slowly sapped them of their life force.

They even had special cultivation manuals that were extremely efficient in restoring lost Cosmic Energy, but in turn were essentially useless in progressing in levels since it harmed one's foundations. They forced any slaves who were cultivators to swap to this manual and used them to feed the most precious herbs.

Not only did that help the Ez'Mahal to harvest the plants far quicker than usual, but it also prevented rebellion. The slaves were always so drained that they could barely stand, let alone fight in an insurrection.

The group drove for roughly 30 minutes on a newly constructed road until the forests gave way to an enormous field spanning god knows how large an area. They didn't even see it all due to some fields having plants reaching a few meters into the air, but it had to be at least dozens of football fields large.

“Is all this on Spiritual Soil?” Zac asked with wide eyes.

“I am not too knowledgeable about what Spiritual Soil is, but the actual area with the better soil is even larger than this,” Henry said after thinking it over. “Deforestation has been ongoing since the integration to open up more farmland. But apparently, the soil is littered with solid rock, and they have been forced to move a mountain’s worth of boulders to clear it.”

As they entered the plantation Zac soon noted mats placed through the fields, and on some of them people were sitting, seemingly in meditation. But at other spots people were aimlessly wandering with confusion and hesitation in their eyes.

They approached a large mansion that was almost in the middle of the fields, and Zac’s brows rose when he saw it was surrounded by people. They looked emaciated but spirited, holding everything from wooden clubs to large rocks in their hands.

Unfortunately, the car Zac and the others sat in was a stolen Ez’Mezal vehicle and the moment they approached they were pelted by rocks as the revolting slaves closed in on them. Henry’s eyes widened in alarm, but Ogras only snorted as he stepped out.

The smarter slaves quickly stopped in their tracks when they saw the demon’s appearance, but the most irate slaves didn’t even register the set of horns on Ogras’ head.

“Don’t kill anyone,” Zac said as he stepped out as well.

The next moment the slaves had frozen in place, with everyone who still held a weapon in their hand having a shadow spear trained on their throat or hearts. Resistance immediately crumbled in the face of overwhelming power, and the rebels quickly discarded their makeshift weaponry.

“We are not part of the Ez’Mahal. We are their enemies. Where are the leaders who ran this place?” Zac asked with a loud voice.

“They ran in that way!” a woman shouted, pointed in the direction of the woods with anger. “They took everything they could carry as well. Treasures and herbs! We had no way to stop them or keep up with their speed.”

“How long ago?” Zac asked.

“Fifteen minutes ago,” she said with a note of uncertainty.

Zac looked over at Ogras, who nodded and suddenly got swallowed in shadows, disappearing from sight. Zac probably possessed the speed to run them down as well, but he was pretty bad at tracking. Ogras was even faster than he was, and his skill set was far more suited for assassinating the slavedrivers.

Those who remained hesitantly looked at Zac, their eyes occasionally darting toward their weapons again. But a burst of his bloodsoaked aura quelled any thoughts of resuming their rebellion.

Zac coughed and repeated the same story to this set of slaves, about who he was and what had happened. This time no one had seen the battle in the Grand Escape, so convincing the plantation slaves about the situation wasn't quite as simple. But the flight of all the Ez'Mezal personnel was a clear indicator that what Zac said wasn't without merit.

“What now?” one woman suddenly asked. “Where is the government? Will they help us?”

“I am sorry, but no,” Zac said, realizing that these people likely had no idea what was going on with Earth.

“The governments have all fallen, and a few new ones have taken their place,” Zac said. “Around 15% of the world's population remains, the rest have fallen to Incursions or wild beasts. Desperate battles are taking place all over the world.

“My armies are currently marching against a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Yes, literal zombies like in the movies,” Zac said. “There is even an old monster heading toward Earth, a being so strong that he can destroy a whole city with a punch.”

“So there is nowhere I can take you all. And honestly, even if I could, why would I? It costs a fortune to teleport someone, and the world has become too massive and dangerous to travel by road or air. But you are welcome to stay here. We are currently rooting out the last of the invaders, but this area will be part of my sphere of influence, and it will be somewhat safe at least,” Zac finished.

Hopelessness filled the eyes of the people gathered in front of him. Many had likely dreamt of being saved by the government, followed by a return to normalcy. But such a thing no longer existed on this planet, and it wouldn't return until their place in the universe was secured through strength.

“Will we be forced to continue using these arrays?” the woman who pointed out where the overseer fled asked.

“No one should be using those things,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “From what I understand they will sap your life force, slowly killing you.”

The colors of the faces in front of him turned noticeably better when they learned that they wouldn't have to slave in the arrays any longer though. Zac sighed when he saw their weak erratic auras, and the next moment a small hill of Nexus Crystals appeared in front of him.

“Each of you take one,” Zac said. “If you don't know, these are Nexus Crystals. They are used for either restoring one's energy or gaining levels. There is no side-effect to using them, but they aren't as effective for gaining levels as killing beasts.”

The slaves hesitantly looked at the mound of crystals for a bit until a few of them stepped forward. Zac noted that some of them were around level 15 to 22, and likely Cultivators. These people had probably been caught the moment they returned from the Tutorial, and barely had any progress since then due to the cultivation manual they were forced to use.

Since everything was dealt with for now he took out a chair to wait for Ogras, and he fielded any questions the people in front of him had. As the minutes passed more and more people were joining, especially after Zac told a few people to gather those out on the fields.

There were still quite a few who were still infusing their arrays, afraid that the odd situation might be a trap to trick them. But soon over a thousand people had gathered in front of him, each clinging to a Nexus Crystal as though it was a heavenly treasure.

“In the next few days, I will open up a store in the town. You can buy more Nexus Crystals there, or anything else you may need. From supplies to weapons and armor,” Zac said. “We only take Nexus Coins though.”

“Most of us barely have any coins at all, how will we survive?” one of the braver men asked.

“Port Atwood will provide for everyone for a limited time, but sooner or later you will have to provide for yourselves. You can either get jobs or hunt monsters for Nexus Coins and materials,” Zac explained.

“What can we even do? You’re level 74, but most of us aren’t even level 10. We weren’t allowed to gain levels, any energy we managed to gather went straight into these god damn plants,” another man grunted.

“It hasn’t even been a year since the integration took place. I am sure it has felt like an eternity to you, but in terms of the multiverse, it is nothing. If you manage to upgrade your race to E-Grade your lifespan will increase to 500 years. Upgrade it again you will live for thousands of years. What are a few months lost?” Zac retorted.

“The means to upgrade your race will be available for purchase in our shops. Even Mortals can evolve their race,” Zac continued. “But you should know that nothing in this world comes free. Only those who struggle and gain enough resources will be able to afford the treasures needed.”

Quite a few of the haggard slaves perked up at Zac’s explanation. A fire rekindled in their eyes, shining with determination to overcome their current situation. However, Zac sighed when he saw that most of them were still downcast. But at least he gave a few of them something to strive for.

Not much later Ogras returned with a lazy expression, his eyes flashing with a hint of disdain as he looked at how the slaves clutched their Nexus Crystals.

“I thought you would want to see this,” Ogras said as fifteen heads thumped down on the ground. “This should be the leaders of this place. I didn’t bother with the heads of the others.”

Chapter 305: War

“The hordes will arrive in our designated War Zone in eight days. We expect the second horde to come in contact with the coalition of Port Atwood and the Sino-Indians two days later,” Mark said as he looked down at the map.

Mark was a distant uncle to Thea, and he was assigned as her primary advisor for the upcoming war. The middle aged man was a seasoned veteran of the Royal Air Force and a decorated general, so it was no surprise that he would be calling the shots in the battle against the undead. Officially he was only here in an advisory role though, with Thea being the figurehead.

Still, she wanted to understand as much as she could even if she might not be the real strategist of the war. A lot of people would die in the upcoming weeks, some as a direct result of her commands. She owed it to them to do everything she could to keep that number as low as possible.

“Why don’t we immediately fight them?” Thea asked with a frown. “We’re giving them free rein over hundreds of miles of land.”

“For one we want them as far away as possible from the Incursion,” Mark explained as he pointed toward the edge of the Dead Zone. “The geeks have surmised that these hordes are large enough to affect the area, changing the Cosmic Energy into miasma at a rate higher than they consume.

“But our goal is to splinter the horde and whittle them down, turning the horde into smaller groups that won’t have this benefit. If we can bring the units beneath the critical mass needed to maintain the transformation we can starve them out. Even if they turn back at that time they will have a week’s travel before they can resupply on miasma,” the general said as he scratched his beard.

“But they will destroy all the towns in their path,” Thea muttered.

“Small price to pay. Besides, we have evacuated most of the people living in the path toward us,” Mark said.

“How long do you think this war will take?” Thea asked, her thoughts heading to Zac.

“At least a month,” Mark said with some hesitation. “Problem is we can’t tell how many elite warriors they have, and that will affect the speed at which can dismantle the horde. They have a thick layer of trash out at the edges, and the cloud of miasma blocks our vision of what hides in the core.”

“How many Incursions do you think their team will be able to close in that time?” Thea asked, interested in hearing the opinion of a war veteran.

“I wouldn’t know, girl. You know his strength better than me. But it seems they want to keep the land they claim, and that will take far more time than the battle,” Mark said with a snort. “Port Atwood is about to get a real headache on their hands.”

“You know, you will need a better strategy than simply running interference,” Ilvere’s voice said as he walked inside the tent.

“What?” Alea said with confusion, once again looking down at the map detailing the progress of the undead horde.

“Lord Atwood,” Ilvere guffawed, drawing an even stare from the poison mistresses. “I heard about your little stalking over in that human town. You even sent the little blue one to ruin the mood, no?”

“That is none of your business. Besides, it was to avoid letting that woman taking advantage of us,” Alea said.

“I’m sure,” Ilvere snorted as he walked over to the table. “You should know that our cultures are different. I could simply beat up the others to court Lady Alyn, but that sort of approach seems to make the humans angry.”

“I don’t understand what you see in that bloodthirsty lunatic,” Alea said with a shake of his head.

“Perhaps I simply like living on the edge,” Ilvere smiled.

Alea rolled her eyes before she looked down at the table in silence a few seconds, as if in deep thought.

“Am I a fool for pursuing this?” Alea suddenly asked.

“Following one’s heart is never foolish,” Ilvere said.

“When did you become so wise?” Alea said, some humor returning to her eyes.

“Well, I wasn’t blessed with a rich daddy nor a pretty face, so I had to use my head for my conquests,” Ilvere grinned before once again looking down at the map. “So what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that we will have to work a lot without pay. These things will barely bring any money per kill,” Alea sighed. “At least it will temper this pathetic excuse for an army.”

“If you think ours is bad you should see the ones from that other force,” Ilvere said with disgust. “It’s no wonder their countries became food for the undead.”

“What do you mean?” Alea asked with confusion. “Our reports say their armies are almost three hundred thousand men strong, with more joining every day.”

“A large group of trash,” Ilvere said. “Armed with pre-integration weaponry. Most are below level 10. They will probably just turn into even more zombies to kill. And all that energy and money being left on the table. I’d say that only fifty thousand or so are proper warriors, though their levels aren’t anything impressive.”

“What about the two elites that are on the ladder?” Alea asked.

“They act like they’re gods, but I’d be able to fight them both to a draw with my restrictions in place,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head.

“About the restrictions,” Alea slowly prodded. “Did you...?”

“Yeah, I got the quest. As did Janos,” Ilvere said. “But completing our mission comes first.”

“Agreed, but if we see the opportunity,” Alea said, drawing a nod from the demon general.

“And if those two get in the way?”

“Then they can join the Undead General in hell,” Alea said with equanimity.

“If you were only this assertive with your private life,” Ilvere said with a final laugh as he left the tent, holding his breath to avoid the wave of poison that followed him out.

“Thank you as always, Miss Sui,” Ling Tian said as he stood up.

“You should rest some more,” Sui said as she looked at the back of her new team leader with worry.

He looked fine but Sui knew that he was anything but. His whole body was a maze of scars from countless battles with the undead.

“I might not be a cultivator but I can gain strength with these two hands,” Ling Tian said, tightening his fist. “More importantly, every Zombie we kill now will be one less to rampage across the settlements in the coming weeks. This is the final battle.”

“But you need to be alive to keep protecting the people,” Sui sighed.

“Haven’t you read the stories?” Ling Tian said with a youthful smile as he stood up to rejoin the battle. “The hero always starts out as a weakling, but soon grows into prominence.”

Sui didn’t know what to say as she saw the receding form of Ling Tian, unsure whether it was her place to butt in. She knew that many made fun of Ling Tian for his chosen name or what they perceived as a vain attempt of playing the hero.

But she truly felt he was a hero. He wasn’t overly strong, yet he dared to risk his life over and over. Who knew how many he had saved over the past months, relentlessly keeping the

undead at bay in the area around Eastern Hills. That in of itself was a great achievement. After all, he was not like that man.

Ling Tian was not able to single-handedly mow through an army with a swing of his axe, and his aura wasn't as vast as the sea.

Suddenly, as if summoned by her thoughts she saw the hunched-over form of Wang Fang walking by. By now he was only a shell of the man he once was, with his cheeks sunken and dark circles under his eyes. The aura of life around him had long turned a murky yellow, compared to the vibrant gold that she usually saw around people. He was not long for the world.

“Enjoying the effects of your boyfriend’s scheming?” Wang Fang growled when he noticed Sui’s glance.

“David told you the water was poisoned and warned everyone not to drink it,” Sui said with annoyance, having repeated the same thing untold times.

It wasn't only his body that had warped, but so had Wang Fang's mind. His actions against David had caused the Monastery to speak out against him in the end, causing their whole hunting squad to become pariahs in the whole eastern border of the Dead Zone.

But not once had Wang Fang looked inward to his own failings, and instead squarely put all the blame on the man who called himself David. Of those who had ignored David's warning and partook in the cursed water, only Wang Fang was still alive.

Their group had no choice but to travel to a settlement far away to avoid the angry mob wanting to curry favor with the Abbot. But they were soon driven out again due to Wang Fang's infamy and irascible personality. It was only at Ling Tian's town Eastern Hills they found sanctuary. Ling Tian took anyone in as long as they were ready to fight the undead threat.

“I might die soon, but that man might join the war. I will drag that schemer with me to hell if it's the last thing I do,” Wang

Fang growled after throwing Sui one last glance, walking away toward his tent.

“The next time we meet David will be the day he dies,” a condescending voice said from behind. “How does he still not realize who he is?”

Sui looked back at John, one of the few westerners who had lived in the Dead Zone since the beginning.

“The poisonous water has made him irrational and paranoid. He doesn’t believe people when they explain how the description of the Super Brother-Man in King’s Crossing perfectly matches David,” Sui said with some helplessness.

But she wondered, would he be in the army they were heading toward?

“Your Eminence, the town of Port Atwood has once again arrived to check up on our status. Do you wish to meet with them?” the elderly monk asked after opening the doors to the secluded courtyard.

Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed as he looked up at the sky. Ribbons of gold crossed the sky above him, making him feel both wonder and despair. Everything would come to an end, but would he truly be able to sever it? Should he?

Was this truly the correct path toward enlightenment?

Brother Stillness looked at the wistful expression on the usually serene face, and worry started to mar his ancient face. He had assisted the Abbot for decades, and he had never seen such an expression.

“Your eminence...?” elder Stillness said with concern as he took a hesitant step toward the pond. “Is it the yin creatures? The mountain will provide sanctuary.”

“Brother Stillness, do you remember when we were young?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly said as he looked at the elder monk across the pond. “This penniless monk ate the Yumberries that elder Small Mountain had grown with meticulous care behind his abode.”

“When this one scurried away he noticed Brother Stillness sitting in a tree not far away, witnessing the theft. Yet when asked by elder Small Mountain Brother Stillness lied and said you ate them. Was this lie good or bad?”

The elder’s long wispy brows rose in surprise before he donned a thoughtful look.

“Lying is not only harming others, but it is also harming one’s self. It is a corruption of the path, and the Buddha decreed lying to be against one the moral precepts,” elder Stillness said before he bowed in thanks. “Amitabha. Only through self-reflection can one find the path.”

Abbot smiled as he looked at the ribbons once more, his eyes turning toward the 5 Pitch-Black ones rising into the cosmos from various corners of the continent. Next, his eyes moved toward the Silver ribbon inlaid with countless fractals, which as usual thrummed with recognition when it was being observed. He once again sighed and looked back down at his old friend.

“Small Mountain was not truly harmed by my theft. He never intended to eat them himself, and chalked it up to the berries going to their fateful owners,” Abbot Everlasting Peace smiled as he caressed the thick golden line connecting himself and elder Stillness. “Yet the shelter you provided a young scared acolyte proved to become a gesture that this penniless monk remembers even 80 years later.”

The old monk looked a bit confused at the Abbot’s exclamation. Was this a karmic lesson, or was the Abbot simply reminiscing? But he didn’t have the chance to inquire as the old Abbot suddenly rose to his feet for the first time in months.

“Abbot..! Your wound..?” Stillness exclaimed with worry, though he couldn’t hide the excitement in his eyes.

“What will come to be, will be,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said, stepping out from the lotus.

Small ripples expanded on the pond as the abbot stepped on the water surface as though it was solid ground. But that

wasn't what truly shocked the old monk.

The magical Zen Treasure that Abbot had sat upon for months in order to recuperate started glowing and changing the moment that the Abbot stepped down from it. The flower radiated a holy light as it rose from the pond, and flew up to position itself behind the Abbot.

As Everlasting Peace walked across the pond golden Sanskrit started to appear in a script across the flower, which itself turned into a holy white. In just seconds it had turned into a Buddhist halo, with dense writings covering its every surface.

As brother Stillness' eyes read the lines his mind turned blank for a second, before he felt an unprecedented clarity. His eyes, full of understanding, quickly moved to meet the Abbot's, who only smiled in response. Excitement filled brother Stillness' heart for a second, but it soon was suffused by a deep sadness.

"Your eminence, this means...?!" he hesitantly asked.

"What will be, will be."

Chapter 306: The Tal-Eladar

It took Zac three days to bring a semblance of order to Verdant Fields, which was the new name given to Grand Escape. The old name simply had too many bad memories associated with it. He initially wanted to head straight to the next Incursion the same day, but he soon realized he had to give up on that plan.

First of all the warriors needed rest. They weren't like Zac with his monstrous attributes. They had truly risked their lives in the battle, and most of the demons had various degrees of wounds, notwithstanding the high-quality gear that Zac lent them.

It was easy to forget that they had charged into an army of hundreds of men with less than twenty people, even though they were just a little bit stronger than the defenders. It was almost a miracle that no one died. Of course, chalking it up to just luck was oversimplifying it. They had arrived with monstrous momentum, and between Zac, Ogras, and Billy the enemies' lines completely collapsed before they could mount a resistance.

Apart from rest and post-battle meditation to consolidate the Dao, there was also the need to consolidate the area. Verdant Fields was in the center of a region with extreme potential value, and Gredas, the old demonkin farmer, had immediately rushed over when he heard about the huge fields of Spiritual Soil.

They had quickly decided to transplant a large amount of the soil to Port Atwood and its neighboring farming islands, but this place would likely become the agricultural headquarters of his empire in the future. The herbs that were currently growing would be able to be used for medicinal baths, something that would be in extremely high demand on earth the coming decades as people tried to evolve their race.

But restoring order to the area was easier said than done. There was not only the issue of clothing, feeding, and treating thousands upon thousands of liberated slaves, but they also needed to set up a working governing body. All while hunting the Ez'Mezal warriors who still hid in the population.

Zac had made fleeing Earth impossible in his fit of rage, but that had also left them with the headache of finding the invaders. This wasn't like the golem Incursion where it was extremely easy to figure out who the enemies were, since the foreign invaders from the Ez'Mahal Empire were able to blend in with a change of clothes.

They were forced to bring over the array that Ogras had used to find the shapeshifters, but by the time they got the array running most had already left the area.

The one thing that made their lives a bit easier was how quickly the non-combat classes had given up, and they hadn't caused any problem so far. Their people came from an empire completely based on slave labor, so a force being defeated and its people turned into slaves happened every day. It was lucky as well that they adapted to the situation so quickly, since there were tens of thousands of them.

Zac was shocked at the count, as the number of people far eclipsed what the demons brought to his island. Usually, the incursions weren't too populous since it cost Nexus Coins to send everyone over, but non-combat classes were far cheaper compared to powerhouses.

But the biggest reason there were so many of them was that the invaders gained its first round of reinforcements not long ago. It was inevitable that the incursions would be able to bolster their ranks within the first year, but Zac was still a bit disappointed that it had already happened. It didn't really affect them in this battle, but he had a feeling that they simply got lucky this time.

The Ez'Mahal had no strong enemies in the area, and Earth's performance hadn't impressed anyone so far. Zac, Billy, and Thea were the only ones who had defeated their neighboring Incursions, and Zac's feat wasn't even publicly known. They

likely hadn't felt there was any need to bolster their troops in the short run, and instead sent over personnel to manage the slaves and help extract everything of value in the area.

Currently, the vast number of non-combat people were separated from the former slaves, and their expertise and actions were being tallied by his army. They needed proper insight into what they were dealing with here.

As things started to get under control with the help of the personnel from Port Atwood, Zac and the others started to turn their eyes toward the next target. He and the others of the strike force were currently sitting in a conference room in Thanso's former mansion, planning their next step.

"Things are mostly settled here," Ogras said from the other side of the table. "Which one have you decided on next?"

Zac looked around the room and saw a wide range of emotions. The demons looked eager as ever, perhaps since two of them had managed to improve a Dao Seed after the battle. Apparently, one's connection to the Dao also improved when one evolved, though Zac didn't know if that also applied to himself with his weird constitution.

The Valkyries sat with stone-cold eyes full of determination. The pitiful lives of the slaves in the area had rekindled the buried memories of their own fates in Greenworth, and they wanted to keep fighting to free others who had been enslaved. For them the battles weren't about resources or improvement, but about liberation.

Emily had returned to her happy-go-lucky self. She had been shaken by the evil perpetrated in Verdant Green before they reclaimed it, but she had channeled that shock and rage into her desire to become stronger. And she was currently riding the powerleveling train that was Zac.

His rampage had actually awarded her almost two levels. Curiously enough she gained almost all of it from the weaker soldiers, whereas the death of the incursion leader awarded her next to nothing. It was at that point Ogras explained that she got a penalty due to the level difference, just like Zac gained no energy for killing weaker beasts by now.

It was a way to avoid too blatant exploitation. But the result was still above expectation since she gained quite a bit of Cosmic Energy without lifting her fingers. It wasn't even impossible that she'd be able to break into the ladder if she followed Zac for a month or two.

"The one with the elves," Zac said, taking out one of the intelligence missives. "It's another force that has actively hunted outside their region for slaves. But this one isn't run by trash. They have some sort of detection arrays, and their defensive array is perpetually running. We will not be able to ambush them."

Ogras grabbed hold of the stack of information with a frown.

"The Tal-Eladar," he said, causing some blood lust to leak from the demonic soldiers. "I do not recognize their crest, though."

The Tal-Eladar wasn't truly elves, but Marshall clan informally called them that due to their appearance. They had long pointed ears that slightly drooped at their tip and lithe frames, which brought to mind elves from fantasy stories. However, there were some differences between elves and the humanoids in the incursion.

First of all their eyes looked a bit creepy according to the report, and a comment likened them to goat's eyes, with oblong horizontal pupils and no sclera. Their teeth were also sharp, meaning they didn't live on morning dew and fruits like elves in the stories did.

Their actions of constant expansion and raids weren't very reminiscent of the harmonious bearing of the woodland people either. While the Ez'Mahal had been somewhat content with tending to their massive plantations the Tal-Eladar had increased the size of their Incursion three-fold since the initial push. It was nowhere near the actions of the Undead Empire, but it was still a large-scale conquest.

That was one of the main reasons why Zac chose this incursion. The Ez'Mahal was targeted for the combination of the horrible treatment of natives with their weak force. The Tal-Eladar were instead targeted for their constant expansion.

Every time they conquered a new town more people would be enslaved or killed, and nipping it in the bud as quickly as possible was important to stop their expansion.

But what Zac didn't expect was the reaction of the demons in the conference room.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"The Tal-Eladar and the demonkin are in an almost perpetual war in our sector," Ogras explained. "You remember how Clan Azh'Rezak makes their money as mercenaries? Our progenitor was a mercenary who made his name in a war against these people. In fact, most of our elders and veterans have fought in wars against the Tal-Eladar."

"So it's a racial thing," Zac said. "Well, we will still go by the standard plan. We will see how they have treated people. If it's like here, then they will get the same treatment. If they have acted within limits then we will let them leave, no matter your bad blood."

The demons looked a bit unwilling, but soon they acquiesced.

"Good. I don't want to have to lug around the Origin Array everywhere to hunt dissidents," Zac said as he turned to Billy who was sitting by one of the ends of the table with a vacant stare.

"Billy, will you be able to fight?" Zac probed.

"Ah?" Billy said, waking with a start. "Billy can fight."

"Good. We are going to another bad place, just like this place was," Zac said. "We need you to thwunk their shield. Like you did in the hunt to save Thea."

Billy seriously nodded.

"Mama always said the strong need to help others. Billy will help save the people."

"Good," Zac said. "Is there anything else that needs to be done here?"

"Everything is dealt with, except our lack of experts is making itself shown," Ogras said with a sigh. "We don't have anyone

strong enough to hold down the fort.”

“I don’t want anyone to defend this place to their deaths,” Zac said. “If someone wants to take this piece of land, let them. I will make them give it back, and then some, after we’re done with the Incursions. But I don’t want to leave these people to their fates if I can help them.”

“We do not need too large defending forces for now,” Ogras agreed. “I doubt anyone on this baby planet can block teleporters or perform other advanced siege tactics. But we simply do not possess the man-power if we wish to run a dozen spheres of influence from all the Incursions we will conquer.”

“I think we can make use of the people here,” Joanna interjected.

A few of the demons threw her a dismissive glance. It wasn’t a dig at the Valkyrie, but rather about what they thought of the liberated humans. And it was true, there was not a single competent warrior as far as the eye could see. The Ez’Mahal had made sure of that. But Joanna ignored the looks and pressed on.

“I don’t mean for defenses, but running the places. We only need a small number of people to act as the police, while we set up a local government. It wasn’t like we needed the army in every city in the old days, right? That butler who has helped us can be the mayor or something,” she explained.

“I agree,” Zac slowly nodded. “Port Atwood has grown by incorporating new people from the beginning. There’s no reason not to continue doing the same here. But that leaves the issue of the tens of thousands of non-combatant captives.”

“Why not just keep them as slaves?” Ogras shrugged.
“They’re already mentally prepared for it.”

Joanna and the other Valkyries in the room were visibly upset at the prospect of Port Atwood turning into a force utilizing slavery, and Zac frowned as well. But he honestly didn’t have any better ideas. He couldn’t simply kill them all, and sending

them back was impossible since the Nexus Hubs were inactive.

At first, he considered sending them to isolated islands in his Archipelago where they could work for Port Atwood without the risk of them fleeing, but he knew that was just slavery with extra steps.

“I know many empires in the multiverse don’t condone slavery, what do they do in cases like these?” Zac asked.

“Well, simply throwing them off the claimed territory is pretty common. What happens then is none of their concern. Most simply become fugitives settling in other areas on the planet. But the most common thing is doing nothing. It doesn’t matter who sits at the top for the common people, life is mostly the same for them in either case,” Ogras said.

“Our situation is a bit more complicated than that though, no?” Zac sighed. “If I simply released everyone then the people of Earth would be furious, and I would be marked as a traitor in no time. And I refuse to release the soldiers or anyone who has stepped over the line in the treatment of the people of Earth.”

“What about this?” Ogras said after some thought. “They all are from this Ez’Mahal Empire, right? That means that they should be able to use the Nexus Hub to return there when the hubs open. Just have them work for passage until then. They will also be assigned a debt according to their actions in the invasions. This debt will partly go to us and partly to the victims as compensation.”

Zac slowly considered the proposition as he threw a glance at the Valkyries. They seemed to be mostly fine with Ogras’ suggestion, and Zac knew he wouldn’t be able to think of something better in the short run. But suddenly something in Ogras’ explanation hinted at another possibility.

“Wait, they will be able to return there? Doesn’t that mean that you all will be able to go back when the hubs activate? More importantly, will you be able to come back here afterward?”

Chapter 307: Finality

Zac's mind couldn't help going down various venues of betrayal when he realized that the demons weren't as cut off from their homeworld as Ogras had initially led him to believe. What if Ogras' Grandfather came stomping through Earth in 99 years as a result of the scheming of the demons of Port Atwood?

"Where did that innocent wide-eyed youth go?" Ogras sighed in mock exasperation as he noted Zac's look. "Here, look at this."

The next moment a screen appeared in front of the demon. It was the part of the status screen that showed his alignment, and it actually said Port Atwood. It didn't provide any title though, like his own status screen that also denoted him as lord.

"I've already told you, we have cut ties with our homeworld. To be able to use the Nexus Hub you would need to maintain your allegiance," Ogras explained.

"What about the other demons? Not all of them stayed on earth voluntarily," Zac probed, not ready to completely drop the subject.

"I have it all in hand. There are a few who maintain the old alignment, but as long as they work for us it doesn't matter. Worst case they'll have an accident before the world gets properly integrated," Ogras shrugged. "Besides, I don't think that's how it works."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked.

"From what I understand it's a one-way ticket for those who have failed their invasion, but managed to survive for a hundred years on a hostile planet. A reward of sorts, I suppose," Ogras explained.

Zac slowly nodded but made a mental note that he would have to research how things worked from a second source as well. He knew that interplanetary travel was prohibitively expensive, but most D-Grade powerhouses should have no problem to teleport themselves in case they felt the potential pay-off was large enough.

“In any case, this might also be a good opportunity to recruit some people,” Ogras continued. “Just like there were people like us who wanted to stay behind, so are there likely people from the Ez’Mahal who wouldn’t mind becoming Earthlings. I can’t imagine a great fate is awaiting these people if they return to the Ez’Mahal Confederation.”

“We can’t recruit these slavers!” Joanna immediately interjected. “Not imprisoning them is bad enough.”

“Girl, I know you had a rough start of it, but one needs to be pragmatic to survive. You are part of the multiverse now, and the only law is the law of the jungle,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “So what if they kept slaves? It was their right as the strong. And if you get strong enough you can kill all of them without anyone speaking up in their defense.”

Joanna only unwillingly glared at Ogras, clearly not convinced by his argument.

“We’ll go with labor for reduced merits for now,” Zac finally concluded. “We’ll revisit the issue of formally incorporating the willing people at a later date, depending on how they behave. For now, is there anything else we need to do before we can head out toward the Tal-Eladar?”

“I would like to draft two hundred million Nexus Coins from Port Atwood’s coffers,” Gredas said, speaking up for the first time since the meeting began, as his only interest was agriculture. “I need your permission for that.”

“Two hundred million?” Zac exclaimed with wide eyes.

“That’s not a small sum. What do you need it for?”

“The Spiritual Soil we will transplant to Port Atwood could become a true moneymaker for us,” Gredas said when he noted Zac’s shock. “You are approaching E-Grade, and in

another year or two most elites of this planet will start evolving. The demand for medicinal baths will explode, and it will only keep growing.

“I want to plant huge fields of Spiritual Grass to prepare for that. But we need to buy seedlings and better arrays to get production going,” the demon farmer said, enthusiasm shining in his eyes. “It will give a return your investment tenfold within a few years, and it will just keep giving as long as we control the Nexus Vein.”

Zac slowly mulled it over. Two hundred million was less than he privately held, but it was still a large chunk of the free resources of Port Atwood. And agriculture was only one of the many expenses that the town faced. Who knew how much it would cost to integrate all these Zones that he was about to conquer?

But Zac also knew that you needed to spend money to make money. All that money would come back into his town coffers, which essentially was his own money. If worse came to worst he could simply pillage and loot a few more incursions to make up for it.

“Fine, but you will have to make a proper budget to show what you need everything for. We are not in a position to waste any money at the moment,” Zac agreed.

With that, the meeting was over, and everyone was given two hours to prepare their gear. Zac didn’t need to do anything at the moment and simply went back to Port Atwood to have dinner with his sister.

Kenzie almost continuously stayed in the cultivation cave nowadays, since her AI allowed her to make tremendous improvements. No energy was wasted between the calculating power of the small chip and the improved cultivation manual that Kenzie utilized.

Zac only returned to Verdant Green ten minutes before the deadline, and the others were already waiting. The laidback manner of the demons was gone, replaced with bloodlust and determination. It appeared that old habits die hard, and they

still carried their inherited grudges even if they had cut ties with Clan Azh'Rezak.

Zac activated the teleporter, and they soon arrived at their destination. It was a large hall without windows, and only two young men sat by a table at one side of the room, looking fidgety.

"Thank god you're here," a man immediately said as he hurried over when he saw Zac and the others appear. "The town is being raided as we speak!"

"Raided? By the invaders?" Zac asked with some surprise.

"We believe they found out that this small town possessed a teleportation array and is used for intelligence gathering. Their force is a lot bigger compared to the usual raiding parties that they use to capture new workers," the young man frantically explained.

"We're almost out of crystals to maintain our shield, and it has only been three hours," the other man added. "We have sent requests for aid from headquarters, but their resources are all tied up in the war with the undead. We have been instructed to start evacuation in twenty minutes."

"How many are there?" Ogras asked as he walked up next to Zac.

"Around three hundred warriors, and many of them are stronger than their normal combatants. They also have over a thousand of their huge wolf-things with them," the guard explained.

"Tal-Eladar and their god damn war beasts," one of the demons muttered, making Zac shoot a questioning glance at Ogras.

"Well, the main reasons our family keep a bunch of Barghest and Gwyllgi is because the Tal-Eladar is extremely adept at beast mastery," Ogras explained. "Their beasts are stronger and better controlled, so we can only try to lessen the impact with waves of dumb barghest. Better our fodder dies to the war beasts than our warriors."

“So what do you think we should do with this army?” Zac asked.

It wasn't that Zac was unsure whether they could defeat the army outside the gates, but rather that he wasn't sure if it was the right move. His tactic was to hit fast and hard with a small squad before the enemy could prepare themselves, and decimating an army would hamper that strategy.

“Good opportunity to gather some up-to-date intelligence,” Ogras said with a spurious smile, though the killing intent was palpable in the room.

“Won't it be a problem if they find out we're here?” Zac hesitantly said.

It was unethical, but perhaps it was better to let this town fall if it meant that they could attack the incursion unnoticed.

“The intelligence report was clearly flawed. It never mentioned this large an amount of war beasts. We probably have no chance of succeeding in a surprise attack as it stands, those things are like scouts,” Ogras said. “We might as well weaken their forces a bit. An attack like this should be led by one of their generals, and killing him would make our lives easier.”

Zac finally agreed and the troop streamed out of the Marshall Clan headquarters that hid the teleporter. As they exited the building they immediately spotted a large number of people standing on a square, fearfully looking in the same direction. It was the townspeople who were likely waiting to be teleported out if things went sideways.

Zac's eyes followed theirs and saw a large shimmering shield that continuously shuddered from attacks. It was clear, however, that they were content on slowly draining the power of the defenses, rather than forcefully breaking it like Billy usually did. This tactic was much slower, but it also didn't waste any resources.

“I can handle this alone,” Zac said. “No need for others to expend their energy.”

Ogras seemed fine with it, but the other demons were rearing for battle. However, a look from Zac made them look down. Zac's overbearing strength made them pretty much consider him a powerhouse of an earlier generation, and they wouldn't dare speak against him even if they had recently evolved.

"You'll get all the battle you wish for, and more, before the month is over," Zac said as he flashed away toward the gate.

It only took him a minute to reach the newly erected wall, where he saw a few soldiers stood trying to kill at least a few of the beast swarming right outside the shield. But the Tal-Eladar easily intercepted the ranged attacks, allowing the beasts rake the shield unimpeded.

The animals were one size larger than even the barghest, and he understood why the guard called them wolves earlier. These things likely weighed as much as a bison, but they possessed a far more balanced build allowing for both power and agility.

However, their faces didn't exactly look like wolves, but rather like the head of enormous vampire bats. They possessed two wide pointed ears, and pitch-black eyes. The nose was pretty flat, and beneath was a large fanged maw. Its paws possessed nasty claws as well, and judging by the powerful aura the animals emitted they would have no problem ripping a person in two with one casual swipe.

"Who are you, head to the square with the others!" a guard captain exclaimed with some shock when he noted that Zac had appeared next to him out of nowhere. "We might need to evacuate you all at moment's notice."

"I'm the reinforcement," Zac calmly explained. "Do you know who the leader of their army is?"

"Reinforcement? You alone?" the grizzled captain said with some doubt.

Zac only sighed as he leaked some of his aura.

"I'm sorry about that," he hurriedly said with a pale face as he involuntarily took a step back.

"It's fine," Zac shrugged. "Their leader?"

“We think it’s that guy with a green band on his arm at eleven o’clock,” the captain said, not directly pointing him out of fear of alerting the man. “He singlehandedly routed our try at breaking out and culling these animals. We lost half our men in five minutes.”

“Thank you,” Zac said with a somber expression, and the next moment he disappeared again.

A monstrous killing intent suddenly billowed out in the middle of the animal pack as Zac appeared with **[Verun’s Bite]** in his hand. Any thoughts of right and wrong that had plagued him the past days were completely suppressed, replaced with ruthless finality.

The frenzied roars of the war beasts were soon replaced with pained wails, and just a few minutes later the sounds of battle were replaced with an eerie silence. Zac stood alone in a field of blood and viscera, his robe fluttering in the wind, completely untouched by the carnage.

One Tal’Eladar warrior was all that remained, and he was lying on the ground with extremely bad wounds. The arm with a green band was lying a few meters away, still gripping a broken spear. The rest were all dead or having fled fast enough for Zac to not bother with them.

A whole army dying would be immediately noted by a proper force like the Tal-Eladar, and they likely already knew that the army had fallen through the use of life-bound talismans. Catching each and every soldier wouldn’t really stop the news from reaching the Incursion, so Zac had opted to not pursue the fleeing soldiers.

“Who are you? This world shouldn’t have someone like you,” he said with a wet cough.

“There are no absolutes in the multiverse,” Zac said as looked down at the warrior who had valiantly fought to stop his onslaught. Of course, it had been impossible to completely curtail Zac’s advances, but it had allowed some of his men to retain their lives.

“What will you do with our people?” he weakly asked, obviously understanding what would happen next to the incursion.

“That depends on how you treated our people in captivity,” Zac said.

The humanoid man sighed with relief as he closed his eyes, his last breath slowly leaving his lungs.

From the ramparts the soldiers looked down in awe and horror, unsure whether what sort of Grim Reaper had arrived to their town.

Chapter 308: Verana Tir'Emarel

It didn't take long until the rest of the squad joined Zac on the field of death. Emelie and the Valkyries looked a bit shaken by the carnage that Zac had unleashed, but the demons nodded approvingly. However, there was one demon who didn't look pleased; Ogras.

“When you do something you go all out, don't you?” Ogras said as he appeared a few seconds after the others. “What happened with questioning them? We already knew our intelligence was incomplete, yet you killed or scared off everyone.”

Zac took a deep breath, calm slowly returning to his mind. He felt a bit sheepish after hearing Ogras' admonishment. What he said was completely true. They needed intelligence. But the moment the battle had started he had completely ignored that need, only focusing on killing everything in sight. Any reason to hold back had been discarded with some flimsy justifications, all to be able to keep swinging his axe.

Luckily Ogras acted quickly and caught a warrior who managed to flee the scene. Zac looked at the demon general who looked back with a frown.

“I need a second. Find out anything you can from the man,” Zac said and flashed away with his movement skill.

Ogras' words were a true wake-up call. He had already started to sense it during the last battle, but after this slaughter he was sure. Something was wrong with him, and his bloodlust made him lose control in battle. He quickly moved away to a secluded spot and sat down.

First, he checked his gear and possessions, but nothing seemed out of sorts. The only thing that had changed recently was his

robe, but he sensed no bloodlust from it. It even gave a soothing and calming sensation, and Zac doubted it was the source of his ruthless behavior. Yrial was a bit flakey, but he would have warned him of something like a side-effect.

Suddenly he had a bad premonition as he looked inward. His internal sight quickly moved to the pocket of isolated space in his mind, and the sight made him despair. The miasmic seal that was sealing away the [**Splinter of Oblivion**] had changed, and a small passage leading out of the space had somehow formed.

Weird energies, that Zac only could liken to distilled corruption, slowly seeped out of the crack and blended with his mental energy the moment it emerged. The amount was so small that if he hadn't specifically looked for it there was no way he would have noticed it in the short run.

Zac wanted to slap himself from holding himself back from asking Yrial for any tips of what to do with this cursed thing in his mind. He had thought about it, but eventually he had decided against it out of paranoia. If he had known that the seal would break so soon he would have made the splinter his highest priority.

Different plans to handle the leak cropped up one after another in his mind, but they kept getting rejected for being unfeasible. The power of the splinter was simply too great, and nothing he could get his hands on would be able to block it out. His mental defensive skill was completely crushed by it earlier, and he wouldn't fare much better today even with his recent powerups.

But as he despaired over what to do he noticed something odd. He had initially assumed that the seal was breaking, but a few signs indicated something else was happening. For one it didn't seem like the defensive runes had lost even a smidgeon of their initial power, but instead a few more fractals had formed.

It was through these new fractals that the small amount of corruption seeped out and entered his mind, and even though the tendrils of the splinter desperately tried to wriggle out,

only a small amount of corruption managed to get through. Even more importantly, the corruption that entered his mind was different from that of the splinter. It was, for lack of a better word, dead. There seemed to be no inherent will in it, and it did nothing to spread or take over his mind.

A new theory was quickly formulating in his mind. The true use of the miasmatic formation in his mind wasn't to seal away the Splinter, but rather to absorb it in a controlled manner. The crack wasn't truly a weakness, but a planned opening to let the corruption through after modification.

But the energies were still purified destruction, carrying a hint of the supreme Dao of Oblivion. Even if it wasn't tainted by the inherent will of the Heart of Oblivion it was still energy that was extremely troublesome for Zac to handle. Who knew what sort of effect it would have on his body?

He kept looking for a bit but couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. He could only gather that the change happened recently, likely just before or during the last battle. He would have noticed it otherwise since he checked up on it now and then.

It also was a relief of sorts, since the change in the fractals somewhat indicated that the Draugr woman was an ally rather than yet another enemy. He had initially considered the possibility that she placed the fractals in his mind to safeguard the splinter until she could rip it out of his head. But that felt less likely now that it seemed that she had devised a way for him to absorb it for himself.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" Ogras voice was suddenly heard from behind, making Zac look over.

"Some complications from my encounters," Zac sighed.

"Luckily I noticed it in time, but I am not sure what the effect will be in the long run. Alert me if I start becoming...
murdery."

"Murdery..?" Ogras snorted. "That's just great."

Zac only helplessly shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he wasn't ready to disclose anything else. And it was not like the

demon was placing all his own cards on the table. Something had happened in the inheritance, but he never made any effort of explaining exactly what had transpired.

“Anyway, we questioned the captive. Turns out they had spies among the Marshall Clan. Normal humans working for them, not shapeshifters or something like that. They recently learned about us and the destruction of the Ez’Mahal, and immediately moved to destroy the teleporter. They were just unlucky they were picked next by you, otherwise they would have been safe for the time being,” Ogras explained.

Zac nodded his head. He wasn’t surprised any longer that some people would choose to side with the invaders. If Thomas Fischer could ally with monsters like the Dominators, why wouldn’t some local people ally with the incursions to gain power and safety?

“What about their forces and human captives?” Zac asked.

“The situation of this Tir’Emarel Family is actually pretty similar to Clan Azh’Rezak. Though they didn’t have the bad luck to get stuck on an island with a humanoid netherbeast,” Ogras said, drawing a roll of Zac’s eyes. “It’s to the point that I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“They are a newly formed family just like us, barely qualifying as a D-Grade force. They only got the chance to keep their Incursion slot thanks to the huge war that our old sector is embroiled in, just like my own family. I think that if my invasion didn’t fail early I would have gotten a quest by The Ruthless Heavens to battle it out with these people,” Ogras said with some wistfulness.

“Well, sorry for ruining the cosmic plan,” Zac snorted. “So the strength of their leader should be around that of Rydel’s?”

“Seems a bit stronger, as Rydel still hadn’t evolved when you fought. This Verana Tir’Emarel has evolved and gained some sort of great opportunity after arriving, and she has spent most of her time in meditation since. Anyway, they possess a Nexus Vein, which naturally means various goodies have cropped up in the area, sort of like Port Atwood,” Ogras continued.

“So, the humans?” Zac probed.

“Most work in the mines or the fields, though they are treated decently enough. No soul-sucking arrays or anything like that. Not all are actually slaves it seems, and the mining parties are actually overseen by Humans or Ishiate foremen,” Ogras said. “They have some program with freedom for contribution. Sounds like a scam to me.”

“A scam?” Zac repeated with some confusion.

“It seems that these people aren’t planning on staying for much longer. It’s not surprising, with the Undead Empire being here and all,” Ogras explained. “I guess they are dangling freedom as a carrot to have people work harder until they cut and run.”

“Without making a lot of enemies in the long run,” Zac added with a thoughtful nod. “Neither your people or the Tal-Eladar seem too bad compared to the zombies and the Ez’Mahal, why are your species hostile?”

“Who knows anymore?” Ogras shrugged. “The war has lasted forever. The original reasons are long forgotten. Now it’s about stealing resources and birthing powerhouses through slaughter. The Ruthless Heaven always provide bonuses during wars since it’s one of the best ways to forge true warriors.”

“Well, we’ve wasted enough time. They will undoubtedly find out about this battle soon enough. Let’s not give them too much time to prepare,” Zac said as he got back up on his feet and walked toward the group waiting in the distance.

The others were ready to go and they immediately set course for the Incursion. This time they didn’t plan on sneaking inside, so the Valkyries took out a handful of modified cars from their Cosmos Sack. Far more effort was spent on strengthening and adapting these cars compared to the ones at the Marshall Clan.

Zac didn’t drive this time either, instead opting to sit in the front seat training with the mental dexterity puzzle. If his mind was slowly being infused with a foreign force it was more

important than ever to have a firm grasp of his mental energy. Perhaps if he could control his mind better he would be in a better position to contend against the mind-altering effect of the splinter of oblivion.

They met no obstacles or traps as they drove along the road, but Zac wasn't really happy about it. They had passed two strongholds that should have been manned by small frontier forces, but both of them were completely abandoned. They all felt it was pretty fishy, and the most likely cause was that the Tal-Eladar were gathering their forces for a concentrated defense.

Their fears were soon realized as they closed in on the core area. An army consisting of over ten thousand beasts and well over a thousand soldiers solemnly stood lined up, awaiting their approach. The scene caused some worry amongst the small squad of Port Atwood, but also some confusion.

Why didn't they fight from within their arrays?

"What's going on?" Zac muttered with some hesitation.

"I guess we'll find out," Ogras said as he nodded ahead.

A woman stepped forward from the orderly line and walked fifty meters toward his convoy before she stopped. On her shoulder a small alien creature sat perched, looking like a ball of fur with four glistening eyes. She also had a white furry pet tucked in her arms, which seemed to be contentedly snoozing away.

"I am Verana Tir'Emarel. Am I correct in assuming that Zachary Atwood, The Super Brother-Man is visiting?" she said with a strong voice carrying across the empty field.

Zac gave Ogras a nonplussed look before he stepped out of the vehicle to see what was going on.

"I didn't believe the rumors of you working together with the treacherous demonkin at first. But seeing his wretched appearance I can only assume you defeated them and turned them into somewhat competent workhorses?" she said after throwing a scathing look at Ogras who stepped out of the car after Zac.

Zac's mouth couldn't help but turn upward with some mirth, but he didn't believe the demons were too happy with the comment, even if Ogras donned a smiling face.

"Girl, what is your goal by confronting us like this? I don't think even the half-animals of the Tal-Eladar to be stupid enough to step out of their Arrays unless necessary," Ogras retorted, causing a wave of killing intent to billow toward them from the army.

"In contrast to the horned goats of the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde we know when to advance and when to retreat," she answered without missing a beat. "You hid it well, but we have already learned of your great power, Mr. Atwood."

"Well, thank you, I guess," Zac responded, still not sure what was going on.

"I have a proposition for you. Even with your great power, the Tir'Emarel Family are no weaklings, and we have prepared for your assault. You might be able to defeat us, but not without casualties," she said, her eyes moving toward the cars behind them. "Not everyone in your party is as strong as you."

Zac frowned and was about to speak up, but Verana continued before he could say anything.

"You should already know that our family is young, and a lot of our resources are tied up in this invasion. The massacre of our whole incursion would cause lasting damage to our force, and the loss of one of our batallions is all the Tal-Eladar blood I want to see. So instead of further bloodshed, why not settle this with a duel? You versus me, one on one," she said.

Zac's brows rose in surprise, and he looked over at Ogras for his opinion.

"It's not a bad idea. If they try to double-cross you, just go a bit murderly on them all," Ogras said. "Saves me a lot of effort as well, so win-win."

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but he saw no true downside to the proposition. If he could conquer another Incursion without losing a single soldier it would be for the best.

“Fine,” Zac said as he stepped forward, [Verun’s Bite] appearing in his hand.

“Lulu! Grub!” she said, placing the two small animals down on the ground.

Zac first thought that she wanted to let her pets get to safety, but his eyes widened the next moment. Terrifying auras started to leak from the beasts as they almost instantly grew to reach almost ten meters.

In just one second the small fluff balls had turned into terrifying killing machines who clearly were well into the E-Grade.

Chapter 309: Grub and Lulu

Zac felt pretty small and vulnerable for the first time in a while as he looked up at the ferocious beasts that trembled with battle intent. He looked over at Ogras and noticed that the demon had taken out a lounge and some refreshments during the transformation of the small pets.

“Uh, isn’t this against some sort of rules?” Zac hesitantly asked as he glanced at the E-Grade animals once more.

The one called Grub had turned into an extremely odd beast that reached ten meters above the ground. Half its body was an enormous head with a mouth that seemed to be able to open 180 degrees. It didn’t possess sharp fangs though, but rather huge flat slabs of teeth, looking like they were meant for crushing rather than tearing.

Its legs were short and stubby, but it radiated immense power even if it looked a bit funny. The thick fur that covered looked extremely coarse and dense, forming a natural armor covering its entire body. Zac felt that it should be a Strength or Endurance-focused beast that excelled in raw power. It would likely possess a Dao seed such as Heaviness to deliver devastating chomps that could crush a large boulder without a problem.

Lulu seemed more speed-based as it had turned into a slightly smaller beast with long slender appendages. Where the fur of Grub was extremely thick this animal possessed a long white mane that looked extremely luxuriant as it glistened under the sun.

Zac wasn’t exactly sure how what sort of attacks he could expect from Lulu since nothing about it seemed very threatening apart from its aura and size. It didn’t have long fiendish claws like some beasts, and while its fangs were sharp

enough it didn't look like an animal that used its mouth as a weapon.

What stood out about it were the oversized ears and eyes, and the closest Earthern animal that Zac could liken it to was a Fennec Fox, except it had a shorter snout. Zac wondered if it was a beast that focused on spells rather than physical prowess. It was rare, but Zac had learned from Alyn that many such species existed in the multiverse.

"I'm a Beast Master, they are my weapons. Is you using your axe against the rules?" Verana retorted from behind the legs of the one she called Lulu, a scornful glare adorning her face.

"Contracted beasts are generally considered a part of one's strength," Ogras agreed with a nod. "Since you need sufficient skill and strength to tame them. Be careful, her power comes from making her beasts even stronger than they already are."

Zac only sighed and cracked his neck as he walked forward, but he was inwardly relieved he agreed to the duel. These animals seemed extremely dangerous, and he wasn't sure that the shields produced by the Valkyries would be able to handle the force they would be able to generate.

He tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the two animals as he walked forward, but something blocked the skill completely apart from confirming their names. He sensed that energy stirred around Verana the moment he used his skill, and he guessed that she possessed some safeguards against spying on her animals.

"So, if I defeat you and these two things your force will leave Earth immediately," Zac confirmed with a steady voice.

"Agreed. But if I win we will be able to stay here for fifty years, provided that you all don't get swallowed up by the undead swarm," Verana countered.

Zac frowned as he considered the proposition. He didn't believe he would lose even against these two behemoths, but he still went over her words carefully. Fifty years wasn't a long time in the grand scheme of things, but it would likely be

enough for them to completely strip the area of anything of value.

Still, it was only a small part of Earth, so Zac felt there wasn't too large a downside to her terms even if he lost by some chance.

“Agreed, provided that you provide basic rights to your citizens and don't expand from your current Zone,” Zac agreed as he unleashed his aura. “Otherwise I will just come back.”

No more words were needed, and immediately Grub released an earthshattering bellow that shook the whole area as a powerful aura started to radiate from Verana as well.

Zac immediately activated [**Loamwalker**] to strike straight at the source; the beastmaster herself. Being a tamer was like most other classes that utilized minions, such as necromancers or summoners. Their main strength usually lay with their minions, whereas they weren't too powerful by themselves. If he took down Verana he would win without even having to battle the two animals.

The earth shrunk beneath his feet as he made a beeline for the Tal-Eladar, but as he closed in on her he started to feel a greater and greater restriction on his movements. He finally realized that the huge bellow that Grub was still releasing wasn't simply a bestial roar, but rather some sort of domain attack.

Zac wasn't able to pinpoint how it actually worked, but it wasn't like a gravitational field so he felt unencumbered. But the efficiency of his movement skill was almost completely gone, slowing him down by a huge degree.

A large fractal edge formed on his blade as he shot a glance at the stocky animal, and he immediately imbued it with a Dao. The fractal turned silver as the Dao of Sharpness imbued it before he shot it straight toward the mouth of the animal. He was hoping to force the beast to close its mouth, stopping the restriction on his skill.

The beast closed its mouth as Zac hoped, but when the enormous teeth slammed together an immense shockwave was

created that instantly reached Zac. He only had time to steady himself before the attack punched into him with enough force to instantly kill most people of Earth.

A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth from the shock to his system, but he hadn't been truly hurt by the attack. Unfortunately, his strike hadn't proven effective either against Grub, as it had turned its head away with startling speed, letting the edge to hit its thickly furred side instead without much impact. Some of the thick hair was carved off, but the fractal edge didn't even draw blood.

Some killing intent started to bubble up in Zac's mind, and he realized that it was the corruption that was discreetly egging him on to start a slaughter. But now that he knew what to look out for he didn't have any problems stabilizing his mind, forcing himself to remain cool and collected as he surveyed the battle.

The stocky beast seemed extremely sturdy while also possessing restraining skills, making it a troublesome enemy to quickly take down. Zac chose to ignore it and instead started to run toward the beast tamer again, this time without a movement skill. He still possessed close to three hundred Dexterity, so even though he couldn't utilize **[Loamwalker]** he still moved like the wind.

Grub started bellowing again, putting further strain on Zac as he ran, while Cosmic Energy Started to swirl around Lulu for the first time of the battle. Zac formed five more blades and shot them toward Lulu to shut it down before it could do anything, without stopping his own advance.

The blades ripped through the air with tremendous force, but the beast made no effort to dodge. It's huge eyes instead lit up in an almost blinding blue radiance, and a wave of extremely pure white-blue flames surged forward.

Oddly enough he couldn't sense any heat from the incoming attack even though it consisted of enough energy to make the air twist and distort around it. Zac initially planned on pushing straight toward it, but he quickly changed his mind when his fractal blades were incinerated in an instant.

The damage his fractal edges sustained were transmitted to his edge, and the enraged roar of Verun echoed in Zac's mind as the Tool Spirit woke up from the damage. Zac himself growled in frustration and stopped his assault to back away from the incoming blast wave. At this moment another shockwave suddenly arrived from the other beast, making Zac feel like he was punched in his gut.

Irritation started to build up in Zac's mind as he turned two blood-shot eyes toward Verana who seemed to be utilizing some skill behind her two beasts. Large amounts of Cosmic Energy swirled around her as she stood completely still with closed eyes. It looked like she was controlling one or both the beasts with her mind, rather than fight with her own body.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as he once again tried to rush toward the beastmaster, this time with [**Nature's Barrier**] swirling around him to hopefully block some of the incoming strikes. But it was clear that the two beasts hadn't shown all their cards.

A huge sun ignited above the head of Lulu, and ray after ray blasted toward Zac, ripping the emerald leaves to pieces after a few shots. The attacks were pretty strong, but not to the point that he couldn't destroy them with a swing of his axe if they passed his defense. But it did noticeably slow him down, allowing Grub to launch his next attack.

The fat beast suddenly disappeared as the sky turned dark. Zac looked up with confusion, only to see the enormous maw of Grub opened wide right above him. Zac didn't know what happened next as his head slammed straight into the ground with enough force to cause large cracks to spread out.

A groan escaped his lips the next moment when the extremely heavy beast landed straight on top of him, causing a huge shockwave to spread outward. It was like a bomb had gone off in the area, causing widespread damage to the ground.

Zac's mind started to get muddled from pain and anger, but somehow he managed to actually push upward and lift Grub above his head with a bestial roar of his own. With a grunt the

stocky animal was lobbed straight at Verana, and its short legs floundered as it tried to right itself in the air.

The lithe frame of Lulu moved like lightning, as it picked up the still unmoving form of Verana in her mouth, moving her away of harm's way. Grub crashed into the ground the next moment, causing another shockwave. This time quite a few of the Tar-Eladar soldiers were impacted, though they were only thrown down on the ground without any real injuries.

A roar echoed in Zac's mind once moar to complement his own anger, and the next moment the spectral form of Verun appeared even though Zac hadn't summoned it. Perhaps seeing its master being hounded by the two beasts had ignited its competitive spirit, and it turned into a hurricane of violence as it pounced on Lulu the moment it moved away from its mistress.

Zac's brows rose when he saw that the ghost-white flames of Lulu seemed able to harm Verun, but that alone wasn't enough to deter the frenzied Tool Spirt. A wail escaped Lulu's mouth as a large section of its fur was ripped off along with parts of its shoulder in a large bite of Verun's oversized jaw.

A tremendous pressure suddenly ripped apart the remaining parts of Grub's domain as the wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** emerged from the void. It shot straight toward Grub who had just got back on its feet, looking a bit disoriented. But it quickly steadied itself as it tried to deter the hand with a concussive series of sound-waves.

Pieces of wood kept raining down from the hand, but damage quickly healed before any lasting wounds could be caused. The dense fractals on the hand lit up in green the moment the hand closed in on the animal, and the next moment an indent was formed in the ground from the pressure of the enormous fractal in the air.

Creaking sounds could be heard from Grub's thick bones as it was forced down on the ground, and the large hand moved toward its neck. Energy surged around Verana as a thick shield above her companion, but it immediately shattered at impact,

making her cough a mouthful of blood and open her eyes for the first time during the battle.

Both beasts were occupied, and Zac rushed straight at the beastmaster who had just received a backlash from her attempt to defend Grub. He hadn't initially wanted to use his ultimate attack since it consumed so much energy since evolving, but he found no better alternative. The combination of the trio was too annoying, and he could only brute force his way through them before he wasted too much power.

He knew that he had less than half his Cosmic Energy remaining after summoning [**Nature's Punishment**], so he needed to immediately end the battle so that he would still have enough energy in case something unexpected cropped up afterward.

"Wait, I give up!" Verana shouted with wide eyes as she saw Zac barrel toward her with the momentum of a runaway beast horde.

To prove her words she swallowed a familiar black pill. Next, the scene of the sudden and unexpected death of an Incursion general repeated itself just as Zac reached Verana.

Chapter 310: Growth

Zac mutely looked down at the unmoving form of Verana before going over the prompts he just received. As expected he got confirmation that the area had been put under his control, and he once again got the opportunity to appoint a mayor.

The two beasts shrunk back to their non-combat form the moment that Verana fell over, and they slipped out of Zac's restraints due to their diminutive size. Both of them scuttled over to their master and cried pitifully when she didn't move, trying to look threatening to keep Zac away. Zac only shook his head in bemusement as he ended his skill and exhorted Verun to come back.

The Tel-Eladar army didn't move a muscle, even though quite a few of them looked extremely displeased. Then again it was too late for them to do anything by now, with Zac standing within arm's reach of their leader. He could easily use her as a hostage in case they mounted an attack.

As he waited for Verana to resurrect Zac chose to look inward. He wanted to look at the splinter right after the battle to see if anything had changed. He sensed that it slightly woke up during the battle, though he felt he was able to block its most obvious manipulation of his emotional state.

But conversely, he had roared in anger and thrown an enormous beast at his enemy like an enraged King Kong. It felt a bit out of character for him, and he was afraid that the corruption was slowly changing his personality without him noticing.

He could at least breathe out in relief when he saw that the miasmic barrier hadn't changed or weakened in the slightest from the battle. But he still felt an even greater urge to quickly evolve to E-Grade.

Evolving wouldn't have a direct boost to his attributes, as they came with gaining levels. But it did seem to strengthen one's mental power considerably since people had a much easier time to advance their Daos according to the demon warriors. Perhaps that would also help with his own problems. Anzonil's disciple had been able to stay sane for over a decade without the help of any miasmatic fractals.

The Tal-Eladar leader woke up a bit later, the effects of **[Coward's Escape]** having passed. She breathed out in relief when she saw her two companions were safe apart from their battle wounds.

"Thank you for not killing me while I was dead," she said with a slightly raspy voice.

"Why did you go as far as to eat that pill?" Zac asked with some curiosity as he calmly watched her get back to his feet.

Since she had swallowed the pill the battle was truly over. She had already failed the invasion, and their path home would close in a few hours. There was no way for them to turn things around as things stood, so Zac wasn't too worried about Verana scheming something.

"I was afraid you wouldn't trust my surrender and kill these two cuties out of precaution," she said as she fed her two pets healing pills. "A deal's a deal. The Tal-Eladar will leave this planet immediately."

Zac internally breathed out in relief when he saw that she wouldn't make any trouble. But he also knew that there likely wasn't much she could do at the moment. When his eyes went to the two small critters who happily cried in her chest he noted that their auras were pretty weak and erratic, far worse than their wounds could explain.

Zac felt that it was likely that her class could instill her beasts with increased power for a short duration, but that it left both parties weakened afterward. Sort of like his own skill, **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. They had likely fought above their usual power from the start, just to have a shot at defeating him.

“I have another proposition,” Zac suddenly said as he looked at Verana.

She hesitantly looked at Zac, with her eyes occasionally darting over to Ogras who was sauntering over.

“Are you going back on your word?” Verana asked somberly.

“No, your people are free to leave. But there is no rush. You have eight hours, right?” Zac said, receiving a nod in confirmation.

“We will not be a party to some demonkin scheme,” she immediately declared when Ogras appeared in earshot.

“Since when has the Tal-Eladar been worthy of our scheming? You always run in head-first like your contracted animals,” Ogras snorted as he walked up next to Zac, giving him a small thumbs-up as his evaluation of the battle. “What are you thinking?”

“You said that your force put a lot of their resources into this invasion. Why not stay behind for a hundred years?” Zac said. “This area will become part of my kingdom, but the Tir’Emarel can maintain a stake in its resources.”

This wasn’t completely an impulse-decision. He had already noted how understaffed they were after conquering the last incursion, and he knew just how huge an impact the demons had on Port Atwood. Just a tenth of their people stayed behind, but they had enabled Zac to create a faction that had almost everything a proper multiverse force needed.

Keeping some of the invaders in his employ would make his life a lot easier. They both possessed strong fighters and experienced non-combat classes that could easily manage this small area for him. It would allow him to keep the benefits

Such a strategy wouldn’t work with most forces, but Ogras’ mention of how similar this force was to his own planted the idea in his mind. Most forces invading earth wouldn’t even consider allying themselves to Zac, but the Tir’Emarel family was pretty weak and recently established.

Even if they set up a connection between the two forces Zac felt it unlikely they would be able to be a threat to earth in a

hundred years. The cost of the invasion would likely be greater than the gains, making it more profitable to turn it into a business venture instead.

Getting a permanent off-world trading channel would be a huge opportunity for them, and could even turn into one of their main revenue streams. The Mercantile system was great, but sometimes it was far more cost-efficient to take the trade outside it.

The Mercantile System wasn't without its demerits. The most glaring one was the prices the System charged for teleporting produce. Things that weren't too valuable couldn't be traded through the system since it added costs based on both value and volume.

That was why they couldn't simply sell off all their surplus gear made from the ant shells and wolf pelts through the Mercantile system. The System would eat up all of their profits, keeping them for itself. In such cases manually transporting the goods was a much better option if the items couldn't be sold locally. Teleporting a Cosmos Sack was quite a bit cheaper than a person, allowing for interplanetary trade as long as the volumes were large enough.

"That would leave us stranded here for a hundred years though, without being able to contact home. And at your mercy," Verana skeptically said.

"A hundred years is just the blink of the eye in the multiverse," Zac insisted. "You'll be back before you know it."

Verana's brows contracted in thought, and it looked like she was seriously considering the offer for the first time.

"That still leaves the issue of what would happen to us if the Undead Empire succeed in their assault. They never care about other forces. Everyone will be forced to leave in a hurry or become undead themselves," the beastmaster said.

"Well, it is a gamble on this planet's power I guess," Zac said. "You would have to leave at least as many fighters as non-

combat classes, and they would be expected to join me in our defense against the Undead, and any other enemies of Earth.”

“This... I cannot make a decision of my own on this matter. Will you give me an hour?” she said after hesitating a bit.

“Sure,” Zac said with a nod, letting Verana return to her forces.

“Allying with the Tal-Eladar,” Ogras muttered as he watched the back of Verana. “Are you trying to make sure my people will never be able to go back home?”

“Hadn’t you already cut ties with them in any case?” Zac smiled.

“Well, whatever. The beastmen can be considered somewhat competent,” Ogras reluctantly agreed. “Much better than the riff-raff we scrounged together from the former slaves of Verdant Green. But you shouldn’t expect things to go this smoothly at the other Incursions. This Verana seems weak-hearted, treating both her beasts and slaves with unusual care.”

“I know,” Zac sighed. “But better make friends than enemies where we can.”

The two sat down and rested for an hour until Verana finally came back.

“I have spoken with my elders and they have agreed to your proposal, though the terms of our future co-operation will be decided when this planet is released from its isolation,” Verana said.

Zac immediately agreed as that was better for him as well. He could only imagine that his position could improve as he grew stronger in the future, which would let him keep more of the benefits.

“We will leave 600 of our people, half of which are warriors as you requested,” Verana added. “They know that they will be part of your influence, but they are Tir’Emarel in the end. They will not accept any orders to be used as fodder or do things against their conscience.”

Zac was internally elated at the number of warriors he just gained. Three hundred veterans were as good an addition as his whole demonkin force, and far more valuable than thousands of his recruits.

“Will you be staying behind as well?” Zac probed, hoping he would get another powerhouse under his command.

“No, my grandmother does not allow it, and has ordered me to return,” she said, actually looking a bit disappointed. “I will leave two of my generals to manage our interests though, and they should be a greater addition than some flakey demon silk pants.”

“Have fun cultivating like a bird in a cage while we conquer a world and explore the multiverse,” Ogras snorted in return.

The three went over the details for a while longer, until Zac insisted on checking out the situation of the humans that lived within the Incursion. If the people of Earth had been secretly treated as cattle everything they had decided until now was moot, but Zac was relieved to find that the situation was as they had heard.

The humans within the Tal-Eladar didn't live luxuriant lives, but they were better off compared to most people since the integration. They had a roof over their heads, they were fed, and the Tal-Eladar kept any beasts at bay. They weren't even stopped from cultivating, though they were expected to provide a certain work-quota every day first.

Still, many had secretly held some hatred for the Tal-Eladar and were screaming for blood when they learned that the Super Brother-Man had conquered the area. Zac ignored those clamors, even if it caused some dissatisfaction. Zac could only hope that they would understand when they learned how the rest of the world fared since the integration.

After making sure everything was under control they watched the thousands of Tal-Eladar stream through the large portal the Nexus Hub had opened. A few looked despondent, but most actually looked relieved, like they were finally heading home after a long time abroad.

To Zac's left the hundreds of people who would stay behind were lined up, bidding farewell to their people. It looked like Verana hadn't compelled anyone to stay behind since most of them had excited expressions on their faces even though they knew they would be stranded here for a hundred years.

Staying behind was a risk, but it also provided many opportunities. If they survived the initial phase they could enjoy the Origin Dao for at least a decade longer, besides the other benefits that cropped up on a newly integrated world. It was an opportunity that most people in their situation could only dream of.

He did occasionally sense some killing intent coming in his direction from the soldiers though. Zac knew it was most likely due to the army he decimated earlier. It was inevitable that his rampage had caused some bad blood, but he could only hope they would do their job. It all came down to the two generals who Verana left behind.

Chapter 311: Peak

Zac judged that the two leaders were around the same level as his demonkin generals. One was a mage while the other was a beastmaster like Verana. The beastmaster was named Jinan, and he would take a co-leadership role of this area along with whoever Adran appointed.

The mage was called Tylia, and she would join the Strike squad as support and ranged firepower. She was a nature mage, one that possessed some healing capabilities along with mainly control spells. Healers were something that Zac desperately lacked, and he felt it would be a great addition when going after the Incursions.

However, a change happened at the last moment before the Incursion closed. Verana who had stayed behind to make sure all her people passed through suddenly turned to Jinan.

“Jinan, take my place. I will to stay behind after all,” she said.

“What?” Jinan said with some shock. “What about the Grand Matriarch? She will skin us alive.”

Zac and Ogras only looked on with interest. It looked like the young mistress of the Tir’Emarel was a bit wilful after all. Verana took out a crystal and placed it on her forehead for a few seconds before giving it to her general.

“Give this to grandma, I’m sure she’ll understand. I am betting on this baby planet for the future of our family,” Verana said as she dragged Jinan to the Nexus Hub, and veritably threw him inside moments before it closed.

“That’s what I get for taunting her,” Ogras muttered under his breath. “A silly girl with dreams of adventure.”

“It’s not like it’s the first time your mouth has gotten you into trouble,” Zac said, suddenly in an excellent mood.

Not only did he get another powerhouse at Ogras' level, but he also had a feeling that adding the Tal-Eladar to his force would balance it out. Currently, most of the important positions in Port Atwood were held by the demons, but the demonkin and Tal-Eladar would restrain each other, allowing his human faction to grow stronger while they competed.

If Verana went according to her original plan the elves would only have two generals and would not be able to have as great an impact as the demons. But with Verana and her two beasts holding down the fort they suddenly became an equal force as clan Azh'Rezak.

"I guess you're stuck with us for the time being," Zac said as he turned to Verana who was walking back toward them.

"I felt uncomfortable leaving my people to the whims of that one," Verana said as she threw a look at Ogras.

Ogras only rolled his eyes in annoyance but decided to keep his mouth shut for once.

"We will head out to the next Incursion almost immediately. Do you want to join us?" Zac probed.

"Lulu needs more time to recover, and they both need at least a week of rest. I used a berserking skill on them to push them to their limits, and if I send them to battle now it will truly harm them. I will stay and organize things here," Verana said.

"That's fine," Zac nodded, not surprised in hearing about her pets. "Figure things out with Adran or Abby, my two head administrators. I don't allow slaves, so figure out a system for the people who live here."

"You should take Tylia though," Verana added, which was just fine with Zac.

The integration of the Zone went far smoother compared to the Ez'Mahal Incursion. Thanks to the Tal-Eladar staying behind Zac only needed to leave some peacekeeping troops before his group was able to move toward their next target. He also instructed Adran to move the former slaves who caused trouble to some of his other towns so that they wouldn't cause any further unrest.

Zac chose one of the easier targets after Tylia had entered the contract of secrecy. That way she wouldn't be able to tell anyone about his undead form in case he was forced to use it, not even to her own master. Zac could only thank the Apostate of Order for creating the system of binding contracts.

The Incursion was situated by a large volcano and was controlled by some species that looked like a mix of humans and dragons. The assault started out fine, with Billy utterly destroying their erected defenses with a tremendous smash, but trouble cropped up almost immediately.

The battle produced their first casualties, even though they followed their strike plan and Tylia performed above expectations. Two demons and a Valkyrie fell in battle, which wasn't a lot of people, but still a sizeable chunk of the small elite troop. They hadn't done anything wrong, but they had been forced to defend against a much too strong an enemy.

The problem rather lay with Ogras who had performed far beneath what was expected. The two of them currently stood in front of the three bodies who had been cleaned and lined up. They would be sent back to Port Atwood to be properly buried later today. Zac felt especially bad about the Valkyrie.

Her name was Jennifer and was among the first dozen to follow him back in Greenworth. She wasn't a cultivator, but she had desperately clawed her way toward the top of the Valkyries with sheer effort. Yet now she lay here unmoving, grisly wound covering her body.

Death could come at any moment.

"What's going on with you? I've seen your strength, and it looked like you were holding back," Zac finally asked after Ogras failed to speak up. "Now we lost three competent fighters."

It wasn't that Ogras had shirked his duties during the battle - it was rather the opposite. He had desperately fought with his spear to take down the generals while Zac battled the leader and his support squad. But the shadows which were a large part of his repertoire had been completely absent, which left the demon with almost no battlefield presence.

It had allowed one of the general to veer off against the exhausted Billy and the demons, and if it wasn't for Tylia half the squad might have been eradicated before Zac unleashed **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to fight almost the whole Incursion alone.

"It's that god damn lunatic," Ogras finally spat out after some hesitation.

"What? Who are you talking about?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The Umbra," Ogras sighed.

"Kenzie told me you looked bad after exiting the Inheritance, what's going on?" Zac probed.

"I got quite a few benefits inside, but the man called Rez also forced something extremely troublesome on me. He had found an odd entity that lived within other's shadows in his journeys. Like a parasite. He never found a way to utilize it while alive, but he always believed it had great potential to strengthen one's shadows," Ogras explained. "So he used me as an experiment to find out if he was correct."

"Let me guess, he made the two of you merge?" Zac sighed.

"Knocked me out, and when I woke up I had this netherblasted critter in my shadows," Ogras growled, and waved his hand.

A blob of shadows grew from his arm, and a terrifying face appeared in front of them. It reminded Zac a bit of the ghastly beings from the hunt, though this thing seemed more corporeal. It soundlessly screeched at the two of them before it once again receded into Ogras' shadow.

"Pretty creepy," Zac muttered.

"Tell me about it," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

"But what does that have to do with this battle?" Zac asked.

"Its presence has increased both the power and volume of my shadows, but my control has lessened. It normally doesn't interfere, but it looks like it doesn't like fire. The moment we entered the battle and all the flame-attuned energies started

swirling about it hid deep within my shadows, making me unable to send out any attacks,” Ogras helplessly explained.

Zac shook his head, inwardly swearing at Brazla, both the real one and the Tool Spirit. Forcing people to pay for treasures by setting up inheritances was clearly a great way to create death traps for one’s descendants. Zac suddenly felt lucky he only got a predecessor who was just a bit eccentric and disinterested in passing on his true inheritance.

“Any other surprises waiting for me?” Zac sighed. “We don’t have a lot of people to spare, you know.”

“I have no idea, I didn’t even know the parasite had this weakness. That asshole didn’t really leave an instruction manual. He just gave me a couple of rewards and told me to come back in a decade if I survived the fusion. Going to come back alright, if just to kill that ghost,” Ogras swore.

Ogras’ powers having turned unstable was a wrench in the plans, but he was still the strongest fighter on the squad even without his shadows. Besides Zac himself, of course. And so far the only weakness they had encountered was that of fire, and there were no other clear fire-attuned enemies apart from the incursion in the underworld.

This time it took two days to get everything in order. The addition of Tylia sped up the recovery of those who were hurt, helping the soldiers get back to fighting strength in record time. The dragonlings were one of the forces that killed or pushed out all other races from their lands, so taking control of the volcano didn’t require any work at all. They simply erected a teleporter and sent a dozen scouts to scour the area for anything of value.

One good thing that came out of Zac being forced to go all out was that he felt he was getting extremely close to finally gaining his level. So he immediately opened the teleporter to their next target the moment that everyone was healed up and ready to go. The soldiers had taken the deaths in stride, as they all knew that assaulting multiple forces in short order was an extremely risky venture.

But the gains were quite impressive as well. Joanna had informed him that the Valkyries had all received a quest after they closed the third Incursion. It was an Incursion closing quest sort of like the one he gained for the demonic Incursion, but it gave out variable rewards depending on how many they managed to close in the coming month. So they were the ones most eager to get going, even though they mourned the death of Jennifer.

The fourth target was another humanoid race, but this time things didn't go according to plan either. As Zac sat in the front seat and played with the mental puzzle he suddenly got a bad premonition. He immediately took out his axe, which alerted the others in the car.

"Something is wrong," Zac only had time to say before a huge number of projectiles flew straight at their cars.

Zac immediately activated [**Nature's Barrier**], and infused it with the Seed of Sanctuary. The skill had no problem covering the entirety of the convoy since the seed had been upgraded to the middle stage from the Dao Impartment. But the ambush cost him over half his cosmic energy as he was forced to reform countless leaves to keep his people safe until they could get in position.

Ogras disappeared from his position in the back seat, and immediately after he appeared in the sky above the cars, two huge black wings covering his back. He was clearly anxious to regain his honor from the last battle, even to the point that he used his ultimate transformation. He thrummed with unrestrained power as a sea of shadows swallowed a large sector of the forest that hid the invaders.

Wails of pain echoed among the trees as innumerable shadow lances destroyed anything within reach. One of the leaders of the ambush even fell from a beam of concentrated shadows before Zac even had time to reach the hastily formed defensive lines.

The strength of the response to their ambush had flustered the invaders, and a few even started to run away when they saw Zac barrel toward them, his towering aura spreading out in all

directions. Only a small core of elites maintained the ranks, and they formed a small elite unit to counter his advance. But they were an established force of the multi-verse, and they had their own hidden aces.

A huge golden bell appeared in the sky above the leaders of the ambush, while the leader of the ambush held a perfect miniature copy of it. His eyes met Zac's, and the next moment he swung the bell with a somber expression. His face turned completely pallid, and it even looked like he aged a bit from the action.

A towering aura was suddenly released from the bell, and it was as though it was sentient. Zac felt an extremely powerful presence focusing on him, and he only had time to summon another layer of leaves before the bell rung. Its chime contained a mysterious force, and the moment it hit Zac he immediately fell over, his vision turning black.

When he woke up again he saw the backs of the Valkyries standing in front of him, desperately maintaining a barrier as he heard Billy's bellow ahead. He quickly got to his feet again with some embarrassment and rushed forward after activating **[Mental Fortress]**. That bell unleashed a terrifying mental attack, and he had forgotten to protect against that type of assault after being pelted by normal spells and arrows.

A glance around the battlefield proved that they had still managed to keep the advantage even with his own incapacitation, in large part thanks to Ogras huge expenditure of Cosmic Energy. Zac noted that the demon's aura was starting to get unstable, and immediately flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]** to relieve the pressure.

The moment he truly entered the fray was also the beginning of the end of the battle. The invading army had already lost all of their momentum from the massive losses Ogras and Billy had caused, and the addition of Zac at full fighting strength completely broke their spirits.

The Incursion truly had put everything in this ambush, as they fielded four generals and the Incursion leader himself in the fight. He had tried to flee at the last minute, but Zac ran him

down and cut him in two. The moment he tried to kill them all with a sneak attack was the moment he sealed his fate.

Zac stood over the bisected body of the E-Grade leader, his eyes closed as a huge amount of cosmic energy washed over him.

He had finally reached the peak of the F-Grade.

Chapter 312: Blood for Blood

Zac couldn't bother with the cleanup of the battlefield as his mind was too preoccupied with other things. He had finally reached level 75, and he was anxious to see the gains it would bring. He knew he had become extremely powerful for a planet this early into an integration, but this battle proved that he was by no means invulnerable.

The most common way of closing Incursions for newly integrated worlds was with massive armies to drown the invaders through sheer numbers. Such a tactic required the whole world to come together and sacrifice millions of lives, and it was because of this that so few newly integrated planets made it through the early phase.

Planets who passed the initial stage through the effort of solitary powerhouses were far less common since normal powerhouses like Thea or even Salvation wasn't enough to singlehandedly close all the incursions of a world. He knew that the Marshall Clan had taken huge losses from the subjugation of their Incursion, even with Thea's help. It took something out of the norm, a monster in human form like Zac, close them as they did now.

But even Zac felt he was barely able to hold on. The cultivators of the incursions came from a wide array of forces, and many of them possessed all kinds of hidden cards that Zac had never encountered before. The bell was such an example. It had knocked him right out without him even having time to react.

So the power-ups of reaching the peak of F-Grade were just what he needed to have greater confidence to tackle the stronger Incursions as well. He only hoped that the quests for

the final skills would be possible to complete quickly, and he eagerly opened up his status screen to see what had changed.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step
Limited Titles	-
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Middle, Seed of Rot - High
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	605 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]
Dexterity	297 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]

Endurance	752 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]
Vitality	441 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]
Intelligence	167 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Wisdom	226 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Luck	140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]
Free Points	21
Nexus Coins	[F] 364 950 610

He had made quite a bit of money closing the last Incursions, and he felt he needed to do something with his fortune soon. Perhaps he could invest it through Calrin, or at least use it to deploy more projects like the large scale agriculture program. As it was now he had no personal need for the coins, and they were no good creating dust in his status screen.

His attributes hadn't noticeably changed though, with one surprising difference. It looked like the final level awarded ten level's worth of free attribute points, meaning he was awarded twenty points plus one from his class. Twenty points weren't a lot for Zac by now, but they would get heavily boosted through his titles. He also noticed a change in his title screen, and first opened that window.

[The First Step: Reach Peak of F-Grade Reward: All Stats +5.]

It was a bit disappointing that he didn't get another 'first in world'-title, but either there was no such thing or one of the Anointed snatched it. But from his experience, he felt the former to be more likely since he had a lot of other titles that the Zhix should have stolen if they shared the same title pool.

When he opened his quest screen two new quests awaited him, though he was slightly disappointed there was no new quest on

his hegemony chain. But when he looked at the requirements to complete the two Class quests he started to grimace.

Class Quests
Deforestation (Class): Cut down a Tree reaching 500 meters in one swing. Reward: Deforestation Skill (0/1)
Hatchetman's Spirit (Class): Form a nature- or axe-Attuned Dao Fragment. Reward: Hatchetman's Spirit (0/1)

Zac didn't get any descriptions of the skills, but going by their names he felt that **[Deforestation]** should be the ultimate offensive skill of his class, perhaps something akin to Nenotheop's Spear World. **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** might either be a defensive skill or some sort of Support skill, something to complement **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

[Hatchetman's Spirit] was both simple and hard to complete. Forming a Dao Fragment was something he would definitely do before evolving, but it was not something he was able to complete in the short run. It looked like he wouldn't have the skill to help him during the Incursions, and perhaps not even in the Tower of Eternity.

The **[Deforestation]** quest reminded him of his first Class Quest. That time he was supposed to chop wood, and now he needed to chop an enormous tree. He didn't think it would be too hard to chop one down, he simply needed to supersize a **[Chop]** and imbue it with the Dao of sharpness.

The problem was that he hadn't heard of any trees of that size on earth. Did they even exist? Things did grow bigger from the Cosmic Energy, but there were no such trees at Port Atwood at least. He would perhaps need to visit Westfort quickly after claiming this incursion to have their intelligence department see if they could find anything.

The next question was what to do with the 21 free points. Finally he chose to go all out on his main attribute, Strength.

He was starting to veer away from the standard 2:1 balance with Dexterity, but with all his titles he already had more points in Dexterity than many agility-based classes would have at his level.

He did briefly consider putting the points in Wisdom to improve his mental defense. The attack from the bell was a poignant reminder that his mind wasn't as sturdy as his body. But he would have to put a huge amount of points into Wisdom to make a difference, and he felt it was more efficient to buy more mental defensive treasures to shore up that weakness.

Since he was done with his status screen he got up to his feet and walked toward the others. The Valkyries seemed quite excited when he approached, and he looked at them with some confusion.

“Congratulations on reaching level 75. Next stop E-Grade!” Joanna said with a smile as she held Nenotheop's spear in her hand.

The two had been inseparable since she got it, and she alone had likely killed as many enemies as the other Valkyries combined with its help. It was truly a testament that attribute was not the only important thing for a cultivator, the right equipment was almost equally important.

“Thank you,” Zac smiled as his eyes glanced across the forest to see how the cleanup of all gear and Cosmos Sacks went. It appeared they were pretty much done.

“Don't forget about our appointment. In fact, stay away from the Nexus Node so you don't get any ideas,” Ogras' voice suddenly echoed from the shadows.

“I know, don't worry,” Zac said with a snort.

But Zac knew it wasn't inconceivable that he would simply skip going if it came to that. Things were heating up on Earth, and he wouldn't hesitate to evolve if things got desperate. He would lose a top tier title and the opportunity to make strong allies, but one needed to be alive to enjoy those benefits.

“Are there any movements from the Incursion?” Zac asked.

“None that we can see,” Ogras said with a shrug. “The ambush contained most of their elites it seems. The others have likely evacuated by now unless they are fools.”

Zac agreed. He had already got the notification that this area was under his control as well.

“That begs the question on how they knew we were coming,” Ogras muttered.

This was something that crossed Zac’s mind as well. Just how had these people know to lie in wait?

“They may have some sort of diviner,” Ogras added. “But there is a simpler solution. I think the Marshall Clan might have realized we are even stronger than they expected. Perhaps they thought we would lose elites from every battle, leaving us considerably weakened after we had finished closing the incursions. But when they saw that wasn’t the case they tried to make it happen by leaking intelligence.”

Zac was about to disagree with Ogras’ words without even considering it, but he stopped himself. He truly didn’t believe Thea would do something like that, and Henry’s main focus was on ridding Earth of all invaders. But the Marshall Clan consisted of thousands of people, most of whom had no relation to him or Port Atwood. Some people might have betrayed their cooperation for a misguided attempt to help their clan.

“We will report it to the main branch of the Marshalls, and we’ll just have to be more careful. I have some things I need to look into with the Marshall people as well,” Zac eventually said, as he started to walk toward their cars. “Let’s go secure the core town.”

“Joanna has reached the ladder!” another of the Valkyries suddenly blurted out when it was apparent that Zac was preparing to leave.

Zac’s eyes widened, and he quickly stopped in his tracks to open the ladder. It was true; Joanna was currently on the 98th position at level 47, meaning she had gained three levels since the assaults started. He wasn’t too surprised considering how

high the levels of their prey were, but his brows instead rose when he saw the name she had chosen.

98th – Atwood Valkyrie Joanna – 47

“Congratulations. But why not use your own name?” Zac asked.

“We need the world to know that Port Atwood is not just you and the demons, no offense Ogras,” Joanna explained.

“Hopefully, we’ll get a few more of the Valkyries on the ladder soon. We had already decided on this naming scheme long ago in case we ever got on the ladder. It was quicker than we expected.”

“Great job, keep it up,” Zac said with a smile. “And it’s a good idea. I’ll put out some good rewards for anyone of Port Atwood who reaches the ladder, no matter which one. Try to figure out what you want and I’ll try to make it happen.”

The group made their way toward the core city of the incursion, but they didn’t hurry in case they had left more ambushes on the way. Luckily no attack arrived, and they drove straight through the wide-open gates of the alien town four hours later.

But Zac was enraged the moment they entered the walled city, as the invaders had left a gift for him. A mountain of human corpses was thrown into a pile reaching over fifteen meters on the main square. The whole area dyed red from thousands of liters of blood, and a hastily written message were scribbled on the walls in red.

“‘*Blood for Blood*’ it says,” Ogras said with a frown.

“Foolish.”

Zac ground his teeth as he looked at the scene that could be straight out of a nightmare. The blood still hadn’t dried on their bodies, meaning they were probably executed the moment these people noticed their leader had fallen. Killing innocents who were no threat just as some sort of petty revenge could only be considered as extreme cowardice. They could just have left through the Nexus Hub, but they stayed behind to butcher all these people out of spite.

“Blood for blood,” Zac repeated with anger smoldering in his eyes. “They better pray I won’t find them in the multiverse later. Search the area. If any invaders remain, kill them.”

Zac himself walked over to the pile and personally put them all in a spare Cosmos Sack before he bought a new teleporter. These people had been enslaved in life and killed for no reason. Giving them a proper burial was the least he could do.

While the forces of Port Atwood secured the area he headed over to Westfort. Ogras insisted on coming along, saying that Zac might back down too quickly in their interrogation. Zac could only acquiesce, and he thought it was fine since Thea was away at the frontlines in any case.

Roland Marshall rushed over ten minutes after they arrived, and when he heard they needed intelligence he drove them to one of the large mansions within the inner wall. It was the headquarters for the intelligence arm of the Marshall Clan, and if anyone knew of any such trees it would be them. Zac explained what he was looking for, though he didn’t mention it was due to his quest.

“So, have you found any trees like that on earth?” Zac asked.

“Well, there is a species of trees from the Ishiate world that grew almost as large as the Redwoods of earth. A few of them might have grown larger than 500 meters by now,” the intelligence officer who had been assigned to help them out thoughtfully said. “But I would avoid those trees unless you truly need them.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a frown.

“From what we have gathered the trees are called Treefathers, and they are holy places to the ishiate. Even the technologically inclined camp of the beastmen considers the trees holy. If you cut down one of them you might inadvertently declare war with the whole Ishiate population,” the man explained.

“Is there no other place?” Zac sighed, wanting to avoid that kind of trouble if possible.

“Well, there are the actual redwoods,” the man said. “Many of them were over a hundred meters before the integration, so one having mutated and grown to five hundred meters is within the realm of possibilities. We have many other examples of plant life growing to that degree compared to their former sizes,” the man said, but his face was still troubled.

“So, spit it out. What’s the problem?” Ogras snorted.

“The former Redwood forests are within the Cradle of God.”

Chapter 313: The Belly of the Beast

Zac's face soured when he heard that he would have to enter the belly of the beast if he wanted to evolve his skill. His initial plan was to reach level 75 and get his two new skills before assaulting Salvation, but now it looked like that idea was impossible to achieve.

He had already discarded the idea of felling one of the so-called Treefathers. For one they weren't as tall as the Redwood according to the report he was holding in his hand. They rather grew wide whereas the Redwood grew tall. And he didn't feel right about essentially killing the representation of the Ishiate's ancestors.

Still, there was some hesitation in his mind until Ogras suddenly motioned him to the side and erected one of the small array disks that Zac brought from the hunt. It isolated the small area around them, and Ogras' shadows did the rest to completely obscure the two.

"What do you need such a high tree for? You never mentioned anything like this," Ogras said. "I thought we were here for rooting out the spies and dragging out some compensation of these fools."

"Compensation?" Zac blurted out with raised brows.

He never even considered such a thing and had simply wanted to fix an issue that the main branch of the Marshall clan perhaps wasn't even aware of. To demand compensation at this juncture seemed a surefire way to sour the relationship with the Marshall clan which felt especially ill-timed now that he had just taken in another group of invaders.

"Don't go overboard. I'm sure your stock around here isn't the best since your stunt at the Auction," Zac sighed. "And I need

the tree for my class.”

“You need an enormous tree for your class..?” Ogras repeated with a blank face. “Never heard anything like it. Does it need to be 500 meters? The ones I spotted in the Mystic Realm weren’t that tall, but still pretty huge.”

“It’s 500 meters minimum,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“So what are you thinking? Do you want to assault this Salvation guy immediately?” Ogras probed.

Zac threw a look at the intelligence officers around them. They were clearly curious about what was going on inside the portable array, but they all kept a respectful distance.

“I think it would be for the best. I don’t have any powerups coming up I think, apart from a few improvements of my Dao. My other skill quest won’t be finished in the short run as well,” Zac said.

Ogras thoughtfully mulled over the information, before he nodded.

“Might as well. But I don’t think our current lineup will be very useful against that person. He might seem to have a huge army on the surface, but in reality, he is only one entity from how you described him. There are no elites and no generals, just Salvation and his puppets. Bringing a bunch of weaklings will only slow us down.” Ogras said.

“Us?” Zac asked with a raised brow, ignoring the comment of the others being weak. Why was the demon so interested in heading into a heated battle?

“As I mentioned I got a few goodies as compensation for the forced fusion with this shadowbastard. I think fighting Salvation with his odd class might be beneficial for me. I have never heard of anything like it before, it’s even more mysterious than your class,” he said.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“Well, others can’t enter his little kingdom without being spotted, but that doesn’t necessarily include us,” Ogras said. “I say we sneak inside, cut down a tree, and kill the guy when he

comes to investigate. The others could use the break to consolidate their gains. Many should be able to gain or upgrade a Dao seed from the recent battles.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He even felt that a few of his own Dao Seeds had improved even though the massive gains he just received from the Inheritance. The most notable was Sharpness, the Dao Seed that he used the most since gaining it. He was even considering using one of his remaining Dao Treasures to push it one step further before heading to the Cradle of God.

“Do you need to prepare anything before we go?” Zac asked, tacitly agreeing with Ogras’ plan.

“I just need a few hours in Port Atwood to make sure my shadows are fed and stable,” Ogras said after some consideration. “She gets a bit agitated otherwise.”

“Great,” Zac nodded. “We’ll head back after this. I will try to improve a Dao seed to at least get a small boost before we fight Salvation. That guy is the strongest person I’ve met considering his level.”

“Which is what makes him so intriguing. Now for the next issue,” Ogras said with a malicious smile as he turned off the Array and dispersed the obscuring shadows.

“Don’t do anything crazy,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“When have I ever?” Ogras answered, throwing Zac a youthful smile as shadows flooded the room.

Things took a pretty nasty turn from there, with Ogras essentially taking the entire building, including Roland, hostages until a young man was brought in front of them. He was called Henry Marshall, named after the current patriarch, and his ambition matched his name.

He wasn’t part of the main branch though, and was rather part of a distant branch. Before the integration, he had barely been considered part of the clan. But since the world changed he had been allowed into the fold, where he had been desperate to prove himself to improve his lot.

He had already been suspected of cooperating with the I'Rallashar, the humanoid clan that just ambushed them, giving intelligence in return for cultivation resources. After hearing that Zac's group was ambushed he was immediately captured and brought over by the chief of the Marshall Intelligence Bureau, a thin and unassuming old man named Charles.

A cursory search of Henry's home was all that was needed to find ample evidence of his culpability.

"So, what punishment will this little guy get?" Ogras sneered as he looked down at the quivering man on the ground.

Charles simply pointed at the forehead of what could be considered his distant nephew, and the next moment a hole appeared that immediately started to leak blood and brain matter. The attack was silent and deadly, and even Ogras seemed a bit surprised by the strike.

"Consorting with the enemy in time of war has always been punished by death by the Marshall Clan," the man said, his face not moving a muscle.

Zac's eyes drifted over to Charles, and he wondered just what kind of man he was before the integration. Something told him that the old man wasn't one of the family members in prominent positions, but rather one of those working in the shadows.

It was a good reminder as well. The Marshall Clan wasn't very strong now when compared to Port Atwood, but that was because his force improved with tremendous speed and left everyone in the dust. But the Marshall Clan teemed with talents that would probably shine when they had managed to completely adapt to the Multiverse.

"It seems we have been too lax with our members as of late, which is our mistake," Charles continued as he started tapping away at a tablet. "I will make sure to rein any aspiring profiteers."

"Thank you," Zac said, not wanting to push the matter any further. "Inform Henry and the others we will delay the

operation a week to recuperate.”

“We estimated each Incursion to take 5 days at the minimum to assault and incorporate,” Charles said with a smile. “You are ahead of schedule as it is. Slow and steady wins the race.”

Zac nodded and dragged the demon out of the building before he could cause any real trouble. Having pointed his shadow spears at everyone until he got answers was bad enough, though Charles didn't seem to mind.

The two returned to Port Atwood, and Zac sent a guard to inform his squad of the break. Ogras disappeared the moment they exited the teleportation station, and Zac headed home. Kenzie was back in the cave it seemed, so Zac immediately erected the arrays around his courtyard before sitting down with a Dao Treasure in his hand.

His gains since meeting Salvation the last time were huge, but this time they would fight at that madman's home turf. Reports indicated that he had turned hundreds of thousands of people into puppets, and who knew what kind of power he would be able to exert. Hoarding his treasures at such a time was a waste.

He stabilized his mind before biting into the treasure, swallowing the sweet juices of the mysterious fruit. His mind was immediately whisked away, and he was once again one with the Dao.

Due to the multiple intense battles recently he had gained no small amount of inspiration to improve his Dao. He had a pretty good idea of what to do with his Dao of Rot, Sanctuary, and Sharpness. But for this treasure, he chose to focus on Sharpness.

Rot had improved extremely rapidly, and he needed some more time to utilize it in battle before he felt ready to push it toward the peak mastery. Sanctuary was perhaps the one he was closest to improve due to the semi-completed vision he saw before Yrial ran out of power. But he still felt Sharpness was the way to go.

His inspiration came from various sources such as the extremely penetrative power of Nenotheop's strikes, the swarm of needles that Thanso used, and he even went back to the old vision of the Axe Man. His last insight was centered around speed through sharpness, to cut through all obstacles. His current insight was a continuation of that, but it rather centered on penetrative power, which in a sense was the essence of sharpness.

He wanted an edge that would be able to cut through anything, even the void if needed. The boundless Dao answered and he felt the seed housed in his axe fractal improve one step further. The mysterious effect of the Dao Treasure ended not long after, and he only had time to slightly stabilize his foundation of his improved Dao Seed before his mind returned to his body.

Zac opened his menu the moment he opened his eyes, eager to check his latest Dao improvement.

Sharpness (High): Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5

He had reached High mastery as expected, though Zac was a bit surprised at the attributes he received. Half of the 30 new points were added to Dexterity, whereas the rest got spread out over Strength, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Still, what Zac cared about wasn't the Attribute gain any longer. It was the improvement stronger Dao Seeds brought to his battle strength. He had a feeling that his improved Seed of Sharpness would massively improve his lethality against stronger opponents. As he got up to his feet he immediately spotted Ogras sitting in a lounge outside his gates.

"I sensed the Dao through the Array. You wouldn't happen to be hoarding Dao Treasures by any chance?" Ogras said the moment Zac stepped out of the courtyard.

"That was my last one," Zac lied face without missing a step.

"I'm sure it was," Ogras muttered as he followed Zac toward the private teleporter.

There was nothing else for Zac to prepare, so he immediately activated the array to open a passage to the secret outpost that the Marshalls used to observe Salvation's actions.

They emerged in what seemed to be an abandoned cellar. The Marshalls had bought off the town from the former mayor, and it was one of the tens of thousands of small towns that managed to get a Nexus Node, but not much else. Most of these places became indefensible as the wildlife got stronger, and those who were strong enough opted to head to larger towns for safety.

According to Ogras, the number of towns would likely increase again in the future when more powerhouses emerged. A mid E-Grade warrior would be enough to stand guard of a town on a D-Grade world unless a particularly aggressive type of beast lived nearby. With the help of arrays, they would be able to fend most beasts unless a beast horde formed.

This place was quite far from the Cradle of God, as Salvation was relentless in his endeavor to eradicate every living being. Staying too close would mean that one eventually would get swallowed up by his puppet tides.

So even though the area that Salvation controlled was much smaller than the Dead Zone no one would stay in any neighboring towns, leaving a huge perimeter without a single living being. It took the two of them almost three days of travel through untamed lands before they entered the area that could be considered part of the Cradle of God.

And they only needed to travel for another thirty minutes before they spotted the first puppet.

Chapter 314: Sneaking Inside

Zac and Ogras were currently hidden within some foliage up a tree, and they had made ample preparations to obscure their presence even further. Both wore treasures that hid one's life force, just like the amulet Zac used to trick the Zombies during the beast waves. Ogras was even continuously operating a shadow skill to hide them even further.

The two even used a portable arrays disk to hide from the mindless sentry, though they could only use it while they were stationary. The only way for them to be any better hidden was if they brought Janos as well who covered them in another layer of illusions, but he was occupied with the battle with the Zombies.

It might have been overkill, but Zac didn't want to take any chances with this excursion. The fact that Salvation got away still irked him, and he didn't want a repeat of that situation. Especially when he saw the man's rapid leveling speed. Salvation had long passed level 60, and likely received another round of powerups from his class quest.

But the worst thing was that Zac knew his levels likely came from killing humans rather than fighting off beasts or the invaders. Every day that lunatic remained alive even more suffering would descend on Earth.

"How intriguing," Ogras said as his eyes were trained on the puppet.

It was one of the guard sentries they had heard about. It simply stood on a small hill with good vantage in a certain direction, its head unceasingly moving back and forth like a moving camera. Other than that it was completely immobile.

“It slowly absorbs cosmic energy, but it is not cultivating. I would guess it possesses a gathering array to keep it going. That explains a lot,” the demon continued.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“It likely means that these things and the way Salvation fights are not purely a result of a unique class,” Ogras explained. “It is more likely a combination of an extremely intricate mother array that control these things, and a class that focuses on puppetry. Rather than a mystical class that does everything.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. The prospect that Salvation was using tools to gain his current power was a relief since it would be pretty unsettling otherwise. He was lower level than Zac and not even on the Dao Ladder, yet he had almost fought evenly with Zac who had Thea for support.

“Does that help us in any way?” Zac asked.

“Well, breaking the connection between a mother array and its children is much easier than breaking the connection of a skill,” Ogras said. “And it means we can substantially weaken Salvation if we find the mother array and destroy it.”

“Don’t you think it’s on his person?” Zac ventured.

“Perhaps not,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “The more complicated the array the larger it needs to be to house the inscriptions. There are array plates as large as planets out in the multiverse from what I’ve heard. More skilled inscribers can inscribe smaller fractals, but I don’t believe The Great Redeemer is skilled enough to cram an array like this into something that Salvation can carry on his body.”

“It’s not necessarily his own creation though,” Zac countered.

“That’s fair,” Ogras nodded. “It might be something found in a Mystic Realm or on some dead powerhouse. That is a problem in itself. All the underlings of this Redeemer you’ve met are different class archetypes, making it hard to guess the situation with the boss.”

“And it seems Calrin won’t be able to dig up anything useful either,” Zac added with some wistfulness.

There were no news from his side even after two weeks of asking around, trying to buy a report on the mysterious Redeemer. The man was either very discreet or Calrin's connections weren't good enough to get his hand on the information.

Zac was about to move on from the invader, but another thought suddenly struck him.

"Wait, will we even be able to kill the guy?" Zac blurted out. "He might have one or many of the Dominators guarding him."

"I thought about that as well, but I doubt it," Ogras said. "If our speculations are correct I don't think anyone would be happier than them if Salvation got himself killed. The Dominators should already be in a bad spot compared to those humans of the other world in the hunt, and if they have to contend with a direct disciple? Forget about it, they will probably throw you a banquet if you kill him."

Zac knew that what Ogras said was based on a lot of speculation on their side, but at the same time, he felt it made some sense. There had been no cooperation between the two forces during the hunt at all, and Salvation had been left alone even if he was weakened since he couldn't bring his puppet army. If the Dominators truly were concerned about his well-being they would have sent protection just like the Medhin with their guards.

"Fair enough. But if we see any non-puppet Zhix in the area we will need to rethink our plan," Zac decided. "Perhaps only cutting down the tree and then make a run for it."

"Fine, but I doubt there will be any living beings in this place if your description of that man is accurate," Ogras shrugged. "It sounds like something has broken his mind. Either the stress of the integration or the Inheritance the Great Redeemer left behind. In either case, it doesn't sound like he is in any position to make logical choices like keeping friendlies alive."

The puppets at the perimeter seemed to be in a passive state where they only performed a simple loop over and over, and Zac and Ogras had no problems proceeding further into the

Cradle unobstructed. There were a few hidden sentries though that they only spotted thanks to Ogras' superior observation skills.

One was dug into the ground with only its head sticking out, and another one was crammed into a tree. It proved that the former humans were truly only seen as tools and that Salvation had them in abundance if he could use them frivolously like this. They had spotted over a dozen sentries the past hour, and they had only traversed in an extremely small part of the Cradle of God.

The total number of sentries must count in the thousands, and Zac could understand why there was so little information about what was going on inside. Very few would be able to enter this place unnoticed, and fewer still were willing to take the risk. But to Ogras all these traps were like a child's game, and he unhurriedly guided the duo through the outer perimeter.

"So where are these trees of yours?" Ogras asked, prompting Zac to take out a tablet and open up a map.

"According to the guesses of the Marshall clan they should be roughly another five hours' travel due northeast," Zac said with some hesitation. "But if they are five hundred meters tall we should be able to see them much earlier."

His words turned prophetic 90 minutes later when they trekked up a small hill under the guise of some shrubbery. They wanted to get a better vantage to check for any threats as they were starting to get pretty far into the core of Salvation's Zone.

But after the outer perimeter of silver scouts, the zone was completely devoid of both living beings and puppets, making the two believe that Salvation kept a large chunk of his guards close at hand. What they did spot, however, was the gargantuan trees that towered into the sky in the distance. Some even reached above the clouds, a testament to how huge they had become.

Even though Zac was unable to properly gauge their height he had a strong suspicion that at least a few of them were large enough for him to complete his quest, and he motioned Ogras to lead the way.

It took them a few more hours before they reached the forest, and Even Ogras couldn't stop himself from being impressed by the majesty of the Redwoods. Zac had never gone to see them before the integration, but he had seen the pictures on the internet.

The forest they walked through now were far beyond what he had seen in pictures, as the trees had grown not only in height but also in width. Many reached more than twenty meters in diameter, and it was to the point that Zac started to hesitate whether he would even be able to fell one of these monstrosities in one swing.

He even started to feel a twang of guilt when he saw these majestic trees reaching up toward the skies, but he hardened his heart as they looked for a target. This was unfortunately not a time for environmental conservation. He truly needed the power up to fight the stronger Incursions. Otherwise, the losses on his side would turn disastrous.

Finally, the two found a tree that fit the bill. In contrast to the other trees it seemed to carry some sort of fungal infection, and cutting it down might even protect the forest from the spread of disease. Zac also had Ogras climb the thing with a fifty-meter rope to make sure it was tall enough, and the crown clocked in at over 540 meters. It was essentially a skyscraper from its dimensions.

“When this tree goes down the sound will probably be enough to alert the whole country,” Ogras commented as he knocked on the trunk that was larger than a basketball court. “It must weigh an insane amount. You might even cause an earthquake.”

“If I can even bring this thing down,” Zac muttered as he looked at it with some hesitation.

As he had grown stronger he was able to create a longer and longer edge with **[Chop]**, though it was still unstable above ten meters in length. Now he needed to at least triple that number, and keep it active long enough to swipe through the whole tree.

But nothing ventured nothing gained.

“Get ready to run,” Zac only said, as he took out [Verun’s Bite] and walked up next to the trunk.

The edge from [Chop] grew with rapid speed until the edge reached ten meters, where Zac momentarily stopped its growth. He needed to instantly push it to 35 meters or so from there, and do it as quickly as possible.

Zac simply decided to push his energy control to the limit and completely flood the fractal on his hand with as much energy as he possibly could. He found that his training with the mental puzzle helped somewhat, as it also made the control of his Cosmic Energy smoother. To stabilize the skill further he imbued it with his recently improved Dao Seed as well.

The edge gained a silver sheen from his Late-stage Dao of Sharpness as it stretched out from his axe until it started to gain ridiculous proportions. He tried to maintain a semblance of control of the fractal edge as long as possible as it grew, but he felt it was starting to become unstable the moment he passed fifteen meters.

He did everything he could to have the Cosmic Energy remain its shape until it finally reached the necessary length. His axe was already moving with fluid motion the moment the fractal edge became long enough, but he started to frown as the edge tore through the wood.

There was significant resistance to his swing, even with his E-Grade axe and Dao of Sharpness combining to make an extremely strong attack. The properties of the wood had clearly been strengthened by the Cosmic Energy to allow it to support its own massive weight.

Zac’s muscles strained to push through the tree as his mind started to become dizzy from the effort of maintaining the shape of the edge. But just as it was about to pass through the other end it finally fizzled, leaving a small piece still intact. Disappointment started to flood Zac’s mind, but his hopes reignited when the tree started to creak ominously.

“Did your quest complete?” Ogras asked, and Zac opened his status screen as the two started to create some distance from the redwood.

The attack had contained enough momentum to make the tree swing, and the movements were in turn enough to break off the last piece of the

A thunderous explosion that caused the ground to shake spread out in the area the moment the tree slammed into the ground, taking two smaller redwoods with it. Zac and Ogras were thrown tens of meters in the air, wildly flailing until Ogras shot a shadow spear into a nearby tree with one hand, and grabbed Zac with the other.

It was as though a hurricane went through the forest and the remaining trees wildly swayed back and forth, making Zac fear that he had started off a chain reaction with his attack. But the area soon calmed down, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief and open his status screen and enter the skill tab.

Deforestation - Proficiency: Early. Their army is the forest and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable.

The swing had counted as a success, and Zac breathed out in relief. He realized the quest had told him to cut the tree down in one swing rather than to completely cut through it so that the edge didn't go all the way through wasn't the end of the world. The quest had likely finished the moment the tree slammed into the ground, but the shockwave had made Zac miss the fact that he gained another fractal on his right bicep.

As he read the description he was reminded of the flavor text of his Hatchetman class. It had said something very familiar, and it almost felt like **[Deforestation]** was the signature skill of his class. Zac really wanted to try it out as soon as possible, but another change made him stop in his tracks.

[Chop], the first attack skill that he obtained had finally evolved from Late to Peak Mastery, becoming the first skill to do so. His skills hadn't improved as quickly as his Daos, and he was quite far away from pushing them all to the peak. He briefly wondered what he could do to push his skills further, but a prod from Ogras brought him out of his musings.

"Holy crap," Ogras muttered, losing some of his trademark calm as he pointed toward a field in the distance.

Any thoughts of skills were thrown out of Zac's head as he visibly paled from what he saw. Holy crap was exactly what Zac felt when he saw the ocean of silver puppets that swarmed toward their position.

And above the puppets hundreds of silver rivers streaked across the sky, forming a beautiful pattern that spoke of impending doom.

Chapter 315: Against the Clock

Worry marred Zac's face as he looked out at the ocean of silver puppets. He already knew the force that Salvation could summon was huge, but it was still intimidating to see such a line-up in person. The endless silver rivers looked like scars in the sky, and the combined aura of the puppets on the ground was extremely daunting.

"This kind of power should not be available to an F-Grade warrior," Ogras muttered, his face slightly pale. "There must be some kind of drawback."

"I didn't sense any weakness last time, apart from the fact that his actual body is pretty weak. He needed to use treasures and his puppets to stay safe. If I can get to him I'd be able to kill him in one swing," Zac said, mustering up some courage.

He was still not happy about the situation, as the arrival of the army arrival was too fast. The forest they were in was an hour away from the central city that Salvation had occupied, a chunk of former Los Angeles. It should have taken the puppets even longer to get here, meaning that Salvation set out toward this place hours ago.

Had they already been spotted?

"Well, so much for a sneak attack," Ogras muttered, echoing Zac's thoughts. "So what do you want to do?"

Zac frowned as he kept looking through the incoming horde through a pair of binoculars. Every single one was a puppet, which in a sense was good news. It meant no one had allied with Salvation, not even the Zhix under control of the Dominators. He did spot a few of the insectoids, but they had invariably been turned into puppets, just like the humans and Ishiate.

However, there were simply so many of them. What if he summoned another face in the sky, except that this one was a hundred times larger? Zac doubted that even he would survive such a strike. But he suddenly froze when he spotted the familiar form walking among the puppets.

Salvation still looked like an insane hobo, but Zac could spot even from this great distance that he had noticeably aged. Silver streaks ran through his oily head and wild beard, and his face was marred with wrinkles. Had he been forced to utilize Life Force in battle recently? If so he might be weakened, making this an opportune moment to strike.

The mad prophet had also arrived at a similar solution to his amputation as Ogras. The hand that Zac managed to chop off at the last minute in the hunt had been replaced by the metallic liquid that ran all the way up to his shoulder. Suddenly Salvation's head snapped straight toward their direction as Zac scouted him out, and it felt as he looked straight into his eyes. Zac didn't know why, but he was sure that it wasn't just a feeling, but rather the truth.

They had already been spotted.

"Let's head down," Zac said. "Perhaps we can surprise attack him while speaking. He's the kind of lunatic who likes an audience."

Ogras nodded and the two jumped down from their position up the tree. Just two minutes later they stood in front of the enormous army of puppets, with Salvation having walked toward the front. The world had almost turned monochromatic from the rivers obscuring the suns, but Zac's whole attention was on the lunatic wearing the dirty sheets.

"Like a moth to flames the spirit longs for salvation," Salvation said as he stepped forward, with ten silver rivers circulating him for protection. It looked like he wasn't taking any chances with Zac within axing distance. "Are you ready to join the Great Undertaking?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm here to finish what I started back in the hunt. Why don't you call your Zhix allies here as well?"

Zac said, making a gambit that Salvation was too crazy to realize he was digging for information.

“Those three are but tools of the Great Lord,” Salvation said with some disdain. “They lack the piety and the dedication to the cause and only serve a purpose until they’ve led the Great Lord here. They know better than to encroach on the holy land.”

Zac felt some relief when hearing that, as it didn’t look like Salvation was lying. His mind was consumed with his insane crusade, and things as subterfuge were beyond him at the moment.

“This one is even loopier than I thought,” Ogras muttered with some interest as he studied Salvation like one would a rabid animal.

“Do not worry, horned one. Not even the scions of Lucifer are beyond redemption,” Salvation said, throwing Ogras a pitying glance.

“Oh? You know of Lord Lucifer?” Ogras said with surprise, making Zac look over with some shock.

“What?” Ogras asked with some confusion after seeing Zac’s look. “Lucifer is one of the most powerful demons around, a true hero. This whole region should know of his name.”

Zac wanted to ask a dozen follow-up questions to that, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

“How did you find us?” Zac couldn’t help but ask of the grimy man.

“The Lord hears all, sees all, is all,” Salvation lifting his eyes far into the air. “How can I not sense your Sapience, your suffering. Let me free you.”

That was all the time Salvation was willing to waste on the conversation as five rivers descended from the skies to charge at the two. Meanwhile, an enormous change took place with the rest of the rivers. They started to change and form fractals in the sky, creating a circle of inscriptions.

A dozen shadow spears suddenly appeared around Salvation that tried to skewer him the moment they rose out of the ground. But it was as though the swirling rivers around their enemy had a mind of their own as they blocked all the strikes before Salvation himself even had time to react.

Large clouds of dissipated silver rose into the air, and a few dozen of the innumerable spare puppets immediately liquefied and joined the defensive perimeter around their master. Ogras tsked in disappointment as he looked up at the change to the liquefied puppets, his spear already having appeared in his hand.

“They seem to be forming an array,” Ogras muttered. “We should probably disrupt it.”

“Can you handle it?” Zac asked. “I’ll try to go straight toward the source.”

“Fine, you’re better suited for charging straight into it like a bull anyway,” Ogras agreed as the two huge shadow wings sprouted on his back.

Zac simply nodded and exploded into motion with **[Loamwalker]** pushing him straight toward Salvation himself. As he pushed forward he charged up his new and improved **[Chop]** to tackle the protective layers surrounding the puppeteers.

Cosmic Energy effortlessly entered the fractal as usual, but when infused the fractal with his energy Zac noticed a startling change. For one he infused over ten times as much energy as usual before the blade assembled, but that wasn’t all. As the fractal edge materialized he also formed a mental connection he had never felt before.

Suddenly it was as though the large five-meter edge was a part of his body, and with a simple mental command, it detached from its position in front of his axe. However, it didn’t shoot off toward Salvation and his metallic rivers but rather started to hover around him like a large scythe of death.

Zac tried to summon another edge, but this time there was no mental connection forming, but rather just another standard

blade that required the regular amount of energy. It looked like the change in his skill was that he received one special edge, while the others remained the same.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time to experiment where the limits of his new addition lay, and Zac refocused on the battle instead. He created another five blades and launched them in quick order toward Salvation, as the special edge stayed within like a bodyguard.

Each blade was imbued with the improved Dao of Sharpness, and they pushed Salvation's defenses to their limits. Each edge completely ripped a river to shreds before dissipating, forcing over a hundred puppets to liquefy. Only around a month had passed since the two fought last time, but Zac had not only improved his Daos considerably but also his weapon.

The rabid fanaticism in Salvation's eyes was briefly doused as fear flashed in his face for the first time. Zac was almost upon him, but this time Salvation wasn't willing to confront him head-on. The ten rivers surrounding him swallowed him up before they scattered in different directions, making Zac unable to tell where he had gone.

Another fifty rivers were created from the puppets, and as they twirled and intertwined it was completely impossible to tell which was which. The only relief was that he hadn't launched **[Nature's Punishment]** immediately in an attempt to destroy Salvation, as he had gotten even better at staying hidden. He would have been forced to waste the huge hand on killing a few hundred puppets, wasting its massive power and energy consumption.

Soon the rivers started to shoot toward Zac, and he rapidly started to destroy them by launching his blades at them, but there was no end in sight. He soon realized that he would need to infuse the blade with the Dao of Sharpness to completely destroy a river, but his mind would become overtaxed before he managed to launch enough attacks with **[Chop]**. Salvation had simply brought too many puppets.

"Shit! What are these things made of?" a frustrated shout could be heard from above as Zac hesitated what to do next,

and he looked up to see Ogras desperately trying to destroy the enormous fractals that had already fully formed.

The rivers in the sky had turned into a long string of fractals in just seconds, and they formed an enormous circle in the sky. Its diameter was at least a square kilometer, and it encompassed the whole battlefield and the puppet army. So far he couldn't sense them doing anything, but even he could sense the massive amounts of Cosmic Energy they started to absorb.

Zac frowned and launched a handful of Dao-infused blades toward the fractals as well, but they were extremely sturdy. The strikes did chip them down somewhat, but a handful of the tens of thousands of puppets immediately reinforced them. Ogras swooped down toward him with some hesitation on his face when he saw that the battle below had stalled as well.

"It has truly formed an array," Ogras said. "This guy is just too weird. We might be better if we exit the encirclement before we consider our next step."

"You have entered the Holy Kingdom, it is time for you to join the unity. Through pain comes clarity," the voice of Salvation echoed across the field, though it was impossible to pinpoint its source.

A foreboding feeling crept into Zac's heart as he shot Ogras a glance. He started to feel that they had been a bit overconfident in confronting this madman. They should probably have backed off when they saw the huge resources that Salvation had expended to confront them, but he had been to anxious to finish the fight, emboldened by his recent powerups.

The demon imperceptibly nodded and the two immediately disappeared from their spot, rushing out of the encirclement. But the moment they were about to cross the threshold it was as though Zac slammed into a wall, and the rebound threw him over ten meters back.

A shockwave made Zac's robe flutter immediately afterward as Ogras launched a beam of shadows at the invisible shield.

But there was not even a shudder, making the ominous feeling in Zac's heart worse.

"There's no way we will break this thing in the short run," Ogras muttered.

"What do we do?" Zac asked, pushing down any panic that threatened to rise to the surface. He hated feeling like a trapped animal.

"Everything should be controlled by that man. We kill him and the rest of it should sort itself out," Ogras hesitantly said.

"Judging by how the fractals are absorbing energy it will take a few minutes for them to charge whatever they're supposed to do."

"I have no method of locating him though," Zac said with a grimace. "He can seamlessly move about the puppets. He might even turn himself into that liquid from what I can tell."

"Well, all the puppets are within the array, so he should be as well, no?" Ogras said. "So if we destroy all the puppets we should be able to find him. If we still can't find him we will at least have destroyed what allows the runes to regenerate, which might allow us to destroy them."

Zac thoughtfully nodded in agreement. It was far better than just standing around, even if he still was a bit unwilling to destroy these poor people who had become victims to Salvation.

"But we're against the clock here, so no holding back," Ogras added.

"I think I have just the thing," Zac said, tightening the grip on his axe.

Zac once again started to run toward where he came from. But this time his aim wasn't to directly kill Salvation, but rather to cause widespread mayhem.

It was time to unleash [**Deforestation**].

Chapter 316: Deforestation

Zac knew time was running out as he rushed toward the sea of puppets. They had no idea what the enormous array in the sky would do, but he couldn't imagine it being anything good. Since Salvation said it was time to join the unity it might mean that both he and Ogras would be turned into puppets the moment the fractals finished charging up.

He also knew that **[Chop]** wouldn't cut it, even with its recent upgrade. There was a limit to how many puppets he could destroy per swing, and the number was too low to rip apart the endless army in front of him. It was like the mission he received to kill enough zombies in ten minutes. This time he needed to kill to maintain a killing speed that was at least ten times higher.

The function of the special blade from **[Chop]** was still unclear as it still hovered around him. However, Zac noted that it had barely cost any Cosmic Energy to maintain since he formed it, meaning it might be possible to keep a permanent edge on hand. He needed to explore ways to manipulate it though, as traveling with a five-meter cutter swirling around him would be pretty inconvenient.

He instead put his hopes on his newly acquired skill, **[Deforestation]**. He received no explanation of how the skill worked when he got it, and there were rather only a few names that entered his mind. But its description indicated it was used as an army killing attack.

So it was with fervent hope he started to flood the fractal on his bicep with Cosmic Energy as he ran toward the puppets. The fractal immediately activated and he finally received a burst of insight, making him understand how to properly utilize the skill. And it was just in time with him arriving in front of the Silver Guards.

“Axe of Felling,” Zac muttered as his arm started to perform a wide horizontal swing.

It felt as though he was pushing through a viscous liquid, but to Zac’s massive pool of Strength it was only a minor inconvenience, some additional strain on his body. The energies in the surroundings started to churn while a large chunk of Zac’s own Cosmic Energy also was dragged out of his body to feed the attack.

[Verun’s Bite] only cleaved air as Zac finished his motion, but the swing was only there to summon the real strike. The true effect of **[Deforestation]** materialized the moment Zac finished his strike, and it moved to repeat Zac’s own swing.

It was a forester’s hatchet, almost a bit reminiscent of his first weapon, his trusty hatchet that had unfortunately turned to scrap in his battle with Vul. The summoned weapon had a somewhat small head for its very long wooden handle, and if it wasn’t for two details one could have thought it was a normal hatchet from Earth.

The first oddity was its size. The hatchet was well over ten meters long, with its head being larger than Zac himself. The second clue to its origin were the fractals that adorned it. There were two lines of inscriptions, one running along the back of the long handle, and the other along its edge.

The fractals along the chestnut-colored handle emitted a sense of imperviousness and fortitude, making it seem the axe would be able to handle any amount of strain without snapping. The ones on the edge gave off a completely different feeling, and it was one that Zac was familiar with. It was sharpness, the ability to cut through anything.

The fractals’ functions might be the standard set that a multiverse hatchet would contain, but they were extremely different from the fractals on a weapon that one might pick up in the System’s general stores. They contained a boundless intricacy in their simplicity, and it was clear they contained truths that were well beyond Zac’s current understanding of the Dao.

Zac tried to imbue the enormous axe with his Dao of Sharpness, but his mental energy was actually rebuffed when he tried to infuse it. Zac knew he might be imagining things, but he almost felt as though the huge axe disdained his Seed of Sharpness, not wanting to be sullied by such a lowly insight into the Dao.

Zac quickly tried a few other Daos, but the result was the same. The axe finished its trajectory without getting imbued at all, and it was an exact copy of Zac's own swing. The attack was simple and unadorned, but the effect was anything but. Zac first thought the attack was a dud, but soon one puppet after another started to fall apart, bisected in the middle by a clean cut.

First it was one, then two, then hundreds of puppets that fell into pieces before turning into vapor. The silver rivers weren't faring any better as they shattered one after another as well from the forester's axe. The attack kept moving outward and the battlefield was soon obscured in a dense silver mist from the thousands of puppets that were destroyed in an instant.

Zac estimated that over twenty thousand puppets had been destroyed by that one massive swing, but he knew that the effect of **[Deforestation]** wasn't over. It was not a single-use skill, but rather a skill that ramped up, as long as his body could take it.

Zac hurried forward through the shrouded battlefield so that he could unleash the follow-up swing as close as possible to the remaining puppets. He shot a glance at Ogras while he rushed forward to see that the demon had unleashed his largest sea of shadows yet.

A large sector of the battlefield was shrouded in utter darkness, and puppets were swallowed and destroyed by the dozens every second. Ogras himself was floating above the shrouded field like a God of darkness, shooting concentrated shadows to destroy any silver rivers that tried to flee his sphere of influence.

It was starting to become clear that Salvation possessed some rationality at least, and it looked like he was trying to stall out

the battle. His puppets had actually been trapped within the barrier as well, but there was still a lot of room for them to move about.

The mad prophet wasn't trying to gather his forces to charge at the two, but he rather seemed content to sacrifice parts of his army while the runes in the sky kept gathering energy. Zac couldn't be sure, but from the power they were starting to emit he feared that they had even less time than they had hoped.

Zac reached the edge of where the attack of **[Axe of Felling]** reached, and he once again charged up the fractal representing **[Deforestation]**.

"Infernal Axe," Zac growled, and suddenly it felt as though he was carrying a mountain on his shoulders when he tried to repeat the swing.

His whole body strained to the max as he desperately pushed his Axe forward, and once again an enormous axe materialized in front of him when he completed the swing. This time it was even more massive, with an edge at least twice the size of the **[Axe of Felling]**.

The axe also looked completely different. The last one was a simple axe apart from the line of fractals, whereas this one was clearly meant for war. The head was larger with a long curved edge looking like molten stone, and it emitted an aura of fiery annihilation. Its handle seemed to be created from a burnt-out trunk of some unknown tree, and scorch marks formed dozens of fractals in a seemingly random pattern along the handle.

It was a forest fire turned into a weapon, and as the enormous axe swung an inferno rippled outward in a massive wave of destruction. This attack was nothing like the nondescript killing of the first swing. It looked like a red tsunami that pushed outward toward the puppets, swallowing anything it reached.

The puppets were not only burnt to when the wave consumed them, but the flames actually contained an extremely sharp cutting power. The flames somehow chopped the silver guards into tens of pieces that were soon turned into cinders before

the wave passed on. They didn't even get the chance to form the silver mist this time as only burnt chunks were left behind.

Salvation tried to move his remaining puppets and rivers away from the firestorm, but the attack was way too fast for even the more agile silver rivers. The wave kept growing and growing in a massive conflagration, and soon the attack had passed hundreds of meters, leaving nothing but scorched earth in its wake.

Zac had fallen down on his knees after releasing the attack, panting with exhaustion. After the two attacks he had a pretty decent idea of the requirements for the first two swings. The Axe of Felling required somewhere around 500 Strength to launch, whereas the second one required 750.

He guessed that normally only the first swing was meant to be used in the F-grade unless perhaps someone managed to reach the required Strength for the second with the help of [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. But thanks to his titles his effective strength just about passed 800, allowing him to launch the second swing, though not effortlessly.

But Zac knew that still wasn't the end. There was one more axe one could summon with [**Deforestation**].

Zac hesitantly looked at the remaining puppets and rivers. His two first swings had killed off roughly a third of the Puppets, where the second swing had destroyed over a hundred thousand puppets alone. The Shadow Ocean that Ogras had summoned would be able to handle a quarter of the original number as well before the time ran out. But that still left almost half of the puppets.

In a perfect world he would repeat the swing of the Infernal Axe a couple of times to rip apart the rest of the puppets, but he realized that this attack couldn't be used repeatedly. The fractal on his arm had dimmed by a large degree, with only a third still being illuminated by a mysterious power.

Zac realized that the attack was a bit like his upgraded axe. The powerful skill had charges, and it needed to restore its energies before it could be used again. Perhaps that was for the

best, as Zac felt how wrung out his body was after using the second strike, even with his extreme physique.

That meant he would either need to try to summon the third axe or cancel the attack and try to destroy the rest of the puppets some other way. Salvation still doggedly refused to leave his position within one of the rivers, so using [**Nature's Punishment**] to finish him off was impossible.

Meanwhile, he didn't feel that [**Chop**] was up to the task of destroying the well over hundred thousand remaining puppets in short order, leaving the final axe as his only solution. The problem was that Zac wasn't sure he would be able to withstand the backlash from trying to force the ultimate attack of [**Deforestation**].

However, they were running out of options and Zac could only make a gambit on his oddly durable body. The air around him twisted from a massive surge of power as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] to push his effective strength to over a thousand points.

The mental effects of the skill were especially poignant with the added effect of the [**Splinter of Oblivion**] bleeding into his mind since the battle started, and Zac forcibly had to restrain himself from actually trying to bite a puppet to death the moment he reached the defending line of silver guards once again.

"Desolation," Zac wheezed with red-tinted eyes as almost all of his remaining Cosmic Energy was sucked dry in the blink of an eye.

Zac started to swing his axe to launch the final axe, which was called [**Desolation**]. But he only managed to swing the axe half-way before he was pushed to his knees from insane pressure, one that didn't only affect his body but even his soul. He felt a deep unwillingness to give in as madness took control of his mind, and he used everything he had to push the axe forward.

His muscles tore as blood started to run down his nose and ears, but it actually seemed to work as the outline of an enormous axe started to form. But its true shape couldn't even

be discerned before a loud snap echoed across the battlefield, and the axe immediately fractured.

The sound came from multiple bones in Zac's arm shattering due to overwhelming pressure. His strength wasn't enough, even with [**Hatchetman's Rage**] activated. Zac had hoped that the requirement for the third axe was 1000 Strength, but that clearly wasn't it as he wasn't even close to finishing the swing before his body broke down and his mind was damaged.

But surprisingly the attack wasn't a complete failure. As the indistinct outline of the axe fractured it turned into a hazy grey mist that rushed out toward the puppets. The mist was pretty sparse and only a small part of the remaining Silver Guards was affected, but the result was still astounding.

Anything the anthracite mist touched started to crumble, and in just seconds the affected guards had turned into nothingness. There were no marks, no remains, nothing. Just a complete and total annihilation. Zac's eyes widened in shock as he looked upon the destruction as he lay immobile on the ground, wondering just how strong the fully finished strike would be.

Unfortunately, the mist was only enough to destroy another ten thousand puppets. But sometimes a little bit of luck was all that was needed to turn a battle around.

As a silver river fragmented due to an errant gust of the deadly mist, and a wretched Salvation was thrown out with a pained wail, a silver shield shattering around him. Even the silver arm he had created for himself broke down, turning into blackened motes that dissipated.

Only Salvation himself seemed fine, with his puppets sacrificing themselves to protect him from the effects of [**Desolation**]. Madness and fear marred the man's face as he looked at Zac with horror, and Zac growled in response as he tried to get back on his feet.

"DESCENT!" Salvation screamed in panic, and the remaining tens of thousands of puppets broke down simultaneously, rapidly forming a sinister cloud beyond anything Zac had seen before.

Chapter 317: Explosions

Zac's eyes widened in alarm because the scene was the same as when Salvation summoned the enormous head in the sky during the hunt, only on a far grander scale. If this attack was allowed to complete its buildup the face would at least be ten times the size of the last time.

Something needed to be done, but his limbs didn't respond to his commands. His last attack had completely overtaxed his body, and apart from the broken bones in his arm and shoulder, he felt he had ripped most of his muscles as well.

He still had some remaining Cosmic Energy in his system, but he couldn't even stand up at the moment, let alone launch an attack to stop Salvation from bringing the equivalent of a comet down on their heads. He only saw one possibility to turn the tides.

[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill] activated around his core, and his battered body was immediately flooded with Miasma. Zac's vision blurred and a sense of weakness immediately spread through his body. The effect was even worse as **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was forcibly canceled before it's time limit, and it looked like switching Class was not a viable method to avoid the backlash from activating the buffing skill.

The transformation would take less than ten seconds, but he started to despair as he realized he wouldn't make it in time. An enormous silver river formed in the clouds above, and it quickly moved down to swallow Salvation's exposed body.

But blood suddenly spurting out of the mad prophet's mouth as a shadowy lance erupted from his chest. He looked down with bafflement as even more lances skewered him, making him lose blood like a sieve.

It was Ogras who had somehow teleported into Salvation's own shadow to attack him before he had time to get back into the protection of his silver rivers. It looked like Ogras had been patiently waiting like a hunter for Salvation to appear to get a shot at assassinating him.

A wet cough escaped Salvation's mouth as he slowly turned his head toward Ogras. The demon was just about to slice off his head when his eyes widened in alarm. The golden fractal on Salvation's forehead lit up with blinding light, and the demon fell back as though he was grievously wounded.

"So it is my time to join the unity," Salvation rasped as he rapidly started to age. "But redemption comes to all. I will be accompanied by thousands, my last gift to the great Lord."

Ogras suddenly started to scream as though he was being ripped apart as he was bathed in golden light. He desperately tried to move away, but it looked like his body didn't respond to his actions.

"Horned one, join me in ete-" Salvation said, but was forcibly interrupted as a huge spiked shield slammed into him with the force of a ballistic missile.

Half of Salvation's body, including most of his head, was destroyed, instantly killing him. The golden fractal lost its source of energy when the grimy priest lost his remaining life force. Ogras soon calmed down, but he was still on his knees panting from whatever he had experienced.

It was Zac who had finally finished his transformation but had found himself unable to move even in his Draugr form.

Luckily one of his arms was still mostly intact apart from a few pulled muscles. He had forced it full of miasma with **[Unholy Strike]** and hurled his huge shield at Salvation since he was afraid he'd miss if he threw his axe with his left arm.

Zac was filled with new energy after the shield hit home, confirming that Salvation had truly died from the attack. But the energy was extremely lacking for how taxing the battle was since Salvation was only level 62. It was enough to push his level to 54 and some ways toward the next level, but nothing more than that.

He arduously got to a sitting position as he sardonically wondered what his opponent would think if he ever got killed in battle. Would he be shocked at the minuscule amount of energy compared to the strength that Zac exhibited? But he was soon dragged out of his musings from the rumblings of the sky.

The silver clouds had stopped condensing with Salvation's death, but they hadn't dissipated. The enormous amount of energies they contained rapidly became more and more chaotic, and alarm bells were starting to go off in Zac's mind.

"Good job, though I believe kill stealing is my job," a weak voice came from his side as Ogras appeared with the shield gripped in a shadow tentacle.

The demon was pale as a sheet, and tear streaks were running down his face. Zac wondered just what the demon had experienced inside that golden light to look like that. After glancing over at the demon's original position Zac saw that the body of salvation was gone, likely snatched up by Ogras as he rushed over here.

"Unfortunately we don't seem to be out of harm's way," the demon continued. "The arrays have stopped gathering energy, but they are still active. My soul is wounded and I'm out of energy, are you able to destroy a rune to let us out of here?"

Zac sighed and shook his head.

"I don't have a lot of offensive skills in this class. The only thing is that throw," Zac explained.

Ogras only groaned and started to desperately rip up huge chunks of the scorched ground beneath them.

"Then get to digging," Ogras said. "We have twenty seconds at best before the energies in those clouds above us rip this area into pieces."

Zac's brows rose in realization, and he punched a deep hole with his working arm, ignoring the pain from using his torn muscles. It only took them ten seconds to dig over twenty meters down in the ground, after which they covered themselves with layers of soil.

However, they weren't done with just that as Zac summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** to form a thick shield above them, and he immediately imbued it with the Seed of Hardness. Ogras still wasn't satisfied as one Array Disk after another appeared, along with a few other defensive treasures that Zac had never seen before.

"Treasures are no good for you dead," Ogras muttered, though he seemed a bit pained as he clutched his items.

Zac was about to respond but a shockwave that almost knocked him unconscious slammed into them, even with the multiple layers of defense. The next moment the world turned white as a massive explosion erupted that drowned out everything else.

Miasma was being drained at an astonishing rate as torrential forces continuously slammed into his shield, and three quarters of his death-attuned energy was gone in just a few seconds. Finally, he was forced to remove the shield while shouting out a warning to Ogras, letting the defensive treasures take the brunt of the attack.

The shimmering layers of shields started shattering at a rapid pace by the unceasing onslaught, and Zac was starting to wonder if he would have to resummon his shield and push it until he ran out of Miasma. But as suddenly as the force erupted it also disappeared and calm once again returned to the area.

Zac and Ogras found themselves at the bottom of an enormous crater, and the two couldn't help but gawk as they looked around. There was simply nothing there apart from the enormous hole that was at least fifty meters deep.

There was a clean line of demarcation in a circle where the edge of the array once was, as it seemed the blast had been contained and pushed downward, at least in the beginning of the eruption. The large fractals in the sky were all gone, clearly unable to hold against the massive forces that had been unleashed.

The two were both pretty bad shape, but they knew it was risky to stay here. The dominators hadn't appeared in the fight,

just like they had hoped, but the massive discharge just now could likely be seen from outside Salvation's area of control. So they arduously made their way out of the crater, only to see another scene of utter desolation.

Half the forest they came from had been toppled, and anything aboveground had been ripped to shreds from the blast after the array containment failed. Zac shook his head in wonderment, feeling as though he had survived staying in the epicenter of a nuclear explosion, mostly through his own power.

The world of Cosmic Energy was both terrifying and wondrous.

Thomas walked through the streets of New Washington, or what remained of them. A somber face marred his tired face as he looked at the scene of devastation.

"Do we have a tally yet?" Thomas sighed, turning to his aide who walked along him with one of her arms in a cast.

"The cleanup process is still underway, but we fear that up to twenty percent of the population died from the explosion, and many more are wounded. The commercial and residential districts were particularly badly hit," she said with a downcast face.

"Do we know how Salvation managed to smuggle so many of his puppets to our sewer system?" Thomas growled, an ember of fury burning in his chest.

"We still have no idea, the routes were completely destroyed from the explosion, making it impossible to map. One theory is that he found an abandoned sewage outlet that ran out of the town that provided him ingress," she said, though it was clear she did not believe in this theory.

"What do you believe?" Thomas sighed, though he had a good idea of what she was thinking.

"Wasn't Salvation allied with... *them*?" the aide said with a low voice, avoiding eye contact with Thomas.

Thomas sighed again as they returned to his office after making the rounds.

“They served the same master, but from how we understand it they belonged to rival camps. I reached out to our contact earlier and they fervently denied any involvement in this terrorist attack. Truthfully I believe them, if only because this insanity is against their goals as well,” Thomas said with a tired voice.

He knew what his aide thought of those monsters, and the path of no return they had embarked upon. But they were out of options and time was running out. Perhaps that man would be able to defeat the Dominators given enough time, but their lord was on his way. He knew that fighting against him was futile, like ants trying to destroy an elephant.

It was time to salvage what could be saved. He knew that only a small fraction of humanity would survive the arrival of The Great Redeemer with his plan, but that was better than the whole world getting harvested. If he needed to sell his soul to save at least a small part of humanity, so be it.

But he hadn't completely given up. As long as he had two hands he would do everything in his power to turn the tides.

“Have there been any news from our other project?” Thomas asked, and the aide immediately took out a few documents, knowing what he was referring to.

“The spies we caught had limited knowledge about the movements of the church, but we have finally managed to locate one of the four entrances that the Church of Everlasting Dao control. We are amassing our armies to strike that outpost as we speak,” she said.

“Any new intelligence?” Thomas probed, as he had been too occupied with the Zombie threat as of late to be up to date to the activities of this clandestine project.

“We have confirmed from multiple sources that they all lead to the same Mystic Realm and that it is an enormous structure that would likely be able to house millions of people. But it is already populated by multiple indigenous forces, and even the core members of the Church have found themselves in pitched battles without making much headway,” she read from the reports.

“Have you found out what’s inside that’s so important that they ignore all the resources of Earth?” Thomas asked with a sharp look in her direction.

“The infiltrators have no idea, even they seemed pretty shocked at the resources their High Vicar spends at conquering that place,” she said. “And the main branch of their church seems to have spent a huge sum to provide reinforcements to help in their efforts.”

“Do we have the strength to conquer the base?” Thomas asked next.

“It is guarded by multiple E-Grade warriors, though they are still somewhat limited by the restrictions. We will need to expend both plenty of lives and a sizeable portion of our old-world weaponry to seize it according to our generals,” she said, waiting for instructions.

Thomas nodded in thought. In fact, he knew more about the situation inside those portals than his aide. Only a handful of people from the Government knew the true reason why the Church so desperately wanted to seize the enormous facility. It had cost them a shocking amount of lives and resources to receive that snippet of information since it had required them to capture one of the Churches’ bishops.

It was the key to not only surviving this calamity but actually making huge strides forward. Their alliance with those lunatics under the Great Redeemer was just the back-up plan to save some of their people if things didn’t work out. It wouldn’t be necessary if they attained their goals with this Mystic Realm.

“It is the gateway that might lead to the salvation of humanity. Spare no expense, we need to seize that entrance.”

Chapter 318: Dao Funnel

“He’s dead?” Void’s Disciple said with a small frown without looking up from the scriptures in front of him.

Inevitability hesitantly nodded and muttered a confirmation, unable to read their leader’s mood as usual.

“The fulcrum teamed up with the leader of the demonkin invaders to assault Salvation. The large explosions at the end appear to be the collective detonation of all his Silver Guards,” Inevitability said.

“How did he manage to move so many of his puppets to all those towns unnoticed?” Void’s Disciple casually asked, but fear immediately gripped Inevitability’s heart. “At least a million people have died, robbing our Lord of his harvest.”

“That... It was me and Harbinger,” Inevitability admitted, her heart rapidly beating.

“Explain,” Void Said, looking up from the ancient texts for the first time since Inevitability entered his cultivation chamber at the bottom of the expansive hive.

Void’s Disciple looked unassuming and even a bit frail, but Inevitability knew that he was anything but. He had always been mysterious to herself and her brother, and they did not even know his age or which hive he originated from.

They only knew that even before the integration the two of them were unable to as much as touch his clothes when teaming up. Now that he had made massive strides in the Dao and racking up all those titles he was far beyond their reach.

It was a shame, she thought. He was a perfect mate now that they had evolved away from the restrictive fetters of the Anointed. Unfortunately, he was just too focused on the mission, to the point it was all-consuming.

“We wanted a back-up plan for when the lord arrives,” she admitted, not daring to lie. “We thought that if we kept that man happy he would speak up for us. We didn’t expect him to detonate the puppets though, but rather capture the townspeople when the lord Redeemer arrived.”

“Did you at least retrieve the Origin Funnel?” he asked with a sigh.

“It was on Salvation’s body when he died. We believe it’s with his killers now,” Inevitability admitted with a grimace.

“So the fulcrum is currently not only walking around with one of the beacons that guide our lord, but also all the Origin Dao that lunatic collected?” Void’s Disciple said, the air around him starting to twist and turn.

Void’s Disciple closed his eyes in exasperation and lightly started tapping his finger on the table. Inevitability started to shudder as she knew that was a sign that he was greatly annoyed, and carnage almost always followed. But the tapping suddenly stopped, allowing Inevitability to breathe out in relief, feeling like a sacrificial offering being granted clemency.

“Well, it’s just one of the beacons, and the Funnel is just a copy the lord made in his youth. The loss is regrettable, but not overly so. That Mystic Realm is far more important. If we can provide our Lord with that thing he will likely not care about our other failings,” Void’s Disciple muttered.

Inevitability ardently nodded, extremely happy to change the subject. The loss of the Funnel was a worthy price to get rid of that man in her opinion. She might not have dared to kill Salvation herself, but the less competition the better.

“What about the church?” Inevitability hesitantly asked. “That thing is valuable, but I don’t believe the Great Lord is willing to make an enemy of the Church of Everlasting Dao.”

“Soon after it awakens the entrances will close. All three of us will enter at that time,” Void’s Disciple calmly explained. “The Mystic Realm is completely separated with high-grade shielding. No karma threads will leak out, allowing us to kill

everything without holding back. Only the three of us need to return from that place, the rest can die inside, no matter if it's the church or the aboriginals.”

Inevitability's eyes lit up in anticipation when she heard Void's words. They had been forced to stay hidden for so long that her whole body was itching in anticipation. Her killing spree in the hunt had barely whet her appetite for blood, and they had avoided all interesting targets out of fear of exposing their intentions or their lord.

But it seemed that it all was coming to an end.

“Even the fulcrum?” Inevitability probed.

Fury still suffused her as she thought of her shameful display during the hunt. Every day she dreamed of tearing that man and that little chick apart, but she held herself back due to fear of the person in front of her.

“Nothing can go wrong inside the Mystic Realm,” Void's Disciple said after a brief pause. “If he enters, then that's his fate.”

Bloodlust started to leak from her body as Inevitability imagined running into Zachary Atwood inside the Mystic Realm. Perhaps she could trick that human to go there without Void finding out?

Zac and Ogras sat hidden inside an array, three hours from the battlefield. They had pushed their tired bodies to the limits to get as far away as possible from that place, afraid that someone would take advantage of their situation. But their bodies could only endure so much, and Ogras was unable to keep going after an hour, forcing Zac to carry him. Finally they found a Cave to hide in while they recuperated.

The moment they sat down they ate a second set of healing pills, and as if by an unspoken agreement created some distance before they started to ponder on the Dao. They had both been in a desperate battle that pushed them to their limits, and it was time to reap the benefits.

Zac gained more from the last battle compared to all of the battles with the Incursion Leaders thus far. An all-out struggle was truly the best way to move forward. His eyes closed as he focused on the large axe fractal in his body. He wasn't pondering on the Dao of Sharpness again, but rather on the Dao of Heaviness. It hadn't been that long since he improved it last time since he evolved it during the hunt. But the previous battle showcased multiple sources of heaviness for him, which he wanted to capitalize on.

The first was the three instances of pressure that his body was subjected to when summoning the axes for **[Deforestation]**. The last one placed such a burden for him that his body almost collapsed, and if his bones didn't break first even his soul would be wounded. The first axe, **[Axe of Felling]**, also contained a hint of imperviousness and solidity that was in a sense related to heaviness.

The second heaviness could be gleaned from the immense explosion that almost killed them earlier. Just the shockwave from the blast was powerful enough to cost him a quarter of his Miasma, and being within sustained errant energies was like being in a zone with far higher gravity. Zac believed the two insights together with other snippets he had gathered from various fights and other sources were enough to push his seed to the peak naturally.

He already possessed one peak seed, but that one came at the cost of multiple Dao Treasures, and he couldn't consume them so freely. Besides, Zac noticed that the effect of the treasures was waning when he improved his Seed of Sharpness. He only had a few shots left to use Dao Treasures before they became useless.

At that point, he would need to get treasures of a higher grade, but it was a complete waste to use such a thing on a Dao Seed. The higher-grade Dao Treasures were rather meant to improve Dao Fragments, and they could save years of effort rather than months. To use them at this juncture was a complete waste.

The two were strapped for time, but both of them needed a day or two of recuperation before they could move again. Ogras was especially badly off as his constitution was far inferior to

Zac's. The golden beam had even wounded his psyche, which was much thornier to heal. Zac, therefore, didn't feel rushed when it took hours to enter a calm state of meditation, but when he finally arrived there the rest came surprisingly easy.

Zac opened his eyes an unknown time later, and after glancing over noticed that Ogras was still in the middle of meditation. Ogras even seemed to be in the middle of a breakthrough judging by the mysterious fluctuations surrounding him, and Zac closed his eyes again.

He didn't want to disturb the demon while he was right in the threshold of improving and instead focused on a second Dao Seed. This time it was Sanctuary. He had been extremely close for a while now thanks to the partial vision, their desperate situation where Zac shielded the two from the blast was enough to push him over the edge.

When he opened his eyes the next time he saw Ogras fiddling with something on the ground, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw it was a piece of Salvation's head. More precisely it was his forehead that still had the shimmering golden fractal imprinted.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Zac wheezed with alarm, knowing how terrible that fractal was. He even forgot checking on his boosted Daos due to the shocking scene.

"Oh, you're up?" Ogras said with a start, having been completely engrossed with the fractal. "I believe this is the control inscription for the array that allowed Salvation to possess so many puppets."

"You better not get any ideas," Zac muttered. "I'm pretty sure the array continuously consumed his life force. When I met him during the hunt he looked slightly above my age, and you saw how rapidly he aged when that thing lit up. He might have been Emily's age when he got his hands on that cursed thing."

"Don't worry, I won't infuse my head with some unknown array. I have enough troublesome things in my body as it is," Ogras snorted.

Zac sighed, knowing the feeling all too well. The multiverse was simply too full of double-edged treasures. Or perhaps it was fairer to say that nothing came without a price. A treasure wouldn't simply boost one's power to great heights without exacting a price in return. It was true for the creature living in Ogras' shadows, and it was true for the splinter in his head.

"Still, it is very interesting," Ogras continued. "I believe I have found a pretty important clue."

"Oh? What's that?" Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

His right arm was still mostly useless as his bones hadn't mended, but at least the muscles in his body had healed enough for him to move about effortlessly. It would take a few more days to be able to push his body in a battle though.

"This thing resonated with me when I evolved a Dao Seed," Ogras explained. "I think it contains Origin Dao."

"What?" Zac asked with surprise as he looked down on the fractal.

"I believe this treasure steals the Origin Dao of the people who Salvation turned to puppets, storing it somehow," Ogras explained. "That would also fit with why that old goat wants to find these baby planets. It might be this type of thing that would be forced upon the so-called fulcrums."

Zac slowly nodded as he mulled over the information. It felt like they were getting close to the truth, although they were still missing some pieces of information.

"It would also explain why such a powerful person as Salvation wasn't even on the Dao Ladder," Zac added. "The array might have stolen all the Origin Dao around him, including his own."

"Exactly," Ogras said with some excitement in his face. "So what I am thinking is this; What if we used all this Origin Dao for ourselves?"

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation as he looked down at the fractal. Even if his improvement was extremely rapid it would take a lot of time to not only reach the peak with his six Dao Seeds but also fuse them into three Fragments.

The fusion itself was far harder than simply reaching the peak, but he was running out of time. But being bathed in a huge amount of Origin Dao might be the key to pushing his Dao further, allowing him to quickly evolve before the Dominators did something irreversible.

“So how would we go about getting our hands on the Origin Dao?” Zac asked with some glee on his face.

“Huh? I have no idea,” Ogras snorted. “We’ll need to do some research.”

Zac threw Ogras an even stare before shaking his head with annoyance.

“What about safety? Do you think the Dominators will be able to track that thing?” Zac asked.

Ogras frowned when he heard the news, and he looked down at the pouch fastened to his belt. But suddenly his eyes lit up again.

“I can throw his corpse into the Mystic Realm for now. That place is completely isolated, and there’s no way the dominators will be able to sense anything across dimensions. We can leisurely study the thing inside,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Zac agreed with a nod. Creating a stable tunnel to the Mystic Realm was on his agenda in any case.

“Keep me posted. Don’t try to keep that thing for yourself, there are a lot of people on our island who could benefit from that.”

“Fine. You ready to go?” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

The two kept as high a pace they could, considering the state of their bodies. But it still took one day longer to return to the small outpost town the Marshall Clan controlled. The guards looked at Zac and Ogras as though they were monsters when they arrived, but their captain still stepped forward with a shocking revelation about worldwide explosions caused by Salvation.

Zac finally understood what Salvation meant with his words in the end, but he knew there was nothing to be done about the situation. The two stepped through the teleporter back to Port

Atwood, Zac's mood greatly dampened by the realization that over a million people had died because he killed Salvation.

But the two didn't even have time to digest the news of Salvation's final revenge as Emily rushed them the moment they stepped out of the teleporter.

"They've found it!"

Chapter 319: Sugar Daddy

Zac was a still bit muddled from getting the news that Salvation had managed to kill so many people as a final act of lunacy that he didn't quite understand what Emily was getting at.

"Who found what?" he asked while looking around.

"Mr. Trang and his squad finally managed to set up a base camp. It took some time because they needed to finish a quest, but they succeeded because of his Kraken. When they bought the teleporter there was already a public teleporter in range that we can't see here. It's probably the underworld," Emily explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

The eyes of both Ogras and Zac lit up at the news. Getting to the underworld before the fire golems destroyed the whole thing was of the highest priority. For Ogras it was about resources, while Zac also considered the humanitarian component. But the exciting news were suddenly eclipsed by a snippet of information from Emily's report.

"His WHAT?" Zac exclaimed, looking at Emily with some horror.

"His pet Kraken," Emily said with a wide grin. "He's named it Little Bau, which apparently means treasure in Vietnamese? I heard it's crazy strong."

Zac didn't know how to react. He was reminded that the old fisherman's class was something like a maritime beast tamer, but he didn't expect him to snag such a scary thing. It also made him a bit leery about having an island kingdom if Kraken were swimming about in the depths. Would they start getting harassed by Lovecraftian nightmares in the near future?

"Anyway, how's their situation?" Zac asked.

“We still don’t know, we’ve been waiting for you,” Emily explained. “Our teleporter is hidden because of your settings, so they shouldn’t know about us. And all the strong people here were occupied so we didn’t dare open it.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod. “We can’t go right now though. My arm is broken in multiple places and Ogras is wounded as well. Salvation was even stronger than expected.”

“Wounded? That guy was that strong? He was only level 61 right?” Emily said with some confusion.

“Girl, he had an army of half a million puppets that exploded in our faces,” Ogras snorted. “It’s a miracle we’re even still alive. The underworld will still be there in a few days. Go punch some barghest or something.”

Emily looked disappointed at the news, but she soon nodded. Zac knew she wanted to get down there as quickly as possible as the underworld was the last hope she had of reuniting with her siblings. Unfortunately, he simply wasn’t in any condition to battle a supposed high- or even top-tier Incursion at the moment. So, for now, it was best to keep their presence hidden in case some unexpected dangers lurked on the other side of the teleporter.

“I’ll go train then,” she said as she hurried away.

“I need money, I’m flat broke,” Ogras suddenly said from the side.

“What?” Zac asked with some skepticism as he threw the demon a glance. “I’m not your sugar daddy.”

“My what? Anyway, between the Origin Array and the temporary gate to the Mystic Realm I barely have enough resources to even support myself,” the demon said.

“Remember, we couldn’t bring Nexus Coins here either.”

“What do you need?” Zac finally said after a brief pause. “And isn’t your income from Calrin’s enough? The revenue should have exploded recently.”

Truthfully, Ogras had provided a lot of assistance not only in battle but also in management and setting a course for the force as a whole. If he needed some Nexus Coins it wasn’t the

end of the world since Zac had hundreds of millions to his name, and even more in the form of treasures and Nexus Crystals.

“That money won’t arrive for a while yet,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “To begin with I need a hundred million to upgrade the temporary array into a permanent one. It’s especially important if we want to set up the hidden outpost to research Salvation.”

Zac sighed and transferred the money to Ogras, not bothering to investigate how much was actually needed. It truly felt like a worthy investment. They still didn’t know how The Great Redeemer tracked his targeted planets. Perhaps even killing his people wasn’t enough. Throwing anything with a connection to him into the Mystic Realm felt like the best solution for the moment.

“It’ll take a day or two to get the needed components from the blue one,” Ogras nodded. “What do you want to do afterward?”

“How long until you are back to fighting condition?” Zac asked.

“Three days at the maximum. That golden light tried to drag my soul out of my body, but it didn’t cause any real lasting damage,” the demon said after thinking it over.

“We’ll head down to the Underworld immediately after,” Zac said. “The other incursions aren’t critical, and it should take a while to whittle down the zombies to a manageable number.”

“Great,” Ogras said with naked greed on his face. “Can’t let those people below us wait for too long, and they can incidentally help me with my financial situation. I’ll handle the gate immediately.”

Zac snorted as he watched the demon get swallowed by shadows before he stepped into the teleporter again to head to his cultivation cave. As he expected he found his sister sitting with closed eyes on one of the mats he acquired in the hunt. She opened her eyes and smiled at him when he approached,

before her eyes suddenly widened at the sight of his arm limply dangling to the side.

“You’re hurt?” she said as she hurried over to him.

“My ultimate skill is pretty taxing to my body, I need to get a bit stronger,” Zac shrugged.

“At least that lunatic is dealt with. But don’t take on more than you can handle,” she said and looked relieved when she realized he was in decent shape at least.

“I’m fine,” Zac smiled. “How are things on your end?”

“I’m making amazing progress in this cave!” she said, her eyes brightening up again. “I think I will enter the level ladder soon. And the other one I have already entered.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion as he opened up his ladder system.

The only one that made sense was the Dao Ladder since Kenzie didn’t possess a lot of wealth. She didn’t handle any of Port Atwood’s finances or fought beasts to level up, so she shouldn’t have a lot of Nexus Coins. So Zac quickly read through the ladder for her name, but he instead found another moniker.

[63 - Pretty Pretty Mega Kenzie]

Zac wryly smiled as he saw the name he hadn’t heard in almost twenty years. It was the moniker Kenzie had given herself when she was four to match his Super Brother-Man alias. Her superhero costume had been a Halloween princess costume and a cape made from a blanket.

“I can’t believe you chose that name,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” Kenzie laughed. “I have already confirmed that these pseudonyms only count for Earth’s ladders, not on other things in the multiverse.”

Zac sighed in relief when he heard that since it had actually been a small worry of his own. He already knew there were ladders in the Tower of Eternity to both showcase historic records and the current status of trial takers. It would have

been a bit embarrassing to have Super Brother-Man show up at such a place when he was looking for a strong force to join.

“What level is your Dao to get placed at the 63rd spot?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I have the Seed of Tinder at the late stage, and I recently got the Seed of Loam,” she said. “When I only had the late-stage seed I didn’t get a placement,”

“Seed of Loam?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“It’s a basic elemental Seed,” Kenzie explained. “Jarvis wants me to get seeds for the four elements before evolving. So I have earth and fire now, but I still need water and air.”

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense since her class was Elementalist. He also felt a bit surprised how quickly people had advanced on the Dao Ladder. He knew he was still far ahead of the curve, but the fact that a Late-Stage seed wasn’t alone to enter the ladder was pretty surprising to him after hearing how hard it was for the demonkin soldiers to gain Dao Seeds back home. It was truly no surprise that The Great Redeemer wanted to get his hand on their Origin Dao.

“Loam doesn’t assist me in battle at the moment, but it does improve my healing and it helps the flower grow,” she added and nodded at the small lotus.

It hadn’t been that long since Zac saw it the last time, but it had actually grown quite a bit and now had the diameter of a dinner plate. But it still emitted almost no life-attuned energy, proving it was still in an extremely early stage. Who knew how many years it would take until it possessed the supreme energies of the one that the Abbot possessed.

“Have you heard anything from the battle with the Zombies?” Zac asked.

“I get an update every evening from Adran. They have started clashing a few days ago, but no big battle has taken place yet. They are essentially nipping at the Zombie’s sides as the horde pushes forward. They’re trying to split up the horde, but that requires killing the high-grade Zombies who keep the dumber

ones in line, and those creatures are hidden in the middle of the horde,” Kenzie said.

Zac nodded, feeling more confident in his plan now that he knew the situation likely wouldn't get too out of hand in the short run.

“I'm heading to the underworld next,” Zac said. “Will you stay here?”

“I have no interest in fighting with a bunch of fire golems,” Kenzie said with a wave of her hand. “I'd rather stay here for now.”

“Are you changing to a non-combat role?” Zac asked curiously since Kenzie rarely fought since she arrived at Port Atwood.

“No, but I don't need as much practical battle experience as others thanks to Jeeves,” Kenzie said. “But I think I will get a secondary job when I reach E-Grade. Alchemist perhaps? It seems pretty fun.”

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard her mention alchemy. That was one field where they were sorely lacking at the moment, and after hearing what Dao Seeds Kenzie possessed she felt perfect for the job. Fire and Earth could both help in concocting pills, and the precise energy control she got with the help of her AI could boost her skills even further.

And no one would be happier than Zac if she focused on a non-combat profession since that would keep her out of harm's way. As long as she still possessed a mage-like class she would be able to defend herself. Besides, Alchemists were always extremely wealthy and had great powerhouses protecting them. It would help secure her future in case something ever happened to him since skilled Alchemists were welcome no matter where they went.

“That sounds like a good idea. I did find that nice cauldron earlier, you can have it,” Zac said and immediately took it out and placed it in the cave. “Just tell me if you need anything to train your skills. Port Atwood could really use a skilled Alchemist.”

“Are you trying to turn your poor sister into a money printing machine?” Kenzie giggled. “In any case, it would have to wait a bit. I want to focus on my Dao while the Origin energies are still abundant in the atmosphere. Dao is the one thing that Jeeves can’t help with, so I need to do that one myself.”

“Ogras and I got our hands on something nice earlier which might come in handy,” Zac said and told her about the golden fractal. “Do you think Jeeves would be able to figure out a way to extract the energy?”

“It’s impossible to tell without looking at it,” Kenzie said with hesitation. “I need to borrow the crystals on formations and inscriptions as well to give Jeeves a better understanding of fractals.”

“Sure, just tell the Merit exchange I gave the go-ahead to browse them,” Zac agreed without hesitation.

The crystals had already been put into the merit exchange. But the cost of reading them could be waived for whoever Zac wished since they were his possessions. In fact, anyone could put information or skill crystals into the merit exchange, and any time the information was perused that individual would get most of the charged Merit.

It was a way to make people share their knowledge with the others of the force instead of hoarding it. Right now there were essentially no information or skill crystals except Zac’s own though, but that would probably change as the years passed.

“The others will complain of nepotism,” Kenzie said with a smile.

Zac only rolled his eyes, completely uncaring what the others thought.

“Oh, by the way, the Abbot’s custodian came here and asked for you while you were gone,” Kenzie said. “You should probably visit him before you leave for the underworld.”

Chapter 320: Karmic Ties

“Abbot Everlasting Peace is looking for me?” Zac said with some worry. “Are they under attack?”

“I have no idea, but it doesn’t seem like it,” Kenzie said with some hesitation. “But it seemed pretty important.”

Zac frowned thoughtfully as he wondered what the old monk could need from him at this juncture. If their mountain wasn’t under attack by the undead the other most likely reason was that there was some issue related to Karma. That old man seemed to have a miraculous insight into that mysterious Dao, to the point that Zac suspected that the old man possessed an advanced Dao Fragment.

“There’s no need to be so serious, just go over there and see what he wants. You’ll get wrinkles if you keep scrunching up your face like that,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

Zac snorted but he felt what she said made sense. There was no point in guessing when he could simply check the situation himself. But he first wanted to heal his arm in case the visit would lead to a battle with the zombies.

“I’ll go tomorrow, I want my bones to properly set first,” Zac said after some consideration. “Ogras will construct a stable gate to the Mystic Realm as soon as possible. We’ll set up an outpost inside to keep sensitive matters, such as Salvation’s things. You can go over whenever you feel ready to look into things.”

“Sure,” Kenzie said with some interest. “I wanted to see that place anyway. It’s like we found an enormous space station.”

“Stay inside the sealed area though, and have a handful of Valkyries always accompany you. There were some odd beasts inside that were almost evolved,” Zac said with some worry.

He was afraid that his sister would do something drastic given the opportunity, and Zac would be down in the core of the planet fighting Fire Golems.

“I’m not stupid,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes.

“Remember I survived both the tutorial and living next to the Dead Zone for months.”

“I just worry,” Zac said with a smile.

Zac spent the rest of the day recuperating in the cave while consolidating his recent Dao improvements. Since he and Ogras rushed out of the Cradle of God he didn’t have time to stop and get a sense of his improved seeds, but now that he was finally home he opened up his menu to take a proper look again.

Heaviness (Peak): Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5

Sanctuary (High): Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.

He was pretty happy with the attributes both the seeds provided. Heaviness had gained mostly Strength as expected, but Sanctuary had changed a bit from giving mainly Wisdom to providing an even split between Endurance and Wisdom instead.

The situation also made him ponder what he should do in regards to his Dao. Yrial wanted him to get the fragments for Life and Death before evolving which would allow him to gain a class that was centered on that concept. However, he was far closer to getting a Fragment related to the Dao of Axe than one of Death as it stood. He still wasn’t used to Rot and Hardness was still only at the Middle stage, making the road to get both to Peak pretty arduous.

Perhaps he could boost them if their plan with Salvation’s array worked out, but Zac was more inclined to use that opportunity to form his first Fragment instead. Perhaps getting a Fragment of Axe would be enough to evolve both his classes, which would be for the best since he wasn’t in a position to delay evolving for too long.

The problem was that he was stumbling in the dark since the System didn't provide any hints to what the results of his actions would be. If he got a fragment of axe and life and then evolved, would he veer away from his Life-death cycle to a simpler evolved axeman? Would that even be a problem?

He finally gave up trying to decide on the spot what to do. He would simply have to see how things progressed and take things one step at a time. Worrying about fragments was a bit premature. He didn't only need to improve his seeds to the peak but also master them to the point that he would be able to fuse them into something that made sense.

When Zac woke up the next day he could move his arm again, though it was still a bit tender. Between his enormous pool of Vitality and expensive pills, he was like a troll from the old tales, regenerating at monstrous speeds.

The morning was spent on some more meditation before he got up and left for the teleporter after saying goodbye to his sister. He wasn't planning on bringing anyone to Mount Everlasting Peace, and he soon found himself at the foot of the sacred mountain. It wasn't the first time seeing the thousands of characters inscribed into the mountain walls, but he was still awed by the sight.

Not much had changed in the months since he came here last time, and the normalcy of the atmosphere was a bit surreal in of itself. One difference though was that no people were staying at the foot of the mountain like the last time. People had likely left the area when the undead horde started spreading, turning this place into an isolated pocket with death all around.

Even the monks were all but missing, leaving the fields completely untended. The only sign that the mountain was still populated were the two monks who sat in meditation a few meters away from the teleporter. They woke up from Zac's arrival, and he nodded at them before he glanced in the direction of the core of the Dead Zone.

It felt like there was an unseen war taking place as a thick wall of miasma rose into the skies a few kilometers away. The line

of demarcation was much clearer now compared to before, making Zac believe the Undead might have erected some unholy beacons outside to combat the purification of the runes on the mountain.

The two young monks stepped forward and told Zac that the Abbot was waiting in his courtyard and directed him toward the summit. Zac followed in tow, ascending the same set of stairs as the last time. This time the pressure was almost negligible, perhaps since Zac had a naturally stronger grasp of his Dao.

They soon reached the peak and Zac truly started to worry when he saw that the temple buildings were devoid of monks as well. A sense of wrongness crept into Zac's heart as he looked around, trying to figure out just what was going on.

"Where is everyone?" Zac asked the monks, who looked slightly troubled. "Did the undead attack?"

"The Abbot will explain everything," one of the two said. "But our disciple brothers are fine."

Zac slowly nodded, as he kept walking toward the small courtyard in the back of the mountain. But he stopped in his tracks the moment he reached the square in front of Abbot Everlasting Peace's home.

Thousands of monks sat silently with closed eyes, not one of them moving a muscle. They were so still that Zac almost would have thought them statues if it wasn't for the terrifying amount of Cosmic Energy that swirled around them, infusing some enormous newly added runes on the ground.

The runes were Sanskrit just as the ones on the mountain walls, but the power they emitted was far beyond anything he sensed from those covering the mountain. Zac still couldn't read the script, but he guessed it was some Buddhist Sutra functioning as an Array.

Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that the air was ripe with. Mysterious energy that made the fractal of **[Mental Fortress]** tingle was also everywhere. It was as though the

monks had combined not only their energy but also their Dao for some unknown reason.

Zac's heartbeat sped up from feeling the power that was contained in the runes as he walked toward the Abbot's courtyard. Was the monastery planning to launch some massive strike at the undead, and needed his help to stabilize the situation?

Various possibilities ran through Zac's head as he pushed open the large doors to find the old monk from last time standing inside. It was the old man who had accompanied him up the stairs and given him some pointers, but he had a complicated expression when he saw Zac enter.

At first he smiled and bowed, and it seemed as though he was about to utter a greeting. But he suddenly looked down again, and if Zac didn't know better he would have thought that he saw shame on the old man's face.

Instead, the old man indicated for Zac to head further in, and Zac complied with some confusion in his heart. His eyes immediately turned to the pond, but to his surprise the huge lotus was gone. He quickly looked around and saw Abbot Everlasting Peace sit on a prayer mat under an old tree on the other side of the pond with a pot of tea by his side.

Zac flashed over to the Abbot and breathed out in relief when he saw that he was fine. The horrifying wound in his chest was gone, and the old man was brimming with vitality even though he still looked quite old.

"This penniless monk is happy to see that benefactor could arrive in time," the old man said with a kindly smile as he indicated for Zac to sit down.

"It is good to see you as well," Zac said, accepting the cup of tea the Abbot poured him.

"This is a wild tea that grew on our sister mountain before the world changed," Everlasting Peace said as he took a small sip with contentment in his eyes. "It was gifted to this penniless monk by a Daoist who lived in seclusion there. He was a great scholar, but this one fears he fell during the Tutorial."

Zac wasn't sure what the old man was getting at, so he simply sipped the tea as while silently listening. It was unlike any tea that Zac had ever drunk before, with a heavy and bitter taste. It was still quite delicious, but Zac was mostly surprised by the fact that there was a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy in the tea.

It wasn't anywhere near what any true spiritual tea would contain, and it was impossible to gain any strength from it. But it was still pretty shocking considering it was something that came from the old Earth, and perhaps it was an indication that magic might actually have existed even before the integration.

"These cups were gifted our mountain three hundred years ago by the local lord. He came to pray to Buddha for a son after years of being unable to conceive a child. When his wish came true he returned with ten chests of gold and these cups that were given to him by a great scholar from the capital," the Abbot continued.

"This monastery has lived side by side with the secular world for over a thousand years, spreading the word of Buddha, and sowing seeds of karma. This poor monk hopes that we have left the world a better place than before. But just as day inevitably gives way to night, so must Karma eventually be severed."

"Severed?" Zac repeated with a frown. "What's going on? Are the undead mounting an attack?"

"Benefactor needs not to worry. This penniless monk is simply rambling, remembering a lost era. The Yin Creatures are of no threat to us," The abbot said as he finished his cup of tea and stood up. "This penniless monk invited benefactor to witness."

"Witness what?" Zac said, his confusion only growing as he drank the last of the tea and followed the old man who was walking toward the exit.

The old monk had waited while the two conversed, and he silently opened the gates to let Zac and the abbot exit. The two stopped right outside the gates, and for the first time since Zac arrived, he saw the monks open their eyes.

“Amithaba, it is time,” the Abbot said with a sad smile as he looked at the sea of monks.

No one said a word, but power immediately surged from the thousands of people and a pillar of light suddenly shot into the sky from the runes on the ground. It almost looked like the light of an incursion, but enormous lines Sanskrit floated in concentric circles around it.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing. The pillar was unlike anything he had witnessed before. Just what had these monks accomplished? It was as though they had invented their very own way of utilizing Cosmic Energy, turning it into something that Zac could only call Buddhist Energy. It gave off a holy and stable feeling, but it was clearly different from the energy of Sui or his Divine Crystals.

A golden halo suddenly erupted with boundless life force behind Abbot Everlasting Peace, and Zac actually had to take a step back with wide eyes. The power that the abbot emitted was almost at the same level as Inevitability, though it was completely different. It was soft and elusive, and it felt as though it contained endless mysteries.

Oddly enough the power that the old monk emitted wasn't didn't cause danger sense to go off in the slightest. Zac could usually feel at least something unless the disparity between himself and the other party was too great. Did the Abbot's Karmic powers obscure his perception awarded from his high Luck?

His thoughts suddenly were interrupted as a silver cloud appeared inside the pillar as though it had been teleported. One moment the pillar was empty, and the next the cloud was there as it had always been present.

Zac's heart immediately started to beat wildly as he realized that there was someone inside the cloud. He couldn't sense the slightest ripple of energy, but Zac could barely discern the shape of a person slightly moving inside. Worse yet was that Zac's instincts screamed at him that whoever was summoned was far beyond what he could handle.

The shocking turn of events made Zac unsure what to believe even to the point that he took out **[Verun's Bite]** to get ready for a desperate struggle. His confusion only grew when the old abbot suddenly got down on his knees and bowed down until his forehead touched the ground toward the silver cloud.

“Disciple greets master.”

Chapter 321: Severing Karma

Zac wasn't sure what to think when seeing the old man getting down on his knees, but he knew that whoever was inside the silver cloud wasn't a simple character. However, panic started to set in when he made a horrible connection. Between the silver haze and having disciples on newly integrated planets there was one clear contender of who hid within the haze - The Great Redeemer.

Was it possible that this secluded monastery was yet another seed planted by the Great Redeemer long ago, just like the Medhin Clan and the Dominators? Had they been biding their time all this while until they finally found the means to summon their lord?

Fury started to build in Zac's heart as he thought about the betrayal. Had these seemingly altruistic monks sacrificed the whole world for their selfish gain? The pained face of the old monk once again flashed in his mind before his eyes turned to his trusty axe in his hand.

If this truly was the arrival of the Great Redeemer things might already be over and their planet doomed. But should he unleash **[Deforestation]** in a final act of defiance? Perhaps it would even buy time for his transfer talisman to complete its activation. The token he got from Yrial was still in his possession, and it might allow him to flee even the seemingly hopeless situation in front of him.

But he knew it took over ten seconds to activate it, so the plan felt like a long shot. But even if it worked, then what? He would be stranded god knows where, while leaving his friends and family behind. He wouldn't be able to learn of their fates until he managed to get back to Earth, and that in of itself

would be a form of torture. But it was better to kill some traitors than simply giving up.

Strangely enough, he was unable to act on his idea. It was as though he had a mental block, making him incapable to turn thoughts into action. He wasn't restrained or under hypnosis, yet his arm was unable to swing his axe at the monks around him.

“Decisiveness can lead to greatness, but it can also lead to ruin. Decisiveness will turn to foolishness unless you first make sure your path is true” a voice suddenly resounded in his head, making Zac immediately turn his eyes to the figure within the portal again.

The voice had spoken straight into his mind rather than out loud, but Zac breathed out in relief when he heard it. The reason for his relief was very simple; the voice didn't belong to The Great Redeemer.

It was likely that his plan had been seen through by this person and somehow stopped through unknown means. So it was both with anticipation and trepidation he saw the figure slowly emerge from the golden pillar. But reality sometimes didn't conform to imagination and Zac couldn't stop himself from gawking in shock when he saw the true form of the mysterious powerhouse.

The same could be said about most of the monks in the square, as they threw each other small questioning glances, confusion clear on their faces. It was not a rugged warrior like Greatest that stepped out of the light, nor was it a sage monk. It was rather a fat little child only wearing a thick bead necklace and a pair of silver silk pants.

He looked mostly human apart from his earlobes who dangled all the way down to his shoulders and a set of mercurial silver eyes. He was also completely bald, with a thin line of silver fractals starting between his brows and going back over his head.

Zac's first thought was that something had gone wrong with the summoning, but he soon realized that wasn't the case. The child didn't seem the slightest surprised to be here, and the

fact that he was actually floating in the air was quite telling that he wasn't some random kid ripped through space. Thea had already told him that flying was the mark of the D-Rank, so the kid in front of him was at least that powerful.

Suddenly he remembered the comforting words of Calrin when Emily was dismayed about her youthful appearance. Was this kid some supreme existence that had was so skilled that he embarked on the path of cultivation early? The fat child threw Zac a knowing wink when he saw the confusion on his face.

“Don't be alarmed. I simply saw the future you contemplated with the axe in your hand and removed it from the realm of possibility,” the little cherub once again spoke in his mind before turning to the Abbot.

“No need for such formalities child,” the kid said with a sweet voice.

Oddly enough it was the voice of an adult, though it was quite high for a male, and Zac could immediately confirm the voice in his head was the same as the one that exited the child's mouth. The Abbot hurriedly got to his feet, completely unflustered about the odd appearance of his apparent master. Zac meanwhile had trouble digesting the information he received mentally.

The child said that it had removed a possible future as though it was nothing special. If one was able to change the future like that, what couldn't he do? Just what kind of monster had the Abbot summoned?

“This penniless monk is called Everlasting Peace, may I ask Master's name?” the abbot said, only increasing Zac's confusion as he stood on the sidelines. Did they not know each other?

“I am the 84th incarnation of the Lotus Emperor. Some call me 84th Fatty or Lord 84th depending on mood and karmic ties,” the child said with a laugh as he looked at the mountain. “How fascinating.”

The next moment reality shifted and everyone found themselves at the foot of the mountain, in front of the steps leading up to the summit. Zac didn't understand how he got there since it was instantaneous and it felt as though he had always stood there somehow, making it seem like his past had changed.

"Spirit consecrated through faith," the child muttered before turning away from the mountain. "In any case. Have you prepared yourself?"

"Disciple is ready," the Abbot said with a somber expression. "Disciple's fellow monks have been informed as well."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but just what is going on?" Zac finally interjected, unable to sit on the sidelines any longer.

The child looked over at Zac, and after a brief pause smiled.

"When I reached the peak of my power I decided to split my soul into one hundred thousand pieces and enter those pieces into Samsara," the small child said. "It birthed 100 000 incarnations without any recollection of their true self. Only when reaching high enough power will our memories return. I was the 84th incarnation to regain its memories."

The explanation wasn't the one Zac was asking for, but his brows still rose in shock when he understood the implications of what the child said. Doing such a crazy thing must require not only enormous power but also great conviction. And if this powerful person was just a small part of his true self, just how powerful was the true Lotus Emperor?

"Isn't it risky? What if a part of you dies before regaining your memories?" Zac asked, curiosity overcoming the oddity of the situation.

"To understand the Karmic cycle is to understand all parts of life, including death. Through walking one hundred thousand paths I will better understand the universe, and through the universe better understand the self. If an incarnation dies so will that part of me die," the child explained with equanimity. "Such is the price of enlightenment."

“It is the fault of this penniless monk. This one was not sure whether he was allowed to say anything before teacher arrived,” Abbot Everlasting Peace explained, understanding what Zac was truly asking about. “I wanted you to understand what transpired here today. Master has come to take me and my fellow monks away.”

“Take you away?” Zac dumbly repeated.

It turned out it was a farewell rather than a betrayal. But Zac suddenly realized the implications of what the old man was saying.

“You’re not staying for the battle against the undead or the other incursions?” Zac probed, some dissatisfaction creeping into his voice.

He had been working his ass off to protect Earth and needed all the help he could get if they wanted to save their planet. The Abbot was likely the strongest person amongst the humans apart from himself due to his high-tiered Dao, and he possesses mysterious insight into Karma that could greatly assist their efforts.

The fact that he decided to take his monks and leave Earth in the moment of its need was almost as great a blow as a true betrayal. He finally understood the look of the old monk who had given him pointers at the stairs, and a frown started forming on his face.

“You mentioned severing Karma. You’re going to cut and run when the undead hordes are destroying everything in its path like locusts, and when we face threats from all directions? I hoped you would join the efforts to protect our home when you had healed up,” Zac continued, but suddenly he realized something and looked at the little child floating next to them.

“Don’t look at me,” the child said with a shake of his head. “I could kick out the incursions, but that would only create a worse future for your planet.”

Zac didn’t say anything, but his face must have conveyed his skepticism.

“Your friend and I walk the same path of Karma, which is extremely rare in the Multiverse. That is how we found each other. Through the boundless Dao, our paths converged and a Karmic connection was formed. I showed him how to create this gate through that link,” Lord 84th explained. “But I am not without enemies. No one would reach any great heights without creating some enmities. Resources are limited after all.”

“Karmic Cultivators are extremely hard to kill because of our ability to see, and to a certain extent tamper with, the great tapestry of fate. But our weakness is that we cannot allow our Karma to get entangled with too many people.”

“I can see the threat you’re facing,” the child continued, and to Zac’s surprise a slightly hazy picture of the Great Redeemer materialized. “This one utilizes a rudimentary method to control Karmic ties to locate your planet. I could easily cut those ties, but by doing so I would get billions of entanglements with the living beings living on this tiny planet.”

“My enemies would eventually find out, and those people are all far stronger than this man,” the child continued. “They would capture everyone on this planet and torture your souls for eternity just to cause trouble to my cultivation.”

“Is there nothing to be done, master?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly interjected. “Completely severing Karma has proven troublesome for this talentless monk. Perhaps if we could provide my friend with some small assistance this poor monk would be able to completely move forward with a pure heart.”

Zac finally realized the true reason why the Abbot had asked for his presence. He likely felt bad about leaving Earth and wanted to get some small assistance from his master. Zac was by far the strongest person, so having him here would be the best option to improve Earth’s fighting chance.

The child seemed to mull it over for a few seconds before slowly nodded and pointed at the Abbot’s forehead. The old

man closed his eyes for a few seconds before his eyes opened again with some excitement as he turned toward Zac.

“If benefactor would be so kind as to lend his hand for a second?” the old man said before grabbing it.

A burst of odd energy suddenly entered Zac’s body, and the sky was suddenly filled with odd lines in all kinds of colors. There were golden lines of various thickness that reached toward each of the monks, and a silver one swirling around Lord 84th like a living snake. There were also four black pillars reaching into the sky in the distance, looking like sickly tears in space.

Three of them were bunched together to the north, whereas one was off by itself far on the horizon.

“This penniless monk is temporarily sharing his vision with benefactor,” the old man explained. “The lines are the ties of Karma. The four sinister lines are connections to the man that master conjured. There was a fifth one but I sense that you are responsible for its severance.”

“I killed Salvation a week ago. He had somehow become the in-name disciple of The Great Redeemer,” Zac said with a nod.

“Something in his possession is still calling for its master,” the old man said and indicated the line by itself. “Taking it into a separate space will not work. The line will simply lead to the entrance.”

Zac didn’t understand how the old man could know of his plan, but he rather focused on the message.

“What should we do? Destroy everything in his possession?” Zac asked.

“That will not help either,” the old man said with a shake of his head. “But this penniless monk now has a way.”

Chapter 322: Convergence of Fate

Considering the circumstances Zac still felt it was extremely lucky that he went back to the monastery in time. If they went by their original plan to simply study Salvation's belongings inside the Mystic Realm outpost they would have entered a state of false security while The Great Redeemer was bearing down on them. However, that still left the issue of actually destroying the black pillar.

The old man suddenly produced a small fruit knife from his sleeve, and the next moment the golden ribbons in the air started to flutter wildly. The golden light from the monks all poured into the knife, filling it with a massive amount of the unfamiliar power.

Both the monks and the Abbot himself looked extremely drained after, and a few of the younger ones even looked ready to keel over from the expenditure. The amount that the Abbot personally infused was just shocking, and Zac felt it was even more energy than what his **[Infernal Axe]** contained.

"Master imparted me with a skill that allowed me to condense the will of us all into an item. It contains our hope for this planet and its people. Bring it next to the item and the rest will become apparent," Abbot Everlasting Peace explained. "The other three ties can be severed the same way as the last one."

Zac looked down at the small knife that the old monk gifted him, and if it wasn't for the special sight temporarily given him he would never have guessed it contained such massive power. It truly was a simple fruit knife without a single fractal, but if he figured out a way to turn the energy into a weapon he might even be able to kill one of the Dominators with it.

“This one truly wished he could do more, but the result of the last battle was largely due to this mountain, and it’s power is not endless,” the Abbot sighed. “This is the limit of what this penniless monk can do. I am truly ashamed.”

“Don’t be. This gift is perfect,” Zac said as he stowed away the knife. “Without this item all our efforts might have been for nothing.”

“This old man also spent the past month to divine the fate of this planet. I believe it might be of importance to benefactor,” the old monk added. “The fate many forces on Earth have converged on the very same hidden realm that benefactor has connections to. This old monk believe-”

“That is sufficient,” the child suddenly interjected, cutting the old man short. “Exposing heaven’s secrets does not come without a price. You are yet not strong enough to divulge more than that without permanent ramifications.”

“That’s enough,” Zac hurriedly agreed, not wanting to turn the old man crippled. “I will look into it.”

The news came like lightning out of the blue. The hidden realm likely referred to the mystic realm. But how could any other forces have connections to that realm? And which forces?

It also begged the question of what made people so interested in that place. It was truly a very odd Mystic Realm, but the energy inside wasn’t amazing enough to indicate there being some supreme treasure inside. And even if there was something of great value inside, how would he even go about seizing it for himself?

The forces staying on Earth weren’t the only ones he would have to fight with if he entered the fray inside. There was also the natives who were far too strong to contend with for the current Zac. If one added the Dominators and the stronger Incursions into the mix the whole thing turned into a deathtrap.

“We must leave now, I should not stay in this sector for much longer,” Lord 84th said before turning to Zac. “If fate wills it, you two will meet again.”

The floating child Buddhist pointed at the mountain next, and it quickly phased out of existence. Zac looked at the empty space with wide eyes before turning back toward the mysterious expert. But not only were Lord 84th and the Abbot gone, but so were all the other monks.

“I recommend you keeping my identity to yourself to avoid any ties of Karma between your planet and me,” Lord 84th voice echoed in his mind.

Zac didn't even have time to react to the disappearances before finding himself standing in the middle of his courtyard, looking around with confusion. It almost felt as though everything had been a dream, but when he opened the teleportation screen he saw that Mount Everlasting Peace was gone from the list.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he opened up the Dao Ladder to see if it had changed. Abbot Everlasting Peace was gone as he suspected, putting him in the first position. Better yet, the change actually wasn't only good for his vanity, but it brought real benefits. When Zac opened his status screen he noticed that he had gotten his first Limited Title.

[Frontrunner [Limited]: Maintain the first position on all three ladders in world. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%.]

From the wording it seemed like he would hold the title for as long as he held the first position, which meant the title was secure at least in the short run. The only way someone would pass him at the moment was if he got stalled because he aimed for high-rarity classes, allowing others to evolve much quicker than him.

The additional Attribute effect pushed the efficiency to 140%. It was a huge difference compared to normal cultivators, and it made his overtuned attributes even crazier. The effect would easily nullify any boost wrought by cultivation manuals when he encountered experts from the multiverse in the future.

It was still somewhat of an empty feeling to receive these gains as he only got them because the abbot left Earth rather than through his own effort. But Zac shook his head to snap out of it. Now was not the time to get picky about the power-

ups. He hurriedly left his courtyard and teleported over to Mystic Island. Every second that the karmic link persisted was a threat to those around him.

Soon enough he reached the core of the island and found Ogras standing some distance from the spatial cracks with a large chest by his side. The chest was wide open and housed dozens of metallic stakes full of fractals, likely the array flags needed to stabilize a path to the Mystic Realm.

The demon immediately noticed Zac's arrival and gave him a questioning look.

"Making sure your money gets used properly?" Ogras jested when he saw Zac hurry over.

"I wish I had that much free time," Zac sighed before retelling his experience with the Abbot, though he didn't mention the identity of Lord 84th as instructed.

"I have never heard of such a thing, but he sounds extremely powerful. Cultivation through rebirth," Ogras mumbled before throwing Zac a weird look. "How odd that a baby planet not only birthed a monster like you but a second oddity like that old monk. I can't remember a single person from my planet ever gaining insight into the Dao of Karma, yet that old goat did it within a month of getting integrated."

Zac nodded in agreement. Stranger yet, it felt like the Abbot wasn't the only one. Salvation would be completely unstoppable on Earth unless Zac was there to thwart him, showcasing a power far beyond what was normal for his level. And there was Billy with his superhuman power and the primordial aura he emitted when he changed form. And those were only the ones he knew of.

Perhaps there were even more oddities that simply matured a bit slower and couldn't be found on the ladder yet.

"So what do you think about what the prophecy?" Zac asked.

"We know too little to be sure what's hidden inside the Mystic Realm. But if multiple forces are currently invested in that place it can only mean that our entrance isn't the only one. Things might get extremely chaotic soon, which might be our

only chance. Perhaps we can fish in muddy waters and snatch the benefits for ourselves,” Ogras mused.

“I’ve been thinking about it. The Underworld Incursion is fire-attuned, which might be troublesome for you. It might be better if you stay here and investigate. I could bring Verana instead to test her out down there,” Zac ventured.

Ogras hesitated for a bit before he reluctantly nodded.

“You better not hoard all the goodies down there if I do this for you,” he muttered. “You’re going to the treasure caves and I’m stuck wandering those spooky halls where E-Grade monsters might be lurking around every corner. And don’t give those beast maniacs too many benefits, they have just joined and haven’t contributed anything.”

“I’ll set aside anything that looks like it might benefit you,” Zac said with a snort before taking out the small golden dagger. “Are you ready?”

Ogras nodded and threw out the mangled corpse of Salvation.

“I still haven’t touched anything in his Cosmos Sack yet. How do you know which item is sharing our position?” Ogras asked.

“No idea,” Zac said a bit sheepishly as he held the cutter. “The Abbot said things would become apparent.”

“He wasn’t messing with you by any chance?” Ogras said as he skeptically looked at the small fruit knife in Zac’s hand.

Zac was about to open the floor to suggestions when the knife suddenly burst into an almost blinding light reminiscent of the golden ribbons that Zac had seen. He had to cover his eyes for a second while Ogras shied away as he shrouded himself in layers of shadows.

“What the-“ the demon shouted, but as soon as the knife burst into light the blinding radiance disappeared.

But a golden luster was still circling the knife as it hummed with power, and Salvation’s Cosmos Sack was actually humming with it. Zac walked over to see what was going on,

and when he spread his awareness into the sack he immediately spotted the thing that was causing the connection.

It wasn't the golden fractal as Zac had expected, but rather a small nondescript token that seemed to be made from stone. There were no fractals on it and no power emanated from it either when he took it out from the pouch. Zac would have thought it was a simple memento if it wasn't marked by the knife.

“What now?” Zac asked, looking over to Ogras.

“How would I know? Try stabbing it, that usually solves most of my problems,” Ogras shrugged, still keeping a respectful distance.

Zac didn't have any better idea, so he placed the token on a stone before stabbing down at it with the fruit knife. He didn't use a lot of his power, but the stab still contained enough force to turn a normal stone to dust. But his swing was stopped short the moment it hit the stone and not a single mark was left on the surface, proving it was no ordinary stone.

The knife suddenly shattered, making Zac's eyes widen in alarm, but the next moment a flood of golden light poured into the token until it cracked with a loud snap. A hurricane of energies erupted from the stone, throwing Zac a dozen meters away and almost pushed him into the zone with spatial tears. Zac grunted as he got to his feet, but he froze when he spotted a familiar figure within the storm of energies that the token unleashed.

It was The Great Redeemer.

Two people floated in space, seemingly unbothered by the fact that there was no oxygen to breathe. They were looking down at a planet with two massive continents separated by a vast singular ocean. But only they knew what they were seeing as their eyes sparkled with enigmatic light.

“Such a grand convergence of fate,” Lord 84th said with some wonder. “But I wonder if it is orchestrated or the will of the heavens?”

The other monks and the mountain had already been stowed away and missed out on the spacewalk. Even the Abbot had been shocked to find that his master housed a whole world in his heart where his disciples resided.

It was where he would live as well for the foreseeable future, hidden away from all pain and suffering of the mortal world to ponder upon the mysteries of the universe. To his aide were senior monks who had walked the path for thousands of years and treasures that most could only dream of. But even though such an opportunity had presented itself he couldn't help but feel unreconciled.

"Is there nothing this poor monk can do to help? Is severing Karma truly the only path?" Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed from the side as he looked down on the planet.

"You should understand the price of meddling with karma by now," Lord 84th said as he pointedly looked at the old man's arm that was limply hanging to the side. "There is nothing you can do."

But the Abbot looked resolute even though divulging the path to his young friend had cost him the use of his arm.

"What is the point of enlightenment if one cannot use it for saving others?" he retorted.

Lord 84th shook his head as he looked into the distance.

"You remind me of my senior brother. He walked the path you are speaking of, taking on the world's sorrows. That path is wrought with suffering, the sea of bitterness has no bounds. And who knows if there is even salvation at the end of the road? Is it truly worth it?" the little master said with sorrow in his eyes.

"But if this useless monk doesn't step through the gates of hell, who will?"

Chapter 323: Sowing Grudges

Even though Zac was placed face to face with the largest threat to Earth he didn't panic. The reason was that The Great Redeemer was obviously not there in person. With his hazy appearance it was clear it was a projection or a splinter of his soul like the one inside Salvation's protective talisman. He had already survived a hologram of this man before, and that was when he was far weaker than now.

But after observing the man for a second Zac felt that the former was more likely than the latter. While the man who appeared from destroying the token was clearly The Great Redeemer, so was it also clear that he looked a lot older than the man Zac saw during the hunt.

The version of the Redeemer that saved Salvation looked to be around Zac's own age or even younger, a man in the prime of his life. But the figure currently glaring at Zac and Ogras was a lot older, looking like someone in his fifties or sixties. That wasn't the only difference as a large scar ran across his face, and the wound contained some sort of sinister energy. It seemed like the result of an extremely powerful attack, one that couldn't be easily healed.

Zac knew there was only one reason that a cultivator would look this old. There was a large difference to how aging worked with cultivators compared to mortals. Most of one's lifespan was spent looking pretty young and when you evolved further you gained enough control to change one's apparent age without using any skill. At the same time, you would be at peak physical capacity all the while.

It was only when one was truly closing in on the end of one's lifespan would one begin to age physically, and most races even lost attributes as the body degraded. The undead was one

exception to this rule, as they became stronger as they lost their sanity due to the degradation in their minds.

That meant that the Great Redeemer was nearing the end of his life, and might be dead in just a hundred years unless he managed to break through his current bottleneck and improve his race once again. It was no wonder he had concocted such a cumbersome method to harvest new worlds that took thousands of years; he was out of options and running out of time.

“The two of you are not mine, and you have broken my beacon,” the Great Redeemer said with a raspy voice as he looked back and forth between Zac and Ogras. “It looks like you know of my grand design.”

Zac was about to answer, but Ogras quickly motioned for him to be quiet as a muzzle of shadows appeared around his mouth.

“Clever child. A bit unusual for your race,” the man snickered with a sinister light in his eyes. “But it will not be enough. Those who try to cut my lifeline will inevitably be condemned to a lifetime of suffering. If I cannot find you now then I will find you a hundred years later.”

The next moment the projection disappeared, leaving the two alone by the Mystic Realm.

“That was close,” the demon muttered as he put away Salvation again.

“Why didn’t you want me to speak with him?” Zac asked.

“A precaution, and it looks like I was right. That man was truly here in person this time, who knows what means he possesses,” the demon explained. “He obviously has some insight into Karma, and I don’t think he would do something so taxing as to project himself all the way here without reason. He was likely trying to form a new Karmic connection with us.”

Understanding dawned in Zac’s eyes, and he once again felt lucky to have the demon by his side.

“What about his threat? Do you really think he will try to find us in a hundred years?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

“Even if we lose our protection from the System we wouldn’t be that easy to find in the multiverse.”

“Hmm,” Ogras mused. “Probably?”

“What, really? He would be that petty?” Zac blurted.

“Well, he seems to be at the end of his line. If he fails his promotion because of us he might as well kill us as revenge before he passes on, right? And if he manages to evolve in spite of us he might still go for us to nip any potential revenge in the bud, or just because he can,” Ogras said. “It’s pretty common. Keeping grudges in one’s heart is detrimental to concentration and can even negatively impact one’s cultivation. And he does not look like the person who will just let go of his grudges.”

Zac remembered the crystal about Galvarion he read in Thea’s Library. That man had been the same. The moment he broke through to the next stage he would start a round of revenge against everyone that had slighted him while he was weak. Perhaps it was not only due to being unforgiving but also to clear his mind of any demons that might haunt him as he pushed toward new heights.

“So even if we defeat the Dominators he will still be a threat?” Zac asked.

“There is always a threat,” Ogras laughed. “If not him then some other bastard that either has what you need or needs what you have. That is what it is to be alive. But it would at least buy us 100 years to get stronger. Don’t dwell too much on it.”

“You’re right,” Zac nodded, “No point in taking his words to heart when there’s a century to go.”

“Well sure, but it might also be another ploy by him. Why would he expose his plans like that like some second-rate villain? He seems more calculating than that. Perhaps he wants us to obsess about the looming threat of his arrival to the point

that we actually form a connection with him that way,” Ogras said.

“Is that even possible?” Zac asked after a brief pause.

“No idea, Karmic Cultivators are pretty secretive about what they can and cannot do. It’s best to focus on the tasks at hand anyway. What will be will be,” Ogras said and walked over to the chest with the array flags. “For now let’s squeeze that asshole’s disciple for all benefits we can get.”

“I’ve asked my sister to look into a way of getting the Origin Dao inside the fractal. She should arrive when the gate is stabilized. If you’re in the area help her out if you’re able to,” Zac said, drawing a surprised look from the demon.

“What does that lass know about arrays? She’s an Elemental Mage,” he said with confusion.

“She’s pretty good with energy control and she has started looking into inscriptions and arrays lately. Besides, we don’t have any other experts in that area, and I trust her. Unless you want me to ask around with the Tal-Eladar?” Zac explained.

“Don’t bring those beasts into the mix. We should keep the Origin Dao for a small circle to maximize our gains,” Ogras said.

Zac snorted, knowing he was mostly thinking about his own benefits. However, he did agree with keeping the Dao for a small group. He did not know the effect of the Origin Dao, but he didn’t want to dilute it if it was anything like the Dao impartment he got from Yrial.

“Well, I’ll help the girl out as best as I can while I look into what might be hiding inside this place,” Ogras said as he looked at the crack in the air in the distance. “When are you leaving?”

“My arm is mostly fine, but I need at least another day to get in fighting condition,” Zac said before he left the demon to set up the array.

Zac spent the next day catching up on everything that had happened while he had fought the Incursions and Salvations while he planned his foray into the underworld. The war with

the Zombie hordes was proceeding as expected, but it was clear that the Undead Empire did not care about the braindead Zombies they unleashed on the world.

It seemed as though there were surprisingly few elite zombies, and foreign undead like the Corpse Golems and specters were nowhere in sight. Ilvere posited in a report that he believed that the Undead Empire was simply using the hordes as sacrifices to spread Miasma.

Every place they passed essentially turned into a Dead Zone, increasing the area that was under their control. It wouldn't surprise Zac if they started expanding in other directions as well now that the threat of the monastery with their purifying powers was gone. Zac frowned as he read the reports, once again feeling how strapped for time they were.

Emily had already caused a storm in Port Atwood to get the expedition to the underworld ready at the fastest speed, and while she held no official position most knew that she lived in the restricted area. So many took an order from her as an order from Zac himself, apart from the true core of Port Atwood. Zac didn't bother stopping it since it was the first and only time she had borrowed his authority like this, and her orders were in line with his wishes.

Both soldiers and non-combat classes stood at the ready to quickly set up a base camp in the underworld. It would both extract the riches of the area while acting as a stronghold in the fight against the underworld incursion. Since everything was dealt with at the home front Zac instead headed over to the Tal-Eladar to get some help.

He might be enough to conquer the Incursion alone, but they didn't know exactly how strong the invaders were. Besides, it had proven extremely effective to have two powerhouses in the strike squad. Zac couldn't protect everyone all the time, and Ogras had been instrumental in keeping casualties at the minimum.

A maid immediately led Zac to a sprawling mansion when Zac arrived through the teleporter, which was Verana's private manor. The beast tamer sat and enjoyed the breeze as she had

Grub in her lap while Lulu lay snoozing to the side. When the fat little beast noticed Zac's arrival it roused itself and made a gurgling sound that he supposed was meant to be threatening.

"What brings young master here today?" Verana asked as she petted Grub to calm him down. "I heard about your battle with the one called Salvation. Is that demon talking you into removing the competition before the war is even won?"

"The integration turned Salvation crazy. He killed over a million of our own people before I stopped him," Zac explained.

He still hadn't told her about the looming threat of the Great Redeemer, but he felt that it still wasn't time to divulge that. That topic would instead be broached when the situation on Earth had stabilized somewhat.

"More importantly, I require your assistance," Zac added.

"We stayed behind as to set the foundation of a mutually beneficial cooperation between our two forces," Verana said with a frown. "We are not soldiers you can simply send to the front line."

Zac rolled his eyes before he explained the situation with the underworld, making sure to divulge the massive wealth in passing.

"While we might not be soldiers we are also Tel-Eladar. We can't stand for innocent people getting slaughtered like that. We will join your assault on the fire golems," Verana nodded, before quickly adding. "As for the resources that might fall under your control, we of course expect a share equal to the help we provided."

"Of course," Zac snorted.

It looked like that one thing that tied most people together was the love of shiny things. After Verana agreed to accompany Zac she asked her maid to gather twenty soldiers to join. Since battle would likely take place in tunnels and slightly cramped spaces they didn't feel fielding a large army was the best option. Instead, they would stay with the tactic of utilizing small elite squads.

But the Tal-Eladar also insisted on bringing a contingent of non-combat classes to eke out their own piece of the underworld. The demons and Calrin had already prepared similarity in addition to the people that Emily gathered, so Zac didn't stop Verana from doing the same.

He would still be in control of the outpost and the teleporter above-ground, and he could easily have it act as a toll booth for any and all resources that flowed from the underworld back to this continent.

Besides ironing out the details of their cooperation Zac also had Verana sign the same type of agreement that all others of the strike force had already agreed upon. He had already decided that he would take this trip in his undead form unless the underworld incursion proved too powerful. He wanted to be as time-efficient as possible, and he wanted to gain some levels to his Undying Bulwark Class.

He had already planned a few things out since it would be too troublesome to force everyone to sign an agreement. Instead of using the easily recognizable [**Verun's Bite**] he would use the unassuming Spirit Tool Sword from the hunt along with his shield while changing his appearance with [**Thousand Faces**].

Only the core people who went would know his real identity, while the rest would know him as another alien expert that he took under his wing. Between the different skills, face, and aura there should be no one who was able to glean his true identity.

Divulging his second class after Verana was sworn to secrecy went about as expected with her almost keeping over in shock. Interestingly enough she seemed equally annoyed as Ogras about his unique advantages.

"No wonder Tylia has looked constipated since returning. She hates keeping secrets," Verana muttered. "I can't believe you possess two races. Teaming up with you might be my biggest contribution to the family ever."

"That's nice, I guess," Zac shrugged.

“So what should we call you when you play undead?” Verana asked, pulling herself together.

“Uh...” Zac said, blanking out.

“Why not something simple, like Mr. Black?” Verana proposed.

Chapter 324: Mr. Black

Zac grimaced at the suggestion but he couldn't think of anything better to call himself.

"Fine, Mr. Black it is," Zac said with some resignation.

He had heard that many Cultivators in the multiverse went by a self-chosen Dao Name rather than their real name while they traveled or visited Mystic Realms. Perhaps he should start looking for a good one so that he didn't find himself in this position all the time.

The two waited for another twenty minutes before the maid arrived once again to inform them that the required people had been assembled. The two got up and after Verana inspected the group and made some small personnel adjustments they left for Port Atwood.

Soon they found themselves in the large lobby of the official teleportation array, and the Tal-Eladar looked around in surprise, some praising the architecture. For all their other differences Zac felt the two had pretty similar tastes in buildings after visiting the Tal-Eladar town. Both seemed to enjoy integrating nature into their homes, making their buildings living and ever-changing.

Verana only briefly looked around the building before her eyes found the large sign by the exit.

"What's the Tower of Myriad Dao?" she immediately asked with a small frown.

"It's a Dao Repository," Zac sighed, inwardly cursing Brazla for his insistence on keeping that sign up.

"How does a baby world possess a Dao repository?" Verana said with confusion. "And why would you choose to broadcast it like that? It seems like a way to invite trouble."

“The system gives out all kinds of things as rewards to quests,” Zac shrugged. “And we have our reasons for putting it there.”

“The Tir’Emarel Clan would be willing to pay a large amount of Nexus Coins or Crystals for the opportunity to peruse it, and you can name your price for taking one of the eight named inheritances,” Verana said.

“I am afraid the things inside are not for sale, but some are available through merit. We can talk about that at a later date,” Zac said, ending the conversation on that topic.

The Tal-Eladar had been quite accommodating so far, and it was true that they were stuck here on Earth for better or worse. But hey had just joined his force last week, and Zac wasn’t about to give them the keys to the kingdom. They would have to prove themselves before they could dream of even seeing the inside of the Towers.

Verana and Tylia threw each other a glance before following in tow. They quickly exited the teleportation structure, and they were soon met with a contingent of Demon Warriors and Valkyries, both of which glared at the Tal-Eladar behind Zac.

“What dense energy,” Verana muttered as she looked at the town still undergoing rapid construction, ignoring the squads who had likely come over to intimidate her. “Did you chose this spot due to proximity to a Nexus Vein?”

“I guess you could say this spot chose me,” Zac responded with a sardonic smile, nodding at Joanna who hurried toward them.

“You remember the people from the Tir’Emarel Clan. Settle them for the day. They will join us tomorrow when we head to the new continent,” Zac explained. “And please come to my courtyard later.”

Joanna nodded and was about to respond but turned toward the sound of a rapid tapping on the ground.

“Honorable Beast Masters!” a voice suddenly resounded from the distance, and Zac saw Calrin run over with as much speed as his short legs allowed him. “You honor Port Atwood with

your presence. This humble one is Calrin Thayer, merchant by trade. I was quite delighted to hear that the great Tal-Eladar has chosen to align itself with Port Atwood. Please don't hesitate to peruse our humble wares before heading to battle. You can't bring money with you to the afterlife, so better spend it on our great armors and weaponry!"

Zac rolled his eyes and dragged the Sky Gnome over to the side.

"What's with the show?" Zac questioned. "We are about to head to the underworld."

"Great businessman will always make time for making money, even when facing death. And who knows what dangers lurk down there? Better if I get friendly with these people so I can use their dumb beasts as shields," Calrin said with a shrewd look. "Besides, who knows if they will find treasure down there? We want it spent or traded with us rather than taken home for their clan to inspect."

Zac gave the Sky Gnome a small thumbs-up before heading back to his courtyard, leaving the merchant to make some inroads with the Tal-Eladar. He wasn't interested in the logistics, and Verana had expressed interest to tour the city, so he let Joanna handle that.

This time his place was already occupied as Kenzie sat under the shade of a tree with a crystal in her hand. Zac noticed that it was the same crystal on formations that he had perused himself during the time he was trapped at the entrance to Anzonil's array in the hunt. Zac didn't interrupt her and instead started to go through the merit exchange for things to use while under the guise of Mr. Black.

The Merit Exchange tokens that all Port Atwood citizens carried had the extremely convenient options of opening a screen to display all the available items at any time. However, it was impossible to buy or reserve any items, so one could only browse. The golems had explained it as a motivational tool. If people kept browsing for treasures they desired, then they would work harder to gather merit.

Joanna later arrived as instructed, and Zac filled her in on his plan. He didn't need to worry about her or any of the other Valkyries since they were all bound to him, so he freely told her about how he would pretend to be Mr. Black. Kenzie had stopped reading by this point and instead chosen to listen in on the conversation.

"I have the perfect thing for your disguise," Kenzie said with some excitement after Joanna left to handle things for tomorrow.

Zac skeptically looked at her as she took out a demonic face mask made from some metal, reminding Zac of a Japanese Oni. It was mostly black but had some red details, while a few simple fractals covered the inside. Zac took it with some interest and looked it over.

"Where did you get this thing?" he asked curiously.

"It's Ogras', but I don't think he will mind. It was meant to be worn by one of the villains in his movie," Kenzie explained. "It's a prop."

"His WHAT?" Zac blurted, almost dropping the demonic mask.

"Oh, he hasn't told you?" Kenzie giggled. "He's trying to make an action movie about Cultivation. He has essentially stolen what happened to you and made some alterations. I think this particular mask was made for one of the generals in the incursion that the main character would battle before a final fight with the big boss."

Zac blankly looked at Kenzie for a few seconds before sighing and shaking his head.

"He actually did it. I better get some royalties if he is using my story to make money," he said before suddenly looking up at his sister. "Wait, why do you have that thing if it's Ogras' movie?"

Kenzie looked a bit startled for a second before rolling her eyes.

"I've attached myself as a consultant and liaison between his actors and the human engineers he has scrounged up for CGI,"

she explained. “So I have access to all kinds of things. Did you know that Zakarith has been made the love interest for the main character?”

Zac’s thoughts went to the diminutive demoness he had captured for information back in the day and could imagine how Ogras had bullied the poor girl into joining the production. It was distracting enough that he lost his train of thought, and soon he was back to finding things that would go well with the mask.

The next morning four distinct groups streamed toward the teleporter to transport over to Westbound Harbor, the name Mr. Trang had chosen for the outpost on the desert continent. One by one the people stepped inside the circle and disappeared.

The smallest contingent were the fourteen Sky Gnomes decked from top to bottom in defensive treasures and Cosmos Sacks. Next was a squad led by the Valkyries who guarded around 150 non-combat personnel who would be responsible for setting up camp in the underworld.

Finally were the demonic and Tal-Eladar groups. The demons were a bit subdued because all their leaders were occupied elsewhere, but it didn’t stop them from glaring at their old enemies with all they had. The newest additions to Port Atwood wouldn’t be outdone in the death stare department, and if glares could kill the whole area would have run red with blood by now.

Zac looked on at the proceedings from the sidelines, having already changed his appearance before appearing this morning. The Spirit Tool sword named [**Hunger**] hung by his waist, still radiating boundless killing intent. He had chosen not to bind it with a drop of blood because he would probably return it after the incursion into the underworld.

Not binding the weapon would essentially cut the power the sword could exhibit in half, but a weapon wasn’t too important to his fighting style as an undead in any case. His power rather came through his shield. As for his robes he had found a pitch-black warriors robe from his gains during the hunt that

possessed at least the basic cleaning and resizing fractals. It was nowhere near as good as his real Spirit Tool he got from Yrial, but defense was the last thing he lacked in his current form.

The official story was that Ogras and Zac both were occupied with an important mission, and they had instead summoned Verana and Mr. Black to hold down the fort while testing them out with a hard mission. Mr. Black's true identity was unknown, but he was only said to be extremely strong and ruthless.

A few demons had seemed interested in testing the veracity of the rumors, swaggering over with some bloodlust in their eyes. But after Zac released a deathly aura teeming with killing intent and the Dao of Rot they quickly changed their minds and hurried away, leaving him to his own devices while the groups teleported over to the other continent.

At least it showed that no one could recognize who he truly was, and Zac wasn't surprised. He had completely changed every part of his appearance, and even if he didn't wear the mask he didn't believe anyone could tell who he truly was. He had even taken it off a few times in passing in front of others to quell any unwanted rumors of his identity.

Zac was one of the last to step through the teleporter. After a few minutes of darkness, he stepped out into a scorching hot atmosphere. It had to be at least 45 degrees from what Zac could tell, and if this had been him from before the integration he would have been incapacitated in no time from the billowing heat.

Now it barely registered for him, and only the weakest non-combat personnel were sweating a bit from the sun's rays. He took look around and he had to say that Mr. Trang had found a pretty nice place for himself. It was a secluded bay protected from the winds, and tropical trees lined the sandy beach. The familiar face of the old fisherman hurried over when he saw Zac standing and taking in the view.

"Mr... Uh... Black?" Mr. Trang hesitantly said as he looked Zac up and down.

Zac had already instructed Joanna to inform Mr. Trang of his true identity, because just like during the auction Mr. Trang would be representative of Port Atwood's human faction in the underworld. So Zac simply nodded in response before he was led to a recently erected structure where Joanna, Calrin, and Verana waited.

With them was also Harvath, one of the E-Grade demons who was part of Zac's strike squad against the incursions. It looked like he had been chosen to represent the demon's interest in this venture. Zac looked around the room and took off his mask before sitting down.

"It's good to see you again Mr. Trang," Zac smiled, causing the old man to flinch a bit.

Zac knew Mr. Trang was a bit thrown by the pitch-black eyes, but he pretended to not notice.

"Has something happened? I can't see the mentioned town in the teleportation menu," Zac continued.

"It only opens two times a day at random times, and it stays open for just a few minutes. We believe it is a security measure," Mr. Trang explained. "It was through dumb luck that we noticed it. But it opened five hours ago so it should open again within 5-6 hours."

"Great," Zac said. "I want everyone ready. We're immediately heading down the next time it opens."

Chapter 325: Underworld

Nexus

“Who’s going first through the teleporter?” Mr. Trang suddenly asked.

Zac was about to say that he would enter first, but he suddenly froze when he saw the old man imperceptibly glance at the new addition to Port Atwood’s forces. Only at that point did he realize the problem.

If he went first Verana would become the strongest person above-ground, and she could easily destroy the teleporter, effectively trapping Zac in the underworld. He didn’t know what she would gain from doing something like that, but he also wasn’t willing to take the risk with so many things riding on him. This place was the only link to the surface, and if it was that easy to reach it by foot the people of the underworld would already have left.

“Verana, Joanna, Mr. Trang, and I will all go down together. When the situation is secured Joanna will return to get the rest,” Zac said, quickly adjusting his plan.

Verana looked a bit surprised at being included in the advance group, but a small smile suddenly crept up on her face and she simply nodded in agreement.

“I want to go as well,” Emily said as she burst through the door, clearly having eavesdropped on them. “You promised.”

“... No, you’ll join the second group,” Zac finally rejected after some hesitation.

Things might get a bit crazy when they arrived unprompted, especially when they brought an alien, so bringing Emily in the earliest group was without benefit. He was also worried

she would act hastily when she got down there, so he wanted to stabilize the situation first.

“My goal is to make whoever is on the other side open the teleporter within an hour to let the rest of you through,” Zac then added when he saw Emily’s face scrunch up. “If that doesn’t happen something might have gone wrong. But don’t enter the teleporter before Joanna has come out even if it opens again.”

The others quickly nodded in agreement before they ironed out the finer details of the expedition. The name of the teleportation destination was Underworld Nexus, and it hinted at what sort of place they were heading into. Since the teleporter opened to the public every day there should be some strong people holding down the fort, and there might also be quite some foot traffic.

If it was possible they would avoid causing any commotion since it might be more convenient to get a better understanding of the underground if their true identities weren’t exposed yet. The fact that Verana would join them would make that a bit harder, but she said she possessed a treasure that would allow her to accompany them without her origins getting exposed.

There was also the risk that the place was like the Cradle of God, a death trap that tried to swallow everyone foolish enough to enter, which was another reason why Zac was hesitant to bring Emily. Better the small group of elites go first and sound out the situation.

In the end, there was only so much that could be done when they had no idea what they dealt with, so soon enough everyone retreated to their respective groups to sit down and meditate while waiting.

Zac briefly pondered on the Dao of Rot until one of Mr. Trang’s men let him know that the teleporter was open on the other side. Zac only grunted in affirmation as he got to his feet, and was soon joined by the other three who would go with him as the advance group.

Zac was interested to note that Lulu and Grub were nowhere to be seen, replaced with a rocklike snake that circled her left

arm like a bracer. The Beast Master noticed Zac's look and smiled as she scratched the head of the snake, eliciting an odd purring sound.

"This is Slither," she introduced. "Lulu and Grub might be out of their element in the underworld considering their size. Slither is much more accustomed to subterranean fighting and scouting."

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that Beast Master was a pretty convenient class. One could simply shore up any weakness by capturing another beast, and you stayed out of harm's way while your beasts battled for you.

Then again, Zac knew things weren't that simple. It took both time and a large number of resources to rear a battle beast. And just capturing it was not enough since if there was no connection it might refuse to fight for you, or even betray you at a critical juncture. Zac didn't like the concept of relying on others for keeping himself safe. He would rather depend on his own to fists for protection than some familiar.

Time was of the essence so the small group immediately headed over to the Teleportation array. Zac still donned his mask, making him look like a human hiding his identity. Verana instead wrapped a white cowl to obscure her features, and it completely hid her non-human features.

More interestingly the cowl seemed to possess some magical feature that made Verana less conspicuous, and Zac had a hard time focusing on her even though he knew about it. It was as though he got distracted by stray thoughts any time he looked in her direction, and soon his eyes drifted away.

"How curious," Mr. Trang muttered with some interest, clearly having realized the magical feature of the cowl as well.

Since it looked like Verana wouldn't be a problem Zac immediately activated the array, and in short order all four had stepped through and disappeared.

After a brief stint in the darkness, the foursome found themselves in a large vaulted cavern teeming with people. They stood on a platform that was raised around a meter into

the air, and as he looked over the sea of people he noted that most were streaming toward two large exits on the opposite side of the cave.

The cave itself didn't feel as stuffy as Zac had feared, and the ceiling reached almost twenty meters in the air. The area was also pretty well lit by a combination of large inlaid crystals in the walls and the ever-present glowing moss. The air was a bit stale though, and the lack of any natural light was a bit uncomfortable. But Zac easily adjusted his state of mind, since he had been in a similar place for weeks during the hunt.

A quick estimation would put the number in the cave above a thousand, and he noted that this place was far more integrated between the races than how it was on the surface. Humans made up almost half of the people in the cave, which wasn't surprising considering how populous the old Earth was compared to the other planets that got smashed together.

But there were representatives from all three of the other races in the streams of pedestrians, and many groups consisted of a mix of human, Ishiate and the Ratmen. Even a handful of Zhix walked along without causing any trouble, though it looked that the Zhix always only walked with their own kind.

"Hey, stop dawdling! Present your tokens and make way for the next group," a gruff voice said, making Zac look over at a guard who glared at them from beneath the platform.

Zac realized that over twenty guards were standing there, and apart from three who inspected a group in front of them they all looked in their direction. The one who had spoken to them was a muscular Ishiate, but all four races apart from the Zhix were represented among the guards.

He could also breathe out in relief when he realized that neither his nor Verana's hidden features had caused any alarm amongst the guards. Actually, quite a few of the people in the area had obscured their features to varying degrees.

In the end Sap Trang stepped forward after shooting a brief glance at Zac and Verana.

“We do not possess any tokens,” he explained with a smile. “It is our first time coming here.”

“You cannot enter the Underworld Nexus without a token,” the beastman said with a shake of his head. “Are you members of the Union or the Council?”

“The Union? Council? We are not part of either,” Sap Trang said with some confusion.

“Fresh meat?” the Ishiate interrupted with some surprise.

“You’re the first in a while, must be from a pretty secluded sector. Come with me and I’ll explain things.”

The man seemed pretty eager, and Zac noted that the other guards looked at the beastman who had spoken up with some envy as he ushered them away from the teleportation platform.

He wasn’t worried that this place was a trap since the people who were continuously streaming out of the teleporter seemed aware of the rules of this place, and they hurriedly presented the same sort of token upon arrival. At the same time, there was a smaller stream of people leaving as well, walking against the stream to use another teleportation array to return to wherever they came from.

“The Underworld Nexus is a neutral town meant as a gathering place for all the native factions of the underworld. Most of those you see coming and going either belong to the Union or the Underworld Council. The Union is led by a group of merchants,” the guard started explaining as they entered the side passage.

“A notable name among you humans from the Union is Little Treasure, who is one of the eight top figures. The union control most of the high-grade mines and many other lucrative resources, so they are extremely wealthy. That’s why many elite cultivators have joined them to enjoy great benefits.

“The Council is a group of extremely strong warriors. They are on the frontline in the fight against the incursions, but they also control a lot of the best training grounds. They aren’t as wealthy as the Union, but they make up for it with military might.”

“The Incursions? What does that mean?” Zac asked, thankful his voice didn’t change too much in his Draugr form.

Zac, of course, knew what the beastman was talking about. But from how he explained it, it sounded like there was more than one incursion in the underworld.

“You are truly lucky if you haven’t been impacted by those alien cultivators in all this time,” the Ishiate guard muttered as he led the group to a guarded side-exit of the cave. “When the Integration took place it also opened portals to other worlds, and foreign invaders have come through those gates. The main goal of the Council is to close those gates, and the Union is generally helping the war effort with resources.”

“How many gates are there?” Mr. Trang asked, understanding what Zac wanted to know.

“There are four that we know off, and the worst of them are the fire golems. They have killed millions of people,” the Ishiate sighed. “I moved here after they flooded my hometown with lava. Only a fraction of us survived, our ancestral halls turned to cinders.”

Zac was truthfully not too surprised that there were multiple incursions. The Underworld spanned a huge area, and hundreds of millions of humans had been teleported here. In fact, he felt it was pretty good news to hear there was more than one. If the system only sent one incursion to test the whole underworld it would likely have meant that particular incursion was terrifyingly strong.

“So where are we headed?” Sap Trang finally asked after they had walked the empty passage for some time.

“We need to issue tokens if you wish to enter this place. Please beware, these tokens are not free as they require inscriptions to work. Each one costs 50 000 Nexus Coins,” the guard explained until he finally stopped in front of a door. “In here.”

The group entered and saw a human sit with an engraving kit in his hands, with a small mountain of tokens behind him. The process of acquiring tokens was pretty simple, with only a drop of blood being needed to bind the Token while the

inscriber activated it. But Zac suspected the tokens contained a tracking array just like the one in Westfort.

“If you want my advice you should quickly join one of the forces as quickly as possible. There is some semblance of order in the Nexus, but truthfully it is quite dangerous for a small unaffiliated group to walk the streets. You might get robbed of your treasures, or even killed,” the guard suddenly said as they got their tokens. “As luck would have it I know a few people in the Union, and I could introduce you.”

“Are the two forces the only ones around?” Mr. Trang asked, sidestepping the offer.

The guard looked a bit irritated at getting his pitch derailed, but he quickly controlled his mood.

“Well, there are some smaller groups and towns that are not directly affiliated with the Union or the Underworld Council, but at least 60% of those who walk the streets here are part of either of them. So what do you say, do you want to head over to my friends in the union? It’s a pretty rare opportunity, and I wouldn’t offer if I hadn’t felt that you guys are pretty strong,” the Ishiate explained.

Some disdain flashed in the eyes of the inscriber as he worked on the final token, but it quickly disappeared a moment later as the man refocused on his work. But both Zac and Verana had noted it, and they threw each other a look.

It seemed to Zac that the great opportunity was nothing more than a scam. Perhaps joining the Union would mean something like joining the New World Government, getting an overlord taking control of your hometown. It was most likely not very hard to join on one’s own, and the guard in front of them perhaps even got a commission for leading new blood to the slaughter.

“Is it the Council or the Union that controls this place?” Zac suddenly asked, as he never heard the guard mention it.

“Actually, neither,” the Ishiate said as he scratched his chin.

At this time the inscriber spoke up for the first time, briefly shooting Zac a glance.

“This place is under the control of the richest man in the underworld, Lord Smaug himself.”

Chapter 326: Subterranean Diplomacy

“He controls this town by himself? How is that possible? He is not even on the power Ladder,” Mr. Trang said with some suspicion after hearing the inscriber’s proclamation.

“Wealth trumps over power,” the inscriber said. “Anyone who tries to cause trouble will get blasted by his various treasures or arrays. I doubt even the Super Brother-Man would dare to cause a ruckus in the Underworld Nexus.”

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ogras’ words. With enough wealth it was possible to completely ensconce yourself within your sphere of influence, buying layers after layers of defensive and offensive structures. Of course, while it was entirely possible to smash your enemies with piles of money it was also true that wealth couldn’t trump over supreme power.

“So he’s not part of any force?” Mr. Trang asked curiously. “Seems like he would be better off joining this Union.”

“He has his own company, Dragonwing Enterprises, and many underlings here in the city. I work for Dragonwing Enterprises for example,” the inscriber explained drawing a glare from the guard.

“They only recruit locally though,” the Ishiate hurriedly added. “So how about it? Shall we head to the Union? Or if fighting is more your style, I actually have some friends working for the Council as well.”

Zac didn’t immediately answer but instead went over what they had learned. He knew they might only have scratched the surface, but it still felt like they had a good enough understanding of the underworld to get to work.

The splintered forces had generally clumped together into larger groups, but it seemed there were no individuals strong enough to become sole leaders. Instead, councils were formed where power was shared. The only exception was this Smaug character who seemed solely to control this town by virtue of wealth rather than strength.

Now that they knew who the players were and what kind of place they had arrived at there was no longer any need for subterfuge. Zac never meant for them to keep their anonymity forever, as there was no point in doing so. They needed to speak with Smaug, and the quickest way to do this was to explain who they were. Mr. Trang seemed to be of the same idea, as he shot a glance at Zac who made a small signal with his hand.

“I am afraid that we do not plan to join any force,” Mr. Trang said with a smile at the Ishiate, before turning toward the inscriber. “We would like to meet your boss.”

Both the ishiate and the inscriber looked a bit startled at the quick change in demeanor before the beastman let out a guffaw.

“Are you crazy? Do you think just anyone can just walk in here and act as they please?” the guard laughed derisively. “I am being nice enough to help you out, but you better smarten up before something bad happens.”

But the inscriber’s eyes thinned as he glanced at Zac’s party, and he seemed to take the situation seriously even though all of their auras were completely restrained.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“We come from the surface, and we represent the Super Brother-Man,” Mr. Trang said, hiding nothing. “The forces of the surface world all tried to reach this place the moment the hunt ended, but currently it is only the Super Brother-Man who possess the capabilities needed to reach this place.”

“Oh, the Super Brother-Man, is it?” the Ishiate laughed even harder. “I forgot to introduce myself, I am Starlight’s long-lost

brother, and this inscriber here is the cousin of Thea Marshall.”

“That’s enough Terre-“ the inscriber said, but his words got caught in his throat as an aura as heavy as a mountain spread out, suffused with killing intent.

The whole cavernous room started shaking and the two men both were unable to move. The Ishiate had fallen down on his belly and was crawling toward the door with horror in his eyes. The inscriber was not much better off as he had fallen back into the pile of empty tokens, his face white as a sheet.

It wasn’t Zac, but rather the snake who peeked out of Verana’s sleeve that was emitting the dense aura, proving that it was another E-Grade beast under her command. In fact, the aura it emitted was even stronger than those of Grub and Lulu, making Zac wonder if Verana held back during their fight.

“The Super Brother-Man has closed multiple incursions in the past week, but there is far more to do. He sent his right-hand man and a general to close the incursions down here, and help the people stuck here,” Joanna explained when the snake finally crawled back inside Verana’s sleeve and restrained its aura.

“Are you... truly from the surface?” the inscriber said, clearly starting to believe their words. “Then why have only you arrived and no one else? We have waited for so long for assistance. And do you have any proof you’re with the Super Brother-Man?”

“It is simple. Most of the people on the surface believe that our new world consists of one huge continent, but that isn’t true. There is, in fact, a second continent, but it is separated by a vast ocean. The Super Brother-Man is the only one with a fleet powerful enough to cross the ocean and survive the leviathans of the sea,” Sap Trang explained.

“Shortly after we set up our outpost we noticed this place appearing now and then on the teleportation panel,” Joanna added. “And as for proof? The force of the Super-Brother-man is Port Atwood, which you should know after the hunt.”

The next moment both her alignment from her status screen appeared, and her current position on the ladder.

“Atwood Valkyrie... a ranker!” the inscriber said with shock. “Are you his right-hand man? Or General?”

“No, I am not strong enough for that yet,” Joanna said, looking a bit pained before gesturing at Zac and Verana. “It’s those two.”

The implication was clear, and the inscriber immediately understood what she was getting at. Not even low rankers were strong enough to become generals under the Super Brother-Man.

“So, can you take us to Smaug now?” Mr. Trang asked.

“Well... It’s not that simple,” the inscriber said with a grimace before turning to the Ishiate who was still on the ground.

“Terrek, you can leave. I will take it from here.”

The Ishiate had been frozen by the door, both afraid to speak up and leave. When he heard the inscriber’s words it was as though he was granted a pardon, and after giving Zac’s party a deep bow he scrambled out of the door.

“Why can’t we meet him?” Joanna pressured, her eyes thinning.

“I don’t know where he is. No one does,” the inscriber hurriedly explained. “We don’t know what Smaug looks like or where he lives. He’s only communicating through the network he has set up here, and the few times he appeared he has been disguised.”

“So what now?” Joanna asked with some displeasure.

“I can take your party to the headquarters of Dragonwing Enterprises. I am only middle management so I can’t contact the Lord, but someone there should be able to,” the appraiser said and got up from his seat.

The group nodded since it seemed as good a plan as any. They might have been able to force the man out by wreaking havoc on the town, but they had come to help people, not cause trouble. The appraiser, who introduced himself as Farid, led

them out of the passageways into the town proper. A few scared faces peeked out through doors along the way, but hurriedly shied away when they passed.

The Underworld Nexus was completely different from what Zac had expected. It was still a cave, but it was just massive, likely even larger than Port Atwood. It was at least 100 meters to the roof, helping quite a bit with the claustrophobic feeling. There was even some wind getting generated by a massive waterfall that fell into a lake where Zac clearly could spot a large number of fishing vessels.

The structures were simple but sturdy, mainly created from a mix of metal and stone. Many rooms didn't have roofs or walls though, instead opting for open architecture. Perhaps people felt enough closed-in as it was, and didn't want to box themselves in even further. Besides, it was not like there was going to be any bad weather down here.

The oddest thing was that the whole thing was brightly lit up as though it was the middle of the day on the surface. The whole cave was illuminated by a couple of massive crystals placed on top of sturdy metal towers.

“We call them Day Crystals, and use them instead of sunlight,” Farid explained when he saw the group's looks. “Smaug owns a mine where they extract them. These crystals are lit up 18 hours a day, with the first and last hour being at half power. We also sell smaller versions to add to your home because electricity is limited.”

Zac nodded, quite impressed by how quickly these people had adapted to life underground. But even with these pretty optimal conditions for a subterranean town, it was impossible to forget they were stuck under miles of rock. The town sharply ended where it reached the wall, and a few barricaded gates led out into the wild.

As they walked it seemed to become more apparent that the explanation of the guard wasn't completely accurate. It was true that the Union and the Underworld Council were the two most powerful forces along with Hive Arbak, the strongest Zhix hive in the underworld. In truth, their numbers only made

up around 10 to 15% of the people in the Underworld Nexus rather than the 60%.

But their influence reached far and wide in the underworld, and it was obvious by how they could so overtly bribe the Underground Nexus guards to do their bidding. As Zac suspected guard did get a commission for enlisting new towns into these forces, which was why he made them sound grander than they truly were.

But Farid explained how there was a large number of varying forces and independent warlords who controlled their respective sectors, making the underworld almost as chaotic as the surface. The towns were far more integrated between species though, mainly since the surface species were dropped off together at the same place when the randomization of the planet took place.

But there was also a large number of refugees as the things Zac heard about the fire incursion was all too real. Every day more refugees streamed through the teleporter, and by now there was no more room to house them in the Underworld Nexus. Luckily there was no lack of crystals, meaning the refugees could be teleported away to reinforce other towns in the underworld network.

“So why has no one of you come to the surface?” Joanna asked as they walked toward the Dragonwing headquarters. “You’ve had half a year to dig your way out.”

“We tried,” Farid said with a sigh. “We all tried the first months. But something is odd with the stone, most of it is incredibly hard. Unless you’re at least level 30 you can forget about even cutting out a chip from the walls, and even the stronger people have trouble making way. Not even the Geomancers are any good. Perhaps when people start reaching E-rank they will be strong enough.”

“Just like there are mines with minerals and Crystals there are also mines with softer stone that can be extracted,” the inscriber explained. “Most settlements are made by the molemen though. The Underworld Nexus is almost unique in the fact that it is completely made from scratch. The cave was

found by Lord Smaug, and he founded the Nexus by the shore.”

The group soon enough reached the Dragonwing Headquarters, a vast complex next to the lake. As they passed through the gate Zac couldn't help but notice there were multiple layers of arrays around the building. He wasn't worried now that they had already been let through, but if he read the energy fluctuations right he guessed that even he would have trouble cracking this place open.

After Farid explained their identities and the snake once again exhibited its might things proceeded quite quickly from there. The group was led to an open-air conference room while the manager sent an emergency transmission to their boss. The manager kept them company as they waited, ensuring that Smaug never took longer than 20 minutes to respond to a message.

The minutes passed and refreshments were brought in as they waited. The manager was extremely curious about the state of the surface and was elated when he heard that the Super Brother-Man was going around closing one incursion after another. The fact that he had started eyeing the underworld wasn't met with suspicion at all by the stocky middle-aged man, but rather delight. The fire golems had truly pushed people to their limits, and it looked like there wasn't a single person who hadn't lost someone to their attacks.

But Zac suddenly got a bad feeling as a gust made his black cloak flutter. He immediately looked around and spotted an odd sphere beneath the table that he knew wasn't there before. It didn't emit any energy, but the feeling only got worse by the second, and Zac knew he could tarry any longer.

“Behind me!” he growled as a field of death expanded around him from **[Fields of Despair]**, while his defensive layers were erected one by one.

The large fractal shield was the last to materialize, and Zac placed it square between the rapidly enlarging ball and the group. The manager was held by his neck by a furious Joanna, but he was clearly not part of what was happening since he

was screaming in fear, looking completely shocked by the change in atmosphere.

Suddenly it sounded like a piece of glass cracking, and then the world turned white.

Chapter 327: Billionaires' Brawl

A massive wave of electricity slammed into Zac's shield as he imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ball had been something similar to his own [**Thunder Punishment**], though the energies were far more concentrated. It gave up the massive area of [**Thunder Punishment**] but instead gained a far greater intensity.

A scream from behind told Zac that his shield wasn't able to properly block out the energies as it was, and he tried imbuing [**Immutable Bulwark**] with the Dao of Sanctuary to see if it would change anything. The shield quickly started transforming, turning into something that looked like a wall that circled his group.

The Dao imbuelement apparently changed the way the shield worked, where it gave up some of its strength to instead be able to protect from all directions. Luckily the durability of the shield was still enough even though it was spread out over a wider area. The problem was that the Miasmatic consumption drastically increased, though he would be able to keep it up for some time before he started to run out of energy.

But Zac didn't want to wait for his attacker to tire himself or herself out, and he looked in all directions for the source of the attack. But it was impossible to see a thing through the storm of lightning outside the protective shield, and he could only growl in frustration. Joanna meanwhile looked ready to rip the Dragonwing manager into pieces as she threw him down on the ground and pointed her spear at him.

"What's going on?" she spat out through grit teeth. "Who's attacking us?"

“I swear I do not know! We have had some friction with the Union lately, perhaps it’s them?” the manager frantically said, trying to keep his head as far away from the spearhead as possible.

Soon enough the lightning storm abated, but Zac barely had time to glance around before a dozen more spheres flew toward them, releasing an inferno of flames that tried to eat through his protective layers.

Zac sighed as he realized that whoever was attacking them was unwittingly a pretty good counter to his undead class. He had activated [**Deathwish**] the moment he realized they were under attack, but he sensed that it hadn’t been used even once. It meant the skill didn’t work against treasures, allowing their attacker to go on as he pleased without receiving any retribution.

“Do you want me to help out?” Verana suddenly asked from behind, not sounding alarmed in the slightest even though flames raged all around them.

“No need,” Zac said after a brief pause. “Protect the others while I deal with this.”

Verana would likely not have too much trouble dealing with this attacker, but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting in his undead form. He had only fought dumb animals when using Undying Bulwark, most of them turned even more rabid and irrational from the Darkness in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect. Fighting a person in disadvantageous conditions felt like a pretty good way to find the limitations and strengths of his current class.

Finally, Zac managed to spot a hooded figure in the distance, and he immediately activated [**Inquisitive Eye**] to get some idea about their attacker. But either the man possessed tremendous Intelligence, or more likely he owned a protective treasure because Zac could not even get the man’s name from the skill.

The limits of the ocular skill were once shining through, and Zac was starting to wonder if it was even worth that he relearned and evolved the skill for his undead form. But he

was still unable to get his hands on a better option, as the only ancillary skill that the lowest floor of his Dao Repository contained was [**Thousand Faces**]. Hopefully, there would be some more options for supportive skills on the next floor, as those were the only skills that seemed to work for both his classes.

It looked like the man in the distance was imbuing yet another ball with Cosmic Energy, though this one shuddered with another type of energy than electricity. Zac didn't want to give him time to lob yet another of those things at him and slammed his shield into the ground with a roar.

A huge shockwave of spikes ripped out of the ground and pushed toward the masked man with great speed, destroying anything in its path. It was the attack engraved into the shield itself, and its effect was even better than Zac had expected. The attacker looked up in alarm, but before he could move the wave of spikes was upon him.

A green shimmer appeared around the masked attacker, and the spikes immediately turned into a murky liquid formed a corrosive pool on the ground. Zac tsk'ed in annoyance and pushed forward, inwardly annoyed with the lack of movement options in his undead class.

But he was still extraordinarily fast due to his massive pool of Dexterity, and Zac was upon the man before he could finish fueling the next offensive array. But the masked attacker seemed to possess an almost endless bag of tricks, and two of his rings lit up when Zac swung his sword down with furious momentum.

The man disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced with a large head of a humanoid skeleton that radiated extremely sinister energies. Zac's brows rose in surprise, but before he had time to create any distance the skeleton spewed out a large gust of a grey haze, covering every inch of his body.

Zac froze for a second, but he soon realized the odd attack simply had no effect on him. He once again thanked the cheat-like constitution of a Draugr, realizing that the mist was likely some poison his undead body was immune to. He swung his

huge tower shield with a grunt, creating a gust that blew the mists away, and he immediately spotted the man in the distance.

“Smaug?” Zac ventured, and the man stopped moving before once again starting to prepare for his next wave of assaults, pretty much confirming his hunch. “Why are you attacking us? Port Atwood and The Super Brother-Man has no enmity with you or your faction.”

“It does not matter,” Smaug answered with a flat voice, taking out a smaller crystal this time. “Sometimes we’re just leaves drifting in the wind.”

The crystal released a shockwave before a blue fractal appeared in the sky above him. Zac wouldn’t have been alarmed if that was all it did, but he looked on in trepidation as another fractal hundreds of meters across also appeared in the air above the lake.

Strong winds that had no place in the Underworld buffeted the whole cave as waves rose over ten meters in the air from the disturbance caused by the huge fractal. Zac was even having some trouble keeping his footing from the torrential winds, and he finally punched the shield into the ground to get a proper footing.

Zac was unsure what to do as five enormous streams rose from the lake, causing dozens of fishing vessels to capsize. The streams melded together into an enormous leviathan that reached the ceiling of the cave before falling toward him. He wasn’t sure if Verana could handle an attack of this magnitude, but she gave a signal that they were fine when he looked back at them.

The others had moved far away from the battle, and a sturdy-looking red barrier shone around them. It gave Zac some confidence as he turned back to face the incoming attack of the array. His muscles swelled to almost ridiculous proportions as he empowered his arms with **[Unholy Strike]**.

The last moment before the humongous water creature slammed into the ground he infused his shield with the Dao of Heaviness and Swung it forward with a punching motion.

Between his massive pool of Strength and the multiplicative boost of [**Unholy Strike**], the shield contained terrifying force and the moment it hit the water creature they both froze for a fraction of a second.

The next moment a massive shockwave exploded from the point of impact, shooting water and hurricane-like gusts across half the cave. The massive energies ripped the whole complex of Dragonwing Enterprises to pieces, and quite a few of the surrounding structures were toppled even though they were made from stone and metal.

One small relief was that he got no streams of energy from any kills, meaning that people in the vicinity had managed to evacuate in time before the battle reached a crescendo. It had been a worry in the back of his head since the battle started. He didn't want any innocent bystanders to lose their lives due to Smaug's crazed assault.

Zac's whole body hurt from being right next to the impact, but he ignored the pain as he looked around with wild eyes. He was tired of all the nasty things Smaug seemed to have up in his sleeves, and he wanted to end this now. He quickly spotted a bedraggled Smaug currently scrambling to his feet, his clothes ripped and in disarray. He hadn't been unscathed from the shockwave either, and blood was running down his forehead.

The true appearance of the wealthiest man of the Underworld was finally exposed, and it was not what Zac expected. He was a young man that might be from India or the Middle East, with a pair of emerald green eyes. He had olive-colored skin and short black hair, and pretty fine features. Zac would guess he was around 20 if he went by the standards of the Old world.

Smaug's eyes widened in alarm when he noted Zac's glare, and he quickly took out a heavily inscribed rapier as Zac barreled toward him like an angry bull. The rapier slightly reminded Zac of the terrible array that Hannah stabbed him with once upon a time, and rage flared up in his heart when remembering the betrayal.

Zac pushed his speed to his limit as he swung **[Hunger]** with ferocious force straight at Smaug himself. The man desperately tried to defend with his weapon, but a snap could be heard as soon as the two weapons collided. It was Smaug's wrist not being able to withstand the power in Zac's swings, immediately shattering from the force.

Smaug wailed in pain, but the scream was quickly cut short as Zac's boot slammed into his chest with the force of a truck, launching him like a ragdoll into the ruins of what might once have been an office building. Zac was right behind him and before he could get up Smaug found **[Hunger]** against his throat, the sword actually shivering with excitement.

Zac's boot was firmly pressed on the man's chest, and his shield was slammed into the ground right next to Smaug's head. His eyes were red and he breathed heavily even though there was no need for it in his current body. Bloodlust had almost completely clouded his mind when he saw the rapier, but he finally managed to calm down before he killed his captive in a fit of rage.

"Why?" was all Zac said through grit teeth as he looked down at the man who had attacked them with a storm of treasures.

The man didn't answer, instead looking back and forth to the sides with some panic. Zac frowned and looked around, but they were in the middle of a pile of rubble and sight was obscured in every direction. A thought struck Zac and he took out one of the mobile array disks with his free hand and threw it down on the ground next to them. It quickly shuddered before a small shield encapsulated the two.

"This area has been obscured by an array," Zac said with a frosty voice, his foot still on Smaug's chest. "Now tell me what the fuck is going on or I'll skewer you."

"Please, save my sister," Smaug coughed out with a pitiful voice, his demeanor completely changed. "I was forced to attack you by those bastards of the Union. Why the hell would I want to attack monsters like you people, only to drag your boss here on the off-chance I survived?"

Chapter 328: Captive

Zac looked down at Smaug that was still being kept at sword-point, unsure what to think about the rapid change in his demeanor. It looked like he was truly telling the truth about his sister, but it wouldn't be surprising if the second-place holder on the wealth ladder was someone adept at deception.

Besides, even if he was telling the truth, did it even matter? Zac if anyone could sympathize with the desire to save and protect one's sister, but the fact remained that Smaug had launched a terrifying barrage of attacks on them. If Zac wasn't strong enough he and his people would have been blasted to pieces by the offensive arrays.

But Zac finally decided it was worth to keep asking questions before deciding what to do about this man.

"Why would the Union want to attack us?" Zac finally asked.

"They are working with the invaders," Smaug said, looking relieved Zac held off on skewering him. "Not the flame golem one, but the others. They are trying to take all of Earth's natural resources for themselves. The invaders provide the Union with pills and other items that are hard to get down here, and the Union provides them with raw resources and Slaves."

"Slaves?" Zac repeated with a frown, though it couldn't be seen through his mask.

"I have been investigating them for months. Some settlements that were said to be eradicated by the golems were actually captured by the Union's people and sold to the invaders for forced labor," Smaug wheezed. "They don't want you here because they are afraid their profiteering will be cut short."

"You should know that if we fell the Super Brother-Man would just come here in person," Zac retorted.

“By that time they would have been able to turn black to white, pinning all the blame on me,” Smaug sighed.

“Still, it’s quite the coincidence that they managed to kidnap your sister just when we arrived, and immediately had you attack us?” Zac said. “We haven’t even been in the underworld for an hour.”

“I don’t know how, but they must have known her identity for some time. I had bodyguards around her, but more than half turned out to be the Union’s men. They acted just 5 minutes after you left with Farid,” he said.

Zac was about to continue the line of questions but the sound of disturbed rubble from behind stopped him in his tracks. He turned around to see it was Joanna who had come over, her spear at the ready. Zac quickly deactivated the array, making her almost launch an attack at him in shock.

“Get the others, but just our people,” Zac said.

“No problem. The manager started running for his life the moment the fighting subsided,” Joanna nodded.

“Wait, help me disarm this guy first,” Zac said.

Joanna understood what he meant, and she quickly took off every piece of equipment on Smaug that might have been a treasure. Soon enough a small mound of jewelry lay to the side of the man, and Joanna had even found a few talisman papers stuck to his inner thighs. He was truly a walking arsenal, decked head to toe with treasures. Even Calrin would likely have to admit defeat against that kind of collection.

A minute later the whole Port Atwood party stood hidden within an array, and Zac recounted his exchange with Smaug, whose real name turned out to be Hassan. He was originally from Syria, but had lived in Europe the past years with his sister. However, it looked like Hassan had completely discarded his old identity, and insisted of being called Smaug.

“What forces do the four Incursions contain?” Mr. Trang asked.

“One looks like humans, though they have vertical pupils,” Smaug quickly said, still stressed even though Zac no longer

pointed a sword at him.

Verana's snake had instead scuttled over to his shoulder and was seemingly napping with its head against his throat. But Smaug was obviously aware of the snake's power since he had turned extremely pale the moment the snake moved over to him. After that he became even more cooperative, and it felt like he couldn't spill all the secrets of the underworld quick enough.

"One has literal demons, it's pretty crazy. Horns and everything. These two are the ones who have bought the most slaves. They keep mostly to themselves, relentlessly mining. The third has some odd walking fish or something, they look pretty scary. I don't think the Union works with them, they attack everything," Smaug explained. "The fourth is the fire golems, and they are the strongest. But there is actually a fifth incursion"

"A fifth?" Zac asked with surprise. "The guard earlier said there was only four."

"I only know about them because of a leak in the Union. They have never appeared and they are even more holed up than the first two incursions. I have no idea what they are up to, but I guess they're busy mining as well," Smaug shrugged.

Zac didn't care too much about there being a fifth incursion. The fact that they kept to themselves hopefully meant that they didn't feel confident in their strength to expand, and instead opted to gather as many resources as possible from their area.

"Do the Underworld Council work with the invaders as well?" Joanna asked next.

"Not really, though they are indirectly benefitting from them. They buy things from the Union that they, in turn, have gotten from the invaders. And they almost exclusively fight with the fishmen and the fire golems, so I'm pretty sure they know about the dealings with the other incursions," Smaug explained. "It's all pretty muddy down here, no clear black and white."

Zac slowly nodded, not feeling the actions of the Council was too big of a deal. They had their hands full as it was, and if they could get resources from the one incursion to fight another it was making the best of a bad situation. It wouldn't be too late to turn their attention toward the demons and invading humans after the more dangerous invaders were dealt with.

He felt the actions of the Union to be far more troublesome. He had seen the treatment of slaves on the surface, and he knew that almost no force would treat them as well as Verana had. To profiteer from something like that in a time of crisis was beyond reprehensible.

He could have looked the other way if the Union just traded normally with the invaders, but since they decided to use their own people as currency he knew he would have to act. If it was true that the Union sells people as slaves to the invaders they didn't need to continue existing.

When they had gotten all out of Smaug that they could Zac suddenly flashed forward and knocked Smaug out cold, giving the rest some privacy.

“So what do you guys think?” he asked.

“That Union seems even more shady than the New World Government,” Joanna said with disgust. “If they are into the slave trade I'm sure they're doing all kinds of evil stuff.”

“I think it's a good target for a take-over,” Verana said, drawing skeptical glances from the others.

“Let's not kid ourselves,” the Beast Master said with a roll of her eyes. “Getting our hand on the resources for our war efforts is one of the main objectives of this expedition. If we kill the leaders of this Merchant Organization and put our own people there we'll have a working infrastructure for everything from Teleportation Arrays to Mines to personnel. We will even gain their intelligence which is likely invaluable.”

“Will their people even work for us?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“The rabbits in the forest do not care which wolf is the pack alpha. They just want to survive,” Verana said with a shrug.

“We can simply cleanse the arm of the organization that dealt in slavery if it bothers you, and claim the rest.”

“I agree. You have so much to deal with as is,” Joanna said. “This will save a lot of time, allowing us to focus on what’s important.”

Mr. Trang nodded in agreement as well, essentially meaning the matter was decided since Zac felt it was the most convenient method as well. But there was still one issue remaining.

“Fine. We’ll confirm what Smaug said about the slave trade. If what he says is true we’ll take control of the Union, taking out everyone at the top” Zac said before motioning at the unconscious man on the ground. “What do we do about this guy though?”

“I say keep him,” Joanna said. “He might seem like a helpless victim, but he must be hiding some secrets. He has been on the top of the Wealth ladder all this time, even eclipsing people like Thea Marshall and Billy who both have closed Incursions. Besides, he attacked us so he owes us restitution, but there is no way his real wealth is on his person”

“I think we should help the sister if possible,” Mr. Trang added. “The child was captured because of our arrival, after all. She’s innocent in all this.”

“Fair enough,” Zac agreed. “Wake him up.”

Joanna took out a bottle of water and poured it over his face, making him wake up sputtering and disoriented.

“We will help save your sister,” Joanna said. “And we’ll also take care of the Union if what you’ve said is true. Of course, if it turns out that you’ve been lying we’ll remove you and Dragonwing Enterprises from the underworld.”

“My words are as true as gold!” the man hurriedly said. “But the Union must know something is wrong by now. We’ve been here for a while, they must wonder what’s going on. I have an idea, but you must trust me.”

“Trust you?” Zac snorted, but the next moment his eyes widened in alarm as Smaug produced another crystal from

nowhere.

Zac's mind blanked out for a second when he saw the pitch-black ball in Smaug's hand. The first thing Joanna had looked for on his body was a cosmos sack, but there was nothing like that on him. They had assumed he simply left it behind before going into battle because he was afraid of losing his wealth. But they were obviously wrong since he still was able to produce objects from nowhere.

If it was just another fire-spewing crystal Zac wouldn't be too worried, but he was actually quite familiar with the thing in Smaug's hand. It was a **[Void Ball]**, identical to the one Zac found during the hunt, and something he still kept on his person as an ace. If that thing went off in this close proximity then even he would perish, since it would release an onslaught of spatial tears destroying everything in the area.

Verana seemed to realize the danger as well, and energy blasted out from her as she started to activate some protective treasure. Zac was much more straightforward and aimed to kill Smaug before he could set the thing off. But before Zac's swing could reach the man the world lurched, making Zac lose his balance and fall to the ground.

He sprung right back up, but he froze when he realized that the surroundings had completely changed. Everyone was there, but they clearly were no longer in the ruins of the Dragonwing complex. Instead they found themselves in some hidden chamber illuminated by a few Day Crystals.

Zac's eyes immediately snapped to Smaug and he was relieved to see that the **[Void Ball]** was nowhere in sight. But he was still infuriated by that brush with death, and he immediately resumed his advance on him as killing intent started leaking.

"Wait! I needed to make the Union think you were dead, or at least unsure what happened! Otherwise they might have harmed my sister!" Smaug hurriedly explained as he scrambled away from Zac. "So I activated the bomb and used a teleportation treasure to move us to my predesignated spot."

"And you are aware that a **[Void Ball]** disrupts space, making teleportation an extremely dangerous venture even before it

sets off?” Verana said with a voice that could turn water to ice. “We are lucky to not arrive here in a dozen pieces.”

“Uh...” was all that Smaug said in response, a sheepish smile spreading on his face as he shrunk further back from the four murderous stares. “Well, there was no instruction manual when I got that thing. My bad, truly.”

“The bomb should have destroyed everything in the area where we stood. Hopefully, the Union thinks I took most of you out before escaping. This place is my hidden compartment beneath the Underworld Nexus. I have a private Teleportation array here,” Smaug continued, clearly wanting to change the subject.

A minute later the group arrived at the hidden teleportation array, with Smaug sporting swollen lips, a crooked nose, and two black eyes giving him the fabled panda-look. Joanna and Mr. Trang immediately stepped through the teleporter after shooting a last glare at the man, leaving the trio of Zac, Verana, and Smaug behind.

Just moments later battle-hardened warriors of three races started to stream through the teleporter, filling the spacious hall that the teleporter was placed in.

“What is going on?” Smaug stammered as his swollen eyes stared at the demons and the Tal-Eladar all emitting powerful auras. “Those are invaders!”

“They were invaders,” Zac corrected him. “Now they fight for the Super Brother-Man.”

“Shit, that guy must be a real monster,” Smaug muttered with some awe in his voice. “If he can even make those bloodthirsty demons fight for him.”

“You have no idea.”

Chapter 329: Negotiations

As Zac oversaw his people streaming out through the teleporter a thought suddenly struck him, and he motioned for Harvath to join him. The demon captain walked over, throwing a curious glance at Smaug and his wretched appearance.

“We’ve learned that there is a second demonkin Incursion in the underworld,” Zac explained after covering them in a sound-isolating array. “Will it be a problem for you?”

Harvath thoughtfully furrowed his brows before he looked at Smaug.

“Does this one possess information about our cousins?” he asked, getting a nod from Zac.

Smaug himself gaped when he stood in front of the demon, making Zac realize the man had never stood face to face with one of the invaders before. It looked like he was hovering between fear of being eaten and fascination with the unknown.

“Do these demons look like us?” Harvath asked, pointing at his face.

“N-No, not really,” Smaug stammered. “Well, they have horns, but I am told that they look a lot bulkier, and don’t have hair?”

“Big black horns?” Harvath probed, “And they are over two meters tall?”

“Yes!” Smaug hurriedly nodded. “And tails.”

“Abyssal Demons,” Harvath said with a grimace before turning to Zac. “Can we speak privately?”

Zac nodded and had Verana take over the task of keeping a watch on Smaug. He still didn’t understand how he could take out items when he was stripped of his possessions, and Zac

didn't want him to take out something else and cause even more trouble.

"What's going on?" Zac asked when the two were alone.

Harvath hesitated a bit before speaking up.

"Do you know how Demon society works?" he asked.

"Isn't it a feudal society? Your former clan controls a certain area, but you are part of a larger kingdom. That kingdom ultimately reports to the planet's leader, though they are largely independent," Zac asked with some confusion.

"That's true for our planet, but our planet is just a backwater member of something larger," Harvath said.

"The Azh'Kir'Khat Horde?" Zac ventured, remembering Verana mentioning the odd name.

"Exactly," Harvath nodded. "I am not too sure about all the details since clan Azh'Rezak was the lowest rung of what could be called a noble clan, and our information was somewhat limited. But the horde consists of hundreds of demonic species."

Zac nodded, still not sure what he was getting at.

"The position of the races in the horde depends on their respective powerhouses at the top. The Abyssal Demons has a terrifying leader who controls one of the top ten clans, making them one of the most prominent demonic species in the horde. These Abyssal Demons are likely not part of that clan, but they still hold some sway back home. I fear that if we rout them it might have dire implications for clan Azh'Rezak," Harvath said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded with a sigh. It was as Zac had feared. He hadn't expected running into a second demonkin Incursion on Earth, and he knew it might cause trouble for the demons of Port Atwood, or rather their former clan.

Even if they left their clan behind many still had people they cared for back home. Even Ogras had his grandfather.

Everyone had friends or relatives who were still part of the clan, and while they chose to cut ties to forge their own path

they didn't want to bring trouble down on the head of Azh'Rezak.

"So what do you think we should do?" Zac finally asked.

"I cannot make this decision for our people," Harvath finally said. "I think we should call the young master."

Zac agreed with the demon's assessment. Exploring the Mystic Realm was important, but they had other pressing matters. It would be for the best to call Ogras over now that it turned out that there were four other Incursions in the underworld that weren't fire-attuned.

"Fine, I'll have someone get Ogras," Zac agreed.

Zac had one of the Valkyries head over to the mystic realm to look for Ogras. Most people still didn't know that the realm was already being explored, though scattered rumors had started to spread about its existence. But he wanted to keep the details vague, so only the Valkyries and a few other core personnel were allowed close to the center of Mystic Island. It had turned to a restricted area just like his own zone in Port Atwood.

Since he knew it would take some time before Ogras arrived he decided to deal with some other matters. First he went over to Calrin, who seemed extremely impatient to get going.

"I hear we're taking over a rival business?" Calrin said with excitement in his eyes. "It's quite exhilarating, all that free money. It's a lot harder to do something like this when mercantile licenses are involved. We truly should consolidate all budding enterprises before people manage to get their hands on licenses."

Zac understood what Calrin meant. His own consortium was targeted by a mighty C-grade Clan, but even they had been forced to use trickery and bribes to steadily whittle down the Thayer Consortia for an eventual takeover. Brute force was not an option when mercantile licenses were involved.

"I'll consider it," Zac said with a smile. "Do you know if Cosmos Sacks can take different shapes than actual sacks?"

“High-grade spatial tools can look like rings or other jewelry, or anything for that matter,” Calrin said. “But it’s usually not worth the trouble unless you’re a true magnate. That kind of spatial tools requires actual insight into the Dao of Space to create, making them over a thousand times more expensive. Why do you ask?”

“That guy over there managed to take out an item from thin air. I am trying to figure out how,” Zac said as he glanced at Smaug.

“Oh,” Calrin said thoughtfully before a small dagger suddenly appeared in his hand from nowhere, without touching one of his Cosmos Sacks. “Like this?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” Zac said with surprise. “How did you do it?”

“He has a mercantile class or at least a hybrid class. We get actual skills that work like Cosmos Sacks, allowing us to hide and protect our wares as we travel. A Cosmos Sack can be stolen, but our personal space can’t.”

“Makes sense, he’s the second-place holder on the wealth ladder,” Zac nodded. “Is there any way to prevent it?”

“Sure, if you have energy shackles,” Calrin nodded. “If he can’t circulate his energy he won’t be able to activate his skill.”

Zac’s eyes lit up and he immediately produced the chain that he stowed away when he saved Thea from the Medhin clan.

“Will this work?” Zac asked as he handed it over to Calrin.

“It’s not a high-quality restraint, but it should suffice against someone like him,” Calrin nodded. “I’ll handle it. I am a bit curious about him anyway.”

Zac nodded and let Calrin walk away with the chain. Soon enough everyone had entered the Underworld, but Zac chose to wait for Ogras to arrive before deciding on the next course of action. He instead erected an array and sat down to absorb a few Miasma crystals to restore his energy reserves and rest.

He didn't know how long he had rested when he sensed a person close-by, and he saw the familiar form of Ogras when he opened his eyes. He temporarily deactivated the array and let the demon enter. Ogras looked annoyed for some reason, making Zac look at him curiously.

"Not making headway with the Mystic Realm? It's only been a day," Zac said.

"I can't believe those Abyssal assholes got placed in the middle of a mountain of resources with no enemies in sight while I got stuck with you," Ogras muttered, obviously having been appraised of the situation in the underworld. "The Ruthless Heavens is truly playing favorites. I say we take down that incursion first."

"And that is your unbiased opinion?" Zac snorted.

"Not really, but it makes sense. The sooner we kick those people out of here the sooner the demons will be able to act in the open. Most demons would be hesitant to show their faces with them lurking in the area," Ogras shrugged.

"Agreed. We'll keep the demons hidden while we deal with the Union," Zac said.

"How will we split the profits?" Ogras asked.

This was something that Zac had thought about earlier. He was currently the de-facto owner of pretty much everything in Port Atwood, but that wasn't a long-term solution. He didn't plan on becoming a tyrant with people toiling under his hegemony.

"All matters related to the underworld will be considered a separate company from Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortia. Port Atwood will own half and the Academy will own 10% to become self-sustaining," Zac said. "You, Verana, and Calrin can figure out what to do with the rest."

"Isn't it a bit early to start giving those people a bunch of benefits?" Ogras said with a frown as he nodded at a clump of Tal-Eladar close-by. "Furthermore, Calrin should be a trading partner rather than a shareholder."

"As I thought, you are up to no good the moment you arrive," a frosty voice said as Verana walked straight through the array.

“No manners, spying on a private conversation,” Ogras retorted with a straight face.

“Wait, where’s Smaug?” Zac said with a frown.

“I knocked him out when I saw this demon approach you with greed in his eyes and deceit in his heart,” Verana said. “I had no choice but to listen in to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid.”

“Be careful, I don’t want to turn the guy into a vegetable. I’ve already knocked him out once, it can’t be good for you for that to happen over and over,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “What’s your proposal?”

“Twenty percent to my clan, ten each to the demons and the merchant,” Verana said.

“Negotiation comes from a place of power. You’re barely bringing anything to the table and want twenty percent?” Ogras snorted.

“Do you?” Verana retorted. “Your people won’t fight against the demons. My people are arguing about who gets to be the vanguard.”

“But the beasts of your soldiers will be limited in the underworld. Besides, this isn’t just about how much effort each party exerts in the underworld. The citizens of Port Atwood has slaved away for months with hundreds dying. The resources of this place will be used to repay those who have bled for our force,” Ogras retorted.

Zac sighed as he listened to the two bicker, and things only got more chaotic when the Sky Gnome joined in. In the end the Demons went victorious from the battle, largely thanks to Zac’s support. They would get 25% of the shares, with Verana getting 10% and Calrin 5%.

Calrin wasn’t happy, but he would still make a lot of money from the Underworld since he would become the sole trading partner for the Underworld Venture, while also setting up a network of Thayer Consortia shops through the Underworld to rid all the wealthy Cultivators of their Crystals.

Verana was less than enthused with the results as well, but what Ogras said was true. The demons had risked their lives for Port Atwood over and over without any payment apart from getting to pick a skill. They were long overdue to reap some benefits for their work.

“So, what’s the plan? Are we heading straight to this Union?” Verana asked.

“Get Smaug first,” Zac said.

Soon the merchant was dragged over, and he sat down opposite Zac after throwing Verana a sullen look.

“Isn’t it a bunch of merchants without a license to protect them?” Ogras said after throwing Smaug a dismissive glance.

“Just kick down the front door and kill everyone who disagrees with the change in management.”

“No! They might kill my sister if you storm their headquarters like that!” Smaug shouted with worry. “Their Arrays will be able to hinder you for a minute or two, who knows what they will do in the meantime?”

“Fine. I’ll save the girl first, then Mr. Black and Snake Girl will kick in the front door,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

“Snake girl?” Verana said with a frosty tone. “Just, keep it up.”

“We need proof what you’ve said is true,” Joanna cut in before the two leaders started bickering again. “Do you know where they keep slaves, and where your sister is kept?”

“Yes to both!” Smaug nodded enthusiastically. “I have created a private network, I can bring us within an hour’s travel from one of their transit camps where they keep slaves before they are sold off. My sister is likely kept at their headquarters.”

“Fine, we’ll take a look at the camp before taking down their headquarters. This group is enough for that, no need to bring the soldiers. They’ll be sent to stabilize the various mines and subsidiaries after we’ve made our move,” Zac said. “Agreed?”

The others nodded in agreement, with Ogras and Verana adding a few suggestions. Zac closed down the array and the group immediately walked toward the teleportation array.

Suddenly their group grew with three people as Emily and two helpless Valkyries joined in. He down looked at the teenager for a second, and only got a stubborn look in return. He sighed and nodded slightly, drawing a wide grin from the girl.

Less than an hour later the group stood in a cave mouth, overlooking a large encampment twenty meters below them. An illusion array had already been installed by the exit, obscuring it from the people walking along the streets in the transit camp.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she looked at the scene with wide eyes.

Zac slightly nodded in agreement, anger burning in his heart as he listened to the cries from the shackled people below.

“We proceed. The Union will cease to exist today.”

Chapter 330: Transit Camp

The scene below was even worse than Zac had feared when he first heard Smaug mention the slave trade. There were long rows of people kept in place by fetters, placed like cattle in small enclosures. All four races could be spotted amongst the slaves, though humans were by far the most common.

Groups of slavers patrolled the area, and there were robust fortifications at all the exits to prevent any slaves from escaping from the cave. There was also a pile of corpses lying in plain view in the encampment, just a few meters from the pens where the slaves were kept. Perhaps they were left there as a deterrent, or perhaps they simply hadn't had time to throw the corpses out to the beasts in the open Underworld.

The Underworld was quite different from how Zac had imagined it, and it was only after traveling for the last hour he realized that the Underworld wasn't an intricate network of tunnels and caverns. Most of the Underworld was actually an open expanse.

The prevalent belief amongst those who were teleported here was that the underworld was between two layers of tectonic plates or just between two rock sediments. It created a continuous subterranean landscape that sometimes had a ceiling height of thousands of meters, and sometimes it was so narrow that one had to crouch to move forward.

There were even forests and arable farmland, though the things that could be grown were generally different types of edible moss or mushrooms. Rivers ran across the hilly grounds, and it if wasn't for the utter lack of sunlight, one might have forgotten they were underground. Instead, everything was illuminated by luminescent plants, creating a mesmerizing display of colorful spots that lit up the boundless darkness.

Most towns were constructed in caves like the one they were spectating through, as the open world was quite dangerous for most people. Enormous packs of mutated bats roved in the sky, and all kinds of subterranean beasts walked the ground.

Even the insects had mutated and turned into monstrous creatures in the underworld, perhaps due to the massive amount of Nexus Crystals boosting the energy in the atmosphere. Getting caught in ten-meter tall spiderwebs or skewered by a scorpion pincer were both real risks in the underworld.

The extremely solid rock walls of the caverns made for a natural defense against the horrors of the underworld, and people only had to fortify the cave exits to create a safe space. Top tier caves were the ones who possessed a natural ecosystem to sustain them, like the cave the Underworld Nexus was built inside, with its own lake.

It was this reliance on caves that the Flame Golems exploited in with their ruthless tactics. They simply blocked up the few exits in the town before flooding it with lava. A few of the citizens had time to rush to a teleportation array, but most towns didn't possess one and could only helplessly wait to get swallowed.

The tunnel they stood in was something that Smaug himself had created to spy on the slaving activities of the Union. It ran for hundreds of meters from a hidden spot in the open underworld, with both sides hidden by arrays. The walls of the tunnel looked oddly melted, and Zac guessed that Smaug had used some treasure to somehow melt the extremely hard stones.

Being reminded that the mysterious fellow might be useful during the fight Zac released the energy restraints that shackled Smaug. Of course only after giving him a stern warning to not mess around.

But any interest in finding out Smaug's hidden means was long pushed to the back of Zac's head as he looked down at the misery beneath them. He was just about to jump down and

start a rampage when the energy in the camp started to fluctuate.

“The teleportation array just activated,” Ogras commented as he looked down with curiosity.

This transit camp was located close to the human incursion since the invaders they traded with weren't able to use teleportation arrays. This also meant that whoever was arriving was not an invader, but rather someone from the Union. The fluctuations soon ended and a small group of people emerged from a building not too far away.

“Here, use this,” Smaug suddenly said, producing yet another ball from nowhere.

“A temporal destabilizer?” Ogras said with surprise. “Where did you get your hands on this?”

“A what?” Zac asked with confusion as he looked down on the thing in Smaug's hand.

“The teleporters transport people through subspace or whatever the fantasy equivalent is,” Smaug said. “If you crush this ball within 50 meters of the teleporter subspace will be made unstable and safeguards in the array will make it impossible to activate for 10 minutes.”

Zac shot a glance at Ogras who nodded in confirmation.

“Can you get your hands on more of this?” Zac asked.

It was an extremely convenient item that could change the course of a battle. It would make sure that his target wasn't able to escape, or that his activities wouldn't leak.

“This is my last one, I got it as a reward for a quest,” Smaug said with a shake of his head.

Zac looked into Smaug's eyes for a few seconds, but he couldn't tell if the man was lying or not. In any case, there would be time to find out more after the situation in the underworld was stabilized. So he grabbed the ball with a nod, and Zac leaped straight out from their hiding spot immediately after, with Emily throwing a fiery axe into his back.

Zac soared straight toward the large stone building the group of people emerged from. It was likely the place that housed the teleportation array, as it was guarded by a squad of soldiers armed to their teeth. With Zac's power, he had no problem jumping all the way to the structure, and he ripped through the air toward the soldiers like a falling star.

“Attack!” one of the guards shouted with panic in his eyes as he spotted Zac in the air, but the next moment he was crushed by the massive weight of Zac's shield as it slammed straight into him.

Zac's landing killed three of the guards and threw the others in the air from the kinetic energy in his landing. He immediately crushed the orb in his hand before taking out his sword.

[Hunger] keened as it turned into a grey streak, dismembering the remaining seven guards in a flash.

With his attributes, it didn't matter that he barely possessed any offensive skills in his current class. Against random warriors on Earth he was essentially an unkillable monster. The commotion alerted the soldiers stationed in the camp, and they streamed toward his location. There were actually over a hundred of them, most having stayed out of sight.

Zac didn't mind that as he instead turned his attention toward the group who had just arrived. It was two middle-aged men dressed in some sort of defensive gear, but it was clear they were not warriors. They had no weapons and they did not emit any dangerous aura, making Zac believe they were businessmen from the Union.

This belief was only strengthened by the four bodyguards who accompanied the two. The moment Zac had arrived they created a protective barrier in front of the merchants, and they didn't care in the slightest that Zac dismembered their presumptive allies. They were only interested in protecting the two VIP's.

“Yet another idealistic fool trying to rescue these wretched people?” one of the merchants sneered.

Zac didn't answer, instead unleashing both his aura and **[Fields of Despair]**. The insidious energies from the splinter

in his mind were already magnifying the rage in his heart, and it somehow entered his aura as well. It made his killing intent almost palpable, and a few soldiers actually started to bleed from their noses or ears when they were buffeted by his aura.

The soldiers were obviously not part of some elite force, and the hastily erected line the warriors just formed immediately collapsed, with over half heedlessly fleeing from the towering killing intent that radiated from Zac. The four bodyguards were better off, but they still slowly backed away, likely looking for an opportunity to escape as well.

“Activate the array!” one of the merchants screamed in fright, the arrogant demeanor replaced with abject horror.

An immense weight immediately descended upon Zac, but how could some random restrictive array stop his onslaught? He had ripped through even stronger arrays when he was looting summit palaces during the hunt, and since then he had only grown even more monstrous.

He took a step forward with a grunt, and a loud snapping sound could be heard as a shockwave was released from his body. The sound came from the array collapsing from brute force, and the sight was so shocking that one of the merchants fell to his knees in despair.

“Wait!” the still standing merchant screamed when Zac started to approach them. “We can pay you! One hundred million Nexus Coins! Just let us leave with our lives!”

Zac was completely indifferent to the pleas, and he steadily took step after step toward the group. The stationed soldiers of the town had given up any idea of sticking their noses into the battle, and one after one they started to flee toward the various exits.

But long before anyone managed to escape through one of the tunnels they fell over with large holes in their bodies, caused by some unseen attacks. Zac noted the shadowy spears that appeared and quickly disappeared though, and he realized that Ogras and the others were containing everyone.

He didn't care that Ogras killed these soldiers at all since they had been complicit to the horrors of this place. If he had been in his human form he would have already mowed down that rabble with a few fractal edges. But he was currently out of ranged attacks since his shield's spike attack still hadn't recharged.

"Two hundred million! And precious cultivation pills!" the merchant screamed when Zac ignored him.

"You forfeited your lives the moment you betrayed humanity," Zac said a hollow voice. "I do not need your blood money."

The four guards disappeared the moment Zac finished his sentence, but they immediately appeared all around him. Their weapons were already sailing toward his body the moment they reappeared, and it looked like they tried a surprise attack as a last-ditch-effort.

The four guards were likely around level 40 to 45 from their auras, just a handful of levels shy from entering the ladder. But Zac also sensed that their auras were, for a lack of a better word, hollow. He hadn't sensed anything like it before, but he had learned from Alyn that it likely meant their levels were mostly propped up by pills and crystals rather than battle.

All four of them were sword wielders, and it even looked like they possessed the same skill. The swords lit up in blue flames as they sailed toward Zac's body from four different directions, but Zac opted to not even respond to the attacks, instead only activating the Dao of Hardness across his body.

Four specters appeared and launched attacks the moment the swords landed on his body. It was **[Deathwish]** that activated, starting the dance of death. Zac could easily have intercepted the attacks with his sword, but he wanted to see the effect of his skill against cultivators since he hadn't sensed any real danger from the attacks.

The results were surprisingly different even though each attack was the same. One of the guards was taken completely by surprise and didn't even react when a spectral sword slit his throat open. He fell down on the ground, and Zac knew the

man would bleed out in less than a minute unless he got immediate medical attention.

The second guard managed to react in time and angled his body as he was being attacked, changing the trajectory of the blade as it entered his body. Instead of getting his heart pierced he only got a lung punctured. It was still a pretty bad wound, but not lethal with the existence of healing pills.

A golden shield appeared around the last two warriors, completely blocking the reflected attack. The shield came from a bracer they both wore. They originally had four crystals inlaid, but one of them cracked when the shield blocked the attack.

Pleased with the result of **[Dethwish]** Zac killed the man on the ground with a stomp as he decapitated the wounded guard with a swing of **[Hunger]**. His own wounds were negligible, and he only needed to pat his robe a few times to snuff out the flames. A small amount of black ichor ran down his throat from one of the swords hitting his neck, but the swing had barely managed to break his skin.

The remaining two guards looked at Zac with despair, knowing that they never would be able to kill Zac even if he didn't put up any resistance. Zac's body was already far sturdier than that of the Corpse Lord he fought during the beast waves, and only the strongest warriors on Earth would be able to wound him by now.

The two immediately started to run away, they were soon rebuffed by two lightning-quick stabs from a long spear. It was Joanna who had joined the battle, and Nenotheop's spear was a blur in her hands as she unleashed a barrage of attacks at the two guards.

Zac stopped in his tracks when he saw the Valkyrie take over, and he looked with interest at how deftly she handled her weapon. The two bodyguards assaulted at her like rabid dogs since she was standing in the way of their escape, and flames danced around them as they tried everything to cut her down. However, she was like an impenetrable spear wall, not budging an inch.

The remaining defensive charges on the guards' bracers were expended in less than 20 seconds, and a few seconds later the last guard fell, his throat torn open by a quick stab from Joanna. The Valkyrie's skills weren't flashy but they were direct and lethal, without any frills or unnecessary motion. Every move she performed was to kill or maim with as little energy expenditure as possible.

When the last of the elite guards fell a suffocated silence spread through the camp, with no one daring to speak up. There was a small group of soldiers who stood rooted at their spot, neither daring to retreat or advance, and the merchants looked like their souls had left their bodies, blankly staring at their downed bodyguards. Even the slaves were completely silent, peeking at the proceedings with sunken eyes.

But suddenly the silence was broken by a shocked scream from Emily.

"Millie!"

Chapter 331: Truths and Lies

Zac, who was about to head over to interrogate the two terrified merchants stopped in his tracks when he heard Emily's cry. He turned over with confusion to see the teenager clawing at the manacles binding a malnourished teenager.

"Don't let those two move," Zac said to Joanna, who nodded in confirmation.

He walked over to Emily and with a tug ripped the chains apart, freeing the young woman.

"What's going on?" he asked as he turned to Emily.

"This is Millie, Camilla. She went to the same school as me. She's from Allentown!" she said with some panic in her eyes.

Zac understood the thoughts running through her head. If one of her schoolmates had found herself captured by the Union, then it wasn't a great sign for the well-being of her siblings. They might even be in the large pile of corpses.

"Calm down, we'll get to the bottom of things," Zac said as he took out a healing pill.

Millie wasn't truly wounded, but she was clearly malnourished and it looked like she had been whipped judging by the tears in her tunic's back. But mostly she seemed to have shut down from trauma. She looked at Zac with a blank stare and only took the pill when he directly put it in her hands.

"This is a healing pill," Zac said before taking a step back, aware of the immense pressure he had just released across the whole town.

"Millie, it's me, Emily Larkin from Southfield High," she said as she handed Millie a canteen. "Hurry and take the pill to

regain your strength.”

The mention of the school seemed to wake the girl out from her stupor, and she rapidly blinked at Emily.

“Emily? From class B? I never saw you in the tutorial, what’s going on?” the girl asked, making some of the close-by slaves surreptitiously look over.

“I was too young to enter the tutorial. We come from the surface,” Emily explained after receiving a nod from Zac. “We work for the Super Brother-Man, and we have come to close the incursions in the Underworld. But when we arrived we heard about the Union capturing people and selling them to the invaders, so we came here first to free you.”

The words were like a match igniting a fire, and a wave of clamors for help rose from the captives. The situation felt a bit annoying, but when Zac looked around he couldn’t find the demon or Verana anywhere. Both were keeping a low profile as to not spread any rumors about invaders before their position was completely solidified.

“What about the other cultivators of Allentown? Where are they?” Emily pressed on. “Do you know where my siblings are? Oscar and Johanna.”

“The town we were dropped off in was destroyed by the flame golems four months ago,” Millie said with a sigh. “But most of us managed to flee since it had so many exits. Some of us settled in various towns, others joined the Union or the Council. I think your sister joined the Council to fight the invaders.”

“And my brother? Do you know what happened to Oscar, Oscar Larkin?” Emily hurriedly asked.

“He... Died...” Millie said, looking down at the ground. “He joined the town guard after the tutorial ended. The flame golems killed all the guards to cause chaos and slow our response.”

Emily slumped down on the ground when she heard the news, a blank stare in her face. Zac sighed with a pang of sadness in

his heart. He knew had been the most likely outcome from the start with how few that were still alive after the integration.

“Let’s find your sister. She’ll know what happened for sure,” Zac said as he crouched down next to Emily.

The teenager quickly perked up, desperately grasping on to his words.

“You’re right! Millie, you never saw Oscar die, right?” she said, getting a hesitant nod in response. “He might have survived!”

Zac personally wasn’t so sure, especially considering the actions of her sister. Joining the Council to fight the invaders sounded like something a person looking for revenge would do. But he didn’t say anything, not wanting to dash her hopes. After giving the teenager a comforting pat he walked over to Joanna, who still kept guard over the terrified merchants.

Emily’s words had been heard by quite a few people in the camp, and the clamors from the slaves were getting louder and louder. Conversely, the guards had turned even more subdued, looking like they wished they could simply sink into the ground.

“Can you handle this?” Zac asked with a wave toward the ruckus when he came back.

“Sure, but could you silence them first?” Joanna said.

Zac nodded, and another burst of his aura erupted through the camp, immediately cutting all conversations short. Joanna winked at him before jumping up at a rooftop, making her visible to all the captured slaves.

“I am Joanna Thompson, Ranked at the 96th spot of the power ladder,” she said, her voice echoing across the camp. “As some of you heard, we come from the surface. Zachary Atwood, also known as the Super Brother-Man is currently busy closing the Incursions on the surface, leading humanity in the battle against the invaders. But after hearing of the plight of the Underworld he spared no expense to find a way to reach this place. We have come to liberate you all, and rebuff the underworld invaders.”

Another wave of exclamations immediately erupted in the crowd. Some were jubilant while others were confused. There were also a decent number of people who suspiciously looked at the proceedings, perhaps not trusting such a fantastical tale.

“You might be skeptical, but let me show you something,” Joanna said, and the next moment a System screen appeared in front of her.

It was the quest that she and the other Valkyries received after closing three Incursions, where they were supposed to assist in closing as many Incursions as possible within a month. It already showed the progress of four, meaning that golem incursion she assisted in closing before she received the quest was counted as well.

“As you can see I have personally assisted the forces of Port Atwood in closing four incursions, just one shy of the total number of Incursions in the underworld. The Super Brother-Man has closed even more, sometimes only relying on his own power,” she explained. “I only show you this to prove the truth of my words.”

“However, when we finally arrived at the Underworld we quickly learned of the despicable acts of the Union, enslaving our people and siding with our enemies. The Super Brother-Man wouldn’t stand for such a thing, so from today forth the Union will cease to exist,” Joanna said, looking like a heroic general with the spear in her hand.

“So please be patient. We will help everyone here, but it will take some time,” she finished.

Zac felt a bit embarrassed by the grandiose speech, and he didn’t really know what to say when the Valkyrie jumped back down on the ground.

“Lord Atwood works so hard, but never claims any credit,” Joanna said as she pointedly looked at Zac. “Someone needed to speak up for him.”

He coughed and nodded in thanks before turning to the merchants.

“You- The Union are no traitors! We have worked hard to protect the people in the underworld!” one of the men said, but his eyes were skittering and the fear was clear on his face.

Zac didn't bother responding only taking a pointed glance at the rows upon rows of captured slaves.

“We are facing an extinction event,” the merchant said. “If we didn't provide people to the incursions they would start raiding our settlements, resulting in a far larger loss of life. Besides, these people are convicted criminals!”

“Lies!” one of the slaves roared in anger. “We were only too poor to pay the protection fees of the Union.”

After calling over Smaug and questioning both the merchants and a few of the slave's Zac finally got a full understanding of the situation. In the beginning, the Union truly only sold murderers, rapists, and other heinous criminals to the Incursions. It was a simple solution to get rid of dangerous people while also appeasing a very strong enemy.

But the Incursion's demands for slaves were insatiable, and the Union ran out of criminals soon enough. So eventually they started to capture anyone that didn't provide any benefits to them or was unable to pay the fees to live within their cities, convicting them with fabricated charges.

When that wasn't enough they started to target whole settlements that wanted to relocate to the Union for safety. The slaves in the transit camp, including Emily's schoolmate, were almost all of the latter type, with a few enemies of the Union thrown in.

Both of the merchants were just middle-management sent to inspect the latest batch of slaves before delivery, and they knew nothing of the inner workings of the Union or the situation of Smaug's sister. They were also only level 35, their strength completely propped up by Crystals.

Zac knew just how many crystals were needed to reach such a high level. The Nexus Crystals were a good boost for recovery, but they were only really useful for leveling right at the beginning of a stage. Even the E-Grade crystals he got his

hands on were only enough for a scant few levels, and Zac had already confirmed that E-Grade crystals were still quite rare in the underworld as well. They were not something that these two people could get their hands on.

Soon enough there was nothing else the two merchants could divulge, and Zac ended their lives with two quick swipes of his sword before turning to Smaug. The merchants had already been doomed the moment they started to dabble in slavery, and the kills didn't even register in Zac's mind.

"How do we get to New London?" Zac asked Smaug who looked down at the two lifeless bodies with some shock.

"I own another hidden outpost an hour's travel away," Smaug quickly explained after he roused himself. "We should hurry. They have likely already realized that this place has been conquered. Hopefully they'll assume the invaders got tired of paying for the slaves and raided the place."

"Couldn't you have placed your teleporters closer?" Zac muttered with some complaint.

"It's not possible, don't you know? If I placed it any closer a quest would start where only one town could remain within a month," Smaug said with a shake of his head. "Towns of competing factions can't be too close."

"Oh, there's such a thing?" Zac said with some surprise.

"It's true, and the distance only increases as the rank of the town is upgraded," Verana said as she walked over. "Lower-ranked towns can be pretty close, but capitals requires over a week of travel, limiting the number of kingdoms on a planet."

Zac nodded in understanding before dragging Smaug over to the building with the teleporter. The spatial disruption had already dissipated, which allowed Zac to bring a squad of soldiers over to handle the situation in the camp. Of course, the demons still stayed behind as to not expose their identities.

The slaves would be transported to the Underworld Nexus for now, since staying at the transit camp wasn't an option. The camp was placed extremely close to the Incursion, and the invaders could come knocking at any moment. Zac felt there

was no need to expend resources to defend it either since it held no strategic value.

The group of Ogras, Verana, Joanna, Smaug, and Emily once again joined Zac and left through the teleporter after the soldiers had taken charge of the slaves, quickly freeing them and sending them away. And thanks to Smaug they managed to quickly and effortlessly infiltrate New London. Smaug clearly had all kinds of contacts and confidantes, as they entered the large city through a hidden passageway that led into the cellar of a bar. When the owner noticed the group walking up the stairs he pretended to see nothing and simply went about his day.

Soon the group stood in an alley some distance from the sprawling headquarters of the Union. It was actually the Admiralty House of London that had been randomized to the Underworld along with a large section of downtown London.

New London was the central hub of The Union, and it was one of the few large settlements that were placed in the open Underworld rather than in a town cave. This had benefited the Union quite a bit when the Flame Golems went on the offensive, flooding one cave after another. Hundreds of thousands of settlers had wanted to relocate to New London, rather braving the Underworld beasts than the Fire Golems.

The large conglomerate had claimed a large number of former Government buildings and turned them into their own. The old world government itself had quickly fallen with the return of the cultivators, and after a couple of tumultuous weeks, the Union became the premier force in the town. And with the help of the resources they got from the slave trade their grasp of the town was rock solid.

“I’ll go fetch the girl,” Ogras said without any preamble, holding a picture of a young girl in his hand.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Smaug said with worry as he took out a handful of things from his hidden space. “I have a few items-“

Ogras immediately snatched all of the treasures, though Zac suspected that the demon wouldn’t need help to infiltrate some

old-world structure with no real powerhouses standing guard. And just as Zac suspected the demon was back just twenty minutes later, with a squirming sack over his shoulder. Smaug immediately ran over to release his sister, but Ogras suddenly summoned his black spear and used it to keep the man at bay.

“We need to have a little chat. This brat has been a captive for weeks, not a few hours as you said.”

Chapter 332: New Management

“We’ve been used as a tool from the start,” Ogras snorted as he glared at Smaug, some killing intent leaking from his body. “I knew something was off about this brat.”

Zac glared at the young man as well, quickly putting two and two together. Smaug had mixed truths and lies in order to push Zac and his group into a collision course with the Union. The fact that the conglomerate sold people as slaves to the invaders had already been proven, but whether they ever pressured Smaug to attack his party was another matter entirely.

“Why?” was all that Zac said with a cold voice, somewhat regretting they had removed his shackles so that he would be able to keep up with them as they traveled.

“My sister is innocent in this. I saw an opportunity. I couldn’t be sure how you would act in the underworld, so I needed to create a conflict with these assholes. But they deserve to be run to the ground,” Smaug said, some ruthlessness flashing in his eyes before his face returned to that of a hapless youngster.

“You asshole!” a muffled voice came from within the sack. “You’ve been tricking people again? You’ve already got me kidnapped, now you’re going to get me killed.”

Ogras glanced at the sack with some humor before putting the girl down on the ground and untied her cover. A beautiful girl in her teens emerged, and her energetic emerald eyes were an obvious sign she was related to Smaug. She had long black hair with a thin braid running down her side, and she wore a hipster ensemble from the old world. A glance with **[Inquisive Eye]** showed that her name was Rima and that she was level 25.

She was a completely different sight from the dirty and bedraggled slaves they had just emancipated, and it looked like she hadn't suffered any injustice in captivity. She glared at Smaug for a second before pushing closer to a bemused Ogras.

"I'm sorry about my useless brother, Mr. Knight. He's an idiot and a liar, but he's a good guy," she said, looking up at the demon with adoring eyes.

"Mr. Knight?" the demon echoed with confusion.

"Well, you're my handsome knight in shining armor. You broke into the stronghold of the bad guys and saved me," she explained, showing no inclination to walk over to her brother.

"Sorry girl, you're a bit young for my taste," Ogras said with a snort, but after a brief pause looked her up and down once more. "Come back in five years."

"Animal," Joanna and Verana echoed in unison, but the demon was completely unaffected by their ire.

"Rima, don't be like that," Smaug entreated, looking a bit embarrassed. "I did what I had to do to keep us safe."

"Stop using me to justify your shady business practices," Rima said with a roll of her eyes. "Do you know how it feels to be mentioned as the reason for you turning into a drug lord?"

"You're a drug dealer?" Zac said with a frown. "Is that why you're so rich?"

"I worked in, uh, pain management before the integration," Smaug said with a cough. "I haven't dabbled in that since the world turned crazy though, even though there is a massive demand from people who want to escape reality."

"Mr. Mask, is it true you work for the Super Brother-Man?" Rima said, looking at Zac with interest. "I heard from Mr. Knight."

"I'm Mr. Black," Zac said. "And yes."

"Mr. Black? How is that any better?" Rima muttered, before perking up again. "Is the Super Brother-Man handsome? How old is he? Is he single?"

“Already abandoning me, girl?” Ogras grunted, though he clearly was just messing around.

“Enough,” Zac said and knocked the girl unconscious with a burst of his aura before taking out **[Hunger]**. “You attacked us, using arrays that would kill most people. I was already considering what punishment you deserved when I thought you acted under duress. Why shouldn’t I kill you right now?”

“I am useful!” Smaug hurriedly said, some fear appearing on his face. “I can provide all sorts of information on the Underworld. I possess riches, and know where to find more.”

“We can get information from the Union and the Council and we already possess more wealth than you,” Ogras laughed. “Try again.”

“I... I’ll work for the Super Brother-Man as well!” Smaug said. “You should understand I’m good with money from my Ladder ranking.”

“People willing to work for The Super Brother-Man would be able to fill a country. Why should we risk letting a shady person like you close to our business interests?” Joanna asked.

“I’ll sign a contract of servitude! I’ll make you money to the best of my abilities for 50 years!” he said, finally starting to panic.

“Sounds annoying to have you around. Who knows what hidden troubles you would cause,” Zac shrugged, lifting his sword as if he wanted to decapitate him just like the two merchants.

“Wait! I have an incomplete license with a limited product line!” Smaug screamed as he backed away.

“Five hundred years,” Zac said, the sword frozen mid-swing.

“Wh-“ Smaug was about to exclaim, but forcibly stopped himself. “Five hundred, happy to be on board.”

“Good. Joanna will be your handler,” Zac said, “She is under a contract of servitude as well, so signing with her will be like signing with the Super Brother-Man.”

Smaug sighed, and soon enough he had entered a 500-year contract with Joanna. Smaug clearly had a complicated relationship with the truth, and Zac didn't want the man to know of his real identity. Having Joanna sign the contract still counted toward his contract limit though, and with all the Valkyries he only had four spots remaining.

Luckily the contracts to keep silent about his identity was a simple agreement between two parties, and those one could enter as many as one pleased. However, since it was a contract of reciprocity he needed to give something in return, which in his case was a monthly stipend for as long as the contract was active.

Zac looked at Smaug's forlorn figure with some humor, knowing things were not really as they seemed. It might have appeared as though the man was forced to sign the contract, but that was simply impossible.

Unless the man wanted to form a contract and work for him the contract wouldn't even materialize, proving that it was all a ploy. Zac guessed that the only thing that Smaug hadn't planned was to share the fact that he had an incomplete license.

In the end, he got his hand on a helper that he sorely needed. He had wanted to find someone to manage his business interests while he focused on cultivation. As time passed his ventures only got more numerous, and someone needed to take charge. Zac himself didn't know exactly what he owned any longer as his empire kept expanding through conquest and development.

"What's an incomplete license?" Zac asked when the contract was signed.

"I have a mercantile class as you already know," Smaug shrugged, his sad demeanor already gone. "I got a quest to rise as high as possible on the Wealth ladder, and the license was the reward. I think I would have gotten a real license if it wasn't for your boss keeping the first spot for himself. Uh, our boss."

“What’s the difference?” Zac asked, and even Ogras perked up in interest.

Calrin had been pretty fleeting in his explanations about the mercantile system since the start, likely wanting to keep details vague so that others wouldn’t know when he was scamming them. Ogras had no idea either, only knowing it enabled intergalactic trade as long as you fulfilled certain criteria.

“The Mercantile System is like a hidden website where you need to unlock every ware one by one. A Mercantile License is your login to the main website, but it is only the start from what I understand. You still need to perform various tasks to upgrade the license to give access to better wares and rates. My license is limited, meaning that it only lasts for 100 years, and I can only buy wares from a corporation called **[Stumpbugle Bombs]**,” Smaug explained.

“That’s some name,” Ogras whistled.

“It’s a goblin company, and they make weird arrays, like the ones I... presented to you earlier,” Smaug coughed. “They only sell consumable weapons, from simple arrays to weapons of mass destruction. I can’t access those though.”

“We’ll find some work for you. Remember, if we find you’re working against the interest of Port Atwood...” Zac said, lifting **[Hunger]** again.

“I know, I know,” Smaug said with a disarming smile.

Zac would look further into that Smaug could bring to the table at a later date, but for now he wanted to focus on the Union. He saw no reason to change his plan just because Smaug had been lying. The Union still needed to be stopped.

Ogras had already made some preliminary reconnaissance while scouring the Union headquarters for Rima, and as luck would have it the top brass of the Union was holding an emergency meeting in response to suddenly losing the transit camp.

Since the hostage was saved Zac felt there to be no need for any subversion as he walked toward the main gate of the

newly erected wall that ran around the headquarters. It was guarded by over twenty cultivators, and the Union had even got their hands on some nasty-looking turrets placed upon the wall walk.

“Halt! This is a restricted area,” a guard shouted as the large mounted weapons turned toward Zac.

“The Super Brother-Man has judged the Union to be working with the foreign invaders. Stand down and you will not be hurt. We are only interested in the leaders,” Zac said as his aura billowed out.

The guards were shocked by the unexpected turn and looked at Zac like he was a primordial beast. It was no surprise since the strongest warriors of Earth could barely release an aura by now, whereas Zac’s aura was heavy enough to almost feel like solid matter. Worse yet, it was rife with killing intent he had accumulated through his constant battles.

A few of the cultivators immediately ran away, not giving their companions a second look. But a few stood still with indecision on their faces. Seeing the guards not stand down Zac rolled his eyes and took out two metal balls from his cosmos sack, and threw them at the two turrets in quick succession. The balls ripped through the air and the weapons instantly turned to scrap metal.

The display of might was all that was needed to sway the last few guards who remained, and Zac was able to push open the gate without having to kill anyone. But a shimmering wall suddenly stopped him in his tracks, and Zac frowned when he realized someone had activated a defensive array.

Zac quickly realized it was just a standard array bought from the Town Shop, and his right arm started swelling from infusing it with [**Unholy Strike**]. He didn’t even deign to push the skill to its limit before he punched out with enough force to make the air distort around his fist.

The barrier shuddered and large cracks started to spread, but the barrier held fast. However, Zac only snorted and punched out again, making the shield completely crumble this time. Ogras, now completely shrouded in shadows, and the others

walked through as this was the most normal thing in the world, leaving a shocked Smaug behind.

“Monster,” Smaug muttered from behind as he carried his unconscious sister.

The group ripped through the building without any resistance. Any time a guard or an employee saw their approach they needlessly ran away, no one even pretending to muster a resistance. It proved how fragile a force like the Union was in the face of true power. There were many weaker forces around, but many would put up a far fiercer resistance against invaders.

Zac followed Ogras’ directions, but it was barely needed as he could sense a clump of weak auras gathered together at the same spot. With their superhuman speeds, it took them less than 20 seconds before they barged into a large hall, where almost forty people were seated.

These were the leaders of the Union, and behind them stood just as many warriors with somewhat impressive auras. But both hesitation and unwillingness to act was clear on their faces as Zac, Verana, and Ogras all released their auras. It submerged the whole building in oppressive might, and most immediately threw their weapons on the ground in hopes of being spared.

A few tried to unleash desperate attacks on Zac’s group, perhaps knowing their sins were too heavy to be spared if they were captured. But they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with, leaving a dozen corpses on the ground.

Some of the seated leaders tried to flee in the commotion, but between Ogras’ shadow spears and Zac’s oppressive aura they found themselves trapped. Zac looked over the group of fearful people, noticing that people from all races apart from Zhix were represented.

“Is this them?” Zac asked with a sighed as he turned to Smaug.

“Yes, a few people are missing, like Little Treasure and Copperfield, the Ishiate at the 11th spot of the wealth ladder,”

Smaug said as he looked across the room. “But this is over 80% of the top brass of the Union.”

It was a bit disheartening to Zac to see this diverse ensemble. This group represented some of the best and the brightest of the underworld, bringing together not only strong warriors but skilled non-combat cultivators. The group even transcended the racial barriers, something the surface still hadn't accomplished. But instead of working together to rebuff the invaders, they had sold their souls for riches.

“Starting today, the Union and all its subsidiaries are under new management.”

Chapter 333: The Underworld Council

Things went quite smoothly after the bodyguards were subdued. The leaders of the Union were swiftly captured and imprisoned as the forces of Port Atwood were called over. Ogras wanted to summarily execute everyone to make an example, but Zac decided on a proper investigation and trial.

The Union was a huge enterprise, and it soon became obvious that not everyone was aware of the slave trade, even at the top. In fact, in the meeting that Zac interrupted, it wasn't obvious that it was a slave camp they lost, but it was rather called a mining camp. Everyone had known about the trade with the invaders, but many thought they were using raw materials rather than people as a currency.

When Zac explained the situation with the slaves, everyone professed their ignorance of the matter, staunchly arguing that they only dealt with traditional business ventures. But as the days passed Calrin and his gnomes easily unraveled who was guilty and benefitted through the revenue streams, and with the interrogations that a shrouded Ogras led they soon had a full picture of what was going on.

As for the normal employees of the Union, things went even smoother than Zac could ever have expected. Verana had been proven right. The moment they started to release the news that they only wanted to deal with the brass because of the slave trade, the normal workers quickly calmed down.

There were a few that fled and disappeared among the large population, either for fear of the unknown, or perhaps because they had done something they were afraid would be unearthed. But most happily went about their days, especially after Zac increased the general salaries by 25%.

But taking charge of the sprawling entity that was the Union wouldn't take just a day or two. There were so many businesses with complicated relationships, and dozens of strategic resources to inspect. Luckily they had the whole network in their hands already.

The Union had used the same type of system as the New World Government, with one Lord creating a hub for all the mayors in the network. It wasn't clear who the true Lord was, but many believed it to be Little Treasure who had fled before Zac made his entrance. And since he even didn't stay behind to defend his domain when their headquarters was assaulted the whole system was immediately awarded to Zac as the assaulting Lord.

Zac himself was mostly uninterested in the practical proceedings and rather focused on the massive archives of intelligence that the Union had gathered the past months. Their secret intelligence dossiers on the demonkin and human Incursions were probably even more thorough than the Council's due to their frequent encounters.

He knew he had to deal with the Demon Incursion as quickly as possible, but he was a bit unsure of what to do. The reason he came here in his undead form was to level up his Undead Class, but after his recent battles he felt there were some clear limitations to his Undying Bulwark Class as it currently stood.

Most of his skills were aimed at keeping himself alive, with **[Deathwish]** being his only offensive skill along with his learned skill **[Unholy Strike]**. He still kept training his utilization of the Dao every day with the trinket, but it would be some time until he could activate **[Cyclic Strike]**.

The lack of offensive and movement skills made his impact on a battlefield limited. It was not like a video game, he didn't have any taunt skills that forced all enemies to attack him. The moment the invaders realized he was a tough nut to crack they could simply assault his allies, completely circumventing both **[Deathwish]** and **[Immutable Bulwark]**. His whole plan was for naught if his gained levels came at the cost of the lives of his friends.

But as he read through the stacks of intelligence of the Underworld he found a possible solution to his problem in one of the scouting reports. But before he had time to send for the person who submitted this report a Valkyrie knocked on the door to the office he had commandeered for himself.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” the Valkyrie said after entering. “Some ambassadors from the Underworld Council is here, what do you want to do?”

“So they came after all. Took them longer than we expected. Have Joanna and Sap Trang join me in Conference Room C,” Zac said as he donned his mask.

He had kept his modified appearance throughout the visit, but he only wore the mask when in public. As he walked through the richly decorated halls he sighed in wonder. Most of the original interiors remained, but most electrical functions had been swapped out with day crystals. It was an interesting mix of the old old world and the post-integration era, and it actually meshed quite well.

The old fisherman and Joanna joined him soon after he sat down at the ornate table, and just minutes later three warriors entered the room. It was two humans and one of the molemen, each of them radiating even stronger auras than the bodyguards of the union. And it was clear that this power came from battle rather than absorbing crystals and eating pills.

The female moleman especially gave off the aura of a powerhouse, and Zac realized that she might be at the same level as someone like Thea. It was to the point that he was a bit tempted to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**, but he knew that it would likely fail or even backfire. The other two were likely rankers as well, or at worst just shy of making the cut.

One of the humans was a middle-aged man that was built like a bear with a large sword on his back. With his large bushy beard he gave off the aura of a brute, but an intelligent light in his eyes indicated he wasn't all brawn. The other human was an old lady with graying hair. She didn't have any

distinguishing items on her, but two snowballs slowly rotated around her, meaning she was likely some sort of ice mage.

The moleman had two large daggers fastened to her waist, and from the aura they emitted Zac realized they were actually one Spirit Tool. Spirit Tools that were split into dual items were far harder to create from what Zac understood, making them as rare as defensive Spirit Tools, or perhaps even rarer.

That this rogue had gotten her hands on such a good item proved once more she had survived some trials and found her lucky encounters, just like him. The only way she could have gotten such a good item was if she completed some harsh quest from the system.

It was clear that the Underworld Council hadn't sent some middlemen to meet with him, but rather some of their core warriors.

"Welcome," Sap Trang said with a kindly smile. "I am Sap Trang, ambassador of Port Atwood. This is Joanna, leader of the Valkyries, and lastly Mr. Black. We apologize for not getting in contact with the Underworld Council sooner, our time down here has been a bit hectic."

"I'd say," the large man said with a wry smile. "I am—"

"Wait," the moleman interjected, looking at Zac with animosity. "You are no human. You are not one of the four founding races. You reek of death, and not like a warrior."

Zac was a bit surprised that his origin was immediately exposed by the moleman. Not even the people of Port Atwood knew he wasn't human. They just thought he had gotten some odd class like Death Knight, which gave him such a spooky aura.

After hesitating for a second he removed his mask, exposing his deathly pale skin and pitch-black eyes. The burly man couldn't stop himself from twitching when he saw the eyes that seemingly led into an endless abyss, and the old woman frowned in consternation.

"Your senses are sharp," Zac said, not surprised about the reactions. "I am undead."

“So The Super Brother-Man gobbles up the Union because they work with the invaders, while himself working with invaders,” the moleman said, some anger burning in her eyes.

“Lara-,” the man said, but was stopped by a glare.

Zac smiled slightly at the accusation, not angry at the questioning. If anything it proved that at least the Council hadn't gotten their priorities mixed up, and truly tried to stop the invaders.

“Lord Atwood recognizes that the world is not black or white,” Sap Trang explained. “The Incursions are a problem that needs to be dealt with, but it doesn't mean he can't recruit talents from the various factions that have invaded our planet. It helps us to gain all sorts of information, allowing us to adapt to this new reality much faster. Just like the Council have benefited from the Union's trade with the invaders.”

“But what we're doing is different from the Union. The aliens working for Lord Atwood have already had their Incursions closed, making them dependent on Port Atwood. Lord Atwood would also never sell or sacrifice our own people,” Joanna added. “You should understand, the moment an invader uses a teleportation array, it means they have truly given up on invading Earth, meaning everyone here works for Lord Atwood.”

The moleman didn't seem completely satisfied with the explanation, but she didn't press the issue further as she sat down with a harrumph.

“I am sorry about the questioning,” the man said with a smile. “We have been isolated down here, constantly fighting the invaders for months. I am Gregor, and these two are Oksana and Lararia. We are three of the 11 seats of the Underworld council.”

“What brings the Underworld Council here today?” Joanna asked.

“First we simply wanted to make your acquaintance, but we also wish to inquire about your future plans,” Gregor said.

“We cannot divulge any specifics, but suffice to say our goal is to close the incursions of the underworld, which would allow us to focus on the real enemies of Earth,” Joanna said.

“Real enemies?” Gregor said with confusion. “Who would that be?”

“You should have heard of two of them. Inevitability and Harbinger, the two top positions on the ladder for the hunt,” Joanna said. “But what you might not know is that those two are under command of someone far more dangerous.”

From there Joanna proceeded to explain the situation about The Great Redeemer and the impending threat he posed. The trio mostly listened silently, sometimes interjecting with incisive questions.

“We learned about the existence of these people from the Zhix down here even before the hunt,” Gregor said with a frown.

“And we have heard about the Dominators from their old world as well. But who would have thought that was just the beginning of the conspiracy?”

“Not even Lord Atwood is ready to fight against the Dominators just yet. They are monstrously strong and possess hidden means provided by their master. But he’s desperately cultivating to gain the power to stop them, and we hope the Council will join us in that battle when the time comes,” Joanna said.

“This topic is far beyond our expectations, and we cannot speak for the whole Council on this matter. But I joined the battle to protect Earth and secure a position in the multiverse. I won’t shy away from any battle to protect our home, no matter if it’s invaders or Dominators,” Gregor said, and the old lady nodded in agreement.

Zac internally breathed out in relief, as one of the most important goals of the Underworld was somewhat accomplished. The discussions went on for a while, and it became clear that one of the biggest worries of the Underworld Council had been that Zac wanted to gobble up the whole Underworld. That he was only using the fight with the Invaders as an excuse to get his foot in the door.

But the fact that they could easily prove that they had closed multiple incursions through Joanna's quest quickly warmed the council members, and discussions rather moved to the topic of cooperation. Zac eventually decided to send over a group of ambassadors to get a better understanding of the battle with the Fire Golems. The squad would also act as Emily's protectors while she looked for her sister since he didn't have time to go himself.

A large problem with the golems was that they were the only force seemingly unencumbered by the extremely hard rock in the Underworld, allowing them to freely create new paths, and flood the ones the Council used with Lava. The council could only perform quick raids against the golems nowadays, afraid that their path of retreat would be cut off.

So the fact that a group of extremely powerful people had entered the Underworld brought hope for the Council that they could finally launch a decisive strike against the core of the Golem Incursion, Stopping the threat for good.

"Can we ask when Lord Atwood plans on moving against the Fire Golems? They are the largest threat to the survival of the Underworld," Gregor finally asked.

Neither Joanna or Sap Trang dared to speak up regarding this subject, as Zac still hadn't made his decision on how to proceed. There was the issue of the demon Incursion, and also that report that had caught his eye. After mulling it over for a few seconds Zac looked up at Gregor.

"There are some things we need to deal with before we turn our eyes toward the Fire Golem Incursion. But we hope to launch an all-out strike within three weeks at the latest."

Chapter 334: Hidden Wealth

“You wanted to see me, sir?” the young woman said with a shaky voice, clearly afraid to enter the large room where Zac had been training with his shield the past day. “I’m Emma.”

Zac looked over with some confusion, not recognizing the girl by the entrance. But he quickly realized who it was, and stowed away his shield.

“Are you the scout I asked for?” Zac asked, trying to not sound threatening.

“Y-Yes. I was in charge of a scout team looking for valuable veins within the Unio- ahem, Lord Atwood’s domain,” Emma hastily explained, keeping her eyes at the ground.

“Great. Come with me for a bit,” Zac said, leaving the training room and the group of Valkyries who had been his sparring partners.

The councilors from the Underworld Council left yesterday along with a group of ambassadors led by Tylia and Joanna, taking the impatient Emily with them. Zac himself had decided to follow up on the idea he had while waiting for things to get sorted out, and called for the person who had written it up, which was the girl currently following him.

Unfortunately she had been out on a mission and it looked like she only returned just now. So since Zac had some time to spare he decided to work on some of his undead skills. All of them were still at the Early Stage, and he hoped that one way to improve his battlefield impact if he upgraded them.

[Bulwark Mastery] was the easiest, as it only required him to learn and incorporate the movements with the shield. It took him less than an hour to upgrade the skill to Middle mastery, and another 10 hours to reach late mastery. But just like with

[**Axe Mastery**] he found that there were something missing to push it toward peak mastery, so he could only stop there.

Upgrading [**Bulwark Mastery**] did not improve his attributes or allowed him to unleash some new power, but it did help a lot in utilizing his shield, and the fractal equivalent in [**Immutable Bulwark**]. It even showed him how to properly fight with a weapon in one hand and shield in the other.

Until now he had been a bit clumsy and limited in that department, but he quickly learned how to use both his weaponry to their full potential. The shield was not only a large plank to block out damage, but it was a tool that would also create the opening for him to finish his enemies with his weapon. His other skills, unfortunately, weren't as easy to level up, but he didn't despair. Hopefully he would be able to push some of them forward in the following weeks.

“Don't worry, you're not in trouble or anything like that. I have read some of your reports. You were the one who wrote this, correct?” Zac wanted to confirm after the two entered his office, handing Emma the report he found the other day.

He could understand Emma's nervousness. She had worked in the department under one of the leaders who were found guilty of human trafficking just this morning. Almost two-thirds of the leaders of the Union had been found complicit to the slave trade, and they were executed as punishment. It wasn't unthinkable that the minions would suffer for the sins of their boss as well.

“Wha- Oh? Yes!” she stammered after glancing over the first page. “I was the one who wrote it. I am the only survivor from that excursion.”

“Large vein deposit. Unknown resource. Quality - Highest. Danger level – Highest,” Zac said, listing the main points from his memory. “Infested by, and I quote you, an insane number of mutated bugs. But no location?”

“Leonard, the department head, did not want us to write the location in the reports of very valuable things. He was afraid competing departments was spying on him. I only told him in person,” the scout said.

“Tell me about this place,” Zac said.

“The vein is three day’s travel from a remote outpost, hidden in a huge cave system at the bottom of a lake. We found it by accident when looking for valuable resources underwater. When we entered we realized there was some odd crystal that was emitting a really mysterious light, but we didn’t have time to excavate even one before we were overrun.”

“By what?” Zac asked.

“Insects, each about as large as a large dog. But they were so strong! We barely managed to harm them, but they slaughtered everyone in seconds. I only managed to use my identification skill once before I fled. The insect was level 68. That was one month ago,” the scout said with horror in her eyes.

“Have you seen anything like that before?” Zac probed.

“No, there are really some strong insects down here in the Underworld, but they are usually solitary. We saw thousands of peak F-Rank beasts, and we didn’t even really enter the vein. I’m sure it’s teeming with E-Grade beasts further down, especially now that so much time has passed,” she said.

“How did you survive?” Zac asked with some suspicion.

“You’re only level 42, and I am sure you were lower at that point.”

“I have a good movement skill,” she said, “and the beasts stopped when I jumped into the water to get back to the surface.”

Zac slowly nodded. He wasn’t disappointed when he heard how dangerous the mysterious cavern was, but rather the opposite. A place crawling with extremely strong beasts was exactly what he needed.

His plan was simple. He wanted to throw himself into the thick of it, and with the help of **[Deathwish]** and **[Fields of Despair]** grind all the way to level 60. Normally such a thing might have taken over a month, mainly because beasts strong enough to provide a nice boost of energy were few and far between.

But this cavern was for some reason overflowing with powerful beasts that would each be able to control their own region on Mystic Island, turning the cave into a cultivator's paradise as long as one was strong enough to survive. Not even the rabid beasts in the hunt would be able to compare to the massive amounts of beasts in there.

Depending on how much stronger the beasts had become in the past weeks it would only take a week or two to get to level 60. If the skill he got at that point would allow him to confidently fight the invaders in his undead form without risking the lives of his people, great. If not, then he would turn into his human form to fight, even if that would result in a loss of cosmic energy.

Besides, there was undoubtedly something interesting in that cave if it had turned its inhabitants so powerful.

"Why do you think the insects are so strong at that place?" Zac asked.

"I don't know... But if I had to guess? I think it's those rocks somehow evolving the insects," she said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded and asked some follow-up questions about anything that might be useful in his expedition. When he felt confident in finding the place he excused the scout after having her sign a temporary contract of confidentiality.

Personally, Zac believed there was another possibility to the one Emma provided. There might be a great natural treasure at the bottom of the cave, which was the source of both the mysterious crystals and the powerful beasts. He already knew that the planet was given a handful of great treasures by the System, items that normally shouldn't appear. His Tree of Ascension was such an example, and the Abbot's lotus was another.

Each such item could bring a great boost to the one who managed to seize it, but so far Zac had only gotten one even though he was so far ahead of the others of earth. The odd place in the report might be his chance at a second one.

Since he had everything he needed he didn't waste any time. He immediately set out after informing Mr. Trang about his decision. Zac knew this somewhat messed with the quest the Valkyries received, but he needed to focus on his own development at this point. He needed to improve as quickly as possible to be able to match the Dominators.

He immediately teleported over to the small town cave that the scout mentioned and immediately rushed out into the open Underworld. The scout had mentioned three days of travel, but Zac didn't want to waste almost a week on travel for the round trip.

Instead, Zac changed into his human form for the first time in a while and rushed across the subterranean landscape with **[Loamwalker]**, and he found himself at the lakefront in less than a day. The fact that he didn't have to skirt around the domain of powerful beasts saved him one day, while his movement skill saved him another.

When he stood by the shore of the crystal clear lake he once again changed his race with the help of his transformation skill and quietly entered the depths when his change to his Draugr form was complete. Remembering the scout's description he swam down twenty meters and ripped apart some moss at the wall to expose the entrance to the cavern.

He swam in the pitch-black water-filled tunnel for almost five minutes before finally finding air, and he couldn't believe that the scouting party dared to enter a scary place like this. Even with his massive pool of Endurance he felt it was a bit unsettling, like a beast of the depths could crop up at any moment to swallow him whole. But he managed to exit the tunnel without any problem, finding himself in a massive cave system.

The cave itself was a large and open area illuminated in green, but not by the usual luminescent moss and fungi. It was rather some crystals embedded in the walls that seemed to have green fireflies fluttering around inside. Zac immediately understood those crystals were what Emma was referring to, but he couldn't sense any special energy from them.

Zac wanted to excavate one of the crystals to take a closer look, but incessant clattering echoing in the cave stopped him in his tracks. It looked like he was getting the same reception as the scouts, as a tidal wave of insects frenziedly rushed toward him.

All of the insects looked the same, though they were of slightly varying sizes. They most closely resembled a giant Weta or cricket, with three pairs of legs where the hindmost set was extra long. But they also possessed enormous mandibles that looked strong enough to bite a human in two. Finally they had a pointy stinger at the back, though the scout didn't know if these things possessed any venom or not as she had to immediately flee.

Their bodies were covered in layered shell, but they looked much thinner compared to the Ayr ants that he fought during the best waves. But in return they were much quicker, jumping toward him with greater speed than a charging Barghest.

Each one of them looked like a decent foe for any cultivator, with their combination of natural weapons and a pretty high speed. But what was truly intimidating was the wave of killing intent that pushed toward him upon their approach. Zac quickly used his eye skill before things got too hectic.

[Lower Crust Battleroach – Insect – Level 73 - Strength]

The result of **[Inquisitive Eye]** proved that the beasts had improved a couple of levels in the short month since the scout was here, making Zac even more confident there was something in the cave that pushed these things to evolve.

However, there was no time to do an in-depth analysis as the tidal wave of insects was upon him. He took out **[Verun's Bite]** as the miasmic haze from **[Fields of Despair]** spread through the cave. The change in energy made a few of the insects stop in confusion, but they were quickly overrun by frenzied brethren.

A fractal shield materialized behind Zac as his axe turned into a blur. Green liquid splattered in all directions as Zac felt a steady stream of energy enter his body, both through **[Fields of Despair]** and the quick kills from his swings.

The shells of the insects barely hindered the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]**, and even **[Deathwish]** steadily killed one insect after another as they threw themselves at him from every direction. Specters kept popping up around him to retaliate any strike against him, his shield, or the fractal bulwark protecting his rear.

Mists of miasma rose from the air as the corpses started to transform into fuel for the fight, and Zac started to slowly push forward as to not get buried in insect corpses. His whole body was already covered in green goop, but he didn't care as he saw every disgusting insect as a burst of energy to progress his levels.

Zac resolutely kept moving downward in the cave, and between the increasingly thick haze of miasma and the constantly appearing specters, it looked like an Undying Legion was trying to break into the underworld. And in the middle of the carnage a system prompt appeared, telling him he had received a quest.

Chapter 335: Ascension Breaker

Zac froze in the middle of his rampage when he noticed the screen in front of him. The momentarily lapse in concentration allowed one of the animals to leap up at him, clenching its mandibles around his throat while trying to scratch open his chest.

The bite wasn't anywhere near strong enough to cut off his head, but it did draw some black ichor with its bite. The pain woke Zac up and he destroyed the Battleroach with a swing of his axe. Battle lust roared in his mind, but he forced himself to stop in his tracks and curl down on the ground with **[Immutable Bulwark]** covering his whole body.

It was his self-invented turtle stance that allowed him a breather in return for an increased expenditure of miasma. The roaches kept their assault going, desperately trying to claw or bite through the thick shield, which only got them whittled down by the specters of **[Deathwish]**. Zac didn't hunker down to catch a breather though, but rather to be able to read the quest without interruptions.

Ascension Breaker (Unique, Limited): Stop the Battleroach King from Evolving into a Primordial Warroach. Reward: [Primordial Breath Amanita], Death Attuned Skill [03:06:23:54].

Zac slowly read through the quest to not miss any details, but it seemed quite straightforward. Somewhere in the cave the insect boss was located, and it seemed that it would evolve in three days. It reminded Zac of the image of the monkey Herald silently cultivating under the Tree of Ascension. But Zac's eyes were mostly glued to the rewards, both of which were quite tempting.

He had no idea what a **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** was, but it surely wasn't anything useless. Anything referring to the Primordial Chaos probably had a great origin. This was because it was generally accepted that the two great Daos of Creation and Oblivion were born from the Primordial Chaos, meaning primordial items might have a connection to the highest of Daos.

Of course, sometimes things were named after the Primordial Chaos simply to sound overbearing or more valuable than things truly were.

The Death Attuned Skill was an even greater lure for him, and he knew what it was a reward tailored to his current needs. The whole reason he entered this den was to gain another skill, and with the help of the quest he might actually walk away with two skills rather than one.

He had already been meaning to explore the depths of this place for any potential reward, but this made him even more eager to head down. Besides, if things proved too dangerous he could always jump into the water and swim to safety. However, as if hearing Zac's thoughts another line of text appeared next to the quest.

[Note: Exits closed. Exits will remain sealed for 1 year upon failure of quest.]

"That's the System I remember," Zac sighed with some helplessness.

It looked like he had no choice but to give it his all to stop the battleroach boss from evolving, and he had a decent idea of what that meant. By traveling with Verana and the beastmasters of the Tal-Eladar the past days he had learned quite a bit about beasts and their cultivation system. While titles and classes were the two largest factors for differences in power between two warriors, the deciding factors for the power of a beast were their bloodline and its purity.

Something that had confused Zac for a long time was the fact that pretty much all the beasts he had met, from the Barghest to the wolf waves, were equally strong as their brethren. This

was because beasts didn't have any titles, and they didn't possess classes either.

Their bloodline was their class, and their levels came with a higher number of raw attributes to compensate for the lack of titles. A strong bloodline would give more attribute points, whereas a weak bloodline would give fewer. Greater bloodlines would also provide a greater number of bloodline skills, like the terrifying beam the Star Ox released at him during the hegemony trial.

But the type of bloodline was not the only important factor to consider. There was also the purity of the bloodline. As generations passed the bloodline of a race might get diluted, pushing the race further and further from their powerful ancestor. In fact, Vul, the Barghest Herald, was not a different race than the other Barghest even though it was far more dangerous. It was simply a talented Barghest whose bloodline had been purified by Clan Azh'Rezak.

Beasts could also purify their bloodline on their own, by slowly rotating their energy to expel impurities. This process could be drastically sped up if the beasts stayed close to natural treasures. The herbs or metals continuously emitted excess energy while they grew or evolved, which was why almost all treasures had beasts guardians close-by. They were using the treasures to essentially cultivate, and losing the treasure would mean losing their chance to evolve.

A skilled Beast Master spent most of their wealth and efforts on purifying the bloodlines of their contracted beasts. It would not only drastically increase their power and longevity, but the bloodline also dictated how far the beast could reach on the road of cultivation. Some of the more intelligent beasts even voluntarily entered contracts with Cultivators in order to get help with improving their bloodline.

But apart from purifying the bloodline there was another, but far rarer possibility; bloodline evolution. It was possible to ascend to a higher tier of being, which usually brought a tremendous boost in power. It was akin to a housecat evolving into a saber-toothed tiger. This was something that might

happen through mutation, but it mostly required a great treasure or some other rare opportunity.

Zac was suspecting that this was the type of evolution he needed to stop, rather than simply stopping an F-Grade to E-Grade evolution. Since the weakest beasts at the edge of the hive were almost at the peak of the F-Grade, there was no way that the Battleroach King hadn't already evolved to E-Grade. Since it was much too early into the integration to talk about evolving to D-Grade, then Bloodline Evolution was the most likely scenario.

Zac closed the menu with a sigh as he got back up on his feet, and with a wide swing created some space from the densely packed battleroaches. He had initially planned on pushing downward step by step, grinding for over a week if need be, but now he felt the clock ticking.

Zac also couldn't stop some worry from creeping in, making him second-guess his decision to come to this place. His experience with most quests so far was that he had been pushed to his limit, barely surviving the trials. That was simply how the System worked. If it was too easy the System wouldn't provide any good rewards. If it was impossible it wouldn't give out the quest since its purpose was to train, not to kill.

Before he kept descending any further into the cave system he first fought his way back to the water. It was the waterline that had allowed Emma to return alive, but when Zac arrived he noticed with some helplessness that a shimmering shield covered the water. It was the System blocking any escape, and he knew better than to try to brute force it.

Instead, he turned back and started making his way down the cavern. The onslaught of battleroaches was relentless, and Zac had killed over a thousand by the time his area was wiped clean. There were still swarms of the roaches remaining further down judging from the incessant clattering echoing from the depths, but it didn't look like they were interested in coming up to his floor.

Cleansing the first floor had taken a bit over an hour, and the short burst of intense carnage had almost given him two full levels. The speed would shock anyone else, but Zac was actually a bit disappointed. While killing the battleroaches provided a steady stream of energy, each kill provided just a fraction of what he would receive from killing a cultivator at the same level.

But the situation was still pretty great since the roaches were completely berserk. They didn't try to avoid the insectoid specters at all, making it possible for **[Deathwish]** to continuously kill targets even with its limited power. The battle had proven pretty easy, with the only issue being the somewhat high energy consumption. Less than half his miasma remained, as the returns from **[Fields of Despair]** couldn't match the expenditure from constantly utilizing multiple skills.

He initially wanted to head straight down to his next floor as to not waste any time, but since he needed to rest up he first walked over to the wall with the shimmering crystals. Inspecting the wall proved he was correct that there definitely was some relation between the crystals and the insects.

At a closer look, he saw that there were quite a few holes where crystals had been extracted, and scratch marks around a few other places indicated that some insect had tried, and failed, to rip out crystals. It only increased his curiosity about the green energy inside, because no matter how he looked at it he didn't sense anything special.

He gingerly touched one of the crystals, and after nothing happened he ripped it out of the wall for further study. The lights kept buzzing inside the crystal even after getting extracted, but no matter what Zac did he couldn't figure out the purpose of these things. However, when Zac accidentally held the crystal close to **[Verun's Bite]** the slumbering spirit inside stirred.

Zac felt some hope that he had finally found something else that Verun wanted to absorb. One troubling realization after he had evolved the axe to E-Grade was that it no longer used blood to evolve. It still consumed the blood of evolved beings

to charge up its fractal, but it didn't do anything to unlock the other four fractals on the haft. Zac had a feeling that he needed to find treasures that would unlock each of the five fractals before evolving it to D-Grade.

Truthfully he had been worried that the axe had become such a picky eater that it would only drink D-Grade blood to evolve, but perhaps Zac simply hadn't found the right materials. If the axe liked these crystals he would evolve Verun in no time, since there were thousands of them in just the room he was standing in. But unfortunately the axe grew disinterested after a few seconds, no longer giving the shimmering crystal any attention.

It was disappointing, but Zac knew he was still on the highest floor. Perhaps the crystals around him were something that Verun wanted, but they were F-Grade when the axe needed crystals of a higher grade.

Greed shimmered in Zac's eyes as he looked at the crystal-studded walls. He truly wanted to pick each one since the crystals were something good enough that even the picky Verun woke up. But he was currently working against the clock, as getting locked inside this place for a year would spell disaster for not only himself but Earth as a whole.

The crystal was put into his Cosmos Sack since Verun wouldn't eat it, and Zac headed over to the entrance to the next floor. It was a large hole straight in the ground, and looking down into it was like looking down into the abyss. There were no crystals in the hole, and the only clue there was something beneath was the incessant susurrus of innumerable insects moving about.

Zac sat down next to the hole as he took out two E-Grade Miasma crystals. Luckily he had stocked up on crystals through Calrin before entering the Underworld, and he would be able to fight non-stop for weeks with the help of his reserves of Miasma Crystals.

His stores of death-attuned energies were filled up in four hours, and Zac stood up to look down into the abyss. Nothing ventured nothing gained, so Zac simply jumped down into the

hole, placing his shield beneath himself as he imbued his body with the Dao of Heaviness.

The air screamed around him as he shot downward like a bullet, reaching the next level in just a few seconds. The whole cave shook from the shockwave of Zac's landing and even the impossibly hard foundation showed some cracks. A surge of energy also welcomed his arrival as at least fifty battleroaches died from the impact.

Zac got up to his feet and shook his head. His ears were ringing, and even he was a bit discombobulated by slamming into the extremely hard ground. But his axe was already moving through muscle memory, and the sounds of pitched battle erupted once more.

Chapter 336: Refined Skills

As Zac once again started up his slaughter he shot a glance at his surroundings. The second floor looked mostly the same, though slightly larger. The same green crystals studded the walls, and the same frenzied critters were already charging him. He even noticed the same type of hole leading to the next floor on the other side of the cave. It almost felt like he was in an illusion world because of the similarity, but the fact that he kept gaining energy was undeniable.

The miasmatic haze once again spread out as Zac methodically killed one battleroach after another. He had three days to complete the quest, and he believed the easiest method was to simply rush down and kill the Roach King. But he had no idea how strong it was so he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before confronting it.

He also had no idea how many floors this place had, but if he started to run out of time he would skip killing the beasts and jump down one floor after another until he reached the bottom. Worst case he would have to fight a bunch of extra battleroaches along with their boss if they jumped after him, but better than getting locked in this cave for a year.

As he kept fighting Zac started to enter a rhythm, almost a dance based on the moves he had recently learned from **[Bulwark Mastery]**. His feet moved across the cavern following a precise pattern as he weaved a trail of carnage with his axe. His shield was quickly becoming an extension of his body, allowing him to control where and when he was attacked by the rabid beasts.

Order was quickly being forced upon the chaotic swarm of battleroaches and Zac realized that he was steadily decreasing his Miasma consumption without lessening the pace that the insects died. As he started to incorporate the teachings of his

skill in battle he also started to more actively work with **[Deathwish]**.

It was possible to simply keep the skill running, but Zac realized his way of using it had been too wasteful. Not every strike against him warranted a retaliation, as the reflected attack would sometimes bring fewer benefits than the cost of Miasma warranted. So he started to control which strikes to counter, and which one to simply endure. It reduced the number of specters appearing around him by half, but the number of kills was almost the same.

Efficiency was something that Zac once excelled at, something forced upon him due to overindulging on cosmic water before he knew any better. But as his powers grew he had slowly forgotten this important lesson, instead opting to fight like a brute because of his massive pool of attributes.

But Zac realized that such a mindset stifled growth, and stopped him from pushing himself to the limits. It also wasted a lot of time. Perhaps not through the battle itself, but most of his time on the last floor had been spent recuperating his expended Miasma. He was not a Cultivator who could rapidly restore his reserves, so he needed to make use of every smidgeon of Miasma in his body.

He slowly got the hang of splitting his attention between striking the weak spots with his axe and manually controlling **[Deathwish]**. But he felt his work still wasn't done. He started to change the way he moved slightly, forcibly stopping the impulses to avoid getting hit in certain spots. Slowly the attacks from the battleroaches started to center on his belly or his head more and more.

Zac's idea was simple. The spectral projections from **[Deathwish]** assaulted the attacker in roughly the same area that Zac was attacked in. That meant if he made sure to get hit in the areas that were weak spots of the roaches the lethality of the projections would increase without any increase in Miasma consumption. It did require more precision though. He needed to make sure his thick skull was hit rather than his vulnerable throat or eyes for example.

More wounds dripping ichor soon adorned Zac's body, but he was slowly getting hang of it. And his efforts were quickly rewarded as a prompt told him that **[Deathwish]** just reached Middle mastery. The effect was immediately obvious, as the continuously appearing spectral projections turned slightly grade more corporeal, and hazy fractals adorned their bodies.

They had also become stronger, noticeably so. Zac had already measured that the power of the specters from **[Deathwish]** was roughly around 10%-15% of the original strike's power, meaning that it usually took a couple of tries until they managed to kill or grievously wound their enemies. Zac couldn't be sure exactly how strong the specters were now, but after using the skill for a few minutes he felt that the power had increased by at least 50%.

But that wasn't the most interesting change in the skill. After upgrading **[Deathwish]** he realized that he suddenly had limited control of the specters as they appeared. Each time a ghost was summoned he felt as though he had grown a new appendage, and with some effort he managed to manipulate the specter.

The effect was extremely limited at the moment though. He only managed to slightly alternate the trajectory of their retaliatory strike. But that slight adjustment could be the difference by hitting a thick chitinous plate or a weak joint, and if Zac could learn to naturally control the specters as they popped up he would truly increase the lethality of the skill by a notch.

Flush with success Zac immediately started to investigate means to improve his other skills as he whittled down the number of battleroaches in the cave. But finding other quick upgrades didn't come as easy. He didn't have any control over **[Fields of Despair]**, so he couldn't figure out any means that might help him move to a higher mastery.

The same went for **[Indomitable]** that he kept running just in case something down here could use mental attacks. That only left **[Immutable Bulwark]**, the fractal wall he currently used to block out all attacks from behind. He knew that he wasn't using it to its full potential since currently it only worked as a

blockade, rather than utilizing the large spikes that covered its front.

During his rampage in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect he had used the bulwark like a bulldozer, putting it in front of his body as he rushed forward. The more vulnerable of the beasts had been crushed into meat paste from his charge, turning the skill into a competent offensive Skill.

But after a few tries he had to give up on that approach against the battleroaches. While the shells of the insects weren't as sturdy as some other species, they were still quite durable. That's why **[Deathwish]** rarely finished its enemies in one swing, and why he had to utilize **[Verun's Bite]** to properly cut the critters apart.

The large bulwark slowly swirled to Zac's front, and with a grunt he started running forward. The roaches screeched in rage as the large shield slammed into them, and nothing they did could stop his progress. Dull thuds started echoing through the caves as the roaches slammed themselves into the incoming wall.

Sadly the collisions of **[Immutable Bulwark]** proved insufficient, and only a scant few of the insects actually died on the spikes. The rest bounced off the shield to the sides, immediately getting back up on their feet to assault Zac from the sides. But Zac suddenly got a burst of energy when he rammed straight into a wall, crushing all the roaches between the bulwark and the cave into a wet mess.

But even when he used the bulwark as a meat press the speed that he killed the beasts was worse when utilizing the combination of his axe and **[Deathwish]**. Zac soon gave up on that tactic, even if it might be the key to upgrading the skill, and once again returned to methodically decimating the roach population with the combination of **[Deathwish]**, and his axe. His bulwark was once again relegated to stay behind his back to block any strikes from the rear.

But Zac suddenly had an idea, and the wide fractal wall rose into the air as it started to turn until the spikes were pointing at the ground. Since there was no longer anything blocking the

roaches that tried to attack Zac from behind they immediately flooded toward his back to claw at his neck and legs. The moment Zac felt a painful swipe on his back the bulwark fell down like a trap roof in an old movie.

He had gotten the idea after witnessing how easily the bugs were crushed against the wall. Since he had control over the fractal shield he could move it around in any direction as long as it wasn't too far from his current position. That gave him the idea to use the large thing as a hammer, crushing everything dumb enough to walk beneath it.

Unfortunately, the bulwark shared an annoying similarity with the movies. The falling bulwark was too slow, to the point that most of the frenzied roaches managed to scuttle out of the way just before they were crushed.

Zac glanced at the large fractal wall with some reluctance, and it once again rose into the air. This time it started emitting a mighty pressure, to the point that the air around it shuddered. Zac had imbued it with his peak stage Seed of Heaviness. The Bulwark once again slammed into the ground, this time with almost three times the speed.

The whole cave shuddered from the impact and the unlucky roaches that were caught beneath were turned into a paste in an instant. Zac was elated with the result and started to move the shield up and down as he focused on the enemies in the front. Loud thumps started to echo through the cave every 5 seconds, making it sound like an industrial press was constantly running.

Using [**Immutable Bulwark**] like a huge hammer was a bit stupid, and it certainly wouldn't work against an intelligent opponent, but it did increase his killing speed while only consuming some mental energy. Another downside was that some quick roaches occasionally reached his unguarded back to attack his neck.

Luckily he had enough control of the situation in the front to give him the freedom to avoid most attacks from the rear any time his danger sense warned him. But wounds still started to

accumulate at a higher speed, making the layers of green goop on his back get intermixed with black ichor.

Soon enough the fighting abated, and Zac stood amongst the sea of destroyed battleroaches. A quick inspection showed that the crystals that studded the walls were no better than the ones on the floor above, so Zac immediately sat down to absorb Miasma as he went over the results of the battle.

The second floor had housed roughly 20% more battleroaches compared to the first, yet he had taken less than ten minutes longer to completely decimate everything. This was a decidedly better grinding speed, especially considering that he had spent quite some time adjusting to his more refined fighting style and experimenting with **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

He had also reached level 57, meaning that he had already gained three levels in one short day. Even his optimistic calculations had him taking at least a week to reach level 60, but as it looked now it might only take two days unless he ran out of battleroaches to kill.

But the most exciting difference in clearing out the second floor was that he had consumed even less miasma than the floor above. This was even though he both utilized **[Immutable Bulwark]** more actively and killed a lot more roaches. It was a testament to the fact that he had wasted too much energy the way he originally fought.

The restoration took a bit over four hours, at which point his mental energy had completely restored itself as well. He had spent over 10 hours in the cave already, so Zac immediately headed down to the next floor.

The sounds of battle kept echoing as Zac turned into a stoic killing machine, knowing no retreat or surrender. He kept working on perfecting his battle coordination, constantly trying to kill the roaches faster and faster without wasting any unnecessary energy.

The roaches on the third floor were a bit larger than the second, with many proving to be level 75, true peak F-Grade beasts. But apart from a decent boost in power and speed they didn't have any new abilities, so Zac kept fighting as usual.

Soon enough the third floor was cleansed, and he only kept going resting as short a time as possible between fights.

After completely decimating the sixth floor Zac realized had been constantly fighting for over 30 hours, and the results were astounding. He had already reached level 60, and as expected he received his next Class Quest.

Chapter 337: Profane Dominance

Zac's leveling speed was shocking, taking just over one day to push from level 54 to 60. But he also knew that his way of going about things would only be possible for someone extremely overpowered like himself. The roaches didn't pose any real threat to him, but he was still covered in shallow wounds from their sharp mandibles and serrated legs.

The fact that the insects were able to hurt him even though his effective endurance was over 1000 proved that almost everyone else on Earth would be ripped to pieces in seconds from the rabid assault of the beasts. Even he was feeling the strain, so he quickly ate a healing pill before opening his status screen.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	60
Class	[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark
Race	[E] Draugr
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity

	Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - High, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - High, Seed of Rot - High
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	718 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]
Dexterity	320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Endurance	827 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]
Vitality	432 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]
Intelligence	174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Wisdom	248 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Luck	140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Free Points	6
Nexus Coins	[F] 295 264 610

Zac hadn't bothered to allocate his free points while pushing down the tunnels, but now he put them all into Strength before opening up the quest screen. The Ascension Breaker quest showed that he had just under two days remaining, but he was more interested in the new quest he had just received.

Profane Dominance (Class): Kill 1000 peak F-Grade beings within 3 hours OR Defeat 1 being at least 30 levels above you. Reward: [Profane Discharge] OR [Profane Seal]. (0/1000 - 0/1)

Zac was surprised to see that it was a forked quest, just like the time he received **[Nature's Punishment]**. At that time he had the choice of whether choosing a nurturing path or a path of destruction going by the quest requirements, and this time there was a clear indication of what he would receive as well.

It was quite clear that no matter which option he chose, it would still be an offensive skill that he would get. **[Profane Discharge]** was likely an area skill that would help him kill large packs of weaker enemies, whereas **[Profane Seal]** was meant as a skill to take down powerhouses.

Indecision plagued Zac as he sat down to restore his depleted reserves of Miasma, and he went over the options over and over. It would be effortless for him to complete the first option, as he had killed battleroaches at a far higher rate until now. But it would have been an extremely daunting task if he didn't have his massive pool of attributes given by his titles and second class.

In fact, if he kept going as he did he wouldn't be able to avoid getting **[Profane Discharge]** even if he wanted to since there were more floors beneath with more battleroaches. The only way was if he drastically slowed down his killing speed, but that might cause trouble with his other quest.

The other skill, **[Profane Seal]**, more troublesome to complete for the current Zac, but not because of the difficulty. He had confidence in defeating most level 90 beings in his current form. It might take some time to whittle it down with **[Deathwish]**, but he was sure he would be able to outlast almost anyone in his current state.

The issue was whether he could even find a level 90 being apart from the Dominators. All the E-Grade beasts he had encountered so far were between level 75 and 80, a far cry from level 90. His only hope was either the Warroach King or the Leaders of the incursions.

Furthermore, if he wanted to aim for this skill he couldn't gain too many levels either. Each level he gained would push the required level of the skill forward as well. Finding a level 90 enemy was hard enough, but if he grinded another ten levels he might not find a target for months.

Both skills were things that he wanted for his current class, and they would help him tremendously during the underworld incursions. This would be the first truly offensive skill for his Epic Class, and he couldn't imagine the skills were anything but amazing. The hours passed as Zac restored his miasma, and he slowly decided on how to proceed. When he was finally topped off, he jumped down to the next floor and was immediately greeted by another wave of battleroaches.

This time there were actually several battleroaches that were over twice as large as their brethren, and their outer shell had a mysterious pattern the same color as the lights in the crystals adorning the walls. Zac immediately realized these were battleroaches that had reached the E-Grade and received a large boost in strength.

Zac would normally have been elated to see the even juicier targets, but he couldn't help but frown in irritation when he saw the battlerroach captains. He only shook his head with a sigh as the large wall of **[Immutable Bulwark]** appeared.

Enraged screeches echoed through the cave as Zac steamrolled everything in his path toward the hole leading to the next floor. Insects were thrown in all directions, and even the larger evolved roaches could only stop Zac for a second before he inevitably kept pushing forward.

There was a simple reason he didn't unleash another wave of destruction on everything around him. He had chosen to go with the second skill, **[Profane Seal]**. Since he didn't know whether the Battlerroach King had a swarm of underlings surrounding him he didn't dare to kill any beasts to inadvertently get the other skill.

He had briefly considered killing the E-Grade roaches at least, reaping the huge amounts of energy from killing evolved beings, but in the end he decided against it. He immediately

realized that one or two swings wouldn't kill those sturdy-looking insects, and he didn't want to waste too much energy on a bunch of underlings.

He was confident to complete the Class quest without any hiccups, but the quest called Ascension Breaker was another matter. Zac had a feeling that the system wouldn't award him the quest with such nice rewards if the Battleroach King wasn't a formidable foe. He would probably need everything in his repertoire to take that thing down.

Since there were no other exits in the cave system he would head down to the bottom floor to fight the boss. Afterward, he would slowly work his way up through the battleroaches he had passed. That would allow him to get the skill he wanted while wasting almost no time.

There was a simple reason he chose to go for **[Profane Seal]**. Getting the area skill might be more convenient for the current him if he wanted to farm out his levels, but Zac looked at it from a longer perspective. The choices he made would perhaps affect what Class choices he would get when upgrading his class, which made him think of Yrial's tips.

He would no doubt try to get a more offensive class when evolving, one that fit better with his personality and set of Dao insights. But that didn't mean he needed to get an identical class as his human side. His hatchetman had already proven to provide great area skills, especially with the addition of **[Deforestation]**. There was no need to head in that direction for his undead class as well.

Perhaps it would be possible to get one class that excelled at large scale battles, and another that would allow him to fight powerhouses and survive. That was at least the goal of Zac. Hopefully it would also allow him to quickly kill, or at least occupy, any Incursion leaders before they could set their sights at his allies.

Zac was unstoppable with the help of **[Immutable Bulwark]**, and with a final push he soared out over the large pit. A dozen screeching battleroaches were also pushed down, and they all fell toward the next floor. Zac landed with a thud, and

crunches could be heard around him from legs and shells cracking when the battleroaches landed all around him.

A glance up at the hole proved that apart from a few overeager battleroaches the others stayed on their floor, impotently screeching down at him. Zac sighed in relief as he kept pushing forward to the next pit and he kept moving further and further down, only killing when absolutely necessary. Each floor had stronger and stronger enemies, with the evolved battleroaches taking up a continuously larger share of the population.

This many E-ranked beasts would spell disaster almost anywhere on earth, but they only served as bowling pins at this moment. But even Zac was shocked by the sheer number of evolved targets, and he knew that he would be able to gain at least five more levels in this place after dealing with the battlerroach king.

There was finally a change when Zac reached the 11th floor, as there was no new pit to jump into. Instead there was a tunnel leading into the dark, out of which a green mist slowly emerged. The tunnel entrance was completely crammed with E-Grade battleroaches, though none of them dared to enter the tunnel itself.

It looked like they were inhaling the green haze, meaning it was probably something beneficial to their cultivation. Zac looked around the room and saw there were more than a thousand battleroaches in total, with at least 200 of them being evolved. He hesitated for a bit before taking out his axe.

He slowly started to take down the roaches on the last floor one by one, forgoing to use **[Deathwish]** completely. He instead only used his axe to finish off the beasts and his shield to block out attacks, trying to perfect his coordination. But even then he was forced to slow down his speed by quite a bit to not inadvertently complete the wrong quest.

Frustration started to well up in his heart, and he felt the urge to go on a rampage, cutting down everything in his path, feasting on the blood of his enemies. But a shake of his head

soon had him back in reality. It was the splinter acting up again, pushing him to unleash hell in the cave.

Zac forcibly ignored the violent impulses, but as the minutes passed he started to feel worse and worse. It was as though his whole body was itching, and he felt like he was starting to go crazy. His mind screamed for blood, and every second he felt like he was about to lose control. Zac's muscles shivered as he desperately held himself back from activating all his other offensive skills.

It was a shocking realization, how big of an impact the splinter had on him. When he went all-out it was just a small whisper in the back of his head cheering him on, but now he felt just how large the impact was. It made him wonder just how much the thing was affecting his actions and personality without him noticing.

Finally, the head of the last battleroach in the cave was crushed with a slam of his shield. Zac had repressed his urges for over four hours, and he slumped down on the ground more exhausted than from all his other battles combined. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to rush into the pitch-black tunnel to unleash a storm of violence at whatever was hiding inside, but he instead took out a Miasma Crystal with shaking hands and started to absorb it.

He had kept [**Indomitable**] going through the whole ordeal, but the mental defense skill seemed to be completely ineffectual against the insidious urgings of the Splinter of Oblivion. The effect slowly ebbed over the next hour though, finally allowing Zac some peace of mind.

Zac got up on his feet after another hour, finally completely back to normal. At least he hoped he was. His Miasma was topped off, and he hadn't expended any mental energy cleaning out the last floor, so he was ready to press on.

He quickly opened up his status screen since he had gained another two full levels from the cave. He put his free points into Strength again before walking toward the tunnel. The green mist was still floating out from the tunnel, and now that

there wasn't a swarm of battleroaches to gobble it up it started to spread through the cave.

Zac hesitantly entered the mist and stopped, but he didn't feel anything bad was happening, and his danger sense didn't warn him either. He even felt a bit energized from staying in the mist even though he didn't breathe at the moment.

Since the mist didn't seem to be poisonous or have any adverse effects he immediately entered the tunnel. But Zac only walked two steps before he stopped in shock, as he was blinded by a blazing emerald light. No matter where he looked he saw huge crystals that were radiating a dazzling luster.

Zac frowned and looked back toward the cave where he came from, but it still looked completely normal. The only answer Zac could arrive at was that something was blocking the sight from outside.

But who would have erected an array at such a place?

Chapter 338: Breaking Out

“What’s the status?” Alea asked with a tired sigh, looking over at Ilvere.

The rugged warrior didn’t have his usual boisterous attitude after entering the town hall that had been turned into a temporary command center for the war efforts of Port Atwood. He rather looked a bit helpless as he scratched his hair, with multiple new scars adorning his arms.

“They keep pressing forward,” Ilvere said. “They’ll be here in a day or so if they keep their usual pace. No matter what we do they won’t be deterred.”

Alea shook her head and looked down at the map with confusion. The last week had been a true exercise in futility.

Initially, everything had gone as planned. The combined forces of Port Atwood and Sino-Indian Alliance met the sea of zombies at the predetermined location and slowly started to whittle down their numbers from the flanks.

The horde didn’t seem to care about the losses and kept stumbling forward in the direction of the Zone rife with human and Ishiate settlements. For every ten meters they progressed they left dozens of destroyed corpses behind as the living continuously peppered them from the sidelines.

Of course, the horde wasn’t completely helpless. Now and then large groups of elite Zombies would break out of the swarm of low tiered undead, charging straight into the ranks of the two armies. These Zombies were not intelligent like humans, but they weren’t like the braindead zombies that only mindlessly stumbled forward.

They were like a pack of wolves, and their bodies were extremely durable. They shot into the ranks of Port Atwood and the other humans, causing some murder and mayhem

before rushing back into the safety of the horde. Port Atwood was generally able to rebuff these raids with the help of the powerful demons and superior equipment. But losses were unavoidable, with hundreds of soldiers already having fallen.

Of course, that was nothing compared to the losses of the Sino-Indian Alliance. They possessed large squads that mainly relied on their old world weaponry, so when the elite zombies pounced them they were like foxes let loose in the hen house. The alliance suffered disastrous losses until they rearranged their ranks to protect the normal soldiers with cultivators.

But even Port Atwood was starting to feel the pressure. Gear was getting destroyed and defensive treasures expended at a rapid rate. For now, only recruits had fallen, but their core warriors would start dying soon as well unless they turned the situation around.

But the most baffling thing had happened two days ago. The large horde suddenly changed course and was currently heading in a direction that would lead them dangerously close to their base camp. When such a thing had happened until now there would always be a swarm of zombies that splintered off from the main horde to cull the population of the nearby town. It was a way to bolster their numbers while they marched, or perhaps just have an outlet for their blood lust.

She didn't believe the reason was to bring the fight to them. They would teleport out long before the slow-moving horde managed to reach them. Besides, even if they managed to take down this place there were mostly non-combat personnel and logistics based here. Most warriors were already trailing the horde.

That wasn't the only odd thing. While the horde that the Marshall clan fought kept their original direction apart from a few odd detours, the third horde had veered off-course as well. It was now heading into a mountainous region that was almost completely devoid of people.

That whole sector had long since become a haven for strong beasts, and there weren't just one or two evolved beast kings prowling those mountains. Heading there with a bunch of

dumb Zombies would simply turn a large number of them to food for the animals.

Their scouts had also spotted dozens of smaller hordes of one to five million zombies leaving the Dead Zone, and their initial fear had been that they moved to bolster the larger swarms just as they started to reduce their numbers. But the smaller hordes moved in irrational patterns as well, and less than a fifth of the smaller hordes had joined up with the three large ones.

“Start packing up. I don’t know why they want this place, but let them have it. We’ll relocate to basecamp two,” Alea said.

Iivere nodded in confirmation, leaving the command center to make preparations. Alea stayed behind and looked at the map as though she was in trance. She needed to figure something out to turn things around. If they just kept nipping at the sides of the swarms they would slowly expend their people and resources, creating a pyrrhic victory.

So far no matter how hard they had pushed the horde just wouldn’t splinter, and they unhesitatingly sacrificed any small groups that were separated from the flock. If things continued in this manner they would never be able to starve them out, since the innumerable zombies kept spewing out a storm of miasma that tainted everything and obscured their vision.

That cloud of miasma, in turn, stopped them from daring to push too deep into the hordes for a decisive blow. They still had no idea what lurked in the middle of the sea of Zombies. If they cut too far into the horde they might find themselves without a path of retreat.

Her lithe fingers slowly ran across the map as the minutes passed, following the paths the hordes had taken during the past weeks. When her finger reached the small wooden soldiers representing the separate horde’s current positions she started again with a different group, over and over. But suddenly she froze, and she quickly got a thick marker to draw out the paths they had walked.

“They’re drawing an array!” she blurted out with some terror in her eyes.

It was still in the early stages, but judging by the paths of the hordes the Undead Empire was drawing a massive fractal with their pathing. The three larger hordes were the main veins of the fractal, with the smaller parties creating assisting pathways.

Her thoughts immediately went to the fact that the huge horde stopped for an hour or two every now and then. They had assumed the leaders of the hordes let the weaker Zombies rest, but what if they only stopped to plant array flags into the ground under the cover of the miasmic cloud. With millions of zombies stomping the ground afterward there would be no way to tell that they had dug up the ground and left something.

She blankly looked down at the map for a second, her mind reeling at the concept of just what kind of effect such a monstrous fractal would have. If it was completed it would span a greater area than most kingdoms, its lines running thousands of miles.

She needed to report this to Lord Atwood and Ogras immediately. This was too terrifying a prospect, something of this magnitude could never be allowed to be unleashed on a planet. She was no expert on arrays, but judging by their pathing she guessed that they would have drawn out the whole fractal in just a month. There was no way they would be able to grind down the main horde within that time.

The worst thing was that she had a pretty decent idea of what the goal of the undead was. The Undead Empire always aimed to take full control of any planet they encountered during an incursion, turning the world into a land of death. But how would that be possible when they faced the constant oppression of the planet itself, which was constantly generating new Cosmic Energy?

Perhaps the goal of the massive array was to kill the very planet itself.

Alea hurried out of the town hall and immediately headed for the teleportation building. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw the large group of people standing in line outside with confused faces.

“What’s going on?” Alea asked the nearest demon with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Something is wrong the array,” the demon warrior said with a slight frown on his face. “We got the instruction to start moving the base, but the array suddenly shut down again just a few minutes after it was activated.”

Alea immediately nodded in thanks before she hurried into the building to find out what was going on. She didn’t have Lord Atwood’s supernatural sense for danger, but she grew up fending for herself, which awarded one an instinct for survival. And her instincts were currently screaming at her that something was terribly wrong.

“What’s happening?” she asked when she found Ilvere, standing together with a few non-combat personnel.

“I was just about to call you,” Ilvere said with a somber face before he walked closer and continued with a soft voice that only she could hear. “Our array is being blocked.”

“How is that possible?” Alea said with shock. “Those siege tools shouldn’t be available on a baby planet. We haven’t prepared any countermeasures.”

“I have no idea. What do you want to do?” Ilvere asked.

Ilvere was a strong military leader, always fighting in the vanguard to bolster the troop morale. But he wasn’t the best-equipped demon to handle this sort of unclear situation. Alea bit her lip for a second, before looking up with determination.

“Get everyone ready and immediately recall the army. Have them return within 6 hours even if they have to run until their feet bleed. Also, send out scouts to investigate in all directions,” she said. “We need to get away from here, something is wrong. If the teleporters are down we can only leave on foot.”

Ilvere nodded and walked out, immediately starting to bark new orders to the gathering crowd. Alea also left the teleportation room after asking the stationed guards to keep trying. They had no experts in arrays so there was no one that she could ask to figure out a work-around or a way to dispel

the blockage. They were currently at the mercy of whoever was running interference.

Various thoughts swirled in her mind as she walked back to her own residence. She quickly put away all her possessions before walking down into the massive room in the basement. It had once been a luxurious spa with two pools, but Alea had turned it into something else completely.

The larger pool was half-filled with a deep green liquid that emanated small puffs of smoke at regular intervals. Alea sighed when she looked at her creation. She was lacking time, and the purification wasn't completely done. But her specially modified [**Corpserot Poison**] should at least be concentrated enough to make most of the elite zombies fall apart in seconds.

Her mood improved noticeably when she walked over to the smaller pool, whose jets kept the liquid inside in constant motion. The electrical pool was truly a marvel, and she had already decided to get her hands on one of these things for her house after the war was over. Imagine watching the stars in one of these things, perhaps even with a companion.

Alea quickly snapped out of her daydreams and put her hand into the warm golden liquid. It was as though her hand was a vacuum or tear in space, as the potent poison rushed into her body without leaving a drop behind. After the first pool was cleared out she did the same with the second pond.

The hours passed as a subdued atmosphere spread across the small town and its 3000 temporary residents. The human barkeep had tried to enliven people's spirit by offering his energized concoctions, but it barely helped. They all knew that something was truly wrong.

The teleportation array was still out of order after four hours, proving that it was not just some odd coincidence. But worse yet, their scouts had recently found out that their retreating army was harried by a swarm of almost a million elite zombies. The undead had kept pace with them since the soldiers of Port Atwood left the main horde of the zombies.

"Have everyone returned?" Alea asked as she stood in the command center once more for a final meeting.

“Three scouts haven’t returned. They were all supposed to scout northwest so I fear they have met some trouble in the passage,” the scout leader said with a sigh. “There’s nothing else in the other directions, apart from the beasts.”

Alea looked down at the map with a frown. Northwest was the direction that she had wanted to move in. Northwest had a reasonably safe path between two mountain ranges that led to a large settlement after a week’s travel.

If they moved north or east they would have to travel twice that distance in extremely hostile terrain before reaching any town with a teleporter. And even if managed to get through to the towns they would face catastrophic losses during their flight. Alea and the other leaders weren’t like Lord Atwood. They couldn’t keep the whole army safe from the continuous onslaught of rabid beasts.

South and southeast were right in the direction of the Zombie horde, and that was to head straight into the maw of the beast. Especially now that the undead seemed to actively fight back for the first time since the conflict started.

“We’ll head northwest,” Alea said as killing intent started to leak from her body. “Someone wants to trap us here, but the people of Port Atwood are not so easy to contain. Prepare for all-out war, we’re breaking out by force.”

Chapter 339: Battleroach King

Zac stared at the mouth of the entrance with confusion, not understanding who could have placed an array there. He couldn't imagine anyone managing to sneak all the way down to the bottom of this roach-infested cave system in one piece and not leave a single trace behind.

The effect of the array wasn't limited to simply blocking out the light from the crystals, but it was also hindering most of the green gas from escaping. Judging by the density of the green mist in the tunnel Zac guessed that only 10% of the gasses escaped through the array, if even that.

He carefully looked around the entrance for any array flags, hoping that the design would give a hint of the origins of whoever had placed it there. However, no matter where he looked he couldn't find a hint of the source of the array, making him wonder if this thing might actually be one of the natural formations he had read about.

But a clattering from further inside the tunnel quickly caught Zac's attention, and he slowly moved forward with his axe and shield at the ready. The radiant tunnel turned out to be less than 50 meters long, and he immediately reached another large cave after turning around a bend.

The whole cavern was filled with a green mist, reaching all the way to the ceiling tens of meters in the air. But even with the thick haze he had no trouble seeing what was going on inside. The cave was blasted by the emerald light of the large crystals, and the light pierced through the mist without any trouble.

His eyes only lingered on the surroundings for a fraction of a second as there was something that immediately commanded his attention. A huge hulking battleroach lay unmoving close

to the center of the cave, seemingly asleep. The layered carapace along its back slowly moved up and down as though they were fans, but Zac noticed that green mist was continuously being sucked into the gaps beneath the shells.

It was the Battleroach King that commanded the center of the cave, and there were quite a few differences between the king and its subjects. The Battleroach King was completely emerald for instance, rather than the brownish-black of the normal battleroaches. It was also huge, spanning over five meters in length.

Its long legs looked a lot sturdier compared to its brethren, and short serrated blades ran along their length. A casual swipe would likely bisect most people without effort. Its mandibles were enormous, spanning over a meter as well. Finally it even had a large horn, reminding Zac of some beetles.

The presence of the huge battleroach was so intense that Zac didn't notice the other object in the cave for a few seconds. But soon enough he spotted the large stubby mushroom that grew just a few meters away from the large beast.

It was almost a meter tall and had a fat bulbous stalk and a spherical cap. All in all, it looked a lot like a supersized fly agaric, apart from its colors. The stalk was a deep purple while the cap was emerald and studded with black spots. It looked extremely toxic, though Zac had a feeling that actually wasn't the case.

It was the first plant that Zac had seen inside the cave system since entering. More interestingly it looked like the mushroom was the source of the massive clouds of green mist. After putting two and two together he quickly realized that the mushroom was the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**.

Zac frowned when he saw that the treasure was out in the open. A battle at his level would cause pretty massive shockwaves if he went all out, and he was afraid that the precious mushroom would get ruined.

Then again, the cave was quite massive, a few times larger than the outer caves where thousands of battleroaches had been crammed together. He would simply have to move the

battle away from the Amanita. Seeing how close the beast was to the mushroom it should be quite important to it, so it would hopefully comply immediately.

There was nothing else for Zac to do at this moment apart from getting on with it, so he stepped out into the cave and immediately used **[Inquisitive Eye]**. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that the beast was level 94, just 2 levels above the minimum required to complete the quest.

Luckily he had only cleared out the last floor to avoid any reinforcements during the battle. If he had slowly made his way down while killing the roaches on each floor there was no way he would have been able to finish the quest for **[Profane Seal]**.

A piercing screech suddenly echoed through the cave as the roach king woke up. It had noticed the prying and it was enraged that someone had encroached upon its domain. Zac wasn't surprised that he had been exposed because his observation skill was truly basic. He immediately ran into the cave, wanting to move as far away from the mushroom as possible.

Zac only had time to take a few steps along the edge of the cave when his danger sense screamed at him. He quickly summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** to protect his front, but the next second a huge force lifted the bulwark with lightning speed. The battleroach king used its horn to wedge beneath the shield, and had yanked it up with superior power.

It was the first time his skill had been so effortlessly circumvented by a beast, and Zac barely had time to move his real shield as well before the beast slammed into him with tremendous force. Zac was thrown into the wall with enough momentum to make his head spin, and a few of the crystals embedded in the wall painfully dug into his back.

The attack wasn't over though as the enormous mandibles closed in around him, aiming to split him in two. Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly pushed his large shield upward to use it as a wedge, and he immediately infused it with the Dao of Hardness.

But Zac's couldn't believe what he was seeing when the top of the sturdy E-Grade shield was being slowly pincerred, the metal starting to twist and bend as the large mandibles cut into it. Seeing that the shield wouldn't be able to hold for much longer he ducked down and forcibly twisted the shield with all of his power.

The move allowed him to drag the shield out of the battleroach's grip before it was ruined, but ducking down put Zac in clawing distance of the front legs and their sharp blades. A burning pain erupted in his shoulder as one of the legs raked a bleeding gash with its first swipe. The other leg tried to cut open another wound as well, but Zac slammed into it with **[Verun's Bite]**.

A sharp clang echoed across the cave as axe and leg met, and Zac looked with dismay when even his axe barely left a mark. This was a swing empowered by his huge Strength and the Dao of Sharpness, not a random swing from some middling cultivator. At least the collision allowed Zac a breather as the leg was pushed back.

Zac didn't want to stay in such a place surrounded by bladed legs, but he had a feeling that the belly was his best bet if he wanted to cause any real damage to this thing. Miasma surged in his arm as he rushed forward two steps. He blocked another swipe from one of the beast's legs as his arm kept swelling from **[Unholy Strike]**, and with a roar swung upward in a ferocious swing.

The air screamed as **[Verun's Bite]** went in for the kill, but the huge target above Zac's head suddenly disappeared. Zac looked in all directions, but the roach was nowhere to be seen. But the roaring mists quickly gave a hint as to where the huge beast had run off to; the skies.

A set of huge magical wings spread out from the back of the emerald battleroach king. Their span was only a few meters, but it was obvious the set of wings didn't follow the laws of nature to keep the huge beast afloat. The wings were made from pure emerald energies, looking extremely similar to the lights in the crystals.

“What the fu-“ Zac groaned, but he suddenly had to jump out of the way as the flying roach dove for him with terrifying speed.

The ground trembled and gravel shot in all directions when the battleroach king slammed into the ground where Zac had just stood. The shockwave from the collision threw Zac a few meters away, and he shot a glance at the mushroom with alarm.

Sometime during the battle a golden shield had encapsulated the natural treasure, and Zac recognized the System’s handiwork immediately. He nodded in relief, knowing that nothing would harm the Amanita even if the two tore the whole cave apart.

The fact that the battleroach managed to crack even the rocky foundation in the cave was a testament just how powerful it was. A level 94 beast was closing in on the level that Inevitability had when he fought it during the hunt, and Zac really felt the pressure. But constant battle had turned Zac’s nerves into steel, and he unhesitatingly rushed toward the beast as it tried to extricate its mandibles from the ground.

The green mist swirled around him as he jumped forward, his axe swinging down with terrifying momentum. The weapon was once again infused with the Dao of Sharpness as Zac aimed down at a joint in the beast’s neck. But a green radiance flashed as a shield appeared right above the joint, stopping Zac’s swing in its tracks.

Zac couldn’t believe what a cheat-like existence the battleroach king was, even possessing defensive skills on top of its abnormally hard shell. But he refused to give up and jumped up on the back of the beast as he stowed away his shield to grab hold to a shell for balance.

Terrifying swings rained down on the head of the battleroach king, and Zac alternated between the Dao of Heaviness and Dao of Sharpness to crack open the thick plating to kill the beast. If that didn’t work he hoped that he would at least be able to cause some blunt force trauma with his powerful attacks.

The roach roared in rage, but no matter how many swings Zac unleashed he couldn't seem to break open its head. But it did start to stumble around, proving that the force was starting to have an effect. Zac resolved to keep slamming down at it, sure that his Spirit Tool would last longer than the brain of the beast.

Suddenly a searing pain erupted in his side, and Zac looked down to see green beam shoot straight through his body and into the wall beyond him, causing a huge scar. Zac screamed in anguish, feeling like his insides were boiling. But he forcibly ignored the pain and quickly looked back to see that the massive wings had changed form to instead form two large arrays, one of which had released a massive beam at him.

The attack had been instantaneous, and not even his danger sense had been able to give a warning in time. Worse yet, it looked like the second array was charging up a similar beam. Zac knew he wouldn't be able to dodge in such close proximity, so he quickly took out his shield and summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

Just a fraction of a second later another terrifying beam hit the bulwark, causing a tremendous impact. Luckily the shield held, but a large amount of Miasma was expended from the blast. But since he had taken out his shield for protection he had let go of the beast, and between the bucking battleroach king and the shockwave he was thrown off from the beast.

A spectral projection looking like the battleroach king bit down at the emerald array hovering above beast's back as Zac was flung away, but it was as though **[Deathwish]** tried to strike a cloud and it ripped right through. Zac sighed in disappointment when he saw the specter slam down on the extremely thick backplate instead. It looked like destroying the arrays was not an option either.

Zac groaned in pain as the wound in his side made itself reminded from the impact of landing on the ground, but Zac forcibly got back up on his feet. He was unwilling and unable to give up, knowing that if he didn't destroy is insectoid tank he'd be trapped down here for a year.

Chapter 340: Battle of Attrition

Just as Zac was unsure of how to proceed against the seemingly impenetrable battleroach king the two arrays above the beast lit up once more. Zac immediately moved the bulwark to his front again, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw dozens of small emerald embers rush out every second, each flying toward him as though they were alive.

The moment he saw the quick turns and amazing speed of the small motes of light Zac realized that he never would be able to block them all, and he wouldn't be able to flee either. Instead, he could only infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness while getting his defensive treasures ready just in case.

The first ember flashed around the large bulwark to slam into Zac's chest, and Zac was relieved to realize that while it was painful the attack only caused a superficial wound that would heal by itself soon enough. Another specter appeared again in response to the attack, once again swinging down at the tough back carapace, though with far less power compared to the last one.

Zac realized that his skill considered the array as the source of the attack, rather than the battleroach. Otherwise it would have aimed for the softer belly instead. But as he saw **[Deathwish]** once again failing to cause any damage he had an inspiration.

The next moment one light after another slammed into him, each causing a small wound on his body. The area above the battleroach was immediately filling up with scores of specters that charged its impervious back plating. However, the appearance of some of the specters soon started to change, taking on a murky green tinge.

Elation flashed in Zac's eyes as he endured the energy barrage. His idea had proven successful. While **[Deathwish]** was still in early mastery he had no connection to the projections that were created, but now things had changed. Since there was a connection Zac realized he might be able to infuse the ghosts with his Dao to empower the strikes.

His idea had proven correct, though Zac only managed to infuse some of the rapidly appearing ghosts. His control of mental energy was still not too impressive, and the window to imbue the ghosts seemed to be shorter than a second. He tried to utilize his earlier lesson about only retaliating to some of the attacks, but his mind was already too occupied with the Dao infusion, so he could only let the skill keep running.

The reason the ghosts turned a murky green was that Zac had chosen to imbue all the specters he could with the Dao of Rot. He realized that if he couldn't even break through the shell while wielding **[Verun's Bite]**, then there would be no way to do it with the far weaker attacks from **[Deathwish]**. But what if he could whittle down the beast in another way?

Zac had already learned that the effect of the Seed of Rot was stacking, and he hoped to accumulate enough rot on the shell to affect the beast. The rapid-fire attacks of the arrays were luckily an excellent way to apply the Dao of Rot over and over, and in just moments the emerald mists around the battleroach had turned a shade darker from Zac's Dao.

Of course, this didn't come without a price. His whole body was covered in flesh wounds and black ichor, and his Miasma was getting drained at a terrifying rate. It was starting to get to the point that Zac was getting unsure whether he would still be standing before his plan would even come to fruition.

However, the exchange seemed to not only drain Zac's reserves. The two arrays soon dimmed down and sank into the body of the battleroach king again. Zac's eyes tried to glean any change in the beast's demeanor, but from what he could tell it was the same as before. The shell still looked as imperious as before, apart from having a slightly darker tint.

The beast looked at Zac as well and its layered protection once again started to slowly fan up and down. Zac glared back at the beast before taking out a healing pill. The two reached a stalemate of sorts, each party perhaps surprised at the power and resilience the other exhibited.

But the stalemate only lasted for a few seconds before both once again exploded into action. Zac slammed his shield into the ground, causing a wave of sharp spikes to erupt in a wave toward the incoming beast. The battleroach didn't falter the slightest, and rushed into it headfirst, crushing the spikes without any trouble.

A few spikes managed to topple its balance, but it was soon upon Zac once again. This time Zac didn't try to block its mandibles with his shield, and instead weaved beneath the beast. The legs' razor-sharp blades flashed all around him as he desperately blocked as many attacks as he could while retaliating with a rot-infused axe over and over. Now and then he tried a surprise-strike at the joints, but the emerald energy shield kept appearing to block any damage.

The brutal melee kept going for minutes as the two unleashed a storm of blows at each other that would render most people crippled. But Zac had truly met his match in endurance this time. The glistening emerald carapace held steady against Zac's assaults, even though Zac mostly tried to hit the same spot over and over.

Soon twenty minutes had passed Zac and was forced to consider means of escape. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and his head was already pounding from constant use of multiple Dao Seeds. He was even considering using his **[Void Ball]** in a bid to end the fight, even if he was certain that would mean failing his class quest.

But a change finally took place in the battle as the battleroach king wildly swung its head to impale Zac on its horn. But the aim was completely off, and Zac was surprised to see that the beast started to stumble as though it was drunk.

His gambit seemed to finally have taken effect. The Dao of Rot might not have worked very well against the inorganic

carapace of the battleroach, but mists of putrefaction still covered the area around the strike. This mist got mixed up with the emerald haze stemming from the treasure mushroom, which the beast constantly absorbed. It looked like the compounding effect of Zac's rot finally eclipsed the beast's natural regeneration.

The battleroach screeched in anger as its legs buckled and it desperately tried to get back on its feet. But the effect was only getting worse, and soon green liquid started to leak through the gaps in the shell as the beast's innards were rapidly rotting away.

Perhaps this was enough to kill the beast in due time, but Zac ran out of patience after waiting another 10 minutes. He walked over with his axe as his arm slowly swelled to ridiculous proportions. The battleroach feebly tried to bite down at Zac, but its coordination was completely ruined by now.

Zac easily passed its large head to reach the insect's neck, and with a roar swung down his axe with all the strength he could muster. An emerald shield appeared above the joint as before, but it had lost its luster and was incessantly flickering. The white head of **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the shield like dry wood, and Zac finally managed to land a true strike.

A flood of energy entered his body almost immediately, and Zac sat down a few meters from the killed beast in exhaustion. He immediately took out two Miasma crystals, too tired to even move. He sensed the impartment of a new fractal on his body, but he was in no state to look into it at the moment.

It was only two hours later he opened his eyes. He was still extremely tired, but a somewhat pressing matter had interrupted him. The large carcass of the battleroach king kept leaking a nauseating goop through the cracks, and by now it had created a fetid pool around it that almost reached Zac's resting spot. Zac put the large carapace away with some disgust before moving over to the mushroom.

He still hadn't received his reward from Ascension breaker yet, but he guessed it would complete when he harvested the

mushroom as it was still protected by the System's defensive shield. Just as he expected the golden shield disappeared when he got close, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when there was nothing inside. The spot where the mushroom had been rooted was empty, apart from a hole reaching into the ground.

But Zac soon breathed out in relief when he saw the two boxes right next to him. They had appeared completely noiselessly without a single energy fluctuation just like his rewards from earlier quests. The larger of the two boxes was made from light-grey stone and inlaid with golden fractals, and it was almost as tall as Zac was.

There was no doubt that the box contained the mushroom, and Zac was more than happy that the System had packaged it for him. Properly harvesting and storing spiritual herbs was a skill in of itself, and he was afraid that he would ruin the mushroom if he simply ripped it out of the ground.

The other box looked like a small jewelry box made out of pitch-black wood. Zac stored the larger box in his Cosmos Sack, instead focusing on the smaller one. As he expected a small crystal was placed inside and Zac immediately took it up to scan its contents.

Zac had been worried that the System would award him something that didn't suit his needs, but it looked like he had been too suspicious. The skill was called [**Winds of Decay**], and Zac didn't hesitate to learn it. It sounded like something that would be a nice addition to his current class, and perhaps he even got this specific skill because of the way he managed to take down the battleroach.

The fractal found a position at the top of his lungs, right below the area that was being occupied by [**Thousand Faces**]. Having already gotten a few skills from outside sources he could tell that while the fit wasn't amazing, it wasn't too bad either. He believed the new skill should be able to display at least 70% of its true power when he used it.

Zac had restored less than a third of his energy the past two hours, but he couldn't stop himself from trying out the skill. Miasma effortlessly entered the fractal, but there was no effect

apart from the miasma changing somehow. He tried to move the energy to his arms to release the skill, but the energy wouldn't budge. Zac frowned as he looked down at the small crystal in his hands until he had an idea.

Fresh air entered his lungs for the first time in days, as he took a deep breath even though he didn't need to breathe in his undead form. The energy from **[Winds of Decay]** entered his lungs as well, making Zac certain he was on the right track. A dark gust billowed out when he exhaled, immediately covering an area of over fifteen meters in no time.

Zac was happy that the skill worked, but he couldn't stop himself from grimacing. Did the System really give him a bad-breath skill? Zac shook his head with a wry smile and instead turned his attention to his class skill, **[Profane Seal]**. He needed something to cleanse the proverbial bad taste in his mouth after getting the last skill. A burst of information entered his mind when he focused on the other fractal, but Zac didn't even have time to celebrate before a change occurred in the cave.

A sudden sound threw any thought of experimenting with his other skill into the back of Zac's mind, and he whirled around with his axe ready. What entered Zac's sight wasn't one of the remaining battleroaches having found it's way down from the floors above. It was something else entirely.

A small humanoid stood in the inner corner of the cave, almost on the opposite side of where Zac entered. It was roughly a meter tall with large two black eyes on a head that looked pretty large for an otherwise lithe frame. If it wasn't for the small horns and the tail Zac would have classified the being as a traditional alien, for lack of a better name.

There were other strange things with the alien apart from the fact that it had somehow found its way down into the cave without him noticing. Two small drones of clearly technological origin hovered above its head, and it looked like he was holding some sort of device in his hand that was more akin to a tablet than some system-approved weapon. Its clothes also didn't follow the style of most battle-gear, and it looked a bit like a modern Chinese Tang suit.

Zac was frozen in shock seeing the unexpected arrival, but the same could be said about the alien. It stood unmoving a few meters into the cave, looking back and forth between the center of the cave and the battle-worn appearance of Zac.

Finally the silence broke as the two spoke up at the same time.

“Draugr?”

“Technocrat?”

Chapter 341: Firmament's Edge

Zac wasn't too surprised that the alien could identify his origins. He hadn't worn his mask during his time in the cave, which exposed his pallid skin and signature pitch-black eyes.

"Technocrat is imprecise and reductionist. I am a member of Firmament's Edge, something greater than what a miscreation like you can ever imagine," the alien arrogantly exclaimed. "Were you the one that ruined my experiment? More importantly, how did you get here?"

Zac mutely stared at the arrogant little alien, unsure of what to make of the situation. He had never heard of Technocrats participating in invading newly integrated planets, yet a member of them stood in front of him. He had no idea what Firmament's Edge was, but he guessed it was one of the many factions within the Technocrat Alliance.

The appearance of a true Technocrat caused a storm in Zac's heart as it dragged up the subject of his mother. Was the appearance of this thing linked to her? Or even worse, was it linked to the item in Kenzie's mind? But Zac forcefully calmed down his fraying emotions and gave the alien an impervious stare. He needed to act the part if he wanted to get some information.

"The Undead Empire goes where it pleases," Zac said with matching arrogance. "I'm here because there were a lot of things to kill."

"You! My poor roach. I spent so much money to infuse it with the genes for energy control! It might have caused an unseen evolution with the help of the Amanita, but you ruined it all!" the alien said with gnashing teeth.

Zac shrugged his shoulders without a care, though he was internally boiling with rage. Was this little prick the reason that the battleroach king had such annoying skills like the energy wings and the defensive shield? It made his life a lot harder than it needed to be. But he pushed down his annoyance since he truly needed to know what was going on.

“Your kind should know better than to encroach a planet under the Undead Empire. What are you doing here?” Zac said.

“Pah, Firmament’s Edge doesn’t fear you. Even if a few of your old undyings crawl out of their sealed cultivation graves we have people to meet them head-on,” the alien snorted, but he suddenly froze in alarm. “Wait, what do you mean under your control?”

“We came to this baby planet through the Incursion, so naturally the planet belongs to The Undead Empire from now on,” Zac snorted, stilling his fraying nerves.

The fact that the Technocrat wasn’t backing down against a monstrous existence as the Undead Empire was pretty telling that Firmament’s Edge wasn’t some backwater faction. His thoughts went to the story that Karunthel told about the Technocrat who had no problem blowing up planets. Even Earth had the technology to ruin their world before the integration. What about a faction of hyper-advanced aliens?

“Shit, have you lunatics already started the terraforming?!” the alien gasped. “We need to speak with your leaders immediately. And how the hell did your people find your way down here so quickly? We have been drilling for months.”

“Why would I arrange a meeting like that?” Zac asked with feigned disinterest, ignoring the question of how he got down to the Underworld.

“We have no interest in the planet, kill all the natives for all I care. But we need to do a quick sweep of the planet before you terraform it,” the alien said. “We are even willing to compensate you for the trouble.”

“What’s so important that you came all the way here?” Zac probed.

“That’s private,” the alien immediately responded with a frown.

“Well, if you don’t tell me what it is you’re looking for, I don’t see a reas-,” Zac pushed the alien, but he was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence.

For some reason his Cosmos Sack had started to vibrate, making Zac look down with confusion. When he infused his mind into the sack he was horrified to see that it was his mother’s necklace that was moving around in the bag’s subspace, something Zac thought was impossible.

He quickly looked up at the alien again, since what happened clearly wasn’t a coincidence. The amulet had been completely inert until now, and it only started to act up the moment he got close to a Technocrat. And as he expected the little alien had taken out some ball that emitted out a barely discernible wave at regular intervals.

“You have it! It’s on this planet! We actually found it!” the Alien screamed in shock and excitement as his eyes were glued to the ball. “The traitor has been found!”

A towering killing intent suffused Zac’s mind as he glared at the exhilarated alien. He had been wary of the Technocrat’s stance since he learned of his mother’s origin, but the alien’s last comment seemed to cement a disappointing reality that he had been dreading for months.

The Technocrats were enemies.

If his mother had been branded a traitor there was no way that things would end well if his and his sister’s origins were exposed. They were barely holding on as it was when the largest threat only was a vagrant D-Grade cultivator. They couldn’t handle being in the crosshairs of one of the universe’s most powerful factions.

This alien could under no circumstance be allowed to live. The danger to his sister was just too big.

A storm of energy swirled around Zac as he immediately activated almost every skill in his repertoire. He wouldn’t take any risks against the Technocrats, especially not when his

sister's safety was at risk. A large swathe of miasma billowed out from him in an instant as **[Fields of Despair]** activated, but Zac held off on summoning the large barrier.

The alien immediately noticed the change, and he looked up at Zac with a scrunched-up face.

“So you have already found it! You should never have meddled in the business of Firmament's Edge,” the alien growled, and the two drones above the alien's head started to hum as they shone with a sinister red light. “Die!”

Zac couldn't sense any energy fluctuations from the increasingly blinding weapons, but he knew that they were charging some extremely strong attack. However, Zac still wasn't worried as he kept the alien within his sight until the moment his danger sense warned him of something bad was about to happen.

Zac stomped down into the ground just before two huge beams shot at this position, causing a wide path of destruction. Even the air itself seemed to be immolated by the terrifying beams, and they even managed to carve holes in the walls that were so deep that the ends of the newly created tunnels couldn't be seen.

But Zac suddenly appeared straight in front of the alien, completely unscathed, as waves of death radiated all around him. The little grey man looked up in shock at Zac's sudden appearance, but he immediately started to disappear through some unknown means. However, Zac still wasn't worried as he once again stomped down his foot.

“Seal” Zac growled, and the area around him drastically changed once again.

The miasma from **[Fields of Despair]** congealed into five large towers that formed a circle with Zac as the epicenter. On the top of each tower an azure fractal shone like a cursed lighthouse, and hazy fractals ran along the length of the spires.

The towers weren't truly corporeal like the hand that Zac summoned with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but they were much more real than the specters from **[Deathwish]**. They were

slightly reminiscent of the Unholy Beacons, but they emitted a far more arcane aura, as though they had been summoned from the true Underworld.

The sudden appearance of the towers wasn't the end of the skill, as each tower shot out a ghastly chain that moved like a lightning bolt to converge at the same spot. A shrill shriek echoed across the cave as the alien appeared twenty meters away from Zac, completely chained down.

Four of the chains had fettered his hands and legs, and the final chain snaked around his neck. The technocrat desperately tried to break the chains with all his might, but it was like they were wrought from divine iron and didn't budge the slightest. A bracer on the alien's arm even shot out two radiant beams at the restraints, but it only left a small mark.

The technocrat only had time to unleash one attack before he started to howl at the top of his lungs as his whole body spasmed uncontrollably. At the same time a haze started to pour out from the chains, once again filling the area with miasma. They were currently forcibly converting the energy inside the small alien into miasma, just like **[Field of Despair]** did with corpses.

Zac grimaced as he looked upon the horrifying torture, but he made no move to stop it. This was, after all, a person who not only had tried to kill him, but also one that had been completely indifferent to the death of his whole planet.

But soon enough the alien managed to focus enough to command the two drones to help out, and they started to charge up new blasts. Zac couldn't let that happen, so immediately hurled two daggers at them. But a red shield sprung up to protect them, making Zac remember the extremely durable forcefield that had protected Kenzie at King's Crossing.

He couldn't allow the two drones to attack the chains or the towers, as even they wouldn't be able to last too long against the terrible blasts those small machines could unleash. The technocrat saw his approach, and he glared at him with hatred. Zac ignored the stare and got ready to destroy the two things

with a swing of his axe, or at least make them miss their targets.

Blinding light suddenly stole Zac's vision as a blast hurled him into the distance, almost knocking him unconscious. But Zac refused to let his mind fill with darkness, not when the stakes were so high. He shook his head and immediately got back on his feet with a groan, and looked up at the fleeing form of the technocrat.

The small alien had actually sacrificed a hand and a leg while the self-detonations of the two drones had destroyed the three other chains. He was currently flying away in the opposite direction of Zac, somehow ignoring gravity. But his escape was immediately stopped the moment he tried to escape between two of the towers as an azure wall appeared to block him.

The alien screamed in frustration and launched a beam of light at the wall from his remaining hand. Zac couldn't tell whether it was a skill or another gadget, but he quickly got his answer as an alien ghost appeared behind the technocrat and gored him through his chest.

Zac wanted to run up and take down the technocrat before he could do anything else. But his legs stopped listening to him after a few steps, making him fall over once more. Luckily Zac wasn't out of cards just yet and took a deep breath.

This time he didn't simply exhale, but rather blew out a gust empowered by **[Winds of Decay]** with all the force he could muster. A black storm expanded from his mouth like a hurricane, and the whole cage created by the five towers were completely engulfed in a second. Screams could be heard from the other side, but Zac didn't stop and kept blowing and blowing, drowning the area in decay.

But even a minute later the screams didn't abate, and Zac frowned as he took out a healing pill and started to drag himself over toward where the screams came from. His sight had been blocked by the dense cloud he released, but when he finally reached the location even he couldn't help but blanch. The state of the Technocrat was beyond pitiful, and Zac almost

instinctually killed him to take him out of his misery before stopping himself.

Half the alien's body was in a state of putrefaction, looking like a corpse dragged out of the sewers. But a mysterious force continuously restored his body and expelled the dead cells in a form of rapid regeneration. Zac couldn't see any machines, but he guessed it was some advanced technology at play.

But this process was clearly extremely painful judging by the alien's screams, and worse was that the moment his new cells were formed they immediately started to rot again due to the lingering effect of [**Winds of Decay**]. The alien was constantly dragged back and forth in a tortuous cycle of life and death, being both and neither at the same time.

It looked like he had lost all body functions since he couldn't move a muscle, he only looked up at Zac with despair.

"Kill me," the alien cried when with a shaking voice.

"Give me answers first," Zac said, fortifying his heart. "What are your Firmament's Edge after?"

Chapter 342: An Easy Gig

“I am not really part of Firmament’s Edge,” the alien wept. “My company was just one of many contracted by them to scan newly integrated planets. I just wanted to use their name to make you back down.”

Zac couldn’t help but shake his head at the Technocrat’s bad luck. Perhaps Firmament’s Edge was a terrifying existence in the multiverse, but unfortunately for the alien Zac was perhaps the only Draugr who had never heard of them before.

“Who is the traitor you mentioned? What were you looking for?” Zac asked.

“I don’t know,” the Alien wheezed, but his eyes widened in horror when black smoke started to emanate from the corner of Zac’s mouth. “I swear, I don’t! We were all given scanning equipment before being transported. We were simply supposed to immediately report back if the equipment found whatever they were looking for.”

It was a huge relief to Zac that it seemed as though the true leaders of the Technocrats hadn’t been warned off by the silver ball that was lying next to the alien. Zac gazed at it for a second before he reached over and crushed it in his fist, twisting it beyond redemption.

“Then why did you mention a traitor?” Zac asked with a scowl after turning back to the dying Technocrat.

“It’s a rumor my boss heard. A top person in Firmament’s Edge stole something extremely valuable and fled to unintegrated territory. But small people like us have no way of finding out the details. If we did, our home planets would get incinerated in a heartbeat,” the alien winced.

Zac kept pushing for more answers, but the alien started to become rambling and incoherent in less than a minute. His

brain was breaking down like the rest of his body, and Zac ended his life with a merciful swing.

He did, however, manage to find out a few more tidbits. The hidden incursion in the underworld was truly a Technocrat Incursion, and it was controlled by a small corporation attached to the Technocrat faction. They only possessed five E-grade warriors, the foreman of the company along with four cultivator bodyguards.

Better yet, it seemed that The System truly had it out for the Technocrats because it essentially confiscated any and all advanced technology that they tried to sneak to Earth. Only minor items without destructive capabilities or components that needed massive amounts of refinement were allowed through, but at exorbitant cost.

Most of their time had been spent building their base since they essentially needed to produce everything from scratch. Of course, the Technocrat's name wasn't just for show, and they already had production lines for all essentials they needed for their mission.

They had created an arsenal of weaponry with the help of the plentiful minerals and crystals in the underworld, creating an impervious defense. Even the two dangerous drones had been created almost from scratch on Earth, proving how great their capabilities were. Luckily they required a few hard to make components that limited their number. But still, rooting them out would be far harder than their low levels indicated.

He also learned that time was of the essence. The technocrats had been arduously digging toward the surface the past three months, not resting a second after they finally managed to manufacture a monstrous machine that was strong enough to rip through the reinforced ground. They expected to be able to reach the surface in less than two weeks, at which point they would set up some massive scanning device they had brought.

Zac couldn't let them reach the surface. His amulet was spotted even though it was inside a Cosmos Sack, proving the quality of the scanning devices Firmament's Edge possessed.

Unfortunately, the alien had no idea how the tools worked or the limits of their capabilities.

He only knew that they couldn't send transmissions through space since the System blocked them. But they might be able to find anything that Leandra had ever touched. Or even worse, they might find Kenzie even if she stayed within the Mystic Realm.

The Technocrat company that had arrived on earth hadn't expected to find anything and only saw the Incursion as an easy gig. They would arrive at the planet, scan it with the items, steal some resources, and then return to get paid by Firmament's Edge.

They had only brought a small crew of mostly non-combat personnel, wanting to keep their costs as low as possible. But that would all change if they found signs that Earth actually was the planet that Firmament's Edge was so desperately searching for. The Great Redeemer would be the least of Zac's problems if that happened.

Zac looked down at the dead body of the technocrat, but he still held off on deactivating [**Profane Seal**]. Keeping the towers around did drain a decent amount of miasma, but there was a good reason for keeping it. A towering aura billowed out from Zac's body, causing the air to shudder as Zac kept changing between infusing it with the Dao of Heaviness, Sharpness, and Rot.

It was his Dao Fields, and he unleashed them to the fullest in hopes of catching and destroying any hidden machines. The technocrat turned delirious before Zac had the opportunity to ask anything about the items he possessed, so Zac was afraid to release the cage. What if a hidden spycam found its way back to the technocrat incursion?

A smattering noise drew Zac's attention, and he looked over in the direction of where the sound came from. Dozens of small detonations took place in the air, looking like flies getting zapped by electricity. Zac looked at the spectacle with confusion until he managed to snag one of the flies as it exploded nearby.

The thing was as small as a grain and seemed to be made from platinum, but Zac couldn't be completely sure of its original form since it was pretty torn. It was covered in cuts so minute that Zac could barely see them, and bent and twisted as though it had been subject to extreme pressure.

It appeared that the thing was immune to his **[Winds of Decay]** skill, but it was helpless against the Dao. It wasn't surprising since the Dao wasn't simply increasing the power of skills, it was attacking with the fundamental truths of the universe. It was hard to block out and even harder to heal from when wounded.

Zac's mind was pounding like he had a bad headache, but he pushed himself to the limit to drown the area in his Dao Fields for a while longer. With his current level of insight the area turned into a field of death, something far beyond the area around the Fiend Wolf during the first beast wave. Even cultivators who had already got their class would likely be turned to mincemeat if they came within 50 meters of Zac at this moment.

Luckily it only took a few seconds before the smattering stopped, meaning all the microscopic machines in the air were destroyed. He didn't know what the purpose of the small machines was, but leaving them intact couldn't possibly end in anything good.

All the gadgets on the alien's body had been destroyed as well, and the two drones were beyond salvaging. But Zac wasn't disappointed by that since he doubted he could do much with them in any case. While he was somewhat tech-savvy for an earthling he could only be considered a caveman by the standards of the far more advanced Technocrats.

Zac couldn't be sure whether there were still some machine spying on him, but by this point there was simply no way for him to be sure. But between his Dao Fields and **[Winds Of Decay]** the area had gone through multiple sweeps, allowing Zac to finally relax somewhat.

Since there was nothing else to trap he could finally unsummon the five majestic towers. They immediately started

to dissipate, once again turning into miasmic clouds. Zac gave the towers once last marveling look, completely satisfied with his first test run of the skill.

His new skill [**Profane Seal**] had been beyond anything that Zac had hoped, and he felt he still hadn't discovered all of its marvels. It was comprised of two parts. The first part was a short-distance teleportation, allowing him to move even faster than when using [**Loamwalker**].

If Zac wanted to the skill could be ended at that point, meaning it would only act as a movement skill. But there were limits to that since the skill seemed to have a cooldown. But it would allow either escape or a rapid charge if needed.

The second half of the skill was the cage he just dissolved.

Zac could create a sealed space the size of which he could control to a certain degree. The only ways to get out was to either destroy the towers through brute force or to kill Zac. But any attack against the towers would be met with the retaliation of [**Deathwish**], meaning the cage protected itself from attacks. It was a flexible skill that could let him trap a group of powerhouses or even lock down a large section of an army.

There were still some details he needed to figure out through experimentation, but Zac was completely satisfied with his choice. He had a feeling that [**Profane Discharge**] would have worked in a similar manner, where the first half of the skill was the same teleport, with the second part being a large scale eruption of force.

But Zac much preferred the cage. With his massive pool of attributes he would be able to whittle almost anyone down before they managed to break out, especially now that he had [**Winds of Decay**] to turn the whole cage into a field of death. He only needed to figure out a way to imbue the breathing skill with the Seed of Rot to turn it even deadlier.

Unfortunately, he had tried that in the heat of battle, but there was no response. Perhaps the skill needed to be upgraded before it could carry the Dao, just like how it was with [**Deathwish**].

All these things together had immediately spelled the end for the Technocrat.

Of course, he knew that [**Profane Seal**] wouldn't always be as effective as it was this time since it wasn't without its weaknesses. The alien had actually only been level 48, mostly relying on his gadgets for survival. A stronger opponent would be able to not only largely resist the drainage of the chains, but might even be able to rebuff them completely.

The cage also wasn't impervious to interference. People from the outside could destroy the towers with enough force, allowing their allies to escape. So when he managed to trap his target he had to act quickly before it all was for nothing, because he would only be able to use the skill once or twice during a battle.

Zac sighed and looked down at the half-rotten corpse of the Technocrat before taking out a vial with a green substance inside. He poured the viscous liquid down over the body, and a cloud immediately rose to the sky. Less than a minute later the body was completely gone, not even leaving the bones.

The liquid was a common item among vagrant cultivators in the multiverse. It was all too common that you were left with a corpse you didn't want to explain, so the best thing was to make it go away. The liquid completely destroyed any remnants, which would hopefully erase any evidence of what you had done.

One item that had withstood the corrosion was a cosmos sack though, and Zac was a bit surprised that a Technocrat even used an item like that. Perhaps spatial devices were still out of reach through technology even for the Technocrats. But Zac didn't immediately pick it up, rather opting to take out an inscribed box to put it in inside.

The box was used to isolate treasures that emitted strong auras, but Zac hoped it would be able to block out any potential distress calls from the items the alien possessed as well. He would bury the box later, only picking it up again when he had a better grasp on the Technocrat's capabilities. For now, it would have to stay in a backpack that Zac took out.

The cave was once again starting to become visible as the mists from **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]** were dissipating. The emerald smoke originating from the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** had already mostly dissipated between the battleroach king's absorption during their battle and the mushroom getting sealed away.

The dispersion of the haze left the cave in full display, allowing Zac to finally grasp how the alien managed to sneak inside.

Chapter 343: Priorities

Just a few meters away the gem-studded wall was flickering in and out of existence, intermittently displaying a well-lit tunnel leading into the distance. Zac wasn't too surprised the alien was able to create a back entrance. If the technocrats possessed the capability to drill through the fortified rock in the Underworld all the way to the surface, then this was a cakewalk.

The alien that Zac killed had been one of the researchers for the Incursion, responsible for finding and identifying valuable resources. The two drones he commanded were likely able to get the job done.

Parts of Zac just wanted to rush through the tunnel into Technocrat territory, killing everything in sight. But he knew he had to act smarter, so he instead sat down to replenish his once again depleted reserves. He wasn't too worried about being interrupted by another Technocrat since what the alien had done down here was a private experiment he hoped would pad his own pocket.

While Zac slowly absorbed the death-attuned energies from the crystals he tried to go over the battle with the battleroach. It had truly pushed him to his limits, and he hoped that he would be able to use the battle to push his insights forward.

But any time he tried to ponder on the Dao the splitting headache only got worse, and he had to give up any idea of improving his Seeds for the time being. Zac wasn't too disappointed though as there would be time for meditation later. Besides, there were other gains to go over.

The battle with the battleroach king had awarded him another three full levels, pushing him all the way to level 65. It felt a bit crazy, but he would have possessed both the first and second spots on the Power Ladder if it listed both his classes.

There was no comparing his own leveling speed with that of the average cultivator by now. Each battleroach in the cave would have been able to push most rankers to their limits, but Zac had killed them by the thousands, gaining more in a few hours than most would in a month.

But Zac knew that the final ten levels would be tough. He had gotten most of the final levels for free through the hunt last time, but this time around he would have to grind them out himself. Luckily he would face a lot of high-leveled enemies soon enough.

Most notably there were the caves teeming with battleroaches above that would give him a good start.

Zac opened his status screen and allocated all his free points into strength. He also checked the quest screen for any changes, but it was now empty of any tasks. After that there was nothing for him to do apart from calming his mind while restored his energy. He still felt some of the effect of the splinter as it had acted up a bit during his last two battles again, but by now it was fully under control.

Five hours later half his Miasma had been restored while all the wounds in his body apart from the one in his sides were completely healed. His head was still pounding a bit, and he knew he would have to avoid using his Dao for a day or two. But it wouldn't be needed for what he was about to do, and Zac didn't want to sit around any longer.

He got up on his feet with a groan and started walking toward the tunnel he came from, leaving the passage the technocrat used where it was. Zac had no idea what waited for him if he entered that path of the unknown, and he feared there would be some hidden surveillance in the cave.

Zac even considered using his **[Void Ball]** to destroy the passage, but he decided against it in the end. There was not much to gain from doing so, and he was afraid that the spatial chaos would destroy the whole cave with him inside.

Instead, he chose to go back the same way he came from in order to return to New London. But before he left he extracted the most radiant crystals of the final cave. It didn't take long as

he only needed to rip them out of the wall after slightly boosting his strength with [**Unholy Strike**].

[**Verun's Bite**] once again shuddered and woke up when presented with the radiant crystals, but Zac realized something was wrong after half a minute. Verun hovered between hunger and confusion as Zac held a crystal to the axe head, but the Tool Spirit eventually gave up on absorbing it.

It looked pretty odd, making Zac unsure whether Spirit Tools were unsure themselves what they needed to evolve. Or perhaps Verun had confused itself with an actual beast, believing that the crystal would help improve its bloodline just like it helped the battleroaches. Zac could only stash away the crystal and refocus on farming the best two hundred or so crystals.

As for the less precious gems, he would figure something out later depending on their value. For now he left them where they were as he slowly climbed up toward the 10th floor. He knew he would have to waste some precious time fighting his way out, but it was better than using the trap door who might lead in the wrong direction. But Zac started to frown as he climbed through the hole in the roof.

It was way too silent.

There had always been a constant clatter of the battleroaches during his time in this cave system, often intermingled with aggressive screeches. But now there was a dead silence, where the only sounds came from Zac himself. After dragging himself up to the crest of the tunnel he quickly saw the reason. A sea of corpses littered the whole floor. The carapaces of over a thousand battleroaches were dismantled and destroyed almost beyond recognition.

Zac quickly crawled up on the floor, readying himself for another battle. But he breathed out in relief when he saw that the wounds weren't caused by any energy weapons or the like, but it rather looked like they had been caused by the other battleroaches. The only explanation that Zac could find was that the roaches had whipped themselves up in a frenzy for some reason, entering an all-out melee.

Perhaps they could sense the death of the battleroach king and immediately started to fight for the role of the new alpha. Or perhaps they had never been a pack species and were only kept in check by the much superior roach on the bottom floor. In any case, it saved Zac a lot of time, though he sighed in disappointment in the missed opportunity. The corpses on this floor alone would probably have given him another level.

A sudden clattering in the distance drew Zac's attention, and he spotted a wounded E-Grade battleroach getting to its feet. It was far larger than any battleroach he had spotted on his descent, making Zac unsure what was going on. Had it grown almost to twice its size simply by killing the competition?

Unfortunately there time to ponder before the beast was upon him. It frenziedly tried to grab Zac with its mandibles and rip him to pieces, but Zac effortlessly slammed its head to the side with a swing of his shield.

After fighting the battleroach king in a pitched melee for almost half an hour it felt like a joke to fight against this large, but ultimately common, battleroach. Its carapace had become a lot sturdier, but after a few well-aimed strikes the beast lay dead with brain leaking out from a deep cut.

However, just as he downed the supersized battleroach a few more rose as well, each of them sporting various degrees of wounds. Zac realized they probably were playing dead to recuperate, but perhaps felt forced into action from Zac's arrival. Altogether there were 8 more of them, all of them E-Grade.

During the fight Zac had ample time to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and he found out that the beasts were only around level 79, which was perhaps one or two levels higher than they were before. So it seemed that the increase in size hadn't come from levels, but rather a purified bloodline.

It took less than a minute before the 8 battleroaches lay dead on the ground, their heads either broken or missing. Zac quickly stowed away the enlarged bodies before heading toward the next floor. The carapaces were nowhere near as good as the emerald shells of the king, but Zac thought they

might be worth keeping since they were definitely a step above the Ayr Hivebeast shells.

The same scene played out in the next couple of floors where there were a few surviving battleroaches, each of them substantially larger than they were before. Zac made short work of them all, which wasn't too hard as all of them were pretty wounded. Some of them were even at death's door already, requiring only a simple swing from Zac to end their lives.

Unfortunately their ragged state also meant that they only gave a small part of their original energy, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he rushed up the floor at the highest possible speed. Fighting his way to the bottom almost took him two days, but getting back up required less than half an hour.

The shimmering barrier was gone as expected, allowing Zac to effortlessly swim through the pitch-black water and resurface in the secluded lake. He was back in New London a day later, once again donning his signature mask. He had dug down the box just outside the small outpost he teleported from, giving him some peace of mind.

Zac's initial instinct was to head back to Port Atwood before rushing the Technocrat Incursion, but he quickly realized that he might need help. So instead of teleporting away again he rushed over to the former Union Headquarters and went to the secluded chambers that Ogras had made his own.

The demon had kept his identity secret all this time as well, always donning a large hood and obscuring his features with a shroud of shadows. But Zac hadn't made any effort of hiding his arrival, so the demon hadn't bothered with his disguise when Zac entered his quarters.

"Good, you're back early. There's a problem," Ogras said the moment Zac entered his office.

"I was just about to say," Zac sighed as he sat down opposite the demon. "What's going on?"

"We've lost contact with the Port Atwood army," Ogras said.

"What?" Zac said with shock. "They're dead?!"

“No, calm down,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “They’re probably alive. But two days ago the whole sector of the Dead Zone where our army was stationed went dark. All the teleportation arrays in the area, including the one where our war outpost was, have been disconnected from the network.”

“How is this possible? Is someone targeting us?” Zac said, scrambling to get a grip on the situation.

Zac had been keyed up to launch a scorched-earth assault on the Technocrats as soon as he got back, but it seemed that the universe had once again thrown a wrench into his plans.

“No, I think it is the Undead Empire that’s finally rearing its fangs,” Ogras said with a sigh. “We have underestimated them. The resources needed to do something like this is unimaginable. I think they are making a statement because three of their generals have already fallen.”

“Can Thea’s people help us?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They have their hands full, the Zombies are pushing hard, and they are too far apart to send scouts,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “Besides, all neighboring arrays that we know of have gone dark as well.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Zac asked.

“You have the flying disk. We can use it to scout a much broader area than running on foot, so we should be able to find them within a week or two if we leave immediately. It only seats a few people, but the two of us are enough to handle most things,” Ogras said.

“One or two weeks...” Zac muttered, blankly staring ahead.

Spending one or two weeks to scour the wilderness for his people would mean that the Technocrat incursion would manage to reach the surface. From the way the alien made it sound they would send out some drones that moved with extreme speed at that time, and those drones would scour the whole planet with their scanners. It would be too late to stop them at that point.

It meant that he would have to choose. Either let the Technocrats dig to the surface, which would have unknown

consequences. Or ignore the plight of his people until he could close the Incursion.

Kenzie or Port Atwood.

“I... I can’t go,” Zac sighed, unable to meet Ogras’ incredulous stare.

Chapter 344: Heretics

“You can’t take time to rescue your people? Most of our elites are in that army. My three generals are there. What the hell is going on?!” Ogras growled causing the shadows in the room to shudder.

“I can’t go until I close an Incursion,” Zac said as he shored up his resolve.

“The flame golems? They might be a problem, but not to the point you should abandon our army. Worst case we can simply make our surface teleporter public, allowing everyone to escape. Besides, there’s not enough magma in the core for the golems to flood the entire Underworld, so they can only slowly destroy town after town,” Ogras said in disbelief.

“It’s not them. It’s the hidden incursion. It turns out it’s the Technocrats,” Zac sighed. “I met one of them while grinding in that cave I found.”

“What? The Technocrat heretics have joined the fight for baby planets? They usually stay clear because the Ruthless Heavens is more hands-on with places like this,” Ogras muttered before he suddenly froze and looked up at Zac with thinning eyes.

“Wait. Technocrats as in the guys whose insignia you just happen to walk around with? The one you ‘accidentally picked up’?”

Zac didn’t answer, but he knew that that the demon had figured out at least half of the story already. If he hadn’t then he wouldn’t be Ogras any longer.

“And the only reason you’d act this obstinate is if it was about your sister,” Ogras continued, proving Zac’s hunch. “Don’t tell me?”

Zac scratched his neck with some helplessness. He hadn’t planned on cluing in Ogras to this secret, but it looked like he

had left too many breadcrumbs to the truth. But at least he could which parts to expose and which parts to keep hidden to protect Kenzie.

“I don’t know the truth either. But my mom might have been one of them, and these Technocrats might be looking for her. I am afraid Kenzie, and even this whole world, will be caught up in something that has nothing to do with us. Leandra disappeared twenty years ago, probably leaving earth,” Zac said. “We can’t get caught up in whatever mess she created.”

Ruthlessness flashed in Zac’s eyes as he looked up at Ogras, who frowned then he sensed the killing intent leaking out from Zac’s body. Just the thought of his sister getting caught by the Technocrats because their mother forced Jeeves into her head made Zac furious.

“So I can’t go to the Dead Zone yet. I cannot let a single one of the Technocrats leave this planet alive,” Zac said with finality.

Ogras silently looked at Zac for a few seconds, before sighing with a shake of his head.

“Fine, let’s go kill some heretics.”

Zac was surprised at the ease of which Ogras agreed, and he couldn’t help but feel a bit suspicious. The demonkin army and his generals were half his claim to power in Port Atwood, and if they fell he would be almost isolated apart from his friendship with Zac.

“How about you take my disk and head to the Dead Zone while I deal with the Incursion?” Zac probed to see his response.

“No point,” Ogras said with a wry smile. “As much as I hate to admit it I am not sure if I’ll be enough to change anything in the face of the Undead Empire. We need the human netherbeast to mow through the zombies like you did with the silver puppets.”

Zac slowly nodded his head, feeling it was a good enough reason.

“I have to go prepare something back at Port Atwood first. We’ll meet back up in an hour or so at the border town I came from,” Zac said before hurrying out of the office toward the teleporter, leaving a befuddled demon behind.

Zac made his way through the chain of arrays before finding himself in Port Atwood. He didn’t find Kenzie in either the cultivation cave or his compound so he hurried over toward the Mystic Realm instead. However, he did change to his human form and clothing first, because he might run into some people who didn’t know about his Mr. Black alias.

There was a new array in the network that led straight to the center of Mystic Island. It wasn’t too long since he came here last time, but it had undergone drastic changes. The chaotic swirl of spatial tears was gone, and in the desolate space that they occupied a small encampment stood instead. The array he arrived at was placed some distance away from the small town, likely as a safety precaution.

There were less than fifty structures, but it had a wall that was even sturdier than the one he had around his own wall. Not only that, but there were also multiple arrays creating a thick layer of defense, stopping any possibility of sneaking inside. Zac was suitably impressed as he walked toward the encampment

“Lord Atwood!” someone called, making Zac turn toward a vaguely familiar woman.

On a second look, he realized it was one of the more recent additions to the Valkyries, a girl who had joined after the first round of casualties during the final beast wave.

“Kaitlin, right?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

“That’s right,” the girl said, some worry evident in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, but have you found our people yet?”

“Not yet,” Zac said, guilt welling up in his chest. “We’re working on it. Is my sister in the Mystic Realm?”

The Valkyrie nodded in confirmation before Zac hurried away. He couldn’t look the girl in the eyes, considering the decision he had made. Because it was an undeniable truth that he had

chosen his sister over the rest of Port Atwood, even though it wasn't even sure that she was in any danger. He could make all excuses in the world, but that was the gist of it.

But keeping his sister, his sole surviving family member as he saw it, safe had been his main goal since the start, the reason why he fought so hard. She was the only reason he had erected Port Atwood. If that meant that people would die, so be it. Zac would have to live with those sacrifices. Besides, everyone knew that they risked death when they joined the fight against the Undead Empire.

He stepped through the teleporter in the center of the settlement, and the next moment he stood in a cave, peering out into the supersized garden that Ogras mentioned. As he walked out he saw the majestic trees lining the horizon and the silver borders crisscrossing the sky, but he didn't have time to marvel at this place. He would have to explore its mysteries at another time.

Beneath the small hill another walled settlement stood, looking almost identical to the one outside. Zac hurriedly looked around until a demon warrior pointed him toward one of the larger buildings, which turned out to be a study filled with books and crystals.

"You're here?" Kenzie said with surprise when she noticed Zac's appearance. "I thought you were in the Underworld."

She had been sitting on a comfortable sofa with an information crystal in her hands.

"I had to go back quickly," Zac said with a smile as he sat down next to her.

"Is it about the arrays stopping working?" Kenzie asked with worry in her eyes.

"That too," Zac sighed. "There's a lot of things to do. How are things on your end?"

"You know, I am pretty sure that this place has something to do with the Technocrats! We went to the gate Ogras talked about, and Jeeves said that the wall is definitely of Technocrat origin!" Kenzie excitedly blurted out, clearly having waited

for the opportunity to share the news. “I didn’t enter like you said, but I’m sure there are a lot of things Jeeves can find out. Zac, perhaps mom is here!”

“Don’t touch anything yet, we aren’t strong enough,” Zac said with worry, reiterating the severity of the situation. “You might trigger an alarm or something, leading mom’s enemies here. And I don’t know about mom being here. The people in this place seems to have been isolated for thousands of years, and mom disappeared only twenty years ago.”

Kenzie’s face went from exuberant to downcast in a second, and Zac felt a pang in his heart as he patted her head. He knew just how much Kenzie wanted to find Leandra.

“But perhaps I’m wrong. We will find out sooner or later,” Zac acquiesced. “I actually came back with some news about mom, though I am not sure about all the details.”

Kenzie once again perked up, but as Zac retold his encounter with the little alien in the underworld her face started to scrunch up in a frown.

“So you think that mom is this high-ranked person from the organization Firmament’s Edge,” Kenzie concluded. “Which means that the thing they’re looking for is Jeeves?”

“Well, it can all be a coincidence,” Zac ventured, though his face betrayed what he truly thought. “But their targeting device did react to the amulet. I will leave it here for now so it won’t happen again.”

“What will you do?” Kenzie asked.

“Well, if they’re mom’s enemies I can’t let them stay on earth. Ogras and I will kick them out of here before they can perform the scan. Who knows what else mom has left on earth. Things are crazy enough without a bunch of technocrats arriving,” Zac said with a wink as he handed over the amulet.

“See if you can find anything about mom, please,” Kenzie entreated.

“I will, though you should know that these people only seemed to be hired thugs. They didn’t seem to know a lot,” Zac

shrugged. "Please stay inside the Mystic Realm until I've dealt with the Incursion. Who knows how strong their scanners are."

"Okay, okay I will stay in here. Perhaps a few will choose to stay behind like the Tal-Eladar. It might us help understand the Technocrats and mom better," Kenzie said.

"Perhaps," Zac smiled, though he knew that would never happen.

"I'm making some headway on my formation studies anyway. It's pretty interesting stuff," Kenzie added.

"Oh?" Zac asked with interest. "Anything on the thing we found on Salvation's body?"

"Well... Maybe?" Kenzie said with some hesitation. "Jeeves have looked at it for quite a while and made some deductions. I think I can break its lock so to speak. But I still have no idea what would actually happen when I did that. Perhaps the Origin Dao trapped inside will flood out around us, but perhaps it will simply disappear? Or perhaps the whole thing would explode?"

Zac was surprised that Kenzie had made progress so quickly with the thing. He would have thought it might take months to figure out the details of such a complicated item. It was no wonder the Technocrats wanted Jeeves back.

"Well, there's no stress. Take your time with it. Remember, stay in the Mystic Realm," Zac said as he made to leave.

"Wait," Kenzie said Zac before he could leave. "Please bring any technology you can find. Jeeves wants to eat it."

Zac stopped in his tracks and looked back with surprise.

"He needs Technological items to evolve, rather than high-grade materials?" Zac asked with confusion as it was completely different from how Spirit Tools evolved.

"Jeeves isn't sure, but probably," Kenzie said. "Jeeves is a combination of technology and magic, so I think I will need both. I have already found a few ores he liked."

Zac thoughtfully nodded. Bringing any gear to the AI might not be a bad idea even if he couldn't eat them. Perhaps Jeeves

could also help them understand the equipment, allowing them to use the things for themselves. And if not he might at least be able to make sure they didn't send any signals to the Technocrats hiding in outer space

"I'll bring it over after we've closed the incursion," Zac agreed. "Take care."

"Be careful!" Kenzie said. "And look after Ogras. He isn't as sturdy as you."

"What he lacks in sturdiness he makes up for in slipperiness," Zac smiled. "We'll be fine."

He left Kenzie's study and took one last look at the artificial sky before entering the teleporter. Zac was back in the Underworld soon enough, appearing in the isolated outpost where he told Ogras to meet him. He couldn't see the demon anywhere, but a dancing shadow in the distance told him that Ogras had already arrived.

"What's with the cloak and dagger?" Zac asked with confusion when he found the demon hiding a few kilometers outside the town.

"The demons are still around. I have probably caused enough problems for grandpa already without adding hatred from the Abyssal Demons.," Ogras shrugged. "I scoured all intelligence regarding the Technocrat incursion while you were gone, and I think I know the path. It will take us two days to get there if we push it."

"Great, let's go. The sooner we destroy the Technocrats the faster we'll be able to head to the Dead Zone."

Chapter 345: Drones

Zac was ready to go, but Ogras held up a hand to stop him before he rushed out into the wilderness.

“You should know that this mission has a pretty decent risk of failing. The Technocrats possess all kinds of tools that don’t really conform to the conventional grading system,” the demon said.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I mean that their technology can be pretty hard to predict. For example, their shields might be way stronger than the arrays we have encountered, or we might be immediately spotted even if we try to sneak in. I have no idea whether my shadows can fool their detection devices,” Ogras explained.

“We’ll just have to see how it goes,” Zac sighed. “I guess I’ll swap over to my Draugr form before we go.”

“Uh, I think your other class might be more useful in an all-out assault,” Ogras said with some skepticism in his eyes. “This might not be the time to look for more levels.”

“I am afraid their devices will detect that I might be part Technocrat, so better that I use my Draugr body,” Zac explained.

“Paranoid, I like it,” Ogras nodded in appreciation. “Well, in any case. I’ll fight with you, but I am not throwing my life away for your vendetta.”

“I know, just do what you can,” Zac agreed.

The two started to run through the dour landscape, both pushing themselves as much as they could while maintaining combat readiness. As they ran Ogras took the opportunity to update Zac on what had been going on in the underworld during his days of training.

The wealth that the merchants had amassed was extremely impressive, but unfortunately it looked like many of them had chosen to hide their wealth rather than carry it around. None of them were powerful fighters, so a common fear had been that their Cosmos Sacks would be snatched without them being able to fight back.

A few of the burrows had been found, but a lot of wealth was still unaccounted for. It had turned into somewhat of a treasure hunt, as whoever found a cache would be handsomely rewarded. Ogras had also received word that Emily finally found her sister, who turned out to be a captain under one of the Councilors. The teenager was staying with her for now, catching up on the lost months.

Their day was pretty uneventful otherwise. Between Ogras' stealth and Zac's towering aura, the wildlife left them alone, allowing them to keep running in peace. It was only after running for almost 40 hours straight did they stop and made camp in a small cave.

"The reports stated that there have been signs of activity in this direction. The resources in the area have been excavated, and scouts have gone missing. There haven't actually been any sightings of the Technocrats, apart from a mention of a red light in the distance," Ogras explained as he took out a map. "But it this can only be the place, especially considering that heretic you killed had time to visit the cavern."

"That some parties managed to walk unencumbered through the area should mean that they haven't bugged the place. Those who got killed probably just got unlucky and encountered the Technocrats," Zac deduced.

"Probably," Ogras agreed. "Or that they ventured too far. In any case, these reports are over a month old. Hopefully the heretics have finished draining the resources in this area, allowing us to get close to their base without them noticing. But that leaves the matter of how we'll deal with the Incursion itself. There's only two of us and you're using that class."

"I can take care of the five E-Grade warriors as long as they are close to each other," Zac said "I have a new skill that's

pretty convenient for such a scenario. But you should make sure to keep some distance from me.”

Ogras looked over with interest, slowly nodding in agreement.

“What about the rest of the Technocrats?” the demon asked.

“Leave no one alive. Kill everyone as quickly as possible. Let no one contact their homeworld,” Zac said.

A ruthless grin spread across Ogras face when he saw Zac’s resolve. It looked like he couldn’t wait to start fighting, which was a bit surprising considering the demon’s earlier misgivings.

“Why are you so eager?” Zac asked with confusion.

He was more than happy that the demon seemed motivated to help out with this problem, but he was a bit skeptical about it. The demon never threw himself into danger unless there was something in it for himself.

“You should know that most forces in the multiverse, including the demons, are in a passive state of war with the Technocrats,” the demon smiled. “But do you know why?”

“Isn’t it because they want to destroy the System while you want to keep it?” Zac answered with a raised brow.

“Well, it’s part of the reason, but the Technocrats are crazy powerful. Normally people wouldn’t want to mess with them. However, there’s another reason from what I’ve gathered. The technocrats hate the Ruthless Heavens, but the Heavens hate the Technocrats just as much it seems,” the demon grinned.

“What? Isn’t the System like an unfeeling program?” Zac blurted out in confusion.

“Well, The Ruthless Heavens at least have some sense of self-preservation I guess,” Ogras shrugged. “According to rumors it brings all kinds of benefits if you take out the Technocrat heretics. For example, it counts as great achievements, which will help with Class Evolutions. I’m sure taking out one of their Incursions will bring amazing benefits.”

Zac could only gape in response. It was truly a ruthless move by the System if what Ogras said was true. A lot of people

were ready to do almost anything to push themselves forward on the path of cultivation. There were innumerable people stuck at one bottleneck or another, so it was no surprise that many forces would fight the Technocrats tooth and nail if it could help them break through.

It would also explain why they didn't expose themselves while in the underworld. They could have gained a lot more resources if they started raiding some settlements. But perhaps the Technocrats were afraid that the other invaders would drop everything to hunt them for merit.

"So I guess there's nothing good that can come from pissing off the System," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Well, I don't think The Ruthless Heavens has time to listen in on ants like us in any case," Ogras grinned. "In any case, I squeezed some things out of the hands of Smaug. I have two of those balls that disrupt teleporters. I am not sure whether they work on Nexus Hubs though."

"Nice. Anything to blow any shields open?" Zac asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I have a few offensive trinkets that should cause widespread carnage though," Ogras said. "If nothing else works we'll have to use your **[Void Ball]**, though avoid it if possible. Even if we break the shield we might not be able to pass because of the spatial tears."

The two discussed various strategies for a bit longer until they finally came to a decision. They would try to sneak inside the Technocrat territory relying on Ogras' shadows. After the battle ensued Zac was responsible for taking down the powerhouses, whereas the more mobile Ogras would be responsible for taking care of the others.

The two immediately set out, keeping to the shadows as they started to traverse the area that was presumed to be claimed by the Technocrats. Thirty minutes into their travels Zac saw clear signs of excavation, with the ground having multiple symmetrical holes leading into the darkness. However, there were neither men nor machines active in the area, allowing the two to breathe easy.

Another hour passed as the two started to move slower and slower, carefully scouring the shadows and the sky for any hints of Technocrat activity. Their carefulness was finally awarded as they spotted a small hovering ball in the distance.

It was the size of a tennis ball and pitch black, almost seamlessly blending into the surroundings. It didn't move or make a sound, only silently floated in the air. Neither Zac nor Ogras had seen such a thing before, but it was easy to assume it was either some sort of surveillance drone or a floating mine.

Ogras looked over questioning at Zac, who motioned the demon to keep going. This would be a test to see if they could pass the sentry unnoticed, or whether it could see through the shroud of darkness. It would greatly impact how they would act in the rest of the assault. The two crept forward, with Ogras completely covering them in dense layers of shadows. They slowly moved closer and closer, making no attempt to avoid the drone.

The drone seemed completely oblivious to their existence until they came within a few hundred meters of it. At that moment it moved with shocking speed to stop right above them, and a mesh of red beams started to run over the ground. Zac's eyes widened and he immediately indicated for Ogras to destroy it.

A beam of shadows, almost completely invisible in the darkness of the Underworld, shot up and ripped a hole through the small ball. It immediately fell out of the air and some unknown energy inside it caused a few flickering discharges. But by the moment it thumped into the ground it looked completely dead, which wasn't a surprise since only its shell remained after getting impaled.

"So much for stealth," Ogras muttered, looking down on the drone with some interest. "Perhaps it would have worked if we had Janos with us, but a moving blob of shadows won't fool the machines."

"It looks like it covers the area of a square kilometer or so," Zac added thoughtfully.

“Perhaps we can circumvent the others with distance, but they should already know this thing is broken,” Ogras said as he poked the destroyed ball by their feet. “What now?”

“We’ll keep going as earlier,” Zac said. “They might not care too much about one destroyed drone. It might have been a beast for all they know since we never exited the shadows. But if we meet more of these things we’ll have to rush it.”

“Yeah, one or two might be okay, but any more than that they’ll definitely understand that something is up,” the demon agreed as they kept moving forward.

Just a few minutes later they spotted another ball in the distance, though they were able to avoid its detection by taking the long way around it. But that orb was just one of many and they soon found themselves stuck. If they wanted to keep moving forward they would either have to enter the field of vision of one of the orbs or start destroying them.

“There’s no way we’ll get to their base unannounced,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“Then we’ll have to speed up. Destroy all the orbs so they at least don’t know what’s coming,” Zac sighed.

The demon nodded and the two immediately sped up. Any drones that came within Ogras’ reach was instantly destroyed, causing one subdued explosion after another. Zac started to feel a bit shocked as they ran, as there were just so many of them. Ogras had destroyed close to a hundred after running for just a few minutes, but that was only a fraction of the inescapable net that the Technocrats had created. A conservative estimation by Zac put the number of drones at five thousand at the minimum.

Soon enough the behavior of the drones started to change, as the unmoving sentries by the sides started to fly toward them one after another. It looked like the Technocrats had finally realized something was up and started to control the movements of the flying scouts. The two of them had still avoided getting scanned by the red lights, but their path of movement could easily be plotted by following the destroyed machines.

“Something’s coming,” Ogras suddenly said, looking into the distance with a frown.

“Shit!” Zac said when he saw what Ogras was talking about.

It was four machines that were suspiciously similar to the two drones that accompanied the Technocrat in the battleroach cavers, with the notable exception that they were twice as large.

“Dodge!” Zac shouted, as even he didn’t want to block four of those beams at the same time.

Ogras grabbed Zac by the arm, and the next moment the two disappeared in a sea of shadows, only to appear fifty meters away. Just a moment later the four beams converged at their earlier spot, and the effect of the four beams was terrifying. Each lance of energy was powerful enough to incinerate the air, and even space itself seemed to be unable to handle the four attacks converging. The area where the beams had ripped through kept twisting and distorting even after the attacks, only stabilizing a few seconds later.

“What is that?!” Ogras spat when he saw the power of the beams, clearly starting to regret accompanying Zac on this venture.

“That’s the Technocrats for you,” Zac sighed as he got ready for battle.

Chapter 346: Heaven's Path

Ogras only grunted in an exasperated agreement before taking out his large spear with one hand while he threw an offensive array at the drones. The crystal sphere ripped through the air, but the machines seemed to understand it was dangerous. They immediately started to spread out, but they didn't have time to move too far before the ball cracked, unleashing a sea of electricity in the sky.

Two of the drones managed to dodge the offensive array, but the other two were swallowed by the dense lightning bolts. Zac briefly saw a red shield enclose the two submerged machines, but they flickered and petered out in just a second. Zac was relieved to see that the technological shields weren't without limits and that they would sooner or later break under pressure. In fact, they seemed only slightly stronger than an ordinary defensive treasure that Zac found dozens of during the hunt.

He took out a clump of steel from his Cosmos Sack that essentially looked like a cannonball, and he hurled it at one of the surviving drones after infusing it with the Seed of Heaviness. Another red shield appeared to protect the drone, but the attack contained enough momentum to push the machine into the ceiling hundreds of meters above. It caused a large explosion when it hit the rock, and scrap pieces started to rain down from the impact zone.

Zac had long ago replaced the small hill of rocks in his Cosmos Sack with something that could better take advantage of his huge attribute pool. Any time he threw rocks or boulders to test out his enemies lately, the stones would break long before his enemies did. However, a steel ball weighing almost a hundred kilos contained terrifying kinetic energy, especially when it was infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

Only one Drone remained, but it was soon taken care of by Ogras who had appeared up in the air. He stabbed straight through the energy field with his spear, and the speartip entered the drone through a joint. A second later the drone expanded until it exploded in a shower of shadows and metal.

Zac nodded, feeling that the Technocrat Incursion might not be too dangerous after all. But when he relaxed he finally realized something odd. He had gained a small surge of energy for destroying the drone just now.

“Why are these things giving cosmic energy?” Zac asked with confusion. “They’re not alive.”

“No idea,” Ogras shrugged with some disinterest. “The Ruthless Heavens provides the energy I suppose.”

“Perhaps the other ones were too weak,” Zac said hesitantly.

“No, there is a need of a soul to gain energy,” Ogras disagreed. “That’s why living golems who cultivate give cosmic energy when killed, but destroying a battleship does not.”

“Then what is it?” Zac asked with confusion. “Are these machines alive?”

“No, check your quest screen,” Ogras said with a smile spreading across his face.

Supremacy of Heaven’s Path (Limited, Area): Close Incursion of the Followers of the Boundless Path. Reward: Merit. (0/1) NOTE: All destruction of inanimate combatants will reward energy while quest is active.

“It’s an area quest,” Ogras explained. “I think that anyone that gets close enough to the heretic’s Incursion will be automatically awarded this quest as an incentive to destroy it.”

“What’s merit though?” Zac asked.

“I would guess it would boost our available class choices when evolving, like eating a Fruit of Ascension,” the demon said, not able to hide his excitement.

“Truly a VIP-treatment,” Zac said with a wry smile. “I wonder if I should start to worry about my own safety.”

“I think we would have noticed it by now if The Ruthless Heavens wanted you to die,” Ogras said, though there was some hesitation in his eyes.

“Like how? Dropping me off all alone on an island with a bunch of demons?” Zac snorted.

‘And having me roll for survival instead of just moving me a few meters,’ Zac internally added.

“Uh...” Ogras said. “I’m sure that was just a coincidence.”

However, Zac did notice that the demon took two subtle steps away to distance himself from him. Zac only rolled his eyes in response and kept going.

“If we got the quest the incursion shouldn’t be too far. Do you know if the other incursions are out in the open or if they are in town caves?” Zac asked.

“Both it seems. The fish people are in a large town cave that’s partly submerged, and I think the humans have a large one as well. But the demons are out in the open,” Ogras said.

Zac nodded and the two kept going, destroying any machinery that tried to impede their approach. Another set of drones tried to stop them a few minutes later, but they were turned into scrap in short order. Their offensive capabilities were pretty terrifying, but their defensive strength left a lot to desire. Even without the assistance of any offensive arrays the shield only needed an attack or two before they broke.

Soon enough they got their answer as they saw something odd in the distance. Another pack of drones appeared out of thin air, though the background started to wobble when they appeared, as though there was a wall of water.

“Illusion array, or whatever their equivalent is,” Ogras muttered. “There’s likely a grand reception awaiting us on the other side.”

Zac took out another cannonball and used it to destroy one of the drones. Soon enough all four were blown to bits, at which

point Zac finally activated his real skills. A shroud of miasma spread out from his body as the large spiked wall appeared in front of him.

“You go ahead,” Ogras smiled. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Zac only snorted in response as he started to run forward, putting his bulwark as close to his body as possible to protect from attacks from any angle. Just as he was about to pass through the illusory wall a sense of danger erupted, but Zac only grit his teeth and imbued his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness.

“Jump,” a roar suddenly came from behind, and Zac didn’t dare to hesitate as he pushed off as fast as possible, causing him to soar tens of meters into the air.

Zac suddenly felt a weight on his shoulders and glanced behind to see that Ogras was actually standing on his back as though it was a surfboard. But before he had the opportunity to tell the demon off an enormous explosion erupted beneath them, pushing a pillar of fire right in their direction. Zac was about to move his bulwark to cover them, but Ogras quickly interjected.

“I’ll handle the fire, keep protecting the front,” he shouted to be heard over the ruckus as he threw down a crystal at the flames.

The crystal cracked the moment it came in contact with the inferno, and the next moment the flames were simply gone, replaced by a thick haze. Zac was shocked by the rapid change, but he quickly realized that Ogras had prepared some tools to counter his newfound weakness to fire.

But Zac didn’t have time to think about that as his danger sense kept screaming in his mind, just as two thick beams of pure energy ripped toward them. The attacks slammed right into Zac’s bulwark, but they were so immense that the beams continued around them, enclosing them in a relentless sea of chaotic energies.

It felt as though he were stuck inside the sun as he held on for dear life against the limitless powers of the two beams. The

heat rose to an unbearable degree just from being next to the scorching rays, and he couldn't even keep his eyes open during the onslaught. Only after a few seconds did the beam relent, and Zac sighed in relief since his Miasma had been depleted at a shocking rate to protect them from the brunt of the attack.

The two fell down on the ground after the attack, and Zac finally had a chance to see what was going on. A large line with hundreds of aliens stood with weapons at the ready, many of them appearing quite shocked that Zac and Ogras were still alive. Interestingly enough the Technocrats were comprised of all sorts of races, where the grey little aliens only accounted for a quarter of the full numbers.

Most of the Technocrats held various types of guns, but some were unarmed apart from small drones hovering around them. A few even donned a sleek exoskeleton as they gripped some sort of energy weaponry.

Accompanying the living Technocrats were almost a hundred four-legged drones and various other mechanized weaponry such as the flying machines. There were even two huge robots that stood over twenty meters, smoke coming out of their right arms. Zac almost drooled at the sight of all the awe-inspiring technology, but he soon cooled down when he realized that the things were there to kill him. He tried using **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the robots, but nothing popped up.

Just a few hundred meters behind the row of warriors the large Nexus Hub hovered, emitting a silver glow that illuminated the whole area. There were rows of simple structures behind the crystal, looking like warehouses and containers of various sizes. It was clearly a temporary encampment, a simple means to an end. It gave a clear indication that the Technocrats truly had no interest in staying on Earth. They simply wanted to complete their mission before returning back home.

It wasn't very hard for Zac to spot his main targets; the four bodyguards and their ward. They stood together in the center of lineup, two people at each side of a stocky alien that was equipped with one of those exoskeletons.

Excitement filled Zac's heart when he saw that all his targets were clumped together, but he didn't dare to pull the trigger and activate [**Profane Seal**] just yet. There were too many robots around, and Zac was afraid that the towers he summoned would get blasted apart in no time.

He needed to reduce their firepower before trapping the others, and taking care of the huge mechas felt like something that should be prioritized. The two attacks they launched while he was airborne stole almost a fifth of his Miasma, so he couldn't take too many such attacks.

"I think we need to destroy the two big guys first," Zac muttered. "Do you feel confident in taking on one of them?"

"I have no idea," Ogras said while scratching his chin. "Who knows what other capabilities they have? There's no way I can take them down if they can keep spewing out such beams"

Zac nodded with a grimace, realizing they were lacking information.

"Let's head into the thick of it. They shouldn't be able to release those kinds of beams if we're in the middle of their army. Stay clear of the clouds I'll release. It will melt your skin right off," Zac said.

"It will what?" Ogras shouted, but Zac was already running toward the defensive line of enemies.

The ever-careful Ogras didn't want to lose the protection of staying close to Zac, so he soon reappeared right behind him as he ran forward. Various weapons started firing at them, and the large cave lit up as though it was a laser show.

Beams kept slamming into [**Immutable Bulwark**], and Zac frowned at the expenditure. He was losing at least a percent of his miasma every second from the concentrated fire, meaning that he would be all out of energy within two minutes if this kept up.

"Can you teleport us inside? I can't keep this up for too long," Zac growled, and Ogras placed a hand on his shoulder with a nod.

The two disappeared, but Zac frowned when he saw that they didn't reappear within the Technocrat ranks, but rather right in front of it.

"I got blocked somehow," Ogras said with a frown.

"I'll open a path," Zac sighed as his arm started swelling, and he rushed forward to cross the last stretch between themselves and the Technocrats.

Explosions and beams filled his whole vision, but Zac didn't care about that nor the energy expenditure as he arrived in front of the Technocrats. A resounding crash reverberated through the area when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was forcibly stopped by a red translucent shield that appeared right in front of them. The shield shuddered when it was stabbed by the spikes on the shield wall, but it held true.

Of course, Zac wasn't planning on breaking through with his defensive skill and pushed the bulwark to the side as he jumped forward, **[Verun's Bite]** already slashing in a horizontal arc with enough power to cause the air to scream in protest. Zac imbued the axe with the Dao of Heaviness just before the edge slammed into the shield, and it cracked like a broken window.

Chapter 347: Enemies Ahead

“Persistent bastards,” Alea muttered with displeasure as a poisonous cloud billowed out from her hand, causing one zombie after another to stumble before they fell down into a rotting heap.

Her skill [**Gift of Talasa**] only possessed limited effect against the undead, but it was one that did not require an actual compound to empower it. After the past few days, she knew she would need to ration her basin-sized stockpiles because it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Undead Empire wanted their army dead even if they had to sacrifice a terrifying number of their low-tiered undead.

“Every god damn hour,” Ilvere agreed as he led a squad of warriors to mow down dozens of Elite Zombies every second.

His weapon, the huge ball attached to its chain, ripped through the air, creating a circle of death around the demonic general. Any zombie unlucky enough to get hit by the wrecking ball was instantly turned to paste, but those closer to Ilvere weren’t much better off as they instantly got bisected by the chain.

The demon wasn’t using any skills at the moment, only taking advantage of the reach of his weapon while occasionally infusing the ball with his Dao to increase the momentum. He was conserving his Cosmic Energy in case another powerhouse hid inside the Zombie wave. Unfortunately Alea herself didn’t have such a luxury, as her only physical weapon was a thin rapier she used to decapitate any Zombie that got too close.

There were also the [**Wailing Spikes**], but controlling those cursed objects cost too much, and wasn’t something that she would use unless she was out of options. So she was stuck wasting Cosmic Energy, desperately circulating her cultivation manual to restore her constantly depleting reserves. But there

was no choice, the undead were completely relentless in their pursuit of the bedraggled forces of Port Atwood.

The 15 000 man strong group had kept a rapid pace northwest to outrun the horde of elite zombies on their tail. They hadn't stopped moving since they fled their temporary base, moving through the wilderness at a rapid pace to get away. But the zombies seemed to have no trouble keeping up, with raids assaulting their rear constantly.

There was no rest for the warriors of Port Atwood. Even Alea herself and Ilvere were forced to occasionally defend the rear to avoid too many casualties. But neither of them ever dared to go all out to clean out a larger swathe of the attacking undead.

Alea was constantly on guard against a pincer strike from ahead. She had thought it would come almost immediately after they fled the small town due to the missing scouts, but so far they hadn't even seen the shadows of any threat at all. That did not instill any confidence though, but rather the opposite.

It appeared the undead were taking a page out of her own playbook, and they seemed willing to slowly grind them down. Normally the constant raids from Zombies wouldn't be a too large concern as Port Atwood lacked neither experts nor gear. But the fact that they were constantly on the move made it hard if not impossible to properly rest up after the battles.

After a full day of fleeing they had tried to take a short rest while the rear guard protected their camp, but just moments after their large group stopped the undead turned crazy, heedlessly rushing their position. Only after a frantic one hour escape did the undead relent, resuming their pattern of constant, but manageable, harassment.

“Enemies ahead! Golems and beacons!” a blaring warning came from a command crystal in Alea's hand, and she immediately gathered a number of the elites fortifying the rear.

Ilvere and his squad also retreated, leaving the task of defending against the elite zombies to the regular army. Some demons would stay behind as well to help out, but the lack of elites would no doubt cause some deaths. But there was nothing to be done since the true threat came from the front.

On a hill a few kilometers ahead a small army stood ready. Their numbers were less than 500, but Alea could sense the powerful energies from the members even from this distance. Their lines were orderly and well-armed. A few of the gargantuan Corpse Golems were present as well, proving this was not another group of rabble. Even two large monoliths were erected, constantly spewing out miasma in the surroundings.

“It’s finally here,” Alea muttered, before turning to Ilvere. “We need to go all out on this one.”

Ilvere somberly nodded as he looked out over the elite army barring their path.

“Can you find the leader?” Alea whispered as her eyes scanned the army over and over.

“No, but I think that’s a good thing,” Ilvere hesitantly said. “If there was a true powerhouse there he wouldn’t bother to hide within the ranks, right? I think there’s no general spearheading this army.”

“It also means we won’t be able to complete our quest just yet,” Alea sardonically smiled.

Soon enough the elites of Port Atwood stood ready, but their numbers were less than half of that of the Undead Army. Of course, Port Atwood was able to augment their lack of experts in various ways.

“Get the lunatics as well,” Alea said after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We can only use them a few times,” Ilvere asked from the side, but Alea nodded without hesitation.

She honestly didn’t feel confident against this small but intimidating force in front of them. It would be one thing if they had Lord Atwood or Ogras here, but there was no one to hold down the fort for them. They would need to use every weapon in their arsenal.

Soon enough ten ragged Ishiate rushed over. They looked wrung out from the last day’s march, but a manic gleam could be seen in all of their eyes. It was the tinkerers that had created the terrifying cannons that utilized Nexus Crystals. They had

been working on improving their inventions since their last field test. Alea hadn't used them in the war so far, wanting to keep their extremely destructive weaponry as a hidden ace.

"Are you confident in blowing up those two pillars over there?" Alea asked a one-eyed Ishiate.

"Mistress, I'd say we need four shots to be somewhat sure. But even the shots we miss would cause some mayhem," the maimed Ishiate said after spying on the Undead squad through a brass binocular. "Of course, If they possess shielding that's another matter."

"Good. We'll sound them out and hopefully break their defensive array. Try to destroy those beacons no matter what. If it seems impossible, maximum carnage," Alea said.

"Maximum carnage," the Ishiate agreed, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Ideally, she would have wanted to prepare longer before assaulting a pure core squad from the Undead Empire, but the Elite Zombies were putting immense pressure on their rear. She could only start the assault prematurely as they truly needed to move forward. A thousand man strong army rushed forward until they created some distance from their non-combatants.

Hundreds of the Atwood Academy recruits immediately started to infuse crystals with energy, creating a wide shimmering wall in front of them. They would be the defensive line protecting the non-combat classes and the ranged strikers such as the Ishiate craftsmen.

At the same time a smaller force pushed forward, including just the strongest warriors. Ilvere was already spinning his weapon in the air above them, accumulating a terrifying momentum. Janos was there as well, and energy surged around him as the area was suddenly filled with demonic warriors storming the front while a haze spread over them. All of it were illusions of course, but it would improve their survivability while hiding their actions within the mist.

“Are you ready?” Alea said to one of the demons with a ranged class, and he nodded as he took out an extremely oversized crossbow from his Cosmos Sack.

The demon was peak F-Grade, but he was barely able to carry the monstrosity. It was more apt to call it a ballista going by its size, and that was just what it was before the craftsmen of Port Atwood got their hands on it. It was over three meters long, and the slot for its bolts looked large enough fit a young tree. It was part of the arsenal Clan Azh'Rezak brought for sieges, and it had served well during the final battle against the beast waves.

But Alea had required something portable since they knew from the start that the war against the Undead would be a continuously moving skirmish, so the craftsmen modified it for such a purpose. Unfortunately, the modifications led to a loss in power, but it was still an extremely mighty weapon. The ranger expertly loaded the crossbow with a densely inscribed bolt that was as long as he was. The number of such a munition was quite limited, but they weren't in a situation to hold back against an army of this level.

But a wail from behind made her snap her neck around just as Alea was ready to give the command to start the operation. Her eyes widened in shock to see a hundred translucent ghosts appearing out of nowhere, assassinating one soldier after another. The soldiers were quick to respond, but most attacks just passed right through their incorporeal bodies.

Only a few of the demons were able to harm them with the help of their Dao, but it was clear that even most Daos were ineffective against them.

“Divine Array!” a captain under Ilvere roared from the defensive line, and the next moment the whole army lit up in golden radiance.

It was an array that Calrin had managed to purchase after a lot of trouble. It didn't make warriors any stronger, but it turned all attacks inside Life-Attuned. The one-sided slaughter quickly turned around, and two-thirds of the ghosts were cut down in rapid succession before the rest managed to slink

away. Alea could breathe out in relief when she saw that the Ishiate tinkers were fine and ready to go.

“Now,” she nodded at the ranger, who immediately got down on his knee. The inscribed cross-bolt was released with a powerful twang that caused a small shockwave as the projectile soared toward the Undead army.

An azure shield sprung up in front of the army, and the bolt got stuck as it started to release a tremendous amount of lightning that tried to rip open the barrier. However, the defensive array was empowered by not one but two Unholy beacons, and the extremely expensive bolt was only able to cause some hairline cracks that let a few errant lightning bolts inside.

Ilvere let out a resounding roar as he pushed the chain forward with enough power to make his whole body shake with strain. The large wrecking ball that had been accumulating a terrifying momentum immediately changed course and soared toward the undead army, its chain magically elongating as it sped forward.

The huge ball was thrown with such force that a few explosions took place in the air as it broke the sound barrier, until it slammed straight into the lodged cross-bolt with pinpoint accuracy. It was like a hammerhead hitting a nail, and the bolt pushed straight through the array, unleashing a final burst of lightning inside, causing chaos even among the elite soldiers.

Most importantly the attack managed to crack the array, exposing the whole army beneath. A couple of deep thumps erupted from behind, sounding like primordial drums of war. It was the Ishiate tinkers who shot their extremely unstable payload at the exposed army with the help of their comically large cannons. The large projectiles soared above Alea’s head like four miniature suns, a mix of splendor and terror waiting to erupt.

The undead warriors clearly understood the threat of the incoming bombs, and a storm of attacks rose from their camp to intercept. But the insane Ishiate hadn’t been lazing about the

past months, and thick green shields sprung up around the projectiles, blocking out the attacks lucky enough to hit. They had managed to incorporate a few defensive treasures into each of the bombs, effectively creating a defensive coating that would allow them to reach their target.

The power of the undead army wasn't anything to scoff at though, and they soon managed to destroy one of the bombs. Its explosion created an enormous fireball up in the air that threw Alea and her party into the ground, and it also dispersed Janos' illusions in an instant.

A second detonation followed soon after to submerge the heavens in an even greater conflagration, making it seem like the end of days were approaching. A third explosion followed after a brief pause, but Alea breathed out in relief to see that it detonated just above the undead army.

The shockwave slammed all the warriors apart from the mighty corpse golems into the ground, immediately stopping the persistent attacks toward the air. Better yet, hidden defensive arrays around the two unholy beacons flashed into being before they got destroyed just as quickly, leaving the towers defenseless.

It allowed the final bomb to sail into the enemy camp and explode just in front of one of the beacons. It looked like a sun erupted, swallowing a third of the army. A second detonation followed soon after, causing an azure wind blade to rip through the firestorm and cause even more mayhem in the undead ranks.

It was the Unholy Beacon getting destroyed by the bomb. The second beacon still stood, but the results were still above Alea's expectations. Those crazy beastmen had made the detonations far stronger than they let on. The hair on her head stood at end when she remembered that those lunatics had repeatedly taken the bombs out to fiddle with the runes, even while running along with the army.

She looked back at their camp with incredulity, seeing the group dance around their cannons in glee, some of them sporting obvious burn marks.

“One fight at the time,” Ilvere laughed as he spat a bit of dirt out of his mouth. “Hopefully we won’t need to enlist their help again. I’m sure your boyfriend is on his way.”

Alea rolled her eyes in exasperation, but a sense of sweetness welled up in her heart. It was true, Lord Atwood was surely on his way by now.

“Just shut up and help me destroy this army.”

Chapter 348: Man Versus Machine

“Defend!” one of the Technocrat warriors screamed, and battle drones pushed forward to block the rapidly closing hole in the shield.

“I’ll go right,” Ogras said from behind before swirling forward in his shadows and effortlessly passed the machines.

Zac grunted and pushed forward as well, though missing the demon’s grace. He stomped forward like an angry bull, tanking a few beams the drones launched at him as he squeezed through the regenerating shield.

The main weapons of the landbound war machines were energy beams just like the drones, though they were able to rapidly attack in exchange for a far weaker power. Getting hit left smarting scorch marks on Zac’s body, but it would take a whole lot of attacks of that caliber to take him down.

A black storm heralded his arrival as Zac unleashed [**Winds of Decay**] the moment he got through the shield. The corrosive cloud did not only cloud the enemies’ vision, but pained screams echoed in the vicinity as some of the warriors fell down in anguish. It was the Technocrats who did not possess any corrosive protection, and Zac felt streams of energy starting to enter him in just a few seconds.

“Stand down! We work for Firmament’s Edge. If the two of you don’t back down this instant we’ll be forced to report your actions to our superiors,” a shout came from the distance, and Zac looked through the haze to see the Technocrat leader staring at him.

“The Undead Empire goes where it pleases,” Zac shouted back. “You heretics of the Boundless Path can never live under the same sky as us.”

Zac didn't know if his words would ever reach Firmament's Edge, but he felt it was prudent to throw the blame on the Undead rather than the people of Earth just in case. As for the Boundless path, he had no idea what that actually was. But if that was what the System called the Technocrats, then it could only be accurate.

Zac asked Ogras during their earlier approach, but the demon wasn't sure either. Perhaps Heaven's Path and the Boundless Path were things that ants like them weren't qualified to know about just yet. Of course, that was why Zac used those words rather than calling the Technocrats invaders or something similar. He wanted to act as a Draugr elite to sow some confusion.

The technocrat kept shouting for Zac to stand down, but he didn't personally take action just yet. Zac chose to ignore him after the initial exchange, instead using his mouth to keep drowning the area in corrosive clouds.

Unfortunately quite a few of the Technocrats seemed to possess some sort of defensive gear that created a personal barrier that kept the mist at bay, and the clouds were kept at arm's length. Almost all the machines were fine as well, with their durable hulls completely sealed to protect the more vulnerable innards.

The skill was just a means for Zac to cause some chaos though, and he was surprised that it managed to melt a few of the machines at all. He instead relied on his axe to cut down anything in his path. Neither the Technocrats nor the machines could last more than a hit or two, allowing him to gain a steady stream of miasma through **[Fields of Despair]**.

Zac's rampage started to put the fear of God into the Technocrats, and no one seemed willing to get within melee range any longer. The humanoids donning the exoskeletons could only stand to the side and spectate Zac and Ogras dismantling their mechanized military.

The machines were going completely berserk though, and tens of them rushed forward to heedlessly throw themselves at Zac. He didn't mind at all and crushed all the machines as they

came. But he only had time to deal with half of the frenzied assault when his mind screamed of danger.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately entered his turtle-stance by jumping down on the ground with **[Immutable Bulwark]** forming a protective layer above him. The next moment his whole vision turned white as something bombarded him from above, turning all the nearby machines into shrapnel in its effort to take Zac down as well.

Luckily it only cost him some miasma and caused some ringing in his ears since he reacted in time. Zac immediately jumped up to his feet and ran through the inferno to see one of the two large robots standing in the distance, streams of smoke rising from its back. Zac couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that the mecha had launched some sort of sneak attack while he was occupied with the smaller war machines.

The ground cracked under Zac's feet as he started to rush forward, his bulwark once again paving the way by mowing down everything in his path as he targeted the huge robot. It seemed to have anticipated Zac's approach, as it calmly raised one of its arms toward him. Its forearm started to transform with a clinking sound, rapidly turning into dozens of pipes aimed in Zac's direction.

Zac frowned when he saw the sight, and another gust of black mist covered Zac and his surroundings as he unleashed some more corrosive clouds. The moment he was covered he slightly changed his approach, wanting to flank the robot instead of rushing head-on.

The robot didn't seem to care in the slightest, and the concentric circles of barrels steadily started to light up, each one of them shuddering with power. The air twisted around the arm of the robot until an enormous shockwave blew Zac's **[Winds of Decay]** far away, cleanly exposing his position. A second shockwave erupted as tens of glowing lights were launched toward Zac.

They looked extremely familiar to the attacks that the Battleroach King had utilized with the help of its arrays, making Zac wonder if one was influenced by the other. The

Technocrat had mentioned that he had infused the beast with certain capabilities after all. Perhaps those were based on this robot. However, there was one clear difference apart from the fact that the incoming lights were black instead of green.

They looked like miniature black holes as the air around them twisted and distorted beyond recognition, warning Zac of the terrifying power they contained as they rushed toward him in parabolic arcs. Zac desperately tried to dodge the ballistics, but they possessed the same type of homing capabilities as the battleroach king.

Zac felt there was no option except to once again hunkering down to withstand the assaults. The projectiles were approaching him from all directions by this point and he saw no other way to block them all. He rolled forward and placed both his shield and bulwark above him to endure the blasts. The large mecha immediately pointed its other arm toward him and shot a beam at him from an attached gun.

Luckily it wasn't the same weapon as the huge barrel that had fired at him while he was launched into the air. That barrel was over five times wider and was mounted instead of a real hand at the end of his arm. The weapon the mecha used now was instead the same type as the ones that the flying drones from earlier used.

Such a beam wouldn't be able to break through his turtle defense, so Zac didn't worry too much about it. But before he knew what was happening he was suddenly flailing about almost ten meters in the air as the black holes closed in on him. The beam hadn't been aimed at his shield to crack open his defense, it was rather shot in front of him.

The blast had launched him up in the air, circumventing his defense against the other attacks. Zac saw no option to infuse his whole body with the Seed of Hardness as he tried to cover as much of his body as possible with **[Immutable Bulwark]** and his shield. But he could only block some of the strikes and a burning pain erupted in his back as one of the black holes slammed into him, causing a deep wound dripping ichor. His Miasma was rapidly depleted as well from the tens of balls hitting his bulwark.

The large tower shield wasn't faring much better, as parts of it got bent and twisted when blocking the attack. The shield still hadn't completely recovered from the bout with the battleroach king, and this put it dangerously close to falling apart completely. Anger burned in Zac's chest from the pain of the multiple impacts, and he roared as he rushed the final stretch.

A huge metallic foot ripped through the air toward Zac as the mecha tried to kill him with a kick. But whatever was controlling the robot had underestimated Zac's strength as he met the kick head-on. The kick slammed into him and pushed him backward, but Zac pushed back with all the power in his body as he imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness.

His fingers dug into the thick plating as he stopped the kick with his superhuman strength. However, Zac wasn't done there. His muscles strained as **[Unholy Strike]** was used to its limit, and Zac was actually starting to drag the huge machine. It tried to fight back, but Zac was relentless. His mind was telling Zac to fling the machine into the horizon, or slam it into the ground like an enraged caveman.

But, unfortunately, reality wouldn't comply with his rage, and he only managed to topple it. The thing was extremely heavy, and even with his Strength he wasn't able to toss it around like a ragdoll. But at least it was down on the ground, and Zac pounced on it like a rabid beast before it could get back on its feet.

All its limbs were equipped with various weapons, such as battle knives and ranged weaponry. But that arsenal was of no use against Zac who had managed to climb up on its chest with his axe ready to cause some real damage. But a flash of greed suddenly overcame his rage, and he peered down at the machine with interest.

He slammed his hand down on the mecha as he infused his Cosmos Sack with energy, but he growled in annoyance when nothing happened. He had wanted to both neutralize the threat and make some money by stealing the whole thing. But if he couldn't take it then it didn't need to continue existing. A

storm of corrosion blew around him as Zac started to hammer down on the chest plate of the machine.

A blue shield managed to block the first round of attacks, but Zac wouldn't give up. Even when he started getting shot by some Technocrats down on the ground he wouldn't relent, and shockwave after shockwave exploded from the top of the robot until the shield broke and Verun's Bite bit into the robot. There was actually a cockpit inside, and a small green alien peered up at Zac with horror when he finally managed to rip apart the chest plate.

A beam flashed as Zac peered down into the cockpit, but he managed to dodge the blast from the pilot's rifle at the last moment with the help of his Luck. Zac growled in anger as he reached into the cockpit and grabbed the alien by the neck. A nasty crack echoed out from the robot as Zac got a huge stream of energy. It looked like killing the pilot also counted as killing the robot itself.

Zac was about to start demolishing the mecha in his towering rage, but he suddenly froze as he tried to put the robot in his Cosmos Sack again. This time it worked without issue, and he fell into the ground with a thump. He took a gander at the state of the battle, and he felt everything was mostly under control.

Most of the battle droids were destroyed by his and Ogras' efforts, and quite a few of the actual technocrats were dead or dying as well. The demon was currently whittling down the second robot, and he had managed to tear off one of its arms somehow. Ogras had activated his ultimate state, and he was currently in the skies circling the landbound mecha. His large wings kept him out of harm's way as he struck the robot over and over with lightning speed.

The foreman and his four bodyguards were still on the battlefield, but they still hadn't done anything. He already knew from questioning the Technocrat earlier that the four cultivators were there to serve as bodyguards for Syvas, the leader of the Incursion. Whether the rest of the Technocrats lived or died didn't matter in the slightest to them as they were just hired hands.

There was no way they would involve themselves in the battle unless they got paid extra or if Zac attacked Syvas himself. But it didn't look like the Technocrat boss had any interest in joining the battle. In fact, the group of 5 seemed to be inching toward the Nexus Hub behind them.

Zac had no intention of letting the leader go, and it looked like it was time to go all-out. But before he assaulted the five E-Grade warriors he needed to make sure his back was protected from the remnants of the Technocrat army.

“It's time buddy,” Zac said as the huge form of Verun appeared with an earthshattering roar.

Chapter 349: The Final Five

The crimson fractal on **[Verun's Bite]** had long been recharged, and he didn't want his battle with the E-Grade powerhouses to be interrupted by the remaining forces. Verun understood his thoughts and immediately stormed into the thick of it, its oversized maw snatching up Technocrats and drones alike.

If the Technocrats equipment could be seen as a counter to Zac, with his inability to activate **[Deathwish]** against attacks that relied on technology, then the opposite could be said for Verun. Some of the drones tried to fire at the large beast, but its intangible form was the perfect counter to the laser beams as they harmlessly passed right through it.

Zac had already guessed that the Tool Spirit was a bit like the ghosts of the Undead Empire. Normal attacks didn't work, and they needed to be empowered by the Dao to be able to reach him. Perhaps only the cultivators would be able to harm it at all, which gave it free rein on the battlefield. Miserably screams echoed across the Underworld as the beast reveled in its uninhibited carnage.

Satisfied that his back was protected by Verun, Zac could finally target the leaders of the Incursion without worries. He stomped into the ground with tremendous force, and the next second he appeared right in front of the Technocrat with one of the spatial crystals in hand. He immediately threw it at the Nexus Hub in the distance, hoping to seal any communication or escape while he was occupied.

"Protect me!" the foreman screamed, and four powerful strikes flashed toward him almost as soon as he arrived.

Zac was inundated in a sea of lightning, and even with his tremendous Endurance he felt his consciousness slipping. Luckily the attacks only lasted less than a second, and Zac

immediately slammed his foot into the ground again before they could launch the next attack. The five large towers rose into the air as Zac unleashed another cloud of corrosion in the cage.

The moment the towers appeared the ghastly chains immediately shot out, but this time each chain targeted a different person. Unfortunately, things did not go as smoothly this time. The four cultivators immediately backed away from Zac while they started to fight the chains, launching powerful strikes to rebuff them. The chains acted like snakes, slithering around and trying to pass their defenses, but the cultivators kept them at bay as they looked for means of breaking out.

The technocrat wasn't as lucky though. He had a personal shield that stopped the chain a few times, but after a few slams the chain managed to create a large enough crack to pass through. The technocrat tried to clumsily defend himself with his expensive-looking exoskeleton, but a wide swing left his whole side open for the chain to sneak up and wrap around his neck.

Zac couldn't believe how weak the man was. It looked like he had never been on a battlefield before, just asking for death by being here. Perhaps he was just a businessman or an owner of the company that had taken the mission to scan Earth, and never even planned to enter a battle.

The brief pause allowed him to scan the five with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. The foreman was actually only level 76, not having improved the slightest since breaking through. The four cultivators were a bit better though, ranging between level 83 and 86. But Zac still didn't feel there was any need for alarm since he had fought far stronger enemies until now.

"Help me you buffoons!" the Technocrat screamed to finally regain the attention of his guards.

"Transform!" one of the guards screamed as he unleashed in an enormous discharge of lightning that pushed the special chain far away.

The next moment the sky above the cage darkened as thick clouds formed in an instant. It was the first time Zac had seen

any clouds in the Underworld, and it was obvious that they were created by the four guards. They were almost as dark as the mist Zac created with **[Winds of Corruption]**, but they were teeming with wild energies as it continuously lit up by lightning bolts.

Zac guessed the four bodyguards came from the same Sect or Clan since they all possessed lightning-attuned classes. Perhaps the foreman had hired them since they would be efficient in protecting him from other Technocrats and their machines.

Of course, lightning attacks were just as effective against humans as well, and Zac's eyes darted between the bodyguards and the foreman, unsure of who to deal with first. But the decision was made for him as the four powerhouses simultaneously charged him. Zac got ready to defend, the world turned white for a second as four massive lightning bolts slammed into the cage.

However, the lightning did not target Zac, but rather the four guards. It slammed into all of them simultaneously, completely hiding them inside the blinding light. Of course, Zac knew they weren't about to kill themselves, so he wasn't surprised when they emerged unscathed. The lightning had helped them transform into another shape.

Crackling white armor covered their bodies, and they all held weapons that seemed to be wrought out of frozen lightning bolts. Two of them were holding spears whereas the other two held broadswords. They had even gained wings made from electricity, making them look like gods of thunder.

Their looks weren't the only thing that changed with the lightning strikes. Their speed almost doubled as they zoomed toward Zac like four streaks of lightning. He barely had time to prepare his defenses before they were upon him, all stabbing toward his vital spots.

Zac blocked two of the strikes with the help of **[Immutable Bulwark]**, one with his shield while he met the final strike with **[Verun's Bite]**. Two ghosts immediately appeared behind the two who stabbed his bulwark, while a crack resounded as

the sword wielder who Zac met head-on broke one of his arms in the clash between weapons.

The two ghosts only managed to cause minor wounds, but the surprise strike was enough to distract one of them enough for the chasing chains to lock around his throat. Zac felt a shock run through his body from the massive amounts of electricity the four warriors released, but he forced himself forward to follow up on his strike.

The sword wielder with the broken arm tried to create some distance between them, but he was attacked by the relentless chain when he tried to flee, forcing him to stop in his tracks. Zac wasn't about to give up on the opportunity, so he slammed the shield into the ground, causing a wave of spikes to push the final bodyguard away as he pursued the wounded one.

A shield erupted around the guard as Zac's axe swung down with ferocious force, defending against the strike. But Zac only refocused his efforts and **[Verun's Bite]** once again fell down with finality. Zac suddenly felt a blazing pain in his side as a lightning spear tore into his body, and a jolt of electricity caused such a shock to his system that he accidentally dropped his weapon.

His muscles spasmed and flinched, but Zac forced himself to throw his body onto the guard who had narrowly escaped being bisected by the swing of his axe. Tens of lightning bolts hit him as he gripped the horrified cultivator, but Zac refused to let go. A fountain of blood rose to the skies when Zac managed to forcibly rip the warrior in two, ignoring the lightning armor completely.

Steam rose from his body, and Zac felt as though he was half-roasted from the barrage of lightning bolts. The constant shocks also aggravated the multiple wounds he had accumulated in the earlier fight, and he felt his steps starting to become unsteady. Every part of his body hurt, but he refused to stop.

He still had some fuel in the tank, even though his expenditure up til now had been massive. It was partly due to the stream of Miasma he was receiving from the spectral chains that had

started to absorb the life force of their captives. Since one of the warriors had died the final chain rushed toward the Technocrat on Zac's command.

The Technocrat leader was unleashing a barrage of attacks on the chain around his neck with a power that belied his earlier embarrassing display. It was the exoskeleton that was showing its worth, even though it could only turn a turd into a more powerful turd. Cracks were already starting to show on the chain, and Zac was afraid he would be freed soon enough unless he was bound tighter.

The sky suddenly rumbled as the area was drowned in a thunderstorm as the clouds started unleashing bolt after bolt in the area. The five towers got the worst of it as they essentially acted as lightning rods. As Zac looked at the chaos he realized that the remaining time was limited, so he forced his exhausted body to exert even more power.

Two unfettered bodyguards remained, one of which had a light wound from [**Deathwish**]. Zac targeted the wounded one first and immediately pounced on him. The guard wanted to keep some distance as he launched a storm of lightning at Zac, but his movements were restricted due to the harassment of the ghastly chain assigned to him.

Zac forcibly ate a couple of strikes as he kept the other guard at bay with [**Immutable Bulwark**]. He finally managed to get close to him, his axe already on its trajectory of death. The cultivator looked unreconciled and glared at Zac with hatred.

"Die!" he roared as his whole body started crackling with berserk powers.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm and he activated both the defensive rings on his hands, causing two barriers to appear around him. The next moment he was blasted into the air once again from a thunderous explosion. The guard had chosen to self-destruct in an effort to bring Zac down with him, but his layered defenses were enough to take the brunt of the strike.

The good news was that the desperate strike didn't only affect Zac. Even the other guard who was trying to flank him was swallowed in the explosion, scorching half of his body and

throwing him up in the air as well. The chain acted quickly and captured him as well, which meant that everyone inside the cage was finally captured.

However, one of the fractals atop the five towers started showing cracks from the barrage of lightning strikes coming from the sky, and a few Technocrats had managed to sneak away from Verun's frenzied carnage to try to break out their leader. Zac's vision was turning blurry from the constant shocks, but he forced himself to run over toward the remaining guards.

The first one was screaming on top of his lungs, already looking a bit shrunken from the incessant drain of life force the chain subjected him to. It didn't look like he had any means of resisting it, in contrast to the Technocrat who still seemed full of energy as he tried to free himself from his fetters. Zac wasted no time and cut off the guard's head in one swift motion. There was no resistance as the guard was completely consumed by the pain and completely oblivious to the surroundings.

The final guard put up a feeble fight, but he was all alone against an enraged Zac, so he was quickly cut into pieces as well. Only the Technocrat leader remained, and he was currently bound by three chains, as he had managed to destroy two others while Zac fought the guards. Luckily new chains replaced those that the Technocrat destroyed, keeping him in bondage during the whole fight.

"You can't kill me! Firmament's Edge won't tolerate it!" the Technocrat wheezed as he saw Zac approach with murder in his eyes. "Not even the Undead Empire or the Demon Legions are safe from their wrath."

"That's not my problem," Zac growled as he lifted his axe.

A wet thud could be heard as the axe almost cleaved the Technocrat in two, but Zac frowned when he got no energy to confirm the kill. The Technocrat was somehow clinging to life, staring straight into Zac's eyes with hatred and what looked like glee.

“I... Warned... You,” the Technocrat wheezed with a sneer as blood poured out of his mouth.

The next moment a terrifying change took place in the technocrat’s body started to twist and deform as he grew with shocking speed.

Chapter 350: Despair

In just the blink of an eye the diminutive leader turned into a huge monstrosity reaching over 3 meters, whose bulging muscles would put even Billy's constitution to shame. Even the large wound from **[Verun's Bite]** was gone, the axe pushed out of its body as the wound closed in an instant. Even the expensive-looking exoskeleton had been discarded as it was bent into scrap metal from the alien's expansion.

Odder yet he had turned into an amalgamation of metal and flesh as parts of him had turned into that of a robot. Zac didn't understand how, but the dying Technocrat had turned into a cyborg teeming with immense power. Even Zac felt threatened from just standing in front of the hulking figure, something he hadn't felt for a long time. Something told Zac that this wasn't some ultimate technique by the Technocrat himself, as his face tilted listlessly to the side and his eyes were empty.

The foreman had warned him about reprisal, but Zac didn't expect it to be so direct. He felt the situation was turning bad, and he immediately unleashed a round of attacks on it, holding nothing back. But metallic clangs and deep thuds were all that could be heard when the axehead hit the Technocrat's muscled torso, only leaving scuff marks behind. Zac couldn't believe it was so durable that he wasn't even able to leave a shallow wound.

He didn't give up though and unleashed one ferocious strike after another across the brute's body in hopes of finding a weak spot. But danger suddenly screamed in Zac's head as a fist as large as a wrecking ball slammed into him with such speed that he didn't have time to even blink.

The power of the punch was enough to shatter all the spectral chains still binding the Technocrat in an instant, and Zac was launched into the air with such speed that it looked like he was

teleported away. The enormous shockwave swept all the corrosive mists in the area away as well, exposing the decomposing corpses of the cultivators on the ground.

It felt like his whole body was broken, and it only got worse when he slammed into one of the towers from **[Profane Seal]** with enough power to cause a large crack running along its whole length. Black ichor ran down his mouth as Zac desperately crawled back to his feet only to see the monstrosity treating his entrapment as a joke.

Alarm bells were going off in Zac's mind, and every fiber of his being was telling him that this was not something he could contend with. He frantically tried to figure out what to do next, but the cyborg wasn't waiting for Zac to come up with a strategy. A huge shockwave exploded out from where it stood as the cyborg disappeared from sight, only to appear right in front of Zac once again.

This time Zac was somewhat ready and he barely managed to duck out of the way from another world-ending fist that instead tore the miasmatic tower apart. It almost looked like the extremely sturdy structure was made out of styrofoam as it shattered and dissipated into churning mists of Miasma.

The destruction of the tower was the straw that broke the camel's back, and **[Profane Seal]** started to crumble. All the chains were already broken which had damaged the other towers as well, and with one tower utterly destroyed the shield was already down for the count.

Luckily the fight outside had mostly ebbed out as well, with Ogras dismantling the last remnants of the Technocrat army. The demon seemed to be in good vigor, though his clothes were completely burned and the side of his face was covered in a large scorch mark. Verun was nowhere to be seen though, but that quickly changed as the large beast appeared out of nowhere and chomped down on the towering cyborg.

Verun didn't have much better luck than Zac did though despite its furious attempts to rip his master's enemy to shreds. The Tool Spirit's large fangs couldn't even break its skin. The cyborg only stoically stood there acting like it couldn't feel a

thing until it slammed its hand in a ferocious overhand slap that hit Verun's head.

The Tool spirit Yelped in pain and was forced to let go, at which point the cyborg unleashed yet another of its terrifying punches. Verun was utterly helpless as it turned into motes of light that fled into Zac's axe. Thankfully Zac could still sense the Tool Spirit in his axe, though it immediately entered hibernation after getting destroyed.

If Zac's heart had been beating in his current form it would have been hammering away at this moment as he gazed upon the Cyborg. Something unfathomable was happening with it. It was as though the monster had gained over 20 levels in just a few seconds, and its towering aura had more than doubled since it attacked Zac the first time.

Futility threatened to consume him as Zac scrambled for any idea of getting out of this mess. The cyborg didn't seem to possess any skills or Dao Seeds, but it also didn't need it due to its ungodly power. It was like a supercharged version of Zac himself, a true testament of the horror of superior attributes.

There was a small remnant of the technocrats sticking close to the Nexus Hub. They had likely tried to escape Earth but was blocked due to Zac's interference. But the group seemed emboldened from the turnaround in the battle and they rushed toward Zac in an effort to assist their foreman in taking him down. Zac had no time to bother about them, so he could only infuse his body with the Seed of Hardness as he kept his eyes trained on the true threat.

Another apocalyptic punch soared toward Zac who desperately activated [**Immutable Bulwark**]. An earthshattering explosion echoed out across the area when the fist connected, and Zac realized the power was well beyond that of the first strike. He wasn't sure he would still be in fighting condition if the first fist contained this amount of force. Even the extremely hard stonebed cracked all around them from the attack, a testament to its immense power.

The unlucky Technocrats who had wanted to fish in muddy waters were rendered into meat paste just from the shockwave.

They died without knowing what happened, likely thinking that the foreman was still on their side. But Zac knew that this thing had no such alliances. The former foreman had turned into an emotionless tool of slaughter upon his death.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the punch caused massive cracks across the bulwark. Neither Salvation's self-detonation nor the laser beams of the two enormous mechas had been enough to cause a crack in his defensive wall, but one simple punch from this thing was all it took. But just as Zac despaired a huge form materialized and punched into the chest of the cyborg.

It was [**Deathwish**] that activated, and the force was tremendous even though it only contained a part of the original strength of the attack. This became especially true after Zac managed to imbue the spectral projection with the Dao of Heaviness with some quick reflexes. The Cyborg was launched into the air, flying tens of meters away before slamming into the ground with a large bang.

"What the hell is that thing?" a shocked voice asked from the side.

Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there, staring at the cyborg with horror in his eyes.

"A cyborg, a mix of man and machine," Zac sighed. "The foreman turned into this thing just as I was about to kill him."

"Mix of man and machine? That's Impossible," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "The heavens won't allow such a thing."

Of course, it was hard to refute the evidence as it stood up again as if nothing had happened. Its chest was completely fine, with not a single blemish from the retaliatory strike. The air around it was crackling and twisting from just standing still, and it looked as though it had once again powered up.

"I can't harm it, and I can't defend against it, and it keeps getting stronger," Zac sighed. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Throw things at it," Ogras said, immediately taking out a handful of offensive arrays.

Hope reignited in Zac's heart as he took out all his offensive treasures as well.

The next moment the Underworld lit up in a cacophony of chaotic energies as over ten powerful offensive arrays exploded at the same time. Everything from fires burning so hot it the flames were white to poisonous mists and crackling lightning caused a both beautiful and terrifying display as the cyborg was submerged in a conflagration of their most powerful arrays.

Zac even went so far as to throw out his one and only **[Void Ball]**, his ultimate tool of destruction. The ball plunged the whole area into spatial chaos far worse than what he had seen over by the entrance to the Mystic Realm. That time he was even thrown inside while fighting the tiger, but he managed to get navigate his way out in one piece.

This time the zone was jam-packed with spatial tears, some as large as two-three meters. Some of the largest tears even combined to form large sections of void space, looking like windows into outer space. Those were even more terrifying than the tears, as one could actually fall into such a thing. What waited on the other side depended on one's luck, but it was most likely a horrible death.

Zac didn't think he could throw a stone through the area unscathed, let alone passing through it. But the hulking form of the cyborg seemed completely unbothered as it stood inside the blast zone, only a few scorch-marks and slightly melted metal the proof that he had been inside radius of the attacks at all. Even the spatial tears were crushed against its body, though they did leave somewhat deep cuts. But the wounds didn't bleed at all, and it didn't look like the cyborg even noticed them.

Zac and Ogras only looked at it with dismay, unsure of what to do next. Its enormous fist suddenly slammed into the ground with impossible speed, causing a huge shockwave to erupt. It looked like an atomic bomb had erupted beneath the ground they stood on, causing crushed stones to blast upward in a circle of hundreds of meters.

Zac and Ogras stood over a hundred meters away from the center of the impact, but they were still pushed back another hundred meters, barely able to keep their footing. The demon also suffered multiple cuts from errant pieces of stone hitting him with the speed of bullets. The remaining power of the offensive arrays were blown away in an instant as well, with only a few spatial tears remaining.

“Is it D-Grade?” Ogas screamed in alarm. “We need to flee!”

Zac had to agree with Ogras’ assessment. This thing was just too powerful. Zac could barely cause a few cracks in the extremely hard rocks around them, but this monster could suddenly cause widespread damage with a simple punch, something Zac wouldn’t even be able to replicate on the surface. There was no way that the Cyborg had less than 2-3000 Strength by now judging from that slam alone.

The two immediately started to run away, but the monster was just too fast. One moment it was still standing in the distance, but in the next it was right next to Ogras, shrouding the demon in darkness. Its fist ripped through the air at the demon, foretelling of impending doom. Ogras roared as torrential amounts of shadows erupted from beneath him, completely submerging the cyborg in darkness.

The cyborg froze and shuddered in response, which caused the shadows to get ripped into pieces and Ogras to cough out blood from the blowback. But the brief pause allowed Zac to once again summon [**Immutable Bulwark**] and place it and himself in front of the demon for a final stand.

But the cyborg had grown too powerful in this short time, and the bulwark only managed to absorb some of the force before cracking like brittle glass. Zac only had time to erect all his other defensive treasures before the herculean fist rammed into his shield, causing both Zac and Ogras to sail hundreds of meters away until they slammed into a wall with a resounding crash.

Zac almost blacked out from the pain as black ichor flowed like a waterfall from his mouth and nose. At least thirty bones in his body were broken, and the demon seemed to be even

worse off when the two crashed into the ground. His shield was completely destroyed as well, well beyond salvaging. Zac desperately tried to get back on his feet to meet the oncoming enemy, but he barely managed to get up to a sitting position.

He was almost all out of Miasma in any case, and using any skill was off the table. He would likely turn to his human form in minutes unless he managed to restock on energy. He briefly considered trying to transform to his human class, but he knew that it was a fool's dream.

There was no way to finish the transformation as the cyborg had already appeared right in front of them with the help of its tremendous speed, a series of crashes in the ground exploding behind it. Its hollow eyes stared down at them without a shred of emotion, which in a sense was even scarier than a glare full of hatred.

The transformation skill required ten seconds to finish, but those seconds were the difference between life and death. Besides, Zac knew that there was no way he could harm the thing, even if he unleashed his most powerful moves from his Hatchetman Class. The monstrosity wasn't even hampered by the spatial tears, and those were far more dangerous than his skills.

"I'm sorry," Zac sighed as he shot a look the demon who helplessly lay in a heap next to him. "This is all my fault."

"This is the life of the cultivator," Ogras wryly smiled with a blood-filled mouth. "The road has to end sometime. Shame I never got to finish my movie."

Zac's snorted before his thoughts wistfully went to his sister as he closed his eyes, ready to meet his maker.

Chapter 351: Out of Control

The enormous fist of the three-meter humanoid slammed down with tremendous force, aiming to finally end everything. But just as it was about to reach its target the air shuddered, and the arm was cleanly cut off. The ground shook slightly as the arm that seemed to weigh over a hundred kilos fell, but not a drop of blood escaped from the huge wound.

Of course, the Corpse Golem didn't even flinch from losing an appendage and immediately tried to attack Thea with its remaining arm. But **[Petalstorm]** had already returned to her side after saving the lives of one of the squads that had veered too deep, and the towering humanoid was bisected into ten pieces in short order.

Not that Thea wasn't able to take out the undead in other ways. But using skills instead of her weapon would cost her more Cosmic Energy, a resource that had turned into the most precious treasure the past days. She shook her head and activated **[Gale Step]**, disappearing from the area as she rode turbulent winds of the battlefield.

Since she managed to gain insight into the Seed of Lightness to support her other seeds her speed had gained a huge upgrade. Combining the Seed of Gust with the Seed of Lightness for her movement skill turned her into a mirage, flittering across the battlefield with almost impossible speed.

She couldn't be bogged down in this seemingly unending war of attrition, she had her goals to accomplish. Normally she wouldn't have stopped for one of those macabre constructs, but she destroyed it by convenience since it was guarding one of her targets.

Thea had already spotted her next prey, a zombie of a young Asian woman who was no taller than 155 centimeters. What set her apart from the rest of the zombies was her enlarged

skull and the thick veins throbbing across her forehead. This one didn't seem to be protected by a guardian, but it rather tried to hide through blending in with the rest of the zombies for safety.

But Thea had become an expert at spotting the zombie captains over the past weeks, and she flashed over, completely ignoring all the Zombies beneath. She still got a constant stream of cosmic energy though, as her invisible weapon mowed straight through the undead horde as it accompanied her in her hunt.

While Thea was extremely hard to spot due to her speed she hadn't activated [**Skysroud**] to turn herself almost completely invisible. The shroud cost too much to be worth it since it also added a defensive barrier. The normal zombies didn't even notice her presence as it was, but the large-headed zombie immediately spotted her and released a shriek that made the air shudder.

"Another mid-tier," Thea muttered with a small smile as an amulet around her neck lit up to block out most of the mental attack contained in the scream.

Between her amulet and [**Calm Seas**] the attack that would have turned most cultivators' brains into mush was effortlessly deflected, not even able to delay Thea a second. She was right in front of the control zombie just a second later, and Cosmic Energy entered the fractal on the top of her hand as she activated [**Windblade**].

It was just a basic skill that she got inside the Tutorial, but it had been raised to peak mastery recently, giving it a substantial boost in its efficiency. With the addition of the Seed of Sharpness and Seed of Lightness it turned into a large scythe of death that swept across the area for a very small amount of Cosmic Energy.

Cosmic Energy surged into her body as the blade killed over a hundred elite zombies before they managed to exhaust its energies, but Thea frowned when she saw that the control zombie exploded into a mess of flesh and viscera before the blade even struck her. Thea quickly looked in all directions,

and thankfully spotted an engorged zombie slowly walking away in the distance.

The large zombie looked as though he had a huge tumor on his stomach, and he was shaking as he shuffled toward the core of the sea of zombies. Thea only snorted and **[Petalstorm]** shot out with blazing speed, blasting a large hole through its torso. Rotten innards spilled out from the zombie as it fell over, but that was not all that fell out.

The maimed body of the control zombie fell out of the stomach of the zombie as well, and it was already dead from the pass-through of the invisible Spirit Tool. Thea had already seen this type of macabre escape tactic before, where the zombie leader somehow transported into the body of a larger undead like a parasite, and ordered their hosts to flee from the battle.

The moment that the control zombie was killed by the strike chaos took hold of the whole sector of the zombie army around her. The tens of thousands of Zombies that were once under the large-headed zombie's control immediately splintered off from the horde, veering straight for the army that radiated with life-force in the distance.

Thea wasn't worried though, as that was all according to plan. The zombies would be dead even before they reached the defensive line.

Since Thea still had quite a bit of energy remaining she stayed in the sea of zombies for another twenty minutes, allowing her to kill a handful of more control zombies and thousands of the normal undead before she started to make her way back toward her camp with plenty energy to spare. Staying any longer might draw the ire of that terrifying being in the center of the horde again.

She had barely made it out with her life in once piece the last time the Corpse Lord tried to kill her, and she wasn't ready to contend against it just yet. The undead general was simply too strong to defeat within the undead horde, which was likely the reason she stayed over there rather than joining the constant

raids. It would require huge sacrifices to bring that woman down, but they hadn't reached that point just yet.

Thea quickly closed in on the million-man-army sending out a handful of [**Windblades**] to cull some dense groups of zombies on the way. Of course, the army didn't actually consist of a million people, but after the forced conscription there were at least 400 000 people that maintained a constant battle against the tide of zombies in this sector.

And this was only one of the five sectors going all out against the zombies, though only the Zhix horde was larger than her army. She didn't love the fact that they were forced to push unwilling people to the front-lines, but the very fate of their planet was at stake.

"Good job. You killed enough controllers to keep us occupied for over an hour," Mark said while handing Thea a water bottle as she entered the command tent.

Controllers were what they called the zombies that kept the enormous sea of braindead zombies in line. Normally they shouldn't have been able to constrain themselves with so many living targets nearby, but they had always kept a semblance of order even when the armies tried everything to trick the undead to splinter from the main horde.

But they finally managed to find some clues, partly with the help of Big Blue, and through chance encounters with the controllers. They finally learned that every single zombie in the horde was controlled by a stronger zombie. However, it didn't seem there was a single undead strong enough to control over a hundred million zombies, so they had created an efficient hierarchy with the help of the mutant zombies with improved mental capabilities.

One low-tier control zombie was able to give simple commands to roughly a thousand normal or elite zombies. It was thanks to them that they didn't simply run off to hunt for something to bite. These low-tiered control zombies were in turn controlled by mid-tier captains, such as the ones that Thea just killed.

One of them could control between ten and fifty low-tier commanders, meaning that one mid-tier zombie could control up to roughly 50 000 zombies depending on their strength. And things followed that pattern with high tier controllers, though Thea had only managed to find and kill one of them. Presumably, some peak controller was keeping the whole army in check, or perhaps it was the Corpse Lord herself holding the reins.

In either case, they soon learned that targeting the mid-tier commanders was the most efficient tactic to destroy the cohesiveness of the zombie horde. Killing a low-tier commander would only let a thousand zombies loose, and that wasn't worth the trouble. Thea could personally kill that number with a couple of windblades.

Killing a high-tier commander wasn't really efficient either, as the mid-tier controllers were usually smart enough to stay put and wait for orders. But when a mid-tier commander was killed their subordinates almost immediately turned to small raiding parties that unhesitatingly rushed the waiting armies of the living in the distance. Only when another commander reined them in fast enough would they stay put within the zombie horde.

"How are things going at the main front?" Thea asked as she took a swig from the canteen.

"It's pretty desperate," Mark said with a grimace. "If those insectoids didn't bolster our numbers we would have been overrun by now. But the constant bombardment is rapidly depleting our cache of old-world weaponry. Over a thousand tanks have been destroyed just over the past day. The undead truly refuses to give up on their chosen path."

"Well, that would ruin the array they're making," Thea nodded. "How long can we keep going?"

"Three days, perhaps four," Mark sighed. "A few days longer if our searches for military bases are successful. But sooner or later the constant barrage of the undead will reach a tipping point where our line breaks and all hell breaks loose."

"Maybe I should head over there?" Thea hesitantly ventured.

Things were rough on their end, where over a thousand people died every hour, but it was nothing compared to the mayhem at the front. Those people were tasked with contesting every step forward the undead took, by any means necessary.

“No point,” Mark said with a shake of his head. “Our work here is helping them as well. This army killed almost three million Zombies yesterday even though our elites are at the main army. We’re stealing their momentum and making sure that the leaders of the horde doesn’t send all their powerhouses to the frontline.”

Thea sighed and nodded with some helplessness. It just felt bad that she stayed here in relative safety while her family members were risking everything to stop the horde in their tracks. But she was the only one who was able to constantly hunt the control zombies to splinter the horde.

“What about the other hordes?” she asked.

“Nothing new,” Mark said. “Port Atwood’s people are still missing. The Sino-Indian Alliance is fighting a losing war, only nipping at the heels of the army. They will not be able to stop the advance of the horde unless something drastically changes.”

“And the movement from the invaders?” Thea asked.

“They are staying clear of us and are focusing on the minor undead hordes. There seems to be an implicit agreement where all the armies avoid each other, targeting only the undead. The zealots are quite terrifying according to our reports, turning every battlefield to hell on earth.”

Thea mulled over the information, though it seemed not much had changed the past hours. Everyone was desperately struggling to stop the Undead Empire, but they were powerful enough to take on the combined powers of all forces without even revealing all their cards. Almost no one would be able to stop them if their leaders joined the fight.

“What about Zac? Any word from him?” Thea asked.

“Nothing. There has been no sighting of him for two weeks. Some believe he is in closed-door cultivation since reaching

level 75, that he's aiming to break through to E-Grade. But our informants believe he has found the Underworld and is busy taking control of its riches," Mark said with some dissatisfaction.

Thea frowned as well, not understanding what Zac was thinking. The idea was for him to quickly close the other incursions before joining the battle against the undead, but he only closed a handful of them before disappearing. He hadn't even gone to help his own people from what they could tell, since he would have to have used their network to get close to the Dead Zone.

She truly hoped he could appear sooner rather than later. Things were turning pretty bleak, and the world needed a hero.

Chapter 352: The Three Paths

The seconds passed but the darkness of true death never arrived, forcing Zac to finally look up to see what was going on. The cyborg still loomed above them like a mountain, completely unmoving. But the terrorizing aura it emitted up till now was gone, making the thing seem like a hollow shell.

“Is it dead? What did you do?” Ogras soon ventured with a weak voice, also realizing something was up.

“I didn’t do anything,” Zac croaked, confusion filling his mind.

He wasn’t sure what to do since he hadn’t received a shred of cosmic energy, something that usually entailed that his enemy was still alive. He was afraid that any sudden action would rekindle the life of the thing, which would end with their death without a doubt. Ogras didn’t have any such compunctions as a blast of shadows hit the cyborg right in its head.

Zac groaned inwardly as he scrambled for anything to use to protect them in case it responded, but the hulking humanoid simply toppled over. It slammed into the ground with a thud that launched Zac a few centimeters up into the air, but that was it. His body was wracked with pain but he still lunged at the humanoid, putting it into one of his Cosmos Sacks.

The demon sighed in relief as he immediately took out a handful of array disks before eating a healing pill. Zac followed suit, and he also took out two E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He still didn’t want to transform into his human form, just in case some scanning device remained in the area. The Nexus Hub would only be blocked for a couple of more minutes, after all.

Normally he would have completed a sweep to look for such a thing, but there was simply no way. His right arm was broken in at least 5 different places, and most of his ribs on the side that tanked the last punch were broken as well. Luckily he didn't need his organs in his current form. Otherwise he would likely have been in a far more critical situation.

Neither of the two spoke for over thirty minutes, both focusing on restoring themselves from their critical states. Thankfully the battle against the other Technocrats was over, and there was no movement at all in the area.

“What the hell is going on?” Zac finally muttered with incredulity, still not believing he had survived that thing.

“Perhaps it ran out of lifeforce? Or perhaps the Heavens wouldn't allow for its continued existence,” Ogras ventured.

“How was that thing even allowed though the Incursion in the first place? High Tech was supposed to be confiscated?” Zac complained, still rattled from being so close to death.

“Heaven's rules have always been negotiable. If the cost outweighs the benefits it will usually back down. The Technocrats might have directly paid for the Ruthless Heaven's to look the other way. Or they might have paid by hiding the seed from Heaven's Eyes. Either way, bringing a thing like this through the Nexus Hub would no doubt bankrupt a clan like Azh'Rezak,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac slowly nodded, suddenly remembering how Greatest was able to keep the System at bay to allow him to have a conversation. Besides, while the Cyborg was closing in on D-Grade power by the end it didn't start out that way. Its first attack could conceivably come from a peak F-grade being if it was using its life-force to empower its strike.

Perhaps the machine or parasite that was put inside the Foreman was just peak F-Grade at the start, but rapidly pushed the host to greater heights by draining its life force or something. It would explain why it only lasted less than a minute before shutting down.

“A hybrid of the Dao of Technology and Cosmic Energy,” Ogras muttered with a raspy voice, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “It’s was not a true fusion, but it’s not too far off. These heretics are something else. Perhaps they can only keep such a thing alive for a few strikes, but it is still a terrifying accomplishment.”

Zac nodded in agreement, but the small movement made him grimace in pain. It was truly a scary thing put inside someone. There likely were no more than 5 people on Earth, including the invaders, who would be able to survive that thing’s onslaught. The two of them would have turned into mush if he didn’t have **[Immutable Bulwark]** and the Seed of Hardness to drain enough of the final strike’s momentum.

“Isn’t this something common among the Technocrats?” Zac asked as he ate another healing pill. “I thought blending technology and cultivation was just their thing.”

By now he started to feel strong enough for a short battle in case it was needed, so he kept his eyes trained on the Nexus Hub. There might be other Technocrats who were waiting for an opportunity to reach the Teleportation Crystal. Some might have been sent away on missions or handling the enormous drill that was digging toward the surface. He needed to defend the Nexus Hub for another 8 hours to make sure that there were no escapees.

The cyborg’s punch had thrown them a few hundred meters away, and they had fallen onto an outcropping that overlooked both the battlefield and the small Technocrat outpost. No one would be able to reach the Hub without them noticing unless they possessed some sort of cloaking technology that could move.

“A true integration of technology and cultivation is impossible since the Dao of Technology is not accepted. The Technocrats always has to work around this inviolable fact, and the way they do this differ. It’s generally known in the multiverse that there are essentially three main paths of the Technocrats,” Ogras explained as finally got up to a sitting position from lying down on the ground like a dead fish.

“The first is the Machine God Faction,” Ogras said. “They go all-in on technology, avoiding the System as much as possible. Some of them might be level 1 but still possess the capability to kill B-Grade hegemons. You can’t consider them mortals though, as their lifespans have been prolonged through technology rather than Race upgrades.”

Zac nodded as that was his original impression of the Technocrats after reading about them.

“The second group are the Technomancers. They use a mix of both systems. They might get a ranger class but use technological guns, like the rifles we took during the Auction. It’s a slightly annoying path since they still would have to exert twice the effort to improve. Their kills with their technological weapons would give no energy or merits,” the demon continued. “But they usually have destructive capabilities that are far stronger than normal cultivators. Just look at the weapons that these things used.”

“The final group are the Transcenders. They use technology to augment themselves, but they fully utilize the class- and cultivation systems of the Ruthless Heavens. But they might swap out their body parts with those of a dragon, or forcibly instill themselves with rare and powerful bloodlines. They are mad scientists using their own bodies as laboratories,” Ogras said.

“How is that possible? Does the System allow such a thing?” Zac asked skeptically. “If it’s possible to become stronger like that, won’t everyone do it?”

“From what I hear that such modifications are in defiance of the Heavens, and it enacts a terrible price that most would say supersedes the gains. I don’t know the details, but such modifications are banned in most Empires. There are unorthodox sects who walk similar paths though, but they work fully within the bounds of the System,” Ogras said hesitantly.

“The goals of the factions are also different. The purists want to destroy the Ruthless Heavens altogether by pushing the Dao

of Technology to the point that they create something even greater than the so-called System; The Machine God,”

“The Technomancer and Transcenders on the other hand partly work somewhat within the rules of heaven, and their goal is to change it rather than destroy it. They want to force the Ruthless Heavens to accept the Dao of Technology through raising an Apostate or forcing the creation of technology-based races,” Ogras explained. “Judging by this ugly thing I’d say this Firmament’s Edge is part of one of the latter factions.”

“Are the Technocrat factions enemies with each other if their goals differ?” Zac asked.

“No idea, but when the whole multiverse is their enemy I would guess that the three factions would stick together. The three factions are something most people in the multiverse know of, but I have no idea about the specifics. This is my first time actually seeing technocrats in the flesh,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“For one they wouldn’t deign to come to my homeworld, and secondly they wouldn’t enter the territory of the Horde unless necessary. The multiverse is filled with old monsters stuck in bottlenecks who are ready to risk their lives for a chance at breaking through.”

Zac nodded in thanks after Ogras explained the situation further. He had pretty much avoided the subject since he learned of his mother’s origins, but he knew that he couldn’t stay ignorant for much longer. That became doubly true when remembering the Abbot’s words. The Mystic Realm was the key to the fate of Earth, and it might be of Technocrat origin.

But all that would have to wait for later, and Zac opened his status screen instead of mulling on the topic any further. The results of the battle were above expectations. He had gained 5 full levels in the short but intense battle, even more than when he fought the extremely powerful Nenotheop who was a far larger threat than the four bodyguards combined. It put Zac at level 70, just a short bit away from the peak of F-Grade.

The four bodyguards gave a good boost, but Zac remembered that the largest source of energy actually came from the

enormous robot earlier. The surge he got when he killed the alien in the cockpit was at least twice that of killing one of the lightning cultivators.

He put the free points into Strength before checking his other gains. Shockingly enough he had upgraded his Dao of Hardness in the heat of battle, though he wasn't sure exactly when. Perhaps it happened when he tried everything in his arsenal to block the final strike of the Cyborg.

Hardness (High): Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.

Zac gained another 25 Endurance and 5 Wisdom from the upgrade, effectively doubling the boost from the Seed of Hardness. He wasn't surprised at all that the seed still almost only gave Endurance since his definition of Hardness was pretty much solely about enduring strikes.

The good news didn't end there, and he noticed that **[Immutable Bulwark]** had evolved as well, pushing it to Middle Mastery. He wanted to check out the differences, but he didn't want to cause any energy fluctuations while they hid within the illusion array. But one thing hadn't gone according to plan. Zac was surprised to see that the quest was still active even though he had got the prompt telling him that he had conquered the area.

"Is your quest active as well?" Zac asked the demon who nodded after a second.

"We might need to wait until the hub is closed. Or perhaps more Technocrats are hiding in the area," Ogras mused, echoing Zac's earlier thoughts.

"Will you be able to heal up in 8 hours?" Zac asked.

"I am afraid not," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "But I'll be able to walk at least. I will need a couple of days to reach prime fighting condition."

Zac grimaced, knowing his situation wasn't much better. But at least they would be able to rest up while looking for the missing army. They would need to travel for over a week since such a large sector was blocked off by the interference.

“I’ll stay here and recuperate until the hub is closed,” Zac said and arduously got up to his feet. “I am not able to scour the area just yet, but perhaps we can catch some people trying to return through the hub. Are you staying or do you want to go back? I could buy the teleporter for you.”

“I’ll go back as soon as the quest is complete,” Ogras said after mulling it over. “My Daos aren’t optimal against the undead, so I’ll have a talk with the dragonling again before we set out.”

“Dragonling?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Smaug, apparently it’s the name of an old dragon on your planet?” Ogras snorted. “Gutsy to name yourself after a primordial species. They’ll rip him into pieces if they find out. But you could buy the teleporter over by the Hub. It might make any late arrival believe that we have left.”

Zac nodded in agreement and got out of the hiding spot to place the teleporter in a conspicuous location before scurrying back. Just that quick walk made him shake with pain, so he hurriedly sat down again with a groan to refocus on healing up.

His state was still quite horrid, but he slowly got better as the hours passed. No one had come or gone while the two waited, and Zac started to worry that any remnant Technocrats had fled the area, making them nigh impossible to find in the short run. But a small movement in the distance the two freeze.

It was one of the inconspicuous scouting drones that were used for keeping watch over the perimeter of the Technocrat Incursion. It had appeared straight out of a solid cave wall on the other side of the settlement, as though it was a ghost.

Chapter 353: Production Lines

Zac immediately realized the same cloaking technology was being used in the settlement as down in the battleroach cave. The camouflage of the technocrats was truly amazing to completely trick one's eyes while not emitting a speck of cosmic energy.

The drone moved about the desolate town, scanning the buildings one by one. Soon afterward it flew over to the battlefield and scanned the hundreds of corpses that Zac and Ogras had left where they were. Finally it flew over to the newly bought teleportation array and scanned it. Zac frowned and took out **[Verun's Bite]**, readying himself for battle.

"Be patient," Ogras whispered as his eyes were trained on the hidden spot the drone came from. "What do you want to do if people show up?"

"Kill everyone, I don't want anyone escaping through the hub," Zac said without hesitation.

The drone passed around the area a few times, but luckily its scans didn't reach their secluded ledge. Their patience was soon rewarded as a group of Technocrats finally emerged from the cave wall and rushed straight toward the Nexus Hub. Only when the group was half-way there did Zac and Ogras appear in a blast of shadows.

The Technocrats were shocked to see two cultivators appear right in their midst and barely managed to put up a resistance before they all lay dead on the ground. Ogras still had trouble moving about and was forced to fight sitting down on the ground while blasting shadow spears in all directions. Zac was a little better off, but he had to use the axe with his off-hand since his right arm was unusable.

“The quest is completed,” Ogras said with excitement after the battle group of Technocrats was finished off.

Zac breathed out in relief since that most likely meant that there were no more invaders around. But he still wanted to make sure.

“Can you keep watch while I check things out?” Zac asked, getting a nod in response.

Zac slowly walked over toward the cloaked entrance in the wall, and he activated the upgraded **[Immutable Bulwark]** just in case as he stepped through the illusion. The shield soon passed right through the wall, and Zac stopped in his tracks to see if anything happened.

Luckily everything seemed completely fine, so he walked through as well. As expected no Technocrats were lying in wait, and he was only met with silence as he stepped into a large empty space. But he still kept the skill active to see what changes there were since it got upgraded.

The size of the bulwark was pretty much the same as before, but after some testing he realized he now was able to change its size. He could make it almost ten meters wide and four meters high, making it look like a proper rampart, but he could also shrink it down to the size of his tower shield. He was also able to move it within fifty meters of himself, allowing him to use it to defend others with greater ease.

There was no change to the shield itself though. It didn't get thicker or gain any new fractals, making Zac guess that its defensive capabilities were still pretty much the same. Of course, it wasn't the end of the world since only the cyborg had been able to crack its defenses so far. Zac only played with the skill for a few seconds before refocusing on the scene inside.

The hidden structure was shockingly different compared to the outside, and it felt like he stood inside a hangar of a spaceship. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made in metal, with electrical lights rather than mushrooms and moss illuminating the area. There was not much to see in the surroundings apart

from a few rows of containers full of raw materials, but there was also the tunnel.

The tunnel that the Technocrats had arduously worked on for months could truly be called a marvel of engineering. It was hexagonal with a diameter of roughly twenty meters, and it was also clad in the same metallic walls as the hall. It was completely symmetrical, with not a single blemish or aberration, but most importantly it was long. Extremely long.

Zac felt as though he was looking at an optical illusion when he peered into the endless tunnel that had a straight 45-degree incline. It looked like when one placed two mirrors in front of each other, creating the appearance of an endless tunnel. There was no way for him to see the end, but he guessed a tremendous excavation machine was at the other side, somewhere close to the surface.

There was also a large platform at the entrance of the tunnel, silently hovering a decimeter above the ground. Zac guessed that the platform was a lift that could take one to the top, but he saw no console or buttons to steer it. Besides, he had no intention to enter the tunnel at this juncture, as it would take hours to get to the surface with this thing.

He finally understood what happened after going through the area. The Technocrats who just arrived had most likely been working on the mining rig at the other side of the tunnel when they suddenly got the alert that their Incursion had fallen. They took the lift back down, and only just arrived to see a desolate battlefield and a hill of corpses outside.

Zac took a final look around before returning to the demon's side. There was still a bit over half the time before the Nexus Hub would shut down, so Zac once again sat down to wait it out while recuperating.

Ogras was well enough to get back on his feet around two hours later, so he left for New London to gather provisions and prepare for the rescue of the Port Atwood Army. Zac himself stayed on, and only stood up the moment that the Nexus Hub was inactivated, finally quenching any chance of any unwelcome surprises. The connection between the Technocrats

and Earth was finally broken, which would hopefully keep his sister safe for at least a century, perhaps forever.

However, Zac didn't immediately leave the area but instead hurried back toward the battlefield. He had already looted the Cosmos Sacks belonging to the four cultivators and the foreman, but there were still hundreds of bodies lying on the ground with all kinds of precious items scattered about.

Apart from the Technocrats there were also the droves of broken-down machines. Some were destroyed beyond salvation, but a few were somewhat intact. Perhaps some engineers back at Port Atwood would be able to piece together a couple of whole robots from the scraps.

The drones had fallen pretty easily to Zac's assault, but that didn't mean they were weak. A single one of the battle droids would likely be able to defeat the average peak F-Grade warrior. Not only that, but their hulls were also extremely sturdy, and Zac had been forced to sometimes swing twice before destroying them.

Getting a handful of these things to guard his towns would be a huge boon since he was spreading his personnel thin as it was. It was one of the more glaring problems with Port Atwood at the moment; they were lacking people. They had liberated quite a few islands by now, but there were only so many people placed on the remote archipelago.

Zac was also pretty sure he wouldn't be finding too many more citizens stranded on the remaining islands that had yet to be scouted out. The beasts were too strong by now, and the average people would have long been killed. It was the same on the mainland, where fewer and fewer towns remained standing. But the people on the mainland at least had the opportunity to cooperate with others in the area to form larger settlements for protection.

Besides, even if Zac didn't manage to turn these robots into competent footsoldiers they would still be worth salvaging. The machines were made from either some high-grade materials or some impressive composite alloys that the

Technocrats created. In either case, he might be able to recast the robots into armors or weaponry.

Zac noted with some annoyance that he actually wasn't the first to scour through the battlefield since he only found a handful of cosmos sacks. The large mecha that Ogras defeated was gone as well, already snatched by the demon. Ogras had most likely looted while fighting since he had been mid-battle up until the cyborg made its appearance.

Luckily there was a lot of ground that the demon hadn't been able to pillage. Neither Ogras nor Zac had entered the structures in the small base camp, and Zac swept through them one by one like a locust. He first hit a warehouse that was filled to the rafters with tens of thousands of ingots of all kinds of metals.

It seemed that they kept a lot of the resources ready on hand for the production lines in the neighboring structure since there was some sort of gravity-defying conveyor-belts connecting the buildings. Zac didn't care about that though and swept all the materials clean.

The next building housed enormous rectangular machines that just looked like large metallic blocks. They reached over ten meters in the air, and their sides were roughly four meters. However, they seemed to be somewhat hastily put together, and not one of them was exactly alike. It looked like they were something the Technocrats had scrounged together to start production as quickly as humanly possible.

Zac didn't understand the function of the large machines, but he guessed that they were some sort of molds that created the robots from scratch. They reminded Zac a bit of the first furnace he bought from the system, the one he used to turn his first batch of raw crystals into real Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a repository of freshly made war machines, but that wasn't surprising since they would all have been sent to the battlefield. The large constructors themselves were the real prize in Zac's opinion though, and he would definitely have some people looking into setting up a production plant back on Port Atwood.

Of course, he'd make sure to check them for bugs or any other failsafe. These things could be programmed to blow up like a nuclear bomb in case someone unlicensed personnel tried to operate them for all Zac knew. Jeeves would hopefully be able to assist them in that department.

There was also the issue of hidden risks of using technology. The things Zac had seen from the Technocrats had all seemed extremely convenient. Who wouldn't want a few thousand drones keeping their place safe at all times? It made sense if a clan in the multiverse purchased a batch of goods from the Technocrats for this very purpose.

Yet no one in the multiverse utilized this sort of technology as far as Zac could tell. It made no sense to Zac, who had long realized that there were no such things as morals or scruples amongst the warriors of the multiverse. Such things were luxuries that very few could afford, and he felt that the anti-technology sentiment didn't make sense unless there were something more to it.

That meant that there was something else that held all these forces back, stopping them from using these things. Ogras had mentioned some unknown costs that would outweigh the benefits when modifying one's body, and it was perhaps the same with incorporating technology into one's force. He essentially needed to understand the situation better before he started transforming Port Atwood into some future-city.

But he still stowed away all the machines and everything else in the production plants. He did put all technology-based in a spare Cosmos Sack though, not wanting to mix them with his real belongings. Apart from the constructors, there were a lot of spare parts, and a row of extremely heavy tubes that Zac suspected were some sort of high-tech batteries. Each one of them was only as long as his legs, but they weighed more than a car.

In the rest of the buildings there wasn't much of interest as most were just residential structures crammed full of bunk beds. He did find what looked like a laboratory, but it seemed to have been ransacked. Perhaps it once belonged to the

researcher that Zac killed, and his place was searched for clues when he never returned to the camp.

He also found what he suspected was the foreman's house and study, and he made sure to take anything that might be worth something there. He even broke apart the walls and floor in search for hidden compartments, but there was nothing of the sort. It hopefully meant that everything of value was kept in his Cosmos Sack that Zac had already looted.

He had briefly scanned the five Cosmos Sacks belonging to the E-Grade warriors, but he didn't have time to properly check everything out. The Sacks belonging to the lightning cultivators weren't very exciting at least. They just contained a decent amount of Nexus Crystals along with various pills and daily necessities. They would likely have left their real assets back home before entering the incursion.

Zac had hoped that the cultivators would have things that would give him a nice boost when he finally reached E-Grade. But 8 months had passed since the Integration by now, and the four had likely already used all such resources on themselves by now. The foreman's sack was filled with all sorts of things, but most were of technological origin, so Zac didn't understand their purpose.

Content that there was nothing left of value Zac finally got back to New London. On his return he learned that Ogras had already left for Port Atwood, and was asked to meet him there. Zac didn't mind and soon enough he stood in his private Teleportation room in his compound, he immediately found the demon after stepping outside.

"How are you feeling?" Zac asked when he saw that Ogras still looked a bit pale.

Honestly, he didn't feel much better himself, and he just wanted to lay down and sleep for a bit. But he couldn't do that just yet and instead used his transformation skill to change to his human form.

"I'll survive," Ogras muttered after Zac stood up again.

"Everything is prepared. Are you ready to go?"

“I’ll just head over to the Mystic Realm to tell Kenzie that we’re okay but that we’re heading out again,” Zac said.

The demon didn’t object, and the two entered Kenzie’s study within the Mystic Realm a few minutes later.

“Wow, the two of you look like walking corpses,” Kenzie said with shock when she saw their bedraggled appearances. “Are you trying to blend in with the Undead?”

Chapter 354: Sortie

“They were a bit stronger than we expected,” Zac simply said, not wanting to go into detail just how close they came to dying a few hours ago.

Ogras played along, donning a lackadaisical look as he hid the fact that he couldn't put any weight on one of his legs. Zac obviously wouldn't divulge that his right arm still wasn't working either.

“I just wanted to tell you that we're fine, but that we're heading out again. We're going to search for our people, it might take a few weeks,” Zac added.

“Great, I'm coming with,” Kenzie said as she stood up, patting her leggings.

“Absolutely not,” Zac said without hesitation.

“I'm going,” Kenzie said with a glare. “You've kept me on the Island long enough. I am starting to feel like a prisoner, and I need some combat experience to keep improving.”

“What about studying arrays?” Zac asked. “And the funnel?”

“I can do that as well. Won't we be sitting on your spaceship most of the time?” Kenzie immediately retorted. “Besides, I've pushed my defensive seed to High mastery and even gotten a Water seed that helps with restoration. I am almost as unkillable as you!”

“Girl, you haven't been using the funnel for yourself, have you?” Ogras probed with suspicion in his eyes. “My head almost got split in two to snatch that thing, you know?”

“I don't need that thing to improve a few Dao Seeds,” Kenzie snorted.

“Monster siblings,” the demon muttered under his breath, receiving a synchronized eye-roll in return.

“It’s great that you’ve improved your Daos, but the Undead Empire is the strongest force on the planet, we have no idea of the dangers we might face,” Zac said. “We probably won’t just be fighting the newly turned Zombies this time.”

“The girl is pretty good with her spells,” Ogras interjected. “She’s even better than most of the other girls you bring along everywhere, and we have room on the flying treasure.”

Zac shot a murderous glare at the demon, but he acted oblivious to the implicit threat. Soon enough Zac was forced to acquiesce to his sister’s demands. Ultimately he knew that he couldn’t keep her locked away on the island forever since that would harm her future development even if she had help from Jeeves.

But he was her big brother, worrying came with the job. Of course, with both himself and Ogras there along with the small hill of defensive treasures he had decked her out in she would have a hard time getting hurt even if she was in the middle of a sea of Zombies. And she did not only survive the Tutorial but also staying at a border town for months, so she wasn’t some helpless damsel in distress.

“Fine, but don’t take any unnecessary risks. Our main goal is to find and eventually save our people, not to have some last stand against the Undead,” Zac said before turning to Ogras. “Is everything prepared?”

“The others are waiting by the public teleporter in Port Atwood,” Ogras said. “There have also been some odd developments, but I thought I would brief everyone when we’re on the move. Don’t forget to withdraw a mountain of crystals for the flying treasure from the town coffers.”

“I need to get a few things as well,” Kenzie added. “I’ll join you in a bit.”

Zac nodded and the group met up again at the teleportation array in Port Atwood ten minutes later. Zac had gone to take out some of Port Atwood’s resources from the Merit Exchange for the trip. He didn’t know the state of the army so he brought out a large number of healing pills, Nexus Crystals, spare weaponry, and even food in case they had run out.

Ogras and Kenzie were already there, and they were joined by Tylia and eight Valkyries. Zac was surprised that neither Verana nor any demons were around, and he looked over at Ogras with some confusion.

“Verana will stay in the Underworld and consolidate our gains and start working on dealing with the Incursions there. I let the brat stay as well to be with her family,” Ogras said before nodding at Tylia. “This one has a skill-set that might prove helpful, and the eight girls will be able to form a small War Array for your sister. Room’s limited so I didn’t bring anyone else. I wanted to find the big ox, but it turns out he went fighting with the Marshall girl.”

Zac’s eyes lit up in understanding, and he felt it was a solid enough lineup. Billy would have been a good addition, but he could probably do more good helping in the fight against the other horde.

“So where are we going?” Zac asked.

“We’ll head to Westfort, and a person from the Sino-Indian Alliance there will take us to Erdenet, the closest array that I could find to where we last heard from our people. There was an array just a few day’s travel away from them, but it got swallowed by the interference as well,” Ogras explained.

Zac nodded and didn’t waste any more time, and just a few minutes later they stood in the Mongolian town. The guide bowed and immediately returned through the teleporter, leaving the small group to their own devices. They walked over to a cleared-out field and Zac immediately summoned the flying tool he got from the Hunt.

The Sky Gnomes had long figured out how to activate the large metallic ball and Zac infused some energy into it, making it quickly grow and change shape. It was as Calrin said, it was one of the simplest flying tools imaginable, only forming a simple disk that they would sit on. It was nothing like the sleek spaceship or the magical steampunk flying vessel he had imagined.

This was actually the first time he would use it since he didn’t feel too confident flying it in the Underworld, where the high

ceiling could be swapped out by a narrow passage at moment's notice. He only had the one and didn't want to crash it.

The group sat down on the large circular surface, and Zac placed a couple of E-Grade crystals into their sockets and placed his hand on a control array. The next moment it floated up into the skies and shot out of the town with tremendous speed.

The air screamed around them, but the group of 12 weren't buffeted by the winds in the slightest as the flying tool at least possessed some sort of protective array. Zac greatly enjoyed the feeling of flying, and he couldn't stop himself from making the treasure take some sharp turns as it flew across the hills.

"Is it out of your system? You're going in the wrong direction," the demon said with a snort, and Zac hastily changed course with an embarrassed cough.

"Okay, so update me on the situation," Zac said after the disk started to fly southward.

"Things are turning pretty chaotic in this area," Ogras said. "I went by the Marshall Spy Agency just before now, and large changes have taken place."

"Changes how?" Zac asked.

"For one there are dozens of hordes now, though the three initial ones are still far larger than the others," Ogras started explaining as he took out a tablet from his Cosmos Sack.

"They are traveling in irregular patterns, and no one could understand what the hell they were doing until recently."

"And what's that?" Zac asked.

"They're making a mind-bogglingly huge array where the Dead Zone is just the core," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac was shocked to hear such a thing since the original Dead Zone was almost as large in area as the former United States. Such a massive piece of land was just the core? But he suddenly remembered the words of the Technocrat he interrogated the other day, and some fear gripped his heart.

“Terraforming,” Zac muttered with a frown.

“Exactly,” Ogras nodded with a serious face. “An array this large can only be used for something terrifying like destroying the whole planet. I believe they want to make this planet death-attuned. I don’t know how it works, but all the planets in the Undead Empire naturally produce Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, and I believe this Array is the key.

“So if they manage to form the array we’re screwed?” Zac asked.

“I am not sure. I’ve asked the blue one to gather information. Such a search might draw some ire from the Undead Empire, but we’ve already passed that point. But I would personally guess that it would take some time to activate such a huge array,” Ogras shrugged. “Also, there’s some good news.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Zac asked, happy to take any good news he could get.

“We’re not the only ones worried about the Undead Empire’s actions. There have been reports of multiple alien armies arriving in the contested area, mainly from the neighboring Incursions,” Ogras said. “Most notably the insane cultists have arrived in full force. Massive battles took place yesterday where a few of the smaller Hordes were eradicated to the last zombie.”

“Makes sense, if the Undead Empire activates that Array it is probably game over for all the other invaders as well. They would have to leave the planet immediately,” Zac nodded.

“Exactly. And they’re not the only ones joining the battle. The insect people have amassed huge armies that have taken down at least three Zombie hordes as well. There are millions of them fighting like they’re possessed,” Ogras said. “They’ve marched for weeks to finally join the war.”

“What about the dominators?” Zac asked. “Are they still banking on us doing the work for them?”

“The Marshall’s are not sure,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “Their network is quite impressive, but it can’t cover the

whole area, especially not now when large parts are cut off from teleportation.”

“I don’t think the Dominators can just sit still any longer,” Kenzie added from the side. “If they don’t do anything they will lose everything as well. They need to at least stall the undead until we can battle them.”

“We just assume they are staying in the shadows though,” Ogras said. “No point on basing our plans on our enemies assisting us.”

“Sounds fair enough. So, where are we heading?” Zac asked as he glanced down at the ground moving rapidly beneath them.

Ogras pressed a few buttons and a map appeared on the tablet he was holding.

“Alea’s outpost was in this small town, Hanliun, when the area got blocked. The main army was a day’s march away, harassing one of the main hordes together with the Sino-Indian Alliance,” Ogras started narrating.

“There was such a distance between the camp and the army?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Remember the Zombie horde numbered over a hundred million, and most of it is shrouded in Miasma. They didn’t want to risk the lives of the non-combatants, and having a headquarter that was constantly on the move would become a problem,” Ogras explained. “So they kept a healthy distance and communicated through crystals, though they might have become blocked as well by now.”

“We cannot know for sure what happened after they lost contact, but I believe they would retreat from the area,” the demon continued. “The only path that makes sense is northwest toward the closest teleporter in Baoqui. What they don’t know is that Baoqui’s teleporter is blocked as well.”

“So we head to that town to meet up with them?” Zac asked.

“Yes, though they would likely reach that place a few days before us judging by the speed we’re going. We could try to

anticipate their next move, but there's no obvious direction they could take after reaching Baoqui," Ogras sighed.

"So if we take the safe route we'll lose time," Zac murmured.

"At least a day," Ogras nodded.

"But if we take a chance we might miss them completely," Zac concluded.

A full day could make a huge difference depending on their situation. By that point they would have been fending for themselves for almost ten days. He might be able to rely on his extremely high Luck to pick the right direction, but was he willing to bet his people's lives on it?

"We'll take the safe route for now," Zac eventually decided.

"But we might adjust as we get closer. Perhaps we can increase the altitude on this thing enough that we can see them far from the distance?"

"I am sure there are restrictions for that," Tylia said, speaking up for the first time in a while. "I have heard that low-grade flying treasures rely on the energy from the ground. The energy is sparser in the sky, so they have built-in restrictions so they won't fall out of the sky."

Zac looked over at the demon, who nodded in confirmation.

"Well, we'll see how far up it will allow us to go later then. By the way, have you ever seen anything like this?" Zac asked Ogras as he took out one of the top-grade crystals with the green shimmering lights within.

The demon stretched out his arm to take the shimmering crystal with interest, but he was preceded by the Tal-Eladar who snatched it up with shock in her eyes.

"High Purity Beast Crystals!" Tylia blurted out as her eyes widened.

Chapter 355: Baoqui

“Young lord... The Tir’Emarel clan would be happy to buy any such crystals you have in your possession,” Tylia said, her eyes not leaving the crystal for a second.

Zac knew he had hit the jackpot when he saw Tylia’s reaction. She wasn’t even a Beast Master, yet she had such an overblown reaction.

“Those are pretty good things,” Ogras said with a whistle. “Just the normal purity ones are even more valuable than attuned crystals, the high purity ones are treasures.”

“What are they good for?” Zac asked, though he had a pretty good idea already.

“Beasts can’t use Nexus Crystals for leveling for some reason. They can stay in a mine and benefit from the increased density of energies, but they can’t directly absorb the energy from the crystals themselves,” Ogras said. “But they can directly benefit from beast crystals.”

“But I can’t sense any energy in these things?” Zac interjected.

“I don’t really know how it works, but the beasts eat these things like food and slowly digest them. It helps them gain levels while also purifying their bloodline to a certain degree,” the demon continued.

“High purity crystals even helps with the foundations of creating a Beast Crystal in the future,” Tylia added from the side. “Feeding your contracted beast crystals will essentially help it grow faster, and you can still give it other treasures to help it improve. The two don’t clash. Buying beast crystals is a major cost for most Classes working with beasts.”

“So are they rare?” Zac asked.

“Not exceedingly rare, but far more uncommon than normal Nexus Crystals,” Tylia said. “I’d say the crystal in your hand is

worth around a million Nexus Coins. Lower purity Crystals are not worth as much though.”

Zac whistled in surprise, knowing that there were almost two hundred such crystals in his cosmos sack. Better yet, there were thousands upon thousands of crystals left in the mine. Even if the worse crystals weren't worth as much he was sure the value of the mine was multiple billions. It was a true treasure trove.

The Crystals would also come in handy in case his experiment with the newborn Ayr Hivequeen worked out. The former Pet Shop Employee had already gotten a beast-related class, but she hadn't been able to form a connection with the queen yet. But with the help of the experts among the Tal-Eladar he was sure he'd be able to groom even more beast masters over the coming years. Perhaps he could trade some crystals for knowledge in beast rearing.

Of course, the real price form that cave was likely the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**, but Zac wasn't sure if discussing it with a Tal-Eladar was the best idea. He'd wait until he was alone with Calrin or Khar, the golem in charge of the Merit Exchange back in Port Atwood.

Tylia kept trying to find out where Zac got his hands on the crystals or at least buy them from him, but he ignored her attempts as he focused on recuperation. He was still far from fully restored, with multiple bones broken in his body.

Luckily the flying disk was essentially on autopilot after activating it. A connection had formed in his mind, and he didn't need to keep his hand on the control array. It zapped through the air with great speed, flying at an altitude of a few hundred meters.

Ogras was even worse off than Zac, so the demon had closed his eyes in meditation as soon as he had explained the situation to the others. He had looked mostly fine since returning from the Technocrat Incursion, but Zac had noticed the small tremors in his hands signaling that he was in great pain.

The others simply spent most of their time cultivating. Kenzie switched between cultivating and reading the crystals on

formations. She had already finished the first crystal, but after that her progress had slowed to a crawl. This was nothing odd of course. The 8 crystals held the condensed knowledge on the art of Arrays from a D-Grade sect. It wasn't something that could be digested in a day or two.

Zac wanted to go through the various things he had looted from the Technocrat Incursion together with his sister, but he knew that now was not the time. Not even Ogras was completely clued in to the details of their relationship with the Technocrats, so he could only wait until they were alone.

The days passed in silence as they crossed the vast lands of Pangea. The cost of travel would ruin the average cultivator on Earth, but the expense wasn't even noticeable for Zac. Since he couldn't cultivate he instead spent most of his time pondering the Dao. He had been in multiple intense fights lately, and he felt close to improving multiple Daos.

He had gained multiple sources of insight to the Seed of Rot recently, and he felt that he might even push that Dao to the Peak soon enough. The biggest contributor was the skill he gained, but there was also the battle with the roach. Even the final axe from **[Deforestation]** felt slightly related to his Dao of Rot, though that axe seemed to be based on some higher Dao.

But as four days passed he unfortunately didn't manage to push any of his remaining Daos to the Peak. He did, however, feel that he made decent progress, and if he just got the opportunity to sit down and meditate in peace for a month or two he'd be able to evolve at least one of them. Of course, getting the chance to sit back and meditate with the current chaos was a distant dream.

The silent cultivation ended as the disk was starting to close in on Baoqui. Everyone looked back and forth across the horizon, hoping to find a glimpse of their people. But even if they were hundreds of meters in the air they could only see so far. They would likely only be able to spot the people if they were a few hours away at the most.

The environment around them was still barren though, with neither their own people or the undead in sight. They had spotted quite a few beasts during the past days though. They were even attacked a few times by flocks of supersized birds, but the disk possessed arrays that rebuffed them without a problem.

The fact that there was nothing to see was both good and bad. Good in the sense that there were no undead forces that had reached all this way so far. Bad in the sense that it started to become increasingly clear that Port Atwood's army hadn't gone in their direction after reaching Baoqui.

Zac was eventually forced to decide whether to take the risk of changing course or keep heading straight ahead. He tried to desperately listen to his gut, or rather his Luck, for any advice of what to do. But his mind was just a confusing mess. In the end, he chose to not risk it and kept the course.

A day later they finally reached Baoqui, but there was no sign of movement anywhere. This was not a surprise though, as half the town was completely obliterated, turned into dozens of massive craters. Somber expressions marred the faces of the group as Zac commanded the disc to land inside the town some distance from the destruction.

Bodies lined the streets, and there were signs of structural damage on the houses still standing. It didn't look like those who had died were warriors though, but rather civilians who were running for their lives. Zac shook his head as the group started walking south, and the group of Valkyries split off to scout the area for clues of their people.

What had transpired started to become increasingly clear as they reached the edge of the town. The town had been conquered by the undead some time ago, leaving no one of its original settlers alive. Then another battle had taken place more recently, where the second party was most likely his own people.

"Battle, pretty intense one," Ogras said with a somber face. "Real undead elites like the ones we fought during the beast waves."

“Our people?” Zac wanted to confirm as they stepped through the decimated wall into the battlefield outside.

“Some,” Ogras eventually said as he pointed at two corpses. “Those two bodies are probably ours judging from their equipment. But most of these bodies died over a week ago, probably when this town fell. They likely became cannon fodder in a surprise attack against our army.”

“At least there are not too many bodies,” Zac said as they walked through the corpses, though he was sick to his stomach seeing over two hundred of his own lying on the ground.

There were over ten thousand corpses in the area, but it was clear that almost all of them were undead. Zac also spotted a few broken Unholy Beacons and over a dozen corpse golems who had fallen protecting them. It had been an intense battle, but one that his people won.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Ogras said with a shake of his head, not sharing Zac’s optimism. “These are just the ones who didn’t turn into zombies after dying. They all have wounds that are too grisly for them to successfully turn. The true number of casualties is likely far larger. Our people might collect bodies to not bolster the undead ranks, or they might have already been turned and joined our enemies.”

Zac’s heart was felt heavy as they looked through the carnage. Clues that Ogras was correct kept appearing. Broken weapons were everywhere, and they kept finding broken array disks. They even found large pieces of metallic shrapnel, and Zac recognized their origin. They came from the huge cannons that the Ishiate tinkers created.

But that was not the end of the surprises. Large pieces of wooden rubble turned out to be the remnants of multiple creator vessels, though Zac couldn’t understand why his army would take out boats on dry land. Only after a few seconds did they realize that Alea and Ilvere likely summoned them to use the offensive arrays. It was likely the Creator Vessels that were responsible for turning half the town into rubble.

Another large swathe of the battlefield was completely void of corpses, and even all vegetation was gone. It was a zone of

death, and an acrid smell entered Zac's nose as they approached it.

"It's Alea, she was forced to go all out. We should not enter this area," Ogras commented with a frown.

"The tracks lead west," a voice shouted from the distance, coming from one of the Valkyries.

"We'll head out immediately," Zac said, urgency burning in his chest.

Until now he had forced himself to believe that everything might be fine, that his people were simply cut off but otherwise unharmed. But after seeing the town full of corpses he couldn't pretend any longer. Even worse was the knowledge that he would have made it in time to this battle if he left immediately rather than head to the Technocrat Incursion. The battle here had taken place two days ago at the most.

Even his decision to farm out his levels while waiting for his people to consolidate their hold over the Underworld Union felt like a shameful display of selfishness at this moment. He had to admit that his own priorities had somehow been eschewed ever since he entered the underworld.

His first instinct was to blame Smaug and his orchestrations to turn their attention toward the Union, but he knew that he himself was the one to blame in the end. He had become complacent after a series of victories, even though he had only closed some of the weakest incursions around. He had pushed back the closing of the incursions in favor of his own growth, not considering the constant threat the invaders were to the people of Earth.

The group stayed in Baoqui for less than ten minutes to gain a decent picture of what happened before they once again set out on the flying disk. This time they had no difficulty knowing which way to go since the passage of thousands of people left a clear track to follow. If that wasn't enough there was also a constant line of slain zombies strewn along the path like a trail of breadcrumbs.

The group had been mostly silent while rushing toward Baoqui, but after witnessing the aftermath of the desperate struggle the atmosphere on the disk had turned extremely oppressive. It was like a pressure cooker that threatened to explode at any moment.

The hours passed and they had soon enough flown for a whole day, but no one could sleep since they knew they were closing in on their people. The tracks looked fresh, and they started seeing groups of undead rushing in the same direction, seemingly trying to catch up.

An hour later they finally saw activity on the horizon, but no one in the group looked even a bit happy. The reason was simple. What entered their eyes was a vast battlefield, where a group of people desperately defended against two far larger swarms of enemies.

“Ready yourselves for battle,” Zac said with grit teeth as days of accumulated bloodlust started to seep out of every pore of his being.

Chapter 356: Final Stand

Ilvere roared in defiance as the huge ball belonging to his weapon shuddered with power, and its trajectory suddenly turned impossible to predict. One second the chunk of metal looked as though it was so light that it might as well be a mirage, but the next moment it gave Alea the impression she was gazing upon a towering mountain.

The two opposing impressions kept swapping until they superimposed, making the weapon emit a shocking energy. The weapon slammed into the Corpse Golem that was guarding one of the Unholy Beacons that the undead army wanted to move to the vanguard to empower their assault.

Alea frowned when she saw the undead abomination effortlessly catch the ball in its arms as though it didn't contain a shred of momentum. But the next moment the Corpse Golem exploded, its bodyparts flying out like projectiles in all directions.

The wrecking ball started moving again and slammed into one of the Unholy Beacons with enough force to cause a crack, but it wasn't enough for it to break altogether. But it was just enough to topple it, and when the tower crashed into the ground it released a burst of errant energies that killed the nearby Zombies. A few unlucky undead warriors were killed from getting hit by the remaining bodyparts of the 4-meter tall Golem as well, making Alea shake her head in wonder.

“Not quite there,” the demon warrior muttered with annoyance, for some reason not happy even though he had managed to destroy one of the Unholy Beacons.

Alea wanted to rebuke the man for experimenting with the skill he got from Lord Atwood in the middle of the battle, but it clearly produced results. She instead focused on the sea of

zombies ahead. Things were getting desperate, and she had no time to worry too much about others.

The ambush at Baoqui had cost them most of their resources, not to mention the 3000 people who fell in battle. The undead had likely planned on ending it all when they finally reached the town, but they had underestimated just how tough it would be to break the warriors of Port Atwood.

Six days of constant harassment had pushed them all beyond what they thought was possible, but many had risen to the challenge and grown tremendously. Hundreds of people died during the death march, but just as many had gained Dao Seeds that allowed them to unleash twice the destruction as before.

Besides, the undead hadn't expected them to carry eight ships possessing sieging capabilities. Over half of their forces fell to the immediate bombardment by the arrays on the ships. Alea hadn't heard of the Allbright Empire that Lord Atwood got his shipyard from, but their craftsmanship was impeccable. Unfortunately, they had run out of hidden cards by now. The ships had been destroyed, over half of them left behind them the past two days as they were beyond salvage.

The Ishiate cannons were all destroyed as well, and only a third of the tinkers remained alive. The undead learned their lesson after the first time the large brass cannons were unleashed, and they mounted a sneak attack to take most of them out. If it wasn't for one of the mad scientists rushing forward and directly detonating one of the bombs to kill all the attackers, along with himself, they would have lost all of the beastmen.

Alea was running out of poison as well. She better understood the mentality of Lord Atwood after this past week, why he had pushed himself to never leave the battlefield during the beast waves. Because every time you stepped back to rest, someone would have to offer their life in return. Such was the burden of the leader.

Alea only had enough accumulated poison for one or two large battles, but there was no point in worrying about the future

when it wasn't even sure that they would even survive the next hour. The army in front of them had appeared out of nowhere, dashing the hope that they finally had killed all of the true undead elites hunting them.

The army consisted of over ten thousand elite zombies, but that wasn't the real problem. There were almost a hundred Corpse Golems and two hundred Corpse Lords, each one of them more powerful than her demonkin warriors. She needed to even the numbers somewhat.

She looked over at the shrouded demon in the distance, and Janos nodded as he closed his eyes. Alea wasted no time as she activated **[Odorless]** and unleashed almost all of her stored up toxins she had concocted to deal with the undead. However, even if she had opened the floodgates to release a tremendous amount of poison didn't look like anything happened, and the undead kept pushing forward.

This was Janos' ultimate skill, creating a massive illusion that kept the world going, apart from one hidden truth. In this case, it was the extremely potent poison that rapidly spread among the undead, unwittingly drilling into their bodies. But the Undead were no fools, and it looked like reality cracked after just a second, exposing the vast clouds of poison that had encompassed a fifth of the army.

Four hooded cultivators standing by the ten Unholy Beacons in the back suddenly floated up into the air as they pointed shriveled fingers at the mists of deadly poison. Alea was shocked to notice that she lost connection to the poison as the four cultivators somehow ragged it up into the air. A huge skull appeared as well, and it sucked up the poison in one deep chomp before disappearing.

Alea grimaced when she saw the mysterious cultivators countering her skill so easily, but the damage was already done to a certain extent. An enormous amount of cosmic energy surged into her body as thousands of zombies and dozens of Corpse Lords toppled over, creating a large hole in the undead army. Of course, most of the energy quickly escaped from her body as she had long reached level 75.

But just as Alea breathed out in relief that her attack was mostly successful a specter that radiated killing intent rose out of the ground in front of her. It was a hooded skeleton, but it wasn't corporeal. It was mostly translucent and seemed to be wrought out of a dark-green Death attuned energy.

The fighters of Port Atwood had encountered spectral combatants before, but this one was completely different from the weak ghosts that were quickly rebuffed with the help of Divine Energy. The whole area turned cold when it appeared, and Alea's instincts screamed of danger.

She didn't even let the thing take a single step before six pitch-black spikes appeared in the air, all of them aiming to impale the ghost as quickly as possible. The ghost moved like a gust toward her, expertly dodging the first three spikes in an instant. But luckily she managed to graze the ghost with the fourth spike, and the tremendous pain the attack elicited made the ghost freeze for an instant.

Alea immediately shot the other two spikes into the chest of the ghost, forcibly enduring the searing pain in her own chest as she received the same damage as the one she inflicted. The ghost was clearly in tremendous pain as well, but it only gazed at her as it forced out a snicker as the dead rose all around her.

The eight translucent spears stabbed into her from all directions before Alea had a chance to react, and she couldn't stop herself from screaming in pain even though not a single drop of blood was spilled. It felt as though her very being was crumbling as her soul was getting ripped apart. She had no way to retaliate or even form a coherent thought as the pain stretched into eternity.

A golden sea suddenly washed over the area, drowning Alea and the wraiths in divine splendor. The eight wraiths were badly wounded by the attack, as thick streams of miasma escaped from their bodies as they endured the life-attuned attack.

"Don't force it, she won't survive," one of the wraiths finally grunted. "We'll collect the body later, the Lord wants it."

The others nodded and shrunk into the ground, fleeing the corrosive effect of the divine ocean. Alea couldn't understand what was happening, still consumed by the inhuman torment of her soul rending. But a warm soothing stream soon entered her body, keeping her fracturing self together for the time being.

Alea opened her eyes and saw a small human holding her hands, continuously infusing her with a warm energy that acted as insulation that kept her mind from dissipating. Around them stood a group of Valkyries who slaughtered any errant zombie that got close, but luckily the poison from earlier had killed almost everything in the vicinity.

"You're... Sui...?" Alea vaguely remembered the name of the purifier who somehow had found their army along with a few hundred warriors three days ago.

Apparently, they were a private army run by one of the towns that formerly stood at the edge of the Dead Zone, but it had long been overrun by the undead. Alea hadn't really had time to get to know them better due to the constant battle, but any assistance was a blessing to their extremely wrung out force.

The small girl in front of her had proven extremely helpful, especially after they figured out that she could reach a terrifying power with the help of the combination of the Valkyrie War Array and the Divine Array. She would be useless against the living, but she was a true nemesis to the undead. She only lacked the ruthlessness to take full advantage of her gift.

"Your soul is in a terrible state," Sui said with a pale face, as she had the Valkyries carry Alea away from the front line. "I don't"

"I know my situation," Alea interrupted with a sigh, allowing herself to be moved back to the defensive line.

She felt as weak as a newborn child, barely able to lift her own hand. But she kept a strong face, hoping that the scared soldiers looking in her directions wouldn't understand how bad it was. Their morale was low enough after their ten-day death march, and she did not want to tack on any further.

The group of specters suddenly appeared around the desperately battling Ilvere, who had been forced to take charge of the whole front line after Alea fell. Her heart was gripped in panic when she saw their appearance, but Ilvere did not look worried. He only released a shrill whistle, and he was immediately pelted with attacks.

But shockingly enough he wasn't attacked by the undead, but rather their own people. Hundreds of arrows fell where he stood almost blotting out the sky for an instant. Rage started to burn in Alea's heart as she helplessly remained in the care of Sui.

"Don't worry," Sui said. "It's not what it looks like."

Only then did Alea realize that the arrows had a golden hue, looking like the arrows of a celestial. They had been imbued with divine energy and didn't pass through the Wraiths as expected, but rather caused small golden explosions the moment they hit the incorporeal bodies. The wraiths wailed in pain and hurried to

Ilvere was actually not unscathed from the arrows, and a few of the projectiles had embedded themselves in his body. However, Ilvere's armor was pretty strong and the golden explosions didn't have any effect on the living, so he only received shallow flesh wounds. He had simply used himself as bait to attack the wraiths, and he was ready to bear the small pain.

The Wraiths had taken some damage from the surprise attack, but unfortunately it wasn't enough to kill them. Luckily they were at least forced to retreat, and they scurried back to the rear of the undead army with shocking speed.

The retreat of the squad of powerful assassins lessened the pressure on Port Atwood to a great degree, but they were still in desperate straits. The air was filled with screams as one warrior after another fell to the relentless assault of the invaders.

The Corpse Lords were just too strong, and three demons needed to co-operate just to keep one them at bay. The recruits were far worse off, and whole squads had been mercilessly

slaughtered the moment the elite undead found an opening in their formations. Alea wanted to help, but she barely could keep herself awake, let alone rejoin the battle.

A wrathful roar suddenly echoed across the battlefield from above, making Alea look up with confusion and hope. A large disk was shooting toward them in the sky, and it seemed to be descending like a meteor. One person standing on top of it wasn't even patient enough for it to land, and he pushed off from the flying treasure with enough force to cause it to almost crash.

The man shot forward through the air like a bullet, crashing into the sea of undead with earth-shattering force. The shockwave caused the whole battle to stop for a second, as only the strongest managed to keep their footing. The zombies unfortunate enough to have stood close to the impact zone were completely gone, turned into mush at the bottom of the large crater. But the man was completely fine, and Alea could finally confirm her suspicion when he stood up.

Lord Atwood had finally arrived.

Chapter 357: Adriel

Lord Atwood wasted no time as a storm of energies started to churn around him, and a palpable sense of dread instinctively entered Alea's heart as an extreme killing intent blanketed the area. She wanted to walk up to him, but her body wouldn't listen, so she could only watch him from afar.

A huge woodsman's axe suddenly appeared above him, and the next moment it swung in an effortless motion, drawing a wide arc in front of Lord Atwood. Alea's brow furrowed, not understanding the meaning of the attack, but the next moment her eyes widened in understanding. An invisible wave of carnage spread out from Lord Atwood, destroying everything in front of him in the blink of an eye.

Only the flanks of the undead army were spared from getting cut into pieces, but the vanguard was utterly decimated, not leaving anything standing. Lord Atwood didn't stop at that point, and he flashed forward with his movement skill, almost taking him out of Alea's vision. Her consciousness was blurring, but she bit her lip to the point that it bled, forcing herself to stay awake to witness the miracle.

The fact that the Young Master and a handful of others jumped down from the flying treasure to take down the leftovers in the flank barely registered in Alea's mind. Her eyes were glued to the broad back of the one she had waited for these past days.

Tens of thousands of elite zombies remained, and they hadn't lost too much of their strength as most of their core combatants stayed in the back. The wraiths also stood there, protected by the encirclement of Unholy Beacons and E-Grade Corpse golems.

But not even a second passed before another, even more powerful, axe appeared above the Lord, this one causing the very air to ignite from its scorching heat. It looked like Its

swing heralded the end of the world, as a towering inferno ripped across the earth, swallowing the whole Undead Army.

There were no screams or wails, just the deafening sound of the crackling fire. But the wave of destruction ended just as abruptly as it appeared, leaving a scorched ground and pieces of flesh burnt beyond recognition. Only a small handful of elites remained, protected by the circle of Unholy Beacons and the hooded cultivators within.

It looked like they had managed to erect a strong enough defense, but doing so didn't come without cost as two of the hooded cultivators had turned to cinders even though they stood in the middle of the group, and smoke rose another one.

Alea wasn't worried though as she and Sui silently gazed at the destruction in the distance. She knew that this wasn't the limit of Lord Atwood's powers. And as expected the air above him shuddered before it shattered to let out the enormous hand that would bring an end to all resistance.

It looked different compared to the last time Alea saw it. It was at least twice as big as before and covered in dense fractals that resonated with the world itself. Shockingly enough the burnt cinders below turned into fertilizer as tall grass frantically rose from the ground, stretching toward the hand in the sky like children reaching for their parent.

The hand moved so fast it looked like teleportation, almost immediately appearing in the sky above the remaining elites of the undead army. A massive fractal appeared beneath the hand and it caused the area underneath to be subject to a tremendous strain.

Only the largest Corpse Golems were able to stay on their feet, while the others were forced down on their knees. The incorporeal specters were even more impacted it seemed as they shrieked while miasmatic clouds were released from their bodies. They quickly tried to enter the ground to escape, but they were rebuffed somehow. It was as though the planet itself was rejecting them.

The next moment something unbelievable happened. The fractal rippled like a pond of water as an enormous mountain

emerged from it, its sharp summit pointing straight down at the undead and their defensive array below.

The mountain didn't look like something created by Cosmic Energy, but rather something solid, something true. It emitted an ancient solidity that spread all the way to where Alea was lying. The mountain kept emerging from the array, and the pressure the undead beneath kept increasing, forcing even the giant Corpse Golems on their knees.

Finally, the mountain hit the defensive array, which at this point shone in with almost blinding light as the ten Unholy Beacons poured out a storm of miasma to reinforce it. The whole area shook from the clash of the two powers, but neither seemed able to gain a foothold. Sui sighed in regret from the side when she saw that the mountain was stopped, and its sharp summit unable to pierce the thick shell protecting their enemies.

However, it was clear that the array was barely holding on, as cracks kept appearing before they quickly were mended with the help of the beacons. One small push was all it would take to crack it open.

The enormous wooden hand looked extremely small as it hovered above the mountain, but it still looked like it wanted to help the mountain descend. It floated down and gave a light tap at the array, but Alea couldn't see what happened next as she was thrown back by an enormous shockwave.

Everything turned white for a second from a burst of pain before she felt the warm sensation of the golden light reappearing, and she arduously opened her eyes to see Sui desperately infuse her with divine energy again. People were climbing up all around them, many sporting some light wounds from the terrifying wave that swept everyone off their feet.

“Wha-“ Alea said with a weak voice.

“It's over,” Sui said with shock in her eyes. “The hand pushed the mountain into the ground. The undead... are all gone. He destroyed them in one fell swoop.”

Alea arduously focused her eyes to see what the purifier meant, and the sight was shocking. The hand was gone, but the mountain and the array in the sky remained. The summit had been pushed at least fifty meters into the ground, and that was after having created an enormous crater where the Unholy Beacons once stood. There was not any sign of the undead who had huddled inside either, but their fate was painfully obvious.

No one moved, some even forgetting to breathe, after seeing the terrifying display in front of them. The air was still a chaotic mess after being subject to both Lord Atwood's towering aura and the terrorizing power of his attacks clashing with the undead's final defense. But one thing was clear.

They had made it.

The huge army full of undead elites had been swept away in less than 20 seconds, leaving a scene of utter devastation. Yet no one cheered or celebrated getting saved. Alea gave a weak sigh as she understood their feelings.

The past days had pushed them all beyond what anyone should be able to endure. They hadn't stopped for more than a few minutes for almost ten days. They had been harassed, pushed, and almost broken by the unrelenting zombies. The people around her only managed to keep standing from pure defiance, no one had the energy to celebrate.

So it was with hollow eyes they silently looked at their leader as he quickly made his way back toward their ranks. His aura reached toward the skies as he passed the sea of corpses he had created, but he restrained it as he hurried to Alea's side. He quickly got down on a knee in front of her, and Alea felt a flurry of emotions in her heart as he looked into his eyes.

"I knew you'd come," Alea smiled before the darkness took her.

"Hm?" Adriel said as his hollow eyes turned toward the distance, his eyes moving away from the enormous crystal in front of him.

He was sitting in his large study that was illuminated by thousands of azure lights, giving it a comfortable sheen of undeath. The moans and wails from a few of the still surviving experiments provided a soothing ambiance as the lich followed the progress of his grand array.

Things were progressing as expected, with only some futile attempts to stop the hordes. But the harassment was of no import, as it only cost them a few million of the newly aligned. It had even turned into a decent grindstone that would hopefully birth a few promising recruits among the unthinking children.

But there were always factors beyond one's control, and the battle he just witnessed through the eyes of his clones was beyond his expectation. The lich king scratched the desiccated skin that formed a thin layer over his skeleton as he considered the implications of what he had just seen.

"What is it, my lord?" the hovering ghost attendant asked with worry.

"I finally saw the top human, I was wondering when he would appear.... Interesting," the Lich muttered. "He killed four of my clones in an instant."

"What?!" the ghost said with some shock.

"Well, I still haven't really mastered the skill, they contained only a fraction of my strength," Adriel said without a care. "Still, a very impressive specimen to release such power while still at F-Grade. He would make great material."

"Do we need to change our plans, my lord?" the attendant asked.

"No need Triv, he is saddled with a handful of refugees and is stuck a long way from the fault-lines," Adriel said with a shake of his head. "It's a shame. I found a person with a semi-complete poison constitution. I have a friend who would pay dearly for that body."

"Do you want to send one of the Generals after him?" Triv probed.

“No, they have their tasks. Besides, the humans seem to have figured out what we are doing. They will have to come to me sooner or later in any case if they want to stop the realignment. There’s no need for us to go out of our way to look for them,” Adriel said as a small smile displayed the blackened teeth in his mouth.

“What about the one who visited us?” the attendant probed.

“Void...” Adriel muttered, some hesitation flashing in his eyes. “Very strong.”

It had truly been a surprise to see the native insectoid appearing in his own palace, completely calm as though he was taking a stroll in his own boneyard. But the Lich soon found that the man’s confidence wasn’t without reason. He was extremely powerful, a top tier progenitor with a higher level than himself. Fighting him outside his own domain would be a risky venture, and killing him inside would not come without a cost.

“Should we agree with his proposal?” the ghost asked as he saw his leader fall into silence.

“No need,” Adriel said with a shake of his head, waking up from his stupor.

“His aura... It’s from that place though. Is it not better to extend some courtesy and delay the realignment? It shouldn’t affect our goal too much,” the ghost said.

“It’s true, the insectoid is connected to that family, but not as you expect,” Adriel said with a small smile. “My teacher found out some more details. His connection is to an exiled bastard who has not been part of the family for tens of thousands of years. He turned to the unorthodox path, so no one in the family will stand up for him. In fact, they have tried to kill him on numerous occasions out of embarrassment.”

The ghost nodded in understanding, no longer worried about the implications. That family was a bit troublesome, but it was no problem if the one called The Great Redeemer was long excommunicated. His Lord might even stand to gain a new

friend by making things hard for the so-called Redeemer, as the iron-clad rules of the old families were not just for show.

“On another note, Threzz has requested permission to fight the Church. Four of his subsquads have been decimated by them,” the attendant added, taking the opportunity to go through the docket now that his master was out of his revelry. He hated being interrupted while watching his crystal, and many had paid dearly for ruining his fun.

“No. Let them prance around for now. Activating the array comes first. But give him three new hordes, and promise him the vanguard when we conquer the entrances,” Adriel said.

“Should we not focus on taking control of one of the entrances?” Triv said with confusion. “We are still not in control of a single one, while the Church has three.”

“The treasure has yet to mature. It is still absorbing the Origin Energy of this infant planet. There are a few months before the realm closes its doors to protect the treasure as it comes into being. The world will have realigned before then, allowing us to fight with an advantage,” Adriel snickered. “The efforts the bodysnatchers are going through now will only benefit us in the end.”

Chapter 358: Catharsis

Zac looked down at the unmoving form of Alea. He had seen her getting attacked by the group of wraiths while he stood on the flying disk, unable to do anything to save her. The feeling of impotence had quickly turned into rage. But his smoldering rage was finally overcome by a sense of panic as he saw her close her eyes in his arms. His mind was a mess, and he didn't know what to do.

"Alea? Alea!" he said with horror, before quickly turning to Sui. "Can you heal her?"

Zac didn't understand why Alea and Sui were together, as she was on the other side of the Dead Zone the last time he saw her. But right now wasn't the time to ask.

"She... Her soul is wounded, almost to the point of crumbling altogether," Sui said, not daring to meet Zac's burning gaze. "It's beyond my power to heal something like this. I am sorry."

Zac took a deep breath to calm down and collect his thoughts. He knew just how terrible wounds to the soul was. He remembered the small wound he got when he tried to clash with the Splinter of Oblivion. It had almost killed him, and that was nothing compared to the soul failing altogether. But he refused to give up like that.

"Can you keep her stable for now?" Zac asked.

"I... My power is limited..." Sui hesitantly said.

Zac immediately took out most of his Divine Crystals, all of them E-Grade. The miasmatic haze in the area was immediately pushed away, replaced with a refreshing atmosphere. Even the furrowed brows of the unconscious Alea smoothed out slightly, indicating that the crystals helped a bit at least.

"How is she?" a voice asked from behind, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing behind him, the metal casing

around his missing arm taken off, allowing a large tentacle shadow slither around the area.

“Her soul’s wounded, it’s bad,” Zac sighed.

“Shit,” Ogras spat and looked up in the distance. “I’ll go kill some dead things in the rear. You should send her back on the disk. Perhaps the blue one can get his hands on something to salvage the situation.”

Zac perked up at the idea and immediately called for his treasure. It had essentially crashed into the ground after he jumped off it, but it was sturdy enough to take a hit or two. All the passengers were fine as well since all of them were powerful enough to easily jump off in time.

He wouldn’t need the disk for the time being since he would have to lead the army back to the closest Teleporter to make sure there were no more losses. He quickly broke his connection to the disk after it arrived and called over the squad of Valkyries who arrived with him.

“Escort Sui and Alea back to Port Atwood as quickly as possible. Have Calrin get his hands on treasures that would help heal or at least stabilize her soul,” Zac said.

He knew that it was far from certain that the Sky Gnome would be able to get his hands on a treasure that could heal a badly wounded soul. Healing the soul was far more complicated than healing a broken body, and the requirements on the pill were on another level entirely. There was one such item among the treasures Yrial had inside the trial, but he wouldn’t be able to get back inside for a decade.

The lotus in his cultivation cave would perhaps be able to help as well, but it was still just a sapling and didn’t generate any energy so far. It would be years before it grew to sufficient size, even if it was constantly nurtured by the Cosmic Water and the Nexus Vein.

“Wait, my people,” Sui hesitantly said.

“I will clean out the undead and allow everyone to rest before returning to Port Atwood. We’ll join you in a few days,” Zac said before nodding at the Valkyries.

They immediately moved the Divine Crystals to form a bed on the desk, and gingerly placed Alea on top of them. Sui hesitated for a bit before she stepped on top of the disk as well.

“It seems I keep owing you more and more,” Zac said with a tired smile as he looked at her.

“This is just what I should do, you do not owe me anything,” Sui hurriedly said as she started

“Wait,” a voice suddenly echoed from behind, and Zac turned over to see Tylia hurrying over.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw the Tal-Eladar. He had forgotten that she wasn’t a beast tamer like most of the people in her clan, but rather a healer. She differed from Sui who had a purifying class that was especially adept at healing Death-attuned wounds though. She was actually closer to his own attunement, having a class related to nature.

But even importantly, she had already evolved to E-Grade, and her means should be superior to Sui’s.

“Can you help her?” Zac hurriedly asked as he indicated the Valkyries to not set out just yet.

Tylia sat down next to Sui and closed her eyes while her hand started to radiate a green light while touching Alea’s forehead. The small purifier gawked at the unfamiliar form of the Tal-Eladar, but she didn’t say anything. Zac didn’t even dare to breathe loudly as Tylia performed her inspection, but his heart started to rattle when he saw her frown. A few seconds later she removed her hand with a shake of her head.

“I cannot heal her either I am afraid. I can only help keep the pieces of her mind together,” Tylia explained.

“Is there nothing that can be done?” Zac desperately asked.

Tylia seemed to consider the question before a few seconds before answering.

“Well, luckily she’s only F-Grade, so her soul is relatively small. It would be much harder if she had evolved already. A D-Grade healer should be able to slowly piece together her

soul. A healing treasure that could mend souls would be even better,” Tylia said. “It’s just...”

“It’s just what?” Zac pressed.

“I am not sure she’ll even survive the trip back to Port Atwood. And even if we manage to keep her stable during the trip, then what? A treasure that can mend a fractured soul is not something you can get through normal channels,” Tylia said.

“Please do what you can,” Zac said with grit teeth. “If you can’t find a means to heal her, try to stabilize her condition at least through any means necessary. I’ll figure out a way to get a healer or a treasure.”

Zac turned to the squad captain among the Valkyries who would take them back, and immediately transferred 200 million Nexus Coins to her. The woman’s eyes widened in shock, but she quickly understood that it was to make sure Calrin had the resources to buy a treasure if it popped up. Zac nodded to the squad captain, who controlled the disk to fly away at top speed.

“Die!” a sudden shriek erupted from just a few meters away, and Zac looked over with confusion.

A ghoul that was just skin of bones were rushing toward him with a sword in hand, his eyes radiating endless madness and killing intent.

Zac frowned, unsure how an undead was able to make it all the way to the center of the army. His first instinct was that the undead was an assassin, but the ghoul seemed frail enough to topple over from a gust of wind. Zac’s danger sense was also completely unresponsive. Still, just seeing an undead made his rage flare up again, and he immediately took out his axe again.

“Wang Fang!” another voice shouted from nearby. “Stop!”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place it as he swung down his axe, its range increased with a fractal blade from **[Chop]**. The ghoul shrieked as he tried to defend from the defending strike, but he was completely helpless and was immediately bisected from the attack.

A trickle of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body, making him shocked how low leveled the undead assassin was. It even doused his reignited anger a bit, replacing it with confusion.

"Ai," the voice from earlier exclaimed, as a young Asian man ran up to the ghost. "You fool."

"What now?" Zac muttered in annoyance as he looked at the man running toward him.

"Wang Fang wasn't a saint, but you did not need to kill him," the man sighed. "He was ill, both in body and mind."

Zac blankly looked back and forth between the zombie and the man, until he finally spotted a familiar flask attached to the zombie's belt. Only then did things click in his mind. Wang Fang, the man who had snatched his flask of Cosmic Water in the Dead Zone.

He didn't know what to think when he looked down at the malnourished form of Wang Fang. Zac had truthfully thought that the man would have died long ago from Cosmic Water Poisoning, but he had somehow held on until now. From the rage in his still-open eyes Zac could only assume that the man had already figured out his real identity as well.

Zac shook his head in bemusement before turning to the man who had tried to stop him. He didn't recognize him and curiously enough he didn't wear the standard gear of the Atwood Army either. The young man wore a similar battle-gear as himself, though the arms of his green robe was a lot wider.

But the most striking thing about him was the countless scars on his face and sloppily mended tears in his clothes. His state was even more wretched compared to Zac's before he was able to improve his race and remove most of his scars. This was clearly someone who had lived in constant battle since the integration, though his power was a bit above average at best.

"Just who are you?" the man asked with a frown. "What gives you the right to execute one of my citizens and send away the only Purifier when we're in the middle of a sea of the undead?"

“I am Zachary Atwood,” Zac simply answered. “And her skills were needed to keep Alea alive.”

The man froze when hearing Zac’s response before he calmed down with two deep breaths.

“Lady Alea has saved quite a few lives, perhaps more so than anyone else here. It’s good that Sui’s helping her,” he finally said. “I am sorry for my response, we have many wounded and I lashed out. I am Ling Tian, and it is an honor to meet you.”

“Ling Tian?” Zac repeated with surprise. “The Ling Tian of Eastern Hills?”

“Yes, have we met before?” Ling Tian asked with confusion.

“No, but I passed through your town once while traversing the Dead Zone. I heard good things. Do you know John from your town? I forgot his last name,” Zac asked, feeling the world was pretty small after all.

“Yes, he’s here. He’s still defending our rear,” Ling Tian nodded. “Thanks to your intervention the main threat is dealt with, and Lord Ilvere is rounding up the stragglers. But there are still some of the weaker undead harassing us from behind. Normally they wouldn’t be a problem, but our people are wrung dry.”

“How many zombies are there behind us?” Zac asked.

“Hard to say, there were a million at the start. Your army killed hundreds of thousands, but the undead have also gotten reinforcements. I’d say there’s three hundred thousand of them remaining unless there are more in hiding,” The young man said after thinking it over.

“Not too many...” Zac mumbled before looking up at Ling Tian. “We’ll destroy that horde before giving the people here a well-deserved rest. How’s the stock of healing pills and food?”

“Destroy?” Ling Tian blurted in shock. “That’s a sea of zombies over there!”

“The pills?” Zac only repeated.

“We ran out two days ago after the battle at Baoqui,” Ling Tian sighed.

Zac nodded and threw Ling Tian a Cosmos Sack.

“Could you do me a favor? Distribute the pills in this sack to help our wounded. I’ll go help my friend with the Zombies,” Zac said and stood up.

“Wait, I can help as well! I can still fight!” Ling Tian said, looking up from the Cosmos Sack in his grasp.

“No need. Healing our people is the most important,” Zac said with a shake of his head before some anger flashed in his eyes. “Besides, I am still pretty pissed off. I need the targets for myself.”

Unbridled bloodlust started to seep from Zac’s whole body as he spoke, blanketing the area. Ling Tian took a step back in shock, and even his own people looked over at him with fear in their eyes.

It was true what he said. He had kept it together as best he could, but seeing Alea’s pitiful state had ignited a furious fire in his heart that threatened to consume him. If he didn’t get an outlet for this wrath soon he felt he would literally explode. So he wasted no more time before rushing over to the rear, where a thick sea of darkness had created a line of demarcation that the zombies were unable to pass.

Any Zombie foolish enough to enter the sea of shadows was immediately stabbed by multiple shadow spears, giving the defenders a rest from their desperate defense. But Zac had no intention to play it safe, so he simply leaped over the large shadow and landed in the middle of the elite zombie horde with a crash.

The rotting zombies shrieked and immediately threw themselves at him with reckless abandon. Teeth and claws tried to rip him to pieces, and Zac let them try their best as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He didn’t know who he was angry at. Was it himself, for delaying the rescue? At the Undead for pushing his people to such a pitiful state? Or the System that set the stage these blood baths just for the off-chance that someone worthwhile would rise from the mountain of corpses? He had no answer,

but then again he hadn't jumped into a sea of zombies in search of answers.

He was looking for catharsis.

Chapter 359: Evil Stars

Zac wasn't actually in great condition after unleashing his three strongest attacks in short succession. He had used almost two thirds of his Cosmic Energy and his body hurt all over. The upgraded **[Nature's Punishment]** was responsible for the largest part of the cost, whereas **[Deforestation]** was the source of the strain.

He had barely managed to heal up his body while he traveled on the Flying Treasure, and using the first two swings of **[Deforestation]** had caused a few of his old wounds to open up again. But with his massive Vitality he would sooner or later get back in shape, and the pain wasn't something that would hinder him in dealing with some weak Zombies.

The fact that **[Nature's Punishment]** had reached Peak mastery had shocked him somewhat. It was the second skill to reach the apex, and Zac would have thought that he would evolve **[Loamwalker]** or **[Axe Mastery]** before he pushed that skill to peak mastery. He did use his movement skill almost constantly in his human form, whereas he had barely used **[Nature's Punishment]** more than ten times.

Truthfully he barely remembered jumping off from the Flying treasure. His wrath pushed through the roof upon seeing his significantly smaller army getting harassed, and yet it managed to increase even further when he saw Alea getting ambushed. He had barely managed to restrain himself from unleashing the third strike of **[Deforestation]** in his fury, instead opting to finish the elites with **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Thinking about a skill reaching peak mastery made Zac remember that he hadn't actually tested **[Chop]** and its extra blade. So Zac finally started to curtail his churning emotions even though he just wanted to go crazy, and instead opted to see the capabilities of the skill. So he summoned **[Chop]** and grew a five-meter blade to clear out the area around him. The

next moment the blade detached, and started to hover by him like a silent sentinel.

The zombies didn't care in the slightest about their fallen brethren, and they unhesitantly stepped over their corpses to get to the source of the life force. This forced Zac to keep summoning new blades and shoot them off into the zombie horde, each blade causing a tunnel of carnage before it ran out of steam. But he mainly focused on the permanent blade, and he was currently using it to constantly sweep the zombies that were lucky enough to survive the thinning out of his other blades.

He quickly realized that he could both choose to control the fractal edge by splitting his attention or to simply let it float in his proximity and attack any enemy that got close. His limit was roughly fifty-meters, and it was almost as quick as the blades he shot out like projectiles. If he wanted to he could have it spin around him at a rapid pace, killing anything that got too close.

But Zac eventually let it guard his back autonomously as he kept pushing through the Zombie horde. He didn't want to rely on the flying blade alone, as the battle caused his rage to resurface. He knew it was to a large part the splinter manipulating him, but he didn't care at the moment. He let the rage flow through him as he became a tool of slaughter.

Constant roars of the zombies echoed across the area as Zac flashed around with [**Loamwalker**]. Any time he appeared he would release a couple of blades with [**Chop**], each attack clearing out over a hundred Zombies. He wouldn't immediately leave though, but instead launch a furious assault with [**Verun's Bite**] at melee range at all the surviving zombies in the area.

He was long covered in bile and rotten flesh, but he didn't care. He just kept swinging his axe, not thinking, not feeling. He didn't know how long he fought or how many Zombies he killed, but he finally stumbled, realizing he was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy.

“You once asked me to remind you that you were becoming a bit murderous. I think this would count. Got it out of your system?” a voice reached him from the side when he finally slowed down his rampage.

Zac blinked and took a look around, and found that Ogras had appeared amongst a clump of shadows. There were still Zombies around, but it could no longer be called a horde. There were rather islands of zombies in a sea of destroyed bodies, with perhaps 10% of the original number remaining.

“I did all this?” Zac muttered with some confusion.

“Don’t flatter yourself. We took care of more than half of them while you went on your rampage,” Ogras snorted. “But you seemed disinclined to cooperate so we stayed out of your path.”

“Let the others deal with the remainders. Some people still have some fight left, and these things give a decent amount of Cosmic Energy and money for the recruits. Don’t hog it all for yourself,” Ogras said with a smile.

Just as Ogras spoke he spotted a familiar figure effortlessly fighting against a clump of a few hundred undead. Kenzie was killing them at an impressive speed as she shot out various skills at a rapid pace. Each skill seemed to be quite basic and something that cost next to no Cosmic Energy, yet the elite zombies kept falling to never stand up again. At her current pace she would need less than a minute to clear the pack.

“It’s quite odd,” Ogras muttered as he followed Zac’s gaze.

“What is?” Zac asked, afraid that the perceptive demon had found a clue of Jeeves.

“It’s hard to explain,” the demon hesitantly said. “But her fighting style is odd.”

“Odd how?” Zac asked as he looked at his sister downing one zombie after another.

It was efficient, but nothing too impressive to be honest. He would personally be able to turn that whole pack to goop with two swings of his axe.

“Don’t you see the flow? She is never in danger. It almost looks like the undead are cooperating with her, trying to get themselves killed,” Ogras said with some incredulity.

Zac initially didn’t understand what Ogras was talking about, but he almost immediately got an explanation of what the demon meant. While Kenzie was focusing on the zombies ahead of her with a flurry of attacks two more undead tried to rush her from behind. She didn’t even look back though, and carelessly waved her hand above her head, shooting out two small fireballs toward them.

The aim of the first spell was perfect and it hit one of the zombies straight in its throat, but the other one was unfortunately aimed toward the ground, and wouldn’t be able to do any damage. But just as Zac considered throwing a rock to kill the other attacker something shocking happened.

The first zombie fell backward from the attack, felling the second one who was a few steps behind. Both the undead fell down on the ground, and the unharmed zombie coincidentally fell into a position where the second fireball hit it straight in its head. The two struggled for a while, but Zac could sense that the fireballs were infused with the Seed of Tinder, and there was no way they would survive.

The remaining zombies ahead were soon killed by Kenzie’s real attacks, and she moved on without giving the two zombies behind a single look. It all looked like a great coincidence things worked out, but Zac knew better than to believe that. It was no doubt Jeeves who helped her out.

At least he hoped that was all it did. If it was actually taking control of her it was a whole different issue. It was something that had bothered him ever since they fought the cyborg. Jeeves and whatever was planted inside the foreman might have come from the same people, and they had no idea if there were some failsafes in the AI that would turn Kenzie into a monster.

“Do you see what I mean?” Ogras said as he slowly shook his head, clearly having a hard time believing what he just witnessed. “That girl is another type of monster. What kind of

scary woman was your mom to give birth to evil stars like the two of you?”

“Well, Kenzie was always the smart one,” Zac coughed, not sure how he would lie his way out of that one. “I guess she got pretty good at fighting zombies during her time at the Dead Zone.”

Kenzie noticed the attention soon enough and stopped her onslaught, instead opting to walk over to the two.

“Are you ok?” she said with worry in her eyes. “I’m sure Alea will be fine. I bet she will be back on her feet by the time we get back to Port Atwood with these people.”

“I’m ok,” Zac smiled, but he wasn’t sure how he really felt.

His rage had subsided after exhausting himself against the zombies, but he was choked up by a feeling of impotency. There were too many things to do, and it felt like he was spread so thin that he would fall apart. Worse yet was that his people kept dying and there wasn’t much he could do about it.

“How are the rest?” Zac finally asked, even though he was afraid of the answer. “How many did we lose?”

“Half,” Ogras sighed. “Just above half of the people who set out from Port Atwood are still alive. Most of the casualties happened two days ago, but there were constant losses during their escape.”

“Half,” Zac numbly repeated.

“The good news is that our fighting capabilities haven’t decreased nearly as much,” Ogras said. “Most of the casualties were the recruits and the non-combat classes. Only 12 of your Valkyries and 17 of the demon warriors died. And you know that the most effective way to get stronger is by pushing oneself beyond one’s limits. The survivors can no longer be considered recruits, they are a true army now.”

“Still,” Zac sighed. “Thousands of our people have died. And for what? The Undead Empire didn’t even lose a general, and their horde is currently on its way to finishing the array.”

“People fall against the invaders every minute all around the globe,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head. “We can’t let it weigh us down. We do what we can and the cards will fall where they will. It’s not your duty to save the world alone, we’re all in this together.”

Zac looked with surprise at his sister, not expecting such a viewpoint from her. He would have thought she would be even more broken up about it, as many of those who fell were people that Kenzie socialized with during her stay at the Academy. Meanwhile Zac hadn’t even met most of them.

But he soon realized that while Kenzie hadn’t battled nearly as much as himself she might have lost even more. He knew she had been forced to witness one person after another dying around her. First the Tutorial where less than half survived, then being dropped off right next to the Dead Zone.

She never spoke much about her time there, but her occasional comments had pictured a pretty bleak existence even before that old dog started to lust after her. Most of the friends she had made the last year had already died. Zac was much better off in that regard. He hadn’t really lost anything so far, which might be why these deaths felt so heavy on his shoulders.

“We’ll let everyone rest for 8 hours,” Zac said, changing the heavy subject. “After that we’ll change course and head for Erdenet.”

The army of Port Atwood hadn’t known about the much closer teleportation station owned by the Sino-Indian Alliance, and they were currently heading for an array that was weeks away. Zac couldn’t spend that much time protecting the army, so he would change course. The return trip would still take over twice as long as it did while he zapped here on his flying treasure.

He didn’t have the time to divert his attention too long, and he needed to get back to closing Incursions. Whittling down millions of low-leveled zombies was a waste of his time, and his strength was better spent on putting out the other fires on Earth that others were unable to deal with.

Ogras and Zac went back to the army, but Kenzie wanted to help out with cleaning out the remaining undead in the area so she stuck around. When the Port Atwood Army heard that they finally would be able to rest most of them simply crumbled down on the cold ground, not even bothering to take out anything to sleep on.

In just seconds snores echoed across the area, while a small group kept watch in all directions. Normally there would also be a group responsible for looting the army, but the zombies carried nothing of value. Zac and Ogras stayed in the middle of the army, each taking out a few crystals to regain their spent Cosmic Energy as quickly as possible.

“That was in the nick of time,” a rough voice came from close-by, and Zac opened his eyes to see Ilvere and Janos walk over.

Chapter 360: Dangers of Technology

Both Ilvere and Janos sported a new collection of scars, but it looked like both of them would be fine after some rest.

“Not quick enough to prevent Alea from being wounded,” Zac sighed after hearing what Ilvere said.

“That lass is strong, I believe she will be able to overcome this,” Ilvere said as he thumped down on the ground in front of Zac and Ogras.

Zac only nodded, though he knew that the situation, unfortunately, wasn't that easy. Being strong-willed wasn't enough to survive a fractured soul.

“Just what happened here?” Zac asked.

Ilvere grimaced as he recounted what the group had encountered since the teleporters went dark. Zac frowned when he heard how arduous their past days had been, and pangs of guilt once again rose in his heart. He knew that he couldn't be responsible for all ills of the world, but he still felt that he was somehow to blame.

“I guess we're lucky we weren't deemed important enough for one of the true generals to act,” Ilvere said with a depreciating smile. “Otherwise we would never have made it this far. They have a lot of strong guys in their ranks.”

“It's still amazing you managed to hold on this long,” Zac said with genuine appreciation.

“The lass was a large factor in our survival, as was the barkeep,” Ilvere said.

“The Barkeep? Ryan?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That boy is a real hero.”

Zac blankly looked at Ilvere for a few seconds, having great trouble reconciling the young man who had been hiding out in his apartment with the epithet 'Hero'. Did the Barkeep class possess some hidden and amazing attacks against the undead? Or did it allow him to become the fabled drunken fist?

"We have been constantly fighting without stopping for over a week. Some people we had to carry for a while since they were truly out of energy, but we normally would have no way of marching for 9 days without sleep. Luckily his brews helped us stay conscious up till now. Of course, many will be in a weak state for a while," Ilvere explained.

"That's okay," Zac nodded. "We should be fine unless the Lich King himself comes knocking."

The two demon generals soon excused themselves though, as they desperately needed to sleep as well. They were amongst those who hadn't slept a wink for the whole duration, and they had always stayed in the frontlines to keep their people safe. Zac and Ogras didn't speak much either, instead opting to recuperate in case another wave of attackers arrived.

Thankfully they were completely unaccosted, and the army set out without trouble 8 hours later. A lot of people were sporting various degrees of wounds and traces of exertion on their faces, but they no longer seemed like zombies themselves. Between the healing pills Zac brought and proper rest they were in far better shape compared to before.

The army kept the highest pace they could through the wildlands, but there was no way such a large group could move as quickly as Zac was able to proceed on his own. So he spent his time going back and forth around the army, killing anything that might prove a threat to them. They had already lost so much, so he didn't want to lose a single man on the final stretch of their return.

Thankfully it quickly became clear that the Undead had given up on taking out his army, as Zac couldn't even find the shadows of a single elite undead in the vicinity. There were still a few zombies and quite a few beasts, but nothing that indicated an army in the area.

Zac could only guess that some of the ghost scouts had seen the final battle, and the generals felt the price was too high to keep targeting them. Besides, the death marsh over the past 10 days had created quite some distance between themselves and the three main hordes.

Since there was no immediate threat he could relax somewhat, and he took the chance to figure out various things. His first idea to save time was to find a town, or at least the ruins of one, to see if he could gain control of it to buy a teleportation array.

Unfortunately there was no response after finding three abandoned towns, and he wasn't able to find a populated one either. This whole area seemed to be made from former tundra, either from eastern Russia or Mongolia, and there were barely any people in these regions even before the integration. Now with strong beasts walking the plains it was no surprise that the few places of civilization he found were long deserted.

After a day's travel it started to become increasingly clear that they might just have to walk the whole way back, but that didn't mean that they couldn't utilize their time efficiently. So Zac took his sister some distance away from the army, and after looking around placed down a few array disks to isolate themselves from prying eyes.

"What's going on?" Kenzie asked with interest when she saw how careful Zac was.

"Here," Zac said as he took out a few of the Technocrat items. "Are these of any benefit to Jeeves?"

He had taken out one of the scout drones and one of the laser weapons that had been attached to a battle droid. Kenzie gingerly picked up the two items and curiously looked at them. Zac was about to explain what they were when a red light shot out of Kenzie's eye and quickly enveloped the two items.

"Wha-" Zac exclaimed as he took a step back.

"Pretty cool, right?" Kenzie said with a wide smile.

"You looked like a cyborg just now," Zac said with a stern face. "What's going on?"

“Well, you told me to avoid showing off my skills yesterday, right?” Kenzie said with a shrug. “So we have been trying to figure out ways to make Jeeves abilities to look more like normal skills.”

His sister was referring to the fact that he warned her of relying on her AI too much. Her performance against the left-over zombies had been a bit too eye-catching, and people had started to talk. Luckily his own power was enough to justify Kenzie’s skills for most people, as they assumed he had given her various treasures and help. But he still didn’t want to take any risks where the secret about Jeeves would leak.

Using a beam that shot out of her eye to scan items felt pretty damn far away from the goal of staying incognito, so he didn’t understand what she meant. She had looked like a robot when the red light exited her pupil. But Zac realized on second thought that he had actually sensed a bit of Cosmic Energy in the ray, something that never was the case with technology.

But Zac didn’t have time to ask how she made that happen, as the drone suddenly started to hover above Kenzie’s hand.

“Wow, so cool,” Kenzie said as the small drone made a few turns around her.

“Is it you controlling it?” Zac asked.

“Yeah, or well, it’s Jeeves who controls it,” Kenzie said. “Do you have more of these?”

“Yeah, a whole lot of them. What are you pla-“ Zac said, but his voice got stuck in his throat.

The drone started to disintegrate, turning into lights as they entered Kenzie’s forehead. In just a second it was completely gone, not even leaving a speck of dust behind.

“Jeeves ate it,” Kenzie explained, though the comment felt a bit superfluous. “It seems he gets smarter the more types of technology he eats. Do you have more stuff?”

“I do, but this doesn’t feel safe,” Zac asked with some hesitation.

Jeeves was probably stolen technology from Firmament's Edge, and feeding it to make it stronger came with very real risks. It was not like Jeeves followed the Three Laws of Robotics. The AI might turn against Kenzie when it was strong enough, killing her before returning to its creators.

"I know what you are thinking, but I think we are bound for life," Kenzie said after some hesitation. "We are fused in a way, my soul gives it life. If I die Jeeves will cease to exist. But perhaps the only way to know how he works for sure is finding mom."

Zac slowly nodded, but he couldn't help but have a bad feeling in his heart. He could only hope there would be some answers inside the Mystic Realm since there was no way that place had no connection to Leandra. He handed over part of the things he looted from the Technocrat Incursion for Kenzie to go through in the end. He also made sure that she wouldn't absorb things that might be crucial in operating the large forges or the mechas.

Unfortunately it seemed that he had made a mistake in not looting the corpses of the Technocrat Incursion. According to Kenzie's preliminary findings it seemed that a lot of the technology relied on subneural chips to act as interfaces between the Technocrat's brains and the drones and such.

Kenzie would still be able to control the items with the help of Jeeves, but it would be difficult for others to handle Technocrat technology in the short run. Perhaps they could refit some things to be controlled by normal computers instead, as implanting chipsets into one's brain seemed like the kind of modifications the System frowned upon.

After handing over the Technocrat items to his sister he resumed his vigil around the army. Ogras sometimes joined him, and they mostly discussed their next step after dropping off the army at a usable Teleportation Array.

"What do you think, can I take him down?" Zac asked during one of their discussions.

"Hm... It would help if we could fight his top general," Ogras mused, understanding that Zac was referring to the Lich King.

“Seeing his strength would give us a hint of the power of the Lich himself. But truthfully...”

“What?” Zac probed as the demon trailed off.

“You have accumulated far more power than is the norm for an F-Grade, and taking down most Incursions will be easy,” Ogras said. “But the Undead Empire is endlessly vast, and we don’t know their means. You will not only be fighting a true undead elite, but also his army and defensive arrays. There is no way he’ll leave the safety of his base as things stand. They can just wait it out until they kill this planet.”

“So you think I need to evolve first?” Zac sighed.

“Well, at least go to the tower and get that title. We might also find other useful items there that will help us,” Ogras said, once again bringing up the Tower of Eternity.

“The tower?” Zac frowned. “There is no time for that. Honestly, I’m thinking of skipping going altogether and instead push for as quick an evolution as possible.”

“What? No!” Ogras shouted. “Don’t be crazy! Remember, getting the title is not the only reason we’re going. You’re supposed to find a patron force as well, in case The Great Redeemer finds his way here.”

“The terraforming might be completed any day now. I can’t gallivant off-planet for weeks while our planet is collapsing!”

“Visiting the tower does not take that long,” the demon said with a roll of his eyes.

“How long does it take then?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had already heard that there were 81 known floors, and Ogras had once divulged that he was stuck on a floor for a month before passing it.

“Between one day and a year,” Ogras said.

“A YEAR?!” Zac shouted. “There’s no way we have time for that!”

“Just listen,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “The tower itself only takes one day at the most. But you are not

transported directly to the Tower.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

Zac hadn't really delved into the subject of the Tower of Eternity before, as he had expected Ogras would go over it before they set out. But it seemed it was time to get a better picture of how that place worked.

“You get teleported to the Base Town. Or at least the Base Town of your sector,” Ogras said. “It is a huge town that extends around the tower itself. After using the token you will be able to stay a year at the longest, though you can leave early. The tower itself takes up to 99 days, but it is in a special space, so only one day will pass in real time.”

“So we could be back just one day after activating the tokens?” Zac asked with intrigue.

“Yes, but we should stay longer if time allows it. Entering the tower itself can only count as half the benefit of that place.”

Chapter 361: An Overdue Meeting

“What’s the point of delaying the stay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“There are all kinds of reasons. The Tower of Eternity is the gathering place of young elites and a way for forces who would never be able to contact each other to interact. It’s a great opportunity for trading or making connections. Some of the larger forces have a permanent presence there, hosting auctions or the like,” Ogras explained with excitement glimmering in his eyes.

“Auctions?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “You think we might be able to find a soul-mending treasure for sale?”

“Perhaps,” Ogras said with hesitation. “But you should know we’re just country bumpkins compared to most people that are there, and there are no restrictions on the wealth they bring. Some bring tens of billions in spending money, and soul-mending treasures are always in demand. I brought a billion nexus coins I got from my grandpa last time, yet I was only a small fish over there.”

Zac frowned in realization. It was true that his net worth was a few billion even excluding the shipyard and the repository, but a lot of it came from the mountain of gear that he looted from Rydel and the hunt. If he easily could convert all that to real money he would have long done so.

There was a significant pile of Nexus Crystals accumulated from the mining operations, but that would make up less than a Billion Nexus Coins even if he sold it all at Calrin’s. A C-grade powerhouse might make more than Zac’s whole net worth in a day or two from exploring a Mystic Realm. So the

financial prowess of old established forces was something that Zac couldn't even dream of matching up against.

He remembered how Average offered a Billion Nexus Coins just for Zac to back off and let him fight the Star Ox. If he encountered such a scion who wanted the soul mending for himself there was no way he could compete. Zac suddenly felt quite impoverished for the first time in a long while.

“Don't look so glum,” Ogras snorted. “We'll figure something out. Besides, auctions are not only about spending strength. If we gather enough funds to seriously overspend we'll most likely win the treasure in an auction. Even most rich scions would stop at a certain point unless they really need the item, as they would look like wasteful idiots who are only good at spending their parent's money otherwise.”

“Can we rob people over there?” Zac suddenly asked. “In case we get outbid.”

He didn't relish the idea of turning to robbery, but if it came down to it some thievery was nothing compared to what he had already done. If snatching a Cosmos Sack would save his people's lives, then he would do so. Of course, stealing was the last possible solution if they truly ran out of options.

“Rob people?” Ogras said as his eyes widened, clearly not liking Zac's idea. “Don't even think about it. There's technically no laws over there, but it's very uncommon for daylight robbery to take place.”

“Why not? A bunch of rich targets from another side of the cosmos. It seems like a pretty good place to rob someone,” Zac said with confusion. “Chances are you'll never see them again afterward.”

“It's not that easy. The Ruthless Heavens will restrict you if you attack someone,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “You can't just snatch the Cosmos Sack and disappear, teleporting out will get a one minute delay. I've heard that even a quest might be created to take you down, depending on what you did. Besides, there's the issue of treasures.”

“What do you mean?” Zac frowned.

It sounded like the System didn't directly stop you from robbing people, but you needed the strength to survive the ordeal. It was almost like a quest for the robber as well. You can rob someone, but you needed to survive for a minute to keep your spoils.

"The Ruthless Heavens restricts what treasures you can bring to the Tower of Eternity," Ogras explained.

"Like the hunt?" Zac asked with a frown, not wanting to leave behind all his stuff again.

"Not exactly. You can bring as many items as you want, but defensive and offensive treasures are limited to E-Grade. Raw materials and other types of treasures can be D-Grade, likely since the Ruthless Heavens wants to give young elites a chance to trade valuable items that can help them grow," Ogras said.

"So what's the problem then?" Zac asked. "I already have E-Grade defensive gear and an E-Grade Spirit Tool Weapon."

"Yes, but both are at low stage," Ogras snorted. "Made for Peak F-Grade warriors and the recently evolved. But what if someone takes out a peak E-Grade defensive treasure to block your attack, then a peak E-Grade offensive array to attack you. Mind you, the **[Void Ball]** you threw at the Technocrat monstrosity was a High E-Grade item, not peak."

Zac frowned, finally understanding what Ogras was getting at. If some rich guy snatched the soul healing treasure out from under his nose it was also possible that he brought some extremely strong defenses, since he was already wealthy.

"How is that fair?" Zac muttered with annoyance. "So some rich guy can just rip through the tower with the help of his family's wealth? Just throw out thousands of offensive arrays at everything around him?"

"Having a rich family or strong friends is a strength in of itself," Ogras smiled. "The Multiverse was never fair, and neither is the Ruthless Heavens. Just look at yourself with all your Progenitor titles or the other Earthlings with their Tutorial title, how is that fair? But the tower tests potential in

the end, and external strength gets more and more restricted the further up the tower you progress.”

“But those restrictions don’t apply to the town outside?” Zac asked, understanding what the demon was getting at.

“Exactly,” Ogras nodded. “That’s why there’s so little violence outside apart from the occasional village idiot who doesn’t understand the immensity of the heavens and earth. No one knows what hidden tricks the other people are carrying around. Starting a fight might kill you, even if you’re the young master of a large clan.”

“Okay, you’ve sold me,” Zac finally said with a nod. “We’re heading to the tower as soon as we’re ready. I just want to reach the peak of E-Grade in my second class to get the quests, and we need to figure out the Dao Funnel as well.”

“Agreed,” Ogras nodded. “But we’re truthfully running out of time. We can only delay these hordes from completing the Terraforming Array for so long. We will probably need a week or two in the tower to accomplish all our goals, so we can’t just go at the last minute either.”

“I know,” Zac sighed, all too aware of the constraint of times.

Where was the peak quality Clone Technique when he needed it? Splitting up into ten people to hit all his targets at once would make his life so much easier. But he knew he was stuck in the middle of the wilderness for the time being, so he could only make the most of it.

Since Zac had figured out his next steps there was nothing much else to do. He asked his sister to pause on the Technocrat research, and instead double down on the Dao Funnel. Meanwhile the two returned to switching between pondering on the Dao while riding in one of the cars and keeping watch for enemies.

But Zac’s mind was unable to properly calm down, and his brain was constantly churning in an effort to solve all the various issues that plagued him and his people.

On the sixth day since setting out Zac was making some small talk with a couple of the Valkyries and John, the American

expat he once met outside Eastern Hills. John had initially been a bit awkward around Zac after reuniting, even apologizing for trying to recruit him into his small zombie hunting party back when Zac went under the alias David. But he soon calmed down after seeing that Zac didn't carry himself like some Emperor or ruthless warlord.

It was a nice break to just hang around a bit. He needed a break from constantly running back and forth to make sure the world wasn't ending. But his a small spike of danger suddenly appeared in his mind, and Zac instinctively looked in the distance, trying to find the source of the feeling. The Valkyries looked at him in confusion, proving that they hadn't noticed anything amiss.

"Is something wrong?" Jenna, one of the Valkyries, asked.

"It's nothing," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Thought I heard something. I'll check it out just in case."

"Do you need us to come with?" another Valkyrie asked with a frown.

"No, that's okay," Zac smiled. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

With that he activated [**Loamwalker**], disappearing in a flash. He quickly moved toward a small hill in the distance, each step moving him dozens of meters forward.

When he saw the person on the other side of the hill his eyes widened in alarm as a storm of leaves erupted around him. His axe had already appeared in his hand as Zac was mentally preparing for a fight for his life.

It was a Zhix warrior who was sitting on a chair, clearly waiting for him. Zac instantly knew the insectoid was bad news because he was completely unable to sense it even the thing it sat just ten meters away from him, leisurely inspecting him with interest. It was just like with his meeting with Inevitability, though this clearly wasn't the same person. This Zhix looked older, and it emitted a cultured aura.

There were no weapons that Zac could see, but that didn't mean he was unarmed. He was wearing a robe that was a bit similar to Zac's own get-up that he got from Yrial, but the

Zhix's went in a maroon hue. It made the insectoid emit a slightly sinister aura even though its otherwise refined appearance.

"Do not worry, I am not here to fight you. I am not as prone to violence as my daughter," the Zhix smiled. "Our meeting was long overdue, so I thought we should have a chat."

"Void's Disciple?" Zac said as he kept his distance, not daring to sit down in the empty seat.

"So cautious. Well, it makes sense after your meeting with my child," he smiled.

"Daughter?" Zac couldn't help himself from confirming since that wasn't nomenclature that should exist among the Zhix.

"Well, that's how I see those two. They were the last survivors of a branch that was almost completely eradicated during the War of Emancipation. I raised them from ignorant children scurrying in the darkness to great warriors in service of our Lord. I am not sure if they see me as a father though," the Zhix smiled. "I only learned the name for it after arriving here, since we have diverged from the old to embrace the new."

"So, what do you want?" Zac asked instead of delving further into Zhix pronouns or genealogy.

"I have come to talk to you about the Undead Empire," Void's Disciple simply said.

"I guess you want me to take care of them for you so that you don't get your boss in trouble?" Zac snorted, not bothering to hide his disdain.

"Did Salvation tell you?" the Zhix asked with a shake of his head. "It's an embarrassing story that one. He somehow found the inheritance that the Lord left for us. Unfortunately my ancestors underestimated the power of the Zhix legions, causing us to lose the war. Our Holy land was lost as well, and along with it much knowledge."

"And you're not here for revenge?" Zac said with suspicion.

"No, his talent was high but his mind was already broken before he found the opportunity. He mixed up our grand

undertaking with the religion of your old world, making him inadvertently work against his own master,” Void said with disdain. “Perhaps him joining his so-called Unity was the greatest outcome.”

“In any case, does my reasoning matter why I want to assist you? You have your path to follow, as do I. I can see it in your eyes and through your actions. You carry the hopes of your people on your shoulders, and only you have the strength to fulfill those dreams. You are nothing like that crafty little beastman who cares more about profits and image than his people,” Void said. “He is currently working toward getting his hands on a teleportation token rather than fighting the invaders.”

Zac stared at Void’s Disciple for a few seconds, not sure what to say. Honestly, what he was saying was true. He knew he had to close the Undead IncurSION as soon as possible, even if it helped the Dominators as well. The alternative was to let the whole planet get terraformed, and that was not something he would allow no matter what.

“I met with the Lich controlling the undead incurSION not long ago,” Void suddenly added, making Zac’s eyes widen in shock. “He is quite strong. Taking him down will not be easy.”

“We’re aware,” Zac tersely said.

“I’m sure,” the Zhix smiled. “But are you aware that the array they are building is already functional?”

Chapter 362: Time Pressure

“What?” Zac couldn’t help but blurt out. “Impossible, the array is far from finished.”

“It doesn’t need to be finished to work, but it will charge much faster if it is,” Void’s Disciple said.

“Changing the alignment of a whole planet is an enormous undertaking for people at our level, so all hope is not yet lost,” Void continued, throwing over a crystal. “The information is there. I guess that you have between one month and two to take the undead down. When the process starts you have a week at best to stop it before the damage becomes irrevocable.”

“And you expect me to believe you will stand down and let the Undead go through with the transformation?” Zac asked.

“That would ruin your lord’s plans as well.”

“If the undead succeed we will stay as long as possible, and hopefully our Lord will take mercy on us and pick us up. If not, then that’s our fate,” Void said with equanimity as he stood up. “We will not be the source of causing new enmities for our Lord, especially not with a force like the Undead Empire. We are not the only seeds as you are no doubt aware of.”

Zac’s thoughts flashed to the Medhin Royals, immediately understanding what he was referring to. There were at least two worlds that The Great Redeemer had planted his seeds of Karma on, and perhaps there were many more of them. It was both a relief and troubling that The Great Redeemer didn’t place all his bets on this planet alone, because that meant that he might still manage to evolve to C-Grade even if Zac saved Earth. Forming a grudge with a C-Grade Hegemon would result in all kinds of trouble.

“And when do you expect your boss to come and pick you up?” Zac asked though he wasn’t really expecting a truthful answer.

“Some mysteries are best left unanswered,” the Zhix smiled, confirming Zac’s guess.

Zac tried to figure out what other information he could try to weasel out of the insectoid now that they stood face to face, but he was dragged out of his musings to once again get ready for battle when he saw the Zhix move. Energy churned around Zac’s body and he was ready to unleash everything he got at moment’s notice.

“I’ve said what needed to be said. The rest will depend on you,” Void’s Disciple said as he calmly looked at Zac. “Of course, if you want you’re welcome to try your hand against me. Killing me will solve one threat to your planet instantly. My children are strong, but they are not able to rein in their bloodthirst. Their carnage would sooner or later result in their demise.”

“So how about it?” Void’s Disciple his eyes even showing some anticipation as the space behind him shuddered.

The next moment it looked like a window to the cosmos appeared behind the Zhix.

Zac squeezed the handle of his axe, a pearl of sweat running down his forehead. This truly was an opportunity that was hard to come by. They still had no idea where Void’s Disciple hid, and they didn’t have any special sight like Abbot Everlasting Peace to track him down again if he disappeared now. The Dominators had been elusive since the integration, only appearing when they wanted.

But as much as he hated to admit it, Zac was afraid. The fight with the Cyborg had utterly crushed his sense of invulnerability, and he wasn’t ready to take on the Dominators. Especially not Void’s Disciple, who felt like a far larger threat than Inevitability and Harbinger, even if those two had passed Void’s Disciple in levels after the hunt.

Zac eventually he lowered his axe, and silently shook his head slightly.

“Another time then,” the Zhix laughed as he threw something at Zac. “I will not assist you directly, but you emerging victorious against the Lich King would be in my best interest, so I will help out a bit. This array is specifically designed to interrupt the arrays in the Lich King’s castle, though the effect will only last for a second or two. Perhaps it will create an opportunity.”

“Is this why you visited him earlier?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked down at the black crystal in his hand.

He was unsure whether to trust the Zhix, but he couldn’t find any reason he would lie at this juncture. The best thing for Void would truly be if Zac won, at which point the Dominator could simply stay hidden until his boss arrived and culled the planet. The Zhix didn’t answer the question, and he only smiled as he turned around to walk into the cosmos he had opened a door into.

But Zac wasn’t ready to just let him go. The whole meeting had been on the Dominator’s terms, and Zac only knew what Void’s Disciple wanted him to know. He needed to get something more out of him, and his mind immediately turned to one matter that so far eluded them.

“I thought you wanted to talk about the Mystic Realm since you came all this way,” Zac said, throwing out a hook open for interpretation.

The Zhix immediately stopped in its tracks, and a monstrous aura rife with killing intent blanketed the whole area in an instant. It was far beyond what he encountered when fighting Inevitability, and Zac unhesitantly activated [**Hatchetman’s Rage**] since he was afraid he would get instantly killed if he didn’t go all-out from the start.

But the aura disappeared as quickly as it came, and the Zhix took a deep breath before looking into Zac’s eyes.

“The item that is being birthed has no fate with you. Only death awaits if you enter the battle for that thing, even if you

are our fated fulcrum. The same goes for the Church and even the Undead Empire. That thing can only go to our Lord,” he tersely said, before entering the cosmos and disappearing.

Zac stared at the spot where Zoid’s Disciple disappeared for a few seconds before he took a deep breath to steady himself. The aura Void’s Disciple released was shocking, but Zac was ecstatic with the result of dangling that bait.

The fact that Void’s Disciple would stop at nothing to gain the treasure of the Mystic Realm, but was willing to let the Undead Empire terraform Earth, was an extremely important revelation. He wasn’t exactly sure what to do with the information just yet, but it was a great clue on how to proceed in their war against The Great Redeemer.

The Zhix’s outburst also gave Zac a decent approximation of the power of Void’s Disciple. The aura had dwarfed his own, even after he had activated his boost. That meant his attributes were clearly superior. Furthermore, his killing intent was also extremely dense which meant he was a seasoned warrior rather than someone who had gained his power by hiding and a cave and cultivating.

He needed to become stronger.

“Is everything alright, Lord Atwood?” one of the Valkyries asked when he returned.

“It was nothing after all,” Zac said as he forced out a smile, trying to hide the backlash from activating his skill.

The next day Zac kept an extremely vigilant watch of the surroundings, but neither Void’s Disciple nor any Zhix horde could be found in the vicinity. He still didn’t know what to believe about what Void said, but Zac leaned toward him telling the truth.

The fact that the array was already working was extremely troubling. Zac thought that the Terraforming would be indefinitely put on hold as long as Thea’s army kept one of the three main hordes from moving. But it turned out that their sacrifices were only delaying the inevitable.

Zac didn't want to take any chances, so he gave himself a four-week time limit before he would have to assault the core of the Dead Zone. He desperately needed to make himself and his people stronger in that short while.

The simplest solution was for himself and Ogras evolving, but they weren't the only ones who could change the course of the battle. Unfortunately it turned out that neither Janos or Ilvere were able to evolve at the moment, lacking the qualifications to upgrade their classes. Zac could only hope that the merits they gained through the past battles would be enough to change that.

Having to guide this the slow convoy was also starting to get on Zac's nerves, and he even went so far as to change to his undead class to hunt any beasts within wide swathes of the army. He couldn't waste any time and wanted to boost his second class to level 75 as well before trying out for the tower. That way he would get the most out of his only attempt, as he wouldn't be able to go again like Ogras.

Another issue that made Zac worry was the constant anger in his chest since he arrived at the battle to see his people getting cut down. He was still able to control or push it down, but it had become a permanent presence in his mind. Now that Void's Disciple had exposed the looming threat of the massive array it only got worse.

Being angry in of itself wasn't the problem, the real issue was that he was being manipulated. He had been consumed by anger in the fight earlier, which was what allowed his skill to evolve. But his rage seemed to have loosened the restrictions on the Splinter of Oblivion, and its wicked energies were constantly seeping into his mind.

However, the change didn't only come with negatives. He had already learned that the funnel that the Draugr-lady set up in his mind did not only let the energy from the splinter out, but it also refined it somehow. Until now he hadn't really understood the effect of having the mysterious energy enter his mind, but he finally understood what it did.

It was making his soul stronger.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly what that meant, but he knew that his spirit was more substantial compared to before. It felt like he would be able to endure using his Dao Seeds for longer, and even his Dao Fields had become slightly more intense.

But Zac was worried even though the boost was a welcome addition now that he was scrambling for all ways to make himself stronger. His mental resilience was quite strong, but the effect of the Splinter just kept increasing. What would happen within the next few years, how long would it be until he turned into Anzonil's disciple, slowly becoming insane?

He needed to find some solution, hopefully one that would be able to keep the benefits while dealing with the unwanted side effects. He wasn't able to cultivate, but perhaps there were ways to improve one's mind that worked similarly, something like meditation manuals.

Zac soon enough returned to the car to ponder on the Dao, but he couldn't calm his mind down enough to enter a meditative state. He kept twisting back and forth before interrupting the Ogras' meditation to discuss various strategies.

The demon had been shocked to learn about the meeting with Void's Disciple, but his analysis of the information was the same as Zac's. It would be foolish to not operate under the assumption that what the Dominator said was true. But the demon took the situation more in stride, simply saying that the situation didn't change much and that there was not much that they could do while they were stuck in the middle of nowhere.

"You might as well go ahead, you acting like this is stressing me out," the demon finally said in exasperation after being interrupted for the fifth time. "The army will take almost another week until it's back. Use that time to close the incursions in the Underworld or something. I can't help with those anyway, so I will stay behind to protect the convoy."

"They might be waiting for me to leave though," Zac hesitantly said.

"Just go undercover, use your undead form and face changing or something," Ogras said with a shrug. "We'll pretend you're

still around. Besides, we haven't seen any undead activity in a week and we're far outside the area of the array they're making. It's a risk, but we need to take some risks at this point."

Zac was hesitant to leave his people at this juncture, but he did feel more confident if the demon stayed behind. Zac had seen the power he was able to unleash, especially after the inheritance. The demon was far stronger today compared to when fighting the Beast waves. Only the appearance of a general would be a match for him if he went all out.

And it was like Ogras said, they were so far away from the Undead Incursion by now. And if Void's Disciple wanted to kill the people here he could have already done so by himself. It was unlikely that Zac would be able to stop him at all as things stood.

"I'll take one last look to make sure no one is trailing us before I leave," Zac finally said. "I'm counting on you to keep our people and my sister safe."

Chapter 363: Stasis

Zac stepped through the Port Atwood teleporter and immediately rushed toward the government buildings. After he left under the guise of darkness he had been rushing without sleep for almost three days. Without adjusting his speed to the slow-moving army he was able to cover ground quite a bit faster, but he did take a circuitous route to keep a lookout for any threats lurking ahead of the army.

Luckily there was nothing apart from the occasional beast pack, nothing that would prove to be more than a small training excursion for the Port Atwood army by this point. His relief over the fact that his people were out of the woods was unfortunately overshadowed by the constant worry over whether he would find Alea waiting for him or if he would find a gravestone with her name on it.

“She is alive,” Adran immediately said when he saw Zac enter his office. “Calrin and the Tal-Eladar Healer has moved her to the valley with the Tree of Ascension. The energy is denser over there and the tree seems to bring her comfort.”

“Anything important that’s happened since I was gone?” Zac asked.

“Nothing major that can’t wait,” Adran said with a shake of his head, allowing Zac to head out without worries.

He immediately set out for the restricted area containing the valley hidden between the four mountain peaks. It had been a while since he last was here, and the area had largely recovered from being drained of energy then poisoned during the battle for the Fruit of Ascension. New vegetation was sprouting up everywhere, though Zac was a bit confused when he looked at them.

It almost felt as though Zac was having a hallucination as he walked among the unfamiliar flora. The plants and trees were

not of species he had seen before, most of them donning various bright colors. The only answer Zac could find was that the poisoned Tree of Ascension had caused a chain of mutations in the area, making the vegetation toxic.

Soon enough he reached the core of the valley and immediately spotted the Sky Gnome fiddling with a Divine Crystal next to a glass display while Tylia stood next to him. Zac's heart was gripped by fear when he saw the unmoving form of Alea inside the glass case, making it seem like a coffin. But he breathed out when he noticed her taking slow breaths, and immediately walked over to Calrin's side.

"How is she?" Zac asked after greeting the two.

"She is stable for now," Tylia said as she looked down at Alea. "I'm afraid we couldn't find a solution to her fractured soul though."

"This is a Stasis Array," Calrin explained when he noticed Zac's confusion. "It is used to keep mortally wounded people alive. But it doesn't completely stop the wound from worsening."

"How long does she have?" Zac asked with a sour feeling.

"Five years at the most," Tylia said after some consideration. "But the faster you find a solution the better. If you wait too long there will be repercussions even if her soul is healed."

"Like how?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Lost memories or crippled cultivation," Tylia sighed.

Zac silently digested the information, trying to figure out what to do. His back-up plan was to get the soul-mending fruit from Yrial if he couldn't heal her any quicker, but it looked like that option was out. Alea would be long dead before he could access the Inheritance Trial again.

"How confident are you of getting your hands on an item that can heal her?" Zac asked Calrin who stood to the side.

"I'm sorry, but there is no chance," Calrin said with a shake of his head. "I only have access to a few merchants, and I only have the lowest access to their wares. On top of that, there are

the restrictions put in place by the System. Even if I manage to expand our business enough to have a monopoly of all commerce on this planet I won't get enough credits to get access to people who can provide those types of pills or treasures."

"So it's impossible to find a solution on Earth?" Zac said with disappointment.

Ogras put forward the possibility of finding a cure in the Tower of Eternity, but Zac had hoped that the problem would be solved before that. It would allow him to climb the tower without worries, but it truly looked like there was no better option at this moment.

"Well... There are a few ways. You might find one in the Tower," the Sky Gnome said, echoing Ogras' idea. "Or if you manage to travel to an established Empire. Perhaps you can find an alchemist who can concoct such a pill there. But there is also the issue of cost in the short term."

"Cost?" Zac asked.

"It cost 25 million Nexus Coins a month to keep this array going," the Sky Gnome explained. "It continuously uses Divine Crystals and E-Grade Nexus Crystals."

"I'll pay for it," Zac said without hesitation.

It was a steep price that might bankrupt most forces on Earth, but Zac didn't care. Just the Beast Crystal mine alone was worth more than keeping the array running for a decade. And he would just keep getting wealthier as time passed. Besides, now was not the time to get stuck on trifling sums of money.

"Is there anything else we can do to improve her state? What about the Tree?" Zac asked, remembering Adran's words.

"We are not sure the reason for this," the Tal-Eladar hesitantly said. "Normally one's constitution and soul are two separate aspects. But the tree seems to be helping her somehow. I am not sure about her class, but staying close to it seems to have a positive effect on her. But it is not to the point that it actually heals her. "

“She is working on gaining a poison constitution,” Zac said.
“Can that have something to do with it?”

It was a bit of a secret, but he didn't want to hold any important information back if it might help heal her. Tylia looked a bit surprised, but not overly so.

“Gaining a constitution without having a natural aptitude is extremely hard,” she said. “She must have had a lucky encounter that allowed her to take the first step at all.”

“Would it help if I got something that might complete the process?” Zac asked.

“No idea, this is far beyond my knowledge. But you should know that treasures that would allow you to gain a special constitution or bloodline are even rarer than soul-mending treasures,” Tylia said. “My work here is done. The young human and I are no longer needed, the array is doing the same thing we did, but better. If it is alright with you I'll return to the side of Lady Verana.”

Zac nodded with a frown hearing that it might not work, but it was still worth trying in his opinion. Those kinds of treasures might be rare, but what Tylia didn't know was that Zac might have just the thing in his possession.

“That is okay,” Zac nodded “I am thankful for your help, I will remember it.”

“If you want to help the Tir'Emarel you just need to provide us with some of those beast crystals of yours,” Tylia smiled as she walked away toward the exit of the valley.

The Sky Gnome perked up when he heard the mention of crystals and he looked at the receding form of the healer before his eyes locked onto Zac with an enamored shimmer.

“Don't look at me like that, it gives me the creeps,” Zac snorted and threw out a Beast Crystal. “I found a mine full of these in the Underworld. Keep it between ourselves.”

“Good quality,” Calrin whistled as he went over it. “Are you keeping or selling?”

“I am low on cash at the moment. I am thinking of selling off most of these to have enough money to buy a soul-healing treasure for Alea,” Zac said. “Would you be able to sell them within a week. Roughly 2 billion Nexus Coins’ worth.”

“No problem, Beast Crystals are always in demand. If I only have a week you’ll lose a few percents though. But all that money... I am sorry to sound callous, but is it truly worth it?” the Sky Gnome said. “You should know, cultivating as a mortal is to burn insane amounts of money. If you spend everything on your subordinates you might find yourself stuck sooner or later.”

“It’s worth it. She has saved my life on multiple occasions, how can I not spend some money to help her back? Besides, don’t I have you to recoup my losses?” Zac said with a smile. “Speaking of that, how much have you earned lately? It’s been some time since the last payout.”

The Sky Gnome looked a bit queasy when speaking about paying dividends, but he sighed after throwing the sleeping poison mistress a glance.

“Our income has been quite impressive lately,” Calrin said. “You have roughly 1.6 Billion Nexus Coins in Thayer Consortia’s books. You shouldn’t expect this kind of income for a while though. We have made extraordinary profits by unloading our mountains of gear all across the planet and looting the towns left by the Invaders.”

“That is amazing work,” Zac said, shocked by the number.

He would have thought that the sky gnome would have been able to gather a few hundred million Nexus Coins at most, but Calrin had clearly been able to accumulate massive wealth from the Incursions they closed above ground. The Sky Gnome had been in charge of gathering everything of value in those places since Zac lacked the man-power to do it himself at the moment.

“That’s not all. Your actual wealth is far higher. I took over management of the stores in the underworld, but most of the mines, towns, and hidden wealth went to you,” the Sky Gnome continued. “I believe you would be able to gain at least a

billion Nexus Coins if we just sold all the stocked-up metals to the System. And finally, there are the town coffers of Port Atwood.”

“How much do I have there?” Zac asked curiously.

“No idea,” Calrin said with some annoyance. “The floating eye controls those assets, and she’s keeping me at bay.”

Zac nodded in understanding, pleasantly surprised by the situation. He had felt like a pauper after handing over most of his Nexus Coins to keep Alea Stable, but his assets were quite a bit above his expectation.

Between the Consortia, His underworld Assets, and the Beast Crystal mine he was almost at 5 billion Nexus Coin in liquid assets. It was a huge amount of wealth for someone in the F-Grade, and it should be enough to buy a high-grade Soul Mending Treasure with money to spare. Just hearing that number was like having a weight lifting from his shoulders, but the funds were only half the problem.

He actually needed to find a treasure to buy as well, and there were no guarantees he would find it when visiting the Tower of Eternity. So he needed some back-up plans as well.

“Have you heard of the [**Primordial Breath Amanita**]?” Zac asked.

“Huh? Amanita? A mushroom?” the Sky Gnome muttered with a slight frown before taking out a huge book from his Cosmos Sack. “Let’s see.”

It was one of the binders he had used to identify the treasures Zac brought with him from the hunt, and this one seemed to be centered on various subterranean treasures.

“Here it is, Primordial Breath Amanita. A treasure that can help evolve bloodlines and constitutions. Extremely poisonous to ingest without proper preparation, but it releases a harmless gas that gives some of its benefits. Very beneficial to plant in Cultivation Chambers,” Calrin read out loud before looking up at Zac. “You found one of these things?”

Zac simply nodded in response.

“It’s a low tiered D-Grade treasure, just like this tree and the lotus you asked about some time ago,” Calrin said. “New planets are simply a breeding-ground for miraculous treasures. These things usually take thousands of years to reach maturity.”

“Do you think we can feed that thing to Alea?” Zac asked.

“No way, we would need a skilled alchemist and the knowledge to prepare it,” the Sky Gnome unhesitantly said. “But we could plant it in the area.”

“Wouldn’t it clash with the Tree of Ascension?” Zac asked.

“We would need to plant it in the underground,” the gnome nodded. “If we go deep enough it should be okay. From there we’ll create a chimney to release the gas it emits around here, allowing the girl to benefit from it.”

Zac’s eyes lit up, and he felt it was a feasible idea. He would even be able to create a secondary outlet leading to his own cultivation cave if he planned everything correctly, making his hidden cave even more magical. He didn’t have any bloodline or constitution as far as he knew, but that might simply be due to ignorance. His mom obviously wasn’t a simple character, and having a bloodline wouldn’t be anything surprising.

“Can you handle that?” Zac asked as he took out the large box containing the mushroom. “Discreetly, of course.”

“No problem,” Calrin said. “I’ll have it ready in a few days. But if you decide to harvest it, remember to sell it at ol’ Calrin’s, ok?”

“Thank you. I’m heading to the Underworld for a week,” Zac said as he gave the sleeping Alea a final look. “It’s about time I get to work again.”

Chapter 364: Crusade

Zac was back in New London soon enough after changing back to his Mr. Black persona, and he was relieved that nothing too alarming happened while he was gone. The two incursions who previously traded with the Union had begun raiding settlements in the area, but Zac was already about to deal with them in any case.

Verana and her Beast Masters didn't need a lot of prodding as most of them were bored from staying put in New London or taking stock of the various properties that were previously owned by the Union. They got ready for war in less than an hour after hearing that they were going to battle with the Abyssal Demons. Zac knew that closing the Incursion of an elite Demonkin species would likely count as a great achievement for their people, and eagerness could be seen on their faces as they streamed toward the teleporter.

The demons who Zac initially brought to the Underworld still hadn't entered the real Underworld due to the presence of the Abyssal Demons. Some of them had stood ready in the hidden cave beneath the Underworld Nexus, whereas others had helped Mr. Trang in scouting out the massive continent above. Those who had been stuck in the darkness for weeks were all too happy when Zac instructed them to secure the Technocrat Incursion as soon as possible. He only had time for a quick sweep after the fight, and there might be more things of value in the area.

Six hours later Zac and his punitive army stood some distance from the demon Incursion. They had long been spotted by some flying bat-thing, which apparently was the demon version of a drone according to Verana, and the demons were waiting for them. There was no way that they would manage to sneak attack these guys.

The Abyssal Demons had built a decent-sized city in the open Underworld, which formed a half-circle against a mountain wall. Zac couldn't really see, but he suspected the demons had dug into the wall for resources, as large plumes of smoke rose from the back of the town, indicating there might be furnaces or some other sort of industry there.

The town itself was covered in a reddish glow from an Array, and it seemed quite sturdy. Billy was not available this time, so Zac turned to Verana for ideas on how to get in. He would no doubt be able to crack it open with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but he wanted to fight in his undead form.

"Grub can probably cause a crack in the array, which would allow you to sneak inside. But he would get killed even before he got close," Verana said with hesitation.

"I can protect him," Zac said as he looked over at the wall in the distance. "Unless they have someone over level 100 my shield will hold."

"Okay, so jump on board," Verana smiled as Grub appeared out of nowhere, and the furry beast quickly grew to its real size.

Zac had already learned that most Beast Masters could keep their pets in some sort of stasis in their bodies. However, the tamed beasts couldn't cultivate while in stasis, so most of the time they were kept in the open. It did however allow them to conjure their pets in the middle of the fight, surprising the enemy.

Slither woke up from its nap on Verana's shoulder, and it started to rapidly grow as well. It ballooned into a terrifying beast reaching over thirty meters in length. Even Zac's hair stood on end when he saw the transformation, but he quickly jumped on top of Grub's head and took out his replacement shield. It was nowhere near as good as the large tower shield he found in the hunt, but it would allow him to activate his skills.

Zac nodded down at Verana who raised a thin sword.

When Grub saw his master's signal he opened his impossibly large maw and emitted a resounding bellow before it slammed its mouth shut, releasing a shockwave by the collision of its large slabs for teeth.

It started rushing forward with a speed that belied its short stubby legs, and the army behind started to follow as soon as there was a comfortable distance. Hundreds of purple fireballs rose from the demon town to meet the charge, and Zac quickly summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] and expanded it to its largest possible size.

Even then it wasn't enough to properly protect the huge beast, so Zac infused the shield with the Seed of Sanctuary to make it even larger. However, Grub wasn't completely helpless himself, and he deftly dodged quite a few of the attacks to lessen Zac's burden.

The next moment Zac's vision swam, and he suddenly found himself looking around in confusion. His surroundings had changed, but he quickly realized that he was right above the expansive town. Grub had somehow teleported, just like when the two fought the first time he met Verana, and it started to descend with amazing momentum.

Zac quickly readjusted his shield as he unleashed his Dao Field rifle with Heaviness. He wasn't able to infuse the large beast directly, so he could only slightly increase their momentum with the help of his Dao.

Grub didn't need much help though as he landed like a furry meteor on the shield, and it immediately cracked to let the two through. Unfortunately, the array seemed to have impressive healing capabilities, and the damage had almost completely healed by the time they landed with a tremendous crash that toppled a dozen buildings around them.

Zac quickly activated [**Fields of Despair**] as he looked around for the control crystal that supported the Defensive Array. Destroying the control crystal wouldn't destroy the whole array, but it would no longer be supplied with energy. From there Verana and the others should be able to quickly whittle down the array to gain entry to the town. That meant that Zac

and Grub were isolated inside the town for now, but he wasn't too worried about it.

He soon spotted a command platform with an enormous Abyssal Demon wielding a jagged two-hand sword on his back. To his side there were two skinny, for the massive Abyssal Demons, demons who stood in front of a large crimson crystal, continuously infusing it with power. A third demon was quickly exchanging a handful of crystals to replenish the lost energy from Grub's descent.

Zac prodded the large beast, and it immediately understood what Zac wanted to do. Unfortunately it seemed it was unable to teleport once again in such short succession. With a lack of better options it started to rush straight ahead with undeniable momentum. The beast also started slamming its teeth to cause massive shockwaves that spread like waves of destruction toward the demons who hurriedly got down from the wall to form a new defensive line.

Dozens of attacks soared toward the charging beast, but Zac immediately activated [**Immutable Bulwark**] once more to erect a shimmering wall covering the two from all directions, effectively turning Grub into a fortified bulldozer.

Screams and wails echoed across the battlefield as Grub's attacks and [**Deathwish**] started to cause mayhem, but a sudden sense of danger made Zac immediately perk up and infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness. His eyes immediately found the demon leader who had gripped his sword and swung it in a massive arc that seemed to make the air itself crackle.

Zac's eyes widened and he immediately changed his tactic to infuse his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness instead of Sanctuary. It shrunk the shield considerably, leaving Grub's flanks open, but it significantly increased the sturdiness of the shield.

A tremendous arc of pure power shot out from the demon lord's sword, and it ripped through the air with terrifying momentum. Even buildings were cut in two and crushed from

the residual shockwave as it sped toward them, but Zac was ready to intercept the strike with his skill.

The whole town shuddered when the blade of energy slammed into Zac's bulwark, and he immediately lost a surprisingly large chunk of Miasma. But Zac breathed out in relief when he realized the power of the swing was well within his limits, and the bulwark wouldn't crack like when he fought the Cyborg.

However, the next second a large wound appeared across his chest, and the black ichor in his body started to freely flow down his chest. Even Grub received a nasty wound across its side, and he bellowed in pain as he glared around in all directions to find who hurt him. Zac's eyes met the Demon Lord's in the distance, and he immediately changed strategy. It wouldn't be so easy to charge the platform like this.

"Big guy, head toward the gate and blow it up, ok?" Zac said to Grub beneath him and it bellowed in understanding.

The Demon Lord kept shooting out his odd attacks, but Zac deftly controlled his defensive skill to swap between the large coverage and the smaller but sturdier one. But wounds still kept accumulating across their bodies, and Zac realized there was no way for him to completely block out the damage.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but he had a suspicion that the Demon Lord had something akin to a Seed of Penetration that reached Peak Mastery at the least. Perhaps it was even a Fragment. Part of the attack simply side-stepped all his defenses, rendering them ineffectual.

Luckily both Zac and Grub were extremely durable, so the beast made it to the gate without any life-threatening wounds. The gate turned into scrap metal with a tremendous crash as the beast rammed straight into it. The moment Zac saw that Grub was out in one piece he jumped off the beast and stomped his foot in the ground, and the next moment he disappeared.

Zac immediately reappeared in front of the control crystal and stomped into the ground again before those around him could react, activating [**Profane Seal**]. The five towers rose out of the ground as the world turned monochromatic due to the

influx of massive amounts of miasma into the area, the change was so sudden that Zac actually managed to kill one of the captains with a quick swing before the others had time to back away.

The Demon Lord was clearly the largest threat, so the five spectral chains flew directly toward him in a bid to seal his dangerous attacks. But Zac barely had time to destroy the control crystal with **[Hunger]** before one of the chains was riddled with cracks. Zac frowned when he saw it, but he kept using three of the chains to occupy the lord while he used the other two in quickly dealing with the remaining two mages who stood next to the crystal.

A torrent of black corrosive clouds also spread out across the field as Zac took deep breaths while he fought, and the clouds intermingled with the miasmatic haze from **[Fields of Despair]**. Screams of pain and rage already echoed across the cage as a large number of trapped soldiers started to get wounded by retaliatory strikes from **[Deathwish]** when trying to escape the entrapment.

The miasma inside Zac's body surged as it kept dropping only to increase again due to the continuous cycle formed between **[Deathwish]** and **[Fields of Despair]**. However, he realized that he would run out of miasma soon enough, as it was overall quite costly to keep this many warriors trapped.

But the Demon Lord didn't give Zac any time to thin the number of enemies as he suddenly roared before he literally caught fire, and the conflagration around him pushed away all of Zac's attacks. The chains were unable to pass through the purple flames without quickly melting, and even the clouds from **[Winds of Decay]** were burnt to cinders as they got close.

The demon sneered at Zac as he lifted his enormous sword toward the sky, and the next moment a hundred-meter version of that very sword appeared above the cage. The sword emitted a tremendous sharpness, and it reminded Zac of the time when he looked at the enormous axe in his Dao Vision.

The sword ruthlessly stabbed into the fractal in the sky, and a large crack immediately appeared on one of the towers. A spectral demon appeared at the same moment, stabbing at the Demon Lord. However, the stab barely harmed the demon lord, and he only laughed uproariously as he seemed to be consumed by battle lust.

Zac wasn't as happy as a new wound had appeared on his back the moment the sword in the sky stabbed down on the shield he had created. It was the same as the earlier strikes, where part of the force went right through his defenses.

But Zac wouldn't give in against something so minor. The Tal-Eladar had already broken through the town defense array since the control crystal was destroyed, and Zac spotted Verana riding her enormous snake outside, causing utter mayhem amongst the demonkin ranks.

The fight outside was clearly pitched, as two of the demons outside had actually turned into 10-meter giants to curtail the snake's wanton destruction. The demons didn't seem deterred just because their leaders were locked inside **[Profane Seal]** at all, and they unhesitantly threw themselves into the meat grinder while emitting guttural roars.

Zac didn't have time to worry about that as he rushed toward the Demon Lord as he swung his sword with tremendous force. He had already changed the size of **[Immutable Bulwark]** to that of a normal tower shield, allowing him to use the skill rather than his subpar replacement shield to block the demon's sword.

The fires burned around him, and Zac was forced to continuously release Miasma from his body to not get burnt, but he wouldn't let up as the two exchanged one brutal attack after another. Neither would back down a single step and both were more than happy to gain another wound if they could retaliate in kind.

Eventually, Zac started to get the upper hand even though the Demon possessed surprising power and the mysterious ability to always cause some damage. Zac was simply too durable. The Abyssal Demon seemed to have some innate advantages

due to his race, but it couldn't match up the power of pure attributes.

Zac suddenly saw an opening as he suddenly threw away his shield when the demon swung too wide due to exhaustion. Zac quickly grabbed the arm of his opponent and yanked it, making the demon stumble forward. The demon didn't even have time to find his balance before [**Hunger**] fell toward his neck with ruthless finality.

The large horned head of the Demon Lord thumped into the ground, and it was the sound symbolized the beginning of the end for the Abyssal Demons.

Chapter 365: Lunatics

Zac looked around the rubble, slightly shocked at the ferocity of the battle. Less than 20% of the Abyssal Demons had chosen to retreat and instead opted to fight with furious intensity against the Tal-Eladar attackers, even after their leader was decapitated. They were true berserkers, roaring on top of their lungs as they tried to rip him apart. But the Abyssal Demons were not the only ones who fought with reckless abandon.

“You people are lunatics,” Zac muttered with a shake of his head.

Verana, who was almost completely drenched in blood, had a satisfied look on her face as she oversaw the looting of the town. Zac could understand her happiness since the fight could be considered a resounding win for the Tal-Eladar against the Demonkin. Verana had been a goddess of war, causing bloodshed wherever she went, making the battle turn completely in their favor.

After Verana quickly killed the two generals stuck outside Zac’s cage with the help of her snake and an offensive array the war was mostly turned into a slaughter. It made a huge difference to have a powerhouse presiding over the battlefield. They could put their thumb on the scale, causing a massive reduction in casualties.

Of course, none of that would have been possible without the help of Zac himself. He captured a good hundred elites along with the leader and two of his generals within **[Profane Seal]**, substantially weakening their defenses and causing chaos. While they were trying to get their leader out of the cage Verana and her beast masters could advance without any real resistance.

“Grudges built upon grudges,” Verana said with a wry smile. “The Boundless Heavens thrives on conflict as war forces us to get stronger or perish. You cannot fight it, so you might as well adapt to it.”

Zac sighed, feeling a bit hopeless at the prospect of living a life of constant strife. He was currently struggling because there were threats against his people in all directions, but was that all life was supposed to amount to? Putting out one fire after another while getting stronger. Was that truly the goal of cultivation?

But Zac forced himself to snap out of his brooding as he bought a teleportation array and nodded at one of the Valkyries who immediately stepped through. A few hundred warriors stepped through the teleporter twenty minutes later, and they looked wide-eyed at the utter destruction around them.

It was the soldiers that worked for the Union, which technically made them his people. They had mostly kept up their previous duties, but they came in handy now. Zac wouldn't entrust them with any important tasks, but scouring the area for lingering threats or points of interest shouldn't be any problem for them.

Zac simply sat down on top of a boulder to overlook it all as he restored his missing miasma. He also called for Harvath, the demon captain who had kept his squad in the hidden cave system beneath the Underworld Nexus until now. The demon had been in charge of clearing out the Technocrat Incursion, but it should be dealt with by now.

The demon arrived soon enough, and he sighed deeply with conflicted emotions as he looked around at the rubble. Zac could understand his feelings, but he didn't know what to say. The two walked over to a secluded spot, and Zac activated an array disk to shroud them from prying eyes.

“Is something the matter?” the demon asked curiously when he saw Zac's actions.

“I need you to do something, but you can't let the Tal-Eladar catch on,” Zac said.

The demon's eyes lit up, and he clearly had no moral compunctions about pulling a fast one on his new allies. Zac smiled when he saw Harvath's reaction and took out one of his Beast Crystals.

"This is...?" Harvath said with some hesitation as he inspected the crystal.

"It's a Beast Crystal, an item for nurturing beasts. I found a large mine of these things. I want you to send a group of experienced people to clean out that whole place for me. The mine is nowhere near as big as the Nexus Mine, so it should only take a few days for a strong crew," Zac said. "The Tal-Eladar would be frothing at the mouth for these things, so don't let them follow you."

"Absolutely," Harvath immediately nodded.

Zac wasn't sure exactly how the Tal-Eladar would react in regards to these crystals, so he chose to not take any risks with them. The crystals might be extremely valuable for the Tal-Eladar, but he knew that the invaders were extremely low on Nexus Coins since they weren't able to bring it to Earth. And Zac needed the money now rather than later.

"Extract the crystals as quickly as possible. I hope to use them to trade for a treasure to treat Alea within two weeks," Zac explained.

The demon's countenance immediately turned somber and he quickly memorized the path as Zac imparted it to him. Alea's situation had already spread among the demons, and they had almost exploded in rage. The poison mistress had proven herself for the demons, and many of them wanted to immediately rush out to fight the undead to the death when learning of the ambush that felled her.

Zac knew that Harvath would perform the task with utmost efficiency after seeing his expression, so he nodded and let him immediately head out.

"What was that about?" Verana said with a smile as she walked over.

"Just delegating a few minor tasks," Zac smiled back.

The cleanup and reorganization took half a day, which was much faster than normal thanks to the help of the vast number of people in the Union's employ. It was only now that Zac truly realized that the people under his command in the underworld was more than ten times that of his people on the surface.

But Zac wasn't satisfied with only closing one of the remaining four incursions in the underworld, and he wanted to ride the momentum. He immediately ordered an assault on the human Incursion next, since he was afraid they had spies in the cities that would warn them what transpired here. He didn't want to give them too much time to prepare their defenses.

The strength of the Abyssal Demon Incursion was higher than Zac expected, and he would categorize it as firmly in the mid-tier. He was afraid that all the incursions in the underworld were stronger than the norm, which was why he didn't want to give them any heads-up.

The army set out almost immediately, and they were joined by a squad of elite Demons as well now that they were able to show themselves. Smaug surprisingly enough requested to join the mission as well, and Zac figured that the man and his arrays would come in handy.

With the reinforcements to his ranks the battle went just as expected. It would normally be extremely strenuous and costly to assault the incursions that were placed inside large town caves, but having Zac as the vanguard kept the whole army safe as he blocked out all the attacks from the invaders with the help of his bulwark.

Any time Zac needed to move or rest for a second Smaug was there, throwing out a handful of balls that created extremely durable shields for a couple of seconds. Zac wasn't sure how much money the man was burning during the battle, but if the man wanted to prove himself with the help of his wallet he was very welcome to do so.

It was better the guy spent some of his money than people losing their lives.

The elites of Port Atwood swept through the whole underworld, and in just five days only the final Incursion remained; the Fire Golems. Zac kept pushing himself to his limit, trapping larger and larger groups in his Miasmatic Cage in the engagements.

The frantic battles were not without their gains. Each one of them had awarded Zac with a level, pushing him all the way to level 73 for his Undying Bulwark Class. It was nowhere near as good as the Technocrat Incursion, but he didn't get any quest that gave a large boost to the energy he gained. Besides, the final 5 levels were quite a bit harder to gain than the earlier ones.

After having closed the Fishman Incursion Zac finally allowed himself to take a breather, so he informed Verana and Harvath that he would enter seclusion for two days. He needed to consolidate his gains from his last fights. Besides, his people were wrung dry from fighting three incursions in short succession.

Fighting along with himself didn't help either. It had become painfully obvious that his Undying Bulwark class was just as Yrial described it; made for a leader of the undead. His **[Fields of Despair]** was essentially poisoning the people fighting alongside him, though they weren't affected by the attribute reduction like his enemies. Now that he had **[Winds of Decay]** as well he was almost as big a threat to his own people as his enemies.

Luckily the people who joined him against the underworld incursions were among the strongest people in his force, so they weren't too badly affected as long as they didn't get too close to him during battle. But since they didn't have a lot of Vitality they needed a prolonged rest before they tackled the more threatening fire golems.

Besides, Zac believed that his army would have returned by that point, providing him with more competent fighters. So Zac returned to his compound on his island, as that was where he had the easiest time to relax. The first thing he did was to go through his status screen to see how his progress was before he could comfortably evolve.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	73
Class	[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark
Race	[E] Draugr
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - High, Seed of Hardness - High, Seed of Sanctuary - High, Seed of Rot - High
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	749 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]
Dexterity	320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Endurance	992 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Vitality	471 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]
Intelligence	174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Wisdom	255 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Luck	140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 184 500 077

He had already put his free points into Strength, but he sighed when he saw the disparity between his Strength and Endurance. He had hoped to decrease the gap between the two attributes, as he did not want to accidentally pigeonhole himself into tank classes when he evolved.

He would pass a thousand Endurance by the time he leveled up, while he wasn't sure he'd ever get to that point with his Strength, even after evolving his Dao seeds and getting the Title from the tower. From how things looked he wouldn't gain a lot of Strength from his final Dao Upgrades either.

Dao	Stage	Effect
Heaviness	Peak	Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5
Sharpness	High	Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5
Trees	Peak	Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5
Hardness	High	Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.
Sanctuary	High	Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.

Rot	High	Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +45.
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His Daos were coming along nicely, even though he hadn't evolved any of them from his last three fights. He had however gained a few insights that he hoped he could turn into Peak Grade Dao Seeds without the help of his last Dao Treasure. He wanted to save that thing for when they cracked open the Dao Funnel in a week or two.

Closing the three incursions, unfortunately, didn't give him any Titles either, but he had made great strides in another department; his skills. The only skill for his undead class that remained at Early mastery was **[Indomitable]**. **[Fields of Despair]**, **[Winds of Decay]** and even **[Profane Seal]** reached middle mastery from the intense battles.

His only idea to improve **[Indomitable]** was to fight enemies using mental attacks, but those didn't exist among the underworld Incursions. He kept it running constantly since his experience with the ambush that knocked him out, but it didn't seem to improve the skill.

He still hadn't had a chance to experiment with the improved skills, but he had a feeling they would allow him to push the final two levels with greater ease. However, they did not make up for another glaring problem that he found himself facing; he no longer had a shield.

Chapter 366: Manufacturing A Fortuitous Encounter

The Cyborg had utterly destroyed his shield with its final punch, and Zac didn't have any good replacement. He had been using much weaker spare during the battles, and he realized that using a low-quality shield weakened his class skills to a certain degree.

This hadn't proved too large a problem against the Incursions so far, but Zac was afraid that it would negatively impact him if he encountered a real threat like the Dominators or the natives in the Mystic Realm. He was already leaning toward the idea of his undead form focusing on dueling strong opponents, but that would prove difficult if he didn't have the equipment to match his power.

Zac finally closed down his screens with a shake of his head before he closed his eyes. There was no point in worrying about his gear as things stood. He could only hope to either loot it somewhere or buy a better one when he visited the Tower. For now, he would rather focus on the things he could improve; the Dao.

The demon leader's frenzied bladework felt like the final clue that Zac needed to push his Seed of Sharpness to the peak. The demon was a true warrior, and his will to cut seemed to affect reality itself as every swing of his passed through all his defenses. It was this sharp and indomitable will that Zac wanted to incorporate into his Dao Seed since it felt perfect for his fighting style. It also reminded him of the axe-man, whose very being radiated an unquestionable faith in his axe, the surety that anything he wanted to cut would get cut.

The hours passed and Zac didn't move a muscle, as he was completely absorbed in searching for the truth to sharpness. Finally he reached some sort of tipping-point, and he sensed

that his gains were successful. The half of the axe fractal in his chest that contained his Seed of sharpness gained a burst of intensity, and he felt that the whole fractal was finally balanced.

Both his Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness were finally at the peak, meaning that the next step was to fuse them. Zac breathed out in relief as he opened his eyes. He was worried that the Splinter in his mind would ruin his attempt, but his mind was like a calm pond.

The past day's relentless battle seemed to have exhausted the negative emotions that accumulated from first seeing Alea get wounded and then meeting Void's Disciple. It allowed him to think clearly for a bit and meditate without lapses in focus.

It felt like he had latched onto a small clue on how to survive the continuous corruption from the splinter in his head. The Dao of Oblivion was the purest form of destruction, the end of everything. It seemed that adapting to that Dao through actions would lessen the negative effects to a certain degree.

Shutting himself off from the world to find a calm center might actually have the opposite effect of what he desired, creating a constant conflict in his mind. If he was right he realized he was already self-medicating to a certain degree, since he was constantly fighting one enemy or another.

There was also the issue of balance. Even if it was true that fighting and killing helped him to get rid of the corrosion in his mind, he couldn't just keep following his impulses to continuously slaughter. He felt there was a real risk that he would end up like a murderous lunatic if that happened.

Zac knew he would have to keep experimenting to figure out the best solution, but for now he had accomplished his goal. A lot of his plans somewhat hinged at improving this seed to peak mastery. He wanted to utilize the Dao Funnel before he headed for the Tower of Eternity, and now he had a chance to actually form a Fragment if all went well.

He had already realized that he most likely wouldn't be able to gain more than one Dao Fragment before entering the tower, and he already knew that gaining Dao Insights inside the tower

itself was impossible without finding a treasure or having an epiphany.

His Fragment of Death was especially far off, with both Rot and Hardness still being at High mastery. His Fragment of life was a bit closer along, with Seed of Trees already being at peak mastery.

So Zac chose to focus on the Fragment of Axe, or whatever came before axe in that line of truths. A Fragment of Axe would hopefully increase his offensive power by a huge degree, which would allow him to climb much further in the Tower. The other two fragments might have great potential in the long run, but Zac was forced to look for quick powerups as things stood.

Even if he didn't manage to fuse his other two fragments before evolving it would still allow him to base his upgraded classes on the Fragment of Axe. From there his Hatchetman upgrade would hopefully be influenced by the life-attuned Dao seeds, and Undying Bulwark would rely on Rot and Hardness.

Zac would certainly have preferred to gain all three fragments before evolving the classes, since he believed that would ultimately lead to better choices, perhaps even two Arcane classes. It would also follow the advice he gained from Yrial. But he was simply out of time, and the path he chose would hopefully at least provide him with two good Epic-Graded classes that would allow him to fight the Dominators and the Lich King.

The old gamer inside him once again felt bad about not being able to grind for a few years extra to push all three Dao Fragments and his skills to the peak. The fact that he was forced to upgrade his class before he had exhausted his potential was truly a waste.

But such was life. There was no such thing as a perfect path in an imperfect world. Perhaps if he was the son of some great hegemon he'd be able to leisurely cultivate for a decade or two before he felt ready to Evolve. But if he did that now he'd probably condemn his whole planet since so much relied on him getting stronger quickly.

Zac sighed and got up on his feet, immediately walking out of his courtyard. The sound of laughter could be heard from the distance, and Zac immediately flashed over with relief flooding his heart. It was Ogras and Kenzie who sat by a patio table having a drink, probably having returned while Zac was meditating.

“Oh, you’re out?” Ogras said as he looked up from the table, a glass of champagne in his hand.

Kenzie sat opposite of him, one of the information crystals on arrays placed on the table in front of her. Seeing his sister again was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders. He knew that the risk for something happening to the army was small, but it had been a constant worry in the back of his mind since he went ahead of the others.

“I’m glad you’re okay. Did everything go as planned?” Zac asked as he sat down on one of the free chairs, grabbing one of the fruits on the table.

“We came back twelve hours ago,” Ogras nodded. “There was no activity worth mentioning. We were assaulted by a pretty massive wolf pack led by a few E-Grade Alphas, but it was dealt with easily since everyone was well rested by that point. If there’s one thing our people know by now, it’s how to kill wolves. More importantly, I’ve heard you’ve been busy?”

Zac’s brows rose when he heard they had been back for so long. He quickly took out a watch from his cosmos sack and realized that he had been meditating for well over a day. It had only felt like an hour or two, but he would need to return back to the Underworld pretty soon.

“I took care of the underworld Incursions,” Zac explained. “I still have the flame golems to deal with, but afterward I’ll be able to move the Union and Council armies to the surface to help with the situation with the undead. In fact, we can probably start sending people from the Union immediately.”

Ogras nodded in agreement.

“The average warriors are better used for thinning out the zombies than fighting incursions. I’ll have someone gather up

Union warriors with decent potential to bolster the numbers in our army,” Ogras said.

“How’s the study on the Dao Funnel going?” Zac asked.

“I still can’t figure out how it was originally meant to be used. I think we’re missing half of the item, the one that would infuse the gathered energy into someone,” Kenzie said.

Zac was inclined to agree since the Great Redeemer would no doubt want to keep the collected Origin Dao for himself. It made no sense to leave the key to extract it on the planet where anyone could find it. He would rather keep it on his body.

“But I have an idea,” Kenzie said as she pointed at the crystal. “I think I can set up a certain array recorded in this thing that will help.”

“Oh?” Zac said as he leaned closer with interest.

Ogras didn’t seem surprised as he leisurely kept drinking his liquor, so Zac guessed that his sister had already consulted the demon on this matter while they were on the road together.

“I mentioned earlier that I can crack open the funnel, but I don’t know what would happen next. I still haven’t made much progress in that department. But I think I have found an array that will allow us to trap the Origin Dao for a while, allowing us to cultivate inside it for a much longer duration,” Kenzie said. “It’s the best idea I could come up with.”

“We never had any means to directly absorb the Origin Dao anyway, so I believe this is fine. It will depend on luck and fate how much we could gain from the experience,” Ogras said from the side. “We’re essentially manufacturing a fortuitous encounter.”

“I agree,” Zac nodded. “We are not in a position to research the funnel for decades. We’ll have to take the gamble. The issue is how many should be present.”

That was the crux of the matter. How much Origin Dao were actually collected inside the funnel? Salvation had slain hundreds of thousands of people, but they had no idea how much Origin Dao that would translate into. It would be a

problem if they gathered the whole army only to realize that the energy got so diluted it had almost no effect.

The same could be said about the opposite. What if they found an ocean of Origin Dao inside when only a couple of people were present? It would be a huge waste if almost all of it dissipated and was wasted. Zac was painfully aware of the fact that they didn't have enough powerful people to take charge of important matters. The Origin Dao might be the key to turn the Valkyries and some of the promising soldiers from elites into powerhouses.

"We actually formulated an idea about that on the way back," Kenzie said. "We make two or three layers of arrays. If we notice the inner layer is too small, we'll break it open to open up the Origin Dao to spread into a wider area where more people are waiting."

Zac slowly mulled over the idea, feeling that it wasn't too bad. It would be a shame for the people sitting in the outer layers if they never even got a whiff of the Origin Dao, but he also knew that they needed to ration the stuff if there wasn't too much of it.

"How long would it take for you to set everything up?" Zac asked.

"We have already tasked Calrin to gather the items for the arrays. I think I will need a week or so to set everything up and make sure everything works," Kenzie said. "He also told us about Alea's situation."

Zac sighed when he heard his sister mention the poison mistress, but he simply nodded.

"Don't worry, aren't you going to the Tower soon?" Kenzie said. "Alea might be back on her feet within a month!"

"That's true. And even if we don't find what we need there, we still have a couple of years. If we can get the Nexus Hub to work we might be able to head to a real metropolis and hire a healer or alchemist," Ogras nodded.

"That's true," Zac smiled. "So what will you do until Kenzie has finished the array?"

“I’ll help out against the undead,” Ogras said. “I need to confirm a few things in battle before improving my Dao, and I wouldn’t be much use against the Fire Golems. I plan to lead the army back to the Dead Zone tomorrow after they’ve had a day’s worth of rest and I’ve gathered the reinforcements.”

Zac felt a bit bad for the army who already needed to go back to the front lines when they just had returned. But this was a war for Earth’s future, he couldn’t be softhearted in such a situation. They needed to do everything in their power to slow down the completion of the array as much as possible.

“Good,” Zac said as he stood up. “I’ll head down to the Underworld in an hour or two after making the rounds.”

“Be careful, those invaders seem pretty strong,” Kenzie said with some worry.

“I’ll be fine, I’ll see you in a couple of days,” Zac smiled. “Those golems don’t know what’s about to hit them.”

Chapter 367: Playing the Part

Zac was just planning to stretch his legs before sitting down to continue his meditation, but his first session lasted much longer than he expected. So he could only give up on trying to improve his other Dao Seeds for now and headed toward the town proper. As he walked through the woods of his private domain he took the opportunity to take a gander at the attribute gains from the evolved seed.

Sharpness (Peak): Strength +15, Dexterity +90, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5

A smile crept across his face when he saw the stats he gained. It was just as he hoped, where he got 10 points to Strength and another 50 to Dexterity. He had counted on that Dexterity boost to keep up with his increasing Strength, and it would allow him to keep focusing all his free points into his main attribute for a while longer.

There was still some time before he had agreed to reconvene with Verana and the others in the Underworld, so he walked over to the government building to meet with Abby and Adran. He had been so focused on the Incursions lately so he wanted to get a report on Port Atwood's situation. Luckily everything was going smoothly, especially the agricultural initiative that Zac infused with extra cash. It would start to yield a harvest for F-Grade Herbs in just a few months, though the E-Grade Spirit Herbs would take a while longer.

The only issue was that the sea creatures were quickly becoming more and more ferocious, and there had been a couple of incidents lately. This wasn't anything too surprising, as attacks from sea creatures was a problem that most coastal cities in the multiverse would encounter. Little Bau, Mr.

Trang's terrifying pet, was helping a lot, but it couldn't be everywhere.

Luckily there were a plethora of defensive structures in the town shop, so Zac agreed to let Abby take 200 million from the town funds to upgrade the shoreline defenses for the islands he controlled. With that in hand he visited Calrin next to get an update on the situation with the Beast Crystals.

"The extraction is finished, but there's also the need to refine the gems from their raw state. But I've made an estimate and I would say you'd get around 1.8 Billion if you sold 80% of your stock," the sky gnome said with some obvious avarice in his eyes. "You also have your 1.64 billion in dividends waiting."

"How much do you think a soul-mending treasure or pill would cost?" Zac asked.

"If it was on a proper market I would say that a pill or treasure that could mend a fractured soul would cost around 500 million to a Billion Nexus Coins depending on success rate and strength of the item," the Sky Gnome said after some hesitation. "Any natural treasure will likely be on the more expensive side of the spectrum."

"That much?" Zac groaned. "It's just to heal someone in F-Grade."

"Souls are complicated and require high-quality items to fix without leaving lasting damage," Calrin sighed. "But you should know that such a treasure might become significantly more expensive in a place like the Tower of Eternity. There is a huge demand for life-saving treasures at a place like that. The price might become double, or even higher."

"Still, that means I should be fine unless something unexpected happens?" Zac sighed in relief.

"You should still gather as much Nexus Coins as possible before going," the sky gnome said. "There are bound to be a lot of great opportunities waiting for those with money at such a place!"

"Like what?" Zac asked.

“People exiting with grave wounds, forced to sell precious items at a discount to pay for healing. People desperate to gather enough funds to buy a piece of treasure that would allow them to reach higher in the tower. There are all kinds of scenarios to exploit,” Calrin said, getting more and more excited as he spoke. “A closed market like that always leads to opportunities for arbitrage.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Zac smiled as he left.

It was a good plan, but he needed money for other things as well. Finding a proper shield, for example. He was also interested in finding pills that would allow him to immediately break open nodes the moment he evolved. He already had the **[Four Gates Pill]**, but many other pills had similar effects. His goal was to eat all his prepared treasures the moment he evolved before bursting forth against the Undead with unparalleled power.

He soon arrived in New London in his Human form, and his arrival caused some commotion when people of the Union realized who he was. He didn’t hide his movements since he wanted people to know about his contribution in the fight against the Fire Golems. People gazed at him with fear or admiration as he walked through the halls with a few Valkyries following behind.

The reason for fighting against the golems in his human form, even though he still needed two levels to reach peak F-Grade in his Draugr-form, was that he felt the risks of using his undead form were too great. Undying Bulwark relied on slowly grinding his enemies to dust, whereas Hatchetman could end the fight in seconds.

The Golems were the strongest invaders in the Underworld, and he was afraid that something unexpected would happen, allowing them to turn the situation around or cause massive casualties amongst his people. It was a bit of a shame that any Cosmic Energy he gained from the kills would be lost, but he felt it was worth it.

Verana and Harvath were already waiting in a large meeting room when he arrived, and they seemed to have recovered

from their slightly haggard expressions after they close down the third Incursion together a few days ago.

“Is everything ready?” Zac asked.

“Everything is ready from this side,” Verana and Havath immediately confirmed. “Will the others from Port Atwood Join us?”

“A small group of elites will join me, but most are still focusing on the undead threat,” Zac said. “I don’t think a large army will help against a force like the Golems. They’ll just spew lava over everything and it will be hard to defend against.”

“It sounds reasonable, though I believe our army should be slightly larger this time. Perhaps a hundred people, with another 50 for support,” Verana said. “The golems are strong, and we will need more than one unit to create defensively layers. Oh, and it would be best if you headed to Glimthain to coordinate a joint assault.”

Glimthain was the main town that the Council controlled. It was an Ishiate town and was once upon a time the capital of the technology-leaning faction among the beastmen. It was placed in the open Underworld, but it was a true stronghold even before the integration, making it a natural choice of headquarter for a faction that fought the Fire Golems.

“I was planning on heading there anyway,” Zac nodded. “I have some things to discuss with the Council.”

Meeting the council was another reason he wanted to come to the underworld in his human form this time. He needed to enlist the strongest warriors around in the fight against the Undead Empire. Even if he managed to get stronger he was still just one man, and there were so many zombies by now.

“We should make our sortie spectacular,” Joanna suddenly spoke up from the side. “They need to know that the Super Brother-Man has arrived and that he will end the threat of the invaders.”

With that she excitedly took out what initially looked like a pike, but Zac realized that it was actually a banner when she

fastened a large cloth to it. Zac shot a bemused look at Joanna before he took a gander at the banner's design. It was emerald grey with black and gold details, and the motif was the four mountain peaks of his island. Beneath the summits there was a shield with an axe as a motif, looking like a nobleman's family crest. It looked quite domineering. It almost felt like something that could have belonged to an old European family.

"What's this?" Zac asked with confusion.

"It's the banner for Port Atwood," Joanna said with glee in her eyes. "I learned from Ms. Tir'Emarel that it's a common practice in the Multiverse as well, and we needed something to display who we were."

"Please, Verana is fine," the Beast Master smiled.

"The black and green are representative of your two, ahem, identities, and the gold is there to make it look regal. The mountains are the largest landmark on your island and the axe and shield represent your authority. Do you like it?" Verana smiled.

"It's pretty cool," Zac willingly admitted. "But I'd feel a bit embarrassed if I would parade such a thing around."

"You don't carry this thing, leave that to us. You only need to walk in the front, preferably releasing some of your aura," Joanna said.

"... Fine," Zac sighed. "If this will get people to willingly follow me into the war against the undead."

"One thing?" Joanna hesitantly added. "Do you think you could put on a pair of shoes?"

Zac blankly looked at the Valkyrie for a few seconds before he looked down on his feet. He never even reflected on the fact that he never wore shoes any longer while in his human form. He had already figured out a way to passively utilize a small amount of cosmic energy to keep his feet clean and not let any grime stick. But it would perhaps look a bit odd if he walked around barefoot.

“You can ride Grub as well,” Verana smiled. “He liked fighting with you, he felt very mighty ramming into the enemies’ line with your shield as protection.”

The two kept coaching Zac on how to make a proper impression on the underworld as the army prepared to sortie. Only a few of the warriors would stay in the underworld, whereas the rest would join the main army in the fight against the zombies. It only took less than ten minutes before everything was dealt with, and the gates of the Union headquarters opened up to let out the forces of Port Atwood.

A few people started running for their lives as the intimidating procession made its way through New London, but even more people stayed to watch in the excitement. Almost everyone in the area had already learned that people from the surface had arrived to New London and that they were led by the Super Brother-Man, but only a few had seen them since they stayed holed up inside the Union headquarters most of the time.

People had been gathering outside the gates since the news spread, either hoping to see the aliens under Zac’s command or try to buy a ticket out of the Underworld. But now they didn’t need to strain to see a glimpse of them as they marched through the main street full of vigor.

Zac knew of the people’s desire to return to the surface, but Port Atwood hadn’t let anyone leave just yet. He wanted to finish up everything before he led an exodus out of this area. And he couldn’t let everyone just leave. There was a huge amount of wealth down here that needed to be extracted to strengthen Earth’s forces. All these things would be needed not only in the fight against the invaders but also to turn Earth into a powerful planet before the System’s protection ended.

Zac rode in the front, sitting on Grub’s head as the enormous beast trudged forward, each step causing a small earthquake. The only people walking in front of him were two Valkyries, each one holding one of the newly created banners. The air around him twisted and bent as he let his aura spread out to a certain degree. Behind him his armies walked in orderly lines, each soldier radiating a tremendous pressure that made the spectators gasp in awe.

It looked like the Demons and Tal-Eladar had gotten caught up in who could shock the spectators more, and each of the demonkin soldiers radiated a massive battle intent with most of them even having released weak Dao Fields. Zac didn't stop him since he knew that such weak Fields wouldn't be able to harm anyone in the area apart from putting people under some pressure.

But unfortunately for the demons it was hard for them to match the glory of the Tal-Eladar, who were assisted by their massive beasts. One tremendous roar after another made the whole area shake as the Tir'Emarel rode their battle beasts behind Zac. Most impressive was of course Verana, who rode on Slither's head, the snake alone taking up the whole road due to its massive size.

The whole thing felt a bit excessive and embarrassing, but Zac followed Joanna's instructions and only sat unmoving with a neutral face. Joanna, who essentially had turned into his PR Director at this point, said it was not only about prestige but also about giving the people of the Underworld hope. They had been suppressed by the Fire Golems for almost a year, and almost everyone had lost a family member or friend to their actions.

This procession would show them that Earth hadn't given up, that a resurgence was coming.

Chapter 368: Glimthain

Joanna initially wanted Zac to hold a rousing speech as well, but he staunchly refused. Instead, a few Valkyries walked alongside the army and told the news about how only one incursion remained, and that they were heading to war against the Fire Golems.

The procession only stopped when they reached the teleportation station, where the back-up from the surface already stood.

“You set things up at Rennbach while I visit the Council,” Zac told Verana as he jumped down from Grub’s head.

Glimthain was quite far from the Fire Golem Incursion, so teleporting the whole army there would be a pretty huge waste of resources. Teleportation costs were already by far the largest drain on Port Atwood’s resources, so he decided to send the army directly to the frontier town to prepare. He also didn’t want to cause some misunderstanding by bringing an army on his first visit to the Underworld Council.

Verana quickly agreed, and Zac indicated for the young woman that worked for the Underworld Council to open the array. Her name was Linn, and she had arrived together with the Councillors back when they visited New London after the Union takeover. Linn immediately complied and entered the array along with Zac and Joanna, while the rest waited for the array close down.

Soon enough the trio reappeared in another grand hall, but Zac’s eyes widened in alarm when he saw four enormous cannons trained on the platform he stood on. They were even larger than the monstrosities the Ishiate tinkerers on Port Atwood had created, with their barrels having a diameter of almost two meters.

Zac's first instinct was to take out his axe and quickly destroy them, but he realized that no one was preparing to fire them. It looked like a defensive measure in case enemies stepped through the array. Luckily they had the ambassador with them, otherwise the welcome might have been quite different.

"This way, sir," Linn said as she led them past the cannons and defensive line of soldiers who curiously looked at him.

"Can you take us to the council immediately?" Zac said. "I don't have much time to spare."

"Certainly, they await your arrival," the ambassador answered without hesitation and the group exited the fortified structure.

Zac and Joanna curiously looked around when they stepped outside of the building, and Zac whistled with surprise when he saw what Glimthain looked like. He had always considered the modern faction of the Ishiate to be somewhat steampunk, and this town truly made that impression stronger. Cramped structures fought for space within massive brass walls that were lined with all kinds of brass weaponry.

A glance at the wall told him that at least a hundred cannons were fastened to the wall walk, and even some rooftops were equipped with ranged siege weaponry. He saw multiple ballistae that appeared to be relying on steam pressure for example. The houses themselves were covered in tubes, and no matter where he looked it seemed to be one pipe or another leaking gas or water vapors.

The town was well illuminated by a mix of Day crystals and gaslights lining the streets, and it seemed to be rush-hour since the streets were filled with people. It was a truly chaotic scene as there were not only pedestrians, but a mix of modern cars and other odd machines that forced their way through the jumble. The chaos wasn't helped by the constant eruption of steam whistles and honks from the cars.

"Oh wow," Joanna said. "How do people live like this?"

"It took some getting used to," Linn said with some embarrassment. "Too many have lost their homes, and the town has become completely overcrowded by now. A new

town has even started to grow outside of the walls since there simply is no room left within. Those buildings regularly get destroyed during the attacks of beasts in the area, but the inner town is one of the safest places in the Underworld due to all the weaponry.”

Zac understood as well that people normally wouldn't live in such an environment, but the dangers lurking in the dark were just too abundant, and it was better to live in squalor than getting eaten by a bat or killed by the Flame Golems. The group immediately entered a jeep that waited for them, and it thankfully only needed to drive a short distance to a grand castle in the center of the town.

The castle itself reminded Zac of a larger version of the main hall of the Cogstown, the Ishiate settlement under his control. But this castle was far larger, and it was not only equipped by a huge number of weapons pointing at the sky, but there were even three zeppelins slowly floating around it.

“This way, sir,” a guard said as Zac stepped out of the car.

“Zac!” a familiar shout could be heard from the distance just as Zac was about to enter the palace, and he looked over with a smile.

It was Emily who was running over, dragging along a slightly embarrassed woman in her early twenties. It was no doubt Emily's sister as she was essentially an adult version of the brat. Zac glanced at her to approximate her strength, and he was surprised to see that there was a faint aura around her.

It meant that even if she wasn't a Ranker she wouldn't be too far off, and she had likely gained a Dao seed judging by the spirituality around her. It looked like not only Emily was a talent when it came to cultivation, but her sister was as well. Then again, it shouldn't be too surprising that they had good genes since all three siblings turned out to be cultivators.

“She's pretty, right?” Emily grinned when she noticed that Zac looked at her sister curiously. “She's very single as well.”

“Idiot, what do you mean by *very* single?” Johanna said with some embarrassment as she gently slapped the back of Emily's

head. She then turned back to Zac who looked at the two with some amusement. “I am Johanna Larkin. I owe you a great debt of gratitude. If it wasn’t for your intervention I would be without any family.”

“It was no problem,” Zac said with a sigh, giving Emily a consoling look.

It seemed like the brother had truly fallen back then after all. Emily looked downcast for a second before she looked up again with an intense stare.

“Are you here to destroy the Flame Golems?”

“Yeah,” Zac said without any preamble.

“Great!” Emily said with burning eyes. “We will help you kill those guys!”

“You can come, but be careful. We don’t have a lot of ways to deal with a room flooding with lava,” Zac said as he handed over two large balls. “Use this in case you run out of options.”

“What’s this?” Emily asked with sparkling eyes as she held the two crystals that seemed to have a small snowstorm inside.

“Fire extinguisher,” Zac said with a smile. “Perhaps it will slow the magma long enough for you to escape in case things go south. I need to speak with the Council now, come with me if you want.”

“I can’t go there, I am just a captain,” Johanna said with a quick shake of her head as Zac started, but Emily only dragged her along with a giggle.

“Who cares, being with this guy is like having an all-access pass,” the teenager smiled as she walked over to Joanna’s side.

The four were led into a large chamber with a massive circular table made from steel and brass. There were already 13 people sitting there, with representatives from all races. Six were humans, while there were 3 Ishiate and 3 Molemen. Finally, a single Zhix sat to the side.

Zac was a bit surprised by the somewhat even distribution as there were at least five times as many humans in the underworld compared to the molemen and Ishiate combined.

But perhaps it was by design so that the humans on the council wouldn't bully the others. Zac was also quite surprised by the presence of a Zhix, but perhaps it simply was a representative for its hive.

The 13 people took up half the table, giving Zac ample room as he sat down on the other side. Emily unceremoniously sat down next to him, but Joanna immediately dragged her back to stand a few steps behind with herself and Johanna. The teenager shot the Valkyrie a glare, but only received another slap in the back of her head from her sister.

"Lord Atwood, It is an honor to finally meet you," one of the molemen spoke up. "I am Romal, the current speaker for the council."

Zac had already read an information package on the Council during the days he stayed in the Union Headquarters, and he knew that the speaker was simply a rotating position amongst the council, and it changed person every month.

"It's nice to meet you all as well," Zac nodded. "You should know why I'm here."

"I won't hide anything from you, things have deteriorated quite a bit on the surface. When your Councillors met your general a few weeks ago he spoke about the Great Redeemer, who is still a looming threat to our planet. But we have a more immediate threat that will destroy Earth within two months unless we do something.

"The Undead Empire is currently singlehandedly fighting against all the combined forces of the world, and they still have the upper hand. Even the other invaders have joined in battle with us, but the zombies are pretty strong. We need assistance," Zac said, immediately divulging his reason for visiting.

"So you're not here about the Flame Golems?" one of the human Councilors said with disappointment.

"No, don't get me wrong. My generals have already closed the other four Incursions of the Underworld, and I am here to immediately close the Flame Golem Incursion. The reason

isn't simply benevolence. I need your armies to come with me to the surface afterward," Zac said. "Immediately."

"I am not questioning your motives, but I am a bit unclear on something," one of the human councilors said. "Your force is strong enough to close four incursions without you even lifting a finger, something that would be impossible for us. If you still can't deal with these zombies, what use are we?"

Zac sighed and explained the situation with the array, and the dozens of massive undead hordes that were still drawing the lines for the massive array.

"So you need more armies to take down the hordes and destroy the array, while you focus on the leaders in the middle..." Romal muttered in understanding.

The meeting kept going for a few hours, where Zac essentially reiterated the situation on the surface and the various threats that Earth still faced. It was easy to see that the gravity of the situation was causing some shock to the Councillors, but he kept narrating what was going on with brutal honesty.

Of course, there were some details that he left out, such as the disappearance of Abbot Everlasting Peace, the Dao Funnel, and the situation with the Mystic Realm. Everything was to push them toward the decision to join the fight without delay.

All three of the molemen on the council were in the top 5 on their ladder, and the lowest rank amongst the others was rank 20. All apart from one were also on the Dao Ladder. These people made a stronger faction than anyone on the surface, barring Port Atwood. Neither the Marshall Clan nor the New World Government could boast of having nearly as many peak elites.

Getting these people to the surface to fight the zombies was Zac's greatest priority. The hours passed as the two factions ironed out the details until Zac finally left with his group in tow. A small smile adorned his face when he sat down in the car, and he didn't even mind the chaotic swirl of people crammed around the vehicle as it drove through the streets.

Zac was quite pleased with the results of the meeting as he returned to the teleportation array with his group in tow. The Council was far more utilitarian compared to the shrewd Marshall Clan, and things were sorted out quite quickly. The Underworld Council would immediately join the battle against the Undead provided that the Fire Golems were dealt with.

They even went so far as to promise to bring their whole force, leaving just enough manpower to protect their settlements from the beasts in the area. All in all, they would bring almost two hundred thousand experienced warriors, and they would cover the teleportation expenses themselves.

Of course, Zac knew their choice was not only about saving Earth. They wanted to bring enough strength to secure a corner of the surface, turning it into their own kingdom. Zac could understand their decision, as Humans and Ishiate were ultimately not built to permanently live underground, and many would no doubt want to live under the blue sky again.

The Council didn't explicitly tell Zac about their plan, but their intentions were quite clear from their line of questions. Zac himself didn't mind at all, feeling their decision made sense. If it was one thing that new earth possessed in abundance, then it was free space. The expansion in size of the planet and the monumental losses amongst the four species had resulted in massive stretches of unclaimed land.

The amount of high-quality land was far more limited though, such as lands close to Nexus Veins or other valuable resources. Those kinds of places were few and far between, though Zac had already claimed a large percentage of those places through closing the Incursions.

The armies of the council would also participate in the upcoming battle. They would assault the massive area under the control of the Flame Golems from almost a dozen tunnel systems simultaneously in a bid to spread out the golems' forces. It would hopefully allow Zac to strike at the core with less resistance.

Zac felt the idea was perfect as he stepped through the teleporter to join his forces. The fight against the Fire Golems

would essentially be a practice-run for their battle against the Lich King and his forces.

Chapter 369: Heat

“Finally out of the tunnels. We’ll arrive in another eight hours or so,” the Council liaison said as he walked next to Zac with quick steps.

His name was Murk, and he was one of the molemen who also possessed a ranger class. He was in charge of showing Zac’s army the correct path in the underworld, as the roads leading to the Flame Golems were pretty confusing. The incursion itself was in a sense placed in the open underworld, but to get to that sector you first needed to pass a bunch of confusing tunnels.

There was no way that Zac would place the fate of his people in the hands of the Council Though, and the Tal-Eladar had over a hundred beasts scouting ahead for them as well. He personally didn’t think that the council had any reason to betray him, but people were unpredictable.

“Come, let’s train!” another voice piped up from the side, and Zac looked over at Emily who glared at him with some grievance in her eyes.

They had been traveling for over three days, as all settlements in the near vicinity of the Flame Golems had long been destroyed. The teenager wanted to make the most of the time, so she had insisted that the two would train with their axes. Zac knew part of it was to get her mind off the fact that her brother had passed away, and he happily obliged.

She was someone he had invested heavily in, and he wanted to make sure she’d get strong enough to protect herself.

“I’ll get you this time,” she muttered stubbornly.

“That’s great,” Zac smiled as he hoisted her up and flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**.

He kept running for a couple of minutes until he found a secluded spot ahead of the army.

“We have 20 minutes or so before they catch up,” Zac said as he let the teenager down.

Emily didn't hesitate to take out her two tomahawks from her cosmos sack, and they both started to radiate with chaotic energies. It was a continuation of her elemental axeman-archetype, and a new skill she got at level 35. This one wasn't a support skill like the earlier one, but rather a pure offensive skill.

Zac smiled as he took out his billy club and a spare shield, and waved at her to start. She immediately disappeared, leaving a scorching mark on the ground, and the next moment she appeared behind him. One of her tomahawks were already in mid-swing, and it lit up with infernal fire.

Her new skill [**Elemental Fury**] looked confusingly similar to her elemental axes, apart from the fact that she needed to use a physical axe for the skill. She could essentially imbue her axes with an element of her choice, and the different elements would have varying effects. The skill allowed her to have a flexible and unpredictable fighting style, and Zac felt it was a good match to her chaotic and aggressive fighting style.

The flame-infusion would imbue her strikes to erupt into large explosions, causing widespread damage in the direction of her swings. There were also earth, lightning, ice, wind, each with their own effects. The only weakness was that she couldn't use the same attack twice in a row, at least not while the skill was in middle mastery.

Zac already knew about the effects of the strikes from their earlier sparring sessions, and he smoothly moved his shield forward to block the swing mid-way. It didn't interrupt the skill, but it caused the gout of fire to spread in all directions, effectively blocking Emily's sight as Zac repositioned himself as he clubbed her on the back.

The teenager stumbled forward, but she smoothly turned the stumble into a confusing set of steps as she once again tried to take him down, this time using the freezing effect of her ice

axe to rob him of his mobility. Zac played along and slightly slowed his speed, but she still couldn't manage to land a hit as his shield always got in the way.

The fighting reached a stalemate lasting a few minutes, until Zac suddenly emitted a spike of killing intent toward her the moment she launched her attack. Emily's face turned deathly pale and she quickly jumped five meters back, and she angrily stomped her foot in the ground as she waved her tomahawks in Zac's direction.

"That's cheating! You said you wouldn't bully me with your levels. How is that not using your levels?" Emily sputtered.

"I had much denser killing intent than that by the time I was your level," Zac laughed. "I know you wanted to quickly improve, so you've used a couple of E-Grade crystals while down here. But doing so has left you lacking in combat experience."

"I've still gone fighting against Barghest every day until recently, and I've even fought against the beast on Mystic Island," Emily countered with a sullen face.

"I know, but you've had demon guards and Valkyries protecting you," Zac said. "You have not yet gone through a true baptism of life and death. It makes you a bit weak against killing intent. You have honed great battle instincts from training with good teachers, but you do not trust them when faced with a great threat."

"So I should just run straight at someone radiating enough killing intent to blot out the sky?" Emily muttered skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get killed early."

"It's about instinct and decisiveness," Zac smiled. "You can never hesitate no matter if you decide to fight or flee. The problem was that you froze when I released the murderous aura. Your movement skill is pretty good, and your attributes are very high for your level, so you should have a decent chance to escape even if you meet someone stronger. Staying alive is the most important."

Truthfully Zac was lying to Emily in his explanation. He was emitting a lot more killing intent than what he possessed when he was around level 40. He wanted to inoculate her against dense auras and massive killing intent, which would hopefully allow her to keep her wits about her in case she found herself against a stronger foe.

The teenager slowly nodded in understanding, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. Soon enough she was back at it, and she used everything in her repertoire as she tried to break past Zac's defenses. She flitted about with surprising speed as she launched everything from fiery blasts up-close to wind blades from surprising angles in the distance.

Zac was extremely happy with her performance, and the only thing that he might feel could use some improvement was the lack of ruthlessness. The fighting felt clean and a bit synthetic, whereas he wished for a more efficient approach like the one that the Valkyries utilized.

They did everything in their power to kill their targets as quickly and efficiently as possible, no matter what they needed to do. They would attack groins or other weak spots, utilize hidden weaponry and the environment to their advantage. Emily still lacked that bit, and that was what he was trying to instill in her.

He had already noticed that she was a bit afraid to get hit in her face, the same as Average, which made him target it even further. Last time he had accidentally knocked her out with a kick, but even before then she often left with a whole number of bruises. Zac felt a bit bad, but he knew that the others on the island, except Alyn perhaps, didn't dare to be ruthless enough against the teenager.

The feral teenager pulled out all the stops, but the results were the same. The army caught up with the two and Verana and Joanna shot amused looks at the swollen face of Emily.

"One of these days," she muttered under her breath. "I'll make your head swell up to the size of a beach ball."

"You'll need to get a lot stronger before you'll have a chance of that," Zac snorted.

It was their last sparring session as they were closing in on the Fire Golems, and the invaders could crop up any time. The army entered heightened alertness, in case of an ambush. But there were no signs of them even though they could see extremely far after exiting the tunnels. The ground was completely silent as well, indicating that there likely no golems hiding beneath them.

Zac had gotten a wealth of intelligence on the Flame Golems from the Council, and the invaders were almost hilariously easy to spot. The smallest golems were over two and a half meters tall, and they all had thick builds. It was like they were made from large black boulders stacked together, and where the stones were bound together by magma.

Their natural heat was enough for goutts of flames to erupt from their bodies at regular intervals, and they were essentially portable firework shows. Stealth was truly not their strong suit, which was why they could only ambush people by silently digging new tunnels until they were right next to you. Luckily the Demons possessed a few Geomancers who were even more skilled than the molemen at detecting changes in the ground.

But there was no surprise attack forthcoming, and they soon enough reached the area of the Flame Golems. It was very different from the general gloom of the underworld, as the moss and dark pools of water were replaced with bubbling lakes of magma.

They were still two hours from the incursion itself but it felt like they were wandering into an active volcano, and the smell of Sulphur lay heavy in the air. The weaker people were already starting to sweat from the scorching heat, and Emily was forced to take off her thick furs with some complaint.

The peak F-Grade warriors were still unaffected by the heat that would make a normal mortal keel over in seconds, but Zac knew that most would be unable to exhibit their full power in the upcoming fight. The golems had truly gotten themselves a home-field advantage. Finally they reached the true core of the incursion, and Zac was shocked at the sight.

“This isn’t what you guys described,” Zac said with a frown as he turned to Murk.

“I-I don’t understand either,” the moleman said with wide eyes. “Our latest intelligence is less than two weeks old.”

The Flame Golem Incursion was situated inside what could best be described as a gargantuan pillar in the open underworld. It was tremendously wide, and walking around it would take over a week. Due to the environment around the pillar it was posited that the core of it might actually be an active volcano, with a pillar of magma that reached all the way to the surface.

The only way to get to the actual incursions was to enter one of the many tight tunnels and cracks that existed in the pillar.

That was why the Council didn’t take the same route as themselves. They started in towns on the opposite sides of the pillar, and they would assault the incursions from multiple directions that way. But there was a problem; the tunnel they were supposed to take was gone, replaced with a huge passage full of engraved pillars.

The new passage was hundreds of meters wide, and it reached even higher into the sky. They were quite some distance from the entrance but they still didn’t have any trouble making out the details due to their size.

The pillars looked almost as large as the towering Redwood mountains over at the Cradle of God, and even from the distance they were able to make out large fractals on all of them. Zac couldn’t be sure what they were made for, but he couldn’t imagine it was anything good.

It felt like the invaders had opened the doors wide open, daring them to enter their meticulously created battlefield. Verana and the other leaders of the army wore troubled faces as well, and Zac finally felt compelled to order a halt. The group of battlefield support quickly set up cooling arrays to ward off the heat, as staying this close would no doubt continuously drain people.

“What do you think?” Zac asked the others. “I know it’s a trap, but can you make out any details?”

“It looks like array towers,” Verana said. “The Tal-Eladar does not use that sort of fortifications, but they are a popular solution.”

Zac nodded, feeling the same way. The towers were reminiscent of a set of buildings that he was able to buy for Port Atwood, though his options were still pretty limited. Each tower was likely an array of its own, and it would be able to launch attacks at anyone close according to some preset instructions.

Such buildings usually had much greater firepower compared to arrays like his own Town Protection array that could attack a far larger area, but it also had a weakness. As long as the tower was destroyed the array would break. So it essentially was extremely lethal in a small area, and somewhat fragile.

But there were over a hundred pillars crammed in that small area as far as Zac could tell, and the army would be blasted from all directions if they entered.

“What should we do?” Joanna asked. “I don’t think we’ll be able to defend against that many towers even if we activate our War Arrays.”

Zac silently stared at the towers for a few seconds before he looked back at his group.

“We’ll wait until 10 minutes until the predetermined time for our joint assault. I’ll handle the towers.”

Chapter 370: Array Towers

Most people looked relieved to hear that Zac would take care of the array towers. Charging those things was to risk one's life without the potential for any gains in levels, so they breathed out in relief when they heard they didn't have to do that. However, Joanna and Emily looked worried when they heard that he would charge into that deathtrap alone.

"You'll handle them?" the Murk said with barely contained skepticism. "Do you have any of your old world weaponry, like tanks? How about I contact the other forces? They might be able to help us."

"It's fine," Zac said with a shake of his head before he turned to Verana. "Where's Smaug?"

"He's hiding amongst the rearguard," the beast mistress leered. "He scurried back there the moment he saw the towers."

Zac snorted and walked back to the end of the convoy, and he soon enough found the person he was looking for.

"I have decided I will defend the rear for you, lord," Smaug immediately said when he saw Zac approach, emitting the aura of a brave warrior. "I am afraid I will just be in the way in such cramped quarters. My arrays cannot distinguish between friend and foe. It is truly a shame, but I will pray for your success as I will defend your backs with my life."

"Isn't that nice," Zac snorted. "Don't worry, I won't make you go to the frontlines. That's not why I brought you here. Do you have any more of those concussive arrays?"

"I can buy five right now, at 20 million each," Smaug said with some relief in his eyes.

Zac sighed, but he nodded in agreement as he transferred the funds.

The concussive arrays were something that Smaug had procured while they fought the Underworld incursions. They were array crystals that essentially functioned as superpowered hand grenades. They caused a tremendous explosion in a somewhat contained area, and the arrays were great at utterly destroying fixed structures.

They weren't as efficient at taking down actual cultivators though, as they had a small delay that would allow most to move out of the way or activate their defenses. But they would be perfect for taking down a couple of towers each in case things went out of control.

“So you're really doing this thing?” Smaug hesitantly said as he looked at the rows and rows of tower arrays. “These golems aren't messing around, and I don't think that the turrets they've built will be anything to laugh at.”

“I have enough cards up my sleeve to feel confident I'll survive for a while at least, and if it turns out to be too dangerous I'll back off,” Zac sighed. “I can't send my people into such an obvious trap. They're not strong enough.”

“It's not just fun and games to be on the top is it?” Smaug snorted. “At least you're also on the top of the Power ladder as well so people don't try to rob you every two days.”

Zac could only let out a deep sigh in agreement as he walked away. It had been a bit odd to reacquaint himself with Smaug during the trip, as this excursion was the first time they met while he was in his human form. He had pulled out all the stops to ingratiate himself with Zac, doing everything from providing arrays from his limited license, to updating him on rumors or valuable deposits, to even trying to set him up with a few ladies.

His over the top enthusiasm was a bit hard to swallow, but it truly is difficult to punch a smiling face.

After he got the arrays he simply sat down on his prayer mat. It actually kept him cool even in this environment, and it allowed him to smoothly wait out the three hours until the agreed-upon time. The only interruption was that Murk confirmed that the other sides of the pillar were normal, but

the closest tunnels had all been closed down or filled with lave.

It had elicited a short discussion about whether they should spend two days or so to head to the closest open tunnels instead of walking into this obvious trap. Zac Eventually decided that they would stay the course. The Golems had the means to close down the tunnels, and he didn't want to waste two days only to find that their new point of ingress had been closed as well.

A few daring scouts had dared to test out the pillars on the edges, and not surprisingly the towers were fire attuned. They all shot out balls of lava that were roughly the size of a soccer ball, and they both possessed kinetic force and fiery heat. The only upside was that it almost looked like they were dropped from the top of the tower rather than being shot, so their speed wasn't troubling.

The real trouble came from the fact that one tower could shoot out quite a few fireballs in a volley every five seconds, and there were over a hundred towers. If their army entered together they would be assaulted by a thousand lava balls in no time, and such an attack would cause massive losses.

The time finally arrived, and Zac hadn't figured out any better strategy than running straight in. He would take down the towers one by one without stopping, allowing him to avoid as many of the lava balls as possible.

A rain of fire from the sky almost completely blotted out the ceiling to welcome his arrival. They looked like fiery drops of rain, slamming down all around him. Zac blanked out for a second by the majestic sight, but he shook his head to snap out of it. He immediately appeared in front of the nearest tower with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and swung a large fractal edge toward the base. The blade was already imbued with his new and improved Seed of Sharpness, and it cut through the pillar without any trouble.

Unfortunately, that was it. The pillar still stood in the same position, as Zac's swing hadn't actually managed to move it at all. He could only take a few steps back and infuse himself

with the Dao of heaviness as he tried to topple the thing over with a body slam. However, the collision must have looked like an ant trying to topple a tree, and Zac only managed to make the tower shudder a bit.

He could only summon a couple of more fractal blades and launch them at the tower as he danced around like a monkey to avoid the increasing amount of lava balls landing all around him. It was not exactly how he wanted to present himself, but it was the best he could do without wasting a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. Each blade was infused with the seed of heaviness this time, and the attacks slammed into the tower with the force of a truck.

The base was already completely cut through, so the attacks were enough to topple it without any problem. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that he was able to destroy a tower without much effort, and he hoped that taking down the first tower would have a cascading effect. The towers were clustered quite close to each other, and he pushed it over in the direction of its closest neighbor.

But a shocking change took place the moment the tower started to topple. It lost all its structural integrity in an instant, and it quickly turned into a tube of lava that spilled down straight toward a gaping Zac. Even he didn't want to take a magma bath unless necessary, even though he was pretty sure he could withstand it for a second or two without getting seriously hurt. He flashed away with **[Loamwalker]** toward the next pillar instead, leaving a large pond of lava in his wake.

After the first experiment he started to get a hang of it, and the second tower only needed three quick swings with the help of his Dao Seeds and **[Chop]**. But the intensity of the lava balls only increased as he got within range of more and more towers, and he quickly became unable to dodge them all without being forced out of the entrance.

He was forced to bear the brunt of some of the attacks if he wanted to keep going, so he activated **[Nature's Barrier]** to block the handful of the lava balls dropped in his directions. Leaves were obviously not the greatest defense against fire,

but with the help of the Dao of Trees they had an unyielding vitality that allowed them to knock the balls away before burning up.

However, as more and more hits struck his defense he realized that he would waste even more Cosmic Energy this way than if he simply unleashed a greater strike. After a short deliberation the energy around him started to surge, and the enormous forester's hatchet appeared behind him. His body strained under the pressure, but a wave of destruction rippled outward causing one tower after another to fall apart into pools of magma.

What better attack to destroy what looked like a bunch of stone trees than **[Deforestation]**?

The first swing of **[Deforestation]** was all he needed, as it destroyed over half the towers. He had already taken down around ten before that, and the big gap gave him a breather from the relentless bombardment of lava projectiles. There was no need to use his second swing for the remainders as he saw it. He instead threw out a couple of boulders to avoid stepping in lava and threw out his concussive arrays at the tightest clumps of towers.

Lava kept raining down from the falling towers, but the threat was dealt with thanks to his **[Axe of Felling]**. What remained was to simply take down the final towers with his Daos, and it only took a few minutes of his time. Zac signaled the army it was fine to move forward after the final tower collapsed, and they quickly sped toward him as they vigilantly kept watch for any remnant defenses.

But it appeared that there were no hidden arrays, among the obvious towers, and the only remnant threat was the massive amount of magma that filled the whole entrance.

The army seemed to have anticipated this though, and the stronger warriors threw out one huge block of stone after another, effectively creating a wide bridge to pass. Zac nodded in appreciation as he jumped up on the bridge from one of his boulders, and the army entered the true Incursion together.

A pillar of the purest flames entered their sight the moment they stepped inside the cave where the golems had built their base. Zac first thought it was the volcano that the Council mentioned, but he soon realized it was the Incursion pillar itself, and it showed just how closely related to flames these golems were.

The other Incursions he had encountered had generally been simply color-coded to match the force, apart from the Undead Empire who had turned the pillar into a beacon of Miasma, where specters slowly circulated the beam.

The flame golems seemed to have the ability to do the same thing, as the Incursion was a huge red flame that almost blinded Zac when he looked at it. He swiftly turned his eyes away, a bit leery about whether the sight meant the golems were powerful enough to enjoy special treatment, or that it just looked that way because all the golems were fire-attuned.

Such musings would have to wait for later though, as he knew that they needed to act quickly. They hadn't spotted a single golem so far, which made Zac believe an ambush was just around the corner. Besides, his new allies were currently fighting the Golems according to Murk's report, and the longer it took for Zac to take down the leader the greater the losses would be among the Council's armies.

The group kept rushing closer and closer toward the Incursion Pillar, but they didn't see any structures anywhere. However, the inside of the enormous stone pillar was still a marvelous sight. These golems were not only insidious combatants who had no compunctions about drowning people in magma, but they were also great artisans.

The golems had for some reason decided to spend a massive amount of effort on thousands of sculptures, each of them a lifelike masterpiece. The motifs were almost always of nature, with everything from large trees to unfamiliar creatures lovingly carved out of transported stones, or even out of the ground itself. The only exception was a huge boulder placed on a hill in the distance, the only stone that looked completely untouched.

Most people thought it was some sort of art, but Zac immediately knew something was wrong, as the boulder actually made him feel threatened.

Chapter 371: The Floor is Lava

Since the suspicious boulder was placed alone on a hill it immediately garnered the attention of the others as well, and many exchanged glances in confusion.

“Did they just found a rock they really liked...?” Joanna muttered, seeming a bit discombobulated from the unexpected scenery around them.

But Zac didn't agree as he trusted his instinct on this matter.

“It's dangerous,” Zac succinctly said shot out five fractal blades in rapid succession.

His hunch proved spot on because the large boulder suddenly burst into flames as it transformed into an enormous amalgamation of fire and rock. The stone split into around twenty pieces that made up its body and limbs. The golem reached over five meters in the air, and the air for tens of meters around it shuddered from the heat and power it radiated.

Lava seeped out between the cracks in the stone, and it slowly dripped on the ground. Mysterious fractals also appeared on the stones and the inscriptions shone with a red glimmer that contained obvious power.

“This is what the golems look like?” Emily muttered in disbelief from behind. “I don't want to fight those things. I'll get torched before even getting close.”

“No!” Murk shouted with fear. “This one is way bigger than the ones we've encountered, and the normal ones aren't covered in fractals.”

“It's a common cultivation method for golems,” Verana said. “They inscribe their bodies with Cosmic Pathways to allow

energy to flow more naturally. This one is one of the generals, or more likely the leader itself.”

“I’ll test it out,” Zac muttered as he glared at the enemy from the distance. “Give me a power boost.”

Emily nodded and she threw a burning axe into his back. Zac felt like lava coursed through his veins before the effect stabilized. He chose the axe that gave Strength and Dexterity since he wanted to finish that thing as quickly as possible. Between his own prowess and Emily’s boost he didn’t fear the golem even if it radiated a greater pressure than even the Demon Lord did.

He disappeared in an instant, and a row of cracks in the ground was the only clue of his path as he rushed forward with the help of his movement skill. He was right in front of the golem in less than a second, and he felt a scorching heat from the Golem’s Dao Field. He felt his skin smarting after just a second, but he breathed out in relief as he guessed that the golem didn’t seem to possess a fragment.

The effect of the Dao field was only slightly stronger than his own Peak fields, where the extra boost came from the golem being in E-Grade. He immediately released a Dao Field containing heaviness, which hopefully would restrain his enemy a bit.

The golem was expecting Zac’s arrival, and its huge fist looked like a small sun as it soared toward him. Zac immediately summoned a fractal edge and imbued it with Heaviness, opting to clash with the enemy head-on. The clash caused a storm of fire to explode far into the sky, but Zac imbued his body with the Seed of Trees to recover from the small burns.

Cracks appeared in the ground as the Golem stumbled a few steps backward from the initial clash, and Zac immediately knew that the golem had around 700 Strength at best. It would be an insurmountable power for most people, but Zac’s effective strength was over a thousand between his high-grade titles and Emily’s boost.

The edge from **[Chop]** detached itself from **[Verun's Bite]** and Zac controlled his blade to harass the golem from behind, as he mounted another assault from the front. The golem lit up in a blaze of flames in response, and the fractals on its chest started to emit an even stronger red light than before.

The already huge creature suddenly grew to twice its size, and Zac sensed real danger from it. He managed to cut off a large chunk of rock from its leg with a few furious swings as it transformed, but it wasn't enough to interrupt the transformation. The intensity of flames around it had increased by at least a tier, and Zac was forced to dismiss his independent fractal edge.

The blazing heat from the Golem King's body caused constant strain on the blade, and Zac was forced to infuse it with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy if he wanted to keep it going. It was more economical to use **[Chop]** to create disposable blades that only lasted one swing. Zac realized that the transformation had caused the golem's flames to increase in intensity, but Zac was still overpowering it in raw strength.

Chunks of rock kept falling as Zac systematically dismantled it, stoically enduring the accumulating burns on his body. The Golem King furiously tried all kinds of attacks to take Zac out, but it wasn't strong enough to crush him and the Seed of Trees kept restoring Zac's burns. It released a deep bellow and slammed both its huge fists downward. Zac didn't want to block such a swing without reason, so he quickly jumped up to avoid the strike, aiming a strike at its head.

The two fists cause a massive earthquake in the area, but Zac managed to cut off a decent chunk of one of its shoulders. But a sense of worry crept into Zac's heart as the rumblings didn't abate, but only got worse. Zac finally realized what was going on, and he turned to the people who were keeping a defensive perimeter in the distance.

“RUN!”

Pandemonium arrived a second later, as an endless amount of lava spewed up from the ground, creating a tidal wave that crashed in the direction of Port Atwood's Forces. It pushed

forward with shocking speed, rapidly closing in on the fleeing warriors. Was the Golem trying to retaliate by killing his people?

Zac grit his teeth in fury as he jumped at the golem to launch another mighty swing, but the creature countered with another punch with its barn door-sized fist. Gravel rained down along the slope from a huge jagged wound that ran all the way along the Golem's arm, but Zac was in turn launched away like a rocket from the eruption of fire the fist released.

A plume of smoke made a streak through the air as Zac was thrown back almost a hundred meters, but he landed on his feet without an issue. He made no attempts to run back up the hill, and instead opted to run back toward his fleeing army. Getting thrown back was just Zac borrowing the golem's momentum, as the huge thing wouldn't be able to push him if he didn't allow it.

He used [**Loamwalker**] to the limit to get back in time, but the distance between his forces and the huge wave of lava kept shrinking. He knew that if that wave hit there would be serious casualties, as far from all of them were equipped to resist an attack of that magnitude.

But he was one with the earth as his steps took him closer and closer to the wave, and he finally caught up. The wave was simply massive by this point, and it shone with an almost blinding light. But Zac didn't hesitate as he started running on top of the malleable magma, ignoring the pain of his bare soles.

Smoke sizzled from his feet causing his eyes to tear up from the pain, but Zac only kept running. Unfortunately bad turned to worse when he realized he was starting to sink, even with his tremendous speed. In just two seconds he was already to his knees, and he started to sink faster and faster. The lava felt like quicksand, and the pain was quickly becoming unbearable.

The fractals on his robe lit up with a beautiful glimmer, but Zac had no time to admire the defensive charge his gear contained as he hurriedly pushed through the lava. Even with

the protection of his top-quality gear he was still subject to tremendous heat, and he felt like a lobster getting boiled alive.

His legs strained as he waded through the viscous magma until he finally broke out on the other side, and his eyes were met with the scene of a few Valkyries desperately erecting defensive shields with the help of their War Array. Zac shook his head as he immediately realized such a wall would not hold against what he just forced his way through, and he took out an item from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

A refreshing scent spread across the area as Zac spread out across the area as he had activated his Dao Field for the Dao of Trees, and the next moment a miraculous sight took place. An impossibly dense jumble of thorned brambles spread out for over two hundred meters in an instant, and they grew to twice the height of the sea of lava.

It was [**Bramble Wall**], the second ace in his repertoire that he found during the hunt. He had already used his [**Void Ball**] against the Cyborg, but he had kept this item all this time since it was an item of protection rather than destruction.

This was the choice he made. He could have likely destroyed the Golem King if he was given another minute, but that would have cost the lives of a large group of his own people. He had already cut off a third of its volume, and he couldn't imagine that didn't count as a grievous wound. But Zac had forcibly resisted the whispers of malice in his mind and literally ran through fire to protect his people.

Unfortunately it was all too obvious that a wall of brambles wasn't the optimal defense against lava, and Zac could see how the vegetation was slowly getting decimated even though the brambles rapidly regrew with shocking ferocity. Zac scrambled for ideas and quickly tried to infuse the roots with the Dao of Trees.

It gave no response, even though the two concepts should have matched. He could only try the Seed of Sanctuary as well since he was out of options. This time it actually worked, and the roots lit up with a slightly golden hue, making them slightly fire-resistant. The spread and effect of his Dao Seed

were far greater than he expected, and an idea formed in his mind that he quickly confirmed.

Sanctuary (Peak): Endurance +50, Intelligence +20, Wisdom +50.

It was another mid-fight breakthrough. The past weeks had made him better realize the duty of a leader, and his decision to give up his own goal for the safety of his people inadvertently helped him push through the final step. He was already close to evolving the seed due to the two iterations of Dao Visions, but this fight gave him the final push.

The bramble wall was still getting scorched by the sea of lava, but the roots managed to last far longer with the help of the Dao of Sanctuary. It even slowly gained thickness due to the regrowth. Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that his army was safe for now.

“How can we help?” Joanna asked from behind.

“I think the Golem King used a skill that was massively empowered by the environment. We’ll just wait it out. Have people move back just in case,” Zac said before he jumped up on the wall of brambles to see what was going on.

The Golem lord still stood in the distance, and it looked like it was infusing power into the ground, making it spew out more and more magma like a real volcano. Zac frowned at the scene, knowing that their time was limited. The bramble would only keep regenerating new roots for twenty or thirty more seconds, while the Golem King seemed to just be getting started.

“Throw your **[Extinguishing Arrays]** over the wall! Buy me a couple of seconds!” Zac shouted as energy started to surge in his forearm.

The huge fractal hand emerged and shot toward the golem with blinding speed. The creature immediately noticed the new threat, and a large fractal appeared in the air behind it. Out of the fractal a white-hot flame emerged, and it actually appeared

to be alive as it took a slightly humanoid shape, forming a head and two fanged arms.

“An elemental!” Verana shouted with some surprise. “Is that thing a Summoner?”

Zac frowned as he looked at the inscribed hand who was suddenly beset by a barrage of flame attacks of the elemental. His own hand started to blister and crack from the transmitted heat, but he grit his teeth as he flooded [**Nature’s Punishment**] with the Seed of Trees, allowing it to continuously regenerate its burnt parts.

It finally managed to arrive above the elemental and Golem who still kept infusing the ground with energy. The large fractal beneath the hand appeared next, just like it did during the battle against the undead. But no mountain emerged from the fractal, but something else entirely.

It was instead an endless torrent of water that spewed out of the fractal, making it look like the other end of the array was at the bottom of an ocean.

Chapter 372: Deluge

An unceasing deluge of water rushed out of the array in the sky, crashing into everything below in an instant. This was the true power of reaching peak mastery of **[Nature's Punishment]**. Nature took many shapes and forms, and the earth was just one of them. Another type of punishment of nature was the relentless waves on the ocean, crushing anything in its path.

Just like the Golem King had his ocean of fire, so did Zac have an ocean of his own.

The elemental had summoned an enormous wall of flames to block out the water, and the clash of the two opposing forces caused thick clouds of steam to spread for kilometers in every direction. Some of the water also spilled over on the sea of lava, which helped to cool it down somewhat. Zac's vision was completely blocked out in just a second, so he could only keep pouring energy into his skill to keep it going while maintaining vigilance for surprise attacks through the haze.

Zac was starting to worry that his bramble wall would crumble before he finished the fight, but a high-pitched shriek echoed across the cave after ten seconds or so. The wail caused Zac's mind to blur for a second and almost made him fall off the wall of brambles. But luckily he had learned his lesson after encountering the mental bell, and he had kept **[Mental Fortress]** active and fully charged during the whole battle.

It only took an instant for him to once again stabilize his mind, and he sensed a stream of Cosmic Energy entering his body. Something had been killed by his attack, and Zac guessed it was the elemental judging from the shriek. However, the surge of energy only felt like one kill, and Zac guessed that the Golem King was still alive. Eventually he couldn't maintain his skill any longer, and the torrential downpour ended.

The problem was that he couldn't see anything past a few meters ahead due to the massive amount of mist in the air. He hadn't really thought about this problem when he decided to attack with water, he simply wanted to cool down the lava and extinguish the burning Golem. But the Golem could be anywhere at this moment, as the Elemental staved off the water for almost ten seconds, giving the Golem ample time to move out of the way.

An attack could come from anywhere as things stood.

“Stay together, shout out if you sense something!” Zac shouted to the people below.

It at least became apparent that the golem no longer was infusing energy into the ground to pour out more lava, as the moving wall of molten stone had stopped, and large parts had already cooled down enough for it to become solid again. Zac briefly considered running back on top of the lava to scout out the area, but he soon enough gave up that idea.

The Golem had already shown its willingness to target his army, and he needed to be close-by in case it was preparing another assault.

“Do you have any means to sense where the golem is?” Zac asked Verana who stood next to him.

“I'm afraid not,” Verana said with a shake of her head. “I think it's best to simply wait a few minutes for the haze to disperse before deciding what to do next.”

Zac had to reluctantly agree, even though it felt like giving the enemy time to prepare their next attack. After two minutes the bramble wall started to rapidly disintegrate, rotting with a speed visible to the naked eye. It wasn't Zac that was doing anything, but it was likely just the natural life cycle of that odd plant. It rapidly grew for a few minutes before its life ended.

Another ten minutes passed where Zac vigilantly walked around the army as a guard, trying to find any clues in the slowly dispersing mist. Every minute that went by made his nerves even more frayed, and his mind even started to play tricks on him. Every small movement in the shadows soon

enough felt like a hidden ambush by the golems, and he had to restrain himself from launching fractal edges in all directions.

But no attack appeared, and when the mist finally dispersed they only saw a desolate landscape devoid of a single Golem. Zac was a bit confused, as it felt like the golems missed the perfect opportunity to strike back. After going over his options he ordered the army to resume their approach toward the core of the Incursion.

But the group only walked for one minute when he got a prompt from the System, telling him that the Incursion was closed. That could only mean that the Golem Lord had died or that he had left through the nexus hub. The news quickly spread among the people since the Valkyries still had their quest for a few more days, and they noticed that their quest progress had advanced by one.

“The whole invasion has probably left already,” Verana guessed as they kept moving toward the Incursion with greater speed. “The moment that golem realized how strong you were it launched its ultimate attack at us, wanting to create an opportunity to escape.”

“They weren’t even willing to properly fight it out? Things might have become different if the Golem brought helpers and some arrays;” Zac said with confusion. “This approach feels a bit different from how the other invaders have reacted. They usually go a bit further.”

“Golems don’t think like us. They generally don’t have emotions, and concepts like honor or revenge are foreign to them. They likely made a calculation that the risks of staying outweighed the potential reward, and immediately left,” Verana guessed.

Zac could only shake his head in disbelief, feeling like he had been robbed of a proper conclusion. These golems really left a sour taste in one’s mouth, causing so much trouble for Earth but not having the decency to allow the natives to retaliate.

Verana’s suspicions were soon enough confirmed when they saw the harried armies of the Council arriving from the other directions as they converged around the Nexus Hub. It turned

out that the golem armies had entered a heated struggle against the Council's armies, contesting every single meter. The golems even held the advantage, but they suddenly fled with shocking speed, only leaving a token force behind to curtail the advance of the Council.

Every single golem that stayed behind fought to its death, even going so far as to detonate themselves in a final attempt to delay the army. Zac realized it was all to let as many as possible flee through the Nexus Hub, and he was speechless at learning they golems were just as ruthless against themselves as they were against others.

He had never encountered a force that would leave behind a tenth of their people like that, and that those people would fight with such rabid ferocity. Perhaps only forces who reared death sworn warriors could do something like that and trust in the results of the rearguard.

Another unfortunate result of the extreme decisiveness of the Golems was that the whole area around the Nexus Hub was completely picked clean. It was just a flat surface, and it looked like the golems had even taken their houses with them as they left through the Hub. There were no stores of resources, no gear or weaponry to loot, nothing.

Even Zac who had fought two pretty taxing battles couldn't properly rest and go over the battle, and he started to run around to look for valuables with the rest of the party. He already had a sour taste in his mouth after not being able to kill the Golem King, and that only got worse when he realized he might be losing a bunch of money on the venture.

But Joanna finally came over with some good news after a few minutes.

"They've found something," Joanna said as she walked up to Zac.

"What?" Zac said with bright eyes, hoping to make at least some money from the Incursion.

"Tunnels, lots of them," Joanna said, making Zac blankly look at her.

What was so special about a bunch of tunnels?

Murk came over as well, and when he heard their exchange and Zac's subsequent confusion he immediately explained the situation.

"The underworld is surprisingly flat, with its elevation only diverging a few hundred meters at most. The most common exception seems to be mines containing spiritual-grade resources," he excitedly explained. "And we've already found indicators what this place holds!"

"So what resources are there?" Zac asked as he got infected by the moleman's exuberance.

"It's a Nexus Crystal Mine!" the moleman said with a wide grin.

"Oh," Zac said, his excitement noticeably waning.

He already had his own Crystal Mine on the island. Port Atwood also gained another 6 mines in the Underworld, though they were far worse than his original mine since they didn't sit right on top of a Nexus Vein.

"You don't understand," Murk said with almost glowing eyes. "I've never seen a mine of this size. Our early estimates say it covers the whole area beneath the pillar, perhaps reaching even further. But that's not the most important thing!"

Zac curiously looked on as the moleman took out a raw Nexus crystals shining with scorching radiance.

"Attuned Crystal? E-Grade?" Zac whistled with surprise. "You think there are more?"

"We only found the one so far, a scout accidentally cracked a small boulder and found this one inside. But if there is one crystal like this, then there are surely more. This might be the greatest mine in the Underworld," the moleman said, almost dancing in place.

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it made sense the golems were placed here considering their attunement. But he also remembered that the golems only kept to themselves during

the start since the integration. Had they mined everything already?

“Don’t worry,” Murk said when he saw Zac’s hesitation “The Council got their hands on a measuring array that detects spiritual resources, and it’s indicating there are still vast resources remaining as long as we go a bit further into the mines. The crystals that were easiest to access might be gone already, but not even the Golems could take it all in a couple of months. Besides, the crystals will regrow.”

“I want a detailed survey as soon as possible,” Zac said, his heart finally starting to thump with excitement.

He knew he had gotten his hand on a huge treasure this time, and he wanted to get a feeling of just how huge it was. E-Grade Fire-Attuned Nexus Crystals weren’t that rare in the multiverse, and even his Top Grade Beast Crystals were worth more.

But the whole Beast Crystal mine would fit in a small side-tunnel of the massive network beneath their feet. There were only 200 top-grade Beast Crystals, but there might be tens of thousands of attuned Nexus Crystals in his newly acquired mine. And with a mine of this magnitude there might even be the possibility of D-Grade crystals appearing in the bottom, or at least in the future as Earth matured.

“We’d be happy to explore the mine together with you in the upcoming weeks,” the moleman quickly said, his whiskers shuddering with excitement. “Our people can provide both insight and efficiency to any mining operation.”

Zac only smiled in response, making no decisions on the spot. The Council had already agreed that the Incursion and it’s surrounding area would fall under his control, but the council would gain a 15% stake in any wealth from this place due to their assistance. The size of the stake had been the largest point of contention in the meeting a few days ago, but Zac ended the discussion with a simple fact. If they had the capability they would have long closed the Incursion themselves.

But the Council could still boost their income even further if they were the ones who did all the work since no one would work for free. He would have to check with one of his administrators if Port Atwood could handle such a massive venture themselves.

“Did we find any stores of already mined crystals? Like a store-room by the entrance of the mine?” Zac asked as an afterthought.

“None, and we’ve gone so far as to frisk the people who entered the mines to make sure they’re not hiding anything,” Joanna said. “I think the golems already found out about the fate of the other Incursions, and they already had one foot out the door before we even arrived. The Golem Lord simply tested your power, and when he noticed your strength he immediately gave the order to return.”

Zac sighed and nodded, feeling that what she said made sense. The golems had time for an orderly evacuation, so it was no surprise that they would also have taken their things. Still, the mine alone was a huge get, though it was unlikely he would be able to extract anything too valuable before he left for the Tower.

The Councillors were already closing in on him from the distance, no doubt hoping to renegotiate the deal after finding out about the riches below. Zac could only smile at their approach, feeling that they only had themselves to blame for the situation. The Council had so many powerhouses, yet they hadn’t closed a single Incursion. They were too tame, and consequently they were unaware that great riches could always be found close to the Incursions.

Zac was a bit wrung dry from the fight though, and he was in no mood for a haggling session. He simply threw out a couple of arrays on the ground and told Joanna that he needed to rest after the fight. The Valkyrie nodded and moved to intercept the Councilors, immediately shutting down any attempts to discuss the mine.

The array disks isolated the small space from the hubbub outside, and Zac sat down on the ground after making sure that

none of the Councillors were brazen enough to push through his arrays. It was true that he needed to recuperate after the fight, and he took out an E-Grade Nexus Crystal.

But the real reason was that he wanted to go over his other gains.

Chapter 373: Desecration

Zac had sensed a few improvements during the battle, but he didn't feel comfortable checking things out while he was still in the middle of battle, waiting for a potential ambush. But now it was about time he looked things over.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees -

	Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Peak, Seed of Hardness - High, Seed of Sanctuary - Peak, Seed of Rot - High
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	773 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]
Dexterity	400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Endurance	1108 [Increase: 70,5%. Efficiency: 140%]
Vitality	496 [Increase: 55,5%. Efficiency: 140%]
Intelligence	196 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Wisdom	299 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Luck	149 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 185 744 753

His attributes, mainly Endurance and Vitality, had taken a large leap forward. But he noticed that he had gained more attribute points than expected, and he looked at the usual source of unexpected boosts; his title list.

[Promising Specialist: Reach 1000 points in a single attribute before evolving to E-Grade. Reward: All stats +5, Endurance +5%.]

Zac had mixed feelings of seeing his new title, realizing it might cause some turbulence in his cultivation path. He had gained more Endurance and survivability, but the result of the title itself might prove problematic for his future progression. He had likely gotten the class option for Big Game Hunter due

to his Apex Hunter-title, and he was worried the same thing would happen now that he was closing in on his next selection.

Would the system try to force him into another tank class now that it considered him a specialist? Yrial even mentioned that the System only allowed people to pick Classes that would suit their talents.

It might not be the first time that someone got 1000 points into the wrong attribute by accident, but Zac reckoned that it was extremely rare at best. He would much rather have gotten the title for reaching 1000 points in Strength, but beggars couldn't be choosers at a time where he desperately needed power-ups. Hopefully the title only meant that he would get an additional option for a tank class without losing his other options during his evolution.

Zac was actually a bit surprised that the title only appeared now. He had already passed 1000 Endurance in his human form even before his latest improvements, but he didn't get the title then. Perhaps the System didn't count boosts like **[Forester's Constitution]** to avoid people cheating with the help of skills like **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and Emily's boosts.

His gain in attributes wasn't actually what he wanted to look for when he sat down, even though it was a welcome bonus. It was the fact that he sensed something change in his movement skill as he ran atop the lava. He still sunk into the molten rock in the end, but he managed to move quite a bit faster than he used to, allowing him to catch up to his squad with record-speed.

As expected he saw that **[Loamwalker]** had reached Late Mastery, and even **[Nature's Barrier]** had improved a step as well. He wasn't quite sure what made the skills suddenly evolve, but he was happy to take it. Both had been subject to lava before they broke through, perhaps that was a clue to push the two skills one step further?

Zac closed the screens after seeing the changes, but he didn't exit the arrays just yet. He first summoned the emerald leaves out of curiosity, and he noticed that the defensive skill didn't have any great changes. The leaves were larger, and they

seemed to contain more energy. Zac deactivated the skill and focused on restoring his Cosmic Energy for two hours as he tried to familiarize himself with his improved Dao Seed next.

The two intense fights had not been too draining, apart from the final strike with **[Nature's Punishment]**. His energy was soon enough at an acceptable level, at which point he exited the array. Zac wryly smiled when a few councilors ran up to him. He had seen them impatiently walking back and forth in the distance while he sat in his array.

The Underworld Council had sent four of the human councilors, perhaps in hopes that Zac would be more amenable to give some concessions to his own people, but they were sorely mistaken. Their roundabout questions of reopening negotiations regarding the mine were immediately shut down. Zac made no decisions on the spot, as he had people better suited at figuring out a plan for the mine than himself. He would let them deal with it while he focused on the Incursions.

But Zac still stayed on to discuss a few other topics, and the meeting took 20 minutes before Zac excused himself. The members of the Underworld Council could only watch in disappointment as Zac bought a teleportation array and disappeared in a flash of light.

The council needed twelve hours before they got their real armies ready, and Zac left a few people to help guide them to the main continent. He wasn't too worried about them trying to doublecross him and take control of the town above, as he had made backup plans.

Mr. Trang and his squads had been busy setting up not one but three back-up towns on the unexplored continent, making sure that Zac never lost the means to get back. If the Council tried something he could descend upon them within a day. A transit station on a separate island from Port Atwood had also been set up, meaning that there was no risk of his town getting infiltrated.

The air on Port Atwood smelled extraordinarily fresh as he stepped out of the teleportation array. He headed over to the Academy when he couldn't find his sister anywhere, and he

found her in the middle of setting up the arrays she mentioned the other day. A new and completely circular structure was being erected, and Zac could see that it held three very distinct layers just like they had discussed.

Ogras and the army had left a few days ago as planned, and they rejoined the extremely harried Sino-Indian Alliance to finally stop the second zombie horde in its tracks. The demon had even entered a heated battle against the Zombie General in the air above the sea of undead, though neither was able to gain an advantage according to the report.

The fight ended with both of them backing away, with Ogras sporting light wounds. Zac guessed that the demon wanted to solidify his Dao through battle, so he had sought out the strongest opponent he could find. Hopefully it would pay dividends with the funnel later. The fact that they managed to force one of the main armies to a halt was a great sign, but he wasn't sure how long they could keep it up after Ogras left the frontlines.

But it would hopefully buy them a couple of more days before the enormous array truly activated, which was great since Kenzie needed some more time to prepare.

Zac couldn't just sit around and wait until the array was finished, and he was torn between a few options. He first considered joining the battle against the Undead Horde, but eventually discarded the idea. He needed to fight in his Draugr-form since he lacked two levels, and he didn't want to alert the Undead Empire about that persona unless necessary.

Eventually he decided to take down another surface incursion in the meantime, as many of the invaders still focused on enriching themselves rather than helping in the fight against the Undead Empire. He had no problem with using those people like a whetstone for his final levels.

Seeing the Flame Golem's actions were also a bit worrying, filling Zac with some urgency. It would become a problem if the invaders decided to follow suit and escape through the Nexus Hub before Zac could get his hands on them. It would both result in loss of experience for him, and that the massive

wealth they plundered from stolen land would be permanently lost.

He wanted to take down as many as possible before they cashed out and fled to their homeworlds, and Zac guessed that many were already planning on leaving due to the Undead Empire.

So he ordered a Valkyrie who was on standby in the Academy to head over to the Fire Golem Incursion and tell his elite squad to join him. Soon enough Verana and a squad of elites met up with 'Mr. Black' outside a teleporter in a town hidden in the wilderness. Apart from Verana and Tylia there was also Harvath and his squad of demons.

Smaug had somehow joined the squad as well, and he looked about ready to cry as he looked up at the sky. He stood still like he was frozen and took one deep breath after another.

"Wait, we have two suns now?" the merchant finally exclaimed after a few seconds.

"And four moons," Joanna smiled.

"Four of them? Wonder if there are treasures up there just waiting for the first person strong enough to grab them," the demon muttered.

"Most moons are pretty desolate places," Verana said from the side. "Few of them have a planet core that generates Cosmic Energy. But those that do are often turned into private residences as the density of Cosmic Energy becomes pretty extraordinary. There would no doubt be treasures for the first explorers at such a place."

Smaug whistled with interest before he finally looked down again and joined the squad as they finished their preparations. All of them looked rested and ready for battle, which wasn't surprising since Zac had essentially carried out the whole battle against the golems himself.

The group set out without preamble, and things went as expected. After having fought against four above-average Incursions in the unfamiliar terrain of the Underworld,

assaulting a much weaker Incursion on the surface provided little challenge for the group.

The moment they reached the incursion Verana silently summoned Grub, and Zac jumped on its head before they rammed the defensive array. The two had acted as a wall breaking team a few times already, and the defenses that the invaders set up proved far too weak to handle their assault. It cracked like brittle glass, and a handful of the feathered humanoids of the incursion coughed up blood from the backlash.

Zac jumped down from Grub and stomped in the ground, teleporting himself over to a section of the invader army where a group of birdmen emitting the powers of E-grade warriors stood. He directly activated [**Profane Seal**], for the first time seeing the skill after he managed to upgrade it to Middle Mastery.

The five sinister towers had gotten an addition of five gates that were placed in the gap between the towers themselves. It looked a bit funny with gates that had open space on both sides, but they emitted a terrifying enough aura for anyone to take them seriously.

Zac couldn't figure out any purpose of the gates apart from the fact that he sensed he was able to open and close them at will. It was pretty convenient as it would allow him to get reinforcements while he fought inside the cage.

On top of the gates the same types of azure fractals as the ones on top of the towers hovered, each of them summoning another spectral chain. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to be much stronger since he upgraded the skill, meaning that a strong warrior would be able to rebuff or break them.

But Zac had already found another usage of the chains as he only commanded five of them to start harassing the Incursion leader and the two guards he had by his sides. The other five started to whip around the large number of birdmen who were also caught inside the large cage as well.

Streams of energies almost immediately started to flood into his body as he started to fight the leader with the help of

[Hunger] and **[Unholy Strike]**. It was the chains that managed to impale one of the average warriors after another, killing them before the corpses were dragged along toward the next victim.

A few of the warriors survived having their torsos penetrated by the spectral chains, and wails and screams of fear started to echo in the area as the chains ruthlessly started to drain them of their life-force. In just a minute the chains were studded by rows of desiccated husks as they whirled around in the air, creating a truly horrifying spectacle completely irreverent of the dead.

He finally understood what the profane part of the skill name was referring to.

Chapter 374: Dao of the Axe

Seeing the horrifying display of his skill Zac's resolve started to waver, but he soon steeled his heart. He had already confirmed with the Marshall Clan that this particular Incursion hadn't shown any mercy, and quite a large number of people had been enslaved and killed by them. Besides, getting killed by a swing of an axe was only marginally better than getting hollowed out by the spectral chains.

The birdman leader screeched in rage as he saw his underlings getting culled one by one, and he desperately tried to take Zac down. He had some sort of wind-related class, and he moved with tremendous speed to attack Zac from various angles like flashes of lightning. One wound after another started to appear on Zac's body as though they came from nowhere, but Zac didn't mind in the slightest.

Undying Bulwark was truly the nemesis of Dexterity-based warriors. He wasn't able to block out the skills, but why should he even try? In less than thirty seconds the birdman general was drenched in blood from his own attacks. The ghosts from **[Deathwish]** had dragged him into a dance of death, and there was no way that Zac wouldn't be the last one standing in such a struggle. Zac himself had quite a few flesh wounds, but it was nothing a normal healing pill wouldn't fix in a couple of hours.

Soon enough the birdman leader gave up on the assault and caused a rain of blood when he shot toward the wall of **[Profane Seal]**. But he couldn't even escape the ghosts over on the other side of the cage, and he finally fell with an anguished wail when he unleashed a flurry of wind blades against one of the towers.

The battle was pretty much over by that point, as almost all of the trapped warriors had already fallen to the onslaught of the combination of the chains and the corrosive mists from

[Winds of Decay]. The remaining warriors outside had long given up, and they frantically fled toward the Nexus Hub along with the non-combat invaders. They were all essentially walking Nexus Crystals, but Zac allowed the survivors to leave through the Hub even though he desperately needed to gain levels.

This was something he had already decided on earlier. He wouldn't start slaughtering people indiscriminately in pursuit of power, and he would stop the moment the fight was over. Besides, he had already killed the leader and his two generals, and those three alone were worth far more Cosmic Energy compared to the remaining army combined.

The whole town was completely desolate in less than ten minutes, and the usual process of integrating the area into a part of Port Atwood began. A group of professionals from Port Atwood immediately streamed out of the Teleportation Array less than 30 minutes after it was built. His people had become experts at quickly and efficiently integrating conquered incursions, from emancipating slaves to sniffing out all valuables in the area.

Zac sat down, as usual, to go over the battle and recuperate. He didn't have any major gains from the battle just as he expected, but it did allow him to become slightly more accustomed to his improved Dao and skills, including the Dao of Sharpness he didn't really get to showcase against the Golems.

The power of his Seed of Sharpness was amazing by this point, and his very presence was dangerous to people who had yet Evolved. Small cuts would appear on their bodies, quickly accumulating to the point that they started to get seriously hurt. Even the weaker of the evolved were slightly affected by the Dao Field, and while he wasn't able to draw blood it looked like their concentration was impacted by the constant scratching of invisible blades.

Zac himself only waited out the 8-hour time limit while resting, and pondering on the results of the battle. The most interesting thing was the upgraded version of **[Profane Seal]**. The additional structures made him look forward to how the

skill would look when he reached the peak. Would it create a whole fortress with an impenetrable wall?

The only unfortunate aspect of the skill was that he wasn't able to infuse it with a Dao, which caused the chain's effect on strong opponents to be pretty limited. The Demon Lord had directly rebuffed them with a fiery aura, and the Cyborg simply disintegrated them with its aura. Perhaps the chains would have lasted longer if he could have infused them with the Dao of Hardness.

Perhaps the skill was the same as **[Deforestation]**. It was a skill given by an Epic class, and maybe those had higher requirements on the Dao to be used, and perhaps he was even expected to have formed a Fragment from Sanctuary and Hardness by this point if going by the class archetype. But he was dragged out of his musings before reaching a conclusion as Verana walked toward him.

"Your strength is getting pretty shocking," Verana said as she sat down next to him. "I am starting to wonder if our presence is even needed when you take down these Incursions. You are becoming an army unto your own."

"I still need people to stabilize the situation outside the cage," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It seems the seal is far weaker from the outside. Besides, it's good training for the future elites of Port Atwood."

"Still, it makes me expectant for the future. It is not often you get to see the ascent of a true powerhouse," Verana sighed.

Zac's initially smiled, but suddenly looked over at the Beast Master with suspicion.

"Okay, what do you want?" Zac asked.

"Tylia told me about the Beast Crystals after we closed the Golem Incursion," Verana said with a roll of her eyes as she sat down in front of him.

"I'm sorry, there's only so many in my hands," Zac said. "And we have quite a few beasts in Port Atwood as well."

"I am guessing you have gotten your hands on a mine though," Verana said. "More crystals will grow."

Zac didn't deny that, as it was pretty obvious he wouldn't just find one high-grade Beast Crystal randomly lying in a corner of the Underworld.

"You should know that we never planned on staying on your planet for a hundred years, but here we are. Our reserves will not last that long. We'd like to buy a share in the mine itself to secure supply," the Tal-Eladar said, finally putting the cards on the table.

"It's not impossible," Zac slowly said. "But do you even have the Nexus Coins for such a transaction?"

"Not yet, but I hope you'll remember your words in a year or two," Verana smiled as she stood up.

Zac sighed when he realized that she wasn't interested in paying up now, but rather only wanted to sound out the possibility. It was the better option of her, of course, since it wouldn't do her much good to spend all her current wealth on a completely stripped mine.

He didn't know how quickly Beast Crystals grew, but he couldn't imagine it was too fast. It would probably take years before new low-grade crystals sprouted. But he needed the money now, so he had no choice but to be a bit shameless.

"A few years is so long, and my memory isn't what it once was," Zac coughed as he stood up.

Verana stopped in her tracks and looked back at him with an even stare.

"I guess you have some means to strengthen your memory, no? Perhaps if I paid a bit up-front?" she said with a flat tone, and Zac could feel his ears heating up a bit. "How much?"

"Oh, not much. One billion would do," Zac said with a smile.

"A BILLION?!" Verana roared, making Lulu who was sleeping in her arms jump up in fright. "ARE YOU CRAZY?"

The two entered a fierce negotiation from there, but it was clear that Verana really needed the crystals. Unfortunately, she was truly unable to fork out so much money, but Zac walked away with another 500 million Nexus Coins in the end, with

the additional promise that the Tal-Eladar would assist in teaching Beast Mastery at the Atwood Academy.

Those nexus coins were likely a large part of the combined wealth the Tal-Eladar had scrounged up in the Underworld, but they fell into the hands of Zac in the end. It wasn't as much as his other sources of Nexus Coins, but it would give him a bit more breathing room when he visited the Tower of Eternity.

Zac returned to Port Atwood after having completed his mission and changed back to his human form after he arrived at his compound. He didn't reach level 74, but he felt he was over half-way there. He would likely just need to close two or three more Incursions to reach level 75.

Kenzie was actually in her courtyard when Zac looked for her, and her eyes were peeled at an extremely intricate blueprint.

"What are you doing?" Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

He immediately saw the blueprint was of the house she was building in the academy, but there were a ton of fractals and lines that Zac couldn't understand at all.

"Jeeves and I are looking over the schematic, to make sure we don't miss anything," Kenzie said, her eyes a bit bloodshot.

"Are you ok?" Zac asked with some worry. "It's okay to take a breather and rest. It will help you avoid mistakes as well."

"Jeeves doesn't make mistakes even when I'm tired," Kenzie smiled. "Besides, everyone is pushing themselves to save our planet. I can't laze about."

"So how's it going?" Zac asked, knowing he wouldn't be able to get her to rest.

"It's pretty much done," Kenzie said. "I will just need a day of testing the arrays and the energy flows to make sure no one made a mistake while setting everything up."

"One day?" Zac said, his eyes lighting up. "That's great."

"Have you decided on who will join us?"

“Not completely,” Zac admitted. “Only the inner layer. How many do you think would be able to sit in the outer layers?”

“I think we could fit 30 people or so? If I make the area any larger I can’t reliably contain the energies,” Kenzie said after thinking it over.

“Can you ask Alyn, Joanna, and Ilvere to nominate 9 people each? I also want to offer spots to Ryan, Lyla, and Ibtap if we can reach him.”

The insectoid had joined Nonet and was currently fighting the Undead Empire along with the Zhix hordes. The communications were sporadic, but he knew that they were still alive two weeks ago at least, and that hive Kundevi was part of a roving squad that had split off from the main Zhix army to hunt the smaller hordes.

That, unfortunately, meant that Zac currently had no means to contact him, and he also couldn’t hold up the activation of the funnel for them. It would be up to fate if they could join.

“What about Thea and the others?” Kenzie asked. “Shouldn’t we invite them too?”

“...No,” Zac finally said. “I want to use this opportunity solely for people of Port Atwood. That means that Verana and the Tal-Eladar won’t join either.”

It took a lot of deliberation, but Zac had eventually arrived at the conscious decision to not invite anyone that wasn’t part of his force. That included both Billy and Thea who he trusted, but who were ultimately allies in charge of their own forces. The same went for Verana. She was a trading partner, not an actual member of Port Atwood. The Tal-Eladar had been helpful lately, but it was essentially a business transaction since they gained something every time they joined him in battle.

Keeping it all for themselves might be selfish, but Zac and Ogras had risked their lives for the opportunity and they wanted to keep all the benefits for themselves. Truthfully, if they could keep all the Origin Dao for just the two of them, they would probably have done so since that would have the

greatest impact in the fight against the invaders and the Dominators.

But since that was impossible they could only use the spillover to create more powerhouses in Port Atwood. Kenzie didn't look too pleased about his decision, but she didn't contradict him in the end.

"I will enter meditation for a day to solidify my Dao," Zac said as he stood up to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Zac did just what he said he would do and entered his courtyard. His goal for tomorrow was to finally form a Dao Fragment, and he hoped to increase his chances of succeeding if he could find a direction to take the first step. He closed off all outside interference before he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. His eyes wandered over the axe over and over, trying to glean any type of truth or inspiration from its form or by how it felt in his hands.

Just what was the Dao of the Axe?

Chapter 375: Free Lunch

It was 4 pm the next day when the crystal in Zac's lap vibrated, indicating that his sister or Ogras was trying to contact him.

"Everything is ready," Kenzie's voice emerged from the crystal after he picked it up. "We couldn't get a hold of Ibtep, but everyone else is here."

"Ask Alyn if she wants to try. I'm on my way," Zac said as he stood up. "Can you bring the prayer mat from the cave?"

"It's already here."

Zac had spent the better part of a day picturing the Dao of the Axe, or at least the part of the Dao that represented his path. He still did not know if his conclusions were correct, but he was simply out of time and would have to roll the dice.

He walked over to the Academy in quick steps and found that everyone apart from Ogras was waiting outside. There were also 50 Demon Soldiers and 30 Valkyries who stood ready to guard the structure against any interruptions. Alyn stood there as well, though he was not sure if it was because she was there to oversee the event or to join it.

Alyn was the back-up he decided to fill Ibtep's spot in case he couldn't be reached. She was not really a core part of his fighting force, but she had contributed a lot to Port Atwood in her own way. He also thought that if Alyn's accomplishments in the Dao increased, then she would also be able to teach the students more efficiently.

"Finally we're doing this," Ogras' voice drifted over, but the usually lazy tone contained an undeniable hint of excitement this time.

The demon sported a new small scar on his left cheek, but other than that he seemed fine even though he had fought an

undead general the other day.

“Let’s hope we got this right, otherwise this will turn into a tragedy,” Zac wryly smiled as he looked across the people who would participate.

All of them belonged to the absolute peak of Port Atwood’s forces. The only exception was a motley mix of youngsters who looked a bit nervous. It was the students that Alyn had recommended, seedlings with potential to become powerhouses under his banner.

If something happened to all of them, including himself, then both Port Atwood and Earth was finished.

“So maudlin,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “It’s just a bunch of Origin Dao, what can go wrong?”

“Famous last words,” Zac snorted, though he felt the demon had a point.

“Let’s head inside and I will explain things,” Zac said as he looked over the group before entering the circular building.

Zac only took a few steps before he froze for a second, looking with some shock at what his sister had created. The walls were covered in a dense pattern of inscriptions, reaching pretty much from floor to ceiling. Even the stone floor and ceiling contained inscribed lines that went in circles around the outer layer he stood in.

Kenzie truly hadn’t been slacking off.

The group was led into the central chamber where the first group would meditate on the Dao when the Dao funnel was cracked open.

The Dao funnel was placed on an altar in the middle of the room, and the altar itself was covered in fractals as well. According to Kenzie the platform had the same effect as the spatial disturbance arrays he had used to block out the usage of teleporters. It was likely that it was these kinds of altars, albeit far more advanced versions, the Undead Empire used to block out the teleporters in the area surrounding his forces.

Whether such a thing would be needed or not wasn't sure, but Kenzie added it as a precaution. They simply knew too little about Origin Dao, and Brazla hadn't been helpful no matter how much Kenzie had begged or cajoled.

Their best guess was that Origin Dao was a mysterious energy that existed in the air around them, just like Cosmic Energy, but that it was impossible for people at their level to detect. It seeped into their souls from exposure, and absorbing the Origin Dao strengthened people's connection to the Dao.

Kenzie was afraid that the energy would dissipate too quickly, perhaps through leaving into other planes of existence. So she had prepared an array to seal space itself, in addition to the arrays that would hopefully keep the Origin Dao consigned to the room they were in.

The inner chamber wasn't actually sealed off, but it rather had an open layout with eight vaulted arches that provided vision to those who would sit outside. Even the inner chamber was separated into two rows, meaning that the group would be split into three priorities.

The innermost row was just two seats, one on each side of the altar. Just behind the seats was a line of fractals forming a circle around the seats and the altar, along with two small glass cylinders covered in fractals. Each of the glass pillars was roughly half a meter high and placed next to the two seats. Finally there were four large fractals on the floor tiles, one on each side of the innermost seats.

“Crack any of those pillars and all the restrictive arrays and the altar will be destroyed immediately, which would hopefully let the Origin Dao dissipate quickly,” Kenzie explained when she saw Zac's gaze. “It's like a panic button.”

“What if I only want to release the Origin Dao toward the next layer?” Zac asked.

“See the fractals that are placed next to your seats?” Kenzie asked. “They are shortcuts to the energy pathways that feed Cosmic Energy to the two sealing arrays. If you disrupt the pathway the array will lose its power in a second or two, allowing the Origin Dao to spread. It doesn't matter what

order you crush them, so just destroy one to open up the second layer, and two to open up the third.”

“So just punch the tile or something?” Zac asked, receiving a nod in confirmation.

Zac asked a few more questions about the details of the arrays before he turned toward the group still waiting behind them. Even the demons were wide-eyed as they looked around, clearly confused and slightly apprehensive about the dense inscriptions covering almost every surface around them.

“I know that most of you don’t know why you have been summoned here,” Zac said, drawing everyone’s attention. “It’s because Ogras and I are ready to present you with a unique opportunity to become stronger.”

No one would say no to a power-up, and people’s eyes lit up in anticipation. Only a few of the more experienced demons kept their cool demeanor, clearly understanding that nothing came for free or without risks. They immediately understood from the building they stood in that this wasn’t a simple bestowment of some treasures.

“You should all know about Salvation and his deeds by now,” Zac started to explain. “The Integration turned him insane, and he killed hundreds of thousands of people, turning them into puppets. Ogras and I killed him after an intense fight.”

“What you don’t know is that Salvation had a mysterious treasure on his body, something that he had stolen from the Inheritance site of the Great Redeemer,” Zac continued pointing at the golden fractal on the altar. “The purpose of this item was to steal Origin Dao.”

“I’m sorry, what’s Origin Dao?” Mr. Trang spoke up, and Zac noticed there was a noticeable hint of confusion on the faces of most people.

Only then did Zac realize that the knowledge of Origin Dao hadn’t been spread through Port Atwood. It was something that not even Ogras knew the word for before Brazla explained the concept, so it was no wonder that not even the demon soldiers had heard of it either. They only knew that people

improved Dao Seeds easier on newly integrated planets for some reason.

“Before the System came there was no magic in your world,” Ogras spoke up to explain. “But now you gain levels and Dao seeds. This is partly because of Cosmic Energy. But the second half is Origin Dao. It’s a unique energy that can be found on newly integrated planets for a short time, an energy that connects your world to the great truths of the Universe.”

“Origin Dao is why people on newly integrated planets gain insights into the Dao far quicker than the rest of the universe. You should have heard of how hard it was from the Demon soldiers back on their home planet,” Zac said, drawing a few nods.

“In any case. This item contains the stolen Origin Dao of all of Salvation’s victims. And we intend to crack this thing open and release the Origin Dao into this building,” Ogras explained, unable to completely hide his impatience.

“What will happen when you do?” Mr. Trang asked hesitantly.

“No idea,” Zac frankly said, drawing confused looks. “Ideally we would have liked to study this for years before attempting this, but we are running out of time. Threats loom in all directions, and we aren’t strong enough as things stand. I will take this risk in order to become stronger, to protect our planet.”

“We hope that the massive amounts of stored Origin Dao will forcibly put us into a prolonged state of epiphany, drastically improving our insights into the Dao,” Ogras explained. “But we might be way off base. Perhaps nothing will happen. Perhaps we will be turned into idiots.”

“There is no such thing as a free lunch,” Mr. Trang muttered, drawing confused looks from the demons.

“Exactly,” Zac said. “This is an opportunity, but there are also real risks involved. I will not force anyone to undergo this experiment, everyone here is free to leave.”

Low discussions spread across the hall, as people talked about the situation with their close friends. But eventually the

discussions died down, and not a single person chose to leave. Zac nodded in satisfaction, happy that the seedlings that Alyn had picked out had the guts to brave danger. It would be impossible to become a powerhouse otherwise.

“Good, prepare your mental states and ponder on the direction you want to evolve your Dao Seeds. Your results will most likely be more impressive if you have a plan in mind before we start,” Zac said.

After Zac explained the situation Kenzie took the floor, explaining the intricacies of the array and how it worked. Zac had been a bit worried that people would be offended by being placed in different tiers around the Funnel, but no one even raised a brow after learning about it. Perhaps they knew the value of the thing they were being offered, and that the leaders could make the most use of it.

Everyone quickly got into position and started to stabilize their mental state while Kenzie did a final test-run of the arrays. The building had already been sealed from the outside world with an extremely strong defensive array.

Since it only covered a small building rather than a whole town its shielding was extremely formidable, and even Zac would probably need some time to crack it open. The array also isolated any sounds, so there would be no disturbances from the outside world while the people meditated.

Zac looked around the inner chamber as he waited for everything to begin. Only thirteen people sat in the room, with the third group sitting at fixed positions outside the arches. Ogras and Zac were the two in the innermost layer, as they were the two top tier powerhouses of Port Atwood and also the ones who had secured the item.

Zac had initially wanted to put his sister there as well, but she had staunchly refused, instead opting to sit at the second layer. With her were the two demon generals, Emily, Sap Trang, and finally the three strongest demons and Valkyries respectively. Mr. Trang was obviously the weakest person in the room, and not technically one of the elites.

But the old fisherman had been with Zac almost from the start, and he had performed above all expectations in every endeavor so far. This was the chance for him to go from a normal elite to a powerhouse without having to solely rely on his scary pet.

Zac knew that Mr. Trang still hadn't been able to improve his race to E-Grade due to his age, but the old man looked at least 15 years younger compared to when he first arrived thanks to the continuous medicine baths he was taking. He would probably have no problem living for a few more decades as things stood, and Zac hoped he would find a solution for his predicament by that time.

Zac already sat on the second of the two prayer mats he owned. The other mat ultimately went to Ogras, even though Zac felt apologetic for his sister. But things were dire, and they needed to push their two strongest as much as possible for the coming fights.

It was also a distinct possibility that she would receive some assistance of her own through her AI, making the prayer mat superfluous.

"You guys ready?" Kenzie asked after having confirmed that the arrays were activated and that everything worked as it should.

"We're ready," Zac nodded as he took a deep steadying breath. "Do your thing."

Chapter 376: Impressions

“As I’ve said, I have no guarantees this will work,” Kenzie muttered as she turned toward the golden funnel.

She took out a small inscription tool and started to add new lines to the funnel. Odd undulations started to appear in the room within seconds, and Zac looked around with wonder. He had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs in his life, but he believed that what he experienced right now might be a bit similar. The world felt as though it was alive, and everything pulsed with life and mystery. He quickly took out his last Dao Treasure so he would be ready to boost his experience.

“Here we go,” Kenzie said, though Zac felt he heard the voice from far away.

A small snap echoed in the room the next seconds, and Zac’s all senses were completely overloaded by impressions and scenes he couldn’t understand or decipher. If the magical sense of oneness with the universe earlier was a subdued whisper, then what he currently experienced was an unrelenting storm that threatened to rip him to shreds.

It was at that moment Zac realized that they might be in over their heads. Zac’s vision was flooded by colors and shapes that shouldn’t exist, and he heard whispers that threatened to drive him insane.

The energy they unleashed was far beyond what he had expected, and he felt like a small boat in the middle of the ocean during a terrifying storm. He was on the brink of succumbing, and he spotted his sister toppling over as she tried to get back to her spot. Ogras was already bleeding out of his nose, and he had actually cut himself on the leg with a small knife as his eyes were completely bloodshot.

“Too... Strong,” he croaked, and Zac understood.

The density was just too much, it was not something that people at their level could handle. If they didn't dilute the Origin Dao they would die or have their minds broken. It took all of Zac's willpower, but he managed to slam down on the restriction in a bid to release the Origin Dao to a wider area.

A second later Zac could finally take a breather, but he was still teetering on the brink of collapse as he looked around, trying to see what was really going on through the hallucinations. Just the quick look around made him forget what he wanted to do, as it felt that each hallucination contained a mystery that could elevate his understanding of the universe.

"Steady your minds and close your eyes. Focus on your own Dao," Ogras growled, which allowed Zac to snap out of it long enough to push the Dao Treasure into his mouth and swallow it.

The surroundings kept getting more abstruse, and Zac got the notion that he would be able to grasp myriad Dao just by looking at the plaster on the wall or a spot melted wax on a candle. The fractals on the wall kept squirming, and Zac believed they tried to spell out divine secrets for him. Everything was calling out to his very soul, but he quickly closed his eyes as well to resist the temptations.

He knew it was the effect of the Origin Dao, that the enigmatic energy was exposing the truths of everything in nature. But just because there were truths to find didn't mean he should delve into them. It would cause chaos to his cultivation system if he got a bunch of new Dao Seeds at this juncture.

He instead used his whole being to focus on the concept of the axe, basing his meditation on the fractal axe in his body. It was still split between the two Daos, and it radiated an immense pressure since Zac reached peak Dao with both his seeds. The groans and shuffling from the people around him soon drifted away as he closed in on himself and his whole being focused on the Dao of the Axe.

Unfortunately, he wasn't shielded from the chaotic energies around him just because he closed his eyes and focused his

mind. The madness crept into his body through each and every one of his cells, making him feel as though he could topple any moment. Zac did everything in his power to ignore the whispers that kept trying to lead him astray, believing they were hints to various Daos in the multiverse.

Luckily a warmth spread from his stomach after a bit, and calming tendrils moved through his body and silenced the chaos to a certain extent. It was the Dao Treasure, and it allowed him to refocus on the Axe with unprecedented clarity.

Space and time no longer held no meaning as his mind was overwhelmed by the endless profundity of the axe. The fractal axe he envisioned kept growing in his mind and Zac started to sense one scene after another play the weapon itself.

He saw scenes of himself, swinging his axe in one desperate struggle after another. He kept pushing forward, and his prey kept getting more dangerous. He saw himself desperately struggling to cause a lethal wound against a barghest, where he was forced to use the environment to his advantage to survive. He could almost taste the blood as his hatchet made its way into the spine of the beast.

Beasts, cultivators, invaders, and even armies entered his vision, only to be bisected and conquered. Everything in the world was fleeting, and the only truth was the weapon he held in his hand. Whoever stood in his path would be crushed by the towering force of his swing, whatever tried to resist would be cut by the gleaming edge.

The scenes kept flashing through his mind, and something started to crystalize. It was the path of the Axe that he had arrived at yesterday. It was a path of indomitability and furious offense, one that gave up on the flexibility of the sword or the speed of the rapiers in favor of monstrous power and momentum.

Nothing could hamper the progress of his axe. All defenses would get crushed, all obstacles cut in two. The axe was the truth that would allow him to walk to the end of the path, and also the tool of slaughter that would keep those around him safe. But before his epiphany could mature into something

real, the visions started to change and he felt himself getting dragged inside.

Zac was no longer looking in on his deed from outside, now it was suddenly him getting killed, and he felt himself dying one indignant death after another. He could see himself as the aggressor, and he looked up only to peer into his own wooden face and two pitch-black eyes that held no emotion or succor as the Zac in the vision swung his axe down.

He was the merchant only following orders, his heads getting cut off in one swift motion. He was the mink defending its mountain, only to get slain. He was a tiger, a cultivator, a zombie, one being after another with their own dreams and aspirations.

But those dreams turned to dust with the arrival of that sharp edge. His resistance was futile against the towering weight of the weapon soaring toward him. Zac died a thousand deaths, and he felt his soul was getting wounded each time.

Soon enough it wasn't even himself who killed, but he rather saw visions men and women getting forced to their knees, and their whole vision was filled with a finger that moved toward their forehead. Pain that Zac never had experienced before rippled through his body as his soul was dragged out of his body in the visions.

The visions became increasingly chaotic as time passed, showing a jumbled mess of scenes that were unfamiliar to him. But as the scenes kept appearing he felt an increasing amount of anger and hatred filling his body. It was different from the Splinter, it was more open and direct. But even though Zac could see it coming he couldn't avoid his mind getting corrupted, and the destructive thoughts were eroding his soul.

But his resilience wouldn't let him falter or give up, so he forcibly lived through the discordant visions of death and destruction as he searched for that feeling that he lost just before. He needed to get back to the axe, the truth that he almost grasped before his mind was led astray.

He felt he was on the cusp of success before things turned dark, and he only needed to regain it. But the constant flurry of

visions took their toll, and Zac was starting to lose track of what was going on. Everything felt muddled as the thousands of impressions threatened to destroy his sense of self.

But some hidden spark inside his mind suddenly ignited his cognizance for one final burst, and he managed to grasp hold of the feeling once more, finally putting an end to the endless visions. The visions finally stilled, and he found himself in outer space, facing the huge fractal that was formed as an axe.

In the far distance in the deepest space were two lights radiating boundless power. It was the very same stars as the one he saw during the Dao Impartment, though this time they felt far more distant. It was no surprise, as he had the help of a C-Grade powerhouse to connect to those stars last time.

But he had another type of help this time. It felt like he was full of a boundless power that allowed him to create a tendril of his own, one that reached for the distant stars just as they reached for him. It was the Origin Dao that empowered him to reach further than he would have been able to on his own, effectively creating a bridge to the Grand Dao.

The tendrils finally connected, and Zac felt a surge of endless knowledge enter his mind. His whole soul, which was already wrung dry from the onslaught of visions, shuddered from the impact, but he held on.

He first didn't know what he was waiting for, but he soon had his answer. As knowledge crammed itself into his brain the fractal started to grow in front of him. He instinctively reached toward it as he absorbed additional truths from the stars. The axe released a keening echo the moment Zac's intangible hand touched it, and the lines that made up its body started to twist and writhe with blinding speed, rearranging themselves after some unknown blueprint.

The outer shape of the enormous fractal was the same, but the lines had reformed to no longer possess two separate sides. The axe looked far more complete now, with one completely integrated pathway. The weapon radiated an immense power, and Zac sensed both his earlier Dao seeds in the mix.

Everything from the emotional heaviness to the most recent indomitable will to cut through everything was accounted for, but there were many additions that he hadn't recognized before. The snippets of truth were all meshed together into a perfect whole, and they together made up the Dao of the Axe.

He knew he had done it, he had upgraded his two Dao Seeds into a Fragment. If he was physically there he would have breathed out in relief.

The two stars in the distance receded after Zac had managed to upgrade the fractal in front of him, and the large axe started to dissipate as well. He realized that this epiphany was over and willed himself to exit his mysterious state. The deed was done, and this step guaranteed that his classes would at least be able to upgrade his class immediately. He was pretty sure that he had passed the 'achievement' part with flying colors, anyway.

But Zac didn't even have had time to celebrate the success of his advancement before a shocking sight entered his vision when he opened his eyes. His experience hadn't been smooth, but Zac had initially chalked it up to the difficulty of forming a Dao Fragment.

The insight needed for that was on a higher level than upgrading a seed, and Zac guessed that would take a greater toll on his body. This was something he had already discussed with Ogras earlier, and the demon had agreed. But reality proved different.

He didn't know how long his meditative state had actually lasted, but the house was still under the full effect of the Origin Dao. Zac felt he had a bit greater resistance against the hallucinations now, and the brief moment of clarity allowed him to witness the state of everyone else in the building.

Something was terribly wrong with the energy they had released.

Chapter 377: Risk and Reward

It was clearly not only Zac who had struggled tremendously to withstand the onslaught of impressions unleashed by the Dao Funnel. Everyone had various degrees of struggle written on their faces, with most in the building even shaking as they had their eyes shut tight as they strained to endure.

Zac's mind churned as he resisted the constant lure of the truths of the universe, and he tried to make his sluggish mind find a way to lessen everyone's burden. He finally remembered the plan from earlier, and he slammed down at a second stone disk next to him, immediately cracking it.

But his addled mind soon realized that someone had already opened up the Origin Dao to the third layer, and when his eyes reached the people sitting outside the arches he realized they were even worse off than those sitting inside.

The Origin Dao might be like the Cosmic Water; Great in small quantities, but it could quickly become a dangerous poison if you indulged in too much of it. Perhaps someone like the Great Redeemer would be able to absorb it all, but he was at Peak D-Grade and he was perhaps planning on absorbing it over decades.

What they were doing right now might be equivalent to jumping into the Nexus Water-pond to take a bath. The only difference being that it was their souls that would take the hit rather than their bodies getting blasted to pieces from absorbing too much energy. That wasn't the only problem though, even if it might be part of the reason almost everyone seemed to have one foot in the grave.

Something was assaulting the people stuck in meditative poses. They were pitch-black specters, reminiscent of those

poor souls who had been corrupted by the splinter in the Eastern Trigram sect. Perhaps they were just another set of hallucinations brought by the massive surge of Origin Dao, but Zac felt a huge amount of resentment coming from the ghosts, which was completely different from the enigmatic and almost addictive feeling that came from the other hallucinations.

The ghosts weren't attacking anyone, it rather looked like they were praying to or even begging for mercy. Others held their translucent head in their hands, radiating hopelessness. Zac's thoughts immediately went to the visions he was forced to endure while he formed his Dao Fragment. Was this the souls of those that Salvation killed?

They flocked around most people, though Zac noted with relief that his sister was completely spared. The same went for Ogras and Janos, while a few more were less crowded as well. His sister had somehow managed to make her way back to her spot in the second layer, and he realized that it was her who had cracked open the array, releasing the Origin Dao to the outer layer.

He couldn't confirm that the ghosts were actually harming anyone since they never touched anyone, but he did note that those that were more crowded seemed to be struggling more. A lot of them were bleeding out of their noses and ears, looking like they had suffered some type of hemorrhage.

But what was even worse was that he saw indistinct silver fractals appearing on the foreheads of those who struggled the most, and even in his currently muddled state he had no problem remembering where he had seen that particular design before. It was the same fractal that shone on Salvation's forehead, though his tattoo was far more intricate than the nascent inscriptions on the people around him.

Was the funnel trying to convert everyone around it, turning them into raving lunatics like Salvation himself?

Worry gripped Zac's heart he and arduously got up to his feet in his eagerness to help everyone. But what should he do? Everyone was in an extremely fragile state, likely fighting a desperate battle with their souls on the line. Dragging

everyone outside might have the opposite reaction of what he hoped, as it might cause a disturbance that made them lose focus and destroy their minds.

His eyes darted to the crystal pillar next to him, but he eventually looked away from that as well. The soldiers stationed outside had standing orders to quickly evacuate everyone in case the arrays were deactivated, and that would be the same as him dragging people outside himself.

He needed to do something by himself, but he was in no condition to start swinging his axe around in the building. Not that he thought he could actually destroy any of the ghosts with [**Verun's Bite**]. But he did possess one weapon that seemed effective against the dead, so he released his Dao field for Dao of Trees, hoping it would bring some vitality to everyone while it drove the ghosts away.

His soul was already battered and bruised, feeling like when he had overtaxed his mental energy during a fight, but he persisted in using it when he saw many people regain some color on their faces. Even the silvery fractal that had appeared on a few foreheads had started to dissipate slightly.

Best yet was that the ghosts started to fall apart, releasing soundless wails as they turned into motes of dust.

The Seed of Trees worked wonders, so he kept his Dao Field going for as long as he could. But his vision started swimming after only 30 seconds, and he was forced to stop. At least everyone looked noticeably better by that point, and Zac could only pray that the extra energy would allow everyone to beat the side-effects of the Dao Funnel on their own.

He believed that as long as they managed to improve their Dao Seeds the corruption would be pushed away by the pure energies of the Daos, just like when he condensed his fragment. The moment the two Stars appeared all the discordant visions had been pushed aside, allowing him to finish his meditation in peace.

This was all he could do, as his mind was starting to tear and distort once more from the beckoning visions and intrusive whispers. He sat down at the mat again, which helped a little

bit with the chaos in his mind. He closed his eyes and desperately focused on the small space that he created when he managed to form a Dao Seed from his own effort.

He needed to turn calamity into an opportunity once more since the funnel obviously wasn't out of Origin Dao just yet. It was either that or flee from this place, taking the winnings before losing everything. But Zac wouldn't stop now that he had come this far. This was a unique opportunity, and he couldn't leave his people behind in any case.

His first instinct was to go for his second fragment since both Trees and Sanctuary were at the peak by now. But he reluctantly had to give up on that idea. Forming the first Fragment had been extremely exhausting, and his condition was exacerbated by providing a respite to those around him. He wasn't confident in forming another Fragment as things stood.

Besides, there was the issue of balance. He was afraid that if he formed a Life-attuned Fragment while his Dao Seeds of Rot and Hardness were still only at High mastery, then his evolution of Undying Bulwark might become messed up. It was a safer option to work on his two final Dao Seeds instead, even if the benefits might be worse.

He desperately closed his eyes again to shut out the hallucinations, and this time he focused on the Seed of Rot, going over all aspects of rot and putrefaction he could. Rot was the seed that he felt was furthest from upgrading, whereas Hardness still had the residual boost of his Dao Vision and recent battles with extremely sturdy foes like the Battleroach King and the Cyborg. Even the imperviousness of the environment in the Underworld had given him some inspiration.

Zac quickly slipped into a deep meditate state again, his mind diving toward that empty universe where only the Dao existed. But just like last time his ascent was intercepted by an onslaught of visions.

Various scenes where he killed his foes with the help of the Seed of Rot started to flash by his eyes. This time the fights

almost exclusively took place in the Underworld against the Roaches and the invaders. But just as he expected the visions turned on him soon enough, and he soon found himself the subject of an endless cycle of rotting away before everything just turned into a chaotic blur.

But the vision felt far less real now, like a weak mimicry of the terrifying experience he endured the last time. His hypothesis had been correct. Part of the trouble had come from forming a Fragment under these weird conditions. Upgrading a normal Seed might prove a deadly challenge for others, but Zac had long gotten used to this sort of struggle due to the Splinter stuck in his head.

Both his body and soul were stronger than usual as well, something that he had realized long ago. This had only been further improved by the unknown energy that continuously seeped out from the Splinter of Oblivion. Even though upgrading his Seed was easier it was still a draining task. It was like the Origin Dao from the funnel was a reservoir of tainted water, and he had to manually siphon out all the poison before he could drink it.

Time passed as Zac worked with everything he had to complete his goal. He didn't know how long it took until the funnel was completely drained of energy. After improving Rot he didn't even dare open his eyes again since his mind felt extremely fragile after enduring another round of visions. He didn't trust himself to not go astray if he looked upon the various hallucinations that the Origin Dao brought on, and could only keep focusing on his Daos.

But with risks also came rewards. Not only had he gained the Dao Fragment that he hoped for, but he even managed to push his final two Seeds to Peak mastery. In fact, after being forced into those cycles of death and despair he felt he had gained more than just the final mastery of the respective Seed, and that forming a Fragment related to death on his own wasn't impossible.

He only needed some sort of spark of inspiration to bring enough momentum. Zac was elated by the amazing results of

the funnel. He had been happy if he just got the fragment and nothing else, but he got so much more than that.

Luckily the effect of the Dao Funnel seemed to have subsided by the time Zac managed to upgrade his Seed of Hardness as well, which was lucky since he wasn't sure what he would do if he had no Dao Seed to focus on. Pained groans could be heard from all directions as people arduously got to their feet.

Zac slowly opened his bleary eyes, taking in the surroundings for the first time since he unleashed his Dao Field. All the ghosts were gone, as were the tempting hallucinations in the building. However, his eyes were drawn to the dense fractals inscribed into the walls, and he even forgot to check on those around him.

“Don't look at the walls,” Kenzie tiredly said, dragging Zac out of his reverie. “The Origin Dao changed the fractals somehow. They contain the Dao now.”

Zac quickly looked away, since he was in no condition to keep pondering on the Dao. But horror flooded his heart when the first things he saw were the unmoving bodies on the floor.

A prickling sensation entered Void's head, prompting him to look far into the distance. He even forgot about the half-dead anointed he held by its throat, or the hundreds of unmoving Zhix warriors strewn across the royal chamber.

“So they actually managed to open it,” Void muttered, some delight filling his heart.

The change in fate made him lose interest in interrogating the miscreation in his hand, and he cracked its huge neck before throwing the oversized Zhix to the side like a piece of garbage. He had wondered if those humans would ever figure out what they held in their possession, but he had underestimated them.

Less than a month had passed since they got their hands on the Funnel, but they had already managed to release the seeds stored inside. Void had feared that it would take them years, but perhaps having enslaved a couple of alien forces worked in that man's favor. He had even considered throwing out a hint

about the Funnel when he met the Super Brother-Man, but in the end he opted against it, afraid that it would increase their vigilance.

“Do you think it will work?” the curious voice of Inevitability asked from the side.

Void looked over at his child, sighing at the sight of her face full of revelry. What would their Lord think of such a bloodthirsty subordinate? Slaughter was just a means to an end, not something to base one’s cultivation around. That path was a dead end, where you were no better than a beast. He knew he would have to educate her better going forward.

But such a small detail couldn’t dampen the sense of victory in his heart.

“It is too early to tell,” Void said with a small smile as he once again looked in the direction of Mr. Atwood’s small island kingdom.

“Our lord is not so easily denied. It’s always good to have a back-up plan.”

Chapter 378: Fallout

There were unmoving bodies in not only the outer layer, but even in the inner one where his core people were seated. Just a glance around indicated that over a third of those who entered the building were lying on the ground right now.

His sister looked tired but otherwise fine, and she was currently walking around trying to help others with the help of Janos. The illusionist seemed to be mostly fine, though it was always a bit hard to tell with that man. Perhaps he had an easier time resisting the mental corruption due to having Wisdom as his main attribute.

Zac grimaced when he saw Emily shakily helping Joanna to her feet, both of them looked ready to keel over from the simple action. Next to Joanna one of the Valkyries lay unmoving in a pool of blood, and her bloodstained eyes were blankly staring into the beyond.

“Don’t blame yourself. This is what it is to be a cultivator; braving death for a chance at greatness,” a hoarse voice echoed from behind, and Zac slowly turned over to see Ogras. “Besides, not all of them are dead. Some are just in a coma.”

The demon was pale as a sheet and his hand was visibly trembling. There was even blood running down his nose and from one of his ears.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“I’ll need to rest for a day or two,” Ogras said without hesitation as he ate a healing pill. “Did you... Did you see a lot of visions as well?”

“Scenes of me killing people and dying. Even scenes of complete strangers. It was a chaotic mess that happened over and over,” Zac nodded.

“What’s going on,” Ogras muttered as his bloodshot eyes turned to the funnel. “It shouldn’t be like this... Unless?”

“Unless what?” Zac asked.

“Resentment,” the demon concluded. “The Origin Dao was dragged out of that lunatic’s victims at their time of death, and perhaps their resentment and other negative feelings came with and tainted the Origin Dao. Perhaps that was even the plan. The gathered resentment of a whole planet would contain shocking power.”

Zac nodded in agreement, though this wasn’t the time to discuss the topic. He instead started walking around the people to check on their condition. He also opened up the array to let the doctors enter, giving strict instructions for everyone to not look at the walls and avoid loud noises. A few, like Ryan, were still in a meditative pose and couldn’t be disturbed, but Zac felt that those were out of harm’s way.

“They should have passed the trial and are currently reaping the rewards,” Ogras agreed as he followed Zac’s eyes. “They should be out of it soon enough.”

Those who still were in the middle of their epiphanies woke up one after another, and after 30 minutes everyone was awake. It was at that time they finally could make a proper tally, and Zac once again felt his insides churning with regret even though he remembered Ogras’ words.

Only the lone Valkyrie had passed away in the second layer, but another one was in a coma. The same went for one of the Demons and Mr. Trang. Six people in the outer layer passed away from the experience, all dying from a brain hemorrhage. Another 8 people were in comas, caused by their minds getting overtaxed.

The doctors planned on moving the unconscious, but Zac stopped them for a second as he arduously walked around to check each one of them. There was an extremely strong correlation between the amount of ghosts people were surrounded by, and the severity of their condition.

Those who had teetered on the brink of collapse when Zac tried to intervene were those who now lay dead on the ground. Also, most of those who were now in a coma were the same people who sported the silver fractals in their foreheads. Sap Trang was the only exception, and Zac guessed that the reason of his unconsciousness was rather his advanced age.

The fractals were thankfully all gone now, but that fact didn't allow Zac to breathe easy. The Great Redeemer was an expert in Karma and seeing his people sporting his marks felt like trouble waiting to happen. He made a mental note of the appearance of everyone who had been marked before he allowed the people to be carried away.

He did also give the order to one of the Valkyries stationed outside to place a secret guard on those people, and to keep a watch out for any suspicious behavior. The woman looked confused, as a few of those who were carried away were her own fellow Valkyries, but she quickly accepted the order and brought a few people along.

Zac shook his head as he walked back into the Dao House, and only then did he start to feel some happiness about the results. The atmosphere was subdued due to those that had fallen, but many of the remaining people were discussing their enormous gains with low voices.

At least it seemed that those who made it through did reap amazing rewards, taking multiple steps forward with their Dao at once. He really wanted to check with his sister how she had done, since she seemed to have been the best at handling the side-effects of the Funnel. But he first gave Ogras a look and the demon shuffled over to talk in private.

Zac recounted what he encountered the brief instant he woke up, how the ghosts had appeared, and the silver fractals that shone on some people's foreheads.

"Did I have a fractal?" Ogras asked. "Or anyone that's still here?"

"No, you just looked to be in extreme pain," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And I don't think anyone conscious right now had any fractals, but I was only awake for less than a

minute. Oh, Mr. Trang is in a coma now, but he didn't have a fractal.”

“It might just be a phenomenon that indicated that they were failing against the onslaught of resentment. The puppets were created when Salvation touched their foreheads, placing a fractal there. But salvation is not here, so the fractals might just be a shadow reflecting the ghost's last moment alive,” the demon mused.

“Of course, there is also the risk that those people now possess some latent problem,” Ogras muttered with a ruthless gleam in his eyes. “It's lucky you managed to wake up and notice the anomaly. What if we have created ten new beacons that will lead that old bastard to Earth? Perhaps... It would be best if they never woke up from their current condition.”

“Out of the question,” Zac said without hesitation. “We can't just kill them. I caused this, so I will figure something out.”

“Then what's your plan?” the demon asked skeptically.

“We monitor them, for now, to see if they act out of the ordinary. The Abbot once shared his Karmic vision with me, and it allowed me to see the Karmic Links of the Dominators and the beacon. Perhaps there is a treasure or pill that will allow me to do the same thing for a short while,” Zac said. “That way I'd be able to tell if they have formed a connection to the Redeemer.”

“Besides, even if they are beacons their link should be far weaker compared to the Dominators', so we only need to make sure they're not transmitting anything after dealing with Void's Disciple and the other two,” Zac added.

“Fair enough, I guess it's worth pursuing other venues first. So what do you think?” Ogras acceded, changing the topic. “Are you ready for the tower? If we leave now we'll have a bit over two weeks before your deadline.”

“There is no stress,” Zac finally said after some consideration. “I want to gain the two last levels for my other class.”

“You can still gain experience inside the tower,” Ogras said. “Or you'll probably be able to buy a pill that gives a level for

an F-Grade warrior when we get there. They're not very rare."

"I know, but I want to gain the levels beforehand in case the skill quests can't be completed inside the tower," Zac explained. "I want both my classes to be at their best before entering the tower. You know I won't get a second chance like you."

Ogras sighed and nodded.

"How is your human class? Need help with your second quest before we go?" the demon said.

Zac froze for a second before his eyes widened. He had completely forgotten because of the hectic events just now, but he had actually completed his second class quest! Zac quickly scoured through his body and found a new fractal firmly placed on his back.

"The quest was Dao-related, I just finished it," Zac admitted.

"Oh? What type of skill is it?" Ogras asked with curiosity.

"No idea," Zac shrugged. "I will try it out before we leave."

"Keep me posted, no secrets in the tower," Ogras smiled. "It will affect our teamwork."

Zac just threw the demon a contemptuous look. Ogras had tried to pry out all of Zac's secrets since day one, and it was shocking how many of them he had actually figured out if you looked back on it. But Zac wouldn't give him a complete understanding of his strengths and weaknesses.

"I think I will be good to go in an hour or two, will you join me or will you stay behind for a bit?" Zac asked as he looked over at the pale-faced demon.

"Monster siblings," Ogras muttered. "The rest of us had our minds turned to putty but the two of you are fine."

Zac could only wryly smile as he looked over at his sister who had been helping everyone in the building since he woke up. She was healthy enough that she was able to emit a soothing field made from her Dao, which helped people around her recuperate faster.

He initially thought that the reason he was mostly fine after that event was the fact that the splinter in his mind had made his soul sturdier, but perhaps that wasn't the only thing he had going for him. Unless Jeeves could somehow help Kenzie block out the visions it might be due to their ancestry.

Having a big-shot mom came with all kinds of perks it seemed.

"I need to solidify my gains," Zac said as he stood up with a grunt. "Can you look after things here?"

"It's fine," the demon nodded. "I'll stick around here for a few days before heading out to play with the zombies. When do we leave?"

"In five days," Zac eventually decided.

But there was something he needed to do before leaving the Academy. He walked over to Alyn who had bloodshot eyes as she sat on a chair with a Divine crystal in her hand.

"I'm sorry," Zac sighed as he sat down next to her. "This thing exceeded my expectations."

"Such is cultivation," Alyn said, but her eyes darted over to the corpses that were lined up not far away.

The bodies that Alyn looked at were the seedlings that she had recommended. Out of the 10 youths, four were in a coma and another three were dead. Only three were still conscious, but they were barely better than the unconscious ones. Only one, a young man looking just a bit older than Emily, managed to stand on his own, whereas the other two seemed to have wounded souls.

It would be a devastating blow to the group of talents that had been slated for grooming if they were forced to take extreme measures because of the silver fractals. Would only three out of the ten youths walk away from this encounter alive in the end?

The results for the group of seedlings were the worst, whereas the demons were best off. They only lost one person, with another three in a coma. Zac could only assume that their

accumulated experiences had hardened their minds, allowing them to more effectively resist the resentment.

“Do they have families? If so make sure they’re taken care of,” Zac said with a heavy heart.

“They were all orphans, which is one reason I chose them,” Alyn with a small shake of her head. “They had no attachments left to their countries or families, which would allow them to work wholeheartedly for Port Atwood.”

“Then provide them with a proper funeral at least,” Zac said as he closed his eyes, a wave of tiredness washing over him. “Do what you can for the others. I’m afraid I can’t stay here, there’s too much to do.”

“Don’t worry. Everyone understood the risk, and also the burden you carry. Just look forward and keep walking,” Alyn sighed.

Chapter 379: Fragment of the Axe

Zac felt bad about leaving while people were still barely able to get to their feet, but he followed Alyn's advice. He lastly went over to check in on his sister, and he was relieved to see that she was fine as well. In fact, she might be even better off than himself as she was still able to spread her Dao in the area around the Dao House.

Only then did he return to his courtyard with brisk steps. He felt a bit muddled the whole way back, as though he was dreaming. Zac knew he had warned everyone of the dangers involved, but he truly hadn't expected anyone to get hurt, much less get killed. He could only endeavor to etch this lesson in his heart so that something like this would not repeat itself.

The arrays around his place flitted to life as he sat down on a padded mat with a sigh. He wanted to immediately go over his gains, but a wave of exhaustion hit him the moment he sat down, and he immediately fell into a dreamless slumber.

Zac opened his eyes again, only to see that four hours had passed in the blink of an eye. The nap had made him feel noticeably better, with only a small headache remaining. He hadn't felt comfortable going over his gains while his people lay dead right in front of him, but he couldn't wait any longer and opened up his Dao Screen.

Dao	Stage	Effect
Fragment of the Axe	Early	All attributes +10, Strength +110, Dexterity + 80, Endurance +15. Effectiveness of Strength +5%.

Seed of Trees	Peak	Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5.
Seed of Hardness	Peak	Endurance +100, Wisdom +20.
Seed of Sanctuary	Peak	Endurance +50, Intelligence +20, Wisdom +50.
Seed of Rot	Peak	Endurance +5, Vitality +45, Intelligence +25, Wisdom +45.

Zac slowly read through the changes, but he was truthfully a bit disappointed with the result. Fusing two Dao seeds into a fragment had only increased the total attributes gained from 240 to 275. He knew that he had attained almost no “new” insight compared to upgrading a single Dao seed, but he had still thought that he would get more when evolving from a Seed to a Fragment.

Of course, he had to remember that if things progressed the way it did with a seed, where the number of attributes given doubled every time it progressed, it would still rack up to a lot. A Fragment would end up giving 2 200 attribute points at a peak mastery, which was a huge number even in the E-Grade.

He hadn't gained a Title by forming a Fragment either, something he had pretty much thought was a done deal. Then again, if there was a ‘first in world’-title like all his other Progenitor titles, then it had likely already gone to Abbot Everlasting Peace. And the general reward for gaining a Dao Fragment might simply be the fact he now had access to Epic classes.

The good part was that he actually gained all attributes from the Fragment, which meant that his luck got boosted as well. And if the pattern kept going as it did with the seeds, then he might end up with a huge boost to Luck by the time the seeds reached Peak. However, if he was being honest with himself he hoped that he wouldn't gain any more Luck from his Dao Seeds.

One of his unique advantages was his huge pool of Luck, where he had almost ten times the amount compared to most people. It had allowed him to survive countless dangers, and often turn the tables on his enemies. That advantage would quickly get eroded if one had an easy-to-access source of the special attribute.

He also got a boost of effectiveness for his main Strength, and that in of itself might turn into a tremendous boost if the number kept increasing as the Fragment evolved. What if he got a 25% boost or something at the peak? The value from that was far higher than static increases, especially with his already large number of High-Tiered Titles.

Then again, he knew that the true benefit of a Dao Fragment wasn't the attributes it awarded. It was just a bonus that the System tacked on. The true benefit came from the huge boost in fighting power. That was doubly true for someone like Zac who was a bit lacking in his control department and who could only use one Dao at the time.

The Seed of Hardness hadn't provided any surprises, even though he had tried to skew the results in his favor. When he pondered on the final upgrade he focused on the rebounding effect of hardness. He imagined creating a body so sturdy that people hurt themselves when they attacked him and thought that he might get some strength that way.

But it still simply doubled down on the Endurance, pushing his highest attribute to even more ridiculous heights. Luckily he had still a lot of room for improvement before he hit his limit. He had already asked Ogras about it recently, and it turned out that the next limit usually lay around 2500 attribute points for humanoids.

But it also meant that he would have to evolve his race as quickly as possible since he was already halfway there. It was only a matter of time before he reached 2500 Endurance with the increased gains in E-Grade.

The Seed of Rot had a surprising change in the attributes it provided, but not overly so. Alea had been on his mind a lot lately, and the way she fought had influenced his insights. He

already knew that Alea's highest attribute was Intelligence, closely followed by Vitality, and that was reflected by the gains in his Seed of Rot.

He was especially happy with the extra 45 points in Vitality since the Tower was a 100-day climb. Having a great regenerative ability would be a huge boon. If he could cut down his rest-time to a third, then he would have a lot more time to spend on the harder floors at the top of the tower. He soon closed the Dao menu and opened his skill menu next to take a look at his new Skill.

Hatchetman's Spirit - Proficiency: Early. Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.

He wasn't sure what oneness with nature meant, but he guessed it was some sort of boosting skill. He knew that Ogras received the skill that turned him into a winged shadow demon was something he got at level 75, and he hoped he got something similar.

Even though he was a bit tempted to activate it right now he chose to wait until he visited Mystic Island. Even if he had a hint of what the skill entailed he couldn't be sure, and he didn't want to accidentally blow up his courtyard.

There was one final thing that he wanted to do before heading out, and he eagerly walked over toward the Nexus Node. He had kept himself in check all this time, but now that he possessed a Dao Fragment he couldn't stop himself from checking out his options to evolve.

He had already confirmed from multiple people that he could simply skip evolving even if he activated the Node. Zac walked over to the huge hovering crystal with eagerness in his eyes, but his face fell after touching the crystal to begin the process.

There was no response.

He kept trying to activate his the Node to display his choices, but no matter how many times he tried there was simply nothing available for him. He swapped through the other systems, such as the skill shop, to see if the crystal was on the

fritz, but it worked just fine. It was hard to believe, but it looked like Zac truly wasn't able to evolve at this point even if he wanted to.

Zac couldn't believe that there was not a single option for him to evolve even after having gained the Fragment of the Axe. Hatcherman was only Rare, and he had already gained the prerequisite Dao for an Epic class. He had a slew of titles and accomplishment under his belt as well, and it felt ludicrous that the system wouldn't deem him worthy after all he had done.

Swallowing his burgeoning anger he rapidly tried to think of any reason why he could be stuck like this, and he could only imagine there being two reasons. The first was his skills. Only two of his skills had reached the peak, while the rest were between Early and High mastery. Not even Axe Mastery was at peak proficiency, which might mean that the System didn't consider him ready to evolve.

The other possibility was that some issues had arisen due to his special situation. His duplicity Core was still F-Grade, which meant it wasn't good enough to accommodate E-Grade classes. This was something that had worried him for some time, but no matter where he looked into the matter he couldn't find any clues.

Or perhaps he needed to evolve both classes at the same time, which was impossible since his other side was only at level 73?

Zac's eyes lit up with hope at the idea as he left the building housing the Nexus Node. He couldn't do anything about the issues of his skills or his Duplicity Core in the short run, but he could easily grind levels with his Undying Bulwark class.

He quickly headed over to Tul'Sarath, the town the Tir'Emarel Clan founded before their Incursion ended. The town felt a bit desolate since a large contingent of people left along with the former slaves being freed. But by now there were quite a few humans and a couple of Ishiate who walked the streets as Zac arrived.

Some had chosen to stay behind after getting liberated, and even more had returned over the past weeks. Life outside was extremely chaotic and dangerous, and many chose to work for the aliens rather than getting eaten by some beasts. Zac shook his head at the irony as he entered Verana's mansion.

"I hear something big took place in Port Atwood," Verana said with a light voice from her seat in a garden when she saw Zac being led over by a maid.

"Nothing too major," Zac said. "I found a trinket containing stored Origin Dao, and we released it."

"It's good to see you are fine," she said with a staid demeanor. "What brings you over today?"

"I am planning to hit a couple of more Incursions over the next days, I could use your support," Zac said.

"Unfortunately we're not able to help this time around," Verana said without hesitation. "My people are exhausted, and I fear another round of battle will cause too many casualties for us to bear. If we keep fighting with this intensity there will be no Tal-Eladar left on this planet in a hundred years. We need to rest and recoup before we can discuss joint battles again."

Zac silently looked at Verana in an effort to figure out her thoughts, and she returned the stare in kind. It was pretty obvious she was angry with him and refused to help out as payback, even if that meant losing out on staking a claim on another Incursion's resources.

"Remember, you asked us to stay behind as a trading partner, not as part of your army," Verana added, ending the prolonged silence.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement.

"It's fine. But don't forget why you, in particular, chose to stay behind. Are you already tired of moving forward?" Zac said as he turned to leave.

Verana didn't answer, and only silently watched him leave.

Not having the help of the Tal-Eladar was a bit of a setback, especially now that all the elites of his force were down for the count for the time being. The only reason he hadn't needed to order his Army to completely retreat was the fact that their lines were bolstered by the huge army of the Underworld Council.

Only nine councilors were currently on the surface, with four staying behind to keep the situation in the Underworld stable. But those nine were enough to stabilize the battlefield, perhaps even more than his three demon generals.

Besides, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that the Tal-Eladar refused to help him this time around. He had used **[Hunger]** while fighting alongside the beastmasters, as only two of them knew of the true identity of Mr. Black.

Now that they weren't around he could freely use **[Verun's Bite]** to fight, allowing him to take full advantage of his new Fragment. He was pretty sure that the Fragment would still work when using a sword, but the effect would be greatly diminished.

He did consider bringing a couple of the demon soldiers or Valkyries along, but he eventually decided against that as well. There would be a lot of casualties if he brought soldiers without powerful generals to hold down the fort, and all of them needed to rest for a couple of days.

Eventually, he arrived at the most logical conclusion. He would go back to his roots and close a couple of incursions on his own. He got everything ready before he headed over to Westfort as Mr. Black. He needed someone to guide him to the hidden outposts next to the incursions so he commandeered one of the Marshalls who worked for the intelligence department.

Just 30 minutes later the scenery was flashing past him as he utilized **[Loamwalker]** to run through the wilderness.

Chapter 380: Coastal Incursion

Not being encumbered with a group of soldiers had its own advantages. Zac could move with over twice the speed he usually did when his elite squad joined him for battle, and it only took him a bit over 8 hours before he reached his destination.

It was an incursion manned with extremely ugly aliens. There was an image attached to the intelligence report, and Zac felt like they looked like humanoid toads who had injected themselves with super-charged steroids to grow oversized muscles.

Their heads were large enough for them to fit a human head in their mouths, and they sat straight at their torsos without a neck. They had two sets of large murky-green eyes, but no ears or noses. They also had four arms, with the second set being slightly smaller and extending from slightly above their thick hips.

Judging by their stocky builds Zac would have thought them leaning toward Strength-based classes like himself, but he learned that they also had quite a few water-based mages. The incursion was placed by the shore, and they had caused massive tsunamis to drown the people of the close-by settlements.

There was also an unconfirmed report that the frogmen were adept at illusionary skills since there was one thing that set this incursion apart from most others. There was no Incursion pillar to showcase their position, and the general guess was that these frogmen had hidden it somehow in a bid to stay under the radar.

These invaders were quite brutal, but Zac had held off on targeting this place until now because they had already killed everyone close-by and it didn't look like they were expanding their territory. The Marshalls were guessing that they were busy with something underwater, as their class-choices and appearance indicated an amphibian nature.

It quickly became obvious to Zac as he crept closer to the Incursion that they mainly lived on land, even if they might be comfortable in the water as well. A sprawling town right on the shoreline spread out, and Zac saw some frogmen walk back and forth along the streets.

Interestingly enough the town didn't have any physical wall, but a wide moat had been dug to encompass the town, turning it into an artificial island. There was only one bridge, and it looked like they could lift it like a drawbridge if needed.

Walls were technically not needed in a world with arrays, but a proper wall kept out weaker beasts without wasting any Nexus Crystals. Walls were so easy to construct now that people had both Cosmos Sacks to transport material and superhuman strength, so almost all settlements that Zac had visited would sport defenses that would make any medieval lord proud.

The fact that there was no wall only made Zac more confident that there was an array protecting the town, but he couldn't sense it even after spying on the town for over twenty minutes. Of course, that didn't mean it wasn't there. The invaders had killed pretty much all humans in the vicinity, so perhaps they didn't bother keeping it active to reduce their running costs. However, any force strong enough to receive a chance to helm an Incursion would at least have the smarts to protect their encampment.

His hunch that the place wasn't as unguarded as it seemed was soon confirmed as the large head of a frogman suddenly appeared in the middle of the artificial river, before it once again submerging under the depth. They actually had guards staying underwater.

Zac wasn't sure how to best attack the town. Taking out a ship and entering from the ocean would be playing straight into

their strength, but just walking up to the bridge felt like walking into a trap.

Unfortunately he had no skills for infiltration in either of his classes, so he decided to get as close as possible while using the natural covers at hand. He crept along in the high grass, but soon enough he couldn't get any closer without stepping on open land. Since Zac had no way to hide any longer he immediately accelerated to a full-out sprint as he ran straight toward the closest section of the moat.

He had eventually decided to go straight in, and the ground cracked beneath him as he barreled forward like an enraged bull. It only took a second for screams and warning sounds started to blast across the town, but Zac wasn't deterred as a storm of miasma was released from him as he activated **[Fields of Despair]** before jumping across the river.

A blast of water suddenly surrounded him as the water in the moat rose with shocking speed, and Zac's brows rose when he noticed that the water had somehow stolen all his momentum mid-jump. The water surged around him as he started to feel a huge pressure bearing down on every part of his body. Luckily he didn't need to breathe in his current form, saving him from drowning due to the trap.

He had been wrong about his assumption that these people didn't have a wall. It was only that it was made out of water rather than stone or wood. The whole moat had risen over ten meters and the water stayed in the air, defying all gravity.

Sharp stabs of pain erupted across Zac's body as the nearby guards launched ranged attacks on him while he was stuck in place. Something was off with the water as well, as no matter how much he flailed his arms and legs to swim out he was still stuck in place. The liquid was somehow enchanted, and it truly was a bane for most land-based cultivators.

Of course, it was not that Zac was completely helpless inside the block of water. Since he couldn't swim out he would simply have to cut his way out. His arm swelled with power as he kept infusing it with miasma, and he noticed that he was

able to cram a lot more energy into his muscles since his latest boost to his Endurance.

The water started to shudder and twist from the huge concentration of power, and Zac finally unleashed a mighty vertical swing that contained a force that shouldn't belong to someone who still hadn't even evolved to E-Grade. The wall of water in the area was completely ripped to shreds from the immense force, and Zac fell down to the exposed riverbed.

The water wall was temporarily dispersed, though another huge gout of water headed straight toward him. It was only barely that Zac managed to jump inside the town in time, avoiding getting trapped once again.

However, he made for quite the sorry figure as he crawled up on dry land. He was completely caked in mud, and there was even a crab that angrily ran along his shoulder. That was fine with Zac, as his embarrassing display had emboldened the frogmen to launch a direct assault on him.

Over a hundred warriors rushed toward him, and Zac sensed a surprising amount of power from the warrior in the lead. The frogman held a large golden trident that Zac immediately could tell was a Spirit Tool, and he also wielded two aquamarine crystals in his second set of hands. The two crystals suddenly lit up with a lustrous shine as he approached.

Zac immediately sensed danger approaching from behind, and he instinctively threw himself forward, barely avoiding a block of ice the size of a truck slamming into the ground where he just stood. The attack caused a huge shockwave, throwing Zac another few steps forward. The moment he landed his foot stomped into the ground, and Zac disappeared from sight.

It was [**Profane Seal**] that Zac activated now that he finally had his target in sight. He had held back on both unleashing his Dao Fragment and his more impressive skills since he was afraid that the incident with the Flame Golems would repeat itself. He wanted to close the incursion as quickly as possible, but he also needed to gain the last two levels.

And now that his prey was caught it was finally time to put his Dao of the Axe to the test.

The towers of [**Profane Seal**] immediately trapped the whole army, and a terrifying aura spread out as Zac unleashed his Dao Field to cover the entire cage. His attributes might not have undergone a huge change by forming a Fragment, but his Dao Field had received a shocking transformation.

The frogmen caught within his aura were no longer harassed by a constant stream of small cuts, they were now receiving huge gaping wounds from nowhere. Energy started streaming into his body almost immediately, as there were unlucky frogmen who received fatal cuts from his Dao Field, their throats getting slit open without any warning.

The number of kills quickly slowed down as shields of water quickly covered the warriors which blocked out most of the power of his Dao Fragment. Unfortunately for the frogmen the nightmare had only started, and the spectral chains started to dance through their life, punching straight through the walls of water with only minimal resistance.

The macabre scene of corpses getting strung along like Zac was making a necklace repeated itself, but Zac's attention was on the leader.

Storms of ice rampaged outside the cage as a hailstorm had formed in no time. It was no doubt the frogman leader who utilized those two crystals to attack [**Profane Seal**] from outside. The power contained in the barrage was impressive, likely because he had such a huge amount of water readily available from the ocean.

However, the Seal had already been upgraded to middle mastery, and it would take some time for the storm to break down the sturdy towers. And Zac reckoned a minute should be all he needed as he pushed toward the froglord, his right arm already swelling from [**Unholy Strike**].

The frogman seemed to sense the danger from Zac's approach, and a huge swirl of energy quickly gathered around him as he swelled up to three times his original size. Living streams of water surged around him as a liquid armor formed on his body. The transformation made him look like a god of the ocean, and

it became especially poignant when the frogman's trident started to crackle with extremely potent lightning.

The invader pointed his trident straight at Zac, and one of the crystals suddenly started to spew out a rampant stream of water that possessed such speed that Zac didn't even have time to summon **[Immutable Bulwark]**. Worse yet, the froglord had crammed the stream with enough electricity to run a small town, and the barrage made Zac's whole body spasm painfully. A spectral ghost appeared to stab the frogman in his chest, but the water armor effortlessly absorbed the strike.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac forcibly resisted getting washed away, but the stream of water seemed endless. He considered activating his Bulwark-skill to redirect the blast, but he instead decided to simply use his axe instead. Rampant energies made the water churn as Zac swung his axe down with all his might.

He had no skill to add range to the attack itself, so he could only use his Dao and his Strength in hopes to create an extended shockwave. The moment he imbued his axe with his newly acquired fragment it felt like he had ability to cut all creation in half, and his axe ripped down through the torrent of water with undeniable momentum.

For a moment it felt like time had stopped, but the illusion only lasted for a fraction of a second. There was an unmistakable feeling that Zac had cut something more than just the water even though his eyes couldn't make sense of the intuition. It did feel like he had unquestionably cut apart space in front of him, and that the space in front of him was actually two separate pieces even now.

But at the same time everything looked the same, making Zac wonder if his mind was just making things up in its belief that the Fragment should create a larger spectacle. Zac had learned to trust his guts by now though and he truly believed that something had changed even if he couldn't see any conclusive proof.

Thankfully there was a reaction to his swing soon enough as the torrent of water stopped slamming into him, allowing Zac

to once again see his opponent. Zac's eyes turned to the hulking form pointing his trident at him, ready to meet its second attack. However, the frogman stood completely frozen, and a huge surge of energy entered his body the next moment.

Zac's eyes widened in surprise as the body of the frogman fell apart into two pieces, and the enormous cut looked so smooth that one could think that he had used a laser from the technocrat's armory. Zac still couldn't figure out exactly what happened, but one thing was abundantly clear; the froglord was as dead as dead can be.

Was that it?

Zac had expected the frog to have a water clone, or do something to avoid the fatal blow, but it simply died where it stood from a single swing empowered by his Dao Fragment. It had emitted such a mighty aura, was it all bluster? Or was the difference of power brought by the Dao Fragment simply that huge?

The fight from there on out went without suspense. The moment the leader fell the barrage of ice from outside stopped, ending any hope of escape for the remaining soldiers. The area was blanketed in dark corrosive clouds and deathly mists, and wails could constantly be heard from within. Just a minute later it the clamor gave way to a deathly silence, with only Zac walking out from one of the gates before **[Profane Seal]** dissipated.

It was at this point the remaining invaders usually fled toward the Nexus Hub in a bid to escape earth, but Zac looked on with confusion as he saw the remaining frogmen streaming into the ocean. Most had already fled, and the town was pretty much desolate by the point that he exited.

Had the invaders chosen to stay on, hiding in the oceans until they could enact revenge?

Chapter 381: Options

Zac's confusion only grew when he couldn't find the Nexus Hub even after entering the town, and he realized he needed some answers. Zac quickly ran after the fleeing frogman and jumped into the ocean himself, but even with his superior attributes he had a hard time catching up with them. They were simply better suited to move quickly underwater with the help of their four arms and huge webbed feet.

The hunt went on for almost twenty minutes, and the frogmen fled in a straight line while harassing Zac with various attacks to keep him at bay. He tried to respond in kind, but he wasn't really used to fighting underwater. It added a whole new dimension to the battle, as the targets were not only noticeably faster, but they could freely move in essentially any direction.

His undead class was also extremely bad at this type of fighting as it both lacked movement skills and ranged attacks. His acquired skill [**Winds of Decay**] could reluctantly be classified as ranged, but he was unable to use it underwater. The only thing he had going for him was that he didn't need to breathe, so he could keep paddling forward as to not let his prey out of his sight.

Zac considered swapping to his other class to start launching fractal blades at the frogmen, but he soon stopped in his tracks when he realized what was going on. Not far ahead a sprawling underwater town stretched out, and the frogmen fled toward a square in the middle. There were still some frogmen in the square, cramming toward the center to touch the enormous crystal placed there.

A cursory glance proved that the place was already mostly evacuated though, probably since the frogmen had plenty of time to leave. Zac had to admit it was a pretty ingenious way to protect their people. The town on the shore was just a decoy or an outpost, while their real base was far out to sea.

The Nexus Hub was actually underwater, which probably explained why there was no pillar to be seen at the surface. The pillar had already been deactivated by now since he had defeated the leader of the incursion, but he noticed that there was an uncharacteristic haze above the water. Perhaps the mist was created by an array in a bid by the frogmen to hide the true seat of their power.

The frogmen that he had followed were actually streaming toward the Nexus Hub rather than some hideout in the ocean, and Zac allowed them to exit now that he knew that they didn't plan on staying on earth. He was more interested in checking out the underwater town, since it was the first time seeing something like this.

Some of the structures were completely submerged in water, but other sections of the town were enveloped by enormous water bubbles, making them habitable by humans as well. Zac felt a place like this would make a decent hidden base, as long as they could figure out how to actually make sure that the pockets of water didn't disappear.

He was also extremely eager to get a hold of this kind of technology, as it might allow him to expand his kingdom to the waters as well. He was sure there were all kinds of valuables hiding in the depths around his islands, but he didn't have a way to properly extract them until now. If he could create mobile air bubbles he'd be able to send people to scout the ocean floor from everything from mines to rare Spirit Herbs.

Things progressed the usual manner from there on out as a troop of people emerged from the Teleportation Array Zac set up within one of the larger air bubbles. Exploring an underwater town would bring its own set of difficulties, but Zac would let others figure that out as he left through the teleportation array to pick up Jonas, the guide from the Marshall Clan.

The following days were just a storm of blood and steel as Zac moved through the continent of Pangea like a walking calamity. Between his unbreakable defense and the terrifying might of his Dao Fragment, nothing could hinder his path. One

incursion after another was shut down as Zac wasted no time. He would have plenty of time to rest in the tower, so now was the time for action.

Jonas Marshall who was forced to guide 'Mr. Black' looked more and more horrified as the days passed, and he didn't even dare to speak up or look in Zac's direction after he had closed three Incursions in less than two days.

Zac didn't care though, as the only thing on his mind was to crush all lingering threats to Earth before he left, or at least those he could handle now. He only returned to Port Atwood after four days of relentless battle, but his hard work had paid off. He had closed every single Incursion on his list.

As far as Zac and the Marshall Clan could tell there were currently only 5 Incursions left on Earth after Zac's rampage, or 7 if you included the Demons and Tal-Eladar. One was the Church of Everlasting Dao, and another was the Undead Empire.

The final three incursions were invaders who had been unlucky enough to be placed next to the Undead Empire itself, and they were all currently embroiled in battle with the undead hordes. They probably didn't fight to help Earth, but rather to prolong their stay so that they could extract more resources from Earth.

No matter their reasons they could still be counted as reluctant allies against the Lich King, so Zac left them alone even though he had the ability to close them down as well. Shutting down all those Incursions had given him a tremendous boost to his confidence, something that he had slightly lacked since encountering the Cyborg. A Dao Fragment provided a far larger boost to his fighting power than upgrading his skills ever could.

But most importantly he had reached his goal; he had finally reached level 75 with his Undying Bulwark Class. He had been forced to head over to Mystic Island and grind the final stretch for a few hours after closing the last Incursion on his list, but he actually made it. He sat down to catch his breath

the moment he entered his courtyard, and he opened up his menu before changing back to his human form.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark
Race	[E] Draugr
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Early, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Hardness - Peak, Seed of Sanctuary - Peak, Seed of Rot - Peak
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	798 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]

Dexterity	400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Endurance	1175 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Vitality	567 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]
Intelligence	218 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Wisdom	313 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Luck	165 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Free Points	19
Nexus Coins	[F] 871 111 618

He had once again been given 20 attribute points rather than 2 from reaching peak F-Grade, one of which was taken by his class. Zac only briefly hesitated before he threw everything into Strength, pushing him one step closer to his goal of getting 1 000 in that attribute before he Evolved.

He had also gained a hefty amount of Nexus Coins, even excluding the 500 million he got from Verana earlier. But that wasn't what truly interested him at this moment, and he quickly opened up his quest menu to have a look at his new quests.

Vanguard of Undeath (Class): Obtain a defensive Dao Fragment. Reward: Vanguard of Undeath skill. (0/1)

Undying Legion (Class): Gather the resentment by vanquishing 500 000 foes Reward: Undying Legion skill. (500 000/500 000) COMPLETE.

There were two new class quests as expected, but he felt a surge of elation when he saw that one of them was actually already completed. The moment he focused on the quest it immediately disappeared from the list, forming a fractal around his right wrist.

After the moment of happiness passed Zac started to frown in consternation though. The quest had been to kill 500 000 things, something he had long accomplished between the beast hordes, all the zombies, and his grinding during the Hunt. But what did ‘gather the resentment’ mean? Was he carrying around a bunch of resentment unknowingly?

He remembered the horrible scenes elicited by the Dao Funnel, and he started to worry that he might be setting himself up for disaster if he didn’t cleanse the resentment somehow. Perhaps it was something like Karma. He was bound to kill a lot more beings than most due to not being able to cultivate, and this was potentially a hidden danger that he needed to watch out for.

Dealing with resentment was outside of his expertise, and he made a mental note of having Kenzie ask Brazla about it. The two of them had a far better relationship, and the chance of the annoying Tool Spirit divulging information was a lot higher if she was the one asking.

He held off on activating [**Undying Legion**] in Port Atwood, and instead focused on [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. The second class quest wasn’t surprising at all, as it essentially mirrored the one for [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**]. Luckily it didn’t demand him to reach Middle mastery of a Dao Fragment due to being a quest for an Epic class, but the quest did present another problem.

He had already decided to walk his own path, forgoing fusing Sanctuary with Hardness to instead entering the path of Life and Death. Would his fragments still be considered Defensive? Yrial mentioned Fragment of the Corpse when they spoke, and that didn’t sound much like a Defensive Dao. It rather seemed to be on the path of death, or perhaps puppetry or control. But his Seed of Trees was at least considered defensive for his last quest, and hopefully that trend would continue.

In either case, the skill would have to wait since he hadn’t gained any inspiration that would allow him to fuse either of his two remaining fragments. He could only put his hopes on some opportunity presenting itself in the Tower or the Base Town.

Since he was done with everything he needed to do he swapped back to his human form, but he didn't immediately leave to find Ogras or his sister. He rather headed over to the Nexus Node once more, hoping to get a better result this time. His heart was pounding in his chest as he touched the large crystal once more.

[E-Rare] Fallen Groveskeeper (The grove fell, but you took on its torment.) // [E-Epic] Undying Warlord (Unstoppable. Undeniable. Unmatched.)

[E-Rare] Mountain's Ward (Defender of the mountain; stout and unyielding.) // [E-Epic] Curse of Nature (All can be corrupted, even life itself.)

It was like a huge weight was lifted from his chest when he saw that there were actual options available for him to pick this time around. It meant that it was the level of his Undying Bulwark-class that had been holding him back, rather than the Duplicity core or something else.

Of course, he still felt he would need to put some priority in upgrading the Specialty core since having an F-grade core when he proceeded to E-Grade might result in unanticipated issues. For example, his Duplicity core was unique, giving him a full set of attributes for his second class. What if he needed to upgrade his Core for that to continue? He could stand to lose a huge amount of attribute points if it worked like that.

Zac carefully read through the classes and their descriptions, before he quickly removed his hand from the Nexus Node to avoid any mishaps or bouts of impulsivity. But he didn't walk away, but he rather stood frozen in place as he looked into the distance with some loss and confusion.

He had to admit that he was extremely disappointed with his options. He had expected there to be at least one Arcane class to pick considering his insane amount of attribute points, titles, and achievements. But he didn't even have two Epic Classes to fall back on, with his human form still being relegated to a Rare class.

Was this some sort of punishment from the System for his heritage? He had already speculated the System had it out for

him before, but was it actually true? Or was he still lacking in other departments to the point that he couldn't even get two Epic classes? Only after a few minutes did he manage to steady his mind and go over the facts.

The situation was disappointing, but Zac believed he had gained a few clues as to how the System would handle his dual classes. The most obvious thing was that it didn't let him independently pick his two classes, but they rather came in pairs. It meant that his idea of only evolving one class and returning to the Tower that way was out.

The combined class evolution provided a few more clues as well. The most striking thing was the fact that his Fragment of the Axe could not be used as a prerequisite to evolve both his classes.

His struggles were clearly far from over.

Chapter 382: Enforced Balance

There was no doubt in Zac's mind that the System had decided that his two class upgrades could not both use the same Daos as a base for its upgrade path. This was by far the most likely reason why he was provided two different options for epic classes for his Undying Bulwark class, but none for his Hatchetman class.

He already knew that the evolution of Undying Bulwark would have to be at least Epic Rarity, which in turn required at least one Dao Fragment to upgrade. That's why the Fragment of the Axe was 'used up' to provide an option to upgrade his Draugr-Class first.

This forced his Hatchetman to rely on his remaining Dao Seeds for options in what direction to evolve in. The fact that neither Fallen Groveskeeper nor Mountain's Ward seemed to have any obvious connection to axes was another strong indicator that his theory was correct.

He could also make a decent guess about which Daos were used for which class choices.

Zac guessed that Undying Warlord used his Fragment of the Axe together with the Dao Seeds he got from Undying Bulwark. It would still likely be a class geared toward leading Undead armies, but with a more offensive component added.

That left the seeds of Rot and Trees for Hatchetman, creating the 'Fallen Groveskeeper' class. It also felt like he had the accomplishments for such a class. He had literally created a 'fallen grove' on his property, the hidden valley where corrupted Tree of Ascension stood.

The Curse of Nature seemed to have incorporated Rot and Trees with the Fragment of the Axe instead, leaving hardness

to create the Mountain's Ward in conjunction with his nature-aspected skills. There were a few more possible combinations of Dao Seeds, but Zac guessed he lacked other qualifications to get other class choices.

It did leave him a bit confused about what sort of connection Curse of Nature had with the Fragment of the Axe. Would it be some sort of class that caused corruption and curses with the swing of his axe? He did have a mental component baked into his Axe Fragment come to think of it, the mental heaviness.

What Zac didn't know was if the System split up everything between his two paths, not only Daos. For example, did the System take half of his accomplishments to evolve Hatcheman, and the other half to evolve Undying Bulwark? It was much harder to figure out what the rules were on something intangible like accomplishments.

Luckily he had some extra merit in the bank from closing the Technocrat incursion, which would hopefully help him out a bit if he found himself lacking in the future. There were also more accomplishments to be had in the Tower of Eternity before he had to pick a class.

Perhaps his current situation was a way for the System to enforce some balance. Having two classes was an almost disgusting advantage, and it was fair enough that he would have to work twice as hard to Evolve both of them to high-quality classes. But it also begged the question of whether he should maintain his goal of getting as high rarities as possible.

He was so far beyond everyone else on Earth, and he had advantages that would make most people in the multiverse green with envy. Yet he hadn't even managed to get any options to upgrade his classes' rarity after all he had accomplished. That proved the difficulties surrounding the highest rarities, and he was once again reminded of Alyn's exhortations of not biting off more than one could chew.

But at the same time, he couldn't stop himself from being drawn toward the concept of an Arcane class. What was the point of cultivation if not becoming as powerful as possible in

order to protect those around you? His classes and the opportunities they provided were a large reason he could defeat even those that possessed equal or even higher attributes than him.

Besides, if he got stuck when evolving to D-Grade in the future he could always head out to adventure and find new opportunities to make up for what he lacked. This time he was pretty much forced to quickly evolve to meet the threats on Earth, but Zac wouldn't be as rushed for time after dealing with the Incursions and the Dominators.

He would have 100 years to slowly and steadily progress, allowing him to push both his Skills and his Daos to the peak before attempting to form his Cultivator's Core.

His options for classes weren't exactly what he had wished for, but they gave him a good hint in what direction to work in. He felt that his optimal choice was to focus on a Fragment of Death next, or at least some subordinate Dao to the Dao of Death. That way he could use his Fragment of the Axe to upgrade Hatchetman, and the Death-attuned Dao Fragment to upgrade Undying bulwark.

Best of all would certainly be if he could get both fragments, which might at even give him the chance at one Arcane class and one Epic, but he couldn't be too greedy.

As for the specific classes he was presented, he didn't analyze them too deeply apart from figuring out why he could choose them. His options would probably change completely the moment he gained another fragment, making it premature to plan his cultivation around the classes he saw now.

He quickly left his private domain to head over to the Thayer Consortia. It was time to finish his preparations.

"The brave general returns!" the Sky Gnome said as he handed over a Cosmos Sack. "I bet your name will be used to scare unruly children after the invaders return home. I've never heard of anyone singlehandedly closing multiple incursions in one week."

The Sky Gnome had already prepared a long list of items that Zac would need, containing everything from a wide array of Attuned Crystals to provisions to last for almost a year. Ogras had said that anything could happen inside the Tower, so he had prepared for every contingency he could think of.

“Half of them fled the moment it became apparent that I would be able to singlehandedly breach their defensive arrays,” Zac said with a wry smile as he accepted the sack. “The leaders usually fled first, leaving mostly the slaves and non-combat classes to cover their escape. I simply stood and watched for the most part.”

“It’s good to have some benevolence, but don’t be complacent when you arrive at the Tower of Eternity,” Calrin said with a serious face. “You will be mixing with all kinds of people, some from terrifying forces, and not everyone will share your kind-hearted mindset. Keep your head down and focus on your task.”

“I will be careful,” Zac smiled. “About that money?”

The sky gnome looked a bit queasy, but he transferred over almost 4 billion nexus coins without complaint. It was the combined worth of the sales of his Beast Crystals, along with his accumulated dividends from all the profits the Thayer Consortia had accumulated since the Beast Waves.

“Here, take this as well,” Calrin said as he took off a ring from one of his fingers. “It’s something the Thayer Progenitor found during his travels. He sto... discovered this from an ancient gravesite, and it has extremely impressive defensive properties. It can only be used once every year though, so only activate it if you’re all out of options.”

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the Thayer ancestor was a hobbyist grave robber in addition to a merchant after having met his descendants. He gratefully accepted the ring, since one could never have too many aces in a place like the Tower of Eternity.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Zac said as he put the ring on his right hand.

“When are you leaving?” Calrin asked curiously.

“In a few hours. I just need to deal with a few matters first,” Zac answered after some thought. “Can you find Ogras to make sure he’s ready as well?”

“I’ll find him, he has requested some items as well,” Calrin nodded. “Good luck. And remember, a great leader always has time to earn some money on the side. Keep your eye peeled for good trades!”

There were a few more things to take care of, and the first was to head over to the battlefield. There were a couple of people he needed to speak with, and he began with the Marshall Clan rather than visiting his own army. He was leaving for a while so he felt he should touch base with Thea first.

It had been over a month since they last spoke in person, though he got regular updates on her activities and her army’s situation. He headed over to the battlefield with the help of a Marshall Liaison residing in Port Atwood and was quickly led toward the command tent of the Marshall’s allied army.

The army was far larger than Zac had thought, with tents almost reaching the horizon. There had to be at least half a million people in the camp, and Zac didn’t understand where she had gotten so many people. But it was good that she had found help against the threat, and he put aside the question as he entered the tent.

There was a middle-aged man who gave off a military vibe standing by a large map, and Thea stood next to him looking slightly troubled. Something had changed about her since he saw her last. She felt harder, and a bit colder compared to before. But Zac wasn’t surprised as war had that effect. He could imagine it was especially demoralizing to be forced to face zombies that were once your people.

The fact that she stayed in a constant cloud of miasma didn’t help either. He had seen the effect the death-attuned energy had on people personally. Zac himself was fine since he could simply cram any errant miasma into his Duplicity core, but others weren’t so lucky. They would first become broody and grim, until they were finally transformed into true zombies.

He could still remember the scene where the poor adventurer finally lost control over the accumulated miasma in his body. And the following scene where his former companions ripped him to pieces to get a hold of his Zombie Core. But Zac could tell that the people he passed in the camp was far from reaching that state, which was a small relief at least.

“Long time no see,” Zac said with a small smile as he walked up toward the table.

“Indeed. I hear your people have closed the final incursions?” Thea said as she looked up from the table. “Are you preparing to assault the Dead Zone? How can we help?”

“Not quite,” Zac sighed. “I need more preparation.”

“Every day of delay costs us ten thousand lives,” Thea said with a frown. “And there’s also the issue of the array.”

Port Atwood had immediately sent an update regarding everything they’ve learned about the array the moment Zac turned back, so the Marshall Clan and the Sino-Indian Alliance long knew about it.

“We still have a few weeks before the array can activate, especially now that we’ve gotten reinforcements from the Underworld,” Zac said, feeling a bit startled about Thea’s strong reaction.

He knew he had gotten a bit side-tracked with the Underworld and rescuing his army, but the fact remained that he was pretty much on schedule. They had discussed a timeline of up to two months to close all the incursions on the surface, and Zac had completed the task well within those parameters.

At the same time he could understand her sentiment. It was her people, many even from her own family, that kept dying in their continuous effort to keep the zombie horde at bay. He had heard that Thea almost lived out on the battlefield, taking on as much as she could so that as few of her people as possible would die.

It might have felt extremely frustrating to suddenly see Zac’s progress stop after only closing a handful of the incursions on the surface. It was only last week he resumed his work, closing

the remaining ones in quick succession. That made the three weeks in-between look particularly suspicious.

But even then things couldn't be rushed.

“We have to be careful about the Undead Empire. They are far beyond any other incursion in power. We need to do everything in our power to improve our odds while we still can, only attacking when we have confidence in success,” Zac said, trying to underscore the importance of taking their time to power up.

“I understand,” Thea sighed.

The two kept discussing the war for twenty minutes or so until Zac needed to leave.

“Ten days to two weeks. I will launch an all-out assault within that time. I hope I can count on your assistance,” Zac said as he left, leaving the two Marshall Clan members silently looking at his back.

“What do you think?” Thea asked as she watched Zac disappear out of sight.

“I think he speaks the truth, he doesn't feel like the scheming type. He needs to do something before evolving,” Mark said after some thought. “All our research does point that evolving to E-Grade is a quick process though, even if you have a high-rarity class. I would guess he has been holding off in order to get a better class. Our liaison mentioned some large event took place at their Academy the other day. ”

“A better class...” Thea mumbled, some light dimming in her eyes. “But he's been level 75 for over a month by now while Earth is dying. So it's for himself in the end... Was I wrong about him?”

Chapter 383: Final Hours

The meeting with Thea was surprisingly tense, but Zac guessed it wasn't anything too surprising considering how her last month had been. It was obvious that she was both physically and spiritually exhausted after fighting the zombies for so long. He could only shrug off the uncomfortable feelings as he proceeded with the things on his list.

He visited his settlements one after another to see whether there was anything that required his attention. Luckily things were running quite smooth so far. The former Incursions had vast swathes of unclaimed land around them, and there hadn't been a single dispute over territory so far. Not that anyone would dare encroach on his domain.

Next he headed over to the Atwood Army, which once again was embroiled in a protracted war against the second undead horde. The soldiers looked at him with awe as he stepped toward the frontline, and he saw Ilvere hurry over from the distance.

"Is there something wrong?" the demon asked with confusion since he hadn't been forewarned about Zac's arrival.

"I'm leaving in a bit," Zac said after making sure no one else was within earshot. "I thought I could thin the herd a bit for you guys before that. Do you know a good sector to strike?"

The general's eyes lit up and he immediately started to think of a plan.

"I'd stay away from the innermost core, even if I were you. The young master mentioned that there is an extremely strong array in there, he barely got out before it closed in around him. There are a few places we call command clumps in the inner area though. They're far into the horde, but not so far as you enter the array of Unholy Beacons," the demon eventually said.

Zac nodded as he had heard Ogras mention it earlier as well. It was the same reason that Thea hadn't dared another assassination attempt. It was pretty much impossible to head into the core unless you were ready to risk it all in taking the General down, and Zac wasn't ready to reveal all his cards before fighting the Lich King.

"Command clumps?" Zac asked curiously, focusing on what he could help with at the moment.

"Clumps with highly intelligent zombies that commands the rest of them. They're what stopping the stupid ones from simply walking off into the woods. We generally try to find and kill solitary leaders like that to fracture the horde one piece at a time," the demon said.

"Won't I cause a stampede if I kill a command clump then?" Zac asked skeptically.

"The clump is surrounded by the strongest zombies. If you kill them as well only the rabble will remain," Ilvere said. "We will be able to handle the weaker ones now that we have the underworld army to help."

"How have things been working out with the Council so far?" Zac asked.

The Underworld Council was the last thing he needed to check in on before returning to Port Atwood. The Atwood Army relied on the strength of the Councilors to keep the Undead General in check. Now that Alea was out of commission only Janos and Ilvere remained. Both had gotten a decent power-up from the Dao Funnel, but they also had a much lower starting point compared to the Undead Empire.

They alone weren't a strong enough deterrent, but with ten councilors to help out, even the undead General would have to think twice before moving out.

"They are competent fighters," Ilvere said with approval. "Much better than the rabble of the Sino-Indian Alliance. But they are also holding back, and they appear to have sent out quite a few scouting parties toward the wilderness."

“They’re no doubt looking for places to set up proper towns,” Zac said, before changing topic. “By the way, how’s your progress on **[Cyclic Strike]** coming along?”

“I’ve mastered it, thanks to the opportunity you and the young master presented,” Ilvere said with some pride. “I managed to push both my Daos to Peak mastery. Everything went extremely smoothly after that. As soon as my soul healed I tried it out, and it almost came naturally, as though the two Daos wanted to form a cycle on their own accord.”

The mouth of Zac started to twitch with some annoyance since he couldn’t say that he had enjoyed the same success the past days. He had renewed his efforts of mastering **[Cyclic Strike]** now that both his Seed of Trees and Rot were at peak mastery. But his control hadn’t really improved at all, and he wasn’t even halfway to being able to activate the skill properly, let alone using it in a fight.

Was this the result of having 0 affinity with the Daos? Was he forced to stay a dumb brute who had to smash his head against every trial that came his way? Was the path of the refined cultivator forever out of his grasp?

He had the demon display the strike a few times, and Zac had to admit that its might was a bit shocking. It almost felt like the large metal ball was infused with a Dao Fragment rather than two Dao Seeds as it shot out in the direction that Ilvere targeted, and the power was enormous for someone at Ilvere’s level.

Yrial had said that the attack was nothing much, but was he simply saying that from the perspective of a C-Grade hegemon? **[Cyclic Strike]** was not too important for Zac who already possessed a real Dao Fragment by now, but what if he managed to form the Life/Death Fragments? How powerful would the skill be if it was powered by Fragments rather than Seeds?

Zac kept having Ilvere repeat the strike over and over, and he asked all kinds of questions to make sense of why the demon mastered the skill so effortlessly. He asked about everything

from how he controlled his Mental Energy to even minor details like how he breathed during the infusion.

Zac was determined to learn the skill during his stay in the Tower. If he couldn't manage that much in 100 days he might as well jump into a well and stay there out of shame.

He didn't immediately find out any solution to his inability to combine his two Daos, but he did get a few clues on how to act going forward. It was all he could do for now, and he returned to the subject of thinning out the zombie horde.

It quickly became apparent that they would need the assistance of the Underworld Council if Zac started rampaging inside the horde, so Zac set off to the nearby, and much larger, camp belonging to the Council. He was immediately showed inside a command tent with great courtesy, and he spotted a few familiar faces there.

"I barely see any of the molemen around?" Zac asked with confusion after going through the customary greetings. "I thought they'd jump at the opportunity to see the sky again after all this time."

"Old habits die hard," Lararia, one of the molemen councilors, said. "We have lived beneath the surface for thousands of years. The darkness and stone have become part of us. Not all are ready to leave their sanctuary just yet, or perhaps ever."

"I see," Zac slowly nodded, understanding their feeling.

The concept of 'home' was something built into one's wiring, and Zac had felt slightly oppressed the whole time he spent down in the tunnels. Coming back to the surface was like he could suddenly breathe again, so he could understand how the opposite held true for the molemen. Perhaps his dreams of creating large underwater towns would end up as a pipe dream unless he could find some amphibious races to join his force.

"So what brings you here today?" another councilor asked.

"I will be busy taking care of a few unavoidable matters for a bit over a week," Zac explained. "So was planning on thinning the horde a bit before I leave. I was hoping I could count on your cooperation."

“No problem. These undead have proven a great whetstone for our armies,” Lararia said without hesitation. “We don’t mind getting our blades wet some more.”

Zac nodded in thanks and immediately set out after ironing out the details of his assault. Ilvere had already prepared his people, so Zac didn’t go back to the Atwood camp. He put on the amulet he got from Ogras back then and flashed straight into the huge sea of zombies, and he found himself mostly unencumbered.

The both good and somewhat frustrating thing about the zombie horde was that it wasn’t tightly clumped. It allowed Zac to simply walk between the millions of undead who were just milling around, but it drastically decreased the lethality of any area attacks aimed to take out a lot of them in one go. It was nothing like the tightly cramped zombie hordes you could see in the movies where they were crammed together like sardines.

He couldn’t be sure whether it was the efficacy of the amulet, or if the general had already decided to not meet Zac’s head-on, but Zac managed to find the clump without much hassle and unleashed the first two stages of **[Deforestation]**, causing a huge swathe of scorched corpses.

Just as Ilvere warned chaos immediately ensued, but Zac stayed on for another hour to rip apart the larger clumps of Zombies with his fractal blades. However, even if he wanted to take this opportunity to get more accustomed to his Fragment of the Axe he chose to not display it here, and he also refrained from using **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]** and his Undying Bulwark class.

He wanted to keep his aces hidden for the final clash in the Dead Zone in a few weeks.

Between the coordinated efforts of Zac, his army, and the Underworld Council a week’s worth of zombies were felled in the span of a few hours. Zac wanted to do more, but he needed to get going. He could only pray that his small help on the frontline would give his people a breather and delay the terraforming a day or two.

He returned to Port Atwood and gave some instructions to Adran and Abby, and he also took the opportunity to plunder the town coffers of another 800 million nexus coins. The money came from a mix of taxes and sales of Nexus Crystals, along with some plundered wealth from the underworld.

His final destination was the secluded valley between the mountain, and Zac was happy to see that Calrin already had accomplished his task. Alea's crystal coffin was shrouded in a green mist that seeped out from a grate next to her, and even the poisoned Tree of Ascension seemed to benefit from the Amanita's mist.

Zac didn't say anything as he looked down at Alea who seemed to simply sleep in her crystal encasing. She neither looked better or worse compared to when he saw her last, which Zac guessed was the best he could hope for. A tired sigh escaped from his lips as he lightly touched the coffin before he left.

He had finally crossed off everything on his list, allowing him to head to the Tower of Eternity with a clear mind. For the people of Port Atwood he would only be gone for 10 days at the most, but for him it would be over a hundred days. He didn't want to carry a nagging feeling that he had missed something for such a long time.

He finally returned to his compound and found both Emily and Kenzie in his sister's courtyard. The three had a dinner where the two seemed to compete in bragging of who had the greatest gains from the Dao House. Zac was relieved to hear that both of them were doing good, and it seemed that everyone had already woken up from their comas by now.

There was still the issue of latent dangers, but at least it seemed like a possibility that people's souls had simply been overtaxed after being forced to ponder on the Dao too intensely. Luckily even those who had fallen unconscious had made great gains, and there were now over 15 people from Port Atwood on the Dao Ladder.

His sister had even managed to crash into the 6th position, while Joanna just missed the top ten at 11th. Emily, who had

chosen to use her real name for the ladder, was currently in the 87th position. She would likely have been a lot further ahead if it wasn't for her late start.

It felt good to have a relaxed meal, but Zac knew he couldn't put things off any longer. He finally headed toward his courtyard to meet up with Ogras, with the two girls following behind.

The demon already stood ready, but no one else was there to see them off. Only a very select number of people knew that Zac was about to leave Earth for a bit as Zac was afraid someone would use his absence to cause damage to Port Atwood or his people. He wanted to use his identity as a deterrent even when he wasn't around.

He took one last look in his Cosmos Sacks to make sure that he hadn't missed anything, before nodding at the demon.

"Stay safe, both of you," Kenzie said. "And you know... See if you can find any news of her?"

"I will," Zac said with a smile as he crushed the token while placing his hand on Ogras' shoulder. "Take care of things while I am gone, ok?"

He looked at his sister for ten seconds as the space around them started to shudder and twist until the System swallowed the two to send them on their way.

Chapter 384: Apparitions

Zac had expected to be stuck in darkness for a prolonged duration, but the two appeared almost immediately some distance away from the base of an enormous set of stairs. Transportation that the System provided itself sure was different Zac reckoned as he looked around to get his bearings.

People kept appearing around him as well, most of them looking quite young. Some looked around in confusion and wonder just like himself, while others immediately started to ascend the steps after orienting themselves. Zac's eyes followed the stairs until his eyes finally reached the crest.

"Holy crap," Zac muttered as his eyes tried to compute was in front of him.

"Pretty impressive, yeah?" Ogras echoed as he looked up at the Tower of Eternity in wonder.

They were currently standing at what seemed to be an endless square, as there was nothing in all directions apart from the people who kept appearing out of thin air. This whole space seemed to be made solely for one thing; the Tower of Eternity. Its name was truly apt as it really towered into space itself, breaking all logic and convention.

The tower itself was a pristine white and completely without adornments as far as Zac could tell from this distance. There were no windows and no decor, and it didn't get any thinner at the top. It essentially looked like a massive tube made from marble, but Zac had trouble getting any sense of its actual size. He could only confirm that it spanned at least a couple of kilometers in width.

As for its height, it was impossible to tell.

The tower itself didn't look very impressive apart from its mindboggling size, but that wasn't the only magical thing

about it. Mysterious lights trailed along its massive surface, causing a beautiful spectacle that stirred something in Zac's soul. It was like a subdued but never-ending firework show that brightened up the sky.

It reminded Zac a bit of the gaudy display of his own Towers of Myriad Dao, but there was a vast difference in their essence. The lights that Brazla conjured around the Dao Repository felt empty and pretentious, but it was completely different with the radiance around the Tower of Eternity.

It was as though the lights were communicating the Grand Dao itself, and Zac's mind shuddered slightly when he watched them. Zac finally understood that the original Brazla had tried to imitate the Tower of Eternity when he created his Dao Repository, but only managed to project a cheap copy.

Zac had a feeling that if he observed the lights for a few months it wouldn't be impossible to gain a completely new Dao Seed. The sight made Zac better understand why almost everyone stayed for the full year inside the Base Town if they could. Just living next to the tower itself was a precious opportunity.

But the divine lights suddenly disappeared and were instead replaced by an impossibly large snake that coiled around the tower. It was majestic beyond comprehension, and Zac couldn't stop gaping like a fool as he watched it stretch its scaled head toward the sky.

The snake actually had a horn on its head, and Zac could barely distinguish some sort of fractals covering it but it was too far to discern any details. It was a shame, as he felt that the inscriptions on the horn contained shocking insights into the Dao.

Everyone around them had stopped what they were doing as well and looked at the snake with rapt attention. A few people even seemed to have been struck by an epiphany as they quickly closed their eyes, delight clear on their faces. The mythological beast only appeared for a minute or so before it dissipated, and was once again replaced by the mysterious light.

“A flood dragon,” Ogras muttered. “I think that is the 38th level? Pretty auspicious to see a sign the moment we arrive.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked curiously, finally taking his eyes off the tower in the distance. “I thought there were only 9 floors?”

“Well, each floor has nine subfloors, each a world in of itself, so most people simply count it as there being 81 levels,” Ogras explained. “The 38th level means that someone has completed the first four floors and another two levels before exiting.”

“Apparitions appear when people pass specific floors, and there are a few rules to it,” the demon added. “It essentially showcases that a powerhouse just completed his climb in the tower.”

“Aren’t there always powerhouses undertaking the trial?” Zac asked with confusion. “Wouldn’t people get blinded by constant apparitions, especially if the time inside the tower is accelerated.”

Zac heard a few snorts from around him and noticed that a few cultivators looked at him like he had a hole in his head. He even heard someone mutter ‘country bumpkin’ under his breath, no doubt talking about him. Even Ogras looked over at Zac with exasperation.

“Don’t underestimate the difficulty of the Tower of Eternity, especially the 36th floor and beyond. I only barely made it past the 27th because my grandpa spent a good chunk of his life savings on me gaining a good score,” Ogras whispered.

“But still,” Zac said.

“If you stay here for a year you might see one of the apparitions between the 36th and 40th levels a few times a week, so it’s nothing too exciting,” a voice drifted over and Zac looked over to see a young man with a bow strapped to his back smiling in their direction. “But the others are pretty rare.”

“Oh?” Zac said with interest.

“This is my second time here. Last time I saw the apparitions for the 45th level ten times during the year I stayed here, which

meant someone passed the 5th floor. The last level of each floor represents a huge spike in difficulty, so it's a tremendous achievement," the man explained.

Zac looked at the man with some confusion before he understood what he meant. The tower of eternity possessed 9 true floors, each of which had 9 subfloors. That meant that the 45th level was the final subfloor of the 5th floor, and the next true floor ended at the 54th level.

"I also was lucky enough to see an apparition for the 52nd floor," the man said, seemingly enjoying Zac's attention.

"And for higher floors like 54th and beyond?" Zac asked with interest.

"No, that's something that you might only see by chance. It doesn't even happen once every ten years," the bowman said with a shake of his head. "But you never know. One of my family's ancestors had the fortune of witnessing the apparition for the 63rd floor, that's a grand occasion taking place only once every few millennia."

Zac's brows rose in surprise when he learned of the details. Apparitions above the 54th level happened every decade or so, but the 63rd was once every couple of thousands of years? That was over a hundred times more difficult from the time it took. Then what about the 72nd level? The young ranger seemed to understand Zac's thoughts, and he was obviously happy to showcase his expertise.

"You're wondering about the higher tiers, right? The last time an apparition for the 63rd level appeared was around 4600 years ago now. It was actually a loose cultivator called Parvan Beradan, though most know him as Lord Beradan now that he's become a C-Grade Lord. As for the 72nd level?" the young man said, pausing for dramatic effect.

"That was the Eveningtide Asura."

Both Zac and Ogras blankly looked at the young man after his grand proclamation, neither of them ever having heard that name before. The ranger seemed a bit embarrassed about the lack of reaction, and he coughed while scratching his chin. But

just as he was about to explain the origin of the so-called Asura, an attendant stepped up to his side.

“Young Master, your reception is waiting,” the young girl next to him discreetly said.

The man gave a start before he sighed with annoyance.

“Anyway!” he said as he started to move away from Zac and Ogras. “Witnessing those top apparitions is an opportunity that one can hope for, but never control. If you need to stock up on goods or intelligence before you try your luck in the tower, remember to visit the Trentach Society!”

After that the ranger started ascending the stairs with rapid steps, and a retinue of ten people quickly followed behind. Only then did Zac realize that the people around him were all elites that completed a quest for the tokens. But even elites who qualified to get a token were only assistants to that guy, so they might just have met a bigshot.

Zac’s eyes followed their figures as they pushed forward, and he realized that the endless stairs simply led up to a vast plateau that the tower itself stood on. The plateau itself was crafted from some black stone, and Zac guessed it was a few kilometers in height. The only reason it didn’t feel so massive was since its size was dwarfed by the tower itself.

“Well, let’s go,” Ogras said with a shrug. “And remember to keep a low profile. There’s no law and no restrictions here, and anyone can be a true monster.”

“That guy told us to visit his store. Do people live here permanently?” Zac asked as the two started to walk up the stairs.

The steps were hundreds of meters wide, so it wasn’t cramped in the slightest even though quite a few people were appearing on the platform.

“Rydel and I were the only ones who had gone to the Tower in my family among those who entered the Incursion, and no one had gone for well over a decade before us,” Ogras said. “But some forces are so big that they always have some people here. Maintaining a compound or a business here is a show of

strength since it proves that the force is flourishing with young talents.”

“So any place up there is controlled by some real powerful families?” Zac asked with a whistle.

“Not all,” Ogras corrected him. “The top forces control the structures closest to the entrance of the towers. But most buildings don’t have a permanent owner, especially at the outer parts of the town. Anyone could live or set up a temporary business there if they want, and close it down when they leave this place.”

The two kept walking and soon enough they reached the summit of the plateau. A sprawling town full of palaces and luxuriant compounds entered his eyes, and it felt extremely bustling. The architecture was extremely varied as well, making Zac believe that the System had simply stolen a bunch of large mansions from different parts of the multiverse.

There was no way that there was a single society that had created all these buildings. But even though the mansions and storefronts varied in both style and size it all seemed to blend perfectly into some sort of cultural melting-pot. It also wasn’t cramped at all, with the streets being over a hundred meters wide.

Even though there were dozens of people ascending the stairs at any moment, the enormous town didn’t seem to have any trouble swallowing them all. Some walked in certain directions with purpose, while others simply chose to meander around. The new arrivals were walking along both in groups or alone, and Zac was shocked to see some of the creatures.

The cultivators they passed came in all shapes and forms, including quite a few Humans. Zac already knew that humans were one of the most populous races in the multiverse, but yet it was a bit mindblowing to see all these humans who were probably from all corners of the universe.

It was a far cry from how many believed that Earth might be the only planet housing life back in the day.

Still, humans were only a somewhat large minority in the mix of people around. Zac couldn't help look over at a dour contingent of undead warriors silently walking toward the center of the town, all of them releasing dense clouds of miasma to avoid the Cosmic Energy in the environment.

Most cultivators took a wide berth around them, some out of fear and others not wanting to get sullied by the death-attuned energy. There were also enormous golems, flying pixies only as large as a hand, and all kinds of other odd beings.

There was one thing that essentially looked like a flying disco ball, and it slowly flew forward with a low hum. There were also a couple of Stargazers as well, and when Zac accidentally looked into their cosmic eye he couldn't help but twitch a bit as his mind got a small shock.

He remembered that these guys almost always used mental classes, and just looking into one's eye was to ask for trouble even if they weren't hostile. Abby was different since she was an administrator without any combat capabilities.

Zac also noted with some interest that the groups of cultivators were more diverse than he had expected. He had thought he might stick out by traveling together with a demon, but he realized that was an unnecessary worry. At least a third of all groups were comprised of a mix of races, so they weren't exactly unique.

But even though all these diverse groups of people were put on the same street it was all surprisingly harmonious. There should be quite a few grudges between races, especially with the System's instigation, but people seemed to get along just fine.

Of course, Zac believed that this serenity was only the surface of the Base Town.

Chapter 385: Protect Your Wallet

“It’s pretty quiet, I thought things would get rowdier if there were no laws,” Zac said with a low volume to Ogras as they walked down the seemingly endless road leading toward the tower.

“Everyone here is an elite of their force, bringing hidden aces to climb as far as possible in the tower. Only a real mouthbreather would risk their lives against enemies of unknown power for no reason. This might be the only chance they have to come here, most people are only concerned to gain strength before evolving,” the demon responded. “Of course, there are always some who were just born without a brain.”

Zac followed Ogras’ gaze and saw a scene where three burly beastkin cultivators seemingly had bumped into a group of hooded beings that were shorter than a meter in height. Even Calrin was slightly taller than the diminutive cultivators who covered their appearance. The beastmen towered above them like giants and they seemed to be rearing for a fight.

“Look where you walk you little shits,” one of the beastmen growled as it threw a forceful kick. “You puny things should scurry in the sewers like the other rats.”

Zac could sense that the power of the beastman wasn’t too bad, and his kick was even imbued with some Dao seed that was at least middle stage. But the kick was forcibly stopped by the small hand of the leading hooded cultivator.

A shockwave erupted from the clash, but Zac noted with interest that its power was quickly swallowed by the atmosphere, and not even those standing within 5 meters were affected apart from a small flutter of their clothes. If such a

collision took place on Earth it would have been able to topple trees over twenty meters away.

The beastman seemed shocked how effortlessly the little cultivator stopped his kick, and he hurriedly took out a large axe with some fear in his eyes. However, before he even had time to swing the group of hooded cultivators disappeared, only to reappear again at the same spot a second later. As for the three beastmen; they stood frozen for a second before their bodies started to fall apart into neatly separated chunks.

Zac looked at the beastmen, knowing they were deadlier than dead. He had barely been able to see what the hooded creatures did, but he realized they were actually some sort of small beastkin that all focused on Dexterity. They hadn't used weapon when dissecting their bulkier brethren, but rather a set of sharp claws on their furry hands.

The people in the surroundings didn't care in the slightest that a murder had taken place just in front of them. Not even the other beastman in the area lifted a brow when seeing their kin get slain. They rather looked down at the killed beastmen like they were idiots, and Zac had to agree. You would have to be extremely powerful or extremely stupid to harass people in a place like this.

Interestingly enough the blood and the bodies of the killed cultivators turned into motes of light that soon enough dissipated, and only the cosmos sacks were left behind. One of the hooded cultivators snatched them up before the group walked away without a care, walking toward the inner parts of the city.

"Some people come here without a real understanding of the world, thinking they're unbeatable," Ogras snorted with a shake of his head. "Let's go."

"Weren't those small guys supposed to be suppressed or something?" Zac asked curiously as he took a last look at the beastmen.

"The larger ones attacked first, so whatever happened next was counted as Self Defense by the Ruthless Heavens," Ogras smiled. "So remember, if you want to kill someone try to make

them hit you first, even if it's just a shove. Then you can kill them without any repercussions. This is another reason why there's so little fighting."

"Even if you win, as long as you hit first you will still get hunted down, right?" Zac confirmed.

"Right," Ogras nodded as he kept walking. "There is an exception though, but it doesn't relate to us. You can simply follow the rule to not hit first and we'll be fine."

"Where are we heading?" Zac asked as he walked along.

"You said we only have ten days here at most, so we better make the most of it," Ogras said. "First off, let's get something to eat. I haven't had a decent meal since I arrived at your godforsaken planet."

Zac stopped in his tracks and gave the demon an even stare, making Ogras roll his eyes in exasperation.

"We need to get a feel of the current situation here. Listening in on the discussion at a tavern is a good way to get some of the latest gossip of the area," the demon snorted. "It might allow us to save a lot of money to learn what we need to know. Information brokers are pretty damn expensive."

Zac reluctantly agreed with Ogras even if he felt the urge to start running back and forth to complete all his various goals of coming here. There was so much to do, with helping Alea and learning more about his Specialty Core being the top priorities before entering the Tower itself. So it was with some reluctance he let the demon drag him to a decently sized open-air restaurant roughly halfway between the stairs and the tower.

"This is roughly the halfway point," Ogras said as they walked inside the huge courtyard of the restaurant. "The buildings from here on out generally have permanent owners. Of course, if you feel the need you can always take a building by force. But there is no point in us doing that even if we have the strength to do so."

It was completely packed, but the two luckily managed to get a table in the back. Almost the moment the two sat down a

golem arrived and gave them each a crystal containing the menu. Zac curiously looked at the waiter, but it stood unmoving until the demon placed a round of orders for the two. Only then did it slightly bow before wordlessly walking away.

“...It’s a puppet?” Zac finally asked as he looked at the dozens of golems walking around between the tables.

“Yes. Only elites can come here, so most businesses use puppets or arrays rather than living personnel. I hear that the elite stores right by the tower entrance have living waiters, but that’s not the kind of place we can freely enter,” Ogras muttered.

“Why not?” Zac asked, not understanding why they couldn’t shop where they wanted.

“This version of the tower is low-tiered, but the strongest forces here are still Peak C-Grade. Getting involved with those kinds of people before we have some sort of backing won’t end well,” Ogras explained. “Besides, most of the top tier establishments require referrals or things like that.”

“Isn’t the point of coming here making a connection with those kinds of forces?” Zac asked skeptically.

“No,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “It’s better to look for a weaker force in my opinion. A strong Early C-Grade or weak Middle C-Grade force might be best. They will be strong enough to rebuff that old goat, but not so strong that we’ll be forced into a situation we can’t dig ourselves out of.”

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. Yrial had full confidence in killing a Peak D-Grade powerhouse even if he was just a soul fragment. It went to show what a huge difference it was between D-Grade and C-Grade. A live C-Grade Hegemon would probably have no problem dealing with The Great Redeemer even if he was stuck in the early stages.

“Besides, those peak forces are millions of years old. What elites haven’t they seen before? There’s no guarantee they’d bother recruiting you even if you passed the 6th floor,” Ogras

added after a thought. “Even if you’re a monster in human skin you’re still a mortal.”

Zac ignored the demon’s insult as he suddenly realized something odd about what the demon said earlier.

“This version?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The tower services the whole multiverse, how could all the young elites fit in this small town?” Ogras snorted. “There are innumerable Base Towns where elites of the same sector gather.”

“Sort of like the incursion forces?” Zac mumbled, remembering that only forces in the same star sector got the opportunity to invade earth.

“Yes, though the area for who gets teleported here is a lot larger,” Ogras shrugged. “At least I saw more forces I didn’t recognize than ones I knew last time. Its scope is quite large.”

“So, the forces we’re looking to ally with are locals?” Zac asked. “Are they staying here or further inside the town?”

“Yes they are, but we’ll deal with all that after you’ve proven your worth by summoning a top tier apparition in the sky,” Ogras shrugged. “For now we’ll be treated like garbage if we go there, and might even get ourselves killed. Remember, those places likely have a bunch of treasures that aren’t suppressed like in the tower.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He also felt it was no point to sound out strong backers before he had proven himself in the tower. That way he wouldn’t need to divulge any of his titles or attributes. He could simply point to the apparition he created with his tower run, and it would vouch for his power.

There were a lot more things Zac wanted to ask about now that he had a better understanding of what sort of place they had arrived at, but just as he was about to ask another question he noticed a squirrely human look in their direction. He was a pure human just like Zac and looked to be somewhere in his thirties.

It wasn’t anything too surprising, but most people looked quite young. Looking a bit older could be a sign that they weren’t

very powerful and had been stuck at F-Grade for a few decades. But it could also mean that he was someone like Zac himself, someone who only evolved his race a bit later than normal.

Some might spend a decade or two perfecting their Daos or gathering achievements, as not all could have direct access to Origin Dao like Zac and Ogras did. So looking even older than Zac was a bit out of the norm, but not unseen. There were even a few people looking middle-aged in the area, though those were likely people who had been stuck on a bottleneck for most of their lives.

When the man noticed Zac's stare he immediately started to walk over to their table. Zac frowned slightly, afraid that trouble had already found them for some reason. Was that man someone from one of the incursions that he had closed? But Zac didn't sense any danger from the man, and he gave a weak smile when he arrived.

"I am sorry. It seems quite crowded here today. Would you mind if I imposed on the two young masters? I am Galau of Clan Beroria by the way, from the Allbright Empire," he said.

Zac's brows rose when he heard of the all too familiar empire, and he immediately indicated for the man to sit down. What were the chances of meeting a countryman of Average and Greatest? He had been thinking of the Allbright Empire often since meeting those two, mainly because he had a standing invitation of Greatest.

It might just have been an offering made out of politeness, but if Zac actually showed up at their doorstep Greatest would hopefully at least be able to arrange something that would help him in his cultivation. Such a powerhouse no doubt had a large network of connections, and he might even be able to introduce Zac to a force that could keep The Great Redeemer at bay.

Greatest was also someone who already knew of his Specialty core but hadn't made any attempts to snatch it, which was Zac's biggest fear in dealing with the powerhouses of the multiverse. He even went so far as to give him his bracer,

which was something that he still wore every day to maintain his secrecy.

“I’m Zac,” Zac simply said, not explaining his origins any further. “This is Ogras.”

“Nice to meet you, I’ll order a round as thanks for your hospitality. Have you been here long?” Galau asked.

“We haven’t entered the Tower yet, if that’s what you’re asking,” Ogras snorted.

“No, no, I am just making conversation,” Galau said with some embarrassment. “I have been frequenting this restaurant for a few months, but it is the first time I see the two young sirs. But I can already tell you’re two people destined for greatness.”

Zac and Ogras gave each other a weird look before the demon leaned over.

“Protect your wallet and your butt,” the demon muttered with a guarded expression.

Chapter 386: Galau

“I am sorry, I am flattered but I am interested in the fairer sex,” Ogras said without waiting for Galau to speak up again. “As for this guy, I’m not sure? I think he’s converted to ascetic cultivation for some reason.”

Galau blankly looked at Ogras for a few seconds, obviously unable to compute what the demon was talking about.

“What? No! I like.. I like the ladies as well,” Galau stammered. “I was just making conversation. I have been here for so long and it simply gets a bit tedious after a while, so I like making new friends.”

“Oh, how long have you been here?” Zac asked with interest.

He knew that Ogras hinted at the fact that Galau might be a scammer, but Zac didn’t care. He was interested in learning more about the Allbright Empire, and they were in need of information. If this guy had been here for a while he surely had a general sense of the situation.

“I only have a month before I need to leave this place,” the man sighed. “It’s a shame. There are not many places where so many forces can gather and display their wares. Interesting treasures and techniques keep appearing in the auction houses.”

Zac could only shake his head with a wry smile. There was nothing to gain by comparing oneself to others. This man seemed to have taken his visit to the Tower as an opportunity to relax and do some shopping, while Zac was here to fight for the future of his planet. But someone like this could be quite useful as well.

“So you’re knowledgeable about the shops in the Base Town?” Zac asked curiously.

“I have gained some understanding of what’s available, except what’s in stock in the top tier firms,” Galau nodded.

“How are the auction schedules? Are there any interesting ones coming up?” Ogras immediately asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Interesting Auctions?” Galau thoughtfully repeated. “I hear that a main branch member of the Talovor Trappings arrived a week ago, they are holding an auction of their wares in three days.”

“What kind of wares?” Ogras asked.

“Mainly wearable treasures. Rings, Amulets, bracelets. That family consists of both craftsmen and traders, and they almost only sell their own wares. Their specialty is defensive treasures, so I expect the auction will turn quite heated,” Galau dutifully explained.

Zac nodded in understanding. Ogras had already explained that defensive treasures and arrays were suppressed in the Tower, but not completely. Having a great defensive treasure could still save your life or allow you to reach a higher floor. It was no wonder that such things would be in high demand at a place like this.

Normally Zac wouldn’t mind spending some of his money on defensive treasures to supplement those he had, but he was hesitant to spend too much money until he managed to get his hands on his top priority items; medicine for Alea and a shield.

“Do these Talovor sell shields as well?” he probed.

“Like physical ones?” Galau asked with surprise. “No. They focus on consumable and rechargeable defensive treasures. For a shield you would either have to find a blacksmith outside of this place or hope that one appears at the general auctions. The System gives them out sometimes as quest rewards to people who don’t want them, and they sell them here to make some money.”

Zac only sighed in understanding, not too surprised about what Galau said. It was essentially the same as what Calrin had

mentioned before. Most good shields were custom-made since they were so expensive.

“Anything else?” Ogras probed.

“Let’s see...” Galau muttered as his brows furrowed. “The Naspheyi clan holds a weekly auction, the next one is tomorrow evening. The quality of the auction can vary a lot, but it’s never too bad. Sometimes amazing items appear as well. Visiting cultivators usually go to them to sell off items they don’t need in order to gather money for other treasures before attempting the climb. There are a few more places like this, but Naspheyi is generally the most reputable among those open to the public.”

Zac shot a look at Ogras, only to see the demon’s eyes glazing over. Zac finally remembered that attending auctions was one of Ogras’ favorite pastimes back in the day, and he sighed with exasperation. The demon was supposed to be helping with information gathering, but he was daydreaming about going on a shopping spree.

“Have you heard of Trentach Society?” Zac asked, remembering the man they met by the stairs.

“Trentach? It’s a high-grade general store,” the youth said. “They carry almost everything, but they do not really stand out in any department. Trentach is actually a cooperative venture between eight allied clans who run the store together. None of the clans can be considered a supreme force, but their combined might is nothing to scoff at.”

“How do you define the grade of the stores?” Zac asked curiously.

“By how close you are to the tower. It’s graded the same as most things, from low to peak. Of course, the grade of a business doesn’t necessarily reflect the quality of the wares. But it is usually indicative of quality,” Galau explained. “This restaurant could barely be considered medium grade, for example, but their food is above average.”

“I am looking for top tier healing treasures, do you know where I could find that?” Zac asked as he kicked the demon

under the table to wake him up from his dreams of auctions.

“Healing treasures?” Galau repeated with some confusion.

“You can get them at any pill shop, they are everywhere. Or do you mean something specific?”

“I am looking for something that can heal a fractured soul,” Zac explained, not opting to lie.

There were likely various pills with soul-mending capabilities in the pill shops, but an extraordinary treasure was needed to heal a fractured soul. It wasn't as simple as a soul wound.

“I'm sorry, such treasures are not readily available in even the higher-tiered Pill stores. But I've seen things that might work crop up every now and then in the auctions,” Galau said before hesitating. “Of course, there's always the Zethaya Pill House by the tower entrance, but...”

“But what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They are an alchemist family and likely one of the three wealthiest clans among those who control shops by the entrance. They are extremely powerful, but more importantly, they have a vast network of connections,” Ogras spoke up for the first time in a while.

“So they have pills for healing souls?” Zac asked. “Then what's the problem?”

“If any shop has it, then it's that place. But their shop is invitation-only, just like all peak grade stores,” Galau explained. “You can't just enter at will. There are always people desperate for their pills, but the Zethaya turn them all away.”

Zac frowned, but Ogras nudged him to not keep pressing the issue. He knew he shouldn't make too big a row at a place like this. Besides, these Zethaya people might invite him if he performs impressively enough in the tower. It should be in their interest to form some ties with promising cultivators while they're still young and weak.

“We might as well head to the auction tomorrow,” Ogras shrugged. “Even if they don't have what we need, we might still be able to find some clues.”

Zac nodded in agreement.

“Let’s look around today, and we’ll head to the auction tomorrow,” Zac agreed.

“Oh, if the two gentlemen are amenable, let me host you tomorrow! I have been awarded a bronze membership due to my regular visits, so you can join me at my table rather than sitting crammed in the back,” Galau enthusiastically said.

Zac looked over with some hesitation at Ogras, who seemed to be a bit confused as well. Why was this guy so helpful to two complete strangers? The universe was seldom so benign. Galau seemed to understand their skepticism, and hurriedly spoke up again.

“I promise, I just wish to be a good host. How about this, I will simply meet you outside the venue before it starts tomorrow. There’s no way that I could do anything suspicious right in front of the Nespheyi Clan’s doors, no?” he hurriedly said.

“Besides, going to the auction as a bronze member has various perks, such as additional information on the items for sale, and complimentary liquor.”

“Deal,” Ogras said without hesitation.

“Excellent!” Galau exclaimed as he raised a glass of some unknown alcohol. “For new friendships.”

The dinner lasted for another hour where Ogras and Zac interrogated Galau for as much information as they could before they split up for the day. Galau initially wanted to accompany them as they walked around Base Town, but the two excused themselves, citing that they needed to get their bearings.

“What do you think?” Zac asked as his eyes followed Galau who scurried away after paying the tab in full.

“A bored young master who wants to pretend to be a commoner for a day?” Ogras ventured. “In either case, we’ll figure it out sooner or later. Between my looks, smarts, charms, and your sturdy body I’m sure we can handle any scheme that guy has planned. So let’s just let him pay for our food and drinks.”

Zac snorted in response, but he didn't contradict the demon. He didn't sense any malice from the guy, so he would let things play themselves out. The two spent the next couple of hours looking around in the shops, gathering snippets of intelligence everywhere. It quickly became apparent that Galau had been pretty much accurate in all the information he shared during the dinner.

They found nothing that would help Alea's condition in the normal stores, even when they went to the upscale establishments in the inner city. Those places had pills that would help with a wounded soul, but not a fractured one, and the two quickly confirmed that their best bet was hoping that someone would put up an item for auction at one of the major houses.

Only when it started to get dark did they decide to find some place to stay. Zac wanted to simply find some empty building in the outer rim, but the demon staunchly refused, citing hours lost every day just walking back and forth to the slums. He wanted to rent a place as far inside as possible, preferably in the inner sector.

Eventually, the two settled on a hotel that covered a huge area at the edge between the middle and the inner zones. It was essentially a gated community where every guest rented their own smaller mansion with its own gardens and arrays. It was extremely tranquil and a perfect spot to meditate during the nights.

What impressed Zac the most was that it actually had a spatial array covering the whole compound, just like the Ayr Hive. The size of the place was at least three times larger when they entered, and the two rented a small mansion for the price of 250 000 Nexus Coins a Day.

It was a steep price, but it was nothing uncommon in this place. Luckily they only planned to stay for ten days. Otherwise just the lodging would have turned into a real sunk cost. According to Galau the buildings starting in the middle of the Base Town came with those arrays from the beginning. They were not something that the owners controlled. That was one of the reasons the inner buildings were so contested.

They contained the best spatial arrays, providing extremely luxurious accommodations to whoever controlled the place. But that wasn't the most important reason that forces wanted to claim structures as close to the tower as possible. The Cosmic Energy was denser closer to the tower, and Galau said there was even some Origin Dao in the core sector.

Origin Dao was nothing special for Zac or even Ogras by this point, as they came from a newly integrated planet. But for people coming from an established force it might be what would allow them to push their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments to the next step before entering the Tower.

Some buildings even possessed temporal arrays, though those were only used for business purposes as it was impossible to cultivate inside those structures. The auction houses were a prime example of that. There were a lot of treasures to auction off, but people did not want to spend half a day of their limited time in the Base Town to visit it.

With the help of the arrays they would spend less than an hour in real-time, while still not missing out on the action. Zac couldn't understand why the System would bother to set things up like this, but he soon understood the motivation. It wanted to create conflict.

As long as there were good lodgings and bad lodgings there would always be covert and overt competition for the best spots.

Chapter 387: The Naspheyi Clan

It wasn't without reason that Zac believed that the difference in the quality of the lodgings would cause friction. He had already witnessed an attempted take-over of a shop with a decent location at a crossroads with a lot of foot traffic. It was a group of Purple humanoids that tried to snatch it from a group of Golems that reminded Zac of the proprietor of the Merit Exchange.

An intense battle ensued, but the humanoids were eventually forced to give up on their takeover after the shop owner took out an amazing offensive artifact. However, that wasn't the end of it. Multiple forces assaulted the humanoids the moment that they started to flee. Apparently they would have been safe if their attempt succeeded, but now that they gave up they became fair game.

It was a world where the powerful lived and ate well, while the weak could just look on from the distance. There was no such thing as equality.

The two mainly meditated during the night as they knew that they had almost no chance to evolve their Daos within the Tower itself. The atmosphere in their borrowed garden was quite nice though, and it allowed Zac to freely gaze upon the ever-changing lights surrounding the tower. Unfortunately he didn't gain anything that would allow him to form his second Fragment, but he still had a few days to go.

Zac and Ogras had already decided to enter the tower toward the end of their visit. They could accomplish most of their goals anonymously right now as they didn't know what would happen after climbing the tower. Ogras wasn't completely sure, but he guessed that the current Zac should be able to

reach at least the 5th floor, something that was pretty rare all things considered.

It might not sound like much climbing only five out of 9 floors, but that was something that only happened a few times a year among the elites of thousands of planets, and everyone succeeding would cause a certain amount of spectacle. That would ideally result in making connections with stronger forces, but it might also put a target on his back.

So they would only allocate one day after the Tower itself to find a backer, and endeavor to finish most of their purchases before.

The auction they were going to attend didn't take place until the evening, so Zac and Ogras took the time to continue their exploration. Ogras wanted to spend another day 'gathering information' at restaurants, but they instead headed to a reputable information broker in the Inner Zone on Zac's insistence.

There were a lot of things that he needed to know, such as the requirements for Specialty Cores and Arcane classes. Zac had already asked the demon next to him, but he had no idea. Ogras had only gotten annoyed by the questions since they were simply a form of humblebragging in his opinion.

The information merchant was run by a sect rather than a Clan, and they were called Seed of Jnana. Zac was pretty surprised to hear that the sect was actually populated by monks, and it made him think of Abbot Everlasting Peace. Was Lord 84th perhaps someone from this sect? It was a strong C-Grade force according to rumors, and splitting off into a 100 000 incarnations might be the Clan Ancestor's bid at breaking through to B-Rank.

None of the monks were present in the store though, so Zac couldn't make any comparisons to the chubby powerhouse's appearance. They were instead met by a puppet who led them to a private room, and Zac was happy to hear that they did indeed carry the information he was looking for.

A short introduction of Arcane Classes only cost 10 million, probably since it was general knowledge among the more

powerful factions. Zac immediately paid for it, and the puppet engraved the knowledge onto a blank Crystal. The puppet didn't immediately give a quote for information about specialty cores though.

“Specific or general knowledge?” The puppet asked with a lifeless voice.

“General,” Zac answered after some hesitation.

He was currently needed general information about Specialty Cores, as his information was a few snippets of rumors from various sources. Besides, even if this place had information on Duplicity Cores there was no guarantee that it would be relevant for his mutated version.

“245 Million Nexus Coins,” the puppet said.

“What's included in the report?” Zac said, whinging a bit at the price.

The puppet opened a screen, and a short presentation was included. A decent list of common cores was included, as was a general guide in matching various types of classes with cores. It mentioned there was a long list of successful combinations to prove the theories. But most importantly there were was a general guide in nurturing and evolving cores.

Zac could only bite the bullet and cough up the money since he didn't even know what to look for in his goal of upgrading his core as things stood right now. There was quite a lot of information in the second crystal he bought, but he breathed out in relief when he skimmed to the part about evolving.

He breathed out in relief when he read that Specialty Cores could only be upgraded to a higher rank after one had upgraded one's Class. But at the same time it said that the strength of cores was limited, so they would quickly become too weak to provide any assistance unless you kept them at the same rank as your class.

Zac also had the puppet list all the specific cores it had intelligence on, and he was both relieved and disappointed that there was nothing on the Duplicity core. He wasn't sure if he

could handle the cost of a specific knowledge packet if a general one cost that much.

Hopefully, that would mean that the core would still be usable at the start of E-Grade, allowing him to put the matter aside until he dealt with the Undead Empire.

The Naspheyi Auction House was a grand structure three quarters in from the edge of the plateau, placing itself somewhere between the middle and the inner cone. It reminded Zac a bit of the Hagia Sophia, with four grand ornamental towers in the corners and an enormous dome atop the main structure.

When the two approached they saw people streaming toward the Auction House even though it didn't start until an hour later. Some were perhaps there to enter an item into the auction last minute, but most likely just wanted good seats.

Zac and Ogras weren't really interested in entering this early, especially since time moved quicker inside. If they entered now they'd be forced to wait half a day before the auction started. So they instead planned to walk around the area to see if they could find anything interesting.

A lot of people were taking advantage of the large draw of the auction house and held impromptu auctions of their own treasures, shouting on top of their lungs to advertise their wares. Some did it because the Auction house didn't find the treasures precious enough, others were probably unwilling to pay the 10% commission.

Of course, there were a lot of scammers as well, wanting to take advantage of inexperienced people.

Zac and Ogras barely had time to make the rounds before they saw a familiar figure wave at them from the distance, some excitement apparent on his face. Unsurprisingly it was Galau, and it even looked like he had been on the lookout for their arrival.

"Just what is this guy's deal?" Zac mumbled with some bemusement. "Is he lonely?"

“I think he is looking for an expert, but he’s running out of time,” Ogras said with a half-smile.

“An expert for what?”

“Someone to help him reach a higher floor than what he would be able to reach himself,” Ogras said. “Strong people often do that for payment.”

“So like what you’re expecting me to do for you, but without pay?” Zac snorted.

“Our situation is different. What’re a few floors between friends?” Ogras said as he shot Zac a toothy grin.

“If it’s something common there should be a market for it, no? Most people wouldn’t turn down free money if they were strong enough,” Zac said, even thinking if it was possible for himself to make some money on the side.

“My guess? He seems to enjoy the auctions, and he has already spent the money that was meant for a carry,” Ogras shrugged. “So now he’s looking for some strong-looking hillbilly’s to do it on the cheap.”

“It’s also possible that he’s offended someone, and no one wants to stick their neck out just for some extra income. So he’s forced to skulk around new arrivals in a circumspect manner, looking for someone who could take him up. We are probably not the first people he has approached if that’s the case.”

“So we should distance ourselves from him?” Zac asked. “We already have enough on our plates as it is, no need to take on additional problems.”

“No need, if my guess is true he’s desperate, and he’ll be far more helpful than even an information merchant. If we get confronted later we can simply proclaim ignorance and simply point to the fact that we just arrived,” Ogras smiled. “For now let’s enjoy his Bronze Ticket and free liquor.”

Zac sighed, but he eventually complied with Ogras’ idea. It was not even certain what the demon speculated was correct, and if he started to act on every little suspicion it would become impossible to get anything done. It was just as

possible that the guy was simply lonely after staying here for months and wanted to make new friends.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said. “You said that your Grandpa spent a huge amount of money for you to climb to the third floor? Did you simply pay someone to carry you?”

“Of course,” Ogras snorted. “I was only level 54 at the time. What do you think, that I would rush inside there on my own? I had only just formed my first Dao Seed at that point.”

“So it wasn’t actually with your own power you got to the third floor,” Zac snorted. “That wasn’t how you made it sound before.”

“I would be able to conquer the third floor with my own prowess by now, so what does it matter,” Ogras muttered, looking a bit glum. Clearly this was a bit of a sore topic for the proud demon.

After I’ve provided you with all kinds of opportunities, Zac lampooned in his mind, but he didn’t bring it up. No one had worked harder for Port Atwood than Ogras, after all.

In the end the two decided to head over to Galau, who excitedly led them around the area full of hawkers displaying their wares. The two didn’t really find any great deals, but Zac bought a decent number of Divine Crystals from a Golem who sold them for 10% cheaper than what Calrin charged.

Ogras also bought a slab of metal, which was apparently complementary to what his black spear was made from. Perhaps he wanted to have some of the material on hand in case he found someone that could upgrade it or even turn it into a proper Spirit Tool.

But neither was ready to buy any valuable treasures outside since they didn’t possess as discerning an eye as Calrin. Galau seemed somewhat proficient at inspecting treasures, but the two wouldn’t put their trust and wallets in the hands of someone they just met.

Soon enough the trio entered the massive Auction Center, and Galau kept trying to make a good impression as he immediately forked out the 200 000 Nexus Coin entrance fee

for both of them. Zac was surprised when he heard the price, and he couldn't help but look around at the sea of people entering the building.

The Naspheyi Clan held an auction like this every week, and according to Galau they also held a few major auctions a year that were even grander. On top of that they took a 10% commission on every sale that took place, though that fee could probably be negotiated down. He couldn't imagine just how rich these guys were.

Of course, most of the entrance fee probably went into keeping the Temporal array active during the auction. The System set them up, but they still required crystals to run. But he wouldn't be surprised if the Clan still made billions of Nexus Coins every week.

"The Naspheyi is an ancient martial clan whose ancestor is reported to be Mid or High C-Grade. Their family members generally use spears," Galau explained when Zac probed about their heritage.

"It's not a mercantile clan?" Zac asked with interest.

"Most huge clans would have some businesses to provide the resources for cultivation. To be a cultivator is to be forced into poverty, always scrambling for resources," Galau said. "But they are mainly a martial clan. This auction house is one of their main sources of income, and they are pretty ruthless with anyone trying to take it away from them."

Zac nodded and looked around the venue. It was simply enormous inside, and he realized this place was just more than an Auction venue. There were multiple restaurants and bars, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw that there was even a brothel.

And just as Zac feared the shadows around the demon started to twist as the demon unhesitatingly teleported away a second later.

Chapter 388: Toxicity

Zac desperately tried to grab onto the demon before it was too late, but Ogras had clearly learnt from his failure during the auction held by the New World Government. Zac didn't exactly know what happened, but he somehow missed the demon, instead grabbing right behind where he stood. He couldn't be sure, but it felt like Ogras had somehow influenced him to slightly misjudge his position.

Was it the Dao Seed that the demon had gained recently?

Ogras had let it slip in conversation a few times, where he mentioned Dao Seeds as plurals rather than singular. Zac learned of it after they did their respective Inheritances. Perhaps The Umbra provided Ogras with a similar Dao Impartment that Zac himself enjoyed.

Galau looked a bit confused at the exchange, but he didn't comment on it. He instead continued to explain how the auction was handled.

“The Naspheyi will only divulge what items will be put to auction within the current segment for bronze members,” Galau explained. “If you don't see anything that tempts you, you can visit one of the other establishments inside to relax until the next segment starts. But the items in the final segment will not be divulged at all, as they want to maintain maximum participation for the top treasures.”

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that these guys really knew how to do business. Such a setup would stop people from leaving early, and most people would still spend money even if they didn't find anything to buy. And people would perhaps become more willing to fork out some real money if they had been plied with alcohol for a few hours before the final section.

The two walked around the enormous lobby for a while as there still was some time. Suddenly the shadows shuddered and Ogras reappeared, looking like he had just experienced a crushing defeat.

“Bunch of Puppets, don’t know what I expected,” Ogras muttered with a constipated look.

Zac snorted in derision as the three entered the auction hall, loath to make a comment. A quick glance indicated that there were actually fewer seats than he had expected. He guessed that there were roughly 3-4000 seats in total, with roughly two-thirds being cramped cinema seats in the back.

The group didn’t have to use those though thanks to Galau and were instead shown to a table some distance from the scene. The table was luckily equipped with a decent-sized screen that would show the items, allowing them to take a good look at all everything.

Zac immediately started to go through the catalog of items that would appear to see if there was anything of use to them. He was surprised to note that quite a few items were listed as unknown items, only describing what they looked like. It seemed quite possible to make a few good deals if your eyes were discerning enough.

Ogras wasn’t nearly as curious, and he only took a quick glance at the catalogue.

“It’s just the opening segment,” Ogras said with disinterest as he indicated a puppet to bring a bottle of liquor. “Those weapons in the start are pretty good. They are there to create some excitement, but the rest is just slightly better than things you can buy in the shops.”

“Don’t get too drunk,” Zac warned. “We’re not here to mess around.”

“Not much else to do here when the brothel is full of automatons,” Ogras scoffed as he started to look around.

“Well, not many who have the ability to get their hands on a Tower token would be willing to work as a... courtesan. Likewise, those types of classes are generally considered non-

combat, which precludes entry to the Tower of Eternity,” Galau coughed with some embarrassment. “But I am sure that a handsome man like you would be able to find a paramour in one of the bars.”

Ogras only snorted in response as he kept observing the other guests. Zac himself only shook his head with a smile, already having heard the demon complain about the lack of brothels in Port Atwood on multiple occasions.

When it was around ten minutes before the auction started the area above their heads was starting to fill up with floating platforms of varying size. On top of them sat groups of people who mostly looked quite impressive, or at least wealthy.

“That’s the VIP platforms, the higher it floats generally mean the higher status of its occupant,” Galau said with a hushed tone, probably afraid to draw the attention of the bigshots upstairs.

Zac shot a glance above, not really caring about the special treatment. It was not like it mattered where he sat as long as he could buy the items he needed.

The auction started soon enough, and Zac was impressed with the quality of the items presented. All kinds of items were sold off in rapid succession, ranging from pills to arrays to weapons. There were some raw materials as well, but Zac noticed that most items were ready to use, and things that might help when climbing the tower.

However, there was nothing that Zac couldn’t do without, so he never placed a single bid. Most items went for between 5 and 15 million Nexus coins, which meant they were decent items, but nothing rare. It was a bit disappointing, but Zac knew the items would get increasingly impressive as the auction went on.

“How are the prices?” Zac asked to the more experienced Ogras.

“The starting bids are slightly below what you would usually pay for the items outside this dimension, but they usually end up a tad more expensive,” the demon said after some

consideration. “It looks like items that will prove helpful in the tower has a slightly higher premium at around 50% to 80%.”

Zac nodded, realizing that Calrin had been spot on with his estimation. This place truly was a money-making machine for the established forces, where they allowed to earn far more money on their products compared to the outside.

Ogras placed a few bids for fun, but he got quickly bored when he realized that the process was completely anonymous where you placed your bid through an array on the table.

“What’s with the secrecy?” Ogras muttered with annoyance. “Takes the fun out of the bidding process.”

“Open bidding caused a bit too much chaos in the end,” Galau said with a wry smile. “A few strong people suppressed the prices of any items they wanted. So the Naspheyi clan finally installed arrays in the table to allow anonymous bidding for everyone’s safety. Of course, anyone is still able to bid openly if they so wish.”

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it was for the best. It would help normal people from becoming targets of the powerful factions, and lessen the risk of getting robbed afterward since the items would be exchanged anonymously after each section.

It did make his own back-up idea of robbing the treasures he needed almost impossible though, so he could only hope the items he was looking for wouldn’t end up too expensive.

Hours passed as the event proceeded, and Zac started to become a bit bored. He hadn’t placed a single bet so far, not daring to waste his limited money before he found what he needed. He did learn quite a bit by the Auctioneer’s explanations about the various treasures, and the day gave him a lot better understanding of what drove the value of treasures.

When it came to Spirit Tools there were generally two factors that decided its value. The first factor was the material the item was created from. Different materials and combinations had different potential it seemed. Some weapons couldn’t be upgraded very far due to poor quality of the core material, whereas others had greater potential.

It was the same as with most people. Very few had the capability to reach the peak of cultivation. Their constitution simply wouldn't allow it unless they managed to remold their bodies through some extreme fortuitous encounter.

Zac had already somewhat instinctively picked up on this difference when he gathered a couple of Spirit Tools earlier, but he couldn't explain it better than the fact that a few of them were better than others.

There were a lot of Spirit Tools for sale on the auction, and it was standard for the auctioneer to explain what the item's core materials were, and its guaranteed evolution. The weapons who could evolve further were tens of times more expensive than those with a limited progression path.

The other thing that could have a large impact on an item was whether it was attuned. It seemed to work just like with crystals, where there were normal Nexus Crystals, but also items like Flame Crystals and Divine Crystals. A weapon with a popular attunement was usually many times more expensive than one without.

After figuring these things out he had a bit disheartening realization about his own weapon, [**Verun's Bite**]. It was a weapon that he got from the Merit shop during his beast wave quest, and he knew by now that it wasn't some top tier item. The weapon had no attunement, and Zac realized its materials were nothing too special either after seeing all the Spirit Tools on display.

However, it was a weapon he had grown extremely accustomed to, and he was loath to give it up for something else unless absolutely necessary. He also had a feeling that Verun had its own points of uniqueness due to the fact that the Tool Spirit could actually appear and fight. The auctioneer had never mentioned such a thing when presenting all these weapons, and she was clearly working hard on the up-sell.

It made Zac believe that the mysterious stone he fed to Verun all back when it was still F-Grade was an extremely precious item. It was his luck that no one on Earth could figure out what it was, which allowed Zac to get it for a fraction of its

true value. That thing alone might be what would allow him to evolve Verun to even greater heights in the future.

Besides, it was not like the more common weapons couldn't be upgraded. They just needed their own fortuitous encounters, just like cultivators did. So even if Verun was common, so what? It just put his axe on the same level as himself, a mortal.

It was only at the second to last section of the auction that Zac started to see things he was interested in on the list. The final 5 items were still obscured, but the 7th weapon was actually listed as a "One-of-a-kind" Shield. There were also multiple pills that would give large boosts to both improving race and opening Nodes.

Zac eagerly waited as the auctioneer sold off one item after another, until she finally arrived at one item that Zac was interested in.

"Next item might not be helpful during your stay inside the Tower of Eternity, but it is a must-have for when you return home triumphantly. It is the [**Treasure Blood Pill**] that will complete up to 15% of the Race upgrade for a general humanoid cultivator. It will even purify your blood, reducing the pill toxicity in your veins by a noticeable degree," the young Auctioneer said with a smile as she presented a crystalline vial.

"Pill Toxicity? What is that?" Zac asked with a frown.

Galau gave Zac a befuddled look, as though Zac asked what air was, but he still quickly answered.

"Most pills contain small amounts of impurities that the body is unable to break down. The more pills you eat the more it accumulates. The problem is that it is very hard to notice that there is a problem before it's too late. You won't lose any attribute points, but it might cause your Cosmic Energy to become a bit sluggish. But most importantly; it might affect your attempts at forming a Cultivation Core negatively," the man said with a hushed voice.

“Eating too many pills will essentially end your path of cultivation unless you deal with the crap,” Ogras added.

“Are all pills like this?” Zac asked with a frown. “Even healing pills?”

“No, its just pills that improve your Dao, Race, or Levels that has this effect as far as I know,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“What about natural treasures?” Zac asked.

“They’re borne by nature, so there’s no residual toxicity,” Galau said. “Instead they are often poisonous, and still require getting turned into pill before they can be used.”

“So this pill is pretty good, even reducing the toxicity rather than increasing it?” Zac asked.

Galau looked back and forth before he leaned over and whispered.

“It’s a sales trick,” he said as quietly as possible. “Remember what she said? It removes toxicity from your blood, but she never said anything about removing it from the body.”

Zac’s eyes widened in understanding, feeling it was a bit lucky to have the experienced youngster to explain the pitfalls. If it wasn’t for his warning he would have unhesitantly bought this thing after learning about pill toxicity, perhaps ready to buy it at a huge premium.

Just from hearing Galau’s explanation he realized that Pill Toxicity would become another barrier for his future cultivation. He would be far more reliant on pills compared to normal cultivators, since the only other way for him to crack open nodes was to risk his body by forcing them open.

But now he learned that even the safer path was fraught with hidden danger. What if he managed to get all the way to peak E-Grade only to discover that his body had accumulated too much toxicity?

Chapter 389: Dreams

“Is there any way to cleanse the toxicity for real?” Zac asked.

“There are various means, like certain Natural Treasures. There are even arrays that will slowly purify the body. Most alchemy clans are researching ways to reduce pill toxicity in their bodies almost as ardently as they are researching new recipes,” Galau said.

The biography of Galvarion that Zac read in the Marshall Library immediately popped into his mind after hearing Galau’s explanation. That mortal had stayed at the peak of E-Grade for over a century before finally forming his core. Was this related to pill toxicity perhaps?

Zac eventually spent 130 million Nexus Coins on a pill that would push forward his Race by a decent amount, pill toxicity or not. Most of the herbs gathered in Port Atwood was geared toward gaining E-Grade Race, and wouldn’t really assist him in reaching D-Grade. And that was something that he had to get done sooner or later, as he would quickly approach the Attribute limit otherwise.

He also spent 100 million on a pill that was guaranteed to break open a node beneath level 80, and another 120 million for a pill with a similar effect. Hearing about the Pill Toxicity made him a bit worried, but he would simply have to find a way to deal with this later. Surviving the Undead Incursion and the Dominators was simply more important in the short run.

Ogras finally bought an item as well, which apparently was a treasure that was known to strengthen the psychic bond between a cultivator and his contracted spirit. It was no doubt bought with the purpose of getting a better handle of the mysterious creature that lived in his shadows, and Zac could

glean that the situation was less than ideal since the demon spent over 300 million on it.

Zac was happy that the demon found an opportunity to get a handle on his parasite, but his mind couldn't help returning to the advertised shield that was listed. For some reason there was no detailed description like those Zac read for the Spirit Tools, and he didn't know if that was a good or a bad thing.

Luckily the wait wasn't long, as two assistants produced a massive shield that thumped down on the ground with enough force to cause the whole scene to shake slightly. The shield itself was more of a large heater shield compared to the huge spiked scutum he used until it broke.

It was made from some material that Zac couldn't recognize, but it obviously was extremely heavy. It looked like a bit like carbon fiber ingrained with streaks of copper. Only the core was a bit different as it was covered in dense white fractals that formed a circle. It didn't have the same ferocity as his old shield but Zac could tell it was of much higher quality.

"Next up is this spectacular item wrought from almost pure Neprosium that has been treated with expert care to provide the highest standards in durability and regeneration," the auctioneer said with a smile as she held her hand on the anthracite and copper shield.

"What do you think this item would go for?" Zac asked with a low voice.

"It doesn't have an attunement and it's not a Spirit Tool, but the material it's made of is extraordinary. A piece of raw Neprosium that large would alone cost hundreds of millions of Nexus Coins. I don't understand why someone would use such a large piece to create a normal shield. The creator will risk making a loss," Galau said bafflement. "Neprosium is rare, and it's a popular material in defensive treasures."

"Perhaps the craftsman had a quest or an inspiration," Ogras shrugged. "They made it for the experience rather than money. I would say you will have to fork out at least 700 million if you want this. People would be willing to pay over 5-600 million just to melt it down for the materials."

“The creator named this shield [**Everlasting**], and I can inform you that it is the only shield appearing in today’s auction. I am sure many of you are a bit confused as to why a blacksmith chose to make this item,” the auctioneer said with a smile, playing on the suspense in the room.

The name made Zac strongly resonate with it. It not only reminded him of the ancient protector in his Dao Vision, but it also indicated that it would be able to take blow after blow. Wasn’t that just what he needed?

“Truthfully it is a failed item. The creator wished to create a mighty Spirit Tool but it wasn’t to be, and it ended up a normal shield without a soul. However, the creator felt it was still an item of beauty, and chose to sell it rather than reforging it,” the auctioneer continued.

“So that’s why the materials used are so damn expensive,” Ogras muttered. “But that blacksmith seems a bit loony to not repurpose the materials.”

“The extravagant choice of material puts it at the very peak of E-Grade items, something that you will not encounter more than once. This, combined with Neprosium’s inherent ability to take in and even strengthen almost any attunement, makes the shield the ultimate companion for any warrior used to the vanguard,” the auctioneer finished her introduction. “Perhaps you can even upgrade it to a true Spirit Tool in the future!”

“Turning a mundane tool into a Spirit Tool is extremely difficult,” Galau whispered when he saw Zac’s interested expression. “But what she said about Neprosium is true. It is a really high-quality material. But you should know that Neprosium doesn’t mix well with a lot of materials, which might make it a picky eater when you try to upgrade it even if you manage to bring it to life.”

Zac slowly digested the information as he took a look at his savings before making a decision. As long as the shield didn’t become too expensive he would buy it. The inherent quality of the material might come in handy in the future, as he walked the path of both life and death. This shield might be usable in both his forms, something that was hard to find.

“The starting bid is 400 million Nexus Coins,” the Auctioneer said. “Minimum increase is 25 million.”

That price was already well over what many of the earlier Spirit Tools sold for, but the bidding immediately pushed the price to 500 million. Zac guessed that those bids were mainly from people who wanted the shield for the material, as the bidding drastically slowed down after having passed the value of the Neprosium itself.

However, it did steadily keep climbing in price, something that seemed to surprise the demon.

“I was wrong,” Ogras whistled. “It might even pass a billion.”

“Shields are rare,” Galau explained. “Not many use them, and they are hard to make. So few are produced, creating a bidding war when a good one finally appears. Besides, Tool Spirits aren’t as important for shields as for weapons. The weapon’s Tool Spirit can increase your lethality to a large degree, but a Spirit Tool shield is mostly better at regenerating itself after taking damage. That’s something Neprosium is already extremely good at by itself.”

Zac waited for a bit longer, but when the price rose to 800 million he immediately increased the bid with 100 million nexus coin hoping to dissuade the competition. But only a few seconds passed until another person raised it with 25 million, at which point Zac raised it to a billion. This repeated twice until he finally bid 1.2 billion while his stomach was churning due to the price they had reached.

It was a huge sum for Zac who had felt the pinch when spending a few million on the creator vessels just a few months back. A billion nexus coins would be able to pay for all the expenses of his Academy for years, perhaps decades, but it wasn’t even enough for a single item here. It was truly a rich man’s game.

“1.2 Billion? Anyone?” the auctioneer smiled as he looked around. “Remember, the shield might not have an attunement right now, but who knows what will happen when you manage to upgrade it.”

It was the most expensive treasures sold so far by over 600 million nexus coins, but it still wasn't any record-breaking amount. She was obviously trying to push the price a bit further with all kinds of exclamations.

“Gaining an attunement during evolution?” Ogras snorted in derision. “How often are people that lucky? And you need to make it a Spirit Tool First.”

Galau didn't say anything, but he nodded in agreement, proving that it was truly just a sales trick. Zac felt pretty annoyed as he inwardly cursed the woman to close the auction. Luckily no one else fell for the auctioneer's exhortations, and Zac successfully won the bid.

Time passed and the item got more and more impressive, but neither Zac nor Ogras bid anymore. The last section only had ten items, each one of them going for well over 1 billion nexus coins. The final treasure was actually an urn from the Limitless Empire, an item predating even the System itself.

It did emit a trace of spirituality, but Zac couldn't tell if there was anything special about it. It had just been excavated from an unknown Mystic Realm according to the Auctioneer, and the method to unseal it was unknown. Perhaps a great treasure waited inside, or perhaps it was just wine that went bad billions of years ago.

The urn eventually went to a lady sitting on one of the top platforms for the staggering price of 47 Billion Nexus coins. The only reason Zac even knew that was because she had entered an open bidding war against a young man sitting on another of the platform.

“That's some gamble,” Ogras muttered. “Or perhaps she just collects those things.”

Zac could only shake his head in bemusement. Life truly wasn't fair.

Unfortunately there were no soul-mending pills or treasures on today's auction unless one of the unknown treasures had such capabilities, but the haul wasn't bad overall. Zac had already

received his items in the intermissions so the group didn't need to stay behind to complete any transactions.

"I'm sorry that you didn't find the thing you were looking for. But don't worry, it's only been a day. There will be many more opportunities," Galau said after they had exited the venue. "How about I treat you two to dinner to cheer everyone up?"

Zac wasn't really in the mood, but Ogras preceded him to graciously accept, loosely mentioning a certain restaurant that he had heard quite a few good things about. Judging from Galau's face that place was obviously expensive, but he quickly recovered and led the two there. He even went so far as to book a private booth for the three of them and ordered a large set of dishes and drinks for the three.

"So, I guess it's about time you explain why you've been following us," Ogras said after they sat down by their table. "If you plan to rob us you should understand by now we aren't that wealthy."

"I don't harbor any malicious thoughts!" Galau said hurriedly, his eyes darting back and forth between the two. "But truthfully there is a matter where I require your help. I need assistance in climbing the tower."

"It's a carry after all? But why us though? We are completely unknown, and you don't know our strength," Ogras asked skeptically.

"That's part of the point," Galau sighed. "I need to reach at least the thirtieth level without it being obvious I was carried. Preferably even higher."

"Thirtieth level?" Ogras muttered. "It's a pretty hard carry, but nothing impossible for the stronger people who offer services like that. Why not just go to them? Are you trying to get a cheaper deal?"

"I am afraid my family will find out from one of my cousins who is also here," Galau sighed. "The point of me climbing is to gain more freedom, but it will become invalid if this gets found out. But if I simply enter with a few unknown friends I

made while dining out it will be harder to prove that I was carried through.”

“I have a decent chance of taking on the 3rd-floor challenge with the help of my saved-up treasures, but I doubt I would be able to climb any further after that,” Galau admitted. “But I need to reach at least the 30th level to achieve my dream.”

“What? Why?” Zac asked with confusion. “It’s just a title, and isn’t it based on the floor rather than level? As long as you pass the third floor aren’t you fine?”

“Because I wish to become an appraiser and run a store,” Galau said, an unfamiliar sense of determination appearing on his usually timid face.

Zac was completely stumped, and he looked over at Ogras to see he could follow what was going on. But the demon looked just as confused as himself, and he had even frozen mid-bite.

What the hell had reaching the 30th level to do with opening up a store?

Chapter 390: Balance

It turned out that Galau's family was a stuffy old martial clan that almost exclusively raised warriors for the Allbright Armies or adventurers who explored wild Mystical Realms on behalf of their owners. Galau's ancestor was one of the 7 grand elders in the family, and the pressure was on him to carry on the legacy.

However, Galau had become enamored with buying and selling artifacts after having handled the inventory that his clansmen had gathered while traveling or fighting wars. He had asked for permission to set up a store, but the elders had denied his request.

"Why say no?" Zac asked with confusion. "Sounds like opening up a side-business would only be good for the family. Cutting out the middle-man."

"For one it's about legacy, but it's also an undeniable fact that families with a stricter focus are more likely to progress, no matter if it's on the martial path of business ventures," Galau sighed. "The ancestors are all dreaming of rearing a C-Grade Powerhouse that can elevate the clan, so they do everything in their power to raise promising warriors. Especially us in the main branch."

"What does this have to do with reaching the 30th level?" Ogras asked.

"I wanted to change profession, giving up the martial path. That would generally see as a sign of weakness, or that I was giving up. It might affect my whole branch negatively. But my Ancestor eventually gave me an ultimatum after I kept pestering my elders. He told me to reach the 30th level in my upcoming visit to this place, to prove that I did have the power to proceed on the martial path if I wanted to."

"But you don't," Ogras laughed.

“So you want to trick your grandpa and your clan to let you do whatever you want?” Zac added with a raised brow.

“Well... Essentially, yes,” Galau coughed. “And that’s why I need to use this circuitous method to not get caught.”

Zac looked over at Ogras to get his opinion. The demon only shrugged in response, meaning he didn’t see any issues with the proposal, and Zac felt the same way. It was a bit shady, but that wasn’t really their problem. Carrying one person to the 30th level shouldn’t be too difficult, especially since it was just the early stage of the 4th floor.

“But why us?” Ogras repeated. “You haven’t explained that part.”

“Because there is no fear in your eyes,” Galau finally said after a short pause. “The biggest asset to becoming a successful business owner is to have an understanding of people, and I believe this is an area where I shine. It’s something that has allowed me to triple the wealth I brought with me, as I was able to sniff out those who lied about their products or were desperate to gain a quick buck.”

“I have observed the warriors who have come and gone the past months, and most carry a well-hidden fear in their hearts as they carry themselves here. It’s natural, this town is full of hidden dragons and people don’t have their elders to protect them. Even the Tower itself brings a real risk of death even with its protective measures.”

“But you two are completely unafraid, and I know it’s not due to stupidity as with some,” Galau continued, his speech increasing in fervor as he turned to Ogras. “The two of you seem to take this as a stroll in the park, not even flinching when you saw those scary people sitting on the floating platforms. This makes me sure you are dark horses, the people I’ve been waiting for over the past months. You surely have the capabilities to reach the fourth floor.”

Neither denied the claims since what he said was essentially accurate. Zac didn’t worry about some people causing problems, as he felt confident in rebuffing most people when he had the System on his side. There was the risk of running

into someone with top tier E-Grade arrays, but it was doubtful that anyone would throw those items around on some random person who kept to himself.

And even if they did he still had [**Loamwalker**] to get away in an instant in case someone took out an unknown crystal. He felt confident in surviving at the edge of even a top tier array thanks to his defensive skill and a massive pool of Endurance.

When neither Ogras nor Zac spoke up Galau's eyes lit up in delight, but Zac felt a bit sorry for the guy. He had a feeling that Galau's plan was bound to go awry. Who would believe that Galau's accomplishment was his own after Zac elicited a projection from something above the fifth floor?

But Zac needed the money, so he could only hope the effect of making the acquaintance of someone like himself would make up for Galau's plans. Besides, he never mentioned any stipulations about him or Ogras not being allowed to ascend too far.

"So what are you ready to pay for bringing you to the 30th level?" Ogras asked, making Zac lock onto Galau with interest as well.

"How about 3 billion Nexus Coins to take me to the 30th level? Each, of course," Galau said. "And we can negotiate an additional price for taking me even further when we get there."

Ogras' eyes glistened with greed, and Zac saw that he was about to agree without hesitation. But there was something else that Zac needed even more than money at the moment, and an aspiring merchant like Galau might be just the right person to ask for it.

"Throw in a Dao Treasure for each of us as well, and you have a deal," Zac said, receiving an enthusiastic nod from the demon.

"Two Dao Treasures," Galau muttered, looking a bit pained. "Fine, but you'll need to take me to the 32nd floor then."

The two mulled it over for the fraction of a second before they immediately stretched out their hands to seal the deal.

Agreeing to carry Galau to the 30th floor would essentially double Zac's and Ogras' wealth, and the two ate until they barely could move in order to celebrate. The restaurant that Ogras recommended had a non-combat class Chef that brought out amazing dishes that all contained a high amount of Cosmic Energy.

These dishes didn't give any temporary boosts to increase their attributes or anything like that, but they were far tastier than anything Zac had ever eaten before. Zac finally understood why Ogras kept calling Earthlings country bumpkins, and he wasn't sure how he would go back to eating some crude meals he had thrown together himself.

Nurturing a proper Chef became one of his side-missions after that evening.

Zac spent the next few days walking around the Base town to search for items that could help his force. With the extra cash infusion from the surprisingly wealthy Galau he had some wiggle room to buy more than the bare essentials.

He first purchased a large number of low-grade talismans from a reputable store. Each one cost less than 100 000 Nexus Coins, but they would perhaps be able to save the lives of his elites in case of a crisis back on Earth. He also cleaned up a sizeable number of herbs on Calrin's List of things they needed to create medicinal baths on a large scale.

He even found a small stack of [**Sky Reed**] that were almost as aged as the other three herbs he gathered during the hunt, which meant that he now had all the needed ingredients to concoct more [**Four Gates Pills**]. Unfortunately still couldn't find any medicine that could help with Alea's situation. Many of the better stores had items that could mend a wounded soul, but a fractured one was something else entirely.

There also weren't any Dao Treasures available, which wasn't too surprising. If anyone had one they would eat it themselves to improve their strength before the Tower. Some did appear during auctions according to Galau, but they were amongst the most fiercely contested items, turning insanely overpriced.

Everyone wanted to have a couple of Dao Treasures on hand in case someone elicited a grand projection. A single projection alone usually wasn't enough to form or upgrade a seed, but there was a decent chance if you also had a treasure to help out.

So Zac could understand the scarcity, but it did put a damper on his goal of forming another Fragment before leaving the Tower of Eternity. He could only put his hopes on Galau's ability to sniff two of them out.

Ogras bought a few items as well, including things that would help out with his progress after evolving. But Zac guessed that the demon already had quite a few such resources in his possession, given by his grandfather. He should have planned on evolving soon after arriving at Earth, but was delayed by various reasons.

Galau was actually the one who bought most of them all, but what he bought during their visits to stores and the open bazaars were completely random. He explained that the items weren't for himself, but things he felt he could make money on either here or when he returned to the Allbright Empire.

Zac spent the nights sitting on his prayer mat, working his hardest to meditate on the Dao. The atmosphere wasn't quite as good as Earth, but it was far better than the Eastern Trigram Sect. That place was completely devoid of spirituality, but he felt he still could progress his Dao here. He also had the tower to help, and he had already seen three projections, though they were of the lowest kind that didn't provide too much.

On the sixth night he took a break as Ogras had brought over some expensive Spiritual Wine. The two sat and enjoyed the evening breeze in the courtyard, gazing up at the sky. The stars were unfamiliar and massive nebulas painted the sky into a mesmerizing haze. It was a poignant reminder of how far away from Earth and its struggles he was at the moment.

"This is the life," Ogras sighed in contentment, the tranquility of the night affecting him.

"Is this what life is like for those who stand at the top? Those who are part of established forces?" Zac asked, somewhat

rhetorically.

“Not in clan Azh’Rezak at least,” Ogras sighed as he took a sip, some wistfulness apparent in his eyes. “There was always struggle, though a different kind compared to the one we face now. But the moment that we as a family relaxed we would be eaten by one of many forces in the surroundings who lusted for our land or our inheritance. I think it’s like that everywhere.”

“Struggle?” Zac asked with some despondency creeping into his heart.

“Balance,” Ogras answered. “The universe is a lawless place, where might makes right. Our kingdoms, empires, galaxies are in a state of a delicate balance that keeps a semblance of peace. But a small ripple will topple that balance, and bloodshed will invariably follow.”

Zac understood what he meant. The moment a clan or sect declined, like through the passing of an ancestor, it would be under constant threat of annihilation. This worked the other way as well. If a true powerhouse emerged in a family it would likely set out on a path of conquest to sustain that person’s continued cultivation and to raise the standard of their progeny.

Any change would result in lines being redrawn and blood spilled until a balance was restored.

“Balance...” Zac echoed, as his eyes slightly glazed over.

The solemn atmosphere was suddenly ruined by the frazzled entrance of Galau as he almost fell through the door to the courtyard.

“He’s about to emerge!” Galau panted.

“What? Who?” Zac asked with some annoyance.

“Reoluv Er Suriav Prehavandar Dravorak,” Galau said in one breath.

“Did you just cast a curse on us?” Ogras muttered with a raised brow.

“No that’s his name,” Galau said, almost jumping back and forth in impatience. “The Dravorak Dynasty is over 100 million years old, and it is the Imperial family of an Empire that is at least as strong as my Allbright Empire. I just found out that he entered the tower yesterday.”

“And this Reoluv is part of this family?” Zac asked, still not understanding what the big deal was.

The Dravorak seemed like a huge force, but there were a few of them around, especially around the core of the town.

“Reoluv is the 15th and youngest son of the current reigning Emperor, born from the Emperor’s favorite wife. He is someone who has received an entire Empire’s blessings and resources. More importantly, he’s supposed to be extremely talented, and he is a strong contender for the throne even though one of his brothers already has broken through to C-Grade,” the young man continued. “Rumors are that the previous Emperor has taken him on as a direct disciple.”

“This all sounds very impressive, but what does that have to do with us?” Zac asked, still confused.

But Ogras’ eyes suddenly widened, and he looked up toward the sky surrounding the tower.

“A Dao Mirage,” Ogras muttered before turning back toward Galau. “Which level?”

“There is no doubt that he will pass the 6th floor, with some even saying that he has the power to reach the later levels of the 7th floor. But most are hesitant whether he would actually be able to pass the 7th floor’s final challenge on the 63rd level since that hasn’t happened for thousands of years,” Galau said.

“Dao Mirage, haven’t we already seen a few?” Zac asked.

“What’s the big deal?”

“Yeah, but that was one of the worst ones. If this Reoluv crashes through to the end of the 7th floor you have a chance of actually breaking through your Dao Seeds. Meditating under the vision from the 7th floor is almost the equivalent of an epiphany,” Galau excitedly said as he took out two boxes.

“These are two Dao Treasures I promised. I was planning on presenting these after the climb, but this opportunity is too rare to miss,” Galau said.

Chapter 391: The Eight Calamities

“You’re not worried we will take the Dao Treasures and run?” Zac couldn’t help but ask. “Don’t you need them for yourself?”

Dao Treasures were obviously hard currency here, especially now that some bigshot was about to emerge from the tower. Giving them out like this was to give up on either an opportunity for himself, or the chance to sell the treasures outside for a huge mark-up.

“I am sure I can trust in your character. Besides, I have managed to get my hands on a few more,” Galau said, but he quickly followed up with another sentence when he saw Zac and Ogras’ eyes light up with avarice. “I can’t part with those though. They’re for my family members and myself after I’ve broken through.”

“Do you even need Dao seeds if you want to become a merchant?” Ogras smiled. “Why not part with a few more of them?”

“The Dao is important for non-combat classes as well!” Galau said as he took a step back. “It can help us in all kinds of ways just like with a warrior. Besides, I plan on becoming a hybrid class at least for E-Grade.”

“Thank you, we’ll remember this favor,” Zac nodded as he took out his prayer mat.

Time was of the essence so he immediately rotated his Cosmic Energy through his pathways a few rounds to clear out the lingering effects of the alcohol. The sky was still the same beautiful spectacle of shimmering stars, and the three silently looked up at the scenery in silence as the minutes passed.

The ethereal mindset as when he gazed upon the skies earlier soon returned, and he felt like he was on the verge of something. He didn't try to force it though, and rather let the feeling naturally stir and grow in his mind.

The tranquility of the night was suddenly broken as a massive titan appeared in the space behind the tower. It stood thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, meters tall, and seemed to be completely wrought out of metal. However, it was clearly not a golem or puppet, but rather a projection of a being made from flesh and blood. It just had a bluish tint like zinc or osmium.

Its head and torso were mostly obscured by the tower itself as it actually stood behind the structure and didn't move, and Zac could only see the sides of the behemoth. That was just fine for Zac as his eyes were glued to the things that it carried in its hands that each was as large as an island. The Titan actually possessed eight arms, each one bare and bulging with muscles, and each hand held a mysterious object.

Most of the treasures did not seem to match the gruff and bulky figure of the Titan, but Zac looked at each and every one of them seriously. One hand held a flute made from a golden metal, and Zac felt like he saw a meteor shower when his eyes locked onto it. Another hand gripped a fan as large as a mountain, seemingly capable of causing a hurricane with a wave.

There was also a burning sword, a castanet crackling with terrifying bolts of lightning, a calabash releasing the sounds of a raging ocean. One hand even held a drum shaped like a volcano, emitting a fiery glow that reminded him of his visit to the magma world and the Fire Golems.

But his eyes only briefly swept over these items before they stopped at the two hands that each held a flower. One was a large Basket Flower, and it swayed as the Titan held onto its long stalk. The air around it seemed to be vibrating to the point space itself cracked.

Zac's eyes finally landed on the last item, a single lotus flower. His thoughts initially went to the massive lotus that was in the

Abbot's possession, but he immediately realized the thing in front of him was in a completely different league. This was a grand treasure of the universe, containing endless power.

Its attunement seemed to be completely different from the Abbot's lotus as well, and its purple leaves emitted a chilling sense of death and putrefaction. It didn't feel like it released toxic plumes, but that it was pestilence itself.

There was something mesmerizing about the lotus, making Zac unable to move his eyes away. He barely had enough presence of mind to quickly cram his Dao Treasure into his mouth. His consciousness started to wander, and his vision was closing in on him. Just as he was about to drift away he heard the seemingly distant voice of Galau speak up in a daze.

"It's The Eight Calamities!"

Zac had no time to react before his whole being was consumed by the Lotus flower. His vision suddenly changed to show a battlefield where two endless armies fought. One army looked a bit like the lizardmen of the church, but they were more akin humanoid dragons. The other force were actual cyclops, each reaching over a hundred meters in height.

At first glance it might have been a foregone conclusion that the lizardmen who only seemed to reach two to three meters in height would be hopelessly outmatched, but reality proved different. The warriors somehow summoned, or more likely used massive war arrays to conjure, fiery dragons to battle their enormous foes.

The battlefield stretched into the horizon, and it felt like thousands of warriors died every minute, and the corpses created mountains of the unwilling dead. The resentment in the air was palpable, and it only grew worse as the war raged on for years and years. The losses were uncountable, and the boundless world itself was teetering on collapse from the accumulated resentment.

Terrible maladies sprouted due to the sea of corpses, and but the armies seemed to be possessed, ignoring their increasingly horrific bodies as they transformed and mutated from the corruption in the air.

A small purple flower quietly floated in a turbid pool of blood, hidden in one of the largest corpse mounds on the planet. It consumed the energies of everything around it and steadily gained power as the war raged on. The massacre only got worse, but the diseases and resentment oddly enough disappeared over time, and suddenly it was as though a spell had been broken.

The war stopped, all thanks to a blood-drenched lotus having eaten its fill.

The grand generals, each one a Peak C-Grade warrior at the least, called for a ceasefire. Everyone seemed to be horrified by their actions and looked as though they were walking in a living nightmare. Their eyes turned toward the thousands of corpse-mountains as immense regret gripped their hearts. It looked like they wanted nothing more than get away from this cursed world that had whipped them into a murderous frenzy, yet they stayed on.

They eventually found the reason for their salvation, a large purple lotus that rested in the middle of an ocean of blood. It had taken on their sins, their resentment, and their ailments, giving the two races a chance at survival. The generals bowed toward the grand treasure in reverence, no one having any ideas of taking it for themselves.

However, things suddenly took a disturbing turn as large welts started to appear on the people around the flower. Just a second later flesh was dripping off everyone's bodies like melted wax. Not even the immensely powerful generals were spared, and they crumbled before they managed to reach any of the teleportation arrays near-by.

The unstoppable putrefaction spread like an invisible wave, reaping the little life that still remained on the once glorious planet that stood at the core of a star sector. The mountains of corpses were slowly absorbed as the lotus kept growing, and every millennia or two another petal emerged on the flower.

Within that petal was the lament of a million powerful warriors sealed, forever unable to leave. The lotus kept slowly growing in its domain as the sole emperor of the planet.

But one day a hand as large as a continent appeared above the desolate planet, and it reached down to grasp the cursed lotus. A torrent of pestilence and rose up to meet the hand, but the Lotus' attack was immediately defeated as a black coffin appeared out of nowhere, sealing the flower within.

The stone sarcophagus shuddered a few times, likely from the lotus releasing immense attacks to escape, but it quieted down again soon enough. But the terrifying power the coffin now radiated was a clear signal that the lotus might be sealed away from the world, but still very much alive. The moment the coffin opened again all life would end.

The scene ended with the enormous hand rising through the atmosphere, leaving the cursed planet behind, and Zac's eyes opened just in time to see a screen appear in front of him.

[Fragment of the Coffin - Early - All Attributes +10, Endurance +80, Vitality +50, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +60, Effectiveness of Endurance +5%]

Zac looked at the line with incomprehension, not understanding how he had gotten there. He had imagined something along the lines of Petrification or Decay when considering the combination of Rot and Hardness, but the vision had rather created an odd Fragment. Was there such a thing as the Dao of the Coffin?

Was it because his thoughts had been on Alea lying in her crystal coffin for the past week? Zac felt that the vision of Alea lying beneath the Tree of Ascension somewhat mirrored what he had just witnessed during his epiphany. Alea was poisonous just like the lotus, and both were preserved within a coffin.

It made him confused whether what he witnessed was something that actually had happened, or whether it was just something his mind conjured to make sense of the insight that he gained from looking at the lotus in the Titan's hand.

Of course, the real issue was what the hell the Dao of the Coffin entailed. He could understand the concept, as a coffin was both hard and the corpses inside would rot away, but he

didn't understand how the Dao of the Coffin would be utilized in battle. Was it defensive? Offensive? He simply couldn't tell.

Unfortunately there was no way for him to try it out before he entered the tower either. His only clue was that he had actually lost a little bit of Endurance in favor of more Vitality and Wisdom when he fused Rot and Hardness. Endurance was obviously the main stat, but its somewhat balanced spread might indicate a Dao less focused on simply defense.

The projection had already disappeared by the time Zac opened his eyes, so he decided to close his eyes again to ponder on his newest Fragment. But his eyes were drawn to a gaping Galau who sat a few meters away, looking at him with what looked to be a mix of elation and jealousy.

"Did you actually gain something?" Galau said with some shock in his eyes. "The fluctuations around you were quite massive."

"Yeah, didn't you?" Zac asked with confusion. "I was dragged into a vision the moment I looked upon that Titan."

Galau opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no words came out.

"You'll get used to it after traveling with that guy for a while," Ogras sighed. "At least we'll hopefully get some soup while the general eats his meat."

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"That was the 'Eight Calamities Titan', one of the rarest projections representing the 62nd level," Galau explained. "Only those with a connection to one of the calamities will gain something from the items in the Titan's hands. Rumors say that special bloodlines might gain something directly from the Titan itself, but I haven't heard of anything like that actually happening so it might be false."

"Eight calamities," Zac muttered. "So those lucky enough to have a Dao that resonated with one of the treasures would get a guaranteed epiphany?"

"Perhaps not an epiphany, but they would make improvements," Galau nodded.

“Then it’s perhaps thanks to you and your Dao Treasure I managed to take a step forward. I’ll remember the favor,” Zac said seriously.

It was true. The Dao of Death, or rather the Dao of the Coffin was the remaining fragment he felt most leery about completing before evolving, but he suddenly gained it when he was actually targeting his Life Fragment.

Even just before Galau came barging into their courtyard he had felt he was on the verge on something, making him somewhat confident he had taken the first step toward a suitable concept for his final Fragment.

Of course, three low-grade Fragments was unfortunately still not enough for him to get his hands on an Arcane class according to the report he bought the other day.

But gaining the Fragment of the Coffin was definitely a step in the right direction, making Zac more hopeful for the future. It truly felt like his high Luck had helped him out again, presenting him with just the vision he needed.

“How does luck work?” Zac suddenly the demon asked after Galau left their courtyard. “Could my Luck have caused that Reoluv to fail the final challenge in order for me to gain this opportunity?”

“Luck is an obscure subject, and I don’t know any specifics,” Ogras said hesitantly. “But I don’t think its effect would be that exaggerated? That guy reaching the 62nd level is exactly what was expected of him.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t a guy like that have a few hidden means to reach even higher?” Zac ventured.

Ogras didn’t answer and rather opted to glance in the direction of the Tower with a pensive expression.

Chapter 392: Emerald Skies

Reoluv was inwardly fuming, but he still had to retain a dignified expression as he received the many congratulations from the various young masters and ladies from distinguished forces as he exited the tower.

Passing the 62nd level was respectable, but not what he had aimed for. His goal had always been to completely conquer the 7th floor, just like his master did once upon a time. But a small mistake had abruptly caused the end of his trial, even before he had used up his final hidden cards. It was just the difference of one level from completing the whole 7th floor, but that 1 level was like an endless abyss.

It was the divide between a talented cultivator and a genius of an era.

The conquering the seventh floor have given him a shot at making contact with the hidden peak forces presiding over the sector, or perhaps provided him with the same sort of opportunity that presented itself for Lord Beradan a few decades after he managed to conquer the 7th floor.

Winning the favor of an undying existence passing by their remote sector would elevate his fate to a level that not even becoming an Emperor could match.

But it was all for naught.

It felt like a cosmic joke, a brief lapse in concentration made his token crack, which forcibly teleported him outside even though he still was able to keep fighting. He didn't even know that was possible, since the tokens were essentially impervious to outside forces. Or did that change at the high-tier floors?

Reoluv grit his teeth at the memory and quickly excused himself from the square full of people, citing the need to go

home and ponder on a few insights he gained from conjuring the Eight Calamities Titan.

The truth was that the mental shock of falling short for such a stupid reason had even made him unable to completely immerse himself in the effect of the Apparition, but perhaps the situation was still salvageable if he hurried home to his master's Dao Chamber. As long as he managed to push one of his fragments to Medium Mastery the tower wouldn't be a complete wash.

Many impressed sighs and comments echoed across the square, praising such a genius that never let himself relax. But he didn't care as he crushed the token even though he could stay here for another month if he wanted to.

At least there was one small comfort in this disappointing climb. There was at least no one in the area who would be able to beat his score in the short run, and he would have another chance in a few years.

"My Lord, it is done," Triv said as his miasmic body shuddered with excitement.

"Oh?" Adriel said with some surprise. "I thought it would take a few more days."

"We managed to sneak a handful of spectral squads behind their lines to place the final flags. They will start to corrode the environment though, so it will be found out within a week that something is wrong," the ghost attendant confirmed.

"You don't need to explain to me," Adriel snorted. "I was the one who modified them."

"My apologies!" Tviv hurriedly said.

Adriel waved his hand that it didn't matter as he thoughtfully stared at his crystal for a few seconds.

"Have we found out the source of undeath yet?" Adriel asked. "Those closed incursions teemed with miasma, but I couldn't recognize its signature. I first thought it was Mhal who had

somehow resurrected, but he was much too stupid to orchestrate something like that.”

“No, we sent a group to greet and possibly integrate the person who closed those incursions, but we were always too late,” Triv said. “We also tried to compare the residual energies to everyone here, but we couldn’t match it either.”

It shouldn’t be possible that it was one of his children. Adriel had never heard of a newly turned citizen ignoring the commands of its leader. Even those ignorant things scuttling around his domain would respond to the calling, shuffling toward him without hesitation. Had the undead warrior mutated to allow him to somehow resist it?

“There is something else,” the attendant added. “He can use the natives’ teleportation arrays. The scouts believe that the warrior is an unaffiliated wanderer since he didn’t respond to the call in the slightest.”

“So he’s not a designated invader at least,” Adriel muttered as he started to pace back and forth. “Unaffiliated wanderer at F or early E-Grade? A twist of fate? Or is a scion of the ancient clans bored enough to visit a baby planet?”

“If it’s one of those young masters who have gained an interest in this world... Should we back off?” Triv Nervously asked.

“No need. If such a personage wanted this planet they would simply visit me and claim it. That would be a pretty good outcome as well. A family that can see through the obscuration of the heavens wouldn’t be stingy with their compensation for claiming a world,” Adriel smiled.

However, Adriel’s instincts told him that the mysterious warrior was not some scion of an ancient clan. He was just a Lich rather than one of the five blessed races, but he was representing the Empire in this invasion. Even one of the purebloods would have had to respond to the call since it contained the authority of the Primo.

“Of course, there’s another possibility,” the Lich pondered.

“What?” Triv asked with confusion. “If not a turned citizen, and not an unaffiliated wanderer, then what?”

“It might be related to the Mystic Realm,” Adriel muttered with a thoughtful smile. “We know it’s an abandoned research facility of the heretics of the Boundless Path. Did the Technocrats perhaps create a synthetic bloodline disconnected from the Call of the Empire? But why would they do that? Immortality?”

“What do you wish us to do, my Lord?” Triv asked hesitantly, knowing the far more knowledgeable lich was simply asking rhetorically.

“Leave it be,” Adriel finally said. “We’ll ignore that man for now since he hasn’t shown any hostility against us. Perhaps activating the array might prompt him to visit me for a talk.”

“So we’re finally liberating this world?” Triv said with excitement. “We’ll finally be able to breathe again!”

“We have played passively long enough,” Adriel agreed as two green sinister lights lit up in his eyes. “Those humans and ants think our citizens are just targets to farm levels? It’s time for them to join my kingdom.”

“Miss Marshall, it’s bad!” Trevor screamed as he almost fell on the ground in his frantic entrance of the command tent.

“What’s going on?” Thea said with a bad premonition as she immediately ran out of the tent, and one glance was all that she needed to know what scared Trevor so badly.

The sky was green.

Enormous azure lines crisscrossed a murky-green sky and the air was rife with miasma. Worse yet, she saw almost a dozen azure pillars reaching toward the sky in various directions. They looked a lot like incursion pillars, though death-attuned rather than the blue one she had encountered during the battle with the Incursion neighboring Westfort.

But a second look helped Thea understand that the pillars weren’t Incursions, but rather a part of the massive array that the undead had worked on for the past months. They connected with some sort of unseen ceiling a thousand meters

in the air, infusing the azure lines with a continuous stream with energy.

Had they failed? But they had held all up until now, sacrificing tens of thousands of lives!

“Shit, I thought we had more time?” Mark said with a grunt as he walked out of the tent as well. “This is beyond what I can deal with, miss. What do you want to do?”

Thea’s mind was blank as she looked at the pillar closest to them. What did she want to do? How should she know? A year ago she was simply running a small non-profit that rescued stray animals, mostly with the help of her family’s vast wealth. She knew nothing about warfare and leadership.

“I...” Thea stammered, her mind trying to grasp for a solution.

It was one thing talking about an array powerful enough to turn Earth into a world of death, but it was a whole other thing seeing it in person. How could they stop it? Or at least delay it? This was not something a swift stab with **[Petalstorm]** could solve.

“Take a breath,” Mark said as he saw her face. “You are not alone in this. You have both the family and the whole planet with you.”

Thea took a steadying breath to calm herself, and she started to go over the situation they found themselves in.

“According to Zac it would still take a week or so for the array to truly activate even after it was completed. It seems that those pillars are dragging energy out of the ground, converts it to dense miasma, and finally funnels it to the inscription lines in the sky,” she analyzed. “Perhaps we can slow down the charge-up by stopping the flow of energy?”

It wasn’t a solution, but it was the first step, helping the following steps to come easier. Just a minute later a group of scouts set out from their camp, guarded by elites decked in a terrifying number of weapons. They would spare no expense to reach the closest pillar to study it and relay images back to the command center.

Meanwhile, their army would launch a massive assault at the undead horde to make sure they didn't veer off toward the pillars to defend it.

But things quickly deteriorated as the scouts got close to the pillar, as all of them zombifying with a speed visible to the naked eye. Thea and the other commanders could only helplessly look at the monitors as their party ripped each other to shreds. The scouting party didn't even manage to get closer than a few hundred meters before they were turned.

What was even scarier was that there was no sign of miasma entering their bodies or any complaints of discomfort from the poor men. The change came abruptly and without any warning.

"We can try launching rockets at the pillars, but our munitions aren't enough to target all of these things. Besides, I fear that this issue cannot be solved with our mundane weaponry. If that was the case the undead wouldn't have left most of the pillars unguarded," Mark said with a sigh.

"Do it, we must try everything," Thea said with a bleak expression. "I'll head to Port Atwood to see if anything can be done on that end."

"We can only pray that man will choose to put his private plans on hold to help deal with this mess."

"Do you have any ideas?" MacKenzie asked, desperately trying to mask the fear taking hold of her heart as she looked up at the pillar in the distance.

This wasn't in line with what they had learned so far. They should have had up to a month at the most, but at least a week before this happened. But it was hard to refute the pillar reaching into the sky.

Their appearance had caused everything to go awry, and with both Zac and Ogras gone people didn't know who to turn to for answers. People keep looking at her, and she understood the fear and question in their eyes. They were wondering where her brother was. Zac and Ogras weren't slated to return

for a few days though, and there was no way for her to contact them.

“We can’t even get close,” Ilvere sighed with a shake of his head. “Anything that gets within a few hundred meters of that thing will be turned into a zombie in a heartbeat, and its domain seems to be spreading. We even tried taping a bunch of divine crystals on a Barghest, but the crystals simply cracked and the barghest was turned as well.”

“I know,” Kenzie sighed. “Thea Marshall visited me a half an hour ago looking for Zac. She looked like she would explode when I explained that Zac was off-world. My hopes of getting a sister-in-law keep getting dimmer. Anyway, it looks like we will need to take down those pillars from a distance.”

“That lassie will wake up from her sleep sooner or later,” Ilvere smiled before returning to business. “Destroying the array flags will be quite difficult. They are dug far into the ground, making a direct assault from distance extremely troublesome. You would have to destroy the whole area to get to the array, but we don’t possess such force.”

“Not necessarily,” Kenzie said as she took out her brother’s flying treasure.

“Wait, what are you planning?” the demon general asked with worry. “If Lord Atwood returns to find you turned into a zombie he will skin us alive.”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenzie said as she stepped onto the flying disk.

Ilvere groaned when he saw that she wouldn’t change her mind, and jumped onto the disk with some resignation. Soon enough the two were soaring through the skies toward a pillar at the outer edge of the green canopy. It only took them half an hour to reach it, and the demon sighed in relief when he saw that it was completely unguarded. At least they wouldn’t have to deal with the undead elites.

Then again, the pillar itself was scary enough to keep everyone at bay.

“So what are you thinking, young miss?” Ilvere said as he hesitantly looked at the pillar a kilometer away.

“I have been working on something my brother left me the past week,” Kenzie said. “I think it will be helpful against the pillars.”

“Powerful offensive arrays?” Ilvere said as his eyes lit up. “That might work, but it needs to be a really powerful one. The pillars are also protected by a shield. Your old world weaponry didn’t work on them according to the report we just got from the human armies.”

“Perhaps not, but what about new-world weaponry?” Kenzie smiled as she released a swarm of newly manufactured drones from her Cosmos Sack.

She knew that her brother would freak out when he learned that she set up the whole production line just hours after he left, rather than slowly study them for any latent risks. But she was tired of just sitting by on the side while people were getting killed, and Jeeves had no problems hacking the things.

An army of weaponized drones was a perfect counter against the sea of undead as Kenzie saw it. They were mostly immune to the corrosive effects of miasma, and even if they fell they wouldn’t convert into new zombies.

The drones flew out with shocking speed and in just a minute they had formed a circle around the pillar. Each of them was only a meter in height, and they didn’t emit even a speck of Cosmic Energy. But Kenzie had great confidence in her children, and she made some final adjustments to their position with the help of her AI.

“Wha-“ Ilvere said with wide eyes as he gazed at the unfamiliar machines with confusion.

But his questions got stuck in his throat as the flying machines no larger than a child each released a beam of terrifying energy straight at the foot of the pillar. When the two managed to open their eyes again only a smoldering crater remained.

Chapter 393: Last Day

Zac woke up early the next day and got ready to head out after training a bit more with [**Cyclic Strike**]. Unfortunately it seemed that the small progress he had attained in the skill over the past weeks had been completely erased after gaining the Fragment of the Coffin. The Fragment completely overpowered the Seed of Trees, making it impossible to maintain a balance.

He could only pause his practice until he gained his final Fragment as well.

At least he could confirm that the odd Dao Fragment worked with his new shield, perhaps even better than the Dao of Hardness did. Hopefully that meant that his Undying Bulwark class would still work as intended.

It was also a decent indicator that Fragment of the Coffin was a Defensive Dao as well, meaning his final skill quest was also most likely completed. He didn't dare change into his Draugr-form to make sure though as he was still in the Base town. He would be stuck in his undead form for roughly an hour after shifting which might cause unintended problems. But he was heading for the Tower soon enough, and there would be ample time to go over things in there.

Today was the last day before entering the tower, so getting the additional fragment ahead of time was a huge boon. Zac and Ogras had already decided upon what to do. They would visit the weekly auction once more in hopes of finding anything of value. It was their last shot before returning to Earth where they were limited to Calrin's selection once again.

No matter the results of the auction they would immediately enter the Tower afterward. They would spend one day inside, leaving one day afterward for networking. Provided that Zac managed to reach a floor high enough to warrant the attention

of the larger forces, that is. In either case, they would have to return to Earth since their ten days were up.

The auction was pretty similar to the first one, though on the second-to-last segment an item that piqued Zac's interest appeared. It was simply called a [**Heaven's Secrets Array**] and was said to upgrade Nexus Nodes.

"What is this?" Zac asked Ogras, but the demon shrugged with confusion as well.

"It's normally called an [**Information array**], but perhaps this is a special variant," Galau said, not showing too much interest. "It acts as a substitute if you're unable to upgrade your Nexus Node for your town."

"Upgrade the Node?" Zac asked with interest. "What does it do?"

"At the lowest level a Nexus Node doesn't provide almost any information about the skills it sells or details about Class Choices. But if you manage to upgrade the status of your force then all its nodes will be more helpful. This Array gives that kind of effect as well, but only to one Node," Galau explained.

"Buy it," Ogras said without hesitation.

"What kind of information?" Zac asked with interest, also pretty interested in purchasing it. "Does it provide better Classes?"

"No, it can't help there. But it gives information about the type of classes, their main attributes and things like that. It's doesn't display everything, but enough to get a better idea of what the classes represent. It is a bit hard sometimes to understand the description after all," Galau shrugged.

"Is it rare?" Zac asked, completely agreeing with Galau's assessment of the cryptic descriptions of the Class choices.

"I guess these things are slightly rare, but it's still not too valuable," Galau said. "Most people that visit this place are from forces that have upgraded their crystals the normal way and have no need for it. It's meant for weaker and newly established forces as a stopgap until they get the real thing."

Zac was immediately interested, and he would make sure to buy that thing unless its price got out of hand. It would help him to choose a class better in line with his goals.

“Next up is the **[Heaven’s Secrets Array]**. I know what many of you are thinking; ‘Isn’t this just an Information Array?’ Truth be told, the array itself is just that, but this specific array is still a bit special. It was crafted by a cultivator adept on the path of Karma, which has given the array a slightly mysterious effect.”

The auctioneer saw that he had managed to catch the attention of quite a few people, and he continued with a bombastic voice.

“It not only provides the benefits of an Information array, but it even gives small Karmic hints of which choices might be best for you. It would be a marvelous opportunity for the youths of your factions who are unsure what path to pick for themselves,” the man said.

Zac was a bit disappointed in the extra function, as that wasn’t something he needed for himself. He only had two options at the moment, and he wasn’t so sure it would expand all that much even with his new seeds. Besides, he had already had a high enough Luck stat that his gut feeling was at least as effective as some small Karmic infusion into the array.

He had rather hoped that it would contain some hacking function that would give access to better structures in the Town Shop or better Classes, but he wasn’t that lucky. Still, it would be an item that would prove greatly beneficial for Port Atwood, especially since the system was so new for everyone. Most established forces followed heritages to choose their classes, but this was a great option for his people.

The price on the screen immediately jumped up to 200 million nexus coins, but the bidding already slowed down after 300. It clearly wasn’t a too valued, and Zac finally snatched it for the price of 380 Million Nexus coins. This was one of the types of items that might be very valuable on the outside, but here it went for a discount since people were more interested in items that could help them climb further.

Soon enough they reached the final segment, but Zac didn't find anything else he wanted. The treasures were extremely good, but they were either too expensive or not things that weren't suited for himself. A set of six small Spirit Tool axes appeared that Zac felt would be perfect for Emily, but they ended up with a price-tag of 3 billion, quickly forcing Zac out of the bidding.

Soon enough they reached the final item, and it wasn't something that Zac could recognize either.

“Our final item in today's Auction is something that might only enter our halls once every few years. It is the crystallized eye of a Pathfinder Oracle,” the Auctioneer said before he paused for dramatic effect.

Zac, along with a lot of other people looked extremely confused, but a low susurrus could be heard from the platforms up in the air.

“This mythical creature has long been hunted to extinction due to its marvelous nature, but now and then a lucky hunter can find its crystalized remains in various Mystic Realms. Legend states that the Pathfinder Oracles could see the truths of the universe, which turned their whole bodies into a treasure for almost any field,” the auctioneer kept going.

“The eye of an oracle is the second most valuable part, with only its core superseding it. It can be used for a wide array of purposes. Almost any Spirit Tool would gain a great boost to spirituality from consuming it, and it can be used to upgrade most basic Specialty Cores. You can even plant it in your cultivation cave, and it will start attracting Origin Dao. It is truly one of the few treasures that almost any genius could make use of.”

Zac had only halfheartedly listened to the Auctioneer's efforts to upsell his final item, but he soon showed full attention to the proceedings. Being able to upgrade the spirituality of a Spirit Tool was pretty amazing, but his axe had already awoken due to that mysterious rock. He was far more interested in the second effect. That large eye could upgrade almost any Specialty core?

Wasn't this exactly what he needed for his Duplicity core?

"Is this thing real?" Zac asked with a hushed tone to Galau who looked at the scene with wide eyes.

"I can't believe such a good thing was put up for auction," the squirrely man said with shock. "The seller must be desperate for cash."

That was all the confirmation Zac needed. It truly possessed the capabilities that were advertised, and Zac immediately got ready for a heated Auction. This was already the last item, so it looked like he would need to find a solution for Alea somewhere else than here. But if he bought this thing he would at least be able to accomplish one of his goals for coming here.

But the auctioneer's next words were like a cold shower, quickly waking him up to reality.

"Opening bid is 5 000 E-Grade Nexus coins. The seller is also willing to accept payment in Attuned Nexus Crystals at market rate."

Five thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins was equivalent to 5 billion Nexus Coins, which was almost all the money that Zac had brought to the Tower. Worse yet, he had already spent a decent chunk on his shield and various other items. Even if he included the 3 billion from Galau he was just above 6 billion at the moment, and it felt very uncertain that would be enough.

His thoughts of borrowing money from Ogras and Galau were soon moot as the price rose with shocking speed. This time there was no one placing open bids, but the number on the screen rose as the auctioneer kept screaming out the current price.

"12 000!" the Auctioneer exclaimed with glee, "An- Wait! 14 000! 22 000!"

Zac's eyes widened in shock at seeing the price, and he couldn't help but inwardly mock himself for thinking he had a chance at that item. The price landed at almost 80 billion nexus coins, which elicited a small round of applause. Yet no one openly admitted to buying it, perhaps to avoid getting

robbed. The eye was truly an item that someone might risk everything to snatch.

Even Ogras looked a bit shocked at the price. That was a huge amount of money even for a small D-Grade force. They might certainly have it, but using it on a consumable item that could only benefit one junior was likely way out of their budget. Such expenditures could only be used on safer investments, such as allowing one of their ancestors to progress a step forward.

This only became more apparent when the System apparently didn't spoonfeed powerhouses Nexus Coins from kills at higher levels. Zac had been shocked when learned of it, but Ogras explained it with the fact that anything E-Grade warriors and higher killed were worth a lot of money by itself. The System didn't feel it necessary to reach into its own pockets to supplement the income.

It was a small relief to Zac since he had initially been afraid that the stronger forces could earn hundreds of billions of nexus coins in a day by going out into the woods and killing a few beasts. But reality showed that it didn't rise that dramatically. Stronger forces could still earn shocking wealth in short times by going out hunting, but not to the degree that Zac feared.

None of this helped Zac though, and he could only wistfully sigh as the Eye went to the unnamed moneybags. The auction had concluded, and Zac was in no mood to stay on for the following festivities.

Their second visit to the Naspheyi Auction was the final thing on their agenda, and Zac couldn't help but despair a bit when he realized they hadn't accomplished a single one of their goals. He was still without any cure for Alea, and his chance at evolving his Duplicity core had slipped through his fingers due to his apparent abject poverty.

An ember of anger ignited in his mind, no doubt fanned on by the splinter. It had already gotten restless after days of Zac's inactivity and tried to instigate something. So Zac was a bit

muddled as they walked toward the Tower as he needed to spend some of his energy to suppress his violent tendencies.

It was getting late but there was no point in returning to their courtyard. They had ample time to rest inside the Tower. They had bought everything they needed, and Zac was unwilling to waste his accrued wealth on anything else at the moment. He felt tired of the whole Base Town and wanted to get on with the challenge already.

The buildings got increasingly grander as they walked down one of the main roads leading toward the immense tower that blotted out half the sky. Soon enough the massive surface of the Tower of Eternity filled up half his vision, a massive block of white that pushed the blue sky to the sides. Even the grand towers and mansions they passed felt like small doll-houses compared to the impossibly large structure.

But even though the structures got larger and more refined, the number of people on the streets were generally decreasing.

Most people stayed at the middle and outer edges of the town since the risk of running into someone dangerous increased the closer you got to the tower itself. There always some who went to the central square to look for carries or just to take in the sights, but people rarely lingered in the area unless they had the power to back it up.

After an hourlong walk they finally reached the Core Area, the solitary row of extraordinary structures placed in a semi-circle around the entrance to the Tower itself. Each structure was as large as a town by itself, and inside the most powerful forces in their star sector resided.

Chapter 394: Last Opportunity

“Is that the Zethaya Pill House you mentioned?” Zac asked as he looked over at the grand pagoda that emanated a palpable medicinal scent that could be sensed from where they stood.

Behind the pagoda was a garden that looked large enough to be considered a proper park, but a high wall obscured what went on there. Only treetops and the occasional roofs could be discerned.

“Yes, that is them. The number one alchemy clan in the system,” Galau nodded with avarice flashing in his eyes.

“Imagine being able to buy a few pills from them. I’d be able to double my investment simply by targeting collectors.”

“The door is open, why don’t people just go in? I don’t see any guards keeping people away,” Zac muttered, unable to tear his eyes away since that might be the final opportunity to accomplish at least one of his tasks.

“There’s an extremely powerful restrictive array blocking the entrance. Most people would be turned to paste just by trying to enter the gates. You need the invitation of the Zethaya to avoid the array,” Galau explained.

“What happens if you simply endure the array and push your way through? Will you be able to buy things?” Ogras asked.

“Or will you be attacked as an intruder?”

Zac’s eyes lit up as he heard Ogras’ question. Having an array to keep out the average people, but allowing the elites of the sector to enter would make sense. It would prevent a bunch of tourists entering their shop while also allowing the family to make friends with unknown powerhouses.

“Well... I’ve heard of people pushing their way through and completing purchases, but I’ve also heard of people getting thrown out. I am not sure about the details,” Galau hesitantly said.

“So this place has been accessible from the start?” Zac said with a scowl at Galau. “Why have we wasted so much time at that auction house if we could simply have gone here on day one?”

“That array is crazy strong, you can only dream of entering if you can’t easily conquer the fourth floor. Entering it might cause wounds that will take weeks to heal,” Galau entreated as he looked at Zac with worry. “Furthermore, there is a high risk of injury even if you give up early. It might ruin our climb.”

Zac realized that he might have been a bit too restrained. If he had showcased some more strength then Galau might have told him about this opportunity long ago, but even now the aspiring merchant believed Zac to be too weak to even think about barging in.

“Don’t worry, isn’t it just an array to keep out the rabble?” Ogras smiled before turning to Zac, clearly understanding what was on his mind. “See if you find something useful for me as well. It’s not every day you get access to a stockpile like theirs.”

Zac took a deep breath and walked over toward the house. A group of people nearby first looked at him speculatively, as though they were trying to figure out which force he belonged to. Only the top tier factions could get into a place like Zethaya, yet Zac was completely unfamiliar.

But those faces quickly turned into sneers when they noticed him stopping outside the array, clearly trying to figure it out. Zac didn’t mind the looks at all as his eyes were trained on the space in front of him. He tried to glean what sort of array it was so that he could best prepare himself.

He had encountered all kinds of barriers during the hunt, and he felt confident in defeating most of them. But he wasn’t without his weaknesses. His mental defense was good but not

great, and he wasn't confident against any poisons that Zethaya's alchemists would concoct.

But his guts told him that the array wouldn't deal with poison or things like fire. It was a gatekeeper and a test, and it was unlikely that even an arrogant place like Zethaya would try to poison their presumptive customers. He felt it more likely to be some sort of restrictive array that required a certain amount of strength to push through

Zac looked over at the group of humanoids who stood some distance away, looking at him like he was some sort of clown.

"Do you guys know what kind of array this is?" Zac probed.

Two of the people only ignored him, but the third spoke up after seemingly thinking it over.

"It's a general suppression array from what I've heard, it restrains both your mind and your body. It gets lighter if you block it with the Dao or strong skills. It's a test of power," the youth said. "But I haven't seen it personally."

"Thank you," Zac nodded and immediately stepped in.

He didn't put all his faith in that man's words, but he thought his words rang true. Some excelled in Dao while having a low Endurance, and others had amazing skills. It made sense that Zethaya would want to test for any sort of unique trait that would qualify aspiring guests as potential powerhouses.

Zac only managed to take two steps before he was stopped in his tracks. It felt like he was carrying a huge boulder on his shoulders, and the air itself had congealed into an impossibly thick sludge that required his body to strain to push forward.

But the strain was only slightly worse than the power required to unleash the second axe of **[Deforestation]**, and he didn't even feel the need to imbue himself with one of his Fragments to proceed. After the brief stop, he started to move forward one step after another, walking through a beautifully decorated tunnel.

The tunnel was only 50 meters in length, but it took him over a minute to traverse toward the end, and sweat was starting to drip down his forehead from the exertion. What was a bit more

embarrassing was that the tunnel turned transparent half-way through, and he noticed there were a decent number of people observing his entrance. He considered activating one of his Dao Fragments, but he felt it might be more impressive to push through without any assistance.

He kept thinking of ways to make sure the deal went through with the discerning clan, but his musings were rudely interrupted. A foot suddenly came out of nowhere, landing straight on his chest with a resounding thud. The attack itself wasn't anything special, but Zac was still within the array which caused a tremendous strain. Zac felt some blood in his mouth, and he had no option but to act.

The Fragment of the Coffin spread through his body, turning it impervious. Not only that, it felt as though his rage imbued him with power, and a monstrous strength surged throughout his body to the point that it felt like he was bursting at the seams.

The unprovoked kick had well and truly pissed him off, and his instincts kicked in. His hand shot forward like a snake and he grasped the ankle with enough force to cause some cracking sounds to echo through the tunnel.

“Wai-“ a voice screamed, but Zac ignored it as he slammed the attacker into the ground with shocking force before he threw him out from the Pill House like a piece of trash. Only a few cracked stones smeared with blood was the evidence that a struggle had taken place.

Zac didn't know if the man was alive or dead after that response, but he didn't care as he took the last steps into the Pill House, his Fragment making the final stretch effortless. A glance showed that the man was lying motionless outside, allowing Zac to focus on the matter at hand without worrying about him throwing out an attack from behind.

The whole shop looked like a luxurious lounge rather than a store, with groups of sofas and beautiful fountains creating a harmonious atmosphere. There were no pills or other wares on display anywhere, but there was a rich medicinal aroma in the store that made all of Zac's cells feel full of life and power.

The whole area was lit up by a glass dome in the ceiling tens of meters in the air, and he saw there were multiple stories that all had open balconies toward the central lounge. There weren't a lot of people inside, but he could spot a couple of groups scattered about, most of them looking over at Zac with curiosity.

But a small sense of danger suddenly pricked his mind, and his eyes turned to see a young human standing on the second floor looking down at him with cold eyes. Zac frowned when he sensed the animosity since he had never seen that guy before. Was it him that sent out an underling to sound him out? And if so, why?

Was it someone from a force that ran one of the Incursions he had closed, like the Ez'Mahal Empire? There were no obvious signs on him or his clothes that could give Zac a hint, and he didn't dare to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**. He was pretty sure that anyone that could enter a place like this possessed an item similar to his own bracer anyway.

The young man looked away soon enough and walked away from the balcony, disappearing out of sight. Zac could only drop the matter as he refocused on a clerk who walked toward him.

"We do apologize for the disturbance, that guest breached our rules and will no longer be allowed back inside," he said, though Zac could tell that he wasn't all that contrite. "I am Orbat, a clerk working for the Zethaya Clan."

"No matter. I passed through that array, does that mean I can shop here?" Zac asked, not wanting to press the issue.

Their reception was an indicator that they did not put all too much value on him, only sending a clerk rather than whoever was running the shop at this moment. A large clan like the Zethaya would no doubt have a couple of people at the Tower at any point in time, meaning they definitely could have sent someone with higher status.

That was the problem with a lack of renown. He was a nobody in the end, someone without strong backing. Even if he was powerful enough to break through the array he was only

someone with potential, whereas the usual guests at this place no doubt had living ancestors at C-Grade.

“Certainly,” Orbat said as he smilingly led Zac to a sectional not far away.

“What’s on the other floors?” Zac asked offhandedly as he sat down.

“The Zethaya Pill House is both a store and a residential district. The Zethaya maintains friendly relations with many forces, and some choose to stay here during their climb, while others simply visit,” the clerk smoothly explained with his ever-present smile.

‘So only for big-shots, huh?’ Zac thought with a wry smile as he shot a look toward the balustrade where he saw the man who emitted some hostility.

He was no longer anywhere to be seen, and Zac threw it into the back of his mind as he refocused on the task at hand.

“I am looking for two items. I am first in need of a pill or a treasure that can heal a fractured soul. Secondly, I am looking for things that can help evolve a specialty core,” Zac explained.

“We do not carry anything that can generally evolve Specialty Cores. I am afraid only extremely rare items like the Pathfinder Eye that appeared earlier has such a magical effect,” the clerk said as he took out a crystal, causing a screen to emerge. “However, we do have the capability to produce the following pills.”

Zac seriously read through the list, and he saw that there were six different pills that were geared toward evolving specific Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, none of them was the Duplicity Core, and he could only sigh internally in disappointment. However, this was a rare opportunity to get some clues at least.

“Does taking one of these pills guarantee an evolution?” Zac asked, not divulging that he wouldn’t buy any of them.

“Unfortunately no, there is a chance of between 40 and 60% of a full evolution with the pills that are brought here. But even if

the evolution is not successful a strong foundation will be created, allowing for easier evolution down the line,” the clerk smoothly explained.

Zac slowly nodded and moved on to the second item he looked for, the soul-mending treasure for Alea.

“May I ask if it’s a preparation for the tower, or whether it’s meant for a patient?” the clerk asked.

“Why does that matter?” Zac frowned.

“The Zethaya carries the **[Serene Soul Pill]** that can perform emergency repair on a fractured soul. It will not heal you completely, but it will stop the fracturing and allow you to slowly recuperate with the help of regular soul-nurturing pills afterward,” the clerk said. “However...”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the explanation, but the ‘however’ sounded extremely ominous.

“The **[Serene Soul Pill]** needs to be imbibed within 5 minutes of being wounded,” Orbat concluded.

Zac closed his eyes to restrain a surge of fury that lambasted his mind for a second and took a deep breath to curtail the Splinter locked in its Miasmatic cage. He needed to enter the tower soon.

“It’s for a patient, the wound is a month old,” Zac conceded.

The clerk nodded, some sympathy showing in his face. Zac frowned when he saw the clerk’s reaction, fearing that he was simply out of luck.

“Well... There is something,” the clerk said after some hesitation. “There is an item in our treasury, but I do not have the authority to make any decisions regarding treasures of that grade. A proper Zethaya Clan member needs to give the go-ahead.”

“What Item?” Zac asked with eagerness.

“I cannot divulge,” the clerk said. “Please wait a moment, I will consult the manager.”

Zac nodded in agreement, and he impatiently waited for the clerk to come back. His mind spun as he tried to come up with arguments for the Zethaya to sell him the item. It seemed like the item was something they kept for themselves in case of emergency or something, which probably meant its effect was pretty amazing.

Paying above market price probably wouldn't work in such a case, since the Zethaya didn't lack for money. Should he promise a favor if he could buy it? Would they care? Did he have anything else to trade with apart from money that would interest an ancient clan?

Soon enough the clerk returned, but he was a bit pale and didn't dare to look up. Next to him was a young man wearing a luxurious blue robe. He radiated an impressive pressure, but it was more like a gently flowing river compared to Zac's usual aura of brutality. It was no doubt the Zethaya Clan member who could decide on the matter.

But Zac frowned when he noticed that a third person was approaching him, walking shoulder to shoulder with the Zethaya Alchemist. It was the young man with the cold eyes that had stood on the second floor earlier.

Zac sighed as he realized that trouble had finally come for him.

Chapter 395: Prajñā Cherry

Zac looked at the approaching trio with some apprehension, afraid that the chance of a smooth transaction taking place might be ruined. He once more tried to connect the man in the red robes or the crest embroidered on his chest with anyone he had offended, but he came up with nothing.

He still wasn't sure exactly what kind of information had been released about him to the multiverse from the 20-odd incursions he had closed, but he felt it was pretty unlikely that the matters were connected.

He had only really started closing incursions for real around two months ago. Chances were that the youth in front of him was already here when it happened, so he probably shouldn't have heard anything. Or did someone specifically send an information packet to the Tower because they knew that Zac would sooner or later arrive here?

It was a scenario that Zac felt was distinctly possible, but at the same time unlikely. The Zethaya was a real big-shot family, a peak C-Grade force. According to what Ogras estimated the most invaders were from between middle D-Grade to early C-Grade forces, with a few 'lucky additions' like clan Azh'Rezak.

Perhaps stronger forces would get access to Incursions as well, but they would probably be sent to planets that already had cosmic Energy and already powerful natives. Both Earth and the Ishiate Planets were almost completely lacking Cosmic Energy before, and the Zhix planet was only slightly better off. Worst off was the moleman planet, since it was essentially half-dead.

There were three anomalies on their planet though, the Technocrats, the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the Undead Empire. The Empire could be explained by the fact that it was

only some weak rural area of the Empire that came. The Church and the Technocrats likely snatched their spots by eradicating the forces that originally owned them though.

Ogras' family had kept their qualifications hidden until their spot was secured specifically to avoid such a fate. The youth accompanying the Zethaya Clan member seemed to be of equal standing, indicating he was probably from a peak faction as well. So it was unlikely he came from one of the remaining Incursions.

But what other enmities could there be? Did he recognize the origin of Zac's bracer? Greatest certainly seemed like a man that seemed to be good at creating grudges with his straightforward manners. Or did the youth sense the splinter in his mind and want it for himself? But he couldn't arrive at any conclusions, and the trio sat down opposite of him.

"I apologize for the wait. I am Boje Zethaya. My attendant told me about your interest in a treasure that can mend a fractured soul?" the man in the blue robe spoke up with a smile.

"That's alright. I'm Zac," Zac nodded, trying to maintain a balance of deference and poise. "That right. I need something that can mend a soul that's been fractured for a while. She- The patient is currently enclosed in a stasis array to not get any worse."

The man in the red robe didn't say anything as he sat down. He only looked Zac up and down with a mix of overt hostility and disdain. Zac didn't want to give the guy an excuse to ruin his business, so he ignored the rude behavior even if it was a bit irking. Perhaps the guy was simply some sort of elitist that didn't like 'commoners' entering his surroundings.

At least the Zethaya representative didn't carry the same sort of hostility.

The blue-robed man nodded and took out a small but intricate chest, and opened it for a short duration. Inside was a branch with a stone fruit attached to a thin stalk. Zac immediately knew it was a great treasure as his cells screamed at him to

consume the fruit, and the calling was even greater than when he first encountered the Fruit of Ascension.

“We do possess this [**Prajñā Cherry**]. It actually comes from an ordinary F-Grade cherry tree, but a great Sage pondered on the Dao of the Mind beneath the tree for a thousand years, giving the tree and a few of its fruits spirituality. This cherry has been infused by the powerhouse and has miraculous effects on the soul, no matter if it is to heal or strengthen it,” the alchemist explained. “It is a High E-Grade Soul Treasure.”

“What price do you have in mind?” Zac asked, trying his best to hide how much he wanted it.

“This thing does not have any set price,” Boje said. “The Zethaya clan normally hires promising warriors for various tasks, and we would be ready to offer this item as a recruitment bonus. Of course, you would have to prove a strength worthy of this unique treasure first.”

“What sort of tasks? And how long would I be working for you?” Zac asked.

“Overestimating yourself,” the red-robed man snorted, but Zac ignored him.

Boje awkwardly smiled as he spoke up.

“We hire warriors for all sorts of purposes. Most choose to become guardians of our clan, signing life-long contracts. Others join us for short durations like a decade or two. The requirements for the latter are a lot harsher though. Someone wanting such a position would have to pass the 6th floor of the Tower to warrant such a large payment like this cherry.”

Zac nodded in understanding. It wasn't too bad to pay a high price for someone to sign a life-long contract. Those treasures would strengthen the cultivator which would benefit the Zethaya as well.

“What would a short-term warrior do?”

“Usually explore Mystic Realms with restrictions. There are some that have limits on attributes or levels, and we need strong warriors to explore for us as we can't send in our elders. The clan would claim a majority of all spoils you get inside,

but you would still walk away with any titles and a part of the treasures. It's usually a great opportunity for any promising warrior," Boje explained.

Zac felt that it sounded like a pretty good deal, but he also understood there was another side to the 'opportunity'. If it was such a good thing the clan would rather send their own people rather than spend a lot of money to send in outsiders. The risk of getting killed or crippled was no doubt high in the places the Zethaya Alchemist talked about.

"I'm unfortunately unable to sign any such contract in the short term. Is there any way for you to directly sell the cherry instead?" Zac asked.

"This item is quite unique and something formed by chance. It is not something we can simply grow as we wish, so we are unwilling to part with it for Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins. But our pill house is always interested in trades of items or intelligence of similar value," Boje explained.

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It might be the young man causing trouble for him, but his instincts told him that wasn't the case. A clan like Zethaya was already obscenely wealthy, and it made sense that they were more interested in unique treasures that could help them in ways that money could not.

The problem was that he wasn't walking around with any impressive treasures that he could trade for the cherry. The Amanita or the budding lotus were both probably worth as much as the cherry, but they were back on his island. Not that he would be able to bring it to this place anyway. The lotus was probably categorized as a D-Grade healing treasure which made it impossible to bring, while the Amanita was helping keep Alea alive.

"Are you looking for natural treasures or items that might be of interest to study?" Zac asked.

He actually had two things in mind. The first was the cyborg body he still kept in his Cosmos Sack. That thing was beyond durable, and perhaps the Zethaya could study it to create pills with similar effects. Any death squad or fanatic would want a

pill that could help them drag down their enemies to hell along with them when they were facing death.

There was no doubt in Zac's mind whether the cyborg corpse was something valuable. It was a creation of a top tier Technocrat faction, people who didn't even fear the Undead Empire if the little alien could be trusted.

Besides, getting rid of that thing might be for the best, in case Firmament's Edge possessed some means to track the corpse. Luckily the body was still only counted as E-Grade since he found no trouble in bringing it here, but it should at least be a Peak E-Grade treasure as he saw it.

The second item of note was the notebook regarding the Draugr corpse. It came uncomfortably close to his secrets, but no one here would be able to discern his specialty core thanks to his bracer. Perhaps the Zethaya would find the report interesting, or at least have the connections to sell the report to the Undead Empire for profit.

He could even sign an agreement that he would look for the samples when he came back and send them to the Zethaya. Then again, they could probably snatch the true Draugr body from Mhal's Clan since it seemed like a small upstart force.

If neither was of interest he would have to try something else. Perhaps this alchemist needed a carry in the tower as well? He had already decided to display his Apex Hunter-title if it came to that since that title was a clear indicator of extreme fighting prowess without divulging any specifics.

"Both are fine, we're particularly interested in items that can either help in our research to create new pills or in methods of combating pill toxicity," Boje said, looking at Zac with some interest.

Zac's eyes lit up and he reached toward his Cosmos Sack to present the Cyborg Corpse.

"I have something that migh-" Zac started, but he was suddenly interrupted by a discordant voice.

"Oh? Isn't this that treasure I was asking about the other day?" the red-robed youth said, finally speaking up. "Hadn't we

already reached an agreement for a trade?”

“Huh? Rasuliel?” Boje Zethaya said with confusion, until his eyes widened slightly in realization. “Uh, of course. It must have slipped my mind due to the excitement with Prince Reoluv’s ascension.”

A surge of anger ignited in Zac’s chest when he realized that the youth had come to create trouble after all. It obviously wasn’t enough for the guy to stare at him with his shitty attitude. Zac immediately discarded the idea to take out the cyborg, but he wouldn’t completely give up at this point. Hopefully Boje Zethaya would choose profits over keeping this Rasuliel character happy.

“I have a corpse of a cultivator who was modified by a peak force to have a forced evolution when approaching death. He rose from a weak early E-Grade warrior to touching upon the D-Grade barrier in the span of one minute, releasing a shocking might that killed all of his enemies before he died of exhaustion,” Zac said, modifying the facts slightly.

“If you can figure out the process of this change you might be able to create a pill that could mimic the effect. I’m sure that kind of pill would be desired by all kinds of forces,” Zac added.

Boje’s eyes lit up in interest when he heard the explanation, and it seemed that he was about to ask a few more questions about it. But he soon restrained himself and sighed with disappointment.

“I am sorry. The item does indeed sound interesting, but our Pill House is known to keep our word. This treasure has already been claimed, and I can only apologize for my forgetfulness,” Boje said as he handed over a small vial. “Please take these healing pills as a token of my apology. They were concocted by my uncle, and are some of the most effective healing pills in Base Town. I wish you luck in your endeavors.”

Zac almost crushed the vial or threw it in the face of the alchemist, but he restrained himself as he put it away. Not that

he would dare eat them after seeing how they acted, but he might be able to sell them for a premium later.

“My family will send over the payment within a month. Its value will no doubt satisfy you,” Rasuliel smiled as he claimed the small box and put it away before he turned to Zac. “I am *so* sorry about that, little guy.”

The world started to turn jagged and Zac’s vision became tinted with red and black and as fury took hold of his mind. The innocuous taunt had turned his smoldering anger into a blazing fire, and he was fast losing control. His body shook from restrained anger, and it was all he could do from not jumping the two and ripping them to pieces.

He needed to quickly find some secluded place to wrestle back control of his mind before he did something stupid. Zac arduously got to his feet and nodded at Boje with grit teeth before he turned toward the exit. The Rasuliel seemed to notice Zac’s weird state, and a taunting voice echoed across the lounge as Zac walked away.

“You said it was meant for a girl? Your Dao Partner perhaps?” Rasuliel laughed. “I am so sorry about that. Let’s hope she meets a more dependable man her next life. Someone who isn’t foolish enough to meddle in the Tsarun Clan’s business.”

Zac froze as the words echoed across the room. His thoughts became a jumble and soon enough he didn’t even know where he was. His vision closed in on him and his consciousness slipped away despite his best efforts to remain lucid.

The last thing he heard before darkness consumed him was a bestial roar that was both familiar and foreign.

Chapter 396: Aftermath

A dense killing intent suffused the whole hall, causing the numerous guests of the Pill House to look over with consternation after hearing the roar. The source was obviously the interloper, who looked angry enough to spontaneously combust. His eyes had turned completely bloodshot, and he was already reaching for his Cosmos Sack.

Rasuliel was inwardly delighted the way things turned out. Sometimes Luck was as important as skill, and he had no doubt been helped by his massive pool of 52 Luck today. Who would have thought that the scoundrel who somehow snatched the Thayer Consortia from underneath his uncle's hands would present himself here?

Furthermore, he was only some no-name cultivator who lacked any proper connections to enter this place the right way. And better yet, he was a hothead who only needed a little bit of goading to lose control.

He couldn't believe a person dumb enough to emit killing intent inside the Zethaya Pill House would be able to get inside, let alone snatch a Mercantile License that their family had targeted for decades.

The arrays in here would block any attempts at retaliation, allowing him to freely kill the interloper without repercussions. The biggest risk to his plans was if this Zac character crushed his token and fled, but as he looked at the man who seemed to have lost all rationality he knew his gambit had proven successful.

As soon as the fool got himself killed he would hopefully be able to glean the whereabouts of those damn Sky Gnomes from his belongings. This level of contribution to the clan was almost at an elder-level, and he couldn't imagine the bump in

resources he would enjoy when presenting the signet and this man's body to his uncle.

The aura of the man in front of him kept rising, and even Rasuliel started to feel some pressure. But even then he wasn't overly worried. Someone who could both get through the entrance array and even block Rudrik's strike was strong, but the Zethaya had spent hundreds of thousands of years to strengthen this place to the limits of what the System allowed.

"I apologize for the harsh words from my friend here," Boje said with a frown. "But I urge you to remember where you are. Violence will not be tolerated within these walls."

But the warning fell on deaf ears as Zac's aura kept increasing, and Rasuliel started to frown when he sensed an extremely sinister energy within it. It was unlike anything he had encountered before, and it elicited an intense sense of danger.

'This guy mentioned some modifications that pushed one's power beyond the natural limits. Has this lunatic actually done the same to himself?' Rasuliel thought, some worry finally creeping into his heart.

The worry quickly turned into a primal fear in Rasuliel's heart as the aura of the man suddenly skyrocketed as a black rune appeared on his forehead. Lines started to cover his whole body as well, creating a pathway reeking of destruction.

Rasuliel suddenly found himself falling backward as he coughed up a mouthful of blood. Just looking at the fractal caused his Soul to get cut, and a glance indicated that Boje had suffered the same fate.

"Stop!" Boje roared as the whole Pill House hummed with power like a beast waking up from its slumber.

One restriction after another appeared in the air, and defensive treasures of inestimable value created an inescapable net around the man who still stood rooted to his spot. But a wave of unadulterated destruction rippled out from his body, and the massive arrays cracked like they were some cheap talismans bought from a flea market.

Thoughts of escape filled Rasuliel's mind, but streams of terrifying power ensconced the whole lobby, cutting off any path of retreat. Rasuliel could only reluctantly turn back toward the human-shaped monster, and he took out a small tube from his Spatial Ring. There was no way he would be able to crush his token and escape from this evil star in time.

He could only bet it all on the cursed object in his hand.

Pain with enough urgency to jolt him awake plagued Zac's body. He found himself bruised and battered in the middle of a huge pile of rubble, every part of his body hurting beyond imagination.

His vision was a bit blurry, but he still saw the towering trees from **[Hatcheman's Spirit]** dissipating around him. When had he activated that skill? And why did it look so different from when he tried it out back on earth? The leaves and trunks shouldn't be black.

And where the hell was he? He had been inside the luxurious lounge of the Zethaya Pill House just a second ago.

A broken-off head of a statue depicting some unknown mythological creature jogged Zac's memory awake. It had been the centerpiece of one of the fountains inside, but now the fountain was gone, replaced with broken pieces of stones and the crushed remnants of the furniture who sat around it.

Zac's mind still had some problems connecting two and two, and his head slowly swiveled around to take in the surroundings. A couple of familiar faces, many with minor wounds and looking haggard, stared back at him from a respectable distance, undisguised horror evident on their faces. It was the other customers and residents of the Zethaya that had spectated his entrance to the Pill House.

Even further back a small crowd had gathered, likely people who were visiting Tower Square. No one dared to take a step forward, and some were even running away after Zac trained his eyes in their direction.

Zac couldn't bother with the onlookers as his muddled mind tried to compute what the hell was going on. He knew he had been bested by the Splinter once more, and it had caused him to completely lose control when he heard the taunts from that Rasuliel guy.

Normally he might have been annoyed, but he still had years to find a cure for Alea. He wouldn't risk everything at this juncture just to forcibly steal a treasure. Doing so would cause unneeded enmities and more trouble than it was worth. But the accumulated anger from the Splinter of Oblivion had pushed his rage to unprecedented heights, ruining his plans completely.

Just thirty meters away a young man in a blue robe lay huddled in a fetal position with multiple layers of arrays shimmering around him. Zac realized it was Boje who was still fine albeit somewhat worse for wear. And just in front of him he could see the outline of another body.

He arduously looked down, but he almost immediately regretted it due to two reasons. The first reason was the huge wound that had mangled a large section of his torso, which put both his bones and innards on open display.

The second was the bloody head he held in his right hand, where his fingers were completely entrenched. His index and ring-fingers were pushed all the way through his eyes, and the sockets were still leaking some mix of blood and brain matter. His thumb meanwhile was inserted in the victim's mouth, making it look like he was holding a bowling ball.

The head wasn't connected to a body, but a grisly and broken spine dangled from beneath. However, a matching headless corpse lay at Zac's feet, clearly indicating who it was.

Rasuliel Tsarun.

Zac groaned as he knew that he had really caused a shitstorm this time around, but he didn't feel too broken up about it. He obviously regretted causing this trouble, but Rasuliel was targeting him for some reason. This random guy had caused him so much trouble for no reason at all, and he didn't feel too broken up about killing him. People died for far less every day.

He irreverently threw away the head before quickly popping one of his best healing pills while he activated his Dao of Trees. His wounds were nothing to scoff at even with his terrifying constitution, and he needed to quickly restore his condition.

The trouble wasn't over just because he had killed his enemy. There was no doubt in Zac's mind that he had been the one to make the first move, meaning that retribution would come soon enough. Ogras appeared the next second as if reading his thoughts.

"We need to flee. *Now*," the demon said with grit teeth.

His usual lackadaisical expression was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a mask of horror.

"The tokens?" Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

"The two of us were judged complicit of your madness, we're stuck here," Ogras said, waving the limp body of Galau in his arms. "This useless guy got so scared that he fainted when you tore down the whole netherblasted building. Throwing out that guy in the beginning wasn't enough?"

"Let's enter the Tower then," Zac said, opting to save the explanations for later. "People seem shocked enough to stay away."

"It just takes one, then all hell breaks loose. The bounty on your head is crazy," Ogras lamented.

Zac nodded and the two unhesitantly sped toward the large platform in front of the Tower after Ogras gripped the body of Rasuliel with a shadow tentacle. There wasn't any actual door to enter, but rather a teleportation array that took you inside.

He figured that they would be fine as long as they managed to get on the platform in one piece. What happened when they exited tomorrow was Future-Zac's problem. He would have 100 days to figure out that mess.

The demon's words, unfortunately, proved prophetic. One impulsive cultivator started rushing after them, and with that the floodgates were opened. Many chose to stand back, but more than half the remaining warriors on the square started

rushing toward Zac, and a few cultivators emerged from the nearby buildings as well.

The fact that he looked half-dead with mortal wounds likely emboldened quite a few of the people who had an eye on whatever the System offered for his death. But they had drastically underestimated his constitution, and he still had some fuel left in his tank.

Better yet, he realized he had activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] during his rampage, and he still benefitted for its effects. He also still had his most powerful skill. He had apparently torn down the building without using either [**Deforestation**] or [**Nature's Punishment**] somehow. Perhaps it was the other guys who did the heavy lifting in the destruction they caused.

He clearly had activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] since he saw the trees just as they dissipated, but the effects of that skill weren't really offensive. He had a hard time seeing himself managing to destroy the Pill House just by activating that skill unless he had misunderstood its uses when he tested it. Had he used it by instinct to avoid certain death?

There was the issue of the appearance of the trees though. They looked corrupted for some reason, but he didn't have time to analyze it before they were gone. He had only tried out the skill once on Mystic Island, and he wasn't sure of all its uses just yet. Perhaps it changed appearance due to circumstances just like [**Nature's Punishment**].

He would have to experiment some more inside the tower. Now was not the time. There were more pressing issues to deal with, such as the swarming bounty hunters right on their heels. His body was full of complaints, but Cosmic Energy started to churn through his body.

The huge axe of [**Deforestation**] appeared in the sky above, but its powerful aura only managed to intimidate a scant few. The rest looked like they had eaten stimulants as they kept running toward him, and the whole square shuddered with power from their skills.

Zac had no compunctions about finishing what he started since these people wanted to kill him out of greed. His body

screamed in protest from the exertion, but he felt that **[Hatchetman's Rage]** still had over ten seconds on the clock. It would be enough to do what needed to be done.

This time he wouldn't hold back as he did against the undead horde, and the Fragment of the Axe Effortlessly slipped into the huge hatchet in the air, causing a terrifying increase in its aura. A few with discerning eyes immediately turned to flee for their lives, but many still kept going.

A small shudder swept out across the square as the hatchet finished its trajectory, and the clamor died down in a second. Most of the attacks aimed at Zac were completely obliterated, with the few remaining losing most of their power. Ogras managed to clear those out with a few shadow-blasts.

However, the results were not quite as impressive as Zac had imagined in his rage-addled brain. Only a dozen died from his attack, while an equal number sported pretty grievous wounds. A small part in the back of his mind reminded him that these were the elites that stood at the peak of the whole sector. Just pushing them back with your own power was a huge accomplishment, let alone killing a bunch of them.

Zac coughed a mouthful of blood as activating the skill in his current condition had put an even worse strain on his body. The gristly wound in his side painted the ground he stepped on red, and he started to feel woozy.

Unfortunately he didn't manage to deter everyone on the square just with that single swing. In fact, a few people with extremely dense auras had appeared as though out of nowhere, each of them looking like a god of war as they closed in on the three. Going by Zac's pathetic appearance they no doubt believed he was an arrow at the end of its flight.

His time was running out on his buff, so Zac could ignore his pain and unleash the second swing as well. The shocking **[Infernal Axe]** appeared in the sky above, and a coruscating wave of flames ripped out across the square, slamming straight into the attacks that came their way.

A chaotic mess of fire and dozens of other elements fought for supremacy in the square, causing a shockwave that launched

Zac off his feet. It was at this time the timer for [**Hatcheman's Rage**] dissipated, causing a wave of exhaustion and pain to wash over him.

A sneaky cultivator seemed to have been waiting for this opportunity, and he appeared out of nowhere from the shadows with a sinister dagger poised to strike. But those very shadows immediately turned on the assassin and ripped him to pieces.

Zac's sight was starting to blur, but a storm of fractal blades blasted through the wall of flames from [**Deforestation**] and flew their way. Zac could immediately sense they contained the energy from a Dao Fragment, and some despair crept into his heart. He was completely spent, and he knew that defense wasn't Ogras' strong suit.

Swapping class was out of the question as well, the blades moved far too quickly. But the square was luckily only so big, and they had already reached their destination. With the help of Ogras moving them through the shadows they found themselves atop the platform, and the fragment-imbued blades hit an invisible wall.

The hunters stopped in their tracks as they looked at Zac with greed in their eyes. But they were unwilling to enter the platform since that would only send them into a separate version of the trial. They were no doubt more interested in staying until he reemerged. Zac looked down at the people with his bloodshot eyes, some residual anger reigniting when he saw their greedy expressions.

"I will for-," Zac said with a hoarse voice that echoed across the square, but his grand proclamation was cut off as they were teleported away.

Chapter 397: Elites

“Pretty, why didn’t you join in on the hunt?” Leyara asked with interest as she looked over at her friend with a spurious smile. “Did you know that guy would be so strong? But I still think you would have a chance to trap him.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, call me Daoist Summit Reacher,” the beautiful woman said with an annoyed look as she glanced at Leyara.

This family and their naming sense, Leyara lamented as she shook her head. And wasn’t it Swordmistress Grace last time?

The two sat at a friends’ viewing terrace that overlooked the Tower Square and the entrance to the Tower of Eternity. They had all gotten the quest, but only Ulmar and Presseus had made a move. They now sat to the side with their frizzy hair, looking a bit embarrassed. They probably hadn’t expected to get drowned in a sea of high-grade flames infused with a Dao Fragment the moment they set out.

“So?” Leyara probed.

Pretty was the strongest person here, which meant she was one of the strongest people in Base Town, especially now that Reoluv had left. Furthermore, as the granddaughter of that war maniac she was probably loaded with nasty treasures perfect to create havoc. It was a bit surprising she didn’t make a move considering the quest reward. It was something that only those with the stoutest Dao Hearts would be able to resist.

“That guy was always so annoying, stupid upstart family. It’s not my problem he got himself killed. The latest Zethaya generation must have let their excessive wealth turn their brains into excrement for things get out of hand like that. Why should I exert myself to clean up their mess?” Pretty shrugged with disinterest.

“But that guy who was with him came from your Allbright Empire though?” Leyara said with an impish smile. “I remember him hiding in the corner looking scared at the party you held a month ago.”

Leyara was so bored after all these gatherings and auctions. There was finally something interesting happening, and she couldn't help but try to stir the pot a bit to make things even more exciting. She knew things would get chaotic if Pretty made a move.

She didn't just have one or two suitors who had timed their climb to be here at the same time as her. Intergalactic dating was pretty hard after all, especially opportunities to meet outside the gaze of the elders. No matter if she decided to help or hunt the results no doubt be spectacular to witness.

“I'm not from the Imperial family, why should I care about what some guy from our Empire does or what company he keeps? I don't even think he's from the Emypyrean sector,” Pretty said with disinterest.

“Yeah... But your grandfather...” Leyara said.

“What does grandpa have to do with some small squabbles between the younger generation?” Pretty snorted.

Leyara only rolled her eyes and gave up. It looked like she wouldn't be able to drag her old friend into the mess.

“Besides, the fun has only started,” Pretty suddenly said with a smile.

“Oh?” Leyara asked, hope reigniting.

“Haven't you noticed? We all still have the quest even though a few minutes have passed. I think the Ruthless Heavens doesn't feel this play has acted itself out yet. Won't he be kicked out of the tower in a day at most?”

Leyara's eyes lit up in excitement as she looked down at the large crowd who stayed by the entrance. Only a few were leaving, but most seemed content to simply wait, intently waiting for that lunatic to return.

“What do you think, Pretty?” Leyara said. “Will he survive? Do you think I should join in on the fun?”

“I know you don’t care about which floor you end up on, why should you join this fight? As for whether he will survive...?” Pretty said with a mysterious smile. “I think he will surprise us all.”

“And don’t call me Pretty.”

Catheyia looked down at the square from the window far up in the tower belonging to the Undead Empire, her pitch-black eyes absorbing the candlelight like two black holes. Calmness had already returned to the core area after the destruction of the Zethaya Pill house, but a storm was still raging inside her heart.

“Did you find out the identity of the man?” Catheyia asked into the shadows, eliciting a dour zombie to emerge.

“I am afraid not, mistress,” the zombie said with a bow. “The warrior entered the Pill House by challenging their array, and he only identified himself as Zac before things deteriorated. However, I did manage to find out a few facts from one of the assistants.”

“Oh?” Catheyia looked over at Varo, the leader of her deathsworn and her personal steward.

“He was able to forcibly pass through the array by virtue of his attributes alone. His constitution should be quite impressive. Also, his main goal of visiting the Zethaya was to find a cure for a fractured soul. It seemed quite urgent for him,” the zombie finished.

“A fractured soul?” Catheyia mumbled, her pale lips curving slightly upward. “The Zethaya better pray that man never grows too powerful. Such a response when he came looking for medicine will no doubt plant a seed of intense grudge. Was that what he wanted to say before he got whisked away?”

“Do you wish us to prepare an ambush of him for when he exits?” the Zombie probed. “A free level would guarantee smoothly passing the 7th floor.”

“No, it would be shameful to use such a crutch in this place. Besides, I have some confidence in passing the 7th floor without any outside assistance. By the way, who was the man he killed?” Catheya asked as she looked over at her assistant.

“Rasuliel Tsarun. A main branch descendant of the Tsarun clan, but only of middling import. He was a talent to be nurtured, but not in line for succession,” Varo said.

“Tsarun? Never heard of them,” Catheya muttered.

“They are a somewhat young force local to this remote sector. They have some connections to the local provinces of our Empire, mainly providing high-quality corpses,” Varo dutifully reported.

“How many of that clan are here right now?” Catheya asked.

“One more main branch member, 8 from side branches, and 17 employees,” Varo said without missing a beat.

“Are you confident in killing them all?” Catheya asked.

“We might have to sacrifice one or two of our deathsworn, but our situation is generally favorable,” the zombie thoughtfully answered, not caring why her mistress wanted to kick the Tsarun Clan out of the Base Town. “Rasuliel was the strongest member of their force. He likely carried most of their treasures as well, leaving the rest somewhat exposed.”

“Good, do it,” Catheya nodded.

“If I may, mistress. This might cause friction between the local province and the Tsarun clan, negatively impacting their access to new bodies,” the steward added. “These provinces are newly formed and have few avenues for such resources.”

“What do I care about that? We’re only here because Master had an epiphany and needed to enter secluded cultivation for a few years,” Catheya shrugged. “If it truly turns into a problem I’ll ask master compensate the local kings after he exits.”

“By your will,” Varo bowed and melded back into the shadows.

Catheya’s abyssal eyes once again turned toward the tower, her thoughts a confused jumble. There was no way that she

was wrong in her conclusion. That crazy warrior carried a hint of aura from her clan's progenitor. But that should be completely impossible.

Her family didn't have any connection to this sector, and she and her master only passed by here during their travels by chance. More importantly, their progenitor left their clan well over a million years ago as she found herself facing the inevitable madness of advanced age.

She created two grand treasures to defend their clan against annihilation, and these treasures were still consecrated by the whole family once a year to maintain the aura of the progenitor. But they had never heard from the ancestor after she left, and every one long believed that she found her end during her search for a way to break through.

Was the grand ancestor still alive? That would mean that she either had managed to break through or found a way to stave off the madness. She couldn't wait for that axe-wielding warrior to emerge. Killing a couple of local noblemen would be a small price to pay for such a valuable piece of information.

But if the progenitor was truly alive, why hadn't she come back during all this time? Was she trapped somewhere and needed assistance? And why had she left her mark on a human? Was he her disciple? It sounded preposterous, but she had her reasons for believing it to be true.

There was an undeniable sense of death surrounding him. It might be impossible to sense for the humans around him, but how could a pure-bred Draugr of an ancient heritage not feel the aura of undeath?

That warrior might hold the clues to the questions that ailed her, and she couldn't wait for him to emerge once again.

Just who was that man?

—

A rancid odor rose from the cauldron, telling Boje that he had actually failed in concocting a basic **[Golden Constitution Pill]**. It was one of the first recipes he learned while still a

teenager, and something he would be able to concoct in his sleep. Yet it had failed today.

The knock on the door made Boje flinch in fear, a sheen of perspiration covering on his forehead. He tightly gripped his fists in an effort to stop their trembling as he tried to get his fraying emotions under check.

“Enter,” he said, trying to sound as unruffled and confident as possible.

He couldn't let the world know that the past encounter had scared him shitless. Others were discussing how to capture the man when he emerged in a day, but Boje only contemplated means of surviving. They hadn't seen those eyes filled with unending madness or felt the aura sharp enough to wound souls.

The reward was certainly alluring, but he wouldn't challenge that god of death. He'd rather take his chances with the floor guardian at the 6th floor than standing in front of that Asura again.

The door opened and his manservant entered holding a clipboard.

“The regeneration of the main hall is essentially finished, apart from some furnishings that are still being made. We paid 2.7 billion to have the Bruckner expedite the process. But we expect it will take at least a month before The Boundless Heavens restores the array functionality,” Ulred said.

“That's to be expected,” Boje nodded. “Take out our 4th and 7th sealed treasures to solidify the main hall.”

“The fourth treasure costs almost 20 billion Nexus Coins a day to keep active,” the Steward reminded.

“I'll take responsibility for the cost,” Boje said. “We have many guests staying with us, and we need to show some sincerity. At least until the issue with that man has been dealt with.”

“Regarding that... What are your instructions?” the manservant hesitantly asked.

Boje knew there was some confusion amongst their ranks. He had immediately entered seclusion, citing a need to ponder on new insights gained from witnessing the battle. But truthfully he had just been scared and wanted to hide away in his sanctum.

It was a shame that Rasuliel had gotten himself killed, robbing Boje the chance of killing that idiot himself. The amount of trouble that guy had created for the Zethaya was inestimable. That guy was completely unknown but insanely strong. Who knew if he'd pop out of nowhere in a few thousand years as a C-Grade hegemon, destroying their strongholds one by one?

Such things happening was all too common.

Of course, he knew that he was the one to blame in the end. Rasuliel had stuffed his pockets full of rare herbs to help progress his crafts, and Boje had felt that it wouldn't be such a big deal even if he bent the Family Rules a bit to reciprocate. His mind had been muddled from the opportunity of concocting a pill with such a rare item as a base.

It would probably have been enough to progress his craft to the next level. But now it was all for naught.

But the steward asked a valid question. How should the Zethaya respond?

“Send someone with an invoice for the furnishings and the **[Prajñā Cherry]** to the Tsarun Clan. Also indicate we're expecting an explanation as to why Rasuliel initiated a fight within our compound, even going so far as to take out a peak offensive treasure while I stood right next to him,” Boje finally said.

“Certainly,” Ulred nodded. “And the man who entered the tower? There have also been quite a few forces who have approached us for information regarding that man.”

“There's no need to hide anything,” Boje eventually said. “Tell them what we know. It's not much anyway. But keep the seal on his transformation or the battle itself.”

“Certainly,” Ulred agreed as he scribbled down a few notes. “All the guests and personnel have already signed contracts of

secrecy. It will not leak.”

“Good,” Boje said. “We’ll wait and see how things turn out tomorrow. Perhaps there is some way for us to turn this calamity into an opportunity.”

Chapter 398: Piker

Darkness quickly gave way to light, and Zac in his muddled state was a bit confused when he was met with a prompt that covered his whole vision.

[Tower of Eternity entered. Use pseudonym or real name?]

It was just like when the ladder system was initiated back in the day, and Zac looked at the prompt blankly for a few seconds. The events that just had transpired made him unwilling to use his real name, but he also didn't want to be known as the Super Brother-Man again. He had already introduced himself as Zac at the Zethaya, and Boje was still alive, so he was a bit unsure what to do.

But suddenly he had a spark of inspiration.

“Zac Piker,” Zac said with a raspy voice.

Piker was his mother's maiden name, at least according to his dad. Zac had been one year when they married, and Leandra took on Robert's last name. By now Zac realized it was probably a fake name she used when she arrived on Earth, which made it a solid option to choose.

Picking this pseudonym was a way for him to signal his mother that they were alive. She would perhaps hear of the name somehow, especially if he climbed far enough, and come help them out with their situation back on Earth.

The scene quickly changed and Zac found himself sitting on by a camp-fire, joined by his two travel companions and a headless corpse. The moment the prompt disappeared Zac felt a pang of worry, and he couldn't help but wonder if he had just made a monumental mistake choosing that name. But done was done, and Zac rather focused on the others.

Galau had woken up at some time during their frantic escape, and he currently sat on the ground looking as though his soul

had left him. His eyes were glazed as they stared into the distance, void of thought and hope. Ogras was instead staring evenly at Zac, his eyes rife with unspoken words.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t expect that to happen,” Zac coughed as he scratched his chin. “But I did get a treasure for Alea I think.”

Of course, his true feelings weren’t quite as calm as he wanted to let on. The Splinter had thoroughly screwed him over this time, to the point of no return. Zac groaned as he reached for his Cosmos Sack and took out a Nexus Crystal to start restoring his energy.

The combination of his terrible wounds, using [**Hatchetman’s Rage**], and activating the first two swings of [**Deforestation**] had really done a number on his body, and he felt so weak that a level 20 would be able to wring his neck if they wanted to.

Luckily he hadn’t suffered any wounds to his soul, so he had no problem activating his Dao of Trees to help recuperating. The Dao soothed his harried body, and he finally had a chance to look around.

If it wasn’t for him remembering entering the Tower he would have thought they had left the special dimension and were teleported somewhere on Earth. He knew that the place was magical, but he had underestimated the Tower of Eternity.

Zac had somewhat expected to find himself inside some sort of maze, where he had to beat the floor boss to proceed to the next floor, like some old school dungeon crawler. But he was currently sitting in front of a fire in a small glade. Around him was a tranquil leafy forest, and there was even a normal sky when he looked up through the canopy.

Nothing about this place felt like either a tower or some sort of Trial, but rather a simple camping trip that brought back his memories to the day that the Integration took place. They were only missing the trusty camper and a cooler full of beer to complete the experience. But everyone present obviously didn’t share Zac’s nostalgia.

“I’m finished,” Galau said with hollow eyes from across the fire. “My cousins will tell the elders what transpired. I will be

sacrificed to the Zethaya Clan in an effort to curry favor and distance themselves from you two lunatics.”

“Well, this is our bad,” Zac said, but corrected himself after seeing the face Ogras was making. “Fine, my bad. I got a bit heated and things got out of hand. We will do our best to make things right for you.”

“You can always say that we kidnapped you,” Ogras finally said after releasing a heavy sigh. “We did carry you into the tower after all.”

Galau didn’t answer, as he kept looking into the distance with a face full of regrets. Zac and Ogras could hear him mumbling under his breath, but Zac could only make out ‘*Why did I sit down at that table?*’. Ogras only rolled his eyes before he turned to Zac.

“Are you okay?”

“Can you give me a few hours?” Zac sighed.

“It’s fine, we’re not short on time any longer,” Ogras shrugged. “We’ll wait.”

Zac nodded in thanks and arduously got up from his sitting position, but he suddenly turned back toward the fire as he took out the small vial he got from Boje.

“Can you tell me what this is?” Zac asked as he waved it at Galau.

The youth initially wanted to ignore him, but he soon enough reluctantly got up to his feet to look at the bottle.

“It’s actually a bottle of High-Grade [**Serene Flesh Pill**]. It’s part of the Zethaya Pill House Serene Path-series of healing and nurturing pills. These three pills are worth almost 200 Million Nexus coins!” Galau blurted out. “The Zethaya truly have the best stuff.”

“Can you be sure that it’s not poisoned or something?” Zac asked.

He initially hadn’t planned on eating these things, but if he only relied on his own pills and constitution he would be in a bad shape for weeks, which was too much time to waste even

within the Tower. He literally had pieces of guts dangling down from the side, and he was hesitant to move around as it was.

Galau looked a bit confused, but his eyes started shimmering with a slight glow, indicating he was using some sort of ocular skill.

“It looks fine to me?” Galau said. “Besides, I think the Zethaya wouldn’t do something to create poison pills disguised as their healing pills. Such a thing would cause massive harm to their reputation. They would rather offer an extreme bounty for your capture if they wanted to deal with you.”

Zac felt it made sense, and he took out one of the pills that looked like a pristine pearl. It was a lot better than any pill he had found during the hunt or bought from Calrin. His gut feeling didn’t warn him either, so he quickly popped the pill into his mouth as he went over to the body of Rasuliel. He searched through his clothes, but a frown started to emerge when he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“Where is the Cosmos Sack?” Zac muttered, worried that he had lost it during the battle. “I clearly saw him putting away a treasure.”

“It’s probably the ring on his finger,” Ogras muttered. “Rich bastard.”

Zac suddenly remembered Calrin mentioning that the high-class Cosmos Sacks were jewelry rather than literal sacks. They were a lot more valuable as they required a craftsman proficient in the Dao of Space to create.

He twisted the ring off from Rasuliel’s finger and limped over to a tree some distance from the campsite. Zac needed to rest a bit and let the pill do its magic. His head was also a complete mess for some reason, and he needed to restore his mental state as well.

Sitting alone in the forest full of wounds made his thoughts go back to his first months on the island, where his body was always in various state of disrepair. He usually felt like a

completely different person compared to the guy who kept getting himself in trouble while fighting the dumb demonic beasts, but sometimes it seemed like he hadn't actually improved all that much.

Zac restarted his recuperation with practiced ease as he went over what had just happened. The whole fight was just a jumbled mess in his mind, and he couldn't remember the details. Had he forgotten due to his anger, or had the splinter actually controlled him? The distinction was extremely important, and he quickly looked inward to check up on the splinter.

The **[Splinter of Oblivion]** was extremely docile at the moment, and it had retracted all its tentacles that usually tried to finagle their way out of the miasmatic prison in his head. It didn't release any of that odd energy into his mind either, making the funnel completely empty. But that alone didn't bring any comfort to Zac at all, and the reason was simple.

One of the Miasmatic Runes were missing.

He had looked at the runes that encircled the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** many times in an attempt to understand them, and he was certain that there were one fewer of them now. Initially there had been nine of them, but now only eight remained, making the gap between them slightly larger.

Worry filled Zac's heart, and he started to wonder if the protection of the mysterious Draugr lady was failing. If the runes disappeared with this speed then he would lose all protection in just a few years. He might be able to reach peak E-Grade in ten years if he pushed himself, but he knew that wasn't enough to control the effects of the splinter.

Or perhaps it happened because he lost control due to his anger. It had empowered the Splinter enough to break one of the runes, resulting in the destruction that followed. If that was the case he would have to focus on ways to fortify his mind to avoid such a scene repeating itself.

Unfortunately there wasn't much he could do about the issue as things currently stood, and he retracted his mind from the splinter.

He instead looked down on his finger to see that the ring Calrin lent him had lost all its luster, and the large inlaid crystal looked like a murky piece of glass. Zac couldn't help but groan when he saw the sight. This had been his strongest defensive ace, but he only had one use of it and it had been expended before he even entered the tower.

It was a poignant reminder that he wasn't invulnerable even with his massive pool of attributes. Everyone had their own advantages and hidden aces. That Rasuliel hadn't seemed like a peak genius, yet he had almost killed Zac even if he activated the ring. There was also the attack fueled by a Dao Fragment that almost hit him as they fled, indicating his level of insight wasn't anything unique in the Tower.

At least his battle came with a few upsides Zac reckoned as he turned his attention to Rasuliel's Spatial Ring. It had turned into an ownerless item since the guy died, allowing Zac to immediately bind it. But he was surprised when he saw the somewhat limited space when he inspected the insides.

The space was only a bit larger compared to the ordinary Cosmos Sacks that cost just a few million Nexus Coins. Zac had expected a spatial tool belonging to a rich guy like that to be able to store mountain ranges if needed, but he guessed he had severely underestimated the difficulty of making Spatial Rings. The space in his own cosmos sack was a lot larger than this.

However, it was a lot more convenient compared to the Cosmos Sack. He needed to physically touch a sack to take out an item, but he could simply will the ring to spit out its contents since it was already on his hand. That would allow him to take out his axe or a defensive treasure a lot quicker, which might be the difference between life and death. He also knew that the space inside a Spatial Ring was a lot more stable, whereas Cosmos Sacks needed to be replaced at regular intervals as to not lose the contents.

Just the ring itself was an amazing treasure worth well over a Billion Nexus Coins, yet he knew that was only the tip of the iceberg after a cursory glance at the contents. He immediately found the box that Rasuliel put away just before the battle

started, and just that box alone almost made Zac feel the danger he found himself in worth it.

He still couldn't be certain that the **[Prajñā Cherry]** would be enough to heal Alea, but it would no doubt make her situation better than it currently was. If he could prolong the time she could stay inside the coffin to a few decades he felt confident he would be able to find a few more treasures to feed her.

Perhaps the Tree of Ascension would be able to produce another fruit as well, and with its odd mutation it might be able to help the Poison Mistress.

Of course, the cherry was just one of a large number of treasures, making Zac feel that expending the charge on his ring to not be the end of the world. There were no doubt more defensive treasures in the Spatial Tool that Rasuliel didn't have a chance to use during their hectic battle.

Zac took out one box or vial after another, glancing at their contents. All of them were clearly good items judging by their spiritual emanations, but he had no idea what they did. He could have Galau go through the things to find anything that would be useful during the climb. But he suddenly froze after opening a particular box.

Wasn't that the Eye of the Pathfinder Oracle?

Chapter 399: The Peaks

Who would have thought that it was actually Rasuliel Tsarun who coughed up a shocking 78 billion Nexus Coins to buy this thing? Zac had already learned that while the Eye was a precious item, it wasn't worth nowhere such an obscene amount. Galau had explained that it would go for at most 20 billion Nexus Coins in the outside world.

There were many ways to upgrade one's specialty core, such as the pills Zethaya Pill House provided. Those pills cost less than a billion Nexus Coins, a far cry from the shocking amount the Eye ended up at. Most proper heritages with instructions on forming Specialty Cores also came with methods to evolving them, making Zac suspect that Rasuliel wanted the Eye for some other purpose than himself.

Did Rasuliel perhaps have some urgent need for the Eye, prompting him to pay through his nose? That might have been why he visited the Zethaya Clan as well. He might have been looking for help in turning the Eye into some specific pill with the help of Boja or some of his elders back home.

Of course, Rasuliel's reasons for overpaying for the item no longer mattered.

Getting his hands on the Eye meant that he had essentially acquired everything on his list before arriving at the Tower of Eternity. Now he only needed to get out in one piece, and he would have all the tools he needed to burst out with a huge amount of power after returning to Earth.

He finally retracted his mind from the Spatial Ring and refocused on recuperating. The **[Serene Flesh Pill]** did wonders to his body, but then it still took a few hours before he felt well enough to even walk any distance. His wound was still an open mess though, and one could see his body slowly growing new cells to restore the hole in his side.

Zac guessed that it would take a few days for his wounds to close completely, and a few days more for him to regain his full strength. It was an extremely long convalescence for someone like Zac with a huge pool of Endurance and Vitality, but it would have been even longer if it wasn't for the pill.

There was an unmistakable aura of a strong Dao in his wound that slowed down his efforts to heal up, but he wasn't as helpless as when Mhal infected him with the Draugr samples. He was slowly grinding down the foreign Dao with his fragments, and it wouldn't be long before all of it was expended.

His Spirit Tool Robes also had mended themselves by this point, which at least blocked the grisly sight of his wound. He got up to his feet with a grunt and returned to the campsite, only to find Ogras leisurely sipping wine from one of the dozens of vats he had bought during the past week. Galau still sat and stared despondently into the great beyond, and didn't even give Zac a glance when he returned.

"He's still out of it?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Sheltered brat, all despondent after a little bit of mayhem," Ogras snorted with some derision before he turned to Zac.

"Now, can you explain what the hell happened? The plan was for you to buy some healing pills. How did that turn into you tearing down the Pill House of an ancient clan and ripping the head off this poor bastard?"

Even if the demon appeared unbothered on the surface it was obvious he was a bit frazzled by the events as well. He looked back and forth between the headless body of Rasuliel and Zac, clearly trying to get a grip on the situation.

Zac sighed as he recounted the whole encounter from the moment he entered, adding on his own speculation about Rasuliel being from one of the ousted families of Earth. He didn't hide the fact that they came from a newly integrated planet since he felt Galau deserved to understand the situation after having been dragged into this level of trouble.

"What' you're progenitors? But what about.... Wait, he's from the Tsarun Clan?" Galau cried when he heard about the

identity of the corpse. “Oh, Mommy.”

“You know about them?” Zac asked curiously and a bit accusatory. “I still don’t know why he targeted me, do you have some sort of feud with them?”

“Ahem...” Ogras coughed. “It’s the Tsarun, remember? Calrin’s old friends?”

Only then did Zac remember why the name was so familiar. It was the old Clan that had worked on stealing Calrin’s Mercantile License for centuries. If that man knew who Zac was, then it would explain his hostility. Who knew how much time and effort clan had spent only for Zac to foil their plans inadvertently.

“I wonder how that Tsarun guy could know that I was the one who helped Calrin though,” Zac muttered. “It looked like he knew right away.”

“Who’s Calrin?” Galau finally asked.

“A merchant targeted by the Tsarun clan fled to my planet, I gave them a place to stay in exchange for a part of his business,” Zac shrugged.

“So you had already made that clan your enemy even before you came here?” Galau blankly asked, looking ready to barf. “Those guys are extremely overbearing. Their patriarch is dead-set on elevating their clan to a peak force, and they don’t shy away from any means. They’re almost bordering on turning into an unorthodox force, but they stay just within the limits to not get targeted.”

“Yes, I didn’t expect them to be here, or that they’d find out about me,” Zac shrugged. “Do you know how that’s possible?”

Galau’s distraught eyes focused for a second, but a frown slowly crept onto his face.

“I don’t know either. The world is full of mysterious skills and arrays though. Do you wear anything bought through that store they were targeting?” he asked.

Zac considered for a few seconds before his eyes turned to the defensive ring given to him by Calrin. Ogras’ eyes lit up as

well as he looked down at his hand.

“I’ll punt that little blue bastard over to the next island next time I see him. Did he do it on purpose to make us complicit?” the demon muttered with annoyance before he wryly smiled at Zac. “I think our plan of feigning ignorance and handing over Calrin in case we meet the Tsarun elders is ruined now.”

Zac could only snort in response. Ruined felt like an understatement after killing one of the young masters of the clan.

“The real issue is how you’ll deal with this. Remember, we’ll only be inside here for a day. By that point those guys might have amassed a small army outside to welcome our return,” the demon added.

“Well, can’t we just zap out the moment we leave the tower?” Zac asked. “It’s a shame to leave so early, but there’s no option. The 60-second limiter should have passed by now, right? Or maybe we can even leave right here?”

“We can’t leave the Tower straight to our homeworld,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “You can only use the token to leave the Tower, then you can use it again to leave this dimension. And I don’t know how it works for us. This situation is outside my general knowledge.”

“Maybe if we climb high enough they’ll back off?” Zac ventured. “Or at least hesitate long enough for us to teleport out?”

“Wait!” Galau suddenly exclaimed as he turned to Zac looking like a drowning man finding a glimmer of hope. “Pretty Peak is in the Base town! Can you ask her for help?”

“Pretty Peak? Who the hell is that?” Ogras said.

“The Peak family of the Allbright Empire!” Galau explained as he pointed at Zac. “He clearly has a connection to them, and they are both strong and overbearing enough to make the Tsarun Clan back down. Even the Zethaya might give them face if they know you are related.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zac said, and he wasn’t lying. “Who are the Peak family?”

“Your bracer,” Galau said. “It is no doubt made by someone from the Peak family. They utilize a unique crafting method that’s easily distinguishable if you know what to look for.”

“So that spiel about the fear in our eyes the other day was all dogshit? You simply recognized the bracer this guy wore and figured we were strong?” Ogras snorted.

“Well... I did not really lie. I simply didn’t explain all my reasons for employing you,” Galau coughed before his face once again was marred by despair. “But what good did my planning do? No one will believe the authenticity of my climb after having seen your rampage. You will no doubt reach the sixth floor, perhaps even conquering it.”

“Tell me what you know about the Peak family,” Zac said with interest, ignoring the complaints of Galau.

He had held back on mentioning Greatest and Average since he didn’t want to expose his connection to them, but it looked like it was for naught. Galau had known about it since the start, and had even used the connection as a measure of his strength.

“It’s a unique family in the Allbright Empire. It can’t really be called a clan since there are only a hundred members or so in the family. But all of them are crazy strong. The patriarch of the family is Ultimate, one of the four Marshalls of the Allbright Empire. He is a friend of the emperor himself,” Galau said.

“What about Pretty? Is she Ultimate’s daughter?” Zac asked.

“No, grand-daughter. Her father is Strongest, the eldest of the three sons of Ultimate. The other two are Greatest and Fiercest,” Galau said.

“What’s with these names?” Ogras snorted.

Zac kept asking a bit about the family without making it obvious who in the family he had a connection with. It turned out that the Peak family actually lived in the capital of the Allbright Empire, but most members were out battling. Greatest had headed to the Red Sector in order to find dangerous criminals to fight.

The Red Sector was apparently one of the more remote zones of the Allbright Empire, and bordering it was a large unclaimed sector with a huge number of spatial anomalies. It made both teleportation arrays impossible to construct while also making it extremely dangerous to travel with Cosmic Ships.

This had turned the sector to a mostly lawless no man's land where unorthodox forces, pirates, and other dangerous people hid. The Allbright Empire often launched assaults on the area, but it was an absolute rat's nest that was almost impossible to completely cleanse.

Apart from the Allbright armies, the Red Zone was also rife with bounty hunters and mercenary squads hoping to make a killing inside the unclaimed territory. The numerous anomalies created a unique atmosphere that regularly gave birth to valuable treasures. Sometimes extremely valuable items were even spat out through a spatial tear, coming from god knows where.

It was in that chaotic space that Greatest sought to hone himself through bloodshed.

Zac suddenly remembered the conversation between Greatest and Average. He had mentioned asking the Red Emperor to allow Average to enter some Eternal Legion. Was the Eternal Legion one of the punitive armies that regularly tried to clean out the pirates and other scum in the lawless zone?

Zac's mouth turned upward slightly when he imagined that gaudy teenager being forced to fight ruthless pirates or crazy cultists while still at F or Early E-Grade. Even strong E-Grade warriors should be at risk there, as people who had the ability to traverse between planets should be very powerful.

He wasn't all too worried about his safety though. Greatest's family was a lot more impressive than he had imagined, and there was no doubt someone hiding in the shadows making sure that Average didn't actually kick the bucket.

But Zac knew that just because he had met those two during his Hegemony trial, there was no way that he could completely rely on them to clean up his mess.

“I truthfully have no connection with that family. I only got this bracer through a chance encounter,” Zac said. “I had never heard of Pretty Peak before today, so I doubt that she would extend a hand to help with our situation.”

Galau looked completely crestfallen, but Zac was internally delighted. Greatest was from a force far stronger than he had expected, with multiple C-Grade powerhouses in its ranks. Perhaps he could ask this Pretty for a way to save Earth from the Great Redeemer.

Chapter 400: The Law of the Land

The problem was that Zac's connection to the Peak Family wasn't all that deep. It was simply a chance encounter between himself and Greatest. Perhaps they would have lent a helping hand if it was before, but now he had a bulls-eye on his back due to the quest.

It was one thing for them to stand up against a solitary D-Grade warrior, but another thing entirely to create enmity with all the forces in the Base Town in order to protect him.

"We'll just have to play it by the ear. In case we get split up later, remember to stay until the time runs out, so that we all exit this place at the same time," Ogras said as he walked over to Galau. "Get up, there's no time to waste."

"You are from a recently integrated planet so you don't understand just how troublesome people you've offended. We need to figure out a way to make amends!" Galau said as he finally dragged himself back to his feet.

"We won't apologize to those assholes. Why was it so hard for them to sell one puny healing treasure?" Ogras snorted. "I say good riddance. Seeing how they acted they would just have caused problems for us even if we cowered in their presence. Might as well be proactive and kill them first."

Zac nodded in agreement. He wouldn't have acted the way he did if it wasn't for the Splinter in his mind, but he was pretty annoyed even without it. That guy wanted Alea to die out of pure spite, even though they had never met before. All because some unverified clue that he had some connections to the Thayer Consortia.

"Anyway, let's get going," Zac said after throwing the demon a nod in thanks for the support. "How do we get to the next

floor?”

Galau looked at Zac incredulously, obviously shocked at how uninformed he was. Ogras wasn't as surprised of course, as he was the source of everything Zac knew about the tower.

“The Tower contains various challenges, and which challenge you will encounter at a specific floor varies. The only way to completely prepare for a climb is to be good at everything, which is of course impossible,” the demon said.

“Challenges? Like what?” Zac asked with interest.

Zac hadn't actually bothered to learn too much about the tower itself until now. He had been so consumed with finding all the things he needed for himself, Earth, and Alea in the Base Town. Ogras had already mentioned that you could brute-force your way through the tower, but he needed to know how things worked now.

Besides, it wasn't like Ogras was a wellspring of information. Getting anything out of the demon when it didn't benefit him was like squeezing water out of a rock.

“It can be anything. It can be passing an array, like you did at the Pill House, finding a treasure, identifying the source of a curse, saving someone,” Ogras explained and listed a handful of other challenges the demon himself encountered.

Zac frowned since his skillset was quite limited. He had a basic understanding of arrays, but that was about it. How the hell would he dispel a curse or complete a summoning ritual for a departed ancestor? He knew nothing about pill concoction, tracking, or any other of the myriad side occupations in existence.

“Don't worry, The Ruthless Heaven's always leaves a path of survival,” Ogras smiled. “There is a second option, one that suits you better.”

“Oh?” Zac perked up.

“Just blast through everything. Might over technique,” the demon grinned. “There is always the option to just kill something instead of completing the quest. It might sometimes be a bit unclear just what needs to be killed though, so make

sure you think it through before you start swinging. Killing the wrong person might have odd consequences.”

Zac sighed in relief. It was just like the System to provide a back-up solution like that, it truly preferred violence over shrewdness.

The three finally got ready to leave the glade they wound up in, and Zac put the headless corpse of Rasuliel into his Cosmos Sack after some deliberation. Perhaps it would come in handy for some reason when they emerged from the tower.

“By the way, what was the reward?” Zac suddenly asked with some morbid curiosity as they walked. “What was my life worth?”

“One free level.”

“One free level? That’s it?” Zac asked incredulously, and he even started to feel a bit insulted by the System.

“That’s a huge reward!” Galau said. “I’ve never heard of such a big reward before at Base Town. It’s usually things like clue crystals that provide hints on how to complete a single quest, but yours is simply one free level.”

“Oh, so a level for the tower? Still, what’s the big deal if you get to one level higher?” Zac asked.

“Because it might allow you to completely skip the final challenge of a floor. Over 90% of all trail takers get stuck at the final challenge of a floor since the difficulty is way higher there than the earlier levels. Blasting past that trial will get you fame, rewards, and a better title,” Ogras explained. “Just look at Reoluv. If he managed to kill you first he would reach the fabled 8th floor rather than being stuck on 7th. It’s the difference between once a decade genius and once a millennia genius. I’d be tempted to take you on right now myself if you weren’t such a monster.”

Zac only rolled his eyes in response, but he suddenly realized that Ogras wasn’t just messing around. The demon was subtly telling him that the quest was still active. And while Galau felt like a slightly hapless youngster he wouldn’t be here unless he was an elite.

It wasn't unthinkable that Galau would try to kill him sooner or later, as that would not only let him pass another level, but it might also allow him to survive the storm that was no doubt brewing outside the tower. If Galau presented his head to the Zethaya or Tsarun Clans he might even get a huge reward.

"Well, thank you for your restraint," Zac quickly answered, adding half-jokingly. "I guess I will have to sleep with one eye open."

The three walked through the tranquil forest for the better part of an hour, and interestingly there wasn't a single predator in sight. He did spot a level 20 bird, but it was pretty small and kept a wide berth from the three.

This was of course fine with Zac who was in no fighting condition at the moment, but it was a bit confusing for someone who had been primed to fight some peak F-Grade boss to complete a trial. Zac was just about to ask what was going on when the scenery changed.

The forest gave way to cultivated farmland that stretched out across the horizon, and a small farming village could be seen in the distance. The whole scene felt extremely calm and idyllic, but Zac was dragged out of his reverie by a prompt from the System.

[The Village of Whittlecreek of the Bravorian Kingdom has lately been subject to an increasing number of raids from Fallen Goblins. Find out the source of the new threat.]

"Did you get the prompt about Whittlecreek as well?" Zac asked curiously.

"Yes, this is our first trial," Ogras said as he pointed at the pastoral village in the distance. "I guess it can be categorized under information gathering. Let's head over to the town first."

"Is there anything else I should know?" Zac said. "The people in the town, for example. Are they real?"

"That's a subject of some debate," Galau said, finally getting into the spirit of adventure. "Some believe these people are real, but others say there are simply illusions or lifelike

puppets created by the System. They do all give Cosmic Energy when killed though, which give more credence to the first theory.”

“The Ruthless Heavens can simply provide energy itself though,” Ogras interjected.

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering how the System had provided Cosmic Energy for destroying robots back at the Technocrat Incursion.

“That’s true,” Galau nodded, before turning back to Zac. “The reason that a large group believes these are just puppets is that they simply ignore all comments about the Tower or the world outside. It doesn’t matter what you do or say, these villagers will truly believe they are from Whittlecreek in the Bravorian Kingdom.”

“The people are also never surprised to see or hostile against other races, like they don’t even know that a huge golem or a humanoid fish is standing in front of them. The villagers would still welcome Mr. Azh’Rodum even if the quest was to rebuff enemy demons,” Galau added.

Ogras had introduced himself using the name of the demon town on his island rather than his true last name even before they entered the tower, and Zac guessed he had done the same when prompted by the system. The demon still didn’t want any clues about his situation leaking back to the demon hordes in case it would bring trouble to either his grandfather or Earth.

There was also the issue of Karmic threads and other troublesome skills. Not using your true name wasn’t a foolproof plan, but it did make various types of information gathering slightly harder. That’s was another reason Zac chose to use his alias as well, apart from sending out a hidden signal to his mother in case she was listening.

“So how would we normally complete a trial like this?” Zac asked.

“This is the very first level, so it should be possible to complete quickly,” Ogras said. “I would guess that there is a

clue in the town itself that would allow us to complete the trial, or at least give us a clear hint of where to go.”

“But that’s the hard way, what about defeating the guardian or whatever?” Zac asked.

“The guardian would probably be the boss of the Fallen Goblins, and we would no doubt find out where he is soon after entering the town,” Ogras said. “Completing the normal way would be to find out why the Goblin tribe moved here. My guess is that a rival Country is trying to weaken them by tricking these vermin to raid the farmlands.”

Zac looked over at the talkative demon with surprise. It sounded like he had thought everything through, and already formulated a plan. He even seemed to have an in-depth understanding of the mechanics of the tower itself, which allowed him to infer hidden clues.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “Remember, I was a lot weaker last time I was here. I wasn’t even level 60, so I focused on gathering intelligence rather than fighting. The guy I hired was a bit of a meathead, so I had to help out where I could.”

“What?” Galau blurted out. “Why would you head here so early?”

“I was bored,” Ogras shrugged, clearly not interested in divulging his precarious situation back in his old clan.

Zac kept asking questions as they walked over toward the town, and Ogras simply told him to play the part. It made things easier if you inserted you into the setting in a believable way. In this case they would say they were warriors who had come to look into the newly emerging threat. That way the villagers might be more inclined to share information with them.

He also underlined that they shouldn’t attack random people. It could quickly make things get out of hand. For example, it might garner the ire of some nearby nobleman of the Bravorian Kingdom who would rush to the village for revenge, and such an individual wasn’t necessarily within the

expected strength of the floor they were on. Many climbs had ended early due to cultivators taking too large liberties while inside, where they took the opportunity to act despicable while out of prying eyes.

After all, no one would ever know what happened during a climb unless they retold the story themselves.

“But why would the System design such an elaborate place like this?” Zac asked. “Why not just present a series of increasingly strong opponents for us to fight? This place must cost an insane amount of energy to keep running.”

“Have you heard about the origins of the System?” Galau asked.

“Of course, the Limitless Empire created it to nurture warriors for their war,” Zac said.

“Exactly. The System has changed a lot since that ancient era, but its main prerogative remains. It needs to create powerful warriors. You shouldn’t see this place simply as a trial to get a good title, but as a training ground to hone your skills,” Galau explained. “Everyone who comes to the Tower is an elite the System has deemed worth nurturing, and this whole place is a massive incubator.”

“And I am not talking about your Skills or your Dao. This place teaches you to think,” the youth added. “That’s what I believe, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“You can look at it this way. Most people who come here are from established factions. They might have good insights and high attributes, but they have lived generally sheltered lives under the protection of their elders. I have no doubt that you as a progenitor have seen far more battle than almost any warrior you encountered in the Base Town,” Galau said.

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense. There was no reason for a clan to throw their youths to the wolves to grow like he did. It might create one or two powerhouses, but most would end up dead. Almost no one was willing to rear their young generations like that.

But that also meant that they turned out like Average, people having the technique but not the grit to make it through a harsh battle.

“It seems you understand. The Tower throws you into a large number of unfamiliar situations, allowing you to gain not just experience in fighting, but also how to solve various types of situations you might encounter in the future. The things you learn today might save your life in a Mystic Realm in the future,” Galau finished.

Some excitement started to well up in Zac’s heart as he listened to Galau’s explanations, and he couldn’t help but look forward to the trials now.

Until now there had only been a fight for survival, where he was thrown into one perilous situation after another. Now he could relax and enjoy some exploration and adventure, all while honing his skills.

It was nice to finally get a breather.

Chapter 401: Taboo Origins

Kenzie exhaled with a tired sigh as she waited for the drones to return to her side. Jeeves was doing all of the calculations when she commanded the flying machines to strike her targets, but the AI ran on her spirit energy to function. Destroying one infusion pillar felt even more draining than using all her Daos to battle for half an hour, even though she didn't even leave the flying treasure.

Ilvere silently gazed upon the destruction, not even bothering to comment as he directed the treasure toward their next target. He had assisted her for her campaign the past two days, taking care of all minor details so that she would only have to worry about the pillars themselves. No one else had accompanied the two out of security concerns.

Kenzie had felt a bit stupid after realizing that bringing the demon general might have opened a can of worms, but the general solved the issue by immediately creating a contract of silence after she destroyed the first pillar. It stipulated that he would keep silent on all matters regarding MacKenzie Atwood, and there was no time limitation. As for remuneration, it was only 1 Nexus Crystal a year.

Ilvere was a trusted general under her brother and Ogras, and she had initially felt it was unnecessary to go to such lengths regarding such a small issue. But the demon had said it was as much for himself as for her as he didn't want his head to leave his shoulders when Lord Atwood returned in two days.

She initially wanted to refute him, but she honestly wasn't sure what the truth was any longer. Her brother had changed during the past months, and she wasn't just talking about the transformation that everyone was forced to undergo to survive in this new environment. He had become harsher, more paranoid. It honestly wasn't impossible that he'd kill Ilvere just to make sure nothing would leak out about their heritage.

Of course, the demon general only knew a part of the truth. She had explained the drones by saying that Zac had found the Technocrat Incursion while in the Underworld, and he had decided to take their technology for himself to protect Earth. It was taboo technology, but things were getting desperate and her brother had made the decision to bear any repercussions by the System for using them.

Luckily for her Earth was somewhat technologically advanced before the integration, and it was impossible for a demon like Ilvere to properly understand the vast gap between the tablets and cars of old Earth and the futuristic drones crammed full of shocking technology. He thought that Zac had put some of their engineers on analyzing the drones before they quickly were deployed into battle, which was of course ludicrous. It would probably take years to reverse-engineer this type of technology, if they ever managed to do it.

As for repercussions, Jeeves assured her there would be none. It was something that her AI was still vague about, but it had on multiple occasions assured her that he would not draw any ire from the System for its existence or actions. She wasn't sure what to believe about that claim though. Her AI was a great teacher, but how could it control what the System would do?

Since Ilvere was in charge of driving the flying treasure toward the next pillar she closed her eyes and focused on one of her training regimens. She formed four thin strands of Dao Energy in her mind and started to arduously weave them together into an ugly braid. It required extreme control of her Dao Energy and it didn't have a lot of applications, but it did help her in various ways.

Braiding her Daos allowed her to take the first step toward fusing them in the future while also helping her to more naturally use multiple Daos while battling. She could only infuse two of her elements into an attack at the moment, but Jeeves assured her a full infusion of all four was possible.

'Can't you help Zac a bit and create a training program for him as well?' Kenzie entreated for the umpteenth time. *'You know he's struggling with this type of stuff.'*

[No. I cannot get involved with him.] the synthetic voice answered as usual. **[I cannot.]**

'But why?' Kenzie lambasted in her mind, her usual caution thrown to the wind due to stress and exhaustion. 'You know he is the best shot for us all surviving. If he fails against the undead we'll all die. Unless you tell me I won't feed you any longer!'

[...]

[Pain. Fear. Loss]

Kenzie's vision suddenly changed to an enormous chamber. Her eyes were instinctively drawn to a large insignia depicting nine horizontal lines of increasingly short length forming a downward-pointing triangle. One vertical line cut straight through the nine lines, splitting the triangle in two, and the ends of the line were sticking out a bit on each side.

There was not much else to see in the chamber. The walls and floor were a pristine white, and the lack of details made it impossible to guess whether they were ten meters or hundreds of meters away.

The only other exception to the endless white was the machine.

The machine was beyond anything she had seen before, no matter if she talked size or complexity. It was built in concentric circles where it formed an upside-down pyramid with its tip pointing toward her vantage point.

Even the small tip that stopped fifty meters or so above her head was over a hundred meters wide, which made it almost incomprehensible just how large the machine was at the far thicker base at the top. The chamber itself must be tens, perhaps hundreds of kilometers in diameter judging by the machine. The construction dwarfed anything she had ever encountered.

Even the Mystic Realm she had spent a lot of time inside recently shouldn't be as big as this single room judging by the size of the apparatus.

The tip of the machine was neither flat nor sharp. It rather ended in thousands of spikes aligned toward her. Each one thrummed with enough power to tear a hole in the fabric of space, and her vision swam from focusing on any single one of them.

Each of the spikes felt like a doomsday device, each one of them containing their own unique way to destroy the world. Four of them actually resonated with Kenzie's soul, making her realize the spikes contained the Daos of Tinder, Loam, Waves, and Gust. But if her Dao Seeds were snippets of a fragment of a grand truth, then these spikes contained the real deal.

Was Jeeves trying to appease her by giving her a hint into her Daos?

A flashing light interrupted Kenzie's inspection and the scene changed to one of utter destruction. The machine was mostly gone, and fragments from the construction scorched almost beyond recognition floated in an empty space illuminated in blue.

Two massive vaulted domes with enormous cracks floated in the distance, each surrounded by a nebula of technological debris. She tried to look closer, but she soon lost sight of the domes as her vision slowly turned away. She realized she was in space as well, slowly rotating from her own momentum.

But the odd sights didn't end, and something even more shocking waited for her as she spun 180 degrees. Endless oceans of lightning covered the darkness of space, creating a spectacle of an impossible scale.

The lightning was too scary and Kenzie felt it contained the power to destroy everything in the world. And its scope was *massive*. She spotted a whole planet being swallowed inside the lightning like a small pebble in a pond, which meant the lightning at least covered an area as large as a whole solar system.

Kenzie couldn't make sense of what happened, and then the scene was over.

'What was that?!' Kenzie asked with shock, barely coherent enough to not speak out aloud.

The magnitude of what she had witnessed was far beyond anything she had encountered so far. It made her remember the Dao Visions that her brother had recounted for her. Such a thing like the machine or the sea of lightning wasn't something someone from their little planet should come into contact with.

The power in that lightning was terrifying. She had no doubt that if just one wisp of lightning from that ocean grazed Earth only a scorched husk would remain. There was something primordial about it, like it contained the wrath of the universe itself.

Your origin? Kenzie ventured when Jeeves didn't directly answer.

[Probably.]

But what does that have to do with my brother or why you won't help him?

[I don't know.]

After that exchange the AI turned taciturn and refused to answer any further questions. But Kenzie was still happy about the result. She had glimpsed what was probably the origin of Jeeves, which was also a clue to finding mom.

That large insignia was the first clue, and she made sure to memorize it properly. The second clue was that terrifying lake of lightning. Was that the System itself descending on the Technocrats? She knew the two forces were at odds, but she hadn't heard of the System actively going against them. It seemed to usually work circuitously by giving quests or restricting the Technocrats in various ways.

Kenzie opened her eyes and resumed looking at the passing landscape since Jeeves wasn't in the mood to talk any longer. These past two days they had been in constant motion, closing one pillar after another with the help of the drone swarms.

However, the next target was likely their last one. The drones were all spent, and they would require at least a week to

convert Cosmic Energy to whatever energy they used to fly about. It was an extremely convenient technology to never require any upkeep, but she wished they just had some batteries they could swap out at this juncture.

It took them two more hours before they reached the pillar by flying at maximum speed. The pillar was the same as all others, an azure beacon of energy left alone in a desolate area. No zombies or other guards were stationed around it, giving them free rein to do what they wanted. It was a bit odd, but it felt like the undead truly didn't care if some pillars were destroyed.

It was due to the redundancies according to Jeeves. Since the undead managed to activate the array a pathway had formed in the sky. That pathway was self-sustaining and slowly filled with miasma by the beacons, and destroying a pillar would only hamper the rate the pathway was filled. It wouldn't stop the array itself. You'd need to destroy the Array Core to do that, and that thing was no doubt in the heart of the Dead Zone.

How such a thing was made was beyond Kenzie even after her intense study of arrays. It was likely a higher-tiered Array compared to the basic ones she had learned thus far. An array surviving even after its flags getting destroyed was no doubt the result of some high-grade technique that might have been unknown to the small Sect where Zac got the information crystals.

Kenzie ordered the swarm of drones to emerge once more and form a circle around the beacon. A high-intensity blast followed, and the next moment the pillar was exchanged with a smoldering crater. Kenzie nodded in satisfaction and recalled her spent drones, but a dozen of them were suddenly destroyed as a female voice drifted across the area.

“So your ilk is still skulking around on this planet after all. Makes sense you wouldn't want to give up that base. But you made a mistake when deciding to meddle with the Empire's affairs. You should know that the conquest won't be stopped for any reason.”

The next moment terrifying energies were released from the ground as another miasmic beacon shot into the sky. In the middle of it a blurry figure floated in the air, teeming with power.

“She’s too strong,” Ilvere said with a frown as he infused the flying disk with a lot of Cosmic Energy. “I’ll try to block her attacks as we flee. Let the young master and Lord Atwood deal with her when they return.”

“Left!” Kenzie suddenly screamed, prompted by Jeeves who had awoken again.

But it was too late.

Ilvere unhesitatingly followed her advice, but his reaction wasn’t quick enough. A lance formed of what looked like crude oil slammed straight into the disk from below, cracking the whole flying treasure in two. Horror filled Kenzie’s heart as they were over a hundred meters into the air.

“Down you go,” the undead woman’s laugh echoed across the area.

‘Help’ Kenzie shrieked in her mind, knowing that she was out of her league.

[Initiating Battle Protocol, full utilization. Time remaining: 1 minute 36 seconds.]

Chapter 402: Whittlecreek

The trio soon enough reached the main gate of the ramshackle wall surrounding the village. It looked like the fortifications were erected hundreds of years ago, but the townspeople had let it deteriorate. The only sign of recent maintenance was a hole in the wall that had been filled with rocks and logs in a clumsy effort to close the gap.

The gate was open, but an old guard gave them a glare as he blocked the path into the town. Zac didn't sense any threat from him, and he could tell that the guard was around level 40 at best. There was also no aura or pressure emanating from him, telling Zac that the old man was wholly unimpressive and likely without even a Dao seed. He was most probably a mortal who had gotten to this point by fighting the local animals and splurging on the occasional Nexus Crystal, and the chances of reaching E-Grade was next to zero.

"Who are you lot?" he gruffly asked as he looked back and forth at the trio with a clear hint of suspicion. "What do you want with Whittlecreek?"

"We're adventurers who heard of the plight of your fair town," Ogras said as he righteously slapped his chest. "We have come to investigate the appearance of those dastardly Goblins."

"Oh, did the guild send you?" the guard said, his eyes immediately brightening in anticipation.

"The Guild? Ah, yes the Guild did send us," Ogras nodded after a brief lapse. "I am sure you've been instructed to cooperate properly?"

"Great! I will inform the Mayor! My name is Keldor, just find me if you need help with anything! I wish you the best of luck," he said as he hurried away toward a large manor at the other side of the town.

Zac gave Ogras an amused glance, not used to his heroic demeanor from before.

“What? Might as well have some fun with it,” Ogras shrugged as they passed through the gate. “Once again, remember the rule. Do not kill innocents inside the Tower. There have been many reports of extremely powerful old cultivators jumping out of nowhere when the normal citizens get killed rather than the targets of the trial.”

“I heard you the first time. Besides, do I strike you like a person that would run around killing people willy-nilly?” Zac snorted.

“Well, not really,” Ogras conceded before he threw Zac a scathing glance. “But you also didn’t strike me as the type of person who would obliterate the shop of one of the most influential forces in the star sector, so what do I know?”

Zac was about to refute the demon but he realizes he didn’t have a lot of leg to stand on. Ogras still wasn’t aware of the whole story regarding the Splinter, so even he must have felt that the whole thing looked like the actions of a madman.

“Well, I am all better now. I won’t do something like that again,” Zac sighed.

“I’m sure,” the demon snorted before he got serious again. “So what do you want to do? Find the Goblins or investigate the source?”

Zac was stumped for a second before he looked around the picturesque town for a bit. It was easy to forget that he was actually undergoing a trial, and that he was inside a mysterious tower in some hidden pocket dimension of outer space.

He hadn’t really considered his tactic before coming. He had just planned on smashing through everything as quickly as possible before going back to Earth. But after having walked past the beautiful fields and having arrived at this place he felt the same sense of calm as when he sat in the courtyard gazing up at the stars the other day.

Those moments of tranquility were hard to come by in his current reality. The moment he stepped out of the Tower he

would have to enter a series of life-and-death battles to take out the last enemies on Earth. But he was now given a hundred days to slow down and adjust his state of mind for a bit.

He knew he couldn't treat the Tower as a vacation, as the higher floors took time to complete, but he also didn't need to rush to the peak. He would be weakened for a while longer due to his wound, so he was in no hurry to rush to the harsher floors.

Besides, he felt that what Galau said about learning to think made a lot of sense. He had been fighting tooth and nail for a year since the integration, but there were still huge holes in his knowledge. He knew a bit about arrays and how to swing his axe, but nothing else. Completing the trials the intended way was a chance for him to actually widen his skillset.

"Are there any benefits to completing levels quickly?" Zac asked.

"Not really, except that it gives more time for the difficult trials further up," Galau said with a shake of his head.

"I thought so," Zac nodded. "Let's try to complete the quests the normal way for now. We can start pushing harder if we notice we're running out of time."

Galau didn't have any objections, not that he had much of a choice. He could go ahead and kill the Goblin Leader if he wanted to, but if he exited the first level without Zac and Ogras, then they would be separated for the rest of the climb. They would have to physically touch every time they stepped into a portal or otherwise their cooperation would end.

"Let's split up," Ogras said as he started to saunter toward what was obviously a tavern. "Just ask around for any clues you can find."

"I will assist... in the tavern," Galau said with a cough.

Zac wryly shook his head in response before he started walking in the other direction. He didn't mind that the two didn't care about the mission as he wanted to get a feel for how the trials worked for himself anyway. He tried to put

himself in the shoes of an actual adventurer who truly had arrived due to the Goblin threat.

Provided that they weren't able to eradicate the whole Goblin tribe with a swing or two with their axe, how would an adventurer go about solving this matter? Zac started to walk up to one townspeople after another, trying to find clues to the situation.

The whole town was full of farmers, and Zac was a bit confused as to why they all stayed in the town rather than tending their fields. But he soon understood that it was due to the goblins who would stream out of the forest and kill solitary farmers when the opportunity presented itself.

They only went out in large groups now to tend the fields once every week, and they had to let the crops fend for themselves most of the time now. A lot of people worriedly talked about weeds and parasites ruining their crop, or that they wouldn't be able to pay this year's tax to the local lord.

Zac was shocked by the reality of it all, and he could understand that there was no consensus on whether these people were real or not. He even tested mentioning the Tower of Eternity and the System, but they truly simply ignored those things like he said nothing at all.

Ogras was proven right as it was no secret where the Goblin Tribe stayed. They had taken up in an abandoned mine some ways' into the forest. The villagers had tried to root them out with the help of their strongest warrior, the Mayor. The campaign ended in an embarrassing defeat, resulting in the mayor still being on bed rest to recuperate.

But no matter who he asked he couldn't find a hint of why the goblins suddenly had arrived. The villagers all assumed that it was simply bad luck, or that the goblins perhaps had been pushed out of their old domain by a rival tribe. They didn't look too deeply into the matter, and most of them seemed to take it as a general inconvenience that would soon enough be sorted by the Lord and the Guild.

Zac sighed in exasperation after having walked around for thirty minutes questioning the townspeople. The base of the

Fallen Goblins was easy enough to find, but he was not one step closer to completing the actual mission. Was he unsuited for this type of work, or was he simply asking the wrong questions?

A sudden movement in the periphery of his vision suddenly caught his attention though, and he flashed over to see what was going on. He had noticed this type of movement multiple times already, but he had ignored it since his danger sense didn't warn him at all.

Sharp pain in his side immediately made him regret using **[Loamwalker]** to move around, and he grimaced as it felt like getting stabbed. His scrunched-up face also had the additional effect of scaring the daylights out of two small children who had been spying on him from behind a large bale of hay.

The young boy who looked no older than five immediately jumped into the bale in an effort to escape, while the even younger girl stood rooted in place like a deer in headlights.

"I'm not someone dangerous, I am from the guild," Zac said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'm here to help your parents."

He felt a bit weird lying to children about who he was, but at least it seemed to have the desired effect as the girl visibly calmed down.

"Mister, are you here to beat up the goblins?" the girl curiously said as she looked up at Zac with big eyes.

"I am," Zac smiled as he tried to remember how to talk to children. "But I am also trying to figure out why they came here in the first place. I don't want any more of them coming here after I've left."

"It's the ghosts!" the girl said with certainty in her eyes. "The grownups don't believe me, but I saw it!"

"Jinny, shh!" the subdued voice of a young boy emerged from within the hay. "We'll get in trouble again."

"What ghosts?" Zac asked with piqued interest.

He didn't know what connection some ghosts had with goblins, but this was the first hint of something out of the ordinary since he arrived here.

"Me and Bulb were visiting the tower, and we saw a ghost! Then the goblins came not long after," the girl exclaimed.

"Jinny..." an entreating voice emerged again as a snot-nosed face popped out of the haystack.

"We are not allowed to go into the forest, but we snuck out when the grown-ups were busy," Jinny said with a low voice. "We saw the old man ghost in the tower! He looked like a bad man."

Zac started to understand what was going on after a round of questioning. These two kids had gone exploring the forest while their parents were out tending the fields roughly two weeks before the goblins first appeared. They had happened upon a large tower, and they saw what they believed was a ghost walking around its base.

The sight had scared the wits out of the children, and they had immediately run back to town to inform the villagers. Eventually the mayor and few of the townspeople went over to scour the area, but they came up with nothing. The parents thought they were lying, and simply punished the two for going into the dangerous forest alone.

"Thank you for the information," Zac smiled. "I will make sure the ghost doesn't cause any trouble."

The kids enthusiastically nodded before they skittered away, and Zac walked over to one of the villagers to ask about the tower.

It turned out that the tower was once a part of the defensive line of the Bravorian Kingdom, but the country had expanded its borders 300 years ago. The war transformed Whittlecreek from a border town to a safe village in the heartlands. The guard tower was abandoned soon enough, and it had stood in the mountains untouched for centuries without causing any trouble.

Zac couldn't be sure, but it certainly sounded like the clue for a simple mystery fitting to the first level of the Tower of Eternity. Armed with this knowledge he turned to the saloon, where he found Ogras chatting up a cute farmer's daughter working double as a waitress. Galau wasn't as talkative, and he rather seemed determined to drink himself into oblivion.

A full barrel of some locally brewed liquor was placed next to him, and Zac saw that it was half-emptied already.

"How does buying things work here?" Zac asked curiously as he sat down opposite them with a groan.

"Nexus Coins," Ogras said with a grin. "But you will usually not be able to bring anything outside."

"Usually?" Zac asked with piqued interest, almost forgetting why he came here.

"It's a gamble," Galau said with slurred speech. "It's a small chance anything you find is real."

Chapter 403: Questing

Zac slowly nodded. It was messing with his head a bit not knowing whether everything around him was real or not. From what he had heard so far it was both and neither. He also briefly wondered if his high Luck stat would skew the ratio of real to fake items in his favor. Perhaps he would walk out of here an extremely rich man.

Or perhaps the System would decide Zac hadn't suffered enough turned all his items illusory.

"Things here also have their own pricing. Sometimes a precious item might only cost a tenth of what it cost outside. You can take a gamble and buy it, and you might make a fortune when you exit," Ogras added.

"Is there any way to discern what's real and what's fake?" Zac asked with interest.

"Nope, not that I know of at least," Ogras said with a shrug. "Perhaps some factions know of a method, but why would they share such a thing with the masses? Oh, the rewards from completing a floor are always real as well."

"Eat it," Galau burped from the side, drawing a confused look from Zac.

"If you find something useful it's best to use it immediately if you can. Everything is real while you're still inside the Tower. The Ruthless Heavens will not reach into your belly to pull the item out," the demon said.

Zac nodded in understanding as he ordered a huge dinner. He wasn't in a rush to head to the tower since Ogras was happy idling about Galau seemed intent on finding the bottom of the barrel. There was still some time remaining on his weakened state brought on by [**Hatchetman's Rage**] anyhow, and the nasty wound in his side still pained him.

“I think I found the clue, by the way,” Zac said as he gorged himself on a huge flank steak.

“Oh?” Ogras said, clearly disinterested.

Zac sighed at the lackluster response, but he still carried on and explained the situation with the tower.

“Sounds like that’s it,” Ogras nodded after hearing the description. “We can head there after finishing things on this end.”

That was fine with Zac as having walked around the town had caused his wounds to flare up again. Taking it easy while he recuperated was just what he needed. The three only set out two hours later, at which point Ogras was forced to carry Galau who had drank himself into oblivion.

As expected of the first level they didn’t encounter any trouble finding their target. It was the only building on the desolate mountain, and it rose almost a hundred meters into the air. Along with the guidance of Zac’s Automatic Map they found the place in no time.

The demon threw the still-sleeping Galau on the ground and showered him with water from one of his canteens, making him wake up with a sputter. The scene made the demon snicker before he started to scout the area.

“There’s no one here,” Ogras said as he looked around. “That wizard guy you mentioned is probably long gone.”

Zac nodded and the three walked inside the dilapidated tower. Nothing seemed to be out of place. In fact, the place was pretty much picked clean, and the only residents seemed to have been a bear and a bunch of birds judging by the droppings everywhere.

The base floor contained a couple of side-rooms holding nothing, and the only path led upward. Zac immediately headed for the stairs, but he only got a few meters before he was stopped.

“Wait,” Galau spoke up and pointed at a dark corner. “There’s an array hiding a set of stairs leading downward.”

“How do you know?” Zac asked curiously.

He liked to believe that he had some attainments in spotting arrays after his time trapped during the hunt, but he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary at all. That a depressed and still half-drunk merchant managed to find something he missed was a bit humbling.

“I have a pretty decent inspection skill,” Galau conceded. “I mainly got it to help me discern whether items I wanted to buy were fake, but it sometimes comes handy in other situations.”

Zac nodded in understanding and the three walked down, their descent spearheaded by Ogras. The demon would have to do most of the heavy lifting while Zac was on the mend, but it shouldn't matter on the beginner floors.

The area at the foot of the stairs was in a lot better state than the levels upstairs that were pretty much reclaimed by nature at this point. The dust was swept away, and it looked like someone had lived here recently. There were both bedding and a table with some scribbled notes, but Zac couldn't read it.

No one was there though, meaning the wizard or whoever the children had seen had likely left some time ago. The three only needed to look around for a minute before Ogras found a hidden passage, and they proceeded even further down to find a hidden chamber that was directly cut into the mountain foundation.

There was only one item in the room, a golden crown lying on a pedestal. The crown seemed to be a bit small for a human's head, but what was most concerning about it was that a black mist that formed hazy fractals slowly swiveled around it. It might be a spirit tool, or the fractals might be a defensive array inscribed into the pedestal.

“It seems to be a cursed object,” Galau said with a frown as he looked at the crown. “We might be abl-.”

However, he didn't get any further as a cannonball slammed into the crown with enough force to almost tear a crack in space. It was Zac who scouted out the thing in his customary

manner. A loud snap could be heard before a distant wail entered their ears.

A sinister aura spread across the room, but it was quickly crushed when Zac unleashed his Dao Field from his Seed of Trees. The sinister atmosphere only lasted for a second before the basement returned to its original state.

The metal ball had completely crushed the treasure and the pedestal it lay on. The fractals were forcibly broken as well. Galau looked at the scene of destruction mutely, before he slowly turned to Zac with an incredulous expression. The demon sighed from the side, but he didn't comment.

"I... I was about to say that we might be able to cleanse the item, allowing us to take it with us. If it turns out it's a real treasure we might have been able to make some money..." Galau said with a wry smile.

Zac coughed with some embarrassment, feeling he had committed a rookie mistake. He even opened up his wounds in his eagerness to help out, which made him feel doubly stupid.

"Well, it's just some random trinket at the first level," Ogras shrugged. "Even if it turned out to be real it would be worth a pittance at best."

Zac nodded in agreement, before looking around in curiosity.

"What now? Do we need to kill the Goblins as well?" Zac asked.

Ogras was about to speak when a hidden door suddenly slid open in the wall opposite them, showcasing a lit hall inside. The three immediately walked inside and found a platform that looked just like the entrance to the tower itself.

"Is that it?" Zac asked, and he couldn't help but feel some disappointment at the lack of excitement.

"The first floor is essentially a tutorial floor," Ogras smiled. "Anyone who has gained the requirements to receive a token should have no trouble completing it. Almost half of all climbers finish the second floor as well."

"Then why the carries if it is so easy?" Zac asked.

“The problem comes from the third floor,” Galau explained. “The final level is especially tough for the average elite. Many are willing to buy the carry just for that trial alone. A few might have been able to complete it themselves if they went all-out, but they would rather pay a few billion to guarantee a reward and the better title.”

Zac nodded in understanding and the three stepped up on the platform, and it immediately started to hum into life. He looked back toward the stairs they came from, and it was a bit unsettling knowing that the whole world he had just visited might just cease to exist since it had fulfilled its purpose.

The next moment he found himself sitting by a table in a rowdy tavern, with Ogras and Galau joining him. The other customers were almost all some sort of beastkin, resembling panthers a bit with their golden eyes and black fur. The occasional humans and elf-like humanoids could be seen as well though, meaning the place they found themselves in wasn't completely homogenous.

Most of the beastkin seemed like warriors rather than the farmers in the last floor, and pretty much everyone was decked in armors and some manner of weaponry. A few of them almost looked like a walking arsenal as they were covered in daggers, swords, and anything sharp they could carry.

Even though they looked pretty ferocious Zac still sensed they weren't too strong, perhaps around level 50 or so at best. He would personally place them at the same strength as the Valkyries. Zac guessed they actually wouldn't meet any peak F-Grade warriors until they reached the final level of the first floor after having seen the average strength of the first two levels.

[The Kingdom of Eyrvar has launched a quest to clear out the Fungal Depths of Lake Varia. Claim the riches in the depths before the mercenaries or the Royal Army.]

“Lucky,” Ogras said with a whistle. “A treasure quest.”

“How's that lucky?” Zac asked with confusion. “Aren't most of the treasures fake anyway?”

“Well, yes. But if you snatch a whole hoard of items, then chances are that at least one or two of them is real,” the demon explained.

“It seems we’re not the only ones after the treasures though,” Galau whispered as he listened in on the conversations on the neighboring tables.

“Excuse me,” Ogras said as he walked over to the table next over with a large cask of the local liquor he bought from a waiter. “We just arrived to the area and heard about the quest. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Sit down, lad,” the mercenary said, his eyes peeled on the jug of liquor.

“Why did the kingdom give suddenly give such an order?” Ogras said, feigning interest.

“The depths are crawling with those goddamn monstrous crustaceans. They would rather waste our lives than their own in clearing it out,” one of the men said with a snort. “Rumors are there is an evolved alpha leading the swarm.”

“Crustaceans? Like big lobsters?” Ogras asked with confusion.

“More like crabs,” the mercenary explained. “Nasty pincers and sharp legs. Pretty smart too.”

“So why are there so many taking up the quest if it’s so dangerous?” the demon probed.

“The pearls,” another man said after taking a huge swig. “It’s no secret in this area so I might as well tell you. Some clams produce magical pearls in the lakes at the bottom of the caverns. Those pearls can be used to prolong your lifespan. Each pearl is worth a pretty penny, and you can keep what you find according to the kingdom.”

“I see, thank you. We will have to think about if we’re ready for something like before heading down,” Ogras nodded ‘thoughtfully’ as he turned towards Zac’s table. “Oh, by the way, when will people start the mission?”

“Tomorrow,” a beastman burped. “That’s why we’re getting drunk today.”

“Let’s go,” Ogras said with a loud voice to Zac and Galau.
“We are behind these people. We need to gather provisions and weaponry if we want to join tomorrow.”

His words elicited a couple of guffaws from the beastkin who kept drinking contentedly. Zac and Ogras followed the demon out of the tavern, and they found themselves in the docks of an alien port city. A few enormous ships were anchored a few hundred meters out to sea, and dozens of smaller vessels could be seen sailing back and forth.

A constant bustle was taking place with people coming ashore or embarking, even though it was the dead of night. Zac whistled with appreciation as he looked around. Was this what Port Atwood would look like when it advanced? He had been afraid that the use of naval ships would decrease as people became stronger, but perhaps that wasn’t necessarily the case.

“What gear would we need for something like this?” Zac asked with some confusion as he turned to Ogras. “Doesn’t sound too complicated.”

“Of course we don’t need to gather gear from some shabby store here,” Ogras snorted. “I just wanted to head out immediately without arousing suspicion. Do you want to let those animals get their paws on our pearls?”

“It could be some basic specimens of [**Longevity Clams**] they were talking about,” Galau added thoughtfully. “Their pearls can be used in concocting pills that improve longevity just like he said. Each pearl is worth millions on the outside. Tens of millions if their quality is good enough. We’ll make a great profit if even a handful of the pearls are real. We’re pretty lucky to get a scenario like this.”

“Lucky, yeah...” Ogras said as he shot Zac a pointed look.

Chapter 404: Remuneration

Zac understood what the demon was inferring. Was his uncommonly high Luck Attribute finally starting to bring him some fortuitous encounters? So far his Luck had mainly been helping him stay alive from ambushes, but he had long known that the attribute could also increase the chance of lucky encounters.

His Luck had increased from 149 to 182 after gaining his two Fragments, which wasn't a small boost. It meant that he also had passed the old attribute limit of the F-Grade, 175 points. Perhaps that came with some new boosts as well? Zac couldn't tell, and there seemed to be no one that knew how it worked in his surroundings either. Even Alyn only had a hazy knowledge of the subject, and his attempts at getting information packets on the subject had failed. So Zac could only speculate, apart from the fundamental knowledge that higher numbers were better.

It didn't take a lot of effort for the trio to learn of the location of the so-called Fungal Hollow. It was a region a few hours north of the town where a river caused a large section of brackish water. A mid-sized mountain rose out of the ocean in the middle of the delta, and that mountain contained the Fungal Hollow.

The group wasted no time as they pushed north, using the moonlight for sight as they ran along the coast. They passed a few fisherman's villages immediately after exiting the town, but soon enough the coastal line turned completely desolate. It was probably due to people not daring to live neighbors with aggressive crab beasts who could emerge from the depths at moment's notice.

The moon and its luster reflecting on the ocean waves were the only sources of light until they finally saw a few large braziers burning in the distance. The flames came from the fortress that

the kingdom had built to keep a watch on the river inlet and to both counter the crustaceans and to stop any enterprising pirates from sailing inland.

The moment they saw the flames Zac knew they were close, but they didn't continue to the settlement ahead. Zac instead took out one of his Creator Vessels from his Cosmos Sack, and they immediately set sail. Galau seemed to be a bit confused by ship, as the Creators had actually put the insignias of the Allbright Empire on them to mask their true origin. But he didn't bring it up, and Zac didn't bother to come up with some excuse.

Zac hadn't expected to use the boat for its intended purpose, but he had rather been inspired by Alea's tactics. The Creator ships had blown up half a town with the help of their offensive arrays in the battle with the undead, making them a great offensive tool. Their hulls were also extremely sturdy to survive the beasts of the sea, making them good shelter in a bind.

But now it came in handy as it allowed them to reach the mountain reaching up through the muddy water without giving away their actions to the royal army. Infiltrating the mountain didn't prove much trouble either, and they smoothly proceeded further and further down into the depths of the mountain hidden by Ogras' shadows.

The interiors of the mountain reminded Zac a bit of a miniature version of the Underworld, as there was a mix of tunnels and caves large enough to house small villages. But instead of molemen the caves were half-submerged in water and crawling with crabs that were up to three meters tall. But Zac could see that the beasts were even weaker compared to the mercenaries, though there were far more crabs than beastmen. Only a couple of swings of [Verun's Bite] would be needed to decimate a whole cave.

But they didn't want to start a battle because that might alert scouts hiding on the mountain, so Ogras led them through a confusing maze of tunnels in their descent. Now and then they were unable to proceed without walking perilously close to the

crabs, but with the help of Ogras and their array disks they could slip past without raising any alarms.

It only took them half an hour to reach the bottom, which was an enormous cave that seemed to lead out to the ocean. There was a shallow and crystal-clear lake covering most of the area, and the three immediately spotted their target. Quite a few crabs were walking about, and they noticed that the largest crabs were actually eating the clams, shell and all.

Perhaps the clams and their precious pearls could help the crabs to evolve, or at least level up?

But the so-called crab king was nowhere to be seen, and Ogras soundlessly killed the few dozen crabs in the cave before they sealed the exits with sound-proofing arrays. After that they had free rein to loot pearls to their heart's content.

Even Galau seemed to finally get over his despondency due to his life plan going awry as he cracked open one clam after another to look for a pearl. There was an almost manic gleam in his eyes as he arduously forced open the shells and It made Zac think of Calrin. He had to admit the squirrely young man had the right temperament for a merchant.

Unfortunately for Galau, he traveled with two people far stronger than him. He had the will but not the power to loot the treasures in front of him. It took him almost twenty seconds to force open one of the sturdy clams, but Zac simply crushed them with a twist to extract the pearl within.

Ogras wasn't as strong, but he managed to poke holes in the shells with pinpoint accuracy, allowing him to take out the pearls without even forcing open the shells. In the end, it was Zac who came out a winner, claiming almost half of the pearls, with Galau barely getting a fifth of them.

The moment the last pearl was extracted a prompt sounded out and a teleportation array appeared by a bank of the subterranean lake. Seeing how easily they completed the floor Zac better understood that things weren't quite equal for everyone who entered. Getting a suitable floor quest could both make and break someone's climb. If it was Zac climbing

alone the second level would have played out pretty differently.

He would have no doubt been spotted soon after entering the mountain, and then he would have been forced to fight his way down to the treasures in the depths. Perhaps even the kingdom on the other shore would be alerted, turning the situation extremely chaotic.

Considering they were still only on the first floor Zac would no doubt have been able to blast through all resistance without breaking a sweat, but it might play out differently on the later floors. He could only pray that his high Luck would overpower the animosity the System seemed to have toward him, giving them suitable challenges at the end of their climb.

The following levels went quite smoothly where they completed one quest after another without encountering any real trouble. They didn't rush at all, but it still only took them 3 days to reach the 9th level. Galau's mood had gotten noticeably better as time went, and by this time he had mostly recovered from the shock.

He even seemed to be a bit excited about the prospect of having befriended a future powerhouse, often reminding Zac to come to him in case he wanted to sell loot from mystic realms or the like in the future.

The ninth level placed them at the foot of a mountain, and the quest was to defeat the Bandit Lord who had made the peak his home. It was the first time the quest directly told them to do battle. The other 8 quests had been possible to complete with only minimal battle, with the option of finding the floor guardian to kill instead.

In fact, they had barely fought at all during the first eight levels. Only a few unlucky sentries had been taken out so that they could complete the quest the intended way.

Climbing the first floor had given Zac a good grasp of how things worked, and he realized that it was always better to complete the quest than killing the floor guardian. Following the quest almost always taught a valuable lesson or led to

some sort of treasure, whereas killing the guardian would make you miss that opportunity.

The treasures might turn out to be fake in the end, but the gained knowledge was real, and Zac vowed to only kill his way out of a level if he really couldn't figure out the quest.

"I can take charge of this one," Galau suddenly said as they ascended the mountain, showing unusual proactivity.

"What's going on? Have you accidentally eaten some stimulants?" Ogras said as he shot the merchant a suspicious stare. "What if you faint again and get yourself killed?"

Galau deflated a bit, but he mustered his courage as he stuck out his chest.

"You have done most of the work, so I should contribute a bit as well," Galau said.

Zac smiled a bit, somewhat understanding Galau's thoughts. He was no doubt a bit cowardly, but he did have a good heart. He wanted to help out and prove his worth during the climb, but he knew that they soon enough would encounter challenges that might prove too dangerous. So he wanted to knock out a few floor guardians early to shore up his contribution.

"That's nice of you, but that's okay," Zac smiled. "Days have passed without me fighting, and I could use the exercise. I get a bit antsy if I don't fight for too long."

"Unless you want to see him rampage again due to lack of bloodshed? You missed most of it last time," Ogras snorted. "It's quite spectacular."

Galau paled as he looked at Zac like he was a dangerous animal before he restrained himself.

"Well, I will simply stay back and support then. It is good to exercise a bit as you're recuperating. But remember, moderation is important," Galau coughed.

Ogras only rolled his eyes as they continued up the mountain.

"But that brings us to another topic," Galau said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“What’s that?” Zac asked as he looked around for hidden traps.

“Our original agreement was for you to help me reach the thirtieth floor so that I could convince my elders to let me start a business. But now that your extraordinary might have been put on open display, that has ruined any chance of that happening. In other words, shouldn’t we revisit the issue of... remuneration,” Galau said, his voice getting lower and lower as he saw Zac and Ogras stop and direct emotionless stares at him.

“I agree,” Ogras eventually said, getting a surprised glance from Zac. “The price you quoted was for a carry by two unknown cultivators. But now you are hiring one of the most famous youths in the sector. How can 3 billion be enough?”

“Wh-“ Galau stammered. “I- I just realized it would be bad form to change the terms mid-climb. I apologize for bringing the matter up.”

“If you say so,” Ogras snorted.

The three reached the peak soon enough and found a weathered fort take up a large part of it. There was only one way to enter unless you climbed up the sheer wall, but that would no doubt leave you exposed to bandits staying in the base.

“You guys stay here,” Zac said as he openly walked toward the closed gate.

What he said earlier was partly true, there were a few things he needed to confirm. First of all, he was simply curious about the power of a floor guardian. He wanted to personally fight all of them so that he would be able to give helpful pointers to the people of Port Atwood. As far as he knew he was the only one who had a token so far, but as people started to reach level 50 more would no doubt get the chance to come here.

And even if no one from Port Atwood got a token there were still Thea and Billy, both of whom should qualify for this place as far as Zac was concerned.

But the part about needing to fight to avoid losing control was a lie. The splinter in his mind had been completely silent since his outburst in the Pill House, and it didn't even release a smidgeon of the odd energy that usually seeped into his mind.

He was rather worried about something having happened to his skill after having seen the black trees surrounding him as he woke up from his stupor in the rubble of the Pill House. Zac had his guesses what was going on, but he needed to confirm them.

Energy surged around him as he walked forward, and a red array sprung up around the fortress, signaling that he had been spotted. That was just fine for Zac, as he released **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. The scenery of the mountain top started to drastically change as one tree after another started to grow.

The trees quickly rose to over fifty meters in height, and some even started to grow from the wall of the fortress, making it seem that the place had been deserted for hundreds of years. The trees themselves were of a traditional leafy variant with green leaves and brown trunks with bark.

There was one exception though, a singular stout tree that appeared just behind Zac. Its trunk was still light brown, but its leaves shone with a golden luster. Around the tree four white ropes were tied, each of them full of intricate knots. Hanging from the ropes were some unknown talismans, but Zac couldn't recognize the script on them.

It looked like something that fit in an old temple, and it did emit a dense aura of life. Zac's cells swelled to life as he felt one with Nature. It was like he was strolling through his own garden rather than toward some Bandit's lair. Zac looked around and sighed in relief.

It looked like the Splinter hadn't corrupted his skill fractals after all.

Chapter 405: Floor Guardian

The bandits quickly understood that the trees sprouting up everywhere were bad news, and various attacks soared out to destroy them. But the projectiles harmlessly shot straight through, hitting the mountain or sailing far out into the air.

It had taken Zac a while to understand the skill as well, but he eventually figured it out. The trees were mostly projections, a way for his spirit to change the surroundings to suit him better. It created an effect similar to a Dao Field, where he was at his optimal state while his interlopers were somewhat weakened.

The only ‘real’ tree was the tree behind him that provided a direct buff to his Strength and Vitality, providing 10% each without any downsides like [**Hatchetman’s Rage**]. Zac also guessed that the skill counted as being inside a forest, which renewed the boost he got from [**Forester’s Constitution**].

Attacking that tree would work, and cutting it down would cancel the skill. But the tree wasn’t just helpless. Each rope on the tree represented one defensive charge that could be used to protect itself or Zac, allowing it to stand long enough for Zac to come and protect it if needed.

The skill even worked as a detection skill as the trees essentially were his eyes and ears. Anything within his forest was within his purview, and it would take a pretty good stealth skill to move about unnoticed.

All in all, it provided a little bit of everything, helping Zac round out his Hatcherman Class. It wasn’t as flashy as Ogras’ equivalent where he turned into a shadowy angel with his 5-meter wings, but it was a skill that he could always use to gain an edge during battle. Zac also guessed it would be useful in

the battle against the undead, as the golden tree emitted an intense amount of life which might counteract the miasma.

Its functions did overlap a bit with the general skills [**Mental Fortress**] and [**Nature's Barrier**] he had bought for himself, but no one would say no to having multiple layers of defense.

When the bandits noticed that their attacks didn't have any effect they instead focused their attacks on Zac, but it was extremely hard for them to hit him. He was in his own forest now and being one with the surroundings pushed the efficiency of [**Loamwalker**] to new heights, making him seem like a forest spirit that flitted back and forth amongst the illusory trees.

He reached the gate without getting hit once and one swing of his axe cracked the shield and gained him entry.

“Another bounty hunter?” a gruff voice sounded the moment he entered the fortress. “But my head is not so easily claimed.”

Zac immediately sensed some danger and jumped forward, but he was still caught inside a massive explosion. The bandit had used an offensive array like a mine. A snap could be heard from behind as one of the ropes fell from the tree, and a green wind rose simultaneously to protect Zac from the flames.

Zac was a bit surprised a floor guardian would fight dirty like that, but he soon found his bearings as he spotted his target. It was a humanoid who stood almost three meters tall, and the humanoid most closely resembled an ogre, though his skin was dark grey.

There was no hair on his head, and there were four large tusks in his mouth that created a bestial image for the bandit. He was a mix of fat and muscular, with a big belly but arms thick enough to look like trees.

Zac actually felt that [**Verun's Bite**] might be more suited for a being like this, or better yet billy's massive club. But the guardian was unarmed, perhaps only relying on his massive and meaty fists. He wore thick bracers to protect his forearms though, and a couple of knives almost as large as swords could be seen dangling from his belt.

He was also accompanied by a dozen or so bandits who all were of the same race, though they were almost a meter shorter than their boss. The bandit lord tried to slap one of the trees with his massive palm in annoyance and growled when it passed straight through.

“I don’t know why you play with these dumb illusions. It won’t save you,” he said before he stomped the ground, seemingly in frustration.

The area rumbled for a second before a dozen spikes shot up at Zac. Each of the spikes was imbued with some sort of Dao, though only an early seed and Zac was taken a bit by surprise once again. He had thought that the ogre would be a similar class as himself going by his attire, but it looked that he was rather some sort of geomancer.

A large fractal blade grew out in front of the edge of **[Verun’s Bite]**, and it soon enough detached as Zac instructed it to hunt down the bandits while he focused on the big boss. The illusory trees even moved about, forming what looked like an arena that enclosed the two of them.

It was nothing like the cage of his other class, and the bandits could simply walk straight through the enclosure if they wanted to. But it still had its uses. Zac had noted that a higher concentration of trees around him increased his control over the area, making him sense the tiniest fluctuations of Daos or Cosmic Energy. Perhaps getting boxed in like that also negatively impacted the mental states of his enemies, making them feel trapped.

But the bandit didn’t seem bothered by getting “trapped” inside the ring of trees at all, and his beady eyes glared straight at Zac as he summoned a large boulder to chuck at him. It contained the same Dao energy as before, but Zac simply turned the boulder to gravel with a punch.

The floor guardian of the first floor might be the first peak F-Grade warrior he had encountered since entering the tower, but the ogre was far from being a match to someone like himself. Zac only decided to battle because he wanted to take a look at his skill once more, and now that he could confirm

[Hatchetman's Spirit] worked as usual again he saw no need to prolong the fight.

One step brought him in front of the Ogre, but the huge bandit was prepared. A chain of explosions erupted, swallowing the two in an inferno. Zac had multiple ways to defend against such a surprise attack, but since he had his new skill up and running he might as well use it.

Another snap from behind allowed him to be enclosed in nature's embrace once more, and after a brief hesitation he also imbued his body with the Fragment of the Coffin to make sure he avoided his wound opening up again. The flames raged all around him for over ten seconds, making Zac look around in confusion.

Had the bandit lord decided to blow himself up?

But the flames eventually abated, and Zac could once again see the ogre in front of him. He was covered in a layer of rock, and Zac had seen the earth-mages among the demons perform the same trick. The Ogre had found an interesting fighting method that took advantage of the high durability of a geomancer, but how could his Endurance match up to a monster like Zac? He would need a far larger bomb to break through his defenses.

"How are you ali-?" the bandit roared, but he didn't get any further as space split from a swing of Zac's axe.

The body of the bandit lord fell apart into two neatly separated pieces, and a small surge of cosmic energy entered his body before it dissipated once more. The underlings had already been decimated by his Fractal Blade, and it returned to hover around him once more.

Zac released **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, and his two companions joined in short order. Neither of them looked too surprised that the battle took less than a minute, and they stepped into the teleportation array that had appeared in the courtyard of the fortress.

But this time Zac wasn't transported to a new world to explore, but he rather found himself in the black space that

might as well be the System's waiting room. As expected a prompt appeared soon after.

[First Floor Complete. Rewarding Title.]

[Choose Reward: Weapon, Skill Crystal, Nexus Coins]

Zac looked over the three options and chose Skill Crystal after just a second of deliberation. It was just the first floor, so none of the options were likely to be anything amazing. A Skill Crystal might benefit someone back home though, or it could at least be put in the Merit Exchange.

The darkness disappeared and Zac found himself on the deck of a boat sailing on a turquoise ocean. Apelike humanoids scurried around all over the ship, and all of them wore the same type of livery indicating they came from the same force.

A crystal had appeared in his hand and he infused some of his energy into it to see if it was something he could use immediately.

[Frozen Enclosure – Create a sphere of ice that surrounds you. The strength of the shield increases with Intelligence.]

Zac sighed and put the crystal away. He had no affinity with Ice, like all other elements, and it was obviously a mage's skill. It would probably have a terrible efficiency if he learned it, so he didn't bother. His sister might find it useful though as she was an Elementalist. There were only so many skills a Class gave, and this might be a nice addition.

Galau appeared a second later, and Ogras came last after half a minute. Neither of them had very excited expressions, meaning they hadn't made any huge hauls either.

“Didn't think that you would immediately get the title,” Zac commented as he opened his Title screen.

The New title had appeared, and just as expected it was a Permanent Title, rather than a Limited one.

[Tower of Eternity – 1st Floor. Strength +5, Endurance +5, Vitality +5]

“I think it's to lessen the need for a second run,” Galau said.
“It's still worth it to come back here if you make large gains,

or if you were unlucky during the first climb. But the things you gain inside the Tower generally won't warrant another tower run."

"I got five points in three attributes, is it the same three attributes for everyone?" Zac asked.

"No," Galau said with a shake of his head. "It boosts the three attributes you focus the most on."

It made sense. Zac would have preferred some Dexterity or wisdom to shore up his weaknesses, but he knew that the third floor at least provided all attributes. And the fact he got the title immediately worked in his favor. There was no way he would be able to return to this place, and getting the titles directly meant that he would have an even better chance of reaching a higher floor.

"What did you think about the boss?" Ogras smiled.

"The weakest a peak F-Grade warrior could possibly be," Zac said. "I can't believe anyone who arrives here wouldn't be able to defeat him."

"Failing is exceedingly rare, but now and then someone messes up horribly or underestimates the challenge," Galau said. "But failing on the first floor is generally pretty shameful. Not something you'd share with others."

"Things will quickly get harder though," Ogras warned. "Of course, it won't be too bad while we're still on the second floor. But don't get lax."

Zac nodded as he closed his eyes to rest. Even if a couple of days had passed he still felt some lingering pangs from the wound in his side, though he could use most of his strength if the situation called for it. If it wasn't for the pill he got from the Zethaya he would no doubt still be bedridden, and that fact alone made Zac mostly forgive Boje's actions.

The ship soon anchored outside a solitary island, and the tree found out the quest was to look for clues to a hidden inheritance of an 'Ascendant', which was what these apemen called a D-Grade powerhouse after some probing.

“Can we take the inheritance for ourselves?” Zac asked, feeling they had hit the jackpot.

“Quit dreaming,” Ogras snorted.

“Some quests task you with finding clues to extremely valuable items, such as divine treasures or long-lost inheritances like this one. But those are almost always fake. It is a huge gamble to try to snatch such a thing,” Galau started to explain.

“First of all, the inheritance is likely not on this island. We would have to set sail with these apemen for weeks rather than continuing on to the next floors,” Ogras continued. “And when we finally arrive we’ll most likely just find another teleporter to the next level.”

“But it is possible for it to be real?” Zac asked.

“There have been some reports of such things turning out to be true, but the odds are extremely low, even worse than with treasures. It’s only really worth trying for such a thing if you find yourself stuck, unable to climb any further,” Galau answered.

“That’s one of the reasons why people keep pushing themselves to climb even if they know they won’t beat the floor guardian they’re at. Their title won’t improve from climbing another few levels, but they might find an opportunity like this,” the demon added.

Chapter 406: Penalties

The trio soon joined the monkeys in scouring the island, and with the help of Galau's superior investigative skill they found an odd fluctuation beneath a lake. They could have explored it themselves and risked falling out with the simian sailors, but they instead called for the captain who awarded them each with a small sack of E-Grade Nexus Crystals as thanks.

Most of the crystals would most likely turn to dust the moment they exited the Tower, but they would work just fine while they were still inside. So all of happily took the reward as it meant they would save on their own stock.

The following floors went quite smoothly as well, as the difficulty could be easily managed by anyone of them. Zac did however note that the setting of the quests started to subtly change. The quests first floor had all taken place in civilized areas such as towns or established countries, with the exception of the floor guardian hiding on a mountain top.

But that changed with the second floor. The surroundings they found themselves in were more wild and untamed. The first level of the second floor took place on the tropical island, and the seventh was on an island as well. The third level took place in a fallen kingdom where order was rapidly crumbling.

They were tasked with escorting one of the surviving children of a once-great noble house to an ally waiting outside the town, and were ambushed by both rebels and random bandits who saw how richly decked the lordling was. But a blast of Zac's massive and blood-drenched aura was all it took to force them all to run for the hills, allowing them to complete the quest without lifting a finger.

Zac felt he learned a lot from their quests, and he more and more understood the crazy gambit of the Lotus Emperor. He had split himself into 10 000 incarnations to live a multitude of

lives. If this method ever came to fruition and he could fuse his incarnations back into one being, just how deep would his knowledge of the universe become?

The final level of the second floor was a simple quest to save a faltering town bordering a massive forest from a dangerous beast in the area. After asking around they learned it was some sort of recently evolved reptile and that it possessed shocking speed.

“It’s usually like this,” Ogras explained. “The final level of a floor almost always requires a proof of strength to conquer. You can’t just luck into a quest that suits your skillset. Strength is ultimately the true language of the multiverse.”

“The 9th level of a floor requires you to defeat a floor guardian 95% of the time, with the final 5% requiring proof of Strength in other ways,” Galau nodded in agreement. “And be careful, the strength will sharply rise compared to the things you’ve fought so far.”

“It’s only the second floor though,” Zac said, but he still took out his axe just in case.

“That’s true, but the attributes of the beasts are around 40% higher because there’s three of us,” Galau said.

“That much?” Zac said with surprise. “What would happen if I brought 10 people to carry?”

“Nine is the limit, and the floors would be almost three times as hard,” Galau said. “Most carries only bring one or two people. Taking too many might negatively impact your own climb.”

“Wait, will we still be penalized after leaving you on the 32nd level?” Zac asked with a frown.

A 40% boost in attributes wasn’t a problem now, but what if it stayed when he assaulted the 5th and 6th-floor guardians? That would be a pretty huge handicap, and he wasn’t so sure that 3 billion Nexus Coins were worth it.

“Any floor one enters together with others will be adjusted accordingly, even if some people drop out early,” Galau

answered before a hesitant expression entered his face. “I didn’t mention it because I was sure you knew.”

“So we’ll be only be penalized on the fourth floor?” Zac mused. “That’s not too bad.”

He had high confidence in defeating a floor guardian of the fourth floor even if it had a 40% attribute boost, and afterward the penalty would decrease, making it not too difficult bringing Ogras compared to going at it alone.

The benefit Ogras would bring would no doubt supersede a 20% bump in the enemies’ strength.

“Any idea of how to find the beast?” Zac asked after they had walked in the forest for two hours.

“I thought it would show itself since we’ve restrained our auras,” Ogras muttered before he turned to Galau. “You should have something to solve the situation.”

“Ahem... The person providing the Tower Carry generally includes all the materials for the climb itself in the price,” the merchant said. “But I do have some items for sale that might help. Best prices in the forest, heh.”

Both Ogras and Zac stopped when they heard the mention of money, and another standoff commenced.

“But then again it’s just a small trinket,” Galau stammered, clearly feeling the pressure. “Here. Simply place this in an open space. If the beast is near-by it will no doubt come.”

Galau handed Zac a small ball with a stench that made his nose-hair curl up. It smelled like thing contained a mix of old diapers and rancid meat, all pressed together into a ball of unholy horrors. The stench was so unbearable it made him question life, and the only reason he didn’t throw it away was that he was afraid it would break into pieces making the smell even more unbearable.

“What the-“ Ogras groaned, looking about ready to hurl. “I’ll keep watch from the trees.”

The next moment he disappeared, no doubt to escape the smell. Galau was already running as well, leaving Zac with the

hot potato still in his hand. He didn't want to spend one more second than necessary with that cursed object in his hand, so he simply left it on a stone and jumped into some bushes that were just outside of the smell.

At least the ball turned out to be pretty effective, and their target arrived just 30 minutes later.

The beast was actually a large snake rather than a reptile, and his hair stood on its end when he looked at it. He still was a bit emotionally scarred after his desperate battle with a mutated snake during the first week of the integration. He had been way too close to death at that time, and there was still some lingering fear deep in his heart.

The snake was at least not as big as Slither, Verana's pet, as it only reached a bit over ten meters in length. It was a deep brown with green spots on its back, and for such a large snake it was pretty slim. It slithered between the trees with surprising agility, and it reached the puke-ball in the blink of an eye.

An enraged hiss emerged from the snake's maw when it realized that it was just bait rather than whatever the ball pretended to be, but at that point Zac was already running toward it with his axe at the ready. However, the snake turned its head with shocking speed and spat out a green mist that immediately covered a hundred meters in front of it.

Zac's brows rose in shock and he hastily infused his body with the Dao of the Coffin as he held his breath. The mist was clearly poisonous, and Zac frowned in consternation when he realized the mist burrowed itself into his pores even after having activated his defensive Dao.

He was just about to switch to the Seed of Trees to start purifying the invading poison, but he noticed a startling change that made him stop. The Dao of the Coffin might have failed in keeping the poison out of his body, but that apparently didn't mean it was helpless against it. It was actually refining it instead.

The mental energy that was spread throughout Zac's body was attacking the poison like white blood cells, and turning it into normal Cosmic Energy that seeped into his body. In other

words, the Snake's attack was restoring Zac's energy rather than harming him.

Was this the effect brought on from the Dao of Rot? He had already discovered the properties that were akin to those of Hardness, but now he also witnessed the Rot. His thoughts briefly went to the lotus locked inside the coffin in his vision, the basis of his Dao Fragment. Corruption locked in a hard exterior.

So what if the hard shell let poison seep through? The interior was meant as a prison for such things anyway.

The Snake hadn't realized that its wide-scale attack was ineffective though, and it immediately went in for the kill when it noticed that Zac had stopped moving. But a flash of light was all it saw before its massive head was removed from its body. The beast was still too weak to prove a worthwhile opponent for him to hone his skills, so he didn't want to waste any time on it. He was more interested in observing the changes inside his body.

Zac sat down in the middle of the poison haze, and he slowly tried to understand what the Dao Fragment did, and if there were some other benefits it could bring. Unfortunately, he didn't find out anything else, but it was an interesting topic to keep looking into. Galau and Ogras arrived soon after the poisonous clouds dissipated, and the demon immediately headed for the carcass.

"Do you need an antidote pill?" Galau asked as he reached for his cosmos sack.

"No need," Zac said with a shake of his head. "A poison of this level won't affect me."

Galau nodded in understanding, not seeming too surprised by the fact that Zac was fine. Having some means to handle poison was a basic precaution for any wandering warrior, so Galau probably thought he had some skill or treasure that protected him. But there still was some hesitation as he looked at Zac.

"What?" Zac asked.

“Why aren’t you using your shield? You paid so much for it but I’ve only seen you take it out to play with a few times,” the merchant asked. “Are you thinking of repurposing the material after all? I could buy it off your hands, but you would make a small loss.”

Zac blankly looked back at Galau for a second, realizing what he meant. It must truly look a bit odd for him to pay through the nose for the shield only to not use it at all.

“Why bother defending against weaklings like this? Might as well directly kill them to get things over with. Would almost be a dishonor to such a nice shield to waste it on some large worm,” the demon said from the side as he extracted a large sack from the head of the snake.

“The gall bladder?” Zac asked curiously. “Do you know how to make antidotes?”

“What antidotes?” the demon snorted. “I want it for my liquor.”

“You can do that as well?” Zac asked with interest. “Does it have any benefits?”

“It might have some benefits if the wine is good enough,” the demon said after some deliberation. “But I mostly want it for the taste. Haven’t been able to drink any good snake wine for a while. Besides, it better than just stowing it away and hoping the gallbladder is real.”

Zac nodded, understanding that this might go under the ‘eat anything you can while still inside the tower’-umbrella, and left the demon to his devices.

Galau helped Zac extract the fangs and poison sack. The poison wasn’t very strong, but who knew if it would come useful in the future. An array had already appeared in the clearing not far away, and Zac started to walk toward it.

“Wait,” Galau suddenly said, and Zac noted that the demon hadn’t moved either.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Take a look at this,” Galau said as he took out a small array disk.

He placed a Nexus Crystal inside the disk, and it lit up and fired a projectile straight into the air a second later like a firework. It looked a lot like one of those flare guns that you kept on a boat in case you got stuck at sea, and it illuminated the whole area in a blue luster for almost a minute before it dimmed.

“What’s that for?” Zac asked.

“For us to find him,” Ogras explained.

“The change of the third floor is that we will no longer emerge at the same position,” Galau explained. “We will be placed in the same area, but there will usually be some sort of barriers between us. Beasts or cultivators, for example. But it can also be arrays or other things.”

“So you’ll shoot off one of these when we arrive at a new level, and we’ll come to pick you up?” Zac asked.

“Exactly. Blue means no danger, red means I’m in danger. So, uh, if you see a red light please hurry,” Galau said.

“Was this how you did it as well?” Zac asked.

“Pretty much. The guy who helped me had a mother-daughter array that allowed him to find me, and I simply hid in the shadows until he showed up,” the demon nodded.

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said with some anticipation as he walked toward the array. “Perhaps we can finally find some decent sparring partners on the next floor.”

Galau didn’t say anything, but rather just looked at Zac like he was a lunatic.

Chapter 407: Mastery

Sweat ran down Zac's back as he weaved back and forth among the pack of plagued Apes. Their quest was to cleanse the area of corruption, but Zac had found the insane beasts living in the area excellent sparring partners.

The progression through the third floor had gone quite smoothly, but the quests started to become harder. Twice they decided to just find and kill the guardian rather than completing the quest as it was simply more convenient that waste multiple days on a single level of the third floor.

One of the times they had been tasked to lead the defense of a town beset by a beast horde for three days until reinforcements could arrive. Zac had hoped to use those beasts to work on his skills, but they proved too weak to make any real progress. After a few hours all of them were tired of killing an endless deluge of critters who were only around level 50 to 60, and Ogras flashed over to kill the alpha to end the level early.

The other time some knowledge of arrays was needed, and neither of them would be able to solve the problem without spending a couple of days in research. They once more decided to not waste time on such a low level and destroyed the body of the deceased ancestor that the array was supposed to restrain. It made the descendants quite pissed off, but it didn't matter to them as they moved on to the next world through the array.

They had also gotten a chance at seeing Galau's skills in battle, and Zac had to admit that he was much stronger than expected. Due to his timid character and somewhat cowardly nature Zac had always thought that he wanted to switch occupation mainly due to lack of talent in combat. But that probably wasn't the case.

A red flare had illuminated the sky when they arrived at the sixth level, making Zac hurry over with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. He had found Galau desperately fighting off a huge pack of mangy wolves with a large two-handed sword. Both the choice of weapon and the aggressive battle-style created an odd disconnect with the usually timid youth, and Zac could only attribute it to his Clan.

They seemed to be solely focused in one direction in hopes of one day creating a real powerhouse, and all their youth were probably required to follow the same heritage. The heritage itself was one that felt pretty similar to his own battle-style, one of full-frontal assaults and massive swings causing widespread destruction.

The sword even contained a familiar feeling as it crushed rather than cut the beasts, and Zac realized it was a high-tier Dao Seed of Heaviness. Galau had chosen a different path than himself though, so the feeling the swings emitted were slightly foreign to Zac. They seemed to go more in the direction of Ilvere, focusing on momentum and impact.

The scene had made Zac question how someone with such a class would swap into a mercantile class, and the answer was simple. Galau's hope was to gain the option of choosing a traveling merchant class with the help of his year of trading in the Base Town, and the impressive profits he had accrued.

Such a class would be a hybrid class, focusing both on battle and business. After all, one would need the prerequisite power to defend oneself while traveling the endless worlds of the multiverse. A merchant couldn't simply put his life and his goods in the hands of hired guards, he needed some capabilities of his own in case the guards proved insufficient or if they even turned on him.

Otherwise, the third floor was not much different compared to the second. The settings of the quest were quite similar to the second floor, with the differences being the enemies being stronger, and that they started in different locations.

Most average warriors they encountered were between level 60 and 75, and the level guardians were all recently evolved

just like the snake of the second floor. The three had continued to push through the levels at a rapid pace, and only stopped their progress at the 8th level at Zac's insistence.

His body was finally as good as new, perhaps even better than usual as the Splinter was still completely silent in his mind. That together with the setting made Zac confident that he could finally make some progress with his skills. He had essentially spent the first two floors as a vacation to decompress from the constant running back and forth on Earth.

It was only after he had slowed down in the Base Town that he realized he was tired to the bone. Stress and trauma had accumulated on top of each other, but he had simply pushed it deep down as there were too many things that only he could handle. And if he didn't, then people would die.

Besides, the enemies were too weak for him to be able to push himself at all, which made it pretty much impossible to improve his skills. Simply activating a skill over and over wasn't enough to improve the proficiency of the skills. It was as a lot more efficient to find insight in the midst of battle.

And the monkeys were simply perfect sparring partners.

The corruption they were supposed to root out had turned them extremely aggressive and almost as tireless as zombies, and their bodies were sturdy enough to take a beating without dropping. Best of all, there was a huge number of them occupation the valley, so the risk of him running out of targets in the short run was quite slim unless he unleashed **[Deforestation]**.

A punch imbued with murky energy ripped toward him, but he effortlessly redirected the force downward with his palm, giving him a huge opening to cut the beast's head clean off. The edge of **[Verun's Bite]** was already by the throat of the monkey, but it only left a shallow cut before Zac backed off again.

The monkey became doubly enraged after having been toyed like that, and a burst of black energy rose from its sturdy frame.

Zac felt he had thought about the Dao in a too shallow a manner until now. He had considered them almost the same as a skill, a boost that would make his active skills more powerful. But the Dao was so much more than that. The Dao was the deeper truths of the universe, what everything was based on.

This was something he had realized after talking with Galau over the past days. The youth wasn't some great warrior, and neither was he from some peak force in the sector. But his family could be considered a strong Peak D-Grade force with hundreds of D-Grade warriors, and they had a rich warrior culture.

The way the youth spoke about the Dao was a lot deeper and more reverent compared to Zac, like it was the basis of everything. Even worse, Galau hadn't strictly said it, but he had indicated that if Zac didn't get a deeper grasp of the Dao, then he risked getting stuck in a bottleneck. Or even worse, create a shaky foundation for future cultivation.

This was something that Zac absolutely wanted to avoid, but he somewhat knew the reason for his current predicament. For one he came from a world recently integrated, and the Dao wasn't an ingrained part of his life yet. But more importantly, he had advanced too fast.

Not only that, but he had also done it mostly through artificial means. Some of his insights came from battle, but it was mostly his skill visions and treasures that had propped up his Dao through unnatural means.

His situation with his Dao insights was akin to Pill Toxicity as he saw it. He had eaten too many 'pills' related to the Dao, and while he had gained a tremendous burst in power in just one short year, it had damaged his foundations. He felt he needed to get a better command of his Daos if he wanted to keep smoothly progressing in the future.

Having a lacking understanding of his own Daos would not only negatively impact his fighting prowess, but it might hamper him in all kinds of ways.

Alyn often talked about the importance of a foundation. The most important part of becoming a successful cultivator was taking things one step at a time, and not hurrying for quick gains. Moving too quickly might inadvertently cut your path of cultivation short, as you find yourself having created a cracked foundation that couldn't support your continued progress.

Luckily there wasn't any actual toxicity in his body, he was only suffering from progressing too quickly. The problem was easier to solve than such a troublesome matter like actual pill toxicity. He would simply have to slow down his cultivation as soon as he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

He would take a couple of years to digest everything he had learned since the start of the integration and stabilize his foundations while shoring up his weaknesses. It would slow down his progress, but it would probably also quicken it in the long run. Besides, wasn't there some time to do it now?

He kept the Fragment of the Axe active in his axe as he tried to pry out all the secrets it contained. The words written at the beginning of his guide to formations felt all the more poignant as he marveled in the feeling of man and axe becoming one.

It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as Alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.

It was not that his skills became stronger by infusing them with the Dao of the Axe. The skills themselves were part of the Dao, and imbuing them with the truth of their origin allowed them to exhibit their real power.

Or something like that, Zac couldn't be too sure.

But he felt he was on the correct path, and he kept at it for hours, a lone human fighting a sea of enraged beasts. The church that had 'hired' them for this mission stayed outside the valley, as the corruption could affect people as well.

However, Zac had found that his Dao of the Coffin had no trouble refining the energy just like with the poison, grinding it down to unattuned Energy that was expelled from his body.

Zac suspected that if he wasn't stuck in a bottleneck he'd even be able to use the cleansed corruption to open up nodes, though he would have to sit in this valley for years to absorb enough energy for a single node.

But Zac felt it was an important distinction. He might not be able to absorb Cosmic Energy like a Cultivator, but he could perhaps build his own system. He could get himself poisoned on purpose, and then slowly convert the poison into energy.

He wasn't sure if it was efficient enough for it to actually be worth the time and suffering, but it was worth keeping in mind. For now, he let his Dao Fragment passively course through his body as he focused on the axe.

There would be time to work on the Dao of the coffin after they had left Galau on the 30th level.

He had considered swapping over to his Draugr form in this secluded valley, but he had eventually decided against it. He really wanted to try his two new skills, but he still didn't have a too great a grasp on Galau's capabilities. The Allbright nobleman might be spying on him at this very moment, it wasn't like he had the ability to know if that was the case.

He had already drawn a large enough target on his back from his actions, and he didn't want to tack on the fact that he ran around with two classes. Who knew how the reaction would be if that got out to the forces waiting in the Base Town.

It didn't mean he had nothing to do just because he couldn't work on his Undying Bulwark class. His primal axe kept sweeping along the aggressive monkeys following a set pattern, switching between sweeping arcs meant for widespread destruction, and quick jabs meant to maim or grapple enemies.

It was the method provided by [**Axe Mastery**], and he had been working on pushing that skill toward the peak the past day. He was swapping between using the training fractals to guide him for an hour and then trying to apply those tactics in battle against his extremely willing sparring partners.

The monkeys were luckily extremely fearful of his Dao Field for the Dao of the Coffin, likely because it could destroy the corruption in their bodies. The moment he unleashed his Dao Field, which now had a diameter of over a hundred meters if he pushed it, the monkeys would run for the hills.

Pushing Axe Mastery to the peak was probably not something that would help him in the tower, but it was still something that needed to be done. It was proof of a basic grasp of his weapon, and something that would positively impact his class choices. How would he get a good axe class if he couldn't even be bothered to max out his most basic axe skill first?

His efforts paid off soon enough, and a prompt told him that he had finally reached the peak of the skill. A familiar sense of pressure in his mind made Zac's eyes lit up, and he quickly flashed away from the valley while he blasted his Dao Field at full force to deter the monkeys from following him.

He found a secluded spot and put multiple layers of arrays down before he sat down and closed his eyes. The skill had actually provided him with another vision, and Zac's heart beat with excitement as he let the vision take him away.

Chapter 408: Creation

A warrior drenched in blood swung his intimidating two-handed axe, causing a wave of destruction to ripple outward. The attack created cascading explosions that cleared out a large swathe of rabid rats that tried to drown a town. There were millions and millions of them, but the axe warrior stoically took down one swarm after another.

The vision changed to a wiry warrior with two jagged hatchets who created blur with his frenzied swings in the arena. The swordsman desperately blocked one strike after another, but he was soon drowned in the avalanche of attacks. One of the hatchets snuck behind the guard and cut off the swordsman's arm, and from there the result was a foregone conclusion. The arena erupted in cheers as the Hatchetman held a decapitated head in the air triumphantly.

A man donning a gentle expression sat beneath a tree in a glade, carving an intricate figurine with the sharp tip at the edge of a grisly war axe. One could have thought he used a small engraving knife judging by the intricate details of the wood carving. But a snap of the twig brought the man out from his reverie, and he looked up to see a group of beasts encroaching on his domain. The congenial face was instantly swapped with one of fury, and the axe started to drip with blood as he lifted it toward its targets.

The warlord laughed maniacally as she decapitated one warrior after another with a swing of her axe. She had some time ago forgotten how to use a shield as she was consumed by her bloodlust, and she instead used it to cave in skulls or break bones. Her axe keened with its master's glee, and the two created a song of madness and fury as they roved the battlefield together.

One scene after another flashed past Zac's eyes, showing all kinds of axe-wielding warriors in the midst of battle. Some

relied on raw strength while others on speed as they launched furious swings at their enemies.

Some had fused their axework with various elements, often ones rife with destruction. Flames and blood were common traits, as were wind. But one of the more powerful warriors shown actually seemed to use insight into the Dao of Space as his swings could pass right through a mountain to hit the target hiding on the other side.

There were also some unexpected usages of the axe. One vision showed a man wielding what looked like a halberd like it was a massive paintbrush, and he drew large fractals in the air with the weave of his weapon that unleashed massive attacks. Another one used hundreds of small flying axes that rapidly spun around him like a swarm of angry wasps.

There was a clear inclination toward certain types of elements and styles of battle though, which Zac felt made sense as not all Dao's fit equally well with the characteristics of an axe. Some had created successful systems that stood out from the norm, but most followed the pattern of a blood-soaked warrior, just like himself.

However, Zac started to frown when he didn't sense any insights coming from the barrage of visions. He was starting to wake up and it was usually at this point that he would incorporate the visions into his Dao, pushing it one step further. There was no resonance and no Dao Stars descending on him to push his fragment to middle grade. It was almost like he had just watched an action movie.

It was cool, but it didn't connect to him on a deeper level. Zac kept trying to grasp onto something to spark an epiphany, but he reluctantly had to give up after an hour after the vision ended. He looked up with a frown, unsure what had gone wrong.

Was it because of the Tower?

He had already known since the start that improving one's Dao within the tower was pretty much impossible. Time dilation cut one's connection to the 'heavens' as Ogras explained it,

and Zac immediately understood what he meant after his first real battle.

There was usually a resonance to his actions when he fought, like his moves and attacks contained a deeper truth. But that was completely missing inside the tower. The Daos still worked just fine, but everything felt hollow for lack of a better word. This didn't affect the strength of the Daos or his skills, but it was simply impossible to move his Dao Fragments forward this way.

It was so bad that he was even pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to gain anything after exiting the Tower. He had initially thought he could fight a couple of harsh battles inside the Tower, and then ponder on the fights outside. But he had already realized that this was likely a fool's dream.

There were no sparks of insight born through battle in the tower, and the Dao was clouded for him. And perhaps this was what had ruined his vision bestowed from his class. Had he missed the opportunity to push one his Dao Fragments to middle grade because he had pushed one of his Skills to the Peak while inside the tower?

It would be extremely frustrating if that was the case, but Zac had some reason to believe that there was something else in play. Ogras had already said that you could benefit from things such as Dao Treasures while inside the tower, even though the effect was worse than outside. The Treasure itself contained Origin Dao, which allowed him to move his Dao Seeds forward even inside the time chamber provided he had the necessary insights to match.

It should have worked the same way with the Vision, as it was an epiphany brought by his class. But there was not even a hint of pushing his Dao forward, which made Zac a bit suspicious there was another possibility. What if it wasn't a Dao vision?

The skill [**Axe Mastery**] was essentially a basic training skill that would allow him to gain a fundamental understanding of his weapon, and reaching the peak meant that he had completed the basic training course. But that didn't mean he had mastered the art of the axe.

He was still just a beginner, a brute who fought more with his attributes than any sort of mastery of his weapon. What if the vision was a way for him to gain inspiration as to how to move forward from his basic mastery. It showed him various masters who had forged their respective paths with the axe, opening a world of possibilities for him.

That might have been the first step in attaining the Fragment of the Axe if one followed the normal proceedings. He would first master [**Axe Mastery**], and from the vision gain inspiration on how to improve his combat further. That would eventually lead to an insight that could form a Dao Fragment. But he had skipped this normal path due to his access to all the Origin Dao on Earth and the Dao Funnel.

Or perhaps he was simply deluding himself to make himself feel better, Zac thought with a sigh. But he felt he wasn't all that far off from the mark with his guess. He would have heard about a second vision by now if there was such a thing as the Mastery-skills were extremely common.

He wasn't in any mood to ponder on his Daos or the Vision any longer in either case, and he instead took out one of his information packets instead. He perused them a little whenever he was free or when he needed to clear his head. This time he once again looked at the package that broached the subject of Arcane Classes.

The restrictions for attaining an Arcane class still felt distant even after gaining his Second Dao Fragment due to the lucky encounter with the calamitous Lotus. The most basic requirement was a Medium Mastery Dao Fragment, but that was just the start.

Zac had until recently felt that achievements wouldn't be a bottleneck for someone like him. He had achieved almost the impossible by rising up as a terrifying Progenitor who had snatched up most of the titles on Earth. Not only that, he somehow had gained dual races and classes, pushing his power and attributes to shocking levels.

Those advantages had snowballed into a list of achievements that would probably even shock the scions of the powerful

clans in the Base Town. How many would be able to close multiple incursions in a week, while fighting all alone?

However, Zac had been thinking about achievements too shallowly. The most important facet of gaining the fabled rank of an Arcane Master is not defeating strong enemies or accumulating a large number of titles. It is about creation, about a spark of genius that opens up new avenues.

Zac grimaced when he reread the snippet from the information package he bought the other day. This seemingly innocuous paragraph almost felt like it was targeted right at him. It would appear that the largest bottleneck to gain an arcane class wouldn't be his Dao Fragments, but rather this part.

What is creation? It is about leading rather than following, a desire to push boundaries further and reach a higher sky. If you simply follow a Heritage to get stronger you have likely already failed. Each Arcane Master is unique, a genius across the eons.

How can one reach the peak by mindlessly following others?

The words resonated deeply with Zac, and he was doubly thankful that he had come to the Tower in the end.

Until now he'd kept moving forward with a reactive mindset. He had been thrown into this messy reality unwillingly and had tried to make the best of the situation one decision at a time. He had tried to be proactive when he chose his Undying Bulwark Class, but his lack of knowledge had still made it backfire a bit.

He was still pretty sure it was mostly fine though, as it was obvious that he could steer the class in other directions more suited for his cultivation path.

It was only after meeting Yrial he got a proper cultivation path and started to think about cultivation from a long-term perspective as well. But even then he simply followed Yrial's path and modified it for his two classes. His master had walked the path of a cycle, and Zac followed in tow without thinking too deeply about it.

That wasn't to say that his path of life and death was bad. He still felt it was the by far best option considering his unique situation. But was there really a need to create a cyclic change as Yrial did with fire and ice?

He needed to figure out something that would be perfect for himself if he wanted to have a shot at an Arcane class. Or was the path he had devised already good enough to be considered a 'creation' as the information packet described? Zac's instincts told him that wasn't the case.

But try as he might, Zac couldn't just conjure a unique path out of thin air. His foundations were too shallow for something like this. Perhaps the old Abbot could do it as he was obviously a great genius in the Dao of Karma, but Zac wasn't talented in that way. He could only pray that getting pushed to the limits over the following months inside the Tower would open a path for him, something great enough in the System's eyes.

For now, he would focus on what he could do. His skills were the most obvious apart from getting better acquainted with his Daos. He opened up his skill window the first time in a while to take a look.

Normal Skills	Proficiency	Description
Inquisitive Eye	Early	See through their secrets. Upgradeable
Book of Babel	-	Enlightenment through understanding.
Mental Fortress	Late	Enduring Stability. Upgradeable
Thousand Faces	-	If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable
Nature's Barrier	Late	Brave thousand

		storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable
Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill	-	If only this skill could fix your face as well.
Class Skills	Proficiency	Description
Axe Mastery	Peak	The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.
Chop	Peak	There is greatness in simplicity.
Forester's Constitution	Middle	Man and Nature, one entity. Upgradeable.
Loamwalker	Late	Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.
Nature's Punishment	Peak	Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.
Hatchetman's Rage	Late	Burn with the vengeance of a forest fire. Upgradeable.
Deforestation	Middle	Their army is the forest and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable
Hatchetman's Spirit	Early	Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.

He had to admit his success was pretty varied and random. He was still only on Middle proficiency at **[Forester's Constitution]**, but he had already reached Peak with **[Nature's Punishment]**. Meanwhile, **[Cyclic Strike]** wasn't

even added to the list because he hadn't even reached early proficiency yet.

Zac had also been shocked to see that Hatcher's Rage had skipped Middle proficiency entirely to jump to late-stage after his rage-out at the Zethaya Pill House.

It seemed that his Splinter had greatly assisted him in his skills related to anger, as many of his recent gains had come from the Splinter pushing his rage to new levels. First, it was witnessing Alea falling in battle, and then it was the battle in Base Town.

Even Deforestation had jumped one grade, which had to be considered a great speed of advancement since he had only used the skill a handful of times.

It was great that the splinter also provided some benefits, but made him slightly leery. He didn't want to rely too much on anger when fighting, even though it boosted his strength. But rampaging was what beasts did, and Zac didn't want to prove Ogras right by turning into an actual Netherbeast. He felt he had at least a decent head on his set of shoulders, and he should try to apply it to his fighting.

Or was he better off leaning into the anger?

Chapter 409: Fermentation

Zac quickly discarded the thought of letting his anger take the wheel. That felt like a great way to become a raving lunatic, especially with the splinter still in his head. He would gladly take the upgrades it provided him, but he didn't want to rely on it any more than that.

The splinter only helped with a scant few of his skills though, and a few other skills showed disappointing progress. Inquisitive Eye was still stuck on early proficiency, which didn't really surprise Zac. He no longer used it since it had essentially become superfluous for him. There was no point in using it on weak enemies, and strong enemies were too powerful for the skill to work on them.

He had tried to purchase the ocular skill Galau used, but the youth didn't possess the actual crystal. He had bought the skill from a Skill House on his home planet, which essentially was like an open Dao Repository.

Warriors short on cash could spend some time working in conjunction with the inscribers of the Skill House to produce skill crystals, and the remuneration would depend on the quality of the skill and the number of uses the crystals contained in the end.

The subject of Skill Crystals had always made Zac a bit confused, especially the high price they commanded. He had always wondered why they weren't cheaper. Couldn't you just copy the skill a thousand times and sell it across the multi-verse? Such a thing would no doubt push the price down from the exorbitant prices they had today.

But it was through Galau he finally realized that creating skill crystals was extremely arduous. First, it needed the owner of the skill to have completely mastered it. Just reaching the peak of the skill wasn't enough, one needed to know its ins and outs

completely to the point that it almost came like breathing to them.

Secondly, it required a skilled inscriber to translate the insights of the warrior into an inscription embedded in the crystal. The two had to work together for months, sometimes even years for high-grade skills, to create the crystal, creating a huge opportunity cost.

Of course, this process could be somewhat sped up if the inscriber and the warrior were the one and the same. In fact, many wandering cultivators learned the basics of inscriptions for this very reason. If they ever found themselves hard on cash they could spend some time refining a skill crystal or two. It wasn't as good money as hunting powerful beasts, but it also didn't put your life at risk.

Some even traveled the multiverse collecting popular skills in order to learn them and resell crystals at other planets for a profit. The fact that skill crystals usually only lasted for a couple of uses guaranteed a constant demand as well, as long as the skill was strong enough.

Inheritance crystals like the one in his Dao Repository were far rarer, and they required extremely expensive materials to not deteriorate after a skill fractal was extracted. It also required a peak D-Grade inscriber at the least, and it wasn't something some hobby inscriber could create. The Inheritance Crystals in the Tower of Myriad Dao was no doubt the result of a labor of love that took the original Brazla centuries to complete.

As for the other lacking skills like **[Forester's Constitution]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, Zac wasn't really sure how to progress them. Forester's Constitution had only upgraded once, and it was while he ran through the corrupted forests of the Dead Zone. Since then there had been no improvements in the skill, making Zac believe it might need constant exposure to various forests to progress.

Unfortunately, that wasn't something he could train on command, and he could only hope that some of the following levels would take place in locations that would benefit the

skills. As for **[Hatchetman's Sprit]**, he had no idea how to improve it just yet.

For now it looked like he was done with his training session, and it would probably be more efficient to delve deeper into his Daos on the higher floors. Zac got back to his feet and quickly made his way back to the small town some distance from the valley that the Church had turned into a temporary command central.

"How goes the investigations?" an acolyte standing guard asked as Zac approached.

"I think I may have found a lead," Zac answered off-handedly. "But I need to confer with my associates."

"That's great!" the acolyte exclaimed. "Your colleagues are currently meditating in your courtyard."

Zac nodded and walked toward his courtyard, where he found Galau going over the haul from the past floors while scribbling in a book. His focus was so great that he only noticed Zac's return when he stood right next to him.

"Oh? You're back?" Galau asked. "Are you taking a break or are we done with this level?"

"I have accomplished what I needed here. I will probably go higher if I want to improve my other skills," Zac said.

"Where's Ogras?"

"He's out back with the barrels. He might actually have a talent for brewery," the youth said.

"Who knows?" Zac smiled. "He might change vocations as well."

"Did you find anything about the corruption?" Galau asked.

"I found a spot in the valley with much denser energies compared to the rest, the source is probably around there, but we might need your eyes to pinpoint the source. I also have an idea of how to deal with it," Zac said as he walked toward the back of the house.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned to Galau.

“Are you familiar with mastery-skills?” Zac asked.

“Of course, why do you ask?” Galau asked with confusion. “I have the [**Sword Mastery**] due to my class.”

“I just reached peak proficiency and was shown a bunch of visions. But I didn’t gain any Dao insight from it. Is that because of the Tower?” Zac asked, some worry creeping back into his heart.

“Dao vision?” Galau repeated before he shook his head. “No, the mastery skill doesn’t provide that. The visions simply give various examples of how you can further your studies, but it’s not required to follow. If you have a Heritage you’ll simply follow that instead.”

Zac sighed in relief, realizing he had been correct with his guess. He thanked the youth and went around the back of the building the church had allocated for them.

“What the-“ Zac exclaimed the moment he walked around the corner, as the whole backyard was filled with over a dozen massive barrels, each holding hundreds of liters of liquor.

“Just how much did you buy in the Base Camp?” Zac asked with shock as he walked up to a vat to smell the fragrance.

“Half of it was bought inside the Tower, remember the 21st level? It was dirt cheap over there,” Ogras smiled. “I am experimenting and trying to improve my odds of keeping my stuff.”

“How’s so?” Zac asked with interest.

“Refined items have a higher chance of staying in your Cosmos Sack when leaving this place, but I have no skills in refinement. So I throw various things into the vats to see what will happen,” the demon explained and pointed at the bottom of the large vat in front of Zac. “Look inside.”

Zac threw Ogras an amused look before he peered into the bottom of the massive container, and his brows rose when he realized just how wasteful the demon was. Apart from a few handfuls of various Spiritual Herbs they had picked up along the climb there were dozens of small shimmering balls lying at the bottom.

“Are those the longevity pearls we found?” Zac said with surprise.

“Yes, that is now my ‘Ten-thousand-year wine’. I am sure it will be a great hit,” the demon said with glee.

“You know people will think that the wine has been fermented for ten thousand years if you call it that?” Zac snorted.

“Exactly, which will allow me to charge me more for it. Not my fault they don’t know their wine,” the demon shrugged.

Zac was about to refute, but he honestly didn’t know what to say. Instead, he could only change the subject to why he came back here.

“I’m done with things here,” Zac said. “I think I will need to find real enemies if I want to improve my other skills. What about you? I haven’t seen you working on your skills at all.”

“I got my class twelve years ago. Even if I was hiding my amazing talents from my family, most of my skills would have reached the peak by now,” the demon said with a roll of his eyes. “Only the new skills I got at level 75 remain, but those will not improve because I activate them among some trash monkeys.”

Zac nodded and took out and looked at the Tower Token. It had been inside a fortified bag that ran along the small of his back the entire time, as it wasn’t possible to put inside a Cosmos Sack for some reason. It was a truly mysterious item. He had clearly crushed it to arrive at this place, but he found it back on his waist in perfect condition when he arrived at the Base Town.

It looked mostly the same, with one side covered in inscriptions. But since he entered the tower there was also a small corner that said how long he had stayed inside. It was written in some general script that was widely used across the multiverse. Zac still didn’t really master the language just yet, but he at least knew the numbers.

Twelve days had passed since they entered, meaning roughly 3 hours had passed in the outside world. Had things calmed down on the outside now, or was a whole army already

stationed and waiting outside the tower? The bounty had remained on his head all this time after all according to Ogras.

“I know that look,” Ogras snorted as he placed a heavy lid on one vat after another before he stowed them away in his Cosmos Sack. “Just focus on the climb. We can’t do anything about what’s going on outside, apart from climbing as high as possible.”

“You’re right,” Zac sighed.

The three set out from the town in short order, and Zac led them to the area where he had found the high concentration of corruption. Zac kept his Dao Field out at all times as he was tired of fighting the monkeys, and they arrived at the spot uncontested. But when they were a few hundred meters from where Zac guessed the source was Ogras stopped with a sour expression.

“I won’t go closer than this. That energy is wreaking havoc in my body, any closer and it will get annoying to cleanse,” Ogras explained with a frown. “You’ll have to deal with this alone.”

Zac looked over at Galau who looked pretty bad as well, even though he had produced some sort of talisman that cleansed the area around them. It looked like he wouldn’t be able to use his ocular skills to figure things out.

“It’s fine, I’ll do it,” Zac shrugged. “But you’ll have to deal with the monkeys after I leave.”

His target was a large black boulder that seemed placed there rather than a natural part of the valley, but as Zac walked a few circles around it he couldn’t figure out what was so special about it. There were no inscriptions on it, and he couldn’t find any other signs it had been tampered with either. So why did it emit such nasty energies?

“Just break it,” Ogras shouted from the distance as he sliced a frenzied monkey into pieces. “These bastards won’t relent while you are over there.”

Zac nodded and went back to do what he did best. Why bother wracking his brain when one good punch would do the trick?

One massive slam was all it took for the boulder to be reduced into rubble, and Zac started to sift through the wreckage for clues. It only took him a few seconds as a thick black haze shrouded a particular piece of the rubble, and even Zac started to feel the effects of the corruption even though he ran the Fragment of the Coffin to the fullest.

He could probably destroy the source with a swing of his axe, but curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to get a better look at the object. A quick inspection from the distance made it clear it was some sort of fossilized bug that had turned into what looked like onyx unless it was an extremely lifelike sculpture.

The bug was slightly larger than a baseball and appeared to have three sets of wings and six sets of legs, making it diverge from the beasts of Earth. It was also evidently clear that it was long dead, so why did it emit such terrifying energies?

“Please hurry, the corruption is getting dangerous!” Galau shouted from the distance.

Zac shrugged and threw fossil or statue into his Spatial Ring, and it joined all the other foreign objects he had collected over the past 20-odd levels. The moment he stowed away the bug the corruption in the area started to dissipate almost immediately, allowing Ogras and Galau to relax a bit.

Was it that easy?

Perhaps it wasn't meant for people to be completely immune to the effects on this floor, but they rather had to figure out a way to destroy the item from a distance. Zac looked over at the other two, and Ogras shrugged as he pointed at the array that had appeared among the rubble from the boulder. Zac shrugged before he joined the two as they moved on to the final level of the third floor.

This time they found themselves on a set of expansive steppes and the only break from the sea of tall grass was a small nomadic village in the distance.

[Challenge the chieftain for the defining treasure of the tribe.]

“You can wait here,” Zac said as he started to walk toward the village, but he was suddenly stopped by Ogras.

“Wait, let me do this one.”

Chapter 410: Heartless

“Looking down on me, will you?” Ogras muttered to himself while cracking his neck as he moved toward the village. “I still remember you running around in a bloody dress like a lunatic.”

Ogras had seen the look in his eyes, and the words of caution had sounded like some elder cautioning children to not run too close to the Barghest pit.

Of course, Ogras knew that Zac’s remarks came from a place of concern, but it was a stark reminder that the gap between the two kept widening. It felt like there was an untapped and unceasing wellspring of potential inside that monster’s body, and if the man didn’t evolve soon he’d start fighting D-Grade Powerhouses.

Just a few months ago Ogras had still felt confident in defeating him if he went all out and utilized some underhanded tactics. But now? He didn’t even dare think about it. If Ogras wasn’t mistaken the guy actually possessed two Fragments now on top of his already monstrous body. And if that wasn’t enough he had enough Luck to bend reality around him in his favor.

Was the man the second coming of The First Defier? Would he also rip the heavens in two while still being a piddling mortal less than a hundred years old?

Ogras could only snort at his wild imagination and refocus on the task at hand. He had spoken with vigor just now, but he truly wasn’t completely confident in taking on this task. Judging by everything he knew of the trial he believed that the 3rd floor shouldn’t prove too difficult with his recent improvements, but he couldn’t be sure.

“I fed you so many good things you asshole, you better contribute to your daddy today,” Ogras muttered as he tapped

the metal casing around his shadowlimb with his spear.

A subdued shudder made the metal cast hum for a bit, but Ogras couldn't tell if the annoying critter living in his shadows agreed or not. But the thing hadn't actively worked against him during battle at least, and it mostly seemed somewhat cooperative.

Now if it could only stop trying to possess him as well, then everything would be swell.

At least the creature came with some benefits now. Using the **[Fruit of Bonding]** had actually turned it into a registered companion, which was a lot better than the crude way that asshole had stitched their souls together. It even came with a small attribute bonus now, boosting both Dexterity and Intelligence.

Name	Ogras Azh'Rezak
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Shadowblade
Race	[E] Demon
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood
Manual	[F] Grey World Mudra [14%]
Titles	Demon Slayer I, Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Tower of Eternity – 3rd floor, Betrayer, One Against Many, Butcher, Chosen of Dao, Invasion Breaker, The First Step, Beastmaster
Limited Titles	Astral Pond – 20m
Dao	Fragment of the Umbra - Early, Seed of

	Mirage - Middle
Companion	[F] Ka'Zur Planeswalker
Strength	272 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]
Dexterity	541 [Increase: 23%. Efficiency: 105%]
Endurance	148 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]
Vitality	99 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]
Intelligence	108 [Increase: 13%. Efficiency: 100%]
Wisdom	69 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]
Luck	49 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 480 687 176

His title screen might not match up to that brute, but Ogras still felt a sense of accomplishment as he looked over his attributes. He had superseded even his most optimistic calculations by over 30%, mostly thanks to his Fragment and new titles.

He had even passed his dream-goal of hitting 500 Dexterity without eschewing his Strength in a bid to get a better class. Just the thought of evolution almost made his hand twitch in anticipation. He had kept himself from checking the crystal after the experience with the funnel, not wanting to let himself become complacent in this place.

The mediocre start to his path of cultivation would require a long time to correct, and he needed to eke out every advantage he could get. Upgrading his Tower Title was the first step, and next he needed to sniff out some Limited Titles to fill out his

quota and boost his somewhat pitiful number of mid-grade Titles.

He was truthfully a bit surprised he hadn't heard of any leads on Earth. Had that odd Mystic Realm pushed aside all the smaller ones that usually globbed onto a newly integrated planet? It would be nice if they could get their hands on a Trial Array, like his family's Astral Pond. But the chances of that happening before they evolved were pretty slim.

Besides, such arrays could take years to set up, and even if MacKenzie had shown shocking skill with arrays it required deeper insights. He remembered that their pond had taken the ancestors 80 years to create after expending countless treasures.

It seemed unlikely he would gain any new titles before he evolved, but such was life. His vision had been broadened lately, but that didn't mean he could become greedy. Hopefully, Zac would get one as a reward by The Ruthless Heavens after gaining control of the whole baby planet.

Ogras threw a last look back at Zac and their mobile crystal mine before he went toward the barbarian camp. A large humanoid chieftain holding two massive scimitars walked out to meet him, and he only roared as he slammed the flat side against his bare chest, creating a sound that resembled the call of the Azh'Kir'Khat war drums.

"Hey there," Ogras hollered with a smile. "If you would be so kind to hand over your defining treasure then we'll be on our way!"

"You want to claim the Whisk of O'Chagga, stonewalker?" the man shouted. "The spirits won't allow such sacrilege!"

The demon could help but blanch at the corny situation, but the mention of the whisk made him perk up. Such a thing would obviously go to himself since he was the one who fought. Who knew? It might turn out to be something valuable.

And if not, perhaps it could be crushed and thrown into one of his vats. He had never drunk liquor infused with ancestral

spirits, should be quite the experience.

But now was not the time to think of such matters. He had gained a lot lately, and it was time to put it to the test. This was not only a battle against the Tower or some dumb barbarian, it was a battle against himself. Against the version of himself who had cowed in the distance and who had only been able to look at a battle of this caliber with jealousy.

The ground suddenly rumbled, and Ogras looked over with a frown to see a large tiger rush over, each leap taking it over twenty meters forward. Had that god damn barbarian actually tricked him? That posturing with slamming his blades was actually to call his mount?

Shadowspears immediately rose out of the ground to skewer the animal while a few also shot toward the barbarian's eyes in an effort to distract him. The appearance of some prehistoric beast was an unwelcome addition to an already tense situation, and Ogras wanted to deal with it as quickly as possible.

The reflexes of the beast were nothing to scoff at though, and a few frenzied swipes destroyed most of the spears, with only a few managing to create shallow wounds in its flank. Ogras tsked in annoyance when he saw the tiger successfully join the barbarian who jumped onto its back.

“The treachery of a stonewalker, as expected,” the barbarian roared, a line of green blood running down his face from a wound to his left cheek.

Ogras didn't bother answering as he immediately infused Cosmic Energy into the large fractal covering his shoulder blades. There was no point in holding back against his enemy, and he decided to activate [**Grey World Arbiter**] immediately.

It would be a bit embarrassing if he fought a long and arduous battle on the third floor after talking big and wide. It would make him look like a wastrel that ran his mouth based on someone else's strength. The two large wings grew out from the fractals and he felt power entering his body as he rose to the sky, and he immediately launched a barrage of shadows at his landbound foe.

“Coward!” the barbarian roared when he saw Ogras move outside the reach of his beast.

Ogras snickered as he infused his spear with shadows to launch a [**Shadowlance**], but he barely had time to start the infusion before a storm of wind blades rippled toward him as the chieftain frenziedly swung his two scimitars in front of him.

The blades were a bit reminiscent of Zac’s axe-blades, but they were extremely thin and had a pale yellow hue that resembled the long dried stalks of grass covering the plains they stood on. The blades flew toward him with pretty annoying speed, and worse yet was that the attacks acted just like blades of grass in a storm, swaying back and forth in an unpredictable manner.

But Ogras had no problems playing that game. Darkness swallowed him as he activated [**Darkside**] to enter the Grey World, allowing him to move with a speed that almost seemed like teleportation to outsiders. He flashed back and forth, but he felt his connection with the Grey World weakening.

It seemed that the vast plains’ connection to the grey world was pretty weak, which wasn’t surprising with the lack of permanent shadows due to the even terrain. But it was enough for him to move behind him the chieftain, and he immediately launched a strike toward the nape of the man’s neck.

Hitting the head increased the likelihood of a lethal strike as it was a larger target, but a head could be swung away with a wider arc than the neck itself. But the panther’s muscles rippled the moment Ogras appeared, and the two moved away with shocking speed, barely avoiding the lance of condensed shadows that ripped through the air.

“Ancestors!” the chieftain roared as he looked at Ogras with some fear in his eyes for the first time, and the air above him shuddered.

A massive, but hazy, projection of a warrior wielding a spear condensed above him, and it emanated a pressure that even superseded the warrior himself. Ogras groaned in annoyance as he watched the huge man turn his spear toward him.

Cultivators relying on ancestral protection were pretty annoying, as they had the ability to call on their long-dead ancestors. As more old goats died over the years the ancestral spirits only got stronger, making the current chieftains harder and harder to deal with.

Luckily such classes were pretty rare in the multiverse as there were hefty downsides to this system. Venerating your ancestors to this degree put mental blocks in your mind, making them gods and yourself a mortal. Surpassing them became almost impossible, which created gradually declining bloodlines.

Besides, such cultivation systems had other weaknesses as well. Ogras' mouth widened in a bloodthirsty smile as the straps holding his cast together snapped open and the metallic container fell to the ground.

A massive sea of shadows spread across the grassy fields, washing out the colors in the area. But Ogras didn't instruct the shadows to head toward the massive guardian in the sky, but rather created a grey tsunami that rippled toward the small village to the side.

"You!" the chieftain roared in anger, and the whole area shook as the fury of the ancestor ignited.

Screams from children could be heard from the village as weak shields were erected by warriors who had stood by to witness the battle of their chief and spiritual pillar. But the expressions in their eyes indicated they didn't hold much confidence in rebuffing the storm of shadows that threatened to consume the whole village.

The huge projection in the air suddenly exploded in a flash of yellow light, and a massive shield sprung up around the village that easily rebuffed the wave of shadows. It was like the sea of shadows tried to swallow a sun, but the blinding light quickly drained the shadows of their strength, destroying most and forcing the rest to flee.

The ancestral guardian had sacrificed his form to keep his descendants safe, while the air around the chieftain distorted

as he seemed to charge up a massive attack directed at Ogras who sneered at him from a safe distance.

A pitch-black arm suddenly emerged from the chest of the chieftain, holding a still-beating heart in its hand. The Ogras who hovered in the air slowly faded, as the true Ogras rose out of the chieftain's shadows. The mount roared in anger when it sensed the fate of its master on its back, but a massive explosion from the shadows beneath blasted open the panther's belly, spreading its innards all over the ground.

The Seed of Mirage and some misdirection had allowed him to launch a quick strike to end it all, and the massive collision of energies had distracted the sharp senses of the panther for long enough to move himself and his explosive array close enough to strike.

"Relying...on.. despicable tactics... heartless," the man coughed out as his mouth filled with blood.

"Perhaps, but I am alive and you are dead," Ogras smiled as he crushed the heart and released a burst of shadows that rampaged inside the body of the dying warrior, instantly killing him.

"If the Heavens are heartless, why shouldn't I be the same?"

Chapter 411: War

Zac witnessed the battle with a small frown, and the screams and cries of the villagers in the distance felt extremely discordant in his ears. His eyes followed Ogras as he looted the fallen Warrior and even put the mangled remains of his mount in his Cosmos Sack before he returned.

“Why did you have to do it like that?” Zac asked as the demon walked up to them. “You could have won in a head-on fight as well.”

“But the risk to my wellbeing would increase,” Ogras answered with a refreshing smile as he refastened his metal casing around the congealed shadows. “Besides, I knew he would choose to protect the village rather than attack me. Those kinds of bloodline warriors have extremely close-knit communities.”

“Still,” Zac sighed but didn’t press the matter further.

It wasn’t his business how Ogras fought, and he knew that the demon was simply using smoke and mirrors with his shadow-wave, rather than actually trying to kill the children in the village. The demon knew as well as the others that killing innocents would likely cause a real mess.

The still gave Zac a bad taste in his mouth as it reminded him of the Flame Golem’s attempt to kill his army back in the Underworld with the wave of lava. It was an ‘anything-goes’ attitude to battle that was unnecessary in a place like this. Ogras didn’t even push himself to his fullest, and even if he failed Zac could step in to defeat the chieftain.

“That weak heart of yours will be the death of you one day,” Ogras snorted as he looked over a whisk he had looted from the body of his enemy.

“Let’s just go,” Zac said as he turned toward the array, engraving the hateful stares of the villagers in his heart.

“Remember, please hurry,” Galau said as he followed Zac.

“We know,” Zac nodded. “Though I think you’ll do just fine on your own if in a pinch. Your skill with the sword is pretty impressive.”

“Remember, the agreement said 32nd level, not the fourth floor,” Galau entreated. “And I have the option of buying further levels if needed.”

“What’s the point of that?” Zac asked curiously “We can’t take you past the fourth floor anyway.”

This was something he and Ogras had already decided. They wouldn’t risk their climb by adding Galau to the penalty of the fifth floor and beyond. They would take him to the floor before the floor guardian at highest, and continue alone from there on out.

“He doesn’t want to stay on a bad level for months,” Ogras explained. “Remember the 24th level?”

Understanding dawned on Zac’s face as he recalled that wretched level. The 24th level took place inside a swamp teeming with all kinds of disgusting bugs, huge ferocious eels, and pockets of poisonous gases. Their objective had been to find a flower, and Galau had pulled out one treasure after another in order to escape that cursed place as quickly as possible.

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed. “We’ll hurry.”

The fourth floor was like the third, but worse. There was no longer any point in color-coding the flares, as they would almost always be thrown into the thick of it according to the merchant. That’s why the merchant wanted to remind them to not dally around wherever they started.

“About the price...” Galau ventured.

“We’ll discuss it when we get there,” the demon smiled.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that felt like a matter that should be discussed when they got there. What if the 32nd level was the same as the 24th? They'd be able to make a killing if that was the case. The three stepped onto the platform as they had so many times before, and Zac once again found himself in the black space.

[Third Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Longevity Medicine, Race Medicine, Energy Medicine]

Zac didn't immediately make his choice, and instead opened his status screen. He had already learned that the black space had an even more dilated time-space. He could spend a few minutes inside with less than a minute passing outside, allowing him to go over the gains before entering whatever mess the fourth floor would bring.

So Zac ignored the prompt with the quest reward and instead opened his status screen.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern

	Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity – 3rd Floor
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sanctuary - Peak
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	861 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]
Dexterity	429 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Endurance	1244 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 147%]
Vitality	649 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 140%]
Intelligence	232 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Wisdom	335 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]
Luck	198 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 2 966 111 618

[Tower of Eternity - 3rd Floor: Reach the 28th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All Attributes +10]

He had already known what the title would reward after discussing it with the other two, but he still felt the title was simply amazing. They had just passed the third floor and the title already gave as large a flat boost as any other title he had

accumulated. His other titles giving a similar amount of attributes had required far greater accomplishments than beating three pretty easy floors.

Just take the Eastern Trigram Hunt, for example. He had been pushed to and beyond his limits multiple times, yet that title was only marginally better than the one for the Tower of Eternity. The other one, **[Progenitor Noblesse]**, was given to him for becoming the first Lord on Earth, which only came about after defeating the three hordes.

Even the attribute points given for just defeating the Second Floor had been pretty generous in Zac's opinion. It had changed the +5 in three specific attributes to +5 to all attributes.

The ten flat attributes didn't do much for Zac, apart from the boost to his Luck which was notoriously hard to improve, but the boost should be huge for most people who came to the Tower. He knew that the average warrior only had between 20 and 40 Luck all combined, so buying a carry to the third floor could essentially increase your Luck with up to 50%.

Just the boost to Luck was worth almost any price in Zac's opinion. Better yet, as they progressed they would move on to percentage-based boosts while still keeping the flat bonuses. As long as Zac conquered the 6th floor the title would be the best one he had, perhaps with the exception of **[Luck of the Draw]** that provided a huge amount of Luck.

Apart from the improved title there was nothing worth noting in the status screen. His Nexus Coins had increased with a couple of million since he entered the Tower, but that was about it. He felt he was closing in on the limits of what he could gain while remaining in F-Grade. The only thing that remained was the final improvements to his Dao and getting as good a Title as possible.

He needed to at least complete his Life-Attuned fragment, and he felt he had a good chance of doing that through forming the Projection the moment he left the Tower of Eternity. According to Galau the effect of forming a Projection was even superior to witnessing it from up-close, and if he could

form one Seed from Reoluv's apparition, then he would no doubt be able to form another by creating one.

He closed down the screen and refocused on the available rewards since the Title was dealt with.

None of the three medicines would help him in the short run but were rather geared toward providing boosts after evolving. There were no names attached to the pills, unfortunately, not that there was a large chance for him to recognize the items even if the System provided them.

He immediately discarded the longevity medicine, and his eyes hovered between Race and Energy for a few seconds before he eventually picked Energy. He already had enough Race-related pills and treasures to improve his constitution considerably, which would also push his attribute limit far enough for it to not become a problem before he completed the transition.

Bursting open another node though would provide a direct boost to his strength after evolving, and perhaps the pills that the System provided had a lower amount of Pill Toxicity compared to the norm. Though he might just throw the pill into the Merit Exchange by this point. He had already accumulated a decent number of such pills, but there were only so many he could eat before even his sturdy body wouldn't be able to take it anymore.

He was no good to Earth if he ate so many pills that he became bedridden from the backlash of overindulging on Energy Pills.

The scenery around him quickly changed after he had made his choice, but Zac didn't even have time to look down at the vial in his hand as the surroundings rapidly darkened while his danger sense activated. Zac looked up to see that a massive boulder was descending upon him. His eyes widened in alarm and he flashed out of the way in the nick of time.

"Wake up soldier!" a gruff roar echoed from behind. "This is no time to daydream! Forward!"

Zac quickly oriented himself, only to realize he was in the middle of a massive battlefield. An allied army of various

humanoid races fought what seemed to be an army consisting of devils. They were vaguely humanoid, but they couldn't be put into the same category as the demonkin as Zac saw it. They felt more like an intelligent beast horde as they came in all shapes and sizes, though uniting them all was the nasty sets of horns on their heads and the thick scales for protection.

Perhaps they were fallen dragonkin, Zac noted, but he knew too little about the races of the multiverse to be sure. But they wielded various weapons, and some also wore armor on top of the scales, so they were likely categorized like cultivators rather than beasts. The large boulder that almost turned him into paste was actually the head of a tyrannical warhammer that was wielded by an enormous twenty-meter monstrosity.

Similar titans could be seen all over the battlefield, and the ground rumbled as they slammed their weapons into the ground or the erected shields of the humanoid armies. What was even more worrying was that these huge devils were clearly out of his league. The auras they emitted were extremely heavy, and Zac guessed they were almost peak E-Grade. It seemed to Zac that the power was almost at the level that the Cyborg emitted toward the end before it shut down.

How the hell would he fight against something like that?

But he quickly realized that he wasn't alone in this fight, and the burden of fighting these things didn't fall on his shoulders. A young woman wielding a thin sword that was almost two meters long rose into the sky, and she unleashed a massive swing that seemed determined to cut the sky in two.

A meter-deep gash appeared on the chest of the devil, who stumbled a few dozen meters back while roaring in pain. Similar scenes took place all over the battlefield, with peak E-Grade warriors or mighty war arrays rising to meet the onslaught of the titans.

Meanwhile thousands of warriors filled the gaps between the peak warriors, creating a chaotic battle that stretched for kilometers in all directions. It was a lot less cramped compared to the chaotic fight for the Fruit of Ascension though, as all combatants were a lot more powerful here. The weakest were

peak F-Grade, and all attacks caused shockwaves that rippled out for dozens of meters.

“Don’t gawk at the Sword Saintess, brat! Do your job!” the voice from earlier echoed behind him, this time a lot closer.

Zac looked around to see a burly middle-aged dwarf who held two spiked hammers in his hands. He was obviously well into E-Grade as well, and judging by the number of insignias on his chest he was likely someone of a decent stature in this army.

“I’m sorry, I’m going now,” Zac said and hurried away, in no particular direction.

Was this how it felt to fight in an army with warriors far stronger than himself? He had seen such scenes in his visions, but it was a completely different thing to experience it himself. Some fear crept into his heart that he would be swept into the battle of one of the peak warriors, or that one of them would even earnestly try to kill him.

But more than that he felt a rush excitement. Things were finally heating up in the until now somewhat tame Tower.

Chapter 412: Voidfire

The gargantuan devil from earlier hadn't seriously tried to kill Zac judging by the massive attacks they unleashed in their battle against the peak warrior from the allied army. It had only swung its weapon down without imbuing it with the Dao or any skill. Perhaps it had only considered him a bug to be squashed, and if it failed it didn't really matter.

It was pretty disconcerting to get thrown into a mess like this, but he had a mission to fulfill. His eyes turned back and forth until he spotted a red flare in the distance. He immediately changed course and found Galau desperately fighting a group of the smallest devils that weren't even as tall as a man.

Zac flashed over and made short work of the group with the help of a Dao-infused **[Chop]**, and none of the other cannon-fodder seemed willing to avenge their brethren for the time being.

"Have you seen Ogras?" Zac asked as he looked around.

"I'm right here, what took you so long?" a lackadaisical voice drifted out of Galau's shadows as the demon appeared.

"You!" Galau stammered. "I could have died!"

"I was ready to help out if things turned bloody. You want to be a traveling merchant, right? I was helping you gain some experience. What if you meet highwaymen in the future? After fighting these guys it would be a breeze, no?" the demon laughed.

Galau spluttered for a bit, but a prompt cut short any chance of a rebuttal.

[Aid the war efforts against the tide of the Verakh. Stop the activation of a *[Voidfire Array]*, or deactivate an activated array.]

The three barely had time to read the whole prompt before battle lust overcame the fear among the devils close-by, and a squad charged the three as they screeched at the top of their lungs.

“Who is the floor guardian in a scenario like this?” Zac asked as he cut a frenzied dragon beast in two. “There’s no way we can defeat the leader of this devil army.”

“The quest is to stop an array from being planted. So I guess that there is some Array master within our power level that we can kill. It’s not always completely clear in the beginning from here on out from what I’ve gathered, so I could be wrong,” the demon shrugged. “I suggest we try for the quest. It seems somewhat doable, and we’ll also find clues of the guardian. Better yet, it might net us a nasty Array.”

“Agreed,” Zac nodded.

The issue was how to find their target in a chaotic battlefield like this.

“The array is called an **[Voidfire Array]**. Can you see anything that fits the description on the battlefield?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“It sounds like an offensive array. Arrays like this are usually placed close to the frontlines to maximize power, but not at the very front as to avoid sabotage,” Galau chimed in.

The trouble was that there was no clear divide indicating where the frontline was. The battlefield could almost be seen as hundreds of individual skirmishes between squads or powerhouses, with weaker combatants strewn in-between.

There were individuals of both camps almost all over to the point it was even difficult to discern which side each army came from. Perhaps it was a measure to avoid either side unleashing massive arrays that could decimate a large chunk of the army. Luckily there was a group of titans standing in a clump far in the distance, which meant that the enemy commanders were likely stationed there.

Similarly, there was a middle-aged man standing on a massive floating sword some ways behind them, overlooking the

battlefield with a stern expression. It was probably the leader of the army they had been conscripted into, and he emanated a towering aura that could be sensed all the way over to where they stood.

“Don’t look,” Ogras said as he slapped Zac’s shoulder with his spear. “We don’t want any attention from the big bosses.”

“I can’t see anything that looks like Voidfire,” Zac said. “Let’s make our way toward the enemy camp.”

The three formed a small squad where Zac took the front and Ogras the flanks as they steamrolled deeper into the army. Galau helped out by making sure they didn’t get too close to any of the elites, which forced them to take a somewhat circuitous pathing.

After they had pushed forward for roughly 15 minutes Zac was forced to slow down, as he realized there were only a scant few humanoids around them now. They had clearly entered the side of the enemies, and he was starting to get mobbed by the devil foot soldiers.

He hadn’t utilized any of his stronger skills though as he had a feeling that doing so might draw the ire of too strong enemies. So he simply kept cutting down enemies one by one while keeping a fractal blade from [**Chop**] attached to his axe, while the independent blade protected their rear.

“Over there!” Galau suddenly exclaimed, making Zac look over to their left.

There was a beast carrying a massive purple pillar on its back, and a group of hooded beings walked along its side. Judging from their direction it seemed they were heading toward a titan rampaging in the distance. Was the [**Voidfire Array**] perhaps a support array? Or did they simply want to strike a surprise attack at whoever arrived to combat the titan?

“That looks like an array core,” Ogras agreed. “Let’s steal it.”

“Isn’t it easier just to break it?” Zac interjected. “I can probably do it from here.”

“And leave such a nice thing in this world?” Ogras disagreed. “Better it comes with us.”

“If we can even use it. What if it explodes in our faces?” Zac said.

“One step at a time,” Ogras smiled as he flashed away.

Zac could only sigh and follow as he grabbed Galau’s shoulder. He activated [**Loamwalker**] and moved straight through the battlefield, each step bringing him over fifty meters away. Ogras was even quicker, and a pond of shadows spread out when he arrived in front of the group.

The fractal edge on Zac’s blade grew as he decapitated the warbeast carrying the Array Core in one massive swing, making hundreds of liters of blood to fall like a waterfall, drenching him in a second.

“Huerk,” Galau hurled from behind, still squeamish about these kinds of gory scenes.

Zac only shook his head to get the blood out of his eyes and jumped over to the carcass of the beast. One yank was enough to rip apart the chains that kept the large crystals fastened, but Zac swore when he realized that he couldn’t put it in his Cosmos Sack.

This had happened a few times before during the climb, generally when the quest called for delivering or protecting an item. Perhaps it was a method for the System to disallow the climbers from completely circumventing the trials by stashing away the quest items.

“Just carry it with you,” Ogras said, but he looked a bit pressured.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked as he fastened the massive crystal like a backpack.

“The quest still isn’t complete,” the demon answered with a sour face, making Zac’s brows rise in realization.

“Is this the wrong item?” Zac asked.

This was the problem with the quests on the higher floors. Things weren’t as clear-cut as before, and it often took some trial and error before they could figure out what needed to be done. The fact that they needed to do so in the middle of an

epic battle-field this time increased the pressure to another tier though.

“It might be only a piece of the puzzle,” Galau mused, his face deathly pale.

“Look around for any-“ the demon said, but was interrupted by a massive roar as one of the enormous devils looked straight at them.

It was the titan that the squad of array masters was heading toward. Did it want revenge because they stole its array?

A humanoid squad hurried over though, and they summoned a massive warrior in the sky with the help of a War Array, and the projection released a terrifying beam of energy that slammed into the chest of the titan.

But the air around the titan suddenly cracked as the devil shuddered, creating a shockwave that blew all the weaker warriors in the area far away. It also made a few of the soldiers managing the array lose their footing, which interrupted the War Array for long enough for the Titan to swing its massive hammer at them. The soldiers only managed to hastily erect a shield at the last second, saving themselves from being annihilated.

“Shit, those guys won’t be able to defend for long,” Ogras muttered.

“Hooded guys fleeing over there!” Zac said as he pointed in the distance in another direction.

It was a group that resembled the array masters they had killed just now, except they had no warbeast accompanying them. One of them was instead carrying a massive backpack, and six large spikes protruded out of it.

“It might be them,” the demon muttered. “It’s only...”

Zac understood what he was getting at. The group of array masters was running straight toward the backlines of the devil army. If they pursued then they would put themselves even deeper in enemy lines. There might not be another squad available to run interference in case they got targeted again.

“It’s okay,” Zac shrugged. “If worse comes to worst and it’s the wrong target we’ll simply have to fight our way back to our side. There’s no way we’ll be expected to fight those big things for more than a second or two.”

“Fair enough,” the demon nodded. “It’s still only the 28th level, after all. It shouldn’t be too convoluted. We have the core crystal, and those are the array flags. We’ll snatch them and teleport out.”

“Let’s go,” Zac said after looking back at the furious titan that was still being held back by the War Array.

The golden projection of the warrior was already starting to dim, meaning that the squad would probably only be able to keep the titan at bay for another 30 seconds or so. But that was enough for Zac and he grabbed Galau again, and the three created a straight line of carnage in their all-out pursuit.

One fractal blade after another carved a path through the devils as Zac kept swinging his axe. Ogras had already taken off his cast, and a twenty-meter long arm crushed any devil that came too close. Zac noted that the demons who Ogras killed oddly enough looked a bit paler after they got killed, like the hand was made out of bleach rather than shadows.

The array masters who carried the six flags soon noticed their approach, and they screeched as they quickly slammed down the six spikes into the ground and started to infuse energy into them. A group of devils also came forward to buy some time, each of them recently evolved judging by their auras.

But that wasn’t enough to noticeably impede the trio, and they fell by the droves as Zac unleashed a barrage of fractal blades. Soon enough they were upon the array masters, only to be met with a wave of illusory flames the devils had managed to bring forth even without the array core.

Zac frowned and activated [**Nature’s Barrier**] and infused it with the Dao of Sanctuary, creating a canopy to protect the three. But the flames passed straight through the leaves and fell onto their bodies.

“Netherblasted soulflames,” Ogras growled as a condensed lance of shadows completely obliterated the torso of one of the array devils. “That hurt you scum.”

Zac growled from the pain as well, but his soul was strong enough to handle something like this after being assaulted by the splinter for months. He immediately spread the Seed of Trees through his body as well to help douse the soul-eating flames, and he felt a soothing warmth almost immediately.

Since they didn't possess the array core the power of the flames was no doubt extremely weakened, and with one step with [**Loamwalker**] Zac was upon them with murder in his eyes. Space split apart as the remaining devils fell apart into neat chunks of flesh as [**Verun's Bite**] roared with glee, and Zac started ripping the array flags out of the ground before the dead array masters even had time to fall apart.

Forcibly taking the flags out like that released another burst of voidflames straight into Zac's face, but he withstood the pain as he snatched them one by one.

“It's here,” Ogras muttered, pointing to an array forming in blood from the fallen devils. “And just in time.”

“Am I supposed to carry around these huge things?” Zac muttered as he had his arms full with the huge spikes.

“They are bound to someone here,” Galau said. “But the connection will break when we leave this world which will allow you to stow them away. And I think we should hurry.”

Zac looked back and saw that the massive titan was running toward them with surprising speed going by its bulky frame. A few warriors tried to intercept, but the massive hammer in its hands swung back and forth like a pendulum, turning devils and men alike into goop in its fury.

“Let's hope not all the floors are like this,” Zac said as they stepped onto the teleportation array.

“Don't jinx it,” Ogras sighed just as they were teleported away.

Chapter 413: Concordat

Cosmic Energy streamed through MacKenzie's body at unprecedented speeds, and Mental Energy was rapidly getting drained as her mind formed thin strands of her Daos and ingeniously wove them into her Cosmic Energy to create a facsimile of true skill.

Jeeves used roughly 30% fire, 10% wind, and 60% water to cause a reflective mist that formed an amazingly real illusion of herself and Ilvere falling while covering their real bodies in a thick mist. Her arm reached out to grab Ilvere's shoulder as a rapid succession of bursts of Cosmic Energy mixed with the Seed of Gust unpredictably moved them until they landed some distance away.

Balls of acrid sludge shot through the mist like bullets, but Kenzie's body floated around like an unbound pixie with the help of Jeeves, effortlessly avoiding all the projectiles. They finally reached the ground that silently opened up to swallow the demon inside.

"Stay here," Kenzie whispered with a monotonous voice as she flitted away.

A dozen emergency drones emerged from her Cosmos Sack and instantly fired at four specific spots that made no sense to Kenzie, but it caused an enraged screech to echo across the area. The newly erected pillar had been destroyed as well, and a scorch-marked woman emerged from the smoke where it had once stood.

It was some sort of the corporeal undead, and no doubt also the source of the attacks earlier as it looked like she stood in a pool of oil that bubbled and churned. She was slim had long grey hair that fell down to her shoulders, and she wore a well-fitting dress that looked suited for a summer stroll. The woman would have been quite beautiful in an austere way if it wasn't

for her enraged and scarred face, or the grisly half-meter talons she had instead of normal fingers.

Unfortunately it looked like Jeeves illusions had failed as the woman looked straight at them through the mist. Kenzie could only see the undead leader's shape through the haze thanks to Jeeves, so the woman must have some sort of skill to do the same.

[Target level 85 – Low-Medium talent. Chance of victory through traditional battle <5%. Permission to activate 'Pretty Pretty Mecha Kenzie' Protocol?]

'Granted.'

"Get ready to flee," Kenzie whispered, taking control of her voice. "I'll unleash something my brother left for me in case things became desperate."

"Just run, lass," Ilvere said with a shake of his head. "I might be able to hold her for a bit at least."

"Don't worry," Kenzie said. "I won't risk my life against some E-Grade powerhouse."

The next moment a massive robot appeared in front of her, reaching over ten meters in the air. It radiated danger as its various weapon system went online one after another due to Jeeve's instructions.

"Wha-" Ilvere said, but Kenzie indicated for him to be silent as they were once again shrouded by an altered illusion technique that hopefully would be able to trick the undead general.

The robot shot a wild array of thin laser beams toward the woman, forcing her to start dodging to avoid getting scorched again. This was what Jeeves aimed for, and the AI helped Kenzie silently sink underground with Ilvere in tow. Simultaneously a fake Kenzie rose into the cockpit of the stationary robot, and the cockpit closed behind her.

The mecha generally required a direct neural connection to control due to its high complexity, but Jeeves had circumvented that somehow, allowing it to be controlled just

like the drones. However, even Jeeves' abilities were limited and such a thing would only be possible in close proximity.

But the Undead Woman was not ready to simply eat the beams without fighting back, and Jeeves continuously reported new sources of damage to her precious machine. Only 30 seconds of intense battle passed before Jeeves warned Kenzie that systems were critical.

'Blow her up' Kenzie instructed with some heartache as she soundlessly moved through the earth while the shockwaves of battle became more and more muted.

[Affirmative.]

A few seconds later a massive explosion rocked the very foundations of the area, making it feel like they were swept up in an earthquake.

[Self-Destruct initiated within 10 meters of the target, connection cut. Likelihood survival: <5%]

Unfortunately, there was no surge of cosmic energy to tell her whether the sacrifice was successful or not, as not even Jeeves was able to circumvent the ironclad rule that kills by technology wouldn't award levels.

But even if that crazed banshee survived the blast she would no doubt be taken out of commission for a prolonged duration, which would hopefully help her brother when he returned. As far as she knew there were only a few Undead Generals still around. She guessed that trading her prized mecha for one of them was a worthy exchange.

Thirty minutes later it became clear that they had evaded pursuit, and the two quickly made their way toward the closest Teleportation Array. It was time to return to Port Atwood. Her mission had been a success, but who knew what countermeasures the Undead would have at the next infusion pillar now that even one of their generals had fallen.

With her mecha destroyed and drones exhausted she was unable to keep destroying the pillars in either case.

She could use a rest.

“Wake up sailor!” Sap Trang grunted as he kicked the sailor who was supposed to keep a lookout. “This is no time to daydream!”

“I’m sorry!” the young man said with a start, forcefully dragged out of his daydreams. “But captain, is there really any need for us to patrol these waters? We haven’t seen a single boat for months, and no beasts that Lord Bau can’t handle.”

“Would you rather head to the front-lines, changing the open seas for a sea of zombies?” Sap said with a glare.

“No! Please don’t make me fight the undead! I’ll keep watch!”

“Good,” Sap Trang said with a nod as his eyes scanned the endless ocean. “Remember, we sail with the flag of Lord Atwood, the champion of Earth. If there is one place that the invaders would want to hit, wouldn’t it be our kingdom? Our soldiers are fighting tooth and nail to protect our world, the least we can do is keep watch over our waters to keep their families safe from ambush.”

Seeing that the young man took his task more seriously after the lecture Sap nodded in satisfaction as he kept making rounds. He didn’t know why, but he had found it hard to stay calm all day, and he needed to keep himself busy.

Perhaps it was because he would soon be back home, which would allow him to meet his grandson again. Who would have known that little Bao was as charming as his grandpa was back in the day, and had already found a little lass for himself?

Even more shocking, the lass was with child! He would be a great grandfather. It was an amazing source of joy in these bleak times, and it was reason enough for him to exhaust his old bones to make sure that the waters were safe.

There was only so much to inspect on these Cosmic Energy Ships that their navy employed though, and most of it went over his head. He would be able to take apart a two-stroke engine and put it back together without breaking a sweat, but these squiggly lines that pushed the boats forward were far beyond his understanding.

The only thing he could do was make sure that no one damaged the lines, and that everything else was kept clean and tidy.

He finally returned to his captain's quarters and observed the sea charts against to confirm that they hadn't veered off course, and that the nagging feeling was his subconscious trying to warn him of that. But a sharp stab in his mind suddenly made him stand up in shock and look toward the south. The pain came from his connection to Little Bau. Was his friend wounded?

They were too far away though, and he only got a few indistinct impressions through the connection, the foremost being danger. But Sap unhesitatingly ran toward the youngster in control of the Arrays on the vessel. Anything that could wound Little Bau in these waters could be a threat to Port Atwood as well.

"Change course, immediately," Sap said with a frown.

"Where to?" the helmsman asked with confusion.

Soon enough the vessel, along with its two sister ships, had changed course and were once again heading toward Pangea. Little Bau was an hour or so away in that direction, but a mist on the water blocked any sight of what it might be that wounded him.

Worry gnawed on Sap as he stood at the fore, trying to glean any signs about what was going on. The bad feeling in his chest was only getting worse as they approached the vast shroud. The mist itself was a cause for concern as the sky was clear as day, meaning there was no reason for such a haze to form in the middle of the ocean.

There was a distinct possibility that this was a smokescreen to hide whatever lurked inside, but Sap still ordered his crew to maintain the course. If the mist was man-made, then all the more reason for them to see what was going on. The two facts that there was both an unnatural cover hours away from Port Atwood and Little Bau being wounded pointed to one grim reality.

Invaders.

Sap shuddered as his vessel cut into the mist and it immediately felt like the temperatures had dropped to almost freezing degrees.

“This is miasma!” one of the demon warriors stationed on the ship exclaimed.

The warrior wasn't talking out of turn either, since he had actually been part of the army that heroically fought their way out of the Dead Zone, running and fighting without rest for two weeks.

“All to your stations, keep communication at a minimum,” Sap immediately ordered, and the sailors worldlessly took their positions with worry in their eyes.

The same order was transferred to the other ships as well, along with an order to stay extremely close. They could barely see 50 meters through the miasmatic clouds, and Sap didn't want them to get picked off one by one.

The minutes passed without anything happening but Sap's nerves only got more and more frayed as they approached Little Bau's location. A massive red wall suddenly appeared just in front of them, reaching over twenty meters into the air. If it wasn't for the fact that Sap spotted worked wood he would have thought it was a cliff-wall, but he realized it was actually a massive ship they had encountered.

“Hard left!” Sap roared, no longer caring about subterfuge, and the helmsman immediately complied.

A sharp tug almost threw Sap off his feet as the three vessels turned and sped away with agility that would be completely impossible without the help of magic. With the help of a burst of Cosmic Energy, they opened up a distance of hundreds of meters in an instant. But that also meant that they lost sight of whatever that massive thing was.

“Fire the Array!” Sap ordered. “Blast away this damn mist!”

Sap didn't worry about whether there were allied forces on the other side. The fact that the mist was created with miasma was all Sap needed to know.

The array lit up and a massive ray of light ripped through the mists, aimed straight at whatever ship they had just encountered. Sap had to close his eyes from the radiant light and it sounded like the air itself was burning. The laser beam had pushed aside all the miasmic mist in the area, creating a wide tunnel that ran across the water until the attack slammed into a golden array on the other side.

The ocean frothed and churned from the clash, but the enemies' array held steady until the beam winked out of existence. But the attack did at least allow Sap to see what they were dealing with.

Only part of the massive ship could be seen, but judging from the displayed section the whole vessel would have to be well over a hundred meters. It was a massive monstrosity wrought with a reddish wood and inlaid with what appeared to be gold. It was a beautiful creation, but Sap couldn't feel any appreciation of the craftsmanship involved as his eyes were drawn to the massive ball hanging down from the bowsprit.

The ball did at least have a diameter of five or six meters, and it was completely made from gold. But it didn't seem to be either an anchor or a wrecking ball, as it was made with extremely fine details. It actually looked like a sun, and as Sap looked at the thing it started to burn with golden flames, pushing all miasma in the area even further away.

"It's those lunatics again!"

"Where did the native heathens get this kind of technology? Almost ripped straight through our shield," Bishop Kyhv-Elerad swore while his eyes moved back and forth through the waters for any sign of the massive beast that had almost managed to sink one of their holy vessels a while earlier.

"Still looking for that Cephalopod?" a raspy voice snickered from the side.

Fury ignited in Kyhv-Elerad's chest when he heard the voice of the cursed being, and he wasn't alone in his disdain either. The crusaders in the vicinity were either looking at the newly

arrived vessels as they pointedly ignored the group of hooded undead, whereas others blatantly glared at their mortal enemies with bloodshot eyes and burgeoning killing intent.

There was nothing that the Bishop would like to do more than ordering a thorough cleanse of their deck, unleashing a storm of steel and fire, but he knew he couldn't. He could only tighten the grip on his consecrated mace in impotence as his eyes turned back to the ocean. The hooded beings clearly noticed his struggle, but they only snickered in disdain.

Kyhv-Elerad had never heard of the Holy Church co-operating with The Undead Empire before, but it was impossible that the writ the high Vicar received a week ago was fake. It had clearly told them to temporarily co-operate with their eternal enemies until this world's native heathens were firmly under control.

Of course, he understood the reason. Almost twenty Incursions annihilated without a trace in less than a month's time. Reports of sightings of the terrifying contraptions from the cursed Technocrat heretics.

Things had turned extremely precarious, and they needed to deal with this Human Lord so that they could focus on the Mystic Realm. The fact that doing so would allow him to avenge Brother Orsiccas and the 3rd battalion, then all the better.

So he would endure standing next to these accursed clones. He would endure being surrounded by the tainted mists that existed in defiance of The Boundless Heavens. He would endure the vermin staying below deck.

For sooner or later the fire of the Boundless Heavens would cleanse all impurities.

Chapter 414: Ill-Gotten Gains

A brief bout of darkness shrouded Zac's vision until he was thrown into the next world. However, the System seemed intent of making the entrances rough ones going forward, and he barely had time to see a moonlit sky and a couple of candles before he fell into a pool of steaming water with his head first.

Zac sputtered as he tried to orient himself in the water, and he soon realized that he had luckily only fallen into a heated pool or hot spring that was a meter or so deep. He had first been afraid that he had been dropped into a pot of soup of some giant or something, but even if he was safe from that fate he still immediately got to his feet and looked around for any looming threats.

“You! Who are you!” a shriek echoed with enough force to make Zac's eardrums vibrate. “AND WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING?!”

Similar shrieks echoed from the vicinity, meaning that the others had likely encountered similar fates. As for the source of the voice, it was an extremely alluring woman with a pair of pointed ears. She wasn't a Tal-Eladar though but more closely resembling the traditional elves in the stories on earth.

Apart from the more generous curves, that is.

The elf stood in the water as well just a few meters away, completely exposed except for a thin layer of lather. It seemed that Zac had been dropped into her courtyard mid-bath, effectively creating an instant grudge with. She was a cultivator as well since Cosmic Energy was already churning around her, though his instincts told him there was no way she

was the guardian of the level due to the lacking density of her aura.

Zac froze in shock for a second as he took in the amazing scenery until he realized that he should probably try to explain himself. But he didn't even have time to open his mouth before shouts from soldiers could be heard approaching and massive drums started beating in the distance. It was no doubt a response to the shrieks that had echoed to the high heavens just now.

[Escape with your ill-gotten gains. Note: Hiding your loot will count as forfeiting the quest.]

'What fucking gains?' Zac inwardly groaned as he looked down at his hands.

His already scrambled head got even more confused when he realized that the massive array flags he was carrying had been replaced by a piece of white frilly fabric. Wasn't that...?

Zac's eyes widened slightly and he looked up at the infuriated elf who had somehow covered herself with what looked like thunderclouds. Their eyes met and the air started crackle from lightning as the woman's eyes started to light up with some unknown power.

The common-sense thing would have been to give back the underwear, but Zac obviously couldn't do that. The system had for some insane reason sent him on a panty-raid, and if he threw away the 'treasure' he would probably fail the trial.

So he could only stifle his complaints as he took out **[Verun's Bite]** again, but instead of targeting the elf he cut a massive hole in the wall. Luckily the outdoor bathhouse didn't seem fortified from the inside, making it easy to escape.

Better yet the girl seemed to prioritize getting dressed over killing him, and she interrupted whatever attack she had been charging up to instead flash toward a dress hanging across a rack right next to the pool. It allowed Zac to slip away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but he only used the skill a couple of times before he stopped and took stock of what was going on.

Zac realized he was halfway up a mountain, and he guessed he either was inside a sect or some sort of town. Bamboo stalks and trees ran along the mountainside, while small lamps emitting a warm light was studded along the path created with large slabs of stones. There were stronger lights among the trees when Zac gazed both up and down the mountain, and he guessed it was courtyards nestled into nature.

It was truthfully one of the most beautiful sceneries he had seen, and he wanted to take in everything as quickly as possible. It would be perfect if he could turn the mountains on his islands into a tranquil paradise like this after the invaders were dealt with. The money he could make from renting out properties like this would be amazing.

But Zac only got a few seconds to drink in the beauty before the sound of rapid steps took him out of his reverie.

“Halt!” a voice could be heard from behind, but Zac ignored it as he gazed into the sky for any flares.

“Now this is more like it!” another voice hollered, and Zac looked over to see that at least one of his companions was fine.

It was Ogras who ran toward him as his shadows knocked out a couple of guards that were hot in pursuit. He was also soaked wet, but it looked like his mission was a bit different from his own as his arms were gripping a veritable mountain of clothes.

“You were given that many to steal?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

“Well, no. I only got the one pair. But since we’ve already stolen the eggs we might as well steal the hen, you know?” the demon laughed, his eyes glistening with excitement. “They will make nice gifts if we can keep them, these are high-quality items.”

“Well that’s just great,” Zac said as he knocked out a guard who tried to intercept their escape. “Have you seen any flare?”

“Nope,” Ogras said, but he nodded toward a courtyard beneath them. “I heard screams in that direction as well though.”

Zac nodded and started running, and after some thought, he took the pair of panties and tried to tie it around his wrist like a

bandana. But the flimsy material turned out to be surprisingly slippery, and after failing multiple times he could only resort to a second option with some defeat.

He put them on his head like a cap.

“Not bad,” The demon nodded in appreciation. “Heavy taste. Just like when we met the first time.”

“Just freeing up my hands,” Zac sighed. “Hiding them in a bag will probably fail the quest.”

“Whatever you say,” the demon snorted.

This whole floor felt like a sick joke. Was the System messing with him? Or was there perhaps some bored Stargazer in charge of operations who decided to play around a bit and create weird scenarios?

A wail from just ahead told them that they had found their target, flare or no flare. A quick **[Chop]** broke through a wall, and they found themselves in a similar spa as the one Zac started in. It seemed like the mountain had dozens of private hot springs along the mountain-side, each with its own accompanying mansion. Perhaps it was a hotel rather than a sect?

They immediately found Galau curled into a ball while four scantily clad women were brutally beating him with sticks and fists as he desperately clung to a few pieces of fabric. But it was clear that the assailants weren't that strong, and the wounds weren't lethal.

“Lucky guy,” Ogras whistled. “I just got the one.”

Zac snorted before he unleashed his accumulated killing intent as he rushed over with his axe waving in the air. The elven ladies immediately retreated with fear when they sensed his strength, but Zac obviously wasn't there to kill them.

He rather grabbed the balled-up Galau and flashed back to the demon's side in an instant, and Zac couldn't help rolling his eyes when he noticed that the demon's laundry pile had noticeably increased in size.

“What’s the matter with you?” Ogras spat as he kicked the butt of the still curled-up youth. “Act like a man. Would you let yourself get castrated and killed if we didn’t drop by?”

“I’m sorry,” Galau stammered. “I did not expect the tower to conjure such a- *what are you two doing?*”

Galau’s eyes went back and forth between Ogras with his huge pile of women’s garments and Zac who stoically wore a pair of panties like a hat. His face was going through a tumultuous change of emotions, and it looked like he was seeing his two travel companions for the first time. Zac only grunted and indicated Galau to start running down the mountain.

“Look at you,” Ogras said with some disdain as they fled. “Calling yourself a merchant, yet you lack a nose for opportunity. Look at Zac wearing his ill-gotten gains with such gusto. Where in the outside world can you live large like that without being captured and strung up in the city square?”

Annoyance surged as Zac fought off the incoming guards who seemed hellbent on preventing them from descending the mountain. But he knew he wouldn’t win a verbal spar with the wily demon, so he could only keep pushing forward while keeping the complaints in his heart. A few of the guards were some ways into the E-Grade, but they quickly and ruthlessly swept aside by a Zac fueled by anger and embarrassment.

The description of the quest wasn’t clear, but it felt to Zac that this whole mountain belonged to some force, and to escape meant to leave the mountain. He wasn’t sure if they also needed to throw off the pursuit, but one step at the time.

A horde of irate cultivators was hot on their heels, but Zac breathed in relief when he sensed that there were no people in the angry mob who could be considered real threats to their lives. He still didn’t want to fight them though, as he felt like these people weren’t meant to be killed, like civilians on regular levels.

Killing a few of them might result in some old monster on the summit descending as well, and then they would truly be in deep shit. Zac instead chose to rely on the small mountain of projectiles in his cosmos Sack, and one piece of rock after

another appeared in his hand before they shout out with pinpoint precision.

He even chose to use normal stones instead of his specially prepared cannonballs as the targets were around peak F-Grade and might actually die if he threw the clumps of metal. But the stones only created an impact that threw the guards away without creating any mortal wounds.

Luckily they had acted extremely quickly, and most of the people were behind them rather than in front. Zac had been out the bath he started in within 20 seconds, and they had brought Galau away in under a minute. The quick escape had allowed them to gain a decent headstart, making their lives a lot easier.

Between Ogras' shadow teleportations and Zac's **[Loamwalker]** they had no problem keeping the lead, and they smashed one hastily erected defensive line after another. The real trial only arrived at the foot of the mountain, as a massive array lit up that covered the whole area.

“Won't be too strong from the inside,” Ogras muttered. “At the same time?”

Zac nodded and a massive fractal edge immediately took shape along the blade of **[Verun's Bite]**. Since it was just an array they targeted, rather than some innocent guard, Zac had no problem infusing the axe with the Fragment of the Axe. The fractal blade turned a deep grey as new fractals appeared along the edge, and its aura quickly became a lot denser.

It was a small change that the Dao Fragment imparted upon the skill, and Zac found it not only made the skill deadlier, but it also seemed more durable. Ogras' followed suit and prepared a strike, though he couldn't use his hands as they were still occupied with his 'treasures'.

Instead the shadows all around them started to shudder as they slithered toward the demon like he was some sort of shadow magnet, and in just a second it looked like the ground around Ogras was pitch-black.

“Go,” Zac muttered when they were 100 meters away from the shield, and he launched the fractal blade in one fluid motion.

The blade ripped through the air and slammed into the sect-protecting shield in an instant. Huge cracks spread all along the green barrier, but before it had a chance to regenerate a thick beam of shadows completely crushed it, which created a large enough passage for them to easily slip through.

The area outside the mountain was completely barren, and there was nowhere to hide for kilometers in any direction. Zac figured that was probably intentional, and any vegetation would get culled so that the guards would have a clean line of sight in case any hostile forces approached.

“Do you have anything to shroud the area?” Ogras asked as he looked back at the mob that still hadn’t given up and streamed out from the shield with murder in their eyes.

“I- yes!” Galau said as he produced a glass ball full of a purple haze. “This one will spread a harmless mist across a pretty massive area. But enough force will blow it away in a minute or two.”

“That’s good enough,” Ogras nodded. “Use it.”

Galau nodded and infused the ball with Cosmic Energy, which made a huge billowing cloud spread out in all directions. The purple haze reminded Zac of the time he poisoned half the demon army and himself with the massive cauldron, and he couldn’t help but shudder at the memory.

Luckily the irate mob also got a bit hesitant after seeing the massive mist, and many stopped in their tracks or even fled to avoid getting swallowed inside.

“Let’s go,” Ogras said when they were completely covered, and a transparent tentacle landed on Zac’s shoulder.

Just a few moments later they were long gone, and Ogras panted a bit with exertion. He had taken them a shocking distance in a quick succession of teleports, something that Zac’s current attainments of [**Loamwalker**] would be unable to do.

Galau reacted quickly the moment Ogras stopped moving the three, and he sprinkled some white dust over himself and the other two.

“Anti-tracking dust,” the merchant explained. “Just in case.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked around.

“What now?”

“Let’s keep moving,” Ogras shrugged. “The Ruthless Heavens should indicate when it considers us having gotten away.”

His words were proven right twenty minute and a huge distance later, as they stumbled upon a teleporter as they crossed a small river in an alien forest.

Zac sighed as he stowed away his only loot from the floor, before he got ready for another fresh hell to welcome them.

Chapter 415: Hidden Rules

Things were pretty hectic in the next world as well, where they were thrown into a canyon full of rabid beasts. But one piece of good news was that the [Voidfire Array] wasn't actually gone or replaced with underwear. The System had been kind enough to place the core and array flags into Zac's Spatial Ring during the transfer.

The mission of the 30th level was to find and save a young master who was being pursued by some rival faction. The target was unfortunately extremely paranoid, and it ended up with the three of them having to find, corner, and kidnap him to complete the mission.

They did stay on for a bit longer than necessary though, as the canyon was filled with E-Grade monster boars that had particularly tasty meat. They spent a few hours stocking up for the climb, as it had turned out that Galau was a pretty decent chef. Only when they had made Galau cook enough food for almost a year did they proceed on to the next level.

The new world they found themselves was an endless desert under a yellow sky with four suns. The monochromatic tone of the surroundings made everything blur together into one big canvas of beige, and the blistering heat didn't help with the discomfort.

And just like in the previous levels they found themselves in the thick of it the moment they arrived. A group of desert warriors was assaulting a merchant's caravan, and it looked like they had taken the role of the last survivors. Bodies and mounts littered the area, most of them seemed to be on the side of the merchants.

Zac immediately went to work, as this felt refreshingly straightforward. One bandit after another got bisected by his fractal blades or skewered by snaking shadow spears. The

remaining bandits quickly realized that they had met a tough opponent and started to flee, using sand-attuned skills to meld into the endless dunes.

“Shit, where are the bodies?” Ogras suddenly growled as he looked around. “Or at least their Cosmos Sacks.”

Zac looked around to see what the demon meant, and he was shocked to discover that the dozens of corpses that had littered the area were gone, not even leaving a drop of blood as evidence that anything had ever been there.

“Was it a mirage?” Zac muttered, but even he didn’t believe his own words.

The demon immediately started to kick away the sand where some of the merchants had fallen, but he found nothing even after digging a few meters down into the sand.

“I think the bandits brought the bodies with them as they fled,” Galau guessed. “They had sand-attuned classes, they can probably move about underground as freely as walking on top of it.”

“What good are you, looking on while they stole my loot,” Ogras muttered as he glared at Galau.

“I’m sorry, I only realized it too late, I thought the shifting of the sand simply covered the corpses,” the youth sheepishly said.

“It’s fine,” Zac shrugged. “Let’s get moving.”

They hadn’t immediately gotten a prompt upon arriving, so they ascended one of the larger dunes in the area to get a better vantage of the situation. A screen appeared as soon they reached the peak, and Zac carefully read the instructions.

[Gain employment with the Desert Eye Caravan and Secure the Transportation Route out of the Heart of Sand]

“Desert eye Caravan?” Zac mumbled as he read the quest. “It’s not the guys who just died, right?”

“We can probably find the answers over there, no?” Ogras said and pointed in the distance.

Zac looked in the direction Ogras indicated and he could vaguely make out some sort of settlement between the dunes. The three immediately set out and found that the place Ogras spotted was a small town set at the bank of a beautiful oasis.

The town itself wasn't anything special, and it could house a couple of thousand people at best. Security also seemed to be a bit lax as there were no walls and no guards that intercepted them when they entered the town. Only a few of the locals, who looked a bit like a mix of a gnome and armadillos, looked up when they entered the city.

It was also clear that it wasn't a permanent settlement for the majority of those walking the streets, but rather a waystation for people traversing the desert. Almost half the buildings were either hotels, bars, or other places for travelers to spend their money, and a large section of the town was meant to house the various mounts people used to travel.

If Cosmos Sacks didn't exist, then there would also no doubt be dozens, if not hundreds, of wagons parked somewhere, filled with goods. But all the goods were likely secured inside a string of Cosmos Sack on the merchants, or on their strongest bodyguards.

"Hold on to your Sacks," Ogras muttered. "Places like this are breeding grounds for pickpockets."

Zac nodded in agreement and made sure that none of his spatial tools were easily snatched. What the demon said was extremely true. Successfully snatching a small purse might essentially set you up for life in a place like this, provided that you managed to abscond with the wealth.

A Cosmos Sack was generally bound to an owner as long as he was alive, but there were no absolutes in this world. Anything from contracts to item bindings could no doubt be broken if the party was strong and motivated enough.

Trades were also taking place all over, and the loud clamor of heated bargaining could be heard from almost every corner. Almost all of the trade seemed to take place between traveling merchants as well, while the locals simply ran the town establishments. The traders likely came from different

countries, and it was easier to trade their wares in the middle in a place like this rather than crossing the entire desert to trade at the opposite side.

The profit margins might become thinner in a place like this, but they also saved a lot on time and provisions, not to mention reducing the risk of getting killed on the road.

“Can you do me a favor?” Galau suddenly said as they inspected the town.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Kill the bandits for me rather than escort the caravan,” the youth said.

“Why?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

Completing the quest generally resulted in more ample rewards, and it wasn’t like the aspiring merchant to say no to free money.

“Are you planning on staying here?” Ogras asked.

“Yes,” Galau succinctly said as he looked around.

“We did promise you to take you to the 32nd level, you know,” Zac reminded. “We’re still one level short.”

“This level is fine,” Galau said. “It’s a merchant-related floor. Caravans from various distant locations will come to this small oasis town to resupply. It is a good opportunity for me to work on my business acumen.”

“There are also no vixens trying to string you up in the rafters,” the demon smiled.

“... That too,” Galau coughed. “Finding a place like this on the fourth floor is my good fortune. It might backfire if we keep going.”

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed, as killing some bandit lord seemed a lot easier and quicker than leading some slow caravan out from the desert anyway.

From there on out things proceeded quite smoothly. It only took Ogras three hours to sniff out one of the lookouts from the bandits skulking around in the town, and with some

‘enhanced interrogation tactics’ they soon found out where the bandits hid.

The bandits had found some mysterious ruins long ago, hidden in a natural cave-system far beneath the sandy surface. The bandits not only gained a decent incomplete heritage related to the Desert there, but also a great hidden base.

Many of the natives actually knew about this all along, but they never bothered to do anything about it as the bandits only targeted the caravans, and then sold the stolen goods to the locals at a discount. It was a thriving eco-system of a both black and white economy.

Even some merchants knew of this, but there wasn’t much they could do as this area was truly a no man’s land. Would they spend their money on an expensive excursion where they hired a mercenary squad to come all the way into the desert and fight the bandits?

It was cheaper to bear the risk of getting robbed and losing your money than being guaranteed to lose all your money on such an expensive endeavor.

They also found the Desert Eye Caravan, and they learned that they would be leaving the town within the day, and completing the quest would likely take around three days. That was unacceptable to both Zac and Ogras, so the tree immediately headed to the hidden passageway that the captured bandit used to head back to their base unnoticed.

What ensued was a messy battle between over a hundred bandits and Zac. Ogras assisted by assassinating one target after another, whereas Zac went for widespread destruction. It was a pretty annoying battle as the enemies had an obvious home-field advantage.

The bandits kept blending into the sands in the area, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the targets. Zac eventually got tired of the guesswork and unleashed [**Nature’s Punishment**] to drown the whole area in a massive deluge. Running around inside the sand suddenly became a lot harder when it turned to dense mud, and they finally managed to catch and execute the Bandit Leader and most of the remaining bandits.

Ogras immediately went on a looting spree, while Zac sat down to go over the battle. He felt that his skill was somewhat restricted in the desert, something he hadn't really encountered before. He could only guess that it was because there was so little water in the area. However, that possibly meant that the skill didn't bring stuff from other dimensions, but rather took them from the area.

Did that mean that [**Nature's Punishment**] would be useless if he fought in space?

Ogras returned with a sour face half an hour later. It looked like the System didn't want to provide a bunch of loot when they skipped the mission, and it looked like the bandits didn't keep any wealth on their persons. Most of it was converted to Nexus Coins in the town, which the System kept for itself when they died.

A teleporter had appeared inside the ruins the moment the bandit lord died, and the three gathered in front of it after everything was dealt with.

"Good luck, you two. I hope you both can conquer the fourth-floor guardian," Galau said with some wistfulness as he transferred the agreed-upon fees to Ogras and Zac.

"Thank you. Wait what?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Well, you no doubt know that if you cannot travel together beyond this floor?" Galau said, looking confused.

Zac's brain froze for a second before he looked over at Ogras who looked like he had just eaten a pile of shit.

"...What?" was all the demon managed to spit out through grit teeth.

"The System wouldn't allow any carries beyond the 4th floor. After all, breaking through the 4th floor is the watermark of an elite. It doesn't only give you a percentage-based boost, but it also conjures an Apparition."

"So we can't even fight the floor guardian together?" Zac confirmed.

“You can, but only the one the System deserves the most credit will get the title and reward. It’s based contribution and potential, I’ve gathered,” Galau explained. “And splitting up later doesn’t help either.”

“So if I enter the final level of this floor with this monstrosity I’m shit out of luck?” Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at Zac.

“Well... Lord Piker is one in a millennium genius. I am afraid the odds of the apparition and titles going to you would be slim,” Galau coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

“We won’t even be able to travel together either for the normal levels?” Zac asked.

“Well, you can, but it is practically unheard of. The restrictions for traveling in groups get even worse from here on out, and only one person gets the benefits. Who would travel in groups in such an environment?” Galau said.

The three stood in a suffocating silence for almost a minute until Ogras finally spoke up.

“Just give me the beacon arrays and a couple of defensive treasures!” the demon spat.

“Wha-?” Galau sputtered, but he still took out the beacon array he had used since the third floor.

“This is on you for not telling your employees! You screwed me over royally here by adding difficulty for my tower trial. The least you can do is provide some compensation,” Ogras said as he snatched the array.

“But... The three billion...” Galau weakly countered.

“Nevermind that,” Ogras growled. “Defensive treasure!”

“I guess this might be my oversight? This is a **[Radiant Intervention]** talisman from Talovor Trappings,” Galau said with a pained expression as he took out a small box containing a golden talisman. “It would normally block a single strike, but it might not be able to completely counter the Floor Guardian. It will also release a blinding light upon impact, which might allow you to turn the tides.”

“Good,” Ogras said as he quickly snatched the treasure, his facial expressions making a 180-turn. ”With this we can barely be considered even.”

“Stay safe,” Zac added to Galau. “And remember, try to stay for the full duration. You might also want to prepare to run the moment we exit. I will do my best to shoulder fallout, but I have no idea what the situation is like outside.”

“I am sure that you will create a grand feat that will turn enmities into friendships,” Galau said, though his smile was somewhat hollow. “Before I forget, I want you to have this.”

The youth took out another box, and inside was a token that was reminiscent of the Tower Token. However, instead of the intricate fractals covering its surface there was only the insignia of the Beroria Family, the clan that Galau Belonged to.

“This is...?” Zac asked, but his heart started to beat faster in excitement.

“A teleportation token to Nal Avadar City, the seat of my family. It’s in the Grand Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire.”

Chapter 416: Bravoria

Goods and Treasures

Zac's eyes lit up as he accepted the token. He knew that he would have to leave Earth sooner or later if he wanted to keep improving, and the Allbright Empire was his first choice. First of all, he had multiple connections there, and there seemed to be all kinds of places where he could grind monsters to his heart's content.

He could even join the same army as Average since it sounded like it was an army that was constantly in battle with the various threats at the border of the Red Zone.

"Wait, Nal Avadar? Not Beroria?" Zac suddenly asked with a start.

"Well, most of us aren't comfortable divulging our real heritage in the Base Town," Galau said with an apologetic smile.

"Ah, I understand," Zac said with a pang of guilt as he did the same thing.

"However, you might not want to use the token depending on how things turn out after we exit," Galau added.

"Do you think your clan will be implicated by my actions here?" Zac asked with worry.

"Our family has fought for The Allbright Empire for over 800 000 years, and many of our ancestors have racked up great merit in the army. The Empire wouldn't allow us to be exterminated over a feud among juniors, especially since I was not directly involved," Galau explained. "But some elder might want to present you to the Tsarun for private benefits if they believe they can get away with it."

"So you're gifting him a deathtrap?" Ogras snorted.

“This token takes him to the city Teleporter, not our family’s private one,” Galau explained. “He can simply identify himself as a wandering cultivator, no? Besides. If the Peak Family speaks up for you, then no one in our family would dare to have any malicious ideas.”

Zac wasn’t too sure about the last statement. Greed could make people do all types of despicable things, and there was no doubt in his mind that some elders in Galau’s family wouldn’t hesitate to sell him out if given the opportunity.

However, what Galau said was true. He could simply go there using [**Thousand Faces**] and immediately leave for the Red sector if things looked dicey with Galau’s family. Securing passage would likely be a bit cumbersome, but there was no way that there weren’t solutions in an established Empire like that.

“Thank you,” Zac repeated. “We’ll see you in a couple of months. Have fun over here.”

With that they left their companion of the last month to live it up among the armadillo-people as they stepped onto the teleporter.

Galau watched his two companions disappear after stepping onto the teleporter, a surprising amount of wistfulness filling his heart.

“Such a bad actor,” Galau muttered with a small smile before he walked over to a particular pile of rubble in the cavern.

Well, subsidizing the demon a decent talisman in return for the goodwill of Zac Piker felt like an extremely worthy investment. As long as that man survived the aftermath of the Zethaya incident then all would be fine. He had been a bit despondent at the start, but after thinking it over Galau quickly realized the opportunity that had presented itself before him.

The resources he had put into garnering trust and camaraderie would turn into a massive leg to hug onto in a millennium, or perhaps even in just a few centuries. Monstrous attributes that hadn’t been seen since who knows when? Dual Fragments?

And he's a Progenitor with connections to the Peak family? Zac Piker even had a good chance of outperforming Prince Reoluv. What was a little talisman compared to that?

Besides, he had ample time to make up for the expenditure in the coming months.

The excitement of excavating unknown treasure filled Galau's heart as he pushed the rubble away, displaying a hole full of Cosmic Sacks. If you added the spatial tools he pilfered from the dead merchants when they arrived at the floor, then this might be the most profitable one yet.

Galau quickly transferred all the loot from the Bandit's cosmos Sacks before he started walking back toward the town. He hadn't been idle while the demon had been busy hunting bandits, and he quickly moved toward a shop at the edge of the settlement. A human merchant ran it, and the store was empty as usual when Galau entered.

"Whad'ya want?" the old man muttered with disinterest, but his eyes widened in fear when Galau threw out a handful of array crystals without warning.

The whole store was locked down in an instant, allowing neither sound nor people to escape. The merchant hastily produced a talisman of his own, but how couldn't Galau be prepared?

The merchant lay prone on the floor snoring before he even had time to activate his defenses. Galau quickly dragged him to a corner in the basement and poured a black tincture down his throat. It would keep in a coma for up to a year without a problem, which was more than enough.

The merchant wasn't well-liked and he had no kin in the town. Him disappearing and being replaced by a much more affable merchant shouldn't result in any waves, and the mystery of his appearance would deter would-be troublemakers.

With lodging secured Galau could finally do what he had longed for the past weeks. One treasure after another started spilling out of his Cosmos Sacks, and he started to go over them one by one with an almost manic gleam in his eyes.

It hadn't been easy stashing away so much loot under the nose of that paranoid demon, but he still had managed to hide away a pretty impressive haul over 30 levels. After having mentioned his warrior heritage and his goals of being a merchant neither Zac nor Ogras had suspected him to have not one but four skills related to thievery, all of which he had used on the locals on each level any chance he got.

Now he only needed to turn this wealth into more wealth over the coming two months, and finally convert it all to Nexus Coins before he left.

After Galau rearranged the store to be more inviting and added his own wares he went out and took out a large sign that he had already prepared. One swing with his massive zweihander was all that was needed to strike down the old one, and the scene would hopefully create enough buzz to spread the news of the new store.

As expected, it took less than ten minutes before the first patron arrived, and the little armadillo's eyes widened when he saw all the exotic wares on display. Galau adorned an affable but somewhat timid smile as he scurried toward the mark.

“Welcome esteemed patron, to Bravoria Goods and Treasures. I am sure you'll find something to your liking!”

Life was pretty good, all things considered.

After the brief intermission Zac found himself standing on a craggy surface adorned with thick moss and a sparse number of trees here and there. It reminded him of the Scottish moorlands he had seen in movies, but he barely had time to orient himself as a heavy shockwave almost made him lose his footing.

It felt like an earthquake, but it only lasted for an instant, making Zac more inclined to believe that there was a massive battle between two powerhouses somewhere closeby. It might be a clue to this level if he could figure out the source and there was clearly a link as the quest prompt appeared immediately following the phenomenon.

[Redirect the Ancestral Avoli from its current path]

Zac's eyes almost crossed in confusion as he read the mission. Redirect the what? And where?

Another shake almost made Zac fall over, and he looked around for the source of the abrupt earthquakes. But he couldn't see anything out of the norm.

A red flare rose into the sky far in the distance, and Zac put his questions aside as he immediately set out to find the demon.

As expected the first attack took place within seconds. A disgusting critter as large as a wolf appeared out from a hidden burrow and threw itself right at Zac, who bisected it without even thinking. Zac wasn't exactly sure whether it was a bug or a beast even after observing the corpse. It looked a bit like a naked mole rat, but it had eight legs and insectoid eyes, and pincers in its mouth rather than teeth.

The beast also wasn't alone, as more of them quickly appeared out of burrows all over, and Zac found himself in a protracted battle where he had to run and fight simultaneously. The critters were luckily not even as strong as the Battleroaches, and the unceasing number of them only turned into more Nexus Coins for him.

Zac soon enough found the demon with hundreds of carcasses around him, and more animals joined their fallen brethren every second as one spear after another skewered them from below.

"Oh, you're here?" the demon noted. "Help me finish off these ugly things."

The two went to work and within five minutes the area was strewn with thousands of the small beasts. The animals gave a decent clue about their mission as well, as they were called **[Avoli Parasites]**, meaning they had some connection to their target.

"Did you know about those rules?" Zac asked when things had calmed down, referring to the limits to traveling together.

"Of course I knew," Ogras snorted. "Since when was the Ruthless Heavens so generous that it would provide top tier

treasures and amazing titles to leeches? Allowing us to travel together for almost half the tower is benevolent enough. I simply wanted to squeeze out a bonus on top of the Nexus Coins.”

“Then why didn’t you split off from us on the third floor?” Zac asked.

“Well, I knew most of it,” Ogras coughed. “I honestly thought that it would be possible to get help all through the fourth floor. I would enter the teleporter to the fifth floor separately, and that way get the maximum benefits. I guess it backfired a bit, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“So what will you do?” Zac probed.

“I’ll sponge off for you for the levels of the fourth floor, but I will fight the floor guardian by myself,” the demon answered without hesitation.

“The guardian still has the boosted attributes of three people though,” Zac reminded.

“The fourth floor is breached a couple of times every week in our sector. The experiences on your planet have given me enough strength to match most scions. Why wouldn’t I be able to defeat it if I use my head?” the demon proudly said.

Zac was about to argue, but he realized that what Ogras said might be true. The demon had produced a Dao Fragment along with another Dao Seed that seemed to be related to illusions judging by the fight with the barbarian chieftain. This alone put him in the top percentile of those who visited the Tower.

Let alone the fourth floor, Ogras might actually have a decent chance at the fifth floor unless the difficulty took an unprecedented leap.

“I understand,” Zac said as his eyes started to turn pitch-black. “We can go over things properly on the 35th level.”

“Ugh, creepy,” Ogras said with a grimace as he witnessed Zac change into his Draugr-form. “I’ll never get used to those eyes of yours. Couldn’t wait even a second after we ditched the dead weight?”

“I’ve been itching to try some things out for a while now,” Zac said with a smile that no doubt looked creepy rather than mirthful in his current shape. “Hopefully we’ll find some targets that will do.”

“Well, there seems to no lack of targets in this place at least,” the demon agreed.

“What do you think of the quest? Have you heard of Ancestral Avolis before?” Zac probed as he took out his new and almost unused shield.

“No, but I think we’re standing on him,” the demon said as he poked his spear into the ground a few times.

Realization immediately dawned in Zac’s eyes, but he still felt a bit skeptical as he looked around. There were massive vistas in all directions, so if they were actually standing on a beast it would have to be as big as his island.

“There are beasts as large as planets swimming around the vast cosmos, so why not ones as large as mountains?” the demon shrugged with disinterest when he saw Zac’s face. “I’m more interested in how we redirect a big bastard like this.”

Zac’s scrambled for ideas as well, but there was only one doable solution he could think of.

“If we find the equivalent of this guy’s brain we might be able to give him a shock great enough to turn,” Zac ventured.

“Sounds as good as any other plan,” the demon agreed. “We can just blast the brain into mush if it doesn’t work. I guess that this thing is the target as well.”

“Probably,” Zac nodded.

It might seem preposterous to kill something as large as an island, but it didn’t seem too hard to Zac. They had already done something similar with the Ayr Hivequeen. They were essentially ants to this thing and could freely make their way into its body to cause havoc. It wasn’t like this huge thing could stop them either, just like Zac couldn’t stop bacteria from running around inside his body.

It took the two some time to orient themselves, but they soon managed to confirm the hypothesis that they were standing on an enormous beast. The Ancestral Avoli had eight legs, each like a mountain of its own, and an oblong body. They were somewhere in the middle, and they figured its head was in the direction the Avoli moved, so they quickly set out.

They found nothing of value on the beast itself, just a bunch of beasts living off of the body of the titan. The bodies of the parasites were worthless as well, and they only served as target practice. But that was just fine with Zac as he had been itching to fight in his Draugr-form for a while.

It was finally time to test his new skills.

Chapter 417: Vanguard of Undeath

Zac's eyes were trained on the sea of parasites that came pouring out of their burrows and he calmly stepped forward as he activated his set of passive skills. A billowing cloud of miasma spread across the area and covered the ground, which elicited an annoyed grunt from Ogras who started to move away in disgust.

Zac could only shrug apologetically, knowing that the skill in his current form affected his allies as well, or at least his living allies. He would have to experiment some more if he ever got some undead companions.

The thousands of parasites didn't seem to care about the miasma though, and they rushed toward the two without hesitation. The situation was a perfect opportunity to Zac, and he activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**] for the first time. A storm of miasma immediately exploded out from his body, which in turn attracted the attention of all the beasts.

Even most of those who had been running toward Ogras changed their course as they seemed intent to take him out first as if their lives depended on it. They flooded toward him like a tide, but Zac didn't worry in the least. He was more interested in the changes that took place to his body.

His vantage rapidly changed as he felt himself grow, and he bones in his body creaked and groaned until he was standing at well over three meters tall. That was just one of the changes though, and Zac couldn't help but marvel at the others. His frame had received a huge upgrade in not only height but also bulk, and he stood his ground like a massive tank.

He wanted to check out his muscles for a second, but it was impossible due to the other addition the skill had brought

forth. His whole body was covered in a thick medieval armor that ran in black and turquoise, created by extremely dense layers of miasma.

Even his equipment had been transformed by the skill.

[Everlasting] had grown to match his increased size, and the circle of fractals in the middle had changed color from white to turquoise to match the details in his armor. Was this the effect of the Neprosium being able to incorporate almost any attunement?

Even **[Verun's Bite]** had enjoyed an upgrade, though it seemed that his Axe couldn't be infused in the same manner as his shield. A massive Fractal axe had instead formed over it, a grisly bardiche that was tailor-made for his hulking frame. The haft was almost two meters long and ended in a sharp spike.

The axehead was one-sided and slightly larger than what felt normal for such a long weapon, with its massive half-moon edge having a diameter of at least a meter. If it had been an actual weapon it would no doubt feel completely unbalanced, but it felt perfect in Zac's hand as he took a step forward that made the ground shudder.

An annoyed growl echoed in Zac's mind, and he realized it was Verun that didn't seem all too happy to be covered in death-attuned energies. A thought struck Zac and he simply put **[Verun's Bite]** away in his Spatial Ring, and the miasma axe thankfully stayed on without a physical base. It did however seem a bit faded until he brought out his axe again.

He could soon confirm that Verun wasn't actually harmed by the death-attuned energies, but it was more akin to being close to a nauseating odor. Zac could only impose on the Spirit Tool for now until he found a better solution. Perhaps he would have to invest in a Death-Attuned axe sooner or later anyway.

Power coursed through his whole body, and a glance at his status screen gave him a start. All his attributes apart from Luck had gained a solid 10% increase, pushing his power to another level. It wasn't as great as the buff from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, but judging by the modest

consumption of miasma he would be able to maintain his current form for the better part of an hour without a problem.

Increased attributes, increased size, impervious armor, and a massive weapon. Zac felt like an invincible tank after having activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**], and he immediately started slaughtering the parasites. Each swing of his axe cause a ghastly wail to echo across the battlefield, and corpses of Avoli Parasites were launched dozens of meters from the force of his momentum.

But Zac only had time to swing his axe a couple of times before his Danger Sense pricked in his mind.

The next moment a handful of shadowlances flew up toward him and his mind froze by the unexpected ambush. The required movements were long ingrained into his body though, and his arm automatically moved to intercept the strikes with [**Everlasting**] before he even had time to question what was going on.

“Ahh! What are you doing!” Ogras screamed with frustration shortly after as a spectral projection stabbed at him as retaliation for the shadowlances.

“What am *I* doing?” Zac grunted in annoyance as he turned toward the demon, but froze for a second when he heard himself.

He sounded like a real devil, where his voice had sunk to a register that shouldn't be reachable for humans. There was also the chill of death to it, giving it an extremely terrifying cadence.

“Is this your new skill?” the demon said with complaint as he shot out another handful of shadowblades, half of which were aimed at Zac.

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about, I used a skill to transform. Can you stop attacking me?” Zac growled in annoyance as he crushed the spears with a swing of his miasmic axe.

“Do you think I want to? Your skill messes with my senses, it's like you've given me tunnel vision. I try to hit the damn

beasts but I somehow end up targeting you anyway,” the demon said with frustration written all over his face.

Only then did the true effect of the skill dawn on Zac. **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had a taunting function? This was something that had been a huge problem with his class before, at least until he got **[Profane Seal]**.

To strike Zac in his Draugr-form was to slowly kill yourself due to the combination of **[Deathwish]** and Zac’s massive Endurance. But why would anyone hit him if they figured that out? They could always flee or target Zac’s allies instead, forcing him to stomp around by himself.

But it looked like **[Vanguard of Undeath]** at least partly shored up that deficiency.

Ogras reluctantly started helping out by testing the limits, and they found that it did not just work on ranged skills. For example, when Ogras used his movement skill he accidentally ended up closer to Zac rather than further away a couple of times, which would have allowed Zac to launch a strike if he wanted.

There were limits to the efficacy of the skill though, and Ogras got better and better controlling his actions as time passed. After struggling for a bit over a minute he managed to essentially rewire his brain as he described it, where he intentionally aimed off-keel to circumvent the effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

But a whole minute in a battle between elites was the same as an eternity, and it would give Zac multiple opportunities to destroy his enemies. Zac also quickly learned that he could control the effect a bit, and reducing the area he taunted lessened the mental strain on him.

Conversely, the area he could cover if he strained was pretty massive, and he realized he could easily cover the whole cage he created with **[Profane Seal]**. So if he managed to trap his target he would essentially be able to force a fight.

The skill worked even better with the brainless parasites as long as he kept his taunt active. They heedlessly threw

themselves at him with even greater fervor than the battleroaches back in the Underworld. They unleashed barrage after barrage of attacks on either his armor or shield, but the strikes barely left a scratch in his current shape.

Spectral parasites kept appearing one after another as strikes against his new armor would activate **[Deathwish]** just like strikes at his body. Large pockets of carnage were simultaneously carved out by his miasmic axe, each swing taking out over five of the beasts without him even infusing the axe with a Dao.

He quickly realized he had some control over the spectral axe, though it wasn't as convenient as **[Chop]**. Still, he was able to elongate the handle by another meter, and the edge could grow to be almost as tall as a full-grown person.

Along with his increased size he had suddenly tripled his range and strike zone, which finally allowed him to mow down his enemies by the handful rather than one by one as he did with **[Unholy Strike]**. He realized that skills like **[Deforestation]** or **[Winds of Decay]** were still far superior to clear out a large number of enemies, but it was still a pretty convenient boost.

Zac almost felt drunk with power from using his ultimate form, as this truly was what he expected from his ultimate strike. The only thing missing was a pair of wings like the ones Ogras got, but he guessed that wasn't really on theme for an Undying Bulwark.

Better yet, this was only the first of his two new skills. Zac was about to try out the second one as well, but he suddenly stopped himself as he turned to Ogras.

“You might want to back away from the battle,” Zac said. “I think my other skill might target you as well.”

“And you're not just trying to mess with me?” Ogras muttered, but he still flashed away to spectate the battle on a hill far in the distance.

The miasma in the area started to churn and swell as Zac fused more and more of his stored miasma into **[Undying Legion]**,

but he was shocked to realize that the skill still kept craving more even after having imbued the fractal with a third of his miasma. It actually gobbled up half of his stores before the skill was satiated.

This was a shocking cost, more than twice compared to **[Profane Seal]**. It was to the point that Zac started to regret trying it out on these trash parasites rather than saving it for a real battle. But it wasn't like he could refund the miasma so he could only keep going.

One shape after another started to rise from the hazy shroud created from **[Fields of Despair]**. They were humanoid skeletons who shone with sinister energy, and Zac felt their power was comparable to pretty strong peak F-Grade warriors judging by their auras. Figures kept rising until over a hundred of them stood in formation, creating a small army.

The skeletons were all whole and without cracks, but the gear they wore was mismatched and obviously worse for the wear. The swords and armors were chipped and filled with rust, but they still contained deathly energy that felt strong enough to kill the peak F-Grade parasites in a swing or two.

Zac nodded in relief when he saw the skill, as the skill quest had been a bit troubling.

It had required him to gather the resentment of 500 000 kills, which made him worry about what would happen when he activated **[Undying Legion]**. The fact that it would be some sort of summoning skill was pretty obvious going by the name, but he had been afraid that he would summon everyone he had killed over the past months.

He didn't feel shame or regret for all those kills, but he also didn't feel proud about the kind of person he had become. Being put face to face again to the victims of his carnage would have been a bit much to handle, so the nondescript skeletons were no doubt a relief.

The parasites didn't worry about where the skeletons had cropped up from and they immediately pounced on their new targets. The skeleton warriors themselves immediately went to work without needing any prompts from Zac. One parasite

after another got ripped to shreds, and a continuous surge of miasma filled Zac's body as he simply watched on.

The skill might have had a massive initial expenditure, but Zac was happy to see that there was no cost at all to maintaining the skill after the skeletons had formed. They kept hacking and slashing without Zac losing an iota of miasma. It was actually the opposite as his reserves kept getting filled thanks to **[Fields of Despair]**.

A thought struck Zac as he watched on, and he tried infusing the Fragment of the Coffin into one of the skeletons. The summoned warrior immediately turned a shade darker, and its sword started to emanate a pretty terrifying aura.

Any beast the Dao-infused skeleton cut started to immediately rot and fester, and the effect was even greater than when he used the Seed of Rot with his axe. Any parasite that was struck with the sword was turned into a pile of goop within a minute. The scene made Zac realize he had forgotten one of the weapons in his arsenal, as he always used the Fragment of the Axe when fighting with his weapon lately.

It was a good reminder that he also had such a tool in his toolbox.

Chapter 418: Undying Legion

Zac kept experimenting with [**Undying Legion**] and he found that he could infuse the Fragment of the Axe into skeletons as well, but only into the few who were wielding an axe. It appeared they couldn't use weapons that he provided either, which made it impossible to hand out a bunch of disposable axes to improve their power.

But the Dao of the Coffin was a more fitting infusion anyway, so Zac felt it was fine. It didn't only improve their offensive power by a huge degree, it also made them a noticeably sturdier. A couple of the skeletons were ripped apart as they were mobbed by the frenzied parasites, but those infused with the Dao of the Coffin were like stalwart defenders who never went down.

One disappointing factor was that he only managed to infuse 12 of the hundred or so skeletons the skill conjured. He wasn't sure whether this was a limit of the skill or due to him lacking control over his Daos, as Zac felt a noticeable strain to split his mental energy and imbue many targets at the same time.

Being able to infuse all of them would, of course, be preferable, but at least it was a start. It created a few skeleton commanders who could lead their brethren into battle. Zac himself joined the fight as well, taking advantage of his massive frame and weapon to carve a path of death in the hordes.

Zac also tested the offensive capabilities of the Fragment of the Coffin in conjunction with [**Vanguard of Undeath**], and the fit was just amazing. It did not only make his conjured armor far sturdier, but it also imbued his axe with the same corrosive capabilities as it did with the skeletons.

He felt extremely lucky to have mastered the Seed of Rot from the fight inside the Inheritance. What if he had simply fused Sanctuary with Hardness to form the Fragment of the Shield instead? He would have turned into a mobile fortress, impervious but unable to dish out nearly as much damage.

Now he was a tank who spread death and decay wherever he walked. Black clouds started to billow around him as well, seeping out through the slits in his helmet as though a fire burned inside the miasmic armor. Thankfully it turned out his summons were completely unaffected by the corrosive mists of [**Winds of Decay**], even though they were neck-deep in it.

One disappointing change to Zac was that he was suddenly unable to infuse the black mists with his Fragment of the Coffin. Ever since the skill reached Middle proficiency he had been able to infuse it with the Seed of Rot, which kicked its corrosion to another level.

But now that the nature of the Dao changed he lost the ability to infuse the gas. Was it because there was no component of hardness to the skill?

Zac felt some disappointment with the development, but he suddenly had a spark of inspiration. If he went by the image of his latest Dao Fragment the corrosive aspect was locked inside the hardness. Zac immediately changed his tactic and infused his lungs with the Fragment of the Coffin instead as he breathed out another lungful of corrosive mists.

The latest gust was clearly different compared to the others. The normal mist was essentially a greyish black, but the new mist also had a greenish hue to it, making it feel more nefarious. His guess had been correct, he simply needed to adapt his thinking a bit to make the skill work.

He made his lungs the coffin, and the skill the aspect of rot that he exhaled.

This discovery did unfortunately bring a whole new problem he had never encountered in his Hatchetman class though. He had too many skills active at the same time. The continuous consumption of miasma wasn't negligible, but the real problem was related to the Dao.

It was simply impossible for Zac to infuse all his skills with the Daos at the same time. The moment he started infusing **[Winds of Decay]**, the infusion to **[Vanguard of Undeath]** ended. It was also completely impossible for him to split his consciousness enough to add his Daos to the spectral projections for **[Deathwish]** while using it for other skills.

He was able to juggle the Fragment of the Coffin back and forth between his skills to some success, but he found himself being constantly delayed and losing focus on the battle itself. It felt like he was trying to solve a Sudoku in the middle of battle, making him constantly distracted. It looked like he would have to work even harder with his exercises to improve his mental control.

Still, only being able to infuse one or two skills at a time was acceptable for now, and with everything in place Zac allowed himself to freely rampage across the back of the Avoli. Ogras kept his distance, staying far away from the toxic battlefield Zac had created. It only took him 10 minutes before a deathly silence had spread out across the back of the titan, with not a single living parasite remaining in the area.

Only then did Zac release his skills, surprised to notice that he had less than a quarter of his Miasma remaining. It wasn't due to wounds since he didn't even have a flesh wound from the battle thanks to the armor, but it was rather due to the massive expenditure. If it wasn't for **[Fields of Despair]** returning some miasma to him he might have turned back to his human form unknowingly.

Zac felt extremely satisfied with the two new skills to his class though, even if their costs were pretty big. He finally started to understand how Undying Bulwark was meant to be used. The first skills had been focused on keeping himself alive in the vanguard of a battle, withstanding both physical and mental attacks.

Then came **[Profane Seal]** that allowed him to trap his target in an arena that would allow no escape until one side was downed. The Seal itself wasn't that strong on the offense though, as the chains only worked on weak cannon fodder. For example, almost all of the Incursion Leaders had been able to

either destroy or push away the chains before they could do any damage.

If it wasn't for Zac's unnaturally high attributes and Daos he would have been forced to slowly grind down his targets with **[Deathwish]**. He had also been able to shore up his weaknesses somewhat with **[Unholy Strike]** and **[Winds of Decay]**. But it was undeniable that both his single-target and large-scale damage was limited compared to his other class.

But that all changed with the final two skills. They added the final missing ingredient to the mix and changed him from a passive defender to a real juggernaut that could change the course of a large-scale battle.

"Had your fill?" Ogras' voice drifted over from the side, and Zac looked over to see the demon walking over, pointedly avoiding going near the parasites melted by the Fragment of the Coffin.

"This undead class of yours is just a cheat," the demon muttered as he shook his head in disgust. "I've never heard of anything like it. How is one supposed to take you down without being a far higher level?"

"Isn't that a good thing?" Zac answered with a smile.

Zac didn't need to showcase his two new aces in front of Ogras, especially now that they would have to go their separate ways after the 4th floor. But it served as a good reminder for the wily demon to not have any ideas even if he had become a lot stronger lately with his Shadow Fragment.

Since Zac had finished trying out his new skills there was no reason to linger on the level. They rushed to the front of the Avoli and entered its body through one of the burrows the Parasites had formed.

It looked like the parasites had a somewhat symbiotic relationship with the host, as they doggedly defended the inner parts of the titan. But the two simply blasted their way through until they found the brain of the beast.

Surprisingly it was just a bit over twenty meters across, which felt pretty small for a beast as large as a mountain range. The

demon had some fun prodding the poor beast, causing one massive earthquake after another as the Avoli started to buck in pain. Zac eventually had to drag him through the teleporter that appeared after one particularly massive earthquake.

Unfortunately there wasn't anything of value that they could find inside the Avoli, but that was simply how things were. You wouldn't always find treasure even when completing the quest, you just improved your odds of finding something of value.

The following levels went by quickly as well, as the 4th floor still wasn't dangerous enough to hamper their progress. They also learned that not every single level would immediately throw them into the thick of it. At least not in an obvious way.

The sixth level had for example put them in the middle of a deadly array, and if Zac hadn't been warned by his Danger Sense they would have had a significant amount of life force drained without even noticing.

But just as the danger increased so did the rewards, at least when they followed through on the quests. One precious item after another went into Zac's Cosmos Sacks or Ogras' barrels until they finally reached the 8th level.

The quest this time was nothing special as it was yet another beast tide quest, with the small addition that an upstart force had taken the opportunity to launch a coup in the middle of the chaos. So not only had they guard against the beasts, but they also needed to protect the mayor from assassination attempts.

Completing the level early was also a bit troublesome, as they couldn't figure out if it was the beast alpha or the matriarch of the upstart clan that was the guardian. There was a real risk that killing the wrong enemy would have some unintended consequences, so they found themselves a bit stuck on defense until reinforcements arrived.

However, that was actually a lucky break for Zac as Verun stirred for the first time since they encountered the Beast Crystals after they had stayed on the level for a couple of hours. The Tool Spirit had finally sensed something that it wanted to eat. It was a great sign to Zac, as he had started to

worry that the fact that the Spirit Tool didn't want to eat anything was a sign that it had reached its limits for improvement.

"Can you take care of things on this end for a day or two?" Zac asked the demon who was standing on the wall walk next to him overlooking the sea of beasts.

"What's that?" Ogras asked with confusion.

"My Tool Spirit is sensing something it wants to eat," Zac explained, not bothering to hide it from the demon. "I want to go take it."

"That's fine. Just go," Ogras shrugged. "We are stuck here for another two days anyway unless you're willing to risk it by guessing which one is the floor guardian."

Zac nodded in agreement and flashed away toward the direction Verun's indicated. He waded straight through the sea of rabid beasts outside the town, turning everything around him into a bloody mess. He only avoided the area where the horde leader, a massive demon tortoise, stood, as to not accidentally get dragged into a battle with it.

Thirty minutes passed and he entered a mountain range that was ordinarily a popular spot to harvest herbs and hunt beasts. But now it was almost completely desolate, with all its occupants having been drafted into the beast army.

A howl echoed across the mountains as Verun's true form suddenly leaped out of Zac's axe, and it started sprinting in a certain direction. Zac could only follow with interest, and he was led into a valley with an oddly sparse Cosmic Energy.

A sense of Déjà Vu filled Zac's heart as he looked around to see a bunch of withered trees and weeds all around him, and his suspicions were only confirmed when they reached the middle of the valley. A massive plant as large as a tree stood alone, and a thick bloody scent wafted out from it.

It looked a bit like a cactus or a succulent flower, with an extremely wide base and no stalk to talk about. Each leaf was almost as tall as Zac himself, and they were extremely thick. There weren't any flowers or fruits that Zac could see, but

perhaps there was something like that hidden inside the layers of leaves.

Another gleeful roar emerged from Verun's throat as it pounced the plant, clearly wanting to bite into its leaves. But a massive shape suddenly burst out of the ground, and it immediately got into a tussle with the Tool Spirit.

Zac's face scrunched up in disgust when he saw that it was a twenty-meter long centipede, but he still jumped into the fray with his axe at the ready. The area rapidly transformed into a sacred grove as he activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], and Zac appeared right next to one of the beast's segments.

A five-meter fractal imbued with the Fragment of the Axe slammed into the beast, aiming to bisect it in one swift attack, but Zac's brows rose when he saw that the strike was actually rebuffed. The centipede was still thrown a dozen meters away due to the force of the swing, but it was very much still in one piece after the attack.

Zac wasn't disappointed though, but he rather looked at the massive insect like he was looking at a pile of Nexus Crystals. Just how strong was that shell?

Chapter 419: Tumbles

A shell that could withstand an offensive Dao Fragment, along with Zac's terrifying force, was definitely a material that could be refined into some very sturdy armor. Hell, he could cover a whole ship in shells judging by how big the centipede was.

The problem was how to kill it without completely crushing the animal with something like **[Nature's Punishment]** and ruining the materials. Zac activated **[Inquisitive Eye]** in hopes it would provide some useful information, but it only managed to find out that the centipede was level 91.

It was actually the highest level beast Zac had fought since entering the Tower. There had been stronger beings in the worlds they passed through, such as the devil titans on the 28th floor, but he had never been expected to fight those.

Zac guessed that the centipede and the massive succulent it was guarding could be considered a side quest, providing an increased challenge in return for a valuable item. Zac also realized there was no time to waste, as it turned out that the centipede was not only able to touch the Tool Spirit, but it was getting the better off it against it.

Verun repeatedly tried to bite through the tough carapace, but it simply didn't possess the strength to do so. The centipede easily shrugged off the attacks as it tried to strangle the Tool Spirit. Zac wasn't worried about Verun though since it had already been proven on multiple occasions that the spectral beast essentially was immortal in its current form.

At least that was Zac's guess as the Tool Spirit had been ripped to shreds on multiple occasions, yet it was fine after sleeping it off inside the axe. It also was in line with what he had learned about Spirit Tools. The Tool Spirit was almost impossible to kill and would persist as long as the Spirit Tool wasn't broken.

But he still didn't want to stand by while his companion was getting harried, so he quickly reentered the fray. He freely moved between the sections of the centipede, effortlessly dodging the hundreds of sharp legs thanks to the near-omniscience provided to him by **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. There was no chance of getting trapped or accidentally stabbed by one of the legs while the trees were his eyes.

Finally, he reached the front section, and with a grunt jumped up toward its head. The centipede immediately sensed the threat and tried to head-butt him away, but Zac shot out a fractal blade that hit the beasts' head with enough force to push it to the side. Zac kept flying toward its neck unencumbered and managed to grab onto the edge of one of its protective plates.

The centipede started to wildly thrash and twist to throw Zac off, but Zac would be able to hold on even if they were thrown into a hurricane with his inhumanly strong grip. He simply allowed himself to be flung back and forth while he held on with his left hand and methodically started to swing toward the gap between two chitinous plates.

This was pretty much the same tactic he had tried against the Battleroach King without any success. But things were different this time around. The centipede didn't seem to possess any real skills for one, especially not a fractal shield to block Zac's strikes. Secondly, his corrosive power had improved by quite a bit since the fight against the battleroaches.

It just took two swings before the plating had turned from a lustrous brown to a withered grey, and another swing to completely break through the thinner protective membrane between the protective plates. The centipede noticed that something was wrong, and it rose over ten meters into the air before it swung its whole body into the ground with all force it could muster.

The whole valley shook from the terrifying body slam, and Zac felt his mouth fill with blood even if he had expended both a defensive charge from the divine tree while also imbuing himself with the Fragment of the coffin.

Zac's vision blurred as the centipede was up in the air again the next moment, revving up for another attempt at crushing its unwelcome passenger. But the corrosion worked extremely quickly since it had turned into a Fragment, and Zac only needed one more swing to slash through its protections.

[Verun's Bite] keened as Zac cut down into the same spot one last time, and the protective membrane crumbled like rotten wood as the axe bit into its neck. This time he hadn't imbued the fractal edge with the Fragment of the Coffin, but rather with the Fragment of the Axe, and Zac effortlessly gored the centipede with **[Chop]** until the fractal blade hit the shell on the other side of its neck.

The beast flailed and spasmed in its death throes, and Zac realized he might have made a mistake when he saw himself falling toward the massive flower. It would probably turn to mush from the fall even if it was a precious spiritual Herb.

But the whole centipede was suddenly flung away as Verun slammed into its massive body as though the Tool Spirit's life depended on it. The final push was also the final straw that broke the camel's back, as Zac felt a surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body. He jumped off at the last moment, avoiding getting inadvertently bodyslammed by a carcass.

A shroud entered his axe just as Zac landed, no doubt meaning that the beast had maxed out the time it could spend outside. A burst of impressions quickly followed, and Zac realized what Verun wanted him to do.

He ignored the dead centipede for now as he climbed up on the massive flower. While he had been flailing about he had spotted what it looked like from above, and there was a large flower in the middle. The fat leaves gave way to far more delicate petals halfway in, and Zac couldn't reach the core of the flower, afraid he'd ruin it.

"You sure about this?" Zac asked as he looked down at the axe in his hand, and received an affirmative response.

Zac only shrugged and threw the Spirit Tool toward the core of the flower, where it landed on a bed of pollen, causing a small white cloud to rise into the air. Just a whiff of the stuff made

Zac's blood almost boil, and he felt though he was ready to go slaughter the whole beast tide himself.

But he regained his senses in just a moment and quickly climbed down the flower again. The feeling of inhaling the pollen had been pretty similar to when he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, and Zac wondered what the effect would be like if the massive succulent was refined into a pill.

He also wondered why Verun was so interested in the flower, but he soon found a possible answer. One of the fatty leaves at the outer edge had been damaged during the fight, and a thick liquid slowly poured out from it, staining the ground red. It really looked like the flower was bleeding.

A surge of energy from the center of the flower meant that Verun had started whatever it wanted to do with the flower, so Zac walked over to the centipede. Thankfully only the plates around its head had been damaged, while the rest of it was intact, so Zac took out **[Hunger]** as he tried to carve up the massive beast.

However, Zac found it surprisingly difficult to dismantle the massive beast even if it was dead, and only after three hours had he managed to stash away the dozens of shells along with its legs. Its flesh smelled quite rancid though, so Zac decided to leave it in the valley for the vultures.

Verun hadn't been lazing off while Zac was working on the centipede, and the massive succulent had shrunk to a noticeable degree over the past hours. Its bulbous leaves looked a bit withered, and its lustrous color had faded somewhat.

It still took the Spirit Tool a full 8 hours before it had completely drained the flower though, and it was completely bereft of life-force when Zac walked over to fetch his axe. The spirit tool looked pretty much the same after having absorbed the flower, except that there now were two fractals that were lit up on the handle.

Zac immediately wanted to see what the extra fractal meant, but he realized that Verun was unresponsive inside the axe. It

either needed to rest from the upgrade, or perhaps it was still in the process of digesting the energies it had consumed.

Everything was dealt with in the mountains, so Zac immediately started running back toward the town. He had only been gone for 9 hours or so, but a lot could happen in that time. And his fears were realized when he saw a thick black plume of smoke rise from the town they were supposed to protect.

He held nothing back as he pushed through the beast tide like a hurricane, but Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the demon standing on the wall walk with a lazy expression. His appearance didn't match his demeanor though, as his face was slightly scorched and a new scar had appeared on his throat.

"What happened to you?" Ogras said with a laugh as Zac approached, and Zac realized he wasn't much better off himself when he looked down at his bedraggled appearance.

He didn't have any obvious wounds as Ogras did, but he realized his face and hands were caked in centipede blood and mud. He had long gotten so used to being covered in gore that it no longer registered, but he realized now he really needed a bath.

"A bit of a tumble," Zac shrugged as he jumped up on the wall. "What about you?"

"The same," the demon smiled.

"Have you figured out who the guardian is?" Zac asked.

"Well, it can't be the matriarch of the Oylan line, because she's already dead," Ogras said.

"Must have been some tumble," Zac snorted as he glanced at the town behind them.

There was widespread destruction in the neighborhood next to the mayor's mansion, and some of the buildings were still smoldering. Zac didn't think that the demon would go out of his way to antagonize that woman while he was away since she was possibly the guardian. She had probably launched an all-out assault at the mayor's mansion, and Ogras had been forced to step in.

“So what do you want to do now?” Zac asked.

“We can just kill that big bugger over there immediately, make some turtle soup,” Ogras said.

Zac agreed and immediately set out. The battle was quickly over. The turtle possessed a pretty strong ice-attributed attack, but it still was much weaker compared to the centipede he had just killed. Besides, being a ten-meter turtle might be worse than being a small one.

When it realized that Zac was far too powerful it tried to retract its neck while it fled, but it didn't provide a lot of defense as Zac could freely enter the shell as the hole was over three meters tall. The alpha beast tried to snap Zac in half in one desperate bite with its powerful jaws, but Zac ended its life with one fluid swing.

The beast horde quickly scattered when their leader was slaughtered, and Ogras joined him not much later as the teleportation array appeared next to the corpse of the alpha beast.

“Are you sure about this?” Zac asked as he stood up, having restored his spent cosmic energy over the past hour.

“I'm sure. You go ahead,” Ogras nodded. “I'll stay behind here for a while to prepare myself.”

“You're not setting out immediately?” Zac probed.

“Well, things worked out pretty well for me while you were gone. The mayor treats me like I am his ancestor after I saved his life, and he just so happens to have a pretty fetching granddaughter who didn't seem immune to the hero's allure...” the demon said with a grin.

“Well, remember we're on the fourth floor. Don't relax and get yourself killed,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Speaking of, could you leave that array behind?” the demon asked.

“The **[Voidfire Array]**? I guess,” Zac said as he took out the massive crystal and the six spikes from his Spatial Ring.

It was a pretty good item, but Zac felt it was better utilized by Ogras in his efforts to conquer the fifth floor. He felt confident enough without it, and he doubted that an array that he snatched on the 28th level would be of much use on the 6th floor or higher.

“Perfect,” the demon said as he put away the array.

“So what is the plan when we exit?” Ogras added with a serious face. “Who knows what the situation will be like.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Zac asked.

“We still want a patron to get rid of that Redeemer for us, right?” the demon said.

“Right,” Zac nodded.

“Then we, or rather you, might just have to spill some blood when we leave. Kill the chickens to scare the monkeys. If you feel the situation is chaotic but manageable, immediately destroy anyone who steps up for the quest,” Ogras said.

“And if it’s too much for us to handle?”

“Then we can only run,” the demon shrugged. “Try to stay alive until we can crush our tokens. Scream for that Peak-girl to save us, perhaps that might make a couple of the pursuers back away.”

“I guess we’ll just have to play it by the ear,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“You better climb pretty damn high so you’ll scare all the rich assholes on the outside. I don’t want to risk my life against these floor guardians only to get skewered the moment I leave. It’s bad enough you’ll steal my spotlight with whatever crazy apparition you’ll summon.”

“I’ll see what I can do. See you on the outside,” Zac said as he stepped onto the teleporter.

Chapter 420: Erudite Master

It was both liberating and jarring to start a trial alone. It wasn't that Zac was worried he'd fail, but he realized how much he had relied on Galau's and Ogras' experience and knowledge as they ascended one level after another. It was mostly them who figured out a plan, while he had eventually been reduced to a simple enforcer.

While it was nothing wrong with that, he still felt he was missing the point of the Tower, and he vowed to do his best in completing the quests rather than steamrolling through the following floors. And it was almost as though the System wanted to help him with his goal, as it had provided him with a final challenge that wasn't related to defeating the floor guardian.

But Zac still felt some dismay as he knew that the final trial of the 4th floor might actually turn out to be impossible.

[Learn the skill of the Erudite Master]

Zac wryly looked at the quest he got, before his eyes trailed the winding path leading up the massive mountain in front of him. This was one of the simpler quests on the surface level. The Erudite Master was both the quest target and the floor guardian, meaning that Zac could either learn his skill or simply beat him up.

Unfortunately, he had proven himself to be hopelessly bad at learning skills without the assistance of Skill Crystals. Ilvere easily learned the skill that had eluded him for months, and he did not doubt that people like his sister or Thea Marshall would only need hours to master it.

But it was a welcome challenge as well, and Zac started to ascend the mountain with determination to make the best of it. He still wasn't completely sure what the rules of his odd body were. Yrial said he had zero affinities with all Daos, yet he

hadn't encountered any bottlenecks, even when forming his fragments.

He had already learned from Galau that just forming a Dao Fragment while still at F-Grade was a sign of great talent, yet he had breezed through that without any issues. Twice.

In fact, he could be said to be pretty talented in the field of Dao, though many of his insights admittedly came from Dao Treasures. But not even the one-in-a-million genius Thea Marshall or his AI-assisted Sister could match up to his insights, proving that things weren't as simple as they seemed.

But the 0 affinities might be related to using the Daos rather than learning them, and if that was the case it would likely become a problem in the future. Everything was based on the Dao in the end, including the very core of all skills. What if he suddenly was unable to improve his skills? Would he be running around with F-Graded skills even after he had formed his Cosmic Core?

A pang of danger suddenly erupted in his mind, and he flashed to the side with the help of his movement skill only to see an arrow whizz past him where his head was just a second ago. He quickly looked around and spotted what looked like a mix of a frog and a dwarf holding a crossbow.

The frogdwarf, and Zac only guessed the gender based on the thin black mustache that ran along its extremely wide mouth, looked quite surprised to see his sneak attack failing. But Zac didn't even have a chance to capture the odd cultivator as he suddenly turned into a stone.

It looked like one of the escape skills he had seen before, and Zac looked around in an attempt to find the frog's new location. But it was in vain as the mountainous forest was completely still.

The tranquility of the forest did not last for long though as Zac was assaulted by one warrior after another who all seemed to be heading for the summit. It looked like it was a free-for-all between cultivators who wanted to meet the Erudite Master, and it felt like they all competed to complete the quest.

Zac had already asked about the possibility of meeting other climbers during a trail but as far as Ogras, or the even more knowledgeable Galau, knew there was no such thing as floors where climbers were pitted against each other.

It was not like Zac had encountered any frog dwarves outside the tower either, so meeting dozens of them would be a bit odd if they were real. Since the frogmen were natives Zac chose to only cripple them a little bit rather than killing them.

Since they went out of their way to attack him he was pretty sure they were fair game, but he still didn't want to mess up his climb due to some old monster popping out of nowhere. Besides, he was already at the end of the fourth floor. It was worth remembering what Galau said.

Nothing was black and white, and all actions have consequences. What if the old master was one of the frogmen as well, and he got enraged by seeing his people getting slaughtered by Zac? Of course, it could also swing the other way, where the frogdwarves were the enemies of the master, and the lenient treatment by Zac was seen as a sign of a weak Dao Heart.

One could go crazy going back and forth what might create the best outcome, but this was just like real life; there was no way to control all small details. He could just follow his conscience as he kept going forward.

It only took him a few hours to reach the summit of the mountain that would give Mount Everest a run for its money. He had initially planned on taking on the floor guardian in his undead form, but after having seen the quest he decided to stay human.

The likelihood of the old master being undead was pretty slim considering the surroundings, and the pathways of his Draugr-class were a lot pickier than his human side. If he wanted a shot at learning the skill he would have to do it as a human.

The peak of the mountain was mostly flat and it had the area of a couple of baseball fields. There was a small pond with a few fishes lazily swimming about, and a solitary tree that looked extremely ancient was providing some shade next to it.

Apart from that there wasn't much to see, and there wasn't even a house to stay in. Confusion entered Zac's heart as he looked around for any erudite master. Had he ascended the wrong mountain?

"Let me have a look at you, lad," a decrepit voice echoed from the distance as an old warrior who had been hidden by the tree stood up.

Zac sighed in relief as he took a good look at the 'Erudite Master'. It was not one of the frogmen, but rather an ancient-looking demon. He wasn't the same kind as either Ogras or abyssal demons though. This one was a pale blue, with golden horns speckled with red.

His build was pretty much the same as a human's apart from the taloned feet and indistinct scale pattern covering his skin. He would probably have been almost two meters in his prime, but time had made him lose at least two decimeters in height.

The Erudite Master was obviously nearing the end of his lifespan judging by how old he looked. Zac still wasn't an expert, but he guessed the old master had a couple of months to a year at best.

The old demon inspected Zac just as how Zac was inspecting him.

"If you want to learn my skill, put that axe away. I am a pugilist, and you will never learn it while wielding a weapon. If you just want to test your strength, you're welcome to do so as well," the demon said with equanimity.

Zac frowned when asked to disarm, but he eventually put his axe away. He didn't feel any animosity from the old demon, and he was curious about what kind of skills he had. Most of all he felt this was a good opportunity to train against a skilled enemy, and he would ruin it if he launched [**Hatchetman's Rage**] and [**Nature's Punishment**] to level the whole mountain top in one all-out move.

"Good," the demon said before his muddy eyes suddenly turned extremely sharp as his aura rose by a shocking degree.

It was still well within what Zac could handle, but he felt the pressure was even greater compared to some of the Invasion generals he had fought recently. That was saying something considering the old man in front of him was still in F-Grade.

The fact that the old demon hadn't evolved didn't dampen Zac's mood. On the contrary, it made his blood pump from excitement. Calrin had once told him that the ones to look out for were those looking very young or those looking very old.

The extremely young were the geniuses who kept pushing forward, breaking through bottlenecks without any trouble. The very old ones were those who had been stuck at their current level for centuries, and this generally led to one of two outcomes.

Either they gave up on the martial path and focused on some side interests, becoming merchants or simply enjoying retirement. Others kept at it to the very end, polishing their skills and power to the limit in hopes of finally finding the spark to break through their bottleneck.

The old man in front of him was obviously the latter type.

Zac didn't know why a man with such a dense aura as the one in front of him was stuck on F-Grade, but right now it didn't matter as the demon emitted a sharp battle intent. The master suddenly pushed forward straight across the pond, and his movements sounded like the roars of beasts.

The demon was almost immediately in front of him, and his right hand formed a fist that shuddered with power. Zac immediately turned to absorb the punch with his left arm, which would allow him to counter with a right-hook of his own.

But shifting his body like that had actually opened him up for the old demon to knee him right in the gut, and Zac was thrown away so far that he almost fell off the mountain top. He wasn't hurt though as the old demon only had used the strength of his body in the opening salvo, and not empowered his strikes with neither skills nor Dao.

Zac flashed back with the help of [Loamwalker] in an instant, and a rapid exchange of punches and kicks commenced. Unfortunately, the exchange generally consisted of Zac punching air while being barraged by attacks from all directions.

The old demon's strikes were extremely unpredictable, and no matter how Zac tried to counter the strikes it seemed to somehow backfire. Initially he had tried to limit the strength he used to match the old demon, but he was already using at least 20% more Dexterity while still getting his ass kicked.

"There is a battle raging," the demon said as he once again punched Zac square in his face. "One in your mind."

Zac's brows rose in shock, wondering if the old man had somehow sensed the splinter.

"There is the instinct of the beast brewing deep inside of you, wanting to break out. But you are fighting it, attempting to maintain the heart of the warrior, defeating technique with technique," the old man explained.

"Find a balance and prepare yourself!" the demon roared as his aura suddenly started to rise once more.

The massive roar caused a storm around them, and Zac was almost forced to close his eyes. The old man was obviously up to something, and his danger sense told him it wasn't something minor. His first instinct was to fight fire with fire, beating the demon down before he could unleash his strike.

However, Zac also believed it was best to be cautious. He was on the fourth floor after all, and it was also a boosted floor due to multiple people joining. The challenge was almost on par with what he would face when meeting the guardian of the fifth floor.

A golden halo surrounded the demon, and the air around him crackled as he pushed his hand forward like a spear. The demon was clearly using a skill this time, though Zac still couldn't sense any Dao.

The power in the attack was palpable, and Zac's hand immediately rose to counter the strike aimed at his gut. But

mid-motion Zac noticed that the man's hand changed direction, likely targeting his more vulnerable throat.

He quickly adjusted by putting both his arms in front of his throat, while preparing to counter after blocking the stab. But a burning sensation in his side was like a wake-up call, and he looked down at his bleeding side with confusion.

Had the demon changed the trajectory of his attack again? But why didn't he notice? Or was the small change in muscle or stance just a feint from the start, meant to confuse him? Luckily the demon had stopped his strike after just piercing his flesh, so he wasn't really wounded.

"Having the heart of the beast and the courage to brave any danger is commendable. Having a cool and calculating heart will allow you to turn a losing battle into victory. But your heart cannot encompass everything," the demon said as he backed away, his hand dripping with blood.

"Who are you in the end?"

Chapter 421: True Strike

Zac was about to make up some story about why he was here, but he stopped himself as he realized the old demon was asking a rhetorical question.

“Your heart and mind are in conflict, and you do not trust one over the other,” the demon said. “This is something a seasoned warrior can exploit.”

Zac understood all too well what the demon was talking about, and it felt a bit embarrassing as this was exactly what he had chided Emily for doing back during their sparring sessions. He had been talking big about decisiveness, but yet he found himself crippled by indecision during the battle with this old demon.

“So what should I do?” Zac said, ignoring the wound on his side. It was nothing too serious that wouldn’t heal up with a normal healing pill.

“A burning heart will stop a mind from being frozen with indecision. A calculative mind will help you distinguish between decisiveness and foolishness. But in my opinion, one must be the leader and the other follower. You might be able to find true balance in the future, but it is much too early. Perhaps when you can walk the sky like the celestials in legend.”

“A leader and a follower?” Zac muttered.

“Are you a warrior of instinct, or a warrior of expertise?” the old man asked.

Zac first wanted to say expertise, but he stopped himself as he knew that wasn’t the truth. He wasn’t some adept weapon master who followed some great set of techniques, and he hadn’t trained with a weapon since young like most cultivators in the multiverse.

He was more like a beast, fighting based on instinct and his superior constitution.

“It seems you understand,” the old man smiled. “Again.”

Zac was already moving the moment the demon disappeared, and he swung toward his right without thought or hesitation. A deep thud echoed across the summit as the demon appeared, his arm glowing with a golden sheen as he blocked Zac’s punch.

“Good!” the demon laughed. “What’s the use of calculating and thinking when you’re an idiot?”

Zac’s face scrunched up, but he had no time to refute the words as the old man launched another barrage of punches, kicks, and attempts to grapple him to the ground. He no longer tried to think or anticipate what the old man did, he only moved the way his instincts indicated him to move.

He was still somewhat of a punching bag, but it wasn’t one-sided any longer. The old man had been a martial artist for hundreds of years, and trying to match him in skill had only made him weaker than he actually was. Now that he relied on instincts, he at least managed to get in a few good punches as well.

The old man suddenly jumped backward, looking a bit worse for the wear from the high-paced battle.

“Good!” he said while breathing a bit heavily. “You are passable. A rough gem that can be polished through thousands of battles. See if you can understand the essence of my skill, **[True Strike]**. If you can learn it you will even be able to use it with that axe of yours. Watch how I attack your left side.”

Zac breathed in relief that he had passed the test to at least get a chance of learning the skill. The ancient demon had already helped him out by pointing out his weakness, so he would feel a bit bad about defeating him just to pass the floor.

So Zac immediately got ready to defend while trying to understand the truth behind **[True Strike]**. He kept his eyes wide open as the old demon’s left hand essentially turned into a golden spear as he slowly walked toward him. It was the

same skill as the one the demon used before when he confused Zac's senses.

The demon's eyes were trained at a spot just beneath Zac's ribcage on his left side, but Zac could oddly enough feel another spot on his body heat up. Zac tensed up as confusion filled his mind once again. His instincts told him that the demon would strike his right side, but he was obviously aiming for the left side.

At last minute he decided to follow his instincts to protect his right side, but he was shocked to see that the demon had attacked the spot he had looked at since the start.

"What the hell?" Zac muttered with confusion.

"Good instincts!" the demon laughed. "[**True Strike**] is a mental attack powered by battle intent. It confuses the instincts of the opponent, allowing you to forcibly create an opening. It is the fruition of 580 years of delving into the psyche of battle, and my grandest accomplishment. See if you can understand it now!"

A powerful golden aura congealed around the demon as he once again targeted the same left spot as before. Zac's instincts were still telling him that the demon was targeting another spot, this time his right leg. Zac quickly tried to take control of the conflicting emotions, but his brows suddenly frowned.

His left hand moved up to block his throat with shocking speed while his whole body got infused with Fragment of the Coffin. [**Verun's Bite**] appeared in his right arm at the same time, and it swung down in a fierce overhead arc.

The old demon's face scrunched up in anger when his sneak attack aimed at Zac's throat failed, and he quickly jumped back as the razor-sharp claws he had suddenly grown retracted into his hand. The facade of a righteous old warrior was gone, and his ice-cold eyes were those of a ruthless killer.

After having spent so much time with Ogras, would Zac simply put down his guard due to a smiling face? The fact that the old demon had been willing to teach him from the beginning was suspicious in and of itself. There was no

guarantee that the floor guardian would be a willing teacher just because the quest told him to learn a skill.

Besides, even if he couldn't trust the instincts due to the demon's skill he could still trust the Danger Sense from having over 250 effective Luck. Such a cheat-like amount of Luck was pretty much the perfect counter of almost any illusionary skill like the one the Demon had just tried to use, and it screamed in no uncertain terms that a deadly attack was aimed at his throat.

"So you knew," the ancient demon snorted. "That's a shame."

The old man's aura condensed the next moment, changing from vast but somewhat weak into something sharper and more sinister. That wasn't all, his bent back started to straighten out while his features smoothed out as well. From looking like a decrepit old man with one foot in the grave he had transformed into a man that might be past his prime, but still full of vigor.

Zac had to say he was pretty impressed by the demon's plan. Had he understood that Zac was a tough enemy from the start, and the whole charade with the demon teaching him his skill was simply an act to not only disarm his enemy but create an opening to kill him in one swift strike. Ogras would no doubt find a kindred spirit in the old demon if he encountered the same trial in his climb.

However, the subterfuge didn't mean that what he had said was false. There was truth to the teachings he shared, and Zac felt he had gained some insight into the proper mentality of a warrior. One of his weaknesses truly was that he lacked guidance from experienced warriors, which made his understanding of battle techniques somewhat shallow.

Alyn and Ogras were both knowledgeable about various topics, but at the end of the day they were just juniors like himself. Yrial no doubt had a great understanding of these kinds of topics, but the time Zac could spend with his master was extremely limited.

"You've helped me understand a few things better," Zac said as he ate one of his regular healing pills. "Hand over the Skill

Crystal for [True Strike] and I'll be on my way.”

The reason for Zac believing there to be a crystal was simple. The man never had any intention actually of teaching anyone his skill, so there must be another way for him to complete the quest. The most obvious solution was that he possessed a skill crystal.

“If I kill you like the others, what good is the crystal to you? If you manage to kill me, why should I share my knowledge?” the demon laughed. “I'll take my insights with me to the grave, or bring them with me to the peak of cultivation.”

“... Fine,” Zac sighed as Cosmic Energy Flooded the fractal on his forearm. “No matter what, you did teach me some of your knowledge, so I will fight you with all I have.”

The wooden hand broke out of the air the next moment and it rose to the sky above the demon, immediately radiating an intractable power. It quickly formed the array as usual, and it covered the whole summit as it glowed with the emerald luster of nature.

“A hand?” the demon laughed as he saw [Nature's Punishment] hovering above him. “That is just perfect.”

A red and golden brilliance rose to the sky as a clawed hand congealed above the demon. It was almost twice the size of Zac's wooden hand, and it emitted an extremely acrid stench of blood. How many had that hand killed to gain such a sinister sanguine aura?

The large claw launched a swipe toward the emerald array, and four rivers of blood rose up to destroy Zac's strike. But the array only wobbled a bit from the demon's all-out strike, and a mountain tip started to emerge soon enough. A massive pressure started to spread across the summit, and the demon once again turned hunched-over from having to withstand the tremendous force.

A ruthless gleam emerged in his eyes as he gave up on destroying the descending mountain, instead opting to strike at Zac with the sanguine hand. But Zac was no longer playing

along, and his full aura with its dense killing intent was released like a shockwave.

A massive fractal edge also appeared on his axe, emitting the undeniable power of a Dao Fragment. One swing was all it took to completely destroy the hand in the sky, leaving the erudite master completely exposed to the mountain above.

The demon obviously realized that he was outmatched, and he tried to find a method to flee. But [**Nature's Punishment**] was almost as effective a cage as [**Profane Seal**] by this point, and the pressure had almost completely locked down the demon's movement.

"Wait, I'll teach you!" the demon said, some fear finally evident on his face.

"Too late," Zac sighed as one peak slammed into another, causing a shockwave that even pushed away the clouds in the area.

The whole mountain shuddered as Zac witnessed the massive destruction from the distance. He had been forced to retreat to the very edge of the summit, but he had still been forced to dig his legs into the ground to not be thrown down to the foot of the mountain.

A surge of Cosmic Energy proved that his enemy was dead, and Zac quickly instructed the hand to lift the mountain again and place it to the side. The hand dissipated after letting the peak rest against a spot with a pretty low incline. Zac thought the scene would create an interesting mystery for any mortal geologist who passed by in the future. If this world was even real, that is.

The whole summit had been completely transformed by the all-out attack. The corpse erudite master was still somewhat whole in the bottom of the crater, but he was still as dead as can be. The pond was also utterly destroyed, and the water had seeped into cracks in the mountain.

The floor guardian had been dealt with, and Zac spotted the teleportation array not far in the distance. He did however not immediately head into it, and instead jumped down into the

large hole. The skill was real if the System made it a quest to learn it, and he wasn't ready to give it up just yet.

An offensive mental skill that was based on battle intent rather than wisdom or intelligence sounded like a great addition to his current repertoire, and he immediately rushed over to the corpse. But no matter how many times he went through the demon's body he couldn't find a Spatial Tool.

Zac swore in annoyance, but he wasn't overly surprised. The demon had seemed pretty confident that Zac wouldn't learn the skill if he died, so it would be odd if he could loot it so easily from his body. However, Zac did have an interesting discovery as he looked around in the pit.

There was light coming from within one of the cracks leading into the heart of the mountain.

Chapter 422: Road to 1000

From one of the cracks in the ground Zac could see a flickering light, but when he peered into it he couldn't see what the source was. It did however reignite Zac's hope, and he started to cut his way into the mountain with the help of his axe.

The light steadily grew brighter as he made his way down, and he suddenly found himself in a passageway that was clearly not naturally formed. There was a tunnel hiding 50 meters down from the summit, and as Zac followed it even further down into the heart of the mountain found that it led to an opulent cultivation cave.

Thick rugs from unknown animals covered the ground, and all kinds of ornaments and treasures were strewn around the floor. There were even small mountains of Nexus Crystals almost touching the ceiling, no doubt a vast wealth for anyone in the F-Grade.

The exorbitant interiors were diametrically opposite from the image of an erudite master, and Zac thanked the heavens for sending the paranoid demon to his side. If Ogras' distrust hadn't rubbed off on him he would have been completely immersed in the training session, taking the behavior of the old demon as the desire of a dying warrior to leave behind something for the world.

Even if he had survived the encounter he would have simply entered the teleporter as it appeared.

But not everyone cared about leaving an inheritance. In fact, most wandering cultivators had no intention of doing so unless they settled down. Even in established factions it wasn't uncommon for an old master to barely leave anything behind. All the wealth they had gathered over the years would already

have been used to prolong their own lifespans and to desperately try to breakthrough.

Zac didn't know why the old goat didn't keep all of his wealth inside a cosmos sack, but it made things easier for him as he swept through the Cultivation Cave, leaving nothing behind. But he wasn't content even after that, and he kept cutting through the mountain walls for over an hour until he found a small hidden pocket with a Cosmos Sack inside.

This was what he had looked for, as there was a rough crystal lying inside. It did look a bit worn though, meaning it had already been used. It started to feel a bit likely that the skill wasn't even something that the demon had come up with, but rather something he had found through a fortuitous encounter.

The Cosmos Sack was also filled with various high-grade treasures, at least for a wandering F-Grade cultivator. There were only a dozen or so crystals, but all of them were E-Grade and Life-attuned, perhaps used to help prolong life. There were also a couple of pills and a few manuals, but Zac didn't go through them one by one, but rather threw them all in his Cosmos Sack.

He wouldn't mess with pills or natural treasures he found while climbing unless he could be sure what they were, and if the items stayed on after the climb he could have Galau or Calrin identify them.

He did immediately teach himself the skill though, and a new fractal appeared right above his navel. It was a disappointing placement, as he knew that it was a pretty common position for class skills. It was close to where the cultivation core would be placed, or rather close to where his Specialty Core was currently nestled.

It was no problem right now, but it was extremely likely that his Class would provide a skill for that location sooner or later, meaning that he would get limited usage of **[True Strike]**. But that was a problem for the future.

Who knew, it was possible he wouldn't get a skill for that slot until he became D-Grade. And this was an issue that all warriors eventually encountered. Zac was pretty lucky that he

hadn't encountered any clashes between his skills so far, even though he had used up more than half of his Skill Sockets.

But sooner or later he would have to start discarding skills to make room for stronger ones, or skills that better suited his cultivation path.

Zac quickly returned to the summit after having found what he looked for, and to his surprise he saw a dozen of the little beings he encountered earlier. They all silently stood in the distance, a couple of them swaddled in bandages, no doubt a result of Zac manhandling them during the climb.

Thankfully there was no animosity in their eyes when Zac appeared, and they bowed in respect when they saw him arrive. Zac nodded in response, realizing that the demon might have been a scourge to the area. The 'erudite master' still had taught Zac a few valuable lessons though. It might just have been a ruse designed to let his guard down, but he could still be considered one of his teachers.

So Zac also gave the unmoving body of the old demon a small bow before he stepped through the teleporter.

[Fourth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: High-Grade Strength Fruit, High-Grade Dexterity Fruit, High-Grade Intelligence Fruit]

Zac's eyes lit up when he saw the rewards, but he held off on choosing and instead opted to first check out his Title.

[Tower of Eternity - 4th Floor: Reach the 37th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. Strength +5%, Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%]

Zac nodded in satisfaction. The bonuses followed the same patterns as the first three floors of the towers, where he first got a bonus that improved his three "main" attributes. This pattern would continue for the following two floors as well.

As for the final three floors, Zac had no idea. He assumed that he would gain Efficiency in the same manner as the earlier floors, but he couldn't be certain. Not even Galau could confidently answer what was the case as too few people in their sector reached those floors. However, Galau did mention

a rumor that the top climbers were more interested in the floor rewards than the titles.

The quality of the items that the System Rewarded had steadily risen, and now it presented something that Zac hadn't even encountered in the Base Town. Attribute Fruits, and High-grade ones at that. Even the best fruits he got his hands on in the hunt were only mid-grade.

Unfortunately there were no Luck fruits or All Attribute fruits, but Zac figured that those kinds of fruits still might appear on a higher floor. His eyes went back and forth between his options as he tried to decide what to get. He could immediately discard the Intelligence fruit since it was the most useless Attribute for him, but he wasn't sure which to pick among the other two.

Dexterity would help him maintain the balance, which would get especially skewed as he kept improving his Dao of the Axe. But he still chose Strength in the end, for a simple reason. He still hadn't given up his desire to reach 1000 Strength before he evolved. He hoped that would not only provide him with better Class options, but also counteract the effect of his massive Endurance pool.

He didn't want to get stuck with two tank classes because he had enough Endurance for three men.

The darkness started to scatter as he'd made his choice, and he found himself facing a hulking warrior clad in spiked armor. He held a sword in each hand and radiated dense killing intent as he took a step toward Zac. Zac put away his attribute fruit while jumping away a few meters to get a better understanding of what was going on, and the quest prompt appeared just as he landed.

[End the tradition of slave deathmatches to settle disputes.]

A quest to enact social reform? How was he supposed to do that without wasting a lot of time? Was the system expecting him to make a grand speech or something? Zac shuddered at the thought as he looked around the packed masses.

His eyes instead found a likely target for a guardian, immediately discarding any thought of completing the level the proper way. It was an extremely obese man who sat at a seat of honor, overlooking the fight while he was fed some sort of fruits by what was obviously slaves.

“Hey, I want to kill that fat guy. Will you help me?” Zac said to the gladiator. “Do you know anything about the arrays in this place?”

But the other gladiator didn't as much as react to his words, and he once again tried to kill him. Zac could only sigh as he flashed forward and punched the gladiator with enough force to throw him like a ragdoll. The man soared like a projectile straight toward the corpulent man who looked on with interest.

A blue shimmering wall lit up just as the gladiator was about to leave the arena, and Zac noticed a small surge of energy to his left. It was a pillar just a few meters away from him, and there were a couple of more just like them.

Zac didn't delay a second, and he immediately shot out toward the fat despot while he shot out huge fractal blades imbued with the Fragment of the Axe in rapid succession. Each of them slammed into one of the pillars almost at the same time, and the barrier protecting the array flags wasn't strong enough to withstand strikes at multiple of its weak spots at once.

A snap echoed out across the arena as the shields failed, and a resounding crash followed when the pillars were turned into rubble. Seeing that over half the array flags were broken, Zac immediately jumped toward the luxurious seats.

The fat leader's cheeks jiggled in fear, and he screamed as he frantically took out a token hanging around his chest. It immediately lit up, and Zac found himself slamming into the ground like a comet. It was a gravity array that had been erected, and it was the strongest one Zac had encountered since he waked through the Zethaya Pill House entrance.

To more precise, it was exactly the same as what he had encountered, which made Zac ponder while he got back to his feet. Was this intentional? Had the Zethaya set it up so that those with enough power to reach the 5th floor would be able

to enter their store? It wouldn't be too hard for them to set something like that up.

There was one difference compared to the previous time he was inside an array like this. Zac wasn't trying to impress anyone by toughing it out with only his body. He immediately released his Dao Field for the axe, causing one shallow cut after another to appear on the ground around him.

The Dao Field helped him counteract the suppressive force to a pretty large degree, and Zac didn't have any trouble moving about any longer. One swing was all it took to destroy a hastily erected back-up shield that the fat man's bodyguards set up, and with two quick steps he found himself in front of his target.

"Wait, I can pay you!" the man trembled.

"Is this arena yours?" Zac simply asked.

"Yes, yes!" the man fervently nodded. "I'll gift it to you, it's yours. The slaves as well!"

Zac only answered with a swing of **[Verun's Bite]**. However, a ruthless gleam appeared in the man's eyes and he launched a massive burst of flames that drowned Zac before it continued to cover half the arena.

A snort could be heard from inside the inferno and a bestial roar followed as the flames were forcibly ripped apart by a swing of Zac's axe. The merchant could only helplessly look on as his torso separated from his legs before he succumbed to death.

Zac bent over the corpse to look for anything of value, but the man didn't even carry a Cosmos Sack.

At least the encounter gave him a decent hint of the strength required for the 5th floor, and he was pleasantly surprised to realize that the strength of the arena master was roughly the same power as the bandit lord on the floor where he left off Galau.

It meant that the 5th floor would barely be any harder than the 4th, except that the quests would likely turn more complicated

or require more advanced knowledge. Not having to deal with the 40% bonus of his enemies was pretty nice, and Zac immediately felt that reaching the sixth floor was a given.

As for the 7th and higher, he would have to wait and see.

It was also good news for Ogras. Unless the demon encountered some sort of situation that directly countered his skillset, then conquering the fifth floor was a distinct possibility. Getting two top tier rewards and a boost in attributes would come in handy for the upcoming fights.

The silence was deafening in the arena as Zac stood over the bisected corpse of the arena master, no one dared to either flee or speak up in fear that they would be targeted by the crazed gladiator. Zac didn't care about their reaction as he surveyed his surroundings, but his eyes lit up when he saw that the teleporter had already appeared in the middle of the arena, and he flashed over.

He had been afraid that killing the arena master wouldn't be enough, and that the real guardian was the Lord of the town or something like that. Luckily, the System had thrown him a bone, handing out an easy one on the first level.

Zac stepped onto the teleporter without bothering to explain himself to the still reeling spectators of the arena. He had started to become a bit numb to the various people he encountered, and he couldn't really be bothered to treat them differently than if they were puppets.

His mind was only focused on climbing higher.

Chapter 423: Cosmic Gaze

The next level placed him in an odd world where it felt like the colors were inverted, and he walked in a forest with white trunks and black leaves under a purple sky. The System wasn't as generous on the second world, and it took him over a day to figure out who the guardian was and to trap the wily beast.

Things were pretty much the same from there on out as Zac bashed his way from one level to another. His resolve to finish the quests fell apart after just three days when he found himself utterly unable to finish a single one of the first three levels of the 5th floor.

In the end he only managed to complete two quests on the whole floor, one assassination and one quest to locate a treasure. The assassination was done as sloppily as was humanly possible. Zac simply stormed the mansion of the target and killed him before he had the chance to run away, destroying half a city-block while completing the mission. He would have been fired on the spot from any decent assassin organization after such a shameful display.

As for the treasure quest, he simply was lucky. He accidentally overheard a few clues from an old drunk outside a tavern, and he almost stumbled onto the right spot just a few hours later. Perhaps his Luck was finally reaching the point where treasures almost jumped straight into his hands out of their own volition?

But even with his Luck and his decision to kill the guardians most of the time, it still took him 13 days to complete the eight levels of the 5th floor. That was pretty much what it took to climb the first three floors altogether, although they didn't rush through those levels.

He did however spend some time to master [**Bulwark Mastery**], and as expected he had been shown several visions

related to cultivators focusing on their shields. There had been some differences between the various cultivators, but the similarities were far greater between the visions related to shields compared to those he got from **[Axe Mastery]**.

Essentially all of them were related to defending, though it happened in different ways. Some were like Zac's class, warriors who stood at the forefront of armies, soaking up the damage and the hate so that his companions would be safe.

Others were mages or array masters who were able to erect massive defenses with their shields acting as the core. Only a few were also offensively geared, but Zac immediately felt that using a shield for attacking was suboptimal and nothing that he was interested in delving deeper into.

None of the visions really resonated with him, and it made him wonder just what he should do when evolving. He had spent most of the 5th floor in his Draugr-form, and he had to say that he was loath to fight without activating **[Vanguard of Undeath]** now.

Just getting a miasmic axe made Zac feel a much greater connection to the class, and he knew he needed to reduce the reliance on shields for his skills going forward. If that would happen immediately when evolving, then great. If not he'd simply have to take it step by step and gradually move toward a more axe-focused fighting style in his Draugr form as well.

The delay caused by working on his skills only added one extra day, so some worry about the higher floors started to sprout, and Zac began to wonder if his problem would be running out of time rather than a lack of power. How frustrating would it be if the time ran out just as he was about to defeat a floor guardian?

At least the floor guardian wasn't anything to write home about. It was a massive golem that would be able to keep the Fire Golem Leader in a pocket as it towered an impressive 30 meters into the air. It was like fighting a moving skyscraper, a massive construct of stone and crystal.

The golem had once been a guardian construct of a long-gone force, and for some reason it had awakened from its sealed

chambers to wreak havoc on the area. Judging by the situation it might have gone the same way as Brazla, its artificial mind slowly getting twisted over the lonely eons.

Zac adopted a straightforward approach to the construct who used a mix of shockwaves and earth-based attacks, apart from its punches who were powerful enough to crush mountains. With the help of [**Chop**] and the Fragment of the Axe he managed to dismantle the giant piece by piece over an hour, all while dodging its attacks with the help of [**Loamwalker**].

It was a bit hard to compare the strength between the golem and the demon cultivator, but he estimated that the golem was only around 20% stronger than the demon. He would likely have been able to finish it off with either [**Nature's Punishment**] or [**Deforestation**], but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting against larger targets.

He knew that the reason for the small difference in strength was because the penalty was gone, and he reminded himself to not get complacent as he ripped out a huge inscribed crystal that had been in the chest of the golem.

Zac knew nothing about constructs, but he felt that the thing in his hands should be the equivalent to an array core, and it might be possible to repurpose somehow if he could keep it. He left the rest of the giant where it lay, as it was essentially scrap metal without the core, especially after Zac had launched hundreds of attacks on it.

[Fifth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Offensive Skill, Defensive Skill, Support Skill. NOTE: All skills will have 80% compatibility or higher.]

Zac quickly took a gander at his title, and he could confirm that nothing unexpected had happened with it.

[Tower of Eternity - 5th Floor: Reach the 46th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. Strength +5%, Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%, All Stats +5%.]

It simply gave an additional +5% to all attributes, which had officially turned it into the title providing the most amount of

attributes by now. It had pushed his Strength one step further, placing it at 927 with the help of the Peak Grade Strength Fruit he consumed the moment he had the chance.

The title did also push his Luck to 204, but it seemed that there was no upgraded version of his Ambidextrous title. Perhaps something related to luck would appear at 250 points, but he didn't hold his breath for it. Zac had long realized that it was getting harder and harder to get his hands on new titles. Stocking up on two more Limited titles wouldn't be too hard, but he needed to find a Mystic Realm or trial that fit.

That was a later headache though, and Zac instead focused on the three rewards, a bit hesitant as to what to choose. The System guaranteed a good fit with his pathways, but the trouble was choosing what would help him the most.

There was also the issue of which class the System would provide the skill for, but he guessed that his human form was more likely. It was still his 'true' race, and also the form he was in when defeating the floor guardian. But he still kept his mind open in case he was proven wrong.

Offensive skills were the first thing Zac discarded. His Offensive capabilities weren't lacking in either of his classes, especially with his two Dao Fragment to help. That left defensive and support skills on the table.

He felt he was somewhat lacking a Defensive skill in his current form, as his [**Mental Fortress**] skill was of middling quality at best. It also had no connection to his Daos, making a Dao infusion impossible. Physical defenses wasn't an issue though, with [**Nature's Barrier**] and [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] providing extra layers of protection on top of his huge pool of Endurance.

And he didn't even need to mention the defensive capabilities of his other class.

Eventually, Zac chose to go with a Support Skill. There was no guarantee that he would get a skill to replace [**Mental Fortress**] with even if he picked the Defensive Skill, while support skills could help him in all kinds of ways.

A blinding pain immediately erupted in his head, and the world turned white as it felt like someone was pouring acid in his eyes. Even Zac wasn't immune to the soul-rending pain, and he found himself on the floor writhing in agony for god know how long until the pain finally subsided.

Sweat rolled down his head as he blearily looked around, and he realized that he had already been thrown into a new world, one of endless darkness and glaciers. The cold would have turned a mortal into a popsicle in a second, but Zac barely noticed it as he looked inward after having made sure there were no enemies nearby.

He wasn't surprised to learn that the skill he had just gained was ocular, as the pain he had just felt in his eyes was all too familiar. It was the agony he felt when he had been forced to redraw his crude pathways into the proper ones provided by his class.

It was like inscribing something on his soul, where he first had to erase his old skill only to inscribe a new one. He had hoped that the pain would be less pronounced, like when he drew the pathways for the class in his Draugr-form, but there was no such luck. It made him a bit worried about his evolution, but Zac knew that was a later problem as he focused on his new skill.

[Cosmic Gaze – See through the veil of the universe. Upgradeable.]

The flavor text was a bit similar to his old skill, **[Inquisitive Eye]**, though it felt a lot more impressive to see through the veil of the universe than to see through their secrets. The skill was also connected to his pathways and it had a great fit, which was a step up from the disconnected fractals that had simply hovered in his eyes before.

Zac looked around for a target to try the skill out on, but the area was truly desolate. That by itself was a problem though, so Zac started to move away from where he appeared. Safety was an illusion this far up the tower, and he couldn't stay around in what was probably a trap. However, he still wanted

to see what his new skill did, and he eventually tried to activate it on a pristine-white tree nearby.

The world suddenly changed, as the dour landscape turned into a vibrant tapestry that shimmered in silver, blue, and white. Zac almost fell down from the rapid change in his surroundings, and it felt just like when he was drowning in Origin Dao from the Dao funnel.

The half-dead tree was suddenly a network of blue energy that surged from its roots beneath the snow up into its trunk. It was depending on the energy of the earth rather than photosynthesis to live.

But Zac barely had time to marvel at the beautiful scene before a formless blob of energy rose from the ground and globbed onto him, and Zac was shocked to notice there were already a couple of blobs sticking to his legs and his back when he looked down. Small motes of lights were slowly leaving his body and entering the little blobs, meaning they stole something from him without him noticing.

The first thing that came to mind was leeches. Were these little things slowly sucking him dry of Cosmic Energy? He quickly tried to brush the things away, but his hands passed right through. However, he thankfully found that they weren't immune to his Dao Fragment, and they quickly disintegrated after a few Dao-infused swings of his hand.

[Help the expedition team find the ice-attuned crystal mine.]

The quest appeared just as he destroyed the pack of energy balls, and Zac suddenly found himself holding a disk that was pretty similar to the beacon array that Galau had used before. He quickly put the array away as he set out to complete the quest.

It took Zac over six hours in the freezing winds to find the place he was looking for, a nondescript snow-covered hill that only reached fifty meters into the air. It certainly wasn't the kind of mountain where you'd expect to find a Nexus Crystal mine, as the energies were barely elevated above the norm in the area.

But thanks to [**Cosmic Gaze**] he could see that a cold blue light was slowly seeping out from the hill at a few spots, and after he cleared the area he saw that the lights emerged from a couple of cracks. The lights only grew brighter as Zac cut his way down a couple of meters, and he could quickly confirm he had found his target as the stone started to become studded with white-blue crystals.

He didn't immediately activate the beacon though, but he instead extracted a few dozen Ice-Attuned Nexus Crystals. He only looted right around the entrance before he activated the beacon though, as he felt that cleaning house would be a mistake.

The disc suddenly enlarged and a group of humanoids stepped through, led by an ice-blue troll that was just skin and bone. He held a staff in his hand, and the whole area turned a few degrees colder when he appeared.

The troll only threw Zac a glance before he looked down into the mine, and nodded with satisfaction. He did release a snort when he saw the holes in the walls, but he didn't comment on Zac snatching a little bit for himself.

"Pay him," the shaman said with a raspy voice, and another troll stepped forward and handed Zac a box.

Zac accepted the box and immediately put it away before he stepped onto the Teleportation Array that had been created from the Array Disk. This was what he had expected. Looting the mine would have given him a couple of ice attuned Nexus Crystals, which were pretty much useless for him. But properly completing a quest usually brought rewards, and Zac gambled that the reward would be better than the crystals.

His new skill proved extremely helpful over the following levels, as various secrets that would have passed him right by were displayed as clear as day from his magical vision.

The skill wasn't some sort of universal key though as Zac quickly realized that the lights he saw through [**Cosmic Gaze**] were attuned energies, and most energies simply weren't attuned. Since attunement was slightly related to the Dao it did however vaguely provide a hint when skills got infused by the

Dao, but it was nowhere as clear as the lights emitted from things such as attuned crystals.

More importantly, he realized that no one noticed when he used the skill on them, which was what had essentially made his old ocular skill useless. Now he would be able to glean clues from his enemies without them noticing, and Zac knew it might be just what he needed when he saw the quest for the final level of the 6th floor.

[Defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse]

Chapter 424: Thelim

Zac found himself standing on a gravel road in the middle of a tranquil forest the moment he appeared at the final level of the 6th floor, and the quest to defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse had appeared immediately upon arrival.

If Zac had been tasked with something like this a few weeks ago he would have thought the quest meant he was supposed to expound on the Dao, proving his deeper understanding compared to these three enlightened cultivators. It would be like a theological debate between a couple of monks.

But Galau had mentioned Dao Discourses in passing, which saved Zac the embarrassment. As it turned out, a Dao Discourse wasn't something as civil as a debate in the traditional sense. There were no podiums and no moderator keeping score of good arguments. It was actually more like a battle.

However, the difference between a Dao Discourse and a normal fight was that the battle only utilized the Dao and nothing else. To make this possible there was an array simply called **[Dao Discourse Array]**. The fight wouldn't take place between the combatants personally, since things like Attributes and Skills would influence the results.

The way Galau described how it worked made it sound like a Dao Discourse was like a mix of Chess and a mock battle. You infused your Daos into the array, and it would conjure various phenomena or avatars that you would use to fight. For example, his Fragment of the Axe would probably be able to conjure axe warriors, or perhaps spiritual axes that flew around in the air. But it obviously wouldn't be able to summon an ice golem.

It was a battle where you benefited from creativity and tactics, but the Dao was still the focus. The stronger your Daos were,

the stronger your avatars would be. Similarly, the greater control you had over them, the better you would be able to fight. You claimed victory by destroying the enemy's avatars or forced them to concede.

Zac hadn't understood why anyone would just give up, but it turned out that one's soul was connected to the array. Every time an avatar was destroyed your soul took a hit. This meant that the risk of death was pretty low, but you stood the risk to seriously harm your soul if you didn't know when to give up.

These types of mock battles were a popular means of both working on your control of the Dao and settling disputes in larger sects, but it was a pretty hard item to get. Why some random force in the middle of the forest had an array like this was beyond Zac's understanding, but he supposed it was simply put there by the System to create a new type of challenge.

When it came to the strength of his Daos Zac felt pretty confident. Two Dao Fragments should by all means be pretty strong even compared to the Floor Guardian of the 6th floor. The problem was his control, or rather lack thereof. His amateurish finesse was already all too apparent from his inability to learn [**Cyclic Strike**], but that wasn't the real problem.

He was still utterly incapable of infusing multiple Daos into a single skill or attack, which was the hallmark of a skilled cultivator. His sister was able to do it since long ago, and Ilvere was getting close as far as Zac could tell. He couldn't be sure, but he also believed Thea mastered that technique going by their time traveling in the hunt.

That was the greatest risk to him failing the quest as he saw it. Infusing two Daos into a skill might not double its might, but it would still increase it by a noticeable degree. The same applied to a Dao Discourse, where using multiple Daos would result in both more versatile and powerful avatars.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to beat some enlightened cultivators through finesse, and there was no chance of him suddenly becoming a masterful Dao controller in an instant.

He would have to rely on brute force and hope that his Daos and mental strength along with some creative tactics were enough to force his enemies to give in.

At least he had **[Cosmic Gaze]** now to help him understand what his enemies would be doing. Daos weren't as obvious as skills, as its natural form was invisible and formless. But with his ocular skill he might be able to figure out what Daos the opponents were using and their plans, allowing him to gain the upper hand.

There were limits to that strategy though as **[Cosmic Gaze]** wasn't some patch that solved everything that Zac currently lacked.

The new skill only elevated Zac from a bumbling idiot to a somewhat capable adventurer thanks to showing him a larger picture of the truth, but it was just a small aid in the end. The levels of the 6th floor had still taken longer and longer to complete for example, even with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

For example, climbing the eight levels of the 6th floor had cost him a full 16 days. Things got more complicated at every level, and the ocular skill only helped resolve certain issues. Still, Zac judged that he saved almost 5 days thanks to **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but it was distinctly possible that the 7th floor would take over 20 days as things looked right now.

One saving grace was that the System had actually been kind enough to swap out his ocular skill in both his classes. He had thought that **[Inquisitive Eye]** would remain in his Draugr-form, but he had been happy to be proven wrong the first time he swapped during the climb. His pitch-black eyes in his undead form were pretty amazing now, both being able to discern life force and the Daos.

Losing his old skill completely didn't bother Zac in the slightest as it didn't serve much of a purpose any longer. Losing the ability to inspect beasts was a bit of an annoyance, but there were no doubt items that could serve a similar purpose in the multiverse. Perhaps whatever the fractal version of AR goggles was?

He had tried learning [**True Strike**] in his undead form as well, but his picky pathways hadn't accepted the crystal. The eyes alone was a great asset when fighting the series of guardians though. The guardians were all well into the E-Grade already, and after the 3rd level they were all at least as strong as the battleroach king if you excluded the Technocrat's modifications.

Of course, they didn't all excel at defense the same way as the massive roach did. One of them was a lightning-attuned thief, and Zac couldn't even catch his robes in his human form. Hundreds of fractal blades were shot out in his attempts to take down the ratman, but the blades only managed to destroy the ancient ruins they fought inside.

Zac was eventually forced to swap classes mid-battle, relying on the defensive charges of his robes and one of Rasuliel's defensive treasures to not get skewered while transitioning. The moment he unleashed the combination of [**Profane Seal**] and [**Vanguard of Undeath**] the fight was essentially over, as his Undying Bulwark class was truly the nemesis of all Dexterity-based classes.

He was thankfully still able to defeat the guardians just fine without being forced to resort to [**Hatchetman's Rage**] or using any of his ultimate skills, which was a relief. He still used his stronger skills now and then, but it was mostly to expedite his climb. If he had been forced to go all out against the normal guardians, then what would he do against the true floor guardian?

The increasing strength of the guardians also came with a constantly increasing risk of real injuries. He hadn't been wounded so far apart from a few minor flesh wounds, but that would probably change starting on the next floor. One mistake and he would be out of commission for a couple of days, and those types of delays could prove extremely costly.

He still had a large number of arrays and other treasures in his Cosmos Sack collecting dust. He hadn't encountered a situation that called for a [**Void Ball**] so far, not mentioning the even stronger arrays that he had found in Rasuliel's Spatial

Tool. Perhaps they would prove to be the key to speed up the fights and reduce the time he had to spend healing up.

At the end of the day there wasn't much he could do about the lack of time, he could only keep his head down and complete the quest he was given. He could always just run in axe swinging, but he truly wanted to succeed in the Dao Discourse if possible. The last floor guardian had been related to learning a skill, and he had found a Skill Crystal.

This quest was directly related to the Dao, and the implication was clear. If he could encounter an opportunity to improve his Daos he had to grab it. It was pretty much the only venue for him to power up without evolving, and improving any of his Daos by one step would increase his power by a noticeable degree.

"Excuse me," a deep voice suddenly rumbled behind him, and Zac turned around only to find himself face-to-face with a walking tree, its face seemingly carved right into the trunk.

It rose almost four meters into the air, where almost half of it was a tree crown that kind of looked like a set of hair for the face that was placed on its trunk.

"Ah?" Zac was only able to answer, his mind a bit on the fritz since he couldn't believe he had neither sensed nor heard a living tree sneaking right up behind him.

"You are blocking the path young man," the tree kindly reminded.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Zac said as he stepped to the side of the road as if by instinct.

"Are you perchance participating in the Dao Discourse as well?" the ent asked as it curiously looked at him, the movement causing its thick trunk to creak in protest.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he nodded in confirmation.

"As I thought," the ent nodded. "How about we go together? I am trying my hand as well, though I do not hold much hope for my chances. My name is Thelim, by the way."

Zac readily agreed as he felt that this large being didn't contain any malicious intentions, and his danger sense was completely quiet as well. The tree could rather be a source of information about the scenario of the level, an opportunity to glean whether there was some Dao-related opportunity hiding somewhere.

And if the ent decided to sneak an attack, then Zac would simply turn him into firewood.

"I am just passing through the area, and I just heard about the Enlightened Three by chance. I heard there was a great opportunity waiting for anyone who could defeat them, do you know anything more?" Zac probed.

"So you're a traveler?" the ent mumbled with a thoughtful nod. "That's why I couldn't place you. Well, it makes sense that you came here."

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what the ent was talking about.

"The opportunity you heard about is the chance to enter the Pool of Tranquility. It's a pond of spiritual dew that has formed a natural formation over countless millennia," Thelim said, the leaves on his head shaking with excitement.

"What does it do?" Zac said as his heart started to beat a bit faster.

The name reminded Zac of something Ogras had mentioned offhandedly. His family apparently possessed a magical pond themselves, which was created with the help of a huge amount of treasures and a powerful array. It was actually a trial ground that could award a Limited Title. The elites of the clan could dive into it, and the further down they managed to go, the better the title the System awarded.

The demon had wanted Zac to buy something similar from the Town Shop, but there was nothing of the sort available. What if this pond was the same? He still had two empty slots for Limited Title, so no matter how good or bad it was, it would still be a pure upgrade.

And even if it didn't give a limited title, then it was still probably related to the Dao. Was drinking the Dew the

equivalent of eating a Dao Treasure? The effect of Dao Treasures was pretty muted inside the Tower, but this was a free opportunity. He might even be able to take away some of the water to drink it outside.

But the next words from the ent dashed Zac's hopes.

"Every day a few drops are added to the pool at sunrise, each droplet infused with the spirituality of daybreak and empowered by the spirit of the forest. If my kind enters our bloodlines will be purified, but there are some benefits for normal people as well," Thelim explained.

"What kinds of benefits?" Zac probed.

"It purifies and strengthens souls."

Zac once again got excited when he heard the effect of the pool. It wasn't exactly what he had hoped for, but it still sounded like something he could benefit immensely from. His soul getting corroded by the splinter was a constant worry, especially since the past few days.

Because the Splinter of Oblivion had finally woken up from its slumber again.

Chapter 425: The Enlightened Three

The splinter was once again active, but it thankfully hadn't shown any change in its behavior. It just extended its tendrils to touch the miasmatic fractals for a bit before it calmed down and started to emit that mysterious energy into his mind just like before.

The fact that the Splinter was once again active meant that he might boil over again, and Zac didn't want another mess like the Zethaya situation on his hands. That time only his enemies got killed, but what if he turned berserk in the middle of Port Atwood next time? He'd end up like Anzonil's disciple, forced to live far away from people.

If he could strengthen and purify his soul he would hopefully be able to increase his resistance to the mood swings brought on by the splinter. Not only that, but the power of the Dao also came from the soul, and having a greater soul no doubt came with all kinds of benefits to his connection with his Dao Fragments.

"Have these enlightened three been bathing in the pool themselves?" Zac suddenly probed, realizing a problem with the situation.

"Of course," the ent laughed, causing the leaves in his crown to flutter. "Some say that their family wanted to keep the Pool of Tranquility for themselves, but they had to provide this opportunity to the younger generations due to pressure from the surrounding forces. Why else would they be so kind as to share their precious dew?"

Zac snorted and agreed with the sentiment. There was no such thing as a free lunch, no one was so 'enlightened' that they would readily hand out their resources to outsiders. It also

made Zac curious just what kind of reception the reluctant hosts had prepared for them.

The two kept walking for over an hour, and the ent was happy to share his experience from living in the area. The forest they stood in was apparently beyond massive, and even an E-Grade warrior would require months of travel to exit it. Thelim had never left it at all, but had rather stayed in the area controlled by his clan most of his life.

Zac had already heard that Earth could be considered a very small planet even after having grown by a huge degree due to the merging of planets. But it was pretty much as small as a D-Graded planet could be, where the larger ones could have a surface area that was hundreds of times larger.

As for C-Graded worlds, the whole area of Earth would barely be considered a clan's fiefdom, a small corner of a single kingdom. Those kinds of worlds were exceedingly rare though, and according to Galau there were just three such planets in the whole Allbright Empire. Seventy percent of all C-grade forces in the Allbright Empire lived on the Allbright World, with the rest divided on the two slightly inferior planets.

Thelim's life in the forest was pretty tranquil, with the various forest races having pretty close ties. This wasn't because there was some sort of harmonious camaraderie brought on by their connection to nature, but rather a need to band together to defend from outside threats. The forest contained all kinds of Spiritual Herbs, and outside forces often wanted to seize parts of the forest for themselves.

That kind of conflict was pretty far from where Zac had ended up though as they were deep in the heart of the forest. Any dangerous beasts had long been culled in the area, and the only sounds were those of birds chirping and the rustling of the leaves. It was as though the peaceful atmosphere seeped into Zac's bones and he suddenly stopped and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong?" Thelim asked with piqued interest when he saw that Zac stood still as though he was in a trance.

“I just had a small improvement from walking in this forest,” Zac said with a smile after a few seconds.

“You truly are a kindred spirit. The breath of nature is dense on you, you should consider staying here for a while. It is an amazing place to come closer to our origin,” the ent nodded and resumed walking.

It had mentioned that they were brethren because it had sensed the Seed of Trees on Zac. Ents were one of those races that were extremely specialized, the opposite of humans who essentially were talentless jack-of-all-trades. Thelim had noticed Zac’s nature attunement the second he saw him, but the ent didn’t seem to notice the other Daos in Zac’s body.

Zac wryly smiled as he resumed walking next to the living tree. He wondered if the ent would feel as close to him if he knew that Zac’s class was called Hatchetman and that he possessed skills such as **[Chop]** and **[Deforestation]**.

It was perhaps even luckier that he didn’t arrive at the floor in his Draugr-form. The stench of death might have prompted Thelim to immediately attack him rather than initiate a conversation. Zac would easily have defeated him, but he would have missed out on the information he provided.

As for the small improvement, it wasn’t a lie. Zac had suddenly sensed a stronger connection with nature around him and had stopped to properly savor the feeling. Unfortunately it wasn’t an epiphany or anything of the sort, but rather an improvement to **[Forester’s Constitution]**.

The passive skill had finally evolved to late proficiency, increasing the boost to Vitality and Endurance by a full 2% each when the effect was doubled. Zac guessed that meant that the skill would provide a 15% boost at peak mastery, which was nothing to scoff at.

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the skill finally had evolved, as he had traveled through all kinds of forests during the past 50-odd levels, including topographies he would never encounter on earth. It was perfect timing as well, as just ten minutes later they reached their destination.

The wild forest gave way to a meticulously cultivated one, where each tree or bush was a work of art. They took the shapes of people, animals, and even landscapes, though they were not sapient plants like Thelim. It also didn't look like they had been pruned, but that they rather had grown into such a shape naturally.

"We're here," Thelim said as he looked around in appreciation. "The trees are slowly formed to grow into these shapes over centuries. It is a popular form of meditation here."

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked at the living sculptures all around them. It sounded crazy to him to spend hundreds of years on shaping a tree, but with lifespans running into the tens of thousands there were probably all kinds of weird time-consuming hobbies out there. The garden was only a few hundred meters deep though so they reached their destination.

A large hedge reaching at least fifty meters into the air surrounded the massive compound where the Enlightened Three and their clan lived, and its gate was guarded by odd humanoids that looked like a mix of trees and humans. Their hair was green and looked like cascading grass, but they had normal skin with a pinkish hue.

"Dryads?" Zac asked with interest as his mind grasped for similar beings from Earth's mythology.

"Just so," the ent rumbled in confirmation. "As I mentioned earlier, the 'Enlightened Three' are three grandchildren of the Perenne Family's Matriarch. They are dryads."

"How strong is this force?" Zac asked curiously as they approached the gate.

Going by the somewhat sparse Cosmic Energy in the area and circuitously questioning the ent it became apparent that there shouldn't be any D-Grade warriors in this world. But there might still be complications if the floor guardian was in the middle of their clan.

"I've heard that the matriarch has passed level 90," the ent whispered. "She is one of the strongest warriors in the sector."

Zac nodded, but not without some confusion. The matriarch was barely strong enough to be a challenge for him, so what about the 'Enlightened Three'? Zac had assumed that they were both the quest target and the floor guardians, but it felt pretty unlikely if the matriarch was only at that level.

"What about the Enlightened three then?" Zac asked.

"They're all Peak F-Grade," the ent said. "But do not look down on them. Rumors are that they could evolve over two decades ago, but they chose to keep refining their souls as they pondered on their Daos. Their insight is extremely high. In fact, don't let the levels of any dryads fool you. They are the blessed children of nature and they have a terrifying affinity with nature-aspected Daos."

"I understand," Zac commented as they passed through the gates.

Zac's appearance drew some interested glances among the forest beings but no one barred his entry, especially since Thelim seemed to have some renown. Zac himself was thinking of a back-up plan to the quest and only threw a cursory glance at the people around him.

His best guess right now was that the matriarch was the floor guardian, but the situation was a bit complicated. The expansive mansion wasn't mobbed, but there would be over ten allied forces and a bunch of loose cultivators in attendance. Many leaders would be here to escort their young, each of them a match to the Perenne Matriarch.

Could he really attack the matriarch in such a situation?

Everyone was here for the Pond and its soul-strengthening effects, and Zac might end up mobbed if he did something hastily. Helping kill an outsider was a pretty small price to pay for gaining access to the Pool of Tranquility. Perhaps he would have to waste a couple of days until the event was over in case he lost the Dao Discourse, and find an opportunity to strike then.

But that was if all else failed since he didn't have the time to wait around like that.

Zac and Thelim were led to a huge glade where a banquet was held. People walked around to mingle and network, but Zac was completely disinterested in the proceedings. What was the point in getting to know a bunch of people that he would never encounter again? He only did the bare minimum as he tried to gather information about his targets.

It was only an hour later that the members of the Perenne Clan arrived, led by a beautiful forest dryad who appeared to be around Zac's age. She had delicate features and her eyes were slightly larger compared to a human's, giving her a very cute appearance. But Zac already knew that she was actually an old cultivator approaching 800 years.

It was obviously the matriarch of the Perenne clan. Her grasslike hair cascaded almost all the way down to the ground, but Zac had already learned that it wasn't completely ornamental. The thick stalks were her weapon as well, and she could grow them over a hundred meters in an instant according to rumors.

Behind her walked a group of cultivators of various races, each of them radiating a respectable aura. They were formerly loose cultivators who had chosen to stay behind after previous gatherings like this one according to Thelim, and it was this very reason that the Perenne family also allowed loose cultivators to join in on the fun.

Finally, there were the 'Enlightened Three'. The three were like younger copies of their grandmother, two youths and a girl. Going by appearance Zac would have guessed they were the same age as Emily, but they were closing in on 100 years. Reaching peak F-Grade in this world was a slow and arduous process due to the sparse energy, but it also gave them ample time to work on their Daos.

"Thank you all for coming to our humble home," the matriarch said with a cherubic voice. "We are delighted to host both honored friends and new acquaintances visiting from afar."

"Our family has been blessed with the Pool of Tranquility, and it is our joy to share the gift of nature with the fated ones," the matriarch continued. "But the dew is limited, and only a select

few can enjoy its effect every decade. The mandate of the Heavens is that power is needed to seize one's fortune, and the precious opportunities cannot be wasted on the subpar."

The matriarch waved her hand the next moment, and an earthquake spread through the area. Zac frowned and got ready for a fight as the ground shook and heaved, with thick roots sprouting from the ground. Zac was about to take out his axe and get to chopping, but the ent placed a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Wait, my friend," the ent said from his side. "Just watch."

Zac hesitantly nodded and held off on taking any action, and he breathed out in relief a few seconds later as he witnessed the miraculous skill of a true arborist. The enormous roots weren't an attack, but the matriarch was actually growing a massive stadium out of the ground.

Chapter 426: Talent

Branches and trees entwined to form expansive bleachers that were partitioned into mid-sized platforms that would be able to house between five and twenty people each. Even seats and tables sprouted up from the ground on the platforms.

Finally an inscribed disk was lifted out of the ground with the help of six gargantuan roots. The platform looked like an enormous coin, with a diameter of thirty meters or so. It would be impossible to have a proper battle on such a small surface, so it could only mean it was exclusively meant for the Dao Discourses.

The disk was almost ten meters high and its surface looked just like the forest floor. It was a bit uneven and covered in grass, with a few bushes growing as well. Two smaller platforms rose up next to the **[Dao Discourse Array]**, one on each side of it. An altar holding a football-sized crystal was placed on each of them, no doubt the control crystals the competitors would use.

“The rules are simple,” the matriarch said as she was lifted to one of the highest platforms by a root that looked like a massive snake. “If you wish to participate, simply take a number. To get the opportunity to bathe in the Pool of Tranquility you need to defeat two of my grandchildren. However, If you lose the first battle you are out.”

“Why this rule?” the Matriarch smiled when she noticed some discontent among the guest. “It’s to save their reserves. A Dao Discourse isn’t as draining as a real battle, but there are dozens of you here. My grandchildren would turn into hollowed-out husks if they had to expend so much spiritual force.”

Of course, there was also the not-so-hidden implication that they were favoring their own. Zac didn’t feel there was

anything wrong with that though. It was their pond after all, and they should be able to stack the odds in their favor a bit.

Zac and Thelim walked over and got their allotted numbers from one of the servants holding a crystal, and Zac was pretty happy with the result. He was placed at the 8th spot, whereas Thelim drew 2nd. It was perfect for Zac as it gave him some time to observe how the Discourse worked. It sounded pretty fantastical from Galau's explanations and he wanted to see some examples before he jumped into the fray himself.

The best would have been to play around with the array for a bit to test out its limits and various ideas, but there was no chance of that happening. The first person to challenge the Enlightened Three was one of the few wandering cultivators just like himself, and she didn't seem all too pleased at being the sacrificial lamb that had to sound out the three youths.

The woman still walked up to the large control crystal and it lit up with power the next moment. Zac looked on with interest as large swirls of mist rose out of the Discourse Array to quickly form the avatars the combatants would use, the wandering cultivator had chosen to form a dozen soldiers, each standing roughly one meter tall.

Their swords radiated a distinct sharpness that Zac was all too familiar with, and he knew that the girl had mastered the Seed of Sharpness, and it was at High Stage judging by its power.

The dryad rather summoned a field of flowers, and Zac couldn't place what Dao they were made from. When Zac looked at it with [**Cosmic Gaze**] he realized its true nature though. The flowers barely emitted any color to his adjusted spectrum, but there were actually vibrant roots running through the platform itself, snaking their way toward the soldiers that were targeting the flowers above.

The wandering cultivator didn't seem to sense anything amiss and she ordered the soldiers to approach the flowers, even sending a few of them forward to scout out the plants. One of the soldiers swept his sword in a wide arc, and a rippling wave of sharpness cut down a noticeable section of them.

There was no reaction from neither the flowers nor the young dryad who held his hand against the control crystal, and the guest immediately realized something was wrong even if she couldn't sense the roots digging ever closer. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before she grit her teeth and ordered her whole squad forward in an attempt to preempt whatever the Perenne scion had planned.

The soldiers only had time to take a few steps before spears made of wood struck out of the ground, piercing the chest of one soldier after another, ripping them apart in seconds. Each strike also seemed to hit the controller as well and she staggered away from the crystal as blood started running down her nose. She threw an unknown pill into her mouth and quickly scurried away after bowing toward the hosts.

The battle was over in an instant, and Zac didn't even get a chance to see the dryad use any hidden cards. He had heard that the three of them had represented the family a decade ago as well, and at that time all three had showcased peak Dao seeds. Some believed that the three had gained Dao Fragments by now while others thought they had rather worked on their supplementary Daos.

One thing that Zac could glean from the fight was that tactics were just as important as strength. The dryad hadn't even bothered using any fancy techniques such as fusing multiple Daos into one stronger projection, but he had rather won using wits.

The Dao that formed the spikes were related to nature as it felt a bit similar to his Seed of Trees, but there were also distinct differences. Zac guessed it might be the Seed of Root. He guessed such a seed could contain some piercing capabilities like those he saw just then. But most importantly, the seed that the youth had used was only at Middle Stage, yet it defeated the wandering cultivator in an instant.

"How skilled," Thelim murmured. "I only sensed the roots due to my natural affinity. I wouldn't have fared any better if I was a human in that fight."

“Good luck,” Zac said to his temporary travel companion as the tree stood up with a grunt.

The one-sided battle seemed to have put a bit of a damper on Thelim’s mood, but he still reluctantly stepped to the plate. His showing was a bit better where he summoned a massive tree that released a storm of leaves to cut his enemy.

The Enlightened Three had changed representative to let the dryads rest in between flights, and the next one conjured stone golems that withstood the barrage of leaves until they reached the tree. A few of them combined forces to forcibly rip apart the tree, at which point Thelim surrendered by unsummoning his avatar.

“Well, it was worth a try at least,” Thelim rumbled with a sigh as he returned to Zac’s side. “Those three siblings are truly fearsome. We both used High Stage seeds, but the amount of spirit he could instill into the avatars were night and day. He also controlled those golems so naturally, while I struggled to just send the leaves in the right direction. Both the strength of their souls and their control over their Daos is top tier.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he didn’t directly comment on the fight. The friendly ent was honestly fighting way above his weight class, and if this was a real fight the living tree would have been ripped to shreds in an instant.

He only had one seed just like the first cultivator, and it wasn’t even a fragment. To challenge the three dryads who had grown up with access to the Pond of Tranquility was to ask for a beating. But the young ent had already said he was mostly joining the fun to gain some experience, so he took the defeat in stride.

Only when the 5th warrior, a local scion of another powerful faction from the looks of it, stepped to the plate did Zac see Dao fusions come to play. Not only did the man, who seemed to be some sort of nymph, fuse two different Daos into a mighty beast that pounced on his enemies, but both seeds were Peak mastery.

The dryad wasn’t to be outdone though, and he created an image of a hunter wielding a bow covered in leaves. The

hunter deftly dodged the rabid assaults of the animal until it finally managed to land a lethal strike with an arrow that shone with the green light of some nature-related Dao.

It was an interesting display, but Zac felt it was a bit lackluster compared to a real fight that brought shockwaves and explosions that could be felt from hundreds of meters away. It almost looked a bit like level 20 warriors and beasts were fighting to the naked eye, though it looked a lot more spectacular when viewing it with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

Finally, it was Zac's turn to the plate, and he was eager to try out his might. He was pretty confident by this point as none of the fights had showcased any Dao Fragments, and he had two he could bring into play. He might not be able to fuse them, but summoning two Fragment Avatar should be able to handle any trouble that came his way.

Zac jumped up on the platform, and after a nod at his competitor he placed his hand on the control crystal and started to imbue it with his Dao. He felt a prickling sensation in his mind as he tried to conjure his avatars, like his brain had suddenly grown two sizes inside his skull.

He understood what he needed to do since connecting with the control crystal provided him with a burst of information, but there was an almost insurmountable resistance when forcing his Fragment of the Axe into the elusive mists hiding inside the platform. It felt like he was trying to grab the haze with his bare hands.

The only solution he could come up with was to steady himself and forcibly push even more of his spiritual energy inside the array, and it finally worked. Eight warriors emerged through the mist, each one of them radiating a palpable killing intent and a force that caused the ground around them to be cut.

However, there were no exclamations of excitement or envy coming from the audience, but rather confused murmurs and subdued snickers. And even if Zac didn't want to admit it, he could understand why. Things had seemed pretty smooth and simple from the stadium, but he had barely managed to create

the avatars in line with his imagination. Anything more was beyond his ability.

The eight soldiers looked mighty, but they twitched and flailed about in an extremely uncoordinated manner. It looked like they were string puppets controlled by the world's worst puppeteer. Zac also knew it wasn't some trick by the array, but rather due to his limitations.

Just conjuring the eight warriors was even more taxing than when he infused the Skeletons of [**Undying Legion**], but Zac had never gone any further than that with the skill. The skeletons didn't require constant commands, though Zac could order them about with a few simple thoughts. But these avatars didn't listen to mental commands but were rather moved by manipulating them with his spirit.

This was just like when he tried to control his spiritual energy and have the two Daos fill the fractal for [**Cyclic Strike**]. The Daos turned into spaghetti in his hands and it all turned into a big mess.

The dryad cultivator had frozen in confusion for a second, but when she noticed that Zac's fumbling wasn't an act she sneered and pushed the small critters looking like walking radishes she had summoned forward. They didn't look as mighty as the hunter, but Zac could see that they were created with the help of two Peak Dao Seeds.

Zac tried to think of a solution to his embarrassing situation, and he could only come up with one course of action. If he couldn't control so many warriors, then he would just have to reduce the numbers. Seven of the axemen dissipated into smoke just before vines shot out by the radish soldiers struck them, but one soldier stayed behind and cut the attacking vines into shreds with one swipe.

Things became a bit easier with only one avatar to control, and the power forced into its diminutive size was far beyond anything that had been seen so far during the battles. The axe warrior roared as he stumbled forward, his axe madly flailing in the air. A wave of destruction rippled out in an instant,

destroying most of the seed warriors who couldn't muster a working response to the random strikes.

Zac breathed in relief as he tried to cajole his avatar to move forward, but he stopped when he saw that the pale-faced dryad dissolved her remaining radish warriors. He first thought that he had won, but he quickly realized she was just changing tactics as a centaur wielding a simple spear appeared to replace the small vegetable avatars.

The centaur immediately galloped forward, and a wild exchange of strikes took place between the two solitary avatars. Truthfully it was mostly the axeman getting hit over and over and Zac infusing even more spiritual energy to keep it standing, while occasionally releasing a massive, but random, swing that either completely missed its mark or grievously wounded its target.

He also tried to incorporate the Dao of the Coffin into the mix, but the only solution he could find was to completely swap out the Dao in the avatar. It changed him from an axe-warrior into an axe-wielding skeleton climbing out of a coffin, and the stone box helped protect its sides from attacks.

It did help with the defenses a bit, but Zac eventually gave it up since swapping back and forth in some sort of pseudo-cycle only helped him drain his mental energy a lot faster. He had already landed a few pretty nasty hits with the avatar powered by the Fragment of the Axe, and one more was likely all it would take to completely destroy it.

But the power of the spear-wielding centaur suddenly shot up by a noticeable degree, and its previously unattuned spear lit up with a color of attunement, this one looking a bit like steel. Not only that, one shape after another started to appear on the dryad's side of the arena, each one of them emitting a respectable amount of power.

It was a literal army of forest critters wielding various weaponry as they approached Zac's solitary avatar.

Zac couldn't help but look up from the crystal to see what the hell was going on. Had the Matriarch suddenly jumped into the mix, or did his opponent go easy on him before? But his

eyes widened in realization when his gaze swept across the three youths standing on the platform on the opposite side.

The 'Enlightened Three' were actually cheating.

Chapter 427: Storm

Zac immediately noticed something odd with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but he initially wasn't sure whether he was just imagining things. Thin tendrils of energy seemed to be passing between the three siblings unbeknownst to him or the other spectators, making Zac believe that they were somehow sharing their spiritual power.

The tendrils were extremely minute though, looking like glistening fishing lines in the air. It made Zac doubt his eyes for a second, especially since none of the spectators were commenting on it.

Or was this the advantage of having the home field? There were tens of E-Grade warriors among the spectators, but none of them spoke up. It was impossible that none of them realized something was amiss if Zac would see it with his newly acquired early proficiency skill. They simply didn't say anything since it happened to an outsider.

It was only good if Zac got thrown out, as it would leave more spots in the pool for their own progeny. So everyone kept their mouths shut in a tacit agreement. Fury started to build in Zac's mind as he railed against the injustice, but he stopped his anger from running amok. He needed to find a solution that didn't end with a bloodbath.

Calling them out wouldn't work. If the spectators cared about fair competition for outsiders, then they should have spoken up already.

If this had been a real fight, he would have launched something like **[Deforestation]** by this point, laying waste to all three of them while taking down the whole stadium and crushing the **[Dao Discourse Array]** into pieces. But doing so would no doubt end with him not being able to access the Pool of Tranquility.

He had tried to circumvent the quests multiple times during the climb, where he had defeated the guardian first before trying to get the treasure related to the quest. That tactic had invariably failed, as the treasures were protected by all kinds of safeguards the System had put in place. One time a bird even swooped down from nowhere to snatch a spiritual herb out of his hands before he could react.

Prickling pain in his mind made him realize an odd change with the array. The moment Zac noticed the reinforcements on the other side he had ordered his avatar to back away while he tried to figure out a plan. But while his mind churned to figure out a plan he had unbeknownst kept infusing the control crystal with massive amounts of spiritual energy.

None of it had entered the axeman though since that required Zac's full attention, but it had rather formed a large formless blob of destructive energies at the bottom of the high platform. Weirder yet, the haze that rested beneath the surface had started to mix and integrate with his spiritual energy without taking any specific form.

It was like his Dao Fragment was a magnet that kept absorbing the mists in the array. Zac completely froze witnessing the spectacle, and it felt like he had woken up from a stupor. He felt as though he had been muddled for the past months, but the Dao Discourse had finally dispersed his illusions.

He had been so focused on the Cycle of Life and Death since meeting Yrial that he had ignored his unique points, and forcibly tried to create a cultivation system that seemed fitting on the surface, but one that still kind of missed the mark. Yrial had tried helping him by having him learn [**Cyclic Strike**] and improve his Dao control, but it was that very skill that had made him reach an impasse.

It was time to accept reality. Creating a cycle where he integrated two diametrically opposite concepts was like trying to breathe underwater for him. It was not in his nature, and forcing such a thing would only create mediocre results.

His thoughts went to the weird ball that Yrial played with and he remembered how it seamlessly flitted back and forth

between frigid flames and fiery ice. Did he truly need to create something like that with his Daos of Life and Death? His sister might be suited for such a path with her amazing affinities and AI to help her fuse the four elements, but he needed to find another direction to take.

He would still keep the core parts, with Life and Death each being one half of the whole, with the Dao of the Axe being the delivery method, or perhaps the thing that bound the two together. But braiding the two together into a revolving cycle was too complicated. Perhaps he could come back to that idea when he was as powerful as Yrial, but for now he needed something simpler.

His eyes again turned to the mists that churned under the surface of the **[Dao Discourse Array]**. By this point he had poured more than twice the energy into the ground compared to what he had used to create the eight axe warriors earlier.

His heart was pounding a bit, but he kept infusing more and more inside as he moved his axeman to the edge of the stage. He suddenly had an idea and started to push his Fragment of the Coffin into the control crystal as well. However, he didn't try to fuse the two fragments or even control them after they entered the ground.

Combining the two Daos would have been impossible, but just pouring it into the control crystal wasn't too bad. It was just like when he infused his body with the Fragment of the Coffin while he infused an attack with the Fragment of the Axe. As long as he didn't need to coordinate the two to work with each other the strain was just a fraction of before.

The second fragment still joined the growing blob of chaos in the ground, and the mists turned more violent and unpredictable. The whole array was starting to shake, and the three dryads seemed to have realized that something odd was going on. They had probably been waiting for Zac to summon new avatars since they saw him steadily infusing the control crystal with more and more spiritual energy.

Striking down all his avatars at once would have a much stronger effect, just like when one of them defeated the first

wandering cultivator. But now it looked like they didn't dare wait any longer and they immediately sent a few of the avatars toward the axeman still stumbling around on the corner of the arena. However, Zac didn't care as his **[Cosmic Gaze]** was trained at the bottom of the arena.

It was like he was mesmerized by the growing mass of untamed destruction hiding at the bottom of the array. Wasn't this the way things had always been when he fought? Supreme might crushing any resistance or any technique. If those three bastards wanted to create a dozen avatars with their combined energy, then he would simply drown them in an avalanche of even more energy.

There was no fusion and no adroit braiding of the two energies into something greater. This was mindless destruction, a tsunami of unrelenting force. And it was time to unleash it. However, that was easier said than done.

His mind strained to the limit as he urged the large blob to rise, but it felt like he was trying to lift a mountain with his mind. The rumbling of the arena got more and more severe, and small cracks could be seen on both the platform and the control crystal that Zac touched.

A searing pain flashed in his mind as the axeman was cut to ribbons by the dryads' avatars, but he didn't care as he was completely focused on the counter he had cooking below.

Finally the blob he had infused almost his whole soul into reached the surface, and Zac was reeling by exertion by this point. Multiple capillaries in his eyes had burst, and he felt the salty taste of blood in his mouth as it freely poured down his nose.

The sounds of exclamations that had been missing earlier finally erupted among the spectators as what looked like a thundercloud rose through the ground. It was a messy mix of light gray spots and a sinister black, with the occasional flashes of bronze. It was probably impossible to tell what it was made from unless one had a skill like **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but one thing was clear.

It was dangerous.

There was just no way for Zac to really control the thundercloud, and he could only push it in a certain direction with everything he had, forcing it forward by sheer force of will. Zac's mind felt like it would snap in two, but he refused to stop. The control crystal started to crackle as the small crystalline cracks turned into major fault lines, but they were continuously removed by the repair fractals.

The mix of Destruction and Putrefaction brought on from his two Daos swept toward the other side like a tidal wave, swallowing the stalwart army of the Enlightened Three in an instant. Explosions and sounds of clashes could be heard from within, as the three siblings desperately tried to dispel the onslaught. But it was like trying to stop a storm with your bare hands.

One avatar after another was either melted into a rotten pool by the Fragment of the Coffin or ripped into pieces by the sharp winds brought on by the Fragment of the Axe. A few simply got annihilated in a flash when the odd bronze-colored flashes appeared. There was no contest between the two sides, and all the refinement and skill the three could muster was pointless in front of Zac's insane outburst of power.

In just a few seconds the whole avatar army was ripped to shreds, and the effect on its controllers wasn't small. The girl staggered backward and clutched her head before she fell over unconscious. The other two siblings shuddered as well, with blood starting to pour out of their noses and ears as they slumped down on the ground.

The two had been implicated as well since they had assisted their sister, and their souls had been wounded as a result. However, Zac was in no position to gloat as he wasn't all that better off. His eyes were completely bloodshot as he looked across the platform, and he had trouble gathering his wits since it felt like his head would split apart in any second.

The method of battle that Zac had chosen was one of mutual destruction. His soul had always felt pretty sturdy just like his odd constitution, and it was only made stronger with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion. Between his soul's strength and his

more advanced Daos, Zac bet that he would be able to take the Enlightened Three out before his soul was ripped apart.

It had worked, but he was still a bit giddy, and he quickly took out an intricate box from his spatial tool. Inside was a blue rose seemingly made from ice, a piece of unblemished beauty. Zac didn't care about that though as he crammed the flower into his mouth and swallowed, allowing a cool sensation to spread down his throat and then throughout his mind.

It was the reward he had gotten from the Ice Troll back on the first level of the 6th floor. It was a soul restoration treasure which quickly soothed his strained mind. He had a couple of items in the same category between his shopping in the Base Town and Rasuliel's pouch, which was what allowed him to identify it.

The icy rose was the strongest such item in his possession though, and he had a feeling that he needed all the strength he could get to handle the fallout from taking out the three dryad brats in one go. The others hadn't been inactive while Zac ate the natural treasure, and the matriarch had already hurried down from the platform she spectated from.

"Elyss!" the dryad cried as she took out a crystalline bottle and poured some unknown mixture down her grandchild's throat, before directing a murderous glare at Zac. "You are pretty ruthless. This is a discourse, not a battlefield."

She punctuated her words with having her aura expand around her, causing her long hair to flutter without any wind. But the matriarch's killing intent wasn't even a tenth of Zac's blood-drenched aura, and he didn't even flinch by being targeted.

"Injury is always a risk during a Dao Discourse," Zac answered with a hoarse voice, completely unphased. "I am more curious why the other two got hurt though. Perhaps you can explain?"

"They are triplets, so of course they're bound to have a deeper connection, one reaching even the spiritual level," the matriarch said without missing a beat.

“So, which one of them is heading up next?” Zac said, eventually deciding to not push the issue.

He was in a pretty bad shape, but the two remaining dryads were far worse off. Crushing them wouldn't be too hard by simply repeating a smaller version of the earlier storm. The Perenne Matriarch's sharp eyes were locked with Zac's for a few seconds before her strained face blossomed into a charming smile.

“No need. I know these children well, they are no match for the might of your Daos. We concede this match, one of the slots to the Pool of Tranquility will belong to you,” she said without a trace of the earlier animosity.

Zac, who was ready to go all out in case things deteriorated, mutely looked at the Perenne Matriarch for a few seconds before he slowly nodded and walked back toward his platform. Was it over that easily? But a sudden realization made him certain that things weren't over just yet.

The teleporter to the next level still hadn't appeared.

Chapter 428: Pool of Tranquility

“My friend, that was truly a... unique Discourse,” the ent coughed when Zac jumped up to the platform they shared. “I have never heard of such a, uh, masculine, manner of handling the Dao. And those insights... Scary, too scary. You are a walking paradox, both a child and a nemesis of the forest.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Zac snorted as he sat down.

“And congratulations on receiving the opportunity to bask in the Pool of Tranquility,” the ent said, patting Zac’s shoulder.

Zac initially only nodded in response, but he got confused when he noted that Thelim had surreptitiously dropped a small acorn that rolled into his lap. Believing it wasn’t a without reason Zac immediately looked at it with his Attuned Sight, and he saw that it contained some nature-attuned energies.

Curious, Zac instilled a minute amount of Cosmic Energy into it, and he suddenly received a short message in his mind, just like with the communications crystal he had gotten from Ogras before. There were only two words recorded, but it was enough to give Zac pause.

Be careful.

It was obviously a warning that things weren’t as simple as they seemed, and Zac wasn’t surprised. For one, the teleporter hadn’t appeared even after the matriarch conceded. That meant that the System still didn’t consider the quest finished. Hidden danger still lurked nearby. He was more surprised that the ent had gone out of his way to warn him at the risk of straining the relationship between his family and the Perenne Clan.

Zac still gave a slight nod in thanks to the ent before turning back toward the stadium. The Pool would only be opened at

sunset, so he would have to wait for a few more hours while the battles continued below.

Due to Zac's performance there were cracks all over the array, and it would take over an hour before it regained full functionality. Zac tried to figure out his next course of action while they waited, but he couldn't do a lot apart from restoring his mental reserves.

Some trap was no doubt waiting for him in the Pool of Tranquility, but he couldn't figure out exactly what it was. Openly attacking the winners was unlikely, since such an action would no doubt spread and sully their reputation. It would also become impossible for them to attract any more guardians from the wandering cultivators.

Thankfully he hadn't shown any of his actual strength, so the dryads were still completely clueless about his massive pool of attributes. They only knew that he was someone with two early-stage Dao Fragments but also someone who had atrocious control over them. Perhaps they even thought he had fallen into some amazing fortuitous encounter that imbued him with the two fragments without having any skills in the subject.

Zac instead started to go over the insights into his path of cultivation gained during the Dao Discourse. He had arrived at the conclusions while pissed off about the cheating, but he still felt that they held true after having calmed down.

He would put his attempts at learning [**Cyclic Strike**] on hold for now, unless it somehow proved extremely easy to master after having gained a life-attuned Dao Fragment. But Zac felt the odds of that was pretty slim. It hadn't worked at all while he had possessed two Peak Dao Seeds, so using the stronger Dao Fragment should only be more complicated.

There was also a need to formalize a new direction. Focusing on force rather than technique was good in all, but he needed to find a 'creation' based on force and his Dao Paths. The chaotic thundercloud created from Axe and Coffin was extremely lethal, but he was only able to summon that thing because of the [**Dao Discourse Array**].

He also needed to figure out a way to bring his future Dao Fragment into the mix. Right now he had unleashed a storm of Axe and Coffin, and this wasn't the fusion of Life and Death he had envisioned. There were a lot of things to consider, and it was a bit hard to theorize what was possible and what was impractical, especially since he was still lacking one of the fragments.

There was also the issue of those flashes of light that had the color of illuminated bronze. They only appeared for a fraction of a second before disintegrating, but the destruction they caused had been far greater than either of his two Fragments. But even though the force was massive he had been completely unable to sense anything from them.

He had a connection to the thundercloud even if he barely could control it, but the same couldn't be said about those lights. They suddenly appeared, and disappeared just as quickly before he had any chance to form any mental connections to them.

“Hey, what feeling did you get from the bronze-colored flashes of light from within the cloud I summoned?” Zac asked as he turned to the ent, curious what the woodland being was able to feel.

“Flashes of light?” Thelim said with confusion. “I did not see any? I only sensed a mix of two Daos, the first one sharp and forceful, perhaps the Dao of the Greatsword? The other one was cold and death-attuned.”

“Oh?” Zac said with surprise. “Nevermind then.”

Had those bronze lights not been visible to the normal spectrum? He had been using Cosmic Gaze the whole time, and he thought that the flashes were seen by everyone. But perhaps the bronze was just the color of the attunement, while the effect was indiscernible to the naked eye.

The most pressing question was what the light represented. Zac felt those sparks might be the clue to a way for him to increase his power, as there were only two reasonable explanations behind the sparks as he saw it.

The first possibility was that the flashes were related to the Splinter of Oblivion. It was a creation based on the Dao of Oblivion, which felt a bit similar to how the sparks simply disintegrated anything they touched. However, the only energy that Zac received from the Splinter was purified to pure spiritual energy by the miasmic fractals.

Another possibility, and the one that Zac felt was most likely, was that the sparks were the result of chance fusions between his two Dao Fragments. The two concepts had combined due to friction or something else, like a nuclear fusion reaction of the Dao.

This fusion in turn created a short-lived spark of some greater concept. If not oblivion, then perhaps something related of a lower tier. He really wanted to experiment based on this idea, because if that was that was going on then he'd have a terrifying ace on his hands. He could only imagine the power of **[Deforestation]** with the additional effect of that mysterious bronze Dao.

But he could only wait for the tournament to end to get his prize and then experiment with his insights on the next level. The hours went by excruciatingly slow, but it gave Zac time to mostly restore his frayed mind. His soul thankfully wasn't hurt, but it would probably have been if he had fought another battle. It was still overtaxed though and his head was pounding.

Finally the tournament was over and all the spots were allocated. Three went to the dryads who had been fighting all day, whereas the last two each went to one wandering cultivator and one young man who looked like an elf. He had barely won the first battle, but during the second he had suddenly burst out with a Dao Fragment, destroying the opposition with a skillful push before the dryad had a chance to adapt.

The guests left the arena to continue the festivities while the six were led by the Perenne Matriarch toward a primordial forest full of gargantuan trees. Zac only nodded in thanks to the ent before he followed in tow, wondering if he would ever get a chance to repay Thelim for his help.

The group stopped after having walked for just ten minutes, but when the matriarch waved her hand the surroundings changed. Initially there had only been an empty spot in the forest as the distance between the trees was pretty big, but it was now replaced with the stump of a massive tree.

This tree must have been the king of the forest when it lived, its size forming a landmark seen hundreds of miles away. The stump was even larger than the platform the Dao Discourse had taken place on, and its size dwarfed even the trees in the redwood forest he had visited with Ogras.

The group jumped onto the stump after marveling at the specimen for a few seconds, and he was surprised to see six small ponds. The Pool of Tranquility was actually on top of the tree itself.

“So what do we do?” the elf asked, and Zac looked over at the matriarch with interest as well.

“The moment the daylight ends there will be a change in the pools. At that moment you simply need to choose one of the pools and submerge yourself. Open your mind to absorb the energies that will be released from the dew,” the matriarch explained. “I will take my leave as to not affect your opportunity. We have also prepared 6 isolation arrays to make sure no sudden sounds will impact your cultivation.”

Zac cracked his neck and looked back and forth. The three dryads pointedly ignored him as though he wasn't there, while the second wandering cultivator kept to himself. Only the young elf tried to make some small conversation where he not-so-subtly tried to understand Zac's origin and whether he was affiliated with any local force.

But the young elf was soon enough subdued by the atmosphere and he simply walked over to the nearest pool, claiming it for himself. Thirty minutes later the sun finally went down beneath the tree crowns, shrouding the area in darkness.

It was like the stump had awoken the moment it no longer basked in sunlight, and it started to radiate an ancient energy as the six pools lit up with a soothing green luster that rose a

few meters into the air. Zac's headache got a lot better from just standing near them, a clear sign that the pools truly worked wonders on the soul.

The wandering cultivator and the elf immediately jumped into their respective pools, but the splash didn't make a sound due to the arrays. Zac glanced at the three dryads who stared right back before jumping into one of the free ponds himself. He saw the three dryads jumping in as well, at which point he slightly relaxed and focused on the energies in the water.

It suddenly felt like he was one with the world as he took one deep breath after another, and his pores opened wide to drink in the energies of the miraculous dew. His headache was gone in seconds, and he quickly closed his eyes and sunk down so that even his head dipped beneath the surface.

He was cautious about letting down his guard while being mesmerized by the opportunity, but his danger sense was completely silent. Zac finally opted to relax his guard a bit to absorb as much of the lights in the water as possible. The effect was immediate and it felt extraordinarily good. It was like his mind was a parched desert and the motes of light were long-awaited raindrops.

The process was akin to stepping into the shower when caked in mud, feeling the dirt sloughing off from his body. His soul was giving the same effect, and he actually felt it shrinking as some discordant energies seeped out him. But Zac felt that the effect wasn't something detrimental, as the remaining spiritual energy got stronger, more condensed.

Zac had no idea that his soul had contained so many impurities, but perhaps everyone started out that way, especially mortals. Mortals didn't have any connection with the Dao, and the soul probably played a big part in that. Zac knew that the pool didn't improve affinities though, but rather cleansed some impurities and helped strengthen it.

A sudden roar in Zac's mind gave him a start and ripped him out of his reverie as his heart started beating with joy. Verun had finally awoken after having slept for two full floors. But Zac barely had time to greet the Tool Spirit before he sensed

an overwhelming thirst coming from the axe even while it was still in his spatial ring.

It was just like when the mysterious stone had appeared during the new world government auction, and the target was clear. It wanted the mysterious liquid in the pond.

Zac didn't have any compunctions about having Verun snatch a part of the Pool of Tranquility. The dryads had tried cheating during the match, so what if he exacted some interest in return? But he didn't even have time to take out his axe when he sensed a startling issue with his mind.

There was something else there, something foreign. It was extremely well hidden, and he hadn't noticed it at all while he enjoyed the process of his mind getting purified, even if he had never completely relaxed his vigil. It was as if the shadow of a whisper that had snuck into his mind along with the energy from the pond. It only took him a second to realize what was going on.

How could Zac not recognize the feeling of having his mind manipulated after having fought against the far more insidious manipulation from the Splinter of Oblivion? He suddenly remembered the dozen powerful cultivators who had stoically walked behind the Perenne Matriarch. Perhaps their choice to stay behind wasn't completely voluntary.

He, unfortunately, didn't have any great solutions to getting rid of the intruder in his mind as it had already snuck past the defenses of [**Mental Fortress**]. Only after discharging a massive amount of mental energy by unleashing his Dao Fragments did the invading energy get ripped to shreds.

Zac still felt some cold sweat running down his back though. That had been way too close. Even if the effects of the dew were amazing he had kept a constant watch against any plot of the Perenne Matriarch, but her ploy had passed by his defenses completely unnoticed. If Verun hadn't shaken him awake he might have fallen further and further into some mental vise he couldn't get out of.

Zac immediately rose from the pool, jumping onto the stump with wild eyes. The first thing he noticed was a teleportation

array that would take him to the next floor, but Zac didn't even give it a second glance as his eyes turned to three specific pools. Zac refused to leave as things stood.

He wasn't done with the Perenne Family just yet.

Chapter 429: Reciprocity

The fact that the teleporter had appeared was a relief since that meant that he had passed the trial. The System had attached a hidden requirement to the quest where he not only needed to stand victorious in the Dao Discourse, but also survive the aftermath.

The moment he noticed and dispelled the threat of being possessed he had conquered the 6th floor and could move on to reap his rewards. But he wasn't ready to let bygones be bygones, and a wave of smoldering anger burned in his chest. If he shrugged off the attempt on his life he would no doubt have this nagging feeling for the rest of his life, a seed of karma that was impossible to resolve.

Part of him just wanted to go on a mindless slaughter, dragging up the whole clan by the roots while leveling half the forest to the ground. But Zac knew that was just the Splinter urging him on. It seemed like the invasion of his mind hadn't just agitated Zac, but also the Splinter itself. Maybe it didn't like the competition.

He knew he couldn't do so though. Not only was it unconscionable, but would also open a can of worms. Who knew what would happen if he started rampaging? Perhaps there were some hidden guardians of the forest keeping watch. Besides, cheating to protect their own resources wasn't really that big a deal, and the Enlightened Three didn't deserve death for their actions.

But the mind invasion was essentially an attempt on his life, and he had no compunctions with exacting at least some sort of revenge. His aura exploded in an instant, causing cascading waves to splash all around him as his massive Dao Field drowned out the primordial energies of the tree stump. The isolation arrays cracked in an instant, exposing the five pools.

Zac didn't waste a second and leaped toward the closest pool that housed one of the three young dryads, but the man had obviously noticed the disturbance already and prepared himself. Dozens of razor-sharp roots shot toward from within the pool before the dryad's head even breached the surface.

But the Enlightened Three weren't the floor guardians. They were simply three peak F-Grade warriors with unusually high accomplishments in the Dao, who also possessed the ability to fuse their spiritual energies together. They had been a threat to Zac before he found his path, but that threat only existed within the confines of the duel.

This was a true battlefield.

A massive fractal edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe tore the roots into shreds even if they were infused with a Peak Dao seed themselves. All five winners had risen out of their pools by this point, most of them staring at Zac with shock. The only exception was the wandering cultivator who gazed around with a glassy-eyed demeanor, which only strengthened Zac's conviction.

A storm of leaves reminiscent of his own [**Nature's Barrier**] started to swirl around the dryad as he looked at Zac with horror, but a swing infused with the Fragment of the Coffin turned them into rotten scraps as Zac barged his way through. His free hand shot forward to grab the shocked dryad by his neck, yanking him up into the air with a tug.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" a scream echoed across the area, and a dozen green blades of grass shot toward Zac with such power that the air around them exploded.

The blades contained enough momentum to pierce through steel, and they seemed to be infused by a Dao Fragment as well. Zac scrambled out of the way, thankful he had grabbed one of the youths in time. The Perenne Matriarch's power had somewhat superseded his expectations, but she had obviously only aimed for spots on his body far from her grandchild.

Things weren't to the point that Zac felt any fear though, and one tree after another appeared around the area and even on top of the stump as Zac activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. The

improved vision brought from the skill immediately exposed the Perenne Matriarch hiding not far away within an array. She sat together with two loose cultivators, and between them was an array with an odd plant placed on it, recently ripped from the ground judging by the soil stuck to its roots.

The blades of grass that had attacked Zac was her hair extending from within the array, and more and more stalks flew out from her head to join the battle. The blades of grass were quick, but Zac was almost impossible to catch now that he had summoned his own forest. He even felt that the effect from the skill had been boosted due to the Pool of Tranquility, and he had completely merged with the forest at this point.

The Matriarch got more and more frenzied though, and the two guardians also started moving toward him. The air even shuddered above the matriarch as a massive head made from tens of thousand blades of grass appeared. A storm of leaves started to shoot toward him as it opened its mouth, and even Zac felt some pressure from the power it contained.

But Zac had one more ace up his sleeve, and he suddenly moved his captive in front of him, aiming to use the dryad as a shield against the leaves.

“You!” the Matriarch screamed in rage as she quickly stopped the massive avatar above her. “You outsiders are all the same!”

Zac ignored the comment as he flashed forward once more, this time targeting the Elyss, the dryad he had knocked unconscious during the Dao Discourse. She had jumped down from the stump just like the others, but she was clearly unaccustomed to life and death battles since she still stood way too close.

The moment she saw Zac rapidly approaching with **[Loamwalker]** she realized her mistake. She didn't even try to put up a fight as she activated an escape skill while erecting a line of defenses. But Zac was in full rampage mode by this point and the dryad's restrictive vines were destroyed in an instant as he appeared before her.

A well-aimed kick shot the girl into the side of the trunk with a loud thud, but the ancient wood didn't even lose a splinter. It

was rather the dryad who was hurt and fell down on the ground with a groan. She tried to get back to her feet, but Zac was already upon her again as he swung [**Verun's Bite**] to rip apart the stalks of grass that had aimed to save her.

“Stay down,” Zac growled as he slammed [**Verun's Bite**] into the stump next to her while still holding onto the other dryad in a tight grip.

A massive shudder ran through the stump out as Zac's axe bit into the wood, and the primordial energies surged for a second before they calmed down again.

“The ancestor!” Elyss cried in dismay, but she still didn't dare to move a single finger.

“One more move and I'll crack his neck and cut the girl in two,” Zac said with a ruthless glimmer as he grabbed the second dryad and jumped on top of the stump again.

“You've hidden your power well,” the elder dryad said as she joined him on top of the ancient stump. “Are you not afraid the heavens will turn against you for returning our hospitality with such enmity?”

“Hospitality?” Zac snorted as he ripped verun out of the tree and stood up straight. “I didn't care that these three cheated during the discourse, but since you wanted to take control of my mind I'll have to act.”

“We would never do something like that!” the male dryad exclaimed with fury, indignation apparent on his face. “We're not an unorthodox force! You're just here to cause trouble! Are you working for the invaders?!”

Things such as mind control and turning cultivators were considered as unorthodox path as it clearly went outside what the Apostate of Order had envisioned when he set up the various contracts of the System. Zac personally felt it was a pretty weird distinction to make since so many forces allowed slavery, but it had something to do with the will of the System.

Zac ignored the young dryad, though he was pretty surprised to see that he seemed genuinely repulsed by the idea. He

instead turned to the young elf who was watching the proceedings perched atop a tree far in the distance.

“Could you take that guy back to the party? Perhaps his mind can still be salvaged,” Zac said as he nodded at the wandering cultivator who had fallen down from the stump due to the shockwaves of battle.

“It looks like I wasn’t really fated with the Pool of Tranquility. No matter, most of the benefit comes from the initial cleansing,” the elf said with a sardonic shrug.

But he still didn’t move, instead opted to turn his eyes to the Perenne Matriarch who tried to kill Zac with her glare.

“Go,” she simply said without her eyes leaving Zac’s.

The elf bowed and prepared to leave, but he first ran forward and grabbed the shoulder of the wandering cultivator after a brief hesitation. The next moment he disappeared in a puff of leaves that scattered all around before dissipating.

“What do you want?” the Perenne Matriarch said.

“I want this pond,” Zac said. “It’s a small price for trying to possess me.”

“Impossible,” the old dryad said without hesitation. “It’s not possible even if I wanted to. It’s a natural formation created by the ancestor of the forest and thousands of years of accumulation. The dew will turn useless if you bring it away.”

“Then release the people you’ve captured,” Zac said after mulling it over.

“It’s also impossible. The seed has been planted, the effect is irreversible. They will be guarding the forest until they die,” the old dryad said with a staid expression.

“Grandma! You didn’t!” Elyss exclaimed with horror.

“Every day new outsiders enter the forest to partake in its riches. But do they pay nature back for providing them with wealth and power? No. They return to their cities on the outside and use their newfound strength to attack us, to join the invaders in their assault. Their greed is endless, their hunger insatiable.

“So what if I control them? These people would be nothing without the forest, so the least they can do is stay behind and defend it,” the Matriarch said with fury in her eyes, the words turning louder and louder as she spoke.

“Grandma...” Elyss said from the ground, her eyes wide with shock.

The other dryad looked shocked as well, and it was all too apparent they hadn't been aware of their grandmother's actions. Zac sighed when he heard her words, a wave of exhaustion sweeping through his body. He couldn't condone her actions, but he could understand her motivations. How far would he go to save the people of Earth? Of Port Atwood?

But that still didn't change things, and Zac threw [**Verun's Bite**] into the closest pool as he took out his spare axe, a High E-Grade battleaxe. Verun keened in delight as it entered the pond, and the whole stump started to shake the next moment as the energies in the area ran amok.

“What are you doing?!” the matriarch exclaimed, her killing intent rising once more.

“My weapon could benefit from the dew, so he'll drink a bit since I can't take the pond with me,” Zac explained.

Verun was like a black hole as it absorbed the dew, and Zac had already witnessed its seemingly endless thirst from having drained hundreds of beasts of their blood. The stump kept shaking as the water levels of the six ponds kept decreasing, until just about half remained. Only then did Verun stop, seemingly satisfied with its haul.

“Don't move,” Zac reminded the matriarch as he jumped down.

“So, will you release my grandchild now?” she spat when Zac emerged.

“I need to do one more thing. Stay here. You should know what I'll do if you're not here when I return. I have the eggs, but I still want the hen,” Zac reminded as he flashed away once more.

He couldn't take the dew, and he couldn't save those poor souls. But there was one more item that had sparked Zac's interest, and he quickly moved through the forest toward the arena. Zac used his movement skill the whole way back, and he appeared on top of the **[Dao Discourse Array]** in less than a minute.

A few quick swings were all it took to separate the platform from the massive roots that had dragged it above ground, but Zac frowned in annoyance when he wasn't able to put it inside his Cosmos Sack.

"This thing can't be carried away, young man," an aged voice said, prompting Zac to turn around.

It was a kind-looking old elf who was accompanied by the same youth who had just left the Pool of Tranquility.

"If it could be stashed away in a Pouch of Holding, Little Glamira wouldn't have been forced to hide it below ground all this time," the old man said with a smile. "The child my grandson brought will be fine, and I guarantee his safe return in front of all these people. In return, could you leave this array intact? The Perenne Family are not the only ones benefitting from it."

Zac slowly nodded, though not without some unwillingness. The **[Dao Discourse Array]** had been his best bet at studying the mysterious Bronze Dao he had somehow conjured. But not even he could carry a 30-meter wide pillar around on his back, so he could only give up on it. He instead turned toward Thelim who looked at the proceedings with confusion written all over his face.

"I don't know if you or even this world is real, but I hope I'll be able to see you again. This treasure might be of use to you," Zac said as he threw the ent a wooden box.

Thelim curiously opened it to see an eggwhite leaf that radiated an intense amount of life-attuned force.

"This!" Thelim exclaimed as he hurriedly closed the box as to not let the aura leak. "This is too precious, I cannot accept it!"

The leaf was a treasure that Zac snatched on the fifth floor. He still had no idea what it was, but it contained almost as much energies as the Fruit of Ascension. Zac didn't dare to eat it though since the leaf didn't cause any cravings in his body like most beneficial treasures did, and he couldn't figure out any other uses for it either.

It was only collecting dust in his Spatial Ring and would probably disappear when he left the tower anyways, so he chose to gift it to Thelim instead to reciprocate his goodwill.

“If you don't want it, then throw it away,” Zac smiled.

He threw one last look at the **[Dao Discourse Array]** before he left with a shake of his head. Some things weren't fated. He soon arrived back at the stump, and finally released the poor dryad who had been dragged back and forth like a ragdoll for the past minutes.

He had nothing to say to the four dryads who gazed at him as though he was a walking calamity as he stepped onto the teleporter, leaving the forest behind.

Chapter 430: Manuals

[Sixth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Compatible Soul Strengthening Manual, Compatible Body Tempering Manual, Beast Mastery Manual]

Zac's eyes made a beeline for the rewards, but his face scrunched together when he noticed that there weren't any rewards related to the Dao. He had almost been certain there would be a Dao Treasure waiting for him, but it looked like the System had a sense of humor. Or perhaps it simply didn't award any Dao Treasures at all since there was still the projection waiting when he exited the tower.

[Tower of Eternity - 6th Floor: Reach the 55th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. All Stats +10%.]

The title was just what Zac expected, but he still couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed. One of his goals before evolving was to reach 1000 points in Strength, but he knew now that he had already maxed out on the benefits he could get from the Tower Title.

The next floor, if he could even pass it, would most likely add a high-tiered component to the title, not any more raw stats. It would be better if you looked at raw combat power, and it was usually more desired to keep the raw attributes down so that one would be able to enter restricted Mystic Realms. But it was far worse for Zac now that he needed to reach a certain threshold rather than stay under it.

Zac didn't have any good ideas on how to boost his Strength with the final 73 points to reach his goal of a thousand. He had only gotten 7 points from the Peak Strength Fruit, but he should be approaching the limit of what he could gain while still in F-Grade. Not that he could get his hands on any more of them anyhow.

There was some Strength waiting for him when he formed his final Dao Fragment, but it wouldn't be enough. Neither Sanctuary nor Trees gave a single point into Strength, and he would probably only get the 10 points from the boost to all attributes.

Was getting a middle Dao Fragment the only option?

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. He had discussed the topic with Galau a couple of more times after they discussed **[Axe Mastery]** when he mastered the skill. According to him it wasn't any easier getting a mid-grade Fragment than pushing your Race Grade to D while still having a F-Grade Class.

A low-Grade Dao Fragment was the standard limit for almost all cultivators. As Galau explained it, over the almost million years his clan had existed, there had been no lack of geniuses who formed Dao Fragments before they evolved. But there hadn't been a single one who managed to evolve the Dao Fragment while still in F-Grade.

It could technically be done though, but it required both a tremendous insight into and affinity with the Dao in question. In other words, you needed to be a cultivator to evolve the Fragment. However, Zac had reason to believe that he might be an exception to this rule.

Galau had said the same thing about Early Stage Dao Fragments as well. According to him one even needed a high affinity if you wanted to form a Dao Fragment at all. It had something to do with an F-Grade warrior lacking a natural spirituality, something that only affinity could make up for.

The first grade of cultivation was based on building a foundation. You started with a weak mortal constitution, and gradually improved it to be able to support cultivation and harmonize with the Dao. In fact, the youth had assumed that Zac was a cultivator based on the fact that he had formed Dao Fragments.

However, Zac hadn't encountered any problems forming his Dao Fragments even with his non-existent affinity, leading

him to believe that there were no such restrictions for him, as long as he got some help in forming the Fragments.

That still meant he needed to encounter an opportunity even greater than the Dao Funnel or the Tower Apparition though, and Zac didn't want to rely on such a longshot for the chance at pushing his Fragment of the Axe to Medium Stage.

There was the possibility of utilizing his Apparition on his Fragment of the Axe instead fusing his third Dao Fragment, but Zac wasn't too sure about that gambit. It would mess up his class choices a bit, but more importantly there was no guarantee of succeeding in upgrading the fragment.

He was pretty close to forming the life-attuned Dao Fragment, and he was almost certain he would be able to push the final distance with the help of his apparition. But the same couldn't be said of his Fragment of the Axe. He barely got used to fighting with it, and he hadn't really figured out what direction to take it.

There was a pretty large risk he would just make some improvements, rather than evolving the Axe Fragment, even with the help of an apparition. If that happened he would essentially have wasted that huge opportunity. Perhaps the following floors would present him with a solution though, so Zac didn't completely give up, and instead turned his attention to the rewards.

Galau had broadened his horizons greatly during their travels, especially after the merchant realized Zac was a pretty clueless progenitor who only got integrated a year ago. One valuable piece of information after another had flooded out of his mouth to curry favor.

The subject of manuals was one such topic. Zac had been looking for something like a meditation manual to combat the splinter in his mind since he returned from the hunt. Calrin hadn't been able to get his hand on anything useful though, and Zac had been forced to solely rely on the miasmatic fractals in his mind.

But such a thing did in fact exist, along with various other types of manuals. A Soul Strengthening Manual was a

technique to gradually improve on one's soul, just like the Pool of Tranquility did. It would not only make one more resistant to soul attacks and Illusions, but would also increase one's spiritual energy reserves.

The soul was the power source of the Daos, and none of the attributes directly contributed in this regard. Intelligence and Wisdom didn't help you with controlling the Daos or strengthen your soul, and neither did any other. The soul's strength was pretty much inborn, though it got stronger from leveling up.

Zac had a feeling that his soul was already a lot stronger than normal, especially after having completely steamrolled the Enlightened Three with his Dao storm. The Splinter of Oblivion had helped by strengthening it even further, and his dip in the pond had helped remove some impurities.

This manual was a chance to work on his soul even further.

Better yet, it was even possible to use such a manual without being a cultivator, so it wasn't something that he would have to throw to the Merit Exchange. There was, however, a pretty big reason as to why it was almost unheard of for cultivators to practice Soul Strengthening Manuals.

It was slow. Excruciatingly slow.

One could spend millennia refining and empowering one's soul, turning it into a diamond completely free of impurities. But you could instead have focused on meditating on your Dao or progressed in levels during that same time, and both would have a greater effect on one's survivability and strength.

Body Tempering Manuals were related to special constitutions or improving one's bloodlines. Practicing a manual along with taking certain treasures or medicinal baths would slowly transform one's body to gain a specialized constitution.

Alea was such an example, though there seemed there were some problems with the method she used. Ogras' grandfather was probably unable to acquire a complete manual, so they had jumped into it blindly. Another possibility was that they had tried to forcibly use a manual with low compatibility.

If the main reason for the scarcity of Soul Strengthening Manuals was the slow progress, then compatibility was the main reason for there being almost no Body Tempering Manuals in circulation. Pretty much all manuals had extremely strict requirements on things such as race, affinities, and even bloodlines to work.

To simply train an unsuitable manual was to court death. If Alea was practicing an incompatible manual then just turning into a monster was the least of her worries. She ran the risk of dying at any moment, and considering her class and constitution she might end up taking half of Port Atwood with her in a storm of poison.

Beast Mastery Manuals were somewhat of a mix between a skill and a mental exercise, and likely the most popular of the three supportive manuals that Zac was offered. It allowed anyone to gain a facsimile of the abilities that a true Beast Master like Verana possessed by allowing you to slowly form a connection to a beast through prolonged meditation.

One could use it to gain a mount like the floor guardian that Ogras fought, or a pure battle companion to fight alongside you. The connection sounded a lot like what he had with Verun, and the chance of betrayal was pretty slim unless the beast got too powerful.

There were drawbacks to this type of manual as well though. Compatibility was an issue with both Soul Strengthening and Body Tempering manuals, but with Beast Mastery Manuals the compatibility issue lay with the beast. You needed certain manuals to tame certain beasts, and some beasts were simply not possible to form a connection with unless they wanted to.

Ogras was the victim of a forced connection from what Zac could tell, where The Umbra had forced a connection that normally wasn't possible to create. He hadn't dared to experiment on himself due to the risk of death, so he had used Ogras to satisfy his curiosity after having turned into an Inheritance Spirit.

Since the System didn't mention compatibility with the manual Zac guessed that it would have to be either pretty

general, or that it was like a lottery what sort of beasts that it would work on. It might turn out useful, but it might also only work on beasts that didn't exist on earth.

In either case the manuals weren't something that would benefit Zac in the short run, but with enough time all of them could help him in different ways. Finding a compatible manual was extremely rare, and most were created through an arduous process of trial and failure by clans that had the resources and manpower to experiment.

A few of the peak forces in the sector would no probably possess them, but having the means to create a specialized constitution that fit your heritage and bloodline was no doubt rare even among the strongest forces in the area.

All three manuals were also a chance for a warrior to gain more class options before evolving, so Zac could understand why they were presented as a reward. Of course, the additional classes Zac would get from a stronger soul or acquiring a beast companion probably wasn't something that Zac wanted right now.

His bottleneck wasn't his constitution either, but rather the Dao and the concept of creation.

But even if Zac didn't need them to get a better class they were still useful in their own way. Zac guessed that this was a way for the System to provide an uncommon perk that most powerhouses could benefit from, or use to shore up weaknesses.

Indecision plagued Zac as he looked back and forth, and he couldn't reach a conclusion. All of them had benefits and drawbacks that made Zac leery to pull the gun. The body refinement manual would allow him to improve on his already monstrous constitution, but there were some pretty big question marks about his body.

There was obviously something special about his body, and Zac worried that the body refinement manual he got from the System wouldn't work well with a body of Technocrat heritage even if it said it was compatible. It might take away what made his body special in order to create something new.

Or perhaps the constitution that would be formed from a technocrat heritage simply wasn't in line with the cultivation path he had embarked upon, that of Life and Death.

Getting a beast companion would be a pure plus, Verun had proven that many times. But there were extremely few decent beasts on Earth, and it wasn't even sure that the manual would work on it. He was also hesitant that there were any beasts strong enough to actually make a difference. He would have to find a pretty monstrous animal to be able to keep up with his own power and growth.

As for the Soul Strengthening Manual, it was simply too slow. Zac wouldn't see any direct benefits until after the incursions and Dominators were gone. He also wasn't sure whether the time spent grinding such a manual would be better used to kill beasts and open up nodes. Leveling up did strengthen one's Soul as well, and reaching higher grades was probably the best counter to the Splinter of Oblivion.

Zac finally made his decision, but before he claimed the reward he paused, first opting to check in on Earth by opening the Ladder. It had become somewhat of an emotional support to see that Kenzie and the others were all alive, so Zac's eyes quickly scanned through the lists to find the familiar names.

But he suddenly froze as the latest change in the Ladder was just too shocking.

Chapter 431: Nine Reincarnations

Zac was like a statue as he gazed at a particular spot on the Ladder. How had such a change come to be?

Ladder - Level		
Rank	Name	Level
1	Super Brother-Man	75
2	Thea Marshall	68
3	Thwonkin' Billy	64
4	Enigma	61
5	Daoist Chosui	60
6	Silverfox	60
7	Guru Anaad Phakiwar	59
8	Thomas Fischer	58
9	Francis	58
10	Lotus	58
...		
100	Blizzard King	53

Ladder - Wealth	
Rank	Name
1	Super Brother-Man
2	Smaug
3	Greed
4	Enigma
5	Thea Marshall
6	Henry Marshall
7	Djinn
8	Thwonkin' Billy
9	Francis
10	The Eternal Eye

Ladder - Dao	
Rank	Name
1	Super Brother-Man
2	Guru Anaad Phakiwar
3	Thea Marshall
4	Abbot Boundless Truth
5	The Eternal Eye
6	Pretty Pretty Mega Kenzie

7	Silverfox
8	Thwonkin' Billy
9	Daoist Chosui
10	Father Thomas

The shocking change was obviously Billy and Thea having gained a massive surge in levels since he checked last. He had taken a look just a few days ago, and Thea was level 65 at that time, while Billy was level 61. That meant they had both gained a tremendous amount of energy in an instant, since less than an hour had passed on the outside since he looked.

But the real shocker was perhaps that Billy had surged to the 8th spot on the Dao Ladder. Before this, he wasn't even ranked, and Zac wasn't sure he even possessed an Early Mastery Dao Seed. Zac couldn't imagine that simple giant pondering on the intricacies of the Dao, but Billy was like an onion.

Every time they met Zac learned one more surprising layer to Billy, from the golden blood to the sleep cultivation. It wouldn't be surprising if someone like that possessed disgustingly high affinity with some Dao, and it only took him some time to figure it out. Judging by the fact that he had also gained multiple levels pointed toward the fact that he had gained it mid-battle.

Zac was happy for his friends, but more so he was worried. Had something happened on the outside that would prompt Thea and Billy to take such a risk? The only way to gain multiple levels in one go was for them to defeat a powerful E-Grade invader, probably a General from the Undead Incursion or a leader from one of the few remaining ones neighboring the Dead Zone.

Thea was aware that he would return in a day or two, but yet she had risked her life in such a fight. Zac almost regretted looking at the ladder after seeing the change, as a seed of worry had been planted in his heart. But he could only shake it

off and focus on his climb. He would leave this place in 50 days, which was just a few hours on the outside.

Apart from the sudden jump by Thea And Billy nothing much had changed since he last checked the ladder, apart from the occasional movement here and there. Francis and Lotus were two new names in the top ten, though Zac had seen them in the top 30 since the beginning.

He had no idea who Lotus was, but Francis was one of the human councilors of the Underworld Council. He had usually hovered between rank 15 and 20, but he had upped his game since he arrived to the surface. Apart from him and Enigma there were two more councilors at the power Ladder, though Zac only knew Gregor personally. It was the man he had met just after taking over the Union. He currently sat at the 54th position with level 55.

The other elites of earth hadn't been idle either, and you now needed to have reached level 53 to get a spot. That meant that there were potentially thousands of people who had attained their level 50 skills by now, something that could bring a huge boost in strength to the Native Armies.

It wasn't bad, but Zac still felt it wasn't enough. He understood why human wave tactics were the only reliable option against incursions unless someone like him appeared. How would a single level 50 warrior take down those leaders he had fought? Even a dozen of them would be useless.

Zac couldn't see the earthlings defeating a leader, or even a general, unless thousands of people sacrificed themselves to exhaust the invader's Cosmic Energy. Even if the Undead Empire hadn't appeared on earth there was probably not much hope for the earthlings. He even guessed that Thea and Billy had paid some extraordinary cost to win whatever fight they had found themselves in.

The invaders would have created permanent outposts, killing or enslaving the local population as they drained the planet of all its wealth. Earth was simply too slow in responding, with only a scant few of the incursions being closed while the invaders were heavily restricted and unable to use arrays.

The movements of the other two ladders were even more static than that of the power ladder. A few names had changed as people died or stopped progressing, but it took a lot for those ladders to move. The Dao Ladder stayed almost completely the same since the large reshuffling that the Dao Funnel brought about, except for Billy.

Half the Dao Ladder was still filled with former spiritual leaders such as monks and priests, with the rest being powerhouses. There wasn't a lot going on with the wealth ladder either. A lot of names had dropped off after Zac conquered the Underworld Union, such as Little Treasure. Much of his wealth had been tied to the Union, and were now part of Port Atwood's coffers.

But Greed, another former Union member who fled, somehow maintained his spot. It meant that he either carried a massive fortune on his person, or that he possessed intangible assets like a Mercantile License. Djinn was a new arrival, but he wasn't in any of the other two ladders. Zac guessed he had found a huge treasure that spiraled him to the top in one go.

In any case, he could breathe out in relief since he saw that all the Valkyries, Kenzie, and Emily were safe, meaning that Port Atwood probably wasn't facing some immediate danger. It allowed him to keep climbing without too many distractions. Hopefully, Thea's actions were simply the result of impatience rather than desperation.

Zac closed the ladders and he immediately picked the Soul Strengthening Manual. The reasoning for him was simple. The Beast Rearing Manual felt pretty useless to him, but the other two were both tempting. Eventually it came down to choosing between Power and Survivability.

The Body Tempering Manual would probably make him stronger as long as practicing it didn't mess up his body, but he was already plenty powerful for his level. The Soul Strengthening Manual on the other hand could help him strengthening his Soul, which was something Zac desperately needed in his fight against the Splinter.

He had already sensed the difference an empowered soul could have on him during his previous fight. The splinter had been truly agitated due to the mind invasion, but Zac had yet been able to stay mostly calm through the fight. If it had been before he would probably have unleashed **[Deforestation]** in a muddled rage before he could analyze the situation.

The splinter was a constant worry, and he needed a long term solution that wasn't reliant on the Miasmatic Fractals. This might be his only chance to get his hand on a Soul Strengthening Manual, and he had to take it even if it would slow down his cultivation or make him miss out on forming a constitution.

Besides, with his path of cultivation he would probably spend a lot of time on the sickbed, wounded from cracking open nodes by force. Galvarion had been forced to recuperate for centuries, and Zac might fare the same fate even with his constitution. Tempering his soul during the downtime would allow him to keep improving even when he was hurt.

The moment he made his choice he was immediately sent off to the next world, and he barely had time to stash the radiant crystal that appeared in his hand before the whole field around him shook as tens of thousands of bodies rose to their feet.

One quick look around seemed to indicate that he was on a battlefield between an insectoid species and a mix of their undead counterparts and humanoid zombies, and judging by the groans and roars from the surroundings the undead had won.

[Rebuff the Invasion.]

Zac wasn't surprised to see the quest, and he summoned the independent fractal blade of **[Chop]** to start clearing out the surroundings while he got his bearings. If he was supposed to rebuff the invasion he needed to find either the incursion of the undead, or whatever means they had used to arrive at this planet.

After that the most straightforward thing would be to cull the leaders of the invasion, which would hopefully force the soldiers to flee. Of course, it was a possibility that the leaders

were far beyond his reach, at which point he would have to figure out to swing the war in the insectoid's favor.

But Zac suddenly frowned as he looked around the area, and his eyes started to shimmer as he activated **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Was the undead really the target?

“Something is going on!” a shout echoed out from the distance as a group of humanoids rushed toward Zac, pushing the slow-moving zombies out of the way. “Why the hell is one of the mercenaries among the children?”

Zac curiously looked and saw that the new group was drenched in darkness to his eyes. Every part of their bodies was covered in death-attuned energies, and it was easy figuring out that they were undead, though these ones were sapient. They were a mix of different humanoid species, and it looked like some of them had swapped out certain body parts.

The fact that they were all sapient meant that they were E-Grade race as far as Zac knew, but his knowledge about the undead was pretty much limited to what Anzonil had told him. Perhaps there were situations where even lower-tiered undead could gain intelligence.

“Please, my lord!” one of the humanoids shouted from afar after having stopped outside the reach of the fractal blade that was still reaping zombies left and right. “The children are innocent! They just haven't woken up yet, please don't waste your strength on them.”

“Hmm,” Zac shrugged noncommittally as he ordered his blade to return to his side.

He had already realized that something was odd even before the group of undead approached him. He had first thought that the scenario was an invasion of the Undead Empire, but the fact that the area was teeming with miasma made Zac realize that might not be the case.

A bunch of killed zombies certainly would release some miasma, but this battlefield essentially felt even more death-attuned than the core of the Dead Zone, and the effect wasn't

nearly this pronounced in the battles he had fought with the undead outside their incursion.

Besides, some insectoid species were extremely invasive as well, just like the Ayr Hivebeasts. Given enough time they would swallow a whole world, and Zac knew there were many more species like it.

The scenario became clear after hearing the exchange between the undead. It looked like he was designated as some sort of mercenary, no doubt hired to help the undead forces to rebuff the insectoid invasion. Luckily he had some experience in dealing with insects, and the mission seemed straightforward enough.

Unfortunately, he was just caught red-handed slaughtering people from his own side. The only solution he could come up with was to act like an aloof master, which hopefully would allow him to not sour his relationship with the Undead Empire. It was best if he could keep his alliance with the undead to gather intelligence about his target.

“Thank you, my lord,” the undead said as he scurried closer, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief.

The undead was level 60 at best, just a bit better than the extremely weak corpses around them. The low levels of the people made Zac believe this was a low-tiered world, just like the one before this.

“My Lord, I am not sure how you appeared here?” the man hesitantly asked as he stopped a few meters away from Zac.

“I got a bit lost,” Zac said. “Can you lead the way out of here?”

“Certainly,” the undead nodded. “The children won’t attack you as long as you are accompanied by one of us.”

Zac was slowly led out of the sea of zombies, and he quickly learned that it was not actually a battlefield, but rather a dumping ground where they had left a mix of acquired corpses and insectoid invaders to slowly turn into true undead. Zac’s arrival had stirred them prematurely, and they would be kept there for some more time to gestate.

Zac was pretty curious about the society of the Undead Empire in general, but there was first one thing he wanted to check first. He quickly took out the luminous crystal he had just got, and he infused his mind into it to see what he had just got.

[Nine Reincarnations Manual]

Temper your spirit through nine reincarnations of life and death and form an impregnable soul, immune to the ravages of Samsara.

Zac's eyes lit up when he read the introduction, and any regret about missing out on a Body Tempering Manual disappeared. It looked like he had just hit the jackpot. Didn't this sound like a manual made for him with his ability to jump between being living and dead?

Chapter 432: Lord Draugr

Zac had no point of reference when it came to Soul Strengthening Manuals, but the one he held in his hand seemed to be pretty damn strong, even if he didn't have his unique constitution. It wasn't quite as tailored to his situation as he first had thought though, and it wasn't strictly limited to people who walked the Path of Life and Death.

The method to train in the manual was to push one's soul to the peak of life before plunging it to the depths of death, simulating a lifetime. After completing enough such revolutions one's soul would undergo a rebirth, shedding some of its imperfections and growing in strength.

If one managed to complete all nine reincarnations they would possess what the manual called a 'Nine-Samsara Soul', and it would be so strong that he essentially wouldn't even need mental protection skills like [**Mental Fortress**] to stay safe. His soul would turn even more monstrous than his nigh-indestructible body.

The number of revolutions one needed to complete a reincarnation wasn't clear, but judging by the language in the crystal it would be a massive undertaking to just complete a few reincarnations, let alone all nine. But Zac hoped that his ability to swap between life and death would be able to expedite the process, though that would probably require some experimentation.

There were two problems with the manual though.

For one, only the method for the first four reincarnations were included in the crystal. He would have to somehow find the rest elsewhere if he wanted to continue practicing the skill, and Zac had no idea where he would even begin his search for the missing pieces of a manual like this. He couldn't just jump into a bunch of Mystic Realms hoping to be lucky.

The fact that the manual was split up could also be seen as a positive though. Zac only gaining the earliest stages of the manual meant that it was probably beneficial even in higher grades. It would have been a shame if he got one that was only useful in E-Grade, after which he would have to swap to a new one.

The second problem with the manual was a bit tricky as well.

Each of the reincarnations required specific environments to practice. The first reincarnation only required him to meditate within one of two specific arrays, one death attuned and the other life-attuned. Kenzie no doubt could help him build two chambers meeting the requirements since Zac had the schematic, but she probably wasn't able to put them on Array Disks just yet.

Perhaps this is where his unique situation could come into play. If he could swap out the increasingly stringent requirements with simply swapping back and forth he would save an enormous amount of time and resources. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to practice the Manual inside the tower, though it wouldn't hurt to try it out.

Zac put away the crystal and looked over at the undead with some curiosity. This was the first time he had talked with a sapient undead, unless you counted his encounter with the Draugr woman in his vision.

"What race are you?" Zac suddenly asked, breaking the silence. "Oh, and what's your name?"

"Ah?" the undead who walked alongside him started.

"Is your race 'Zombie'? Or are you a Corspelord?" Zac asked with curiosity.

"A zombie is a derogatory term for those who still haven't awakened," the undead answered after some hesitation. "My name is Eldar and I am a Revenant, the most common Race of the undead."

"Could you explain a bit more? What's the Difference between a Corspelord and a Revenant?" Zac asked. "It seems we have the time."

“Well...” Eldar said with clear conflict on his face.

Zac understood what was troubling the Revenant, and he immediately had an idea. There was something he could test which might make the group more talkative.

“Wait a minute,” Zac said as he stopped in his tracks.

The group of undead stopped and looked at Zac with confusion, and their eyes widened in shock as Zac’s skin turned deathly pale and he started to release a massive amount of miasma around him. His brown eyes quickly darkened until they were two black globes leading into the abyss.

“Wha- how?” the undead sputtered with confusion on his face.

“I am Draugr. I simply used a skill to look like a human,” Zac said as he turned his abyssal eyes toward the group. “I have been traveling among the living for all my life. This is the first time I actually stepped on death-attuned soil. I hope you can answer my questions and clear some points of confusion for me.”

“I- ah, of course!” he said. “I am sorry, Lord Draugr.”

Zac nodded in relief. This was one of the loopholes the trio had found during their climb, mostly thanks to Ogras’ predilection of talking far and wide at any tavern he could find. Their races were never made an issue, as though the System forced all the natives to be enlightened and look past race.

However, if you mentioned your race they would understand you, in contrast to mentioning the Tower of Eternity. They hadn’t found any use for that small feature though, until now. The revenants had already been respectful earlier when he was a powerful mercenary hired to help in the war, but now it was as though they looked upon an idol.

“I am sorry for the discourtesy just now,” Eldar said as he bowed deeply.

“It is fine. I understand that you’d be hesitant to discuss this matter with the living,” Zac said. “Now, about the races? I have traveled with my master my whole life, and he hasn’t explained all these things for me for reasons I cannot disclose.

But now that I am returning to the Empire I need this information.”

It was a pretty horrible excuse, but judging by the attitudes of the group of Revenants they wouldn't question him no matter what he said.

“Ah? Yes Certainly!” Eldar hurriedly said though he looked pretty confused. “May I ask which Empire you are referring to? Our kingdom of Zarvadar borders no force that can be considered an Empire as far as I can tell.”

Zac frowned in confusion for a second until he realized the problem. This world wasn't actually part of the Undead Empire. How would it be? It was part of the Tower. The inhabitants of the worlds were never aware of anything larger than their planet, and higher grade beings were mentioned as things of legend.

That meant that he, unfortunately, couldn't milk Eldar for information about the Undead Empire. Perhaps it wasn't completely a loss though, since there were still a lot of things that he might know. There was only one undead force in the multiverse as far as Zac could tell, and this world should no doubt be based on the situation in the Undead Empire.

“Nevermind, I cannot divulge,” Zac coughed. “Now, about the races?”

“As you probably know, most of our population comes from corpses awakening, just like the field you saw earlier,” Eldar said, eager to please. “Only the powerful can conceive children of their own, so adoption is more common. And these types of children are all Revenants.”

“However, the undead are special in that some can change their races to a certain degree, though supreme existences such as Lord Draugr does not need such things. Some shed their mortal coil through a ritual to turn into pure beings of miasma. They gain races such as wraiths and specters,” the revenant explained. “A few others choose to become Corpse Lords.”

“Corpse Lords are a manufactured race. They are built by taking extraordinary bodyparts from multiple sources, creating a

stronger than average body. Their progeny inherit a mix of their parent's bodies, which can both turn out great and pretty bad. Corpse lord clans are usually subservient clans to either Liches or one of the five noble races, as their origin is that their ancestors were created."

"Does Corpse lords have any weaknesses?" Zac asked.

"Well, combining bodyparts is a hard venture, and only the most skilled Liches can do it without side effects. Most Corpse lords are cursed with their bodyparts being in dissonance. They need to take medicine to quell the effects, and they are always looking for more compatible bodyparts. The risk for an earlier descent into madness is also pretty high."

"Then why would a Revenant choose to become such a being?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Ah, lord Draugr might not know, but cultivation comes hard to us Revenants. We are not blessed with your talents, and becoming a corpse lord is somewhat of a shortcut to power some chooses to take," Eldar explained, not without some helplessness on his face. "Most revenants are forever stuck at the F-Grade, unable to truly enter the path of cultivation."

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Mhal, the Corpse lord general. His research had been related to this subject. Infusing Draugr genes into one's body would be able to increase the affinity with miasma, and perhaps even decrease the dissonance between bodyparts.

"Nevermind," Zac said, realizing he asked something he shouldn't have. "Are Liches one of the noble races?"

"Liches aren't a race," Eldar said with a shake of his head. "It's more of a position, as well as a branching class tree. Creators of undead, miasma controllers. That incubation field you ended up in was maintained by a group of Liches for example. They're needed to speed up the awakening of the children. But there are also many combat-oriented sub-classes."

"So what race are they?" Zac asked with confusion.

“Most are Revenants, but the most skilled Liches are of course among the five noble races. Apart from the Eternal Clan who exclusively follow the Sanguine Path.”

“I know of the Eternal Clan,” Zac slowly said. “But what about the other three races?”

“Apart from your noble bloodline, there is the Izh’Rak Reavers. Their bodies are the strongest of all undead races, without being burdened with any of the demerits the Corpselords have. Then there is the Eidolon, the leaders of the specters,” Eldar explained. “They are the only spectral race that is born that way, never having shed their physical form through the ritual. Most believe their control over miasma is second only to the Founders.”

“Do you know what the founders look like?” Zac asked. “My master never told me.”

Zac had no idea who these founders were, but he had an inkling. He kind of wanted to ask to make sure, but he saw the gazes of the group of Revenants. He had clearly asked a bit too much, and Zac was afraid that going too far would label him an imposter or something, making his quest all that harder.

“No, the form of the exalted Founders are beyond the knowledge of remote Kingdoms such as ours. They are the origin of our species, I am sure they live in far greater places than here. Places where the Miasma is dense enough to turn liquid,” Eldar sighed, clear longing on his face.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard Eldar’s explanation. One popular theory was that the undead races were created by one single powerhouse, someone at the level of Emperor Limitless. He would probably have become an Apostate if he appeared in this era, but this all happened before the System arrived as the undead existed even before the System.

These founders might be the descendants of this grand ancestor, and if that was the case it wasn’t surprising they would be considered the greatest undead race.

After some more questioning, he got a pretty decent understanding of the undead Races. The Draugr could be

considered the jack-of-all-trades of the five noble races. Their bodies weren't as excellent as the Izh'Rak Reavers, and their affinity with miasma wasn't as great as the Eidolon. But they still excelled on both those subjects, making them excellent all-rounders.

The Eternal Clan followed the Sanguine Path as Eldar called it, and it even seemed to be some confusion whether the members were really undead or not. Some believed they were rather a closely allied race that had decided to join the undead for some reason.

"Thank you," Zac finally said after he had satiated most of his curiosity.

There was still a lot that he wanted to know, but he felt that it would be too suspicious if he kept going. He instead turned his attention to something else.

"Where are we heading?" Zac asked as he looked at the desolate surroundings.

"We have set up a fort an hour's travel from here," Eldar explained. "You and the other mercenaries were supposed to be placed under General Niksi, but now I am not sure..."

Zac understood what he meant. Perhaps it would breach some sort of protocol for some normal undead to order around a Draugr.

"I need a place with both miasma and Normal Cosmic energy," Zac said, switching subjects.

"Certainly," Eldar said, though his face looked like Zac had asked for a huge pile of feces to be placed in his bed. "We have already erected arrays to convert the energies for our guests. I'm sure one of the array masters can make some adjustments."

Zac nodded in thanks as he thought of his next move. He didn't have a lot of time on his hands, but if there was one floor he should stay some time extra on, wouldn't it be this one? Where else would he be able to find assistance in grinding the levels of his skills? Where else would he get tips on controlling miasma?

It was time to integrate into undead society.

Chapter 433: War

“Charge!” Zac roared as he pushed forward, each step causing the ground to shudder as his frame grew and quickly became ensconced in pitch-black armor.

Ten thousand Revenant warriors roared in response, charging the insectoid army without any care for their lives as a thick haze of miasma covered the battlefield hundreds of meters in each direction. One after another fell as they approached the defensive line, but a fanatical gleam burned in the eyes of the survivors as they kept running.

Zac had severely underestimated the impact a purebred Draugr had in undead societies. He had figured it would be something like an elite on earth. It would elicit some admiration and perhaps jealousy, but nothing too extravagant. But he had been sorely mistaken.

He had been given a king’s welcome the moment he arrived at the base camp, and the Revenant general had even offered her position to him without hesitation. However, Zac had declined, instead opting to take command of an elite troop of 10 000 warriors with the intent to train his skills.

Anzonil, the old horndog, had also hit the mark on the pull of his race to the opposite sex. He had essentially been visited half of the eligible E-Grade females in the kingdom by this point. He had only managed to stave them off by indicating that any spread of his bloodline would be met with swift and bloody retribution by his elders.

He knew the effect wouldn’t be that pronounced in the real Undead Empire though, as there apparently had been no one from the five noble races visiting the kingdom of Zarvadar for millennia. Giving birth to a progeny that was even half-Draugr would skyrocket that family into the stratosphere.

The interest had barely waned from the threat of his imaginary elders though, and joining the battlefield had as much been an escape from the incessant courtships as it was a way to improve his skills.

He had already confirmed that the floor guardian was a 'breeder', which was a specialized clone of the queen. She resided in a hive that had fallen out of the sky one day, continuously spewing out new soldiers. The original script was probably to help the war efforts to the point that a large-scale attack on the hive was possible, though Zac felt somewhat confident in assaulting the place alone after getting a grasp on the power levels involved in the struggle.

However, Zac wasn't quite ready to leave this floor yet as he had found it extremely rewarding to use his class as it was intended.

Zac was almost upon the defensive line of the insectoid army he had targeted, and he quickly summoned the massive shield from [**Immutable Bulwark**]. It had slightly changed shape to look like the armor he wore when using [**Vanguard of Undeath**], and he used it as a wall breaker when he slammed into the row of hulking insectoid brutes that held the front line.

The specialized defenders were even larger than Zac in his transformed form, but they still flew out of the way as though they were made from styrofoam as Zac ripped into the army. A hundred skeleton warriors rose from the miasmic mists the moment Zac had pushed his way inside, hacking and slashing in every direction.

They caused massive confusion among the attackers, which allowed Zac's subordinates to widen the breach into a massive hole. Soon enough the Revenant army cut their way through the middle of the army, wedging themselves in and forcing the insectoids to split in the middle. The roars of battle echoed in Zac's ears, and it felt like the battle lust of his warriors empowered him.

In fact, the accumulated killing intent of an army of the dead had been the key to upgrading [**Indomitable**], and it had pushed to Middle Proficiency during his first skirmish. He had

initially thought that the only way to improve the skill was to be hit with mental attacks, but he realized he had been completely wrong.

Hundreds of ranged attacks soared toward the vanguard, and Zac infused his fractal shield with the Seed of Sanctuary, quickly increasing its size to encompass the elite core of his army. The Seed was nowhere as strong as his Fragment of the Coffin, but the coffin didn't help increase the area he could protect.

Unfortunately, he would soon lose even this capability, which was the downside of abandoning the Fragment of the Shield in favor of his Life-Death duality. Whatever Fragment the Seed of Sanctuary turned into, it would no doubt be life-attuned, which would probably make it impossible to use with his current class.

Of course, the Revenant army wasn't helpless even if Zac couldn't protect them all. They formed a second layer of defense in the sky that blocked out most of the attacks, and the soldiers ripped into the insectoid ranks with brutal fervor. Meanwhile, ten massive beacons were erected, and nine enormous cauldrons were placed between them.

It made Zac remember Mhal and his elite army. He had used cauldrons as well, though the way these warriors used it was slightly different. Massive black clouds started to billow out of the cauldrons in no time, and Zac knew it was a death-attuned poison that only affected the living. Dozens of liches instructed the mists to

Zac had learned that the spellcasters of the undead armies generally followed three heritages. First were the poison masters such as the lich in his squad, using toxins to cause widespread death. There were also many ice-attuned mages who fused death and frost into extremely potent attacks that turned enemies into frozen statues.

Finally, there were the soul manipulators who used mental attacks, curses, and illusions. However, these specialists were extremely rare and usually required inborn affinities, sort of like the purifiers on earth. There were certainly more classes,

but these three were the most common, at least in this kingdom.

Zac had thought it had something to do with affinities, but the reason was a lot more pragmatic. The spellcasters of the undead armies leaned toward classes that would leave the corpses of their enemies intact. A fireball could turn a dozen warriors into cinders, but that would mean that the kingdom missed out on having a dozen new soldiers join their ranks.

The battle quickly turned into the undead's favor, and not just because Zac mowed through the army like a bulldozer. The two sides were almost equal in strength before his arrival, and the single addition of **[Fields of Despair]** had tipped the scales in the Revenant's favor.

Zac had only utilized parts of the skill until now, the part that recovered miasma from kills and the part that weakened enemies. But with an army of the dead at his command he could utilize the skill to its full effect, where the also undead around him also benefitted from the skill.

He had initially expected that all the miasma released from kills would go to him, but **[Fields of Despair]** actually provided the energy to the one who landed the killing blow. So the skill didn't just weaken the enemies, but it also increased the endurance of the undead, allowing them to keep fighting.

Using skills as they were intended was the best way to increase their proficiency. Zac had managed to push **[Fields of Despair]** to late proficiency after just a few fights, and the skill reaching late proficiency actually benefitted him.

Back when he upgraded the skill to middle proficiency the only thing that changed was that the skill's coverage more than doubled. Upgrading it to late proficiency had doubled the area once again, and by this point it was able to cover almost a third of a battlefield this size. One more upgrade and he would probably be able to cover a square kilometer in miasma.

That wasn't the only benefit the skill provided after getting upgraded. He could actually feel the combatants within the mist now. The effect was nowhere near as comprehensive as the omniscience of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, but it was more

akin to having radar and sensing everyone in the mist like hazy blips.

He wouldn't be able to use the new feature to dodge attacks, but he would be a lot harder to sneak up on this way. Hiding within the miasmatic mists would be impossible without possessing some sort of counter.

"I'm going in," Zac said to the two powerful warriors who had fought right behind him the whole time

They were his two assigned lieutenants, each chosen due to their ability to stay alive in the head of the battle.

"We'll hold the line," Yrvos, a Revenant created from a massive Ogre, grunted as he crushed an enemy with his barrel-sized mallet.

Zac nodded before slamming one of his feet into the ground, disappearing in a puff of miasma. He immediately appeared in front of a group of massive ants at the rear of the army, each of them well into the E-Grade. They were war beasts that the insectoids reared, and one of the most powerful weapons in their repertoire.

Sitting on their backs were a group of commanders and beastmasters, and it seemed as though they had been expecting Zac's appearance. Ten pillars of light appeared around them, forming an array with Zac and the ants in the middle. A pressure immediately started to push down on him, whereas the insectoids seemed unaffected at all.

Zac frowned as he looked around, but he still proceeded with his plans as he stomped the ground again, erecting the cage of **[Profane Seal]**. The mists of **[Fields of Despair]** were joined by the black churning clouds of **[Winds of Decay]**. He didn't imbue the mists with the Dao of the Coffin though, but he had rather chosen to imbue **[Profane Seal]** with it.

His Dao Fragment had amazing synergy with the skill, and not using the two together would be a wasted opportunity. First, it made the five towers and their corresponding gates pretty much impervious to the outside forces who tried to break in

and assist their leaders. Secondly, they empowered the chains immensely.

The spectral chains had become a bit useless against the targets Zac mainly focused on with the skill, instantly crumbling from the attacks of the powerhouses. But the chains now required tremendous effort to destroy by the insectoids, making them far more lethal. They also gained a corrosive effect when they attacked and could even deal significant damage by just lashing opponents.

Zac felt as though he was mired in quicksand due to the array, and he was utterly incapable of dodging the rabid attacks from the massive ants who tried to gore him with their sharp legs. But he had never planned on dodging anything anyways, and he immediately started to whittle down the massive insects with the help of [**Deathwish**].

The E-Grade warriors quickly realized their plan had failed, and they jumped down from the backs of the ants to increase the pressure. But Zac was like a whirlwind of death as his massive miasmatic bardiche ripped through the thick plating of the ants and the bodies of the insectoid leaders alike.

The massive pressure he was under from the array started to take its toll though, and he was starting to run a bit low on miasma. However, Zac didn't worry as one of the gates to [**Profane Seal**] soundlessly opened while Zac kept the insectoids busy.

The doors closed again just a second later, while But one pillar after another exploded as spectral warriors appeared out of nowhere, killing the array masters and dismantling the array in seconds. After they had completed their main mission they started to take out the normal soldiers in the cage that the spectral chains still hadn't dealt with.

Zac wouldn't have any issue dealing with the array himself, but he wanted to use the various squads in his employ as much as possible. It wasn't due to something as noble as giving his soldiers a chance to grow through battle. Zac knew very little about the war tactics of the undead, apart from the mindless hordes of the unawakened zombies.

Alea had partly suffered her grievous wounds due to lacking knowledge as well, not expecting to get ambushed by ghosts like that. He didn't want that kind of surprise to happen to his armies in the clash against the Undead Incursion.

He had unearthed all kinds of knowledge during the three days he'd stayed on this floor. One small tidbit was that the spectral warriors couldn't pass through Dao-infused surfaces or skills with enough power. That's why he needed to open the door for the ghosts to enter his cage. Similarly, if warriors had their Dao Field unleashed they wouldn't be ambushed out of nowhere as the spectral warriors would be slowed by quite a bit.

Having one's Dao Field constantly active would put a drain on one's soul, but it would be worth it in the heat of battle to avoid unwelcome surprises such as getting skewered from a ghost popping out of the ground.

With the threat of the way Zac methodically killed off the leaders one by one, leaving just the largest ant alive. Zac no longer had any means to see its level, but he guessed it was around level 85 and focused on Endurance. It was a perfect target for his daily practice.

"You can go," Zac said with his deep voice.

The ghosts who had remained inside the cage until now bowed before they streamed out through a gate that Zac opened, leaving Zac alone inside. Zac cracked his neck as he looked at the target dummy in front of him.

The past three days had been full of failures, but today he'd conjure those bronze sparks no matter what.

Chapter 434: Repurpose

The departure of the spectral warriors left only Zac and the remaining inside the cage, along with a hundred decaying bodies that slowly replenished his reserves with miasma. He was still uncomfortably low on energy though, so he bit down on a pitch-black pill that turned into a thick sludge that ran down his throat. A surge of miasma spread through his body, almost instantly restoring a fifth of his miasma reserves.

Zac tried to not to think of the foul taste of the **[Warrior Pill]** he just ate as he swapped out **[Verun's Bite]** for one of his disposable axes. It was a pill that had a similar effect as Cosmic Water but without the downsides as long as you used them in moderation. The **[Warrior Pill]** was a lot weaker than the water though, and you could only eat one a day before side effects started to crop up.

Next he dispelled **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and shrunk back to his original size. He wanted to experiment with his Daos, and he had found that his control got even worse in his transformed body. Miasma kept churning around in his body to keep the miasmatic armor and weaponry active, which might cause some interference.

Or it was just the fact that the spiritual energy needed to travel further when his body was bigger.

The air around Zac started to shudder as he unleashed his Dao field for his Axe Fragment to the utmost. The ant seemed to sense the threat and attempted to ambush him, but Zac kept dodging as he tried to regain the feeling he had during the Dao Discourse.

It was obviously harder to concentrate with a massive beast trying to skewer you, but Zac felt that it was far easier to make breakthroughs mid-battle compared to sitting alone in a courtyard meditating. The pressure and risk of death would

stimulate his potential, and something new would hopefully be born from his struggle.

The atmosphere inside the cage kept changing as Zac switched back and forth between the Dao Fields for his two fragments, one moment containing invisible blades and the next second corrosive winds. He had kept trying to recreate the Dao Storm with the help of his aura over the past days, but he was simply not making any progress.

He did at least manage to superimpose the two Dao fields for a second by force. When he wanted to release a second Dao Field the other automatically receded into his body, but he was able to stop it by simply blocking it out. However, that caused a pretty hefty loss in spiritual energy as the energy simply dissipated instead of returning.

There were also no bronze flashes appearing in the brief seconds he managed to keep the two Dao Fields going simultaneously. Zac figured that the density of energies wasn't enough to force a reaction when it came to Dao Fields. He could only sigh in disappointment at yet another failed experiment and move on.

If Dao Fields could be considered the gaseous form of the Dao, then directly infusing it into a weapon or skill would be the liquid equivalent, and allowed for a larger amount of spiritual energy.

The Dao Storm had contained most of his spiritual energy, and perhaps that kind of density is what was needed to summon the bronze flashes. But he couldn't just crank out half his soul in one attack, but rather recreate that amount of energy in a single point to force a fusion like before.

The problem was that Dao Infusion wasn't like a water faucet. He couldn't just increase the lever and have more Dao Energy flow out of his head. Until now things had been binary where he either chose to infuse something or not. The amount of energy it cost would depend on the skill or item getting infused, and it would regulate itself automatically.

This was the problem that he had struggled with over the past three days. Trying to control the amount of mental energy that

ran down his arm into his axe was like trying to push more air into a bag with his bare hands. Zac kept trying various approaches he had thought up while resting as he ran between the ant's legs, but nothing worked.

Since he still couldn't figure out any way for him to control the amount of energy he could only try to fuse the two Daos once again. It felt like Zac's mind would split apart as he forcibly pushed his two Dao Fragments along his arms before they streamed into the axe at the same time.

It was yesterday he had finally found a way to force both his Daos to converge. He used each of his arms like a conductor for one Fragment, only trying to push them together when they reached his axe. He only needed to use some Miasma as the method of delivery. However, there were still many problems to solve, and the first trial was the reason that he was using a temporary axe at the moment.

Verun had roared in Zac's mind the moment the two streams had entered the axe before it immediately rebuffed the two Dao Fragments. Zac first thought it was because it wasn't able to properly utilize both fragments at the same time due to its lacking materials, but his next experiment showed that there were other issues at play.

When Zac tried the same thing with a spare axe the two fragments had entered without a problem, but the whole axe exploded into scrap metals in an instant, maiming his hands and almost blinding him. Zac had first thought he managed a fusion at the first try, but he quickly realized he had overestimated himself.

The explosion came from the two untamed energies along with the miasma causing strain on the weapon rather than a fusion of the two. It was still an impressive outburst of energy though as the axe scraps had either been infused with the Fragment of the Axe or Fragment of the Coffin as they shot out like projectiles in every direction.

Zac figured there was an issue of speed. He would never be able to squeeze out half his mental energy for a single strike, as he had done during the Dao Discourse. He instead wanted

to rely on smaller amounts of energies colliding at higher velocities. It was like the experiments on old earth where scientists shot electrons at each other with extremely high momentum to see what kind of energies were released by the collision.

He needed to turn himself into a particle collider.

Having a plan was one thing, but finding a solution was something else entirely. A minute later his axe couldn't take it any longer and turned into a bomb as well. Zac had learned to see the signs by this point though and threw it away in time, but he froze a second later.

What about [**Cyclic Strike**]? He had given up on the skill for his new path, but perhaps some parts could be repurposed. The two fractals from the skill were perfectly placed on his shoulders, and he would easily be able to push his two Dao Fragments there before they continued down his arms.

The correct usage of the skill was to infuse his Daos into the two fractals, and sort of braid the energies in a way that allowed the two Daos to mesh together and combine. After that had been accomplished you could infuse whatever you wanted with this new combined energy.

Zac had never really gotten much further than infusing both fractals with their respective Daos. He hadn't even been close to finishing the type of mesh required, but that wasn't his goal at the moment. He felt like he was so close to the answer that he could taste it, and he gave the ant a quick punch to throw it away before he prepared to test his newest theory.

Zac immediately took out two daggers and stabbed one into each shoulder without as much as a grunt. Ichor started to drip down his arms and back, but he didn't care as he hurriedly activated the two maimed fractals with a smile that would no doubt look a bit deranged to an outsider.

The Dao Fragments entered the two fractals of [**Cyclic Strike**], but Zac didn't care at all about balance this time as he tried to force the energies to the center of the fractals as quickly as possible. Normally it wouldn't have been possible

without properly following the winding pathways, but he had carved a new path for himself.

The two daggers acted as conductors and allowed him to skip all intricacies of the skill fractal, leaving just the part that acted as an entrance funnel, along with the core of the skill that Zac guessed was responsible for the fusion. The weapon blade allowed him to pass by over 70% of the fractal by just pushing the energy right through the metal itself.

Adrenaline started to course through his body when he realized that it was actually working, and blobs formed from his two Dao Fragments shot toward each other in his chest.

But happiness quickly turned to panic as Zac felt a terrifying buildup taking place when the two blobs merged, and he desperately tried to push it out of his body. He wasn't sure if he'd even survive if the blob exploded like his axes, taking half his torso with it.

The energy only got halfway down his arm before the ball of energy collapsed in a soundless implosion, annihilating a good chunk of his bicep as it disappeared. The pain was excruciating, but Zac was still delighted with the result as his eyes were trained on the wound.

The implosion had contained a bronze-colored spark.

Zac was in no mood to stay at the battlefield any longer, and Zac ordered the ten chains of **[Profane Seal]** to kill the ant who was already on its last legs from the sparring session. The battle outside had already ended as well, with liches going through the battlefield to find salvageable bodies.

The corpses were placed in two piles. The second pile was the fallen Revenants and the insectoids who weren't salvageable, and these bodies were slated to be incinerated. He was still curious as to why it was impossible to re-reanimate a Revant, but he put the matter and instead hurried back to the outpost to go over the results.

“You're back, Lord Piker,” Uro, a steward that the Zervadar kingdom had provided for him, said with a bow as Zac barged through the door.

“Is there any news from the Guild?” Zac asked he sat down with a grimace as the wound in his arm made itself remembered.

“I will enquire,” Uro said and left the courtyard, allowing Zac to go over his findings.

His arm was a mess, but his short experiment with **[Cyclic Strike]** as a base was a huge step forward. There was a lot of work left to do though. First of all, he couldn't keep stabbing himself with knives to create shortcuts in the pathways. It was both time-consuming and inefficient compared to using real pathways, not to mention that it hurt like hell.

Right now Zac had only an extremely crude proof-of-concept that needed huge improvements to be considered passable. He would somehow need to redraw the skill fractals of **[Cyclic Strike]** to better fit his purpose, but he had no idea how to go about doing such a thing.

The next step was to control the fused energies long enough for him to hurt his enemy rather than himself. Right now it couldn't be considered a weapon as much as a creative way to kill yourself, akin to creating a bomb right next to your heart. If the spark had gone off just half a second earlier he might have lost the whole arm instead of just some muscle tissue and ichor.

The question was whether he really needed to stay on any longer on this level, as these kinds of experiments could be performed while climbing.

He still had many skill upgrades waiting for his Draugr-Class, but he wasn't sure how long it would take to grind them out with his army. Zac guessed he would have to hear what the Guild had to say before deciding whether to stay or not, and he looked up with anticipation as his steward soundlessly entered his courtyard twenty minutes later.

“A representative from the Inscriber Guild is here,” Uro said with another bow.

“Let her in,” Zac said, knowing that they would no doubt send Ildera again.

“Lord Piker,” the beautiful Vice Guild Master said with a curtsy the moment she entered the courtyard. “Ah! You’re wounded! Let me-”

“It’s fine,” Zac cut her off before she used his wound as an excuse to fondle him again.

If Zac hadn’t known she was a Revenant he would have thought she was a pale human. Ildera had one of the highest levels in the whole kingdom, and she had become remarkably close to a living being as far as Zac could tell. With the notable exception of running on miasma rather than Cosmic Energy and food.

“How did it go?” Zac asked as he took another healing pill, one special-made for his undead constitution and provided by the woman in front of him.

The formation master looked a bit unhappy about being rebuffed, but seeing Zac using the pills she had gifted him lessened her displeasure noticeably.

“I’m afraid we failed you,” Ildera said with a pout as she sat down next to him. “Feel free to punish me as you see fit.”

“What went wrong?” Zac asked with disappointment, ignoring the innuendo.

That Ildera failed to create the Array Disks for **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was a bit of a blow, and he started to wonder if even his sister would be up to the task.

Chapter 435: Breeder Clone

“We weren’t successful in inscribing the life-aspected formation,” the undead inscriptionist said as she took out a couple of pitch-black array disks. “You will likely need a life-attuned Array Master for that half. I do maintain some contact with a master who might be able to do it, but it will probably require a few months.”

Zac stared at the inscriptions with bemusement for a second before he looked down at the densely inscribed array disks. Was there really a need to leave him on a cliff like that just now?

“This is great, no need to disturb your friend,” Zac assured after he composed himself. “How many did you manage to inscribe?”

“We made six, but I assure you we use high-quality materials,” Ildera said with some confusion. “They will not break even after repeated usage, so having six of them is overkill.”

The first thing Zac had done after arriving at the outpost was to commission the construction of array disks for his Soul Strengthening Manual. The forces he encountered in the Tower were all at least E-Graded by now, and many had skilled inscriptionists who could help save some time. He still had over 40 days left in the tower, and he wanted to use the days to the fullest.

It would also save his sister a lot of effort if he could simply get his hands on array disks rather than having her spend weeks on creating two cultivation caves. The reason he commissioned multiple copies was even simpler. He needed to improve the odds of the arrays making it out of the Tower.

“What do you know about redrawing skill fractals?” Zac suddenly asked, taking the opportunity to learn from an E-

Grade cultivator. “Seeing as you’re an expert on inscriptions I hope you would have some insights to share.”

Ildera surprisingly didn’t answer though, but rather looked at Zac with a troubled expression.

“I am not qualified to discuss such matters with the young master. I am sure that your elders will show you the way when you reach the point of creating, adjusting, and fusing skills,” she said. “I am afraid that me intervening at this point would deviate your path of cultivation.”

It appeared that using his imaginary master and elders as a shield from any questions and courtships had its drawbacks. He tried to cajole some answers for a while but she was like a brick wall, citing that it wasn’t her place to disrupt ‘his master’s plan’.

She eventually relented a bit by gifting him a handful of sheets that were actually made from the skin of E-Grade cultivators. Zac’s hair stood on end when he realized what he was holding, but it was apparently a material made for practicing inscribing skill fractals and pathways. It was the closest one could get without starting to experiment with your own body.

The Array Master once again tried to turn the short visit into a romantic outing after the main matter was dealt with, but she was soon enough led out from the courtyard by Uro.

“My master contacted me earlier. He ordered me to take down the Breeder within the day as a trial. I will be leaving in a few hours,” Zac said when the steward returned.

Uro, the ever stoic servant, simply inquired whether Zac needed assistance or any specific equipment for his task. Zac asked for some more **[Warrior Pills]** after some deliberation, along with another batch of Miasma Crystals. The steward bowed and left the courtyard once again.

Ildera not being willing to help out with redrawing the fractals was a bit of a let-down, but she still had provided a lot of help. Her words had indicated that modifying skills was possible, and not some cockeyed idea he had come up with. Even more

surprising, she had actually mentioned that Fusing skills was possible as well.

Creating skills was nothing strange. It seemed to be somewhat expected after reaching E-Grade, at least if you had a higher rarity class. Those with uncommon classes would probably get by with just buying skills, but he had a hard time believing someone with an Epic class would be able to reach D-Grade without having created at least one skill tailored to their cultivation path.

Modifying skills to better suit you felt pretty straightforward as well, though it was probably a lot more complicated than it sounded. Skill fractals were delicately designed networks of thin pathways that allowed Cosmic Energy to transform into all kinds of magical effects.

The skill fractals were something like an imbue of Dao as far as Zac could tell. Pushing the energy through the network infused the un-attuned energy with higher truths, which is how Cosmic Energy turned into anything from fireballs to Zac's fractal edges formed from **[Chop]**. That was also why one could ponder on the Dao through studying skill fractals.

Even small modifications of a fractal would destroy the delicate pattern the fractal created, and you really needed to know what you were doing to not completely mess everything up.

Fusing two skills was another beast altogether. Zac had no idea where to even begin with such a daunting task. He could only assume that the System assisted somehow since skill fusions sounded way too complicated to understand for someone who hadn't spent eons studying fractals.

Zac looked up at the dour sky with some wistfulness. It almost felt as though he was back on the island again during those two solitary months. An ignoramus fumbling in the dark, trying to make sense of what was going on.

He had stepped over a mountain of corpses to get where he was right now, but he was still just someone on the threshold of cultivation. In the beginning he was like a caveman, crudely pushing Cosmic Energy into various body parts to increase his

strength. But was he all that much better now, impaling himself with daggers to create shortcuts in his skill fractals?

The steward returned soon enough and he wordlessly handed over a Cosmos Sack. Zac didn't think much of it, but his eyes widened in shock when he scanned the contents of the pouch.

“What's all this?” Zac asked with shock.

“It's from the Royal Family. Killing the breeder is just a stepping stone on Lord Piker's path, but it is the difference between life and death for the Kingdom of Zarvadar. This is a token of our appreciation,” Uro said, some life appearing on his face for the first time since he was assigned to Zac.

The reason Zac was so shocked was that there were roughly a hundred D-Grade Nexus Crystals inside the pouch, along with all kinds of pills and herbs. It might not be much compared to the vast amount of wealth he found inside the Spatial Ring belonging to Rasuliel, but it was still the biggest haul of any single level unless you counted special encounters such as the Pool of Tranquility.

Since Zac had made his decision he immediately prepared to set out. The commander of the outpost apparently wanted to hold a banquet in his honor, but Zac declined as he much preferred to depart without any pomp or ceremony. Fearing some sort of commotion he donned a cloak before he slipped through the back door of the mansion to blend in with the soldiers.

It was still a bit weird walking among the undead in their natural habitat. It was as though he was in some sort of bizarro-world where everything was similar but not quite the same. He had seen a young couple walk hand in hand, one of them a human zombie sporting a decent amount of decay and the other a Corpselord stitched together from at least 5 different races.

Another thing that had been a bit surprising was their love for scents. Almost all the undead living in the kingdom were too low-tiered to eat and drink, so they looked elsewhere to find the satisfaction a good meal could bring. Many enjoyed

complex fragrances and most households created their own incense or potpourri.

Zac had long known about the location of the level guardian and he switched over to his human form when he was far enough. It was still quite the distance, and it took him six hours to reach the insectoid stronghold where the Breeder Clone was located, even when he employed [**Loamwalker**] to its fullest.

The location wasn't very hard to find as it was a huge crater caused by the insect hive slamming into the undead planet. The Breeder had arrived alone and quickly started to produce an army for conquest. The insectoid queen had essentially shot out a bunch of hives specially designed for space travel, and they would autonomously conquer planets they landed on before reconnecting with the main hive.

Zac deliberated for a few seconds, but he eventually decided to head in as a Draugr. He had somewhat fallen into the routine where he relied on his human form for most tasks, while occasionally switching over to Undying Bulwark when Hatchetman proved a bad fit.

This was reflected in the slanted masteries of his skills, and Zac decided to push through the whole of the 7th floor in his Draugr form unless a level was a particularly bad match.

Sneaking inside the hive was out of the question no matter what class he chose as the whole crater was crawling with warriors. But full frontal conflict was Zac's forte, so he started to grow from activating [**Vanguard of Undeath**] as he ran down the slopes.

Just seconds later enraged screeches echoed across the area as Zac mowed down one warrior after another with the help of [**Immutable Bulwark**]. He didn't bother killing too many of the warriors, wanting to save his miasma. Some unlucky warriors got bisected by the massive miasmatic axe from getting too close, but most just got lightly maimed before they were thrown out of the way.

He was however forced to start cutting his way forward when he reached the hive, which pretty much looked like a

nondescript comet. The entrance was completely blocked with innumerable warriors and beast companions, and Zac was completely drenched in a mix of blood, ichor, and green goop when he finally reached the Breeding Chambers.

The Breeder Clone seemed to be something like a mix of a worm and a factory, a gargantuan mound of flesh over 50 meters long. Zac barely had time to consider a course of action as a massive burst of Fragment-empowered acid threatened to swallow him whole.

He initially planned on enduring the blast before countering, but his Danger Sense screamed that doing so would be a monumental mistake. He could only slam his foot into the ground to teleport next to the massive insect with the help of **[Profane Seal]** and then stomp again to erect the cage.

His pitch-black bardiche swiped at the enormous slab of flesh, but he was surprised to see that the creature had a consistency like pudding. His axe went right through, but the only effect was that he almost got doused by another spurt of acid. Even worse, just seconds later the large wound had closed.

Zac briefly considered swapping over to his other class to deal with this weird creature, but he suddenly had an idea. The ten chains all stopped killing the soldiers that kept emerging from pods that covered the Breeder's body and instead shot far into its gelatinous flesh.

The Clone violently started to shudder and shoot acid in all directions, forcing Zac to desperately scramble back and forth as he combated the tide of newly hatched insectoids that tried to rip him into shreds. However, he almost moaned in pleasure as torrential amounts of energy kept surging into his body from the Breeder Clone.

The amount of energy that the chains managed to drain from the queen was shocking, and a massive cloud of miasma had long formed over Zac's head as he simply had no way to storing this much energy. It took a full 10 minutes for the ten chains to completely drain the queen, which awarded Zac a final burst of energy that confirmed the kill.

The whole Breeding Chamber was partly submerged in massive pools of corrosive acid by this point, and together with the black clouds of [**Winds of Decay**], the hive had truly turned into a hellscape for any being, living or dead. Zac wasted no time inside the hive and quickly stepped through the teleporter.

The combination of his shocking Endurance and the layers of defensive skills that Undying Bulwark provided made Zac a nigh-impervious tank, but he still looked beyond saving when he appeared in the middle of the streets of some massive town. His pale skin was sloughing off his body in multiple spots, and Zac shuffled into an alley as he threw a healing pill into his mouth.

It appeared the days of easy victories were over.

The Breeder Queen hadn't been an insurmountable enemy, but the thing was both hard to kill while possessing unique strengths that would make her a pain to fight for either of his classes. The realization forced him to stay in place and heal up before heading out, as he didn't dare to challenge the level in his current condition.

Zac was thankfully able to reach an almost perfect condition within a few hours thanks to the pills he was given, and he immediately resumed his climb. He wanted to regain the days he lost on the first level, sparing barely an hour a day for sleep and meditation.

But progress was getting slower and slower, and not a single level provided a quick solution.

Worst of them all was the 60th level where he was trapped in an endless loop of restrictive arrays for nine full days. When Zac finally managed to break out through a bout of unhinged fury he didn't even attempt to complete the quest, but instead opted to turn the poor guardian into a pile of meat.

The unceasing experiments into fusing his Dao Fragments was also a cause of constant delays. In fact, the largest threat to his well being was his own training regimen. The guardians left their fair share of wounds by this point, but none of them had

managed to blast one of his lungs into smithereens like he had during a particularly ill-fated training session.

Zac was essentially leaving a trail of bodies and black ichor in his wake, but that trail was at least getting closer and closer to the peak of the 7th floor.

Chapter 436: The Tallest Trees

Ogras warily looked around as he appeared in the new world. Only when he saw that he had appeared on a busy street did he allow himself to look down at the gash at his side. Luckily the mayor's all-out attack had barely missed as Ogras jumped onto the teleporter, allowing him to avoid wasting a week recuperating.

Who knew that the old goat would become so infuriated? Becoming a grandfather should be a happy occasion, after all.

That world was done with, but he couldn't help but once again wonder if these worlds were real. Would he become a father? Well, not that he wasn't one already after his years of whoring and playing around about back home. There were no doubt at least a dozen little bastards with his blood running around the streets of Ter'Ferizan.

The demon's gaze darted back and forth across the street as he popped a pill in his mouth, his shadow tendrils meanwhile spreading out in search of threats and treasures. But it just looked like a somewhat flourishing metropolis, though the energy density was pretty abysmal. Luckily he didn't have to search for long as the quest screen appeared on its own the moment he started walking.

[Become an honorary disciple of the Transcendent Master.]

The demon sneered when he saw the name. Anyone who had the gall to call himself a Transcendent Master in a place like this was no doubt an insufferable asshole of the highest order. Just the thought of becoming a disciple to such a pretentious prick made his hair stand on end. An ornery person like that would no doubt request the full ceremony with kneeling and offering thanks to the heavens.

It didn't take a lot of time to find out that the so-called Transcendent Master was an adviser to the crown and one of the guardian pillars of this country. The title had been awarded him by the former emperor after having fought off an invasion of the Grev Reapers, whatever that was. He currently lived alone, and he accepted 5 honorary disciples to carry on his legacy every year.

The next trial was unsurprisingly tomorrow.

"Leech, you better help me this time or I won't feed you for a month," the demon said as he sat in the hotel room he had hired for the night.

Ogras still had no proper means to communicate with Leech, but the creature living in his shadows released a few undulations, which he felt represented a reluctant acquiescence. Ogras' mouth widened into a grin as he started to prepare, and one item after another fell into his shadows, seemingly transported into another dimension.

The next day Ogras found himself shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of middle-aged warriors, all seemingly stuck at the precipice of evolution. Becoming an Honorary Disciple also meant getting access to the vast fortune of the old master, which included various herbs that would help push one's constitution forward. It was a huge opportunity in a country where even worthless stalk of grass could be coveted if it contained some Cosmic Energy.

There were three trials to the apprenticeship; Mind, Body, Heart. The Trial of Mind was essentially just a confusion array, and his grandpa had thrown him into enough of those while growing up for him to effortlessly pass through. He did however slow himself down somewhat as to not garner too much attention, as that might interfere with his plans. The standards of mental strength in the kingdom were obviously wanting, and just a third of the trial takers passed it.

The Trial of Body was just as simple, and Ogras was starting to wonder if the old goat was simply phoning it in. The old master simply said that the trial would be over when half the

contestants had been thrown out of the courtyard where the trials were being held, which resulted in an all-out brawl.

Ogras had initially been planning on going easy again to stay unnoticed, but he was a bit embarrassed to realize his worries were superfluous as he found himself perfectly mediocre without even trying. Then again, he was holding back on his shadow skills, and instead tried to make do with his spear skills.

During the free-for-all he had barely needed to act to be thrown into the six specific positions he needed to reach. But thankfully no one seemed to have noticed that a spike was shot into the ground the moment Ogras landed, and by the time the Trial of the Body was over the six spikes had formed a circle that covered the entire courtyard.

“The Trial of the Heart will test your convictions, your morality, and your loyalty to this great nation,” the stalwart old master said as he stood in front of the 20 remaining trial takers. “A crooked tree will never grow to its full potential, always forced to live in the shadows of others. As such, I will only assist those with a righteous heart.”

The old master proceeded to walk toward one warrior after another, using some unknown means to figure out whether they were righteous. Ogras’ heart started to beat in anticipation as the Transcendent Master got closer and closer, readying himself for battle. But Ogras’ eyes widened in alarm when the old master suddenly turned toward him, hostility all too apparent in his eyes.

He had been exposed.

“You!” the old man roared as a massive surge of energy started radiating from his body, transforming him from an aged scholar into a ferocious warrior.

An explosion erupted from a nearby pavilion as a shimmering sword burst through its ceiling before it shot toward the old master, but Ogras saw no need to let the Transcendent Master arm himself. A massive crystal appeared in his arms and he immediately slammed it into the ground while infusing it with Cosmic Energy.

Roiling waves of illusory flames immediately inundated the whole courtyard and the trial takers fell over screaming, desperately clutching their heads.

The Transcendent Master seemed a lot better off though, perhaps due to being the floor guardian. His eyes still looked bloodshot though as he gripped the flying sword and slashed toward Ogras with an enraged roar.

The demon narrowly dodged a wind blade that would no doubt have cut him into two as he charged the old man with his spear drawing a majestic arc in the air. But two sharp lances of congealed shadows suddenly gored the old master from behind, leaving two nasty wounds.

The old man was obviously a seasoned fighter who would normally have been able to intercept such an attack, but his soul was currently on fire courtesy of the **[Voidfire Array]**.

Two wounds weren't enough to take the old man down. However, it did cause him to lose focus for a short moment, which allowed Ogras to launch a massive shadowlance that ripped a hole through his torso.

The old master looked at Ogras with confusion, anger, and betrayal as he fell on his back while Ogras retrieved the six spikes with his shadow tendrils. It looked like the old man couldn't comprehend why someone would assault him after his centuries of service to the kingdom.

Ogras walked over to the old man who barely clung onto life and looked down at him with a bland gaze. One swift strike ended it, and Ogras quickly snatched the powerful sword before it flew away.

“What’s so bad about living in the shadows?” Ogras muttered as he jumped onto the teleporter. “It’s the tallest trees that have to bear the winds.”

—

“How did things go?” Catheya asked, her eyes never leaving the screen in front of her.

“There are no more members of the Tsarun-Clan in the Base Town. However, three managed to destroy their tokens and

leave,” Varo recounted stoically.

“He’s already passed the 6th floor, but his speed is average at best and it keeps getting worse,” Catheya muttered. “It’s hard to draw any conclusions. What do you think?”

“I took the liberty of asking around some more after completing my mission,” Varo slowly said. “I would venture that he is being held back by a lack of knowledge of the tower and assisting treasures such as Array Breakers.”

“Why do you say that?” Catheya asked with interest.

If Zac Piker truly was a disciple of her ancestor, then he should be well aware of all the hidden risks and opportunities inside the Tower of Eternity, especially those on the higher floors. But his speed did honestly indicate that there were some problems.

“I found something at one of the Intelligence offices at the outer rim,” Varo said as he handed her an Information crystal.

“Super Brother-Man? Fights with an axe... A powerful native who defeated an incursion?” Catheya mumbled as she scanned the contents. “Who are these Ez’Mahal-people?”

“It’s a small feudal force in the sector, no one of import. Judging by their strength I would guess that the newly integrated planet was of the lowest grade,” Varo said. “The Ez’Mahal could barely be considered a High D-Grade force, and a splintered one at that.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Catheya muttered as her brows furrowed with confusion.

Zac Piker being an Integration Progenitor would explain why he was so powerful without anyone knowing about him. The combination of the Tutorial, the massive amount of Origin Dao, and the various opportunities The Ruthless Heavens provide to such planets could sometimes create extreme outliers.

But it also made the connection to her ancestor all the more baffling.

“It is a bit disappointing. Perhaps I am overestimating my instincts,” Catheya muttered before she turned to her steward. “How far do you think he will go?”

“He will pass the 7th floor,” Varo said without hesitation.

“Why do you say that?” Catheya asked, her mouth tugging upward.

“Instinct,” Varo answered after some hesitation.

“That’s why we’re such a good combination,” Catheya smiled.

“I think so too. In fact, I think he might even beat the 8th.”

Varo’s brows rose a bit before his expressionless appearance returned, but Catheya knew it meant that her attendant disagreed. Catheya still had a feeling about that man, even if she didn’t have anything to substantiate it with.

“Do you remember Reoluv of the Dravorak Dynasty?” Varo suddenly said.

“What about him?” Catheya mumbled with disinterest as her gaze returned to the Tower Ladder.

“His brother just arrived, and he’s ready for a fight.”

“The Zethaya sends their regards,” a young woman said with a bow as she handed Yeorav a crystalline vial.

“Mh,” Yeorav nodded as he stashed away the pills without much interest. “What did you find out?”

“It is just as your informant indicated. A confrontation between Zac Piker and Rasuliel Tsarun resulted in the destruction of the Zethaya Pill House and the death of Rasuliel. Boje Zethaya indicated that there was likely some unknown history between the two, as Rasuliel went out of his way to antagonize Mr. Piker.”

“What else?”

Yara went over the details of the altercation in the Pill House, with Yeorav occasionally asking clarifying questions.

“So he either has an extreme amount of Endurance, or he possessed some sort of treasure to withstand the Tsarun brat’s **[Abjuration of Zerthava]**. Where did he get his hands on that thing, anyway? Only those in the Boundless Factions can make that cursed item,” Yeorav asked.

“There have been rumors of the Tsarun doing business with unorthodox forces,” Yara said after some thought. “But nothing substantiated and not to the point that it has created a pushback.”

“That old pretender is too greedy, too impatient,” Yeorav snorted with disdain. “He wants to stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of the Allbright Dynasty and my ancestors, but his ambition has turned him insane. How can a dynasty be created on such a murky foundation?”

“Well, these events will no doubt infuriate them. Boje also let slip that Rasuliel was the one who bought the Pathfinder Oracle’s Eye a few days ago, and it is now in Mr. Piker’s possession,” Yara added.

“Oh?” Yeorav said with some excitement.

He knew his family had a few body parts of Pathfinder Oracles in their treasury, but there was no chance of getting his hands on them because of their ancestor’s strict rules about cultivation.

The number of resources he could draw from the treasury while still in F-Grade had long been tapped out. He would only be able to trade for it with an item of equal value, and it had to be something he had found himself without assistance.

The odds of that happening without him entering the depths of dozens of Mystic Realms were almost nil, but such an opportunity had somehow presented itself in front of him now. A treasure like that was something that you couldn’t get your hand on even if you had the money, and he could think of multiple ways he could utilize such a thing.

His little brother was no doubt kicking himself for not having the patience to wait just a few days before attempting his climb. But luck was sometimes as important as skill.

“Has everything been set up?” Yeorav asked.

“Everyone is in position. But multiple forces are similarly preparing for when Mr. Piker emerges,” Yara said.

“What have the undead been up to?” Yeorav asked.

“They haven’t made any movements since they threw out the Tsarun Clan from the Base Town,” she said, some confusion clearly written on her face.

“Their motivation doesn’t really matter. Perhaps they just want a top grade body to bring back home,” Yeorav said as he gently grabbed Yara’s hand. “It will be an all-out brawl later. Don’t get mixed into this mess.”

“Is... All this really necessary?” Yara sighed as she moved closer to Yeorav.

“You know how my family operates. If Reoluv ascends I will probably just be relegated to manage a far-off corner, but if it’s second brother I’ll be assassinated along with everyone close to me,” Yeorav said with a pained grimace. “My only hope is passing the 7th floor and getting accepted to one of those far-away places. I’ll take you with me and leave the in-fighting to my siblings.”

Not many people in their remote corner of the multiverse were aware, but passing the 7th floor essentially gave you a direct shot at entering massive factions that towered far beyond anything else in the sector. The whole sector was just a small corner of their domains, breeding grounds that occasionally fostered promising seedlings.

Most thought that Lord Beradan had been lucky and encountered a great master after passing the 7th floor, but he would probably still have been able to join one of those forces due to his amazing talents and his showing in the tower.

Yeorav knew his own limitations, and he hadn’t seen passing the 7th floor as a realistic opportunity. He knew he wasn’t his brother’s match in either talent or diligence, especially since their ancestor had taken Reoluv as a direct disciple.

Just reaching the 7th floor was a stretch without expending some treasures. Defeating the floor guardian? A fool's dream. But that had all changed now. Yeorav didn't know what that poor man had done to piss off the Boundless Heavens to this extent, but it actually awarded everyone who appeared in the Base down the quest.

His previous plan was to wait a decade or two and pass the 6th floor with the help of some treasures, but now a better opportunity had presented itself. It had prompted him to cache in on every favor and borrowing from everyone he could think of to stock up on enough offensive and defensive treasures to conquer a minor empire.

It should allow him to propel him through the 7th floor, and with the help of the quest he'd skip the floor guardian altogether.

He normally wouldn't stoop to such despicable levels as he had no bad blood against this Zac Piker. He would rather meet whatever fate came his way when Reoluv or their Second Brother ascended to the throne, but he knew that wasn't an option any longer. His relationship with Yara had been exposed, so whatever ending he would meet, so would she.

It was a shame, but Zac Piker needed to die so that they could live.

"But that man seems dangerous, and he's already entered the 7th floor," Yara said with worry.

"Opportunities are always found in the midst of danger," Yeorav muttered as he stroked Yara's hair. "Besides, I didn't come to the Base Town empty-handed."

Chapter 437: Struggle for Supremacy

Barely healed wounds covered Zac's whole body after hacking and slashing his way through the 7th floor, and he breathed out in relief when he saw that he wouldn't face the floor guardian of the 7th floor immediately. Not even the thick armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had been enough to prevent him from getting hurt from the increasingly intense battles.

He had already spent a full day to restore his combat strength to its peak on the 62nd level, but he still could use some more time to rest up. His upper chest getting obliterated had cost him a second Zethaya Pill, but even then it had taken a couple of days before he dared to swap over to his human form.

Losing a lung and maiming his heart wasn't too bad when he didn't need to breathe or pump blood, but in his human form it might have proved lethal.

Zac looked down at his token with a sigh, seeing that only 27 days remained. He essentially knew that reaching the 72nd floor was not only a matter of strength by this point, but also luck. Twenty-seven days felt like a lot, but it was only 3 days per floor. Getting stuck just once would probably mean his climb was over.

The time constraints also made him hesitant whether he would be able to experiment any more with his Dao Implosions. Continuously wounding himself hadn't really delayed him too much so far since he was pretty used to fighting wounded.

But the enemies were becoming pretty strong by this point, and the 73rd floor entailed another steep boost in difficulty. He couldn't keep running around with maimed bodyparts any longer unless he knew he wouldn't encounter the guardian for another day or so.

Besides, Zac had started to realize that his goal of using the bronze flashes offensively was far far away.

Zac had hoped that he would be able to utilize the mysterious flashes offensively by the time he reached the floor guardian, but the past days had proven that it was simply impossible. For one, he had only managed to actually force four fusions over a hundred attempts. Worse yet, each of those fusions had been so unstable that they had exploded in his face before he managed to use them for anything.

The fact that it was somewhat working felt like an indication that he was moving in the right direction, but he started to fear that he wouldn't be able to create a working system before he evolved. The question was whether his current progress could be considered a 'creation'.

He felt it was unique enough as he had never heard of anyone doing what he was attempting, and it was also suited to his special circumstances. He had also arrived at the system mostly by his own effort, rather than following a heritage or a master. Yrial was a definite influence on the path, but not to the point that it could be said that Zac was following in his footsteps.

In either case, it looked like he would have to fight without using prototype Dao Implosions on this level. But he was still confident in his chances, especially in his human form. He felt that he would be able to take out almost anything with unrelenting ferocity as long as he utilized [**Hatchetman's Rage**] and [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] along with his supreme attacks, which is why he had already swapped over to his Hatcherman class.

Looking around made his brows furrow though. It looked like he was in the middle of a massive arena, one a hundred times larger than the slave ring he wound up in after completing the 4th floor.

Zac sat on a platform rising roughly half a meter above a floor made of large tiles, and he noticed there was an array ensconcing the platform. Zac hesitated for a second before he

walked over to gingerly touch it, and he found that it felt like solid rock.

It looked like he was trapped like a beast in his cage, and a Dao-infused punch to the array indicated that breaking it was likely beyond his capabilities. He grunted in annoyance but quickly calmed himself down as he sat down in the middle of the platform and sat down to rest up and figure out what was going on.

The first thing he had noticed was that his was not the only platform in the arena. He could spot at least two hundred platforms around him, but just a few had golden arrays like his own. Indistinct shapes of other warriors could be seen inside, but he couldn't make out any exact appearances of the others.

He could however tell that they were likely humanoids just like himself judging by the size and shape rather than war beasts. Was this some sort of colosseum where he would be forced to fight other gladiators to the death? If so, why hadn't he gotten any quest prompt yet?

And who was the floor guardian in this scenario? There were no spectator stands or people visible in any direction, and the arena simply ended with a vast emptiness, like they were on top of a disk floating around in space.

Was this another riddle he was too stupid to figure out? It had been a humbling experience realizing that he couldn't complete a single one of the quests of the 7th floor, forcing him to fight against the guardians instead.

Mostly it wasn't an issue of figuring out how to complete the quest. The problem was that it would take too much time, or that he didn't possess the prerequisite skills needed. Almost all the quests either required some specific knowledge or treasures to pave the way.

Even the quest on the previous floor requiring him to unseal a tomb to acquire a treasure within was hopeless. The array had completely stumped him, and it was designed in such a way that brute force didn't work. But he had somewhat expected such a result.

He had been going in knowing full well he would have to rely on his strength above all. But even finding the guardians was turning into a chore, which is why he barely had enough time to complete the 8th floor now.

The fact that he was stuck inside an array at the moment didn't help with his impatience to get going.

Minutes passed and Zac started to realize what was going on though. One array after another flashed into life, and another cultivator found themselves seated on a platform in the arena. After just 15 minutes half the platforms were filled, and Zac started to mentally prepare himself for a messy battle.

The closest platform suddenly flashed to life, and Zac looked over with interest. A hazy outline of a humanoid youth could be seen beyond the golden wall, and his head swiveled back and forth for a few seconds before he sat down.

“Shit, how unlucky. A battle of fate. I should have postponed my climb a day,” the youth swore. “Better not be any Tower Breakers today.”

Zac sat some distance away from the one who had spoken up, but he could still make out the words from the guy.

His mind spun as he tried to understand the scenario. This level felt different compared to those before. The previous levels had all placed him in some sort of scenario, where he already had an identity and a clear mission. But Zac knew this was different as he looked at the indistinct shapes around him.

Were these people actually real?

But where did they come from if they were real? Were they teleported here like he was during his Hegemony quest? Or judging by the words of the youth next to him, were these people also warriors climbing the Tower of Eternity? If that was the case there was no way these people came from his sector though.

If he passed the 7th floor he would be the first to do so for thousands of years in his star sector, but the Tower tested the young generation all across the multiverse. Scrounging up a couple hundred of people reaching the 7th floor shouldn't be

too hard, especially not if it included people coming from higher-tier sectors with B-Grade forces and even higher.

But that presented a problem. He knew nothing of the capabilities of such individuals or the hidden means they possessed. What if they threw out hundreds of peak-grade arrays to blast this whole world into pieces?

There was also that term; Tower Breaker. Did that signify people strong enough to climb the whole Tower? Such a thing was unheard of in his sector, but it wasn't necessarily that case in other parts of the multiverse.

Zac barely couldn't comprehend the strength required for that. Even the normal level guardians of the seventh floor all possessed various unique advantages along with at least one Dao Fragment. How would the boss two floors higher look? Would it have Peak Fragments? Something even higher?

Zac hesitated for a second before he turned back toward the youth on the platform next to him.

"Hey, what's going on?" Zac said with a high whisper.

"You don't know?" the youth answered after a few seconds of silence. "You better crush your token, buddy. When the walls come down, blood will fall like rain."

"Do you know about the Tower of Eternity?" Zac probed.

"Are you trying to test me?" the man laughed. "Well, whatever. We're all real. We know of the Tower of Eternity. We're just unlucky sobs who the Ruthless Heavens took an interest in."

"What do you mean?" Zac probed, praying the chatty youth wouldn't stop explaining the situation.

"This is a rare scenario. A convergence of fate, you could call it. The Ruthless Heavens noticed a lot of promising climbers in the Tower at the same time, and instead of a floor guardian we get to fight each other. Fun, huh?"

"Why would it do something like that?" Zac asked.

"To make the survivors stronger, of course. What better way to become stronger than a life-and-death battle amongst the elites

of the multiverse?” the youth snorted. “Shit, I had a pretty good chance of passing the seventh floor as well. Now I’ll have to do this stupid climb one more time.”

Zac frowned when he heard the youth complain. What he said no doubt meant that it was a lot harder to pass a floor like this than to fight the normal guardian. This was obviously pretty bad news.

After having fought one tough battle after another in the earlier levels of the 7th floor he knew he would be in for a fight that would push him hard when he met the floor guardian, but he still believed it would be manageable.

But he was far less confident about the messy situation he was in right now.

“Got any tips?” Zac sighed.

“Have fun and don’t get killed. That’s what my dad said when he sent me off, has worked pretty well for me so far.”

Zac wanted to glean more information out of the man, but the array around him suddenly started to flash as a screen appeared in front of him. Zac blanched when he read the quest, and any hope of the young man next to him lying was dashed in an instant.

The wording in the quest was all too familiar, and nothing good ever followed seeing that line.

[Struggle for Supremacy.]

Chapter 438: Points

“Supremacy...” Zac mumbled with some helplessness.

At least there was no confusion about what needed to be done this time. It was a Battle Royale. It made Zac remember when he sat wounded and wrung out in the tunnels of his crystal mine, and the quest for the Fruit of Ascension suddenly popped up.

The system had told the inhabitants of the island to fight for supremacy back then as well, and what followed was a bloodbath. This time things were slightly fuzzy though. Was this really a last man standing scenario?

Thankfully it seemed like the system wasn't done, and a few more lines appeared in front of him.

[Defeating each contestant rewards 1 point, in addition to all accumulated points of the vanquished.]

[Trail ends when 10 contestants remain, or when no combat has taken place for 3 minutes. Avoiding battle for more than 5 minutes counts as forfeiture of climb.]

[Ladder will display the top ten contestants.]

Zac quickly looked around and noticed a huge screen appearing in the sky. It was currently completely blank, but it was no doubt the scoreboard the System mentioned.

At least the System wasn't so heartless that it would only let one person through. Ten spots being awarded wasn't too bad since he guessed there were roughly 200 platforms in the vast arena. That meant 5% of the people would pass. Those odds didn't seem too bad considering they were on the last level of the 7th floor, whose guardian would no doubt have been extremely strong.

The question now was what level of power was required to be considered the top 5% in a group like this. He felt pretty confident in himself compared to almost any F-Grade cultivator, but he also knew that he knew nothing of how things worked with B-Grade and higher forces.

Neither did Ogras nor anyone else in the sector it seemed, as the strongest forces were all C-Grade. Perhaps the strongest people would know more, but the things beyond C-Grade might as well be myths for people like him.

Zac immediately tried to figure out a strategy to last as long as possible. Best case scenario he avoided battle altogether as the others fought it out. He would then swoop in and defeat a few warriors and snatch their accumulated points.

But he knew that was probably a pipe dream. He had no ability in stealth, and most of these people no probably had anti-stealth capabilities anyway. Besides, the system clearly disallowed such a tactic with its set of rules. Huddling in a corner might be seen as a sign of weakness as well, prompting him to get attacked.

Should he go the other way and blast his aura to the fullest, drowning his surroundings in his killing intent? No, something like that would probably backfire. They might consider him a raid boss and team up to take him out before turning on each other.

A thought suddenly struck him and he took out a couple of talismans and an Array Disk. He tried activating them one by one but he sighed in relief when none of them worked. Next he took out an amulet, a pretty weak defensive treasure he had snatched during the climb. The amulet immediately created a shimmering shield around him, though it was dimmer compared to the first time he tried it out.

It seemed that the System had enforced certain rules on the floor. Expendable treasures such as talismans, offensive items, and Array Disks had been completely disabled for the Battle Royale. However, real defensive treasures like his robes seemed to work, albeit in a reduced capacity.

Not being able to use any external items might be seen as a detriment, but for Zac that could only be considered a huge boon. He came from a newly integrated planet of a weak sector, and the things he could bring out would probably seem like a joke to most of these people.

Most scions of B-Grade clans would probably be able to beat him to death with their wallets alone, and even if the efficacy was lowered he would be in deep shit if someone took out a bunch of peak-grade arrays. He was pretty confident in the durability of his body, but even he wouldn't survive getting blasted by twenty **[Void Balls]**.

This leveled the playing field somewhat at least and he took a few deep calming breaths as he looked around. All the platforms were full by this point, and the warriors inside essentially stood rooted to their spots as they waited for the timer to hit zero.

The array flashed faster and faster, and suddenly it was just gone, exposing himself and the other warriors. The whole area shuddered as hundreds of immense auras burst out, each one powerful enough to completely steamroll anyone on Earth.

Not even a second passed before blood was spilled, and Zac was already behind in the count before he had even jumped down from the platform. A few had taken the opportunity to launch quick strikes on their neighbors for early points, and the scoreboard had already filled up with ten names.

One warrior after another released their strongest skills and transformed, and everything from tempestuous storms of energy to awe-inspiring avatars started to take form across the arena.

However, one phenomenon reigned supreme, to the point that all battles ground to a halt. Zac was primed to meet any assault, but he couldn't stop looking at the spectacle on the other side of the arena as well.

It was as though a sun had appeared from nowhere as a colossal ball of primordial flames covered an area of hundreds of meters in each direction. Space itself seemed unable to

withstand the heat as countless spatial tears were scorched open before they quickly mended again.

Zac had fought various flame-aspected warriors, but nothing he had seen had come close to the heat generated in that globe. The flames contained a boundless fury and scorching heat that threatened everyone in the arena, and Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to never cross the woman who sat on top of the sun.

There was no doubt in his mind that the ball contained at least a medium Dao Fragment, but the terrifying fluctuations made Zac believe that the reality was likely far scarier. Perhaps you'd even need Peak Fragment to reach those levels of power.

The fiery globe was a stark contrast to the young woman who hovered above the sun, as her face was an ice-cold mask as she gazed down on the arena as a goddess looking down at her subjects. Zac couldn't be sure from the distance, but she seemed to be a human from what he could tell.

A gargantuan avatar suddenly appeared behind her, a six-winged humanoid who could either be a fallen angel or a demon. It looked like it was seated inside the ball of flames, but it was still only submerged to its navel due to its towering height.

The avatar formed an odd seal with its fingers which conjured six enormous fractal circles above his head. The sense of danger in Zac's mind surged, and he started backing away even if he was on the other side of the arena.

Six terrifying whirlwinds of purest flames rose out from the ball of flames and entered the fractals, imbuing them with their scorching heat. The next moment the whole arena was illuminated in a blaring light as each fractal launched a condensed pillar at an unfortunate cultivator who was too close to the sun.

Five of the unlucky targets were simply obliterated, the flames not even leaving their bones or treasures intact. Only one woman, a rugged beastkin woman wielding an odd kettle with incense, managed to survive by conjuring a massive beast

avatar that managed to block the flames for a fraction of a second, which allowed her to move out of the way.

She was still grazed by the attack as it slammed into the ground, and she quickly took out a pill while she kept retreating with horror written all over her face. The beastkin only got a few steps though before she crumpled down on the ground as she started spewing grey clouds from her mouth. A second later she had turned into a bonfire as the flames had somehow burned her from inside.

The scene had completely subdued the whole arena. Just getting grazed by her attacks had been enough to get yourself killed, and she was still sitting on enough flames to drown out half the arena.

The flame goddess thankfully didn't seem inclined to push things any further for the moment and instead sat down on top of the ball of flames to spectate the battles. Zac had first thought that some people would call for teaming up against the monstrous powerhouse, but she was completely ignored as dozens of battles erupted as people increased their distance from the stationary sun.

Perhaps she only wanted to stake her position in the top ten, and no one was foolish enough to contend for the first position when you could fight for one of the other nine spots. Hopefully, she would only strike one unlucky person every three minutes to not get kicked out, and effortlessly pass the trial.

It was a humbling reminder that the sector he came from was just a backwater corner of the multiverse. He was probably the strongest F-Grade warrior there, but there was always a higher peak. He had no confidence in defeating that girl. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to handle one of her attacks in his human form.

His Undead form would perhaps be able to tank a few strikes, but defeating her in that form would be impossible. The vast power of the sun would melt his miasmic cage in seconds, and he would be turned into cinder before he would get close enough to hit her with an axe.

Was this the actual peak of the F-Grade, or were there even stronger people out there?

The flame girl was shockingly not the only warrior that made Zac leery, there were two more that he knew he would have to avoid if possible. Worse yet, half of the contenders were like him, holding back to observe the surroundings. There were no doubt a few more powerhouses hiding in the mix, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

He had briefly entertained the notion of gaining the first spot as he waited for the arrays to deactivate, but now he was rather wondering if he'd even make it into the top ten.

The system wouldn't give the leaders an easy time either, as there was actually a picture attached next to their names and points so that anyone would know who they were. One person obviously wasn't prepared for that, as his face started to distort and change in an effort to circumvent the ladder. But the picture next to his name kept changing as well.

Zac had no time to worry about others though, as a sword tip pierced out of thin air, aimed straight at his heart. It contained an inexorable force, and it felt like the sword was a kilometer long slab of metal rather than just a meter. He immediately summoned [**Nature's Barrier**] and imbued it with the Dao of Trees to block the incoming strike, while also getting ready to activate his Dao of the Coffin in case it was needed.

A vast expanse of trees spread out around Zac as he activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] as well, but this time the trees found competition from massive fractal swords that materialized all around him before they stabbed into the ground. He felt he was no longer in his private grove, but rather in a contested forest full of wood and steel.

The large sword pillars would have to wait though, as the incoming strike was stronger than expected. One of the ropes on the divine tree from [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] snapped, providing him with another shimmering layer of defense.

Thankfully it seemed like his layers defenses enough to stop the attack even if it was impossible for him to imbue the nature-attuned skills with the Fragment of the Coffin. The

dozens of Dao-Infused leaves didn't completely manage to impede the strike though, proving just how much power the stab had contained.

He had just activated the defensive barrier from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** as an extra precaution since he felt that **[Nature's barrier]** should be enough to block an opening salvo. His defensive skill was based on his Endurance after all, and even if the attack was infused with a Dao Fragment it still had to contend with a Peak Dao Seed and over 1800 effective Endurance.

But the attack wasn't over it seemed. The huge swords around him started to hum like they were struck by a tuning fork and two swords emerged out of the closest sword pillars like the massive swords were portals to some other dimension.

It was at this time his opponent finally appeared as well, rushing out of another sword pillar ready to strike.

It was a thin humanoid with purple skin and golden eyes. His build was pretty much the same as a very lanky human with the exception that his arms seemed to have an extra joint and that a thick but short tail extended from his lower back.

"Sorry, about this. You seem nice fellow, but I decided to give this floor a try," the man said as the three additional swords plunged toward Zac, each from its own direction. "And I need every point I can get."

Zac could only smile wryly in response. It looked like information wasn't free after all.

Chapter 439: Battle of Fates

Zac briefly wondered if the swordsman had assumed him to be a weakling due to his cluelessness about the Battle of Fates.

A burst of Zac's shocking killing intent spread out as he moved with lightning speed, his axe already falling toward the youth as a storm of leaves pushed away the three hovering blades temporarily. The man's eyes widened in surprise, but the display didn't deter him as a sharp aura radiated from him as he met Zac's attack with the sword in his hand.

A blinding flash of light was followed by a massive shockwave when [**Verun's Bite**] collided with a golden sword that the youth used to defend from Zac's overhead swing. A small crack could be heard from the man's arm though, and it was obvious he had strained to block the strike.

Zac was still pretty shocked by the guy's power, as his swing was both empowered by the Fragment of the Axe and the titanic power in his arms. But the arm holding the sword was only forced backward a bit before it stabilized again, though the man's whole body was shaking from strain.

This was the first time someone at his level had been able to cleanly block his strike as far as Zac could remember, but he wouldn't give up from something small like that so he immediately geared up for another strike. The swordsman was obviously not interested in matching brute force, and he suddenly shot back almost a hundred meters while the three flying blades prevented Zac from following by unleashing a storm of strikes at him.

Zac frowned and tried to follow using [**Loamwalker**], but he was for some reason unable to shrink the distance with his skill. Was it the sword pillars who messed with his mobility somehow? He could only move forward the normal way, but

each step was contested by a barrage of strikes that kept ripping the leaves of [**Nature's Barrier**] to shreds.

The swordsman thankfully didn't try to attack Zac from afar while he tried to catch up, but he rather swung at one of the sword pillars right next to him. A hymn of vibrating metals echoed out as the man unleashed a frenzied series of swings.

Zac didn't understand what he was doing, but waiting for an opponent to finish charging up a strike was the height of idiocy, so he started launching fractal blades of his own at the swordmaster every time he saw an opening between the flying swords. He received a few cuts in return, but it wasn't anything worse than flesh wounds.

But the man expertly met the incoming fractal blades with his sword and somehow redirected the force of the projectiles to harmlessly pass by him as he kept swinging at the pillar. Zac finally noticed what was going on. The swordmaster was charging the massive sword pillars with power.

They had looked pretty much like dull steel swords before, but now they gleamed with some unknown energy. Zac had realized the issue too late as the dozens of pillars started to shoot out a cascade of sword beams toward him.

Zac did have the advantage of 360-degree vision thanks to [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], but knowing where the attacks came from didn't really help when you were unable to dodge. There were just too many blades, especially with the three corporeal blades already harassing him.

Resonating sword waves kept coming at Zac from every angle, and he found himself incapable of blocking them all with the help of [**Nature's Barrier**] as the leaves were getting destroyed faster than he could create them. He eventually chose to just rush straight through the storm while imbuing his body with the Fragment of the Coffin, but he found himself swinging through air as the target had somehow passed through one of the sword pillars and appeared on the other side of the sword forest.

Zac growled in frustration as he instead chose to demolish one of the pillars, and one mighty swing with [**Verun's Bite**]

completely obliterated it and caused shards to shoot out in all directions. However, Zac felt like he was stuck in some sort of time loop when he saw the splinters fly back and recombine, once again forming an unblemished sword.

Thoughts of retreat started to intrude as Zac looked for a solution, but he stubbornly threw the impulse away. The guy he was fighting didn't have the confidence to win in this Battle of Fates. If he couldn't even beat him, how the hell would he reach the top ten? This was something like a trial for him, proving to himself that he could contend with the elites of the multiverse.

Cosmic Energy surge into his arm as a crack appeared in the air above the battlefield, allowing the hand of [**Nature's Punishment**] to emerge. Zac wasted no time as the wooden hand formed a seal, conjuring the enormous array that emitted an intense pressure toward the ground.

It was only then that Zac realized a potential problem. Were there punishments to summon in this weird dimension? There was nothing apart from the arena in this dimension. However, he breathed out in relief when he saw a pitch-black peak emerge from the array, bearing down on the forest below.

Those sword pillars were simply too annoying, providing the swordsman with both a powerful attack and an escape skill while also restraining Zac's movement. He wouldn't be able to end the fight while they remained, so he saw no recourse but to go for mutual destruction and sacrifice his forest to crush the pillars.

A stabbing pain suddenly flashed in Zac's mind, and it almost felt like when he looked upon the massive axe in his Dao Vision all those months ago. Zac looked over at his enemy with some alarm, only to see that the swordmaster had swapped out his mighty golden blade with a run-down sword in a simple leather scabbard.

Zac had no idea what was so special about the sword, but his Danger Sense told him that it was far deadlier than the other blades he had so far. He was unable to do too much about it though as he was occupied with controlling [**Nature's**

Punishment] while blocking the hundreds of sword waves that threatened to drown him, but Zac did manage to send a few fractal blades toward the swordsman to force him to split his attention.

However, the blades only made it halfway before they were eroded by the unceasing barrage of sword blades. The fractal edges formed by [**Chop**] were both larger and more ferocious, but they unable to withstand dozens of collisions.

Zac realized he wouldn't be able to stop whatever the swordsman was cooking up, so he got ready to expend another defensive charge to endure the strike while he completed the attack of [**Nature's Punishment**]. However, Zac soon realized that he wasn't the target.

The lanky warrior unsheathed and swung the blade in one lightning-quick motion toward the sky, and the rusty blade was back in its old scabbard within the blink of an eye. The only evidence of the attack was a white arc left behind along the sword's trajectory.

The light didn't disappear even after the swing ended, but it rather grew and grew until it was a hundred-meter wide half-moon that rose into the air to meet the pitch-black mountain's descent, and Zac was shocked to see the peak get cleaved in two along with the whole emerald array.

Burning pain seared his hand, and he forcibly ended the skill before the sword arc hit the wooden hand. Luckily it seemed that the swordsman had miscalculated things as well, and he looked shocked when the two halves of the mountain kept falling rather than disintegrating into motes of Cosmic Energy.

A massive shockwave erupted as the two enormous boulders slammed into the ground. The mountain exploded into thousands of jagged rocks, some as large as a car, that flew in all directions with terrifying momentum. The swordsman tried to escape through the closest sword pillar, but he was immediately spat out, perhaps because most of the swords had been utterly destroyed by the massive slabs of rock.

Zac saw his opportunity as witnessed the swordsman scamper back and forth among the flying gravel. He immediately

activated [**Loamwalker**], and immediately sensed that it was no longer restrained. He pushed through the chaos the moment he realized the skill worked, ignoring the twangs of pains from being pelted by the pieces of rocks flying around.

Suddenly he was right upon the swordsman, and [**Verun's Bite**] was ready to strike.

“Wha-“ the man exclaimed as he tried to phase away using some unknown means, but Zac's free hand was even faster as he grabbed the youth's arm and infused it with the Dao of the Coffin.

Zac wasn't planning on hurting the lanky warrior with his Dao, but he made a bet that it would be able to disturb the warrior's escape just like how he was able to stop Ogras from blending into the shadows. His guess was right as the enemy's form turned corporeal again.

The man was no weakling since he had reached the 7th floor, and he wasn't ready to give up just because he knew he wasn't Zac's match in a direct confrontation. A barrage of sword strikes harassed Zac as the man resummoned three golden swords, and each strike came from unpredictable angles and contained a tremendous force.

Zac kept blocking with [**Nature's Barrier**] and [**Verun's Bite**], all while trying to get a good swing at the man. He still had a death grip on the other man's arm, but his attempts at pushing him down to the ground proved impossible as the cultivator somehow resisted Zac's force.

But he wouldn't relent either and he ignored any finesse as he used a meter-long fractal edge and delivered one earthshattering strike after another while forcibly enduring the hail of sword strikes. Since Zac had captured his target it had turned into a battle of endurance, and if it was one thing Zac was confident in, then it was his ability to take a beating.

However, he suddenly remembered that he had gained a few new cards, and his killing intent congealed into a spear that stabbed into the man's back as Zac activated [**True Strike**]. Others wouldn't be able to see the spear as it was only a mean for Zac to control where he wanted to redirect the attention.

A golden disc looking like a miniature shield flashed into existence and radiated a massive amount of power as a necklace on the man's neck dimmed. It covered the warrior's whole back in an instant, defending the man against Zac's 'surprise attack'.

Of course, there wasn't actually an attack coming since the skill only created a threat without any real follow-up. But that by itself was sometimes enough as the man hurriedly back to see what was going on and if he needed to dodge.

The movement only took a split second, but that was all Zac needed as he activated the second fractal on **[Verun's Bite]** while swinging with everything he had. The distraction had caused a small weakness in the warrior's defense, and that was the difference between life and death.

The fractal edge of **[Chop]** suddenly disappeared, and **[Verun's Bite]** slipped past the golden sword as it gained a sanguine glow. It finally continued unimpeded toward the swordsman, and blood splashed in all directions.

"I'm sorry," Zac muttered as his axe bit into the shoulder of the warrior. "I need every point I can get."

Zac could have just as easily aimed his axe to bite into the man's head, instantly killing him, but he decided against it. He had no grievance with his enemy apart from them being competitors in the System's game of elimination. Besides, these people probably came from powerful forces, and who knew what kind of seeds of Karma killing these people would form.

"Shit, just my luck," he said as he reached toward the token on his waist. "Thank you for showing leniency. If you're ever in Asc-"

However, he wasn't able to finish his sentence though as he disappeared from the arena before he even had time to touch his token. His weapons disappeared with him as well, which was a shame since that rusty blade looked extremely interesting. However, Zac suddenly noticed that a Cosmos Sack was lying on the ground where the swordmaster just stood.

He quickly snatched it up and stowed it away as this wasn't the time to go over his gains. Zac's eyes rather looked around for any incoming threats, but no one seemed inclined to jump him as things stood. His eyes locked with a demon who wasn't too far away, but the man quickly retreated.

Perhaps he had seen Zac's battle and felt there were easier targets to focus on first, and Zac looked down at [**Verun's Bite**] and saw the glow slowly retreat into the second fractal on the handle. Judging by the density of the light he would be able to use the fractal another 3 or 4 times before he needed to recharge it with blood.

This was the resulting upgrade from Verun devouring the massive succulent back on the 4th floor, but he had only been able to utilize it recently as the Tool Spirit had been digesting the various energies it had absorbed. The feature wasn't as flashy as the summoning Verun itself, but it did drastically increase the sharpness of the edge for an instant, allowing a sudden burst of power that was hard to adjust to.

Zac had found that it was extremely effective to combine the effect with [**True Strike**] as the lapse in concentration of the enemy allowed him to make the most of the short burst in power. If he had used the fractal from the start the swordsman would probably have been able to use one of his defensive treasures to counter it, wasting the effect.

The brief respite after the battle allowed Zac to take a gander at the situation, and he was surprised to see how frenziedly people were fighting. Was there really a need to risk your life like this? Most of these people were scions of powerful clans, and many no doubt had a second climb remaining.

There were still over fifty fights going on, and Zac saw one person after another flash out of the arena, leaving only a Cosmos Sack behind. The scene made Zac realize that there might be some special protections in place, with the System providing last-second saves before they died.

That didn't explain why everyone fought so desperately. Was it about the Cosmos Sacks? The treasures carried around by a Scion of a B- or A-Grade Force were of extreme value for

someone like him, but it couldn't possibly be like that for everyone? Was there some other secret to this special level?

Still, many knew their limits. For example, Zac spotted a golem defeating some sort of devil cultivator, and the Golem reached down and crushed its own Token the second it snatched the Cosmos Sack left behind, disappearing with the spoils.

The number of contestants had dropped less half in just a minute, and Zac realized that things might be over pretty soon. He needed to defeat a few more people while there still were easy targets around. But just as he was about to pick a target he felt a sudden gust of wind right behind him, making his hair stand on end.

“Hey.”

Chapter 440: Fractured

Zac rapidly spun around to find himself face to face with an angelic girl who smiled in his direction. She had appeared out of nowhere, and Zac frowned as he swung his axe toward her neck without hesitation. His Danger Sense was quiet but his instincts screamed of danger, and Zac infused his body with the Fragment of the Coffin while the spiritual forest reappeared around him mid-swing.

But she only looked on with a smile, her eyes trained at his.

There was finally a response of danger in his mind, but it was though it was muffled, subdued to the point that he could barely feel it. That only made Zac even more certain that the girl was a real threat, and Zac strained for his swing to move even faster.

However, he suddenly noticed something was wrong. He felt as though he was moving extremely quickly, but his axe wasn't getting any closer to his target. Terror started to well up in his heart and he tried to flee, but it was futile as the whole world was suddenly gone, replaced with two enormous eyes, both of them only containing a blue vertical fracture that contained endless power.

Every fiber in Zac's body screamed for him to look away, but his body didn't listen to his commands as the eyes consumed his everything. A snap could be felt inside his mind as **[Mental Fortress]** crumbled like rotten wood, and then an all-consuming pain wracked his mind.

His very being was being eroded, and Zac knew he stood on the precipice of death. This wasn't a death his Specialty core could circumvent, as this was brought on by his soul crumbling, his mental force fracturing and falling apart.

He tried to move his hands toward the token attached to his side, as it wasn't worth dying just to get a better title. But any

sense of his body was long gone, and his vision swam as he fell down on the ground. His mind was turning blurry, but he felt some relief when he sensed a small vibration from the token by his side.

A shocking burst of ferocity suddenly burst forward, ripping the two enormous eyes into shreds.

Boundless destruction rampaged across his mind, startling Zac's blurred consciousness awake again. It was the [**Splinter of Oblivion**] that had been freed from its cage and lashed out in fury. Dark and extremely potent energies ravaged across his mind. His soul was quickly becoming tainted, but the splinter at least seemed to temporarily hold his crumbling soul together.

Zac once again regained a semblance of control of his body, and he saw the mentalist standing just a meter away from him. She didn't move an inch, but rather stood in place as she violently convulsed. Her sapphire eyes were replaced by two ravaged sockets from where black blood poured down like waterfalls, staining her dress before it pooled at her feet.

Was the Splinter of Oblivion the cause of this? Was that the reason she still hadn't been teleported out? The backlash she had received seemed to have been just as serious as his own, and it seemed like a coinflip who would succumb to their mental wounds first.

It was an opportunity for him to escape from the Tower, but Zac was dismayed to find that his arm wouldn't move toward the token. The duplicity core had considered him on the verge of dying, and the slower automatic process of changing form had begun as miasma started to spread through his body. Worse yet, the Splinter's awakening seemed to have canceled the automatic transfer out of here and he was now stuck in place.

Zac would normally still be able to move in this state even if he was severely weakened, but with the shock to his soul he had turned completely immobile. He could only helplessly lie on the ground, praying that the Splinter would be able to keep

his mind intact long enough for him to change form and do something about it.

He couldn't help but curse his bad luck being targeted by a mentalist, one of the rarest class types. Did he project the image of being a rube or something? First he was targeted by the neighbor, then this scary girl. Did she perhaps think he was an easy target since he was an axe wielder, a class choice that famously favored by meatheads?

If that was her reasoning, she was unfortunately spot-on. Zac was somewhat confident he'd survive at least one attack of that insanely powerful fire mage, but his mental defenses were completely inadequate to counter the strike of a mental user who was strong enough to reach the peak of the 7th floor.

Worse suddenly turned to worst as a massive lance of darkness pierced the chest of the mentalist, instantly killing her by the looks of it. It was some sort of masked assassin wielding a meter-long spike who had appeared out of nowhere, immediately reaping her life.

He had probably noticed that she was barely hanging on and realized it was an opportunity to reap some easy points. Worse yet, after he had killed the mentalist he turned his attentions toward Zac, who was still lying impotently on the ground. Perhaps he thought that Zac was faking it or simply immobilized since he hadn't been teleported out yet.

It looked like his avenger would immediately turn into his killer.

A blazing pain of getting his innards shredded joined the agony of having his soul tortured as the black pike stabbed into his chest. A burst of power ripped apart his left lung, and it took everything in his power to not even blink from the attack.

He was still completely immobile, and his only chance of survival was for the man to think he stabbed a corpse as death-attuned energies already spread through his body. However, he suddenly caught a lucky break as the assassin flashed away the next second, narrowly avoiding a massive arrow that caused cracks around its trajectory.

One of the spatial cracks swiped Zac's side, and he could only bear having yet another grisly wound opening on his already lacerated body.

A few seconds passed and Zac realized he had somehow made it. The mentalist was dead, the assassin occupied elsewhere, and the rest of the cultivators had no time to worry about a corpse lying on the ground.

Zac couldn't help but feel he was a bit lucky even though both his soul and body were wounded beyond their limits. His terrifying Endurance and death-attuned energy had allowed him to narrowly escape death, and giving him a small opportunity to survive.

Another relief was that the splinter was quickly being pushed back into its cage by the miasmatic fractals, but Zac felt some helplessness when he noticed that yet another one of the fractals had been destroyed. That was two fractals gone from his visit to the Base Town, and he didn't know how many of them were required for the cage to maintain its efficacy.

There was also the issue of the large amounts of unfiltered energies the splinter had left all over his fractured soul. He had no idea what the long-term effect of such pollution would be.

However, that problem was nothing compared to the fact that his soul was once again falling apart now that it didn't have the splinter to keep the pieces together. He did have a solution, but it was just that the price was one he really didn't want to pay. His heart was full of reluctance, but he knew he didn't have a choice. His body would slowly mend, but his soul was another matter.

He arduously managed to move his hand toward his mouth, praying that no one was watching the supposed corpses. When it was finally right in front of his mouth a small intricate box appeared from his Spatial Ring.

The [**Prajñā Cherry**] was the only thing in his possession that could mend a soul as damaged as his currently was. He felt extremely apologetic to Alea, but he wouldn't do her any good if his own soul broke apart before he even got back to Earth.

A swift motion propped open the lid and Zac immediately shoved the cherry into his mouth, stem and all, before he put the box back into his spatial ring. A warmth spread through Zac's mouth, but abyssal darkness was spreading through his mind even faster, making Zac lose any sense of self.

A sharp pain suddenly flared up in his leg as a large piece of rubble from a broken platform slammed into it, probably the result of a frantic battle nearby. The pain shocked Zac awake long enough to roughly chew a few times and swallow the cherry.

Zac's mind slowly descended into the darkness once more, but suddenly there was a burst of warmth, like his soul was caressed in a hug. He still didn't regain any feeling in his body though, and the clamor of battle turned into a distant susurrus.

Was this death?

A deep bell echoed in the darkness, and the bottomless abyss was replaced with a boundless sky with splashes of clouds colored pink by a sunset. The slight rustle of leaves was the only thing interrupting the tranquility of the evening. Zac realized he was on a solitary peak surrounded by arid badlands.

The rustling came from a small tree with purple leaves, and by the looks of things the tree was the only growth for miles in each direction. Sharp cliffs devoid of any growth surrounded him, leading down toward a canyon far below. Similar rocky pillars could be seen far in the distance, though none of them seemed to have any vegetation growing.

It was only then that Zac realized his vantage was that of the tree itself, which would explain why he was incapable of movement. Was this the origin of the cherry that he had just eaten?

"Amitabha," a gentle but decidedly masculine voice drifted out from beneath his vantage point, and Zac noticed a large figure sitting right next to the tree.

Shockingly enough he seemed to notice Zac as well, as he looked up in his direction with a smile on his face. The old

man reminded Zac of Abbot Everlasting Peace from his mannerisms, though this monk was anything but human.

Zac had no idea what race the thing beneath him was. It was a generally humanoid, though extremely rotund. It almost looked like a large ball with a smaller ball on top for a head. It didn't look like obesity though, but rather a natural feature of his species. From his massive torso two surprisingly long and slender arms extended downward, and his hands were placed in his lap.

If one could call it that since the monk didn't actually have any legs.

It instead had two massive wings lying across the ground like a cape, and when their feathers rustled it sounded like divine bells while shimmering lights danced about. The being looked odd but it was definitely a Buddhist cultivator rather than a beast, as he was dressed in a Kasaya while wearing a large bead necklace.

He had a generally humanoid face, with a set of large golden eyes that radiated wisdom, a small mouth, and a normal nose. There also seemed to be a third eye in his forehead, like that of Anzonil, though it was closed at the moment. Finally, a long mane of long gray feathers ran down his head and back, held together with a string like a ponytail.

Even if the being looked a bit odd there was no doubt in Zac's mind he was a powerful warrior. His aura was subdued, but the power in his gaze was undeniable. Besides, looking at the mysterious lights that naturally radiated from his wings almost felt as beneficial for his Dao as witnessing a Tower Apparition.

"Little cherry tree, how can you suddenly carry such fate?" the winged being mumbled, before his eyes slowly lit up with comprehension. "I see... You taught this poor monk something today. Benevolence must be reciprocated, thus completing the cycle and severing karma."

Zac tried to ask what the old monk meant, but he was unable to speak or even move. He could only watch as the monk slapped his two hands together in prayer, and the sound of his

hands clapping was like divine thunder that echoed through the cosmos.

Zac's mind was filled with a shocking force in an instant, and he felt a connection to the universe he had never sensed before. All living things were part of a greater whole, all connected by karma and Heaven's Will. Was this the grand truth of the universe, or was it the cultivation path of the winged monk sitting under the cherry tree?

The feeling only lasted for a second, and when he looked around he had returned to the solitary mountain peak, while the monk was nowhere to be seen.

Zac could sense that he, or rather the cherry tree, had transformed somehow from what the monk did. It still looked the same from the outside as far as Zac could see, but there was a tremendous power hiding within.

A massive halo that looked like a setting sun suddenly exploded out from the tree as its branches started to violently shake. Buddhist hymns sang across the badlands as the tree kept growing and transforming. It had just been a bit over five meters before, but it grew over a hundred meters in an instant.

Its appearance had also taken a drastic turn, as its purple leaves were suddenly covered in golden fractals while its trunk turned almost black with similar engravings. Its canopy stretched hundreds of meters in each direction, sheltering the area from the sweltering sun.

The changes weren't over though as the roots kept growing downward along the hoodoo, their exuberant vitality transforming the arid rock as they descended toward the parched ground. First, it was simply moss that covered the sheer rock, but soon enough even small trees and flowers forced their ways through the cracks, turning the rocky pillar into a living monument.

The edges of the branches started to droop as they kept growing, and soon they had formed a dome with the pillar as a center. Outside was still the sandblasted wastelands, but the area within the canopy was quickly turning into a pocket-sized paradise.

Chapter 441: Faceless

The vision of the consecrated tree and its kingdom slowly faded as Zac returned to his body. Before he fell into the vision his soul had been crumbling while his body was grievously wounded, but he realized his body was almost completely healed upon waking up. A vigorous energy was gathered at his remaining wounds, and he felt them close with enough efficacy to put most of his healing pills to shame.

A thought struck Zac and he immediately opened his Dao Menu, and as expected there was a new entrant.

Fragment of the Bodhi (Early): All attributes +10, Endurance +60, Vitality +80, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +50, Effectiveness of Vitality +5%.

The vision had actually managed to help him form the third Dao Fragment, and the Fragment of the Bodhi even had tremendous healing capabilities from the looks of it. However, it was his mind rather than his body that had been in a critical state, and Zac hurriedly looked inward while still maintaining his unmoving posture. Unearthing all the capabilities of his new fragment would have to wait.

A vibrant emerald force surged through his soul, encompassing the splintered pieces of spiritual energy into a warm embrace. Most of his soul was already back together, and the remaining fractures were being mended with a speed visible to the naked eyes.

However, he noted with a frown that his soul wasn't uniform any longer. Whenever he had gazed at it before it had looked like a translucent ball in his mind, and this ball had become slightly larger and more pristine after taking a dip in the Pool of Tranquility.

However, now it almost looked like some sort of tadpoles were swimming about in his soul, small fuzzy blotches on an

otherwise clear backdrop. It was no doubt the remnant energies left from the Splinter of Oblivion's rampage. Not only that, but it also seemed as though some of the alien energies had crammed themselves into the cracks of his soul turning itself into some sort of mortar as the **[Prajñā Cherry]** healed him.

Zac had no idea what this infiltration would result in, and it felt like this was the very thing that the Miasmatic Fractals had defended against the past months. The Draugr-lady's cage had managed to cleanse the energies for him before they merged with his soul.

He didn't feel anything amiss or different at the moment, but he knew he couldn't trust those instincts. The splinter had manipulated him many times before, and sometimes with him only realizing it after the fact.

Seeing the situation about almost made Zac want to leave the tower early and find someone who could create the second of his Soul Strengthening Arrays. He was losing miasmatic fractals left and right and it felt like things were spiraling out of control. However, he knew he couldn't give up now. He had paid a steep price to remain in contention, and he wasn't ready to exit now.

The mentalist was pretty insane, but he had now transformed into his Draugr-form. Reaching middle proficiency on **[Indomitable]** had allowed him to infuse the skill with the Fragment of the Coffin, and the two together should make him strong enough in case another mentalist lurked in the arena.

As for anything else, he had **[Immutable Bulwark]** and his shield.

Zac had initially turned his focus toward his soul, but he now tried to get a grip of the surroundings while maintaining the disguise of a corpse. The vision had clearly taken less than five minutes, as he would have been booted from the arena by now otherwise.

He was still lying on the ground with the still-warm corpse of the woman who fractured his soul, and their combined blood had created a large pool that he was currently lying inside. The

scene was pretty gristly, but that was a blessing in disguise as he had at least been left alone.

Zac tried to move a bit, but he realized he was still extremely weakened even though the transformation to his Draugr-form had ended. Perhaps it was due to the fact that his soul was still being pieced back together by the emerald glow. A lot of his organs were also turned to mush by the stab from the assassin's spike, which might have left some hidden weakness even if he had been restored by the cherry and his new Dao Fragment.

Each second felt like an eternity as Zac waited for the reconstruction of his mind to finish. He really needed to fight someone since he could be kicked out of the arena any second now due to inactivity. But Zac realized he should have been careful what he wished for, as he was suddenly shrouded by a shadow.

A figure had appeared out of nowhere, a small goblin-looking humanoid no more than a meter tall, and he bent over to rummage through the clothes of the dead woman next to Zac. There was actually someone bold enough to loot the corpses while battles raged all around them? Zac made sure to be completely unmoving, and he anxiously tried to urge his body to regain its strength.

Zac's didn't as much as blink when the thief started to rummage through his clothes as well, or even when he found the Cosmos Sack hidden within his robes. Anxiousness burned in his chest, but he finally felt a sense of completeness as his soul was finally whole again. Zac's hand snapped forward like a spear, and with the help of the Fragment of Axe his hand became sharp enough to stab straight into the chest of the unsuspecting thief.

The man looked one-part confused and two-part horrified as his torso turned into shreds in an instant. Zac almost gaped in disbelief at the scene, but he quickly snatched back his cosmos sack in case it would be teleported out. But the man was deader than dead, and his upper torso slid off to the side while his legs crumpled.

Zac looked down at his hand with some shock, not able to comprehend the terrifying burst of power he had unleashed. His jab had been infused with the Fragment of the Axe, but the effect more chaotic and destructive than it should be. Was this the result of his soul getting tainted?

The situation was too chaotic to investigate at the moment though, and Zac knew he would have to look into this after he left this level. He instead quickly rummaged through the mangled corpse, but he only found the spatial ring that seemed to have belonged to the mentalist before. As for the thief's own possessions, he could find none.

There was not even a complimentary cosmos sack dropped by the system, making Zac snort with irritation as he got up to his feet. Maybe thieves got the same sort of pocket dimension skills like merchants did, effectively robbing Zac of his chance to loot another scion.

However, he quickly realized his mistake and he immediately changed his face with [**Thousand Faces**], bearing the painful transition. He didn't think the cultivators around him had the time to completely understand what transpired here, but he didn't want the fact of his dual-class to spread even if these people were from completely different sectors.

Luckily he was completely drenched in blood and viscera, making it nigh impossible to match him going by clothes either. Furthermore, he would soon be covered up in another layer of miasmic armor. The large shield that appeared on his arm would hopefully also make it even harder to connect to his human side. As for his axe, there wasn't much he could do about that.

The people around him were far too dangerous for him to use [**Hunger**] instead of his main weapon. He didn't even dare to swap out [**Verun's Bite**] for a spare axe.

A wide sweep proved that he was out of trouble for the moment, and Zac thanked the gods that there was no immediate threat. He had just killed a cultivator, which meant he had some breathing room before he needed to fight again. But the situation that he was met with was a bit odd.

There were still roughly 30 people in the arena, but only a handful of battles still raged on. The others were simply looking at the others and up at the ladder. Quite a few were actually looking right at him as well, donning calculative expressions. Their discerning eyes were a bit hair-raising, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He knew he wasn't strong enough to kill everyone that might have witnessed his transformation. Zac could only pretend nothing was wrong and hope that they'd chalk up the situation to some odd transformation skill. At least he wasn't jumped by the remaining warriors, which gave Zac a chance to look up at the ladder as well.

A lot of changes had taken place in the ladder during his unconsciousness. Only the first three positions were completely unmoved, and it looked like they were content with the results as they leisurely looked around at the others. All of them had over twenty points, making it essentially impossible not to pass the trial as long as they didn't get kicked for inactivity.

The second and third positions actually seemed to be from the same Clan as they shared the same last name, but they seemed to have no intention of teaming up judging by how far they stood from each other. Things generally seemed pretty civil, and Zac couldn't understand why some of the spectators didn't try to take advantage of the few people who were currently embroiled in life-and-death battles.

Had the remaining elites agreed upon some code of conduct while he was out of it?

Zac wasn't on the ladder as expected, which wasn't surprising as he had only defeated two people, one of which only provided one point. It was unlikely that the thief he just defeated was anything special either, and he had probably defeated one opponent at best before deciding to loot rather than compete for the top ten positions.

The problem was deciding who to target next. Picking one of the people on the ladder would guarantee a top ten placement if he won, but the battles would no doubt be pretty rough.

Fighting Iz Tayn who still sat on top of her miniature sun was a non-starter, but the other 9 were obviously no weaklings either since only one of them was currently getting attacked.

The other option was taking on one or a few of the remaining spectators in hopes that his combined points would at least push him to the tenth spot. That tactic might end with him expending a lot of energy without anything to show for it though. Those who still stood in the arena were no doubt the elites of elites, and taking out two of them to gather points was probably harder than just one person in the top 10.

Zac soon enough made his choice and started moving, prompting most of the spectators to look over at him with vigilance. Zac ignored the gazes as a sea of miasma started to billow out around him, followed by the massive fractal bulwark that started to hover in front of him in case of a sneak attack.

His body groaned and creaked as he activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**] next. Zac didn't summon his skeletal helpers this time around though, as he wasn't too confident in their ability to help out in a place like this. Judging by the attacks he had seen they would be ripped to shreds in no time unless he infused them with his Dao, and he would need his fragments for his other skills.

He had a feeling that the skill would change in interesting ways as it leveled up, but for now he couldn't justify the cost of activating the [**Undying Legion**]. Instead, he stomped down on the ground and disappeared, and stomped down again the instant he appeared in front of a familiar figure.

It was actually the masked man wielding a pitch-black spike, the guy who had almost killed him earlier. His pseudonym was Faceless 9, and he was currently holding the 7th position on the ladder with 13 points.

Zac couldn't deny that part of his reasoning for choosing this man as a target was fueled by vengeance for getting his innards shredded, but there was also some logic to it. He had already seen some of the man's repertoire and weapon whereas most of the top contenders were a mystery to him.

Furthermore, judging from what Zac had witnessed the man seemed to be an assassin-type character, which was the best match for his current form. He had already been forced to change race, and he wouldn't be able to swap back to his human form anytime soon. Finally there were a couple of corpses around him, which would help fuel his miasmic reserves through **[Fields of Despair]**.

“Wrong choice,” the masked man grunted with an emotionless voice before he disappeared, and Zac's mind screamed of danger the next moment, prompting him to immediately block the back of his head with his shield.

If Zac had been a fraction of a second slower he would probably have died then and there as the black spike slammed into **[Everlasting]** with enough force to make Zac stumble forward. The sturdy shield was almost pierced straight through as well, though the fractals helped it to quickly regain its original form.

Cold sweat ran down Zac's back, but he pushed aside his lingering fear as he quickly infused **[Deathwish]** with the Fragment of the Coffin before it was too late. The assassin snorted and disappeared the next moment, but even he seemed a bit shocked to find himself right in front of the massive Bardiche Zac wielded.

A huge gash tore open the man's chest as the spectral projection stabbed into the back of Faceless 9, but he narrowly avoided any lethal wounds. Zac tsked in annoyance as he tried to swing his axe again, but it appeared that the assassin quickly learned from his mistake as he managed to move further away, somehow circumventing the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

Zac sighed in regret when he saw that his gambit had failed. He had hoped to take down the man with a surprise strike relying on the discombobulating effect from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, but the masked warrior had dodged with almost impossible nimbleness. Zac did manage to leave a pretty nasty gash though, but it wasn't enough to weaken him to any significant degree.

It looked like Zac would have to do things the hard way, and billowing clouds of corrosive gas started to shroud the cage as the wails of fifteen chains started echo out of the cage as an azure fractal formed in the sky.

Chapter 442: A Break from the Monotony

Finally succeeding in upgrading [**Profane Seal**] during his climb was one of Zac's greatest gains while climbing the 7th floor. The upgrade added five more chains that extended from the top of five massive tombstones that had been added to the cage, and they would be sorely needed to catch the slippery assassin.

The additional chains wasn't the only benefit from the skill evolving. Dense scripts lit up with azure luster on top of the huge tombstones, and they formed a large fractal in the air that covered the entirety of the cage. It was a restrictive array, somewhat akin to the gravity array of the Zethaya Pill House.

It was another layer of restrictions that hindered anyone who had been caught in Zac's cage. Along with [**Fields of Despair**], the spectral chains, [**Winds of Decay**], and the taunting effect of [**Vanguard of Undeath**] the area within [**Profane Seal**] had become a real hellscape for the living.

But the man caught in Zac's trap was no normal man, and he barely seemed troubled at all by the situation.

Another warning of danger exploded in Zac's mind, this one even more urgent than before. He desperately moved [**Undying Bulwark**] to block his torso while infusing it with the Fragment of the Coffin. A sharp snap could be heard as the bulwark was pierced straight through as the pitch-black spike continued toward Zac's body.

Almost all of the strike's momentum had been absorbed by the defensive skill though, and the spike didn't even manage to piece the next level of defense, the thick miasmatic armor that covered Zac's whole body.

Zac was ready to retaliate with his axe, but his brows rose in surprise when a spectral projection suddenly appeared on the other side of the cage. He pushed the confusion aside and infused the ghost with the Fragment of the Coffin just as it stabbed the man, creating another shallow wound that immediately started to fester.

It was shocking how far the man had instantly moved after stabbing him, but the fifteen chains of **[Profane Seal]** immediately set out to trap the assassin while Zac started to release torrential amounts of corrosive mists into the cage. He had failed in taking the man down with one strike, but Zac was still confident in whittling him down using his standard approach.

The assassin tried striking Zac's vitals a few more times, but between **[Immutable Bulwark]** and his shield he was able to escape unscathed, while adding more and more wounds with the help of **[Deathwish]**. Faceless 9 was probably the fastest enemy he had ever fought, but his defense wasn't too impressive.

Besides, the spectral projections were immutable. The masked warrior had unleashed flurries of stabs at them the moment they appeared, but the stabs went straight through their incorporeal bodies. They could only be blocked, which made them the perfect counter for people who relied on not getting hit.

The assassin suddenly appeared far in the distance, and Zac frowned as he realized the assassin was up to something. Bleeding abscesses could be seen at various parts of his arms, whereas the wounds on his body were continuously leaking pus. A smaller spike suddenly appeared in his hand, but rather than attacking Zac he stabbed himself in his heart.

Zac's eyes widened in shock witnessing what looked like a suicide, but he quickly realized that things were about to get rough. The man's muscles suddenly started to writhe and wriggle as black liquid reminiscent of his ichor poured out of his wounds before they coagulated, forming thick scabs around his wounds.

The nine closest chains were suddenly thrown away with enough force to cause cracks all along the links as the man stabbed forward with enough speed to become a blur, which gave the man another short breather. Impenetrable darkness spread through the cage the next moment as the assassin unleashed some sort of domain, and any clue of the man's whereabouts was gone. The man's attuned energies had completely blended in with the surroundings, rendering **[Cosmic Gaze]** useless.

Even his life-force was hidden by the dome of darkness, rendering the unique vision brought by his Draugr race impotent. Just as Zac tried to figure out his next step a sharp pain erupted in his left leg, and he realized a hole as wide as a quarter having appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

The hole went straight through not only his armor but his whole leg, and he felt his black ichor pouring out of the wound. He sensed that another spectral ghost had automatically appeared some distance away, but Zac didn't have time to imbue it before it had struck the assassin. What had just happened?

Another wound suddenly opened up, this time on his right arm. Zac frowned at the fact that he couldn't sense a thing before being struck, not a single warning from his Danger Sense that he was about to get attacked. This time he managed to imbue the projection from **[Deathwish]**, but Zac couldn't help but worry.

Zac had already heard that there were methods to circumvent the special senses from Luck, but this was the first time he had seen it to such a degree. Was this the hallmark of a top-tier assassin?

This was a fighting-style that was completely different compared to anything else Zac had witnessed during the Battle Royale. The man had no big avatars and there were no flashy skills that emitted massive outbursts of energy. However, that didn't mean the man was weak, and it wasn't without reason that none of the spectators had dared to target him.

Zac was sitting at over 300 effective luck, but he couldn't even begin to sense when the attacks were coming. Not only that, but his Endurance and multiple layers of defense barely impeded the man as two gristly wounds had appeared on his body without him impeding the strikes in the slightest.

There was an extreme penetrative force between his jabs, and just one or two attacks might be enough to kill most people. The man had no doubt been able to effortlessly assassinate one guardian after another during his climb using this method, barely sustaining any wounds.

However, a muted pang of danger suddenly erupted, and Zac hurriedly protected his head with his shield, safely looking another strike aimed at his head. Zac nodded in understanding as he realized that his Danger Sense at least could sense lethal strikes. It meant that the darkness hadn't changed much.

So Zac simply ordered the chains to flail about at random as he stood rooted in place, only focusing on staying alive and infusing the **[Deathwish]** with the Fragment of the Coffin.

Finally, there was a break from the monotony.

Iz Tavn curiously looked at the weird cage formed from death-attuned energies, and the two fighters who were grinding each other down within. Luckily she had been gifted the skill **[Sungod's Eyes]** by her uncle before entering the tower. Otherwise, she would have missed out on the melee due to the **[Red Hand Shroud]**.

Not that the fight was anything impressive. The assassin from the Red Hand Society had actually been forced to infuse himself with their disgusting compound to keep fighting, whereas the odd one was just unusually competent at taking a beating. He would no doubt be able to make a decent living as a sparring partner at one of her family's Trial Planets.

She had been deeply disappointed that there wasn't anyone interesting in the arena after something interesting finally happened in this dull Tower climb. The two siblings from the Primeval Lake were pretty strong, but they were still not

strong enough to force her hand even if they joined forces. It was a shame that there was no one like their grand-uncle in their current generation. Then it would have truly been a clash of fates.

She felt a bit bad about scorching a few unlucky people out of frustration, but then again it could be seen as them lacking in fate by being spawned so close to her. After that she let the others escape in time, apart from the despicable fellows who didn't respect the proper rules of conduct. Such people could burn for all she cared.

But something interesting finally had happened. He seemed to think that no one had noticed his transformation, but everything that her sun illuminated was within her domain. How could she not see what happened? What kind of encounter would allow one to change between a Human and a Draugr?

More importantly, was he really human? It was extremely minute, but there was something odd hidden within that she had never encountered before. Something primordial.

Mixing an ordinary Human bloodline with the blood of higher beings was nothing unusual, as humans in general were extraordinarily average. Her own family was a prime example of that practice. But the odd thing was that her own bloodline felt some pressure from that man, which she had never encountered before. At least not against someone in her own grade who hadn't undergone their bloodline evolutions yet.

That wasn't the only odd thing, and she couldn't help herself from being engrossed as she replayed the events in her mind. It didn't make sense. She saw him almost dying from his soul shattering, then somehow being saved by an errant arrow that forced the Red Hand-Assassin to move away.

He then proceeded to eat a natural treasure that somehow changed its provenance mid-consumption, and finally recovering over two minutes. All without being targeted or hit at all as battles raged all around him. It was as though his surroundings had been shifted to a separate dimension. Was it dumb luck? Or accumulated Luck?

She didn't think that even she would be that lucky if put in such a situation, and she had almost 200 Luck along with her Fate-augmenting treasures.

So Iz felt like a child who had found an odd colorful bug in their family's garden, and her eyes followed the bulky man as he tried to take down a much more skilled opponent by sheer stubbornness.

The man from the Red Hand Society was clearly one of their stronger cadets, likely someone who had survived the hellish training on one of their induction planets. Anyone who survived long enough to enter the Society from one of those hellholes was an emotionless murderer who had solidified their path with a million corpses.

He kept opening up one wound after another on the Draugr, who was leaking like a sieve by this point. He was using some nurturing Dao Fragment from the looks of it, but his control of the Fragment was atrocious. Why didn't he form proper Dao Arrays on the wounds?

The humanoid cockroach tried, again and again, to catch his opponent with his axe and the fifteen chains that flailed about in the cage, but he didn't seem to possess any means to pierce through the darkness of the shroud. The assassin effortlessly moved back and forth between the attacks, bursting forward with one stab after another.

Of course, the assassin was facing his own troubles as well. He was starting to look disfigured from the wounds of the retaliatory strikes. Absolute strikes were the worst to people like him. If it was her she could have simply formed a shield of flames to block out any such attempts, but the assassin seemed to follow a much more extreme path lacking such tools.

He had quickly expended the few defensive treasures in his arsenal, and since talismans and arrays didn't work here he had to endure a thousand little pin-pricks infused with a corrosive Dao Fragment. However, the fragments the Draugr used, were just Early Stage, a far cry from her three Middle Fragments that empowered each other. Even worse, he seemed

unable to properly coordinate them into something more potent.

Should she kill the assassin to make sure that the colorful bug didn't die? She had already moved a flame tendril to stand ready beneath the miasmic cage. A quick poke and the struggle would be over.

But that would be a bit rude, not to mention somewhat embarrassing to butt in on a fight after having killed a few people for that kind of transgressions. She guessed she would have to leave it up to fate.

Finally it seemed like the assassin had enough, and he launched a rapid succession of furious stabs as he moved quickly enough to make it hard even for Iz to follow. But the armored warrior was like an impenetrable fortress, enduring the strikes he could endure and blocking those he could not.

The failed assault was followed by an attempt at escape, and the assassin first tried to teleport out of the miasmic cage. But he was completely unable to leave, and another special warrior attacked him the moment he tried to slip through the cracks. A furious assault on one of the towers was only met with a storm of ghosts as well it seemed.

The moment the assassin realized that both killing the man and escaping was impossible he immediately reached down and crushed the token on his belt. Ever the pragmatists, the assassins.

The Red Hand Assassin disappeared in a flash, taking the domain with him. The Draugr stumbled around for a few seconds, seemingly unaware that he had actually won. The fifteen spectral chains kept flailing back and forth inside the cage as he stood hunched over, ready to eat another stab.

Only after twenty seconds passed did the man have enough presence of mind to look up at the sky. He had appeared on the 6th spot, meaning that the battle was won. Only then did he slowly start to move toward the Cosmos Sack, leaving a trail of black goop in his wake.

Iz was unsure what to do. The man was very interesting, but he was some random person from another part of the universe. Was there any point in trying to look into his secrets? There were a lot of oddities on his body, but who didn't have a secret or two? But it was *interesting*.

Of course, there was one easy way to test if they had some connection of fate. She instructed Uyirrik to get to work, and Iz's bloodline familiar formed another seal as she channeled a piece of her **[World's End]** into the array.

Someone who was dead obviously couldn't carry any fate or secrets worth fretting over.

Chapter 443: Fate

Zac felt like a block of swiss cheese as he desperately rotated his new Fragment while eating Healing Pills like they were candy. Whatever that assassin had infused himself with had made him disgustingly durable, and Zac couldn't believe how many Dao-infused strikes it took to force him to give in.

Scabs had covered almost every part of the man's blackened body, and he looked more like an undead compared to Zac himself by the end. It appeared that whatever the black spike infused into the man's body forcibly kept the assassin going while instantly patching up his accumulating wounds.

But the layered corrosive effects had finally proven too much, forcing the man to crush his Token. The encounter had been too close for comfort though, and Zac wasn't sure whether he would have been able to endure if it wasn't for his new Dao Fragment that kept patching up his lacerated body. Zac shook his head as he arduously moved over to the spot where the assassin left the arena and bent over to pick up the Cosmos Sack he left behind.

A glance at the sky confirmed that he was pretty much safe from elimination at this point. He was in sixth place on the ladder with 18 points. He had a shot at reaching even higher since there was only a 3 point difference between the 4th and his spot, but he wasn't sure his body would be able to take it.

He had barely defeated the assassin even though his class was a direct counter, and he was running low on miasma due to the massive loss of ichor. He did pop a **[Soldier Pill]** to restore some of his reserves, but running low on Miasma wasn't the only issue. Zac looked down at **[Everlasting]** with a sigh.

The shield currently had multiple holes after getting brutalized during the fight. The fractals of the shield were thankfully still intact, and the holes were slowly closing themselves by the

automatic repair function. However, its structural integrity was breached, and the weakness would transfer over to **[Immutable Bulwark]** as well, meaning his defenses were compromised by at least half until the shield had restored itself.

There was also the issue of the splinter. The side-effects of having one's soul filled with the splinter's corrosion had started to make itself known during the latter half of the fight. A smoldering fury had started to build as he got increasingly wounded, and it was a strain to stay in place.

His subconscious had been screaming at him to destroy everything, to bravely rush forward and crush everything with the axe in his hand. That was obviously lunacy though, as he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him, much less his target flitting about in the darkness domain.

The impulses had luckily calmed down the moment the battle ended, and Zac felt like himself again after just ten seconds. But it proved that prolonged battles could turn a bit iffy in the short term. Any thought of retreat had been long thrown out of his mind as he fought, and he would rather have died than given up in the heat of the moment, even though he was just inside a trial.

That fact alone made Zac leery about entering another battle. Getting a higher position would probably improve his reward if past experience was any indication, but he wasn't ready to die just to get a better placement. But it might not be up to him if he entered another battle, but rather the Splinter.

All this combined made Zac unwilling to fight until getting a better handle on his situation. In fact, he wanted to keep **[Profane Seal]** active until the trial ended as a protective measure, but he felt that he was losing control over the skill, meaning that it was reaching its limits of how long it could stay active. He could only reluctantly release the skill as he tried to appear as intimidating as possible to avoid immediately getting attacked.

Thankfully his miasmic armor from **[Vanguard of Undeath]** automatically repaired itself, and it should be impossible to see

all the wounds covering his body. Along with the swirling clouds of his **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Winds of Decay]** he should look just as menacing as when he was at full strength.

However, not even a second had passed after the cage went down before alarm bells once again went off in his mind, and he saw a massive pillar of fire bearing down at him with terrifying momentum. He barely had time to adjust **[Immutable Bulwark]** before the beam was upon him, and it suddenly felt like he was being burned alive.

Flames burst out in all directions as the attack slammed into the bulwark, and the fractal shield only managed to block parts of the shocking amount of energies, before the excess energy went around its edges. Zac was soon enough trapped within a corridor of flames, barely holding on.

He was slowly being pushed back as **[Everlasting]** started to lose its shape from the heat. Each second felt like an eternity as Zac could only focus on holding on. He had seen what had happened to the beastkin warrior by just getting grazed by a beam just like this one, and he couldn't let it hit him. His defensive fragments and sturdy constitution might be able to handle the flames, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

Zac's whole body was shaking from the strain, and much of the miasma he had just restored with his **[Soldier Pill]** had been expended as his wounds reopened. Finally, he wasn't able to hold any longer. Perhaps if he had been in peak condition he would be able to withstand such an attack multiple times, but now there was simply no way.

The shield cracked and Zac reached down toward his token to escape before it was too late. But no flames waited behind the crumbled bulwark, only the vast sky. Just a few errant sparks remained, but Zac barely dodged them by ungracefully frog leaping forward. It looked like he wouldn't share the same fate as the poor beastkin woman at least, but a furious rage just as potent as the flames had erupted in his mind from the brush with death.

His vision turned a bit jagged and monochromatic as he glared at the woman sitting atop the sun. The air twisted and turned

around him as he lifted his bardiche as his arm swelled from a massive infusion of miasma from [**Unholy Strike**]. Blood would be repaid with blood.

Only at last second did he manage to wrest back control of his mind, and he was shocked at what he had almost done. He had just been about to infuse his weapon with the Fragment of the Axe before throwing it at Iz Tayn.

Not even mentioning if such a crude attack would ever reach her before Verun was turned into ash, just what was he thinking? That crazy powerful cultivator was the last person he should antagonize, especially considering she only seemed intent on attacking once judging by her demeanor.

The power in his arm still needed a release though, and a powerful slam into the ground caused a massive rift that stretched fifty meters forward as the miasmatic mists swirled around him. Zac quickly turned back toward the scorching sun afterward as he readied another [**Undying Bulwark**] just in case.

The two stared at each other for a few seconds, until Iz Tayn finally broke eye contact as she turned to the other participants who looked at the spectacle with confusion and trepidation.

“This has gone on long enough. Start fighting or leave immediately if you’re not in the top ten,” the woman said with a bored voice before she turned pointed at Zac. “Not him though. We are connected by fate.”

Her eyes once against turned toward him, and Zac felt like she was looking at an interesting curiosity. Had she witnessed his transformation and wanted to dissect him like he had been warned off by his master? Warning bells went off in Zac’s mind when he saw her look, and he slowly started to back away even further from her.

Thankfully she didn’t seem to have any interest in attacking him again and instead chose to spectate the six battles that immediately erupted as a direct result of her words. More than half the remaining warriors had targeted someone else, whereas the rest immediately crushed their tokens with downcast expressions.

No one did target Zac though, and he didn't make any moves either. He had already been hesitant to fight any more due to his wounds and gaining the attention by that pyromancer didn't allow him to split his attention. He needed to be alert enough to counter anything that she had planned, or at least flee fast enough before being burned alive.

The battles took less than two minutes, and Zac was pushed down to the 8th position in the end as two warriors, one unranked and the other the previous 10th spot holder, managed to accumulate enough points to pass him. The moment the fighting was over ten pillars of light emerged, and Zac realized that one of them was placed on top of the platform where he started out.

The others immediately realized what was going on, and over half the winners rushed toward their respective platforms with as fast as their legs could carry them, none of them interested in staying behind. There was nothing to gain by staying in the arena, but everything could be lost if Iz Tayn decided to burn everything to the ground.

Only the two cultivators from the same family slowly walked toward their respective teleporter after bowing toward Iz Tayn, receiving a small nod in return.

Everyone seemed loath to stay in the arena, but perhaps no one was as motivated to flee as Zac himself. He couldn't care less what fate the insanely powerful pyromancer thought she had with him, his only interest was getting to the teleporter. But horror gripped his heart as the bored voice echoed out behind him.

"Wait, Mr. Bug," Iz Tayn said, and Zac's eyes widened with alarm when he saw that the scorching sun transformed into a massive river that snaked toward him.

There was no way he would wait to see what this maniac had in store, especially after she actually referred him to a bug even though his name was on full display in the ladder. He redoubled his efforts at reaching the teleporter, but he was forced to stop in his tracks when a towering wall of flames rose to block his path.

If it had been someone else's flames he would have simply run straight through, but he didn't dare to do something so foolhardy here. He quickly launched a wide swipe with **[Unholy Strike]** empowered with the Fragment of the Axe, but the strike was quickly swallowed up by the wall of flames like a pebble in a lake.

Zac turned around and saw that the girl was almost upon him, and his instincts screamed at him to get out as he saw a white flame forming above her hand. He desperately tried to think of some way out, but he could only come up with one solution.

His miasmic armor dissipated into a gust of smoke as he shrunk back to his normal size, and he stabbed his shoulders with two daggers as he ran straight toward the wall of flames. A massive surge of mental energy pushed into the two fractals of **[Cyclic Strike]** and Zac felt a mix of fear and anticipation when the two fragments actually fused into a bronze flash.

A roar echoed out across the arena as he punched the wall of flames with all he got, and a five-meter wide void was created as the bronze spark sprung out of his fist and erupted in a fierce implosion that simply deleted the flames barring his path. Zac was flush with elation at finally being able to use the bronze flash for something useful, but he had no time to think about that now as he jumped straight toward the teleporter that was just twenty meters away.

He glanced back mid-air just in case, only to see that Iz Tayn was only ten meters away. She donned an incredulous expression as she watched Zac soar toward the teleportation array, but Zac was unclear whether it was due to his incredibly stupid technique or because her wall got breached.

However, her expression soon turned thoughtful as she pushed two fingers into the white-hot flames she had conjured. A small glob of flames covered in dense fractals was quickly extracted and Zac couldn't help but curse when she flicked it toward him with a small smile.

He quickly moved his bulwark and infused it with the Fragment of the Coffin as he braced for impact, but his defenses weren't enough. The small flame shot straight

through [**Immutable Bulwark**] and hit him in an instant. The stench of burnt flesh spread out in an instant as a burn-mark as large as a fist appeared on his chest.

Zac growled with pain as he quickly applied the Fragment of the Bodhi on the wound, but he was relieved to see that the flames seemed unable to spread as they did with the beastkin. It still hurt like hell and he shot a furious look at the girl who had stopped in her tracks.

“God damn lunatic,” Zac spat through grit teeth as he disappeared through the teleporter.

Chapter 444: Dreams

Hot hot flames and darkness. Billy didn't like it. Billy tried to get away, but it kept following wherever he went. But suddenly the hot darkness was gone, and Billy saw he was on the mountain again.

"You were having a nightmare," the statue said.

"Billy told you, Billy won't listen to you, Statue-man!" Billy snorted with disdain as he glared at the twenty-meter statue.

"Trying to trick Billy that Billy is not human!"

The statue-man loudly groaned in response. Did he finally realize that Billy was too smart to be tricked?

"Remember, I only told you that you have Titanic blood due to your ancestry? It has simply awoken in you, pushing your mundane human bloodline aside," statue-man said, using a soft voice like a woman. "You are a descendant of mine, remember how I awakened your bloodline transformation?"

"Keep trying to trick Billy with big words," Billy muttered as he started to turn over rocks and rip up bushes.

"...What are you doing now?" the statue finally said after some silence.

"Billy is looking for a way out. You think you can trap Billy here? Billy is a genius, Alien-man said so himself. Billy will find the door," Billy muttered as he started digging a hole.

"Look- Listen. I am not trapping you, remember? I simply created this world so that I can guide you in your dreams. Isn't it working? Aren't you stronger after waking up?" the voice said with a sigh.

"Stupid statue, everyone feels better after a good night's sleep. Mama always says so," Billy snorted as shot another despising glare at the huge Statue looking like a human.

The statue was a bit annoying, even if it looked almost as handsome as Billy himself. Statue-man had big muscles like Billy, and he held a really big hammer that looked good for thwonkin'.

But Statue-man was always trying to trick Billy, so Billy had tried to break it. But the stone was very hard, even Billy couldn't thwonk it to make it go quiet. Billy did manage to drag it away once, but the next night it was right back. But Billy would one day find a way to thwonk it for good.

The trouble was that Billy always forgot about this stupid mountain and Statue-man when waking up. Statue-man said that it was to protect him from enemy forces, but Billy believed that it was just so that Thea wouldn't help Billy figure out a way to thwonk him. Thea was almost as smart as Billy, and she had a lot of books.

Billy bet that at least one book could tell him how to make a statue shut up, mama always said that books had all kinds of smart things written down.

"Lord, help this child," Statue-man groaned.

"Billy is an adult," Billy muttered in response.

"Never mind," the statue sighed. "What happened to you? You have pretty serious wounds. I can only help so much through this dreamscape."

"Are you peeping at billy? Mama said that peeping toms get no dessert," Billy said with a scowl.

"We are connected through our bloodline, I can tell without peeping," Statue-man said.

Billy hesitated for a bit, but he eventually decided to tell Statue-man what happened. Statue-man was a bit stupid and a liar, but he had helped Billy a few times with getting better at thwonkin'.

"Bad guys are attacking Billy's friend's town while he is away. Billy came to help. Their boats had a lot of fire," Billy muttered before his face lit up with glee. "But Billy thwonked one of their boats and now the zombies and lizardmen are fish poop."

“Good! A real man is true to his brethren, and ruthless to his enemies,” Statue-man roared. “But your enemies are pretty strong. Why don’t you draw the Array I imparted to you and I’ll-”

“Billy won’t fall for your tricks!” Billy cut off Statue-man
“Billy knows that Statue-Man wants to use the drawing to escape Billy’s dreams!”

“Ai, this child’s bloodline might actually be too pure for his own good. The other Emperors would laugh if they heard how hard it was to get a disciple.”

“What did you find out?” Adriel asked as he gazed down at the ocean waves.

“It was Thea Marshall and Thwonkin’ Billy,” the ghost answered with a hollow voice. “They managed to sink one of the advance vessels before being forced to retreat by the Bishop. They were both wounded in the conflict and will likely not be able to fight for a week or two.”

Adriel nodded with satisfaction. Those two weren’t a real threat to his plans, but they had been a constant annoyance for a few months now, like two flies who refused to go away. It was good to hear that they finally had been brought to justice, and he knew that Krisko would perform a rite of thanks to the Founders upon hearing the news.

Besides, it was good news for another reason. Neither the Super-Brother-Man nor the two incursion leaders who chose to join his banner had participated in any of the raids that tried to impede their progress. The human champion was truly held up somehow, perhaps even sent off-world by the Ruthless Heavens.

If they hadn’t captured a couple of the living to gain access to their Ladder, Adriel would have thought that the man was wounded after enduring the tribulation. But he was clearly still at level 75, proving he hadn’t taken that step just yet.

“Our soldiers?” Adriel asked.

“Less than 5% survived from the vessel,” the scout reported.
“There are extremely bloodthirsty beasts in the waters, some

of them seem to be controlled by the powerful contracted cephalopod.”

“What about the arrays on the ship?” Adriel asked, cutting to the heart of the matter.

“We managed to recover them,” the ghost nodded.

“Good,” Adriel sighed with relief.

Losing a few hundred Revenants born on a world with such abundant Origin Dao was regrettable. These were among the first to awaken, and they would no doubt have become strong subordinates. But the mission could still be considered a win as long as they managed to plant the arrays.

The alignment would commence in 5 days, and as long as they managed to trap the Super-Brother Man on his island kingdom until then he would have won.

The brains of the zealots must have been scorched by their flames, as they still believed that they could actually kill the target in the middle of his own kingdom. Adriel knew better. He was happy to let them fight it out as he placed the spatial locks down.

Of course, if that was only what was needed to be done he wouldn't have needed to send his strongest clones to this remote corner of the world. He had a secret mission to fulfill, handed to him straight from his master's master.

Who would have thought that some great powerhouse from the Empire Heartlands was touring their remote Kingdom? With the distances involved there might not be a single guest for tens of thousands of years, and usually not people with this kind of clout.

More importantly, the great master had a treasured disciple who craved unique bodies for experimentation, preferably ones leaned toward the Three Great Arts. And didn't he have a prime body waiting for him here? Thankfully his master had managed to hear about it and quickly contacted him.

This was his shot at greatness. Between the contribution of aligning a world with such a unique Mystic Realm and gaining the favor of that great master, he might actually have a chance

at gaining a teleportation token to the Heartlands. He had heard that treasures that could cause two forces to fight to the death in this remote sector were sold like they were worthless sticks of incense over there.

Adriel had already promised the body to Harkon, but he would have to get out of that contract even if it meant killing his old friend. He could only pray that they had managed to keep the poison girl alive long enough that she hadn't decomposed or been cremated.

His hollow eyes looked out across the waters, cursing the Zealots for building such bulky vessels rather than the small skippers that their enemies used. They would long have reached the islands if they could move even half as fast as the ships the humans utilized.

But they were so close that Adriel could taste it by now, and he could already sense markings left behind by Mhal even without the help of the tracking arrays. They would be there in less than a day, and without the human champion there they might be able to completely conquer the town.

It was time to make all his dreams come true.

"You were right! He passed the 7th floor. Only took him something like 20 minutes too!" Leyara said with excitement, prompting Pretty to look over. "How did you know?"

"I had a feeling," Pretty said with a smile.

"You know something, I can feel it," Leyara said with a pout. "I can't take it! Just look at the chaos below! My sister-disciples will be green with envy when they hear of this spectacle. Our sector might never have seen anything like it!"

Pretty Peak sighed as she looked down at the crowd that kept growing by the minute. Three-quarters of the climb was over for Zac Piker, and he could be dropping out at any moment now that he had reached the 8th floor.

One fight after another had erupted as the square was only so big, and forces fought for the opportunity to be closer to the array. Mr. Piker would be drowned in a deluge of attacks the

moment he emerged from the teleporter, and everyone wanted to be the one to land the killing blow.

Pretty felt some helplessness as she saw the commotion. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do in this situation. The man had a minor connection to her uncle, but she couldn't be expected to deal with a mess of this magnitude, right?

“What are you thinking about? Do you want to join? I am sure Prince Yeorav would give some face and let you set up camp next to his array,” Leyara said. “Might be a good chance to make a connection? He's pretty handsome and less muscle-headed than his cultivation-maniac brother.”

“I told you I'm not joining,” Pretty sighed. “Besides, Yeorav has a Dao Companion already.”

“So what's wrong?” Leyara asked as she took out a bottle of wine.

“Zac Piker has a small connection to my family, and I'm not sure what to do,” Pretty finally admitted, but regretted it the moment she saw her friend's exuberant expression.

“I knew it!” Leyara screamed with excitement. “Secret Boyfriend? Hiding him from your crazy grandpa?”

“What?” Pretty snorted with a roll of her eyes. “My uncle met him by chance. Uncle Greatest sent Average on a training mission, and they met Zac Piker by chance. Mr. Piker beat the crap out of Average, and my uncle was impressed by his performance.”

“He's from the Allbright Empire? But why haven't we heard of him before?” Leyara asked with confusion.

“I'm not sure if he's actually from my Empire or not. He was sent to an abandoned planet in the Red Zone for a quest by The System. I think my cousin was used as a prop for him,” Pretty explained.

“Well, Average is only 17. Beating him up shouldn't be too hard, he has barely started setting up his foundation,” Leyara shrugged.

“Well, my uncle said there’s something miraculous about Mr. Piker,” Pretty said. “But he refused to say what when dad asked.”

“Well, that’s not surprising. He beat the 7th floor. There’s no way he hasn’t had some unique encounters,” Leyara said.

“So what do you think I should do?” Pretty asked.

“You can’t stop what’s going on down there, even if you team up with that mysterious Draugr,” Leyara said as her eyes started to radiate with a white glow. “There are multiple peak arrays down there, and the powers are chaotic enough to indicate that there are at least a dozen offensive treasures reaching high-tier.”

“So he’s doomed?” Pretty sighed. “It doesn’t make sense that the System would create a scenario like this. We finally see a great genius emerge in this sector, only to have him die by the hands of a thousand pieces of trash?”

“Well, perhaps things will turn into an all-out brawl where the preparations are used on competing forces rather than on Mr. Piker. Or perhaps he has concocted some sort of counter, who knows?” Leyara said, though she looked less than enthused about Mr. Piker’s chances. “But I think the System will only require him to survive for a short moment to consider it a pass.”

“Well, he’s had almost a hundred days to prepare, and hopefully he’ll have found something that can assist him,” Pretty nodded.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to get ready just in case,” Leyara said thoughtfully as she adjusted her dress to show a bit more cleavage.

“What are you thinking about now?” Pretty asked with exasperation.

“Well, if he actually survives long enough for the quest to expire, wouldn’t he become this sector’s Number One Prince Charming?” Leyara said as she started applying some make-up to her already immaculate face. “This is a prime opportunity to

snag both a dashing husband and an amazing seedling for our forces.”

Chapter 445: Gains

[Seventh Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Evolution of *[Verun's Bite]*, Duplicity Core Upgrade to E-Grade, Upgrade of Port Atwood to World Capital]

[Additional Reward 8th place: Limited Title Slots +1, Peak F-Grade All Attribute fruit]

Zac's pitch-black eyes went back and forth between the three choices, the pain and exhaustion almost completely blown away. Then again, the black dimension seemed to have some sort of suppressive effect on wounds, so he probably wouldn't be as chipper when he left this place.

A quick look down at his chest proved that the crazy girl had left a burn-mark that almost looked like a fractal, but the wound showed no signs at spreading at least. However, that didn't provide much comfort, as there had obviously been something off about that piece of flame she had shot at him.

His best guess was that she had formed some sort of Karmic Tie to him for some reason. Iz Tayn came from some top tier force though, and Zac hoped that the distance to his remote sector would prove too far away to make it worth tracking him down. If it was even possible since she was just an F-Grade cultivator.

However, the encounter with the crazy flame girl wasn't enough to put a damper on his feelings at the moment. He had passed the 7th floor, a feat that only happened once every few millennia in a star sector with trillions of cultivators. And were no two ways around it, these rewards were amazing.

Better yet, they were clearly custom-made for himself, which was a first since he entered the tower. The reward for clearing

the 6th floor had been pretty great too, but it was still something generalized apart from the compatibility.

Was it because he had cleared a high-tiered floor, or was it because there had been a special event?

Even better, there was actually a bonus reward for reaching the 8th place, and it provided something he had never even heard of before. Getting a fourth slot for a Limited Titles was an extremely powerful boon, and Zac started to understand why so many had been fighting tooth and nail even to the point that some died.

Getting another spot for Limited Titles wasn't as simple as having another title. If that was it then Zac wouldn't have been so excited, since he already had thirty of them. Limited Titles had never been too important for Zac until now, simply because he hadn't encountered any such opportunities so far.

But Galau had properly described the roles of Limited Titles during their climb. The merchant had already confirmed that getting real titles would get harder and harder, and most people got almost 80% of their titles during the F-Grade. That's why some called normal titles 'Foundational Titles'. They set the foundation for your entire cultivation journey.

Limited Titles were something that you could continuously improve though, and there was almost an unlimited number of opportunities for such titles in the Multiverse. They were the lure the System used to keep luring cultivators into deadly trials and unexplored Mystic Realms, and they just kept getting better the more dangerous the trial was.

One single Limited Title snatched from a deadly D-Grade trial might be even better than the Tower-title he had worked for the past 70 days. Getting another Limited Title slot was essentially getting a 15-20% boost to your power, provided you could get a good title that provided Efficiency.

The reward might not be useful at the moment, but Zac would quickly be able to acquire a few Limited Titles after leaving Earth. As for the scions who risked their lives, it was understandable as well. This was a reward that no amount of treasures, wealth, or guidance could provide, and they no

doubt had a bunch of top-quality Limited Titles to choose from through their forces.

Not only that, the System even threw in a small bonus in the form of an All Attribute fruit, which was equivalent to a pretty good Low-Tiered Title. That was the most valuable of all the Attribute fruits, even more so than Luck Fruits. Zac was extremely thankful that he didn't give in to the fear in his heart that told him to cut his losses after narrowly surviving his soul getting crushed.

The rewards from this floor alone far eclipsed the rewards from the first six floors combined.

It also made him wonder just what the others received. Take Iz Tavn for example. She was already strong to the point that it felt like she had somehow snuck inside the Tower while being E-Grade. Just what level would she reach after getting her individualized reward plus whatever reward was awarded the first spot. Did she get multiple Limited Title slots?

Remembering the traumatizing encounter where he almost died made him think of something else, and he reluctantly turned his eyes away from the rewards. Zac wasn't ready to immediately make a choice what to pick, so he first opened his Status screen to check something, and just as expected he had taken a huge step forward.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer

	I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 7th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate
Limited Titles	Frontrunner
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early
Core	[F] Duplicity
Strength	980 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 163%]
Dexterity	498 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]
Endurance	1282 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 163%]
Vitality	673 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 163%]
Intelligence	264 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]
Wisdom	386 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]
Luck	243 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 155%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 6 830 543 287

Zac's stared with confusion at his attributes, unable to compute the changes for a few seconds. It was a welcome problem through; he had gained too many points. He already knew he would get a small boost from fusing his last two Dao Seeds, but that alone couldn't explain the growth. But he soon enough realized what was going on as he kept opening menus.

The first thing he checked was the Dao Menu. He had taken a quick look during the Battle Royale, but he didn't have the time to properly look at the attributes at that time.

Dao	Stage	Effect
Fragment of the Axe	Early	All attributes +10, Strength +110, Dexterity + 80, Endurance +15. Effectiveness of Strength +5%
Fragment of the Coffin	Early	All attributes +10, Endurance +80, Vitality +50, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +60. Effectiveness of Endurance +5%
Fragment of the Bodhi	Early	All attributes +10, Endurance +60, Vitality +80, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +50, Effectiveness of Vitality +5%

Gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi was all thanks to the [**Prajñā Cherry**], and Zac wondered if the Zethaya had even known the true value of that thing since Boje had considered a soul-healing treasure. Then again, they did cherish it to the point that they weren't willing to part with it for money, so they probably knew that wasn't the limits of its capabilities.

There wasn't a lot of change to his attributes as far as Zac could remember, with the fragment essentially only adding the +10 to all attributes and a little bit of Wisdom. However, he immediately noticed how similar its distribution it was to the Fragment of the Coffin. The weight of attributes was almost identical, with just the focus on Endurance and Vitality being switched.

Getting the Fragment of the Bodhi rather than something like the Grove or the Forest was a bit unexpected, but perhaps not as much as getting the Coffin. Zac had read up on Buddhism a bit since learning that it was an actual cultivation system in the multiverse, so he knew a little bit of what the word represented.

The Bodhi was a divine tree that the Buddha gained enlightenment under, and the word was the term for true Enlightenment, the escape from the cycle of reincarnation. The only issue was that such a Dao sounded related to Buddhism, and he wasn't sure how good a fit that would be to his current cultivation path.

Ogras had joked about him embarking on the path of ascetic cultivation like a monk, but he wasn't ready to take a vow of silence just yet.

But his instincts told him that it wouldn't be an issue. The name of a Dao Fragment wasn't important, what mattered were the concepts the Fragment contained. The main focus of the vision hadn't been the Buddhist praying, but rather how the cherry tree had changed after the blessing. It had turned into a divine tree that became the guardian of the desolate badlands.

It didn't only provide the whole area with vitality, but it also empowered everything within its domain. Normal weeds and grasses had become full of life and power, quickly growing far stronger than they would be able to on their own. From what Zac could tell the healing he had enjoyed was just part of the picture. The fragment might have a huge impact on his Hatcherman class, as many of its skills were related to nature.

What would happen if he turned the wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** into a divine hand?

Getting the third Fragment early was a huge relief to Zac, and it took a lot of pressure off. It was a shame that it came at the cost of the Soul Mending Medicine, but now that he had passed the Seventh floor he should have a stronger position for bargaining when he exited. Perhaps he could buy another one

off the hands from some powerful clan who wanted to make a connection with him.

It also meant that the chance of gaining something from the Tower Apparition was a lot higher since he now could upgrade any of his three Fragments. Ideally, he wanted to upgrade the Fragment of the Axe, but it wasn't completely necessary at this point. Any of the three would allow him to gain an arcane class, as long as the System considered his new path to be unique enough to be called a 'creation'.

He couldn't wait to experiment some with his new fragment during his ascent of the 8th floor. He had finally managed to use the bronze flash for something useful just now, and it had been shockingly effective. It felt like confirmation that he was on the right path, and he needed to capture the moment of inspiration and expand it to his new Fragment as well.

Of course, getting the final Dao Fragment wasn't the only surprising gain from the 7th floor. He had not only upgraded his Tower Title, but he had actually gained another one, the first one in a good while. He had assumed that he wouldn't get any more titles before evolving unless he got something from his massive pool of luck, but it appeared he had underestimated himself.

[Tower of Eternity - 7th Floor: Reach the 64th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10, All Stats +10%, Effect of Attributes +5%]

[Heaven's Triumvirate: Attain three Dao Fragments while still at F-Grade. Reward: All stats +5%. All Stats +5. Effect of Attributes +5%]

The Tower-title had upgraded, but not quite as expected. It had immediately given him +5% all efficiency, rather than just for his three main attributes. That meant one would probably get the perfect 10/10/10 from completing the 8th floor. But then what would happen on the 9th? Did it provide a separate title?

The guy earlier had mentioned 'tower breakers', and from context it sounded like someone who would be able to defeat the whole Tower of Eternity. Was Tower Breaker perhaps the name of not only the achievement, but an actual title?

Zac unfortunately knew that the 9th floor was out of his reach unless the rules drastically changed on the final floor. The progression of strength had been pretty even during the climb, and he knew that he would start entering true life-and-death battles on the 8th floor.

Even the defeating guardian wasn't a given, and he had already decided to start looking for clues to amazing inheritances as a back-up.

Time was a precious resource, so Zac held off on choosing a reward a while longer and instead to sit down and recuperate while he was in this special zone. Getting chased down by Iz Tain had only worsened his wounds from the battle with Faceless 9, and he needed to give himself and his poor shield some time to rest up.

[Everlasting] almost looked like a melted clump of metal, but it was truly a tenacious item as it was slowly regaining its original shape. Just like his body, it would probably be in serviceable condition within a few hours.

However, the situation with his soul wasn't as easy to fix. The verdant glow had completely disappeared by now, leaving his soul whole. But his soul had inexorably changed after the experience. It was now crisscrossed by black lines where the fractures once were, reminiscent of a Kintsugi bowl. There were also some splotches here and there, marring the picture even further.

He had already felt the effect during the battle earlier, where bloodlust had coursed through his body, almost to the point that he was ready to run straight into a sun. Zac was afraid that the effect would only become worse as the corruption grew. The energies might even start damaging the miasmic runes from the outside.

He quickly needed to find a solution.

Chapter 446: The Hayner Clan

The mental defense skills available to either of his classes were of no help against the Splinter. For example, **[Indomitable]** formed a formidable wall around Zac's soul, but it didn't help when the threat was already a part of him. The **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** might help, but he still hadn't found anyone who could create the second Array Disk required to practice it. Having just one of the arrays was useless, and he couldn't even begin to practice the first reincarnation.

The Fragment of the Bodhi did seem to be able to stabilize the situation somewhat at least, just like his Seed of Trees had constrained the Draugr-bloodline that had been implanted in him. It was a losing battle though, and it was probably only a matter of time before something went wrong.

The only solution that Zac could think of for the moment was to keep the energies in check best he could, and hopefully he'd find something to use during the last day that had been allocated for the Base Town. Or perhaps he was worrying over nothing and his soul would slowly grind down the infected parts since the main body of the Splinter was still locked away in its cage.

Thirty minutes quickly passed as Zac almost went into a trance-like state where he tried using his new fragment to the utmost while absorbing E-Grade Miasma Crystals and Healing Pills. Some fresh hell was no doubt waiting outside his special zone, and he needed to be at his best.

He was still far from top condition, but it should be enough for him to survive the initial chaos and properly rest somewhere else. He would have rather stayed inside the black dimension

for a few more hours, but the whole zone had started to shudder, indicating that it was time to leave.

The problem was what reward to choose, as all of them were extremely tempting. He knew that evolution of the weapon wasn't something as simple as an upgrade from Middle to Peak E-Grade, but it was rather more akin to a bloodline evolution of a beast. It might provide Verun with a matching attunement to his own, or swap out the materials with ones of far higher quality.

The somewhat humble origins of his axe hadn't been a problem so far, but it would sooner or later start to fall behind, or even get stuck in a bottleneck. It needed fortuitous encounters just like himself, and this was a great opportunity to improve his companion to something with greater potential. It would probably also help during the final remainder of the climb, and he would need every advantage he could get.

As for the Specialty Core Upgrade, it spoke for itself. He already had the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]** in his possession, so it was not completely needed in his case. But the eye was an amazing treasure that could be used for almost anything it seemed, and upgrading his core this way would free up the treasure for other uses.

As for upgrading Port Atwood to a World Capital, Zac wasn't as clear what it would entail. It would no doubt come with a slew of advantages to his force in general, and it would probably also give him some sort of title for being the one who founded the capital after integration. It would provide access to all kinds of new businesses and other beneficial buildings as well since it was a common requirement in the Town Shop to have the World Capital.

Indecision gnawed at him for a minute, but he knew he couldn't stall forever. His eyes eventually went to the middle option, and he picked the Duplicity Core upgrade. His reason was simple; his core was a unique mutation, and there were no guarantees the eye would be able to upgrade it even if he ate it after evolving.

Meanwhile, the System termed it as an upgrade, and there shouldn't be any chance of the upgrade failing. Evolving Verun would have been nice as well, but Verun was ultimately a pretty common Spirit Tool, and finding other opportunities to improve it shouldn't prove impossible. Even his Pathfinder-Eye could upgrade the Spirit Tool if need be.

Besides, Verun was still keeping up at his current power without a problem, especially after he had managed to light up another fractal on its handle. He would probably need to reach level 100 or so before the axe started to fall behind.

As for the World Capital, he had great confidence in accomplishing that on his own, provided that he didn't get himself killed first. Taking that option would ultimately only speed up the process, and he felt it wasn't worth it. It would perhaps have given him a better title for getting the World Capital while still in F-Grade, but he wasn't lacking for titles.

The choice was made, so Zac waited for him to be teleported to the start of the 8th floor. But nothing happened for a few seconds until a startling change took place in the empty space. A densely inscribed circle appeared beneath his feet, and it illuminated him in golden luster.

A volatile surge of energy entered his body the next moment, and Zac had to force himself to stay still instead of rolling around in pain. The colossal amount of power streamed straight toward his core, and he didn't dare make a move in fear that he would ruin what was happening.

Who would have known that the system would force an upgrade immediately, rather than handing him some pill?

The pain thankfully only lasted for less than a minute, and Zac could only guess it wasn't a big deal for the System to upgrade a simple F-Grade Specialty Core, even if it was a mutated version. Zac wanted to immediately inspect the upgraded Specialty Core, but the surroundings changed as he was teleported to the next world.

The massive Bulwark from [**Immutable Bulwark**] was conjured within a second of arriving as he hefted the somewhat restored [**Everlasting**], and [**Indomitable**]

defended his mind from taking another hit. The cherry had worked wonders, but he guessed the soul was still a bit vulnerable after having almost crumbled to pieces.

It was lucky as well, as a massive blade slammed straight into his shield just as Zac appeared in the new world. A pained roar followed as **[Deathwish]** retaliated the strike. But even then he didn't get any respite as his danger sense hollered in the back of his mind, forcing him to jump to the side as the air itself where he stood was ripped open.

[Seize the Hayner Clan's defining treasure before the invaders.]

Zac sighed in disappointment even though he saw the quest was related to a defining treasure. He had been down this road before during the past floors, and he knew things weren't so simple. First of all, he was thrown onto some desolate beach without any civilization nearby, and he had no idea where this Hayner Clan was located.

But that was just the start of his problems. Right behind him was a massive pillar that stretched into the sky, and one warrior after another appeared around him. The soldiers were immediately beset with attacks from a defending force that didn't ask any questions but rather tried to immediately kill anything that appeared.

The situation was all too familiar to him. It was an incursion.

However, the chaos was still a bit different from the one he was used to. It looked like he had arrived just minutes after the pillar appeared, yet an army full with peak F-Grade to powerful E-Grade warriors were already fighting back great ferocity. The attacks he had just avoided came from the defenders who looked like a mix of humans and trolls.

They stood almost three meters tall and had pale green skin. They seemed to favor physical combat as well, and even the strike he barely dodged had come from an explosive arrow-attack. Zac could understand the words the humans streaming out of the pillar screamed, but the defenders spoke in an unintelligible guttural gibberish.

How would he find out where the Hayner Clan was? And who was the guardian in a scenario like this? He seemed to be allied with the raiders, but also not judging by the wording of the quest. He could liken it to being an infiltrator who had joined the incursion with hidden motives, so everyone was an enemy.

Was the Incursion leader the guardian, or was it perhaps the patriarch of the Hayner Clan? As for actually finding the treasure, he had already given up on it. He knew that even if he found the clan there would be all sorts of hurdles to jump in order to get the treasure, hurdles he didn't have the time nor the skills to deal with.

Eventually, he could only find one solution to his situation, and Zac's searched the area until he spotted a human radiating a sinister aura as he commanded his troops to take down the defending armies. Zac steadied himself as he activated **[Profane Seal]**, appearing in front of the man without warning.

The man looked extremely shocked to be attacked by one of his own, but he immediately reacted as a huge bird made from hundreds of flying daggers appeared in front of him as he flashed away. However, the cage was already erected, and Zac steadily grew to his towering form as miasma covered the area.

The flying daggers assailed him like an angry swarm of bees, and Zac was quickly forced to actively block with **[Immutable Bulwark]** as he noted that the daggers were infused with a Dao fragment and could cut straight through his miasmatic armor. The fractal shield thankfully held though, and Zac saw Dao Empowered specters appear around the incursion general in an instant.

However, most of the specters' strikes were diffused with some sort of small shields that appeared around the leader, with only a few of them managing to land an actual blow on him.

Zac knew he had taken the strength of the potential guardian too lightly at that moment. He hadn't mentally adjusted due to

the increased difficulty because he hadn't fought a real floor guardian at the end of the 7th floor, but rather a bunch of cultivators. It made him still think of his competition as roughly the same as the 62nd level, forgetting about the sharp increase that came with the final levels of a floor.

The man was also an incursion general, which Zac had ample experience in defeating without exerting any herculean effort. It had made him confident in deflecting the small blades with his impervious armor, but he received a rude awakening as over ten daggers bore into his body and reopened some wounds.

If that was all that happened it would have been fine, as such small weapons weren't any threat to Zac's towering physique. But a blistering pain started to radiate from the wounds in an instant, and Zac felt the world lurch for a second before he found his bearings. He realized what was going on in an instant; the daggers were poisoned.

The only relief was that he sensed the poison being immediately contained to a pretty large degree as he activated the Fragment of the Coffin. But it was nothing like when he fought the corroded monkeys back on the third floor. The Coffin didn't make him magically immune to all poisons, it only strengthened his resistance to it and allowed him to refine it.

This poison he was struck with was on a completely other level compared to what he had absorbed before, and it seemed to also be empowered by a Dao of its own. It wasn't life-threatening as far as Zac could tell, especially with his Draugrbody's natural resistance against poisons as well. But it would still take some effort to refine it all.

"You are not one of ours!" the man roared from the other side of the cage, a large festering wound having appeared on his arm.

Zac didn't answer as he was focused on combating the poison spreading through his body, while simultaneously making sure that he wasn't cut by any more of those small daggers. He noted that a concerted effort to break through from the leader's

soldiers was already underway, and he knew his time was limited.

He quickly pushed his taunting effect to the limit as he rushed toward his target, with ten of the fifteen chains targeting the general. The other five started to take out the people who had been caught inside the cage along with their leader, and these people quickly turned into nourishment for him. The Incursion Leader managed to stave off the chains though by allocating a large number of his flying daggers to fight them off.

A poison master was a decent counter to his build since intangible attacks like poison or illusions wouldn't trigger **[Deathwish]**, but that didn't mean Zac was helpless. He could still retaliate if the man used daggers rather than pure poison attacks like Alea, and he also had his massive bardiche to strike back.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac ran straight toward the incursion leader, but the man seemed intent on stalling as he was swallowed by a hurricane of blades before he was whisked away. Unfortunately for the man, he hadn't realized he was under the effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and the general suddenly appeared only five meters away from Zac.

Zac's arm was already bulging from cramming it full of miasmic energy from **[Unholy Strike]** and the sounds of ghastly wails filled the cage as the massive black axe crashed into the whirlwind just when the general appeared.

The axe went straight through the general's torso, but Zac felt no elation as the swing provided no resistance, and it looked like he had struck a pile of mud as the invader's body fell apart into a rotten pile on the ground. The general had escaped his killing blow.

Chapter 447: Fated

Danger sense erupted in Zac's mind the next moment, and he desperately swiveled **[Everlasting]** to block a strike coming from behind. A dark-green lance had appeared out of nowhere, aimed straight at Zac's core. Zac tried to dodge, but his bulky body wasn't quick enough and he barely managed to reposition himself before the lance slid right through his armor as though it was made of paper before continuing into his side.

Radiating pain spread throughout his body, and Zac felt like he was being bitten by a million fire ants. But the lance pushing straight through his body had one upside; the incursion leader was suddenly well within his range. The man was pretty quick, but he was nowhere near as fast as the assassin he had just fought.

Zac immediately let go of his shield as he grabbed onto the poison master before he could slink away again. His grip covered half the invader's torso, and there was no escaping now. The warrior seemed to realize the problem, and a green blade appeared in his hand as he tried to cut Zac's arm off with one swift motion.

A black shield appeared around Zac's arm as he hurriedly threw out a talisman from his Spatial Ring. It was something he had gotten from the undead level, a defensive treasure that could be used almost instantly. It wasn't strong enough to completely block out the strike, but it absorbed enough momentum for the Fragment of the Coffin along with his conjured armor to block out the rest.

Wet crunching sounds emerged from the poison master's body as Zac's grip closed like a vise. The man started wailing in pain as he desperately tried to morph away, but Zac was flooding the guy with his corrosive Dao, making it impossible to change his form.

However, the man seemed completely unwilling to give in even when half his torso was crushed, and a storm of daggers rushed toward them both in an attempt at mutual destruction. Zac was forced to quickly cut the man in two to finally sense a burst of energy enter his body as the flying daggers lost their power and fell down on the ground.

The invasion leader had almost been as durable as himself, launching destructive strikes even though half his body was crippled. Perhaps he was just like Alea, forced to focus on Vitality to counteract the effects of the poisons he used.

Zac felt as though both his body and mind were on fire from the poison, but he still released the cage of **[Profane Seal]**. The fighting between both sides had mostly subsided, and they gapingly looked on as the massive form of Zac walked forward, holding the crushed incursion leader like a ragdoll in his almost grotesquely large hand.

“This invasion is over. Return or die,” Zac said to the humans, his gravelly voice sending shivers down the spines of the listeners.

Seeing that most of the humans immediately fled toward the incursion pillar he turned to the massive trolls. They hesitantly looked at Zac, unsure whether he was an ally or just a bloodthirsty lunatic.

“Do you understand my words now?” Zac simply asked as he forcibly tried to quell the storm raging in his mind.

“We understand, Warmaster,” one of the trolls said as he stepped forward. “Why did you help us?”

“I am following a prophecy that took me to your world. I am looking for the Hayner Clan,” Zac said.

Following a prophecy was an excuse that Ogras had used multiple times when searching for information upon arriving at new levels. It didn't really explain why they were there, and neither did it divulge whether you were an ally or a foe. Furthermore, a lot of people read into it whatever fit their point of view, which made them accidentally divulge some extra information.

“The Hayner Clan?” the troll mumbled with a frown. “Are they the cause of this cataclysm?”

“They have something in their possession that should not exist on this planet,” Zac said, neither confirming nor denying the troll’s question.

“So it is them,” the troll growled. “Delving into the taboo. They pretended to be our saviors bringing words of warning, but they were actually the harbingers of our doom.”

It turned out that the Hayner Clan was an ancient clan full of sages who delved into the mysteries of the heavens. They had warned the forces of this world that a great war was coming, that invaders would come to disrupt their way of life. It had allowed the forces to ready themselves for war, but it had also inadvertently helped Zac gain an excuse for why he was looking for them.

However, a frown quickly formed beneath Zac’s helmet while listening as it quickly became apparent that the family focused on the Dao of Karma, just like Abbot Everlasting Peace. Fighting those kinds of people was notoriously annoying since they were often able to anticipate your next move.

Did the Hayner Clan already know they were targeted by him? Perhaps they had even gone underground the moment he arrived, which would make Zac’s mission even harder to complete.

He had already confirmed that the incursion leader wasn’t the guardian of the level. No Teleportation Array had appeared when he killed the poison master, and he was pretty sure by now that he would have to actually find the Hayner Clan to advance to the next floor. After asking about the general state of the world and getting a decent map of the area Zac left the trolls to deal with the aftermath of the incursion.

However, Zac only ran for twenty minutes before he stopped and took out another healing treasure along with some general antidote pills. With the number of pills he had eaten over the last hour the effect was drastically reduced, but he needed to do something about the poison rampaging through his body.

It had been a struggle to just stand upright and talk with the trolls. They were very congenial after he had killed the Incursion leader, even calling him Warmaster, but that friendliness might have taken a sharp turn if they found out he was in an extremely wounded state. Dealing with poison was his strong suit, but the wounds had tacked up to an almost unmanageable state by now.

He knew he was running out of time to reach the top of the 8th floor, but he still needed to take a moment to rest. At least the last level had finished extremely quickly which saved him a few hours, even though the final levels of each floor usually were pretty quick to deal with. It wouldn't be the end of the world if he spent a couple of hours healing up from the aftermath.

Taking the opportunity of the downtime Zac first looked inward, checking out his new and improved Specialty Core. Its size and coloring were pretty much the same, but the density of fractals covering its surface was on a whole new level. The inscriptions were so fine that he couldn't discern them all with his spiritual vision.

There was also an indefinable upgrade in the quality of the Duplicity Core. It almost felt like it had been a cheap plastic ball before, but it was now upgraded to solid metal. The quality and composition were essentially improved. However, Zac quickly started to feel some confusion as he tried to understand the changes the upgrade had brought.

The reason was simple; there were none. The line in his status screen had been updated to say **[E] Duplicity**, but that was about it. It didn't provide any more attributes, and there was nothing else that seemed to have changed.

It was a pretty big disappointment, as it currently awarded 5% Strength and 5% Endurance, based on the two main attributes of his classes. Zac thought that those boosts might increase from the upgrade, which was another reason he opted to take the Specialty Core upgrade as an award. If his boost went from 5% to 10%, then his Strength would have passed 1000 by now. But it seemed like that wasn't meant to be.

However, it wasn't a complete loss. He had only seen those things as a bonus if he got them. The main point was that he would be able to evolve his two classes without having to worry whether his Specialty Core would be able to keep up. Besides, Yrial seemed to indicate that the speed of his transformation should improve as the Core evolved. He didn't dare to try it out right now as he was both poisoned and wounded though, and his Draugr form was better at enduring such a state.

Not gaining any boost to his Strength was disappointing, but he had gotten his hands on another Peak Attribute fruit which would allow him to almost reach his goal. As long as a Medium Fragment increased the boost to All Attributes he would breach 1000 Strength no matter which of the three Fragments he managed to upgrade from the Tower Apparition.

As for whether he would manage to upgrade his Dao from the Apparition, he felt it almost was a given by now. He had reached the 8th floor, something that only happened once every few millennia. The strength of the apparition he would summon should be on a completely different tier compared to those he had witnessed before, and the effect was reportedly boosted significantly when you were the one who conjured it.

After having rested up for another hour he felt strong enough that he didn't need to solely focus on recuperation. Most of the poison had already been converted to energy, with just a few Dao-empowered remnants lingering on. Those remnants would take a while longer to grind down, but they weren't a threat to him at all.

Seeing the situation stabilized he first took out the Peak Attribute fruit and ate it. A warmth spread through his body, and he quickly checked the status screen for the result. A quick mental calculation let him know that he had gained 8 to All Attributes, which would have to be considered a pretty good result.

However, his Strength had only gained 7 points, pushing his total to 992. It was only one point less than the other attributes, but it proved a somewhat disappointing fact; he had hit the cap for how much Strength he could gain by eating treasures.

Adding the fruits from the hunt he had gained a total of 25 points in Strength before he hit the limit.

An attribute limit of twenty-five was as good as it got in the F-grade as far as Zac could tell, where most people were only able to gain 15-20 points from Attribute Fruits. However, he had held out some unspoken hope that his odd constitution would also apply to this situation, where his limits were a lot higher compared to normal. But it looked like his body had to follow the same rules as everyone else.

But there were not only bad news waiting after he looked through his status screen. His Luck had shot up to 257, and it had provided a title just like he had hoped.

[Fated: Gain 250 Luck at F-Grade Reward: Effect of Luck +5%]

It wasn't anything special truthfully, but Zac guessed it was fair enough. His luck was so high from having gained so many titles, and if the System kept giving titles for those kinds of accomplishments it would essentially mean he was getting rewarded for getting rewarded. Besides, even if the boost was pretty small it was still a High-Tiered Title that boosted Luck. Such a thing was extremely hard to come by.

Zac closed the screen and turned his attentions to the two Cosmos Sacks and the Spatial Ring he had gained during the last level. He couldn't help but smile in anticipation as he scanned the content of the first pouch, wondering what kind of treasures the elites of the Multiverse would carry around.

A blank look of confusion spread across his face though as he first scanned the swordsman's sack. Zac couldn't figure out what was going on. He would have expected a cosmos Sack from someone like that to be filled to the brim with all kinds of mysterious items, but there was even less inside than his own Cosmos Sack.

The first thing he noticed was one of the golden swords. It was one of the three that the lanky humanoid had controlled with his mind and that had kept harassing him throughout the fight. But he couldn't find the other three swords he used even after scanning the contents multiple times. Had the System simply

snatched a part of the losers' treasures at random as they left the Tower? Because that was what it looked like after going through the contents.

He did however spot the old sword in its tattered scabbard. It was something that had piqued Zac's interest due to its dangerous aura, and Zac curiously took it out from the Sack. Upon looking at it from such close proximity it felt like the sword was something that had been left to rot in some storehouse for millennia before being picked up. The leather scabbard was extremely faded and dried out, and it looked like a strong wind would turn it to dust.

However, his mind started to scream of danger the moment he gripped the hilt, and a furious presence suddenly urged him to draw the sword and paint the world red. Zac groaned and quickly threw the sword to the ground, but it took him over ten minutes to regain his composure. The presence had awakened the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** inside its cage, and it furiously railed against the miasmic fractals.

It felt like when he had been possessed by the cursed ghosts during the hunt, as violent impulses had tried to take over his mind. Zac looked at the old sword with some lingering fear, unsure what he was dealing with.

Was it a Tool Spirit that had gone insane?

Chapter 448: Nouveau Riche

Brazla had only turned a bit schizophrenic and annoying over time, but he wasn't strictly dangerous. However, it was possible that some Tool Spirits turned sinister as they went insane. Zac knew there had to be some benefit to the sword though as the swordsman used it as an ace. The half-moon attack had contained a shocking sharpness that cut both his mountain and array apart, was it perhaps only possible to conjure such an attack with this sword?

Zac was loath to carry the weird sword around, and he tried putting it back into the Cosmos Sack again. But the sword refused to enter the pouch, and Zac soon realized the Sacks left behind were temporary pouches just like the one he got from the hunt. He threw the sword into his own sack instead as he turned to the next items in the pouch.

The bag contained an assortment of pills along with a small mound of crystals and a couple of manuals. However, Zac refrained from touching those, afraid that they would be protected like Mhal's manual was. They possibly contained skills and cultivation techniques whose quality was unrivaled in his sector, and such things would no doubt come with high-grade theft-protection.

The bag from the masked man was a lot more ominous. It contained over a hundred heads from a dozen different races, each of them placed in their own densely inscribed boxes. Their eyes were sewn shut and a talisman was pushed half-way into their mouths. Why the hell was this man carrying around something like this?

It didn't seem to be part of his Class since he never used any heads to fight. Was this some sort of morbid way to create talismans? And if Zac only got part of their accumulated treasures, just how many heads had Faceless 9 been carrying around in total? Apart from that, there were a bunch of vials

and assorted treasures, including five identical spikes that the assassin stabbed himself with during their fight.

Zac hesitated for a second before he transferred two of them to his own spatial ring. He wasn't sure exactly what these things were, but they allowed the assassin to fight beyond his normal capabilities. The spikes probably had even worse side-effects than his [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but he might be forced to go all out upon exiting the tower in a few days.

Just like with the swordsman's pouch there was another pile full of an assortment of items in one corner, likely things the assassin had picked up inside the tower. However, after seeing the heads he was in no mood to look too closely at what captured the interest of such a lunatic.

Finally, there was the Spatial Ring belonging to the mentalist, the spatial tool that Zac held felt held the most promise. The two sacks were dropped off by the system, but this was the real deal that was taken from her person. And he only needed a glance to realize he had hit jackpot. It looked just like what he expected a wealthy scion's cosmos sack to look. First of all, the space inside the ring was well over ten times the size of Rasuliel's spatial tool.

The dimensions were also extremely clearly defined, compared to the somewhat hazy borders of his own ring. According to Galau that was a sign of high-quality craftsmanship, and proof that its space would stay stable for a long time. Cosmos Sacks only stayed functional for a decade or two before they needed to be swapped out, and Rasuliel's ring was probably an old hand-me-down from the looks of it.

But the ring he had just gotten his hands on was no doubt recently produced, and it would hold together for thousands of years before its subspace deteriorated. Seeing the amazing Spatial ring raised another question in Zac's mind. Were these items protected from the general rules of the tower, or did he risk losing them as well?

Seeing as they were the personal items of trial takers Zac leaned toward the former, but he guessed he would have to exit the tower to make sure. His first instinct was to

immediately swap out his sub-par ring, but that might cause him to lose all his possessions. Perhaps he should use as many items as possible before leaving the tower, just in case. But he knew that using up the contents of the Spatial Ring would be nigh-impossible.

There were at least ten thousand E-Grade Nexus Crystals neatly stacked in one corner. However, they were somewhat different from his own, as they all seemed to be covered in some sort of engravings. Zac took out one of them, and he was surprised to see that it didn't leak a smidgeon of energy. He hesitated for a few seconds longer, but he eventually tried to absorb the energy.

It was extremely uncomfortable to absorb energy from a Nexus Crystal in his Draugr form, and it felt akin to drinking tainted water to parch your thirst. Nausea hit him immediately, but he only needed to continue the absorption for a few seconds to confirm his hunch.

The energies inside the crystal were actually released at twice the rate compared to a normal one, as the inscription formed some sort of energy transfer array akin to his Mother-Daughter array that had been put into the Merit Exchange long ago. It was a pretty luxuriant method since it was used on simple unattuned crystals, and the cost of the craftsmanship was no doubt far beyond the value of the crystals themselves.

The inscribed Nexus Crystals weren't the only types of crystals in the ring. Another, far smaller, pile of crystals sat next to the mountain of Nexus Crystals, each of them looking like a block of ice. Zac had never seen such a resource previously and took one out to get a better look. The crystal was cool to the touch and mysterious emanations spread from it, and Zac immediately felt a reaction as he held it in his hand.

The reaction didn't come from his body though, like when he was near a great natural treasure, but it rather was a prickling sensation from his soul. Zac had a pretty good guess what it was after remembering just who had been the owner of the sack, and he could quickly confirm it was some sort of Soul Crystal.

The crystal didn't seem to be attuned, but rather something that contained mental energy. He had never heard of anything like it before, and it had never been on display in any of the shops in the Base Town. A soothing sensation entered his mind the moment he started absorbing it, and he felt his drained soul rapidly regain its vigor.

This would be a great asset in speeding up his climb. Better yet, if these things worked like Nexus Crystals he might even be able to use them to strengthen his mind. If direct absorption didn't work he might still be able to use them together with his Soul Strengthening Manual.

It was also a huge relief to see that there seemed to be no response from the pieces from the Splinter of Oblivion swimming about, meaning that he could use the Soul Crystals without worry that he was harming himself. He didn't want another Cosmic Water situation on his hands, after all.

Apart from the soul crystals there were a plethora of dresses, all of which sported dense sets of inscriptions. It looked like the mentalist actually had a full wardrobe of defensive treasures, and if Zac wasn't wrong then all of them seemed to be Spirit Tools. There were also dozens of rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, each a defensive treasure that looked quite high-tiered.

Using expensive treasures as though they were normal clothes was another level of wealth that Zac hadn't encountered before. Almost everyone he knew pretty much wore the same get-up every day after getting graded clothing. It was the same with himself. The white robes he got from Yrial were the strongest defensive wear he had, and it possessed self-repairing and self-cleaning features. Wearing other clothes seemed silly by this point.

There was also a large number of pills, raw materials, and natural treasures that seemed valuable enough to make him doubt his eyes. There were also a few Soul-Mending treasures, but Zac wasn't too sure whether they would be strong enough to replace the Cherry in regards to helping Alea. Their energy fluctuations were a lot stronger than equivalent pills in his own

possession, but they were far weaker compared to the cherry he had eaten.

There were also a bunch of things Zac couldn't understand, such as a large metallic head, what looked like a massive drum that had a diameter of over five meters, and all kinds of odd trinkets. Perhaps they were specialized tools that could assist in specific tasks, but Zac didn't have time to go through them one by one.

He did however spot something he recognized. There was a large leaf with ten luxuriant prayer mats placed on top. Zac was perhaps way off-base with his speculations, but he was pretty sure he was looking at a flying treasure, one of much higher quality than the one he lent his sister. It seemed to have been crafted from a natural treasure, with both natural and inscribed fractals combining into an extremely exquisite pattern.

It was a shame that Flying treasures were disabled in the Tower of Eternity. Perhaps the System considered having one to be too large an advantage and restricted them completely. It would have saved Zac a huge amount of time if he could have used one, as he spent days just traveling on each floor.

Finally, there was the pile of random items that seemed to be just flung into a corner of its own, no doubt the things she had found during her climb. Zac wryly smiled as he looked at the treasure trove, and he almost forgave the woman for destroying his soul.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds on how to deal with the three spatial tools before he poured out all their contents one by one. He had no inspection skills and no knowledge worth mentioning in appraisal, but there were some ways to tell what was good and what was not.

Every time he had encountered a beneficial natural treasure he had been able to feel his whole body itching as it craved the energies the item contained. It was the same with **[Verun's Bite]** as well. Zac eventually found six treasures that elicited such a response in his body.

He also discovered 4 items that verun seemed interested in, two slabs of metal, a piece of bone that was almost pink, and an odd rock. However, the axe was only able to absorb the rock, while it could only roar in anger at the other three items. Perhaps they were materials that could assist in upgrading the quality of the axe, but reforging a Spirit Tool probably required the assistance of a skilled Blacksmith or Inscriptionist.

Soon enough everything in the two Cosmos Sacks was transferred to his own spare cosmos sacks, at which point they dissipated into motes of light. The high-quality spatial ring stayed behind though, even though Zac had emptied it of all its contents. Zac was pretty sure that it was a permanent item, but he wouldn't risk the vast wealth inside on a hunch. He also stowed away the Natural Treasures that elicited such a strong reaction in his body, albeit not without some reluctance.

He would put Calrin on figuring out what to do with these items. The Sky Gnomes seemed to be thieves as much as merchants, and they probably knew what hidden dangers there were to owning loot like this. He didn't want to add a bunch of B-Grade forces to the list of Earth's enemies due to ignorance.

Having dealt with the treasures he sat down and redoubled the efforts on restoring his body, this time with the additional support of Soul Crystals.

Zac set out five hours later, which was a lot better than what he expected going by the state his body had been in. The combination of the Fragment of the Bodhi and his newly acquired Soul Crystals helped supercharge his recovery, building on his already shockingly high Vitality. Since he was pretty much healed up he swapped over to his human form in order to move quicker.

Unfortunately, things didn't go quite as smoothly for the rest of the level as in the beginning. It quickly became apparent that the Hayner clan was very aware of his existence as they had disseminated the news that a dangerous solitary invader threatened their whole world. Zac had been beset by everything from righteous citizens to large Bandit Gangs as he headed toward the lands the Hayner Clan controlled.

But Zac was like a moving calamity, essentially fulfilling the Hayner prophecy whether he liked it or not. All obstacles were destroyed in the quickest manner as Zac had no time to spare. Most opposing forces were destroyed with utter prejudice, apart from a few unlucky souls who Zac caught and dragged along to question on the move.

However, he suddenly stopped in his tracks just as he was about to enter the domain of the Hayner. An old troll wearing a voluminous robe with a star-pattern stood in the middle of the road, and from the looks of it, he was waiting for Zac. The old man seemed to be blind judging by his milky-white eyes, yet he stared straight at Zac like he was peering into his soul.

“Catching a glimpse of heaven’s secrets can be both a blessing and a curse. It told me that the key to my family’s survival was stopping you,” the man said, and surprisingly enough there was a kindly smile on his face. “Karma brought us together, but severing karma is Heaven’s Path.”

Zac was about to respond, but suddenly he found himself without any ground to stand on as an enormous sinkhole hundreds of meters across swallowed them both up, causing them to barrel into the abyss.

Chapter 449: Pawn of Fate

Zac's heart hammered with horror as he plunged further and further into the abyss. He tried to find something to hold on to, but he found himself pelted by one rock after another as massive boulders detached from the walls and slammed into him with the force of a speeding truck. There was no way that this wasn't the work of the old Hayner Patriarch.

He did however notice that the old man had fallen inside as well, and he was some ways above him. But his situation didn't seem nearly as bad. The old seer was sitting on a piece of land as he sailed toward the bottom as well, but not a single boulder hit him or even came close. Zac glowered in anger at the man who had caused this mess and quickly charged up a **[Chop]**.

However, a second after he launched the strike at the old man a massive boulder slammed into the fractal blade, resulting in mutual destruction. Zac was about to charge up another strike but just as he was thrown off-course by another boulder. Was all this really a coincidence, or was this what it was like to fight against Karmic Cultivator?

It would take more than some errant rocks to take him out though, and Zac stopped trying to hit the man and instead focused on the depths below. They had fallen for almost 15 seconds already, but Zac noticed the dive was about to have a very abrupt end as the ground below was quickly rising up to meet them.

Zac only had a second to think, and without any better options available he activated a defensive charge of his robes along with another talisman as he infused himself with the Dao of the Coffin. He couldn't actually die or get seriously hurt from just falling in standard gravity, but he didn't want to risk getting knocked out as he suspected the old man had some means to deal with the landing.

Zac landed like a comet, causing a massive crater with himself in the epicenter. Zac felt the taste of iron in his mouth, but he ignored the pain and scrambled to his feet to meet the next wave of attacks. A massive boulder had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but Zac cut it apart just in time to see the shockwave of his own crash landing buffeting the old man's descent.

It actually allowed him to land as smoothly as if he had only jumped down from a small incline, and Zac couldn't help himself from swearing at the scene.

"You are quite adept at resisting karmic manipulations. I am Ter'Erian Hayner, former patriarch of the Hayner Clan," the old man smiled when he noticed Zac's glare.

"Why did you do this?" Zac growled, his anger already building. "You should have realized that trapping yourself in here with me can't end well for you."

"Even a blind old man can see how powerful you are. My descendants aren't your match. So I nudged events a bit to create this place for us since I learned of your coming," he said. "Of course, nature had already laid the groundwork."

Zac looked around, and he had to say he was pretty shocked by what a karmic cultivator could do. The hole they found themselves in was the biggest one he had ever seen. It was hundreds of meters wide, and its edges were almost completely sheer. The sky could still be visible far above, but even he would have some trouble getting back up in short order.

"Do you have the clan-defining treasure on you?" Zac asked.

"The **[Star of Aryaldar]** is placed on top of a flying treasure. The flying treasure has also been reinforced with an illusion array and an isolation array, and my descendants have been instructed to keep flying across this vast continent for 23 days before returning," the man smiled.

"Twenty-three days," Zac repeated with an even stare.

"Indeed. The star is the core of our heritage, we cannot lose it. We sacrificed much to glean find a path out of this calamity.

The longer it is hidden the better, and after 23 days the treasure will be safe. You might still be able to find the treasure if fate is on your side, but are you in a position to worry about that?”

A surge of anger flashed in Zac’s mind as the pieces of oblivion seemed energized. But Zac quickly calmed down as he tried to understand the situation. The Hayner clan was obviously the real deal since they had indirectly inferred the rules of the Tower even if they didn’t know about its existence. Twenty-three days was how much time remained of his climb.

The treasure would be safe in 23 days as he would have been thrown out of the Tower by then. But Zac suddenly froze when he realized what the old man had said.

“What do you mean position to worry?” Zac frowned.

“Celestial stone will fall into this hole in a short while,” the old man said, some ruthlessness finally shining through his congenial facade.

“A celestial stone?” Zac muttered with confusion until his eyes widened in alarm. “A god damn meteor?”

“My clan worked for a thousand years to form a karmic link with one of the stones sailing about in the vast beyond, gently nudging closer to us. It became our clan-defending treasure, and when better to use it than now?”

These people were lunatics. That was the only thing Zac could think of as he looked the old man with an aghast expression. Dragging a meteor down on top of his own head to take out a threat to his clan was beyond overkill. Even if his mission succeeded he would have destroyed half his country from the impact, along with getting himself killed.

Zac also knew that there was no way that the old man would let him climb out of the hole in peace either. He could only take him out as quickly as possible and pray that he was the level guardian. A storm of energy immediately exploded around him as he activated [**Hatchetman’s Rage**], and almost looked like a sea of flames was conjured by his wrath.

He hadn't used the skill too often since he was worried that the mental effect of the skill would synergize with the anger that the Splinter was always fanning in the background, but now was not the time to care about such things. A towering power made him feel flush with potential, and he almost welcomed the descent of the metro to test his mettle against it.

However, he quickly snapped out of it and instead focused his attention to the old man. Each upgrade of the skill had prolonged the effect of the boost by 10 full seconds, so he still had less than a minute to finish the fight before he would enter a weakened state. However, that should be more than enough to settle the fight.

Zac shot toward the old man as he shot out five fractal blades in an instant, with a sixth starting to whirl around him like a buzzsaw. The air screamed from the power in the blades as they contained the highest power Zac could muster. However, it almost looked like the old man was a hologram as he flickered the moment the attacks were supposed to hit him.

The fractal blades passed right through and crashed into the sheer wall behind, causing massive scars in the rock that ran for dozens of meters. Zac didn't exactly understand how the old man dodged without moving, but he guessed he was messing with fate somehow. But Zac still rushed forward, confident that there had to be some limits to what the man could avoid.

However, the ground suddenly crumbled beneath his feet just as he was about to attack the Hayner patriarch, which completely robbed him of his momentum and made him slam into the ground. A crystalline staff appeared in the Hayner patriarch's hands just as Zac was about to get back on his feet, and Zac summoned a storm of leaves to protect himself from whatever strike was coming.

A shudder in the air lifted Zac from his feet and threw him dozens of meters away. However, his danger sense hadn't warned him of anything, and as far as he could tell the attack hadn't harmed him in the slightest. He felt some disorientation for a second, but he regained his wits after shaking his head, and soon enough he was back on his feet. The old man had

conjured a massive avatar behind him by this point, a shimmering priest holding a large crystal toward the heavens.

Reality suddenly shifted, and Zac suddenly saw dozens of versions of himself split off from his body. A few rushed toward the old man, whereas others started channeling Cosmic Energy into his arm. There were even two massive spectral axes from **[Deforestation]** that appeared in the sky.

His mind was a confused jumble as competing ideas and impressions clamored for supremacy, and he felt his cosmic and mental energies rapidly drain into the different versions of himself. But Zac suddenly roared at the top of his lungs as he stomped in the ground with enough force to cause cracks to spread over ten meters in each direction. Five explosions followed in quick succession as Zac pushed toward his target.

It felt like he was forced to push through solid matter to advance, and it was as though his mind was being dragged toward the other incantations of himself. But it wasn't enough to stop him and Zac was soon upon the old man again. **[Verun's Bite]** fell, its sanguine glow illuminating the surroundings.

Zac stood panting to restrain his rage as he looked down on the old man on the ground. A massive wound ran from his shoulder down to his navel, and he was almost split in two by Zac's strike. He looked down at the troll with some confusion, as he hadn't actually expected his strike to hit that easily. The idea had been to push him a bit further to expend his defensive treasures, after which he would finish him with **[Nature's Punishment]**.

But perhaps he had overestimated the old man.

"How?!" the ancient troll coughed with confusion in his eyes as he was bleeding out on the ground. "Why are you immune to the pull of fate?!"

Zac wasn't completely sure what the old man was on about. The weird illusion he had been put under was pretty annoying, but it could barely be considered a nuisance due to draining his energy. Was it supposed to do something more?

Perhaps he had his almost inhuman pool of Luck to thank for avoiding any serious harm. Karmic warriors seemed to fight by slightly augmenting causality and fate in their favor, but Zac had a huge amount of Luck that did the same thing. The special attribute might be the best way of countering these kinds of people.

The battle was over as the man lay dying on the ground, and Zac could breathe out in relief when he saw that a Teleportation Array had appeared a few meters away. Killing the guardians was never a requirement unless it was stated in the quest, defeating them was all that was needed. However, most of the battles so far had ended with a fatality as the guardians were seldom good people.

The battle hadn't been too exhaustive and he was completely unscathed. However, he still wasn't too elated with the results. Normally he would have stayed on the floor an hour at the least to recover from his weakened state and calm his mind, but he knew that wasn't an option this time.

A massive ball of fire had appeared in the sky by now, and Zac knew he would have to leave within a minute.

"Why did you go this far?" Zac asked as he looked down on the old man. "You should have seen that I didn't really want your life."

"Sometimes drastic measures are needed to push fate in the direction one desires, Warmaster," the old troll coughed. "Or should I say trial-taker?"

"You know?" Zac said with surprise.

"Even the heavens aren't perfect. Fragments and pieces slip through," the old man wheezed. "However, that knowledge is what led you to our doorstep. I peered too deep, and I cannot be allowed to live. At least my family is ignorant of the truth, and the calamity will hopefully end through my death and your disappearance."

Zac looked at the old man for a few seconds, but he had no idea what to say. What could one say in a situation like this? It might be true that he was being used as a real Hatchetman by

the System, taking out those in its net who had learned too much.

“I’m sorry things ended this way,” Zac sighed and started to walk toward the teleportation array.

“Freedom is an illusion, trial-taker,” the old seer coughed as Zac stepped onto the platform. “Are you any freer than us?”

Zac took one last look at the old troll. The seer’s face had turned into a grotesque mask of anger and irreconciliation as the blank eyes stared up at the sky. Zac wasn’t sure if he was looking at the meteor that was fast approaching, or the heavens above.

“I am Ter’Erian Hayner, and I am more than a pawn!”

Chapter 450: Out of Reach

The encounter with the old seer was pretty jarring, but it wouldn't stop Zac from moving. He had his goals, and he knew that one couldn't get anywhere in this world without knocking out the competition. It was not a matter of Ogras-induced cynicism, but a rather reality forced onto everyone by the System. If there was no conflict, then one would be created.

Hearing the old seer's final words indicated that the worlds he traversed might all be real, but did it really change anything? He could only shrug off any hesitation and insecurities and head toward the next guardian.

Climbing the 8th floor presented a new kind of torture as Zac desperately pushed through the levels. He had almost completely given up on sleep by now, his rest was slightly slowing down while revolving the Fragment of the Bodhi to help recuperate his exhausted body and keeping the Splinter in check.

He had realized that the Splinter wasn't as intrusive when his mental state was in perfect condition, but problems quickly arose after having expended a lot of mental energy. He almost fell into a rage after every straining battle, and he quickly had to restore his mental energies to not go out of control. By this point, he needed to pretty much constantly travel with a Soul Crystal in his free hand to stay lucid.

The problem was that every time he used his Dao he felt as though the Splinter's corrosion got slightly more ingrained into his soul, for good or bad. It did seem that the Dao he forced into his attacks kept getting stronger, but it came at the cost of his mind getting slowly eroded. Zac could only push back against the effects as he kept climbing.

He considered stopping using his Daos altogether until he found a solution, but that would eventually just slightly delay the inevitable. Besides, not using his Daos would effectively end his climb. He couldn't defeat any enemies without them, and he was not ready to stop climbing.

His experiences in the tower had completely remolded him, pushed him toward a peak he didn't even know it existed. It had resulted in his mind getting invaded, but Zac started to believe that his best bet at finding a solution was to keep climbing. The 7th floor rewards were customized for his needs, and perhaps the 8th floor would be even more tailored to his needs.

And what did he currently need more than something to control the Splinter?

He might even find a solution before even reaching the 72nd level, as the 8th floor was a veritable treasure trove. It was almost torture to traverse one world after another and hearing about shocking treasures that would drive anyone mad, knowing that each of them was just out of his reach.

The 65th floor seemed to contain an ancient array left behind by a long-extinct race. It would be able to awaken one's 'hidden potential', which according to rumors meant gaining a huge surge of attributes and perhaps even awakening a constitution. But it was locked behind the floor's quest, and Zac simply couldn't complete it. So he could only take out his frustrations on the guardian before moving on.

The next floor contained what Zac guessed was a top tier E-Grade Axe Spirit Tool, but it was in the hands of a peak E-Grade warlord. This one wasn't quite as alluring as the previous floor, but it would still be a huge boon to have an alternative to [**Verun's Bite**]. This was especially true as it was rumored to have 'a corrosive attunement', making it an extremely good weapon of choice for his Draugr-form.

Zac initially thought that he was doomed to get not his hands on it, but news spread that the warlord had suddenly died just as Zac was about to finish things up on the floor. He couldn't join the fight for the warlord's hoard though, as he was

running out of time. He could only grit his teeth and move on to the next floor, leaving the treasures behind.

It almost felt like the System kept throwing out more and more alluring baits in his path in an effort to stop him from climbing any further. It was to the point that Zac wondered if it was some sort of trail that tested his determination, and Zac staunchly kept his eyes on the prize as he kept moving toward the next levels.

Missing out on all the treasures was a big disappointment, but he did make some startling progress with his experiments. Zac had almost reached a 40% success rate in forming the bronze flashes since getting to the 8th floor. He still needed to use his crude method of stabbing himself in the shoulders, but with the help of the Fragment of the Bodhi he was able to keep experimenting even after accumulating one grisly wound after another.

Zac had initially been afraid that the experiments would worsen his mental condition even more, but he soon realized it was the opposite. His mind actually calmed down after having shot out a bronze flash. It almost felt like some sort of mental bloodletting where the darkness in his mind was expelled through the Dao Implosions.

The explanation that Zac felt was most likely was that the Splinter of Oblivion had a part in the creation of the bronze sparks somehow. Perhaps it acted as a base to what the two fragments would fuse into, like a blueprint to the higher Daos. That would explain the increased success rate of forming the Bronze sparks compared to his trials during the 7th floor.

Before the only energies from the Splinter that suffused his soul were the small amounts of purified energy that the Miasmatic Fractals slowly let out of the cage. But now his soul was completely infiltrated. The improvements felt like a small silver lining to the mess he found himself in, but there were still some parts that he hadn't figured out.

Things weren't working out as he had hoped with his third Dao Fragment. No matter how many times he tried he simply couldn't form some equivalent of the bronze flash when trying

to fuse the Fragment of the Bodhi with the Fragment of the Axe. The same problem arose when trying to fuse the Bodhi with the Coffin.

Only the combination of Axe and Coffin worked, leaving Zac wondering just what was missing. Did the second fusion require another method of activation to work? Or did it only work because the destructive flash leaned toward Oblivion rather than Creation?

His utter failure was another hint that he was on the right track about the Splinter, but he still wasn't completely convinced. The two Grand Daos of Creation and Oblivion were extremely high concepts, and pretty much all lower Daos should contain hints of both of them. The Bodhi wasn't pure Creation, and the Coffin wasn't pure Oblivion.

Not even the higher concepts of Life and Death that he was striving for were pure Creation and Oblivion. So it was a bit odd that he couldn't mix the Fragment of the Axe, which by itself should lean toward Oblivion, with the Fragment of the Bodhi.

There was no real way for him to verify what was really going on at the moment. For now, he could only take the opportunity to self-medicate while working out the possibilities and limitations of the bronze flashes. It seemed that desperation had played a part in managing to actually use the Dao Implosion.

His left arm was a mess after having ruptured dozens of times, but he had managed to successfully destroy a strong beast in the heat of battle once with the help of the Dao Implosion. The key seemed to be adrenaline, or rather battle lust. When he was just experimenting while traversing the worlds he was too calm, and that led to him being too slow in moving the bronze spark out of his body.

It was as if he was energized, then the blob of energy he created would be energized as well. Zac even tried to slap himself and roar on top of his lungs to get his blood pumping, but it wasn't very effective. Only his true fight-or-flight

responses seemed to be working, perhaps as they activated some primal part of his brain.

His theory of the origin of the flashes also gave Zac some clues into what needed to be done to somewhat formalize his 'creation'. The largest problem was that he had no control over the energies he created, and he could only push it forward. But perhaps there was a solution; he needed to take control of the Splinter of Oblivion.

If the flashes were truly created with help from the debris of the Splinter, then he needed to somehow form a connection with it. It would allow him to guarantee a successful formation, rather than leaving things up to fate. It would perhaps even allow him to stabilize the volatile energy long enough that he could infuse it into skills rather than just throwing it away like a hot potato.

Messing with the Splinter would come with huge risks though, and Zac wasn't confident at even attempting to opening the miasmic cage in his mind before his soul was a lot stronger compared to now. It once came back to a lack of time. He wished he could jump into some time chamber and practice **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** until his soul was strong enough to withstand the Splinter's influence.

However, Zac didn't spend all his time on the bronze flashes as they were still somewhat of a long-term goal. He had gained many other new upgrades that needed to be better understood, such as his new Dao Fragment.

One slightly surprising benefit was just how much stronger the fragment had made his Hachetman class.

Zac was currently assaulting a massive army on the 67th floor, and he was being pelted from all directions as he tried to reach the princess in the middle of the army. He was somewhat confident that she was the level guardian, and Zac had immediately set out toward her army the moment he learned of her insane crusade.

This level was the same as the previous ones on the 8th floor. He had quickly learned of rumors talking about a divine tree that was about to bear fruit. Elites from all over the world were

getting ready to compete for the natural treasure as the fruit seemed to possess the capabilities of opening the “third eye”.

The effect of the third eye, or the soul’s eye, sounded a lot like his Danger Sense after asking around, and he felt that combining the two might almost turn him permanently omniscient like when he used [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**]. But he could only ignore the temptation while cursing the fact that he was too slow. If he had another month left on his climb he could have cleaned up on these last levels, but now he didn’t have the leeway to take any detours.

Targeting one of the amazing treasures that appeared on each level now would essentially erase any chances of completing the floor. so the treasure had to be more tempting than an upgraded title and a tailor-made reward by the System itself. And while the treasures thus far had all seemed extremely valuable they weren’t quite at that level so far.

That didn’t make the situation less frustrating though.

Luckily he had a whole army to take out his annoyance on, and a storm of purple leaves flew around him as he waded into the army that desperately tried keeping him at bay. It was [**Nature’s Barrier**] that had changed its appearance after getting infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi and reaching Peak Mastery.

Not only had the leaves become shockingly sturdy, but the skill even provided a restorative effect in the eye of the storm now. It was just like the hidden world within the cherry tree’s canopy in the vision. If Zac had the fragment while fighting the swordmaster in the Battle of Fates he probably wouldn’t have needed to use any other defenses than this skill.

His defensive skill wasn’t the only one that had benefitted from gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi. Pretty much every single nature-aspected skill in his repertoire became stronger in one way or another, just like how Coffin added all kinds of effects to his death-attuned skills.

The forest created from [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**] now provided a defensive sphere from the outside. It wasn’t too useful for Zac at his current stage, but it would help with keeping allies

safe in large-scale conflicts. The skill had also reached Middle Proficiency on the last level since he was pretty much forced to activate it during every battle now.

One surprising skill that benefitted from the Dao Fragment was [**Loamwalker**]. Not only did it increase the distance he could travel with each step, especially inside forests, but Zac even felt a mysterious energy rising from the ground and entering his body with every step. The energy was an earthy brown when he looked at it with [**Cosmic Gaze**] and he guessed it was earth-attuned energies.

He didn't have a use for the attuned energies, but being able to move much faster was a godsend.

The fabric of space cracked as Zac closed in on the princess' command tent, and a wooden hand covered in leaves and flowers quickly emerged, causing verdant lights to fly around its fingers in an exuberant dance. An outsider might think that the vibrant image might mean that the massive hand was about to bestow a blessing on the lands, but the reality wasn't quite so benign.

Zac had quickly figured out the fundamental use of the Fragment of the Bodhi apart from the healing. Life mutated and grew far beyond its normal means within the canopy of the consecrated cherry tree, and Zac was able to bestow that same effect to his skills. That meant that it wasn't simply a defensive or offensive boost to his nature skills, but rather a foundational empowerment.

[**Nature's barrier**] naturally became even better at defense as the leaves mutated, but the hand instead evolved in a more forceful direction, which was evident by the terrifying aura it had started to radiate. A two hundred meter wide array appeared as an immense pressure forced the average soldiers down on their knees.

An enormous sword saint appeared in the sky above the command tent, likely the avatar conjured by the princess he was targeting. She was currently on a path of carnage to earn the respect of her father, but her path was littered by the bodies

of innocent civilians who were unlucky enough to live too close to the border of a rival kingdom.

Zac had no moral issue with taking someone like this out. She didn't respect the lives of others to attain her goal, so why should he respect hers? The massive sword saint aimed her sword at the core of the array which also meant that the wooden hand above it was targeted.

Destructive energies started gathering around the avatar, but Zac wasn't worried as an unassuming trunk descended from the core of the array.

Chapter 451: Little Bean

The single tree looked like any ordinary one, apart from its lack of branches. But it quickly grew into a tremendous spike, like the finger of a forest god. It just took a second for it to grow to a size that almost eclipsed the mountains he had pulled through the array before, and the tip of the tree pushed straight toward the command center beneath.

A shocking burst of energy rippled out from the massive avatar's weapon, and multiple layers of the protective membrane of [**Nature's Barrier**] were decimated even though the princess aimed at [**Nature's Punishment**] rather than in his direction.

A hollow with a diameter of almost fifty meters was punched straight through the wooden spike, but hundreds of branches grew from the hole and merged to restore its original form. Zac felt a huge strain on his mind from the increased consumption, but he could only grit his teeth as he pierced the avatar with his punishment.

The avatar only managed to ineffectually rip off a few layers of the branch before it was forcibly dispelled, and the branch passed through the chaotic energies as it slammed straight into the command tent where the princess resided. The ground heaved and cracked and Zac felt a surge of energy enter his body,

A shudder went through his body as a storm of miasma spread to every inch. The hundreds of leaves around him disappeared into motes of lights, and the verdant forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] was gone a second later. Only the towering tree remained as a testament of his earlier attacks.

That didn't mean the army was safe though, as billowing clouds of corrosion and miasma quickly spread out before the warriors had time to understand what was going on.

This was the true power of the upgraded core, and it was the only feature that mattered as far as Zac was concerned. It was disappointing that it hadn't provided any attributes when reaching E-Grade, but the transformation only took a second now as long as he used Yrial's Transformation skill.

Not only that, but he had also learned that he could now transform twice before he needed to wait for an hour again. In other words, he could now almost completely freely use his two classes in one battle as long as he had a second to spare during a fight.

Zac stomped the ground and appeared next to the massive branch that was stabbed into the ground, just in time to see a part of it explode as his target emerged. She was drenched in blood and one of her arms hung limply to her side, but she still radiated the aura of someone with a fight left in her.

The cage of [**Profane Seal**] was erected with the branch in the middle, and five of the chains immediately cut into the massive piece of wood. A surge of energy entered Zac's body as he started his usual whittling down of his enemy.

It was one interesting perk he had found from being able to quickly change between classes. Most of his skills disappeared when he changed classes, but there were two exceptions. The first exception was the punishments he could summon through [**Nature's Punishment**], like the tree he was able to call forth since gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi.

It was teeming with lifeforce that the chains could steal and then feed to his Draugr-form. This synergy was why he opted for the tree rather than the massive mountain he usually used.

It made him even more unkillable as the piece of wood turned into an enormous battery that would keep him going far longer than he would be able to without. It was to the point that miasma steamed out of his body due to overconsumption, which further aligned the surroundings in his favor against living enemies.

The second skill that lingered was [**Winds of Decay**]. The skill was made from his breath, so it didn't matter that he changed class as the mists remained. This wasn't as much of a

boon though as the skill targeted him the moment he changed to his human form. It didn't bother him thanks to his huge pool of Vitality, but it was still pretty uncomfortable to stand inside.

The miasmatic cage shook as the two clashed one time after another, but soon enough the princess couldn't stand it any longer. Her body was covered in festering wounds as the armor-clad Zac towered above her.

“Why?” she asked with fury and despair in her eyes. “Who are you?”

“Fate, I guess,” Zac answered as his bardiche fell.

Zac didn't swap back to his human form just yet as he wasn't sure what would await him at the other side of the teleporter. He rather just restored his reserves to peak condition before he stepped through to the next realm.

It felt like he was being squeezed for every piece of potential he had, and he was embroiled in constant battle as he kept going. At least it kept the Splinter mostly satiated as he ripped through the later levels of the 8th floor. Unfortunately, he never heard of any treasures or inheritances that seemed able to restrain the corruption in his mind, and this continued all the way to the 71st level.

The second-to-last level of the 8th floor would no doubt be a real nightmare, but his all-out push the past weeks had at least made sure he had over 3 days to complete it. **[Verun's Bite]** was already high in the air to counter any sneak-attack, and Zac had equipped **[Everlasting]** and changed into his Draugr form just in case of a sudden assault.

But when the scenery changed he realized there would be no ambush this time around the moment he stepped through the teleporter. The surprising stillness even seemed to subdue the splinter in his mind as it crept into the back of its miasmatic cage.

He was in a small cabin that was best described as futuristic. The whole wall in front of him was just one massive screen that seemed to be showing a blueprint, and another wall displayed a majestic nebula and stars that were fixed in the

distance. Zac almost forgot he was in the Tower of Eternity for a second as he looked around with excitement.

Was he on a spaceship?

That was the immediate conclusion judging by the screen in front of him, unless he was reading the blueprint completely wrong. The map showed an elongated vessel that looked pretty sleek apart from a large circular bulb in the middle, and Zac found that he was able to zoom in and out by touching the screen.

The first thing he could see was that the ship was just massive. He was currently in a section that seemed to house thousands of cabins, just like the cabin floors on a cruise liner. The cabin he was in was around twenty square meters, and while it was less than a tenth the size of the largest cabin, it was still a decent size.

Each cabin had a series of numbers or letters marked, though Zac couldn't read them. He guessed it was either the name or serial number of the person who lived inside. Some cabins were pretty large, but they had over twenty numbers attached, meaning they were probably barracks or shared domiciles.

Perhaps the cabin belonged to some sort of middle-management or a petty officer on board the space cruiser. The huge number of cabins only took up a small section of the total space on the ship though, and he saw that there were more sections just like it. If it wasn't due to the shape and the two massive thrusters at the back of the vessel he would have thought it was rather a space station than a ship.

He tried to engrave every detail into his mind in case he needed it later, but it seemed the resident of this cabin only had limited access as over half the ship was blacked out except the general outline. Perhaps those sections were critical parts of the ship only accessible to authorized personnel.

Zac eventually backed away and tried to figure out his next step. A quest screen conveniently appeared after he retreated though, indicating what needed to be done.

[Stop the Little Bean from returning from its expedition.]

Zac wasn't overly surprised to read the contents of the quest after seeing the surroundings, but some hesitation crept into his heart as he looked at the wall displaying the vibrant nebula in the distance. This *was* still the Tower of Eternity, right?

Or had the System sent him out on an actual mission to mess with its enemies, the Technocrats? Since meeting the Hayner patriarch he had started wondering if he was actually ever inside the Tower, or if he was just sent to various corners of the multiverse like when he completed the Hegemony-quest.

A muffled swishing sound interrupted his thoughts as the door leading to his quarters suddenly opened, displaying a young man who was looking down with a troubled frown at a screen that hovered in front of him.

He entered the small cabin without even looking up, and he only noticed something was wrong when a grey object ripped through the air straight toward his head. His eyes widened in shock when he looked up only to find himself face-to-face with Zac, and an orange shield started to materialize around him.

But it was much too late, and **[Everlasting]** slammed into his head with enough force to throw him into the wall, immediately knocking him out cold. Zac hurried over and dragged the man further inside the cabin, and sighed in relief when he saw that the cabin door closed by itself.

Things calmed down again, but Zac stood frozen for almost ten minutes, waiting for some backup to come rushing through the door. But it looked like his actions had gone by unnoticed, allowing him to breathe out in relief. Zac didn't put away his weapons though, but rather just hunched down to take stock of the man whose cabin he had been thrown into.

It was a human just like himself, or at least mostly human. Some parts of his body seemed to be mechanical, which Zac guessed made the man a cyborg. His clothing made believe he wasn't a warrior like the other cyborg he had met though, but rather some sort of non-combat personnel.

He had also all but confirmed Zac's suspicions that this was a Technocrat vessel.

The shield that he had smashed through was clearly of technological origin, just like those in the technocrat incursion, though it was a bright orange rather than the red ones back then. Apart from the shield, there were no signs of any weaponry on him though. The man wore a uniform made out of cloth, and there was not a single fractal anywhere on them.

His build wasn't anything to write home about either, and when Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] there was almost no response either from the man or the surroundings. It made Zac guess that he was on a vessel belonging to the Machine God-faction. Both Transcenders and Technomancers would possess at least some equipment connected to cultivation.

Zac quickly found the source of the shield, a small bracelet on his arm, and after having taken it off he started to look for any piece of detachable technology on him until he finally poured some water over the unconscious man.

“Wha? How?” the man sputtered as he wildly looked around, making Zac realize that the guy even had mechanical eyes.

“Who are you?! How did you manage to board the Little Bean? We just fell out of subspace!”

“Nevermind that,” Zac said as he trained his pitch-black orbs pierced into the man's augmented vision, making him flinch.

“Tell me what I need to know and I'll let you live. If you're not willing to cooperate I don't mind killing and reanimating you. You will help me one way or another.”

“No, please!” the man cried, clearly horrified at the prospect of being turned into a zombie.

Being a Draugr had its advantages, and there was no way for the guy to know that Zac didn't even know how to turn someone into a Zombie. None of those he had killed in his undead form seemed to have shown any inclination to turn at least, meaning there was probably some hidden component to it.

“Have you heard of the Tower of Eternity?” Zac asked first, wanting to check on his earlier suspicions.

“The Tower of Eternity?” Jaol said with confusion. “Never heard of it. It’s not related to our corporation, I swear!”

Zac nodded in relief, but he suddenly froze. His answer sounded similar to all the others during his climb, but there was one significant difference. He actually mentioned the tower by name, which had never happened before. They had always responded with some sort of confusion and completely glossed over the mention.

“What is your name, and what is your mission?” Zac asked as he settled in front of the man who had slowly inched toward a corner of his cabin.

“I am Jaol. I’m just a comms officer of the Little Bean, no one important!” he said.

“A comms officer?” Zac repeated. “Know this. If you send out an alert through any hidden gadgets that end with me cornered, then I’ll kill you first before trying to fight my way out.”

The man quickly nodded his head, but Zac noticed his eyes darted toward his arm where Zac had taken off the wristwatch.

“Where is the Little Bean heading?” Zac asked, and pushed the axe toward the man once again when he seemed hesitant to answer. “Answer me.”

“We’re heading to the closest outpost, but we’ve fallen out of subspace,” Jaol explained. “It’s because of that thing. I guess that’s why you’re here? It has created too many anomalies for our engines to handle. We were forced out of subspace until our engineers can fix the damage.”

Zac’s interest was perked when he heard about the situation aboard the ship. It was clear that the leaders Little Bean had found something that they wanted to bring back to their forces, but it was obviously something pretty amazing if it could mess with the entire vessel and its advanced technology.

It also gave him a lead in completing the quest in the normal manner. If he could take out the engineers, or somehow sabotage the repair efforts, then he would essentially be done with the mission? The best thing would be to blow up the engines altogether, but Zac guessed that they would be pretty

hard to get to. But it felt entirely possible that the chief engineer would be the guardian if it wasn't the captain.

“What have you found out about the item?” Zac urged, not wanting to let on he had no idea what the guy talked about.

“It keeps bending the laws of physics in unpredictable manners, fusing, and changing matter without following any of the known rules. It really deserves being a shard from the **[Spark of Creation]**,” Jaol exclaimed, excitement seemingly making him forget he was a hostage at the moment.

“Spark of creation?” Zac repeated, his eyes widening.

Didn't this sound a bit too familiar?

Chapter 452: Road of No Return

The more questions Zac asked about the item the Technocrats had found the more certain he became. The item truly seemed to be the equivalent of the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind. The Technocrats had found it on a low-tiered world at the edge of some sector, though they hadn't realized its true origins initially.

Apparently, the technocrat factions often released swarms of drones that floated about in the multiverse, and now and then they'd pick up odd energy fluctuations from valuable materials. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and some things that might seem useless to cultivators could be extremely valuable for the Technocrats, and vice versa.

This time though they knew that there was a special item rather than raw materials, and it would be discovered sooner or later. Orders were quickly sent out from above and they tasked the ship Jaol worked on to retrieve it before the local factions realized there was a treasure under their nose.

The Shard, which is what they called it, had long since fused with a humanoid cultivator, which had created a series of shocking changes in both his physique and his surroundings. The man was F-Grade like Zac himself, and he had managed to stave off the effects for almost five years before he started to succumb to the influences of the item.

The Splinter of Oblivion was like an insidious whisper that caused its user to become an avatar of destruction, a madman who couldn't stop fighting. It had been the same for everyone Zac had seen in the visions, with the exception of the Draugr-woman. However, the effect of the Shard of Creation was completely different according to the technocrat.

An item of Creation sounded like something positive to Zac but that truly hadn't been the case for the poor cultivator. If the Splinter turned people into powerful lunatics, then the Shard turned them into monsters. The moment the man lost control he had started transforming and growing.

New limbs, weird tumors, hair, horns, and all types of appendages had started growing on the man, who quickly changed from a normal biped into a massive blob of flesh. Some parts of him had even changed its composition completely, turning into rocks, precious metals, and constructs that moved about.

There seemed to be no limits to his changes as long as he didn't run out of energy. He had completely drained the area he lived in by the time the Technocrats had arrived, and they believed he would keep absorbing energy until his soul couldn't take it any longer.

Of course, the man had become a raving lunatic by the point the Technocrats arrived. Being forcibly turned into a monstrosity that kept growing and changing had to be unimaginably painful. They had obliterated the being with orbital attacks, turning multiple square kilometers into a smoldering hellscape, leaving only the Shard intact.

The task force quickly loaded the items and hurriedly fled. The attack on an integrated planet with advanced weaponry had launched a wide-scale quest of retribution, and they had been forced to fight their way out of the sector while constantly dogged by Spiritual Vessels and the powerhouses steering them.

The Shard was now kept in a secured field that was designed to isolate energies, but it kept causing trouble to their vessel through bursts of creation that slipped through. It had turned a motor into a sentient golem and exchanged a highly condensed liquid energy into something that smelled like wine.

It had already forced the Little Bean out of subspace six times, and if it wasn't for the multiple layers of redundancies and skilled technicians the ship would have been turned to scrap metal stuck in the middle of nowhere. A few of the crew had

wanted them to drop it off at a desolate planet and let someone else pick it up, but the Captain was adamant about being the one who brought it in.

“How long until you return?” Zac asked.

“Two weeks,” Jaol hurriedly said.

“I will capture more people, and if he gives another answer I’ll come back for you, understand?” Zac said, his pitch-black eyes boring into the comms officer.

“One day if we get the subspace engines running,” the comms officer immediately corrected himself as he repeatedly bowed his head in apology. “We would have already been picked up if the Shard hadn’t completely destroyed our antennas as well. I have worked on opening up a line of communication for days now, but we are lacking some components.”

Zac slowly nodded with a snort. This sounded more like a situation that the System would arrange. The engineers might be able to get the system up and running at any moment, at which point he would be barreling toward an enemy stronghold. He would need to delay the efforts or quickly tackle the guardian if he wanted a shot at defeating the level. But there was one thing Zac didn’t really understand.

“Can’t your people scan this area if you’re so close?” Zac asked skeptically. “Just one day of travel.”

“One day in subspace can be both close and impossibly far. We would pass through multiple dimensional layers. Our space station doesn’t have that advanced scanning equipment,” Jaol said.

“How strong is the most powerful warrior on your vessel? And how strong is your chief engineer?” Zac probed

“Strongest warrior?” Jaol said. “The captain is a Class-3 Transhuman, and the chief engineer is only lacking a few critical upgrades to reach late Class-2. My readings are telling me that you are somewhere in the range of early to middle Class-2. Why not just leave, instead of throwing your life away? I will not say anything.”

Zac only glared at the technocrat without saying anything, making him shrink back toward the wall again. Classes were likely the equivalent of ranks to the Machine God faction, where Jaol had mistaken him for middle E-Rank. It made Zac a bit curious about the mechanical eyes he employed but now was not the time.

Hearing that there was a D-Grade warrior on the ship was problematic. He wouldn't be able to run rampant and simply cut his way through to the engineering bay. If the captain suddenly showed up his only recourse would be to crush his token.

However, the real issue was the Shard. Should he go for it?

It felt like the System was presenting him with an alternative to assaulting the 8th floor guardian. He could either target the engineers and the engine to delay the ship, or he could snatch the Shard of Creation.

In a perfect world, he would be able to do both, but either action would no doubt expose his presence on the ship and result in a massive response. With someone like the captain onboard he wasn't very confident in completing either task, and doing both seemed nigh impossible.

The question was what he wanted the most. The past levels had pushed him pretty hard, and he wasn't completely confident in a fight against a floor guardian of this power level. But the rewards would no doubt be shocking as well. The gains from the 7th floor had been extremely suited for him, and the completion reward for the 8th floor should be pretty amazing as well.

On the other hand, finding a Shard of Creation was once in a lifetime opportunity. He had long thought about finding a counterweight to the Splinter in his mind in order to restrain it, and this was his chance. This desire had only increased over the past weeks since his soul got infiltrated.

Shooting out bronze sparks every now and then to weaken the splinter was a patchwork solution at best, but sooner or later it wouldn't be enough. It felt like he was a pressure cooker waiting to explode, and this might be his only option on hand.

The item was just the kind of thing he had envisioned, and Zac felt it wasn't a coincidence he had been placed here. It was a temptation that he could either follow or choose to ignore.

But did he even dare to absorb such a thing?

The ending of that poor sap who had fused with it previously sounded beyond horrifying, and he didn't really have any means to counteract it apart from his Soul Strengthening Manual and the Miasmatic Fractals inside his head. He also didn't dare place his hopes on a second old master popping out of nowhere and giving him another set of fractals to house the Shard.

The optimal scenario was that the Shard would enter the miasmatic cage and the two items would restrain each other. The worst-case scenario was that some unexpected chain reaction would take place, causing a massive eruption in energies that would blow both him and the Little Bean into smithereens.

There was also the issue of agency. The words of the Seer back on the 73rd level echoed in his mind. He had said that Zac was just as much a pawn as he in the eyes of the System, and perhaps he was right. It couldn't be seen as a coincidence that the System first presented him with the Splinter of Oblivion at the specially created Hunt on his planet, and just a few months later put him next to a Shard of Creation out of a trillion possible scenarios.

What was the goal of the System here?

It felt like he was being led by the nose down a path rather than creating his own destiny, and he wasn't sure for what purpose. It was one thing if the System simply wanted to make him stronger, and found a suitable solution for him. But everything he had heard about the System indicated that it wasn't so benevolent, and also not hands-on to this degree.

Was the System treating him like a prize hog, feeding him with these two treasures? But to what end? Considering his Technocrat heritage he felt like it couldn't be anything good. Or was it the mysterious Draugr woman who somehow influenced his fate? He had no idea what cultivators standing at the peak were capable of.

But was there anything he could do about it, even if he was being manipulated? He needed power, and he had started down a road of no return the moment he got mixed up with the Splinter. Things were already spiraling out of control, and this might be his only opportunity to strike a balance in his body.

Hesitation gnawed in his heart for a few seconds, but he eventually decided to go for it. The Splinter was uncommonly silent in his mind, and he guessed it was because it sensed the presence of its opposite. He needed to make this effect permanent by bringing the shard with him.

There were a lot of logical reasons to not take such a massive risk, but every fiber in his body told him to consume it. It felt like he was a puzzle, and the Shard was the final piece to finish the image. This wasn't the decision he would have made before the integration, and it probably wasn't even the decision he would have made just a few months ago. But he had realized something during his climb.

One needed to push oneself to achieve anything worthwhile.

On the surface it might have seemed that Zac had pushed himself beyond what was almost possible, but most of his actions had been forced out of need. But here was a difference between risking your life to survive, and risking your life to push yourself to greater heights. He had mostly done the former, but he knew that he needed to take some risks to keep his momentum going.

Things might very well turn to shit, but even the random cultivator on an unintegrated planet had managed to stave off the insanity for a few years. If things truly didn't work out he would still have time to save Earth and deal with the Dominators and even have a couple of years to find a way to rip both the items out of his body.

Besides, the very fact that he was probably being manipulated into consuming both these items felt like an indication that he wasn't going to die from it. Why would the System or some mysterious peak being go through all the trouble of manipulating his fate and the Tower of Eternity if the end

result would be him simply dying? There were a lot of easier ways to kill a puny F-Grade warrior.

Since he had made his decision he could only walk forward, taking things as they came.

Chapter 453: Clearance

“Where is the Shard stored?” Zac asked after having made his decision.

“It is in a restricted holding bay, with multiple layers of defenses around it,” Jaol said, his eyes widening upon the realization that Zac wasn’t deterred by the presence of the captain. “The captain will come the moment he hears his cargo is being targeted. He is part-owner of the whole vessel, and it has taken a lot of damage from this mission. If the mission fails he will face disastrous consequences, but if he succeeds he will gain centuries’ worth of resources.”

“How would I gain access?” Zac pushed, ignoring the warnings.

“You can’t,” Jaol said without hesitation. “I have no idea how to get inside!”

“Think harder,” Zac growled as a black mist started to steam out of his mouth, adding an acrid smell to the cabin.

“I-I... You would need to have special authorization. But it is impossible for you! You have no neural implants, and even if you get inside there are extremely strong autonomous Class-2 Guardians inside,” Jaol exclaimed.

“Don’t you have access-cards or something?” Zac said with a frown.

“Cards? Like a medieval key?” Jaol said with incomprehension. “Why would we have such a blatant security risk as keys that can be stolen?”

“I guess that means you’ll have to take me there,” Zac smiled.

“Are you crazy?! You will be spotted in ten seconds after leaving this place. There’s no one on this ship that has eye-augmentations that even slightly look like yours,” the comm’s

officer staunchly refused. “We’ll both be dead within a minute.”

Zac snorted as he activated his Transformation skill, and the never-ending black in his eyes quickly gave way to white sclera and irises. His deathly pale complexion gained life, and he was once again a normal human, at least outwardly indistinguishable from a technocrat human.

“Wha-“ Jaol sputtered as he looked up and down at Zac incredulously. “How is such a perfect transition possible? Not even the chimeral Transcenders are able to do something like this before reaching Class-3.”

“What’s with these classes you’re talking about?” Zac muttered. “Isn’t it just ranks?”

“We refuse to use the classifications of the Cursed Heavens,” Jaol said haughtily before remembering he was a hostage at the moment. “Uh, no offense.”

“So you’re just being obstinate? Each Class represents a grade?” Zac confirmed.

“Well, yes,” Jaol coughed.

“So can we go? And remember, our fates are bound together. I die, you die,” reminded his hostage.

“... You can’t.” Jaol sighed after a short silence. “That’s what I’ve been telling you. You have no implants, so the Ship will consider you an intruder. Only people with clearance will be able to walk around this ship. I don’t even understand how you can stand in my cabin without detection.”

Zac glared at Jaol before he looked around. The implicit meaning was that the technocrat had expected a rescue, but none seemed to be forthcoming. Zac’s brows furrowed with contemplation as he tried to figure out what was going on. Was it the System that protected him? The problem was that he had no idea if that protection extended out of the cabin he found himself in.

“So how do I get clearance?” Zac asked.

“Get clearance? Impossible. You aren’t even connected to the Multiverse Network through implants or your sigil, getting clearance is impossible. If it had been so easy we would have been infiltrated and extinguished long ago.

Zac felt a bit helpless as he looked around the room before he spotted a few small holes in the wall not far away. Did spaceships have air ducts? They should have, considering how many people were aboard. Perhaps if he cut through the floor he’d find whole service levels he could traverse instead. But before he could ask about it he suddenly had a thought, and his head snapped back toward Jaol.

“Sigils?” Zac said, an idea suddenly popping up in his head. “Like this?”

He took out the necklace that Leandra had left with his father before disappearing. He still hadn’t found any use for the thing, but it was obviously more than a simple piece of metal. It had been able to vibrate and move about in his Cosmos Sack when he met the technocrat researcher back on earth, and it might have other functions that would be useful now.

He wasn’t really worried about attracting his mother’s enemies either, as he was transported god-knows-where by the System. If anything it might rather throw Firmament’s Edge off the scent by thinking Leandra had popped up on this vessel.

The small token suddenly shuddered, making Zac worried he had activated some hidden alarm, but it quickly calmed down again. However, the technocrat hostage wasn’t as calm as he looked up and down at Zac with confusion and fear.

“This is impossible!! How did you get such clearance?!” Jaol almost screamed.

“What are you talking about,” Zac said, starting to get a bit exasperated by the rapid change of his captive’s emotions. “And keep your voice down.”

“A- I...” Jaol sputtered with clear hesitation on his face.

“Remember, if I get pushed into a corner I’ll take you out before anything else,” Zac muttered and pushed Jaol with his

axe when it looked like the comm's officer was planning on cooking up another lie.

"I swear I don't understand! I don't recognize that insignia, but it has somehow given you Level 4-access on our ship! Even I only have Level 2-access. It uses some archaic access code I have never heard of before, designating you as a Council Inspector! What Council?!" Jaol blabbered.

Zac looked down at the necklace in his hand with mixed emotions. It looked like his mother had come through for him after all. He had already known that she was probably some sort of big shot among technocrats before something happened to make her turn traitor, and this seemed to further confirm it.

But where was she? Why had she left Earth and her alone, even to the point that her husband had died from the integration? Long repressed emotions threatened to run rampant as he held the sigil, but he quickly gathered his wits and focused on the task at hand.

"Is Level 4-access enough to get to the Shard?" Zac asked.

"No," Jaol said. "It gives access to all parts of the ship except critical areas that need the Captain's direct authorization. In other words, special authorization."

"Who has special access?"

"Just two people as far as I am aware. The Captain and Dr. Freid," Jaol said.

Messing with the captain was obviously out of the question, which only left him with one option.

"Who is Dr. Fried?" Zac probed.

"Uh, no idea," Jaol said.

"Jaol..." Zac growled threateningly.

The comms officer hesitated for a few seconds before he eventually reached towards his eyes, and literally pulled them out of their sockets. Zac couldn't stop himself from gaping in shock as the man handed his eyes to him. Zac unconsciously accepted them with confusion, before he looked back at Jaol with utter befuddlement.

The comms officer didn't say anything, but Zac noted that he had pointed his head down, and it almost looked like the empty sockets were staring straight at Zac's waist. Zac tried to follow the lack of vision, and he suddenly had a hunch of what was going on. He immediately stowed the two eyes into his Cosmos Sack.

"I put your eyes in my Spatial Tool," Zac said as he looked at the Technocrat with interest.

"I know, I just lost connection," Jaol nodded.

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"I don't want any hard evidence of divulging information about Dr. Fried. He comes from a powerful corporation," Jaol sighed. "Dr. Fried was sent by Deramex Dynamics, our employer's employer. He's an expert at force fields, and he is in charge of keeping the Shard of Creation restrained."

"Sounds like he's doing a pretty shit job," Zac muttered as he tried to look anywhere except the two empty sockets that stared right at him.

Was this was it felt like talking with him when he was in his Draugr-form?

"Yes, well," Jaol shrugged. "I don't understand how that works, but he has set up multiple layers of restrictions around the shard in the middle of the bean. I've heard from a few guards that the problems we've seen are just the tip of the iceberg of what goes on within the containment field. Dr. Fried has said that the Shard does not like being without a host, and it resents being trapped."

"Likes? Resents?" Zac asked with shock. "It's alive?"

"It's beyond me. Perhaps alive in the sense that a virus is alive?" Jaol ventured.

Zac felt like it was an apt description after having observed the Splinter in its prison over the past few months. It wasn't an inert object, but it also didn't feel sentient.

"What strength is the Doctor?" Zac asked.

"I think he's late Class-2?" Jaol said hesitantly.

“Is he strong in combat?” Zac asked with a frown.

“I am pretty sure he’s a pure researcher,” Jaol said. “Their combat strength is on the lower end, but they no doubt have some means to protect themselves.”

Zac grunted in affirmation. This was exactly what he hoped for. The plan he had come up with was pretty simple. He’d use the necklace to get to Dr. Fried, kidnap the researcher, and use him as a keycard to the Shard. Seeing as the doctor seemed to have a pretty high status he might even be able to use him as a hostage to blow up the engines and pass the stage afterward.

“Do you know where to find him?” Zac asked.

“I can point you to his lab on the map,” Jaol quickly said. “It’s not too far, you’ll be able to get there easily.”

“Point on the map?” Zac smiled. “We’re going together.”

Jaol froze for a few seconds before he deflated with a sigh.

“Alright... Is there anything else I need to know about the doctor?” Zac asked.

Zac asked a few questions to gauge his strength, but Jaol didn’t seem to know too much. The researcher spent almost all his time split between his lab and by the Shard. He was also pretty haughty and barely socialized with the crew. He even seemed to have taken a superior stance toward the captain even if he was just a Class-2 non-combat class.

But that was fine with Zac. It meant that he would get his opportunity as long as he managed to get to the laboratory to set up an ambush.

“Okay, let’s go,” Zac finally said after he had asked everything he could think of.

“Well, you’re still looking a bit...” Jaol hesitantly said.

Zac looked down and immediately realized the problem. He looked like someone doing cosplay with his ancient robes and weaponry. It wouldn’t take an AI to figure out something was wrong if he walked down the corridors wearing cultivator’s robes. His first idea was to take clothes from Jaol, but waving

around an axe for months while focusing on Endurance and Strength had made his build pretty bulky.

Jaol was a head shorter and probably weighed 100 pounds less, so getting into his fitted uniform was impossible. It also seemed that the clothes they wore didn't have an automatic-fit like his robes. Sending Jaol out for a disguise was out of the question as well. The Technocrat would probably rat him out the second he was out of earshot, so Zac had to go with the second-best option.

“Call someone here. Someone with a similar build as mine,” Zac said.

“A- alright. I need my eyes back then,” Jaol said, and soon enough pushed back the two orbs into their respective sockets.

“So weird,” Zac muttered.

Jaol didn't dare to comment, but he rather summoned a screen that appeared in front of him, looking a bit like the status screens that the system used. Zac saw a bunch of faces flash by on the screen until Jaol's eyes lit up. The screen disappeared the next moment, and Jaol slightly turned away.

“It's Jaol. Something is wrong with these calculations, could you assist me? I'll owe you one,” Jaol started muttering out into thin air. “Well, it's a bit inconvenient, could you come to my compartment? Yes, I am sorry, I'll provide 10% of this month's salary as compensation.”

“Well?” Zac asked.

“A colleague will come over in a minute, he is off for the day so no one will feel it out of place if he's not around,” Jaol said, a small smile creeping up on his face for the first time since getting captured. “His build is pretty similar to yours as well.”

“Why do you look so happy about this?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“He's kind of a work rival, and we're up for the same promotion,” Jaol said, looking a bit embarrassed. “If I have to live through this calamity I might as well drag him with me.”

“Fair enough,” Zac snorted as he walked next to the door. “But no funny business.”

Chapter 454: Undercover

Jaol hurriedly nodded in response to Zac's warning as the ship schematic on the wall changed to a large array of complex schematics and diagrams. They didn't have to wait long until the sliding door opened, and a burly man stepped through, his eyes trained on Jaol who stood by the screen seemingly in deep thought.

"You better not be lying about pay-" the man said, but didn't get any further before he was on the ground twitching.

"Undress him and take away anything that he can use to warn people," Zac said.

"That's impossible. He has implants like everyone else. The moment you try to tamper with that a warning will go out," Jaol said with a shake of his head.

Zac thought for a few seconds before he took out a vial and threw over a pill to Jaol.

"Feed him this," Zac simply said.

"If he dies you will be exposed," the comms technician hesitantly said as he looked down on the pill with trepidation.

"It'll just make sure he won't wake up for a day or two," Zac explained.

A minute later Zac inspected himself in a monitor, and it felt like he was on some science fiction show as his clothing completely matched that of Jaol's. The clothes of the poor man who was now slumbering in Jaol's sleeping pod was a bit long and snug, but it was a passable fit that shouldn't arouse any attention from a casual glance.

"Let's go," Zac said as he cracked his neck. "Take me to Dr. Fried's laboratory."

“I-” Jaol said before he sighed and shook his head. “Fine, let’s go. Try not to speak. If anyone asks, we’re heading toward the research department because the scanning equipment has been broken by the Shard. This is actually true, but it’s a low priority compared to the engines. It would have been better if I had a gift. Some might see this as me taking the chance to suck up to the doctor.”

Zac nodded, feeling it wasn’t a bad idea.

“What kind of gift?” Zac probed.

“Rare materials and stuff like that. Something I could pretend to have picked up on the planet we just visited and wanted to use as a bribe,” Jaol thoughtfully said.

“I have a few things,” Zac said before he froze as he looked down at his Spatial Ring.

He hurriedly reached for his pouch, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that all items were still there even though he wasn’t inside the tower. But what did that mean? Were all his items safe? Or would the confiscation still happen the moment the trial ended? Perhaps it was even possible to cheat the System this way by sending out everything he had gained. But he obviously couldn’t trust Jaol to come through and send his amassed wealth back to Earth.

Even if Zac somehow managed to make Jaol obey, did the technocrat even have the ability to follow through? They could be anywhere in the multiverse right now, and there was probably no way for some random technocrat to find his sector, let alone Earth. Zac eventually threw out a handful of random materials he hadn’t figured out the use of.

“This...!” Jaol said with wide eyes as he looked at the items that emitted strong fluctuation.

“So?”

“Ah? Yes, yes,” Jaol hurriedly said as he reached out and took one of the items, a piece of purple wood.

It was something that Zac picked up on the 6th floor. He had noticed that a tree survived even though Zac fought right next to it. The bark was extremely durable and was even able to

resist being cut with the Fragment of the Axe twice. Strangely enough, the whole tree withered when Zac cut it down to bring with him, leaving only the plank-sized piece of lumber intact.

“A piece of wood is actually valuable among technocrats?” Zac asked curiously as he saw Jaol’s excitement.

“Well, no. It is rather the unique energy signature of the material that is valuable. We can extract it and infuse it in an alloy to make a stronger material,” Jaol said without taking his eyes off the piece of wood. “My preliminary reading says that it should be able to increase the durability of many alloys by some degree.”

Zac shrugged and the two finally left the compartment, and they found themselves in a luxuriant hallway. It didn’t feel cramped at all like how it often was with cruise liners back on Earth, but the hallway was almost ten meters wide with the occasional seats and greenery. There was even a small artificial river running along the middle, creating a soothing atmosphere. Zac wasn’t there to sightsee though and they hurried toward the center of the ship.

Soon enough they reached a door that seemed to be a checkpoint between sectors, and Zac noticed how stiff Jaol looked as he waited for it to open. But the door slid open without any issue, making them both release a breath in relief as they kept going. It looked like the insignia left by Leandra really worked like some sort of universal key.

It only took a few minutes of walking for the surroundings to quickly change. Zac remembered the map he had studied, and they now were in the sector where the cabins housed over ten people each. The hallways had become a lot more cramped, and there were even missing platings and exposed wires seen at spots.

Zac was surprised at the stark contrast between different parts of the ship. Jaol’s compartment and the section around it were hypermodern, with not a speck of dust in the fancy hallways.

“This looks more run-down than what I would have expected,” Zac muttered with a low voice as they passed through the

barracks and a large mess hall. “It’s like this part will fall off at any moment.”

“Well...” Jaol coughed. “We’re a freelance freight-class vessel bought from an auction selling off the inventory of a defunct company. The ship itself is well over four thousand years old and long due for an overhaul. The section where I and the higher-ups live was refurbished five years ago, but this section...”

“Four thousand years?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

A thousand years wasn’t much in the world of cultivation, but he knew how quickly technology failed back on Earth. A machine holding together for a couple of decades was a nigh-miracle, and this spaceship had stayed in one piece over thousands of years and countless missions?

“Are there no teleporters on the ship?” Zac asked after they had walked a while.

They had passed through a seemingly endless number of passageways and were currently passing through what seemed to be a large mess hall. They had passed some people by now, but Zac was relieved to see that they only shot Jaol, or rather the piece of lumber in his arms, a curious glance before continuing with their business.

“There are a few for emergencies,” Jaol said after a few seconds. “But we can’t use them. They require a lot of energy to power to use. In other words it is a waste of money.”

“Jaol!” a voice reached them from the other side of the shabby mess-hall, and Zac looked over to see a stout woman wave and walk over toward them.

“Deal with this,” Zac simply said with a low voice before he looked away.

“Ah, Kerven,” Jaol weakly smiled as he turned around to face the woman who curiously looked at them. “I thought you were on duty today?”

“Can’t do anything until the changes stop. The thing is acting up again,” the woman muttered as she curiously looked back

and forth between Zac and the piece of wood in Jaol's arms.
"What are you up to? Isn't this your day off?"

"I, ah... I was planning on seeing if I could pick Dr. Fried's brain about our problems. This is just a small token of my appreciation."

"Uh, huh," she said with a raised brow before she shrugged.
"Well, I won't keep you up."

Zac's eyes followed her as he walked away, and some killing intent started to leak as he frowned. The splinter in his mind had woken up a few minutes ago, demanding blood to be spilled. Jaol's eyes widened in horror as he sensed the dangerous aura that Zac was leaking, and he tried dragged Zac toward the exit.

The door closed behind them and Zac took a ragged breath before he shot the technician a shot.

"Let's go," he said and started walking again.

"We're almost there," Jaol answered with a sigh.

It took them almost half an hour to reach the center of the ship, the massive ball that contained both the containment field for the Shard of Creation and Dr. Fried's temporary lab. Luckily enough they didn't meet a single guard until they reached the laboratory itself, and Zac felt the ship was a bit overly reliant on the AI and the security doors.

He couldn't be sure, but it seemed like it shouldn't be too hard for an assassin-type Cultivator like Faceless 9 to cause severe damage to a ship with as lax security as this.

However, the door leading into the lab was guarded by two men wearing some sort of tactical gear and holding some sort of energy batons. They didn't feel like real warriors to Zac, but rather security guards who were there to make sure that no one peeked at the researcher's lab without authorization.

"I am Jaol Kresson, Junior Deputy of the Communications Department. We're here to see Dr. Fried if possible to ask a few questions about how to deal with the recent disturbances from the cargo. I brought a small token of my appreciation that

I think will pique the doctor's interest," Jaol said with a slimy smile as he stepped forward.

"The Doctor is out," the guard slowly said after having looked at the piece of spiritual wood for a few seconds. "Let me-"

He didn't get further though as Zac moved forward like a ghost and punched the guard straight in his face as **[Everlasting]** appeared from his Spatial Ring slammed into the other guard simultaneously. One of the soldiers immediately went down whereas the other one required another jab before he lay unmoving on the ground.

"Hurry," Zac said as he grabbed the two unconscious men and carried them into the laboratory.

Jaol quickly bent over and wiped a spot of blood before he followed after with a face as white as a mask. Zac guessed he hadn't seen a lot of action up-close, and the situation was getting a bit tense. He had no idea if his actions just now had caused some hidden alarm to go off, but he had acted by instinct when he saw the guard activating his communication device. Jaol looked at Zac like he was a lunatic though, and Zac started to worry that the comm's officer might do something stupid from desperation.

"Stay calm," Zac whispered. "We'll stow these two in some corner, and after I've captured Dr. Fried you're free to go."

"Yes, yes," Jaol fervently nodded. "How did you know the door to the lab would open?"

"I-" Zac said with raised brows. "Huh. I just figured it would open like all the other ones?"

Jaol's mouth opened as though he wanted to say something, but he slowly closed it again and instead helped move the two guards so that they were hidden beneath a desk in the inner part of the laboratory.

Zac fed them a double dose of his knock-out pills even if the guards were just early E-Grade at best. He didn't want them waking up any time soon even if he started to cause a ruckus when the doctor returned. However, because he had acted so fast he had no idea where the doctor was or when he would

return. He didn't dare walk around and look for Dr. Fried though as Zac wasn't meant to be here. He could be stopped at any moment, at which point the jig would be up.

He could only hope that the doctor would return to the lab soon enough. But the minutes passed as the two sat in an increasingly oppressive silence, and Zac was starting to get worried. His eyes were slowly growing bloodshot and his mind was awash with murderous thoughts.

The splinter was making itself reminded, and the effect was even worse than usual. Was it angry because of the close proximity to the Shard? Zac could only bear with it for the moment as he took out a soul crystal to try and soothe his soul.

"Your ship isn't quite what I was expecting," Zac finally grunted, grasping for some topic of conversation to distract himself. "It seems you're using a lot of old technology together with newer ones."

"Old technology? All technology is old," Jaol said, seemingly more than happy to break the silence.

"What do you mean? Don't you come up with new things and improve?" Zac said with a frown. "Isn't that the whole point of your factions?"

"Where did you hear that?" Jaol asked with confusion.

"I-" Zac said, but stopped himself when he realized he had no idea.

He had just assumed that the Technocrat factions were somewhat like Earth before the integration, constantly figuring out new things. But then again, the Technocrat faction was Billions of years old. Had they reached a point where they couldn't progress any further?

Chapter 455: The Machine

God Faction

“We’re in the 43rd age right now,” Jaol said, seemingly understanding Zac’s thoughts. “Each age represents the pinnacle of technology taking a step forward, which usually resulted in a trickle-down effect that empowered the whole Technocrat faction. But almost all of these ages took place in the early stages of the System Era, before it was as powerful as today. The current has lasted for over 70 million years.”

“So you keep doing the same thing over and over again, with no improvement?” Zac asked.

“Isn’t Heaven’s Path the same?” Jaol muttered. “Cultivating and fighting, doing the same over and over again.”

“I guess,” Zac shrugged. “So how do you improve? How do you become more powerful?”

“Work and save Bits, buy upgrades for myself,” Jaol slowly said. “I’ve been working on this freight for 4 years, and I was planning on performing my fourth overhaul with my savings along with the reward for completing this mission. But now...”

“So money can simply solve all your problems? You get rich enough and you’ll instantly shoot to Class-3?” Zac probed with interest.

Jaol hesitated again, seemingly unsure whether he should answer.

“I don’t believe that this is some secret information of your faction. I can probably buy an information packet anywhere explaining this in detail,” Zac said.

“Well, I guess you’re right. I doubt I can get in any more trouble than I already am,” Jaol sighed.

I wouldn't be so sure about that, Zac thought.

Zac wasn't about to say that he not only wanted to steal the shard but also destroy the ship's engines if possible. In fact, he had been consciously vague about what he wanted to do just in case there was some built-in warning system in everyone's head that woke up if he mentioned stuff like 'blowing up the engine' or 'stealing the cargo'.

There was no telling what safeguards the ship had against its employees. Jaol was pretty forthcoming, but Zac had already noticed that the technocrat had tried to hide vital information to trip Zac up multiple times. There was no way he'd warn him that there were certain things he couldn't say without sending an alert to the captain.

"So? What's stopping you from shooting up to Class-3?" Zac asked.

"Well, first of all, I don't have the money for such an upgrade. But secondly, my soul isn't strong enough," Jaol shrugged. "I would need to drastically strengthen it to be able to support that level of power. I honestly doubt I'll ever get there unless Little Bean suddenly strikes it rich with a lucky encounter."

Zac was about to say that it was a bit unscientific for a technocrat to believe in souls, but he stopped himself after realize that really wasn't the case. He only needed to look inward to see irrefutable proof that the soul existed. Ignoring that in favor of some sort of atheistic technology-centered world-view was akin to burying one's head in the sand by this point.

"You're a soul cultivator?" Zac asked with confusion, some alarm bells going off in his head after his recent encounters.

"Not as the people following Heaven's Path would see it," Jaol said after some hesitation. "Did you board our ship without even basic knowledge of our capabilities?"

Zac only glared in response, making Jaol shrink back again.

"Well. I think you people call us the Machine God Faction, and I guess that is accurate. Our 'cultivation' is essentially slowly upgrading our body parts one by one. For example. My

eyes have been improved, along with most of my organs. I no longer require food, but I rather run on energy cells.”

“You’re turning yourself into robots?” Zac asked with shock.

“Is it any different with you? Your body is a biomechanical machine controlled by electrical impulses from your brain and nervous system. We are simply upgrading the machine we were born with to become stronger and more durable. The Captain is completely augmented by this point, for example,” Jaol said, some jealousy evident in his eyes.

“So he’s immortal?” Zac asked with surprise. “If you can call a robot that.”

“Robots and Transhumans are different things,” Jaol said with a shake of his head. “Transhumans have souls, robots do not. The captain is not immortal, as his soul age over time. True consciousness is the foundation of life, and it is not something that can be created. At least not until the Machine God awakens. At that point, we’ll all be able to digitize our souls and reach immortality.”

“So that’s what you’re fighting for?” Zac asked curiously.

The vision was reminiscent of how some people on Earth wanted to download their minds onto computers and live forever. Some had even believed that the technology for something like that would be invented within their lifetime, if the integration hadn’t taken place that is. It looked like the reality wasn’t quite so simple as the Machine God Faction had been working toward that goal for billions of years.

“Well, the big shots are, I guess?” Jaol said. “Most of us are just trying to live our lives.”

“So what’s the point of upgrading soul if you’re a machine? You said your soul is too weak to become Class-3,” Zac said.

“As we upgrade our bodies our components become increasingly complex while the materials become more and more exotic. But more importantly, the components are infused with the deeper truths of the universe, what you call the Dao. The soul is the core of a being, and it is connected to every component. The stronger a module is, the larger the

demands are on your soul. If your mind is not strong enough you won't be able to control it. Worst case the components will put such a strain on your mind that your soul breaks," Jaol explained.

Zac felt that it was an interesting alternative to traditional cultivation. They somehow directly infused their bodies with the Dao rather than learning it and used their souls as some sort of spiritual battery. It seemed like a mortal would be better off as a Technocrat than cultivating the normal path by the sound of it. The only cultivation that mattered was that of the soul, and anyone could do that, even himself with his zero aptitudes.

"So you still need to cultivate in Soul Strengthening Manuals to progress?" Zac snorted. "Isn't that bit ironic?"

"Soul Strengthening was there long before the System, so it's not really a part of Heaven's Path. Besides, our methods are more refined," Jaol said.

"More refined how?" Zac asked with interest, almost moving over to search the technocrat again for soul strengthening secrets.

Fixing his soul was a top priority, and he wasn't above abusing whatever means the Technocrats had. He didn't have the ingrained distrust, or even hatred, of the Dao of Technology like many of the old forces of the Multiverse. He'd use any tool that he could get to protect himself and the people around him. If the Technocrat had some bioengineered elixir to give his soul a power-up he'd drink it in a heartbeat.

"We train through the Neural Network. Our company gives access to a decent algorithm, and as a Comm's Officer I can use the facilities 20 hours a week," Jaol said with some pride.

It turned out that all the Technocrats were connected to a virtual universe through their implants. But it wasn't actually virtual, as one's soul entered the network as an avatar. It was perhaps more apt to call it a synthetic spiritual world, where distances were irrelevant as it existed in another plane of reality.

It honestly sounded like something that should have been created by a great mentalist faction, but it was rather constructed by the Technocrats. It was the piece of technology that defined the sixth era, and it was still considered one of the five greatest inventions among the Technocrat factions. It only went to show how important the soul was for them. It was the whole base of their identity, whereas their body was just a transient and exchangeable coil.

Inside this world were Training Facilities where one could slowly strengthen their souls with the help of some sort of advanced algorithms. There were both public facilities where one could train in return for an hourly fee, but the results in such places were pretty average. Most corporations had their own Soul Strengthening Algorithms, and getting access to those kinds of facilities were one of the means to attract talents to their force.

Even more conveniently, it turned out that Technocrats could access the network while sleeping, so they could work on their Souls at night without disturbing their daily routines. Stronger people could even allocate a part of their minds to constantly train inside the network while going about their days.

Even Zac couldn't help but feel a bit jealous at the convenience of the Neural Network. It was accessible from almost anywhere within their domains, and it was even possible to reach it from much of integrated space. How convenient wouldn't it be if he could gain access to such a place?

"Can anyone enter?" Zac asked.

"Of course," Jaol said, but Zac felt like his robotic eyes were a bit teasing. "You just need to implant a neural device or be given access by one of the other two factions. That will mark you as a member of the Boundless Path though, and you wouldn't be able to live peacefully among cultivators."

Zac wryly smiled and discarded the thought. He had enough problems on his hands, and there was no need to make the whole Multiverse his enemy just to get access to those training facilities, especially when his own Soul Strengthening Manual

was probably equivalent to some of the best training algorithms.

“Wait, what is this Boundless and Heaven’s Path you keep mentioning?” Zac suddenly asked. “Is it the same as Orthodox and Unorthodox forces?”

He remembered seeing the Boundless Path being mentioned during the quest to take out the Technocrat Incursion, but he had never heard much about it since then. People in his sector only divided factions in orthodox and unorthodox as far as he could tell.

“It’s related, but also different. I feel that you cultivators don’t really understand our factions because they bunch us together with a bunch of lunatics,” Jaol said.

“How so?”

“We’re not some heretics trying to tear the world apart. We just want to live free from the control of an insane AI run amok. What good has the so-called System brought to the world? Endless strife and suffering, and for what? Nurturing powerhouses for a war that is long over?” Jaol said with conviction in his eyes. “Yet we’re being hunted from all directions because we threaten the interest of the powerful factions who rely on the System to stay in control.”

“Do you really think that the universe would be so much better off if you managed to destroy the System?” Zac snorted, though what the technocrat said did somewhat resonate with him.

“At least we would be free,” Jaol muttered.

“You still haven’t explained the difference,” Zac reminded.

“The System is a guidance system, but it also a limitation. A prison. The Boundless Faction are those who don’t want to bow down to a false Heaven,” Jaol said. “The factions who follow the Path of Technology are part of the Boundless Faction, but so are many cultivators. Some of the cultivators are sinners who try to take shortcuts through nefarious means, but there are also righteous factions.”

“Why would normal cultivators choose to cultivate outside the System?” Zac said skeptically. “It seems to create a lot of problems for oneself for no gain.”

“Because the Path of Technology wasn’t the only path that got cut off when Emperor Limitless began his mad experiment. Some paths are missing, others are broken,” Jaol said.

“How do you know all this?” Zac asked. “No offense, but you kind of seem like a nobody.”

The comms officer glared at Zac before he quickly remembered where he was and deflated again.

“Everyone knows. The origin of our factions and our goals is something that everyone learns in school,” Jaol said. “Besides, my teacher told us that the stronger you cultivators are, the more likely you are to belong to the Boundless Faction. The Pinnacle Warriors and Emperors can see the truth of the false heavens, and join the Boundless Path to continue their journey.”

Zac obviously wouldn’t believe something Jaol had been told by some war-time propaganda teacher, but perhaps there was some truth to it. Why would people decide to go against the System? Were there some problems that arose at the higher Grades that forced people away from the conventional path?

But then again, did it matter? He had never heard of anything like that in his sector, so even if it was true then it was some problem that was far far away from him. He had barely taken the first step of cultivation, and he wasn’t much better than some random hillbilly.

“Where do you get the components then? Just buy them at a market, or do you make them yourself?” Zac asked.

“You need to contract a manufacturer or work for a company that has manufacturing lines. It’s another thing that separates good from bad corporations,” Jaol said. “Almost all my components are acquired at a discount through my employer.”

“So companies are essentially like sects?” Zac asked. “They both provide body upgrades and Soul Strengthening Manuals?”

“I guess you could say that,” Jaol slowly nodded.

“Corporations have a database of components that provide high synergy with each other. So the best is to move up the ranks within the company to get access to matching parts of the same series. There’s a high risk of compatibility issues arising if you mix and match at random.”

Chapter 456: Dr. Fried

It sounded to Zac like corporations had something very similar to the Heritages of the traditional factions. But instead of Cultivation manuals and instructions on what classes and Titles to get, the Technocrat Corporations instead had manufacturing blueprints and lists of components that worked well together.

“Are everyone in your company equally strong if you have the same components then? Sounds like a weakness for a force,” Zac said skeptically.

“Well, some parts are custom made to fit with our soul frequency, and compatibility with standard components differ between people,” Jaol explained. “So there will always be some differences.”

“Does it matter where you buy the components from though, as long as the compatibility is high? Isn’t the same no matter where you go if all technology is old?”

“I’m sure two swords crafted by two different blacksmiths are not the same. One might have better materials or benefit from a secret crafting technique. It’s the same with us. There are billions of Class-1 Materials out there, meaning there is an almost endless number of combinations of body parts to choose from.

“A good component might perform a few percent better than a similar one from a competitor, and certain components might have a synergy that improves performance even further. These incremental advantages really tack up when you consider the number of components a single Transhuman carries. Elite Class-1 Transhumans from peak forces can easily annihilate a Mid Class-2 Transhumans with shoddy components,” Jaol said.

Zac nodded in understanding, and he couldn't help but find some humor at how similar things between Technocrats and Cultivators were, even though they were of completely opposing philosophies. The situation was exactly the same as the one he found himself in. He had gained one incremental advantage after another with the help of his titles and second class, and these small advantages had tacked up into something immense by now.

There was no comparing himself with an average cultivator like the weaker Demon Warriors. He would be able to take out them by the hundreds, if not thousands, by now. The System played favorites, and the average cultivator was nothing but fertilizer for the elite few.

“So you can't change jobs if you want to keep upgrading?” Zac asked. “Because of component synergy.”

“There are often some rules where we can still contract our old employer for a set amount of years after changing job, but most choose to do a large overhaul of components to reform their core if they change force. This will incur a huge cost, but it will allow them to incrementally improve by swapping out components one by one again with the help of their new employer,” Jaol said. “Real elites are even given welcoming packages of full component sets upon getting headhunted.”

The two kept talking as they waited for the doctor to return to his office, and Zac quickly got a pretty decent understanding of the Technocrats, or at least the Machine God faction that Jaol belonged to. And just as he had expected, they weren't better or worse than any other people he had encountered before.

They simply represented a different world-view compared to the factions working within the System's rules. But it was also clear that they weren't any better than the ruthless factions that could slaughter each other for a little bit of wealth.

The struggle for resources was extremely intense, and there were huge societal differences between the classes. The lower classes worked themselves to the bone to be able to upgrade to higher Classes and provide a better future for their progeny, or

just to prolong their lives with the technologies that emulated the effects of Race upgrades.

Meanwhile, the massive corporations and families held almost all of the wealth and technology to themselves, almost making themselves into gods among men. Zac himself wasn't very convinced by Jaol's world view. Personally, he felt the System was like the weather. You couldn't control it and it sometimes screwed you over, but it was part of life. It certainly had a hand in a lot of the struggle across the multiverse, but things might become even more chaotic if it disappeared.

Zac wasn't just interrogating Jaol to make conversation and distract himself from the whispers of the Splinter, but it was also to understand the technology he had back home. He had gotten his hands on whole production lines and massive fabricators, so he had hoped he'd be able to produce massive weapons that would be able to blow The Great Redeemer to kingdom come if he showed up.

But it appeared that there were multiple issues with his plan. Not only would such powerful weapons be powered by his soul, but he would also need the blueprints for that kind of weaponry. There was also the issue of his fabrication machines. The ones he owned were no doubt Class-1 fabricators, and would therefore be unable to manufacture higher-class items.

Finally, there was the issue of retaliation. Small infractions didn't seem to bother the System, but if you went too big relying on technology you'd land in a heap of trouble, just like the Little Bean did by launching orbital strikes.

He also wanted to know as much as possible of how cultivation worked among technocrats to better be able to help and protect his sister. With Jeeves in her head, she could be considered a technocrat, and it looked like he would have to somehow come up with a Soul Strengthening Manual for her. Normal components put a strain on a technocrat's soul, and he could only imagine that miraculous technology like Jeeves would be even more demanding.

He even tried making Jaol download the Soul Strengthening Algorithm he used, but it seemed as though there were heavy restrictions to stop any such theft. Zac also wasn't comfortable letting Kenzie onto the Neural Network because of the risk of getting exposed. At least he hoped she hadn't found her way onto the network yet. The System was blocking Earth from the multiverse, and he could only pray that it also included the network.

Unfortunately, it looked like the doctor was quite tied up somewhere, and over an hour passed without anyone entering the lab. The long bout inactivity along with the raving Splinter started to take its toll, and Zac eventually had no choice but to stab his two shoulders and resume his experiments.

A fountain of blood erupted in all directions as a bronze flash burst out through his arm and decimated some machinery near-by, leaving Jaol gobsmacked at the other side of the room.

"What's taking so long?" Zac panted as his murky eyes filled with killing intent were trained on the comm's officer.

"I- ah..." Jaol stammered after he saw the outwardly unhinged actions of Zac. "I don't know. If it's alright with you I can access our network to see if anything has happened."

Zac thought for a moment before he walked over next to the comm's officer as he dragged out the bleeding daggers from his shoulders.

"Do it. No funny-business," Zac reminded.

Jaol hurriedly nodded as a screen appeared in front of him. A series of screens and rows of texts appeared in rapid succession, and Zac had no way to understand what was going on. Was this what it felt like for his grandfather when Zac set up his computer back before he passed?

"Something odd has happened," Jaol eventually said. "There are over ten incident reports due to mutations, causing problems all over the ship. There are usually some things that need fixing since we acquired the cargo, but not to this degree."

“The Shard has become more active?” Zac asked with a frown.

“It seems like it,” Jaol said before he shot a hesitant look at Zac. “It seemed to have started shortly after you boarded the ship.”

“So you don’t think the Doctor will be coming back here? He’s busy putting out fires?” Zac asked.

“I don’t think so? He has never helped with repairs before. I think Dr. Fried is more interested in taking readings of the Shard than helping the Little Bean, but that also means he probably will come back here to go over the results sooner or later,” Jaol ventured.

Luckily they didn’t have to wait too much longer as the door suddenly opened as Zac sat poised to strike. However, instead of a person a small ball flew inside, and alarm bells immediately set off in Zac’s mind.

He pushed forward to rush out of the laboratory, but his eyes widened in alarm as **[Loamwalker]** refused to activate. Only then did he realize that he was in outer space, whereas the skill needed to be connected to the earth to work. The ball detonated in a massive shockwave the next moment, and Zac found himself thrown into a wall as he was almost blinded by a piercing light.

His ears were ringing and he was completely blinded, but his eyes weren’t the only way for him to see what was going on. Dozens of fractal trees rose from the metallic ground inside the lab and the area outside the next moment, and Zac was once again inside a forest.

The augmented vision from **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]** showed that a dozen robots were waiting outside, seemingly controlled by two Technocrats standing behind with an array of screens in front of them. There was also somber-looking Transhuman wearing a white robe spectating from behind, and Zac immediately recognized Dr. Fried from a picture Jaol had shown him.

His conventional vision was just a blur from the grenade, but he still navigated himself outside as a storm of leaves spread

out around him.

“It’s an intruder!” one of the two guards exclaimed with shock.

Had they just thought they were dealing with some corporate espionage or some curious crewmember who wanted to take a gander at the doctor’s research? Zac felt he had caught a lucky break as he shot out a rapid series of Fractal Blades. The blades managed to destroy half the machines, but the remaining ones unleashed an unrelenting barrage of attacks. Both the technocrats were unscathed as well as dense shields had blocked the two strikes he had launched at them.

Zac dodged most of the attacks even if he was blind, but he found out that the projectiles automatically detonated into a kinetic storm that contained some mysterious energy that almost completely ignored the leaves of [**Nature’s Barrier**] and caused painful wounds across his body.

But to a warrior who had an effective Endurance of over two thousand, the lacerations could barely be considered a wound at all, and Verun lit up in a sanguine glow as Zac appeared right between the two controllers. A wide arc of death ended with the two Technocrats falling into puddles of blood and what looked like mercury, but Zac had already moved on to his real target.

Zac grabbed the throat of the old researcher before he had a chance to react at all. He looked pretty much like a normal human in his thirties, except for being silver. Was this the mark of higher-tier components? The mechanical parts of Jaol were easily discernable, but Zac could barely tell that the throat he was gripping wasn’t actually skin.

“I am working for Deramex Dynamics,” Dr. Fried said with a calm voice as he looked into the eyes of Zac. “You should know the price we’ve paid for retrieving this item. I do not know which force you belong to, but we will respond in kind if this mission goes awry. My private emergency vessel is untraceable and anchored at the end of that corridor, it requires no authorization to use. Leave now and this will be the end of it.”

“The Undead Empire would welcome your company’s attempts at revenge. I am sure some Lich would find your weird bodies an excellent source for experiments,” Zac smiled, ignoring the offer.

Blaming the Undead Empire for his actions had become almost ingrained by now. Some day Karma might come knocking, but for now they made an excellent boogiemans to blame all evil on. It was less convincing when he was in his human form, but the undead probably had a bunch of living lackeys that got things done for them in the life-attuned territories.

The doctor only snorted in response, and Zac’s eyes widened when the man’s head disintegrated into nothing as a massive blast was released from the torso of the researcher. There was no warning at all, and Zac was flung into a wall with a searing pain in his chest. However, he had managed to activate one of the defensive charges of his robes at the last moment, which had absorbed over half of the damage.

The surprise attack wasn’t the real issue though, it was the fact that the doctor seemingly had blown his own head up. How would he use the man’s special authorization to get to the Shard if he was dead?

“Behind you!” Jaol suddenly shouted, and Zac immediately looked back only to see a floating head fleeing in the distance.

A cannon-ball ripped through the air and knocked the head into a wall less than a second after the shout, and Zac flashed over and picked up the seemingly unconscious Dr. Fried. There was no stream of energy entering his body at least, which indicated that the technocrat was alive. In fact, he hadn’t even got any energy for “killing” the two controllers, and Zac was starting to suspect that you needed to destroy the souls of the warriors of the Machine God faction, or at least destroy some sort of core component.

Zac looked down at the head in satisfaction as he jogged back toward Jaol. He had barely needed to use any energy to capture his target, which would allow him to go all out against the defenses surrounding the Shard.

The Machine-God faction didn't have key-cards, but this was the second-best thing. Now that he knew that the head could teleport he was also infusing it with the Fragment of the Coffin to keep it in place, which hopefully would work with Technocrat tech as well.

As for whether the doctor was actually unconscious or acting, he didn't care. Unless the man had planted a bomb inside his head he was likely not a threat any longer. It was fine by him if he wanted to play dead as long as he managed to get past the massive security doors and their accompanying shields that were currently blocking his path.

Jaol had moved out from the lab sometime during the battle, and he was currently looking at the destruction around him with dismay. Zac felt a bit bad about the fate waiting for the guy, but he suddenly had a thought.

"Do you use Nexus Coins?" Zac asked.

"No, but we can trade them with Bits for a small fee," Jaol mumbled with a hollow voice.

Zac nodded and immediately transferred 100 million Nexus Coins to the comm's officer. Jaol's eyes widened in shock, probably because 100 million Nexus Coins was more than he'd make in a decade, perhaps a lifetime, at his current post.

"You no longer need to stay undercover on this ship," Zac smiled as he said with a voice that carried far and wide, which quickly changed Jaol's face from excitement into horror.

"Thank you for your assistance, I wouldn't have come this far without you. There is a ship down that corridor according to the doctor, I suggest you take it before reinforcements arrive."

With that Zac flashed away with Dr. Fried's head in his grip.

Jaol looked at the receding back of his captor with mute incomprehension for a few seconds, before his eyes turned to the two unmoving controllers on the ground. Indecision gnawed at him, but only for so long.

He rushed inside the lab and he quickly put everything valuable and untraceable into his Subspace Container. He would need every resource he could get if he had to flee to a

lawless zone where Deramex Dynamics wouldn't be able to find him.

Chapter 457: Desolation

Zac's large donation was compensation for pushing Jaol's fate off-course, but it wasn't completely born from benevolence. Such a huge sum would draw massive suspicion toward the comms officer, and his end would no doubt be pretty horrible if he stayed on the ship.

But the same probably held even if Zac hadn't done it. The guy seemed pretty shell-shocked, and Zac was afraid he didn't understand the severity of the situation. This way he forced the guy into action to save his skin. It was both an apology and a threat. Jaol could take that money and escape, taking the knowledge of Zac with him.

Of course, the easiest solution would have been to kill Jaol, but it wouldn't sit right with him. Zac's actions of reciprocity with Thelim, the Ent back on the 6th floor, had opened his eyes to an important truth. Giving back or severing Karma wasn't only vital for Karmic cultivators, but everyone.

If he had cut down Jaol after having received help with the heist and all that valuable information it would have festered like an untreated wound in the back of his head. So he could only rely on this little ploy to deal with him instead. The money was a huge sum to most people in the F-grade, but it was almost nothing to Zac, especially after looting the mentalist. Just one of her dresses was probably worth five times that amount, and there were over a dozen of them.

He was already rushing toward the containment center, but Zac was observing the young technocrat through **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. He saw Jaol run inside and snatch some things from the laboratory before fleeing toward the escape vessel as fast as his legs could carry him.

Zac nodded in satisfaction as he ran to the metallic gates guarding the room housing the Shard, and he breathed out in

relief when they soundlessly slid open without prompting. He was thankful he hadn't gone full musclebrain as he had initially considered as he saw the doors were over two meters thick with three layers of hidden energy shields within.

There was no way he would have been able to cut through such an arrangement in short order.

The interior chamber was massive, with a ceiling height of well over a hundred meters. It was inside the core of the ship, the monstrous spherical construction that had given the ship its name. The cubic chamber that housed the Shard just took up a part of it though, even with its impressive size. It was a good reminder that the ship was like a flying city, and he wondered if completely crippling it had ever been on the table for an F-Grade warrior like himself.

Roughly fifteen technocrats were standing inside the room, and they looked up with shock at the intrusion. None of them seemed like a threat though so Zac rather focused on the giant ball with a diameter of 100 meters in the middle. It was the outer shielding that protected the ship from the Shard, and dozens of tubes as large as a man ran along the floor from the right, likely powering the thing up.

Zac could barely discern another, far smaller, shield inside the ball. But further within, there was just a radiant light, like they had captured a miniature sun. He couldn't actually see the Shard of Creation, but he was sure it was within the core. This was somewhat proven by the fact that the splinter in his mind was fully raging by this point, pushing the Miasmatic Cage to its limits.

He was considering how he could use the doctor's head to pass by the defenses when an alarm suddenly started blaring out from hidden speakers as dozens of robotic sentries rose from the ground. The seemingly empty containment chamber had turned into a battlefield in an instant. The technocrats didn't seem to be combatants though as they fled for their lives through a smaller exit in the back.

Zac didn't stop their escape as they were essentially civilians, and he had given up subterfuge by now.

Bad turned to worse as a dangerous spike in his mind prompted him to quickly discard the head, just in time before it exploded in a concentrated gush of purple plasma that immediately melted the reinforced ground where it landed. Zac couldn't believe the professor would up and kill himself.

But Zac's brows rose when a cylindrical box inside the inner layer released some steam and opened up, at which point Dr. Fried stepped outside, completely unscathed. Soul Transfer or a backup body? The technocrats were full of weird means.

"Thank you for carrying me the last stretch," the doctor snorted as a series of clanking sounds echoed out from within his body. "Good thing I kept a few spares in case something happened with the treasure."

Zac wanted to retort something clever, but he couldn't come up with anything before he was bombarded with attacks from the robotic guards that had repositioned themselves to protect the power supply of the shield.

It seemed the sentries had only held back due to the presence of Dr. Fried's head, but now they weren't restricted any longer. Zac furiously charged the closest machine as he released **[Nature's Barrier]** along with **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** to turn the surroundings into his domain.

He knew his time was limited as the captain could appear at any moment.

He needed to break through the shield in front of him, but the machines kept blasting him with concussive projectiles that threw him off-balance. It wasn't enough to hurt him as the leaves still absorbed most of the damage, but it did slow him down considerably.

Three furious swings with **[Verun's Bite]** crushed the thick shield protecting the robot, and another one cleaved it in two. He tried launching a few fractal blades at the shield next, but they were actually shot down mid-air by the remaining sentries. Zac grunted in annoyance and glanced at the machines, but he didn't have time to figure out his next step before his danger sense went off again.

He quickly flashed away with [**Loamwalker**], and it was just in time as a substantial explosion erupted where he had just stood, making him realize the machines were triggered to blow up the moment they were out of commission.

“It’s useless,” the voice of Dr. Fried drifted over, and Zac’s eyes widened when he looked over.

A massive machine had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, looking like a mix of a walking crystal ball and a mecha. It had eight sturdy spider legs that held a platform in the air. On top of it, a ten-meter crystal ball rested, and it resembled the containment shields a bit. Finally, there was a platform on top that the doctor himself stood on.

Over a hundred thin arms reached down from the upper dais, and appendages ended with small satellites pointed at the crystal ball from every direction. It looked to Zac like they were used to restrain the ball in the middle, and he could understand why. A chaotic swirl of febrile energies rushed around inside the crystal, and Zac started to wonder if the crazy researcher had turned the Shard of Creation into a weapon.

Zac immediately launched a series of fractal blades at the outer shield as he spread the storm of leaves to block any attempts at shooting them down. However, the fractal blades ineffectually hit the shield, only creating small ripples even though they were infused with the Fragment of the Axe.

“I told you,” Dr. Fried laughed. “As long as the sentries are standing you won’t be able to destroy this shield, and the captain will be here long before then.”

Zac growled in annoyance when he saw the researcher sitting snugly on top of the weird machine, and he launched another series of fractal blades at the shield. But it was completely useless like the last time.

He quickly realized that his current strategy wouldn’t work. The bots were too durable and they focused on slowing him down rather than taking him out. He quickly forced a storm of Cosmic Energy toward the fractal on the right side of his

chest, and soon after the first axe of [**Deforestation**] appeared above him.

The bots were just too annoying, and he would rather fell them in one big swing. His arm swelled as he swung [**Verun's Bite**] in a wide arc toward the group of sentries that protected the massive array of tubing. The machines had proven a tough target for [**Chop**], but against the [**Axe of Felling**] they were little more than pieces of lumbers as they fell apart and exploded in an instant.

“You fool!” Dr. Fried cackled when he saw Zac launch his massive strike. “Did you really think that the shield was reliant on exposed power lines? Who would design such a shoddy defense?! You cultivators are really not much better than animals.”

Zac only snorted in response, but he was honestly a bit surprised that it didn't seem to have any effect at all. He had still managed to destroy most of the robots though, and he was sure that the massive tubes at least provided some power to the shields. Perhaps it was only running on some auxiliary powers right now, and the doctor was only putting up a brave face.

Besides, it wasn't like Zac was all out of options.

Veins popped out all over his arm as he forced even more energy into the skill fractal, and the flaming axe appeared next, causing the very air around it to twist and combust. Zac didn't waste a second as he launched it straight at the shield, empowering the strike even further with the Fragment of the Axe.

The cutting flames of [**Infernal Axe**] slammed into the containment field with the force of a tidal wave, and flames were pushed in all directions, incinerating everything around them. Dozens of expensive-looking machines were reduced to scorched pieces of scrap, and even large sections of the floor were turned into molten pools.

But the shield had endured. Some cracks had appeared across its surface, but they were quickly mended. Zac tsk'ed in annoyance when he saw that the containment held. He hadn't

expected that the outer shield could withstand the second strike, even after losing its main power supply.

“You’re decent enough for a cultivator, but how can you match up to my lovingly crafted isolation sphere? It can even restrain the Shard, so what can a fiddling little h- ah?” the doctor ranted, but was interrupted as a pulse suddenly spread from within the core containment.

Zac couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the molten plasma around him turn to mud, and trees and mushrooms appeared out of nowhere inside the huge room, causing the shield to flicker a few times before it died out. Zac and the researcher mutely stared at each other for a second, both obviously shocked by the turn of events.

Was the Shard helping him?

It seemed as though the Shard destroyed the backups while Zac took out the outer power source. The question was whether this was a random act of creation, or whether the Shard was sentient and had some plan of its own. But Zac couldn’t focus on that right now as the air twisted and turned as Dr. Fried seemed ready to launch his final attack with the weird machine.

But Zac had one more card up his sleeve and he endured the pain as he pushed almost a third of his Cosmic Energy into the fractal of [**Deforestation**], initiating the third and final swing. His bones creaked and groaned as he pushed his arm forward, but he wasn’t the same person as when he attempted the swing in his battle with Salvation.

A terrifying axe appeared in the air, and even Zac felt some palpitations in his heart after sensing the aura. It was an ashy-grey single-bladed axe with a long edge that almost formed an inverted ‘S’. The poll and shoulder of the axe seemed to form a robed being whose four arms ran along the cheek of the axe head.

The shaft was straight and unadorned, ending at a spiked knob, showing none of the craftsmanship of the intricate axe head. But the most striking aspect of the axe wasn’t its incongruous design, but rather the desolate aura that spread out around it.

A tremendous resistance pushed against him as Zac almost finished the swing, but he roared and struggled to complete the motion with everything he had. He felt a sharp pain in his forearm as accumulated wounds from past levels reopened, but he didn't care. Zac could have activated [**Hatchetman's Fury**] to effortlessly finish the swing, but he didn't dare to be under the influence of that skill at the moment.

The scientist had noticeably quieted down as he no doubt understood the power of the attack Zac had brought forth, but he didn't flinch as he frantically tapped at a console in front of him. It looked like the rampant surges of power inside the crystal were being magnified, but they were still being contained.

"Die!" the researcher screeched as dozens of the machine's appendages rapidly reshuffled to no longer envelop the ball, but rather expose the side facing Zac.

The sphere immediately started to destabilize, and a second later the crystal cracked as a terrifying surge of destruction rippled toward him. Zac's mind screamed of danger, but he was unwilling to back down as canceling his strike now would not only cause a backlash but also put it on a long cooldown. It was also unclear whether [**Nature's Punishment**] would even work in a place like this, as there was no nature to draw from.

His destructive capabilities were in other words quite limited, and his other class wouldn't be any help in breaching the core containment field either. He could only meet fire with fire and bet the house on his ultimate strike. Zac roared in defiance as he finalized the swing even though his arm was strained beyond its limits.

A grey wave silently swept forward as the sinister [**Axe of Desolation**] matched the swing, and the whole ship shuddered as the two monstrous attacks collided.

Chapter 458: Creation

The whole room violently shook as the wave of ash collided with the vibrant beam. There were no explosions though as the collision of the attacks was very different from anything Zac had witnessed before, and it led Zac to believe that Dr. Fried really had managed to harness at least a small part of the Shard of Creation.

The energies that had been contained inside the crystal ball contained the ability of inception, and weird items kept popping up one after another, each stealing a bit of the momentum from his attack. A massive blue icicle appeared from nowhere and shot toward Zac, but it crumbled into drifting ash by the wave of desolation before it even had time to pick up any momentum.

There were rocks, waterfalls, and scorching flames that appeared to hinder the wave of desolation and strike at Zac, like all the elements of the world had combined to take him down. However, the third swing of **[Deforestation]** was the pinnacle of Zac's power, and it wasn't enough to just throw some rubble in front of it.

The grey cloud was noticeably diminished as it pushed through the construct's attack, but it still had almost half of its energy remaining when it finally exhausted the beam and swallowed the odd machine along with the doctor on top of it. There was still no explosion as the mecha only shuddered before falling apart. It was as though the thing was a burnt-out log that turned into a pile of ash when prodded.

The doctor's face was frozen in a visage of fear and incomprehension as it crumbled as well. Zac knew the man was finally dead body and soul as well as he felt the surge of energy entering his body. A quick look around unfortunately indicated that the doctor wasn't the level guardian, as no teleportation array had appeared upon his death.

The largest threat was dealt with, but Zac didn't rest as only half his objective was completed. He flashed forward, running past the pile of dust that was once the doctor and his battle platform. He wanted to stay in the wake of his own attack, though he kept a healthy distance as he didn't want to turn into another dust pile.

The wave had lost even more energy from killing Dr. Fried, but it was a large-scale attack capable of taking out tens of thousands of people, so it continued forward in the limited space of the inner containment field. It finally reached the core that housed the Shard itself, another spherical shield with a diameter of no more than 10 meters.

A tremendous shockwave suddenly threw Zac back across half the room, but his eyes lit up when he saw what was going on.

The last burst of power inside the [**Axe of Desolation**] had managed to crack open the final shield, and radiant tendrils reached out from the breach. They looked like condensed sunlight but almost moved around like the tentacles of an octopus as they gingerly felt around outside the containment shield.

It looked just like when the Splinter in his mind was searching for cracks or weaknesses inside the miasmic cage, and Zac knew his opportunity had presented itself. He flashed forward with [**Loamwalker**] as far as he could until he left the spiritual forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], at which point he started to run normally. He needed to snatch the item before the shield healed.

"HALT!" a tremendous roar suddenly echoed from behind, and the power in the voice alone was enough for Zac to stumble as bloody gashes appeared all over his body.

Zac knew this was the end-run, and he scrambled to his feet and kept going, ignoring the mounting sense of doom from his danger sense.

However, it quickly became too much and he glanced back and spotted an infuriated metallic humanoid approaching. The cyborg's speed was way faster than his own, and it was upon Zac in an instant. Terrifying energies surged around him, and

Zac desperately activated a Bodhi-infused [**Nature's Barrier**] to protect himself.

However, a flashing light almost blinded Zac, and he felt a stabbing pain in his mind as all the leaves were shredded to pieces in an instant. They didn't even impede the technocrat for a second as he reached for Zac's throat.

Zac swung his axe with all he got at the incoming hand, but [**Verun's Bite**] didn't even leave a mark as it was blocked by a thin energy layer covering the hand. Conversely, the hand released some sort of counter and Zac felt the Spirit Tool yowl in pain from the clash. Zac already understood who this was, and he wasn't surprised that his attack didn't work.

This was the captain, a true D-Grade Powerhouse. Even if he was the lowest rung among D-Grade warriors there was no contesting him while still in F-Grade.

But the clash had fulfilled its purpose as Zac was shot backward like a comet from the counterforce, straight into the core containment area. Zac prepared himself to swap classes if needed to block another strike, but he realized the man had stopped some distance away with a sinister smile. A small pang of pain suddenly flared up in the back of Zac's head as he hit something within the light, and Zac immediately felt an odd force invade his body.

He realized that he had accidentally hit the Shard, and he quickly tried to reach for his Tower Token to teleport out as planned. However, he only had time to see the technocrat captain shouting a bunch of orders before the world turned white.

A crackling sound full of ebullience echoed out into the void, each snap exuding the primordial Dao. For untold ages the [**Spark of Creation**] left its mark on the universe, its conceptions growing ever larger and more intricate. But suddenly its revelry was encroached upon.

His breath was the Dao and his hand was the earth, and when he moved the Heavens shied away. He gripped the Spark and

clenched with enough force to tear the fabric of reality to shreds. The shockwave shattered the Dimensional Core that the Spark had turned into its nourishment, the explosion destroying innumerable planets.

Unwillingness. Desperation. Desire. The spark shattered, its remnants fleeing to all corners of the myriad planes. Creation was never over.

A great sage sat upon his platform with a kindly smile, and with a wave of his arm he brought forth his miracles. Magical scenes covered the night sky, scenes of unfettered creativity and depth. The crowd was busy gaining inspiration from the apparitions above, and no one heard the despondent wails from the captives below as their very souls were being used as fertilizer for the sage's false gifts.

The warrior's arm quickly grew and formed a massive scythe as he swung it in a wide arc that decimated the closest attackers. His eyes were already hollow and his face a sallow mask, but there was no going back now. He released a bestial roar as he rushed into the thick of the Verith Tribe's Truthslayers, and a shockwave of metal and flesh exploded out from him like a detonation of a Taboo Treasure.

Wings containing boundless force stretched out for hundreds of meters in each direction, like two canopies shrouding the earth. Each flap of the gargantuan bird's wings brought forth storms that ravaged the plains below as it traversed its prison. It hated its inability soar higher, and it released a cry of desolation. A shudder pushed the clouds away as the wings grew yet longer. Blood seeped out from its body and fell like rain, but it didn't care as it soared ever higher toward the stars above.

The young monk desperately prayed for tranquility as he climbed the lonely peak. He couldn't stay at the monastery any longer, he couldn't risk the lives of his brothers. But the whispers never ended even after reciting the mantras. It would be so easy to give in to desire, to grasp the power that resided within. One thought to turn dreams into reality, one wish to challenge fate itself.

Zac had once again found himself captive within a storm of visions showing an unceasing number of fates. Most were pretty horrible, and any notion that the Shard was the 'good' to the Splinter's 'bad' was finally gone. Those who had found themselves in possession of a Shard mostly seemed to be just as wretched, just with a different flavor. Coming in contact with concepts that were too far beyond comprehension was to play with fire, you were bound to get burned sooner or later.

The flashing visions suddenly stopped, and he found himself looking at a solitary figure from above. However, this time there wasn't a Draugr-Lady calmly sitting within a lake of miasma in silent contemplation. Instead, there was a cultivator perched on a terrifyingly tall peak under a shimmering night sky.

He wasn't Dragur, or any other undead race for that matter, but rather a humanoid alien with ashen-grey skin. The alien almost looked human with extremely fine features, making it hard to discern its gender. It did however have four eyes, one normal set and another one placed almost to the side of his head. The cultivator probably had 360-degree vision thanks to this feature.

The warrior radiated a dense and powerful aura full of verve, and even if Zac couldn't put his finger on it he somehow felt like the cultivator was the exact opposite of the Draugr lady. The whole peak was drowned in a vibrant shimmer as northern lights in all colors imaginable danced around him. It was a beautiful spectacle, but the cultivator didn't seem to care as his or her eyes were closed in meditation.

"Hm?" the cultivator mumbled, and judging by the cadence of the voice he was no doubt a man.

The alien looked up from the ground, and his two sets of eyes seemed to focus on the spot where Zac's spirit hovered. Zac's emotions surged in anticipation as he tried to speak, but he was simply a blob consciousness without any opportunity to communicate. But it really looked like the System had prepared another fortuitous encounter after all.

“Be’Zi mentioned meeting a child following her path just this way, and now you arrive at my doorstep just moments later?” the man said with a spurious smile. “I wonder what The Villainous Heavens has planned this time?”

The elation Zac felt was slowly doused as he listened to the seated cultivator. Even though the expressions on this man’s face were more amicable than the cold visage of the Draugr, he still felt less welcoming.

“Creation and Oblivion. Broken peaks and an ocean of despair. The cycle continues,” the cultivator muttered before he smiled again. “Will you break it? Or will you drown as well?”

Zac didn’t understand what the hell the odd cultivator was speaking about, but he was more worried about whether he would provide assistance or not. He felt fine at the moment, but he knew that a storm was probably brewing inside his body back at the ship. A storm that would have no problem crushing him, body and soul, if not dealt with properly.

“The Villainous Heavens brought you to me, but why should I bow to the bindings of fate?” the alien continued, his four eyes gaining a ruthless gleam.

Zac’s Danger Sense was quiet, but his instincts still screamed of danger as the lights surrounding the peak started to flash with increased intensity. Zac suddenly sensed his soul being crushed by immense pressure, like he was being thrown into a black hole. But a sudden shudder from beneath the mountain froze the northern lights, and the pressure disappeared in an instant.

“Mh?” the man said as he looked down at the ground again.

“Very well. Let the threads of fate run its course. I hope you will survive long enough to provide my wife and I with some entertainment. The eons are growing tedious, after all,” he said.

The man pointed a finger at Zac, and his surroundings rapidly closed in and disappeared. Zac realized that the man had sent him away, and he couldn’t help but feel some disappointment

over the fact that he still refused to help out, even though he obviously had a connection with the Draugr lady.

Had the path the System laid out for him gone awry due to the cultivator's reluctance to assist, and if so, what did that mean for him and his odds of survival? Frantic thoughts swirled in Zac's mind as his vision turned black, but the voice of the cultivator drifted into his ears just before his vision disappeared completely.

“Creation is a miracle, but it is also a drug. It will satisfy your desires until you are nothing but a ball of cravings, a husk of a man. But through temperance and austerity, Creation will bow to your will.”

Chapter 459: Perception of Reality

“Two days remaining,” Ogras muttered as he looked out the window of the small farmstead. “I guess it’s about time.”

“What’s that, darling?” the lithe woman purred in Ogras’ ear.

“I need to go out for a bit,” the demon said with a smile as he pinched the bare bottom of his little savior.

“You shouldn’t walk around too much with those wounds of yours,” she said with some admonishment in her eyes. “You were on death’s bed just three weeks ago.”

“Didn’t I prove just how healthy I was yesterday?” Ogras said with a cheeky grin and received a roll of the eyes in return.

He had been pretty confident in defeating the 5th floor guardian after his experience with the Transcendent Master, but the fight had pushed him way harder than expected. The enraged beast had been a perfect counter to him as well, too stupid to be tricked.

Things didn’t really turn for the better at the following three levels as he looked for an inheritance to end his run with. His wounds kept accumulating until he almost died at the hands of the assassin who guarded the gates to the 49th floor. If it wasn’t for the defensive treasures he had commandeered from Galau he might have actually met his end then and there.

Thankfully he managed to escape from the assassin’s pursuit, and he quickly disappeared into one of the neighboring kingdoms. However, the wounds were too severe, and he had fallen unconscious outside this Uynala’s farmstead.

“Are you sure you don’t want to enter the path of cultivation?” Ogras asked as he looked at the girl lying in the bed.

“Only problems will come from that. Life is beautiful because it is short. Why would I want to prolong it just to fill it with bloodshed?” Uynala said with disapproval. “Look at that wound on your chest. Is it really worth it?”

Ogras only smiled in response as he finished dressing and walked out of the small house. He didn't have a specific place in mind, but rather simply chose to walk a while to loosen up. One day on the inside meant roughly 15 minutes on the outside. He might find himself in deep shit real soon and needed to be ready.

The massive gash in his chest was still a bit troublesome, but he would be able to fight at full power without issue. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that though. Zac should have reached a floor high enough to scare off any attempt at their lives, and if not he would serve as an excellent lightning rod for their attacks until they tired themselves out.

The demon found himself on top of a small hill soon enough, and Ogras took a deep breath as he looked around at the quiet vale where he had stayed the past days. The world of cultivators and immortals was almost completely cut off from this little community. The strongest person he had encountered was an old hunter who was level 29.

People worked their fields and lived off the land, without strife or any real suffering. Their lives were short but fulfilling. Uynala would probably marry someone from the community, and their three weeks together would turn into a hazy memory of an adolescent escapade.

“Is it worth it...?” Ogras mumbled as he looked up at the sky. “Definitely.”

He donned a mask and robe and crushed his token the next moment, not sparing the house and its savior another look. A brief bout of darkness shrouded his surroundings until the world exploded into colors.

—

The beautiful lake was hidden deep within the mountains, untouched for thousands of years. Not a ripple could be seen

on its surface, making it seem like a perfect mirror that reflected the heavens above. If one looked from a certain angle it would be impossible to discern which sky was real and which one was fake.

A scream suddenly broke the tranquility of the secluded mountain as a harried cultivator desperately fled for his life. A group of warriors was high on his heels, and the man's back was covered in wounds. He looked back and forth, but there was nowhere to hide. He knew he would have to make a final stand if he wanted to break free.

An hour later the same man slowly breached the crest of the mountain housing the tranquil pond, and his eyes lit up when he saw the inviting waters. He had barely survived the ordeal, and he was grievously wounded and without provisions. But at least he could drink his fill.

The man dipped his hands in the pond, causing a ripple spread across the tranquil surface. If the man hadn't been completely focused on quenching his thirst he would have noticed a shocking change in his surroundings. Just as the pond rippled from his actions, so did the sky above.

Heavens and lake mirrored each other, and it was impossible to tell which was which.

But his mind was occupied with thoughts of escape, and he lamented the fact that he couldn't simply sprout wings and fly away, leaving his problems behind. He was so engrossed in his escapism he didn't even notice how the air behind him shuddered as two crystalline wings appeared on his back. He only kept drinking the icy cold water, feeling it was the most delectable thing ever.

He finally managed to quench his thirst, and the moment his hand left the pond the ripples disappeared, once again turning into a mirror. The man looked down at his reflection again, feeling that he wasn't as harried any longer.

There was something odd about him though, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Did he get the feeling because of the wound across his chest? No matter. The important thing was that he would be able to keep moving for a bit longer.

He jumped off from the ground, his wings vigorously pushing through the air to lift him into the sky. The warrior soon soared among the clouds and set off toward the sunset. Each beat of his wings filled his tired soul with a sense of freedom as trees and hilltops flashed by beneath. But his sense of euphoria slowly dimmed down and was replaced with a creeping unease.

Something was wrong.

He had sensed it before, and the feeling only became more and more palpable as time passed. It was like he was dream walking, where the world wasn't true and correct as he had always known it.

The wings!

Since when did he have wings?! What were these crystalline monstrosities attached to his back? Was this some curse the guards of his family had placed on him before being struck down? But he had never heard of anything like it.

Incongruous emotions clashed in his mind, memories of a life in the heavens, and memories of a life on the ground. But the memories of soaring among the clouds soon shattered, turning into crystalline shards that floated away.

He was elated at grasping the truth, but his eyes widened in horror when the wings on his back disintegrated, turning into shards just like the false memories. Without any means of flight he plummeted toward the forest below, and a large thud echoed out across the desolate mountain as he slammed into the ground.

The wounds of the warrior had worsened, but he was at least alive. The false memories were gone, and his pursuers were half a world away. A sense of freedom once again filled his soul, and it allowed him to rally the energy to keep going.

Dreams of his boundless future started to form as he walked across the unknown forest, but he suddenly felt the creeping unease return. He started running to escape the mounting dread, but it only worsened as time passed. What was

happening to him? Who was messing with his mind, his perception of reality?

And what else about him was false? Something was no doubt the origin of the undeniable unease. He looked down at his hands and froze in place. Were these hands really his? Or were they figments of his imagination just like his wings?

The answer soon presented itself as the hands fractured and turned into crystal shards that started drifting toward the sky. But as more and more of his body fragmented and split off from his body, the heavier his apprehension became.

These memories that were left in his mind, were they real or more figments of his imagination? They turned more and more disjointed, and soon enough they were filled with nothing but short bursts of faces and places that he couldn't name or place.

Am I even real?

A swirl of crystalline fragments floated into the sky, and a ripple spread out as they breached the surface. The small crystals kept falling until they fell onto the bed of the tranquil pond, joining the millions of other ones just like them.

Ogras found himself standing on top of the teleportation array, and he took a deep breath beneath the mask before sat down and went over his final gain of the Tower of Eternity.

“Reality is a perception,” Ogras muttered with a frown.

A surge of energy inundating his body as his understanding coalesced, and he felt a new path opening up before him. He had gained the Seed of Mirage from the inheritance trial, and he had quickly incorporated it into his fighting techniques as a means of distraction.

But was the way he looked at the concept too shallow? What if false could be true, and true be false? How could someone defend at something that was neither real nor fake, while simultaneously being both? His eyes stayed closed for another five minutes until Ogras finally took another deep breath and opened his Dao Screen.

Seed of Mirage (High): Dexterity +15, Intelligence +35, Wisdom +10

It looked like he had gained 5 Dexterity and Wisdom along with 20 points into Intelligence. It wasn't a huge amount, but it did push his somewhat lacking Intelligence a bit further. He had never planned on focusing on the attribute even though it was beneficial to some of his skills, but he would gladly take it when it came for free.

Only after having secured his gains did he bother to check in on his surroundings, and his expression immediately soured when he saw what was going on.

"Shit..." Ogras muttered as his eyes met the hundreds of glares from the mob waiting outside the protective shielding.

Had something happened to Zac's climb that emboldened these fools? Or did they have a false sense of security by their numbers? They would find that numbers were meaningless in a battle of powerhouses, and if they got swept up by the chaos it was their problem.

At least they couldn't target him until he stepped off the platform, but he knew that was only a temporary protection. The human cockroach would have to find a more permanent solution for their trio.

The array suddenly shuddered, and a pale Galau appeared the next moment. No apparition appeared upon his exit, but he still sat down with closed eyes as he took out a pill from his Cosmos Sack.

"You're late," Ogras grinned beneath the mask, quickly pulling himself together. "Just missed my Apparition, and it was a pretty good one. By the way, do you have a tool to check what level that guy has reached? Hello?"

"Ah?" Galau suddenly said. "Mr. Azh'Rodum? It has been a while, I am glad you are fine. What did you say just now? You want to see the tower ladder?"

"What happened to you?" Ogras asked with a raised brow. "Trouble at the desert town?"

“Ah- well,” Galau said with a weak smile as his hand reached for his spatial pouch again. “Negotiations fell through at the last moment. I got a bit greedy I am afraid, wanting to make a big profit right before I left.”

This face turned even whiter the next moment, and he looked ready to puke. Ogras looked on with incomprehension before his eyes widened in understanding. He quickly reached for his own Cosmos Sack, and a second later his expression was an exact copy of the merchant’s. So many barrels of fine liquor gone.

“It’s that bad?” Ogras asked, trying to find some solace in the sorrows of others.

Almost a third of his barrels remained though, and most importantly he still had the treasure he got for defeating the fifth floor. That thing alone was worth more than everything he had stashed away combined. Together with what that asshole provided in the inheritance he stood a chance to open up two of his hidden nodes in one go, provided that he would survive, of course.

“It’s worse than I expected,” Galau confessed with an almost crying expression, but he still took out an opaque crystal. “At least I could keep some of m- WHAT IN THE HEAVENS?!”

“What?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“He’s reached the 71st floor,” Galau sputtered, incredulity evident on his face. “Almost at the gates to the 9th floor.”

“Monster,” Ogras snorted with a shake of his head, even though he wasn’t as calm as he let on. “We’ll see if it’s enough to deter the group of starving Gwyllgi waiting outside the gates.”

Chapter 460: Indigestion

Zac took a deep breath as he found himself back in his body, and he was almost surprised to see that he was still in one piece after the four-eyed cultivator refused to provide him with a cage for the Shard. He did sense a new power coursing through his body, but it didn't feel too bad. His whole body was pins and needles, but there was nothing like the all-consuming rage and insanity that the Splinter sometimes brought forth.

Even the Splinter seemed to have been subdued by the alien presence in Zac's body, and the railing against the Miasmatic Cage had completely stopped. This alone made Zac pretty hopeful for the future, as this was exactly the sort of effect he had hoped to gain by taking this huge risk. Satisfied that he wouldn't up and explode the next minute he quickly took in his surroundings.

The radiant lights that previously lit up the core chamber were gone, and he found himself sitting on the metallic floor. He immediately reached for the token fastened to his belt, but he stopped himself when he realized that there was no threat.

The initial plan was to snatch the token and escape if he encountered the captain, but he realized that might not be needed now since the core containment shield had been erected again with him inside it. Three massive machines that had appeared while he took his spiritual journey powered the sphere from the outside, each of them shuddering with power.

Just outside the energy cage the metallic Transhuman stood guard, staring at Zac like a praying mantis. Beside him were a few technocrat scientists that were busying themselves with dozens of panels in front of them. It had been impossible to make out the orders the captain shouted earlier, but Zac quickly put two and two together as he looked at what was going on.

Jaol had mentioned a drastic increase of issues on the ship, and Dr. Fried believed that the anomalies appeared because the Shard wanted a host. Perhaps the technocrats hoped that him absorbing the Shard would result in fewer problems, which was something they desperately needed until they were out of harm's way.

"I don't know what your plan was, but I'll be keeping an eye on you until we return to our domain. Deramex Dynamics will no doubt pay even more for the Shard being delivered a compatible host," the silver Transhuman said, immediately confirming Zac's guess.

Zac ignored the man as he touched the shield, only to feel a painful zap that traveled along his arm. He wasn't worried in the slightest about being imprisoned; it was actually the opposite. This was the perfect outcome for him since they couldn't possibly know he would disappear the moment he cracked his Token.

Since his safety was guaranteed for now he wasn't too anxious to return, and he would rather wait things out for a few days to see whether any unanticipated changes arose within his body. He also didn't want to exit too early, as he had made an agreement with Ogras and Galau. Perhaps he would even be able to figure out a way to complete the mission on this level and then test his mettle against the floor guardian.

However, his eyes widened in shock when he looked down at the token. It showed that less than two days remained on his climb. How was that possible? He had over a week remaining on his climb when he arrived on the ship, allowing him to allocate over three days to finish this level before moving on to the floor guardian. There was even the chance of fighting for a treasure if one appeared on the 73rd level, in case he defeated the 8th floor guardian quickly.

He had pushed himself to the limits over the past weeks, but the system had somehow invalidated his efforts and stolen time on his climb. But a sudden realization made him want to curse out loud. He wasn't inside the tower any longer. He hadn't even considered it until now, but it appeared as though he had been forced to complete this level under normal

temporal conditions. He had spent an hour and a half on this level, which pretty much was the equivalent of 6 days in of climbing time.

It also meant that his climb would end in less than thirty minutes unless he managed to get to the next level.

Even worse, were there perhaps other changes to the rules he had taken for granted? Would he even get sent out if he crushed his token at this point? Panic started to build in his body, and he was no longer as calm and collected as before. He desperately started to look around for an opportunity to escape, wishing for some solution to present itself.

A deep thud made his whole body shudder for an instant, before a shockwave of creation spread out, causing the environment to turn into a chaotic mess of random shapes and colors. The shockwave was contained within the shield though, and it seemed as though the power was slowly drained by the three large machines.

“It’s pointless,” the captain’s voice could be heard from outside, but Zac couldn’t bother with it as he had more pressing issues to deal with.

The Shard had awakened.

A shudder traveled across Zac’s whole body as it felt he was being ripped apart, and the next moment hundreds of bleeding cracks appeared across his body before quickly closing again. What had changed? The thing had been quietly moving about his body like a curious animal, but suddenly it was frenetically releasing power to the point that Zac had trouble withstanding it.

Desire. Was this what the cultivator in the vision had warned him about. Zac had suddenly wished for a way to return to the Tower, and the Shard of Creation started rampaging a moment later. Worse yet, the Splinter had woken up from the massive fluctuations in his body, and Zac felt his mind tremble as it pitted itself against one of the Miasmatic Fractals.

It almost seemed as though the two remnants were creating some sort of loop where they kept agitating each other further

and further. The visions he saw were pretty grim, but it was nothing like this. The Shard was going haywire in his body, pouring out an ever-increasing amount of unfamiliar energies.

It was just like when he was drowning inside the pond of Cosmic Water, except that this time the energies came from one of the highest Daos in existence. There was no telling what would happen next, and he briefly considered whether he should crush his token in hopes that he would get sent out after all.

However, Zac eventually decided against it. His situation wouldn't be any better in the Base Town than here, and there was a complicated situation waiting outside. He would need his mental faculties to deal with whatever the forces in the Base Town had planned, and he would rather try to deal with this mess onboard a technocrat vessel than among the elites of his sector.

If he left the Tower of Eternity like this there was a decent chance that the tragedy of the Zethaya Pill House would repeat itself, this time perhaps causing trouble of irrevocable levels.

Zac knew needed to get rid of this excess energy before he exploded, and he desperately tried to force the energy out into his arm just like when he experimented with the bronze flashes. If something was going to explode it was better if it was an appendage. Ogras had lost an arm, but it hadn't really slowed the demon down at all.

However, the energies from the Shard of Creation weren't that easy to manipulate. Besides, his whole body, including his arms, was already crammed full of power. Zac briefly lamented that he couldn't expand his arm to contain the energies like with **[Unholy Strike]**, and his eyes widened in horror the next moment as his arm turned into a macabre slab sinew and muscle that kept growing until it slammed into the entrapment a few meters away.

The shield wobbled for a bit but it didn't break, but Zac didn't care about that as he frenziedly wished for his arm to get back to normal over and over in his mind, in hopes that the Shard

would comply. And Zac was almost ready to cry when he saw his arm twist and turn until it returned back to normal.

In fact, it was actually better than normal. There had been a few wounds and a crack in one of his bones earlier from launching the third swing of [**Deforestation**], but the arm was completely unblemished now, even missing a few recent scars that had yet to fade away. It was both a relief and cause for worry, as he wasn't sure whether this was really his old arm, or rather something that the Shard of Creation had reforged from nothing.

Worse yet, he felt that while the rapid transformations had expended some of the energies of creation building up inside him, it had also expended something from him. He wasn't sure what, but it was something else than Cosmic Energy or Mental Energy. However, Zac barely had time to feel a sense of relief before hell broke loose.

He sensed another buildup of energies in his chest, but it refused to budge in the slightest this time. Instead, it shot toward the Miasmatic Cage with furious momentum. The Splinter wasn't about to be outdone and the whole cage shuddered as it started to release unprecedented levels of power.

Zac desperately tried everything he could think of to stop the inevitable, but the two forces crashed into one of the seven remaining fractals at the same time. The pain in his mind threatened to turn him insane, but his mind felt like a small ship lost on a raging ocean. The Miasmatic cage barely held, but Zac sensed that the Fractal had started leaking from the crash.

The two remnants had failed in destroying each other, but their war was turning Zac's body into a ravaged battlefield as even higher amounts of energies rampaged around, and he was barely cognizant of the fact that he was on the ground screaming his lungs out as the air around him crackled before it broke apart.

"What is he doing?!" the captain screamed from outside, but Zac barely heard it over the roar of the powers clashing in his body.

The whole core containment was already painted red as his body kept crumbling before being forcibly restored by the Shard. The pain was excruciating, but that was only a minor inconvenience compared to the cost. Zac had finally recognized the pain deep in his soul that came each time he expended the Shard's powers. It was feeding on his life force.

His mind was a hazy mess, but he still understood that he needed to expel the excess energies even if it came at a cost of his longevity. He arduously got back on his knees and started punching the ground, each punch containing enough Strength to cause the whole room to shake.

The alloy was made to withstand terrifying power, but each punch expelled some of both the two peak Daos of Creation and Oblivion. Oblivion turned metal to nothingness as Creation turned his hand into massive sledgehammers. The entrapment had only been meant to keep the waves of creation inside, but that was only half the force inside Zac at the moment.

It just took a few seconds of rabid punching for a deep hope to form, and he suddenly found himself falling face-first over twenty meters into a subfloor that seemed to be some sort of service level.

The pain startled his muddled head awake for a second, and he quickly stopped swinging to instead look around. All kinds of pipes ran along the walls and into the floor and ceiling above, and there were no signs of any technocrats anywhere.

“Lower the shield!” a voice roared from above, and Zac desperately looked around for an escape route.

He started running toward what he believed was the rear end of the ship, and the aura around him kept increasing as Creation and Oblivion started to seep out of his body. Wherever he passed destruction followed, either in the form of utter annihilation or rampant mutation.

The waves that radiated from him had been contained while he still was within the shield, but now he was like a walking radiation sphere that ruined everything around him no matter if he wanted to or not. But that was fine with Zac as it both

lessened the stress inside his body while it worked toward completing the mission.

Hopefully he'd break enough to make a Teleportation Array appear, which would send him back to the tower and its elongated spacetime. As long as he left soon he would still have a day left to deal with this mess.

A sense of Danger suddenly cut through the pain and confusion, but he felt himself getting punched before he had a chance to even erect any defenses. A biting cold spread through his body as a massive hole was blasted open in his chest, the force throwing him through multiple walls. It was the Captain who had caught up, and it looked like he was no longer interested in keeping him alive. Half Zac's torso was gone, and it was barely held together by a few thin strings of flesh.

Zac felt death creeping forth, and not like when he changed his race to Draugr. This was a true death. He was full of reluctance as there were too many people counting on him back home. And the Vibrant energies surged in his body, and Zac was started awake by excruciating pain as his torso grew back in an instant.

Cold sweat ran down Zac's forehead as he shakily got up on his feet and glanced down at his perfectly intact chest. Was this why the Technocrats had launched an orbital strike on the previous host? He briefly wondered what Ogras would say after seeing such a disgusting regeneration speed, but he knew it came at a cost. He had lost even more of his longevity, and it was not a small amount as far as Zac could tell.

Worse yet, the captain was already charging up another strike.

Chapter 461: Pink

Zac barely had time to release another set of leaves and activate a defensive charge of his robes before the Captain was once again in front of him, his fist crackling with power. However, just as the captain appeared in front of Zac the two slivers decided to once again try to destroy the Miasmic Cage, and a massive wave of wild energies blasted out from Zac's body.

Everything within fifty meters was destroyed in an instant. Some parts had been annihilated or at least destroyed with complete prejudice, whereas some of the surroundings had been twisted and transformed beyond recognition. A dozen large crystals had also appeared out of nowhere, making the area look like a quartz mine.

The Captain wasn't unscathed either, and his chest lit up as a wave of dozens of shields spread out around him. However, these shields obviously hadn't been augmented by Dr. Fried as they proved utterly incapable of hindering the aura of Creation and Oblivion that radiated out from Zac.

The shields cracked like brittle glass and the Captain was suddenly inundated in the energies of the two remnants. His body twisted and mutated as other parts just withered away, but he immediately shot back with enough speed to break the sound barrier. The wave subsided and Zac once again found himself in control of his body, and he looked up with bleary eyes only to see the captain's body quickly reforming itself to peak condition.

It looked like killing a D-Grade warrior wouldn't be so easy.

The captain had learned his lesson though, and he no longer seemed interested in getting up-close to Zac. Perhaps he had wanted to minimize the damage to his ship that way, but the detonation seemed to have been too dangerous for comfort.

Instead, he raised his arm toward Zac, and a dozen miniature drones were released from his arm and created a circle in the air.

Streams of power emerged from his arm and connected with the drones, and a simile of an array was formed. A ball that seemed to be a mix of electricity and plasma was quickly formed within the circle, and Zac's danger sense once again startled him awake from his muddled state.

Zac was still dealing with the aftermath of the shockwave himself, and fleeing from the captain was out of the question. He just hesitated for a fraction of a second before he sent the command to his specialty core, and he almost fell over again as a surge of Miasma joined the chaos within his body.

But the transformation finished in time, allowing Zac to barely erect **[Immutable Bulwark]** before a terrifying beam of energy slammed into him.

The captain was going all out to take him down, and his latest attack was causing even more damage to the ship than Zac's own efforts. Everything around him melted as he was pushed back over a hundred meters, but his defensive skill had protected him from getting incinerated at least. However, Zac saw that the shield was about to break after just a second of defending, and he unhesitatingly jumped out of the way at the last moment.

He had hoped that the beam would shoot past him and blast a hole in the hull, but it winked out immediately after Zac dodged it. His Danger Sense screamed again, and he re-summoned the large fractal bulwark to block his upper body as the Captain, or rather his detached arm, appeared in front of him.

[Immutable Bulwark] cracked in an instant under the pressure of the D-Grade warrior's punch and Zac was thrown through two walls before he slammed into what could either be a massive pipe or some sort of tunnel.

Scorching pain suddenly radiated from his leg, and Zac miserably got out of the indent that he had caused. An almost blinding light drowned the area the next moment as the dented

metal was incinerated from the contents within. A beautiful yet terrifying stream of light coursed through the conduit, and Zac's eyes widened at the display.

The light didn't give off any heat or aura of power like a Cosmic Energy, but it still almost amputated his leg by just grazing it. His usually impervious body had proved wholly incapable of stopping it and the pain was excruciating. The good news was that the captain had stopped over a hundred meters away, and he didn't seem to be readying himself to activate another beam.

Was it just fear of another shockwave, or was it fear of damaging the power conduit behind him? It was probably one of the main lines of power that ran this whole ship as far as Zac could guess. What else would require this much power in a reclaimed old freight vessel?

His first instinct was to blow up the pipeline, but the problem was that he had sort of already done that by slamming into it like an infuriated Barghest. The thick metal tubing was dented and twisted, but the stream of lights seemed wholly undeterred. The parts of metal that blocked its original path had simply been incinerated, allowing the energy river to continue on its intended trajectory.

It made him believe that the piping itself might actually be there to protect others from getting themselves killed, or prevent things from getting into the energy feed. The stream itself was rather controlled through some other means, which made it much harder to blow up.

He had a sudden bout of inspiration as he quickly stabbed his shoulders with two knives as he stared into the eyes of the technocrat. The Fragments of the Bodhi and the Axe poured into the two fractals on his shoulders, and his whole body felt some reprieve as a lot of the back-up energies inside his body poured into the fractal as well.

An extremely large blob had formed in his chest in an instant, and it started expanding at a shocking pace. Zac frantically pushed it out of his chest and into his arm as usual, but the ball of creation was as large as a beach ball by the time it reached

his elbow. Zac grit his teeth and pushed half of his left arm straight into the stream of energy with one instant motion.

The pain of getting his arm singed off up to the elbow was almost enough to make him black out, but a spastic mess of flesh grew out and replaced the lost forearm in an instant as Zac repeatedly wished for a hand just like before when his arm was destroyed.

“What have you done!” the Captain screamed with fury before he launched toward Zac with murder in his eyes.

A billowing wave of killing intent caused his whole body to shudder, and he unhesitantly reached for the Token again. However, his eyes widened when he realized that his newly created hand was completely without strength and coordination. It flopped around like a wet noodle, and he couldn't even grip properly.

However, the whole thing became moot before the captain had a chance to arrive. A scorching pain enveloped him as a huge explosion of pink and blue flung straight through a meter-thick wall. Multiple bones creaked in pain, but he had thankfully been able to infuse his body with the Fragment of the Coffin along with expending a defensive talisman.

One explosion after another rocked the whole vessel, but he unsteadily got back to his feet in case the captain would show up again. But the only thing he saw was blue and pink flames spreading in every direction, and immense structural damage. Zac's eyes lit up at the scene, and he quickly looked around for a Teleportation Array.

Fleeing from the captain had already caused an excessive amount of damage to the ship, and he refused to believe that the chain of explosions that he could feel in his bones wasn't enough to get the job done. Just as expected, just twenty meters away a Teleportation Array had appeared, and Zac lunged at it as he knew he was running out of time.

However, just as he was about to step onto the platform the whole ship heaved as a massive crack opened up beneath his feet. Zac desperately tried to reach the array, but his

surroundings turned to a blur as he was flung away from the spaceship decompressing.

A distance of hundreds of meters was opened up between Zac and the technocrat ship in an instant, and the momentum kept pushing him further and further away. He panicked for a second, but he soon enough realized that the Miasma in his body was keeping him safe, though the expenditure was pretty taxing.

Another shockwave from the distance caused Zac to spin out of control as he was pushed even further, and he started to flail his arm to regain control. And surprisingly enough it worked. He realized he could actually shoot out a burst of miasma to somewhat mimic the effect of a propulsion engine. It allowed him to right himself soon enough, and he finally got a good look at the surroundings.

Pieces of metal were spinning about all around him, and in the distance a series of explosions harried the gargantuan vessel he had just fallen out of. The dome of the bean in the middle of the ship had completely buckled, and the shockwave he had just felt was no doubt one of the enormous thrusters in the rear exploding.

A beautiful wave of the radiant destruction was currently spreading outward like a supernova explosion, but he seemed to be far from the blast zone. But guilt rather than happiness filled Zac's mind as he witnessed the scene. He hadn't really considered the implications of his actions when he infused the unknown pink spark into the river of energy.

He had subconsciously compared it to pouring sugar in a car tank to stall the engine, but this was much worse. Tens of thousands of people lived and worked on that ship, and he had turned it into scrap metal. Thankfully, the vessels had some fail-safes installed as blue shields spread across the breaches that leaked atmosphere, meaning that most of the technocrats were probably safe.

Zac breathed in relief as he thought of his next move. Usually the Teleportation Array followed you if you kept moving,

pretty much urging you to move on to the next level. Would it be the same in outer space though?

There was nothing to lose from trying, and he quickly looked for any clues. Thankfully the familiar array was just a few dozen meters away from him, attached to a piece of wreckage from the Little Bean.

A sudden collision inside his body forced him to puke a mouthful of blood that instantly turned into an ice sculpture, which rudely informed him that two slivers in his body wouldn't even take a break after being thrown into space. He ignored the pain as he propelled himself toward the array with the help of a burst of Miasma expelled from his hands.

The array lit up the moment he floated into it, and a brief bout of darkness provided some reprieve to the chaotic war that had resumed in his body. But the struggle for supremacy between the two artifacts immediately started up again the moment he appeared in the next world.

Zac tried to get a grasp of the situation at the 72nd level, but another clash made him double over and puke another stream of blood that this time turned into sanguine butterflies. The little bugs fluttered about for a couple of seconds before they exploded, causing widespread destruction to the area around him.

He tried to rouse a response to the reignited war, but he knew he was in pretty bad shape. He had plenty of Miasma and ichor to spare, but his constitution and soul were drained after being inundated in Creation over and over again. The adrenaline coursing through his body during the escape had kept him going, but the brief sojourn into outer space had cooled him down.

A quest prompt appeared in front of Zac's eyes, but his fuzzy mind couldn't make out what the screen said as his body suddenly expanded ten meters before shrinking back again, the agony enough to make Zac scream out loud. Another burst of energies threatened to burn his pathways clear, and he desperately pounded down on the ground with enough force to

cause a massive explosion that caused gravel and dirt to fly in all directions.

Zac zealously clung on to the parting words of the cultivator in the vision, using it as a foundation to steer back on course. The cultivator had told him to restrain himself and not wish for anything, and by now he understood all too well what he meant by restraining desires. The moment he had an errant thought it was immediately fulfilled, but the results were seldom what he hoped for.

It was like the Shard of Creation was an evil genie that sort of fulfilled his wishes, but in a way that seemed to backfire while also draining him of longevity. Should he try releasing a couple of flashes to tire out the Shard? The Splinter was also causing trouble, but it was still contained in its cage even if the fractal was leaking pretty badly by this point.

But releasing flashes was like putting band-aids on a sinking ship, and he needed a permanent solution. Should he try to expedite their attempts at breaking open the cage? It would happen sooner or later anyway as they kept slamming into the Miasmatic Fractal, and perhaps it would allow him to trap both remnants inside.

But something suddenly cut through both the pain and confusion as Zac's Danger Sense suddenly screamed that his life was in danger. It was not from something within, but rather from someone or something attacking him again.

The Splinter brought forth an all-consuming fury that threatened to burn Zac alive as hundreds of eyes spontaneously grew on his body to see what had accosted him. But the vision scared Zac straight, and the eyes immediately shrunk back into his body.

It was an actual Dragon from mythology, a primordial beast over a hundred meters long.

Chapter 462: Dragon

Had dragons actually existed on Earth once upon a time? That was the only way Zac could explain it going by how stunningly similar it was to the depictions he had seen since he was a child. It looked like a traditional black dragon, though its scales were tinted slightly red at the edges. Two great horns adorned its head, and sharp spikes ran along its spine down to the edge of the thirty-meter long tail.

Only then did Zac realize that he had been dropped off right in front of an enormous cave mouth, which probably led into the dragon's den. What caused the surge of danger was a blade of power that was rushing toward him, seemingly caused by a swipe of the dragon's claws. Had he awakened the dragon and pissed it off by causing a ruckus at its door-step?

Zac had to push down a primordial fear as he prepared himself for battle. There was no way that this big thing wasn't the floor guardian. One good thing about the situation was that the dragon emitted an immense pressure that seemed to have subdued the remnants to some degree.

The swipe slammed into the bulwark the next moment, and Zac nodded in relief when he felt that the attack's power was immense but a lot more manageable than the Technocrat Captain's. He completed the transformation of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** before he stomped down on the ground as he activated all his passive skills. An explosion of miasma erupted as Zac appeared right beneath the dragon's chest, and the cage of **[Profane Seal]** rose from the ground the next instant.

Even the hundred skeletons of **[Undying Legion]** appeared and surrounded the enormous beast, and they immediately moved toward it without any fear of death. It was a pretty huge Miasma expenditure, but Zac figured that he would throw

everything in his repertoire on the big bastard before swapping back to his human form as he still had one change remaining.

But Zac still felt a bit stumped as he looked up at the beast. How the hell would he take this thing down? He had grown to a hulking behemoth himself, but he wasn't even close to reaching the dragon's chest with his axe. The thick legs looked extremely fortified as well by thick scales, and it was not like they were very good targets anyway since the thing could fly.

However, the dragon gave Zac no time to form a proper battle plan as it stomped at him with one of its frontal claws. Zac quickly scrambled out of the way as he took out the five strongest Offensive Talismans he had been given by the Undead Kingdom. He threw them all toward the scales on its chest, and a huge explosion of ice and poison rocked the whole area the next moment.

Zac's pitch-black eyes widened in surprise when the vision cleared to display completely unblemished scales. The dragon was still infuriated by the attack, and its long neck curved as it tried to catch Zac in its massive maws. Ten spectral chains slammed into its head with enough momentum to veer it off-course, before they tried to find a way beneath the scales to burrow into its body.

The scene gave Zac an idea and a spectral chain suddenly flashed over to him and looped a few rounds around his body before it hoisted him up in the air. His arm swelled to almost ridiculous proportions as he forced as much miasma as possible into it with **[Unholy Strike]** while the chain lifted him toward the dragon's softer underbelly.

The creation energies worked in his favor this time, and it felt like there was no limit to how much Miasma he could infuse into his biceps. It just kept growing to accommodate. He still didn't dare to overdo it though in case he harmed his main arm. His left hand was still barely serviceable since it was reformed, though he felt that he was gradually regaining control over it. But he couldn't afford that sort of thing happening to the arm he used to wield **[Verun's Bite]**.

Zac growled as he swung the massive black bardiche with everything he got, and the power was actually so great that the whole beast was pushed back a few meters. A small stream of blood leaked out from the wound, and Zac's eyes lit up as he saw his chance. The first swing had been infused with the Fragment of the Axe to cut through the thick scales, but his second swing was instead infused with the corrosion of the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac wasn't done there as he breathed out a cloud of corruption into the open wound as he frenziedly swung over and over to cause as much rot and fester as he could. But he only managed to swing four times before the beast roared and moved with shocking speed. It almost looked like it teleported as the bleeding chest was replaced by a scaled tail barreling toward him.

The shield of **[Immutable Bulwark]** quickly moved to block, but he was still slammed into the ground like a comet while the spectral chain was fractured into pieces. The other fourteen tried to worm their way into the open wound in retaliation, which stopped any follow-up from the beast.

It didn't help Zac much though as the dragon's attack had been infused with some sort of Dao Fragment related to brute strength. The armor of his transformation broke apart all along his back when he slammed into the ground with enough force to cause a small earthquake. It felt like half the bones in his body had broken from the impact, but he suddenly felt a lot better as a cold and soothing stream of energy surged across his body.

Zac's first guess was that the Shard of Creation had yet again healed him at the cost of even more of his lifespan, but the feeling was completely different this time. There was not that aching hollow feeling that had accosted him the last times, and he crawled up from the ground with confusion just in time to see 12 of the closest skeletons crack and crumble into dust. What was this?

Only then did the real use of **[Undying Legion]** dawn on him. They were not only soldiers but also decoys that took damage for him. He had not used the skill a lot since trying it out

against the Avoli Parasites, and when he did use the skill it was only on weaker enemies. The skill cost a lot and he didn't want to waste any Miasma in tough battles, which meant he had only seen the surface use of the skill.

Since he hadn't really been hurt until now he hadn't witnessed the secondary use of the skill; damage transference. He wasn't given 100 lives though, judging by the fact that over 10 skeletons were destroyed from one single strike. But it was still enough to let him keep fighting a lot longer. He also wasn't sure how strong the effect was.

For example, he doubted the skeletons could deal with a massive wound like the one where he got his whole torso blown to bits.

However, Zac's problems had just started as he found that the dragon was looking down at him with malice in its eyes. It almost seemed enraged at the fact that its mighty tail hadn't even managed to hurt him. Its wings started to furiously beat, causing torrential winds that made the miasma and corrosive mists to billow into the air.

The azure fractal in the sky was obviously strained as large cracks appeared on it before they mended themselves, but it stopped the dragon from going airborne. The beast did however manage to rise onto its back-legs, and Zac felt a foreboding sensation as a very familiar light lit up deep in the open maw.

An unceasing stream of scorching flames slammed into Zac the next moment, and he could only turtle up on the ground beneath his Fractal Bulwark. The flames carried a terrifying heat, and it felt like he was being boiled alive inside his little bubble. Less than a second passed before he felt that all the skeletons outside had been turned to ash, and he even sensed that the whole miasmatic cage struggled to withstand the sea of flames that covered the whole area by now.

The shield of [**Profane Seal**] finally broke a few seconds later, and Zac received a strong backlash that made him groan in pain. Even the thick bulwark started to show signs of tearing as small cracks let droplets of flames through.

He felt a scorching pain in his leg as one of them dripped right through a crack in the armor, but the burn was immediately healed by the Shard of Creation at the cost of even more life force. Zac knew he needed to finish the battles quickly. He couldn't let the Shard keep draining him to heal his wounds, or he'd return to Port Atwood as a senior citizen.

The flames finally abated, and Zac looked around only to see scorched earth in all directions. All the skeletal soldiers were gone, as was the cage trapping the beast. Even the vast swathes of Miasma and corrosive mists from **[Winds of Decay]** had been singed clean, leaving only superheated air.

Zac saw his opportunity as the dragon seemed pretty drained from having expelled a small ocean of flames, and he immediately swapped back to his human form. Lush growth rose from the ashen fields as the domain of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** emerged, and Zac immediately launched a series of Fractal blades at the open maw of the dragon.

However, the Fragment-infused blades only caused minor scars on its face before they broke apart, and Zac knew he would have to use something stronger than that. Cosmic Energy surged in his body as he activated **[Nature's Punishment]**, and the wooden fist emerged from the crack in space before it flew toward the exhausted dragon.

But another pulse from the Shard made Zac's hand twist and deform. Shockingly enough the same thing happened to the wooden hand, and it suddenly looked like a misshapen stump. The scene thankfully only lasted for a second before both of them turned back to normal after Zac shouted in his mind.

He had accidentally put too much focus on his hand from activating the skill, which the Shard had interpreted as desire.

A grand peak emerged from the enormous fractal in the sky the next second, and it shot straight down toward the head of the dragon. Zac wanted to end it once and for all with one massive strike, but he was dismayed to find that he had underestimated the sturdiness of a dragon's skull. Blood poured down from its head like rain, but it resisted the downward push with a furious roar.

It looked like it refused to give up in a battle of pure strength, and its whole body trembled as it tried to throw away mountain pressing down on it. However, its head had been noticeably pushed down toward the ground, and its throat was only five meters in the air while its whole body was fixed in position.

Zac knew he wouldn't get a better opportunity than this.

This was his final shot, but he knew that any attack with **[Verun's Bite]** wouldn't cut it against the thick plating protecting the dragon's throat. There were only two things in his repertoire that had a shot at killing this thing in one go. The first option was the third swing of **[Deforestation]**, but it was impossible to launch the skill again after such a short duration.

Besides, he didn't have time to wind up 3 consecutive strikes before the dragon had managed to divert the mountain. He was already feeling that he was losing control of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The second option was more fraught with danger, but he had already come to a point of no return. He felt that both the remnants were already building up for another strike at the fractal cage, and he knew that the rune was already teetering on the brink of collapse. His best shot at surviving whatever came next was to exhaust both the slivers first.

Two knives appeared in his hands and he stabbed them into his shoulders before he tried to launch what should be his ultimate move. He hadn't tried this before, but he saw no real alternative. A normal bronze flash was extremely strong, but the implosion area wasn't large enough to wound a beast of this size.

The pale pink flash he had managed to summon on the Technocrat Ship might work, but he still had no idea what it actually did. It might even heal the dragon rather than hurt it for all he knew.

Besides, either of those attacks would only exhaust one of the remnants, and he wanted to tire both of them out before the Miasmatic Cage broke open. He needed to see if he could create a new flash by fusing Bodhi and Coffin in hopes it would

create a mix of the two. That would involve both the slivers, and it should release the strongest force he could muster.

If that couldn't kill a dragon, then nothing would.

He was extremely drained already, but he still pushed more mental energy into the two fractals on his shoulders than he had ever done before. His vision was turning blurred, but he forcibly held on to his consciousness as he jumped toward the dragon's throat. The two Fragments entered the modified **[Cyclic Strike]** without issue, and streams of energies started to converge in the middle of his chest to merge as usual.

But the moment the two energies tried to merge in his chest the remnants turned insane.

Chapter 463: Chaos

The Shard of creation immediately stormed toward the Miasmatic Fractal while pouring out unprecedented amounts of energies like it was suicidal, and the Splinter responded in kind. The rune cracked in an instant, causing a chaotic storm of energies that left a new set of cracks on his soul. However, a fractured soul wasn't actually his most pressing issue, as something terrifying was brewing in his chest.

The two streams of energy resisted being merged. Meanwhile, the dual skill fractals were like funnels that didn't stop infusing the two energies, causing more and more opposing energies to gather in his chest. Zac wasn't even providing any mental energy to the skill any longer, but the energy was rather ripped from the two remnants. He couldn't understand what was going on, nothing like this had happened before when forming a flash.

However, the two remnants seemed completely uncaring about the shocking amounts of energy they were losing. Dozens of tentacles shot out of the cage the instant the gap was created, all of them targeting the Shard hovering outside. It met the assault with radiant tendrils of its own. Dozens of clashes took place in an instant, but the battle was quickly slowing down as the two remnants started to look faded and listless.

It was too much.

Zac couldn't even begin to prepare a strike in this condition, and he was horrified to find himself locked in the air as massive surges of power radiated around him. In fact, it seemed as though the whole area had been forced to a halt, as neither the dragon nor the descending mountain moved in the slightest. However, the wind still blew, and Zac briefly noted a bird flying in the sky above, proving that time actually hadn't stopped.

Both Zac and his foe were just locked in place as a bomb was growing inside his chest.

Finally, the situation reached a tipping point just as the two remnants seemed to be on their last legs. They no longer fought, but their tentacles rather gripped each other for support as they teetered on the brink of collapse. Meanwhile, the pressure in his chest had built to such a degree that the two sides no longer were able to resist the merge, and the two streams finally fused into a new energy.

However, that was anything but good news as Zac was still frozen, and this new creation contained such terrifying force that Zac was almost scared out of his mind. Just its existence was breaking apart Zac's body, but he was utterly incapable of moving it even an inch.

Zac screamed with desperation in his mind, fervently wishing for the Spark of Creation to push the thing out of his body. His desire was thankfully granted, and a spear of white metal was forged by some of the left-over energies spread through his body. It emerged from his chest and shot toward the throat of the dragon with the terrifying creation residing within.

The universe suddenly stopped as time and space unraveled, and a hazy pattern emerged as the fused energy exploded.

Zac was still stuck in the air, and his eyes were glued to the thing he had brought forth into the universe. It emitted an unlimited sense of vastness that threatened to turn him insane. It felt like it was trying to force the whole universe into his mind, but his soul was already bursting at the seams from just being subjected to an insignificant corner of the whole.

He needed to look away, but he wasn't even able to blink. Zac was forced to witness the profundity of the universe and the end of his existence.

The dome of heaven suddenly cracked as boundless lightning spread across the horizon. They were the only thing that moved in this world of grey, and the lightning seemed to accumulate right above his position. Zac tried to look up to see what was going on, but his eyes were still fixed as they were before the world stopped. He could sense a terrifying pressure

from above though, like he was being gazed upon by an indifferent god.

Power, supremacy, but also happiness?

There was no way for him to comprehend the series of events, but he was relieved to see that the odd pattern in front of him was starting to fade. His mind was right on the brink of a meltdown, and he fervently prayed he would be able to withstand the insane pressures until the grey rune was gone.

A pure pillar of lightning suddenly slammed into the pattern from above, but it was forcibly dispersed by a deep shudder emerging from within the rune. Another blast followed immediately after, and this process repeated eight times with increased intensity until a golden beam of lightning descended.

Its might was even a match to the mysterious rune, and it wasn't as easily dispersed as the earlier bolts.

Zac felt multiple shudders deep in his soul, but the final lightning bolt was like an unmovable fixture. Only after ten seconds did it dissipate, but it left behind a pillar of golden fractals so densely inscribed that Zac's couldn't even begin to comprehend what they were meant to do. The pattern inside seemed intent to escape, and a world-ending amount of energy ravaged inside the cage.

The world shook and the universe seemed to be cracking as Zac's vision faded to black.

A shudder ran through his body he was startled awake, and he scrambled to his feet as he looked for threats in all directions. It felt like his eyes were full of sand and his head turned to mush, but he was alive. The dragon lay unmoving next to him with a massive hole in its throat where the mysterious rune had appeared. The summoned mountain was lying beside it, making an odd addition to the environment.

There wasn't any sign of either the grey pattern or the terrifying lightning though. The massive dragon was completely unscathed apart from the hole in its throat, even though it should have been reduced to ash by the lightning

strikes that struck the pattern right beneath it. It almost felt like what he witnessed while the world had stopped was a dream.

But he knew that what he had seen was all too real, and he had an inkling of what going on. The grey pattern he had summoned was something the System desired, and it had slowly created a situation for Zac to provide it on a silver platter. He had sensed the greed of the heavens, and the jubilation when the pattern was trapped.

He had been played.

Zac had a pretty good idea of what the thing he summoned was as well. It was Chaos, or more likely a small fragment of it. It was the origin of the Dao, and just looking at it had almost driven Zac insane. If the System hadn't swooped in to steal the thing he would have probably died then and there.

He didn't even have the energy to be mad about being used as an incubation chamber for the System. What could he do? Scream at the sky like a raving lunatic? A sigh emerged from Zac's lips as he looked down at the token by his side. It looked like he had been unconscious for over twelve hours, giving him some time to finish things up on this level and recuperate, but nothing more than that.

His climb would end at the entrance of the 73rd floor.

He took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky, and he felt a sense of peace, for the first time in months it felt like. But the tranquility made him freeze in realization as he finally noticed that the two remnants had been completely quiet since he woke up half a minute ago. He quickly turned his sight inward, and he almost reeled in shock at the drastic changes that had taken place.

The most important changes were obviously the ones that had happened to his Miasmic Cage. Only six Miasmic Runes remained as expected, but they had gotten company. Six golden fractals teeming with power had been added to the mix, forming an alternating circle in his mind. The construction seemed extremely robust, as though the two sets of runes formed something greater than the sum of its parts.

More importantly, the cage already housed the two remnants. Was this the System's method of reciprocity, some sort of reward for Zac providing it with the Chaos Pattern?

The two remnants were still entwined by their tendrils just like at the end of the fight, and they still seemed completely listless. They didn't move or struggle at all, and they felt faded, almost dying. They had been forcibly drained in order to form that special blob, and it seemed that it had almost taken all the power they had in the end.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he sat unmoving for a few seconds. He had made it after all. The two remnants had glommed on to each other and formed a mutual restriction, while his cage had upgraded to an unprecedented level. Of course, he knew that he couldn't completely count on the issue being solved.

The remnants couldn't even be destroyed by a warrior who was able to crush a black hole with his bare hands, so he doubted that getting slightly overtaxed would take them out. Besides, he wasn't confident in putting all his trust in the System's restrictive fractals. What if the System suddenly decided it wanted another Chaos Pattern and started prodding around in his head?

He still needed to quickly upgrade the strength of his soul to make sure he could handle any future problems. Besides, he still hadn't given up on his path after his recent troubles. On the contrary, he felt more confident about his choice than ever, which meant that strengthening his soul was still a top priority.

Fusing the Coffin and the Bodhi again was obviously out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future. But the bronze flash and its Bodhi-based equivalent were still very much on the table. He just needed to create a proper foundation first. He was currently like a kid with matches, playing with things he didn't understand.

He was shocked at the recklessness he had displayed during the latter parts of the climb as he looked back on the past weeks. He had not only risked his life untold times by creating

the bronze flashes, but he had headed straight toward the Shard without any regard for his life.

Was it the Splinter that had egged him on toward his own path of destruction? Or was it the System that was somehow messing with his sense of reason in order to achieve its goals?

The current breather he had been given would hopefully give him the time he needed to work on his soul, and figure out a way to control the high-grade energies to such a grade that he could reliably use them.

There was no need for him to go to the lengths that he had to forcibly try to tame the flashes while still being a beginner cultivator. The glimpse of the Chaos Pattern had proved that he was in way over his head, and he needed to learn to walk before he could run.

However, it wasn't all good news as his soul had once again gone through a change after his encounter. Another set of white scars had been added to the black tendrils, making his whole soul look checkered. However, both the black and white scars seemed ephemeral and dim, like they were about to fade away. It looked like they had been completely drained just like the real slivers.

At least his soul seemed to have been healed by the Creation's infiltration, but Zac still swallowed one of the soul-healing treasures he had gotten from the mentalist just in case there were hidden wounds he couldn't spot.

It did clear his mind a bit, though it obviously wasn't able to expel the two high-tiered energies that had infiltrated his soul. There were no creation-based globules of energy in his soul though, but there was still a decent amount of left-over energies spread across his body. It was just a pittance compared to what he had spent in the final clash, but it would be able to help him out in a pinch.

As long as he didn't accidentally let his mind stray and waste it, of course.

His soul getting marked by the events didn't feel too surprising, as it had been the unwilling conduit as the two

remnants were drained. However, another change was pretty startling. The two fractals on his shoulders had changed. The torrential amounts of energies that coursed through the crude shortcut he had made had actually remolded the skill fractals, making the pathing permanent.

But that was not all as fine markings lined the paths, creating patterns way beyond his comprehension. They were not fractals, and neither were they formed in the inscription language that was commonly used in the Multiverse. They felt more primal, like they were natural markings created by the Dao itself.

The fractal on his left shoulder had clearly been marked by the Shard of Creation, whereas the right one gave off the desolate aura of the Splinter of Oblivion. This could be both good news and bad news, but Zac wasn't ready to experiment whether it would cause any trouble when forming the bronze sparks.

Not that he was very sure that he'd actually be able to form one, judging by how pale and faded the scars on his soul were.

Apart from that his body was in decent condition, except for the horrifying cost of life force. He would have to ask an expert to make sure, but he believed that he had lost decades from the intense usage of the Shard. If he had kept going like that for a few days he would have died of old age, or at least reached an advanced enough age to make further cultivation impossible.

There was no way that using the Shard for recuperation was worth it, as it cost way more of his life compared to slowly recuperating with healing pills.

At least the Shard's forced healing regimen had helped him prepare for what waited outside the tower. The long bout of unconsciousness had also restored most of his missing Cosmic Energy, and he would be able to reach peak condition before the deadline was up. Only two hours remained on his climb, and his two companions had probably already emerged.

If he knew Ogras he would probably want to maximize his benefits by witnessing both his own and Zac's Apparitions. He

didn't immediately enter the Teleportation array though, but rather turned to the unmoving body of the dragon.

His climb might have ended prematurely, but there were still treasures to be claimed.

Chapter 464: An Old Friend

“Worst dragon ever,” Zac muttered with disgust as he emerged from the dragon’s den.

He had expected to be met by a veritable sea of treasures upon entering the cave, but the only thing that had waited for him was an enormous mat and a small mountain of raw fire-attuned crystals. Certainly, the mat seemed to have been woven from extraordinary materials to create a soft and luxuriant feeling, but it was a far cry from the dragon’s hoard he had been expecting.

At least there was the actual carcass of the dragon itself. Such a beast was no doubt a living treasure, and he needed to harvest it before moving on. He had already given up on any hope of finding treasure on the 9th floor, so he needed to make the most of this beast.

However, Zac didn’t simply put the whole thing into a cosmos sack, but he rather chose to methodically harvest its body piece by piece. It would be a huge shame if the whole dragon turned to dust the moment he left the tower, and this way he would at least be able to guarantee that some parts would make it.

Zac tried to pry off as many scales as possible, along with its two massive horns. He also dug out what he believed to be a Beast Core from its head, though he was a bit surprised since those things usually only appeared after reaching D-Grade. The dragon was extremely powerful, but Zac truthfully suspected it was still in early E-Grade.

He had heard a bit about dragons from Galau. They were terrifying beasts and among the most naturally endowed creatures in the multiverse. They could grow impossibly large as well, making Zac believe he was only dealing with a youngling or a mixed-blood dragon.

Still, leaving anything behind would be a waste, so he even poured almost all his containers to fill them with dragon blood. Enough blood to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool entered his dozen or so canteens and the magical barrels of liquor he had bought.

He did feed a lot of it to **[Verun's Bite]** as well, but not enough to accidentally cause another upgrade. It took hours, sometimes days, for **[Verun's Bite]** to absorb treasures, and Zac was about to potentially face an army waiting outside the gates of the tower. The spirit tool was extremely interested in the beast core also, but it would have to wait.

It was a waste, but he could only pray that the Dragon Core would turn out to be real as he might need Verun's special skills for the upcoming battle. He had somewhat counted on the bronze flash to act as an ace, but there was no way that the remnants were in the position to provide help anytime soon.

He had tried summoning a bronze flash over twenty times while carving up the beast, but nothing happened. The two Fragments entered his reworked fractals just fine, but when they met in the chest they just turned into an impure mix of the two fragments that soon dissipated, just like the failed attempts from before. Something had clearly changed, as he had almost 50% success rate before.

The transformation of the fractals on his shoulders might be causing problems, but he was pretty sure that wasn't it.

An hour had passed since he had woken up by now, and he started to see some patterns of how things might go from here on out. It quickly became clear that the remnants were really capable of some sort of self-restoration. Small motes of energies appeared from within their bodies, even though no Cosmic or Mental energy had entered the cage.

However, it had been a slow grind for a pitiful amount of energy.

Things only went even worse for the remnants from there as the new cage created some sort of suction just moments after the motes of energy formed. The energy was instantly ripped

out the Shard and Splinter, leaving only a fraction behind. The rest was purified and funneled out into Zac's body.

The purified energy from the Splinter made its way to his soul, as usual, subtly strengthening it. However, the energy from the Shard rather went into his body, where it seeped into his cells who greedily gobbled it up in an instant. Zac didn't feel any difference in his body, but he guessed that it would slowly improve his constitution.

The amount that he got was far lower compared to before though, and he was not even receiving a tenth of the purified energies he got from the Splinter before he entered the tower. That was fine with Zac though, as the gifts from the remnants always came with deadly downsides.

Focusing on just himself for the time being felt a lot more pertinent. It seemed like he had touched upon some of the massive secrets of the multiverse, and he was slowly forming a few theories based on what Jaol had told him about the System and what the four-eyed alien said. But all those things were too grand, too complicated, and not something he wanted to get involved with.

He could mess with the broken peaks of the Boundless Path when he had reached A-Grade and was bored with life. Until then the Chaos Patterns and the skies full of lightning could stay as far away as possible as far as he was concerned. He wasn't even in a mood to start experimenting with the flashes again before he had got his Soul Strengthening Manual up and running.

Actually, it seemed that his mind was agreeing with his reluctance to get involved, as his memory Chaos Pattern he had just witnessed was growing foggier by the minute. He couldn't remember any details any longer, and he wouldn't be surprised if it would completely disappear from his memory in a day or two.

It was a pain to dismember the extremely sturdy dragon, and Zac was quickly running out of time. So he finally ran into the carcass and chopped its insides into massive slabs of meat and

threw them into his Cosmos Sack. Finally he threw the mangled remains into the sack as well and called it a day.

There was one more thing Zac wanted to do before he left the floor though, and he took out an inscribed box containing an unknown fruit. It was one of the natural treasures he had found during the climb. He still had no idea what it did, but he figured that his body knew what it was doing as it urged him to eat it.

He was somewhat certain that the items he had pilfered during the Battle of Fates would stay, but the same couldn't be said about these things. He wanted to follow Galau's advice and rather eat them than have them turn back into the System's hands the moment he left.

It was only 30 minutes later that he snapped out of his state of vivid hallucinations and bouts of extreme gastrointestinal distress. His whole body was covered in a film of extremely foul-smelling oil, and he felt weak like he had been afflicted with food poisoning.

The natural treasure hadn't actually been toxic, but it rather looked like the treasure was the kind that helped expel impurities like pill toxicity. The problem was the way of expulsion. Some things needed to be processed into pills before eaten, and that scary fruit was probably one of them. He had less than 30 minutes remaining, but he still spent 10 of those vigorously scrubbing off the foul gunk. The smell was making him nauseated, which was saying something considering he could be covered in blood without noticing it nowadays.

Zac immediately discarded any thought of eating any more of the treasures as he stepped into the teleporter with a tired sigh.

[Eighth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: [Two Extremities Physique Array], [Divine Investiture Array], [Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]]

Zac found himself in the familiar black dimension, and he almost felt some wistfulness that this was the last time he would come to this place. Of course, the wistfulness wasn't

brought on by nostalgia, but rather that this was the last of the rewards. He first opened his title screen to sate his curiosity.

[Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor: Reach the 73rd level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10, All Stats +10%, Effect of Attributes +10%]

The upgraded title was just as he had expected after seeing the change on the seventh floor, and he couldn't help but feel a bit curious about what would change upon finishing the whole tower. Was there a secret title waiting at the top after all?

However, his attention was soon diverted from the Tower title when he noticed that there was a new addition to his ever-growing list of achievements. And it was an odd one.

[Terminus – Gaze upon the Terminus.]

There was only a short description and no reward, the first empty Title Zac had encountered thus far. Zac guessed the Terminus either referred to the lightning sea or the pattern that he could no longer remember, but he didn't understand why the System would add a title if it wouldn't dole out any Attributes.

Perhaps someone in the Base Town would know, but he felt that keeping this experience to himself was for the best. Stuff like the Dao of Chaos involved the System itself and the peak individuals of the multiverse, and just talking about it might bring a calamity upon his head.

He could only close the title screen with mixed emotions and instead turn his attention to the three arrays up for grabs. However, the rewards honestly had him a bit stumped. He understood the words as he read them one by one, but he had some trouble understanding what they meant.

Zac was surprised that the rewards didn't feel as tailored to his situation compared to the previous floor. Truthfully, they even seemed worse compared to the ones he had been awarded after succeeding in the Battle of Fates, as each of them had represented a clear and almost immediate boost to himself or his force.

Was there an element of luck where you could either get a good set of reward choices or a subpar one? Or were the arrays perhaps even better than the 7th floor awards, but Zac was too ignorant to tell? He looked back and forth between the three options, and he felt some helplessness at the fact that he didn't know what any of the three arrays did.

The first array, the [**Two Extremities Physique Array**], might be some sort of training array to form a unique constitution. It might even be an extremely suited constitution based on the name. Two Extremities could refer to life and death, or perhaps even Creation and Oblivion. Remolding his body to be able to withstand the two remnants seemed pretty amazing. That might just be wishful thinking though.

That would mean that the award was an upgraded version of the body tempering manual, an array that would directly awaken a life and death constitution. However, there was another possibility, based on the wording of the first and third rewards. One was called a Physique Array, and the other a Soul Array.

That kind of wording was a bit reminiscent of War arrays, and it made him remember something; the Fire Golem down in the Underworld. Parts of its body had been engraved with crude fractals, and he had learned this was a common way for constructs to improve their power.

Was the same thing possible for humans? Was it perhaps an array that would be engraved to his body, somehow boosting it beyond its normal capabilities? He guessed something like that would work like a synthetic constitution or something, where it provided similar boosts.

Whichever way the array worked the end result was most likely the same. It would probably directly increase his combat power by improving his body, almost like having a private War array. It would give a direct and convenient boost to his Strength, and it was definitely a viable choice.

As for the [**Divine Investiture Array**], he had no idea. Judging by the name it might be something that could improve a person or an item. Divine Investiture, maybe it meant that it

could bestow Heaven's Blessing. Perhaps it was something like the array that he had passed when he climbed the 8th floor, but a greater version? Or was it related to fate?

Getting the System's blessing didn't sound too bad right about now, and it sort of felt like the System owed him one after the last two levels.

Then there was the final reward, one related to the soul. He would have preferred one that mentioned caging rambunctious slivers, but this one rather seemed geared toward taking advantage of the odd scars covering his soul. It seemed to be based on the concept of duality just like the Constitution Array, but he had no idea what a 'Soul Array' could do. Did it improve one's control over the Dao's, perhaps?

It did however include the word Arhat, which was a Buddhist term. He didn't know if what would cause any issues with his cultivation or his recently acquired manual, but he guessed that anything he got from the eighth floor would be compatible with him. An Arhat was a perfected being who had reached enlightenment, so perhaps the Soul Array would be able to push his soul to a perfect state?

Zac looked back and forth between the options, but he truthfully didn't need to look too long before he decided on the third option, the **[Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]**. It wasn't that he felt it was perfect for his situation, as he honestly had no idea what it did, but he'd obviously take anything that helped his soul at the current juncture.

The other two options were probably great as well, but they were luxuries compared to a necessity. His arm reached toward the hovering prompt in front of him, but he suddenly froze in shock as the silence of the special dimension was broken.

[First choice will grant you power. Second choice brings rectification of regret. Third choice will lead you down an alternative Path]

Zac didn't know how to react when he heard the emotionless voice in his head. A year had passed and he had almost

forgotten those early days of the Integration, but it all rushed back to him at that moment.

The System was once again directly speaking with him.

Chapter 465: Beware the Terminus

Zac froze like a deer in the headlights as he looked in all directions. Back when the integration first took place he had been completely clueless, unaware of just how powerful a thing the System was. But now he was all too aware just how mighty it was, and the attention put him under immense psychological pressure.

However, he knew this was a rare opportunity and he needed some clarifications.

“Was it you who pushed me down this path, who put these two remnants in front of me?”

[Yes. User qualified for unique empowerment scenario. Congratulations.]

Zac felt some fury flare up at hearing the same annoying emotionless congratulations as he did when the two last spoke, but he quickly restrained himself this time and instead focused on what was important.

“Are we done then?” Zac asked, his heart pounding. “You won’t mess with me any longer? I gave you that Pattern, and you provided me with protections against the fractals.”

[Reciprocity has been achieved and balance is maintained. Beware the Terminus.]

“What does that even mean?” Zac asked with some bitterness in his voice, but he was only met with silence.

“What regrets are you talking about? And what alternate path? Please elaborate,” Zac tried instead, as he didn’t understand what the hell the system had been talking about earlier.

Unfortunately, it looked like the System wasn't any more talkative this time around, and it had left after delivering a few cryptic lines. Zac once again looked upon the screen with the three rewards, his earlier resolve completely crushed. Could he trust the System? Or was it messing with him once again?

His thoughts about the first reward didn't change, as the comment was in line with his own thoughts. But the other two threw him for a loop. What did an alternate path mean? Did it refer to his soul cultivation, or was it something much bigger? Would it tamper with his nascent Creation based on Life and Death? Would it actually force him to embark on Buddhist Cultivation, forgoing his current classes?

And what the hell did rectification of regret mean?

He had done things he wasn't too proud of since the integration, but he would say there was only one real regret; not reaching his father before he was murdered. It couldn't possibly be an array that could resurrect the dead, could it? Or was it rather related to his inability to cultivate? The more he thought about it the more likely it felt.

Wasn't that exactly what Divine Investiture meant? The ability to cultivate was based on one's affinity with the Daos, something that he was completely lacking. What if this array could rectify that deficiency in his body, allowing him to embark on the path of a true cultivator?

There were a lot of secrets related to his body, secrets that might make him want to stay a mortal. But he also knew that things would get extremely rough the further he walked down the path of cultivation. Things weren't too bad right now in F-Grade, but the situation would get much worse for each grade as far as he knew. This might be his shot at getting the final, and greatest, boost to his power, becoming a proper cultivator.

Zac finally went with his gut and reached for the second option.

Zac chose the **[Divine Investiture Array]** based on his guess that the System wasn't actively messing with him. Why would it even bother? It was in control of the rewards after all. He wasn't interested in changing his path, which would

potentially make the **[Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]** useless. And between rectifying regret and strength, he chose the former.

He had plenty of Strength from a bunch of other sources, and a constitution array wasn't required for him to deal with the issues on Earth. He hadn't even seen anyone in his sector utilizing this kind of thing, and it didn't come up when Galau talked about constitutions. It was probably some sort of high-tiered boost not available in his sector, but people did just fine without them.

Rectifying regret was more in line with his purpose of cultivation. He didn't really care about power for power's sake, and not all his troubles could get solved by becoming stronger. Perhaps the **[Divine Investiture Array]** would make him a cultivator, or perhaps its function was something else entirely, but it didn't matter.

He didn't want to experience some tragedy in the future and realize it could have been prevented if he hadn't been too greedy for more power.

Zac didn't immediately pick the reward though, but he first started putting on one ring after another on his fingers, before moving on to bracers, earrings, and necklaces. It was the jewelry he looted from the mentalist, each of them a pretty strong treasure that contained one charge either of offensive or defensive nature.

He had seen a couple of similar items by now, and he guessed that all of them were either high or more likely peak-tier quality. It was like he was decked in treasures that each could release an attack or shield at least at the level of the **[Void Bomb]** that was powerful enough to tear holes in space. The items were clearly made for a woman, but he wasn't in a position to be picky at the moment. The whole square could be full of people wanting to rip him to shreds for all he knew, and every small advantage would make a huge difference.

They were outside items so they were pretty limited inside the Tower, but they would be back to their full power out in the Base Town. He actually wanted to don a few dresses as well to

improve his defenses even further, but he was afraid that he'd ruin any chances of finding a patron if he came out looking like a maniac.

He looked down at his body a second later, satisfied with the result. Ogras had once told him that wealth was one of the greatest weapons, and he was inclined to agree as he looked at the glistening treasures covering his hands and arms. It was like he suddenly had 10 lives, though each item spent was probably the equivalent of losing Hundreds of Millions of Nexus Coins, perhaps even Billions.

Zac also had enough Creation Energy in his body for one major restoration as well, but he didn't want to use it unless absolutely necessary. He finally prepared one of the spikes of Faceless 9 in the sleeves of his robes, but he was even leerier about that spike compared to the Creation Energy. It might be lethal for outsiders to use, and he would only stab himself with that thing if he really didn't see any alternatives.

Normally he would have entered the new floor as a Draugr to defend against surprise attacks, but he, unfortunately, couldn't do that as he was exiting the tower. Zac wasn't ready to expose his second identity, which meant would have to defend against any potential assault with treasures and his nature-based defensive skills.

Zac took a few deep breaths before he picked the **[Divine Investiture Array]**, and the next moment he was teleported to the 73rd floor. He crushed his token the moment he arrived, but his Danger Sense already screamed in alarm.

He immediately activated one of the defensive charges of a ring as he created a massive fractal edge that he swung in a grand 360-degree arc. A dozen massive rats were turned into mince-meat, and his whole body was drenched in blood and viscera in an instant. It wasn't exactly how he wanted to look upon exiting the tower, but perhaps it would give off an intimidating impression.

A glance at his surroundings showed that he had been thrown into the middle of an endless rat tide that relentlessly tried to swarm him from every direction with furious abandon, and he

was forced to fight them off as their teeth seemed to be able to bite straight through the shield he had summoned. Even the leaves of [Nature's Barrier] were getting ripped apart and swallowed by the crazed beasts.

Thankfully he only needed to fight for ten seconds before he was teleported out of the Tower of Eternity, where the Dao Apparition awaited.

The stone slate floated through the vast cosmos, just as it had since there was only darkness. Ancient lines marred its surface, every single groove and turn containing seemingly boundless profundity.

It spoke of the grand tenets of the universe, but very few had the ability to glean any of its secrets. So it continued its solitary journey through the vast cosmos. It silently passed the grand warriors who traversed the stars, and not even ancient existences born from stardust itself could sense its presence.

But all journeys must end.

A remote and solitary planet shone like a green gem, the stele imperceptibly adjusted its trajectory to head toward it. It breached the atmosphere not long after, and it finally settled down in a secluded valley.

The stele settled down gently on the ground, as though it wasn't encumbered by gravity in the slightest. However, a simple touch of the slate made the whole world tremble, causing earthquakes and extreme weather to ravage the whole planet for months before subsiding.

The primordial stone plaque sat in its valley undisturbed, but the planet slowly changed from the fundamental truths it espoused. War ravaged the continents and enough blood was spilled that crops refused to grow in the soil. Countries rose and fell like the turn of the seasons, grand warriors becoming kings before turning to dust.

One day a one-armed man found himself in the valley. His army had been utterly defeated in battle, and he needed a safe harbor to hide from his enemies. He hadn't lost through

lacking skill or tactics, but through inferior numbers. It filled him with irreconciliation that a fool defeated him, but there was nothing to do about the situation. Reality wasn't fair.

There was something alluring about the valley though, and the general soon forgot his anger as he scoured its nooks and crannies until he found the ancient stele. He was unable to take his eyes away from the patterns covering the surface, and it felt like they were the most beautiful things in the universe.

He sat down in front of it as though he was possessed, his eyes never leaving the stone for a second. The seasons passed as the man pondered upon the stele, silent and unmoving. Months turned to years, and years turned into millennia. Forces emerged and fell soon after, great triumphs and defeats replaced each other one by one on the continent.

However, no one ever visited the secluded valley. No one even spoke about the mountains that shielded it from the surrounding countries. It was as though it was separated from the world, a dimension of its own. It was just a man and a stone, and eons of silence.

A storm suddenly erupted in the valley, and the millennia of tranquility ended. The cultivator shuddered, as though he was brought out from a dream.

"War," he muttered as he got on his feet and looked to the stars.

War was the motor of progress, and blood was needed to turn the wheels of fate. Bowed to his master before walking over to take away the monument, as he felt there was still much to learn. But no matter how he strained and pulled it wouldn't move the slightest. Cracks spread for tens of thousands of meters around him, but the monument refused to be moved.

The man sighed in disappointment, but there was no real anger in his eyes. There was just tranquility, and the burning fires of conflict. Increasingly powerful waves started to emanate from his body until he suddenly disappeared in a massive explosion. The next moment he stood in space, looking down at the planet below.

His homeworld had once been without end in his mind, a battlefield whose scale beggared comprehension. But now the scene was too small, just a small ripple in the universe not worth mentioning. He needed a grander arena to progress further. The warlord waved his hand, and a moon was ripped from its trajectory, and crushed into an unadorned lance of stone and steel.

Its materials were nothing special, but space still broke from the slightest movement of its tip.

He looked down at the planet, or rather the now-ruined valley where he had spent most of his life. If it wasn't meant for him any longer, then it might as well continue its journey toward the next fated one. Being stuck on this small corner was an insult to the grandeur it represented.

He swung the lance with one swift motion, and space trembled as a wave of unfettered destruction carved off a section of the planet, sending the continent spinning toward the endless black. The universe needed war, and war needed more than one general.

A stone slate floated through the vast cosmos, and it would continue doing so until there was only darkness. Ancient lines marred its surface, almost every single groove and turn containing seemingly boundless profundity.

Chapter 466: War

“He made it to the 72nd floor after all!” Balios said to his uncle. “He might even make it the whole way.”

“He’s almost out of time. There was less than a day remaining when he finally managed to pass the 71st level. Even if he defeats the guardian now he will be exhausted and most likely wounded,” Ubrok answered, but there were clear signs of hesitation on his face.

“Still,” Balios whispered. “Perhaps we should stay out of this? Even lord Beradan only made it to the 65th floor. No matter if he passes or not he’s still someone we shouldn’t get involved with. We’re just sticking our necks out while the real lords will reap the eventual rewards. The promised payment for assistance is not worth our lives.”

“You are right. Let’s back away,” Ubrok finally relented. “We cannot get involved with the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura, our force will not be able to withstand the fallout no matter which side stands victorious. Let’s back away and enjoy the apparition in peace. I might even be able to improve my Dao Seed after all these years.”

Balios hurriedly nodded in agreement and their group of 8 started making their way back across the square. They weren’t alone in choosing retreat over the quest reward and the private bounties provided by a few scions. The heated competition for the front-row seats of the square had quickly died down as Zac Piker had knocked down one level after another, eclipsing all the sector’s geniuses for the past hundreds of thousands of years.

Things had calmed down as Mr. Piker, or rather Lord Piker, found himself stuck on the 71st level for almost a week, but the moment he’d reached the final level of the 8th floor people

started to worry. Some had already backed away, and there were not many willing to take the place of the deserters.

A million years had passed, but the lessons that the Eveningtide Asura had engraved into the souls of the people of the Zecia Sector were still vividly remembered. Opening yourself and your family up to that level of vengeance was not worth the potential prize or remuneration. However, the group only managed to retreat a hundred meters before a commotion broke out across the square.

“73!” a cultivator screamed with shock, immediately causing some panic to finally appear even in the eyes of the staunchest of warriors.

A few still remained, clearly intent on betting it all, but most people started running for their lives. However, the fleeing cultivators stopped just a few seconds later because the tower started releasing an immense pressure as waves of power radiated across the whole town, far beyond what anyone had ever seen before.

Greed fought with fear, but the allure was too great. Witnessing a 9th-floor apparition from a front-row seat was too enticing to give up, and the whole square sat down on the ground as if they were of one mind. Balios froze in hesitation, unsure whether he should flee further or join the others. The hesitation only lasted for a fraction of a second as he hurriedly took out his prepared mat as he gazed up at the sky.

The pressure emitted from the tower kept accumulating, and fewer and fewer managed to hold their backs straight. A few even started bleeding from their ears from the immense aura of the Tower of Eternity. It was as though the Heavens themselves had descended upon the Base Town, standing in judgment.

But the pressure was suddenly gone, and Balios’s eyes widened in shock as the tower flickered before it suddenly disappeared as well. Taking its place was a stone plaque whose size was a match to the Tower of Eternity. Balios’s eyes were drawn toward the mysterious scars covering its surface, and his mind turned blank the next moment.

It was only sometime later he woke up from his trance, but he was shocked to realize he couldn't remember a thing, not even how much time had passed. But something had changed inside his body, and it felt like his blood had been replaced by fire. The drums of war echoed in his mind and his arms bulged as he subconsciously dragged out [Skylark], his azure blue Azrathir Spirit Tool.

The sword hummed in response, seemingly influenced by the odd state of its master.

The teleportation array lit up, and the whole square collectively held their breath as the man they had been waiting for the past day reappeared. However, this was not a hero's exit, but rather that of a beggar. The man's aura seemed strong and stable, but he was completely covered in still-wet blood. He was also decked out in odd jewelry that made him look like a robber who had absconded with a maiden's jewelry box.

His rough state wasn't surprising, as he had passed to the 73rd floor at the last possible moment. He was probably putting up a brave front, and he quickly sat down and closed his eyes, enjoying the protection of the array. Zac Piker had overtaxed himself, forgetting that there was another trial waiting for him outside.

Balios's eyes were slowly turning bloodshot, and a wordless agreement passed between him and his uncle. The group no longer had any interest in retreating, but instead slowly made their way back toward their position.

"The quest! It changed!" another man suddenly shouted.

The flames of war were already drowning out most of Balios's thoughts, but curiosity overcame bloodthirst and he slowly looked away from the blood-drenched man to instead check out the changes of the quest.

Fatebreaker (Unique, Limited): Kill Zac Piker within the time limit. Reward: Ten free levels in the Tower of Eternity. [00:01:00]

Balios's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets as he read the reward. What was going on? If the previous reward had

been unprecedented, then the current one was beyond comprehension. Had Lord Piker spent his whole climb cursing the Heavens, and this was his retribution?

The whole square was like a kettle that threatened to boil over at any second, and Balios's eyes were locked at the humanoid treasure trove. A few minutes passed and Balios almost lashed out at his neighbors in a bloodthirsty rage, his muscles shuddering as he tried to keep his impulses in check.

But finally, the man stood up and turned toward the square.

"I—" Lord Piker said, but he stopped when the protective array suddenly winked out like it just ran out of power.

Everyone gaped in incomprehension for a second, but chaos took hold of the square the next moment.

Zac appeared on the teleportation array, and he relaxed when he saw that the defensive array was still up and running. He needed to quickly consolidate his gains, so he sat down on the ground after nodding at Ogras and Galau who were mutely staring at him with eyes as wide as saucers.

He was relieved to see that all the defensive treasures he had equipped before exiting were still there, as was the valuable Spatial Ring that had belonged to the mentalist. He was pretty certain at this point that all the loot he had snatched from other climbers was still in his possession, though the same probably didn't hold true for the other valuables he picked up during the climb.

The other two didn't say a word as Zac closed his eyes, and he could understand their stunned expressions.

Not even he had really expected to pass the 7th floor, let alone the 8th. But all that could wait until later as he needed to focus on the vision he had just witnessed. It felt as though he had sat right next to that man for tens of thousands of years, appreciating the stone stele and its mysteries. Just looking at it had filled him with a desire for conquest, a bit like when he used **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

The runes spoke of the survival of the fittest, about the need for conflict. Through battle the weaker sides would get cleansed, or 'weakness leaving the hive' as the Zhix would call it. The strong would get stronger, and the universe would benefit as a whole. It was evolution, continuous betterment by discarding what didn't perform.

Zac wasn't sure what concept the rune represented, but he felt that it was either a Dao of Conflict or a Dao of War. The man in the vision had leaned toward the latter, but he had also been colored by his past experiences as a general. The man only grasped a snippet of the truths the stele contained, but that part alone had turned him into a terrifying powerhouse that made him break through multiple grades without any other assistance.

The main takeaway for Zac was the connection between battle and creation; war always had a purpose. It might be held to protect your beliefs or to punish evil. War might erupt over resources, or to take out a hated enemy. It might just simply be the pursuit of strength. Purpose and conviction were what separated a warrior and a beast or a madman.

This meant that the concept engraved upon the stele wasn't based on Oblivion, as it was not mindless destruction. It was creation through destruction, where you built your future through conflict. It felt like one of the most fundamental fusions of the two peak concept after looking at the ancient runes, but the Dao Fragment it resonated with most was his Fragment of the Axe. Perhaps all weapon-related Daos were children of the Dao of War.

A swing empowered by your conviction would move faster and hit harder than an empty attack. As long as he fought for what he believed in he would be able to push himself much further than if he fought with hesitation or reluctance in his heart. He had combined many aspects of heaviness and sharpness into the Fragment of the Axe, such as sharpness through speed and heaviness from momentum.

But he now added the reason for swinging his axe into his Dao.

Energy surged around him as he felt his insight coalesce, and his body was flush with power in an instant. He opened his eyes and immediately opened his Dao screen to see the result, and he was extremely satisfied with the results.

Fragment of the Axe (Middle): All attributes +20, Strength +225, Dexterity +120, Endurance +15, Wisdom +50. Effectiveness of Strength +10%.

It was a massive boost, though Zac looked at the additional all attributes with mixed emotions. He had hoped to maintain his massive lead in Luck against general cultivators, but it looked like deep insights into the Dao would be able to bridge some of the gap. Of course, he would still maintain a commanding lead thanks to his large number of titles that improved upon his base Luck.

Perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised about the increased Luck stemming from a deeper understanding of the Dao. Gaining Dao Seeds and Dao Fragments was just forming a stronger connection with the heavens, which in turn should improve one's fate.

The evolution of his Fragment of the Axe wasn't the only thing that he had gained from the vision. The stone stele had almost been all-encompassing, and he felt like he had created a foundation for improving both his other Fragments as well. Both the Fragment of the Coffin and the Fragment of the Bodhi were at the lowest possible level until now, but Zac now had something to build upon when he came back.

Taking the first step forward toward an upgrade had always been the hardest for him, but upgrading the two Fragments was only a matter of time now. It wasn't to the point that he felt one week of meditation would do the trick, but he still believed that he would be able to take the next step within a few months even if he didn't enter any life and death battles.

Unfortunately, he couldn't revel in his latest gains at the moment, as there were some pressing issues to deal with.

"Are you okay?" Ogras asked with a hoarse voice as Zac stood up, and Zac noted a slightly manic look in the eyes behind the mask he wore to cover his features.

“Not my blood,” Zac shrugged. “I’m in perfect condition, I killed the guardian over twelve hours ago. What’s going on?”

“People started to leave, but then the apparition appeared and the quest changed. We’re in deep shit,” Ogras growled.

“It changed?” Zac exclaimed with shock. “I’ll deal with this. Stay behind me if I can’t convince them to back away. I’ll activate a defensive treasure I found.”

He turned toward the square, and he immediately understood what Ogras meant. The field in front of the tower only half-filled with cultivators from all sorts of races, but people were rushing toward the center square from every direction.

“I-“ Zac said with a carrying voice, but he was cut short as the shield in front of him suddenly disappeared.

His mind blanked out as he found himself exposed to a whole army waiting to kill him. He had hoped to work out a diplomatic resolution, but he realized that was a fool’s dream as a collective roar spread across the square. His eyes widened in alarm, and his danger sense was already going off the charts.

The Spectral Forest of [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**] appeared in an instant, and [**Nature’s Barrier**] followed right after. He infused the Fragment of the Bodhi into the leaves without hesitation and spread it to cover his two companions as well. The two of them backed away as far as they possibly could, each of them erecting a few layers of defenses of their own.

He didn’t understand what was going on. It felt like he and the System had struck an accord earlier, and it had even gone so far as to help him out by directly speaking to him. But then it followed it up with dialing up the bounty on his head to the point that it made these people froth at the mouth.

Was the System unhappy with his choice?

Chapter 467: Man Versus World

Over a hundred attacks teeming with power soared toward him, and the whole sky was shrouded by the multifarious display. Zac's fractal leaves condensed to cover a smaller area to create more layers of defense, but the defenses were quickly ripped to shreds by the onslaught.

Zac was far stronger than anyone here, but the attackers weren't weaklings by any means. This was a low-grade sector, but everyone present was still the strongest of a generation, all intent on taking him out. There was only so much [**Nature's Barrier**] could block before the leaves were exhausted, and he knew that he couldn't just sit around like a target dummy.

[**Verun's Bite**] keened with delight as Zac's arm was almost turning into a blur. One fractal blade after another radiating terrifying energy ripped into the storm of attacks, crushing most of them without even needing to clash. The extreme power that radiated out from the middle-stage Dao Fragment was enough to utterly dominate the weaker strikes, and they were ripped into swirls of Cosmic Energy.

However, if each of his fractal blades was like a powerful elephant, then the weaker attacks were like a sea of rabid hyenas that slowly managed to whittle them down. There were just too many attackers, and he felt his waves of fractal edges slowly getting pushed back as more and more cultivators joined the fight.

It was a bit disappointing to not being able to utterly crush his enemies with sheer might, but it was still a massive show of force that he could almost create a stalemate when exchanging blows with hundreds of the top geniuses of the sector. He also knew that it was a testament to just how powerful a Mid-Grade Dao Fragment was.

His weapon was just average if you discounted the uncommonly high spirituality of the Tool Spirit, and [Chop] was as basic a skill as they came. However, each blade still managed to crush a dozen beautiful and intricate skills that sailed toward him before they ran out of steam. Of course, if he didn't do something soon he might get himself or his two companions hurt.

However, Zac was prepared for exactly this kind of worst-case scenario, and Cosmic Energy streamed toward his neck.

Mysterious fluctuations spread out from his position the next second as a massive eye emerged out of the void. It was one of the treasures he had taken from the mentalist's Spatial Ring, a necklace with an eye that actually seemed alive. The conjured eye didn't move, but it rather just stared at the sea of cultivators and the incoming attacks. A mystic ray of blue light spread out the next moment, and the attacks cracked in an instant, leaving not a single one intact.

Dozens of warriors fell back with blood pouring from their eyes, their souls definitely hurt by the clash. It caused a lull in the battle, and Zac figured this was his last chance to stop the madness before it got out of hand.

“Stop now and I won't cause any trouble for you or your clans,” Zac roared at the top of his lungs. “But I will kill everyone who stays behind, no matter heritage or affiliation! This is your only warning!”

His voice was filled with power, and the air shuddered around him as his blood-drenched aura was unleashed to its fullest. He hoped to wake these people up from their greed-fueled battle fervor. However, the effect of his words and his aura was far worse than he anticipated, and not a single one seemed willing to back down.

It was like they had eaten stimulants or some sort of berserking pill.

A few had been killed or incapacitated by the massive eye, but new warriors filled the ranks, and Zac could see that the streets were filling up with people who wanted to join the chaos. Just defending wouldn't cut it, and he needed to go with Ogras'

idea. Kill a few chickens to scare the monkeys as the demon called it.

Another defensive treasure cracked on his hand, causing a shimmering fractal made from churning waters to appear in the air. Torrential typhoons shot toward the cultivators and swallowed up even more attacks, but a few still slipped through and slammed into his newly formed leaves. The storms weren't as effective as the mysterious eye in pushing back the attackers, but it gave Zac enough time to charge up **[Deforestation]**.

Zac was going all-out from the start. If the first swing wouldn't convince them to back off, then there was a tsunami of flames waiting. If people still hadn't managed to curb their greed he would release the **[Axe of Desolation]** and end the battle altogether. The massive woodcutter's axe materialized above him, and Zac immediately initiated the **[Axe of Felling]**.

You could say that he had started this battle with this very attack just before he was forced to flee into the tower, and he would end it the same way.

"Stop its activation!" a shout echoed out across the square, and Zac was suddenly covered in uncomfortable energy that made the Cosmic Energy in his body feel slow and listless.

He quickly activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, but his eyes widened when the attack passed right through the emerald shield and drilled into his chest.

"It's a curse, a rare type of mental attack!" Galau screamed from behind. "You can break it by force or treasures, look inward!"

Zac's eyes lit up and he looked inside, and he immediately spotted crude runes covering the Skill Fractal for **[Deforestation]**. He rotated a storm of Cosmic Energy to slam into it, and three forceful pushes cracked it wide open. It caused light internal bleeding as well, but it wasn't a big deal for someone like Zac.

However, that was just the first of dozens attempts to tie down the massive axe in the sky. It was covered in ten layers of restrictive arrays as well, and no matter how hard Zac struggled he wasn't able to move his arm forward. It was a type of counter to his attacks he had never seen before, and he couldn't figure out any quick fix to launch the skill.

His axe was already tied up in the swing, making it impossible to send out any fractal attacks to destroy the restrictions.

[Nature's Punishment] was liable to destroy the axe as well, not that Zac was able to unleash both the attacks at the same time. Ogras seemed to have understood the issue as a beam of darkness slammed into the restrictions from behind, but only the outermost of the many layers of restrictions were broken.

"Don't worry," Zac said as he looked back. "I'll deal with this."

He felt thankful that the demon was willing to stick his neck out in a messy situation like this, but Ogras was honestly more of a liability than an asset at this moment unless he had completely transformed during the time since they parted ways in the tower. He could only activate yet another of the one-time treasures, and he felt a large chunk of Cosmic Energy leave his body as a thousand golden swords shot toward the restrictions around the **[Axe of Felling]**.

The restrictions were ripped to pieces before the swords continued toward the mob and caused widespread carnage as the summoned weapons slipped straight past hastily erected shields and into their bodies. However, the **[Axe of Felling]** was already dissipating, and Zac had lost his connection to the fractal axe. Nothing happened as Zac swung **[Verun's Bite]** over and over until the massive woodcutter's axe dissipated.

Zac growled with annoyance and tried to resummon the axe, but he was shocked to find that the skill wouldn't activate. It seemed that **[Deforestation]** had been put on its cooldown since the first swing had technically been initiated. Zac didn't even know that an outcome like this was possible, and he scrambled for new ideas to deal with the mob and their next salvo of attacks.

Zac activated another one of the treasures, an offensively geared ring that released an invisible force that made the whole square twist and bend. Dozens fell to their knees screaming, their eyes and ears bleeding as they clutched their heads. It looked like the mentalist had been in possession of multiple mental attack treasures in addition to her terrifying skills.

The attack gave Zac a short breather and he turned toward his two companions who were still hiding in the back.

“How do I defend against more curses?” Zac asked.

Galau only hesitated for a short moment before he took out a small doll and threw it over to Zac.

“Pour some energy into this. It will take your place. But curses are very hard to plant when the target is anticipating it,” the merchant hurriedly said as his eyes darted back and in search of any lurking threat. “You can also guard your fractals with your Daos if they try it again.”

Zac nodded in thanks before he turned back toward the enemies. Losing [**Deforestation**] to such a trick was a huge blow, but he wasn't out of options just yet. Cosmic Energy surged into his hand instead, and the sky above him cracked.

He also activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] for good measure, as he was confident that the Splinter was in no condition to cause any trouble at the moment. The leaves surrounding him suddenly lost the beautiful fractals covering their surface as the wooden hand emerged from its separate dimension. Zac needed to make this one count, so he chose to infuse the attack with the Fragment of the Bodhi rather than his defensive canopy.

However, the wooden hand barely had time to move more than ten meters before it was almost blasted to pieces by three beams of light that converged right at its position. Zac endured the pain in his own hand and looked around, realizing that three attackers were holding identical mirrors covered in fractals. It was no doubt an array, and if there was one there were bound to be more arrays waiting to be activated.

A shockwave spread out from his original position as he flashed forward, two massive avatars appearing in an instant as a bracer on each of his arms cracked. One formed a vast cloud of darkness that covered the sky. Everything that entered it disappeared, including the beams of light. The other was a kneeling warrior without features, and he enclosed Ogras and Galau in a protective embrace.

The second treasure was activated to prevent the attackers from taking his two companions hostage in case he needed to enter a melee with the mob, whereas the second one would let him complete his skill. The vast clouds allowed the hand to move forward shrouded in darkness, and it quickly managed to erect its emerald array above the chaotic army.

However, its activation was by no means uncontested as over twenty avatars and powerful attacks rose to meet it.

The combined power the dozen elite warriors was barely able to hold back the descent of the punishment, and Zac found it difficult to make any headway. Zac was considering whether he should try to cause some chaos by jumping into the fray or perhaps weaken their coordination with another treasure.

Finally, he also decided to make a move himself. It would put Ogras and Galau at some risk, but he felt he needed his hands to get a bit bloodied if he wanted to end this thing. Perhaps the mob thought he kept using treasures because he wasn't actually that strong, which emboldened them to keep going. It would put him in harm's way of his own punishment, but he was durable enough to withstand some friendly fire.

He was just about to flash forward with **[Loamwalker]** when a group of cultivators suddenly appeared out of nowhere at the front of the army. Most of them radiated a powerful aura that could almost match the weaker warriors in the Battle of Fates, and Zac knew that the true elites of the sector had made their move.

Zac wasn't worried in the slightest, rather the opposite. He believed if he managed to take out these people then any cohesion in the army would crumble, and he would only need to defend against some weaklings for another minute to make

it out alive. Zac directly charged at the quintet, but he didn't have time to move before each of them produced a different treasure in their hands.

"Four Gates!" one of the men shouted, and one massive doorway appeared in each direction around Zac.

The doors cracked open, and four densely inscribed hands emerged, each one forming a different seal. Zac noticed there was a group of warriors behind the man who had created a War Array to support the summoning, but he didn't have a chance to even attack before he was beset by a series of hallucinations.

Not only that, it felt like the world was twisted and inverted. He saw that his hand moved when he tried to walk, and the world was suddenly upside-down. It was like all his wires had been crossed, and just making the smallest movement needed great focus. Eating one of the mental pills and cracking another defensive treasure did alleviate the symptoms somewhat, but it was still a struggle to understand what was going on around him.

Zac knew he would have been able to improve the situation by infusing [**Mental Fortress**] with the Fragment of the Bohdi Rather than Fragment of the Coffin, but he knew that the still-struggling [**Nature's Punishment**] would be destroyed if it lost its Dao empowerment. He really needed to take out these five new arrivals, he arduously split his attention from the wooden hand to shoot out a series of fractal blades toward the group.

"Six Directions!" a second cultivator shouted immediately as Zac launched his attacks, and six elongated Fractals formed a circle in the sky.

Zac growled in annoyance when he saw that he had been trapped by a shield that blocked his strikes with only the smallest of cracks forming, and he realized that it might be even sturdier than the cage he created with [**Profane Seal**].

But these people would soon understand he wasn't someone they could trap so easily.

Chapter 468: Restrained

Zac realized that breaking through the thick shield would be difficult from the outside, but the wooden hand was already presiding above the army outside of the shield. He needed to create an opportunity to let the punishment descend, which would hopefully ruin the array as well. He had a few options, but he ultimately chose to utilize one of the rings on his finger, which was another offensive treasure from the mentalist.

He hoped that the mental attack would be able to breach the Six Direction's shield, as it seemed physical in nature. It was unlikely they had prepared mental defenses after his display upon entering the tower, after all. The ring on his finger cracked and Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the almost imperceptible wave slip through minute cracks between the six fractals and descend on the army.

Another burst of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body as several cultivators instantly got their souls crushed, and many of the skills blocking **[Nature's Punishment]** failed as warriors were forced to withstand a massive trauma to their souls. It seemed as though the group of five in the front were protected by some unknown means though, and they didn't even flinch as the wave passed them by.

The offensive treasure had fulfilled its purpose as the avatars that blocked **[Nature's Punishment]** lost their vigor in an instant, and a massive branch finally managed to emerge from the emerald fractal in the sky. Chaotic storms of Cosmic Energy caused massive waves in the sky as warriors threw out defensive treasures and all sorts of talismans as a last-ditch effort, but everything was pushed aside or crushed as the massive branch descended.

Only at the last moment was the wooden punishment stopped by a prismatic shield that reminded Zac of a soap bubble. Zac kept infusing the skill with more and more power though, and

he felt like he was just missing a little bit to break the last line of defenses. One cultivator after another fell beneath the shield as they were overtaxed by the pressure, but the replacements were seemingly endless.

Zac suddenly had an idea and he took out an impressive-looking talisman from his Spatial Ring and threw it toward the army with a roar. The eyes of quite a few warriors widened in alarm, and they quickly refocused their efforts to defend their minds from yet another concussive wave. The army had already been beset by two peak-grade soul-harming arrays, and many were probably hanging on by a thread.

However, no mental attack emerged as the talisman cracked in front of the prismatic shield. Instead, a weak shield sprung up and covered a patch of dirt.

The prismatic shield burst apart the next moment, and the wooden finger headed right toward the army with world-ending force. The branch slammed into the large square cobblestones of the square like the finger of an angry god and the whole area shook and heaved as Zac was inundated in a massive amount of Cosmic Energy. At least 50 people had died from the initial attack, and even more sported gristly wound from the shockwave.

However, the attack wasn't over just yet.

Hundreds of sharp branches grew out of the tree and stabbed everything in its surroundings, causing another wave of carnage. It was just like when the spectral chains of **[Profane Seal]** targeted the living inside its cage, and desolate cries echoed across the core area of Base Town as one cultivator after another was impaled.

Only then did the emerald array in the air dissipate while Zac lost his mental connection to the tree. It remained on the square though, its branches filled with the unmoving bodies of dozens of fallen warriors. It had turned into a twisted monument drenched in the blood of the elites of the sector, and hopefully it would serve as a reminder to choose life over wealth for anyone who had any ideas on Zac.

Unfortunately, it seemed as though the group maintaining the two powerful arrays around him had come prepared, and another shield protected them from the fall-out from **[Nature's Punishment]** as they prepared their next moves. It was becoming increasingly apparent that this group of five was the largest threat unless there were even stronger people lying in wait in one of the palaces that lined the square.

“Heaven's Punishment!” “Hell Suppression!” two more cultivators shouted in unison as Zac scrambled for a way to break the stalemate, leaving only the young man in the middle of the group of five unoccupied.

A vast array in an unblemished white appeared in the sky, and it felt like his body was being slowly being ground to dust just by being covered in its lights. Zac wanted to get out the way, but a pitch-black array suddenly covered the ground he stood on, and he helplessly fell down onto the cobblestones from an immense pressure.

Zac's whole body was immobilized by an almost unbearable weight, and the whole square around him cracked even though it was made from some mysterious material that didn't even scar until he brought out **[Nature's Punishment]**. The four arrays were no doubt at the absolute peak of what could be brought to the Base down, and they had even formed a system to create an even stronger effect.

Just moving his arms was a struggle, and Zac started to worry for the first time as he saw the leader of the group prepare what would no doubt be the finale. He considered activating another defensive treasure pre-emptively, but he quickly decided against it. He was running low on Cosmic Energy by this point, and each activation took a good chunk of his reserves. He'd only activate another talisman if he saw a lethal attack coming.

He was also out of offensive treasures, leaving him unable to deal with any of the four arrays restricting him. He was almost out of options, and he knew he would have to pay a price to deal with this situation. However, he was unwilling to keep his head bowed down to some warriors relying on superior numbers.

He remembered the feelings of irreconcilable hatred of the general in his vision; the frustration of being bested not by skills or hard work, but by being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. He would have done well to remember that general's painful lesson, but he had walked into this fight with a feeling of superiority, that numbers were irrelevant to his superior might.

But he had been met with ingenious tactics and boundless ferocity, proving that not even someone who had stood shoulder to shoulder with the elites of the multiverse was safe. Death could come at any time, from the most unlikely of perpetrators.

Veins wiggled beneath his skin across his body as he forced himself back on his knees. The pressure was terrifying, but he was slowly adapting to it with the help of his insights into the Dao of Heaviness. Thin layers of skin were peeling off from his face and arms before rising toward the array above like he was spontaneously falling apart, but he ignored the pain as his wild eyes were trained at the group of warriors.

The whole shield shuddered as Zac flashed forward and cut into it with **[Verun's Bite]**, the weapon radiating sanguine light that painted the group red. The woman controlling the array paled from the backlash, forced to take a step back. It did hold against his assault though, but Zac was just getting started.

Power and rage coursed through his veins as he slammed one time after another, each strike containing enough force to split mountains. His whole body creaked and groaned from the pressure and wounds were opening up from just moving about, but he kept swinging his axe with relentless ferocity.

The woman controlling the Six Directions array was empowered by a retinue running a War Array, but the supportive cultivators fell down with bleeding orifices as they were being overtaxed. Cracks started spreading across the shimmering wall, and just a bit would be enough to break through and reach these people.

As long as he got into melee range things would be over, as no one here was his match in such close proximity.

Zac's eyes were filled with blood from the immense pressure from the combination of the suppressive array and **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, but the leader of the five looked into his with equanimity as he took out a large box and pointed it toward Zac. Zac's danger sense screamed for him to move, but he first sent a mental command into his axe.

A swirl of mysterious energies slipped through the cracks Zac had caused in the shield, and the primordial beast appeared in all its glory a second later. Zac wasn't the only one who had undergone a drastic change during the climb, Verun had gotten received its own share of opportunities.

The beast was actually a bit smaller compared to before, but it was more condensed, more corporeal, compared to before. It was still five meters long and reached almost three meters into the air, making it a massive beast compared to anything that had lived on Earth at least. Its huge maw with its grisly fangs looked the same as before, but the number of eyes had actually increased on its head.

It now had two sets of eyes, all four of them seemingly moving independent of each other as they looked for targets. Swirls of blood also slowly rotated around its paws, and Zac sensed a hint of the dragon's primordial aura from the Tool Spirit. It released an earthshattering roar after having finally appeared after so long, and it immediately pounced on the cultivators on the square.

Zac had initially wanted to force his way out of the shield, but he knew enough to listen to his danger sense. So he jumped back to avoid whatever the leader had planned. He didn't know what was inside that box, but it felt extremely dangerous, even to him.

Being forced to back off at this critical juncture was a disappointment, but the shield was seriously weakened and its controller seemed to be running out of steam. Verun was also causing mass panic among the cultivators outside, and together with the mass casualties from **[Nature's Punishment]** he pretty much only had the five elites and their retainers to worry about. And he still had something that could easily turn the tides.

Zac was still a bit hesitant though as he took out the rusty sword from his Spatial Ring.

However, he had witnessed the power of the sinister weapon himself during the Battle of Fates. That swordsman had been able to utterly destroy **[Nature's Punishment]** with the help of this cursed weapon, and if Zac hadn't deactivated his skill in time he might even have lost his hand. It was his best option to end things in one go, especially now that the rabble had been mostly routed with the help of the massive tree's descent.

Besides, he didn't want to waste any more of the mentalist's jewelry. He would have wasted too many treasures before even returning to earth if he continued like this, and those things might be crucial in the upcoming fights against the Dominators. Zac gripped the dried-out leather of the hilt, and his wounds opened all over his arm as he forcibly started dragging it out of its scabbard.

Blood fell on the ground like rain, and Zac roared into the sky as a storm of voices entered his mind. Odd veins started traveling up his arm from his sword as well, like the weapon was trying to fuse with his body. Even the exhausted remnants shuddered from the intrusion into his mind, but they weren't in any condition to affect the course of events.

Zac suppressed the voices with everything he got as he strained to finish the attack quicker.

It almost felt like he was trying to complete the third swing of **[Deforestation]** by unsheathing the blade, and a huge chunk of his remaining Cosmic Energy was swallowed by the sword in an instant. But Zac didn't care as he felt that a horrible power was brewing within the sword, and his arm bulged as he finally managed to drag out the reluctant weapon before the veins could spread above his elbow.

A piercing wail echoed across the square and Zac's vision doubled from the mental shock, but he still swung the weapon in a wide arc toward the cultivators running the arrays. He wasn't sure whether there was a trick to using the weapon, so he tried to mimic the form of the swordsman as best as he could remember.

The familiar white half-moon thankfully appeared, but it was covered in the same red pulsating veins as those snaking up along his arm. The strike had felt like a pure sword-strike when the lanky swordsman used the weapon back on the 7th floor, but now it really felt like something an unorthodox cultivator would use. It hadn't weakened the power of the strike though, but rather the opposite.

Zac moved his mental energy and started infusing the blade with the Fragment of the Axe for good measure. Zac got a rabid pushback from the weapon, but Zac growled and crammed it in, no matter what the crazy voices were screaming. The blade shuddered and a few cracks appeared, but it quickly mended and continued to expand as it picked up more and more speed as it rushed toward the shield, now empowered with Zac's most destructive Dao.

It was like the edge was tapping an unceasing fount of power, and was soon so large that the whole army would be hit if it managed to break out from its cage. Most of the surviving warriors had already started running for their lives after realizing their attacks passed straight through Verun's body, and seeing the corrupted half-moon broke the will of the few remaining cultivators hoping to fish in muddy waters.

Only the five cultivators stood their ground, and they seemed to have some confidence in the layers of restrictions they had superimposed on the square.

"Breath of Cosmos!" the leader shouted, and he finally opened the box that he had held in his arms until now.

A cloud of stardust emerged from the chest, and it drifted straight through the shield and toward the incoming attack. The whole blade was soon covered in a glistening cloud, and it looked like a beautiful nebula. The aura of madness that the half-moon emitted was completely swallowed by the dust, and Zac sensed that the cloud was slowly grinding it down.

However, Zac's attack pushed forward with undeniable intractability, and it was like the mysterious cloud that had caused such a strong reaction in Zac's mind only managed to

nip at its heels. The leader looked extremely surprised at the turn of events before some worry started to show on his face.

“Release your greatest attacks!” the leader shouted, as Cosmic Energy started to surge around his body.

“This is not what we agreed upon!” another of the five retorted. “You guaranteed that the [**Five Dimensional Seal**] would restrain him! Does this look restrained to you?!”

Chapter 469: Clashing Fates

The man who had spoken up wasn't the only one who looked at the leader with fear-induced anger, but another two of them seemed to be ready to leave then and there.

"I'll increase the compensation. Besides, he is still restrained even if he's not incapacitated. We just need to break this attack and we'll have won," the man said.

The man looked unreconciled but he still complied, and he took out a green finger from his Spatial Tool and swallowed it. The next moment he swelled over five times in size while an enormous cauldron appeared behind him, and he launched a punch that shuddered with power toward Zac. The attack caused a cascading series of putrid explosions to rock the area, and a few unlucky cultivators who had been maimed from the fight earlier were consumed as well, turning into brittle skeletons in an instant.

The four elites followed suit, and all of them either transformed from an ultimate skill or caused an avatar to appear behind their backs. One of them seemed to be a lightning cultivator, and another summoned a beast that looked even more dangerous than Verun. The Tool Spirit roared in defiance, but it still stayed away from the five due to Zac's command and kept routing the stragglers.

Zac was a bit out of it from the increasingly intrusive screams emerging from the tattered sword, but he could still hear their discussion. He was initially confused just who these five people were, as they were of mixed races and dressed completely differently. It didn't seem like they belonged to the same force, and this notion was only reinforced when they released their ultimate skills.

From the conversation, it looked like a group of elites had decided to band together in order to incapacitate him. Zac

guessed they had kept their aces in hopes that they would be able to snatch the final prize the moment he was lying within the arrays unable to even lift a finger.

The two sides clashed, and it felt like the world had frozen before cataclysmic waves of attuned energies spread in all directions, drowning the whole square in color. There was a very clear divide in the sky, with Zac's side being white with red streaks, and the other half being a mix of colors representing the five elites.

It looked like there was a stalemate taking place, but Zac knew things weren't that simple. His attack was one single wave of unadulterated power, whereas the other side was a mostly disjointed mix. It was only a matter of time before his attack would break through at which point things would go south very quickly for his enemies.

The leader of the group seemed to have understood what was going going to happen as well, and he immediately took action. However, he neither tried another counter nor tried to run away, but he rather slapped a talisman onto the back of the woman next to him, the cultivator responsible for the 'Six Directions Array'.

She disappeared in a puff, leaving the others flabbergasted.

Their side had already been on the losing end of the confrontation, and they had suddenly lost a fifth of their power along with the powerful shield protecting them. The four remaining attacks crumbled in an instant, and the half-moon seized the opportunity pushed forward with furious momentum.

One of the masters tried to run, but it seemed as though he was bogged down in a quagmire. He released a soundless scream as the half-moon bisected him, but Zac's brows furrowed when he saw that the blade actually seemed to swallow the man. The red veins crept out from the edge and latched onto the cultivator, and his body was drained in an instant.

Most of the retinues that infused the five through War Arrays met the same fate, and only the leader managed to hold on by expending a series of defensive treasures. Zac finally couldn't

take the strain from holding the sword any longer, and he immediately put away the thing, causing the half-moon to disappear after releasing a wail of discontent.

Zac flashed forward the next moment and he activated the first fractal of **[Verun's Bite]** again, intending to end things then and there. The mob of cultivators was mostly dealt with, but as long as the man who had organized the assault was alive he wouldn't feel safe. He was in front of the leader in an instant, and his axe shone with a sanguine glow as it fell toward his head.

However, before Zac's attack had a chance to connect a necklace lit around the man up, and Zac felt an all-consuming pain as the defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** crumbled in an instant. His chest had been turned into a bloody mess yet again, and it was almost as bad as yesterday when he got punched by the Technocrat Captain.

Thankfully Zac still possessed the final energies that the Shard of Creation had released during its rampage, and he quickly urged it to reform his torso before he passed out. It almost looked like time went in reverse as his body reformed in an instant, but the fact that his robes were broken and tattered was proof that he had been at death's door just a second ago.

The richly dressed youth gaped in shock and dismay as Zac's axe bit into his body. The richly decked man tried to push the axehead out of his body, but Zac utterly overpowered him as he released a storm of rampant energies that turned the man's insides into a mess.

He somehow managed to stay alive, and their eyes met as the man clung to life.

"I'm sorry. You needed to die for my dream to come true. My ending is well deserved," the cultivator weakly smiled before his volume rose to be heard across the square. "I risked everything for power, but I failed. My ending has no relation with my clan."

Zac didn't say anything, and the man died a just a few seconds later. A lot of murmurs erupted from the cultivators who had

spectated the battle from a safe distance, and a lot of people seemed to be recording the events into information crystals.

Being recorded was pretty much expected, so he didn't care, but he rather readied his still bloody axe for any follow-up attacks. As expected, his mind suddenly felt a pang of danger, and he quickly turned around as **[Everlasting]** appeared on his arm.

However, the assassin who had wanted to take advantage of the moment Zac let his guard down found himself impaled on a black spear as Ogras appeared out of his shadows. A burst of shadows ripped the man to pieces, and the demon walked up next to Zac as his face dripped with blood.

"It's over!" the demon shouted. "The quest is over, and Lord Piker has withstood the Trial of the Ruthless Heavens. We understand the allure of the reward and the effect of the Apparition, so we'll let all enmities stay in behind and dissipate in Base Town as we leave. But any further attempts on our lives here or out in the open world will be met with a vengeance of extreme proportions. If not today then later."

A snort escaped from Zac's nose even if he understood the severity of the situation. It was just like Ogras, appearing the last moment looking like a heroic defender of justice with his spear pointed at the skies. Zac knew full well that the demon was nowhere near as confident as he wanted to appear, but it was for the best that Ogras dealt with the fallout.

Zac had immediately understood what Ogras was doing. He was trying to make minimize potential threats that could crop up in the future. They already had the Zethaya, Tsarun Clan, and The Great Redeemer to worry about, and causing a grudge with dozens of more families would neither do him nor Earth any good.

He could only hope that the forces of the sector would take the death of their scions with stride. A few people dying should barely be noticeable for these huge forces as thousands died every day in their struggle to become stronger. Such was the life of a cultivator.

If that wasn't enough the various forces still might on his good due to worry about what he might become in the future. He had reached the 9th floor, something that only had happened once in recent memory, which should be a huge indicator of great potential for the people in this sector.

Thankfully it looked like no one wanted to fight any longer. Perhaps it was because the quest had ended, or perhaps it was because he was still essentially unscathed while the bodies of his enemies littered the whole square. The corpse-tree rising almost fifty meters into the air was also a poignant warning to anyone arriving late.

It was a relief, as he was currently pretty exhausted. Along with the backlash from activating [**Hatchetman's Rage**] he wouldn't even be able to muster half his power right now. But there was one thing that cut through the fatigue; greed. Just as there were bodies strewn everywhere across the field, so were there Spirit Tools and Cosmos Sacks.

His eyes turned to the man lying in front of him, the presumptive leader of the other side. He walked over toward the corpse and bent down to take the Spatial Ring on his finger. However, he stopped when he saw a man from the sidelines take a few steps toward him.

“Ah, Lord Piker, I mean no disrespect. But you might not want to take that man's possessions,” a man hesitantly spoke up from the distance. “That is Yeorav Dravorak, of the Dravorak Dynasty. You might want to let them take his body and belongings back.”

Zac looked down at the body in front of him without a change in expression, but some waves still rose in his heart. Was this the brother of Reoluv, the man whose Tower Apparition had given him the Fragment of the Coffin, and the greatest Genius in the sector for thousands of years? And more importantly, the Dravorak Dynasty was a peak force in the sector. How would they respond to one of their princes dying?

Was this why the man had spoken up right before his death?

But at the same time, wasn't it too late by now for a show of respect? If the Dravorak wanted revenge, would him giving

back the man's body make any difference? If this had been inside The tower or in the wild, then Zac would definitely have looted the body before destroying it, but this had taken place in front of hundreds of people.

He wasn't sure what the custom was regarding this, and he glanced at the demon for assistance.

"The young Prince was an honorable man, facing his fate with equanimity," Ogras said. "His companions can claim him and his belongings. However, that only goes for the young prince. The rest bet their lives for power and wealth, and their possessions are Lord Piker's rightful claim for standing victorious. Everyone is free to claim the bodies of the deceased though, to give them their final rites."

Zac glanced at the expressions of those standing in the distance, and from the looks of it the demon's way of dealing with things wasn't anything uncommon. However, his eyes widened when he saw the woman who he had just fought return. Her eyes were bloodshot as she looked down at Yeroluv Dravorak, before her eyes moved to meet Zac's.

Zac felt the demon next to him tense up, gearing up for a battle, but Zac stopped him with a shake of his head.

"I am sorry. I-" she said before she looked down again with a shake of her head. "I am sorry."

She bent down and gingerly picked up the body of Yeorav before she slowly walked away from the square with the man in her arms. Zac's eyes followed the woman's lonely back as she carried the body to the edge of the square before she squatted down. It didn't look like she was planning on avenging him or anything, but rather that she seemed at a loss of what to do next.

Zac only shook his head with some heaviness.

It sounded like that man had desperately needed to get the reward for taking him out, to the point that he had been willing to die for it. That didn't really make him evil though, but rather someone out of options. Zac knew the feeling all too

well, having been forced to make decisions that went against his conscience to protect those around him.

Ogras would probably have killed the lover as well if they hadn't been inside the Base Town where his actions might have triggered another quest, but Zac had no such intentions. It might be akin to releasing a wolf back into the forest, but what trouble could she possibly cause compared to Yeorav's family?

Zac didn't even have the energy to start speculating the aftermath of killing a scion of the Dravorak Dynasty, and instead focused on the task at hand.

"I am Zac Piker, and I am not connected to any force," Zac said with a hoarse but carrying voice.

He had long considered what he should say if he ever got to this point, and he was glad to see the eyes light up among many of the scions.

"There is a man calling himself The Great Redeemer is heading for my planet, intent on sacrificing everyone on it for an evil ritual. I believe he is currently a Peak D-Grade Warrior, and he has some knowledge of the Dao of Karma, but that's all I know," Zac continued.

This was the plan. He'd simply lay the cards on the table. He had no bargaining skills, and his time was limited, so he wanted to create a sense of urgency. There should be a lot of C-Grade forces interested in making a connection with him, and everyone would want to be the first to tie him to their chariot.

The scions looked a bit confused about the sudden change in topic, but a few eyes lit up in comprehension as they realized what was going on.

"I come from a weak recently integrated planet, and no one will be able to stop him. Taking care of a D-Grade Hegemon would be a small task for many of your ancestors, but it would be a favor I would forever remember. I am wi-" Zac said, but he was interrupted by a man who had just walked out of one of the palaces.

“Wait! I know that man!” the youth said with surprise. “He’s the excommunicated son of the Heliophos Clan! They have been looking for him for tens of thousands of years!”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the news. Things would only become easier if the man was actually a fugitive. Perhaps he could even count on this Heliophos Clan clan to deal with the problem for him.

But the drastic change in expression among the people quickly doused Zac’s excitement.

Chapter 470: Friends and Foes

People who had already spoken up of their support suddenly looked troubled, and a few others were even walking away without hesitation. Just what was going on? He quickly looked over at Ogras, but he shook his head in confusion as well.

Zac could only guess they were another peak force, and he looked over at Galau for confirmation.

“Ah... This...” Galau stammered, clearly unwilling to broach the subject in front of such a large audience. “I think you should speak with Heliophos Clan before doing anything else.”

Zac slowly nodded as he looked at the troubled faces of the people around him.

“Is there anyone here who belongs to the Heliophos Clan?” Zac asked.

“The Heliophos Clan isn’t a combat-oriented family, so they don’t climb the Tower of Eternity,” the youth from earlier said after the silence had stretched on for a while. “They are a solitary clan focusing on divination and fate augmentation.”

Zac inwardly groaned in annoyance when he put two and two together. These people didn’t want to risk causing a rift with a clan full of Karmic Cultivators. They might find that their clan was on the brink of ruination a few hundred years later without knowing what had happened. No one wanted to be the one to take out The Great Redeemer if it meant making such a troublesome enemy.

He was about to ask the merchant to clarify just how powerful the Heliophos Clan was, but he suddenly noticed that the crowd was giving way for someone to reach the front. Was

there actually someone who could speak for this odd clan here?

“Now that was something else,” a slightly amused voice said, and young cultivators hurriedly scurried out of the way to give room to a young woman.

Zac looked over and almost took a step back in shock, as the woman looked almost identical to someone he had seen before. The newcomer was almost a picture-perfect copy of the mysterious Draugr-lady who had given him the miasmic fractals in his mind, and whose presumed husband he had just met in another vision.

Behind her two Revenants walked in pace, one of which radiated an aura that was at least comparable to the man he had just taken out. If such an elite was just an attendant, then the Draugr might be frightfully powerful, even if Zac couldn't gauge anything from her appearance alone. Add to that the vast resources of the Undead Empire, and this small group might be an even bigger threat compared to those he had just fought.

However, they didn't emit any killing intent, but rather the opposite. It was like the Draugr was looking at him like he was some long-lost brother or something. Was this a huge coincidence? Or was this the System messing with his fate somehow? He warily stared at her, trying to figure out what her aim was.

“You don't need to worry about me. I'm not even from this star sector, I wouldn't care even if you killed everyone in this place,” she smiled. “In fact, I'm a friend and I come bearing gifts.”

Almost forty bloody heads appeared in front of her the next second.

“I... encouraged a few forces to stay away from this matter as I wanted to meet with you,” she said as she looked down at the heads like they were a pile of garbage. “I also dealt with the Tsarun clan for you, so that we would be able to talk uninterrupted.”

“What do you want?” Zac asked suspiciously before he looked down at the heads with a grimace.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that things had deteriorated into an irreconcilable feud with the Tsarun Clan after this.

It made no sense that this Draugr wanted to make friends with him. The Undead Empire wasn't strictly xenophobic, but they seldom mingled with the living. Or did she simply need a strong F-Grade ally for some task? Or more likely, was she able to sense his connection to Be'Zi somehow?

“I think it's a discussion best held in private,” the Draugr said, not offering any clues.

“A- My friend,” a familiar voice said as Boje Zethaya scurried forward. “I feel terribly apologetic about the mess caused by my inattentiveness the other day. Why don't you use my family's abode to conduct any meetings you might have?”

“Well, shall we?” the Draugr said as she sauntered toward the Pill House with the powerful-looking revenant silently walking behind her.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he decided to check things out. This girl wasn't even from this Sector, which meant she had a pretty strong backing. Traveling between sectors was something that only the extremely powerful or the exorbitantly wealthy could do.

It was a possibility that she came from some big shot family of the Undead Empire, and she might even be able to solve the problem on Earth with a few words. One newly integrated planet couldn't be very important in the wider scope of things. It was absolutely worth exploring further.

He first turned to Ogras and Galau who had walked over as well, but still stood some distance apart from the gathered mob.

“Will you two be fine?” Zac asked.

“I- I need to talk with my cousins,” Galau said with a slightly hollow voice.

“Tell me if you need help with anything,” Zac nodded.

“I’ll come with you after dealing with the battlefield. You talk with the Draugr, I’ll stay outside and see if I can find out some more about that clan. I don’t believe there isn’t a single force that’s brave enough to stick their neck out and help deal with that old goat coming for us,” the demon said.

Zac nodded as he looked around at the square full of corpses. His eyes moved to a corpse lying just a few meters away, a stocky humanoid holding a beautiful blue sword which hummed with spirituality. Ogras looked over as well, and a shadow tendril brought over the sword.

“Water attuned,” the demon muttered. “Might be suited for old man Trang.”

Zac nodded before his eyes turned toward the merchant who was scurrying toward one of the roads leading toward the outer sector of Base Town. However, he didn’t get far before one scion after another approached him. Finally, two stunning beauties dispersed the crowds before they led Galau to a palace facing the square.

“They seem to know him. The Peak girl?” Ogras muttered as he shot a glance at the merchant just as they walked into the grand building.

“Perhaps,” Zac nodded. “We haven’t done anything evil in his presence though, and the Peak family might prove our best shot at dealing with this mess. Let them sound Galau out while I talk with the Draugr.”

Zac left the demon to deal with the clean-up, and he only personally took the Spatial tools of the three elites who had assisted Yeorav before he walked toward the Pill House. He couldn’t stop his curiosity though, and he took a look at his status screen he walked.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power
Limited Titles	Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	1253 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 199%]
Dexterity	590 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]
Endurance	1453 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 189%]
Vitality	784 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 189%]

Intelligence	293 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]
Wisdom	494 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]
Luck	285 [Increase: 86%. Efficiency: 179%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 6 862 770 130

Zac wryly smiled as he looked at his status screen. He had been worried about being able to reach 1000 Strength at all, but he had suddenly shot way past his goal. However, he quickly realized that all of it didn't come from his upgraded Dao Fragment, but there were actually two new titles as well.

[Peak Power: Reach 5000 Attribute Points while still in F-Grade Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

As expected, there was another Title for reaching a monstrous number like 5000 attribute points while still at F-Grade. However, he wasn't as sure about just how rare it was any longer after witnessing the Battle of Fates and his Mid-Grade Dao Fragment.

One Dao Fragment awarded 550 attribute points, which together with the effect of titles closed in on a thousand points. If someone had a couple of them, or perhaps even a Late-Stage Dao Seed, then reaching 5000 attribute points wouldn't be all too difficult. However, that wasn't all he gained, as he had actually gained another title, though this one was limited.

[Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th [Limited]: Attain the 14th best all-time result in the Zecia Sector. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Luck +6%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Vitality +6%]

He was honestly a bit surprised about being only the fourteenth position. It was still an extremely good result, but

he had only heard of the Eveningtide Asura. But then again, the sector was probably extremely old, and outliers were bound to appear now and then over millions of years.

However, he noticed that his recently gained title related to the Terminus was missing in his status screen, though he could still find it if he opened the actual title screen. It was a bit odd, but he honestly felt it was for the best. What if some old monster had the ability to spy on his status screen? Having seen the Terminus might only cause a bunch of problems for him.

Normally he would have looked through his status screen a bit longer, but he had things to do and time was limited. He soon walked through the passageway into the Pill House, and there was no array impeding him this time. Zac almost felt as though he had dreamed that the place had been turned into a pile of rubble just one day ago, as the place looked almost like a carbon-copy of its predecessor.

Boje was already waiting in the lobby, and Zac was personally led by the man to the second floor.

“Let us know if there’s anything else you need,” he said as he stopped outside a room.

“Do you have any more of those cherries?” Zac asked before walking inside.

“A- No? I thought you...” Boje stammered a bit, looking a bit confused.

“I had to use it on myself in the tower, so I need another soul-healing treasure for the intended recipient,” Zac explained.

“Oh, I see,” Boje said with a troubled face. “I am afraid I don’t have anything on me. If you give me a week I’ll be able to send for something from my family, and I’ll be happy to directly gift it to you.”

“I’m leaving today,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “See if you can find out if anyone has something that would work.”

“We’d be happy to,” Boje said before he handed Zac two tokens after some thought. “This teleportation token leads to one of our main stores, and the insignia gives you the status of

an esteemed guest. You will be able to order a medicine tailored for your friend there, and our resident alchemist will immediately concoct it. Such a pill would not have any secondary effects like the Cherry might have produced, but its healing efficacy will be at least of the same level, probably higher.”

Zac’s eyes lit up and he immediately accepted the two tokens. He wouldn’t personally go there until he could be certain about his safety, but he might be able to send someone else there if he couldn’t find any solution for Alea in the short run.

“Thank you. You can speak with Ogras if there is anything else,” Zac nodded.

He couldn’t help but feel some sort of vindication as he stepped inside the room. Last time he had come here as a nobody, a supplicant begging for resources. Now he was a bigshot who got things done with a wave of his hand, and he’d be lying if he said that it didn’t feel pretty nice.

“I didn’t have a chance to introduce myself earlier,” the Draugr smiled as Zac closed the door behind him. “I am Catheya Sharva’Zi. I am from what you would call the Empire Heartlands.”

“Why have you come to this remote corner of the universe then?” Zac asked with some confusion. “Shouldn’t be anything of interest here.”

“My master is looking for a certain opportunity to break through,” Catheya said. “He received some clues that made us pass by this frontier region. But he suddenly had a bout of inspiration and had to enter seclusion for a few years. I got bored and chose to visit the Tower.”

Zac only wryly smiled as he sat down. Having a big tree like a great master to depend on seemed to allow for a pretty leisurely lifestyle.

“Did you know? It has been over a million years since someone breached the 8th floor in this sector,” the Draugr said as she glanced at the Revenant standing by the side.

He nodded and produced an exquisite teapot out of nowhere and expertly poured Zac a cup before he lit a stick of mild incense.

“The Eveningtide Asura,” Zac nodded, ignoring the drink for now.

“Yes,” Catheya said. “You two are more similar than you might think. He was a Progenitor as well.”

Zac frowned as she looked at the Draugr. Had she found out about Earth, and was planning to use it against him?

“I mean nothing by my words,” Catheya smiled as she handed over a crystal. “Take a look by yourself.”

Zac gave Catheya another glance as he quickly scanned the contents.

“Ez’Mahal,” Zac snorted, some fury erupting in his chest again.

Those scumbags weren’t content with treating the Earthlings like cattle, but they even dared to place a bounty on his head? He wondered what their reaction would be after hearing about his deeds inside the Tower of Eternity.

“It seems you have looked into me while I climbed. Why? I have no connection to your Undead Empire,” Zac said as he stashed away the information crystal.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Catheya said with a smile. “I was somewhat convinced when I saw you when you entered the tower, but now I am certain. You and I are connected, I know it. You even smell like one of us.”

Zac didn’t say anything, but he was pretty surprised about her last comment. Did he actually smell like a Draugr?

Chapter 471: Quid Pro Quo

Iz Tayn slowly walked through the vast gardens in her home, not sparing the divine flowers a second glance until she reached a burning mountain.

“Hello, uncle. Is grandpa awake?” she asked, and the ground started to shake the next moment.

Enormous pieces of rocks rearranged themselves, and the mountain turned into a golem hundreds of meters tall. Its whole body was covered in extremely dense scriptures to the point that not a single inch of its body wasn't covered with fractals. Iz always liked looking at the mysterious patterns while meditating, but she had other things to do today.

“Master has been expecting your return, he is awake,” the enormous golem rumbled as it stretched out a finger that was over a dozen meters wide.

Iz disappeared in a puff of flames the next moment, and the fiery flowers and red sky were replaced with the boundless cosmos. In front of her a scorching sun hovered in the void, with an impossibly large man sitting on top of it. The man looked to be an amalgam of man and flames, and the heat he emanated far eclipsed the sun beneath him.

It was Mohzius Tayn, her grandfather.

Iz was just a speck of dust compared to the terrifying size of her ancestor. However, the scales of the cosmos somehow changed, and the gargantuan man was suddenly the same size as Iz herself, and the sun even smaller than her own **[World's End]**.

“How did it go?” the middle-aged man asked with a warm smile.

“51 Days,” Iz said as the bored expression she usually wore outside became increasingly animated. “You lied! It wasn't

exciting at all. The last guy was pretty tough, but it was just one long slog.”

“Ha!” Mohzius laughed, and the star beneath him flickered as it shared the man’s mood. “Old Man River’s descendant in your cohort took over 65 days to break the ceiling. I can’t wait to see his face when he hears about this.”

“My age group? Theleferos is almost twenty thousand years old,” Iz snorted, but she was still secretly happy about her grandpa’s expression.

Seeing his smile more valuable than the titles and new treasures she received, since her grandpa had been pretty down since her grandma had to leave.

“Still the young generation,” Mohzius smiled. “By the way, haven’t you only been gone for a few days? Why didn’t you stay and play with your friends? I am sure we have a nice house by the tower.”

“What friends? Just a bunch of people who only thinks about benefits and getting stronger all day,” Iz muttered before her eyes lit with excitement. “I met someone interesting inside the Tower though! But I need your help, grandpa.”

“Hm? Met someone? A boy?” the old man said, a frown quickly appearing on his face.

“Yes, but I just found him interesting,” Iz hurriedly explained.

“Bringing someone out from that spatial fold is quite troublesome,” the man muttered. “Your uncle can’t do it without getting hurt, and I can’t leave this place for the next few centuries.”

“No, he’s not someone from that place,” Iz said with a shake of her head as she described her encounter on the 7th floor.

“Dual classes and dual races? And you say he’s a human rather than a wanderer?” her grandpa said, looking a bit interested.

“Sounds like a mutated constitution or a twinned soul. Perhaps even the fusion of two individuals with interwoven fates.”

“But he somehow managed to remove the marking just after I returned. Can you help me?” Iz entreated.

“That is much easier,” the man nodded, and a small mote of flame split off from the sun and entered Iz’s forehead.

A small rune emerged a few seconds later, and the man grabbed it in his hand.

“He seems to have completely blown up his torso to rid himself of the mark,” Mohzius said with a smile. “A gutsy fellow. But he didn’t notice the branding on his spirit body. I strengthened it a bit, he won’t be able to remove it easily now. But why do you want to see him?”

“No particular reason,” Iz shrugged. “I was bored and he was interesting, so I thought I would go visit and take a look. Besides, he called me a lunatic, he owes me an explanation.”

“Remember to not go around causing trouble in the lower realms,” the man sternly said. “Most people are just trying to live their lives.”

“I know, grandpa,” Iz muttered.

“... Fine,” the old man eventually relented. “You can go when you have undergone your next bloodline evolution and formed your first Dao Branch.”

“But that can take decades!” Iz exclaimed.

“Just the blink of an eye,” Mohzius smiled. “Better work hard.”

“Fine. I’ll go and break through now. Goodbye, grandpa,” Iz Tayn said before she looked up at the stars. “Goodbye, grandma.”

The next moment she disappeared from the remote star system, leaving the giant sitting on his sun. However, a massive claw ripped through the fabric of space, and a scar even larger than the celestial body appeared the next moment.

An eye of impossible proportions gazed down through the tear, and just its gaze put tremendous pressure on the whole star system. However, the giant wasn’t worried in the least, but rather looked up with a smile matching the one that was usually reserved for his sole granddaughter.

“It seems you’re well on the way of getting better. Just a few dozen millennia and you might be able to descend,” he said with barely restrained elation.

“I didn’t hear everything just now. Has little Iz met a boy? And you actually wanted to send her into his arms?” a booming voice echoed across the cosmos.

“Iz is more talented than both of us combined, but she lacks the drive and curiosity to walk toward the Terminus. I am hoping that she will find something worth fighting for, like how I fought for you all those years ago,” Mohzius said, his smile widening.

A snort could be heard from within the void, and the whole star system shook in response.

“If my granddaughter runs away with some man before I can even meet her, I’ll fight it out with you, old man,” the voice said as white flames danced in the eye. “How dare he call my beautiful granddaughter a lunatic. He better not come to this sector of space.”

“Yes dear,” the old man smiled as he closed his eyes, some wistfulness flashing in their depths. “You should go back now. I can only hold back the Heavens for so long.”

“How do you know my ancestor? Is she your master?”
Catheya asked point-blank, her pitch-black orbs boring into Zac’s eyes.

Zac was about to respond, but he suddenly felt a small pang of pain in his chest. He was already feeling pretty wretched after the fight, and he couldn’t help but wonder if the cursed sword had left some lingering threats.

However, he felt fine except the exhaustion and a quick inspection couldn’t pinpoint any issues, so he returned his attention back to the Draugr sitting in front of him.

“It’s not what you think,” Zac finally said after the pause.

“Then what?” She said, leaning forward in eagerness.

“There is an Incursion of the Undead Empire on my home planet,” Zac slowly said, ignoring the question. “Can you deal

with it?”

Cathey froze for a second before she wryly sighed.

“No. I am willing to pay a lot for information pertaining to my ancestor, but I cannot help you in that regard,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Why not?” Zac said with a frown. “One small planet shouldn’t matter to you guys.”

“It doesn’t really, but there are a few iron-clad commandments in the Empire. The first one is cohesion. Undead Kingdoms cannot go to war against each other. Skirmishes for unclaimed resources and are okay, but full-scale wars are banned. The second commandment is the Commandment of Conquest,” she said.

“Conquest?” Zac repeated.

“All the Kingdoms of the Empire have a quota to expand, and no one is allowed to hinder a crusade. I could take over the Incursion if I could somehow make my way to your planet, but I would still be bound by law to conquer the planet,” she said.

“Why?” Zac said with incredulity.

“Do you know the history of our people?” Cathey asked.

“I just know the Undead Empire is older than the System,” Zac shrugged.

“Well, the undead races are older, but the Undead Empire is not,” she said. “Do you know about the Darkness?”

“What? The Darkness?” Zac said, the rapid change of topics throwing him off-balance.

“When the System was born, the universe was drained of its energy to feed its usurpation of the heavens. The path of cultivation was cut off,” she said.

Zac nodded in understanding. Alyn had told him about this while she explaining the origin of the System.

“For most races it was a great inconvenience, but for the Undead Races it was a calamity. Our existence is dependent on

death-attuned energies, and when the universe was being drained so was our lifeline,” Catheya said.

Zac’s eyes immediately widened in understanding. This was something he hadn’t considered. If all Cosmic Energy was suddenly gone, then Zac would live as he did before the Integration. But his Draugr-side would be screwed.

Even just sitting around would slowly expend miasma, though nowhere near the amounts that were expended during battle. But he would no doubt die within the year if he didn’t have any Miasma Crystals to top himself off.

But Zac remembered that the Darkness as Catheya called it had lasted over a million years. How did the undead races survive for so long? He could only imagine that more powerful warriors required a lot of Miasma to just survive.

“The Founders and the Undead Princes searched the whole universe for pockets of energies that could sustain us, but over 95% of our population succumbed before we found the Heartlands. Since then there’s been a standing order to realign the universe, because if the whole Multiverse is death-attuned we’ll never be without a lifeline again. So we will never stop expanding.”

“That’s... Crazy,” Zac sighed.

“Well,” Catheya said with a smile. “Only the fanatics take the mission seriously nowadays. But conflict is still the cornerstone of progress, and The Ruthless Heavens is very much in favor of the way we’re doing things as it causes conflict everywhere. That by itself provides us with some special benefits. Besides, we cannot disobey the commandments since they are coded into our bloodlines by the Primo.”

“The Primo?” Zac asked.

“I cannot discuss the Primo,” Catheya said with a shake of her head.

Zac sighed with a nod. He could only guess that the Primo was either the founder of the Undead Empire or the current Emperor. It didn’t really matter though. What mattered was the

fact that there was no way for the Draugr in front of him to settle the Incursion.

However, the Undead Incursions was just the first of the many threats that Earth was facing, and he was pretty confident in dealing with it on his own after all his recent gains.

“What about the thing I mentioned out in the square? You said you’re not from this sector, so you wouldn’t care about offending these guys, right?” Zac probed.

“I’m not sure how I would be able to help with this matter? He sounds like someone on his last legs. I doubt he would care for a second that your planet was under the protection of some powerhouse unless the powerhouse was actually standing guard over the planet,” Catheya slowly said. “I also don’t carry anything that can kill someone that strong with any guarantee, since items of that grade can’t be taken to this place.”

“Can’t your clan do something?” Zac asks with some helplessness.

“My master probably wouldn’t mind killing that guy if I asked him. He has no love for the unorthodox cultivators. But we have no means to find him. He could be anywhere in this sector, and him being versed in the Dao of Karma which makes him twice as slippery. Do you have a token to summon my master if needed?”

“A-“ Zac stammered, realizing that there were glaring issues in his plan of getting a patron.

“I am willing to join a force as long as they can provide protection of Earth,” Zac said.

“Well, that might work, though not with me. Undead Kingdoms and forces cannot form alliances with the living, with you being targets of conquest and all. We could strike an unofficial partnership though,” the Draugr smiled. “But there are a lot of problems with this plan.”

“Problems how?” Zac asked.

“Is my ancestor alive?” Catheya smiled, but the effect was extremely creepy if you combined it with her dead eyes.

Zac sighed and mulled it over for a second.

“She was alive three months ago to the best of my knowledge. Or well, alive by undead standards I guess?” Zac said. “What problems?”

“She’s really alive?!” Catheya exclaimed, even standing up in excitement.

Zac was pretty sure by this point that the Draugr-lady in his vision was an ancestor to the one in front of him, one that seemed to have gone missing. Had she perhaps left her clan behind due to issues stemming from the Splinter of Oblivion? She was clearly extremely powerful, and if she went mad it wouldn’t be just a small Pill House going up in smokes.

She might blow up a whole planet.

It was a great bargaining tool for Zac though. She clearly was anxious to learn about her ancestor, and she seemed to come from an extremely powerful faction of one of the oldest forces in the Multiverse. She was probably the most knowledgeable person he had met, perhaps with the exception of some of the scions he had met during the fight on the 7th floor.

It was time to get his money’s worth.

“The problems?” Zac reminded.

“Well, you can technically join a faction, either as an ally or a subordinate. But that doesn’t mean that you can get the help you need,” Catheya said after having composed herself. “First of all, travel will not be possible as your world probably hasn’t met the requirements to connect with the multiverse. You can’t even teleport to local factions, how are you going to teleport to other factions of the sector?”

“So there’s no hope?” Zac said with some bleakness.

“Well, most people here have tokens to give out. You could technically form an agreement now, and then use the token to fetch a powerhouse to assist you. The one going would need to be a Planetary Leader though, since others wouldn’t be able to bring anyone back while the planet is closed-off,” Catheya said.

“How do you know this?” Zac asked. “Seems like a pretty specific rule.”

“I’ve led an incursion myself,” Catheya explained as it was a matter of course. “That’s how I met Varo over there. I guess you could say he was that planet’s version of you. Anyway, the rules are pretty much the same for an invader, so I read up on how things worked. It’s a bit more convenient for the invader though, as the world immediately gets integrated after the conquest is done with. But you will still be cut-off for a hundred years even if you win.”

Zac’s eyes turned toward the silent Revenant, and he couldn’t help but shudder. Would this have been the fate of himself and Kenzie if he hadn’t managed to accumulate enough power? The Revenant seemed to feel the gaze, and he opened his eyes and looked over at Zac.

“That was him, I am me. We’re nothing but strangers fated to never meet,” Varo said before he once again closed his eyes.

Chapter 472: Arcane

“Oh?” Io said, looking up from his position in the middle of the Data Array.

The thousands of screens around him faded away as he stood up and walked out, taking in the fresh breath of air for the first time in almost a year. He didn't like to be away from his array for too long, so he immediately made a beeline toward the restricted area in the middle of the sect.

Io was just a peak D-Grade warrior, but he was still let into the hidden realm without any hassle after flashing a token. A guard even arranged for transportation to where he needed to go, and he stood in front of the Lake of Solace after just a couple of hours.

Being friends with a Grand Deacon had its benefits.

“Oh? I thought I would have to drag you outside for you to leave your little cave,” a laughing voice echoed out across the lake.

“I experience far more in the Data Array than I could ever do with my own two eyes,” Io said with a smile as he drifted over to the small island in the middle. “How are things on your end?”

Io and A'Feris came from the same world, so Io had helped him gain his footing in the sect, which had formed a friendship that had lasted for eons. A'Feris had passed him by in terms of cultivation long ago, and was now one of the elites of the force.

“Same as usual,” A'Feris said with a smile as he poured a cup of tea for his old friend. “Something is lacking. I need some impetus to take the next step, but it eludes me.”

“You still look quite calm,” Io commented.

“Well, my road has taken me further than I ever expected. Even if it stopped here it wouldn’t be the worst of fates,” A’Feris laughed.

“How about taking a disciple?” Io smiled. “Some have found the experience rewarding, and have even managed to break through their barriers that way.”

“Why would I want to get bogged down with one of those snotty brats who keep relying on their elders to solve all their little problems?” A’Feris snorted with derision before he looked at Io with suspicion. “Wait, why are you saying this right now? What have you found out through your Array? Or do you have some descendants you’ve hidden from me?”

“I just received a report of an outlier in the Zecia sector,” Io said as he took a sip of the tea.

“Zecia? I haven’t heard of it,” A’Feris said. “What sort of outlier?”

“It is one of the frontier sectors that could tentatively be said to be within our domain, though ownership of those sectors is quite contested as you know,” Io explained. “Someone just reached the 9th floor of the Tower of Eternity, though just the entrance.”

“Tower of Eternity?” A’Feris muttered. “Haven’t heard of that place in a long time. So who was it?”

“His name is Zac Piker, but that’s all I know,” Io said. “It is likely a pseudonym though.”

“That’s it?” A’Feris laughed. “Is this the limits of the so-called Living Library?”

“I am guessing he is a wandering cultivator or a Planet Progenitor. The established forces in that kind of place don’t have the means to nurture that level of elite, so those who appear are the results of a series of lucky encounters. Of the 14 people who have passed the 8th floor in the Zecia sector, 11 of them have been unattached,” Io said.

“A gem in the rough,” A’Feris muttered. “What path is he following?”

“I just found out about his existence, no real information has leaked out yet,” Io said. “One of our agents will know more in a few hours. I thought I’d let you know before others learn of it. I will only be able to block the information from leaking for a day or two though.”

“Discipleship...” A’Feris muttered as his fingers ran along the grisly weapon that never left his side. “We will see. It’s not just a matter of convenience, but also of fate. He might be someone worth nurturing, but he needs to walk a similar path as mine. Otherwise both our times would be wasted.”

It was a pretty odd situation.

The man had essentially been killed by Catheya and turned into a revenant, but he still seemed happy enough to follow her. But Zac knew that “realignment” wasn’t anything evil in the eyes of the undead after his stay at the Undead Kingdom during his climb. It was the same as waking up someone who had been sleepwalking.

“What if I sign a contract with the scions here?” Zac asked as he turned back to Catheya, getting back to the topic at hand. “Something along the line that they cannot attack me and promise to provide assistance, in return for me joining their force.”

“The people here are just juniors, they can’t speak for their elders,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Besides, there are ways for the elders to forcibly break the contracts as the difference between them and you is so vast. Then they can simply make up some reason for why they apprehend you before they steal all your treasures and dig out your secrets. They might even hand you over to that Heliophos Clan to curry favor.”

“So what should I do?” Zac asked. “I can’t be the first guy who has needed to hire someone much stronger than me.”

“Of course not. But you have stood out too much. You definitely have a bunch of secrets on you, to the point that

even I am extremely curious. Maintaining reputation in the face of such a huge potential gain is nothing,” Catheya smiled.

Zac slowly nodded, and he remembered Yrial’s situation. He had almost lost his life multiple times to so-called righteous factions who wanted his treasures without paying for them. There was no right and wrong in the Multiverse, there was only power and benefits. Crushing a token to arrive at a foreign force full of D- and C-Grade Hegemons would be like serving himself up on a platter if there were no safeguards in place.

The fact that The Great Redeemer was from a powerful clan of Karmic Cultivators only made the situation messier.

The only force he felt he could somewhat trust was the Peak family, but he wasn’t completely ready to put his life in their hands. But it was a last-ditch solution if everything else failed. He could head over to their place if he got a token from Pretty. Even if he ended up captured he would probably have a better ending than whatever The Great Redeemer had planned.

“Do you have any solution? Just preventing him from finding my planet is enough for now,” Zac said as he explained the situation with the Dominators and the beacon he had destroyed with the help of the old abbot.

“Cutting off any Karmic Ties before he reaches your plane is your best bet, as it doesn’t matter how close or far he is from your planet then. He will not be able to find you through the spatial folds of the sector without any guidance, at least not while The Ruthless Heavens is shrouding your world. And I do have something for that actually,” Catheya slowly said as she turned to the Revenant behind her. “Go fetch the 8th and 23rd treasures.”

“The local chapter will require remuneration,” Varo slowly said.

“That’s fine,” she said with a disinterested wave.

The man nodded and blended into the shadows with a bow.

“What are the treasures?” Zac asked with interest.

He probably had a lot of good things in his bag, but he had no idea what most of them were. Besides, even if they were valuable there was no guarantee that they'd be able to help him with his current predicaments.

“The 8th treasure is called [**Lantern of Fate**]. Anyone it illuminates will have their karmic ties exposed, and you will even be able to destroy the ties with enough effort. The wearer will also be immune from forming karmic ties when it's activated,” Catheya said.

Zac's eyes lit up, as it sounded like a treasure that produced the karmic ties that the Abbot had allowed him to see for a short while.

This was exactly what he needed to make sure there were no lingering ties between Earth and The Great Redeemer after he had dealt with the Dominators. It could solve any potential issue stemming from his repeated contact with the Redeemer, and make sure that nothing was wrong with those who had almost been possessed during the activation of the Dao Funnel.

“And the 23rd?” Zac asked with mounting excitement.

“A peak E-Grade treasure of erasure. Use it on the corpses of the underlings of the Redeemer, and any hidden karmic links will be severed. We use those kinds of treasures before we create new subjects with... troublesome histories. No one wants an insanely strong powerhouse to come for you to reclaim the body of a descendant,” Catheya said with a wry smile.

“Both these two items are yours in return for the information I'm looking for. You will have to sign a contract saying that the treasures cannot be used against the forces of the Undead Empire though,” she added.

“Deal,” Zac nodded without hesitation.

It was a bit disappointing that she wasn't able to directly help with neither The Great Redeemer nor the Undead Incursion. However, he wasn't really worried about the invaders any longer. He had gained far more than expected during his visit

to the Tower of Eternity, and he had great confidence in dealing with the Lich King.

He had hoped to get some help with the incursion to be able to delay his evolution. He had made a lot of improvements in the tower, but he had been too rushed to make gains. If he could have a couple of months to figure out what was going on with his Dao fusions and what to do about the two items in his head he would probably be able to get even better classes.

“So...?” Catheya asked with a raised brow.

“Let me see the treasures first,” Zac said with a smile, taking a cue from the paranoid demon.

“Fine,” she snorted.

“By the way, do you know the requirements from the system for it to consider one’s path a ‘Creation’?” Zac asked instead as they waited for the Revenant to return.

“Big appetite, already grasping for an Arcane class?” Catheya smiled.

“Something like that,” Zac said, not denying it.

He had passed the 8th floor of the Tower of Eternity. It shouldn’t come as a shock that someone like him wanted to get the best possible rarity for their class.

“You should think long and hard before taking that step,” Catheya said.

“Why wouldn’t I want to get an Arcane class?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

Was this another lecture like that of Alyn? To pursue greatness through mediocrity.

“Have you changed your view of cultivation since your world got integrated?” Catheya asked.

“Of course,” Zac nodded.

“Will you change it again?”

“Probably,” Zac responded after a short deliberation.

“Well, there you go,” Catheya smiled.

“What?” Zac said, not following the logic.

“The Arcane class gives you a bit more attributes and a few other benefits, but you shouldn’t think of it as something as simple as the next step after Epic rarity. Getting an Arcane class is confirming your path of cultivation, and doing so is irrevocable,” she said.

“Irrevocable? What does that mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“It means that you cannot change directions any longer. The path you chose will be the path you will have for the rest of your life. If your Creation is substandard, then your path of cultivation will be cut short,” Catheya explained. “Arcane classes are probably extremely rare in this sector, but they are more common where I am from. However, most people hold off on choosing them until later in their life.”

“What’s the difference between choosing now and later?” Zac asked, though he had an inkling.

“We’re just children,” Catheya said. “Our understanding of the Dao and the universe is shallow at best. Choosing an Arcane Class immediately is like choosing your future profession as a child. You don’t know what you are doing. So people wait until their understanding becomes deeper and the Creation becomes more refined.

“You lose some attributes, but trying to maximize attributes is a fool’s venture in any case,” the Draugr continued. “What is important is your path and your Dao. They will take you past the bottlenecks, a few extra points in Strength will not.”

The room turned silent as Zac looked down at his hands with a frown. He would have to confirm that she was telling the truth about Arcane classes, but what should he do if it was the truth? He felt that his creation was extremely high tier since it followed the path of Life and Death, which might even be turned into that of Creation and Oblivion with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion and the Shard of Creation.

But was that enough? There were still huge obstacles to overcome. He still couldn’t use the energies as he pleased, and

he was essentially fumbling in the dark about most aspects. Besides, he wasn't even sure if his ideas would even work any longer after the changes just before he left the tower. The pathways to [**Cyclic Strike**] had been rebranded, and he hadn't been able to confirm whether they even worked like before.

What would happen if he chose an Arcane class based on such rickety foundations? His whole future might be ruined since he grasped for too much, just like Alyn had warned him of.

The silence stretched on for another four minutes until the revenant returned with two boxes.

"This is the lantern," Catheya smiled. "Be careful not to use it constantly. It consumes life-force to run."

"Lifeforce? How much?" Zac said with a frown.

"One minute's use will result in a year lost when used," the revenant spoke up after the Draugr shot him a glance. "Ten years if you have reached the D-Grade. It is not strong enough to protect the fate of those stronger than that."

Zac nodded in thanks. It was a bit creepy to pay with your life to use an item, especially after already having already lost so much of it to the Shard. But just using it for short durations wouldn't be too bad, especially as he was about to evolve and get a new chunk of lifespan any day now.

"So, about the information?" The Draugr said.

"I don't know if the one I'm thinking of is related to you, but you look just like a younger version of the one I saw," Zac said as he stowed away the two treasures. "I think her name is Be'Zi."

"So you really have met her?!" the Draugr almost screamed as she leaned across the table. "Is she in this sector?"

"I don't know," Zac said. "We met in a vision since we walk similar paths. She bestowed me with something to protect me. Perhaps that's what you can sense from me."

"Why would she help you though?" Catheya said with confusion.

“She believed it was fate we met,” Zac shrugged. “According to her husband she seemed to place pretty great emphasis on such things.”

“Her WHAT?!” Catheya shouted as she slammed the table.
“WHO?!”

Chapter 473: Twilight Harbor

Catheya looked extremely shocked at the prospect of her ancestor having married, or perhaps having remarried as she already had descendants since before.

“I didn’t get his name,” Zac coughed before he described his appearance.

“Our ancestor has run off with an Aetherlord? What?” Catheya mumbled as she sat down with a thump. “Well, better that than some human I guess. No offense.”

Zac only snorted in response, not taking the thing to heart. It was not like he was lining up to date someone who wasn’t even alive.

“Why hasn’t she returned though?” Catheya asked. “Where is she now? How was her mental state?”

“I have no idea where she is,” Zac said. “I saw her sitting in a dark cave with a sea of liquefied Miasma slowly rotating around her. It felt like a drop of that pond would be able to instantly kill me. She seemed normal, a bit cold I guess?”

“So why hasn’t she been back for so long?” she muttered with some despondency.

“She didn’t say, I saw them for less than a minute,” Zac said, but he spoke up again after some hesitation. “But the path we walk has side-effects. You saw what happened to this place the other day. She might be afraid of hurting her family if she lost control.”

“Madness...” Catheya muttered. “I feel like you are still keeping some secrets from me though.”

“Some things aren’t of any value to you, but they pertain to my cultivation path. I know that the two of them cultivate opposite Daos though, and I think they are forming some system between them. That might be why your ancestor can stay alive,” Zac added after some thought, feeling he hadn’t provided much information in return for the treasures.

“The also husband spoke of broken peaks and seemed to carry resentment toward the System.”

“Broken peaks...” Catheya muttered. “The Boundless Path? This might be important, I need to speak with my master.”

“Stuff like that is beyond me. I’m just a newly integrated Progenitor, I don’t have any experience with stuff like old ancestors,” Zac shrugged. “Can I ask something else?”

“What?” Catheya said, though her interest in keeping up the conversation seemed to have waned somewhat now that she had the information she wanted.

“What ways are there to gain more limited title slots?”

Catheya was someone from a higher sector than the one he lived in, which meant that things that her knowledge might be unrivaled compared to all the other scions in the Base town. She also didn’t care about offending any local force like the Heliophos Clan, so he needed to milk her for as much knowledge as he could before he returned to Earth.

“Limited Titles... Just what did you encounter in the Tower of Eternity?” Catheya said, her crestfallen demeanor replaced by one filled with curiosity. “Did you encounter a trial?”

“A what?”

“A special event inside the tower. You encountered one, didn’t you?” Catheya asked.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he slowly nodded.

“The fate you carry must be pretty immense,” Catheya muttered. “Then again, that was already all too apparent from the events outside.”

“Fate?”

“The amount of attention the Heavens put on you. It is both a blessing and a curse,” Catheya smiled.

Zac weakly smiled in return, knowing the sentiment all too well.

“So, Limited Titles?” Zac said.

“It’s extremely rare. My master is deemed to have great genius partly because he has 4 Limited Slots. There are people with more, but I don’t know how they have gotten the other one. There are only a few generally known means to gain such a boost, and the Tower and its equivalent trials are the only I have heard of before D-Grade,” Catheya said.

“Why is there a limit at all?” Zac muttered. “Why doesn’t the System not just have normal titles? Isn’t its goal to make people powerful?”

“Tell me what trial you encountered,” Catheya smiled.

“It was called a Battle of Fates, it replaced the 63rd floor,” Zac said after deciding if the trade of information was worth it.

“That’s a rough one, but its mortality is pretty low,” Catheya nodded. “It’s a decent one to get, as long as you’re adept at combat.”

“So, titles?” Zac said.

“Did you know that cultivators today are stronger than they were pre-system?” Catheya said.

“Isn’t that the point of the System?” Zac responded, not understanding where Catheya was going. “Making warriors stronger.”

“Yes, but I am talking stage by stage,” Catheya explained.

“The average cultivators of today are only slightly better than the average ancient cultivators, but the elites are almost twice as powerful going by the records. Can you guess why?”

“The titles?” Zac immediately understood.

“Exactly. Skills, Cultivation manuals, Bloodlines, and Daos. All this existed before the System. But titles did not,” the Draugr said. “It’s still not completely understood exactly what

the Ruthless Heavens does when giving out titles, but the consensus is that it can be seen as an extremely exact, but minute, Bloodline Evolution. A Title improves our base constitution by a small degree.

“However, nothing comes without a price. It no doubt costs the System energy to improve the fundamental aspects of a warrior, and the Heavens is running at maximum capacity as far as we can tell, constantly integrating new realms. It can’t expend unlimited resources on every person, especially as its core directive is to manufacture warriors as efficiently as possible,” Catheya said.

“The general belief is that it’s pretty cheap for the System to award titles to warriors who are still in the earliest stages of cultivation. Giving 5% to Intelligence is barely anything. But providing 5% Intelligence for an A-Grade Prince? That would require terrifying amounts of energy,” the Draugr continued.

“But even if you get the title early, you’ll still get the same boost when reaching A-Grade later,” Zac countered.

“The Heavens won’t provide that energy. You will need to collect that yourself through killing or cultivating,” the Draugr smiled.

“So if you have a bunch of titles your cultivation will be slower?” Zac asked with surprise.

“Yes. The amount of energy a warrior requires to level up differs from person to person. A higher potential will require more energy,” Catheya explained as matter of course. “It’s not noticeable in the F-grade as the System subsidizes everyone, but elites generally gain levels slower. That’s why most factions force their general warriors to use lower Rarity Classes. They’ll shoot up to their bottlenecks far quicker, and a few might even break through with the extra time on their hands.”

“So the system provides the Titles as rewards, but you have to provide the energy required to maintain them yourself,” Zac concluded.

“Exactly,” Catheya nodded.

“And the limited titles?” Zac asked.

“The Ruthless Heavens still needed an extra incentive for people to enter dangerous places. Often people return empty-handed from such ventures, but if they at least could get a Title out of it more are likely to risk their lives. This dramatically increases the death rate among cultivators, but those who survive are stronger and more experienced,” Catheya smiled. “Besides, if you have a limited number of titles you will gradually upgrade them, and it will create a smaller strain on the Ruthless Heavens.”

“Of course, that’s just the general theory. Another is that Titles are actually unrealized potential. There is only so much potential that the System can dig out from a person, so it can’t provide unlimited titles and need to set a limit,” Catheya added.

The two kept talking for almost an hour, where the two kept going tit-for-tat for information. She obviously didn’t know as much about the Dao or cultivation as Yrial, but she had the viewpoint of someone who was born in a top tier faction. That came with all kinds of snippets of information that accumulated into a huge advantage.

Catheya was more interested in his experiences, and kept asking about whether he had encountered any cursed Mystic Realms or performed rituals on battlefields. Zac realized she tried to understand why he “smelled” like a Draugr, but he kept that secret to himself as he extracted one piece of information after another.

For example, he learned that it was possible to control one’s Dao to the point that you could actually form arrays with the mental energy before infusing it into skills. It would increase the boost even further, and sometimes even change the way a skill worked. He had never heard of anything of the sort before, which meant that it probably wasn’t a widely known technique here. Of course, that wasn’t something that was fated with Zac in any case.

However, the real shock was learning just what a **[Divine Investiture Array]** was, and he almost exploded in anger

when doing so.

It was actually an array to create or alter Spirit Tools. It could either take raw materials or an already existing spirit tool, and it would create something new with it. It was extremely sought after as you could create a Spirit Tool with extreme growth potential that was uniquely suited to one's own battle style and Dao.

It was a very convenient item, and Catheya even went so far as to offer 250 billion Nexus Coins for it, but it didn't detract from the fact that the System had screwed him over yet again. How was an array like this supposed to 'rectify regret'? Had it straight out lied to him, or did it refer to the fact that **[Verun's Bite]** was starting to lag behind, which could be considered regretful?

"You don't understand how great such an array is. It can potentially create an item that will follow you for the rest of your life. An item you buy from a Blacksmith will always be influenced by the creator's Dao and path and limited by his lack of skill, creating frictions that become more obvious the further you progress," the Draugr explained with exasperation.

"The **[Divine Investiture]** array, on the other hand, can create an unblemished item that is a direct bridge between you and the Heavens," Catheya continued as she looked at Zac like he was an idiot. "Having a perfectly suited weapon is even more important than having a perfect cultivation manual, it's a top tier reward of the Tower. I would have tried tricking it out of your hands if you didn't have a karmic connection to my ancestor."

Zac slowly nodded in understanding, though there was still a sense of frustration about the situation. It sounded like something he could use though, and he contemplated upgrading Verun after returning to Earth. He had gathered quite a few materials during his climb, and he would be able to get some more in the Base Town.

He had the Pathfinder Eye and pieces of a true Dragon, along with metals, bones, and other odd materials that attracted the Tool Spirit's desire. It should allow him to elevate **[Verun's**

Bite] to a terrifying level, which might be considered rectifying regret in some roundabout way.

Another valuable piece of intel appeared a few minutes later, when the Draugr asked where he had got his hands on a Sword Slave.

“A what?” Zac asked after hearing the unfamiliar term. “Do you mean one of the avatars I conjured? They were defensive treasures.”

“No, I mean the old sword you used at the end,” the Draugr snorted. “I am guessing you looted those defensive treasures from some poor girl during the Trial, judging by their design.”

“Oh, that one. I picked it up during the Battle of Fates as well,” Zac explained, not commenting on the fact that he was still wearing a bunch of jewelry.

He probably looked a bit weird, but he would be in a weakened state for a while longer, and there was no way he’d take off his defensive treasures in front of the Draugr.

“You should be careful about that item, and have whatever the human equivalent to a Cleansing Lich is take a look at you,” Catheya said.

“Just what is it?” Zac asked with some worry, making a mental note to have Sui check up on his condition. “It feels a bit like a Spirit Tool, but it’s still different.”

“I guess you could call it a cursed object. A piece of a cultivator’s soul has fused with that weapon, either through accident or through a ritual. The skill you used is most likely one the warrior knew before dying,” Catheya explained.

“Judging by its appearance its state is unstable, and it even tried to fuse with your arm.”

“The man I took it from didn’t seem to get any backlash from using it,” Zac said, hoping the Draugr would have a solution.

The power of the attack he had unleashed was somewhere between the Second and Third swings of **[Deforestation]**, and if he could use the weapon freely it would be a great ace to take out if needed. But his arm did feel a bit uncomfortable now that Catheya mentioned. He had just thought it was the

general state of weakness from [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but perhaps there was something more.

“Then he must have had some means to counteract the side-effects of the weapon,” Catheya guessed.

“So what’s the point of having one of these Cursed Swords instead of a normal Spirit Tool?” Zac asked.

“There really isn’t one, Spirit Tools are generally more convenient as the Tool Spirits are more compatible to reside in a weapon. It’s either a sinister cultivator who makes them with mass sacrifices to suit their warped paths or as a punishment. Imagine, capturing the soul of your enemy and forcing it into an old rotten sword? It’s pretty impactful,” Catheya smiled. “Of course, I’d personally make them into my followers instead.”

Zac shook his head with disgust before his thoughts went back to the youth back on the platform. Had he actually done something so cruel as to trap the souls of his enemies as punishment? It didn’t fit with the image he righteous swordsman image he projected. But Zac was soon dragged out of his thoughts though as someone knocked at the door.

Varo slowly walked over and opened it up to show Galau standing outside.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Galau said as he repeatedly bowed toward Zac and Catheya. “Ms. Peak and her friend have waited to speak with you for some time now... I wonder if you might be available today?”

“Interesting fellow,” Catheya muttered as she stood up. “We’re done here in any case. Here, take this. I believe it might become useful to you someday. You need to upgrade your Nexus Hub quite a bit before using it though. You can contact me through the Fallen Ferrymen there.”

It was another Teleportation Token, though it looked more refined compared to those had seen until now.

“Does this lead to the Undead Empire?” Zac asked as he looked at the Draugr askance.

“No,” she snorted. “If you showed up at a teleportation array in the heartlands you would get snatched up and realigned in seconds. This token leads to Twilight Harbor, an interesting place in a frontier sector neighboring this one. That sector is even younger than Zecia, and things are very chaotic and exciting. You could call Twilight Harbor a ‘Gray Zone’, one of the few places where the living and dead intermingle.”

“Didn’t you say that wasn’t allowed by the Empire?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“It’s not. But I never said that all undead are part of the Empire, did I?” the Draugr said with a smile as she left the room.

Chapter 474: Challenged

Zac looked over at Galau, who shook his head in confusion.

“I thought they were all part of the same Empire as well, even if it was a pretty weak connection for local Kingdoms,” the merchant said. “Perhaps that’s only true for the Zecia sector?”

“Where is Pretty Peak now?” Zac asked, dropping the subject.

Zac was a bit surprised that the token didn’t lead to Catheya’s home planet, as he would have expected her to want to stay in touch. But she probably believed that he would never go to the Empire Heartlands, and felt it a waste of a token.

She couldn’t know that it was a place that Zac was actually interested in visiting sooner or later, in order to find opportunities for his Draugr class. That would have to wait until he got a surefire way to hide his unique condition though. Greatest was only a D-Grade warrior after all, and Zac doubted that the bracer he made would be able to fool anyone in such a place.

Twilight Harbor sounded like an interesting place as well though, and it might serve as a safer substitute to the Empire Heartlands. Leaving one’s planet while still at the F-grade was nigh-suicidal though, as any random peak E-Grade warrior might be able to kill him. He needed to reach at least a level of Strength where he could escape from a D-Grade warrior if needed.

“Lady Peak and Lady Lioress are currently resting in a neighboring room,” Galau said.

“Lioress? Who’s that?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure. Her first name is Leyara. My guess is that she is a disciple of some of the hidden peak experts of the sector judging by the way others treat her,” Galau said with a low voice. “They might both be able to get in contact with the

Heliophos clan for you, which isn't easy from what I've heard."

"Let them wait a few seconds more," Zac said as he indicated Galau to come inside instead. "Did you hear any mentions of The Great Redeemer outside? Are the claims credible? I'm thinking that cultivator who spoke up might have been messing with me as revenge or something."

"Have you seen the man you mentioned?" Galau asked, receiving a nod in response.

"Is this him?" Galau asked, and a face along with some text appeared on a screen the next moment.

"That's him," Zac confirmed with a sigh.

It was obviously the man he had seen twice, though his age was somewhat younger compared to the real-time avatar he had conjured when breaking the beacon. It looked like he wasn't lucky this time around, and the Redeemer really was part of the karmic cultivator clan.

"Well, his real name is Voridis A'Heliophos. He is not technically part of the Heliophos clan, hence the prefix. He is presumably an illegitimate son of one of the grand elders of the family. It's said that the elder came back to the clan with a 5-year-old child after having traveled for a few centuries, and he said the boy was his son," Galau started explaining as he took out a crystal.

"It's hard to get details since it seems like a touchy subject with the clan, but apparently the boy seemed to have some unique gifts, and he was heavily nurtured even if he wasn't part of the real bloodline. But something happened and Voridis couldn't form his cultivator core, so he fell out of favor within the clan, much to his and his father's dismay.

"He got desperate, both due to his own remaining lifespan growing shorter by the day, and to prove himself to his clan again. He left the clan and came back as a D-Grade powerhouse 200 years later. However, the elders noticed something was wrong with his karma even though it was covered deep. It was eventually exposed that Voridis had used

a taboo ritual that was powered by the death of millions of people,” Voridis said.

“So why is he still out causing trouble if he was exposed?” Zac asked with a frown.

“His father pled for leniency, and the patriarch relented and only exiled him after crippling his cultivation and putting a karmic curse on him. They planned to let him live out his life as a mortal on a desolate planet to understand the plight of those he had killed.

A thousand years later another sacrifice was exposed, and it became soon became apparent that it was Voridis who had regained his ability to cultivate and had just reformed his Cultivation Core. That was tens of thousands of years ago, and he still hasn’t been caught by his family. There are at least 4 taboo genocides linked to him. The System has handed out multiple quests for his death as well, but he is still alive,” Galau narrated, clearly reading off some information packet.

“Taboo?” Zac asked. “Like unorthodox?”

“Exactly. What he’s doing is going against the will of the Heavens. That man wasn’t talented enough to form a core by himself, but he didn’t want his risk his life in Mystic Realms in hopes of finding opportunities that could allow him to break through. Instead, he chose to sacrifice mortals to change his fate. That is one of the most taboo actions to the heavens,” Galau explained.

Zac slowly nodded as he went over the information that Galau had provided. The origin of The Great Redeemer didn’t change anything. The good news was that the Heliophos Clan seemed intent on dealing with their embarrassment, but the bad news was that the father seemed ready to cover for him even after all his transgressions.

It also meant that killing Voridis might cause all kinds of issues for Earth, as someone like a Grand Elder of a C-Grade Karmic Clan probably could mess with a single D-Grade planet without much effort. Perhaps focusing on making Earth harder to find rather than dealing with the man himself was really the better course of action.

There should be no cause of conflict between Earth and the Heliophos Clan if Earth simply hid away until the Great Redeemer had died or moved on.

Zac also noted that the Merchant's wealth of knowledge seemed a lot broader right now compared to his comments after the fight.

"You've been busy since we exited," Zac commented.

"Ah, well," Galau coughed. "Gathering the information was mostly done by the two misses, I am just the messenger. Incidentally, why don't we head over and say hello?"

Zac shot an even glance at the merchant, waiting for an explanation.

"Well, you know what happened with the Tsarun Clan, and then the fight as we exited. I was afraid that it might implicate my family after all, but thankfully I managed to form a connection with the Peak Family. That way I won't return to my Family like a criminal," the merchant confessed. "I'm sorry."

"Isn't knowing me enough of a boon now that the bounty is lifted?" Zac asked with confusion.

He wasn't trying to be arrogant, but he was the first person to conquer the 8th floor in an extremely long time in the sector, which no doubt hinted at him being a future powerhouse. Shouldn't such an accomplishment be worth something?

"Honestly, it's still not decided whether knowing you is a boon or a curse," Galau said with a wry smile. "It's unclear what the attitude of the Heliophos Clan and the Dravorak Dynasty will be. That will affect whether you will be seen as a murderous fugitive or a pride of the sector until you are strong enough to speak for yourself."

"I guess I overestimated myself," Zac wryly smiled. "Before we head over, can you look into a few things for me?"

"Look into?" Galau said, his interest immediately piqued.

"Treasures?"

"Exactly," Zac nodded.

He had spent over an hour with Catheya, but he hadn't been completely focused on their conversation. His hand had imperceptibly moved toward the Cosmos Sacks now and then, and he glanced at its contents.

There were a lot of things missing, but there was even more remaining. For example, almost the whole dragon was left intact, apart from some scales and the messy remains he threw inside at the end. Both the massive horns and the Dragon Core were still there, which was a huge relief as they were probably worth the most of the beast.

“Do you know what this is?” Zac asked. “Be careful, it comes from an elite assassin.”

Galau gingerly took the spike and turned it over as his eyes flickered with light.

“There is a liquid inside,” the merchant slowly said. “That is the real treasure. The young master from Zethaya might be more knowledgeable about it.”

“I'm not comfortable with exposing what I found just yet,” Zac smiled. “Please keep these things to yourself as well.”

“Of course,” Galau hurriedly nodded.

Zac took out one item after another from his Spatial Tools, and the eyes of Galau grew even wider.

“I've never heard of items with such craftsmanship appearing in the Tower of Eternity,” the merchant mumbled. “Is it a special perk of the higher floors?”

Zac wouldn't expose the fact that he had taken them off the body of an elite from another part of the universe. He was afraid that would hurt resale value in case he decided to swap them for cold hard cash instead.

It turned out that over twenty of the odd trinkets in the Mentalist's Spatial Ring were Array Breakers that could take out specific types of formations. It wasn't anything related to evolving or fighting, but rather items that were probably used to expedite the climb for the young mentalist. Galau couldn't pinpoint exactly what sort of arrays they worked against though, as that would require some experimentation.

He was a bit surprised that there were no treasures geared toward evolving among the things he had picked up from the three elites. They should all have been right at the precipice before evolving, so why weren't they preparing? Or was there perhaps no point for people like them to carry around such items, as they could simply visit their clan's storage rooms?

Galau also had no idea what the odd heads that Zac found in Faceless 9's Cosmos Sack were. He could confirm that they were some sort of unorthodox arrays that had trapped the souls of the previous owners, but he said that experimentation was the only way to know for sure what the arrays did.

It was either that or to hand them over to an array master who could slowly decipher the inscriptions on the talisman, but Zac didn't know anyone like that at the moment.

Zac could only nod with some defeat and hope that the Sky Gnome back on earth knew more even though the Thayer Consortia wasn't nearly as powerful as Galau's clan. They were however once a C-Grade merchant clan, and a lot of knowledge should remain even if they had fallen to their current pitiful state over the past centuries.

The two soon enough left the room. The Zethaya scion was actually waiting outside, and Zac already knew the results of the Alchemist's inquiries judging by his expression.

"I am afraid that there are no treasures to heal old wounds in the Base Town. Plenty of people have brought pills that can heal a recently wounded soul, such as our Zethaya's [**Serene Soul Pill**]. But you would normally only bring items like the [**Prajñā Cherry**] if you plan on selling or trading it," Boje explained with a pained expression.

"That's fine, I guessed as much," Zac sighed. "You don't happen to know a way to block out Karmic links for a whole planet?"

"Is this about the Heliophos Traitor?" Boje thoughtfully said. "It's an unusual problem. Perhaps there are arrays that can provide such an effect, but I would have to confer with a proper Array Master."

Zac nodded in thanks as the alchemist walked off again, and his eyes turned to a woman who stood in a doorway not far away. It was one of the two ladies who had snatched up Galau earlier, and judging by the trademark purple hair it was no doubt Pretty Peak.

“He’s happy you’re not holding a grudge,” Pretty smiled. “Outliers like you are a nightmare for large clans. Come inside, and we can discuss your predicament.”

Zac nodded and followed her inside where the second girl waited. She immediately stood up when he appeared, but Zac noticed that her smile looked a bit forced. Her eyes repeatedly went toward the various jewelry that decked his hands, while occasionally darting over to Galau to the side.

Had the merchant said something weird?

However, she soon snapped out of it and introduced herself as Leyara Lioress, calling herself the personal disciple of ‘The Void Priestess’. That didn’t mean anything to Zac, but judging by Galau’s reaction it seemed as though she was a big shot in the sector, or at least in the Allbright Empire. Zac marked down the information for later before he introduced himself.

“I’m Zac, nice to meet you,” Zac simply said.

“I am Pretty Peak, but you can call me Divine Fist,” Pretty added from the side, drawing a blank stare from Zac.

“Don’t mind her,” Leyara giggled from the side as she walked closer to Zac, causing a puff of perfume to waft over. “Pretty was finally allowed to change name a year ago after forming a Mid-Grade Fragment while still in F-Grade. But she can’t decide on a new name.”

“Yes, I’ve met your cousin,” Zac coughed, surprised at how much stronger she seemed to be compared to her cousin.

“How is Average?”

“He’s current-“ Pretty began, but Zac’s attention was suddenly diverted by a System Prompt that appeared in front of him.

[Lordship of Port Atwood Challenged]

“Lordship challenged?!” Zac swore out loud as he saw the prompt as he glared at the two girls, his dense killing intent started leaking a bit. “Who?”

“It’s not us. Such a prompt means your Capital is being attacked,” Pretty said, her equanimity slightly cracking in front of Zac’s aura.

Zac immediately stood up in alarm upon hearing the news and started to walk out the door without another word.

“Wait,” Pretty said from behind, and Zac looked back to see both the girls throw a Cosmos Sack over.

“We’ll contact the Heliophos Clan for you,” Pretty said. “We should have heard back within a month. You can read in the crystal how to contact me without exposing yourself.”

“A small greeting gift from me,” Leyara added as well.

“Thank you both,” Zac nodded and left in a hurry to find Ogras.

“What did you give him?” Pretty asked her friend after Zac had left the room, noticing that her friend had acted a bit unnatural since Zac Piker had arrived.

“You heard the merchant’s descriptions,” Leyara said with a slight blush. “And you saw what he wore. Many geniuses have unique interests and tastes, and you have to adapt to circumstances.”

“You didn’t...” Pretty exclaimed, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Chapter 475: Trapped

Zac rushed out of the meeting room and found the demon sitting in the lobby downstairs, surrounded by a handful of scions. Ogras looked up and immediately spotted something was wrong with his expression and flashed over.

“The town is being attacked,” Zac simply said with a low voice. “I got a prompt by the System.”

“What?!” the demon said with surprise. “Who would be able to attack the island?”

“I’ll go deal with it immediately,” Zac said. “It doesn’t look like we’ll be able to get any force to help us out against that guy anyway.”

“No,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “I asked around. It seems a few C-Grade forces in the sector have gone from rulers of their areas to beggars after having crossed that Clan. One weird calamity after another befell their factions until nothing was left. They are definitely not some benign monks, and no one wants to be the next one to fall.”

“You can stay behind a bit longer while I deal with this,” Zac said after thinking it over. “I got something that will be able to see karma threads at least. See if you can find anything else that can help us hide our planet better, like arrays or obscuring treasures.”

“I’ll make some inquiries. Many still want to make a connection to us even if they will stay out of the way of the Heliophos Clan,” the demon said. “I’m sure I can squeeze all kinds of good things out of the people here. There might be something useful in the sacks I looted as well, I haven’t had a chance to go through them yet.”

“Might as well make the most of the situation,” Zac sighed. “I’ve already asked Boje Zethaya, but see if you can find any

soul healing treasures. My soul cracked and I was forced to use the treasure during the climb and I don't have anything to heal Alea now. And get some materials for upgrading weapons as well."

The demon looked shocked, before he wryly looked at the people around.

"I'll ask, but if the Zethaya Descendant can't find anything I doubt I will fare any better," Ogras said. "But the girl is strong and we still have time. We need to focus on that old bastard coming for us. I'll see what solutions there are."

"Good. I got a token from Boje anyway, so we can always send someone over for a healing pill," Zac agreed as he took out the Tower Token. "When will you come back?"

"I'll sort things out quickly before returning as well," Ogras said after some thought. "Give me an hour or so."

Zac only nodded and cracked his token, and ten seconds later he was back on earth.

It almost felt surreal to be back in his secluded courtyard after moving through dozens of worlds that might have either been real or imaginary. The experiences over the past 100 days had been life-changing. Some parts had far exceeded his expectations, but for other things he had come up short.

The increase to his power compared to when he left Earth just 10 days ago was almost incalculable, yet he had still failed in either getting a real solution in the fight against The Great Redeemer or a cure for Alea. It wasn't all hopeless though, as Ogras might be able to come back with something that would help them shroud Earth from any karmic trails.

But there was no time to rest. He was still not completely recuperated from the showdown outside the Tower of Eternity, but he had thankfully relied heavily on his accumulated treasures to tide that tribulation. It left him with a decent amount of Cosmic Energy to spare, though the side-effects of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** were still there to a certain degree.

There were no obvious sounds of battle that he could hear, so he immediately rushed toward his Nexus Node. His first

instinct was that someone might be trying to tamper with his private Node while he was away, like a spy trying to snatch his lordship from under his nose. But the house with the node was empty, and it didn't look like anyone had messed with it either.

Zac quickly walked out of the building and was about to head toward the town, when a shocking explosion erupted to the south. Trees were almost flattened to the ground and Zac felt the shockwave deep into his bones even though the explosion came from hundreds of meters away. There was only one thing in that direction; the shipyard.

"The creators?" Zac muttered with confusion before he flashed away.

A massive plume of flames rose to the sky the moment he passed the final layer of trees, and Zac was forced to cover his face from the intense light. The explosion earlier must have taken place somewhere out on the water, but Zac could feel the heat all the way from where he stood.

Zac was about to rush toward the Creator Offices, but he noticed that a familiar figure had appeared in front of him without him noticing. It was Rahm, the Creator Liaison.

"Lord Atwood, it has been a while. I hope you are well?" the stoic Creator said, seemingly unperturbed by the fact that the whole area had been turned into a blazing inferno.

"I'm fine," Zac said. "More importantly, what is going on? Are there attackers on the island? Or is this an experiment?"

"It is not an experiment, unfortunately," Rahm said. "It would appear that you are being invaded. Multiple large ships have breached your shores, and there have been sounds of conflict for a while now. The explosion just now was one of the ships trying to breach our arrays."

"Do you need assistance?" Zac asked.

"No," a booming voice echoed as the familiar spider-golem emerged from the offices. "It's so rare I get to see some action, and I hold no love for neither the fanatics nor the unliving. There is no way these children will be able to breach our

fortifications, so you can rest easy. Nothing will be able to anchor this side of your living quarters.”

It was Karunthel, the Creator foreman who had shown up. He looked pretty much the same as before, with the noticeable addition of a cannon radiating a terrifying amount of energy that had been mounted onto his torso. The spider golem was turning more and more into a killer robot every day.

“What?” Zac blurted with confusion. “Are they *both* attacking us? They are supposed to be mortal enemies.”

“I guess you youngsters gave them a scare. Should’ve finished them off sooner though, now they’re crawling all over the island,” Karunthel shrugged as he inspected Zac.

“Brat, your aura is getting nice and condensed. But if you would accept a piece of advice, don’t get hung up on perfection. Cultivation might not be a sprint, but it is not a marathon either. You need to maintain momentum and keep pushing forward. The second you stop it will be much harder to start running again,” he said.

“Thank you,” Zac said, though he couldn’t really focus on the advice after hearing the whole island was under attack. “I will soon evolve. So you are fine here?”

“They have already realized we’re a Mercantile Structure and will soon move on,” Karunthel laughed. “And I am not allowed to blast those rats who are staying outside the shields. Not within the job description. But I’ve expanded the shield to the maximum area that I am allowed, which will keep part of your coastline safe at least.”

“Thank you, I’ll visit you once this is dealt with,” Zac nodded and immediately started running toward Port Atwood.

Zac rapidly moved through his private forest like a specter, each step with **[Loamwalker]** moving him fifty meters forward. Urgency and some confusion made his mind muddled as he tried to figure out just what was going on. Had the two bitter enemies really put their differences aside just for him? He had never heard of anything like it.

And more importantly, how the hell had they found these secluded islands so easily? It had taken months of exploration to find the mainland, so finding his small island would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

He could only pray he wasn't too late yet again. With both him and Ogras gone and Alea in a coma, there was pretty much no one who would be able to rebuff an assault. He could only thank the System that it was kind enough to provide a warning that his people were under attack.

Another massive shockwave erupted in the distance, containing enough power to almost throw him off his feet. A plume of golden flames rose into the sky, and Zac remembered Ogras' descriptions of the zealot's powers all too well. Fury started to smolder in his mind, fiery anger at the people who dared launch such a massive strike at a town full of civilians and non-combat personnel.

The world shrunk around him as he pushed **[Loamwalker]** to its limits. The towering flames came from the northeast, some ways inland from the coast. It was the part of Port Atwood that contained the Academy and the structures related to his army. It seemed the attackers knew what parts they needed to take out first.

Was there really a spy on the island?

Port Atwood had thankfully overhauled its defenses since the last waves of attack though, and his people should at least be able to hold out for while even against the Undead Empire. Back then he barely had the resources to run a simple town protection array, but Port Atwood had been a Global City for quite some time now.

He had given his subordinates almost free reign with the town's funds in order to develop Port Atwood, and he saw waves of flames slamming into a sturdy crystalline barrier as he approached the battlefield. Four massive fractals shone in the sky, and one of them suddenly lit up.

A tremendous surge of chaotic energies cut straight through the seas of flames with such force that space was ripped open,

and a thundering explosion could be heard as the attack hit something on the other side of the ten-meter tall wall.

It was clear that the town had added some great new defenses, but both the Undead Empire and the Church of the Everlasting Dao were terrifying forces with extremely deep heritages. A golden ball slammed into the crystalline shield protecting the wall the next moment, causing massive cracks all over as streams of fire shot toward the people standing guard on the wall walk.

Zac's eyes widened with anger as he saw the gouts of flames pour down toward his army who were desperately trying to maintain the barrier. The ground cracked beneath his feet as he leaped forward, and a storm of leaves spread out to create a vast canopy to block out the rain of fire.

“Lord Atwood!” a Valkyrie suddenly screamed, and hundreds of hopeful eyes were turned in his direction.

Zac only nodded in response as he flew toward the golden ball in the sky with furious momentum, and his body was hardened by the Fragment of the Coffin as his fist slammed into the molten core. A shockwave spread out in all directions from his punch, and a few warriors were even thrown off from the wall as the golden ball was twisted and deformed before it was flung away.

Another shudder spread through the earth as the ball landed some distance outside the wall. Zac himself landed on the wall walk, and he tried to understand what was going on outside. However, the only thing that met his gaze was a sea of flames that spread in every direction outside the city wall.

The lunatics had set half the island on fire it seemed.

“What's going on?” Zac asked as a familiar demon rushed to his side.

It was Harvath, one of the Demon captains who had accompanied him in the Underworld and the earlier Incursions.

“We discovered six massive ships heading this way about a day ago, carrying both the undead and zealots of the Church of

Everlasting Dao,” Harvath explained between pants. “We tried to stop their advance with repeated raids using our smaller vessels, but we only managed to sink two of them before our ships were too burned to continue attacking.”

“The Undead Empire has really teamed up with the Chuch?” Zac asked incredulously, still having trouble believing it was true.

“It appears that way,” Harvath said. “Three of the remaining ships sailed for our island, with the final one veering off for some reason. We fear that other settlements might have been hit.”

“You don’t know?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They are somehow blocking our teleporters. It is like this island has become isolated from the rest of the world. We have lost connection to all other locations on our Teleportation List. We could still teleport within the island until recently, but we lost that ability a few minutes ago. We have sent out scouting vessels but haven’t gotten word back,” he said.

“How’s that possible?” Zac muttered with a frown.

“General Ilvere believes the ship might have dropped some manner of spatial disruption arrays into the ocean as they sailed toward us,” Harvath said. “But we don’t know.”

Zac frowned when he heard about the block. It seemed to be the same technology as that which almost got Alea and his whole army killed. He hadn’t expected being troubled by such technology right as he returned, and he didn’t have any real way to solve them. The simplest method would be to destroy the jammers, but he didn’t even know what they looked like.

Were the Invaders trying to imprison him on this remote island?

Chapter 476: Sowing Discord

“How do things look with the Undead Incursion?” Zac asked after making sure that another molten ball wasn’t coming their way. “Have you found out how long until it activates?”

“... The array has already been activated,” the demon said after a brief hesitation. “Half the sky of the main continent is reportedly covered with a green array.”

“WHAT?!” Zac almost roared, his eyes widening with shock. “Since when?”

“Four days ago,” the demon sighed. “But it is not converting the world as of yet, it is currently drawing energy from the planet. Your sister and the human champions have worked hard to slow it down for your return, but I am not sure how much time there is left. Lady Atwood will likely know more.”

“Ok, where is my sister right now?” Zac asked, his mind reeling after getting bombarded by a series of unwelcome news the past hour.

His miscalculation of the time he had remaining had caused massive repercussions for Earth, and he couldn’t help but feel ashamed when he thought back to his meeting with Thea just before leaving for the tower. He could only pray that he had returned in time to set things right.

“She is fighting at Azh’Rodum,” Harvath said. “She is holding the invaders back with your swarm of flying machines.”

“My machines?” Zac repeated with confusion before he remembered the drones.

She had actually gained control of the drone swarms, which Zac guessed wasn’t surprising considering Jeeves. Some fear flickered in his heart, but he knew he couldn’t blame her for taking them out. If now was not the time to use it, then when? But another point of confusion suddenly entered his mind.

“Wait, Azh’Rodum? What are they doing so far inland?” Zac asked with a frown.

“We don’t know. They first tried bombarding us from a distance where we couldn’t retaliate, but our shields were too strong for those attacks. So two ships stayed outside this town while they prepared for a siege, while the largest ship sailed north,” the demon captain explained. “We believe they might be targeting the Vein through the mine.”

“Who went with her?” Zac asked.

“Most of the Valkyries, along with Ilvere and a squad of E-Grade demons. Azh’Rodum is not as strongly defended, and it is the gateway to the Nexus Vein, so most of our elites went there. Our task here is simply to hold out until you and the young lord returned, or until the threat inland was averted. The young master... Is he here?” Harvath asked as he looked around.

“Ogras is still in the Tower of Eternity, he is fine. I got a prompt that Port Atwood was under attack so I immediately returned. Ogras will return a bit later after he has dealt with some matters over there,” Zac explained as his mind went over the details.

Some things didn’t make sense. His force had been in combat for over a day. Why hadn’t the system warned him? He also suddenly remembered the spike in levels for Thea and Billy roughly twelve hours ago in real-time.

“Are Billy and Thea on the island?” Zac asked.

“Yes, it was only thanks to them we managed to sink one of the ships before we were pushed back,” Harvath nodded, some respect shining in his eyes. “They are currently on bed-rest. Janos had to hypnotize the big one to prevent him from running out and bashing the invaders with that nasty club of his. They will be fine in a week or two.”

Zac sighed in relief when hearing those two were fine. It looked like they actually had risked their lives to protect his people. But it made him all-the-more confused why the alert had only warned him just now.

“Did something change a few minutes ago?” Zac suddenly asked.

“A few minutes ago?” the demon repeated. “Nothing special has happened except our communications being blocked. They did also start shooting those massive balls at our shield recently. We can’t see them any longer because of the flames, but the zealots set up large siege tools some distance from here.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It seemed that the System only gave out a warning at the last moment, which was a valuable piece of information. He couldn’t rely on the System as a warning call to protect his home. This time he was lucky enough to be able to get back to town almost instantly, but that wouldn’t always be the case.

He really needed to erect a more permanent protection that would withstand any threat on Earth.

“I can’t see anything in front of me, what are they doing on the other side of the flames?” Zac finally asked.

“Our vision has been blocked for a while now as well. It’s almost exclusively the Cultists who have set up camp outside. We received a report that the situation is almost the opposite at Azh’Rodum before we lost contact. There’s almost only undead warriors up there.”

“I’ll deal with the attackers here before heading to Azh’Rodum,” Zac said. “Try to find out if they’ve erected some sort of array anywhere. We need to break the arrays blocking our communications.”

With that, he simply jumped out from the wall and landed in a sea of flames that rose over a dozen meters into the air. He had just jumped twenty meters or so, but his vision was completely blocked in both directions, and he was forced to activate the Fragment of the coffin to not get burnt. A thought suddenly struck him and his Specialty Core activated.

The undead and the cultists might be working together on the surface, but things weren’t very harmonious from the sound of it. Perhaps he could cause some confusion within their ranks

with his alternate form while also letting his Hatchetman class rest for a bit. Both the main skills of Hatchetman were on cool-down, after all, along with [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

Granted, he was still pretty confident at defeating this army even with Hatchetman in a weakened state. His power had almost doubled in the ten short days since he left Earth, while the Invaders still should have some small restrictions to their power. Not only that, but he had also gone through all sorts of life-and-death encounters, sharpening his skills to the utmost.

His body grew as the pitch-black armor covered his body, and Zac caused the flames surrounding him to die out with one massive swing of his bardiche. It put him face-to-face with the Zealot army, and he was delighted to see their anger and confusion as a sea of miasma spread out around him as he started running toward their front-lines.

“You! What ploy is this!” a massive roar echoed out from the army, and a huge lizardman decked in a thick armor shining in gold and red pushed past the inquisitors at the front.

Zac didn't answer, but he rather took out one of the enormous Unholy Beacons from his Cosmos Sack and slammed it into the ground like he was planting a flag. It immediately started spewing out miasma, though most of it was burned away by the surrounding flames. But this was more about sending a message than getting more death-attuned energy, and the effect was immediate.

“Heretic! Your sins will be judged today!” the infuriated Bishop roared, and Zac couldn't help but snicker beneath his helmet as the undead liaisons were mobbed by infuriated cultists.

There was no time to waste though as his sister was fighting for her life as far as he knew. The only reason he didn't immediately rush to Azh'Rodum was that he believed her to be somewhat safe with the help of the drone swarm he had left on Port Atwood. She also had access to the Town Shop, meaning she could keep buying one defensive layer after another as was needed.

He still didn't want to waste time with the crazy zealots though, and he stomped down onto the ground to teleport into the middle of the army. However, he was surprised to find himself rebuffed, and he stumbled a bit as he appeared right outside a golden shield that had appeared in front of the army.

“We have fought your kind for millions of years. Did you truly think we didn't come prepared?!” the bishop roared with mad laughter.

Zac knew he was putting himself in a disadvantage by fighting as an undead against the cultists, as they had whole armies dedicated to fighting the Undead Empire. However, he saw it as an opportunity to fight in an adverse situation, and he still felt he had the strength to prevail. There was no way he wouldn't be able to deal with these guys head-on unless the leaders of the two Incursions had shown up on his doorstep.

But that would be fine with Zac as well, as killing those two would essentially end the incursions and threat to Earth.

His arm swelled as he forced his arm full of Miasma for **[Unholy Strike]**, and the whole area shook as the shield was beset by a series of furious swings empowered by his improved Middle Stage Dao Fragment. Almost a dozen of the robed priests standing behind the shield hunkered over after the first swing, with a few even starting bleeding down their ears.

A storm of golden flames beset him as Zac tried to force his way through the shield, but he kept them at bay with **[Immutable Bulwark]**. However, he noticed with some surprise that the flames were like sticky napalm, and they stayed on the fractal bulwark and slowly whittled it down. It was like the flames and the Miasma canceled each other out, and Zac felt a far higher-than-normal consumption just to maintain the fractal shield.

His reserves of death-attuned energies were thankfully immense due to his almost inhuman attribute pool, and he kept providing the bulwark with more and more energy until he managed to create a crack in the wall. He forced himself

through in an instant, he was upon the cultists like a fox in a henhouse.

Two burly clergymen tried to take him down by swinging scepters that contained the same fiery energy as the ranged attacks. Zac blocked one of them with his axe, and the other one got slammed with **[Everlasting]** with enough force to be thrown dozens of meters away. Zac heard a crunching sound after the man was hit with the shield-bash, and he felt a surge of energy not long after he fell onto the ground.

“Regroup!” the leader from before shouted, but Zac didn’t want to give them any time to retreat to a safe distance.

He stomped his foot into the ground once more, and the cage of **[Profane Seal]** rose from the ground and captured almost the whole army along with the siege tools that had been shooting out the molten cores at the City Shield. However, he was unable to spread his corrosive breath along with miasma from **[Fields of Despair]** to cover the cage, as waves of flames kept dispersing the mists.

Zac finally gave up on his usual tactic, and instead started fighting by hand as he commanded the fifteen spectral chains to target the weaker warriors. Ghosts kept appearing in the cage as well as hundreds of the cultists tried to destroy the gates and the towers of **[Profane Seal]**, only to hurt themselves.

A hundred skeletal warriors also emerged from the ground, and they formed ten squads that moved across the cage to take out stragglers and interrupt the zealot’s attempts to form a proper defense against the chains. Unfortunately, it seemed as though the cultists were quite adept at fighting skeletons, and Zac felt himself losing subordinates at a rapid pace.

However, it wasn’t like the life and death of the skeletons mattered, as long as they fulfilled their purpose. The whole cage was an utter mess soon enough with battles taking place everywhere. Errant flames and miasmatic gusts made visibility almost impossible, and Zac was only able to make sense of the situation with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

A tremendous wave of golden flames threatened to swallow Zac whole as the siege weapons launched a barrage meant for shield-breaking right at him, scoring a few over fifteen zealots by mistake. He swiftly cut the projectiles apart with a Dao-infused swing, and he started taking out the operators the next moment.

One siege tool after another entered his Spatial ring as the controllers were cut into two, and the situation was turning gradually into his favor as each chain soon held multiple desiccated corpses while they whizzed around. The head priest had been suspiciously silent until now though, but Zac finally spotted him through the flames.

Two wings sprouted out from his back, and he rose over a dozen meters into the air even after the suppressive effect of the azure fractal sealing the cage. A glowing orb of flames over fifteen meters across emerged behind his back, making him look like an apostle of the sun. However, it still looked a bit hollow in Zac's eyes as he had witnessed the true flames conjured by Iz Tayn.

“Weight of the Heavens!” the priest roared and a massive array appeared in the sky above the cage the next moment.

Zac's eyes widened at the sight, but it still wasn't enough to make him despair or even worry. He had faced a lot stronger arrays just a few hours ago, and Zac still had almost half his treasures remaining if need be. Besides, the restrictive array from **[Profane Seal]** didn't only put pressure on the people inside, it also acted as a protection from outside interference.

But Zac realized that the cultists were going all-out as he spotted nine priests who had kept out of harm's way until now, each of them holding a metal sun toward the sky that seemed to burn the controllers alive. He immediately directed a chain toward each of the priests, but they were immediately rebuffed by a fiery wall of flames whose heat was enough to turn the spectral fetters into motes of miasma when they got too close.

A few seconds later the nine priests were gone, replaced with nine hovering suns positioned in a circle at the edge of the cage.

The nine glowing suns were clearly related to the array that had lit up in the sky above, but the main controller was no doubt the Bishop who was still hovering up in the air. Zac growled in frustration over the lack of ranged options in his Undying Bulwark class, and he opted to try out his recently invented tactic again.

A spectral chain made a few loops around his chest before it hoisted him up, but he only managed to rise five meters before the Bishop launched a stream of fire that destroyed the midsection of the chain. Zac helplessly fell down again, wondering if he actually had to waste one of his single-use treasures on a simple general.

“A lowly cretin wants to rise toward the sky?” The Bishop roared. “The Boundless Heaven’s won’t abide!”

Chapter 477: Meteors

The Bishop's golden array lit up the next moment, and a fiery meteor several times larger than the one that had slammed into the City Shield begun its descent, its fall accompanied by a rain of fire so hot that the air itself was incinerated.

Zac realized these maniacs weren't called zealots by chance, and over a hundred of their own would die if that thing slammed into the ground in the confined space of [**Profane Seal**].

"We wanted to use this strike on the native Lord, but taking out an elite from the five cursed races is a worthy trade," the Bishop laughed from the sky.

The meteor rammed into the miasmic fractal acting as a dome for the miasmic cage the next second, and Zac knew in an instant that it would only hold for so long before cracking. Zac started running toward the edge of the cage along with the surviving cultists, but he was forced to carve a path of blood as the lunatics seemed ready to sacrifice their lives just to keep him within the blast zone.

However, the normal cultists had no means to even impede Zac's escape, and he reached the edge of his cage just as the azure fractal broke apart, transmitting a blowback to Zac that made him stumble for a second.

The meteor regained its momentum in an instant, but it actually managed to change its trajectory as it went straight for Zac. He growled in annoyance as he activated [**Immutable Bulwark**] and infused it with the Fragment of the Coffin. The fractal wall grew to its maximum size, reaching almost twenty meters across, but it could still barely cover a third of the meteor as the two collided.

Zac felt like he was being subject to the gravity of a sun as he was locked in a battle of man versus nature. His whole body

trembled from the strain as the pressure was transmitted from the skill into his body. A few zealots tried to take the opportunity to strike while Zac was occupied, but they found themselves turned into desiccated husks from a few spectral chains that hovered around Zac like sentinels.

The meteor thankfully lost its momentum fast enough, and Zac pushed the fiery ball toward the largest clump of soldiers with a grunt, and it landed among them with a massive outburst of flames that rushed in every direction. The soldiers had desperately tried to erect some golden shields to stop the meteor as well, but they were nowhere near as powerful as Zac and his fractal bulwark.

The shields had broken in an instant and the cultists were either turned to paste or burned alive.

Screams could be heard from every direction, and not even Zac was completely unscathed even if he had managed to change the trajectory of the array. He had lost a large chunk of Miasma to maintain the massive shield as it was pressed against the flaming meteor, and he was still beset by the waves of flames that instantly covered the entire cage after the impact.

He also felt that the whole cage was being pushed toward its breaking point. The dome in the sky breaking had already damaged [**Profane Seal**], and cracks now covered both the towers and gates of the skill. The only thing maintaining the skill right now was probably the infusion of energy from the fifteen spectral chains.

However, Zac didn't enjoy that kind of energy boost as [**Fields of Despair**] was completely countered by the all-consuming flames. The miasmatic haze hadn't been present at all during the battle, and he hadn't gotten even a smidgeon of Miasma from the large number of killed zealots. It was the first time he had met a perfect counter to so many of his skills in his Undying Bulwark form, and he felt it wasn't by chance that the Church of Everlasting Dao and the Undying Empire were such bitter enemies.

Zac quickly readjusted his shield so that it shrunk just to the point that it covered his body. It was just in time as well as waves of fire and molten stones shot toward him. The heat was blistering, but it was somewhat manageable by circulating the Fragment of the Bodhi through his body. His first instinct was to dispel the cage and regroup, perhaps even change back to his human form to gain some ranged capabilities to take out the bishop and the stragglers.

However, Zac eventually decided against that course of action. Instead of fleeing from the scorching heat of the meteor, he rather ran toward it. The ground shuddered beneath his feet as he ran as quickly as his bulky transformation allowed, and he ignored the burning heat that was transmitted straight through his armor as he started scrambling up the burning meteor.

The Bishop was still floating in the air, the flames seemingly having no effect on him, and he started to rise even higher when he noticed Zac's approach.

There should no doubt be a limit of how long an E-Grade warrior could stay in the sky, but Zac wasn't willing to let the Bishop run amok until he ran out of steam. He wanted to end things quickly since his sister was waiting for him, but he was out of offensive treasures that could kill the flying man in one go.

Hoisting himself into the air with the spectral chains had already failed spectacularly as well, so he could only move as quickly as he could until he reached the top of the meteor to use it as a springboard before it was too late. The bishop launched a storm of flames in his direction, but he simply punched through them as he jumped toward the lizardman in the sky.

The meteor cracked beneath Zac's feet as he put everything into the hulking leap, and his arm was already swelling in size in preparation for the final strike. The Bishop snorted and flexed his wings, but ten spectral chains whipped at him from behind to push him down. It was the final hurrah of the spectral chains before [**Profane Seal**] was destroyed by the flames.

Eight of the chains were incinerated as they tried to destroy the radiant sun that shielded the Bishop, but the sacrifice released a dense storm of Miasmatic gases that allowed the final two chains to pass straight through the globe of fire unscathed. The Bishop was forced to stop ascending to avoid the attack, which kept him in Zac's trajectory.

The wings of the cultist suddenly his own body in an embrace and Zac realized the man was using some sort of movement skill. However, that was just what Zac hoped for and he immediately swung his axe as he saw a burst of flames appear in front of him. The massive bardiche fell, cutting straight through a golden fractal and luxuriant armor.

The large meteor lost most of its heat in an instant, and three thuds echoed out across the battlefield as Zac and the two bisected pieces of the Bishop landed on the scorched ground. A large surge of energy entered his body, but he also felt a backlash as the miasmatic cage finally broke apart.

Zac would have thought that seeing their leader getting cut in two would douse the fighting spirit of the surviving zealots, but he had severely underestimated just how crazy these people were. Most of them started emitting extremely condensed fires from their mouths and eyes, and they heedlessly ran toward him as their bodies started swelling.

Some fell onto the ground before they even got close to Zac, their bodies turning into bloated balloons before exploding into cascading flames. It reminded Zac of the man that had exploded when he saved Kenzie from the New World Government at the border town. The whole area shuddered as dozens of eruptions went off one after another as the soldiers tried to bring Zac with them down to hell.

The pitch-black armor from [**Vanguard of Undeath**] was already in a haggard state after climbing atop the meteor, and the blasts were quickly ripping apart the remaining layers. Zac blocked out the attacks he could with [**Immutable Bulwark**], whereas the few remaining skeletons absorbed some of the attacks for him.

Thankfully enough the battlefield turned quiet soon enough, with just him and a few dying cultists remaining.

His hair was singed clean off and burns covered a large part of his body, but one of the two invading armies were dealt with at least. The cultists hadn't even managed to harm him apart from some surface burns, but they had been a surprisingly hard nut to crack. It looked like most, if not all, of the Incursion restrictions were gone by this point.

Normally he would have wanted to sit down and go over the battle at this juncture, as it felt like he had gained a lot from the fight. But there was no time, and Zac turned back to his human form before he walked back through the burning wreckage toward Port Atwood's Wall.

He jumped up with a grunt, appearing next to the demon captain and a few Valkyries that had waited for his return.

"I've dealt with the leader and the army, but be careful," Zac said as he cracked his neck. "There might be more hiding."

Harvath slowly nodded as he looked out across the destruction outside the wall, mute disbelief apparent in his eyes.

"Have you found anything about the array jamming?" Zac asked as he took out one of his healing pills to deal with the burns.

"I'm sorry, we didn't dare to leave the wall while you fought in case we would become a liability. We'll start cleaning up the battlefield and looking for the array immediately," Harvath said as he started awake.

"That's fine," Zac nodded as he took out his new flying treasure, the large inscribed leaf. "I'm heading inland. Be careful, most of the cultists chose to blow themselves up, but perhaps there are reinforcements on the ship."

"We'll be careful," Harvath nodded. "Don't worry and let us deal with the aftermath."

Zac jumped on the treasure the next moment, and it soundlessly rose to the sky before it shot away with enough speed to rip the clouds in two.

It felt a bit bad to leave Port Atwood while there still were enemies remaining. He had dealt with the army, but who knew what other things the cultists had planned. It was all-too-apparent just how far they were willing to go to take out their enemies, and he wouldn't be surprised if they had more nasty surprises in store for his island.

However, there was only one of him, and he needed to prioritize where to strike for maximum effect.

The speed of Zac's new flying treasure was just shocking, and he wasn't sure whether he would have been able to hang on if it wasn't for the protective array that blocked out any wind. He didn't have any means to make an exact measurement, but he felt that the leaf would be able to keep up with a modern fighter jet.

At least it felt like he moved a lot faster compared to when he had flown in a commercial airplane before the integration.

It wasn't all thanks to the high-quality craftsmanship of the vessel though. He had actually noticed that he could infuse the leaf with the Fragment of the Bodhi, which boosted the treasure's speed by around 30%. He even believed he could push the thing even further if he had some Nature-Attuned crystals to feed into the sockets rather than normal E-Grade Nexus Crystals.

It would normally have taken Zac hours to reach Azh'Rodum by foot, even if he used **[Loamwalker]** to speed up, but he was closing in on the center of the island after just 15 minutes of travel. He was anxious to reach the demon stronghold, as he didn't want to repeat the tragedy of arriving just a few seconds too late again.

Finally, he saw the battlefield ahead, or rather the massive clouds of miasma that covered a huge section of the northern parts of the island. The undead forces had no doubt set up a large array of Unholy Beacons to form such a vast cloud, but he frowned in confusion when he saw that there wasn't much of a battle raging.

There was a hovering line of sentries protecting the whole flank of Azh'Rodum, and there were over a hundred craters on

the ground outside, along with a few scorched bodies. It looked there had been a few minor skirmishes that had been ended with laser-beams by his sister, but the complete lack of damage to the town fortifications indicated that the undead army wasn't even straining itself to take over the town.

However, the defenders were desperately launching attacks at an azure shield from the walls of Azh'Rodum, with dozens of projectiles hitting the barrier every second. It almost felt like the roles of invader and defender had been swapped. Zac guessed that something was brewing within the cloud of miasma that needed to be dealt with, and quickly judging by the fervor of the attacks.

He didn't even touch down inside the town to get a grasp on the situation, but he rather chose to fly straight toward the miasmatic shield. Just when he was a hundred meters from the shield he pushed off while simultaneously stowing away the treasure. Tremendous amounts of Cosmic Energy swirled around him as he shot toward the shield while **[Verun's Bite]** drenched the area in a bloody hue.

This time he would be the meteor.

Chapter 478: Fighting Fate

The air screamed around Zac as he shot toward the azure shield with the speed of an airplane, and even he got a bit worried he was playing a bit fast and loose with his life. However, he threw any hesitation into the back of his mind as he conjured a fractal blade that was as large as himself. He was perfectly capable of making it even larger, but he needed to contain the impact to a smaller area.

The blade first changed color to a gleaming silver as he imbued it with the Fragment of the Axe, but the sanguine glow quickly spread from [**Verun's Bite**] as well to cover the whole fractal edge. This was the most power he could release without utilizing [**Hatchetman's Rage**] or the slumbering remnants, and he could only pray that it was enough to punch a hole in the massive array.

The world froze as Zac's attack cut into the shield with all the power he could muster, but an enormous shockwave that dispersed the clouds of miasma soon followed. Hairline cracks spread for hundreds of meters in each direction, and Zac managed to squeeze through the hole in the barrier before it healed.

However, the point of impact was over 100 meters into the air and he had no means to control his descent. The collision had also caused him to completely lose balance, and any hopes of a hero's entrance were dashed as he slammed into the ground face-first. Another shockwave, this one a lot smaller, spread out from the point of impact, instantly killing the closest zombies. He scrambled back to his feet while wiping away some of the blood running down his nose, and he took stock of the situation.

The insides of the array were shrouded by dense swirls of miasmatic haze, and his skin crawled from the contact with the condensed death-attuned energies. The extremely limited sight

made it impossible to see any clear threat to Port Atwood, and instantly getting mobbed by enraged elite zombies didn't make things easier to discern.

Fractal blades shot out in each direction as swathes of destruction were carved into the undead hordes. However, these were the best of the zombies as the fractal blades were whittled down before they reached too far. Each strike still killed over fifty zombies, but the blade broke apart from a storm of counterstrikes after that.

Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] in hopes of making anything out, but everything became a haze varying degrees of grey. However, he did spot spots with more condensed energies, and he immediately shot toward the closest target.

A few seconds later he found himself in front of an Unholy Beacon, and Zac wasn't surprised by the sight at all. What did make him frown in consternation, however, was the array surrounding it. There hadn't been anything like that around the beacons he had seen until now, and he guessed it was some sort of secondary array that was powered by the beacon.

The beacon was guarded by a hulking Corpse Golem that immediately swung at Zac the moment he appeared. However, Zac's physique was beyond monstrous by now, with an effective strength reaching 2500. Zac countered the punch with his own, his fist not even a tenth the size of the massive undead construct.

A thundering explosion echoed out as the arm of the golem blew apart from the force, and it was cut in two the next second as Zac slashed it with a lazy swing as he stepped toward the beacon. He couldn't make out its purpose, so Zac simply cut a few lines to ruin the inscriptions before he ripped the beacon out of the ground and stashed it in his Spatial Ring.

Zac was a moving calamity as he moved from beacon to beacon at his utmost speed, and he had stolen ten beacons in less than three minutes. Some of them had launched massive outbursts of death-attuned energies at him though, but Zac had managed to dodge the waves of death with the help of [**Loamwalker**].

One of them had actually detonated just as he was about to stow it away, but the vibrant energies of the Fragment of the Bodhi were able to neutralize the attack. He still hadn't spotted any leaders though, so he could only keep going in hopes that they would be forced to show their hand sooner or later.

A large shudder echoed out when he ripped another beacon out of the ground, and he saw that the shield finally flickered before it dissipated.

It had been pretty smashed by his tremendous momentum when he launched himself at it, but it had soon healed itself after he pushed his way through. But now it looked like Zac had caused too much destruction within the shield, to the point that it could no longer maintain its functionality. The highly condensed Miasma started within the barrier to spread out as well, but Zac knew that it would sooner or later be cleansed by the pure energies of the world.

However, his confusion only grew while looking around as visibility steadily grew better. He couldn't see any high-grade siege tools or anything else that would separate the thousands of zombies from normal elites. But he finally spotted a group of hooded beings in the back of the army, guarded by five hulking E-Grade Corpse Golems.

Zac immediately rushed toward them, carving a line of true death through the zombie horde. The hooded warriors didn't react to his approach, but the golems readied themselves for battle and started rushing toward him. However, these golems were only marginally stronger than those who had guarded the Unholy Beacons, and Zac needed less than a minute to turn them into small hills of rock-hard flesh.

The hooded warriors had started fleeing but he effortlessly captured one of them while blocking the escape of the others. It tried to struggle out of his grasp, but Zac was surprised to find that it was pitifully weak.

"What are you planning?" Zac growled with anger as he ripped the hood from the lich's head.

However, what met Zac's gaze wasn't the Lich King or one of his generals, but just some random revenants that couldn't

have been higher than Level 60. Zac immediately crushed its neck in frustration before he captured the others, getting the same results.

Just what was going on?

It quickly became apparent that this was all a big diversion, and that the undead wasn't actually interested in conquering Azh'Rodum. But what was the point of sacrificing their own without any gain? Was it to trick the Church of the Everlasting Dao? Or was the real mission taking place somewhere else?

Zac's first thought was the mines, just like how Harvath had guessed. Were they trying to mess with his Nexus Vein somehow? If the real leaders had entered the confusing mess of subterranean tunnels beneath the island it would be extremely annoying to root them out, as his own force still hadn't completely mapped the nigh endless number of narrow passageways that ran beneath the surface.

However, he suddenly saw someone running toward him, decimating all the zombies that tried to impede her path with a barrage of attacks based on the four elements. Zac immediately flashed over to Kenzie, who immediately threw herself in his arms. He really wanted to catch up and hear what had happened since he left, but he saw how frazzled she had looked as she ran toward him.

Something was wrong.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked. "What's going on?"

"I am fine, but someone is tampering with the arrays in the valley since some time ago!" Kenzie said with worry as she released him. "I stationed a few sentries on the mountain just in case, but I can't get a hold of them now with the jammers. I'm afraid they're up to something over there. I've been trying to head to the mountain, but the undead swarms anyone who leaves the town. We've tried breaking out but their shields were too strong."

"I'll deal with it," Zac said as the leaf appeared again beneath his feet. "There are no elites here, it seems. I think this whole army is a diversion. I'll be back in a bit."

The next second he was hundreds of meters away, speeding toward the secluded valley.

Panic coursed through Zac's body as he infused the flying treasure with the Fragment of the Bodhi. He had handed over control of the network of arrays he had erected around the island to his sister upon leaving, so he hadn't noticed anything wrong at all since arriving. His thoughts were a mess as he tried to figure out the purpose of whoever had breached the arrays.

Were they looking for Alea, or did they have some other agenda?

Was it because of the mutated Tree of Ascension? That thing would no doubt be of huge value for anyone dabbling with poison, perhaps even after having reached E-Grade. However, there should be no way that the Undead Empire knew about it as access to the valley was completely restricted after Zac took control of the island.

Besides, things wouldn't end well even if the invaders weren't there specifically for Alea. Would they simply let her rest in peace after seeing her next to the Tree of Ascension? Of course not.

Zac and his sister had placed strong protective arrays around the whole valley to keep people away, but the invaders were either extremely strong or adept at breaking arrays. The inner shield protecting Alea's Stasis Array wasn't much stronger than the outer one, and Zac was doubtful that it would prove a challenge to whoever had encroached upon the valley.

Less than five minutes had passed since he left the outskirts of Azh'Rodum, but he felt like it had been hours when he finally breached the crest leading into the valley. He immediately noticed that there was something wrong with the outer array covering the whole valley like a dome. It was still intact, but it felt completely drained of energy like it was just there for show.

The leaf shot straight through it, and he was at the core of the valley in seconds. However, his fears were immediately realized as he spotted four hooded individuals sitting in a

circle around Alea's stasis array, right next to the [**Tree of Ascension**]. An intricate array covered the ground around the stasis array, and Zac sensed extremely pure fluctuations of Death-Attuned energies from the crystals powering it.

Zac jumped down from the flying treasure and rushed forward like an enraged beast, his axe already shining with a sanguine glow. The air popped around him as his aura billowed out without restraints, and even the slumbering Splinter stirred in his mind from Zac's towering fury.

"So you are he-" the closest man said with a hoarse voice, but he couldn't even finish his sentence before he was obliterated by a world-ending punch, turning into scraps of flesh that rained down upon the area.

The three others quickly rose from their seated positions around the array and unleashed what looked like a swarm of jumbo mosquitoes at him, but Zac ignored them as he unleashed a Dao field based on his strongest Dao Fragment. Many of the bugs died from the sharpness of the domain, but even more managed to resist as they assaulted every piece of exposed skin on his body.

The spectral forest of [**Hatchetman's Sprit**] rose from the ground, and an emerald shield protected Zac from the gnats as he cut through the swarm. The hooded warriors released another barrage of what seemed to be poisonous insects and airborne toxins, but everything was destroyed by Zac's furious assault.

The second robed warrior was quickly cut into a dozen pieces from a furious barrage of swings, and the third was literally ripped apart the moment Zac caught him with his free hand. Only one final warrior remained in just a couple of seconds, and Zac had him caught in an iron grip as he took ragged breaths due to barely restrained rage.

He had gotten even angrier as he had seen the Stasis Array at close distance, as it had obviously been tampered with. The golden glass was replaced by a murky black sheen, and he couldn't even see Alea's body inside due to an extremely dense violet cloud within the glass. He couldn't even tell

whether she was alive or dead while standing just a few meters away.

“Tell me, what have you done?!” he roared as he ripped off the hood of the man, exposing a man that looked like a corpse that had been left out in a desert for weeks.

“Fractured soul, not living, not dead,” the man wheezed with a laugh. “I was anointing her to become an elite of our Empire, but now it’s all for naught. You might as well put the girl out of her misery.”

“Tell me how to fix this!” Zac screamed into the man’s face, his anger towering to an unprecedented degree.

“Death is the destination for all. You can’t fight fate,” the desiccated husk of a man laughed, and Zac’s danger sense soon erupted, forcing him to throw the man away.

The hooded Lich exploded into an enormous cloud of gasses that were no doubt extremely toxic, but a few wide swings with **[Verun’s Bite]** pushed the cloud north and toward the edge of the island.

Zac only took a cursory glance at the surroundings before running over toward the glass array that had kept Alea’s soul from crumbling any further. However, he stumbled after just a few steps, and his mind started to become cloudy. He quickly ate one of his best antidotes as he circulated the Fragment of the Coffin in an effort to refine the invisible toxins that must have made their way into his body.

Helplessness threatened to immobilize him as he looked down at the array. He somewhat regretted not bringing his sister in his hurry to get here in time, but he instinctively knew there was nothing she could do in front of something like this. He ripped out the four crystals powering the array, and they were no-doubt D-Grade Miasma Crystals from the fluctuations.

Extremely condensed streams of death-attuned energies tried to infect his body without him even trying to absorb anything, but his Specialty Core just trembled a bit as it absorbed the infiltration. Zac put the crystals into his pouch as he swung his axe a few times to ruin the intricate layout of inscriptions

covering the ground, and the array immediately lost any remaining strength.

The array was stopped, but his heart still hammered as he gripped the cover glass coffin to push it away. But before he even had a chance to move the lid an invisible shockwave erupted from within, and his surroundings changed the next instant.

Chapter 479: Fragments

”GET OUT!” Yasera screeched, her eyes muddled and unfocused from the Hera Leaves. “You keep taking up time and money, what are you good for?”

Tears pooled in Alea’s eyes, but she knew her mom was not herself at the moment.

“I’ll be useful, I promise,” Alea said as she shuffled out of their corner of the communal space, her eyes downcast to avoid the mean stares of the others.

She quickly found herself on the streets, the two burly guards at the door only sparing her a glance as she vacantly stopped after a few meters. What should she do? Mama was not well, and they had no money.

Alea already scrounged food outside most days, but the shopkeepers had started to become wise to her tricks. There was only one solution left. She needed to start working as well.

The madame had said that she should wait a while longer, but mom needed money now. So Alea tried to still her beating heart as she looked back and forth along the street to find a willing customer.

She finally spotted a young man who seemed to have recently passed the Age of Adulthood. He wore mostly ragged clothes just like most people in the slums, but there was something about him. There was an energy around him that made him feel the same way as the scary man who always followed the Madame around.

The energy of a cultivator. Besides, he looked very handsome even if he had a lazy expression, and the dirt on his body seemed to be recently applied compared to the ingrained filth some walked around with. He would no doubt have some coin

to spare, and compared with most of the men who entered the Tea House this one seemed a lot better.

She slowly walked up toward him before he had the chance to walk away, and quickly gathered her courage as he looked up at the man who was over two heads taller than her.

“Yo-young master, ho-how about having a cup of tea with me?” Alea stuttered as she desperately tried to mimic the ladies of the White Lotus Tea House.

The young man with the lackadaisical expression looked down at her with surprise, and she tried to give off the innocent charm that Madam Sai said would be her best weapon for the next few years. However, Alea became uneasy when she realized that he didn’t have that gleam in his eyes that was so easy to discern. The expression that meant that the man was no longer thinking with his brain.

Was he too young to be interested in these kinds of things? Alea still wasn’t sure how everything worked, but she was confident she had seen even younger men entering the private compartment in the Tea House.

“Why did you call me young master? Do you recognize me?” he said curiously as he walked closer.

“Ah, no?” Alea said, some fear taking hold of her heart.

Had she made a mistake and said something she shouldn’t? Madam Sai always said that words were the most dangerous things, and one wrong word could cause a lifetime of suffering.

“Then how did you know that I am rich? I am not wearing anything expensive, and both my face and my clothes are dirty,” he said as he took another step closer.

“That,” Alea said, looking back and forth, trying to figure out a way to get out of the situation.

She pleadingly looked at the two guards behind, but they pointedly ignored her. Had they already realized that the young man was too dangerous to mess with?

“I’ll give you an E-Grade Nexus Crystal if you tell me,” the young man said.

Alea’s eyes widened in shock when she heard what he said. An E-Grade Nexus Crystal was a huge fortune. One aunty in the Tea House had been tipped one once, and she had been able to eat her fill for over a year on that, even after having given the Tea House their share.

Could she make that much money by just answering a few questions? Her instincts said no. Things that seemed too good to be true always came with hidden dangers. More than one girl in the Tea House had disappeared after being offered a handsome reward to visit a patron in their homes.

Some believed they had found a better life, but Madam Sai said they were usually sold into slavery, or even turned into some sort of materials for evil cultivators.

“My patience is only so long,” the young man said as he took out a shimmering crystal from nowhere and waved it in front of her.

Alea’s heart started to beat rapidly, and she was unable to take her eyes off the mesmerizing crystal in his hand. She had never seen anything so beautiful, and it radiated amazing amounts of energy.

“Your clothes look worn but they are new, the wear doesn’t seem natural. It is like you have rubbed the clothes against a stone to make it look worse than it is. It’s the same with the face, it’s dirty but your skin is healthy and clear,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth as quickly as she could form them.

“I guess I overestimated my disguise,” the youth wryly smiled as he threw her the crystal.

Alea’s eyes lit up as she clutched the crystal, quickly placing it inside a hidden pocket within her dress. The youth looked at her with amusement for a second before he seemingly had thought of something.

“Here, hold this for a second,” he said, handing her another crystal, though this one was a smoothly polished sphere that

didn't emit the same beautiful colors.

Alea didn't dare to say no to the young master, so she gingerly gripped the ball, and she noticed that the young man's eyes lit up when it started to gleam with a mysterious purple shimmer.

"Are you sure about this?" Ogras asked with a serious expression.

"What's there to think about?" Namys growled from the side as she glared at Alea. "The Lord has spent so much time on effort on this. Why are you hesitating?"

"Namys," Ogras sighed before he turned back to Alea.

Alea looked down at the large vat with trepidation, knowing that she might never be able to leave once she entered the bubbling pool.

The young lord didn't know this, but she had found out that there had been three before her. Three young women who had died while attempting this. Her knowledge about constitutions was shallow, but she had learned from the old master that instructed the nine of them that the risk of dying was extremely high unless there was a great fit between you and the manual.

And that risk only increased when you were dealing with deadly poison.

But this was the path she had chosen. If she died she would at least die at the peak of beauty. Her thoughts went to her recent return to the White Lotus Tea House, the first visit in 6 years. Her mother, the beautiful goddess wrapped in the finest garments, was gone, replaced by a wretched hag.

Her face had been pocked by scabs, and her skin sallow from overindulging on alcohol and Hera Leaves. The lithe and graceful curves were gone, replaced by sagging skin and festering sores.

Yasera hadn't cared where she had been. She hadn't even bothered looking for her after she left with Lord Azh'Rezak. Her mother had only demanded money or liquor after having seen the quality of the dress and jewelry she wore. Alea had

turned away without another word, ignoring her mother's cries as her childhood crumbled around her.

"I'm ready," she said as she let her dress fall to the ground, showcasing her pristine body.

"Good," Ogras said, trying his best to appear unperturbed by the scene as he handed her a shimmering beast crystal. "The main component of the medicinal bath comes from a swamp creature named **[Er'Harkath Marshwalker]**. They are known for their ability to store all kinds of poisons in their body without harming themselves. Try your best to fuse with this thing as quickly as possible."

Alea nodded and after one deep breath swallowed the crystal whole as she stepped into the pool. This would either be the first step on the path of cultivation, or the last day of her life.

"Is that him?" Ilvere whispered with incredulity as he gazed at the human in the distance. "I can't believe that guy toppled the Azh'Rezak Clan singlehandedly. While wearing lady's garments."

"Progenitor. Odd advantages," Janos muttered.

"Why is he even alive?" Namys growled. "He's a threat to our Lord, especially now that he's doubly weakened. Alea, shouldn't you do something?"

Alea's mouth curved upward as she looked at the man, trying to imagine the scene that Lord Ogras had described. One human dressed in Vesarith's dress and drenched in blood, running around causing havoc. It somehow felt like the world had just turned a bit more interesting.

"Lord Azh'Rezak hasn't told us to do anything, so why should I?" Alea smiled as she stood up and adjusted her dress.

"What are you doing?" Namys wheezed as she saw Alea skip toward the human.

"Are you heading to the mines again?" Alea said with a smile as she walked next to Zac.

"Yeah," he said, looking a bit perturbed.

“Why don’t I join you?” Alea said, snaking her arm around his.

“I have a lot to do,” Zac sighed, helplessness evident in his eyes.

It was a refreshing difference compared to those meathead warriors at the compound she had trained with, a bunch of men with overblown egos and rampant aggression. This guy was the strongest warrior on the island, but he didn’t even know what to do with himself when she teased him. It was both intriguing and a bit frustrating.

“I know, learn about The Ruthless Heavens?” she said, pushing her breasts toward his arm, the response leaving nothing wanting. “I know. I know all that basic stuff as well, I can teach you just as well as Alyn can. And wouldn’t it be nicer with just the two of us?”

Her heart hammered in her chest as she hurried away from the Gazebo, and she immediately jumped onto the teleporter taking her to Azh’Rodum.

Just what had she done?

This had been the perfect opportunity, but she had ruined it all by poisoning him because of that stupid impulse. She regretted stepping into that bath for the first time since gaining this odd constitution. For the first time, the gains didn’t seem to match up to the costs. Of course, a larger part of her knew that absorbing the essence of the swamp monster was the only reason she had been able to save Lord Atwood at all during the final Beast Wave.

Without it, she would just have been another bystander.

She walked up to the secluded rooftop garden in her mansion and lay down on the recliner, her eyes absentmindedly looking up at the stars. The blue sky that once had felt so cold and glaring felt soothing for the first time since arriving to this odd world.

He was drifting away. The sturdy back kept growing, now towering like a mountain in front of her. It was this cursed situation that pushed him toward the Heavens themselves. It

should be a joy seeing the man she loved growing stronger, but she couldn't help but feel pangs of loneliness as the two drifted further and further apart. She simply couldn't keep up. No one on Earth could.

Zac was leaving again soon, this time for the Underworld, and a changed man would no doubt return. She had somewhat managed to improve their situation after her mistakes, and there was no longer that thinly veiled disappointment in his eyes when he looked at her.

But that didn't change the reality they found themselves in. He was Lord Atwood, the de-facto leader of a world, and perhaps even a future elite that would make his name known in the whole Sector.

She was just Alea, a prostitute's daughter who hadn't even earned the right to take a last name. She had thought that becoming a cultivator would change her fate, but she was still that same dirty child from the slums looking up at the gods soaring through the skies toward their faraway palaces.

How long would it be until they looked at each other like strangers?

Zac was inundated in one vision after another, snippets of Alea's life flashing past him. He had a vague understanding of what was going on, and the knowledge was terrifying. Alea's soul was rapidly falling apart, and fragments of her soul released the visions for him.

He didn't know how this was possible as it had never happened with all the people he had killed until now. But one thing was certain; Alea was not long for this world if this kept on. Suddenly another shudder emerged from the coffin, but this time Alea's voice rather than another vision entered his mind.

"I'm not ready. I want to follow you."

Chapter 480: Desperate Times

Zac's mind was thrown into disarray after witnessing one snippet after another of Alea's life pass by his eyes, but he still desperately tried to figure out a way to salvage the situation. Once he was back in his own body again he immediately lifted the casket, only to be met by a horrifying sight.

Alea's body had been turned completely black, and dense waves of corruption and death radiated from her body. Gases leaked out of her pores as well, and Zac was forced to quickly close the lid again as the noxious fumes almost made him keel over after a single breath.

That scene alone made him furious enough to almost spontaneously combust, but he restrained his anger as he searched for a solution. However, there were simply no treasures in his possession that would allow him to save her life.

Her soul was falling apart, and her body was no longer fit for a living being as far as he could tell. But her last words echoed through his mind, and he refused to give up as long as there was a chance that he could save her.

His first idea was to turn her into a Revenant somehow, as that would at least allow her to keep 'living' in a sense. However, not only would that erase Alea and create a new personality, but it might turn her into a subordinate of the Lich King. It was those robed liches who had initiated the process, which might have left some sort of mark.

Also, he had no idea how to actually turn someone into a Revenant.

"Follow me..." Zac muttered as he stared down at the crystalline casket, and in his desperation he suddenly thought

of something.

He didn't have any idea whether what he did was insane or not, but he was unable to think of anything else as he took out an object and placed it on top of the lid.

It was the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

This the only solution available to him. Her soul was already a problem that was out of his league after having lost the **[Prajñā Cherry]**, and with the Lich messing up her body she was way beyond his means of salvation. He wasn't even sure whether a D-Grade healer would be able to bring her back from the brink of death, let alone his paltry E-Grade pills.

But what if she became a Tool Spirit, a being that was essentially immortal? He had recently learned about two pieces of key information. First, living beings could be turned into Spirit Tools, or rather 'Sword Slaves' through sacrificial rituals. Second, the **[Divine Investiture Array]** could pretty much turn anything into a Spirit Tool.

If he turned Alea into a Tool Spirit she would be able to live on, just like Brazla. It was obviously a messed-up solution, but one that would fulfill her wish and keep her 'alive'. The universe was full of magical things that he couldn't even imagine, and perhaps he would be able to turn her back into a living being again in the future.

He immediately infused a stream of Cosmic Energy into the **[Divine Investiture Array]** before he could change his mind. A massive pillar of gold shot down from the heavens and slammed into the valley with enough force to completely obliterate all clouds for kilometers in each direction.

A groundswell of energy rose from the depths of the mountain to meet the golden pillar, and Zac found himself submerged in a surge of power so dense that it was almost a liquid. He did not doubt that he would be able to gain multiple levels in minutes from staying in a magical place like this upon reaching E-Grade, but that wasn't why he had summoned these energies.

He suddenly felt a spiritual nudge from beneath the lid, and Zac refocused on the coffin Alea lay inside. His eyes lit up in excitement upon sensing it. Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt it was as an agreement of his plan. Perhaps she could understand what was going to happen after being in the middle of it.

However, nothing happened with the casket, and the energies simply seemed to swirl around it as Zac felt the spiritual signal from within weaken. Zac's mind spun for solutions, trying to figure out what the problem was. Was the array wasn't enough?

Zac emptied his Spatial Ring of anything that might help with her situation, and a stream of golden energy immediately emerged from the **[Divine Investiture Array]** and snatched a third of his Soul Crystals before starting going over the other things he had taken out. Zac didn't mind at the least, as he suddenly felt Alea's presence once more from within the coffin, making it seem as though the Soul Crystals had condensed her soul again.

The next thing to be selected by the golden tendrils was the fossilized bug that radiated an unceasing aura of corrosion. Zac had picked it up on the 3rd floor of the tower, but he believed that it was a lucky find as neither Ogras nor Galau had been able to even get close due to the aura it emitted. He thought it might fit with Alea and her constitution, so he took it out as well.

However, it wasn't enough as he felt Alea's spirit slowly weaken again.

Panic welled up once more, and he grit his teeth and took out an intricately inscribed jade box and opened its lid. The tendrils of light immediately pounced on the contents, and Zac wasn't surprised as it was the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]**. The Auctioneer had said that it was perfect to improve a Spirit Tool's spirituality, and it might just be what was needed.

The cost was pretty shocking, but he had already gone so far as to expend his **[Divine Investiture Array]**. It was too late to hold back.

But Zac's eyes suddenly widened in alarm as another tendril reached out behind Zac and picked up **[Everlasting]** that he had poured out of his spatial ring along with the rest of his treasures. Zac was about to take the shield back, but he stopped himself after some hesitation and let the golden light use the E-Grade defensive treasure as another ingredient.

It wasn't even a Spirit Tool, and he could always get another shield elsewhere.

The tendril also reached behind him and ripped off a few of the largest branches of the **[Tree of Ascension]** while a storm of gases was dragged out from the underground where the Amanita Mushroom resided. Only then did the array seem satiated, and the tendrils receded back into the crystal as a Golden Cocoon formed around the Stasis Array.

'Thank you...' a silent whisper suddenly echoed out in his mind, but its volume grew lower and lower toward the end, as though Alea was moving away from him.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked, but a sinking feeling spread through his chest as there was no answer. "Alea?"

The silence stretched on, and Zac started to panic as he couldn't get an answer from Alea no matter what he did. He wanted to go closer, but he was instantly rebuffed by the powerful force from the **[Divine Investiture]** array.

Zac could only anxiously wait for the light to dissipate. Time passed as more and more energy was infused into the cocoon, but Zac didn't move a muscle. He knew there were no doubt a dozen things that needed to be done on the island, but he refused to leave until he had seen this thing through. Only two hours later did the lights finally dissipate as the cocoon cracked, revealing the item within.

The large crystal encasing Alea was recuperating inside was gone, as was his shield and all the materials he had poured into the array. In their place was only one thing, a massive black coffin.

The coffin was just over two meters long, and seemed to be crafted from a mix of the wood from the **[Tree of Ascension]**

and some black crystal or smooth stone. The two materials formed intricate patterns all across the surface, though they didn't seem to be fractals as far as he could tell. They were more akin to the markings of the Stone Stele he had seen in the vision, though they obviously didn't contain that kind of power.

The coffin's shape was traditional with the top being slightly wider before narrowing again toward the bottom. It looked nothing like the translucent glass studded with Divine Crystals of before, but rather a rugged and completely opaque box that carried a heavy and almost solemn aura.

There were two sets of fractals covering the lid as well. First was a circle placed at the wider section toward the top, and the other set was two lines of inscriptions that ran parallel along the length of the lid. The fractals almost reminded Zac of a funeral wreath with two ribbons hanging down.

Finally, there were thick pitch-black chains that were wound around the whole coffin a few times, and Zac was surprised when he realized they actually emerged from holes on the side of the coffin. A quick estimate told Zac there were over five meters of links wound around the ominous item, and there were perhaps even more chains waiting inside the coffin itself.

All in all, it felt like an extremely somber item, and Zac was pretty shocked at how it had turned out. He wasn't sure what he had expected the **[Divine Investiture Array]** to do, but at least it wasn't something as drastic as this. It had completely repurposed the items he had thrown inside in just two hours, a feat that would no doubt be utterly impossible even for great artisans like the original Brazla.

But the amazing craftsmanship wasn't really what Zac was interested in right now. He hurried over to the coffin and tried to open the lid, but no matter how hard he strained he was utterly incapable of moving it even an inch.

He growled in frustration as veins bulged across his arms, but he could eventually only give up. He tried peering into the six holes the chains emerged from on the sides, but there was nothing but darkness inside of the coffin. Zac tried shining a

light inside with an illumination crystal, but it was as though the light was immediately swallowed the moment it entered.

Zac sat back with a blank look, his determination slowly being swapped out by confusion and depression. Just what had he done? Making Spirit Tools from living cultivators wasn't just considered an unorthodox method, but a downright evil one. He felt like a mad scientist playing god, and he had no idea what would come of this.

“What have you done?” a furious voice said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras walk over with bloodshot eyes, his eyes darting between the coffin and Zac.

“She said she wasn't ready to leave, that she wanted to follow me,” Zac mumbled with a hollow voice. “Her soul was falling apart because of those damn liches. She wasn't ready to let go, and this was the only solution I could think of.”

The demon stared at Zac for a few seconds, while Zac simply looked at the coffin with a lost expression.

“So what is this?” Ogras finally said as he looked at the coffin. “Exactly what did you do? I can't sense her presence any longer.”

“I got something called a [**Divine Investiture Array**] from the eighth floor, it could turn anything into a Spirit Tool. I also added the [**Pathfinder Oracle Eye**], and it seems the process swallowed my shield along with a bunch of the treasures I have gathered so far,” Zac explained.

“This... This is not right,” Ogras said with disgust on his face. “It goes against the natural order. How will her soul find rest or enter the cycle of the Heavens this way? You have cursed her.”

Zac said could say nothing in response, bleakness washing over him as he felt some disgust with himself. The silence stretched on with one man brooding and the other man stewing.

“You threw a shield worth over a billion into this, and it was one of the cheaper materials?” Ogras finally said with a

grimace. “The things you expended here would be able to pay for the foundation of a great faction.”

“I figured that if I could turn her into a Spirit Tool like Brazla, she would be able to stay alive. We could find a way to turn her back into flesh and bone in the future,” Zac sighed as he looked up from the coffin. “Do you know if it’s possible?”

“No idea,” Ogras said. “Anyway, we can’t stay here.”

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“We’re getting invaded, remember?” Ogras snorted. “There are still enemies to deal with even after your rampage, we need to clear them out so we don’t leave any hidden threats. Besides, we are running out of time to deal with the unliving. Your sister might have bought us some time, but we’re still cutting it close.”

Zac nodded before he walked over to the coffin. He silently looked at the beautifully crafted surface and the chains that kept the thing sealed before he slowly reached down to put it in his Spatial Ring.

But the coffin suddenly shuddered and started shrinking as the chains moved about. In just a second the coffin had shrunk to just half a decimeter’s length, and one of its chains had formed a loop through the top holes of the coffin.

Zac immediately understood what was going on, and he didn’t hesitate to put the chain above his head to wear it as a necklace. The moment the coffin touched a chest a weak tendril emerged from the treasure, but there was no voice accompanying it this time. It still gave some comfort for Zac, and he desperately clung to the idea that Alea was still inside there, but that she was simply too drained to communicate at the moment.

Chapter 481: The Next Step

Confusion and guilt plagued Zac's conscience about what he had just done to Alea. But the deed was done, and he couldn't stay in this secluded valley and second-guess himself forever.

The two jumped onto Zac's flying treasure, immediately setting off toward Azh'Rodum. As they flew he got an update of the situation from the demon. Ogras had returned 30 minutes ago, at which point order was mostly restored to the island. The Valkyries had discovered the jamming array that blocked out any communication and teleportation on the island and immediately deactivated it.

They were still locked out from the rest of the world, but Kenzie and the other experts were working on multiple solutions while multiple squads had set sail to look for hints of similar arrays. Even the Creators were furiously producing new vessels to replace the destroyed ones, and they had already delivered three Carracks in record speed.

They reached Azh'Rodum soon enough, and Zac was relieved to see that the miasmic clouds were mostly dispelled by this point. He saw hundreds of warriors walking through the forests in groups, likely looking for stragglers who had wandered off from the rest of the zombies. An inquiry told him that his sister and the demon generals had already returned to Port Atwood, and they took the teleporter back as well.

The scene in Port Atwood was pretty similar to the one in Azh'Rodum. The raging flames had been doused by now, but much of the southern edge of the island had been completely ruined by the wildfires. Thankfully they sat right on top of a Nexus Vain, and the dense energies would restore the greenery in a year or two.

The two walked over to the battlefield, where the bodies of the fallen cultists were still being examined for lingering threats. The few who survived Zac's onslaught had either tried to go out in a blaze of glory or were summarily executed by one of the demon armies. Zac didn't care about that, as there was no middle ground with these two forces.

He saw his sister stand at the edge of the battlefield as a dozen drones roved back and forth across the area. It was the same ones who had stood sentry around the Technocrat incursion, and Zac guessed she was looking for any survivors who tried to play dead. The demon generals were nowhere to be seen though, perhaps occupied elsewhere.

Of course, her search was a bit redundant considering that demon warriors and a few nauseated humans were cutting the head off every corpse just in case. It was both to kill the stragglers and to avoid any corpses from rising again.

Their approach was quickly noticed, and Kenzie ran over with worry written on her face.

"What happened? Is Alea okay?" she asked the moment they appeared.

"... It's complicated," Zac sighed. "We'll talk about it later. How are things here? How are the losses?"

"Around 200 people died from the invasion, almost of them during the battles at sea before they reached our island," Kenzie said. "We mostly stayed within the arrays after they arrived though, so very few people were hurt."

Zac closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. Another 200 people dead, and that was probably just a drop in the bucket compared to the losses on the main continent. But he couldn't do anything about it, and he slowly opened his eyes and indicated for his sister to continue.

"The threat was essentially over after you arrived. We're mostly cleaning up and rebuilding by this point. We've also figured out a means of communication, old-school radio signals. A few engineers and the Ishiate tinkerers have managed to strengthen the signals of old machines to the point

we can communicate pretty great distances, but it's only in morse code."

"That's good," Zac nodded. "Do the ships you've sent out have these things?"

"They do, and we've actually found the missing Cultist Ship already thanks to Mr. Trang's Companion. It is sailing away from us, toward Mystic Island I think," Kenzie sighed. "We have sent over half of our remaining ships to harass it though, but it will take a few days to catch up. Ilvere is leading those ships."

"I'll deal with it," Zac said with a frown, preparing to take out his Flying Treasure again.

"Just let it be," Ogras said from the side. "Our time is limited, and we can deal with the stragglers another day. It should take them a few days to reach that Island, perhaps over a week if they're constantly under harassment. We already have elites stationed there, and they can just jump into the Mystic Realm and close the spatial tunnel, allowing us to reclaim the island at a later date."

Letting the invaders have free reign in his Archipelago went against every fiber in his body, but he knew that he didn't have much of a choice as there were bigger fish to fry.

"How long do we have until the realignment array activates?" Zac asked

"We broke a couple of key pillars before we had to stop," Kenzie answered. "I can't be sure, but we think it will take around 6 or 7 days to complete unless something changed the last day. But the sooner it's stopped the better. It's draining our planet, who knows what long-term effect that might have."

"What about the arrays blocking our Teleportation Array?" Zac asked. "I heard you were working on some sort of solution?"

"We haven't located any more arrays apart from the one on this island," Kenzie said with some helplessness. "So we are still locked out from the main continent. Worst case you can

try flying over to Cogstown and use their Teleporter, it's possible it hasn't been impacted by the spatial disruption."

"That will cost us a few days though," Ogras interjected. "And we don't know the situation on the Mainland."

"Calrin and I have looked into these types of arrays since what happened to Alea and the army," Kenzie said. "I figured they might block out all teleporters around the Dead Zone after they activated the realignment array. They found a simpler solution though by just blocking this island though. But I do have something that might work."

"You do?" Zac asked with surprise.

"Blocking arrays is a standard tactic during conflicts in the multiverse," Ogras added from the side. "It's almost impossible to catch your targets if they just keep teleporting away. Just look at the insectoids and their war. They have tried to catch the followers of the old Redeemer for months, but they just keep teleporting away from any compromised hive."

"So there are solutions?" Zac asked.

"It boils down to whether your or your opponent's methods are better, and that's why I'm not sure," Kenzie explained. "We managed to get our hands on a **[Spatial Reinforcement Array]**, and it should technically be able to stabilize the subspace or whatever long enough for you to teleport to the main continent."

"That's great!" Zac exclaimed, a weight lifted from his shoulders.

"Well, it's just that we're dealing with two ancient factions, their jamming arrays are probably pretty strong. I'm not sure what would happen if our array breaks apart before your jump is completed. You might be thrown out in the middle of the ocean, or you might be torn to pieces by spatial rifts."

"...Oh," Zac muttered. "So it's either waste a day or two getting to Cogstown in hopes that their teleporter still works, or risk getting ripped apart?"

"Pretty much," Kenzie said with a weak smile.

“Just teleport,” Ogras shrugged from the side. “With your luck, you’ll be just thrown out right in front of the Lich King even if the array breaks.”

Zac only snorted in response before he turned back to his sister.

“Can I do anything to help with the spatial array thing?” Zac asked. “I’ve gathered all kinds of items during my climb.”

“I don’t think so,” Kenzie said. “Some treasures might be able to make the array stronger, but I don’t know how to do that.”

“That’s fine. Where are Thea and Billy?” Zac asked. “I heard they helped out while I was gone. Oh, and where are the Tal-Eladar? I haven’t seen a single one since returning.”

“Billy and Thea are recuperating in a mansion next to the hospital,” Kenzie said before her face scrunched up. “As for the Tal-Eladar…”

“They didn’t come,” the demon snorted. “I told you that you can’t rely on those wily beast tamers.”

“Is that true?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked over at his sister, and her face told him everything he needed to know.

“We sent a distress call, but they delayed and delayed until our Teleportation Array was blocked out,” Kenzie said with some anger.

Zac knew that the Tal-Eladar just stayed behind as business partners, but he was still pretty angry that they simply chose to cower to the side when their ally was being attacked like this. This was the second time Verana had refused to get involved with the conflicts on Earth, and it had become abundantly clear that they couldn’t be relied upon for anything important.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll regret their choice sooner or later,” Zac finally said after a short silence, which elicited a knowing snort from Ogras.

“So what happened in the Tower of Eternity?” Kenzie asked with some worry. “Ogras said that you caused a mess, but things turned out mostly fine?”

Zac glared at the demon who just grinned back at him.

“Well, I got a pretty good result and made some allies, but I might have also made some enemies as well. I had to suddenly leave due to getting a prompt about Port Atwood being invaded, so I don’t know about the fallout,” Zac said as he took out the [**Heaven’s Secrets Array**]. “More importantly, can you install this thing on my Nexus Node later when you have the time? It can help with my evolution.”

“Oh?” Kenzie said with interest as she looked down at the array. “It shouldn’t take too long, I’ll go deal with it right now. I’m done here anyway.”

Zac nodded before he left his sister to visit his two friends, and two Valkyries immediately accompanied him and helped him catch up to speed as they walked. They reached the mansion soon enough, where the guards wordlessly let him in with a bow. He indicated for the Valkyries to stay outside as he entered, and he quickly spotted where the two were recuperating with the help of [**Cosmic Gaze**].

A few quick steps brought him to a large bedroom on the second floor, and he entered after softly knocking at the door.

“You’re back,” Thea said with a weak voice from her bed facing a window looking out at a beautiful garden. “Your intelligence was incorrect. They made their move early.”

“I heard,” Zac sighed as he sat down next to her bedside.

He was inwardly relieved though that Thea seemed fine, with all her limbs intact. He did spot a wound on her stomach that was lit up with miasmatic energies though. But it didn’t look as bad as the one he got himself from Mhal, and it should heal up as long as she slowly ground down the lingering Dao with her own.

“I’m sorry,” Zac said. “And thank you for helping my people while I was away. Who knows how many would have died if you weren’t there.”

“So? Have you dealt with everything?” Thea said as she turned to look at Zac, her piercing blue eyes staring evenly into his.

Zac was silent for a few seconds thinking it over. There was honestly more he could do to improve his current power while still in F-Grade, a lot of untapped potential as Catheya would call it. But more importantly than that, there was a burning desire that was eating him alive.

There had been a desire smoldering in his chest since the events in the valley, the desire to unleash an unprecedented level of vengeance upon the so-called Lich King for what he or his subjects did to his island and Alea. Zac's face was without expression, but a fire burned in his eyes as he looked down at Thea.

"I am evolving right now and heading toward the core of the Dead Zone the moment it's completed," Zac said, and he felt a momentum building in his body the moment he made his choice. "The Undead Incursion will be gone within a few days."

Chapter 482: Love's Bond

Zac didn't immediately leave the mansion though, but rather gave some of his best healing pills to Thea. He was about to leave her room to visit Billy as well, and Thea surprisingly jumped down from her bed to join him. The giant was even worse off than Thea from what she said.

He had taken the brunt of the attacks after changing into massive form to sink the ship, and this time Zac hadn't been there to block out the attacks with **[Nature's Barrier]** like during the hunt. Billy had been badly burned by the flames of the cultists it seemed.

It was easy to figure out with room the giant resided in as the whole room shook from the massive snores from within, but they stopped when Zac walked into the room.

"You're back!" Billy rumbled as he woke up. "Help Billy a bit! A stupid horny guy keeps tricking Billy, making him forget how to leave this place! All horny people seems tricky, could use a good thwonkin'."

"Don't let your fans hear that," Thea snorted from the side as she walked inside as well, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

"He has over thirty suitors among the Demons on this island," Thea said with some bemusement. "It's a bit surreal."

"Of course it is super real. Billy is the most dashing prince, Mama always said so," Billy nodded with a complacent expression. "But Billy doesn't like horny girls."

"Uh, you should just call them Demons," Zac coughed, the anger in his gut somewhat dispersed by the giant's antics.

He couldn't stay for too long though, and he had to leave after making sure Thea and Billy had everything they needed.

“I’m sorry about how things turned out. I underestimated the Undead Empire and put too much trust in the words of Void’s Disciple. I was sure I had a few more weeks,” Zac apologized again just as he was about to exit.

“It’s our fault as well,” Thea sighed as she sat down next to Billy. “We didn’t adapt quickly enough to this new reality, forcing the whole burden onto your shoulders. We played politics and fought for benefits when we should have been fighting for our lives and our futures.”

Zac sighed as well, not knowing how to respond, and he left the mansion in silence.

“You really are evolving?” a voice said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there.

“I am,” Zac nodded before he wryly smiled. “Did you know that Billy is pretty popular among the female demons?”

“Well, it makes sense. He’s even bulkier than the Abyssal Demons, and rumors are circulating on the island that he has some powerful bloodline that increased his strength even further,” the demon shrugged. “Between his constitution and his potential, he’s one of the best bachelors on this world, perhaps even better than you since you’re a mortal.”

Zac only shook his head in bemusement before he got back to the matter at hand.

“I need to take down the Undead Incursion quickly. Do you think I can do it without evolving?” Zac asked as the two walked toward his private section.

“It’s hard to say,” the demon said after a while. “Normally I would have said yes, but we’re running out of time. The Lich King seems adept at arrays judging by what we have seen so far, and he has no doubt turned the core zone into a fortress over the past year. He doesn’t even need to maintain the shield for that long, just a few days will do and he will have won.”

“You really think his arrays are that strong?” Zac asked skeptically. “I even managed to break the arrays in the Base Town.”

“That’s different, those were mobile arrays powered by F-Grade warriors,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “The undead array will have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Unholy Beacons powering it. He might even sacrifice tens of millions of Zombies to give the defenses a boost until the realignment is complete.”

“Still,” Zac muttered, but he knew the demon had a point.

“Sieges can take years, decades even, to slowly grind down the defensive arrays, and that’s with proper equipment we don’t have. You need to be a lot stronger to crack them in an instant,” the demon said. “The normal method would have been for us to bring millions of fodder to blast attacks on the shield to weaken it before we made our move. But there’s no time for that either.”

Zac slowly nodded. He had somewhat hoped for the demon to convince him otherwise, but it truly looked like he needed to get a few power-ups to increase his certainty of success. He wasn’t willing to bet Earth’s future that he was able to break through the defensive perimeters and destroy the realignment array within one week without evolving.

“Where’s my sister?” Zac asked. “Has she installed the array?”

“She’s still trying to figure out the thing,” Ogras said. “But you need to slow down.”

“What? You know we’re running out of time,” Zac said.

“Just a few hours have passed since you exited the tower. You have fought half the Sector’s geniuses and then fended off the invasions. You even turned Alea into a heaven-cursed necklace. You’re not stable at the moment, you can’t evolve in your current state,” the demon said. “Honestly, if you were the scion of some clan you would probably have been forced into silent meditation for at least year to regain a sense of tranquility and balance.”

“So you just want me to sit around?” Zac said with disbelief.

“The planet is dying as we speak.”

“We are all dying,” the demon snorted. “Don’t ruin everything now by rushing into things. Sit down and heal up and calm

your mind at least. A few hours spent now will save you a lot of time in the long run.”

Zac was somewhat unwilling, but he knew that the demon was right. He wasn't in his right mind at the moment, and he needed to cool off. But he still felt like a child who got sent to take his nap as he walked back to his courtyard and sat down.

His thoughts were a whirl as he tried to calm down, and his mind kept jumping between the various things that needed his attention, each more urgent than the last. But slowly circulating the Fragment of the Bodhi helped him relax his tense muscles, and his thoughts slowly followed. Visiting the Tower of Eternity was supposed to give him a breather to decompress, but things had gone increasingly out of hand with the Splinter and then the time crunch to complete the climb.

He felt more wound up than ever, especially after what he went through with Alea.

His eyes slowly opened and he looked down at the black 5-centimeter casket hanging on its chain around his neck. He still didn't know whether he had done the right thing or not. What if he had completely damned Alea by turning her into something like the Sword Slave he had snatched from the swordmaster? The voices that had invaded his mind while using the thing had sounded beyond wretched.

The one solace in his mind was that the System had said that the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was a rectification of regret.

If Alea had died in front of his eyes like that, then he would have regretted it forever. To be just too late to save her not just once, but twice would have been too much to take. The System was essentially omniscient and perhaps it had already known that things would end up like this. It did make him a bit pissed off that the System didn't provide a better solution to save her, but he guessed the System was more interested in making him stronger than it was in saving the poison mistress.

However, his actions had no doubt caused some complications to his plans. A lot of his materials had gone into the **[Divine Investiture Array]** in his frenzied attempts to save the demoness. It also meant that he no longer had any way to

upgrade his axe, except letting it slowly eat various treasures. Of course, most items meant for Verun had gone to Alea, but he at least had the Dragon Core still.

The real question was what sort of item that he had created. He had initially just been focused on saving Alea's soul, but the array was meant to create a perfect Spirit Tool. This became doubly important as **[Everlasting]** had been thrown into the mix, leaving him without anything to activate half of his skills.

It might even affect his coming Class choices for all he knew, so he needed to understand what he was dealing with.

He tried sending his mind into the coffin to see if he could glean anything, but it was impossible. Zac suddenly had an idea and released a drop of blood onto the necklace, which was immediately swallowed.

A stream of information immediately entered his mind as he felt the same sort of connection as he did to his robes and **[Verun's Bite]**. He couldn't help but feel a sense of sourness when he realized that either Alea or the System had named the chain-covered coffin **[Love's Bond]**.

There was still no active response from the demoness even after having bound the treasure with his blood. The coffin was still in a "passive" state like his robes, where he could use it but he couldn't sense any Spirit Tool's sapience. This was the norm for an E-Grade Spirit Tool though, with the tool awakening Spirituality usually happened at higher grades, if ever.

However, the stream of information had broadened his insight of what a spirit tool could do, and a mental command made two chains rush out from the holes on the side of the coffin and latch onto his left arm as the coffin rapidly grew in size.

It took just a fraction of a second before the coffin had become almost as tall as Zac himself while keeping the width of a normal coffin. But it was a lot thinner compared to what should be expected, with a depth of just 15 centimeters. It had actually turned into a shield.

However, that was just one of its functions, and another mental command prompted the chains to snake around his torso as the coffin moved toward his back. It grew a lot shorter as well, making it almost resemble a coffin for a child or perhaps a gnome.

Four more chains reached out from their respective holes, each of them dancing in the air as though Zac was a snake charmer. He was already used to this kind of fighting from the chains in **[Profane Seal]**, and commanding them was almost as natural as moving his own limbs. The chains shot out in an instant, and four trees in his courtyard had holes punched through with such force that they barely shuddered before the chains had passed through.

The chains didn't have the life-sucking abilities of the spectral chains, but there seemed to be some inherently corrosive effect attached to them, perhaps an addition provided from the mysterious fossilized bug he had thrown into the mix. It wasn't immediately noticeable, but the holes in the trees started to wither after a few seconds as well like they were being assaulted by some sort of invasive rot.

Furthermore, the chains were actual corporeal links made by top-tier materials like Neprosium, compared to the far more fragile fractal chains that his skill conjured. There was no way that a casual swing of an E-Grade warrior would be able to break them apart as they could do with the spectral copies.

That meant that the chains were essentially a combination or fusion of hardness and rot, which made them a perfect fit for using together with the Fragment of the Coffin.

However, Zac didn't take the time to experiment with all the possibilities of the chains at the moment, so he retracted them back into the coffin. He was extremely relieved that there was a second form of Alea's new form since he was somewhat leery about using the coffin in its shield-state. What if he encountered some powerhouse that managed to break it? What effect would it have on his chances of restoring her to her demon form?

The chains themselves looked like his Neprosium shield but slightly darker, so they wouldn't break so easily. Besides, Neprosium had excellent healing capabilities even if that happened. The chains would probably just reform if the links broke as long as he retrieved the material.

It still felt weird to consider using Alea as a Spirit Tool, but he also knew that was what she wished for. At least he prayed that was what that wordless spiritual connection meant. She wanted to accompany him in his journey, and leaving her in a corner of his Spatial Ring felt even worse than using the treasure.

He would need some time to think of the pitch-black coffin as **[Love's Bond]** rather than Alea, but he would make the best of the situation. Besides, that might be his best shot at actually getting the poison mistress back.

Zac had asked about Spirit Tool upgrades while talking to Catheya since they had broached the subject when discussing the **[Divine Investiture Array]**. Much of what she said hadn't been anything new, but one thing had stuck out. Using the same weapon a lot and for a long time gradually formed a bond that was helpful in all kinds of ways.

It would allow a warrior to squeeze out more potential during a battle, and it would even help with upgrading the Spirit Tool. That was why most elites wanted a powerful weapon that could follow them during their whole Cultivation Path, rather than repeatedly swapping out their weapon for a stronger one. Nurturing this bond was the same as nurturing the Spirit Tool, so using the coffin in battle might actually be the best method to heal her soul, odd as it might sound.

A chain snaked around his throat as the coffin shrunk again, and it soon enough had returned to its passive state. Zac finally tried imbuing the Spirit Tool with his three fragments, but he found that the coffin, unsurprisingly, resisted the Fragment of the Axe. Imbuing it with the Fragment of the Bodhi worked, but he couldn't sense any direct effect when doing so.

But when he tried imbuing the skill with the final Fragment he was shocked. The surprise didn't come from the fact that the

defensive fragment entered the Spirit Tool effortlessly. After all, if the Dao of the Coffin didn't fit this Spirit Tool, then nothing would. The surprise came from something else.

The Fragment of the Coffin had evolved.

Chapter 483: Against the Natural Order

Zac quickly opened up his Dao Screen, and as expected, there was a change.

Fragment of the Coffin (Middle): All attributes +20, Endurance +190, Vitality +120, Intelligence +35, Wisdom +65. Effectiveness of Endurance +10%

Zac still didn't know when the upgrade took place, but he guessed that it mainly came from creating a Coffin-type Spirit Tool. He had sat as though he was in trance witnessing the whole process, and something about the experience had helped him break through.

Of course, more things had contributed to the upgrade. He had taken the first step toward upgrading the Fragment from witnessing the Dao Apparition of the War Stele, and he had fought both in the life-and-death battle against half the Base Town, followed by the battle against the cultists.

These battles had set the foundations for the evolution, and the magical activation of the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was probably the final spark that upgraded the Fragment. However, these things were just the latest additions. Alea had been the spark of inspiration to the formation of the Fragment of the Coffin since the very beginning.

The vision of her lying in the stasis array had felt like a perfect mirror of the blood-drenched lotus he witnessed during his Dao Vision. The two visions had merged into the Fragment of the Coffin, and the recent events were a continuation of that reality. Zac couldn't exactly pinpoint what concept was added to the Dao Fragment though, but he slowly started to form an idea.

He had long since started to walk the path of life and death, but only the Seed of Trees had properly incorporated this concept so far. The Seed of Rot was clearly death-attuned, but that seed was mostly propped up by fortuitous encounters. The concept he had incorporated into the Fragment of the Coffin was one he already had brushed upon before; life through death.

There were some differences though. The insight related to trees was more akin to how a seed would grow from the ashes of a burned-down forest, gaining life through death. However, the insights he gained now was rather based on embracing death for a shot at life.

He knew that he essentially had killed Alea when he turned her into a Spirit Tool. Even if her consciousness awoke again she wouldn't be living. But Alea dying was the only way for her to live. The insight contained the willingness to go against the natural order, whereas the earlier insight was based on making the most of the natural order.

They were the same, but also the opposite.

Zac felt it was an extremely important step in the creation he was building for himself, a realignment of his Dao so that it would better fit as one half of the whole. Getting a second Middle-Grade Fragment would no doubt improve his choices upon evolving as well, but for now he focused on the gained attributes.

The improved attributes weren't too surprising, apart from the boost to Endurance being slightly smaller than expected. That was the best-case scenario though. He had reached a terrifying 1692 Endurance in his Human form after the latest upgrade, and while he still was some ways from the attribute cap of 2500, he still needed to be careful. A few more titles and another Dao upgrade and he might hit the ceiling.

He had only lost 3 points in Strength from reaching the limit of the F-Grade, but a loss at this stage could be huge in case there were complications for him to upgrade his Race to D-Grade.

There wasn't cause to worry just yet though, and Zac refocused on **[Love's Bond]**. He already knew that there were also actually two skills in the Spirit Tool already to match the two fractals on the handle of **[Verun's Bite]**, but he wouldn't use them now as they had pretty big cool-downs.

A long cool-down was fine with Zac though since that meant that the skills were a lot stronger than normal. It was just like how his ultimate skills, except **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, couldn't be used over and over.

All in all, he felt that his new Spirit Tool was even better than expected. The more he thought about it the more he felt it would be extremely easy to incorporate **[Love's Bond]** into his fighting style without it affecting the fighting style he had come up with for himself.

It almost symbolized his whole creation in a sense. It was an extremely good fit with most of his skills in his Undying Bulwark class, while also adding something new to the table. It perfectly mirrored his Fragment of the Coffin as well, and he would perhaps be able to move them both toward the Dao of Death over time.

But the Spirit Tool also represented life and rebirth through Alea's soul and the purpose of its creation. If things progressed as he hoped he would be able to turn Death into Life, and give Alea back her life again.

He could even think of some interesting possibilities with the sparks he could create with the help of the remnants. Getting them under control was a long-term plan, but perhaps he would be able to use the chains as a delivery method in the future.

In the final attack against the dragon he had used Creation Energy to form a spear to house the spark, but perhaps he could simply put the sparks into the coffin and shoot them out with a chain. He could only imagine the destructive potential of a Neprosium chain infused with the purest destruction.

He wouldn't need to force it or change himself to adapt to the shield, and the System upheld its end of the bargain and created a Spirit Tool suited just for him. The process had even

given him a second Mid-Tier Fragment, which might allow him to get a fitting Arcane class. After having upgraded a second he couldn't help but fantasize about what options he might see when touching the Nexus Node this time.

Zac didn't immediately head over to the Nexus Node though, but he rather spent another hour to completely rid himself of the weakened state from using [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. He had gotten mostly better during his talk with Catheya, but he wanted to be completely rid of any lingering threats to his evolution before taking that step.

He already had the ticking-time bombs in his head to worry about.

Truthfully, the Undead Incursion wasn't the only reason why he wanted to evolve as quickly as possible; there were two more reasons. The first was the two remnants in his mind. He knew there was a tribulation waiting for him when evolving. It was the final test before reaching E-Grade, and he would normally be completely confident in passing.

However, the two remnants in his mind had already proven extremely adept at causing chaos at the most inopportune times, and Zac was afraid that they would flare up during the tribulation. It was better to smoothly into E-Grade now while they remnants were still drained and in an inactive state.

The second was that he was getting dangerously close to the limit of how many attributes he could have. With the Fragment of the Coffin having evolved just now, his wiggle room was getting limited. There was also probably a title waiting for reaching E-Grade first on the planet, and then there was potentially something for surviving the integration, closing the most Incursions, and becoming the world leader, and so on.

There were potentially a lot of titles waiting the moment he managed to close the final Incursions, and he wanted to have the ability to enjoy the bonuses. His plan was to immediately eat the [**Fruit of Rebirth**] and the two race-boosting pills he got in the base town while flying toward the core of the Dead Zone.

It might not be enough to completely pass into D-Grade Race, but it would at least set up the foundations and both increase his longevity and unlock some of the Attribute Cap of having a D-Grade race.

Zac finally felt he had both figured out what he needed to do and calmed his mind, and the next thing was simply for him to evolve so that he could set out toward the Undead Incursion. He walked over to the Nexus House and found that Kenzie was still installing the **[Heaven's Secrets Array]** he bought during an auction in Base Town.

"How are things?" Zac asked when he arrived, nodding at Ogras who stood to the side as well.

"I'll have this array installed in half an hour," Kenzie answered as she blew a wisp of hair away from her face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'll be able to get a breather when the undead are dealt with," Zac sighed.

"Have you decided what to do to get to the mainland?" Ogras asked.

"If we haven't managed to stop the disruption by the point I'm ready to leave, then I'll risk it and use Kenzie's stabilization array. The area that was jammed by the undead the last time was enormous, and I'm afraid that going to Cogstown will just be a waste of time," Zac said.

"Fair enough," Ogras shrugged.

"I'll get Calrin's uncle to help me set it up," Kenzie said.

"He's pretty skilled with arrays, but he can only help with things that we buy through Thayer Consortia. Something to do with limitations of the Mercantile License."

"That little blue bastard should be thankful that we don't throw him into a spatial tear to search for a safe passage for us," Ogras muttered from the side.

Zac snorted and was inclined to agree. The Sky Gnome's small act of giving him a protective ring had caused a ripple effect of almost incomprehensible proportions. It had led to the Zethaya

Pill house blowing up, and him gaining infamy through slaughtering over a hundred scions of the Zecia sector.

Who knew what trouble waited for him when venturing into the vaster stage of the sector?

However, the demon's words also made him think of something else, and he turned to Ogras.

"Can you have the Sky Gnome and his appraisers come over?" Zac asked. "We need to make a preliminary tally of the gains, I want to see if there's anything useful we can bring to the Dead Zone."

"Sure," Ogras said with some excitement as he flickered away.

Zac turned to his sister and handed her his Cosmos Sack. His most important Treasures had already been moved over to his new Spatial Ring after it was confirmed that it didn't disappear. Most of the stuff he didn't have any direct use for was thrown into the Cosmos Sack to be either appraised or added to the Merit Store.

"I'll go talk with Brazla for a bit," Zac said.

"Is this about Alea?" Kenzie asked as her eyes darted to the necklace around Zac's neck. "Ogras told me what happened."

"I was too late again," Zac sighed. "This was the only thing I could think of."

Kenzie silently looked at her brother, but her eyes spoke volumes.

"I... I just couldn't sit and watch her die," Zac coughed, dodging the meaning of the stare.

He truthfully wasn't sure how he felt about the demoness even now. He had thought about her a lot during the climb, and seeing those snippets of Alea's memories had rekindled the memories of those months they had spent almost attached at the hip after he closed the Demon Incursion. They had gone through ups and downs together, and he knew her even more intimately than Ogras in a sense.

If this had been before the Integration he would no doubt have believed it was love. But the past year had numbed him, made

him almost unable to think about anything except getting stronger. First, it was to find his family, then it was to save Earth. He had never stopped to consider things such as love, especially not after Hannah's betrayal.

But all of that was moot now that she was a coffin.

"So you think you can bring her back in the future?" Kenzie asked instead after seeing her brother's brooding silence.

"That's what I hope. I'll go talk with Brazla, he might know more," Zac said with a pained face. "Provided he's in a talkative mood today."

"Say hello from me, it's been a while since I had time to visit him. This thing will be up and running when you're back," Kenzie said as she turned back to keep working on the **[Heaven's Secrets Array]**.

Zac smiled as he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, and he found himself in front of The Towers of Myriad Dao in a few seconds. His Dao Repository had always looked gaudy, but now that he had witnessed the awe-inspiring Tower of Eternity and its mysterious apparitions, it looked even worse.

The lights were blinding but hollow, completely lacking the mysteries of the universe. Zac kept his opinions to himself though as he walked inside the repository with a staid expression.

"So you survived, after all," the ever-annoying voice drifted over as Brazla descended from a golden light appearing out of nowhere.

The Tool Spirit was decked in golden armor with multiple golden and gem-studded swords attached to his back. Zac wasn't sure, but he guessed that he was copying the creator of the Blademaster Inheritance this time, perhaps inspired by the war outside.

"I thought more capable owners had descended on the island for a moment, but I guess the Great Brazla have to make do with you for a while longer," Brazla added as he threw Zac a scathing glance as he conjured his throne.

“I’ll try to live up to your expectations,” Zac sighed. “My sister sends her regards.”

“I-“ Brazla said, but he suddenly froze as he stared at the necklace around Zac’s neck. “What’s that?”

Chapter 484: Invitations

“This craftsmanship,” Brazla muttered with glowing eyes as he teleported closer. “It almost matches that of the Great Brazla himself. But why does it have a False Spirit within?”

“That’s what I came to talk to you about. One of my people was dying and her soul was crumbling. The only thing I could think of was to use a **[Divine Investiture Array]** to lock her soul in a Spirit Tool in hopes of saving her life.”

“Using the holy array for such a purpose,” Brazla muttered. “Sacrilege. My creator would have turned you into blood mist if he heard about you wasted such a chance on something so frivolous.”

“I was out of options and got desperate,” Zac admitted. “I came to ask you, do you know if I can bring her back?”

“Bring her back?” Brazla asked as he looked at Zac like he was an idiot. “Why would you want to do that? As long as the girl’s spirit heals she can become a True Spirit. You will have to break some rules to upgrade her, but you already seem all too willing to dabble in the taboo.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked.

“This thing will not be able to improve the normal way. You need to find... creative solutions to upgrade it. Solutions that the heavens won’t be too happy about,” the Tool Spirit said, clearly taking pleasure in Zac’s misfortune.

“Why would I need to upgrade the Spirit Tool though?” Zac asked. “I just want to return her to life.”

“Upgrading a weapon will upgrade the spirituality residing within. Just look at the dumb mutt inside your Axe. You will need to upgrade this thing if you want to heal the girl,” Brazla said.

Zac frowned when he heard the news. This was clearly bad. He had never had any desire to go against the System by becoming an unorthodox cultivator, but it was exactly what he needed to do to upgrade [**Love's Bond**] from the sound of it. Even weirder, it almost felt like the System was pushing him in that direction as it was the System that gave him the array.

Just what was it planning?

Was this another type of trial it wanted to have him survive? If he stepped on the unorthodox path he would be turned into a pariah like the Technocrats, and people might get quests to kill him just by coming close to him. Or was the system planning something else entirely? Something related to the Terminus?

But first of all, Zac needed to know if there even was a point to go down that road.

“If I make her a new body, can I put her soul into it and give her back her life?” Zac asked.

“No idea,” Brazla shrugged with disinterest. “Seems pretty stupid.”

“Haven't you ever hoped to become living? To become able to cultivate just like your creator?” Zac probed, hoping to elicit some response.

“Why would the Great Brazla ever want to become a fleshbag cursed by mortality? I am perfection, unsullied by time, and I will walk these halls long after both you and your planet has turned to dust. I might not be able to cultivate, but I am eternal,” the Tool Spirit harangued, and shining lights started appearing all around him like he was a God's avatar or something.

“But do you know if it's possible? Someone as knowledgeable as you must surely have figured some things out,” Zac entreated.

“My creator once mentioned that Spirit Tools can reach a sublime state where they are virtually indistinguishable from cultivators, but he had never seen it himself. Of course, The Great Brazla wouldn't degrade himself to the point of being mistaken for a lowly Human. But all things are possible,” the

Tool Spirit admitted. “Turning a False Spirit back into someone living is probably possible.”

“So it’s possible, after all,” Zac sighed in relief.

“It might be possible, but what you want to do is going against the natural order,” Brazla snorted. “It’s akin to bringing back those from the dead. It might be achievable for the great characters of the multiverse, but what does that have to do with a piece of trash like you?”

“I’ll work hard and get there sooner or later,” Zac said. “As long as it’s possible it’ll be fine.”

A derisive snort was all the Tool Spirit deigned to respond with before he dissipated again.

Zac felt as though a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders as he walked back toward the Nexus House. Brazla was obviously a bit fuzzy on the details, but it really seemed that returning Alea into a demon was within the realm of possibilities. That was all Zac could ask for right now. He knew the process would likely be a long and arduous one, but at least he knew he hadn’t completely messed things up.

The knowledge gave him a sense of purpose beyond saving Earth as well, but for now, he needed to refocus on the task at hand. He needed to get his items appraised and deal with the realignment.

The thought of his items suddenly reminded him of the two Cosmos Sacks he had stowed away just before leaving Base Town. They were from Leyara and Pretty, and curiosity made him take a look before returning to his sister.

The Cosmos Sack he got from Pretty Peak just contained three crystals and a teleportation token, but he was surprised to see that one of them was a Skill Crystal. He didn’t immediately touch it, but rather turned his attention toward the middle crystal that seemed to be a communication crystal. He immediately infused some Cosmic Energy into it and he immediately heard the voice of Pretty Peak in his mind.

I engraved this thing because some things should not be spoken aloud. You should not rely on the Heliophos Clan

dealing with the threat to your planet. There are some unsavory rumors about that clan among the top forces of the Zecia sector.

Divination comes with a cost, one that few are willing to pay unless absolutely necessary. One cannot divulge Heaven's Secrets wantonly. But being able to glimpse the future is also an extremely addicting power from what I have heard.

Zac suddenly remembered Lord 84th who stopped Abbot Everlasting Peace from saying too much. The reincarnated Buddhist had said essentially the same thing. Did divination perhaps mess with the plans the System had set in motion across the multiverse and was therefore punished? Or was it simply that such a heaven-defying ability couldn't be powered by something so basic as Cosmic Energy?

Zac shook his head as he kept listening.

Many believe that the Heliophos Clan is searching for means to avoid the side-effects of Divination and Karmic Manipulation. They are already suspected to have been gravitating toward unorthodox means for tens of thousands of years.

It's possible that Voridis is performing his mad experiments with the clan's tacit blessing, and that they even have covertly protected him from capture by manipulating events behind the curtain. I don't understand how Voridis have survived pursuit for so long otherwise.

I bet they can't wait to find out what scheme that lunatic has concocted in case they can use it for themselves.

Zac sighed when he heard the explanation. Yet another method to deal with the threat of the Redeemer seemed to have been ruined then and there. It looked like hiding was his only option, but as long as he cut any Karmic Links in time they were likely safe.

After meeting Catheya he finally had a better grasp of just how a Star Sector was constituted. She had likened a Star Sector with a book, where each page was a Dimensional layer. A Star Sector was, in other words, not a coherent galaxy teeming with

life, but rather parts of multiple planes stacked so close to each other that dimensional travel was possible.

Not even singular forces were constrained to a single dimension. The Allbright Empire was comprised of planets and continents across thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of realities. Some planets in the Empire might actually exist in the same reality, but so far away from each other that it was infinitely faster to use interdimensional travel rather than normal travel to go between the two planets.

It was akin to wormhole technology that Zac had seen in Science Fiction movies, where space was somehow bent and twisted, and traveling out of the main dimension was like taking a short-cut compared to moving in a straight line.

The whole thing was extremely confusing, but the biggest takeaway was the difficulty of finding one's way without a marker. The Redeemer was probably traveling toward Earth or another seeded planet at this very moment, but he needed to move through multiple dimensions to get here. As long as any Karmic Link was cut off before Voridis was within a few dimensional layers of Earth, then finding this place was almost impossible.

Especially while the System's shroud was still in effect.

This was also why flying treasures that could travel between worlds was expensive to the point that even D-Grade warriors were often confined to their own world, or at least their solar system. The vessels didn't only need to have the capability to fly through the vacuum of space, but they also needed the capabilities to push through dimensional layers.

It was a bit uncomfortable to think about, but Zac's only recourse was to hide Earth so that Voridis fed on some other poor planets instead of Earth. He could only pray that the people of Berum would manage to take out all the remaining members of the Medhin Royals on their side, as no one deserved getting culled by a lunatic like the Redeemer.

That would be the best-case scenario, where all the seed planets managed to hide from Voridis. He already looked as though he wasn't long for the world, and 100 years was a long

time. Perhaps the issue would be dealt with by the time that Earth was properly integrated into the Zecia sector.

I will contact the Heliophos Clan for you, the message continued. But you truly shouldn't expect much. You can still get in touch with me by visiting Jaera at the Blossom Rose Sword School that's close to Trasteria, the city where the Teleportation Token leads. She is an elder there, and a disciple of my father.

Trasteria is located on the main continent of the Allbright Empire, a vast place full of opportunities. You can simply use the token to move to a place with more opportunities if you want. But you should know that your situation is precarious. Standing out too much without a backing can cause an endless amount of trouble to arrive at your doorstep.

The universe is full of lunatics ready to risk everything to progress one step further on the road of cultivation, and some might believe you might be the key for them to take that step.

I hope you will be able to survive the following centuries, the Zecia sector needs a beacon.

The second information crystal was a comprehensive introduction packet of the Allbright Empire, its forces, and even some Mystic Realms that provided good limited titles. There were also a couple of identities that Zac could freely assume with the help of the attached skill, which was of the Shapeshifting variety. It was like he was about to enter the witness protection program or something.

The skill was called [**Shared Identity**], and it worked a bit differently compared to [**Thousand Faces**]. The skill he got from Pretty seemed to be able to create a greater transformation, where even one's aura could be changed by a certain degree, but it came with only three "pre-loaded" identities.

He could essentially take one of these three shared identities, but he wouldn't be able to change his face as he wished like he could with [**Thousand Faces**]. Zac held off on learning the skill for now, but it wasn't impossible he'd use it in the future. It would be pretty convenient to step into the shoes of

someone with a proper background, but he didn't know if there were hidden strings attached to taking the name of one of these three men.

Zac turned his attentions to the second Cosmos Sack next, but his expression froze when he noticed its contents. There were only two things inside, a short note and a frilly piece of fabric.

A small greeting gift to remember me by. I am not allowed to hand out Teleportation Tokens to the Void Gate, but I would be happy to entertain you if you have the opportunity to stop by. We can talk about fashion and our futures under the light of the Void Star.

-Leyara

Zac blankly looked at the note, his mind unable to compute what was going on. The strained smile of Leyara suddenly flashed by in his mind, before he remembered the apologetic face of Galau. Just what had the merchant divulged during their meeting? Would he be known as some sort of deviant in the whole Sector because of that one level in the tower?

A sigh escaped from his mouth as he stowed away the Cosmos Sack, unsure what to do with the "treasure". He could only reluctantly put it into his Spatial ring, as it would be weird throwing it out in the middle of his forest. However, things didn't get much better when he returned to the Nexus House where Kenzie stood next to a rack of exquisite dresses, while three Sky Gnomes eagerly went through the mound of treasures.

"Why are there so many dresses in your sack?" Kenzie asked with a weird smile when she noticed his return.

"I was about to ask," the demon laughed from the side. "I thought I absconded with the most 'treasures' back then, but I see that I still have much to learn."

"Are you planning on wooing someone? Is it Thea?" Kenzie asked before she shot him a hesitant look. "Or don't tell me...?"

"Don't be silly," Zac sighed. "The seventh floor had me fighting actual scions from other parts of the multiverse. I

looted my new ring and those dresses from a girl who targeted me.”

“Do you think any trouble from that will lead back to Earth?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“I doubt it?” Zac said hesitantly. “It kind of looked like my human side was killed by the girl who I looted, and she was killed by someone else in turn. I fought the rest of the battle in my Draugr-form. I don’t think the System would allow problems to follow you back home, right? Perhaps it’s possible to do something to ‘cleanse’ the items if needed?”

However, he honestly wasn’t as sure as he let on.

Chapter 485: Choices

He had already noticed it back during his meeting with Catheya, but there was something wrong with his chest. Iz Tayn had left a burn on his body that he hadn't been able to get rid of with healing pills. However, getting his torso blown apart and reformed by Creation Energy had dealt with that problem.

Or so he thought.

He still couldn't see any mark on his body, but he had felt a slight pain in his chest multiple times now, but the feeling was gone before he had a chance to react, making him almost doubt it was ever there. He couldn't see anything amiss, but the fire mage seemed to come from a real powerful force.

She might have all kinds of means of tracking he had no idea about.

“The Thayer Consortia happens to be skilled in those kinds of endeavors, we'll happily help in this regard... For a small remuneration,” Calrin said as he gave a prim bow. “Young Lord, it is good to see you again.”

Zac didn't immediately greet the wily merchant, but he rather gazed at the Sky Gnome for a few seconds as his thumb rubbed the defensive treasure that he received from Calrin before he left for the tower.

“Did you know that the ring you gave me would cause trouble with the Tsarun clan?” Zac asked while he tried to gauge the slippery merchant's face for any lies.

“No way!” Calrin said, looking genuinely shocked. “It is just a defensive treasure that has been kept in my family. I just wanted to make sure that you, my great benefactor, wouldn't meet any untoward end during your first sojourn into the Cultivator World!”

“Well, your small gift led to the destruction of the Zethaya Pill House, and the death of almost a hundred elites of the sector. Including a Dravorak Princeling,” the demon snorted from the side. “Oh, and a main branch Tsarun Scion along with all their members at the Base Town. Thayer Consortia might become famous across the whole sector over the following years as the rumors spread.”

“It- Ah? Dravorak as in the Dravorak Dynasty?” the Sky Gnome said, his face aghast. “Did they see the signet as well? I mean, it wasn’t my intention to cause any trouble. I don’t understand what’s going on?”

“Just what happened during your climb?!” Kenzie exclaimed with shock from the side after glaring at the Sky Gnome, who quickly busied himself with the pile of treasures by the side.

“It’s complicated,” Zac sighed. “I got spotted by one of Calrin’s old enemies, but problem was that I didn’t handle it well. Things got a bit out of control from there and a bunch of people tried to kill me. But it was mostly sorted out.”

“Sorted out?” Ogras snorted from the side, but he didn’t add any more oil to the fire after a glare from Zac.

“Well, we also learned a few things about the origins of the Redeemer. For now, make sure that no one on Port Atwood mentions where they come from if they decide to head to the Tower of Eternity. My identity might be a bit delicate,” Zac said after some thought as he turned to Kenzie.

“If I may, young master,” Calrin said from the side, “What level did you reach?”

“73rd level. The entrance of the 9th floor,” Zac said, not bothering to hide the truth.

“9th Floor!” Calrin screamed while the appraisers looked up from the pile of treasures for the first time, shock clearly written all over their faces.

“Monster! True monster!” the Sky Gnome muttered, before his face lit up again. “But that’s for the best. With you as a guardian, The Thayer Consortia will reach unprecedented

heights. I, Calrin Thayer, will not only have led my family out of a calamity, but toward the heaven's themselves!"

"What are you getting so big-headed for, you little bastard," Ogras snorted from the side. "You better think of new ways to provide benefits to your shareholders instead. A big tree might give you shade, but it also requires a lot of nutrients."

Zac slightly smiled at the antics, but he didn't correct the demon. He still couldn't tell if the Sky Gnome had exposed his connection to the Thayer Consortia on purpose or not, but it had caused heaps of trouble regardless. The little merchant would have to work extra hard to make up for the chaos he had caused.

But he knew that he would have to rely on the Sky Gnome to a certain degree after meeting Catheya. He had no idea that elites required more energy to level up compared to weaker cultivators, which honestly made him worry about his own situation a bit.

Not only were his attributes almost ten times higher compared to a normal cultivator, but he also had high efficiency on the attributes. Add to that that he had a second class to level, and the even more troubling issue of him being a mortal. All that combined made for an extremely torturous leveling experience that would require terrifying amounts of bloodshed and treasures to reach the peak of E-Grade.

As for the grades above that, he didn't even dare think about it.

"How long until you've gone through everything?" Zac asked instead as he turned to Clarin.

"We'll have a preliminary answer for you in two hours," Calrin hurriedly said. "You can focus on your cultivation with ease."

Zac nodded before he turned to Ogras.

"So, do you have any advice? The information crystals I have only mentioned the three tribulations," Zac asked. "Heart, Body, and Soul. It said that using treasures to pass is impossible and that you had to rely on your own prowess."

Then it just went on to say that one should have an elder nearby in case of a mishap.”

The information crystal was something he had bought in Base Town during the first week he stayed there. He had bought a bunch of general information crystals that contained all sorts of things that were good to know. Most of it was things that any teenager belonging to a cultivation force would know, which was why they cost almost nothing.

However, that also meant that they didn't delve too deep into any topics, only giving an overview.

Buying the crystals had been the first step toward self-reliance for the humans of Port Atwood. It wasn't that he didn't trust Ogras or Alyn's teachings, but their world view and knowledge were influenced by growing up in Clan Azh'Rezak.

What worked there wasn't necessarily optimal for Port Atwood, so it didn't hurt getting another source of knowledge. It wasn't anywhere near as comprehensive as Thea's library, but it was a start.

“It differs,” Ogras said as he looked at the Nexus Node while Kenzie was putting the finishing touches to the support array. “It tests you in one of three ways, depending on where The Ruthless Heaven's feels you are lacking. The tribulation will strike at your weakness, and either you pass or you fail.”

“What happens if you fail?” Zac asked.

“Anything from mild wounds to death depending on how badly you performed and whether someone could disperse the tribulation for you,” the demon shrugged. “But truthfully, I've only met one who failed his trial so badly he was forced to give up on cultivation. Obburak, a guard in my home. He undertook the trial drunk out of his mind, it ended with him going insane.”

“Insane? Just what did he encounter?” Zac asked with a frown.

“The Body Tribulation is essentially The Ruthless Heavens beating you up, and you just have to bear it. It is to test that you have created a foundation sturdy enough to keep building

upon. You will probably not get that one considering your monstrous constitution,” the demon said with an envious glance. “It is the most common trial for Dexterity and Intelligence-based classes.”

“And then?” Zac urged.

“Next there is the Spirit Tribulation,” the demon continued. “Your soul is attacked in a way that neither Skills nor items can protect you from. You need to use your soul and Dao to defend yourself. The Soul is the connection to the Heavens, and it needs to be strong enough to withstand the weight of the Dao,” Alyn said.

Zac grimaced as he heard the description. His soul was already in a pretty fragile state after having been forcibly torn apart and mended twice the past month. It was a patchwork upon a patchwork, where the slightest thing might set off a chain-reaction beyond his control. However, his soul had become pretty sturdy from the series of harrowing experiences, so he still felt some confidence in case he got that one, at least while the Remnants stayed inactive.

“Finally there is the Heart Tribulation. You will be thrown into illusions and temptations, and you will need to break free. The Heavens test your conviction and mental fortitude. A sturdy body and soul is needed to walk the path of cultivation, but a resolute heart might be even more important,” the demon continued. “This is the trial that turned Obburak into a simpleton, by the way.”

Zac slowly nodded as he listened to the options. The third one didn't feel too difficult either. His mental state should be a lot sturdier compared to most peak F-Grade warriors after his countless life-and-death battles. Many cultivators who had reached this point had never even left their own clan's estates, and this kind of trial might be pretty difficult for that kind of greenhouse warriors.

Still, it was a relief that the risk of death or crippling was pretty low. He could still fail, but he would at least be able to heal up and fight the Undead Empire in his current condition.

“Is it the same for all the rarities, or are there more things to be wary of when talking Epic Classes or higher?” Zac asked.

“Perhaps Epic and higher have different trials apart from the normal three, I wouldn’t know,” the demon slowly said. “But they will no doubt be more dangerous. Each increase in rarity means a sharp increase in difficulty that accompanies the tribulation.”

Zac looked at the Crystal with mixed emotions. He wasn’t sure if he was ready. He wanted to consolidate his gains and stabilize his foundations before attempting this. But time waited for no man, and he couldn’t hold off any longer.

Hearing about the losses out on the ocean, and seeing the scorched landscape outside his home had been a stark reminder that every day he spent on accumulating his strength was another day of disastrous losses across the world.

Perhaps he would be able to enter the heart of the Dead Zone and take out the Lich King without evolving. But perhaps he wouldn’t. With the situation looking like it did there would be no second chances or do-overs. If his assault failed or even got slightly delayed the whole world would fall.

He could not have that on his consciousness.

“It’s done,” Kenzie said as she looked up with a tired grin.

“Thank you. Try to rest up,” Zac smiled, a pang of guilt blossoming up in his heart again.

He had heard from Ogras just how hard she had fought to keep things together while he was gone, and her unstable aura clearly indicated that her soul was overtaxed. He had already learned from Jaol that using high tech was draining on the soul, and Jeeves was no doubt as high tech as they came.

“Here, take these with you as well,” Zac said as he took out a stack of Soul Crystals. “They’ll help restore your mental energy.”

“Where did you get that?” Ogras said with wide eyes, his hand already reaching out to snatch one from Kenzie.

“Here, take this,” Zac snorted and took out a few more after he slapped away the demon’s hand. “I got these Soul Crystals from the Mentalist Cultivator on the 7th floor as well.”

“It’s called a Soul Crystal?” Ogras asked curiously as he tried absorbing it.

“No idea, that’s just what I called it,” Zac shrugged. “They didn’t have these things on your home planet?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of crystals like this in our sector at all,” Ogras muttered with a frown. “Perhaps our sector simply doesn’t produce them. Trade between sectors is pretty difficult from what I’ve heard, and only the top people do it. Nobodies like us will have to make do with local products.”

“So I won’t be able to restock on these things?” Zac muttered with disappointment.

He had thought that might be a real possibility after not having seen a single Soul Crystal during his time in the Base Town, but he had held on to some small hope that was because he’d only been there for less than two weeks. But judging by the demon’s reaction he wasn’t so lucky.

He suddenly regretted using Soul Crystals like candy during his climb, but he also knew that they had played a large part in him managing to break through the 8th floor. But he would have to be more careful about any expenditure going forward, which was fine now that the two primordial Remnants were restraining each other.

With the array installed Zac couldn’t wait any longer, and he walked over to the large crystal with brisk steps, anticipation making his heart pound. The moment Zac touched the Nexus Node to initiate the upgrade a screen appeared in front of him, but it was vastly different compared to the sparse rows of information he had seen the last time. He almost completely forgot his surroundings as he eagerly read the boxes.

Free Attributes Gained Per Level: 10

Base Attributes Gained Per Node 76-100:

Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +6

Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +7
Arcane: Base Attributes: +8
Base Attributes Gained Per Node 101-125:
Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +14
Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +16
Arcane: Base Attributes: +18
Base Attributes Gained Per Node 126-150:
Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +22
Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +25
Arcane: Base Attributes: +28

[Option 1.]

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Gatekeeper of Sukhavati [E-Epic]	Vitality + 10, Endurance +8, Wisdom +5	Chains of Samsara
<i>Paradise is waiting, but only the worthy may step past your gates. Divergence from Hatchetman.</i>		
Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Undying Warlord [E-Epic]	Strength +12, Endurance +10	Profane Annihilation

*Unstoppable. Undeniable.
Unmatched. Divergence
from Undying Bulwark.*

[Option 2.]

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Vessel of Destruction [E-Arcane]	Strength +38, Agility +5 Endurance -10	Avatar of Wrath
<i>Only through destruction can creation take place. Become the harbinger of a new era. Upgrade of Hatchetman.</i>		
Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Nature's Lament [E-Epic]	Endurance +10, Wisdom +11	Touch of Anguish
<i>Paradise is a lie, a putrid tomb of unimaginable horrors. Divergence from Undying Bulwark.</i>		

[Option 3.]

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained

Edge of Arcadia [E-Epic]	Strength +14, Vitality +8	Rapturous Divide
<i>Even paradise needs a butcher, an unrelenting storm of violence. Upgrade of Hatchetman.</i>		
Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Fetters of Desolation [E-Epic]	Strength +11, Endurance +8, Wisdom +5	Blighted Cut
<i>Bind them to your calamity. Sever their path. Emerge alone. Divergence from Undying Bulwark.</i>		

[Option 4.]

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Gaia's Apostle [E-Epic]	Strength +5, Vitality +12, Wisdom + 5	Gaia's Eruption
<i>The champion of verdure, unmatched and unkillable. Upgrade of Hatchetman.</i>		
Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained

Wall of Bones [E-Epic]	Endurance +18, Vitality +5	Profane Phalanx
<i>The living can only run in fear as the tide of bones moves forward. Upgrade of Undying Bulwark.</i>		

[Option 5.]

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Warmaster of Hecate [E-Epic]	Strength +15, Vitality +7	Nature's Fall
<i>Empowered by the Sacred Yew, the Warmaster becomes Death incarnate. Divergence of Hatchetman.</i>		

Name	Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)	First Skill Gained
Risen Asura[E-Epic]	Strength +12, Endurance +11	Winds of War
<i>Not even death can chain down your furor. Divergence of Undying Bulwark.</i>		

Chapter 486: Decision

Zac looked at the options with mixed emotions. He had succeeded in the sense that there actually was an Arcane class available, a class called Vessel of Destruction. However, it didn't have another Arcane to accompany it. It was rather matched with an Epic Class called Nature's Lament.

He had been hesitant about what he should do after hearing Catheya's description, and this only muddied the waters further. With Arcane classes locking in your future path there was a real risk that picking just one Arcane class while leaving the other at Epic might have some unanticipated ramifications.

If there had been a set of two Arcane classes he might just have ignored Catheya's warning and followed Yrial's advice to shoot for the stars, but now he wasn't so sure.

His instincts told him that he needed to create a functioning system between his two classes where both sides moved toward a common goal. He had felt there were some compatibility issues with his second class for some time now, and there was a real risk that his Draugr side might turn into a bottleneck if he wasn't careful.

Zac slowly read the description of Vessel of Destruction. It felt most likely that it was based around the Splinter. It seemed to utilize the rage that the splinter radiated, and the class would perhaps even help him in harnessing the bronze sparks. It also provided a skill called Avatar of Wrath, which sounded like some sort of boosting skill in the vein of [**Hatchetman's Rage**], or perhaps something more akin to [**Vanguard of Undeath**].

However, nothing indicated that it also incorporated the Shard or the balance between the two forces, and neither was there any such indication on the accompanying class. It wasn't surprising though, as there simply hadn't been enough time for

him to get acquainted with the pink flashes and the Shard of Creation.

He only had access to it during the frantic escape from the Technocrat vessel and the subsequent battle against the dragon. That was nothing compared to the months of carrying the Splinter and the weeks of constant experimentation into the bronze flashes.

The Dao requirements had been fulfilled after reaching Middle mastery with the Dao of the Coffin, and there was no doubt in his mind that he had gone far beyond what was required to generate enough merit for a second Arcane option. He had conquered the 8th floor of the Tower of Eternity. He had taken down a literal dragon before forcing the elites of the whole sector to give in.

He had taken out a whole Technocrat vessel, and he had closed almost all the Incursions of a newly Integrated world. He had even witnessed the ‘Terminus’, the origin and the end of the Dao itself. If he didn’t have enough achievements by now, then who did?

That meant there was a problem with his ‘creation’.

There was a fuzzy image of his future cultivation in his mind, one based on a few defining features of his power. It was a path of duality, exemplified through his two classes, his opposing Daos, and the two remnants in his mind. But there was still nothing that really tied these three pairs together. He also had no actual idea what the bronze and pink flashes he created were, or even how he was supposed to properly use them.

He knew that there was no way for him to gain a quick fix to upgrade Nature’s Lament to an Arcane option, so he could only drop the issue for now. Cultivation was measured in centuries, even millennia, and he had ample time to figure out the missing pieces of his cultivation path.

There were all sorts of logical reasons why he shouldn’t take the Vessel of Destruction, but the word ‘Arcane’ was like a target that kept drawing back Zac’s eyes. The class was clearly powerful, and it would both provide more attributes from the

Base Attributes, while almost ten extra attribute points per level.

It was an extremely lopsided class, but his unique situation with bonus attributes would cancel out the huge downside of negative Endurance. He was frozen in indecision for a few seconds, but eventually, his fears of the potential risks overcame the lure of the potential rewards.

He was giving up on an Arcane class for E-Grade.

Zac slowly read through each of the four other options instead, not too surprised with the rarity of them. He had already expected to be presented mostly Epic Classes, perhaps with a few Rare ones peppered in. The only question was how many options he would be provided.

There was no denying that his visit to the Tower of Eternity had been worth it in terms of options to choose from. Not only did his options max out at five, but every single Class apart from Vessel of Destruction was Epic. Most of them were new as well, with only Undying Warlord remaining as an option from his previous inquiry.

The **[Heaven's Secrets Array]** was also showing its worth, and the information he was given was just on a completely different level compared to last time. It didn't just provide him with information about what attributes the classes provided, but even revealed the names of the skills he would gain.

Zac already knew about the base attributes after having spoken with Ylvas and Catheya, but it was still eye-opening to see the numbers in person. It was not without reason that Ogras had said that Low-Tiered Titles were useless for anything except leveraging them into medium and high-tiered counterparts.

Even a common class warrior would gain the equivalent of a top tier Low-tiered title every level while still early E-Grade, excluding Luck of course. Furthermore, that boost would increase further at reaching Middle E-Grade, and then once more upon reaching High E-Grade. If things followed the same pattern as F-Grade, then there might also be a bonus waiting at the peak of E-Grade.

And that wasn't all. The actual class gave another round of attributes on top of the base, and a quick glance proved that an epic class seemed to give another 20 to 25 attribute points, in addition to the ten free attribute points. That meant that a Low E-Grade Warrior with an Epic class would gain almost 80 Attribute points per level, which was in line with what Ylvas had said.

The real question on Zac's mind was how this base worked for him. Judging by the description it seemed like a done deal that he would get the class-specific attributes from both classes, along with two sets of free attributes as he did level his classes separately. But would he also get two base packs per level?

It would make a huge difference, as more than half of the attributes came from the Base Attributes awarded upon breaking open a node. If he didn't get the base attributes twice he'd "only" get 50% more attributes compared to a normal cultivator, drastically reducing his advantage.

Another piece of information that the array added was whether the evolution was an upgrade or a divergence. Zac guessed that meant that the new class would either build upon the earlier class or move it away from its predecessor in some other direction.

For example, Edge of Arcadia and Gaia's Apostle were both clearly related to the Hatchetman Class, but judging by their attributes and skills they went in different directions. Edge of Arcadia seemed to focus more on axe-work whereas Gaia's Apostle leaned toward nature skills like **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

A divergence would instead stake out a new path, perhaps only partially relying on the earlier class. It wasn't surprising that he saw mostly divergent options for his Draugr-class after splitting up its Dao Seeds with hardness going into the Coffin and Sanctuary going into the Bodhi. It might result in some of his old skills becoming obsolete, but Zac already knew that going in.

Zac knew he needed to make a decision, and he first excluded the fourth option. The Draugr-class seemed to be purely

defensive, which was the very thing he wanted to move away from. Gaia's Apostle didn't really resonate with him either, even though **[Nature's Punishment]** had been one of his main skills for dealing with tough opponents.

The other three options both had strong points and demerits, but Zac eventually discarded the first option as well, leaving him with options three and five. Undying Warlord seemed like a good fit for him, as it probably was just like his current class with a higher focus on offense. However, the problem was with the class 'Gatekeeper of Sukhavati'.

The class didn't provide a single point in Strength, which indicated a significant step away from his current fighting style. Even worse, it seemed to be lopsided in the sense that it was based on both the Bodhi and the Coffin. He didn't want those two Fragments going into the same class, as he wanted for each class to represent one of the concepts of life and death, or Creation and Oblivion.

The third and fifth options both seemed to fulfill all his goals for his new class. The Draugr Classes seemed to be geared much more offensively compared to Undying Bulwark. Risen Asura gave the feeling of pure violence and oppression, like he would become an unstoppable killing machine that refused to die until all his enemies had fallen before him.

The Fetters of Desolation was a bit less clear, but he still felt it was a very good match. The name of the class didn't really sound like something he'd want to use, but there were some good indications that it was still suited for him. The first indicator was the skill, Blighted Cut. It sounded like a weapon-based attack, and perhaps something that took advantage of the Corrosive elements of the Dao of the Coffin.

The flavor text also made him think of a restriction-based warrior who entrapped and weakened his enemies before he delivered the killing blow. That seemed like a good option to him, as that was the main way that he used his Undying Bulwark Class. He trapped his enemies in the Miasmatic Cage, then whittled them down with **[Winds of Decay]**, **[Deathwish]**, and the Spectral Chains.

If the enemy tried a desperate strike he took them out with **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Unholy Strike]**.

Of course, these were still just hypotheses, but there was undeniably something about that class that pulled at him. He wasn't sure whether there was the advertised Karmic Guidance that was supposed to be included in the **[Heaven's Secret Array]**, or if it was because of his recently acquired Spirit Tool.

As for the two classes for his human side, both of them had strong points.

Arcadia contained the meaning of becoming one with nature, which was exactly the direction he wanted to take the class based on his life-aspected vision for his path. But it still had Strength as its main attribute, which clearly indicated a warrior-archetype together with the flavor text and skill option.

However, Warmaster of Hecate had provided an interesting twist to his envisioned path. Hecate was a goddess of witchcraft, death, and poison. It was a fusion of Death and Life, while still being a warrior-type class with a connection to nature. This fit well together with the 'Risen' part of the other class, which seemed based on his recent insight of Life from Death.

So one of the options blended life and death, incorporating a nascent duality of his two main concepts into both the classes. The other option was more neatly separated with his Human side representing life and nature, and his Draugr side representing death and desolation.

The question was whether he wanted to fuse these two concepts already and build upon it, or if it was better to progress in the two paths separately until he understood more about what the paths entailed.

Eventually, his eyes turned to the third option, the combination of Edge of Arcadia and Fetters of Desolation.

He decided to go with this option for two reasons. First was the fact that Warmaster of Hecate was a Divergence of

Hatchetman, a class he felt perfectly suited for him. He would rather upgrade his human side and get a Divergent class for his Draugr side.

The second reason was that he felt it was too early to start mucking about and fusing the two concepts of life and death into one single class. He wasn't even sure if that was the form his 'creation' would take in the future, and he didn't want to walk down that path before he had come to a conclusion there.

However, he didn't immediately activate his option, but rather turned toward his sister and Ogras who curiously looked at him.

"It's working," Zac nodded.

"Well no shit," the demon muttered. "You've been standing still with a disgusting grin on your face for five minutes. Are you ready to evolve?"

"I'm going now," Zac nodded.

"None of us can help you if you mess up, so you might as well do it in your courtyard where you won't be disturbed," the demon said. "You will have a minute or so before the tribulation descends."

Zac nodded in agreement, as it sounded as the best option.

"This might take a while, but make sure I'm okay if I haven't emerged in a day," Zac said as he took out the dozen Array Breakers from his Spatial Ring. "And focus on identifying treasures that will help in the battle against the Undead Empire. I'm pretty sure that these are all Array Breakers, see which ones might be of use against anything the Lich King uses."

"We'll certainly extract their secrets by the time you're done," Calrin hurriedly nodded, obviously eager to rack up some contribution.

"Good," Zac nodded before he turned back to the Nexus Node and picked the third option before having a chance to change his mind again.

[Tribulation will descend in 1 Minute]

“Good luck,” Kenzie said from the side, but some excitement was evident in her eyes. “You’re making history here.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Zac smiled before he flashed away, quickly returning to his courtyard.

The moment he entered he activated his layered arrays before he sat down on his prayer mat. He doubted it would be of any help, but it did help him calm his mind a bit better as he waited for the minute to pass.

Finally it arrived, and he felt himself being surrounded by a mysterious energy. He couldn’t figure out what it was made of, but it felt a bit reminiscent of the sky of lightning he had witnessed when the Chaos Pattern had appeared. Of course, it was an extremely watered-down version.

He was just about to close his eyes and brace for the tribulation when two prompts appeared in front of him.

[Heart Tribulation Descends. Struggle for Survival]

[Spirit Tribulation Descends. Struggle for Survival]

“...Shit,” Zac muttered before his world was consumed by pain and fire.

Chapter 487: Heart

Zac growled from the pain as it felt like his soul had been doused in kerosene and lit on fire. The torment made it almost impossible for him to form a coherent thought, let alone erect some sort of defense.

Not that there was any. He knew that skills and items were useless in a case like this, and he could only bear with it. The pain was agonizing, but it wouldn't actually hurt his soul unless he gave in. He repeated the word 'endure' over and over in his mind, turning it into a mantra of perseverance.

The pain was well beyond what he had expected for a tribulation though, it was almost up there with other terrifying ordeals such as his dip in the Cosmic Water pond. Did everyone have to endure suffering of this magnitude, or was he given special attention because he chose an Epic class?

However, he didn't have time to form any hypothesis before his surroundings blurred, and he suddenly found himself in his bed. Zac looked around in confusion, his past experiences turning muddled and indistinct as a slender arm reached around him. He smiled and turned over, coming face to face with his new girlfriend.

"What is it?" Hannah asked she scratched his beard with a wink. "Can't sleep?"

"Something like that," Zac smiled as he dragged her closer to him.

"Hmm," Hanna hummed as she leaned in for a kiss as her hand reached downward.

Zac's body was quick to respond, but he froze just as he was about to reciprocate her actions. How did he get here? Why did things seem so off?

“What’s wrong?” Hannah panted in his ear, her hand stopping just as it was about to reach inside his underwear.

Lust fought with unease, but Zac finally shook his head and climbed out of his bed, his head darting back and forth with a wildness in his eyes.

Something wasn’t right.

A heavy sense of wrongness encompassed him even though everything in his studio apartment looked like it should. But a shocking pain in his mind almost made him keel over, and he held his head in his hands as the world turned blurry.

“Zac? What’s going on? Should I call an ambulance?” Hanna asked with fright as she ran over, but Zac’s eyes widened when a knife suddenly appeared in her hand and sank deep into his chest.

“You’re not real,” Zac growled, finally remembering what was going on. “This is not real.”

“Yes, isn’t that what you like to tell yourself after you discarded me like trash?” Hannah sneered as the world collapsed.

Anxiety burned in Zac’s chest as he urged the flying disk to move faster, but it felt like he was flying through solid matter as he saw his beleaguered army in the distance. Alea stood in the front, desperately fighting to create an opportunity for the army to survive. But it was for naught as she was cut down where she stood by a group of spectral assassins.

Zac finally managed to push through the solidified air as he landed next to her, and he quickly put a healing pill in her mouth. But it barely had an effect as the wounds kept bleeding, staining the ground in a crimson hue.

“Why didn’t you save me?” Alea cried as she looked up at Zac with desolation in her eyes. “I loved you. I bled for you. But you only saw me as a tool to further your goals.”

“I-“ Zac stammered, but he had no chance to form a response before one sobbing voice after another spoke up around him.

“Why did you give up on us?” a Valkyrie cried. “You were supposed to lead us out of misery, not into it.”

“Why?” a dozen dying soldiers cried in anguish, their wails growing in agony and sorrow by the second.

“Why?!”

“WHY?!”

The chorus grew louder and louder, and Zac felt like his mind was splitting apart. A wave of pain came from nowhere at that very moment, making him fall over in agony. He arduously got to his feet again, and he tried to explain himself to the angry mob of corpses. He didn't mean for anyone to die. He was trying to do the right thing, but he was just one man, unable to save everyone.

But the words didn't come. It felt like when he was in a dream where he wanted to throw a punch, but he was wholly impotent to actually urge his hand to move. He wasn't even sure whether his explanation could be considered a legitimate excuse, but it was moot as he couldn't even vocalize a single word. Zac only helplessly fell backward, the screams growing ever louder in his mind.

Alea crawled closer as he mutely sat on the ground, leaving a trail of blood and intestines behind her. It was with great exertion she managed to drag herself up along his torso, completely drenching Zac in blood while doing so. She whimpered in pain as she enclosed him in a final embrace, her head resting on his shoulder.

“Was this all a game to you?” the sorrowful voice of the poison mistress whispered in his ear. “You played around in the Underworld, looking for opportunities to level up. You left us to fight one of the strongest forces in the Multiverse. You sent us to our deaths. You're the leader, you should join us.”

“Join us!” the chorus echoed as a storm of poison seeped out of every pore of Alea's body.

Zac felt muddled from the blazing pain in his head, but his Danger Sense screamed for him to wake up.

No!

Zac ardently recoiled in his mind, and the world around him cracked like a broken mirror.

Shame and self-blame threatened to drown Zac as he stood in front of Thea's sickbed. Her piercing blue eyes had lost their luster as she hollowly stared at him, and her ragged breaths told him she already hovered at death's door.

"I thought we had formed an understanding during our time in the Hunt. But the moment we left you forgot about me, discarded me for the next shiny thing. Was that all I was to you? A means to an end during the hunt?" she asked with a voice so weak that it was barely audible.

"Billy was true in his sincerity toward you. But were you sincere toward him? Or were you just patronizing him while abusing his naiveté and strength? You didn't even bother going in person to help with his Incursion, you rather sent a subordinate to steal the main achievement from him," Thea continued, despondency creeping into her voice.

"That's not--"

"Yet we came here, leaving our own people to fend for themselves. Just so that you wouldn't have yet another excuse to avoid doing the right thing. We bled for you. Why won't you do the same?" she said just as her eyes grew blank, her final breath leaving her lungs.

Panic made Zac's heart beat like a drum, but he suddenly calmed down as he looked at the unmoving body of Thea Marshall.

"You're alive, and I will save you all," Zac growled as the world crumbled.

He had dreaded this moment, but Zac was finally here, his fingers fidgeted with nervousness as he walked across the field toward the man sitting on a rock. His steps were unsteady from the mounting pain in his head, but this thing couldn't be held off any longer.

The man looked upon hearing Zac's approach, his disfigured face scrunching up in anger upon seeing who it was. David

slowly stood up with the assistance of a cane, and he spat at the ground the moment Zac arrived.

“I was captured, tortured, left for dead. All because I used to know you,” David said before Zac had a chance to greet him, his face contorting in anger and pain. “I wake up screaming every night, drenched in sweat, because of what that lunatic put me through. But you didn’t even come to visit me. You threw me out of your mind as you stowed me away on this desolate island, where I wouldn’t be able to remind you of what you’ve become.”

“Hannah,” Zac said, but he was interrupted by David, whose fury was quickly mounting.

“Hannah was traumatized, manipulated, and abused. First by The Lord of Eyes, then by the infiltrators, and finally by your little demon lover. You couldn’t even wait for a second to cast her away the moment she finally regained a sense of stability. All because she didn’t fit with your ‘new self’, the great lone-wolf warrior who consorted with Demons,” David spat.

“But perhaps it’s for the best, no?” the mutilated man said as he swung his cane at Zac. “Better to be a cast-away than turned into a cursed piece of jewelry.”

Zac tried to catch the cane, but another wave of pain made him space out, and he found himself on the ground as David desperately tried to pummel him.

“It’s all your fault!” he screamed, but he was forced to stop as he spat out a mouthful of blood from the exertion.

“I’m sorry,” Zac said through grit teeth as he woke up from his stupor, once again realizing he was inside an illusion. “The way I treated you isn’t right. I will visit the real you when this is all over.”

The world dissipated in a haze, and he was surprised to find himself in a very familiar place, this time completely aware he was still undergoing the Heart Tribulation. It was his childhood room where he had lived until he moved out at 21. However, it looked vastly different from how it did before the

Integration. It was rather decorated exactly the same as when he was a child.

That wasn't all, as he could actually see himself lying asleep in his bed. Why was the System showing him this? It was no doubt another trick of the Heart Tribulation, but why was it so different compared to the other ones that preyed on his emotions? Why had he come here like some sort of Ghost of Christmas Future?

A wave of agony suddenly burst through the illusion, and Zac found himself soundlessly screaming into the room. The waves of pain were getting worse, and Zac was getting worried that the other Tribulation was running amok with him stuck in these visions.

Becoming aware that this was all an illusion obviously wasn't the key to getting out, so he started to look around for any clues on how to break the illusion. But there was no clearly identifiable clue to help him escape, and he could only turn to the sleeping form in the bed.

It was a surreal feeling to see himself as a ten-year-old. Things he had completely forgotten were reproduced with perfect crispness as well. There were his posters and the orange lava lamp that always were turned on when he went to bed but inexplicably turned off when he awoke. Of course, it was his parents who turned it off as they checked in on him, but today it was still turned on in the middle of the night.

However, that small detail wasn't the only thing that was a bit off.

There was a note of discordance in the memory, the sounds of agitated voices seeping through the door. The two voices grew gradually louder, but Zac still couldn't make out any distinct words. The fact that it felt like his head was splitting apart didn't make things easier either. He tried to move closer to the source of the commotion, but he found himself stuck next to the bed, or perhaps rather stuck to his younger self.

However, the argument taking place outside his room was soon enough to wake up the ten-year-old version of himself, and Zac couldn't help but feel some trepidation as he saw

himself getting out of bed. He looked just as confused as Zac felt, but he still silently moved over toward his door. Zac thankfully moved in accord, and they got closer to the source of the sounds.

“... Doctor,” Zac heard as they inched closer, and he could finally confirm that it was his father’s voice, though the voice sounded frantic in a way that he had never heard before.

Young Zac seemed to come to the same realization as he slowly turned the doorknob and created a small crack in his door without making a sound. It was just enough for some light from the corridor to bleed inside, along with the voices. The voices of his parents.

“Doctor? What would some mortal doctor be able to help me with?” Leandra snorted, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Besides. I am telling you I am not sick.”

“Darling, calm down. You just had a baby, don’t get agitated,” Robert seemed to try to placate her.

“I’m not agitated, I’m just telling you what needs to happen,” his mom answered with a cold tone that Zac had never heard before. “I guess I can consider myself lucky that the pain of childbirth startled me awake.”

Zac frowned as he listened in on the conversation from his vantage as a silent specter behind his own body. Was this actually a memory of his, or yet another lie shown by the System? Because he couldn’t remember this ever happening in his real life, though his childhood had always been a bit hazy.

But judging from the discussion and how old he looked, this might just be the night when his mother disappeared, never to be heard from again.

Chapter 488: The Final Era

“Did you really plan on leaving while just leaving a note? What about Zac? What about our daughter?” Robert wheezed, his franticness turning to anger mid-sentence.

“Don’t mention that little monster. And I am doing this for our daughter. She is destined for greatness,” Leandra retorted. “Against all odds, she is an actual match. She will finish what her ancestors started tens of millions of years ago.”

Another wave of pain intruded in his mind, but Zac growled as he forcibly pushed it away with far greater fervor than he had done before. He refused to be disturbed by the other tribulation at this point. He wasn’t sure if this was all real or not, but he needed to hear what his parents were saying.

What the hell did she mean by calling him a monster? And what was with the ambiguous wording of his dad? His mind was running a mile a minute, but he had no chance to digest the words of his mother before she spoke up again.

“You know what? Why am I even-“ his mother’s continued, before a muffled scream followed by a thud came from the room on the other side of the corridor, his parent’s room.

And the room where his sister slept.

“I’m sorry, Robert,” Leandra sighed, her voice barely audible through the door. “In another lifetime, perhaps.”

Terror was clearly written on the face of his younger self, but Zac still saw himself slowly open the door and sneak outside. There was a shining light coming from the next-door room, and he steeled himself before he glanced inside.

Only to lock eyes with Leandra who stood next to the crib, an unconscious Robert by her feet.

“You heard us?” she said as she looked at the younger Zac with an unperturbed face.

His younger self didn't say a word, but he only looked down at the unmoving form of his father, before his eyes turned back to his newly-born sister who still radiated a red light from her forehead.

“Some things have been set in motion that cannot be stopped. You were the first, and she is the second. Perhaps this is for the best, I was never happy with the original plan in any case,” she said with a calm voice as she looked down at him. “And the heavens proved me right.”

Zac observed his mother as a specter behind his younger self, and it felt like a wave of memories were awakened by the familiar face. However, there was a difference between the gentle woman that hazily appeared in the back of his mind, and the woman in front of him. The gentleness was utterly gone, replaced by far uglier emotions hiding within her eyes as she looked down at his younger self.

Disgust and rage.

He, or rather his ten-year-old self, was clearly in shock by the turn of events, but he still spoke up.

“Is Kenzie sick?” he said hesitantly as he fearfully took a step toward the crib.

“You want to protect her?” Leandra laughed. “Well, perhaps you can be good for something. I can't stay here. My awakening has already alerted the Cursed Heavens and some other old bastards. Someone will need to stand guard as we rebuild from the ground up.”

It looked like his younger self received a shock the next second, and he fell over right next to Kenzie's cradle. The present Zac was still there though, and he looked down at himself before his eyes once again turned back to Leandra.

It at least looked like she wasn't aware of his existence, in contrast to Be'Zi and her husband who could sense his presence in his visions. She gave the two unmoving forms on the floor a long look before she once again focused on Kenzie, but Zac couldn't understand what she was doing.

She stood unmoving with her hand on his sister's infant head for a good ten minutes, but there were no changes and no energy fluctuations as far as Zac could tell.

"It can still be salvaged," she breathed in relief as she took a step back.

The next moment she bent down and put her index finger against his forehead, and a shudder ran through his ten-year-old body. Finally, she walked over to a cabinet in the room, and a familiar item appeared in her hand; the pendant. She placed it next to a paper before she took one last look at the room where she had lived the past ten years.

"Keep her safe. I'll be back to claim her after I've dealt with this mess," she mumbled down at Robert, or perhaps himself. "She is carrying the fate of the Final Era."

A rift opened up in space the next moment, and she walked right through it without a second glance.

Confusion muddled his thoughts as he tried to make sense of the vision. Was this really what happened twenty years ago when his mother disappeared? Had she wiped his memory of the actual events, planting the story of her mysterious disappearance?

And what was with her reaction to him? Zac didn't remember her fondly due to her abandonment as a child, but he had to admit that she had been nothing but a good mother before she disappeared. But the eyes of Leandra had been those of a fanatic on a mission, almost reminding Zac of Salvation.

There was one possibility that immediately came to mind though; Robert wasn't his biological father.

It might even be possible that Leandra wasn't his mother, but his instincts told him they were mother and son. They had a lot of similar features, especially their eyes who looked identical. But perhaps her hatred was a projection of any animosity she carried for his biological father?

That was the only reason he could think of that would explain the hatred from his own flesh and blood.

Leandra's grand proclamations of carrying out the will of the ancestors and the 'Fate of the Final Era' also felt extremely ominous, and not something he wanted Kenzie to get embroiled in. But was it really up to him, or was their mother really coming back to take Kenzie away?

A mother reuniting with her children might seem like something good, but there was something deeply wrong with the way Leandra had looked at Kenzie as well, though there wasn't the unmasked hatred she held for Zac. Was Leandra just using her as nourishment for Jeeves, where the mysterious AI was using Kenzie and her soul as an incubation chamber until the point that Leandra came to steal it?

That would explain why the AI had taken so long to awaken. It only happened months after the integration was over according to his Sister. Had it fed on her soul until that point, slowing her progression and weakening her potential?

Then again, all this was just conjecture, his frayed mind running amok from not knowing whether this was real or fake. Was this just the System messing with his head, preying on his fears, causing a bout of paranoia that would trap him in this illusion forever? Or was it trying to create a rift between himself and his mother, making sure that he never joined Leandra's camp?

Did the System have other plans for him?

Zac's mind was a mess, and he felt a weird sense of disconnect with reality like he had been living a lie his whole life. The whole room around him started to twist and contort like it tried to superimpose on his own sense of reality.

His emotions started to spiral out of control, but Zac quickly stabilized his thoughts. He knew that these feelings were mostly fake. This was the Heart Tribulation. The System had shown him an illusion that had caused a crack in his mental fortitude, and it had tried to push him toward insanity from there.

But his mind wasn't so easily shaken, not after all the things he had gone through the past year. He had looked at the Terminus and survived, how could this compare? Perhaps the

things he had seen were real, perhaps they weren't. It wasn't much that he could do about it in either case if he didn't get stronger.

The fact that their mother might have ulterior motives about Kenzie had been something that Zac had considered a real possibility since the moment he figured out their origin. Witnessing this scene did nothing to change that. He would still keep his guard up for anything that might come his way.

It was the same with his own heritage. Perhaps Robert wasn't his biological father, but so what? He had been as real a father as any could have been. The fact that there might be some other guy out there didn't matter in the slightest to Zac, he could just be considered a sperm donor at best if it even was true. There was no point in looking into the matter any further.

It was far more important to keep improving and get stronger.

Only then would he be able to achieve his goals, only then would he be able to feel a sense of safety and freedom. He needed to become stronger to protect his sister and everyone else that had come to mean something to him over the past year. To protect Earth itself against those who wished it harm.

The room drenched in the red glow cracked, and he immediately found himself back in his body, the real one. He didn't know exactly what had changed, but he somehow felt stable, like he could face anything with a calm heart. Was this a hidden benefit of succeeding against the Heart Tribulation?

He breathed out in relief, but he quickly remembered that he wasn't out of the woods just yet. He just overcame the Heart Tribulation, but there was still the Soul Tribulation to deal with. Just before he was dragged into the illusion he had felt like his soul was lit on fire, and it had made itself remembered multiple times during the hallucinations as well.

Another wave of terrifying agony assaulted him the moment he remembered his predicament, setting his whole world on fire. He screamed in pain, but he quickly activated the Fragment of the Axe and spread it across his whole soul. The Soul was the connection to the Dao, and his fragments would

be able to dampen the effect of the Tribulation from what he knew.

And thankfully, the searing pain quieted down by a noticeable degree the moment his soul was covered in a dense layer of his Dao. It was just like when he used the Seed of Trees to ward off the corruption in the wound that Mhal left in his side. However, the mysterious energy that had descended upon him was still there in full force, meaning he wasn't safe just because his tactic had worked out.

Zac quickly looked inwards and breathed out in relief when he saw that his soul was fine apart from some small wounds that could be fixed with a normal Soul Healing Pill. It was a lot better than he had feared after having felt those bouts of agony during the Heart Tribulation, and nothing compared to the time after the Shard had ripped it apart and ensconced itself in the tears.

But one part was a bit worrying. The scars were still there, and not only did they seem more integrated with his soul, but they had now regained some of their luster. Had they somehow managed to feed on whatever energy the System used to put his soul under pressure?

The pain quickly got worse though, making Zac unable to gather any further clues from the scars. The Dao energy of the Axe was somehow losing its efficacy, but Zac had an idea and swapped to the Fragment of the Coffin. The pain became manageable once more, and Zac soon set into a cyclic pattern where he moved from one Dao Fragment to another to handle the Soul Tribulation.

Zac lost track of time as he just focused on enduring, but it gradually grew harder as the effect grew steadily worse, even if he kept swapping between Daos. However, a sudden shudder from within his soul suddenly blasted his defenses straight open, giving the tribulation energy free access to his soul.

However, Zac felt no pain at all as two whirlpools appeared, one black and one white, and they dragged the Tribulation Energy into the abyss with extreme fervor. Zac was shocked to

see that the energy didn't go into the scars though, but the other side of the whirlpools were clearly inside the cage that housed the two Remnants.

Both of them seemed enlivened, and they started fighting with each other once more. However, they quickly calmed down and focused on absorbing the unwilling Tribulation Energies. Zac tried to figure out a way to break the connection, but he couldn't destroy the two whirlpools no matter what he did.

However, it thankfully looked like he had the System on his side this time. It Seemed that it considered him having passed the second Tribulation as well as the Soul Tribulation was actually becoming food, and the energies around Zac dissipated the next second. Better yet, the Fractals of the cage woke up once more and stole most of the energy from the Remnants.

They looked clearly upset about the situation as they slammed their tendrils against the walls, but the cage didn't even shudder as it continued its siphoning. A few minutes later a surge of extremely pure energies seeped into his soul and body, and he felt extremely invigorated. The wounds on his soul closed by themselves, and he felt a huge surge of power coursing through his body.

He had made it, he was finally an E-Grade Mortal.

Chapter 489: A Frayed Web of Uncertainty

What had changed?

Who had made such a mess of his Karma, turning it into a frayed web of uncertainty? Finding the source of the Karmic Turbulence had proven futile though, with connections having formed from every single direction. There was a larger overlying cause, but any attempt of his to scry the source was met with failure.

Voridis hesitated for a while longer until he finally made a decision. There was a populated world just one jump away, and Voridis realigned his vessel after casting an obscuring haze to confuse any potential pursuers. He needed to know what was going on. Had the orthodox faction among the elders finally made their move?

That was the only explanation Voridis could think of as he descended upon the planet. The humanoids of the town he chose fell to the ground as their futures were drained clean, but these morsels wouldn't even pay for the delay to his plan. Only the Mayor was left alive, turned into a marker to enable his return.

Anger bubbled in Voridis' chest as he located the Nexus Hub and teleported away after donning his disguise. He was finally reaching fruition of his goal, thousands of years of planning on the cusp of producing results. His wretched circumstances over the past eons would all change as long as he succeeded, but something was threatening to ruin it all.

A brief bout of darkness swallowed him before he appeared in a simple tower.

"Identification," the golem rumbled with a threatening tone, but it immediately backed away when Voridis flashed his

token as a member of the Hephasar.

His identity was stolen, of course, the token was taken from the body of one of their Chieftains. But they wouldn't know for a few centuries as the corpse of the man was currently soaring through the outskirts of the sector attached to a meteor.

His family was still believing him to be traveling the Zecia sector in search of opportunities to form his inner sanctum, when it was just his body kept 'alive' by special means. Voridis snickered at the thought as flew straight toward the floating palace in the distance, the local chapter of The Hidden Whispers.

Just emitting a hint of his aura, modified to be unrecognizable of course, was enough for him to immediately receive VIP treatment. He was led into an opulent room where an elderly man waited. Voridis inwardly snorted in annoyance when he realized the old man was not only Peak D-Grade as well, but also wearing multiple layers of protection.

So much for free information.

"What do you wish to know?" the man said with a smile as they sat down.

"Voridis A'Heliophos," Voridis said with a growl.

"Oh, you too? Well, it is no wonder," the old man smiled, his eyes never leaving Voridis in search of any clues.

"Hmph," Voridis grunted noncommittally, though he was extremely anxious to know what the man meant.

It really looked like there was something wrong, to the point that it was already spread to the better information houses within a day.

He wanted to trap the old bastard's soul and drain it of its secrets, but he knew he couldn't cause any waves in this place. There was a C-Grade Monarch presiding over this town, after all. Voridis normally wouldn't have come to a place like this at all, but he was afraid some backwater Information House wouldn't have the information he needed.

“What does Sir need to know? I am afraid we have no clues about his current whereabouts. But we have gathered his known movements over the past few Millennia,” the old man said. “We are also buying any pertinent information.”

“I heard there are opportunities related to his capture from certain channels, but I just emerged from cultivation,” Voridis said. “I need to know what rewards there are.”

“I understand. Sir can buy the relevant information for 1 Billion Nexus Coins. The price is steep due to how fresh it is, these things will not become public knowledge for some time,” the old man smiled.

“Hmph, old thief,” Voridis snorted, but he still transferred the money without hesitation.

A few minutes later he was returning toward the Nexus Hub with haste, not wanting to spend one second longer in this place than necessary. He paid the exorbitant fee and teleported away, once again returning to the remote town at the edge of the Zecia sector.

Voridis culled the Mayor as well before he flew off in his vessel, not leaving a soul behind who could bear witness to his appearance. He quickly performed his obscuration rite before he jumped back to the original plane, only then feeling safe from pursuit once more. He didn't immediately set the course toward the closest beacon though, but he started reading the contents of the missive he just bought.

He needed to know who would have to pay the ultimate price for messing with his plans.

However, Voridis' anger was exchanged for exhilaration the more he read. Ninth Floor? Known across the Sector? Powerhouses of the upper realms asking about him? How was it possible that he had lucked into such a huge windfall?!

A soul embraced by the fate of a world, a world steeped in the Energy of Inception. Two Fulcrums, and one world would be born from the death of another. But what if the Fulcrum of Fate was powerful enough that it could impact the whole

Sector? His plan no longer seemed like a long-shot, but almost a foregone conclusion.

It felt like his worn body was injected with stimulants as his mind ran thousands of simulations to make sure that his original design for his Fulcrum Array would still work. He might need to make some alterations to capitalize on the external Karmic Links, but it was definitely possible.

As for any repercussions, he didn't care. That brat would disappear long before the Shroud of the Ruthless Heavens dissipated, turning him into an interesting but forgettable side-note of the Zecia Sector's history. No-one would mourn or avenge the death of an unattached F-Grade brat.

The question now was how to locate which of the seed worlds held the key to his ascension.

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"What is your impression of the situation?" Theos asked.

"It's tricky. Voridis is extremely crafty, but Zac Piker is no doubt in possession of multiple Teleportation Tokens. If Voridis makes a mistake a lingering threat might be created, one that would lead to the demise of our clan," Reolus sighed as his milky-white eyes gazed toward the stars. "I can't see it..."

"I know," Theos Heliophos sighed. "Voridis will never back away from such a convergence of Karma, even if I send out Geros in person. I should have followed the whispers of fate and killed that boy. I became too greedy."

"We all did," Reolus muttered from the side. "So what do you want to do?"

"Spread the news. I will perform a Fate Augmentation to the person who brings Voridis to us, dead or alive," Theos said after a while. "Make a show of looking for him as well, but no need to draw upon the Eyes of Heaven. We'll show our stance, and let the chips fall where they may. We are not yet facing a choice between calamity and fortune."

"Voridis will either find him, or he won't," Reolus nodded. "It has nothing to do with us. But what about those people from

the higher planes?”

“They won’t cause any storms in this remote place over a single child, at least not until someone claims him. There’s no lack of talents in the higher planes, and even if they miss out on this seedling, another one will come along in a millennium or two from another sector,” Theos said.

“They failed,” the sturdy man growled as the golden flames in the brazier died out, ending the telepathic communication.

“Perhaps this was the Boundless Heavens punishing us for consorting with the cursed races,” Vicar Uld sighed as his hand created the sigil for a blessing. “Bishop Kyhv-Elerad and our brothers have joined the embrace of the Heavens, it is a small consolation at least.”

Uld had honestly been skeptical about the excursion from the beginning, which is why he sent Kyhv-Elerad and kept his trusted subordinate Trovad next to him. Both of them were zealots and fools, but Kyhv-Elerad had already cozied up to Arkensau. And he couldn’t have that.

He really missed Bishop Orsiccas, the only other leader of the mission team that knew of the true purpose of these Invasions. Sending his confidante over to secure the body of the Monarch-Select had been a massive miscalculation, one that had left him alone dealing with these maniacs for months.

“Did we manage to retrieve any of the bodies?” Uld still had to ask. “I would like to send them back to be interred among the other martyrs.”

“None made it back after stepping foot on the island,” Trovad sighed. “Only the vessel aiming for the spatial tunnel survived.”

“Shame,” Uld muttered, feeling the pinch of missing an opportunity to make some money.

“Some good news has emerged from the Incubator Realm though,” Trovad added. “We have managed to seize and purify one of the towns on the second layer. Our scribes are already

working at gaining control of the systems. Inquisitor Arkensau has entered the depths.”

Uld nodded with equanimity, but a pang of annoyance flared up in his chest upon hearing that name. This was supposed to be his opportunity, his chance to garner massive amounts of credit with the Zecia Chapter. But who would have expected the Grand Cardinal to send his own disciple to this remote planet to take charge of the invasion?

He had thought that this would be his chance to get transferred out of the Zecia sector to one of the real Cathedrals of the Everlasting Dao. To be anointed in the holy flames and born anew as a true elite of unlimited potential. But that bastard was stealing it under his nose, and he was unable to do anything about it.

“Have we located the inception point of the Dimensional Seed yet?” Uld asked. “We’re only a few months away from its completion.”

He still couldn’t believe that a treasure like a Dimensional Seed could be found in a remote sector like the Zecia. He had never even heard of such a thing before the Grand Cardinal himself explained what it was and the importance of acquiring it. There shouldn’t be enough energy in this area of space. Just which of the heretic factions was it that had created this mystic realm?

That seed held the promise of endless possibilities. It could be the core to create a Hidden Realm of almost unimaginable size. Imagine, controlling a Hidden Realm that would slowly grow to the size of an Empire. But in contrast to a normal Empire that was beset by threats in all directions, you would be a true hegemon as long as you controlled who could enter through the spatial tunnel.

A hidden Realm of that quality was unheard of in a small place like Zecia.

But that wasn’t the reason the Grand Cardinal wanted it. There was one more usage for the Seed from what Urd understood. It could be used as a foundation upon creating the Inner Sanctum of a C-Grade Monarch. It would help create a world so

powerful that it might even have enough potential to take that mythical next step.

The vaunted B-Grade.

The Grand Cardinal couldn't use it for himself since he had already formed his inner world, but Uld was willing to bet that he planned on trading it for some opportunity to break through his current bottleneck, or to be transferred to the Embrace of the Boundless Heavens. Even Uld himself was tempted to take the treasure and run, but he knew that was impossible with the Martyr Array engraved into his soul.

There was no escape, only obedience.

"We haven't found it yet, the spatial anomalies are too numerous, rendering our arrays useless. We have been forced to search manually, but those natives know the depths far better than us, leading to setbacks," Trovad said.

"Well, Inquisitor Arkensau is the best suited for handling the Natives," Uld said.

"What about the last vessel and the Monarch-Select?"

"Have them investigate whether they can destroy the entrance," Uld said. "We will not be able to hold that place it seems, but we might at least be able to stop the Monarch-Select from entering."

"What about the Super-Brother Man?" Trovad asked with a smoldering anger. "With all due respect, are we leaving him after what he's done?"

"The Monarch-Select has no choice but to assault the cursed races if he wants to protect this planet," Uld said with a small smile. "We will find our opportunity there, we will be able to end both the Natives and the Unliving in one fell swoop if the Heavens provide. Inform Inquisitor Arkensau about the return of the Monarch-Select. He will no doubt be interested in joining the Holy War."

Trovad's eyes lit up with fervor upon hearing the term Holy War, and quickly left the chapel after saluting. Uld looked at the receding back of the Bishop with some disdain, before he started to plan his next move.

If he played his cards right he might be able to realize all his goals in one fell swoop. If all three of those powerful bastards died he would be half-done. Only those monstrous Insectoids and the slippery bastards inside the Mystic Realm would stand between him and the Dimensional Seed.

Those were odds he was willing to take.

Chapter 490: The Second Step

Zac took a deep breath as he looked around, a sense of calmness filling him.

He had done it, he'd passed the first true bottleneck of cultivation, the watershed that separated those who had a shot at immortality and those who were destined to stay mortal. He had been a bit worried about complications arising due to his weird body without any affinities, but it looked like he had been worrying about nothing.

Then again, he certainly understood why most warriors waited to consolidate their gains before evolving, some taking years to ready themselves for the Tribulation. He hadn't been prepared for just how perilous it would be. However, things had gone above expectations all things considered. Getting dual Tribulations was pretty rough, but he almost felt he was lucky it happened.

The Heart Tribulation was much harder than the Spirit Tribulation in his case. Enduring pain was his forte by now, but he had been drawn into those visions that preyed on his insecurities way too easily. If it wasn't for the constant waves of pain he might have forgotten himself for real, which would have made it so much harder to extricate himself.

He might even have failed that Tribulation altogether.

It was dealt with now though, and he wouldn't have to worry about the next Tribulation for quite some time. The remnants had fallen asleep again it seemed, but they didn't look quite as wretched as before. However, it was a good sign that they immediately started fighting each other rather than the cage the moment they got energized, and perhaps he wouldn't have to keep living in dread of their awakening.

But he made a mental note to mention the arrays for the Soul Strengthening Manual to his sister. Perhaps she could work on it while he dealt with the undead threat.

He cracked his neck and looked down at his watch, extremely surprised to see that almost 14 hours had passed since he sat down. It felt like the Tribulations hadn't taken more than half an hour. Something had messed with his sense of time it seemed, most likely the five visions.

But it still was better than his allotment of one day, and it gave him some room to figure out his situation. He immediately opened his status screen to see what was going on.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	75
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select
Limited Titles	Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	1704 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]
Dexterity	708 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Endurance	1871 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]
Vitality	1136 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 189%]
Intelligence	434 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Wisdom	721 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]
Luck	321 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 6 862 691 291

There wasn't a lot of things that had changed to the status screen from his evolution, apart from his attributes having increased a by quite a bit. However, Zac was a bit surprised he was still level 75. He had assumed that he would move to level 76 upon evolving, but it looked like he was wrong in that regard. It seemed that Evolving was just shedding the limiters on your body, but you would still have to do the work yourself.

He opened his Class Screen next, and he saw one of the major sources for his massive boost in Strength.

Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia.

Strength +100, +10%. Vitality +50, +5%.

Level: Strength +14/28/42, Vitality +8/16/24, +10 Free.

Skills: Rapturous Divide (LOCKED)

The class itself gave him an impressive 100 flat Strength, which turned into almost 200 thanks to his titles. He guessed that his Draugr form provided a similar boost, but he held off on swapping over for the moment as there were more things he wanted to check out first. Another reason for his increased attributes rather was his new title.

He couldn't help but be a bit curious about his first E-Grade title, and he focused on the line that said 'Monarch-Select'. Titles would get harder and harder to get now that he had Evolved, so anything he got was likely based on a real tough accomplishment.

**[Monarch Select: First to Reach E-Grade in World
Reward: Base attributes +50, Luck +5, All stats +5%]**

The term 'Base Attributes' was the same as the one he had seen on the prompt where he chose which class to upgrade. It looked like any low-tiered title he got now wouldn't give +All Stats any longer, as the boost to Luck would be too massive. That was a relief for Zac though as it meant it would be easier for him to maintain his advantage.

The flat attribute bonus was enormous though, 50 points in each attribute was a massive boost even for him, especially with his extreme multipliers. A single title gave him 305 raw attribute points, which was almost as much as he got from gaining 50 levels while in F-Grade. Add to that yet another multiplier, and he had gained big from not letting anyone else snag this unique title.

He had thought that the massive amounts of Attributes gained from his Dao Fragments would be the only thing that mattered for a while, but he now knew that wasn't the case. Both his levels and Limited Titles would provide massive boosts that would be equally impressive.

It really made sense now that he could take care of dozens of Early E-Grade warriors without breaking a sweat, but started struggling against Middle E-Grade warriors. Peak E-Grade

was still impossible for him to deal with, even the weakest ones.

Just breaking open all nodes alone would rack up to something like 1300 points in each attribute by the time one would have reached level 150. Furthermore, someone who had reached Peak E-Grade couldn't be complete trash as such people would have been weeded out long before then. They would have a bunch of titles and Daos to supplement those attributes even further.

There was still a long way for him to go.

The name of the title made him think of something else as well, and he opened the Quest Screen next. As expected, there were new quests that had appeared in the previously empty menu.

Second Step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the Trial within one Year. Reward: Unique E-Grade Structure (Quality based on performance), Qualification to stake claim on World. (0/1)

Zac's eyes lit up with glee as he saw the new quest. He had been pretty sure that he would get something like this upon Evolving, and he had been proven right. The quest where he had killed the Star Ox had only been called the first step, which heavily indicated it to be a chain quest.

That quest had given him the ticket to the Tower of Eternity which had turned out hugely beneficial to him, so he had high hopes for the follow-up quest as well.

And the rewards really didn't disappoint.

Every unique structure that Zac had seen had come with enormous benefits to a nascent force. Brazla was pretty annoying, but the value of the inheritances and the Skill Repositories was enormous. The Creator Shipyard was perhaps even greater, with the ability to upgrade its grade perhaps even all the way to B-Grade. Even Thea's Library was a valuable asset.

Qualification to stake claim was likely related to upgrading one's town to a World Capital, and himself from a Lord to

whatever the equivalent was of someone ruling over a whole planet. However, the upgraded title wasn't directly given as a reward, making Zac believe there was some hidden catch to the qualification.

Perhaps it would activate some sort of quest that pitted him against the world, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to do that while the Dominators were still around. But as long as he dealt with them one way or another he felt confident that no one on earth would have anything to say about him becoming the de-facto leader of the planet.

The contents of the quest itself were equally vague as the last one though. It looked like he would be teleported to another world once more. However, after having completed over 70 levels in the Tower of Eternity it didn't feel like a challenge to do one more.

The only issue was that of what level the System expected him to be before undertaking the trial. For the last quest he had been given a month before he needed to activate the quest, but this time there was a full year. It was great for Zac who had his hands full at the moment, but it also made him wonder what level of strength was expected to complete the quest.

However, the Hegemony Quest would have to wait until he'd dealt with the more pressing issues, and he rather turned his attention to another quest that had appeared.

Rapturous Divide (Class): Split Life and Death. Reward: Rapturous Divide Skill (0/1).

The second quest was far more inscrutable than any other Skill quest he had gotten before now. Split Life and Death? What did that even mean? It made him long for the easier tasks back in F-Grade, which essentially told him to go chop a tree or kill some monsters. It really felt like he finally had left the beginner village of a game and the difficulty suddenly spiked.

Life and death were related to his path though. Was the System testing him? Or perhaps even pushing him to experiment until he managed to push his Creation to the next level. He already knew that there would be less hand-holding in the E-Grade, and that was probably even more so for Epic-Ranked Classes.

They were on the precipice of forming their own cultivation paths, and it made sense that the System tried to encourage you in that regard.

It also probably meant that his other Class, Fetters of Desolation, had a similarly inscrutable quest to gain the **[Blighted Cut]** skill. The name might sound simpler compared to **[Rapturous Divide]**, but he doubted that meant it was a weaker skill or an easier quest. **[Chop]** was a pretty simple skill, but it had become a staple of his fighting style, something that could be used in almost any situation.

Apart from the quests and the updated class, there was not much new in the Status Screen. However, there were still differences to explore, and Zac turned his vision inwards. His outward appearance was the same, but that couldn't be said for his interiors. Almost completely new Pathways had been branded onto his body after he passed the tribulations.

The pathways were far more intricate compared to before, and there was a sense of spirituality radiating from them that had been completely missing before. His skills were thankfully all still there, and from the looks of it, the fit of his skills was at least as good as before. However, that might not be the case on his undead side, as he had chosen a divergent class.

Zac immediately started to experiment with his new pathways, it felt as though he could cram massive amounts of Cosmic Energy into the pathways without damaging them. That would no doubt allow him to generate far more power in his attacks, provided that the Skill Fractals could accommodate all that extra energy.

However, even though the flow of Cosmic Energy far eclipsed anything he'd felt before, he still noticed dozens of spots in his pathways that worsened the circulation. They reminded Zac of stagnant ponds in the middle of a river of Cosmic Energy, disrupting the flow and tainting the outlet.

They could be found all over his body, but they seemed to mainly be in 'critical' spots, with almost two-thirds being found in his head and torso. But there were also places like this in every major joint, and next to the locations that housed

or could house Skill Fractals. Were these hazy ponds the nodes he needed to break?

It was as though these stagnant pools in his pathways both contained some sort of leaks while simultaneously blocking the flow. With this happening all over his body he felt he could only use his body to a fraction of its real potential, and it was no wonder that fixing these trouble spots by breaking open nodes would boost one's attributes.

His mental image of nodes had been completely different compared to how these things looked like though. He had pictured something like a pressurized tank he needed to push more and more energy into until it finally popped. But it seemed like it was more like a clog in a pipe that needed to get flushed.

But even with all these obstructions in his upgraded pathways, there was no denying that the speed with which he could circulate Cosmic Energy had increased by at least five times. That was pretty huge as well as it would drastically cut down on recuperation time since it meant he would be able to absorb Nexus Crystals a lot faster.

He still was barely better than Thea who was still in F-Grade though, but he was doomed to fall short in this regard when comparing to elite Cultivators. But with his Vitality and Endurance, he would be able to keep fighting almost continuously, which would be needed if he wanted to move through the levels quickly.

Chapter 491: Clashing Versions

Since he was done with checking what he needed to in his human form he finally swapped over to his Draugr side. The process activated as usual, but Zac frowned when he felt that it took almost 3 seconds to transform, which was a lot worse compared to before he evolved. Was it because the Pathways had become more complicated, and swapping them out took more time and energy?

However, there was still a solution. The transformation skill Yrial provided was geared toward the F-Grade, and it could hopefully be upgraded to once again shrink the time it took to change forms. The skill was unfortunately something that the C-Grade ghost put together without much thought, and it neither had proficiencies or an upgrade Path.

Zac would either have to figure out a way to recreate the skill or wait until he could enter the Inheritance Trial again. He could only put the issue aside before opening his Class Menu once again, as there were some things he wanted to confirm there as well.

Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation.

Strength +50, +5%. Endurance +50, +5%. Wisdom +50, +5%

Level: Strength +11/22/33, Endurance +8/16/24, Wisdom +5/10/15, +10 Free.

Skills: Blighted Cut (LOCKED)

Zac was a bit surprised that he had gained equal parts in the three attributes from the class, even though he would gain more than twice the amount of Strength compared to Wisdom at each level. But that was great news for Zac as he was

already pretty lopsided toward Strength with his class choices, while his low Mental Defense was his biggest weakness.

A quick mental calculation confirmed what Zac had expected. The per-level gains from his old classes remained, but the flat class bonuses had been swapped out. For example, Undying Bulwark had provided 10% Endurance and 5% Vitality before, but 5% of the Endurance and all of the Vitality was swapped out for Strength and Wisdom.

There was still a net gain as the flat attributes increased drastically, but it was still a bit of a shame. One of his strong suits was his almost inhuman Endurance, but that advantage would slightly weaken in favor of the massive amounts of Strength he would rack up during the E-Grade. Perhaps it might even be worth putting some of his free points into Endurance to maintain the lead over normal Cultivators.

He opened his Quest Menu next, and interestingly enough, the Hegemony quest wasn't there in his Draugr form. Was the quest chain perhaps connected to the race he was when the integration started? He still hadn't gained his Draugr form when completing the first quest, after all.

There was a skill quest though, and Zac breathed out in relief when he read the task.

Blighted Cut (Class): Kill an evolved being of equal or higher level with a single non-lethal cut. Reward: Blighted Cut Skill (0/1).

The quest for Blighted Cut was thankfully a lot more straightforward compared to the one for **[Rapturous Divide]**. However, it was still not a free win by any means, as it seemed to put very high demands on the corrosive effects of his Dao. That was at least Zac's takeaway going by the name of the skill. He needed to make a non-lethal attack lethal with the help of his caustic power.

The Fragment of the Coffin contained a decent corrosive effect, but it always required him to stack up numerous wounds to create an effect strong enough to cause real harm. For example, Faceless 9 was completely covered in rotting

wounds by the time he finally gave up, but it wasn't enough to actually take him out.

It meant that he would have to make some inroads into the death-aspect of his cultivation path as well to complete this quest. Perhaps the System felt that he had utilized too many Dao Treasures to prop up the Seed of Rot, leaving the foundation lacking.

Zac shook his head as he turned his sight inward, and unfortunately, it looked like the bad news would just keep coming. His pathways had been reformed just like in his human form, but there were some other changes. The once-perfect fit of the class skills was ruined for multiple skills, mainly those that dealt with pure defense.

However, he noted that the fit for **[Profane Seal]**, **[Deathwish]**, and **[Immutable]** was just fine while the fit of **[Winds of Decay]** had actually improved. This was just what Zac had expected though, where he moved away from a defensive class toward a more offensively geared one.

But more importantly, the nodes looked completely identical in his Draugr form as in his human side. The effect the nodes had on the flow of energy through the pathways wasn't exactly the same, as the two sets of pathways differed from each other. But the nodes themselves were in the exact same position.

It was clear to him that the Nodes weren't actually a part of the pathways themselves, but rather something tied to his body. However, they didn't feel corporeal at the same time, but rather intangible. Zac suddenly had an idea as a knife appeared in his hand and he stabbed his leg, aiming right for a node.

Black ichor started dripping down his leg, but the bleeding quickly stopped thanks to Zac's massive pool of Vitality. However, Zac was more interested in the fact that the node he just struck showed no reaction at all from being stabbed. It ruined one idea he had where he would forcibly rip the nodes open and rely on his inhuman durability to recuperate. It simply didn't work.

The situation clearly hinted at a situation where he would only need to break open each node once. This was great news for

his leveling speed, but it was horrible news for his Attribute Gain. Of course, he would have to confirm his hypothesis by actually cracking open a node and gaining a level, but it looked pretty clear-cut from where he sat.

There was one more thing he wanted to consume before he ended his seclusion, but he first wanted to tell his sister he was fine.

However the scenes from the tribulation repeated in his mind upon thinking of Kenzie, and he was unsure what to think. Was their mother really on the way back to take his sister somewhere? And judging by the malice and madness in her eyes she might just kill Zac along with the whole planet if she was in a bad mood.

Her ability to simply conjure a spatial portal out of nothing proved she was a big-shot, though he had already suspected as much. Not only was she involved with a peak force like Firmament's Edge, but her necklace seemed to be some sort of ghost key that gave blanket access to Technocrat facilities.

The necklace by itself was a cause for concern, and he took it out of his Spatial Ring and looked it over. Reaching the E-Grade, unfortunately, hadn't increased his skills of discernment, and he still couldn't find any clues of how it worked. However, the moment he touched the token with his mind in an attempt to look inside, a drastic change occurred.

The token hummed to life and floated up into the air by itself. **[Verun's Bite]** was already in Zac's hand as he jumped up in alarm, though confusion plagued his mind. He had tried scanning the medallion the same way dozens of times, but there hadn't been any response until now. What had changed? Was there something different about his mental energy after evolving? Or was it the Remnants?

However, Zac had no time to figure it out as a figure appeared in front of him. The figure of his mother.

"Zac, my son," Leandra said with a smile marred with longing.

"Mom?" Zac said, his mind thrown into chaos once more. "Is that you?"

He had just seen a crazed incarnation of his mother during the Heart Tribulation, but now a completely different Leandra stood in front of him. Her demeanor was in stark contrast to the one the System depicted. There was happiness, but also sadness as she looked upon Zac.

“It looks the Integration took place, after all,” Leandra sighed, not answering his question. “I am glad you are fine, and evolved at that. Where is your sister? Is she okay?”

“Kenzie’s fine. Is this really you, or an AI?” Zac asked, some doubts worming into his heart when he heard his mother immediately ask about Kenzie.

“It seems you have learned a few truths,” Leandra nodded. “You are not speaking with the real me, but a Synthetic AI based on me. I left it in the necklace, and it activated now that someone of my blood has reached the E-Grade.”

“Why wait until now?” Zac asked with a frown.

“My identity is a bit complicated, I am an enemy of the System,” Leandra freely admitted. “I couldn’t allow any clues of my existence to appear on the planet right after it got integrated. The Cursed Heavens would have spotted me, which would have put your lives in danger. It should have taken you a while to reach E-Grade, and the System has long turned its gaze elsewhere.”

“What’s going on?” Zac asked, trying to calm his chaotic mind to not miss any details. “Why did you leave back then? Kenzie was just a newborn.”

“My family, your family, has been working on a miraculous device with the help of some of the greatest minds of the multiverse for dozens of generations. But things turned awry and most of our clan died. Some people we thought were friends betrayed us at our moment of weakness out of greed, causing even greater losses,” Leandra said, pain and anger flashing in her eyes.

“I was badly hurt, but I managed to barely escape. I set course for your homeworld as it was a desolate rock far from either integrated or controlled space, where our family once hid a

small laboratory. The base was abandoned after the experiments were concluded, to not draw the attention of the System, but I discovered it in our family's archives. I scrubbed any knowledge of it to make it a safe harbor in case I needed it," Leandra said with a wry smile. "Who knew that the desolate world would have turned populated in just a few dozen millennia?"

"My wounds were too harsh, and a safety protocol kicked in where I lost my memories and any aura that could lead my captors to me. Robert found me as I wandered around in your world in a daze, and we had you two years later," Leandra smiled. "But when I had Kenzie ten years later there were complications, and the pain woke the real me up from its recuperative slumber."

"My aura was immediately noticed by both the Heavens and my enemies, and I was forced to flee Earth shortly after Kenzie was born. I couldn't risk leading my enemies to you, especially not while I wasn't strong enough to protect you. I don't know where my real me is, but I am sure I am still working hard on finding a solution so that I can return to your side," Leandra said.

"Is Kenzie here as well? The time I can stay here is limited, I want to see her before I go," Leandra said.

"She is out in the wilderness training," Zac lied. "She will be back in a week or so. Can you wait until then?"

Zac felt he could see a spark of turbulent emotions flash in her eyes, though it was quickly masked with a forlorn disappointment.

"Well, there will be time for us to meet in the future," Leandra sighed. "Be careful, you two. Don't mention your connection to me, it will cause you trouble. And stay away from the Mystic Realm that seems like a science fiction movie. Some unknown force found it and set up their own experiments after we abandoned the place. It might be extremely dangerous depending on what they did there. I didn't have a chance to scout it out myself."

“Are you really coming to get us?” Zac asked, his heart beating in fear-mixed anticipation.

“Earth is a low-tiered world with no strong points. The Multiverse is a magical place that you cannot even imagine. Staying there will only harm your future,” Leandra said with a shake of her head. “You need land, resources, and opportunities to reach your full potential. Earth is lacking on all three fronts. Staying there is a waste of your future.”

“Remember to protect your sister. I left a protective AI with her that will be able to help her out, but it is just an assistant in the end. It’s not infallible,” his mother added. “I must go now, or your location will be discovered. Stay safe, Zac.”

With that, she was gone, and the medallion once again turned into an inert ornament as far as Zac could tell. He stood frozen for a few seconds, unsure of what to believe. Seeing another version of Leandra just after seeing the vision hadn’t really made him clearer on whether his mother was a friend or a foe, or which version was the real one.

But there were a few snippets of information that probably were true as they were mentioned in both encounters. First of all, it really didn’t look like she had left willingly. Both versions seemed forced to leave Earth because her presence was made known.

Secondly, she was coming back. One version felt like a farmer who wanted to reap her harvest, and the other was a loving mother who wanted to provide a better future for her children. His heart wanted to believe that the second version was the true one, but something held him back. There was a voice whispering in his mind that all the projection said, was just a cover story to make sure he didn’t mess up her plans.

Then again, he had become pretty paranoid over the past year, and his opinions were already somewhat swayed after having been shown the original vision. Perhaps that was exactly what the System was aiming for by creating a Heart Tribulation like that, just as he had initially suspected.

But the real question was; did he dare to risk it? Could he really allow his mother to return?

Chapter 492: Heartbeat

Zac wasn't sure. Was he willing to bet his and Kenzie's lives on his mother being a friend who wanted the best for them, or should he start looking for ways to actively hide from her just like he was planning to do with the Great Redeemer? Perhaps the two plans could be fused, making sure neither party could find their way to Earth.

The more Zac thought about it, the better the idea seemed. He would try to stop Leandra from finding them, at least until they could protect themselves from whatever she had planned. One piece of good news in that regard was that she was wounded just thirty years ago or so. It might seem like a lifetime to him, but it was just the length of a single round of meditation for high-grade powerhouses.

Getting wounded enough to lose your memories at that level must mean that her enemies, possibly the rulers of Firmament's Edge, were extremely powerful, and healing from such a battle could take centuries. It was just like the Great Redeemer and his nasty scar that radiated terrifying energies. He would probably carry that wound for centuries before he could completely heal.

Leandra might be unable to come back for the time being due to being forced to focus on recuperating. She had been awoken ahead of time, and perhaps there were repercussions for that. The longer he had to prepare, the better he could hide himself and his sister. He would begin with the lantern, but he had a feeling that a Technocrat's tracking wouldn't be based on something like Karmic Threads.

Perhaps there were anti-technocrat arrays that would stop her from finding Jeeves. The orthodox forces had been fighting the Technocrats for millions of years, there should be all kinds of solutions in circulation.

Zac stood up with a grunt and walked out of his courtyard to let his sister know he was fine, but he was surprised to find a drone hovering just a few meters outside. He knew it must have been Kenzie who put it there, and she came running a few seconds later as expected.

“You did it,” Kenzie said with a wide grin, and Zac nodded with a smile, inwardly thankful he had erected his obscuring arrays around his courtyard before he evolved.

Zac knew that he would have to tell her about his visions sooner or later, but now was not the time. However, he couldn’t help but feel a foreboding as he saw the undeniable similarities between Kenzie’s and Leandra’s features.

His mother’s appearance had always been a bit blurry in his mind, but it was refreshed upon seeing her twice in short order. And Kenzie really took after Leandra, no matter if you spoke of the slightly curled hair or their hazel eyes. Her appearance was a stark reminder that Leandra might come to collect at any moment, and it reignited his desire to become stronger.

And the first step toward that end was to open his first Hidden Node.

“I’m fine,” Zac said as he looked around. “I passed the tribulation without any issue. I just wanted to tell you that before I headed inside again.”

“What’s going on?” Kenzie asked. “Do you need to undergo the tribulation twice because of your two races?”

“No, I actually got two tribulations, but they descended at the same time, so it’s dealt with. I have gathered a few things I can finally use now that I’m E-Grade,” Zac explained. “I can use a few of them while heading toward the Dead Zone, but some need to be taken while in seclusion. I’ll be away for a few more hours.”

“Is it dangerous?” Kenzie asked with some worry. “You just passed the tribulations. Don’t you need to stabilize your foundation or something?”

“It should be fine,” Zac said, though he honestly had no idea.

Yrial didn't explain exactly what would happen when he used the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, apart from that it would break open a Hidden Node. If you were lucky and knew to listen well it could also expose more of the Hidden Nodes spread through your body, but only the one node was essentially guaranteed.

However, the Lord of Cycles never divulged if there were any dangers to absorbing the treasure. Taking normal pills to gain a level wasn't dangerous from what he had gathered though. It mimicked the method used when cultivating, but it sped up the process drastically. It would hurt a bit, but you wouldn't cripple yourself from opening a node this way.

It was nothing like forcing them open by cramming the nodes full of cosmic Energy.

But opening a Hidden Node was his best shot at getting a direct power spike before setting out to the Dead Zone. He would be able to force a few nodes open as well while traveling, but he had no idea what to do about the skill quests for the time being. He didn't have any Dao Treasures either, at least not that he was aware.

So the Hidden Node had the highest priority.

"Alright, I'll keep helping old man Gemidir with the Array," Kenzie said. "Be careful."

"Don't let that old thief scam you," Zac smiled before he returned to the courtyard.

Zac erected the restrictive arrays once more, and he sat down as he took out the box he bought during the trial, the container that held the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**. It was the most valuable item available in the inheritance, except for Yrial's lock of hair, that is.

He gingerly took it out, and the whole courtyard was suddenly drowned in cascading waves of energy. The fluctuations were extremely exotic as well. They neither felt like Attuned Energies or Dao Energy, but rather something he had never encountered before. Of course, it could simply be a higher-tiered attunement that he was too stupid to recognize.

The so-called **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** didn't really look like the eye of a beast, which wasn't a surprise since it actually wasn't one. The Pathfinder Eye he recently expended to create **[Love's Bond]** was actually part of a slain beast, but this thing was something else entirely. It was rather a natural treasure, a convergence of specific energies that had been given physical form.

It was an object created by chance from some unknown event in a dead universe, something that had proven extremely hard or even impossible to reproduce. It meant that the supply was extremely limited, and not something that normally would appear in the hands of someone like him. The name came from the fact that the crystalline clump had a discoloration in the middle that somewhat looked like an eye.

Zac didn't eat the treasure, but he rather took off his robe to leave his chest bare before he pushed the item against his navel. Next, he simply started infusing the thing with Cosmic Energy. The small rock was like a bottomless abyss, swallowing everything Zac threw at it. But it was finally satiated after Zac had spent more than half of his reserves, and treasure started to sink into his body.

He had expected to feel a scorching pain like he had put a piece of coal against his flesh, but nothing of the sort happened. It rather felt like he suddenly had eaten a massive feast, making him a bit bloated. The treasure was quickly getting ready to do its thing, and Zac immediately focused his mind again as he observed the changes.

The slightest fluctuation could be a clue to another hidden node going by how Yrial had explained it, and he didn't want to miss a single thing.

The amount of energy Zac could sense from the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** was just shocking, like he had swallowed dozens of high-grade pills in one go. His own Cosmic Energy was just a fraction of the whole, something to mark the treasure with his own aura. However, the energy ball didn't spread out across his pathways and, but it rather set up camp close to his Duplicity Core.

One tendril after another reached out in various directions of his body, like they were some sort of scouts that looked for their target. After having looked around for a bit they returned, looking slightly expended. This repeated over and over, and Zac tried to engrave every movement and every pause in his mind.

However, he couldn't help but worry as time passed. He and Yrial had briefly wondered whether he actually had any Hidden Nodes due to his unique constitution, and things weren't looking too good right now. The ball of energy had almost halved in size over the hours as it sent out one tendril after another in search of a node, but it hadn't found anything of note just yet.

Zac refused to give up unless the ball of energy completely ran out of steam though, so the search continued until there was finally a change. Zac felt a surge of victory as one of the tendrils froze after having dug into his heart. One tendril after another joined it until there suddenly were ten of them reaching inside, clearly having found what they were looking for.

The next moment the main energy ball pounced like a predator going for its prey.

Only then did Zac see what the treasure was doing. A major section of his pathways ran through his heart, and six normal nodes were surrounding it. However, there was now a small distortion added to the mix right in the middle. Zac was 100% sure that it hadn't been there before, since he had gone over his whole body after his evolution.

Or rather it hadn't been visible to his internal vision.

However, the Eye had managed to find it, and the small disturbance was quickly enlarged as the ten tendrils of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** poured massive amounts of the mysterious energies into the hidden node. Another stagnant pond quickly appeared, though this one looked completely different to the other ones he had seen so far.

It looked like an actual black hole, and any energy that entered it was swallowed without a hint of where it was going.

A shudder spread across his body as it suddenly felt like he had two hearts, each one beating to its own tune. The new addition was deeper and slower, like the beat of a war drum. Each beat became heavier and heavier as the hidden node was getting unlocked by the remaining energies of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, and Zac finally couldn't hold on as he spat a mouthful of blood.

He was shocked to see that the blood actually looked like brown sludge, but he didn't get a chance to even consider any course of action before he felt a crack in his heart, and a surge of energy stormed into his mind.

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Zac had once again been thrown into a vision, finding himself on an utterly lifeless piece of stone soaring through the vast cosmos. There were no stars around him, leaving the area almost completely shrouded in darkness. The weak light from a distant nebula was all that illuminated the surface of the celestial body, and the single feature that barely stood out against the bleak surroundings.

It was a man, or Zac at least guessed it was a man going by the muscular build, stoically sitting on top of a prayer mat. His features were shrouded in darkness, and most of his body was covered by a simple robe, giving no indication of who it might be. He was completely unmoving as well, utterly blending in with the surroundings to the point Zac would have thought he was a statue or a corpse if it wasn't for one detail.

The heartbeat.

A heavy heartbeat beat once every few seconds with such vigor that ripples pushed out from around the cultivator's unmoving form. But more interestingly it looked like there was a pushback the next moment, like a receding wave. The counterforce dragged dense amounts of energy into his body, before the man's heartbeat once more to send out another ripple to gather even more.

It felt as though his heartbeat was absorbing the power of space itself, and even the stars in the distance flickered as if they were affected by the beat as well. It was like this man was

an actual black hole, taking everything from the surroundings for himself. It was no wonder that the meteor he was sitting on was completely void of life and energies. He had no doubt already consumed it all.

Was this some sort of cultivation method based on the heart? Or was it simply the effect of his unique constitution? Was he traveling across the cosmos like a locust, draining any area he passed of its vitality?

Zac quickly realized that the meteor was moving with shocking speed as well. They were rapidly closing in on a sun and looked like they could collide at any moment. However, the man was completely oblivious to his surroundings, and Zac soon understood why. The sun was completely helpless in front of that man's heartbeat, and a massive chunk of flames was ripped from the enormous sphere in an instant.

An odd crack in space appeared above the man's head, and the stream of flames was swallowed without leaving a morsel behind. Zac was flabbergasted at the scene, as just a fraction of those streams of flames were far more condensed than the whole scorching sun that Iz Tayn summoned during the Battle of Fates.

Finally, there was a change in the man's demeanor as they whizzed past the dimmed-out sun. Steam rose from his body as he slightly shuddered, and Zac looked on with a mix of confusion and anticipation. It appeared as though the heart cultivator might have swallowed a bit more than he could chew, and Zac was curious to see if he would show some way to deal with the fallout.

Zac had found himself in the very same predicament a couple of times after all, and he had only survived by the skin of his teeth.

There was also one more question burning in Zac's mind. Was this man in front of him an ancestor of his, either living or dead? Dao Visions showed you people who were walking the same general path as you, such as the Axe-Man and the Immutable Defender, but this wasn't a Dao Vision. It was a

vision brought forth from his own body, a hidden node in his heart.

And such a vision would probably be based on an ancestor of his.

Chapter 493: Void Heart

Hidden nodes could generally be categorized into two types from what Zac had gathered. There were the Racial Nodes that most cultivators of the same race had, such as the Three Gates. Pretty much all humanoids had these three hidden nodes, with one important exception. They could have been swapped out by Inherited Nodes provided by your bloodline.

Perhaps there were more types out there, but those were the two that Zac could gather intelligence on.

People with strong enough bloodlines had hidden nodes more specialized for their Paths, and these types of Inherited Nodes were one reason that families with amazing bloodlines churned out so many powerful warriors. However, he was a bit confused by what he saw, as the most likely source of any bloodlines and Inherited Nodes was no doubt his mother.

However, the shuddering man in front of him definitely didn't look like a Technocrat. He was emitting a terrifying force from his body, like his average-sized frame contained endless power. It was the same sort of fierce aura like he had sensed from Greatest, one of a warrior who used his own body as a weapon.

However, Zac felt this man was on par with those supreme existences he had seen in his previous visions, rather than some D-Grade warrior.

Finally, the man stopped shaking, but plumes of steam still rose from his body from the heat he emitted. A small dagger that seemed able to tear space apart by its very existence suddenly appeared in his hand, and he stabbed his leg in one swift motion.

A torrent of blood shot to the sky, and Zac was shocked to see the amount. The wound had closed itself in a fraction of a second, but hundreds of liters had poured out in that short

window. Weirder yet, the blood didn't actually freeze from the glacial cold of the vacuum of space.

In fact, it did the opposite as it suddenly combusted like it was gasoline rather than blood, lighting up the meteor for a short moment before the area was once more plunged into darkness. It looked like expelling the burning blood had drastically improved the man's situation, and he had once returned to his statuesque demeanor.

The heartbeat the only proof that the man still lived.

Zac slowly woke up from the vision, but he somehow still heard the man's pulse deep in his soul. Each thud made Zac's blood rage like it followed the mysterious man's heart rather than his own. With every thud, their hearts synchronized a bit more until Zac's heartbeat was perfectly in tune to the hooded man's.

His blood started coursing through his body at unprecedented speeds, but he felt no discomfort at all. It was like his heartbeat was in tune with the universe, and a small ripple spread out from his body before space stabilized itself again.

A crackling sound from the sky woke Zac up from his reverie, and he was shocked to see a massive swirl up in the sky. Massive amounts of Cosmic Energy had gathered into a whirlwind of untamed power, and Zac's eyes lit up in anticipation as he waited for the energy to descend.

However, elation quickly turned to confusion, before he was filled with annoyance. The energy had no intention of entering his body as it did with the mysterious cultivator in the vision, but it was rather dispersing again now that Zac no longer heard the deep heartbeat. Zac's dreams of a few free levels crashed and burned just as they were born, and he instead turned his attention to a screen that had appeared in front of him.

[Void Heart – An all-encompassing heart born from the primordial void.]

Zac looked at the screen with some confusion, trying to understand just what this new node meant. It was clear that it was an Inherited Node he had opened, rather than something

like the three gates. But the problem was that there were a huge number of these Inherited Nodes, and people rarely divulged them.

A hidden node was like a secret weapon of a clan, and one of the most guarded secrets. This had made it impossible for Zac to gain a decent understanding of Inherited nodes, like what limits and capabilities they usually had. But he had learned a thing or two from Galau, who freely admitted that his clan possessed no Inherited Nodes.

Him getting an unknown Inherited Node rather than one of the Three Gates could be both good and bad, as Inherited Nodes ranged from being extremely overpowered to utter trash. **[Void Heart]** seemed to be a Node that helped with cultivation rather than giving a direct boost to his power like the common nodes like the **[Flesh Gate]**.

But the description was unfortunately of the less informative variety.

The “all-encompassing” was no doubt referring to the man’s ability to seemingly absorb any energy, as he swallowed anything he passed, even a sun. There was also no doubt an element of energy gathering to the node, evidenced by the convergence of Cosmic Energy in the sky just now.

Unfortunately, improving energy absorption might mean that it increased cultivation speed, which would be pretty useless to Zac since he couldn’t cultivate. What if this **[Void Heart]** kept gathering massive amounts of energies around him, but he could only look at it from a distance, unable to take it for himself?

Wouldn’t that be a novel way of torture?

But the vision gave him an inkling that it might not be exactly that case. There seemed to be two components to the ability that the node provided, judging by the vision. The first was the heart, and the second was the blood. The heart seemed to swallow the energy of the area, which was related to some sort of absorption, though not necessarily one related to normal cultivation.

The man also exsanguinated himself on purpose, and there was clearly something wrong with the blood. Zac's best guess was that it was a node that would allow him to absorb various types of energies better than a normal warrior, but that kind of absorption would fill his heart with impurities or toxins.

The exsanguination would in turn allow him to simply flush the toxins out of his body. It was a system of keeping the good and expelling the bad. Something like that seemed to match with Zac's impressions of his own body as well. He had survived his body getting crammed full of all kinds of weird energies until now.

There was the Cosmic Water, then the storm of Miasma in the Dead Zone, and finally the high-grade energies of the two Remnants in his mind. His body was clearly unnaturally resilient to all kinds of energies, and this Hidden Node might actually be the first step toward taking advantage of this, more than just surviving.

It was just a hypothesis though, but one easily tested. Zac took out a Miasma Crystal from his Spatial Ring and absorbed some of its energy. At first, he felt extreme nausea having condensed death-attuned energies in his system, but something mysterious soon happened.

The death-attuned energies entered his pathways and were shot in a few quick revolutions through his body, but each time they entered his heart the nausea lessened. A few minutes later the feeling was gone altogether, but there instead was a chilliness in his veins. Zac took out his axe and drew a small cut on his arm, and blood that was slightly darker than normal started dripping down on the ground.

It was barely discernible, but then again he had only absorbed death-attuned energies from the Miasma Crystal for a short duration. Perhaps his blood would turn into the black Ichor altogether if he kept at it long enough.

This quick experiment clearly indicated he was on the right path with the node, but this obviously wasn't the right way to utilize the hidden node. It would be a lot more efficient to

simply use a normal Nexus Crystal in this case, as there would be no need to waste time and energy on cleansing it.

But some things might work, such as Natural Treasures. A lot of herbs and other Natural Oddities contained massive amounts of energy, but they were too chaotic and toxic to ingest unless made into pills or concoctions first. And sometimes even that was impossible. Besides, this sort of refinement always led to a significant loss in energy, at least among pills made by normal Alchemists.

Perhaps it wasn't the case with top tier Alchemists in the multiverse, but it wasn't like Zac had access to those kinds of people.

He didn't dare try that out right now though, as he might be badly wounded if proven wrong. But if he was right, then he might have found the key to leveling up quickly in E-Grade, perhaps even beyond. He might not be able to gobble up a sun anytime soon, but he might be able to bargain hunt for energy-rich items that were normally too chaotic to turn into anything useful.

He really wanted to find the little blue merchant and requisition some items immediately, but he knew that such experiments would have to wait until after the Undead Horde. Instead, he got out of his courtyard only to find Emily waiting some distance from the gates. She was lazily throwing rocks at a drone that deftly dodged the small projectiles.

Zac was a bit surprised to see the teenager here, as she was out at sea last time he heard, boosting the Intelligence for the scouts and water mages in charge of searching for the Jamming Arrays.

"You're back! But why do you look the same?" Emily added from the side as she suspiciously looked at him up and down. "And what did you do just now? I thought you were about to upgrade the Nexus Vein or something."

"It didn't work out, unfortunately," Zac said with a smile. "You'll have to make do with the normal one for now. And why would I look different?"

Suddenly a fiery axe appeared in her hand, and she threw it at Zac.

“WOW!” she screamed as she looked at Zac with wide eyes. “Monster! At least you got stronger. A lot stronger. How am I supposed to beat you up now?”

“I guess you’ll have to work harder,” Zac snorted.

“Aren’t people supposed to become more handsome when evolving? But you’re still the same monk as ever,” Emily said, waving at Kenzie who was coming over as well.

“You’re thinking of race upgrades,” Zac sighed with some exasperation as he ran his hand across his once-again bald head. “I haven’t upgraded that yet. I thought you were helping the others looking for the jamming arrays?”

“I returned when I heard you were back. I’m coming with you to fight the zombies,” Emily said, her face scrunching up with stubbornness when seeing Zac’s frown. “You might need me. What if you’re just too weak to win? Wouldn’t you feel stupid if you got stuck outside an array, just lacking 10% Strength to get through?”

“... Fine,” Zac sighed. “But you should know that even getting to the mainland will be risky.”

“I’m going as well,” Kenzie suddenly added from the side.

“What? Why?” Zac said, just stopping short of staunchly refusing.

“Calrin and I figured out a few of the Array Breakers while you evolved, but you probably won’t be able to use them,” Kenzie explained. “They either takes a few weeks of study or general knowledge of formations. So I need to go as well.”

Zac really didn’t want to bring his sister to the heart of the Dead Zone, but he knew that he might not have much of a choice. It was all hands on deck right now, and Kenzie might be the foremost expert on arrays among all the natives of Earth. There were more skilled people among the Sky Gnomes and the Creators, but he couldn’t bring them for something like this due to the limitations of the Mercantile System.

“Alright, alright,” Zac sighed before he turned to the demon who had appeared to the side as well. “Did you evolve as well?”

“No,” Ogras said. “Me evolving won’t change the grand scheme of things in the battle with the undead. I need a month or two to consolidate everything. So, what classes did you get? Epic? Or Even Arcane?”

“It’s too early for me to get an Arcane,” Zac said. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to get that rarity before you really know what you’re doing from what I gathered.”

“Well, I guess that excludes you. So what did you end up with?” the demon said, almost leaning forward in anticipation.

“What about you?” Zac snorted. “There’s no way you didn’t check out your options while I evolved.”

“He did, like two seconds after you left,” Kenzie smiled from the side. “But he won’t say what options he got.”

“Why aren’t you working on that reinforcement array?” Ogras said with some exasperation.

Zac laughed, but he was inwardly a bit worried about the demon. Was there some trouble with his evolution? He had seemed pretty intent on evolving the moment they returned based on their discussions in the tower, but something seemed to have changed his mind.

He knew that the demon had a Rare class right now. Was he perhaps lacking something to get an option? Or was it the opposite? Did he feel that he was on the verge of getting enough merit to be provided with an Epic class, and closing out the Undead Incursion might give him the final push to take that step?

Chapter 494: Balance

Thankfully it wasn't critical to Zac's plan that Ogras had evolved. He mainly wanted to bring the demon for his obscuring capabilities, and those seemed to be mainly based on his Dao of Shadows. Getting a boost to his main attribute Dexterity probably wouldn't make those skills any stronger.

The fact that Ogras wouldn't be as strong wasn't a huge deal either, as he would personally deal with the Lich King. However, as Zac looked around at the three people he was reminded that no man was an island. Certainly, none of these people were nearly as strong as him in direct battle, but they all brought something to the table that would increase the odds of success.

He realized now how foolish his initial idea to deal with the Undead Empire alone was.

"I've done what I can about that array," Kenzie said as she pointed toward the house housing Zac's private Teleportation Array. "The old Gnome is performing the finishing touches over there."

"I'm thinking of leveling up immediately," Zac said, changing the topic. "Is there any problem for me to start taking the pills I've prepared?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Ogras said. "That's usually how it goes. Of course, most people spend years at the peak of F-Grade to solidify their progression. But you should be fine. You're a meathead who find your path in battle anyway, I'm not sure sitting down and meditating will do you any good. Just eat it and then stabilize your foundation by bashing zombies."

"Sounds good to me," Zac said as he took out one of the pills that would give him a level.

It wasn't the **[Four Gates Pill]** with spirituality he found during the Hunt though. He wasn't sure if he wanted to eat that thing right now, or rather save it for when he hit a roadblock. It might even be something that he could use to open up more hidden nodes in the future.

There were no guarantees, but Zac felt he had a pretty good idea about the location of one hidden node at least thanks to ingesting the treasure earlier. He had observed every movement of the energy tendrils from the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, and it had sent its tendrils to one specific spot multiple times, and they had stayed there with hesitation for a bit before moving on.

This node was close to a crossroads of pathways on the top of his head. He obviously couldn't be sure, but he believed that the node the tendrils had found might be the **[Spirit Gate]**, one of the three common Hidden Nodes. It supposedly increased your control over Mental Energy by a large degree, which was something Zac desperately needed.

His control was atrocious because of his non-existent affinity to the Daos, but opening the Spirit Gate might allow him to at least control his Daos to the same degree as most cultivators did. He probably wouldn't reach the level of people like Catheya or Iz Tayn, but it was at least something.

His goal wasn't to become the most powerful man in the universe or anything, but he still wanted to maintain his ability to punch above his weight class. Being an elite was the best deterrence, after all. People still spoke about the Eveningtide Asura in hushed tones after a million years. He wanted to create that same effect so that Earth would be left alone without him having to guard the planet day and night.

Of course, there was no guarantee that the pill he picked up during the hunt was any good for opening hidden nodes, and he didn't want to take the gamble just yet. Judging by the power it contained it might even be able to break open nodes at high E-Grade. Besides, he still knew nothing about his **[Void Heart]**.

Perhaps he would see far better results if he waited to take that pill until he could maximize the benefits with that node somehow. There was a chance that the Node might have an impact on the absorption of pills, after all. But until then there were still a bunch of normal pills he could take.

He couldn't wait any longer, and he took out one of his normal leveling pills. Zac really wanted to know how leveling would work in E-Grade. The attribute gains were split between opening nodes and gaining levels, and he still didn't know if the Node breaking needed to be done in both his forms.

“And eating these kinds of pills won't weaken or wound me before the battle?” Zac asked.

“It'll hurt, but not like forcing it open with excess energy,” the demon said as he looked on with curiosity.

Zac nodded and immediately popped the pill in his mouth as he sat down. The pill felt like a small sun that ran down his throat before it hit his stomach. However, the energies didn't set up camp like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, but it rather shot out like it had a life of its own.

The little packet of energy surged around his body with shocking speed until it suddenly stopped at one of the weak spots on his right arm. Zac was a bit surprised as he had simply assumed that it would go clock-wise from where his Duplicity Core was placed, but it looked like it was random.

The intensity of the pill energy kept increasing as a huge amount of warmth streamed into the node, and Zac was shocked at how much energy the unassuming bead had contained. It was just like Ogras had said, it hurt a bit but it wasn't too bad, it almost felt like he was getting pinched. However, his brows started to furrow as time passed.

Over twenty minutes had passed, and the pill was starting to lose its steam. However, the node showed no signs of changing, and the pill finally petered out. Zac felt the same, but he opened his status screen to be sure. But just as expected, he was still level 75.

“Wasn’t this thing supposed to guarantee a level up to level 80?” Zac complained as he opened his eyes and turned to the demon. “What now?”

The demon looked perfectly jubilant as a grin spread across his face.

“I guess there’s some justice in the world, after all,” Ogras snorted. “If you gained level quickly on top of everything the rest of us might just as well have given up.”

“Well?”

“I don’t know? Take another one, you should have a few,” the demon shrugged as he looked at Zac as though he was an interesting oddity.

He also threw a Cosmos Sack at Zac, who caught it with an inquisitive look. It wasn’t like Ogras to freely give out any gifts.

“These are some of the gifts I gathered from the rich bastards in Base Town earlier. There should be a few dozen such pills inside. I handed most of it over to the gnomes to categorize,” Ogras said as a grin spread across his face again. “Now let’s see how many you need to eat to break open the first node.”

Zac sighed, but he could only oblige. He took out a second pill that guaranteed the same effect, and he was relieved to see that the pill energy stopped at the same node as the last one and continued the work there. However, his frown quickly returned as the pill energy quickly drained while the node stayed the same.

Only at the last second did he felt something change in his body. It was like he had cracked his neck and suddenly felt looser. His body felt lighter, and the energy surged through his body with greater vigor.

Zac quickly looked inward and saw that the weak spot had completely transformed. The murky pond that sucked energy had changed into a slowly rotating whirlpool that kept moving from its own momentum. It reminded Zac of the Dao whirl he had experimented with a bit during the time he tried to keep the Draugr-wound in check with the Seed of Trees.

A quick check on the status screen showed him that he had gained 7 points to the base attributes, but surprisingly enough he hadn't gained the extra Strength and Vitality from gaining a level in Edge of Acadia. He frowned in annoyance and immediately ate another pill, ignoring the demon's snicker from the side.

Ten minutes later the whirlpool had gone from a slightly weak swirl into a surging but stable whirlpool that empowered rather than weakened his pathways. He had finally gained a level and reached level 76 in his Edge of Arcadia class. It looked like two pills weren't quite enough for both opening the node and gaining the level, but the third one did the trick.

He would probably have been better off using a Nexus Crystal after the node was opened, as breaking the node was the hard part. After that, he only needed to gather enough energy to qualify for a level increase. But he had been a bit impatient, and the condensed energies in these pills were far more efficient for this purpose, though they left some toxins behind.

Having to use three pills wasn't great news when only one was supposed to 'guarantee' a level, but it also wasn't too bad, especially after having gotten his new hidden node. However, there was one more problem. He didn't gain anything from his Draugr side it seemed, neither from levels or nodes.

Zac gave it a thought before he activated his Duplicity Core, and he changed into his Draugr for the second time this day. A glance at his status screen proved what he already knew; Fetters of Desolation was still at level 75. However, there was an interesting change when he checked out the node on his right arm.

It had actually turned into a whirlpool as well, but it was so weak that it was almost completely unmoving. It was far worse than it had been in his human side at any point in time, and it looked like it could die out at any moment. It was obviously lacking energy, perhaps the full amount needed for a level.

Node-breaking was something that affected both his classes simultaneously it seemed, but he would need to fill the nodes

with energy separately. That, unfortunately, confirmed that he wouldn't get a second set of base attributes and that he no longer would get twice the amount of attributes from levels compared to others.

This was a pretty big blow to his unique advantages to becoming a powerhouse. His massive pool of raw attributes was his greatest ace against the cultivators who could fuse their Daos and empower their strikes with their Manuals. He would still get more points than others, but the difference was nowhere near as big any longer.

It was a very important reminder that he couldn't relax in the pursuit of power. You needed to keep pushing yourself and keep finding new opportunities to advance. If he couldn't steamroll people with raw stats any longer, then he would simply have to find another advantage. The first thing that came to mind was the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** that hopefully would be able to make his soul strong enough to handle the Remnants.

The second thing was the possibility of getting rewards for closing down the last Incursions and reaping the rewards.

"How are your preparations?" Zac asked as he got back to his feet. "How soon can we leave?"

"We're ready anytime," Kenzie said as she got up from the table she had summoned while Zac focused on leveling up.

"Good. There's no time to waste," Zac said. "We're heading out in 1 hour. Get a defensive squad of Valkyries as well."

"I can protect myself," Kenzie disagreed.

"Yes, but Emily is a Support class who needs guardians. We're going all out here, and we have no idea what we might be facing," Zac said. "I'll be able to unleash more power if I know you guys are safe."

"Fine. We'll get everything in order," Kenzie nodded. "Meet back here?"

"I'll go see if I can get some goodies from that slippery bastard we picked up in the underworld," Ogras muttered. "Knowing you, things will turn pretty chaotic over there."

With that, he disappeared in a puff of shadows, and Emily sat down on a rock and started to play with her tomahawks. Kenzie sent out a Drone before she walked back to the Teleportation House, no doubt to make sure the Stabilization Array would be installed in time.

“Good,” Zac muttered as he simply sat down under the sun to start stabilizing his mind. “In one hour we’ll assault the Undead Incursion.”

As long as we don’t get ripped apart by the spatial turbulence, Zac added in his mind.

Chapter 495: Turbulence

“You sure you need me for this?” Ogras said as he looked at the modified Teleportation Array with some trepidation. “It might cause less strain on the array the fewer people who goes, it might be better if I just stay behind after all.”

“This is our only shot, and I might not be able to deal with this alone,” Zac said. “Besides, what are you whining about? Even a teenager is going, and you’re afraid?”

“Sending two or ten people won’t really make a difference to the Array,” Kenzie adding from the side, a hint of schadenfreude in her eyes. “As long as we enter the same time we have as good a chance of surviving as when going alone.”

“Don’t speak such unlucky words,” Ogras muttered, but it looked like he had resigned himself to going with the rest.

“Is there anything we need to know?” Zac asked the old Sky Gnome to the side.

“The moment the [**Spatial Reinforcement Array**] activates it will cause a clash with whatever the unliving have planted,” Gemidir said. “If you see new destinations appearing in the teleportation screen it means it’s working. For the time being.”

“For the time being?” Zac repeated skeptically.

“Our array will probably only last a minute or two against the jammers of the undead empire, so you can’t dally or hesitate,” Kenzie said. “Immediately pick an option and we’ll all jump onto the array. We can’t waste a single second. Just make sure you don’t pick a town in the wrong direction.”

Zac looked around, his eyes turning to Joanna and her squad of six valkyries who silently stood behind her. Zac recognized all of them, as they were all among the oldest members who had followed him all the way from Greenworth. They had followed him to both close incursions and conquer the

underworld. The constant battle had utterly reforged them into stalwart warriors.

Their gear was swapped out since the last time he saw them though. All of them wore massive shields made from chitinous shells on their backs, each one large enough to cover their whole bodies. Their goal in the upcoming fight wasn't to boost Zac's prowess, but rather use their newly-acquired War Arrays to protect the rear against unanticipated attacks.

He couldn't always protect Emily and his sister, but this group of six would hopefully be able to stall long enough for him to come to their aid. Zac took a deep breath before he turned to the ancient Sky Gnome who stood by to the side.

"Do it," Zac said as he opened his teleportation screen.

It only showed the handful of teleportation arrays that were studded across the island, but nothing beyond that. He heard some tinkering sounds as the Gnome drew some lines to connect the final power outlets, and a hum suddenly echoed out from the array as Zac felt his vision doubling for a second.

However, Zac forcibly ignored the odd effect and immediately chose a town he recognized. It was one of the newly created settlements close to the shore of Pangea, as he figured a shorter jump would have a higher success rate.

Zac jumped into the array, dragging a swearing Ogras by his lapel just in case the demon chose to change his mind at the last second. The array whisked them away, and his surroundings were replaced by darkness.

However, something felt wrong. It was as though he was being squeezed through a too-thin a pipe. The discomfort quickly turned to pain, but there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't in control of himself during these types of teleportations, and he could only endure the pain and pray that the others were fine.

But the darkness of subspace suddenly cracked, and Zac found himself far up in the sky, heedlessly tumbling from the wind as droplets of blood rained down all around him. Screams echoed out from every direction, and he saw multiple bloodied people

flailing about. He was obviously wounded as well judging by the blood around him, but they were flesh wounds at worst considering his sturdy frame.

However, his sister and Emily weren't so lucky, and they were utterly drenched in blood as they fell toward the ground. The scene made his heart burn with anxiety, and four chains shot out as **[Love's Bond]** transformed to its backpack form. The emerald leaf appeared beneath him the next moment, and five seconds later the whole group was collected and safe.

Ogras and Kenzie had appeared on top of the leaf by their own means, whereas Joanna had managed to throw out ropes to half the Valkyries. Zac only needed to snatch up a screeching Emily and the rest of the Valkyries. Thankfully everyone was fine, apart from getting bloodied. No one had died and no one sported a crippling wound.

Only then did Zac take stock of their whereabouts, and he frowned when he realized they were above the open sea. No matter what direction he looked in there was nothing, just sky and water. There was a pretty nasty storm cloud in one direction, but there was not a hint of shoreline.

"Is everyone okay?" Joanna said with a hoarse voice from the side.

"I'm fine," Kenzie said as she ate a healing pill. "I think they booby-trapped the subspace by filling it with spatial tears or something. If we had continued the whole way we would probably have emerged as chunks of meat. Thankfully we installed a failsafe in the array that would take us out of subspace if it got deadly."

"You had?" Zac said with surprise.

"Do you think I would gamble with all our lives?" Kenzie retorted with exasperation.

"Where the hell are we though?" Ogras muttered from the side as shadows rushed through his alabaster hair and face to remove any blood.

"We can't be anywhere close to the Dead Zone," Joanna said as she looked around. "The array in the sky is massive, yet we

can't see it at all. I think we might be some distance away from the continent.”

“Well, we'll just have to fly,” Kenzie said as she pointed in a certain direction. “We should hit land as long as we move in that direction.”

Zac guessed that Jeeves had calculated it for her based on the suns in the sky or something, and he unhesitatingly sent a mental command to the leaf. However, Zac soon enough handed over the task of steering the vessel to Joanna as he wanted to take the opportunity to start leveling up in earnest.

The leaf was terrifyingly quick, but New Earth was also shockingly large, so now was as good a time as any to start eating his stock of Node-breaking pills. There was the issue of Pill Toxicity, but right now wasn't a time to worry about that.

Besides, his new Hidden Node might even have some ability to deal with toxicity. He didn't feel any better after getting bled by the spatial tears, but he also shouldn't carry a lot of toxicity just yet. He doubted it would let him eat pills indiscriminately even if it worked, but it would still be a great help since he didn't have access to things like cleansing arrays at the moment.

Now that Zac knew what kind of energies he was dealing with he felt confident enough to swallow two Node Breaking Pills at once. He wanted to see whether they attacked different Nodes, or if there was some sort of system to which nodes were opened.

“Lunatic,” a disgusted grunt came from the side as the demon looked on with shock. “The heavens won't abide with you forever, you know?”

Zac only flipped the demon off in response before he focused on the two balls of fire that had erupted in his belly.

He was happy to see that they both stopped by one of the nodes in his left leg after having skittered about for a bit, as that proved that he would be able to improve his leveling speed as long as his body could take the extra strain. But Zac

started sweating from pain immediately the moment the two streams of power entered the nodes.

There wasn't a simple doubling of pain when taking two pills, but rather an exponential increase by ten times. It felt like his leg was getting continuously stabbed, but he grit his teeth and endured it until the pain finally stopped after half an hour. Was this what it would feel like to brute-force nodes in the future?

This time the Node didn't even break open even after ingesting two pills, and Zac unhesitatingly slammed two more of them. Another bout of agony lasting for half an hour passed, and the second node had finally been opened. He took a shuddering breath before he kept going. It felt like torture, but he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before he reached the Dead Zone, especially now that he had brought his people with him.

Zac didn't know how much time had passed as he crammed one pill after another down his gullet as though he was possessed. Sweat streamed down his body, and soon enough the sweat had turned red as he actually started bleeding from his pores. His sister tried to stop his manic assault on his nodes multiple times, but Zac shrugged away the attempts as he felt it was working.

But finally he couldn't take the pain any longer, but he had already broken open his fifth node and gained its equivalent level by that point. The suns had started to set by that point already, meaning that Zac had been occupied for at least 4 or 5 hours.

"Just what did you eat growing up?" Ogras muttered from the side when he saw that Zac finally had stopped abusing himself. "This was not what I meant that it was fine to start taking Node-Breaking Pills. Taking pills like that should be a straight ticket to the morgue, or at least the infirmary."

Zac could only respond with a weak smile, and he guessed that this wasn't the time to explain that he was actually a bit disappointed with the results of the experiment. When he was forcibly instilled with the Miasma from tens of thousands of Zombies he managed to eat ten purification pills in one go.

Just three was supposed to be a death sentence, but he survived just fine.

He had thought that he would at least be able to take four or five Node Breaking pills in one go to speed up the process, especially after gaining the odd Hidden Node. But he honestly didn't dare to even try three of them at the moment.

The experiment also indicated that the **[Void Heart]** did not have much of an effect when ingesting pills. He couldn't sense his heart doing anything at all, really, compared to the noticeable effect when absorbing a Miasma Crystal. Did it perhaps only work on natural sources of energy, rather than refined ones? The man in the vision had eaten the void and a sun, after all, not a mountain of pills.

Another stark realization was that he couldn't simply eat Node Breaking Pills continuously. He felt that he was quickly building up a resistance as they traveled, and by the time he had cracked open the fifth node he wasn't very confident there was any point in continuing his mad consumption. He knew that once couldn't simply keep eating pills for a few days and reach the peak of the E-Grade, but he still felt it was too early to feel this kind of response.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Zac asked. "I still have a lot of pills."

"The resistance will decrease with time, but the process is pretty tedious. And you won't get the full effect again no matter how long you wait." Ogras leered. "But gaining levels through killing and cultivation also helps reset your body, so to speak. I guess you've reached your cap for now unless you find some Natural Treasure with similar effects."

Zac sighed, but he guessed he should be thankful there was a limit to how much you could gain from just cramming a bunch of pills down your gullet. If there were no restrictions then the Incursion leaders would all have been level 150 rather than 80 to 90 by now. Gaining 5 full levels in one day was still extremely good, and it had boosted his attributes by a shocking degree.

However, he still wasn't out of things to use just because he couldn't eat any more Node-breaking pills. Zac swapped over to his Draugr form and took out one of his D-Grade Miasma Crystals. He didn't have too many of them, but Zac figured it would be enough to fill up the five empty Nodes on his Undead Side.

Terrifying waves of Death-Attuned energies slammed into his body as he started absorbing a D-Grade crystal for the first time. It felt like he was deep inside the liquid miasma that surrounded Be'Zi for a second, almost drowning from the waves crashing through him. But he soon managed to steady himself and, it felt like he had ascended to the heavens because of how good it felt.

He could barely restrain himself from moaning out loud, which would have become an eternal point of embarrassment in front of this group. He would rather stab himself to snap out of it than being forced to listen to Emily's and Ogras' taunts over the following centuries.

Zac noticed that the death-attuned energy from the Miasma Crystal didn't have any idea where to move, in contrast to the Pills that almost seemed to have homing capabilities. Still, it wasn't too hard for Zac to push the excess miasma into the sluggish whirlpool on his right arm. It felt like the whirl was like a bottomless hole as more and more energies burrowed into the spot, gradually filling it with vigor.

The stagnant whirlpool slowly started to pick up speed, but it took Zac well over an hour before he felt a shudder through his body as the node stopped consuming Miasma. The time it took wasn't too bad, but it was still more than expected.

He had leveled pretty damn quickly with E-Grade crystals in the F-Grade, and he was already in the 40's by the time he got his hands on some. If he got some E-Grade crystals at level 1, then he'd blast through levels like they were nothing.

It only got worse from there though, as the second node took almost 50% longer to fill up until another wave of power spread through his body. He simply kept going though as land was still nowhere near in sight.

The third node took over three hours to fill, and the fourth node took five. It had cost him 9 D-Grade crystals to complete, which was pretty bad news. It had almost emptied his stock, and this was just for filling already opened nodes. The node breaking was the most energy-demanding part, and it seemed like using Nexus Crystals to level up would already be impractical for him by the time he reached level 80 with both his classes.

Zac still had one more node to fill with energy though, but he stopped as they finally could see land far in the distance.

Chapter 496: Death Defiance

At first, there was just a thin green line, but they were able to make out the landscape soon enough. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that it was a pretty normal coast with some leafy growth and grasslands.

It wasn't the sandblasted desert of the scorched continent, as the only greenery there was the strip of palms along the coast. Zac still couldn't see any massive Array in the sky though, which meant they were still quite far from the Dead Zone.

"We'll have to keep going until we find a settlement," Zac said as he put away his Miasma Crystals. "We will need to make another jump."

"Finally," Emily muttered. "It's so uncomfortable to sit next to you while you absorb that stuff. Feels like I am both cold and feverish at the same time."

"Sorry about that," Zac smiled as he turned back to his human form. "I needed to get some levels for my second Class as well."

Zac opened his screen again and couldn't help but marvel at the progress over the past day. Rushing levels in the E-Grade was just putting himself further and further apart from the rest of the humans of Earth.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	80
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select
Limited Titles	Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	1988 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]
Dexterity	766 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Endurance	2004 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]
Vitality	1278 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 189%]
Intelligence	492 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Wisdom	814 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]
Luck	321 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]
Free Points	90

Nexus Coins	[F] 6 896 098 998
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Zac's Strength had already passed his Endurance by this point, though **[Forester's Constitution]** was barely keeping it ahead in his human form. It was no surprise though, as his class choices heavily leaned toward Strength.

It was crazy to think that his Strength wasn't even 1000 just two days ago, and it was a clear justification why so many he met believed that choosing low-rarity classes was the way to go.

It made sense. He felt he had pushed the F-Grade to a point that was almost unprecedented in his whole Sector thanks to his combination of having two classes and snatching up almost all progenitor titles of Earth. He had then risked his life multiple times inside the Tower of Eternity to push himself even further.

Yet he had gained just as many attributes by simply gaining a couple of levels in the E-Grade.

He also knew it would be an extremely taxing challenge to form a Cultivation Core that was high-quality enough to be able to support someone like him, whereas a genius who chose an Uncommon E-Grade class would barely meet a bottleneck at all.

Zac's eyes turned to the 90 Free Points next, but there wasn't really a question of what he needed to do for now. He threw it all into his Dexterity, pushing it to 914. The flat points from the class had skewed his ratio, but the allocation had righted the ship once more.

However, he wasn't sure whether he could keep putting all his free points into Dexterity as he had done during most of the F-Grade. His fighting style didn't only rely on his massive strength, but also his nigh-invulnerability. The latter would take a hit during the E-Grade, as he only got 8 points in Endurance per level from his Fetters of Desolation class.

Meanwhile, he would get more than three times that in Strength if you counted the Strength coming from both his classes. Perhaps putting part of his Free attributes into Endurance to help it stay up was his best shot at keeping himself sturdy enough. That combined with the Boosts from his Daos would probably be enough to stay an unkillable juggernaut.

Zac put the matter aside for now as he wouldn't gain any more easy levels in the short run. However, he was still a bit leery about the attribute cap, and he ate one of his basic Race Evolving Pills to push his attribute cap forward a bit. It was obviously not enough to completely evolve his race to D-Grade, but he could still improve his attribute cap from 2500 by at least a few hundred this way.

That was all that Zac needed for the moment, as it was enough to avoid any issues in case he had some Dao Epiphany during the battle with the Undead. An exuberant energy entered his stomach, and an intense warmth spread throughout his whole body. Streams of the power entered every single pore, filling them with power.

His cells were like a bottomless abyss, and they greedily swallowed everything he could give them. Unfortunately, the pill only contained so much energy, and the warmth quickly abated as his body absorbed the last of the energies. He hadn't made any breakthrough or, but his body felt extremely good, like he had just had a full-body massage.

Zac took a deep breath to enjoy the fresh air, but an abominable smell hit his nostrils and immediately dragged him out of his reverie, only to be met with ten appalled stares. He quickly looked down at his body, only to find his skin covered in an oily brown substance.

"You stink," the demon said with a disgusted snarl. "Why are you improving your Race in this cramped space?"

Kenzie didn't even speak up before she blasted him with cascading waves of water with the help of one of her skills, utterly drenching him and almost throwing him off the leaf.

The torrent of water continued for a few seconds, but all the gunk was blasted clean when it abated.

“Uh, thanks,” Zac said as he spat out a mouthful of water. “I’d forgotten that would happen.”

It almost felt like he had made a social faux pas akin to releasing a fart in a cramped elevator, and he turned his gaze toward the horizon to hide his embarrassment, instead focusing on finding a town. Thankfully he had the perfect item for an occasion just like this, and he took out the **[Automatic Map]** from his Spatial Ring.

The area it showed was a bit limited, but it was still twice what they could see with their naked eyes, and there were even markings of Nexus Nodes on it. It didn’t take them long to find a settlement with the help of the map. It was a walled-off enclave with about 200 houses hidden in the shadow of a mountain, with no roads leading to and from the place. Zac didn’t bother announcing their presence they landed in the middle of the square.

Unfortunately, it looked like the place was one of the weakest settlements that hadn’t even bought a Teleportation Array so far.

They were a small community completely cut-off from the world, and seeing the flying treasure and the weird retinue was a huge shock to them. However, Zac had no time for an orientation with these people, and they simply found the leader, a nondescript middle-aged man who had reached level 32.

There was a small exploit he had found while traveling before. Zac essentially explained who he was and exposed his level, and the mayor was more than willing to join his banner as a subordinate. Judging by how gaunt everyone looked they had a hard time even getting enough Nexus Coins for food, and joining the strongest man in the world was no doubt a godsent opportunity.

A small hovel like this would never have unlocked the ability to buy a Teleportation Array normally, but now that they were part of Port Atwood the mayor suddenly had a large increase

in available purchases, including a slew of arrays. There were limits to how many places Zac could “boost” like this, but he was still well within his limits as he only had a dozen towns or so under his command.

Zac then donated enough money for him to buy the array, and he breathed out in relief when he saw that almost all of his connections were still there when checking out the Array Menu. The advance forts belonging to the Marshal Clan weren’t available though, meaning that anything inside or even too close to the Dead Zone was blocked out by jammers or the death-attuned energies.

They were gone from the remote village a few seconds later, having teleported over to one of the strongholds closest to the Dead Zone. It was a base controlled by the Underworld Council, and Zac felt it was their best bet at getting updated intelligence from the front-lines.

“Halt!” a man mounting a massive machine-gun shouted upon their appearance, but he quickly realized who they were and stood down.

“I need to speak with the Council,” Zac said, and he was immediately led out of the building housing the Teleportation Array.

However, Zac stopped in his tracks the moment he exited the building, and he couldn’t help but gawk at how the whole world was tinted in azure. The blue sky of Earth had been completely supplanted by the chilly light-blue tint of death attuned energies. If it wasn’t for the normal Cosmic Energy in the area he would have thought the world was already realigned.

However, there was an unmistakable hint of death in the ambient energies even though this camp wasn’t inside the Dead Zone, proving that the alignment was already in progress.

The azure hue was unexpected, but the most shocking scene was the gargantuan lines crisscrossing the sky, forming fractals whose size beggared comprehension. Just how much energy had been siphoned out of their planet to form this array? Zac

started to worry that Earth would end up crippled even if they managed to deal with the undead somehow.

He hated to say it, but was this world even worth staying on if that happened?

Death Defiance (Unique, Limited): The war between life and death is as old as time. Stop the realignment of your world. Reward: World Core Upgrade. Individual rewards based on contribution. (0/1).

“Did you guys just get a quest?” Zac asked with confusion as he looked at the screen that had suddenly appeared in front of him. “To deal with the undead?”

“Yep!” Emily said with excitement shining in her eyes, and the Valkyries nodded their heads as well.

Zac frowned in confusion as he looked away from the ominous skies. Why was the System giving out a quest like this? It hadn't done that when he fought any of the other Incursions. Did the system perhaps feel that people weren't struggling enough against the Undead Empire, and wanted to push for a final cataclysmic battle?

They soon walked into a command tent, where six of the Underworld Councillors were already waiting.

“Thank god you're here. We were starting to get a bit worried,” Gregor said, and it almost looked like he wanted to run over and touch Zac to make sure he was actually real. “We were even contemplating paying the fee to enter the Ark World. But seeing you shoot up in levels the past hours felt like a stay of execution.”

Zac nodded at the human Councillor with a smile before frowned in confusion at the unfamiliar word.

“The what? Ark World?” Zac asked with confusion, almost forgetting about the quest he just got.

“The New World Government approached us two days ago, shortly after we lost connection with Port Atwood. They said that they have discovered a spatial tunnel leading to a safe Mystic Realm. They call it the Ark World. They are currently

shaking down the elites of the Earth to allow them to join the exodus,” Gregor explained.

“So they’re abandoning Earth?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Well, honestly I can understand them. There’s not much we can do. We can barely hold the lines against these undying bastards. Reaching the heart of the Dead Zone and taking out the leaders? Impossible. At least for us...” Gregor said pointedly.

“That’s why I’m here,” Zac said. “If the array in the sky activates, then I have failed. At that point, you might as well leave for the Ark World if you can. Humans won’t survive long on a death-attuned planet.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Romal, the official speaker of the council, said. “I would be honored to join you in battle. I would rather fight for our shared planet than hiding in some cramped Mystic Realm. Our people have already done that once, and I know what future such a decision will lead to.”

“And it’s not like the unliving are stupid,” another councilor added. “They will find us sooner or later hiding in that hidden realm. I bet they have ten ways of forcing a passage open for every way we have to keep it closed.”

“I will just take a very small group that will help with the arrays. I will deal with the Lich King myself. But you can still help me in other ways. Do you know if any of the Undead Generals are out on the battlefield?” Zac asked.

“We believe one still resides within the closest horde,” Gregor nodded. “It has stayed extremely cohesive compared to the other two hordes.”

“Can you make sure the horde and their army are occupied for the next two days?” Zac asked. “Things will go smoother if the Lich King isn’t aided by any generals or his hordes.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Romal promised. “When are you setting out?”

“Immediately after we’re done here. The sooner the array in the sky is turned off the better,” Zac said. “By the way, have

you guys received a quest to stop the Undead Incursion as well?”

“We received it yesterday,” Gregor nodded. “Everyone who is above level 30 and beneath this cursed sky has it. I guess the rest are considered irrelevant in this fight.”

Chapter 497: Attunement

“Are there any merit exchanges that have cropped up?” Zac asked as the quest reminded him of the beast waves back on his island. “And have you figured out what the World Core upgrade entails?”

“Merit exchanges? Not that we know of,” Gregor slowly said with some confusion. “We don’t know anything about the core either. Perhaps it will upgrade our planet to C-Grade? The System did mention it was D-Grade when we got integrated, after all.”

“You wish,” Ogras snorted from the side, drawing everyone’s glances. “This World is as wretched as D-Grade worlds come. The feels abundant now, but wait until the Origin Dao is gone and you’ve reached peak E-Grade. There is no way that a single quest will bump you all the way to a C-Grade Planet. Our whole Demon Horde with tens of thousands of forces only have one of them.”

“So what do you think?” Zac asked.

“It might push the world a bit further, to something like middle D-Grade. It might increase the size of the world as well, as it is quite small. A larger planet would allow larger forces and higher overall strength. Or it might even give the world an attunement, which would probably be the most valuable reward.”

“An attunement?” Zac repeated thoughtfully.

“It might not be useful for us, but for the following generations,” Ogras added. “A fire-attuned world would generate a lot of fire-aspected treasures and herbs, attuned crystals, and even the fire affinities of cultivators would slowly increase. Specialization begets power.”

Zac nodded in agreement. Such a scenario would probably be the best for Earth, though it was useless for him unless the attunement was Life. The planet becoming Death-aspected for his Draugr-side was obviously not going to happen, as that was the very thing the quest goal was designed to stop.

The Councilors also tried to discreetly inquire why he had been missing the past days and how he managed to gain so many levels in short order. Zac explained it by slightly mixing truths and lies. He said he left for the Tower of Eternity in order to evolve his Daos and gain achievements to the point that he could evolve. That was the only way he would gain enough power to assault the Dead Zone.

Lying about going to the Tower of Eternity was a waste of effort. It was just a matter of time before his activities were made known across Earth. It shouldn't be too hard for people to figure out he was the one who caused such a ruckus the moment they went to the Tower themselves.

As for the levels, he didn't bother hiding it and told them about the Node Breaking Pills. He had a massive surplus of them now that he couldn't use any more for the time being. Most would probably be put into his Merit Exchange so they stayed within his force, but he could also consider selling some of them to outsiders.

In fact, Zac was already thinking of holding an auction of his own sooner or later, provided their whole planet didn't fall to the Undead Empire. He had a lot of items right now that were pretty common in the Multiverse, but still unheard of on Earth. It was a perfect opportunity to make some money before people managed to find their own business connections.

No one on Earth was nearly as wealthy as he was, but the accumulated wealth of tens of thousands of elites should be pretty impressive by now. It was a bit unethical to overcharge his fellow countrymen, but it could be considered a fee for closing pretty much all the Incursions for them.

Zac didn't want to stay in the base any longer than that, and he left after he had transferred all the latest intelligence reports to a tablet. The bad news was that the Dead Zone was enormous

by this point, having grown more than twice in size since he visited the last time.

The realignment array had not only increased the density of the Death-Attunement, but the forces of Pangea left multiple kilometers every day. Death spread forth like an intractable wave, and you could even see the process with your naked eyes. Every single one of the border towns was long gone, having turned into unlivable ghost towns by now.

Teleporting closer wouldn't work either due to the jamming. That meant that there was no time to waste, as the distance they needed to traverse was simply massive. He guessed that it would take over half a day to reach the core of the Dead Zone even with the flying treasure.

They still had some time according to Kenzie's estimate, but he didn't want to be late once more. The desolate landscape flashed past them as they soared through the air, this time hidden from sight with the help of a mobile illusion array that made them perfectly blend in with the surroundings.

He had gotten the idea from the seer during the climb. He had mentioned that his descendants had placed a treasure on a flying treasure and hid in the sky, making them impossible to find. The Dead Zone was no doubt crawling with those ghost scouts, but this would give them a small chance at arriving to the core unnoticed.

At the beginning of their flight they could see not only the undead horde far in the distance but also trucks and armies moving about on the ground. However, after one hour had passed there was no activity from the living. They saw a smaller horde move toward the larger one at the edge of the Dead Zone, but that was about it.

The hours passed but no one could relax. Everyone was afraid a storm of ghosts would blast through the clouds and attack them at any moment. But it really looked like their approach went by unnoticed. The Dead Zone was perhaps too big to monitor by now, allowing them to pass by unnoticed.

Zac was about to return to his meditation but something in the distance caught his attention.

“Wait, stop for a second,” Zac said as he pointed at a specific spot. “Set down the vessel over there.”

He had kept [**Cosmic Gaze**] running to keep watch of any hidden threats. But rather than ghosts, it had allowed him to see something unexpected, a beacon of life in a sea of dour death. Joanna immediately changed course and they landed where he indicated, and Zac’s eyes widened with recognition as he looked around. He had been here before.

He once sat beneath the tree in front of him.

“What is it?” Ogras asked with confusion as Zac walked over to the mutated tree. “We don’t really have time for a botanical study.”

“I just want to confirm something,” Zac said as he closed his eyes with one hand against the magnificent tree.

It was really the same one. He had found this mysterious tree once more, hidden in a sea of death. It felt like there was some sort of fate behind the second encounter.

“Hopefully you can help me in the future,” Zac muttered as he ran his fingers across the bark. “I’ll come back again after I’ve dealt with the undead.”

“Heaven’s help us,” the demon muttered from the side. “He’s lost it.”

“Shush,” Kenzie said as she kicked Ogras’ shin before turning to Zac. “What is it?”

“Life and Death,” Zac said as he stepped back onto the leaf. “It’s pretty amazing. If I could bring it with me without killing it I would. I feel I can use it as a base to study my Daos.”

Seeing the small beacon of life in the sea of death not only resonated with his Daos, but it also made him remember his Skill Quest. Splitting Life and Death was such an obscure concept, but perhaps this natural oddity might guide him down the right path.

“Take note of this place,” Zac said to the Valkyries and his sister. “We need to return after we’ve dealt with the Incursion.”

The group kept flying through the Dead Zone, but the dense Death-attunement was, unfortunately, having an impact on his vessel, drastically slowing its speed. It was still a lot quicker compared to the old disk he had, but it felt like a crawl after the shocking speed it exhibited when infused with the Dao of the Bodhi.

Zac didn't dare waste his mental energy on speeding up the vessel though in case something happened. He knew he was the muscle of the expedition, with the others acting as backup. The delay gave him enough time to finish filling his fifth node on his Draugr though, allowing him to balance out his two classes at level 80.

He put the 10 points into Dexterity once more before he turned back into his human form. He still didn't want to expose his Draugr side to the undead invaders unless necessary, especially after learning about Catheya and her master. What if that Peak C-Grade monster became interested and tracked him down?

He was already traveling in search of something to break through, and wouldn't Zac's body make an interesting study? Even Yrial said so. Zac sighed for the umpteenth time over the fact there was no one to turn to for help regarding these issues. No old ancestor who could make their problems go away with a wave of his hand. Everything was up to him to solve, but he was out of treasures that could help him become stronger.

He instead turned his attention to the next thing; his skills.

With him having reached Peak mastery of multiple skills along with having evolved, then upgrading his skills was the next logical step. He had already learned some of the paths from Galau and his visit to the Undead Kingdom, and he had shored up his knowledge from the following encounters.

There were a few ways to upgrade his skills, demanding various degrees of interaction by himself. The simplest method was to adjust the skill fractal so that it would be useable in the e-grade as well. That wasn't to say that his old skills suddenly had turned useless, but there was a limit of how much energy they could contain.

His miasmic bulwark would only be able to block so much damage, and the wooden hand he conjured with [**Nature's Punishment**] would only be able to unleash so much destruction. But this could be changed.

The skill fractals were right now like crude drawings placed in the masterpiece that were the intricate E-Grade Pathways. You could slowly adjust these drawings to blend better, to take advantage of the higher amount of energies that could flow through them. The process of doing this was the same as when he manually drew the pathways for his two classes back in the F-Grade.

However, there was no blueprint provided this time. This meant that you were required to not only understand the skill to a great degree, but also how the skill fractals worked. You could actually ruin the skill altogether, forcing you to redraw the fractal from scratch. It wasn't really a big deal for someone as durable as him, but it would no doubt hurt like hell and likely force him to delay his progression for a while.

This method was generally considered the easiest way of progress, but it wasn't really that case for Zac. Most people had grown up in a world of cultivation, spending their entire childhood studying fractals and pathways and the Dao in preparation of when they could finally start cultivating. He could still somewhat intuitively understand what parts of the fractals did, but his understanding was still far worse compared to any average cultivator in this regard.

The second method was to upgrade through epiphany, and Zac guessed that this was his best shot at rapid progress. Just like one could have a Dao epiphany mid-battle, so could he have a breakthrough for his skills. He had seen it a few times already with his skills, though that was just upgrading the proficiency.

Galau had also mentioned Skill Arrays, which was something that most forces and academies used. You could even say they were an integral part of a proper Heritage. They were like assisted guidance systems that helped you upgrade certain skills. They resulted in slightly worse compatibility compared to doing it yourself, but they would undeniably save time that you could spend on gaining levels instead.

You also needed an array that would work on your specific skills, and Zac was pretty skeptical he would be able to find something like that anytime soon.

Finally, there were the Skill Upgrade Quests that the System would reward, but the first one wasn't until level 90 as far as he knew. It was usually a branched quest that would either allow him to upgrade a skill or transform it, and he guessed that this was the best chance to fuse two of his skills into one.

Certainly, one could fuse skills without the assistance of the System, but you needed an extremely strong understanding to do something like that. Some treasures could put you in a state of faux-enlightenment to assist you in the process, but it was probably something better left alone until you had reached a much higher understanding.

Perhaps Yrial could assist him a bit the next time he entered the Inheritance, but that was still a decade away.

Zac didn't really have a lot of options right now, but he kept looking inward at his skill fractals, and their connection to the pathways. He figured that if he got a better grasp of the fractals and how they were lacking compared to the pathways, then he might be more likely to be able to gain an epiphany mid-battle.

Sort of like the heat of the battle was how he managed to form the bronze flashes inside the Tower.

However, no matter how hard he tried over the following hours, he simply couldn't make heads or tails about it. He would no doubt be able to redraw all the fractals in his sleep by now, but that didn't really help him in his predicament.

"I think we're just two hours away by foot now," Kenzie suddenly said, waking Zac up from his reverie. "What do you want to do?"

"Let's go by foot from here," Zac said after some hesitation. "We'll see if we can reach the core unnoticed."

Chapter 498: Go Time

Zac wasn't confident that their mobile illusion array would do them any good against the defenses of the Undead Empire. He figured that they would be able to hide more efficiently as a small group of humanoids in a forest that was no doubt teeming with zombies, rather than on top of a lustrous giant leaf ripping through the otherwise dour sky.

There was no way that the Lich King hadn't erected any defensive arrays now that the realignment was so close, but there was a very big difference between a passively running array and an array actively controlled by an array master. Perhaps they would be able to crack open the entrance if they caught the Lich King by surprise.

Besides, they would have to be on the ground anyway if they wanted to deploy any of the array breakers they had brought.

The group landed inside the forest, and everyone already wore some sort of equipment that hid their life-attuned aura. Ogras and Zac increased the effect even further by adding a layer of shadows and dousing them in his Dao Field for the Fragment of the Coffin.

The coffin wasn't strictly Death-Attuned just yet, but it was death-adjacent, and it helped them blend into the surroundings a lot better than if they just walked in as-is. They soon got a chance at testing the efficacy of their disguise as they spotted a mob of zombies lumbering about. But they could breathe out in relief when their small group could walk by completely unnoticed.

The zombies treated them as though they were air, and the group kept running further toward the core of the Dead Zone. Of course, that small encounter wasn't enough for them to relax. Those zombies were still unawakened, which meant they were as dumb as they came. Real Revenants might not be

able to sense that their group was alive, but they would no doubt understand that something was amiss with a group of strangers running toward their stronghold.

Luckily it seemed that the undead didn't bother planting any spectral scouts in the forest. Perhaps they figured that the increasingly dense number of zombies would be enough as an early warning, or perhaps they didn't even care if anyone came all this way, confident in their defensive capabilities.

But the group of 11 still avoided any undead they spotted as they inched closer to their target. It forced them to take some detours, but it still only took them three hours until reached their target, the true inner sanctum of the Dead Zone. Or rather the barrier that blocked them off from it.

Massive pitch-black runes hovered in the air, each of them humming with strength. They formed a long wall that stretched kilometers in each direction, and Zac could vaguely spot massive Unholy Beacons some distance behind them, no doubt powering them with a steady flow of power.

There was no physical wall acting as a foundation, but that didn't mean the barrier would be any easier to deal with. This was something that made use of the Dead Zone itself, and it would no doubt require a massive blast to crack open. However, reaching the target wasn't the only trouble they faced.

There was also the even thicker wall of zombies that stood between them and the array. The density of the undead lumbering about in the forest had gradually increased as the density of Miasma did, and they currently had zombies within 30 meters in pretty much every direction by now. However, they almost formed a solid wall of putrid flesh along the defensive array in front of them.

The swarm of zombies was well over twenty meters thick, and it seemed to stretch endlessly in each direction along the barrier. Millions and millions of former citizens of earth turned into nothing more than an unliving fortification. At least that was what Zac figured they were, as this band of zombies definitively hadn't come about naturally.

“How the hell are we supposed to sneak in like this?” Ogras spat. “There is no way that the people inside won’t be alerted if we start killing this rabble.”

“Can’t we just walk past them?” Emily asked. “Isn’t that what our talismans are for?”

“No way,” the demon said as he threw a humored glance at the teenager. “They’re stupid, but not *that* stupid. Besides, I bet there is some failsafe for that.”

“Some sort of diversion?” Zac muttered.

He briefly considered using the thing he had gotten from Void’s Disciple, but he eventually decided against it. This was still just an outer shield, and the real forces of the Lich King were nowhere in sight. Using that thing right now was a waste, and better left to use as a surprise when Zac was right in front of his target.

Besides, Void had said that he was meant to activate the black crystal it inside a ‘castle’ and there were nothing of the sort in sight just yet. That point alone made Zac a bit worried. It meant that his whole idea to sneak attack the leaders had already failed. Even if they rushed inside after blasting through the wall the Lich King would probably be ready to meet their assault.

Still, they had managed to get pretty close without getting noticed, which was worth something. It would be too late to recall larger forces to defend by this point, and there was no way undead general stationed in the horde would be able to come back in time.

“Can’t be anything big,” Ogras slowly said. “We want these rotting bastards out of the way without causing a scene. We need to hit the shield before the owners inside notice us. If they take active control it will be twice as hard to break inside.”

“What about Miasma Crystals?” Emily ventured. “We throw a few of them to the left and one to the right. I heard that zombies search out things that benefit their strength instinctively. Shouldn’t that split them up?”

The idea of throwing out Miasma Crystals as breadcrumbs sounded extraordinarily stupid, but it quickly became apparent that no one had a better idea. Joanna proposed they dig a tunnel, but Zac remembered how the slightest tremor in the earth was immediately exposed by geomancers when fighting the second beast wave.

Orgas also suggested for Zac to somehow telepathically control them in his Draugr form, but he simply had no way to do that.

Though to be fair, turning into a Draugr might push the zombies away, as there was a massive inherent difference in caste between the noble races and some newly turned zombies without sapience. But he wanted to keep that as an ace in the hole, so they had no better option than going with Emily's plan.

Dozens of F-Grade Miasma Crystals soared through the air and landed in the densely packed groups of zombies as Zac started to throw them to their left and right. It took a few seconds for the undead to register what was going on, but they slowly started to congregate toward the energy-rich crystals on the ground.

It created a five-meter wide corridor almost completely devoid of zombies in front of them, and the group unhesitantly rushed forward and set up an illusion array right next to the barrier. A few zombies seemed to feel that something was amiss, but they soon joined the others in the struggle for Miasma Crystals after they couldn't see anything odd in their surroundings.

This close to the barrier they could finally spot an almost completely transparent black film blocking them like a wall, proving the shield covered every inch of the Core Zone. Kenzie immediately set up a set of mobile arrays that blocked out their presence, meaning the Zombies wouldn't find them even if they lost interest in the Miasma Crystals.

However, there was clearly no love lost between the zombies, and the attraction of the crystals was beyond their expectation as undead fought tooth and nail for them. It was just a matter

of time before the ruckus was exposed or the zombies started getting ripped apart, so they were still against the clock.

The group had gone over the plan multiple times on the leaf and as they ran through the forest, and now was the time to put it into action. Zac and Ogras were both imbued with a fiery axe, whereas Kenzie got the one crackling with lightning that improved Intelligence and Wisdom. This was the benefit Emily had gotten from upgrading the proficiency of the skill. She could now boost three people in total, but she was only able to get one boost per type.

The six valkyries each took out a large engraved spike and stuck it into the ground, forming a perfect circle within their bubble. They then placed their massive bulwarks outside them to prevent any interference while further isolating their small circle. Kenzie withdrew a densely inscribed skull that emitted scorching heat, along with a bunch of Flame Crystals they had dug up from Zac's new mine in the underworld.

Six chains were attached to the skull in various positions, and the six valkyries each took one and attached it to their respective spike, effectively fettering the head to the ground. Kenzie made sure that the inscriptions held and that the array flags were properly planted, and Zac couldn't help but look at the odd scene with bemusement.

This was one of the array breakers he had found in the mentalist's Spatial Ring, and Kenzie had chosen this one for two reasons. First of all, it was fire-attuned, which seemed pretty effective against the undead based both on Zac's experiences and looking at the Church of the Everlasting Dao. Secondly, it was one of the breakers that were simple to use, with the downside that it carried low strength on its own.

Its strength was rather based on the power of the people infusing it. The users would feed it with their energy and Dao, and the Array would convert it into an attack especially suited for burning a hole in an array. It would allow Zac to not only take advantage of his recent boost in energy circulation but also release a blast of power without wasting any of his long cooldown attacks on the wall.

“Give me a few seconds,” Kenzie said as she pushed one spike after another down into the ground, forming yet another array surrounding the treasure in the middle. “Get ready to infuse the main array with your Cosmic Energy and Daos. The more chaotic the better.”

Ten spikes turned to dozens that embedded themselves in the ground as Kenzie threw them in rapid succession, forming an increasingly large array that soon enough spread even outside the confines of their illusion array. Small spikes shot out between the zombies with pinpoint precision and lodged themselves in the ground.

“These spikes will destabilize the energy flow in the area, making it harder for the shield to feed off the ambient energy. They might even disconnect this section of the barrier from the Unholy Beacons. They will burn out quickly though, so you need to activate the array breaker immediately,” she said.

Zac and the others nodded, and cosmic energy was already coursing through Zac’s body as he readied himself.

“Go!” Kenzie said the moment she had finalized connecting the inscribed skull with the six spikes that the valkyries controlled.

Zac, Ogras, Kenzie, and Joanna immediately placed their hands on the skull that was as large as an elephant’s, and the whole area started to twist and turn as a massive congregation of power started building inside the hollow head. Its eyes started to flicker with chaotic colors as the Daos of the four clashed with increasing ferocity. It even started to vibrate, causing the chains to rattle, but it still seemed like it could swallow more.

Emily was instead dancing around inside the array waving her tomahawks, and Zac realized that his mind felt extremely refreshed. Whatever she was doing was actually dispersing the negative effect of standing inside miasma. It was a lot like **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]** in that regard, as it felt like the inhospitable atmosphere had suddenly turned into something uniquely suited to them.

It helped Zac move his energy with a lot more vigor as an unceasing torrent of energy coursed through his arm and into the inscribed head. He infused the head with his Fragment of the Axe as well, as he felt that Dao Fragment would increase the destructive might the most. In a perfect world, he would have wanted to use all three Fragments, but he simply wasn't able to do that.

The hollow skull was quickly approaching the limits of what it could contain, while the six remaining Valkyries focused on keeping the supportive Array Flags stable. The ground shuddered and heaved by this point, and the Zombies finally realized something was amiss.

There was no way for the illusion array to block out the terrifying amounts of energy they were churning inside as it was affecting the whole area by this point, and the zombies roared as they charged at the source of the disturbance.

“Shield!” Joanna shouted, and six streams of silver Cosmic Energy streamed from the Valkyries and fused to form a sturdy wall surrounding them, using the chitinous shields as a base.

The zombies desperately tried to cut through, but the War Array the Valkyries got from the quest showed it's worth as it didn't even shudder from the onslaught. Of course, these zombies were far from being the elites of the Undead Empire, but there were over a hundred attackers in just a second.

The stalwart shield allowed Zac and the others to wholeheartedly focus on the skull, and it finally rose into the air, stretching all the chains taut.

“Get ready to run!” Kenzie said as she swiped straight at the chains, breaking it in three swift motions.

A piercing screech seemingly from the abyss emerged from the mouth of the skull, and a blinding flame illuminated the sky it exploded into motion. Zac's heart lurched when he saw that the flaming skull actually flew straight into the sky, and he started to worry that the weird treasure would simply fly away. However, his worries were alleviated when Kenzie threw out a flaming spike straight at the closest of the black runes that was twenty meters away from them.

It looked like the skull had found its prey as it immediately did a 180 and shot toward the barrier with extreme momentum. It instantly broke the sound barrier as it flew toward the wall, causing waves of multifarious flames to incinerate everything close to its path, including dozens of zombies.

A terrifying blast spread out the next moment as the flaming skull actually bit into the black fractal, and Zac's eyes lit up when a small crack in the rune appeared in an instant. The crack quickly grew as the flames increased in intensity seemingly without limit, and Zac took a steadying breath as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his right hand.

It was go time.

Chapter 499: Pillars and Beams

The whole array of black runes lit up in an instant, but the runes around Zac's group were still dim thanks to Kenzie's efforts. However, explosions erupted in every direction as the Array Flags burnt out in quick succession. Thankfully the barrier couldn't hold it any longer, and it suddenly shattered as the maw of the fiery skull closed with a snap.

A massive crack provided an ingress for the group and they heedlessly braved the flames as they rushed inside, protected by the still-running War Array of the six Valkyries. A victorious roar sent a fiery discharge in each direction before the skull crumbled to white ash. Zac immediately summoned **[Nature's Barrier]** and blocked out the fallout, but the zombies on the other side of the array weren't so lucky.

Hundreds of them were incinerated in one fell swoop, and the shield had already mended itself before any new unliving could take their place. It looked like these pitiful creatures really weren't considered part of the Undead Empire just yet, as they were utterly incapable of following Zac and the others through the intangible barrier.

Zac knew that an advanced force like the Undead Empire would be able to erect arrays that could discern friend and foe, especially when there was such a striking difference between the living and the dead. But it looked like the Lich King had elected to keep even his own outside the core area. Perhaps too many zombies would be a drain on the limited Miasma in the atmosphere or something.

Of course, it wasn't like there weren't any zombies on the other side of the enclosure.

Large mobs of the undead were already rushing toward them from the distance, while Zac spotted clumps of Corpse Golems guarding the Unholy Beacons. These ones were the real deal as well, the crafty and ruthless elite zombies that probably were on the precipice of evolving into sapient Revenants.

Zac flashed away and gripped one of the zombies who shrieked as he tried to dig his rotting teeth into Zac's arm. Its assault was obviously futile with Zac's 2000 plus Endurance though. Zac shook the undead man for a bit to make him release his grip before he flung him toward the defensive array.

The nearby zombies roared in anger as they tried to mob Zac in retaliation, but they were immediately dismembered by a few lazy swings of his axe. The projectile zombie flew straight through the array, confirming Zac's guess. It worked like his own [**Town Defense Array**], only keeping people out in one direction. It was valuable information in case they were forced to flee later on.

"Let's go," Zac said. "They definitely know we're here by now."

The squad immediately started running toward the shining Incursion Pillar that was barely discernible in the distance through the thick miasmic haze. However, they barely had time to move a few hundred meters before the sky changed, and one azure fractal after another started appearing.

These runes were clearly not the realignment array, but rather something meant to deal with intruders.

"Uynala, you were right," Ogras groaned. "It's not worth it."

"What?" Kenzie asked with a frown from the side.

Zac ignored the two as he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] and turned it toward the sky. The arrays were obviously made from miasma, but Zac frowned when he saw that they contained something that could best be described as condensed death, and this weird energy was quickly accumulating more power. It was like the array was taking the death-attuned Cosmic

Energy and taking away the energy itself, leaving just the concept behind.

He didn't know what use that stuff was, but it felt extremely dangerous. He needed to stop them from activating.

“Destroy the Unholy Beacons,” Zac said as a massive fractal edge grew out from **[Verun's Bite]**.

He activated **[Loamwalker]** the next second, and within moments he found himself in front of the closest beacon. It was more than three times the size of the mobile pillars he had seen so far during the two invasions of his island, and the hair on his arms stood on end from the extremely condensed miasma surrounding it.

A fractal blade grew from his axe and a wide arc swept through the guarding golems, causing them to fall apart into stale clumps of meat. A small amount of energy entered his body, but Zac frowned when he realized that it didn't target any specific node in his body like he would have assumed. It instead started to spread out across his limbs, until it finally started to dissipate.

Did he need to direct the energy himself?

Zac quickly took hold of the energy and condensed it into a ball, and it was thankfully an easy process to figure out the next step. He quickly pushed the ball of energy through his pathways until he felt some pliability from a node in his left leg. But he barely had time to push the small amount of energy inside the node before almost a hundred translucent green balls poured out of the massive brazier at the top of the beacon.

They caused an extremely uncomfortable weight to descend on him, and it felt like a mix of mental and physical pressure. However, Zac's Wisdom had shot all the way up to 800 over the past days, a number that even most early E-Grade mentalist would be hard-pressed to match. Combine that with a soul that had been forced to endure the continuous pressure from the Splinter of Oblivion for months, and he was starting to truly shore up his old weakness.

He didn't even need to infuse [**Mental Fortress**] with the Fragment of the Bodhi to effortlessly shrug off the mental pressure, and a few quick swings caused the tower to crumble. However, his mind warned him of danger the moment the beacon started to collapse, and he hurriedly flashed away.

It was just in time as well, as a chain of explosions turned the whole area around the beacon into a frozen hellscape. At least half of the odd spheres had been filled with ice-attuned energies it seemed, and while their individual destructiveness wasn't too threatening they still were a cause for concern when there were almost a hundred of them balled together.

Zac glanced at the sky and was relieved to see that a handful of the newly appeared fractals had dissipated, but most were still going strong as they condensed their energies. One of them suddenly activated, and a wave of darkness shot down at Ogras and Kenzie who were whittling down another one of the beacons.

Ogras had already taken out the Corpse golems and was working on the tower, whereas Kenzie waved her staff to conjure dozens of fireballs in an instant that shot out at an incoming wave of zombies. The flames seemed to have a life of their own as they hopped from target to target and caused an extremely impressive amount of destruction for how little energy she seemed to have consumed.

However, there was no time to admire his sister's growth as the wave from the sky was almost upon them.

"Watch out!" Zac shouted at the demon, who immediately was swallowed whole by a shroud of shadows.

Another ball of shadows started to rise around Kenzie, but she had already flickered away in a gust of wind, narrowly avoiding the darkness. The demon wasn't as lucky, as he was actually forced out of the shadows a few meters away from his earlier position as the wave swallowed him whole. The area turned back to normal the next moment, but Zac knew something was wrong when he saw how pale the demon was.

He instantly flashed over and immediately sensed an overwhelming death-attuned aura coming from the demon. It

was like he was being forcibly converted into a Revenant in front of his eyes, and the process looked extremely painful. Zac quickly grabbed the demon's shoulder and flooded him with the Fragment of the Bodhi as he gobbled up the large amounts of death-attuned energies for himself.

He felt a bit queasy from the incompatible energy, but his **[Void Heart]** would deal with it soon enough.

"Urh," the demon groaned as he spat a ball of black phlegm. "Zombifying beams. Just great. Thanks, by the way."

"No problem," Zac smiled. "Thank you for protecting Kenzie."

"What protecting, just making a fool of myself," Ogras grunted as he shakily got back to his feet.

The next moment he disappeared and reappeared next to the Unholy Beacon once more. A storm of strikes slammed into the base as a forest of shadow spears rose to meet the falling balls, piercing all of them with expert accuracy. The beacon toppled the next moment, but the demon was obviously out for blood, or at least unwilling to let the arrays in the sky keep shooting at them.

The demon didn't even stop to loot the potentially valuable pillar as he shot toward the next one, repeating the process. However, the arrays in the sky were all starting to power up by now, and they clearly didn't only rely on the closest Unholy Beacons for power. Staying around and taking out the pillars was a waste of time, and the group instead started rushing toward the core.

Wave after wave of elite zombies appeared to impede their path, but Zac's group was like a grindstone that turned anything that came too close into shreds. Zac was occasionally shooting out a fractal blade or flashed away to take out another beacon, but he mainly relied on the others to break open a path so that he could reserve his strength.

It was rather Kenzie and Joanna that did the heavy lifting. The Chief Valkyrie seemed to have gained a repeatable area strike upon reaching level 50, and she was using it freely at the

moment. It was a pretty odd one as well. She kept conjuring a silver ball in the air in front of her, but the moment it appeared she attacked it with a powerful stab with her spear.

The ball immediately cracked like a broken mirror, and sharp shards reminiscent of all kinds of crude weapons shot into the zombie horde with even greater momentum than her strike had. Some of the shards were shaped like speartips, and they punched gruesome holes into the undead. Others were bladed weapons like swords or axes, and these shards cleanly cut limbs or heads off any zombie they passed.

Zac shot a surprised glance at Joanna, feeling that she was walking down an interesting path. It made him think of the War Stele and the Dao of War, one of the possible upgrade-paths of the various Weapon-based Daos. If Joanna managed to walk down that road she would have a chance to become as powerful as the great general in the vision.

Kenzie's side was an ever-changing scene as well, where the undying got incinerated one second and flash-frozen the next. She had also summoned a mysterious wheel that hovered above her head, and every time it turned 90 degrees a devastating blast from one of the four elements was launched.

It reminded Zac of a drone as it kept pace with Kenzie, but he could quickly confirm that it was a construct made from Attuned Energies with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Zac didn't understand what kind of skill it was, but it felt a bit like the massive demonic angel that Iz Tayn had summoned. Was the wheel some sort of companion, but perhaps more akin to a golem than an Elemental?

However, while the recent improvements of the two were impressive, their low levels was an undeniable weakness. Each strike could only kill so many of the unthinking rabble, but there was an unending stream of them that kept trying to tire them out before they reached the core. At least that was what Zac thought the undead were trying to do.

They were beset by an endless number of elite zombies as they ran, but they had not encountered a single revenant or another elite unit of the undead Empire since taking down the Unholy

Beacons. Worse yet, the group was constantly bombarded by waves of death from above, and they often had to interrupt their strike to desperately scramble out of the way.

Kenzie was already panting from the exertion, but she insisted that she could keep going. Zac didn't say anything as he knew they tried to help as much as they could while allowing him to save his strength. Because these waves of unliving were just the appetizer, whereas the main course was finally coming into vision in just ahead.

A massive black fortress, reaching toward the sky with a backdrop consisting of an azure pillar that pierced the miasmic haze.

This was the first structure Zac's group had encountered inside the Dead Zone, aside from the endless ruins of the countries it had gobbled up. But Zac guessed that this monstrous structure would have no problem housing every single elite that was brought over from the Undead Kingdom of the Zecia sector, along with tens of thousands of the best zombies who were 'recruited' here on earth.

It might even be more apt to call it a city than a castle if it wasn't for the fact that it really seemed to be one cohesive structure. Its pitch-black wall rose almost twenty meters into the air, wrought from some stone that Zac didn't recognize. It was covered in both azure fractals and intricate carvings reminiscent of European Gothic architecture.

Dozens of towers protruded from within the walls as well, each of them well over a hundred meters tall. They all seemed to house terrifyingly powerful Unholy Beacons at the top, probably responsible for providing energy for the whole building. They almost looked like fountains as dense clouds of Miasma billowed down along their lengths as though it was liquid.

They could vaguely spot the roof of many more sections, but the towering wall made it hard to make out any real impression of the layout inside. However, finding their way inside was the least of their concern at the moment, as they

first needed to break through the army waiting at the wall walk.

Thousands of Revenants, Golems, and Corpse Lords stood at the front, their killing intent palpable as they looked down at their small squad from above.

“Super-Brother Man, or should I say Zachary Atwood?” a decrepit voice full of power flowed down from up high, which helped Zac spot an all-too-familiar hooded being. “You came after all, not that you had much choice. But you’ll find the Undead Empire a completely different target than the invaders you’ve fought until now.”

Fury surged in Zac’s chest as he looked at the man at the wall.

It was him. The Lich King.

Chapter 500: Wallbreakers

It was the man that had almost killed Alea. The man who had left him no recourse but to either let her die or turn her into a Spirit Tool, not to mention causing the creeping death of their whole planet.

His appearance was all-too-familiar, as it was the very same one as the four ghosts he had fought back on Port Atwood. Zac had already known that the hooded beings he killed were clones or projections, as destroying the four identical copies provided no Cosmic Energy. He had also suspected him to either be the Lich King or one of his Generals, but it looked like he had his answer now.

He was accompanied by a powerful-looking female to his left, and a wretched ghost to his right. If one of the generals was occupied in the zombie horde, then these two might just be the last two generals of the Undead Incursion. The Abbot had killed two of the six when they tried to take down Mount Everlasting Peace, and Zac dealt with Mhal himself, leaving just three. A host of ghosts who hovered behind them in the air as well, perhaps there to provide the three with War Arrays.

Anger burned inside his chest, and his mind worked a mile a minute in figuring out a way to get up on that wall-walk to rip that man into pieces. However, he was surprised to sense the Demon next to him sporting a similar killing intent.

“It’s that bitch,” Ogras muttered from the side, his eyes trained at the ghastly woman standing to the side of the Lich King.

She looked almost like a pale human with long, black, flowing hair, but her hands were replaced by grisly claws with unnaturally long fingers.

“You know her too?” Kenzie asked with surprise. “She’s the one that almost killed me and Ilvere. I thought we had killed her by detonating the mecha.”

“All the more reason for me to skewer her,” the demon muttered. “That crazy banshee almost caught me inside an array when we fought last time. This time we’ll see who will be the Scuttlecreeper and who’ll be the Gwyllgi.”

A roar from behind interrupted their discussion, and Zac turned around to see that the zombies pretty much had caught up with them. There were thankfully no zombies between themselves and the wall though. Perhaps the Lich King was afraid of friendly fire.

The Undead saw zombies as something between children and potential recruits, after all. They both were and weren’t part of the Undead Empire just yet, and while they wouldn’t really mourn their true death, they also weren’t keen on killing them with their own hands.

The six Valkyries set up their war array once more, and they started a methodical slaughter of anyone that came too close under the direction of Joanna, allowing Zac and the others to focus on the castle.

“Do you people have any better ideas than charging right at them?” Zac asked.

“They are obviously prepared for a siege,” the demon said with a frown. “I can’t sense anything, but I bet this place is covered in both defensive and Offensive Arrays.”

“He’s right,” Kenzie said from the side. “The wall itself is full of array flags. Those huge towers contain offensive arrays as well.”

“We can’t dally too long,” Joanna said from the side as she looked behind them. “We will be overrun in a few minutes without assistance.”

“I can’t keep boosting you either for very long,” Emily muttered. “It drains way more energy now than it did before. Perhaps because you’re E-Grade and boost me a 100 points?”

Zac’s brows rose in confusion as he looked over. Her skill was supposed to boost his attributes by 10% after having been upgraded to High Mastery. However, a glance at his status screen confirmed that it truly only gave him 100 Strength.

Perhaps there were limits to how much the skill could provide, and 100 Points was no doubt a huge amount for most people in the F-Grade. It made sense that she couldn't use it on a B-Grade monster and gain tens of thousands of points too, which would allow her to skip multiple grades and kill D-Grade Hegemons without much effort.

But now was not the time to experiment with the limits of Emily's supportive capabilities.

"Let me see how the arrays look," Zac said as he shot forward, a surge of warmth entering his back as Emily reapplied her buff.

A pillar of light rose toward the sky as a shockingly large fractal edge appeared. It glistened with sharpness as it stretched almost a hundred meters into the air, far exceeding the height of the wall. **[Chop]** might not be able to evolve, but just being able to cram five times more energy into the Skill Fractal before he lost control made a huge difference.

The ground cracked for dozens of meters in each direction as Zac launched himself into the sky, and the air screamed as he swung the towering fractal edge straight down toward the Lich King, seemingly intent to cut the whole fortress in two. The area heaved as a black shield materialized just before the blade would hit them, forcing Zac's edge to a stop.

The clouds of miasma churned as blade and shield met, and winds buffeted the zombies who were approaching. Zac grunted in annoyance though, as he was incapable of cutting the shield open even after having infused the skill with the Fragment of the Axe. He lost control a second later and the blade dematerialized while the barrier remained.

However, while the shield held against Zac's strike it didn't do so effortlessly. It didn't crack, but it did shudder and fluctuate a bit, and Zac noticed that a few of the core members of the Incursion took a step back or reached for their weapons upon witnessing the strike. The shield wasn't invincible after all.

It looked like the Lich King hadn't completely ruined his finances when erecting the defensive arrays around his fortress. Perhaps he had spent too much of his invasion budget

on the massive fractal in the sky and thousands of Unholy Beacons. This was the only reason Zac had a chance at taking them down at all, as there were obviously way more powerful arrays than this readily available in the Undead Kingdoms.

But those were too expensive to bring, and a Kingdom would rather cut their losses than overinvest in an incursion.

“Not quite enough, Monarch-Select,” the Lich King snorted as a green fractal appeared in front of him.

He reached out a withered hand and tapped it, and a massive copy appeared above one of the Array Towers the next second. Danger screamed in Zac’s mind as the fractal started humming with power, and a torrent of what looked like radioactive toxins shot toward him while he was still mid-air.

Another fractal blade shot into the array with tremendous speed, this time forming a stab aimed right at the Lich King’s head. The Lich welcomed the strike without a care, and the shield unfortunately held against the assault once more. However, piercing the shield with a normal **[Chop]** had never been Zac’s intent.

He shot away from the rebound like a bullet, narrowly dodging an acid beam that would have swallowed him whole if he didn’t react in time. It was the downside of **[Loamwalker]**; the skill didn’t do him much good while mid-air.

However, Zac could always move around with the help of **[Chop]** as long as he had some fixtures to generate momentum with. He could probably even generate some push by simply swinging in the air quickly enough. He landed some distance from the wall and immediately flashed away, appearing next to his squad the next moment.

They were currently embroiled in a moving battle where they kept running back and forth while keeping a safe distance to the fortress’ wall while dodging the constant blasts from the fractals in the sky.

“It’s strong,” Ogras muttered as he threw out a barrage of shadows at a clump of zombies. “But not impenetrable. What about that thing you used in Base Town?”

“It’s too soon,” Zac said with a shake of his head after sending a mental thread into his Spatial Ring. “It is still drained from the last strike. I’ll have to use [**Nature’s Punishment**].”

“Wait,” Kenzie said. “I still have a few ideas. We should use some treasures so you can save your strength.”

“What do you need us to do?” Zac asked, agreeing immediately.

“Can you hold their attacks off for a few seconds while stationary if we get closer?” Kenzie asked.

“Those Array Towers are pretty scary, but it shouldn’t be a problem,” Zac nodded. “Worst case I’ll have to use a defensive treasure.”

He was out of powerful offensive treasure from the mentalist’s collection, but he still had a few defensive ones. He figured he might as well use them sooner rather than later, as they would become useless soon enough with his rapid growth in attributes.

“Good,” Kenzie said as she took out a golden eye that was a bit reminiscent of the skill that the Mentalist used to fracture his soul during the climb. “This thing should both weaken the shield and give its controller a backlash.”

“What if it fails?” Joanna asked with some worry.

“The drones are not completely restored, but they’ll be able to launch one strike,” Kenzie slowly said before she turned to Ogras and Zac. “If that fails as well you’ll have to do the rest yourself.”

“What are you doing playing with those cursed things anyway, girl? Don’t you know you’ll draw the ire of the Heavens by getting involved with that stuff?” the demon muttered.

“It’s not like we have a lot of options right now,” Kenzie said as she put away her staff. “Oh, and this attack will cost some of the Soul Crystals.”

“That’s fine,” Zac nodded, feeling it was worth the exchange if it gave a shot at wounding the soul of the Lich King. “Ogras and I will guard Kenzie, the rest stay behind.”

The group didn't tally any longer as they rushed toward the wall as one. A storm of attacks quickly descended from the undead elites at the wall walk, but between **[Nature's Barrier]** and Ogras' ability to slightly move the trio by holding their shoulders they reached their targeted distance without wasting too much energy.

Of course, the attacks were not the full force of the Undead Empire, as neither the Lich King nor the generals had made a move. That changed though as the Lich King swung his hand, causing a full five of the array towers to light up and form a series of different runes in the sky. Each of them contained even more power than the toxic attack from earlier, far exceeding Zac's expectations.

Zac's eyes widened as he turned to his sister who was fast at work with the golden eye.

"How long?"

"Ten seconds," Kenzie said as a sheen of perspiration covered her forehead, mostly from the pressure of the situation Zac guessed.

The two generals, at least Zac assumed that the unmoving ghost to the Lich King's side was general as well despite his weak energy signature, were thankfully still unmoving though. Zac still gave up any thought of defending that long with the help of **[Nature's Barrier]**, as the arrays alone would prove too much to handle.

His defensive skill in his human class was designed to withstand many smaller hits, not to take on extremely powerful blasts like this. His Draugr side would probably be able to deal with it, but it was still too early to expose that side. He instead activated one of the rings on his finger. A golden gate appeared in front of them, each door branded with a fractal that emitted extremely dense power.

"What?!" the Lich King exclaimed, seemingly taken by surprise for the first time since they arrived.

Zac wasn't surprised, as the quality of his defensive treasures wasn't something that should exist on a newly integrated

world, perhaps not in the Zecia sector at all. But it was too late to cancel the attacks as they shot toward the defensive treasure. The whole area was suffused in a storm of chaotic energies the next moment, but the divine gate held fast, protecting the trio behind it.

However, the threat wasn't over as Zac sensed something that he had been ready for the whole time. He stomped into the ground with his full force, causing a massive explosion that spread out in each direction. Rampant waves of his Dao spread through the cracks as Zac had flooded his leg with the Fragment of the Bodhi as well, and Zac felt a small of Cosmic Energy entering his body.

Kenzie hadn't been prepared for the massive shockwave, and she helplessly fell over, barely managing to hold on to the Array Breaker.

"Sorry, there are ghosts in the ground," Zac explained, and Ogras instantly disappeared.

He reappeared among Emily and the Valkyries the next moment, just in time to rip two spectral assassins to pieces with a barrage of swings. A vast sea of shadows spread out from their position the next moment, no doubt making it impossible for any more backstabs to take place. Zac had already seen this tactic being used before and he wasn't about to fall for that trick, especially not after having learned how to deal with the ghost warriors during his climb.

Kenzie shot another glare at Zac before she crammed a bunch of Soul Crystals into the eye as she realigned the pedestal that came with it. It was covered in dense inscriptions as well, and Zac felt his mind blurring a bit just from looking at them. His sister wasted no time as she adroitly activated the Array Breaker, and a gargantuan sapphire eye appeared in the sky.

The blue eye didn't launch an attack, but it rather shot straight toward the Lich King until it hit the barrier. However, no explosion wreaked havoc on the barrier. It rather looked like the eye had jumped into a pond of water as the whole barrier started to ripple like a pond as the Array Breaker entered the defensive layer itself.

It somehow seemed to have managed to brand itself on the barrier, like an enormous sticker on the shield that gazed down on the soldiers on the wall. Multiple warriors keel over from its stare and even the Lich King hunkered over from its assault.

But the shield still held true.

Chapter 501: Death's Embrace

The Lich King was clearly hit by a psychic attack, but he still seemed very much in control of the shield. And while the barrier had dimmed by a certain degree it wasn't to the point that a swing or two would break it.

"I guess we have no choice," Kenzie muttered as drones started appearing above her in rapid succession, each of them independently dodging any errant attack that came too close.

This was the first time Zac had seen his sister control more than one or two of them, and his eyes widened when he saw that she had summoned almost a hundred of them and had them coordinate with perfect precision as they charged up a beam. Something like this would no doubt demand great control even if she was assisted by Jeeves.

If he had a tenth of this skill when controlling his Dao Fragments, then he would be nigh-unstoppable.

The brand of the eye remained on the barrier no matter what the Lich King tried, but he obviously wasn't dismayed to see the appearance of the drones. Zac's brows rose when he saw the arrays on the wall light up as an uncountable number of the same balls floated out to create a second barrier.

They were similar to ones those that had poured out of the Beacons earlier, but Zac felt some disgust when he noticed there seemed to be screaming faces inside the balls. They only appeared for a second before they were replaced by churning mists, making Zac wonder if his eyes were playing a trick with him.

"These are the souls of your people," the white-clad general laughed to the Lich King's side. "Are you ready to sacrifice

them to break our shield? They can still enter the Wheel of Samsara, but not if you destroy them like this.”

Zac froze as his eyes widened. Those things were really the souls of former Earthlings? Were the Unholy Beacons of the Undead Empire actually powered by souls? Kenzie paled at the words, but Zac put a hand on her shoulder.

“Keep going, I’ll deal with these things. Destroying the balls is the best thing we can do for them. Imagine being trapped by these lunatics forever,” Zac said as Cosmic Energy surged to the fractal close to his heart. “Besides, there’s no way that E-Grade people are strong enough to affect the afterlife.”

Zac at least hoped that was the case.

There was no time to lose. He felt that these things would impede and weaken the strike of the drones, ruining their best option to break inside the fortress. He needed to do something about it, but a couple of **[Chop]**’s wouldn’t be enough. It was a bit of a shame to bring out his big guns early, but it was time to activate **[Deforestation]**.

Zac figured that at least only one of his swings would be wasted on these floating spheres, and his arm grew taut as a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered the skill fractal. This time he didn’t feel any pain or pressure at all, and he immediately swung his axe as he imbued the **[Axe of Felling]** with his Fragment of the Bodhi.

It wasn’t as powerful as his Fragment of the Axe, but that was against normal targets. He wanted to purify these souls and release them to the afterlife if there was such a thing. The Fragment of the Bodhi was no doubt his best chance for accomplishing that.

A green ripple of destruction shot forward, and a deafening wail made Zac stumble for a second. It was the innumerable souls getting cut apart, causing a massive backlash to rush back at Zac. If this had been before, then his soul might have actually cracked like during the climb, but now he only felt a splitting headache as he started running forward.

The way was paved, and Kenzie seized the opportunity to follow through on her end. Heat blared down on Zac as dozens of beams of pure energy passed above him before they tore into the weakened shield, right on top of the blue eye. Cracks immediately spread across the whole barrier as multiple fractals on the wall broke.

The wound quickly started to close though, but a massive torrent of shadows followed the blast, and they wriggled inside the cracks in an instant. A few of the shadows stayed inside the cracks, reminiscent of the scars on Zac's own soul, whereas others continued through the cracks and shot toward the Lich King.

Ogras was obviously not trying to kill him, but rather to divert his attention by forcing him to deal with an attack while controlling the Array. The desiccated Lich was unfortunately a powerful E-Grade warrior, and a swing of his staff was all that was needed to disperse the dozens of shadowy spears.

However, the small delay was all Zac needed as his second swing of [**Deforestation**] was already in full force, and the [**Infernal Axe**] unleashed a rampant wave of flames at the weakened barrier. This time he did utilize the Fragment of the Axe, and the splintered shield was quickly cut to ribbons before the wave continued forward into the physical wall.

The flames climbed up the pitch-black fortification, utterly destroying the remaining fractals and ornamental details before it reached the crest of the wall. A large number of the elite soldiers of the Undead Empire were instantly incinerated, but the Lich King quickly prepared a response. An enormous avatar appeared in the sky, a chained-down corpse that spewed an unending stream of green bile from his mouth.

The putrid liquid fell onto the flames of Zac's attack, and a rapid shockwave of noxious gasses shot down in Zac's direction as the green bile was vaporized by the wave of flames. Zac also sensed that his skill was quenched in one move, though it was slightly expended already from breaking the barrier and destroying half the wall.

The cloud rapidly closed in on him and Zac's hairs stood on end as he realized just how potent the toxin was. There was no way that his sister or even Ogras would survive taking a single breath of that stuff.

"Back away!" Zac shouted and was relieved to see Kenzie flashing away to rejoin the others, but he didn't follow his own advice.

The Fragment of the Coffin churned through his body, and he thanked the gods for his recent boost to his Vitality as he rushed through the broken barrier before the Lich King had time to repair it. Even then, he felt extremely weakened for a few seconds, but his heart suddenly thumped with increased vigor.

It was the **[Void Heart]** that had activated once more, and Zac's heart beat with enough force to cause some ripples in the noxious fumes around him. Of course, it was nothing like the massive effect of the man in the vision, but the poisonous vapors right next to him slowly seeped into his pores and were absorbed into his heart. Zac couldn't worry whether this was a good or a bad thing right now though, as he was in the middle of a battle.

His vision was completely obscured by the extremely dense poison, but he could still spot Death-Attuned hotspots when activating **[Cosmic Gaze]**. However, he noticed something odd when he looked around. The general stood like a beacon of power on top of the wall walk, but the Lich King standing next to her was barely contained a third of her power.

Had he somehow swapped his real self with a clone the moment Zac lost vision of his target due to the toxic fumes? And where was the original? Zac had planned on taking them all out in one move by unleashing the third swing now that the barrier had been breached, but it looked like that idea was out the window.

It felt a bit of a waste, but he couldn't keep the **[Axe of Desolation]** on the back-burner for too long. If he didn't use the swing within a minute or activated another skill, then the skill would reset and enter its cooldown period. The last thing

he was lacking at the moment was Cosmic Energy reserves, so not using the attack with this many targets in front of him would be a huge waste.

He quickly ran up the wall, using the cracks from his previous strikes as a foothold to reach the crest with a few jumps. The ghost was gone, but the female general immediately launched a swipe with enough power to make Zac's danger sense prickle. A shield appeared on his left arm as his amulet transformed into its defensive form.

The massive swipe was blocked without issue, but it had left a few small marks on the surface of [**Love's Bond**]. Still, seeing his new Spirit Tool get damaged like that filled Zac with a towering fury as he rushed straight toward the banshee, utterly destroying the clone of the Lich King with a sideswipe, almost as an afterthought.

Zac was in far better control of his emotions now that the Splinter was properly locked up, so he didn't completely give in to his anger. However, that didn't mean he couldn't utilize it, and he channeled his churning killing intent into [**True Strike**], launching it toward the Undead General's back.

With Zac's amount of accumulated killing intent the skill could barely be considered a feint any longer, but almost a compulsion. It probably felt like a D-Grade Hegemon was bearing down on her from behind, and the general couldn't ignore it just as expected. She quickly turned around to meet the attack as a shimmering shield appeared to block out Zac, but nothing met her furious swipe toward the rear.

The general immediately understood she had been duped, but she didn't have time to retreat before she was slammed in the face with a shield-bash powered by 2000 Strength and rage. A crunching sound echoed out as she was thrown back like a ragdoll, black ichor spewing in every direction.

Zac couldn't activate [**Loamwalker**] at the moment, but the wall collapsed beneath his feet as he pushed forward to catch up to her flying form, and [**Verun's Bite**] keened as a Bodhi-infused swingripped through the air. The general unfortunately

had enough mental presence to desperately block the swing with her claws.

However, she couldn't match Zac's power output at all and was flung toward the inner section of the fortress with a wail of pain, four of her fingers cleanly cut off. Her bad luck wasn't ending there though. The coffin shield quickly returned to its necklace form while Zac growled as he swung **[Verun's Bite]** in a wide arc toward the general. A massive half-moon of death spread out as the final swing of **[Deforestation]** had activated.

Zac figured that if he couldn't locate the Lich King, then he might as well just destroy everything.

There was no need to even use **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to activate the third swing it this time, his evolved physique more than enough to handle the massive strain. A coruscating wave of destruction ripped into the inner structures of the fortress, causing a chain reaction of buildings collapsing. The ground shuddered as almost a third of the fortress was leveled with one attack.

A series of interlocking shields in front of the Miasma Towers eventually managed to exhaust the energy of the strike, but the ground still shook for a few seconds as a few structurally unsound parts of the fortress collapsed. A shocking surge of cosmic energy entered his body as the **[Axe of Desolation]** no doubt killed hundreds of the undead who were staying inside the buildings he destroyed, and he immediately directed it toward the node he located earlier.

He dispatched the few Revenants foolish enough to actually attack him before he turned his sight inward for a second. He had started feeling some discomfort in his Node when he kept infusing it with energy, and it even resisted his attempts at pushing more of his accumulated energies inside.

He wanted to see if it was ready to burst open, but was quickly disappointed. The node looked pretty much the same as before, apart from there being a decent amount of energies swirling about beneath the surface. Even more Cosmic Energy

was needed it seemed, and he tried instilling some of his left-over kill energy again.

This time it worked, but he really had to cram it inside. It felt like the node was completely full, and he was currently increasing the pressure inside by forcibly instilling more Cosmic Energy. The pain was gradually increasing, but Zac sighed in relief when the pain abated a few seconds after the last of his surplus energy had been pushed inside.

Just how much energy would be needed was something he would have to worry about later as bursting nodes mid-battle seemed like a spectacularly stupid idea. He instead activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** again as he looked around for his next target. The Incursion was still very much active, which meant that the Lich King still hadn't left Earth even after Zac had made his way inside.

That meant he was currently hiding somewhere in the area, most likely protecting the core of the realignment array. The ghost was nowhere to be seen as well, and Zac didn't remember killing it. However, that was of lesser concern as it didn't seem to be a combat-oriented cultivator. Perhaps he was the strategist of the invasion or something.

However, Zac frowned in annoyance when he noticed that the other general was still alive as well. She had probably managed to flicker away just in time to avoid getting engulfed in the wave of desolation, and was now standing on top of one of the Array Towers.

Her face was completely disfigured and black ichor stained her dress, and her aura was clearly a bit unstable. She touched an array atop the tower before she floated down again. Zac saw her running further into the fortress before slinking inside a massive palatial section that was built on top of the roof of a more common-looking barrack.

He was just about to go after her, but he sensed a presence to his right.

"You go find the boss," Ogras said as his eyes were trained on the fleeing form of the undead general. "I'll deal with that one. I want to see what she has prepared inside her own lair."

“What about the others?” Zac hesitantly asked. “There might be more of the ghosts.”

“They can keep the trash at bay for hours if need be,” the demon shrugged. “And your sister has erected some anti-ghost array. If my clan had someone half as talented in formations as that girl back home, we wouldn’t just be a bottom-feeding clan at the edge of our planet.”

Zac nodded in agreement, but his eyes widened in alarm when he saw the surviving towers all light as one. It looked like the undead planned on unleashing everything in one massive blast before Zac dismantled the rest of the forest.

“Run!” Ogras screamed as he was swallowed by shadows, but Zac shrugged off the demon’s attempts at bringing him along.

Instead, he instructed [**Love’s Bond**] to retake its defensive form, and he unhesitantly activated the circular fractal on its lid. This was the first time Zac actually activated one of the two skills, this one called [**Death’s Embrace**].

The whole coffin shook as the chains that held the lid shut twisted and moved until a small opening appeared. A dense black cloud spread out and rose into the air until it formed a massive torso, making it look like he had summoned a genie. But Zac’s heart was still thrown into chaos as it was no ordinary elemental that had appeared.

It was Alea.

Chapter 502: Scourge

Zac froze as he looked up at the sky with shock in his eyes, but he quickly regained his wits. However, he couldn't help but feel some sourness in his heart as he looked at the familiar figure in the sky, as he knew it wasn't Alea come back to life.

The avatar looked a lot like the poison mistress, but there were also undeniable differences. Its eyes didn't have the signature red irises, but they were rather pitch-black and without emotion. The same went for her usually expressive features, as it was the same delicate face but without any of the emotions.

The previously beautiful horns that shimmered in red like a sunset or crystallized fire were replaced by far longer curved horns, these ones tainted by green and purple. She no longer looked like the Torrid Demonkin that all the members of Clan Azh'Rezak belonged to, but was rather an avatar of corruption.

Perhaps this was what she would look like if she had managed to perfect and awaken her poison constitution before she fell, though Zac felt her appearance had more to do with the materials that went into the creation of **[Love's Bond]**.

The skill didn't create a whole body either, which was yet another reminder it wasn't actually Alea. Beneath her upper torso there was only black smoke that reached down into the coffin. Yet this semi-corporeal avatar was still more than ten meters in height, and it completely blocked Zac from the Array Towers' barrage of attacks that were bearing down on him.

The demonic avatar's arms were formed as well, and they reached up toward the incoming attacks as though she wanted to embrace them. A small sphere appeared in between her outstretched hands, a small seed that started to rapidly spin around its own axis. It was as though this unassuming ball was

a black hole, and the air around it immediately started to twist and distort.

The torrential downpour of poison, ice, and miasma was seemingly unending, but it was all dragged into the small seed. It almost looked like the attacks tried to ignore the suction, but they were distorted and bent beyond their normal shape as they were dragged inside kicking and screaming.

Zac first thought the attacks were weaker than expected, but then a trail of ice broke free from the suction of **[Death's Embrace]** and slammed into the wall twenty meters from him. The wall immediately froze right over, creating a huge ice block that sealed over thirty unlucky Revenants inside. Even Zac felt some pain in his feet as the ice spread across the wall-walk, and he had to circulate some energy to not get frozen as well.

But there were only a few such examples as most of the attacks were sucked into the rapidly rotating ball. It grew larger and larger until it had turned into a chaotic sun that illuminated the whole fortress in green and azure light. Only then did the offensive arrays run out of steam, and the arrays slowly stopped radiating power.

The ball stayed where it was between the arms of the avatar though, and Alea's avatar slowly cradled it in her arms as she put her cheek against its surface in an embrace. Zac couldn't help but feel some trepidation as he looked at the ball. If that thing destabilized and exploded then it would probably be game over even for him. He wouldn't get away without some serious wounds at the least.

But the ball appeared completely inert, and Zac's eyes widened as Alea's maw opened wider and wider until it swallowed the thing whole. It looked absolutely horrific as the glowing sphere was even larger than Alea's head, but it was still gobbled down whole. The whole avatar lit up with terrifying power, but it didn't unleash a strike or something with the excess energy.

Instead it started to dissipate into clouds that receded toward the coffin.

Zac couldn't help himself, and he tried to send his mind to the avatar in hopes of getting a response, but Alea didn't so much as look at him. There was no connection like the one he felt with Verun either, and Zac shook his head before he gave up. The lid snapped shut the moment the avatar had returned to the coffin, and Zac didn't even get a chance to look inside.

A few violent shakes rocked the Spirit Tool, but it still seemed fine overall. In fact, it felt like it had just eaten a treasure, and it gained a slight green luster as it turned back to its necklace form again.

This was the first skill of [**Love's Bond**], a terrifyingly powerful summon that not only could defend against most kinds of attacks, but it could even take the energy for itself. The full-powered blast of the undead fortress would probably have been able to seriously harm him in his human form, but now it was turned into food for his new Spirit Tool instead.

However, while the skill was extremely powerful it wasn't without its limits. It would take days for the skill to be usable again, perhaps over a week if it took longer to refine the ball of poison. But it was still just what Zac needed. The defensive charges on his robes were essentially useless for someone like him by this point, and this was an excellent replacement.

His life wasn't in danger very often, but when it was he needed an extremely powerful, and preferably reusable, skill that could turn calamity into opportunity.

Having stolen a full-powered blast of the array towers meant he had avoided crisis for now, but he still didn't want to wait around for the towers to recharge for another salvo. He immediately rushed into the fortress toward the closest tower, but he was immediately beset by attacks from hidden mechanisms from every direction as the remaining soldiers on the wall followed him into the fortress, joining the hidden defenders in assaulting him.

Arrows, ice spears, and blobs of poison shot toward him from hidden vantages, and Zac could barely see the dour sky any longer from the chaotic waves of power. It looked like the Lich King had already expected his outer shields to be broken,

so he had set up a second layer of defense. These attacks by themselves weren't a threat to someone with 2000 Endurance, but they still required him to either dodge or block with **[Nature's Barrier]**.

It would slowly drain him of his energy, which had already taken somewhat of a hit from activating **[Death's Embrace]** and **[Deforestation]**. However, his recent increase in attributes came with a massive boost to his Cosmic Energy reserves, while his skills were still all F-Grade. It meant his endurance was through the roof, and he would be able to keep going for a lot longer even in a frantic situation like this.

A fractal forest rose from the ground, turning the dour fortress into one filled with greenery. It was immediately beset by a storm of miasma though, causing a battle between life and death inside the fortress. However, even if he couldn't utilize the skill to its utmost potential, he still gained most of its benefits.

It felt like he had gained a thousand eyes, and Fractal blades started to shoot out in seemingly random directions as his right arm was turning into a blur. One wall after another crumbled, exposing squads of soldiers hidden within.

More Cosmic Energy entered his body, and he kept forcing it into the node in his leg as he reached the first Array Tower. He finally reached a point where he didn't dare to infuse any longer, as he clearly felt the node was on the verge of cracking open. He could only reluctantly let the remaining energy dissipate, as this fight was too important.

He couldn't risk crippling himself from an experiment while the Lich King was still standing, but he could always open the node at a later date.

Zac grunted as **[Verun's Bite]** screamed through the air as he focused his frustration on the tower in front of him instead, but a fractal appeared on the surface of the stones the moment the edge was about to bite into bricks. A concussive mental wave exploded out from the inscription, but Zac was barely phased as he swung again.

This time the defensive array was expended, and a fifty-meter fractal edge cut the massive tower clean off after Zac bombarded the skill fractal for **[Chop]** with Cosmic Energy. Zac couldn't help but feel that the skill description was right; there was greatness in simplicity. Now that he could control far more energy thanks to his improved pathways, **[Chop]** had grown all the more lethal.

A terrifying punch followed, and a cloud of dust billowed out as the lofty structure crumbled.

Zac wouldn't stop there, and he destroyed one tower after another in quick succession, taking out over fifty squads of elite soldiers along the way. A shudder in the distance told Zac that Ogras had begun his assault on the general as well, and he couldn't help but worry about the safety of his sister.

However, not only did she carry two of his Defensive Treasures, but she also had Jeeves to detect any surprises coming her way. He would be able to return and help the squad in case they were starting to get overrun, but he felt that he would be able to deal with this place before it came to that.

A crash resounded next to him as his unique fractal blade blasted through a wall, utterly ripping it apart. Zac had instructed the special fractal blade to cause maximum structural damage, and it was like a hurricane that accompanied him on his rampage through the fortress. It kept expending Cosmic Energy, but Zac had more than enough to spare.

The last Array Tower finally crumbled as Zac unleashed a barrage of furious stikes at its base, and it toppled over and crushed another section of the wall. With the Lich King staying out of the way he had become completely unstoppable, and the towers didn't even get the chance to launch a second round of attacks before they were all smoldering ruins.

The gargantuan Array Towers also doubled as Unholy Beacons, and their destruction would hopefully put a stop to the various arrays in the area, including the ones in the sky that kept shooting down waves of death toward the ground. It was

pretty clear to Zac that the Lich King was an adept Array Master, perhaps even having that as his main class.

So taking out the towers was in a way directly cutting limbs off the Incursion Leader, as he wouldn't be able to utilize their power any longer.

However, even though a battle between Ogras and the banshee raged in full in the distance whereas Zac was running around inside the fortress like an enraged bull, the Lich King still hadn't shown his face. Zac couldn't help but feel the Lich was cooking up something, and his eyes turned toward a seemingly inconspicuous structure to the side of the fortress.

Or rather toward the ground beneath it.

He had kept watch for any suspect energy fluctuations during his rampage, but the Lich King had truly hidden himself well. There were no hotspots of Death-Attuned energies anywhere that could give Zac a clue to either the location of the incursion leader or the core of the realignment array. Zac had first thought the Lich would go to some throne room to prepare his last defense, but the cathedral-like castle in the back of the fortress was completely devoid of both movement and energy.

However, Zac had made some discoveries.

The towers actually seemed to form a pattern around the building he was looking at, almost forming a star shape if you would draw a line between their placements on a map. Zac felt it possible that the Lich King had used those towers as a conduit to the realignment array, and he might therefore stay inside that building where the power would be concentrated.

It was either that, or the Lich had fled through a hidden tunnel toward the Incursion Beacon that was placed some distance behind the fortress.

Zac dismissed his fractal edge as he ran over to the building, and simply punched a hole through the wall before he walked in. A normal door might be booby-trapped, so it was better to create your own entrance. However, the structure was just as unexciting on the inside as outside. It seemed to have been

some sort of administrative building, with dozens of desks placed with some distance between.

It was empty now, but the place was stacked with various missives and reports, somewhat skewing Zac's impression of how the invasion had worked. It looked a lot more structured from this side, compared to the seemingly mindless hordes that had spread across the continent like locusts with just the smallest of inputs from a few leaders.

But this showed a lot more refinement.

However, that wasn't why Zac came here, and he walked back and forth through the building until he found what he was looking for. There really seemed to be something beneath this building, though he couldn't find an entrance. There were occasional waves of Death Attuned energies rising from beneath, indicating something was going on. They were pretty minute though, and he probably wouldn't have noticed them without **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

The ground shook and pieces of gravel flew in every direction as Zac started to cut a path down, and he quickly destroyed the floor as he dug a twenty-meter deep hole. The cuts started to sound hollow at that point, and Zac started to make his way forward with greater care. Finally, the edge cut straight through the ground, displaying a dimly lit hall beneath.

There was no way his digging had gone by unnoticed, so a sneak attack was out the window. He still took out a corpse from his Spatial Ring and threw it inside, waiting for any potential trap to spring. A thud echoed out a second later, and Zac guessed the hidden chamber had a fifty-meter ceiling.

There was no response, so Zac simply activated **[Nature's Barrier]** while infusing the always-running **[Mental Fortress]** with a Dao Fragment as he jumped down. His eyes glared in every direction as he fell, but there was no attack coming at him. Instead, he found himself in an enormous room full of inscribed pillars. The only light came from purple crystals embedded in the room, giving it an oppressive feeling.

Was this the core of the Realignment Array? Zac immediately moved to start destroying the pillars, but he froze when he

suddenly heard a voice on the other side of the room.

“It seems I made a miscalculation,” a sigh echoed out across the vast chamber. “To think that your power had increased to this degree in just a few short days. It shouldn’t be possible, yet here we are. You stole my precious poison corpse and somehow turned it into a treasure shield, and now you are ruining my mission. You truly are a scourge.”

Chapter 503: Hidden Aces

“And you killed countless people and almost converted our world,” Zac said as he looked around. “How about this? Undo what you’ve done with the Realignment and I’ll let you leave this world alive, or your version of it at least. I let bygones be bygones, and your Kingdom will give up any claim to this planet. I don’t think that your Kingdom wants an enemy like me anyway.”

Zac’s biggest worry right now was the realignment array. Kenzie was coming along with her knowledge of arrays, but there were no guarantees she’d be able to deal with such massive formation. That left Zac’s far cruder method, finding the Array Core and bashing it. But none of them had any idea what that would result in.

What if doing so would cause the array to go out of control, completely crippling the planet?

The best outcome would be the Lich giving up and backing away, based on the potential of Zac’s future growth. Besides, revenge was a dish best served cold. Zac definitely would deal with the Lich King because of what he’d done sooner or later, but it didn’t have to be today. He could always visit the Undead Kingdom as his Draugr persona in the future and track this guy down. Saving Earth was more important.

But a laugh echoed across the halls as a robed figure emerged from the darkness, and a glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** could confirm that this was the real Lich King. The hooded undead teemed with power, far more than he ever had on top of the wall.

“What makes you think it is reversible? Death is the shadow of life, a natural absolute of the universe. Our arrays only speed the process up,” he laughed. “You’re long past the point of return.”

“Bullshit,” Zac growled without hesitation. “The thing hasn’t even started up.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” the Lich snickered as the fractals on the hundreds of pillars lit up in an instant. “But does it matter when you are about to join us?”

The energy density of the chamber grew by a terrifying degree in an instant, and Zac’s danger sense prickled as he looked around with a frown. He unhesitatingly shot out a series of fractal edges toward the closest pillars, but the blades actually crumbled mid-air as it looked like a million motes of darkness fed on them until they couldn’t maintain their form.

Zac activated [**Loamwalker**] to flash to a pillar instead, but it felt like he was trying to move through solid matter. Was nature blocked out in this place? He activated [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**] next to rid himself of the effect, but it didn’t work either. It was like he had lit up a weak candle of life in a raging storm of death, and his skill was ripped apart in an instant.

“I’ve reinforced this array for a year and it contains the will of the Undead Empire. It is powered by an enormous fortune of crystals and is perfected by the ancient sages. How could your little domain possibly resist it?” the Lich laughed. “You are indeed powerful and bursting with potential, but you are too confident in your strength. You are not fighting me, but an Empire, and the only result is Death.”

The intensity kept increasing, and Zac soon found himself on his knees. His skin burned like someone had thrown acid on him, but it was the black motes that tried to burrow into his skin. He tried to block them out with the Fragment of the Coffin and the Fragment of the Bodhi, but neither could help him for more than a second.

This array was just terrifying. It had created an absolute zone of death, and he as a living being was completely restrained. However, he still had one more card to pull, and a pitch-black crystal appeared in his hand as he readied himself. He quickly infused it with Cosmic Energy to activate it before he slammed it into the ground.

The whole area shuddered as the darkness turned into a vast nebula, and Zac felt the immense pressure of the array disappear. He immediately pushed all the Cosmic Energy he could muster into **[Chop]** as **[Verun's Bite]** lit up with sanguine luster. He wanted to take out the pillars and the Lich King alike in one massive swing.

However, Zac had barely time to begin his swing before he found himself on the ground again, the vision of the cosmos so brief that it might just as well have been a figment of his imagination. The crystal lay cracked on the ground, completely devoid of power.

“Void’s Disciple,” Adriel snorted. “A supreme talent, to even have managed to catch a glimpse of the Dao of Space at such an early stage. He would be welcomed with open arms in most forces of the Zecia Sector. It’s his bad luck to have been attached to such a wretched master.”

Zac sighed as he looked at the cracked crystal in front of him with mixed emotions. It was a big setback that this thing didn’t work at all, as it would force him to expose his Draugr form. But it was also was a bit of a relief. He had built up Void’s Disciple into some sort of mysterious powerhouse after their last encounter, but this was a good reminder that the Zhix warlord was just someone with an incomplete heritage and a bit of a headstart.

He had wanted to deal with this without exposing his undead form, but he was just restrained too much by this array of death. He sent the command to his duplicity core, while he circulated some energy to shoot out a feeble fractal blade toward the Lich king. Of course, it didn’t even make it half-way before it crumbled as well.

“You knew?” Zac croaked, trying to stall for a bit.

“He is talented, but just a native barbarian in the end. Just like you. How could I not notice him scanning the arrays in my domain?” Adriel said. “But there is time for us to discuss all this after you have awakened anew.”

Zac was just about to complete his transformation, but his mind suddenly screamed of danger. He used everything in his

power to slightly adjust his torso as a pitch-black spike descended out of nowhere, aiming straight for his heart. He just managed to adjust his chest enough to avoid getting his heart pierced, but the weapon still punctured his lung.

Bad turned to worse as a massive storm of miasma tore through his body, and Zac knew he would have died then and there if it wasn't for his unique constitution. Zac arduously looked around only to see a gaunt spectral assassin shrouded in a robe of pure darkness. He had never seen this assassin before, but he radiated a dense aura of killing intent.

Who was this? His aura was even stronger than that of the banshee general he fought earlier. And his mind had only managed to warn him at the very last second, barely allowing him to avoid getting his heart ruined. Was that ghost from before not actually the last general, but there had actually been one more lying wait all this time?

If that was the case then he was a true assassin. Zac had never seen a hint of his aura or his impressive killing intent, something that would only be born from a lot of carnage. He didn't do anything while Zac tore down half the fort and killed most of the soldiers, but waited to strike until he was confident in succeeding.

"Don't soil the body," the Lich said from the side, though he clearly seemed to be in a good mood. "I lost the poison constitution lass, but we can still submit this body. It might be even better for my purposes. The dreams of the Heartlands are not yet dead."

Zac's chaotic mind wandered, but he snapped back into focus as the transformation into his Draugr form finished. The waves of miasma that crashed through his body due to the spike were no longer harmful, but rather invigorating. The spike still hurt, but getting gored by a small spike wasn't a wound that really bothered Zac any longer.

Zac had been in this exact situation before, and there was no need to change a winning concept. A bladelike fist full of the Fragment of the Bodhi punched into the chest of the spectral assassin as Zac leaped to his feet.

“Wh-” the ghost said, but he didn’t have time to react before his throat was caught in a vise-like grip.

The extremely powerful array that once had threatened to crush his body and soul was no longer an impediment at all. In fact, Zac had never felt this comfortable in his undead form before. This place felt like a paradise for cultivation, and he already started thinking of whether he could bring these pillars back home to create a proper cultivation ground.

This was why Zac had been confident in jumping down into the hole at all. Most of the attacks that the Lich King had brought forth had either been based on death or poison. And in this form, he was confident in dealing with either.

There was no crunch as Zac ripped the ghost general’s head clean off with another infusion from the Fragment of the Bodhi, but a surge of energy entered his body as he followed it up by crushing the head.

“What!” the lich screamed as he fell back. “Draugr? It’s you? It has been you all along?! This is impossible!”

“You keep saying that,” Zac said with an abyssal voice as a child-sized coffin appeared on his back. “You should know by now that nothing is impossible in the Multiverse.”

Four chains shot out the next moment, each of them aiming for the Lich with a palpable eagerness. Zac followed suit as a black armor covered his body, and Zac stomped down on the ground to appear right next to the Lich.

The Lich King was clearly frazzled by the turn of events, and Zac couldn’t blame him. This array he had set up would be the bane of almost any living warrior dumb enough to get caught inside, and even if Zac could withstand it he should have been severely weakened. But how could the lich have expected to run into one of the few living people in the multiverse that the array was utterly useless against?

The fractal cage sprung up while Zac simultaneously pushed the taunting function of [**Vanguard of Undeath**] to its peak. He had already shown his hidden ace, and he couldn’t let this man escape no matter what. The Lich King screamed as he

unleashed a barrage of poison from his body, and Zac noticed that the real body of the Lich had once again been replaced by a copy.

However, the real body appeared just ten meters away, and the chains of [**Love's Bond**] were already twisted around his body before he had time to realize that he hadn't escaped as he had planned.

The massive avatar once more appeared in the sky as a waterfall of toxins started to fall, but the chains effortlessly moved the lich out of the way. Bursts of poison emerged from his own mouth next, but if there was one thing the chains were unafraid of, then it would be toxins. They twisted even harder until sickening crunches echoed out through the subterranean hall as one bone after another snapped by the pressure.

Zac suddenly felt a tremendous surge of energy entering his body as the Lich finally couldn't take it any longer. Zac had been worried that there would be even more tricks to the Lich King, but he and his personal assassin had placed too much trust in the arrays in this chamber. It allowed him to take them out in quick succession, and Zac could already confirm that the Invasion has failed as the familiar prompt appeared in front of him, telling him that the area had come under his control.

There shouldn't be many surviving invaders after Zac had torn the whole place apart, but they would probably be fleeing toward the incursion by now. Zac didn't care about that as he hadn't exposed his Draugr form to anyone on the surface, and unless there was another ghost that could hide against his scans there were no witnesses down here either.

They would only be able to retell the situation of a terrifying Progenitor, and they would sooner or later connect that with "Zac Piker" of the Tower of Eternity, which would explain how this was all possible. Hopefully, that meant that any issue with the Undead Empire would end then and there, as Catheya had indicated that she would make sure no problem would crop up even if he booted the local undead from Earth.

But honestly, Zac couldn't bother going over every eventuality. He closed his eyes as he felt a sense of calm

spreading through his body. He had done it. He had defeated the Undead Empire, which would allow Earth to keep going for a while longer.

At least until the next threat would come along.

Chapter 504: Broken

Zac took another look around before he released [**Profane Seal**] as he gazed down at the corpse of the Lich King. This wretched half-man half-corpse had caused so much trouble for Earth, but he hadn't even been able to resist one attack of his new Spirit Tool. He couldn't help but shake his head as he bent down to look for treasure.

He pried a low-quality Spatial Ring from the man's hand and found a top-quality Cosmos Sack hidden within his robes before he threw the body into his Spatial Ring. He walked over to the ghost next, which had turned into a pile of shimmering sand upon dying.

It felt a bit weird digging around in a pile of ghost ashes, but Zac found a spatial pouch and a set of throwing darts inside. He popped a healing pill next as he explored the chamber, and he could quickly confirm there were only two points of interest apart from the numerous inscribed pillars. The first was a pedestal holding a large black rock, and the second was a proper entrance in the direction of the palace.

It didn't require a genius in formations to figure out the pedestal, or rather the rock, was the core of the array, but Zac left it alone so that Kenzie could look at it instead. As for the entrance, it was sealed shut, and Zac had more pressing things to do than to look for treasure in the palace. A massive amount of energy coursed through his body after his two kills.

The Lich might have been the highest leveled individual on Earth apart from the Dominators, and the amount of energy he had gained from the kill was staggering. This energy alone was more than all the kills above-ground, and it would probably take him weeks to grind the equivalent with any targets he could find on Earth.

He really needed to make sure everything was okay on the surface though, and he ran back to the hole in the ceiling, speeding against the clock as the accumulated energy already had started to dissipate from his body. But he froze just as he was about to jump up before he looked down at his chest.

The wound to his lung had mostly healed by now thanks to the pill, and he activated his duplicity core again. With **[Profane Seal]** expended his undead form was severely weakened, not to mention there might still be curious eyes upstairs. He felt a stabbing pain in his chest when the transformation completed, but it wasn't too bad.

Zac jumped up through the entrance he came from, and soon enough found himself back in the open air. It wasn't too different from how he left it, but he saw a clear change as he jumped up on one of the tallest buildings that were still standing after the battle. Streams of the surviving undead were rushing toward the Incursion Pillar, and the fortress was fast losing its population.

This was just how it usually went. The invaders all got a warning the leader was dead, and the countdown before the Nexus Hub closed had begun. A glance over in his sister's direction showed they had moved away even further from the fortress, and the unthinking zombies seemed to have lost interest in them by now.

Perhaps they were unsure what to do after having lost connection to the Lich King.

"Good job," a bloodied Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows. "That girl suddenly lost her composure, I'm guessing she got the prompt of her leader's untimely demise."

"I dealt with the other General as well. There should be no more threats, but are you okay to guard the others for a bit?" Zac asked. "I think I found the array, but let these people clear out a bit before I bring Kenzie over. I want to use the energy to break open a node before it's too late."

"These guys don't seem to have any fight left in them," the demon nodded as he looked around. "Go ahead, I'll look after things."

Zac nodded and entered the building he stood on, finding a secluded spot. There was no point in him going after the fleeing Revenants and Corpse Lords, as that would only result in a net loss of accumulated energy with the speed he was losing energy from killing the Lich King.

He only hesitated for a second before he sat down on his prayer mat. The fighting above had only left him with some grazes, and the stab wasn't too bad either. Most of the danger had come from the torrent of miasma, which had been completely neutralized and absorbed moment he turned into a Draugr. Apart from having spent most of his big skills he was essentially in good condition.

He couldn't discard this opportunity to become stronger, and he directly started pushing the remaining energy toward the node in his left leg. The Undead Empire was dealt with, but he still needed every advantage he could get in the upcoming fight against the Dominators. He needed to break open a few more nodes, and he turned his vision inward.

The node in his leg was just like before; partially opened and chock-full of energy while still impeding energy circulation. Seeing that nothing had changed from swapping classes back and forth he started to forcibly infuse it, and the pain quickly grew to uncomfortable levels.

The minutes passed and Zac started to brace himself for what was coming, but even he hadn't expected the extreme agony when the node finally exploded. His white robes got drenched in blood as his a chunk of his leg exploded as well to the point that bone was exposed. But that pain was still nothing compared to the agony he felt on a spiritual level.

The nodes were something between corporeal and intangible, fixed on what Ogras called a Spirit Body. It was essentially an energy copy that perfectly matched your physical form, and it was the housing of the pathways. And now this Spirit Body was wounded from the explosion, causing the pathways in his legs to become messed up.

He finally understood the difference between opening a node the normal way and forcing it open. The normal way was akin

to unclogging a drain by pouring down some solvent before snaking it dislodge whatever caused the bad flow. Forcing a node open was rather like throwing a stick of dynamite down the drain and blowing up the clog, along with half your house.

This self-inflicted carnage did not only hurt a lot, but Zac also realized it had weakened him drastically. His Energy circulation was all out of control, even in the parts of his body that weren't harmed. He immediately took out another pill, this one intended to heal souls.

It helped with the pain somewhat, but there was no time for him to properly heal as an immense pressure suddenly descended upon him. Zac barely had time to get on his feet before a blinding golden light bled through the cracks in the wall, and then he was falling as the building collapsed.

A blistering heat was pushing down from above as well, almost immediately making the stones to burn upon the slightest touch. A new set of shallow wounds covered his body as he was buried in an avalanche of stones, but he immediately started to dig himself out. But there were just golden flames and smoke all around him, robbing him of his visibility. He didn't even know if he was digging in the right direction.

Worry gripped his heart as Zac pushed the heated stones out of the way. What the hell was going on?

The strength required to unleash an attack with that kind of impact was not something anyone in his group could deal with, and it didn't look like something that the undead would use. There was only one group who could conjure something like this.

The cultists.

He quickly circulated energy as he tried to forcibly push himself out of the mountain of rubble. But a blaring pain erupted in his left leg after putting too much pressure on it, almost making him black out from the agony. The events had made him forgot about the wound from blasting open the node, but at least he had managed to break free from the building.

Only to be met with an utter inferno.

Golden flames had embroiled the fortress in every direction, and scorched corpses of elite Undead Warriors littered the wall. Zac had already killed most of them through his earlier rampage, and there couldn't be many still around after this salvo. The cultists must have bombarded the fortress with massive siege weapons to cause this kind of destruction in an instant.

Panic really started to set in but opening the Ladder screen allowed Zac to breathe out in relief. He could spot both his sister and Emily on the Dao Ladder, and Joanna on the Level ladder. Whatever was going on right now hadn't affected them just yet.

That didn't mean he could relax, but he simply couldn't find any target. There were just flames and corpses everywhere, and a sky on fire. He hobbled toward one of the broken towers, each step feeling like he was getting stabbed. A few jumps later he found himself on the broken peak, looking across the landscape.

Nothing.

There was no zealot army amassing outside the gates, just a grey haze in every direction except for the Incursion pillar. The bombardment was thankfully confined to the fortress, and he believed that Ogras was experienced enough to avoid getting scorched. Zac felt a fluctuation from his spatial ring, and he took out a communication crystal with surprise.

These things hadn't worked since they had reached the core of the Dead Zone, but now he heard his Sister on the other side of the line.

"What's going on?" Zac asked. "Is everyone okay?"

"It's the cultists! A huge flying vessel suddenly appeared in the sky, and we immediately fled into the woods to not implicate you," Kenzie said from the other side. "Ogras shrouded us, so we're fine."

"Stay hidden," Zac said. "I can deal with this alone."

“Be careful. I don’t think they just came for the undead. They are probably here to deal with you as well,” she said.

“It seems that way,” Zac sighed as a storm of flames was falling straight toward him.

Cosmic Energy surged in his body, but a blazing pain made itself reminded as the recently opened node flared up. He could only grit his teeth as he forced the Cosmic Energy to move. However, he barely managed to form a 30-meter fractal edge with [**Chop**] this time, compared to the 100-meter blade he easily conjured earlier.

It wasn’t enough. The blade cut into the wall of flames like a knife, but it was swallowed whole without breaking apart the attack. Zac didn’t hesitate to activate a defensive treasure, and a sphere enclosed him and the top of the tower in an instant. The flames slammed down like a furious waterfall the next second, and Zac felt the scorching heat even within his protective bubble.

The base of the tower was quickly incinerated, and the tip was just held in the air with the help of the barrier. But the flames finally subsided, which allowed the skies to clear out. Only then did he finally spot the source of the attacks. A large vessel in gold and red hovered a few hundred meters above the fortress, something that looked like a mix of a flying treasure and a floating island.

Zac couldn’t see how it looked from the top, but it seemed to be kept in the air with a massive ball of flames. Zac sighed with a shake of his head as he took out his own flying treasure. The cultists really liked their fire. He quickly rose into the sky as the tower fell to the ground behind him, no longer supported by the shield.

Nausea and double-vision plagued him from the pain of opening a node, so he needed to end this fast. He forced the unruly Cosmic Energy into his arm as he prepared his last skill of mass destruction. He had used up [**Deforestation**] in his earlier fight, but there was still one more card he could bring out; [**Nature’s Punishment**].

His whole body was covered in sweat from the pain of forcibly utilizing his maimed pathways, but he couldn't stop at this juncture. Space cracked and the familiar hand flew out, though Zac couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed that the hand hadn't changed at all from him evolving.

It still radiated terrifying might due to the Fragment of the Bodhi though, and it shot straight through a burst of flames without even getting its leaves singed.

The hand placed itself straight above the floating warship, and Zac didn't delay a second before the familiar branch started to descend. There was no way to tell what these unhinged lunatics had planned, and he needed to strike before it was too late.

The branch quickly grew in size as it shot down at the ship, but a burning whip covered in white-hot flames shot up to meet its descent. Zac spotted a lizardman standing at the fore of the vessel, his eyes lit up like two blazing beacons as five swirls of pure-white globes of fire circulated behind him.

Zac had fought one of the other generals just the other day, but the power this man emitted far eclipsed him. In fact, this man even felt more threatening than the Lich King himself, though much of the danger from the Undead Leader came from his command of formations.

Had the leader of the Church of the Everlasting Dao come in person?

Chapter 505: Fate's Obduracy

If this really was the Incursion Leader of the Church of Everlasting Dao, then a massive chance had presented itself as Zac still didn't know where the cultist Incursion was located. They had somehow managed to hide their base of operations all this time while sending out roving death squads that killed everything in their path.

The best idea his people had to find these guys were to investigate the zones of Pangea that had no reports of human activity. They figured the lack of surviving towns could mean that everyone had already been killed by the Church, and the Incursion Pillar was close. But killing the leader here would save them all that trouble, as the Incursion would still end if he died.

However, the Head Priest of the church was clearly no chump. One of the flaming balls hovering behind his back entered the whip as it elongated to reach well over a hundred meters. The very air burned while the whip ripped through the sky as the weapon's flames increased in intensity many times over. Zac instantly felt a blistering pain in his arm as the damage to the branch was transferred over.

It was like the whip was a boa constrictor that tried to squeeze the life out of the branch as it looped around it multiple times over, preventing it from freely growing in size. The white-hot flames had quickly latched on to the branch as well, and an inferno raged on across its surface. Burnt bark fell like rain from the sky as new layers grew out at the cost of even more of Zac's Cosmic Energy.

Zac felt like a fool when he saw the scene. The pain from opening his node had made him activate the skill as usual, instead of thinking things through. He had always used the

wooden punishment since gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi as the two resonated the best, but he would clearly have been better off using the mountain or water punishment this time around. Still, there was no point in crying over spilled milk.

The fight had turned into a battle between destruction and creation in a sense, and Zac intended to emerge the victor of that struggle.

He kept infusing [**Nature's Punishment**] with his Dao and Cosmic Energy while he tried to force the branch to descend. The priest on the other hand was forced to infuse one globe of flames after another into his Spirit Tool to power the fires raging across the swelling branch.

But Zac still hadn't met anyone who was able to outlast him in a clash of endurance, but he actually felt the skill starting to destabilize much quicker than usual. He had no choice, and the energy around him veritably exploded as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. The branch suddenly radiated powerful waves as well, and the flames were quickly subdued.

Zac saw his chance as he made a final push, and the whip simply snapped as the branch exploded in size. Newly born branches spread in every direction before they all turned toward the warship, like hundreds of falling spears. The wooden punishment had finally gained its momentum, and it crashed into the warship with enough force to push both the miasmic clouds and the flames aside.

A golden shield appeared to block the strike, but it quickly broke as the main branch punched a massive hole. Flame and metal rained down toward the ground as both the ship and the sun that powered it broke apart and screams echoed across the golden sky as dozens of cultists plummeted toward the ground. Zac managed to kill most of them with a rapid flurry of fractal edges, but his focus was still on the leaders.

The head priest was still alive, as the surge of cosmic energy he felt was nowhere big enough to correspond to killing someone that powerful. Finally, his target emerged through the smoke on top of a far smaller flying vessel with four powerful

warriors to his side. Zac prepared himself for a final clash, wanting to end the battle before the timer for his buff ran out.

But his eyes widened in shock when he realized that there would be no cataclysmic battle in the sky. The so-called zealots left a burning trail in the air as they fled for their lives.

Zac couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the Church Leader escape with enough gusto to almost punch a hole in the sound barrier. Was this the same faction as the one where pretty much everyone was ready to blow themselves up just at a shot at dragging you with them to hell? Where was the fanaticism?

The leaf ripped through the air as Zac instructed his flying vessel to pursue, as he didn't want to let the cultists get away. A chance like this wouldn't come again. The smaller vessel shot away with shocking speed, but Zac's own leaf wasn't any worse than whatever some local cultists could bring to the table.

It whizzed after the group of five, taking advantage of the fact that the cultists were actually burning away the death-attuned haze in front of them, forming some sort of a wind tunnel. But Zac soon realized that he actually was unable to catch up to the group, as they seemed to have an endless supply of fire-attuned Nexus Crystals that they fed into the vessel, allowing it to burn through the Dead Zone.

Zac immediately started peppering them with fractal blades from behind, but he sighed when he saw the man with the whip crush them one by one without overtaxing himself. The Spirit Tool in the Head Priest's hand was no doubt top-tier, and he was clearly some ways into the E-Grade as well.

Zac kept trying to take them down while **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was still active, but he was out of cards. The sense of power was soon replaced with weakness, and he wasn't sure what he should do. He didn't want to leave these guys alive. But he also couldn't leave Kenzie and the others alone in the middle of the Dead Zone while he harried the Church of Everlasting Dao for god know how long. Besides, there was still the Realignment Array to deal with.

A few more minutes passed as he adapted to the state of weakness while they flew further and further. But finally, he had an idea, and the amulet around his neck slithered to his back to gain its backpack form. The inscribed circle on the lid was dimmed out after having used [**Death's Embrace**], but there was another set of inscriptions that were still in working order. Zac infused a large chunk of his remaining Cosmic Energy and the two lines of fractals running along its length lit up.

The scripture started to slither back and forth across the coffin lid for a second before they suddenly rose into the air, forming two actual chains wrought from darkness that shot toward his targets. However, the Head Priest unleashed a massive arc of flames that crashed into the two chains, causing them to shatter in an instant.

However, a skill from [**Love's Bond**] obviously wouldn't be defeated so easily. The two shattered chains suddenly regrew into four before they resumed their pursuit. The cultists desperately swatted them down over and over, but it was useless. They just split and grew back when they broke apart, just like the heads of a hydra.

Zac had already gotten a hint of what the skill would do, but his eyes still widened in shock when he saw the sea of darkness rushing after the vessel with wild abandon. Finally, the cultists couldn't hold the tide back any longer, and they were swallowed up by a ball of chains that frantically writhed as it tried to crush everything within its cage.

The ball was quickly dragged back toward Zac who could hear crunching sounds and screams from within. However, a massive blast of flames suddenly erupted from within, forcing the chains away long enough for a flash of light to escape the stranglehold.

Zac frowned as he looked at the river of flames that rushed toward the horizon with a speed that superseded Zac's leaf by many times over. He knew it wasn't an errant burst of flames, but rather some sort of escape skill or treasure, something in the same vein as the top tier escape skill that was in Thea's possession.

Zac sighed as he knew that there was no way he'd be able to capture whoever had fled, and he turned his attention back to the ball of chains that hovered in front of him. The chains of darkness had pretty much turned into a solid by this point, and things had turned completely silent by this point as blood dripped down from the bottom.

This was the second skill of [**Love's Bond**], called [**Fate's Obduracy**]. This skill could be used like now to wear down a single target with an unceasing wave of chains. Another strategy could be him sending the set of chains out to cause widespread destruction, where any attempt of stopping the advance would worsen the situation. In either case, it was a nigh-unstoppable skill of destruction.

Just like [**Death's Embrace**] it had a pretty long cool-down. He wouldn't be able to use the skill for a full two weeks, and he would need to feed the coffin with some energy-rich treasures to recharge itself.

There was also a limit of just how many times the chains could reproduce. The cultists hadn't actually been that far from shaking off the attack. If the Head Priest hadn't burnt all five of those globes of flames to deal with [**Nature's Punishment**] he might have been able to exhaust the skill completely.

Zac instructed the mess of chains to unravel, and it displayed an utterly crumpled ship along with three barely distinguishable corpses. That meant that the burst of flames had contained two people, one of them being the man with the whip. Zac sighed as he instructed his leaf to fly back toward the Undead Fortress after looting the corpses.

He couldn't help but feel some disappointment upon failing to kill that man. If he had just died with the rest of the cultists he would have been done by now, having killed the two most annoying Incursion leaders in one fell swoop. But he guessed he couldn't always luck out, even with a Luck of over 300.

The emerald leaf whizzed through the air as Zac returned toward the undead fortress. However, he started to worry again as he flew, as he saw terrifying numbers of zombies stream toward the core of the Dead Zone as well. He had already

noticed that the outer shield had been deactivated, perhaps as a result of him breaking the Array Towers in the base, and now the enormous number of zombies who were previously stuck outside were on the move.

Zac didn't hesitate to infuse the leaf with the Fragment of the Bodhi to speed up his return, but he quickly changed course when he saw a group of familiar faces some ways from the ruined fortress. It was everyone except Ogras who had planted themselves on top of a small hill, and the Valkyries had once again erected a shield wall as they were utterly surrounded by a sea of zombies.

However, it barely seemed necessary. The shield occasionally received a swipe from a close-by zombie, but there was no concerted effort to push past the barrier. They all kept moving forward, streaming toward the fortress as though they were under a spell.

"You're back!" Kenzie said with a relieved smile. "What happened?"

"I've dealt the cultists, but a few got away. What's going on?" Zac asked with bemusement as he landed next to them. "And where is Ogras?"

"He went off to check things out," Kenzie said. "As for these guys? We think they are heading toward the Incursion, it started just a minute or two after you flew away. It's like something luring them toward the teleporter."

"We think the Undead Kingdom is doing something to attract the Zombies to bring them over to the other side," Joanna added.

"Why aren't you fighting them?" Zac asked curiously. "It should be a good opportunity to level up."

"It feels weird," Kenzie said. "It was one thing when they were attacking us, but now they are just ignoring us. They are former Earthlings after all. We were thinking it would be better to simply let them go if it means they'll at least live on in some way."

“Besides, we’ve even gained a lot,” Emily said with a wide grin.

“Oh?” Zac said with confusion, but he suddenly remembered the teenager should have gotten a part of his Cosmic Energy due to her buff. “How much did you gain?”

“Six,” she said, her widening grin almost splitting her face in two. “I gained more than six levels thanks to you! I told you we should go out hunting together. I’d pass Thea Marshall in a week or two.”

“If you always ride the coattails of others you’ll turn into a useless vase,” a voice echoed out across the hill as Ogras appeared from the shadows. “You need to rely on yourself.”

“What about you playing all cool and saying you’d deal with that lady general? Kenzie detonated a bomb right in her face just a few days ago. Zac almost knocked the soul out of her body and then cut off her hand. It’s not like you’re any different,” Emily retorted with a scathing glance.

“You were a lot cuter after Zac picked you up from the streets. Feels like I’ve lost a daughter,” Ogras sighed with an exaggeratedly forlorn expression.

Or perhaps it was just his wretched appearance that gave that impression, as he looked like he had been oven-roasted for a few hours. His body sported multiple new scorch-marks that weren’t there when they met earlier, and even his white hair had been singed clean off.

“What’s with your look?” Zac couldn’t help but ask with a snort, as the demon really cut a sorry sight. “I thought you left the fortress before the cultists arrived.”

“Those netherblasted lunatics really didn’t hold back. Who knows how much wealth was destroyed? I tried to salvage what I could before it was too late,” the demon explained.

“Hey, you two are matching now,” Emily said with glee as she pointedly looked at Ogras’ bald head.

“Shit, don’t lump me together with that eunuch,” Ogras spat as his white hair quickly grew back until it reached his shoulders again. “That’s better.”

“Did you find anything?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Not much,” the demon shrugged. “A storeroom full of half-burnt herbs. I don’t recognize the thing, but there were massive quantities. I am guessing it’s something used on zombies from how much of it they had. So what happened with the cultists? Did you get the leader?”

“I don’t think so,” Zac sighed as he retold his encounter with the zealots.

“A whip? That’s a pretty rare weapon for a man,” the demon muttered. “I never heard of him from any reports either. It should be the leader of the incursion who only ventured out to deal with you. Shame. Such life-saving measures usually come with a price though.”

“Let’s hope so. I’ll go check things out at the Incursion,” Zac finally said as he took out the flying treasure again.

However, the moment he was about to instill the leaf with some energy to activate it, he felt the whole world shudder and turn slanted. An agonizing pain ripped through his body, and he felt his vision close in on him.

Chapter 506: Triv

Zac woke up with a start, his head a chaotic mess, but he instinctively shot to his feet with his weapon at the ready. He barely had time to stop himself from bisecting a shocked Valkyrie before he remembered where he was.

“Sorry about that. How long was I out?” Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

“Around forty minutes,” Kenzie said with worry. “What’s wrong? Are you poisoned?”

“It’s nothing,” Zac said as he rubbed his temples. “I broke open a Node by force earlier because of all the energy I gained. I think I overextended myself a bit.”

“I completely forgot after seeing you zip around as usual. I’m surprised you could fight like that at all,” Ogras said, his eyes wide. “I guess that even the Heavens has finally had enough of your luck and sent some cultists in your direction. Karma always comes knocking sooner or later.”

Zac turned his sight inward, and he was a bit better than before. His pathways were still a mess, but his flesh was on the mend already. He guessed that he had fallen unconscious because he had used his pathways when he should have been resting. It was a valuable experience though, learning what kind of effect exploding a node had on his body and combat readiness.

But the node wasn’t the only problem that ailed his body at the moment. He thought a second before he walked a few steps away, and shocked exclamations echoed across the hill as he stabbed himself in his arm. A large spurt of blood stained the ground, but the wound quickly scabbed over.

“Don’t worry, just expelling some toxins,” Zac said as he took out his flying treasure. “I feel a lot better already. Get ready.”

I'll check out the situation around the pillar for threats before we deal with the realignment array."

Zac really did feel a lot better after having exsanguinated himself. **[Void Heart]** had absorbed both a bunch of miasma and poisons during the fight, and having been bled a few times helped him get some of the impurities out. He still would have preferred to rest up some more, but there was still the aftermath of the invasion to deal with. He gingerly tried activating the flying treasure again, and this time it went smoothly.

He soon closed in on the azure pillar and he actually saw a familiar figure fretting back and forth some distance away from it, the ghost who had hovered right next to the Lich King earlier. It looked unsure whether to enter or not. However, the moment it spotted Zac its visage turned even ghastlier and became marred with horror, and it immediately shot toward the Nexus Hub.

The ghost wasn't all that quick though, especially not compared to a top-tier flying treasure like Zac's. Just a second after the ghost spotted him he had been caught, held firmly in Zac's grasp. A few Revenants were overseeing the zombies as well, but they unhesitantly jumped into the teleportation array, abandoning their colleague.

"Who are you?" Zac asked as he shook the ghost for a bit.

"Sir, I am just an attendant to Lord Ad- ah, I mean the Wretched Lich Adriel. A thousand blessings upon you for freeing me!" he hurriedly said. "Please spare this useless one, I am not a threat to you or your planet. I am just a custodian, a non-combat class ordered to come to this planet against his wishes."

"Shameless enough," Zac snorted. "What's going on here?"

"We're bringing back the children," the ghost explained, not hesitating to spill the beans. "They will have a better future coming with us than staying here, and it will rid your planet of these walking Holy Beacons."

Zac frowned as he looked at the zombies who mindlessly shuffled forward until they disappeared into the Incursion Pillar. Perhaps the ghost was right. The death-attunement should dissipate sooner or later, and what would become of these people?

Some might turn sapient and find themselves stuck on a planet with a hostile environment full of enemies. But most would simply be cut down by cultivators gathering Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. At the Undead Kingdom, they would at least have a chance to be born anew.

“...Fine, I’ll let them go. Now, tell me how to turn off the Realignment Array,” Zac said.

This was the most pressing issue now. The quest to stop the realignment still hadn’t completed. He had actually noticed that the massive lines in the sky had started to fade while he hunted the cultists, but it seemingly wasn’t enough. The most likely suspect was obviously the array below the surface, but he still believed that having this attendant to turn it off the safest bet.

But his hopes were quickly dashed as the ghost frantically shook his head.

“I can’t!” the ghost cried. “I would love to explain to the young master, but I can’t.”

“The first directive?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Yes, yes! You are very well-read. The first directive precludes me from helping you no matter my personal wish to assist!” the ghost nodded.

Zac frowned as his eyes bore into the squirming specter. Catheya had never really explained exactly how binding the commandments were, but they didn’t seem like complete compulsions to Zac. There should be some wiggle-room, and Zac felt he might as well do some name-dropping to see if the Draugr girl could help him one last time.

“I recently became friends with Catheya Sharva’Zi from the Empire Heartlands when I visited the Tower of Eternity. It appears she is visiting your Kingdom while her master is in

secluded cultivation?” Zac said as he took out the Teleportation Token she gave him before he flashed his Tower Title. “She gave me this token, you might recognize it.”

“This! Ninth Floor! And you know that Exalted Mistress?” the ghost veritably screamed as its incorporeal eyes darted back and forth between the title and the token.

Catheya actually hadn't given him a Token representing her force, but he was willing to bet that some random ghost wouldn't know the difference. For all it knew, it might very well be a teleportation token leading straight to the Empire Heartlands rather than the Twilight Harbor.

“I can put in a good word for you next time I meet her, or I can do the opposite,” Zac shrugged. “I will turn off the Realignment array sooner or later even if I have to rip this whole Fortress apart. I don't mind turning you into a pile of ghost dust first though.”

The ghost sputtered for a few seconds until it calmed down.

“Did you know that the attunement of a planet is based on its World Core? It is a magical crystal residing in the deepest core of a world. Some believe that a world core is essentially alive, and the planet's attunement a result of its cultivation where it absorbs the energy of The Cosmos. What do you think would happen if such a core was flooded with Death while it was sealed off from the cosmos?” the ghost said before it dimmed as though it was wounded.

Zac's eyes widened as he looked at the wretched appearance of the ghost. Was it actually wounded from divulging some information like that? However, it still hadn't answered his question, at least not straight out. Most of what it said was just general information and theories, and nothing that he wouldn't be able to piece together himself.

However, Zac obviously understood the implied meaning behind the ghost's words.

“The array in the sky was just blocking out the cosmos,” Zac muttered before he looked down at the ground.

It seemed as though the people of earth had gotten things a bit backward. If Zac had understood the ghost's explanation correctly, the enormous array in the sky wasn't actually the realignment array. It was at best half of it responsible for isolating the planet from the universe, preventing it from absorbing normal energy. The real realignment was taking place underground.

Both parts were important to stop, but the most important might be whatever was going on in that underground chamber. It looked like he would have to bring his sister, after all. Catching other undead wouldn't do him any good either, as they no doubt would be implicated by the same compulsions.

"You'll be coming with me for a bit," Zac said to the ghost as **[Love's Bond]** transformed into a coffin on his back.

The next moment four chains wrapped around the screeching ghost, each of them imbued with the Fragment of the Bodhi. One twist would rip the hostage apart if he tried anything, but it looked unlikely judging by how weak it felt. Zac still kept his eyes on the ghost as they flew back to his group to pick up his sister.

Ogras might be helpful as well, but he seemed pretty wrung out. Zac left him on the hill instead so that he could protect the group while he recuperated. After all, there was still one Undead General on the loose who could appear at any moment.

"What's this?" Kenzie asked as she curiously looked at the captured ghost.

"Young Master, you should not mix with the forces of the Boundless Path," the ghost said, pointedly ignoring Kenzie. "Living or Dead, we still follow Heaven's Path. Consorting with heretics will only lead to a lifetime of suffering."

"She's not a Technocrat. She's my sister," Zac snorted. "I just closed a Technocrat Incursion and picked up some tools that are helpful until we've grown stronger. And you talk pretty big after almost having killed our planet."

“A thousand apologies, mistress!” the ghost exclaimed, his attitude taking a dramatic turn. “This humble one is called Triv, I worked as a caretaker of the previous lord of this manor.”

Zac suddenly realized that the ghost would be a pretty good source of knowledge. It obviously wouldn't be as knowledgeable as someone like Catheya, but he was still the right-hand-man to the Lich King. He should have listened in on all sorts of conversations and had free access to a lot of intelligence.

Perhaps keeping him on Earth wouldn't be such a bad idea, provided he could be controlled.

“I thought he might be useful in turning off the realignment array,” Zac added. “It is obviously still going since the quest hasn't completed.”

“But the massive arrays in the sky seems to be weakening,” Kenzie skeptically said. “They should clear up in another hour or two.”

Zac quickly recounted his experiences below ground as they reached the entrance to the hidden subterranean chamber. The group jumped down as one, but Kenzie immediately fell over, completely pale and shuddering. Only then did Zac remember the extremely dense death attunement in the air.

It wasn't too bad for him now that the Lich King wasn't there to amplify the effect, but someone like Kenzie was clearly worse off. He quickly handed her an E-Grade Divine crystal as he spread out his Dao Field for the Fragment of the Bodhi. It helped alleviate her symptoms, but it also made the ghost scream in pain until Zac moved the chains out of the field.

“Thank you,” Kenzie said with a hoarse voice. “That was pretty scary.”

“No problem,” Zac said with a smile as he looked around. “What do you think?”

“These things are part of one array. I think the condensed death energy in here is just an after-effect. Kind of like radiation in a power plant or something,” she muttered as she

looked around, her eyes flashing in red a few seconds before they dimmed again.

“How do we turn this thing off?” Zac asked.

Kenzie walked over to the closest pillar, and she went over every line for a few minutes. They also tried to go over the mysterious core, but they couldn't even get close before the aura of death became too overpowering.

“I think we can deactivate the pillars if we make our way from the outside,” she hesitantly said. “We'll leave the core for last.”

Zac nodded as they moved to the edge of the chamber, where Kenzie started breaking a few inscription lines that connected the pillar with the dense runes on the floor. Zac helped out by ripping crystal after crystal out of the sockets, rapidly expanding his stockpile of Miasma Crystals. They spent the next hour going back and forth, where Zac essentially acted as a mobile counterforce to the death attunement in the air.

However, even he was starting to grow tired as it was a constant drain on his mental energy to keep his Dao Field active in this environment. Zac initially wanted to start smashing pillars, but Kenzie was afraid that would cause a massive final discharge of death energies that might hurt the World Core.

But Kenzie got more and more skilled at turning off the pillars, and soon enough they had all dimmed down, leaving just the pedestal. It emitted a terrifying amount of death-attuned energy even though the pillars were all turned off. The energy clearly came from the rock. It was pitch-black and polished smooth, making it almost look like an egg.

The egg emitted mysterious fluctuations as well, and Zac frowned when he realized that it rendered his Dao Field utterly useless. Kenzie couldn't get close to it at all, and they had to retreat after a short while.

“What is that thing?” Zac asked with a frown as he turned to the ghost who was still chained up. “And don't tell me you don't know.”

“I’m not exactly sure what it is,” the ghost said. “They are called Seeds of Uneath. Our kingdom receives them from the Empire along with this array.”

“Like a realignment kit?” Zac asked.

“Precisely,” the ghost nodded. “Even small Kingdoms such as ours can obviously convert a planet on our own, but our means require high-graded items that are impossible to bring through an Incursion. But the empire provides these things as a sol-.”

It didn’t get any further though before massive convulsions wracked its intangible form. Zac sighed in annoyance, as it looked like they couldn’t get anything more out of the ghost without it exploding for breaking the commandments.

“So, now tell me. Why shouldn’t I kill you now that we know everything?” Zac asked as his eyes bore into the translucent orbs of the ghost.

Chapter 507: Lump of Coal

“Kill me?!” Triv shrieked with dismay. “No! Let me stay on this planet. I can be useful for you!”

“You’d stay on a life-attuned planet rather than return to your Kingdom?” Zac snorted.

“I’m fine while my master is dead. There is no way I will survive returning to face Lord Rexus. My soul will be tortured until it finally crumbles from age,” Triv hurriedly said, the words veritably spilling out of his mouth. “That’s why I resisted the call earlier.”

“I thought you couldn’t resist the compulsions of the empire?” Zac said.

“That’s different. The one calling was Lord Rexus, Lord Adriel’s master, and the investor of this Invasion. I’m technically part of his force though he didn’t awaken me. Adriel did. His call is hard to resist, but it’s nothing compared to the rules imprinted onto our very souls.”

“What level are you?” Zac slowly asked. “And what can you bring to the table?”

“I’m a level 73 Custodian, and I even have gained two Dao Seeds after staying here,” the ghost said with some pride piercing through fear, as he shared his status screen. “I am practically guaranteed to advance to an E-Grade Butler in the future. I will be better assistance to your daily life than any custodian burdened with a corporeal could hope to be, provided you help me purchase Miasma Crystals for my survival.”

Zac shook his head in bemusement when he saw that the ghost really was telling the truth. Its class was **[F - Uncommon] - Spectral Custodian**. There were really all types of classes in the world. He also noted with some interest that the ghost only

was aligned to the undead Empire. Normally it wouldn't look like that.

You were aligned to your local force, not the empire it was a part of, just like Zac was aligned to Port Atwood, rather than Earth itself. Triv should have been aligned to his master's force, but he must've had mentally cut ties with it, leaving only an alignment with the Undead Empire.

"A ghost butler," Kenzie mumbled, her mouth rising with intrigue. "Might be pretty convenient with your situation."

"Sign a contract to serve me properly and you can stay on Earth," Zac said after a brief hesitation.

He knew how it would look taking in an undead after what they had done to Earth, but Port Atwood had long since passed the point of no return in picking up stray aliens. If it had been one of the generals or the Lich King he wouldn't be so willing to leave them alive, but a non-combat attendant couldn't be considered as culpable. Non-combat classes almost never had a say in the decisions of a force, after all.

"Nothing would have pleased me more," Triv said with a sigh, though Zac felt he didn't really mean it. "But our commands precludes me from entering contracts with the living."

"Oh? Is that so?" Zac said as his eyes slowly turned pitch-black. "That won't be a problem."

The cooldown for his change had passed while he was unconscious, allowing him to turn into his Draugr form once more. The ghost looked on frozen with incomprehension, its mouth ajar.

"Now," Zac said with his abyssal voice. "The contract!"

"It was you the whole time... The mystery undead! This is impossible!" the ghost screamed.

"The Lich King said the same thing just before he died," Zac shrugged.

"Such a pure bloodline... No wonder the Noble Lady made your acquaintance!" the ghost spoke, and his whole form

shuddered as his excitement quickly mounted. “I’ll sign, I’ll sign!”

The next moment the ghost had entered a lifetime contract of servitude with Zac, and Zac finally released him from the chains that bound him. The ghost had obviously just wanted to serve as means of survival before, but now it looked beyond excited.

“Why are you so happy all of a sudden?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I’m a custodian, a caretaker of the elite. When our master is strong, we benefit as well. Our bloodlines become stronger if our master’s bloodlines are stronger.”

“So you’re like a parasite?” Kenzie asked from the side. “Will you slow down my brother’s cultivation?”

“No, no, not at all,” Triv hurriedly said when Zac’s brows furrowed together. “This comes to no detriment to our master! You can see us as a mix of a supportive and non-combat class.”

“Can you buff me in combat?” Zac asked curiously.

“Alas, no,” Triv said with a shake of his head, but he quickly followed up when Zac’s eyes dimmed with disinterest. “My skill set is more linked to your home. I can help improve its environment to better suit your needs. Lord Adriel’s Dao Chamber was largely set up by me, for example. It will take some time until I can sync with you to that level though.”

“What else?”

“I am there to deal with all the small things that flutter’s on my lord’s periphery. Cleaning, lighting incense, keeping track of servants, maintenance of private arrays, poison and threat detection. As I evolve I will also gain some small healing capabilities and the ability to deal with unwanted spying or Karmic manipulation. We allow our masters to focus on what’s important, becoming stronger,” Triv hurriedly said.

Zac had to admit it sounded pretty convenient having a butler, though that might just be Triv upselling his usefulness. But he first needed to deal with the realignment array before he went

into detail about what Triv could do and what limitations he had from his compulsions. However, Zac suddenly felt a weird presence appear in his mind, and his eyes once more turned to the ghost.

The chains of [**Love's Bond**] trapped the ghost the moment he felt the foreign presence in his mind, and the ghost wailed as he was about to be ripped to shreds.

“What did you just do?” Zac growled as Kenzie looked on with confusion and worry.

“My apologies, Lord! It's my skill called [**Deathbound Attendant**]. This is just our connection that you can use to send me commands,” he screamed.

Zac took a steadying breath. He had overreacted a bit due to his history with getting his soul cracked. But there really was nothing wrong with the mark after a second glance, not that the ghost could harm him with a Contract of Servitude active. He dropped the subject and once more focused on the Seed of Undeath.

“We'll talk more about what benefits you can bring later,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “What do you think? Just yonk that thing?”

“The podium seems to be some sort of absorption array,” Kenzie nodded. “I think it will be fine to just take it. But perhaps put the thing in a separate Cosmos Sack?”

“Okay, stand back just in case,” Zac said as he walked over.

The closer he got to the egg the fiercer the death buffeted him. It felt like he was inside an extremely refined Dao Field of death-attunement, but it wasn't painful at all in his Draugr form. The Seed of Undeath wasn't fastened to the podium itself, but rather placed down into a groove.

Zac simply reached over to put it into his Spatial Ring, but a surge entered his arm the moment his hand touched the smooth surface. A storm of death spread through his body, and his recently opened node was instantly filled with miasma to the point that he gained a level in his undead form as well.

He had already reached level 81 in his human form earlier. He had lost most of the energy from killing the Lich King due to the cultists' interruption, but he had gained enough to at least fill up the opened node by killing most of the zealots shortly after. Now his classes were once more in balance.

His eyes lit up as he felt just how magical the thing was, and he already had an idea what to do with the egg.

There was already a life-attuned cultivation cave back on his island that used the Lotus as a core. What if he created an adjoining cultivation cave steeped in death, using this egg as a core? With the help of Kenzie and his new butler, it would quickly be turned into cultivation heaven that would give him a leg up on his cultivation, no matter if it was his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** or pondering on the Dao.

The egg calmed down after the initial burst, and Zac safely stowed the thing away. A prompt appeared the next moment, confirming that the quest **[Death Defiance]** had been completed. Zac sighed in relief as that meant that Earth was finally safe from being turned into the latest branch of the Undead Empire.

As to whether the planet would rid itself entirely of the Miasma, it was too soon to tell.

The quest being marked as completed was just the beginning of the good things coming his way. An inscribed box had appeared next to him just as expected. It was the same with Kenzie, who eagerly reached for her own reward and opened the box.

A small tool was placed inside the chest. It looked a bit like a pen, but there were a couple of attachments that reminded Zac of the bits to a screwdriver. Finally, there was a small crystalline bottle containing some dark-purple liquid.

“What’s that?” Zac muttered with some interest, as he hadn’t seen anything like it before.

“It’s an inscription kit,” the ghost sighed. “The small parts are for inscribing on different surfaces, such as array flags, stone, or skin.”

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard the explanation. It looked like his sister had gotten a reward tailored for her needs, or perhaps based on the fact that she had mainly contributed by erecting arrays. In either case, it probably meant that a customized reward was waiting for him as well, rather than some random thing that might be useful or just something to throw into the Merit Exchange.

But before he opened his own box he noticed that it looked like the ghost was on the verge of tears.

“What’s with you?” Zac asked with some bemusement.

“I just failed a quest,” Triv groaned. “As the custodian of the Incursion Leader, I would no doubt have received an extremely valuable reward.”

Zac immediately understood that the ghost probably had an opposing quest for **[Death Defiance]**. After all, Catheya had mentioned that the System was very much in favor of the Undead Empire causing struggle all over the multiverse and that it brought some special benefits. He only snorted in response and instead focused on his own box.

A grin was spreading across his face as he opened his box, and Kenzie walked over with interest as well. He was the one who took out the Lich King and two of the generals, after all. His reward should be the best one around.

But he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw what was neatly placed inside.

“A lump of coal? Have you really been that naughty?” Kenzie laughed, and Zac once again found himself questioning his relationship with the System.

However, he somewhat got his hopes up as he noticed Triv staring at the box with greed in his eyes.

“This! High-grade Bloodline Marrow!”

Zac was about to ask what the ghost knew, but a shudder suddenly rose from the ground, like a small earthquake.

Was it the World Core?

“Anything?” Ogras muttered as Leech flittered back and forth among the ruins like a snake extending from his arm. “You better find something to evolve or I’ll figure out some way to eat you. Blocking my evolution, you really have a deathwish.”

A few coruscating waves rippled along the tentacle, and it started to look through the rubble for race-boosting opportunities with more fervor. Ogras snorted as he kept looking as well.

He really couldn’t catch a break.

Ogras didn’t ask for much. Some good wine, a few pretty girls to accompany him, and a decent class evolution. Hadn’t he earned that much by now after being dragged through one near-death experience after another by that walking calamity? But no, this bastard attached to his soul wasn’t ready to evolve, which meant that Ogras wasn’t ready to evolve either, apparently.

Now he was stuck looking for something to help this netherblasted Planeswalker take the next step. He had already found a few valuables among the ruins, and there were also quite a few natural treasures in the Cosmos Sack of the general he killed, but nothing that would help Leech evolve.

It didn’t help either that the blasted shadow couldn’t tell him what it needed.

“And you better gain the ability to communicate soon enough,” the demon added. “I’m tired of guessing what ails you every day.”

A sudden shudder spread through the whole fortress, and Ogras stopped his search for a bit. It looked like Zac and the lass had finally managed to turn off the array. A box appeared to his side as well, and he snatched it up without hesitation before he flashed out of the ruin. Ogras looked around with anticipation, but he frowned when he couldn’t sense anything in the air.

There was no influx of Cosmic Energy, and neither was there any new attunement that he could sense. Then again, anyone would be hard-pressed to make any real assumptions after the

undead and the cultists had tainted the air of the area. Not that he really had any idea what a World Core upgrade actually entailed.

He had sounded pretty confident in front of the humans, but he was honestly just spitballing. They needed to be reminded of his value as that human cockroach knocked off one threat after another, after all. So that the demons, or more importantly himself, weren't left by the wayside the moment the last incursion was closed.

He turned his attention to the small box in his hand, and he opened it with some anticipation. Getting a last-minute boost before evolving couldn't hurt.

"What the hell is that?" the demon muttered with a frown, but the tentacle on his arm vibrated with glee.

Chapter 508: Bloodlines

The time was finally up, and the azure pillar winked out of existence, leaving yet another inert Nexus Hub behind. If things worked as usual, it would soon disappear without a trace like the others, leaving just the one on his island behind. The last zombies in the area had passed through the portal over an hour ago, leaving the surroundings of the fortress bare.

It was nice to get a confirmation that the Undead Incursion truly was over, but Zac still had a hard time celebrating.

Zac sighed as he looked around the rubble. The Lich King was dealt with and the array was turned off, but as he didn't really feel like a victor as he looked out across the desolate landscape. No matter what the "World Core Upgrade" entailed it hadn't cleaned up the dour atmosphere at the core of the Dead Zone at all.

In fact, they hadn't noticed any change at all after that weird tremor. Ogras said that the upgrade would take a while though, so there was no point in completely giving up on this area.

But Zac had to admit that this place felt dead in a completely new sense of the word. Was there really a return from this? Getting blasted by the furious flames of the cultists at the 11th hour had turned things from bad to worse, and it had turned the whole area into a desolate region. Whatever those flames contained had somehow canceled out much of the miasma in the area, causing it to become almost completely void of any Cosmic Energy at all.

It felt like just breathing was a chore right now, like there was no oxygen in the air. The Lich King was probably spouting the things about Earth's death to mess with his mind, but there was perhaps a nugget of truth hidden inside the taunt. His new butler was no use either, as it had quickly become apparent

that Triv wouldn't turn into the wellspring of information as Zac had hoped.

Any question that was related to restricted knowledge of the Undead Empire caused a battle between the Contract of Servitude and whatever compulsion the ghost was born with, and it started to shake in pain as the two orders clashed. Zac was forced to cancel his questions to save him a few times until he finally gave up learning anything of use.

They did however manage to confirm that Triv could be used as a confirmation of source if Zac already had the answer. For example, Zac could say that there was one general alive, and the ghost could confirm it. But probing where he was and what skills he or she possessed was impossible.

There were also no limitations on general knowledge or non-classified intelligence of the Undead Empire, meaning that he could still be useful in the end. He might not be able to talk about his own Kingdom, but he was more than happy to spill any rumors he could think of about the living forces of the Zecia Sector.

The ghost had left him alone to recuperate earlier, instead joining Kenzie in her attempts to take control of the large number of arrays that were still active in the area while Zac kept watch and recuperated. But now that the incursion was closed and there was no sign of the Cultists Returning, there was finally time to go over his gains.

The Cosmos Sack of the assassin unfortunately didn't contain a lot. There were a set of similar spikes like the one he used during the fight, along with two daggers shrouded in darkness. They seemed to be decent Spirit Tools, but Zac couldn't think of anyone they were suited for at the moment. Perhaps Ogras, but that demon had already gotten more than enough benefits for free, and he would have to purchase the daggers with Merit Points if he wanted them.

There was also a cultivation manual and a few information crystals. One of them contained surprisingly detailed intelligence of the forces of Earth, including up-to-date docket on the top elites. His own report was actually decently

accurate as well, though it was based on the period when he was closing incursions left and right. Which was a shame for the assassin, as Zac was many times stronger compared to back then.

However, there was one piece of information that was a bit shocking. There was actually a mention of the Tal-Eladar and their recent actions. They had been seen together with the Brindevalt Clan, which apparently was the name of one of the three remaining Incursions that neighbored the Dead Zone. There was even a small notation that the Brindevalt Clan had some sort of business dealings with other factions of the Tal-Eladar.

Was this their plan? Give up on Earth and somehow leave through the Nexus Hub of another force? Zac didn't even know whether that was possible or not, but he couldn't see any other reason for Verana to contact some random force. He had always wondered why the Tal-Eladar hadn't stepped up and fought with Port Atwood when they had their backs against the wall, but it looked like he had found the answer.

They had always had an exit strategy in case things turned south.

The intelligence was days old though, and Zac still didn't know what had come from the discussions, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. However, his annoyance was quickly alleviated as he turned toward the next Spatial tool. The Assassin had traveled lightly it seemed, but Spatial Tools of the Lich King was a different story.

The Cosmos Sack contained a large number of Unholy Beacons, though Zac realized they weren't activated. It further confirmed Zac's guess that the souls of Earthlings were used in their creation, while these things were just spares brought from home.

There were also several siege tools left completely unused, along with a vast array of cultivation resources. The Cosmos Sack was clearly a superior variant of the sack he looted from Rydel, the de-facto leader of the Demon incursion. That meant the Spatial Ring was Adriel's private stash, and Zac could

immediately confirm that the quality of the things stored inside was a lot higher than the things in the Cosmos Sack.

One look was enough to confirm that Adriel truly was a formation master. There were at least a thousand array flags in the Spatial ring, though most of them seemed to be empty flags waiting to be inscribed.

There was also a large number of herbs and powders, and Zac quickly realized they were poisonous after taking out a few of them. There was also a large cauldron that reminded Zac of the one he had seen the Imp Herald use in the heart of the cave systems of his island. There were a large number of crystals as well, but most interesting was a milky-white crystal as large as a washbasin.

He took it out with interest, and his eyes lit up after instilling some Cosmic Energy into it. It was suddenly showing an enormous horde that looked ready to completely crumble. An army comprised of all four races of Earth was nibbling at its heels, but the real problem came from within.

The zombies had gone crazy, attacking anything around them, which usually meant they were attacking other zombies. It was like the horde had lost all cohesion, and it was suddenly everyone for himself. Zac figured that the death of the Lich King had removed or lessened whatever restraint that kept them from killing each other, and it had turned into pandemonium.

Zac tried to change the scope of the long-distance spying array, but his vision was stuck in place until he finally was forced to give up. But Zac believed that Kenzie or someone on the island would be able to figure the thing out. Having this thing mounted in his courtyard would be pretty convenient, as it would allow him to check in on all his islands without alerting anyone.

He had always been a bit leery about Big Brother until now, but surely it was a different thing if he was the one watching?

The crystal and everything else of interest was thrown into his own spatial ring, where he spotted the lump of coal once more. Or rather, the Bloodline Marrow. Triv had no idea what kind

of beast it came from, but he did know what they were used for. Not surprisingly it affected bloodlines, but not as Zac had expected.

It was actually akin to poison to warriors with a bloodline. If whatever genes were preserved inside the marrow entered the body of someone with a bloodline, there would be a clash. The resident bloodline would become agitated and force out the intruding bloodline. It didn't sound very useful on paper, but it actually had a very specific purpose.

It would force a slumbering Bloodline awake, and the struggle would condense and strengthen it. It was just like normal cultivation, where fighting for your life ended with you stronger, provided you survived, of course. There was also a small chance of gaining whatever bloodline hid inside the marrow in case you didn't have one originally, but that was generally seen as a waste.

It was also something that could help upgrade what Triv called Beastcrafted Spirit Tools, which essentially meant Spirit Tools that used animal parts. Zac still didn't trust the ghost even with a Contract of Servitude active, but he seemed to be telling the truth based on the fact that **[Verun's Bite]** really wanted the thing, while **[Love's Bond]** was completely indifferent.

It was a relief, as that meant there wouldn't be any conflicts of interest in case he decided to feed it to Verun. Zac figured that he could finally provide his axe with a feast when they returned to Port Atwood, providing all the things he had saved up until now. However, he was still leaning toward only giving his axe the Dragon Core, while keeping the marrow to himself.

The recent opening of his Hidden node and talking with his mother had made him think more and more about his heritage. Not really in terms of wanting to reunite with Leandra, but rather to make the most of the odd constitution he had been given. **[Void Heart]** clearly felt like a special node based on a bloodline, and he was sure that there would be exponential benefits the more Hidden Nodes he opened.

Especially if he managed to wake up a bloodline to match them.

But Zac felt that simply boiling a piece of marrow and drinking it as a soup was too crude, and he wanted to do some more research to improve his odds of waking up his constitution. He kept going through the Cosmos Sack a while longer, but he soon got tired of the dour view and he started to make his way down from the peak of the broken tower.

The wound in his leg had mostly healed over the past 6 hours, but his pathways were still a bit of a mess. He believed he'd be back at full power in a week's time tops though, provided he wasn't forced to go all out in another battle. The biggest issue was redrawing the broken pathways, which was both painful and took a lot of time and effort now that they were so intricate.

Zac was pretty disappointed with the long recuperation times, but he soon enough remembered Galvarion's experience. The aquatic cultivator had spent over a century in the E-Grade, most of it on a sickbed. Being slightly weakened for a week per node was nothing compared to that. Of course, that was provided that the damage didn't get worse with each successive node.

Triv was hovering just by the base of the broken-down tower, apparently having left Kenzie's side some time ago.

"You're really stuck here with us now," Zac said as his eyes turned to the spot where the azure pillar had once stood.

"Come with me."

"It is my pleasure to stay with the young lord. How can I be of assistance?" the ghost asked as they walked around the rubble.

"Take me to my sister," Zac said, and they found her resting in an emptied warehouse with Joanna keeping guard.

Zac figured this was as good a place as any, and he bought the Teleportation Array. However, he frowned when he couldn't see any towns on the teleportation screen.

Was this place still jammed?

Kenzie immediately realized something was wrong as well, but she simply threw out a large number of Nexus Crystals.

“It’s working, but it will cost a huge amount of crystals to teleport out,” Kenzie muttered. “The teleporter can’t use the energy of the atmosphere here because there is none. I don’t know if it’s because of what the cultists did or if it’s an effect of the Dead Zone itself.”

“Well, we have more than enough crystals,” Zac shrugged. “Most of the zombies in the area have left, and we have broken the Unholy Beacons. Perhaps the Array will work by itself as soon as the area clears up a bit. But what about the jamming?”

Port Atwood had appeared on his Teleportation Menu after Kenzie had thrown out the Nexus Crystals, but that didn’t really alleviate Zac’s fears after their last experience. He couldn’t stop himself from throwing a glare at the Ghost who floated by the corner, and Triv could only weakly smile in return.

“Either the jammers broke from us pushing through it, or more likely our people have found the arrays and disabled them,” Kenzie said.

“We should send something over with a note side to make sure it safe,” Joanna suggested from the side, sharing Zac’s sentiments. “In case there are there still are some traps.”

Zac nodded in agreement. No need to play with your life when there was no hurry to go home.

“I guess,” Kenzie said as she got to her feet. “Have you found anything interesting?”

“A few things,” Zac said. “I’ve been busy recuperating for most of the time. I guess Ogras has gotten his hand on anything of value by now. Do you need my help taking apart those pillars below-ground?”

“No, it’s fine now that they’ve been inactive for a while. Joanna helped me pry them out of the ground. By the way, I found out something interesting from your ghost butler earlier.”

“Oh?” Zac said as he looked over at the ghost, who seemingly tried to make himself look agreeable.

“Did you know? It seems that a surprisingly large number of all Earthlings have pretty good bloodlines, some that are completely unknown in the Zecia sector?” she said.

“Is that unusual?” Zac asked.

“There are sometimes some interesting bloodlines that pop up when visiting a newly integrated planet, but not like we’ve seen on this see- ehm, on Earth,” Triv said from the side. “It is no doubt from the escaped test subjects.”

“The what?” Zac asked, but he immediately realized what the ghost was referring to.

The Mystic Realm.

“The undead believes that the Mystic Realm was used for researching Bloodlines. Some of the test subjects escaped thousands of years ago, and they became our ancestors. Isn’t that crazy?” Kenzie said with excitement.

Zac’s thoughts went back to the lump of coal in his Spatial Ring once more. A mysterious base researching Bloodlines?

Wasn’t that just perfect?

Chapter 509: Challenge

Zac had just lamented that him using the Bloodline Marrow by itself would be a bit wasteful, and now this opportunity presented itself? What if he could find something to bring out the most of the marrow and guarantee that his bloodline could awaken?

“Perhaps we can find things to strengthen the people of Port Atwood,” Kenzie exclaimed, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “There might be bloodline manuals or elixirs stashed inside the Mystic Realm. Perhaps even things to open Hidden nodes.”

“There are also werewolves and god knows what else in there according to Ogras,” Zac said to calm his sister down before he turned to Triv. “Do you have any proof of this theory?”

“Young master, I don’t. But we are quite good judges of the quality of bodies, and as far as we can tell, the inhabitants of this planet aren’t natural,” Triv said.

“That’s impossible though. We have mapped our evolution for millions of years,” Zac countered, though the words of his mother’s projection echoed in the back of his head.

According to her, she was surprised to find Earth inhabited at all when she arrived.

“Yes, this planet has a natural seed of life, but many heritages do not belong here,” Triv conceded. “I personally believe that some accident happened inside that Mystic Realm a few thousand years ago. The owners left, and a group of test subjects managed to break free and ended up on this planet.”

Zac quickly understood what would happen next if what the ghost said was true. Those escapees would find themselves on an unintegrated planet utterly devoid of cosmic energy. They would be like castaways, unable to become stronger, and unable to leave. Their children wouldn’t have any chance to

become cultivators, but their bloodlines would still be passed on.

Was this the source of Billy's golden blood? And was it perhaps even the source of his own bloodline? He had figured that it came from his mother, but perhaps that was completely wrong. Perhaps his **[Void Heart]** came from someone who had fled the Mystic Realm thousands of years ago.

"What kind of experiments do you think would take place in such a hidden base?" Zac asked.

"We believed it was related to some boundless faction, they're always up to something. Perhaps they wanted to create a new bloodline suited to their needs, using other bloodlines as a base. Perhaps they wanted to evolve bloodlines and sell the results to wealthy families. It is impossible to tell without gaining access to the research data," the ghost said.

"The Undead Incursion was after the Mystic Realm as well, and so are the cultists," Kenzie added.

"I know," Zac nodded.

Void's Disciple had said as much when they met, and the invaders had pretty much confirmed it by sailing toward his Mystic Realm entrance even after failing their attack on Port Atwood. He still didn't know what was so alluring about that place, but it might contain some treasure valuable enough to cause waves in the whole Zecia sector.

"Well, did you know that the Church of Everlasting Dao already controls three different portals that all lead to our Mystic Realm," Kenzie said. "According to Triv, at least."

"How come you're so talkative all of a sudden?" Zac asked skeptically. "You almost exploded last time I tried to have you divulge some minor secrets."

"This matter regarding bloodlines was a welcome surprise, but it's not related to the goal of the Undead Empire," Triv explained, this time taking a spiritual hit.

"So you were after something else," Zac said.

"Yes," the ghost croaked, further wounding himself.

“What was it?” Zac muttered curiously, but he hurriedly corrected himself when he saw that Triv was starting to shake and expand. “Wait, don’t answer that!”

But he was still extremely curious about what could elicit such a response. Two major factions and the Dominators were all gunning toward that item, yet he was somehow still kept out of the loop.

“Julia might be able to find out more,” Kenzie said, seemingly reading his thoughts.

“What? Julia?” Zac repeated with confusion “How would that be possible?”

The former government official had simply stayed on the island since jumping onto the teleporter with him, sometimes assisting with diplomatic issues with the Marshall Clan. How would she know something that he didn’t about the mystic realm?

“The New World Government actually performed an all-out assault on one of the cultists’ bases and killed one of their Generals. That’s how they got access to the mystic realm and started the ‘Ark World’ project,” Kenzie explained. “They should have found out a few things if they’re taking such drastic measures.”

“The one time that little faction showed some spine,” the ghost muttered from the side. “The humans of this planet are wholly unimpressive. If it wasn’t for young master and the many bloodlines running around, then this world would be completely worthless.”

“So you’re saying I should send out Julia as a spy? I doubt she will be able to return to her position after these months,” Zac said, ignoring the ghost.

“She should still have some contacts who would want to make a connection with you, especially now that the Undead Incursion is dealt with,” Kenzie explained.

“I’ll talk with her when we get back,” Zac nodded before he turned to the ghost.

However, Zac couldn't help but feel himself being dragged against his will once more as he thought about the Mystic Realm, just like when the System had placed him in front of the two remnants. It seemed like he really didn't have a choice but to explore its depths this time either. All his enemies would be there, and it was related to his family to do with his family. The mystic realm was his best bet at figuring out whether Leandra was a friend or a foe.

And now it might even help him with his constitution?

Him having some sort of bloodline was pretty much confirmed from getting the odd Hidden Node [**Void Heart**]. If it was based on some previous captive, then there might actually be more information and even a manual waiting for him inside the Mystic Realm. After all, he wanted to maintain his above-average power, and opening additional Hidden Nodes was one of the best available methods in the E-Grade.

Just like the F-grade was the best opportunity to farm Titles, the E-Grade was the best opportunity to open up nodes that might benefit him for the rest of his life. Every grade was like that as far as Zac understood. He wasn't sure about how the higher grades worked, but it seemed like D-Grade was the only rank where you could perfect your Cultivator Core.

“What else do you know about the Mystic Realm?” Zac asked Triv.

“Not much,” the ghost said, but he hurriedly explained after getting a glare from Zac. “The scant intelligence we had was based on spying on the Cultists and capturing a few of their warriors. We were focused on the realignment. As long as it completed the planet would be ours, including the Mystic Realm.”

Zac asked a few more questions, but he soon realized there was not much else that the butler could divulge between lack of first-hand information and the compulsions. Hopefully, he'd be able to gain more information through Julia. Of course, by this point he could probably just fly over to New Washington and demand answers from Thomas Fischer.

Seeing that the teleporter was up and running was a relief, but there was one more thing that Zac wanted to take care of before he left this place.

“Take me to the residence Mhal used before I killed him,” Zac said as he turned to Mhal.

“It was you?” Triv blurted with surprise as he led the way. “We figured it was the Monks.”

Zac only shrugged in response as he ushered the ghost out of the warehouse. The fortress was only so big, and they soon reached a structure, or at least the ruins of one. The above-ground manor had been completely destroyed from the battle, but the ghost informed him that there was a large underground compound as well after it activated some sort of ocular skill.

A quick search led him to a reinforced steel hatch in the ground. But a physical barrier was no match for Zac who simply ripped the thick metal plate out of its hinges. However, he immediately regretted his action as a rancid odor immediately rose from the dark hole. It was so bad that he nearly swapped over to his Draugr-form to avoid keeling over.

“What is this stench?” Zac blanched.

“Mhal performed quite a few experiments in his spare time. I believe he tried to find a suitable upgrade for his current constitution. Corpse Lords are usually like that, obsessed with their bodies. Better to discard the body entirely, if you ask me. You become a bit weaker, but you only need to focus on one type of improvement,” Triv said as it looked down at the tunnel with some disdain.

“I found a notebook on his body after I defeated him. He brought something valuable to this place, something that he hid from you and the Lich King. He was instructed by his clan to experiment on this planet, away from prying eyes.” Zac said. “I need to find it.”

“He did?” Triv said with surprise. “He never struck me or Lord Adriel as the clever type, but rather a brute. But perhaps that was exactly what he wanted.”

Zac quickly found the source of the stench as he walked down a set of stairs. Three massive holding cells were filled with dismembered bodies in various states of decay. There were a handful of zombies as well who desperately charged at the bars when they sensed him. Zac made short work of them all before he threw out a massive amount of corpse destroying powder.

It alleviated the smell a bit, but Zac still worked at maximum efficiency to look for the hidden Draugr samples. Triv was flying straight through walls and the ground in search of hidden compartments as well, eager to prove its worth.

“Young master, over here,” Triv said a while later as he rose from the floor. “How curious, I couldn’t sense anything at all until I hit a barrier. It really seems like this little vassal force was keeping a lot of secrets. Are they planning a rebellion?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with you, remember?” Zac snorted as he walked over. “You’re an Earthling now.”

“Of course, of course,” the ghost hurriedly nodded. “But the young master should know that returning to the embrace of the Empire is the only way for a pure-blood Draugr to realize his full potential.”

“How do you know I’m pure-blood?” Zac asked with some curiosity as he started digging up the ground.

“I cannot be certain, but your bloodline is certainly a lot stronger than anything I’ve encountered before. And it feels... Old. That’s how it feels with the ancient clans of the Heartlands, I’m told,” the ghost hesitantly said. “If I may, why cling to your human form at all if you have the chance to discard it? You even have the opportunity to awaken without losing your sense of self, something that is usually extremely difficult to achieve.”

“Well, being human doesn’t seem so glamorous to you, perhaps, but I like it,” Zac muttered, his eyes trained at the box he had unearthed.

Zac hesitated about what to do for a few seconds as he looked down at the pitch-black container. He could sense that this

truly was what he was looking for, as there was a slight resonance between his Specialty Core and the box. But what now? Were the samples of his bloodline any use to him any longer?

He eventually stashed away the box without opening it, much to Triv's disappointment. Zac was afraid that there were traps in the chest itself that would break the samples inside. Who knew, they might become useful for upgrading his Specialty core in the future? He had the System to help him out for the first evolution, but next time he might not be so lucky.

There was nothing else of interest in the chamber, and Zac quickly returned to the surface, the stale air feeling like a fresh gust after that rancid environment. If there had been any lingering feelings of pity for the Corpse Lord's Clan before due to the letter he read, then that pity had been utterly quashed after seeing the aftermath of Mhal's experimentation.

In either case, there was not much left to do in the Dead Zone, and Zac prepared to get going. However, he realized that the ghost presented a problem as he returned to his sister's side.

"Is there any way you can hide?" Zac asked as he turned to the ghost who kept pace two steps behind. "I can't be bringing you around in the open. I already have enough people talking behind my back from working with the demons."

"Here," the ghost said as he produced a small black tower no larger than three centimeters in height. "I can stay inside this, as long as young master don't put it into a Spatial Treasure. With your permission, I'll rest for a few days as my soul is wounded. If you need me, just call by nudging the mark in your mind."

Zac nodded and the ghost disappeared the next moment as the small tower started giving off a weak azure light. Zac curiously looked at the thing, but he couldn't figure out if it was a Spatial Treasure or if the ghost could actually shrink itself to such a diminutive size.

"I don't understand why you don't just kill that thing," Ogras muttered with disgust as he stepped out of the shadows.

"Nothing good will come from keeping that one."

“I’ll destroy any Karmic Ties he might carry later,” Zac said.
“I have the lamp now.”

“Karmic Ties is just one of the many dangers in the Multiverse,” Ogras shrugged. “Another one is consorting with the unliving. It usually ends with you joining them.”

“A bit late for that,” Zac snorted, which elicited a laugh from Kenzie as she fiddled with her new inscription tool.

“One of them playing with ghosts, the other with Technocrat toys. You two siblings are truly testing the limits,” the demon muttered. “You better pray the Ruthless Heavens don’t take you up on your challenge.”

Chapter 510: Eveningtide

Zac only rolled his eyes at the demon's slightly ominous comment, but he did somewhat agree. The two of them were playing a dangerous game, him with the remnant and Kenzie with Jeeves. Such powerful items really shouldn't be in the hands of piddling low-grade cultivators, and it would only drag them into trouble with the System.

But there wasn't much he could do about it right now, apart from growing stronger to tackle whatever came their way.

"Are you done here?" Zac asked instead.

"I managed to dig out some of the intelligence crystals from the place you indicated, but most of them were ruined. Also, I can't read them," the demon said as he threw it over to Zac.

He tried to activate it as well, but his Cosmic Energy was immediately rebuffed. Even worse, some cracks spread across its surface, prompting Zac to hurriedly retract his energy.

"I'll try as an undead later," Zac said as he placed Triv's tower in a pocket. "If we're done here, then you can call over our people. I'll leave as soon as we can confirm the situation on the other side. Send this to Port Atwood please."

He quickly imprinted a few instructions onto a crystal and handed it to his sister. Kenzie grabbed it before she poured hundreds of Nexus Crystals out on the ground in a circle around the Teleportation Array. She looked a bit hesitant about what to do next though, but Ogras seemed to understand her thoughts.

"Here," Ogras said and threw a massive leg from some unknown beast onto the array. "Harvested it during the climb. It tasted like wet fur anyway."

Kenzie nodded and placed the crystal on top of the leg, and the next moment the two items flashed away.

“We’re returning to Port Atwood?” Joanna asked as they waited for a response on the other side.

“I want that tree, but I need to see what’s happened with the ship heading for Mystic Island. I’ll go back if there’s still a chance to protect our teleporter,” Zac said after some consideration. “If not, I’ll simply fly and get the tree. I’ll be able to observe the Dead Zone that way as well.”

Ten minutes later a group of soldiers emerged from the teleporter, including a sun-tanned Ilvere.

“You did it,” Ilvere said with a grin as he looked around at the ruins. “Must have been some battle. I wish I was here to kick these damn zombies off the planet as well. What about Alea’s...?”

Zac sighed as he saw the demon general’s downcast expression. Zac had made sure that only a few core members could know about Alea’s situation, but the two remaining demon Generals were among the group of people he felt should be aware of what was going on. The normal demons would only think that she had been killed by the invaders when they assaulted the island.

“I ripped him apart with her chains,” Zac simply said.

“Good!” Ilvere roared. “Then her soul can be at peace no matter what happens next.”

“What’s going on with the boat?” Zac asked, eager to change the subject.

“We failed,” Ilvere sighed. “Those ships are so slow, but it suddenly spat out a small vessel that shot toward the Mystic Island with a speed that eclipsed our ships. Worse yet, they managed to break the tunnel just by detonating something on the shore. We currently have around 100 people trapped inside the mystic realm. We managed to sink the large warship in retaliation”

“At least our people safe,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “Can you see what you can do?”

“Sure,” Kenzie nodded.

Since there wasn't much he could do now that the spatial tunnel was already broken, he decided to go fetch the mutated tree instead. Ilvere would lead the squad of soldiers to search out the core of the Dead Zone instead, while simultaneously taking away all the Unholy Beacons that were still standing.

After all, they still hadn't found any natural resources in the area. All the other Incursions had been placed near some valuable resources of Earth, so it stood to reason that it should be the same here. Of course, there was the possibility that the perk of the Undead Empire was getting placed in an extremely population-dense area, as corpses were the most valuable resource to them.

Seeing his army get to work with practiced ease let him bring out his Flying Treasure without worry, but he was surprised to see Ogras jumping on top as well.

"I have nothing to do, so I figure I'd come with you," the demon shrugged with a grin. "What if you suddenly pass out again and fall into a horde of zombies?"

"Well, the company is always welcome," Zac slowly said.

"I'm curious if you can actually gain something from the tree. You're a mortal but you keep getting insights left and right. I want to figure out if there's something I've missed. Just look at that giant. Sometimes there's genius hidden within a haze of stupidity," the demon smiled.

"Well, thank you," Zac snorted as he turned to Joanna who had also joined him on the leaf.

"I'm just here to help you steer in case you need to relax," Joanna explained.

Emily and the rest of the Valkyries would return to Port Atwood with Kenzie though. They weren't as high-leveled, and they had stayed long enough in such a Miasma-dense area. Any longer and they might have adverse effects.

The trio soon set off, and the atmosphere was a lot more relaxed as they returned toward the outer reaches of the Dead Zone. Zac took Joanna up on the offer to steer so that he could

focus on recuperation, whereas Ogras took out a jug of some liquor and drank as he gazed out across the horizon.

Zac got a bit bored after an hour though and joined Ogras for a drink instead.

“By the way, I found out some more about the Eveningtide Asura after you left the Base Town,” Ogras said as he handed Zac a jug. “Figured it might be useful as some see you as the second coming of that guy after your display with erecting a netherblasted Corpse Tree right in front of the Tower entrance.”

“A what?” Joanna asked from the side.

“And?” Zac coughed with some embarrassment, ignoring the question. “Is that good news or bad news?”

“Hard to say. Unattached elites cropping out of nowhere is always a cause for concern. It will usually result in multiple forces getting destroyed before a balance is restored,” the demon said.

“But that rarely happens to the peak forces because of their hidden reserves. The attacker would have to overpower and ancient Empire, and that’s easier said than done. So they have grown complacent,” Ogras continued.

Zac nodded in agreement. If it was before he visited the Base Town he would have believed it wasn’t too hard for a powerhouse to take out a slightly weaker force, but he had seen just how desperate things had become upon him exiting the tower. And that was only a few hundred warriors with limitations on what sort of items they could bring to the special dimensions.

What about the biggest forces? They would be able to bring out billions of warriors and an almost inexhaustible number of treasures to defend themselves. Taking them out as a lone powerhouse would be almost impossible.

“But then the Eveningtide Asura came along,” Ogras smiled “And now there’s you.”

“Just who is that guy, and what did he do?” Zac asked.

Zac had been repeatedly been compared to that man since he had conquered the 8th floor, so it was a bit interesting to hear what kind of man the so-called Asura was.

“He utterly annihilated a fifth of the peak forces in this sector,” Ogras said with gleaming eyes. “Killed them to the last man. Trillions of lives lost, even a C-Grade continent was grievously wounded to the point it decreased in grade. A murderous lunatic, it sounds like.”

“Why would he do something like that?” Zac said with shock.

No wonder so many seemed so leery about him after the fight outside the Tower. The problem was whether the forces of the multiverse would want to stomp him out before he grew powerful, or whether they would instead try to nurture a good relationship. Some obviously tried the latter, such as Boje and Pretty, but that didn’t necessarily represent the intentions of their ancestors.

“To resolve grudges. Those who died had tried to hunt him down to get their hands on his treasures before he grew powerful, and he was almost killed dozens of times. But he barely managed to slip away each time, until he finally disappeared for 100 000 years,” Ogras said. “But then he finally came back, as a Peak C-Grade Monarch. Blood flowed like rivers for 500 years before he was satisfied and left our sector for good.”

“Wait, just Peak C-Grade? Did he manage to do all that without even breaking into the B-Grade? How is that possible, don’t all the peak forces have Peak C-Grade Monarchs hidden in seclusion?” Zac asked incredulously. “With the help of their arrays, they should be able to defend even against someone like that.”

“I actually learned something interesting regarding that,” Ogras snorted. “Our sector is a bit generous, or rather boastful, when it comes to assigning grades to forces.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“There are probably less than 10 High C-Grade Monarchs in the whole sector,” Ogras said, drawing a surprised exclamation

from both Joanna and Zac. “Some say even less than five. And not a single Peak C-Grade warrior unless they are hiding their strength for some reason. The reason that Dravorak Dynasty is so famous right now is that they have one of the few confirmed High C-Grade Monarchs.”

“What?” Zac said. “Are you messing with me? What about all the peak C-Grade forces?”

“Having a Pseudo C-Grade Monarch makes a force C-Grade. Having a true C-Grade Monarch, no matter how weak, makes the force Middle C-Grade. Having an Elite Early C-Grade or a weak Mid C-Grade makes the force a High C-Grade force. Finally, Forces with at least Mid-Grade C-Grade warriors and strong foundations are called the Peak C-Grade forces of the Zecia Sector,” Ogras snorted.

Zac was about to refute the man, but he suddenly remembered Anzonil. His force was regarded as a weak D-Grade force simply because he had formed a Pseudo Core. It sounded like the same was possible with whatever was required to move into the C-Grade, and a remote sector like Zecia considered that good enough.

It also explained why Catheya’s master seemingly held such a level of esteem in the Undead Kingdom. Perhaps it wasn’t only the fact he came from the heartlands, but also that he simply was stronger than anyone else in the whole sector. No wonder that Catheya could decapitate 40 people without anyone lifting a finger to retaliate.

It didn’t make a big difference for Zac as things were, but it did actually lessen the pressure he felt somewhat. It meant that if he managed to reach at least Early C-Grade in the future, then there was probably no force in the whole sector that would dare mess with him or Earth. He had thought he would have to reach High C-Grade for that effect.

Of course, the revelation also indicated that there might be something lacking in the Zecia sector as a whole if no one was able to reach Peak C Grade. Perhaps it was resources, or perhaps the cultivation techniques. In either case, it was bad

news for him. If not even the most talented cultivators could reach Peak C-Grade, how would he, a talentless mortal do it?

Of course, he was way early in worrying about the C-Grade. But it was worth remembering, as it meant that following the “standard” elite route of Zecia would have an end-point that was even lower than that of his master, Yrial. He would have to go above and beyond somehow. But it was clearly possible if the Eveningtide Asura managed to break through.

“Is he still alive?” Zac asked curiously. “The Asura?”

“No idea,” Ogras shrugged. “This happened something like a million years ago. Perhaps not even the ancient bastards from the strongest forces were alive back then. There were rumors that he had offended some terrifying unorthodox force a few hundred thousand years ago, and after that, he hasn’t been heard of. Sounds like someone who loved getting himself in trouble, and perhaps his luck ran out. Also, considering how many mortals he killed in his quest for vengeance he might have been punished by the Ruthless Heavens.”

The atmosphere on the leaf became a bit subdued as they looked out across the landscape. Zac prayed that things wouldn’t play out as they did with the Eveningtide Asura. It also confirmed the importance of keeping anything valuable with you hidden, at least until you were strong enough to defend yourself.

However, his mood soon lightened again as they closed in on their target; the mutated tree that was somehow generating life through death. Joanna set them down next to the tree, and Zac walked up to it once more. However, no matter what he did he found himself unable to push his Dao any further, and he couldn’t make any inroads on his skill quests either.

He was forced to give up after five hours, but he still felt that the tree held some secrets worth exploring. He took out a large barrel and filled it with dirt before he gingerly cut three branches and placed them inside. He also inserted a couple of miasma crystals into the earth after some consideration.

He hadn’t gained much from the last set of saplings he took, but that might be because of him having placed them into his

Cosmos Sack. He had long forgotten to replant them, which had turned them into worthless sticks in his back. But now he was planning on building a death-attuned cultivation cave, meaning he would have a proper home ready for them.

They set out a minute later, and they actually reached the edge of the Dead Zone a bit faster than expected. However, they soon realized that it wasn't because of their speed, but rather because the Dead Zone seemed to be shrinking. It was a huge relief to see the world naturally heal itself so quickly, and it felt like a good indicator that hadn't been damaged beyond repair.

But that didn't mean that the undead threat was completely dealt with, as they saw massive swathes of zombies lumbering around as they flew closer to the battlefield he had seen in his crystal. Some of them seemed to be heading toward the core of the Dead Zone, whereas others trailed off toward inhabited lands.

It would take a lot of work to deal with the hundreds of millions of Zombies.

Some were already working on it though, and Zac was surprised to see the battle was still raging. It wasn't an all-out battle though, as the humans mostly seemed to fight in an effort to corral the zombies away from the area with human settlements. However, the horde still looked extremely rowdy. Some drifted back toward the Dead Zone, but most seemed intent on feasting on the living.

Zac looked inward to check the status of his body. The node had mostly stabilized by now, and while the pathways were still a bit messy he had started to work on redrawing them over the past day. He still had a long way to go but he felt he had made enough progress to comfortably dish out a couple of fractal edges.

"I'll help them out a bit," Zac said as he jumped down from the leaf, hurdling toward the zombies like a human cannonball.

Chapter 511: Plans and Schemes

“How is it?” Gregor asked as he spat out some blood from his mouth, reminding him of his internal injuries.

A decent number of wounds covered his body from ceaseless fighting over the past two days, and the two newly gained scimitars in his hands felt as heavy as mountains. But there was not much else to do. The zombie bastards had gone crazy out of nowhere, and it only became worse when that shudder went through the planet.

But the pain was intermixed with a sweet sense of bliss, as that shudder had indicated the continued survival of Earth. That man had really done it. One man and a small support staff charging into the core of the Dead Zone to kill the Lich King, and somehow living to tell the tale.

If only the other undead bastards could take the hint and throw in the towel as well.

“We won’t be able to hold much longer,” Lararia frowned as she looked out over the frontlines. “I think our best bet is fighting a battle of retreat, leading them away from our sector.”

“Some of these bastards will still ignore us and do whatever they want,” Oksana muttered. “Our scouts are indicating that packs of zombies are appearing all over the place, causing havoc.”

“What about Enigma?” Gregor asked.

“We can’t find him,” Lararia said with worry. “He took his squad to search for the general, but we’ve lost contact.”

“Well, let’s hope he’s just held up,” Gregor mumbled. “Our faction will need – Wait, is that him?”

The other Councilors followed his gaze, and their eyes immediately lit up. It wasn't their unsociable strongman who essentially lived out in the battlefields, but rather an emerald leaf that pushed through the clear blue sky.

The others didn't have time to comment before someone jumped out from the flying treasure, falling straight toward the sea of zombies like a meteor. A terrifying impact erupted the next second as a coruscating wave of rock and mud spread out like a tsunami, swallowing hundreds of zombies in an instant.

A massive plume of sand rose to the sky from the impact and obscured their vision. However, Gregor barely had time to register the series of events as an enormous blade ripped the dust apart as it shot out with terrifying momentum.

It was at least fifty meters long, and the zombies were cut apart as though they were made from paper. Was this the same wretched creatures that caused their soldiers so much trouble due to their sturdy bodies? A shocking corridor of destruction ripped forward, leaving not a single body intact. Gregor had to rapidly blink a couple of times as he stared at the edge's advance, as it almost felt like his eyes were cut by just looking at the skill.

Gregor himself and many of the councilors had tried to take advantage of the thick density of zombies in a similar fashion, utilizing their area skills to cause as much damage as possible. However, the zombies were just too tough. Each zombie drained their attacks, like they sucked up some of the energy like sponges, causing the skills to fizzle after a dozen kills or so.

However, Lord Atwood's attack seemed to face no such impediments. It kept flying until they destabilized well over a hundred meters away from him. Was it a difference of Dao? The fractal blade that cut through the horde like butter either had a greenish tint, the color giving the attack a distinct power.

They had already guessed that Lord Atwood had surpassed the stage of Dao Seeds, and this seemed to be a confirmation of it.

However, it quickly became apparent that the enormous blade was no ultimate strike, as Lord Atwood seemingly was able to

keep conjuring them at will. One, two, three blades followed suit in short order, each of reaping their own set of the unliving as Lord Atwood moved with impossible speed within the horde. Each blade took out thousands of the clumped-together bastards.

“So many of them dead in an instant,” Oksana muttered with disbelief written all over her face. “Is this the power of the E-Grade?”

“No way,” Lararia said with a shake of her head, her tail nervously flitting back and forth from watching the bloody display. “If that was the case, then the general would have singlehandedly decimated our army. This is Lord Atwood’s personal power.”

“Shit, didn’t he just fight the Lich King yesterday? And now he’s already back at full power?” Gregor sputtered with disbelief. “Is that man unstoppable?”

Each step moved Lord Atwood fifty meters forward and resulted in another gory wave of destruction, and a primordial fear gripped Gregor’s heart as he looked at the carnage. They could sense his immense aura even all the way from where they stood, and Gregor felt like a helpless hare gazing at an apex predator.

An eruption of darkness suddenly swallowed another section of the zombie horde, and the undead fell by the hundreds. Gregor looked at the spectacle with confusion until he suddenly noticed the horned demon emerging out of the shadows to decimate everything in his surroundings, only to disappear a moment later.

He kept moving the battlefield through teleportation, like a grim reaper toying with the mindless undead. Gregor had thought Lord Atwood to be an outlier after he essentially dealt with the Fire Golem Incursion singlehandedly, but it looked like he extremely capable followers as well.

“Enigma isn’t even a match to the right-hand man,” Lararia muttered, echoing his thoughts. “We’d probably need the whole council to secure a kill. Provided that this is the limits of that man’s power.”

“Don’t speak such unlucky words, what if they hear us?” Oksana said with a frown. “Besides, they are our saviors.”

“Should we join them?” Gregor ventured after a while.

“No point,” a new voice said, and they saw Romal walk over, his bloody shovel slung across his back. “We might just get in the way. Let’s hold the line and deal with stragglers until they’re done.”

The other Councilors nodded in agreement, and they spent the next hour dealing with the scraps while the two monsters kept wreaking havoc. Joanna, the spear warrior following Lord Atwood, joined them early on and confirmed the destruction of the Undead Incursion.

The demon joined them half an hour later, appearing in their midst without notice. However, Lord Atwood kept mowing down Zombies for over two hours, methodically decimating the undead. Every three seconds the air would shudder as he released a massive fractal edge, and he would move toward the next group without bothering to look at the results.

Gregor had already turned numb to that man’s actions, but he couldn’t help but wonder just how much Cosmic Energy that man had used by this point. But it looked like even Lord Atwood had a limit, and he finally stopped his carnage as he started walking toward their army.

A tremendous aura radiated from his body, but Gregor was surprised to feel a refreshing aura coming from it. However, the zombies clearly didn’t share his sentiments as they fled for their lives, desperately moving out of the Dao Field as he walked toward the Council’s Army.

Releasing the aura essentially ended the battle, and over a hundred thousand warriors silently watched the approach of a single bloodied man. Even Gregor felt mesmerized as he looked at Lord Atwood’s approach, as he drew quite the picture with the suns setting behind his back.

The bestial axe in his hand glistened in the sunlight as dark blood dripped from the teeth fastened to its axehead. However, the white flowing robes he wore were unmarred by even a

speck of dust, proving that he hadn't even been close to becoming injured during the fight.

However, the most gripping things were his eyes. It felt like they contained a boundless power that made Gregor shudder from hundreds of meters away. His very existence was cause for pressure, and it looked like the army felt the same as a wide passage in the ranks opened up without any order. It wasn't surprising, of course.

Who'd dare to block a man who had just mowed down millions of zombies?

Lord Atwood soon appeared in front of them and nodded as he stashed away his weapon.

"Have you found any clues about the general who was leading this horde?" he simply asked.

"Ah- Ehm, no," Gregor said, quickly finding his bearings. "I'm afraid not. The horde suddenly turned chaotic and rowdy without warning two days ago, we believe it might have been because the general fled. Enigma set out to find him with a group of elites, but we haven't heard any news."

Lord Atwood nodded with a sigh.

"Well, the portal is closed and the Dead Zone is shrinking. We'll be able to smoke him out sooner or later. Contact Port Atwood if you hear anything," he said.

"Of course," Gregor nodded.

"Where's the closest teleporter?" Lord Atwood asked.

"An hour by foot in that direction," Romal said with a weak voice as he pointed westward.

"Thank you for your hard work," Lord Atwood said as he jumped back onto his flying treasure. "But remember, this isn't over. There are still multiple dangers threatening Earth, so don't let down your guards. I will hold an auction in a few weeks, there will be a lot of items that will be helpful for the elites of our world. You should come."

"Port Atwood next?" the mysterious demon asked, but Lord Atwood shook his head.

“No, there’s someone I need to talk to first,” Lord Atwood said with a shake of his head.

“Who?” the demon asked with surprise.

“Verana,” Zac simply answered as he nodded for his bodyguard to start flying. “I need some answers.”

A bloodthirsty laugh echoed out across the area as the demon joined him on the leaf, leaving a subdued group of councilors behind. Only when the trio had turned into a small spot on the horizon did Gregor remember to breathe, and he realized his back was completely drenched in sweat.

“Imagine if we actually had gone with the original plan to fight that monster,” Gregor wryly smiled. “We’d be skeletons tossed into some corner of the Underworld by now.”

And more importantly, he felt very happy that he wasn’t related to that Verana character, going by the fire in Lord Atwood’s eyes.

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A subdued silence lingered in the large conference room, with no one of the 10-odd people present wanting to be the first one to speak up. Thomas wasn’t in any hurry either, so he slowly looked out across the room of representatives to get a sense of their thoughts.

The power dynamic of the New World Government had slowly changed with democracy giving way to hegemony, but such was the natural result in a world like theirs. However, Thomas knew all-too-well that his current position was nowhere near as stable as that of the Super Brother-Man, Zachary Atwood.

He was unable to completely subdue the other factions of the government with his force alone, so he was still forced to accede to the will of the many in many scenarios. It did bog down his plans a bit, but he could only blame himself for being lacking in talent.

“It’s closed and the array has been turned off,” Francis Girardot finally muttered as he looked over at Thomas.

Thomas slowly nodded in confirmation, but he didn't speak up just yet. Zachary Atwood had made his move after all, and he was curious to see what the others had to say about it. His biggest worry right now was that the other members would start flocking to his rising star, abandoning the arduously crafted plans of theirs.

"Is this good news or bad news?" Johana, the Russian representative, asked.

"It is obviously good news to have one less threat to worry about," Asano said from the other side of the table. "The question is whether it changes our plans."

Multiple heads slowly turned toward Thomas sitting at the short end of the table. Asano's words had a clear implication. What can you provide that the Super Brother-Man can't?

"This doesn't change our plans," Thomas finally said. "Zachary defeating the Undead Empire is not wholly unexpected. The undead were powerful, but ultimately limited by the rules of the System. The real threat to Earth is not. The threat of the Redeemer remains. We will proceed with the Ark World Project."

Murmurs of agreement went around the table, though a few faces looked troubled.

"What about bringing Zachary Atwood into the plan?" a councilor ventured. "It would greatly improve our chances to seize the item."

"Absolutely not," Thomas Fischer said without hesitation. "Remember the uses of the Dimensional Seed? We want it to create a safe haven for our people. But what would Zachary Atwood use it for?"

"The C-Grade," Asano muttered thoughtfully.

"Exactly. All our intelligence indicates that he only cares about the safety of his sister. He even left his whole army to fend for themselves for weeks against the undead. He mysteriously disappeared for a month while humans died by the millions. He will no doubt save the seed to break through in the future," Thomas said without missing a beat.

“But he’s facing the same threat as us. The master of the Dominators,” another representative muttered. “Surely he can be convin-“

“We already possess two tokens that would take us off-world,” Thomas cut him off. “There is no way that Zachary Atwood doesn’t have at least as many. He can always cut and run, bringing his closest people with him after having looted all the treasures of Earth.”

The representatives slowly nodded in agreement, clearly seeing the problem as well.

“Besides. It’s not like we’re hopeless,” Thomas added with a smile. “I’m happy to announce that Silverfox and I have finally managed to broker an agreement with the True Sky-faction of the Ark World. Zachary Atwood is strong, but can he contend with their high E-Grade ancestors?”

Chapter 512: Regret

Verana sat by a flowerbed in her garden, absentmindedly stroking Lulu's soft fur as the beast slept in her lap while cradling a beast crystal. A sense of impending doom had filled her heart the entire day, and she finally knew it was time for a reckoning the moment Lys hurried into her room with worry in her eyes. Not that her maid needed to explain what was going on as she had already received the prompt.

Zachary Atwood had arrived.

The humans under her employ had already divulged his evolution and explosive gain in levels over the past days, and the fact that their surroundings weren't drowned in Miasma was proof enough of what had transpired. The young master of the Brindevalt had sent a message as well five hours ago, confirming her hunch. The Undead Empire was thrown off from this baby world, making Zachary Atwood its de-facto leader.

This should normally have been a joyous occasion, but she had messed up. She had been frozen in hesitation about the implications of offending the undead and the Church of the Everlasting Dao, until the point that they lost connection through the teleporter. Now Zac was back, and his thoughts about their actions were known only to himself.

Why had she hesitated back then? It was not like either of those forces were on good terms with the Tal-Eladar. In fact, it was the opposite, with the higher-tiered tribes having joined more than one excursion to curtail the expansion of the Undead Kingdoms.

She finally understood the weight of command that her grandmother had tried teaching her about, but now it might be too late. Her mind ran a mile a minute as she tried to figure out the optimal path to take from here on out. There was a

palpable pressure on her as the course of the meeting might decide whether she and her people would survive the day.

Because one thing was clear. If the Super Brother-Man had arrived with the intent to kill, then there was nothing she could do. He had taken out almost a dozen forces stronger than heirs, and even the undead wasn't a match to him. She still couldn't believe it as she had seen him in action on multiple occasions, but it was hard to argue with the facts placed in front of her.

She finally concluded that her best course of action was to feign ignorance; that she was preparing her forces to assist when Port Atwood was under attack, but the arrays had suddenly disappeared just when they were about to set out. So she adorned a welcoming smile when the human and his annoying companion stepped into her garden.

Verana gasped as she felt a terrifying pressure spread out through her backyard. Zachary Atwood was clearly making his stance known, and the few attendants were forced to flee from the immense pressure as the flora was pushed to the ground. Even Verana felt the strain, and Lulu whined in her lap as she was startled awake, her little muscles growing taut.

There was no longer any confusion about how Zachary Atwood had defeated the undead after feeling this terrorizing aura. It was almost incomprehensible how much he had grown since they last met. Verana already knew that he had gone off-world for some opportunity, but just what kind of encounter could utterly transform someone to this degree? She still maintained the smile though, wanting to make it feel like nothing was amiss.

However, that smile turned extremely forced when she heard Zac's first words.

"I thought you would have left for the Brindevalt Clan by now."

Zac looked at the frozen smile of Verana with a snort before he sat down opposite her.

“I am not sure what you’ve heard, but I assure you that the Tir’Emarel Family has upheld their part of the agreement without any deviance,” Verana said after a second. “We have not divulged any information about you to the Brindevalt. I feared the worst had happened to you when we lost contact, and we sought out an ally.”

“You know, I wondered what made you so willing to stay behind on a planet invaded by not only the undead but also the insane cultists,” Zac said, freely speaking his thoughts. “It turns out you had an escape route from the beginning.”

“Can’t trust the pointy-ears, they are only true to their beasts,” Ogras snorted from the side, drawing an angered look from Verana.

“I can understand how it looks, but I hope that you can understand my predicament. I wanted to assist, but I also had orders from my family to not offend any powerful forces while I was cut off from the clan. By the time I found the resolve to go against my family’s wishes we had lost connection to Port Atwood,” Verana explained. “Also, I believe the Brindevalt can become a great asset as well. They are-“

“You can send a message to your friends,” Zac cut her off. “I am heading back to consolidate my gains. But I will head out and slaughter every invading force that remains on Earth the moment I’m done. They better be gone within the week unless they’re ready to face me in battle.”

Zac stood up, not caring that Verana’s smiling face had turned into an emotionless mask, her eyes the only thing that betrayed the churning emotions within.

“I’ll uphold my bargain, you are welcome to stay as a trading partner. However, since you’re unwilling to fight for this planet’s survival, then you can forget about taking part in its resources. I will see any expansion from the Tal-Eladar as an act of war, and I will act swiftly in response,” Zac said as he walked out without another word.

He had said what needed to be said, and he was in no mood to stay any longer. His wholesale slaughter of the zombie horde had tired him out, and he just wanted to sleep for a few hours.

Ogras stood up as well, but he didn't immediately join Zac as he left. Instead, he turned toward Verana with a grin.

"What?" she snorted with annoyance after Zac had left the garden. "Don't pretend a calculating coward like you would have acted any different when faced with such a situation."

"I might be a coward, but I at least have a nose for opportunity. You've just pissed off the first person to reach the 9th floor of the Tower of Eternity in a million years," Ogras said, his grin almost splitting his face apart. "You better pray that the Tribal Elders of your race doesn't sacrifice your whole clan as a form of appeasement to the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura."

"WHAT?!" Verana exclaimed with shock, but she quickly calmed down. "Another life from a demon's poisonous tongue."

However, Ogras noticed that the Beast Master was not as calm as she let on, and he decided to twist the knife a bit.

"Believe what you will. Would I bother lying about something like this? The news will sooner or later spread across the whole Sector, and the natives will bring back news over the coming years. You'll see. Silly girl, you stayed on this little planet for its opportunities, but you let it all slip through your fingers," Ogras laughed as he flashed away, effortlessly avoiding an infuriated swipe by Verana.

He appeared right at the exit of the garden and looked back at Verana who stood rooted in place with a stormy expression. One of them looked physically ill and the other looking like he had just won the lottery.

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"What were you doing?" Zac asked when Ogras appeared by his side again.

"Rubbing some salt in the wound," the demon snickered. "Never forget to kick your enemies when they are down."

"What do you think they'll do?" Zac asked, ignoring the comment.

“The potential value of a trade route like this is too valuable to simply give up,” Ogras slowly said. “They will definitely leave at least some people here. Not that I think that they can simply leave as they want through someone else’s Incursion. There should be a massive cost to that. I didn’t even know it was possible. At best the girl and a few of her elites will be able to escape this planet, leaving the rest behind. Doesn’t really matter now, does it? You have gained many superior allies since we met these bastards.”

Zac nodded in agreement. If things fell through with the Tir’Emarel clan, then there would be a hundred stronger factions that would probably be more than willing to trade with him after the System’s shroud was lifted. Provided he didn’t become a pariah of the Sector, of course.

The Tal-Eladar kept a wide berth around them as they walked through the town, and they soon reached the Teleportation Array. They appeared in Port Atwood a bout of darkness later, and the two let out a collective sigh of relief. He had seen the others step through just fine, but almost getting ripped to shreds while stuck mid-teleportation had left a small seed of fear in Zac’s heart.

He just wanted to run home and sleep, but there was one thing that couldn’t wait.

“You want to see your girlfriend?” Zac asked after having nodded at the soldiers standing guard at the teleportation tree.

“What? Who?” Ogras blurted and took a step back.

“Emma MacHale,” Zac snorted.

“Oh, her?” Ogras muttered. “What a waste. Why are you seeing her for?”

“I need to speak with Julia,” Zac explained. “I want information from the New World Government.”

“Why not just go over and cut off a couple of heads before demanding answers? The amount they had badmouthed you would have gotten them all killed long ago on my home planet,” Ogras asked.

“I might disband them, or I might not,” Zac shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. There should be quite a few turncoats who are willing to offer up intelligence though, so I’ll have Julia work a bit in the meantime.”

The two soon found themselves at the sprawling mansion that Emma had demanded as remuneration for getting ‘kidnapped’. They found the two sitting outside, with Emma reading some scripts while Julia cultivated.

“What are the two of you doing here?” Emma said with a raised brow. “Questions about same-sex relationships? The two of you finally tying the knot?”

“That bore wouldn’t be able to land me in a thousand years,” Ogras laughed as he snatched the bottle of wine next to Emma. “He’s here for your little lover.”

“What’s going on?” Julia said as she opened her eyes.

“Are you interested in some work?” Zac asked as he looked down at the former government official.

It turned out that the answer was a resounding yes, and Julia almost ran out of the mansion before Zac had explained the situation in full. Staying still for months on end on an isolated island was clearly fraying her nerves.

They eventually decided that Julia would go to Westfort, bringing two bodyguards with her upon Emma’s insistence. As for her next step, that would depend on what she found out in the town. She seemed to have the matter in hand, so Zac left after giving her a deadline of a week. If she couldn’t find out anything by then he would have to take some more drastic measures.

Zac and Ogras left soon after, and Zac started walking toward his private area.

“What will you do next?” Ogras asked.

“I need to recuperate,” Zac sighed. “Cracking open a node caused more trouble than expected. It’s really a pain to be a mortal.”

“Yes, you’re one unlucky bastard,” Ogras muttered, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he flashed away.

Zac made his way back to his compound and found that his sister had left a note. She had left for Mystic Island by teleporting to the closest island. The teleporter on Mystic Island itself was apparently blocked by spatial turbulence, probably due to whatever the cultists did to close the tunnel.

Since there was nothing else to do he finally let himself rest for a bit, and he drifted off before his head even touched the pillow. He only woke a full six hours later, feeling a lot better compared to before.

Seeing that no one was looking for him he took the opportunity to start redrawing his pathways again. A map of the extremely intricate lines had thankfully been imprinted in his mind when he evolved, so there was no guesswork involved. However, the process was anything but simple just because he knew how things were supposed to look.

He slowly carved the extremely thin pathways with the help of his Cosmic Energy, but he was repeatedly forced to stop and redraw the lines. The slightest deviation would ruin everything, and he kept slipping up, forcing him to start over. Minutes turned to hours, but when he finally paused he realized that he had just redrawn a centimeter’s length, even though it felt like kilometers of interwoven lines.

This was going to be a lot of work.

Chapter 513: Pathways

Zac grunted as he got to his feet after having finished his recuperation for the night. One week had passed since the events in the Dead Zone, and he had finally restored the pathways in his leg to optimal condition. It had also given him some time to take it easy and find some stability. Having first rushed through the levels in the Tower of Eternity, only to be thrown into a hectic battle against the Undead Empire had taken its mental toll.

Redrawing the pathways had felt like a chore the first days, but he quickly realized the benefits of doing so. One of his weaknesses was a lack of familiarity with the patterns and fractals that made up pathways and skill fractals alike, but he was slowly shoring up that weakness while redrawing his fractals.

The process was slow, but it allowed him to gain a far greater insight into how the fractals actually worked and how they interacted with nodes and skill fractals. He had generally considered them magic veins until now, pumping Cosmic Energy instead of blood, but he realized that was a reductionist way to look at it.

The pathways created an extremely intricate network of thousands of fine energy routes, that actually worked together to transform the Cosmic Energy he used. You could say that raw cosmic energy entered his pathways from his cells, where it was stored until he would form a Cultivation Core, but that Cosmic Energy wasn't in tune with his class.

However, the energy was split apart into thousands of minuscule streams through the fractals, and when they recombined in the Skill Fractals the energy had transformed a bit, like the previously raw Cosmic Energy had been forced to all stay on the same wavelength. Zac guessed that the pathways also did the same with Cosmic Energy that was

absorbed through cultivation, though he couldn't test that for himself.

He hadn't been completely certain why the pathways between classes were so different before, but this was the most likely explanation. It was not only about fitting with the skills but rather forming a specific type of Cosmic Energy. It didn't quite go as far as give the energy an attunement though, but perhaps that was exactly what would happen at higher grades.

Having spent most of his waking time redrawing these pathways had given Zac a newfound understanding not only of the fractals but also about his class. He still lacked a theoretical foundation, but he felt that his understanding would perhaps even eclipse that of most cultivators by the time he reached peak E-Grade.

Furthermore, his week of introspection had also given him a better understanding of the pathways, then he had also gained a better understanding of what the Nodes actually did. If the pathway was a pattern of pipes helped remold his Cosmic Energy, then the spinning whirlwinds of the Nodes were essentially self-sustaining repeaters that sped up the process.

He still couldn't figure out exactly how his Hidden Node fit into this system just yet, but he hoped he'd be able to find out more when exploring the Mystic Realm in the future.

Seeing as he had essentially been holed up in his courtyard since returning, Zac decided to take a stroll through Port Atwood. Most things were pretty much the same as usual, but there was an extraordinarily large number of Tal-Eladar and their beast companions walking the streets. Zac knew that these were only the ones on a break as well, with most of them working on the surroundings of Port Atwood and Azh'Rodum.

Verana had quickly made her stance known as she appeared in Port Atwood just a few hours after Zac, bringing with her most of her non-combat class clansmen. They had quickly gotten to work at rebuilding broken parts of the town, replanting burnt-down trees, and even expanding the town with new structures.

The leader herself had spent a lot of time in the Atwood Academy, teaching the kids what she knew about beast rearing

and cultivation, even bringing a couple of litters of infant beasts. Zac had half-expected her to flee with the Brindevalt Clan, but she clearly felt there was more value to stay on, even with the cooling relations with Zac.

Zac obviously didn't really buy into this PR-campaign, but he also wouldn't say no to free labor.

As for the Brindevalt, they were long gone. The few remaining Incursions had all closed their doors and returned to wherever they came from by now, apart from the cultists. The Brindevalts had even sent a batch of resources and their congratulations through Verana before leaving, while setting things up so that taking over their domain would go smoothly.

Verana was most likely the reason for their congeniality, as the others had simply slunk away in the night after looting everything they could. They probably understood that the natives would come for them next, even if they had fought against the Zombie hordes together.

Or perhaps they had heard about Zac's existence and his deeds inside the Tower and had decisively left.

He still had no idea exactly what kinds of waves his emergence had created. He was still a small shrimp, but he had done something that hadn't been accomplished for a million years. No one living in the whole Zecia Sector had reached his level in the Tower of Eternity, at least not to his knowledge.

Zac had asked Calrin to try to buy some reports of what was going on, but he still hadn't heard anything from the Sky Gnome. It wasn't that surprising though as less than ten days had passed since he left the Base Town. With Calrin's limited network it might take some more time before they got hold of the news.

But that very same uncertainty made him unsure about his next steps. One of the first orders he had sent out to his people after returning was to look for places with high numbers of E-Grade beasts. Mystic Island was the best place in the archipelago, but much of its core had been cleansed of beasts to secure the base camp by the spatial tunnel.

Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of other good options. He had essentially out-leveled Earth, making it extremely hard for him to advance. He had gotten his hands on quite a few Teleportation Tokens by now though, allowing him to go to a lot of interesting places. He alone had the tokens from Galau, Pretty, Boje, and Catheya. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Ogras had received over a hundred tokens from all kinds of forces during the time he stayed behind in the Base Town. Zac essentially had access to every major Empire in the Zecia sector, except a few xenophobic and racially uniform ones. Unfortunately, it turned out that all the tokens he had gathered were useless at the moment.

The Nexus Hub was still inert, most likely because the Cultists were still on the loose.

That meant he was stuck on earth for the time being, unable to whizz off to some off-world hunting grounds to grind out a couple of levels. His predicament had also made him understand why the Dominators barely had gained any levels apart from the boost from the hunt. It simply wasn't possible on Earth.

Zac's aimless wandering soon led him to the Academy, and he entered after having thought of something he had put off until now. He found Alyn sitting at the veranda of her house like many times before, and he sat down next to her.

"A cup of tea?" Alyn asked as she looked over with a smile.

"No thank you," Zac said. "A lot to do today."

"Be careful, or you will get addicted to the stress," Alyn said. "It's okay to take a break sometimes. In fact, it's advisable. It allows your Dao and your path to harmonize with the real you, the one that isn't forced into one desperate situation after another."

"I will hopefully have time for that when I've closed the final Incursion," Zac smiled, though he honestly wasn't so sure.

"Have you found their whereabouts by now?" she asked.

"They've killed quite a few of our people through their two

visits to this island.”

“Not yet,” Zac sighed. “I’ve been busy, but I have my people looking into it. We’ll probably hear back soon.”

“Good,” Alyn nodded. “You are nurturing the heart of an Emperor. Let others deal with the little things while you focus on your cultivation.”

“Got any tips?” Zac smiled, feeling a bit reminiscent of the days the two spent in the Nexus Crystal Mine while Zac was working on ridding his body of his Cosmic Water dependency. Life had felt a lot simpler back then.

“What tips can I give you?” Alyn shook her head. “My teachings are meant to bring the most out of the talentless cultivators, turning them into contributing cogs in the machine. Neither I nor Clan Azh’Rezak knew anything about raising true elites. If we did we wouldn’t have been a clan that could barely be considered nobility. You will have to find your own path, or find a better teacher.”

“I was just kidding. On another note, can you call back any students who participated in the Dao Funnel last month, in case they are out training? Not a single one can be missing,” Zac said.

“What’s going on?” Alyn said, a small frown adorning her face.

Zac was about to explain, but he froze for a second and instead took out the Lantern. He immediately infused some energy into it, and he suddenly felt a connection to the thing as a ghastly white flame lit up behind the glass.

The two were doused in the spectral shine, and Zac was suddenly covered in ribbons in all kinds of colors. A few were pretty thick, but most were thin as a strand of hair. Alyn also had a few bonds, most of them stretching out in various directions of the town. There were also two that rose straight into the sky, but Zac was relieved to see that they looked completely different than those of the Great Redeemer.

They rather had the same red color as the Demon Incursion had while it still was active, making Zac believe they were

rather Karmic Links to some family or friends back on her home planet.

Satisfied that there was no hidden problem with Alyn quickly turned off the Lantern, unwilling to spend any more lifeforce than needed. He had actually seen a grey hair when his hair started to grow out the other day, a reminder of how much lifeforce he had already lost because of the Shard of Creation.

He would gain it back many times over when he reached D-grade Race, but it was still pretty disconcerting to see, considering his lifespan should be over 500 years by this point.

“I need to do this with everyone who was there,” Zac said. “It turns out the Redeemer guy is actually a bastard from a C-Grade clan of Karmic Cultivators. This thing will root out hidden dangers. Keep this to yourself.”

The truth about Voridis A’Heliophos, or rather The Great Redeemer, was still not disseminated among even the core of Port Atwood. No one present really knew too much about the means about the abilities and limits of that mysterious power, so they kept it on the safe side. The fewer who know any real details, the smaller the risk of inadvertently forming any Karmic Links.

“I understand, I will arrange things properly,” Alyn nodded as she took out a crystal. “When do you need them gathered?”

“Make it three days from now,” Zac said as he stood up. “A few of the soldiers are out to sea right now I think.”

Since he couldn’t scan for Karmic threats right now he could only focus on one of his other projects while he waited for Julia to return. Zac couldn’t help but smile when remembering the former government employee’s excitement to get some responsibilities. She had lived a quiet life while her partner had worked on Ogras’ movie along with a few PR gigs across the achipelago, and she seemed bored out of her mind.

Ogras had said that it was suspicious how eager she was to go talk with some unknown people at the New World Government, but Zac didn’t believe she was a spy. There were no doubt spies on the island judging from how the invaders

seemed to have known about the general situation, but Julia wasn't a prime suspect.

She had been restricted to a far greater degree compared to others to avoid this very situation, so it was more likely that she just wanted to do something productive. Besides, she seemed to have gotten extremely complicated feelings for the New World Government since hearing Emma's stories. The suspect was likely someone else.

Not that it really mattered any longer. The undead were dealt with and the Zealots were next, and any planning or scheming of the New World Government was redundant in the face of pure power. Besides, they seemed more invested in their 'Ark Project' than world domination by now, even after the undead threat was dealt with.

Zac was soon back in his private area, and he stepped onto his private teleporter. The next moment he appeared in a small nondescript cave. It looked like any other place among the subterranean tunnels of his mountain range, apart from being illuminated by Luminous Pearls rather than the luminescent moss.

But it was anything but normal.

Zac started walking toward an empty wall, but when he passed an almost invisible layer the surroundings changed, and he was inundated in dense waves of energies. The hair on his arms stood up as he was simultaneously buffeted by both life and death.

It looked like his cultivation cave was finally up and running.

Chapter 514: Cultivation Cave

Zac had finally set up a private cultivation area for his Draugr-side and Soul Cultivation, or rather his sister and Triv had. They had completely transformed the cave system around the original cultivation cave, and it would barely be recognizable by this point. He felt bad about constantly having his sister work on one array project after another, but he had no one else to turn to.

The demons were completely incompetent in that regard, and the Creators couldn't help with this project. The Sky Gnomes had helped with a portion of it, but they were only allowed to help install arrays that were bought through them. Triv was a welcome addition though.

The ghost was just acceptable in his skill of placing arrays, but he had shown a surprising insight and attunement to natural energy flows, a genuine Feng Shui Master. That knowledge allowed Kenzie to take advantage of the rich energies in the cave to a much higher degree, drastically increasing the efficacy of the formations.

Between that and Kenzie's unnaturally high precision in array placement, they had managed to make amazing progress in one short week. He would have to hire a genuine Array Master to improve things even further, but those kinds of services weren't available in the Town Shop. It was a restriction put in place by the System to prevent people from having too easy access to means of empowerment. It wanted people to struggle, after all.

There were a lot of buildings he could purchase from the store, but they were almost all services that were geared toward various types of convenience. He had for example purchased a bank to go with the Merit Store in the square of the town,

though there were pretty strict limits on how much you could deposit. Not by the bankers themselves, but on the System.

Zac had already deposited his maximum allowance as an Early E-Grade warrior, 1 Billion Nexus Coins, which would be directly handed over to his sister in case he died. It would be just a small portion of his full wealth, but he couldn't be certain what would happen if he got himself killed. The people of Earth might turn on Kenzie because of greed, but she could just use one of his Teleportation Tokens and withdraw the money on some other world instead.

The cave Zac stood in right now was simply the entrance rather than the real cultivation area, as Triv insisted that a Teleportation Array would cause too much spatial turbulence. Besides, Kenzie would be able to teleport here now without inadvertently disturbing him mid-cultivation. The shudder he had felt as he stepped forward was a simple illusion- and containment array, hiding the real entrance and stopping the dense energies from escaping.

The tunnel had changed a lot since he visited the last time. Before it had been filled with subterranean plants such as the mushrooms and glowing moss, creating a magical passage into the hidden cultivation chambers. But now it was like the tunnel had been split in two, each side representing either life or death.

The left side of the tunnel still looked very much the same, but the right side had turned dour and colorless as an ashy haze emerged from the rock wall itself. Some of the plants had already died off, whereas others were barely hanging on. New growth had started to emerge though, mainly a pitch-black moss that had supplanted the luminescent one.

It was an odd feeling walking in the middle of the tunnel, with half his body feeling the vigorous life coming from the Lotus, while the other side was drenched in the cold grip of death. This was obviously not an accidental design, but rather meticulously planned. However, the miraculous environment was nothing compared to the cave he entered next.

It was a perfectly circular cavern that had actually been turned into a small forest, with the domed ceiling reaching almost fifty meters in the air. Half the chamber was filled with Death-attuned trees that had been brought over from the core of the Dead Zone, and the other half were trees that had grown in the secluded valley.

It was Triv's idea to plant the trees here, based on Zac's preferences. Some liked to cultivate in sheer chambers without any distracting components, whereas others liked to be surrounded by things that made them peaceful. Zac had chosen this type of environment as this was how usually had meditated since the beginning, sitting in the forest by his campsite.

In the middle of the cave was a large glade, with a prayer mat placed perfectly aligned to be in the center. There were two more mats in the chamber, though Zac couldn't see them from his current vantage. They were placed at central locations in the respective attunement of the cave. The area around the left mat would be full of life-attuned energies, whereas the other one would be surrounded by miasma.

The trees might seem haphazardly planted, but that was anything but the truth. This was the work of Triv, who had meticulously aligned every tree to form the embryo of a natural formation. The formation itself wasn't anything special, but it filled a very important purpose. It would gather the energies in the room and have them naturally flow toward the prayer mat in the center.

If he sat down on that mat he would be able to see two passageways perfectly opposite each other, one to the left and another to the right. The left one would lead to his original cultivation cave, where the Life-attuned Lotus still resided in the pool of Cosmic Water. Dense waves of purest life-force entered his subterranean forest from that side, but it met an opposing force coming from the other.

The right door led to a completely new chamber that had been dug into the mountain, and it was a smaller and modified version of the array they had found beneath the Undead

Fortress. In the center of the chamber was the Seed of Undeath, surrounded by the very same pillars as before.

However, the pillars didn't blast miasma toward the world core any longer, but rather extracted it from the Seed to push it toward the central cave.

There was also a hidden room beneath it filled with Unholy Beacons. They took the Cosmic Energy that the Nexus Vein emitted and transformed it into Miasma that fed the Seed of Undeath and its array. Together with a couple of shielding arrays that kept the Death Attunement from spreading out, it had formed a hidden eco-system of death in the heart of the mountain.

Zac heard some rustling on the life-attuned side of the forest, and he walked over to see his sister scrutinizing a large stone pillar. It was embedded into the ground just outside the glade on the life-attuned half of the forest. It did look a bit like the pillars that now stood in the Death Chamber, but they were actually Array Flags that Kenzie had created herself.

Normally such a flag would just be a few decimeters long, but she was still unable to make them as small as the small sticks he had bought from the System.

"How does it look?" Zac asked as he walked over.

"It should work as intended, I've compared it with the disks you gave me. I've also recreated similar pillars on the other side of the cave," Kenzie smiled.

"Why?" Zac asked curiously. "Was there something wrong with the Array Disks?"

The array that Kenzie was working on wasn't something related to energy flow, but it was something much more pressing. It was the array to practice his Soul Strengthening Manual. The Remnants were still very docile in his mind, but he hadn't forgotten just how dangerous they could be. It felt like a miracle that he was still standing after the events in the tower, and he needed to be proactive in dealing with them.

The Remnants were still extremely weak, but they were slowly but surely regaining their strength. Most of the energy they

gained still entered his soul and his body to strengthen them, but a part of it remained. For example, he was pretty certain that he would be able to conjure a bronze flash by this point just based on the amount of energy contained in the markings covering his soul.

Part of him wanted to just exhaust the energies that had gathered up til now to avoid any danger, but part of him was reluctant to waste his hidden ace. Who knew when he would need to be able to blast something with a ball of pure destruction?

“No, they were honestly better than what I created. But I can’t create Array Disks, and the Arrays would become lopsided if one was a small disk and the other half a forest in size,” Kenzie said, looking a bit embarrassed. “I talked with Triv, and he believed that it might cause the death-attuned energies to push into the life cave too much.”

“That’s fine,” Zac said. “Thank you for your help, and sorry I keep asking you to do stuff like this.”

“I’m not in a hurry to reach the E-Grade, and I don’t care about ladder positions or stuff like that,” Kenzie shrugged. “This way I can at least help you and help protect Earth.”

The two walked around the cave for a bit longer, where Kenzie made a final inspection of the pillars.

“It good to go. I won’t disturb you any longer,” Kenzie said as she packed up her things. “Good luck with this stuff.”

“Thank you,” Zac said as he walked over to the mat placed on the right side of the cave.

Dense clouds of miasma slowly swirled around it, somewhat reminding Zac of how it looked in his opened nodes. The mat itself was actually a piece of the massive mat that he had looted from the dragon cave.

Calrin had identified it to be made from extremely valuable materials that aided in cultivation, with the inner pieces holding the most value. It had been cut into almost 100 pieces and refashioned into a set of mats with the inner mats going to

the core warriors of Port Atwood, with the rest being put in the Merit Exchange.

Zac took a deep breath before he sat down. It was finally time for him to start working on his [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**].

The cultivation method for the first Reincarnation of the [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**] was quite simple. There was not much he needed to do, except alternate between using the Death-Array aptly called [**Death Soul Array**] and the counterpart that Kenzie had just finished setting up, the [**Life Soul Array**].

There were some ways that one could improve the efficacy of the two arrays though. The manual mentioned cultivating in life- and death attuned cultivation caves for example, and there were also a few treasures listed that could help speed up the process. However, Zac had only taken the most basic steps with the help so far by relying on the attunements generated by the Lotus and the Seed respectively.

But it was entirely possible that he would start using more expensive methods to boost the cave even further. Triv was quite adept in improving the atmosphere this way, though his knowledge was mostly limited to death attunements so far. But the ghost was already studiously working on expanding his knowledge of life attuned measures to be more of service.

Honestly, Zac was becoming more and more pleased with his decision to keep the ghost around. Triv had already proven an extremely valuable asset in the construction of this cave, and he had all sorts of ideas to improve the state of Port Atwood in general. Most of the changes would be pretty expensive to enact, but Zac wasn't too worried about cost at the moment. Now that the undead threat was dealt with his force had started to focus on expansion rather than war, and his income increased every day.

There was still the Zealots and the Dominators to deal with, but they weren't a threat that required his whole force. He himself and perhaps a small strike squad would be all that he

needed for those two threats, whereas the endless number of Zombies had required the cooperation of the whole world.

Zac went over the cultivation method in his mind, still keeping his human form. He wanted to get the hang of things before he started to experiment with swapping races for the cultivation.

A low hum echoed across the glade as Zac activated the array, and it felt like the Miasma around him stirred. His skin prickled as well, and he quickly started to become a bit uncomfortable. However, he ignored the impulses to turn into a Draugr as he infused the array with some spiritual energy.

The moment his mind made a connection with the array he felt a weak, but constant, drain on his mind as the array absorbed more and more of his mental energy. It wasn't a problem in the beginning, but he started to feel a bit queasy after half an hour had passed. He even started to wonder if there was something wrong with the array.

However, just as he was about to abort the experiment a surge of energy rose from the array, and he felt a powerful stream enter his mind. It was his own mental energy, but it was tinged with death this time. Zac nodded in satisfaction and kept going, and the array had completed a circulation after roughly 45 minutes.

Zac kept going according to the manual, seeing that the array worked as intended. He slowly completed one revolution after another, and his soul became a bit ghastlier every time. The two Remnants even woke up from their slumber for a few seconds, but they quickly calmed down again for some unknown reason. Perhaps they knew that whatever Zac was doing wasn't a threat to their existence.

Only after nine full revolutions was the first half of the cultivation session complete. His mind was completely permeated by death by now, and he almost felt like a ghost. The Miasma around him no longer felt uncomfortable, but rather inviting to the point that Zac almost thought he had changed to his Draugr constitution subconsciously.

It even felt so good that he was inclined to lay down and take a nap in the soothing mists. However, he immediately snapped

out of it as he walked over to the other side of the forest. The usually soothing life-attuned energies that had turned the greenery even lusher felt like scorching gusts that threatened to blister his skin, but Zac ignored the illusion as he sat down at the second prayer mat.

Another revolution began, but this time his Mental Energy brought back some warmth after it had passed through the array. He completed the nine revolutions once more, and only then did he feel like he was back to his normal self. Zac stood up from his mat and stretched before he checked on his gains.

And truthfully, they weren't all that great.

Chapter 515: Divide

A lot of work for little benefit. That was Zac's first impression of the results from completing a full cycle of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

His soul was in very good condition, all things considered, and it looked like it had turned a smidgeon more condensed. However, Zac had spent almost fourteen hours in this session, and the results felt a bit lackluster for such an investment. He started to understand why so few warriors chose to spend time on a Soul Strengthening Manual.

But he didn't have a choice.

The two Remnants would wake up sooner or later, and he needed to empower his soul before then. He needed to be the one in charge, a fact that had become even more apparent after seeing the name of the Arcane Class he was presented. He didn't just want to be a vessel, he needed to be the controller.

But it was undeniable that there was a problem with the time expenditure. He couldn't waste 14 hours a day on this array, he needed to gather Cosmic Energy to crack open nodes, ponder on the Daos, and work on his Race Evolution as well, besides all the other stuff that required his attention in Port Atwood.

The situation wasn't hopeless though. This was just a trial run in unoptimized conditions, and he was hopeful that he would be able to expedite the speed of each revolution. If he could decrease each Revolution from 45 to 15 minutes with the help of his unique constitution he would suddenly only need to spend four and a half hours a day on Soul Cultivation, which was far more acceptable.

And Zac already had ideas on how to improve efficiency. The two arrays were essentially dialysis machines for his mental energy. It sucked the energy out and ran it across the arrays, where some impurities were shed while some attuned energies

were infused. Each revolution would increase the attunement until his soul was stuffed, at which point he swapped array.

The clash between life-attuned energies and death attuned energies at the second set of revolutions seemed to strengthen his soul without really hurting it as well, and he had a feeling that this controlled clash was one of the interesting aspects that set this method apart from other Soul Strengthening Manuals.

The other was obviously the transformative impact when enough cycles had taken place to form a “Reincarnation”.

Another small benefit came from his **[Void Heart]**. It had actually absorbed some of the dense energies in the cave and pushed it into the next node to break open; this one located in his right leg instead. It wasn't a huge amount, but it also wasn't negligible. If he also managed to get his hands on a better version of the **[Mother-Daughter Array]** the benefits would be quite noticeable over time.

Zac also felt pretty relieved that the nodes in early E-Gradeseemed to be located on his extremities. A lot of nodes were located on his torso, neck, and head though, and they were the cause for a lot of sleepless nights. Those around his heart and organs could always be cracked open in his undead form, but others felt extremely dangerous. What if he accidentally decapitated himself when he cracked open a node in his throat?

He needed to find a way to contain the damage from node-breaking to only his spirit body somehow, leaving his flesh intact. Either that or become sturdy enough that a node explosion couldn't harm him. Zac wasn't all that worried though, as a lot of E-Grade mortals had passed this hurdle before him. He just needed to find out how they did it.

Part of Zac wanted to sit down again and immediately start tinkering with the process, for example trying to perform a revolution while changing his race. There was no time to experiment with improving the process right now though. The Manual said that he could only do one revolution a day. Any more would just needlessly tax his soul without any benefits.

He walked over to the central glade instead and looked down at the small tree that grew there.

It was the very same branch he had brought from the Dead Zone, the tree that encompassed both life and death. He had planted it right at the delimitation of the two attunements, which meant that half of its branches were drenched in death while the other half enjoyed the sweet succor of life. He hoped to study what changes that brought to the mutated tree, and perhaps even gain some insights from the process.

A second branch was placed in the life-attuned side, with a final one being steeped in Miasma. He wanted to see how the saplings adapted to the different environments. The branch shouldn't have any problems surviving being replanted in the area teeming with miasma, as that would be the same conditions it had in the Dead Zone.

But what about being placed in a place already teeming with life? Would it double up on producing vibrant energies, becoming a beacon on verdure? Or would it perhaps swap over and start creating miasma? Zac couldn't wait to find out. Of course, something like this wouldn't change in a day or two.

Not much had happened in the few days since the tree was replanted, but Zac was relieved to see that it was doing just fine. There were no signs of wilting or that it hadn't taken to the earth, and after infusing it a bit with the Fragment of the Bodhi he could confirm that roots had already taken hold.

A glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** showed that the tree was still mostly attuned to death though, which wasn't a surprise considering where it grew up. However, life was slowly gaining a foothold in the branches, and it didn't seem impossible that it would reach a true equilibrium in the future.

Zac nodded with satisfaction before he sat down at the central mat. It was already getting late, and Zac wasn't in the mood to leave this place for the day. Many people would still be awake all the way until 2 or 3 am now that they only needed a few hours of sleep, but old habits die hard. You couldn't just pop in at someone's place at 11 pm.

He instead focused his attentions on Fragment of the Bodhi. Zac hoped to gain some sort of insight by sitting in an area where life was in a constant struggle against death. The battle with the Lich King, unfortunately, hadn't provided any real inspiration, and the only thing he could do now was to grind at it until it was time to face the last threats to Earth.

That was not to say that his experience in the Dead Zone was without any benefits. His battle of attrition with the Head Priest, where his Bodhi-infused branch managed to overpower the scorching flames, had resonated with him. Following that it was his meditation in front of the mutated tree.

The two together had pushed him forward, and it felt like he was on the cusp of crystallizing some sort of breakthrough. But it still needed more time or some sort of breakthrough.

He needed to make the best of the time, as he actually sensed that the Origin Dao was slowly starting to dissipate. It wasn't like it was a rapid decline, but the peak had clearly been met. What would follow would be a gradual dissipation of the Origin Dao until Earth was indistinguishable from any other world of the Zecia sector.

It was a bit surprising the decline was happening so fast, the snippets of information on the subject indicated that it could stay for well over a decade. However, as things looked now the Origin Dao would run out in a year or two. One possibility was that there actually were more Dao Funnels like the one Salvation carried on Earth.

If The Great Redeemer really was planning to harvest the Origin Dao of a planet, then it also made sense that he would leave more than one funnel behind to collect it for him. That way he would only need to pick up the Funnels upon arrival before he did whatever the Fulcrum-plan entailed.

Another possibility was that the Realignment Array had caused some irredeemable damage to Earth even if it was shut off in time. It still was anyone's guess whether the massive swathe of death around the undead incursion would ever heal completely, but the damage was perhaps also done to a more fundamental level.

In either case, the time of rapid growth for Earth's population was coming to an end as quickly as it began, and most cultivators of Port Atwood had been instructed to focus on the Dao rather than leveling to make the most of it. Anyone could reach peak F-Grade in a few years with the right support system, but gaining and evolving a Dao Seed was something else entirely.

It was by far the most common reason for people to not being able to evolve. People simply didn't have the affinities or opportunities to form a Seed on their own. A large number of the citizens of Earth might never form a Dao Seed if they didn't seize this opportunity.

The scenes of his recent battles flashed through his mind as he occasionally looked over at the branch that was able to perform such a miraculous transformation. He even thought back to the original vision with the cherry tree, where the blessed tree had created a magical realm beneath its branches.

The canopy had turned into a perfect barrier that took on the heat and the desolation from the badlands outside and fed it into its Buddhist Kingdom inside. It was just like how the branch in front of him took the miasma of the area and turned it into life.

However, the transformation process was just one part of the miracle. The other was to form and protect the core of life that was allowed to grow powerful without outside interference. The Seed would be weak at the beginning, and only through protection would it be able to grow. Otherwise, it would be like a candle in the wind.

"Isolation. Creation through protection," Zac muttered, and his mind shuddered as he felt a resonance from the Dao.

Zac followed the instinct and kept searching for answers, various scenes flashing before his eyes as they slowly congealed into something new. It all began with the vision in the Tower. The general had been allowed to grow into his potential only due to the stele shielding him from the outside worlds for millennia, which echoed his current thoughts.

The hours passed until something finally congealed in Zac's mind. A surge of warmth spread from his mind to every corner of his body as the Fragment of the Bodhi evolved into middle stage. He felt more powerful than ever, but he held off on checking his gains as his intuition told him that he wasn't done. There was more to gain.

Zac stood up, pushed forward by an intangible momentum, and he swiped his right hand through the air as though his hand was a bladed weapon. A shudder spread forward as the swing actually was infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi. However, the energies in the air didn't turn chaotic from the action, but rather the opposite.

The whole air around the central glade was one big conflict zone between life and death, where miasma and divine energy fought for supremacy. At some places, the miasma had encroached a bit on the other side, whereas life had managed to gain a small foothold on places at the death attuned side.

However, the moment Zac swung his palm the fighting stopped, and a clean line of demarcation could be seen. The miasma spread to an invisible line but didn't move an inch further. Order had been brought to the area, and life was split from death.

This was thanks to Zac's latest insight into the Fragment of the Bodhi, and Zac marveled at the scene until the effects of the swing dissipated, causing the thousand small conflicts to once again erupt all over the glade. But it had been enough to reach his goal, and Zac opened his Quest Screen to check it out.

<p>Rapturous Divide (Class): Split Life and Death. Reward: Rapturous Divide Skill (1/1) COMPLETE</p>
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A fractal appeared the next moment, taking a spot on his left arm, essentially mirroring the fractal for **[Nature's Punishment]** on his other arm. The fractal looked a lot different though, forming two completely separate lines that didn't have one single fractal that connected each side. The only fractal until now that had even been a little bit similar

was [**Cyclic Strike**], though these fractals were a lot more intricate.

Zac's heartbeat sped up with excitement, but he restrained himself from immediately busting out the skill. Who knew what effect the skill would have, he's get lambasted by his sister if he accidentally tore apart the arrays she had spent so much time and energy to set up.

Zac instead only turned his sight inward, to try and get a sense of what kind of skill [**Rapturous Divide**] was. But there were no clues he could glean at all from the new pattern. However, he did notice that the two lines looked far more intricate compared to his previous skills, like it was an embroidery using extremely fine silk threads compared to the coarse rope of the F-Grade skills.

He marveled at the fractal for a while before he eventually retracted his sight. He also wanted to see his attribute gains, so he opened his status screen to see the boost he got from his upgraded fragment.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	81
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[E] Human
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern

	Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select
Limited Titles	Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	2090 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]
Dexterity	992 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Endurance	2229 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]
Vitality	1476 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 199%]
Intelligence	545 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]
Wisdom	911 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]
Luck	340 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 5 919 241 817

Fragment of the Bodhi (Middle): All attributes +20, Endurance +140, Vitality +160, Intelligence +30, Wisdom +80, Effectiveness of Vitality +10%.

He had made shocking progress in one night, though the two breakthroughs were related. However, Zac knew he couldn't

rest on his laurels as things stood. Some things had gone above expectations, but he was still struggling in other compartments.

Perhaps he should have realized that his unique situation with dual races would cause complications when upgrading them.

Chapter 516: Beastcrafting

Miasma spread out through Zac's body as he activated his Specialty Core. He walked over to the Death-Attuned side once more and took out a large tub that he filled with water before he threw in a dozen E-Grade Miasma Crystals. Next were a handful of stalks of Netherbloom, along with various other herbs that he had found in the Cosmos Sack left on the body of Adriel.

It was time to work on his Race once more.

He had already used up the **[Fruit of Rebirth]** the moment he returned to Port Atwood, and the massive amount of progress made on his racial upgrade allowed him to realize a somewhat surprising with his body. His nodes were the same between his Races, but his actual Races were separate.

Zac had somewhat figured that his Racial Rank would be shared between his two sides as he only had one body and because his two classes shared the same Node System. However, that wasn't the case. He could clearly feel that his Human side was on the cusp of evolving into D-Grade, whereas his Undead Side barely had improved at all.

That was starting to become an extremely urgent issue now that his third Dao Fragment had evolved. Even worse, the insight had been partly based on protection, which had caused the Fragment to boost Endurance more than expected. One more breakthrough and he might actually hit the Attribute limit on his undead side.

Of course, Zac had already tried to remedy the situation by eating the remaining Racial Upgrade Pills he bought at the Base Town Auctions, but he had almost killed himself doing so. It turned out his Draugr side was extremely picky, and the pills that humans would use were essentially poison to him.

Triv was no use either. It could barely confirm that the Undead used various methods of improving races. For example, they created incense sticks using herbs, where the composition depended on what race the original body was. There were also the standard medicinal baths according to Triv, but its helpfulness ended there.

The ghost was unable to divulge a single mixture, as his commandments apparently regarded that as betraying the Undead Empire. However, the ghost didn't have any issues at all mixing up a medicinal bath following a recipe that Zac provided, proving there were loopholes to the limitations. Unfortunately, the same issue arose with the normal medicinal baths; they didn't work on his undead side either.

Zac had no idea what would happen if he passed the attribute cap as things stood. Would both his classes lose out on points? Or would his Draugr alone take the hit? Zac really wasn't willing to find out, and he was doing everything he could to stave off that ever happening.

He had no idea how things came to this. He had specifically asked about race upgrades while visiting the Undead Kingdom inside the Tower of Eternity, but he heard no clues about his current predicament. He had been afraid that he would need a Lich to help him upgrade his race to D-Grade as they were responsible for giving Revenants sapience, but that thankfully wasn't the case.

They had assured him that cultivation and treasures would work just fine, but the care package they had provided him with hadn't contained anything to improve his constitution. Perhaps they expected his 'master' or elders to have prepared far superior materials for him already and felt it would almost be an insult to give him their scraps.

The freezing bath he had concocted was just a stopgap measure as he was all out of ideas. The dense death-attuned waters along with random herbs from Adriel's Cosmos Sack did help a bit, but properly preparing a medicinal bath was far more complicated than what he was haphazardly throwing together. It required precise measurements of the different

herbs, and they needed to be processed and added in a certain manner.

Using it as he did was essentially wasting over 95% of the efficacy, and he would run out of herbs long before he upgraded his race at this pace. He was rapidly burning money for very little gain. The **[Void Heart]** was no use for upgrading his Race either, but rather the opposite. It just stole some of the energies of the medicinal baths and fed it into the node in his leg, leaving a bunch of impurities in his bloodstream.

He did get small amounts of refined energies from the Shard of Creation though, but he had no idea if that mysterious energy actually helped with his race, or if it had some other sort of effect on his body.

He had already sent Valkyries and Demons to look for manuals or clues in the ruins of his newly acquired Death Fort, but he didn't hold out much hope. Zac knew he most likely already was in possession of the recipes anyway, locked away inside the crystals of the Lich King. But those were still out of his reach, as even the old Sky Gnome had failed in cracking their protections no matter what he or his little pet tried.

He felt as though he was falling into the same old predicament as last time. He had managed to improve his constitution a small bit, but he didn't know how much his attribute cap had increased as a result. His Strength had already passed his Endurance by now, and it felt like the tragedy of the F-Grade cap could take place again at any moment.

But he also knew he needed to keep pushing himself forward. Inevitability was level 111 by now, and Void's Disciple was level 108. Zac still felt that the older Zhix warrior was a far larger threat compared to the unhinged maniac he battled during the Hunt. He felt pretty confident in dealing with Inevitability if they met again today, but he was far less certain about the Dominator Leader.

He had given him Zac an extremely oppressive and mysterious feeling when they met, and Zac had no clue exactly what skills he had. The Zhix Hordes had no idea either; everyone who had

seen Void's Disciple in action had been killed. He was like a murderous ghost that moved back and forth across the hives.

Zac knew that catching him was impossible, even though he still coordinated with the Zhix Armies to track his movements. He had somehow opened up a rift in space and walked straight through it when they met, and the Lich King had indicated that Void's Disciple actually had gained the Dao of Space. How was he supposed to catch someone like that?

Even if Zac found him and started fighting, he could still just slink away if he started losing.

The best solution was taking him on inside the Mystic Realm, and Julia would hopefully return with good news today. Until then he needed to do what he could to improve his power, even if it meant him wasting mountains of precious herbs.

Zac only stepped out of the vat two hours later, and he swapped back to his human form immediately. A knife appeared in his right hand as he cut a deep wound across his forearm. Ice cold blood spurted out for a few seconds until his extreme Vitality closed the wound, but Zac repeated the process a few times to release well over two liters of blood.

His makeshift medicine baths did have some effect on his Draugr race, but it also came with a huge amount of impurities that the **[Void Heart]** puked out into his bloodstream. Just one bath meant he would have to bleed himself for a few more times over the coming day, and there was also the impurities from the Soul Strengthening session to deal with.

The lackluster results of his racial upgrade had somewhat put a damper on the excitement of upgrading his Dao Fragment, and Zac sighed with annoyance as he left his cultivation cave. He teleported back to his compound, but he didn't immediately head over to his Courtyard. Instead, he left the small number of mansions behind and entered the wilderness.

He walked for two minutes until he appeared in a secluded spot hidden deep in his private forest. It was actually a place that held some significance to him; it was the very spot where he woke up after the integration.

However, the small glade was completely unrecognizable by now, with its bloodroot and cardinals replaced with a sanguine pond with a diameter of five meters. Even Zac felt a bit pressured as he walked next to the pond of Dragon Blood, and he felt that he could even hear distant roars. The pressure no doubt came from the Dragon's bloodline, as it felt similar to the pressure that he had felt during his fight with the primordial beast.

The pond had shrunk a bit since his last visit, which surprised Zac as that was the third time. He still topped the pond off with more Dragon blood from one of his vats, realizing he would run in a week if things kept up like this. However, he had no direct usage for the blood anyway, and he felt it was best used like this.

He also threw in a few more Beast Crystals for good measure as he couldn't sense the unique energy fluctuations from the previous ones he threw in. He didn't know if he was simply wasting money, but Verun had seemed to like them any time he got close to one. A sense of anticipation gripped Zac's heart as looked at the large crystal sticking out in the middle of the pond.

It was the latest transformation of **[Verun's Bite]**. The Spirit Tool had been pushed hard in the latest fights against the Lich King and the elites of the Tower of Eternity. He honestly wasn't confident that the weapon would be able to keep up for the coming fights, and this was his best bet unless he actually chose to swap it out for a new axe.

That's why he chose to feed it the Dragon Core the moment he returned to Port Atwood, though he still kept the Bloodline Marrow for himself. The weapon had immediately turned into a crystal like the previous time it underwent massive changes, but it had still sent out a mental plea for more Dragon blood.

It still looked there would be some time before the evolution finished, and Zac was extremely eager to see the result. Zac hoped that the primordial bloodline of the Dragon along with the Beast Crystals would cause some equivalent of a Bloodline Evolution of Verun.

It didn't really work like that for normal Spirit Tools as far as he knew, but it was possible for Beastcrafted weapons according to Triv. Bloodline evolutions were obviously a pretty impressive boost to the potential power such Spirit Tools could exhibit, but beast crafted weapons had downsides as well.

First of all, their upgrade ceiling was generally low to start with. Secondly, they were a lot pickier for upgrade components compared to normal weapons, and two seemingly identical weapons could have completely different requirements. The latter in particular was a big reason why pretty much all weapons he had seen at the Base Town were made from metals, wood, or crystal.

They were simpler to evolve, and the upgrade paths were generally a lot clearer. No one wanted to risk being stuck with a weapon that couldn't evolve any longer, forcing them to get a new weapon instead. One's weapon was a huge component of your combat prowess, after all, and it was impossible to immediately exhibit one's full strength after changing weapons.

But Zac didn't really have either desire or the ability to swap out his axe to a better one, and his eyes were locked at the pupa as he conjured all kinds of possibilities in his mind. Zac only spent a couple of minutes by the pond though before he got ready to leave, a crack echoed out across the glade just as he turned away.

Zac's eyes lit up in anticipation as the red crystal crumbled bit by bit, slowly showcasing the weapon hidden within. A sudden shockwave blasted the crystal to pieces though, and an enormous shape appeared by the pool as the blood was sucked into the weapon.

It was Verun, who still looked like an oversized ancestor of a hyena, apart from his massively oversized maw and multiple sets of eyes. Zac had almost thought he would turn into a half-dragon or something after eating the core, but its changes were a lot more subtle than that. Its fur had turned from a dusty brown to a glossy black, with red highlights covering its body.

It almost looked like he had scales, but a second glance showed that it was just a pattern. It had also grown a thick mane that ran from its head all the way down to its short tail, somewhat reminding Zac of the spikes of the black dragon he fought. Its claws had changed as well, turning bigger and darker.

Its whole image had turned more refined, without losing its aura of lethality. There was a sense of sharpness and danger to it, like it was a true predator that didn't only use its brawns to take down its enemies.

Finally, there were streams of energy that circulated each of its four legs, and a glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** displayed two swirls just above its paws, both with a different color. The first one was had a sanguine hue, which wasn't surprising as its favorite food had always been blood. The other one was a bit more surprising though.

The second swirl was felt like was steely gray and felt pretty similar to his Fragment of the Axe, though the Heaviness was swapped out by something else. Force maybe? In either case, it thankfully wasn't fire-related, something Zac had worried would happen from ingesting a Dragon Core.

Dragon Flames were obviously powerful, but not something that suited Zac's current path. So the fact that the addition felt element-neutral was a relief. The massive beast looked down at Zac from the other side of the pool, happiness radiating through their mental bond. It raised its head and let out a massive roar the next moment. The terrifying cry was powerful enough to cause the closest trees to shake, and even Zac had to take a step back from the volume.

Birds screeched in panic in the distance, and Zac wouldn't be surprised if the whole town heard the roar. It felt like the Verun wanted the whole world to know there was a new alpha in town.

Chapter 517: Jammers

Volume was not the only thing extraordinary with Verun's roar as dozens of trees suddenly exploded, utterly ripped to shreds. It almost looked like Verun had torn them apart with its mouth, but Zac guessed it should have been the soundwaves.

The Tool Spirit leaped over the now-emptied pond and buffed Zac's chest once before it dissipated into a stream of energy that entered the axe that now was embedded in the ground of the dried-out pool. Zac jumped down and ripped it out, but he almost lost his balance from how heavy it was.

The axe had always been on the heavier side, and he would never have been able to [Verun's Bite] before the integration. But its weight had increased by over ten times from absorbing the Dragon Core and evolving, and that wasn't the only thing that had changed. Its overall design was the same as before, but the handle was now pitch-black to match Verun's fur.

But more importantly; a third rune had lit up, meaning another skill or function should have been unlocked from the upgrade.

The axehead itself had slightly changed as well. It had turned even bigger, with its edge gaining over five centimeters in length. The bone it was made from felt sturdier as well, and the edge was sharp enough to easily draw blood on even his durable skin. There were also thin red lines running across the bone, almost looking like cracks in the material.

However, Zac didn't feel any weakness or damage when holding the weapon, and he guessed the new pattern was just mirroring the red streaks in Verun's fur. He jumped up from the pond and swung it around a bit, and deep growls echoed out as it split the air apart.

He had initially worried that the increased weight would make it feel unwieldy, but it was actually the opposite. The weapon felt far sturdier, and it resonated better with his Dao. It felt like

every swing contained a gigantic and undeniable force, like a mountain was crashing down where he swung his weapon. But he put away the weapon after a while and started to walk back toward his courtyard.

Between his Dao Epiphany and working on his race morning had already come, so just Zac planned on resting for an hour or two before starting his next day. However, he noticed a drone zooming about outside the entrance to his Courtyard as he returned. Kenzie had painted it red to be more easily spotted as well.

It was no longer a surveillance drone, but more of a flying butler to his sister who sent it on all kinds of errands. She, or rather Jeeves, had even equipped it with speaking capabilities, though Zac had made sure that it wasn't an actual AI.

[Julia has returned] the consciously mechanical voice of the drone spoke up.

“Is Kenzie home?” Zac asked.

[Yes. The mistress is working on her arrays.]

“I'm coming over, there's something we need to talk about,” Zac sighed.

Seeing how his sister was becoming increasingly comfortable with using Technocrat tech, he knew he couldn't hold off any longer. He needed to tell his sister about his visions of his mother. What if she kept going like this, and one day connected to the Digital World of the Machine God Faction? Who knew what kinds of alarms that would trigger?

Earth already had enough to deal with without dragging a full-blown Technocrat Armada to the Zecia sector.

Zac soon arrived at her mansion, or rather series of towering structures that his sister had let erect. Only the smallest of the houses, a rusting one-story house with a large garden, was her residence though. The other buildings were rather workshops for her experiments, Technocrat Technology and Arrays alike.

He found her tinkering with a massive onyx stone in the middle of one of the workshops, surrounded by protective arrays. Zac's brows rose in alarm when he saw the series of

formations, as it felt like her experiments were far more dangerous than she had let on. Kenzie looked over when he entered the workroom, and she finished up whatever inscriptions she was adding to the block with the tool she got from the quest last week.

“Good timing, I’ve made a breakthrough with these jamming arrays. I think we can actually use them when we’re finished. They should work as long as you activate it in your Draugr form.” Kenzie said but frowned when she saw Zac’s expression. “What’s wrong, you look so serious? Didn’t the soul boosting array work?”

“The array worked great, I just need to figure out some way to make my Soul Cultivation faster. Zac said as he walked over and poked a defensive shield. “What’s with these shields? You’re not risking your life for this are you?”

“It’s a precaution so I don’t blow up his building, but I’m not in any danger. Jeeves will notice if it starts destabilizing so I can run away with time to spare,” Kenzie said. “By the way, what was that roar earlier? It almost made me ruin this thing.”

“Just remember to be careful. These things come from pretty damn dangerous factions,” Zac sighed. “The roar was Verun, it finally finished absorbing all the materials.”

“It sounded pretty powerful,” Kenzie smiled.

“Let’s hope it will be enough to deal with the Dominators,” Zac said as he looked closer at the Jamming array. “Will these things be as effective as when the undead used them?”

“They should work the same,” Kenzie nodded. “Just put Miasma Crystals into the sockets and everything within a day’s march will be blocked out. But we still need to finish some modifications to circumvent restrictions on these things, and that will turn them into consumable items. They’ll only work for a handful of times before they break down.”

“How many?” Zac asked.

“Probably more than ten, but no more than twenty,” Kenzie hesitantly said.

“That’s plenty,” Zac said with a sigh of relief.

These things would come in handy over the following month, and it was something his force sorely lacked. Because Earth was about to be plunged into a civil war, and this would give them the advantage they needed. The war wasn't against the New World Government, but against a far more dangerous enemy; The Dominators.

The Zhix hordes had cleanly split into two camps by now, either gathering behind the Anointed or the Dominators. Now that the undead threat was dealt with the tensions had risen to an unprecedented degree. The followers of the Dominators needed to be rooted out, but the efforts of the other Zhix had proven futile since the integration took place.

Their previous methods at dealing with the Dominators and their followers had been crude but effective. They had sent wave after wave of soldiers after their target, drowning them in a sea of relentless violence. The Dominators ran out of Cosmic Energy sooner or later, at which point they were slaughtered.

The Zhix were still more than willing to sacrifice themselves to root out the final vestiges of corruption in their bloodline, especially now that they knew of the source. But the emergence of Teleportation Arrays had turned their efforts useless. The War Council of the Zhix had already contacted Port Atwood in search of a solution, and he would meet up with them in a week, provided he didn't need to change his plans due to Julia.

These jamming devices would allow him to trap the Zhix hives who had defected, and with the help of the Zhix hordes take out anyone that might have formed a Karmic Link with the Great Redeemer.

Zac didn't feel it was enough to locate the leading Dominators to secure Earth. His instincts told him the Dominators were using these traitors as a back-up. Void's Disciple had been slowly converting hives to join their side over the past year, and mercilessly slaughtering some of the staunchest detractors.

There had to be a purpose to this, and the most likely reason Zac and Ogras could fathom was to form a karmic link. The

Great Redeemer would perhaps be able to find Earth as long as there were enough followers spread across the planet, even if the main perpetrators were already killed.

Or perhaps it wasn't about back-up plans, but about boosting the signal. The Karmic Link between the Great Redeemer and the Dominators couldn't be too strong, as they hadn't even met in person. Voridis had visited the Zhix planet thousands of years ago, and the link should have weakened by now. But what if there were tens of millions of insectoids praising his name? It might give him all the clues he needed to find Earth.

It would also explain why both the Dominators and the Medhin Clan were so intent on taking over the planet, apart from avoiding the Incursions spawning. The more who were under his banner, the easier the planet would be to find.

So he needed to deal with the traitors as soon as possible, and these jammers were the key to fighting them.

"So what's up?" Kenzie said, dragging him out of his thoughts. "Scarlet said you needed to talk?"

"It's about mom. There's something I haven't told you," Zac sighed before he started recounting his visions.

This time he held nothing back, retelling both his visions of their mother and the words Leandra spoke. He connected that with what he had learned so far about Firmament's Edge and added his own analysis of the situation. He knew it would probably upset his sister, but she needed to know that their mom might be an extremely dangerous character and as large a threat to them as The Great Redeemer.

"You really met mom?" Kenzie said with a low voice. "Why didn't you get me? Then I would at least have been able to hear her voice, even if it was just a projection."

"I didn't dare let Jeeves close to her, even if it was just an AI," Zac explained. "Something about the way she talked felt unsettling."

"Jeeves said that no one but me can access him," Kenzie said with a downcast voice.

“Would he really know if that was true?” Zac countered. “Can he really know more about any hidden functions than his creator?”

The two kept going back and forth for a while longer. Kenzie initially refused to believe that their mother might wish them harm. The fact that she might even have been used as a test subject seemed to be too much to even consider, and from the rapidly changing expressions on her face she didn't seem to hear the answers she was looking for from Jeeves either.

“In any case, we don't know which version was the true one. Perhaps both were false. But if Leandra really is a top tier warrior of the technocrat faction, just her appearance might plunge the whole planet into a storm of blood. Just getting close to the technocrat incursion gave me a quest to kill them all,” Zac said. “We can't deal with the battle between the System and the Technocrats for the time being, and Jeeves seems to be right at the heart of the conflict.”

“I know,” Kenzie sighed. “You might be right. It's definitely suspicious she only called Jeeves an assistant. Jeeves definitely isn't like other Technocrat technology. He doesn't follow any rules these things do. He's alive, which shouldn't be possible to technology under the rule of the System.”

“For now, see if you can figure out a way to hide Jeeves' location. The stronger he grows the easier he might be to find. I doubt Technocrats would use Karma to find him, but rather some sort of hidden bug or connection through the Soul World,” Zac said.

“I'll see what I can do,” Kenzie said with a slightly hollow voice.

“I'm sorry I didn't have any better news to give you,” Zac sighed.

“That's okay. We're still better off than most people on Earth,” Kenzie said. “Besides, we might find the truth when we start looking into the Mystic Realm in earnest. Who knows, it might even one of the labs where they researched Jeeves. Even if some other force took it over later, they still left a lot of the

infrastructure intact according to Ogras. There might be records that only Jeeves can access.”

“That’s what I’m thinking as well. There is no rush to find Leandra. We will both be able to live thousands of years. We can slowly figure out the truth without risking our lives or the lives of everyone on Earth,” Zac nodded. “Perhaps Julia will have some good news as well.”

“That’s true,” Kenzie said, her eyes lighting up a bit again. “I told her that you’d meet her at 7 am in the government building.”

“Thank you,” Zac said as he stood up. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenzie said.

Zac felt a sense of heaviness as he walked back to his courtyard. Things had gone pretty much as expected, and he could only pray that would be the end of his sister’s attempts at looking for their mother in the short run. But he honestly didn’t feel completely secure, and he made a note to look into whether it was possible to block out the Technocrat’s Soul World, like a multiversal wifi-blocker.

There was still a few hours before the arranged time, so he just took a short nap before he started consolidating his latest gains, getting a feel of his upgraded Dao Fragment. The insight mostly felt defensive in nature, which Zac was pretty happy with. His defensive capabilities were starting to slip now that he got so little Endurance, but this would push him a step further.

He was also surprised to find out that the insight actually had changed his Dao Field by quite a bit.

Chapter 518: Artifact

It was now extremely clear how big the improved Dao Field was, as it formed an almost perfect bubble around him spreading for up to 200 meters. It looked like he used a defensive treasure, though his Dao Field was more transparent.

It even had a direct defensive capability, as Zac noticed that a few falling leaves were rebuffed and pushed to the side. He didn't expect the Dao field to protect him against ultimate strikes or anything, but who knew how strong such a field could become as he progressed.

His other Dao Fields were a lot more diffuse, with his Dao Field of the Axe being a pretty much invisible field full of razor blades. Zac found it interesting how they started to move apart in how they looked, and it made him curious about how things would work at the higher grades. The time quickly passed as he meditated though, and it was soon enough time to get going.

Zac walked over to the enormous government building, and he couldn't help but notice that the sprawling structure had grown in size in between every time he visited. This time another wing had been added, built in an interesting mix of human and demon architecture that was a blend of living wood and glass.

The building was full of people even though it was still pretty early. Zac walked over to the desk and was soon led to a secluded meeting room overlooking the square, guided by an extremely flustered office clerk he didn't recognize. He guessed it was someone who had been transferred to Port Atwood recently from one of the satellite towns in the archipelago.

It still felt a bit odd to see strangers on his island, as he still somewhat considered Port Atwood the desolate place where he had spent months alone with the demons. Even when new

people finally started arriving it was still in small numbers, and he could pretty much place every single face. But the last months had seen an explosion in citizens, though everyone was thoroughly screened by Adran and Abby.

Julia had already arrived, gazing at the town below through the large window with a cup of coffee in her hands.

“One of the things I like about our new lives,” Zac smiled as he sat down at the conference table, pouring himself a cup. “Spiritual coffee-beans.”

“Now if everything didn’t want to kill us, then we would have been golden,” Julia responded with a wry smile as she turned toward him.

“So? What did you learn?” Zac asked.

“It’s a mess,” Julia said, looking completely crestfallen. “The New World Government is beyond salvation. The cultist shapeshifters had infiltrated extremely deep, but a core section led by Thomas Fischer has actually taken up with the Dominators. A lot of the cultists were purged soon after, but I don’t know if they got them all or how they were exposed.”

“If we could buy that **[Origin Array]** to root out any aliens, then so can they,” Zac shrugged. “Did you find out anything else about the cultists?”

“Not much, honestly. It feels like the shapeshifters had gone through huge lengths to obfuscate anything tangible about their origins,” Julia said as she took out a tablet. “However, I did manage to find the location of both the government’s spatial tunnel, along with the location of another entrance currently held by the Church of Everlasting Dao.”

“Good,” Zac nodded with relief. “I might have to enter from somewhere else in the future unless the spatial turbulence around ours dies down.”

“You should know that at least the government’s entrance is booby-trapped,” Julia said. “Officially it was to protect everyone in case they needed to flee the undead, but it would work just as well against you. There are also strict checks to

get inside. The whole entrance is a fortress, anyone coming by foot will be attacked without pardon.”

“Pretty careful,” Zac muttered. “Well, it makes sense. They’re essentially the weakest group around. I still don’t understand how they expect things to work out in their favor. They’re only around because no one can be bothered with wiping them out.”

“Well, I actually learned quite a few things about the Mystic Realm, in case you want to move on from the subject of the invaders,” Julia said.

Zac slowly tapped the table in thought.

“What do you think?” he finally asked. “You haven’t been with the government for a while, but you were still a part of the upper management during a time when the infiltration most likely already had started. They must have come from somewhere.”

“I have a theory, but I am unable to confirm it,” Julia slowly said.

Zac didn’t say anything, only indicated for her to keep talking.

“The Government secured a handful of hunting grounds for our soldiers during the early stages of the integration, even before you appeared,” Julia began. “We had found one place in particular, just one week’s travel from Main Paris, one of the larger secondary hubs of the government. Better yet, the route to get there was pretty safe, which was key as we still hadn’t set up too many teleportation arrays. The cost constant of mass teleportations was also something we had trouble affording.”

“We sent soldiers to Main Paris through arrays, and then put them on cargo planes or convoys. Some would return directly to New Washington by teleportation array later, but others would stay there. There was constant traffic both the old way and through teleporters, and infiltrators could easily have used Main Paris as the point of ingress,” Julia said as she showed Main Paris on a map.

“Main Paris is located in the middle of Pangea,” Zac muttered. “They would have been able to travel to most major towns of Earth within a month or two even if they traveled by foot.

Such a trip would be suicide for most humans, but it shouldn't have too difficult for the church.”

“Exactly,” Julia nodded.

“So you think the Incursion is in this forest?” Zac asked.

“Probably not. We should have found it if that was the case,” Julia said with a shake of her head. “The training ground was a medium-sized forest full of Derriers, a pack animal from the Ishiate world. They are quite aggressive, but not very powerful, and there's a lot of them. Makes for perfect target practice. The forest was blocked to north and west by an inhospitable mountain range and a massive saltwater lake to the east. We came from the South. It created an enclosed area that allowed the Derriers to multiply freely.

“We mapped the forest easily, but we never managed to get past the mountain range due to extremely aggressive birds that lived there. They were hunting Derriers as well, so our soldiers mostly stayed at the southern side of the forest. But if the invaders could find a path through the mountain...” she continued.

“So they might be on the other side,” Zac nodded in understanding.

“Exactly. The area on the other side of that mountain range is one of the twelve yet uncharted territories of Pangea, and my best guess of their whereabouts,” she explained.

“Sounds like our best bet,” Zac agreed. “I will go there to check things out as soon as I've prepared everything I need.”

“Be careful, those birds in the mountain are extremely territorial. They even ripped apart a couple of our fighter jets that we sent to scout things out,” Julia said.

“The more powerful they are, the better,” Zac shrugged. “I could use the experience. What have you found out about the Mystic Realm? Have you found what everyone's after?”

“Thomas is keeping a lot of details close to the vest. But it's impossible to keep everything secret in this big an operation, so my contacts and I have managed to piece together some things,” Julia said. “The fact that there are a lot of people who

wish that they joined you instead of New Washington made my job a lot easier as well.”

Zac wryly smiled in response, but he honestly wasn't all that interested in taking on a bunch of flaky diplomats from the New World Government. Especially not after hearing the disgusting stories from Emma MacHale and seeing how they mismanaged his hometown.

“Thomas Fisher seems to believe there is some sort of dimensional artifact inside the Mystic Realm that will save them not only from the cultists and Dominators, but even the Great Redeemer himself. It's this item that every force is after,” Julia said, immediately dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“Dimensional artifact?” Zac repeated with confusion. “What's that?”

“No idea. But from what I gathered it seems to be still growing in the depths of the realm. Thomas is moving a lot of his resources into the Mystic Realm, and many of the elite squads never leave any longer. Even Thomas only exits for a few hours at a time. I believe...” Julia said, gathering her thoughts.

“Yes?” Zac asked.

“It is because of this dimensional artifact. The moment it's uncovered it will temporarily destabilize the Mystic Realm, cutting off the entrances. That's why everyone's missing. The Dominators, the Cultists, the New World Government. No one wants to be caught outside. That's at least the conclusion I and my contacts reached,” Julia said.

“Do you have any timeline for when that would happen?” Zac asked with worry.

If it really was true, then he needed to get going quicker than he anticipated. He absolutely couldn't be locked outside if both the Incursion Leader and the Dominators were inside the Mystic Realm. Not only would that leave the most powerful invaders unchecked, but it would also make it impossible to kill the Dominators.

He didn't know whether The Great Redeemer could find Earth while the Dominators were inside the Mystic Realm, but he didn't want to risk it. What if Void's Disciple managed to lock the Mystic Realm down completely, and simply stayed there until Voridis appeared?

"We couldn't find an exact date, but you should have at least a month. I got a hold of various orders to the military and a few departments. There are multiple projects related to the Ark World that have a delivery deadline of 36 days from now. I think the government is confident of the entrances being open until then, while the elites are already standing by in case something unexpected happens," Julia said.

"Thirty-six days," Zac muttered. "A month."

It wasn't a lot, but it was better than nothing. In fact, it might even be for the best to deal with this matter as quickly as possible. However, he knew that the number of power-ups he would be able to gain in such a short time was limited.

"What makes the government think they can actually compete for that item though?" Zac asked next, which was the most burning question in his mind. "I could simply fly over to their entrance and snatch their entrance if I wanted to, and I bet the Dominators could do the same."

"You shouldn't underestimate them," Julia said. "They control most of the old world's weaponry. Thousands of missiles and other types of explosives."

Zac made a noncommittal shrug, not feeling too threatened by something like that any longer. He would be able to push them all away with a few swings of his axe, or just move out of the way with **[Loamwalker]**. Or just block them with some defensive skills.

"You also shouldn't take their entrance unless you have to. They've already made it clear that multiple people can set off the booby-trap to the entrance. Stealing the entrance and jumping inside would be suicidal," Julia said.

Zac grunted with annoyance, but he had to admit it was a pretty good deterrent. He almost died the last time he entered a

booby-trapped teleporter after all. If it wasn't for his sister adding a safety measure he would have been ripped apart instead of thrown out over the ocean. But would that method really work in a spatial tunnel to a mystic realm?

Where would he be thrown out if he exited mid-transportation? The void of space?

“But more importantly, they have apparently brokered an agreement with some of the forces inside the Mystic Realm,” Julia added, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. “They are currently advertising it, how they have allied with multiple powerful E-Grade warriors.”

“They have? What do the aliens get out of that deal?” Zac said skeptically.

“Freedom. Getting out of the Mystic Realm when this is all done,” Julia said.

Zac frowned when he heard her explanation. Joining up with a bunch of strangers who were far more powerful was a recipe for disaster, something that Catheya had driven home during their talk. The government obviously had some way to restrain them though, as Earth wasn't already crawling with escapees.

Ogras had mentioned the extremely strong security measures in the research base, perhaps the government had managed to use those checkpoints to their advantage. Still. It only took one mistake to release the floodgates, at which point any agreement would be null and void. Why would a bunch of powerful E-Grade warriors bother following the orders of Thomas Fisher and the useless diplomats?

“Wait, forces plural?” Zac asked, but he suddenly remembered Ogras' description of his visit to the Mystic Realm.

He had met two peak F-Grade warriors fighting to the death, meaning they might come from opposing factions.

“There are at least five forces in the Mystic Realm, each trapped inside and in control of their own section of the research base,” Julia said explained, opening a rough sketch on her tablet. “It's apparently shockingly large, like a country. But no one has access to the core region of the base as I've

understood. But the restrictions are weakening inside for some reason, and everyone is looking for a path to the dimensional artifact.”

Zac looked down at the sketch that looked like a hexagonal star, his eyes drawn to the ‘X’ marked in the center of the map. An artifact that could deal with even The Great Redeemer? He couldn’t let that fall into the hands of anyone else.

Chapter 519: Cleanse

Zac already knew there were some natives living inside the Mystic Realm since long ago, but the situation that Julia described had exceeded his expectations.

“Do you know the strength of the aliens?” Zac asked with some worry.

“The Intelligence said High E-Grade, but it’s hard to know what that means,” Julia said.

Zac nodded in agreement. Just level alone was an imprecise measurement of someone’s power. For example, the Dragon he had fought in the Tower of Eternity was likely only early E-Grade, but extremely powerful due to its race and bloodline. Meanwhile, there were Mid-E Grade warriors by this point that was essentially no threat to Zac.

With his recent gains, he felt confident in dealing with some high E-Grade warriors as well, though that would depend on whether they had any unique advantages of their own. Ogras’ said that the energy inside the Mystic Realm was pretty sparse, and perhaps it was hard to ponder on the Dao as well.

However, the base was most likely used to research bloodlines once upon a time, meaning every force should have one or multiple powerful bloodlines to boost their combat power. Besides, the E-Grade warriors he had fought up until now were mostly newly ascended, whereas those in the Mystic Realm might be thousands of years old.

What if he met someone who had polished their skills for millennia while spending centuries on opening each and every one of their Inherited Hidden Nodes? The leaders might even be stronger than the Dominators.

“There are also large unpopulated sections as far as I heard, and the government is currently busy exploring the sections

that the natives are locked out of. There are even large forests full of monsters,” Julia added.

“There are forests? Like real outside forests?” Zac asked with surprise. “Is there a world outside this star-shaped structure?”

“No, it’s still inside, with walls all around. I have no idea if there’s anything outside,” Julia said with a shake of her head.

“The government’s entrance has ended up in one of these forests, but it is vastly different compared to the one you describe in the information package you gave me.”

“Different how?”

“The forest is massive, almost half the size of this island I reckon. And it is full of powerful beasts at peak F-Grade,” Julia said. “The government can only use their entrance at certain times a day when the beasts sleep, and rush to an entrance they have secured. Perhaps the builders of the research base were breeding the beast once, but they have definitely gone by feral now.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and his heart still sped up a bit.

A bunch of powerful beasts? Wasn’t that exactly what he was looking for? These ones were just F-Grade and mostly useless to Zac, but perhaps there were similar forests full of early E-Grade beasts further inside the realm?

“There are all kinds of information on this tablet,” Julia said as she handed it over. “But it is mostly about the government’s latest movement and the situation on Earth. The government has barely scratched the surface of the Mystic Realm, and I think you would have to go for yourself to get a real understanding of that place.”

“Thank you. Good job,” Zac said as he stood up.

It looked like the real showdown with the Dominators would take place in a month or two. He wasn’t confident in being able to lock down Void’s Disciple even with the Jamming arrays, but the situation inside the Mystic Realm would likely force them into each other’s crosshairs.

The only time Void’s Disciple had lost his cool was when Zac threatened to take the item inside the Mystic Realm. Snatching

that item would force the Dominators to come to him rather than him trying to find them, which was the best solution he could think of right now. It was no doubt crucial to the Great Redeemer, and it beat having to scour every Zhix hive on the planet.

The biggest flaw of the plan would be the delay. Vovidis might reach Earth's universe at any moment, and there really wasn't any back-up plan if that happened. It would be every man for himself. The only relief was the massive amount of teleportation tokens he had amassed in the Base Town. It would allow everyone close to him to leave earth, as long as he closed down the Cultist Incursion first.

Of course, that only went for something like 200 people.

"Ah, one more thing," Julia said as Zac was about to leave.

"Yes?" Zac asked with confusion.

"I want a job," Julia said. "A Permanent one."

"Oh?" Zac asked as he stopped in his tracks. "What do you have in mind?"

"Alea was in charge of law and order for a while, until she wasn't," Julia said, drawing a frown from Zac. "Security is still high in Port Atwood with your existence as a deterrent, but things are more chaotic in your other settlements. You are still maintaining control thanks to your armies, but we need civil law enforcement as well. I want to help build such a section."

Zac slowly mulled over for a few seconds without giving a direct response. He had honestly dropped a ball regarding this, but he could absolutely understand if normal non-combat classes and the weaker citizens felt unsafe if there was no one around to keep law and order.

But the whole concept of law enforcement was a bit tricky in their new world as well. It was easier said than done keeping a population in check when anyone could gain superpowers. Perhaps there was some service he could purchase as more options became available in the Town Shop?

“I’ll talk it over with a few others before making a decision,” Zac said after a while. “But it sounds like a good idea.”

He had a lot to think about, so he sent a message to his sister as he left that he needed to consolidate his gains before he retreated to his cultivation cave. He started up the second cycle of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** since he felt he might as well be productive while sitting around, and he decided to try the array as a Draugr this time.

He didn’t change much, apart from starting at the life-attuned side of the array. His mind was soon filled with life, and the life-attuned energies no longer felt like poison to his undead body. Seeing that things seemed to work just fine he started circulating the manual by rote while he went over his meeting with Julia.

The array didn’t take too much of his concentration while it was active, and he could even look through the tablet while his mental energy was drained and infused with attunement. Most of it was reports of movements of the various forces of Earth just like she said, which wasn’t really something Zac cared about.

There were some minor conflicts brewing between the council and the New World Governments according to the intelligence, and Zac was actually a bit surprised at how unified the Council Stayed even after returning to the surface. None of the thirteen councilors had joined any of their racial factions as far as Zac could tell, instead choosing to stay with their former group.

In either case, squabbles between local forces wasn’t really something that Zac wanted to get involved in, as long as they didn’t involve his people or hurt innocents. Some internal strife might even toughen them up, which would prepare the Earthlings for when the planet was properly integrated into the Multiverse in the future.

Zac was more interested in the more pressing issues; the Dominators, the cultists, and the mystic realm. He was trying to figure out the best approach, one that would allow him to rid the world of lingering threats with the highest success rate.

He eventually decided against assaulting either of the two tunnels that Julia had located. He was curious about the pocket realm since he still only hadn't been able to explore its mysteries, but it felt like a safer route to reopen their own entrance. Kenzie had already made some preliminary measurements that were positive.

The cultists had detonated a massive bomb on the shores of Mystic Island, but they were forced to do it far from the tunnel itself. So it had only destabilized rather than broken down completely. Right now they were still waiting out the spatial turbulence, but it would gradually calm down over the following weeks. They might even be able to add some stabilizing arrays or treasures to the tunnel, which would force it open early if necessary.

More preparations were needed for the war against the traitor Zhix as well, which left the Cultist Incursion. Closing the incursion next felt like the most optimal route. It might leave some cultists spread all across Earth, but they could methodically be purged with the help of **[Origin Arrays]** over the following 100 years.

Closing the incursion would come with a lot of benefits as well. Earth was still in a "trial"-phase as things stood, and some parts of the System were still locked away from them. Closing the Incursion would allow him to purchase more structures, and it would probably activate his nexus hub.

Succeeding in proving your worth to the System by booting out all invaders also came with direct benefits according to Abby, though what kind of benefits differed since the System was always trying out new methods of integration. For example, the Ladder system was something that neither Abby nor Ogras had heard of before.

Dealing with the Cultists sooner rather than later was the best option as well. He had almost killed the Head Priest, and only a week had passed since then. He might still be severely weakened from barely escaping **[Fate's Obduracy]**, allowing Zac to strike while the iron was hot.

The bird mountain was also pretty interesting from Julia's description. There was a critical lack of good grinding spots, but those birds sounded pretty formidable if they could even take down airplanes soon after the integration.

The hours passed as Zac finished his second day of Soul Cultivation, and the results were identical to when he cultivated as a Human. He was about to work on his Draugr race next, but his communication crystal suddenly shook, delivering the message he had been waiting for.

The time to scan everyone for lingering karmic threats was finally here, and Zac teleported over to the Atwood Academy. A Valkyrie informed him that everyone was already waiting, so he flashed over to the Dao House.

He noticed a few Tal-Eladar standing in the distance, looking at the Dao House with thoughtful faces. They had probably figured out some things about it after staying at the Academy for a few days, but they only nodded at them before entering. The thirty-odd people were already gathered in the inner chambers of the Dao House, and they all looked over when Zac arrived.

Even Ogras had emerged from his bout of secluded cultivation, though Zac could sense that he still hadn't evolved.

Zac nodded at the familiar faces before he glanced at the wall. He was surprised to feel that he still could sense a small echo of the Dao in the walls themselves, imprinted from when they cracked open the funnel. If people kept pondering on the Dao inside this place over the years it might become a real treasure even though it was made from normal materials, kind of like the Cherry Tree in his vision.

The mysterious grooves covering the Dao House wasn't the only interesting change. He spotted Sap Trang standing with two of the valkyries, and Zac barely recognized him as his hair had turned completely black over the past week. Having taken Medicinal Baths for months had improved the old fisherman's constitution tremendously, but the latest improvement was far more drastic than anything up til now.

“Long time no see,” Zac smiled as he walked over to Sap Trang. “How do you feel?”

“Better than I’ve had in decades,” Sap Trang said with a toothy smile. “That compound you sent over has worked wonders. It felt like it helped me absorb the Medicinal Baths better as well. I talked with Little Alyn earlier, and she believes my odds at evolving my constitution has improved by a lot. You don’t happen to have some more? Not for me, but the other elderly in the town.”

“I’m glad it worked,” Zac said with a smile. “I’m afraid I don’t have much of that stuff left over to help the others, but I’ll see if we can buy some through the Consortia. We’ll catch up later.”

It was truly great news that things were looking up for the old fisherman. He was essentially the first human member of his force, and he had proven himself over and over. It would have been a real shame if he passed away from old age just as the doors to nigh-immortality had opened themselves to the people of Earth.

The compound that Sap Trang mentioned was simply some Longevity Pearls that had been ground down by the Sky Gnomes, together with a few dried herbs that were there to stop the efficacy from immediately dissipating. The short remaining lifespan of the old fisherman was one of the biggest hindrances to evolving his Race, and Zac wanted to see if the pearls could help with that situation.

To put it a bit bluntly, it was also an experiment that would benefit Zac. He had wasted a lot of lifeforce during his climb, and similar situations might arise in the future as well, as long as the Shard was stuck in his head.

Seeing the effect of longevity treasures on Mr. Trang was a way for him to prepare for the future.

Chapter 520: A Clean Break

Zac had tried the compound on himself as well, but the efficacy was extremely limited in his case. He didn't believe it was because of his constitution or anything like that though, but simply because he was already E-Grade Race. He would probably have to get his hands on better pearls. These longevity treasures were something he picked up on the second level of the Tower after all, so they weren't some supreme treasures.

Of course, there was also the possibility that the life-force sucked clean by the Shard was gone forever, but Zac wouldn't take that for a given until he had tried to remedy the situation with better materials. Even if that was the case it wasn't the end of the world though, as long as he reached D-Grade and restocked on a few millennia of additional lifespan.

In fact, he felt it was a possibility that his lifespan was already longer than most people as he had to evolve his Race twice. Wasn't it more than fair that he got twice as much life-force from the double upgrades?

The discussions in the room had died down as soon as Zac arrived, and he quickly realized what was going through their heads going by their expressions.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you all, but this is not another opportunity," Zac smiled as he looked around at the hopeful faces. "We are just making sure that there are no lingering side-effects to our earlier experiment. You don't need to do anything, just stand still while we do our thing."

With that, Zac took out the **[Lantern of Fate]** and activated it, illuminating the whole inner chamber and the participants in an ethereal light. Hundreds of strands appeared in the room, with Zac singlehandedly being the source of almost half of them. The others couldn't see anything except the spooky light

from the lantern, but Zac could quickly figure out what was going on as each strand emitted a unique aura.

“How is it?” Ogras asked as he walked over, and Zac sighed in response.

Most of the lines attached to the people in the room weren’t anything special, mostly leading toward various directions in port Atwood. Zac and most of the demons also had additional strands pointing toward the sky, with the demons having blood-red lines that pointed toward the same direction.

Zac and Ogras had an additional mix of different colors, no doubt representing the connections they had made in the Tower of Eternity. However, there was a group of people who had all had an ashy-grey strand that pointed toward the sky, people who really shouldn’t have any connection to anyone outside earth.

It looked like the gift of Origin Dao came with a price after all.

“What do we do now? How does that thing work?” Ogras asked from the side with a low volume. “Should we...?”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head, but he still took out **[Verun’s Bite]**. “The lamp has a solution.”

The changed appearance of the axe drew a whistle from Ogras and appreciative looks from the demons, who could easily understand that the Spirit Tool had become even more powerful. Zac didn’t immediately swing at the ribbons though, but he rather opened a small compartment on the lamp, exposing a small reservoir of oil.

This part was just as important as the lamp itself, as just seeing the Karmic lines was just half the battle. The second part was cutting them, and a normal weapon wouldn’t be able to accomplish that. The best would be things like the dagger that the Abbot gave him back then, but it had broken apart after one usage.

However, the lamp wasn’t a top-tier treasure without reason, and it came with a solution that even he could use.

“I only have a little bit of this,” Zac said as he smeared some of the oil across the edge of his axe. “Let’s hope we won’t

have to use this thing too much.”

He did have the second treasure of the Undead Kingdom as well, the item of erasure. However, he wanted to save that for the Dominators and their items since they should have a much stronger karmic connection to the Redeemer compared to these weak ribbons.

The students of Atwood Academy recoiled in fear as Zac suddenly appeared in front of them, but he didn't dare explain what was going on in case that would ruin their preparations. He moved as quickly as he could and swung his axe at the closest grey ribbon with such speed that the young girl in front of him couldn't even react.

Ogras was just one step behind, though he simply moved the girl away from the others in case something would go wrong. Groans echoed across the hall as one person after another coughed up a mouthful of blood and fell unconscious until less than twenty people remained standing. Most of the students were among the unconscious, but one demon and a few of the valkyries had been affected as well, along with Sap Trang.

Zac wasn't surprised by the group of unconscious people. They were essentially the same group as those who had been accosted by those ghosts when he cracked open the funnel. He couldn't help but feel that these people were a bit pitiful, not only reading the smallest rewards from the funnel but also getting all of the drawbacks.

The rest stood rooted in place, not completely understanding what was going on. They had only seen Zac starting to swing his axe in the air like a lunatic, while one person after another collapsed onto the floor. They looked warily at Zac and Ogras, but they breathed out in relief when they saw Zac put the lamp away.

“Take them to the infirmary,” Ogras said to the demons who stood by before he walked Zac away from the others. “We should do this again at a later date to make sure it worked. Can't be too careful that old bastard.”

“We'll do a second scan before we enter the Mystic Realm,” Zac nodded in agreement before he properly looked up and

down at the demon. “You still haven’t evolved? What’s going on?”

“It’s the netherblasted shadow-beast,” Ogras sighed after making sure no one else was within earshot. “The bastard has complicated things for me. I heard from your sister about the Mystic Realm. I really need to go into seclusion if I want a shot at evolving before then. Can you deal with the rest yourself?”

Zac thought it over, and he eventually nodded.

“I’ll head out to find the cultists next,” Zac said. “They are different from the Undead Empire though. I should be able to deal with it alone.”

“Their defenses seem a lot simpler; just kill everything in the surroundings. But be careful. Don’t forget how crazy they are. That’s how I got my arm replaced by this bastard,” Ogras said as he knocked the metal cast on his arm.

“I know,” Zac sighed. “I’ll go alone. I’m not sure I’d be able to protect others from their fire if they start exploding themselves.”

“Well, your past year has led to this moment,” Ogras snorted. “Some zealot fire shouldn’t be able to take out the unkillable cockroach.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Zac snorted at the demon who melded into the shadows the next moment.

Zac left as well after having made sure that everyone was alive and stable, and headed over to Thayer Consortia to pick up some items he had ordered. While he was there he also asked Calrin to look into blocking Technocrat tech, though he didn’t hold too much of a hope of him finding anything useful.

He also asked them to start preparing for the auction. He still hadn’t decided whether he should hold it before or after he dealt with the Mystic Realm, but he leaned toward the latter. No point in empowering outsiders just before the showdown that would decide Earth’s future. It might come back to bite him in the ass.

He returned to his compound next and found Emily having dinner with his sister.

“I’m heading out to deal with the cultists,” Zac said to the two. “Be careful while I’m gone.”

“Already? You need me to call the shield squad?” Kenzie asked.

“No, I’m going alone this time,” Zac said with a shake of his head, ignoring the pout coming from Emily’s side.

Since Ogras had gone into seclusion to prepare for his breakthrough he didn’t feel comfortable bringing Emily and the others. He had mostly brought them last time because of the high stakes of the Undead Incursion, but it was different now. If things went according to plan he would find a half-abandoned Incursion base as most of the cultists were busy exploring the Mystic Realm.

He would either close it down or flee with the help of the emerald leaf, allowing him to try again later. There was no point in risking the lives of his people in such a scenario.

In fact, he felt that anyone except Ogras might turn out to be a liability, where Zac would have to split his attention between protecting others and taking out the invaders. The Valkyries had made tremendous gains over the past months, but they still weren’t ready to tackle people like the cultists head-on.

Meanwhile, he felt confident that his recent gain in power was enough to close the incursion. After all, he had managed to defeat the Head Priest once already in a head-on collision, and that was before his Dao upgrade and while being weakened from the node opening. He was in tip-top shape right now, and he even had a charge from the Splinter as a back-up in case things turned really dire.

“Fine,” Kenzie sighed. “But be careful. They seem pretty insane, but they are an ancient faction. They must have some things to rely on after being able to avoid getting eradicated after making enemies left and right.”

Zac talked with his sister and Emily a bit longer before he walked over to his teleportation house. He changed his

appearance with [**Thousand Faces**] before he entered though, as he didn't want his movements to be tracked. His vision turned black for a minute before he appeared in Westfort.

The teleportation station was bustling with activity, and over a hundred warriors were coming and going. The small British town was quickly becoming a proper world hub, though Zac believed that they hadn't managed to upgrade the town through the System just yet.

He showed an ID given to him by Thea at the security checkpoint, and he was quickly escorted to a secured area without another word. A somewhat familiar face hurried over the next moment, and Zac remembered he was one of the intelligence officers of the Marshall Clan.

"Lord Atwood," said with a small bow. "What brings you here today?"

"Is Thea around?" he asked after some thought.

He had only talked with her through correspondence after closing the Undead Incursion, as Thea and Billy had already healed up enough for them to leave by the time he returned to Port Atwood. He wasn't running against the clock right now, so he could spare some time to discuss things with her before he set off for Main Paris.

"She and Mr. Trask Jr. are currently in the library. Would you like for us to arrange transportation?" the officer asked, and Zac soon found himself sitting in the back of a town car with tinted windows.

All the defensive perimeters around the Old Homestead opened up without issue, and he was quickly led to the shell-like tower. His appearance reverted back to normal as he stepped through the door, and he found Thea sitting on a sofa where he read about Galvarion a few months back. Billy was dozing off next to her, his snores likely blocked out by an array.

However, he woke up as Zac approached and waved at him with a big grin.

“How are you two feeling?” Zac smiled as he sat down on a sofa opposite them.

“Haha, Billy is good,” the giant said as he waved his massive arms with enough force to create a gust, which earned him a slap from one of Big Blue’s tentacles. “Stupid fish.”

Zac wondered if the two would erupt in battle, but Thea smoothly distracted Billy by taking out a grilled turkey leg, as though she had done this dance many times before.

“That’s good to hear,” Zac said as he looked over at Thea who had put aside the crystal she was reading. “I have some news.”

He quickly recounted what he had found out from Julia regarding the Mystic Realm, though Billy quickly zoned out until he mentioned the large number of powerful beasts. He immediately wanted to head out for some thwonking, but Zac and Thea managed to calm him down.

“So what do you want to do?” Thea asked after a while. “Are you heading in now?”

“I’m completely healed up now,” Zac slowly said. “So I am thinking I’ll hit the Cultists first. That way I’ll both gain a new entrance, while also cutting off their escape route. We can slowly flush them out afterward. Those lunatics doesn’t deserve any leniency. Besides, that way we can limit the spread of information about Earth.”

“They probably have already sent back information about the Mystic Realm though. I think that’s what prompted the extra investment,” Thea countered.

“Still,” Zac said.

Another reason he wanted to close the incursion was to free himself up to use both his classes while battling the invaders without risking the news immediately reaching the church. However, he wasn’t really willing to discuss that matter in front of Big Blue and Billy. He didn’t believe that Billy would betray him, but the giant didn’t really have any filters and might blurt it out at an inopportune time.

“Do you need help with the cultists?” Thea asked, changing the subject.

“Billy want to help as well!” the giant roared. “Stupid fire-lizards burned Billy’s clothes.”

“Just focus on recuperation,” Zac smiled. “It will be all hands on deck in the Mystic Realm later.”

“We’re mostly better. Billy and I have already talked about it. If you don’t need help with the Incursion, can we enter the Inheritance while you are away?”

Chapter 521: Birds

“You want to enter right now? You sure you don’t want to wait?” Zac asked with surprise. “You might die, you know. As I told you in the letter, the masters of the Inheritances all seem to be eccentric characters. Why not wait until you’ve reached level 75?”

Zac had gifted them each a shot at an Inheritance as thanks for protecting Port Atwood while he was away. So he wasn’t surprised to hear her bring it up, but he was a bit confused that she already wanted to take the trial. They knew they only had one chance, so he had assumed that the two would wait until they reached peak F-Grade. After all, that came with a set of powerups, such as titles, bonus attributes, and skills.

Their efforts had slowed down the approach of the invaders by hours, which was the whole reason he could complete the climb without worry. He didn’t know what he would do if he suddenly got the prompt of the invasion while he was inside the tower, but he most likely would have left early. He would have lost out on so much if that happened, including the Shard of Creation.

Not only that, the two had actually completely missed out on the quest for defeating the Undead Incursion because of their wounds. Thea and Billy should have been two of the highest contributors in the battle against the undead except himself and the Abbot, but they never got the quest as they were stuck in sickbeds on his island.

Giving them each a shot at an inheritance along with some of the things he had gotten during the climb was the least he could provide in return. The inheritances were limited, so any spot he gave out might mean that some descendant of his missed out in the future. But he figured that he would be powerful enough to be able to provide even better things to his grandchildren if it ever came to that.

Better use the inheritances now while they still could provide a lot of value.

His sister had already claimed the Invoker inheritance, and Adran was keeping his eyes on the craftsmen who had started perusing the Celestial Artisan Heritage. Someone might be worthy of taking on the inheritance as well.

As for the last two inheritances, Zac wasn't sure. It would depend on which inheritances Thea and Billy decided upon, though he had a pretty good idea what they would go for.

"We're sure," Thea nodded. "We can't keep playing it safe. I feel we're not powerful enough to help out as we are. We won't be able to reach level 75 in thirty-six days, there's just no way. We'll enter in a day or two after I've confirmed a few things here."

"Billy wants the Titan," Billy said from the side. "Billy doesn't know why, but it feels familiar..?"

"It does?" Zac asked with interest.

Was it perhaps his bloodline calling to him?

"Billy thinks he dreamt being a big giant that was called a Titan?" Billy muttered with a frown. "Can't remember..."

"Well, I think it suits you," Zac said. "I've seen the statue of the master of the Titan Inheritance. He looks just as strong as you, so you should be able to get things that make you stronger as well."

The Titan felt like the given choice for Billy, though Zac also felt that the Undying Fiend might be able to provide Billy with means of shoring up his lacking defenses. But the Inheritances were ultimately a matter of compatibility rather than what people needed, and Billy was definitely the most compatible with the Titan inheritance.

"Good!" Billy fervently nodded. "Billy has slept too much. Last fight hurt, Billy needs to get better at thwonkin'."

"What about you?" Zac asked as he turned to Thea.

"I'll take the Blade Emperor if that's okay," Thea said after a few seconds.

Zac nodded, feeling inwardly relieved. There wasn't really any standout in Port Atwood that could benefit from that Inheritance. The only one using a sword of the core forces was Sap Trang, but he wasn't really a sword master, but rather a water mage or beast tamer. Besides, Zac also had the heritage for the Blade Emperor, which probably contained half of the value that the old master left behind.

"What kind of test was there?" Thea asked. "Is it based on strength or suitability?"

"Suitability," Zac said after some hesitation. "It got a bit dangerous for me because I kind of cheated a bit, and Ogras was only in danger because the master he chose was a lunatic. But the trials should be achievable by normal talented people, as they were meant as gifts for the descendants of Brazla, the tower's creator."

"Good," Thea said with some relief.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be gone this time while looking for the cultists. Just have my sister lead you in if I'm not around. Oh, the tool spirit is slightly insane as well, so don't try to anger it. It might mess with your trial out of spite," Zac said, drawing an even stare from Thea.

"Anything else...?" she asked.

"No, that's it," Zac with a shake of his head. "Or well, just compliment it a bit and it might make your lives easier. I need some help from your family with the teleporters, but I'll just grab someone from your intelligence office."

"Good luck," Thea said as she quickly scribbled a letter.

"What we can do is limited, but don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. I don't think anyone over at the Intelligence Bureau will cause any trouble for you, but take this letter just in case."

Zac nodded and left, and he walked over to the building that housed the intelligence department of the Marshall Clan. Charles Marshall immediately met up with him, and Zac couldn't help but snort when he saw that he looked at the

shadows with some worry. The demon had apparently left quite an impression during his last visit to the Bureau.

“Ogras isn’t here,” Zac said with a smile. “I need to be teleported to Main Paris without anyone finding out.”

“Main Paris...?” Charles repeated with a calculating look. “You’re not...?”

“I’m not planning on taking out the New World Government,” Zac snorted as he handed him Thea’s letter. “At least not yet. I am looking for the base of operations of the cultists. You don’t happen to know anything else?”

Charles’ eyes lit up, and he quickly took out a stack of documents. He quickly provided a rundown of their findings, and much of it was similar to what Julia had said. The old spy had singled out three possible locations, one of which was the same uncharted territory as Julia pointed out.

A second one was in the middle of a vast marshland that spread out to the south of the heartlands of Pangea. There were some settlements there, but only at the edge. The place was swarming with hostile wildlife, the worst of which being the millions of massive mosquitoes that could suck a person dry in a second.

The high humidity of the area had turned the core of the swamp essentially uncharted as well, which was why Charles believed that an incursion could hide there without notice. The pillars weren’t lighthouses that could be seen from tens of miles after all, and Zac had only spotted the undead one through the miasmic haze when he was almost upon it.

The final spot was a remote area to the far north, an inhospitable world of ice north of the even most distant of settlements. It was the least-likely place in Charles’ opinion, but he had scribbled a note that said that they might like the hostile environment to temper themselves since they were fire-attributed.

Zac went over the documents as Charles read Thea’s letter, and Zac felt some relief that it probably wouldn’t take too long to deal with the cultists. He personally felt the northern

location was a long shot, which meant he only needed two trips to find his target. The fact that both Julia and Charles had landed on the same spot was a good indicator as well, as both had access to vast, but different, intelligence networks.

“Inheritance,” Charles muttered from the side. “May I ask if this is a real inheritance like the ones described in our library?”

“It is. A peak D-Grade inheritance. I have a few of them, and I gave Thea one slot. Keep this to yourself though,” Zac nodded

“Certainly, though I need to share it with Henry. May I ask if there is there danger?” the thin old man asked with worry.

It was easy to forget that this kindly old man was a ruthless assassin who had murdered a family member for breaking the family rules, rather than a doting grandpa worrying for Thea’s safety.

“Some. She can give up though if it gets too hard,” Zac shrugged. “I’ll take a look at the place near Main Paris first. Do you have a method to take me there?”

“You appeared in Westfort with a disguise. Are you able to take on specific faces with your skill?” Charles asked.

“I can, but it doesn’t hold up to scrutiny too well,” Zac nodded.

“That’s fine,” Charles said as he started tapping on a tablet before he handed it over.

“This is an informant of mine who has access to Main Paris. If that doesn’t work we also control a remote town roughly half a day’s flight from the city. It’s up to you which you want to utilize,” the old man said.

Zac eventually decided to forgo his plan of going through New Paris in his search for the Cultist Incursion. After seeing the location of the Marshall-controlled town on the map, he felt it would only delay him a couple of hours. There were a lot more mountains to cross going from that direction, but it didn’t matter to Zac who had a flying treasure.

This way he was less likely to tip off any infiltrators hiding in New Paris or getting spotted when flying above a trafficked route.

“I’ll go through the smaller town,” Zac said as he stood up. “One more thing. The remaining Invaders gained the ability to use teleporters the moment their Incursion was closed. You might want to increase security going forward. Who knows what a bunch of zealots trapped on earth will do.”

“We have been preparing for this for some time,” Charles nodded. “We’ll slowly ramp up our measures over the next day to not cause any alarm.”

Zac nodded in agreement and things from there went quite smoothly. Zac was led by a nondescript family member of the Marshall Clan to the village called Peyraud. It was apparently a small French town with less than a thousand citizens that had turned to a minor stronghold.

It had survived until now because it was just outside of the hunting range of the mutated birds of the mountain range. The ferocious flocks hunted everything else though, which had scared off any stronger beasts from the area.

Of course, Zac knew that this place would be overrun in a year at most, like most places that only survived thanks to a lack of natural predator. The birds would sooner or later evolve, which in turn would increase their appetite and hunting grounds. These villagers were lucky enough that they at least had managed to get a Teleporter, allowing them to flee before they got gobbled up.

Zac didn’t immediately jump onto his flying treasure but rather kept running through a dense forest for an hour until he was far away from any human activity. Only then did he take out the emerald leaf and set off for the massive mountain range. He quickly understood why people hadn’t ventured past the mountains until now. They were simply enormous.

Something this big was hard to properly gauge, but he guessed that they were a match to the Himalayan mountain ranges of old Earth. However, these mountains were made from an

almost pristine white rock, making Zac believe they came from one of the other planets.

The second reason why people avoided the mountains soon presented itself as well, as hundreds of small spots rose from a mountain peak as Zac approached. The distant spots quickly grew in size until Zac realized that some of the incoming birds were just enormous. There were some with a wingspan of just a couple of meters, but the larger ones looked like they could snatch up a fighter jet in their claws.

Zac didn't want to get embroiled in an aerial battle at this juncture, so he immediately urged the leaf to take evasive maneuvers. But the mutated eagles had no problem matching his speed as they intercepted. A piercing cry suddenly exploded in his ears with enough power to make him dizzy, but he quickly righted himself just in time to see a bird bursting forward with shocking speed.

It seemed like the bird had activated some inherent skill, as it appeared right in front of him in almost an instant. A light flashed among the clouds as Verun was unleashed, and a rain of blood followed as the eagle was chopped in two. The massive bird had been on the threshold of reaching the E-Grade, but it was cut apart like paper in the face of the upgraded Spirit Tool.

More importantly, the weapon actually emitted a primordial aura that made the eagles stop in their tracks. It allowed him to increase the distance as the flying treasure was pushed to its limits. However, their territorial instincts soon won over their primal fear for the aura the axe emitted, and they swooped toward Zac like kamikaze pilots.

Zac could only sigh in annoyance as he started pushing Cosmic Energy toward **[Chop]**, but he suddenly stopped himself and moved the energy toward the fractal on his left arm instead. He still hadn't tested **[Rapturous Divide]**, but wasn't this the perfect opportunity? He was still just at the edge of the mountain range, far from the supposed location of the Incursion.

However, as he pushed Cosmic Energy into the fractal he realized a problem; the skill refused to activate.

Chapter 522: The Abyss and Arcadia

The massive eagles soared ever closer, but Zac didn't panic as he opened his skill menu while fleeing from the flock. He had already looked at the description, but he wanted to use it as a clue to what might be the problem.

[E] Rapturous Divide - Proficiency: Early. Between the Abyss and Arcadia is an endless chasm. Upgradeable.

The [E] in front of the skill was unique, as the other skills were without any tag. However, that wasn't important right now, but rather finding out why he couldn't use the skill. His eyes bore into the text like he was trying to see any hidden truths behind them, and his mind furiously worked to put together the clues so far.

"Split life and death...The Abyss and Arcadia," Zac muttered with a frown as he tried to understand the fractal, and something suddenly clicked.

He quickly pushed Cosmic Energy into **[Chop]** as well, and a terrifyingly large fractal blade grew out from **[Verun's Bite]**. He was still only able to maintain a stable edge that was around 10 meters, whereas anything larger would start to destabilize after a few seconds.

However, a change quickly spread out through the blade as a powerful twinned surge of energy shot into the fractal edge from his left arm. The shaky blade immediately stabilized before it started to transform. The blade grew even larger and more robust as a new set of overlapping fractals covered its length, one golden and one black.

Zac felt a completely new connection to the blade like it was part of himself, and he finally understood what his new skill would do. He infused the massive edge with the Fragment of the Coffin before he swung it in a wide horizontal arc toward the hundreds of enormous eagles that were still bearing down on them.

The evasive maneuvers while he tried to figure out his skills had incited blood-lust in the flock, and their eyes shone with a sinister light as they flapped their wings with enough force to cause a storm. The fractal edge didn't shot toward the beasts like how **[Chop]** usually worked, but a black wave instead spread out from it as the edge itself turned into a lustrous gold.

The wave was extremely swift, and it covered a large number of the eagles before they even had a chance to react.

However, there was no scene of carnage that followed the swing. A few eagles screamed in pain as they were assaulted by the corrosive components of the Fragment of the Coffin, but there was blood raining the mountain walls this time. The eagles were instead shrouded in darkness, like Zac had thrown a can of black paint rather than a ferocious attack at them.

The odd scene wasn't surprising to Zac, as he had only set up the first half of the attack. The air screamed as he swung the golden fractal edge once more, and another wave shot out, this one looking like a wave of sunlight breaking through the clouds. The fractal edge still stayed attached to **[Verun's Bite]**, but it crumbled shortly after the second wave had left it.

The golden wave passed through the flock of birds as well, and a shocking change occurred. A clear line ran straight across the flock, with the upper side only holding the golden sheen, and the lower side drenched in darkness. It reminded Zac of his bout of inspiration inside his cultivation cave where he split the two conflicting energies apart, though on a far grander scale.

The odd scene only lasted for an instant before the horizon cracked, the dividing line between gold and black turning into a crack in space itself. Two opposite shockwaves spread out, one toward the sky and one toward the ground. Hundreds of

birds fell apart mid-flight, looking like they had been cut apart by a laser.

The two shockwaves caused a cascading halo to emerge on the horizon, and Zac froze in awe as he looked at the spectacle. The golden wave had turned into what looked like a massive sunset that spread for over a hundred meters. Even more amazing, Zac felt like he could hear Buddhist hymns coming from a paradise he could barely discern through the golden haze.

The golden sun was matched by a black opposite, the two halves forming an almost perfect circle. The hair on Zac's arms stood on end as he turned his attention to the darker half, feeling like he was looking at the netherworld itself. Distant wails of lost soul rattled in his mind, and Zac felt like someone or something was staring back at him from within the darkness.

The effect only lasted for a few seconds before it dissipated, leaving a sky clear of any aggressive birds. The attack hadn't hit every eagle, but it looked like a couple of them had been swallowed by half-suns, not even leaving a corpse like their bisected brethren. Zac nodded in appreciation as he kept flying, thankful he had done this test on the outer side of the mountain range.

[Rapturous Divide] was a lot flashier than he had expected, and he could only pray that no lizardmen scouts were hiding in this remote part of the mountain range. Of course, he knew that he had pushed the skill pretty hard as well, and he realized now that he didn't actually need to use a 100-meter blade to create it.

He could have activated the skill by adding a small half-meter edge over **[Verun's Bite]** as well, which would allow him to use the skill in a one-on-one melee battle.

The skill took advantage of the opposing natures of life and death. The two were each other's opposites, and this fact was utilized to create a divide in space itself. It was a high-concept empowerment that would turn most defenses useless, just like a spatial tear would. If he had this skill when fighting the

battleroach king or the dragon he wouldn't have been so hard-pressed to wound them, as he doubted they were able to stop a tear in space itself.

Such a divide might not completely be what he looked for when it came to his insights to his cultivation path, but Zac felt it didn't matter too much as it was just a single skill. Not every action he took needed to be an echo of his insights. It was still based on life and death, which better than most of his other skills, proving that his new class moved in the right direction.

Zac looked inward for a second, and he was somewhat disappointed to see that he had lost connection to the Skill fractal, just like when his other skills were on cooldown. It looked like he wouldn't be able to shoot out a rapid barrage of space-splitting life-and-death waves. Then again, that wasn't really on the table in any case, as that single strike had cost him almost 10 percent of his total Cosmic Energy reserves.

At least it didn't seem to be a long cooldown skill like **[Deforestation]**, which could only be used every 12 hours or so. He kept a close look at the fractal as he flew between the mountain peaks, and could soon confirm that **[Rapturous Divide]** could be used again after three minutes.

Three minutes wasn't bad, but not great either. Most intense fights felt quite long, but they were usually over in less time than that. However, it would be a great addition in prolonged battles, providing a repeatable destructive boost to just shooting out an infinite number of fractal edges. However, he still didn't use the skill at the next group of predatory birds that assaulted him, and instead opted to take them out with **[Chop]**.

The pack of eagles that Zac annihilated earlier wasn't the only one, but most likely a single roost out of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the mountain range. His flight through the towering peaks quickly turned into an endless battle, where the skyline was covered by frenzied birds defending their mountain.

Most of the birds were F-Grade, but the occasional early E-grade alpha appeared as well. The feather of the evolved birds

was like steel, partly absorbing the strikes of a normal [**Chop**] even though [**Verun's Bite**] had been upgraded. Zac realized that this wasn't the fault of his Spirit Tool though, but rather on the skill itself.

The skill had definitely become stronger with the upgrade of the axe, but the effect was only partial. It seemed like a simple F-Grade skill wouldn't be able to keep up with the upgrades of an E-Grade axe. He sighed in disappointment when he realized that his main skill would peter out into obsolescence sooner or later.

However, the skill was still useful, not only as a delivery method of his E-grade skill, but on its own. The skill itself might not be able to outright kill these powerful birds, but it was another matter entirely when he infused the blades with the Fragment of the Axe. One silver flash after another lit up the pristine mountain peaks as desolate cries resounded, each wail marking the end of a king of the sky.

An ever-increasing amount of energy surged toward the turbid node in his left leg, and Zac realized that he would be able to burst open a node in a day or two if he kept going like this. However, Zac slowly started to look for some way to get out of this situation. It felt like no matter how many beasts he killed, there were still more and more that appeared in the skyline all around him.

It did allow him to get acquainted with his new skill though, and now and then a group of birds would be split apart as the white mountain wall was lit up in golden splendor. He quickly figured out that his maximum limit of the skill was a 150-meter spatial tear, while he actually realized there was a lower limit as well at 75 centimeters.

The cost of the activation wasn't quite linear though. Just activating the skill was the cause of over half of the energy expenditure, while the length of the tear added an almost linear expenditure.

The strength of the attack was based on the length of the tear as well, with the shorter tear unleashing a more intense wave of destruction. However, the shortest tear was at best twice as

strong as the largest one, meaning that the massive divide wasn't all that weak compared to the one-on-one strike.

However, the hours passed and Zac couldn't take it any longer. He was starting to tire even when fighting while holding a D-Grade Nexus Crystal for energy restoration. He flew into a narrow canyon and jumped off the leaf mid-flight, immediately taking out an Illusion Array Disk the moment he landed. He shot forward a few hundred meters with the help of **[Loamwalker]** the next second, hiding inside a cave.

A sleeping bear yowled in surprise at the unwelcome intruder, but it was quickly cut in two before it could warn the frenzied eagles that flew back and forth outside. Their screeches caused the walls of the cave to shake as their feathers carved deep grooves in the mountain walls, but they couldn't find the target no matter how hard they looked.

They finally left after taking out their frustrations on a group of poor mountain goats who failed to blend in with the white rocks, allowing Zac to breathe out. He wasn't really worried about being overrun by the bloodthirsty birds, but rather that he was causing too big a ruckus. He had passed most of the mountain range by now, and he was closing in on the uncharted territory on the other side.

Thousands of massive eagles clumping around a foreign object in the sky while screeching at the top of their lungs would probably be spotted from miles away, and he wanted to retain at least some of the element of surprise. The birds were gone, but Zac didn't immediately move out, and instead sat down to recuperate his lost Cosmic Energy for a few hours.

Only when he was completely topped off again did he move out. This time he didn't take out his flying treasure though but instead tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible between the mountains. There were pretty much not a single beast barring his path down on in the canyon, which wasn't surprising considering what lived on the mountain tops. It allowed Zac to make good speed, and he reached the end of the mountain range just an hour later.

And what met his eyes was an endless primordial jungle.

Chapter 523: Jungle

It turned out that on the other side of the expansive mountain range was a basin, a vast depression in the landscape. It looked like something left behind by a meteor millions of years ago and it almost felt like he had entered a different climate zone as warm winds wafted onto his face. The humidity had gained a huge spike on this side of the mountains as well, like all the moisture was trapped in the basin.

That wasn't surprising though as massive waterfalls could be spotted to the west, no doubt stemming from the inland sea Julia mentioned before. He would have turned completely clammy in seconds if it wasn't for his improved constitution. Judging by how healthy the enormous plantlife looked there was no doubt a lot of rain as well, perhaps as the clouds would get stopped by the mountains.

Zac still couldn't spot any Incursion pillar yet, but he had a good feeling about this place. First of all, the energy was quite dense in the area. The second reason was simple as well; there were a lot of fire-attuned energies in the air even though there was so much humidity. Zac first thought there might be a fire-crystal mine beneath the ground, but he soon found the real source of the energies.

He could barely discern a volcano in the distance, standing roughly in the middle of the basin. It was pretty far away, and he guessed that it would take half a day getting there on foot even if he kept a high pace. Smoke rose from the top, proving it was active, and it looked like it was continuously releasing energies out into the forest around it.

It really looked like a pretty good starting spot for a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao. A volcano in an energy-dense valley was probably a treasure trove for a fire-based force. Better yet, the humidity had created a large amount of low-hanging clouds that limited his vision. It wasn't nearly as

dense as the clouds of miasma in the Dead Zone, but it would do just fine in hiding an Incursion pillar if you were far away.

Especially if the cultists helped improve the effect somehow.

The volcano spread small amounts of fire-energies across the whole jungle, but when Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] there was an odd sight. The whole jungle lit up in a dim red glow from his special sight, but the volcano itself was utterly devoid of energy. Something close to the volcano was either hiding the energies or absorbing them.

The clammy haze thankfully allowed Zac some protection as he took out his flying treasure once more. He honestly would have preferred to travel by foot, but he had a mission to complete. His desire wasn't about safety or stealth though, but something more primal. It felt like the forest was calling out to him somehow.

It wasn't as strong as when he had come close to great natural treasures like the Cherry or the Tree of Ascension, but the feeling was similar. It felt like the forest itself had gained a semblance of spirituality that resonated with his body, or perhaps more accurately his class. He felt like he would be able to progress both his nature-based skills and his Dao in this place a lot more efficiently than even staying in his cultivation cave.

Progressing skills wasn't necessarily about energy density, but rather about opportunity and insight. So secluded cultivation might be good to improve some aspects of his strength, but skills were not one of them. A few of his skills, like [**Forester's Constitution**] and [**Loamwalker**] were still stuck at Late Proficiency, and this might be a good place to practice those skills.

However, Zac knew that would have to wait until he dealt with the cultists, so he set off on top of his flying treasure, heading straight for the volcano.

He kept a much lower altitude than normal this time, staying close to the treetops in hopes to blend in with the enormous leaves of the tree crowns. A roar suddenly echoed out across the area as a five-meter panther jumped up straight at him, but

Zac killed it with one swift swing. Its carcass joined the mountain of high-grade meat in his Cosmos Sack before even a second had passed as Zac whizzed past the area.

It was no wonder that the desolate mountain range could support so many birds, the jungle below was simply littered with beasts. Everything from ten-meter snakes to insects as large as dogs tried to strike at him as Zac whizzed through their domains, and the area was drenched in a constant clamor of thousands of different animal calls.

The beasts unfortunately weren't very powerful even though many of them were quite large. The birds might have already hunted anything that could be a threat to them, or perhaps it was the cultists' doing if this indeed was their hidden base of operations. It was even possible that the stronger beasts were smart enough to figure out that he wasn't some tasty morsel drifting around on a wayward leaf.

A streak of flames suddenly shot toward him out of nowhere, forcing Zac to quickly swivel out of the way. It pushed past him toward the skies and only ran out of steam after having flown hundreds of meters. Zac first thought there was some beast spewing fire at him, but he quickly spotted an inconspicuous tower among the tall palms, colored so that it would blend in with the surroundings.

Another fireball soared just past him, and Zac felt the familiar aura of the zealots from the golden flames. Zac shot out a **[Chop]** and the tower crumbled, its defensive shield utterly incapable of withstanding a middle-grade fragment. He was quite happy that he had probably found the right place, but it would take him half an hour before he reached the volcano even if he pushed the leaf to its limits.

There was no way he would be able to launch a surprise strike at the cultists any longer, but there was only so much you could prepare in thirty minutes. They should still be unable to utilize any teleportation arrays, making it impossible for them to recall any forces from the Mystic Realm. Unless their Incursion spawned right on top of one of the entrances they wouldn't be able to return in time.

Zac quickly scoured the surroundings, and he soon realized there actually was a neat perimeter of similar towers forming a circle around the volcano. However, Zac felt that these things weren't meant to deal with cultivators, but rather to scare off the flocks of birds. They would be almost useless to deal with forces on the ground with the thick foliage blocking their fireballs.

If that was the case it might still take some time before they realized something was wrong, but Zac wouldn't hold his breath. The cultists were crazy, but not stupid. They should be fully aware that he was coming for them sooner or later, as they were the last invaders remaining on Earth.

Deep thuds echoed out from his chest as his heart started beating rapidly in anticipation of the upcoming battle, but Zac took a few calming breaths to steady himself as he started to fly toward the volcano again. He quickly realized that the various sounds of the jungle were steadily growing few and far in between, like the beasts knew better than to stay close to the mountain in the middle of the jungle.

Zac kept his eye peeled for any hints of the Incursion, and his eyes lit up when he saw a shimmering glow as he started to make his way around the volcano. He had figured that the pillar would either have to be inside the volcano itself or hidden behind it, and it looked like it was the latter.

A minute later the whole pillar was on full display, rising into the clouds right behind the plumes of smoke coming from the volcano. The cultists were full-fledged lunatics, but Zac had to admit they had a flair for architecture. The back of the mountain was lit up with splashes of gold and red, and grand temples and mansions built from the pristine white stones seemed to compete with each other in how elaborate their designs were.

The Incursion Pillar itself started right at the foot of the mountain, while the town itself was comprised of an ascending series of tiered structures ran halfway up the volcano. It did look a bit odd, as the most important structure was essentially located furthest out, while it was the temples that took the best spots at the highest positions of the mountain.

However, the buildings only reached halfway up the volcano, after which they abruptly stopped. Above that was only one thing; a gargantuan rune of three lines. The three simple wavy lines were the insignia of the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the huge rune emitted a pressure that even Zac could feel from the distance. The lines apparently represented The Heavens, The System, and The Dao; their concept of divinity.

The scene reminded Zac of the consecrated mountain that Abbot Everlasting Peace lived on, where prayer and conviction had brought forth a true power. It was a reminder of how contradictory a force the Church of Everlasting Dao was. Triv had talked about them at great length over the past week, seemingly taking real pleasure in causing trouble the enemies of the Undead Empire.

It was more correct to call the Church of Everlasting Dao two entwined forces rather than one single unit, with one being the fanatics and the other the body-merchants.

Some considered the fanatics as just a front, but the massive rune was a stark reminder that there were quite a few members who wholeheartedly believed in the Divinity of the System. Mount Everlasting Peace had been consecrated over a thousand years to gain spirituality upon the integration, but this mountain was coming close to emitting the same holiness after just a year.

The confusing layout of the town itself made Zac a bit unsure of how to proceed though. Normally he would bash through a wall and defeat the armies, and finally corral the remaining enemies toward the Incursion pillar. But the Nexus Hub was already within his reach unless the open-aired temple surrounding the red-and-gold pillar contained some hidden safeguards.

It felt a bit too simple. Abby had already explained the rules of taking over towns, and it worked the same with Incursions. If he walked over and claimed the Nexus Hub a quest would start where the invaders had a short time window to rebuff him before their invasion ended by default. That was why the Incursion Leaders seldom left their base of operations.

But seeing the pillar unguarded like this made him feel there was some sort of trap, which was only reinforced by the fact that he still hadn't spotted a single person so far. The whole town looked abandoned, like they already had fled before he arrived. However, there was no way that a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao would simply pack up and leave without a fight.

Besides, there was no prompt from the system that the Incursion had failed, which meant that the Head Priest was still around somewhere. Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] to see if any suspicious energy movements surrounded the Nexus Hub, but the pillar itself drowned out any potential clues. It almost blinded him from how much energies it contained, and he was immediately forced to look away.

Indecision gnawed at him for a few seconds, but he eventually made his decision and instead shot toward the largest temple, a resplendent structure placed right beneath the enormous rune. It was a massive construction with spires well over a hundred meters high, each of them holding a radiant fire.

In fact, every single building had a golden fire burning at the roof, though the ones at the main temple were quite a bit larger than the others. Zac chose to target the temple because those spires reminded him of the array towers at the undead fortress. He could always claim the Nexus Hub after destroying the temples and the gargantuan rune, which would hopefully preempt any booby traps the cultists had left for him.

The leaf made a detour around the pillar before it made a beeline for the temple, and there was finally some activity from the cultists' side. A hundred warriors streamed out of the gates of the temple, seemingly rearing for battle. Just a hundred warriors wouldn't even slow Zac for more than a few seconds, but he still activated [**Nature's Barrier**].

Zac felt that there was no way that this was all these guys had prepared, and his suspicions were quickly proven right as hundreds of fiery globes moved to intercept him. It was the braziers on top of the houses all along the mountainside that rose into the air, creating a beautiful spectacle.

The air screamed as Zac whizzed back and forth, dodging the incendiary attacks. But there were just too many of them. One projectile after another slammed into the leaves he had conjured, setting them on fire. It quickly turned Zac's whole vision into a golden inferno. He lost a steady stream of energy just to keep the initial salvo at bay.

The emerald shield surrounding the flying treasure was still holding on just fine, but Zac knew it was just a matter of time before a breach happened. The emerald leaf didn't seem to be made for anything but travel. There were no offensive arrays, but just decent set defensive options. It wouldn't hold for too long against a barrage of this magnitude.

Zac infused the leaf with the Fragment of the Bohdi, and it blasted toward the town with regained momentum. The intensity of the barrage just increased as he closed in on the temple, but he finally was close enough for his purposes. A hundred-meter fractal blade reached toward the sky as Zac raised [**Verun's Bite**], preparing for a vertical swing.

Two streams of opposing forces crawled up along the blade, reinforcing it and allowing it to grow another fifty percent as it was colored in gold and black. The flying treasure stopped in its tracks a few hundred meters away from the temple, and Zac pushed as much of his Fragment of the Coffin as he could into the towering blade.

It felt like the world split apart as the blade swung down, unleashing a wave of unadulterated darkness toward the temple and the top of the volcano itself. The attack passed through the barrage of golden flames like they weren't even there before it covered the radiant temple in a desolate gloom.

It was time to send these cultists to a true paradise.

Chapter 524: Fanaticism

The zealots seemed enraged rather than wounded after being drenched in the darkness of [**Rapturous Divide**]. It was like they took it as a personal affront that he had shrouded their temple and part of the massive rune in darkness.

They all started emitting flames that actually seemed to counteract the darkness, and Zac's eyes widened in surprise when he saw that even the temple itself seemed capable to resist the effect of his skill. Nothing like this had happened when he fought the massive eagles before, but they were just dumb birds after all.

It was naïve to think that there was no way to counteract his newly acquired skill, and Zac knew he couldn't waste any time. He had already tested this before. The separate clouds didn't hold any individual power, they were only useful if they worked together. If the cultists managed to destroy the first wave before he managed to release the second one, the skill would have been wasted.

He hurriedly swung his golden blade in a second arc, the fractal edge crumbling into motes of light as a second wave shot out, this one reinforced by the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A few cultists welcomed the golden wave as they peppered Zac with a barrage of flame-based attacks, but most seemed to understand that something was wrong. They immediately used movement skills to get out of the way, clearly treasuring their lives higher than the well-being of their temple. Zac didn't care about that though, as his main goal wasn't some weak footsoldiers.

Zac looked at the golden wave flying toward the mountain with anticipation as he conjured another set of leaves [**Nature's Barrier**] to block out the attacks that still tried to bring him out of the sky. However, there was still a sense of

unease lingering in the back of his mind. The problem wasn't that he felt pressure from the large number of attacks, but rather that it all felt extremely haphazard for such a powerful force.

A few simple fireball arrays and a hundred soldiers from a force that was a scourge known across the whole Multiverse? He had taken out far more than that during the invasion of Port Atwood, and everything indicated that there should be thousands of cultists remaining on Earth. What was going on?

Zac's first instinct when he saw how empty the emptiness of the town was that this place actually wasn't the incursion, but rather one of their bases. But it was hard to argue with the massive pillar in red and gold that rose into the sky behind him.

Did the cultists perhaps conduct multiple simultaneous invasions on Earth, allowing them to discard all pillars but one? Their go-to method was to simply snatch the Incursion opportunity from other forces as far as he could tell, and perhaps they sometimes doubled up by mistake.

However, all that would have to wait as the golden wave pushed into the temple shrouded in darkness, causing the whole mountain to rumble. Screams of fury and grief echoed across the mountainside as the whole temple was cleanly split into two, and the opposing shockwaves toppled the four spires in one go.

Zac only managed to glimpse the opulent decor of the temple before it was utterly reduced to rubble, and a cascading wave of destruction followed in its wake as massive pieces of white boulders and raw rocks started falling down the side of the volcano, smashing everything in its path. It started to look like a mountain slide that kept growing in severity, and even Zac was a bit shocked by how effective his attack was.

Of course, his success was aided by the fact that the temple itself was unaided by any defensive arrays, apart from the natural aura that seemed to resist the darkness of his first wave. Zac figured that the swing wouldn't have been

anywhere near as effective against the undead fortress and its sturdy formations.

The large rune remained though, and Zac started to launch a series of Fractal edges at it, all infused with the Fragment of the Axe. A few zealots tried everything within their power to stop him, but they were like flies to Zac who stood far up in the air, launching his punishment upon the lands like a god of death.

His hunch about the rune was quickly proven right as it was far better protected against strikes compared to the rest of the buildings. A fiery aura burst out from the three wavy lines and rebuffed the fractal blades, turning them into cinders before they could bite into the engraving itself.

However, Zac wasn't discouraged, and his arm turned into a blur that rapidly launched blade after blade without exhaustion. What he was doing was high sacrilege judging by how pissed-off the zealots down on the ground appeared. One had actually burst into flames and exploded out of sheer anger, and Zac figured that if this couldn't draw out the Head Priest, then nothing would.

He still moved about in random patterns in the sky as he whittled down the energy of the rune, afraid that the Zealots were setting up a death beam or something similar. However, he was completely left to his own devices, apart from the occasional fireball coming from the few still-standing houses of the mountainside.

Blind faith ultimately wasn't an opponent to a sharp edge, and the three runes finally ran out of its mysterious energy, allowing Zac to turn the whole section of the volcano into a broken mess full of jagged scars. The three runes were replaced with a hundred cracks in less than thirty seconds, and part of the wall even collapsed into the center of the volcano, allowing a stream of magma to escape the volcano and crawl down toward the Incursion Pillar.

The scene made Zac's brows furrow as he had no idea what would happen if the Nexus Hub was swallowed by magma. Would the Incursion end, or would he become unable to claim

the crystal? He looked around to get an indication of what was going on from the remaining invaders, but they weren't much of any help. Most of them had simply slumped down on the ground with tears running down their eyes, looking at the destruction with despair.

Zac felt a small sense of relief, as they looked utterly incapable of mounting any sort of trap. Had they really given up on this place? Didn't they care about going back home, instead focusing all their resources on the Mystic Realm? However, he suddenly noticed something off; a group of nine cultists in high-quality robes that shot toward the incursion pillar with impressive speed.

He hadn't seen them before as far as he could tell, meaning they perhaps had been waiting for some opportunity to strike. Zac hesitated what to do as he saw their escape, but he felt he finally couldn't wait any longer as he saw the cultists take out nine massive fiery crystals. They looked a lot like the Nexus Hub itself, except for the weak fire-attuned energies they emitted. The cultists wasted no time before they started inserting them into a set of grooves in the open-aired temple that encircled the Incursion.

Were they summoning someone? Or something?

Nothing good would come from letting the leaders complete their ritual, and Zac shot forward in an instant, putting away the leaf midair as he soared toward the pillar. A few of the cultists tried to impede his trajectory, some even sacrificing themselves by blowing up. But Zac was unstoppable as he slammed into the ground right next to the pillar. He immediately destroyed the closest fire crystal with a swing of his axe, simultaneously killing the priest who fiddled with it.

He quickly transformed [**Love's Bond**] into its shield form before the swing even finished its trajectory, expecting a massive eruption of flames to swallow him when the crystal cracked. However, nothing of the sort happened. A bunch of shards flew in all directions, accompanied by some fiery dust that spread out like a small cloud. Zac made sure not to inhale it even though he didn't sense any danger from the stuff.

However, a sense of unease grew as the remaining eight priests seemed to work on inscribing the crystals even faster. Zac pushed his speed to the limit, moving like a tornado in a circle around the incursion. The eight priests and their pillars were destroyed in short order, allowing Zac to finally breathe out in relief.

But the creeping sense of danger only increased rather than subsided, and Zac quickly jumped up on the roof of the temple to get a better vantage.

A second group of cultists he hadn't sensed at all until now had somehow emerged among the rubble, but none of them cared about Zac in the slightest. They instead knelt toward the mountain peak, or perhaps toward the rune that Zac had destroyed. Zac didn't understand what they were doing, but he couldn't help but get a sinking feeling.

This was all too shady, and he would rather retreat for a bit and reassess the situation than stay for whatever these guys had planned. He ignored the Nexus Hub that hovered just fifty meters away, afraid that touching it was the key to their trap. Zac instead took out his flying treasure once more. However, his eyes widened in alarm when he infused it with his mental command as the emerald leaf was utterly unresponsive.

It felt like he was standing on some random palm leaf snatched from the jungle rather than a treasure inscribed and empowered by some unknown master from a greater sector than Zecia. He tried swapping the crystals that were already provided as a power source, but it didn't improve the situation at all.

Zac could pretty much confirm that something was wrong now, and he immediately started running for his life. But he only managed to activate **[Loamwalker]** once, barely getting a hundred meters away from the Incursion toward the jungle, before the ground started heaving to the point that he was thrown off his feet and unable to regain his footing.

Some fear finally started to set in and he tried to scramble toward the comparable safety of the jungle. But an apocalyptic explosion erupted behind him, forcing him to look back. The

whole sky had been replaced by fire and molten rock as the volcano exploded. Not erupted, but literally exploded.

Pieces of the volcano as large as skyscrapers flew through the air as though they were weightless, soaring toward the distant edges of the basin. Only the foot of the mountain remained, releasing an endless amount of lava. A massive shockwave slammed into him before he even had a chance to erect any defenses, and Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood as he felt some of his bones were broken.

If he was in such a bad shape this far away from the epicenter, then there was no need to talk about the cultists who had knelt in prayer. They were either ashes or meat paste by now, swallowed by the blast.

Zac didn't know whether he should feel lucky that the eruption had contained such force that no rocks were falling anywhere near the volcano, but he quickly understood that he had bigger problems as the rumbles beneath him just kept increasing in intensity. Just the vibrations alone would probably have killed a weaker cultivator, and even Zac felt his wounds worsen by the second.

But even that wasn't the scariest thing going on right now. It was rather the three golden waves that slowly rose from within the lava, carried upward by a pillar of golden flames. An intense wave of divinity, far eclipsing that of the simple inscription on the wall, radiated from the enormous insignia, and Zac felt tears running down his face from just gazing at it. Looking at the three lines truly felt like gazing upon God himself.

If God was an entity of endless fury and destruction.

Zac's mind shook as his danger-sense screamed bloody murder. Just a minute ago he had felt like a god of slaughter as he dismantled the rune and half the town from the safety of his leaf, but he realized how valuable that feeling had been. He was not a god, he could barely be considered an ant compared to the real powers of the universe.

The golden insignia finally stabilized up in the sky, drowning the whole basin in its golden splendor. At least the rumblings

had subsided somewhat, allowing Zac to get back on his feet. There was no hesitation in his mind as he activated **[Loamwalker]** to get the hell away from there.

However, he only managed to flee less than a hundred meters before a scorching pain enveloped him, prompting him to fall over once more. He shot out a series of fractal edges in each direction while his eyes wildly looked for the source of the threat, but he only cut through empty air. His harried mind scrambled to figure out what was going on, and he quickly figured out the reason for the pain.

It was that dust he had been covered in earlier, the innocuous substance that had been released from the crystals. A moment ago they felt like just some golden sand that had covered him as he destroyed the array crystals, but they weren't so innocuous any longer. They now radiated a restrictive force that made it look like he was on fire.

Even worse, the flames also formed an intangible bond that ran between his body and the temple behind him, like a leash made of energy. It connected him to the cloud of golden sand that was still spread around the broken crystals like a fetter. Or perhaps it was more apt to say that the light was connected to the Incursion itself, as he saw that the flames had merged with the energy pillar itself.

He had been tricked.

Chapter 525: Sigil

Zac finally understood why the cultists had acted so weirdly until now. A few of them had simply been sacrificial pawns for Zac to kill in hopes that it would make him lower his guard. The cultists utilized the fact that everyone thought of them as insane zealots with no regard for their lives. They were ruthless against others, but perhaps even more-so against themselves.

But the real method to deal with him was obviously not the meager defense in front of the main temple, and the inscription in the mountain wall was probably just a red herring as well. The real threat was brooding inside the lava itself, its presence obscured by the huge rune and the natural fire-attuned energies of the volcano itself.

That only left the issue of the nine flame crystals. Zac had immediately remembered the invasion of Port Atwood the other week when he saw them setting up their “array”. The invaders had set up a very similar constellation back then to summon the set of meteors. Nine clergymen set themselves ablaze in a circle around him, just like these ones planted the crystals in a circle around the incursion pillar.

Were the actions back on the island all a sacrifice to trick him into destroying those crystals?

The utter lack of powerful arrays had also made him lower his guard somewhat after he had destroyed everything that looked like a threat. But the golden insignia in the sky radiated a terrifying pressure, even eclipsing the force of Adriel’s blast that was powered by four array towers.

Figuring out how they had actually managed to create the massive avatar in the sky obviously wasn’t as important as getting the hell out of here though. He activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] to get a hint of how the burning fetters worked, and it

was mostly fire-attuned as expected. However, there was also that other odd energy mixed withing; the energy of conviction.

The golden fetter seemed to be held together by the faith of these zealots, and Zac long knew their conviction was as strong as it could get. Zac growled with frustration as he tried cutting the bindings apart, but **[Verun's Bite]** just flew straight through the flames without affecting it at all. Infusing the blade with his Dao Fragments didn't make a lick of difference either, it was even more intangible than the ghosts he had fought until now.

He tried ignoring the pain and keep running away next, and he was soon screaming on top of his lungs as he stretched the flames to their limits. He was hoping to snap the fetter with brute force, but the pain quickly became too much to bear even for him, forcing him to move back toward the incursion pillar once more.

A bell suddenly echoed across the basin, a clear gong that seemed to reach the depths of his soul. It obviously came from the rune in the sky, like it was announcing the descent of the divine. A few cracks echoed out from his body and he coughed out another mouthful of blood, just in time to see a waterfall of fire fall out from the sky.

The flames came out of the insignia itself, and it felt like time itself slowed down as it slowly made its way toward the ground. Zac's danger sense was once again screaming at him to get away, and one glance was enough to realize that the fire that was currently moving toward him was far more dangerous than normal flames.

It was once more that power of conviction that made the flames almost seem holy, and Zac started to understand what was going on.

The Zealots had probably prayed toward the rune on the volcano since they arrived, constantly reinforcing it with the power of their conviction. The rune in turn had taken that energy and infused the golden insignia that now hung in the sky. Who knew what the end-goal was of this thing was, if Zac had not shown up to ruin their plans.

Set the whole world on fire?

Knowing the cultists it wasn't such a far-fetched idea. The body snatchers would capture the high-value corpses of Earth, after which the fanatics torched the whole planet, leaving no evidence or lingering threats behind.

Zac's mind churned as he tried to figure out a way out of the situation, and he could eventually only come up with one solution. Space split apart above him as he ran toward the incursion, once more jumping on top of the roof closest to the pillar itself.

The wooden hand of [**Nature's Punishment**] rose toward the sky, but Zac frowned when he felt the hand being rebuffed as it tried to ascend after a certain height. The three lines hummed as it released a radiant light, and Zac found himself unable to place the skill above the insignia, like it was some sacrilege that went against the order of the heavens themselves.

It immediately dashed his idea of drowning the burning sigil in a deluge of water.

With his first plan ruined he could only move to his backup plan, and he instead activated the hand where it was. The enormous emerald fractal lit up in the sky, and a torrent of water started pouring out. However, the water didn't target the insignia itself, but rather the golden flames it spewed out. He could at least deal with the flames even if he couldn't take out the root cause just yet.

A massive explosion threw Zac off the roof again as the water of [**Nature's Punishment**] was instantly turned into steam the moment it came in contact with the holy flames. The same happened to the streams that missed the flames and instead fell on the lava below, but the reaction at least managed to slow the lava's advance toward his location.

Pain racked Zac's body, but he made sure to keep the skill going as he scrambled back on his feet, pushing [**Nature's Punishment**] to its limits as he infused it with the Fragment of the Bodhi. There was thankfully no lack of water with such an

enormous lake nearby, and enough liquid to submerge a city block burst out of the fractal.

Zac breathed out in relief as he could quickly make out that the descending sea of golden flames had been stopped in its tracks, whittled down by the incessant outpouring of water. However, that didn't mean that he had won, but rather that he had entered a competition of endurance of which skill would run out of steam first.

If it was just a cultivator on the other side, then Zac would have been confident in outlasting them without breaking a sweat, but he quickly came to realize that he was dealing with something else entirely as the seconds passed. Sweat started streaming down his whole body from the heat and exertion, and he felt that he wouldn't be able to keep the skill going for much longer.

It wasn't an issue of Cosmic Energy, but simply that there was a limit to how long the skill could function. However, he could sense that the energy that the golden lines radiated had been expended by more than half, meaning it wasn't some infallible item that drew power from the heavens or something.

Only five seconds remained on [**Nature's Punishment**], and he immediately made his choice as he pushed the golden hand to readjust itself somewhat. The emerald fractal that came with the skill was pretty much fixed after having been activated, but he could tilt it a little bit, which allowed him to change the direction of the stream of water.

He didn't try to catch a larger part of the wave of flames that kept raining down from the insignia, but rather the opposite. The water instead shot straight toward the incursion pillar and himself. Zac steadied himself as a wall of water slammed into him, completely drenching him as it tried to carry him away toward the jungle.

However, Zac quickly stomped his feet into the ground with enough force to lodge himself in the rock, while doing the same with a fractal blade from [**Chop**]. He wouldn't have loved anything more than being carried far from this place, but the water was unfortunately unable to douse the fiery bonds

that kept him in place. The Incursion pillar rebuffed the water without any effort as well, and it looked like the pillar empowered the bond.

He was afraid that he would accidentally kill himself if he pushed himself too far, so he had to stay around. **[Nature's Punishment]** finally ended, and Zac saw that his efforts at least had allowed him to quell the threat of the magma flowing out from the remains of the volcano. It had already cooled into odd layers of stone that formed a towering wall where the city once stood.

However, the insignia was still going strong, and Zac scrambled to figure out what to do next. The flames weren't especially fast, but they would still reach him in just a few seconds. Wasting no time he immediately rushed into the Incursion pillar itself. A strong rebounding force was emitted from the Nexus Hub, but he had no problem pushing through.

He quickly reached the center of the pillar and he swung his axe with all the force he could muster.

A golden shield that Zac recognized all too well appeared in front of his edge just as it was about to bite into the large crystal and Zac sighed when he realized that the System prevented him from destroying the crystal itself. He hoped he would be able to free himself from the burning bond that way, but it looked like it would be impossible. However, that didn't mean that there was no reaction to his attack as a prompt appeared in front of him.

[Nexus Hub Capture Activated. Hold for 1 hour to conquer.]

Zac quickly read the screen before he waved it away. It wouldn't help him against the incoming sea of flames, but it did sound like there wouldn't be any grace period for the Invaders if he completed the capture. How would they use his Nexus Hub to return home when they were enemies?

However, he first needed to survive the incoming flames, and he looked up with consternation. He eventually decided against unleashing **[Deforestation]** in hopes of destroying the rune, wanting to save it just in case. It was still possible that

the Head Priest and his remaining generals were hiding in the vicinity somewhere, waiting for him to be weakened enough by the insignia before they struck a killing blow.

He needed to save his most powerful ace just in case.

The bronze flash would probably do the trick, but he had no way to get up there with his flying treasure being blocked out somehow. There was something else though. Zac sighed as he took out the rusty sword, and discordant wails immediately assaulted his ears.

Using the cursed sword so soon after activating it last time came with very real risks according to Catheya. A weapon like this fed on its victims, and it was evidenced by how he already heard the voices even before even unsheathing the weapon. You would normally use some restraining method on a weapon like this, or starve it out to weaken it before you used it again.

But Zac didn't have the luxury of waiting around as the golden insignia seemed more than capable of spewing out its unceasing flames for a while longer. His whole body was wracked with pain as he drew the blade, unleashing the half-moon toward the three lines in the sky. It steadily started to grow as it picked up speed, seemingly eager to attack the energy-rich rune in the sky.

A handful of tendrils immediately emerged from the weapon and latched onto Zac's arm as well, making it look like the sword was fusing with his body. A mysterious energy burrowed into his arm and headed straight for his head the next moment, effortlessly evading his attempts to block it out with **[Mental Fortress]**.

Extremely intrusive voices boomed in his mind, blocking out any coherent thought. Zac's eyes widened in fear as he saw more and more tendrils reaching out from the weapon, and his whole arm was covered in an instant. He wanted to stow away the weapon, but he knew he needed to hold on, as putting it away would cancel the attack in the sky.

However, a deep resounding heartbeat suddenly quelled the voices, and Zac felt like his heart turned into a black hole that

swallowed the invading energies whole. More and more energy entered his hidden node, and more was even dragged out from the sword itself. Zac even sensed fear from the weapon just before the sword detached itself from his arm and turned inert.

The half-moon thankfully wasn't affected by the struggle on the ground as it effortlessly cut through the sea of flames in the sky, heading straight for the divine rune. It created a corridor free of fire for a brief second before the sea closed in on itself as it passed by. It seemed unable to actually absorb the flames, but the flames also seemed unable to deter its progression.

Finally, it reached its maximum size just as it slammed into the rune. There was no clear winner and no explosion of wild energies, only a stalemate that emitted a steadily increasing pressure. Zac knew things wouldn't end well no matter what the outcome was judging by the ominous buildup, and he quickly tried to activate one of his defensive treasures.

However, he quickly found that the restriction on the area didn't only apply to his flying leaf, but even his defensive talismans. **[Love's Bond]** seemed unable to activate its skills as well, though he could thankfully swap between its different forms.

An explosion finally rocked the area and the thick haze from the evaporated water was pushed away, exposing three golden lines and no silver half-moon. Even the cursed sword had been unable to take out the divine symbol it looked like. However, Zac soon noticed that the rune wasn't completely unscathed.

Not only had it lost its radiant luster, but there was even a small tear on one of the golden lines. The crack quickly spread, like a piece of ice that was slowly breaking apart. However, Zac didn't really feel any relief as his danger sense didn't calm down in the slightest. Looking up at the enormous rune made him feel like he was standing in front of a dam that was slowly bursting.

That rune had contained terrifying amounts of flames. What would happen when it finally broke apart?

He couldn't help but think back to Ogras' words of warning, of how the cultists always seemed to default to blowing everything up when it looked like they would fail. Miasma immediately started coursing through his body as his eyes and hair turned pitch-black. He couldn't flee and breaking the rune didn't seem to have helped all too much. He would need to endure the final blast, and that would require his other class.

Ogras and his big mouth.

Chapter 526: Holy Fire

Zac didn't have time to curse the demon for his foreshadowing as he felt something terrifying was coming. He immediately started setting up his layers of defenses, not holding anything back for potential enemies. Everything except him was long dead in the area, killed by either the explosion, the magma, or the concussive explosions who had rocked the whole core of the basin.

The cage of [**Profane Seal**] sprung up around him, forming an outer layer of protection. Zac normally used the skill as a means of caging his enemies, but it was just as good at defending from the outside. It was also one of the skills that hadn't worsened in compatibility at all since gaining the Fetters of Desolation class. Between the chains and the entrapment, it looked like it was right up the new class's ally.

The cage encapsulated the Incursion as well even when he shrunk it to the smallest size possible, and Zac was both surprised and relieved to see that the energy-dense pillar didn't cause a clash with his skill. The pillar that almost blinded him with its intense fire-attuned energies shone straight through the fractal dome of his skill like it was just an illusion.

Zac had no idea how that worked, but he had no time to look into it as the flames were almost upon him.

A huge amount of Miasma left his body the next moment a hundred skeletons materialized. They didn't stay around inside the cage though, but they rather ran out as Zac opened the back gate of [**Profane Seal**] before closing it again. The skeletons didn't stop there, but they kept running into the jungle, only stopping hundreds of meters away when he couldn't control them any further away.

They weren't there to defend against the incoming flames, but rather act as damage substitutes. They would hopefully work

as sentries as well in case there actually were cultists hiding in the jungle. He didn't share vision with the things, but he did have a vague sense of the life-force around them. He would also feel it if they were destroyed by something, giving him an early warning that way.

The skeletons barely made it out in time as the holy flames finally descended upon the cage. He was immediately inundated in not only a blazing heat, but also a pressure that he could feel on a spiritual level. But the shield held, though Zac knew that the golden flames were not the true threat. The real danger was the damaged insignia in the sky.

The enormous rune still hadn't completely cracked yet, but Zac could see between the fiery sky that it wasn't long for this world. There was a massive cut in the middle of it now, where the half-moon blade had struck it. Hairline cracks spread all across its surface as well, and an intense light radiated out from the cracks, proving there was still a lot of untamed energies trapped inside.

Zac still didn't feel safe after seeing the ominous portents in the sky, and the black armor spread out across his body as **[Love's Bond]** took its defensive form. He might not be able to activate **[Death's Embrace]** as things stood, but he could still use the shield-shaped coffin to summon **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

He also tried activating a few backup defensive talismans just in case, but they didn't work just like everything else. There was nothing else he could activate, so he finally started digging a hole into the ground, hoping to use the earth itself as an insulating layer against the flames. It had worked against Salvation, so he hoped it would work once more.

However, Zac only managed to rip a ten-meter hole before a terrifying crack in the sky released a tremendous pressure, almost destroying the outer cage in an instant. The massive gates and miasmic towers were reduced to decrepit ruins, and the azure fractals had almost turned invisible from the flames. There was no more time, so he punched the ground one last time and jumped into the hole before he put his bulwark as a stopgap to block out the flames.

[Profane Seal] completely crumbled the next moment, just as a shocking aura was released above him. Zac couldn't see what was going on because of having burrowed down, but it almost felt like a celestial had descended upon the basin. A marvelous aura drenched the whole jungle, and Zac felt his mind going blank.

The Lord was calling him, so what was he doing underground? He needed to welcome His arrival and offer obeisance. Zac slowly got up to his feet, but his whole body suddenly froze as he was startled awake.

What the hell was that?

One more second and he would have deactivated his defensive shield and welcomed the holy flames from above. His mind had thankfully been hardened by constant life-and-death struggles and competing with the Splinter, allowing him to snap out of it before it was too late. More importantly, he still had **[Indomitable]** to fall back on. It was far stronger than **[Mental Fortress]**, and it had managed to rebuff the false thoughts after just a second, even though the skill was still middle proficiency.

It was just in time too, as the flames slammed into the bulwark the next second, immediately incinerating the shallow layers of dirt above.

The miasmic shield from **[Immutabe Bulwark]** was mostly opaque, but it still allowed him to somewhat see the fiery hellscape above. The flames were no longer golden, but rather replaced by a milky white. The holy aura in the flames was multiple times stronger than what he felt before, no doubt containing the essence of the rune in the sky.

His heartstrings tugged again as he saw the pristine flames, and part of him just wanted to open his arms and take it on. But he didn't completely lose himself this time after already having realized the threat of the flames. However, it did make him wonder. Were the zealots perhaps not quite as pious as advertised, but rather forcibly converted?

Zac's pitch-black eyes were illuminated by the flames as he thought of the possibilities. What if the Church of Everlasting

Dao had formed some sort of ingenious cultivation system? They turned cultivators into zealots with the holy flames, and the zealots kept empowering the flames with their conviction. It formed a self-perpetuating source of power that could swallow everything in its surroundings.

Things quickly took a turn for the worse though, stopping Zac from entertaining any other stray thoughts. The flames steadily ate away at the floor itself, until he was standing in a deep crater, assaulted by flames from every direction.

His bulwark was able to rebuff the flames, but it couldn't cover him from all sides, so the flames finally reached his last line of defense, the black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. His whole body was awash with pain the next moment as the flames glommed onto him. Zac tried to at least keep the flames outside, but they were like burrowing parasites that found their way inside through the tiniest cracks and weaknesses in his defenses.

Sizzling sounds escaped from within his armor as he was getting cremated alive. He screamed on top of his lungs, but his cries were drowned out by the roaring flames. Rolling around on the ground did nothing, and the Bulwark had essentially become useless by this point. All he could see was white, and all that he could feel was agony.

Even his mind was assaulted by the insidious whispers of the holy flames, trying to make him stop resisting with the help of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Undying Legion]**. He was currently infusing the black armor with the Fragment of the Coffin, while his body itself fought the flames with the Fragment of the Bodhi. He also released a steady stream of miasma from his pores, which helped combat the flames as well.

He also got one surge of vitality after another as a handful of skeleton warriors crumbled every second or so. He felt that if he stopped anyone of these things he would actually die, so he could only keep going while ignoring the calls from within the fire. Zac quickly worked his way through the hundred-odd summons though, at which point he only was able to rely on himself.

Every second felt like an hour, but he finally felt like the flames started to weaken? Or was he just so badly burned that he couldn't really tell any longer? A deep thud suddenly shook the ground, and Zac glanced toward the source of the sound with bleary eyes, only to see a massive golden pillar stab into the ground just fifty meters away from him.

The sigil had finally broken down and was falling apart.

However, he didn't have time to celebrate as the surroundings suddenly started to darken, and he looked up in horror only to see an enormous golden pillar falling straight toward him. His legs didn't really listen to him, so Zac barely had time to resummon his bulwark before it slammed into him like a mountain. The pressure from the slam transferred into his body, and Zac once more felt the cracking of broken bones.

The thing was just way too heavy to throw off, and Zac was forced to activate [**Unholy Strike**] to just angle his bulwark and have it thump down next to him, causing a minor earthquake. A series of tremendous shockwaves followed, and the area was soon covered in the remnants of the broken sigil.

The fall of the insignia also meant the end of the white-hot flames, but the remnants of the sea of golden fire still covered the area. The golden flames only felt like a sunburn after having withstood the condensed version though, and Zac slowly made his way toward the Nexus Hub.

Without the sigil in the sky, the sea of golden flames had lost its source, and it died down soon after. However, there was one fire remaining; the fetters binding him to the Incursion Pillar. Zac was shocked to see that the fetter still held. Just what was that golden dust made of to be able to withstand just about everything and keep him in place?

However, the only capability of the odd flame was to prevent him from leaving, which was fine with Zac. He wasn't planning on going anywhere while the pillar was still active, and he instead sat down in the middle of the crater and popped a healing pill into his mouth.

Only when things had calmed down did he realize just how bad his state was. He had 9 broken bones and multiple

wounded organs. Even worse, most of his body was covered in severe burns from the flames. If he had been a weaker human he would likely have died from the shock alone. Even with his massive Endurance and Vitality it still felt like his skin was on fire, and the salves in his possession were only limited in their efficacy.

His wretched state wasn't the only surprise though.

There was a lot of energy in his body, slowly swirling around his Hidden Node. Zac hadn't noticed earlier due to the pain, but it looked like his **[Void Heart]** had been busy while he withstood the flames, and a massive amount of power had accumulated. Even better, it looked like energy extracted with his hidden node stayed within his body longer without dissipating compared to the energy that came from kills.

It was good news though, as he didn't want to repeat the mistake from the Undead Incursion. What if he broke open his next node, only for the Head Priest to jump out of the woodwork once more? Then again, he had already done some research to avoid something like that happening again and he had actually learned a few tricks thanks to Triv.

The ghost had been utterly astounded to find out that Zac actually was a mortal, and he even insisted that a pureblood Draugr couldn't be one. It also made him a lot more adamant about having Zac "return" to the Empire Heartlands to seize his so-called birthright. Triv was sure that Zac would be able to cultivate as long as he found a proper Draugr master.

Zac wasn't so sure though, even if his undead side was of the noble race. He had a feeling that his utter lack of cultivation ability was related to his constitution, and not something a better master could solve.

But after the ghost had calmed down it actually taught Zac a pretty nifty trick. Being an energy-based creature Triv had a really marvelous control of his energy, and it taught Zac a simple method to use his own Miasma or Cosmic Energy to "trap" external energy.

Triv used it as a defensive measure, but it worked for Zac as well in preventing energy loss. It was far from fool-proof, but

it did prolong the duration he could keep the energy he gained from kills by a large margin.

Cultivators could apparently just use their own cultivation manuals for a far superior result, some being able to store the energy for weeks if need be. Zac was nowhere near that, but he could at least keep 80% of any energy he gained for over an hour. It was enough for his purposes, as it would give him ample time to get to safety in case he wanted to try breaking open a node.

It was also enough to wait out the Nexus Hub this time, and the golden pillar finally winked out of existence, and Zac sighed in relief when his bindings disappeared as well.

During this whole time he had kept an eye out for any movement, but the area was utterly desolate. Neither [**Cosmic Gaze**] nor his augmented Draugr-vision had seen a lick of activity, essentially proving that the cultists had given up on this place.

With the Incursion being closed as well there was not much reason for the cultists to return either. Zac guessed they were either running toward the mystic realm or hiding in some desolate corner of Earth right now. With no threat appearing, Zac decided to try bursting open the node in his leg. He was in a pretty wretched state, but not to the point that he needed bed-rest.

He would need to rest up in either case after this fight, so he might as well take the opportunity to break open a node. That way he could heal everything together without wasting time. However, just as he was about to take control of the energy circling his heart a series of prompts appeared, making him stop in his tracks.

[Congratulations. Integration Trial Succeeded. Calculating Grade.]

[Grade awarded: A. Contribution Rank: 1. Grade awarded increased to S.]

Chapter 527: The Next Step

“Shit, why is it so hard to get one’s hands on some tokens? Or some other way to activate that big-ass crystal inland?” Smaug muttered in annoyance as he paced back and forth in his home-prison in Port Atwood.

Who would have thought that he would be put under house arrest and tasked with coming up with money-making schemes by that little blue devil? He had just tried to get a better understanding of the resources available to his new boss, and this was the thanks he got?

“Ai, the heavens are truly jealous of talent. To think I would be turned prisoner because I wanted to help out,” Smaug lamented as he paced back and forth.

“What are you talking about, prisoner? You can still walk around in this neighborhood without getting impaled by those Amazons,” Rima giggled. “And you wouldn’t be in this predicament if you hadn’t tried to infiltrate that shipyard. You knew that place was off-limits.”

“I had to take the shot, stupid. That place is extremely suspicious, even more so than the Repository,” Smaug snorted. “Those muscle-heads are busy now, and I need to get some things done before that man realizes how open-ended his orders were.”

That was the good point of Lord Atwood; he wasn’t a hands-on boss. He had told him to head to Port Atwood and listen to the little blue bastard. But it turned out that second-hand commands weren’t actually binding under his contract. He had pretended that the little asshole’s order to stay in the neighborhood was binding, but they were anything but.

He could leave anytime, as Lord Atwood only told him to go here and listen, not that he couldn’t leave.

“Don’t you have any decency?” Rima said with disdain.

“Instead of thinking of ways of enriching yourself, you could actually do what was asked of you.”

“Would me having decency help Earth survive this shitstorm?” Smaug countered. “No, right? So I might as well prepare for the off-chance we survive, or more likely if things go south here. What about you? How goes it with the sister? Do they have a way off this cursed rock?”

“She’s never around,” Rima muttered. “And besides, I don’t want to get closer to MacKenzie for you, useless brother. She is the sister of Lord Atwood and a good friend of Ogras Azh’Rezak. She’s even close to that manly Demon General.”

“What would those three want with a useless brat?” Smaug snorted. “What do you bring to the table to those kinds of people?”

“Why would I need to be strong to become someone’s wife?” Rima said with a roll of her eyes.

“Don’t get too attached,” Smaug muttered. “This planet’s future is limited even if the great lord Atwood manages to deal with the most immediate mess. I’ve found out a few things. Even if we survive all this we’ll just turn into some backwater planet at the edge of the universe, a place where even the birds won’t shit.”

“This again,” Rima sighed.

“I am telling you. Our aim should be getting to some real human metropolis! There will be opportunities for advancement for me. And for you? Won’t there be real geniuses to marry? People with family trees millions of years old, and pockets as deep as the Mariana Trench,” Smaug said, his eyes glistening.

“Besides-“ Smaug continued, but he was stopped in his tracks by a series of prompts that appeared in front of him.

He had actually done it. That wooden block had taken out the cultists.

“You see!” Rima said with glee. “He really is a prince charming. He’s done more for this world than the rest of us

combined. Perhaps he even has some time to settle down now. He's been single for a while now."

"That man has become addicted to becoming stronger already," Smaug muttered absentmindedly as he closed the screen that told him his rating was a measly D-Grade. "He won't be looking for romance anytime soon."

Rima snorted in response, but Smaug wasn't interested in having this debate once more. He was more interested in going through his licensed wares. He already knew that there were limitations to the items he could purchase because of the ongoing invasions, and his eyes glimmered when he saw two of the latest additions that had appeared now that the war was over.

[Goblin Honor – Temporarily ignore a contract erected by someone at Level 100 or below.]

[Stumpbugle Talisman – Teleport to Stumpbugle Headquarters for career opportunities!]

Going to a place called "Stumpbugle" wasn't really what he had in mind when he said he would strike out in a real metropolis, and he had no desire to meet the inventors of the weird treasures that were available for purchase. But it was also an undeniable fact that Earth was on the brink of destruction, even if they had dealt with the Incursion.

The weaker threat was gone, but what about that old monster who could appear at moment's notice?

Those zombie bastards had clearly known how to block teleportation arrays, so a peak D-Grade cultivator was probably able to do the same with just a wave of his arm. What if the whole planet got jammed the moment he arrived? Wouldn't that mean that he and Rima would be stuck here until they were turned into some sort of cultivation resource? Was he willing to bet everything on Zachary Atwood prevailing against those odds?

He wasn't.

--

The vast cloud of dust in a forgotten corner outside the Zecia Sector shuddered as it started spinning and condensing. Only by coming close would one be able to realize that these weren't particles of ice drifting about in space, but rather tens of millions of intricate machines lying dormant, soaking up the energies of the near-by irregularity.

The machines had soon congealed into a person, a woman freely floating about in the vast beyond. Her amber eyes opened for the first time in decades as she looked around with some confusion. It was too early. She immediately opened a screen to see what had dragged her out of the reverie.

Had something happened to the project?

However, he quickly learned she had been awoken due to her Talisman activating from scenario 18, and she sighed in relief. Tens of thousands of screens appeared in front of her, taking up thousands of square meters in front of her. All kinds of readings and snippets flittered across the screens with terrifying speed for a second before they dissolved to dust and returned to her body again.

“Hm? How curious. How was he able to evolve with his cursed constitution? Did we miss something back then?” Leandra muttered as she thoughtfully looked at the vast star in front of her. “Or is it another ploy by the System?”

In either case, it was good news. Her daughter should be safe with such a powerful protector now that the planet had withstood the Integration Trial. Her suggestions should remain in their depths, helping them stay alive even without her assistance. She really wanted to rush back, but she knew that she had to be careful. She was in no state of moving about.

A lot of sacrifices had been made to come this far, she couldn't ruin the efforts of her ancestors by being hasty.

There was also the oddity of someone using one of her backdoor keys on a merchant's vessel at the edge of integrated space. Had one of the children been sent on a mission by the cursed heavens? Such a quest was obviously not an accident, and annoyance flared up in her heart at the thought of her flesh

and blood being manipulated to turn against her by that damned broken AI.

A slight pressure in her forehead dragged her out of her thoughts, and she quickly activated defensive measures to evade the tracking attempt on her soul.

“They still haven’t given up,” Leandra muttered as she once more dissolved into motes that spread across space.

The last thing to dissolve was the two amber eyes, radiating an unshakeable conviction.

“There will be a reckoning one day. Those who moved against our family will all pay the price, even the heavens themselves.”

“Do you have it?” A’Feris asked, not without some interest as far as Io could tell.

He was glad to see some fire within the eyes of his old friend. Io knew his own limits had long been reached, but A’Feris still had a small chance to go further. However, he was losing his momentum, the most dangerous thing to lose in cultivation apart from one’s life.

Perhaps this Zac Piker was the key.

The more he gathered the more he felt like this little demon was just what A’Feris needed. The young axeman’s penchant for drawing ire from both his contemporaries and the Boundless Heavens itself almost seemed unmatched.

“I have it here,” Io said, and one scene after another appeared.

It showed the utter destruction of a grand mansion by a square, and a bloodied man walking out of the rubble, holding a head in his hand. A young demonling appeared next to him, and they fled to a teleported, harried by hundreds of attacks.

It showed a hazy outline of how the Tower of Eternity changed into one of the Primordial Steles, and how it infected the minds of the children gathered in front of it. Finally, it culminated in a heated battle where one stood against many but prevailed.

“The Stele of Conflict?” A’Feris snorted. “The Zecia sector will become hectic as the ripples of war spread out from this enclosed dimension. That thing is like a mindplague.”

“Conflicts will engulf the sector, and heroes will emerge from the flames,” Io nodded.

“Axe, sharpness heaviness. Corpse? No, putrefaction? Interesting,” A’Feris muttered, his eyes glistening as he looked on. “And echoes of the Sukhavati? Greedy boy.”

“It might look greedy, but what if it works out?” Io said. “He is clearly on his way to forming a path of supremacy. With some guidance-”

“It’s not that easy to walk the path of Life and Death,” A’Feris sighed with a shake of his head. “He is too discordant right now. He is grasping for everything, trying to encompass the universe. It is an extremely unstable and dangerous state. Me or someone else stepping in now would only impede his path. He needs to form his own understanding and be the one to make the sacrifices.”

“So you’re not taking him in, after all?” Io asked. “Such a rare seedling, and with your path...”

“I didn’t say that,” A’Feris smiled. “I just said that it is too early now. He seems to have a few interesting challenges ahead. Let him deal with them by himself. If he can emerge alive he might be able to create a workable path from the experience. It’s not too late to join a proper force by that point and benefit from some structured guidance. Have any of the old bastards claimed him?”

“Not at the moment,” Io said. “Perhaps they are thinking in the same way.”

“Are you saying I’m becoming like the old geezers?” A’Feris snorted. “I’m still pretty young for someone at my stage, you know.”

Io smiled and shook his head before his eye turned back to the screen.

“He reminds me of you. I watched your struggle against the Foradine Covenant back on the Verokh Continent just like this.

I hope he can become another pillar of our Sect some day in the future,” Io said with reminiscence in his eyes.

“I was a lot more dashing, no doubt,” A’Feris laughed. “But I agree. There is potential in him, and he’s a gamble worthy to take. Well, unless he goes and does something stupid like joining the unorthodox. He’s a progenitor, right? We’ll go pick him up after the shroud has been lifted. The quarantine should have been lifted by then. It was just an image of the Stele, after all, rather than the real thing.”

A sigh escaped from Uld’s lips as he kept infusing the altar with power. The fires danced in his eyes, but his gaze was locked on the unmoving form of Arkensau. Who knew that this bastard possessed something as valuable as a **[Heaven’s Intervention]**?

If not for that, then he would have been interring the body and preparing it for sale. But now he was stuck nurturing this idiot back to health instead, while the Monarch-Select ran rampant across the planet. And now he was stuck here on this desolate rock.

“Orders from above, for your eyes only,” Trovad said as his eyes turned to the altar. “Arrived just hours before the gate was closed. How is Inquisitor Arkensau?”

“With Heaven’s blessing, he will be fine within a week or two. The seed burns strong within him,” Uld said as he accepted the golden-inlaid crystal.

Uld touched the crystal with the sigil in his mind, and a mix of exhaustion and relief washed through him as the strict voice of Archbishop Vantes echoed in his mind.

Be wary of the local called the Super Brother-Man. We believe him to have appeared in the Tower of Eternity recently, causing a storm and conquering the eighth floor. The Church has never feared other forces of this remote Sector, but caution is needed.

The Dimensional Seed is of utmost importance, far eclipsing the value of any bodies. This mission will replace all the

original goals. Keep the inquisitors in check, leave no weaknesses. Acquire the Seed and lock yourselves away in the Mystic Realm. We will be able to find you after the shroud of the heavens has been lifted. Your reward for a completed mission will far eclipse the cost of a hundred years.

Failure will likewise come at a great cost.

A wave of exhaustion buffeted his mind, but there was nothing Uld could do. The orders had been given so he could only comply.

“How did it go? Did the Monarch-Select fall?” Uld asked.

“Not even he should have survived the judgment,” Trovad said with conviction. “We will know for sure in a day. The glory of the heavens still lingers, blocking our sight, but the recordings should arrive shortly.”

Chapter 528: S-Grade

“He did it!” Kenzie smiled, her clenched fists finally relaxing in her lap.

“It’s amazing,” Lyla said from the side. “It’s finally over. Maybe we can finally start living our lives again.”

“There are still some things that needs to be done though,” Kenzie smiled, though the smile felt a bit strained.

“Like what?” Lyla asked with confusion.

Lyla had stayed with Kenzie in her courtyard to help take her mind off the fact that Zac was risking his life against the cultists. She had instead asked far and wide about the various arrays and contraptions. It was a welcome distraction, and Kenzie had freely told her about the various arrays she was working on.

But all things must come to an end sooner or later. Her hesitation had already cost too much.

“Dealing with the traitors and the spies on the island, for example,” she said with a steady voice, her eyes boring into Lyla’s.

Kenzie had known for a while. She had known that Lyla was the one feeding intelligence back to the mainland through an ingenious array that was no doubt provided by the cultist infiltrators of the New World Government. It was because of her that so many had died, and she was the reason the cultists had learned of the entrance to the Mystic Realm.

Zac had saved her life, but she had returned the favor with malice, increasing the risk to him and everyone else in Port Atwood. Lyla had almost cut off their access to something their mother had left behind as well, which was unforgivable by itself.

Lyla only looked at her with incomprehension for a second until her form fell apart, her body replaced by a clay dummy. However, how could Kenzie not be prepared for something like this? She had seen Lyla use this very skill to survive multiple times during the Tutorial and their expeditions in the Dead Zone.

Her garden was like a fortress with layers and layers of arrays. They were originally meant to keep the area safe in case of a mishap with her experiments, but they worked just as well for trapping a level 36 cultivator. Not even her brother would be able to sense the slightest fluctuation even if he passed by right outside.

Lyla had learned to almost perfectly blend with the earth, but Kenzie had already managed to push her Seed of Loam to Peak Mastery. Together with Jeeves, it was effortless to pinpoint her location. Kenzie slightly circulated her Cosmic Energy, and an earth pillar rose from the ground, unearthing a horrified Lyla.

“Wait, they have my parents! I had no choice-” Lyla cried, but it was too late.

A Dao-empowered flame swallowed her whole, and no substitution or movement skill would save her from the Seed of Tinder. A shrill scream emerged from her throat, but it was almost instantly cut short by a wind-blade that decapitated her. The headless corpse was turned into ashes in less than a minute, and a wave of Kenzie’s hand spread the ashes in the garden.

Lyla had almost been as powerful as herself back during the Tutorial, but those days were long gone. She had stopped pushing herself since arriving at Port Atwood, spending most days not even cultivating at all. Killing her was completely effortless for Kenzie.

Some confusion and guilt appeared in Kenzie’s auburn eyes, but a red flash appeared in their depths and she gradually regained her composure.

“You’re right, I need to harden myself,” Kenzie sighed before she looked down at the scorched spot on the grass. “I’m sorry.

But those who move against the family will have to pay the price.”

Zac’s eyes lit up upon seeing the prompts. It looked very similar to when he had completed the Incursion Master quest, where he had gained the Dao Repository. He obviously wasn’t surprised at being placed first in the contribution tally, but the grade was something new.

He had only heard of A-Grade before, and this was something even above that. Did that mean there were S-Grade cultivators as well? Zac had asked around about what the limit of cultivation was, but he had never got a real answer. The people of the Zecia sector didn’t even know what the B-Grade entailed, let alone anything above that.

The next moment an even better prompt appeared.

[Distributing Rewards]

[Additional Reward: Limited Title Slots +1. Frontrunner Title Permanence.]

Zac whistled in surprise seeing the reward, or rather tried to whistle with his badly burnt lips. This was pretty huge. He had essentially received not one, but two additional Limited Title slots in one go. This was just what he needed to maintain his attribute lead against the elite cultivators of the sector.

He might not get double the attributes per level any longer, but having five Limited Title slots should allow him to stay ahead of even the greatest elites of the sector. Of course, that still required him to actually find some opportunities that provided a title.

The title permanence was a welcome surprise as well, but it made him think of something. Zac quickly tried to open the Ladder screen, only to find that nothing happened. Zac grimaced in annoyance when he realized the System had finished its Ladder experiment.

This could both be seen as good news and bad news. It was good news in the sense that no one beneath D-Rank would be able to find out his level any longer thanks to his bracer. Every

single step he had taken until now had been monitored by millions of people, but now he was suddenly free. However, the change came with detriments as well.

He could no longer find any information about the Dominators either, though he didn't expect them to gain a bunch of levels out of nowhere. But more importantly, he wouldn't be able to keep tabs on his force and make sure everything was alright. Just opening the screen and looking at the familiar names during his tower climb had been a huge source of comfort, but he wouldn't be able to do so any longer while traveling the Zecia sector in the future.

There were life-monitoring treasures to buy that would provide a similar function, and Zac added it to the ever-growing list of things that Calrin needed to get him. But he also realized that the odds actually getting something useful from the Sky Gnome might have increased now that the incursions were gone and some restrictions were removed.

It was also somewhat of a relief that the title rewards didn't provide immediate attributes as he still wasn't sure how much his home-made Draugr Baths had increased his attribute cap. Zac quickly opened his title screen to be sure nothing had changed though.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	81
Class	[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation
Race	[E] Draugr
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500,

	Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	2090 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 218%]
Dexterity	992 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Endurance	2083 [Increase: 86%. Efficiency: 218%]
Vitality	1375 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 218%]
Intelligence	545 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	911 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	340 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 5 919 187 601

Zac sighed in relief when he saw that his attributes were still the same, but he did notice a few differences after looking around through his screens. The first of all was the update of the titles, with Frontrunner having moved to the permanent bracket. But he had also gained a new title, which honestly wasn't too surprising.

[Apex Progenitor: Pass the World Integration Trial with S Grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%]

It was a real top tier title, only being rivaled by his Tower Climb and Apex Hunter titles so far, giving a whopping 10% efficiency in every attribute. It had actually pushed him past 200% efficiency on his main attributes, meaning that he was more than twice as strong as his attributes indicated.

Efficiency was pretty much impossible to discern even with high-quality spying skills from what Zac had learned, so even if someone managed to glean his attributes they might only set themselves up for disaster. They would see Zac having 2000 Strength, only for him to burst out with the power of more than the double a second later.

He was also happy to see that he had finally taken some steps forward with his undead skills, with **[Indomitable]** reaching Late Proficiency, and both his ultimate skills having reached Middle Proficiency. He was still lagging behind compared to his human class, but it was a step in the right direction.

The fit of his skills, especially **[Undying Legion]** and **[Indomitable]** had worsened in compatibility since evolving, but they were still useful. They might turn into components of skill fusions for his new class in the future, but they would have to reach Peak Proficiency first for that to work.

There were also a lot of additions to his Town Shop, mainly defensive arrays that looked far more powerful than anything he had been able to purchase before. However, they were still limited by his power, with the strongest arrays being marked as "Early E-Grade". That didn't really come as a surprise though.

The system would never let people buy too powerful defenses, as that would drastically lessen the amount of conflict in the

multiverse.

It was still a big upgrade to his weak Town Protection Array though, and Zac looked through the options for a few seconds until he suddenly froze in realization. The System called the Limited Title boost an additional reward. If that was the addition, then where were the original rewards?

The greed for loot quickly overcame the weariness in his body, and he scoured the whole crater for treasures. However, there was nothing apart from smoking-hot soil and an inert Nexus hub in the hole he found himself in. Glee was slowly replaced with confusion as he looked around. What was going on?

Was the reward once again related to his town? The phrasing of the prompts was extremely familiar to the way the System spoke when he received the Dao Repository, so Abby might have gotten the rewards back home. Last time the Stargazer held it back so that he would be able to choose where to place the reward, so there might be a similar situation waiting for him.

Zac immediately bought a Teleportation Array, but this time he didn't make it public. Zac rather kept it to himself like the array in his private area. If the teleporter was open a group of Valkyries and Demons would step through to this place a few minutes later, and Zac wasn't comfortable leaving them here in case the cultists returned.

He soon found himself back in his compound instead, somewhat relieved that there were no signs of his sister. It allowed him to hobble over to his courtyard and close the arrays without causing any worry with his wretched appearance. There were no rewards in his home either, but he still held off on his urge to visit the Stargazer.

There was no way he wouldn't cause a panic if he entered the government building looking like a mix of a zombie and a rotisserie chicken, but more importantly, he still had a node to break open. He had been interrupted by the prompt just as he was about to break it open, and the rewards had allowed him to slow down and think clearly. There was no point in staying

in a burning crater to open a node when he had free access to his home.

The accumulated energy in his chest was running a bit low because of the delay, so Zac ate one of his node-breaking pills while channeling the remains from the **[Void Heart]** to his leg. He also ate an anesthetic pill to block out the pain of his broken bones and burned skin. The pain wasn't to the point that he was immobilized, but he was afraid that it would mess with his concentration breaking open the node.

He only got something like 20% of the efficacy of the Node Breaking pill, but it was enough to tide him over along with the energies ripped from his cursed sword and the holy flames. A small explosion echoed out in the isolated courtyard after around ten minutes, and a splatter of black ichor stained the ground.

Zac suddenly remembered learning about a medical factoid before the integration, of how some women naturally forget the excruciating pain of childbirth. It was apparently an evolutionary measure so that the people wouldn't shy away from having more children. The reason for remembering such a random tidbit was obviously that he must have blocked out just how painful breaking open the last node was.

His pain-relief pill had worked wonders against the burns, but it was utterly incapable of dealing with the agony of getting his pathways blasted open. Waves of pain crashed into his mind, and he helplessly fell back on the ground, unable to move in the slightest. He ate another healing pill as he grabbed a Miasma Crystal in each hand, his eyes closed to block out the world.

Only an hour later was he able to get up again, but he had to admit that his state was a lot better than last time.

Recuperating instead of entering a life-and-death battle right after breaking open a node had not surprisingly helped him minimize the damage from the node-breaking. He would still need to redraw the section of the pathways around the Node, this time in his Draugr form. But he felt stable enough that he

could get up again without falling unconscious like he did last time.

He soon left his courtyard, but he still didn't enter the town. He instead returned to the burnt-out crater he just came from, relieved to see that it was still void of cultists. He finally made the teleporter public as he gazed at the massive golden pillars that were deeply embedded in the ground. Just how had the zealots gotten their hands on this much gold?

And how much was it worth?

Chapter 529: Adaptability

The broken pieces of the enormous sigil still radiated some heat even after over an hour had passed, but it wasn't to the point that Zac felt it was dangerous any longer. He walked closer to it to see if it actually was just normal gold, and he finally realized a pattern covered its surface. It almost looked like Damascus Steel but in gold and white, and where the white formed what looked like hazy patterns.

It clearly wasn't inscribed though, but it rather looked more like something that had naturally grown over time. However, the patterns didn't contain anywhere near the amount of meaning and power as the groves he had seen on the Stele during the vision in the Tower of Eternity. It almost felt like the patterns hadn't really finished forming just yet.

It made Zac unsure whether it actually was a normal metal that was in the process of being enhanced by the fire-attuned energies and prayer, or if it was some alloy the cultists were creating inside the volcano. Zac shook his head and instead made his way up the crater, feeling that it would have to be a mystery for someone else to solve. He had enough on his plate as it was.

His deathly gaze roved across the smoldering mountainside and the jungles for a couple of minutes, but he couldn't sense the slightest hint of life. Had every single cultist died after all? Not that it mattered too much, as there obviously hadn't been anyone of import at the base when he arrived. Just a skeleton crew that would set about the chain reaction that almost got him killed.

They were obviously ready to completely abandon the incursion.

Zac sighed as he understood the implication. He had hoped to be done with the zealots in one swift move with this final

fight, at least dealing with the Head Priest and his bishops. But they were probably all still around, waiting to cause trouble at moment's notice. It was a bit of a shame there was not a single cultist to catch and interrogate, but they probably would rather blow themselves up than answer any questions.

Their actions were still a bit perplexing though. Why would they do something like this rather than just cutting their losses and returning home, just like the other invaders? Was the Mystic Realm really that important to them, or rather the Dimensional Artifact inside? It looked like they bet everything on that item and the fact that he wouldn't be able to hunt them down over the next century.

He would need to visit the Mystic Realm entrance to make sure, but Zac guessed that he would be met by a closed entrance impossible to open from outside. If he put himself in their shoes, their best course of action would be to hide inside the mystic Realm for a hundred years, at which point he would try to contact his superiors to pick them up.

Preferably while snatching the Dimensional Artifact.

A hundred years might be a long time to someone like himself, but to the elders of the Church of the Everlasting Dao it was nothing. Waiting a bit longer for the results would probably not matter all that much to them. Not everyone was strapped for time like The Great Redeemer. It meant that yet another old monster probably had set his sights on Earth and its resources.

He would either get the Dimensional Artifact or try to hunt them down, as the Church didn't feel like the kind of people who would drop something like this. However, Zac couldn't really muster any urgency from the realization, as it honestly didn't feel like it changed much by this point. There were already a bunch of old monsters bearing down on the planet, including his mother. What was one more?

Zac sighed as he sat down on the ground, his form once more turning back to human. A wave of pain radiated through his body as his body came alive, and he quickly ate another healing pill as he kept watch over the area. But there was not

much to guard against as everything was completely burned and leveled.

The soothing energy of the Fragment of the Bodhi also spread through his body, helping out with restoring his tissue. However, there was stubborn energy hiding in the wounds, rabidly resisting both his pills and his Dao. It looked like some special energy had been infused into the blast, and he would have to slowly grind it down.

As he looked down at the crater he felt that the near-death experience had brought home an important lesson. There were all sorts of amazing treasures and arrays in the world, but nothing was impervious. Treasures could fail at any time, and he could only trust his own body in the end.

A buzz behind him told him that the teleporter had activated, and he turned over to see a vanguard group of demons carefully emerging inside the crater. Ilvere stood at the front, and he looked around with wide eyes before he spotted Zac sitting above. He quickly jumped up, and he gave a start when he saw Zac's wretched appearance.

"Don't you look like shit?" Ilvere laughed as he took out a large vat from his Cosmos Sack. "Something to drink? You look like you could need one. I've made it myself, with some help of that barkeep."

Zac wryly smiled as he took a swig from the Demonic homebrew, and he immediately became thankful that his gullet was reinforced by his high Endurance. The vile brew tasted like paint thinner, but it actually managed to give him a slight buzz. He wouldn't be surprised if a single mouthful would kill a normal human.

"What happened here? It looks like a natural disaster rather than a battlefield," the demon asked as he looked around at the destruction. "No bodies. They sacrificed themselves?"

"There was almost no one here," Zac sighed as he recounted what happened.

"So the lunatics are here to stay," Ilvere muttered with a grimace, echoing Zac's own thoughts. "I hoped we'd be done

with them after their two invasions. Like fleas, these ones. Got to take them all out before they start to fester.”

“Well, that’s why I have you guys, right?” Zac snorted.

“Well, whatever. What do you want us to do?” Ilvere asked.

“Just the usual,” Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. “Stay close to this area though. I think the valuable resource was the volcano, but I’m not sure if they broke it. What do you think about those golden things?”

Ilvere grunted in thought, before his massive weapon shot out with extreme momentum, slamming into one of the huge slabs of metals not far from where Zac sat. A deep gong echoed out across the area, and Ilvere even had to take a step back from the power inside the sound wave. Zac felt a bit impacted as well, but not to the point that he was hurt.

A small mark was left on the slab, but it didn’t even look dented from the attack. The metal ball on the other hand looked like it had been put over a fire, radiating some heat that forced Ilvere to spin it in the air until it cooled down again.

“Won’t probably be able to maintain its original function, but it’s definitely good stuff. Perhaps we can reforge them into weapons and armor with flame attunement?” Ilvere muttered. “You have that mine in the underworld as well. If you can figure out a way to fuse the two resources you might even be able to make something valuable enough to even export through the blue one’s Mercantile Licence.”

Zac’s eyes lit up at the prospect. He still hadn’t been able to use Calrin’s consortia for interplanetary trades so far, as the fees were too high to justify selling stuff like the ant carapace armors. But what if he could make a bunch of attuned weaponry? Fire had always been a popular Dao and cultivation path due to its offensive nature.

An armor providing flame-resistant would be a huge asset against fire-based forces like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the flame golems of the Underworld, and flame-attuned weaponry would no doubt sell like hotcakes.

“Harvesting those things have the highest priority then. Don’t bother scouring the jungle. It’s full of beasts, and it would take the whole army to canvass it,” Zac said.

Zac gave it a thought and bought a set of defensive arrays as well for the area around his newly-acquired ruins. He usually didn’t bother with that in the beginning, but he didn’t want to risk the lives of his people in case some suicidal zealot was waiting for an opportunity in the vast jungle.

“Everyone returns together later, and everyone gets tested,” Zac added. “Both with Origin Array and the root.”

“Understood,” Ilvere agreed. “We’ll make sure not to bring any of those bastards back to the island.”

Zac nodded and stepped through the teleporter the next moment, appearing in the public teleportation station. He was surprised to find Joanna waiting there for him and she walked over with brisk steps.

“Welcome back. The Administrator is looking for you,” Joanna said with a smile. “You really did it. You actually saved Earth, like a real-life action hero.”

“I don’t think that action heroes look like this after winning,” Zac wryly smiled. “And there are still a lot of bad guys around.”

“You know, it’s okay to celebrate taking a step in the right direction,” Joanna said as she walked next to him. “If you only focus on what’s wrong you’ll always feel stressed out.”

“I know,” Zac smiled. “One step at a time. By the way, have Billy and Thea come here while I was gone?”

“Not to my knowledge?” Joanna said. “Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

Zac had somewhat expected the two to claim their Inheritances by now, but perhaps they weren’t quite ready just yet. Then again, he had closed the incursion a bit faster than expected, taking less than a day to get the job done. They would probably come over within the week unless their reward for

surviving the Integration allowed them to gain another boost before the trial.

Joanna followed him over toward the government building, and Zac heard she had gained a rating of C by the system, with most of the Valkyries having gained a D. C was apparently the highest of anyone in Port Atwood, though Joanna hadn't asked his sister as she was busy with her experiments.

Most of the townspeople got an F or E, which didn't surprise Zac seeing how the System was so biased in favor of the Elites. It also turned out that only those with C or higher gained rewards and a Title. Zac guessed that getting to live another day was the only gift those with worse ratings got.

However, the situation was a bit baffling to Zac.

“What do you think the System graded you on?” Zac asked with some confusion. “A rating of D seems pretty bad for how many Incursions you guys helped me close. Not even Thea has closed as many as you did.”

“I don't think it's just that,” Joanna said with a shake of her head. “It has only been an hour, but I've started to get a small understanding of the situation after asking around. A part of the grade was definitely achievements, Dao, and Level, which isn't a surprise. But I also think a big part of it was adaptability.”

“Adaptability?” Zac muttered.

“Ryan, for example, got a D grade like the Valkyries, even though he hasn't closed a single incursion. He did however quickly adapt after coming here, and now he's one of the most successful people on the island,” Joanna said. “But both Ryan and us Valkyries didn't really excel in the beginning. We only got where we are because of you, so we didn't get too impressive grades.”

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. The Incursions and the integration was a massive trial, and the System was probably only interested in helping those who were able to embrace their new reality and make the most of it. Besides, not only those like him or Thea was of value to the System. People

like Smaug and Henry Marshall should probably have pretty decent ratings as well as they excelled in what they set out to do.

There was a palpable celebratory atmosphere in the town as the two walked toward the government building. People were out on the street with big smiles on their faces, and Zac was surprised to see that some had even raised the flag of Port Atwood on their storefronts or from their porches.

Zac had already hidden his identity with a hooded robe though, mostly because he was a bit embarrassed about his crispy appearance. Joanna wanted him to hold some sort of speech rouse to the citizens, but Zac was far too tired for something like that. He only wanted to get his rewards then rest up for a day or two.

They soon reached their destination, and Zac walked up to Abby's private floor in one of the wings after issuing a set of orders for Joanna to start preparing the Valkyries for the Mystic Realm. He entered after a knock and found Abby hovering in the middle of a bunch of screens. She closed them and turned toward him, and Zac was surprised to see that she had grown since last time.

The diameter of the floating eyeball must have increased by 20 to 30 percent, and her shimmering eye looked even more magical compared to before. It seemed like his Administrator had reached E-Grade or at least evolved her race.

Another new addition was a golem standing in the corner of the room, a massive construct of polished stone that reached almost three meters into the air. One of its arms was just a long spike, and the other formed a shield. It didn't move in the slightest when Zac entered, but Zac still felt a vague pressure from it, meaning it should probably have the combat strength of an Early E-Grade cultivator.

Had the Stargazer bought herself a bodyguard?

"It's been a while," Zac smiled as he sat down at a free seat.

"Well, you've been busy," Abby said as her massive eye turned toward him. "I'm guessing you're here about the

reward?”

“So there is one, after all?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up in anticipation.

“Yes, two actually,” Abby said.

Chapter 530: Incentives for Exploration

“There are two rewards? What are they?” Zac asked with anticipation.

“You could say one is for you and one is for Port Atwood. The first is a pretty interesting mobile array, called the [**Spatial Gate Array**]. It is a two-part array that has two functions, the first of which will allow you to teleport to Port Atwood from almost anywhere in the whole sector once every decade,” Abby said.

“What? Can’t I already do that as a world leader?” Zac asked with disappointment. “And without the wait time.”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple. Nexus Hubs requires upgrades. You might need to do multiple jumps to return if the hubs you use are too low-quality. Each jump is a risk of entering a hostile environment,” Abby said. “Besides, from what I’ve heard your identity has become a bit sensitive in your sector.”

“So?” Zac asked, still feeling a bit peeved.

“What if your identity gets exposed while traveling? The first thing that a City Lord would do is deactivating the teleportation arrays, trapping you in place,” Abby said. “Not much you can do about that apart from either taking over the town or fleeing to some other force in hopes of using their teleportation array.

“This array could help you circumvent this, making you far harder to pin down. You could be stuck on a desolate planet or in the void of space itself. As long as you’re not in a hidden realm you can just activate this treasure and get sent home as soon as you’ve infused enough energy,” Abby explained.

Zac whistled in understanding. It did indeed sound indeed convenient. It would allow him to venture out to improve himself with greater peace of mind. The cultists joining hands with the undead had reminded how exposed his people were while he wasn't around. There was a limit of what one could do with the Town Shop against a powerful enemy, after all.

Once a decade was a very long cool-down, but it was enough in case of an emergency. Things usually moved pretty slowly in the multiverse. With people's lifespans being in the millennia it was unlikely that Earth would be attacked multiple times within a decade when things had stabilized.

"It is an extremely convenient array and valuable lifeline for someone who is planning on traveling the multiverse. Any outlaw or wandering cultivator would kill for something like this. You would almost become as hard to trap as a Karmic or Spatial Cultivator," Abby said. "The escape measure has various good functions as well, such as countermeasures to spatial lockdowns and tampering."

"What about the other function?" Zac asked.

"It allows you to erect a temporary Teleportation Array lasting a few minutes, even out in the wilderness," Abby said. "You need the materials for it though, and it has a downside. It's expensive. Very expensive."

"How expensive?" Zac asked with some worry.

"Five times the standard rate," Abby said.

"Doesn't that make it useless?" Zac blanched.

The reason that almost no one below the D-Grade would travel between worlds was the cost of teleportation. It wasn't like weaker cultivators didn't want to travel to Mystic Realms to gain titles and experience, but they simply couldn't afford it. Just the fees alone could ruin even a wealthy scion.

Zac was extremely wealthy for a self-made cultivator at his level, but just the prospect of teleporting to the Allbright Empire or some of the other cultivation spots he had in mind was a source of some dread. Paying five times that price

would put him in the poor house. It was like taking a helicopter to go buy groceries.

“It’s a bit extravagant, but it is a good option to have. It doesn’t have the cool-down like the escape function of the **[Spatial Gate Array]**, meaning you never need to worry about being stranded on some desolate planet,” Abby said.

“Is the escape function as expensive?” Zac asked.

“No, that function is free. You just need to set up a base array somewhere safe,” Abby explained.

Zac immediately decided he would put it in his cultivation cave, and had Abby make the arrangements. With the layers of arrays that place had become even more fortified than his compound, and he could empower the protections even further with the new arrays available in the store.

More importantly, only his sister, Abby, and Triv knew the exact location of that place, making the risk of sabotage lower. The **[Spatial Gate Array]** was pretty amazing all-in-all and something that he didn’t even know he needed until now.

Even if the instant escape function was used up he would still be able to construct a mobile Teleportation Array. It did mean that he would need to walk around with more Nexus Coins than he anticipated, but the Auction should take care of his lack of funds soon enough. Zac wondered what this thing could be worth, and he opened his Town Shop menu to see if it was available there.

“You don’t need to look. This isn’t something available in the Town Shop, no matter how much of the inventory you unlock. It only contains Base Arrays. In fact, you shouldn’t rely on those arrays too much. There are extremely effective Array Breakers readily available in the Multiverse for every single array in the shop,” the Stargazer snickered.

“What?” Zac exclaimed. “So they’re useless?”

“Well no. They might be useless against invasions of advanced enemies who have done their research about your defenses, but they work just fine against weaker foes and beasts. It’s not

like anyone on Earth can get their hands on those kinds of siege tools right now,” Abby explained.

Zac sighed in relief, but he was still worried about the future. It felt like he was buying a door lock that everyone had a master key for. It wasn't like forces like the Underworld Council and the New World Government were the enemies he was worried about, but rather the more advanced forces that might make their way to Earth in the future in search of his secrets and wealth.

That was years away though, and he would have ample time to construct individualized defensive arrays. Kenzie might even be able to adjust the store-bought ones so that they wouldn't be so easy to break open with standardized solutions.

“Worrying me for nothing,” Zac snorted. “What about the second reward?”

“Nothing as exciting, but still something of use to you. It's an upgradeable puppet army,” Abby said. “They can both defend your lands autonomously, or you can control them with an adept array master. Your sister could use them instead of those cursed items she seems to like.”

“How strong are they?” Zac asked.

“There are 1000 Soldiers, each equivalent to Early E-Grade, with 3 leaders at Middle E-Grade. They should be able to keep most forces of Earth at bay for the foreseeable future,” the stargazer explained. “I haven't summoned them all yet as you need to pick a spawn Zone.”

“Is that one of them behind me?” Zac asked as he pointed at the unmoving golem standing in the corner.

“Just so. I took one out to make sure I understood the reward. But now that you mention it, an Administrator without any guards is highly irregular,” Abby said.

“Just keep it,” Zac snorted before he considered what he could do with an additional army. “Can I bring them to the Mystic Realm?”

Pure power wouldn't cut it in the Mystic Realm judging by what he'd heard so far. Half the battle would be exploring the

research base to find the Dimensional Artifact, while securing your base from the other factions. That was an endeavor that was manpower intensive, and he would feel much better about sending a bunch of puppets into the depths of the Research Lab rather than the Valkyries and his soldiers.

“No, you can consider them a defensive structure. You can send them out by themselves, though they work best in squads under the three leaders,” Abby explained, dashing his hopes.

“How big an area can they guard autonomously?” Zac asked with some disappointment.

“An island of this size wouldn’t be an issue,” Abby said without hesitation.

Zac asked a few more questions, until he understood the function of the puppet army properly. He eventually decided to keep two of the armies in Port Atwood while sending the last one to Mystic Island to protect against any further sabotage. He could change the composition in the future though, allowing him to protect the settlements that were more important to Port Atwood.

“You said they’re upgradeable? How do I upgrade them?” Zac probed.

“You will have to ask the golems over at the shipyard. The System has connected the puppet army to them, which is good news for you. Any upgrade they do will be of a much higher quality than a standardized solution,” Abby said.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the Creators would be in charge of upgrading them. They might turn out pretty weird after Karunthel got his spider-hands on the puppets, but their offensive capabilities would probably be extremely impressive. He had to head over there later, in either case, to see about the possibilities of upgrading the shipyard.

“One item which will freely allow me to return to Earth, another that will allow me to protect the town while I’m gone? Do you think the System is sending me a message?” Zac said as a joke after instructing Abby where to set up the puppet

armies, but he was surprised to see that the Stargazer agreed without hesitation.

“Of course it is,” Abby said as matter of course. “The System wants you to become stronger, but this planet is holding you back. The best route of you becoming a powerhouse is to spread your wings, so I wouldn’t be surprised that the System calculated the most pertinent rewards to help you become stronger were those that allowed you to leave.”

Zac shrugged, not sure if he believed Abby’s explanation or not, but the gifts were indeed exactly what he needed. The **[Spatial Gate Array]** was especially valuable, as it would allow himself and his companions to escape certain death in many situations, and it would be useful all the way until he reached C-Grade and started traveling beyond the Zecia Sector.

Since he was already there he asked the Stargazer to update him on the state of things, but he quickly felt himself being submerged in a sea of data he didn’t understand. Abby quickly caught on and slowed down, and finally stopped narrating altogether.

“The day-to-day running of a force isn’t something the leader bothers with. Are the elders of mighty Clans or Sects busying themselves each day with diplomatic issues and crop yields? No, they are cultivating. You don’t have a younger generation to deal with this for you, but you do have me and many other promising administrators,” Abby said.

Zac knew that was true. The patriarch or sect leaders were never the most powerful people of a force, but rather something that could be considered middle management. They were powerful enough to command respect, but they only ran the day to day operations. The real decision-makers were the elders who either traveled the sector for opportunities or were secluded in cultivation in hopes of breaking through.

That wasn’t to say that those positions were useless. The sect leader did have access to most of the resources of the force, and they were in a far better position to break through in the

future. Most of the grand elders of a clan had probably been the clan leader for a couple of millennia once upon a time.

This was probably also why Abby was pushing for Zac to be such a hands-off boss. She had clearly evolved since they met last time, no doubt benefitting from having almost free reins when running his force. He would have to put in some checks and balances soon though, but some pilfering of public resources was pretty much bound to happen.

Of course, there were limits to everything.

“How are criminals dealt with today?” Zac asked out of the blue.

“Thrown out of your sphere of influence or killed, depending on the severity of their crime. You don’t have any dungeon at the moment, though you might want to consider building one. They are usually an effective deterrent against criminals,” Abby said. “Your army is keeping the law at the moment.”

“Julia wants to set up a proper Law Enforcement Section for Port Atwood. What do you think about that?” Zac asked.

“Most sects and clans have some sort of Law Enforcement to keep the rabble in check,” Abby said with a bob. “How they deal with transgressions vary wildly between forces. That girl seems capable enough, but she would need someone more powerful to help enforce the laws. The leader of the Law Enforcement Hall of a Sect is usually one of the strongest cultivators around. They have to be.”

Zac nodded in agreement. Just Julia wouldn’t be enough. His first choice would be Ilvere, but he was already in charge of the Army. But on further thought, Zac felt Janos might be a pretty decent choice. He didn’t speak much, but he was as powerful as Ilvere while having a skillset extremely suited for incapacitating without killing.

He left the government building soon after and made his way back to his courtyard. The festivities in the town had only grown during his talk with Abby, but he was too tired to join in on the excitement. He found a drone mentioning that Kenzie

had left for Mystic Island to work on the tunnel there. It was for the best with the cultists acting as they did.

The chance of him being able to steal one of their entrances felt slim at best, especially after the New World Government already had done so once. So he instead spent the next day in rest, working on restoring his body. The worst of his burns were healed by that point, making him look like a boiled lobster instead of a grilled chicken.

The wound from breaking open his node was healing nicely as well, though Zac had only just started redrawing his pathway. Zac guessed would need another week or so to return to 100%, but that didn't mean he needed to sit around in his courtyard. There were a lot of things he could do, some of which he had put off for too long already.

Zac somberly left his courtyard and walked over to the teleportation array. He took a deep breath before he stepped onto the array and he appeared at the top of a small hill covered in flowers a few seconds later. It was his first time coming to this specific island, the only prison of his archipelago.

The secluded island where Hannah and David lived.

Chapter 531: Peace

The island might be the only place where Zac held a captive, but it looked like a paradise rather than a dungeon. A vibrant array of colors spread across the hill as flowers covered almost every inch apart from a small path. It wasn't wildflowers though, but rather a meticulously arranged garden that stretched from the teleportation array down into a field below.

If that was all it wouldn't have been too surprising, as getting flowers to bloom was infinitely easier now that there was Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere. What actually surprised Zac was that the flowers seemed to contain a hint of the Dao, and together managed to form an elusive Dao Field.

Zac couldn't tell what it was as it was just a weak hint at the moment, but if given time it might grow into something impressive. He slowly walked along the path, spreading out his own Dao of the Bodhi to get a sense of what was going on.

“From what I'd heard about you I would have thought that your aura would turn my flowers into dust rather than fill them with happiness,” a voice drifted over from a tree to the side, causing Zac's heart to lurch. “But your Dao almost feels like that of a farmer's. Or perhaps of a forest elf?”

Part of Zac's reaction was because he recognized the voice, but part of it was that Zac actually hadn't sensed David at all as he sat beneath the poplar at the edge of the forest. He had utterly blended in with the surroundings, causing Zac's senses to pretty much register him as another shrub or something.

Zac still felt some nervousness as memories of the meeting with David during his Tribulation flashed through his mind. However, it was a completely different David who sat beneath the tree and enjoyed the rays of sun that managed to make their way through the thick foliage.

He wasn't disfigured for one. He still had a bunch of scars, but they were only thin white lines on healthy sun-tanned skin, much like the ones Zac had before he evolved his Race to E-Grade. There was also not hatred and blame in his eyes, but rather an almost eerie tranquility.

Zac couldn't help but wonder just what had happened to the boisterous man during his months on this island. Or had the previously energetic personality already died from being captured by the cultist? Or perhaps it already happened during the Tutorial when Izzie died?

There was only one way to find out what went through his head, so Zac deactivated his Dao and walked over with a smile.

"It's called the Dao of the Bodhi, and it comes from the Seed of Trees and the Seed of Sanctuary," he explained, not hiding anything. "I actually have a class related to nature, though I focus more on fighting."

"That explains it," David said as he handed Zac a fruit from a basket next to him. "Taste it, I grew these myself."

Zac looked down at the fruit that looked like a red plum before took a bite, mostly out of courtesy. A sweet taste almost exploded in his mouth, making Zac wolf down the rest of the fruit in a second.

"This might be one of the most delicious things I've ever eaten," Zac said with wide eyes, not exaggerating at all.

The fruit wasn't quite as tasty as the Fruit of Ascension, but the plum wasn't actually a spiritual fruit. It contained a weak hint of Cosmic Energy, but so did everything else in this day and age. The taste must have come from something else, like how it had been nurtured by David.

"It's my first harvest," David smiled as he handed Zac another one. "Months of work for 29 plums. The next harvest will be bigger though, and I believe the fruits will be even tastier."

Zac ate the second one with a lot more reserve, but he actually stopped halfway through. It was nice sitting here like this

under the rustling trees while gazing at the fields of flowers. But it was not why he came here.

“... I’m sorry,” Zac sighed. “I’m sorry about you getting captured because of me. I’m sorry about putting off visiting for so long.”

“You shouldn’t carry the blame for the deeds of others,” David said with a shake of his head. “And I know you have your hands full. We’re all just scraping by here in the apocalypse. At least now I’ve found my path, and I am at peace.”

“You know, I have a few islands that specializes in farming, and a spot on the main continent that has Spiritual Soil. You’re welcome to head over there if you want if you need seeds or just experiment with various ideas,” Zac offered.

“Perhaps I will one day. But I feel I still have a lot to gain by staying on this island. Besides, I don’t want to leave Hannah here all alone,” David smiled. “Both Izzie and Tyler passed away during the Tutorial, so there’s only the two of us still alive of the old gang. There’s no point in going back to Greenworth either. We have to stick together.”

Zac didn’t take offense that David didn’t include him in his list of ‘the gang’. He had just met Hannah a few months before the integration, whereas the four of them had been friends since the first grade. As for him not going back to Greenworth, it was no surprise.

Port Atwood had long since gotten a pretty good overview of who was alive and who was dead or missing around the world thanks to their cooperation with the Marshall Clan. It had already been confirmed that both of David’s parents had passed away during the first chaotic month, while his big brother and cousin had passed away in the very same Tutorial that Kenzie was part of.

There was nothing really connecting him to their old hometown any longer, just like how it was with Zac.

It was the same for most people of Port Atwood. With only a tenth of the population of Earth surviving the Integration most had lost their whole families. A few lucky ones had been able

to help their households move to Port Atwood or another city under his control, but most were left alone in this new reality of theirs.

It was a cause of concern as quite a few people were suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress on the island. The few therapists on the island had their hands full, and there were all sorts of supports group for those who had trouble acclimatizing.

However, there was undeniably something about cultivation that changed you to your core. Perhaps it was the increase in Intelligence of Wisdom that made your mind stronger, or perhaps it was the effect of their ruthless reality, but a surprising number of people were able to bear the mental strain just fine. They kept moving forward while the people around them were dying left and right.

Zac himself was a prime example of that. Someone who had gone through so much bloodshed and near-death experiences over the past years should be a broken mess by now. But he honestly felt fine, apart from exhaustion that could be felt all the way to his core. Even the fact that his ex-girlfriend tried to murder him just a few short months ago barely registered on his mind.

“... How is she?” Zac asked.

“Not bad. Not great. She doesn’t like this island as much as I do. But I guess she agrees that it beats prison,” David said with a wry smile. “We... are dating.”

“That’s good,” Zac only nodded in response, not surprised in the slightest.

The two of them shared a deep history, and they had survived the Tutorial and everything else together. Besides, something was almost bound to happen with only two people marooned on an island with just the occasional visitor there to drop off supplies. It was either start dating or turn on each other.

“It’s her who planted these flowers around the array, though I made the pattern. I think she sees the arrays as the door to her cell, and she wanted to hide it in beauty.”

“Do you blame me for sending her here?” Zac asked.

“No,” David smiled as he looked across his fields. “She was under the influence of that infiltrator, but she was ultimately exploited because there was a character flaw to exploit. Luckily, you survived, or she would have been a real sinner of Earth.”

Zac sighed as he looked out across the flowers, not sure what to say next.

“Come, let me show you what I’ve done so far,” David finally said as he stood up, and Zac was relieved to see him walking with neither a limp nor needing some sort of cane as he did in the vision.

The two toured the fields and the pruned forest that David spent his days tending, mostly talking about things of lesser import. Zac described some of the races and odd things he had encountered during his visit to the Tower of Eternity, and David spoke about his life on the island and his insights into the various plants he cared for.

The longer they spent together, the more Zac felt that David reminded him of someone else; Abbot Everlasting Peace. Not in their manner of speech, but some sort of mental tranquility that made them one with their surroundings.

However, Zac didn’t feel that David had become one with the universe and taken the first step on the paths of Karma or Samsara, but rather that he had become one with nature. Zac was the one with a mid-tier Nature-aspected Dao Fragment, yet it felt like David was the one who was more in tune with the plants around them.

Zac even asked David about it, but he didn’t have any real answer. He only felt that it was a natural result of persistence, and being wholehearted in his desire to grow and connect with the plants. David said that he believed that everything had a soul, or at least the potential for birthing one, in this new reality of theirs.

There was an important truth in there, something that Zac felt might one day become extremely important in his own

cultivation. The matter of sincerity toward the Dao, something that he felt that he was currently lacking a bit. He had made amazing gains to his understanding of the Dao over the past year, but he wouldn't say that he was sincere in his interest.

He had worked so hard on the Daos in order to get stronger, rather than having a desire to delve deeper into the mysteries of the universe. He honestly didn't care all too much about trees or coffins, but rather the power the fragments represented.

But that might become a bottleneck that kept him back in the future. He was just scraping by, reliant on treasures and lucky opportunities to shore up his weakness. Zac felt he would need to find some sort of common ground with his Daos sooner or later, and he felt that taking a hint from David was an important first step.

He slowly his Dao Field once more, but he let energy naturally seep out of his body as he tried to connect with the fields around him. And he had to admit that David was onto something. It felt like many of the trees were living and the energy inside them responded to the touch of his Dao.

"You see," David said with a smile, somehow understanding what was going on.

Their stroll soon took them to a small hill by the sea some distance from the teleporter. On top of it stood a beautiful farmhouse surrounded by flowers. It almost looked like something out of a fairy tale, with the glistening sea and rustling plants creating an extremely soothing atmosphere.

However, Zac wasn't able to completely immerse himself in the beauty as his eyes were trained on something else; his former girlfriend who was currently tending to a small patch outside one of the windows of the house. She wore a simple dress that somewhat reminded Zac of the Amish, but there were lines of fractals lining the hem.

Zac guessed that it was something that his sister had sent over, as he doubted that the Demons would be so accommodating. Hannah looked up when she heard them approaching, a small smile on her face. However, the smile immediately froze on

her face when she saw Zac standing next to David. Zac only looked back at her, surprised at how calm he felt inside.

The same couldn't be said for Hannah as she hurried back inside the building with her head hanging low. The door slammed shut, leaving the two of them outside. Zac was a bit surprised by the violent reaction, though he guessed she might be afraid that he was coming here for revenge.

"I'm sorry," David sighed. "I guess she's not ready to face you just yet."

"It's fine. We can talk another day," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Tell her that I don't carry any resentment for what happened."

It was true that Zac didn't mind not being able to talk things through with his ex. He had mostly come here for David rather than Hannah, as he was a victim while she was ultimately a perpetrator. Seeing that she looked fine was enough for him, as it allowed him to erase the image that had built up in his mind since the Heart Tribulation.

Zac was just about to leave, but David suddenly spoke up after some hesitation.

"Wait, before you go. Hannah wrote you this some time ago, but she never sent it out," he said as he took out a sealed envelope from his Cosmos Sack. "I think she would regret it if you just left like this though."

Zac accepted the letter, and a movement in the periphery caught his eye. It was Hannah who looked at them from the second story of the small house. Their eyes met once more before Hannah sighed and shook her head. She receded further into the room, while Zac turned toward the Teleportation Array without another word. He felt a sense of serenity, but also some lament as he walked through the fields, the beauty of the island barely registering in his mind.

Peace because he finally faced a fear that had been buried deep in his heart, and sadness because it felt like yet one more of his scant few connections to the past had been severed.

Chapter 532: Upgrading the Shipyard

Zac looked down at the letter in his hand as he walked the last stretch toward the array, but he eventually put it away unopened and unread. He didn't want to ruin the state he was in right now, and he took one last look at the world David had built for himself and Hannah.

David had said something that stuck with him as they walked along the fields. He said that the world had become extremely terrifying, but it had also become far more beautiful. David had chosen to focus on the latter, which was what had turned this island to such an amazing place.

It was true. With the Dao unlocked the world had fundamentally changed, like a bleak tapestry having been given color and meaning. Wasn't the quest for meaning something that so many struggled with before the Integration? Searching for an understanding of the universe and what their place was.

Now it was actually possible.

Over the past year he had just run from one goal to another, desperately clawing himself forward in his pursuit of power. But that wasn't any way to live. He would eventually crash and burn if things continued this way, or he would at least end up with a shaky understanding of the world around him. It wasn't that he needed to ignore all the things that needed to be done, but he also needed to find some joy in his life.

This was the mindset he needed to remember, along with the sincerity he needed to nurture as he kept working on his Dao Fragments.

Zac took one last breath of the enticing mix of aromas before he activated the Teleportation Array. He also bought a

comprehensive set of upgrades to the Arrays put in place by his sister. It would take decently strong E-Grade beast a lot of effort to break through the barriers, and Zac would be instantly warned anywhere on Earth.

He briefly considered adding some Farming Arrays to the island as well, but he eventually decided against it. David wasn't looking for efficiency or actually farming for profit. He was rather cultivating his heart and his mind through farming, and arrays wouldn't help with that. He left the fields as they were, not putting his thumb on the scale any further.

However, Zac didn't return to his compound but rather decided to tour his domain for a bit. Visiting Abby had reminded him how long it was since he had seen the day to day operations of his force, and now was as good a time as any to check things out.

He visited the farming islands first, but he was surprised to see that the scale actually hadn't increased over the past months. Zac asked a foreman what was going on, and learned that most of the herb production had been moved to either his own island or the large Spirit Soil Fields on the main continent.

The old farming island was mainly used for growing high-quality crops for the people of Port Atwood now, rather than Spiritual Herbs for cultivation.

It was a step in the right direction in Zac's mind, as it showed that people were not only thinking of surviving and getting stronger. People were no longer living day to day, and didn't just plant what would grow the fastest. They were rather growing rice and all kinds of vegetables to improve their quality of life, while simultaneously providing them with greater profit.

He could see the same energy in the towns that were studded along the archipelago, though some of the verve no doubt came from the fact that the Incursions had finally been closed. A massive harbor had sprung in Refugee Harbor unbeknownst to him, and he could spot dozens of boats sailing out on the sea, likely to catch fish or search for valuable herbs underwater.

All kinds of shops had cropped up as well, real businesses started by people. Strong-looking warriors walked down the streets as well, seemingly returning from monster hunting ventures. Most of them carried the insignia of Port Atwood, meaning they were part of his army, whereas others looked like free cultivators.

Zac felt that it really wasn't a coincidence that humans littered the Multiverse. They were resilient creatures that could adapt so quickly to such a drastic change of their lives. Or perhaps that was a too generous a conclusion. With only around 10% of all humans remaining, one might rather say that those unable to adapt had long perished.

In either case, it felt extremely gratifying to walk through the bustling streets, his real identity hidden with **[Thousand Faces]**. He had already arranged a secondary set of credentials with Adran, a Port Atwood inspector which gave him blanket access without having to expose his true identity.

He soon continued from the local cluster of towns to the various alien towns he had snatched out of the hands of the invaders. However, he quickly realized that most of them were little more than outposts who would be hard pressed to do much more than act as scouts for any threats. He had multiple mines and fields standing empty, with no personnel there to extract the resources.

He needed more people. That was the biggest takeaway he got after making the rounds. Thankfully, he shouldn't be as hard-pressed to attract talents as when he had to sell himself with the help of Sap Trang in the market of New Washington. There should be millions of people willing to relocate to one of his towns.

He finally made a series of jumps that took him to the small outpost at the edge of the unhabituated continent. It had surprisingly grown to a proper town by now, and Zac saw quite a few molemen walking the streets. He found the local mayor, a human administrator who worked under Adran, to find out what was going on.

It turned out that Westbound Harbor had turned into a massive trade hub in the short time since it was established. It still wasn't possible to freely travel back and forth between the two continents as there were still the cultists roaming about. Of course, it was not solely a security issue, but also a financial one.

There were still massive untapped resources in the underworld that were almost worthless to its inhabitants, while they lacked some things that existed in abundance on Pangea. It would be foolish to not take advantage of this opportunity, so Port Atwood allowed people to travel here from the underworld to trade with their own merchants.

These merchants would then head over to the other continent, to unload the inventory before returning once more. It was exceedingly lucrative, but Zac snorted when he saw how nervous the Mayor started to become the more Zac asked about the situation. A short interrogation later had netted Zac a shocking 200 million Nexus Coins that the administrator had gathered through bribes and skimming Port Atwood's coffers.

It wasn't that much compared to the massive wealth Zac controlled at the moment, but it was still shocking how much one single person had managed to take for himself in just a few months thanks to the lack of oversight. He really needed to set up a proper organization to take care of issues like this.

The mayor obviously couldn't stay on, so Zac released his aura in the government building, which immediately alerted the guards staying put. A squad of demons appeared a few seconds later, but they visibly relaxed when they saw it was Zac who had appeared rather than some dangerous threat.

"This guy has proven a bit greedy. Have someone new take over. Remind the next mayor about the value of moderation," Zac said to the guards, who nodded as he sneered at the despondent administrator.

Zac also asked the guards on duty about whether they had found anything of interest on the continent, but there were nothing at all for at least four days' travel inland. There were just endless dunes. However, initial estimations put the

continent at least half the size of Pangea, which meant there were ample room for multiple climate zones.

Some day he would travel further inland assisted by his flying treasure, but not today. He had some breathing room before he needed to enter the Mystic Realm, but not to the point that he could map such a massive place. He instead returned to his courtyard before he started walking toward the Creator Shipyard.

This was one of the things Zac had looked forward to since getting the Iliex Shipyard as a reward, though upgrading the shipyard had gone down in priority somewhat since he got his hands on his flying treasure. But equipping his army with proper Flying Treasures would be a huge boon for his force in general, as long as he could stomach the price.

Zac soon arrived at the shipyard and headed straight into the Liaison's office. Rahm stood behind a reception, like he had been expecting Zac's arrival. Of course, knowing this particular Creator it was just as possible that he had simply stood there without moving for a couple of days.

"Lord Atwood. Congratulations on your evolution," Rahm said with his usual staid expression.

"Thank you," Zac smiled. "Is Foreman Karunthel here?"

"About time you came to visit," a rumbling voice snorted as Karunthel emerged from the depths of the building. "Didn't you evolve almost two weeks ago?"

"I'm sorry. There's just too much for me to do," Zac said with a wry smile. "You don't happen to have a clone technique that can allow me to get more stuff done?"

"Takes a certain aptitude to make the most of clones, and I'm not too sure you have that kind of aptitude, you little brat," Karunthel laughed, not seeming all that miffed about being forgotten.

"Well, it was just a joke," Zac said, though he couldn't help but feel a irritated about the low evaluation.

It really felt like he would have to work a bit on his image. Everyone seemed to think that he was just an unkillable brute

swinging his axe around. Certainly, it was mostly true, but he still wanted to be known for more than just that.

“Are you here about upgrading our facilities, Lord Atwood?” Rahm asked, conveniently giving Zac an opening for the real reason he came.

“Yes, exactly,” Zac nodded. “You said I could upgrade the shipyard after I evolved. Is the process automatic, or do I need to pay a price..?”

“Not so fast, kiddo. I am supposed to come up with some sort of quest for you before we can release the good items,” Karunthel mused.

“We already have instruct-“ Rahm tried to interject, but he was silenced by a wave of one of Rahm’s legs.

“How about this. Being stuck on this desolate rock is causing delays to my experiments. I am lacking some materials that I cannot get my hands on here. Bring me what I require and we’ll process the upgrade for you,” the foreman decided.

“This is not-“

“This is not an unreasonable request indeed, *thank you Rahm*, I know,” Karunthel said as a dense aura spread out throughout the lobby.

Only then was Zac reminded that the spider golem in front of him was no doubt a D-Grade being, and not an early D-Grade warrior either. His aura was far beyond that of the Technocrat Captain that almost got him killed, and Zac could barely breathe in front the suffocating pressure. Rahm didn’t look affected at all though, keeping his neutral expressions.

However, he seemed to relent to the demands of his boss as he only sighed and took a step back.

“That’s better,” Karunthel smiled as the pressure disappeared. “Here, get me these things. It might be a bit challenging to gather them all, but I’ll add something extra as a reward.”

“Get you what?” Zac asked, but he soon understood what Karunthel was talking about as a quest prompt appeared in front of him.

Materials for Karunthel (Unique, Limited): Acquire 100 Kilograms of [Urgarat Flakes], 1 kilogram of [Realm Locus], 1 living [Ferric Worldeater], 1 [Daemonic Manastone] Reward: Upgrade Iliex Shipyard to Early D-Grade. 1 Custom-Designed Early D-Grade Vessel. (0/4)

Zac read through the quest, his mouth turning a bit upward as he felt like he had just gotten a standard fetch-quest from a MMO game. The problem was that he didn't recognize a single one of the materials. The last two seemed to be pretty rare, as they only needed one of each. The demons might have some clues about the last one, but the third item seemed exceedingly troublesome.

"How am I supposed to catch something that eats worlds?" Zac asked with a grimace.

"They're not as dangerous as it sounds," Karunthel laughed. "Well, not the young ones, anyway."

"Where can I get these things?" Zac asked, hoping to get a running start on the quest.

"Sorry, can't give any clues. Finding the items is half the challenge," Karunthel said, his smile widening even further.

Zac couldn't help but feel that the creator foreman was messing with him a bit, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He would have to inquire with someone more knowledgeable, like Brazla or Calrin. It felt a bit difficult, However, Zac was more interested in the rewards right now.

"What's this reward at the end?" Zac asked with anticipation.

"It's a reward for completing the quest. We'll be able to provide a flagship vessel for your force, and I'll be in charge of it myself since you're helping me out," Karunthel explained. "I'll build it based on your specifications."

"D-Grade vessel. A Cosmic Vessel?" Zac said, and he couldn't help but look up at the sky through a window.

"Don't get your hopes up too high, brat," the foreman snorted. "I only make good things, but it is still an Early D-Grade vessel. You will not be able to explore the whole Sector in that

thing, but you might be able to visit neighboring planets as long as they're not too far away."

"What about the customization?" Zac asked.

"The reward has a set budget," Rahm said. "It cannot excel at everything for the quoted price."

"You could skimp out on the spatial arrays and focus only on offensive capabilities, turning it into a slow-moving mobile fortress. Or you could do the opposite, making a scout vessel that can reach further into the cosmos," the foreman added. "Just figure out what you want to use the thing for, and I'll whip up something nice."

Chapter 533: Non-lethal Lethality

A keening cry echoed out across the jungle as Zac swung his axe in one lightning-quick motion, his abyssal eyes keeping track of the streams of life inside the target. However, the massive boar didn't fall apart into two gory slabs from the swing as one might expect, but it rather just seemed enraged.

A deep cut had appeared on its flank, and while it was freely bleeding down on the forest floor it was far from a grievous wound. With the high Vitality of an E-Grade beast the wound would soon enough heal by itself without any intervention.

"Kill through a non-lethal cut," Zac muttered as he dodged the boar's charge.

He had been walking around the jungles surrounding the former volcano over the past five days, fighting for a couple of hours while spending the rest on cultivation in his cave. He knew that any potential progress before the Mystic Realm closed its doors was limited, and he tried to make the most of it until Kenzie managed to crack open the tunnel.

The most obvious solution he could think of was gaining **[Blighted Cut]**, a skill that would hopefully improve his offensive capabilities in his undead form. He needed a mainstay skill in the vein of **[Chop]**, and this might just be it. Walking around in nature like this would also allow him to bond with nature for lack of a better word, trying to incorporate the lessons he learned from visiting David.

But completing the quest was proving more difficult than expected, though he was making decent inroads. The wound in the boar's side had already turned into a sickly dark color, and the beast shook from the pain.

This effect solely came about from infusing his blade with the Fragment of the Coffin, as this was the only method he could think of to complete the quest. He had already tried killing an evolved beast the same way he killed Vul, the Barghest alpha, all those months ago. He had inflicted a shallow wound that blinded a panther before tricking it into impaling itself on a sharpened log that he had prepared.

He had technically killed it with a single non-lethal cut that time, but the System wasn't impressed. That meant that his initial guess was more likely, that he needed to use his Dao to kill the beast. Considering his class the most likely suspect was obviously Fragment of the Coffin, and the boar was just the latest experiment.

The wound had already been inflicted, so he didn't swing again. Zac strained his mind to connect to the wound instead, trying to impose his will upon it. It actually worked, and the wound kept getting worse instead of closing itself.

This was a method he had devised after discussing the Dao with his sister. He had already come to terms with the fact that his control over the Dao was pretty bad, and he probably wasn't going to form any Dao Arrays like those Catheya described anytime soon. But he had also realized that there were more ways to make the most of your mental energy than just using fine control.

Kenzie had told him of the various ways she used her Dao infusion when fighting. Jeeves had taught her various ways that she could maximize the efficiency of her Cosmic Energy and Dao, doing as much damage as possible for as low a cost as possible. For example, when she shot the fireballs that seemed to bounce from head to head between her targets, it wasn't the skill's work.

Her skill was just a normal fireball, as basic as they came, but it changed with the help of her Seed of Tinder. It only managed to bounce around like that because she controlled her Seed of Tinder to move toward the next target from a distance, and the skill kind of just followed along if she controlled things just right.

Zac never used the Dao like that when it came to **[Chop]** for example. He just crammed a bunch of Mental Energy into the fractal edge before he launched it at his enemies. But he understood now that he didn't actually need to disconnect his soul from the strike immediately, though it did free up his concentration for other things.

That was what he was doing now with the strike against the boar. He was trying to use the corrosive elements of the Fragment of the Coffin to worsen the condition of the beast, turning a non-lethal strike lethal. He urged his mental energies festering in the wound to spread toward its heart, to enter the bloodstream, to fight off the natural resistance of the animal. Anything that could kill it.

But he suddenly felt a pang in his mind, and the connection was broken. It was the natural resistance of an evolved being that booted the foreign intruder, and Zac knew that the wound would start to close if he didn't do anything.

The attempt was a failure, but Zac still didn't feel disappointed.

He had managed to hold the connection longer than his last attempt, and at a greater distance as well. He was quickly understanding that it wasn't really a matter of control or skill, but it was more akin to learning to use a limb you didn't know you had. A bit more and he would get there.

Then again, Zac understood that maintaining the Dao inside his enemy was only part of the requirements to complete the quest for **[Blighted Cut]**. There was also the issue of causing enough damage, which was as much an issue of understanding his Dao and his target as it was about maintaining its effectiveness.

His first attempt had simply been to keep the wound festering as long as possible in hopes that the beast would succumb that way. However, he quickly learned that maintaining a status quo wasn't enough, and it was a losing battle. The mental energy infused into his strike was only so strong, and it would be slowly whittled down by the natural defenses of his target.

So he couldn't just run out the clock, but he needed to proactively push his skill forward. This was where his own limitations came in, as he simply wasn't able to turn the Dao into fine strands that burrowed toward his intended targets like some sort of designer poison. He could only push it in the general direction, just like he pushed the massive clouds of energy forward during his Dao Discourse.

But Zac was surprised how big an impact this simple action had. The previously shallow cut had quickly turned into serious festering wounds that would ail the beasts even after his mental energy had been routed.

The boar roared in pain and anger as it charged Zac once more, but a chain shot out from his back and punched a large hole in its forehead. There was not much point in practicing at the same target over and over, as the beasts quickly learned to resist his attempts.

But that was fine as there was no lack of beasts in the enormous forest, and Zac guessed that hundreds broke through to E-Grade every day right now. With the cultists gone and the defensive towers destroyed, the only threat to the beasts was the flock of birds from the mountains.

It felt like Earth in general was fast reaching a tipping point, where millions of peak F-Grade beasts finally broke the shackles of their inferior bloodlines and took the next step on the path of cultivation. The beasts had always been a step ahead of the cultivators since the integration, and the humans were fast approaching peak F-Grade as well.

That was great news for Zac, though killing level 76 beasts weren't all that beneficial for his cultivation either. However, it did provide him with a seemingly endless supply of targets to practice both his Dao and his control over **[Love's Bond]**.

Any Spirit Tool created by the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was supposed to be a perfect fit for his needs and something that would be able to follow him in his cultivation until the end. He needed to become better at using it, and not only relying on his axe.

Doing so would not only improve his overall strength, as using both his spirit tools at the same time wasn't a problem, but it might even give him a greater understanding of both his classes and his cultivation path.

It was probably the best he could do for Alea as well. Just hanging around his neck day after day wouldn't challenge her spirit. Spirit Tools grew and were refined through battle, and only through being used could they bring out their full potential.

The boar fell to the ground with a thud, but Zac didn't bother harvesting the meat since it was tainted by him. He only extracted the two tusks as they might be of use for the craftsmen on Port Atwood, before he shot out a chain that latched onto a tree in the distance. The beast was left where it was, its meat turning into a feast for the other beasts in the region.

The trees flashed past Zac with a dizzying blur as the chains pulled him forward with extreme momentum. He almost felt like a certain superhero as he flew through the forest toward the domain of the next E-Grade beast he had marked for target practice.

Using the chains as a mode of transportation was something he had already dabbled with since fighting the dragon, and he was quickly becoming more accustomed to it. With **[Love's Bond]** he could also use real and extremely sturdy chains rather than the flimsy spectral ones that the Cultist Bishop effortlessly had cut apart with his flames.

He still wasn't fast as when he walked with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but it was still a huge improvement for his Draugr side, which was previously a slow-moving tank. It looked a bit embarrassing though, like he was being dragged around through the jungle like a ragdoll. Then again, he had long discarded any semblance of cultivator's dignity in favor of pragmatism, so this was nothing to him.

Zac kept working on his coordination and his strikes like this over the next two days, slowly making progress in how much damage he was causing with a 'non-lethal' strike. Better yet,

he would no doubt be able to apply these insights to his other Daos and his other class in the future.

Most of his time was still spent in the Cultivation Cave though, sitting inside his Soul Strengthening Arrays while going over his insights. The array pretty much ran on its own by now with how used Zac was getting to the feeling, and he could both ponder on the Dao and work on repairing his pathways while cycling his Mental Energy.

It was a bit like working while being severely sleep-deprived though since the array was siphoning his mental energy. He made quite a few mistakes and was forced to redraw the pathways many times, though it was still a lot more efficient to multitask than just sit around waiting for the array to finish.

Another interesting thing he had learned about the array was that he was actually making better progress when swapping his race in the middle. However, the benefits only appeared when he sat as a Draugr in the life-attuned side and as a human in the death-attuned.

It was like the stark contrasts helped reinforce the effect of the array, which resulted in a larger number of clashes and his soul getting strengthened and purified to a higher degree. One full cultivation procedure still took around 10 hours even when using E-Grade Crystals to power the array, but the improvement he saw while swapping his races was double a normal circulation.

That meant that he was almost three times as efficient compared to his first try, getting 28 hours' worth of cultivation done in just ten hours. There were probably even greater gains to be had in the future as well, though Zac guessed any future improvements wouldn't come quite as easily.

He had ordered a couple of D-Grade attuned crystals from the Sky Gnome to see the effect, but the cost of that was a bit extravagant even for him. It would have to provide a huge benefit to motivate spending over a hundred million Nexus Coins every day. For now, he made do with just E-Grade crystals as he was still mostly focusing on short-term benefits and upgrading his skills.

Zac was currently fighting some sort of mutated cat that was as big as a rhino. It looked extremely cute even with its size, with two enormous eyes that stared straight into his. The beast suddenly turned into a blur, and Zac barely had time to block a furious swipe toward his throat by using the flat side of his axe.

The beast unsurprisingly excelled at Dexterity, and Zac tried multiple times to inflict it with a wound without success. It was like trying to hit a cloud, where the cat was just a blur. It was almost as bad as when he fought Faceless 9 back in the tower, though the cat didn't have that man's lethality.

It wouldn't have been hard to kill the thing with the help of **[Deathwish]**, but that wasn't his goal. He instead activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and grew to a towering behemoth almost reaching four meters. The transformation added around half a meter to his height after reaching middle proficiency, while also increasing the thickness of the plating of his miasmic armor.

More importantly, it increased the power of his taunting effect, and the cat suddenly rammed straight into him by mistake when it tried to pass him by. Zac took the opportunity and delivered a shallow cut in its side, eliciting a pained yowl from the beast. It scrambled out of the way as Zac stood rooted to the ground, keeping his focus on the skill.

Zac instantly pushed the mental energy further into its body, like an army performing a blitz to attack its enemy unaware. The natural defenses of the beast were quickly roused, but Zac was like a steamroller as he pushed his energy toward its organs.

This was the one.

Chapter 534: Blighted Cut

The enormous feline had become utterly enraged by Zac's attack, and it even seemed that the shallow wound had emboldened it, making it think that was the limit of Zac's capabilities. It shot forward over and over, its claws trying to rip through his armor. However, the cat couldn't get through the thick plating, allowing Zac to completely focus on his quest.

His abyssal eyes were trained at the nimble form, his eyes clearly seeing the vibrant life-force rousing in the beast's body to combat the virulence of his strike. It was like witnessing the clash between white blood cells and a virus with his own eyes. However, he was actually able to impact the battle with his mind.

A small headache throbbed in his head as he pushed his concentration to the max, and it look like a surge of death stormed toward the innards of the beast. The cat stumbled on the ground, thrashing in pain from the invasion. Zac felt adrenaline in his body spike, but he still kept his eyes peeled on the animal.

There was some hesitation in Zac's heart about subjecting such a stunning animal to such cruel treatment. However, Zac quickly pushed those discordant thoughts out of his mind as he knew that this thing was anything but a docile house-pet. He had seen carcasses of almost a hundred animals as at the edge of this thing's domain.

Their bodies had been utterly mutilated before they were left to rot. The cat seemed to enjoy hunting and torturing animals for sport, even when it didn't require food. This, along with the fact that it was at least level 85, was why Zac marked it for death the moment he would start trying to complete his quest in earnest.

Most of the kills until now had been for training, whereas Zac saved the beasts that met the requirements of his quest for when he felt he had made enough progress to try for the quest again. He found this animal three days ago, and he would immediately have executed it if it wasn't because he needed some more practice first.

However, the shocking cruelty that this cat had displayed toward its prey wasn't something unique for this specific E-grade beast, though it was a bit more excessive than most. Beasts seemed to grow more ruthless and aggressive as they evolved, with even herbivores gaining a thirst for blood.

Things on Earth would probably be a bit chaotic over the coming years. A second wave of bloodshed would assault Earth's settlements with aggressive beasts trying to take everyone out through starting beast tides like the ones that the System sometimes conjured as a quest. The forces who had survived until now thanks to not having any close-by Incursions to worry about would probably fall by the wayside, while powerful warriors would emerge from the surviving towns.

Things would calm down when D-Grade beast kings emerged, as they were intelligent enough to not mindlessly attack human settlements. They instead set up their kingdoms deep in unclaimed territories, where no humans would dare enter. Even better, they kept their subjects in check, lessening the number of beast tides.

Only at that point could Earth be considered to have been fully integrated; when the energy infusion of the planet was finished, and a balance between races, forces, and beasts had been reached.

But for now, there could be no peace with the animals. If Zac didn't take out this beast now, then it would probably target the people who moved to the town next to the volcano. It had already been determined that the volcano itself was a unique natural treasure that produced something that calrin called an Earth-Fire, a spiritual flame that was extremely beneficial for craftsmen.

Blacksmiths in particular would be able to both increase the quality and quantity of their crafts with the help of the volcano, and it was no coincidence that the zealots nurtured the massive insignia inside the magma itself. If Zac could set up a bunch of smithies here then it was just a matter of time before someone like the Craftsman Brazla would emerge within his sphere of influence.

So all potential threats to this area had to die for the future of his force.

Zac pushed his energy more and more, though it felt just as frustrating as during the Dao Discourse. It was like he was trying to move the clouds with his bare hands, and it was slow and arduous work. However, the cat had entered a frenzy from the pain, discarding its survival instincts in favor of taking Zac down with it.

Sparks flew across the area as the beast slammed into his armor over and over, and trees toppled as the air itself was split apart from its attempts to tear him apart. Some puncture wounds even started to appear across Zac's body as the beast managed to bite through his sturdy armor, but Zac didn't care as he did everything in his power to boost the corruption.

Finally, he succeeded in what he had tried so many times before. The corrosive energy managed to take hold in the cat's heart, and its heartbeat rapidly started getting erratic before the whole organ ruptured. The beast yowled on top of its lungs from the pain before its survival instincts finally overrode its bloodlust.

It tried to flee into the jungle, but it had lost its coordination as many of its muscles had turned into a rotten mess by now. A deep thud echoed across the jungle before Zac felt a surge of cosmic energy. However, he wasn't happy with the result as the stupid thing had actually gored itself on the trunk of a tree it had felled earlier.

Zac quickly opened his quest screen and sighed in relief when he could confirm that the quest actually had been completed even with the abrupt end to the cat's life. He guessed the System passed him because the thing was just a walking

corpse with its heart being ruined, and there was no way it would survive even a minute longer.

He wouldn't look in the mouth of a gift horse though, and Zac instead smiled with anticipation as a fractal appeared on his left forearm.

[Blighted Cut] actually took the exact same spot as **[Rapturous Divide]**, though the Skill fractal itself obviously looked completely different. He immediately activated it since he was in a perfect spot to try it out, and he was surprised to find that it was a toggled skill just like **[Deathwish]** or his mental defense skills.

A small but constant stream of energy entered the Skill Fractal, and he looked around to see what the skill did. He didn't feel stronger at all, and no avatar appeared to fight for him. But he soon heard a corrosive sizzling on the ground, and he found that his axe was slowly dripping a grey liquid that seemed to seep out of the weapon itself.

The scene made him worried for Verun, as the Tool Spirit had shown some apprehension to some of his skills before. However, there were no complaints from the spirit tool at all, meaning it wasn't hurt or uncomfortable. In fact, the same was true for when he used **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

He had been forced to use another weapon before to conjure the massive black bardiche, but after Verun had swallowed the Dragon Core it had no problem to stomach the corrosive and deathly elements of his skills.

Eager to try the effect of the liquid Zac quickly walked over to the closest tree, and simply pushed the edge toward the bark. The sizzling sound of corrosion quickly emerged from the point of contact, but that was the least of what happened. Ashy-grey tendrils spread across the tree with impressive speed, and it only took four seconds before the tree fell apart.

Only a minute later was the tree a rotten mess on the ground, with almost nothing remaining intact. Zac wasn't done there, and he transformed **[Love's Bond]** to its backpack form, and four chains emerged like snakes. Zac suddenly felt his

miasmatic consumption increasing by a large degree, and he wasn't surprised as he looked at his other spirit tool.

The whole coffin had gained a temporary upgrade, just like how Verun turned into a massive Bardiche. **[Love's Bond]** still looked like a coffin, but instead of being child-sized it turned into a massive box that reached almost three meters tall. It was a lot wider as well, and it completely blocked his whole back like a turtle shell.

Zac had already tried it out before, and he knew that a similar effect would happen when he used the weapon in its shield form. The difference wasn't as startling there though, as **[Love's Bond]** was able to adjust its size to match his increased stature by itself. It only gained another protective layer from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

The increase in miasmatic consumption obviously didn't come about from this change though, but rather that he had activated **[Blighted Cut]**. Each of the chains was dripping with the corrosive liquid all along their length, though the links themselves weren't hurt in the slightest. Each of the chains already contained a hint of corruption, but even Zac felt some trepidation when he looked at the chains now.

Even he would probably be in some danger if an enemy came at him with this kind of set-up.

Just attacking a tree was obviously not enough to get a proper gauge of the limits of his new skill, and he spent the next hour like a god of death in the jungle. Anything he targeted was turned into a rotting goop before he moved on. It utterly ruined the bodies of the beasts, meaning Zac probably shouldn't use it when hunting for valuable bodyparts.

Zac had first thought he had gained a supercharged version of his Fragment of the Coffin, but he quickly learned that wasn't the case. He couldn't combine **[Blighted Cut]** with skills like **[Deathwish]**, **[Profane Seal]** or **[Winds of Decay]**, though it was fine together with **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Unholy Strike]**.

The skill rather provided him with a way to deal real damage while skills like **[Deathwish]** and **[Profane Seal]** restrained his

enemies.

As for the lethality of the skill, it went without mention. Nothing under E-Grade could withstand a single strike, even when he didn't empower the corrosion even further with the Fragment of the Coffin. A simple scrape when lashing out with **[Love's Bond]** was enough to condemn them to a bout of excruciating pain before they died.

The only animal that survived more than half a minute was the massive rhinoceros Zac was currently fighting, but that wasn't because of it having some sort of immunity to his skill. He had caught it with two chains of **[Love's Bond]**, keeping it in place. It had tried to run the moment he saw Zac, but it was currently utterly unable to move.

Zac had just attacked anything he came across until now, but he wanted to see the effect of the skill while just restraining an enemy. Zac quickly realized that the effect was clearly worse when he didn't draw blood. There was still a sizzling sound across the rhino's thick hide, but it didn't immediately turn into a pile of rotting meat. It meant that the skill acted more like a venom than an acid, which has an important distinction.

However, that wasn't the real surprise as Zac felt a startling feedback from the skill the moment the beast was caught. Zac immediately followed his instincts and infused the skill with more Miasma, and his eyes widened when three blades of the corrosive liquid appeared out of nowhere around the rhino, each shooting into the beast from a different direction before it had a chance to react.

They each hit the animal simultaneously, and Zac gaped when he saw that the animal didn't even have time to cry out in pain before it had turned into a black pool of goop on the ground. The blades had not only cut the animal apart into six pieces, but it had infused every piece with a terrifying amount of poison.

The blades had appeared for less than a second before they were gone, and Zac barely had time to see them. However, he still had goosebumps on his arms from the terrifying aura they

emitted. It felt like just a graze from those things could kill just about anything.

It was a truly sinister skill. Not only did it continuously inflict enemies with a shocking virulence, it even had some sort of execution that only worked when the target was trapped. Perhaps it was a hint of what the future held for his Fetters of Desolation class. Zac quickly looked inward at the skill fractal, and he wasn't surprised that the skill went on cooldown after activating the final strike. Not even the passive effect worked any longer, meaning Zac would have to be careful about using the execution preemptively in the future.

The skill itself wasn't as flashy as [**Rapturous Divide**], but Zac was still very happy with the result. It was extremely lethal, which shored up one of his weaknesses in his current class. He was lacking in offense, which turned every match into a drawn-out slugfest. Between his coffin and his new skill, he would probably be able to take out E-Grade enemies even faster as a Draugr compared to as a human.

His human form was still superior to his Draugr side in large-scale combat though as he didn't have any way to properly attack large hordes with [**Blighted Cut**]. The situation was fine with him though, as he had always felt it a good idea to allow each class to have its own specialty apart from just being based on different elements.

Zac had finally reached his goal of completing his class quest, but he still didn't leave the jungle. He had spent the last ten days almost solely as a Draugr, but he had some things to do here in his human form as well. He had already felt that spending some time in this jungle as a Human might benefit some of his skills, and that idea had only become stronger after meeting David.

So Zac swapped over to his Edge of Arcadia class and started clearing out a perimeter around the volcano. However, he only had time to battle for less than 30 minutes before someone tried to contact him through his Communication Crystal.

“Are you free? Thea and Billy are here, they need your help,” Joanna said through the crystal.

Chapter 535: War Council

“What? Are Thea and Billy okay?” Zac asked with worry.

“They’re fine. They arrived a while ago, tried to enter the Inheritance. But the Tool Spirit is blocking them, and not even your sister couldn’t change its mind,” Joanna explained. “He’s also being a bit... like himself.”

Zac groaned and immediately took out his flying treasure, quickly returning to the volcano. Joanna waited for him there, and they teleported to his private courtyard as it was closest to the Towers of Myriad Dao. However, he barely had time to exit the teleportation house before he saw a massive form appear in front of the Dao Repository.

It was Billy, who must have evolved his skill. He was almost as tall as some of the smaller towers, reaching roughly 15 meters into the air. His club looked like something used to smash mountains, the skull on its end having a diameter of at least 5 meters. Worry gripped Zac’s heart as he activated **[Loamwalker]**, leaving Joanna behind.

Had the Tool Spirit annoyed Billy to the point that he was gearing up to destroy the whole Dao Repository?

It wasn’t that he was worried about the repository itself. It was probably a peak D-Grade Spirit Tool, and nothing that Billy would be able to destroy no matter how much he wanted to. He was more worried about the retaliation from an insane Tool Spirit. There were D-Grade golems inside from what he had gathered, meant to be the challenge to open up the higher floors.

What if Brazla released them upon the town as punishment?

“HAHA BILLY WINS!” a massive roar echoed across half of Port Atwood as Billy jumped high into the air while stretching his weapon toward the sky.

Between the jump and the length of the club they reached a bit higher than the tallest towers, and the whole square shook when the giant landed again.

“Stupid golden ghost thinks he can be bigg-“

Billy didn't get any further though before Brazla's massive form appeared in full splendor above the Towers of Myriad Dao, accompanied by his signature golden radiance. The avatar was well over a hundred meters tall, and it looked down upon Billy and Port Atwood like a god standing in judgment.

“An ant dreaming of matching the sky,” a rumbling voice echoed out across the area, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw that Brazla was about to blast Billy with one of his lightning bolts.

“WAIT!” Zac roared as he appeared in front of the towering giant. “Calm down. What is going on here?!”

Billy looked down with surprise, and he started to shrink again after throwing Brazla a glare.

“Golden boy said Billy and Thea was small, so Billy proved him wrong. He still needs a good thwonkin’,” the giant snorted.

Zac wryly smiled before he turned to Thea who had appeared close-by as well.

“You weren't lying about the Tool Spirit,” she said, a few veins popping out on her forehead. “He makes Big Blue feel like a true gentleman.”

“I know,” Zac said with some resignation. “What's the problem here?”

“These two talentless ants tried to enter the trial without adult supervision,” a haughty voice echoed out from the gates as the massive head in the sky disappeared.

The gates swung open the next moment, and Brazla along with an exasperated Kenzie walked out.

“I already told you Thea and Billy would come to take the trial, and you said that you didn't care,” Zac sighed. “What's changed?”

“That was before I saw what kind of wretched beings that you wanted to waste The Great Brazla’s gifts upon. Why don’t I just send two pigs into the inheritances that my creator so arduously gathered? The effect will be the same,” Brazla snorted as his back bent further and further back until the Tool Spirit was almost looking straight up into the sky.

Zac inwardly groaned when he saw that Brazla was in his most haughty mode today for some reason. He only took that insane power-pose when he started to refer to himself in third person and his annoyance factor maxed out. Zac knew he could probably force the thing to make way if he wanted, but he was afraid that Brazla would mess with the trial if he did something like that.

Simultaneously, he could feel killing intent leaking from Thea, and Billy’s brows were crunching together until they almost formed a unibrow.

“How can anyone enter the eyes of the Great Brazla?” Kenzie cajoled from the side. “We are just scraping by on this desolate rock, trying to glean a fraction of the wisdom from the Great Sage. Surely The Great Brazla wouldn’t hold back on this little bit of wisdom? I am sure my brother would improve your surroundings as a thank you for your magnanimity.”

The tool spirit froze, and he slowly returned to a normal standing position, his eyes slowly turning toward Zac.

“... What do you want me to build?” Zac said.

“The Great Brazla have noticed your little spectral servant scurrying about lately, moving trees and planting flowers. His efforts are barely passable, and this great sage will allow him to create a natural spirit gathering formation around this domicile,” Brazla said as though he was giving Zac a favor.

“You want a Spirit Gathering Array?” Zac said in confusion
“Why?”

Brazla might act like a cultivator, but he couldn’t actually cultivate. Increasing the density of the Cosmic Energy in his surroundings wouldn’t help him in the slightest, and it would just make the direct area around the repository slightly worse

as the energy had to come from somewhere. However, he immediately regretted his question when he saw the Tool Spirit gearing up for some insane tirade.

“Never mind. A Natural Spirit Array, right? I’ll have Triv set one up as soon as he returns from his mission,” Zac said. “So, they can enter now?”

“Fine, though The Great Brazla still feels that his gifts are wasted on these two. At least the little bird,” Brazla lamented. “The dumb brute seems to have found the resting place of his ancestor, so it might be a bit more apropos. Well, The Great Brazla is a gracious master and an even more gracious host. Enter, and witness a glimpse of greatness.”

“... Wow,” Thea just said as she passed through the gates, and Zac inwardly sighed when he saw she was still fuming.

“I’m sorry Billy,” Zac said to Billy who still blared at Brazla. “He is a bit mean, but you can be the bigger man here and let it go.”

“Mama always said to forgive those who don’t know better,” the giant said with a snort as he entered as well. “So Billy will forgive the stupid ghost.”

“You look better,” Kenzie commented from the side. “I heard from Ilvere you looked a bit-”

“Disgusting,” Brazla cut in. “You should understand it reflects poorly upon The Great Brazla if you walk around town looking like a burnt piece of dung. Have you no shame? At least you waited to heal up before you dared present yourself in front of me.”

“Well, if you unlocked the E-Grade skills I wouldn’t be such a wretched state after every battle,” Zac snorted.

“You’re welcome to try the trial if you’re tired of living,” Brazla said with disinterest as he conjured a mirror, blocking him from seeing Zac. “That’s better.”

Zac sighed and looked away. He really wanted to access the skills locked away in the repository, but he wasn’t ready. The trail to open up the second floor was to defeat at least one

Half-Step D-Grade Golem, meaning someone at the same level as Anzonil, the Array Master he met during the Hunt.

If it was just a peak E-Grade Golem, then he would probably have tried his luck, as he was somewhat confident in taking it out as long as he went all out. However, the D-Grade was a quantitative leap that far surpassed that between F and E grade, and he didn't want to burn his chances. He only had one shot on the trial, and if he failed then he would have to wait for one of his subjects to get the job done.

Certainly, a Half-Step D-Grade Golem was ultimately not a true D-Grade golem, but it should still be far more powerful than a peak E-Grade warrior. Zac was currently hoping to reach the point where he could challenge the trial before he left Earth to continue his cultivation so that he could arm himself with a few additional skills.

But for now, he would have to do with the things that were already unlocked.

Thea stood in the distance, gazing up at the enormous statue of the Blade Emperor. His face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat, but the focus was still the massive blade that was stabbed into the ground in front of him. It radiated a terrifying sharpness, eclipsing the insights of his own Dao even though it was just a statue. Of course, the sharpness was hollow without true meaning, just like everything else in this place.

The Marshall Scion clearly wasn't in any mood to stay here, as she flashed away after taking a few calming breaths.

“STUPID STATUE MAN! I’LL THWONK YOU THIS TI-” a roar suddenly echoed out through the hall.

Zac immediately turned toward the source only to see Billy flying toward the head of the statue depicting the Titan. However, Billy was thankfully swallowed by the Inheritance teleporter mid-flight before he could do any damage.

“What the hell...” Kenzie muttered from the side, and Zac couldn't help but worry that he had made a mistake letting Billy enter that place.

“Can you see what’s going on inside their trials?” Zac asked as he turned back toward the Tool Spirit.

“Perhaps I do, perhaps I don’t. The heaven’s secrets are not so easily divulged,” Brazla said trying to adopt a mysterious air, but only came off as condescending.

“Well, can you tell me about the blade Emperor and the Titan? What kind of people were they?” Zac asked.

“The Titan was a dumb brute who kept causing trouble. He came to my master to have him forge a set of defensive treasures,” Brazla said. “The small mountain of muscles you brought should do just fine.”

Zac sighed in relief, as he felt like Billy and that guy would be two peas in a pod. Besides, someone like that would probably not have a convoluted trial. However, his relief only lasted as a weird smile spread across Brazla’s face.

“As for the Blademaster... A lunatic who married his sword,” Brazla snorted before he shot Zac a mocking glance. “Be careful you don’t end up like him. He was a friend of master and a talented swordsman, but he died a laughingstock and his wife was sold at an auction soon after.”

Zac coughed and didn’t deign to comment on the Spirit Tool’s snide remark, and he walked out before the Tool Spirit had time to make any more remarks about Alea.

Since Zac was back in Port Atwood he felt that he might as well head over to the Soul Strengthening Array for the day, waiting for the two to come out. He had spent the better part of a day inside, though their trials could take anything from a few hours to a few days. It was up to whatever the creator of the Inheritance had decided, and Brazla wasn’t any help there.

However, Kenzie held him back before he had a chance to walk away.

“Wait, I was about to call you anyway,” Kenzie said.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked as he stopped in his tracks.

“Nothing. We just got a message from Nonet before. They asked if you could join the Zhix War Council for a meeting

tomorrow?” she asked.

“Of course. Are the jammers completed?” Zac asked.

“They’re up and running since a few days ago,” Kenzie nodded and took out the three black pillars. “Do you want to prepare the armies?”

“Have the elite squads get ready,” Zac said after some thought. “We shouldn’t need the whole army for these fights. We’ll only target one hive at a time, and there’s no lack of Zhix warriors who can make up the numbers.”

Kenzie nodded in understanding as Zac put away the Jamming Arrays. He had almost forgotten about the matter of the Zhix due to his hectic schedule over the past weeks. But it looked like he had run of time to play around in the jungle. It was a bit of a shame, but he still had accomplished his main goal over there, and he could work on his skills in other places as well.

However, he didn’t know how long he would be gone after joining the Zhix war chariot, so he needed to finish up with his other tasks here in Port Atwood first.

“Oh, and Calrin said he had found something you looked for,” Kenzie added.

“Really? Already?” Zac said and he immediately changed his plans.

He had immediately visited Calrin about the Shipyard Upgrade quest after having talked with Karunthel a week ago, and things had looked a bit bleak at first outlook. Even the knowledgeable Sky Gnome had only heard of half of the required materials, and it was the two most common ones.

But had the little gnome suddenly come through for them and actually gathered the items ahead of schedule? It should either be that or he had finally unsealed and cleansed the hundreds of Cosmos Sacks Zac claimed after the battle outside the Tower of Eternity.

In either case, he was about to gain a windfall, and his steps got quicker and quicker as he walked toward the Thayer Consortia.

Chapter 536: Sincerity

What an asshole.

She knew that Zac had warned her of this Brazla, but she was still fuming after the encounter. However, she knew that part of the reason she got so angry was that the words of the Tool Spirit were getting to her a bit. The image she had nurtured of herself had been cracking over the past weeks.

Waking up in the tutorial had been horrifying, but also exhilarating. Her life had lacked any drive and goals before, with everything she could dream of readily handed to her. But she suddenly found herself at the edge of life and death, and she had *excelled*. The pixies had called her a once-a-millennia genius, and her performance compared to the other tutorial takers echoed that remark.

She even had the [**Apex Trainee**] title to prove it. Not a single human on Earth had performed better than she had. But was that enough?

Zachary Atwood had initially crushed her confidence with his monstrous power, but she had eventually come to terms with the fact that some people were just beyond comprehension. However, her genius' halo kept taking one hit after another as the months passed. There was Inevitability who could only make her feel despair, then the undead, and finally the cultists.

She had pushed herself beyond her limits, but it wasn't enough.

Were the pixies just humoring her? Or was the title of a millennial genius on a god-forsaken planet just worthless? So hearing Brazla utterly disregard her like that had dug at those insecurities, and those insecurities had turned to anger. However, that anger was quickly exchanged with vigilance as she appeared in the Inheritance Trial.

Just what had happened here?

It looked like she had arrived at a compound where a battle just had taken place. She stood in a massive courtyard full of training equipment, but the hundreds of dead bodies were a clear indication that something had gone terribly wrong if this was just an exercise. The corpses were fresh, and the pools of blood still hadn't dried out. However, there were no sounds of fighting anywhere, meaning that the battle was over.

It had obviously been a one-sided slaughter as well, as every single corpse wore the same type of robes. It was likely a sword-sect judging by the weapons in their hands and the insignia covering their backs. She stood frozen for a couple of seconds until she grit her teeth and walked over to the closest corpse.

This was a test, and she couldn't show any weakness. Wasn't part of the reason she decided to undergo this trial early to shake off her weaknesses, both mental and physical, and regain her momentum? A little bit of carnage was nothing special any longer.

She turned over the corpse and inspected the wounds, and she could immediately confirm that she had been killed with one extremely precise cut. Half her throat and her jugular were cut, and an extremely sharp energy emanated from the wound. A stabbing pain prickled her eyes just looking at the wound, and she hurriedly looked away to avoid getting injured.

Suddenly a hidden killing intent assaulted her senses, and she didn't hesitate to shoot out **[Petalstorm]** preemptively. However, she only saw a flash of light as her weapon was intercepted and thrown back to her side.

"A hidden blade," a tired voice drifted over. "Who are you? You are not a conjuration by my demons, but you are definitely not one of that bastard's descendants either."

Thea immediately understood who she was talking to, but she still didn't dare to move over. That killing intent hadn't been fake. However, she at least spotted the source of the voice, sitting with his back toward one of few still-standing sections of a building.

“I am Thea Marshall. I am not sure what has happened to the original creator of the Towers of Myriad Dao. It was awarded by the System to a friend of mine, and he gave me the opportunity to come here,” Thea said, not hiding anything.

“Towers of Myriad Dao,” the man snorted. “That’s Brazla alright. So that old goat croaked before he could sire any descendants. A shame, but that’s what you get when looking for love in the wrong places. No wonder that insufferable Tool Spirit has had the guts to break into my sanctum.”

Thea didn’t know how to respond to that, and the man seemed content to let the silence stretch out. She cursed her lacking conversational abilities, but the silence at least let her observe the cultivator in front of her. It was a humanoid male, but his skin had a yellowish tint while his eyes were amber with a thin slit, like those of an alligator.

His build was quite slender, but he was still felt extremely muscular. It almost looked like his forearms were covered in steel wires. However, her eyes couldn’t help but turn to the massive sword in his grip. Or it would perhaps be more apt to say that he cradled it like it was his only source of comfort, with both his legs and arms entwining the blade in an embrace.

Thea’s mouth opened and closed a few times, and she was unsure what would happen next. Zac hadn’t really explained what would happen inside, true to his laconic self. He just said that there would be a trial to pass, but it was up to the masters to design those trials.

“I am hoping to lear-“ Thea finally said, but she was cut off as the swordsman suddenly appeared three meters away from her, the massive sword in his hand.

“Live or die,” he simply said as he lazily swung his sword.

It looked like the Blade Emperor was barely putting any effort into the swing, but it felt like the whole universe was splitting apart to Thea as the sword approached. Her instincts were screaming at her to retreat, to activate her life-saving skill. However, a sense of stubbornness bloomed in her heart.

This was a test. She knew it. This was the kind of pressure that guy had endured over and over as he pushed forward, and conquering those obstacles was what had allowed him to push far beyond anyone else on Earth. She couldn't keep dancing around, balancing progress with the burdens of her family.

She wouldn't retreat any longer, she wanted to walk forward with confidence as well. She sent out a mental command, causing **[Petalstorm]** to immediately return to its original form, a slender rapier just over a meter long. She rarely used this form any longer due to the convenience of it splitting apart, but a bunch of miniature blades wouldn't cut it here.

The blade-master didn't use any skill in his swing, so she wouldn't either. She instead infused her Daos and her conviction into the strike as she met blade with blade, putting it all on the line. It felt like she was trying to keep the whole universe at bay, and her arms were immediately covered with cuts.

But she held on, refusing to relent to the strike. She wouldn't give in even if she was turned into ribbons.

"Rare Class... Tempest Blade..." the Blade Emperor muttered as he looked at her, not sharing her plight in the slightest. "Passable technique... Above Average Strength... Decent control of your Dao... However..."

The monumental pressure disappeared the next moment, and her own swing was simultaneously canceled. Thea's hands were shaking from the experience, feeling that she had just narrowly escaped death. This was a true D-Grade powerhouse, completely different from anything she had encountered before.

Just a thoughtless swing contained the truth of the sword itself, making her Dao Braiding look like a child's plaything. Her emotions were in turmoil as well by the Blade Emperor's comments. Her confidence had soared after hearing one positive comment after another, but that 'however' had felt like a cold shower.

Was she just a nobody after all?

“Is there something wrong?” Thea asked, her heart beating furiously. “I am willing to learn and improve.”

This was the most powerful being she had met thus far, even if it was just a fragment of an old cultivator. Any insight he could provide would probably be worth more than a dozen battles or spending years in her library.

“Why did you come to me if you mess about with the elements? I am the Blade Emperor, not the Wind Emperor. My path is one of purity,” he said as his aura exploded, and Thea was forced a step back from the pressure. “What is your goal? Where does your heart lie?”

Her eyes widened as his aura towered toward the sky, but what really startled her was its shape. His aura was actually a perfect copy of his sword, though thousands of times larger. Could an aura actually take a shape like that? He was truly the Blade Emperor.

“I- I just want to become stronger. I wanted to hit faster, kill my enemies before they could kill me or my family. I want to become more powerful to stand at the peak. I don’t want to be a nobody,” Thea said, the words pouring out of her mouth as she bared her inner thoughts. “I attained the Seed of Gale during the Tutorial and incorporated it in my blade. Was that a mistake? I heard I could fuse it with my Seed of Sharpness into a speed-based Fragment of the Sword.”

The Blade Emperor didn’t immediately answer, but his eyes bore into hers. Even his pupils felt like two swords under his aura, but she shoved away any hesitation as she stared back with steely eyes.

“Well, you are passable I guess. You can call me Irei, and this is Silene,” he said as he caressed his sword, and the terrifying pressure disappeared the next moment.

“What? Just like that?” Thea said with wide eyes before she had time to correct herself. “I mean-“

She lost her train of thought mid-sentence though as she noticed that the surroundings had changed, the battlefield

replaced with a run-down courtyard located deep in some mountain range.

“I didn’t leave many things in this inheritance, but the things I left all hold tremendous value,” The Blade Emperor said with a solemn expression.

Six blades rose out of the ground the next moment before they lined up in the air in front of her. Thea’s eyes lit up when she saw the exquisite weapons. Each of them emitted both spirituality and power that far eclipsed her **[Petalstorm]**.

They exuded quality, and when Thea prodded the weapons she even felt a sense of spirituality in every single one. She had already learned that her own weapon was barely of passable grade, with neither an attunement nor any spirituality. Its future would be limited, and she had already started looking for ways to acquire something better.

This was exactly why she had chosen this Inheritance; the chance to gain a weapon that could stay with her as she took the next step on her path of cultivation.

“Children, come out,” Irei said, and Thea’s eyes widened when six projections emerged.

She couldn’t believe that every single one of the six weapons had such spirituality that their Tool Spirit could emerge, though they were just small hazy projections. She believed she had a decent understanding of Spirit Tools thanks to Big Blue, and these swords should only be Early E-Grade. It meant that their potential was even greater than she had anticipated.

However, she didn’t quite understand what Irei meant by children, as they looked nothing of the sort. For example, the largest sword, a massive two-hander that reeked of bloodlust, conjured what looked like a small devil. Another Tool Spirit looked like a feline predator that would probably turn into the apex predator in any forest it was placed in.

There was even one that just looked just like the sword itself, though its colors were inverted. She quickly realized that there was a correlation between the spirits and their weapons like they embodied the way the weapon was meant to be used. Her

eyes moved back and forth between the six Spirit Tools, and she tried to understand which one was the best for her path.

“You can choose to leave here with one of my children, or you can choose to leave empty-handed. It is up to you,” Irei said as he looked at the hovering swords, and Thea couldn’t help but feel there was love in his eyes as he looked at each one of them.

She soon enough discarded three weapons that were clearly incompatible with her class and fighting style, and also the odd inverted Tool Spirit. Both of the two remaining ones looked quite strong, especially one that had a Tool Spirit that looked like a gemstone with a trapped lightning bolt. The other weapon looked a lot more nondescript.

It was a thin and slightly curved scimitar made from an elegant blue metal that would blend into the sky. Its tool spirit was a fluffy cloud, that continuously changed between a small thundercloud and an innocuous ball of cotton. The weapon didn’t look as intricate as the crystalline weapon, and the tool spirit was probably the least imposing one.

However, her eyes kept coming back to it, and she felt some sort of connection to it.

“You’ve chosen Aigale I see, or **[Storm’s Break]** as the original creator called it. It seems you understand yourself well enough, only Aigale and Naral to a lesser degree are suitable for you,” Irei said as the other weapons disappeared. “She is my eighty-fourth adopted child, and she gained incipient spirit after we witnessed a storm of such ferocity that a D-Grade force was killed to the last man. Aigale is meant to dance among the clouds, and strike without warning like a sudden thunderstorm.”

The other swords disappeared, and Thea eagerly grabbed the scimitar and cut a small wound on her hand to bind the Spirit Tool to herself. However, the moment she felt a sense of connection to **[Storm’s Break]** she also found herself trapped in a storm of extremely sharp energies. She immediately looked over at the Blade Emperor, but he only had eyes for his own weapon.

“I have fulfilled my bargain with that old bastard, but our business is yet not done. Seeing a woman with a fickle heart brings up some bad memories,” the Blade Emperor muttered as a terrifying killing intent started leaking from his body.

“Fickle heart?” Thea said, some anger blossoming in her heart even when she felt herself being under tremendous pressure from the sword energies around her. “I’ve never messed around with anyone’s feelings.”

“Not toward men. Toward your weapon, your true companion,” the Blade Emperor grunted with disdain. “What if you treat my daughter in the same manner as that little thing you are ready to discard? Wouldn’t she lead a miserable existence if that was the case?”

“What do you want me to do?!” Thea screamed as she was left with dozen deep gashes in just seconds.

She tried using her Dexterity to dodge the spiritual blades, but they were simply everywhere. Forcing her way out was impossible as well, as the intensity of the blades just increased as she tried to exit the sphere. She would perish long before getting out.

“Prove your sincerity toward the sword. That is the only way for a weakling like you to leave my Blade Domain,” the Blade Emperor said. “Become one with the sword or die. It is up to you.”

Chapter 537: Clues

Zac couldn't help but fantasize about whether the Sky Gnome had actually got his hands on one of the four materials required for the Shipyard Upgrade. If it actually was the case, then it would most likely be the first one, the **[Urgarat Flakes]**. It was a very rare form of metal, but it was not nearly as rare as the other things Karunthel asked for.

As to why the metal was so rare, it was because it was not a natural element you could find in a mine, but rather something produced when a certain stone beast evolved to D-Grade. The beast was called an **[Urgarat Crawler]**, and it was a creature that only lived on certain earth- or metal-attuned planets.

When it was ready to form its Beast Core and evolve to D-Grade it first created a thick cocoon from the materials it found in the ground. These materials were in turn transformed by the heavy Dao Fluctuations that were released from its evolution. One of the most common mutations was the **[Urgarat Flakes]**, an extremely sturdy alloy.

It was in other words something you could only stumble upon by chance. You might be able to keep the crawlers as domesticated animals, but the value of the materials didn't make up for the cost of nurturing a beast all the way to the D-Grade, so no one wasted their time on such an unprofitable venture.

The Sky Gnome did find the second material, the **[Realm Locus]** in one of his large encyclopedias as well, though the information was limited. It was an organic gemstone that grew in places with a lot of spatial activity. That meant that they were mostly found inside mystic realms, and they contained a small amount of sealed space-time.

The gnome guessed that Karunthel wanted the gem in order to improve some spatial array for either a weapon or space flight.

However, the supply for **[Realm Locus]** was even worse than that of **[Urgarat Flakes]**, and the demand was a lot higher as things with Spatial Attunement had a lot of uses. There were no Nexus Crystals attuned with the Dao of Space in the Zecia sector either.

Those crystals only appeared at C-Grade and above, and the **[Realm Locus]** was one of the few D-Grade materials that could act as a substitute. It was clearly inferior to the real material, but they did not have a lot of options out in a frontier Sector.

Things only got worse from there as Calrin couldn't make heads or tails about the last two materials, and they were forced to send an inquiry to an intelligence agency at the end. That could probably only mean that they were even harder to acquire.

The quest that had seemed easy enough to complete at a first glance had quickly turned into an arduous task, and the Sky Gnome had already indicated that Zac would most likely need to find some of the materials himself. That obviously couldn't be done on Earth, but rather required him to travel to places where there was a chance of the items appearing.

But now, just a week later, Calrin was already calling for him, and Zac couldn't help but getting his hopes up. There were just 4 materials he needed to find, after all, so getting just one was a huge step in the right direction. Of course, it was more likely that he had simply gotten the intelligence reports back than the materials themselves.

Zac still made his way to the commercial district as quickly as possible, but he couldn't help but stop and admire the massive transformation the consortia had undertaken since arriving at Earth. The huge compound had looked like a condemned city-block where not even beggars would stay before, but now domineering structures stood in front with opulent mansions hiding in the back.

There were also four shops now instead of one, each focusing on their respective wares.

The largest one sold armor and weaponry, most of it made by Port Atwood craftsmen themselves, and the second store contained miscellaneous tools for cultivators along with day-to-day items. There was everything from crude talismans to Cosmos Sacks to all sorts of tools required by non-combat classes.

The next store was natural treasures where you could buy herbs and pills, along with a limited supply of Nexus Crystals. The store also bought most sorts of herbs as well, and from what Zac heard they actually bought more than they sold. They also sold some foodstuffs in the store, though most foods were still sold in the open square by the farmers themselves.

The final store was the smallest one, but also the most exclusive. Only VIP clients of the consortia could enter, and it was the place with the most valuable items of every type. This was the store that Zac entered, and he was quickly shown to the highest floor by one of the clerks. Calrin appeared a minute later, sporting a dapper suit that no doubt was made from Spiritual Materials.

The somewhat impoverished image of the Sky Gnome was long gone, replaced by a man looking like a titan of industry. Of course, the effect was pretty limited with his diminutive size.

“Have you found one of the materials?” Zac asked without preamble.

“Alas, no,” Calrin sighed. “Though I believe I will receive word from the intelligence agency soon enough.”

“So why did you call me here?” Zac sighed as he sat down.

“You’ve put quite a few orders with me apart from the four materials, remember?” Calrin smiled as he took out a crystal. “I called you about this.”

Zac accepted the crystal with some confusion and infused it with some energy.

A long list of materials appeared, followed by an in-depth guide on how to create a powder that should be applied to one’s body.

“**[Bone-Forging Dust]**?” Zac read aloud with confusion before he looked up at the Sky Gnome. “What is this stuff?”

“It’s a race improvement formula, see how the materials differ from anything else you’ve seen?” Calrin explained.

Zac took a second look at the materials, and something suddenly dawned on him. Not a single one of the items was a herb. It was all bones from ferocious beasts, stones, or metals. It was extremely different from the medicinal baths that the people of Port Atwood were using, as those were almost exclusively using various herbs that they grew in the Spiritual Soil.

“It’s unfortunately not a recipe for the undead. Those things are just impossible to buy it seems,” Calrin sighed. “But I came across this recipe when I tried to come up with a solution for you. I believe your problems might occur because your dead body clashes with the life- and nature-attunement in the plants of a medicinal bath. But what if there’s nothing like that in the mixture?”

“So you think I won’t have the same reaction with this new recipe,” Zac nodded in understanding.

“Even better, you possessed more than half the materials after killing beasts in all four directions, including the most annoying component to get,” Calrin said before he produced a long shimmering horn. “And I have already acquired the rest.”

It was the **[Star Ox Horn]** that Zac had left with Calrin long ago in hopes of finding some use for it. Back then it was one of the most valuable things in his possession, but it had quickly been thrown aside for far actually precious treasures like the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]** and the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

He had honestly forgotten about it, but it turned out it was doubly lucky he didn’t sell the opportunity to Average for a measly 1 Billion Nexus Coins. It also wasn’t too surprising that the horn was used for a recipe like this, as Calrin had already found out that the item was related to evolutions. Zac felt that the gnome’s idea was pretty feasible, and it was definitely worth trying.

The worst thing that could happen was that he slightly poisoned himself once more, but he was already used to that.

“You should know this, though. The only reason I managed to buy a full recipe on the cheap was that it is not too impressive. It is just one notch better than the dirt-cheap concoctions we are preparing for your army, but its cost is well over a hundredfold,” Calrin said. “And it is supposed to hurt pretty bad. So bad that it’s actually possible to gain a few points in Endurance from using it.”

“It’s worth some pain if I can get the benefits from it. As for cost, it shouldn’t matter either. How are we looking? Is everything unsealed and uncursed or whatever?” Zac asked.

He had waited a long time now to get a proper look at the small mountain of items he had absconded with after his massacre outside the Tower of Eternity. He had done one preliminary check just before heading over to the Undead Incursion, but he had handed over the rest of the sacks that he and Ogras had collected to the Sky Gnomes later.

The demon probably still held on to some of the benefits he had siphoned off the various scions while Zac met with Catheya, but most of the loot was in the Cosmos Sacks and Spatial rings they had taken of the bodies of the victims. However, he worried about hidden threats such as karmic links or even booby traps, something that was apparently not too uncommon, so he had hired Calrin and his ilk to cleanse them.

Truthfully, utilizing karmic links weren’t all that common in the multiverse, and it was more likely for a cultivator to plant a bomb as a final act of revenge on their killer. First of all, karmic links were easy to break, with even Zac being able to break the links of a D-Grade karmic cultivator. Stronger warriors could break, or at least obscure that kind of weak links even without the help of treasures.

Secondly, normal cultivators couldn’t utilize a karmic link to hunt down someone on the other side of the sector. It would take someone with a deep understanding like Vوريدis A’Heliophos or his clan members to actually make use of

them, or powerful forces ready to spend the money to hire a Karmic Cultivator.

Another issue apart from traps was the seals that covered a large number of the more valuable items, anti-theft devices that were put in place to disallow outsiders to steal the secrets of their clan.

“Almost all of the cultivation crystals containing manual and Skills are beyond our capabilities, but that is usually how it goes,” Calrin said with a shake of his head. “They are always guarded the hardest. However, 17 of the manuals are public manuals that are commonly known in the multiverse, and those weren’t sealed or were only using standard seals. The best of them is [**Warrior’s Heart**]. It’s an unattuned manual that can only take you to Peak E-Grade if you’re lucky, but the bonus to combat power and recovery is impressive.”

“It’s meant for armies?” Zac asked, immediately understanding the use of the thing.

“Exactly. It’s made for armies using traditional weaponry. I’ve heard that it is a simplification of a much better manual, but I don’t know if that’s true. In either case, it is very popular in the Zecia sector, and you’ve gathered four versions of it,” the sky gnome said.

“Four versions of the same manual?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Some forces modify manuals to better suit their inheritance or what weapons they enjoy. Others manage to make some adjustments to increase the power output or recovery by some degree,” Calrin explained. “You can classify a manual from being from Low Grade to Peak Grade. The original manual is a Mid E-Grade cultivation manual, but I’d say that one of the versions you got is almost High Grade. It must have belonged to a pretty powerful clan who exerted a lot of effort in improving it before.”

“What do you recommend doing with manuals like that?” Zac asked.

“Sell the worse duplicates, keep one or two of the best ones for yourself,” Calrin said. “You could either sell them through me or wait for the Auction you’re planning on holding. I would say you stand to gain more by selling them here on Earth. There should be a lack of manuals of this kind on Earth, while they are ultimately very common in the multiverse. Besides, that way you would know what manuals your competition is cultivating.”

“We’ll add them to the Auction then,” Zac agreed. “What about the rest?”

“It’s too much to go over one by one,” Calrin said with an avaricious glint in his eyes as he took out another crystal. “We created a tally for you. Incidentally, the cost of unsealing all these treasures landed at 1 Billion Nexus Coins.”

Chapter 538: Nepotism

Billy looked around curiously, but he frowned when there was nothing but fog everywhere. Still, Billy remembered Zac's words. This magic statue was dangerous. Of course, Billy was smart enough to understand that without Zac telling. The statue was able to grow in size so much that Billy could fit inside without problem, so how could it be normal?

Zac was just trying to help though, so Billy wouldn't point out his friend's silly mistake. Billy was a bit confused why the statue in Zac's house made Billy so annoyed though. It was almost as handsome as Billy himself, so he should like it.

He couldn't figure it out, so he just gripped **[Bonker]** even harder as he walked forward. Finally, there was a change in the fog as a smaller statue appeared, standing just a bit taller than Billy himself. Billy frowned at the sight, and something about this statue man was really annoying Billy as well. It felt like the statue was really asking for a beating.

"Welcome, descendant. I am Thrak, the Titan. Prove your worthi-" a loud voice shouted out from the stone, but it did get any further before **[Bonker]** slammed into its head, utterly reducing the whole statue into rubble.

"Stupid stone, trying to talk like a person," Billy said with a snort, anger smoldering in his chest.

Wait, why was Billy angry? Something about the talking stone had made Billy extremely annoyed, but he couldn't remember why? Had Mama warned him of talking statues before? No, that wasn't it. Billy looked down at the broken stone for a few seconds before he shrugged and kept walking.

If Mama hadn't mentioned it, and he couldn't remember, then it couldn't be too important.

Still, the hidden space within the big statue started to annoy Billy. Zac had said that there would be a lot of good things inside, but there were just crazy stones and mist. He kept trying to remember Zac's other ideas, but Billy had been busy looking at the big octopus when he talked. It was a lot bigger than the ones he had seen at the aquarium, and it even had more arms.

Mama said that a lot of people thought octopuses were really yummy, but Billy had never tasted it. He wondered what Big Blue tasted like. Billy bet it tasted real good since it had so many arms. He couldn't help but drool a bit as he thought about it. Perhaps he should ask Thea if she could give Billy an arm? Big Blue already had so many.

An hour passed and Billy finally gave up on finding the treasure. Perhaps it was buried under the ground, but it was too hard to dig in, even for Billy. He took out a bed from his Magic Pouch and lay down, and thunderous snores soon echoed across the inheritance site.

"You're back," Statue Man said.

"Ah! Billy remembers now!" Billy roared in anger. "You're the one who sent the talking stone to trick me! You're the one who stole Billy's good things!"

He immediately ran toward the statue, and **[Bonker]** ripped through the air as it shot against Statue Man's head. But **[Bonker]**'s bubbly skull was stopped by the shield, meaning that Billy wouldn't be able to destroy Statue Man today either.

"Calm down. I haven't done anything to steal your good things. In fact, I've been trying to give you good things for months now," the statue said, like Billy didn't know that Statue Man was a trickster.

But in this case, it seemed like it was telling the truth. Billy was smart, so he could tell when people were lying.

"Oh, it's wasn't you?" Billy said with confusion. "Why didn't you say so, trying to confuse Billy. Stupid."

"... Anyway," Statue man sighed. "What's going on? What talking stone? Why do I sense a familiar aura from where you

are sleeping?”

Billy considered whether he should tell Statue Man or not, but he eventually decided he could use some help. Billy had been lost in the mist for too long, and he was starting to get bored. Perhaps the Statue Man could help him figure out how to dig for treasure in the hard ground. Or perhaps he was even friends with the other Statue Man.

“Billy’s friend had another Statue Man, and he let Billy go inside to look for treasures. But Billy couldn’t find any treasure anyway. Statues are all bad,” Billy said.

Statue Man was a bit stupid as usual, needing Billy to repeat himself multiple times before he understood what Billy was talking about. But he eventually understood.

“So you’re inside a trail created from a descendant of our clan? Small world, no wonder it felt familiar. The bloodline is weak and impure, but it has undergone a real awakening,” statue-man muttered. “This is good. I can only provide you with theory through this realm, but this half-blood child might be able to help you take the first steps with your bloodline,” the statue said.

“Billy has told you, Billy is human. Billy doesn’t need any blood either, Billy’s body is full of it,” Billy snorted.

“Nevermind then,” the Statue said. “But what about treasures? There is a lot of treasure outside, but you won’t be able to find it without help. So let me help you find some treasure, ok?”

“How?” Billy asked skeptically. “Billy knows you can’t get out. Billy won’t draw the thing outside to let you free.”

“How about this?” the Statue said. “This time when you wake up, you will remember me for one hour. If you shout ‘Statue man, help me!’ I’ll be able to come out and help you, but only for 10 seconds. Any more than that might hurt me and the place where you are.”

“How does Billy know you’re not lying?” Billy said skeptically.

“I swear on my mother that what I said just now was true,” the statue said solemnly.

“Good! Billy will trust you this time!” Billy said with a big smile.

However, Billy knew now that Statue Man was a liar. He never swore on his mama when it came to drawing that thing outside. Billy had actually considered drawing it before, but now he definitely wouldn't. Some statues are just too stupid.

“But first, explain to me how the trial works,” the Statue said, drawing Billy out of his thoughts.

“Billy doesn't know. Billy only saw a talking stone. It was annoying so it got thwoned,” Billy shrugged. “Then nothing happened.”

“The Inheritance Trial seems to have been pretty poorly crafted to allow such a situation to occur without any fallbacks,” the statue muttered. “Well, just call for me outside, and I'll find the guy with the treasure for you.”

Billy woke up a bit later, and he actually remembered Statue Man this time, just like he said. However, he didn't immediately call for him, but rather looked around for a while longer. Billy didn't want to call that guy unless he had to. However, there really was just mist everywhere, and Billy finally gave up.

“STUPID STATUE MAN, COME HELP ME!” Billy roared, and a terrifying pressure spread out the next moment.

Billy's eyes widened in shock as he looked for the threat. However, he was afraid that **[Bonker]** wouldn't be able to help him right now. Not even that old spear guy during the hunt was as scary as this. He felt a bunch of bad feelings in his chest, just like those days he had to protect mama from papa when his mouth smelled funny.

Why had Billy cast the spell to let Statue Man out? Was it actually he who was the stupid one?

“IN THE NAME OF THE EASTERN MOUNTAIN, HELP THIS CHILD”, a thunderous voice suddenly echoed out across the area, causing the whole world to shake and most of the mist to disappear.

The terrifying pressure was gone the next moment, and Billy could breathe out in relief. Statue Man really didn't lie this time and went back inside Billy's dreams.

"Ah? The Eastern Mountain?" a startled voice answered from nowhere the next second, though Billy felt it was a lot weaker than the earlier voice.

Wait, what earlier voice?

Billy frowned with confusion, feeling like he had forgotten something again. Whatever, he had finally solved the riddle as the mist was going away, opening a tunnel to somewhere that shone with light. A wide smile spread across Billy's face as he hurried along, and he could already see himself decked in treasure, looking rich enough to make even the golden ghost jealous.

No stupid trial could trick Billy for too long.

However, Billy stopped in his tracks with confusion when he realized he was standing on a cliff on top of a mountain. He quickly looked back, but the mist was gone, and the flat place he had walked around in for so long was no longer there. This really was a mysterious statue to hold a whole mountain and magic mist.

"Welcome," a deep voice said, and Billy looked toward the source of the voice with vigilance, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn't another stone, but a man that actually looked a lot like Billy himself.

"Hello! I am Billy. Do you have treasures to give out?" Billy said as he walked over with quick steps.

"I do," the man grinned. "A lot of good ones. Are you really a descendant of Brazla? You look much more handsome than him. Almost as handsome as Thrak himself."

"Brazla? Who is that?" Billy said with confusion. "Billy came here because Billy's friend had a house full of large statues. Zac said that if Billy jumped into the Titan statue, then Billy would get a bunch of good things."

"Haha, that greedy bastard kicked the bucket!" Thrak roared with laughter, and the whole mountain shook with his laughter.

“That’s what you get for tricking Thrak!”

Billy didn’t say anything and only looked at the muscular man with suspicion. He seemed a bit stupid, could he really have good treasure?

“Who was it that spoke earlier? Are you really someone from Eastern Mountain?” Thrak asked with almost burning eyes, and Billy started to feel a bit uncomfortable.

It was a bit troublesome to be the world’s most handsome boy, even if it made him happy when mama complimented him.

“Ah? Why do you keep asking Billy weird stuff? Billy was lost in the mist, then Billy fell asleep. Suddenly I found you after I woke up,” Billy shrugged as he took a step away.

“Interesting. I can still feel that aura on you though, so I definitely didn’t dream,” Thrak rumbled. “Well, whatever. I’ll help like the great ancestor asked, but rules are rules. Do you want my treasures?”

Billy hurriedly nodded in agreement, his eyes scanning the mountain for good places to start digging.

“Only someone strong can get the treasures of Thrak. It’s a rule. Prove you’re strong by bashing that rock,” Thrak said as he pointed next to Billy.

Billy looked over with confusion, and he saw that there was a round rock just twenty meters away. It was over ten meters tall too, and Billy didn’t understand how he had missed it earlier.

“I just need to thwunk the stone?” Billy said skeptically. “Can Billy use **[Bonker]**?”

“Its name is Bonker?” Thrak laughed. “Good name!”

“It called itself something else, but it was stupid so Billy renamed it,” Billy shrugged.

“Sure, you can use your club. Just turn that ball into small stones and I’ll give you treasures,” Thrak smiled.

Billy shrugged in confusion, but he still walked over to the stone. He had thwunked a lot bigger things than this stone, so it didn’t really feel like a challenge to break it. He still took the

mission seriously, so he walked over and swung at the stone with a lot of power and the impact caused a shockwave to spread out all around them.

However, the rock was completely fine.

“Tsk, you’re pretty weak, huh?” the man said from behind, immediately igniting a fire in Billy’s chest.

Billy glared back before he looked over at the stupid rock again, and this time he activated **[Disintegrator]**, which gave the club a huge destructive power. This was the skill Billy used to break apart that golden ship earlier. Surely it should work on a rock? But Billy even infused the Seed of Expansion in the strike.

The air around **[Bonker]** started shaking as popping sounds echoed out across the mountain, and Billy bashed the stone with everything he had. A huge explosion erupted, as the air around the stone was sucked into a ball the size of a marble before it exploded with the force of a missile. This eruption repeated six times, each explosion larger than the ones before, and even Billy was thrown away twenty meters from the shockwaves.

Six times was just one worse than Billy’s record, and he victoriously looked up at his work. However, Billy’s eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw that the rock didn’t as much as move from the attack, and it only got a small mark where he hit. The ground around it was turned into sand like expected, but the ball was fine.

What kind of super stone was this?

Thrak didn’t say anything this time, but Billy couldn’t help but blush when he heard a snicker from the side. No holding back anymore. Billy got back up on his feet, and he grew one meter every step he took toward the stone. Power coursed through his veins, and he suddenly felt connected to the whole mountain beneath him.

He now realized what he had missed. The Dao of Expansion wasn’t right. **[Bonker]** rose into the air, and it suddenly turned heavier as it was imbued with the Dao of Boulder, and Billy

swung down with everything in his body as he activated another skill. The mountain shook, and the ball finally cracked.

“Good! Good seedling! I understand why the Eastern Mountain is interested in you!” Thrak roared from the side.

“So, will you give Billy treasures now?” Billy panted.

“Of course. But before that. How about you stay with Thrak for a few days and learn a thing or two?” the man smiled.

“What can you teach Billy? No offense, but you seem a bit stupid,” Billy said skeptically.

“Haha I am stupid, but that doesn’t matter because I am strong,” Thrak laughed as he thumped his chest.

He suddenly started growing, and Billy’s eyes widened when he saw Thrak using the same trick as himself. However, he was a bit different from Billy. Billy got golden hair when growing for some reason, but this guy’s hair stayed brown. But he was a lot better at growing than Billy, and Billy gaped when the man became as big as the mountain they stood on.

What was this?! One fart from him and his town Billyville would be blown away.

“See? Pretty strong, right?” Thrak laughed, and his voice alone caused the whole mountain to shake.

Thrak shrunk again after flexing his muscles for a bit, and he was soon enough just a bit taller than Billy again.

“Now let Thrak teach you how to bash without getting bashed. It took Thrak a lot of effort to figure this out, so listen well.”

Chapter 539: Loot

“What? ONE BILLION for some unsealing?” Zac almost roared as some killing intent started leaking from his body.

“Most of it was the cost of materials. Unsealing is akin to array breaking, and we had to spend a lot to get the work done. Just the best version of [**Warrior’s Heart**] cost us almost 45 Million to unseal, in addition to time and manpower spent. The whole process of unsealing this many treasures required half the clan to work arduously through the week, including our elders and children,” Calrin said with a sorrowful visage.

“It was quite an ordeal, come look how gaunt the young ones have become from the stress,” Calrin said with a deep sigh, clearly getting ready to summon a bunch of gnome kids once more to tug at Zac’s heartstrings.

“Alright, alright,” Zac snorted. “No need to parade the children around again. One billion it is, but you better not have unsealed a bunch of garbage and expect me to pay.”

“Just a pittance for a man such as yourself,” Calrin said with a smile. “Don’t be too surprised when you hear this, but the total value of the treasures in the Cosmos Sack reached almost 100 Billion Nexus Coins.”

“So you took a flat 1% fee?” Zac said, the quoted value of his treasures quickly calming him down.

Zac had actually expected it to be a lot lower after seeing how little treasures there were in the mentalist’s Spatial Ring. People wouldn’t be bringing items meant for the E-Grade into the tower, but rather leave it with their clans, and F-grade items along with their equipment could only be so valuable.

However, he was happy to be wrong this time.

He had felt a bit like a pauper after [**Love’s Bond**] had swallowed most of his net worth, and much of the remainders

were swallowed by **[Verun's Bite]**. He still had a few billion Nexus Coins, but it no longer felt like a mountain of wealth, especially not after having visited the Base Town. The elites there could throw out over a Hundred Billion Nexus Coins without batting an eye, and all the peak treasures were far out of his price range.

“Indeed, where else can you get such a low fee for work of this nature? Only for friends and family,” Calrin said with righteousness.

Zac snorted when he saw the Sky Gnome's expression, but he knew that Calrin was telling the truth. One percent wasn't a very high fee for this kind of work. Identifying items cost 5% at the General Store that the System provided to all Town Lords, and they could only identify pretty common items. One percent to not only identify, but also tally and unseal was a great deal.

“Well, whatever,” Zac said as he turned his attention toward the crystal with the list of items.

A list materialized as he infused some energy into it, and his eyes widened as one line after another appeared, listing an untold number of treasures. The scions of the clans of the Zecia Sector had really come prepared when dealing with the tower.

“We've consolidated items of the same category into the same list item as there are simply too many of some items,” Calrin explained. “For example, both **[Second Wind Pill]** and **[Surging Vitality Pill]** are middle E-Grade healing pills, so they are both listed as such. And you have 2348 of those kinds of pills.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and he saw that the list clumped items together by category and grade. For example, there were 84 Low-Grade swords, and 12 Peak Grade swords among the weaponry. However, there were actually 643 High-Grade Swords, which obviously stood out compared to the other qualities.

“Why are there so many High-Grade Swords?” Zac asked with confusion. “Was someone carrying around hundreds of them?”

“Most of them are of the same make, unattuned shortwords with matching inscriptions. I am guessing that the previous owner was either planning on selling some weapons that their clan had produced, or was able to use the swords in some sort of weapon array,” Calrin said.

“Weapon array?” Zac asked with interest.

“A mix of a swordmaster and an array master. It is not too uncommon a path. Rather than just controlling one weapon, you would control hundreds of them like a swarm. Some C-Grade Monarchs command millions. You can even set up arrays to unleash powerful attacks or just overwhelm the enemies with numbers,” Calrin explained.

Zac’s nodded in understanding. He had encountered that sort of fighters before, it was just that he didn’t know the name for it. One of the Incursion Masters used flying needles to attack him from every imaginable angle. There was also the poison master at the start of the 8th floor who attacked with a flying swarm of daggers.

Even a few of the visions he had seen when reaching peak mastery of [**Axe Mastery**] had used sets of flying axes.

Of course, swords were just one type of weapons he had gathered, and Zac realized he had gotten almost ten thousand weapons from his trip to the Base Town, most of them Medium and High-quality E-Grade weapons. This was far more than he had anticipated as there were just a few hundred people he killed. He had picked up a couple of dozen weapons during his climb as well, but nothing that would explain this number.

These were all normal weapons forged with E-Grade materials, but they weren’t Spirit Tools. Calrin’s explanation seemed pretty likely, that some of these collections of gear were meant for resale. A lot of people used the Tower of Eternity as an opportunity to make money as it was a way to circumvent the fees to trade through the Mercantile System.

This was even further evidenced by the mountains of raw materials. There were over 50 thousand E-Grade Attuned crystals altogether, making up roughly a fifth of the total value

of the loot. They had probably been brought from attuned worlds where there was a massive surplus of certain crystals, intended to trade for other ones that were more valuable back home.

It was the same with there being large stocks of over a hundred different materials and herbs, many of them extremely useful for Port Atwood. All of them were just peak F-Grade or E-Grade materials, but that was just what Port Atwood needed right now to successfully upgrade from an F-Grade force to a legitimate E-Grade force.

Finally, there were was the list of “big-ticket items” at the end, and Zac looked through them one by one.

There was first of all 92 Spirit Tools, though most of them were the bog-standard fare that might not even make it into an auction. At least a quarter of those who managed to get a ticket to the Tower of Eternity would already have gotten their hands on a Spirit Tool, and it was mostly the stronger people of the Base Town who had assaulted him at the end.

Of course, there were still a lot of people who might have the wealth or background to own a Spirit Tool but hadn't found a fitting one. Ogras was a prime example of this, as his spear was just High-Quality E-Grade weapon without any spirituality.

However, there were some good Spirit Tools among those he had acquired too, and two of the Spirit Tools were actually marked as Peak Quality by Calrin. The Sky Gnome assigned two types of grades on each weapon; rank and quality. For example, one of the Peak Quality Spirit Tools was just Early E-Grade, whereas the other one was Peak Quality High E-Grade.

That still meant that they were both good enough to have been put at the last section of the Auctions that Zac attended, with the latter probably being something that would be saved for one of the bigger monthly auctions.

The quality assessment by the Sky Gnomes was a mix of attunement, craftsmanship, and upgrade potential. **[Verun's Bite]** would no doubt have been assessed as Low Quality

when he got it, but Calrin said it was either High or Peak quality by now. He was unsure though, as Zac had taken an unorthodox path in upgrading it by feeding it a bunch of uncommon treasures.

Who knew what the stone he fed Verun was, and who knew what effect a bunch of Dragon blood and a Dragon Core would have? But it had definitely improved the weapon at a fundamental level, and not just evolved it to a higher grade. The bones that created the axehead looked completely different from how it did before, and its potential had probably shot through the roof.

Just the fact that Verun already had enough spirituality to actually leave the weapon and take form meant that reaching D-Grade would probably just require him finding the right set of materials. There shouldn't be any bottlenecks to mention.

Zac didn't really care about the lower quality Spirit Tools, and he guessed that some would be sold during the auction while others would enter the merit exchange. But the two Peak Quality Spirit Tools were essentially strategic resources that he wanted to assign himself. They were a bit troubling though, as he didn't have a clear candidate in mind.

The first one was a bestial claw, perhaps something that could be used by a pugilist. It actually came from one of the leaders of the attack, but he hadn't even taken it out during the fight as he was busy maintaining that Six Directions array or whatever it was called. It was a bit sad, the man got killed by the cursed blade's half-moon before he even had a chance to display his ultimate skills.

The highest-graded Spirit Tool was actually a cauldron, and according to Calrin it could both be used for alchemy and fighting. It was much higher in quality compared to the cauldron he had gifted to his sister, and it was likely the most valuable Spirit Tool on Port Atwood apart from **[Love's Bond]**.

His first idea was to give it to his sister as well, but he eventually decided against it. Kenzie had only shown a fleeting interest in alchemy, and it felt like a waste to give

something this valuable away as though it was a toy. He would keep it for himself for now, and rent it out in case his force managed to nurture a talented Alchemist in the future.

That would bind him or her to his force, as a good cauldron was extremely important to progress in alchemy, just like a proper weapon was required to bring out your greatest potential in battle.

The origin of the cauldron was a bit baffling though. Zac's first assumption was that he had killed someone from the Zethaya clan, but he felt that he would have been informed some way or another if that was the case. But it didn't come from one of the five leaders of the assault either, but rather one of the nameless faces in the mob. Calrin had found the cauldron inside a normal Cosmos Sack along with over ten thousand pills of middling quality.

Calrin guessed that it was the defining treasure of a weaker or declining alchemy clan, and the elders had lent it to whoever had entered the Tower of Eternity. The scion would probably just use the cauldron to smash through the earlier floors of the tower before he focused on his alchemy and selling pills, but he had perhaps been caught up in the madness that his Projection elicited.

Zac had been shocked to hear from Ogras that the projection of the Stele had turned everyone almost mad, and it had somewhat lowered the anger he had felt over the incident. He remembered feeling extremely confused that a bunch of weaklings dared to risk their lives fighting him even after he reached the 9th floor, but it turned out that the System had essentially shoved a berserker pill down everyone's throats.

Or perhaps it was the Stele itself. It was based on war or conflict, after all, and the power of its impartment might just have been too high. Perhaps all 9th-floor apparitions had that kind of effect.

In either case, Spirit Toos were obviously not the only high-value items in the Cosmos Sacks. There were was one item on the list that was a natural treasure similar to the **[Evolution Fruit]** he got from Yrial, though it was a shimmering liquid

stored in a large crystal vial. Zac was a bit tempted to drink it himself, but he felt it was a bit unnecessary.

It probably wouldn't work on his Draugr side judging by its name, [**Water of Exuberance**], and it felt like a waste to use on his human side as well. His human side had almost reached D-Grade Race already thanks to the [**Evolution Fruit**], and he could just complete the final step by taking normal medicinal baths.

It would better serve someone on his force, perhaps Sap Trang now that his odds of evolving seemed to have improved.

Chapter 540: Attunement

There were also over a dozen peak quality talismans that were a mix of defensive and offensive among the most valuable treasures, but Zac immediately realized that their craftsmanship paled compared to the ones he had looted from the mentalist. They would still work as back-ups to his somewhat depleted reserves, and he could give out a few more to his core fighters.

But he wasn't personally very interested in talismans of that tier any longer, feeling that his recent attribute gain had made him outgrow these items to a certain degree. After all, a peak E-Grade talisman contained roughly the power of an average peak E-Grade warrior, and he was nearing that point as is.

There were a few items he was extremely keen on keeping for himself though.

The first of them was a consumable talisman as well, called **[Zephyr's Charge]**. It was a peak-grade speed imbue-ment treasure if he understood the explanation correctly, and it would essentially give him wings and increase his speed for a few minutes. It would be perfect in case he needed to flee or run down a fleeing enemy, especially in his Draugr form that lacked dependable mobility options.

The second was a handful of **[Spatial Displacement Talismans]**, a treasure that would instantaneously move him to a random spot within a kilometer. It was an amazing treasure to escape certain doom scenarios, provided that space wasn't locked down. For example, if he had a treasure like this when the Hayner Clan Patriarch tried to drop a meteor on his head, then he wouldn't have to leave the floor so early. He could just have teleported out of the hole and hunted down that treasure.

Finally, there was something called a **[Blood Nucleus]**, a rare treasure related to bloodline awakenings. It was the most valuable item of them all, and Calrin had priced it at 20 Billion Nexus Coins. That might not seem like a terrifying amount after having possessed something like the **[Divine Investiture Array]**, but it was still something that Zac would never have been able to afford if he tried to purchase it during an auction.

He figured that the **[Blood Nucleus]** would go perfect together with the marrow he got for himself from the previous quest. The only reason he didn't cram both of them down his throat right now was that he needed some sort of understanding of his supposed bloodline before trying to wake it up.

There were many items that Zac didn't recognize either, but judging by the value that Calrin had assigned they were rare treasures that warriors most likely had brought to the Base Town to sell. These kinds of treasures weren't immediately valuable to Zac, but that didn't mean that they would sell them for Nexus Coins.

Almost all forces in the multiverse were constantly operating under a lack of resources, and there were always thousands of plans or undertakings on hold due to missing certain ingredients. Top forces like the Dravorak Dynasty might not struggle like this due to their power and vast connections, but Zac had already encountered the problem of lacking materials from the Creator quest.

There were a million ways he could gain more Nexus Coins, so selling precious resources instead of holding onto them for a rainy day was just stupid. This was unfortunately how most forces reasoned, which only worsened the availability of rare items.

Calrin also provided his recommendations of what to keep, what to save for the Auction, what to put in the merit exchange, and so on. Zac mostly went with the Sky Gnome's arrangements, apart from making some minor adjustments.

It wasn't that the Sky Gnome suddenly had turned a new leaf and become a decent and honest merchant, but he had kept his greed under check since Zac returned from the Tower of

Eternity. Part of it was probably because of Zac's amazing performance, while part of it was that he knew he was on thin ice after the trouble the ring he gifted Zac caused.

Zac felt like he had just won the lottery as he left the Thayer Consortia, even though there was only one "supreme" treasure like the **[Blood Nucleus]**. Calrin's estimate was around 100 billion, but that was going by Zecia sector prices. They believed they could make even more as long as they were smart about what items to put on the auction for the native forces.

The elites of Earth were flush with cash at the moment, and they needed to exploit that.

Every force was hunting the hundreds of millions of Zombies for everything they were worth at the moment, wanting to capitalize on this one-time opportunity. The undead were like headless chickens with the Lich King dying, and they had essentially turned into walking bags of wealth to the cultivators of Earth, just like how it was during the beginning of the integration.

Not only did people gain clean-up quests by the System, but the zombies gave a good amount of both Cosmic Energy and Nexus Coins. Add to that the Miasma Cores that formed in the elite zombies' heads, and it was so lucrative that people were still forgoing sleep even two weeks later. Even the Underworld Council only undertook a cursory search for Enigma who was still missing while they focused on enriching themselves.

At the same time, there was almost nothing for the Earthlings to spend their money on. The general stores provided by the System only sold bare essentials and the lowest grades of weaponry, and there weren't a lot of other options for them. Starlight, the Ishiate elite, apparently possessed a limited Mercantile License and had some wares to sell, but his influence was limited thanks to pushback from Calrin and the Marshall Clan who were aiming to set up their own business empire.

The Marshalls themselves had kept a low profile until now, perhaps partly because they already knew about his auction.

Zac had mentioned it to Thea, who no doubt had informed her grandfather as well. Perhaps they were ready to roll out their businesses already but held themselves back out of respect to him.

Either case it was good for Zac, as it meant that people were more likely to spend their hard-earned money in Port Atwood. He could almost see the mountain of wealth in front of his eyes as he teleported back to his cultivation cave.

When he arrived in the hidden cave he looked over at the array that looked similar to the Teleportation Array, though the inscriptions were a lot denser. It was the “homing point” of the **[Spatial Gate Array]**, the location where he would arrive in case he was forced to use the escape function.

The other part was a thin bracelet that was hidden beneath the sturdy bracer he got from Greatest. He kept the bracer on at all times, and he figured it might be able to hide the **[Spatial Gate Array]** from any discerning eyes. It seemed to be one of the most valuable things in his possession, though not quite at the level of things like the **[Pathfinder Eye]** or the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

Then again, it was hard to put a price on survival. There was simply no supply of an item like the **[Spatial Array Gate]** in the Zecia sector, though there were a lot of other escape measures around. For example, there was the skill that Thea possessed, and whatever the Head Priest used to turn into a stream of flames that allowed him to escape the Dead Zone. There were even the weaker teleportation talismans he had gained just now.

“My lord, welcome back,” A voice drifted out from the rocks themselves as Triv emerged.

“It’s been a while. I was almost starting to fear that you had managed to escape your contract,” Zac said with a small smile. “Did you find anything interesting?”

The ghost had been gone for over a week as Zac sent it on a mission after it finished helping Kenzie setting up the cultivation caves. The ghost was a non-combat class, but his incorporeal form also made him a qualified scout by default.

So Zac sent the ghost out to explore the depths of his island, to see if there was anything interesting or valuable in the vicinity of the root of the Nexus Vein.

“Even if I managed to break the Contract of Servitude I would still surely stay with the young master,” Triv hurriedly exclaimed, eliciting a snort from Zac.

But honestly, it wasn't impossible that the ghost was telling the truth. Just like Calrin hugged onto his legs because of the potential he represented, so could Triv. A completely purebred Draugr of an ancient bloodline was unheard of in a remote sector like Zecia. The few Draugr clans around were apparently just mixed-blood clans that would just barely be considered Draugr by Heartland Standards.

Following Zac was Triv's ticket to the Empire Heartlands in the future, as Triv was still certain that Zac would end up there sooner or later. And Zac probably would, provided that he ever reached C-Grade or higher. By that time Earth should already be safe, and the Zecia sector wouldn't be able to provide him with a proper environment.

Triv had mentioned a common saying during one of his campaigns to recruit Zac to the dark side. He said that there were four requirements to cultivation: Wealth, Companionship, Method, and Environment. Not one could be lacking if one wanted to reach the peak.

Wealth was the most important, and that went double for someone like Zac who was just a mortal. To cultivate was to burn money, and it only got exponentially worse. In the beginning he could cultivate and gain levels with just a couple of Nexus Crystals who were barely worth anything, but now he was contemplating buying Attuned D-Grade crystals for hundreds of millions just for some advancements to his soul. And it would only get worse from here on out.

Second was companionship, but it didn't refer to girlfriends or even Dao Companions. It meant that no one could reach the peak alone. You needed a master to teach you, friends you could trust your back to, a support system that could take care of things that were distracting you from your cultivation.

Method was partly referring to a cultivation manual, but it also incorporated things such as Inheritances, Heritages, Dao Impartments, and even hunting grounds. Some insights would have to come from within, but there was no need to reinvent the wheel at every turn. Taking advantage of the wisdom and knowledge of others would allow you to make faster progress without any detriment.

Finally was Environment, and this requirement was why Triv believed Zac would end up in the Empire Heartlands sooner or later. It wasn't without reason that B-Grade powerhouses never appeared in the Zecia sector. It simply didn't allow it. No crops would grow if the soil was barren. He needed to go to the more prosperous sectors of the Multiverse if he wanted to progress further after a certain stage.

In fact, moving as soon as possible was the optimal choice from a cultivation standpoint. Earth was just a desolate rock by most standards, and staying here would no doubt delay his cultivation speed.

"It is quite odd," Triv said, dragging Zac back to the present. "There are some Divine Crystals growing close to the source of the Nexus Vein. This can happen spontaneously, but it is far more likely on life or nature-aspected planets. When the world becomes attuned so does most of the neutral Veins."

"So the World Core's upgrade was gaining an attunement after all?" Zac said with excitement.

This was something that had stumped him and everyone else over the past two weeks. The world was supposed to have upgraded its core because he had defeated the Undead Incursion. There even was that pulse that spread across the whole planet. However, after the pulse there was no follow-up at all.

The density of energy was pretty much the same as before, still slowly climbing as the world continued its gradual integration. No new Nexus Veins or treasures were sprouting up from the ground either, and no attuned energies could be found. Most had simply assumed that it would take more time

for the world to adapt to the reward, but it looked like the clues were finally starting to appear.

“Well, that’s the thing. I also sensed weak hints of Miasma close to the vein,” Triv said with hesitation. “Though I don’t believe the vein is turning death attuned.”

“What? Did you do something?” Zac said with a frown.

“I swear on the Empire, I didn’t do anything! It could be an effect of the realignment array being shut off at the last minute. Either that, or…” the ghost said, drifting off at the end.

“Or what?” Zac asked.

“Or the planet has gained a multi-attunement,” Triv said.

“You mean the planet might both have life and death attunements?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up.

Wouldn’t that mean that the planet was turning into a cultivation haven for himself?

“I wouldn’t be so quick to celebrate if that was the case,” Triv sighed. “It might not be a good thing.”

Zac couldn’t stop himself from audibly groaning when he saw the scrunched-up visage of the ghost. What now?

Chapter 541: Dust and Bones

“How can a planet having multiple attunements not be good? It sounds extremely good,” Zac asked with a frown.

“In some cases, certainly. Worlds with Wood and Water attunements are supremely valuable among Herbalists, for example. One such planet might be worth as much as 1000 normal worlds of the same grade as they can grow unique plants that require both attunements to thrive. However, such planets appearing is thanks to the two elements harmonizing well with each other,” Triv explained.

Zac immediately understood what the ghost was driving at. Was the World Core going to explode from the clashing elements of life and death? Attunements didn't get much more mismatched than life and death. They were each other's opposites, and they would constantly clash. His own cultivation chamber was proof of that.

“So what would happen with such a world?” Zac asked with some trepidation. “Will the World Core be in trouble?”

“I have never heard of a life and death planet before,” Triv admitted. “I don't think there's not much use for one, with young master being the exception. The Empire wouldn't want their planets tainted with life, and death-attunement would make large sections unsuitable for the living. Perhaps it would be able to birth unique treasures, but that's beyond my knowledge.”

“So what is the worst-case scenario?” Zac sighed.

“The World Core might crumble from the opposing attunements, which would turn the planet into a desolate rock void of energy. Or it could cause the whole planet to completely fall apart,” Triv said.

Zac closed his eyes, a wave of exhaustion hitting him almost like a sledgehammer. Was there yet another thing for him to worry about now? There was already enough on his plate, and now he had to prevent the planet from going up in smokes on top of everything else?

“It might not happen,” Triv quickly said when he saw Zac’s reaction. “I am not an expert on the subject, but there are multiple outcomes. Sometimes one attunement can overpower the other, and turn into a single-attunement planet. It is also possible that the planet finds some sort of equilibrium, turning it into an extremely rare existence in the cosmos. In fact, I believe this is the most likely scenario.”

“Why? What did you find?” Zac asked eagerly, like a man gripping hold of a lifebuoy.

Zac would take any clue that indicated that the world wasn’t actually ending.

“Well, didn’t young master mention that the World Core upgrade was part of a quest reward that encompassed the whole planet? It would make no sense that the System would provide a detriment as a reward,” Triv said.

Zac’s quickly nodded in agreement. It was true. The System was pretty annoying, and its gifts often felt a bit backhanded. Being stuck with annoying Tool Spirits like Brazla and Big Blue was ample proof of that. However, they were undeniably rewards. It made no sense that the system would leave the world worse off than before as a reward.

However, it didn’t hurt to make sure.

“Is there anything I can do to decrease the risk of anything bad happening?” Zac sighed.

“Our Empire can easily realign a planet as you know, and many living forces possess similar capabilities. Perhaps there are some arrays to stabilize the process of giving a planet attunement?” Triv ventured, but he didn’t seem very sure. “In either case, with the speed things are progressing it will probably take decades before the attunement is finished, so we have ample time to prepare. There are only small hints right

next to the nexus Vein, I might even have seen things incorrectly.”

“Well, that’s good I guess. Wait, your first instinct was that the planet would blow up because of the dual attunement? What about me? Am I in any danger?” Zac asked.

“I honestly don’t know how young master is still alive,” the ghost coughed. “Life and death shouldn’t intermingle. It is one of the most basic rules of the Undead Empire. But at the same time, everything is possible. I am just a poor ghost, my understanding of the truths of the heavens are shallow at best.”

“Have you ever heard of undead cultivating life attuned classes or Daos?” Zac asked.

“No, never. It is almost impossible. Our affinities with those types of Daos are essentially non-existent. Why would you spend centuries on attaining a life-aspected Dao Seed when you can gain a death aspected one in a few months?” the ghost said, looking disgusted at the mere thought.

However, the ghost shuddered the next second, meaning that this line of questioning wasn’t permitted by the restrictions engraved on its soul, so Zac could only drop it.

“Well, I guess I will have to figure things out myself,” Zac sighed before he produced the body refining recipe he just got from Calrin. “Do you think this will work on me?”

The ghost scanned the guide, his eyes widening in incredulity.

“It looks like something you would use on a beast companion to refine its constitution?” it hesitantly said. “I’m not sure. It might work? I don’t see anything that would directly clash with you at least. But a pureblood Draugr using some sort of beast powder... The heavens will weep.”

“I’m sure the heavens will be fine,” Zac snorted as he handed the ghost the materials required for the dust. “I’ll go cultivate for a bit. Are you able to prepare the **[Bone-Forging Dust]**?”

“Certainly, young master,” the ghost said as he took the Cosmos Sack. “The process is quite similar to grinding the materials used for making incense sticks, and I have ample experience in this regard. There will not be any issues.”

Zac nodded in thanks and the ghost disappeared into the wall the next moment.

It was quite an impressive skill the specter had, being able to freely pass through walls. He could even bring inanimate objects with him, making him an excellent scout or assassin. It sort of felt like a bit of a waste for such a special existence to become a butler.

Unfortunately, its abilities didn't work with the living, which ruined Zac's idea to have the ghost taking him to the depths of the Mystic Realm, ignoring all the barriers and walls. He couldn't send Triv by himself either, as that was a death sentence for a non-combat class.

Zac walked into his cultivation cave and immediately started up the Soul Strengthening array. His mind was slowly drained and he let his thoughts drift for a bit. Between grinding his skill and going over the list of treasures his mind was a bit exhausted, and he was too tired to ponder on the Dao while cultivating his soul.

He even dozed off a bit and was only awakened when the revolution finished and he felt a surge of Mental Energy entering his mind. Every time he completed a revolution he couldn't help but marvel at his soul. It wasn't really growing all that much bigger from the revolutions, but it felt like his soul was getting polished each time.

More importantly, it also seemed like the revolutions helped deal with the Splinter to some regard. He never felt the surges of murderousness like he did before any longer, even though the Splinter had regained a decent amount of its strength by now. It was still restrained by the Shard, but it wasn't in a completely half-dead state any longer.

The two remnants were still interlocked and unmoving inside the improved cage, but the amount of cleansed energies that was seeping out was gradually increasing without him feeling any negative effects from it. His mind had gained a few boosts during the climb, but it couldn't completely explain his balanced state of mind.

The small improvements that came from the array couldn't be the reason for his tranquil state either. His soul was definitely a bit stronger, but Soul Strengthening was a slow grind and not something that gave instant results. It was more likely that the spiritual dialysis also helped with the hidden corruption from the Splinter, either by design or by chance.

If that was true it was a huge boon, though it also meant that skipping cultivation sessions would harm his mental state.

Zac finished up the session after ten hours as usual before he walked over to the inner cave that housed the **[Seed of Undeath]**. He found his ghost butler cultivating by silently hovering in the air, and there was a supersized pestle by its side. Inside was a silvery compound, no doubt the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** the ghost had prepared for him.

“Young master, it is all done according to the specifications,” the ghost said as it woke up. “There should be enough for 8 to 10 applications.”

Zac nodded in understanding, though he felt a bit disappointed. The powder had roughly the same effect as the medicinal baths according to Calrin, and ten medicinal baths on the road to D-Grade would just scratch the surface. It should be able to increase his attribute limits by a few hundred points though, which was the most pressing matter.

“And the pain,” the ghost hesitantly added.

“I know,” Zac said as he sat down and disrobed. “Not much of a choice right now. Help me apply it.”

The ghost nodded and a stream of the silvery powder rose from the pitch-black mortar, controlled by the ghost's miasmatic tendrils.

Zac sat motionless for over a minute, waiting with a mix of fear and anticipation for the dust to start working. However, he started to worry about the dust not working after all, which would mean that he had wasted over 300 million Nexus Coins. However, his fears soon abated as he started to feel some warmth covering his whole body.

“It seems to be working,” Zac said with excitement to Triv who waited upon him to the side, but the smile on his face quickly turned crooked as the warmth turned to pain.

First, it just felt like an itch he couldn't scratch, but that was just the appetizer. It seemed as though the powder was slowly getting absorbed through the skin, and the pain just kept getting worse as more and more of the powder entered his pores. The itch turned into a stabbing pain after ten minutes, and after another ten minutes he felt almost like he was on fire.

The slowly mounting degree of agony was torture by itself, as Zac still didn't know where the limits lay. There were no timeframes indicated in the crystal either, meaning he had no idea how long the torment would last. He could only try to keep his mind stabilized and bear with it, while not even using his Daos to counteract the powder.

Doing so would no doubt counteract the effect, and it would be the same if his **[Void Heart]** activated. However, even he couldn't stop himself from shuddering as the pain suddenly spiked to a level he previously thought was impossible.

“My lord, are you okay?” Triv worriedly asked.

“Ow... My bones,” Zac spat through grit teeth as veins danced all across his body.

He didn't trust himself to open his mouth again, afraid that he would start screaming on top of his lungs. The powder had just entered his bones, and it felt like some sort of parasite was gnawing at him, slowly breaking down his body from the inside. It was beyond painful, and it almost made him look back at the ordeal with the cultists with longing.

Zac quickly realized what the powder was doing. It was continuously breaking down his body parts, especially his bones, before forcibly mending them, each time leaving them slightly stronger. It was a bit like his Soul Strengthening Array which utilized the clashes between life and death to strengthen his soul, though the powder was far more crude and brutal.

“All the powder has entered your body by now,” the ghost suddenly said. “Young master just needs to bear it a bit

longer.”

Zac stiffly nodded, no longer able to speak. He didn't know how long he sat in the death-attuned sanctum until the pain finally abated, and he took a deep ragged breath even though there actually wasn't any need for oxygen in his current form. He slowly put on his robes once more, but his hands didn't really listen to his commands.

“Let me, young master,” the ghost said and hurriedly dressed Zac.

“Thank you,” Zac said with a hoarse voice. “How long did this take?”

“Around forty minutes,” Triv said.

“Forty minutes?!” Zac exclaimed, his voice cracking. “It felt like days.”

Zac shakily threw a healing pill into his mouth, though he knew that he wasn't really hurt. The soothing stream of energy that spread through his boy helped him stabilize himself a bit at least, but he still needed over 30 minutes before he felt ready to stand up.

“What do young master want to do with the rest of the powder?” Triv asked.

“I'll take it,” Zac sighed.

“If I may, if you just-”

“Enough,” Zac said, not in any mood to hear about how great the Undead Empire was and how this all was unnecessary.

“When can I use this next time?”

“Three days,” the ghost sighed. “Your body will need to rest and recuperate for three days.”

“Fine,” Zac nodded. “By the way, ready yourself for war. You will need to come with me and activate the Jamming Arrays, perhaps as soon as today. I could do it but I don't want to expose my identity.”

“I would have loved to, but I can't,” Triv said, clearly relieved.

“Those arrays can't be activated by just anyone. There are

restrictions in place.”

“We’ve removed them,” Zac said. “Anyone wielding miasma can activate them now.”

“What?! Impossible!” the ghost said with shock. “There’s no way we would leave such a weakness that it could be used against us... Hm?”

“You figured it out?” Zac snorted. “It might be impossible for the living to take control of those things, but it’s not like the protections against other undead are as strong. But don’t worry. You just need to activate the array then hide while we do the fighting.”

“It’s my pleasure to assist,” the ghost said, clearly void of any sort of pleasure.

“Oh, and that insane Tool Spirit at my Dao Repository wants a natural spirit gathering array because he thinks he’s a cultivator, can you start thinking about how such a thing would look? It needs to be pretty too, or he’ll probably start shooting lightning bolts at people,” Zac added.

“Naturally,” Triv nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s it,” Zac said as he left. “Pretty calm day for Port Atwood.”

Chapter 542: Crusade

Zac returned to his compound and just visited his sister for a bite before turning in for the night. Neither Billy nor Thea had returned from their trials just yet according to Kenzie, which hopefully was a good thing. It might mean they managed to get opportunities similar to himself, where he got an additional trial that increased the time that the trial took.

Ogras' Inheritance had passed quicker, only taking him a few hours. The demon hadn't divulged everything that happened, it did seem like his haul wasn't all too impressive apart from the weird creature he was bonded with. Zac guessed his encounter was similar to Zac's if he only defeated the golem and simply got some contribution points to shop for.

The harrowing experience of using the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** left him utterly unable to find the tranquility to ponder on the Dao, especially not with his bones still throbbing painfully. His mind was far too muddled to go over any plans for the war with the Zhix traitors as well, so he just fell on top of his bed and entered a dreamless slumber.

He woke up the next day expecting to be met with a wave of pain, but he was surprised to notice that he felt fine. In fact, better than fine. The pain was completely washed away, and his body felt like he just had spent the last hour stretching and limbering up. He didn't know if it was thanks to his high Vitality or if it was just how the powder worked, but he felt a lot lighter as he walked toward the teleporter.

He had already gotten all the pertinent details yesterday from Kenzie, and his destination had appeared on his Teleportation Screen.

Zac cracked his neck before he stepped into the teleporter, ready to withstand an assault at moment's notice. He was expected by the Zhix War Council, but you never knew what

that meant. There might be a hundred Anointed on the other side of the teleporter waiting to welcome him with their massive fists for all he knew.

Or even worse, a banquet full of all the disgusting things Ibtep had tried to feed him before.

He appeared in a dark cave the next moment, with ten Zhix warriors standing guard. Two of them shot toward him without hesitation, their short spears aiming for his vitals the moment he materialized. Zac didn't panic at all, and simply materialized the crude club he had used against the Zhix before.

Two hollow bonks later and the two attacking warriors lay sprawled out at the ground at the other side of the room.

"Strength to your hive," Zac said. "I am Zachary Atwood. I am expected."

The still-standing Zhix didn't answer with anything but a bow, and two of them stepped off and led him through an intricate series of tunnels, ignoring their unconscious brethren. Zac looked at the surroundings with interest, as this was the first time he had actually been inside a Zhix hive. He had always meant to revisit his local Hive to meet with Nonet, but there was always some fire or another he had to put out.

Zac had always pictured something a bit like a mix of an Ayr Hive and the town caves he had visited, but he realized he had severely underestimated the love for architecture among the Zhix. It would be fairer to compare the Zhix Hive with a dwarven subterranean city. There was extraordinary attention to detail, no matter whether you looked at the intricately tiled floor or the engraved patterns adorning the walls.

Unfortunately, it seemed like he was walking in a restricted part of the complex structure as he saw almost no Zhix warriors while they proceeded deeper into the hive, and there were no buildings or rooms to give an insight into how they lived their day-to-day. It was clear they walked further into the earth though, into the heart of the hive.

It only took them a few minutes to reach their goal though, a large chamber with no point of interest apart from a massive set of doors. In front of it, a familiar figure stood waiting, and Zac walked over with a smile. Zac looked at Ibtep with interest, feeling that the past months had transformed him from a harmless oddball to a warrior emitting a solid aura. Zac could still discern the inquisitive light in his eyes though, the thing that somewhat set him apart from most other insectoids.

The two hadn't actually seen each other since they split ways at Marshall Manor. Ibtep had been in one long deployment against the undead hordes, both working as a liaison due to his knowledge of humans, and as a scout. Zac had felt a bit bad that this guy wasn't there to join in the opportunity of the Dao Funnel, but it felt like he had improved tremendously even without it.

"Greetings, Lord Atwood," Ibtep said with a bow, almost topping over due to the weight of the massive backpack that he still carried around. "Care for a snack? They are quite delicious, and they can calm a warrior's mind, readying you for combat."

He produced a small jar the next moment, and Zac blanched when he saw it contained a few extraordinarily fatty larvae. It looked like some of the Zhix's odd customs remained, and it made him worry about what came next.

"No thank you," Zac said with a somewhat forced smile. "It's good to see you're okay. How is Nonet?"

"Nonet has fought valiantly for Hive Kundevi and Port Atwood, and our Hive can now join the council," Ibtep said with pride before he slightly deflated again. "Of course, Lord Atwood might be a part of that reason."

"Are the others already here?" Zac asked.

"Yes, they are waiting on the other side of this door. I cannot follow inside, it is not my place," Ibtep explained.

Zac nodded as he looked up at the massive gates once more. They reached over ten meters into the air and were covered in a painstakingly detailed mural that depicted various battles. It

was a vivid reminder that the Zhix wasn't just a barbaric tribe of insectoids, but an ancient society with thousands of years of history.

"Your people actually managed to open these things before the integration?" Zac asked as he looked up at the enormous doors.

"Just the greatest of the Anointed," Ibtap said with a shake of his head. "Normal warriors would never be able to step through these gates. It requires both renown and enough power to actually open the doors."

Zac only smiled as he put his hands against the doors and pushed. There was some resistance, but they soundlessly opened and let him inside. However, he was still inwardly shocked when he realized just how much power was required to open these things. There was no way that anyone beneath level 40 or 50 would be able to open these doors, proving just how powerful the Zhix Anointed were even before the integration.

However, it was ultimately not a challenge for an E-Grade warrior, and Zac effortlessly entered the inner chambers where over thirty Anointed stood around a table, with another ten normal Zhix warriors standing by at the side. The smaller Zhix obviously weren't as powerful as the hulking spiritual leaders of their race, but Zac could immediately sense that every single one of them was quite strong. He wouldn't be surprised if they all were between level 65 and 75.

The group of Anointed turned toward him as he entered, silently gazing down at him like giants looking down at a small critter. Zac wryly smiled and wondered how this was how it felt to be a Sky Gnome. Zac was about to greet the group, but he inwardly groaned when he felt the aura of one of the largest Anointed blast across the chamber as he started walking toward him.

It looked like Zhix traditions were still going strong.

Zac couldn't help but ask himself if there was any limit to how big these guys could grow. Normal Zhix were slightly shorter than male humans on average, with weaker anointed like

Nonet reaching a bit over three meters. Herat, the Anointed he met during the hunt was another half-meter taller than that, but he was far from the largest one in this place.

There were three anointed in particular that towered above the others, each of them well over four meters tall. The largest one was probably approaching five meters. Zac barely reached their thighs, like a young child next to their parents. And it was one of these three behemoths that had decided to test his mettle as he flashed forward and swung a huge fist toward his chest.

It felt like the fist grew to the size of a mountain, but Zac realized it was just an illusion brought on by the massive killing intent carried within. This hulking Anointed had no doubt been steeped in battle the past months to accumulate such a terrifying aura. However, the fist was still as large as his whole torso, and Zac was afraid he'd shoot out like a bullet when he got hit.

The fist accompanied by that dense aura was pretty intimidating, but Zac was no slouch either. A boundless killing intent spread throughout the whole chamber, almost turning into a palpable haze from how thick it was. A few of the attendants even fell down on their knees before they forced themselves back on their feet with embarrassment.

Zac didn't care about the normal Zhix though, but he instead readied his body to receive the strike. He stomped down into the ground to lodge himself in place as he leaned forward. He could only pray that his bones were completely healed from using the [**Bone-Forging Dust**] yesterday, as this would probably hurt. At least it couldn't be too bad as his danger sense barely acted up.

A deep clap of thunder echoed out across the hall as the Zhix's massive fist slammed into Zac's chest. Even digging his legs into the solid stone tiles wasn't enough, and Zac was pushed back over twenty meters from the furious momentum. It felt like someone had swung a wrecking ball into him and Zac actually had to stop himself from grunting in pain.

The Zhix warrior clearly had almost 8 or 900 Strength, and it also had a dexterity that was almost on par, increasing the speed and destructiveness of the strike. There was even a hint of a high-tiered Dao Seed in the fist, but Zac knew he hadn't actually infused his strike. This was just a normal attack to test his might.

He looked with surprise at the towering Anointed. Had they found a way to move forward and evolve? From what Zac understood the rite of Anointment came at a cost, cutting off their path of advancement. But these were not attributes that a normal F-Grade warrior should have, at least not without a huge number of special opportunities that he doubted that the Anointed would possess.

“You are wondering how I could bring forth such strength, human Warmaster?” the massive Zhix laughed, its booming voice causing ripples in the air. “I have entered the crusade. I will fight for another year or so, then I will join the ancestors. This will be the final War, and my final gift to my Hive.”

Zac's eyes widened in understanding, once more shocked at the conviction these people carried. He didn't know the specifics, but it seemed as though the Anointed knew of some technique traded their lifespan for power. It didn't seem to be directly burning life-force though, as Zac had seen that enough times to recognize the unique aura it radiated.

“So I guess it's time for me to reciprocate?” Zac said as he fully unleashed his aura.

The whole cave shuddered, and it only got worse as Zac started moving toward the enormous insectoid.

“Wait, Warmaster,” the Anointed hurriedly said as he took a step back. “If there is one thing we have learned over the past year is that our hives cannot only rely on the old teachings to survive. We must also adapt and move forward. There is no need for you to carry on with that archaic tradition, let us instead talk about the looming threat.”

The other Anointed hurriedly nodded as well, immediately launching into a discussion while pointedly looking away from

Zac and his rapidly dwindling momentum. Zac speechlessly looked on with his fist still in the air.

So I just ate your fist for nothing? Zac thought as he looked at the shameless Zhix with mixed feelings.

“I am Rhubat. Strength to your hive. Nonet said you might be able to provide a tactic that would expedite our crusade?” the shameless Zhix said.

“Is this room secure?” Zac asked with a sigh, finally dropping the subject.

“Everyone who has not yet entered the crusade, leave this room,” Rhubat said without hesitation, and a small group of Anointed along with the group of normal Zhix warriors left the chambers.

However, almost all the Anointed stayed, including Nonet who stood to the side, looking almost like a child next to some of its larger colleagues. However, Zac noted that Nonet must have grown by something like 30 centimeters since he had seen the hive leader last time.

“You too?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked over in Nonet’s direction.

“The Anointed exist to serve the Hives. The crusade is our highest order. This is the final crusade, after which the Zhix will be eradicated or have no need for the Anointed any longer. Our era is coming to an end,” Nonet said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement.

Chapter 543: Battleplans

Zac sighed when he heard Nonet's declaration, but he could understand the sentiment. The Anointed were terrifyingly powerful beings who could act as spiritual leaders and protectors of the Zhix, but that could only continue for so long. The world would soon pass them by as they were stuck at the F-Grade. A random warrior would be able to kill them with a simple swing in a decade or two.

Such a transference in power would undoubtedly affect their positions as leaders as well, especially as their purpose of existence would fade into memory with the fall of the Dominators. They rather wanted to go out on their own terms, fulfilling the mission they had carried for over a thousand years.

"What about Hive Kundevi?" Zac asked.

"We have made arrangements for our elders and strongest warriors to take over after we've fulfilled our purpose," another Zhix explained, and one Anointed after another added a snippet of information.

Zac listened to their explanation, and it sounded like the Zhix would set up governance with two major pillars; the clergy and the army. One would provide spiritual guidance and be in charge of running the non-combat side of things, while the Army would nurture the next generation of warriors and protect the hives.

The true elites would still be interred into some sort of templar order, making sure there was a balance in power between the two factions.

As for their reproduction, it turned out that Anointed weren't actually needed for that. From how Ibtep explained it back then it sounded like the anointed were like hive queens that made it possible for Zhix eggs to be fertilized, but it wasn't the

whole story. They were simply the ‘alphas’ of the hive, but the alpha didn’t necessarily need to be Anointed.

It had always simply been like that until now as they were so much more powerful than anyone else in the hives.

“We hope you will be able to watch over the children in the future. This new world is hectic and confusing, but you humans seem quite able to adapt,” Nonet added after the group had explained the future path of the Zhix.

Zac finally understood why the large Zhix had taken the time to explain things in such detail. They would be gone in a year, and he was the greatest threat to their population apart from the Dominators. He could definitely eradicate the Zhix if he put his mind to it.

“I’ll do my best,” Zac said with a nod, and after some thought added some more reassurance. “I believe my force has become so successful because I welcomed people from all the races. It has allowed me to advance much further than other factions. I will make sure that none of the races will get pushed out in the future as we’re stronger together.”

Of course, both Zac and the Zhix understood that promise was provided that no one stepped out of line. Zac didn’t really have an active interest in the governance of the new planet, but he definitely wasn’t some sort of pacifist. He wouldn’t make making examples out of some factions if people started causing trouble for him.

“That’s all we ask,” Rhubat said.

With that out of the way they immediately dove into discussing the details of the crusade. Zac immediately took out one of the Jammers from his cosmos sack and briefly explained how it worked. He was a bit fuzzy on the limitations of the array though to give himself some leeway. He didn’t believe anyone here was a traitor, but better safe than sorry.

“My army can set out at any time,” Zac said. “And I am sure the Human Council would join if I ask as well. We just need to leave some to keep whittling down the zombies.”

“Thank you, but there is no need. It is the Zhix who have brought this threat onto this world, so it will fall onto the Zhix to solve it,” another one of the three enormous Anointed said with a shake of its head. “It is better your kind deal with the remaining unliving before they spread across the planet like the corruption they are.”

“With your ability to stop the traitors from fleeing, there will be no need for massive armies,” another Anointed added. “Just enough to take out one hive at a time. An army assisted by a coalition of us Anointed will be more than enough.”

“Fine,” Zac slowly nodded.

Zac was honestly somewhat relieved that his army wouldn't have to get their hands dirtied once again. The war was a good opportunity for them to gain battle experience against a strong opponent that wasn't braindead like the zombies, but it would definitely lead to casualties. The Zhix were more like the demons than humans in one regard.

Their culture was steeped in battle, and the integration only added to their power. And there were a lot of them. His army had many elites, but there were too few of them, and the Zhix warfare doctrine was essentially based around taking down more powerful warriors by grinding them down with a ceaseless wave of violence.

“But I still need to come with. The items that can block out teleporters and communication must be activated by the unliving, so I need to bring my undead servant,” Zac said, and added a short explanation after seeing the odd stares. “I captured it from the Incursion for information.”

Zac also felt that he needed to be present in case the real Dominators showed up. That way he might be able to avoid a wholesale slaughter of his allies. Zac might not be fully confident in killing them without sounding them out first, but he was confident in both being able to slow them down and getting away in one piece.

After all, there would be a need for manpower in the Mystic Realm, and this group of Anointed might be the best allies he could get his hands on. They were as powerful as early E-

Grade warriors and they had ample combat experience. Bringing these guys would help him even out the odds against the other factions.

Besides, Zac guessed that they would have to enter the Mystic Realm anyway if they wanted to finish their crusade. Void's Disciple had no doubt already brought in some hives to help him look for the dimensional treasure. He couldn't do everything himself. And there were only so many Hives that this group could ambush before the Dominators realized something was wrong.

"That is fine. We need the assistance of humans for another matter," the Rhubat added. "Teleportation. Our hives were not placed too close together in this new world, and many hives have been destroyed already from the war. If we would use our own network then we would have to spend months on foot."

The enormous table lit up the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw it was a surprisingly detailed map of Pangea. There were a lot of indistinct sections, including most of the unmapped zones on his own tablet. But a lot of it was properly filled in with what seemed to be even greater detail than the maps produced by the Marshal Clan.

"This is something Vanexis was gifted by the System," Rhubat said, nodding to the other 5-meter Anointed who had spoken earlier, as he took out a small metal ball from his Cosmos Sack. "As long as a warrior travels with a ball like this in their possession, then everything around them will be recorded and added to the map. We have thousands of these balls."

Zac whistled with surprise as he looked down at the map again. The Zhix had truly been busy going by how much distance they had covered to map out these places.

"There are 28 Hives we have marked," Rhubat said. "All of them are within two hours' travel."

"Only twenty-eight hives?" Zac asked with surprise.

Twenty-eight cities were nothing to the human population, even after the integration, so it sounded like a really low number if the Zhix had actually defected to the Dominators.

“Don’t underestimate these hives. The Dominators have gathered their subjects into massive hives far eclipsing any structures from our old world. Their numbers are almost on par with our hundreds of remaining hives,” Vanexis rumbled. “Each of them holds over a hundred thousand warriors along with millions of normal Zhix.”

Zac nodded in understanding when he heard the explanation, and he tried to understand the motivation for the Dominators to concentrate their followers like this. Was it just out of convenience, or did it have to do with karma? Was the effect of faith more pronounced when one’s followers gathered together, rather than having them spread across the planet?

It was undeniably how cults worked, where groups of people secluded themselves from the rest of the world. This closed system shut out any dissenting voices, which lead to a deeper and deeper indoctrination.

“We will need the help of another human force for this,” Zac said as he looked at the map. “I don’t have access to that many teleporters.”

“Do you still have multiple factions within your race? We thought the human towns were all under you?” Rhubat asked with confusion. “I have seen the strength of the other human elites. How can they challenge your rule?”

Zac didn’t understand the question at first, but it turned out that the Zhix had already changed their structure so that there were only two forces among their race; The Council of the Anointed and The Dominators. All Anointed-run hives were accessible for all the Zhix, whereas they were obviously shut out from their enemies’ teleporters.

It was extremely different from Humans who not only had a handful of major factions like Port Atwood and New World Government, but also dozens of mid-sized forces, though most of the mid-sized forces were kind of under the umbrella of the Marshall Clan by now. There were even hundreds, perhaps thousands, of towns that weren’t really aligned with any of the forces, but rather free bases that had survived some way or another.

“I have been busy throwing out all the invaders of our planet until now,” Zac said before he wryly smiled. “I guess humans are a bit more individualistic as well. We didn’t really get along before the integration either. I probably won’t meddle with the human forces unless necessary. But I can fetch a guide to open the portals for us without a problem.”

The group went over the detail for some time, but the idea was quite simple. Zac would enter a human-controlled town ahead of the army together with a squadron of Zhix scouts, and they would rush to the Hive and get ready to activate the jammers. The army would enter after a short interval, and Zac would activate the jammers the moment the last of the Zhix army had passed through the teleporter.

Activating the jammer before the army had actually arrived at the Hive might warn the traitor Zhix, but they were afraid that the elites would immediately flee through the teleporter the moment they spotted an incoming army. The elites might still try to flee by foot, but the scouts would hopefully be able to spot them this way.

As for the battle itself, it sounded straightforward enough. The Anointed would act as wall breakers and crush all resistance, while the normal Zhix warriors would back them up. In case one of the Dominators showed up, they would take them down even if they had to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives.

“How long do you need to prepare, Warmaster?” Rhubat finally asked, surprising Zac a bit.

“I only need to pick up my ghost and a guide,” Zac said after some thought. “It’s dependent on how quickly you can gather your armies.”

“The armies and the other Anointed are standing ready. Our movements are no doubt being watched, so we need to move quickly from this point on. We want to take out as many of these hives as possible before they adapt,” Rhubat said as killing intent started to leak from its body. “If we can take down five of the Hives before the rest gather, then we are confident in emerging victorious even if Void’s Disciple shows up.”

“Remember, not even the humans can know where we are going,” Nonet added.

“I know,” Zac nodded.

It was already known that there were humans co-operating with the Dominators, and they would have to move randomly to avoid getting exposed and ambushed. There was no point in messing around, so Zac soon exited the secluded chambers. Ibtap was still waiting for him outside, and the scout joined him as they returned to Port Atwood.

However, Zac didn't even have time to call the ghost before he sensed strong fluctuations over at the Dao Repository.

“Wait here,” Zac groaned in exasperation as he rushed over.

Thankfully it turned out that it wasn't Brazla who was causing trouble. The square outside the Repository was completely tranquil, and neither lightning bolts nor a massive face was hovering above it. The fluctuations only grew in power though, and Zac felt they came from inside the towers themselves.

Zac quickly entered the Towers of Myriad Dao, and he quickly spotted the source of the commotion; the statue of the Blade Emperor.

“The girl is coming out,” Brazla said as he descended from a golden cloud floating around in the ceiling.

“Did she pass?” Zac asked as his eyes returned to the statue.

“She did, if barely,” the Tool Spirit snorted as he turned two disdainful eyes toward the array in the same direction.

“Though I'm not so sure she will have the guts to take on the following challenge in the E-Grade.”

Chapter 544: Intent

Zac looked over at the Tool Spirit with surprise. This time Brazla was dressed like a scholar, and he held a golden abacus in his hands instead of some sort of oversized weaponry. There was also a sense of calmness in his eyes like he had transcended the mortal plane or was beyond mundane worries.

Of course, it was just Brazla playing the part, but it was far comparable to the domineering and arrogant persona he had when pretending to be a cultivator. In fact, Kenzie had already told him that Brazla was usually easier to deal with when he was dressed as a non-combat class. If you saw him wielding some sort of weaponry you were usually better off throwing out a few compliments and trying again tomorrow.

Thea appeared the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw her appearance. Brazla wasn't kidding around when he said that Thea had barely passed. She was unconscious and she looked beyond wretched. Her clothes were in tatters and her whole body was completely drenched in blood. Just a few stripes of her hair remained, hanging in clumps held together by coagulated blood.

The only thing that looked completely intact was a blue sword that hummed with power. It was gripped in Thea's right hand with such force that her knuckles were white. Zac wondered if this was the invisible weapon she usually wielded, or if it was something she had gained inside the Inheritance.

This was not the time to worry about the details though, and Zac unhesitatingly rushed over as he took out one of his better healing pills. However, his mind actually screamed of danger the moment he reached her side.

“Wai-“ Zac shouted as he jumped backward, but it was too late as an extremely sharp energy shot out of one of her wounds

and flew toward him, cutting open a shallow wound on his right arm.

He had been utterly incapable of stopping that attack, and his usually impervious skin was cut like butter. If Zac reacted any slower he might actually have lost his arm. The odd energy thankfully didn't try again but rather returned and entered Thea's body once more, causing a small shudder.

Zac barely felt any pain at all from the small cut, but a burning pain bloomed a second later. He looked down at the wound with surprise, and he found that it was an extremely clean wound, even exceeding the sharpness of the cuts he formed with [**Rapturous Divide**]. Was this the power of the Fragment of the Sword, or was this something else entirely?

Because that small energy didn't simply feel like a Dao.

"Such profound Dao Intent," Brazla muttered. "That strand of consciousness has actually made progress on his path."

"The Blade Emperor did this?" Zac asked. "And what is Dao Intent?"

"That girl is not adept enough in the Dao to form such a pure strand of Sword Intent. It can only come from Irei. It's really a shame," Brazla said, unfortunately ignoring the second question.

Only then did Thea wake up, and she looked around with some confusion before she realized where she was.

"Hey, catch this," Zac said before throwing the pill to Thea who immediately swallowed it before she once again closed her eyes to focus on her recuperation. Zac sighed in relief when he saw Thea was fine before turned back to the Tool Spirit. "What's a shame?"

"Irei," Brazla said as he looked up at the statue. "He was destined to become a C-Grade Monarch, but he fell to his demons in the end. Do you know why the Blade Emperor is the only one who left a complete heritage in addition to an Inheritance?"

"Because he was a friend of your creator?" Zac asked, not hesitating to take advantage of the fact that Brazla was in one

of his rare sharing moods today.

“True, but that’s not the reason. It’s here because of his obsession with the sword and creating a family. He adopted one Sword Child after another after marrying his main weapon, and he poured obscene amounts of wealth into them to awaken their spirits. When he ran out of money he turned to my master, who helped him evolve the Swords in return for the Heritage,” Brazla said. “If he had used even a third of all that wealth on himself he would have broken past his bottleneck without a doubt. He is the second most talented person of the seven.”

“So what happened?” Zac asked.

“Mental disorder brought by betrayal. It turned into a heart demon that was the source of his obsession with gathering swords,” Brazla said with a shake of his head. “Remember his fate well. You mundane beings are not meant to grasp at heaven’s secrets. To cultivate is to go against the heavens, and it is not done without shedding your humanity. As the millennia pass you will come to realize that you don’t recognize the person that stares back at you through the mirror any longer.”

Thea opened her eyes and listened to Brazla with a serious expression, and Zac felt a sense of heaviness as well. It was true. How could someone keep their humanity as the eons passed and almost every one they had ever known had long turned to dust? The reasons for struggling to become more powerful might no longer matter, and you were suddenly just a walking nuclear weapon devoid of purpose.

“Thankfully The Great Brazla is not limited by such trifles, as he is endless and eternal,” Brazla said as he drifted away with a snort.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked, shaking off Brazla’s ominous portents.

“I’ll be fine. I haven’t completely absorbed the sword energies. Did the Tool Spirit Call it Sword Intent just now? And where is Billy?” Thea croaked.

“Billy is still inside,” Zac said before looking at Thea with interest. “He called it both a Dao Intent and a Sword Intent. Are you able to share how it’s created?”

That small amount of energy had been extremely powerful, and Zac was hoping to form something similar for himself. After all, if there was Sword Intent, then there should surely be Axe Intent as well. If he could add that power to his strikes, then he would probably be able to fight one tier stronger enemies without breaking a sweat.

“It seems to be something that comes after a Dao Field,” Thea hesitantly said as she started smearing her vast number of scars with some ointment. “The Blade Emperor was able to materialize real objects with it. He trapped me in a cage of Dao Intent Swords, and I had to use my own Dao Field to get out. I’m not sure if it’s even possible to create naturally in my rank. You might be able to do it.”

“So how do you still have the energy?” Zac asked before he remembered how rude it was to pry into other’s cultivation secrets. “Sorry, it’s fine if you don’t want to tell.”

“It’s okay. I was imparted with a small amount of Sword Intent to guide me on the path of the sword. I think I might be able to use it sort of like a mother dough for my own strikes too, as long as I don’t overuse it,” Thea said after some thought. “We could spar a bit if you want.”

“It sounds like a good idea, but it would have to wait. The war against the dominators is starting right now,” Zac sighed.

“I’ll come along,” she said as she got up and started walking toward the exit, though her steps were shaky.

“Are you crazy?” Zac said. “You’re covered in wounds, go rest. We do need someone from the Marshalls to take us around, but I’ll grab one of your cousins.”

“No, I’m going. I’m not staying behind any longer,” Thea said with her determination. “I’m moving forward as well.”

“You... Fine,” Zac sighed. “Our job is only ancillary anyway. I won’t fight either, I’ll just help with the jammers. This is the

Zhix' war, and they don't want us to step in unless absolutely necessary."

"Fine," Thea said as she wobbled out of the Dao Repository.

"Are you really...?" Zac couldn't help but interject again, but he was quickly shut up by another glare.

Zac was about to call Triv as well, but he actually appeared from between two bushes and shot toward them.

"My lord," Triv said, but his greeting turned into a scream as Thea unhesitatingly drew her blade in one fluid motion aimed at slaughter. "Ai!"

"He's my butler," Zac shouted in alarm, and he barely had time to block the swing with Verun, narrowly preventing Triv from getting cut in two.

Normally a sword swing wouldn't matter to a ghost, but Zac sensed a shadow of that terrifyingly sharp energy inside the weapon. He still wasn't completely clear how it was made, but it would definitely be able to harm the ghost since it was related to the Dao.

"I'm sorry," Thea said as she sheathed her weapon before she gave Zac an odd look. "You have a ghost butler?"

"This is why young master shouldn't consort with the living. Violent and lowly creatures," Triv sighed as he made some distance from Thea.

"Triv is quite knowledgeable about all kinds of things, and he helps me sorting out the day-to-day," Zac shrugged.

Zac hesitated for a bit before he also told Thea about Triv's early findings.

"A life and death planet," Thea slowly said before she sighed. "This will be a detriment to most of us."

"Well, as I said, it's not sure it will come to happen," Zac said as he scratched his chin, feeling a bit guilty.

There was no way it was a coincidence that the planet got such a weird attunement. Zac was the main contributor to the quest, dealing with the lich king, the elite army, and two and a half of

the generals himself. The planet probably got its attunements to match his, as the System wanted to gift him a suitable cultivation environment. The fact that it screwed over the rest of the planet wasn't something that the elitist System would care about.

"It might not be too bad for normal humans either. A lot of people lived quite well at the edge of the Dead Zone, living outside and hunting inside. As long as we can concentrate the attunements to certain spots we can maintain that sort of balance," Zac added after a bit, trying to find some positives in the situation. "And both life and death are powerful attunements. Powerful healers and black mages might emerge from Earth in the future."

Undead might not be able to deal with life-attunements, but Humans didn't have the same limitations. Having a high affinity to Death was extremely unlikely, but people could still go down that path without too much going against them. Assassins, Necromancers, Black Mages. A death-attuned planet would help nurture all those kinds of powerful existences.

"That might be true. Even if half the world will turn into a Dead Zone there will still be plenty of room to live on," Thea slowly nodded as she walked toward the teleporter. "Well, that's an issue for later. Let's go."

"You might want to change clothes first," Zac coughed, which drew a snicker from Triv as well.

Only then did Thea look down at the rags she wore over her bloodied body, and her hand moved up to her almost-bald head. She stiffly nodded without a word and Zac hurriedly led her to his sister's mansion where she could shower and change.

She only emerged 30 minutes later, but the transformation was almost shocking. Her hair had been regrown and her clothes changed, but the sword scars remained all over her body, angry red lines that seemed to refuse to disappear. Zac's wound was actually in a similar state, though he felt it would close a few hours.

That still was a pretty long time for an errant spurt of energy, just a fragment of whatever Thea carried inside her body. Zac could actually sense that very same power in her eyes as well as her piercing blue eyes had gained an undeniable sharpness to them. The only thing that he couldn't ascertain was whether that energy was something beneficial or yet another risky venture like his own Remnants.

The trio soon returned to the teleporter where Ibtep still was waiting, and Zac turned to the ghost.

“You better enter your house for now. We'll be traveling with the Zhix for a while. The Anointed seem to really hate the undead.”

“Those things,” Triv muttered with a mix of disgust and incredulity, clearly understanding who Zac was talking about. “Not natural.”

“A being wrought from purest corruption shouldn't talk of what is natural,” Ibtep said with a snort as it gave the ghost an askance look.

Triv didn't respond, and only flew into the pagoda in Zac's sleeve and disappeared. The trio activated the teleporter the next moment and found themselves surrounded by dozens of Anointed who stood ready. The teleporter they appeared in was another one than the array he entered through last time.

They were in an unfathomably large underground chamber, and Zac spotted a vast army behind the towering priests. There were hundreds of thousands of Zhix standing ready and armed to their teeth, every one of them radiating palpable killing intent. The whole chamber felt like a pressure cooker from the accumulated aura, and it felt claustrophobic even though it was over twenty meters to the ceiling.

“We're ready to go,” Zac said after making sure he wouldn't get sucker-punched again. “Where do you want to teleport first?”

“We want to take out the first Hives as quickly as possible, which will hopefully help us trap more of them before they devise some sort of retaliation,” Rhubat said as he turned to

Thea who was clearly affected by the extremely dense killing intent. “Please take us to the town called Lübeck, pathfinder.”

Chapter 545: War Machine

“I’m no-“ Thea was about to interject, but she just shrugged and accepted her new title in the end.

Zac only smiled wryly as he stepped into the teleporter with Thea, the squad of ten Zhix scouts and Ibtep following close behind.

It looked like the town didn’t get a lot of visitors as the guards reeled with shock when their group stepped out of the teleporter. The reclusive Marshall Scion wasn’t immediately recognized, but the small German town exploded with activity when the guards realized who they were.

The mayor, a shockingly rotund middle-aged lady, came rushing over with such momentum that she almost only looked like a spherical blur.

“Our armies are passing through here,” Thea said without preamble when the breathless mayor appeared. “More Zhix will come. A lot more. Tell your people to stand down. And close the gates to make sure our presence isn’t leaked.”

Zac nodded when he saw the Mayor give a rapid series of orders into a walkie-talkie without hesitation. Bringing a big shot like Thea rather than some random guide was already proving to be the right choice. He needed to hold up his part of the bargain though, so he turned to the group of scouts who all seemed fully focused on the mission.

“We’ll go on ahead,” Zac said as he took out his leaf. “Can you stay here and make sure there’s no trouble?”

“Sure,” Thea nodded. “I’ll catch up with the army.”

The group of scouts stepped onto the leaf after some explaining, and the group of 12 shot out toward the enemy hive. They stayed close to the ground to avoid getting spotted, though Zhix surveillance was seldom not performed

aboveground. They rather built scouting chutes designed to catch the vibrations from the surface, sending the signals back to the hives as an early warning.

It only took them thirty minutes to reach their destination, a dense crop of forest on the opposite side of the hive. Zac figured that the array of Lübeck should be unaffected when activating the Jammer at this position, though the thing hadn't been through enough testing to ascertain its exact limits. This would be a learning experience for him as well.

The leaf stopped just above the ground and the group of scouts nodded at Zac before they spread out through the forest, soundlessly moving between the trees like ghosts. Only Ibtép stayed behind in case he was needed to communicate with the Zhix army. Zac stepped down from the flying treasure as well and took out a concealment array disk to avoid getting spotted.

He took out the Jamming array next, while also prodding the sigil in his mind that connected him to his butler. The small pagoda floated out from his sleeve a second later, after which the ghost appeared.

"My lord," Triv said with a bow as he looked around.

"Convenient," Ibtép muttered from the side, its eyes trained at the small pagoda. "Is it the same magic as that of the Ayr Hive in your base? If the Zhix could use this sort of magic on our hives..."

"I'm not sure," Zac said. "I think only ghosts can live in this pagoda. But the Ayr Hive might be possible to mimic? Not sure how much use it would be though."

"Imagine, one Zhix could carry a whole hive in its pocket, tens of thousands of warriors pouring out when attacked," Ibtép muttered.

"I think it would be a bit uncomfortable to stay in someone's pocket all day. Imagine the shaking," Zac countered, which made Ibtép nod thoughtfully.

"This item is not made for the living," Triv said as it shot Ibtép a cool glance. "There are many ways to create portable worlds though, but all of them are beyond your means."

“Some further thinking is required on this matter,” Ibtep only murmured, his eyes clearly spinning with ideas.

Zac shrugged and turned back toward the Jamming Array. The thing was pretty much idiot-proof thanks to his sister, so he only needed to place it down on the ground and insert Fifty E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He started to get to work, and Triv couldn't help but float over and look at the jammer with interest.

The preparations were soon finished, and Zac performed a cursory inspection before he sent a message to Thea to start calling over the Zhix. His job was essentially done by now, and he only needed to make sure no one messed with the jammer.

“The modifications are crude, but they can't hide the amazing ideas they were built upon. To think that it would be possible to rework the array this way. The person who did this is definitely a genius,” Triv muttered before it turned to Zac. “It's your sister, isn't it? She is a unique talent when it comes to understanding and modifying energy paths.”

Zac thought for a second before he nodded in affirmation. It wasn't like it was a big secret, especially not after Kenzie had helped Triv create his cultivation cave.

“You might want to consider sending her to one of the powerful Craftsman Sects in the Sector,” the ghost said. “It comes with some restrictions, but she will get proper guidance and she can return home as a resident Array Master after having reached a certain level.”

“Why would a sect be generous enough to train people before letting them go?” Zac asked with skepticism. “That would be like watering someone else's fields.”

“They take a tax. If your sister returns to your force, you will have to pay a fee based on her attainments, part of which would go to the sect as remuneration for the training,” Triv said. “It is mostly just academies and craftsmen sects that do things this way though. Joining a combat-focused sect is generally a more permanent decision.”

“Pay a fee? For life?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No, until enough benefits have been provided,” Triv said.

“She can also work off that debt herself as a roaming cultivator or by staying inside the sect.”

“So you essentially become an indentured worker until you can free yourself?” Zac sighed. “Doesn’t sound like a good place to send Kenzie.”

“It might sound harsh, but such are the rules of the universe. No one will go out of their way and share their arduously accumulated heritage for no return. Just working off the debt over a few centuries isn’t too bad as it will also help you improve on your craft, and there is no lack of applicants to such places. The best ones require both great connections and heaven-sent talents,” Triv said.

Kenzie’s future was something Zac had thought about, but it was ultimately up to her what path she wanted to take. She would need to find some environment that suited her unique gifts, and Zac knew that place wasn’t by his side. He needed mountains of enemies to cut his way through in order to progress, but she seemed far more suited to orthodox cultivation.

Jeeves could help her improve both her class and her skills, and she also made tremendous progress by just cultivating inside his cultivation cave. She might be able to make huge gains if she entered some of those ancient places and gobbled up and improved all the great manuals and skills for herself. Just the thought made him both a bit excited and jealous.

“What about me?” Zac asked. “Isn’t there some good opportunities for me like that as well?”

“Well... Perhaps,” Triv said hesitantly. “Young Master might be better off joining an army or a mercenary band and fight at the borders.”

The borders in this case were referring to the space outside the properly integrated space. The Zecia sector was huge, and it turned out that less than 3% could actually be considered part of some force’s domain. Most star systems might officially be

within the domain of an Empire or Sect, but there was no way that they had the man-power or resources to keep a presence at the more remote zones.

The planet he was sent to for his Hegemony quest was a prime example of that situation. The planet was integrated and part of the Allbright Empire, but it was so weak and declined that the System only provided the barest of functions. Most unclaimed territories were just a bunch of junk planets with low potential, but millions of clans, sects, and mercenary groups traveled those zones to find riches.

There was always some treasure hiding among the mountain of trash. You never knew when you might find an unclaimed Mystic Realm, precious remnants, or valuable treasure.

There were also the even more chaotic danger zones, such as the massive area full of Spatial Anomalies close to the Allbright Empire. There were no doubt far more opportunities there compared to the unclaimed areas, but there were also far more dangers. Only the craziest mercenaries decided to risk their lives in such a place, contending not only with the pirates and unorthodox forces, but with the fickleness of space itself.

Zac still hadn't decided on his future course of action, but he instinctively felt unwilling to join a mercenary band or some army like Average. First of all, there was the risk of someone higher up in the organization becoming interested in digging out his secrets. But there was also the simple fact that Zac enjoyed his freedom.

His life had become a lot worse by most metrics since the integration, but one big plus was the huge degree of freedom he enjoyed.

"They're all through," Thea said through the crystal, waking Zac up from his dreams of the future.

"Do it," Zac nodded at Triv, and the ghost infused its miasma into the Jammer.

The Array immediately hummed into life, and Zac felt a weak pulse spreading out from where they stood. However, the wave immediately turned invisible after less than ten meters,

and Zac knew there was no way the Zhix would be able to find the source. He jumped up to sit on the branch of one of the taller trees and it gave him a secluded vantage of the hive far in the distance.

Now it was up to the Zhix to deal with the rest.

Nonet walked at the forefront of the army, the warriors of Hive Kundevi following close behind. The chaos in the human settlement caused by their appearance had been cause for some amusement, but it couldn't shake the sense of heaviness that gripped the heart of the army. It wasn't natural. Using corruption to fight other Zhix because of their use of corruption.

Of course, the situation wasn't as simple as that, but that was still how it felt among some of the army. There were no doubt still many Zhix inside the enemy hives who believed in the old precepts as well, but it couldn't be helped. The corruption needed to be cleansed once and for all, and no roots of evil left behind.

"Get ready," Rhubat rumbled from his position at the vanguard, and Nonet looked up and saw the hive in the distance.

The walls were lined with soldiers standing in wait, but Nonet only needed a single glance to realize that the defenders were both outnumbered and lacking in power. This wouldn't be a battle, but a slaughter. A few warriors of Hive Kundevi seemed to have reached the same conclusion, as some struggle appeared on their faces.

"Remember the cause, remember the precepts," Nonet said with a heavy tone, and the warriors shook themselves free from any stray thoughts.

There were no negotiation and no posturing. Rhubat started increasing his steps as they came closer to the hive, and the Anointed lit up with corruption as the vast army behind them started running to keep up with their leaders.

Hundreds of Punishment Spears, each of them dozens of meters long, appeared in the sky, all of them shuddering with unbridled killing intent. A rumbling roar was finally unleashed from the hundreds of thousands of warriors that covered the vast plains, and the air shook as a red cloud spread across the area.

The haze was made from the congealed killing intent of the army, and it smoothly entered the fractal spears, empowering them with conviction. The Punishment Spears sucked in more and more, and the first group of attacks finally soared toward the hive as Rhubat, Vanexis, and Raha each launched their spears forward with a mental command.

Their power was far beyond that of the other Anointed, and they were able to carry the will of the Zhix with far greater grace than Nonet could ever dream of. The whole mountain vibrated as the spears soared toward the standing army, but a massive shield sprung up to block them out. It looked like someone had stolen a piece of the night sky, a vast cosmos that enclosed the whole mountain that held the Dominator Hive.

It was them. It was the undeniable mark of the Dominators, the proof of their corruption. Only they had the ability to drown the world in night like this. However, the scene didn't deter the Crusaders in the slightest. It only bolstered the conviction, and dozens of spears shot into the shield the next moment as the Anointed poured everything they had into the projectiles.

They all carried the momentum the Zhix had accumulated for millennia, the will to break free of the chains of the Dominators.

The shield barely managed to hold against the attacks, but they weren't done there. A ten-meter insignia depicting the seal of Hive Kundevi appeared behind Nonet, and similar scenes played out all across the front of the army. The seal shone down at Nonet, causing its frame to grow another meter as the Regalia of the Crusade covered its frame.

The power of the Anointment coursed through Nonet's veins, and all hesitation and worries were burnt out of its mind. The future didn't matter any longer. Only the Crusade mattered.

Nonet's feet turned to a blur as the leader shot toward the galactic shield, its ceremonial dagger already glowing with radiant luster.

A terrifying shockwave spread out as Nonet slammed into the wall, and small cracks spread out from where the dagger hit the barrier. The other Anointed had done the same, and the earth shook as one massive attack after another was launched. The shield finally couldn't take it any longer, and the night-sky dissipated like it had just been a dream.

Nonet didn't need to give a signal on what to do next. The warriors of Hive Kundevi followed close behind as Nonet made its move. A squad of traitors was butchered with one swing of Nonet's dagger, and the Kundevi Warriors made short work of the survivors. There were a lot of traitors still outside, but Nonet didn't focus on that as it pushed itself into the cramped entrance in front of it. Nonet had a mission to perform, and there would be others to deal with the warriors on the slopes.

The furious war machine of the Zhix was had once again awoken to face the threat of the Dominators, and not a single soul would be spared.

Chapter 546: Massacre

Zac looked on with both awe and horror at the carnage that was taking place in the distance. The Anointed were simply terrifying when working together, and Zac doubted that any local faction apart from his own would be able to survive their assault. He suddenly felt a presence to his side though, and he looked over to a neighboring tree as he drew his axe.

“Hey,” Thea said as she landed.

“Was I that easy to spot?” Zac grimaced as he put [Verun’s Bite] away.

“Well, I knew the jammer would be placed in this area, and that you would spectate. It was only a matter of time,” Thea said as she turned back to the battlefield. “It’s a massacre.”

There were no two ways about it. The Zhix Crusaders were obviously not interested in taking prisoners or holding any trials to find the true culprits. Everyone in the hive received the same treatment; a swift death.

Only ten minutes had passed since the battle started but less than 1% of the defending warriors remained. They were fighting desperately to prolong the inevitable, and Zac knew they fought for their honor, to prove their strength to their ancestors before they joined their ranks in the afterlife.

“A lot of them seems to have entered the hive, killing the civilians as well,” Thea added after a brief pause.

“I know,” Zac nodded.

“You could stop them. They would back down if you demanded it,” she said.

“I think you underestimate the importance the Zhix put on this war. It’s the very core of their society. Me telling them to stop would probably just give them two targets to fight rather than

one,” Zac said, and he added after some hesitation. “But I have no intention of finding out.”

“How are we any different than our enemies if we go down this path?” Thea said as she turned to Zac.

There was no anger simmering in her eyes, nor was there reproach. There was only an almost disturbing tranquility.

“Who’s to say we’re any different?” Zac sighed. “We’re just rival factions fighting in the mud. They must die so that we can live. We’re not the good guys, and they aren’t really the bad guys. At least not most of them. We just have opposing interests.”

“Hmm,” Thea only said, not commenting any further.

The silence stretched on, and Zac felt more and more suffocated as he looked at the increasingly silent mountain in the distance. Should he do something? Millions of lives would be extinguished just so that he could be sure that no karmic threats were lurking on Earth. How could he be so calm while enabling a genocide?

“Someone’s running,” Thea suddenly said, and Zac saw what she was talking about.

A hidden door had appeared just a few hundred meters away from their location, and a group of Zhix was hurrying out through it. It looked to be mostly elders and clergymen, but they were guarded by a squad of elites. It was probably the leaders of the hive, the mouthpieces of the true Dominators. They were the true target, at least for Zac, and if these people managed to flee then the crusade would lose most of its meaning.

The hidden exit was extremely far from the Hive itself, and there was no way that their actions could be spotted by the Anointed. The squad of scouts wouldn’t be able to stop these guys either, even if they put their lives on the line.

“I’ll deal with it,” Zac said and immediately flashed away, each step taking him dozens of meters through the forest.

He appeared in front of the group of Zhix just a few seconds later, prompting the group to stop in their tracks. They first

looked horrified upon being intercepted, but they soon breathed out in relief when they saw it wasn't an Anointed waiting for him, but rather a human.

“A human?!” one of the elders exclaimed as he took two steps forward. “Did your government send you? Hurry, help us get away from here. Our master is Void Disciple, and we have a working cooperation with your kind. You will be rich!”

The old Zhix didn't get any further. His body froze for an instant before it fell apart as blood spurted in every direction. A blue wave spread out the next moment, reaping the lives of more than half of the remaining escapees. Only those lucky enough to stand far away survived the attack that seemingly came out of nowhere.

It was Thea who had arrived as well, weaving a tapestry of death all around her. A few of the guards shot toward her with reckless abandon, releasing a terrifying killing intent. They all seemed to have the same class as well, some sort of earthen warrior. Stones grew to cover their whole bodies, and they quickly grew into 3-meter golems with sharp spikes for arms.

Was this perhaps something devised to counter the towering Anointed?

Carrying around a ton of rock on their bodies did nothing to slow them down, and they tried to stab Thea from every direction. However, their rocky exterior was like paper in front of her, and each swing of her new weapon reaped a life. She weaved through the insectoids like a dancer, each of her strikes both beautiful and deadly.

Zac first felt her swordsmanship felt a bit ostentatious, but he soon realized there was meaning behind every movement. Just slightly repositioning her shoulder or lifting her weapon a few degrees caused changes in the battlefield as the warriors instinctively responded. It was like she was a puppeteer who magically created openings in her opponents to deliver instant death.

The battle was over in less than thirty seconds, with Zac only killing two unlucky fellows who ran straight at him in their attempts to flee from Thea. The Marshall scion had done the

rest, and her breath wasn't even labored even though Zac knew she wasn't in perfect condition at the moment. She looked over at Zac with a small smile, before she shook her head and walked over.

"I've told you already, stupid. You're not alone in wanting to protect Earth," she said as she swung her sword in the air, causing all blood on it to fly off its edge. "You don't have to carry this burden alone."

Two Zhix scouts appeared the next moment ready for battle, but they froze when they saw the carnage. Zac briefly explained the situation, and one of them set off to fetch a regiment that could explore the escape tunnel. Zac and Thea walked back to the spot where the jammer was placed, and they found Triv nervously flitting back and forth until he spotted Zac.

The war was still raging, but there were no more breakouts it seemed. Zac wordlessly watched as the last of the insurgent Zhix fell, his mind repeating Thea's words over and over. It helped him with his confusion a bit, but it was impossible to completely shrug off the weight of sin he had amassed today.

The four just needed to wait for another 20 minutes before one of the scouts returned to their hiding spot.

"It is done, Warmaster. You can release the lock," the scout said. "The Anointed asked for you."

"We'll be there in a minute," Zac nodded as he started to take out the Miasma Crystals from the array as Triv returned to his pagoda.

The group flew over to the fallen hive a second later, and they were shocked by the sight even if they had witnessed everything from a distance. It looked like the lone mountain was crying as streams of blood covered its slopes. The smell was even worse, and Thea visibly paled before she bent over and puked.

Even Zac felt nauseated by the intense stench of death as he landed the leaf. There were thankfully almost no corpses around though, but an enormous pyre was already burning

some distance from the hive. Between the small mountain of corpses and how the world had been painted in blood, it really felt like they had entered the depths of hell.

Zac once more felt his conviction waver as he looked around. It felt like this whole mountain had become cursed from what had transpired. Ominous energies swirled around the mountain, visible only to his [Cosmic Gaze]. This was something that couldn't be created by a normal war as far as he could tell, but rather a mass genocide of an entire population.

“Warmaster,” a bloodied Rhubat said as he walked over. “The purification is complete. The next target awaits.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed, forcibly pushing down all the confusion and hesitation. “Where to?”

“Come with us first,” Rhubat said as he activated the teleporter and walked inside.

At least 90% of the Anointed followed Rhubat, but only a small part of the ordinary soldiers entered as well. It was around ten thousand normal warriors, all of them emitting a bloody aura. Zac guessed it was the captains and sergeants of the army, and he soon followed inside as well with Thea and Ibtep.

They found themselves in another subterranean chamber the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when there was yet another identical army already waiting. Its size was even larger than the last one, probably approaching half a million warriors.

“We hope to be able to strike at least three hives before they realize what's going on,” Rhubat said. “After that, we will join our forces as we expect them to do the same. The next town is Gothenburg.”

Zac nodded in understanding and turned to Thea who activated the Teleporter once more.

The same scene repeated itself as the vanguard stepped through the teleporter. Thea stayed behind as Zac set off with the advance scouts, and he looked around with marvel as they flew across the desolate landscape.

Roughly a year had passed since the integration, which meant that summer should be approaching once more. However, you wouldn't get that feeling at all in the northern reaches of Pangea where the Scandinavian Cultivators had banded together and formed Asgard, an independent force allied to the Marshall Clan.

It was Zac's first time this far out on the reaches of the massive continent. He had generally traveled within the heartlands where most humans and incursions ended up, or to the southeast where the Dead Zone was located. This area didn't look like the old Scandinavia though, but it would be more apt to say they had appeared on the Arctic Circle.

Thick layers of ice and snow had turned the world white, but that actually didn't mean that it was lifeless. He saw towering trees braving the extreme weather, seemingly unbothered by the permafrost. A massive pack of wolves consisting of thousands of hunters passed by beneath them as well, proving there was ample prey available as well.

It was the magical effect of Cosmic Energy. Zac guessed the temperature was minus 30 degrees or so, but he only felt a bit chilly in his normal robes. It would have to become a lot colder than this for him to be affected at all, so it was no wonder that beasts could deal with it just fine. There were probably a lot of humans who succumbed to the harsh environment at the beginning of the integration though.

They soon found their spot close to the hive and set up the Jamming array hidden by a mountain of ice. The same scene of carnage repeated itself an hour later. The snow-covered Hive had turned completely red as the merciless Zhix army slaughtered all the citizens of the Hive. Zac started to feel numb to the carnage, but he still felt hollow inside as he gazed at the puddles of blood that had turned to ice all over the mountain.

The slaughter continued from there, but something suddenly changed when the army arrived at the fifth hive. This time a full million Zhix marched across the wasteland, and Zac felt horrified at the amount of Nexus Coins the Zhix had spent to move around the armies like this. A war of this scale was

probably only possible thanks to the wealth that the Zhix had gained from fighting the zombies over the past months.

The last four assaults were essentially one-sided slaughters, but it looked like the Dominators were finally responding in kind. There was barely any free ground around the insurgent hive as hundreds of thousands of warriors stood at the ready.

There were also massive towers that had been erected at the perimeter, seemingly a last-minute purchase from the Town Shop. They all radiated power, and Zac knew that there would be noticeable casualties to push past that line of defense. He even asked if they wanted him to act as a wall-breaker, but the Zhix War Council actually rejected it.

He could only shake his head in bemusement as he looked on, but he was relieved to see that the Zhix weren't completely incapable of resisting the fiery barrages that the towers launched. Those enormous seals that the Anointed summoned seemed to be a natural War Array of some kind, and the Zhix warriors infused it with power to create a sturdy shield that protected them from attacks coming from above.

However, the Array Towers was only the first counter that the defenders had prepared for them.

Hidden pathways suddenly opened up behind the Anointed army and warriors flooded out of them. The War Council suddenly found themselves pincerred as they dealt with the barriers and Array Towers to the Front, and an all-out assault from the rear. Worse yet, almost all of the Anointed were at the other side of the army acting as a vanguard, so the elite Zhix among the Dominators faced little resistance as they pushed into the rearguard.

Worry gripped Zac's heart as he looked at the scene, and he decisively started walking toward the army with a ruthless gleam. He had happily stayed out of the war until now as some sort of coping mechanism, but he couldn't allow this to go on. Their losses would be too big if he didn't turn things around.

"Are you really doing this? After standing back so long?"
Thea asked from behind, and Zac only nodded in response.

However, he only managed to take a few steps before his mind screamed of danger. He immediately tried to flash away, but he was shocked to find himself rooted in place as the whole world rapidly slowed to a crawl. One possibility immediately entered his mind.

Had the true Dominators finally made their appearance?

Chapter 547: Monster

Zac's danger sense was screaming for him to watch out, but he didn't need a sixth sense to realize that he was in trouble. He immediately activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] while the emerald leaves of [**Nature's Barrier**] exploded out from his body, covering him from every direction.

The spectral forest rose around him as well, but Zac's worries only intensified when he saw that the trees and leaves of his two skills were quickly stopped in their tracks as well. The leaves just froze in the air, utterly incapable of intercepting any attacks. He tried to look around in search of a threat, but he found himself stuck in position as well, no longer able to move at all.

The war was still raging in the distance though, proving that time hadn't really stopped. It seemed that the effect only reached 30 meters or so judging by the movement of the grass on the ground. It was an extremely uncomfortable experience to somehow be out of sync with the world around him. It felt a bit like when the world froze as the Chaos Pattern emerged during the tower, but he also got a similar feeling like when the Karmic Cultivator of the Hayner Clan tried to control his movements.

However, he could at least be certain that it wasn't the System who was messing with him. A large hooded being had appeared in the sky, reaching over twenty meters into the air. Zac tried to discern its features, but it actually looked like it didn't have a face. In place of facial features, there was just a swirling void.

It held some weird brass contraption that seemed to contain the mysteries of the universe itself, and it felt like it was this item that was rooting him in place. Zac couldn't be sure, but he believed that the skill both contained a hint of both Space and Karma. Zac guessed that it was the avatar of some sort of

ultimate technique, and going by the types of energies there was one clear suspect; The Dominators.

Zac was quickly proven right when he finally spotted the source of the restraints, an unassuming Zhix wearing the standard combat regalia of the Zhix War Council Army. However, instead of the short spears or daggers that the Zhix favored, he was instead wielding a pitch-black spear of full length that hummed with power.

The reason Zac knew this spear-wielding Zhix was his attacker was simple; he couldn't sense the warrior's aura. It was just like when he first met Inevitability, it was almost like there was no one standing in front of him. However, the Zhix warrior was very much alive, and he stepped into the locked zone and started making his way toward Zac.

Zac strained to rip himself free, but he couldn't even begin amassing any power in his limbs. It felt like he was trying to overturn the fundamental laws of the universe by moving, he glanced at the Zhix with some incredulity. How was he this strong? The strength of this restraining skill meant two things.

First of all, he could pretty much be sure that he was dealing with Harbinger, the last of the three elite Dominators. He had already met the other two, and the presumed Dominators beneath the three leaders were over 15 levels behind. There was no way someone at level 85 would be able to unleash a force of this magnitude.

Secondly, the Dominator was likely burning his life-force to deal with him. Zac knew that the Dominators were strong, but there shouldn't be such a disparity that he couldn't even lift his fingers in response. There was also a familiar aura on him, reminding him of that old warrior among the Berum Resistance who sacrificed his life to let them assault the Nenotheop mountain.

Messing with life-force wasn't something that people could do willy-nilly. First of all, you generally needed some sort of Berserker skill to tap into the core of your being. Using such a thing was essential to sacrifice 800 warriors to kill 1000. It wasn't a tap you could turn on and off, but something that had

a large risk of killing or crippling your cultivation. Zac knew he was an exception of sorts with how the Shard worked.

Harbinger was going a step further, putting everything on the line.

However, Zac didn't feel hopeless as there were no doubt limitations to a skill or treasure as powerful as this. As expected, not only did Harbinger have some problems pushing through the spatial lock himself, but the Avatar was slowly dissipating in the sky.

A quick calculation proved that Zac would get skewered before the lock dissipated though, and he frantically looked for a solution. A glance toward Thea showed that she was trapped as well, but she was thankfully at the edge of the sphere. There was no way that Harbinger would have time to target them both as he could only move at a slow walk.

The Cosmic Energy felt like syrup in his body, and Zac wasn't really able to rotate it with the momentum needed to activate his skills. However, he had actually already activated two of them, and Zac gave a command to the divine tree stalwartly standing behind him.

The ceremonial band on the tree trunk snapped, and a shield started to form around him. However, just the edges had time to materialize before it was frozen as well, essentially looking like a hollow ring completely incapable of defending anyone. Zac wanted to swear when he saw the scene, but he was unable to form the words.

A defensive talisman fizzled the next moment as well, proving that the restrictions didn't only apply to his skills.

Harbinger seemed to have expected the failures, and a small smile crept up across his face as he closed in on Zac. His spear moved in slow-motion, but it slowly angled itself to begin a mighty jab aimed straight at his throat. The Dominator was going for an instant kill.

Real worry finally started to grip Zac's heart as one back-up plan after another had failed. He had initially believed that he would always be able to flee with the help of his newly

acquired escape talismans, but he wasn't so sure any longer after seeing how nothing seemed to work inside this field.

However, a shudder in his mind suddenly made his eyes light up. Most things were frozen in place, but there were exceptions. No matter what rules or Dao that were the basis for Harbingers skills, how could they trump the concepts of Creation and Oblivion. The two remnants were completely unaffected inside their prison, and the mysterious energies that had infiltrated his soul moved about as usual as well.

Wasn't this a perfect occasion to try out something he had been holding on to up till now?

Thea hovered frozen in the air, filled with a sense of impotence as she saw Zac in the same predicament. The terrifying Zhix pushed through the sealed space as though it was wading through water, and it was almost upon Zac. Its spear was already moving toward Zac's throat, and the weapon gained a stronger and stronger radiance.

The air around the weapon was cracking and splitting apart, which was very telling of its power. The Zhix was putting it all on the line with that one strike. Thea could even sense they were empowered by an offensive Dao Fragment, and she wasn't confident that even Zac's terrifying constitution would be able to withstand the attack.

She tried to figure out some way to help him out, just long enough for this seal to break, but she was coming up empty-handed. Her skills simply wouldn't activate, and she wasn't able to reach down toward her Cosmos Sack to take out any treasures. She felt her eyes were burning as she saw the spearpoint inching ever closer, passing straight beneath the incipient emerald shield that failed to properly form.

However, a shocking aura suddenly slammed into the core of her being and she looked with shock and horror at Zac. He looked the same as before, but Thea felt that she was gazing upon a natural calamity rather than a fellow cultivator. His eyes turned into metallic orbs as black runes slowly appeared

across his face, seemingly creating a tattoo pathway that led down toward his shoulders.

The runes looked simple enough, but they still contained a primordial power, something that Thea hadn't even encountered when dealing with Irei or his terrifying sword intent. Just what had Zac gotten himself mixed up in to have something so terrifying appearing on his body?

Unfortunately, it didn't seem as though the Zhix was deterred by Zac's outburst of power, but rather the opposite. Its mouth curved upward in a ruthless smile and its until now subdued aura exploded outward, hitting Thea like a sledgehammer. How was this assassin so powerful? The aura was far stronger than that of Inevitability back during the hunt!

Was it actually Void's Disciple, the leader of the Dominators? Or was Inevitability perhaps actually limited somehow inside the hunt, making that chain-wielding lunatic unable to put forth its full potential. It didn't matter right now though as the spear was cutting through space itself as it finally reached Zac's throat.

However, no blood was actually drawn as the mysterious runes already covered much of Zac's throat, and it seemed able to resist the sharp point of the pitch-black daggers. The Zhix didn't seem surprised, and a shimmering fractal halo made from inscrutable runes lit up behind him like he was a saint that had suddenly reached enlightenment.

The whole area was drowned in a shimmering dark-blue luster, and the spear gained newfound momentum as it was flooded with some sort of powerful energy. It allowed the spear to push even further into Zac's skin as it seemed to infuse the dagger itself with some mysterious power. Zac's defenses couldn't stop the weapon and the weapon finally started sliding into his throat. There were no groans of pain or gouts of blood, but Thea knew that was only because space was still frozen.

Despair flooded Thea's heart as she saw Zac's throat slowly being ripped open, the sickening sound of the spear digging deeper was the only thing she could hear in this frozen zone. Was this really it? Was this how the savior of Earth would fall?

Was the defense of his mysterious tattoos really not enough to save him?

A terrifying change suddenly took place as Zac finally exploded out with power. It was like that terrifying aura from before was congealed, and she looked on with incredulity as Zac's arms suddenly shot forward with impossible speed as a sphere of unadulterated power emerged from his hands.

It felt like Thea's brain stopped working as she looked at the brownish sphere. It was as big as a football but it somehow felt as massive as a sun. Even odder, it felt like her memory and impressions were continuously being destroyed and renewed as she looked at it, making it impossible for her to form an opinion on what that thing was actually made from. It was Dao but it wasn't Dao. It was Cosmic Energy but it wasn't Cosmic Energy.

One thing was for sure though; it wasn't restrained by the spatial cage they found themselves in, and it flew straight toward the chest of the Dominator. The Zhix saw the sphere shooting toward his body, but it completely ignored it and instead pushed its weapon even harder, seemingly fine with both of them going down to the underworld together.

But even that powerful Zhix couldn't have anticipated the scene that took place next.

There was no explosion and no shockwave as the ball hit the chest of the assassin, just an instantaneous expansion followed by utter annihilation. Thea couldn't see exactly how big the attack was, as there literally wasn't anything to see, but she could still sense what *didn't* exist. It felt like space and time had simply been removed from existence where the sphere exploded, and not even a vacuum remained.

The spatial lock was broken as the massive avatar in the sky fell apart, and the ground beneath Thea cracked as she shot away as quickly as her legs could move her. It wasn't a conscious decision, but a primal fear of whatever Zac had unleashed. To get too close was to die, where one's soul wouldn't even be able to remain. Only after running for

hundreds of meters did she manage to stop herself, but her heart wouldn't stop beating like a drum.

Only then did Thea see what had happened to the Zhix. Its torso and most of its legs were simply gone, leaving not as much as a scrap behind. Most of its arms had been annihilated as well, only hanging on to its neck by a thin ribbon of flesh. She knew there was no coming back from that, especially as she could sense a hint of that aura of annihilation in its remaining body parts as well.

Zac looked the same as before apart from the running blood that stained his chest red. The spear was still embedded in his throat, but he ripped it out without a care in the world. Thea's horror increased even further when the wound closed on itself with speed visible to the eyes, and there was only one thought in her head when she saw those terrifying lifeless eyes of his.

Monster.

Chapter 548: Wrath

A wave of pain spread across Zac's body, shocking him awake from his trance-like state. He still felt under the influence of his skill though as the world was drowned in a metallic luster. He took a steadying breath as he looked around, and he finally spotted the remains of Harbinger.

However, Zac's brows rose when he realized that he actually hadn't gained any Cosmic Energy so far, and he pushed his exhausted body to walk over to the Zhix assassin. He was full of vigilance that it might release a final desperate attack, but he quickly realized that Harbinger was in no position to do so.

Cracks spread across the insectoid's remaining body parts before they crumbled to dust like his body was made from burnt-out wood rather than flesh and blood. There was also no energy remaining in its body according to **[Cosmic Gaze]**. The fact that the Zhix was still living was a miracle. There was no way that it would have the power to attack in this state.

"You sacrificed most of your life-force to keep me trapped so long. Even if you succeeded you wouldn't live much longer," Zac said with a hoarse voice. "All this for some insane cultivator that happened to visit your world thousands of years ago?"

"I... don't care... about him," the crumbling head actually managed to say with a whisper. "All... for... father."

Harbinger died the next moment, and Zac felt a tremendous surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body. This was by far the greatest amount of energy he had ever gained from a single kill, with the possible exception of the Dragon. However, he was both level capped and unconscious that time around, so it didn't really count.

Cracking open the next node shouldn't be an issue with this much energy, even if he barely had worked on it so far.

However, Zac wasn't as interested in a single node compared to the other things that were going on in his body, so he just trapped the energy before moving on.

This was the first time he had activated his [**Cyclic Strike**] to summon a bronze flash since his battle with the dragon, and he was a bit shocked how well things went, all things considered. There was no need to maim himself and almost no difficulty at all to summon the bronze flash, and he somehow even managed to shoot it out of his hands.

It really seemed that the forcibly redrawn pathways on his shoulders did exactly what he had hoped.

However, even if the result was good there were undeniably some problems with how things went. First of all, he quickly lost control over the remnants' energies and he ended up using everything instead of just a portion. His soul was completely drained of the energy that had been slowly siphoned off the Splinter and it would probably take weeks before he could even launch a weaker bronze flash.

He had also completely blacked out there for a second when the infused energies passed a certain threshold. He had felt a sharp stab in his soul and only woke up after he had finished the attack. However, he had not only launched the strike but even healed himself with help of the Shard of Creation while unconscious, and there were fragmented memories of his actions.

Perhaps it would be more apt to say that he had entered some sort of auto-pilot or trance-like state, but it made him wonder if it was actually himself or the Remnants that was behind the wheel. In any case, it proved that he needed to keep grinding at the Soul Strengthening Array. He had been able to use his mind to slow down the flow of energy a little bit when activating [**Cyclic Strike**], proving he might be able to freely control it in the future.

"Are... you okay?" a hesitant voice asked from the side, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

Zac looked over, only to feel a searing pain on his shoulder. A couple of hairline cracks had appeared out of nowhere just as

some sort of fractal pathway disappeared, looking just like the ones that consumed the remains of Harbinger. Fear surged in Zac's chest, but he slowly calmed down when he realized that it didn't seem as though the cracks would spread any further.

Was this a side-effect from unleashing a bronze flash of this magnitude? Was his body perhaps unable to bear the Dao of Oblivion, even if it was just a shadow of a corner of that high-tiered Dao?

In fact, his attack couldn't really be called a flash any longer. It was a proper sphere of unadulterated destruction. It had disintegrated everything within a one-meter diameter. That was enough to pretty much kill any humanoid of normal size. Better yet, Zac doubted that there were too many things on Earth that could block those kinds of scary energies.

Space itself broke apart and was destroyed, how was some defensive talisman going to protect against that?

"I'm fine," Zac eventually answered, though that wasn't entirely true.

The cracks on his shoulders wasn't the only thing ailing him. Zac felt weak all over, like he hadn't only overtaxed his mind but also his body. He still had an ample amount of Cosmic Energy remaining, but his mental energy was almost drained clean.

"What... Was that?" Thea eventually asked as she kept her distance from Zac. "My mind has never screamed of danger like that before, not even when I was on the brink of dying. And I wasn't even the target."

"I guess you could say it was pure annihilation," Zac sighed. "Don't think about it too much. It involves some things that I can't talk about. Just considerer it one of my hidden cards."

"Some card," Thea muttered as she looked down at the tragic remains of Harbinger.

Harbinger's face had cracked in two and collapsed into its skull, making it seem as though the head was just a broken sculpture. Zac sighed as he looked at the odd scene. Some card

indeed. Only he knew there were still too many issues to resolve before it could really be called a hidden card though.

Apart from his lacking control, there was one more fundamental weakness to his Annihilation Sphere; it took too long to charge up. Who would let Zac stand still for a few seconds while he radiated that terrifying aura? He got lucky with Harbinger since he was willing to die to complete his strike, but most people didn't have that conviction.

They would either strike him from a distance or run for their lives if they encountered an attack imbued with oblivion. They wouldn't be trapped in a spatial lock like Thea or Harbinger. That meant he needed to learn how to create an opening so that he could get a chance to shoot out the blast without obstruction or interruption.

"Annihilation... Even its Cosmos Sack is gone," Thea muttered from the side.

Zac swore in surprise and hurried over to the corpse, no longer caring about the long-term implications of his situation.

It was true. There was simply nothing left between the insectoid's lower thighs and shoulders. Not even a scrap remained, meaning anything Harbinger carried on its belt or back was gone.

"Well, shit."

"OPEN IT!" Inevitability screamed as the air around her wailed from her unbridled bloodlust.

"We can't, Lady Inevitability! There's a-" an elder cried, but it didn't get any further before it was turned to meat paste from a lashing.

Over one hundred corpses were already strewn around her, but it did nothing to stymie the fury that was building in her chest. She had hoped to unleash it on her brother's killer, but these people were useless. She couldn't hold it in any longer, and she released a roar filled with her fury and madness.

The whole chamber quaked and cracks spread along the walls, but Inevitability didn't care as she let the anger consume her. It rose with wave after wave until she barely remembered her

name, it was all made inconsequential by the fiery wrath. Crackling sounds echoed out in the subterranean chamber as her skin ruptured and fell apart, but a new layer had already grown beneath it.

It was different from before. The skin was harder yet flexible, and there were streaks of red hidden right beneath the surface. Inevitability's remaining sliver of sanity knew it was a good thing, and she kept delving deeper and deeper into her madness as her power skyrocketed.

She felt she was filled with boundless power, and dozens of chains appeared around her, wildly flailing about in a mad dance of exuberance. Harbinger was almost completely forgotten as she drank the sweet nectar of strength.

Some of the already damaged walls couldn't take it any longer and collapsed and screams echoed out across the hive. However, the screams ended as abruptly as they came as the chains seemed to have a life of their own. They shot forward like a pack of frenzied beasts the moment they found something living.

Of course, it was Inevitability that was giving free rein to her bloodlust. It felt like a bottomless abyss, but each kill filled it a little bit. The moment the abyss had turned into a sea of blood she would be made whole.

“Enough.”

The calm voice was like a bucket of cold water that ripped Inevitability back to reality. She found herself standing in the middle of the ruins of her Hive, over ten layers turned to rubble. Thousands of corpses and hacked-off body parts were strewn across the area, and a putrid stench made her nose curl.

What bad luck that she had damaged the air vents as well.

But most importantly she saw that the Teleportation Array had just activated, and Void's Disciple had emerged. He was clearly furious, but he still seemed distracted by something as his gaze was trained on her.

“This is unexpected,” Void's Disciple said as he looked her up and down, and Inevitability felt her heartbeat speed up.

But the gaze of her father-husband wasn't enough to make her forget what had happened just now.

"They killed him," Inevitability said with grit teeth. "How could those abominations accomplish something like that?! We need to rip them to pieces."

"Your brother should have been able to kill at least a few dozen Anointed before safely escaping. His survivability is even higher than yours," Void's Disciple slowly said with his brows furrowed. "Something must have gone wrong. Did he encounter the remaining zealots or the Super Brother-Man?"

He raised his hand the next moment and a screen of light appeared, showing a grainy image of a human whose face covered in weird markings. In front of him were just a head and a pitch-black spear. The man standing above her brother's remains looked a bit different, but how couldn't Inevitability recognize that cursed man?

"It's him! The human! I'LL KILL HIM!" Inevitability screamed as the red streaks across her body lit up.

"We might have a chance if we hurry," Void's Disciple muttered as his body exploded with power.

The Teleportation Array lit up the next moment, but it flickered ominously. Void's Disciple kept infusing more and more power, but he was suddenly pushed back by a spatial storm and a couple of shallow wounds appeared on his face.

"Is it my fault? Did I damage it?" Inevitability asked with worry.

"No. I am unable to force my way through the disturbance," Void's Disciple grunted. "I have just touched the edge of the Dao of Space, it is not enough."

A killing intent that could easily match her own exploded out the next moment as Void's Disciple roared in fury and frustration, his face twisted into a mask of madness and murder. Inevitability's eyes lit up at the sight. This was the true face of Void's Disciple, and she was now the only one to have seen that visage and lived to tell the tale.

Void's Disciple punched down at the Teleportation Array the next moment, and it actually cracked.

Inevitability's eyes widened even further as she knew just how sturdy the things provided by the System were. She had attacked the Teleportation Arrays multiple times before out of boredom and curiosity, but she had not even been able to leave a mark.

The second stage of Void Disciple's [**Void Crusher**] was unleashed the next moment as thousands of spatial rifts shot out across the area. They dug into the earth or passed straight through a few of the lucky survivors, cutting anything into pieces until they formed a spherical pattern hundreds of meters wide.

"It looks like the Heavens doesn't want to provide today," Void's Disciple sighed, his face once more turning expressionless. "But we will have our chance inside the Mystic Realm. Harbinger's death at least came with some good. Your anger reached a high enough level to awaken your implanted bloodline."

"Is that what this is?" Inevitability blurted as she looked down at her hands, a ruthless grin spreading across her face.

This was exactly what she needed to exact her revenge.

"You need to enter the machine once more. That way you will be able to stabilize it and stop your body from rejecting it," Void's Disciple nodded.

Inevitability blanched when she thought back to that contraption that had tortured her in the darkness for weeks, but she knew better than to argue with her master. He might have outwardly calmed down, but she knew better than anyone that the fires were still burning beneath the surface. To question him now was to ask for death.

"Let's go," Void's Disciple said as he ripped open a tunnel in space. "This place will not last much longer."

The two stepped through the mid-range gate, leaving the wounded where they were. However, they only needed to

suffer for a few seconds before the remaining spatial rifts congealed into a singular point.

The next moment the whole Hive imploded, leaving nothing but a perfectly spherical crater behind.

Chapter 549: Adcarkas

Harbinger's Cosmos Sack was gone, its contents probably lost in some unreachable spatial fold, but there was at least something for him to loot; the pitch-black spear that was lying in the grass, its shaft still in the grip of the Dominator. It was definitely valuable, probably a High-Quality Spirit Tool judging by the spirituality it emitted.

Zac lifted it and looked it over for a few seconds, but he couldn't figure out what it was made of. It was extremely hard and looked like some sort of stone, but it was pliable like a spear made from wood or metal. He was able to bend it almost 180 degrees when he exerted himself, and it sprung back to its original form the moment he let go.

It was a bit regretful, but it definitely looked like something that was a perfect fit for Ogras.

He didn't begrudge the demon from finally getting his hands on a Spirit Tool. A boost in Ogras' combat strength was a direct benefit for Port Atwood. But Zac had been the one to almost get himself killed this time, yet he gained nothing, not even some trinkets. Perhaps he could squeeze some of the valuables out of the demon's paws in exchange for the weapon later.

"Warmaster, are you safe?" a rumbling voice suddenly echoed out as Rhubat came rushing, closely followed by a score of massive Anointed and hundreds of elite warriors. "We sensed a massive spike in corruption and realized something was happening here."

Only then did Zac remember the ongoing war, but he breathed in relief when he saw that things weren't as bad as he had feared. The Anointed had spread out and reinforced the rear, and the frontlines were stable enough to allow a contingent to freely head over to his location.

Larger numbers weren't enough to turn the tides when the opponents were life-force-burning Anointed.

"We got ambushed," Zac said as he pointed at the head on the ground. "I think it's Harbinger, but I can't tell for sure."

"It was truly one of the three!" another of the Anointed exclaimed. "The head releases such waves of corruption even in death."

"This is Karath... It's really them," Rhubat sighed as the giant knelt down to inspect the remains. "I met this one before the integration. To think such a promising scholar was hiding a secret like this. This must mean that Void's Disciple is Adcarkas after all, the Sage of the Grand Basin."

Zac's brows rose in interest. It sounded like the Dominators were actually some sort of important people even before the Integration. Their ability to mask their powers must have been shocking to be able to walk among the Zhix with their corruption-spotting antennae. He wanted to know more about their history, but there were more pressing matters at the moment.

"So, what's our next move?" Zac asked. "It seems that the enemies have realized what we're doing here."

"Four hives were cleansed before this, and enough warriors to fill three more will be purified in this battle," Rhubat slowly said. "The numbers are now in our favor. We will try to keep going and take out more Hives, but we expect the remaining heretics to have adapted by now. Our warriors need rest as well, so we will pause for reconnaissance after this battle."

"Good," Zac nodded with some relief. "I need to rest a bit as well. How long do you need?"

He had a huge amount of energy sloshing around his body at the moment, and he didn't want to waste it.

"Ten hours," Rhubat said after some thought before he turned toward Thea. "We'd like to keep the Pathfinder though in order to send out the scouts."

"That's fine with me," Thea nodded.

The Anointed returned to the war after seeing that everything was fine, but they still stayed close-by so that they could come to Zac's aid at moment's notice. Zac himself was about to sit down and rest up, but he suddenly saw an azure stream of light shooting straight toward him. He wasn't worried as he saw the magical light though, but rather amused.

It was Triv who was using some sort of movement skill to return to him and the Jammer.

"Young master, you are safe," the ghost said with relief as it congealed into a proper form.

"Just where did you go earlier?" Zac snorted. "I couldn't find you anywhere."

"I, ah... repositioned myself a bit. I did not want to become a burden during the Young Master's fight. That aura you released..." the ghost hesitantly said.

"Well, thank you for your assistance," Zac snorted, not seeing any reason to divulge the origins of his Annihilation Sphere. The lack of information might help keep the ghost in check even better. "I need to keep the energy inside my body for another hour while they finish up the battle. Look after the Jammer for me."

He didn't dare break open the node right away in case one of the other Dominators would show up so he could only focus on retaining the energy until he could go back to Port Atwood. The battle thankfully didn't last that long though, and Zac hurried toward the Teleportation Array of the fallen Hive after just 40 minutes.

The deaths after this battle were staggering even compared to the previous ones, and Zac sighed when he heard that over 100 000 of their own had fallen over the last hour. It was still a great victory on paper considering how many enemies they faced, and a testament to how a small group of elites like the Anointed could keep fatalities down. But their losses were still large enough to populate a small town, making it hard to celebrate the win.

Zac soon appeared in his compound, and he found Joanna sitting in meditation just outside. She woke up when she sensed the fluctuations from the array and immediately turned to Zac.

“I wasn’t able to contact you, but Billy’s returned as well,” Joanna said with an odd face.

“Did he pass the trial?” Zac asked.

“I... don’t know,” Joanna said after some hesitation. “But I think so?”

“What’s going on? Where is he?” Zac asked with a frown.

“He’s just outside the Dao Repository. He’s been sleeping for 14 hours straight,” Joanna said. “He isn’t deeply wounded, but it looks like someone has been using him as a punching bag. He fell asleep the moment he emerged from the Inheritance, and Brazla immediately threw him out because of the snores. I tried to move him but he almost bashed my head in without waking up.”

Zac’s gazed at the Valkyrie with confusion before he flashed over to the Dao Repository once more. It didn’t take a lot of effort to find where the giant was lying as it sounded like someone was performing large-scale logging in his forest.

Billy was lying sprawled on his back just outside the tiled square of the Dao Repository, and Zac couldn’t help but laugh when he saw Billy’s face. It was completely swollen to the point that it looked like he just had an allergic reaction. However, the fact that his face also was almost purple from layers of bruises that looked like meaty fists indicated he had been repeatedly punched.

It seemed that the titan’s trial was a lot more straightforward than his own or Thea’s.

Zac guessed that Billy’s nose was broken as well as it was completely congested which caused the terrifying snore, and he shook his head as he prodded him from some distance with the help of his club.

“NO MORE!” Billy screamed as he shot up to his feet.

The giant wildly looked around for a few seconds with heaving breaths until he realized what was going on.

“Ah- It’s you. Billy thought he was still stuck with the crazy one,” Billy sighed in relief as he sat down.

“How did it go?” Zac smiled as he took out an ointment. “Your face is a bit swollen. This will help.”

“Stupid crazy Titan said he wanted to teach Billy self-defense. But it only ended with Billy being punched in the face over and over,” Billy sighed. “But Billy is a lot better at defending now! Come, hit Billy.”

“Uh, okay,” Zac said before he immediately moved forward, his club ripped through the air as he swung it toward Billy’s chin with a decent amount of strength.

However, Billy’s massive muscles suddenly tightened to the point that they looked like steel wires, and the hulking man turned to a blur the next instant. Zac’s mind suddenly screamed of danger as the grotesque skull on Billy’s club was bearing down on him with shocking speed.

The ground cracked all around Zac as he pushed himself back, narrowly avoiding the smash. He looked with surprise at the giant, feeling he was over twice as fast as before. Billy had neither excelled at defense nor speed before, making him an extremely lopsided meathead. However, one of those weaknesses had been shored up during the inheritance it looked like.

But it seemed to be his speed rather than endurance that had been improved, so Zac didn’t understand what Billy meant by self-defense.

“I thought you said that the Titan taught you how to protect yourself?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“Crazy man said that the best way to not get hit is to kill everyone before they can hit you,” Billy sagely said.

“Hard to argue with that logic,” Joanna snorted from the side.

“Crazy man taught Billy a good skill that makes Billy quicker the stronger he gets. But it is very tiring,” Billy sighed as he

gulped down a couple of huge mouthfuls of water.

Zac believed he understood what Billy was talking about. It was either some sort of rare skill that increased Billy's Dexterity based on his Strength, or perhaps a movement skill that was based on Strength rather than Dexterity as was the norm.

"I have to go," Zac sighed. "What are you doing next Billy?"

"Billy is going to Billyville," Billy said after some thought.

"Billy is tired and has not been home for a long time."

"That sounds good," Zac said and added after some thought.

"Thea and I are going away in a few weeks. To a special place like the hunt. We don't know how long we will be gone. Do you want to come as well?"

"Why are you going there?" Billy asked curiously.

"Find treasure and beat up bad guys," Zac smiled.

"Haha, you always do that. You need a hobby. But Billy will come help you," Billy grinned as he started walking away, heading toward the town.

Zac nodded at Joanna who followed him to make sure he got home rather than kidnapped by some group of lovestruck demons. He was left alone in his private forest, and he entered his courtyard to finally absorb the massive amount of Cosmic Energy surging through his body.

However, he didn't immediately push the energy into his body, but he rather swapped over to his Draugr-form first. He figured that if one of his pathways was going to be destroyed, then it might as well be the pathways in his undead form. His human pathways wouldn't be harmed this way as they would be stored in his specialty core.

This allowed him to keep using his Human form while recuperating while only bearing some of the detriments of node-breaking. He would still be weakened due to the shock to the system, but he would be able to use Cosmic Energy without getting a backlash like in the Dead Zone.

The process went quite smoothly, if you could consider a part of your body literally blowing up smooth. The energy from taking out the Dominator was easily able to crack open his eighth node, even though that node alone required about as much energy as the first three nodes combined. The energy was even enough to provide his Fetters of Desolation class with a level and set the foundation for his ninth node, meaning he was now level 83 in his Undead form while his human side was still 82.

The next node was in an unfortunate spot though. It was just between his right elbow and his bicep, making it a very precarious spot. He had already learned to somewhat decrease the degree to which he maimed himself with every node opening, but he needed to be careful now. His arms were pretty damn muscular compared to before the integration, but they were still far thinner compared to his legs.

One mishap and he might find himself in the same situation as Ogras, with only a stub for an arm. He wouldn't be able to grow it back before reaching D-Grade at the earliest unless he managed to get his hands on a treasure with the same effect. However, Ogras had searched high and low for such a thing in the Base Town without any success, so items with that sort of effect seemed as rare as soul-mending treasures.

He needed to keep improving the process of node-opening with every level he gained. Pretty much all the nodes during early E-Grade were located in his extremities, but he would move onto more precarious placements in middle E-Grade. In late E-Grade, the nodes would all be located around his head and heart, and even cultivators could die from a single mistake at that point, let alone mortals.

A wave of exhaustion gripped him after the upgrade was complete, and he fell into a deep slumber as the Fragment of the Bodhi worked on both his node-related wound and the weird cracks that had appeared on his shoulders and neck.

Zac woke up only seven hours later, and he frowned when he saw that the tears from unleashing the Annihilation Sphere hadn't healed at all. They didn't really seem to cause any more problems than some random scars, but Zac knew it was

important that he slowly healed the wounds. These kinds of injuries were a big problem to cultivators.

High-concept wounds from battles or overextending yourself was like spiritual sequela, and it could cause problems to one's future cultivation if left unchecked. What if some remnants of Oblivion hiding in his shoulders suddenly exploded when he opened a near-by node in the future? He might die then and there.

Zac's body was still feeling wrung out even after resting for such a long time, and something seemed to have changed at the war front while he was out. Nonet and Ibtep had actually appeared in Port Atwood as he was inspecting his body, and they were quickly ushered to his compound.

"What's going on?" Zac asked when he saw the two Zhix. "I thought I was supposed to meet up with you in two hours?"

"There is no need. A challenge has been issued and a final battle will take place in ten days," Nonet simply said.

Chapter 550: Swamp

“Ten days?” Zac frowned. “Why don’t we just keep going?”

The New World Government’s deadline for entering the Mystic Realm was inching closer, and he definitely couldn’t get caught outside when the hidden world closed its doors. Besides, wanted to be over with this bloody matter as quickly as possible.

“Our scouts returned a few hours ago. The hives are emptied, except one that is utterly destroyed. Only the weak have been left behind, just like during a migration. The number of remaining Zhix is still in the millions, but we cannot locate them. A letter of challenge was issued just an hour ago though. For the future of the Zhix,” Ibtep explained.

Zac asked a bit more and he learned that the challenge was something that occasionally happened before their integration. It was essentially an all-out war between two forces that competed for resources. The survivor would claim the hive and its land, and the losers would either be killed or assimilated.

This time there would be no assimilation if the council won though, only death awaited those who chose to follow the Dominators.

“So it’s one all-out war. Do you think the Dominators will be there?” Zac asked.

“It is hard to say,” Nonet said with a shake of its enormous head. “No Zhix would stay behind when the challenge is issued. However, the Dominators are Zhix, yet they are not. They might not care about the precepts and enter this hidden world you have mentioned. They might even try something before then.”

Zac nodded with a frown. Retaliation from the Dominators was something he had been worrying about since slaying Harbinger. He knew all-too-well just how crazy Inevitability was, and he wouldn't put it past her to go slaughter everyone in his outpost. He had been half-expecting a notification in his communication crystal while cultivating, but he had thankfully been uninterrupted the whole time.

He didn't know why, but it looked like his people were safe for now though. Void's Disciple seemed quite capable to move about across Pangea freely, and he should have attacked one of his towns by now if he had decided to act. He still decided to pull back more of his forces to the island and his private continent just in case.

The two Zhix left a few minutes later, leaving Zac to ponder his next move. The break was honestly a relief to Zac, as he was not completely ready to meet another one of the Dominators. Fighting both of them simultaneously felt extremely risky as well, especially while Ogras was still in seclusion. The pause would give him some time to prepare his next move.

There was no way for him to prepare another Annihilation Sphere even if the battle was delayed another ten days though. The Splinter simply didn't produce enough energy for that. He would have to use some other means to deal with them instead.

The delay also threw about his plans a bit, as he needed to prepare himself for the Mystic Realm as well. He wanted to enter the Mystic Realm within two weeks if possible, as that would still give him some time to maneuver even if his sister proved unable to force open the broken pathway.

Zac hadn't heard any updates from his sister for a while, and he couldn't sit around any longer. He walked over to his own array and teleported over to Mystic Island. He needed to see how things were going.

It was quite some time since Zac was here last, but not much had changed. The base camp was a bit desolate though, as most of the normal staff was stuck on the other side of the

spatial tunnel. Now it was mostly demons and Valkyries staying here to protect Kenzie and a few scientists. A large number of the Sentry Golems were probably off wandering the island as well, making sure no one tried sneaking up on the camp.

“Oh, you’re here?” Kenzie said with surprise as Zac entered her workshop. “Is the war over?”

“It’s on hold for ten days,” Zac smiled as he looked around. “How’re things going here?”

“It’s slow,” Kenzie sighed. “The tunnel is still a mess, that bomb the zealots set up really did a number on space itself. The turbulence got better a lot faster in the beginning, but it has been slowing down lately. I’m not sure it will clear up before the deadline you set.”

The deadline Zac set was ten days before the government. Part of it was simply a precaution, but there was another important reason for the haste.

The other forces were frantically searching the Mystic Realm at this very moment and he was already pretty far behind. He couldn’t just enter the last minute and expect everything to go his way. He definitely had a hidden ace with his familiar connection to the Mystic Realm along with his sister and Jeeves, but he wouldn’t take anything for granted.

In a perfect world, he would already have started to explore the mysterious research base, but he wasn’t ready to risk it all by trying to sneak into the New World Government’s entrance. Seizing it was even riskier as there were probably spies from both the cultists and the Dominators ready to blow up the spatial tunnel at moment’s notice.

“Can you crack it open early?” Zac asked.

“We can give it a try, but if we fail it will make things a lot worse,” Kenzie said. “If we wait another week or two our chances will be better.”

Zac slowly thought it over, before he nodded in agreement.

“I want to try it in twelve days, after the battle is dealt with.” Zac eventually decided. “If things fall apart I’ll just have to try

my luck by sneaking inside some other way.”

“You know you can just talk with the government officials, right?” Kenzie said.

“If they were ready to work together they would have contacted us long ago,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“They’ve had ample chances to extend an olive branch since I closed the last Incursion. Even before then.”

“Fine,” Kenzie shrugged. “But remember to not kill a bunch of people willy-nilly.”

“I know,” Zac agreed.

Not killing weaklings was an unwritten rule of the multiverse, and something Zac had to start taking note of now that he was on a higher grade than the rest of Earth. It was widely considered extremely vile to wantonly slaughtering the weak, almost like killing innocent puppies. Of course, if that was the only problem the blood-drenched cultivators of the multiverse wouldn’t have cared.

But there were a lot of signs pointing toward the fact that killing substantially weaker people went against the will of the Heavens and that it affected one’s karma negatively, almost like giving you a hidden debuff to your Luck. It wasn’t something that was visible on your status screen, but through how the universe treated you.

After all, F-grade cultivators weren’t useful to the System, but they represented seeds of potential. The System wouldn’t care if a bunch of warriors killed each other in a war, as that might result in a few powerhouses emerging, but the mighty slaughtering substantially weaker people was another matter altogether.

The strong didn’t get stronger, and a lot of potential was snuffed out as the weak got culled. It was wasting resources, and essentially working against the System. A few people dying here and there didn’t really matter, but if you went too far you would draw the ire of the System, and it would start treating you like an enemy of the heavens like the Technocrats.

There were even rumors of powerful cultivators that were actively hunted by the system for their actions, who were forced to hide from the eyes of the Heavens. That wasn't something that had any relation to a small corner like the Zecia sector though, as you needed to be much more powerful for something like that to happen according to Triv.

"I'll be going away for a couple of days," Zac eventually said. "I need to keep improving as much as possible before we enter, so I have decided to head to one of the uncharted sectors of Pangea. It's the swamp."

"Really? The swamp?" Kenzie said with a scrunched-up nose. "That place seems pretty disgusting."

"There's a lot of putrefaction and death in the swamp from what I understand," Zac said. "It might provide me with some sort of inspiration. Or there might be a lot of valuable plants."

It was the latter that was the biggest reason for Zac deciding to go. The integration of a new world led to the appearance of a bunch of valuable resources, like the Amanita and the Tree of Ascension. There were no doubt more that had appeared, but most had probably already been snatched up by the people around the world.

If there were any remaining natural treasures of that grade on earth, then they were probably hidden in the unexplored pockets. The swamp seemed particularly dangerous, and Zac believed that no one should have properly explored its inner areas. Finding some valuable treasure was his last chance at gaining another power up before heading into the Mystic Realm, and he could probably burst open another node while looking around.

It was a risky move considering that Void's Disciple might show up with a vengeance at moment's notice, but he had the **[Spatial Gate Array]** now. He could set an array up in ten minutes, and his town just had to defend that long for him to return. Ten minutes should definitely be doable even against Void's Disciple with the comprehensive upgrades to the defensive Arrays of Port Atwood.

The value of a World Capital had quickly shown itself in the number of good things available in the Town Shop, and Abby and Adran had been busy squeezing as much benefit as possible out of the available arrays and fortifications.

Zac immediately turned thoughts to action as he teleported to the array closest to the swamp, leaving just a small squad of Valkyries to act as a relay in case they needed to reach him through his Communication Crystal. He actually owned a town just on the edge of the swamp, a small base that was formerly one of the incursions he had closed. It had belonged to a humanoid race that somewhat reminded Zac of the Zhix, though they looked a lot more like humans.

It was most likely one of the demi-human races of the multiverse. Humans were just too prolific, after all, and they had proven very compatible for procreation with most humanoid species. They were like blank canvases, and there were very few humanoids that didn't have a little bit of human in their genome.

What was human and what wasn't had already become blurred, but people essentially went by the race in the status screen, which was dictated by the dominant heritage. This was rarely the human side, especially not when matched against powerful races.

The ones who had controlled this former Incursion were likely the result of a mix of some insectoid race and humans a long time ago, which might have been why they were placed so close to a swamp. It made Zac's life a lot easier anyway, as he didn't have to utilize the Marshall Clan for transportation this time, exposing his plans while doing so.

He was soon flying atop his treasure above the marsh, looking down with interest. After hearing the description of the place he had first thought this might be where the Everglades ended up, but he soon realized that that wasn't exactly the case.

Zac was no botanical expert, but there were just too many unfamiliar trees and plants in the ground below for this to be a piece of Florida. At best it might have combined the wetlands with some marshes and tropical forests of the other planets,

most likely the Ishiate world as it seemed to have been just one massive forest.

It had created a unique ecosystem with a forest floor that was mostly submerged like a mangrove system. However, there were smatterings of solid land with some regularity, though not quite to the point that you could freely walk on the ground.

However, the infusion of Cosmic Energy to the marshlands had helped the trees explode in size, which included their branches and roots. It had formed vast systems of bridges running along the rivers, and Zac saw one beast after another running along their length from tree to tree.

He just needed to travel above the marshland for a few minutes to realize the place was teeming with various species, just like the primordial jungle where he had spent a lot of time after dealing with the cultists. However, if the atmosphere over by the volcano was a boisterous cacophony, then this place held a subdued silence, with animal calls only occasionally breaking through the silence.

The whole area felt like it was full of adventure and mystery, and Zac wondered if this was how the explorers of old felt when they traveled along the rivers of Mississippi or through the virgin jungles of Africa. Of course, he had the added safety net of being able to fly away, and a superhuman constitution that would protect him from most insect bites and poisons.

The place provided Zac with a sense of adventure, but more importantly it provided him with solace. The bloody scenes over the past days had left him with a feeling of heaviness that reached deep into his soul, and this was an opportunity for him to not only regain a sense of balance but even work on his skills.

Of course, if he could find some treasure while doing so, all the better.

Chapter 551: Connectedness

The atmosphere of this unusual forest was fascinating, but the ambient energy was even more interesting. Zac was currently flying toward the center of the marshland at a leisurely pace that pretty much matched a speed that he would be able to keep on land as well. He hadn't noticed anything weird in the beginning, but he could now confirm that the energy density had increased a bit since he entered this place.

With this pace it would only take him two days at the most to reach the core, but Zac eventually decided to land on top of a massive root that had grown over ten meters wide. The waters quickly turned chaotic as a group of oversized salamanders swam toward him, but they quickly fled for their lives when Zac unleashed a bit of his aura.

He took a deep breath, surprised that the smell was fresh and earthy rather than the expected foul odor of brackish water. Zac started walking along the roots toward the depths of the marshland, occasionally jumping up to instead use a bridge made from branches, following a somewhat meandering path.

Of course, he could always jump between trees in a straight line instead of using such a slow method of travel, but that would destroy the whole purpose why he landed. He wanted to get a feel of the forest, to walk on top of the trees as he followed the natural paths formed by nature itself.

Zac had initially planned on using the primordial jungle as a means to evolving his nature-affected skills. But large sections of the jungle were utterly ruined because of the battle against the cultists, or rather their emblem, and he had mainly tried to focus on gaining Blighted Cut during that week of recuperation. It had prevented him from working on his other class as much as he wanted.

But now was a perfect opportunity. It was just him and a boundless wilderness that had never been tread by man from the looks of things. Zac kept emitting some of his latent killing intent, which essentially worked as not only a bug-repellant but also a deterrent for any of the stronger beasts lurking in the depths of the wide rivers.

He occasionally stopped and sensed the various trees and gargantuan flowers in his path, trying to understand their role and path to survival in this place. The world of cultivation was a cut-throat place, but nature had always been just as competitive even before the Integration. Everything needed a method to survive, along with the ability to adapt now that the atmosphere was chock-full of magic.

Some of the more massive trees simply dominated their domain with size alone, stealing the sunlight for themselves. Other trees formed symbiotic relationships with other plants defending them in return for somewhere to grow. It wasn't all too different compared to before the integration, honestly, though it did feel like evolution was sped up by a huge degree.

Then again, there were quite a few new oddities that didn't exist before. He had been attacked no less than twenty times by the plantlife itself after having just traveled for two hours. One tree moved its branches with surprising speed in an effort to spear him on a sharp point. Others tried to entangle him with their roots.

He had actually let one do it to see what would happen, and he was slowly dragged underwater where he could see a bunch of rotting beast carcasses provide nutrients to the tree. Some plants had even formed hunting teams with the beasts. A huge flower had suddenly released a bunch of pollen in his face, and Zac immediately felt some restrictions on his movement.

Not more than ten seconds passed before a swarm of mosquitoes appeared, hoping to bleed him dry while he was incapacitated. The pollen was only immobilizing, so the two groups had teamed up where the mosquitoes got the blood while the plant got the corpse.

It was both horrifying and extremely intriguing to see the hundreds of paths to survival, and Zac felt something click into place after walking along for half a day. He was delighted to see that [**Forester's Constitution**] finally reached peak mastery. The upgrade had boosted his attribute bonus to 15% as expected.

But more importantly, he felt a sense of connectedness with the nature around him.

It wasn't like when he was using [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] and he essentially became omniscient within his conjured forest, but rather an innate sixth sense about the forest itself. It was like an inborn intuition had been implanted into his subconscious. He tried to make sense of the feeling, but he only found a use for it ten minutes later when he felt something attracted him from within a dense bush.

Zac decided to follow the hunch, and he pushed his way inside, his massive Endurance enough to avoid getting cut into ribbons by the extremely sharp barbs. He had expected the interior of the bush to be pretty dark, but there was actually a source of light inside; a small set of stalks that gave off a gentle green light.

He immediately understood that this was some sort of Spiritual Herb hiding within the thorny bush, and his eyes lit up when he realized the use of Peak Mastery of the skill. His hunch had actually led him to a hidden treasure that he never would have spotted before. He had essentially turned into a truffle-seeking pig that could find the hidden treasures of the forest.

It wasn't exactly that he could sense treasures though, but rather that he had been given an instinctive understanding of the forests. He just felt that the brambles looked like a place that could contain some good things, and this feeling was in turn boosted by his massive pool of Luck.

Zac also noticed that his honed instincts worked with dangers as well within a few minutes. He somehow had a far better understanding of what parts of the rivers would hold aggressive beasts or which types of foliage could hide something lying in wait. This part of the skill wasn't as useful

to someone like him who already had his danger sense, but it would probably have been a huge boon for a normal cultivator who spent a lot of time in the forests.

Staying alive was the most important thing on the path of cultivation, after all.

The best thing was that the skill was passive too, meaning he could freely make use of his upgraded instincts without any ramifications. It allowed him to pick up one Spiritual Root after another as he walked through the marshes, each of them giving off impressive spiritual energy. However, he quickly realized that good herbs weren't like weeds, growing everywhere.

Less than a tenth of the spots his instincts told him about was actually home to something interesting, the rest were simply empty. However, he actually didn't need to dig or inspect every single one. As long as he got close enough he would get a sense from his Luck as well, and he tried to understand this Treasure Sense just as well as he understood his Danger Sense.

This sense wasn't something new. He could always tell whether something he found in a Cosmos Sack was useless or something valuable by instinct, just like he could somewhat get a sense of the quality of Spiritual Tools. Part of it came from sensing the aura of the items, but part of it was simply instincts brought by his Luck. However, this sense hadn't really proven too useful while actually searching for treasures until now.

Zac soon concluded that his Luck was quite precise as long as he got within 7 meters or so. He could tell there was something there with some certainty at such close proximity. The actual range was a bit odd though, but he guessed that he might have been given 1 meter of detection range per effective 100 Luck.

Sometimes he could get a vague hint even further away than that though, but it was to the point that Zac had a hard time discerning whether it was just his "gut" telling him something that might be completely fabricated, or if it was actually some

supernatural phenomenon helping him out. In either case, it wasn't something he could put too much faith in.

A Treasure Sense of seven meters wasn't bad, but it wasn't life-changing either. It allowed him to pick up the occasional baubles that were strewn along his way, but it was a far cry from the examples Ogras had listed before. He didn't get any strong urge to suddenly make a turn only to find a divine treasure a few kilometers away or anything magical like that.

But it was far superior to what the general cultivator could enjoy. The forest didn't look like it was full of treasures to the untrained eye, but **[Forester's Constitution]** had opened Zac up to the truth. His Luck then helped him make the best of the knowledge, which turned him into a moneymaking machine compared to most adventurers.

The number of plants Zac harvested as he explored was nothing compared to the vast fields his people grew back at Verdant Hills, but farmed Spirit Plants and wild ones couldn't be compared with each other. It was mainly weaker plants that could be freely farmed, whereas the more valuable ones resisted domestication.

There was also the issue of energy consumption. Most of the high-quality plants required quite a bit of energy, making it impossible to grow them in larger numbers. They needed a territory of their own, just like many beasts did. So a lot of spiritual roots and plants did not have a constant supply, which massively increased their value in case they were needed for popular pill recipes.

That was one of the main fields of research for most Alchemy clans too. Any clan that managed to improve a recipe by changing a wild-grown plant with a farmed one stood to gain a massive amount of wealth. They could undercut the market while still maintaining massive profit margins thanks to using cheaper resources.

Zac had no idea if the roots, grasses, and flowers he picked up were anything valuable in high demand, but he still took a detour every time he sensed something in the vicinity. It wasn't like he was strapped for cash, but it went against every

fiber in his body to leave money lying on the floor. He also wanted to nurture his instincts this way.

And who knew, some of the plants might be really effective in improving his Draugr-race. He was willing to do almost anything to swap out that terrifying dust to something less painful to use.

Constantly harvesting the low-grade Spiritual Plants gave him some insights as well. Spiritual Plants were essentially the equivalent of plants that had started on the path of cultivation, and it felt like exploring them helped him gain insight into his own nature-aspected Dao Fragment. He felt it might be even more conducive to his cultivation to travel through forests like this rather than sitting in his cultivation cave.

Zac kept going deeper and deeper into the massive swamp over the following day, and his newfound intuition helped him avoid a lot of trouble. However, the energy in the atmosphere kept increasing, and the beasts both grew more numerous and more powerful. Most of them were just late or peak F-Grade though, with E-Grade animals being very rare.

He would probably have to reach the core before he got an opportunity to see the real kings of the marshes.

Zac finally decided to stop for the day after having taken out a group of humongous E-grade crocodiles, each of them more than twenty meters long. It felt like going up against prehistoric dinosaurs when fighting them, but they were still ultimately just early E-Grade. Just a minute was needed to take out the whole pack, and he suddenly had 8 more carcasses in his Cosmos Sack.

The stench of blood filled the air as the river ran red, so Zac quickly moved some distance away. The crocodiles should be the local hegemony of this small section of the river, but the other animals could probably figure out that the blood meant there might be an opportunity for a sneak attack or even free food.

He soon found an enormous tree with a hollow large enough that he could rest for the day, perhaps the former resting place of some mutated squirrel. Zac blocked out the entrance with

one of his spare tower shields before he sat down and calmed his mind. The reason he moved away from the battle wasn't that he was worried that he would become embroiled in another battle, but it was rather that he didn't want a bunch of beasts interrupting him while redrawing his pathways.

He quickly changed to his Draugr form and once more started performing the arduous task.

The physical wound from breaking open the Node was pretty much healed, though he had barely begun fixing the pathways. He estimated that his undead form was weakened roughly 30% or so, and even his human side wasn't in top shape even though he looked fine on paper.

Zac guessed that the broken pathways in his inactive form counted like some sort of hidden wound even when he fought as a human, though the effect was limited. In either case, it meant he needed to work quickly so that the pathways were fixed before the war in 8 days. He might need everything in his arsenal in case the remaining two showed up.

He kept working on the pathways for a few hours before he swapped back to his human form, at which point he simply closed his eyes and tried to sense the nature around him. He would normally have wanted to practice his Soul Strengthening Manual as well, but it was impossible while on the move. Setting up a teleportation array through his **[Spatial Gate Array]** was technically possible, but they were temporary one-time consumables, so he wouldn't be able to return.

Going without the arrays for a few days wasn't a problem though, and it freed up a lot of time to focus on other things, such as his Dao. It almost felt like the whole swamp was one enormous entity, and he tried to find some inspiration for the Fragment of the Bodhi by connecting to it. He spent the rest of the night in that sort of reverie before he once more set out at the break of dawn.

Today he would explore the core of the wetlands.

Chapter 552: River

Zac had spent close to two days in the marshes already, and he would definitely reach what could be considered the core zone today. Of course, that wasn't saying much as the core of such a massive forest was large enough that he could wander around for weeks without seeing the same tree twice.

As for what Zac considered the core area, it was where Cosmic Energy was the densest. The Nexus Vein covered his whole island and then some back home, and he guessed it was a similar situation here in the forest. The core Zone was equivalent to Port Atwood, and this was where the strongest beasts would reside, along with the most valuable herbs and minerals.

His hunch was quickly proven right over the following hours as the number of E-Grade beasts he encountered kept increasing. He even spotted a massive swarm of E-Grade hornets far in the distance, each one of them as large as a labrador. Even Zac felt a bit intimidated by the swarm, so he actually chose to hide inside the river to not draw their attention.

Beasts were weaker than cultivators in general, but they made up for it in numbers. He wasn't in any mood to be besieged by thousands of murderous hornets for no real return. Even if he emerged victoriously it would still be a pitched battle, and the risk didn't weigh up for the rewards. There was no point in messing with a swarm like that unless they were guarding some great treasure.

He did fight the occasional E-Grade beast though, mostly overgrown bugs or river-creatures. There was a large number of alien amphibians that looked like predatory catfish. Their maws were wide enough to swallow Zac in one bite, and there were over five rows of jagged teeth hiding within. They even

had short stubby legs like salamanders, and they could break into a surprisingly quick sprint on the ground.

Zac fought and harvested intermittently as he scoped the core zone, and his Cosmos Sack was gradually filling up with valuables. He didn't recognize the herbs he was picking at all, but each beast carcass was worth between 10 000 and 100 000 Nexus Coins depending on species and level.

The bountiful harvest went on for a few hours until there was a startling change in the atmosphere; it had become quiet.

The sounds of nature had always been a bit subdued in this swamp, but it had suddenly become completely silent after Zac passed an unseen threshold. He had never encountered this before, but it could only mean a few things. There were no beasts here, meaning they either had all been killed or scared away by something. Zac immediately started to look around for clues, but there wasn't much to go by.

This section of the wetlands looked pretty much the same as the rest, with the exception that the river he was following along was a bit wider than the rest. It was over five kilometers across, which would have allowed it to compete with massive rivers like the Amazon River before the Integration. Now it was just a tributary from some much larger source of water.

Zac's first instinct was to avoid this place just like the hornets earlier, but he eventually chose to stay. He was here for training and treasures, after all, and this felt like a place that could provide both. He kept going along the shoreline, but he concealed as much of his aura as he could. However, he only walked a few hundred meters before there was a change in his body.

His cells had all woken up and were screaming at him that there was something delicious nearby. This wasn't something coming from his recently upgraded [**Forester's Constitution**], but rather the general feelings of desire that great treasures like the Fruit of Ascension elicited. Zac immediately started to look for any special energy signatures with [**Cosmic Gaze**], though not without some hesitation.

There was something odd about the feeling, though he couldn't exactly place it.

It quickly became apparent that the treasure could be found on a small island in the middle of the river. There was a constant swirl of haze surrounding it though, making it impossible for Zac to guess what was going on inside. He could only see the edges of the island sticking out, but he could at least make some deductions of what kind of situation might be waiting for him over there.

The island just had a diameter of 100 meters or so, so the valuable item shouldn't be something huge like a Crystal Mine. It was also unlikely that there was some sort of hive with a huge number of beasts like a hornet hive or an ant's nest waiting on the other side of the fog. The island was too small, so there could either be just one big guy guarding the treasure, or a pack of medium-sized beasts.

As for the treasure, it was probably some sort of plant with a powerful energy signature.

However, Zac didn't immediately rush over to take the item. There was a constant buzz in the back of his head, alerting him of danger. It wasn't an acute sense of dread, but rather a pervasive sense of wrongness. He couldn't make heads or tails about the feeling, but he knew to take extra precautions.

Perhaps the feeling was simply because his subconscious believed a life and death struggle waited for him on the island. The most powerful animals always erected their lairs next to valuable herbs as the aura the treasures released could help refine their bloodlines. There was no way that this island wasn't occupied since Zac's cells were screaming at him to eat whatever was hiding within the mists.

With the sheer amount of hidden cards and advantages he had stacked up over the past year, Zac didn't feel all too worried about whatever was waiting for him though. He was confident in dealing with pretty much anything Earth was able to throw at him this early into the integration. However, Zac still wanted to deal with this situation like a normal cultivator.

He needed to come up with a plan that would allow him to minimize the danger. He wouldn't always stay on Earth where there were no real surprises. Cultivation on Earth was too orderly as everyone began at the same time, and it provided him a false sense of security that wouldn't hold up out in the multiverse. Even the Mystic Realm would contain unknown dangers that could threaten his life by all accounts.

He needed to learn to do things the right way, or he would sooner or later be killed because he encountered something that couldn't be solved by swinging his axe extra hard.

His class and Dao thankfully enabled Zac to blend in with the surroundings, allowing him to spy on the island from his vantage hidden in a tree crown by the shore. However, Zac frowned when there was no change even after four hours. The mists didn't dissipate, and there were never any sounds that came from the island. No beast ever left the moat to hunt either, leaving Zac wondering if he was just being paranoid.

Was there actually no beast living there?

There was only so much time he had to spare, and he eventually decided to just go for it. He figured that he could either swap to his Draugr form and walk along the bottom of the river, or use his leaf as a boat. He eventually decided to move upstream a bit before he placed the leaf on the river. He infused himself with the Fragment of the Bodhi and simply allowed his flying treasure to drift toward the island like a normal piece of debris.

Zac didn't move in the slightest and **[Verun's Bite]** was already in his hand in case of an ambush, but he drifted through the haze without issue until his flying treasure hit land. He immediately disembarked and stowed away the treasure before he looked around the island with some confusion and desire. He had smelt an extremely enticing aroma since he entered the fog, and he couldn't wait to snatch whatever was the source.

The haze was actually not that thick on the island, one quick scan confirmed that there were no guarding beasts around. Not that they could fit with the tree that grew from the center of the

island. The tree wasn't overly tall, just reaching twenty meters into the sky. However, it was shockingly wide, its trunk taking up the better part of the whole island.

Even the massive redwoods back then couldn't compete with this weird monstrosity in terms of girth.

However, Zac wasn't interested in the tree trunk, but rather the bulbous branches that spread out at its crown. There were only 6 branches in total on the whole tree, and each of them looked like a shrub with an enormous flower growing on it. It was no doubt these flowers who were the source of the smell, and Zac could sense how most of the energy gathered by the tree was infused into these six treasures.

The fact that there were no beasts around only made Zac more apprehensive as he stayed on the edge of the island though. It was a bit disconcerting that he couldn't find the source of danger or wrongness, but he also couldn't just stand around doing nothing. He had already made his move, and delaying would just increase the danger he was in.

His spirit tool necklace transformed, and a chain shot out from his back and snaked around one of the stubby branches, and Zac shot toward it as he dragged himself up. The sudden movement was just in time as five sharp spikes punched through the ground and stabbed his previous location with enough force to make the air crackle. Zac immediately looked back and saw that it was a group of roots, but they receded beneath the ground after they missed.

The scene wasn't very surprising to Zac. If there were no beast guardian around in this place, then it was most likely that the tree itself was a dangerous predator. And since there were no branches on this fatty tree, then it most likely had nimble roots to deal with its prey. A trunk of this width should be able to grow a massive root system, after all.

Zac wasted no time as he didn't believe for a second that this probing attack was all the tree could muster, considering that the whole area was cleansed of animals. He moved to cut off the closest flower, but a weird shield actually appeared around

it. Zac grunted in annoyance as he swung his axe down at the emerald barrier, and the collision made the whole tree shudder.

The shaking didn't subside, though, and Zac's eyes widened when the whole river exploded as thousands of roots, each one hundreds of meters long, rose into the sky. Zac had expected more roots to be waiting, but not to the point that the sky itself was almost blocked out. He hurriedly launched a barrage of strikes at the stalk connecting the flower to the branch, and the shield finally cracked.

But there was just enough time to harvest the one flower before his mind screamed of danger for real. Hundreds of roots shot toward him with a speed and agility that far surpassed any other plant he had encountered thus far, and he barely managed to dodge the strikes by moving over to the top of the trunk with **[Loamwalker]**.

The roots actually emitted a powerful killing intent as they froze in the air. However, they only wiggled in the air for a second before the tree seemed to have located him once more. Zac immediately flashed toward the next flower as he cut apart roots by the scores, but his eyes suddenly widened in alarm.

Two chains slammed into the top of the massive trunk the next moment, dragging Zac right back where he came from.

It was just in time as well as the flower released what looked like a plume of pollen that created a yellow haze that lingered just for an instant before it started spreading through the air. Zac thankfully evaded most of it, but some of it definitely made its way to him. A huge surge of desire and killing intent welled up in his heart, and his breaths started to become ragged as he looked at the remaining flowers.

His hunch had been right; that pollen was definitely not normal.

The other four flowers quickly followed suit and released their own clouds of pollen, and Zac was soon surrounded from all sides as he kept dancing back and forth while cutting off any incoming roots. He was only buying time though as the roots regrew within seconds and rejoined the battle.

However, there was nothing else he could do until those clouds of pollen dissipated enough for him to snatch the flowers. He was already in a bad state from just taking a whiff, and he might actually go insane if he stayed inside the clouds too long. It was a very weird feeling as two conflicting impulses fought inside his mind. One of the voices was telling him to stay away as the increasingly large cloud of pollen was dangerous, while the other was screaming at him to jump into the cloud and push his face into the flower.

Was the thing a lure?

Roars suddenly echoed out across the area, as though in direct response to his hunch. Zac also saw a large number of Cosmic Energy clusters moving closer with the help of [**Cosmic Gaze**], which probably meant that hundreds of beasts were pushing toward his location with their utmost speed. The quickest animals were all in E-Grade, and the strongest ones actually managed to push through the forest of deadly roots to arrive at the small island.

The area had been void of life just a minute ago, but it suddenly looked as though a beast tide was forming all around him, madly fighting against the countless roots in the river. Something was clearly wrong with the animals though as many of them were frothing at the mouth as their eyes shone with madness.

They cared for nothing except their desire to reach the island. The water had already turned red, but the island had similarly grown to twice its original size thanks to the hundreds of snaking roots that had been cut or ripped off by Zac and the beasts. This was definitely the tree's doing.

It was orchestrating a bloodbath.

Chapter 553: Roots

The chaotic scene made Zac's eyes widen with shock, but he quickly found his bearings as he started to prepare. A spectral forest rose up on the small island, using the fallen roots as soil. He also summoned the unique blade of **[Chop]** and had it circle around him, which helped tremendously in dealing with the incessant attacks from roots.

The fat tree seemed infuriated that a bunch of other plants had sprung up in its private domain and the water churned as even more roots rose to rip them apart. But how could normal roots destroy an incorporeal forest? They harmlessly passed straight through, which only angered the tree further. It was the drugged beasts that were forced to take the brunt of the tree's wrath in the end though as Zac was proving a tough nut to crack.

A slight vibration in the air was all the warning Zac got before he was suddenly attacked by a small bird who flashed past him with such speed that it might as well have been a beam of light. Not even the additional sight afforded him by **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** was enough to avoid the strike. A small wound appeared on his right arm, but the small beast was thankfully not powerful enough to cause any more damage than that.

However, it seemed as though the bloodthirsty little swallow wasn't done there, and it veered in a wide arc around the tree before it shot toward him once more.

The emerald leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** appeared to create a nigh-impenetrable wall against the assailant, but it was like a blur completely unfettered by gravity or its own momentum as it made seemingly impossible turns around the leaves and roots alike. Another bloody line was cut open on Zac's cheek, and he swore in annoyance when the autonomous fractal edge missed the bird for the second time.

The bird gave up on the kill after it realized Zac was barely affected at all. It instead shot toward one of the five remaining flowers, but Zac's eyes widened when swallow suddenly just up and exploded just as it landed on the pistil. Was it the pollen or something else?

Zac was unsure what to do in either case. He wanted to loot the flowers without destroying the tree as that would allow him to come back for more treasures in the future. But it looked extremely dangerous to get close. Zac eventually decided to test things out a bit and he threw one of his beast carcasses at the closest branch.

The massive beast shot forward like a wrecking ball and ripped through multiple layers of roots that tried to stop its advance. It only got within a few meters of the flower before three extremely powerful roots appeared though. They were pitch-black compared to the others who were dark brown, and it looked like naturally formed fractals covered their length.

These were the real killing weapons of the tree.

The special roots effortlessly intercepted the carcass that weighed well over a tonne, and it was gored and flung away in an instant. However, Zac noted that the body didn't show any inclination to explode, meaning that the pollen probably only worked on living creatures. He tested things further and shot a few fractal blades at the special roots, but his eyes widened when he couldn't even cut them apart when he imbued [**Chop**] with Fragment of the Axe.

The three roots disappeared the next moment as they blended in with the thousands of normal roots, but Zac wouldn't be tricked now that he knew they existed. It might be hard to spot them with his normal sight, but the roots were almost lit up like beacons to his [**Cosmic Gaze**]. The normal roots contained a respectable amount of Nature-aspected energy, but the three killing roots contained some sort of intense fiery power as well.

The vision of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] also allowed him to keep track of the three roots, and it almost seemed as though the roots were observing him from the distance. However, danger

screamed in his mind the next moment as one of the three shot straight toward him. The leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** superimposed to create an extremely thick layer of protection, and Zac activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** for good measure.

A rippling shockwave spread out the next moment as the root slammed into his defenses with the force of a runaway train. Scores of roots around Zac were ripped apart from the chaotic swirls of energies, and his own defenses didn't fare much better. Over a dozen layers of leaves were ripped apart, and the emerald shield cracked as well.

The shield managed to absorb most of the remaining momentum from the strike, but Zac was still hurled hundreds of meters away from the impact. He groaned in pain from the punch as he fell into the river, but his brows furrowed when he saw a dark-brown sticky substance covered his chest where the root hit him. Only then did he somewhat realize that the tip of the root had been covered in some unknown compound.

Were the special roots venomous like actual snakes?

Thankfully his defenses were powerful enough to prevent the root from drawing blood, which barely prevented Zac from being injected with this unknown liquid. He was filled with both dread and marvel as he looked at the three roots that acted just like beasts. It was amazing that a plant could evolve to such a degree in one short year. Or was this perhaps something that the System had rather planted here as a hidden opportunity?

In either case, it wasn't enough to deter him, and he swam back toward the island, slaughtering any beast that tried to get in his way. It was time to bring out the big guns. He didn't want to use his hidden cards for this fight, but that didn't mean that he couldn't even use his skills. A massive woodcutter's axe appeared the next moment as Zac ran back toward the tree on top of floating carcasses.

Activating **[Deforestation]** was essentially effortless by now, and an extremely sharp wave of destruction rippled out the next moment.

Hundreds of roots were cut off and destroyed by that one swing, which once more exposed the bulbous tree within. The three special roots survived though, which didn't really surprise Zac. But cleaning out the normal roots had fulfilled the purpose of the Axe of Felling, and Zac quickly threw out a fat stack of papers the moment he set his foot on the real part of the island.

The whole river shook and a conflagration consumed the tree crown a second later, with a plume of flames rising over fifty meters into the air. The explosions came from a stack of over a hundred low-tiered fire talismans he activated as one, and it was Zac's best idea to disperse the barely visible pollen that had spread all over the area.

He figured that the flames would be able to clear out the toxin in the air, but he was worried that his Infernal Axe would not only destroy the pollen but even the tree itself. A bunch of low-tiered talismans shouldn't be able to harm a tree with this strong vitality though, making them a better tool for this purpose. And if the tree was destroyed by something like this, it couldn't have been anything precious anyway.

Nothing ventured nothing gained. That was what passed through his mind as Zac swallowed a handful of soul-soothing and general antidote pills. He shot toward the closest flower the next moment, and he could breathe out in relief when he didn't sense anything odd even after appearing right in front of it. Either the dangers of the pollen had been dealt with, or his body was simply strong enough to withstand it.

A few furious swings later a second flower had entered his Cosmos Sack, and he was already moving toward the next. The Axe of Felling had contained a large amount of his Fragment of the Axe, and he could still feel how it still was impacting the roots he cut earlier. The surging vitality of the tree tried to forcibly regrow the roots, but Zac was actively resisting using his latest insights into Dao Control. His head hurt, but he refused to let his mental energy be dispersed.

It gave him enough breathing room to continue with his harvest. However, he only managed to pluck the third flower before a weird scene took place. The three special roots

actually assaulted the remaining flowers themselves, stabbing straight into their cores before they absorbed the flower's essence. Only a second passed before the flowers looked withered like they had been left to dry in the sun for weeks.

Cannibalism? Zac thought with wide eyes, and his eyes only got even wider when the roots suddenly doubled in size as their auras exploded with ferocity. He barely had time to think before he was slammed with a force that even exceeded that of the massive Anointed, but Zac wasn't even allowed to be thrown away in peace before he was attacked again.

The three roots had gained a massive spike in power from absorbing the three flowers, but the tree itself looked a bit wan. The normal roots didn't bother him any longer either, but they rather went after the huge number of beasts and dragged them underwater. It looked like it desperately needed some nourishment after losing all six of its treasures in one go.

But Zac was in no state to worry about the tree's situation as he was being harried by those three roots. He had already gotten his hands on the treasure so there was no point in staying here, but the three roots refused to let him leave. They were even a lot faster than he was since they grew in size, and he could just saunter away.

His axe was a blur as he desperately countered the barrage of strikes, but he rapidly gained one wound after another even with his still active [**Nature's Barrier**] picking up some of the slack. This couldn't go on. His Endurance and Vitality was monstrous for an E-Grade human, but how could it compare to that of a tree monster? It thankfully lacked the power to unleash a killing blow, but it was still a hassle to deal with.

It was a shame, but Zac saw no recourse but to launch the second strike of [**Deforestation**], Infernal Axe, and hope that he didn't accidentally burn up his treasure tree.

The second defensive charge of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] provided enough time to activate the second swing, and a furious wave of cutting flames spread out across the river. It contained the fury of mother nature itself, and the attack incinerated everything from island to shore. Even the special

roots were unable to resist the fiery wrath of Zac's ultimate skill, and they slunk away before they were ripped apart like everything else.

Zac saw his opportunity and flashed away, barely avoiding a large spurt of that odd liquid the roots were covered in. That final gout of venom had actually come from the tree trunk itself like it had opened a valve to shoot out a beam of poison at him. But Zac had already taken out his flying treasure at that point, and he was much too quick to be caught by now.

He found himself on the shore a second later and he became one with the forest the next moment. Zac was certain he could feel the fury of that bloodthirsty tree in the distance, but Zac didn't care as he moved further away. The fight wasn't really finished, but there was no point to kill the goose that lay the golden eggs.

Three flowers were reabsorbed by the tree itself, but getting at least half of them was decent enough. Better yet, he had managed to do so without permanently harming the tree and without using any of his cheats. Zac marked down the spot on his private map before he moved on, looking for other opportunities in the core region of the Swamps.

Zac found a lot of precious herbs, but he also found himself in a constant struggle. He was actually assaulted by the hornets twice over the following day, and Zac finally couldn't take it any longer. He spent half a day looking for their hive before he mounted an assault on the small mountain. After thirty minutes of all-out carnage did he find himself in the depths of the hive.

There was a shocking monstrosity in the heart of the cave, a queen whose only job was to birth more soldiers. But it seemed as though the queen was unable to defend herself apart from a mental attack that couldn't harm Zac in the slightest. It reminded him of the queen he fought during the undead level at the tower, though this hornet queen was a lot less evolved for war.

It allowed him to completely ignore the beast and ransack the place for treasures, but the only thing he found was lots of

extremely energy-dense honey. Hornets shouldn't actually be producing honey as far as Zac knew, but perhaps these things were rather bees that had mutated into predators from the Integration. In either case, the stuff was chock-full of Cosmic Energy, especially the Royal Jelly he found next to the queen.

It contained far more energy than even E-Grade Nexus Crystals, and Zac actually gained a level in his human form just from eating a fifth of the Royal Jelly. It pushed him to level 83 in his human shape as well, catching up to his Draugr side. He quickly put the ten free points into Dexterity, just like he had with all other free points in the E-Grade, before he moved on.

But he didn't find another real treasure like the fatty tree and its flowers even after spending a total of six days in the vast forests. He still felt like the past week was well spent as he made a lot of progress on his meditation, while even upgrading one of his skills. He had even gotten a better understanding of his Luck and how to make the most of it. But it was time to head home.

Zac eventually found a secluded cave and erected a teleportation array. It was a bit wasteful to burn almost 100 million Nexus Coins on a single-use array, but he didn't want to waste a whole day flying back to the settlement at the edge of the Swamp. There were no messages waiting for him when returning, so he immediately headed over to Calrin's place to get an estimate on his gains.

"You're back," Calrin said with curiosity as Zac sat down on a chair in the private meeting room of the Thayer Consortia.

"Did you find anything interesting?"

"You tell me," Zac said as he took out one of the enormous flowers.

Chapter 554: Life, Death, War

“My body is telling me that this should be good stuff, but its pollen also seemed pretty deadly,” Zac said as he placed the flower on the merchant’s inspection table.

“The energies condensed in the pistil are both strong and peculiar, but I don’t recognize this species,” the Sky Gnome said as he looked at the natural treasure with interest. “It should be something good though. How did you find it?”

“It grew on a tree,” Zac said as he described his encounter in the swamp.

“This reminds me of something,” Calrin muttered as he took out one of his massive tomes.

A short moment later a page depicting a similar tree to the one on the island appeared.

“It’s a [**Rageroot Oak**], a plant that can match your Tree of Ascension in rarity. It’s lucky you didn’t actually cut it down. Its trunk contains a sap that might even be able to drive you mad,” Calrin read. “The sap and pollen are both valuable and can be continuously extracted. The flowers can take decades to form though.”

Zac felt some cold sweat running down the back when he saw the description. He remembered how something had dripped from those special roots, it turned out to be sap meant to turn him into a madman.

“What’s it good for though? Berserk pills?” Zac asked, not too enthused.

Power never came for free, no matter if you were talking about War Arrays or Berserking Pills. War Arrays would always force you to travel with weaker subordinates, each one of them

a weak link. As for Berserking Pills, they generally had pretty gruesome side-effects. The stronger the effect the worse the drawback would be.

“The pollen can be made into a potent beast lure which can be useful in all sorts of situations. You can both use it for yourself in case you need to refine yourself through battle, or you can use it to unleash a beast tide on your enemies. The sap is indeed a popular ingredient in Berserking Pills that allows warriors to unleash their potential during a battle,” Calrin explained.

“And the flower itself? It should be the greatest treasure,” Zac said.

“There is a core in the center of the flower,” Calrin said. “It’s a natural treasure that works as a Berserking Pill as well.”

“That’s it?” Zac asked with disappointment.

“Don’t underestimate those cores. It will allow an E-Grade warrior to increase their power by one step, and it will not have any major side-effects, just extreme exhaustion afterward. These two combined make it extremely rare and valuable. A pill that gives such a massive boost would carry severe long-term side-effects, or might even lead to death,” Calrin explained.

Zac finally realized that he really had picked up something good this time. He had researched this matter for a bit after getting his hands on the Cyborg Corpse, which could be considered the epitome of a Berserking transformation. One step didn’t refer to level, but stages of cultivation, meaning an Early E-Grade warrior would be able to exhibit the power of a Middle E-Grade warrior with the help of these flowers.

That was almost a doubling in power, and to be able to get such a boost without lasting detriments was amazing. The cyborg might have gone all the way from early E-Grade to Half-step D-Grade, but that also cut the Technocrat’s lifespan down to less than a minute. These flower cores might save his life in the future, turning the tides in a tough battle.

“I also have some wild herbs here as well, see if there’s anything valuable,” Zac added as he threw over a Cosmos Sack.

There, unfortunately, wasn’t anything too impressive, but his six-day haul was still worth over 300 million nexus coins. That was only the immediate value of the herbs he found thanks to **[Forester’s Constitution]**, and not including the mountains of E-Grade carcasses that he had amassed in his Cosmos Sack.

It wasn’t a huge sum for him any longer, but it proved how profitable even normal exploration could be. You needed both the skills to find the plants and the strength to survive the environment though, which disqualified pretty much everyone on Earth apart from a select few. Besides, he had the advantage of being the first explorer, and future generations probably wouldn’t be able to collect such a haul.

But it made him excited for the future. This was the gain from a random forest on his planet. How much wealth could one stand to profit by exploring a newly emerged Mystic Realm in the future, a world that was not only untouched but possibly held extremely rare or even previously unseen herbs?

Zac walked out of the consortia with a sense of excitement, but he didn’t get far before he sensed a powerful presence close-by.

“Hey,” a voice said, and Zac looked over at the shadows with surprise.

“It’s you?” Zac asked. “How do you keep finding me like this?”

“I just need to ask around. It’s not like you’re very circumspect,” Ogras snorted.

“Well, is it done?” Zac asked.

“It’s done,” Ogras nodded as he stepped out into the light, and Zac could feel that the aura of the Demon was a lot more condensed compared to before.

“What level are you now?” Zac asked with curiosity, as it was obvious the demon had gained a substantial amount of Attributes.

“Eighty-three,” Ogras shrugged, his mouth curving slightly upward. “A decent early push.”

“Eighty-three? What the f-,” Zac swore. “How have you already caught up to me? I had to fight multiple life-and-death battles to get here.”

“Node-opening pills work as intended on me since I’m not a primordial beast,” Ogras snorted. “You racked up a premature resistance by eating them by the handful.”

“Well, it’s good that you’re out,” Zac said. “I killed one of the Dominators while you broke through. I can use some back-up soon.”

“Oh? Which one?” Ogras said with surprise. “I thought they had already decided to follow the same strategy as the zealots.”

Zac quickly recapped what had taken place while Ogras was in secluded cultivation.

“Well, it’s good that one of them is dealt with, though it does make me worry a bit that there has been no response. Makes me think they are up to something,” Ogras grunted. “Got anything useful from its body?”

“No, I accidentally broke his Cosmos Sack,” Zac explained with a grimace. “I’ve saved the remains to cleanse of karmic ties later, but I want all three of them first. Oh, but I did get this.”

Zac took out the pitch-black spear the next moment and threw it over to Ogras. The demon caught it effortlessly even though it weighed hundreds of kilos, and the weapon turned to a blur as Ogras started stabbing it into the air.

“It contains some material and insight related to Space,” Ogras muttered with excitement. “It can even enter the shadows! I just need to find a decent Blacksmith to infuse some more shadow-related materials and it will be perfect for me! Are you giving this to me?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to find some way to pay me back later,” Zac smiled. “We both know how valuable this spear is. Some offhanded advice won’t cut it.”

“Fine, I’ll figure something out,” Ogras shrugged as he dripped his blood on the weapon. “Such a good thing.”

“Get ready for the war in three days,” Zac said as he started walking toward the closest teleporter. “We might have to deal with the other two Dominators there.”

“I’ll head out for a day or two to get used to my improved strength,” Ogras said. “But I will arrange things.”

Zac chose to stay behind in Port Atwood while the Demon went away to hone himself through combat, spending his time either in his Soul Strengthening Array or pondering on the Dao. His most recent trips had given him a lot of insights, especially into the Fragment of the Bodhi, and he wanted to incorporate those snippets into his understanding of the Dao as quickly as possible. It wasn’t enough to actually evolve any of the Fragments, but it was a step in the right direction.

The days flew by and the morning of the Challenge quickly arrived. Zac hadn’t even left his Cultivation Cave during the three days, but he had gotten occasional reports from Triv. The ghost had availed himself as a sort of filter to save Zac’s time. Crystals full of reports were sent to his compound daily by Abby and others, and Triv sifted through them to categorize them by importance and urgency.

Of course, the most crucial reports were sealed so that only Zac could see them.

This time Zac didn’t set out to war with just Triv, but there was a whole squad waiting for him. Both Ogras and his two remaining generals were there, as was Joanna with a defensive squad of shield-bearing Valkyries and Emily. Triv was already resting inside his pagoda as well, ready to erect the jammers once final time.

Only his sister was missing from this group of core combatants of Port Atwood, with her being busy dealing with the Mystic Realm. Things were thankfully looking up over at Mystic Island, and Kenzie had indicated that there shouldn’t be any problems with attempting a re-opening in a few days.

“You know why we’re here,” Zac simply said as he looked around. “We’re not going to participate in the war itself. Our only job is to deal with the real threat; the Dominators. There should still be two karmic connections that can lead that man to Earth, but if we manage to destroy them we’ll be safe for a century.”

“What if the insectoids want to deal with those guys by themselves?” Ilvere asked.

“Ignore them,” Zac eventually said after giving it some thought. “This is a matter of survival for our planet. Taking out the Dominators takes precedence over anything else. I’ll just apologize to the Anointed afterward if it comes to that.”

The group nodded in understanding, each of them already well aware of their respective roles. Zac would be the main combatant and Ogras would be back-up, with the rest of the group offering assistance in different ways. Thea would take the same role as Ogras as well if she decided to join them this time as well.

Zac didn’t feel safe with letting anyone else directly fight the Dominators, and he was only confident in those two thanks to their ability to escape if needed. Harbinger had both proven his power and conviction in the previous battle, and he was afraid that even elites like Billy would just find themselves to be cannon fodder in front of their strength.

The group set out just a few minutes later, and they appeared at an array at the foot of a mountain this time. Zac could sense a terrifying aura though, and a breathtaking scene met his eyes when he turned his head.

Millions of Zhix stood armed and ready, an army many times larger than what he had witnessed so far. Not only that, one look was enough to tell that they hadn’t thrown in random people to bolster the ranks. Each and every one was a hardened warrior who had seen battle before. The scene made him sigh with awe but also disappointment.

With an army like this in existence, why did he have to close all those Incursions himself? It was living proof that the thing that made newly integrated planets fail mostly lack of

coordination and sacrificial will. The Zhix could have taken out a large number of Incursions themselves, but they had been paralyzed by their complex relationship with Cosmic Energy.

“Warmaster, you are here,” Rhubat nodded as it walked over. “You brought more people this time?”

“We will stay to the side as promised. I just want to take precautions in case the other two appear today,” Zac explained.

The Grand Anointed slowly nodded in understanding, which Zac also took as a tacit agreement that his people could fight the Dominators in case they showed up.

There wasn't else for them to do, and they set out just a few minutes later. Thea had already appeared before his group did, and it looked like the Anointed already had made their plans and preparations before this.

The vast army traveled for over 6 hours until they reached a secluded basin nestled in between towering mountains. There were no known human settlements within hours according to Thea, which was one of the reasons this location was picked. Another reason was probably that the basin stretched far into the horizon, allowing it to accommodate two massive armies.

Zac didn't have to wait long for them to spot their enemies. An endless black snake was moving toward them from the distance, emerging from a canyon on the other side of the basin. The people in his group frowned when they saw that the enemy army was at least 30% larger than their own, but Zac wasn't as worried.

These people hadn't witnessed the power of the Anointed who had entered the Crusade.

Their group found a small mountain not far from their own backlines. It rose about 200 meters above the ground, which allowed them to be close enough to witness the action without risking being suddenly dragged into it.

“Activate the jammer,” Zac finally said when the two armies had lined up with a kilometer's distance, and Triv adroitly

activated the black pillar.

There was a subdued silence in the millions of Zhix stood ready for war, the War Council was betting everything to secure the future of their race. The Dominators had been a shadow in the collective mind of the Zhix for millennia, and this was their final chance to fulfill the wish of their ancestors to completely cleanse it.

Conversely, if they failed the Zhix would fall. The dominators would seize control, which would be a short hegemony that would last until The Great Redeemer got here to cull the planet.

“So we just stand here?” Ogras muttered with a lazy expression.

“This is the struggle of the Zhix, our presence will only muddy the waters,” Thea said from the side, only sparing the demon a glance before turning back toward the battlefield.

The stalemate only lasted for around ten minutes, before a prolonged note was released from a horn somewhere. The call released the floodgates, and the two armies started rushing toward each other. There were no deft stratagems or tactics employed, but rather just brutal fervor as the armies clashed.

The warriors didn't even seem to utilize their classes or skills, but rather just infused their bodies and traditional weapons with Cosmic Energy. It was a bit like Zac before he figured out how his pathways worked, where he just pushed around the energy in his body to improve his power.

Was this a tacit agreement between the two sides? An oath to deal with their conflict following the ancient precepts?

The armies weren't thick, the rows only having a depth of a hundred warriors or so, but the war stretched all the way to the horizon. There were hundreds of thousands of simultaneous clashes, and even the sky was affected by the collective outburst of killing intent and Cosmic Energy. The whole sky glowed in red as the Zhix fought tooth and nail everything they had, and Zac started to enter a mystic state as he looked on from the mountain top.

“This...!” Zac whispered, his eyes widening.

The others on the mountain looked at him with confusion, but he was no longer in any state to think about that as his aura exploded around him, forcing everyone to move away. His aura wasn't calm or condensed though, but rather a chaotic mess of energies that tried to devour everything around them.

“Death,” he muttered next and order was imposed upon the chaos.

A massive sphere of darkness had been created, and the deathly energies inside it swirled in a vortex much like how his nodes looked. The enormous sphere took up almost half his vision, and perhaps by accident it covered most of the enemy army. Zac didn't know if others could see what he saw, but it didn't matter. His mind was full of pictures flashing by, superimposing themselves over the gory bloodbath beneath him.

People died by the scores every second, and each death seemed to resonate with him. The two opposing armies were like two opposite energies clashing, and something new would be born from the struggle.

“Life,” Zac whispered in a trance, and his aura was split in two.

The growing sphere of death was pushed aside, forced to share space with a vibrant ball of life. Inside it was a power-generating vortex as well, but it flowed in the opposite direction of the sphere of death. The two spheres brought order to the chaos, but they each struggled for dominance.

The space between the two turned into a delimiting line of constant conflict, perfectly mirroring the war of the Zhix. And just like something new would be born out of this carnage, so was something brewing in his own aura. The thing he had been searching for since he started to look for a truth of his own.

“War,” Zac growled, and the world finally clicked in place.

Blood fell like rain under a crimson sky, and a Path was born.

Chapter 555: Trinity

Zac's robes fluttered as his massive aura caused sharp winds to blanket the mountain peak. However, he wasn't in any state to notice the tumultuous state of the mountain he was sitting on. His full attention was split between the magical scene in the air that held the conceptualization of his path, and the all-out struggle below that resonated with him.

The two spheres seemed to hold the powers to both destroy the world and recreate it, but they were still bound and manipulated by the third force in the middle. If the two spheres were represented by the two armies below, then the war itself represented a third force that drew the two opposites toward each other, changing their energies through conflict.

Most of Zac's waking hours over the past months had gone into trying to understand the various moving components that comprised his unique situation, when he wasn't putting out fires left and right. On the most fundamental level, there were his two classes and their corresponding Daos, but that was just one aspect of his cultivation path.

There were also his weaponry and skills, and even Port Atwood. Yrial and his guidance was also an important factor, and his master's own path had been the reason that Zac so arduously tried to form a cycle of Life and Death until giving up during the Tower of Eternity. There was also the issue of the two remnants in his head, and the powerful bloodline he suspected himself to have.

Not everything needed to necessarily be part of some sort of cultivation masterplan, but the more the better. The more factors behind his success he managed to integrate into his path, the better and sturdier it would become. That would become even more important if he actually managed to take the step into Dual Arcane classes in the future.

Moving forward from that point on would be far more complicated, putting huge requirements on one's foundation. Certainly, no piddling E-Grade warriors would be able to fathom a perfected path, but if there contradictions and mistakes were too large, then he might not be able to fix them further down the path.

The problem was that there had been a fundamental barrier to his improvements all this while; deciphering how all his unique points fit together. There was undeniably a theme of Life and Death, but he hadn't really figured out how to fuse that with his axe-work just yet. **[Rapturous Divide]** and **[Blighted Cut]** was a move in the right direction, but gaining scheduled skills couldn't be considered understanding one's cultivation path. He was still making isolated improvements without thinking of the whole, which was starting to become dangerous.

But that finally started to change.

He had completely lost any sense of time or his surroundings on the mountain by this point as his whole being was consumed by his epiphany. The Dao always felt elusive and intangible, but it was so clear to him at this moment. It felt like one breath right now was as effective as hours of silent meditation. He suddenly understood everything with unprecedented clarity. Where he currently was, and where he needed to go.

Zac realized that he had looked at it all wrong until now. He had thought of his cultivation path as one of duality, where life and death were the main components. He had two races and two classes and even two remnants to match them. However, there were also triplets in the mix.

He had three sets of Daos, each distinct and unique, and he could produce three different 'Sparks' from the remnants based on his Daos. However, he had been stuck in a mental trap even after discarding a cyclic path and the original purpose of **[Cyclic Strike]**. He had still seen his future path as one of duality, even if it wasn't one of skill and balance but rather force.

But Life and Death weren't the concepts that defined him or his rise after the Integration. It was his struggle.

His path was not one of Cyclic Dominance that used skilled control to seamlessly switch between states and concepts, and neither was it one of Harmonic Equilibrium. His path was one of struggle, where the flames of war would open the path of Life and Death. His path was one of a Defiant Struggle that would pave a bloody path all the way toward the peak.

One year ago, Zac had been stranded in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a hatchet in his hand. Now he was one of the most powerful people in the younger generation in the whole sector, and his name was known across whole galaxies. Was this thanks to his deep insight into Life and Death? Of course not.

The air screamed as [**Verun's Bite**] appeared in his hand, its blackish edge casting a deathly gleam. Zac's eyes turned down to the axe, the weapon which had followed him since the beast waves. His weapon had been a constant through his struggles, but yet it had been relegated to become some sort of delivery-method for his "more advanced" concepts.

But that was completely backward.

His weapon wasn't just a replaceable component, it was the catalyst to everything. Without it, his path was dead in the water, just like the two remnants in his mind who were stuck at an impasse that would only end when one of the two was defeated.

Zac's eyes flashed as he remembered the Stele and the vision it brought. The ancient plaque carried the essence of a primordial concept as it soared through space in search of new generals. It pushed the idea that without struggle there would be nothing. A universe could be born, only to never flourish. It would remain lifeless and slowly die to entropy over the countless eons if there was no catalyst for change and improvement.

It wasn't a duality he was looking to create, but a trinity with the axe in the center. The axe contained his struggle, his determination, and his undying will, and those things could

even influence life and death itself as long as he became powerful enough. It would be the catalyst, the seed for change.

In the case of the sparks, 'War' also represented his personal control. He had seen how things went once already when he excluded his Fragment of the Axe to create the Chaos Pattern. He had immediately lost control and conjured the System itself. He was just a cog rather than someone in control, and it was almost a miracle that he was still alive after doing something so foolhardy.

If his current ideas were correct, then the Fragment of the Axe was crucial when touching upon Creation and Oblivion. It was the fragment he was the most skilled with, and it was outside the purview of the two remnants. It was truly his, and he could use this fact to draw in the opposing powers of both his two other Daos or the Remnants, and from there push their struggle to suit his goals by being the general in charge of the war.

That was why the Fragment of the Axe had been needed to create useable sparks. If you took that part out of the equation, you only had Oblivion and Creation to create Chaos, and those two were still exclusively the Heaven's Domain. He was only borrowing a small and simplified corner of the vast power of Oblivion and Creation through the remnants, and there was no point in making it the core of his cultivation path.

That small insight made him realize something else. Was the ultimate spark perhaps not the combination of his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin, but rather a combination of all three of his Daos? Was that the key to activating both the Remnants at the same time? He had essentially become a vessel for the System the last time, but things might be different in the future if he managed to impose his will with the help of his Axe Dao.

Of course, he wasn't ready to test that any time soon. First of all, creating a spark with both remnants and his Fragment of the Axe would require him to somehow modify **[Cyclic Strike]** to allow three simultaneous streams of energy. Besides, he didn't dare something like that before his soul was much stronger.

It still wasn't certain that Zac would need to evolve his Fragment of the Axe into a Branch of War in the future to accommodate his most recent insights. He knew too little about those Daos. Of course, he knew too little about that powerful Dao, so taking that specific decision this early was pointless.

Besides, it wasn't like everything needed to revolve around the remnants. They contained mysterious and incredible power, but the dangers were there to match. For now, he just needed to survive them. Controlling them would come later. Whether they would be truly integrated into his classes or remain as foreign objects that could be used to unleash ultimate strikes was still impossible to decide.

Who knew, as long as he followed this road he might one day become powerful enough to control both Creation and Oblivion by himself without the need of any remnants at all. At that time he might be able to absorb them, or at least discard them as they would be useless by that point.

Because at that point he would become an actual wielder of Creation and Oblivion, perhaps even able to conjure Primordial Chaos.

A sense of danger suddenly cut through his thoughts as the skies themselves rumbled in anger. Zac was forcibly snapped out of his reverie and finally regained the sense of his surroundings, prompting him to look around in confusion. The sky was still colored crimson from one of the suns setting, aptly matching the still ongoing carnage below.

However, there were mountains of Zhix corpses by this point, making Zac realize hours might have passed in his special state. There was no one around him either, and Zac saw that the others in his elite group sat a few hundred meters away from him conversing with low voices or spectating the battle. None of them seemed to have heard the thunder crashing into his ears just now though, as they didn't even glance toward the sky.

The fact that no one else seemed to have heard the thunder didn't relieve him, but it rather filled him with dread. He was

pretty much a demi-god by old-world standards, there was no way he was hearing things wrong.

A flash of lightning stretched across the whole sky the next moment. It was massive, drawing a line as thick as the smaller sun across the stratosphere. It looked to be extremely far off as well, which only magnified just how much lightning that arc contained. It might spear straight through the planet if it landed instead of just passing by Earth through the horizon.

Zac's eyes were wide as he witnessed the spectacle, and even the furious battle down below was utterly forgotten. The bolt looked absolutely terrifying, but it was also extraordinarily beautiful. It felt like they were condensed from the purest Dao, and Zac felt that limitless insights were just out of his reach.

If he could only absorb a little bit...

However, Zac immediately cursed his stray thoughts. An extremely small tendril suddenly appeared just a few thousand meters above him. It looked like a purple piece of string, but Zac didn't hesitate to start running away from his people even if they were hundreds of meters apart. His mind was screaming with horror, and it was not just his Danger Sense.

That purple lightning was far less mysterious and a lot more terrifying when it was bearing down on you. It felt like that seemingly insignificant tendril contained the wrath of the Heavens themselves, and just the thought of getting struck by that thing filled him with horror. His first instinct was that it was the System sending lightning at him a second time, but something told him that might not be the case.

The bolt looked completely different compared to the lightning that the System conjured in the Tower of Eternity when he summoned the Chaos Pattern. For one, it was purple instead of blue and gold. Secondly, Zac had been able to sense a sort of presence that time, but now the feeling was completely different.

Before it had felt like a vast and indifferent being had looked down at him from high above, but he couldn't sense a being this time. It was rather like the Dao itself tried to kill him as he sensed a boundless, but inanimate, fury and killing intent in

the bolt. It made him think that it might be less of a tribulation to withstand and more of an assassination attempt to survive.

It was futile. Zac was pushing [**Loamwalker**] to the limit, but it looked as though the tendril was affixed to the space right above his location no matter how far he moved. It snaked its way down with deceptive speed, and Zac barely had time to sit down and erect all his available layers of defenses.

However, some things were the same as during the Tribulation. His skills, talismans, and even Daos seemed utterly incapable of impeding the bolt. The shields cracked and even his soul received a backlash as the thunderbolt struck straight between his eyebrows.

What followed next was a pain even greater than when he jumped into the Cosmic Pond.

Chapter 556: Heaven's Mandate

Pain and pressure threatened to tear Zac's body apart in an instant as it swelled to uncomfortable proportions. However, Zac wasn't the same person as back when he was flooded by Cosmic Water, and he forced himself to remain conscious as he looked for solutions.

Another thing that differed from similar situations was that Zac wasn't exactly being filled up with a terrifying amount of Cosmic Energy as he was in the Cosmic Water or when forming his Duplicity Core in the Dead Zone. Whatever the purple bolt of lightning was made of seemed to be something different.

It would be more apt to call it a messy mix of countless different Daos.

Zac was almost delirious from pain, but he strove to actively combat the lightning bolt as well by utilizing his newest method of controlling his mental energy. Directly defending hadn't worked, so he instead tried to push it out of his body with Fragment of the Bodhi mental energy, essentially doing the opposite of when he completed the quest for **[Blighted Cut]**. However, the mysterious lightning bolt was completely unmoved by Zac's efforts.

The odd and messy heterogeneity that Zac had never encountered before made it extremely hard to combat. His Daos were effective against some parts of the bolt but almost seemed to be making things worse on other parts. He was quickly reduced to passively enduring the lightning as he ground it down by exhausting his mental energy. However, it wasn't enough.

There was simply too much energy inside that bolt. And it was not only that, there were hints of high-tiered concepts beyond Zac's current understanding hidden in the chaotic mix, making it even more precarious to carry it around in his body. Even the remnants seemed subdued in its presence, something he only had witnessed once before, trying to appear inconspicuous rather than railing against its prison due to the chaos.

Zac popped one pill after another into his mouth as he tried one thing after another to weather the storm, and the others had realized something was wrong by now. They rushed closer, but they didn't get too close after Zac arduously shook his head at them. They wouldn't be able to help him this time, but he was starting to despair as the bolt seemed to have no intention to relent in its efforts to rip his body apart. Bloody cracks had spread all over his body already, and a similar situation could be seen in his soul.

But a deep heartbeat suddenly echoed out across the area as **[Void Heart]** thumped.

Nothing Zac had done until now could even be considered a temporary relief against the bolt, but there was actually a change in the lightning that coursed through his body after his Hidden Node activated. Better yet, it didn't seem to be on an isolated part of his body either. The whole bolt was frozen after the first heartbeat. However, Zac also felt a sharp pain in his heart, seemingly a backlash from messing with the purple lightning. It looked like even his omnivorous Hidden Node had problems dealing with this.

The **[Void Heart]** didn't give up after just one try though and another beat, this one even heavier, made his whole body vibrate. This time the foreign lightning didn't just stop, but the Hidden Node actually managed to rip off a small piece of the purple energy in the bolt before it swallowed it whole.

The stabbing pain that followed almost made him black out.

Zac started to worry for real as blood seeped down his mouth. He had only absorbed a few percent of the energy, but the backlash felt almost as dangerous as the lightning itself. He would be dead long before the Node had absorbed it all and

Zac still hadn't found any way for him to control it. Zac was elated that something finally worked, but he was also worried about the implications.

He was pretty sure that this bolt was some sort of Tribulation brought forth by the system. The timing was too spot-on, and what else would be able to conjure that endless bolt in the sky? Perhaps the tribulation came from forming a proper path, or perhaps there was something else behind its emergence.

In either case, it was something that should be sent by the System. It felt extremely risky to try and steal that energy for himself, especially as the pain after the second beat almost knocked him unconscious. What if the System got angry and retaliated?

A third beat and another piece of the bolt was sucked into the vortex in his heart, disappearing into some unknown space of the **[Void Heart]**, and Zac was lying on the ground by this point. The rampaging energies lost their energy once again, freezing in place all over his body. It was extremely lucky as well, as the backlash this time actually did knock him out, though only for a few seconds.

Zac realized he had fallen down on the ground at some time, but he was too tired and in too much pain to sit up. He could only lay sprawled on the ground, panting and fearing for what would come next. Not a scrap of energy had been released back from the Hidden Node either, which was odd by itself.

The Node instead started shaking more and more violently until Zac puked out a huge stream of blood that shot down the mountain and turned into a red mist. It was the trapped purple lightning that had actually managed to escape from his node, damaging it a bit while doing so. It did seem a bit changed though, like he had spit it up mid-digestion.

A fourth beat echoed out but it looked like the purple bolt had enough of Zac's weird bloodline. It actually reabsorbed the regurgitated lightning and fled out of his pores, its tendrils seemingly destroying everything in his surroundings out of frustration. It created a magical scene where the whole

mountain was illuminated in purple, and this time it looked as though the lightning was visible by everyone.

The bolt in the sky disappeared the next moment after emitting a final burst of fury and murderousness. Zac looked like he had just lost ten battles in a row, but the lightning didn't get away completely unscathed either. The Hidden Node had actually managed to reabsorb a small part of the escaped energy before it left his body.

Zac weakly opened his eyes to see the group staying some distance away, seemingly afraid to approach without his go-ahead.

“Are you okay? What can we do?” Joanna shouted with worry in her eyes.

“It's over, it should be fine now,” Zac said with a weak voice, but everyone on the mountain could easily hear it as even the weakest among them were late F-Grade warriors by now.

The Valkyries and Triv immediately rushed over while Ogras and Thea maintained the distance as they vigilantly looked at the surroundings. Zac snorted as he knew that the demon was simply afraid of getting hit by some surprise lightning. The Valkyries immediately started to clean his wounds as they erected a series of arrays around him, hiding Zac's wretched state from any prying eyes.

The ghost flitted around as it seemed to be observing the air around Zac. It only took a few seconds before Triv's eyes widened as its head snapped toward Zac who was still unable to get on his feet. It had clearly gleaned something from the remnant energy that had melded with the air and disappeared.

“This is Heavenly Lightning! Ancient Tribulation!” Triv said with horror in its eyes as it flew away from Zac once more.

“What did you do to draw the wrath of the heavens?!”

The Valkyries already looked utterly baffled as they looked at Zac's pathetic state and that only intensified when they heard Triv's words.

“Just meditating,” Zac said with a frown, his whole body feeling like it had been incinerated. “Why did I suddenly get

blasted by another Tribulation?”

The ghost seemed to be hesitating about something, its eyes darting toward the Valkyries who were still inside the arrays.

“I have to rest a bit,” Zac simply said. “Wake me up if something changes.”

Zac spent over an hour in an almost fugue state where he completely focused on recuperation. He finally dared to move and circulate his energy a bit, and he was relieved to realize that his body wasn't as grievously wounded as he had feared. There were a huge number of both internal and external wounds, but that wasn't a problem to Zac.

The situation was similar with his soul, but it was thankfully far from fragmenting. His state more resembled having overextended himself in battle, which would be a lot quicker to recover from. Of course, there was always a risk that hidden threats were lurking in his body waiting to explode.

“Thank you for your help. Give me and Triv a moment please,” Zac said with an exhausted voice as he opened his eyes. “No one comes in.”

Joanna nodded and handed him a bottle of water before they exited the layers of arrays. However, they didn't go far, simply choosing to erect a perimeter around him.

“You know something,” Zac evenly said.

“I... Ah...” The ghost said before its voice echoed out in Zac's mind.

It's the punishment of the Heavens, the result of embarking on the Boundless Path, Triv's voice said.

“WHAT?!” Zac exclaimed with shock before he quickly erected a sealing array and dragged the ghost inside. “When did I do something like that? Explain yourself.”

“It is just what I heard,” Triv said. “I might be wrong!”

“Just tell me what you know,” Zac exhorted.

“Before the System, all cultivation went against the Heavens. It was to steal the essence of the Dao to attain immortality. But

the universe wouldn't give in just like that, and it would send tribulation down on the cultivators," Triv sighed. "This all changed with the arrival of the System.

"Cultivation no longer goes against the Heavens; it is now Heaven's mandate. The only tribulations now are the trials that the System has envisioned to weed out the weak and train the strong. It is completely different from how it was before when the Heavens tried to smite those who stole its lifeblood."

"What does this have to do with me?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

"It seems Young Master has gained an insight that is either moving in an unrecognized direction or is outside the Heaven's Mandate altogether. You need to adjust your path to once more enter Heaven's Path."

Zac didn't understand what the ghost was talking about. How had he entered the Boundless Path? However, he suddenly remembered something. The last thing he had thought of before the lightning appeared was to personally take charge of Creation, Oblivion, and the Primordial Chaos itself. He only now realized how ballooned his ego was at that moment. This was something that not even the greatest masters of the universe could control from what he had gathered.

More importantly; if he really took control of the Dao of Chaos he would probably become one of the strongest beings in the universe, perhaps even superior to the previous Apostates. Was this what the system meant by 'Beware the Terminus'? Did it think he was fomenting an insurrection when creating his cultivation path?

It was a bit odd though, there shouldn't be any lack of people dreaming of seizing control of the Dao itself and become the master of the multiverse. In fact, should be one of the most common goals among elite cultivators. Was the System really zapping people left and right for having ambition? It seemed completely contrary to its purpose. Or was there some other reason that the System actually felt threatened and took action? Something unique about him?

In either case, the ghost's words came at a really bad time. The vision he had seen during his epiphany earlier had already turned muddled and indistinct in his mind, but he still remembered how vast it was and how it encompassed his path of cultivation perfectly. How could he just part with it like that? He felt that he would never reach his full potential if he walked away from this.

“And if I don't change my path?” Zac asked with reluctance.

“The further you walk down this path the greater the suppression of the Heavens. Not only will you be forced to withstand the true tribulations of the Heavens, the ones aimed at murder rather than training, but the even System will turn its back from you. I doubt the System would care about an E-Grade or even D-Grade warrior, but if you go too far you might find yourself unable to freely walk in integrated space,” Triv said fearfully. “However...”

“However what?” Zac asked with exhaustion.

He had somewhat understood where Triv was going with his explanation from the very beginning, but he had let them prattle on as he gathered his own thoughts. He truly didn't know what he should do even if the ghost was right. There was still a burning reluctance in his chest as he thought about giving up just as he began, but was it worth it to keep struggling?

He was not out to overthrow the Heavens or anything. He mainly wanted to get stronger so that he could protect those close to him. He had started to enjoy becoming stronger while uncovering the secrets of the universe, but it wasn't the main reason he pushed himself so hard. He would still be an elite even if he gave up on his envisioned path of cultivation, wasn't that enough?

“However, every single one of the Apostates walked the Boundless Path,” Triv eventually said. “As did the Primo.”

Chapter 557: Retaliation

The ghost was racked with pain after divulging information about the Primo, meaning Triv had once again been punished for breaking the laws branded onto its soul. It even turned mostly transparent this time, meaning that it might have been hurt pretty bad. Zac quickly threw a soul mending pill he got from the Undead Kingdom into its incorporeal body as he considered the implications of what Triv said.

Who would have thought that the big-shots who had affected the Multiverse as a whole all stepped onto the Boundless Path? Perhaps that was even the only way to reach the greatest heights. He remembered his short conversation with the mysterious man who had married Be'Zi who had spoken about the broken peaks of the System.

That wasn't to say that the System was useless though. It had drastically increased the average power of the elites of the multiverse, and it had pushed the boundaries of what was possible. The Apostates were ultimately extreme outliers and not an indicator of the general situation of the average cultivator on the Boundless Path.

It did feel a bit like walking the Boundless Path was the way of the elite from what Triv said, but he wasn't sure if it was for him. After all, most people seemed more than happy to stay in Heaven's Path, and it was still possible to reach C-Grade and even greater heights.

Setting the issue of his path aside, there were some things that the Ghost had said that he didn't quite understand.

“Are the System and the ‘Heavens’ not the same thing?” Zac asked. “How can the ‘Heavens’ send Tribulations at me even if that's not how the System operates?”

“That is beyond me, perhaps beyond everyone in this sector. They are one but also separate, that's all I've heard on the

matter. Digging too deep into taboo subjects like this is fraught with dangers as well. Heaven's secrets are not so easily divulged," Triv said as he looked up at the sky with some fear.

"That lightning bolt was extremely frightening. There is no way that normal cultivators would survive more than a second or two. How can whole factions possibly follow this path?" Zac asked next, hoping to find some sort of solution in case the lightning returned.

"I'm no expert on methods of unorthodox cultivation," Triv reiterated. "Though my impression was that both the F-Grade and E-Grades were safe from true Tribulations."

"Guess I'm one lucky turkey then," Zac snorted, but he suddenly thought of something and opened his title screen.

[Terminus – Gaze upon the Terminus.]

It was the first time in a long while he had looked at this odd title that neither appeared in his status screen nor provided any attributes. But Zac guessed that this actually might be the key as to why the Heavens reacted to the creation of his path. If others thoughts about the Primordial Chaos and the Terminus it was just wishful thinking and not something that the Heavens needed to waste its energy on.

But he had not only seen it, but he still lived to tell the tale. Perhaps this made him a real threat in the Heavens' eyes.

"That said," Triv added, though he seemed pretty reluctant at the idea of Zac continuing down this path. "I would guess that they either have methods to hide from or weaken the Tribulation. You would probably have to visit unorthodox space to find out any real details. Taboo subjects are not freely spread in integrated space to avoid any repercussions."

Zac kept talking with the ghost for a while, but it really didn't know much about the subject. As for formalizing a path, it knew even less. It was the same with Ogras and the others. For one, creating a real cultivation path was something that a lot of weaker factions didn't have any organized intelligence on. They just muddled along, often focusing on lower-rarity cultivation to improve their odds.

He still didn't feel he really had a full handle on the situation with his cultivation, but he felt he should just stay the course for the time being.

The thing that muddied the waters was the opposing signals from the System. It seemed to want him to go down this path for some reason, but it also warned him of the 'Terminus'. Was this the name of the real Heavens perhaps? When the System told him to "beware the Terminus", was it perhaps warning him that the Pre-System Heavens would try to stop him?

Zac eventually sighed and shook his head, deciding to focus on the present instead of worrying about these far-off things.

Hopefully, his previous experience was just a result of him wanting to take control of Chaos itself. If that was the case he might be fine as long as he didn't become too greedy. He could simply focus on just Life, Death, and Struggle like he originally planned when pondering his path during the epiphany.

He deactivated the layers of defenses around him after letting Triv clean him up. The ghost had a skill called [**Twilight Scrub**] for this very purpose, true to his class. It was a convenient mix of a shower and a wash that just looked like a dense cloud, but it was unfortunately made for the unliving. The azure haze that cleansed his body of both blood and grime felt like a touch of death itself. It wasn't harmful though, so Zac didn't waste time changing into his Draugr form just to clean up.

The group outside breathed out in relief when they saw that Zac was really fine, at least outwardly.

"What the hell happened to you earlier?" Ogras asked with exasperation. "First you blast your aura at full power, then you sit around with the expression of a simpleton for hours until you suddenly start running like a maniac. And *what* was that lightning?! I've never seen anything like it."

Zac was exhausted, but seeing the demon so frazzled that he started prattling off did improve his mood a bit. It also looked like he didn't recognize the purple lightning as Triv did, once

more proving the advantage of being part of a greater force. Then again, it might just be because Triv was a spirit being who was extremely sensitive to energies as his body was made from it.

“Nothing much, I just had an epiphany,” Zac shrugged, the corner of his mouth tugging slightly upward.

“What’s with that smirk?” Ogras muttered, looking like he had swallowed a fly after hearing that Zac had taken yet another step forward.

Teasing aside, Zac still didn’t really know if he had actually gained anything from his encounter apart from solidifying his path. The Hidden Node still hadn’t spat out the energy it managed to reabsorb, and Zac started to think that the **[Void Heart]** kept that Tribulation Lightning for itself. That might not be the worst thing though, as it hopefully meant that the node would become stronger.

Zac also asked some questions about what had transpired while he was unconscious or mid-enlightenment, but the others hadn’t really gained anything from witnessing the struggle below. They also hadn’t shared his vision of the two massive spheres splitting the basin in two, and the vortex of struggle in the middle. Zac was relieved to hear it was for his eyes only, as that vision could be considered a core cultivation secret of his, almost on the level of his mutated Duplicity Core.

The shocking lightning field that blasted out from his body earlier had apparently given pause to the bloodshed below, but the war had immediately picked up its pace again as he focused on recuperation. Thankfully it looked like the Dominators really wasn’t around. If they were, then they would definitely have attacked him at his moment of weakness.

He looked down at the battlefield once more. This time he didn’t see the scene as a representation of his cultivation path, but just as the gruesome war that it was. Hours had passed by this point, and the battle had reached its high point.

Over 90% of both sides were actively engaged in battle, with neither side retaining any spare combatants. The last 10% Zhix were roving elite squads that shored up any weaknesses that appeared in the frontlines, or who mounted assaults aimed at taking out leaders or Anointed. And it had worked with things being so chaotic.

It looked like a quarter of the Anointed had fallen by this point, and more joined their ranks by the minutes. They resembled proud lions that were finally harried to death by a vast pack of hyenas. Massive swathes of destruction surrounded every fallen Anointed, and it took hundreds of strikes to finally bring one of the behemoths down.

Of course, the fall of a spiritual leader only led to further slaughter as the hive soldiers of the fallen Anointed turned insane in their desire for revenge.

The number of combatants was almost uncountable, but the ferocity of the war was also unmatched. Zac and his group once more found their spirits subdued by the bloodshed. Only a lunatic would be able to witness this much death without batting an eye. Even Triv looked downcast as he gazed upon the scene below, though his reasons were different than the rest.

“So many children... What a waste. Young master, why not...” Triv whispered by his side.

“I’m not going to raise an army of Zhix undead,” Zac said without hesitation. “You’ve seen it. They cremate their fallen. I neither want nor need an army like this.”

This wasn’t the first time the ghost had brought forth the point of saving the bodies of his enemies to create undead followers. Zac had staunchly refused until now, though he inwardly wasn’t as confident. There were a lot of bodies of his fallen enemies stored in Cosmos Sacks. They had the potential to create a group of elites that might be able to rival all the geniuses in his force.

But the time wasn’t right.

Triv had actually provided a large-scale array that would slowly infuse Miasma into bodies. The field of corpses he appeared on during the climb was one such Array of Awakening as Triv called. The problem was that anyone who was resurrected through that array would automatically be part of the Undead Empire. That's why Triv didn't even get a backlash from providing it. The Undead Empire was more than happy to let others raise more subjects for them.

Perhaps he could revisit the issue if the planet really gained a Life-Death attunement though, and after he had visited Twilight Harbor and gathered intelligence on how unattached undead factions functioned.

Besides, he didn't have the resources to nurture unliving elites at the moment. He did have the **[Corpsebloom Mantra]** he looted from Mhal along with a few more random manuals and skills, but he was never able to unlock the manuals of the Lich King. Even if he managed to awaken a group of undead right now, he would just be wasting their potential.

The war raged on for a few more hours before there were just a few pockets of traitors on one side, with the Zhix War Council having more than enough steam to crush the last resistance in minutes.

Bloodied and ruthless Anointed pushed forward, their ceremonial knives continuously giving the last rites to those led astray, and finally there was just deafening silence as the victors stood over the fallen. Zac looked down at the carnage with mixed emotions until he sighed and stood up. All-in-all they had stayed in this basin for around 8 hours, and Zac was eager to leave this cursed place and its intense stench of blood.

"Looks like it's over," Zac said as he turned to Triv. "You can turn off the jammer."

However, Zac got a sinking feeling when his Communication crystal started vibrating just a few seconds after the black pillar stopped humming.

"Lord Atwood, settlements are under attack!"

Zac inwardly swore as his group gathered around him, looks of worry adorning their faces.

“Attacked? Who? Where?” Zac asked with anger. “Is it Port Atwood again?”

“No, it’s thankfully just settlements on the mainland. We’ve first lost contact with Site 27 less than an hour after you activated the Jammer. Four hours later Bastion disappeared, and just now Site 2,” the voice said on the other side of the crystal.

“Where are you?” Zac asked next, recognizing the owner to be one Sarah, one of the newer Valkyries. “How are you able to contact me?”

“We set out toward your location from the closest town when we lost contact with you. We’ve left relays to keep us updated. But we were unable to enter the mountain range where you are staying, so we could only warn you now. I’m sorry,” Sarah sighed.

“That’s okay. Are you able to get back by yourselves?” Zac asked. “I might need to move quickly.”

“No problem. We’ll be back in Port Atwood in a few hours,” Sarah said without worry.

Zac sighed in relief as he muttered the list of towns with confusion. Those three settlements were nowhere near each other. Site 2 was the provisional name of one of the first Incursions he closed; the time he saved the Ishiate towns from the rockmen. Bastion was the location of another Incursion, but it was given that name as there were large numbers of humans actually living there.

The controlling faction there had been one of the better ones, all things considered, killing few natives and ‘only’ enslaving them to gain a workforce. Finally, Site 27 was one of the last Incursions, one he didn’t actually fight against. It was one of the forces who gave up soon after Zac closed the Undead Incursion, leaving a ghost-town between two secluded peaks behind.

Still, Zac couldn't completely understand why those three had been targeted. They were on different parts of Pangea, and they weren't of critical importance to him at all. None of them were all that easy to access, making it impossible they were random strikes. Either three forces would have to coordinate their efforts or a group that moved extremely quickly between the towns. Judging by the fact they were attacked in sequence, it was more likely it was the latter.

Was it Void's Disciple?

Chapter 558: Showdown

Zac had been dreading a response from Void's Disciple since killing Harbinger, and this might be his opening move. He felt doubly thankful that he had already sent most people back to Port Atwood in case of attack, minimizing loss of life. However, there were still Skeleton Crews stationed at every spot to keep operations going and there had probably been losses.

"Did anyone manage to return from those places?" Zac asked with a sigh.

"Unfortunately, no," the answer came. "There were roughly 20 people stationed in each of those locations to maintain basic operations."

Zac and the others kept asking things through the Crystal, but Sarah didn't know much. They didn't dare to roll out the army as all leaders of Port Atwood were currently away, so they could only look on with dismay as one settlement after another had disappeared from the screen. They had tried to send out a few squads to random settlements to look around, but they had all come back empty-handed.

Various thoughts swirled through Zac's head, but he eventually made his decision. He needed to get going, even if he had to pay the price to erect another teleportation array with his **[Spatial Transfer Array]**. But there was no point in rushing. He wasn't able to reach the three lost settlements in short order anyway, and immediately heading there might allow even more of his towns to be attacked behind his back.

The problem was that he didn't know where this mystery attacker would strike next.

"Anyone who can figure out why these three places were targeted?" Zac asked with a frown.

The Valkyries shook their heads, and Ogras didn't speak up either.

"Metals," Ilvere suddenly said, drawing the gazes of the others.

"What?" Zac asked.

"You know, I've been in charge of taking stock of the bases you've conquered. All three of those places you mentioned have Spiritual Metal deposits of pretty high quality. That's the only thing I can think of," the general said.

"Metals," Zac repeated thoughtfully. "But there shouldn't have been too much extracted, and it either left with the invaders or has been transferred to Port Atwood. I had already sent everyone back as well. It's not like they can extract the whole place in minutes or even hours."

"Either they want to stop you from extracting things as well, perhaps preventing us from properly preparing for the Mystic Realm," Ogras slowly said. "The mines might be ruined. Or they are looking for an exotic piece of metal that might be found somewhere in their depths."

Zac nodded with a frown. Just like Nexus Crystal mines sometimes could produce Attuned Crystals or higher-grade ones, so could metal deposit contains small amounts of extremely valuable materials. It was on his radar to scan all his reserves for such items, but he sorely lacked the manpower for such a task.

He hadn't even fully mapped out his own Crystal Mine as its tunnels stretched kilometer after kilometer below ground, seemingly neverending pathways that kept turning and branching. He still only had an inkling of what all his conquered towns could provide.

The problem was how quickly things had transpired. It should take a few hours to reach those places from any other settlement even if you had some good movement method, and from there you would have to enter the depths to extract that precious ore. Zac would have needed almost a whole day to

travel to those three locations, even if he only gave himself an hour per mine and used the Flying Treasure.

“Do we have other places that fit the description?” he asked.

“There’s just the one,” Ilvere slowly said. “Site 16.”

Zac immediately remembered the place he was referring to. It was the incursion with the birdmen, that one placed on top of a mountain.

“Good. If the last town was lost just a few minutes ago, then we have a few hours if things will progress as before,” Zac muttered. “Traveling to that place will take time even if it’s Void’s Disciple. Stay here, I need to speak to the Zhix.”

The other nodded and Zac descended the mountain, walking straight toward the battlefield a hundred meters per step. The war was over, but a subdued silence stretched across the whole basin. Groups of warriors walked across the fields to retrieve the fallen, but most simply sat down, many with tears streaming down their cheeks.

Those worst off were actually the Anointed, all of them sitting in prayer, tear-streaked blood covering their faces. Even the three great Anointed hadn’t walked out of the war unscathed, and Vanexis had even lost a hand. It went to show how massive groups of weaker cultivators could take out much stronger opponents if they were willing to sacrifice enough lives.

He found Rhubat sitting at the center of the army, and he was relieved to see a bloodied but living Nonet not far away. He had lost track of Nonet during his epiphany, but it appeared that Hive Kundevi thankfully was not one of the Hives targeted by the elite executioner squads.

“Congratulations on your victory,” Zac said as he turned back to Rhubat. “I’m sorry to interrupt, something urgent has come up.”

“This is not a victory, Warmaster,” Rhubat sighed, its enormous face a mask of pain and sorrow. “There are no victors today. We’ve lost half our children this day, yet the war is not over.”

“That is why I’ve come. I won’t be able to stay with you on the way back. Someone has attacked three of my settlements while you fought, it seems the person can move extremely quickly,” Zac said. “I need to go before more of my towns are destroyed.”

“Do you suspect the Dominators?” Rhubat said, and the other Anointed in the vicinity perked up from their desolate states.

“I do,” Zac said. “Void seems to have some method to move about somewhat freely.”

“What are you planning?”

“If it’s really Void I’m thinking we should launch an ambush. We need to hit hard and quick because he’s so slippery,” Zac said. “We have located the next place we believe he’ll target, I’m heading there now.”

“Good, agreed. Vanexis and Raja will oversee the rites,” Rhubat said as the giant got to its feet. “Six councilors will come with me. Any more will likely just be a hindrance this time. Our old methods will not work in this scenario.”

A few of the largest Zhix roused themselves and got to their feet with solemn expressions, joining Zac as they returned up the mountain. Zac wasted no time before he found a hidden cave large enough to house his group plus the Anointed. He erected an illusion array at the door before a pile of materials emerged from his cosmos sack.

His hands turned to a blur next as a crude but functional teleportation array was erected in minutes.

“How is this possible?” Thea muttered with incomprehension as she looked down at the newly created array. “There’s no town for hours. Can you actually create arrays like this?”

“No. At least not that I know of. I was given this ability as a reward when the final incursion was closed,” Zac shrugged. “Perhaps the System knew I would be running around all over. There are some limitations though. Only I can activate it and it is only usable once.”

Zac didn’t explain the other details of his array though, letting them form their own hypotheses. He didn’t even need to take

out the bracelet hidden beneath his bracer for his **[Spatial Gate Array]** to work. He just needed to infuse it with Cosmic Energy and a connection was formed between the bracelet and the array. Zac's best guess was that the bracelet contained some sort of spatial energy, and it infused it into Zac's previously dead array to give it enough power to work just once.

It was intentional that he did things this way. This meant that both the Zhix and the Marshall Clan would know that he could plop down an array at any time, anywhere. Such an ability was pretty scary and would make his force almost unassailable.

Port Atwood and these forces had a harmonious cooperation right now, and this display would hopefully help quash any contrary thoughts while he was off cultivating or looking for resources in the future.

“Can you place one inside the Mystic Realm later?” Thea suddenly asked. “In case we need to send out things or people.”

“Teleportation arrays doesn't work inside Mystic Realms,” Ogras said with a lazy expression. “At least not conventional ones. Something about a different sort of space. Now, let's go before the next Site disappears from the Teleportation Array.”

Zac nodded and the group flashed over, appearing in Site 16 a moment later. Their appearance caused some confusion among the stationed troops, and the confusion only increased when Joanna ordered them back to Port Atwood immediately.

After conferring with the Zhix for a bit they quickly learned that if it really was Void's Disciple that was attacking them, then he should come from the south. An enemy hive was in that direction, and it was one of the closest settlements as well. The problem was whether they should set out from the town, or just sit around here while waiting for someone to show up.

In the end only Zac, Ogras, the Anointed, and Janos stayed. They would form a squad that would patrol the area toward the north. The rest were sent back as well as there simply wasn't enough room on the flying leaf. He was able to increase and decrease its size to some degree, but the Anointed would be

still be packed like sardines. It was clearly not a tool to transport armies, but rather a private treasure for a wealthy scion.

Thea wasn't all too happy about the arrangement, but Zac felt that Janos might be better to bring. They had a lot of fire-power between himself and the others, but Janos provided something unique. If he could trap or at least weaken the Dominators with illusions his value would be extremely high in the battle.

The group flew back and forth at the foot of the mountain, looking for any sign of invaders. However, three hours passed without anything to show for it. Honestly, that was fine by Zac. Only 7 hours had passed since he was sapped by that terrifying Tribulation lightning, and the longer that things dragged on, the more he would be able to recuperate. Certainly, he was in good enough a state to fight, but he wasn't in peak condition.

"Over there," Rhubat suddenly said as it pointed toward the forest. "An odd corruption suddenly appeared in that direction. It might be worth investigating."

Zac nodded and changed course, knowing already that the Zhix were able to sense Cosmic Energy to a far greater degree than humans. A few seconds later he understood what the Anointed was talking about as his **[Cosmic Gaze]** picked up something odd as well. A small spatial disturbance had appeared in the middle of a secluded glade, and it was steadily growing.

Zac landed right in front of it, and he quickly summoned Triv from his pagoda.

"Hide some distance away from here," Zac said as he took out the jammer. "Activate it the moment someone appears."

The ghost nodded and stowed away the jammer, immediately flying into the dense bushes and disappearing from sight.

The Anointed murmured in a mix of shock and disgust when they saw Triv, but they didn't comment on it as their focus was all on the anomaly. They only needed to wait for ten more

seconds before the gate rapidly changed, forming a proper portal, and Zac couldn't help his heartbeat speeding up when he saw a familiar figure emerging the next second.

"It's you after all," Zac said with a frown as he mentally prepared for one of the toughest battles of his life.

Shocking energies started to radiate from the bodies of the Anointed as well, and they glared at the much smaller Zhix that had appeared with seething hatred in their eyes.

"Betrayer, it turns the deeds of your kin wasn't even for yourselves in the end? We hear your kin betrayed the Zhix for an outsider? Why? Power? Power is available for everyone. There is no need to go so far" Rhubat rumbled as a dense killing intent blanketed the field. "You were the Great Sage. You were supposed to help the Zhix move forward, not destroy us."

"And perhaps I would have if the Integration waited for a few generations," Void's Disciple said with a hollow smile before he shot a dark look at Zac. "You killed my son."

"Death is unavoidable in war. Is that why you attacked some random settlements?" Zac retorted.

"Just releasing some tension before the real battle," Void's disciple said as a savage grin spread across his face.

Zac had seen a glimpse of that madness once before, and he quickly activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] and [**Nature's Barrier**].

"Don't worry. There will be a reckoning, but not today," Void's disciple laughed as his face returned to its original form. "You know where our fates will clash. Only one faction will gain the Dimensional Seed."

'Dimensional Seed? That's the name of the treasure?' Zac thought, but he still kept his face neutral.

"That is not up to you betrayer," Rhubat rumbled, and the auras of the seven Anointed exploded out with enough power to even make the nearby trees sway.

Their lifeforce shone like radiant beacons as crude patterns lit up across their bodies. Zac's eyes widened at the sight, guessing that this was the true form of the Crusade. But if they would die in a year just from being in their normal state, how long would they be able to fight like this? And would they even be able to return?

"You lunatics have really entered the Crusade, and you have even learned some new tricks since you embraced the truth of Cosmic Energy. However, it is still just a lamentable corruption of a true path," Void's Disciple said with a shake of his head, and Zac was almost certain he could see some pity in his eyes. "No matter."

"It's active," Triv whispered in his mind, meaning that the jammer was activated.

Zac inwardly nodded. This was an opportunity of sorts. An opportunity to see how Void Disciple's mysterious skills worked, and what they could do to restrain them. He had personally seen Void's Disciple open tears in space twice now, simply disappearing or appearing where he wanted. Such a skill was even more annoying to deal with than his own **[Spatial Gate Array]**. A lot of people had thought long and hard to combat such a skill, and the first idea that was brought forward was the jammer.

It worked on Teleportation Arrays, so why not on normal teleportation?

Four balls actually flew out of Void's Disciple's own shadow the next moment, and each of them exploded and caused intense spatial distortions. Zac recognized the items at a glance as he had used that kind of offensive treasure before. They were not **[Void Balls]**, but rather the same sort of spatial disruption balls he used to block arrays in the Underworld.

Ogras had launched the first blow against the Dominator, and the rest were quick on the uptake. Zac's aura exploded outward as well as determination shone in his eyes. **[Verun's Bite]** was already in his hand and the Spirit Tool keened with bloodlust.

It was time to see whether he or Void's Disciple was the strongest warrior of Earth.

Chapter 559: Void

Hiring, or perhaps it was more accurate to say capturing, Smaug had proven extremely beneficial since Calrin was still unable to procure these types of offensive treasures, let alone more powerful ones like **[Void Balls]**. Void's Disciple frowned and seemed to prepare something to deal with the twisting air around him, but he suddenly got a blank look on his face as Janos fell down on his knees.

The illusionist had actually managed to trap the Dominator in an illusion or something similar, but the power gap between the two was just too great. The effect broke in less than a breath's time, and blood flowed out of Janos' ears and nose from the backlash. Zac frowned when he saw it as he quickly could make some guesses from the way things played out.

Void's Disciple didn't completely block the strike, which meant that he didn't have a top-tier mental protection treasure or skill. For example, Janos was able to break through **[Mental Fortress]** on his human side, but not **[Indomitable]** when Zac was a Draugr. But the fact that the Dominator was able to almost instantly break out of the mental trap meant that he likely had both a lot of Wisdom and an extremely strong mentality.

Then again, the latter was expected considering his identity. Void's Disciple's very existence had been taboo most of his life, yet he had not only taken two disciples, but he had even made a name for himself in Zhix society. He had walked among his enemies for decades, not rousing any suspicion even though everyone was on the look-out for the slightest hint of corruption.

Such a feat shouldn't be possible without an extremely sturdy psyche.

However, Janos' attempt did slow Void's Disciple down long enough for the spatial chaos to envelop him completely before blending into the air and disappearing, which hopefully meant that the Dominator had been a bit restricted. But Zac also didn't dare to put all his hopes on these offensive treasures. They were essentially array breakers that targeted Teleportation Arrays, and there was no telling just how effective they were against a spatial warrior.

Of course, Zac and the Anointed weren't just sitting around either, and a probing fractal blade was already flying toward the Dominator as **[Love's Bond]** had moved to his back. Two chains soundlessly slithered down his back and into the underbrush as they stealthily made their way toward the Zhix as well, while the seven Anointed were directly rushing toward Void's Disciple without any regard for their safety.

The Dominator didn't seem phased by the situation at all though. Their assault mostly seemed to infuriate Void's Disciple, and his visage once more turned into that of a frenzied murderer before it smoothed out again. However, Zac could still see the murder in his eyes as the Dominator stared back at him. A terrifying aura spread out, but he didn't lash out like some sort of berserker. He instead blocked Zac's Axe-infused fractal blade with just the palm of his left hand, and the edge actually shattered without even managing to draw blood.

Zac's eyes widened at the sight, unable to comprehend how he could avoid getting injured at all. The basic skill **[Chop]** couldn't really keep up with the latest improvements of **[Verun's Bite]**, but it still had a terrifying cutting power between the Fragment of the Axe and the skill itself. Even Zac would receive a deep cut if he hit himself with such a swing.

Just how sturdy was this guy?

The movements of Void's Disciple were short and concise, and he gave Zac the impression of a Martial Arts-master who wasted no movement when delivering his strikes. Almost at the same time as he blocked Zac's attack, a parchment scroll appeared in his other hand, and he unfurled it toward the two closest Anointed. Zac first thought it was a huge talisman, but

it was oddly enough just painted black from top to bottom without any inscriptions or fractals at all.

However, a mysterious energy radiated from within the darkness. It was completely different from the darkness Zac conjured with **[Rapturous Divide]** though, and Zac felt he was looking up at the night sky for some reason. His danger sense woke up by the scene too even if he wasn't the target, and he immediately got a bad feeling.

“Watch out!” Zac shouted, but it was too late.

The two had Anointed seemed to sense the threat as well, but they showed no indication of backing down as the darkness of the scroll rippled forward until a star-studded barrier appeared right in front of them. It was like Void's Disciple had summoned a piece of the cosmos itself, and Zac could see both stars and nebulae in the depths of that wall.

A shockingly explosive power streamed into the ceremonial knives they each held, and they actually exploded into metallic shards that shot everywhere. However, a set of new golden energy blades had taken their place, and Zac shuddered when he felt the extremely condensed belief gathered within. It was just like the rune that the cultists had nurtured, only with a different flavor.

Each of them struck at the wall as the runes of their arms lit up, meaning the two were holding nothing back in their desire to break the first line of defenses and opening a path for their allies. But Zac still hadn't expected what happened next as the two actually fell into darkness and disappeared. The night-sky receded back into the scroll in an instant and the next moment both the two Anointed and the darkness was gone.

Zac's eyes were wide in shock. He had seen over a hundred types of defensive barriers during his battles, everything from his emerald leaves to celestial deities appearing to block his strikes. They all worked essentially the same way though, but this was something else entirely. Had Void's Disciple actually created a portal to space? However, that should be impossible, at least from what they had gathered.

Information on the Dao of Space was limited in the Zecia sector, but they had managed to make some deductions from what they managed to find out. First of all, there was no Fragment of Space, meaning that Void's Disciple should be controlling some related subordinate fragment rather than the real thing. Just like Zac was currently in control of the Fragment of the Coffin rather than the Fragment of Death.

Secondly, there should be limits on distance. Zac could only move 100 meters with **[Loamwalker]**, and Ogras a few times that distance if he pushed himself with his shadow warp skill. Void's Disciple was able to move a lot further through his portal skill, but it shouldn't be strong to the point that he could open a gate to outer space. An E-Grade warrior simply didn't have the Cosmic Energy needed to create such a long-distance portal.

You would need at least a D-Grade Hegemon's Cultivator Core to sustain that kind of massive drain.

"It's not teleportation. That scroll is some sort of trapping treasure," Ogras muttered with a frown from the side. "We might be able to get them back out again if we snatch it."

Zac's eyes immediately turned to the scroll in the man's hand, also feeling that it was the most logical conclusion. The Dominator thankfully didn't activate the scroll again, but rather just punched out toward his next target. It was another one of the Anointed, and it roared in defiance as its whole body lit up, conjuring an enormous lance of fire that shot straight toward the much smaller Zhix.

The first looked like a simple training punch, but the air twisted and contracted as some invisible force pushed outward, shattering the beam of flames in instant before slamming into the gargantuan Zhix. Crushing sounds echoed out as the Anointed was shot backward, and Zac didn't know whether the warrior was alive or dead as it flew into the distance.

Rhubat roared in anger when it saw the exchange, and Zac almost fell off his feet when the giant stomped down on the ground with terrifying force. Trees were uprooted and thrown

aside for over a hundred meters in each direction as the ground heaved. But Zac quickly realized that the stomp wasn't just an outburst of fury as he saw dense brownish energies appear in the oddly symmetrical cracks around Rhubat's foot.

It was clearly some sort of Earth-attuned Dao, and a Fragment at that. It looked like height wasn't the only way that Rhubat excelled if it had managed to reach such an accomplishment without either visiting the Tower of Eternity or partaking in opening the Dao Funnel.

Something shot out of the ground where the attuned energies were the densest the next moment, and it had such speed that even Zac only could see a blur as it hurtled toward the Dominator. Void's Disciple seemed ready though, and what looked like a fisherman's net made from black silk appeared in his hands as he stretched it in front of him. A multicolored shimmer enveloped him the next moment, making Zac realize it was some sort of defensive treasure.

The projectile hit the net, and Zac subconsciously held his breath in anticipation to see if the greatest Anointed was enough to harm the most powerful Dominator. Zac could immediately sense that Rhubat's attack held a force many times greater than what Ilvere could produce with his Dao of Momentum, even when using **[Cyclic Strike]** to push his force even further. Not only that, but Zac could also sense that the attack contained a terrifying amount of belief, far greater than what the two energy knives earlier contained.

The air itself seemed to cry before it exploded the instant the net and the projectile collided, but the black threads of the net actually held against the attack. The force in Rhubat's attack had been strong enough to rip apart the air as it shot out of the ground, but it looked like Void's Disciple managed to trap the projectile in one go, forcing it to a stop just a few centimeters away from his chest.

Only then did Zac see what the projectile actually was. It was a perfectly spherical stone that was absolutely covered in extremely dense fractals. It actually reminded Zac of his own Duplicity core, though this stone was brownish grey. It had a diameter of around 30 centimeters but the impression Zac got

from it was that it was as heavy as a mountain. As for whether it was a skill or some sort of treasure, Zac actually had no idea.

It was instilled with a terrifying amount of energy, yet Void's Disciple had somehow managed to block it with the net. But it was not without effort as he had been forced to take two steps back. Zac also noticed a minute tremor in his left hand, proving that he wasn't some invincible monster. The strike might not have been enough to harm him, but it had given a hint to the limits of his strength.

However, Rhubat was actually not done as the energies inside the ball increased exponentially for an instant before it exploded in a terrifying eruption of stone splinters. Almost all of them shot toward Void's Disciple as though they were guided by the huge amount of faith within, but a few flew in Zac's direction as well. His arm turned to a blur as he blocked the three incoming shards with his axe, each of them looking like a 10-centimeter stone nail, and he was shocked at how much force they contained.

Even Zac felt some pain in his wrist after forcibly blocking the three strikes, which was all he needed to know about the power of the seemingly unassuming needles. Massive craters exploded all over the area, and a few sturdy tree trunks were turned to dust in an instant as the nails shot straight through them with the force of a rocket before continuing to wreak even more havoc upon the forest.

Zac was finally hopeful that something had worked against the immensely powerful Dominator. Even he had felt some pressure from three needles, but Void's Disciple had been drowned in over 50 of them at point-blank range while he was clearly the target of the zealous faith-based energy within. The situation was completely obfuscated by the chaotic energies in the air and the massive dust clouds, but Zac's brows furrowed when a wave of danger once more perked up in his mind.

A storm of emerald leaves infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi covered their whole side as Zac also activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. Rhubat reacted almost as quickly as he knelt down and pushed both his hands against the ground,

erecting ten sturdy walls that were covered in motifs of warriors holding different types of shields.

Zac only felt a shudder in the air as his mind screamed, and space split apart the next second. The consecutive walls fell apart like butter, and a terrifying slash almost bisected Rhubat while another councilor lost his legs. The dust and chaotic energies that had blocked Zac's sight was blown away as well, exposing a still-standing Void's Disciple within.

Over a dozen spikes were embedded in his small frame, and his face was covered in blood as he stood panting over twenty meters from his original position. Judging by the deep gouges in the ground he had been unable to contain the strike and had been pushed backward. However, Zac frowned when he sensed that his aura was just as strong and stable as before. As for that invisible cut, it seemed to have been launched by a small, unassuming dagger in his hand. The attack had contained shocking power, but Zac knew it wouldn't impact the Dominator much.

Only a few seconds had passed since Ogras threw the spatial disruption spheres, but over half of the Anointed were already taken out of commission. They had already agreed that the group of Anointed launch the first strike if it really was the Dominators they were up against, but it didn't have the desired effect. They had hoped to at least wound him and make him expose some of his hidden cards.

Or at least anger him to the point that he was less likely to escape in case things turned dire.

But it didn't really feel like Void's Disciple was going all out at all, but rather toying with the far larger targets. The chaos in space seemed to have barely affected him either, as both his offensive and defensive means seemed to carry a hint of space inside. He needed to do something before the Anointed were all killed, but he was still waiting for the right opportunity to burst out one massive strike aimed to kill.

And that opportunity presented itself the next moment as the two chains had finally made their way to their target.

Chapter 560: Pressure

The two chains of **[Love's Bond]** had finally reached their target. However, Void's Disciple, or rather Adcarkas, only snorted as he swung his dagger at the two metallic snakes approaching him. Another invisible attack shot out, and an extremely deep scar appeared in the ground. The cut was laser-sharp, but it exploded as it had created some sort of vacuum, causing dust and stones to shoot in all directions.

The power in the strike was shocking even when the Zhix clearly wasn't going all out, and Zac knew that most weapons would be ruined by such an attack. Then again, **[Love's Bond]** was no normal weapon. Not even Void's Disciple should be able to comprehend the value of the coffin on Zac's back, what kind of unique treasures and materials went into its creation.

White scars appeared on the two chains where Adcarkas struck, but they didn't even crack from the swing. Void's Disciple eyes widened in surprise, as this was the first time in the battle things didn't go exactly his way. The Zhix reacted instantaneously though as he tried to move away, but the two chains gained a burst of speed allowing one to catch his ankle before he got away.

This was exactly what Zac had been waiting for, and huge amounts of his corrosive Dao flooded the two chains as he stomped down into the ground, flashing forward with **[Loamwalker]**.

He didn't actually think that the Dao Fragment would be able to harm the Dominator, but Zac hoped that it would restrict him like it did with Ogras when he tried to meld with the shadows. Even if that didn't work, they were still physically bound to each other. He didn't have access to **[Profane Seal]** in his current form, but this wasn't a bad substitute. There would be no escape, only a brutal melee; just what Zac excelled at.

But Zac had also seen just how powerful Void was, and more surprisingly, just how many treasures he possessed. Something unexpected could happen in a drawn-out fight, so he needed to go hard from the start. Exposing all his ultimate cards this early would spell disaster if he failed, but he knew that he needed to use some of his aces in this fight.

A storm was kicked up as Zac appeared right in front of Void's Disciple, and both himself and his Tool Spirit were radiating a mesmerizing glow. He had activated not only the second rune on his axe, but also [**Hatchetman's Rage**] to push his power to the next level. Doing so essentially put a timer on the fight, but he didn't expect the battle to last very long with the intensity it had until now.

"So you found your courage after all. I might not be allowed to kill you, but I can make you suffer," the dominator said as fury burned in his eyes, and he turned into a blur the next moment as his dagger shot straight toward Zac's kidneys.

Zac quickly pivoted while simultaneously swinging down his axe and [**Verun's Bite**] fell in a vertical swoop toward Adcarkas. Zac also activated [**True Strike**], trying to split the Dominator's attention by making him think someone was attacking him from behind, but the Dominator just snorted in derision at the ploy as he continued his stab. The chains of [**Love's Bond**] also make Void's Disciple's lose his balance, but it was as though Zac was trying to move a mountain with the chain while Void's Disciple stood unmoving like a towering tree.

The dagger barely missed Zac's body, but he still felt a searing pain as a deep wound still opened up somehow, and blood streamed down his left leg. Just dodging that dagger wasn't enough, it had to be covered in some invisible energy. Zac was unfortunately completely incapable of spotting it though. Was it because [**Cosmic Gaze**] was still stuck at Early Proficiency? No matter how much he strained his eyes he hadn't been able to see the attunement of any of the skills Void's Disciple used, only the destruction they caused.

But Zac suddenly felt a pop as the strain on his eyes lessened, and hazy energies appeared around Void's Disciple the next

moment. Zac felt a surge of confidence as he realized that his ocular skill had actually evolved mid-battle. Had he finally found the key to upgrading this skill; spotting invisible energies?

Improving his sight against someone who relied on invisible skills was huge, and it would hopefully allow Zac to gain an advantage. For example, just a first look at his enemy had exposed that the small dagger the Dominator held in his hand was just a decoy. There was also an invisible weapon that was attached to his fist, and Zac suspected that this was the real weapon Void's Disciple relied on.

Zac could only see a translucent outline, but it would appear that the weapon was some sort of bladed glove or a claw, something that a pugilist would use. Two edges stretched out on both sides of his arm, starting halfway down his forearm and ending fifteen centimeters in front of his fist where they joined together into a rounded edge.

It was no wonder he had been cut even if he dodged the knife, as he had been well within reach of the much larger hidden blade. Zac couldn't see how the edge was attached to Void's Disciple's arm at all, making him believe that it might be an energy weapon like the fractal edges of his **[Chop]**.

The wound in Zac's gut was deep, but with his berserking skill active he barely registered it. The pain rather fueled his killing intent, and he growled in fury as he continued his own swing, trying to cut Void's Disciple in two. The Dominator's free hand rose to meet the blade, and Zac finally noticed that something was up with it.

There was a thin film covering the palm, and Zac barely could discern some sort of runes covering it. It turned out that it wasn't just his palm that had been able to block his **[Chop]**, but there was some sort of defensive layer that Zac had been unable to spot until now. Adcarkas was trying to block Zac's attack the same way as before, probably thinking it would damage Zac's morale if his attacks were diverted by a simple palm.

However, a physical swing by a boosted Zac and a fractal edge were two completely different concepts.

A terrifying force slammed into the barely discernible barrier, and any remaining complacency in Void Disciple's face was gone as cracks echoed out from his arm as bones broke. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw the scene, as this had been his goal all along. If he activated something like **[Deforestation]** or **[Raputous Divide]**, then the Dominator would respond in kind. But Void's Disciple was clearly arrogant, using the bare minimum to fend off the assaults thus far, like it was an indignity for him to use proper skills against weaklings.

Zac was hoping to bank on this haughtiness to deliver a devastating blow with the help of the three superimposed boosts of his Dao and two berserking skills. But the Zhix reacted instantaneously and moved his body in a mysterious fashion, and Zac felt the force in his strike being slowly exhausted as the Dominator pushed his hands in a spiral while slowly bending further and further down toward the ground.

"Stellar Convergence," Adcarkas growled as his purple eyes stared into Zac's, and a miniature spiral galaxy had sprung up around them the next moment.

It spread over a hundred meters around the two, and Zac could sense a shocking amount of destructive power in every single one of the stars. The others hurriedly scrambled out of the way, but Zac was caught in the heart of the galaxy, with Void's Disciple being the black hole. Zac frowned at the situation and thought to take a step back to regroup, but his mind immediately screamed of danger.

Zac quickly understood that he would have to withstand the power inside the stars if he wanted to back away, and even he would be bloodied and battered if the hundreds of lights went off simultaneously. He could only push forward, but that was his desire anyway. It seemed as though Void was trying to steal or somehow convert the force in Zac's swing, but he would still be grievously wounded if Zac managed to cut through the defenses before he was done.

It was essentially a race, so he grit his teeth as he tried to break the odd defense that Adcarkas' spinning hands continuously conjured. He could already see that the initial collision had caused fault-lines to appear all over the Dominator's hand on top of the broken bones, and Zac felt that just a little more would be needed to break through. Besides, the stalemate also gave him a chance to maneuver [**Love's Bond**], and the Dominator now had a fetter binding each of his limbs.

A pitch-black beam suddenly shot past straight next to Zac's leg, expertly avoiding the rotating stars all around him. It unerringly flew toward the Dominator's throat as he dealt with Zac's strike. It was Ogras who had already turned into his ultimate form, but he actually had a second set of wings this time. As he pointed his newly acquired spear at the Zhix. He looked like a god of darkness, and multiple beams shot at weak spots of the zhix in short order.

A bloody gash appeared on the Zhix's throat, but it was unfortunately not enough. Ogras' shadowlance simply wasn't strong enough to fatally wound someone like Void's Disciple in one go. However, Ogras was like a mobile turret, continuously shooting out more and more lances as Zac and Void's Disciple were locked in a stalemate where Zac couldn't retreat nor managed to push forward.

His arms were already shaking with strain, but the odd technique that the Zhix was doing kept dissipating the impact, forcing Zac to instill more and more energy into the strike to keep going. Of course, it was just a swing that utilized his physical power and Dao rather than any skills, so Zac could keep going for a good while longer.

Ten shallow gashes appeared in an instant all across the dominator's body thanks to the demon's efforts, most of them centered at weak spots. The other Anointed seemed to be preparing something similar, but it finally looked like Adcarkas had enough as a necklace cracked. A dome that locked everyone except Zac outside appeared in an instant, locking him, Adcarkas, and his swirling galaxy inside.

"Break it!" Zac heard Ogras roar from outside, but the voice was muted like he was extremely far away.

The Anointed had backed off when Rhubat was wounded, but their hulking bodies moved toward the glimmering barrier without hesitation. The runes on their body lit up as they punched on the barrier, seemingly delighted that there was finally something they could do to assist Zac.

Unfortunately, Zac's brief break in his attention to see what was going on proved to be a fatal mistake as a tremendous force surge within the Dominator's body. The palm blocking Zac's swing suddenly disappeared, and Zac couldn't help but lose his balance as he had been pushing with everything he had.

The Dominator had managed slightly twist himself while diffusing Zac's swing, and with Zac's lapse of concentration he had swiveled to the point that his body wasn't even in the trajectory of the swing any longer. The Blade of **[Verun's Bite]** harmlessly ripped apart the air right next to him, only cutting off a small piece of Void Disciple's robes.

Zac knew he was in trouble, and the shield of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** immediately covered him as the emerald leaves completely ensconced him. He was even considering activating the first skill of **[Love's Bond]** to survive, but doing so would force him to transform the Spirit Tool to its shield form, which would free Void's Disciple of his four fetters.

He eventually decided to bet the house on him being able to withstand Void Disciple's attack, at which point he would counter.

Void's Disciple was shockingly fast, and he had somehow transferred the force of Zac's downward swing into a rotating momentum that turned into a mighty roundhouse kick aimed at Zac's side. The kick immediately broke the shield and Zac was thrown away, the pain even cutting through the haze of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

However, while the kick was mighty, it wasn't the real problem.

A series of explosions rocked Zac the next moment as one star after another in the galaxy exploded, each one of them containing the force of an early E-Grade Warriors' full-

powered attack. Zac desperately conjured more and more emerald leaves as they were disintegrated, and the spectral forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** disintegrated before he even landed as all the defensive charges were used up.

But he survived. A few of his ribs were definitely broken and Zac looked like a bloodied corpse, but he was still alive and in fighting condition. The kick had thrown him straight through the galaxy until he hit the barrier from inside, and a coruscating series of explosions had detonated all the stars on this side of the galaxy.

The skill dissipated the next moment, leaving just Zac, Void's Disciple, and the four chains that connected them inside the dome.

Zac spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground, and he shot the Zhix a murderous look as the Cosmic Energy in his body surged. Space split apart the next moment as the massive wooden hand appeared above the dome, but that wasn't it. Zac himself was already rushing back toward Void's Disciple as a fractal blade grew out from his axe, its gleaming edge quickly turning golden.

Void's Disciple laughed as his body transformed. He only grew a head taller, but his body turned pitch black while his eyes became burning suns. His muscles grew in size as well, and he radiated a shocking pressure that made Zac think of the Cyborg. Void's Disciple seemed to have a class that mixed the concepts of space and pugilism, and this ought to be his true fighting form.

It looked like the Dominator was finally ready to show his real cards, but it remained to see whether they were greater than the combined force of both **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Rapturous Divide]**.

Chapter 561: Liar

Void's Disciple emitted a terrifying aura in his changed form, and Zac couldn't help but consider taking one of his newly acquired **[Rageroot Oak Seeds]** to push his power even further. However, he quickly decided against it and refocused on his two attacks.

The seeds belonged to the same category as **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, both being berserking methods. Using multiple such means at the same was the height of foolhardiness as the gain was far from multiplicative, while the dangers were exponential. He was somewhat confident that his uniquely sturdy body would allow him to survive using both at the same time, but that wasn't the only issue. He might even become weaker than his normal strength if the two rampant powers clashed.

That would put the whole group at risk, and the backlash might be so terrifying that he wouldn't be able to use his full power for months. After all, it was important to remember that while his longevity increased as he cultivated, so did the time required for recuperation. It wasn't unheard of for cultivators to enter seclusion for millennia in order to slowly deal with particularly nasty afflictions.

As he saw it, the item was better left for his Draugr side that lacked such abilities on its own. Of course, there was also the issue of secrecy to consider. He didn't want to reveal cards like the seed or his second class unless he felt confident in taking out Adcarkas, and it still felt like he was peeling away one layer of another of his enemy.

His current combo wasn't far from his peak strength though, and he was ready to make this one count. The enormous fractal appeared in the sky as the wooden hand was placed right above Void's Disciple, the pressure caused the Dominator to sink a few centimeters into the ground. However, his back

was still ramrod straight, and he didn't try to extricate himself from either the chains or the pressure of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

He seemed perfectly confident in being able to rebuff whatever Zac could bring fort.

A small branch immediately started to descend from the fractal, as it didn't feel that any of the other punishments would have a particular advantage against the Zhix. The Mountain would have a similar crushing effect, but it didn't benefit from his Fragment of the Bodhi nearly as much as the tree did.

However, the whole area was covered in darkness before the sapling had time to grow into a towering tree. It wasn't Void's Disciple who was conjuring a counter though, but rather Ogras who had drenched the whole area in shadows. A storm of attacks slammed into the Dominator's barrier the next moment as thousands of shadow spears rose out of the shade. The spears didn't contain a large amount of power on their own, but they were innumerable.

Ogras himself was enshrouded in extremely dense power, and he dove from the sky with shocking speed, his spear stabbing straight into the shield with enough force to cause the whole thing to wobble. It wasn't enough to completely break it, but his efforts should no doubt have pushed the barrier a lot closer to running out of steam as it didn't have a source of energy.

Rhubat and his brethren had summoned their enormous sigils as well, and they slammed into the shield from different directions to overtax the defensive shield. The sigils were a lot smaller now that they weren't powered by the combined energy Zhix Armies, but they were still nothing to scoff at as they were powered by lifeforce instead.

The shield shook and heaved, but Zac was shocked to see that it somehow managed to stay intact. Adcarkas' amulet must have been a real peak defensive treasure to withstand such punishment, almost rivaling the ones Zac had lifted from the mentalist's pouch.

Zac still believed it should be a peak E-Grade talisman at best though, even if Void Disciple wasn't restricted like people were in the Tower of Eternity. The reason was simple; activating even a low-quality D-Grade talisman was as taxing as throwing out over a hundred E-Grade talismans. Even Zac would be completely drained of Cosmic Energy before it was half-activated.

So it was with some confidence he instructed the branch to stab straight into the ceiling of the dome, and the barrier actually popped like a soap bubble. The desperate attacks of the others had exhausted the barrier enough to pave the way for Zac, and he intended to make the most of it.

The four chains grew taut as Zac tried to restrict the Zhix as much as possible, but the Dominator still managed to point his left hand toward the sky with a savage grin. Three small vortices appeared behind him the next moment, all of them hovering behind his head like a halo. They didn't look like galaxies though, but rather whirlpools with the core being a bottomless darkness like a black hole.

One of them flew up to Adcarkas' fist, and the vortex grew to over fifty meters diameter in an instant. Zac frowned when a black pillar rose out of it the next moment, rising toward the rapidly growing branch that kept gaining momentum as it pushed downward.

What were the odds that his nemesis had such a similar skill as his own?

The massive pillar collided with the tip of the blooming tree branch, and the clouds in the sky were pushed away from the tremendous shockwave. It was like space itself cried as the two strikes tried to destroy the other, but it looked like neither Void's Disciple nor Zac could claim an advantage. Zac didn't bother about that though as he rushed forward, and he was in front of the Dominator the next moment, both of them shrouded from the sun by the pillar above.

This close Zac actually made a new discovery. It wasn't a black pillar that Void's Disciple had summoned, but it was actually a massive finger over a hundred meters long. Even

more shocking, not even the whole thing had emerged, making Zac wonder just how huge the being to whom the finger belonged was. But the good news was that it seemed as though Void's Disciple needed to match his finger with the skill, forcing him to keep pointing toward the sky.

The enormous branch was infused with the wrath of nature and his own Dao though, so even this massive poke wasn't able to eradicate it. Cracks and explosions kept appearing across the trunk as the finger was infused with whatever Dao the Dominator utilized, but the branch quickly regrew and shot more and more branches into the finger to whittle it down. If **[Nature's Punishment]** actually broke through right now Zac would harm himself as well, but he had a plan for that.

The radiant luster on both the wooden hand and the branch suddenly dimmed as Zac retracted the Fragment of the Bodhi, but his fractal edge lit up like a beacon instead. He had transferred his Dao infusion to his second strike, and the branch was quickly being dismantled as the finger pushed upward. That was fine by Zac though, as **[Nature's Punishment]** was meant to create an opening and restrain the Zhix even further.

A puff of golden clouds swallowed them both as Zac slammed his axe in a downward motion aimed to cut the Zhix from shoulder to hip, but another of the vortices had appeared in front of Void Disciple's free palm. It actually swallowed a good deal of the golden clouds, but Zac still knew he had succeeded as his target was illuminated in a golden sheen. **[Rapturous Divide]** was his only E-Grade skill in this class, and it wasn't as easy to counter.

However, Zac needed to get the second strike in as well, and fast. His skill in the sky was on the verge of falling apart, and Void Disciple's other hand would be freed in a second. He activated **[True Strike]** a second time, pushing all of his killing intent into creating a believable illusion of a fatal attack. The Zhix had impeccable instincts though and ignored the feeling, but both Zac and he were surprised to see a familiar spear stabbing the Dominator from behind.

It was obviously Ogras who had taken the opportunity to launch a hidden strike from the large swathes of shadows that Void's Disciple had created with his finger.

The wound barely drew blood, but Adcarkas briefly lost his concentration from the surprise and pain, and Zac reacted by instinct. His fractal edge bloomed with the sinister power of both the second half or **[Rapturous Divide]** and the Fragment of the Coffin as Zac swung **[Verun's Bite]** with both urgency and force. Void Disciple's eyes widened in alarm and the last vortex started to expand with an explosive speed.

However, it was too late.

The two shrouds had come in contact, and the divide between Heaven and Hell was drawn. A smooth line appeared across Void Disciple's torso before his body fell apart. The spatial divide had completely bisected the Dominator, and the angle should have destroyed lungs, heart, and most of his innards in one go.

Jubilation filled Zac's heart, but his mind suddenly screamed of mortal danger. There was no hesitation as he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**. Ogras, true to form, had already receded into the shadows once more, which was lucky as the three vortices simultaneously imploded. The was a bit similar to when he used his Bronze flash on Harbinger, but not quite as final.

A huge crack in space appeared whey they had fought, swallowing everything from Zac's branch to tons and tons of soil before the scar closed. Zac had no idea where that scar led, but his instincts told him that his odds of survival would have been zero if he had been caught up in that blast.

"Good attempt," a snort echoed out from every direction the next moment though, and Zac's elation was quenched in an instant.

There had been no surge of Cosmic Energy when Zac killed the Dominator!

Void Disciple had appeared once more standing exactly where he stood earlier, or rather in the bottom of the crater he had

created. Unscathed. The fatal wound was gone, and even the fetters of [**Love's Bond**] lay down at the ground covered in cracks. His face wasn't a mask of fury either, but one of ridicule as he stomped down on the ground with a force that matched Rhubat's earlier efforts.

A wail echoed out the next moment as Ogras was somehow forced out of the shadows. The demon desperately tried to escape, but he was punched in his chest with enough force to be thrown over a hundred meters away. A huge amount of blood splashed in every direction until Ogras haplessly fell on the ground. He rolled for over a dozen meters more before he finally lay there, unmoving.

Horror and confusion plagued Zac's mind, but there was no time to see if his companion was alive.

"I have to admit, I underestimated you. It is no disgrace that my son fell to your hands," Adcarkas said as he surveyed the battlefield. "I can't help but wonder what else you have in store. But no matter. My intuition tells me we will have a chance to find out in the future, if you can make it to the heart of the Mystic Realm that is."

A token appeared in his hand the next moment, and he crushed it before Zac had a chance to respond. A bright flash obscured the crater for an instant, and when the light disappeared the Dominator was gone, not leaving a single clue as to where he had disappeared to.

They had failed.

Shock filled Zac's heart, and he flashed over to Ogras' unmoving form instead of trying to find the fleeing Dominator. Not that Zac felt he had any chance of catching up in either case. He didn't have a clue where the Zhix had gone. Even his upgraded [**Cosmic Gaze**] could only see a yellow glow at the spot he crushed the talisman.

It was some sort of escape treasure, but not one dependent on the Dao of Space.

But Zac didn't care about that right now as the demon released a racking cough before he weakly looked around. Zac's eyes

were trained on Ogras though, or rather the enormous hole in his torso where his heart should have been.

“Did we get him?” the demon weakly asked, his voice barely a whisper.

“We got him,” Zac said with red-rimmed eyes.

“What a shitty liar,” Ogras smiled as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 562: Back Again

A deluge of sorrow and self-blame had turned Zac's mind into mush as he stared down at the unmoving form of Ogras. Countless what-ifs swirled in his mind, ways that he could have prevented this from happening. But he still couldn't comprehend how these latest events came to be. He had seen Void's Disciple die, he just knew it wasn't some sort of illusion that he cut the man apart.

However, things had gone out of hand too fast, even if you discounted the Dominator's miraculous recovery by the end. They had scrambled to get back in control since the moment two of the Anointed were swallowed by that scroll, but things had only got worse instead. It wasn't completely unexpected though, they had only learned of the situation less than an hour ago, and there had been no time for proper preparation.

The turbulence in his mind finally gave way to a bleak desolation. He had worked so hard, pushed himself beyond what he thought possible in his efforts to become stronger. Yet the ones he fought for kept falling one after another. First Alea, then Ogras. Would even more of his companions join the two when they set out for the Mystic Realm? The situation was almost as bad with the Anointed. The fight had lasted less than a minute, but Zac didn't doubt that the group of seven had burned a significant portion of their already limited lifespan.

Even more frustratingly, there was nothing he could do to remedy the situation. He still needed to enter the abandoned Research Base, and he still needed to fight Void's Disciple again, along with Inevitability and whoever else proved to be a threat to Earth. They had paid such a huge price just now, but they got almost nothing in return.

However, a sudden change startled Zac out of his self-reproach as the previously unmoving body of Ogras started to shudder and spasm. His skin turned pitch-black the next moment, and

the instantaneously turned into shadows only to be reformed once more. His limbs twitched and kicked as well, but it didn't look like natural movements at all. It was more like a powerful electric current made him twitch uncontrollably.

Zac was aghast as he witnessed the macabre spectacle, but there was also a tinge of hope in the back of his mind.

If there was one thing that the demon excelled at, then it was keeping himself alive by any means. Had he actually found a way to defy death itself and bring himself back, just like Void's Disciple himself? However, Zac's anticipation was soon poisoned with suspicion. A minute passed while the cycle between demon and shadow kept repeating, and Zac could see that something was off.

The energy signatures the demon was emitting were wrong. They felt alien, sinister. Like a devil had taken the opportunity to possess Ogras' body when his own soul left it. However, Zac couldn't bring himself to nip this potential threat in the bud. He could only shake his head in an effort to clear his muddled thoughts, preparing for the worst.

If something really had possessed the demon, then he could only pray it wasn't a strong one as he had already entered his weakened state after using **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

The odd fluctuations finally ended, but Zac's heart was still hammering as he stood vigil in front of the body. He had clearly seen what had the transformations had done. Ogras had cycled between shadow and flesh over and over, but a small change had taken place between each revolution.

The gaping hole in his chest grew a little smaller from each cycle, but not through flesh regrowing like how the Shard of Creation had healed his own mortal wounds. Missing flesh had instead been replaced with congealed shadows, shadows that had regrown the demon's missing organs bit by bit. An indistinct heart had formed from darkness itself, and Zac had felt its beat when it was fully formed.

The only sign of Ogras even being wounded in the end was the copious amount of blood around him, and the fact that the recreated skin on his chest was dark grey. Zac wasn't sure

what to do, but the demon made the decision for him as he suddenly coughed and woke up, his eyes blearily looking around. Zac was relieved to see that Ogras' gaze looked the same, but he still could feel that sinister aura emanating from his body.

“Urh? Ah? I'm alive?” Ogras wheezed with confusion, but Zac wasn't in any state to answer him.

“What's the first thing you ever said to me?” Zac asked as **[Verun's Bite]** materialized in his right hand.

“What?” Ogras sputtered, clearly having some trouble understanding what was going on.

“Answer me,” Zac said, the grip on his axe tightening. “What was the first thing you ever said to me?”

“I said ‘You natives are barbarians, so aggressive.’ You were wearing a dress at the time. Now what the hell is going on?” the demon sighed.

“You're emitting some pretty sinister energies,” Zac said as he relaxed slightly, though not completely.

“Well, I can't seem to move. I need some healing,” Ogras eventually said after a brief pause.

Zac hesitated for a second, but he eventually took out one of his best healing pills and shoved it into Ogras mouth as he infused the demon's body with the Fragment of the Bodhi. Only then did he realize how bad a state the demon was in, even after having reformed the hole in his torso. His spiritual sense couldn't see what was going on in the shadow-part of Ogras' body at all, but countless small scars covered the rest of his insides.

Worse yet, healing them with his Dao Fragment seemed to barely have any effect. The demon wasn't really at any risk of dying as far as Zac could tell, but it would no doubt be a long road of recovery, even provided that the demon's new heart worked as intended.

“What the hell happened at the end?” Ogras asked. “I remember escaping into the shadows when those vortices

destabilized, and then waking up with your ugly face scowling down on me.”

Zac sighed before he sat down himself, and he retold the final events without missing anything while simultaneously trying to gauge the demon’s thoughts. However, the demon didn’t let on anything, he just silently listened to the series of events with a small frown on his face.

“Well, people often say that I am heartless, I guess they were right,” Ogras eventually said with a weak smile, but Zac felt that he could hear some confusion and perhaps even fear in his voice.

“It wasn’t you who did this?” Zac asked. “I thought it might be the skill you got at E-Grade or something.”

“A skill that could allow me to walk away after getting a netherblasted hole in my chest? I wish. This must have been Leech. Can you take off my cast?” the demon said.

Zac nodded and he gingerly took off the metal arm that usually held the congealed shadows. He was ready to blast out with a **[Verun’s Bite]** in case of an ambush, but his brows rose when the cast opened and nothing was there apart from Ogras’ stump. He turned to Ogras, but he saw that the demon wasn’t all that surprised by the disappearance of his shadow tentacle.

“I guess that I can’t call that bast-, I mean little buddy, Leech any longer. How about Spare? If he’s going to turn into spare organs for me in the future,” Ogras grinned, still lying sprawled on the ground.

Zac wryly smiled, but there was still worry in his heart. Ogras seemed to want to pretend it was all under his control, but he had definitely cut it close just now. His pale was completely pallid, and his hand shook noticeably. And who knew what the future ramifications would be for something like this? Getting possessed and having your body turned into a vessel wasn’t unheard of in the multiverse.

“Well, I’m glad you can laugh about this,” Zac snorted as he glanced at the destruction around them.

It looked like Ogras had cheated death this time once more, but the others weren't so lucky. The two unscathed Anointed had just returned with the body of the one who was flung away, and he really had perished from the Dominator's strike. With Void's Disciple having escaped there was probably no chance of saving the ones trapped in the scroll either, if that was even possible in the first case.

It was a poignant reminder of how cheap life was in the multiverse.

"This was such a shitshow," Zac muttered with a shake of his head.

It looked like the universe agreed as a massive explosion erupted far in the distance, in the direction of Site 16.

The displacement had caused more damage to Void Disciple's already harried constitution, and waves of all-consuming pain buffeted him until he finally couldn't take it any longer. The only way for him to withstand the chaotic storm in his mind had been to unleash his might once more, destroying parts of the town around him.

Sweat trailed down his face as he started running, unhesitatingly abandoning his original goal. It was regrettable, but he had already found most of what he needed. The enormous surplus of foul Karma gathered from the Zhix Wars would hopefully be able to substitute what was missing. The notion made him start, and he quickly shook his head to refocus his straying thoughts.

He wasn't in the Mystic Realm right now, he couldn't let his minds wander so freely out here.

Fragment of the Vacuum helped remove the space in front of him, and he pushed himself as quickly as possible to get out of the range of whatever was preventing his **[Cosmic Gate]** from activating.

Void Disciple's mind was filled with reproach as the surroundings flashed past him. To think that a moment of anger could cause such devastating results. He knew that he

should have just left, what could those people have done to prevent it? But seeing the face of his son's murderer had made him lose control. How could he face Harbinger in the afterlife if he didn't exact at least a punishment that was within the bounds of his Master's acceptance?

But the newly integrated sapling had grown into a towering tree, and Void's Disciple knew that he had barely gotten out of the situation alive.

At least he had managed to get back at that wretched demon for using **[Skybreaker]** right in front of him. There had been no energy forthcoming from his strike, but he should at least be crippled from the punch full of spatial tears. Void's Disciple kept moving for another hour until he finally sensed that the hidden dimensions were tranquil once more, and he arduously opened a gate toward the nearest hive.

However, he barely had time to walk through the portal before the pain erupted once more, and Void Disciple helplessly fell over as he desperately clutched his head. The cost of subverting fate wasn't an insignificant one, at least not with the treasure that his Master had provided. The timeline struggled to repair itself, and the wound spreading from his shoulder all the way to the hipbone on the opposite side deepened once more.

Having insight into a corner of space had driven home just how terrifying that final strike of Zachary Atwood was. It combined two opposing Daos to create an endlessly deep rift in space, and not even he would have survived normally. But it was also a testament to the greatness of space, the great delimiter.

The soul-shaking pain continued for a few more minutes until the bleeding finally stopped. The wounds managed to close a bit thanks to him having over 2000 Vitality running at a tremendous efficiency, but he knew that it would keep getting worse almost no matter how high the attribute was. The threads of karma surrounding the human progenitor were too strong, and subverting his deeds was far more difficult than normal.

Transferring all of it to the **[Karmic Subversion Effigy]** was impossible, and the effect would slowly weaken over time, the damage seeping back to him.

He popped a pill into his mouth as he got back on his feet, arduously opening a portal again. He needed to get back into the Mystic Ream, to enter the healing vats they had commandeered. He had been loath to use unknown technology thus far, especially since it required the assistance of those scheming natives, but now he didn't have too much of a choice. He would really end up bisected if he didn't increase his rate of healing.

Of course, the physical wound was just the most immediate concern.

The **[Karmic Subversion Effigy]** was a taboo item, and using something like that would have consequences even when not used against someone so loved by karma as the Super Brother-Man. It was one of his master's more successful experiments into harvesting Karma on a large scale, but it was ultimately a flawed item.

His Master hadn't mentioned anything of the sort in the scriptures he left behind, but Void's Disciple had managed to make a few discoveries over the past centuries. Using it would allow you to live when you should have died, but that life would eventually become a curse. He could already feel the darkness spread in the depths of his mind, and he still hadn't figured out a method to counteract it.

Not yet.

He couldn't stop now. He had a goal to accomplish, and his daughter needed him to be strong for a while longer. The loss of his necklace was a shame, but the **[Scroll of the Depths]** would be able to be activated again as soon as it had absorbed enough energy from the stars. It should be finished well before the doors of the Mystic Realms closed.

Void's Disciple finally reached the hive, and he wordlessly activated the Teleportation Array before disappearing, his brooding aura quenching any questions from his followers. He appeared in a snow-blasted valley a minute later, the spatial

tunnel just a few kilometers away. He entered the Mystic Realm after handing over the scroll to his trusted attendant, and he felt the sense of freedom once more as the darkness transferred him to a shielded subspace. Not even a brush with death and getting cursed could dampen the spirit of liberty after centuries of bondage.

Here he was Adcarkas once more.

Chapter 563: Return

Zac looked in the direction of Site 16 with incredulity. Void's Disciple hadn't fled as expected, but he actually went out of his way to blow up the town even when it was uninhabited. Was there some deeper meaning to his actions, or did he feel that he hadn't caused enough damage to their group before?

Zac personally wasn't really feeling ready for another battle as he had already entered his weakened state. Swapping over to his Draugr form wouldn't help against that, and he would have to use one of his very limited [**Rageroot Oak Seeds**] just to regain his combat strength temporarily. The others looked just as worn-out too, with only two of the Anointed maintaining full combat strength.

But could they just sit still, doing nothing?

"We are willing to set out if you are, Warmaster," Rhubat rumbled as the group of Anointed walked over. "We will ignite our life-force to explode ourselves if need-be."

"... I'm sorry. I can't. I'm in no state to fight him again, and neither are these two," Zac eventually said as he nodded at the two demons.

Janos was sitting still not far away, his eyes closed in a slight frown. He had been knocked unconscious by the backlash, but his breathing was steady and his aura was slowly stabilizing after having meditated for a while. Zac was confident that the illusionist simply needed rest to recover. But he still couldn't assist in another fight in this short a window. His soul might be irrevocably hurt if he did.

"Do not apologize, Warmaster. Without your efforts all seven of us would have fallen," Rhubat said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement. "Sacrificing once life without a chance of victory isn't noble, it's foolishness. Especially now that doing so will empower our enemy."

“The Sage has grown so powerful. I couldn’t sense any corruption even at such close distance,” another of the Anointed said with a forlorn expression. ”Three councilors lost for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” Ogras grunted as he finally managed to get up to a sitting position, though he had to lean against a rock to stay upright. “That asshole was a mystery until now. No one knew anything about him apart from his affiliation and his connection to the Dao of Space. But now we know quite a lot. We can use that next time.”

Zac nodded in agreement. The mission was a failure, but not an abject one. They had gathered a lot of intelligence, and they had exhausted some of Adcarkas’ aces. The scroll seemed very dangerous, but he still only used it once, meaning it was either a one-time thing or had other restrictions. He also shouldn’t have too many peak-grade defensive talismans, as those things simply had no supply on Earth.

Furthermore, now that Zac had calmed down from the heat of the battle he realized something. Void’s Disciple was definitely strong even though he only went all out toward the end, but his power wasn’t insurmountable. Their Attributes shouldn’t be too far from each other judging by the stalemate from their clash, and Zac was probably even ahead in Strength and Endurance.

The cracks of bones had been heard when Zac launched his attacks, and Adcarkas had been slowly pushed down in their deadlock. Part of the reason was that the Dominator was taking the momentum for himself, but part of it was definitely because Zac was simply overpowering him with the help of **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**.

If he could make some improvements and perhaps even awaken a bloodline inside the Mystic Realm, then he would feel confident in clashing once more.

There was however the issue of the Zhix magically surviving getting bisected. It would be extremely difficult to finish off a person who not only was extremely strong but also had such a cheat-like skill. However, something so heaven-defying

shouldn't come without a price. Zac had lost decades of his lifespan because of the Shard of Creation, and who knew what complications Ogras be stuck with from getting his body fused with the shadow-creature.

"Do you understand how he survived?" Zac asked as he turned back to Ogras. "I'm confident that it wasn't an illusion. He was really split apart by my attack. How the hell did he survive that?"

"Not illusion," Janos added from the side without opening his eyes, and Zac felt that he would know if anyone.

"I agree," Ogras nodded. "There are all kinds of odd techniques and treasures in the world, but it shouldn't have been a mirage. I was in the shadows right behind him when it happened, I saw blood rain down toward me, I could see his body splitting. I felt him die. Pretty scary skill of yours, by the way. What's it called?"

"Nevermind that. Do you think it was a skill or a treasure he used?"

"I'm guessing treasure. I haven't heard of E-Grade skills that can subvert life and death like that. I'm guessing that whatever you pulled off in the base-town should be the same?" the demon said, his eyes boring into Zac's.

Zac slightly nodded in acquiescence, knowing that the demon was referring to the time that his chest was blown apart in front of everyone, only to have it instantly regrow with the help of the last remnants of Creation Energy in his body. Zac still hadn't explained how he did that to the demon, not that Ogras had asked until now. He still wouldn't tell Ogras about the Shard of Creation though, for both their sakes.

He had been reminded the hard way of the dangers of dealing with those things earlier today, and he didn't want to bring another tribulation down on the demon's head as well.

"Is that even possible though? Where did he get something like this? He should mostly have stayed in secluded cultivation since the integration, apart from when he set out to cause some

destruction,” Zac said skeptically and turned to the Anointed to see if they knew anything else.

“Don’t look at me, Warmaster,” Rhubat said with embarrassment. “This is beyond our knowledge. The Dominators of old always followed one of three means of battle. Some controlled chains of enslavement. Others caused thousands of casualties with their spears. A few walked the path of pugilism as Adcarkas, rampaging through our ranks with their fists alone. However, there are no records of surviving something like this, and neither of the mystical skills of space we witnessed.”

Zac nodded in understanding. They had already gotten an information package about ancient battles against the Dominators back on the Zhix homeworld. It wasn’t much to go on though, especially as those wars took place around two thousand years ago. The Medhin Royals seemed to have followed the spear heritage as well, but Zac’s best guess was that thousands of years had caused the heritages to diverge.

“You called him the Sage of the Basin earlier,” Zac asked instead, changing the topic. “What did you mean by that? What was his earlier identity?”

Zac didn’t know much about the civilian identity of Void’s Disciple from before. Even the Zhix War Council had only managed to confirm the real identities of the Dominators after Harbinger appeared. Adcarkas and his children had passed completely under the radar until the integration, and pretty much everyone who encountered them after was killed.

But perhaps they could find out some useful information by digging through their past.

“Adcarkas was a great scholar and artisan, to the point that his name was known across the world. He was an expert on all kinds of topics, from painting masterworks to perfecting superior smelting techniques to create stronger metals. The Sage also invented marvelous machines that would have made the lives of our kin easier if there had been time for them to spread and become adapted,” Rhubat explained.

A few of the other Anointed had moved over by this point and added to Rhubat's explanation. He had been a 'wanderer', a traveling Zhix whose Hive had fallen in a war. He had taken up residence in a hive placed in the middle of an enormous basin, where he had mostly stayed to work on his projects. According to general knowledge, he should be around 50 years old, but he could be much older since he appeared out of nowhere.

It sort of sounded like Void's Disciple had been someone like the Zhix World's Leonardo DaVinci, a great mind that could change the course of history. Then again, Zac suspected that Void's Disciple was quite a bit older than what was believed, and a few centuries was enough time to master all kinds of things.

He didn't have any proof on the last guess, but he trusted his intuition. Void's Disciple emitted a similar aura as the Demon Master he had fought during the Tower of Eternity. The aura of an old expert who had perfected his skills and combat techniques to the peak.

"All those treasures though, where did he get them?" Zac muttered.

"He might have made them," Ogras ventured. "At least the weaker ones. Just think about it, he spent decades, possibly centuries, in an unintegrated world with very sparse Cosmic Energy. Cultivation would have to have been extremely slow. He might have built all those things in his search of improving his power in other ways."

Ogras' guess was as good as any theory they could come up with now, and the conversation eventually died out as everyone focused on recuperation. Only when an hour had passed did they begin to stir again, and Adcarkas was probably long gone by now.

"The Crusade will truly move into the hidden world you spoke of after all," Rhubat eventually sighed.

Zac understood the giant's despondency. The Anointed were almost out of time, and who knew how long the visit to the Mystic Realm would last? The Anointed would perhaps never

be able to return to their hives even if they won, provided that the supposed lockdown that Julia mentioned lasted longer than expected. No one would cherish the thought of dying in a foreign world.

“I’ll look for more ways to restrain him until we set out. What will you do next?” Zac asked.

“We need to finish the rites for the fallen,” Rhubat slowly said. “We will return to the Hives for now, but we will follow you into the hidden world.”

“Will you be done with everything in one week?” Zac asked, and he received a nod of confirmation. “Good. We’ll try opening the pathway at that time. I’ll send someone to discuss the details, but I need to focus on getting stronger myself. I’m not sure he’ll back off next time going by how much importance he places on the Spatial Artifact.”

The group set out a few minutes later, and Ogras was able to walk again by the time they reached Site 16, albeit with the assistance of Janos. However, Ogras’ aura was even weaker than a mortal’s, and Zac wondered just how long it would take before he completely recovered.

The destruction of the outpost wasn’t as bad as Zac had feared, but everything within a hundred meters of the mine entrance had been reduced to rubble, including the Teleportation Array. That wasn’t a problem for Zac though as he could simply buy a new one, which made him even more confused as to why Void’s Disciple had done something so pointless.

“We can sense remnants of the corruption,” Rhubat said with some surprise. “We still don’t understand how they managed to hide it, but perhaps he was unable to in his current state. There’s a trail leading east from the epicenter of the attack.”

“Look,” Ogras added as he pointed to the left, and Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw that one of the security cameras were still intact.

Port Atwood was still sorely lacking in personnel, but they had a huge amount of resources that they were able to use to get almost anything from the Marshall Clan. All outposts had been

equipped with old-world security measures to shore up the lack of guards, so Void's Disciple's actions might actually have been caught on film.

They hurried toward a secluded guardhouse, and Zac turned on the monitors while the giants tried to peer inside through the doorway, their bulky frames much too big to fit inside. The latest hours started to flash by on the screen as Zac fast-forwarded the film until there finally was a change.

"It's him," Zac muttered when the familiar form appeared. "He's actually bleeding from the wound!"

There wasn't much else to see on the tape, but it was still good to see that Void Disciple hadn't come out unscathed after all. It broke the illusion of them dealing with someone unkillable. And it also seemed as though he could confirm a suspicion; he was after the mine.

The Dominator had appeared within frame as he moved toward the mine with impressive speed, but he had suddenly stopped and grasped his head. A second later the screen turned to static for a whole minute until the current scene outside appeared on the monitors, with the Dominator gone.

It seemed as though he had been planning on entering the mine, but changed his mind and left eastbound if Rhubat's senses could be trusted.

"A backlash? Something else?" Zac muttered, his eyes glistening.

"Serves him right for killing me," Ogras muttered. "Though I wish he would have looked a bit more wretched than sporting some surface wound."

Zac wryly smiled as he stepped out of the guardhouse and bought a new Teleportation Array. There was just a week left until his sister would rip open the portal to the Mystic Realm once more, not much time for his final preparations.

Chapter 564: Precipice

The following days passed quickly after Zac's group returned to Port Atwood. He sent Ibtep and Joanna with the Anointed to act as liaisons to iron out the logistics of the upcoming mission. As for himself, he had been planning on dealing with all kinds of things to prepare Port Atwood for the Mystic Realm. However, Zac was quickly shown the value of a proper support system as everything was being taken care of better and more efficiently than if he had done it himself.

Triv and Abby were working in tandem to quash all sorts of issues, from designing a proper base that could hold everyone in Port Atwood, to figuring out what sorts of materials they needed to bring into the research base. The general plan was to set up a proper outpost in the garden on the other side of the portal, and then build advance posts as they reached further and further inside the Mystic Realm. This freed up most of Zac's time, allowing him to spend most of his time inside his Cultivation Cave, nursing his wounds while looking for ways to improve his power.

The brush with death had increased his desire to become stronger even further, but time was limited. The best he could come up with was to solidify his gains from the battle while trying to figure out if there was any concrete gain from his epiphany. Unfortunately, no matter how he looked or experimented he knew that he neither gained any affinity to his Daos, nor had he evolved any of them.

He had definitely taken a step in the right direction on the mountain top, but he was still very lacking if he wanted to upgrade any of his Dao Fragments to high mastery. However, he did make one interesting discovery as he searched for clues inside his body. His **[Void Heart]** had turned inert since swallowing the tendril of Tribulation Lightning. It wouldn't activate no matter what he did or what energies he consumed.

Zac noticed the anomaly while dealing with the wounds from the fight. His broken ribs and flesh wounds would heal by themselves thanks to the atmosphere in his cave and his high Vitality, but there were extremely stubborn pieces of foreign Dao lodged in the wounds. Both the exploding stars and Void's Disciple's kick had been infused with Daos, and different ones at that.

The one in the kick was the strongest, and Zac guessed it might even be a High-Tiered Dao. It was completely foreign as well, and not something that he had encountered in any of his other fights. The closest sensation the stubborn Dao before was when he was thrown out of the Technocrat spaceship and found himself swirling in space for a bit. It wasn't surprising considering all of Adcarkas' skills seemed to be related to space.

The wounds from the stars instead contained an energy that made him think of the sun, a fire-pected Dao that was distinctly different from neighboring Daos such as the Seed of Tinder. It wasn't as explosive, but it was still extremely stubborn as it smoldered in his wounds as though it would do so for billions of years. The Fragment of the Star did exist according to Big Blue, though the space octopus had no idea how to form it.

These invasive Daos didn't really affect his combat readiness all too much after his bones had set and flesh healed, but it was still a hidden threat that he needed to deal with. Grinding them down with his own Daos was slow and arduous, which was why he thought of his **[Void Heart]**. If it could swallow tribulation lightning, it could surely eat a little bit of foreign Dao?

The problem was that it didn't act on the alien energies in his body, and he didn't have any control of the Hidden Node either. Since manually activating it was out of the question, he instead thought of another way to activate it. He once more absorbed some miasma as a Human to kickstart the node, but it ended with him being nauseated for 30 minutes until he managed to disperse the chill of death inside his body.

He still didn't know what to do with this information, but he hoped that he would get a huge surge of energy when the node was finally done digesting the purple lightning. Getting a free level or two wouldn't be enough to defeat Void's Disciple, but it was a start.

Ogras had immediately entered seclusion as well when they returned, but the rest of Port Atwood exploded into action as every department worked around the clock to ready everything in time. His sister was one of the busiest people of all as she kept traveling between Mystic Island, Thea's Library, and The Tower of Myriad Dao to gather as much information as she could before trying to crack open the spatial tunnel.

The elites of his army were also recalled from the zombie hunt to prepare and consolidate their gains over the following days, while the non-combatants prepared hundreds of different things that might be needed in the upcoming mission in the Mystic Realm. The settlements that Void's Disciple attacked were recaptured as well, but no one could figure out what Void's Disciple had done in those mines.

The New World Government had sent in over 50 thousand people according to Julia, so there was definitely a use of manpower inside. Zac initially felt a bit reluctant to follow suit, as he had dealt with most threats either alone or with the help of a small group. But he couldn't run around those endless tunnels by himself in search of the Spatial Treasure, so this time he would bring a large chunk of his army. Besides, if it turned out that the excess personnel was superfluous, then he could always send them back at the last minute.

Julia tried to help out by gathering more intelligence from the New World Government, but it was slim pickings. Thomas Fischer had put in place a new set of extremely restrictive protocols to stop any further leaks, and anyone who entered the Mystic Realm had to sign a contract of confidentiality. A System-enforced contract, so there was no chance of shirking the agreement.

Ilvere suggested launching an assault, but Zac decided against it. He was afraid that the New World Government would do something drastic if he appeared at this juncture, like opening

the pathways so that the natives of the Mystic Realm could escape and reach Earth. He couldn't let that happen, he didn't feel confident in leaving Earth exposed to a bunch of E-Grade aliens while he was stuck inside the mystic realm.

It wasn't the end of the world though, as Zac doubted there was much that Thomas Fischer knew that he couldn't figure out by himself in a few days. There was no way that these so-called native allies had given the government too much intelligence on the research base, the New World Government simply wasn't powerful enough to barter with high e-grade elders that might be over a thousand years old.

Kenzie arrived at the Cultivation Cave five days after Zac returned from Site 16, and Zac frowned when he saw her eyes were sunken from chronic sleep deprivation. Triv was with her as well, and the ghost bowed toward Zac before it started sprucing up the place.

"Don't overwork yourself," Zac sighed as he looked at his sister with worry.

"I'll be able to rest as soon as I pack things up here," Kenzie smiled.

"So it's done?" Zac asked with relief.

"It's done," Kenzie said, her smile turning into a grin. "You could start it up right now if you wanted, but it's better if you wait two days. The spatial turbulence grows weaker every day."

"That's amazing, good job," Zac applauded. "Do you need any help here?"

"No, you'll just get in the way. Triv and I can handle this, you go deal with things in Port Atwood instead. Verana has been wanting to talk with you for a while," Kenzie said.

"Fine, I'll get out of your hair," Zac said as he stood up from his prayer mat. "What do the Tal-Eladar want?"

"They want to join us in the Mystic Realm, of course. No one should have told them outright, but it is impossible to keep an expedition of this magnitude secret," Kenzie shrugged.

“Is Ogras out yet?” Zac asked.

He liked having the demon with him when dealing with Clan Tir’Emarel. Ogras couldn’t help himself when he saw the beastmasters, he immediately started to annoy them by ruining their plans out of spite. That usually resulted in a better negotiation position for Zac, which was just what someone like him needed.

“No,” Kenzie said with a shake of his head, her smile turning into a frown. “What happened back then? He doesn’t even answer when I call.”

“Void’s Disciple is just as strong as we feared,” Zac sighed. “None of us got off scot-free. He was wounded, and he might be a bit depressed after taking a loss right after evolving. He’ll be out for the Mystic Realm though.”

Kenzie’s eyes thinned a bit in suspicion, but Zac didn’t want her to know just how close to dying Ogras got. He simply flashed away the next moment and teleported over to the academy to deal with the Tal-Eladar. Zac eventually made a deal with Verana where she would send a squad of 150 experts into the Mystic Realm, focusing on cultivators excelling in scouting and healing.

Tylia was probably still the greatest healer on Earth, and having her join the mission might save a lot of lives. The keen senses of the Tal-Eladar war-beasts might be invaluable as well, so Zac relented on his stance against them for now. However, he did make sure to sign a contract with Verana that the Spatial Artifact and any D-Grade or higher treasures would go to Port Atwood.

They would be given Merit Points for turning them in though. This type of employer-employee contract was pretty common when exploring Mystic Realms, and she wasn’t really surprised at all when Zac brought it up. As for E-Grade resources and lower, it was up to luck. If you found it, it was yours. That was the simplest way of encouraging people to explore the depths of the research base.

The next two days were like a blur, and more and more powerful people appeared in Port Atwood by the minute. First

it was Thea along with a hundred experts and 500 support personnel of the Marshall Alliance. Then came Billy and Nigel, the latter looking less than enthused about entering such a dangerous place. However, Nigel had a rare buffing class similar to Emily's, and he would be able to singlehandedly bolster the defenses of any base.

The Underworld Council provided warriors of all four races as well, along with Gregor and five fellow councilors. The rest would stay to make sure nothing happened to their bases in their absence, just like the majority of the Port Atwood Army. Finally the Zhix arrived, and the appearance of over a hundred hulking Anointed caused quite the commotion among the citizens of Port Atwood.

In fact, a lot of people didn't even know about the existence of the Anointed since they mostly stayed in the hearts of their Hives. It caused quite some chaos, and Zac was forced to send them to Mystic Island early as to not cause a riot. Of course, it was only a day later that Zac and the others joined them.

Everyone had gathered in the central valley of Mystic Island, and Zac couldn't help but marvel as he looked back at the group of over 5000 people behind him. Most of them normal Zhix warriors and the soldiers of Port Atwood, but this was still the greatest army that Earth had ever assembled. This group would probably be able to take out the New World Government in minutes even if he didn't personally get involved.

Zac eventually turned back looked with anticipation at Kenzie and her group of craftsmen as they performed the finishing checks on the array they had drawn around the spatial tunnel. It would block out the turbulence from the Spatial Bomb that the Cultists detonated, allowing the old teleportation array to work once more.

Even Zac couldn't help but feel some butterflies in his stomach as he looked at the still inactive array. There was so much hanging on this expedition. If they won then Earth would finally be free of threats, at least for another 99 years. It would give him and everyone else a breather, an opportunity to solidify their foundations and find their bearings.

Conversely, if they failed, then that was that. The Great Redeemer would come sooner or later, and Earth would be turned into a cultivation resource. Ogras and he had even discussed giving out some of his teleportation tokens beforehand just in case, but he knew it was kind of a moot point.

Coughing up between one and ten billion Nexus Coins for the Nexus Hub activation wasn't something that the average people could endure.

"Sometimes I don't know whether you're my lucky star or an ill omen," sighed echoed out from Zac's side as Ogras appeared out of nowhere. "A normal warrior would be given months to stabilize his foundation and get to understand their limits. I get time for a celebratory drink before I'm thrown at the big boss, and then I'm dragged here before I even have a chance to nurse my wounds."

"You can go on as long a vacation as you want after this is dealt with," Zac snorted.

"See, you say that, but how can that possibly be true while I am living next to a disaster magnet? If you run out of enemies, then the Ruthless Heavens will just conjure one for you," Ogras spat.

"Can't do much about that," Zac smiled before he turned serious again. "How's your situation?"

A shroud of shadows covered the two before Ogras spoke up.

"There's both good and bad news," the demon shrugged. "I won't be able to fight for at least a month, perhaps even longer. There are some complications on top of the wounds."

"Anything I can do to help?" Zac frowned. "I have a lot of pills."

"No, I think that I need to wait this out," Ogras said with a frown, and he hesitated a bit before he kept going. "Spare is redrawing my pathways."

"What?!" Zac blurted. "Is that even possible?"

“Apparently,” the demon grimaced. “I don’t think it’s too bad though. The changes are small, and they seem to be improvements. Even better, my affinity to the Dao of Shadows has taken a huge leap forward. I was a genius before, but now I’m simply a heaven-defying scion.”

Zac only rolled his eyes in response, but he couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy upon hearing about the affinity. Then again, Ogras had literally died to gain this lucky opportunity. And judging by the demon’s face, it wasn’t as simple as he let on. There were definitely dangers that accompanied this sudden windfall.

“Well, it’s good that you’re up and runn-“ Zac responded, but he drifted off when he saw that Kenzie had stood up and waved at him.

Everything was ready.

“Do it,” Zac nodded, his heart rapidly beating as he prepared for disaster.

Chapter 565: Convictions

There was no time to lose now that everything was dealt with. They were already running behind the others who had spent weeks, even months inside the Mystic Realm already, and they needed to catch up.

Kenzie immediately started drawing the final inscriptions that would complete the outer array since Zac had given the go-ahead. The assistants had already moved away just in case, with only Kenzie staying next to the array. The final touches only took a few minutes, and Zac saw the air all around them shudder for a few seconds before it returned to normal.

“It worked!” Kenzie exclaimed a few seconds later as the inner array lit up as well.

“Uh, it did?” Zac asked, feeling there was some lack of payoff.

He had almost expected a massive tear in space to appear, only for Kenzie’s array to beat it back after a herculean effort. Zac obviously wasn’t the only one feeling this way either. Ogras looked at the array with a visible disappointment, and Thea was looking at Kenzie with confusion.

“That’s it,” Kenzie snorted, clearly a bit miffed about everyone’s reactions. “I can add some fireworks to the next array if you want.”

“Just thought there would be some spatial rifts or something,” Zac sheepishly smiled before he refocused. “I’ll go first to make sure it’s safe.”

“I’m coming with, I know the place best after all,” Ogras said. “I’ve also been inside enough to be able to tell if the array works as intended.”

“What? In your condition?” Zac frowned as he asked with a low voice. “What’s your goal? Last time we almost had to drag you through the teleporter.”

“I figure I’m better off on the other side in case this thing breaks down after one use,” Ogras shrugged with a grin. “I’ll just hide in your shadows and reap the rewards.”

“Well, fine,” Zac said as he turned to Thea and the other leaders. “I’ll send a message back through the portal in a minute at most. You can begin the transfer as soon as I’ve done so, provided Kenzie gives the go-ahead.”

Thea looked reluctant at being left behind, but Billy didn’t care in the slightest. Nigel on the other hand looked like he was praying for the thing to fail so that he could stay behind. As for the Zhix, they stoically stood in vigil, their facial expressions unreadable.

“What should we do if this thing breaks after you enter, Warmaster?” Rhubat eventually rumbled. “The enemies of the Zhix are on the other side.”

“If this thing really breaks down after we go through, have Kenzie fix it. If she’s unable to... Enter through the New World Government’s tunnel. Thea can show you the way,” Zac said without hesitation.

This was something he had about before, and he eventually decided to sacrifice the New World Government if it came to that. The survival of Earth was more important than anything else, and they simply didn’t have any other options. He had sent out dozens of squads in search of other tunnels, including to the uncharted continent. But they hadn’t found anything, meaning the New World Government tunnel was the only other one remaining.

Of course, following the Dominators through their own tunnel would have been the best option, but no one had been able to figure out where it was. Void’s Disciple must have tracked down a pathway as secluded as the one on Mystic Island.

“Be careful around the New World Government though. The tunnel would be filled with traps. And be careful as to not let anything dangerous reach Earth.”

“You won’t mind if we oust your kind?” Rhubat asked curiously.

“They’re not my kind,” Zac shrugged. “But try a non-violent approach if possible, no matter if we meet them inside or outside. We’re all part of this planet after all.”

The Anointed nodded in agreement, and Zac stepped onto the array with the demon following close behind. The darkness lasted just an instant until he appeared in a familiar room, a wave of relief washing over him when he could confirm that the array worked just fine. He didn’t even realize that he had been holding his breath as he stepped through, and his hands were clammy as well.

Getting almost killed while teleporting once had undeniably left a shadow in his mind.

“Ah!” a scream echoed out the second Zac appeared, and he spotted a young woman grasping for a spear that stood balanced against the wall. “Intruders! Wait, Lord Atwood?”

“It’s me. Tina, right?” Zac smiled as he recognized the Valkyrie. “I’m sorry it took so long to reopen the entrance. Is everyone okay here?”

Ogras appeared before Tina had a chance to answer, glancing around the building before walking up next to Zac.

“The array seems stable enough,” Ogras muttered after he threw the Valkyrie a glance. “I didn’t notice any differences compared to the last times. Should be fine I think?”

“Good,” Zac nodded as he sent back an information crystal to the other side, telling the others that it worked.

“More people are coming soon, so let’s get out of the way,” Zac said as he led the two out of the Teleportation Building.

The base camp outside looked pretty much the same as the last time Zac visited, except for a couple of new buildings having been added to the mix. The odd lines covered the sky, and the trees created a perimeter around the fields far off in the distance. Finally, there was the barely discernable wall, and Zac’s heartbeat sped up at the thought of what awaited inside.

“Everything seems fine here. Have there been any problems?” Zac said as soon as he could confirm that there were no immediate threats.

“Nothing much has happened here apart from us going a bit stir-crazy,” Tina said as she waved at the other castaways who looked at Zac with relief in their eyes. “We have just explored the vicinity and cultivated. Those worm-things don’t attack as long as five of us travel together. We have encountered something odd though.”

“Odd? What’s going on?” Zac asked as he looked around again, properly this time.

Only then did he realize that Ogras had stopped in his tracks after stepping outside the teleportation building, a deep frown adorning his face. Zac had only been here for a few short visits when he needed to talk with his sister, but he hadn’t actually left the immediate vicinity of the entrance. However, it appeared as though the demon had figured something out.

“This world is growing,” the demon finally blurted out, his eyes wide with shock.

“They are here,” Leviala said, her milky-white eyes opening for the first time in weeks. “The door has been reopened.”

“Sorry for having you do this, child,” Uvek sighed as he hurriedly handed his granddaughter the extract before the backlash kicked in.

She drank the murky texture down with a slight frown, but she didn’t complain about the astringent taste. She never did.

“It’s not more horned beings,” Leviala said. “Well, there are, but there are other races as well. Some I have never seen before.”

“Any humans?” Tictus, the squirrely chief Datamancer, asked with worry in his eyes.

“Yes, most,” Leviala nodded.

The eyes around the table lit up, but Uvek shook his head.

“Things outside are not like in here. Our races will not bring us together. Remember, it is our clan that that needs to stand united, even against other humans,” Uvek said.

The other elders soon remembered themselves and low discussion as to what to do next appeared in the sealed Elder’s

Hall.

“How powerful are they?” Tictus eventually asked.

“I can’t see,” Leviala said with a shake of her head.

“How about...” another elder muttered.

“No! She cannot open the Eyes of Heaven again so soon. She had used her bloodline too much already to keep track of all the changes. It might kill her if we push even further. We need to remember our goal! These outsiders that keep pouring in are after that thing in the center, but what are we after?” Uvek said.

“Freedom,” Tictus muttered.

“Exactly! We need to leave here, but then what?” Uvek said as he looked across the room.

“I have learned some things by speaking with Hekruv Vira of the True Sky faction. They have had ample contact with the outsiders through their terminals. If he is speaking the truth, and I believe he is, then the planet outside has changed, and it will be thrown out into the universe in one hundred years. We need to have a D-Grade warrior before then to protect us, and Leviala is our best hope! She is the first one since the ancestor to awaken [**Heaven’s Eyes**] instead of [**King’s Eyes**] or [**Lord’s Eyes**]. We can’t ruin her potential for short-term benefits!”

“Do not forget Yvian,” the decrepit voice of the second elder spoke up, and Uvek forced himself to nod in acquiescence.

However, his inner thoughts weren’t quite as agreeable. It would be a disaster for Clan Cartava if that impetuous man became the next Patriarch. They had already been captured once due to their unique bloodline, and he knew they needed to keep a low profile as they stepped out into the true universe. But Yvian carried dreams of grandeur, to lead the clan to the peak.

But he didn’t understand that they were just ants in the grand scheme of things. Their ancestral homelands had been like a fortress, and their echelon elders were known across the sector for their prowess. But their sanctuary was reduced to ashes the

moment the ancestor passed away, their elders slaughtered like chickens, proving they were just frogs in the bottom of the well.

Having wealth was a sin if you weren't powerful enough to protect it.

Even then, Yvian bore a deep desire for conquest. Before he had wanted to conquer this accursed cage, but now he had turned his sights to the planet outside. He believed that it was ripe for the picking as the outsiders were pathetically weak according to the True Sky Faction. But Uvek knew better. The real powerhouses hadn't made their moves yet, or they moved in the shadows.

"So what do we do?" Tictus asked.

"The storms are acting up again," Uvek muttered. "And we haven't found any terminals that can reach this new faction."

"The old patterns no longer holds, and some subsystems have completely shut down," Tictus sighed said with a shake of his head. "A unit was caught unaware in Red-04, only three managed to return alive. We can't go to Section 8 at all the moment."

"We left a message where the horned one appeared," Uvek eventually said. "We can't go there now, but we might soon meet in the inner sections."

"What if they're hostile?" the second elder asked with a rasping voice.

"We won't look for trouble, but we will not back away either. We will never be captives again," Uvek said, his eyes burning with determination.

"Never again," the others echoed.

"This is our edge. The outsiders are treating this as a treasure hunt. We are fighting for survival. Our convictions aren't the same."

"He's hurt," Yano whispered, the soulgems studding his head glimmering as his fury instilled them with power. "Another is missing, and the third is in the vat. This is our chance!"

“We can’t,” Helo sighed, his own, far grander, gems instead spreading a soothing blue radiance. “Only three Masons remain, and they are badly wounded as well. And remember, they are not alone. Their armies outnumber us five to one. Those insectoids might be weaker in general, but you saw how they fought. We can’t match that suicidal ferocity. Our kin is not meant for battle like that.”

“But another opportunity like this won’t come again!” Yano spat, though the red glow of his gems had clearly dimmed.

He knew the horror of their new masters better than anyone. He had seen his own parents getting ripped apart by the bare hands of the one called Void’s Disciple, their soulgems being harvested the same way the old controllers did. What had their kin done to deserve a fate such as this? Captured and experimented on for thousands of years, and when they finally saw a chance at freedom, they were slaughtered and enslaved once more.

But Helo wouldn’t give up. Too many had fallen for him to give in to despair now.

“We need to be patient,” Helo eventually said.

“You keep saying that, but our people are dying,” Yano said, tears already streaming down his face. “Besides. If you help Void’s Disciple to create that item... Even if you survive, you’ll be cursed. Heaven’s won’t abide something like this. With the old Masons fallen, only you can lead us now.”

“I will survive. I can’t fall here,” Helo said with determination, the soothing gems flashing a sanguine red for a second before he got a hold of himself. “We must endure for another ten days. At that time the thing will be born. The elders believed that would bring about huge changes to our world, with previously inaccessible parts being forced open.”

“How does that help us?” Yano asked. “Without our Masons, we are not powerful enough to compete for that thing.”

“But we might be able to nudge events in our favor. Perhaps we might even be able to nudge those monsters right off a cliff. The Grand Mason told me something before he

succumbed to his wounds, something that she only learned recently,” Helo said, his voice growing even lower. “The Administrator is alive.”

“What? How is that even possible? The cataclysm back then-“ Yano exclaimed, his gems turning grey out of fear.

“I don’t understand either,” Helo said, his gems shimmering yellow in confusion. “But if these insectoids want the item, they will have to enter the Administrator’s domain. These interlopers are strong, but do you really believe they can survive such an encounter?”

Chapter 566: Lunar Tribe

Hevastes rushed through the forest, his sharp nose all the guidance he needed to avoid his distant, and far less enlightened, cousins. A squad of silent killers followed in tow, ruthlessness gleaming in their eyes. They set out five days ago at the behest of Cervantes to find a new path to the weaklings of the Cartava Clan.

A century ago this would have been considered a suicide mission, a way to discard unwanted members of the tribe. They would most likely perish to the environment, and if they somehow survived they'd still have an impossible mission to complete.

However, things had changed. Hevastes looked up at the distant Skythreads, both excitement and trepidation filling his hearts. He remembered running through these woods just three hundred years ago as a fledgling member of his first hunting squad. The sky had been so much closer then, and the distances weren't so insurmountable. But the world had grown, just as Hevastes himself had.

It almost felt like he would leave part of himself behind when they finally left this place.

They finally reached their target location; a seemingly insignificant corner of the forest where the wall made a slight turn. There were no signs of anything special about this place, apart from a small grate in the Memorysteel close to the ceiling.

A century ago this small vent just had a diameter of ten centimeters, but by now it was over a meter across, effortlessly providing a new point of ingress for their kin. Similar weaknesses were appearing all over the base, with new ones being discovered every week. The sanctums of the Core Sector were still unreachable, meaning it still was impossible to reach

the bloodline pools freely. But it was just a matter of time by now.

Of course, the dangers had increased just like the opportunities had.

“Isolating steps,” Hevastes muttered and one of his subordinates produced a series of spikes, each of them connected to a small dongle.

Hevastes took out his charger and poured some of the harvested Base Power into each spike. He couldn’t help but grimace at the expenditure, especially now that it was so hard to harvest. But times had changed, and there was no point in hoarding things that would be useless in the outer world.

Seeing that the spikes had activated properly he threw them into the wall with pinpoint precision, each of them hitting the wall with half a meter’s distance, all the way up to the grate. The spikes embedded themselves in the Memorysteel as though the wall was made of mud, and a few seconds later the fusion was complete.

The arrays on the had completely dimmed by the time that the spikes had become part of the wall, and Kato didn’t need any prompting as he climbed up along the spikes. He took out a tablet from his backpack as he carved a small groove with his special tool, allowing him to connect to the local systems through a cable.

Hevastes saw the screen light up a second later, and the whole group tensed as they prepared themselves for retaliation. However, the seconds passed without either the wall awakening or the corruption appearing, allowing them to breathe out in relief. It wasn’t that they didn’t trust Kato, he was one of the most skilled Datamancers in the tribe after all. But things had become too unpredictable as of late.

The grate swung up a few seconds later, and Kato jumped down to the others with a relieved look on his eyes. After all, it was usually the Datamancers who got the worst of it in case they were discovered.

“Excellent job. How long?” Hevastes asked.

“Sixteen hours under normal operations,” Kato said before he hesitantly added. “But the risk of anomalies is high.”

“Ten hours. Everyone needs to be back here by that time in case we get split up. Any latecomers will have to return by themselves,” Hevastes eventually decided.

The rest of the squad nodded without hesitation, even though the implication was clear. Returning to the tribe without Hevastes’ source of Base Power was a suicide mission, and they were better off staying in the forest, praying that some other squad would pass by before they were discovered by the beasts.

“Remember the goal. First of all, find a path to the Cartava Clan. Secondly, if an opportunity arises, capture the Grand Elder’s granddaughter. Finding information about the interlopers would be a bonus, but other squads are working on that,” Hevastes said as he looked across the group.

The group of veterans nodded, though they couldn’t hide the confusion from their captain. After all, most of them had worked together for almost two centuries. But they were elite warriors that were content in following orders, which couldn’t be said about the ever-curious Datamancer.

“Is that brat really worth the risk?” Kato hesitantly asked when no one else would speak up. “We have already spent such a large amount of our resources on this one objective.”

“Are you questioning Cervantes’ orders?” Hevastes asked coolly.

“N-No, absolutely not,” Kato hurriedly said with a shake of his head, quickly realizing the folly of questioning the Alpha’s grand nephew. “I just hoped to understand the goal to better complete my mission.”

“Very well. I don’t know all the details either, but my uncle said one thing that might interest you. Leviala Cartava is the key to prolonging our lifespans by many times over. Now tell me, is it worth snatching her?” Hevastes said with a cruel smile.

The eyes of even the veterans in the group widened in shock, before a red tint spread in their eyes. Hevastes knew all too well what they were thinking. The bloodline of their tribe was unmatched, and the only one in this realm solely focused on combat. Those gemlings far on the other side were only useful for creating living treasures, and the True Sky Faction had long lost their way by interbreeding.

Only the Titans and unique specimens were a match to their prowess, but the specimens were long gone while the Titans all perished when the cataclysm turned their sector into the wastelands. If it wasn't for the unique environment, the werewolves would long have been able to dominate this whole realm.

But there was a downside to their power; it took them too long to cultivate. They were part-beast, which had provided them with superior bodies and power. But they still had the much shorter lifespan of humans, making it almost impossible to unleash their full potential before they grew old. But what if their lifespans could be improved upon?

Hevastes could feel it. This was the era of the Lunar Tribe.

“Exactly! This world is expanding!” Tina nodded with an odd face as she looked at Ogras. “It seems impossible, but this whole base seems to be growing like it was a living creature or something. It's already grown around ten percent since we were trapped here.”

“Growing how?” Zac said with confusion.

The rest of the leaders had already arrived through the teleporter by this point, and they all looked at Ogras and Tina like they were crazy. How could a base grow by itself?

“We first noticed it with the keypad that allows us to enter the real base. It was rising higher and higher up in the air, and now it's 30 centimeters further up than before,” Tina said.

“Is it some sort of liquid metal?” Thea asked from the side, but the Valkyries shook their heads in response.

“I honestly feel like it’s some sort of magic rather than something that can be explained rationally. We first assumed that the wall was rising from the ground, but we soon realized that this affects everything except for living things,” Tina explained.

“I thought this place was made for giants, but what if the whole realm started growing around the same time the Integration took place?” Ogras muttered as his eyes scanned the surroundings. “Or perhaps even sooner.”

Zac looked over with confusion before he understood what Ogras was getting at. The demon was the first one to explore the mystic realm, and he had already noted that he believed that this section was built to accommodate some sort of golem or giant species reaching 5-6 meters in height. But what if that wasn’t the case, but rather the result of the place growing?

“A bunch of Cosmic Energy flooded Earth, and some of it was passed into this place?” Zac asked.

“Or that the shock of integration kicked the Dimensional Seed alive,” Ogras shrugged.

“We found out some of the rules by studying the trees,” another Valkyrie interjected. “They are the same as before, but they are now spaced further apart like the ground between them is expanding.”

“Spatial expansion,” Thea said with wonder as she looked around.

“But our people have only been trapped here for a few weeks and it’s grown by ten percent? This base should be thousands of years old, it doesn’t add up,” Joanna countered with a frown as she looked at the valkyries.

“The treasure is awakening,” Zac said. “That is probably speeding up the process if it’s the source.”

“It’s the most likely scenario,” Ogras agreed. “But that means two things if true. First, these changes will probably only increase in severity as the treasure awakens. Second, we are just at the edge of the Mystic realm. The effect might be far worse in the core, the closer we get to the treasure itself. We

already knew this place is huge, but it might have turned into a continent overnight.”

“We have tried mapping the growth rate and it seems as though-,” Tina said, but he forgot herself upon seeing the form of Rhubat breaking through the roof of the teleportation house like some sort of insectoid Godzilla.

“I forgot about those giants in all the excitement,” Ogras looked over with a snort.

Zac sighed and flashed over, and threw away the rubble of the teleportation house, the pieces of the building flying far out into the grassland.

“Amazing. Worlds within worlds,” Rhubat said as it looked around, ignoring the mayhem its appearance had caused.

“This place is extremely ancient, older than both your and our civilizations combined,” Zac said. “There will be a lot of dangers inside, I’ll be counting on you guys.”

“The chief corruptor is still standing, so we will not stop either,” Rhubat agreed and moved out of the way to make room for more Anointed to enter.

“Start setting everything up,” Zac instructed the logistics crew before he flashed back to the core group. “I need some more details from the scientists who have stayed here.”

The Valkyries who had been marooned in the Mystic Realm was not the only citizens caught inside when the cultists attacked. There were also a group of professors that were studying the mystic realm while Zac was busy dealing with other things.

The logistics officers got to work while Zac entered a warehouse to go over things in detail. There were proper meeting rooms as well, but they were too small to house the Anointed, and he wanted them represented.

The scientists seemed extremely uncomfortable by being stuck in a building with not only 5-meter tall giants that stared down at them as though they were snacks, but also with the most powerful people on the former Ladder. But they quickly

gathered their wits and started going over the measurements they had taken since they were stuck.

The biosphere had grown just like Tina and Ogras said, by 12% to be exact. This included everything that could be considered dead, such as stones, the metal walls, and the ground itself. The odd growth also affected organic materials that weren't alive, such as pieces of lumber. The people and the plants were completely unaffected though.

Most of that growth had happened over the last 16 days, and it seemed to be accelerating. As for the process of expansion, it couldn't be explained by science. The first guess of the scientists was that the spatial expansion acted on an atomic level, increasing the distance between molecules in materials. But it was quickly proven to be wrong.

Matter was literally appearing out of nowhere. A piece of lumber would keep growing in volume in this realm but its density would remain constant, meaning that its weight increased. As for where the additional matter came from, the Scientist had no idea. One conjecture was that it was being absorbed from subspace or neighboring dimensions, while some simply believed it to be magic no matter how unscientific that sounded.

“Isn't this a huge opportunity?” Ogras said from the side when he heard the explanation. “Can't we throw out everything of value and it will keep multiplying? What if we get a bunch of extremely valuable materials? Wouldn't we literally be growing money?”

Chapter 567: Expansion

Zac's eyes lit up at the idea, and he could see himself throwing out his mountains of loot and watch them grow. This could be a game-changer for Port Atwood, and he immediately turned toward the scientists with fire in his eyes.

“Unfortunately, no. It doesn't work that way,” a scientist said, but he quickly shrunk back when over ten angry glares were directed his way. “Ahem... That is... This change doesn't seem to affect items with a certain amount of energy. Nexus Crystals won't grow in size, for example, and neither will Spiritual Materials. However, we have only been able to test this on our limited supply of materials in this short while. There might be some materials we can grow this way to great effect.”

Zac couldn't help but feel some disappointment at losing such a good money-making opportunity before it could even start. Being able to grow things like gold and steel might sound amazing, but mortal materials were essentially worthless in the multiverse.

Even Zac could conjure a mountain out of nowhere with **[Nature's Punishment]**, and powerful beings could harvest whole planets with a wave of their hands. Some Mystic Realms also contained shocking amounts of certain elements. You could find a world containing hundreds of billions of tonnes of purest gold, ripe for the taking.

Of course, it was still worth growing some materials since it was free. There was a large demand for construction materials to build and expand the towns of his force, and normal materials were enough to build houses.

Zac already gave up on the idea, but the demon wasn't as easily convinced.

“What about the walls of this place?” Ogras said with a frown. “That metal can’t be something common. I couldn’t even leave a lasting mark when going all out last time I was here.”

“That- We are not sure how to explain the walls, but we have a conjecture?” another scientist explained as she adjusted her glasses. “We believe that the material of the base itself, while extremely high technology, is not spiritual in nature. It is some sort of advanced metallurgy that we don’t understand. Its regenerative properties are in turn powered by an external energy supply.”

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering the Technocrat vessel he visited. It was the same there. The Technocrats seemed to use advanced techniques to somehow drain high-grade materials from their spirituality, while still retaining their strength. It seemed like a waste of time to Zac, but it might be required for the materials to work with the “Dao of Technology”.

“We haven’t been able to prove this though, as we’ve been unable to take samples,” she added.

They asked a few questions more about the mysterious growth, but there was only so much that the scientists had managed to find out. They neither had the tools nor the strength to get to the bottom of things, and most of what they knew was conjecture. Zac guessed that he would find out more as he ventured deeper into the Mystic Realm.

“Have you encountered any living beings?” Zac asked next. “Apart from the worms.”

“No, but the amount of time we spent inside the actual construct is limited. Only three of us managed to get clearance,” Tina said from the side. “We also never left the security door that protects this section, as we were afraid to open it and let the natives inside.”

“It’s good that you took it safe,” Zac nodded before he asked with confusion. “But what do you mean not getting access? That console doesn’t give access to everyone?”

“No,” Tina said with a shake of her head. “I think it’s bugged or something.”

“Or it has some sort of requirements we don’t fully grasp just yet,” the head scientist added. “There seem to be some requirements though, the main being a minimum power. All the people with access are over level 50.”

“Anything else?” Zac asked.

“Two are mortals, one is a cultivator. So spirituality might not actually be a boon but a hindrance,” a scientist hesitantly said. “But it’s too early to tell with such a small sample.”

“Also, we only managed to get Tier-2 clearance, which only let us travel a very limited section outside. Only some doors opened for us. We might not even have been able to open that security door even if we tried,” Tina said.

“Maybe I had beginner’s luck? Or maybe I’m just that handsome?” Ogras grinned from the side, drawing multiple eye-rolls in response.

It would be a problem though if only Ogras could control that main exit from their position on the frontier. Would they have to station him like some sort of doorman just so they would be able to maintain their mobility? And what about further inside? There would no doubt be more barriers toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

“It might be looking for some specific genome that only a few in the multiverse possess. It shouldn’t be based on human anatomy considering a demon has had the most success though,” Joanna ventured. “If this place is built by Technocrats it shouldn’t make its decision on something like constitution or levels, right?”

“Right,” Zac nodded. “Anything else?”

“There has been seismic activity in the past two weeks. It might be related to the growth,” another scientist said after some thought. “The earthquakes have been mild so far, but they might cause troubles down the line if they increase in severity. The walls might break apart from the vibrations, allowing outsiders to enter our secured area.”

Zac nodded in understanding, a slight frown adorning his face. He had heard just how sturdy this place was from Ogras. Furthermore, it had managed to hold peak E-Grade warriors trapped for millennia. He probably wouldn't be able to open new pathways by punching his way through the walls even if he exhausted himself.

Then again, few things could contend against nature itself, and it wouldn't be too surprising if some cracks started to appear. But Zac didn't feel that to be just a negative. There were obviously problems with mobility inside this place since the natives still hadn't managed to escape to Earth. That probably meant that it would be difficult reaching either the Dominators and the Dimensional Seed as well.

"Thank you for your excellent work," Zac said as he looked around. "I know you guys are tired of this place, but we can't leave just yet. Some new intelligence has come to light since you were locked inside, and every faction on Earth is scrambling to get inside this place. We are already behind the others because of the cultists, so I will need to rely on your expertise a while longer."

The scientists nodded without hesitation, and Zac guessed that they were more than happy to stay now that there was a bunch of powerful people to protect them. After all, what scientist wouldn't be interested in researching a magical world in a hidden dimension that kept bending the laws of physics?

Everyone already knew what they were supposed to do, and they split up to lead their respective factions as one person after another emerged through the teleporter. The transportation of personnel took hours as the teleporter couldn't stay active continuously. Kenzie shut it down on multiple occasions to make sure that her array wouldn't suddenly crack from overextension. It was important to maintain function as long as possible in case something unexpected happened.

They would probably need to order other things from Calrin as well as they kept figuring out the rules in this weird place. Besides, they were still able to spy on the other factions as

long as the tunnel remained open, and Zac might also need to exit in the next few days depending on how things panned out.

Setting up a proper command center and barracks would take the better part of a day. They didn't know how long they would need to use this place for, so they did everything properly like they were building a whole town from the ground up. It felt extremely slow to Zac, but he also knew that something like this would be completely impossible without the aid of Cosmos Sacks and superhuman strength.

However, the mass-scale expansion angered the only other resident of the secluded biosphere, and a hundred worm-like creatures suddenly burrowed out of the ground and struck the settlers to protect their domain. However, they were immediately cut into ribbons by Thea who happened to be nearby.

Zac's whistled in surprise at the efficiency at which she disposed a bunch of peak F-Grade beasts. It looked like her gain had been pretty impressive, after all. It might be a result of incorporating that Sword Intent she gained inside the Inheritance, but Zac distinctly felt that her Dao was improving at a rapid pace.

"She's become more powerful," Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows. "You should either bed her or dispose of her while we're here. Either way, you'll have dealt with a potential threat."

"Whatever," Zac snorted. "I'm tired of standing around watching the construction. Let's go check out the base for a bit."

"What? Right now?" Ogras blanched. "I'm hurt over here."

"If you're well enough to run your mouth, then you're surely well enough to walk around a bit as well," Zac said as he started gathering people.

Soon enough a preliminary scouting party was assembled, consisting of Zac, Kenzie, Ogras, Thea, and Ibtep. The insectoid acted as a representative to the Anointed, and he also had a scouting class which might come in handy.

They weren't planning on going too far today, but just to see if they could get credentials and observe the changes inside the proper structure. There was also a hidden reason only known to Zac and Kenzie. Zac wanted to see if he or at least his sister could gain access to the main systems of this research base, either through their heritage or through Jeeves.

That would give them a huge edge in the competition for the treasure. In fact, it might end the struggle altogether if they could simply lock everyone in place while they went and fetched the seed.

The group set out, leaving the massive Anointed to guard the base in case of another monster wave, but Zac felt it was unlikely. He had gazed around the biosphere from a high vantage with **[Cosmic Gaze]**, and he only found a few hundred markings of attuned energies. That last skirmish had probably wiped out over a third of all so-called **[Ocodon Worms]**.

It didn't take long for Ogras to lead them to the gate he had used the last time he visited.

"It's really further up," Ogras said as he stabbed his spear into the ground to use as a foothold, and he had to jump up to touch the screen.

The door swung open without incident, displaying what looked like a storage room or perhaps break room.

"Well, the arrays and technology seem to function just fine, even if this place is growing," Ogras muttered as he made to stride inside.

"Wait a bit," Kenzie said before she floated up to the screen herself, no doubt temporarily assisted by her Dao.

Zac looked on with anticipation, and his eyes lit up just like the screen the moment Kenzie touched the screen. A pleasant female voice spoke out through some sort of hidden speaker, confirming that another credential had been handed out.

[Chief Caretaker Signature added. Tier-4 Access Added.]

"What? Chief Caretaker? I only became a caretaker with worse access?" Ogras spat with jealousy written all over his

face.

“The computer obviously felt you were meant for grunt-work while I was leadership material. Or perhaps I’m just that handsome,” Kenzie said with a grin, drawing a glare from the demon.

Everyone quickly followed suit to get their credentials, but the others weren’t as lucky as Kenzie. Thea managed to at least get Tier-3 access like Ogras, but when it was Ibtep’s turn nothing happened. And worse yet, the same thing actually happened with Zac.

Zac looked at the screen with confusion, some intrusive thoughts gnawing at him in the back of his mind. He knew there was something odd about the timeline when he was a baby, and the visions of Leandra he had seen had hinted at some things that Zac didn’t really want to think of. His sister had been given the best clearance right away, but he wasn’t even accredited? How could that possibly happen when it was their family that build this place?

Unless his family tree wasn’t as clear-cut as believed.

Chapter 568: First Entry

Not being welcomed like a long-lost son by the Technocrat console felt surprisingly distressing, but Zac pushed all errant thoughts to the back of his head. There was no way for him to get to the truth of the matter as things stood, and it wasn't like his biological heritage was all that important to him.

Besides, Zac wasn't actually worried about not getting any access even if the implications of his failure were troubling. He took out Leandra's talisman, and he jumped up to the console once more. He might not have got the reception he wanted, but he still held the key to the kingdom.

[Council Inspector identity confirmed. Tier-4 Access Added.]

"What was that?" Thea asked with raised brows, looking up from the detritus she was studying.

"I got it in the Tower of Eternity," Zac lied, and he was relieved to see that the demon played along without causing trouble this time. "The enemies on one of the levels were technocrats. I snatched this thing, and I just figured it might work here as well."

"What's a council inspector?" Ibtep asked curiously.

"No idea," Zac shrugged, and this time he didn't need to know. He really had no idea. "But this thing gave the same type of clearance at the technocrat level in the tower. Maybe they're Technocrat law enforcement, and this is their badge?"

"Can I try?" Thea asked, and Zac agreed after some thought.

She jumped up just like Zac did, but a scowl appeared on her face when nothing happened, and the scowl worsened into a glare when Ogras snickered to the side. Zac didn't know why, but he actually felt relieved to see nothing happen, and that

feeling only increased when Ibtap similarly failed to gain any credentials with help of the token.

“Perhaps it is bound to me because I was the first one to use it,” Zac ventured. “It would be weird if multiple people could use the same identity.”

“Well, let’s just go,” Thea said with a scowl as she entered the base, with the others quickly following.

However, Zac held Kenzie back as he erected an isolation array. The others looked back at them curiously, but they soon walked further inside to not look like they were prying.

“Your clearance, was that by itself or something Jeeves did?” Zac asked when they were alone.

“It was Jeeves,” Kenzie said, disappointment evident in her eyes. “I was supposed to get the same credentials as Ogras, but Jeeves made the system give me the highest clearance available to this terminal.”

She still didn’t look happy with the fact that she at least got a normal clearance, and Zac understood what she was thinking. This realm was supposed to be some sort of bridge between her and their mother, but she was only given the same treatment as an outsider. And even that was better than what Zac got.

It wasn’t a good start.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zac said. “Just look at me. I was the same until I used mom’s token. The technocrats are advanced but they can’t plan for every eventuality. The place was abandoned by mom’s family an incredibly long time ago from the sounds of it, to the point that mom planned on hiding out in this long-forgotten place. She was probably not even born when this place was created. It would rather be odd if we were suddenly given access.”

“You’re right,” Kenzie nodded, her features easing up a bit.

“Besides, this is just some random terminal at the edge of the compound. The good stuff should be further inside. Or could Jeeves connect to some bigger system?” Zac asked.

“There wasn’t anything interesting. Just thousands of years or automated reports on readings of the biosphere where we’re staying inside. It seems that the terminal was mostly made for access and climate control. I can make it rain I think, but that’s about it,” Kenzie said.

“Well, put a hold on that,” Zac said with a small smile. “At least it’s a good start that Jeeves can connect with these things. I doubt any of the other factions can get that much out of the systems in this place.”

The two soon rejoined the rest of the expedition, and Ogras led them down the same paths as he had explored before. Zac had already read the reports, but he was still shocked at how massive the place was. Some of it was probably due to the spatial expansion, but it was undeniable that this base was most likely bigger than his whole island even before it started to grow.

It was hard to grasp how a structure could be so massive. Port Atwood was roughly the size of Hawaii according to measurements taken by some geologists, and his mind had trouble computing such an undertaking. Then again, for the Technocrats building something like might be as easy as turning a page. They just needed to send out a few million robots to work around the clock for a couple of years.

They kept moving further and further inside, with Kenzie and Thea being responsible for most of the conversation. Zac and Ogras talked a bit as well, but Ibtep mostly walked in silence.

“You’ve been pretty quiet for a while,” Kenzie finally said.

“You don’t think this is interesting?”

“A Hive made of metal, large beyond comprehension. It makes one wonder of all the marvels out there in the universe,” Ibtep said after some thought.

“You’ll be able to see them sooner or later,” Kenzie said with a smile.

“Perhaps...” Ibtep said with a sigh. “But Nonet will never get the chance, and neither will the rest of the Anointed. A

lifetime of service to the Zhix, and only death is their reward. This is not cutting off weakness, it is cutting off our roots.”

The Zhix suddenly turned to Zac, its eyes almost burning.

“Can you do something?”

“Save the Anointed?” Zac asked with surprise. “I have no idea how to do something like that?”

“Here,” Ibtep said as he took out a stone gourd from his massive backpack. “Please don’t tell anyone I gave you this. Especially not Nonet.”

“What’s this?” Zac asked with a frown as he held the gourd. He could feel that there was some liquid inside, and he guessed that it wasn’t something simple.

“It’s the Elixir of Anointment,” Ibtep said. “I figured you humans have all kinds of ideas and methods, so I... borrowed it from Rhubat’s Hive. Perhaps you can find a way to improve it, to cure the bad side-effects of taking it. Perhaps even reverse the effect and allow the Anointed to cultivate as normal.”

Zac looked at the odd Zhix with interest. It appeared as though this wasn’t something he had come up with at the spur of the moment. The Elixir of Anointment was no doubt a highly controlled substance, and Zac had no idea of how Ibtep managed to abscond with it from one of the greatest Hives in the world. Perhaps he had gained some unique advantages from his class?

Furthermore, it looked like his actions were highly sacrilegious among the Zhix, but he still went through with it to save the Anointed. It was a reminder that Ibtep’s thoughts and actions were much more flexible compared to most Zhix, who were strictly bound by their precepts and conventions.

But could Zac do something, even if he had the elixir? Perhaps Jeeves could help once more?

“I’ll be honest, Alchemy is one of the areas where our planet is especially lacking,” Zac eventually said after he saw Kenzie surreptitiously shake her head. “We can’t even make basic pills right now, let alone improving these types of formulae.”

Ibtep only sighed and nodded its head, clearly not too surprised with the outcome.

“However... There might be a way,” Zac said after some hesitation. “I made a connection with a very powerful faction while undertaking a trial. They are called the Zethaya Clan, and they specialize in Alchemy. If there is anyone who can help fix the Anointed’s situation and these Elixirs, it would be them,” Zac said.

“Really?!” Ibtep said with shock.

“However, visiting them is extremely dangerous. They have not only D-grade Hegemons, but even C-Grade Monarchs under their employ. They could destroy this whole planet without breaking a sweat,” Zac said.

“Are you not friends? Did you not provide a proper gift?” Ibtep asked.

Zac blanched a bit before his face returned to normal. Blowing up their store and almost killing their direct descendant was more an act of war than a gift. However, that wasn’t the only trouble with using the Teleportation Token.

“Well, my identity is a bit complicated for a number of reasons. I might be a wanted man in the whole sector, or I might be considered a promising youth worth nurturing,”

The others were listening in on the conversation, and Thea’s eyes were practically burning as she stared at him.

“Just what did you do in the Tower of Eternity?” Kenzie said. “Ogras said that you made a splash, but that’s not it, is it?”

“I had a bit of a cultivation deviation,” Zac said after some thought. “This got a bit out of hand, and I had to kill a few hundred people.”

“A few hundred scions of the most powerful clans around, including a prince of the most powerful Empire of the whole Zecia sector,” Ogras said, almost looking like he had finally gotten rid of a huge burden, his smile growing wider and wider. “Your brother is probably a living legend by now, a bogeyman used to scare children.”

“Won’t this drag even more enemies to our planet?” Thea asked with anger. “Don’t we have enough to deal with?”

“Like you’ve contributed so much until now,” Ogras snorted from the side, which almost made the Marshall heiress flinch.

“That’s enough,” Zac sighed. “I didn’t plan for things to get out of hand like that. The System was manipulating things from the shadows. It released something that made everyone lose their minds, and it was kill or be killed.”

“Why would it do something like that?” Kenzie asked with confusion.

“To make the strong even stronger,” Thea muttered as her fist clenched.

“Anyway,” Zac said as he turned back to the eager Zhix. “I could send you or someone else to the Zethaya with this mixture, but they would still know you were related to me. They might catch you to get to me. And I won’t be able to save you, no matter how much I would want to. They are simply too powerful.”

“I would still be willing to go,” Ibtep said without hesitation. “As would any number of Zhix, no doubt.”

“The cost to activate this token is two Billion Nexus Coins,” Zac slowly said after having made his decision. “I can’t fork out that much money right now. If you can cover half, I’ll give you the token.”

The main use of that particular token was to concoct a pill for Alea as a last resort. Now that things turned out as they did, it didn’t hold as much value to Zac. Certainly, having access to a D-Grade Alchemist from a top-tier force would always be extremely convenient, but he wasn’t in direct need of getting some item or pill completed.

Still, you never knew what would happen in the future, and he wasn’t certain that giving it away would be the best move. They were one-time tokens, after all. So he decided to give a test of sorts to the Zhix. If he couldn’t even scrounge up the money for transportation, how would he survive being sent to a C-grade continent?

Of course, Zac had to admit that he had a selfish reason for relenting as well. He was extremely anxious to know about what people were saying about him in the multiverse. He needed to make some adjustments to his plans if it turned out that he had become a wanted man, and they would need to make preparations for Earth as well.

“I will do it! I am going right now,” Ibtep said as he started running back toward the base, no longer caring the slightest about the Technocrat base, nor apparently about the fact that he never got any clearance to return through the security door.

The insectoid would have to wait a bit in the break room as others kept going though, since there still were sections to explore. They finally reached the door leading to the “outer section” that Ogras had mentioned, but they didn’t immediately open it. For all they knew, there might be an army lying in wait on the other side.

“Do we keep going, or head back?” Kenzie asked as she turned to Zac for a decision.

“You go back for now. Let me and Ogras sound things out first,” Zac said.

“I’m coming as well,” Thea said without hesitation.

“Like glue, this one,” Ogras muttered from the side, drawing another glare from Thea.

“It’s just a preliminary scouting mission to see if there are any threats nearby. Ogras and I’ll go because we’re already in the E-Grade. You’ll have plenty of time to get tired of this place over the coming weeks,” Zac smiled. “We’ll be back in a few hours.”

“... Fine,” Thea eventually relented. “But I won’t be left behind when the real missions start. Try to find a hunting ground like the ones you mentioned. If we just spend our days searching without cultivating we might fall behind the other factions.”

“I hear you looked like you just underwent a thousand-cut torture a few days ago, and you’re already rearing to get

beaten up again?" Ogras snorted. "Did the inheritance turn you into a simpleton?"

"None of your business," Thea spat and walked away in the direction of the garden.

"Don't be like that to my sister-in-law," Kenzie admonished before she turned to Zac. "And you, blockhead. How hard would it be to take her with you? Just send that demon away on some mission and you're suddenly on a date. What a missed opportunity."

Ogras only snickered in response, clearly taking some pleasure in Zac's helpless expression. Kenzie gave a reminder to be careful before she left as well.

"You know. The two of you might be a pretty good match. She seems to have picked up a masochistic streak just like you. You can play around in beast tides for fun," Ogras laughed as he walked toward the console of the security door.

"Let's just go," Zac sighed as he readied himself in case of battle.

Chapter 569: Rifts

“Are you ready?” Ogras asked as he stopped next to the console. “You’ll have to deal with any eventual threat by yourself, you know?”

“I’m fine,” Zac nodded as a swirl of emerald leaves surrounded him. “Open it.”

Ogras nodded and touched the panel, and he immediately melded with the shadows as the door slid open. A fractal edge had already appeared on **[Verun’s Bite]**, but Zac could quickly breathe out in relief as there was nothing on the other side. Ogras soon reappeared from Zac’s shadows as well, though his eyes were fixed at the corridor outside, confusion evident in his eyes.

Zac was just as baffled, as the scenery definitely didn’t match what he had pictured in his mind. Ogras had described the dilapidated state of the inner sectors in great detail for his report, but everything seemed to look the same as in their own private area. The hallway was devoid of life or activity, but it was clean and without damage. The fractals that ran along the wall shone with bright luster, and there was no dried blood to talk about.

“How is this possible?” Ogras muttered from behind as he looked around in confusion.

Zac wouldn’t immediately trust his eyes though, and he carefully entered the inner sector, readying himself in case what they saw was an illusion. But if it was one, then it had to be a damn good one as Zac couldn’t feel anything amiss.

“Is the layout the same as before?” Zac asked after some thought.

“It should be,” Ogras nodded after looking back and forth for some time. “The missing pieces have been replaced, but the

general layout is the same.”

Zac nodded in relief. He was afraid for a second that the Mystic Realm was able to move its corridors to rearrange its layout. That would have made it almost impossible to map the place out, and any progress would be random.

“I guess it’s the arrays?” Zac ventured. “The walls slowly heal themselves, so there are probably even more maintenance functions. There might be repair-puppets or machines running around and replacing broken things or something. Pretty convenient for the natives if the materials they scavenge actually get replaced somehow.”

“That might explain why our sector is untouched,” Ogras muttered. “No point in breaking past this door if they can keep mining their old tunnels. Perhaps they have already broken through to our place before, only to find the same empty corridors and barracks as us.”

“Or they’ve already taken everything of value,” Zac noted with a grimace. “We passed a lot of empty rooms back there.”

“The simplest way to find out what’s going on is by catching another native. The last one I took hostage actually went and died before I got a hold of anything interesting,” Ogras spat as he looked around.

Zac nodded in agreement. It was a shame how things panned out with Ogras’ captive. He had only managed to confirm that the beastkin truly was a real-life werewolf and that they were of rival factions. A short time later the human had shuddered and died, likely from suicide as to not divulge any critical information. Perhaps he was afraid of leading a new unknown force to his faction’s gates.

“So, where do you want to go?” the demon asked.

“Let’s head in the direction where you saw those two fighting. Perhaps we can find some clues where the natives stay,” Zac said after some thoughts. “No point in looking for the core areas at this stage.”

“It’s this way... I think,” Ogras said as he led the way.

It was quite a distance between the door and the scene of the battle, and Zac only got increasingly baffled as they walked. He just couldn't make sense of the mental map of the compound. He understood that the Technocrats might not have the same sort of budgetary constraints as earthlings did, needing to make the most out of every square meter, but the winding pathways felt extremely sub-optimized. It almost felt like this place was built just for the sake of it, and that they didn't really fill any objective.

"What do you think the purpose of these endless hallways is?" Zac finally asked after a while. "It would be one thing if there were a bunch of laboratories or office space, but the rooms we've looked into are just empty storerooms. Most of the space between these corridors doesn't even seem accessible."

"I guess millions worked in this place if this really was a research base," Ogras slowly said. "That is the same as a decent-sized clan. Any organization of that size would need a vast number of supportive functions. Perhaps this area is some sort of ancillary area, and arrays that run this place are hidden within the walls. These corridors might just be for array masters to make their way between the arrays."

"So service corridors," Zac nodded in agreement. "That might be it."

"It's also possible it's intentional," Ogras mused. "That these pathways form some sort of array themselves. Just think of those lines in the sky over the fields. They are not random, but rather form some sort of pattern."

"An array as large as a small country," Zac muttered. "It should be extremely powerful."

"We can't guess what's in the mind of some Technocrats," Ogras spat. "They're all insane. No offense."

Zac snorted, but he kept mapping the surroundings in his mind. It was a shame that the magical map that the Zhix owned couldn't be transferred over here as it would have been a huge help. He had already checked his **[Automatic Map]** as well, but it didn't possess an indoor function. There was just one dot on the parchment, which called the base **[SGR-03]**.

He guessed it was the abbreviation for the base, but he didn't know if it was the name given by Leandra's force or something decided by the force who took over after the technocrats left.

"So, while we're on the subject. Care to explain how the token from your mom could turn you into a Council Inspector?" Ogras said as he threw Zac a sideways glance.

"I don't know," Zac shrugged, and it was the truth. "I only found out about the credentials inside the Tower of Eternity, I didn't lie about that. Personally, I don't think it's real. I think it's something she prepared as some sort of Technocrat Array Breaker, something that would allow her to go where she pleased without divulging her real identity."

"You know what that means, right?" Ogras said with a calculating look. "You would have to be a real bigshot to accomplish something like that. I can't imagine what kind of person would be able to create something that could bypass all the defenses of the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde. We would be killed long ago by the Beastmaster or some other enemy if it was that easy."

"Well, I'm still trying to figure out the truth as well. I'm hoping we'll be able to find more inside this place,"

"You... Don't think she's here right?" Ogras hesitated, a flash of fear appearing in his eyes. "That could prove deadly."

"What are you worried about?" Zac snorted. "If she really is a big-shot she wouldn't be bothered with some E-Grade people."

"Maybe she isn't happy about cultivators hanging around her Technocrat children and decides to purge us all," Ogras muttered.

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's isn't here," Zac eventually said. "I'm almost positive she left earth to heal and avoid pursuit."

"That would be for the best," Ogras muttered as he kept leading Zac down the hallways.

Ogras had no trouble remembering the path, provided that the sector truly hadn't changed, and it wasn't that far either

according to the demon. But Zac suddenly felt a sharp spike of danger after they had walked for ten minutes. He immediately drew his weapon before he jumped back, not forgetting to drag the weakened demon along as well.

“What’s going on?” the demon asked with confusion as he looked around for any threats. “I didn’t sense anything.”

“I suddenly felt a pang of danger,” Zac said with a bit of confusion, as the surroundings were still the same sterile walls of metal.

“Well, go forward and test things out,” Ogras said after a brief pause.

“You’re really taking advantage of your wounds right now,” Zac muttered, but he still went along with the arrangement.

“Well, it should work like this even if I was back in top condition. If I get hit by something in here I might die, whereas you will get a flesh wound that might hurt for a couple of hours,” Ogras said with an uncaring shrug. “If there’s a trap it’s better you fall in it than me.”

“Well, whatever,” Zac snorted as he transformed [**Love’s Bond**] to its shield form.

He also activated both [**Nature’s Barrier**] and [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**], the latter mostly to gain a better sense of the surroundings. However, nothing much changed. It was still an empty corridor in the middle of nowhere. Just what was it that made his mind scream of danger?

However, he only needed to take ten steps forward to find the answer.

The previously innocent-looking corridor transformed in an instant, and Zac found himself on a collision course with a spatial tear. There wasn’t even any time for him to retreat, and his eyes looked on with horror as his coffin-shield hit the tear head-on. This was something he had been deadly afraid would happen, that his Spirit Tool, or rather Alea would be damaged from something that it couldn’t block.

However, the spatial tear didn’t actually cut the thick black lid apart like it would with almost everything else. The coffin

somehow managed to push back at it, destabilizing it enough to disappear. The clash did leave a mark on the lid, but something like that would heal by itself quickly enough, just like the chains that had cracked during his fight with Void's Disciple.

The scene was a huge source of relief, as not only were spatial tears one of the few things that could still cut him apart if he wasn't careful, but it was also something that Void's Disciple used when fighting. Seeing that **[Love's Bond]** was this durable gave him a lot more confidence for their next fight.

Seeing as how limited the damage essentially meant he could push his way out of the trap, but he didn't leave just yet. He instead swapped over to his Draugr-form, and the fractal shield of **[Immutable Bulwark]** infused with the Fragment of the Coffin appeared in front of the lid.

The mainstay defensive skill of his undead side was, unfortunately, suffering from the same fate as **[Chop]**, where the skill couldn't quite keep up with his recent growth. The strength of the shield was based on the quality of his shield and his Endurance, but the increase in its durability had clearly not been linear lately. He would have to upgrade it to an E-Grade skill for it to maintain its usefulness going forward.

However, while the skill wasn't able to completely block the spatial tears that came close, it did still manage to weaken them before they slammed into **[Love's Bond]**. It lessened the strain on his physical shield significantly, and Zac only needed to keep infusing more Miasma and Mental Energy into the skill to restore it.

Zac took one step after another as the buzzing sounds of void tears disintegrating echoed through the hallways. However, he didn't move back toward Ogras, but he rather kept going straight ahead.

A hidden spatial minefield had for some reason appeared to block their path, and Zac wanted to see if he could push through. Perhaps the anomaly only lasted for a few meters, allowing people to skip through if they were careful and skilled enough. Conversely, the whole area in this direction

might be compromised, which would be valuable intelligence as well.

However, Zac didn't get far before new tears appeared out of nowhere, almost doubling the density of threats around him. Zac knew he was approaching his limits as new cracks were forming almost as quickly on his shield as they healed up again. But he kept pushing forward until there finally was a change to his surroundings.

A red barrier suddenly appeared five meters ahead, and Zac's eyes widened in recognition. It looked a lot like the barrier that Jeeves had conjured when he first met Kenzie in the border town. However, it was almost as though it was infected, with tinges of some unknown energy floating about within the shield. And it was from these corruptions that spatial tears kept spewing out one after another.

Some of the tears stayed put and hovered in front of the barrier, while others drifted about, some even disappearing out of sight. However, Zac's Danger Sense told him that they didn't actually disappear, but rather that they turned invisible somehow. However, just as Zac noticed the barrier, it was as though the barrier noticed Zac. A spatial storm rippled out from the corruptions, pushing the previously static spatial tears in the tunnel toward him while simultaneously spewing out an endless number of new ones.

This time there was no hesitation as Zac fled for his life, not even trying to break that barrier. He would be long dead before his attack landed. He spotted the demon in the distance looking in his direction with a slight frown, but his face suddenly turned into a mask of terror as Zac closed in on him.

"Lunatic! Did you cause a crack in this dimension?!" Ogras shrieked in horror as he started running, but he only got a few steps before he was wrapped up by a chain as Zac flashed past him like some sort of nightmare spider.

There was no way for Zac to return to his human form without getting ripped apart by the spatial storm, so he had to use the chains of **[Love's Bond]** to drag himself and Ogras away. He tried to hamper the progress of the rapidly approaching storm

by erecting one fractal bulwark after another, but they were cut apart without slowing the tears by more than a second.

“What’s wrong with this place?!” Ogras screamed, tightly wrapped by a chain, and Zac couldn’t help but agree.

It was one hell of a place his ancestors had built.

Chapter 570: The World is Ending

The chains of **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the walls and floor of the research base with tremendous force, but they still barely managed to dig deep enough for Zac to propel himself forward. A swirling storm of spatial rifts was right on his tail, like a maw of a terrifying beast. If they caught up they'd both be ripped apart in an instant.

“Left!” Ogras suddenly shouted, and Zac immediately changed the course.

However, both Zac and Ogras couldn't believe what they were seeing when the spatial tears actually turned to continue the pursuit, though many of them didn't manage to pivot in time. There was no time for Zac to figure out why some dimensional rifts were seemingly alive, but the scene did give him an idea of what to do.

Zac kept turning back and forth in the endless tunnel, though he was careful to not stray too far from the pathway they came from. Each turn they managed to shake off another group of tears until there only were a handful left. A small group was manageable, so Zac stopped in his tracks and let Ogras down before he changed **[Love's Bond]** to its shield form.

A second later another group of scars covered the coffin's lid, but there were at least no threat any longer. They managed to escape unscathed, but a sheen of perspiration covered Zac's forehead as he looked at the demon.

“Since when did spatial tears get tracking capabilities?” he muttered, and Ogras snorted as threw Zac a scathing look.

“What did you do back then? Everything was fine, then all hell broke loose,” the demon said. “By the way, you better never

use that movement technique in public. I'm not sure I'd be able to survive the second-hand shame."

"It's not stupid if it works," Zac muttered. "Did you find any clues what was going on?"

"I suddenly saw you disappear into thin air, not even leaving a hint of energy behind. Thirty seconds later a bunch of spatial tears appeared before you reappeared, looking like there were a dozen Rakefiends hot in pursuit," the demon said.

Zac was surprised to hear that he had disappeared from the demon's sight, just like some of the spatial tears seemingly appeared out of nowhere. It looked like the hallways were equipped with technocrat cloaking technology just like what he encountered by the Battleroach King. That technology didn't release any energy either, at least not anything he could spot.

He still didn't know what to make of the encounter, so he retold everything he saw in the booby-trapped corridor. Of course, he didn't mention that Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, could create shields that looked a lot like the one he saw. He instead likened it to the orange shields that the Technocrat Incursion used. Ogras frowned as he listened, but he didn't immediately offer an opinion.

"What do you think?" Zac finally asked. "Did you really pass through this way before?"

"I have never heard of something like this. But it sounds like something suddenly took control of those rifts if they originally were almost static as you said. My guess is that it's a security feature. Did you notice? Not one of the tears hit the walls. They either turned to follow us or gave up to avoid a collision," Ogras explained.

"It seems like a really weird security measure though," Zac muttered. "It almost looked like the spatial tears seeped out of the Technocrat barrier like it was part of its energy source. Why make things so complicated instead of just adding some normal energy weaponry?"

“Perhaps it’s not how things were originally designed,” Ogras shrugged. “A powerful dimensional treasure is growing somewhere in the base. I’ve heard that grand treasures can affect whole planets. Perhaps Spatial Energies has somehow infiltrated whatever this place runs on.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He remembered the vision of the cursed lotus in the Tower of Eternity all too well. A whole planet went insane with bloodlust because of its existence, and who knew what would happen if that giant didn’t seal it before it was too late. However, the implications were clear if this really was the case.

“If the treasure is powerful enough to cause something like this before it’s even born, then just how powerful is it? It might even be greater than D-Grade. The Low-quality D-Grade treasures I’ve found so far didn’t have such a shocking effect on its surroundings at all.

“Well, the Tree of Ascension and that mushroom you found can barely be considered D-Grade treasures. Their ranking is as much based on their rarity as the actual power they contain. But I agree. Something like this should be Peak D-Grade at a minimum. No wonder that the cultists discarded everything for a chance at this treasure. It is likely worth more than your whole planet,” Ogras said, the familiar tint of greed shining in his eyes.

“It’s still odd that they only seem to be sporadically active,” Zac muttered. “Unless the situation when you arrived the first time was out of the norm.”

“Perhaps it was,” Ogras ventured. “The blood and destruction wasn’t fresh, but it wasn’t too old either. Perhaps the defenses suddenly failed, allowing the natives to push further away from their bases than usual. Then the security measures recovered, and this sector became inaccessible again. We might be locked out of the rest of the base.”

“But if that’s the case, how will we ever be able to reach the core? If I can’t survive pushing through in my Draugr Form, I don’t think anyone of us will,” Zac said with a frown.

“If the defenses have been down once, then it might happen again. Or perhaps the spatial turbulence here is a result of the artifact awakening, and is completely random,” Ogras ventured.

Zac nodded before he turned toward the way they came from

“What are you doing?” Ogras asked with confusion as he followed in tow. “Ready for round two?”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “But I want to see if the rifts are still there.”

The chains of [**Love’s Bond**] had moved them quite a distance in the minutes they fled, but they were soon back to the position where they stopped the last time. There wasn’t a single spatial tear in sight the whole way, and everything looked exactly the same as before with not even a hint of a spatial storm having swept the hallways just a few minutes ago.

However, Zac still felt the same sense of palpitations from his Danger Sense from the area ahead of them, meaning that the tears no doubt still hid behind some sort of cloaking. He shot a second glance at the corridor just to make sure, but [**Cosmic Gaze**] still couldn’t spot anything. Taking six steps forward took him to the outer layer of the spatial tears, and his vision immediately lit up from the powerful energies they contained.

It really was the same sort of cloaking technology.

Zac eventually stepped back and placed a boulder to the side of the corridor at a safe distance from the trap before left a communication crystal warning of the dangers ahead on top of it. He didn’t know if it would be cleansed just like everything else, but it was worth trying out.

“And there really was nothing like this the last time?” Zac asked as he turned back to Ogras.

“No way, you think I’d forget to mention something like this in my report?” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “I wasn’t attacked a single time while I entered here, not counting the werewolf.”

“It’s a bit weird we’re being attacked at all,” Zac muttered. “I have a Tier-4 clearance of a Council Inspector. It should be

enough for me to not get attacked just for walking down an empty corridor. There were no warnings or anything.”

“There might have been warnings though,” Ogras interjected. “Just that we don’t have the equipment to hear it. So what do we do now?”

“Well, there’s no lack of corridors,” Zac eventually said. “Let’s see if we can find an alternative route to the scene of the battle.”

The demon nodded in agreement before he led Zac down another way. However, reaching their destination was quickly proving easier said than done, and they were forced to reroute by the very same type of spatial barriers as before another twenty-six times before Ogras finally declared they had arrived.

Altogether they had walked almost five times the distance as the direct route, and even Zac was starting to become a bit confused by this seemingly endless labyrinth. But coming here was definitely worth it since they had finally encountered something different. They weren’t surprised that the bodies of the two fallen warriors were gone, but they didn’t expect to see that something else left in their stead.

A large steel board had been placed in the middle of the corridor, and two lines of words were written in an eye-catching red. The letters were penned in the general script of the Multiverse, which Zac had mostly mastered by this point.

We are Clan Cartava, we mean no harm

The world is ending - Free us and gain an ally for life

Beneath the words was an extremely intricate map that highlighted a certain path. It was a bit hard to judge, but it looked like it would take them up to half a day to follow the path indicated. As to where it led, the board didn’t say.

“A bit bombastic message,” Zac muttered before he thought of something. “Do you think it’s true? Will the birth of the treasure actually destroy the Mystic Realm?”

“I doubt it,” Ogras said, though not without hesitation. “The Zealots are crazy, but they are not idiots. They wouldn’t be so

willing to move into this place if the treasure would blow up the whole mystic realm. Those guys clearly know what that thing is, and if it would break this place they would find some other way to snatch it. It's easy to forget because of their antics, but that bunch of lunatics belongs to a proper B-Grade force that spreads far beyond this sector"

"So they're lying?" Zac nodded at the signpost.

"They are either lying or they simply don't understand what's going on. We couldn't find out what a Dimensional Seed was even on the outside, so how can these people know? I'm more interested in the second line. 'Free us and gain an ally for life'? I guess that means the implicit meaning is 'Hinder us and gain an enemy for life?'"

"I feel they're trying to make first contact without divulging too much about themselves to either us or any other faction that might discover this thing. How did they know to leave this message here though? It's clearly meant for us, or perhaps any outsiders, rather than some other native faction. Did you leave a note as well?" Zac asked.

"No, I tried to make it look like the two killed each other. I didn't want my presence to be known at all. Otherwise, I would have snatched the bodies for further study," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "I must have slipped up or they have some means that could see through my actions. What do you want to do? Follow the map?"

"Not right now," Zac eventually said. "It will take us almost straight east for a huge distance. I'd rather get a better understanding of what we're dealing with before I head that far from our base."

A compass didn't work in this place, so directions were obviously a bit unclear in this place. However, they had a rough sketch of the Mystic Realm thanks to Julia's and Thea's efforts, and it looked a bit like a crude drawing of a sun or a star, where their secured area was located in one of the outer spikes.

The whole core section of the Mystic Realm formed a shockingly large circle, and the map essentially detailed a path

that kept to a small part of the outer rim. The indicated path did have a huge amount of backtracking and twists and turns as well, making Zac believe that it took the spatial rifts into consideration.

They had already encountered a large number of barriers in their preliminary exploration, and it wasn't too out of field that there would be a lot more of them peppered throughout this place. This map might actually allow them to head over to the other camp while avoiding those spatial tears altogether.

“How is this thing still here though?” Ogras suddenly muttered, making Zac start and look away from the map.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“All debris has been removed, even bloodstains are scrubbed clean. Why is this thing left untouched?”

“It's made of metal that looks a lot like the walls,” Zac slowly said. “Perhaps the cleaning arrays or whatever doesn't touch it because of that?”

“Perhaps,” Ogras muttered as he tried to lift the foot that the sign was attached to, but both were surprised to see that Ogras couldn't budge it.

“Let me try,” Zac said and gripped the signboard, and veins started appearing across his forehead as he strained to dislodge the thing from the ground.

A snap finally echoed through the corridor as the sign gave way, and Zac was thrown backward from the accumulated force.

“What kind of super-glue was that?” Zac muttered as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Not glue,” Ogras muttered as he pointed at the base of the sign. “Look.”

Chapter 571: Back-up Plans

Zac curiously looked where the demon pointed and he realized that there were three thin spikes, each of them no more than five centimeters long, at the bottom of the sign. Just like the rest of the signpost they seemed to be made from the very same material as the walls, though the spikes had intricate engravings covering their surface.

His eyes immediately moved to the spot where the sign stood earlier, and he saw that three matching holes could be seen in the floor. However, the cavities were rapidly closing, and just a few seconds later they were gone. It would have been impossible to know that something was socketed there just a moment ago if they hadn't seen it themselves.

"Weird," Zac muttered, and he stabbed the sign down into the ground to see whether it would get stuck again.

However, a pinging sound echoing through the corridor, and three light marks on the floor were the only results of his attempt. Not even forcibly pushing it into the ground did any good, and neither did instilling the board with his Dao or Cosmic Energy.

"We're clearly missing something," Ogras eventually said after having watched Zac's failed attempts for half a minute.

Zac nodded in agreement and stowed away the sign, hoping that his sister or the scientists would be able to figure out what's going on with the help of that thing.

"You want to follow the map?" Ogras asked.

"We've done what we came for," Zac said with a shake of his head after some thought. "Let's return."

The two started making their way back while simultaneously searching for other points of interest, but there was really not much going on. There were just more corridors and storage

rooms, all of which were emptied apart from the occasional crate full of worthless materials.

They also made a slight detour to see whether Zac's own leave-behind had survived like the signpost, but neither of them was really surprised to see that both boulder and communication crystal were gone. It wasn't a disappointment though as it cleared some things up for Zac. There really were secret rules that governed this place, as evidenced by the native's ability to manipulate the floor and sign like that.

Was this perhaps the true message this Cartava Clan wanted to convey?

The message was short, but it had exposed a lot. First of all, Clan Cartava knew of their existence somehow. Secondly, they showed that the previously thought impervious metal was somehow possible to influence to great lengths. The map might lead to a third clue as well. All-in-all it proved the value of the clan, and Zac leaned toward following the map as soon as possible.

They soon reached the security door leading to their area, and Zac used his credentials just to test that his unique title worked as well as the caretaker credentials. However, they didn't immediately return to the settlement as there was something Zac wanted to try first. They walked into one of the massive empty warehouses, and Zac took out **[Verun's Bite]**.

Ogras had already reported how sturdy the alloys the base was made from were, and seeing what happened with the Signpost had piqued Zac's interest even further. He wanted to cut off a piece and bring it back for further study.

Zac walked over to a wall and swung his axe in a precise arc, but he only ended up with a slight pain in his wrist as the wall didn't budge at all. He frowned and infused the axe with the Fragment of the Axe, and his weapon finally cut into the wall without to much resistance. However, it reminded him of the early days of the integration, where he barely managed to cut into the extraordinarily hard walls of his Nexus Crystal mine.

Worse yet, the wall quickly healed itself the moment Zac prepared to swing again. However, a minute of furious swings

later he had managed to cut out a slab of metal that was as big as his fist, and it actually weighed over a hundred kilograms from the feel of it.

Ogras walked over curiously to take a look at the sample, but neither of them could make heads or tails of the situation. The alloy had definitely changed properties after Zac managed to cut it out, but not as they expected. He had almost thought that it would turn liquid from what they had seen, but it had only turned.... Worse.

It was definitely a solid like before, but Zac had no problem remolding it with his hands. It suddenly felt like it was barely as hard as gold, let alone steel. It was a far cry from the walls, or the signpost that seemed to be extraordinarily sturdy as well. However, they didn't have the opportunity to play around for long before Zac's senses prickled as previously unseen scripts appeared across the walls.

Zac had specifically chosen to enter a storeroom to cut out a sample since not one of the warehouses they had visited were booby-trapped with spatial rifts. However, it was quickly becoming clear that not even these side chambers were safe as the whole room transformed in front of their very eyes. The walls turned into spears that shot toward them, and worse yet a red barrier had appeared across the exit, blocking their escape. A series of spatial tears emerged a second later, all of them heading for Zac.

"Give it back!" Ogras screamed as he dodged the incoming stabs, and Zac could only comply.

He tossed the slab of metal toward the wall where he took it, and they both breathed out in relief when the spears slowed down. However, Zac was still forced to block a series of attacks for half a minute before the room had calmed down again and the barrier disappeared.

"What a stingy building," Ogras muttered as he kicked one of the empty shelves, and Zac couldn't help but agree.

It had billions of tonnes of this alloy, and it couldn't share just a handful of the stuff?

So it was mostly empty-handed that the two returned to the town, though the signpost caused some waves among the core members of the expedition. Some were worried that their activities were already spotted, and a frantic search for hidden cameras begun. The scientists were instead more curious about the spikes, and the odd material that seemed to almost be alive.

Their first assessment was that their earlier assumptions were correct. It wasn't the material itself that was magical, it was either the script that covered the walls or some sort of energy that transformed it. However, why the natives could build a sign made from the material and maintain its strength while Zac couldn't even harvest a single ingot still eluded them.

Zac left the sign with his sister, hoping that they could figure some things out. As for himself, he didn't head out again. There was no point in him running around in those endless corridors himself. Zac and Ogras had been walking around for hours, but they had only seen a fraction of the immediate area. It was more efficient to send out a hundred scouting units who could work together to map out the place and mark all traps.

As for himself, he still had multiple things to work on, the most pressing being the intrusive Dao from Void's Disciple and pondering on the Dao.

This was both a way to save time and a way for him to relinquish some control. Zac knew he had a problem with delegating tasks he considered important since seeing Alea fall. He left the nitty-gritty to his people in Port Atwood while doing the rest himself. But his explorations had really driven home just how massive this base was, and the fact that he wouldn't be able to explore it by himself even if he was given months.

Things progressed quickly over the two following days. Kenzie's drone army was a huge help in mapping out the interiors of the base, which allowed the subsequent scouting squads to make rapid progress inside the Mystic Realm. The master map of the corridors was quickly expanded and improved upon without needing Zac to do much of the work himself.

There were a few issues that had quickly cropped up though. The drones were unable to move too far in the tunnels as Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, would lose control over them. This wasn't something unique to the Mystic Realm, but rather that the range of the AI was limited. Kenzie believed that this range would increase by a huge margin if Jeeves evolved, but there was no indication of that happening anytime soon.

Jeeves had only consumed a scant few items from the Technocrat Incursion, and Zac doubted an item that magical would be easy to evolve. That was exactly how Zac liked things though, as an overpowered AI was not something he wanted to deal with. It was better if Kenzie focused on her own Strength in Zac's opinion.

The real issue was the matter of the missing squad.

One Hundred scouting units and ten elite squads set out as soon as a strategy could be devised, and their goal was to find and map out the areas that the Drones couldn't reach. The elite units consisted of powerful warriors of all factions, and they were supposed to take the vanguard in case one of the native factions showed up. They were all equipped with a lot of powerful talismans, both offensive and defensive, to the point that they would be able to blow up half a city if need be.

However, one of the ten squads, which included three Valkyries, had simply gone missing. There had been no sounds of struggle, and there were no clues left behind. They had vanished without a trace. Zac himself had set out to search for them, but there was simply nothing to go by, forcing him to return after a few hours.

Zac initially suspected Clan Cartava of kidnapping his people, but after thinking it through he wasn't so sure. The map they provided seemed to indicate that the Clan was located to the east, while the missing scouting unit had rather tried to move northbound in search of a way into the core sections of the base. That might mean that the second force in the area that was responsible, or perhaps even some new type of trap.

But the spatial barriers that blocked the corridors weren't actually that dangerous unless you forced your way inside as

Zac did, so most were inclined to believe foul play was involved. They also had no idea whether Clan Cartava was the werewolves Ogras encountered or the humans, or perhaps even a third force. In either case, it wouldn't be a surprise if there were both hostile and friendly factions inside the mystic realm.

However, the rest of the scouting units were making rapid progress, and the command center was bustling with activity as well.

A massive courtyard was immediately cordoned off for Zac in the original biosphere, which raised a few brows among the different forces. He already had a massive area for himself on his island, so people started to wonder whether he had turned agoraphobic or something. However, the real reason wasn't quite so exciting, though Zac still didn't want it to be known.

His compound needed to be pretty big to house not only his home, but also his Life-Death Array. Kenzie and Triv had dismantled it when they arrived to his cultivation cave a few days ago, though it only was a temporary measure until Kenzie was able to create an Array Disk able to match the death-attuned one in his possession.

Zac wasn't willing to let up on his soul cultivation, and who knew how long this place would be locked down when the Dimensional Seed awakened. This had become especially important after realizing that the array also kept his soul in check. Thankfully he only caused some murmurs with his massive set of concealment and isolation arrays, and there was no lack of open space around.

In fact, people had already spread out across all the Biospheres within the outer section they controlled. It allowed the various forces to keep to themselves a bit, and it was also necessary to deal with the limited amount of Cosmic Energy.

A surprising issue had cropped up while Zac and Ogras were off exploring. More and more people arrived in the Mystic Realm, and the supply of Cosmic Energy soon couldn't meet the demand. Thankfully this issue was solved the moment they split up.

The tunnel to the real world also held steady, and according to Kenzie it should definitely stay that way for at least another week, which incidentally was the deadline of the New World Government projects. It was Jeeves' opinion, based on data it extrapolated from analyzing the array that kept the pathway open. The cost of keeping it running kept increasing as the turbulence from the Mystic Realm's side slowly grew worse, and it believed the spatial chaos to reach a breaking point in around 7 to 12 days.

After that point, the turbulence would be too strong for the natural pathway to remain open. The array Kenzie set up would be rendered useless, and the portal would naturally close. Zac was pretty impressed that AI had managed to extrapolate such critical information just from an array, but he was perhaps even more impressed that the New World Government seemed to have figured the same thing out somehow.

It was a valuable reminder that even a weak force like the New World Government had a lot of talents that he didn't even know about. A lot of the top scientists of the old world were probably part of the government as well, along with any next-gen technology that the governments controlled before the integration. That might be what allowed them to make such detailed plans for the Mystic Realm.

With things being a lot clearer, Zac finally decided to take the risk and go ahead with his back-up plan. He had spent ten days in recuperation by now, and he was in peak condition apart from some remnant Dao that he still hadn't managed to completely route. However, he sorely needed more tools to deal with Void's Disciple, along with the High E-Grade elders who were apparently waiting for him.

He needed to break open the next floor of his Dao Repository.

Chapter 572: Flames

Zac normally wouldn't have done something so risky as to challenge a Half-Step D-Grade Golem, but he was running out of options. He had ambushed Void's Disciple with the strongest people he could muster, but he still walked away almost scot-free. Certainly, he did seem to have been slightly worse for the wear in the security feed, but their group was in a far worse condition.

He needed another power-up.

That was his greatest takeaway from the battle, and that feeling had only increased since arriving at the Mystic Realm. The influence that the Dao of Space had over this whole base was far greater than he had expected, and who knew whether that would bring Adcarkas even more advantages.

He had tried to come up with other ideas over the past ten days, but this was the only thing with a decent chance of success. His first hope had been to quickly find some way to awaken his bloodline, they hadn't found a single useful thing inside so far. There were a lot of signs pointing toward this being a bloodline research base, but the useful stuff might all be locked in the center of the research base. Furthermore, the portal would close in a couple of days, so it was now or never.

It didn't look like his Hidden Node was gearing up to provide him with pure Dao distilled from Tribulation Lightning either, so he would have to risk his life for power once more. If he could gain access to the E-Grade skills he would gain a large boost in power, and the same went for Ogras and the elite Demons who had already evolved as well.

Besides, Zac wasn't doing anything he didn't have a certain confidence in succeeding. Zac believed that he had found a path to victory, or at least a way to survive the attempt.

It became possible only when combining a few things that had changed over the past weeks. First of all, was the discovery that **[Blighted Cut]** worked just as well on inanimate objects as it did on living beings. Even rocks would rot and lose their structural integrity when hit by the E-Grade skill of his Undead Class.

Zac had also confirmed the same thing on the guarding puppets he got for closing the Incursions. It was the most similar target to the trial of the Dao Repository, and his undead skillset was extremely efficient in taking them out. Even the captains were helpless against the combination of his extreme durability and high lethality.

Secondly, it was the fact that Triv had already confirmed that the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** would work on his undead form. He had been worried before that he would encounter the same issue as with the Race-improving herbs. Luckily there were surprisingly almost no Life-attuned energies inside the seed, just a fiery power that would work even on the unliving.

Finally, he had visited Brazla five times over the past week, each time finagling a little bit of information about the trial as he mainly focused on finding out about the Dimensional Seed. The takeaway was that berserking items such as the seed were allowed in the trial, whereas powerful arrays or talismans were not. The logic was that surviving using a powerful Berserker Treasure could be considered a strength of your own, and a unique perk of cultivators with high Vitality.

This meant that he could use his Draugr-class, push it to the equivalent of Middle E-Grade with the seed, and restrict and grind down the trial golem while staying safe with the toolkit of his Fetters of Desolation-class. Zac quickly turned thoughts to action as he snuck back through the Spatial tunnel, with only the guarding Valkyries knowing he had left the Mystic Realm.

Zac wasted no time back on Earth either and he immediately teleported back to his compound. Everything pointed to him having almost a week, but he still felt the risk of getting locked outside. He had already decided that he would stay in Port

Atwood at most for an hour or two, even if he had to drag himself back to the Mystic Realm while half-dead.

“Oh? I thought you had left. I was looking forward to some peace and quiet,” Brazla snorted as Zac entered the Repository, but Zac still inwardly breathed out in relief when he saw that the Tool Spirit seemed to have one of his more amiable personalities today.

“I want to undergo the trial to unlock the E-Grade skills,” Zac said as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hands.

“So you think you’re infallible now that you’ve spent some time among the weaklings,” Brazla said with disdain. “Well, no matter. It makes no difference to The Great Sage whether you live or die.”

Brazla lazily waved the arms of his golden robes next, and a portal appeared in the middle of the hallway.

“Just step inside and you’ll be taken to the trial ground,” Brazla said with disinterest.

Zac nodded but he didn’t immediately enter. He instead swapped over to his undead class while **[Love’s Bond]** transformed into its shield-form. Zac didn’t stop there either, but he also activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]** along with **[Immutable Bulwark]**. This would be a trial conducted by Brazla himself, and Zac wouldn’t take any chances. He might not get the opportunity to transform on the other side.

“So cautious,” Brazla snorted, but Zac only ignored him as he stepped up to the teleporter.

“Any last-minute advice?” Zac asked.

“The faster you fail the quicker I can return to my rest,” Brazla said after some thought. “So don’t dally.”

“Great,” Zac sighed as he stepped onto the teleporter.

The teleportation was immediate, but Zac didn’t even have an opportunity to take stock of his surroundings before a stream of lava the thickness of his thighs almost hit his head. He barely had time to move his shield in time, but he was still pushed back over ten meters from the incredible force of the

molten rock. If that wasn't enough Zac also was assailed by a terrifying heat until he finally managed to divert the stream in its entirety. He could feel a stinging sensation on his face, and he audibly groaned when he knew that he had become a monk once more.

However, he was still more concerned about the stream of molten rock as it wasn't simple lava like the one in the Underworld. This lava contained a fierce spirituality, and Zac actually guessed that it could be considered a powerful E-Grade material. That fact alone made him gawk as he took stock of his surroundings. It was a huge sea of lava, with the only solid ground being the small island he was standing on.

Far in the distance rocky walls could barely be discerned through the smoke rising from the fiery lake, and they reached toward the sky in all directions until he could spot a circle of red sky straight above him. It didn't take a genius to figure out that he had appeared inside a volcano, and a high-grade one at that.

Thankfully Brazla had saw fit to let him out on the only safe spot, a circular plateau that rose a few meters above the sea of lava and spanned around five hundred meters across. It didn't seem to be a natural formation as it was perfectly circular and flat. Even its surface consisted of beautiful tiles, each of them with a unique image engraved.

The platform was mostly empty apart from what looked like an enormous anvil placed in the middle. Next to it was what looked to be a small pool of lava, no more than ten meters across. Zac guessed that it was connected to the massive lake, but he couldn't be certain as the intense attuned energies that rose from that pond almost blinded him when using [**Cosmic Gaze**].

There were also several boulders studded across its surface along with a dozen slabs of unknown metals stacked to the side. The raw materials looked different from each other, but it was clear that all of them could withstand the intense heat without a problem, meaning they likely were spiritual metals.

At least Zac guessed anything that could survive in this harsh environment to be a valuable material.

Zac couldn't be certain, but it felt as though the sea of lava was at least a dozen miles across, which meant this monstrosity of a volcano completely dwarfed both the volcano in the underworld and the one that the Church of Everlasting Dao had controlled. It almost beggared comprehension how much lava would be required to fill it up.

There was one break in the lava right behind him though, a single pathway leading across the whole ocean into a tunnel on the other side of the wall. But it was precariously narrow, just two meters across, and it was constantly being blasted by waves of magma or gouts of flames.

His first instinct was that his trial would take place on the other side, and Zac couldn't help but feel he had bit off more than he could chew by taking on this trial. He wasn't confident in making it across that narrow bridge even when using his sturdier class. The power in that sea of lava was just too intense.

However, a voice soon dragged him out of his musings.

"This was my creator's smithy. Or well, one of them," a grating voice echoed out, and Zac looked up to see Brazla floating in the air.

The Tool Spirit had changed getup since entering the trial ground, and he was currently gripping a grotesquely large hammer, its massive bulk even overshadowing Billy's club. It was golden just like everything else Brazla used, but this weapon actually had a palpable aura in contrast to the other weapons the Tool Spirit often conjured. A thought suddenly struck Zac, and he looked at the Tool Spirit with suspicion.

Was the guardian actually Brazla himself?

"A Celestial Craftsman such as Brazla wouldn't deign to lower himself to muck around in the mud with some child," Brazla snorted with disdain, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking. "Your opponent is over there. The Great Sage is only here to be amused."

Zac nodded in understanding as he turned in the direction the tool spirit was pointing in.

A ten-meter rock was lying on the other side of the stone plateau, looking just like the other boulders that studded its surface. Zac had initially thought that those pieces of rubble were things that had been spit out by the lava and accidentally fallen onto the plateau, but the truth didn't seem so simple. Just as Zac looked over a startling change took place as the rock itself exploded, causing the whole area to be shrouded in dust.

“Have fun,” the Tool Spirit laughed as he floated higher in the air.

Zac wanted to swear at the cavalier attitude of Brazla, but he knew better than that. It was better to direct his ire toward the guardian than the tool spirit, as there was no telling that Brazla would do if he got annoyed. Zac couldn't see what was going on inside the dust cloud, but his **[Cosmic Gaze]** noticed that vast amounts of attuned energies radiated from its center.

Something illuminated the cloud in grey and a fiery orange, and Zac recognized both the Daos; Fire and Steel. Zac frowned when he felt the intense spiritual fluctuations, as they almost rivaled his own Dao Field. He had somewhat hoped that the trial guardian would be more like the Cyborg in the Underworld. It had possessed shockingly high attributes, but it didn't utilize the Dao at all, severely limiting the damage it did.

If the Cyborg had also been able to use just a Peak Seed rather than just its body, then Zac definitely wouldn't have survived the encounter.

However, he was clearly not as lucky this time around. An explosion erupted from within the cloud once more, and the blast forced Zac back a few steps. He quickly swallowed the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, decidedly going all-out from the start. His instincts told him that undergoing this trial without it would be nigh suicidal.

It was as though Zac swallowed the molten ocean itself as a shocking force spread through his limbs. It felt like every cell

in his body suddenly had a heartbeat of its own, and all of them were beating like the drums of war. Even his soul had ballooned up to unprecedented proportions and Zac almost believed he was the heavens themselves for a moment before he found his bearings.

However, he couldn't sit still and wait to see what was going on in that ominous dust cloud. A surging momentum was building up in his chest, and it demanded release. A mighty roar escaped from his lips as he bent down toward the ground to rip out one of the intricate tiles. He would start this battle like he often did, with a pre-emptive throw containing all his bloodlust.

However, the stone refused to budge, and Zac felt a towering fury lambasting his mind, a fury directed at the creator of this place. How dare a mere tile setter subvert the will of a god? His arms shook with exertion, but it was to no avail. But Zac figured it might be for the best as he started running toward the cloud with purpose in his steps and death in his eyes.

After all, was there any better feeling than ripping apart your enemies with your bare hands?

Chapter 573: Ash and Steel

Ash and steel swirled in Zac's eyes as he pushed forward, urged on by the call of battle. His muscles trembled in anticipation and veins were popping out all across his body to accommodate the overflowing Miasma, and there was even a red haze rising from his very pores. It was no doubt weakness leaving his body, a miracle that the Zhix warriors could only dream of achieving.

The trial no longer mattered. The E-Grade skills no longer mattered. The only thing of import was the thrill of the fight, to use this smithy as an opportunity to temper himself in the fires of war. His axe was already salivating corrosive venom across the floor, no doubt anxious to bite into their shrouded enemy.

A third explosion erupted from within the haze, but Zac's anticipation only grew as his arm swelled. His power was already enough to rival the firmament itself, but it wasn't enough. He pushed into the cloud, but he only took two steps before he sharply stepped to the right as his axe fell. The pincer of a massive tong suddenly appeared and barely missed his head, its size enough to grab Zac's whole torso even when he already had turned into his ultimate form that rose over three meters into the air.

Zac only sneered as his bardiche fell toward the exposed hand, his response already planned out. His soul was one with the Dao itself, so how could a paltry sneak attack ever work? However, he screamed in anger when his foe didn't have the decency to lose his hand from the transgression. What should have been a fountain of nurturing blood only turned into a reverberating clang that finally pushed all the dust out of the area, exposing his prey.

And it was big.

The target towered almost three meters above him, but Zac didn't care about the specifics. There were weapons to clash with and limbs to cut, what else was there to know? His first attack had only left a jagged scar on metal and a small festering wound, far from accomplishing his goal. But wasn't that great news? How boring would it be if one swing would have ended the fight? This way he could keep tempering himself, keep reveling in the glory of slaughter.

The massive slab of a hand swiped out at him after being cut, and Zac laughed as he moved his shield to slam it out of the way. A faint voice whispered in the back of his head about a way to empower its defensive capabilities, but he couldn't abide by such cowardice. An intractable force pushed into the core of his being as he was thrown away, and the sweet taste of miasma appeared in his mouth as he slammed into the ground over thirty meters away.

But Zac had eaten the divine seed, making him invulnerable. He could be kicked down a million times, yet he would rise again to tear down his foes. Not even a second had passed before he was almost back at his target, launching a flurry of strikes aimed to maim and brutalize the big bastard in front of him. The tong kept slamming into him and throwing him away, but Zac was more than happy to go along with the cycle of destruction.

Every time he came back he could see a few more scars on his enemy while he was just fine. The wounds were like a beautiful piece of art, and Zac an artisan using his axe as a paintbrush. A bit more and a masterpiece would be born. However, the coward in front of him seemed to finally have realized the futility of catching Zac with its tongs.

Zac was the incarnation of war, his technique and movements the peak of perfection. To catch him unaware was as impossible as catching the wind. The miscreant was clearly on its last legs as it reached for something attached to its back, no doubt another feeble attempt to take him out. Zac laughed uproariously, as he gathered power in his fist to meet whatever his prey had in store. A punch felt like the right decision here.

Violence would be met with violence, and blood would be repaid with blood.

However, a piercing scream of danger finally managed to cut through the madness, and Zac's eyes widened in horror when he saw what was about to hit him. He barely managed to stop in his tracks and move his shield to block, but there was no time to activate **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He was also unable to completely dispel his accumulated momentum, so Zac was still caught by the edge of the enormous hammer and thrown to the other edge of the platform like a ragdoll.

His whole body hurt, but the pain was still muted and somehow distant thanks to the fierce killing intent still churning in his chest. However, his Danger Sense had allowed him to at least regain most of his rationality, though Zac couldn't be sure. He had felt completely lucid just a second ago as well, and that he had everything under control. But only now did he realize that he had acted like a raving lunatic, and worrying wounds covered his whole body.

Zac had severely overestimated his mental fortitude when planning this fight. He previously believed himself almost immune to the effects of taking a berserking item thanks to his experience dealing with this kind of mental affliction before. But it turned out that not even the Splinter of Oblivion had managed to prepare him for the insidious whispers of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

Thankfully he wasn't hurt to the point of no return, though it didn't look great. His shield arm was hurting quite a bit, and there were even some cracks in a few bones. He hadn't used his defensive skills at all when he fought like a rabid animal, and his body had paid the price. His internal wounds were too numerous to count, and black ichor leaked from the seams of his black armor. He would probably have to use one of his two remaining **[Serene Flesh Pills]** to quickly recover from this mess.

At least he still felt power coursing through his body, allowing him to fight far above his normal capability. No matter if it was speed or strength, it had nearly increased by 60% as far as he could tell. Besides, Zac wasn't the only one who had taken

damage from his insane offensive, and he looked over at his target who seemed content to maintain its distance.

Only after having woken up from his furor did Zac get a proper look at what he was dealing with. It was indeed a golem, but calling it a robot might be more appropriate going by its appearance. It was a bulky bipedal machine that reminded Zac of a five-meter-tall dwarf. It was roughly the height of the greatest Anointed, but its circumference was a few times wider than even Rhubat's. Its four limbs were short and stocky, with an almost spherical torso that was clad in a steel mesh apron. The apron was mostly in tatters by now though, and Zac distinctly remembered having attacked it multiple times already.

Its head was attached straight on its torso without a neck, and in its right hand was an almost picture-perfect copy of the hammer that Brazla had in his hands earlier. The only difference was that it was wrought from some black metal, and it emitted an extremely heavy aura. The array on its hammer face was a bit different too, and Zac almost got a bit dizzy when tracing the extremely intricate lines. This was the weapon the golem had finally grabbed from its back to deal with him.

The golem still held the same steel tong as before in its left hand, completing the look of a mechanical blacksmith. It looked far more like a proper craftsman when compared to the Creators over at Zac's shipyard. Perhaps it really was one too, an assistant who had helped the original Brazla in his work. That would explain why the hammer emitted such shocking pressure.

Anything that could be used in forging spiritual metals would have to be extremely durable as to not break apart after a few days of hammering. The golem blacksmith was clearly made from some sort of attuned materials, making it exude an aura akin to Zac's own Dao Field. It wasn't quite at the same level, but it spoke volumes about the quality of the materials the golem was crafted with.

This was just further proven by his series of frenzied attacks earlier. Zac had maintained some sort of rationality earlier, or

perhaps it would be fairer to call it a beast's instincts. He had primarily focused on cutting off the golem's limbs, and over a dozen strikes empowered by **[Blighted Cut]** and sometimes also **[Unholy Strikes]** had reached their mark before he was thrown away. However, the golem clearly had its limbs, and they seemed to be in working order.

However, that wasn't to say that his efforts were completely ineffective. The colors of the metals around the axe scars were decidedly darker than the rest of its body, meaning that Zac had laid the foundation for victory. He was clear on how powerful his new E-Grade skill was, and not even spiritual metals would be able to resist forever.

The golem might even have some problems judging by the fact that it didn't move toward him. It just stood in the distance and stared at him. Zac just needed to keep working on it and it would sooner or later lose its limbs. However, now that he was awake he would hopefully be able to do so without directly trading blows. After all, his body was sturdy, but not as sturdy as spiritual metals.

Zac really wanted to just sit down and rest up a bit first though, but he forcibly pushed those ideas to the back of his mind. The timer had started the moment that he swallowed the berserking seed, and he had no idea how long it would retain its effect. He had turned a bit insane there for a moment, but its potency couldn't be denied.

Its boosting effect was far beyond what **[Hatchetman's Rage]** provided, a qualitative boost that pushed every aspect of his power to the next tier. Zac knew there was no way for him to break through this golem's defenses without it, especially not if he was suddenly forced to deal with a weakened state.

Calrin's book only described the general properties of the Rageroot Oak and its seeds, but it didn't provide any details. He didn't know exactly how bad the drawbacks were, and when they would kick in. He only knew that it would last longer than a skill, 15 minutes at the minimum. That left ample time, but Zac was afraid that he would slide back into his delusions of being a god of war without notice. He needed

to quickly finish this so that he could eat a soul-nurturing pill to calm down a bit.

Besides, the golem had finally started moving when it realized that Zac wasn't rushing back toward it, and it was already lumbering toward him.

Its step was slow and deliberate, and its weight caused tremors in the ground. Part of its slow speed could probably be attributed to the scars that covered its legs, but Zac also felt that the golem should have an attribute spread similar to his own; focusing on Endurance and Strength. It definitely wasn't something that excelled at speed, which was a shame as his current class was particularly effective against those kinds of targets.

A power-based class was a lot trickier to deal with. That swing before had contained a ruthless finality that had warned him of death and he didn't feel confident in trading a series of blows with the giant in front of him now that it didn't only use the restraining tongs and its fist. Not even with the seed empowering him to unprecedented heights.

But Zac already had experienced dismantling an even bigger golem during the hunt, and he knew how to deal with something like this. Zac released a deep breath as he started to walk back toward the golem, causing a storm of corrosive mists to spread across the whole platform. He didn't really expect the golem to be hurt by [**Winds of Decay**], but he wanted to turn the battlefield more in his favor.

If some of the corrosive mists managed to enter the dozens of festering scars, then all the better.

The miasmatic mists of [**Fields of Despair**] soon billowed out as well, but it barely had time to spread out before the golem's chest expanded to the point that it almost doubled in size. A storm of fire spewed out of its mouth the next moment, spreading hundreds of meters in every direction and utterly destroying Zac's efforts in an instant.

Not a shred of his two skills remained, but the flames lingered on the floor, turning the plateau into an inferno as well. Zac stomped down with force, dispelling the flames in his

immediate vicinity. But the temperature was definitely out of Zac's comfort zone, and he looked at the stoic golem with some trepidation. It looked like the golem had more abilities than just its physical prowess.

Zac had to admit that he might have taken on a bit more than he could chew this time.

Chapter 574: Deathwish

Zac swore in annoyance when he saw the blacksmith effortlessly quash his attempts to putrefy the surroundings.

Turning a battlefield into one that favored you and restrained your enemy was a basic tactic that both his classes possessed. His human side had [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], while his Draugr side had multiple skills in this category. Zac was hoping to use these methods to counteract the blistering heat, but he was out of luck this time.

There was no time to formulate a plan either as the hammer in the golem's meaty hand suddenly turned into a blur. The distance between the two was still over 200 meters, but that wasn't much to E-Grade beings. Zac immediately conjured a fractal bulwark to meet whatever blow the guardian had prepared, but he frowned in consternation when the hammer slammed into the ground right in front of it rather than launched an attack in his direction.

It obviously wasn't a mistake, and Zac's first guess was that it launched something through the ground, like an earthquake or metal spikes that would rise to stab him. However, Zac had still underestimated the advantage that the golem enjoyed in this place, and he was shocked to see a monstrous pillar of smoldering rocks rising out of the lava lake behind him.

It looked like a fiery dragon jumping out of the sea, and it reached almost a hundred meters in height before it started falling in a parabolic arc. Straight toward Zac. There was no hesitation as Zac started running as quickly as his legs could carry him. He would probably be able to block the pillar as it only held the attunement of the lava sea itself, but doing so would fill no purpose.

The stream of lava slammed into the ground half a second after Zac got out of the way, causing a wave of magma to

splatter in every direction. Even its fiery droplets were as large as small boulders, but it was far more manageable for Zac to control and he easily blocked the ones who flew in his direction. However, the attack had left pools of magma across half the plateau, severely limiting Zac's mobility. Just the ambient heat was causing a constant drain on his Miasma, and this only made it worse.

Zac frowned at the scene as he felt that the golem really was cheating. His **[Cosmic Gaze]** could clearly sense that there seemed to be some connection between the robot and the sea of lava surrounding them, which steadily supplied it with a stream of power. It all surged toward a spot roughly at the same place as his own Duplicity Core, which no doubt was the command core of the golem itself.

Destroying it would instantly end the battle, but it was easier said than done. Those kinds of cores were always the most heavily protected components of a puppet, and this blacksmith was no exception. Zac would have to cut his way through the extremely thick plating of its torso if he wanted to take out the golem that way.

And Zac didn't know if he had the energy to keep fighting that long, especially when the Golem was getting outside help. It was like the Dao Discourse all over again, and Zac was pretty certain that this thing would never run out of steam unless he somehow managed to break that connection.

He briefly considered erecting **[Profane Seal]** now that the lava pillar had already landed, but he eventually discarded the idea. The golem was still in peak condition, and Zac felt that he would have to wear the thing down a bit before trying to entrap it. He could only use the skill once, and it would be wasted if it immediately got destroyed by that huge hammer or another lava pillar.

First thing first, he needed to sound out the power of this thing, this time while in control of his faculties. Zac made his way toward the robot, the black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** at least somewhat protecting him from the scorching heat. He still couldn't quite match the golem in bulk

even in this form, but the disparity wasn't nearly as bad as without it.

His fractal bulwark repositioned itself to the front of [**Love's Bond**], superimposing his defenses. Zac didn't have any movement skills to increase his speed, but the plateau was only so big. Each step forward increased his momentum, and he was in front of the golem in just a few seconds, his accumulated force already transferred to a mighty swing aimed to strike down its left leg.

His arm had already swollen up to a size that matched the golem's own as [**Unholy Strike**] was pushed to its limits once more. He needed to dig deeper and deeper with every swing, further increasing the amount of corrosion that could be left behind. However, the robot blacksmith responded with a speed that belied its stocky frame. Its hammer was somehow instantly moved to its left hand, and it pushed the massive hammerhead down toward the ground to block Zac's swing.

The clang of two metals clashing reverberated across the whole area and the inner walls of the volcano bounced the sound back, making it sound like the tolling of church bells. But Zac had no chance to appreciate the hauntingly beautiful sound as he looked at the hammer for signs of damage, only to come up empty-handed.

The first clash between weapons had ended without a victor.

[**Verun's Bite**] had reached new heights since its evolution, but the densely inscribed hammer was obviously a lovingly crafted treasure as well. A fractal had lit up on its side, completely protecting it from getting cut into by the furious swing of Zac's axe. He had managed to cause some damage to the metal plating on the golem itself during his earlier rampage, but it seemed that the hammer itself had reached a far greater level of durability. He didn't even have a chance to apply any corrosion with the array blocking the blackish liquid.

However, the power of Zac's swings wasn't anything to scoff at even for a half-step D-Grade golem. It contained layers of empowerment from multiple skills and the [**Rageroot Oak**

Seed]. Its power was far beyond Zac's normal limits, and even the dragon wouldn't have been able to withstand its might. The enormous golem stumbled back a few steps and the hammer was pushed away, exposing its legs once more.

Zac's eyes lit up at the opportunity, but the blacksmith managed to expertly make use of Zac's force to power a counter-swing before Zac had the chance to swing again. The enormous hammerhead moved in a precise arc, with Zac's head at the end of its trajectory.

There was no time to move away, so Zac forcibly stilled the whispers in his mind that told him to fight fire with fire. He instead readied himself to block the swing, moving to intercept it with his shield. Blocking a direct hit would activate **[Deathwish]**, and the distraction would hopefully create another opening to attack.

The array on the hammer lit up as it approached Zac's barrier, illuminating the pitch-black armor in gold. Zac's aura surged in anticipation of launching a counter of his own, but his abyssal eyes widened in shock when the golem's attack reached **[Immutable Bulwark]**. A weight that Zac never had felt before hit him, far surpassing any Gravity Array he had ever encountered.

It felt as though he was being crushed in the heart of a black hole as a soul-crushing pressure immediately threatened to break every bone in his body. The furious energy of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** surged within his body to counteract the effect, but even the top-quality berserker item proved insufficient. It only took a fraction of a second to realize that his arm would break if he didn't back down.

He immediately angled the shield to allow the hammer to slide down its side and slam into the ground instead. The shockwave would still wound him at such proximity, but it was far preferable to being brutalized by a direct hit. However, just as Zac was tried to divert the attack, so did the golem try to keep the original trajectory. It somehow seemed to be able to anticipate and match Zac's actions, and small adjustments to its stance was all it required to keep the force pointing toward Zac.

A desperate push thankfully forced the golem a bit off-balance, allowing Zac to take a step to the side as he angled the shield even further. The hammer slid down its surface, the friction causing sparks across the whole coffin lid. But the massive slab of metal slammed into the ground instead of onto Zac's body, allowing him to breathe out in relief.

Zac still felt like he was being punched in the gut by the force from the shockwave, but he grit his teeth and stood his ground knowing he would have taken damage for nothing if he didn't respond in kind. The golem's reaction was quick as it tried to keep Zac at bay with its tongs but he managed to push them aside with a swipe of his axe. However, his mind wasn't exactly on the tongs, but rather another realization.

It was [**Deathwish**]. He hadn't truly blocked the hammer's strike, but he had still absorbed some of the force from the swing while redirecting most of it. He didn't actually know that was enough to activate the strike, and he quickly took the opportunity to conjure a massive spectral blacksmith that slammed down toward the back of the blacksmith's head.

The huge golem seemed to take the threat of the spectral hammer extremely seriously, perhaps thinking it would do as much damage as its own. It actually swiveled its torso 180 degrees to meet the attack while its legs stood rooted in place. Zac's had no idea that its upper body could spin around like that, but he could spot an opportunity when he saw it.

The massive blacksmith's hammer rose to meet its spectral twin, and the whole ghost was obliterated in an instant as the true hammer ripped through the false one. Zac didn't care about that though as he lunged for the closest leg. One, two, three swings bit into one of the deeper scars as Zac desperately tried to cut off its leg in one go. However, the metal was simply too hard, and Zac was beset by a counterforce almost strong enough to sprain his wrist.

The barrage was enough to deepen the wound at least, and this time even more corrosive liquid empowered by the Fragment of the Coffin was left behind. The golem's response was quick and it kept spinning its torso clockwise as it kept its hammer swing going. The two-meter wide hammer once more ripped

through the air as it moved straight toward Zac, but he was already moving away from the blacksmith.

The hammer ripped through the air just in front of Zac's face, a gust of fiery wind buffeting his face through the slits of his helmet. However, Zac didn't care as it felt as though a new door had opened to him thanks to the latest exchange, and he realized that there was huge room for improvement in how he fought as a Draugr.

Zac had always been extremely confident of his Endurance since getting his second class, certain that he would be able to outlast anyone in a brutal melee. That had made his technique sloppy, where he relied on his body to be able to take the beating. There was no reason to take on unnecessary punishment though; he needed to improve his efficiency.

Rather than blocking 100% of a strike he could block 20% while diverting the rest of the force. This was just how many of the more experienced fighters had acted, like how Void's Disciple had somehow sapped the strength from his strikes. It would result in the same outcome, but with him wasting less Miasma and getting wounded less.

He needed to increase as much damage as possible while taking as little damage as possible. It was such a basic concept, but it was easier said than done to apply it in the heat of battle. The tongs were already coming for his head as the blacksmith advanced on him, but Zac took a step forward while angling his shield once more, allowing the pincers to push right past his head as he came close.

The corrosion from his previous strike along with his Dao was still lodged in the golem's leg, but it was quickly being eroded by a fiery heat emanating from the Puppet Core. He couldn't allow his earlier efforts to go to waste, and he swung twice in quick succession once more before a terrifying swing of the hammer forced him back.

Zac's mind screamed at him to keep going, to stop backing away from the battle, but he refused to give in to the battle lust again. He had already taken too much damage, so he needed to be measured in his approach. The golem kept pushing forward

with an intractable momentum, like Zac was just a stubborn block of metal on the anvil.

Zac felt a slight in his arm as he rerouted the hammer toward the ground, and another spectral blacksmith appeared. The golem froze from indecision for an instant, but Zac shook his head when it quickly chose to ignore the ghost.

The spectral hammer slammed into the golem's head with furious velocity, but Zac knew it was just a hollow strike. However, Zac's eyes widened in surprise when the hammer slammed into the golem with enough force to cause it to stumble, and a small but noticeable dent had appeared on its head. There was no earthly reason that his counter-skill could do enough damage for something like this to happen except one.

[Deathwish] had evolved to the next stage.

Chapter 575: Tempering

Zac was elated to see that another one of his skills had evolved. It had become increasingly hard to push them forward lately, partly because of his lack of good targets to practice on. **[Deathwish]** was a mainstay of his class too, a skill that was a constant drain on his enemy and the bane of any Dexterity-based classes.

However, Zac knew that he couldn't expect too much from the skill in this fight, even if it had just reached Late Proficiency. The spectral blacksmith's attack did cause a slight dent, but the golem immediately regained its footing. The small stumble did give Zac the opportunity to launch another barrage of axe swings before the tongs came for him though, which was exactly what he needed.

He tried to repeat his earlier successes and block the pincers next, but he had underestimated the golem as Zac suddenly had a meaty leg slam into his shield as the tong disappeared from sight. Zac was thrown away once more as pain wracked his body. He had made some improvements to his fighting style just now, but it was too little too late. This couldn't go on.

He was getting better, but the golem was also slowly adapting, and Zac would bleed out before he managed to completely dismantle that thing if he didn't change things up a bit. He eventually made a decision as **[Love's Bond]** turned into its offensive form, its four free chains hovering in the air around him like venomous snakes. Droplets of corrosive liquid fell down on the burning tiles beneath, causing a constant sizzling sound around him.

The fractal shield of **[Immutable Bulwark]** disappeared as he no longer had a shield to base it on, but that was easily solved as Zac took out one of his back-up shields. It wasn't anything special, but it was enough to conjure his defensive skills. The

defensive capabilities of the skills were considerably worse when based on a normal shield, but it wasn't like Zac dared to take a direct hit in any case.

He rushed back to repeat the process, and the golem met his approach with a wide vertical arc of the hammer again. Zac had already expected this, and a new fractal bulwark had already appeared to divert the hammer. He quickly took a diagonal step as the four chains shot forward. Two of them moved to intercept the golem's left hand as the other two tried to poke holes in the golem's legs like spears.

Zac himself was in hot pursuit, though not without his own difficulties. His left arm hurt like hell as the provisional shield had been turned to scrap metal that dug into his arm. Even blocking a portion of the hammer had completely destroyed both the fractal bulwark and the shield beneath. Zac could only throw the twisted shield to the ground and summon a new one from his Spatial Ring as he reached the golem's legs.

Metal clashed against metal, but the crisp sounds were slowly turning dull as the metal was steadily being deteriorated. Zac almost decided to go all-in then and there, but he quickly shook his head as he backed away. He had almost let his success go to his head, allowing the seed to take control once more.

But the two-meter wide hammer was still a deadly threat. One hit and it would be game over. Zac couldn't help but briefly think of Ogras while he walked a tightrope, moving back and forth to whittle down the golem while narrowly avoiding taking a lethal blow. Cold sweat would no doubt be running down his face and back if he was in his human form right now. Was this how fighting felt like for Dexterity-based cultivators, walking hand in hand with death?

It was just terrifying.

However, while the golem was mighty, but it was ultimately not a sapient cultivator. It had some sort of battle-algorithm that improved over the course of the fight, but Zac was able to figure the preferred trajectories and fighting patterns soon enough. The swings that had felt life-threatening a few

minutes ago no longer felt as dangerous as Zac and his chains swirled about.

The golem's attacks still contained the same power as before, but Zac was well aware of its reach and speed by now. He didn't take as much damage from his blocks either, as he slowly managed to lessen the force he forcibly had to block every time. In the beginning, he was taking on up to 30% before he managed to divert the strike, but after just a few minutes that number should have decreased to 20%.

His back-up-shields now managed to withstand two strikes before breaking apart, and his arm wasn't hurt every time either.

The chains of [**Love's Bond**] kept slamming into the scars with extreme force, and the ground was littered with metal plates and molten puddles from the disposable shields. It was like the chains lived their own lives as they targeted the weaknesses of the golem, and Zac could almost exclusively focus on creating as much damage as he could.

The golem, or rather its components, finally couldn't take it any longer after another five minutes of intense battering. It took a step toward Zac to launch its next swing, but a snap echoed out as its left leg shattered like it was made from brittle glass. The ceaseless attacks of [**Blighted Cut**] had finally permeated the whole leg, and Zac's eyes lit up as he saw his opportunity.

He immediately stomped into the ground while the golem toppled over, and the cage of [**Profane Seal**] sprung up around them. The lava lake just outside the cage immediately started to wear down the skill, but Zac didn't care about that as he ordered the 20 spectral chains to shoot toward his prey. The four available chains of [**Love's Bond**] were even quicker as they wrapped around the golem multiple times before they slammed into the ground to pin it down, especially focusing on keeping the hammer-wielding arm in check.

The golem desperately tried to pry itself free with its tongs, but Zac was already upon the golem with his axe, and a frenzied series of swings destroyed the arm before the spectral

chains had even reached him. Soon enough the golem was barely visible beneath over a dozen chains, but Zac still felt a pang of danger as the whole golem burst into searing-hot flames.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, knowing that his spectral chains wouldn't be able to last more than a second or two in this state. But he still didn't back down. If the golem managed to break out then it was over. He was running dangerously low on Miasma already, and just summoning **[Profane Seal]** had been a risk.

A bit more and his Specialty Core would activate by itself, and a 3-second phase of weakness was enough for him to be turned into paste. The fires spread from the golem to the point that the pile of chains looked like a bonfire, and even Zac's armor had been ignited.

The golem was seemingly trying to bring Zac down with it to hell as it exuded more and more flames, but Zac ignored the scorching pain across his body as the fire danced in his eyes. He was waiting, each moment feeling like an eternity, but suddenly there was a change in the skill fractal on his arm.

The real strike of **[Blighted Cut]** was finally ready.

Zac didn't hesitate, knowing his time was limited. The moment felt the change in **[Blighted Cut]** he immediately seized the opportunity. This was what he had worked so hard for, and he needed to make it count. Three black waves appeared around the golem and they shot into its bulky frame in an instant, cutting through the flames like they weren't even there.

It was like the strike was both corporeal and a projection as it passed straight through the chains that held the golem in place, and the waves disappeared into the golem's torso, each of them aiming for the same spot. The robot blacksmith frenetically struggled for another few seconds, but it was futile. A subdued crack could be heard from within, and Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that the golem's core had been cut apart.

Without that, it was just a big hunk of metal, and it unsurprisingly stopped moving just a second later. There was no surge of energy entering his body to confirm the kill, but that was always the case with beings without sapience. The blacksmith was ultimately a puppet rather than a true golem cultivator like the Creators, and destroying it didn't award any Cosmic Energy at all.

It was as though the air left Zac's body after golem stopped moving, and he barely managed to escape the flames before he helplessly fell down on the ground from exhaustion. He still felt the effects of the seed coursing through his body, but he knew his body wasn't in any state to take advantage of it any longer. Activating the final and ultimate strike of **[Blighted Cut]** had drained him of his last Miasma as well, and his Duplicity Core had already begun reverting him back to a human.

He would normally hold off on turning back to human considering the state his body was in, but Zac didn't have much choice at the moment. He could only prepare the **[Serene Flesh Pill]** and he popped it into his mouth the instant the transformation was complete. A surge of pain wracked his body the moment he came alive, but it was thankfully quickly soothed by the High-Quality Zethaya pill.

His body was still drained of energy though, and he was content lying on the ground gasping for air a while longer.

"What a disgraceful display," a disgusted voice snorted, and Zac turned his bleary eyes toward the Tool Spirit who had appeared next to him at an unknown time. "I knew you were talentless, but this was beyond the pale. What kind of craven backwater planet was I sent to if you're the best of the best?"

"Well, the golem is down, which means I passed, right?" Zac sighed, his voice barely recognizable.

"Luckily for you, my creator didn't add any base requirement of skill or grace, so you barely passed," the Tool Spirit said with a shake of his head. "As specified, you will be provided with a round of tempering for being the one to open the second floor of the Dao Repository. Considering your level you would

be given the full 30 minutes, but I'll go ahead and deduct 10 minutes for cheating by using a Berserking Item."

"What tempering? And wait, I got a reduction for using the seed?! You never mentioned anything like this before," Zac said with a frown as he dragged himself up to his feet. "You said it was okay using things like that!"

The fact that he had missed out on some rewards because the Tool Spirit wasn't doing his job was infuriating, and anger overcame his caution as he glared at Brazla.

"Well, you never asked," Brazla laughed, clearly delighted by Zac's anger. "Besides, The Great Sage only said that you were allowed to use it. I never said that it wouldn't affect your grading."

Zac wanted to argue that it clearly making things difficult for him, but his head was just a mush after the fight. He could only point at the Tool Spirit in righteous indignation, which only seemed to delight Brazla even further.

"Can't be wearing those rags during the tempering though," Brazla muttered, and Zac found himself floating in front of the Tool Spirit the next moment.

"Wai-" Zac screamed, but it was to no avail as everything from his robes to his spatial ring was dragged off his body, leaving him stark naked.

"Now, off you go."

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, but the Tool Spirit was impossibly fast as its golden hammer turned into a blur. He wasn't even able to consider a response before the Tool Spirit had already attacked him. Zac was already exhausted from the battle, but he inwardly knew that he wouldn't have been able to block that strike even in peak condition. It was just on a completely different level than even the golem just now.

Thankfully there was no painful sensation from being hit by the golden hammer, but alarm bells still went off in his head when he was launched into the air. Worse yet, he found himself completely restrained as his body became covered in dense golden fractals. He couldn't circulate his Cosmic Energy

at all, and his mental connection to his Spirit Tools was severed as well.

He was utterly helpless, and he could only look on with trepidation as he flew closer and closer to the enormous anvil in the middle of the plateau. The battle before had caused massive shockwaves and fires to spread across the whole area, but the massive slab of metal still stood there completely unscathed.

Zac's flight got an abrupt end as Zac slammed into the anvil's side face first, and the blinding pain almost made him pass out. He wanted to get away, or at least reset his broken nose, but he still couldn't move because of the runes covering his body.

So he could only mentally curse the tool spirit one last time as he started sliding down toward the pool of magma below.

Chapter 576: Plunge

Zac struggled against the restraints that covered his body, but it was to no avail and the only reason he didn't cry out in shock as he fell toward the red-hot magma was that he was physically unable to.

It was a poignant reminder of the true power of the annoying braggart who usually just messed around in the Towers of Myriad Dao. Brazla might not be a real cultivator, but he was definitely a top-tier D-Grade Tool Spirit, perhaps even approaching C-Grade. Going by how powerful Verun already was in E-Grade, then Brazla was probably the most powerful being in Port Atwood, with Karunthel being the only possible exception.

The lava in the small pond below him was definitely something far more dangerous than the lake surrounding the platform, and Zac was almost thankful that he couldn't activate [**Cosmic Gaze**] close to the pond. The shocking amounts of attuned energies below him made the hair on his arms stand on end, and looking straight at it with his skill might have blinded him.

However, Zac quickly calmed down even as he still fell. Suddenly being stripped naked and thrown into a metal anvil with enough force to break his nose had plunged his exhausted mind into chaos, but he quickly remembered what was going on. Brazla might be annoying and fond of causing trouble, but he always did what his creator had instructed him to.

The Tool Spirit's execution was definitely lacking, but this was no doubt an opportunity that Zac had to seize.

That notion only grew stronger as an extremely intricate script appeared on the pool of lava just before he dropped into it, and Zac immediately realized how similar it was to the golden array that currently covered and restrained his body. He didn't

get the chance to get a better look though as he was submerged in the lava the next moment, forcing him to quickly close his eyes.

His body instinctively strained to swim up to the surface, but he was still completely unable to move as he sunk deeper and deeper into the depths. Thankfully, he quickly realized that the lava around him didn't hurt at all. The magma rather felt like a warm embrace, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. That by itself confused Zac even further as fresh air somehow entered his lungs even when he was supposed to be submerged.

Was the lava around him just an illusion?

The notion was so strong that he actually opened his eyes, but surrounding him was just an endless red, with the occasional wisp of white-hot fires. It definitely looked like lava, but his vision wasn't completely obfuscated as he could actually see his body just fine, making him feel like he was submerged in water rather than molten rock.

The situation was extremely odd, but his attention was quickly seized by the small sparks of white flames that flitted about before they disappeared. There was something unique about those flames. It was definitely fire-attunement, but also something more. It felt like he could only grasp the edge of it, similar to how he was unable to understand even a corner of the Chaos Pattern back then.

It was pretty annoying that he couldn't activate [**Cosmic Gaze**] to get a better look, but he wasn't too sure it would do him any good against those small fires. They didn't feel as vast as the Purple Lightning or domineering as the System's presence, but they were extremely pure. The impression they gave Zac was that all the attuned energies he had seen until now were fake, a hollow mimicry of energies truly touched by the Dao.

Was this perhaps how C-Grade attuned energies looked like? Or was it something else entirely? It honestly didn't feel as powerful as something that could be considered C-Grade, and it was rather more reminiscent of the Dao Intent that Thea had been imparted from the Inheritance. In either case, it was

definitely something valuable, and Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation.

The odd surroundings made it impossible to get a proper bearing but it felt like he was being submerged deeper and deeper by the second, to the point that he had descended thousands of meters into the depths of the volcano. The pure energies around him only seemed to become even stronger as he sank deeper, and the surroundings quickly changed from red to a warm yellow until it was just a world of pure white.

When the color gradient stopped changing so did Zac's impression of descending, and he knew that his opportunity was about to arrive. Brazla had said that he had gained 20 minutes of Body Tempering, and he guessed that the clock had already started ticking. The problem was that Zac had no idea what to do next.

He didn't own any bloodline tempering manual just yet, and the white fire around him didn't seem to do anything apart from heating his body. He wasn't a cultivator either, so he was unable to naturally absorb the energies from his surroundings. Not that he was sure it would be possible to circulate a Cultivation Manual when covered in a set of restraining runes.

However, tendrils of warmth finally started burrowing into his body, filling him with that mysterious force he had sensed earlier. Zac was initially worried that such a force would be dangerous to absorb when he was just E-Grade, but the white fire was extremely gentle as the warmth spread across his body. The intensity kept increasing, but it didn't hurt at all.

It was as though his body could contain an endless amount of this force without issue, and that he could withstand the steadily increasing heat in his body. The exhaustion from the battle was soon forgotten, replaced with a state of complete relaxation. It was like he had returned to the womb, and his eyes were starting to get heavy.

But Zac's eyes shot open just as they were about to close as he noticed a startling change across his body. His skin had started to change color, rapidly turning molten red. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing as he looked down at his hands. It

looked like he was made out of metal, and that this metal was heated in a furnace to a melting-point. It didn't hurt at all though, and Zac guessed this was the tempering that Brazla mentioned.

Zac was about close his eyes again and let the warmth wash his body clean, but a sudden force slammed into him, startling him awake. It felt startlingly similar to when the blacksmith golem pummeled him with its hammer, and sharp pain radiated across Zac's torso. It wasn't quite at the level of the terrifying **[Bone-Forging Dust]** he had used a couple of times by now, but it was still extremely painful. However, he knew that he had to endure to get the full benefits of whatever this tempering entailed.

One slam after another made Zac's body shudder, and the words of Brazla reappeared in the back of his mind. Less than a minute had passed and it felt like he was about to pass out from the pain, how would he be able to withstand almost 20 more minutes of this? But Zac forcibly pushed those cowardly thoughts out of his mind, and he emptied his mind as he welcomed another hammering.

This was a god-given opportunity to empower himself, and he wouldn't waste it.

The hits kept increasing in both strength and frequency though, and Zac's conviction was quickly starting to crack. He had essentially been turned into a piece of raw metal that was being worked over by this mysterious array, his flesh turned malleable by the heat around him. Were there even any benefits of doing this? He was just being pummeled over and over. What if this opportunity was meant for Peak E-Grade warriors who had properly evolved their bodies to D-Grade long ago? Was this perhaps even detrimental to him rather than beneficial?

However, those invasive thoughts were suddenly thrown away after a couple of minutes as Zac suddenly could see palpable results, and his eyes lit up as he wished the hits could come even faster.

His body was still glowing red-hot, but murky clouds were being expelled from his pores all across his body. They tainted the pure white of the surroundings for an instant before incinerated to the point that they were utterly annihilated. These clouds were definitely impurities and various types of sequelae trapped in his body, and he could even recognize their sources with the help of the weak aura they emitted just before they were burnt away.

First to get expelled was the fiery energies of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, and small explosions erupted as they came in contact with the magma. Next were the stubborn Dao energies left in his body from his fight with Void's Disciple. The sight made him widen his eyes, as there was a lot more stuck in his body than he had realized.

His pores kept spewing out the two foreign Daos, and by the time the slams no longer could extract any more he had expelled even more than he had removed himself over the past ten days. The tempering didn't end there though, and Zac's eyes were wide with marvel as impurities left from his **[Bone Forging Dust]**, node-breaking pills, and all other sorts of treasures spewed out one by one.

Every second he felt as though his body was becoming lighter, and worry had long been exchanged with elation. Who would have known that such a huge boon was hidden within the Dao Repository? The magical molding even managed to find hidden remnants of the wound Mhal left when implanting him with the Draugr-samples so long ago, and the deathly energies were quashed in the lava lake.

Zac couldn't help but lament that his time in the lake was limited even though it felt like his body was being broken and remolded every second.

That feeling only grew when there was finally a reaction from his **[Void Heart]**. It had been utterly silent since swallowing the Tribulation Lightning, but it had suddenly started vibrating as it gobbled up a small part of the fiery energies in his body. Not only that, but Zac' actually felt two more spots on his body vibrate in a similar fashion.

First was the same spot in his head as he had sensed before, the spot that Zac suspected to be another hidden node related to his soul or the Dao. The second vibration came from his spine down at the small of his back. It immediately made him think of the **[Bloodline Marrow]** he had been awarded before, and he could only lament that it was left in his Spatial Ring.

Unfortunately, the three spots only seemed to resonate with each other, with the two spots seeming unwilling to be opened. Zac tried everything he could to steer more of the mysterious energy into those two spots, but it was to no avail. Soon enough there were only seconds left before twenty minutes had passed, and Zac knew that this opportunity wasn't enough to break open the two nodes.

He could only give up on breaking open those two nodes, but he also knew that just finding them was a huge step forward. Before he only suspected the spot in his head, but now he was 100% certain about the location of two hidden nodes. Forcibly opening them was just a matter of finding the right sort of treasure by now.

The time was running out, so Zac readied himself mentally in case he would have to swim out by himself somehow, but a scene right at the end made him almost forget about the hidden node.

Not one, not two, but six small runes that clearly were of different origins suddenly shot out between his brows just before his vision blurred. The next moment he found himself panting on the ground in the hallways of the Towers of Myriad Dao, and Zac was relieved to see his spatial ring and treasures lying next to him.

His mind was foggy and unfocused after having both gone through a tough battle and the subsequent tempering, but he forced himself to stay awake as he reached for his spatial rings and robes. Just getting dressed felt like an almost insurmountable task, but by the time he was clothed again, he actually felt a lot better.

The six runes he saw at the end were definitely cause for concern, but Zac couldn't stifle his curiosity as he quickly

opened his status screen. His body had been thoroughly cleansed and tempered, and he hoped that the encounter had pushed him to D-Grade race. However, confusion rather than elation marred his face after opening the status screen. His status had changed, but definitely not as he had expected.

[E] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted, Unawakened)

Chapter 577: Corruption

Zac mutely looked at the revised line in his status screen for a few seconds. There was only one way to interpret the addition even though it didn't exactly match the intelligence he had gathered so far. His lava bath had purified his constitution to the point that his previously unknown Bloodline could be listed, even if it hadn't completely awakened yet.

And he had to admit that it sounded pretty damn powerful.

Zac almost ate his **[Bloodline Marrow]** then and there in hopes to properly awaken it, but he barely managed to restrain the impulse. First of all, his body was in a completely drained state after using the **[Berserking Pill]** even if the lava bath had managed to expel most of the toxins. Eating a treasure in this condition was essentially the same as flushing them down the toilet.

But more importantly, the fact that the status screen termed his bloodline 'corrupted' gave him pause.

He had never heard of something like this before. Zac had bought a few general missives about bloodlines after realizing he might have one, but they didn't cover anything like this. The unawakened line was just as described, but the mention of corruption had never been brought up at all.

The most basic way to explain a bloodline was to call it a genetic mutation brought on by an extremely powerful ancestor. After reaching a certain stage their bodies became vessels of their cultivation path, fundamentally affecting their genetics. The body of someone walking the path of fire would essentially turn into a being whose flesh could turn into flames at will. Even their convictions and beliefs were added into the bloodlines.

The rules of what was required to pass on a bloodline weren't exactly clear, but the general consensus was that one needed to

reach middle C-Grade at the least for one's body to transform to the point that their cultivation path could be passed on. However, this actually happening was still extremely rare, which meant that there most likely were more requirements. Some posited that there was a requirement of affinity and understanding of the Dao, whereas others believed that great mental strength was required.

In either case, one needed to be beyond the norm for a bloodline to be born. It was also generally believed that the more powerful a cultivator became, the greater a bloodline they would leave behind. A C-Grade Monarch's bloodline would probably be the lowest rung, to the point that it disappeared after a few short generations. Only the most powerful beings could leave behind bloodlines that could stay on generation after generation.

The effect of bloodlines was extremely varied as well, ranging from giving huge boosts to controlling specific Daos or calling upon the strength of your body, whereas others were essentially useless. Some might even become detrimental to the descendants if the ancestor practiced some cruel and unorthodox path.

Bloodlines started unawakened, but they could be awakened through either cultivating a Body Tempering Manual or some specific Bloodline Manual. Of course, some treasures could get the job done as well, such as the **[Bloodline Marrow]**. The average effect of the first awakening was generally set at around 15 to 25% provided the bloodline matched your path, and this boost could be anything from cultivation speed to power output in battle.

That meant that a mortal with a combat-oriented bloodline was almost equal to a cultivator without one, as one got a boost from their heritage while the other got a similar boost from their Cultivation Manual. Of course, having both would provide multiplicative boosts, which was the situation most cultivators longed for. Higher-quality bloodlines could even provide unique skills, and Zac considered the devouring ability of **[Void Heart]** to belong to that category, even though he couldn't control it yet.

The line that said Corrupted on his status screen was actually the place that should display the rarity of the bloodline. Bloodlines shared the same rarity as classes, going from Common to Epic. Zac guessed there were even greater bloodlines as well, though that wasn't something that a cheap missive in the Zecia sector would either cover or confirm.

Bloodline rarity was also fixed according to the manuals, and not something that either training or treasures could impact. A higher rarity generally meant a more powerful bloodline that could be awakened more times. Of course, a higher-rarity bloodline was a lot harder to improve as well, just like how it went with classes. Furthermore, the number of awakenings you could perform depended on your bloodline's rarity to a large degree, but it could still be influenced by hard work and opportunities.

But what did corrupted mean? The line felt extremely ominous, to the point that Zac almost felt he was beset with an affliction rather than an opportunity. Nothing in the information missive had prepared him for that line, and he wasn't sure whether.

But Zac eventually decided to simply keep going. There were multiple possible explanations of why his bloodline was considered corrupted, with the most likely one being that it was affected by his Technocrat heritage. Perhaps the System immediately considered his body corrupted from that as a basis.

He had to admit there being a possibility of his condition being a result of his mother's experiments as well. But even if that was the case, it still shouldn't be something detrimental. Leandra should have been trying to make a powerful bloodline or modify an existing one to suit her needs better, which should mean that it wasn't a detrimental constitution.

What was important was that it was useful and provided benefits, and Zac already felt that it was doing just that. For now, he only had only one Hidden Node doing some work, but Zac believed it might prove extremely useful in the future. He still remembered the vision of that mysterious man passing by a sun, stealing its essence for his own cultivation.

That was exactly what he needed; an alternative method of cultivation that would help him move forward. Reaching the higher grades of Cultivation as a mortal was already akin to defying the heavens, he was also doing it with multiple high-rarity classes. Gaining the ability to break past bottlenecks might prove even more helpful than yet another power boost.

Zac could only put the matter aside for now, and he instead turned his attention to the state of his body. The tempering process had hurt to the point that he almost went insane, but it hadn't actually wounded him. The pain that he felt just a minute ago almost felt like a dream, and even the wounds from the battle with the golem had improved considerably. He still felt too tired to move at the moment, so he simply scrambled up to a sitting position for now.

It was a huge wake-up call for Zac to see the amount of impurities he had expelled during the tempering. He had thought himself almost in perfect condition based on looking at his interiors with his spiritual sight, but there was actually so much gunk left behind without him noticing. Almost every life-threatening encounter seemed to have left a hidden wound, and who knew if the tempering even got it all.

However, the most worrying part wasn't the sequelae, but the small marks that had been expelled right at the end. Zac barely had a chance to study them before he was returned to the repository, but he did manage to sense familiar auras from a few of them. The first, and perhaps the most worrying, definitely came from Faceless 13. The mark carried the same sinister aura as the spikes he still carried around in his Spatial Ring.

Zac couldn't imagine having a hidden mark left behind by that man a good thing, no matter if it was meant to track or slowly kill him.

The second mark was made him think of Rasuliel Tsarun for some reason. He didn't know how he had been marked by the Tsarun scion, but his eyes suddenly turned to the Spatial Ring on his finger. He had already swapped the ring he got from the Tsarun Disciple for the much superior ring he looted from the

Mentalist, but perhaps he had been branded when stealing Rasuliel's ring.

That would also explain why he didn't get a mark by taking the second ring, as he wasn't actually the one who killed the mentalist or stole her ring. It was rather that squirrely thief who had tried to rob them while they both were out of commission.

The third mark, which was also the one that emitted the strongest energies, felt just like he cursed sword in his possession. He guessed that it was a hidden trap of using that accursed thing, a brand that would grow in power with every use. Nothing good could come from having that thing in his body, and he vowed to not use the sword again unless absolutely necessary.

Finally, there was one mark that was created with miasma, but Zac didn't get much more than that.

The fact that the mark was wrought from miasma severely limited the number of suspects. Be'Zi, Catheya, Adriel, and perhaps Mhal were the main ones, though Be'Zi being the source felt like a long shot. Not because Zac implicitly trusted her, but rather that he didn't feel confident that an opportunity created by the original Brazla would be able to extract something that she had planted on him. Case in point; the miasmatic cage in his mind were utterly unaffected by the tempering.

Be'Zi was definitely far stronger than Brazla ever was, sitting at B-Rank cultivation at the minimum. That was a full two-stage difference, which should simply be too much to deal with for an opportunity left behind.

The last two marks Zac couldn't make heads or tails of, but that was perhaps because they were weaker than the first four. The other four marks were all far more intricate, which perhaps was what allowed Zac to recognize them. His best guess was that they were left by people in the Base Town.

In either case, it was better to have them gone than remaining, but the experience made him wonder what else was hidden in his body. Unfortunately, there was not much he could do about

the situation at the moment. Most cultivators had elders to turn to, far more powerful cultivators who could blast most hidden threats by circulating their own energies through their descendants' bodies.

Zac didn't have that advantage, meaning he would have to rely on other opportunities to purge himself of hidden threats. He knew there were cleansing arrays out there, and it was perhaps about time something like that was added to his cultivation cave.

"Are you done wallowing about? I can't have trash littering my floor," the all-too-familiar voice of Brazla echoed out from above, prompting Zac to reluctantly get up on his feet with a grunt.

"Thank you," Zac said, though he didn't feel all that grateful to the Tool Spirit itself, but rather its creator. "Is there any way for me to get back to the lava pool for another round of refinement?"

Zac wasn't thinking about going there right now, but rather when reaching Peak E-Grade. He almost regretted partaking in such a good opportunity right now, as he probably would be saddled with another round of impurities by the time he was ready to form his Cultivation Core. He still remembered reading about Galvarion, the aquatic mortal who needed to spend over a century to remove all his impurities. Zac simply didn't have that kind of time.

He had made a huge splash in the Tower of Eternity, and there was also the issue of The Great Redeemer coming for revenge in a hundred years even if Zac managed to obscure Earth. Urgency pushed him forward, and his goal was to reach at least the middle stages of D-Grade before Earth got integrated for real.

At that level he should only have to worry about C-Grade Monarchs, and those kinds of people generally wouldn't come for a tiny D-Grade planet like Earth. There were only so many C-Grade cultivators in a remote sector like Zecia, and they were either in perpetual secluded cultivation or exploring the

most dangerous corners of the sector in hopes of progressing their cultivation.

But cultivating with that speed would be hard even for a genius cultivator, let alone a mortal. But this lava pool might be one of the keys to speeding up the process.

“Greedy little brat. Do you think such purification is something mundane that can be used as one wanted? It was only possible thanks to the Earthen Fire seed that my master found in the bottom of that volcano, and it has a finite source of power. It had already been nurtured for tens of millions of years by the time my creator found it on an uninhabited world, and he kept purifying it for dozens of millennia as he turned the whole mountain into his forge. It was so limited that my creator couldn’t even bear to use it for his own cultivation, so it was eventually left to future generations,” Brazla said with a haughty voice.

“So it was something that magical?” Zac said with disappointment, though he wasn’t too surprised.

Galau was the one who taught him about Pill Toxicity and how hard it was to get rid of it. If ridding your body of hidden threats was as easy as jumping into a pool of lava, then all volcanoes would have long become strategic resources of the multiverse.

“Of course, why else would the System expend so much energy to cram my master’s forge into a pocket dimension left in a corner of my body?” Brazla snorted.

Chapter 578: Sacrifices

“What? It was the System who created that trial?” Zac asked with confusion. “I thought it was Bra- ahem, your creator who put it there for his descendants?”

“Are you stupid?” Brazla sneered. “My creator didn’t plan on being dead when his descendants would use the Towers of Myriad Dao. Why would there be restrictions and trials to visit the higher floors? It was the System that refitted my body a bit, perfecting the towers even further. Seems like a waste of effort to award the towers to someone like you if you ask the Great Brazla, but here we are.”

Zac was surprised to hear that the System was personally stepping in to modify its rewards, but he had to admit that he had never considered things from Brazla’s perspective. Indeed, why would the original Brazla put forth such trials to access the skills? Most Dao Repositories were free to enter for the owning force, with the elders deciding who could get what skills. But Zac had to accomplish feats of strength to gain the same sort of access.

Furthermore, it was the same with Thea’s library. She would also have to pass some sort of trial to gain access to higher-tiered intelligence. So it turned out that the System was refitting these quest rewards, both improving them and making them serve as motivational- or training tools.

“Besides,” Brazla said with a shake of his head, a hint of wistfulness flashing in his eyes. “That world is no more. Now that the final fragment was awakened, it will be lost forever, with the System taking the last energies.”

“Then why couldn’t you let me have it?” Zac muttered with some annoyance. “If the System was going to steal the rest anyways.”

“Those were the rules that were put in place,” Brazla shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter in either case. You would only have gained the same amount of time even if you waited until reaching middle E-Grade for real. I guess it was a bad matchup. If you focused on Agility or Intelligence you might have had a shot even without that treasure. That puppet was even dumber than you, after all.”

Zac felt a bit disappointed he couldn’t have his body forged inside the lava again, but he couldn’t complain. It was a free bonus that he didn’t even know existed, and while it hadn’t directly improved his power it did solve a lot of hidden issues for him. Besides, there was still the real reward to go for. However, Zac wanted to take advantage of the Tool Spirit’s uncharacteristic mood to see if he could get some information.

“The tempering expelled something from my body I didn’t know was there. Six marks, probably left by my enemies. Do you know what those are?”

“I saw, you really shouldn’t let yourself get branded like that. Most of them were tracking marks, and one was a curse,” Brazla snorted.

“Tracking marks? Are heading for earth now because of me?” Zac exclaimed. “Is it a Karmic Link?”

“Karmic Link? Don’t get blinded by that one Karmic Cultivator who wants this desolate rock for some reason. Those methods are beyond rare. Isn’t his family famous through this whole sector because of their extremely rare ability to touch upon that Dao?” Brazla snorted. “Even then, a small mark like those that got expelled isn’t enough for something as great as intergalactic tracking. Perhaps if it was a supreme existence placing the mark. But why would someone like that turn his gaze toward you, or even this whole sector for that matter?”

“Then what is it?” Zac asked.

“The trees and bushes around my square-“

“I’ll have someone beautify and prune the forest around you,” Zac sighed without pause.

“I can’t tell you about the curse, but the others are minor markers that would stay dormant until triggered,” the Tool Spirit said as a satisfied grin spread across his face.

“Triggered? How?” Zac asked.

“The better ones could trigger upon entering an array covering a set area, usually a town. The worse ones would require a direct scan of your body specifically. It would essentially make it harder for you to stay hidden while traveling.

Intelligence houses are notorious for placing such things on their clients if they think they can get away with it, but anyone with a portable array can do the same. Those runes are easily destroyed by purification methods though, so they are generally useless against the wealthy,” Brazla shrugged.

Zac sighed in relief, realizing it wasn’t as bad as he had previously feared. The looming threat of The Great Redeemer had really made him a bit paranoid about the dangers of the multiverse. But it was worth remembering that the plan of Voridis A’Heliophos was thousands of years in the making, and it still seemed easier said than done to find even Earth after all that effort.

It was a weight off his shoulders, and it allowed him to properly focus on the task at hand. As for plotting revenge for some random tracking mark, it wasn’t really worth his time and effort. He had enough enemies as it was.

“I want to see the E-Grade skills,” Zac said as he slowly got to his feet.

Brazla shrugged with disinterest and a set of stairs leading to a previously inaccessible section appeared to Zac’s left. He looked over to see if Brazla was planning on joining him, but the tool spirit had already disappeared. It felt a bit like Brazla was depressed after visiting the lava world. It might have brought back memories of his creator, and the volcano was perhaps even Brazla’s own birthplace.

Zac didn’t mind the peace and quiet as he made his way toward the next floor. However, he actually had to stop and take a breath after just a couple of steps, his hands shaking with exhaustion. The lava bath had managed to cleanse him of

the remnants of the [**Rageroot Oak Seed**], but he was still completely wrung dry. He felt hungover, sick, and voraciously hungry at the same time.

He was really craving a proper dinner full of E-Grade meat, but he wasn't sure he would be able to hold it down at the moment. He ate a couple of fasting pills instead, which somewhat relieved his symptoms and allowed him to walk up the rest of the stairs.

So he soon found himself in an austere chamber illuminated by only natural light. Gone were the opulent displays of the first floor, replaced with a display of pure craftsmanship. There were painstakingly engraved pictures covering the wall, and a quick look indicated that they were probably scenes out of the original Brazla's life.

It piqued Zac's curiosity, but he was ultimately more interested in the fourteen crystals that hovered in a semicircle on the other side of the room.

There were not a lot of crystals compared to the first floor, but Zac already knew that each and every one of them was a peak-quality skill hand-picked by Brazla himself, with the purpose of creating a foundation for his family. He could only pray that there was at least one or two that he could make use of.

Zac walked past the crystals one by one, touching a plaque in front of them to receive a stream of information about the skill stored within. After having gone through the whole set he couldn't help but nod in appreciation at Brazla's foresight when preparing this set of skills.

There was an endless number of paths to take in cultivation, just like the name of the Dao Repository indicated. That meant that the odds of being a perfect match to a skill you randomly picked up was pretty slim though. The first floor of the Dao Repository was a reflection of this, as the skills placed there were extremely varied, to the point that Zac barely had gained anything from it.

But seeing the selection on the second floor Zac realized that the original Brazla probably had a purpose of arranging things like this. The first floor was available to anyone who had just

set out on the path of cultivation. A new level one cultivator would be able to unlock a huge array of classes with the help of that set of skills.

That was how most people in the Tutorial started their cultivation journey according to Thea. They were given a choice of skill after completing the first mini-mission, and that skill would become their main method of survival until reaching level 25. If someone picked **[Fireball]** and used it during the month-long Tutorial, then they would probably be able to choose some sort of mage class upon reaching level 25.

However, cultivators who had reached E-Grade would generally set in their own ways, with the more talented ones already having started forming their cultivation path. The Celestial Craftsman understood this fact and had therefore focused on skills that would be helpful for a wide array of people.

Six of the fourteen skills were heavily related to the six base attributes, without possessing a connection to a specific Dao. They also seemed to be following the concept of greatness from simplicity, which not only made them powerful but also easy to fuse with other skills down the line.

For example, the Dexterity-based skill was an offensive skill simply called **[Soaring Ocean]**, but it wasn't actually a water-based skill. It was rather a bit reminiscent of how Ogras fought with his shadow spears.

It was a speed-based attack that made use of a rapid series of strikes rather than one strong attack. The weapon could seemingly be almost anything from the looks of it, from hands to bladed weapons to even things like Ogras' shadows. The true power of the skill came from the fact that each consecutive strike would increase your speed by a bit, and your momentum would keep growing endlessly as long as you kept attacking.

Eventually, your speed would be far beyond your normal limits, and with increased speed came improved lethality. The enemy would be drowned in an endless sea of attacks until they succumbed.

It was a bit like a berserking skill though. If you pushed your speed too far your body would start to get hurt as well.

Meanwhile, both Endurance and Wisdom were defensive skills, while Vitality was a self-recuperating ability. Intelligence was surprisingly not a spell, but that was perhaps because most spells leaned toward a specific attunement. It instead was a mind-boosting spell that put your mind into overdrive, essentially slowing down the world around you.

That would allow you to use your other spells even faster and from the sound of it, to the point that you would become a spell turret wreaking havoc on the battlefield. Zac was initially pretty interested in that skill even if it was meant for mages, but it clearly stated that it put high requirements on both calculating speed and affinities, so he would be completely unable to use it for things like rapid-fire [**Chop**].

As for the rest of the prepared skills, they were mainly ancillary skills that would come in handy for most adventurers.

The first one that piqued Zac's interest was actually an upgraded version of [**Thousand Faces**], aptly named [**Million Faces**]. It worked similarly to the F-Graded skill, but it both gave a greater influence on modifications.

With this skill he would be able to completely change his build if need be, and even be able to pass off as other humanoid races to a cursory glance. But most importantly, it allowed you to curtail and modify your aura to some degree. It could both bolster the aura you emitted, fooling others into thinking you were stronger than you were, or weaken it to make others underestimate you.

It would even be able to slightly change the 'flavor' of your aura, which was even better. Your aura was like a fingerprint, and Zac could essentially identify anyone he knew in the base was just by sensing their aura. There were a few exceptions to that though, namely Billy and Kenzie.

Kenzie had help from her AI to completely mask her aura, while Billy could do so himself for some reason. Ogras was hard to spot as well, but that was because his shadows helped

mute his aura a bit. Zac still could recognize the flavor as long as they were close enough.

The other ancillary skills were similarly impressive and Zac felt like a child in a candy store as he looked at the varying options. However, his luck had finally caught up with him, as he, unfortunately, had spotted several clashes with his current skills. He only had so many slots for skills, and more than half of them were already used up.

If he wanted to learn these new skills, then he would have to sacrifice a few of his old ones.

Chapter 579: Void

Zac still hadn't fully gripped what he could and couldn't do with his future skill upgrades and skill fusions, so he couldn't help but worry about making a colossal mistake by removing some of his class skills to get a quick power-up. However, some choices weren't very hard to make, the first being his shapeshifting skill.

The upgraded version unsurprisingly commandeered the same skill slot as **[Thousand Faces]**, and it was the first pick of Zac. A familiar screen appeared in front of him the next moment.

[Learning the skill Million Faces will result in the permanent loss of the skill Thousand Faces. Proceed?]

Following that was a simple **[YES/NO]** prompt.

Zac touched the 'YES', prompting a stream of energy to enter his body. It made its way to his throat, and a stabbing pain spread across his neck as one skill fractal branded itself on top of the old one, supplanting its spot.

The discomfort was thankfully just at the level of redrawing one's pathways, and Zac had ample experience with that after breaking open a bunch of nodes. The pain soon abated, and the transfer was complete. He opened his skill screen and Thousand Faces was gone as expected, replaced with a new line.

[Million Faces - Proficiency: -. A million Faces, A million lives. Become an untraceable stream in the fabric of reality. Upgradeable.]

The prompt earlier was something that Alyn had already told him about, and Zac knew that he would only get it once like some sort of tutorial. There wouldn't be any warnings in case

of skill clashes again, except when getting a new skill through one of his classes.

The skill was the same as the new one in the sense that it didn't have any proficiency, but its fractal was far more intricate compared to the old one. However, Zac saw the base pattern was pretty much the same, just with greater details and a couple of additions.

Zac also needed to add the skill in his undead form, but he would have to wait for an hour before he could swap over again.

In the meantime, there were more skills to learn as a human. The second one that Zac immediately learned was **[Primal Polyglot]**, a skill that was a superior E-Grade alternative to **[Book of Babel]**. Zac had already learned that multiple skills had similar functions as **[Book of Babel]**, but the better ones provided additional benefits as well.

This skill was one such example.

[Primal Polyglot] provided the same feature of breaking down language barriers, but it went one step further. It provided the user with an almost instinctual understanding of 'Dao-based' language according to the description. This applied to a lot of things, most notably inscriptions, formations, and even pathways.

The skill wouldn't allow him to understand any fractal he saw at a glance, but it would help him get a sense of what he was dealing with based on the fundamental characteristics of the fractal. The same went for inscriptions and even some written languages. It would help Zac with everything from deducing arrays to spotting hidden dangers, and it seemed like a skill that could go hand in hand with his **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

[Primal Polyglot - Proficiency: -. To comprehend the Language of the Dao is to comprehend the universe.]

Zac hoped that this skill would not only help him catch up with cultivators who had properly learned to decipher fractals and pathways since they were young, but perhaps even bridge some of the gaps of having no Dao Affinities.

Another skill that he considered replacing was **[True Strike]**. The one that occupied the same slot was **[Surging Vitality]**, the skill unsurprisingly related to the Vitality attribute. The skill he got from the duplicitous demon during his tower climb had proven useful in a couple of battles, but it wasn't a critical addition in his human form.

His Edge of Arcadia-class rather excelled in large-scale battles, and **[True Strike]** couldn't help much there.

More importantly, its effect had proven somewhat limited on enemies with ample combat experience, such as Void's Disciple. They seemed able to intuit it was a feint with their honed battle instincts, making it a waste of an effort. Replacing it with a skill that could boost his healing abilities drastically seemed like a worthy trade.

However, he held off on it for now, opting to wait to see whether he could add the skill in his Draugr class instead. His undead side was still superior for recuperation as it didn't require his organs to function, and there was no skill occupying that specific slot in his second set of pathways.

The only issue was the fit on his undead side. The original Brazla had planned for a lot, but preparing for undead descendants wasn't one of his contingencies. Only the ancillary skills on the first floor had fit his Draugr side at all, and Zac wasn't sure he would fare any better this time around. But it was worth the try if it meant he could keep another skill.

Having gone through the options he eventually sat down to rest, waiting for the cooldown of his Specialty Core end. During that time he kept absorbing Cosmic Energy from E-Grade Nexus Crystals. It didn't really help him with his cultivation, but some of it was swallowed by the core to be converted to Miasma. He had been completely drained when he swapped over, and this way he wouldn't be hit by a severe state of weakness when turning undead again.

It was a bit stressful to stay outside the Mystic Realm this long, but he didn't have much of a choice. He needed to learn every skill that could be useful right now, and he was in a pretty wretched state in any case. He had joked about crawling

back to the Mystic Realm if need be, but he might actually have been forced to do so if he didn't rest up while waiting for his Specialty Core Cooldown.

Some of his weakened state could be traced to dozens of internal wounds he accumulated during his rampage, but most of it no doubt was an effect of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

Zac had really underestimated that seed, no matter if you were talking about the influence it had on his mind or the side-effects of using it. Most of the toxins had been removed during the tempering, but he still felt almost like he had one foot in the grave. He didn't even dare to imagine what kind of state he would be in if he hadn't enjoyed the cleansing magma immediately after. More importantly, Zac understood that he never could use that item in front of people he couldn't trust 100% as he would be utterly vulnerable afterward.

An hour quickly passed and Zac reluctantly got back to his feet. One new skill after another was added to Zac's repertoire before he finally swapped to his Draugr form and went another round. The final tally was six skills in his human form and three skills in his Draugr side. His fears were unfortunately realized when it turned out that only the ancillary skills could be added to his undead side, which forced him to give up on **[True Strike]**.

A top-tier E-Grade healing skill simply trumped the utility that the misdirection skill provided.

Seeing that he was done with everything he exited the Repository, almost thankful that Brazla was nowhere in sight. Waves of exhaustion crashed against his mind, but he still made a last-minute decision to head over to the Thayer Consortia.

He had a lot of outstanding orders with the Sky Gnome at the moment, most of them for quite rare items. It felt prudent to check things out himself in case he needed to ask follow-up questions to whatever Calrin had managed to acquire.

But more importantly, he needed to see if the Sky Gnome could find out anything about corrupted bloodlines or the Void Emperor Bloodline. Hopefully, he would be able to get his

hand on some missive explaining the situation before he was locked inside the Mystic Realm. That would allow him to sidestep a potential mistake down the line.

Each step felt like a workout, but he soon enough arrived at the Thayer Consortia, surprising Calrin who was busy at work fielding the hundreds of work orders for everything from defensive talismans to cultivation resources to use in case they got stuck inside the research base.

“Lord Atwood, don’t you look... Eh...” Calrin coughed, seemingly unable to come up with a compliment that wasn’t a blatant lie. “There’s no need for you to come yourself next time. Those spear maidens of yours can bring the things you require next time.”

“I was in the neighborhood. Have you found what I asked for?” Zac sighed as he collapsed into the closest chair.

“I have. It’s only the box though,” Calrin said, a slight blush tinting his round cheeks. “I’m afraid that the rest were out of our grasp, even at a premium.”

Zac had tried getting his hands on all kinds of items that could provide immediate power-ups, the most pressing being E-Grade Dao Treasures. He hadn’t eaten a single one since reaching E-Grade, which meant that he would get the full benefit if he managed to secure one.

There was a decent chance that a high-quality Dao Treasure would propel him all the way to gaining a High Mastery Dao Fragment, which was why Zac had wanted to get one even if he had to pay ten times what they were worth. He was even ready to sell off most of his treasure stockpile if the Sky Gnome could make it happen. But it looked like money couldn’t just solve everything.

Zac also expended some efforts to figure out what the Spatial Artifact in the Mystic Realm was in case he needed to prepare something to snatch it. Void’s Disciple had divulged the name but neither Brazla nor Calrin could find anything out at all. Of course, Zac didn’t dare to outright ask around about a ‘Dimensional Seed’.

This treasure was something that the Church of Everlasting Dao went all-out to obtain, to the point that they gave up all their other objectives. If someone suddenly started inquiring about such an item to the intelligence-gathering houses, trouble might soon follow. Certainly, most such establishments prided themselves on their discretion, but that was just up to a point.

So they could only gather missives on spatial and dimensional treasures in general, hoping that one of them would detail what a Dimensional Seed was. But so far there wasn't much.

“Oh! That reminds me,” Calrin said as he took out a crystal. “This one didn't have any information on the Dimensional Seed, but it did actually have some information about the **[Ferric Worldeater]**.”

“Oh, really?” Zac asked with surprise.

“There is a faction called the Void Monastery led by a peak figure of the Zecia sector, the Void Priestess. They are in control of a unique spatial anomaly the Void Star, and according to rumors there have been sightings of **[Ferric Voidwyrms]** drifting in the void around it. The name sounded familiar, so I started looking into it. Apparently **[Ferric Voidwyrms]** are the larvae-form of a **[Ferric Worldeater]**”, Calrin said.

This was great news to Zac, and the excitement dispelled some of the exhaustion.

The **[Ferric Worldeater]** was one of the materials that Karunthel required to upgrade the shipyard. Zac already knew about the first two items, and it was just a matter of time before he could get his hands on them. The last two were trickier. But Zac believed he might be able to find out some more about the fourth item **[Daemonic Manastone]** through Ogras.

Since it had the name Daemonic, it might perhaps be related to the Demonic hordes. There were only two pure demonic factions in the whole Zecia sector, with the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde being the stronger of the two. There were certainly

more demonkin spread across the sector just like humans, but Azh'Kir'Khat was his best bet.

That left only the worldeaters, but there hadn't been much to go by. They were surprisingly hard to gather intelligence on, even after having such an ominous name. But it looked like the Sky Gnome had come through for him once more.

Better yet, Zac actually had an in with this particular force.

“They are still quite dangerous even in their larvae form, but they will only evolve to their true state if they manage to devour a World Core. The better the World Core, the greater the potential of the critter. If it manages to gobble up a C-Grade World Core, then the thing would eventually become unstoppable in a remote sector such as ours,” Calrin said with some fear in his eyes.

“What kind of faction is the Void Monastery?” Zac asked.

He knew that they were religious in nature based on the terminology, but he never had a chance to ask about it when he met Leyara in the Base Town. His curiosity had grown since getting the **[Void Heart]**-node, and now it felt as though they were connected by fate.

The Void Monastery might hold not only the solution to finishing Karunthel's quest, but it might even hold the key to his new bloodline.

Chapter 580: Gate

It wasn't such a stretch to think that a faction that all seemed centered around the 'Void' was related to his constitution. Someone called the Void Priestess living by the Void Star lording over a faction called the Void Monastery was a bit too on the nose for it all to be a complete coincidence.

Then again, there were no doubt quite a few heritages containing the word 'Void', just like there was an endless number of ones having the name Heavenly, Primordial, Divine, or Origin. These words conveyed a sense of profundity and vastness, a sense that was rarely justified. The only reason he had held back researching Leyara's heritage until now was the shocking cost of buying intelligence on a powerful C-Grade faction.

But looking into it was worth the expense now, especially considering the **[Ferric Worldeaters]**.

"I can certainly buy the missive..." the Sky Gnome said, though he looked a bit troubled. "But... Ah... Our operational funds are currently a bit..."

"How much?" Zac asked, understanding what the Sky Gnome was getting at.

"Two point five billion," Calrin coughed, looking disgusted even if it wasn't his own money.

"Just send the report to the Mystic Realm before it closes. I'm especially curious whether they have a Void-related bloodline," Zac sighed as he transferred the funds. "Also, see if you can find out anything about abnormal bloodlines. Mutated, corrupted, and unique bloodlines."

"Mutated..?" Calrin muttered before he quickly nodded. "I haven't heard of anything like it, but I will make some discreet inquiries."

“Great. Also, prepare for a flash sale of our stockpile of resources in case we need to flee in the future. I’m running a bit low on money,” Zac added after some thought.

“Not to make Young Master’s day worse, but the box came at a certain premium as well,” the Sky Gnome said with a weak smile.

The box in question wasn’t a treasure, but rather a treasure box that would hopefully house and isolate the Dimensional Seed when he managed to snag it.

It cost 775 million nexus coins even though it wasn’t even a Spirit Tool, and Zac felt almost physically ill when he had to fork out such an exorbitant sum for an empty box. The reason for the price was the same as with **[Everlasting]**, the shield that had become a component of **[Love’s Bond]**. The locker was almost exclusively made from some sort of Treasure Jade that was one of the best materials around for storing treasures.

Part of the cost also came from the meticulous arrays that covered both its inner and outer surfaces, inscriptions meant to boost the effectiveness of the materials even further. It might be a bit overkill, but Zac wouldn’t take any chances with an item that was so valuable that both the Dominators and the cultists would stop at nothing to get it.

“Thank you,” Zac said as he put away the box in his Spatial Ring. “If you manage to get your hands on anything else, send it directly into the Mystic Realm. I doubt I will exit again before the Mystic Realm closes.”

“Certainly... And good luck,” Calrin said. “Remember, wealth is important, but surviving even more-so. My instincts are telling me that this treasure might cause more harm than good.”

“I actually feel the same way,” Zac grunted. “But someone is going to get it, and that someone might as well be me.”

Zac made his way to the teleporter, and he could breathe out in relief when he passed through the tunnel to the Mystic Realm. Everything pointed toward the pathway lasting a few more days, but it had still been in the back of Zac’s head the whole

time he spent outside. He didn't know what he'd do if he actually was closed out early by some freak accident.

Zac immediately made his way toward his temporary compound, as the exhaustion from using the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** was only growing in severity. His surroundings were soon just a blur, and he simply fell down on the grass the moment he had entered his protective arrays, immediately entering a dreamless slumber. He had no idea how long he had slept when he finally roused himself, but the realization that he wasn't alone shocked him wide awake.

"I wish I had one of my cameras with me," a leering voice reached Zac's ears just as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hands, causing him to sigh in exasperation and turn to Ogras who was sitting by a table not far away.

"Wasn't it you who told me that entering others' arrays was the height of rudeness?" Zac muttered as he took out a bottle of water from his spatial ring.

He still felt drained even after having slept, but he didn't really feel weakened any longer. It felt like he would be ready to go again as long as he got something to eat.

"Well, that rule's for strangers, not good comrades. So, care to tell me what you've been up to? You look like you've been swallowed and spat out by a Govidar Mawbeast," Ogras asked as he took a swig of wine.

"Your home planet sounds like a real nightmare going by all these monsters you've described," Zac snorted. "If you must know, I broke open the second floor of the Dao Repository, unlocking the skills within."

"WHAT?" Ogras exclaimed, immediately jumping to his feet.

"How is that possible?! You shouldn't be that powerful!" the demon said, his eyes a chaotic mix of confusion, glee, and jealousy.

"I have my ways," Zac said with a smile as he took out a massive slab of meat.

Zac rarely felt hungry any longer, but he felt like his stomach was about to implode right now. He tore into the meat like a

ravenous beast, and he only stopped when he had eaten over ten kilos of E-Grade beast meat. He didn't understand the physics of it, but he didn't question it either as every bite felt like quenching rain in the parched desert that was his body.

"So?" Ogras eventually asked, posture leaning forward.

"How about a pretty please?" Zac smiled.

"I'd rather get cut apart by those spatial storms," Ogras spat.

"I'm kidding," Zac snorted. "You can bring up to five of the evolved Demons. Oh, and bring Verana."

"Why bother with her?" Ogras asked with confusion.

"The charges in the crystals are limited, but not to the point that we can't spare a couple of slots. It's all to improve our upcoming odds," Zac shrugged.

"Well, those beasts have been proven useful lately," Ogras thoughtfully nodded. "Might not hurt to keep them happy."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked as he looked at his watch, and he was shocked to find out that he had slept for 30 straight hours.

"Now you realize?" Ogras laughed. "The beastmasters were getting anxious that no one really was overly interested in cooperating with them, so they volunteered to expand our maps. It turns out that their beasts can actually smell or somehow sense the spatial traps. Guess that's another thing you have in common with them."

Zac ignored the jab, but he understood what the demon was getting at. He was able to easily identify the hidden traps thanks to his Danger Sense, but others weren't as lucky. They had to tread carefully all the time, as moving too quickly could result in suddenly getting bisected by a hidden spatial tear. The scientists were working on some means to identify the tears ahead of time, but progress was slow for now.

However, these beastmasters actually could keep a decent pace thanks to their companions. That would not only decrease the risk of getting hurt but also rapidly speed up the progress they were making. They might prove integral to dealing with the

inner parts of the Mystic Realm, as Zac could only imagine that the spatial anomalies would get even worse in there.

“Have a beastmaster join every scouting unit. Take three Tal-Eladar to the repository instead,” Zac eventually said. “Up to 3 skills per person.”

“How about five for your good buddy?” Ogras asked. “I did just die helping you.”

“Fine, but I honestly doubt that you can even benefit from that many. I only took six different skills myself, and that’s for two classes,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “So, what else happened while I slept?”

“Nothin spec- oh, speak of the devil. Your little spear maiden is waiting outside. She might know more,” Ogras said before he was swallowed by the shadows.

“Deal with the scouting parties before you leave!” Zac shouted with a roll of his eyes before he walked out to get Joanna.

Joanna understood what he was looking for, so she immediately started updating Zac of what had transpired while he was out of commission. Nothing urgent had happened, apart from their people learning new things by the hour. Their internal map had rapidly expanded, but the most important realization might be that the Cosmic Energy seemed to grow denser the further inside the Mystic Realm you moved.

There were already murmurs of people wanting to move further into the base, to turn some of the massive warehouses into advance camps. Zac wasn’t too surprised, as the ambient Cosmic Energy in the biospheres was pretty dismal, especially for the people of Port Atwood who were accustomed to living on top of a Nexus Vein.

This area right here was the safest thanks to the meter-thick door that only Tier-3 access could open, but every cultivator felt as though they were being stifled by the lacking ambient energy.

The difference was already measurable in the abandoned halls, and people believed that the inner sections of the Mystic Realm to be even better. However, moving to the core of the

Mystic Realm was easier said than done, as they had discovered a troubling phenomenon. There didn't seem to be pathways leading further inside the Mystic Realm.

After they exited the massive door they could walk for roughly an hour toward the center of the Mystic Realm. But at that point one could only turn left or right, forgoing exploring the inner reaches. This was partly because most of the corridors simply stopped, while the few remaining ones were all guarded by endless spatial barriers.

They had already termed the sector they explored the 'Outer Band', endless corridors, and Service Tunnels, and their current goal was to find a way to reach further inside.

"Are you really okay?" Joanna asked with worry after having delivered the status update. "No one has seen you for almost two days, some people even believed you to have getting hurt by a spatial storm."

"I'm just a bit exhausted. I had to go all out to upgrade the Dao Repository," Zac said with a tired sigh. "What about your mission? Did you make it?"

"Yes! We reached the end of the map," Joanna nodded.

Most of the activities had been focused on dealing expanding their map while improving their understanding of this place. However, Joanna had put together a small squad of elites where she had teamed up with Thea and Billy to follow the map to see where the Cartava Clan wanted to lead them. It was a test for his group of closest allies. It was a test for himself of sorts as well, to see if he could let go and let others handle important tasks.

The fact that Joanna seemed fine was ample proof that he hadn't misplaced his trust.

"We mostly followed the path, while also making sure we had a back-up route in case of ambush. But there was nothing untoward through the path. At the end, there was an enormous gate, a lot bigger than the one leading into this biosphere. We, unfortunately, couldn't open it, which is why we returned. We

figured that one of you two siblings might be able to open it with Tier-4 clearance?" Joanna explained.

"A gate?" Zac mused. "Did you knock?"

"Well... Billy tried to break it open," Joanna said with a grimace. "We almost got ourselves killed then and there. The corridor came alive and tried to stab us."

"Sounds like Billy, alright," Zac snorted. "It's good that you're okay. Guess it's good to know what happens when you try to force these things open. Did you find out anything else?"

"No," Joanna sighed. "But the door is in the inner edge of the Outer Band. I think it's your best bet at reaching further inside of the base."

"Good," Zac said with some excitement as he stood up. "I'll check it out myself."

"What credentials did Billy get?" Zac asked as he suddenly thought of something.

"Nothing," Joanna said with a shake of her head. "I did manage to get a Tier 3 Clearance though."

"Could it be..." Zac mused. "Bloodlines?"

"Excuse me?" Joanna asked with confusion.

"Nothing," Zac said as he passed through his arrays. "Are you rested enough to set out again? It would be best to bring someone who has already traveled that path."

"We're coming with," a familiar voice reached Zac's ears just as he exited his compound, and Zac looked over at Billy and Thea who seemed to have been standing in wait for some time.

Chapter 581: Hunger

“What’s with you lately?” Zac asked as he looked over at Thea with confusion. “I can’t go five meters without you popping out of nowhere.”

“Do you not want me around?” Thea asked with a frown.

“No, I appreciate your company,” Zac sighed. “You just seem... Angry. Is everything okay?”

“Well, I am a bit annoyed that you apparently went ahead and put a sector-wide bulls-eye on our planet when you went off-planet,” Thea said with a glare, but she soon deflated. “But I’m angrier with myself. The Inheritance... Was a wake-up call. I’ve been playing it too safe, never going all out to push myself further.

“Yet I’ve been complaining about the fact that the disparity in power between us just keeps growing. I already wasted my time while you did all the hard work, and I need to grasp every opportunity that I can now. I can feel it. If I don’t increase my momentum, I might not even make it past E-Grade. My class rarity won’t allow it.”

Zac looked at Thea with wide eyes. He wasn’t sure if he had ever heard her speak that much in one go, and Zac also noticed that Joanna had moved far away at some unknown time. It looked like she had already thought things over, and what she said made sense. You could never relent on the path of cultivation. He had gathered a huge advantage during his time in the F-Grade, but he needed to keep at it if he wanted to stay relevant.

His titles and attributes would slowly lose their value as others gained more powerful cultivation manuals and improved their Dao Control. According to his sister, the ability to braid two Dao Seeds into one attack essentially had the same effect as

boosting both seeds one stage. The sum became greater than its parts.

He could only imagine that Dao Arrays were even more powerful, and he would be left in the dust unless he came up with his own strengths. It was good that Thea also had come to understand this fundamental truth. That insight alone might be worth more than anything else she gained from that Inheritance.

“Well, that’s fine... But don’t overextend yourself,” Zac eventually said as he scratched his chin. “I only act like I do because I have layers and layers of defensive measures. I’m not really someone to take after.”

“No, I’ve seen how you fight,” Thea snorted. “I’m more interested in taking after your guts than your battle techniques.”

“I’m sure you’d make an excellent axe-warrior,” Zac smiled before he turned to Billy who was standing not far away with a contrite look. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Billy made a mistake,” Billy sighed with a blush. “Billy is so smart, but for some reason the door was harder.”

“Well, it’s bad luck you didn’t get any credentials to open it the normal way,” Zac said, though he wasn’t so sure.

The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If Billy’s titanic bloodline came from this place, then it made sense that he wouldn’t be able to move about freely. What kind of security system would hand out clearance to research subjects?

If he really was correct on this, then it might even explain why he didn’t get any credentials either, and why Ogras got one so effortlessly. He already knew that clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any hereditary bloodlines, and Ogras hadn’t acquired a synthetic one either unless his fusion with a shadow creature could count.

The only hole in the theory was the fact that Kenzie got access while he didn’t, unless he considered the very real possibility that Kenzie wasn’t the only child that Leandra experimented

on. She gave Jeeves to Kenzie, but she might have infused him with a bloodline instead for two separate experiments.

“Stupid door realized Billy was too powerful, tried to keep Billy away. But we’ll see,” Billy muttered, but he shrank back a bit after getting an even look from Thea.

“Don’t thwunk any more doors,” she said simply said, but Billy still nodded hurriedly in agreement.

“Well, let’s go,” Zac shrugged as they set out.

“I’m coming as well!” a youthful voice shouted, and Zac grimaced when he saw Emily run toward them.

“What happened to your face?” Zac asked with a frown, noticing the new scar that just barely missed her eye.

“My face? What about your head? Have you become addicted to being bald?” Emily said with a glare. “No scouting parties dared to take me with them because of you, so I’ve been fighting on Mystic Island to gain levels. Come on, let me come with you. I swear I’ll be careful. And look, this!”

Cosmic Energy in her body suddenly surged as a five-meter-tall Totem Pole appeared in front of her.

“I’ve reached level 50 already, and this is my new skill,” she said with a proud smile. “Not bad right?”

“It looks good, but what does it-“ Zac muttered, but he stopped when he felt the Cosmic Energy churn in the area.

Not only that, but it almost felt like he had turned into a cultivator as the Cosmic Energy seemed to be actively burrowing into his body.

“That’s not all!” Emily smiled as a fiery axe appeared in her hand.

She didn’t use the buffing skill on Zac though, but rather threw it straight at the Totem Pole. This led to a startling transformation as the Totem almost grew twice in size while its design changed. If the earlier version looked like something that a bit like something you could find in Incan ruins to worship one’s ancestors, then the new one was something made to worship a sun god.

Fiery energies radiated from the pillar, and a large flame radiated at its top.

“My Strength has increased,” Thea exclaimed with surprise, while Billy almost drooled as he looked at the Totem Pole.

“It buffs everyone in an area this way?” Zac said with surprise, but he suddenly noticed something different compared to getting directly buffed by the axe.

It only gave half of the amount it normally did.

Still, a 5% area boost was huge if this thing was placed on a battlefield, and that number might even grow as the skill’s proficiency increased. Coupled with the increased energy restoration it could even turn the tides of a war.

“I don’t get any buff when using it like this. But I can even detonate this thing in case an enemy tries to take it down,” Emily whispered so that only Zac could hear. “Its explosion should hurt anyone that’s not crazy durable like you.”

“Alright, you can come with us,” Zac eventually nodded. “Let’s go see what’s on the other side of that door.”

It looked like Emily’s face was about to split in two judging by her grin, but she quickly composed herself after getting stared down.

“This is a serious mission. No messing around,” Zac said. “And if things look dangerous on that other side of the door you need to back down immediately while I try to keep you safe. Understand?”

“I understand,” Emily quickly nodded with a serious expression. “You can count on me. I’m not some kid any longer.”

She put her hands to her hips and pushed out her chest to underscore her point, but the power-pose didn’t really inspire a lot of confidence. She still looked like a cosplaying child due to the combination of her oversized furs and diminutive frame. Even Thea could barely contain her smile, whereas Billy openly snickered.

“Where’s the demon?” Thea suddenly asked as she looked around. “That guy is like bad weather, always appearing to ruin a good day.”

“He’s busy elsewhere,” Zac smiled. “It’s just us.”

Zac considered bringing some more people, but these three and Joanna were enough. The rest would need to stay and guard the fort while he was away. Getting to the end of the map would take the better part of a day even if they didn’t take any detours, so they immediately set out as to not waste any time.

However, they only managed to get to the security door before Zac had to stop the group.

“Wait,” Zac said as he took out a massive slab of grilled meat, digging into it like a voracious animal.

“What? You’re hungry?” Emily asked with confusion. “You had grease on your face when you left your compound as well. Are you a pig or something?”

Thea looked on with confusion as well, whereas Billy’s reaction was much more straightforward. He sat down himself and produced an even bigger slab of meat, happily joining Zac for a travel snack.

“I was forced to use a Berserking Item yesterday,” Zac sighed after he had devoured another few kilos of meat. “It turns out that it left my body starving for nutrients. We might need to take a few extra pitstops.”

“Should we cancel this mission?” Thea asked, and Joanna seemed to agree. “Someone told me that I shouldn’t overextend myself earlier, I think that advice can apply to you as well.”

“I’m fine,” Zac said. “I’m already a lot better than I was yesterday. I’m sure I’ll be back to normal by the time we reach that gate you mentioned.”

It was true. Between his sleep and the E-Grade meat he felt a lot better. He was still feeling a bit drained, but he would be able to fight just fine, especially if he had time to digest some more energy-dense food over the following hours. Thea and

Joanna eventually relented and they set off again, though this time with a slightly slower speed to allow Zac to recuperate and restore his reserves.

His new skill, [**Surging Vitality**] unfortunately didn't work at all against something like this either. The nourishing storm that swept through his body helped with the countless small wounds left from his battle with the Golem Blacksmith, but they weren't the real problem right now.

Emily also tried imbuing him with her Earthen axe that improved Endurance and Vitality, but it didn't really help either, so Zac simply kept walking while almost constantly nibbling on something or another. The endless identical tunnels quickly turned into a blur, but having Emily and Billy around kept the atmosphere light. They quickly reached the inner part of the outer band, at which point they veered east.

They actually did pass a few corridors leading further inside, but they were blocked by spatial storms without exception. Not only that, the spatial tears were placed a lot more densely in these traps, and Zac's danger sense seemed to think these pathways were a lot more dangerous than the first one he encountered.

He wasn't really confident in breaking through a normal spatial blockade, let alone these empowered versions.

"It's a bit odd," Thea eventually said after Zac had backed away from the third pathway that might lead out of the Outer Ring. "Have you looked at the layout on the other side of these storms? I'm not actually sure they are leading to the inner reaches. These corridors seem to end in large empty rooms. There might not actually be any physical path leading further inside, which seems like a crazy design choice."

"Ogras and I guessed that these corridors might be an enormous array or something, forming massive fractals. Perhaps they wanted that stuff separate from the inner sections," Zac said, though he agreed with Thea's sentiment. "Those rooms on the other side might be teleportation rooms as well. The Technocrats have real teleporters that don't use

Cosmic Energy. I saw something like that in the Tower of Eternity.”

Of course, Zac wasn't really sure he would dare to use one of the ancient teleporters left behind by his mother's family. The research base had been abandoned for god knows how long, and it was now infected by a powerful Spatial Treasure. Using an unknown teleporter sounded like a surefire way to get ripped apart by spatial anomalies.

“Do you think it's worth for me to go to the Tower of Eternity as well?” Thea suddenly asked, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“Absolutely,” Zac said without hesitation. “My power almost doubled over there. It was the only reason I could take down the Undead Incursion in one go. Why, have you got your hands on a token?”

“Both Billy and I have, we have been thinking about going as soon as this Mystic Realm is dealt with,” Thea said, and Zac noticed some hesitation on her face. “I think I owe you an apology. I was furious when you disappeared. But I only considered things from my perspective. It was unfair of me to demand of you to risk your life before you felt confident in success.”

“Well, my sister seems to believe I have problems communicating clearly, so I think I'm partly to blame as well,” Zac said with a wry smile.

The two kept moving forward where Zac detailed most of his experiences in the Base Town and Tower of Eternity, sharing the lessons he learned the hard way. Thea in turn tried to teach him how to braid Daos to empower skills even further, though things quickly became a bit embarrassing as Zac couldn't even finish the first step.

“So I guess I haven't completely fallen behind,” Thea said with a small smile when Zac eventually had to give up.

Zac only laughed in response as he went back to surveying the surroundings. It felt nice, almost when the two traveled together during the Hunt. A lot of the pressures of command

could be put aside for a while, allowing Zac to just be himself. However, the journey eventually had to end.

It took them thirteen hours to reach their target; an enormous gate that reached over thirty meters into the air. In fact, even the tunnels were extra supersized the last kilometer or so, meaning that this area probably was more spacious than the usual tunnels even before the spatial expansion began.

That fact alone made Zac believe they had finally reached something of value after running around in empty hallways for almost a week. Zac's heart beat rapidly as he walked up to the console to the side. His axe was already in his hand, while the others prepared themselves in case of battle.

“Here I go,” Zac muttered as he activated the gate mechanism.

Chapter 582: Conformation of Supremacy

The group released a collective sigh of relief when the gates slid open without issue, giving them a first look at what waited for them on the other side. It was definitely a change of pace, and the group walked inside curiously. It looked like they had entered actually a glasshouse in the middle of a forest.

The gate led them into a room over one hundred meters across, and it appeared to be some sort of holding room or stable for beasts, with metallic troughs and dozens of reinforced stalls. They could also spot all sorts of advanced equipment in a series of adjoining rooms, which was only possible because both the inner and outer walls were made from some transparent material.

Outside the building was an enormous forest completely different from the artificial biospheres they had arrived in. It felt wild and genuine, like something they might find on Earth if you discounted the fact that most of the foliage was either white, silver, or purple. The place was huge as well, and Zac could even spot a few mountains in the distance. Zac couldn't be sure from where he stood, but he guessed that it would take hours to traverse the whole thing even if he kept a high pace.

However, it didn't take long to realize that this massive forest was still just another part of the research base as the familiar lines ran across the sky as the enormous alloy wall stretched into the distance. There was one odd addition though; nine orbs in the sky that reminded Zac of the moon. Four of them seemed broken, but the other five radiated a silver glow.

The transparent building they found themselves in was installed like an extension of the wall, with the gate they passed through on one side and a large barn door at the opposite.

The glasshouse was just enormous, but Zac figured it probably that it was only a few hundred square meters before the spatial expansion began. Furthermore, going by the current size of the stalls, the animals that were housed here should be around the size of a rhinoceros, which wasn't that big for a multiverse-beast.

"I think it's a satellite base to perform field experiments," Thea eventually said as she looked across the building. "The original owners of this place were studying something inside this forest, and this place was used to take measurements."

Zac slowly nodded in agreement, feeling there was a lot of merit to that theory. It looked like there was room for about a dozen animals at a time going by the number of stalls, whereas the forest outside was large enough to sustain a whole ecosystem.

"Ah!" Billy suddenly exclaimed from another room, and Zac's swirled toward him with wide eyes, fearing that the giant had triggered another trap.

Zac breathed out in relief though when he saw that Billy had actually managed to open the gates by pressing a large button on one of the closest consoles.

"Be careful," Zac quickly exhorted. "We have no idea what these things do. One of them might trigger an alarm and make the building attack us."

Billy quickly nodded and stepped away.

Still, it was good news to know that even someone without any clearance could open the door without assistance. As long as Zac placed a squad at this place in the future they would be able to come and go as they pleased without having to rely on himself or Kenzie.

"Why would the Cartava Clan lead us here?" Zac muttered as he looked over the consoles.

Most of them seemed to be out of order or at least turned off. There were no new messages like another signpost either, leaving Zac a bit confused.

“This place definitely leads further inside the Mystic Realm than what we have accessed until now,” Thea answered as she nodded to their left. “Look, we’re right at the edge of the Outer Band, but the forest continues for god knows how further in.”

“Let’s check it out,” Zac said after some thought. “Not much anyone of us can gain from these machines anyway.”

“Might have been a good idea to bring something more than a bunch of muscleheads,” Joanna muttered from the side, and Zac could only wryly smile.

True, his expedition squad was a bit lopsided, with the three strongest humans along with a teenage shaman and a Valkyrie guide. Billy’s disposition spoke for itself, and both Zac and Thea were only focused on getting stronger, to put it nicely. More accurately, they were both fighting idiots.

Billy was more than willing to get out of the boring stables and he pushed open the barn doors with a grunt. The group walked outside, but they stopped after only a few meters, realizing the glasshouse had disappeared. More importantly, Zac felt a sense of impending doom, like he would die if he didn’t get out of the way.

The only reason that he didn’t start running was that the feeling was distinctly different from his Danger Sense, like it was a cheap mimicry of the real thing.

“Illusion array,” Thea muttered as she looked around with some trepidation. “Do you feel the weird sensation of dread as well?”

“It might be something to keep beasts away,” Emily ventured. “Like bug repellent.”

“Probably,” Thea nodded before she looked into the sky with a slight frown. “The ambient energy is so dense in here, and there is some attunement in it as well.”

Zac needed a bit longer to properly sense the Cosmic Energy, but he could immediately see what she was meaning with the help of [Cosmic Gaze]. The whole forest was shrouded in a

silvery haze after he activated his ocular skill, and it seemed to radiate down from the moons like light summer rain.

“Should we head toward the closest mountain? The closest one isn’t too far, and we might be able to spot other exits that way,” Thea ventured. “It’s either that or keep to the wall.”

“Let’s go to the mountain,” Zac eventually said. “The wall looks the same far into the horizon. We will probably learn more if we head a bit further in.”

They immediately set out, this time led by Zac who was using his natural affinity with the forest that came from **[Forester’s Constitution]**. There were occasional calls of beasts that reverberated through the forest, and Zac tried to keep them away from any potentially dangerous spot. It was worth remembering that this place wasn’t like Earth or the Tower of Eternity, and Zac couldn’t help but feel some pressure as he walked through the woods.

There were no limits here, so the beasts could even be D-Grade for all they knew.

The fact that the strongest cultivators were just High E-Grade indicated that the beasts weren’t that powerful, and neither did the howls contain that kind of power. But they couldn’t be certain. So Zac’s senses were pushed to their limits as he kept a vigil of the surroundings, and the others looked back and forth as they snuck through dense parts of the undergrowth.

However, they only had time to advance for fifteen minutes before Zac sensed a hint of killing intent to their left. He looked over with a frown as he hadn’t seen any actual threat, but Thea reacted even quicker as her sword both left and entered its sheath before Zac even had time to summon **[Verun’s Bite]**. A thin sapphire blade shot out from her weapon, appearing to be a wind blade infused with some Dao.

The wind blade contained extremely sharp energy along with a hint of that mysterious force that Brazla called Sword Intent. A muffled thud sounded out the next moment, and the group hurried over to see what had been the source of the killing intent.

It turned out to be a wolf with luxuriant white fur, with a grey marking in its forehead the only exception. It was about as large as a cow, and seemingly just at the bottleneck of the E-Grade judging by the pressure the carcass emitted.

“Won’t be too bad if the beasts are just at this level,” Zac muttered. “But there could be stronger ones out there as well. Maybe we should-”

“We can’t back down from seeing just one F-grade beast,” Thea interjected. “We’ll never reach the core of this Mystic Realm then. But we need to be careful, if there is one wolf there are definitely more.”

“Billy isn’t afraid of any stupid dogs,” Billy muttered as he gripped his club even tighter.

“Let’s keep going then,” Zac said as stowed away the carcass before spreading some corpse-removing powder across the grass to remove the scent of blood.

The group kept going, moving in a circuitous path toward the mountain ahead. Zac kept his eyes peeled for more wolves, but there were no odd energy movements in the air, nor were there any bloodthirsty howls of a pack on the prowl. A couple of minutes later they started to relax again as they closed in on the mountain.

However, Zac’s eyes widened in shock when hundreds of wolves materialized out of what looked like moonlight, each of them emitting an aura of an E-Grade beast. Not only that, but Zac could tell with one glance that they weren’t some average mutts. They should come from some powerful bloodline, as even the weakest E-Grade wolves easily eclipsed the pressure that the Fiend Wolf of the Beast Tides emitted.

He even sensed a few auras that were a match to his own.

“Run!” Zac unhesitantly shouted, but he froze upon turning around.

They were surrounded.

More and more wolves kept appearing out of thin air and there were thousands of them encircling their small group before they had a chance to react. Zac didn’t know if there were even

more of them on the way, but he knew that dealing with just these ones would be difficult enough. They needed to get back to the glasshouse before they were overrun.

None of the wolves had made their move yet, but Zac wasn't above drawing first blood as a massive fractal blade appeared, stretching over a hundred meters and cutting dozens of trees apart from its aura alone. It shimmered in gold and black, and Zac launched two series of swings at the wolves who blocked their retreat.

Two wolves, each of them radiating an extremely condensed aura, were ready for the attack though. The marks in their foreheads lit up as the two clouds of **[Rapturous Divide]** shot toward their rearguard, and the thousands of wolves immediately released a unified howl. A huge moon appeared above them the next instant, and it drenched the whole battlefield in a silver radiance. The light contained an immense pressure as well, and it immediately forced Emily to her knees.

The others were able to stand it, though Joanna was visibly pale from the effort.

More importantly, Zac frowned when he sensed the energies of his strike being continuously whittled down. He tried to counteract the effect by using his recently improved command of his Dao, but it felt like he was trying to hold back the tide with his bare hands. By the time the two energies of **[Rapturous Divide]** reached the wolves they were all but hollowed-out.

The familiar scene of the paradisial divide still appeared, but it almost felt like an illusion. A few dozen wolves were cut apart in an instant before one of the larger wolves literally bit the image with enough force to rip it apart, but there were more than enough beasts to fill up holes in the ranks.

The two wolves who towered above the others howled again, and the previously orderly encirclement rippled as over a hundred wolves started rushing toward them.

“STAY AWAY FROM BILLY’S FRIENDS!” Billy roared as his body started growing, but the growth actually stopped when he reached just four meters.

His physique had transformed though, his muscles turning inhumanly defined as a golden set of runes spread across his frame like a wildfire. Zac was mostly focused on the incoming wolves, but he could swear that the giant even gained at least twenty additional muscles that humans simply lacked. Even Billy's eyes radiated an immense primordial aura as the air exploded around him, and he was among the E-Grade wolves before Zac had a chance to make his next move.

A coruscating shockwave erupted where Billy appeared, and five wolves were turned into paste before he had even swung his club. What followed was a tremendous horizontal swing that caused sixteen wolves to implode, and the whole area shook and heaved as the titan remolded the area with his fury.

However, these wolves were far from ordinary prey, and a squad led by a grizzled alpha moved to intercept Billy's advance, and a wave of silver light actually managed to stop the giant's attack. It looked like the energy of his attack was whittled down just like Zac's was just a few seconds ago.

Five wolves appeared out of silver light next to Billy the next moment, but it was as though the giant had eyes in his neck as the series of muscles in his shins generated a furious and instantaneous momentum, which allowed him to spin his club in a 360-degree arc, killing three and maiming another two.

"Help him carve a way out. I'll protect our backs," Zac said as he exploded into action as well as a series of fractal blades shot out to hopefully cause some damage to the incoming beasts.

However, the incessant moonlight from above was still causing trouble, and the fractal blades couldn't even guarantee a single kill before they were drained and broke apart. It was like the environment itself was fighting against them, and the animals kept getting closer to the exposed backs of his squad. Thea and Joanna were already desperately pushing forward and Emily's form was in constant motion as she sent out one buff or minor axe strike after another.

Zac frowned as he saw the incoming tide, and his eyes darted at the two leaders who still kept their position on top of a rock

in the center of the pack like generals overseeing their army. His wide-scale attacks were restrained by whatever that moon above was doing, so he would need to get closer if he wanted to kill them. But doing so would likely result in the death of at least one person in his squad.

The fighting only started a few seconds ago, but everyone but Emily already sported wounds. If they also had to deal with the wolves coming from behind they would be overrun in seconds. He needed to thin out the herd a bit before he dealt with the leaders. Using **[Deforestation]** or **[Nature's Punishment]** felt extremely risky as well as long as the moon remained, so he needed to come up with another solution.

A huge amount of energy surged toward an intricate fractal at the lower end of his spine, and it quickly started to radiate a shocking amount of power.

There hadn't even been a chance to test the skill out, but Zac saw no option but to active **[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

Chapter 583: Overrun

A shockwave erupted from Zac's body, causing the closest wolves to be thrown away as their bodies twisted and deformed. Zac wasn't focused on that though, but rather the three-meter halo that had appeared behind him. It was a circle that shone in silver, though the silver of a honed blade rather than the moonlight that drowned out the area.

It was covered in dense scripts, but the true core of the skill was the image in the middle of the halo.

It was the deceptively unadorned axe that Zac had witnessed in his very first Dao Vision, the weapon of the axe-man who had singlehandedly caused the death of both the divine faction and most likely a whole world. The axe looked almost exactly the same as how Zac remembered it when it was stabbed into the ground next to the endless chasm, and the image infused the halo with an almost blinding sharpness.

"Supremacy," Zac muttered as he started running forward, each step causing cracks to spread for dozens of meters.

His momentum was rapidly growing as his spectral forest rose around him, giving him perfect vantage of the incoming wolves. He realized that there were as many invisible wolves approaching as visible ones, but he didn't worry. The heaviness and sharpness of the halo behind him coursed through his body, and it was ready to be released at moment's notice.

Zac swung [**Verun's Bite**] toward the closest clump of wolves when they were just twenty meters away, and pained yowls cut through the incessant roars of the vast wolf pack. The mournful cries were immediately cut short though as a dozen E-Grade wolves were flung away like they were pieces of trash, their bodies mangled almost beyond recognition. The ground itself was crushed and split apart as well, forming a

deep chasm that stretched almost fifty meters before the power in Zac's swing lost its strength.

That was just the beginning though, as one swing after another started reaping the lives of the vanguard of the wolves, to the point that his killing speed surpassed that of the other three combined. Waves of moonlight drowned him both from above and from the wolves themselves, but this new skill wasn't as easily worn down as **[Chop]**. The halo was connected to Zac himself and almost impervious to the effect while the strikes were instantaneous, not allowing for the slightest weakening before the damage was already done.

His targets weren't cleanly bisected as they would have been from **[Rapturous Divide]** or the final swing of **[Blighted Cut]**, but they rather looked like they had been cut and bludgeoned simultaneously. Wherever Zac turned his attention a wave of carnage would soon follow as long as the halo behind his back remained.

Each swing of his axe contained not only his own strength, but it also contained a fragment of the boundless conviction and power of the original wielder of the simple woodman's axe. The blood of the wolves was already dying the whole area red, and a shocking stream of Cosmic Energy was entering Zac's body from the kill.

There were simply too many wolves to stop them all from reaching the Thea and the others, so he could only focus on the most powerful-looking squads. The others would be able to deal with the peak F-Grade wolves and their recently evolved brothers, but only Zac could kill the ones who were approaching middle E-Grade quickly enough.

Five packs was enough to almost open up his next node, and Zac was forced to trap the rest as to not break a node in the middle of the battle. It almost looked like he formed a sanguine cloud that rotated around him as he flashed back and forth among the trees, each jump with **[Loamwalker]** resulting in the death of even more wolves.

These elite wolves weren't dumb brutes that simply took Zac's attacks lying, and his whole body was covered in wounds

caused by razor-sharp claws and hundreds of energy-attacks that they could launch from their foreheads. Their bodies were extremely sturdy as well, and if it wasn't for the added sharpness of his swings, he would eventually have been overrun by their sheer numbers.

It was all thanks to his recently acquired skill; **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, the skill in the Dao Repository that was linked to the Strength Attribute. It didn't conjure a massive weapon like **[Deforestation]** or any fantastical sights like **[Rapturous Divide]**. It simply infused his normal swings with the power of the object depicted in the avatar.

The axe-man in his Dao Vision had almost split a whole world apart with a swing of his axe, but Zac obviously couldn't quite reach that level with his swings. But it still produced an effect far beyond the destruction he could cause with his most similar skill; **[Unholy Strike]**, while also having a slew of other benefits.

First of all, **[Conformation of Supremacy]** didn't need to be charged for every attack like the skill he got from Mhal required. The halo did dim down a bit after every attack, but Zac could push more Cosmic Energy into it to reignite its power. The effect also wasn't limited to an increase in physical strength, but it rather imbued his swings with a mysterious energy based on the avatar, almost like it gained an additional Dao Seed.

The only downsides to the skill were the high energy consumption and the fact that the skill could be considered a mid-range attack at best since it didn't actually launch any projectiles. The damage caused by Zac's swings were rather just an outburst of the force contained in his attacks.

It had been a pretty big disappointment to see that the Endurance-based defensive skill clashed with **[Deforestation]**, forcing him to give up on getting a new defensive skill now that **[Nature's Barrier]** was lagging behind. However, the fact that the Strength-based skill didn't clash with a single one of his skills felt like a huge windfall. It was the third skill he had picked up, and his only regret was that he couldn't get it in his Draugr side as well.

The skill was simple and direct, just how Zac liked it. He was only able to infuse it with his Fragment of the Axe at the moment, but some Dao limitations weren't that uncommon with early proficiency skills.

The fact that the picture within the halo looked just like the axe in his Dao Vision obviously wasn't a coincidence, but the skill actually had no connection to that axe-wielding master at all. **[Conformation of Supremacy]** was rather a blank slate, where you could create your own avatar of supremacy.

The image was interchangeable, and it could be different every time the skill was activated. However, the better the image resonated with your current intent, the more power it would provide, albeit at a higher energy-consumption.

Zac chose the image based on that Dao Vision as it still held a huge position in his heart, and his thoughts often wandered back to the scene of that man's battle against the celestials and the gates of heaven. He had witnessed even more shocking sights and even more powerful beings since then, for example the Grand Protector who defended his world against the death of a universe. But the axe-man was the first true supreme being Zac had seen, a testament of what was possible in this new world.

There was probably no avatar that was as defining of Zac's cultivation path as that lone axe, making it the optimal choice for an avatar. Choosing other avatars might bring out all kinds of interesting effects, but he needed every advantage he could eke out at the moment.

Another horizontal swing resulted in a wave of destruction rippling outward, but a solid silver crescent flew out to intercept the attack. It was one of the leading wolves who had launched some sort of attack from its forehead, and Zac glanced at it with a frown. He tried another few attacks, but the wolves had caught on by now as they spread out.

[Conformation of Supremacy] was able to boost the power of his attacks by a great degree, but its range was limited to around fifty meters, and it weakened the further away from Zac the strike was. He was forced to keep running back and

forth, but each swing only managed to take out a couple of wolves after they started to adapt.

He was still keeping a decent pace, and the Cosmic Energy gathered in his body was starting to reach almost uncomfortable levels, but he knew that the situation wasn't really sustainable. Each swing empowered by his new skill cost a decent chunk of Cosmic Energy, even more than a dozen **[Chop]**'s. That was fine when he killed over twenty powerful wolves with one strike, but he was killing fewer than five with each attack right now.

Zac appeared next to another elite wolf, and it bit straight at his throat the moment he appeared. Zac was ready for the attack thanks to **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** though, and he simply pivoted his body a bit as **[Verun's Bite]** fell, cutting both its spine and lungs apart as a heavy wave of sharpness swallowed another three wolves before they had time to jump away.

Another surge of energy entered his body, and he was starting to feel bloated. However, his mind wasn't on slowing down his killing, but rather the opposite. He needed to change the current situation somehow. The moon in the sky was able to whittle down any long-range attacks from the looks of it, forcing both him and the others into a melee against the beasts.

The moon itself was hundreds of meters in the air, and there was no way for Zac to break it apart. He tried flashing toward the two leaders in an attempt to take them out, but two massive lunar crescents forced him into a defensive stance as the other wolves heedlessly started rushing toward the others.

He could only scramble back to protect the rear of the others, unable to leave as much as a flesh wound on the two alphas.

Zac growled in annoyance as he crushed the head of the closest wolf, and he was even considering taking out the cursed blade to deal with the moon above him. The curse that he just had managed to expel was a troubling hidden threat, but he didn't have a lot of options at the moment. He tried shooting a few fractal blades toward the sky, but the pressure that the moon emitted was clearly stronger the closer the blades got.

A sigh escaped his lips as he took out the rotting sword, but he froze when a sudden thud echoed out from his chest. The closest wolves staggered backward with bleeding ears, but Zac wasn't all that much better off as he stumbled to his knees. Another thud caused a wave of weakness to spread across his body, and he sensed how his accumulated energy was rapidly being stolen.

The **[Void Heart]** had finally woken up, and it was hungry.

The wolves clearly saw an opportunity when Zac fell down on his knees, but a sapphire sheen cut apart the two closest nearby wolves as Thea suddenly appeared next to him.

“Are you okay?” she shouted as she desperately fended off the elite wolves that were going in for the kill.

A wave of destruction rippled out to clear the area as Zac swung his axe from a kneeling position, but another heartbeat made him lose his balance causing him to fall over. Even worse, he sensed that the hidden node was still voraciously hungry, and Zac was afraid that it would start feasting on his own Cosmic Energy if he didn't quickly kill some more beasts.

“Can you create an opening on the big ones? I might be able to take one out then,” Thea whispered as she helped Zac to his feet.

Zac wordlessly nodded as he looked at the two wolves in the distance. Creating an opening didn't only mean to occupy the two big bastards, but it meant also dealing with a huge number of the more powerful that was barring the path. He looked down at the tattered sword for a second, but he decidedly put it away.

The white arc that the sword produced was extremely powerful, but it wasn't that fast. He was afraid that the moonlight would have whittled it down before it even had a chance to pick up its pace, which would place a curse on him for nothing. More importantly, the cursed sword was considered an external tool, and kills with the weapon wouldn't count as his kills. Normally that wouldn't matter, but his hidden node was screaming for sustenance.

[Deforestation] was also a risky move, and something he wanted to save for later if possible.

Finally, there was only one thing that he could think of, and **[Love's Bond]** slithered across his body as it fastened itself to his back. He hadn't expected to waste any of the long-cooldown skills of his Spirit Tool at this juncture, but he saw no better option. He had one remaining card that might work even in these conditions, and it might even be able to destroy the foundations of the moon itself.

He needed to activate **[Fate's Obduracy]**.

Chapter 584: Storm Surge

The offensive skill of his Spirit Tool was extremely powerful, and it even had the unique feature of becoming stronger by being damaged. The moon would only assist him by forcing the chains to break and split apart like a hydra, and kills by his bound weapon obviously counted as his own. It was an attack of massive proportions as well, to the point that it might even destabilize the moon in the sky, killing two birds with one stone.

It was clear that the two leaders didn't conjure the enormous moon by themselves. It was continuously bolstered by hundreds of streams of energy coming from the whole pack. The moon had already grown a bit dimmer from the mounting death tally, and Zac hoped there would be a critical point where the skill failed.

The two fractal lines on the lid lit up as the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward, and an eerie rattling sound echoed across the area as the fractals turned into two new chains wrought by pure darkness. A discordant sizzling sound immediately entered Zac's ears as the moonlight started to break them apart, but Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that two chains turned into four as a result. Waves of silver light erupted from the wolves as well, and they slammed into the incoming chains to dispel the attack. But the result was simply even more chains.

The last time Zac used this skill he had focused it all on a small clump of targets, but this time he spread the net wide. Most of the chains flew in the direction of the leaders to clear out all the beasts that were in the way, while the remainder turned in a parabolic arc in the opposite direction to assist his beleaguered squad. Billy was fighting valiantly, but his chest rose and fell like two bellows as sweat streamed down his face.

He was maintaining a speed that even Zac would have trouble matching, and Zac guessed it was the skill he had learned in the Inheritance. There was no way that such a powerful technique didn't have a downside though, and Zac guessed that its energy consumption was immense. Billy was still not even peak F-Grade, and he wouldn't be able to keep going indefinitely.

One wolf after another was gored by the chains, and the two leaders finally lost their patience as they roared in anger, each of them swiping at the chains from their position. A series of lunar blades shot out from their claws, and the air itself was ripped apart as they flew forward.

The chains of [**Fate's Obduracy**] was no match from the combined attacks of what no doubt were two middle E-Grade beasts with powerful bloodlines. But that was just what Zac hoped to see as the chains rapidly multiplied, instantly turning into a sea of links that caused havoc across the battlefield.

A terrifying surge of Cosmic Energy soared into his body, almost immediately eclipsing what Zac could bear. But the [**Void Heart**] had turned into a black hole, unceasingly swallowing more and more pure Cosmic Energy. It was the exact opposite of how it usually worked which was a bit concerning, but Zac figured that it was better than releasing it out into the atmosphere.

Over two hundred E-Grade wolves had died from one single attack, and it was still going strong. This was no doubt Zac's largest harvest ever, and it had significantly lessened the pressure of the moon above. One of the leaders seemed to have entered a state of madness after witnessing the sea of corpses, and it could no longer hold back as it jumped forward, releasing a frenzied barrage of attacks on the chains of [**Love's Bond**].

Its whole body shone with lunar light, and the extremely durable links were like dried wood in front of its all-out offensive. The chains kept splitting and rejoining the fight, but they were steadily pushed back. Zac tried to cause as much damage to the wolf as possible, but he only managed to cause some minor wounds.

However, that was fine with Zac as he intentionally retreated the chains further and further back, and he had soon created a distance of hundreds of meters between the two alpha wolves. The second leader seemed a lot more coolheaded, and it roared a warning to its companion. Only then did the leader seem to cool down a bit, but Zac had already achieved his purpose.

The wolves in the way were dead, and the leader was alone. It was just in time as well as the see chains had reached a breaking-point after taking on the whole wolf pack for half a minute, and all but four chains shattered and dissipated in an instant. It left a slightly wounded and disoriented wolf among a sea of corpses.

However, the Chains didn't even have time to completely dispel before another form appeared right above the alpha wolf. It was Thea, and both her palms were pointed straight at the back of the wolf's head as terrifying energies surged around her body. The wolf was in a frenzied state, but its reactions were on point.

It immediately lit up with lunar light as it tried to jump away, but four chains had unknowingly snaked around its legs, rooting it in place. It was the true chains of **[Love's Bond]**, and Zac had snuck them next to the wolf among the skill he launched. The chains cracked in an instant from the pressure that the wolf emitted, but a fraction of a second was all that was needed.

A beam of pure energy that made Zac's hair stand on end slammed into the back of the alpha wolf's head before it had a chance to dodge, and Zac almost lost his footing as the beam passed straight through the skull and slammed into the ground with barely any loss of power. It was the very same skill that Thea had tried using against Inevitability during the hunt, but this time it was not only far more powerful, but it was also performed point-blank.

However, Thea wasn't unscathed either, and her eyes rolled up in her head as she fell down on the ground after releasing the beam of destruction.

The concentrated power was perhaps only matched by Zac's final strike of **[Blighted Cut]**, but it took everything of Thea to launch it. The other alpha wolf howled with rage and jumped off from the rock as well, but Zac's reaction was even quicker. He appeared next to the unmoving form of Thea and scooped her up before a barrage of attacks had a chance to kill her.

Such speed would have been impossible a second ago, but the combination of Zac's widespread killing and Thea assassinating one of the leaders was enough to break the moon lording in the sky. It dissipated into a cloud of chaotic energies that slowly started to dissipate.

The remaining wolves were utterly infuriated by seeing their leader getting killed, but they still maintained their distance. Zac wasn't clear whether it was because they hadn't received any orders from the infuriated alpha, or if it was because of the hundreds of corpses that surrounded Zac's position.

But the air was almost vibrating by the incessant howls that came from every direction. There was a ruthless bloodlust in them, to the point that it was palpable. Their combined fury had essentially become a mental attack that caused even Zac to feel some shudders in his mind. And if he was in that state, then there was no need to explain the state of the others.

Thea woke up after just a second, but her face was pallid and her hands were shaking badly.

"Billy! I need you to help the others! Take them and run back where we came from! I'll hold the rest off and lead them away from you. Can you do it?" Zac said as he started launching a barrage of fractal blades at the wolves.

Without the moon protecting them **[Chop]** once more had a decent lethality, but that was just to a certain point. They still had only killed off less than 30 percent of the whole pack, and each fractal blade only managed to kill a few of beasts before they lost their strength. Cutting through powerful E-Grade beasts took a lot of energy, and **[Chop]** could only contain so much being an F-Grade skill.

These wolves were still a lot sturdier than most things Zac had encountered in the Tower of Eternity, and it probably wasn't a coincidence.

In fact, they reminded Zac more of Verun than any wolves he had seen thus far. They weren't similar in appearance, but rather the primal aura they emitted. Zac could only guess that it wasn't a coincidence that these beasts were brought here. They were most likely former subjects for experimentation just like the groups of cultivators stuck in the research base.

"Billy will save them! Then Billy will come back and save you too!" the giant shouted before he gently scooped up an unconscious Emily in his free arm.

The teenager had constantly infused the others, including Zac, with buffs while also providing Cosmic Energy through her dance. But all of them were peak fighters with a lot of titles while Emily was just level 50. She had already overtaxed herself to the point she fell unconscious, with Joanna standing vigil over her.

Joanna herself wasn't much better off as she was barely keeping upright with the help of her spear. Billy simply picked her up by the lapel of her battlesuit and threw her across one of his shoulders. Billy was about to do the same with Thea as well, but she shook her head as she steadied her steps.

"I can walk by myself," Thea said before she turned to Zac. "I'm sorry. I keep letting you down."

"What are you talking about, things would have been a lot worse if you didn't take out the big guy," Zac said. "Don't worry, I'll be fine now that the moon is gone. This might be an opportunity for me. You've already got your levels. I'll join you guys a bit later."

"That kill pushed me all the way to level 75. Next time I won't be a burden," Thea said, and she led Billy away.

A group of wolves suddenly appeared out of nowhere to intercept them, but a blinding blue flash lit up the surroundings before they simply fell apart. Thea stumbled as blood poured down her ears, and she looked like she was teetering on the

brink of collapse. However, she somehow managed to steady herself and start running, allowing Zac to finally breathe out in relief.

Unfortunately, the relief was short-lived as over a hundred of the wolves split off from the main pack while the elites kept Zac busy. Thea was barely standing by this point, and Billy was carrying Joanna and Emily. There was no way they'd be able to fend off such a squad.

Zac growled in annoyance as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and sharp pain spread across his body. He initially didn't want to use this skill while still dealing with some lingering effects of using the [**Rageroot Oak Seed**]. However, he was out of options and he needed to kill a lot of wolves quickly.

The fractal edge attached to his axe grew over 100 meters and gained a golden sheen. [**Rapturous Divide**] had finally come off cooldown from his first attempt, and now was as good as time as any to use it. However, he didn't shoot launch his massive fractal edge at the hundreds of wolves that went for Billy, but rather toward the elites that were blocking his path.

His new skill was powerful, but the hides of these wolves were far too durable, and it wouldn't be able to take out all of them in one go.

That was not to say that he had abandoned his allies. Massive amounts of Cosmic Energy was already surging into his left forearm as he launched two swings toward the elite wolves with enough speed to turn his arm into a blur. The wolves shot out a barrage of crescent moons to stop the clouds, but [**Rapturous Divide**] wasn't possible to stop that way.

The alpha moved to intercept as well, but it was too slow. The hulking wolves were first covered in a layer of gold which was immediately followed by the darkness of the abyss. Zac didn't bother looking at the result, confident in the fact that most of the wolves should die from that attack. He instead activated [**Loamwalker**] flashing right past the spatial divide.

He was more worried about the pack of wolves that were rapidly closing in on his allies. They thankfully didn't get far

before a massive hand appeared in the air above them, and most of them were pushed down on their stomachs from the terrifying pressure it emitted thanks to **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and the Fragment of the Bodhi.

It was finally Zac's who restrained the wolves, rather than the other side around.

A shocking amount of water spilled out the fractal the next moment, drowning the whole area in water. A lot of wolves were crushed to death by the endless deluge while the survivors were swept up in a tsunami that started leveling this whole sector of the forest.

The water punishment wasn't as deadly as the wooden one, but it was able to cause more widespread chaos. He had essentially poured half a lake on top of the leader of the Underworld Golem Incursion, and this time there was no lava to immediately turn the endless amount of water into steam.

A mighty howl reverberated through the air, and Zac frowned when he knew that the Alpha Wolf had made his move. This was only further evidenced by the fact that the whole area was drowned in a cold white luster. It was almost like the world had become monochrome, and Zac quickly turned back toward the alpha just in time to see an enormous beam shoot past him, aiming straight for the array in the sky.

Zac wanted to stop it, but there was no time. The speed of the beam was almost instantaneous, and it slammed into the emerald array the next moment. Zac's grunted and staggered a step backward as the array cracked. Even the hand was pierced by the light, and Zac was forced to immediately discard the skill.

Billy and Thea had already managed to flee by this point, but Zac knew his job was not over as he turned toward the remaining leader and the hundreds of wolves who were still standing.

Chapter 585: Alpha

The burning embers of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] kept Zac standing through the frenetic absorption from his [**Void Heart**] as scores of wolves were drowned or crushed by [**Nature's Punishment**] before the manmade calamity was ended prematurely. Each thump from the Hidden Node caused a bout of dizziness, but Zac forced his mind to focus as he gazed at the remaining wolves.

As for the wolves that had been swept away by the tsunami, he didn't really care. Almost half of them had died judging by the streams of energy that still entered his body, and the survivors shouldn't be in any state to cause any more trouble. Billy and Thea were long out of sight, and Zac felt a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulder. He just needed to keep these rabid bastards at bay for a bit longer before he could retreat as well.

However, he would only escape if he really ran out of options, especially after having activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. He really didn't want to stop while his [**Void Heart**] still absorbed energy. Something important was definitely happening inside the Node, and Zac didn't want to ruin it at this juncture.

It might be evolving, or it might be fusing it with the extremely pure Dao Energy of the Tribulation lightning to create something amazing.

Besides, Zac still had some cards up his sleeve, though the same could obviously be said about the Alpha. A gibbous moon had appeared a hundred meters above its head, and it was no doubt the source of the earlier beam. The moon was different than the earlier one though, as a single look with [**Cosmic Gaze**] indicated that it didn't draw any energy from the other wolves. Zac didn't feel any restrictions either, which hopefully meant that the moon wouldn't be able to whittle down his large-scale attacks.

The new moon might have been lacking some functionality, but it clearly had some other abilities to make up for it. Its luster gradually increased in intensity as the alpha howled, and Zac guessed that another beam was incoming. His mind raced as he tried to think of a solution. The last attack was just too fast, and he wasn't confident in countering its speed. The second skill of **[Love's Bond]** would no doubt be able to block it, but he had already wasted one of his aces for this fight.

It took a lot of resources and time to light up the two fractals of **[Fate's Obduracy]** after using it against the cultists, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to restore the skill again before he met his real enemies. He couldn't waste limited skills like his bronze spark or **[Death's Embrace]** against these wolves, as it was just a chance encounter with the wildlife.

Thankfully there were some other options available now that the whole battlefield wasn't locked down.

Zac's arm strained as a massive axe appeared above his head, and the first swing of **[Deforestation]** was launched the moment that the second pulse of the moon shot toward him. The wave of destruction and the beam of lunar light clashed in the air between the two, and Zac's brows scrunched when he actually couldn't cut through the moonlight.

It was rather the beam that crushed his cutting wave, though it lost almost all its strength doing so. The rest was quickly dispersed by a swing of Zac's axe. The moon itself dimmed considerably as well, and it shrunk from a gibbous moon to a half-moon. That no doubt meant that the conjuration had more charges in store. But so did Zac.

The Infernal Axe appeared while the shockwaves of the first clash had yet to ebb, and Zac immediately launched it toward the wolf pack. If the Axe of Felling barely fell short, then the second swing should get the trick done. Better yet, it appeared as though the moon needed a few more seconds to charge up its next attack. It gave Zac time to create some wholesale slaughter in the meantime.

A rippling wave of flames crashed toward the wolves, and there finally was a primal fear deep within their eyes. Not even

the drowned shrubbery in the surroundings was spared as they were incinerated the moment the Infernal Axe crossed their path.

The alpha was obviously far smarter than a regular beast, and it seemed to understand that its pack was in a bad spot. It released another keening howl into the sky, and the scores of wolves around it quickly followed suit as their bodies started to radiate lunar light.

Zac's brows first scrunched at the scene, but his confusion was quickly replaced with shock as the howling wolves turned into pure light that was swallowed by the moon. Each infusion increased its luster by a noticeable degree, clearly cutting down on the time the skill needed to attack again. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Not only had the wolves activated what essentially was a War Array before, but they were even able to coordinate some sort of sacrificial skill now. The half-moon released a blinding wave of light the next moment, this time a widespread radiance that was a match to the incoming wildfire in width.

Fiery goutts and white flashes turned the battlefield into a blinding hellscape, and Zac was forced to close his eyes from the intensity. However, **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** was still active, allowing him to narrowly dodge a series of errant blasts of chaotic energies. A large number of the wolves weren't as lucky, and yet another dense stream of Cosmic Energy was gobbled up by the Hidden Node.

The last round of energy seemed to finally have satiated the **[Void Heart]** though, and Zac could finally breathe out in relief as the incessant beating stopped. However, the fact that the node didn't seem to demand any more energy wouldn't stop Zac from releasing the final axe. The last alpha wolf was looking a bit worse for the wear, and it couldn't have too much energy left after unleashing these powerful attacks.

If Zac could kill it along with a last batch of elites then he would get a round of energy just for himself, and it would definitely be enough for him to gain another level. Perhaps even two levels depending on how much the alpha provided.

That would put him at level 85, and it wasn't completely unheard of to gain some sort of class quest at that point. Most got their second quests at level 90, but it wasn't an iron-clad rule.

The ominous Axe of Desolation took shape above his head even before the chaotic energies of the battlefield had abated, and his arm strained as he begun the third and final swing. However, an extremely scary stream of almost impossibly condensed energies was suddenly spat out of the **[Void Heart]**, and it started to rampage through Zac's body as though it was looking for something.

It felt like a stream of lava was burrowing through his body, and Zac was completely unable to maintain the skill because of the pain. A small gust of the ashen desolation shot out toward the wolves, but it was a far cry from the true power of the final swing of **[Deforestation]**. The alpha wolf quickly noticed Zac's wretched state as he was lying on the ground spasming, and its eyes lit up as the remaining crescent moon actually shot straight toward him like a projectile.

"I think I need some help buddy," Zac croaked as he looked at the army of remaining wolves.

An infuriated howl immediately answered in his mind, and Verun appeared next to him in all its splendor. Its eyes were immediately trained on the incoming crescent, and bloodlust shone in its eyes. It released another mighty roar, this time for real rather than in Zac's head, and the forest shook from the power it contained.

The red streaks across Verun's hide shone with a sanguine luster as its mane danced in the wind. Swirls of blood floated around its paws, and Zac felt as though he was looking at a sea of death when gazing at the streams. The crescent was almost upon them, but Zac didn't worry even if he was barely able to remain conscious. His Tool Spirit emitted a haughty confidence even in front of the incoming attack.

Verun actually sent out a crescent of its own the next moment, a massive arc of condensed blood. It clashed with the Crescent Moon the next moment, but there was no explosion or

shockwave. The blood was liquid, and it actually swallowed the moon whole as it continued its trajectory. The blood crescent quickly destabilized though, exploding into cascading streams of silvery blood that maimed any wolf it hit.

The Tool Spirit was clearly the one with the advantage, but Verun actually seemed enraged that it didn't manage to hit the alpha wolf with its attack. It turned into a stream of sanguine energy as it flashed forward, heading straight for the core of the pack. A few wolves tried to block Verun's path, but they were quickly turned into dried husks that fell to the ground, causing Zac to be beset by another wave of Cosmic Energy.

A bloodthirsty aura exploded out from the alpha once more as it ran toward the Tool Spirit, and its eyes had turned into two silver moons.

A storm of red and silver erupted in middle of the pack as the two beasts fought for supremacy. Zac himself wanted to help, but he was in no state to even move. He could only make himself as inconspicuous as possible as he hid behind the carcasses of a couple of wolves, spectating the battle from his hidden spot.

Most of his concentration was still aimed at the situation inside his body though, and he was starting to worry when he saw that the stream actually had glommed onto his [**Axe Mastery**] skill fractal. That skill wasn't all that important to him any longer, so losing it wouldn't be the end of the world. But if that odd stream of energy could destroy one skill, then it could destroy another.

A massive outburst of power forced Zac out of spiritual sight though, just in time to see Verun bite down on the alpha wolf's neck with its oversized maw. Both combatants sported a series of wounds, but the wolf was clearly worse off. Not one of the other beasts helped their leader though, and they just stood rooted in place as Verun started fling his head back and forth until it managed to rip off most of the wolf's neck.

Blood poured out of the dying alpha wolf like a fountain, but it was quickly absorbed by Verun as the Tool Spirit roared victoriously toward the sky. Zac was completely inundated

with Cosmic Energy as well a second later, to the point that he almost forgot the pain he was in. He was about to force himself back on his feet in case the wolf pack went berserk, but his eyes widened when he saw that the sea of wolves lay down on the ground in an act of submission, their heads pointing toward Verun.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing. Had these wolves actually accepted Verun as the new alpha after it killed the old one? A few of the more powerful wolves seemed to share Zac's skepticism though, and they jumped the Tool Spirit as one. However, Verun had turned the far more powerful alpha wolf into a bloody mess, so how could these upstarts match its might?

They were ruthlessly slaughtered in seconds, and soon there was not a single wolf who dared to lift its head. Zac hesitated for a second before he started to make his way toward Verun who still proudly stood on the hill overlooking its new subjects. His movement was immediately discovered, and dozens of wolves seemed ready to pounce.

However, a snarl from Verun stopped them in their tracks, but Zac could see that they barely were able to restrain themselves. The instinct of these animals was extremely strong, to the point that their muscles shuddered as they kept themselves at bay. Zac knew that just a hasty movement would be enough to set them off, no matter how much Verun ordered against it.

It was a shame as thoughts of domestication had entered his mind when he saw the situation unfold. Who would say no to a powerful pack of E-Grade wolves who could do their bidding? Having them would be far more effective than the Barghest who had essentially turned into training fodder for the young cultivators of Port Atwood.

His only hope was that the wolves were overly excited from the battle and all the blood, and that they would be easier to domesticate after things calmed down.

"Good Job," Zac smiled as he patted the Tool Spirit, not caring at all about his hand being drenched in blood of the alpha

wolf. “Do you think you can keep these guys under contr-“

He didn't get any further though as the sound of a tremendous heartbeat rippled out from his body. Verun yowled in surprise and took a step back, and the nearest wolves seemed to have been physically impacted from it as blood started pouring out of their mouths and ears.

Zac himself was shocked to see that the terrifying stream of energy of before was just the first half, and second part had just been expelled from the Hidden Node. He was barely standing upright with the original force in his body, and he felt the same sort of despair now as when he saw the Tribulation Lightning coming for him.

This was too much for him to handle.

“Protect me,” Zac only had time to say before his Hidden Node beat again, causing the two streams to join up and slam into his soul.

Chapter 586: Delayed Gratification

The Bodhi had stood like a beacon in the arid badlands for centuries, its vitality in a constant struggle against the desolation around it. With each turn of the seasons it was buffeted by the anguish of a dying world, but the onslaught only served to temper the purity of its conviction. The inscriptions on the golden leaves contained deeper truths every year, and its intention was clear; to bring life to this sea of suffering.

Another century passed before a wind picked up pace among the lifeless glaciers in the far east, and it met no resistance by the flat steppes as it pushed forward. The leaves of the Bodhi was once again dancing with delight from the ethereal caress, and a song of nature echoed throughout the badlands. The proclamation of the Holy Sangha was hidden among the leaves, constantly consecrating its surroundings.

The world had been on the brink of death for untold ages, but life always finds a way. A stalk of grass pushed through parched dirt, heralding the new era.

A hundred hooded beings walked forward between the Fallen Hills, each step bringing forth the rattling of chains and clattering of bones. The sun was high in the sky, blasting an uncomfortable warmth that was rapidly dispelling the soothing haze. Now and then a protector would emerge from his grave and charge at the procession, but their oath kept them bound them to their graves. They finally reached their target, the Nameless Mountain.

The hooded beings knelt in obeisance, keeping in check their desire to gaze upon the Holy Coffin. The coffin in question was the only interment on the whole mountain, as nothing could encroach on its domain. One day the black coffin had

simply appeared there, and to this day no one had been able to figure out its origin. They didn't even know who, or what was inside.

But they knew it was powerful, akin to a god.

A thud echoed out from the coffin, a thud that made the whole clergy shake with excitement. The coffin had answered their call, meaning that their plight was over. A small crack opened in the chained-up coffin, and an endless tide of darkness and pestilence surged toward the sky to meet the punishing rays of the sun.

The whole world was covered in darkness a second later, and the land was once more at peace. The clergymen once more performed the rites of obeisance before they rose to their feet. The junior acolyte finally couldn't help himself as they started making their way out of the holy hills, and the skeleton snuck a glance at the peak of the mountain.

The coffin silently hung from its chains from the branch of a pitch-black tree, behind it a faltering sun; That was the last thing the novice Necromancer ever saw.

Zac finally remembered himself after being awash in the two visions, but his spiritual journey wasn't over there. He was shown one scene after another, not all of them from his own memories.

Many of the visions were all-too-familiar, each bringing with them a painful memory. They showcased his struggles and desperate battles, from the barghest who had found his campsite to the wolves who had surrendered just seconds ago. There were also visions of strange lands, of weird objects containing terrifying amounts of wild energies. They all beckoned to Zac, urging him to conquer the opposition and claim them as his price.

The visions were so quick that they almost turned to a blur, but he did notice one odd detail. In every single scene there was one constant; the Stele of Conflict he had conjured during his climb. Sometimes it was placed right next to the action, and other times it was discretely placed in the background.

But it was always there.

Zac tried to make sense of the scenes, but something was just out of his grasp. He was instead swept up by the heat of the battles he witnessed, and it almost felt like he had eaten another berserking treasure as he saw one scene of bloodshed after another. Something was growing inside him. Each kill was another building block, each battle setting the foundation. He was building a bridge toward the Heavens with the corpses of his enemies.

The scenes were suddenly ripped apart by a shocking flash of blue lightning, throwing him into one final vision.

A cracked dome floated in space, an impossibly large structure broken and scorched beyond repair. An infant's cry echoed out toward the vast beyond, but it was overpowered by the roar of an endless sea of lightning. It should have ended then and there, but a hand pushed through Heaven's Wrath and brought him away, ignoring the sizzling sounds of molten flesh and metal.

Darkness.

Only a then did Zac find himself back in his own body, and he took a ragged breath as he opened his eyes. Most of the wolves were gone, but a few new carcasses were strewn around him as Verun stood in vigil next to him. The streams of blood around its feet were mostly gone by this point though, meaning that the Tool Spirit was running out of time.

However, Zac sensed that he would be able to keep Verun around for a few minutes longer as long as it didn't need to expend a bunch of energy fighting. Seeing that he was safe for the moment Zac breathed out in relief before his mind turned to the scenes he had just witnessed. The last thing he remembered was the stream of power rushing straight for his mind, and then he was swept up in a series of visions.

He was curious about his status screen, but the state of his body took precedence. Zac had seen how his skill was attacked earlier by the initial stream of energy, and he definitely felt that something was different compared to before, prompting him to turn his sight inward. The moment he activated his

spiritual sight Zac realized that drastic changes had taken place, though he couldn't understand what the significance of the change was.

First of all, all three Skill Fractals that came with a Dao Vision had changed, not only [**Axe Mastery**]. The other two skills, [**Forester's Constitution**] and [**Bulwark Mastery**] were transformed as well. Their fractals had looked like an axe, a tree, and a shield respectively, but they had now looked like abstract skill fractals just like all the others.

Intuition fueled by [**Primal Polyglot**] told Zac that it wasn't an upgrade, but neither was it a devolution. The change probably came from the second difference that Zac spotted a second later. He could make out three objects in the middle of his soul.

His soul had looked like a slightly murky glass ball in his mind until now, with scars and lines crossing its surface. The cage for the remnants was hidden in a subspace of its own so it wasn't directly visible, but now actual objects were moving about in his mind.

In the absolute middle of his mind Zac actually saw himself, or a rather a small spiritual avatar in his likeness. He was holding [**Verun's Bite**] in his hand and he kept swinging it as he dodged and pivoted in place. It looked like the small spirit-copy was fighting an endless number of invisible enemies, and the constant battle was generating some sort of power that Zac could sense hidden within the avatar.

Pure streams of the Dao from the surroundings were steadily entering the avatar's body as well, like his miniature self was a black hole.

The energies didn't come from his soul though, but rather the two other objects that were slowly orbiting his avatar. The first of them was the chained coffin hovering from the branch of a dead tree with a dying sun serving as its backdrop. The scene looked almost exactly like his vision earlier, and half of the energy that his avatar was absorbing was the deathly haze that escaped from within the coffin.

The final addition was unsurprisingly the Bodhi Tree that he had witnessed in two Dao Visions by now. Its canopy formed an almost perfect circle, and the leaves continuously radiated golden energy that slowly drifted toward avatar Zac. The energies of the two apparitions continuously clashed as they formed a black-and-gold nebula that swiveled around the avatar until they were swallowed.

It was obviously his three Dao Fragments given form, and Zac started to understand what was going on as he looked upon the scene. This was an actual embryonic representation of his cultivation path where the “core” of his Daos had moved from Skill fractals to his Soul. It seemed a lot more logical compared to before, though he didn’t know if there were any real benefits of the change.

The odd thing was that neither Ogras nor anyone else on Port Atwood had never mentioned anything like this. Zac had even asked if problems could arise when upgrading the skills or his Daos, but Ogras seemed to be of the understanding that it didn’t matter. The fractal would upgrade to a better form that could keep housing the Dao according to the demon.

The first reason for the change Zac could think of was the fact that he had taken the first steps toward a proper path worthy of an Arcane Class. It wouldn’t be too surprising if Ogras didn’t know about that change, as Arcane classes simply didn’t exist on his homeworld. Zac figured that the change could only be good if that was the case.

There might be hidden benefits of changing things up this way or even hidden pitfalls of keeping one’s Daos inside the Skill fractals.

However, what confused Zac a bit was where those energies were going. All three apparitions were steadily generating pure Dao, but it was all swallowed by the avatar. Zac tried to magnify the scene as much as he could until he suddenly froze in shock. He didn’t hesitate this time as he took out what looked like a piece of coal, and he crammed it into his mouth like he was starving.

A prickling sensation spread through his body the next moment, like every cell in his body was undergoing some sort of acupuncture. A comfortable heat was also starting to accumulate in his spine. He was neither undergoing another round of tempering or acupuncture though, but he had rather eaten the **[Bloodline Marrow]** because of what he sensed inside his avatar.

It was his second Hidden Node, nestled in the head of his spiritual avatar.

Zac had spotted this node a few times by now, but the latest burst of energy had almost completely opened it. He could feel that it was just on the verge of breaking open, but the burst from before wasn't quite enough to get the job done, causing it to slowly close again. The Dao Energies were trying to keep it open, but it was a losing battle.

He had saved the marrow all this time in hopes of using it to awaken his bloodline, but he couldn't give up on this opportunity. Breaking open Hidden Nodes were far more difficult than nurturing one's bloodline, and if his marrow could take him the final stretch it would definitely be worth it. Zac thought of eating the spiritual **[Four Gates Pill]** as well, but he soon decided against it.

There was nothing that actually indicated that the pill would be able to help with Hidden Nodes, and his body was already chock-full of Cosmic Energy thanks to Verun's onslaught. Besides, he had already decided to eat it before reaching the core for a burst of levels in case he still hadn't gained enough power-ups by then.

This was no time to get distracted though, and he stopped the energy from the marrow from burrowing into his bones, instead directing it toward his mind. He guessed that the **[Bloodline Marrow]** was trying to activate his bloodline, but he didn't change his mind as he staunchly pushed all of the energy into his spiritual avatar instead.

More and more power was crammed into the node hidden within his spiritual self until a ripple spread out from his glabella. It was his second Hidden Node that had properly

been broken open, and Zac felt his mental energy surge and spread out like never before. For a moment he felt connected with everything in the universe, where he was one with the Dao. But he lost the fantastical feeling as soon as he gained it, and Zac's mind was once again whisked away to yet another vision.

He was once more sitting next to his mysterious ancestor, hurtling through the vast space on top of a meteor.

Chapter 587: Pathstrider

It almost felt like Zac had never left the solitary rock hurtling through the boundless expanse. He felt the heat of the drained sun on his back, and the surface of the meteor was still illuminated by its rays. He soon realized that the meteor wasn't as simple as it seemed though as space and time seemed to bend to its will. It kept running into one energy-dense object after another at a rapid pace, the vast distances of outer space made inconsequential.

Everything from stars to mysterious meteors was sucked dry by the cultivator, turning him into a wandering calamity. But the world suddenly shuddered as the meteor was forced to a stop in the middle of nowhere, and Zac spotted a man standing in the void. He radiated terrifying killing intent, and he looked at the unmoving man on top of the meteor with greed in his eyes.

The man said something as a sword materialized in his hand, but Zac couldn't make out any sound at all. However, the sword alone spoke volumes, and its sharpness immediately forced Zac to look away. Zac's still couldn't see the features of his presumed ancestor from his vantage, but it looked like he didn't care all too much about the man who barred their path.

The ancestor didn't summon a weapon of his own, but he rather just pointed at the swordmaster with his left hand. Zac felt the world was ending the next moment as both space and time were ripped apart. An area spanning millions of kilometers was caught up in the storm of annihilation, and not even the vacuum of the void was unscathed.

Zac could somewhat spot the swordmaster struggling within the torrent for a few seconds, but he was soon drowned and obliterated. Neither his body nor his treasure sword survived, and the whole sector of space still hadn't restored its spatial integrity by the time the meteor started moving again.

The vision started to fade as soon as the ‘battle’ ended, but it still replayed over and over in Zac’s mind.

There was one thing that Zac was certain of; the attack hadn’t contained even a shred of Cosmic Energy. It was a simple outburst of Dao and mental energy, a truly weaponized version of a Dao Field. That fact alone almost made Zac’s mind short-circuit, and one thought remained even after Zac woke up in the silver forest.

Just how powerful was that man’s soul to be able to utterly destroy an area far surpassing a planet just with just his Dao?

Another screen appeared like when he opened his last node, but the text wasn’t all that helpful this time around either.

[Spiritual Void - An omnivorous mind tempered by the primordial void.]

He quickly turned his sight inward once more, but not much had changed. The three apparitions still floated about in the center of his soul, and the Hidden Node inside his avatar was still slowly drawing on the energies of the three images. However, the node was properly opened this time around, and Zac figured that this behavior was one of the features of the node.

Part of him wanted to immediately start experimenting with his Daos, but the time that Verun could maintain its corporeal form was quickly running out. He conveyed a couple of orders through the Tool Spirit, and he was relieved to see that most of the remaining wolves blended into the forest the next second.

He had only given two orders to the pack since he was afraid that they wouldn’t be able to follow anything more complex than that. The first was to stay away from the wall at the side with the glasshouse. Secondly, he ordered all but six wolves to go away, to go about their business. The remaining six wolves were just at the Peak F-Grade, and Zac alone could subdue their fighting spirit with his aura even after being afflicted by the weakness of **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**.

Verun turned into a stream of blood that squeezed into the axe a minute later, leaving Zac and the wolves in an awkward

stalemate. However, Zac was relieved to see that releasing his aura wasn't even necessary. The wolves were actually subdued by Verun even after it returned to the axe, and they even followed basic commands by Zac himself.

The group started to walk back the way Zac came from as soon as he had looted the corpses of both the alphas and most of the elites. Zac still held off on experimenting with his Daos, partly because he was afraid that he'd spook the wolves, and partly because he felt that his new hidden node hadn't completely stabilized yet.

But there were other things to check while he made his way back, and he opened his status screen to see if the recent experiences had changed anything there.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	83
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[E] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted, Unawakened)
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated,

	Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Pathstrider
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	2756 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 228%]
Dexterity	1312 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Endurance	2338 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 218%]
Vitality	1552 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 218%]
Intelligence	584 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	1071 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	359 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[F] 1 839 996 020

Zac felt a surge of adrenaline course through his body when he saw how much his attributes had improved, almost completely making him forget how exhausted he felt from the backlash. The probable source was easily spotted as well, and Zac quickly opened up his Dao Screen.

<p>[Fragment of the Axe (High): All attributes +30, Strength +500, Dexterity +250, Endurance +30, Wisdom +110. Effectiveness of Strength +15%.]</p>
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He had initially been afraid that the series of Dao Visions wouldn't improve his Fragments, but it looked like it was an unfounded fear. The digested Tribulation Lightning had actually allowed him to push his main Dao to the next level just based on his insights back during the Zhix Wars. That was a huge windfall for Zac, and that improvement alone drastically increased his confidence for the upcoming battles. The attributes were a welcome boost, but the true gain was the improvement to the Dao's lethality in battle.

It was a bit of a disappointment that his earlier theory had been wrong though, with neither the All Attributes nor Efficiency doubling at every upgrade. It rather looked like he gained 10 All Attributes and 5% Efficiency at every step. It meant that he would end up with 40 to all attributes at Peak Mastery, as opposed to 80.

The total amount of gained attributes would still be the same, but the difference meant a loss of hundreds of points in Luck when including all three Fragments. This way it would possibly be easier for him to maintain his lead compared to others though, so Zac figured it might not be too bad. The other two Dao Fragments hadn't improved this time around, though Zac felt he had made some strides just by congealing those two apparitions.

That wasn't the only gain of the battle, as he had actually gotten a new title. Zac eagerly opened his Title Screen to see what the Pathstrider title provided, but the prompt almost made him collapse in despair.

[Pathstrider: Form a cohesive Cultivation Path while still in E-Grade. Reward: Marked for further training.]

This was the second title he got without an actual reward, but Zac inwardly groaned as he felt that this one was even worse than the Terminus title. He knew all too well what the System considered 'training'. This title was essentially a trouble-magnet, and the only thing that Zac felt was missing was the infuriating 'congratulations' that the System extended.

Zac sighed and closed the status screen, which drew a few wary glances from the young wolves. At least the title brought some good news; his cultivation path had been given a passing mark by the system.

There was nothing else for him to do in this forest for the time being, and he increased his speed toward the glasshouse. The wolves followed in tow, though it looked like every step they took was full of reluctance as they ran further and further from the rest of the pack.

The return trip took him almost an hour thanks to his weakened condition, but he finally reached the area with the camouflaged glasshouse. Zac wasn't sure whether the others were still around or whether they were on the way back to the base, but his question was soon answered as Billy appeared out of nowhere with his club at the ready.

"Wait! I tamed these guys," Zac explained, but his voice rapidly lost its strength as the group of wolves pounced at the giant without hesitation.

The young wolves were clearly out for blood, and nothing Zac did with [**Verun's Bite**] could quell their bloodthirst. Zac could only sigh and flash forward, punching the closest one on the side of its head, instantly knocking it out. Billy grinned and followed suit as he bashed the closest one, and a few seconds later all six wolves were lying unconscious on the ground.

"Ah, stupid dogs," Billy muttered. "Need to be trained."

"Exactly," Zac nodded as he turned to Thea who had walked out from the illusion array while the two dealt with the wolves. "Are you okay?"

Billy was still looking a bit tired, but his wounds were mostly superficial. He would most likely be fine in a few days. However, Thea looked a lot worse for the wear. Her face was completely pallid and her eyes were sunken, and they even seemed to have lost some of their color. The skill she used, [**Void Piercer**], was able to display a completely shocking might, but something told him that the cost of using it was equally harsh.

She simply shouldn't be able to release such an amount of power as things currently stood, and Zac guessed that the skill could be considered a Taboo Skill like the escape method she possessed. It either had to cost life force or come with some other huge drawback, something far worse than his current state from using [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

"It's nothing," Thea said with a shake of her head. "I'll be better in a bit. It's good to see you're fine as well, the energy outbursts before were pretty intense."

"... Be careful," Zac could only say, realizing that Thea didn't want him to worry. "How's Emily and Joanna?"

"They're both sleeping," Billy yawned. "Thea should be sleeping as well, but she refused."

"Emily overdrew her energy to the point that she even used a little bit of life-force," Thea sighed. "She needs to rest, or it might harm her future cultivation."

Zac nodded with a grimace, feeling a wave of guilt coming over him. He knew that the teenager needed to spread her wings and join proper missions if she would have any chance of making it on the road of cultivation, but this was probably the wrong place to do so.

"Don't blame yourself. No one can predict everything, and she will be fine," Thea said. "More importantly, we were afraid you would be coming with a thousand wolves nipping at your heels, but you actually tamed a few of them? What's going on? Why didn't these guys attack you?"

"It's my Tool Spirit," Zac said after some thought as he looked down at the pitiable animals, explaining how Verun became the alpha of the pack.

"It's that powerful?" Thea asked with glimmering eyes. "It seems I need to focus even more on my new companion."

"I was hoping they would stay docile even when I'm not around, but It looks like that might take some time. Perhaps the beastmasters have some means to quickly domesticate them tough," Zac muttered.

“The Tal-Eladar, can they be trusted?” Thea asked. “Your relations seem a bit strained.”

“They are a business partner rather than an ally,” Zac said after some thought. “They were pretty useless before, but they seem to have come around since they failed to assist during the Undead Incurion. Their ambiguous situation makes them work really hard as well.”

“So what are you planning on doing next?” Thea asked, putting the matter of the wolves aside.

“I’m going to explore the forest a bit,” Zac said without hesitation. “But I need to do something first.”

As for what that was, it was simple. He still had a storm of Cosmic Energy rampaging about in his body, and he needed to break open some nodes now that he was safe within the glasshouse.

Chapter 588: Lunar Forest

Zac had considered his next step on his way back, and he decided to take a tour of this place, taking advantage of the fact that his axe had somehow given him a carte blanche of the forest. He had already sensed that there was a lot of valuable herbs in this forest, and only he could pass through these parts without becoming food for the wolves.

Everything pointed toward this place being created for bloodline research, so any plant that grew in this place might be useful for exactly that. Opening his second Hidden Node had been an unexpected gain, but it also cost him one of his two bloodline treasures, leaving him only with the **[Bloodline Nucleus]** he gained during the Tower Climb. It would be best if he could find some plants to make up for the loss.

The Dimensional Treasure wouldn't wake up for a few days in either case, and his sister seemed to believe that the spatial obstructions would be in place until it did. Now was his last chance to break open his nodes and do some simple exploration. He guessed there would be no time for that afterward.

He also wanted to set out on his own for a bit to get a better understanding of the changes in his body and to get accustomed to his new skills.

“So you're setting off alone again?” Thea asked with a frown.

“Bringing these guys was a test,” Zac said as he pointed down at the unconscious wolves. “I can somewhat move among the wolves because I'm connected to my axe, but it looks like that protection doesn't extend to others. However, I still need your help.”

“What are you thinking?” Thea asked, her brows relaxing a bit.

“A squad needs to find the entrances to the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm. I tried instructing the wolves to stay away from these parts, which hopefully will allow you to move along the wall toward the center. It might still be extremely dangerous even without the wolves though,” Zac said. “I’ll take a look at the other side to see if there’s another structure like this one over there.”

“We’ll go back and update the main group and bring Emily to a safer place to recuperate. Should we bring your sister back here?” Thea said before she gave Zac a pointed look. “She’s the only other one who can open these doors. It’s a bit odd that only the two of you managed to get Tier-4 clearance, by the way.”

“I got my clearance through the Tower of Eternity. Kenzie might just be lucky. There can only be one chief caretaker after all. Have Joanna stay in the glasshouse to open the gate for you instead. My sister has enough on her plate,” Zac said after some thought before he looked down at the wolves. “Someone needs to look after these guys as well.”

Billy and Zac carried the unconscious wolves into the oversized stalls next, and Zac was relieved to see that a barrier automatically sprung up, trapping them inside. Not only that, but water was also dispensed and a few light bulbs started to emit the same lunar light as the moons outside. It saved Zac a lot of headache, allowing him to immediately prepare to open his nodes.

It was over an hour since he gained the energy by this point, and he had already lost a third of the energy he gained from the battle. More and more energy seeped through the cracks of his energy trap, and if he didn’t use the energy soon it would all be lost.

“I need to break open a node. Give me an hour,” Zac said as he sat walked toward one of the adjoining rooms.

“What? Break open? Are you crazy?” Thea blurted as she grabbed his arm. “I read that doing so is extremely harmful. It can even kill you!”

“I don’t have a lot of options as a mortal,” Zac explained with a grimace. “But I’m pretty sturdy. I’ll be fine.”

Thea reluctantly let him go, and Zac sat down as soon as the sliding doors closed. The next node was in his leg just like most of the previous ones, though it was a bit further up. It was just below his knee this time, forcing Zac to be extremely careful. He became a little bit more skilled every time he opened a node, but getting wounded was inevitable.

The only thing he could hope to accomplish was to try to avoid letting anything important get destroyed and rather sacrifice his muscles. It hurt just as much that way, but muscles seemed to be the easiest part to restore with healing pills and his Dao. So it was with extreme caution that he pushed more and more of his excess energy into the node, until a surging force erupted twenty minutes later.

A stabbing pain almost made Zac black out, but he clenched his fist with enough force to draw blood from his palms to stay awake. His left leg had almost been blown clean off this time even with how careful he was, and it almost looked like one of the wolves from before had ripped out a part of his calf.

Blood drenched the whole floor, and some had even splattered on the glass walls, and Zac quickly ate a healing pill as he activated **[Surging Vitality]**. For a few seconds there was no effect, but the maimed muscles on his legs started to wiggle and writhe a moment later, almost looking like a pack of snakes as they twisted about.

The pain intensified over twofold, but Zac held on, ignoring both the sweat that streamed down his leg and the large amount of Cosmic Energy that was drained. It turned out that **[Surging Vitality]** could actually utilize the energy he gathered from kills, and one stream after another entered the skill fractal by his Specialty Core.

The energy wasn’t transformed into life-attuned energy or something nature aspected like his Dao though, but it rather reminded Zac of his **[Bone-Forging Dust]**. The energy was unattuned, or perhaps flesh-attuned if there was such a thing. The energy entered his mangled leg, and it boosted the natural

healing ability of his body rather than traditional life-attuned healing. That was why his muscles were wriggling so much; they were being forcibly regrown.

Such a process was excruciating though, a far cry from the warm and soothing streams of healing pills or the curing skills of people like Sui. It also only worked on his flesh physical body and not his pathways, though that wasn't a surprise.

What was a bit surprising was how much energy it cost. Using the skill for just fifteen minutes had cost him almost as much Cosmic Energy as the pitched battle before, and it had cost him over half of the accumulated kill energy. The remaining energy was barely enough for him to push his human side to level 84 and start working on his next node.

But on the bright side, it was very effective. Newly grown flesh had replaced the broken mess, and a process that would take even someone like Zac days had been shortened to fifteen minutes. His new muscles still felt a bit stiff and weakened, but he would no doubt get used to it soon enough.

This efficacy alone was reason enough to ditch [**True Strike**]. He would save so much time with the help of the skill in the future. The fact that the healing cost him around half a level was regrettable, but someone like Zac would always be fighting powerful enemies that provided huge amounts of energy.

Mending his flesh was quick, but his pathways were far harder to deal with. He spent another hour making basic repairs after his flesh was fixed, which should allow him to use his Cosmic Energy as long as he didn't use over 50% of his power. Any more than that and he would probably overtax himself like he did during the Undead Incursion. Falling unconscious was fine next to his sister and the Valkyries, but doing so in a foreign forest was another thing altogether.

He slowly got to his feet, causing a series of crackling and popping sounds as the dried blood that covered him started falling off. He saw Thea waiting just outside the transparent walls staring at him with shock.

“How are you still standing? That room looks like something from a horror movie!” Thea exclaimed, her face completely pale as she looked at Zac with worry.

“Well, I’m used to it by now,” Zac shrugged.

“Is this what you have to do every time to level up?” Thea said, her eyes fixed on the pool of blood on the floor. “I’ve read about it, but I had no idea...”

“Well, it’s not like this when I use pills or treasures to gain levels,” Zac said. “Sorry for making you worry.”

“I...” Thea mumbled, but she eventually only shook her head with a sigh. “I can’t join the squad you mentioned earlier. I need to rest, after all. Should I get the demon instead? He’s crafty enough.”

“He should be back by now,” Zac agreed. “Have him come over. I’ll head out now.”

Thea seemed inclined to stop him, but she eventually just walked next to Zac as he stepped out of the glasshouse again.

“The spatial tunnels might close while you’re out. Anything you need to relay to the outside world?” Thea finally asked just as he was about to leave.

“I won’t be that long. A day or two tops,” Zac said. “Just let my sister and the other leaders know I’m okay.”

“Okay,” Thea nodded. “Stay safe. There’s no guarantee the wolves are the only threat in this place.”

Zac immediately set off, cutting a straight path through the enormous forest. His leg was hurting a bit, but he could maintain a good pace even with a slight limp. Only five minutes passed before he met a small family of wolves, but they quickly backed off when Zac waved Verun in their direction. It somewhat proved that they hadn’t just forgotten about his Tool Spirit, at least not yet.

Thea’s final warning echoed in his mind, but he eventually realized something odd after half an hour had passed. She seemed to be wrong about there being other threats than the wolves, almost impossibly wrong. He didn’t encounter a

single living being in this vast forest even after running for over an hour, except the occasional spotting of lunar wolves. Confusion marred his face as he looked back and forth, but he couldn't make sense of the situation.

Didn't these wolves need to eat?

He knew that it was possible to sustain yourself solely on Cosmic Energy further down the road, but that went for D-Grade warriors and above. They still ate in general though, as high-quality food could provide some benefits. But it wasn't necessary to survive. However, E-Grade beings shouldn't have evolved to that point just yet.

Were these wolves perhaps an exception? Or were they rather vegetarians? They definitely didn't look like animals that lived only on fruits or stalks of grass, so he was more inclined to believe they were able to find sustenance from energy alone. Perhaps that was the true purpose of those artificial moons in the sky, and even the reason why the wolves were brought here.

The solitude gave him a chance to try some things out though, and he stopped in a secluded valley after having traveled for another hour. The aftermath of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] was completely gone by this point, and the halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] appeared behind his body once more. However, this time the avatar didn't depict the unadorned axe of the axe-man, but rather the insanely powerful shield of the Grand Protector who appeared in the Dao Vision for his second class.

A surge of power filled his body, and Zac could almost feel his mind connect with the ancient cultivator who had sacrificed his life to save his world. However, no fractal barrier appeared to protect his front as he swung [**Verun's Bite**]. He rather found his strikes gain a tremendous weight, like each of them carried the weight of a world. His attacks were heavy enough to cause scars in the air, but the damage to the ground looked completely different than the long scars before.

This time it almost looked like a small meteor had hit the ground when he swung his axe, with a crater no more than 5

meters wide appearing. It was deep though, reaching twice as far down as it was wide, and Zac accidentally fell into it when it appeared. A slight pain bloomed up when he faceplanted on the ground, but a ten-meter drop couldn't hurt him any longer.

He was more interested in the soil itself. It had become almost impossibly dense, and it took some force for him to dig into it with his hands. It was as though the area had been subjected to a terrifying amount of gravity, packing the soil to the point that it had almost turned into solid matter. Zac jumped out of the pit before he looked back at his new skill with mixed emotions.

The effect of using the shield as a basis for the skill instead of the woodsman's axe was impressive, and it was perhaps a better avatar for a duel, but Zac was disappointed to find that it didn't work as he'd hoped. In his fight with the wolves, he used a weapon as an avatar, which increased his might. He had hoped that using a defensive treasure with [**Conformation of Supremacy**] would instead create some sort of defensive effect.

But his new skill was true to its nature as a pure Strength-based skill, and it looked like it just took the weight and power of the shield to use it as a bludgeon. It still opened a few new avenues of how he could use it, but it clearly wasn't a one-size-fits-all-type situation where he could use it as everything from a defensive to a movement skill.

The limitation was a bit of a let-down, but not overly so. Partly because Zac somewhat expected such a situation, but mostly because he felt that he finally could use his Dao again.

His new Hidden Node had finally stabilized, and it was time to see what it could do.

Chapter 589: Tracks

Zac's new Hidden Node had finally calmed down and the somewhat erratic trajectories of the two circular apparitions had stabilized. The three now formed a stable system, and Zac's intuition told him that using his mental energy shouldn't pose a problem any longer. However, Zac still noted that his Hidden Node was still slowly eating the energies from the three Dao projections, though not nearly as frantically as before.

It felt like a small drain on his mind, but his soul was pretty strong by this point, and he was generating new Mental Energy a lot quicker than the speed of consumption of his Hidden Node. It would no doubt slow down his recuperation after a battle, but he still had a pile of Soul Crystals in case he was in a hurry.

He was about to infuse his skill, but a thought suddenly struck him as he activated **[Primal Polyglot]** first. The translation function worked passively just like the **[Book of Babel]**, but the active interpretation of the Dao-based language needed an infusion of Cosmic Energy. He had tried using it a few times before as they traveled through the endless tunnels, but it appeared as though the skill didn't really help with Technocrat materials.

His vision didn't change at all after activating the skill, but it still felt like he was looking at something different than before as he gazed at the halo hovering behind him. It felt a bit similar to how two different people could have completely different impressions of a painting or a poem, it gave Zac a completely new outlook as he gazed at the circular fractals.

The skill allowed him to gain a better understanding of how the halo and the apparition were connected, but he didn't gain any immediate insights into the limitations of his skill though. Zac guessed he would have to experiment with one apparition

after another to see what would be useful, and what would be inefficient.

Zac briefly considered using the Chaos Pattern or his Remnants for a huge destructive boost, but he quickly dispelled any such thoughts. He didn't want to call down the Tribulation Lightning again, even if things turned out pretty good the last time around.

That scene with the endless sea of lightning might even have been a warning by the heavens, so he instead focused on his Dao. He tried infusing [**Confirmation of Supremacy**] with the Fragment of the Axe seeing that everything seemed to be in order, but worry gripped his heart when nothing happened.

However, Zac immediately calmed down when he found that he could infuse the skill with the Fragment of the Coffin just fine. It would appear that the choice of projection also impacted what Daos were infusible. The feeling he got from the shield was mostly one of imperviousness and hardness, and his Fragment of the Coffin was the Fragment that best represented that feeling.

A stream of mental energy made its way into the halo from his mind, and Zac noted with interest that the energies seeping out of the hanging coffin joined the mental energy flow, effectively turning it into Dao Energy. The infusion somehow felt a lot smoother from before, like the process had been streamlined. That by itself didn't really change its power or anything, though the speed of his infusion seemed to have somewhat sped up.

It was only a difference of a fraction of a second, but even such a small boost could prove vital in a pitched battle.

However, another change made Zac's eyes glisten. A second stream was released from his avatar, or rather the Hidden Node lodged within his body. It was the same pitch-black energy as the one released from the coffin, and the two streams seamlessly merged just before they entered the skill fractal.

Zac initially didn't know whether this change held any significance, but he quickly realized what was going on. He hadn't used his new E-Grade skill a lot, but he was almost

certain that he was able to instill more of his mental energy compared to before.

Of course, that might be because he had changed the avatar to a shield that really matched the Fragment of the Coffin.

There was a simple way to make sure though, and Zac quickly dispelled [**Conformation of Supremacy**] to instead conjure a fractal blade with [**Chop**]. It was the skill he was most used to, and he knew exactly how much mental energy he could infuse into the blade before it wouldn't work any longer.

Zac's eyes lit up as he infused more and more of his Dao into the blade, and he was still using the Fragment of the Coffin. A similar scene took place in his mind this time around as well, as two streams of energies fused just as they entered the skill fractal on his hand.

The fractal blade immediately gained a sinister aura as it was filled with the putrefying part of his Dao Fragment, but the color kept increasing in intensity and power until it almost turned pitch-black.

It didn't take Zac long to figure out the difference from before. He could suddenly infuse around 20% more mental energy into his skills, which made his attacks around 10% more powerful compared to before if you contributed half his power to his Dao Fragments. It was an amazing boost that seemed to come with pretty much no downsides, apart from a small but constant drain on his mind.

Of course, there was some bad news that came along with the good. Zac had hoped that the Hidden Node in his mind would be related to Dao control and affinity like the general Hidden Node [**Spirit Gate**], but it rather looked like [**Spiritual Void**] was a combat-oriented node that replaced quality with quantity.

Zac experimenting for a few minutes longer to make sure, but he could quickly confirm that he was still beyond incompetent when it came to things like Dao Braiding. He couldn't turn his Hidden Node on or off either, though he could somewhat reduce the amount of energy it expelled along with a Dao infusion.

Another change took place a few minutes later, as the additional infusion from his Hidden Node started to wane, leaving Zac with just his own mental energy. He wasn't too surprised about that though. He had already guessed that the **[Spiritual Void]** acted like some sort of Dao Battery, storing excess energy until it would be released in battle.

The node was a bit unwieldy in the sense that he couldn't control when to use it and when his own Dao was enough, but his control would probably improve when his bloodline awakened. The boosting effect would probably become even greater in the future as well, and he couldn't help but think back to the scene where his presumed ancestor crushed his enemy by simply releasing the floodgates in his mind.

Perhaps even more importantly, the node gave him an important glimpse into his Void Emperor bloodline. Things were finally started to make sense, and the lack of affinities no longer felt as detrimental as they once did. His body might be 'corrupted' with a complete lack of affinities, but it appeared that his bloodline was shoring up those weaknesses one by one.

The **[Void Heart]** was related to energy gathering, allowing him to eat all kinds of energies as an alternative form of cultivation. The second node in his soul allowed for an additional outburst of mental energy, replacing Dao Braiding or Dao Arrays with additional force.

It perfectly aligned with his insights back during the Dao Discourse to the point that it made him question whether that epiphany was actually just his bloodline telling his subconscious how to fight.

Zac did fell a few trees with his improved Fragment of the Axe as well, and it had taken a noticeable step forward in lethality. The fragment hadn't really seemed to gain any new functionality as they sometimes did, but it had rather just become more powerful. It wasn't too surprising, as the upgrade had been based on war and conflict rather than adding something new like Mental Heaviness.

Seeing that everything was fine even after the drastic changes to his mind Zac set out again, taking a circuitous route through the forest. It took almost 20 hours for him to reach the other side, but he had spent a few hours picking up energy-dense plants.

He didn't recognize a single one of them, but they all contained the energy of the moon. The combination of specific growth requirements and unique attributes was usually a recipe for a valuable treasure, so he had high hopes that the Sky Gnome could turn these things into piles of cash even if they proved useless in awakening his bloodline.

A few hours were spent on rest and redrawing his pathways as well. He ate a small hill of meat before he set out again, but he finally felt like he had rid himself of the last after-effects of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**. His body was in pretty good condition all things considered, with only his pathways causing some issues now.

It was a bit of an annoyance, but Zac knew he couldn't complain. Most mortals would probably turn green with envy when hearing how quickly he pushed through levels.

Zac kept moving forward after resuming his exploration, and the silver forest finally gave way to the band of grass that ran along the wall. The opposite side of the forest was constructed pretty much the same way as the area they came from, with a thirty-meter tall wall stretching across the horizon.

However, there was one startling difference; the wall was actually damaged, like it had just endured a siege. The scripts had lost their luster at multiple places, and there were hundreds of cracks. Zac even believed he would be able to cram himself through some of the larger fractures.

Zac's first guess was that another battle had taken place here just like the one that should have taken place just before Ogras first arrived in the Mystic Realm, but he quickly discarded that thought. The damage was simply too widespread, going on for as far as he could see. If a battle had caused this kind of damage they definitely weren't at the E-Grade.

But more to the point, Zac sensed the same type of spatial energies in many of the cracks, making him believe that this was rather the result of spatial turbulence.

There were no spatial tears or other dangers for the moment though, so Zac started walking along the edge of the forest in a parallel to the wall, keeping his form hidden among the shrubbery. He was looking for a natural exit like the glasshouse or a gate, but so far there were no clues.

The cracks might provide ingress to the other side, but Zac wouldn't try that unless he really needed to. After all, the walls were alive, and he didn't want to get buried alive inside the technocrat alloy. A sudden shudder from his forester's intuition made him turn his concentration to a patch of the forest ahead of him.

He first didn't understand what **[Forester's Constitution]** was trying to tell him as there were no herbs there, but his eyes widened when he noticed something.

There were footsteps, and not something left by the wolves.

Zac bent down to get a closer look, and while he was no expert in tracking he felt the trail was fresh. He hesitated for a second, but his curiosity quickly overcame his caution. He soon took out his axe and he started to follow the tracks, taking great care to not create any sounds.

The tracks came from the depths of the forest before they made a turn at the edge. It looked like a group had taken a shortcut like him, but the droplets of blood on the grass indicated that their passage might not have been as carefree. The trail moved in the same direction as the one Zac already walked, keeping to the edge of the forest all the time.

There was no doubt that the owners of the footprints weren't far away as the blood on the ground still hadn't dried, and it only took him fifteen minutes before he spotted some movement ahead. Zac had thought about how to make first contact with the natives a fair bit over the past weeks, but no planning had prepared him for the situation in front of him.

Five werewolves were standing not far from the wall, most of them sporting somewhat severe wounds. One of them even seemed to have lost an arm recently, and he swayed a bit where he stood. But more importantly, one of them was carrying an unconscious human, a girl who looked no older than Zac himself

How were you supposed to react to what looked like a straight-up kidnapping?

His first instinct was to save help the captive out simply based on the fact they both were human, but he quickly discarded the thought. He had no idea what was going on, and getting involved might cause unnecessary trouble. His main goal was to kill the two remaining Dominators to cut off the last two Karmic Links leading to earth.

Anything else was secondary.

However, a burst of annoyance made Zac grit his teeth when an all-too-familiar prompt appeared in front of him.

[Damsel in Distress (Training (1/10)): Rescue the Damsel in Distress. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1) NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 9 levels.]

Chapter 590: Let's Talk

Zac mutely looked at the quest prompt for a few seconds, realizing that his new Pathstrider-title wasted no time in causing trouble for him. He had been free from any meddling by the System since the battle outside the Tower of Eternity, but it looked like his good days were over.

Not only did the System force him to take a side, but it even said that this was just the first of a series of quests. The failure penalty was almost of grotesque proportions as well. Losing nine levels would put him right back at the start of the E-Grade, and this time he wouldn't be able to gain most of the levels through pills.

Of course, the real threat was losing two of his skills, and it was something he couldn't allow to happen no matter what.

The one small blessing was that there was no time limit on the quest, which allowed Zac to stay hidden for a bit longer to spy on the werewolves. The beastkin actually felt a bit familiar to the lunar wolves in the forest with all of them emitting the same sort of lunar energy. Most of them had mottled fur in black and silver, but one who emitted the strongest aura was almost completely silvery-white.

Zac guessed that the silver werewolf was the leader, and he even had a marking on his forehead. It pretty much confirmed Zac's earlier theory that the werewolves in this Research Base and the lunar wolves were somehow connected through bloodlines. The werewolves might even be normal humans who had the bloodline of the wolves transplanted into their bodies for all Zac knew.

The more pressing issue was how to deal with the situation.

The auras of the warriors weren't weak by any means, but neither did they make Zac feel a lot of pressure. He felt pretty confident in dealing with them without wasting any more of

his aces, but that by itself made him a bit wary. The system wouldn't just give him a freebie, making him believe there was some catch to the quest.

So Zac wasn't in any rush to rush out, especially as the group was doing something that sparked Zac's curiosity.

They had been standing at a seemingly inconspicuous part of the wall, with one of the werewolves touching and prodding the smooth surface all this while. But it looked like he finally had found what he looked for, and he took out one disk after another and pressed them against the metal. The disks stayed in place like they had suction cups, and the beastkin quickly formed two vertical lines with the help of twelve identical disks.

The werewolf wasn't finished there, but he actually took out a tablet next and he connected it to one of the disks through a cable. It was a bit surreal watching a werewolf deftly using what seemed to be futuristic technology, but perhaps he shouldn't be surprised considering what kind of place this was.

There was still no sign of what they were up to even after the werewolf had been tapping away at the tablet with an almost dizzying speed for five minutes, but then there was finally a change. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing as a gate started to take form in the wall with the disks acting as the frames.

It looked just like the gates they had passed through to get to this place, though it was only three meters high. It was also looking very rough, but it was gradually transforming into a proper door. Part of him wanted to stay and watch a while longer to see what else the tech-savvy werewolf had up his sleeve, but Zac knew that he couldn't wait longer if he wanted to intercept.

That door might disappear the moment they passed through it, locking Zac outside. There was no timer on the quest, but that didn't mean that he couldn't fail it. He slowly rose from his hidden position, but he had underestimated the senses of the werewolves as even that small movement put them on edge.

Their bodies immediately grew half a size as Zac prepared himself for battle, allowing them to tower over a meter above Zac. Their claws grew longer as well, and Zac felt that they could even match low quality E-Grade Tool Spirits.

Zac's hypothesis that these beastkin were related to the lunar wolves was further confirmed as they started radiating a cold piercing light that turned the whole area into a blinding white.

But Zac had already figured out the solution to this trick though, so he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] and [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] which immediately allowed him to spot the trio. They had discarded their captive on the ground and were now rushing straight toward him while the leader stayed behind to observe.

The auras the warriors had grown since they transformed, but it was absolutely not to the point that Zac feared for his life. He still found himself in a tricky spot as he didn't want to kill them in order to not ruin any potential cooperation with these people. After all, the quest had told him to save the girl, but nothing about killing these people.

"Wait, let's talk-" Zac said as he lifted a hand to indicate that he didn't want trouble, but he was quickly forced to move his hand away as a series of claws ripped through the air in an attempt to cut it clean off.

The werewolves seemed to have taken his words as a sign of weakness as they looked at him with disdain. Zac was a bit confused about what gave these guys the guts to attack him even if his words were a bit defensive, but he suddenly realized that his aura was actually quite weak at the moment because of his broken pathways.

Not only that, but a lot of his excess spirituality was also swallowed by his [**Spiritual Void**] rather than being passively emitted from his body as an aura. He hadn't realized it before, but these two facts combined probably made him appear like a recently evolved cultivator at best. He still had a hard time deciding on a course of action though, so he was immediately put in a passive state as he started avoiding a furious barrage

of claws infused with the power of the moon without trying to expose his real strength.

However, a single sentence immediately quenched his hopes of a peaceful release of the human girl.

“Don’t kill him. He’s one of the outsiders,” the leader growled as he spectated the battle. “The others we caught were even weaker than this one. Let’s take him with us to the relay station as well.”

Zac’s pupils shrunk as he immediately realized what the werewolf was talking about. It turned out that it was these werewolves who were responsible for his missing squad. A thick killing intent roiled out from his body, far eclipsing his diminutive aura, causing the pupils of his enemies to shrink into needlepoints.

The outburst was so powerful that even the unconscious human on the ground stirred awake, and the werewolves quickly tried to back away and regroup. However, how could Zac allow for something like that?

The closest werewolf was instantly bisected as **[Verun’s Bite]** emitted a sanguine glow, leaving just four alive. The other two werewolves barely had time to flash away by turning into moonlight before Zac’s blade reached them as well, but he was immediately hot in pursuit.

“He must be one of their leaders!” the silver werewolf shouted from behind. “Restrain him!”

The silver light in the whole area transformed the next moment as the wolves lit up like beacons, and the radiance was so powerful that the moonlight almost seemed to have turned into a liquid. It felt just like the restriction during his last fight, but perhaps even more powerful. Even worse, the pressure was steadily increasing, forcing him to flash forward with **[Loamwalker]**, finally leaving the forest.

The light put some painful pressure on his still tender leg, but he knew that he simply needed to fight in a melee range to almost completely circumvent its effect. Someone with less Strength than him might have been completely unable to move

due to the pressure though. He quickly targeted one of the soldiers at random, and while he seemed surprised at Zac's decisiveness he still quickly responded by slashing at Zac's throat with his claws.

Zac blocked it with his axe before he rammed him straight on with his shoulder, but he was a bit surprised by the result. He had expected to send the wolf flying with multiple broken bones, but he was actually just pushed back with a grunt. The bodies of these people were clearly extremely sturdy, making Zac wonder just what they had gone through to be in such a wretched state.

The attack had caused a shock to the werewolf's system though, allowing Zac to immediately follow up with a swing of [**Verun's Bite**] infused with the Fragment of the Axe.

A lunar barrier appeared to block the strike, but this was a High Mastery Dao Fragment. The barrier was cut apart like it was made from paper, and the werewolf's head was lopped off the next moment. Zac didn't get any time to celebrate though as he felt a searing pain on his neck and back as a series of crescent moons hidden in the moonlight slammed into him, instantly drenching his body with blood.

Zac grunted with pain, but he was more surprised that the attacks managed to hide from the omnipresence of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. He wildly looked around with [**Cosmic Gaze**] to spot the source of the attacks, and he realized that another werewolf had appeared from the forest. But Zac was even more surprised to see that the newcomer was ignoring him after the first barrage, and instead was rushing straight toward the gate.

Not only that, but the others were doing the same, even leaving behind their tools and backpacks on the ground.

"Run! Run!" the leader shouted as he kicked the girl on the ground, which launched her body into the arms of one of the others. "Open that god damn thing even if the algorithms are imperfect!"

Zac could sigh at how different these guys were compared to their frenzied cousins as he set out in pursuit.

Two combatants were already down, which left three more to go, not counting the wolf who was still desperately working on opening the door. Zac was starting to feel a bit woozy from fighting in his current condition, but it wasn't like he had any option but to keep going.

It was a bit risky, but he started pushing energy into the skill fractal of **[RapturousDivide]** as a fractal blade appeared in front of his axehead. Zac knew he would need to take them out before they opened that door so he wanted to catch them all in a close-range swipe. However, a series of spatial tears suddenly appeared out of nowhere, almost cutting him to ribbons.

Zac desperately jumped out of the way as he looked for the source of the attack. It was the backpack that one of the werewolves had discarded earlier. It was actually a booby-trap, but Zac had ignored it because it didn't emit even a hint of Cosmic Energy, and his danger sense didn't warn him either.

He quickly tried to find his footing and resume his pursuit, but a sense of foreboding suddenly came over him. However, he didn't even have time to make a move before a hand appeared from the moonlight and pressed a small mechanical item against his chest.

Terror filled Zac's heart when he thought he was about to get ripped apart by a bunch of spatial tears, but one fear was replaced with another as he found his body completely restrained. That little thing that looked like a toy had somehow taken control of the Cosmic Energy in his body, and his body had locked itself into place.

He tried to struggle free, but moving was completely impossible.

"Shit, the outsiders have some formidable people," the silver werewolf spat as he emerged out of the moonlight, and he lifted Zac by his neck before started to walk toward the others. "But that's good. This one should know a lot more than those scouts."

Zac wasn't even able to respond, but he was suddenly filled with hope as he noticed something. His Specialty Core wasn't

restrained at all by the odd item latched to his chest, and it had even started its transformation. The werewolf was thankfully completely oblivious to that fact as he was more focused on the wolf dealing with the gate.

He didn't get any further than ten meters though as the massive cage of death sprung up around him, trapping all the remaining werewolves along with the human captive. The cable connecting the werewolf's tablet to the wall was ripped apart by the barrier of **[Profane Seal]** as well, effectively stopping his work.

The weird Technocrat restraining tool fell to the ground as Zac's hand punched through the chest of the werewolf leader. The bindings before had made him drop **[Verun's Bite]**, but his hand still had terrifying penetrating power since it was infused with his recently upgraded Dao Fragment.

The werewolf leader looked into Zac's abyssal eyes for a second before his head rolled over, and Zac felt a surge of energy entering his body. The pitch-black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** covered him the next moment as he turned toward the remaining werewolves, and over a dozen chains stabbed toward the disbelieving targets as Zac started to advance on them.

The unexpected close call was enough for him to completely clear his head, and Zac immediately started his customary grinding down of his targets with newfound zeal. The werewolves tried to turn into motes of light to escape again, but their moonlight was completely overpowered by the combination of **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]**.

Just a few seconds later only one enemy was left alive, the werewolf who had been responsible for summoning the gate earlier. Zac figured that he would be able to answer some questions in case the human girl didn't know, for example where that relay station was. He left the werewolf utterly restrained by his sets of chains, but he couldn't help but feel a headache coming on as he turned his abyssal eyes toward the human.

She had been shocked awake by the kick earlier, and she had witnessed everything that came afterward. Him getting locked down and then transforming to a Draugr. He knew that his unique situation would be exposed to the world sooner or later, but it was still too early. If this girl was allowed to return to her clan, then he would sooner or later be exposed. Not even a contract felt like a surefire way to protect the secrets as Catheya had explained.

But could he really kill her to protect his secret? That would definitely be crossing a line.

“Don’t kill me. I won’t tell anyone, I swear on my Clan’s name,” the girl hurriedly said, clearly understanding what kind of thoughts were running through Zac’s mind.

“I won’t harm you,” Zac eventually said after some pause. “But I can’t just let you go either. At least not for the time being. What you saw can get both me and my people in trouble if it spreads out. You will need to sign a contract and stay with me for a while.”

“I understand your predicament, I really do,” the girl sighed. “But I have too many people depending on me. I cannot let that happen. But don’t worry. You risked your life to save me, so I’ll keep my word.”

Alarm bells immediately went off in Zac’s mind when he heard her response, and Zac immediately erected every defense he had while launching every single free chain at her. She was planning something, something dangerous. The feeling of alarm only intensified as the girl’s eyes turned white, and Zac fought a strange feeling that enveloped his mind as he tried to restrain her before it was too late.

Zac desperately jumped out of the way as he looked for the source of the attack. It was the backpack that one of the werewolves had discarded earlier. It was actually a booby-trap, but Zac had ignored it because it didn’t emit even a hint of Cosmic Energy, and his danger sense didn’t warn him either.

He quickly tried to find his footing and resume his pursuit, but a weird mental nudge pushed him back a step.

“Behind you!” the human girl screamed in warning, and Zac’s reaction was instantaneous.

Chapter 591: The Hero's Journey

Zac spun around, just in time to see a hand materialize out of nowhere a meter away from him. It held some mechanism in its hand, but Zac slapped the thing out of the furry paw before he swung his axe twice in quick succession.

The clouds of [**Rapturous Divide**] spread in the area in front of him as a surprised-looking silvery werewolf was cut apart by the spatial divide. It was the werewolf leader who had been caught by surprise. He had somehow managed to hide completely in the moonlight, tricking both Zac's senses and his Danger sense.

Thankfully he had the tables turned on him because of the early warning, and the werewolf helplessly fell on the ground as his blood flowed like rivers. Zac didn't immediately target the other wolves, but he rather stopped for a second and looked down at the dying warrior. He didn't know why, but Zac felt an eerie sense of déjà vu as he saw the hand just now.

"It's you!" the werewolf coughed as he bled out, but his two blood-red eyes were actually staring at the girl fifty meters away rather than at Zac. "You weren't restrained!"

Zac looked over in confusion and was surprised to see that the young woman was in an extremely precarious condition for some reason, with blood freely running from her eyes, nose, and ears. She couldn't even respond to the werewolf's accusations, as she puked out both her dinner and a bucket of blood before she fell in a heap.

"You used the eyes of time to meddle! Don't think this will save you! You hold the key to immortality, and the Lunar Tribe will not be stopped! We will-" werewolf raved until the light in his eyes died.

The dying words of the werewolf leader rekindled the feeling of wrongness, but he was more concerned about dealing with the remaining werewolves. He left the dead leader where he was and instead focused on the last two as he rushed toward the gate. However, he couldn't believe what he was seeing when the werewolves actually made a 180-turn, rushing straight toward him.

Did that werewolf leader hold such a big position in their hearts that they were ready to throw their lives away to avenge him? Zac's state was pretty bad from fighting so soon after node-breaking, but these remaining wolves were absolutely not his match.

Zac prepared to meet their assault head-on, but he found himself swinging his axe through empty space as the wolves suddenly disappeared. He immediately sensed where they had appeared though; right next to the girl and the fallen corpse of their leader.

A wave of anger surged in his mind when he thought of the wretched state of the former captive. She was clearly on the verge of death. Had the wolves decided to retaliate against her instead of him when realizing they couldn't deal with him?

Rage bubbled in his heart when he saw her pitiable state, and he once more pushed himself beyond what was safe, instantly appearing next to the closest werewolf. The beastkin desperately reached for a pouch on his leader's waist as his body turned into moonlight, but the process was interrupted in the middle as Zac punched clean through his head with an Axe-Infused jab.

The other werewolf actually appeared right next to him before his attack was even finished, snatching the satchel and disappearing. But his camouflage was nowhere near the level of his fallen leader, especially not when most of the moonlight in the area had dissipated by now. He might as well have skipped using the skill as Zac could see his outline perfectly with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

Zac caught up with him with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and ended his life in one swing. He looted the stolen pouch

without losing his momentum before he appeared right next to the smallest werewolf who was still desperately typing on his tablet. Despair flooded his eyes when he saw Zac appear next to him, but a hint of ruthlessness flashed in his eyes as he pushed a button at the corner of his tablet.

A surge of danger screamed in Zac's mind, allowing him to barely dodge a metal spike as the wall came alive, ruthlessly stabbing at both himself and the werewolf. One attack after another was launched in quick succession like a crashing wave of liquid metal.

A painful wound was ripped open in Zac's side as the wall almost had turned into a terrifying maw that tried to swallow him whole, but he pushed through the pain as he ran for his life. The werewolf was even worse off as he was instantly killed by an alloy spike that pierced his head. Zac risked it to look behind, just in time to see the corpse being dragged inside the wall itself.

The scene only boosted Zac's desire to escape, but he still stopped for an instant to snatch up the wounded girl before he ran into the forest. He felt the spikes pierce into the ground right behind him even after reaching the edge of the forest, and only after running for another minute could he confirm that the wall wasn't hunting him any longer.

The girl had already gone unconscious again, and Zac sighed as he fed her some of his better healing pills for both the body and the soul before dealing his own wounds. She was his ticket to learning about this base, and he couldn't let her die after going through all that trouble.

A sudden wave of dizziness threatened to push him into the embrace of unconscious just like the last time he fought while still over-doing it right after breaking open a node, but he couldn't risk it in this place. A burst of pain jolted him awake as he stabbed himself in the leg, and the shock to his system pushed the drowsiness away.

His body was still in a pretty pathetic state though, but it slowly improved over the next two hours. The wound in his side was purely physical in its form, which allowed him to

quickly heal it up with the help of [**Surging Vitality**]. It cost him most of the energy from his battle, but it wasn't all that much anyway.

Only the leader was powerful, but his aura was pretty unstable even before the fight. The energy rewarded by the System took things like that into account, so he didn't get nearly as much energy from this battle as from the one against the wolves.

The whole fight made him wonder what the purpose of this training session was. He hadn't really learned anything new from the battle, and it definitely hadn't pushed him beyond his limits to make some sort of breakthrough.

Was it more about setting a series of events in motion?

A second quest prompt quickly answered his question for him.

The Hero's Journey (Training (2/10)): Rescue your scouting squad before they are moved from the relay station. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/7). [04:34:22] NOTE: Three deaths count as failure. Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 7 levels.]

Zac quickly read the quest, and a sense of relief filled him when he saw that the punishment had lessened. However, the loss of skills was still there, meaning that he definitely couldn't skip it. Then again, he had no plans to do so anyway.

He had already decided to rescue his people the moment the werewolf leader opened his mouth, so the quest didn't really change anything this time around. The problem was that there was a time limit for this quest.

Four hours wasn't little, but it wasn't a lot either. The relay station was definitely on the other side of the wall, but the gate had disappeared when that smaller werewolf somehow triggered the defenses of the wall.

The encounter had also proved that there was even more about this place he didn't understand than he had anticipated. He took out a small trinket from his Spatial ring and he turned it over a few times before stowing it away again. It was the thing that the Werewolf leader tried to attack him with before he was

killed, but Zac couldn't figure out how it worked or what it did at all.

Who knew how technocrat weaponry and tricks these werewolves had? Zac was afraid that he would just get himself killed if he stormed the relay station blindly. Perhaps they could control the walls freely, easily trapping him in a corridor before flooding it with spatial tears. Not even he would be able to escape something like that.

Zac's eyes slowly turned to the unconscious girl lying next to him. She was the key to this mission. He felt a bit bad about bringing her with him on a rescue mission in her wounded state, but he didn't have a lot of options. He couldn't risk failing the quest, and she would definitely increase the odds of success thanks to her knowledge of this place.

At least the girl's situation seemed to have stabilized thanks to his pills, though she was still unconscious. He looked down at her curiously, feeling for some reason that they had met before. But that was obviously impossible since she clearly wasn't someone from his force. She was wearing what looked like a technocrat uniform, but she was definitely a cultivator judging by the aura she unconsciously emitted.

Zac couldn't be certain, but it felt like she had recently evolved to the E-Grade, which was pretty impressive considering her young age and the somewhat lacking cultivation environment. Then again, the girl might look 20, but she could be 100 years old for all Zac knew.

Normally Zac would have been happy to recuperate a while longer while waiting for the girl to come around, but the timer left him restless. He was in decent shape in any case, and he hadn't used any of his long cooldown skills during the battle. It was time to start looking for a way to get to the other side of the wall.

He got up to his feet and slung the girl across his shoulder before he made his way back toward the wall as he kept vigil of the surroundings. There might be more werewolves lurking in the area, or some other hidden traps initiated by the werewolf technician. But it looked like the alloy had returned

to normal, and an unmoving wall met his eyes when he reached the edge of the forest.

Even throwing anything from boulders to corpses at the wall elicited no response, and Zac finally dared to personally move closer. He let the girl down on a patch of grass before he started to prod the wall, but there was no sign of the gate at all. A quick survey of the immediate section of the wall exposed a pretty huge crack a few hundred meters away, but Zac was extremely hesitant to use it.

The wolves hadn't even tried using those cracks as a means of escape when facing death, making Zac believe that the jagged scars in the walls were deathtraps. But he had no idea what to do next. He had found a few technological gadgets along with a spare tablet in the werewolf leader's cosmos sack, but he had no idea how to use it.

The tablet wouldn't turn on, and the disks wouldn't stick to the wall no matter how hard Zac pushed. Three minutes passed without him making any progress, and he finally couldn't wait any longer. He walked over to the unconscious girl as he took out a bottle of water. However, an idea struck him and he released a burst of killing intent aimed at her. It actually worked. The girl groaned as her eyelids fluttered, and she woke up a second later.

Her bleary eyes peered back and forth until they finally found Zac. Her pupils constricted for a second, but she quickly calmed down as she slowly got up to a sitting position.

"Thank you for saving me. I'm Leviala Cartava," she said with a weak voice.

Chapter 592: Datamancers

Zac once more got a weird feeling when he looked into Leviala's eyes now that she had woken up. Of course, that might be because of the way they looked. The girl looked like a normal, albeit frail, Caucasian girl, with a both short and lithe frame. However, her eyes dashed any chance of mistaking her for some random Earthling.

One of them was normal, though it seemed to contain impurities, small spots of darkness peppered about her sclera and green iris. But the other eye was completely white, to the point that it seemed that she was born without a pupil at all. In its place was an extremely dense fractal, and trying to understand it with **[Primal Polyglot]** could only provide him with one hint.

It was a curse, one aimed at the girl herself.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you for the warning before," Zac shrugged as he handed her the bottle of water, trying to not appear weirded out by the odd appearance of the eye. "Are you okay? I didn't know what was wrong with you, so I simply gave you a couple of different healing pills."

"My soul is wounded, but whatever you gave me is really helping. The outside is really full of marvelous things," she said with a weak smile.

"So I'm guessing you're from Clan Cartava?" Zac said. "How did you end up getting captured?"

"The Lunar Tribe have kept a lot of secrets over the years it seems," Leviala sighed. "We've always thought them muscleheads with limited understanding of how this world works. But they managed to sneak all the way to our domiciles without triggering any of our alarms. They used pathways that we had no idea existed and killed my guards before the elders had a chance to react."

Zac slowly nodded. It wasn't too surprising if the native forces finally started to make use of hidden aces they had accumulated over the past millennia now that the world was changing. No matter if it was to get out of this place or to seize the treasures of this Mystic Realm, now was the time to go all out.

It was a bit odd that these werewolves had wasted this opportunity on this girl in front of him though. It was almost a suicide mission to infiltrate a hostile faction like that, and he couldn't see anything on her that was worth the effort. He had already searched her for Cosmos Sacks or other spatial tools, and there simply wasn't anything on her.

The most likely reason was the parting words of the werewolf leader, but Zac had no time to worry about the key to immortality. He had a quest to complete. But there were some things he needed to understand before setting out.

"What is this thing?" Zac asked as he took out the small mechanism that he almost was struck by before. "A weapon?"

"No, they're called restraint modules," the girl said with a shake of her head as she took out an identical one from within her robes. "It locks your Cosmic Energy in place, which also restricts your movement. It was used to restrain research subjects long ago."

"So it was something like that," Zac whistled, though he wouldn't completely take her word for it. "Then how are you free?"

"They lose their efficacy over time as the body adapts. But my parents also implanted me with a hidden blocker at birth and only told me and my grandfather. It contains an algorithm to deactivate restraint modules and some other things, and enough Base Power to connect with items outside my body," Leviala said. "I was waiting for an opportunity to escape, but those werewolves were too vigilant. Luckily you came along."

"Base Power? What's that?" Zac asked as he put away the small mechanism.

“It’s the energy that this base runs on. All the tools we’ve looted in this world runs on Base Power, and it’s also required to interface with the base itself,” Leviala explained.

“Is that why this tablet won’t start up?” Zac said as he waved the thing he looted from the werewolf leader.

“Yes, these things require a fresh stream of Base Power to operate,” Leviala nodded before she looked at the disks lying next to Zac with a frown. “What are you doing?”

“I need to get to the other side, but the door those werewolves summoned is gone. You should have heard them before, they have captured one of our squads. I want to get them back,” Zac said. “How do I get that door to open again?”

“You shouldn’t go there. The Wasteland is in that direction,” Leviala said, her face turning a shade paler. “Besides, they should have been taken to the relay station. There are probably multiple squads waiting there to cross the Wasteland together. Not only that, the base might be protected by other means as well. I’m afraid that it’s impossible to save your friends.”

“Let me worry about that,” Zac shrugged as he poured out everything from the werewolf’s Cosmos Sack on the ground. “Where can I get this Base Power? Does anything among these items contain it?”

“Listen to me, it’s a shame about your people, but we need to get out of this world. We are about to be trapped again in just a few days. The world is ending. Getting caught inside will only doom both our Clans,” she said as her odd eyes bore into his.

“We know,” Zac said, ignoring the discomfort of the stare. “About the trapped thing, that is.”

“You know? Why are you people still staying here then? The space treasure? You don’t understand the horror of that thing,” the girl said with fear in her eyes, a fear that didn’t seem faked to Zac. “Our Clan is ready to form an alliance with your leaders, provided that you help us out of this place. We left you a map to this forest before the storms returned. If you open a specific gate from your side, we can all-“

“I’m sorry, but we aren’t going anywhere,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “And neither are we letting anyone out. Now, these things, how do-”

“Why not?” Leviala blurted, and it was obvious she felt that Zac was a lunatic for wanting to stay in this place. “We know that your world is newly introduced to the world of cultivation, and we can help. There is much we have lost while locked in this place, but we can help each other to face the threat of outsiders.”

“Various reasons. But most the most important task our faction is dealing with is to hunt down a group of insectoid humanoids,” Zac sighed, slightly annoyed at the delay.

He knew that he needed the help of this girl if he wanted to use these machines though, as there was no time to go get his sister. So he quickly calmed down so that he could explain what was going on. He took out a picture of Void’s Disciple that they had captured when the Dominator had entered Site 17.

“Unless this man dies, then everyone, including the people of your Clan, will die. The same probably goes for a group of cultists that have entered this place. They need to be taken out as well. I don’t really care about that treasure, but our enemies do. That’s our way to hunt them down.”

Blank incomprehension was written all over Leviala’s face, but even more-so despair. Zac guessed that she had expected to finally be able to leave this prison of theirs pretty soon, but that door had suddenly closed right in her face.

“I cannot speak for my elders... But if what you’re saying is true, then Clan Cartava might be able to help you locate these threats. But can you explain what’s going on? I’m willing to act as a liaison between our forces,” she said after some thought.

Zac immediately explained the threat of The Great Redeemer and the Church of Everlasting Dao in broad strokes, about the Karmic Ties that needed to be severed for their planet to remain hidden. This was not some secret intelligence, after all, but rather something that was generally disseminated by this

point. Of course, a lot of people believed it was just a ruse by him and Port Atwood to seize control.

“A Deviant Karmic Cultivator, at peak D-Grade at that?” Leviala blanched. “It seems the outside isn’t all that safe either.”

“We all have our problems,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Now, the door?”

“A Datamancer is needed to open this thing, along with the specific key-code. This whole world is full of hidden pathways like this, but we know of less than one percent of them. Forcing the gate-protocol to activate is almost impossible without the prerequisite knowledge.”

“A Datamancer? What?” Zac asked.

“That’s what we call those who can interface with this base. Only they can rewrite protocols and bypass the restrictions. You should have people like this as well. Opening the gate to this forest was a test of sorts. Unless you have people extremely skilled in data manipulation you wouldn’t be able to pass that gate, let alone let us out,” Leviala explained.

“Hackers?” Zac muttered. “I’m sorry, but that’s not how we got here.”

“What?” Leviala said with confusion. “Did you manage to break the door open? Do you possess such powerful means?”

“No. One of my friends almost got himself killed trying that,” Zac snorted. “I have clearance high enough to open the door.”

“Clearance? Wait... You’re part of the Builders?!” she shrieked as she tried to get away.

Zac was a bit surprised at the strong reaction, but he couldn’t let the girl get away. He instructed [**Love’s Bond**] to snatch up the running girl, which wasn’t too hard considering how weakened her current condition was. She didn’t even get to her feet before she fell over again, only making it three meters in her escape.

Using the chains was as much to help her get up as to prevent her from escaping. It was a bit of a safety measure though as

he was afraid Leviala possessed some sort of escape treasure or skill.

“Calm down. I’m not part of any builders,” Zac said after Leviala had stopped struggling against the bindings. “The terminal where we arrived gives out clearances left and right. Most people got Tier-2 or Tier-3 clearance, but I managed to get Tier-4 clearance thanks to an item I acquired off-world. That’s how I got in here.”

Of course, Zac suspected that he tenuously could be considered part of the “builders”, provided that Leviala was referring to his mother’s Clan. But he wasn’t about to divulge that sort of information seeing her strong reaction. Still, her reactions just now had divulged a lot. Not only did the natives completely lack clearances, but Clan Cartava didn’t seem to know as much about them as he’d feared after seeing the signpost left behind.

“What? Such a thing is possible? I’ve never heard of a terminal giving out clearances. Is it because you’re outsiders, perhaps? It seems a lot of our assumptions about you were incorrect.” Leviala mumbled with a slight frown before her eyes lit up. “You have traveled between worlds? How is it? What kinds of places exist out there?”

“I’ve been off-planet a few times, yes. There are all kinds of worlds out there, but I can’t tell you about it right now. I’m a bit strapped for time,” Zac said. “So, the Base Power? Anything among these things that has it? I want to activate the tablet.”

It felt like Zac had over a hundred questions rattling around in his head, but he needed to prioritize his quest for now.

“These things are called chargers,” Leviala eventually said as she pointed down at a cylindrical item. “Press the sheer side against the bottom of the tablet for a few seconds to instill it with power.”

Zac followed her instructions and it worked just as described. The tablet turned on after two seconds of charging, though that didn’t help Zac much. Rows and boxes full of illegible text covered the screen, and Zac couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“Do you know how to work these things?” Zac asked.

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I can read the language, but I don’t know how these things work. It takes decades to learn these things, and only the Datamancers can make use of this information in any case. You would have to find the line for activating the door, and then bypass the security protocols.”

Zac thought for a second before he showed her the tablet.

“Let me worry about the security checks. Can you tell me if one of these boxes is related to gate opening?”

“It’s either that or climbing through one of the cracks,” Zac added.

“That’s even more impossible!” Leviala said. “There are security protocols in place to trap research subjects. You’re almost guaranteed to get trapped inside the Memorysteel if you try to enter through one of those places, and there are no builders to let you out. Not a single one who has been caught inside a wall has ever made it out as far as I know.”

Zac simply stared at her in response as he held the tablet toward her. She eventually sighed in defeat before her eyes started darting back and forth for almost a minute. She finally pointed at one of the boxes, though hesitation was written all over her face.

“Perhaps this one? It seems to mention something about a security check, which is always performed when opening a door. The other algorithms seem to be more related to the general operation of the wall itself,” she said. “But just finding the right program isn’t enough.”

Zac nodded in thanks before he took the tablet. He honestly had no idea what to do from this point on, but he gained some confidence from the simple fact that he got the quest by the System. It seemed to believe he would have a chance to complete it, meaning he should be able to open the door.

He didn’t even try to understand what he was looking at since it was too far beyond his understanding and he simply pressed the box Leviala indicated. However, he did take one

precaution though. He had taken out his mother's token from his Spatial ring, and he held it against the same spot as the charger when he pressed the button.

“Wait, what are you doing?! You will alert the security protocols!” Leviala screamed when she saw Zac's impetuous actions, but her words got caught in her throat when the gate started forming without issue, and at a much greater speed than when the werewolf was trying to conjure it.

Chapter 593: Old Friends

“I’m in,” Zac said, his mouth tugging upward as he felt like the lead in an 80’s movie about hackers.

This was obviously lost on the Cartava scion though, and she blankly looked back and forth between him and the gate.

“Wh- How?” she eventually sputtered, looking like a lifetime of common sense was rapidly being upended.

“I have my ways,” Zac smiled as he stashed away the talisman again before the Cartava scion could spot it.

The talisman didn’t contain any clear hints of its origins as far as Zac could tell, but it was obviously a technocrat Tool if you knew a bit about them. Even Ogras could discern the truth at a single glance, and someone like Leviala could probably glean even more. He obviously wouldn’t divulge his secrets to this stranger, even if she was cooperative so far.

The door slid open a second later, exposing the interiors. The state of the base on the other side was far worse than even the war-torn wall. The walls of the corridor had completely crumbled, and even the roof was missing at spots.

Only an endless black could be glimpsed through the cracks, making it seem as though the research base was hurtling through space. But the darkness that Zac could see through the cracks rather reminded Zac of the bleak blackness of the Abyss he could glimpse through **[Rapturous Divide]** rather than the empty darkness of outer space.

The truth probably wasn’t quite that sinister though. Mystic Realms were pocket sub-dimensions, and they had to have an end somewhere. What he saw was probably the void between dimensions, the place where one would end up if you fell through a spatial tear. However, he still got an oppressive

feeling when he looked, so Zac's instincts told him there were other dangers lurking in the darkness.

The scene gave Zac some pause, but he quickly roused himself. There was no telling how long the door would last even if he used his mother's token.

"Okay, let's go," Zac nodded as he started walking, but Leviala looked at him like he was crazy.

"What? You want me to go?" Leviala almost screamed, her face a mix of horror and confusion. "I am no good to you. You've seen the state I'm in, I'll only be a burden. I'll rest up before returning to my clan instead. That way I can warn them about those enemies of yours so that we can start prepar-

"There'll be plenty of time for that later," Zac said as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** once more lifted the aghast Cartava scion into the air. "I'm sorry but I'll need to bring you along as a guide. You've already proven you're essential to rescuing my people by helping me with the tablet."

"I've never been to this section of the base! I'll be of no use to you!" she exclaimed as she vehemently struggled against the restraints.

But Zac ignored her complaints as he stepped through the gate which soundlessly closed behind them. A few seconds later it had turned into another piece of broken corridors that ran along the wall. Strangely enough, there was no telling that a vast forest stood on the other side of the wall after passing through, not even after peering through the cracks. Only a murky haze could be seen on the other side, making Zac believe the cracks were actually filled with spatial anomalies.

No wonder the werewolves refused to take a shortcut.

"So much for not being captured. It was all for nothing," Leviala muttered with a hint of despair from her chain cocoon, and Zac could only apologetically smile in response.

She was right. She might have gone out of the ashes into the fire from her perspective, swapping a known captor to a more powerful unknown one. Not only that, but Zac was also fumbling in the dark in this dangerous place, which put them

both at risk. But there was nothing to be done about the situation. The System gave him no choice in the matter.

“I really am sorry about all this,” Zac coughed as he stepped further inside, dragging a clearly unwilling Leviala along with his chains. “You could say my hands are tied.”

“Stop, STOP!” she screamed. “Alright, I’ll help you. But stop walking ahead randomly or you’ll get us both killed!”

“What, really?” Zac said, but he still stopped in his tracks.

“Help me with this matter and I’ll make it up to you. Is there anything you or your Clan needs? I can send for it before the pathways to this world close.”

“Like what?” Leviala asked curiously as she stopped struggling against the restraints, confirming Zac’s guess.

This girl was full of curiosity about the outside world and its marvels, which wasn’t too surprising considering her situation. Hopefully, he would be able to use that to keep her cooperative.

“I have no idea what you guys are lacking in this world. Pills? Manuals? Attuned Crystals?”

“Land,” Leviala said without hesitation. “I’ve heard that planets have spots with greater energy density compared to others, treasure lands where you can cultivate at twice the speed at half the effort. Can you provide us with such a thing?”

“There are a few such places on Earth,” Zac slowly nodded.

“But those places are extremely valuable strategic resources. Being my guide for a few hours isn’t worth a Nexus Vein, no offense.”

“I also saved you from being captured by werewolves by warning you, but fine. We’ll revisit this matter later,” Leviala sighed. “Our first priority should be staying alive in this place.”

“Good. Now, how do I find that relay station?” Zac asked.

“I don’t know where it is, but it shouldn’t be too far in from this gate. Half an hour away at the most. Any further and the

station would be inside the Wasteland itself, and no permanent structure can survive in there. But make no mistake, our lives are in peril every second even here at the edge.”

“What’s the Wasteland?” Zac asked with a frown. “Another Biosphere like the forest before?”

“No,” Leviala said with a shake of her head. “Something much more dangerous. It will take some time to explain, but you need to understand the dangers to not get us both killed.”

“Give me the abridged version,” Zac reluctantly agreed, though part of him just wanted to set out.

The windows into the void looked pretty unsettling, but the atmosphere was intact and there was no suction dragging items out through the cracks. As for spatial tears, Zac figured his Luck had proven a pretty good early warning system. But seeing Leviala’s exaggerated reactions there were probably more dangers than what met the eyes.

“Our people were taken here over fifteen thousand years ago and experimented on for millennia,” Leviala began, but was interrupted by an impatient Zac.

“Is this really the short version?”

“Just listen,” Leviala said with a glare. “We were taken here because of our bloodlines, but there was an incident that put an end to the experiments around five thousand years ago. A mystical item appeared out of nowhere, rippling through the spatial barriers like they didn’t exist.

“It slammed into this base like a meteor, completely ripping apart a large section of it. It hit the base from the east, annihilating the subjects who were experimented on there. Only by digging through data did we find out that the subjects there was a clan of Titans, renowned for their physical prowess.”

Zac’s heartbeat sped up a bit when he heard the mention of Titans, although he had already been somewhat certain that this place was the source of Billy’s heritage. However, it seemed more likely that Billy’s ancestor somehow managed to

reach Earth through a spatial tear or something, rather than the whole clan escaping.

“The object made its way into the core of the base, presumably killing all our captors as well,” Leviala continued.

“Presumably? You don’t know if they were killed?” Zac asked with confusion.

“What followed after the impact was over a hundred years of spatial chaos. We call the event the Cataclysm. You should have encountered those rifts by now, right? Those kinds of things raged across the whole base, wreaking havoc. We lost most of our people during those days. But one day it just stopped and the base woke up again. By that time our captors were all gone, and we slowly managed to eke out a living here,” Leviala said.

“Do you know who was it that captured you?” Zac asked curiously.

“They called themselves the Tsarun Clan,” Leviala said.

“WHAT?!” Zac exclaimed. “Those guys?”

“You know of them? Are they still around? Do they know of your planet?” Leviala said, fear shining in her eyes. “Our elders were peak D-Grade, but they were all slaughtered by those people when they came for us. They are terrifying.”

“They’re around, and they are still extremely powerful. They have a pretty unsavory reputation as well, and no one wants to make an enemy out of them. There are also rumors of them working with unorthodox forces to become more powerful. So I guess it’s not too surprising they started messing around with a Technocrat Research Base,” Zac explained.

Leviala looked shook that their captor was still around and living well.

“You don’t need to worry about me selling you out though,” Zac added when he saw the fear in her eyes. “They probably are more interested in capturing me than they are in capturing you.”

“What? Are you carrying a unique bloodline as well?” Leviala blurted.

“No, we are enemies for other reasons. A small disagreement ended up with them losing one of their main-branch descendants and getting publicly embarrassed,” Zac slowly said, his voice somewhat decreasing in strength after seeing the mounting horror in her eyes. “Anyway, I guess we have a common enemy? So what happened afterward?”

“When my ancestors realized they were left alone in this place they immediately started looking for an escape. But movement in this place is always highly restricted, and we never found a way out. However, we managed to find a few tablets left behind by the Tsarun Clan and that’s how we learned the methods of the Datamancers,” Leviala said.

“Unfortunately, only a few of our people can become true Datamancers as they can’t be registered as research subjects by the AI of this place. Only one out of a thousand might have the ability to become a Datamancer, and even then it’s highly random their degree of success,” Leviala said.

“People without bloodlines,” Zac muttered.

“Exactly,” Leviala nodded. “Our clan was essentially bred and experimented on for millennia with the sole purpose of purifying and strengthening our bloodline, and it was the same with the other clans. For someone to be born without it after all that it is extremely rare. I guess there are a lot more potential Datamancers among you outsiders.”

“In either case. We found out about the fundamental rules of this base through reading the Tsarun Clan reports. As you mentioned, they didn’t build this base. They rather stumbled upon it during an exploration trip outside of integrated space. They spent tens of thousands of years slowly gaining control over the basic functions, but we believe they never managed to get a hold on the core secrets of this place,” Leviala continued.

“What do you know about the original creators?” Zac asked, straining to keep his face impassive.

“Not much,” Leviala said with a shake of her head. “We know they were terrifyingly powerful, far greater than the Tsarun Clan. We think they finished their research then left this base, though we don’t know why they didn’t repurpose this place. The Tsarun were only digging through the scraps for their own project.”

Zac sighed and nodded. He wasn’t sure she was telling the truth or kept the secrets about his mother’s clan to herself, but there was still ample time to find out the truth.

“This is all valuable information, but what does this have to do with the Wastelands?” Zac asked, returning to the main subject.

“I needed you to understand how dangerous it was during the age after the cataclysm, where less than five percent of our Clan survived. Because the wasteland never healed. It is the sector where the dimensional treasure passed through before hitting the core of this base, and the laws of space are still in flux here. The rest of this world has found an equilibrium and is bound by the rules of the Builders, but the wasteland is in a permanent state of turmoil,” Leviala sighed.

“So what? If the werewolves can pass it, so can I,” Zac said.

“We have spent millennia mapping the spatial storms, but that knowledge holds no sway in the wastelands. A spatial storm can descend on you at moment’s notice, and that’s not all. This area is full of spatial holes, and sometimes things fall out. Dangerous things,” she said, her eyes inadvertently darting toward the ominous scars in the ceiling.

“Dangerous things?” Zac said with a frown.

“There are weird dimensional beasts hidden in the darkness. They can’t survive in our environment for long, and they cause massive destruction in their attempts to return to the void. Encountering those things almost always results in death. But other things can fall out as well, like a mountain getting dropped on your head. You never know,” Leviala said.

“Then how can the Lunar Tribe pass it?”

“They live the closest to the wasteland, so they understand it the best. Their bodies are also very strong, and their lunar skills allow them to briefly pass through spatial storms unscathed. I’ve heard they also maintain routes where they have left protective measures, like small safe bubbles powered by Base Power,” Leviala said.

“Don’t your clan have something similar?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No. We never go here. Treasures sometimes fall out of the void, but the dangers far overshadow the potential gain. Besides, passing the wasteland only leads to the Lunar Tribe, and you’ve seen how our relationship is,” Leviala said.

“So, the relay station?” Zac asked.

“It’s probably a base where the scouting units gather to cross the wasteland together. Powering those safe bubbles require a lot of Base Power, and each squad can’t pass alone. Besides, there is safety in numbers. I’ve also heard that they make the troublemakers and the elderly take the vanguard, so they’ll somewhat block the spatial storms with their bodies if one arrives unnoticed,” Leviala said.

“Okay, we hopefully won’t need to worry about that. Which way? If you don’t know, just follow your instincts,” Zac said.

Leviala looked into the eyes of Zac for a few seconds before she sighed as a small glimmer activated in her eyes. Her one remaining good eye turned milky white the next moment, eliciting a strong sense of unease in Zac’s mind. However, it soon returned to normal, though Leviala looked even more sickly than before.

“That way,” she said as she nodded at a route as blood started to flow down her nose again. “Now, can you rearrange these chains to something more comfortable?”

Chapter 594: Bubbles

Zac frowned when he saw that Leviala's condition seemed to have worsened even further, instead simply nodding in thanks. He went down the corridor that Leviala indicated, maintaining a pace just slow enough so that his Danger Sense would be able to pick up any hints of spatial tears in time.

He would have preferred to transform [**Love's Bond**] to its defensive form as well, but it turned out that was impossible because of Leviala. She could barely stand at the moment, let alone keep up with him. He instead had to fashion some sort of chair out of two of his chains, allowing him to carry her to his side. Carrying her on his back would have been a lot more convenient, but he definitely wasn't about to let a complete stranger have her arms around his neck. That was a good way to get yourself killed or captured.

The path they followed looked much very much the same as the area where they entered, with a state of decay that far exceeded anything Ogras described in his report. Occasional flickering in the scripts on the wall indicated that the area wasn't completely disconnected from the base, but it apparently wasn't in any state to repair this place. Or perhaps the Base AI had simply deemed it too costly what with the spatial turbulence.

They continued down the corridor for a few minutes before they reached a huge crack in the wall. It was wide enough for five people to enter together, and it seemed to be heading in the direction of the wastelands. Zac tried to peer inside, but it was completely pitch black apart from some light at the end of the tunnel, making it a possible shortcut.

"Do you think they entered here?"

"I can't activate my eyes again, I will end up in a coma," she said as she peered into the darkness. "But it's doubtful. I don't

think the Lunar Tribe would use these kinds of paths unless absolutely necessary. The corridors are still connected to the base and they follow most of the rules, but anything can happen in a crack like this. I think we should continue down the road.”

Zac nodded and kept walking without hesitation. He felt a vague sense of threat from that dark ingress anyway, and he probably wouldn't have entered even if he traveled alone. Something dangerous waited inside.

A minute later they reached a crossing, with a proper path heading the same way as the eerie crack from before. Zac looked at his reluctant guide again, but she still shook her head.

“No, not that way either,” Leviala said. “That corridor is the start of a looping spiral, a dead end. Cracks might have created a new path in there, but perhaps not. We would waste almost an hour going this way.”

“A looping spiral?” Zac asked.

“These endless corridors follow certain patterns and we have learned to somewhat intuit some of them after living in them all our lives. I'm almost certain that this will corridor is a dead end, but I can't actually explain how I know it. It's a vague sense based on the direction we're walking, proximity to the forest, previous corridors, and so on.”

“Is it your ocular bloodline?” Zac asked.

“No, everyone born in this place can somewhat do this,” Leviala explained.

Zac guessed that it was a naturally nurtured equivalent to his recently gained sense from **[Forester's Constitution]** unless she was hiding something. Perhaps she could tell based on the inscriptions on the wall or some other small sign that Zac couldn't notice. Either way, he felt it was better to go with her instincts unless his own Danger Sense started to rail against them.

The state of the base gradually worsened even further as they proceeded until Zac suddenly froze before he activated

[Loamwalker], moving himself and Leviala back where they came from. Not even a half a second passed before an extremely dense storm of spatial tears passed right through the corridor, seemingly both exiting and entering through the Memorsteeel walls.

“You see?” Leviala sighed, her face ghastly white. “We were lucky this time, but things will only get worse from here on out. You can’t sense these sudden storms either, so it’s impos-

She didn’t get any further before Zac moved again, once more narrowly avoiding a weird fluctuation that appeared from one of the cracks in the roof. It almost felt like the spatial tears from before had summoned something.

“-ible to completely avoid. Wait, how are you doing that?” Leviala asked as she looked down at Zac with confusion.

Zac didn’t immediately answer, but rather kept his eye peeled at the situation ahead. The thing that had appeared clearly was of a spatial nature, but it was something else than a tear. It almost looked like a soap bubble, but it actually reflected a blue sun rather than the surroundings. The bubble was almost two meters across, and much smaller spheres surrounded it like satellites.

It only remained a few seconds before it destabilized with a pop, causing an extremely powerful implosion that made Zac’s hair stand on end. There was no way that he would have survived it if he hadn’t moved away in time.

“What was that?”

“We call them Void Bubbles,” Leviala said with a sigh. “It’s actually a pretty rare sight. We don’t really know what they are. Some believe that they are the result of the dimensional layers temporarily weakening, giving a glimpse of the outside. More than one desperate cultivator has jumped into those bubbles in hopes of escaping this place, but I doubt anyone actually survived.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He could somewhat the power brewing in the center of that bubble, and it was definitely not

something any random E-Grade cultivator could survive. However, he suddenly froze with realization. Triv seemed certain that quite a few people had escaped from this base because there were so many high-quality corpses on Earth. Was this the method they used?

“Is it always that blue sun?” Zac asked to make sure.

“No, the scene is always different. Most of them picture outer space though,” Leviala said. “Seeing one depicting land is very rare.”

Zac nodded, feeling that his theory wasn’t completely without merit, but something she said piqued his curiosity.

“You guys know what space is?” Zac asked curiously.

“You know, we’ve lost much, but we’ve only been in this place for a couple of millennia. My great grandfather was born in the Zecia Sector,” she said with a scathing glance.

“Alright then,” Zac coughed and started walking.

He felt a bit stupid hearing her explanation, and his plans for exchanging information of the outside for information on the inside died in its cradle. She might know even more than himself about the Zecia sector for all he knew since the Cartava Clan was seemingly a proper cultivation clan before they were captured.

They kept going further from their starting points, and the spatial anomalies only grew more and more common. Zac’s Danger Sense kept doing wonders though, and seeing that Zac really was able to somewhat predict the spatial tears made Leviala calm down a bit. It allowed her to relax before she started explaining the base patterns in greater detail.

Zac felt he learned a lot, though he knew that he simply couldn’t gain an intuitive feel for the place just by hearing about patterns such as ‘Downstream Wing’ and ‘Fierce Otodon’. But it did give him a glimpse into how these native forces functioned, which might be even more valuable.

“We should turn here,” Leviala eventually said as they reached another crossing. “This should be the main path leading toward the Wasteland, and if we go any further without turning

we'll reach the Outer Divide. I doubt that the Outer Divide is breached even this close to the Wasteland, so going there is a waste of time."

Zac nodded in agreement, but they only proceeded a hundred meters before Zac's mind once more screamed of danger. However, this time it was to the point that Zac almost fell over from the shock to his mind, with only thoughts of escape remaining. He scrambled out of the way like his life depended on it, completely forgetting about Leviala.

The Cartava scion was dragged along thanks to the chains of **[Love's Bond]**, barely missing a massive claw that suddenly appeared from one of the cracks in the roof. It slammed into the ground with a devastating force, shredding the sturdy alloy like it was nothing. Zac desperately scrambled to his feet to keep backing away, and he looked at the hand with fear. He didn't even dare to think about attacking that thing out of fear that it would sense his killing intent.

The hand emitted energy waves almost at the level of Greatest, meaning that the beast should be somewhere in the late D-Grade.

The hand looked both corporeal and energy-based, and it twisted and distorted as it tried to grab hold of something in the corridor. It almost looked like a hologram if not for the deep scars that were caused in the walls. However, the runes on the walls suddenly lit up, and dozens of Memorysteel spears stabbed into the hand.

But seeing the result only made Zac even more certain of the power of the creature. He had been on the receiving end of those things, and the still tender flesh in his side was a poignant reminder of how powerful they were. But the spears were actually completely unable to harm the claw, and it easily crushed them like they were made out of paper.

The claw had its own problems though, and it kept distorting more and more until it was barely recognizable any longer. Only then did the hand recede into the void again, leaving an utterly decimated hallway that seemed unable to restore its previous form,

“It’s a dimensional creature,” Leviala whispered, her face pallid. “I never expected to see one in person. We’re lucky to be alive.”

“Where the hell did it come from?” Zac muttered as he peered into the darkness.

“We believe they live in the void. But I have no idea how that’s possible,” Leviala said.

“Why did it attack though?” Zac muttered.

“They are drawn here by the dimensional treasure, but they can’t enter this type of dimension freely. So they skulk around the cracks in space, sometimes reaching in to attack people. A few of the smaller ones sometimes fall through completely, but that only happens in the wasteland and the core region where the cracks are larger,” Leviala said.

Zac grimaced when he heard the mention about the core section where the Dimensional Seed was located. It sounded like the sector itself was just as dangerous as the Wasteland, perhaps even more so. Void’s Disciple and the zealots might be the least of his worries when he reached that place.

“What now?” Zac muttered. “Is there an alternative path?”

“The beast should go away if we wait a few minutes. But be careful,” Leviala said. “I already overdid it by activating my bloodline twice. You’re on your own now, I can’t warn you again as I did during the battle against the werewolves.”

“That’s no problem,” Zac said. “But while we’re at the subject, just how did you manage to warn me before? You’ve seen how sharp my senses are, but I didn’t sense a thing. More to the point, you shouted out before Hevastes had even reached me. Are your clan members Karmic Cultivators?”

Leviala’s warning was as good an opening as any, and Zac finally couldn’t hold back his curiosity after having walked these broken hallways for almost an hour. He had replayed that battle over and over in his mind, and Karma was the only explanation he could think of. He still remembered that odd feeling of déjà vu, and it made him think of his battle with the Hayner Patriarch more than anything.

He knew that Karmic Cultivators were exceedingly rare, but it really looked like she had divined the future before, warning him of something that was about to take place. The backlash also matched with what he knew of divination. There was always a price to pay to peer into the future, and even a powerful monk like Lord 84th wasn't an exception.

Perhaps the Tsarun clan wanted the power of precognition for themselves and had tried to extract that capability from the Cartava clan. Or perhaps they wanted to breed a bunch of seers, forcing them to write divinations day in and day out until they were killed by the heavens. There was no doubt that such a power would prove immensely beneficial for a power-hungry man like the Tsarun patriarch.

“No,” she hurriedly said as she shook her head with such force that she almost fell out of her chair made out of chains. “Our clan has nothing to do with Divination or Karma.”

“Then why such a strong reaction?” Zac said as a frown spread across his face. “Our planet does have a grudge against a Karmic Cultivator, but that doesn't mean we're enemies with all of them. But let me be clear; if I find out that you're lying, then your clan will have to find another way out of this place than through me. I can't have another group of people manipulating Karma against me or my people. You better tell me right now what's going on.”

Chapter 595: Karma and Time

“No, I swear I’m not lying!” Leviaala exclaimed with a pale face. “You’re not the first one to make that deduction. Our clan was constantly harassed because a lot of forces believed us to manipulate Karma for our profit. I only reacted strongly because our clan suffered a lot of harassment because of this.”

“If not Karma, then what?” Zac asked.

“You have probably realized that my clan has an eye-based bloodline after seeing me,” Leviaala eventually said. “That’s why we were caught and brought here.”

“Really? Just because of that?” Zac asked, skepticism written all over his face. “There’s no way the Tsarun clan would capture you because of that.”

It wasn’t without reason Zac had that sort of reaction. He had learned a thing or two about bloodlines from gathering missives by now, and he wasn’t completely clueless any longer. The most common types of bloodlines were combat-oriented, with the second most common being affinity-related, either boosting cultivation speed or Skill Control.

Ocular Bloodlines were a lot rarer than those types, but not to the point that it was exceedingly rare. But more importantly, they were generally not seen as too useful since they mainly focused on scouting or helping with things like inscriptions and crafting.

There was no way that the power-hungry Tsarun-clan would waste so much effort on something useless though. Those wolves had gained a pretty decent boost to their combat strength when their bloodlines awakened, surpassing the general estimates of common bloodlines. There had to be something special about Clan Cartava to warrant their capture.

“Our clan has nothing to do with Karma, really. Our bloodlines provide us with scouting abilities and some suppression,” Leviala repeated once more.

“Then why did that guy say that you’re the key to immortality?” Zac asked with a frown, feeling he was being taken for a ride.

Zac’s gut told him that the werewolf threw out that last line with his dying breath to cause trouble, but that didn’t mean that he was lying. These werewolves had fought in the Outer Ring against the humans, and now they had managed to somehow capture one of them. The fact that the werewolves worked so hard against the humans rather than trying to escape meant they possessed something even more valuable than freedom.

Immortality was one such thing. Even a pig would become an overlord given enough time, so it was definitely an alluring concept for most cultivators. Perhaps the werewolf believed Zac would feel the same and torture the girl for her secrets. However, Zac wasn’t personally all that interested in the prospect of immortality.

He grew up expecting to live around 80 years, so his current lifespan approaching the thousands was already shocking enough. Who would want to walk the universe until the end of time? It sounded torturous more than anything. The girl seemed reluctant to say anything more though as she looked around back and forth. Zac had an idea of what she was worried about, and he took out and activated an Isolation Array.

“No one can hear us now,” Zac said. “I normally wouldn’t pressure someone like this, but you’re simply acting too suspiciously. I can’t have anything going wrong in this place. Billions of lives depend on it.”

“...Fine,” Leviala eventually sighed. “You have to swear on your path of cultivation to not divulge what I’m about to say, and not to experiment on me or my clansmen.”

“I swear to not divulge anything as long as you don’t move against me or my force,” Zac nodded. “And I would never

experiment on people.”

Leviala looked at Zac for a while longer, before she eventually nodded.

“Our bloodline really isn’t anything more than a decent ocular heritage. But that wasn’t always the case. Our founding ancestor’s eyes were different from ours. They contained the power of time itself. Not only did he live five times longer than a normal cultivator at his stage, but he was able to glimpse into both the past and present to some degree,” Leviala said. “His children never inherited his gift though, but the ancestor’s actions started the rumors about us being a Karmic Clan.

“Eventually, the rumors died down though and our lives started to return to normal. However, the Tsarun Clan found out about the true nature of our founding ancestor’s eyes through a traitor. They wanted that power of time for themselves. I don’t know why, but I think it was for the same reason as the Lunar Tribe. They want to extract the power in our eyes to increase their longevity,” Leviala said.

“And you have the same types of eyes as your ancestor,” Zac deduced before he looked at her with exasperation. “All that talk, and it’s still related to Karma after all?”

“You seem to have a flawed understanding of the Dao of Karma. Karma and Divination are completely separate from the Dao of Time. Karma is an understanding of the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. It’s understanding causality, and in some cases deliberately influencing the future by taking some seemingly inscrutable actions,” Leviala explained.

“They are unable to see the whole picture as normal cultivators though, so they connect with the omnipresent Heavens for a short moment to borrow its omniscience, all the karmic ties and relations. But ultimately, they are still not actually peering into the future or the past,” she continued. “Furthermore, Karma is just one type of Divination. There’s also the Numerology of the Dao of Order, and some oracles even enter contracts with strange beings of other dimensions

who can show them glimpses of the unknown. I'm sure there are even more types out there.”

“So they aren't actually able to see the future. But you are?”
Zac said with a frown.

Timeline altering seemed extremely overpowered, especially for someone in the E-Grade. Getting your soul wounded and a bleeding nose could barely be considered a backlash for something so heaven-defying. The brand on her eye looked a lot more worrisome, but how could that compare to altering the past?

“No. I can just glimpse fragmented images, and generally just the from past. When I chose a direction before I looked into the past and saw werewolves coming from this corridor,”
Leviala explained. “But during your battle, I felt a sudden urge to peek into the future, and I saw a hand holding a restraint module behind you. I knew that we both would be in trouble if that really happened, so I called out.

“As you saw, looking into the future is a lot more dangerous than the past, because even just looking will invariably change the future. Besides, I can only see a short image, but there's no guarantee that I would understand what I saw. This time I was lucky since I knew that you getting sealed would be bad for me, but the risk of receiving the backlash and gaining nothing in return is high,” Leviala said. “The backlash is also extremely harsh, every usage comes with a permanent cost.”

Zac slowly nodded. He couldn't pinpoint what, but he felt that there was something odd with her description of the events. Perhaps it was the ‘sudden urge’ to peek into the future that was the most suspect. Then again, he often got those sorts of urges thanks to his high Luck, and perhaps she had a similar ability.

“So you got a glimpse of a bad future, and warned me to prevent it? Can everyone in your clan do this?” Zac asked.

“No,” Leviala said. “Just a select few.”

“Thank you for letting me know. And don't worry, I have no interest in your time eyes,” Zac said as he picked up the

isolation disk. “I don’t want to be hunted down by the old monsters in the sector for holding a key to increased longevity.”

Leviala could only weakly smile in response, and the two set out a few minutes later after there was no sign of the Void Creature returning. Zac wasn’t joking when he said that he would keep the secret to himself. Part of it was the reason he just said. He didn’t want to live a life where he was hunted by powerful factions, like Yrial or the Eveningtide Asura.

But part of it was definitely because of her situation. She hadn’t said it outright, but warning him had definitely come at a cost. He had noticed that Leviala had repeatedly reached for her branded eye as they traveled along the corridors, and he guessed that the curse was a direct result of peering into the future.

After all, if meddling with the strings of Karma came at a sharp price, then the same would probably hold for meddling with time. The System or the real Heavens protected the fundamental rules of the universe it seemed. Otherwise things would turn extremely chaotic with people jumping back and forth through timelines as they pleased.

The minutes turned into two hours as they progressed further and further from their starting position, though they had to backtrack a few times after encountering completely crumbled sections of the corridors. Perennial spatial storms were swirling about in these places, making it completely impossible to pass through.

But finally, there was a change as they heard a loud argument in the distance. They had moved in complete silence after the first 30 minutes out of fear of alerting the sensitive werewolves, with Leviala only giving directions with her hands. Two gruff voices echoed through the corridors, making the two freeze in position. Zac once more took out the isolation array, hoping that the energy fluctuations wouldn’t alert anyone.

The two listened for a bit, and it quickly became apparent it was an argument between two squad leaders. One of them

wanted to set out immediately since he believed something had gone wrong. The other wanted to wait for Hevastes as he carried a lot of the Base Power required to power the safe bubbles placed in the Wasteland.

They couldn't hear everything though, and the voices stopped after a minute.

"It should be just up ahead," Zac said with a low voice. "Stay here."

"You'll come pick me up, right?" Leviala said with worry. "I'm don't think I can get back alone. I should tell you; I hold some weight in my clan, things will get a lot easier for you if you have me assisting you from the inside. I doubt my people would be ready to head for the depths of this place rather than the exit if my grandpa doesn't tell them to."

"Of course, I'll help you," Zac assured her as silvery tufts of hair started to grow from his face.

A blinding agony spread through Zac's body the next moment as he activated **[Million Faces]** for the first time. The fit with his pathways wasn't any better with the upgraded skill, which meant that every minor adjustment was accompanied by the feeling of his bones being crushed and reformed. And Zac wasn't planning on a minor adjustment.

His face elongated while his body grew a few decimeters as he donned a hunched-over posture with his arms hanging low. Sharp claws grew out from his hands and he felt his teeth growing sharp as well.

"How do I look?" Zac grunted a minute later, though he had some problems forming words properly with a canine snout.

"Just what are you? Can you turn into anything?" Leviala whispered in shock.

"It's a transformation skill," Zac snorted. "Do I look like a werewolf?"

"Honestly, you look like a failed miscreation," Leviala said, and she clearly had problems looking in his direction.

Zac sighed when he saw her disgusted face, and a wave of disgust hit him as well when he took out a mirror. The only way he would be mistaken for a werewolf was if the werewolf not only suffered from a severe case of mange but also a series of birth defects.

The extent he could change his body was a lot greater with his new skill, but turning into a werewolf was clearly overreaching. But he still wanted to get a small advantage this way. Leviale believed that the Relay Station was in what she called a chokepoint chamber, a large warehouse with one entrance and one exit.

It would be the only path to get to the other side, and it was easily defended. Most settlements in the Mystic Realm were built in these kinds of chambers, or series of such warehouses, and sometimes they could even control the barriers leading in and out. Leviale guessed that they wouldn't have too great a control of the base this far from their real domain, but she couldn't be sure.

The Lunar Clan had already provided her with plenty of surprises.

He thought for a second before he had an idea to improve the disguise. He took out a couple of bandages next and covered over half his face and hands, with the uneven tufts of silver hair sticking out between. He took out the dead werewolf leader next and pushed his bisected body against the bandages, drenching them with blood.

Leviale seemed ready to vomit at the macabre display, but Zac had long turned numb to these kinds of grotesque actions. What did it matter if he got a little bloodied if he could complete his quest and save his people? Next, he put on a spare set of the clothes he found in Hevastes' Cosmos Sack, finishing the makeshift transformation.

"What about now?" Zac said as he spun around.

"I guess you can pass as Hevastes from a distance, but you won't be able to infiltrate them this way," Leviale said.

“That’s fine, I just need to get through the door,” Zac muttered.

“You know, Hevastes and the others were weakened after they killed my guard, but I don’t think the other squads are in that bad a shape. And there might be quite a few of them,” she exhorted. “You might not-“

“I have to do this,” Zac said as he stood up and cracked his neck. “Wait here, we’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Zac started making his way toward the source of the argument earlier, and he took on a shuffling walk to make it look like he was wounded. He wanted to create the illusion of Hevastes returning alone in defeat after failing his mission. He soon enough reached a proper arch that was blocked with a familiar red barrier.

“Lord Hevastes, is that you?” a hesitant voice emerged from the other side as a werewolf stepped forward, looking at Zac’s appearance with shock.

“Get the fuck out of the way,” Zac growled, trying to make his voice mimic the gruff timbre of the werewolf leader.

A surge of relief hit Zac a second later as the barrier flickered out, and Zac wasted no time.

“Wh-“ the wolf said with wide eyes, but he didn’t get any further before Zac’s hand snapped forward, gripping the werewolf by the throat and cracking his neck.

A surge of Cosmic Energy confirmed the kill, and [**Verun’s Bite**] appeared in his hand as he started to transform back to normal.

“We’re under attack!” another guard screamed just before Zac managed to end his life as well.

Zac had never expected to enter the open space unnoticed with his wretched disguise. Cosmic Energy churned through his body as he was primed for an all-out assault.

Chapter 596: Hands

“Who are you?!” a bulky werewolf roared as he produced a large spear that seemed to be made from the same material as the walls, and a quick estimate by Zac indicated there were around fifty werewolves in the emptied-out storeroom.

It was a bit more than Zac had hoped, but he knew that he couldn't back down now. Zac's only response to the inquiry was unleashing a roar at the top of his lungs, reinforced with his aura and billowing killing-intent. The very air in the room vibrated, and two large screens that displayed some unintelligible data actually cracked pressure the pressure.

The sudden outburst made the werewolves freeze for an instant like they had been faced with a dangerous predator, giving Zac a brief window to scan the large warehouse that had been outfitted into what looked a bit like a campsite. He immediately found what he was looking for; a group of dirty and bloodied humans and one demon huddled in a corner chained to the wall.

All of them carried somewhat serious wounds, with two apparently being unconscious. The pathetic state of his people ignited another surge of fury in his heart, and any hesitation flew out of his head as he threw out over a hundred items while activating [**Nature's Punishment**].

The werewolves had already regained their bearing after the surprising outburst, and they started to radiate lunar light one by one. The room was over two hundred meters across, but it was still a lot more confined compared to the earlier battles in the forests. More importantly; the walls were reflective, and Zac worried what would happen if they were allowed to completely unleash their Bloodline War Array.

However, the cold moonlight was overpowered before it even had a chance to stabilize as the whole area erupted in an

unceasing cascade of elemental eruptions.

Huge flowers wrought from flame bloomed as icicles as long as five meters fell from the sky. Lakes of thunder covered the ground and torrential winds full of hidden blades cut at the flustered werewolves. It was as though an army of elementalists had descended upon Relay Station, intent on ripping it apart.

There obviously were no mages assisting Zac in his rescue attempt though, but the commotion was rather the result of throwing out a full stack of low and medium-grade talismans at the cost of a decent chunk of his Cosmic Energy. These low-quality offensive talismans would normally not be able to kill even a peak F-Grade warrior, let alone these werewolves with powerful constitutions.

But packed together in a confined space like this they could cause some serious harm. More importantly, they emitted almost blinding light while the explosions made any attempts of organization impossible.

A storm of Spatial Tears erupted the next second as Zac's hidden ace, a **[Void Ball]**, detonated right where the most powerful-looking werewolves were fending off blasts from every direction. A few werewolves were immediately cut into ribbons, but most of them suddenly turned into light, allowing the tears to pass right through their intangible form.

Zac had already learned about this bloodline ability though, so he wasn't surprised to see them materializing almost immediately with various degrees of wounds. There were still a lot of chaotic Spatial Tears around them as well, forcing the werewolves to find another way to protect themselves. Most of them were suddenly enclosed in red barriers as they jumped out of the way.

The shields were obviously of the same source as the ones he had seen in this base before, but the werewolves had managed to construct portable defensive mechanisms.

However, it looked like the barriers shared one inconvenient trait with the barriers of the base itself. The spatial tears seamlessly entered the shields themselves, melding with them

into one entity. Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt that it was no way that some portable device would be able to lock in and contain a spatial tear.

As expected, the leaders quickly grabbed small machines hidden in various pockets and threw them far away, and a series of small explosions soon after as the machines erupted into what looked like weakened copies of the **[Void Ball]** itself. The werewolf leaders had managed to save their hides, but Zac had already achieved his purpose.

The chaos caused by the **[Void Ball]** and explosive talismans had caused complete disorder amongst the ranks of the werewolves, and their Lunar War Array had almost completely fallen apart.

Zac knew they would be able to restore order soon enough, but the confusion had given him just enough time to conjure the enormous wooden hand hovering by the ceiling fifty meters up in the air. Zac didn't waste even a second before the large emerald array appeared, and a small branch started to descend the moment it appeared.

"Above!" a werewolf shouted, but it was too late.

The branch rapidly grew as innumerable branches sprouted, each of them shooting for a werewolf. Transcendent lights rose to meet their descent, and smoke rose from Zac's hand as the damage was transmitted from the avatar in the sky. However, the wooden punishment contained an almost boundless vitality, and that effect was only boosted even further thanks to the Fragment of the Bodhi and his newly acquired **[Spiritual Void]**.

His strike was chock-full of Dao, and bark rained down from the sky as it was ripped off and regrew in a rapid cycle of growth and withering. Zac's consumption of energy was enormous to withstand the hastily erected War Array, but their defense had one fatal weakness; it didn't actually provide any physical defenses.

A massive surge of Cosmic Energy filled his body as one werewolf after another was speared through. Over ten branches were aiming for each werewolf, and they could only

maintain their intangible form for a short while. Over half the werewolves died from the blitz attack before the War Array finally managed to exhaust [**Nature's Punishment**] to the point that Zac could no longer maintain it.

Just under twenty werewolves remained at this point, some of them maimed or even grievously wounded from fending off the branches of the bloody tree that now stood in the center of the Relay Station like a cursed effigy adorned with carcasses for offerings. Surrounding it was the spectral forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], and together they had turned the sci-fi interior into a fey forest.

The attack was a huge success, but Zac still couldn't help but worry as he glanced at the enormous cracks that had appeared on the walls. The powerful Memorstee normally wouldn't have been damaged to this point from the battle, but the metal in this section clearly wasn't being provided enough Base Power to recover. He knew that he would have to end this quickly unless he wanted to bring the whole roof down on his head.

"Join together!" one of the leaders desperately screamed, but Zac was relieved to see that six of the remaining warriors completely ignored the call as they fled through the gate on the other side.

But there were still twelve werewolves to deal with, each of them powerful enough to withstand the strike of [**Nature's Punishment**]. Certainly, none of them came out of the clash unscathed, but they still carried a great fighting spirit as they moved together. A radiant silver moon had already appeared behind their backs as they howled toward Zac, causing dense lunar energies to stream out of their bodies.

The moonlight congealed into an enormous Lunar Wolf that immediately lunged at Zac, and he felt a huge pressure bearing down on him. He didn't hesitate to activate the defensive charge of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], but the shimmering barrier was quickly whittled down by an extremely piercing radiance that radiated from the spectral wolf's forehead.

Four chains shot out from the coffin that had appeared on Zac's back and they launched forward like black spears full of corrosion as Zac flooded them with the Fragment of the coffin. They pierced into the intangible wolf with enormous momentum, but it was like he was hitting a cloud. However, the radiant luster of the wolf somewhat dimmed from the black gases that spread from the chains, and the invasion caused a slight pause in the beast's advance.

The reprieve was enough for Zac to charge up his next massive skill, and a golden cloud spread out in a wave as a fifty-meter fractal blade swept out. The wave was rapidly diminished by the moonlight, but a second wave came crashing into the first just as the four chains slid out of the way. The two opposites of **[Rapturous Divide]** emerged in the warehouse the next moment, and both gold and black started competing with the silver for dominance.

The collision caused the whole room to shake, and cracks in the wall grew even further as Zac's newly erected corpse tree was cut in half and fell onto the ground with a deep thud. A few pieces of the wall and roof were actually completely dislodged from the shockwave, but they didn't fall down as Zac expected.

They rather were sucked up into the Void, leaving gaping holes just like the ones that were everywhere in the corridors. The scene intensified Zac's worries, but it seemed to have a far more profound impact on the few remaining werewolves as over half of them started running for their lives even if the spectral wolf managed to cancel out most of Zac's attack.

That left just four beastkin who seemed to be in a state of conflict between duty and fear, but Zac felt no such turmoil as he pushed forward. A brutal melee where **[Verun's Bite]** and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** turned into a dizzying blur resulted in the last of the werewolves, including the leader who had spoken up at the start, lying dead on the ground.

Zac sported some minor wounds and a nasty scar across his throat, but he was still in decent shape. His victory was all thanks to his initial blitz this time around. Zac had thought about the battle on the way over here, and he realized

something while talking with Leviala. These natives had a lot of weird items that Zac didn't understand, but that worked the other way as well.

The fat stack of talismans and the **[Void Ball]** had essentially put them in a reactive position while breaking their Lunar War Array, the greatest threat to Zac's large-scale attacks. After that it was just a matter of time before Zac was the last man standing. The werewolves weren't even given a chance to launch any of the technological weapons or traps they should have prepared in this place.

This wasn't the time to wallow in self-congratulatory revelry though, and he quickly snatched up the closest corpses of the werewolf leaders before he rushed over to his scouting squad. The walls of the room were all creaking ominously by this point, and Zac got a bad feeling when he remembered the fear in the eyes of the werewolves as they fled.

He had thought the fear was directed at himself in the heat of the battle, but he now had a feeling that he was overestimating his importance.

"Are you guys okay?" Zac panted as he started ripping apart the bindings that held the group in place.

The scouts were bound by Memorysteel chains that were fused with the walls themselves, but they definitely didn't contain the same restraining capabilities as the odd gizmo in his possession. Then again, the material was extremely sturdy by itself, and even Zac had to strain a bit to break the chains.

"We're fine. We knew that you'd come for us," one of the two Valkyries said as she got to her feet.

Zac could only weakly smile in response, too shamefaced to admit that he only found out about their situation by a coincidence. He could only redouble his efforts in freeing everyone, urged on both embarrassment and a mounting fear as the cracks in the walls kept spreading.

"We should hunt the last ones down before they bring back more people!" a man that Zac didn't recognize huffed as Zac

broke apart his fetters. “Better yet, we should invade them... right ...back.”

The man had begun speaking with surging momentum, but he barely managed to squeeze the last words out as Zac silenced him with a glare. The others looked at Zac with confusion, but there was no time to explain the mounting danger he felt.

“Wha-“ the man stuttered.

“Just shut up and run,” Zac said as he freed the last scout, the demon warrior.

However, it was too late.

A series of odd explosions erupted all along the roof, and Zac guessed it was the remaining Base Power in the wall that had become unstable as the chamber had lost the last of its structural integrity. The blasts were the straw that broke the camel’s back as the roof was ripped clean off and swallowed by the void. The atmosphere was still intact, but Zac didn’t care about that as he felt a very familiar dread gripping his heart.

Not only that, but an immense pressure weighed down on him like a restrictive array had been activated.

“Run!” Zac screamed as he grabbed one of the scouts with his free arm while his chains grabbed another four.

Only the demon warrior was able to stand, and he carried the last scout on his back. However, the two only managed to take a few steps before a horrifying scene entered their eyes. Two tentacles reached down from the void, making their way toward Zac and the Demon warrior. The scene was scary enough by itself in conjuncture with the immense aura the appendages emitted, but Zac’s terror reached even greater heights when he realized what the vines were made of.

Hands. Thousands of hands stitched together.

Chapter 597: The Collector

Zac felt like his brain was about to short-circuit when he saw what he was dealing with. It was one thing to see the distorting claw of the Void Creature before, but just what kind of eldritch horror would have these kinds of appendages? The sinister aura of this thing was far beyond the earlier creature as well, and Zac believed the only reason he could even stand was that the being was greatly restrained when entering the dimension of the Mystic Realm.

But there was no time to ponder what he was dealing with as the ropes made of hands were extremely quick and nimble. He desperately activated [**Loamwalker**] to flash out of the way of one of the two appendages, but he could immediately see that the demon wouldn't be able to do the same.

The ground cracked under Zac's feet as he hurriedly changed direction, forcibly tackling the demon from behind. The demon coughed up a mouthful of blood and the Valkyrie's wounds seemed to worsen, but the push was enough to throw the two away, allowing them to avoid the first grab.

The demon's face was pallid, but he understood what was at stake. He grit his teeth as he got up to his feet, and Cosmic Energy surged through his body as he sprinted toward the red barrier. This was Zac's only hope; that the Base would block this thing as a security measure. He had already learned from Leviala that the barriers worked just like normal defensive arrays; usually just blocking passage from one direction. But hopefully it would detect the Void Creature passing through the barrier, and move to intercept it.

Zac activated [**Loamwalker**] once more to follow in the demon's footsteps, but horror gripped his heart when his skill was forcibly deactivated mid-step. One of the appendages had managed to grab hold to one of the unconscious scouts hanging from one of [**Love's Bond's**] chains, and Zac

shuddered when he realized that the hands could actually move like normal as they grabbed the scout's legs and arms.

Desperation welled in his heart as Zac tried to drag him free only to find himself completely unable to match the power of the being still hidden in the void. He quickly found himself being lifted off the ground, utterly incapable of resisting. Guilt welled up in Zac's heart, but he could only release the scout before it was too late, and dropping toward the ground barely allowed him to dodge the second appendage.

The poor unconscious scout was quickly being hoisted into the darkness as the hands passed him along, but Zac resolutely looked forward as he activated **[Loamwalker]** again. The demon had already managed to escape through the barrier with one of the Valkyries, and the appendages completely ignored him after that.

The scene somewhat confirmed Zac's guess, and not having to worry about the demon gave Zac at least some reprieve. If he only could make it through the barrier he would be safe as well.

However, Zac was gripped by despair when a third rope of hands suddenly descended from the sky, barring Zac's escape. He was forced to immediately stop, as another step with his movement skill would put him right in range of the outreached hands. He frantically ran in a different direction as he started charging up his most powerful remaining skill, **[Deforestation]**. If he couldn't run out, then he would need to fight his way out.

The brief pause caused by the appearance of a third appendage was all that the eldritch horror needed though, and it effortlessly snatched up a second scout. This time it simply yanked him free, causing cracks to spread all over the links of **[Love's Bond]**. The body of the scout obviously couldn't withstand such force either, and just the upper body of the poor man was taken away while his legs fell on the floor.

The only consolation was that the scout was already severely wounded before, and losing both his legs was just too much to

endure. The shock immediately killed him, sparing him from being alive for whatever the Void Creature had in store.

Sweat beads streamed down Zac's face as he desperately dodged the lightning-quick vines as he prepared his Hail Mary attempt to get out of the Relay Station. He definitely feared for his life, but now there was yet another reason for him to worry; his training quest still hadn't been completed.

Two people were lost to the horrifying appendages in an instant. Losing a third one meant failure to his quest, and he couldn't let that happen no matter what. He moved the Valkyrie under his arm into one of his chains to free up his movement, and he kept the three scouts tight on his back to avoid another snatching.

But whatever the thing on the other side of the Void still didn't seem satiated as the three vines reached for him as he dodged back and forth in the refitted warehouse in an attempt to find an opening. Zac could even sense a palpable hunger coming from the void even if he couldn't see the main body of the creature.

[Deforestation] was finally charged up though, and the woodsman's axe emerged before it released a wave of destruction toward the sky. Zac didn't even pause to see the result as he rushed for the exit, but he immediately found himself blocked again. The vines were only pushed back a bit from the strike as shallow wounds that looked like spatial tears appeared on the hands, but they were still able to move around freely in the room.

An odd undulation rocked Zac's mind for an instant, but he shook his head and immediately followed up with the second swing. The Axe of Felling had not really hurt the creature, but it had at least stopped it for a second. Perhaps an opening would show itself if he kept pushing, so Zac unhesitatingly unleashed a fiery wave of Axe-infused destruction toward the void.

The flames were unfortunately restrained as the air was almost non-existent in the chamber by this point, and it didn't seem like this creature was weak to fire either like one could have

hoped. The cutting fire glommed onto the vines like napalm, but it was as though the hands absorbed their energy, quickly extinguishing them before they shot out toward Zac again.

However, Zac didn't completely give up hope as he saw that the appendages had started distorting just like the claw from before. It seemed like his attacks had increased the pace at which the Void Creature was expelled from the Mystic Realm, and if he could cause enough damage he might be able to flee. Luckily, there was one final card up Zac's sleeve, and the ominous Axe of Desolation made its entry.

A wave of darkness almost completely filled the Relay Station, engulfing all three appendages in a darkness that seemed a shade blacker than even the Void itself. A series of powerful implosions could be heard within, and Zac's eyes lit up as he started rushing for the exit again. However, a scream of danger made him stop in his tracks, allowing him to barely dodge a badly mangled hand that grabbed for his throat.

An instant later the full tentacle emerged through the desolation, proving that even his strongest strike had failed to take out the tentacles.

The hands on the appendage had turned completely pitch-black from the attack though, and a large number of them had seen their finger turn into ash that drifted toward the void. Its form was rapidly distorting back and forth as well, and it was clearly about to be booted out of this space. However, a weird rune suddenly lit up on the back of all the hands, and the tentacle flashed forward with unprecedented speed, immediately snatching up Zac by his waist.

A crushing pressure threatened to grind his pelvic bone to dust, but Zac ignored the pain as he desperately cut into the hands with everything he had. The sanguine glow of the first rune on **[Verun's Bite]** had already been activated again, quickly burning through the small amount of E-Grade blood he had managed to gather since the battle with the Lunar Wolves.

Every swing contained enough force to turn a Middle E-Grade Warrior into paste, but the only effect was small scars like the

earlier ones appearing across the hands. But the barrage also increased the speed the appendage destabilized, and Zac suddenly found his axe striking air as the appendage disappeared with a pop, just like the Void Bubble from before.

The implosion made Zac helplessly hover in the air for a short moment before a huge force exploded outward, slamming Zac into the Memorysteel wall. However, luck was on Zac's side one final time as he had been thrown right next to the gate. He quickly crawled through the barrier while dragging the chains with him.

It was just in time as well since the last two tentacles finally managed to break through the cloud of desolation just as Zac passed through the red barrier. His whole body was hurting, but he arduously got up to his feet in case the hands tried to force their way through the gate. He didn't want to use it, but he still had the second skill of [**Love's Bond**] to block the path in case that happened.

But the tentacles stopped right outside the barrier before they started to retreat into the void again.

A surge of relief almost made Zac pass out, but his eyes suddenly widened in shock when he saw that none of the three scouts he had carried on his chains was moving. Blood was streaming down his mouth because of internal injuries, but he ignored his own state as he frantically reached for the people on the ground.

Thankfully it turned out that none of them were dead, but they had rather been rendered unconscious some time during the battle. It was no wonder considering the speed Zac had moved around to avoid the grasping hands. Just the g-force alone would probably have been enough to kill a normal human.

Add to that the scout's conditions, the sparse oxygen, and intense pressure from the Void Creature and it was almost a miracle they were still alive. The demon and the Valkyrie he carried outside were sitting just a few meters away, and he was blankly staring at the Void through the barrier like his soul had left his body.

Zac threw a Cosmos Sack full of first-aid items to the demon, dragging him out of his blank state before he quickly fed all the unconscious scouts healing pills himself. Their complexions quickly improved, and a few of them even started stir like they were about to wake up. A prompt appeared the next moment, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief.

He had passed the quest, albeit barely.

It seemed like the Void Creature really didn't dare pass through the red barrier for some reason. Of course, the terrifying tentacles were on their last legs because of the Axe of Desolation, and it was possible that the creature simply didn't want to lose two more appendages and cut its losses.

Seeing that he had escaped death once more Zac simply slumped down on the ground, a wave of exhaustion hitting him like a punch to the face. However, he knew that he still was at the edge of the Wasteland, and a new horror could appear at moment's notice, quest or no quest. He quickly took out a healing pill and two D-Grade Nexus Crystals to restore his energy as quickly as possible.

The first of the unconscious scouts roused themselves a few minutes later, prompting Zac to open his eyes again. It was the man who had spoken up just before the Void Creature appeared. He blankly looked around like he was surprised to be alive for a few seconds before he spotted Zac seated against the wall.

"I- Ah, I'm Jonas, Jonas Marshall," the man said with a hoarse voice. "Thank you for saving us, from the wolves and that... thing. I didn't mean to order you about earlier, I-"

"It's fine," Zac shrugged, his voice equally hoarse. "I simply sensed something was wrong."

Of course, that was only part of the story. Another reason for the scathing glare was the fear this guy had put him in harm's way. He thought the training quest finished at that point and was afraid that the call for revenge would trigger the third part of his training regimen.

But no prompt had appeared as a result of the man's words, which was a huge relief.

The next logical step would have been to enter the Wastelands, and Zac was in no mood to risk his life against spatial storms and Void Creatures. He knew the System's preferences, and he wouldn't have been surprised if it kept escalating the conflict through quests until he had eradicated the whole Lunar Tribe before it turned him toward the Core Sector.

"And we can't follow those werewolves as we are, even if that monster wasn't around," Zac added as he got to his feet with a grunt. "A place called the Wasteland is in that direction and we don't have the equipment or understanding to cross it. It's apparently full of the things we just encountered."

The others visibly paled at that as they threw a few fearful glances toward the barrier. The horrifying appendages were gone for now, but that didn't mean there were even more of them waiting in the darkness.

"Let's go," Zac said. "We can't stay here any longer. We're returning to our base camp."

The scouts were more than willing to comply and they immediately got themselves ready to travel even in their pitiable states. The demon wordlessly kept carrying one of the unconscious scouts on his back, while Zac carried another two on his chains. The last 2 managed to walk by themselves, albeit barely.

None of them were in any mood to talk, and neither was Zac. This encounter had been much too close for comfort. Worse yet, this was just the second of ten quests. He didn't even dare to think what fresh hell the System would put him through next. So it was in an oppressive silence the group scurried away from the Relay Station, following the same route that Zac took on the way in.

They quickly reached the alcove where Zac had left Leviala, and the Cartava Scion was still sitting there, fretfully peering around the corner. When she saw Zac's and the others' states her eyes widened in shock as she got up to her feet.

“What happened?” Leviala hesitantly asked as her eyes peered at the group behind Zac.

“I managed to catch them off-guard and things worked out against the werewolves. A weird Dimensional Creature made from thousands of hands popped up though, and we lost two of our people,” Zac sighed as he formed the chain-chair again. “Let’s go.”

However, Leviala didn’t move, but simply looked at Zac with horror.

“Thousands of hands? You met the Collector?” Leviala said, her voice barely a whisper.

“What? The Collector? I don’t know. It had tentacles made from thousands of hands sewn together. I managed to destroy one of the tentacles, allowing us to escape,” Zac said.

“YOU HARMED IT?!” Leviala shrieked as she scrambled onto the chair. “We need to go! *NOW!*”

Chapter 598: The Hero's Burden

The Hero's Burden (Training (3/10)): Avoid the Collector while leading your followers to safety. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 5 levels.]

Zac barely had time to take in Leviala's exaggerated reaction before the prompt in front of him appeared. Zac quickly scanned the quest with some exhaustion. He wasn't completely wrung dry just yet, but he was also far from an optimal condition. But the quest acted as a warning of sorts, and Zac knew there wasn't anything he could do except keep going.

The quest didn't have a timer, and neither didn't have any restrictions. But that might actually not be a good thing, since it might mean that a single death would result in failure. The punishment for failing had decreased once more at least, though the punishment was still far too rich for Zac's tastes.

"Let's keep moving. If you're unable to move any longer, tell me and I'll carry you," Zac said before he turned to Leviala who was already sitting on her chair. "Is it safe to talk?"

"It can't hear us, but it can sense us," Leviala whispered with fear in her eyes as she gazed at the cracks in the ceiling. "It'll pounce if we stop for just a moment."

Zac nodded in understanding as he set out, keeping as high a pace as he dared in this chaotic place.

"What do you know about that thing?" Zac asked.

"The Collector is said to be the second greatest source of deaths during the Cataclysm, only lacking compared to the

spatial storms themselves. It's not necessarily the strongest Void Creature, but it's definitely one of the weirdest. But more importantly, it's unusually resilient to our dimension. You saw the claw before. It deformed by itself in seconds. But the Collector's hands can stay for hours as long as they're not attacked," Leviala said.

"The Collector is also extremely crafty, and it's even able to enter the research base through Spatial Tears. There have been reports of people being snatched all over the base, even in sectors thought to be safe," she said as she held her hands against her chest. "But I don't understand. It's been gone for thousands of years. It left a few centuries after the Cataclysm, and there have been no sightings since."

"Well, I guess it came back now that the treasure is maturing," Zac sighed. "Why do you call it the Collector? Does it actually collect hands?"

"That's our guess, at least. We think it somehow attaches them to itself to better withstand this dimension. That's why it's so dangerous to attack it. It really treasures its collection, and it will hunt you down if you harm the hands," Leviala said, looking almost ready to cry. "And now we're in a sector full of breaches."

"Uh, well," Zac muttered, but he didn't get any further before a sense of dread filled him. "RUN!"

The others didn't hesitate at all as Cosmic Energy surged in their bodies as they rushed down the corridor. It was just in time as well, as a tentacle suddenly rushed out of a crack in the ceiling just behind them.

"It's really the Collector," Leviala said ai. "We're doomed. We're doomed. It's either the Collector or getting bisected by Spatial Tears."

"Shut up or I'll use you as a shield," Zac growled as he kept running.

Another sense of danger filled his mind the next moment, and he stopped just in time to avoid running straight into a Spatial Tear. A piece of his robes was cut apart though, telling just

how close he had come to getting split open like a melon. The others quickly stopped in their tracks as well, barely avoiding the spatial storm that emerged from the void the next second.

Zac's nerves were taut as a bowstring, but there was no way to force himself through the storm. But waiting for the spatial storm to pass was obviously not an option either with the Collector in pursuit.

"Left!" Leviala screamed, and Zac immediately turned down another corridor, the others desperately following in tow.

The hands were too close though, and the slower Valkyrie was about to get snatched up.

"Shit!" Zac growled as he stopped in his tracks before he shot forward like a cannonball as his free chains slammed into the memory steel in the opposite direction.

A barrage of five-meter fractal edges slammed into the hands of the Collector the next second, each carrying a tremendous force. Small scars appeared on the hands, but Zac's normal F-Grade [**Chop**] could barely slow the tentacle down as it grasped for the deathly pale Valkyrie. Zac saw no option but to go in himself, and he appeared right behind his follower just as the hand was about to grasp her neck.

A tremendous shockwave caused cracks to spread across the whole corridor as [**Verun's Bite**] collided with the palm of the slightly larger hand at the end of the tentacle. A weird scar appeared on the skin as the fingers on the closest hands spasmed and bent in impossible angles, perhaps an indication of pain.

Zac wasn't much better off though, a weird sinister energy had entered his body the moment the two opposites clashed. Zac felt his vision blur for a second, but a thud from his chest woke him right up, just in time to avoid getting snatched up by a second grab. Whatever energy had entered his body just now, his [**Void Heart**] had swallowed it. If that was a good or a bad thing, only time could tell.

The all-out Axe-Infused swing had only left a flesh wound but Zac didn't care as he fled, dragged away by two of the chains

he had embedded in the wall before rushing back. The collision had fulfilled its purpose as the Valkyrie had already moved a hundred meters away, and Zac sighed in relief when he saw the Collector retracting its appendage.

Those things were only so long, so if Zac could obstruct it a second or two he would be able to keep his people safe.

“Argh!” the demon suddenly screamed from the vanguard, immediately proving Zac wrong.

The group had kept running while Zac stalled the Tentacle, and this time they didn’t have Zac’s Luck to keep them safe from the spatial tear.

A huge wound had opened up in the Demon’s side, and blood already pooled on the floor beneath him.

“Eat this,” Zac said as he threw out one of his top-quality private healing pills.

“Thank you,” the Demon said as he swallowed the pill, but Zac’s eyes widened when a flame appeared in his hands.

However, the Demon wasn’t targeting him or anyone else, but rather used a fireball spell to quickly cauterize the wound, leaving a nasty burn instead.

“I can keep going,” the demon said with a ragged breath, but Zac saw that his whole body shook.

Zac nodded, but he still took the unconscious Valkyrie the Demon had been carrying. The demon actually stretched out his hand to take her back, but he reluctantly stopped himself after looking down at his wound.

“You can carry her when the pill has restored you a bit more,” Zac said as he started running.

“Thank you... Jana is... my wife,” the demon said. “Save her first if it comes down to that.”

Zac’s brows rose, but now wasn’t the time to ask for details. The group kept running down the unknown corridor, led by Levia’s expertise and guesswork. It was clear their speed wasn’t enough to avoid detection though, as the tentacles of the Collector kept appearing through the cracks in the walls or

ceilings. It felt like they were one bad turn away from disaster at every moment.

They thankfully weren't all that far from the gate though, and Zac knew that he would only need to keep it up for another 15 minutes if they kept this pace. He could do it.

However, disaster finally struck after they had been forced down yet another unknown corridor by the emergence of another tentacle. What should have been a normal pathway had turned into a dead-end because of a collapsed wall some distance in, with a massive number of spatial anomalies making it impossible to climb across the rubble.

The Collector's tentacle was actually still around as well, like it knew that they were trapped.

"It's over," Leviala said as tears streamed down her face, her eyes slowly turning toward the spatial tears. "Better the tears..."

"I told you to stop talking like that," Zac muttered as a terrifying aura exploded out from his body, and he felt how a series of black fractals appeared across his face.

He was out of options, so he could only blast his way out. And the only card he had that could deal with this monstrosity was his Annihilation Sphere. A surge of destruction coursed through his body as the energy of Oblivion seeped out of his soul like steam on a cold day. His avatar had stopped fighting as well, and instead stretched out its two hands in front of it as a surging river of Dao was released from it.

The coffin was the same, releasing a small amount of Coffin-Dao that blended with the energy of the Splinter of Oblivion, though the amount it released was somewhat lower because of the infusion of Oblivion. The streams entered his pathways and Zac started to feel his mind blur, but he couldn't let himself go into a trance in a place like this, against an enemy like this.

He desperately held on to his sanity as he pushed his two hands forward meeting the outreached hands of the Collector head-on.

The world froze for an instant before the tip of the tentacle simply disappeared, taking dozens of hands with it. A half-meter sphere of nothingness replaced the tip, and Zac looked at it with wonder as he was thrown back. He didn't know why, but that small ball of Annihilation was infinitely beautiful, like it contained the ultimate truth of the universe.

The sphere only existed for a fraction of a second though before it disappeared, leaving a frozen and maimed tentacle behind. However, the tentacle didn't remain unmoving for long as a series of shudders spread through its hands. One implosion after another erupted next as the whole tentacle seemed to fall apart.

A single Annihilation Sphere had done more harm to the creature than all of **[Deforestation's]** swings combined, and the thing immediately lost its ability to stay in this dimension. Leviala looked at Zac with blank incomprehension, and the others in the group weren't any better. Even the Valkyries looked at Zac with a mix of awe and horror, like Zac suddenly had become even more terrifying than the eldritch horror hunting them.

"Are you okay," one of the Valkyries asked, but she didn't dare to walk over.

"I'm fine," Zac coughed as he got back to his feet with some difficulty.

It wasn't completely true though. Using the Annihilation Sphere so soon after having gone through a heated battle had put an immense strain on his mind, and he was barely holding on to his consciousness. He could also feel that the cracks that ran down his neck had worsened this time around, making Zac feel some helplessness.

The cracks had never really healed since the last time he used his Annihilation sphere. His flesh had mended, but the odd energies had stayed on like hidden tendrils lodged in his body. Not even the lava bath had managed to expel them like the rest of his impurities, and neither was his **[Void Heart]** able to gobble them up.

He had no idea what the long-term ramification was of using the bronze flash over and over, and he could only pray that he would find some solution sooner rather than later. Because it wasn't like he could stop using the remnants even if he wanted to. They were his final card when everything was hopeless, when it was either do or die.

“Wh-” Leviala wheezed, seemingly struggling to form a coherent sentence.

“Looks like I had to go all-out again,” Zac wryly smiled in response as he started running back the path they came from now that the tentacle was gone.

“What kind of-” the Cartava scion stuttered, but she was interrupted as a massive earthquake rocked the whole corridor with such force that she fell out of her chair.

Zac's tried to make his mind focus up as he turned around, but he immediately realized that he wouldn't be able to do anything against what was coming, even if he was in perfect condition.

At least twenty tentacles had forced their way out of the rubble of the collapsed corridor, and they madly pushed toward them, destroying everything in their path. The Memorysteel walls were ripped apart and deformed, exposing a series of worn-down tubes and contraptions hidden inside the walls.

It looked like a tide of hands were coming for them, no longer caring about playing it safe.

No orders were needed this time around as the group ran for their lives, not caring about anything but moving as quickly as possible. But the tentacles were too quick, especially since they didn't bother taking the same winding path as Zac's group. They rather just crushed the walls in the way, forming a new path for themselves.

Zac was out of ideas. He was exhausted and out of aces. He still had [**Love's Bond**], but he didn't believe for a second that his Spirit Tool's skill would be able to block the Collector's path. It would probably just end with his Spirit Tool getting damaged and Alea's soul getting wounded even further.

But a radiant light suddenly filled the corridor as the decrepit scripts on the walls flared into life. An endless series of clanking sounds echoed from within the walls the next moment, like someone had turned on the machines inside. Dozens of red barriers sprung up next, the closest one right in front of Zac's group.

Zac and the others passed through effortlessly though, allowing them to breathe out in a collective sigh of relief. Of course, one single barrier wasn't enough for Zac to feel safe considering that the sounds of destruction from behind hadn't abated at all. The group kept running through one barrier after another, barely maintaining their footing.

"The Administrator is intervening!" Leviala suddenly cried with joy.

A huge surge of power made Zac's hair stand on end the next moment, and he quickly looked back to see what was going on. He could quickly determine there was no immediate threat, but what he saw still made him want to run for the hills.

Was this the true form of Collector?

Chapter 599: Horror

Seeing the scene behind them almost made Zac forget the primal fear the tide of hands had elicited just a few seconds ago. The whole base had simply disappeared just a hundred meters behind them, replaced by a Void that stretched into infinity. It looked like the series of red barriers had been erected to maintain atmospheric pressure to the base.

There were no stars or nebulae in the Void, yet it wasn't completely dark. A thin strand of light stretched across the horizon, like a beam of light that had squeezed through a crack. Zac had no idea what that crack was, but he figured that it perhaps was a path to a real spacetime rather than the void between dimensions.

The scene was pretty shocking, but it was nothing compared to the appearance of the Collector.

The disgusting hand-tentacles were horrifying enough, but its main body easily topped it. Zac had imagined some sort of Lovecraftian horror after seeing the tentacles, but he wasn't sure whether the real Collector was better or worse. It almost looked like an ashy-gray blob of yarn floating in space, but the more he looked the more horrific it became.

Its form was a slightly uneven sphere that spanned thousands of meters across, making it a creature far larger than anything Zac had ever encountered before. He initially thought it was covered with coarse skin or short-haired fur, but a second glance actually revealed that they were just more body-parts sewn onto its real form. However, it wasn't just hands on its main body, but everything from legs to whole torsos and heads.

Worse yet, the bodyparts moved in everything from lackluster swaying to frantic clawing. Zac even spotted a head-and-handless torso desperately clawing at its midriff with its two

stumps, probably trying to rip itself off from the Collector's body. The scene made him gape in horror, and an intrusive thought pushed away everything else.

Were the collected bodies still alive?

There weren't only humans attached to the body either, but Zac quickly spotted hundreds of werewolves as well. But that wasn't the extent of it as he could easily discern at least thirty different races in short order. It looked like the Research Base wasn't the Collector's only hunting ground, which would explain why it had disappeared for so long.

As for the tentacles, there were hundreds, most of them randomly swaying about in the void like strands that had come loose from the ball of yarn. Only a few of them actually had bodyparts covering them though, with the rest appearing to be made from something that looked like an oily liquid. In fact, there were large patches of bare parts on the main body as well, meaning that the Collector wasn't done with its horrifying undertaking.

The Collector only had one additional feature, a weird hole in the middle of its body that seemed endless, like it led into a dimension of its own. Just looking into the depths made Zac's soul shudder, immediately forcing him to look away. He had actually felt a pull on his soul, like the maw of the Collector had some sort of spiritual pull.

A clanking sound dragged Zac out of his muddled state though as a series of enormous metal rings floated out in the void. There were over a hundred of them, each covered in dense scripts and thrumming with power. Zac quickly realized that the rings were made out of Memorysteel, and it was likely this 'Administrator' who had chosen to completely transform a section of the base to defend against the Collector's attacks.

The rings were of varying sizes, with the smallest ones being just ten meters in diameter with the largest ones being at least a few hundred meters across. The rings moved themselves to form a series of uneven tubes aimed at the creature before they started spinning with increasing velocity. The rings had turned

into a blur in almost an instant, easily having reached tens of thousands of rpm.

Radiant motes of light soon appeared out of nowhere in the center of the tubes, likely somehow generated by the spinning. It was hard to tell whether the lights were made from extremely condensed energy or if they were an actual liquid, and it made Zac think of the experiments on plasma he had read about years ago.

However, this definitely wasn't something that would have been possible to create in some Earth lab, but rather some high-tiered energy that definitely exceeded anything he had seen aboard the Little Bean. Zac knew that he would instantly be turned to ash if he even got close to those things, and he kept backing away as he gazed at the accumulating lights with trepidation.

Suddenly one of the blobs of light turned into a ten-meter wide streak, hitting the Collector's main body like the discharge of a rail gun. Cascading lights illuminated the Void, and Zac felt a series of small wounds appearing on his soul from just looking at the spectacle. The Collector shuddered from the collision, but it clearly wasn't dead as dozens of tentacles shot toward the still-accumulating energy weapons.

"Run! Just being witness to a fight like this is a death sentence," Leviala screamed, blood streaming down her nose.

Zac wordlessly nodded, no longer daring to stay on to watch the result of the clash between Void Creature and the base itself. He snatched up the scouts who had all fallen unconscious as he rushed back where they came from, barely keeping himself upright after a series of shockwaves that meant that the battle had started in earnest.

The base was at least occupying the Collector's attention now, allowing Zac to only worry about the spatial tears as he ran for his life. However, that was easier said than done since the epic struggle was causing serious damage to the already weakened section. It looked like the whole place could collapse at moment's notice, with pieces of wall and ceiling falling all around them.

The spatial tears constantly poured through the cracks, and Zac was forced to jump back and forth like a monkey to avoid getting himself and his people cut into ribbons. On top of that, there was the constant threat that the Collector would return full of vengeance after having been blasted by the base's energy weapons.

Zac's heart was beating like a drum when they finally reached the inconspicuous part of the wall that led back to the forest, and he quickly took out the tablet, his shaky hands barely able to maintain a grip on it.

The gate he was conjured same way as last time, with Leviala being much too distracted to even care about how he did it. She kept a constant vigil to their back in case the tentacles returned, and she only turned back when she heard the sound of the gate sliding open. Zac didn't wait for even a second as he rushed out.

Seeing the lush forest felt like a stay of execution, and he unceremoniously fell down in a heap on the grass as he dumped his followers on the ground. He didn't know why, but it felt like the enormous wall would be able to keep the monster at bay, and the System apparently agreed as he suddenly got a prompt that he had completed the third part of his training regimen.

A wave of exhaustion hit him the second he saw the prompt, but he barely managed to keep himself from falling unconscious. His pumping adrenaline had kept him going even after unleashing the power of Oblivion, but his debts had come back to haunt him as a searing pain spread from his head down to his shoulders.

He quickly ate a series of pills, ranging from soul-mending to fasting pills to provide nutrients, and he took out both a Soul Crystal and a D-Grade Nexus Crystal to start restoring his condition. The scouts started to come to one after another as well, and they quickly sat down and focused on recuperation as well after having taken in their surroundings.

Three hours passed before Zac sighed and opened his eyes again, having barely reached a combat-ready state. New flesh

had once more covered the cracks formed from unleashing the Annihilation sphere, and his mind didn't feel like it was full of cotton any longer. However, he knew that he was spreading himself too thin at the moment, and he wasn't sure how many more training quests he had in him.

It felt like the difficulty had taken a sharp spike after the first one, but he didn't know if that was just because he was unlucky enough to run into the Collector. It was hard to tell whether the System created its quest as things progressed, or whether it had foreseen everything that would happen. If it was the former, then he could only blame his bad luck and pray that his hardships would be taken into account when he finished the quest chain.

If it was the latter, he could only once chalk it up to the System being a real asshole.

He suddenly heard some shuffling next to him, and he looked over to see Leviala getting to her feet to stretch. It looked like she finally had regained some of her strength after using her Taboo Bloodline Skill.

"I don't know whether to call you lucky or unlucky," she muttered as she glanced at Zac with a complicated look. "Getting attacked by two different Void Creatures is some misfortune, they're not *that* common. But we still managed to survive somehow, even being saved by the base itself."

"Well, I often find myself asking that as well. Luck and misfortune seem to be two sides of the same coin in the multiverse," Zac said with a wry smile.

"What happened there at the end, though?" Leviala asked with a frown. "Why did the Collector become so angry that it directly attacked the base. Did you do something? I must have blacked out for a second."

"I just damaged one of its tentacles a bit again," Zac shrugged. "Perhaps it got angry because it happened for a second time."

"Hmm," Leviala said, suspicion written all over her face.

Actually, Zac wasn't surprised at her reaction. He had learned something peculiar from talking with Thea some time ago. She

was actually unable to remember exactly what Zac did when he killed Harbinger back during the Zhix war. She only remembered him stretching out his arms, then seeing the Zhix lying destroyed on the ground. Everything in between was just a blank.

It turned out that his Annihilation Sphere actually messed with the minds of others, somehow deleting or destroying the memories of witnessing it. He didn't know if it was because of the System's meddling, or rather if it was because normal people couldn't withstand that kind of high-tiered concept.

Zac was actually leaning toward the latter as the oddity reminded him of him seeing the Chaos Pattern during his battle with the dragon. He could still somewhat remember a sense of complete understanding of the universe for an instant, just like how he had felt when seeing his Annihilation Sphere just now.

But any actual understanding had gradually disappeared, and he couldn't remember a single feature of the Chaos Pattern by the time he left the Tower of Eternity. This weird phenomenon was partly why he dared to use the Annihilation Sphere in front of others. He even believed that the only thing awaiting Leviala if she used her Bloodline Skill to see what happened would be a shocking backlash, especially considering the Collector was involved as well.

"Well, now what?" Leviala asked, making Zac freeze in fear.

But it looked like the System was giving him a breather this time around, with no new prompt appearing.

"None of us are in great shape," Zac eventually said as he took out the backpacks of the werewolves. "Let's rest a bit longer before we get going."

He had only managed to snatch one Cosmos Sack and two backpacks back at the Relay Station, but all three belonged to squad leaders, meaning they should hold the best stuff. Now was as good a time as any to see if there actually were any returns from almost getting killed a dozen times over.

However, Zac's face scrunched up when he noticed the sacks were mostly full of food and first-aid items, along with some gadgets that mostly looked like more of the same as what he had looted off of Hevastes. He noted with interest that there was not a single pill or Nexus Crystal among their possessions, and it was the same with Hevastes' bag.

Instead, there were a few vials of a milky liquid that had healing properties according to Leviala, but the effect was a lot worse compared to his healing pills. That wasn't to say that his mother's family was unable to create proper remedies. The problem was rather that these vials essentially contained run-off of the real thing, siphoned off the base by the natives.

Seeing there was not much of interest he turned his attention to the gadgets. There were two charges similar to the one he looted from Hevastes, but they both were not only smaller, but they also looked homemade. His best guess was that Hevastes' charger was looted somewhere on the base while the other two were created in its likeness to the best of the werewolves' abilities.

Still, it was an impressive feat to reverse-engineer a piece of equipment like this, and it proved that the natives weren't simply scavengers in this place.

There were also two tablets identical to the one in his possession, and Zac simply put them aside as he honed in on a tablet that looked a bit different compared to the others.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he turned to the Cartava Scion.

"A mapper," Leviala said as she leaned over, and Zac could see some desire in her good eye. "It's used to record safe paths. You can also add comments about security measures, spatial traps in it, creating detailed maps."

Zac's eyes lit up as he looked down at the smaller tablet in his hands. Wasn't this exactly what he needed right now?

Chapter 600: Mapper

Zac looked down at the rough tablet in his hands like it was a priceless treasure, and he immediately infused it with some Base Energy as he kept Leandra's token hidden in his palm. It hummed a second later as the screen lit up, making Zac feel a surge of success. No matter what the true intentions of his mother were, it was undeniable that she had provided him with a huge advantage by leaving behind the token.

It was starting to look like it was some sort of ghost key in this place, working on almost everything. Of course, the thing was clearly not infallible as the walls held no compunctions about attacking him, and neither did it remove the barriers in the corridors.

"It's unlocked!" Leviaala said with wide eyes, and it almost looked she would drag the tablet out of his hands. "How could this intelligence be unsecured?! This is top-secret information for a faction. Look, this! It's their route through the Wastelands. And these paths, they're completely new! They're taking advantage of the spatial expansion to find new routes through vents and even some pipes."

Zac let her keep talking as it helped him a lot as well. The maps Leviaala browsed through almost looked like schematics for circuitry to him, and he had a hard time understanding all of them. His sister or the scientists would probably be able to figure the thing out, but learning from a native would save a lot of time and effort.

"Look at these ones! They're circumventing so many natural blockades. A few of them even might even be able to reach the Inner Labs! Just what is the Lunar Tribe planning?" Leviaala added with grudging respect mixed with a hint of confusion. "And why are they going in that direction? All the pathways out of here seem to be at the edges of the realm. Aren't they trying to escape?"

Zac was about to ask a few questions, but he froze as the dreaded prompt had appeared once again. He threw Leviala an exasperated look even though he knew it wasn't really her fault before he focused on the blue screens that had appeared this time.

[Man Versus Nature (Training (4/10)): Reach the core of the Wasteland before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[Man Versus Machine (Training (4/9)): Enter 'Inner Lab 16' before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of one random skill and 4 levels. Choosing second option will disqualify trainee from highest reward tier.]

It turned out that Zac had been given a branching quest this time, likely based on the large number of maps in his new mapper. Zac was about to immediately discard the one that would lead him into the Wasteland, but he stopped himself. At first glance it felt like the first option was suicidal, but perhaps that wasn't the case.

As long as the Collector had been pushed back from the direct vicinity of the base, then he had everything he needed to succeed. He had the map and a lot of Base power, and the ability to discern Spatial Tears before they appeared. Meanwhile, the second quest indicated that he might come in direct conflict with the base itself, which could complicate things when trying to deal with the Dominators.

It wasn't that Zac wanted to enter a place like the Wasteland, but the note at the end gave him pause. Judging by the difficulty of the training session so far, the reward would probably be at the level of the 8th floor of the Tower of Eternity or even higher. Getting a customized top-tier reward at this stage would be huge, considering that all Zac's greatest

assets, from [**Love's Bond**] to the Creator Shipyard and the Dao Repository, came from these kinds of rewards.

This difference was further exemplified by the fact that the Man Versus Machine-quest decreased the quest chain to 9 total quests. The punishment had decreased as well, and it looked like completing 6 quests essentially was a 'passing grade', with every subsequent quest improving the reward.

Stopping at the 9th quest instead of the 10th might be a massive blow, like how huge Zac's loss would have been if he had stopped at the 7th floor instead of the 8th in the Tower of Eternity.

But Zac also had to think of the big picture. He wasn't here to gain rewards, but to complete a specific task. He wasn't sure whether passing through the Wasteland or heading to these Laboratories was the best course of action to deal with the Dominators.

"What's the inner labs?" Zac asked, turning to the Cartava descendant for guidance.

"What? Well, that's..." Leviala said, hesitation clearly written all over her face.

"I should tell you that Port Atwood controls more than half of the world outside, including almost all top-quality cultivation sites and high-value resources. If Clan Cartava wants a good domain to rebuild your clan on the outside you need to give something in return," Zac said.

Jonas and the other scout that weren't from Port Atwood looked a bit miffed at the domineering proclamation, but they held their tongues. Zac's words were a bit boastful, but they were essentially true if you counted the whole second continent as his own. There were certainly a lot of Nexus Crystal Mines and other resources strewn across the planet, but most of the really valuable deposits received an Incursion next to it, meaning they now belonged to him.

"Well, it's not really secret knowledge among the people in here," Leviala said after some hesitation. "Each faction in here has managed to take control of some laboratories or unique

technology in their area, and each of them provides something valuable. For example, Clan Cartava owns a series of unique greenhouses with various valuable fruits for Race Upgrades and even upgrading your constitution.”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard about race upgrades. Perhaps they even had some herb that worked on his undead constitution, allowing him to keep working on his Draugr Race now that he had almost run out of **[Bone-Forging Dust]**.

“The most valuable of the outer laboratories are arguably controlled by the gemlings on the opposite side of the base,” Leviala continued after some thought. “They contain something called bloodline vats. I hear that bathing in that stuff can help forcibly awaken a bloodline. The bloodlines of the gemlings are apparently notoriously hard to awaken naturally, but thanks to these vats they are able to have as many bloodline warriors as the rest of us.”

“Then what about the inner laboratories?” Zac asked curiously.

“The outer laboratories contain great things, but they were ultimately used for large-scale experiments. The materials are helpful, but not without limits or side-effects. However, the inner laboratories were made for more valuable experiments. The number of resources that can be found there is much scarcer, but their quality is conversely higher. Quite a few skirmishes have erupted for the things that can be found there over the past millennia,” Leviala sighed.

“Who controls the inner laboratories now then?” Zac asked.

“No one. Or perhaps the Administrator,” Leviala said. “The inner laboratories are normally not accessible, but every few decades a lot of the barriers in this place disappears. We believe it’s the base that shuts down some functions for routine maintenance or energy conservation. That always gave us a brief window to rush to the inner areas and loot the valuables.

“However, no one who has chosen to stay behind when the barriers reappeared has ever been found alive again. We think the Administrator kills them when it wakes up,” she continued. “But it usually gave us a month of searching for opportunities and trading or fighting with the other factions.”

“So the lunar tribe wants to snatch the good things in this base before escaping,” Zac muttered. “What can be found in the inner labs that the werewolves have targeted here?”

“I don’t know,” Leviala said. “It’s actually random. The core of the base is running as though it was never abandoned by the Builders. The Administrator prepares all kinds of experiments and scenarios, completely changing the layouts of the inner labs between gatherings. I... managed to enhance my Bloodline at an inner lab fifteen years ago.”

Zac’s eyes lit up at the piece of news. His mouth was almost frothing at the mention of bloodline vats and race upgrades, but it sounded like there were even more valuable things waiting in the inner labs. He was first a bit hesitant when the System mentioned better rewards by heading to the Wasteland, but it sounded like these labs provided a different set of opportunities instead.

Of course, he understood that the quest wasn’t a complete freebie, and he had just been given a glimpse of the Administrator’s powers just a few hours ago. Still, the second quest seemed to take him in the direction he needed to go, whereas going through the Wasteland was a gamble.

“When is the next time the base will enter maintenance mode or whatever?” Zac asked after some thought.

“Not for a few years at least, unless something changes due to the dimensional treasure,” Leviala said. “I guess that’s why the Lunar Clan has been working so hard to find an alternative route.”

Zac nodded and made his decision, causing the prompt about the Wasteland to disappear. He didn’t immediately set out though, but rather stayed and rested with the others. There was no timer for this quest, and he planned on taking his people back to the glasshouse before setting out again. Judging by the maps he would have a few days to spare even if he returned, and he wanted to use that time to recuperate and deal with any matters waiting back at the base.

The group rested for another two hours, and even Leviala could walk by herself by that point. They didn’t enter the

forest though out of fear of running into the wolf pack. However, they didn't walk along the wall either, as the walls sometimes malfunctioned according to the Leviala. They could suddenly launch an attack out of nowhere.

That's why they traveled just at the edge of the forest just like the werewolves did, taking the long route back.

"We crossed parts of the forest to save some time," Jonas Marshall ventured, clearly anxious to get back. "The werewolves burned some sort of herb with an acrid smell as we moved. I think it was a beast deterrent."

"This stuff?" Zac asked after rummaging about in one of the backpacks he had looted.

"Exactly," Jonas nodded.

"We'll still go around," Zac muttered. "I don't want to risk running into the wolf pack inside again. I'm not sure I can protect you all if these things don't work."

"Again?" Leviala asked with surprise, turning toward Zac. "You fought the lunar wolves?"

"Yeah," Zac nodded as he stowed away the herbs. "They're pretty tough, they only relented after I killed their alphas."

Leviala looked at Zac for a few seconds, her mouth forming words but no sounds coming out. She eventually just released a resigned sigh and turned away, not prying into the subject any longer. Zac smiled a bit before he turned toward the scouts. It wasn't just a random comment of his, but rather a conscious decision to tell Leviala.

He needed to build up an image of Strength in her mind, which would hopefully result in easier negotiations with the elders of the Cartava Clan down the road. Meanwhile, there were some other things Zac wanted to know.

"Do you know why the werewolves kidnapped you?" Zac asked.

"They took us because they wanted intelligence on how to get out of this place. Apparently, they had visited our biospheres multiple times before, but there were no spatial anomalies

back then. They thought we had some sort of tool or technology to open a passage,” Jonas added. “I think their plan was to steal that machine and then take it to their town. They didn’t believe us when we said that was impossible.”

Zac frowned a bit, but he didn’t comment on it. Their theory was wrong, but not overly so. Zac guessed that it was the System that cracked open the pathways during the Integration. Before the pathways had been blocked or hidden, either because of the Tsarun Clan or the Dimensional Seed wanting to protect itself.

It was a problem if the werewolves thought that he or the other leaders of his coalition carried a teleporter on their person though. That meant they might get in the way during the battle for the Dimensional Seed.

Chapter 601: Next Step

Zac estimated it would take up to a day before they would reach the glasshouse since his flying treasure wouldn't work inside Mystic Realms. This wasn't a failing of his leaf, but rather how E-Grade flying treasures were created. They generally were dependant on the energy in the ground, which was why Zac's could fly no higher than a few hundred meters into the air.

These methods rarely worked in Mystic Realms because they didn't have World Cores to rely on, and only D-Grade flying treasures who were completely powered by themselves or the user could fly freely. There were apparently specially made E-Grade flying treasures that would work in Mystic Realms as well, but that wasn't something Zac had access to right now.

Moving through an empty forest at least allowed him to learn more about the Research Base, so he walked next to Leviala most of the time exchanging information about Earth or the latest situation in the Zecia sector for intelligence on the Mystic Realm. He quickly gained a better understanding of the factions and their locations, and he found that the Cartava clan was surprisingly close to his own entrance.

However, their domiciles were on the other side of the Outer Band, making it almost impossible to travel between their bases. The natives split the base into four sectors, each formed like a ring around the core of the base. First was the Outer Rim where Zac's people appeared, and the next ring was called the Living Layer.

All the factions lived in this layer since the energy density there was better than the outer rim, while simultaneously not being actively controlled by the Administrator. These settlements sprawled out over Biospheres like those Zac had set up his base in, to Laboratories and emptied warehouses.

Next was the inner layer, where a lot of the core structures of the Research base were located, including the lab that Zac needed to reach for his quest. This layer was only accessible during the specific windows Leviala mentioned before.

Finally, there was the core. Leviala wasn't actually sure what went on there, though she might have been holding back.

She said that most natives believed the core to be the residential areas of the Builders, and perhaps where the computers housing The Administrator was located. There were also rumors of peak resources being kept there for the most precious experiments, resources that not even the Tsarun Clan had managed to get their hands on. Of course, now it was also the home of the Dimensional Seed.

The newfound knowledge made Zac a bit hesitant about whether he had done the right thing to not pass through the wasteland. In the opposite direction of the Wasteland was the True Sky Faction and the New World Government, with the government's starting position being very similar to his own.

Zac guessed that either the Dominators or the Church of Everlasting Dao should be somewhere close to the Lunar Clan, with the other faction being close to the Gemlings. Such a spread definitely didn't feel random, but rather something the System had orchestrated when integrating this Mystic Realm. Perhaps that was even the reason Leandra's Clan abandoned this place; it had been discovered by the System, and continuing to perform experiments would bring that terrifying lightning down on their heads.

He also started to get a better understanding of the Tsarun-clan's goals. They had captured Leviala's clan for their ancestor's ability to harness Time. The Tsarun Patriarch still hadn't reached the end of his lifespan from what Zac had heard, but he wasn't exactly young either. If he could extract time out of the Cartava Clan's eyes he might be able to increase his lifespan a few times over, allowing him to keep making breakthroughs.

The gemlings on the opposite sides were probably brought in for their ability to make money. They were a weird golemlike clan from Leviala's explanations, and their bloodline was

pretty odd. They were able to cut off parts of their souls and imbue it into gems they grew on their bodies, and then use those gems as cores for Spirit Tools.

This practice almost guaranteed that the Spirit Tool would have a great spirituality, which increased their value more than tenfold. The only issue was the bloodline among these gemlings was extremely weak, and they needed a lot of assistance to activate their heritage. But as long as the Tsarun Clan managed to purify their bloodlines, then they would be able to essentially farm those precious crystals and make a fortune.

The Titans were probably brought for their prowess, and cultivating warriors with that bloodline would bolster their armies. As for the Lunar Clan, he wasn't as sure, but perhaps it was because of their lunar ability. Their Leader, Cervantes, was almost immortal according to Leviala, and he could freely swap back and forth between moonlight and flesh. Not even imbuing attacks with Dao had helped bring him down during the wars over the past two thousand years, and he was generally considered the most powerful warrior in the Mystic Realm.

As for the True Sky Faction, it wasn't actually a unique race at all. The Tsarun clan had apparently captured thousands of people with various bloodlines, probably in search of something valuable. These people banded together after the Cataclysm, led by a few cultivators who all carried unique powerful bloodlines.

But the fact that the faction had so many different backgrounds had resulted in the dilution of any inherent bloodlines. On the flip-side that had resulted in them having by far the most Datamancers of the four factions, and they were usually the ones who hosted the various trade meetings when the barriers were lifted.

That was partly because they were the most populous faction though. Thanks to the large number of Datamancers they had managed to secure and take control of dozens of habitable sections in the second layer, essentially turning one side of the base into a small kingdom with a capital and multiple towns.

Even some people from the other three clans had decided to join the True Sky Factions over the years, though generally these people were outcasts of their factions for one reason or another.

The hours passed in this manner until Leviala suddenly stopped. Zac looked around in confusion, first thinking that some Lunar Wolves had appeared. However, Leviala rather walked toward the wall. The section looked the same as the sections that they had passed until now, but Zac understood that there probably was a hidden gate in this area.

“Is this the path to your clan?” Zac asked.

“One of them,” Leviala said. “I mentioned it before, but a bit further there is a proper gate, not a hidden service entrance like the ones we have used. That gate leads straight toward the inner sector, but our clan can be found within a few hours’ travel. This place is a hidden gate that we haven’t managed to unlock yet, but you seem to be able to walk unhindered in this base. I thought it was better to take an unknown route back in case more werewolves are lurking around.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Zac said as he started placing disks where Leviala indicated.

He had been struggling a bit about what to do with Leviala, but he eventually decided to send her back to allow her people to start preparations. There was a small risk that she would bring home intelligence on him that would be used to betray Port Atwood, but Zac felt that to be a slim risk. She had seen first-hand how he had dealt with the Werewolves and the Collector, and how freely his people could move through the base.

The Cartava Clan didn’t stand to gain anything by going against him, but they could benefit greatly by allying themselves with Port Atwood.

“What’s your next step?” Leviala finally asked as Zac’s preparations were nearing completion.

“I’m heading to the Inner Circle, following one of the maps I got,” Zac eventually said. “I need to find a way to the Core.”

“You would need a guide even if you have a map. The inner section presents its own challenges,” Leviala slowly said.

“What do you have in mind?” Zac asked with a small smile.

“How about we set a time and place to meet up? Perhaps at the edge of the Living Layer. The way there shouldn’t be too dangerous, but after that things might get complicated depending on what security measures we’ll encounter,” Leviala said.

Zac thought about it for a few seconds, but he eventually agreed. He was already planning on bringing Kenzie since his instincts told him he would need Jeeves’ assistance to get to the core, but bringing a native would bring a lot of knowledge to the table. They decided on a location to meet, and the time would be in two days. That would give Zac enough time to deal with everything back at the base and return.

“Be careful on your return. You never told me exactly how you got captured, but it seems a bit odd to me. Can you be sure that no one in your clan is working against you?” Zac said as he connected his tablet to the disks on the wall. “If things get out of hand you can always come to our side. We’re always happy to welcome new talent to our ranks.”

“No clan members would do something like working with the Lunar Clan at such an integral time,” Leviala muttered, though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was Zac.

“Step back,” Zac said as he turned to the scouts as he took out his axe.

“What are you-“ Leviala said with confusion, but she quickly realized what was going on.

Zac only shrugged in response before he activated the tablet. His axe might be useless in case the wall came alive, but it would work just fine in case there was an army of hostile combatants on the other side, no matter if it was Cartava clan members or werewolves. Thankfully only empty halls met his eyes as the gates slid open.

“I’ll see you in a few days then,” Leviala said. “I’ll bring a talented Datamancer to help out as well. Don’t worry, it’s my first-degree uncle and he’s our family’s chief technician.”

Zac nodded in understanding. When she talked about family in this case she wasn’t talking about the whole Cartava Clan that was comprised of almost 40 000 members. It was rather her actual family in the same sense that he would use the word. Having someone like her uncle there would no doubt help a lot, and the Datamancers seemed more akin to a crafting class than a combat-class, so Zac wasn’t worried even if he was E-Grade.

Leviala entered the next moment, her steps still a bit unsteady. However, Zac had gifted her a set of various pills, partly to help her get home in one piece, and partly as some sort of display of the good things that he could provide in return for the natives’ cooperation.

There was no point in dawdling around, and the six remaining people of the group immediately set out as the gate merged into the wall behind them.

They were almost half-way to the glass-house by this point, but only one hour passed before Zac sensed something. Zac instantly flashed in front of his group as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hands, but he relaxed when he saw Thea stepping out from behind a tree a hundred meters away. She turned into a gust the next moment, immediately appearing in front of them.

“Cousin!” Jonas shouted with excitement, but Thea only gave him a small nod of acknowledgment before she turned to Zac.

“You’ve been busy it looks like,” she said with a smile.

“Well, one thing led to another,” Zac sighed. “Are you here alone?”

“No, I went ahead of the group when one of your demonkin geomancers sensed some vibrations in the ground,” she explained. “We thought it was a wolf pack that had strayed from the center of the forest.”

“Well, let’s go back. I have made some discoveries,” Zac said.

“We still haven’t mapped out the whole area. We have found a gate, but it actually attacked us the moment we got close,” Thea said.

Zac frowned when he heard that the gate was actively attacking people. Didn’t Leviala know about it, or did she hide it?

“That’s okay. I’ve found everything we need for the next step of the plan,” Zac said.

“Just like that?” Thea asked before she looked him up and down with a wry smile. “It really seems that the demon is right about one thing. Let you run off for just one day and you’ll come back with massive gains.”

“I’d be more than happy to be the one staying behind next time,” Zac said with a shudder, thinking back to just how close it was for him to be turned into a part of a Void Creature’s bodysuit.

They started walking in the direction of the glasshouse, and Zac helped catch Thea up to speed.

“So we’re going to those labs next?” Thea asked.

“I’m thinking that’s the move,” Zac nodded. “We might find useful things there, and it’s close to the Core sector where the treasure is. If the barriers really disappear when the Dimensional Seed matures we’ll be in a good starting position.”

“We’ll need to make some preparations then,” Thea mused before she added with a low voice. “By the way, I met with your friend, Ogras. Something seems to be wrong with him. He didn’t come with us to this place, he’s holed up in your compound. He hid his face in a big robe as well.”

Zac frowned at that, and the image of shadows repairing the hole in Ogras’ chest resurged. The demon had seemed fine until now, but were there complications from his familiar fusing with him after all?

Chapter 602: Crowdfunding

Zac wasn't particularly worried if the demon's fusion somehow altered his constitution. Danger was always present on the road of cultivation, and getting fused with a shadow creature couldn't be as bad as getting stuck with two remnants in his head. But the demon's reaction was a cause for concern and something that he needed to investigate.

"I need to go back anyway to prepare a few things," Zac said after some thought. "I'll check in on him. If everything goes according to plan we'll set out from the glasshouse in a day or so."

"If you're going back you might want to speak with the Anointed as well," Thea said. "They're getting impatient, and they are already planning to force their way through the base. I tried to stop them but they don't listen to me."

Zac's eyes at the idea of thousands of war-crazy Zhix attacking the gates and the walls of the Mystic Realm. He had already seen how the base acted from small-scale infractions, and he also knew that it had far more deadly methods available after seeing how it dealt with the Collector. The Zhix might bring a calamity down on their heads if he didn't stop them.

"I'll talk with them," Zac said. "Can you help prepare this place for the arrival of a proper army?"

"What about the wolves?" Thea asked.

"Let's hope they're smart enough to stay away from the Zhix," Zac muttered. "Otherwise I think they'll be used as therapeutic punching bags."

Zac's group soon rejoined Thea's squad of vanguard scouts who all seemed extremely surprised to see the group emerge from the forest. Zac moved forward alone from there on out since there were others who could help the rescued scouts get

back. He just took one last look at the group with a sense of accomplishment before he disappeared among the trees.

He knew that he couldn't save everyone and that there would inevitably be losses. But it still felt great to actually succeed in saving his people. So it was with newfound vigor he started to cover as much distance as he could with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. The quest told him to enter the Inner Laboratory before the Dimensional Seed matured, which was around 4 days from now. He didn't want to cut it too close either, so there was no time to waste.

He arrived at the hidden glasshouse and only briefly greeted the researchers there before he set out again. Having been given some reassurance from his travels with Leviala he no longer felt the need to go slow in the stable section of the Outer Ring, and he kept a rapid pace as he flashed forward over and over with the help of his movement skill.

That way it only took him two hours before he stood in front of the gate leading into the inner section. This time there was actually a group waiting on the other side when he opened it, standing behind two nasty-looking cannons that could only come from the Ishiate Tinkerers. Even Zac felt some pressure staring into the two half-meter wide barrels that were no doubt loaded with some energy-dense concoction.

Most of the guards clearly recognized him and quickly moved to push the cannons out of the way, but one of them stepped forward with his sword at the ready.

"Eat this," the guard gruffly said as he threw over a small package, drawing shocked glances from his colleagues.

"What?" Zac asked with confusion as he looked down at the bag.

"It's policy, stupid," the guard said as the other guards slowly started to inch away from him. "Don't want any of those lizard bastards to sneak inside."

"Keep up the good work," Zac said with a small smile as he ate the minty root.

Zac looked at the other guards next as he stepped past the cannons, and left some short parting words before he disappeared.

“Learn from this guy. No one is exempt, not even me.”

A shudder in Zac’s soul reminded him of a pressing issue, but he still hurried over to Biosphere 4 instead of his own compound. It was the place where most of the Zhix stayed, including the Zhix War Council. His arrival was met with bubbling excitement as the Zhix had long associated him with war. He was immediately led to a gathering hall, and one Anointed after another hurried inside.

Zac saw the eagerness in their eyes, and he didn’t waste any time with small talk when everyone was gathered.

“I think I have an idea where the Dominators are,” Zac said as he took out a crude map of the Research base.

He quickly started adding details to the mostly blank map, such as the Living Layer, the Inner Ring, and the Core. He then added the wasteland cutting through half of the base and the four major forces, completing the map.

“We are situated close to Clan Cartava, and we’re the only natives they have encountered. To the east is the wasteland, and no one can live there for weeks, let alone months. Beyond that is the Lunar tribe, beastkin warriors who have been responsible for ambushing our people. The True Sky Faction is to the northwest of Clan Cartava, and they have been in contact with the Human Government.

“That leaves this place,” Zac continued and pointed at the spot on the opposite side of the base compared with their own.

“There is a golem-race living here. This should be the most likely location of the Dominators and their armies considering the werewolves have time to send scouting parties all the way here. If they’re not there, they are somewhere close to the Lunar Clan.”

“How do we get to this side, Warmaster?” Rhubat rumbled with a frown. “This place is confusing. It looks like a hive at first glance, but it is built following a completely different

logic and philosophy. Our instincts have been proven wrong time and time again.”

“There are two paths,” Zac said. “Either passing the wasteland and making your way through the outer rim. But I’ll tell you right now; if 100 sets out, only 5 will make it to the other side. I only reached the edge of that place when I set out to rescue our missing scouts, and I almost got killed many times over.”

“The Zhix are not afraid of death, but we cannot take such losses. We would be too weakened to complete the crusade,” another Anointed said with a shake of its head.

“The other option is to cut straight through the base,” Zac said. “But that’s currently impossible, but we might get our opportunity in four days. There will still be dangers though.”

“We are ready. What can we do now?” Rhubat said.

“You should have heard about us discovering the large forest half a day from here, right?” Zac said. “That place is our entrance to the inner sectors. From there we can take our armies past the Domestic Zone and enter the inner base.

“I think the core will be too dangerous for the general armies to enter because of the spatial rifts, but if we go along the inner band we can essentially walk a full circle around the base, visiting each faction starting with the True Sky Faction and ending with the Lunar Tribe. That way we’ll find the Dominators sooner or later.”

“What if these natives bar our path?” Rhubat rumbled.

“Nothing is more important than taking down the Dominators,” Zac said without hesitation. “I’ve already told the Cartava Clan of the threat the Dominators represent. If these natives can help us against our common enemy, then great. If they move against us, we’ll take them down.”

“So the Final Crusade starts in four days,” Rhubat said as he closed his eyes, and a dense aura of bloodthirst spread across the hall.

“Will you walk with us, Warmaster?” Vanexis asked next.

“...No, not immediately at least,” Zac said. “I think Void’s Disciple will head for the treasure in the Core, and I can’t let him snatch it. He’s already proven he’s talented with the Dao of Space. Who knows how powerful he will become if he gets his hands on that thing? I’ve seen the destruction the Dimensional Seed has wrought on this base, no one can withstand it.”

Worry flashed in Rhubhat’s eyes and he quickly nodded in agreement.

“I’m thinking that a small elite unit will head for the core sector as soon as we find a way to get inside there, and we’ll meet up on the other side of the base after the army has made its way around. I’m heading out tomorrow in hopes of finding out more,” Zac said.

“Do you need our assistance?” Rhubat asked.

“It’s impossible, I’m afraid,” Zac said. “I managed to get my hands on a map to the inner laboratories, but the path goes through pipes and air ducts. You guys are too big to squeeze inside.”

The meeting went on for a bit longer, though making any exact plans was hard when so much was in the air. But the general plan was set. A large part of the army would start the transfer to the Lunar Forest, leaving just a smaller defensive squad in charge of this outer sector. They would be in charge of stopping any attempts of the natives to force their way outside, and if need be trigger the destabilizers that Kenzie had installed.

He left after 20 minutes, heading for Biosphere 1. However, a familiar figure caught up to Zac just as he was about to leave the Zhix’s domiciles.

It was Ibtep, and they threw down an isolation array the moment they arrived next to Zac.

“I did it,” Ibtep said as soon as the Array activated. “I have gathered 8 Billion Nexus Coins. Do the offer still stand?”

“What? EIGHT BILLION?” Zac sputtered, shocked to hear that the Zhix liaison somehow had become even wealthier than

himself. “How is that possible?”

“Almost no Zhix has used that currency so far, and they hold it in no regard. Cosmic Energy might not be seen as corruption any longer, but it still isn’t something that the Zhix can embrace in a year or two. When Zhix warriors heard I had a shot at helping the Anointed they immediately donated everything they had accumulated without any further questions, and most Zhix have gathered over a million coins after fighting the unliving and the traitors,” Ibteq explained.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually produced the teleportation token along with the Clan Zethaya VIP Token.

“This token will let you meet the Alchemist. Remember, be careful. I don’t know what world this token will take you to, but there will definitely be D-Grade beings and perhaps even stronger cultivators. Keep your head down, don’t offend anyone,” Zac said, and he added something after some thought. “You can tell the Zethaya Clan that I’m sorry I couldn’t come in person, I am busy stabilizing my foundation after breaking through.”

Zac hoped that small addition would decrease the chance of Ibteq getting double-crossed. There was no such thing as benevolent forces, and the only thing that kept young elites somewhat safe was the risk of future retaliation. However, those that walked the path of the elite were even more likely than normal cultivators to get stuck in bottlenecks.

That’s was why so many factions had the guts to go after the Eveningtide Asura even after he had proven his strength in the Tower of Eternity. They figured that someone that had such a heavy foundation might not even make it to D-Grade. Their bet obviously proved to be a huge loss, but most such gambles ended up okay.

But if Zac could spread the fact that he had already evolved to E-Grade, he might plant the seeds of hesitation in the minds of those who were considering going after his secrets or Earth.

“Only the mission matter. I will go straight to the pill store and then return,” Ibteq nodded.

“One more thing,” Zac added after some thought. “See if you can find out what’s going on in the Sector, if there are any news about me or The Great Redeemer. Our planet needs to know what to expect. But your safety comes first.”

“Understood,” Ibtep said, though he was almost stamping in place out of impatience. “I have to go now before the gate closes.”

“Good luck,” Zac smiled. “We’ll deal with the things on this end.”

Ibtep scurried toward Biosphere 1 the next moment, no doubt heading straight for the tunnel leading to the outer world. Zac arrived just a few moments later, instead heading for his cordoned-off sector. The reason he needed to go back from the glasshouse was simple; he really needed a round in his Soul Strengthening Array.

Utilizing the energy of the remnants always came at a cost, and the weird cracks hidden in his body were only part of it. His soul was unsettled, and he needed to stabilize it before setting course for the Inner Sectors. After all, there was a good chance that his next outing would lead him straight from the Inner Lab to the Core, and he needed to be in peak condition for whatever waited there.

However, he only took a step inside his courtyard before he stopped, immediately sensing a familiar presence.

“Where did you run off to?” a dour voice said from a secluded corner of his courtyard. “People were starting to freak out.”

“Okay, what’s going on with you?” Zac said with a frown, ignoring the question. “Do we need to be worried?”

His question wasn’t without merit, as the demon had undergone an almost shocking transformation since they met just a few days ago.

Chapter 603: Monochrome

Leviala made her way through the pathways, her mind still in turmoil from the events of the past two days. Of course, the constant pain emanating from her right eye didn't help. She knew there would be a price to meddle with the past, but she hadn't expected it to be that great. There were accounts of her ancestor doing even greater things multiple times over without being afflicted with the same curse.

But not only had she been blinded, but she could even feel how her affinities had worsened. It felt like her future had turned bleaker, and she wasn't even sure if her actions were worth it. The abyssal eyes of Zachary Atwood in his secret form had put such pressure on her that she acted hastily, when 'being captured' by him likely wouldn't have been the worst of fates.

Seeing how he not only cared for her safety but even risked his life for his people, was all that she needed to know about his character. He might be a ruthless pragmatist, but he was definitely good at heart. But such was the problem with her ability. She had a short window of connecting her mind to the past. If she had waited any longer the backlash would have killed her, and she had needed to make a decision.

Then again, knowledge was power. Her knowing his secret might not hold any value right now, but that would definitely change if she managed to lead her clan out of this place. She could set up a series of safeguards for herself and her people, guaranteeing security in return for her silence. It was a shady course of action, but their Clan was currently like a weak candle in the wind, any small shock could be what toppled them.

Now the question was what she should do next.

Her grandfather might have some ideas on how to lessen the backlash, but that wasn't the only problem she was facing. The fact that Zachary Atwood wouldn't let them out would definitely be seen as an act of war by some, but her instincts told her that letting the Second Elder and Yvian assault Port Atwood would result in massive casualties, and most likely end in defeat.

She had seen Zachary's strength all-too-clear, and what she hadn't witnessed weighed even heavier on her mind. Try as she might, but she absolutely couldn't remember what he did against the Collector. But just the thought of trying to peer back at the events with her gaze made her break out in a cold sweat, and all her instincts told her that doing so would cause the collapse of her soul.

The thought of Yvian was also a cause of concern, making her frown as she rounded another corner. The parting words of Zac repeated over and over in her head, and she had to admit they rang true. The beastmen were crafty, but not overly so. They might have realized they could use the vents as points of ingress, but Clan Cartava had done for weeks already. The paths Hevastes took should have triggered newly installed alarms, yet they reached her private gardens without issue.

Not only that, the guard response was a lot slower than what should be expected, allowing the werewolves to leave just like they came. If it wasn't for the traps and automatic defenses her family had set up, then they would have finished the job unscathed.

So it wasn't elation that gripped her heart when she encountered a group of clansmen, but rather suspicion and fear. Because it only took one glance to see that the squad of eight all belonged to the faction of the second elder.

"Young miss!" the middle-aged man in the lead exclaimed as he took a step forward. "You made it back safe. But, your eye-!"

"Velar, how come you're here?" Leviala smiled, but she wasn't as calm as she let on.

“Looking for you, of course,” Velar sighed. “We’ve turned the whole place upside-down in search of you. Those bastards from the Lunar Clan are truly audacious to do something like this when we’re at the cusp of freedom.”

“It was actually the foreigners who saved me in the end,” Leviala said. “They-“

“You shouldn’t trust those people,” Velar said with a frown. “We have it on good authority that the foreigners are working with the Lunar Clan to pilfer this place before they escape together. We were about to force open a path to them in hopes of rescuing you, but it looks like that won’t be necessary. Come, let’s hurry back. Your fiancé will be elated to hear you are okay.”

“My what?”

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on either,” Ogras sighed as he touched his horns.

The two horns on his head hadn’t changed shape since they met last, but they no longer looked like liquid fire like the rest of the Torrid Demons. They had turned monochrome, and now rather reminded Zac of dancing shadows. His skin had lost some of its red tint as well, and the scale-like markings almost looked like they were covered in ash.

It looked like the demon was really in the process of turning into a shadow-creature.

“Can’t you stop the transformation?” Zac asked with some wariness in his eyes.

“I’m slowly losing ground to Asshole,” Ogras muttered, and Zac realized that the demon had renamed his contracted beast once more. “It attacked my mind while I learned the new skills. That’s why I’ve been holed up here for a while, to shore up my defenses and stabilize the situation so to speak.”

“It’s attacking your mind?” Zac repeated with a frown.

“Yes, but I think I have found a solution,” Ogras said. “I realized it lost some of its control after I ate race-boosting

pills. I need to evolve my race within a month. Strengthening my soul would be for the best as well, but your array doesn't seem to work on me for some reason."

"You tried out the array?" Zac said some anger. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

"How can I break something by sitting down on a mat?" Ogras spat. "It wouldn't even start up."

"Well, that's fine, then," Zac sighed. "I think it only works if you have some connection to life and death. In either case, I might have a method to help you improve quickly."

"Really?" Ogras asked, his eyes lighting up. "Or wait, are you talking about pills? I've eaten all the pills I had by now over the past few days. I've built up immunity by now."

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It should be something else. I met someone while exploring the forest."

He then briefly recounted his experiences over the past days.

"I leave for a few days and all kinds of exciting things happen. You saved the granddaughter of some Clan Elder?" Ogras muttered, and Zac's mouth curved slightly upward when he saw the signature jealousy. "You keep encountering powerful beauties at every turn, yet you keep your hands to yourself. What a waste. So, you're saying that the Clan Cartava has access to these greenhouses full of race-boosting natural treasures?"

"You're lucky we're close to the faction that has control over the race-boosting stuff," Zac nodded.

"I guess your luck is finally starting to rub off, huh?" Ogras muttered. "Well then, let's go."

"Wait," Zac said. "I got a quest to reach the Inner Labs. I'm thinking we should hit that first. If you don't find anything useful there, we can go to the Cartava Clan. I don't want to waste time with them unless absolutely necessary."

"What's in the Inner Labs?" Ogras asked hesitantly.

"Apparently the good stuff of this place, but it changes every time," Zac said.

“Okay, new plan. I come with you to mooch off your latest windfall. I’m not going to be stuck in some Technocrat Greenhouse while you’re visiting the treasure vault of this netherblasted place,” Ogras said. “I can fight off Asshole a while longer if it will line my pockets.”

“Well, at least your intentions are pure,” Zac snorted. “I need to use the array here before we set off though.”

“Fine,” Ogras sighed. “I’ll stay here for now. Need to get used to the new skills anyway.”

Zac couldn’t help but worry as he walked out of his courtyard. The demon seemed to be fighting a losing battle at the moment. If this plan to evolve his Race didn’t pan out, then Zac would have to make some difficult decisions. That shadowcreature was a pretty sinister creature from what they had gathered, making Ogras a ticking time bomb.

He was the second most powerful person of his faction, and Zac couldn’t have him running around putting people’s lives at risk if he suddenly turned into a murderous beast. The only relief was that they weren’t exactly fighting against the clock with this new issue. They had ample time to look for treasures in both the Inner Labs and at Clan Cartava. So Zac threw the issue to the back of his mind as he reached the building housing his Life-Death array.

The building was almost as large as a soccer field, with no windows to show what was going on inside. The interiors were surprisingly similar to his cultivation cave back home though, with three circular chambers. The energy density inside was obviously worse though, as the place was powered by Miasma Crystals and Divine Crystals rather than the natural energies of his Nexus Vein and the weird Array he had taken from the Undead Incursion.

Still, his temporary arrangement for his Soul Strengthening Array was probably better than the cultivation environment of almost anyone on Earth.

Zac sat down on his prayer mat, but he didn’t immediately activate the array. He rather stabilized his mind for a while as he went over the events of the past days. His first takeaway

was that the Mystic Realm was a lot more dangerous than he had anticipated. He had only considered the leaders of the respective factions and the two remaining Dominators as threats going in, but dangers were lurking around every corner.

He hadn't even encountered a single one of his targets, but he had already wasted so many of his hidden aces. **[Fate's Obduracy]** was used up on the Lunar Wolves, and his arduously accumulated energy from the Splinter of Oblivion was expended to deal with the Collector's ghastly appendage.

The latter, in particular, was a huge blow to his plans. The Bronze Flashes of before had changed since his pathways were rewritten, and he couldn't use them as freely as he did in the Tower any longer. In return, he had gained a semblance of control and a huge boost in destructive power, but he probably wouldn't have time to recharge another blast before the showdown at the core of the Mystic Realm.

The Annihilation Sphere was the ultimate card he had set aside to kill Void's Disciple in one go, where the chaotic powers of Oblivion hopefully rendered the Dominator's odd ability of resurrection unusable.

There was still a decent chunk of Creation energy that had accumulated in his body by now, but he had only used the 'pink flash' once; when tainting the energy source of Little Bean. He still had no idea what effect it would have when used on a cultivator. It might even heal his enemy for all Zac knew.

But as one door closed another door opened. He had lost some things, but he had created new opportunities. Evolving his Fragment of the Axe was a huge and unexpected boost, but it wasn't enough to give him full confidence in the upcoming battles. Because if he could improve, then so could Void's Disciple. The next opportunity would hopefully appear in the Inner Lab, but until then he had other things to work on.

He walked over to the death-attuned side next and activated the Life-Death Array after making sure everything was in order. The familiar suction appeared, and his mental energy steadily started to enter the intricate circuitry that made up half the array.

Zac would normally relax or focus on other things while the array did its thing, but this time was different as Zac kept a constant vigil on his soul. This was the first time he used the array since gaining the three apparitions in the center of his mind, and he had to make sure that there wasn't a clash.

It only took a minute before Zac noticed a very important difference. The deathly energies seeping out from the coffin suddenly split off, with only a thin strand continuing toward his avatar in the middle. The rest joined his mental energy as it entered the array. Zac had no way to tell if this change was good or detrimental, but he decided to keep going for the time being.

The array was going to turn his mental-energy death-attuned before returning it in either case, so adding the energy from the Fragment of the Coffin shouldn't be a bad thing. Actually, incorporating his Daos into the array was one of the first things he had tried to increase the efficiency of the arrays, but until now it had proven impossible.

There was nothing to 'imbue' with his Dao when using the array, which had made it impossible for Zac to do anything except passively letting the array do its thing. One thing was certain though, adding his Dao to the procedure had increased the difficulty manifold, and Zac started to feel a strain as the minutes passed.

Chapter 604: Anchor

Completing a cycle was normally just time-consuming rather than exhausting, but adding his Dao had completely changed the pressure he felt. His brows furrowed in concentration, and his hands were even shaking a bit by the time the siphoning of the first cycle finished. The added difficulty was thankfully rewarded when his mental energy came surging back. The mental energy was seeped in death, far beyond what a normal cycle usually accomplished. It was almost like he had completed three of the nine cycles in one go.

That wasn't the only thing either as his avatar also received a surge of death-attuned energies that burrowed into his **[Spiritual Void]**. The amount was more than twice what Zac would naturally supply during the same duration, and Zac immediately realized the implication. He could actually use the array to charge his Hidden Node, allowing him to use the node to an even greater degree during battles.

Zac couldn't wait to see the effect of completing a whole session with his Dao so it was with great gusto he started the second cycle. However, sweat was already streaming down his face by the point he had reached the end of the cycle, and it was just barely he managed to complete the rotation without falling unconscious.

The gain was similar to the first round though, but Zac had to actively stop any more of his Dao from escaping the coffin as he started the third of the nine revolutions. There was no way he would be able to complete a third Dao-Empowered rotation, and he needed to finish all nine cycles to gain any benefit from the session.

He tried to understand what caused the additional strain to alleviate it, but he couldn't discern anything. Zac could just chalk it up to there being some mental strain from using 'attuned' mental energy compared to just empty energy like

normal. The next cycles were very much the same as normal, allowing Zac to revert to his autopilot cultivation while focusing on other things.

The most important point was fixing his pathways after bursting open the node before setting out toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

He had continuously worked on the pathways both while traveling and harvesting plants, but also during every break while waiting for his wounds to heal. But the fight against the werewolf, the collector, and the subsequent escape had caused his patchwork repairs to worsen a bit, and he couldn't keep it like that if he wanted to go all out in the future.

Zac's progress was slow as he mended his pathways, especially after having exhausted his mind more than usual when infusing the array with his Dao. The exhaustion resulted in mistake after mistake, forcing him to redraw the same fractals over and over before it was correct. **[Primal Polyglot]** did help a bit though, giving him an instinctual sense of how fractals should look to work.

But a sudden spark of inspiration made him think of another skill that he hadn't found a reason to use just yet, one of the E-Grade Ancillary skills he had learned in the Dao Repository. It was called **[Spiritual Anchor]**, and it could tentatively be considered a defensive skill.

However, the skill didn't actually protect against attacks, but it rather allowed you to create an anchor-point for yourself. The anchor was pretty much a back-up point that made an image of your body, your soul, your skill fractals, and pathways. The main use of the skill was to discover if you had been marked, possessed, or otherwise tampered with in some unknown way.

For example, the brands that his lava bath exposed had most likely been hidden as nondescript fractals attached somewhere on his body, and it was hard to spot something like that among the millions of fractals that constituted his pathways. With **[Spiritual Anchor]** he could create an anchor point every time before going off-world in the future, making sure he wasn't inadvertently bringing trouble back home to Earth.

Zac had unhesitantly learned the skill when he saw its use, eager to gain some protection after having seen six different marks getting expelled from his body just minutes earlier. Of course, he had proceeded to make his first anchor-point the moment his body was back in good condition, creating a baseline before he properly set out into the Mystic Realm.

The skill had a weakness though; if Zac already carried hidden threats when making the anchor-point, then he would pretty much never notice it since it would be part of the stored image in his mind. Still, it was an extremely valuable tool for someone like Zac who didn't have elders who could scan him with their superior mental acuity.

The current situation with his broken pathways made him think of another use for the skill though; it was a proper reference-map for his whole pathway system. His pathways were branded in his mind already, which was what allowed him to redraw them after breaking open a node, but **[Spiritual Anchor]** would perhaps make things even easier for him.

Zac quickly activated the skill, and his eyes lit up when he saw the result. It worked just as he hoped, with the anchor superimposing itself over his pathways, including the broken parts. His progress suddenly sped up significantly as he started redrawing the pathways, and the number of mistakes lessened drastically as well.

Using his new skill significantly decreased the difficulty of his work. It was like he was tracing a series of lines rather than drawing something from memory. He wasn't improving his understanding of fractals when doing things this way, but this wasn't the time to worry about that; he had bigger fish to fry.

The following hours passed without anything else surprising taking place, with one cycle after another being completed as Zac made rapid progress on his pathways. Zac stopped working on the pathways during the ninth cycle though, instead turning his sight to his mind to see the end-result of the first half of his improved Soul Cultivation-method.

There were no two ways about it; the result was far superior. The deathly energies in his mind were extremely dense, and if

he quantified it the result was somewhere between 40 to 50% greater compared to before, all thanks to the first two rotations being infused with the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac's mind was still throbbing even hours later though, but he could only bear with it, knowing he had to do the same thing on his life-attuned side. He would have to empower two revolutions again to bring his soul back to equilibrium after all. So he quickly swapped over to his Draugr side and started the process once more, preparing himself to push through the first two revolutions by hook or crook.

He could quickly confirm that the shimmering golden energies from the bodhi tree joined the mental stream, but the enormous strain he had anticipated never arrived. Certainly, the difficulty was much harder than normal, but it wasn't any worse compared to the first cycle on the Death-attuned side.

Was this a limitation of his Dao-Apparitions, perhaps? Each apparition was limited in the amount of energy it could exude, causing the strain to steadily increase as the drain continued. However, swapping to a different Dao would reset the difficulty since the other Apparition was still full of vigor.

This was great news to Zac since it meant that he would be able to go all out with both the arrays in the future without worrying that he would overextend himself during the first half. A great surge returned half an hour later, causing a series of frantic collisions as life fought with death in his mind.

Zac felt his vision double for a second from the shocks to his soul, but he breathed out in relief after confirming that the increased intensity was still manageable. The second cycle started up a few seconds later, and Zac let the shimmering golden haze join in that time as well. An even greater series of clashes followed when the cycle ended, causing small cracks to spread across his soul.

Blood started running down Zac's nose as his eyes were completely bloodshot, but he ate a soul-mending pill as he kept going, this time stopping any more Dao from entering. He was only able to resume work on his pathways on the fifth revolution because of nausea from the collisions.

The session finally ended after roughly ten hours, confirming that Dao infusion improved the gains of the array, but not how quickly it ran. Still, the results were impressive, especially considering he had only infused two out of the nine revolutions. He felt that a lot more impurities had been expelled from the Life-Death explosions in his mind than normal, almost exactly matching the additional attunement he had measured.

That meant the efficiency of his Soul Strengthening-array had increased almost 40% simply from forming his Dao-Apparitions.

Better yet, Zac was almost certain this wasn't the limits of his gains. For example; what if his Dao Fragments evolved to the next stage? The power of the Dao that entered the Array would become greater, which in turn should result in a bigger boost. And his soul would keep getting stronger over time, which would hopefully increase the number of revolutions that he could empower.

As long as he kept working on it the improvements would be huge, potentially saving him centuries of cultivation down the road. After all, Soul Cultivation was powerful for a variety of reasons, but people still didn't do it because of the huge time investment. But it felt like Zac had found the key to staying ahead of the remnants locked in his mind this time around.

Just like the progress on his soul was great, so was the work on his pathways thanks to **[Spiritual Anchor]**. He couldn't help but curse himself for not thinking of it sooner. To be fair, nothing like this was mentioned in the information missive on the skill, perhaps since Brazla hadn't expected his E-Grade descendants to be mortals.

His pathways were almost completely fixed thanks to the improved speed. Just a few more hours of dedicated redrawing and he would be back to normal. Part of Zac just wanted to stay in this place and swap between sleeping and cultivating, but he knew that was simply impossible.

So he went over his provisions and talismans before he stood up and walked out toward where he left the demon. Ogras was

still sitting at the same spot as before, for once in meditation rather than drinking and cajoling.

“You’re ready to set out?” Ogras asked as he opened his eyes.

“Let’s go,” Zac nodded. “We just need to fetch Kenzie.”

“What? Why?” Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

“She’s the best when it comes to Technocrat Technology. I don’t want to completely rely on that Cartava Clan Member,” Zac shrugged. “Besides, there are sometimes opportunities you can’t take away in the labs, I don’t want her to miss out. Billy and Thea are coming as well.”

Ogras grumbled a bit as he got to his feet, and he donned a hooded robe to mask his changing complexion. The two walked over to the buildings that Kenzie controlled, a mix of workshops and warehouses to store everything from gathered Memorysteel to inactive drone swarms.

“I’ll wait outside,” Ogras said, and Zac shrugged with some confusion before walking inside by himself.

“You’re back!” Kenzie exclaimed with relief before her smile turned into a scowl. “What’s the matter with you men? I had to find out you set out alone from Thea? And that you had returned in one piece, *half a day ago*, from the guards? Do none of you have communication crystals?!”

“Uh,” Zac only said, but his sister was obviously not done.

“Also! You told Thea that I couldn’t go visit that forest, and now I’m essentially on house arrest! You need to be careful with what you say.”

“Well, I guess that’s my bad?” Zac grimaced.

“Well, fine,” Kenzie muttered. “Have you seen Ogras? I can’t contact him either.”

“He’s right outside, we’re ready to set out again,” Zac said and hurriedly added when he saw her scowl deepening. “I’m here to see if you are free to go with us to the inner parts of the base. We could use your skill set.”

“You mean you need Jeeves?” Kenzie muttered, but her mood had clearly turned for the better as she started packing things.

The two updated each other of what was had happened lately while she prepared, but not much had changed on Kenzie’s side. She had tried all sorts of things to interface with the base, but the systems were highly modular according to Jeeves. Connecting to one terminal only provided access to that area and nothing else, which meant that she wouldn’t be able to assist him remotely.

Zac really didn’t want to bring his sister into the depths of the Mystic Realm, especially after seeing just how dangerous the base could be. But he also knew that he couldn’t rely on himself pressing random boxes on the Datamancer tablet either. Neither did he feel comfortable with relying too much on Leviala or her Clan.

He could only pray that the dangers of his Man Versus Technology-quest weren’t as lethal as what he had encountered thus far.

Chapter 605: Missive

Bringing Kenzie to the heart of the base filled Zac with trepidation, but she quickly proved her value as she narrated what she had done while Zac was out exploring. She had managed to get quite a few things done even with the high security of the base, mainly increasing the protection of the gates leading to their bases.

Most notably she had constructed a series of defensive lines leading all the way from the biospheres to the fortified door leading to the Outer Rim, where one press of a button would trigger the base to attack everything within hundreds of meters. It was the same sort of arrangement the Werewolf Datamancer had activated as a last resort against him, though Kenzie's method could be used remotely.

Also, she had finished boobytrapping the spatial tunnel, making sure that it would close up if anyone without Port Atwood credentials tried to enter it, making it impassable. It would remain closed even after the spatial turbulence abated until Kenzie fixed it again.

Of course, this trap would be possible to trigger remotely as well.

It was a weight off Zac's shoulders. Having all the elites of his alliance enter the depths of the Mystic Realm would expose not only their temporary bases but even Earth. This way there would be no risk of either the Cartava Clan or the Werewolves sneaking outside while Zac was busy dealing with the Dimensional Seed.

The other exits were still an issue that Zac couldn't affect, but his remote archipelago should be relatively safe even if some of the natives managed to sneak out while he was occupied.

She, or rather Jeeves, had even figured out a way to add certain modules to the base. Most notably, they had finished a

prototype communications relay that could be connected to door terminals. The whole base was under some sort of interference that limited the range of cultivator-based communication crystals, and they could barely reach from one side of the base to another.

But what Kenzie had created would allow Port Atwood's people to use their Earth-based technology to communicate throughout the base, as long as there wasn't too-large a distance between the relays that Kenzie would install. It wouldn't even be a problem to communicate with the Glass-house all the way from their base.

This functionality already existed inside the base according to Leviala, but they didn't have time to hack into that system. This seemed like a quick and easy fix that would allow them to set up a private network within the base, further increasing security. Zac also updated Kenzie about what he had encountered while exploring the base, though he downplayed just how close he got to dying.

"It's good that you managed to take our people back. But it looks like those werewolves will be a problem," Kenzie sighed.

"They're pretty damn strong," Zac nodded. "I think only a few of our people and the strongest Anointed can deal with their elite soldiers on a one-on-one. But hopefully, we'll get some help from Clan Cartava after I saved their young miss."

"Oh, that reminds me. I got something for you from Calrin," Kenzie said. "Why did you spend so much money to look up a force full of nuns? Because of Leyara Lioress? The report says she's quite a beauty."

"Oh, it's here?" Zac asked with excitement, ignoring the jab at the end.

He had completely forgotten about his most recent order with the Sky Gnome due to the recent events, but this was perfect. Anything that could help him increase his understanding of his Bloodline would be helpful as he set course for the Inner Lab.

“I read it, there’s not too much information,” Kenzie said as she handed over a crystal. “They seldom invite outsiders, and they don’t leave their monasteries very often. However, their Strength is pretty amazing. The current Void Priestess is a true powerhouse, and she singlehandedly fought off six Monarchs of similar rank two hundred thousand years ago. Since then, she has probably only grown stronger.”

Zac’s brows rose in shock when he learned about the strength of Leyara’s Master. It was no wonder Leyara could stand next to Pretty Peak and the other elite scions right at the center of the Base Town.

Defeating six people of the same rank wasn’t anything special for him, but it was a completely different story at the C-Grade. Out of trillions of people only one C-Grade warrior might appear, and who among these elites didn’t have their own slew of unique encounters and hidden aces? Everyone was a monster who punched way above their weight class by that point, as even just regular elites had long been weeded out by that point.

Zac quickly scanned the contents of the Crystal, but there was not much else apart from what he had already learned. The only significant clue was that there were rumors of some sort of connection between that reclusive force and the Limitless Empire.

Both the Void Priestess and many of her followers had often been seen trying to acquire remnants of that long-fallen empire, sometimes spending obscene amounts of money on seemingly useless relics. The information suddenly made him remember something he had almost forgotten. Back during the first action of the Base Town an Urn was sold for an extremely exaggerated price.

The buyer, wasn’t it actually Leyara? He had only caught a glimpse of her face when she entered the bidding war on top of the floating platform, but the more he thought about it the more certain he became. He simply hadn’t made the connection back when they actually met as his mind was still occupied with his conversation with Catheya.

The huge battle between the Void Priestess and the other C-Grade Monarchs that had caused waves in the whole Zecia sector 200 000 years ago was apparently over a C-Grade Mystic Realm said to contain remnants of the Limitless Empire as well.

That didn't say too much though, as there were quite a few collectors and enthusiasts when it came to the Limitless Empire. It was once the most powerful force in the multiverse, and Emperor Limitless was generally considered the most powerful being in history. Some simply found it interesting, while others hoped to strike it rich by finding a supreme treasure among the ancient rubble.

But it was also possible that the Void Monastery had some actual relation to that ancient faction? Did that have some implications to his Void Emperor Constitution? He couldn't stop his mind from wandering, and one possibility made his heart beat like a drum.

What if his mother had implanted him with the bloodline of Emperor Limitless?

"If you want to reach that Lab we should get going. We only have a bit over three days," Kenzie reminded. "It will take almost two days even if we keep a high pace based on the maps you gave me, and that's provided we don't run into any issues on the way."

"Do you think you will be able to use these tablets like the native Datamancers?" Zac asked.

"Probably, at least with the help of my clearance. Jeeves might be able to force open some things, but he isn't really built for these kinds of tasks. So if we encounter someplace where neither of our credentials works there might be trouble," Kenzie said after some thought.

"That's good enough. Better than completely relying on outsiders," Zac nodded, knowing that Jeeves was mainly a cultivation tool aimed to make Kenzie stronger. "Do you have an exact estimate of when the Dimensional Seed will mature?"

“Hard to say,” Kenzie said hesitantly. “Our estimates are based on when the spatial turbulence reaches a critical level and the portal naturally closes. But the Dimensional Seed might mature sooner or later as well. But it should be close. It’s like the treasure is gathering Spatial energies to make a final push.”

“Well, better safe than sorry. I want to reach the Lab with one day to spare. Let’s go,” Zac nodded.

The idea of him having such a vaunted bloodline felt extremely alluring, but he knew it was a long shot. He couldn’t be certain, but he didn’t believe that the man in his visions was Emperor Limitless at least. The man soaring through the cosmos on a meteor was extremely powerful, but he wasn’t anywhere near the godlike being that crushed the Heart of Oblivion or the Spark of Creation. Zac wasn’t even sure if he was at the same level as the ancient protector was the source of his Draugr’s Dao Vision.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a connection. Perhaps the Void Bloodline came from some other powerful person from the Limitless Empire. After all, the Limitless Emperor didn’t create the System alone. He had the assistance of millions of unbelievably powerful warriors, many of them probably even at the A-Grade.

Perhaps the remnants of one of these powerhouses were located in the Zecia sector, which was both the source of his Bloodline and the heritage that the Void Monastery was built upon.

No matter what the truth was, it was worth looking into. The Void Monastery was hard to visit according to the missive, but it wasn’t impossible. As a powerful faction they controlled thousands of worlds, and some of them were popular trade hubs the Monastery used to gather cultivation resources. If went there he would probably be able to contact Leyara one way or another.

Kenzie had soon prepared everything she needed, which was apparently half a workshop including a series of technocrat 3D-printers she had cobbled together. The demon was still

waiting outside, giving Kenzie a sunny smile as they exited her house.

“So you are in the mystic realm, after all? I guess your communication crystal broke,” Kenzie said coolly.

“Enough,” Zac sighed, knowing that Ogras had been lying low due to his condition. “No time to lose.”

Zac maintained a rapid pace this trip on his way out of the base, but neither his sister nor Orgas had any problems keeping up. Ogras had his shadows and Kenzie utilized some sort of wind-based movement skill to run, each step making her look like she was weightless.

They arrived at the glasshouse just a few hours later, having been only half an hour delayed by Kenzie installing her new communications modules. Kenzie opened the gate this time to confirm that their different clearance titles didn't mean different access. Zac wasn't very interested in the interiors, but Ogras curiously glanced toward the stalls.

“What is this place..?” Ogras muttered as he looked around.

“I think it's for them,” Zac said as he pointed to the caged Lunar Wolves. “Thea said it might be a field lab to study the Lunar Wolves, and I'm inclined to believe. To take a bloodline of a beast and infusing it into a cultivator. Have you heard of anything like it?”

“Anything's possible,” Ogras shrugged. “Some beasts can even gain a humanoid form at certain stages, allowing them to essentially become cultivators themselves. The humanoid descendants of such cultivators would carry their bloodline. Of course, this seems to be something else, like a shortcut.”

“We'll find out what's going on here sooner or later,” Zac said as he started walking, but he stopped when he noticed that his sister hadn't followed them inside. “What are you doing?”

He saw that Kenzie was still standing by the terminal, but she had connected the tablet to it. The screen was rapidly flashing with the language of the base, and Kenzie was seemingly trying to take it all in.

“I’m just checking this thing out,” Kenzie said without moving her eyes away from the screen. “I want to see how these main gates work, if you can change the clearance levels required to pass through. I mean, if the natives don’t have any clearance levels, then we might be able to lower the clearance to level 1 or something.”

“Don’t fiddle with that door though,” Zac quickly said. “The walls will try to kill us if you trigger the security protocols, and this one has already been triggered once.”

“Don’t worry, I’m just reading,” Kenzie smiled. “Give me a few minutes. There’s so much information to go through. This one has ten times the number of protocols compared to the normal doors.”

“Fine, I need to talk with Thea anyway. But be careful with that thing,” Zac said as he walked out through the barn door.

He had already spotted Thea standing outside, overseeing the transformation in the area. Two large walls had appeared in the short while Zac had been cultivating, with massive brass cannons mounted at regular intervals. Hundreds of Zhix warriors scurried back and forth working on the defensive perimeter, and groups of human cultivators seemed to be readying themselves for war as well.

Thick barriers rose toward the sky as well, blocking any potential attacks coming from the forest, and Zac could even spot squads of Tal-Eladar roving outside, maintaining an outer perimeter. Zac hadn’t given any explicit orders on how to deal with moving the armies forward, but it seemed like they had everything in hand.

He had been worried about leaving these people alone as they traveled toward the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm, but seeing the strength and ingenuity of the elites of Earth filled him with confidence, allowing him to solely focus on his own mission.

Chapter 606: Inner Layer

“You’re back,” Thea said as spotted Zac walking over. “You’re looking better.”

“Finally had some time to rest up a bit,” Zac smiled. “Have there been any problems with the wolves?”

“Not really, a few of them appeared in the distance, but a bunch of Anointed scared them away. I think the Zhix were actually a bit disappointed,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Zac snorted. “Are you ready to set out?”

“I’m ready, but Billy will be sitting this one out,” Thea said.

“Oh, why?” Zac asked with confusion. “Is he hurt?”

He had already asked about Emily and Joanna from Kenzie, and while neither of them was in critical condition, they weren’t ready to set out again either. Emily was still unconscious after overdrafting her Cosmic Energy, but she was being continuously fed healing pills and nurtured by healers. Not having those two available to join the army was already a big loss, and losing an elite lite Billy would definitely weaken his army.

It was a shame for Billy as well, considering where they were. If anyone could find something suitable in a place like this, it would probably be Billy, considering he was a descendant of one of the races brought here.

“No, nothing like that. He suddenly fell asleep and a lot of energy is entering his body. I think he has some sort of epiphany,” Thea said as he nodded over at a tent. “I had some people drag him over there.”

“Oh, guess he found an opportunity of his own. Well, he can catch up with the real armies later,” Zac said.

The two headed over to a command tent where the Anointed had already gathered, and they shored up their plans over the next twenty minutes. It wasn't really anything too complicated. The Zhix would set out the moment the treasure matured no matter whether Zac had come back by that point or not, heading for the inner area.

They could technically set out earlier than that, but there were simply too many barriers security checks in the way right now. They were severely lacking in understanding of this place compared to the natives, and Kenzie couldn't be everywhere putting out fires. However, a C-Grade treasure maturing had huge ramifications according to what he had learned, to the point that they could transform whole planets.

This was a risk, but also their chance. Everything pointed to the Dimensional Seed being somehow integrated with the base itself, and the terrifying outburst of power should knock out most security systems. It would both remove the advantage of the natives while simultaneously giving them free passage toward the Inner Layer.

Hopefully, Zac's group would be able to meet up with them there, but if not, then a small group of elite Anointed would enter the core while the rest would start looking for the Dominator's armies. They would be assisted by all the different factions of the Atwood Alliance, but the goal was for them to only deal with the followers of the Dominators, with Zac's group dealing with Inevitability and Void's Disciple themselves.

It was a risk for their army to travel without any real powerhouses to shore up their ranks, but both Zac and Rhubat saw no choice but to take the gamble that at least Void's Disciple wouldn't waste his time in the outer reaches, rather rushing for the treasure in the core. It was most likely the same with all factions that chose to head for the riches in the core, like the cultists and the Lunar Tribe.

That left the natives, but Zac felt that the Anointed with their War Arrays and great ferocity would be able to protect themselves. The natives should be smarter than to enter an all-

out war against their armies considering their main goal should be escaping.

But for now, the army would finish setting up this defensive perimeter before creating a final one at the main gate leading toward the inner reaches. It was the gate that the Cartava Clan wanted them to open, making Zac a bit reluctant to use it, but there were no alternatives. It was the only path leading inside that they had found except the Lunar Tribe's maps. But those backdoor pathways were simply too narrow for both an army and the hulking anointed.

The two returned to Ogras and Kenzie who had finished her readings, and just the four of them set out accompanied by a squad of a hundred elites that would set up the initial perimeter by the gate. These elites were the cream of the crop, and they had no problem keeping up with Zac's small group even when he exerted some effort.

Their breakneck pace allowed them to reach the inner gate in just six hours, and even the group of Anointed were panting a bit by that point. The larger Anointed were fine though, as were Ogras and Thea.

"This is the place," Zac said as he nodded at the gate. "We will keep going for a bit longer."

"How about you let me try modifying this door?" Kenzie interjected. "We don't actually know what will happen when the treasure wakes up. What if the door stays the same? Isn't Tier-4 clearance required to enter? Only we have that"

Zac looked up at the towering wall with hesitation for a few seconds until he eventually nodded in agreement.

"You guys stay here," Zac said to the scout. "I'll protect her if the wall goes crazy."

The two walked up to the gate, but neither tried to open it. He felt he had reached an accord with Leviala by this point, but he still didn't want to bet that there was a trap waiting on the other side. Kenzie infused a bit more Base Power into the tablet as she hooked it up to the gate itself rather than the terminal that was a few meters up in the air. Zac looked at his

sister inquisitively, wondering if she really knew what she was doing.

“The frame is directly connected to the terminal,” Kenzie shrugged. “It’s all the same to Jeeves whether he gains access to the gate or the terminal itself.”

“Is... Jeeves actually entering these things, or is it just telling you what to do?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“It’s connected to them like this tablet is connected to the wall. He doesn’t actually enter the wall or whatever. Why? What’s wrong?” Kenzie asked with a slightly distracted voice as most of her focus was reserved for the screen.

“The administrator,” Zac said. “It might be a problem if the Base AI consider Jeeves a threat. Jeeves is probably higher-quality tech, but it’s still just F-Grade. Meanwhile, I saw the Administrator fight with what I think was a C-Grade monstrosity on even footing.”

“I considered that, but these gates are completely isolated from the looks of it. Besides, Jeeves is essentially masquerading as the tablet itself, we shouldn’t be exposed even if that AI was directly looking at what we are doing,” Kenzie said.

“Fine,” Zac slowly nodded. “But you can’t do things like this in the core. The Administrator is actively controlling those parts according to Leviala. No point in risking it unless absolutely necessary.”

“Leviala?” Kenzie said with an impish smile. “First-name basis?”

“Just focus,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s already done,” Kenzie giggled as she retrieved the tablet, leaving one of her communication dongles behind. “This gate will only require Class-3 clearance to open now, while still having the same security protocols as before. Jeeves even activated a dormant anti-tampering protocol to make hacking harder. If the Cartava Clan couldn’t get through before, they definitely shouldn’t be able to now.”

“Good job,” Zac nodded. “I think you might be our biggest ace in this place.”

“It’s good that you finally understand,” Kenzie said with a wink. “Not everything can be solved with an axe.”

“Well, not everything, more than one would expect,” Zac smiled.

Zac’s group left the scouts behind after confirming no wolves were lurking nearby, heading straight for their next target; a nondescript grate almost twenty meters into the air, barely visible on the wall from the ground. It took them almost two hours to get there, even after increasing their pace. The grate was a ‘swarm pipe’ according to Leviala, a small outlet that released swarms of microscopic machines whose job was to kill any unwanted flora and pollinate the wanted species.

However, these gardener-machines had either stopped working or they had been blocked by structural damage further inside the base, as those machines hadn’t been seen for centuries. And now, with the spatial expansion, the pipe was wide enough to allow people to squeeze through, albeit barely.

“Is it really necessary to take this circuitous path?” Kenzie asked as she looked down on the mapper with some hesitation. “I’m sure we could find a path without squeezing through claustrophobic pipes and run-off grates.”

“Might as well, it should only add a few hours’ travel time compared to a more direct route. And the path doesn’t only take into account these kinds of hidden paths, but also spatial anomalies. There should be some reason as to why the werewolves chose these paths rather than the normal corridors,” Zac said. “I want to avoid any spatial tears for as long as we can. I don’t know if that thing in the Void is still angry.”

“Fine,” Kenzie shrugged.

Zac quickly took out a series of daggers with flat handles and quickly infused each of them with a smidgeon of Base Power before he threw them into the wall. As expected, the knives embedded themselves into the Memorysteel without issue, forming a set of steps all the way up to the gate.

Kenzie was about to jump up to open it, but she was stopped by Zac who went up himself with his tablet. His sister seemed to be confident in Jeeves' abilities, but he wasn't so certain. Leandra had warned him of the Mystic Realm in their short talk after he evolved, and Zac was worried that his mother's warning was based on her desire to keep Jeeves rather than her children safe.

Perhaps there were things in this place that could harm Jeeves, and doing so harm Kenzie as well. He had witnessed the power this base still possessed after all these years, and connecting Jeeves to the wrong terminal might cause the AI to overload.

However, Zac quickly realized that opening the lid to a grate was very different from opening a hidden gate with the help of Leviala. A series of weird boxes appeared, but none of them looked like the one he had pressed before. Touching the token against the tablet didn't help either, so Zac could only jump down in defeat and let his sister deal with it.

The following hours passed without any surprises as they followed the detailed map left behind by the Werewolf scouts. They quickly realized just how much larger the Living Layer was compared to the Outer Ring. They weren't able to move very quickly due to moving through uncharted pathways, but they had still walked a depth that was twice that of the Outer Ring with most of the map still remaining.

It wasn't solely due to how the base was constructed either. Part of it definitely came from the spatial expansion that only seemed to be increasing in severity on their way in. When they entered the pipe they were forced to walk hunched-over, but after a few hours the pipes were wide enough for them to walk upright without issue.

The pipe took a circuitous path on its way to the Inner Layer, and with the lack of natural lighting, it quickly became extremely claustrophobic. Ogras repeatedly muttered about blasting a hole in the wall and walking through the normal corridors, and Thea stopped reprimanding him after an hour.

“That’s enough whining,” Kenzie eventually said, the tablet in her hands illuminating her face. “We’ll be exiting this pipe soon. It seems the werewolves created an exit that leads to a warehouse. From there we will take the normal paths for a while.”

Kenzie was the whose mood hadn’t been dampened by the pitch-black and cramped tunnels, probably since she had spent most time holed up in her workshops lately. She was also constantly using the tablet in her hands, and one box after another flashed in an endless cycle. They had stopped now and then as well, allowing Kenzie to keep installing her communication modules in the walls.

They finally reached the marked spot Kenzie mentioned and found clear signs of outside interference. What had once been a small vent had been expanded into a proper grate with hinges and everything. Zac opened it up and peered inside, and found that the warehouse was even bigger than the place where the Lunar Tribe had set up their Relay Station.

The room was almost impossibly large, and their point of ingress was almost fifty meters in the air. This place was different from what they were used to for another reason as well; there were thousands of metallic boxes neatly arranged across the wall and in aisles across the room. The boxes were each almost thirty meters tall, though that likely meant they were about two meters before the spatial expansion took place.

Zac’s eyes lit up with excitement, and he jumped down after getting a go-ahead from his sister. Ogras was right on his heels, and he looked at the massive craters with greed. Thea and Kenzie quickly made their way down as well, and they all walked over to the closest box.

“Do you think it contains those big controllable robots?” Ogras asked before he looked at Kenzie askance. “*Someone* destroyed the ones we had.”

“Well, *someone* had to keep the Undead at bay while you were off having fun in the Tower of Eternity,” Kenzie shot right back.

Zac didn't mind their bickering as he looked down the aisle that was so long that it almost looked like an illusion. He didn't care if the boxes contained mechas or raw materials. As long as they contained anything of even a little bit of value on the outside, then they had just struck a motherlode.

Chapter 607: Unmarked Boxes

“I wouldn’t say the Tower of Eternity was all fun and games,” Zac muttered as his eyes turned back to the box in front of him. “Do complex machines like mechas and drones grow in this place?”

“I am not sure, but I don’t think so?” Kenzie said. “I have been keeping watch on my drones, and they are exactly the same as before. I think it’s because they have an active energy source and a steady current, and the energy is dense enough to inhibit whatever the Dimensional Seed is doing to this place.”

“So the Core Sector might actually be normal-sized?” Thea ventured. “I imagine that the Core if any place would have a lot of this Base Power running through the walls.”

“Perhaps,” Kenzie said. “But it’s also possible that the spatial energies of the Dimensional Seed would just overpower everything around it in such close proximity. I guess we’ll find out as we get closer.”

“So, can we open these things?” Ogras asked with gleaming eyes. “Or is there a reason the beastmen left them behind?”

“I- Don’t think there’s a problem?” Kenzie said, but she didn’t seem sure as she looked down at her tablet. “I can’t see anything out of the norm. It’s just a storage box with some environmental maintenance protocols. Is it really worth looting this place now though? We have time, but...”

“Treasures are meant to be taken, girl. Your brother is a walking opportunity-magnet, we need to make use of it. Knowing his luck these boxes might contain exactly what we need to deal with the insect bastards,” Ogras said as he turned to Zac. “Go ahead. Conjure something useful.”

“I’m not some magician,” Zac snorted, but he was tempted.

It felt like a waste to leave these boxes behind. Who knew what would happen in the future? The whole base might start falling apart after the Dimensional Seed was taken away considering how integrated it seemed to be with the base. Anything left behind might be lost forever. Zac had over ten empty top-quality Cosmos Sacks on him, meant to be stuffed with everything from raw materials to spaceships, and now was as good a time as any to start looting.

So Zac jumped up to press the only button on the box, a small smile spreading across his face.

“Wait stop!” Kenzie shouted with urgency, prompting Zac to immediately push away from the box without opening it, and he landed right behind the group.

“What? What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“There’s something weird going on. Everything is fine according to the readings, but I sensed some sort of energies in the air. I think-“ she muttered, but she didn’t get any further as a series of previously hidden vents suddenly appeared on the closest boxes.

A dense cloud of some unknown gas blasted out the next moment, forcing the group to scramble out of the way. They quickly realized that it was just normal steam released to depressurize the containers, but the fact they suddenly woke up without Zac touching them clearly wasn’t good news.

“Some luck. Forgot you’re a trouble magnet as well,” Ogras muttered as shadows swallowed their group, and they reappeared half across the vast storeroom a second later.

Zac could only roll his eyes in response as they rushed for the only door in the warehouse, an exit on the opposite side where they came from. A barrier had already appeared to block their escape and Zac frowned when he saw how thick it was. It looked like a beefed-up version of the ones they had encountered before, or perhaps it was simply being fed a lot more Base Power compared to the shields in the Outer Ring.

Worse yet, more and more boxes were releasing steam, and the whole room echoed with clanking sounds as they opened by the hundreds.

The ground cracked beneath Zac's feet as he shot toward the red barrier while a halo appeared behind his back. Inside it was the avatar of the axe-man's axe, and it caused Zac's aura to grow deeper as he slammed [**Verun's Bite**] into the shield.

Popping sounds echoed out across the area as the air exploded from the force generated by [**Conformation of Supremacy**]. A series of crashes quickly followed as both Ogras and Thea appeared to his left and right, each of them releasing an all-out strike at the barrier. But the shield was beyond sturdy. It didn't even shudder even though the air itself had been ripped apart, forming a series of chaotic spatial tears that were quickly swallowed by the barrier itself.

"Watch out!" Kenzie screamed, but Zac was already moving by that point as his Danger Sense had warned him of an impending attack.

Two bronze blades stabbed into the ground where he just stood a moment ago, both of them attached to thin mechanical arms that stretched over fifty meters into the haze. Zac looked toward the source, spotting a spherical object that was slowly emerging from the steam. It was about three meters across, making the massive container it came out of look almost comically oversized.

Zac's first guess was that Kenzie was right. The boxes had grown while the contents had not. That by itself felt like a huge lucky break as the force contained in that stab just now had been a bit troubling, powerful enough to leave marks on the sturdy Memorysteel floor. But Kenzie's theory was quickly proven imperfect at best as more spherical objects came rolling out of the nearby crates, each of them of a different size.

The smallest ones were just about Zac's height, with the largest ones being tower monstrosities reaching almost fifteen meters in the air. The steam quickly dissipated as well, giving the group a better look at what they were dealing with. Zac

wasn't surprised to see that they were all some sort of landbound drones that looked like enormous brass balls.

The bladed weapons from before were actually a part of the ball's surface, like hidden mantis scythes that were normally protected inside the ball itself. A dozen smaller such appendages suddenly split out from the bottom of the ball as well, creating a series of nimble appendages that allowed the closest machines to rush toward them.

"Can you control it? Or them?" Zac said as he looked across the warehouse with trepidation.

Did all these containers contain a killing machine like this?

The question quickly became apparent as more and more machines scurried out, quickly forming an army inside the warehouse. Thankfully it looked like less than a third of the boxes actually conjured a spider ball. The rest still housed similar machines, but they failed to activate for some reason or another.

There were also quite a few machines that seemed to move about like they were drunk, perhaps lacking some integral parts due to lack of service over the past millennia. Zac quickly realized what was going on. The smaller machines seemed to work flawlessly as they arranged themselves before moving toward his group. The mid-sized ones had various problems affecting their mobility, and the largest balls didn't even seem able to activate.

The Spatial Expansion had worked on these machines, but to varying degrees. The more they had expanded the worse condition they were left in. That wasn't surprising considering they no doubt contained extremely precise technology, like all kinds of chipsets that might have broken down from being forcibly expanded by the Dao of Space.

Still, the functional ones were more than enough to make Zac feel some pressure, and he was quickly beset by a flurry of scythes coming at him from every direction. Each swing contained a fierce momentum, and the blades themselves were barely damaged after Zac blocked them with **[Chop]**.

Whatever alloy they were made of was even sturdier than the Memorsteeel in the walls.

The one saving grace was that some of the machines were so massive that they blocked out their smaller brethren, making it so they only needed to face a few dozen at a time. Still, Zac knew it would take a huge effort to take them all out, so he looked over at his sister who frantically was typing away at her tablet.

“Nothing I do works!” she said with panic in her eyes. “I- I- can’t...”

“Stay calm,” Zac said as his arms turned into a blur while keeping the continuous waves of attacks at bay. “If you can’t control the robots, work on the shield instead.”

“Right!” Kenzie exclaimed as she quickly found her bearing, and she hurried to the wall and directly connected it to her tablet with a cable.

Ogras immediately threw out a series of array disks before he covered her in shadows, but it didn’t seem to work as five of the robots immediately targeted Kenzie’s position. Their attacks only made it half-way before a blue streak rippled through the air though, and the mantis-like blades fell to the ground cleanly cut off. It was Thea who had targeted the thin arms of the robots rather than the blades themselves, and Zac noticed that scars appeared out of nowhere on a lot of the battlebots.

It was likely Thea’s invisible Spirit Tool, which Zac thought she had discarded in favor of the graceful blue sword in her hands. But it looked like Thea had rather added another weapon to her repertoire, with one focusing on large-scale battle and the other one on direct confrontation.

Ogras wasn’t to be outdone either, and he melded with the shadows on the ground before he appeared in the middle among the machines, causing chaos among their ranks. It was hard to tell what was real and what was shadows as he flitted around, but every time his new spear struck a battlebot was destroyed. He was using the machines’ weaknesses against

them; the openings created in their outer shell every time they extended their weapons.

Zac wanted to join in as well, but he found himself in a passive state where he was forced to stay close to Kenzie, blocking an endless series of attacks. It even felt like the machines understood what Kenzie was trying to do, and more and more of the battlebots seemed to be targeting his sister. This wasn't like when they assaulted the Undead Incursion either; there were no Valkyries to erect a defensive War Array around his sister, and Ogras' array disks were just illusion arrays to hide her.

Part of him wanted to just drop a mountain on these machines, but he was afraid that the commotion would just cause even more trouble. The further they went into the base, the higher the risk was that they would attract attention from the Administrator. Besides, using [**Nature's Punishment**] might actually cause the whole roof to blow off again, providing the Collector with another point of ingress.

"What should we do?" Ogras shouted as he dragged out his spear from a 4-meter battlebot.

The machine tried to swing down one of its massive blades on the demon, but it suddenly shuddered before a storm of shadows emerged from every small crack in its plating. Everything inside was no doubt ripped apart from the demon's shadows.

"Keep destroying these things, but no attacks that might harm the base itself," Zac said as his eyes turned pitch-black. "I'll keep Kenzie safe as she works on the barrier."

A huge Miasmatic Bulwark emerged the next second, effortlessly blocking the barrage of strikes coming Kenzie's way. Zac positioned himself right between the machines, readying himself for a protracted defense. His body grew as he activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. He didn't believe that the skill's taunting effect would work on the machines, but his increased size gave him a better reach.

"How does it look?" Zac asked as he cut off a scythe that tried to pass around his bulwark to strike Kenzie.

“It’s working, but I need a few minutes,” Kenzy said she frantically tapped away at her tablet.

Zac only grunted in response as he kept blocking. The defensive capabilities of his undead class were far beyond what he could manage in his human form, but his Draugr class wasn’t all that effective in dealing with machines.

[Deathwish] didn’t seem able to copy the battlebots, perhaps because of the lack of spirituality. Furthermore, both **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Winds of Decay]** would probably harm his own people more than they would the robots.

Thea and Ogras were thankfully doing the work of half an army by themselves. It looked like the two were competing with each other for kills, with the Marshall Scion desperately trying to keep up with Ogras’ large-scale destruction. Unfortunately for her, Ogras had already evolved and he had gained almost ten levels since doing so. That was the equivalent of over 80 F-Grade levels in terms of attributes, and Thea simply couldn’t compete with that, try as she might.

Still, she showed amazing expertise as she moved back and forth between the machines. The smaller spider balls were extremely nimble and they could send out up to five scythes at a time. They created whole spheres of death around them, with bronze streaks filling the air. If these machines were dropped into his army they would have singlehandedly caused mass casualties before they were brought down.

But Thea somehow managed to walk right into those zones of death, quickly delivering a single strike with pinpoint precision, destroying the machine in one go. Zac himself had only turned into a glorified guardian, or more like a mobile fortress as he expanded **[Immutable Bulwark]** to its maximum proportions.

He was also being assisted by the small mountain of broken machines that created a half-circle around them, making it harder and harder for the larger machines to get close. The big ones barely worked, but their scythes were simply humongous and they carried a tremendous force that managed to stab some ways into Zac’s shield before he managed to shrug them off.

Zac wasn't really comfortable just staying on the passive, but he really had nothing to counter with at a time like this. It was one limitation of **[Love's Bond]**; it was unable to send out any chains while it was in its defensive form. That made it impossible for Zac to start destroying the battlebots with **[Blighted Cut]**, even though he was pretty certain he would be able to puncture even these sturdy things with the help of the extremely potent corrosion.

"It's done!" Kenzie finally shouted, and the shield blocking the exit disappeared a second later. "Hurry, it will activate soon again!"

Zac quickly shrunk his bulwark just enough for Thea and Ogras to slip past him, and he brought up the rear as the others fled through the door. Zac was about to deactivate his fractal shield and exit as well, but he changed his mind at the last second as his Danger Sense had suddenly woken up again. A huge explosion rocked whole the area the next moment, causing massive cracks in Zac's fractal bulwark before the force threw him out of the gate.

Ogras was last to exit before Zac, and the demon yelped in surprised as he barely managed to avoid Zac's hulking form as he hurtled through the air. Zac slammed into the wall with enough force to cause a dent in the memory steel, but he just groaned as he got back on his feet, ready for another attack.

However, he was relieved to see that the gate had closed again.

"I just blocked the barrier for a few seconds, it's active again. Those robots shouldn't be able to get out," Kenzie said. "That last blast was the closest ones self-destructing."

"Okay, that might have been my bad. No more messing with unmarked boxes," Ogras muttered with a wry smile.

Chapter 608: Divine Guidance

“We never even touched the thing. I think it sensed us standing around and activated, causing a chain reaction,” Kenzie said as she sighed. “The Werewolves must have known and simply ran straight through.”

“Well, they were thankfully not too powerful,” Zac said as he turned back to human. “But there might be more powerful machines further in if these things were just left behind here.”

“You’re full of surprises...” Thea muttered as she gave him Zac an inscrutable look.

Zac could only shrug his shoulders in response, not really in the mood to explain exactly how things worked with his undead side. She already knew some parts of it from back during the hunt though, so him using two new skills shouldn’t come as too big a shock.

“We should go in case they can sense us through the wall,” Kenzie said as she took out her mapper, seemingly trying to help her brother change the subject. “Let them calm down by themselves. We are just an hour away from where we’re supposed to meet your new friend.”

“Right, let’s go,” Zac nodded as he shot one last look at the gate before he started walking again.

“I can’t believe you set a time and location,” Ogras muttered as he stowed away his spear. “It’s like you want to be ambushed.”

Thea didn’t say anything, but she seemed to be in agreement with the demon’s sentiment.

“We could really use their expertise. Kenzie can’t be expected to find out every hidden danger in this place, and we might

walk into a real deathtrap sooner or later if we keep going like this,” Zac said. “Besides, they’re a clan with an Ocular Bloodline, how strong can they be?”

“Famous last words,” Thea muttered, but she didn’t offer any alternative course of action.

The group kept a high pace through the oversized corridors, and the map held true, keeping them out of the way of any barriers or spatial tears. They were forced to pass through a second warehouse, but they had learned their lesson already and relied on Ogras to teleport them through the enormous room with three rapid jumps.

They finally reached their destination 80 minutes later, a nondescript crossing looking like any other. Zac and Leviaala had chosen this place since Leviaala was certain that she’d be able to get here from Clan Cartava’s headquarters. However, no one was there awaiting their arrival, and neither were there any clues left behind.

“Well, the labs are further down this way, though the map becomes incomplete at the end. The werewolves either ran out of time or encountered some difficulties,” Kenzie said as she pointed down the path right ahead. “What do you want to do? Wait here or keep going?”

“We’re already a bit late, but she’s still not here,” Zac muttered as he looked around another time. “Something might have changed on their side.”

“Well, we should be able to figure it out without her,” Ogras said, clearly unwilling on giving up on a chance at the treasure. “We have the map, right? We can just go to the end, and Kenzie should be able to gather clues from there, leading us to this Inner Lab. The Cartava Clan might have become greedy, heading there before us to loot the riches.”

“Maybe we should go find those natives instead?” Thea hesitantly said. “Their base is only half a day from here, right? We can head over there and form an alliance, paving the way for our people. Then we can go to the Inner Labs after the seed has matured. Isn’t the whole plan that the defenses will be lowered then?”

“... I can’t wait that long,” Zac sighed.

“What?” Thea asked with confusion. “Is there something you haven’t told us?”

Zac hesitated for a bit before he set up an isolation array, and both Ogras and Kenzie added their own methods to obscure the area even further.

“I have a quest telling me I have to get there before the Dimensional Seed matures. It might fail if we take a detour to Clan Cartava. I didn’t find a mapper on the Werewolf squad responsible for heading there, so we don’t have any safe paths in that direction.”

“It specifically said you had to get there before the Seed Matures?” Ogras asked to confirm, a thoughtful look donning his face. “What else did it say?”

Zac deliberated for a second before he shared the quest screen, including the note at the end.

“What the hell?” Thea muttered, her eyes wide in disbelief. “What kind of quest is this? You’ve already completed 3 quests and there are 6 more? And there are punishments? Why are there punishments?”

“Just the System being an asshole again,” Zac shrugged. “The punishment was a lot worse in the beginning, but I still don’t want to risk losing one of my core skills.”

“Divine guidance... It has to be,” Ogras said with wide eyes.

“Divine guidance? What?” Kenzie said, looking at Ogras skeptically. “Isn’t it just a special quest Zac got because he’s strong?”

“All those things you described before, were they part of this quest chain?” Ogras asked.

“Yes, starting with rescuing Leviala Cartava,” Zac nodded, feeling the demon might be on to something.

After all, he only got this chain of quests after he got the **[Pathstrider]**-title, marking him a candidate for training. Divine Guidance sounded like something the demon might call a chain of training quests.

“So, the reason we managed to reach this place was that the System led you to the only native carrying a set of maps?” Ogras asked to confirm.

“I... guess?” Zac asked hesitantly, his suspicions only growing when he saw Ogras’ reaction. “You think that the System is leading me to the Core?”

“My grandfather once told me a story, a rumor he heard from his captain on the battlefield. About Lord Lucifer’s younger days,” Ogras said.

“Lucifer? The Devil?” Thea blurted.

“A C-Grade Demon Monarch,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “In either case, my grandpa saved the life of his captain during a war. That’s how grandpa gained an opportunity to reach D-Grade. His captain turned out to be a descendant of Lord Lucifer himself, out to gain experience and battle merit as an unnamed soldier of the Horde.”

“Larok, the captain, told grandpa some stories about his ancestor after they became friends, tales of bravery and such. It turns out, Lord Lucifer was accidentally sucked into a newly emerged C-Grade Mystic Realm when he was a peak E-Grade warrior, a death sentence if there ever was one. But not only did he survive, but he even emerged with one of the core treasures of that place.”

“What was it?” Kenzie asked curiously.

“Some sort of Natural Treasure that helped him form a supreme Cultivator’s Core. He used his newfound power to wage a 1000-year campaign, utterly stomping out various threats to the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde,” Ogras said. “The contribution points he accumulated from that war set him up for life, and he’s now standing tall as one of the supreme Warchiefs of the Horde.”

“What’s this got to do with us?” Thea asked with an exasperated tone.

“Patience, girl,” Ogras snorted. “Apparently, Lord Lucifer was surrounded by terrifying beasts in that Mystic Realm, but he refused to give up. So he hid beneath the ground and

cultivated, planning to form a Cultivation Core prematurely before making a mad dash to escape. But he was suddenly given a task by The Ruthless Heavens and he saw a chance at survival even without breaking through with shaky foundations. One task followed another, unknowingly leading him to the treasure, and then to a hidden exit of the realm.”

“The System guided him through a chain of quests, not only to become stronger but also to help him achieve his goals. You think the same is happening here?” Zac muttered.

“Exactly. The Ruthless Heavens put its fingers on the scales for its chosen few. We already know you are blessed with monstrous Luck, drawing the attention of The Ruthless Heavens over and over. It knows what you need, and the threats you face. If we don’t kill the Dominators, the Great Redeemer will track you down and harvest your soul. It is creating a path of survival for you, a way to beat the odds,” Ogras said.

“We can still do all that even without completing some quests though,” Thea countered.

“Can we? Can we guarantee it?” Ogras said with a sharp glance. “We believe the Dimensional Treasure to be C-Grade Treasure for it to attract the zealots and the Dominators to this extent. A treasure of that level has a spirituality, a sense of self-perseverance. It might knock out the security of this place, but it might also bolster it. What if our only way to reach the Core or the other side is to reach the Inner Lab before it’s too late? And if we stay outside, we’ll be locked out forever?”

“Divine Guidance,” Zac muttered. “And you’re not just saying all this because you want the treasures inside?”

“There are no conflicts of interest here,” Ogras smiled. “We all win if we head for the Inner Lab. This was our plan from the start. Why question it now?”

“Alright let’s just go,” Zac agreed, and the group set out again.

However, they only kept going for another hour before they encountered a bloody sight; Leviala, lying on the ground in a pool of dried blood, her face haggard and pale. Judging by the

trail of blood on the walls she had come here through an air duct, but she had stopped moving after falling down the fifty meters to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” Leviala weakly said as she looked up at Zac. “I meant to go to our meeting point, but I guess I dozed off.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Zac sighed as he threw a set of healing pills at the girl. “How do you keep ending up in a state like this?”

“Do you think I enjoy this?” Leviala said with a glare as she ate the healing pills. “You were right. Things are bad back home.”

“Bad how?” Zac said, but there was no time to hear an explanation as he suddenly sensed people to his left.

He quickly swirled as his axe appeared in his hand, and the others quickly prepared themselves as well as over fifty people had appeared out of nowhere a hundred meters away. There was no way for so many people to sneak up on a group like theirs that easily, making Zac believe they had some high-tiered cloaking technology from this base.

They were definitely humans, but their appearance gave Zac some pause. They looked a lot like the Technocrats Zac had fought when closing the incursion as they all carried various energy-weapons while having shields formed from the same red barriers as the base.

There were also hundreds of flying machines that looked a bit like Kenzie’s drones, though their design was fundamentally different. They rather looked like small airplanes, with barrels attached to the wings. They definitely were tools of war rather than scouting judging by the attachments, and even Zac felt some pressure from being the target of that many weapons.

“Technocrats?” Ogras muttered with hesitation.

“Interesting designs,” Kenzie whispered as she looked at the drones with gleaming eyes, and Zac inwardly groaned when he realized that his sister’s Drone Swarm was about to grow in size once more.

Ogras only snickered, clearly having realized what was about to happen as well. He didn't know about Jeeves, but he did know that this base was built by Zac's and Kenzie's ancestors, and their unique advantages had been put on ample display over the past weeks. Trying to use this base's weaponry against them was foolhardy at best.

"Traitors of my family," Leviala sighed, sadness written all over her face. "I'm sorry, I thought I shook them off."

Zac was a bit surprised that the soldiers of the Cartava Clan had gone in this direction, but on further thought, it was perhaps to be expected. Technology had become an integrated part of their lives over the past millennia, and their bloodlines weren't that useful for battle from what Leviala had explained.

Meanwhile, there was the Lunar Tribe with their superior constitutions and the gemlings who could create powerful weapons and armor. The Cartava Clan was at a clear disadvantage there, and it looked like they had turned to technology to bridge that gap and secure their place in the Mystic Realm.

"This is proof. Leviala Cartava has betrayed her clan, consorting with outsiders to bring doom upon our clan," a middle-aged man said. "Capture her and leave at least one of the outsiders alive. They know the composition of their armies and the means of escaping this wretched place."

"Wait! Please don't hurt them!" Leviala said, causing the man to sneer disdainfully. However, his face froze when he heard her next sentence. "They're still people from my clan. Please don't kill them!"

"Attack!" the man immediately shouted as he reached for his gun, clearly having understood that his numerical advantage was just for show.

The whole corridor lit up in red as the soldiers fired their weapons, but a storm of leaves appeared to block out the first barrage. Zac sighed and turned to his sister.

"Don't ruin my new toys," she only said, confirming Zac's suspicions.

“Men make plans and the Heavens laugh,” Ogras snickered to the side with a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. “I guess it’s war.”

Chapter 609: Conflicting Truths

The group in front of them didn't exactly cause Zac's Danger Sense to go haywire, but he still didn't want to risk his sister getting hurt. So he pushed aside any reluctance over this no-win situation as he stomped down on the ground, pushing himself forward with enough force to cause a dent in the Memorysteel on the ground.

The next moment the whole shielded frontline of the Cartava Clansmen was sent flying as Zac slammed straight into their ranks while using [**Love's Bond**] as a wallbreaker, the sturdy coffin easily deflecting the beams shooting out from the handheld energy weapons. He had intentionally not used [**Loamwalker**] for that very purpose, to draw the enemies' attention toward himself.

A few projectiles still shot toward the others as well, but they were all capable of dealing with it. Only Leviala helplessly scrambled into a side corridor after realizing her attempts at reconciliation were futile. Kenzie had instead conjured what looked like a raincloud, and the beams actually dispersed as they entered it.

"Something's wrong with the swarm!" a man in the back of the Cartava platoon suddenly shouted.

"Fix it, NOW!" the middle-aged captain roared as he rushed to block Zac along with a group of cultivators.

The man was somewhere between middle and high E-Grade judging by his aura, but Zac still wouldn't look down on the enemy even if he didn't emit the aura of an elite like Void's Disciple. He just barely avoided the restraining tool of the werewolves in his first battle with the natives, and who knew what kind of hidden means the Cartava Clan possessed?

After all, Leviala had never given him any real details of the strength and means of her clan, to the point that he didn't even know they fought like Technocrats.

However, it was clear that not everyone in the clan leaned toward the 'Dao of Technology' as over half the squad emitted the condensed auras of traditional warriors. The captain and his squad of elites were definitely part of this group as they rushed toward Zac with killing intent seeping out of their bodies.

A massive pressure enveloped Zac as he prepared to meet the incoming cultivators, and it felt like he was ensconced in quicksand. He glanced down at his body and noticed he was covered in blue fractals, their glow mirrored in the eyes of three of the cultivators. The eyes of a few more lit up next, and Zac felt the world turning upside down and bend and distort.

He was initially worried that these cultivators were throwing him into another space-time or something with the help of their bloodlines, but he quickly realized that his warped surroundings were simply illusions. A few of the members of the Cartava elite squad were apparently the same sort of cultivators as Janos, mental support mages.

Those kinds of people were a bit troublesome, but it was a lot better than time-cultivators as far as Zac was concerned, and it somewhat confirmed what Leviala had said before. Only a select few had that ability in her clan, with the rest having a lower-quality version of the bloodline.

Zac's soul was thankfully a lot more powerful than the average Strength-based cultivator's thanks to the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** and his lucky encounters.

Furthermore, while **[Mental Fortress]** was just an average mental defensive skill, it was enough to help him minimize the effect to the point that he could at least tell fake from real.

The first thing to welcome his escape from the illusions was two sets of shimmering grey eyes and the realization that some sort of stones had started to grow across his body. Two of the cultivators actually had Medusa eyes from the looks of it, their gaze slowly petrifying him.

Zac quickly understood what was going on; the Cartava Cultivators who didn't rely on Technology all seemed to have classes or at least skills that took advantage of their eyes. He guessed that most eye-related skills would have an increased effect for cultivators with an Ocular Bloodline, even if the actual usage of the Bloodline might be related to something different.

The cultivators seemed to somewhat relax after seeing Zac getting entrapped in layer after layer of restrictions, but they still maintained their gazes on him as they stopped twenty meters away. Only the captain rushed forward, wielding an exquisite sword in his hands. It wasn't a technocrat energy weapon, but Zac rather assumed it to be a Spirit Tool made from some reddish metal.

There was also a large red gem embedded in the hilt, making it possible for Zac to guess its origins; the gemlings on the other side of the base. A sharp aura that was all too similar to Zac radiated from the sword as the captain suddenly disappeared. The captain possessed a Late-Stage Seed of Sharpness. The swordsman appeared right next to Zac a moment later, the edge already ripping through the air on its way toward Zac's throat.

But the air around Zac suddenly started crackling as he unleashed his aura in full, further empowering it with his **[Spiritual Void]**. The stones on his body crumbled to dust and the blue restraining fractals shattered as Zac finally fought back in earnest. His body turned into a blur next as a coffin lid appeared to intercept the sword-strike.

A series of groans echoed out from the cultivator squad after Zac had forcibly broken their skills, and chaos erupted among the soldiers as Zac's immense aura slammed into them like a hammer. The captain's eyes widened in horror when he realized Zac had been going easy on them until now, and he quickly tried to flash away the moment he realized his execution had failed.

But there was no way Zac would allow that, and **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the captain with the full force of someone with over five thousand effective Strength. A deep thud was

followed by the sound of bones breaking. The leader of the Cartava Clan's platoon was shot through his own ranks like a projectile, slamming into the Memorysteel wall with enough force to cause the whole corridor to vibrate.

The captain was still someone well into the E-Grade though, so Zac immediately caught up to him with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and punched him in the side of his head the moment the captain ricocheted off the wall. He slammed down into the ground causing another shudder to spread out across the area, and a mute silence spread among the Clan Cartava warriors as they looked at Zac with mute incomprehension.

Getting trapped earlier wasn't Zac simply getting caught unaware. On the contrary, he could have instantly broken the blue fractals covering his body just by using his superior attributes to force it, and one attack of **[Rapturous Divide]** would have instantly killed the ocular cultivators along with half the platoon. However, he had quickly decided against that, allowing the elite squad to keep going to display more of what kind of classes and tactics they used.

He still held a small hope that things could be salvaged peacefully even after all this, which was why he didn't just cut the captain in two, but he felt there was a real risk that his own army would be embroiled in a large-scale battle with these people in a few days. Any intelligence he gathered right now could be sent back, which hopefully would save some lives.

The momentum of the Cartava Clan had completely been quashed by the combination of their drones failing them and Zac using their leader like a punching bag. A few warriors in the back reacted the quickest, immediately starting running for their lives. However, they only got a few meters before the whole area turned into a hazy gray, like a dense fog late at night.

It was Ogras who had appeared out of nowhere and flooded the whole area with his shadows. The fleeing cultivators immediately found themselves caught by an endless number of shadow tendrils, and they actually sank into the shadows like half their bodies had been sent to another dimension. The Cartava warriors reacted instantaneously as they took out

energy-knives that were able to cut straight through the shadows, and they desperately flailed about in an attempt to free themselves.

But shadows were intangible, and cutting them with a blade didn't really do much. They simply reformed and bound the warriors again. A few of the more powerful warriors did manage to free themselves one way or another, but they didn't even get a taste of freedom before they found themselves gored by a black spear hiding among the shadows.

Zac looked at the display with gleaming eyes. It felt like the Cartava warriors were shipwrecked sailors on a sea of shadows, and Ogras was a shark in the depths, striking from the darkness before immediately disappearing again. Zac felt that it was worth learning from the demon in this regard, especially for his second class. Fetters of Desolation was a class focusing on restraining and whittling down the enemy, just like Ogras was doing right now.

It wasn't too surprising that Ogras could so easily capture over a dozen people in an instant. Most of the warriors in the back of the platoon seemed to be responsible for the drones, and their 'weapons' had just been tablets and some weird helmets. Then again, the frontlines weren't doing any better even though they were manned by soldiers armed with proper energy weapons.

Thea had made her move as well, turning into a whirlwind that destroyed every piece of equipment in her path. The floor was already littered with broken components from everything from tablets to guns and even clothes. Everything that could be used as a weapon was either cut by the invisible blades or Thea herself, and any resistance resulted in streaks turning into bleeding wounds.

Less than half a minute had passed, but the Cartava squadron was already utterly crushed. The drones that had been silently hovering in the air until now suddenly started moving, forming an orderly line as they flew toward Kenzie. She simply took out a Cosmos Sack with a wide grin, and the machines flew straight into it one by one while Leviala stared at her with a flabbergasted look.

“Lay down your weapons, or we’ll start killing,” Zac roared when he saw the battle was over, and everyone immediately followed suit.

The soldiers were seated against the wall a minute later, unarmed and with a dozen of Kenzie’s own Drones keeping watch. The others had already gathered again, with Leviala hesitantly standing between Zac’s group and her clan members. She already looked a lot better compared to before, and it seemed she had overextended herself, running out of Cosmic Energy in her escape.

“Girl, how is your faction still standing?” Ogras asked with bemusement as he glanced at Leviala. “You better pledge allegiance to this guy fast, otherwise you’ll just get eradicated even if you get out of this realm alive.”

“These people are not our strongest warriors,” Leviala muttered, though she looked a bit shamefaced at the result of the battle even if her clansmen were technically her enemies in this scenario. “We have a lot of powerhouses.”

“More importantly,” Zac said as he lifted the still-unconscious middle-aged man by his neck. “What’s up with the bullshit this guy was spewing? I told you we were looking for an alliance.”

Leviala sighed as she started explaining the situation back in her clan. It turned out that the werewolves hadn’t just kidnapped Leviala, but also destroyed a few key buildings along with the corridors leading toward the Lunar Forest. The chaos had allowed the werewolves to slink away. Clan Cartava wasn’t about to give up Leviala though, and they immediately decided to set out toward the Wasteland. But just as the first groups were about to set out a damning video emerged.

It was without audio, but it clearly displayed two werewolves talking with an unknown human and two demonkin in an abandoned warehouse.

The clan had already learned of Ogras’ appearance somehow, and they quickly put two and two together. They believed Port Atwood and the Lunar Clan were working together, targeting Clan Cartava at this critical time.

“What, there’s a video of our people conversing with Werewolves?” Zac said with confusion all over his face, and he turned to Ogras.

“Impossible,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “No one would be that stupid.”

“It’s true,” Leviala said, her eyes flickering. “I saw the video myself after I returned.”

“There’s one simple explanation of how that’s possible, apart from betrayal,” Thea interjected as she took an all-too-familiar root, holding it so the captives couldn’t see it.

“Impossible, our people have been rigorously tested,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“I know, but theirs haven’t,” Thea said as she looked at the captives.

Chapter 610: Looming Threat

“What are you talking about?” Leviala asked with confusion.

“Nothing, continue. What happened next?” Zac said, not wanting to make any decisions before hearing the whole story.

Seeing the outsiders conspiring with their old enemies the Lunar Clan had, unsurprisingly, agitated the people of Clan Cartava, especially after they had extended an olive branch through the plaque. It was at moment time a man named Yvian stepped out, saying that he and Leviala were betrothed, but had kept it secret as to not distract from the more important matters at hand. He vowed to get his fiancé back, even if he had to battle both the “insidious outsiders” and the Lunar Tribe.

Apparently, Yvian was the heir of the second branch of the Clan and the second-best candidate for future Clan Leader after Leviala herself. He and his faction quickly turned the clan against Zac’s people and immediately rerouted the scouting parties to search in the direction of the Lunar Forest instead. The explosions together with the video made it look like the werewolves kidnapped Leviala before escaping toward the outer world.

As for the fake engagement, it was a way to bridge the gap between the two main branches of the clan now that Leviala was gone. With Leviala gone and the Grand elder being quite old, the Second Branch would eventually become the main branch. Of course, their plans went awry the moment Leviala was accidentally found by one of the scouting parties.

Leviala had returned to her clan with the second-branch scouts even if she had misgivings, but the news she brought back were mostly discarded. They called the news of the

Dominators and the Great Redeemer a fabrication meant to trick the clan into staying behind while their enemies got themselves to safety.

Some even insinuated that Leviala had been brainwashed by the enemies.

Even her own grandfather seemed hesitant about what she said, so Leviala eventually saw no other option but to turn to Zac for help. There was no way that she would be able to convince her Datamancer uncle to come along in a situation like this, so she set out alone. She was quickly discovered and she was forced to fight her way out of an encirclement.

The only reason she was still alive was that most of the clan members were in the dark about the coup, simply thinking that Leviala was under some sort of hypnosis or compulsion. So they were afraid to actually attack her too ruthlessly, which allowed her to 'escape'. Of course, that escape might just have been a ploy, a gambit by the second branch to find a secret pathway to the Lunar Forest.

Frowns adorned Zac and his group as they digested the new information. They didn't really care about the coup, even if Zac felt a bit bad for Leviala, but the implications were clear. Clan Cartava were gearing up for a war against Port Atwood at this very moment, both to get back at their old enemies and to seize a chance to escape.

The second branch already had wide support for the attack even before Leviala returned, and it sounded like that support had only increased when Leviala admitted that Zac wouldn't let them out before the Dimensional Seed matured.

"Please, come with me to Clan Cartava," Leviala entreated. "I couldn't convince the elders, but if you display your might, I'm sure they will understand that there is no point for you to play those games. We can avoid an unnecessary war, and set our sights on our true enemies instead."

Zac didn't immediately respond, but he rather went over his options in his mind.

“One thing at a time,” Zac eventually said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Leviala’s idea. Instead, he threw out a large bag of Springroot on the ground. “Everyone. Eat a piece of this root. Anyone who does will be allowed to return to your clan. Everyone else...”

Hesitation and skepticism were written all over the faces of the cartava soldiers, and many turned their eyes to Leviala who somewhat had taken on the role of an intermediary.

“Please. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but can you explain what’s going on? What’s the effect of this Springroot?” Leviala hesitantly asked as she looked down at the bag.

“The outside world is full of dangers,” Ogras said loudly enough so that all the captives could hear. “One of those dangers is a race of shapeshifters, cultivators who can make themselves look like any race, masquerading as either a friend or a foe. Those you saw in the videos were not our people. We are already at war with the Lunar Tribe, even having killed off all those scouting units who caused trouble for you.”

Ogras gave Zac a look next, but Zac blankly looked back, not sure what the demon wanted him to do.

“Throw out some of the bodies,” Ogras voice whispered in his ear, projected by a small shadow.

Zac understood what the demon was looking for, and he threw out a handful of the werewolf corpses he had collected during his fights.

“That’s Hevastes!” one of the ocular cultivators exclaimed, drawing a round of murmurs.

“These shapeshifters have caused a lot of trouble on the outside, and we know they entered this realm long before we did,” Ogras said as he glanced at Leviala.” These roots are our weapon against them. For most people, including you humans, they are harmless. A tasty snack. For those damn shapeshifters, they are deadly poison.”

Zac bent down and ate a root to prove Ogras’ words before he turned to the soldiers. Leviala soon followed suit, though a sheen of nervous perspiration covered her face. She was

obviously not taking Ogras' words at face value, but rather stepping forward for her clan members.

"Now, your turn. Come forward, one at a time," Zac said after confirming that Leviala wasn't a shapeshifter.

The soldiers looked at each other hesitantly, until one of the stronger warriors grit his teeth and stepped forward. However, just as he was about to pick a root up, another one stood up with a fierce look.

"This is a trap!" he shouted. "We saw the young miss returning with all kinds of delusions. Fighting the Collector? The Base actively protecting them? I bet the source are these poisonous roots!"

"Force-feed him," Zac said without hesitation, and a storm of shadows immediately trapped the raging man.

He didn't even have a chance to take his life before Ogras appeared right in front of him, cramming a handful of roots down his throat. He struggled for a few seconds before the life left his eyes. His body started to transform a second later, turning into the all-too-familiar lizard-like humanoids. The soldiers around him scrambled out of the way, looking at the transformation with horror.

"Vatos!" one of the soldiers exclaimed with horror.

"Sorry, Vatos is long dead, most likely. Replaced by the shapeshifters. Now eat or you can all join Vatos in the netherworld," Ogras snorted as his and Zac's killing intent drenched the squad.

Soon enough everyone had eaten a piece of Springroot, even the unconscious soldiers had some stuffed down their throat. There weren't any more shapeshifters though, which was a relief to Zac. It hopefully meant that Clan Cartava wasn't too infiltrated already. But it also meant that their gearing for war was an idea mostly of their own making, as Zac doubted the cultists were strong enough to take out all the elders without causing a ruckus.

"Who are these aliens?" a soldier muttered as he looked down at the lizardman corpse.

“Members of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They’re an extremely powerful faction, their presence in the Zecia sector is just a small branch. They are religious fanatics, purging planets of all life to appease the Heavens. Their goal was to do that to my home planet, but their goal changed when they learned about the Dimensional Treasure in this place,” Zac explained.

“We’ve really been infiltrated,” Leviala sighed. “You were right.”

“I’m afraid so,” Zac nodded. “You people have nothing to gain from fighting our faction, but our enemy is fanning the flames. After all, I have already agreed to letting your clan out as soon as we’ve dealt with the threats to our world. The only thing that would happen if you attack us is our guards closing the spatial tunnel permanently, locking us both inside.”

“But how haven’t we noticed anything?” Leviala muttered.

“We’re clansmen, we know each other. How can someone just blend in without arousing suspicion? And we haven’t seen any other outsiders apart from you. Our neighbors are dealing with Humans as well.”

“The werewolves,” Ogras said without hesitation. “They must be infiltrated. Shapeshifters came with the scouting parties, some stayed behind to infiltrate you as well.”

Zac felt a headache coming on as he tried to figure out what to do. There were thousands of elite Zhix rearing for war just outside the gate leading to Clan Cartava, and disaster was just around the corner if the Church of Everlasting Dao was manipulating things behind the scene. This battle had almost been a joke, but the Zhix wouldn’t have his strength nor Kenzie’s ability to disable their strongest offensive tools, the Technocrat weaponry.

There was a decent chance both sides would suffer massive casualties, and the only winners would be the Dominators and the cultists.

“I’ve already sent a warning back to our people,” Kenzie said, clearly understanding what was going through Zac’s head.

“What do you want to do?” Ogras asked.

Zac’s eyes flickered between Leviala and the soldiers, who all shied away from his gaze.

“You’ve proved that your words are true,” Leviala added from the side. “Let’s go back to the clan and bring the body. We have fifty clan members to testify the veracity of your claims, all of them of the Second Elder’s faction. So if we both have our factions take a step back, then we’ll-”

“Our people came to this place for an important mission,” Zac interjected. “Besides, you clearly don’t have the ability to make your clan take a step back. A few infiltrators shouldn’t be able to completely turn your clan against us in just a few days. There should already have been some plans on dealing with us, with the cultists simply silencing dissent and urging on the warmongers.”

“That’s-“ Leviala muttered, looking down with shame. “Still, if we go back...”

“How much time left?” Zac asked, turning to Kenzie.

“A bit over two days?” Kenzie said after some thought. “We should reach the Inner Lab in around five hours. We can’t return the same way we came from, but we should be able to make it back to our people well over a day before the treasure matures. It depends on how long the Cartava Clan is willing to wait if they’re aiming to break out.”

Zac understood what Kenzie meant. Zac’s plans were based on waiting for the seed to mature, but the Cartava Clan was the opposite. They needed to escape before the time was up, and it took around between eight and twelve hours to get from the gate in the Lunar Forest to the Spatial Tunnel for an F-Grade warrior who knew the path.

Add to that civilians and some extra time for safe measure, and Clan Cartava would probably not want to wait until the last minute if they really decided to attack. They might already be ready for battle as they were standing there. Kenzie’s defensive measures at the gate could probably buy them some

time, but there was no way that a native clan didn't have some last-ditch methods to force their way through the base.

The only consolation was that large-scale destruction seemed to attract the active attention of the defensive AI, and the Cartava Clan probably didn't want to use those last-ditch methods unless everything else had failed already.

"The inner Lab? Are you still talking about that?" Leviala exclaimed incredulously as she stared at Kenzie. "Our people are about to be tricked into a war, who knows how many casualties that would result in? Let me be clear. This fight was lopsided, but our armies aren't any pushovers, especially not inside this Mystic Realm. We need to turn back right now."

However, no one in Zac's group cared about Leviala's opinions, all instead turning toward Zac. He turned toward the subdued captain who had already woken up by now with the help of a few zaps from Kenzie's drones. His eyes were a bit glazed over after Zac's punch, but he seemed to have been able to follow what was going on.

"You can all return to your clan. Take that body and these roots with you, it's the proof of what I've said is true. But tell your elders this; We didn't come to this godforsaken place for fun. We came here to save our planet, and we are willing to lay our lives on the line to do so. Force our hands, and we will walk over the ruins of your clan to get the job done," Zac said, his killing intent almost dense enough to become corporeal. "I know the allure of the outside world is strong, but don't lose it all by acting hastily. I'm coming back to get our people soon enough."

The soldiers looked extremely unwilling, but no one offered any rebuttal, instead looking down with their fists clenched. Zac could only pray that his threat would cause make the elders hesitate about their plans, slowing any plans to break out. He couldn't turn back now. His instincts told him to push forward, and Ogras' words of warning about Divine Guidance were the last push he needed to make his decision.

"We'll keep going," Zac said as he turned to his group.

"What... What about me?" Leviala hesitantly asked.

“You’re coming with us,” Zac said as he formed the same chair made out of chains as before. “I know that you’re not happy with how things turned out. But the quicker you help us get where we need to go, the quicker we’ll be able to return and prevent any bloodshed.”

“Fine,” Leviala sighed as she dragged herself onto the chair, the links quickly turning red from a few wounds reopening.

“Let’s hurry,” Zac said as he left the soldiers where they were, the other three silently following in tow. “We’ll speed up. I’ll deal with any spatial tears.”

“Spatial Tears are the least of our worries where we’re going. If it was just that we’d long have looted the Inner Layer. There are alarms, sentries, mechanized guards, traps, and who knows what else,” Leviala warned.

“Good thing we brought you then, girl,” Ogras grinned.

“The last stretch is through a long stretch of tubing according to the maps. Surely the base wouldn’t have any alarms there,” Kenzie added.

“You... How did you do that before? You simply took all our drones like they were yours,” Leviala asked with a slightly fearful look.

“Well, they *are* mine now,” Kenzie smiled, ignoring the question. “Spoils of war and all that.”

Chapter 611: Lab 16

The group immediately set out, keeping a rapid pace on their way toward Inner Lab 16. They were making good time thanks to the complementary competencies of Kenzie and Laviala, but Zac was still filled with anxiety. The only thing giving him some peace of mind was Kenzie's ability to almost freely contact their forces back at the forest, allowing him to stay up to date on the situation.

The army had finished preparations for the outermost layer of defense around the base, but they doubled down on their preparations after hearing about a possible attack. They also increased the number of scouts keeping watch in all sectors under their control in case the Cartava Clan appeared somewhere other than through the gate.

An evacuation was already underway as well, with almost all non-essential personnel already having been transferred out of the Mystic Realm. Only some non-combat cultivators would stay inside the Research Base after the Dimensional Seed matured, with a skeleton crew to maintain the base while the rest set out to assist the Zhix on their crusade.

Eventually, Zac didn't have time to worry about his people though, as just passing through the corridors on the way to the Inner Layer demanded all his attention. Just as Laviala had warned, the increasingly common Spatial tears was just one of the problems facing them.

"Wait," Kenzie suddenly said, and the group hid against a wall as they activated a series of cloaking methods.

No one still dared as much as breathe loudly as they waited steeped in silence. Half a minute later clattering sounds echoed out through the corridors as a patrol unit consisting of two spider balls and six drones moved past them. This was the

sixth squad they had to hide from in just 20 minutes, a stark contrast to the abandoned outer reaches.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to simply force his way through, and the small squads weren't a threat to his group. But getting discovered or destroying the sentries resulted in a lockdown, which would cause way more of a headache than it was worth.

"Okay, we're good," Kenzie eventually nodded and the group set out again.

"Just how are you discovering these sentries?" Leviala asked with a frown. "We have tried for centuries to discover their signals."

"I told you, we got our hands on some Technocrat technology on the outside. We didn't enter this place blindly," Zac snorted from ahead, getting a bit annoyed at Leviala's attempts to delve into his sister's secrets.

Of course, he knew that his go-to excuse was pretty weak, but Kenzie was forced to display her abilities if they wanted to get back in time. Thea was clearly also curious about what was going on, but she had never asked about it over the past weeks even after Kenzie displayed an uncharacteristic level of competence for a 20-year old without a science background.

They finally reached the spot the Werewolves had marked after slowly and methodically making progress through the minefield of guards and traps. They were getting close to the Inner Layer now, and the Spatial Expansion was getting more and more pronounced. Zac guessed the surroundings had increased around 25 times in size, making him feel like a citizen of Lilliput.

This massive transformation was what provided Zac's group with a new route. The section they had just reached was designed remarkably different compared to the much simpler corridors in the Outer Ring. The walls were still made from Memorysteel, but the design was of a lot higher quality and there were a lot of windows to the rooms inside.

Leviala explained that this section had once been the place of residence of the middle-tier workers of the base. The corridor

itself reminded Zac of the living quarters of Little Bean, as it was roughly twice as wide compared to the outer hallways, and filled with lounge areas and what looked like zen gardens. There were a lot more doors as well, each of them leading to an apartment ranging from 50 to hundreds of square meters in size.

Clan Cartava had long looted these quarters of everything that wasn't destroyed during the spatial storms of the Cataclysm, with only the stronger people continuing into the Inner Layers when the base shut down for maintenance. Their group still headed into one of the larger apartments though, a living quarter that probably once had belonged to some chief scientist.

What set this place apart compared to most other rooms was that it had its own small-scale laboratory, which unsurprisingly had grown enormous along with everything else. This was what provided them with a route to the inner lab, and they reached a wall socket hidden behind a table. The socket was covered by a lid, and a gust of stale air hit their group when Zac pushed it open.

On the other side was a metallic tubing around 180 centimeters in height, just a bit too low to walk upright. Not even Leviala was sure, but they guessed it was a special tube meant to transport some sort of gas or plasma to this home lab, which was why none of the other apartments had something like this.

“And we are sure this pipe won't suddenly be filled with some Technocrat poison?” Thea hesitantly muttered as she looked into the vent.

“Uh... No?” Kenzie hesitantly said. “But I think we should at least have noticed some remnants having leaked into this room if that was the case? That lid wasn't exactly a perfect fit after the expansion.”

“I'll go first and block up the tunnel as long as I can in case something comes crashing down on us. But hopefully it won't come to that,” Zac said before he turned to Leviala. “Can you walk on your own from here?”

“I’ll make do. My wounds are a bit better by now,” Leviala said. “I should be able to walk the last stretch.”

Zac nodded as he entered the pipe, and the group kept walking for another hour until Kenzie told them to stop. The Werewolf maps stopped soon after the pipe entrance, but Leviala had provided them with a complimentary map. The spot Kenzie they had reached should be just a few meters from the gate leading to the Lab, and they had decided to cut their way out of the wall instead of trying to break into the Lab.

There were all kinds of alarms in the laboratories according to Leviala, so if they had to cut their way out, it was better if it was here. A few minutes later they were out, with Zac having done most of the work to get them out. Their activities had drawn the ire of the base though, and they were forced to back away for another twenty minutes before they could approach the gate.

“Let me,” Kenzie said as she floated up to the terminal in the gate, and they all breathed out in relief when the door opened without issue.

They walked inside after confirming no guards were waiting for them, but Zac quickly stopped as the world lurched for an instant. The insides had looked normal before, but Zac was shocked to realize that everything was normal-sized.

“How is this possible?” Ogras muttered as he looked around with wide eyes, confirming that Zac wasn’t the only one whose perception had shifted.

“The space is normal here?” Leviala exclaimed with surprise. “How weird. Even our outer labs have grown a bit over the past months.”

“It has to be an effect of the Dao of Space,” Thea said with gleaming eyes. “Space has become relative.”

“Well, it should be a good thing. It means the lab is fully functional, right? Our chances of finding something useful has increased,” Zac said as he looked around the beautifully crafted work areas as he walked into the Laboratory, if it could even be called that.

It rather felt like he had entered the headquarters of some IT start-up that had way too much money to spend, with everything from manicured miniature gardens to what looked like an extremely high-end restaurant where every table was placed on a small moat in an indoor lake. It almost made Zac wonder if they had come to the right place.

“This is a recreational area for the scientists,” Leviala said with a dour expression as she looked at the opulent surroundings. “I guess they needed to relax a bit after experimenting on us like we were beasts.”

“Nevermind that,” Ogras muttered. “Where are the good things stored, girl? We need to get back before your family does something stupid.”

“This way,” the Cartava scion sighed as she led the group through the series of gardens.

Zac was wordlessly following along, but he did shoot an imperceptible glance at his sister who nodded in return as she summoned a couple of drones. They still needed Leviala to save time, but it was undeniable that a divide had been erected between them after learning what her clan was up to. So Zac had his sister and Ogras keeping constant watch over Leviala to make sure she didn't try something.

After all, no matter what her personal belief about who was right and wrong, there was no way that Leviala would side with Port Atwood if it came down to it, especially if the Zhix started killing her clansmen. They needed to double-check and triple-check everything she said and did, to make sure she wasn't leading them into a trap of some sort.

Hopefully, Kenzie would be able to spot anything of technological nature, while Ogras was perennially suspicious of everything around him. Any odd movement from the native would immediately be caught by him.

They soon reached a sliding door made from the same reinforced glass as the glasshouse, and it automatically opened up when they approached, letting them enter a small containment chamber. A second sliding door opened a minute later, and the group entered a spotless laboratory. There were

around thirty tables in the main hall, a room of about 300 square meters, and each of them was connected to a series of expensive-looking machines.

Most of the tables were empty, but the remaining ones quickly drew their attention. A number of different items were hovering in the air, some of them looking complete and a few others seemingly mid-production with the help of several mechanical arms. More importantly, spatial tears were either hovering next to the machines like they were locked in place, or fused into the machines themselves.

There seemed to be a few adjoining labs as well, the layout reminiscent of the glasshouse's side-rooms. While the others looked around with curiosity Zac's attention was drawn by something else; the fact that his old quest had been completed.

It felt like he had caught a lucky break this time as the only threat turned out to be the sentry robots, as the Cartava troupe couldn't really be considered a formidable enemy. Now the question was why the System wanted to bring him here.

There were no natural treasures in sight, and nothing else that Zac felt was of immediate value. There were these weird machines hovering above the table, but Zac wasn't so confident that the System wanted him to take a bunch of Technocrat items considering its disdain for the Dao of Technology.

"What is this room?" Zac asked Leviala, hoping to find some clues.

"It seems this place has been turned into a mechanical lab," Leviala sighed. "It is honestly one of the worse ones."

"Oh?" Ogras asked, his eyes thinning. "How so?"

"These kinds of labs usually house various sorts of advanced machinery, which isn't really useful to cultivators. Sometimes we've found things that are valuable to Datamancers and our mechanical troops, but neither of those professions will remain in the outer world," Leviala sighed.

"So there's nothing?" Ogras muttered as they walked among the tables.

“The side chambers usually contain raw materials and natural treasures stockpiled for experiments. One can still find good items there. Valuable metals, race boosting treasures, pure ener-” Leviala said but stopped in surprise when Ogras turned into a gust of shadows, appearing in front of the closest door leading to a side chamber.

Zac glanced over and wryly smiled, but the smile froze on his face when he was blasted away by a shockwave of tremendous force without warning. He slammed into a table, but his momentum kept him going until he knocked into a wall on the other side of the lab. The shockwave also contained some sort of high-pitch sound that made him nauseated, but he quickly got up to his feet to reorient himself.

Only to see Leviala speeding toward the exit with one of the Spatial Machines in her arms.

Chapter 612: Betrayal

Ogras was the one who had reacted quickest thanks to being outside the direct blast zone of the shockwave, and half the room was already drenched in shadows by the time that Zac got back to his feet. However, the laboratory was only so big, and Leviala was already at the door after having released the tremendous pulse.

The ground cracked beneath Zac's feet as he pushed **[Loamwalker]** to its limits, but he had to desperately force himself to take a sharp turn at the last moment when an enormous spatial tear appeared right in front of the gate. It completely covered the exit and a few meters next to it, and one more step would have ended with Zac lost in the void.

Zac looked on with a mix of helplessness and fury, but he had no way to make the tear close early. But the base quickly suppressed the tear, and Zac hurriedly rushed toward the closed door on the other side. The containment door didn't activate by itself this time so Zac immediately reached for the console, but nothing happened even after pushing his mother's token against it.

Only then did Zac realize that Leviala wasn't actually gone, but she had rather stopped on the other side of the two doors, looking back at them.

There was no joy or derision on her face, just exhaustion. More importantly, Zac saw how her one good eye was rapidly clouding over, her pupil and iris being replaced by another ominous fractal. It was similar to the one on her other eye, but there were also clear differences. Something told Zac that the two were still connected like they each were a half of a whole. Blood was running down her eyes and nose, and she even swayed while standing still.

Zac's instincts screamed at him that whatever Leviala had taken was a huge threat to his people, so he grabbed a groove in the sliding door in an attempt to force it open. The door was stuck, but Zac's Strength was a match for most peak E-Grade warriors by this point, and even the reinforced glass started to crack from his efforts.

Leviala's eyes widened in surprise when she saw how even the door frames started to bend, and she flashed away in a frantic escape across the recreational area. She was shockingly quick, using some sort of footwork that she had never displayed in front of Zac before, and she was through the exit in less than a second.

He wasn't too worried though as Zac knew that Leviala wouldn't be able to maintain that pace for long, especially not with the sentries lurking outside. As long as he could force this door open they would be able to catch up.

However, red lights suddenly flooded the Laboratory as previously unseen safety-shutters sprung up to reinforce the sliding doors. Zac barely had the time to witness a shocking transformation take place in the rec area before his vision was blocked by decimeter-thick plating. It looked like the whole lounge had been filled with some sort of liquid electricity or plasma, turning it into a deathly gauntlet.

The exit was blocked as well by a shield even thicker than the one that had kept them at bay with the spider balls, and there were even two series of rings that appeared. They looked just like miniature versions of the terrifying energy turrets the Administrator used to combat the Collector in the void, and Zac's hairs stood on end when he saw that they were trained right at him.

"Stop, stop! She has done something to the security system!" Kenzie screamed as she frantically typed away on the tablet.

The blaring alarm stopped a few seconds later, and the shutters slid back into the floor. Zac could only sheepishly smile in response to the glares he got from his companions before he looked out again. The recreational area had turned back to normal, but it had been eye-opening to see just how many

security-measures were hidden among the gardens and restaurants.

It was obvious; even if Zac managed to break down the door with one of his more powerful moves, that was still the least of their problems. And as for Leviala, she was long gone.

“Look at the terminal inside the containment room,” Kenzie said after exhaling in relief. “She’s left something there, but I can’t connect to it.”

Zac’s eyes turned to the terminal Kenzie pointed at. A dongle Zac hadn’t noticed before was attached to it, obviously something left by Leviala on her way out while the spatial tear blocked their vision.

“Good eye,” Leviala’s voice reached them through the dongle. “I’ve booby-trapped this exit. Force it open and you’ll trigger a series of algorithms that will alert the Administrator, so you’ll have to stay put for the time being. I’m sorry things turned out this way. I can’t turn my back on my clan, not after how much my people have suffered. Even if I have to marry that bastard and go along with their schemes. Such is the burden of responsibility.”

“We can still solve this peacefully,” Zac said with grit teeth. “Undo what you’ve done here, and we’ll come with you to your clan to sort everything out.”

“I am sorry, I really am,” Leviala sighed on the other side before the connection cut off.

A vibration rippled across the door the next moment, making Zac look over at his sister who kept typing away.

“I activated a sound-proofing function,” Kenzie said as she looked down at her tablet. “She shouldn’t be able to hear us any longer. But she’s proven me wrong before, so who knows. I can’t do anything from here. I can open this door, but it will activate the security measures just like when you force it open.”

Zac growled in annoyance, and he contemplated whether he should try forcing the doors open again.

“I’m not sure brute force is the solution this time around,” Ogras sighed, clearly knowing what Zac was thinking. “I don’t think even you would make it out of that gauntlet in one piece. That lass fooled us. She fooled us all. She wouldn’t have acted if she didn’t have some confidence in keeping us here. After all, she’s seen both your and your sister’s means.”

He turned into a puff of shadows that shot toward the door’s hinges next, but he soon appeared again.

“It’s completely sealed. Not even a speck of dust can get through,” the demon added with annoyance.

“I’m sorry,” Kenzie said as she wiped some blood running down her nose. “I scanned her for hidden weapons, but I didn’t find anything. I don’t understand how she accomplished all this.”

Leviala’s sudden shockwave had hit them all without notice, and Kenzie had been thrown into a wall as well. The same went for Thea, except she looked unscathed. She had probably managed to control her body in time thanks to her high Dexterity.

“Don’t blame yourself. We were all on guard for her, but she hid her means too deeply. She never displayed any strength during all the time since I met her, to the point I almost thought she was a non-combat class. My Danger Sense didn’t give me a warning either, like the attack came out of nowhere,” Zac sighed.

“What did she take?” Thea asked with a frown as she looked away from the exit, turning toward the empty table. “I honestly don’t think she planned this until she saw that item. That machine must have been something extremely important if it made her ready to risk her life to betray us all.”

They hurried over to the table where Kenzie plugged her tablet into a control panel as the rest looked for clues. They couldn’t find anything though, forcing them to wait for Kenzie’s findings.

“It’s actually some sort of spatial drill,” Kenzie said with surprise. “Researching its technology was commissioned by

some Head Researcher twenty years ago, but it was just finished two weeks ago. It can drill a tunnel through chaotic space, and it seems even better than the array we used to force open the path to the mystic realm.”

“Head Researcher?” Thea repeated with confusion. “Who’s that? The Cartava Clan?”

“I don’t know?” Kenzie said as she hesitantly turned toward Zac. “Did she say anything like that?”

“It’s hard to trust anything she’s said until now, but I doubt it,” Zac said. “If they had the means to order the base to this degree, then they would probably have been able to escape long ago.”

“Then who?”

“Perhaps the base itself?” Ogras muttered. “Didn’t you mention some Administrator before?”

“That’s just the name of the computer system controlling this base. Would it really order itself to research something?” Zac hesitantly said. “If it was able to do that, it could just have done it, right?”

“More importantly, can the natives use that item to force their way outside?” Thea interjected.

“Possibly,” Kenzie nodded. “But I’m not sure how well it would work, it’s an experimental technology. And they would have to use it at least close to our portal. Drilling anywhere else won’t do them any good. They would probably just end up in outer space.”

“So, she has the key to escape this prison?” Ogras spat. “No wonder the lass took the risk. With all of us stuck in this place, our force is severely weakened. If they figure out some way to ambush our people, we’re screwed.”

“Can you warn them?” Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie.

“It looks like we are jammed, we can only pray that they are prepared. I don’t get it... Just how did she figure out how to take this thing?” Kenzie muttered. “If they had any knowledge

of an item like this, wouldn't they have fought harder to come here themselves? Long before we arrived?"

"Her eyes... Time," Zac muttered, finally putting two and two together. "Her ability doesn't allow her to peer into the future. It allows her to go back in time. We were probably the ones to tell her in an alternate future. Shit, she's been misdirecting me with half-truths since the start."

"That's heaven-defying if true," Ogras exclaimed with shock. "The backlash has to be immense."

"You saw her eyes. Her second eye got a curse as well," Zac said. "I think she crippled herself to bring that item to her clan. If she can even make it back alive."

"I don't think she would have taken the risk if she believed she wouldn't make it," Thea said. "She would have had a better chance of saving her people by staying with us if that was the case. She might just have been playing weak, or she has some special method to at least temporarily withstand the backlash."

"Are there any other exits to this place?" Zac asked.

"I can't see from this terminal," Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

"Quickly, look around," Zac sighed.

The group immediately spread out, entering the side chambers one by one. But it only took them a minute to confirm that they really were trapped. The only exit was the way they came from, and attacking any surface of the lab seemed to trigger the massive security response.

"Well, it looks like we're stuck. What do we do?" Thea eventually sighed. "Leviala Cartava will be back with her clan in a few hours, and I think they will immediately set out afterward. There's no way they won't seize this opportunity. Our people might be attacked in less than ten hours."

"Can you see if any of these machines can help us out?" Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie. "They were made by the base, so they might not trigger the alarms?"

“I’ll try to figure out some way to escape this place,” Kenzie nodded and immediately walked over to the closest item and started tapping away on her tablet.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Ogras muttered and disappeared, leaving a confused Zac behind.

“If it comes down to it I’ll use my escape skill. I’ll only lose a few levels,” Thea said as she walked over to him.

“Doesn’t it send you in a completely random direction?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Well, yes,” Thea admitted with a grimace.

“Let’s see what Kenzie can come up with first. No point in you risking your life if there’s a better solution out there,” Zac said. “You’d probably end up in the void around us or some random section where you couldn’t get back. And teleportation in this environment...”

“I guess there’s not much I can change even if I manage to get out of here by myself,” Thea said with a helpless expression.

“I’m sorry about all this,” Zac said with a sigh. “I underestimated her too much. Now both our people might be hurt because of me.”

“It’s not your fault. No one is working harder than you to protect our planet. You simply can’t control everything,” Thea said. “It’s an important lesson for us all. Besides, we all knew that the stakes were high going in. Let’s just see if we can turn things around.”

“I’ll see what Ogras is up to. The look in his eyes made me a bit worried,” Zac wryly smiled before he gave Thea one last look. “Thank you.”

He walked over to the storeroom he saw Ogras slink toward before and a frown spread across his face when he saw what the demon was up to. Ogras was trying to snatch the stored treasure, a vial containing some unknown liquid. The only problem was that it was behind a containment field that looked a lot like the liquid electricity that had flooded the area outside just a minute ago.

“What are you doing?” Zac frowned. “We have bigger fish to fry, and you might trigger the alarms.”

“I’m no help when it comes to taboo technology, I’ll leave that to your sister,” Ogras shrugged without taking his eyes off the vial on the other side of the electricity wall. “I figure that if we’re stuck here for the moment we might as well take the good things left behind. Isn’t that why we came anyway? Besides, I’ve already confirmed that these things aren’t connected to whatever that lass did.”

A dozen shadow spears slammed into the barrier the next moment to prove his point, and Zac only breathed out a few seconds later when there was no retaliation from the Administrator. He was about to retort, but he stopped in his track when a new prompt appeared; the fifth quest in his training chain had been doled out.

[The Benevolent Ruler (Training (5/9)): Seize at least 2 opportunities for your followers. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 4 levels.]

Chapter 613: Helping Hand

Zac couldn't help but give the demon an appreciative look when he saw the objective of his new quest. As far as quests go, this had to be one of the easier ones. The containment field was still keeping Ogras at bay, but with his help it should just be a matter of time before they breached it.

Better yet, the punishment for failure had reduced once more, and it was a huge relief to see that his skills were finally safe. Losing four levels would still be a kick to the groin, but he could always regain them later if he needed to abruptly end his training regimen early. For example, he knew he needed to get back to his people immediately after dealing with this place, even if it meant giving up on his quest.

Thankfully it didn't look like that would be necessary, at least not for the next quest. After all, it was like Ogras said; why were they here if not to seize a couple of opportunities? Furthermore, Zac's instincts told him that the System would point him toward Clan Cartava for his sixth quest.

The System liked war and struggle, and that was the only option left after Leviala's final betrayal. She had chosen to give her clan a shot at escaping, even if it meant trapping Zac here and killing her way out. There was no way he could let that go unanswered. Besides, she had the Spatial Drill now, and something like that might be needed later to drill through spatial storms at the Core.

Ogras' words about Divine Guidance also echoed in the back of Zac's mind. The drill might be exactly what the System was leading him toward, but Leviala messing with the timelines might have pushed its plans out of whack.

Zac eventually gave up on trying to figure out the purpose of what the system was doing, instead turning his attention to the task at hand. He needed to seize the first opportunity for his

follower. It was a transparent vial containing just a deciliter of some unknown liquid. The liquid was red like blood, but small golden sparks swirled around inside it even though the vial was completely immobile.

It looked a bit like a health potion from a video game to Zac, but it definitely was something more valuable since it was the only thing in the room. Out of all the side rooms it was the item most likely to be something that could boost one's race, as the three rooms he had visited only housed various metals. Unfortunately for Ogras, the containment field that protected the vial was extremely sturdy.

"Come on," Ogras growled as extremely condensed shadows glommed onto the energy field.

Zac immediately understood what the demon was trying to do. He was trying to exhaust a small section of the field to create an opening. However, the shadows were being destroyed far too quickly, only slightly weakening the electric field. He sighed and stepped up next to Ogras, his arm suddenly covered in thick layers of leaves as his arm started emitting an aura of death.

"Oh?" Ogras exclaimed, but he quickly understood Zac's plan and redoubled his efforts.

Searing pain ripped through Zac's arm as he forcibly pushed it through the opening Ogras had created. Leaves were rapidly being disintegrated even though they were infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi, and the Fragment of the Coffin only helped block some of the damage to his arm as he reached for the vial.

Pushing forward was extremely arduous as well, reminiscent of how it felt to activate [**Deforestation**] before his Strength had reached its current state. Sweat ran down his forehead from pain and exertion, but he refused to back down as he desperately pushed forward centimeter by centimeter, finally grasping the vial.

He immediately stashed the thing in his Spatial Ring and dragged his arm back, plumes of smoke rising from his scorched skin. But Zac was still beset by shocking amounts of

lightning even after having retracted his arm, and the supercharged power rampaged through his body. Zac actually hoped for his **[Void Heart]** to deal with the mess, but it was too slow.

Organs were lacerated and burned, and even his veins had turned to conduits that allowed the lightning to course all through his body. But the electricity was thankfully an attack without source, and every wound caused it to exhaust some of its energy. **[Void Heart]** finally woke up as well, releasing a deep beat that could be heard even outside his body, but it barely managed to swallow any of the lightning. It had already been used up on torturing Zac.

The wounds weren't too bad at least, and Zac quickly healed it up with the help of a pill and **[Surging Vitality]**. Ogras expectantly looked at Zac as he stood up and took out the vial, the liquid inside illuminating the surroundings in vibrant gold as it sloshed around. Both were surprised at the change, but the vial quickly turned red again when the liquid stopped moving. Zac knew the Ogras wanted it, but he didn't immediately hand it over.

He first wanted to get a sense of the liquid it contained. It didn't give off a strong sense of spirituality, but Zac's cells were still screaming with hunger as he looked at the contents. Zac guessed it had to be made from natural materials before being processed by some unknown Technocrat technique, an alternative method to the pill-making of Alchemists.

"This..." Ogras hesitantly said.

"Just take it," Zac snorted and handed it over after a second. "Don't drink it before Kenzie figures out what it is. It would be pretty messed up if you died drinking poison after all your near-death experiences."

Just as Zac expected his quest updated itself the moment he handed the vial to Ogras. It looked like the System really was referring to the items in the side-rooms, and it didn't get marked as half-complete until Zac physically handed it over. Just one more bout of electrotherapy and he would be done.

“This is no poison, I can feel it in my bones,” Ogras muttered. “With all the netherblasted misfortune we’ve encountered until now, we’re slated for some stunning gains next. Balance of the Heavens.”

“I’ve found it!” Kenzie’s voice suddenly echoed from outside, drawing their attention.

“See? Balance of the Heavens,” Ogras grinned and flashed outside, with Zac quickly following in tow.

“This thing is our ticket outside!” Kenzie exclaimed as she pointed at one of the tables.

The item hovering on top of it looked like a mirror or a solar cell, a circular disk with a diameter of roughly a meter.

“What is it?” Zac asked curiously.

“This is an escape pod of sorts,” Kenzie said with excitement. “It makes use the spatial energy that’s all over this base, and it can teleport people away. However...”

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

“The experiment is incomplete, the control feature isn’t quite finished. It might spit us out in the Void, inside the Core, or back where we came from.”

“Are you able to fix it?” Zac asked.

“I can try, but it will take some time. I need to run some calculations, and my... computer can only work so fast. It might take up to half a day, and even then I can’t promise anything,” Kenzie said.

“It’s all we got at the moment,” Zac said. “Do it.”

“So... where do you want it to go? I think I can get it to send us in a certain direction only, but it would take too long to make a proper fix that would allow you to actually steer it,” Kenzie asked.

“Take us back where we came from,” Zac said without hesitation. “Get us as close to the Lunar Forest as possible. Overshoot into the outer rim rather than undershoot if that’s an option.”

Kenzie nodded and immediately started typing away, while Zac took proper stock of what else there was in the laboratory. There were eight side-rooms altogether, two of them larger stockrooms full of unguarded materials. These metals and minerals all seemed to be very high quality though, so Zac immediately snatched them up.

Three of the rooms contained more valuable metals from the looks of it, each of them no larger than a bowling ball but still protected by the same sort of setup as Ogras' vial. The seventh room contained something far more interesting though.

It was a fist-sized crystal that hovered on top of a pedestal and miniature spatial fractures kept erupting all around it. It had to be crammed full of energy to look like that, likely Space-Attuned energies thanks to the Dimensional Treasure. It was still just a piece of stone that Zac saw no immediate use for, but he soon thought of another quest of his as he looked at it.

Materials for Karunthel (Unique, Limited): Acquire 100 Kilograms of [Urgarat Flakes], 1 kilogram of [Realm Locus], 1 living [Ferric Worldeater], 1 [Daemonic Manastone] Reward: Upgrade Iliex Shipyard to Early D-Grade. 1 Custom-Designed Early D-Grade Vessel. (0/4)

According to Calrin's description, he could very well be looking at a ball of **[Realm Locus]**. It was supposed to be a gemstone full of spatial energy, and it was mainly used when making spatial treasures. Like the weird machines outside. The environment in this Mystic Realm should be perfect for those things to spring up as well, and looking for a few crystals if an opportunity arose was already on Zac's agenda.

He had no pictures of how **[Realm Locus]** was supposed to look, but he figured that he would know if he had the right thing as soon as he held it in his hand, provided that the crystal weighed more than a kilo. He didn't immediately try to snatch it though, but he rather went over to inspect the last room, where he found Thea standing looking at the protected treasure.

It was another crystal hovering in the air, this one a calm blue rather than the chaotic black of the possible **[Realm Locus]**. It

didn't emit any spatial fluctuations like the other one either, but it rather contained a mysterious shimmer that caused Zac's vision to double for a second before he quickly activated **[Mental Fortress]**.

"Is there something special about this crystal?" Zac asked curiously as he walked up to Thea whose eyes were trained on the item.

"My Spirit Tool seems to want to absorb it," Thea said. "I think it might be one of the crystals of those natives you mentioned? It might actually awaken spirituality in my weapon, just like how you've done with your axe."

"Doesn't that sword already have Spirituality?" Zac asked curiously. "It sounded like that was the Blade Emperor's thing."

"It's for my other one, **[Petalstorm]**," Thea explained before it shook her head. "It's not worth it though. We have more important things to worry about."

Neither **[Verun's Bite]** or **[Love's Bond]** showed any indication of wanting the crystal inside the containment field, which probably meant that Thea was on the money with her guess. The Gemling crystals supposedly contained a part of their soul, and feeding such an item to a treasure with a soul of its own might cause a clash rather than provide any benefits.

"It's fine, we're stuck here for a few hours anyway. Let me get it out for you," Zac said, seeing an opportunity to complete his quest in one fell swoop.

However, he stopped himself before trying something foolhardy, and instead walked out and called Ogras over first. There was no point in getting himself maimed when the demon could weaken the field for him as they did before.

"What is it? You really need a third participant?" Ogras grinned as he entered the room. "Fine, but no eye contact. That goes for both of you."

"Stop messing around. Help me get this crystal out," Zac sighed.

The demon snickered, but he still walked over the electricity barrier and started flooding it with shadows just like the last time. Zac cracked his neck and made sure there were no lingering threats in his body before he got ready again. He pushed his hand into the shield, but alarm bells suddenly went off in his head as he saw a Memorysteel spike shoot straight toward his head.

The whole room was coming alive as liquid electricity started pouring down the walls by the gallons.

“What the-!” Zac exclaimed as he tried to back away. “Run!”

Both Ogras and Thea were thankfully Dexterity classes, and they turned into gusts as they sped out. Zac was right on their heels, but a shocking pain made Zac’s vision go white for a second as he was stabbed by another spike that shot straight out of the doorframe itself. He pushed down the pain and tried to flash out, but the brief delay had robbed him of his opportunity to get out.

The door was already sealed shut, with another layer of electricity on top of it. Zac’s first instinct was to force his way out, but he hesitated, afraid that attacking the door would trigger the alarms outside and put the others in harm’s way as well.

“What did you do?!” Zac heard a frazzled Thea shout on the other side, but he had no time to worry about that at the moment as the whole room was submerged in a chaotic storm of electricity.

Zac sighed and turned away from the door, wondering why he cursed himself by thinking that the quest would be easy.

Chapter 614: Gifts and Reciprocation

There was no time to wonder why his second attempt at taking out a guarded item resulted in a far greater response. It felt like the whole room was closing in on him, like he had been caught in the maw of some metallic beast. Add to that the still increasing amounts of liquid electricity, which was probably the Base Power that ran everything here, and he felt like his life was on the line.

A glimmer to his side caught his attention though, and he was surprised to see that the pedestal had fallen apart, and the Gemling gem was falling toward the ground, only guarded by the omnipresent Base Power. Zac swung his axe in an arc, forcing a few Memorysteel spikes out of the way as he lunged for the gem.

Getting his hands the second opportunity was a relief, but he still needed to survive this calamity. He activated [**Surging Vitality**] to heal his rapidly accumulating wounds, but he soon realized that he wasn't able to fight and move around while using the healing skill. It just ended with him getting stabbed by even more spikes, creating an unsustainable loop of healing and getting hurt.

The leaves of [**Nature's Barriers**] were disintegrated almost as soon as they were conjured as well, utterly incapable of blocking either the Base Power or the spikes. Only [**Love's Bond**] was able to block out the spikes, but it only protected part of his front. Zac saw no other option; he needed to take a risk if he wanted to get through this in one piece.

A wave of miasma spread through his body as he activated his Specialty Core. The world turned blurry as the transformation took place, but his Danger Sense woke him up just in time to desperately yank his head out of the way. A spike shot right

past his left cheek, drawing a wound that missed his eye by just a centimeter.

Zac managed to dodge that one even in his weakened state, but he still got stabbed by four other spikes, drenching him in his own blood. However, the blood was incinerated as soon as it left Zac's body by the energy currents rippling all around him. Burns already covered a good deal of his skin by this point too as the Base Power freely burrowed into his body.

He was too weak to keep the attacks at bay with [**Verun's Bite**], so Zac saw no option but to adapt his turtle stance, curling into a ball on the floor with [**Love's Bond**] on top of him, trying to protect as much of his body as possible.

Shocking pain assailed his legs since he had to choose between guarding his head and his extremities, and he looked down to see that one of the Memorysteel spikes had completely impaled one of his shins. Even worse, the spikes were starting to get charged by the environment, and Zac felt an unprecedented jolt of electricity coursing through his body the next moment, almost making him throw away his shield in a spasmodic twitch.

The crack in his defenses led to him being impaled three more times before he managed to transform, but he was finally able to conjure a massive fractal bulwark that covered his whole frame as his body was encapsulated by the black armor of [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. He even tried to activate [**Profane Seal**] as a safety measure, but the room was unfortunately much too small for the skill to fit.

Zac immediately moved the fractal shield of [**Immutable Bulwark**] to move to his back, forming a curved wall that protected him from his feet up to his head. It even covered some of his sides, with his actual shield blocking another third. Only his right side was exposed, but he was strong enough to force back most spikes with his pitch-black bardiche.

A few spikes still snuck past his defense, but the armor of [**Vanguard of Undeath**] provided a final layer of protection that stopped the wounds from getting too bloody. The base was unfortunately like a rabid dog, refusing to give up on its

prey. Zac was forced to frantically bob and weave as the attacks grew more frantic, but he quickly started to get a hang of the tempo.

The spikes seemed random at first glance, but Zac soon learned they followed patterns that he could use to minimize his damage.

After a minute he had reached a state where he wasn't being gored at all, and Zac felt that he would be able to get out of this in one piece as long as he didn't run out of miasma. His armor protected against most of the Base Power as well, though some continuously snuck past the cracks in his armor and scorched him.

Finally, the dozens of spikes retracted, but Zac didn't have time to breathe out in relief before the whole room was absolutely flooded with Base Power, even worse than how it looked when he accidentally triggered Leviala's trap. His armor held for just a second before it literally exploded, and Zac found himself utterly exposed to the terrifying currents outside.

It was like the base had an automated process; first stab the interloper to death, then incinerate the remains with a storm of Base Power.

His shield and fractal bulwark were completely useless against the thousands of currents that swam around in the small room, and Zac screamed in pain as his body was filled with more and more of it. Things were quickly spiraling out of control, but his Hidden Node finally came through for him as it activated.

A deep thud rippled out from his body, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw the impact it had on the Base Power in the room. It was like the heartbeat had imposed symmetry on the chaos, and he felt he could almost discern some fractals among the lightning bolts as they were frozen in the air. **[Void Heart]** beat again, and it drew a huge amount of energy into its odd hidden dimension.

The energy came from the Base Power that had already snuck into his body, which unfortunately meant a vacuum was left behind. A vacuum that was almost instantly filled by more

base power entering his body through his pores, causing another wave of damage before the hidden node swallowed another mouthful.

Zac would normally be elated that his hidden node found something to feast on, but he only wished that his body didn't need to be the conduit. He could only struggle to maintain his consciousness as he cycled the Fragment of the Bodhi to make some patchwork repairs on his body while **[Void Heart]** slowly but steadily gobbled up all the lightning in the room.

The minutes passed, each second feeling like an hour, but his hidden node actually managed to swallow all of it. Zac essentially looked like a lump of coal by that point, but he was at least alive. The door slid up by itself, displaying the three standing outside with worry and horror in their eyes.

“Are you okay?!” Thea screamed as she rushed into the room to drag Zac outside.

“I'm not sure if we should loot any more of those side rooms,” Zac said with a cracking voice, his exhalation creating a plume of smoke.

“Idiot, why couldn't you just wait? I could have checked if I could break the security measures,” Kenzie said with red-rimmed eyes.

“No point of that,” Zac said as he arduously sat up, his body quickly shrinking. “You have your things to do, don't worry about me. I'll heal up quickly, go deal with that teleporter.”

“I'm multitasking, I am still doing the calculations,” Kenzie muttered, but she still walked back to the escape pod after making sure Zac was okay.

Zac suddenly swung his axe, cutting a large gash in his arms to the shock of the others. A spurt of black ichor dropped onto the floor, and Thea's eyes widened to saucers when the ichor turned into a pool of lightning that scorched the ground for a few seconds before they fizzled out.

Zac had no time to worry about their reactions as **[Void Heart]** had just released a huge surge of pure energy, and he had just expelled the first round of energy run-off. Most of the

energy went into his opened but not yet filled node on his Draugr-side, effortlessly pushing it to the same level as his human side.

But his Hidden Node beat again before Zac had time to figure out his next move, and he could only push it into the next node.

One beat followed another, as more and more energy was released. However, Zac frowned as he made some calculations in his mind. Each subsequent beat released a bit less power into his body, and Zac realized that he would just about manage to break open his next node if he let things continue this way.

He could sense that the others were looking at him from a short distance, but he didn't have the luxury to split his attention at the moment. Breaking open a node at this juncture was a risk, but Kenzie had already said it would be hours before the teleporter was ready. He would be able to make quite a bit of progress on his Draugr-pathways in that time.

Besides, he would probably deal with the Cartava Clan in his human form, whose pathways were already back to normal by now.

He hesitated for just a second before he ate a mouthful of Node-Breaking pills he had lying around while also gripping a D-Grade Miasma Crystal in each hand. The efficacy of the pills was severely diminished because of his accumulated immunity, but it was enough to tip things over into his favor. A small explosion soon erupted as his right leg turned to a bloody mess.

There was still a thick blob of energy left over, but Zac didn't use it to push his level to 85. He still had burns covering most of his body, and his organs were badly lacerated. Add to that his exploded leg, and he would need to use a huge amount of energy with **[Surging Vitality]**. He quickly transformed back to his human form before the energy dissipated, and he immediately pushed all the left-over energy into the skill fractal of **[Surging Vitality]**.

Burned skin fell off all around him as the skill started to patch him up, looking like pieces of coal on the ground. Beneath was just more burned skin, but it wasn't completely destroyed. Zac kept the skill going and the second layer of skin rapidly started mending as well. It felt like he was being bitten by fire ants all over his body, but Zac could only hold on and stop himself from rolling around on the ground.

His body looked a lot better after a few more minutes, but there was still a lot of work to be done on his body. He had unfortunately run out of the left-over energy by that point, but he still had his normal reserves of Cosmic Energy. His leg was quickly patched up next along with the wounds to his insides.

He eventually ran out of Cosmic Energy as well, something that was almost impossible in a fight because of his massive pool of Attributes. But he was in decent shape by that point. A few hours of recuperation along with a couple of healing pills would take him the final stretch. He was lucky that there was no Dao in the Base Power, making the repairs a lot quicker and cheaper than those from a pitched fight.

There were still a lot of lightning impurities dumped into his blood though, so Zac summoned his axe and cut himself open a few times more, each time depositing a stream of electrified blood. He was only content after his sixth cut, where it looked like his blood was completely normal, and he contentedly breathed out in relief as he looked up at the others.

“Your healing capabilities are just... Monstrous,” Thea finally spoke up. She had been watching from a distance all this time, making sure he was okay. “And weird.”

“Cockroach, a real cockroach,” Ogras muttered as he walked away with a disgusted shake of his head.

“I'm sorry, you tried to help and you got yourself hurt again,” Thea sighed.

“It's okay,” Zac smiled as he took out the gem from his Spatial Ring. “Getting zapped actually helped with my cultivation. Here, take it.”

Thea wordlessly took the crystal, her eyes moving back and forth between the gem and Zac. He felt a bit embarrassed by the intense stare, and he could only cough a bit to hide his discomfort.

“I still need to recuperate a bit,” he said.

“Of course... Thank you,” Thea said softly and walked away.

He nodded before he limped over to a corner where he closed his eyes, gripping a D-Grade Nexus Crystal in each hand. He kept working on his constitution over the next hour until the cooldown of his Specialty Core was up, at which point he swapped over again.

A wave of nausea hit him when his working pathways were replaced with the mess leftover from the node-breaking. But he quickly found his bearing and activated [**Spiritual Anchor**]. He had thankfully been able to get the skill for both his classes, and it provided him with immense help as he rapidly started to rewrite his pathways.

The following hours went by arduously slow, with Zac spending most of his time fixing his pathways. He only occasionally stopped to check in on Kenzie’s progress. Soon eight hours had passed, and Zac was mostly done with his work. There were still some small details missing in his pathways, but he felt confident he could bring out his full strength for a fight without causing a backlash, especially in his human form.

Doing so repeatedly would probably harm him though, so there was definitely a need to properly fix things later on.

In a perfect world, he would have been able to jump into some little spatial bubble and spend a week getting back to a perfect state, but time waited for no man. Kenzie had finally completed her work, or at least taken it to such a level that it would be usable. Zac cracked his neck as he got up on his feet, turning back to his human form once more.

Ogras had been holding off on taking the liquid, but Kenzie had actually managed to confirm that it was something called a [**Corporeal Serum**]. It would not only give him a huge push

in upgrading his Race, but it would even give him some attributes since it contained pieces of E-Grade Attribute fruits.

Unfortunately, there was no mention of where the materials for the serum were sourced, and Zac could only pray he would run into a greenhouse where the fruits were grown after dealing with Void's Disciple. For now, they needed to get out of here, and they quickly got everything in order.

"So, how do we use this thing?" Ogras asked hesitantly as they looked down at the disk on the table.

"I had to make some sacrifices to make it work," Kenzie said as her eyes darted around. "It... can only take two of us at the most. If I made it any bigger, I wouldn't be able to set a direction, and it might not even make it back into proper space."

"You two siblings should use it," Thea said without hesitation, and even Ogras reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"And leave you guys here?" Zac asked with a frown. "What if some security protocol suddenly activates? I don't think Leviala was lying when she said that this place was dangerous to stay in."

"This place seems safe enough," Thea said. "You would be the one taking the real risk using that thing. Just come pick us up after you've saved our people."

"I'll go alone," Zac said after some thought. "No point risking Kenzie's life as well."

"You'll go alone? With your sense of direction?" Kenzie snorted. "How are you even going to find your way back in case you're dropped off at some unknown place? And who's going to deal with all their machines?"

Zac was full of reluctance as he looked down at the small disk, but he had to admit that Kenzie was making a good point. The two walked onto the disk, but Thea spoke up just as they were about to activate the escape pod.

"Wait," she said, making Zac look over with confusion.

The confusion quickly turned to bafflement as Thea walked up to him and grabbed him by his collar. Zac slightly opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but both words and thoughts flew out of his mind as a pair of soft lips pressed against his.

Chapter 615: A Different Sky

A sense of completion filled her body as she punched the door, causing a massive explosion that launched pieces of the Bloodline Vat in every direction. Rampant energies blasted out of the sealed chambers, her prison for the past month.

But she was finally out.

Inevitably looked around and saw that things were the same. Some of their new serfs had been bloodied by shrapnel, but she wasn't in the mood to enjoy their pained cries as she turned her attention inward.

The crystal was perfectly formed in her body, continuously swallowing her Cosmic Energy and releasing a slightly modified energy. She had already heard from her master what the change would entail. The angrier she became the more powerful the energy would become. This power would come at the expense of her rationality, and perhaps even her safety, but who cared about that when it would allow her to kill those that angered her?

She opened her status screen, taking a look at her race to make sure.

[D] – Zhix – Manic Vessel (Special)

She went over her attributes quickly as well, disappointed that they hadn't leaped forward after weeks of suffering. But the Bloodline Seed had finally managed to imprint a Synthetic Bloodline on her body with the help of the taboo technology. It, unfortunately, wasn't a Combat Bloodline, but she didn't really mind.

Calling it Special made it feel like the Bloodline was something her master had prepared specifically for her. She was about to close her status screen, but she noticed something interesting.

[E] Chains of Fate [24%]. 5% - ?.

There was a change in her cultivation manual as well, with a new number appearing. She would have to ask her master to be sure, but she guessed that her bloodline gave a five percent power boost at the minimum, rising even higher depending on her anger. As where the roof was, it would depend on how much Zachary Atwood would manage to piss her off.

Good, you're out. Come see me, a voice echoed in Inevitability's head, and her eyes lit up as she hurried toward the building her master used.

However, she stopped in her tracks when she saw her master's situation, her eyes widening in shock. He was pale and gaunt, looking like he was beset by some unknown affliction. His pristine muscles were all withered away and it looked like a gust would topple him over. The only reason she didn't panic was that his aura was as stable as ever.

"What's wrong?!" Inevitability said with shock after she closed the door behind her.

Just what had happened while she was locked in that damn machine?

"You did it. Good job, Kirath," Adcarkas said with a smile. "I'm fine. I had a tousel with the Super Brother-Man. He is stronger than I expected."

"He's still alive after meeting you?" Inevitability said incredulously.

"I met him outside. I couldn't go all-out because of the compulsions," Adcarkas sighed as he got to his feet. "Come with me, it's almost time."

Kirath mutely nodded as she followed her master out of the town, moving toward the inner reaches of the Heathen World. Her eyes kept darting toward her master with worry, seeing how he struggled to keep the pace. But she knew better than to ask or offer help.

A few walls of spatial tears tried to bar their path, but her master easily moved out of the way so that they could reach further inside.

“There is something I need to tell you. Something I’ve kept from you and your brother all this time,” Adcarkas suddenly said without stopping.

“What’s going on?” Inevitability asked with confusion.

“I was born almost 800 years ago. My master was Barvat, the previous leader of the True Path. However, the True Path was almost extinguished when the Crusade took place. The war killed most of our people, leaving just Barvat behind, severely weakened. Much was lost in those desperate years, and my master’s conviction started faltering,” Adcarkas sighed.

“How is this related to our current situation?” Inevitability asked with a frown.

Truthfully, she hated listening about the True Path or The Great Redeemer. Their master was as much to blame for her brother’s death as Zachary Atwood, as far as she was concerned. If not for his rules they would have long killed that human to snuff out a threat in its cradle. Besides, his convoluted plan had forced her true master to live like a rat for centuries when he should have been the leader of the Zhix.

“Just listen,” Adcarkas said, a dangerous glint in his eyes telling Inevitability that he would not tolerate any more interruptions.

“Barvat asked himself, was all this suffering worth the small morsels of power that Voridis A’Heliophos left for us? Are there truly no other paths to take? But such thoughts were obviously heresy, and he suffered great backlashes as a result. However, he somehow managed to hold on for centuries while being tortured by the Karmic Bindings of The Great Redeemer. One day he managed to complete a daring plan,” Adcarkas said. “And that’s when he took me on as a disciple, an orphan of just four years.”

“He split my soul into two.”

“Wh-“ Inevitability blurted, but she quickly stopped herself.

“It was crude and it shouldn’t have succeeded, but here I stand. Then again, I suspect that I was not his first attempt. Most of my soul is completely bound by the Karmic Bindings,

but a small part is free. One part is out in the open, one is hidden, like a whisper in the void,” Adcarkas sighed. “I couldn’t openly defy our master, but my subconscious could slightly alter my actions, and sometimes even take over for a short duration.”

Inevitabilities’ heart beat like a drum as she listened to her master. This was the first time she had ever heard him display anything except devout fervor and fanaticism for The Great Redeemer.

“Obviously such a procedure caused some side-effects, like an unstable disposition,” Adcarkas wryly smiled. “But it gave me a chance to break the chains that binds me. That would have bound you.”

“Would have?” Inevitability muttered with confusion.

“Haven’t you noticed? Neither you nor your brother were as fervent followers as me or previous generations. It was not a coincidence. My subconscious modified your cultivation manuals. It wasn’t enough to completely rid you of the Karmic Contract, but it was a step in the right direction. That’s why you could attack Zachary Atwood during the hunt. That’s why your brother could move out without telling me,” Adcarkas sighed, vexation glimmering in his eyes. “You could say I am responsible for the death of Karath through my meddling.”

“That’s not-!” Kirath blurted, but was stopped by a wave of Adcarkas’ hand.

“First I hoped that my changes would lessen the bindings by each subsequent generation, but that goal had to be discarded when the Integration took place. I saw no option but to fulfill the contract. However, everything changed when we found this place,” Adcarkas said. “Here the Karmic Contract is muted, and I could freely plan for our future.”

“So we’re not going to follow that man when he arrives?!” Inevitability couldn’t stop herself from asking, her eyes widening with anticipation.

“You’ve read the reports. What’s the point of following a man who needed to take a crooked path just to reach D-Grade, even

with the vast wealth of a grand Cultivator Clan at his beck and call? And now he's out of time, needing to perform an even greater sacrifice. Trash," Adcarkas spat.

"Then what are we doing here? Let's just go?" Inevitability ventured.

"We can't," Adcarkas sighed. "We are still caught in his net. But I think I might have found a solution. Ah, we're here."

Inevitability hadn't checked where they were going at all as she raptly listened to her master's narration, but her eyes widened when she saw a massive field of spatial rifts blocking their path, hundreds upon hundreds of them.

"Stay close to me," Adcarkas said as they started to make their way through the field of spatial chaos.

Kirath stayed on the heels of Adcarkas, a sheen of sweat covering her face as they moved forward. Her master was clearly struggling to clear the path for them, and she hated that there wasn't anything she could do to assist him. It took them almost an hour to move just a hundred meters, but Kirath was shocked to see what was on the other side.

It was a large spatial sphere hovering in the center of a large hall, a starry night depicted in its center. Kirath had heard of these Void Spheres before, but they weren't supposed to be this big, or this stable. It was no doubt an accomplishment of her master. After all, the whole room was absolutely covered in dense inscriptions.

She also noted with interest that there were over a hundred crystals embedded among the inscriptions. She had wondered where all those Gemling artisans had gone, it turned out that they had been turned into materials for an array.

"What's this?" Kirath asked with wonder.

"The way to break the bonds of fate. The key to freedom," Adcarkas said with a smile.

"A Void Sphere?" Kirath asked with confusion.

"Our Strength is still nothing compared to Vوريدis A'Heliophos," Adcarkas explained. "So we need to borrow the

power of the Dimensional Seed. It's just a treasure, but is still a tier higher than our master."

"I understand!" Kirath said, her eyes lighting up. "It's amazing how master could think of something as intricate as this."

"You're just as important for the next step," Adcarkas said as he took out a box. "This will require both our effort. For freedom."

"Me?" Kirath repeated as her eyes turned to the box as her master opened it.

It looked like an egg made from thousands of thin metal wires, each of them woven in extremely intricate patterns. It was roughly the size of her head, but it wasn't completely solid. She could somewhat discern a sanguine crystal glistening in its core, held in place by some of the wires.

The crystal itself wasn't something Inevitability recognized, but her antennae felt a sharp backlash from the amount of power it contained. She didn't know what her master had created, but she knew that it had the power to kill her outright.

A small spatial tear suddenly appeared out of nowhere, cutting a shallow wound on her master's arm. A trail of blood ran down his hand, entering a small groove on the metal egg. The blood continued to run down the sides of the egg, forming an intricate red pattern across its surface.

"You next," Adcarkas said as he walked over to Kirath.

She unhesitantly cut open a similar wound as her master. Kirath felt a wave of dizziness hit as her blood dripped down on the egg, and she looked down at it with confusion. Her blood actually followed a completely different set of grooves, forming a second pattern on the surface of the egg before it entered its depths.

"Good," Adcarkas nodded before he walked over to the Void Sphere.

Kirath followed his actions with confusion, and her eyes widened when she saw him throw the egg inside the sphere. It rippled like the surface of a lake, and the starry night suddenly disappeared. It was replaced by thousands out of thousands of

harried faces, all of them Zhix. One tormented spirit kept replacing another in an endless cycle until the sphere stabilized and turned completely pitch-black.

“Enter it,” Adcarkas said.

“What? Enter? That thing?” Kirath said with hesitation.

“My body is too wounded to withstand it for too long. But it is not dangerous to you now that your bloodline is awakened.

Look,” Adcarkas said as he pushed his bleeding hand into the Void Sphere, causing a small swirl of red to enter its depths.

But his arm was mostly unscathed as he dragged it out again.

“Besides, I need to control the array to make sure it runs properly.”

“What do I need to do?” Kirath asked.

“Just hold on and don’t move. You will form the connection between us and our master. He will try to stop us from breaking the contract, and it will hurt. But you need to hold on.

For freedom,” Adcarkas said as he turned toward Kirath, yearning in his eyes.

“I understand. I will not disappoint you,” Kirath said as she took a steadying breath before entering the massive sphere.

Her heart hammered from fear as she was submerged in the darkness. She didn’t fear getting killed in battle, but this was something else entirely. But seconds passed and she soon calmed down soon enough as she felt that nothing was amiss. It even felt a bit like she was enclosed in her master’s embrace because of the enormous concentration of Spatial Energy around her.

There was a weird power burrowing into her body, but it wasn’t very painful. It just seemed to blend with the power from the crystal in her chest. She opened her eyes, seeing a small swirl of her blood rushing from her arm toward the heart of the sphere. Just like her master’s. She turned her head toward the outside, and she saw her master looking back at her speaking as he gestured.

I can’t hear you, she said, but no sound came out.

Adcarkas still nodded in understanding and indicated for her to take a seated position and steady her mind. She quickly followed his instructions, and she felt a weird power appear all around her a second later. Her master had started.

The weird power soon started to enter her body and discomfort quickly turned into pain. She grit her teeth and held on, not wanting to ruin her master's efforts. But the odd energy started creeping into her mind as well, like tendrils of corruption. Her very soul reflexively shuddered and tried to shake off the intrusion, and a sense of wrongness quickly overcame her determination.

Eventually, she couldn't take it any longer, and she opened her eyes again to look at her master for directions. He looked back at her with a comforting smile, but there was a terrifying coldness in the depths of his eyes. She tried to move but her body didn't listen.

Desolation, sorrow, acceptance.

She closed her eyes again, and images of a long-lost time flickered through her mind. Of the small workshop in the heart of the basin, some distance away from the Hive. Of two orphans playing while their master worked on his inventions. A carefree time under a different sky.

A smile crept across Adcarkas face as he sensed how the resistance subsided, knowing his gambit had succeeded.

“A Fulcrum and the death of a world, to open the path to Monarchy. I'll provide these things, erasing the debt of the True Path and severing Karma. If my dear master is here to reap the benefits or not, that's his problem,” Adcarkas muttered as his eyes turned toward the Core of the Mystic Realm. “My destiny lies elsewhere.”

Chapter 616: Blood for Blood

The kiss came without warning, but it didn't feel wrong. Zac's hand moved to Thea's waist, and the two pressed closer in a passionate embrace. However, the warm softness disappeared as quickly as it came when Thea took a step back, leaving behind only her scent. It left Zac standing with a blank look, the series of events playing on repeat in his head.

"Uh," Zac eventually said after much thought, eliciting a snicker from his sister.

"Just in case," Thea shrugged as she pushed back one of her blond locks behind her ear.

Zac still had some trouble comprehending how things had come to this. Had she mistaken him getting the Gemling crystal as a grand declaration of love? He looked over to Ogras who stood to the side with a wide grin plastered across his face.

"Hey, don't look at me. One is all you get," Ogras snorted.

"We'll talk later. I'll get you out of here, I promise," Zac finally said to Thea as he composed himself, and Kenzie activated the machine.

A weird egg-like bubble immediately enclosed the two before it shrunk back and dropped into a spatial tear that appeared right beneath them. Both the Atwood siblings were gone a second later, and the tear closed behind them. Left were just Ogras, Thea, and a sterile lab.

"So, where's my reward?" Ogras snickered as he turned to Thea. "I almost got my ass handed to me to get that little stone out. How about it? We will probably be stuck here for a wh--"

Ogras didn't get any further as he hurriedly escaped into a swirl of shadows to avoid a sharp blue light that shot straight for his head. He appeared on the other side of the room a moment later, and Thea only gave him a scathing glance as she sheathed her weapon.

"What a violent girl," Ogras laughed. "I think Zac's better off picking one of his off-world misses."

"What are you talking about?" Thea asked with a frown.

"Oh, now you're talking with me?" Ogras grinned as he took out the **[Corporeal Serum]**. "I guess I could tell you, but where would the fun be in that? More importantly, the Lucky Token and our Computer Whisperer are gone, you better ready yourself for what comes next. Things will probably only get worse before they get better from here on out."

—

A painful current ripped through Zac's body as it felt like he was being squeezed through a thin tube. But the pain was thankfully gone as quickly as it came and Zac realized that his surroundings had already changed. He found himself in the corner of a warehouse, and he breathed out in relief when he saw his sister standing safely right next to him. Their surroundings were not as lucky, as everything within a sphere of 5 meters around them had been completely disintegrated, though new Memorysteel was already moving to make up for the parts lost.

The scene made Zac's heart thump an additional time, but he quickly calmed down when he realized there actually wasn't any response from the automated defenses. His eyes turned toward the disk beneath their feet, his best guess was that it contained some sort of failsafe that stopped the base from acting out.

Kenzie breathed in relief when he saw that the disk was still fine, and she bent down and stashed it away. She had already taken away all the other machines from the Lab, leaving just the spatial gemstone and the protected metals behind. It wasn't that Zac didn't want to take them, but just getting out the

second item had been dangerous enough, and he didn't want another incident on his hands.

"Let's go," Zac quickly said, and he grabbed Kenzie by her waist as he flashed away, hurriedly leaving the room before setting her down. The base still hadn't responded to them blasting a hole in its wall, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't do so in a second or two.

"We're alive," Kenzie said, almost looking surprised. "I guess Ogras was right about you. You're a luck magnet. You didn't just survive, you even got the girl. I'm jealous."

"Have you had enough?" Zac asked with exasperation, though he was inwardly a bit embarrassed.

He hadn't expected Thea to make a move like that out of the blue. They had gotten along quite well during their exploratory outings in this place, but she hadn't let on any interest at all. Then again, he wasn't the sharpest when it came to those things, and the more perceptive Demon had hinted to there being a spark a few times already.

Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't interested himself. Thea was smart, driven, and she cared for the people around her. She had an aura that inspired confidence even when she didn't say anything, and they seemed to be seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. It was just that Zac hadn't really been thinking about these matters since the integration, especially after what happened with Hannah and Alea.

It almost felt like he was cursed when it came to love, perhaps to make up for his luck in other departments. But mostly it was the simple fact that it was hard to think about matters of love when you had the fate of a whole planet riding on your shoulders.

"Hey, why are you looking all scrunched-up like that? I know you're interested, it's good that you're putting yourself out there a bit after Hannah. Although, I guess it was rather that Thea finally got tired of waiting? You should have gone all out, like in that picture of the sailor going off to war," Kenzie said.

“Alright, alright,” Zac sighed as he looked around. “I’ll deal with this after we’ve prevented our people from getting slaughtered. Can you tell where we are?”

“One second,” Kenzie said as she took out her tablet, but a frown slowly spread on her face. “We were teleported in the right direction, but we’re a bit far-off. Look.”

A series of dots appeared on the screen the next moment, almost looking like a star constellation.

“I don’t have a map in this sector, but these dots are my communication modules,” Kenzie said before she pointed at one solitary dot far from the others. “This is us.”

“It looks like we’re in the Outer Ring at least,” Zac said with a frown. “But we’ve been sent too far. We passed our own base and have been sent in the direction of the True Sky Faction.”

“Yeah, not even our scouts have made it this far. We’re over ten hours away if we go by the speed of scouts,” Kenzie said.

“Can you contact our people?” Zac sighed.

“No, we’re too far. I need to get closer to my network,” Kenzie said.

“Alright, jump onto my back,” Zac said.

“I can keep up, you know,” Kenzie muttered, but she still did as he asked.

“I know, but you don’t have my Danger Sense,” Zac said as he converted [**Love’s Bond**] to its shield-form. “Ten hours is way too slow. I’m going to be pushing it a bit. Hang on tight and tell me where to go.”

He shot down the corridor the next moment, following Kenzie’s directions. She didn’t have the natural understanding of Leviala or the other natives, but Jeeves was an AI with amazing machine learning capabilities. They had already mapped so many pathways and Leviala had shared some input before she decided to betray them, allowing Jeeves to make decent deductions of the surroundings.

Of course, where the barriers and spatial tears were hidden was all-too-random as far as they could tell.

Zac's mind suddenly screamed of danger just a few minutes after they set out, and he barely had time to stop before he entered a hidden mine-field, his coffin-shield receiving two scars in return for smashing the outer spatial rifts.

However, Zac had expected this to happen so he immediately set out with even greater speed. One thing they had realized over the past weeks was that these barriers at least weren't placed too closely. So if you encountered one trap, then you wouldn't see another one at least for a few minutes. Zac only slowed down to a slightly less frantic pace four minutes later until they hit their next trap.

The two kept up this system of switching between a jog and a sprint, with the coffin taking one cut after another over the following hours. The shield thankfully had amazing restorative properties and it was always restored before it received a new scar. Finally, after three hours of rushing, they came close enough for Kenzie to place a communications device, and she quickly tried to contact their forces.

"Who's this?" an indistinct voice echoed out on the other side, barely audible over the sound of explosions.

"It's MacKenzie Atwood. My brother is here as well. What's going on?" Kenzie said.

"Thank god! It's Joanna. We're under attack by natives and their machines! We got your warning thankfully, which saved a lot of lives. Those lunatics blew up the gate and hundreds of meters of the wall with some sort of spatial bomb. Our whole defensive perimeter was swallowed by the void, but none of our forces was inside," the voice said.

"What?!" Zac exclaimed with shock before he glanced at his sister. "The drill?"

"It shouldn't have that kind of power I think?" she said, though she clearly wasn't sure. "Besides, it requires a lot of spatial energy to run. If they used it now, they wouldn't be able to use it to get out unless they had some special power source."

"What happened next?" Zac asked as he started running again.

“They came out blasting before the wall had a chance to heal. We tried to fight them but they have thousands and thousands of machines. We were forced to focus on defending as we retreated toward the second line of defense. We only made it thanks to the beastmasters,” Joanna narrated.

“The beastmasters?” Zac repeated with surprise bordering on disbelief.

He had fought both against and with the Tal-Eladar before, and he hadn’t expected to hear that they were such a big help in this place. After all, there were almost as many Anointed in the Mystic Realm there were Tal-Eladar, and most of the beastmasters weren’t anything special.

“They managed to create a beast tide somehow, summoning those Lunar Wolves. They went crazy as they attacked the natives, but they mostly ignored us thanks to some sort of smoke the beastmasters released. It allowed us to make it back to our second line of defense with far fewer casualties,” Joanna said.

“What’s the situation now?” Zac asked as he breathed out in relief.

It was lucky that he had started mending fences with Verana. Who knew how many lives she and her people had just saved? Losing the Lunar Wolves was a shame, but it wasn’t like he had any thought-out plans for them in either case.

“I don’t think they have any more of those bombs since they neither used them against the wolves or our second line of defense. They are currently resting up while their machines are trying to exhaust our shields outside the glasshouse. They have too much firepower, we have been forced to set out on raids to draw attention and let the shields restore, a lot of people have been wounded,” Joanna sighed. “We’ve expended thousands of talismans to minimize our casualties.”

“That’s what they’re for,” Zac said. “I’m on my way. Just try to hold out, and start backing away if you can’t. No need to make a last stand.”

“I understand,” Joanna said.

Fury burned in Zac's chest when he heard that Clan Cartava really had gone all-out to attack his people. Any thoughts of reconciliation were thrown out of his head. He'd quash this uprising, and take the spatial drill from Leviala even if he had to pry it from her cold dead hands. But he could only keep running for now, steeped in anxiety, as there was still a long way to go.

But finally, they reached mapped-out areas of the Outer Rim, at which point Zac could go all out. He turned into a blur in the hallways as he kept using [**Loamwalker**] to maximize his speed. He could soon hear sounds could from ahead, running steps and subdued voices. Zac immediately took out his axe just in case, but a flurry of emotions went through his heart when he saw the source of the sounds. The corridors were filled with soldiers with various degrees of injuries.

Some were carrying their unconscious or fallen brethren, while others seemingly had given up, sitting down against the Memorysteel wall with a blank look in their eyes. Zac guessed the wounded were being sent toward the next defensive layer, the gate leading to their secluded section at the edge of the Mystic Realm.

"Lord Atwood!" A bloodied soldier said with relief when he saw Zac appear around the corner. "You're here!"

It was like a ripple went through the stream of people, with hundreds of eyes turning his way. Zac felt a bit uncomfortable, but he knew he could just slink away. He needed to say something

"I'm here," Zac said with a voice that echoed through the corridors, a voice full of pent-up anger. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but I'll make sure these aggressors never forget the price of messing with our people."

It was short and a bit cliché, but it contained an unbending conviction that almost turned palpable as Zac passed through the ranks. There would be blood for blood.

Chapter 617: Like Moths to a Flame

Leviala looked on at the destruction from her drone chair with bleakness, her sight only made possible by using [Heaven's Eyes] as her physical eyes had already become useless. Guilt and self-loathing filled her as plumes of fire rose to the sky, and the air vibrated from the unending barrage of attacks.

“War always has casualties, child,” Tictus sighed as he kept tapping away on his drone-controlling tablet next to her. “I know you feel this is a mistake, and it might very well be. But the elders are not acting without reason. We know there has been an infiltration, and we know that this outside force might not necessarily have been aiming at us. But we still chose this path, your grandfather still chose to step down voluntarily even after your account. Do you know why?”

“Freedom. The fact that the outsiders were as powerful as you described only spurred the elders into action. What would have happened if we did as you said? We would be forcibly conscripted into a war that was not of our choosing, stuck in this hell as the world around us crumbled. Who do you think this Lord Atwood would see as expendable? What role would we have in his private crusade?”

“But more importantly, this outcome was already cemented the moment that Zachary Atwood closed the door to our prison cell. The same is already happening over at the True Sky Faction. It is a basic instinct to wish to be free,” Tictus said. “Your sacrifice gave us a fighting chance at least. But you’d be wrong to blame yourself for anything.”

Leviala weakly nodded, even that small movement causing a wave of blinding pain in her mind.

“We... Should hurry,” Leviala whispered. “I have a bad feeling.”

They should already have been out by now, but Clan Cartava had met setback after setback on their path to freedom. First were the corridors that turned rabid, killing dozens and destroying a large chunk of their mechanized troops the moment they reached the gate to this forest. It was no doubt the work of Kenzie, the mysterious sister of Zachary Atwood.

It turned out that they had kept their guard up even before her betrayal.

But that was just the start. They had been forced to detonate their last remaining spatial bomb to pass just the gate, something that had been meant as a last-ditch weapon to quickly annihilate the opposition without any losses. Now they had been forced into a protracted battle against these lunatics that were far more powerful than was normal considering their low levels.

The outsiders had even managed to enlist help from the Lunar Wolves, with thousands of beasts trying to rip through their ranks.

“The elders are still restoring their reserves after pushing back that army of giants. And I still can’t believe a Titan managed to survive somehow. I wonder if that means some of our ancestors made it out alive as well,” Tictus muttered.

“Still,” Leviala sighed. “It feels like a darkness is coming ever closer, threatening to swallow us up at any moment.”

“It’s not much longer. Their shields are on the verge of crumbling. Ten more minutes and we’ll be able to launch a final assault, utterly crushing them. From there it’s just one sprint to the gates of freedom.”

Foolish.

How utterly foolish he had been, to believe that he could stand on an even footing with these natives on the basis of the millions of people he controlled. He coughed out a mouthful of blood as he crawled up to a sitting position. It provided

vantage for him to witness the fires that stretched across the horizon.

The True Sky Faction was supposed to be like them by all accounts, a fragmented group whose main advantage was numbers rather than individual strength. They had a council as a deciding organ, and there were even elections every decade by the sounds of things.

But the moment they found a weakness, they pounced like a pack of rabid beasts, forcing their way through the spatial rifts using some unknown means, storming toward their spatial tunnel. The only reason their soldiers weren't completely overrun was the timely assistance of the tide of beasts that were attracted by the smell of blood. The blood of his soldiers.

Even that was just a delay of the inevitable though. The New World Government had worked tirelessly to unearth as many weapon caches as possible over the past year, taking everything they could get their hands on. US Army Stockpiles or old Soviet munitions belonging to African Warlords, they took it all.

But their rockets had barely managed to take out a third of the far superior machines of the True Sky Faction, and when their cultivators eventually made their move it was already over. A few ambassadors had managed to escape, but their defensive measures worked against them this time. The moment someone in the outer base heard of what was going on they triggered the trap, closing the tunnel and abandoning their people.

Of course, Thomas Fisher had an override, but it wasn't like he would have a chance to use it seeing as how he was surrounded by a diverse group of aliens.

“Human, we know you have a method to reopen the tunnel. Tell us how to remove the restrictions, and you and your people can join the True Sky Faction,” a furry monkeyman said, his fur silver and bristled from advanced age. “Together we'll deal with the other factions, creating a foundation that can stand tall in the multiverse.”

“Joining you bastards?” Fischer coughed with a wan smile as he infused some energy into the hidden fractal inscribed on the back of his tooth. “I’m not worthy. Besides, I can’t have you treacherous bastards running around on Earth.”

“Treacherous? You kept eliciting our help in return for our freedom, but you never delivered on your end. We’ve lost hundreds of warriors and three settlements keeping those cultists at bay. Now the world is ending, and we have run out of both options and patience,” the burly humanoid said with a growl as he looked down at Thomas’s wretched form. “Now, the exit.”

“You can forget it. What life would we lead with bastards like you lording over us? I’d rather leave our people to our own tyrant. At least he’s born in the United States.”

“I gave you a choice, but never mind,” the old cultivator sighed as he turned to one of his companions. “Search his mind.”

Thomas’s heart thumped with fear at the prospect of getting mind-raped by some alien, but he quickly calmed down again, taking a steadying breath. He still couldn’t understand how things came to this. He still remembered the sense of purpose he had back then, how he had led his people through the Tutorial before creating the foundation for his people to survive.

When had his goals changed? When had his convictions changed?

It felt like his humanity had been chipped away piece by piece by the temptation of power. He usually blamed the lizardmen and the insane insectoids for his actions. But in his heart of hearts, he knew better. This new world was poisonous, and he had gladly drunk its putrid waters.

Perhaps it was for the best that it came to this. He could die while he still maintained at least some of his humanity. He knew he was greedy and scheming, but never let it be known that he didn’t care for his country. This would be his final gift.

The rest would be up to Zachary Atwood.

“Have you heard of Atomic Bombs?” Thomas laughed as he looked up at the aliens before he activated the array. “They’re banned outside, but who would have thought it was possible to assemble one in this place?”

The eyes of the alien widened with comprehension.

“Run!”

But it was too late. A sun was born, blossoming just a few hundred meters away, and it would soon swallow them all.

“Trash, what kind of warrior kills themselves instead of fighting?” Cervantes snorted and threw the corpse into a wall before he turned to Yoros. “Have you confirmed it?”

“Yes,” the shaman quickly nodded as he ripped the bone-spike out of the pretender’s head. “Their leaders entered through another portal.”

“Shame. And the item?” Cervantes asked as he scanned through the Cosmos Sacks.

It was infuriating. These weaklings possessed a level of wealth that beggared his own, and these were just some insignificant scouts. Meanwhile, he had been forced to cultivate in this cursed environment, living on run-off and scraps like a rat. He would have formed his core a long time ago if it wasn’t for his wretched circumstances.

But fate was finally turning.

“They call it a Dimensional Seed. Their leaders seem to want it to reach the C-Grade, but it can be used to create a private world. A new home for our Tribe?” the shaman hesitantly said, looking at his leader in hopes to discern his thoughts.

“C-Grade or a private world,” Cervantes mused. “Well, my useless nephew failed with his task, but things might not be over yet. The answers lie at the Core.”

“Fate congregates toward the center,” Yoros agreed.

“Something enormous is brewing.”

“Good,” Cervantes nodded as he turned to his clansmen standing in wait.

The whole room was still illuminated by lunar splendor after having activated the ceremony, with thousands of his kin radiating a ruthless aura. The killing intent was palpable as well thanks to the corpses of the hundred pretenders lying on the ground.

“I know you all yearn for freedom,” he said. “To bask in the glory of the true moon. But we have suffered in this hellhole for millennia. If we try to leave now, we are just victims who managed to escape. That is not the Lunar Tribe. No, we will seize this moment and turn calamity into opportunity. Our people will not have died in vain. We’ll strike at the core.”

A war-hungry roar emerged from his tribe, and Cervantes nodded with a grin. However, Yoros walked over to him with a hesitant look on his face.

“We should hurry. Something changed a few hours ago. The fluctuations are growing erratic.”

Zac flashed through the throng of people with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to help them, but what could he do except rush to the frontlines? He ran as fast as his legs could carry him and his sister, but each face he passed was imprinted on his mind, building his furious momentum to even greater heights.

This was a cruel reminder of the realities of the Multiverse. He and Clan Cartava didn’t really have any great reason to become enemies, but sometimes that wasn’t enough to become friends. Conflicting views and lack of trust had led to this miserable outcome, and the Church of Everlasting Dao was clearly adept in muddying the waters even further. And there was nothing he could do but to finish things once and for all.

He was still hundreds of meters away from the gate, but he could still feel the deep explosions in the distance as their force transferred through the Memorysteel walls. The incessant tremors were ample proof of the intensity of the battle taking place on the other side. They finally reached the gate, and it actually opened itself as a group of bloodied soldiers were about to retreat.

“Lord Atwood!” a chorus of voices shouted, but Zac’s eyes were on the defensive perimeter outside the glasshouse.

It almost looked like the whole sky had been lit on fire.

A constant bombardment assailed the defensive array. It was still holding, but it was obviously on its last legs. Cracks kept appearing, allowing a series of beams to slip inside and wreak havoc on the temporary town inside. Only the glasshouse was unscathed, the reinforced glass seemingly immune to Technocrat energy weapons.

A hundred Anointed stood in a line behind the barrier, a thick stream of energy emerging from their bodies to strengthen the shields. They were each supported by a squad of Zhix warriors who infused them in power. They in turn were supported by a group of supportive cultivators who did everything from protecting them from errant attacks to improving their energy transference.

Emily was one of them, her face pale as she held her hands against a totem pole she had conjured.

The physical wall was halfway crumbled already, with most of the Ishiate cannons in ruins. Still, over a hundred warriors stood on top of the wall-walk, desperately sending out attacks as others ran to reinforce the cracks in the barriers.

Zac flashed forward, appearing next to Joanna on top of the wall just as she sent out a storm of fractal weapons through the shield. However, Zac saw how they were quickly destroyed by an onslaught of lasers.

“Thank god you’re here,” she exclaimed when she saw Zac appear. “I don’t know how much longer we would last without you. Those machines are just too annoying.”

Zac looked out across the battlefield and saw what Joanna was talking about. The whole forest outside had been leveled to give way to a massive mechanical army. The flying drones were just one of the machines the Cartava Clan used to fight their war for them. There were just as many drones that looked completely different, like flying red eggs.

They didn't have any weapons, but it was obvious that they were rather there to form an enormous red canopy of shields that covered the whole army. There were also landbound machines that packed a wallop, along with a few robots whose function Zac couldn't immediately discern. As for the Cartava clansmen themselves, they actually stood out of reach, letting the machines do their bidding.

The mechanical army was clearly the most immediate threat, and he turned to his sister who looked at the army with greed. She had already taken out her tablet and she was tapping away with fervor. However, she suddenly froze as her eyes widened in horror, just as the drones broke the carefully arranged line a few hundred meters away from the barrier.

They all suddenly shot straight toward the wall, and even Zac could sense a rapidly accumulating energy in the machines.

“They're booby-trapped! They activated a self-destruct protocol the moment I connected with them. I can't deactivate it, they'll blow up this whole town!”

Chapter 618: Path to Freedom

Zac blanched when he saw over a thousand drones shooting straight toward them. Most of the machines thankfully held their position, but he had felt the power of just a handful of spider balls self-destructing just a few hours ago. He understood all-too-well that the harried defensive shield wouldn't provide much protection against a blast of that magnitude.

“Can you deal with this wave? I have an idea on how to deal with the rest!” Kenzie hurriedly said, and Zac grit his teeth before he nodded.

The coffin appeared on his back almost instantly, and a thick cloud of pitch-black gases emerged from it as Zac shot out one max-sized fractal blade after another. The others on the wall-walk desperately tried to help thin the numbers of drones as well, and one massive explosion after another incinerated the air itself outside the barrier.

Unfortunately, there were just too many of them, and the barriers of the defensive drones protected them as well. Only Zac was powerful enough to destroy shields and drones alike, but even then they only managed to destroy a third of them before the machines were upon them.

A majestic demoness had thankfully already appeared outside the barrier by that point. It was [**Death's Embrace**], the final card up Zac's sleeve. He had hoped to save it for later, but the Mystic Realm kept forcing him into one desperate situation after another. Alea's opened arms wide in what looked like a welcoming hug, and the drones actually seemed to be attracted by the gesture.

They were spread out into small squads of defenders and attackers before, likely to avoid getting taken out by one massive attack, but they all turned to move straight toward the demonic avatar. Zac could clearly sense them being dragged from some mysterious force of the avatar though. One explosion after another erupted in her embrace, but they were muted like the fiery outbursts were sucked straight into a black hole.

A small sphere of fire and steel quickly grew in Alea's arms until it was almost too big for her to contain. There were still over a hundred machines left, but Zac knew that the skill had reached its limits. He quickly gave the order, and the avatar's jaw unhinged as she swallowed the massive ball before returning turning into a mist that receded into the coffin.

Zac was already prepared, and two streaks of light flickered in front of the wall. Two clouds, one gold and one black, could be seen for just an instant before space split in two and destroyed the remaining suicide drones in one go. Zac exhaled in relief when he saw that the first group was dealt with before he quickly scanned his Spirit Tool. He was worried that something would go wrong after **[Love's Bond]** swallowed a bunch of drone scraps and fire, but it looked like the coffin really could eat anything.

Alea had still not as much as sent him an emotion or impression like Verun often did, so Zac couldn't tell whether feeding her things this way was beneficial or detrimental. But that was a worry for later as a second squad was already setting out toward them, this one more than twice as big.

"I'm not sure I can block this without creating some massive fallout," Zac whispered with worry to his sister who was tapping away with such speed that her fingers had turned into a blur.

"I got it!" Kenzie shouted. "I'll knock them all out for a few seconds. Get ready to destroy them. I will not be able to do help you for a while after that. My... computer... will need to recharge."

Zac looked at Kenzie with surprise, but he quickly understood what she meant. It sounded like she or Jeeves had developed some sort of energy discharge aimed at Technocrat machines, and it was powered by Jeeves himself. Zac wasn't sure how to feel about that. It was one thing for the AI to help her with the tech side of things and give cultivation pointers, but now it was starting to directly weaponize itself as well?

Where would it end?

He knew that he couldn't be picky at a moment like this though, and he nodded at her to go ahead as he started to charge up [**Deforestation**]. He had decided to go all-out from the get-go considering that this mechanized army might actually be the strongest force of the Cartava Clan. Kenzie sighed as she shot a forlorn look at the vast repository of weaponry she wouldn't be able to steal before a sharp red light shot out of her eyes as she rose up in the air.

Her face turned into a callous mask as she looked down at the mechanized army outside the gates, like an emperor looking down on its subjects. She placed her palm on the tablet in her grip before throwing it out toward the incoming horde. The tablet exploded after just a few meters, releasing a small wave that Zac barely could discern.

It didn't look like much, but it was extremely effective. The hundreds of red shields covering the army disappeared in an instant, and the machines all stopped in their tracks as the drones started to drop from the sky. Zac was already on the move by that point as he jumped down from the wall and rushed toward the army with all the speed he could muster without activating [**Loamwalker**].

“Stop him!” someone roared from within the mechanized army, but the Cartava Clan's caution was working against them now that Zac and Kenzie had arrived.

They had wanted to let their robot armies pave the way for them while they conserved their strength, but they ended up in a position where they were unable to intercept Zac as he swung his arm and then swung it again as two massive axes almost superimposed on each other.

A ripple spread out through the exposed machines before thousands of deep cuts appeared out of nowhere. Many of the falling drones were directly destroyed while the larger robots on the ground just got their plating shredded. The mechanical army didn't even get a chance to wake up before a wave of flames hit them next, scorching and shredding everything that was still standing.

Just like that, the foundation that had held Clan Cartava safe from the other natives was gone, utterly destroyed because of the deadly combo of Zac and his sister. An army made up of over ten thousand drones and thousands of other weapons were destroyed in an instant, but that wasn't Zac's main goal.

He rushed forward through the wreckage, his eyes trained on the chaotic defensive line behind the inferno. He spotted a few scorched corpses among the burned metal scraps, no doubt Datamancers hiding among the machines.

But those people weren't his concern any longer, his eyes were already trained on the true army of his enemies. The Cartava Clan had let their machines attack the base for hours by this point, and they had clearly grown complacent after dealing with the wolves. They had no proper shields up since the defensive drones stationed at their front lines were still malfunctioning, and many seemed to be frozen in stupor upon seeing their whole robot army being destroyed in an instant.

Zac felt some hesitation for a second, but he quickly pushed it aside as emerged through the flames like a god of war. The enormous pitch-black Axe of Desolation appeared above his head, and it clove the air in a horizontal arc. A massive cloud of destruction billowed toward them, as if Zac's judgment upon the Cartava Clan had taken form.

The wave of desolation moved deceptively fast, hitting the frontlines of Clan Cartava before the drones had a chance to reset themselves the quick-witted cultivators had erected some shields by themselves, but the cloud easily slipped through the cracks. There were no screams as the first clansmen succumbed to the Axe of Desolation. They simply stopped moving before they fell apart, crumbling into pieces of ash that drifted away.

Some reacted quicker than others as they desperately tried to attack the cloud or flee for their lives, the latter finding far greater success than the former. The defenders managed to weaken and delay the wave a bit, but hundreds of people still died in an instant, some of them even E-Grade.

Of course, a single attack wasn't enough to completely eradicate an E-Grade clan.

A massive eye suddenly appeared in the sky, and even Zac felt immense pressure from it even if its gaze was trained on the wave of desolation. The thick black clouds tried to push even further, but it had already exhausted too much energy dealing with the frontlines. It was stopped in its tracks, locked in a stalemate with the fractal eye.

The impasse didn't last long though as a massive hole was blasted through the wave. Three seniors walked through, each of them radiating intense killing intent. Two of them were old men with long flowing beards, while the third was an old lady. None of them held any weapons as far as Zac could tell, but he knew that all three of them were proper cultivators judging by their auras.

It was no doubt the elders who had stepped forward at this crucial time.

They stopped in front of their army, gazing at Zac with a mix of shock and anger.

“You must be the one called Zachary Atwood,” the man in the middle said with a murderous glare, his aura exploding toward the sky. “You're powerful, but Clan Cartava has waited for liberation for millennia. We will not be stopped by your tyranny.”

A roar of agreement erupted from behind, with the thousands of soldiers glaring daggers at him. The previous fear and hesitation was swept away, replaced with a palpable bloodlust.

Zac's eyes thinned as he looked at the old geezer. His aura was actually weaker compared to the man to his left, yet he seemed to speak for the three. Zac guessed that this was the second elder that Leviala mentioned, the one who essentially staged a

coup. That meant the old guy to the left should be the previous Grand Elder, Leviala's grandfather and the most powerful warrior of Clan Cartava.

Three high E-Grade Cultivators and an army assisting them from behind. It was a bit more than he could handle, but he knew that his people would join soon now that the mechanized army was dealt with. He just needed to hold down these three seniors while his people dealt with the others, at which point victory was theirs.

He was about to make his move, but he suddenly felt slight tremors in the ground ten meters away from him and he immediately guessed something was amiss. He quickly jumped away just as the ground exploded, but Zac hurriedly stopped sending out a fractal blade mid-swing when he saw a familiar head pop out.

"WE ARE HERE! Ah? Why are you here?" Billy roared as he emerged full of vigor, but he quickly lost his momentum when he saw Zac standing right next to him.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" Zac asked with bafflement.

"These big guys told Billy they are good at digging, so Billy wanted to ambush the bad guys," Billy explained as one Anointed after another emerged from the hole, each of them radiating looking fully rested in contrast to those who had manned the walls.

"Ambush?" Zac said with a confused look. "Then you did you scream we're here?"

"A-!" Billy exclaimed as Rhubat sighed and shook his head. "I guess Billy got too excited?"

"It matters not, Wallbreaker. We have appeared right on time," Rhubat rumbled before he turned to Zac. "We're here to assist you, Warmaster."

Zac nodded in thanks before he started when he saw Verana emerge behind the legs of the Anointed as well, accompanied by six other Beastmasters. It looked like this elite squad had planned on going all out when the barrier broke, launching a

deadly counter the moment Clan Cartava thought they had seized victory.

But now that Zac had appeared the Anointed had changed their plan, digging their way out prematurely. After all, there was no way that the energy-sensitive Zhix hadn't sensed his appearance.

"We can just help keep one at bay for a bit," Verana said as she looked at the old lady who had not spoken until now. "They are proper Late-Stage warriors, after all."

"That's plenty," Zac said as his aura started to grow.

"Are you truly determined to bar our way on our path to freedom?" the man to the left suddenly asked, his face a mask of grief and exhaustion.

"It might have been possible to work something out before, but that time has passed," Zac said as he turned back toward his enemies.

"So it has," the man sighed.

His aura was completely unleashed the next moment as an elongated ring of white lightning appeared like a halo behind its back. It was almost blindingly radiant, and it reminded Zac of a vertical eye made from pure energy.

"We'll take that one!" Billy roared as he grew, his height soon dwarfing even Rhubat's. "He zapped Billy before. Billy's gonna thwunk him back."

"That old lady still hasn't made her move," Verana said, her face clearly a bit reluctant. "But we'll do our best."

Lulu, Grub, and Slither appeared from within her sleeves, each of them rapidly growing into massive beasts in an instant. They were a lot more powerful compared to the last time Zac saw them, probably thanks to Verana purchasing a part of the Beast Crystal mine before Zac set off to the Tower of Eternity. Verana wasn't planning on staying behind this time as she jumped up on the head of Slither while the other Beastmasters joined in, each of them conjuring mysterious fractals that entered the bodies of the three beasts.

Zac felt he must look like a toddler sandwiched between the hulking Anointed and the awe-inspiring beasts, but his aura told the truth. With two of the elders occupied for the time being Zac only needed to worry about the second elder, and that was perfect in his book. This man was the mastermind behind all the trouble Clan Cartava had caused as far as he could tell, and taking him out would make everything else a lot easier.

The ground was already vibrating as the chains of [**Love's Bond**] slithered out from the coffin on his back, each of them looking like a tentacle hungry for destruction. It was the Zhix horde, thousands of furious insectoids to settle their grudge with the Cartava army.

“Go,” Zac growled, as he pointed his axe toward the second elder.

The ground cracked for hundreds of meters and the sky lit up in color as six massive sets of auras clashed, fighting for supremacy.

Chapter 619: Despicable

A spectral forest rose from the ground as Zac flashed forward, the trees immediately giving him a second sight as he tried to close the distance to the Second Elder. Most of the Cartava Clan cultivators seemed to be leaning toward mage-classes, which meant that turning the fight into a melee was his best bet at ending things quickly.

The Second Elder frowned as he looked at the forest that had sprung up around him. He pushed his hand forward, causing hundreds of runes to appear, each of them seemingly made out of steel. Zac could somewhat guess what was going on. The Grand Elder used lightning as an element, his insights probably stemming from the Base Power that powered this place.

The Second Elder instead had focused on the Memorysteel itself for inspiration.

Zac was a bit surprised none of them seemed to have insights into space even with all the spatial rifts around them, but he guessed it was simply too hard to gain insight into that Dao as an E-Grade cultivator in this place.

A sudden pang of danger dragged Zac out of his thoughts as a metal arrow shot straight toward him, coming from the closest rune. It contained a tremendous force, and the air itself was frayed as it flew straight toward him. But Zac only glanced at it before refocusing on his enemy as a chain lashed out to intercept.

The sharp sound of metal colliding echoed out as chain and arrow clashed and a small shockwave erupted. The chain of **[Love's Bond]** was pushed away, but it was clearly Zac who came out victorious in the initial engagement. One of the links had a small white mark from where the arrowhead hit, but the whole arrow was disfigured as it fell to the ground.

One flash forward moved Zac almost a hundred meters, putting him just ten meters away from the old man. A radiant edge was already tearing through the air as **[Chop]** expanded to over fifteen meters, creating a vast kill-zone in front of him. The elder looked startled as he moved to run away, but he was far too slow. The blade bit into his torso before he could take more than a single step, instantly bisecting the old man.

However, Zac just frowned as the Second Elder supposedly died, and his worry was quickly confirmed as Zac found himself surrounded by over a hundred pitch-black spikes that reminded him of Alea's ultimate attack. The bisected old man turned into streams of metal the next moment shooting toward him with extreme speed.

Destroying all the spikes around him would be too annoying so he immediately activated **[Loamwalker]** to flash away, but he didn't even manage to take a single step before the two streams of metals reached his legs and turned into two manacles that felt as heavy as mountains. The sudden burden made him stumble, and the spikes shot toward him at that precise moment.

Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to get away, and the veins on his forehead pulsated as he forcibly took a step forward and disappeared with the help of his movement skill. It felt like the muscles in his legs would tear from the exertion, but a loud snap confirmed that he had forcibly broken the restrictive skills as he moved.

A green barrier appeared around Zac as he activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, just in time as he crashed through a dozen of the black spikes. The barrier barely held as Zac escaped the encirclement, a testament to how powerful the attack was when counting the number of spikes left behind.

He appeared fifty meters away, and he turned around just in time to see a large spatial tear being created by the hundred remaining spikes. They had actually ripped a hole into space when they stabbed toward a singular point, and the air twisted and distorted as the rift swallowed everything around it before space mended itself.

There was no time for Zac to regain his footing though as one arrow after another shot toward him from the runes all around him. Zac growled in annoyance as his chains turned into a blur, forming a defensive barrier even more effective than **[Nature's Barrier]**. It was something he had come up with some time ago, but it only worked when there weren't too many projectiles to deal with.

The chains kept him safe for the time being, but he knew that this wasn't a sustainable situation.

He had already spotted ten clones of the old man forming a circle around him, each of them forming different hand seals, no doubt preparing his next major attack. Massive outbursts of lightning and massive sigils clashing to his left was proof of a battle that was quickly reaching a fever pitch, and the three beasts to his right were already bloodied as the Tal-Eladar desperately held on for dear life.

The Second Elder had seized the momentum the moment Zac looked over at that very first arrow. It had given him a short window to teleport away while leaving behind a boobytrapped clone, even escaping Zac's improved senses from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. Zac knew he needed to break the stalemate, but it looked like the second elder wasn't actually trying to take him out. He was just probing him while stalling for time, waiting for the others to finish up their fights.

Unfortunately, Zac saw no simple quick fix. The clones were extremely life-like, and Zac couldn't actually tell which one was the real elder even with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Zac knew what he had to do, though he hated such tactics. But this was not the time to hesitate, and the lustrous halo of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** appeared behind his back while he also started infusing a storm of Cosmic Energy into **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The axe of the axe-man appeared inside the halo, and Zac shot toward the closest avatar. It was shredded into pieces by one swing of his E-Grade skill, the ground itself turned into a deep gorge from the force generated by the halo. The clone wasn't the real elder this time either, and his body fell apart into liquid metal once more.

This blob didn't shoot toward Zac, but it rather rose into the sky as it absorbed the metal runes in the area, forming one massive fractal. Zac spotted a similar fractal as large as a fist suddenly appear on his robe, and he felt a tremendous pressure like he was bound by unseen fetters. It reminded him of those annoying spiderlings he had fought during the final battle of the second Beast Wave, where each spider that attached to him increased the gravity.

This one mark added over ten times as much weight on his body, but Zac was also not the same person as he was back then. He bore the weight without a change in expression as he flashed toward the second clone. This one was right at the edge of his fractal forest, and it was the closest one to the Cartava Army.

The second avatar was destroyed in a single swing as well, and another massive fractal appeared, just as expected. The strain on his body more than doubled, but Zac only snorted as he pushed his free hand forward. An enormous crack in the sky appeared, but not right above him. It was instead above the army just a few hundred meters away, and the large wooden hand emerged in all its glory.

Zac wasted no time as he rushed forward, running away from the encirclement and his spectral forest. He was surprised to feel that the restraints increased by a whole tier after he left the circle the elder's clones had set up, but he could still move almost freely supported by his almost inhuman amount of Strength.

Screams of confusion erupted among the natives as an emerald fractal appeared in the sky, immediately putting the soldiers under immense pressure. Confusion quickly turned to fear as a small sapling rapidly grew into a towering tree, with hundreds of branches shooting downward like spears.

It was like the tree had eyes as well, with the attacks only targeting the natives while avoiding the allied army of Port Atwood.

"Despicable!" the second elder roared, and he actually emerged out of the ground in the middle of the encirclement.

It was no wonder that Zac couldn't pinpoint his location. He was actually hiding underground, masking his aura while he let his clones fight for him. But Zac didn't care that the real elder had appeared as his eyes were peeled on a young man shouting orders in the middle of the army.

This was a battle for the survival of Earth, and if he needed to act despicably to get the job done, so be it. The second elder seemed to want to draw things out to tip the scales in their favor, but Zac had one card up his sleeve to force his hand; the elder's grandson. Zac had already spotted the man he suspected to be the one called Yvian some time ago. Furthermore, he was just an early E-Grade warrior, not a match to Zac at all.

Hundreds of barriers erupted as the soldiers tried to defend against the death from above, but the Zhix warriors didn't have any such worries as they launched another assault with unmitigated bloodthirst. The pitched battle between the two armies quickly turned to a bloodbath as the soldiers found themselves unable to deal with the pincer attack of both Zac and Zhix.

An enormous explosion erupted to his left, and Zac saw Billy appear out of nowhere to block the Grand Elder's attempt to reach his clansmen. A torrent of lightning bolts blasted out from the glowing eye behind the old man in an attempt to force Billy to give way, but the ten-meter giant released a thunderous roar as he slammed his gargantuan club into the ground.

The whole area shook like the whole mystic realm was about to split apart before a towering mountain rose from the ground to block the old man. A section mountain exploded in turn as six familiar balls shot out with shocking force, each of them exploding around the Grand Elder, drowning him in a ceaseless barrage of stone-shards reinforced by Zhix conviction.

It was the Anointed that launched a surprise strike while the elder was preoccupied with the plight of his clansmen, and their joint attack caused some serious wounds to appear across his body.

The three beasts were similarly unleashing ultimate strikes to block the infuriated old lady, leaving just the Second Elder to protect his clan. As expected, a towering metallic beast suddenly rose among the soldiers, looking a bit like the werewolf but wearing a spiked turtle shell on its back. The spikes turned into innumerable spears that slammed into the descending tree, ripping apart branches by the hundreds.

Zac only snorted as he kept infusing [**Nature's Punishment**] with even more Cosmic Energy, causing new branches to sprout and stab at the soldiers beneath. As for himself, two quick flashes put him right in front of the man he guessed was Yvian.

“No!” the man screamed as his face turned pallid in fear.

A barrier appeared in front of him, but it cracked before Zac's overhand swing even reached it, the massive pressure of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] alone enough to shatter it. However, the second elder appeared in front of Yvian out of nowhere, his whole body turning into a pitch-black metal covered in dense sets of shimmering fractals.

It was like he had turned himself into a war machine, and he stabbed his right hand forward while the other hand moved up to block Zac's swing. Zac's Danger Sense warned him of the huge force contained in the jab, but he didn't care at all as his eyes were filled with death as he stared at his targets.

Just as [**Verun's Bite**] was about to clash with the palm it erupted with tremendous force, far eclipsing anything he had displayed until now.

“Wh-!” the old man blurted, but it was too late.

A massive scar split the ground for over a hundred meters as Zac infused his attack with Fragment of the Axe, the first time since he arrived that one of his attacks were infused with the Dao. The sudden and shocking increase in power had been too much, and the steel-related Dao Fragment that the old man used was clearly just at early mastery.

A sharp pain spread in his side as the jab of the second elder managed to puncture Zac's body even with his high

Endurance. However, the elder didn't follow up on his attack, and neither did Zac. Zac just took a step back to extricate the steely hand from his body before the wound rapidly started to close.

The two forms of Yvian and his grandfather only stood unmoving for a second before they split apart, and it was their deaths that fueled the activation of [**Surging Vitality**]. It would normally be impossible for Zac to use his healing skill in the middle of a battle, but there were just dead bodies all around him while Zhix elites had quickly formed a protective circle while he healed up.

It had been a gamble since the beginning, but it worked out in the end. There was something Zac had noticed the moment he stepped into this Mystic Realm; it almost felt like the Tower of Eternity in the sense that his connection with the Dao was extremely weak.

He was still able to push his Fragment of the Axe forward thanks to his earlier encounters, but he had already realized from his battles until now that none of his enemies really excelled in the Dao. The downed elder was proof of that. He was no doubt hundreds of years old, yet he only had a Low-Grade Dao Fragment.

Perhaps this was because of the characteristics of the Mystic Realm or perhaps it was a result of the Dimensional Seed sucking up all the Origin Dao, but in either case, it gave him a hidden weapon. Thanks to hiding his cards during the whole battle, Zac was able to burst out with extreme force in an instant with the help of a High-Mastery Dao Fragment.

Leviala had no doubt warned of his power before, but by hiding his attainment while targeting Yvian he had created an opening. Still, there was no satisfaction in Zac's heart for dealing with the Second Elder this way. He knew that Ogras would be smiling with pride if he had seen Zac's tactic, but this wasn't how he wanted to deal with problems. His eyes gazed across the Cartava army that was completely crumbling by this point, and hesitation filled his heart. What now?

And it was at that point another prompt appeared in front of him.

Chapter 620: Sankhara-Dukkha

Zac knew his people weren't out of the woods just yet, but he still scanned the prompt that had appeared in front of him before deciding on his next move.

Sankhara-Dukkha (Training (6/9)): Emerge victorious and seize the Spatial Drill. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 2 levels.]

He didn't know what the quest name was referring to, but the task was more straightforward. It also confirmed the importance of the Spatial Drill to the point that it almost felt like the System had sensed his hesitation and told him 'do what you want as long as you get the drill'.

The problem was what he should do now. He had just killed the Second Elder a few seconds ago, and his death had instantly roused the battle lust of the Zhix as they rampaged through the army with newfound vigor. Less than a third of the native army was still standing, with Zac being the biggest perpetrator by unleashing both the third swing of **[Deforestation]** and **[Nature's Punishment]** upon them.

He could probably force a surrender as long as they dealt with the two remaining elders, but to what end? What would he do, saddled with thousands of prisoners when they needed to move toward the core of the Mystic Realm?

But could he just slaughter them all just out of convenience?

Was there some sort of middle-ground?

"No!" a wail echoed out from the distance, and Zac turned his head to see the old lady desperately trying to break past the

beasts in an effort to reach him, or perhaps the body of the Second Elder.

Her eyes were stained with tears and her old body was covered in bloody wounds. The air around her kept twisting and distorting as Grub constantly switched between slamming his enormous teeth together and releasing his massive bellows. Zac remembered all-too-well the restrictive power those soundwaves possessed.

The elder still pushed forward, shielded by a massive avatar that looked a bit like a huge scarecrow. It was made from hundreds of different plants, with leaves and fruits giving it facial features. Its limbs were made from straw and roots, and it was decked in a robe made from leaves. It stood over twenty meters tall, and it radiated both a life-force that eclipsed Zac's own wooden hand while also radiating the aura of a powerful adversary.

The grass around its feet kept growing taller as flowers sprung up around it. Perhaps it was the avatar of a God of Harvest, something the elder had used to nurture the plants of the clan. But that was obviously not its only function as that avatar alone seemed more than capable to deal with all three of Verana's beasts, even when they were empowered by a group of elite Beastmasters.

It wasn't very quick, but its attacks contained an enormous force. Slither tried to block as the elder and her champion pushed through Grub's restraints, but the old lady was on a rampage. A single punch from the avatar threw the snake over fifty meters away, and it was clearly grievously wounded from the hit.

Lulu harried the old lady while running in circles as she tried to light the scarecrow on fire with her spells, but roots kept stabbing up from the ground leaving deep lacerations on the foxlike beast. It was like nature heeded the old lady's call, lashing out at everything around her.

If nothing changed, then the third elder would soon reach the clashing armies. That wasn't the real problem though. The problem was the look in her eyes as she unerringly stared at

Zac. He didn't know the background of this senior, but judging by the bone-chilling killing intent in her eyes as she stared at him, she was more likely to self-detonate than to surrender.

Then something suddenly changed. A ball of extremely concentrated poison shot toward the old lady as Slither unleashed one final attack before it fell unconscious. A series of thick leaves sprouted from the ground, but they were instantly incinerated as the blob flew straight toward the old lady. It contained a corrosive effect of a magnitude that rivaled **[Blighted Cut]**, and even Zac felt some pressure from it.

The elder was finally forced to look away from Zac to meet the new threat head-on. She made a series of seals as the scarecrow hurriedly bent over, placing its two slab-like hands to block the incoming projectile. The already oversized hands of the avatar quickly grew even larger, turning into two meter-thick ramparts.

A storm of purple smoke erupted when the blob hit the wall, and even Zac felt the ground shudder from almost two hundred meters away. That wasn't all the Beastmasters had prepared though. Grub released a piercing high-pitched wail that conjured a tunnel that swallowed the elder in an instant. It didn't seem to hurt her, but it was like time had slowed down inside it.

The elder's avatar was already preoccupied with dealing with Slither's attack, allowing Lulu to fire a massive pillar of white flames straight at the old lady, incinerating the air itself. The elder moved like in slow-motion inside the pillar, but a storm of golden leaves flew out to block out the attack.

Zac breathed out in relief as he started running over. The trio had gone all-out, but it still looked like the elder would come out unscathed. However, the situation had given him a window of opportunity where he could quickly restrain her with the help of the restraint module he still carried with him. If he could capture her with the help of that thing, the war would be over since the grand elder was already wounded thanks to the Anointed's surprise attack.

His approach was immediately spotted, and a ruthless gleam shone in the elder's eyes as she looked at him. It looked like she had given the massive scarecrow some sort of order as well as it was slowly turning toward him, its hands mostly corroded away. But Zac didn't care as he rushed toward her.

However, a familial form soundlessly rose from the ground like the soil was made from water, appearing right behind the old woman. There was no hesitation as Rhubat made his move the moment he saw an opening thanks to both the elder and the avatar being preoccupied.

“Wai-“ Zac said as he rushed forward, but it was too late.

The elder seemed to have realized something was wrong the moment Rhubat appeared as well, and dozens of vines appeared behind her to tie him up. But the roots were instantly turned to ash as Rhubat exploded with radiant flames; the flames from burning one's lifeforce. Rhubat's fist gained a golden glimmer as it punched straight through the vines and then the torso of the Cartava Lady, instantly killing her in one blow.

Her gaze never left Zac's though, not even in death.

The foliage and fruits that made up the twenty-meter avatar rapidly started to wither and rot away as it slowly curled into a fetal position. A second later it was just a putrid ball, but simply standing in its vicinity caused Zac's Danger Sense to go off. Something was brewing inside that ball.

”Quickly, get away!” Zac shouted, allowing the Anointed to scramble out of the way just before the crumbling avatar exploded, disintegrating the old lady and the surrounding fifty meters.

“Thank you, Warmaster,” a bloodied Rhubat rumbled as he appeared next to him.

“No problem. Here, take this,” Zac said as he threw a large Longevity Pearl to him. “Eat this thing. It might help you a bit.”

Rhubat shrugged and swallowed the pearl in one go, its massive size making the pearl seem like a small pill.

“Longevity,” Rhubat said as he looked down at Zac with surprise. “This is a great gift.”

“I can’t have you leave us just yet,” Zac smiled, happy that the pearl seemed to have at least some effect on restoring Rhubat’s remaining lifeforce.

“Not while the crusade is unfinished,” Rhubat agreed.

“Help me with the last one,” Zac said as he looked over at the Grand Elder. “I have an item that can completely restrain him.”

They had already come this far, so Zac felt he might as well take this war all the way. The old man was bleeding all over, but the others in the group were even worse-off by now. The massive explosion had actually saved the lives of two of the Anointed, but one was already dead on the ground. Killing the third elder had come with a cost.

The death of the second elder had made the old man freeze and look over, allowing the other Anointed to barely jump out of the way of a beam of electricity so intense that it lingered in the air like a scar on reality. Only Billy’s aura was still somewhat stable, but he was covered in scorch marks from head to toe, his lungs working like bellows as he greedily swallowed air.

Everyone was unwilling or unable to make the first move, putting them in an impasse for a few seconds. The old man’s eyes moved from the crater to Zac, and finally to the rapidly crumbling army of his clansmen. There was fury in his eyes, but more so helplessness. But then there was finally tranquility and a dash of insanity as he smiled at Zac.

“Cartava, forever standing!” the man suddenly roared as he lit up like a beacon, causing massive waves of lightning that forced Billy and the Anointed to back away.

A collective roar erupted among the remaining Cartava soldiers, and each of them turned into beacons as well as a blazing lightning eye appeared above their heads. The whole area shook from the outburst of Cosmic Energy, and Zac got a sinking feeling as he saw the madness in the old man’s eyes.

“Shit, they’re blowing themselves up!” Zac screamed as he looked on with wide eyes as he launched a barrage of fractal blades at the Grand Elder.

The fractal blades didn’t even get close before they were turned to ash, and Zac was all out of powerful moves. His blitz had been short and brutal, and [**Rapturous Divide**] was still on its cooldown.

“RETREAT!” Rhubat roared as he erected his series of earthen shields to protect his grievously wounded brethren.

The Port Atwood army had already disengaged, with everyone running for their lives as hundreds of people joined each other in death. The world turned white a second later, and Zac almost felt like the whole Mystic Realm was falling apart. He could only open his eyes a few seconds later, only to see hundreds of craters littering the battlefield, the largest one unsurprisingly the Grand Elder’s handiwork.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked as he turned to the Anointed.

“We’re fine, Warmaster,” Rhubat sighed as it gazed at the elder’s crater. “A valiant ending.”

“Hmm,” Zac hummed, feeling something was amiss, though he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Those thoughts were thrown into the back of his head though when he spotted a familiar figure in the distance.

—

“It’s over,” Tictus sighed, a wave of desolation emanating from his body. “It’s all... over.”

“Grandpa,” Leviala sighed with a forlorn expression.

“I know father would have wanted to say goodbye, but he was out of time. This way our elites will be able to bring him away, giving the clan a final chance at survival. Perhaps an opportunity will arise if they hide until after the treasure matures,” Tictus said as he put away his tablet.

“What about you?” Leviala whispered. “You can still...”

“We’re standing outside the field. If they try to help us, they’ll expose themselves and break the illusion. They are probably already gone,” Tictus smiled.

“I’m sorry,” Leviala said. “If not for...”

“Don’t be. I’m happy to accompany you, child. It’s not right for you to be left alone after all you’ve sacrificed. Besides... Mala, my children... All have already gone ahead. I’m... tired,” Tictus smiled as he looked down at his niece.

Leviala only felt hollow inside as she deactivated her bloodline skill. She had seen enough. Her curse almost felt like a blessing at this point, shielding her from the suffering around her. People she had grown up with, people she had looked up to or despised. A fragmented clan bound together by their common plight.

So many gone in just an instant, crushed by a vengeful judgment. The hair on the back of her neck suddenly stood up as an immense aura came closer, and she could hear the sounds of bare feet walking through the grass a few seconds later.

“Anything to say for yourself?” Zachary said, and she could feel his eyes boring into her.

Leviala opened her eyes and turned toward the source of the sound. She couldn’t see him, but yet she could. He towered in front of her like a force of nature itself. She was blind, but she felt that she never had seen so clearly before, not even when awakening her bloodline back then.

Zachary Atwood was an aberration, an entity that should never have been provoked. Fate swirled around him, drawn to him like fireflies were to fire. To go against him was to go against the Heavens themselves. Yet she also knew one fundamental truth.

He was just one. One among many.

One star that shone a little bit brighter in a vast universe of stars and blazing suns, each of them swallowing everything in their surroundings in their unceasing ascent to the peak. People like her and her clan were just the soil that would help

these stars grow, and a sense of exhaustion and helplessness washed over her.

But then there was peace.

“In my next life, I pray that I will not become a cultivator,”
Leviala whispered as she closed her eyes forever.

Chapter 621: Ripples

Zac sighed as he looked down at Leviala as her body collapsed in the drone chair. He hadn't touched her, but it wasn't hard to tell that she died. It looked a bit like she committed suicide, but Zac soon realized that was not really the case. One glance with [**Comic Gaze**] exposed rampant energies that ripped through her innards. It looked like her body was full of what Zac assumed to be temporal cracks, and there was even a hint of something all-too-familiar; the aura of the purple Heavenly Lightning.

It felt quite diluted, or perhaps it was more apt to say it was hollow. Still, it felt like ample proof that her messing with time really came with grave consequences, especially when she didn't have any means to protect herself like Zac with his [**Void Heart**]. The sinister cracks that were only visible to his special sight stemmed from her two cursed eyes, spreading throughout her body.

His best guess was that she had somehow contained or managed to delay the effect, but she simply gave up just now, letting the curse end her life. Zac had run through the corridors with righteous indignation before, a towering fury building over the betrayal and assault on his people. He had meted out justice, or at least vengeance, but there was no sense of closure at this moment.

Looking down at Leviala Zac just felt... cheated. The Cartava Clan definitely deserved what was coming to them, but that didn't change much.

"Poor child," the middle-aged man next to the drone chair said with a sigh.

Zac's eyes turned to the man, taking in the intricate machinery that covered his Technocrat-suit and the helmet lying to the

side. He was definitely a Datamancer, probably one of the leaders and main controllers of the battlebot swarm.

“I guess you’re her uncle, the Datamancer?” Zac slowly said. “Where is the Spatial Drill?”

“Why should I tell you that?” the man said with a desolate smile. “My niece is dead, as is my own family. We have lost our elders, our mechanical armies, and most of our elites. Clan Cartava has fallen, this place finally did us in. Just kill me and get it over with.”

“Many have died, but even more should still be alive,” Zac said, steeling his heart as he pointed toward the direction of the gate to the Cartava Clan. “This is just a part of your people. There should still be thousands of civilians relying on your protection. What kind of future they will lead will depend on your answers. Or I can go there and settle things myself, leaving no lingering threat behind.”

Honestly, Zac didn’t want anything to do with the Cartava civilians. He almost hoped they would hide away in some corner of the Mystic Realm, out of sight and out of mind until he had dealt with his real goals in this place. But he had already confirmed that the quest was just at (1/2) in completion, meaning the drill was still unaccounted for. He needed answers, even if he had to use the rest of the Cartava Clan as leverage.

Zac was about to continue pressuring the Datamancer, but a pulse suddenly rippled through the air. It didn’t come from the middle-aged man though, but rather seemed to come from the inner parts of the Mystic Realm.

“Wh-“ Zac said as he took a steadying step, but he didn’t even have time to react before a second pulse arrived.

He suddenly found himself standing over fifty meters away from the Datamancer, displaced by some mysterious means. He hadn’t even felt himself move. The Datamancer had essentially jumped onto the drone chair of Leviala, and he stared at the direction of the core, his miserable demeanor replaced with a calculating look.

Zac could easily understand what he was thinking; was the Dimensional Seed Awakening?

Suddenly a huge sphere made from spatial tears and the same type of shielding as the base used sprung up around the Datamancer. Zac immediately realized something was wrong, and he rushed forward, his axe already shining with a sanguine light as he activated the first fractal on its handle.

The Datamancer only glanced at Zac before he bent over Leviala's corpse, and Zac felt his blood freeze when he saw what he was doing. He was digging out her eyes with his own bare hands before he transferred them to a special vial he had taken out from a Cosmos Sack. After that, he took out a crystal sphere, a ball filled with something that looked like a black hole.

Zac still couldn't figure out what the Datamancer was up to, but his instincts told him that he had to stop it. The shield was thankfully only so strong, and it soon crumbled under Zac's all-out onslaught. One more swing and the Datamancer would be dead.

"Stop right now or I'll turn you into mincemeat," Zac growled as he walked closer, only keeping him alive because he needed answers.

The Datamancer frowned as he looked over at Zac before he seemed to come to a decision.

"You asked about the Spatial Drill, didn't you?" the man said as he warily looked at Zac. "Well, here it is."

The Spatial Drill appeared in his free hand the next moment, making Zac's heart lurch. He would instantly fail his quest if the Datamancer destroyed it, but that wasn't the real issue. Zac's instincts told him that it would cause untold problems down the line if Zac didn't get his hands on that tool. He expected it to be hidden or in the hands of one of the elders, but it turned out that they had handed it over to their chief Datamancer.

"Don't do anything stupid," Zac warned, cosmic energy already coursing through his body.

“The Heavens have a sense of humor. Just as I was resigned to death, it provided a path of survival. I thought I was ready to pass on, but I guess not. I am but 180 years old, I can still start over as long as I get out of here,” the Datamancer muttered, but Zac wasn’t sure whether the man was talking to himself or to him.

“We can make a deal,” Zac said as he took out a teleportation token from his Spatial Ring. “I have dozens of teleportation tokens that can take you almost anywhere in the Zecia Sector. Give me the Spatial Drill and help me reach the core and I’ll give you one along with enough Nexus Coins to activate it.”

The middle-aged man looked at the token with hesitation and greed, but a third ripple suddenly appeared out of nowhere, this one causing them both suddenly to appear five meters into the air. The two landed onto the ground without any issue, but Zac got a sinking feeling when the Datamancer’s eyes had calmed down after the spatial displacement.

“The world is ending, and you’re still thinking of the treasure?” the middle-aged man smiled. “I hope you’ll find it in your heart to leave a path for my clansmen. Here, catch.”

Zac was about to try to convince him once more while simultaneously having one of his chains move toward the man below the ground. But his eyes widened in horror when the Datamancer suddenly threw the Spatial Drill out with great force as a series of new barriers appeared around him.

Confusion clouded Zac’s mind, and he didn’t know what he should do. What did the System want from him? The quest told him to get the Spatial Drill, but the drill had led him to one of the topmost Datamancers in the Mystic Realm. Besides, the Drill was a Technocrat tool, shouldn’t it survive some roughhousing, especially with Kenzie there to make some field repairs?

But a sudden realization hit him. Why did he care about what the System might or might not want him to do? Ogras’ story about Divine Guidance had planted a seed of hesitation, but was there any point to second-guessing himself? He just

needed to follow his instincts, and they told him to go for the machine.

Getting the drill was far more important than capturing a Datamancer.

He flashed forward with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but a fourth ripple caused reality to bend for an instant before it was restored. This one was far more powerful than the previous anomalies and Zac quickly realized that something was wrong. It almost felt like he was in one of those nightmares where he tried to run but he couldn't move from his current spot. His legs moved forward just fine though, and he could quickly confirm that it wasn't some sort of illusion.

It was space itself that had started to unravel.

Hundreds of meters had been compressed into what appeared to be a hundredth of the distance. Each step with his movement skill pushed him forward, but it looked like Zac moved less than a meter. Thankfully the same odd situation seemed to affect the Spatial Drill, and it looked like it moved in slow motion on its descent toward the ground.

It felt like time had stopped as he desperately tried to make himself run faster. Zac spared a glance at the Datamancer after a few seconds, and his brows rose in shock as he saw what he was doing. He had already thrown Leviala's corpse to the ground, and it looked like he had extracted something from the machine.

Another contraption held the weird ball that looked like a black hole, and the two together looked like some kind of doomsday device. The Datamancer was slowly moving to insert another item into the contraption, something that clearly was an energy source full of Base Power. The sphere was already radiating tremendous spatial waves, and Zac didn't even want to think what would happen when the device would get a busload of Base Power.

Another odd pulse hit Zac, and he suddenly found himself moving forward with dizzying velocity. He barely had time to refocus on the task at hand, and he stopped just in time to snatch the Spatial Drill out of the air, immediately putting it in

his Spatial Ring for safekeeping. He immediately turned back toward the Datamancer to capture him, but he soon realized that he was too late.

A huge Void Sphere was born where the doomsday device hovered a second ago. It was more than twice as big as the Void Spheres he had seen until now, but that wasn't the only odd thing. The Datamancer had done something to modify it. It almost looked like it had an arched doorway that held back the outer layer of spatial turbulence. Zac immediately started running, but the distance was too great. The Datamancer passed through the arch before Zac made it halfway back.

But it was clear that he was struggling.

Layers after layers of shielding appeared around his body, but they were destroyed almost as quickly as they were formed. But he didn't care as he had almost reached his goal; the core of the Void Sphere. This one didn't show a distant star or the void of outer space, but rather land. It, thankfully, wasn't Earth though as the sky was yellow while the ground was covered by some weird bone-like trees.

It looked like the Datamancer had already prepared a final escape plan for his clan, or perhaps for just himself. Seeing how he had dug out Leviala's eyes before discarding her body like it was trash, Zac guessed it was the latter. Something had changed after the first ripple had arrived, something that the Datamancer believed had given him a shot at survival.

Even worse, Zac felt that the Cartava elite really believed the world was ending, and Zac's own conviction that the natives were wrong was honestly starting to become poisoned with doubt. But the thought of jumping into the Void Sphere as well didn't even cross his mind.

He couldn't even entertain the thought that the Mystic Realm was falling apart. Even if he managed to escape alive through that spatial bubble, then what? His sister, all his friends, all his subordinates would still be stuck in a collapsing realm, facing death all alone. He was better off fighting for a chance of survival in this place, and the Spatial Drill might be the key to the puzzle.

Zac still kept running toward the Void Sphere, but he eventually stopped a hundred meters away. The Sphere was starting to suck in everything in its surroundings, and Zac was afraid that he would be dragged inside if he came closer or tried to snatch the Datamancer with his chains.

Eventually, Zac simply stopped to observe. Part of him wanted to send out a fractal blade as some sort of retribution for how he had treated his niece's body. Something unconscionable like that shouldn't go unpunished. But he reined in his bubbling anger, more concerned about what he was trying to do.

Space in the mystic realm was becoming weird and unstable, and he and his people might soon need to use similar means to escape. If Zac could learn what to do and what to avoid by observing this attempt it might save lives further down the road.

Most of the Technocrat shields had already collapsed around the middle-aged man, and his right arm was suddenly cut clean off as he pushed through the inner spatial tears. He looked like a mangled corpse from over a dozen deep lacerations, but Zac could sense that he was still alive as he finally managed to push through the spatial folds, falling into the core of the Void Sphere. His body twisted and distorted, making him look like a blob.

Both the Datamancers and the Void Sphere disappeared a second later, leaving Zac wondering if he actually made it or not. One thing was clear though; Leviala hadn't been lying about the dangers of those things. Jumping into a Void Sphere was fraught with danger, and even someone with ample preparations had been pushed to the brink of death in his escape attempt.

Yet another ripple caused space to bend into an u-shape, and Zac's heart lurched when he suddenly saw treetops from the Lunar Forest point down toward him. Honestly, Zac wasn't sure whether he or the half-dead Datamancer had the best odds of survival at the moment.

Chapter 622: Upheavals

It looked like the structural integrity of the Mystic Realm was starting to unravel because of the mysterious ripples. Zac tried to discern what the ethereal waves were doing as they passed through the area, but his **[Cosmic Gaze]** simply couldn't pick up anything at all. Zac could only guess that the Dao or energy inside those ripples was simply too high-tiered for his skill to catch them, which wasn't surprising considering the grade of the Dimensional Seed.

Zac had a strong feeling that things would only get worse before they got better though, and he started running back toward his people.

Short was long and long was short as one pulse after another started hitting him with increasing velocity. The weird spatial expansion and contraction started to leave a mark on his body, as an odd sense of hollowness spread through his limbs, like his energy had been exhausted from being stretched and molded like a ball.

The same seemed to be true of Zac's surroundings. He could see trees falling apart for seemingly no reason in the distance, and hairline cracks spread across the Memorysteel wall and on the ground. Zac's worries that the whole base would fall apart as the Dimensional Seed matured only intensified, and he needed to confer with Kenzie who should have some readings by now.

The army had already retreated toward the fort by the time Zac managed to cross the battlefield where hundreds of mangled bodies still lay unmoving. It should just have taken a second or two with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but he repeatedly found himself running in the wrong direction or repositioned.

Verana, Billy, and the Anointed had stayed behind to rest up while waiting for Zac, but they immediately started running as

well when they saw how quickly things were deteriorating. Verana was carrying her wounded beasts in her arms as she ran for her life, and Rhubat carried one of his brethren over his shoulders as he rushed toward the shield, each step causing tremors in the ground.

“Warmaster! What’s happening?!” the Anointed shouted when Zac finally caught up to them, prompting Verana to look over with the gaze of a drowning sailor seeing a life raft.

“I’m not sure why, but the Dimensional Treasure is awakening early! We need to gather up our people to not get separated!” Zac shouted back without stopping.

Zac had no idea what he was talking about, but this wasn’t the time to let that on. Gathering together felt as good an idea as any, and he hoped that whatever was going on would at least somewhat follow the rules of teleportation. That if people touched each other they would stay together.

The pulses kept increasing in intensity, but Zac somewhat breathed out in relief as they managed to make their way back to the base. The shield had already collapsed, and thousands of eyes turned toward him with worry and questions. A glance indicated that most of the wounded had already returned, gathering together with the others within the wall.

He wanted to assure them all that everything would be fine, but his eyes darted toward the core of the Mystic Realm with hesitation. Should he try to get everyone out of here? He was about to speak to his people, but he suddenly found himself unable to speak as monstrous energy suffused everything around him.

The world twisted, and Zac couldn’t maintain even a semblance of control. He was as large as a moon, a single thought taking days to reach his extremities. He was just a speck of stardust, where just a drop of water would be enough to drown him a million times over. Space had collapsed, where distances and dimensions held no sway.

All was chaos.

It was only possible to make sense of his surroundings for an instant before the universe turned mad again. The world turned flat before it became... less. He saw a vast infinity where space even stretched toward the future and the past, a dimension where space and time had melded into one.

He saw a world sailing in the shadows of reality, he saw life and death collapsing into themselves. An eye stared back at him, seemingly surprised to be seen. A pair of hands ripping apart the sky. He saw a splinter hidden at the bottom of a sea, a shard in the heart of a volcano. Weird visions assailed him one as the fundamental laws of space collapsed around him.

The world finally returned to normal, or at least not as insane. Zac wasn't sure how he felt. It was as though he had caught a glimpse of destiny, or heaven's secrets themselves. Now he was back in his mortal flesh like he was blinded from the truth. But this was no time for introspection as the cataclysmic changes clearly had just begun.

His eyes widened in shock as the towering Memorysteel wall started to fall apart, turning into streams of liquid that rushed toward the core of the Mystic Realm like a river in the sky. And it wasn't the only one. Thousands more just like it appeared in all directions, and Zac was only able to see it since the whole dimension kept bending and twisting.

A terrifying explosion erupted to his left as one of the moons crashed into the ground. It was like a flashbang of unprecedented proportions had been set off, and Zac felt a terrifying force throw him into the air.

One moment he saw a forest in ruins, the next moment he found himself in a vast darkness with a thin line of light. He didn't even have time to panic at being thrown out into the Void before he was back inside the base, and he slammed into the crumbling wall they had built as a defensive line. It was pretty odd that the shockwave had pushed him toward the point of impact, but Zac was more confused as to why the walls remained unscathed.

The wall was made from massive blocks they had harvested from a nearby island outside the Mystic Realm, and they stood

completely unphased as everything else seemed to fall apart. Was it because the material wasn't native to the Mystic Realm?

Others had realized the same oddity as well, and more and more huddle against the battlements and their false sense of safety. Zac made his way over to his sister who hid next to the wall, desperately typing away at a tablet.

“Are you okay?” Zac said.

“I'm fine. I'm trying to understand what's go-“ Kenzie said, her words cut short as she suddenly disappeared, only appearing a second later. –“ing on here. But it's chaos. There's not much we can do but wait.”

The world kept twisting and shaking for over an hour, at which point most people had fallen unconscious. Even Zac was barely hanging on, and he could eventually just close his eyes and hide against the wall while shielding his sister. But the shakes finally subsided, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief as he popped a Soldier Pill and Fasting Pill to give a quick boost to his exhausted body.

Kenzie had barely been able to stay conscious but she wasn't in any condition to start dealing with this mess. She quickly sat down in a meditative pose to focus on recuperation. Zac wasn't quite as wrung dry and he immediately stood up to start looking for clues. The glasshouse, the walls, and the forest were all still there, but the cataclysmic changed had caused large sections to fall apart.

More importantly, it was clear that they had all shrunk significantly, to the point that all or at least most of the spatial expansion had been undone. The walls were only six meters tall now, a far cry from their previous 50-meters height. The same went for the glasshouse, which was now a building of normal proportions.

It almost felt like a good thing, but his heart almost jumped out of his mouth when he looked up.

The metallic lines in the sky were gone, replaced with vast darkness; the Void had suddenly come much closer. There

were thankfully no Void Creatures flying about as far as he could see, but it still felt like something was looking back at him from within the darkness. Those terrifying hand-covered tentacles could descend any moment for all he knew, but things were at least quiet for the moment.

Perhaps it was thanks to a shimmering film protecting the atmosphere in the area. It almost looked like he was gazing at an ocean made of soapy water in the sky. The barrier rippled like waves on the water, seemingly expanding and contracting like it was breathing.

Zac sighed in relief and jumped up on the wall to get a better look at the situation, but the scene almost made him fall off again. The whole mystic realm had been completely transformed, to the point that Zac almost felt he must have been unconscious for years.

First of all, it became abundantly clear that the whole Mystic Realm had fallen apart. The Lunar forest simply cut off a few kilometers inland, the ground suddenly giving way to the Void. He could see similar scenes through the cracks of the broken Memorysteel wall, and he immediately realized they had been cut off from their way back home.

A quick survey showed hundreds of platforms drifting in the darkness. Some were completely detached and turned into small spatial islands in the void, but many were still held together by small strips of land.

For Example, Zac could spot a strip of land in the distance, a 50-meter wide natural bridge that connected their island with the next one over. To fall off it would mean falling into the darkness, which would either result in becoming food for the creatures of the void or ripped apart from spatial turbulence.

Most of the islands were covered in either exposed and partly crumbled Memorysteel corridors, or a flat slab of Memorysteel that no doubt held pieces of the research base inside. Others held forests or grasslands, even large bodies of water. It was no doubt the biomes that were spread across the base, now turned into small pockets of life in the darkness.

But not even this shocking transformation left as great an impression on Zac as what had happened in the heart of the Mystic Realm. With the towering walls back to their normal size and the artificial sky gone, Zac had an almost unimpeded sight all the way to the core of the mystic realm.

Where an impossibly huge mountain peak stood.

It was hard to get a sense of scope in this place, but he could see land platforms hovering around the foot of the mountain. If those platforms were roughly the same size as the one he was currently situated on, then the mountain was over a hundred thousand meters tall. The mountain itself glistened with a metallic luster, and Zac's eyes widened when he realized that it was probably made from all that Memorysteel that had drifted away earlier.

The platforms almost looked like small pieces of debris rather than islands that were kilometers across, and it seemed to Zac that most of them were connected to the foot of the mountain. In fact, most of the platforms were held together in a vast spiderweb, providing Zac and his people multiple paths to the mountain if need be.

The mountain didn't look like a natural formation, but it rather felt like the Memorysteel had been subject to some shocking magnetic forces, like it had been pulled up by immense power. It had created a single conical mountain peak that was slightly twisted but oddly symmetrical in a way that made Zac think of soft-serve ice cream.

As for what had been the source of the magnetic pull, it wasn't hard to guess.

A huge metal sphere hovered right above the peak. Judging by its size it might be as big as a planet, or at least a very large moon. It wasn't an actual planet though, as the sphere didn't seem solid. Massive ravines covered its surface, and mysterious energy fluctuations and lights escaped through the cracks.

There was no doubt in Zac's mind. The Dimensional Seed was most likely inside the heart of that sphere in the sky.

The situation was too sudden, too unexpected. The old plans would have to be scrapped, but he didn't know what his next goal was. Honestly, he had no idea how to even get out of this place, let alone complete the missions he came here to finish. It was chaos, both around him and in his mind.

A sudden clap of thunder drew Zac's attention. He realized that the noise came from a platform far behind him, at the edge of the mystic realm itself. It was one of the solitary platforms that were unconnected to the mesh of islands. Zac looked on with shock as the protective bubble around it flickered a few times before it disappeared, which was followed by a complete and utter collapse.

It was like the piece of land had been subject to the vacuum of space, and it was ripped apart from immense forces of every direction. Zac looked up at the protective film above, a sense of foreboding gripping his heart.

They needed to do something, and quickly.

Chapter 623: Benevolent Shepherd

Seeing a moat of land just like the one he was standing on falling apart filled Zac with a sense of urgency, and he jumped down to his sister who looked a lot better by this point. It was the same with himself. The sense of exhaustion and hollowness was quickly passing, and the soldiers all around them were gradually coming to as well, with groans and mutterings breaking the silence.

“Do you have any ideas?” Zac asked after briefly recounting the situation.

“It’s weird, I thought that the Spatial Energy would increase exponentially after the Dimensional Seed awakened, but it’s just the opposite. The surroundings are almost completely drained,” Kenzie muttered with a shamefaced expression. “I’m sorry, the calculations we ran were completely wrong. A lot of people are in danger now because of it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Zac said. “We would have entered this place no matter what. We just need to figure out our next step. Is it possible to use the Spatial Drill to get out of here in case of emergency?”

“It’s doubtful,” Kenzie sighed. “We don’t have any localization-abilities right now. It’s like we would be randomly drilling for oil without any geological surveys. The chance of hitting the jackpot is minuscule. Perhaps if we could get to the same spot where the Spatial Tunnel is located, but is that even possible now?”

“Honestly, I doubt it,” Zac sighed as he stood up. “I didn’t see any bridge between our island and the one on the other side of the glasshouse. I’ll check things out to see if we can cross through the void. Or make bridges or something.”

He entered the glasshouse, relieved to see that the door actually opened without issue when he tapped the console that was now just a meter above the ground. However, the situation on the other side of the gate was even worse than he had expected. It looked like the Mystic Realm had cracked almost right along the wall to the Lunar Forest, and less than twenty meters of the corridor remained before it cut off into the void.

The next island looked to be over a hundred meters away with a vast expanse of the Void separating them. The protective film seemed to be cutting off right at the edge of the island as well, meaning that there was no atmosphere in the gap. If one wanted to pass through to the island next over, they would have to really enter the Void.

That might sound simple, but Zac knew it was anything but. The Void wasn't like outer space. He had survived in space for a few minutes after blowing up the Little Bean, but he wasn't as confident about this venture. The Void was a subdimension, a fold between realities, and it was something else different a simple vacuum from what he had gathered.

The Void Creatures had unique constitutions to live inside the void, but the moment they entered a normal dimension like the research base, their bodies started to be rejected by the surroundings. Zac was afraid the same would happen to him and his people if they tried to jump across to the neighboring island.

Another surprise was that the short stretch of corridor wasn't actually empty. There were over thirty soldiers who had huddled against the gate, and they almost fell onto Zac the moment he activated the console.

"Thank you!" they gasped as they ran into the glasshouse.

"Did anyone see what happened to the people further inside?" Zac asked a soldier that he vaguely recognized as a warrior of Port Atwood.

"I'm afraid not," a human cultivator said after looking around at the others. "We were running back toward this place after you appeared, but the world suddenly turned crazy. I woke up a minute ago, my body just a few meters from that edge."

“Join the others, we might need to move out soon,” Zac said as he took out a Cosmos Sack. “Help me distribute healing pills and some Nexus Crystals among all the people.”

Zac himself didn't immediately return to Kenzie's side, but he rather walked over to the edge of the realm. He only dared to do so after securing his body with the help of the chains of **[Love's Bond]** though. The mysterious film was just a decimeter away from the abrupt end of the corridor, looking like a soap bubble.

There was nothing outside, just vast darkness far more oppressive than any starry sky. He took out a random spear from his Spatial Ring, pushing it through the barrier that let him pass without any resistance. It wasn't just morbid curiosity, he needed to see the effect of the Void if he was to lead his people between these precipitous islands.

Something was wrong though. The spear didn't appear at all on the other side of the barrier. Zac curiously pulled it back after a second, and he could confirm that it was mostly intact, albeit barely. It seemed pretty run-down, having lost its sheen while large spots of rust had appeared on its surface. It still maintained its structural integrity, but it looked like something that had been discarded in the wild for decades after just a second of exposure.

Zac took a deep breath and reached out his hand, gingerly touching the barrier. His hand passed through a second later, and he immediately felt a sharp pain in his hand that quickly forced him to drag it back. It had taken less than a second, but his fingers looked like all moisture had been sucked out of them.

The experiment's conclusions were pretty evident, and they confirmed his suspicions. You could fall through the edge of the platforms, and if you did, you were probably screwed. Just a few seconds in that kind of atmosphere would be enough to kill most people. It even appeared that something weird was going on with the dimension, from how nothing appeared on the other side. Space in the void might be bent, or perhaps even following some dimensional rules he couldn't understand.

Trying to jump to another platform seemed impossible in other words, though he would have to test by throwing some items or corpses to make sure.

A sudden sharp jab of danger shook his mind, and he immediately had his chains drag him backward. It was just in time too as a massive claw pushed through the barrier in an attempt to snatch him up, the claw looking a lot like the one he encountered with Leviala a while ago.

Zac already had his axe in hand, but he didn't make any moves as he looked at the situation. A frown slowly crept across his face as he realized there was a clear difference between this claw and the one he saw before. This one was distorting a lot slower. Eventually, it looked like the owner of the claw couldn't deal with the spatial distortions any longer and it hurriedly drew it back, but over ten seconds had passed by that point.

Zac didn't know exactly what to draw from that lesson, but it was a clear possibility that the difference between the Void and this fragmented realm was slowly decreasing, allowing the Void Creatures to stay inside longer. If that was the case they were in serious trouble, as even the smallest and weakest Void Creatures seemed to be quite powerful. What if a bunch of eldritch horrors like the Collector suddenly appeared?

They needed to get moving.

As to where, he wasn't sure, but he felt that the closer they got to the mountain the safer they would be. The protective sphere around the mountain was so thick that he could discern even from here, while it was just a thin film in this outer plateau.

He was soon back at Kenzie's side, and all of the leaders had gathered together by this point.

"Warmaster, what do you recommend?" Rhubat asked as dozens of eyes were trained on him.

"I thi-" Zac said, but he was interrupted by a prompt appearing in front of him.

"A quest!" someone shouted and judging by the commotion it was something everyone had received.

Zac looked at the wall of text in front of him, his frown deepening the more he read.

[Special Dynamic Scenario activated]

[As interlopers of a crumbling Taboo Undertaking there is just one road to salvation. Set out on a pilgrimage of redemption and claim a Spatial Seal. Only those marked will be saved upon the collapse of the dimension.]

[NOTE: Each person can only possess one Spatial Seal. A spatial seal can be gained by extracting it from the Taboo Mountain or killing a seal owner. Only those branded will be teleported out when the dimension collapses. Teleportation will take place upon dimensional collapse.]

[Struggle for Survival]

A sigh escaped from Zac's lips after having read through the quest, or rather the 'dynamic scenario'. It looked like the System really wasn't all-too-jazzed about people exploring a Technocrat research base, considering that it didn't even provide any rewards. The reward was that you got to live another day.

There were unfortunately a lot of questions left even after having seen the rules. For example, how rare were these seals, and what was required to get them? If they littered the mountain, then great, but Zac guessed that they wouldn't be so lucky considering how there were mentions of killing seal owners.

With all factions congregating on the same spot, everyone grasping for a shot at survival, this was going to turn into a bloodbath. The bloodshed would only be exacerbated by the fact that there was no timer either, and no one could really tell when this place would fall apart. The conflict would only keep escalating until everyone had a seal or the realm collapsed.

"Survival," Rhubat rumbled as their muscles tensed.

"You've seen the quest," Zac sighed as he turned to Joanna who had walked over. "We need to move out. Our starting position is working against us, the other factions are probably closer to the mountains. Get everyone ready."

“I’ll see to it,” she said before she started barking orders to the soldiers.

Zac knew he would be able to get read to the mountain quickly by himself, but it didn’t look like that was an option right now. The reason was simple; the others had gotten one prompt, but he had received two.

Benevolent Shepherd (Training (7/9)): Lead your followers to the Taboo Mountain and provide at least 3000 with Spatial Seals. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/3000).

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of rewards.]

He had finally “passed” his training regimen, but it looked like he still needed to complete all the steps to receive a reward. His personal quest also gave him some insight into the odds of survival. A quick survey indicated that there were around five thousand people gathered together in the fort.

To save over three thousand meant the seals couldn’t be all-too-rare, to the point that only a few would be able to get out. The question was only how large a share of the total amount of seals the System expected him to snatch. The higher a share the more bloody the quest would become.

Zac even had a hunch about the true purpose of this quest. Did the System want him to take out the native factions in his efforts to gather the seals, preventing them from rejoining the Zecia Sector? These unfortunate prisoners had obviously not come here voluntarily, but that might not matter in the eyes of the System.

It just believed they were heretics dabbling with the Dao of Technology.

“What about those stationed at the base?” Joanna asked.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Zac sighed. “We’re cut off from them. Hopefully, we can meet up with them on the way to the mountain.”

Of course, Zac had a sinking feeling that those left behind at the portal might be beyond salvation. The further out they

were, the fewer protections the platforms seemed to have. Their base was on the very edge of the Mystic Realm, and it wasn't impossible that section didn't even survive the cataclysmic events just now.

“AH! WHO MOVED BILLY TO THIS SCARY PLACE?!” a shout suddenly reverberated out across the fort, making Zac look over at the source of the voice.

Billy had woken up again it seemed and he was standing on top of the wall with eyes as wide as saucers.

“Billy,” Zac said as he flashed over. “Thank you for your help before.”

“Ah, it's you!” Billy said with a wide smile. “No problem, Billy just helped thwunk the bad guys. What is happening?”

“We need to get to the mountain to get out of here,” Zac said.

“No problem, Billy is great with directions. Billy will lead the way,” Billy sagely nodded.

“Can you help our people first? Make everyone get ready to travel,” Zac smiled.

The giant nodded and jumped back down the wall, seemingly full of vigor again. Zac turned just in time to see his sister appearing next to him. She immediately released a stream of drones that flew hundreds of meters into the air, forming a massive surveillance matrix.

“I'll map out a route for us. Not all the platforms seem to have bridges, while others are like crossroads with multiple options. Some islands might collapse as well, so we need to-,” Kenzie said, but she stopped herself as she looked down at her tablet. “Ah? People?”

“What's going on?” Zac asked.

“It must be the remaining people of the Cartava Clan,” Kenzie said with a slight frown. “They're already on the move.”

Chapter 624: Island Hopping

“The Cartava Clan?” Zac muttered with a frown. “What kind of group?”

“Thousands of people. Some of them are E-Grade, but most emit very weak energy signatures,” Kenzie said as he read the report on her tablet.

Zac slowly nodded, not surprised to hear the Cartava Clan had left some of their elites with the civilians just in case.

“Where are they going?” Zac asked, his vision blocked by the trees.

“They’re cutting through the forest. It looks like they’re already moving toward the core,” Kenzie said, opening a map. “You don’t think they’ll try to destroy the bridges to trap us here? Less competition for those seals.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the tablet before looking down at his people. Everyone was hustling and bustling to prepare for the move, dressing wounds and desperately absorbing Cosmic Energy from Nexus Crystals. They knew that falling behind in this place would mean death. But it still looked like it would take a minute or two before they were ready to set out.

“It looks like they are heading for a plateau far away from us, but it doesn’t hurt to be safe. I’ll go ahead to protect our route, meet up with me as quickly as humanly possible. The Cartava Clan isn’t the only faction we need to worry about. Others are already closer to the core, and they might try to dislodge all the platforms,” Zac said.

Kenzie nodded before she pointed at a bridge in the distance. “That’s our best option for now. We have multiple possible routes from there. The only issue is that we might be blocked by the base security.”

Zac's eyes followed where she pointed and nodded when he saw it was the closest bridge apart from one behind them. It seemed like a safe bet, and it wasn't the same as the one that the Cartava Clan was running toward.

"You're not going to... you know? Right?" Kenzie hesitated. "That group is mostly made up of mortals and children."

"No, I won't go after them," Zac sighed as he took out the Spatial Drill from his ring and handed it to his sister. "They have paid their price, they're just a shadow of their former strength. I won't move against them as long as they don't try anything again. Try to learn how this thing works, we might need to use it before this is over."

With that he set off, running toward the bridge Kenzie indicated. However, he did perform some looting while he waited. He ran straight through the battlebot swarm and swept up a few of the more powerful-looking machines without losing any speed. Next was the battlefield where he looted a Cosmos Sack from the Second Elder and his grandson.

He did take a small detour to the craters left by the Grand Elder and the third elder. He did manage to find a slightly damaged sack from the third elder, but not as much as a scrap remained after the Grand Elder's final attack.

Zac quickly realized something was wrong with the situation though.

He didn't have time to properly look for clues, but he had seen quite a few people exploding in a final act of defiance, from the demons just after the integration to the crazed cultists. In all these cases there were always some remains, like a foot or a piece of a skull. But the hundreds of craters on the battlefield were simply empty, like someone had thrown out an offensive talisman.

Had they been tricked?

The possibility only increased Zac's vigilance. It was one thing if the Cartava Clan were led by a small number of guards, but it might be trouble if the Grand Elder was still alive. They definitely couldn't be too friendly to his people at

the moment, and they might use this opportunity to launch a counter-strike. With that in mind, he only spent a minute at the battlefield before rushing off, only taking a moment to put the body of Leviala in his Corpse Sack.

The bridge was somewhat close to the gate clan Cartava had attacked from, but it wasn't hours away any longer now that the base had shrunk down. Zac guessed that it would take his people around an hour to get there, and for himself, it shouldn't take more than twenty minutes if he pushed himself.

The Memorysteel wall along the way looked like it was on its last legs. Most of the fractals had gone out, and the cracks were even worse than those at the outskirts of the Wasteland. These cracks were sometimes tens of meters wide, and they seemed to differ from the ominous scars from before. These were completely dead sections of the wall, clearly displaying the void or small sections of corridors on the other side.

Zac's best guess was that the walls and everything else in this place had lost its energy source but that they still worked independently as long as the components were fine.

Thankfully there were no traps along the way, and the bridge remained intact when he arrived less than ten minutes later. The bridge was actually a Memorysteel corridor that stretched straight through the Void over to the next island. It would probably lead toward an area formerly under the control of the Cartava Clan, though it was hard to tell how much of its original functionality the base maintained in its current state.

The section with the bridge was in even worse a state than the wall section Zac had passed, where the wall had been twisted and turned many times after the ground had been split apart. The bridge looked serviceable at least, with a distinct protective film around it. They would have to walk on top of the crushed and bent Memorysteel corridor, but something like that was easy enough for the cultivators who had been brought into the Mystic Realm.

After confirming that the bridge worked he took up a guarding position from on top of a piece of the wall, keeping watch of both his surroundings and the situation on the other platform.

There were no movements, but Zac heard one clap of thunder after another as he waited, each second feeling like minutes as he watched how the edge of the mystic realm crumbled piece by piece.

The crumbling islands at the edge of the Mystic Realm were troubling enough, but Zac soon noticed something else. The Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere was slowly decreasing. It would take a while for it to become an issue, but he couldn't help but wonder how things would be in a few hours. It wasn't completely impossible that they would have to finish the sprint toward the mountain without any ambient energy to assist them.

That alone was a huge issue as Cosmic Energy was required to use not only skills, but also to take advantage of the superhuman attributes that they had gained from the integration. The quicker they could get going the better. His wait was thankfully over after just over forty minutes as he saw his army rushing toward him with great speed. Billy was in the forefront, his head swiveling back and forth with wide eyes.

"Haha, Billy did it!" the giant shouted before a massive yawn escaped his lips. "Billy led the people here. Ah, so tired."

His eyes rolled into his eyes the next moment as he fell on the ground, but Zac breathed out in relief when the signature thunderous snores assaulted the surroundings.

"Wallbreaker fought desperately in the battle before," Rhubat said as one of his brethren picked Billy up, carrying him on its shoulder. "His reserves are depleted. We'll tend for him."

"This platform will fall apart in less than an hour going by how quickly the defensive membrane is losing energy density," Kenzie said breathlessly as she walked up next to Zac. "There is no time to waste."

"Start moving, follow me!" Zac shouted. "Across the corridor. Keep a high pace but keep the order."

Zac himself took the lead, with a swirl of leaves flying around him as he had his axe at the ready. He felt extremely exposed

as he ran across the jagged pieces of metal, his eyes constantly trying to see any signs of danger in the void that was all around him.

He could only breathe out in relief when he stepped down on land again, proving that the trip was possible. But he still couldn't help but worry after seeing just how close the protective film was to the exposed tunnel.

More and more people moved across, and no one needed any urging to pass as quickly as possible. Walking across that bridge had felt even scarier than when he was lost in outer space, especially considering he didn't have any token this time that could teleport him outside if need be. Besides, he knew all-too-well what kind of creatures lurked in the darkness.

Kenzie was one of the first to get across, and she immediately opened her tablet as he looked at the corridors that covered this place. A group of scouts was quickly called over, and Kenzie showed them where the army needed to go.

"Scout close-by corridors, decide on a path for us," Zac said, and the scouts nodded and immediately set out.

One of them actually started climbing up along the broken walls in an attempt to get up on the roof but he was immediately forced down again as half his body suddenly disappeared into the void the moment he reached the top. He looked half-dead when he fell onto the ground, but he slowly crawled back on his feet with a pallid face.

"Rest up instead," Zac sighed in disappointment after seeing that his first choice of path was a no-go.

Why go through a maze when you could go above it? But it looked like the roof itself acted as the separator between Void and Mystic Realm on this platform.

More and more people streamed across the bridge and the broken square was almost filled to capacity after a few minutes. However, a sudden shudder made Zac look down toward the other platform with worry, just in time to see a

mass of *something* rip the whole bridge apart while snatching up almost fifty people.

A few people desperately managed to hang on the ruined bridge as they crawled to safety, but roughly a hundred people were stranded on the other side, shock written all over their faces as they saw their road to survival being lost to the darkness.

Worse yet, with the connection lost, the islands slowly started drifting further and further away from each other. Zac immediately tried to throw a rope across, but it simply disappeared the moment it entered the darkness, never to reappear on the other side.

“The Void isn’t a proper 3-dimensional space I think,” Kenzie said with sorrow. “We can’t really exist in it properly, and directions hold no sway. Even if you get a rope across... I’m afraid...”

“I understand,” Zac sighed as he walked to the edge of the platform.

A hundred desperate sets of eyes looked back at him, but some of them fell to their knees when they saw Zac shake his head. Others were infuriated screaming and pointing in his direction. No sound could make it across the chasm, but Zac had a good idea of what they were saying.

Cursing him for bringing them to this place.

He sighed and shook his head, but he suddenly had an idea as **[Love’s Bond]** turned into its offensive form and two chains rose into the sky.

“It’s not-“ Kenzie said, but she stopped when she saw what Zac was doing.

The chains didn’t try to pass through the void, but they instead formed a shape, an arrow pointing in the direction of the next bridge, the one that the Cartava Clan probably had used. He could see that it was still in one piece, and it was the only option if they wanted to have a shot at survival.

The people on the other side immediately understood what he was talking about, and they started running as quickly as their

legs could carry them.

“Its shield is depleting much faster now,” Kenzie said with a frown. “But the shield on this island became stronger. I think the bridges act as power conduits as well for whatever protects these floating plots of land. We might want to break any pathways behind us.”

“Agreed. We keep going,” Zac sighed.

The squad set out, following the preliminary path the scouts had staked out. Zac and Kenzie walked in the front, with Zac on the look-out for Spatial Tears and Void Beasts, and Kenzie keeping track of the paths.

The first minutes were a bit slow, but Zac gradually increased the pace as they realized something; they hadn’t encountered a single spatial tear since the cataclysm. It looked more and more likely that they had been sucked into the mountain or the Dimensional Seed along with all that Memorysteel, and Zac was soon running at as high a pace that the army could withstand, the walls almost turning into a blur.

They did encounter a few closed gates along the way, but they were easily solved by Kenzie. Her Grade-4 clearance didn’t actually work everywhere, but that was easily fixed within a minute by her hacking the terminal.

One small relief about the situation was that the base had completely lost any central control functions. The corridors on the floating islands were like the limbs of a corpse without the Core computers taking charge; They had no brain to control them, but you could still trick them to move with some electricity. That allowed Kenzie to fully activate Jeeves to force its way through the protections without worrying about any repercussions.

However, alarmed shouts and sounds of battle erupted at the back of the army, and Zac swore in exasperation as he rushed over. Nothing good ever lasts.

Chapter 625: Under Attack

Zac immediately rushed back when hearing the commotion, fearing that the mysterious entity that had snatched up his people from the bridge had returned. But thankfully they hadn't been ambushed by the Collector or any rival faction, but rather the base itself. The walls had gone crazy, frenziedly attacking a group of cultivators who desperately activated one defensive talisman after another to stay alive.

The halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] appeared behind Zac's back as he flashed forward. He used the avatar of the axe this time, imbuing each swing a great force and sharpness, allowing him to crush the spikes as they tried to stab at everything that moved.

The cultivators were all elites as well and they organized their efforts to block the attacks. They normally wouldn't have been strong enough to deal with something like this, but Zac quickly realized that the attacks were pretty weakened compared to what he was used to. A series of cracks echoed out a second later, and the walls fell apart, exposing a neighboring corridor on one side and an empty storage room on the other.

Zac bent down and picked up a piece of Memorysteel, and found that it was quite malleable.

"What happened?" Zac asked with a frown as he turned to a panting soldier.

"I don't know," the bloodied soldiers said. "The walls suddenly started vibrating. Its surface looked like water during an earthquake. Then it just started attacking."

"I think the programming in the research base is unraveling because of the state of this base," Kenzie said as she came running. "This might not be the last time."

“We’ll see if we can gravitate towards open platforms as much as possible,” Zac nodded. “For now, have everyone keep watch for any changes in the surroundings.”

The group set out again, but the scouts soon came back with the news that they wouldn’t be able to reach the platform the way they were going. Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he walked over to the Anointed.

“Help me destroy the walls. They seem to have limited energy now. As long as we can cause enough damage they should crumble,” Zac said. “Finding a new path would waste too much time.”

“Let us handle it, Warmaster,” Rhubat said. “We know you must have expended a lot of energy during the previous battles.”

He turned to a group of Anointed the next moment and they nodded in understanding. A squad of a hundred Zhix followed behind, and four massive seals appeared in the air. The whole section started shaking a moment later as the Anointed unleashed an all-out barrage on the walls. The seals pretty much acted as hammers, slamming into it over and over.

The spikes were crushed as soon as they formed and the walls had to keep expending energy to reform the massive dents and cracks that appeared. Finally, after just 40 seconds, the walls crumbled, providing them access to a neighboring corridor.

From there on out they kept moving quickly, taking the path of least resistance where they either forced their way through the walls or followed the corridors depending on what seemed fastest. Reaching the third platform went without issue, apart from some disagreements about who would go first. Only after Zac and the Anointed quashed any dissent could they get across the bridge, a 50-meter wide strip of land.

The third platform continued with Memorysteel walls for ten minutes until they suddenly gave way to large fields of farmland. It seemed to have been recently harvested though, and Zac realized they had reached the sector the Cartava Clan lived in.

“I’ll go ahead,” Zac suddenly said before he turned into a blur as he flickered back and forth, running to every corner of the fields over the next 30 minutes as the army kept running straight ahead.

He even entered a series of side paths and corridors, but Zac couldn’t find what he was looking for; the glasshouses that held the race-boosting treasures. Zac could only sigh in disappointment and rejoin the others. Zac knew it was a longshot that a bunch of valuable natural treasures would be waiting for him in this place, but he couldn’t help himself from making sure.

But the Cartava Clan had clearly picked everything clean before they set off. He had got his hands on two of the Cosmos Sacks of the elders though, so it wasn’t impossible that some of the stored items were the race-boosting fruits Leviaala mentioned. But now was not the time to properly go through his haul.

The group kept going, and they soon passed the farmland biospheres to enter the corridors again. However, this place was different compared to what they had encountered so far. It wasn’t the empty shells of the outer sector, but it also wasn’t the abandoned opulence of the inner layer.

Most importantly, the tunnels were drastically transformed from the bare aesthetic. There were paintings, mosaics, statues, benches adorning the walls, and the roof was covered in what looked like a starry sky. All the art looked somewhat recent as well, no doubt additions left by the Cartava clan. A huge crack in the wall allowed Zac to see a vast warehouse, spanning hundreds of meters even after the spatial expansion was gone.

Inside was a whole neighborhood of small Memorysteel townhouses in straight rows, forming a series of parallel streets. The houses were all made from metal, but they were somehow dyed in bright colors to bring life to the section. Some of the houses even had small gardens.

Large broken spheres hung in the sky, probably a source of light that had broken during the massive shake-ups. In fact,

quite a few of the houses had fallen apart, some missing whole walls, while others were essentially unscathed. Zac guessed that repairs and upgrades had been made with spatially expanded materials, which then shrunk during the upheavals.

It was clear that they had appeared in the proper residential districts of the Cartava Clan, though they were still just at the edge. Those houses likely belonged to families who worked the fields, while the real elites lived somewhere further inside.

Zac and his followers didn't get much further though before he suddenly stopped in his tracks, the hairs on his arms standing on end. There was no hesitation as the chains shot out from **[Love's Bond]** to form a wide net that pushed everyone back as Zac desperately retreated.

"WATCH OUT!" Zac roared as he threw out a set of defensive talismans before summoning **[Nature's Barrier]** and infused it with the Fragment of the Bodhi. A series of massive explosions quickly followed and a scorching heat slammed into the frontlines the next moment.

Layers after layers of emerald leaves were incinerated, but Zac kept infusing Cosmic Energy to create a storm of leaves that filled the whole corridor. Others were thankfully quick on the uptake, and a series of barriers quickly sprung up to lessen his burden. Only half a minute later did the inferno subside, allowing them to breathe out in relief.

"Those explosions were definitely not a part of the base," Kenzie said as she looked down at her tablet. "I think we triggered some trap when we entered this section."

"Why did they boobytrap their homes?" Joanna said with incomprehension.

"Revenge," one of the Anointed said. "These natives fight without honor, breaking bonds without pause. I can see them doing something like this."

Zac nodded in agreement. He wouldn't put it past them to leave something like this behind to strike at either him or Lunar Tribe.

“They might have left some protections behind just in case. The clan must have rushed toward the exit the moment Leviala returned with the Spatial Drill,” Kenzie shrugged. “Some things of value were definitely left behind, and they might have wanted to protect these items in case they were able to return in the future.”

“In either case, let’s go around the town instead of through it. There might be good things in the Cartava territory, but there’s no time to waste on something like that now,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “Or is this the only way to the bridge?”

“We can take a detour, but we need to hurry!” Kenzie said with worry in her eyes. “That blast weakened the dimensional protections. We lost something like 30 minutes.”

“All the more reason to take the long path,” Zac said. “If there is one bomb there is probably more of them lying in wait.”

They immediately returned to the fields and chose a different path, which allowed them to reach the fourth platform without any further issue. The walls did try to attack them a few times as their defensive algorithms went haywire though, but that was far preferable to the powerful incendiaries before. The next platform was also almost completely transformed by the Cartava clan, though this one seemed to house an industrial zone. The warehouses had been emptied out and turned into factories that seemed to house some sort of 3D-printers.

The machines were made from Memorysteel like everything else, but they were clearly not of Technocrat origin. They were far-too-crude for that, yet they were still probably decades or ahead of Earth’s technological progress. Kenzie’s eyes glistened as she looked at the homebrewed machinery, but Zac dragged her away.

There was no point in risking their lives for some machines that would just piss the System off even further. It had already marked this place as a “Taboo Undertaking”, so Zac wouldn’t be surprised as every piece of technology inside this place was branded some way or another.

Still, it took them over an hour to pass this island, partly out of fear of more traps and partly due to the complex layout. There

were also quite a few security measures that took some time to crack since they were modified by the Cartava Clan and already supposed to be disconnected from the main AI hub.

Finally they reached the edge of the island. But just as Zac was about to lead the group across he stopped as a thunderous sound erupted far in the distance.

Zac looked over, and his eyes widened in shock when he saw one platform after another fall apart. It was like a chain reaction that had started somewhere close to the mountain, and it almost made it all the way to the outermost platforms. A few islands survived in the destruction thanks to having multiple bridges, but over twenty plots of lands had crumbled in an instant.

“What was that?!” Joanna wheezed.

“I think someone has reached the mountain already,” Zac frowned. “They are destroying the bridges and killing the competition.”

The series of platforms that fell apart was quite far away, but that didn't stop Zac and the others from feeling a creeping sense of dread. It wasn't all that hard to destroy the bridges that spanned the void, and there were only so many platforms between themselves and whoever had enacted that ruthless plan.

Seeing dozens of islands just fall apart like that put everyone under a tremendous pressure, and Zac immediately crossed with his sister. The other side was just a short corridor that led to what looked like a large square that you could see in something like a mall. Dilapidated storefronts lined the sides, and a broken glass dome gave them a glimpse of the void outside.

“These Technocrats really knew how to live it up,” Emily muttered as she entered behind Zac. “I can't believe they have this kind of place inside a research base.”

Zac looked over at the teenager, relieved to see that she looked better. She had been carried by one of the Valkyries for most of the trip, completely drained from using her skills on the

whole army. It felt like he needed to find some way for Emily to improve her energy reserves so that she didn't get this drained all the time.

"I guess you have to add all kinds of things for people to not go insane," Zac shrugged. "After all, people probably spent centuries in this place back when it was running properly."

More and more warriors quickly crossed the bridge and the entrance to the square was quickly filling up even when it was far larger than any similar structure on Earth.

"What direction should we go, Warm-" Rhubat said, but the Zhix stopped as it suddenly turned toward the broken-down glass ceiling in the sky.

Zac didn't understand what was wrong, but he suddenly felt an uncomfortable pressure as the protective film outside the dome bulged downward like something was pushing to come through. And he knew all-too-well what kind of thing that would be.

He could only pray it wasn't the Collector.

"Incoming! Spread out! Non-combat classes and support staff enter the side corridors!" Zac roared, and the soldiers quickly made a defensive ring around the square.

The barrier cracked the next moment as a huge miscreation fell onto the square with a massive thud. Zac panicked as he looked up at the ceiling, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that the film had repaired itself after the Void Creature had pushed through. Only then did he focus on the target at hand.

The Void Creature looked a bit like a short pitch-black caterpillar, but it had spindly legs all around its body rather than in sets on the bottom. Its body was almost thirty meters long, but it was at least ten meters across as well, giving it a stocky appearance. Its face was just a black vortex that emitted a black gas, and Zac estimated it might actually be a Half-Step D-Grade creature.

However, it was clearly not used to existing in this kind of dimension, as it kept shuddering as the long legs on its back twitched like the creature was in its death throes.

That didn't mean it was completely restrained though, and all its legs suddenly pushed forward in a motion that reminded Zac of how octopi swim. It probably moved about in a very similar fashion as it floated around in the void. Of course, this time only the legs on the bottom provided any real traction, but it still almost turned into a black blur as it shot forward.

Straight at Zac.

Chapter 626: Denizens of the Void

Zac didn't know whether it was lucky or unlucky that the terrifying creature went straight for him, but at least it would prevent the normal warriors from bearing the brunt of the terrifying creature. He quickly threw Emily to a side passage as he readied himself for battle.

“Attack it from a distance,” Zac shouted before he charged up **[Rapturous Divide]**. “It can't survive in this dimension for long. The more we damage it the quicker we'll be able to destroy it. “

A golden cloud entered the huge maw the next second, quickly followed by a black cloud imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin. A perfectly straight scar in space was ripped open, but Zac was shocked to see that it barely had any effect on the creature. The spatial divide had actually split the creature in two, but it almost looked like Zac's attack was just an illusion.

There were no wounds, no nothing. It was like spatial tears had no effect on the Void Beast. Zac figured that he perhaps shouldn't be too surprised considering that this thing usually lived in the folds between dimensions. The other warriors didn't fare much better as pitch-black barriers that looked like small tiles of onyx appeared at the tip of the creature's legs, effortlessly swallowing any attack that came close. Only the Anointed managed to launch strikes with enough force to cause some minor cracks on the defensive shields, but they were repaired as quickly as they appeared.

Zac guessed what was going on and he quickly activated **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, this time imbuing the skill with the image of the supreme shield. The creature was almost upon him by now, but Zac didn't back away. Less than half of his people had passed the bridge by this point, and if Zac

didn't block now, then the bridge would be exposed to the Void Beast.

He couldn't let that happen.

A growl escaped Zac's lips as he rushed forward, meeting the beast head-on. His axe was empowered by the weight of the supreme shield in the avatar, and he swung it in a heroic arc right at the bottom of the beast's face, right beneath the massive mouth that reminded Zac of the Collector's maw. He was hoping to crush its jaw and perhaps cut off a few of its legs in one go, but a huge barrier appeared to block its whole face, if one could call a large vortex a face.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he infused the strike with the Fragment of the Coffin and swung with all that he got. He didn't really fear the beast itself, but rather the way that it had made all the attacks just disappear, like it was conjuring portals to the void. However, Zac felt there should be some limits to an ability like that, especially when he attacked in person and infused the strike with a Dao Fragment.

The world shuddered for an instant as the edge of [**Verun's Bite**] hit the large barrier, like he had somehow been misaligned with the surroundings. But his vision quickly turned back to normal as a large crack spread across the black surface of the shielding. Zac didn't get any chance to celebrate or follow up on his initial swing though as the creature slammed into him with the force of a runaway train.

His all-out swing hadn't even stopped the creature in its tracks, and Zac found himself completely overpowered.

A fiery axe shot into his body from the distance as Emily boosted him with her Strength-improving Axe. Hundreds of attacks also harassed the caterpillar to the point that it was completely engulfed by a blinding chaos of radiant Skills. Yet those shields kept swallowing everything while keeping the Void Beast safe, and it seemed completely intent on taking him down.

The only reason Zac didn't get slammed into a wall, or even worse shot through the corridor and into the Void, was that he hurriedly launched the four chains of [**Love's Bond**], each of

them turning into anchors in the wall or the floor to stop him from getting pushed back. The chains were able to hold him in place, but that essentially put him in a vise that threatened to crush him.

He gripped the handle of [**Verun's Bite**] with his second hand, both his arms shaking from exertion. But it was simply impossible to force the Void Beast back. Its short legs dug deep grooves in the Memorysteel ground as it kept the pressure up, and released more and more of that pitch-black smoke.

The cloud emitted a strange pressure that made Zac feel extremely uncomfortable, almost like when he had pushed his hand into the void. Even worse, there seemed to be no limits to how much of it could spew out from its gullet. Zac didn't know whether the creature released it to lessen the burden of normal space on its body, or if it was meant as some sort of weapon.

In either case, it was poison to Zac, but he was unable to extricate himself. He was just ten meters from the corridor leading outside, and soldiers were still streaming across the bridge and into the square. Backing down would mean those people getting stuck. But he also wasn't strong enough to force the creature back in his current state, so he could only push his worries aside as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

The air twisted around him power surged through his arms, and the painful pressure was no longer so taxing. Zac shoved at the creature with everything he had, and he actually managed to force the Void Beast back a bit. It wasn't much, but it gave Zac the breather he needed to launch another swing, this one empowered by his berserking skill.

The barrier cracked like a mirror in an instant, and the axe bit into flesh. However, a sense of annoyance flared up in Zac's chest as his momentum suddenly disappeared the moment it touched the body of the caterpillar, making his all-out swing look like a slight love-tap.

Zac quickly realized the attack was more powerful than it seemed though as the legs on the creature's back twitched, and

a weird distortion rippled through its body before it returned to normal. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that his attacks were working, but he didn't have the opportunity to launch another swing before his Danger Sense overpowered the furor brought on by [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

A crackling ball of pure energy had formed inside the Void Beast's abyssal maw, and Zac desperately veered out of the way, barely allowing him to dodge it as it shot out like a slow-moving cannonball. An extremely powerful suction ripped into his body, and Zac's eyes teared when he felt a piece of his chin actually being torn off and swallowed by the ball as it passed through.

A bloody wound on his shoulder was opened up as well, but at least he had managed to dodge a surefire kill. That terrifying ball definitely had the power to crush him into a meat cube and swallow him whole. But Zac still regretted his course of action when he remembered that the corridor and his people were on the other side.

What if the ball hit the bridge? The Memorysteel definitely couldn't take the force that hid in that attack.

Thick earthen walls thankfully rose from the ground the moment Zac dodged as Rhubat and a group of Anointed conjured one defensive barrier after another in an effort to block the sphere. It thankfully didn't move very fast, but it was simply unstoppable in its advance. Massive holes appeared in the barriers as the ball simply ate them.

But Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that the ball had shrunk by a small degree after swallowing five enormous barriers in a row. It looked unstoppable, but it ultimately had the same weakness as all skills; it had a limited amount of energy. It could be exhausted.

"Keep attacking! Fill it!" he shouted, and a storm of flames, earth, and all sorts of objects flew toward the Void Ball. Someone even took out an SUV and threw it into the void ball, and a creaking sound echoed out as the attack swallowed the vehicle whole.

Zac was about to help out, but he sensed that the creature was gearing up for another attack, and he definitely couldn't let that happen. The first ball had already made it to the corridor by that point, and it had actually swallowed a few people who were able to move out of the way because of the thousands of people desperately trying to pass the bridge.

After all, a thirty-meter Void Beast was scary, but not as scary as being left behind on a soon-to-collapse island in the void.

Zac felt the terrible energies brewing inside the mouth of the creature, and he knew he had to risk it. The chains of **[Love's bond]** detached from the wall, as he stomped down on the ground. The creature saw the change and it started to push again, but he narrowly managed to stay in place by overexerting his legs.

Meanwhile, the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward and snaked around the hulking creature before Zac gripped them with his free hand. He desperately yanked at them with all he had, and it was barely enough to overpower the thin legs and slam the creature into the ground.

A shockingly large club appeared out of nowhere, the knobby skull striking right on top of the creature's head to compound Zac's own hit. It was Billy who had woken up from the commotion, and he had already activated his Titanic form. Billy's attack was simple and crude, but it contained a shocking force that caused another series of ripples to spread through the creature's body. More importantly, it interrupted the Void Beast's accumulation of its second attack.

The creature tried to get up, but Zac furiously dragged the creature back into the ground again as he lambasted it with dozens of strikes empowered by **[Conformation of Supremacy]**. The first strikes were completely absorbed like the first one, but its body started to twist and bend like it was a mirage.

Zac suddenly managed to rip off a large section of its head after having launched almost twenty strikes and a weird sticky goo started dripping from the massive wound. The Void Beast's blood didn't pool at the ground though, but it actually

floated in the air like a cloud. A second thunderous smash from Billy hit the caterpillar in the middle of its body, giving Zac a chance to glance at the situation behind him.

The Anointed had thankfully dealt with the void sphere, but the chaos had activated the defensive measures of the corridor. The Anointed were forced to fight against the frenzied defensive algorithm, desperately trying to contain the damage as to not let the whole corner of the island fall apart.

There were thankfully still a lot of warriors inside the square as hundreds of strikes slammed into the Void Beast. Each of them carried just a fraction of the power of a single one of Zac's own swings, but when added together it turned into an unceasing avalanche that forced the creature to expend more and more energy to stay safe.

A high-pitched wail escaped from its mouth as the creature started to madly thrash and twist, and the force threw Zac into the air. The creature seemingly saw its opportunity as it started forming another void sphere, but Zac only grunted as his Cosmic Energy surged into his forearm. The huge wooden hand appeared a moment later, but it didn't actually conjure the emerald array this time.

The hand instead directly gripped the creature, its wooden fingers digging deep into pitch-black flesh. It had been a long time since Zac used the hand to physically fight for him instead of conjuring one of the punishments, and he was shocked at the power of the grip. It was like space itself was breaking apart as the fingers squeezed tighter and tighter.

The Void Beast thrashed even harder as it tried to break away, and vast clouds of pitch-black gasses covered it. But it was undeniable that it was in a bad way since its body kept distorting to the point it was barely recognizable by now. Zac was still flailing about in the air since he was connected to the creature through the chains, but he forcefully pulled on one of the fetters, launching him straight toward the caterpillar.

The whole Memorysteel floor cracked beneath the creature as Zac swung his axe once more, and a second shudder followed suit as Billy hit again. It was only then that Zac realized that

Billy was using some sort of ramping skill like his own **[Deforestation]**.

The third hit had taken quite some time to charge up, but it was tremendous, even eclipsing his own strikes. Certainly, Zac was using a skill that he could launch over a dozen times in the blink of an eye, but it was still shocking considering he had over five thousand effective Strength. For Billy, an F-Grade warrior, to match that kind of power output was astonishing no matter what kind of restrictions that skill had.

Billy's enormous slam was the straw that broke the camel's back and Zac felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body, confirming the kill. The Void Beast didn't collapse on the ground though, but it rather looked like its body was slowly phasing out of reality.

"Haha! Billy is finally 75!" Billy exclaimed with a wide grin, and Zac noticed that dozens of people had wide grins on their faces.

It looked like everyone had a pretty good harvest for participating in taking down a Half-Step D-Grade creature. Their contribution was extremely limited, but the amount of energy from killing a level 150 creature Half-Step D-Grade creature was obviously massive. And while they hadn't actually hurt the creature, they had at least helped expend its energy by unceasingly attacking it.

A sudden thump from his chest gave Zac a start, and he was surprised to see that his **[Void Heart]** had suddenly awakened even when there weren't any foreign energies rampaging through his body.

There was definitely something inside the dissipating cloud that his hidden node wanted to eat.

Chapter 627: Hunger

Zac's hidden node felt like a ball of hunger trained on a specific spot inside the dissipating "corpse" of the Void Beast. He instinctively understood what was going on though and activated his **[Cosmic Gaze]** as he tried to find the source of the avarice. The creature had turned into a haze by this point, but there was a small spot that released mysterious fluctuations to his augmented sight.

Zac hesitated for a moment, but he still sent one of his chains inside to snatch whatever radiated that odd energy signature. The chain was mottled when it came out a second later, but Zac could sense that it was just temporary. The links would soon heal up by themselves, partly thanks to the massive amount of energy it had swallowed during the fight with the Cartava Clan.

Seeing that the coffin was safe, Zac instead turned his attention to the thing he had dragged out of the cloud. It was roughly as large as a fist, but it hard to tell what it was made from as it reminded Zac of a pallasite meteorite; a mix of pitch-black metal and dark-golden crystals. Zac couldn't be completely sure, but he guessed it was the failed core of the Void Beast.

It was mesmerizing to look at, completely different from the fake cores he had harvested from the beasts and zombies in the Dead Zones. This was a proper Beast Core, albeit a failed one. It still held the accumulation of the Void Beast's cultivation, and it was clearly marked by whatever Dao the caterpillar had gained during its life in the void.

More importantly, it contained massive amounts of energy, far more than any D-Grade Crystals. The energy was extremely different though. It felt like it was some sort of Attuned Energy, but also different. It made him think of the blue sword-streaks that Thea had gained from the inheritance trial.

The best comparison he could think of was that Attuned Energy was like lemon-flavored water, whereas the energy hidden inside the small core in front of him was pure fruit-juices squeezed straight from the citrus itself. Attuned energies were ultimately flavored Cosmic Energy, whereas this force had become something else.

More impressively, it felt like the energy was almost sentient, as it seemed to flinch every time his hidden node beat.

It almost felt like he was looking at a nuclear warhead with a will of its own, but his **[Void Heart]** was obviously of a different opinion. If the node was a human it would be screaming on top of its lungs right now in an epic tantrum, and Zac eventually decided to oblige. He gingerly reached his hands toward the Beast Core and touched its surface.

“What are you doing!” Verana shouted with shock as she hurried over, and Zac noticed that quite a few demons and Tal-Eladar looked at him like he was crazy.

Zac couldn't worry about that at the moment though as thick black tendrils spread across his arm, and it felt like someone had poured molten lead in his veins. Small bloody explosions erupted all along his arm in an instant as even Zac's body had trouble containing this chaotic power. But things quickly stabilized when his hidden node started to absorb the energy, and Zac almost felt like it was giddy as it thumped over and over. The pain was still excruciating as the energy was dragged from his arm into his heart, but at least it didn't look like he would explode this time either.

His guess from before proved right as well judging by the behavior of the Beast Core. It initially stormed into his arm with a brutal fervor, seemingly intent to rip him apart. But the moment his hidden node thumped and absorbed its first mouthful the Beast Core drastically changed its behavior as it tried to cut its connection with Zac's pathways.

Unfortunately, it had already been caught by **[Void Heart]** as it dragged more and more energy from the core with glee. However, it only absorbed a fifth of the energy inside the core before it started slowing down, and Zac got a sense of

exhaustion from it. He quickly threw the Beast Core into his Spatial Ring to avoid any mishaps, and only then did he look over at Verana who gazed at his arm with wide eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked.

“That was a Beast Core! Absorbing the raw energies of a Beast Cores is like drinking poison, the energy is too chaotic to control or make use of. And that was a Beast Core of an aberrant lifeform! Who knows what kind of dangerous energies it contains,” Verana hurriedly explained, though she quickly calmed down as well. “But you seem fine for some reason...? I don’t understand...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zac shrugged. “My body is pretty resilient when it comes to weird energies.”

“Alright,” Verana sighed as she dropped the subject, though there was both curiosity and skepticism in her eyes.

“Is everything okay with the bridge?” Zac asked.

Verana had been somewhere in the middle of the army to guard the soldiers in case the walls suddenly attacked, which meant she had been trapped outside the square when the Void Beast attacked. Not that she would be a lot of help since all three of her companions were still wounded and overtaxed from the previous fight.

“Everything’s fine,” Verana nodded. “We got stuck outside for a bit when the wall woke up, but there were no further attacks on us or the bridge. These creatures might hold their own territories in the darkness, preferring solitude.”

“Good,” Zac nodded, wholeheartedly hoping her theory was correct.

Dealing with one Void Beast hadn’t been too difficult. Part of it was thanks to the huge numerical advantage, but it was mostly because the Void Beast was restrained by this dimension. Its aura was definitely a match to the golem he fought in the Dao Repository, but the actual strength it exhibited was less than half that.

But even with such an advantage then they would still be in deep trouble if just two attacked at the same time. He could

only hold down one at a time, which would give the second one free rein to rampage among the normal soldiers. He glanced up at the ceiling again, a sense of foreboding chilling his heart. There was no point in tempting fate.

“We’re setting off,” Zac said.

The group didn’t want to loiter in case another beast was lurking outside the dome atop the square, and they scurried into the corridors with gusto. Zac let the other elites lead the way while he jumped up and sat on the shoulder of one of the Anointed who usually accompanied Rhubat. The weakness of activating [**Hatchetman’s Rage**] had hit him, and the ambient Cosmic Energy had gotten so sparse by this point that his natural absorption had turned into a weak trickle.

So he could only depend on the gargantuan Zhix for a while as he started absorbing Cosmic Energy from Nexus Crystals. He also took the opportunity to look inward to see if something had changed with his [**Void Heart**], but Zac was disappointed to see that it had gone quiet again. It didn’t look like it was about to spit out anything either, but rather like it had gone into hibernation.

Zac still felt like this was an opportunity for him though. He had just remembered that this wasn’t the first time he had encountered energy with this particular flavor. He had actually absorbed the very same force from the Collector when they fought, but he was in the middle of a fight for his life at that time and didn’t have any chance to look into it.

He still couldn’t figure out exactly what it was. Even if it was something more advanced than Attuned Energy he still felt he should be able to recognize its flavor somewhat. He had encountered all sorts of cultivators by this point, and he was seldom completely flummoxed when trying to figure out what kind of Dao they were cultivating.

All fire-related Daos gave off a similar fiery aura, and the same went for all other Daos as well. But these Void Beasts seemed to have a flavor of their own. Zac could only guess it was because of the unique environment they lived in, so he simply named the energy Void Energy in his mind.

Zac wondered exactly what his node wanted with this energy. It usually spat out anything it swallowed, but this particular energy seemed to stay inside. He guessed that it was something that could actually nurture the hidden node, or perhaps even help with awakening his bloodline down the line.

The issue was that he had never heard of upgrading Hidden Nodes. Hidden Nodes were supposed to give permanent and unique boons, sort of like titles. They were either opened or unopened. But was it perhaps possible to upgrade them if they were linked to a Bloodline?

There was unfortunately much he could figure things out at the moment. Perhaps he could find some records at the Core of the Mystic Realm, though he wasn't sure whether the innermost sector of the research base even existed any longer. That by itself put a pretty big dent in his secondary goals to find out more about Leandra and awakening his bloodline.

For example, those bloodline vats that the Gemlings controlled might already be lost to the Void by this point. His only other chance was to stumble onto something at the core, but he wasn't too optimistic as he looked around.

It was clear, the state of the islands was gradually getting worse, and not because of the weakening Cosmic Energy and protective film. Zac believed that the rough state of the walls and structures of the inner island was due to something else. The closer they got to the core, the more the materials had been impacted by the spatial expansion. That in turn had resulted in larger destruction when the Dimensional Seed took everything back.

The increasingly dilapidated state of the corridors at least helped expedite their progression somewhat since more and more walls had crumbled to provide new pathways. Of course, the sparse Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere also made it harder to restore one's reserves, which made it difficult for the cultivators to keep a high tempo.

They thankfully passed over to the next platform without issue, and Zac once more closed his eyes to focus on restoring his energy after they had passed over.

“Zac,” Kenzie suddenly exclaimed, dragging him out of his meditation as he looked down at his sister.

“What is it?”

“Look,” Kenzie said as she pointed down a side corridor.

Zac looked over, and his eyes widened when he realized that the section looked remarkably similar to the corridors they had passed just before entering the pipe. However, those paths went in a different direction compared to the route they were following. He quickly jumped down from the Anointed’s shoulder and walked over to Kenzie.

“Can you see if it’s the same place?” Zac asked with a mix of hope and trepidation.

“Wait a second,” Kenzie said as she took out her tablet and changed the screen to a map. “Ah! I knew it!”

“What?” Zac asked.

“I gave Thea a few communication modules while you were recuperating back then, and one has been installed,” Kenzie said. “Oh, and there’s a message a message recorded.”

“Well, go ahead and play it,” Zac said anxiously.

If you hear this the world has transformed already, Thea’s voice emerged from the console. We’re fine. The chaos destroyed the laboratory though, allowing us to escape. We have decided to move toward the mountain to scout things out. Who knows? We’re in a pretty good position, so we might actually be able to get there first. I only have one more of these things, so I’ll save it until we reach the mountain.

Zac slowly exhaled, extremely relieved to hear the two were fine. He had worried for a second it was Thea or Ogras recording a final goodbye or something. Then again, he wasn’t too surprised to hear they were okay. If anyone could survive on their own in this place, then it would be them.

“What do you want to do?” Kenzie asked.

“Let’s follow our original route. You heard her; they’ll be at the mountain. In fact, they might already be there by this time. Both of them are powerful Dexterity-based cultivators. They

should have been able to get quite far before the energy got too scattered,” Zac smiled and turned back without another look.

“What about the items in the lab? Didn’t you need that crystal?” Kenzie asked.

“It’s not worth the delay,” Zac said after some thought.

“Reaching the mountain before our enemies blow up the bridge is more important than anything else. Besides, if one such crystal can appear here, then I bet there will be more around the Dimensional Seed itself.”

Chapter 628: Resisting Fate

A lance of golden flames tore through the air, and Ogras barely managed to avoid it before he unleashed a beam of destruction of his own. However, he didn't aim at the bishop in the forefront, but rather at the group of underlings who worked on infusing the weird array at the edge of the mountain.

“Why fight? This is a world of sinners, they must be cleansed!” the bishop roared. “The Heavens themselves are on our side. Move away, stop resisting fate.”

“Well, you have me convinced,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

He was swallowed by a wave of shadows, appearing in front of the leader as he unleashed a sharp stab aimed at his throat. Unfortunately, a swam of golden motes of light forced him away yet again. He had already been blasted by one of those things, and he was still missing a chunk of flesh on his side. Ogras tsked in annoyance as he glared at the cultist leader who looked all-too-similar to the bastard who took his arm.

This one was far stronger though, and it wasn't only thanks to the fact that he was no longer restricted like they were during those beast waves. More importantly, he was backed up by far more professional elites compared to the strike squad who had appeared through the mini-incursion.

He could only flash away again, landing on a cliff made from Memorysteel that gave him vantage over the cultist army.

How did things get out of hand to this point? Did those two siblings know that this god-damned place was going to fall apart? There definitely was something suspicious going on, particularly with the girl. There was always that look in her eye when they talked. Like she was holding in something huge.

Was Zachary Atwood downplaying their role in regards to the Technocrat heathens? Did they have some other hidden motives in coming to this accursed place? It was no point worrying about that now. He would be able to ask that annoying guy himself as long as he and the ‘lady Marshall’ didn’t mess up too badly.

But these cultists weren’t any pushovers, and there were just too many of them.

Thankfully, he had already absorbed the [**Corporeal Serum**], and the effect was amazing. Not only did it provide as many attribute points as a few levels would, but it completely pushed his Race all the way to D-Grade.

Certainly, he had already made some impressive strides through the pills he embezzled at the Base Town along with high-quality herbal baths. But he had to give it to these Technocrat heretics; they knew how to brew a potion. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad becoming the son-in-law to a powerful Technocrat, enjoying these sorts of serums on the down-low while maintaining the façade of a good and proper orthodox cultivator.

Perhaps he should take a cue from Thea Marshall’s tactics.

Of course, the real gain of the serum didn’t come from a small boost in attributes and an increase in his longevity, especially when it felt less and less likely he would get to enjoy his additional lifespan as the minutes passed. The real gain came from his body’s transformation. Who would have thought that his series of circumstances would result in him getting a Mutated Race?

He still felt some lingering shock when remembering the surprise waiting for him when he opened his status screen after having imbibed the serum.

[D] Planeswalker Demon

Planeswalker Demon, a unique race not recorded within the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde. An amalgamation of his beast companion and his own heritage. He had heard of things like this happening before. People encountering fortuitous, or more

likely unlucky, encounters sometimes ended up changing their bodies to the point that they no longer could be considered the same race as they once were.

Truthfully, something like this generally ended in disaster. The races of the multiverse were the product of billions of years of natural selection, essentially perfect vessels for cultivating the Heavenly Dao. That was why most races looked so similar in their makeup; the cultivation pathways worked best when they looked a certain way.

So, to change this product of nature would usually result in a mutation that brought more problems than perks. After all, if it was a good thing it would be called something like Ascended Race or at least Augmented Race, not something so ominous as Mutated Race.

Yet, in his case, Ogras felt he came out ahead. Perhaps some of that aberration's luck was finally rubbing off on him.

He looked at the vast field of shadows that harried the vanguard army, and it felt like he was looking at his own body. He had never felt so close to his Dao or the shadows he controlled. It was like the difference between a pyromancer and a fire elemental. Both were masters of flames, but only the elemental could claim the Dao of Fire as its birthright, controlling it with inborn ease. That was how he felt with the shadows right now.

Ogras had even sensed the location of a Hidden Node when he and his familiar were melded into one; roughly in the middle of his spine. Give it a decade or two and he was confident he'd be able to grind it open with his manual even if he didn't find any amazing treasures to help him out. There still was the hidden threat of where the hell Asshole's consciousness had disappeared to, but that was a worry for later. For now, there were lizardmen to kill.

Thankfully he wasn't the only one who had made some gains.

A flower of sword radiance and blood bloomed as Thea Marshall appeared seemingly out of nowhere among a group of cultists, killing two and maiming another before they had a chance to react. A massive pillar of fire erupted where she

stood, but the human had already fled under the guise of Ogras' shadows.

In another corner of the army, a throat was slit open as though by itself, yet no one noticed until the zealot toppled over. Only at that time did fiery shields erupt in the area.

Ogras whistled in surprise as he melded with the shadows. The girl had a knack for timing, no matter when talking about finding an opening to appear herself or silently assassinating unknowing warriors. She was like a gust of wind. By the time the gale had passed, you were already dead.

Of course, her antics were only made possible thanks to her upgraded weapon. Ogras couldn't help but feel a pang of envy when he saw how huge an upgrade that hidden blade had undergone after incorporating that crystal. It somehow passed right through the defenses of these lunatics without alerting anyone, turning into a supreme assassin's tool.

If only he had taken it for himself instead. An ability like this was exactly what he needed for his new spear. But that little lass had been smart, kissing that netherbeast before he set off. If he made his move now... it would spell trouble. He knew he wouldn't get away with it considering his reputation. But there would be more opportunities in the future.

She was lacking in raw firepower even with her upgraded weapon though, even worse than himself, and she could only take out one or two soldiers after staking her life. There was clearly a limit on how often she could use that piercing skill of her blade as well, and she only dared to activate it against the normal soldiers.

Besides, she could only move this freely thanks to him drawing the attention of the bishop and the elite squad. But Ogras could still see a seed of potential in her now, something he hadn't really felt before. As long as she had a fortuitous encounter or two before evolving, she would have a chance to make a name for herself in the Zecia sector in the future.

Of course, not like the monster in their midst.

Unfortunately, even with their recent boosts, they were fighting a losing battle. Ogras once more unleashed a barrage of spears from a mirage clone in the distance as he stabbed out from the shadows with his spear. A golden shield appeared to block once more, and Ogras could only sigh and recede into the darkness again.

His eyes turned to the growing golden fractal covering the edge of the mountain, and he knew it wouldn't be long before yet another series of islands fell. The plan of the cultists was crude but effective. They had quickly figured out that it was actually the mountain that protected the realm fragments floating around in the Void.

They somehow infected the energy keeping the islands safe before destroying the bridge connecting to the platforms outside, causing a shocking chain reaction. That would leave more energy for the mountain itself, likely extending the time it would be able to remain before this hellhole collapsed.

It would also cut off any unlucky people who still hadn't reached the mountain.

Normally Ogras wouldn't care considering he had already made it, but he needed to stall these lunatics until backup arrived. He and the Marshall girl had already spotted their people scrambling on their way here, but there were a lot of islands to pass on the way to the mountain, and the cultists were too efficient in their method of destruction.

That's how the two found themselves in a battle of attrition against an army of over a thousand cultists that seemed intent on setting the whole mountain on fire. They could only slip through the cracks and cause some annoyance and delays, and hopefully, that would be enough.

Another wave of flames spread out as a hundred Cultists slammed their staffs into the ground, and a scorched Thea was forced to desperately jump to safety while Ogras barely managed to fend off the waves while retreating.

"This one is done for," Ogras sighed as he appeared next to his companion. "Let's back off and recuperate before the next wave."

Thea wordlessly nodded as she took out a Nexus Crystal from her pouch. Her eyes were sunken from exhaustion, and Ogras knew he didn't look much better. He had just thirty percent left in his tank, and they would need to keep going for hours if they wanted to delay the cultists long enough.

The two scurried into the cracks in the mountain, taking advantage of the uneven terrain to hide from the pursuit. A squad of elites tried to follow them through the cracks, but it only took a few minutes to lose the trail.

Ogras thumped down on the ground in a secluded crevasse a few minutes later and started absorbing some energy as well. Thea mirrored his actions as she ate some dried rations to fill her stomach as well. The rumbling thunder of yet another collapsing island echoed out in the distance.

“This is the final stretch, keep going!” Cervantes urged as his eyes were veritably burning with hatred.

The sky collapsed once more as another accursed tentacle of the Collector greedily grabbed at a clump of tribesmen. He was exhausted, but Cervantes still roused his bloodline as he flashed forward to intercept.

His whole body transformed into a radiant light that took the form of a massive wolf's head, and it bit down at the tentacle with enough force to rip space apart. A shudder spread across the tentacle as Cervantes infused a storm of energy through his fractal teeth, but he knew all-too-well how durable this bastard was. This bite of his was just a scratch to this monstrosity.

A part of the light turned into his legs as he touched down on the ground to readjust his momentum, and a geyser of moonlight pushed the appendage far into the air by taking advantage of the momentary immobility from his bite. His tribesmen didn't waste his efforts by staying to fight alongside him, but instead opted to make it worthwhile. They urged their exhausted bodies to turn into beams of light as they flashed forward toward the bridge, leaving an illuminated corridor through the end of the island.

A dozen tentacles were already descending by that point, all of them aiming toward Cervantes himself. He wasn't surprised. This ancient bastard had harried them for the last hours and across three whole islands, and it had already realized who it was that kept it from adding more bodies to its collection.

The whole sky was blotted out by hands, some of them clearly belonging to his tribesmen, but Cervantes didn't panic at all. A hateful sneer spread out across his face as he threw out a meticulously crafted machine as large as a full-grown man. A sharp whistle was released by the machine before it froze in space, and a silver radiance spread out the next second, illuminating the whole sky.

The light lingered for a second before it started to change, congealing into what almost looked like solid matter. It wasn't actually what happened, but Cervantes melded with the tunnel of light to escape the Lunar Domain. It was his father's invention, a method to stabilize space with the Dao of the Moon.

Its original use was to forcibly stabilize chaotic zones during the Cataclysm, but it worked quite well in dealing with Void Beasts as well. The tentacles started to rapidly distort as the laws of space were reinforced, but the Collector was unable to easily extricate itself. Space had already become too stable, and even Cervantes would have a hard time moving through that domain, let alone a Void Beast.

The appendages were trapped for the moment, giving Cervantes and his rearguard the opportunity to cross the bridge. But the Collector was ultimately a pinnacle creature, and space itself cracked as the monstrosity ripped itself free. It did lose quite a few of its trophies in the process, but Cervantes knew that it was ultimately just a flesh wound.

They were safe for now, but Cervantes still had a hard time swallowing the hatred in his heart. Over two hundred of his tribesmen had been snatched up over the past hours, each of them handpicked elites whose talents would be a great asset when rebuilding their tribe on the outside. He couldn't believe their bad luck that this horror had decided to doggedly target them when there no doubt were far easier trophies to collect.

One day he would return to this accursed dimension just to rip this bastard in two.

“People ahead! Humans!” a scout suddenly exclaimed as her eyes flickered with light, her warning dragging Cervantes back to the present.

Cervantes hesitated for only a second before his eyes gleamed with ruthlessness. He took out a small syringe and injected it into his arm, and he felt a surge of power spreading through his limbs.

“Ready yourselves for battle,” he growled.

Chapter 629: Final Stretch

“This is the final stretch, keep going!” Zac shouted as he urged the warriors around him to keep running.

The faces of the soldiers were pallid masks of exhaustion by this point, but they kept putting one foot ahead of the other as they gripped Nexus Crystals in their hands. The last ten hours had pushed them to their very limits even though they weren't the ones who carried the main burden of their mad dash.

The problem was the increasingly sparse Cosmic Energy. It kept getting worse, to the point that there was barely any left at all by now. Just maintaining a superhuman speed was a constant source of drain, and with battles peppered in these people were running on fumes by this point.

After all, most of these people didn't even have a tenth of Zac's monstrous reserves, and the fact that they were cultivators didn't help in the slightest in this energy-sparse environment.

But there was no option but to keep going, even if they were out of strength. They were all-too-aware of the situation. They had heard the crashing sounds of collapsing islands coming ever closer. They had seen the huge golden flames at the foot of the mountain, causing a shocking chain of destruction that ended with a whole section of islands being decimated.

And their platform was next.

There was only a vast emptiness to their left when they crossed the last bridge. The neighboring islands were all gone. It was lucky that they had decided to run diagonally across the islands in an attempt to reach a more western point of the mountain. Otherwise, they would have already been thrown to the void.

Part of Zac had even considered picking up his sister and make a run for it, but he knew he would only be harming himself if he did that. There were just so many barriers in the way as they crossed the islands, anything from walls they needed to punch through to gates that needed to be hacked.

There were even thousands of battlebots that still roamed the inner islands like the whole base hadn't gone up in smokes, immediately attacking upon spotting his people. If Zac had left the others behind he would long have run out of energy by this point from the constant expenditure. That by itself was suicide since there was a hostile force waiting at the foot of the mountain.

The only lucky break, if you could call it that, was that they had only been attacked by one more Void Beast as they ran, and this one was roughly at the same level as the caterpillar from before. They had completely overwhelmed it with a furious assault before they set out again. There were a few times that a claw or an appendage appeared out of nowhere to snatch a few people though, but there wasn't much Zac could do about it.

It looked like the smarter Void Beasts were content with staying outside the islands, with the dumber ones falling through the protective film. After all, the whole Mystic Realm was crumbling. The Void Beasts only needed to wait for the last islands to crumble and gobble up everyone who was launched into the darkness.

Zac couldn't help but wonder about the fate of the True Sky Faction and the New World Government. The first islands that collapsed should have been roughly in the area where those factions resided. If the New World Government were still stuck at the outer sectors of the base they were definitely dead by now unless the spatial tunnels back to Earth still worked even in this environment.

It was a big blow to Earth to lose that many elites, but Zac didn't have the luxury of worrying about others. He had kept running ahead with rotating elite squads to pave the way ever since the weakness from using [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. They

cleared the corridors of automated sentries, laser traps, bugging walls, and all kinds of dangers.

These forays allowed the weaker of his followers to just focusing on keeping up, and the army usually caught up within minutes of Zac's elite units setting out. But Zac knew the truth. Every time the bulk of the army caught up, there were a few people missing. This had turned into a true death march, and some people simply dropped down on the ground with their reserves completely drained.

Zac knew it, the soldiers knew it, but no one spoke about the fallen people that formed a trail of suffering across the past five or so platforms. They could only look ahead, praying that they would be able to cross the final hurdle before it was too late. Zac was in full panic-mode by this point. It had been over an hour since the last set of islands collapsed.

It felt like the floor beneath his feet could collapse at any moment as he was launched into the void. This was the innermost section of the research base, and he had spotted multiple places that seemed to hold treasures, but he didn't even consider looking into it. Any leftover energy he had was used to clear any hurdles in front of them instead.

The others were of the same sentiment, and four Anointed next to him didn't need any prompt to slam into the Memorysteel wall in front of them with almost suicidal fervor. The whole area shock as they unleashed a frantic barrage, turning the wall into scraps in just seconds. Zac unhesitatingly rushed straight through, and his eyes lit up at what waited on the other side.

There were no more corridors, just twisted memorysteel of a broken base that had formed a sharp and uneven square at the edge of the island. On the other side was a thirty-meter wide wire that led to their goal; the 'Taboo Mountain'. As long as they ran up that bridge they would be safe, or at least not in immediate peril.

However, reality often didn't live up to one's hopes and dreams, and Zac's eyes widened in horror when he saw the bridge leading to salvation start to crumble just as they made it.

A wave of flames rolled down along the collapsing rubble, and his heart beat like a drum out of fear when he realized that those runic flames were even eating the protective film. The cultists weren't just blowing up the path itself, they even targeted the protections that kept the islands safe. No wonder the other islands crumbled so quickly.

“Break the bridge!” Zac roared as he flashed forward.

There was nothing else he could do. They had already missed their chance of crossing as part of the bridge had already been swallowed by the Void. The only thing they could do now was to cut off the rest before those flames reached them. The island they stood on was still connected to the mountain through neighboring islands, which would hopefully keep it from collapsing.

The anointed quickly caught up and assisted him, and a series of desperate attacks hammered down on the Memorysteel wire as the wall of flames crept closer. But the bridge finally broke off, allowing Zac's group to breathe out in relief. The flames were all swallowed by the void just like the bridge itself, and the island didn't immediately fall apart like they had seen before.

The advance squad breathed out in relief, but they all knew that this only amounted to a stay of execution. They had lost their access to the mountain. Without the energy provided from the Taboo Mountain, the barrier would quickly start to weaken even without the interference of the Church of Everlasting Dao.

Running toward the next bridge was hopeless as well. The next bridge was a full two islands over, and they had to pass through complex memorysteel corridors while the cultists could run right over.

Besides, they were approaching the section of the previous Wasteland. A lot of those islands were fragmented or extremely small, and quite a few had already crumbled even without any outside interference. The protective film was clearly a lot weaker there compared to the rest of the islands, and going there was tantamount to suicide.

Zac's eyes turned to the army standing on the edge of the mountain, a towering fury burning in his chest. They were sneering and laughing at him like they were watching a great show as the protective film was slowly dissipating on their island. They might not be able to attack Zac or his people, but they clearly didn't feel that they needed to.

"What do we do, Warmaster?" Rhubat frowned. "Can we build a new bridge?"

"No," Zac sighed.

"We can!" Kenzie interjected as she came running, accompanied by Joanna and a group of Valkyries. "I think this thing will work!"

Zac felt the flame of hope reigniting in his chest when he saw what she was holding; the Spatial Drill. His eyes turned to the short stretch of darkness separating their island and the Memorysteel mountain. It was less than a hundred meters. Was this the true purpose of why the System wanted him to go back? He needed the Spatial Drill to save his people at this very juncture.

"What is that?" Joanna asked as she curiously looked at the weird Technocrat Tool.

"A Spatial Drill. It can create some sort of tunnels in space. It was this thing the Cartava Clan planned to use to escape this Mystic Realm," Zac explained as he turned to his sister. "How long do you need?"

"Just a few minutes," she said. "It's good to go, but it needs to dig a path through the Void."

"A few minutes," Zac muttered as he looked up at the weakening barriers. "Do it."

Kenzie nodded and walked over to the very edge of the island before she started tapping away at her console. The Anointed had heard their conversation and they formed a protective circle around her to let her work unabated.

More and more of his people streamed into the broken square, but they stopped in their tracks when they saw the vast chasm between the island and the mountain. A few of them simply

slumped down on the ground with eyes devoid of hope, while others looked to Zac for salvation. They hadn't heard the conversation between him and his sister, but they could clearly understand the severity of the situation.

“Don't give up! We will open a spatial tunnel to the other side,” Zac roared as she looked at the exhausted army. “I know you are tired, but there is a hostile army on the other side. We'll need to take them out if we want to live. I'll lead the charge, but I can't do it alone. I need the assistance of all of you. Prepare yourselves.”

Thousands of faces lit up when they heard they still had a shot at survival, and the whole square lit up as people frantically started absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals. They all knew who was waiting on the foot of the mountain. Many had even fought against the crazed cultists before. They knew they were in for a tough fight, and every extra morsel of Cosmic Energy might be the difference between life and death.

“Everyone, eat a Springroot provided by our people, right now,” Joanna added from the side. “Anyone who hasn't eaten one in one minute will be executed. If you see someone faking or exchanging it, immediately report it.”

The Valkyries reacted instantly, each of them taking out a Large bag of Springroot as they walked through the ranks. Everyone quickly ate the root without hesitation, more than used to this procedure. A commotion erupted as a Zhix suddenly tried to break off, but the warrior was cut down by his brethren before he could even take a step.

A similar scenario happened a moment later, when a human cultivator stealthily tried to swap out the provided root with something he had hidden in his sleeve. The moment he was exposed he tried to flee, only to get crushed by a close-by Anointed.

Zac had no idea when those two shapeshifters had snuck into his ranks, but he guessed it was sometime during the dash toward the end. Everyone had already been forced to eat a Springroot the moment they set out toward the first bridge, at

which point a few cultists had been exposed as well according to his sister.

There had been no time to continuously test everyone as they ran for their lives though. Which had allowed a few of them to blend in with the others.

Seeing that everything was dealt with Zac sat down the next moment, gripping a D-Grade Nexus Crystal in each hand as a storm of Cosmic Energy entered his body. There was only so much he could replenish in a scant few minutes, and he estimated he was only 40% full by the time that Kenzie shouted.

Zac opened his eyes and saw a large vortex at the edge of the platform, seemingly fused to the exceedingly thin defensive film. The Spatial Drill was hovering in the air in front of it, constantly releasing a powerful beam into the hole. Kenzie had also pushed two odd spears into the ground on the sides of the vortex, and Zac guessed they were there to maintain the tunnel as soon as it was finished.

“What’s going to happen next?” Zac asked as he walked over with **[Verun’s Bite]** in his hands.

“The drill should reach the other side in a minute or so,” Kenzie said. “At that time, space will be directly connected between our two sides. You can’t let the cultists blow up the gate though. The drill is running on some weird spatial energy, and it only has fuel for this one attempt.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Zac nodded as his eyes turned to the cultists waiting on the other side.

They had clearly figured out that his people were up to something, and they were making preparations of their own. Zac’s tightened his grip as he took a deep breath. He was exhausted but he could only forcibly rouse his body to meet the challenge.

It was time to exterminate these lunatics once and for all.

Chapter 630: Foothold

Zac was ready for war, but the cultists were perhaps even more so. Not a single zealot had moved on toward the next bridge by the looks of it. They had instead taken defensive positions while one sun after another ignited and rose into the air like a fiery sentry. Not only that, the whole edge of the mountain was lit on fire, with flames reaching over twenty meters into the sky.

It looked like the Church of Everlasting Dao had figured out their plan, or at least didn't want to take any risks.

"Have anyone seen Ogras or Thea?" Zac asked as he surveyed the army.

He couldn't be certain about Thea, but Zac knew that Ogras was somewhere on the mountain. They had seen a huge eruption of shadows around twenty minutes ago, but it was swallowed by an even larger fire. The demon was probably trying to help them out, but Zac hadn't seen a hint of either him or Thea since they reached the square.

"I've looked, but I haven't spotted them. But I'm sure they're fine," Joanna said. "They might be waiting for an opportunity to strike."

Zac solemnly nodded as he imprinted the defensive measures in his mind. Whoever entered first would find themselves right in the crosshairs of over a hundred attacks. Not only that, he could clearly sense that there was some sort of array at the edge of the mountain, but neither **[Cosmic Gaze]** nor **[Primal Polyglot]** could tell what it was.

That wasn't because the skills were too weak, but rather that he couldn't see the situation too clearly. The surface of Taboo Mountain was roughly 20 meters above their current platform, so he could only see the thick crust beneath. The only reason

they could spot the army at all was thanks to the incline and the fact that the mountain was far enough.

“Can you change where the other portal appears? Like on the other side of the mountain?” Zac hesitantly asked.

Even if he couldn't see everything, he could see enough. Even he wasn't certain he'd walk out unscathed from an all-out attack that the whole cultist army had prepared for almost five minutes.

“No,” Kenzie sighed. “I can only drill a straight line. That's why the Cartava Clan needed to get to a specific spot to escape this place.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded with a somber expression. “I'll go all-out from the start and try to create a safe zone right next to the exit.”

“We will be right behind you, Warmaster,” Rhubat said. “We'll secure this lifeline for our warriors no matter what. Here, take this.”

The enormous Anointed took out a small spike, though in the hands of Zac it would look like a proper spear. Zac took it in his free hand and turned it over curiously. It didn't look like something from the System, but rather an ancient weapon from the Zhix homeworld. It was exceedingly beautifully crafted with dense scripts covering the long metal shaft, and its bladed spearpoint was made from some purple metal he had never seen before.

“What's this?” Zac asked with confusion.

“It is **[Judgement]**, the symbol of the crusade. Stab it into the ground, and we'll do the rest. The ancestors will protect us. I hoped to save it for the final battle, but we'll have to make do without it.”

“This...” Zac hesitantly said as he looked at the spear in his hand.

It seemed like an artifact of extraordinary value. But that value, unfortunately, seemed to be largely cultural. There was something mysterious about the runes, but he couldn't sense any spiritual fluctuations from it. This was a battle of life and

death, and he wasn't sure he could trust some pre-integration weapon to save their hides.

"Do not worry, Warmaster. I know what you are thinking, but the energy gathered in this weapon would easily kill those miscreations we've fought on the way here. It is simply sealed. It will take a second for it to awaken, which is why you need to activate it immediately. We'll follow right behind you and take charge of the activation," Rhubat explained.

"Okay," Zac slowly nodded as he looked at the spear.

He still couldn't figure it out, but Zac guessed it was like the Sanskrit on the Mountain Everlasting Peace. It had been consecrated with Zhix conviction for over a thousand years, which might have created something magical. In either case, stabbing it into the ground wouldn't take any time, and if it didn't work he would simply have to figure something else out.

"Is it offensive or defensive in nature?" Zac asked.

"We do not know," Vanexis said with a shrug next to Rhubat. "It has never been activated before."

"Great," Zac wryly smiled as he looked at the elite soldiers standing behind him.

Billy stood with the group of elite Anointed that would enter right behind himself, and he had an unusually somber expression. The demons and Tal-Eladar were right behind them, and Emily stood in their ranks. Zac felt bad about pushing a teenager to the frontlines, but her totemic ability was just too useful. Thankfully she knew enough to not actually enter battle, but rather focus on buffing

This small elite squad would be responsible to take control of the edge of the mountain, after which the rest of Port Atwood's forces would enter.

"Any second now, get ready," Kenzie said, dragging Zac's eyes back to the portal. "And stay safe."

"I've defeated these guys so many times by now," Zac smiled. "Nothing will go wrong."

Everyone soon turned to the portal. Zac's heart hammered as adrenaline coursed through his body, and the muscles in his legs were taut with tension.

“NOW!” Kenzie shouted and Zac shot forward like a bullet straight toward the portal.

The four-meter tall vortex had looked like a window into the void before, but just after Kenzie exclaimed it transformed to instead show a fiery hellscape with hundreds of suns hovering in the sky. The Spatial Drill had directly connected two positions in contrast to teleportation arrays, and Zac found himself inside the inferno the moment he stepped through.

Scorching heat licked his face but Zac roared as he blasted his Dao Field based on Fragment of the Coffin and empowered it with his **[Spiritual Void]**. It was like a concussion grenade had erupted right where he stood, pushing the golden flames away for over thirty meters around him.

Zac had managed to clear the area of flames the moment he appeared, but his Danger Sense was still going haywire. There was a dense script covering the ground, and the fractals had actually started to climb up his legs, the inscriptions looking like fiery snakes. The fractals felt like molten steel against his skin, and Zac found himself encumbered by greater and greater weight pressing him down.

It reminded him of the bindings Brazla used on him in the lava bath, and while it wasn't too bad for him just yet, it would be devastating for the normal soldiers. They would turn into sitting ducks unable to move by this level of restraints. Worse, those were just one of the preparations of the cultists. There were already hundreds of attacks soaring toward him, and cascading waterfalls of golden flames were descending from the suns in the sky.

Some of the suns were even falling toward him, the air itself incinerating from their descent.

Even Zac felt some fear at the shocking display, but he could only put his trust in the Anointed as he stabbed the spearhead into the ground before he took two rapid steps forward. A fractal blade attached to **[Verun's Bite]** grew fifty meters with

each step, and it was like he was an apostle of nature as a storm of verdure erupted around him, from the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** to the forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

By the time Zac had taken his two steps to create some distance from the portal, the edge of **[Chop]** had gained the mysterious sets of fractals of life and death. A wave of darkness swept out, swallowing the first wave of attacks.

However, these were the elites of the incursion, and Zac frowned when he saw how quickly the energy of **[Rapturous Divide]** was being expended. But it thankfully only needed to last for a fraction of a second before the opposing wave of energy rushed forward, causing the familiar friction of life and death.

Dozens of attacks, most of them based on the holy fire-heritage of the Church of Everlasting Dao, were ripped to shreds as the spatial delimitation appeared. It was quickly being whittled down, but Zac desperately pushed back by steadily infusing both the half-circles with their respective Daos. Infusing two Daos at once was usually impossible for him with his awful control, but he managed to force it for a second as he channeled Cosmic Energy into his next skill.

A loud thunder-like clap from behind almost made Zac lose his footing, but the omniscience of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** let him proceed without worry. It was the advance group of Anointed who had surrounded **[Judgement]**. They were led by Rhubat and Vanexis and all of them slapping their enormous hands against their chests in what somewhat looked like a haka.

Zac was worried for a second that their actions would prove fruitless, but he was thankfully proven wrong almost immediately. A wave rippled out from the spear embedded in the ground before it exploded with mysterious white light that spread like a wildfire. The golden fractals around it cracked and dimmed down as one spectral monolith after another rose from the ground.

Even the golden inscriptions that had reached all the way up to Zac's knees were subdued by the radiant glow of the Zhix

heirloom, and it felt like a huge weight was literally lifted from his shoulders which allowed him to move freely. It didn't look like it was the Anointed who personally helped him, but rather that the spear itself was intelligent. For example, Zac's fractal forest was completely unaffected as well, and Billy was completely drenched in the light as he rapidly grew into his Titanic form.

It was the monoliths rather than the light that was the source of a shocking pressure though, a pressure that exceeded anything Zac could have imagined from such an unassuming weapon. The pillars radiated an aura that even eclipsed the peak-grade talismans he had used when fighting for his life outside the Tower of Eternity. It proved that the spear was a real treasure, and most likely the most powerful item of the old Zhix world.

He still didn't know exactly what the Anointed's ace would do, but it did lessen the pressure Zac felt a bit as he started summoning the first axe of **[Deforestation]**. The divide of **[Rapturous Divide]** had only lasted for a few seconds before it was finally overpowered by the frenzied assault of the army.

“Destroy the gate!” an infuriated roar echoed out from a soldier in the core of the cultist army, but how could Zac let that happen?

The source of the shout was definitely one of the leaders of the army judging by his outfit, but Zac could immediately tell that it wasn't the people he had fought back at the Undead Incursion. It wasn't the true leader, but Zac still sensed that he was at least at the same level as himself. That by itself usually meant a free kill for someone like Zac, but the bishop was clearly empowered by a War Array that far eclipsed what his Valkyries were able to conjure.

A huge sun shone above the bishop's head, and it was like the other suns empowered it, which in turn empowered the bishop himself. He radiated a fierce holy aura, and he had hundreds of soldiers backing him up. It was vastly different from fighting him in a one-on-one.

Whatever the Anointed were conjuring wasn't ready, but it wasn't like the cultists were going to wait around for them to

finish. The huge glowing orbs were almost upon him, and Zac couldn't let them get any closer. They were crammed full of chaotic energies by the looks of it, and if they slammed into the ground they might even be able to break off the edge of the mountain.

Thankfully his skill had already been fully infused by this point, and Zac immediately swung his arm as the enormous hatchet above his head mirrored his movement. He didn't target the leader, but rather a dense cluster of incoming attacks. It felt a bit of a waste to waste the first swing of **[Deforestation]** on blowing up attacks instead of taking out a part of the army, but he didn't have a lot of options.

A wave of unmatched sharpness rippled out, and a series of coruscating explosions almost blinded him as a large number of the glowing suns were ripped apart. It almost looked like a meteor shower as burning pieces of molten stone rained down on the ground but the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** were powerful enough to divert the fallout before they incinerated from the heat.

The sky was unfortunately still littered with incoming attacks. Zac felt a bit unwilling, but he could only prepare to activate his second swing in order to clean out another set of suns.

However, he quickly stopped when he realized that his backup was already on the move.

Chapter 631: Judgement

The darkness of the Void was completely pushed away from the skyline littered with fiery spheres and the fires that raged all around Zac. He was about to make his move, but a massive foot flashed right past Zac as an earth-shattering roar caused the ground to shudder. It was Billy who was already swinging his grotesque club like a baseball player, the knobbly skull at its top aimed straight for the descending suns.

The air itself shattered like a broken mirror as Billy unleashed some sort of earthquake-like skill, but that wasn't the end of it. Enormous spikes shot out of the ground, each of them stabbing at or blocking another sun. Billy had somehow managed to take control of the Memorysteel itself, and one sun after another exploded in specular fashion.

The explosions were earth-shattering, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when they swallowed Billy whole. However, the giant quickly shot out of the flames, golden flames licking his whole body. Burns covered his whole body, but he seemed mostly fine. His hair had been singed completely clean, including his eyebrows, and Zac's mouth quirked up when he saw that he had gained a brother monk.

Billy was ultimately just one person, and there were still a huge number of attacks threatening to blow them all to kingdom come. But the shadows of the large spikes unexpectedly detached from the Memorysteel and stabbed into the air, extinguishing one sun after another. An azure tornado swept forward out of nowhere as well, rippling through a series of the attacks that the cultists had launched toward the spatial gate.

It was obviously Ogras and Thea who had appeared, but Zac couldn't actually pinpoint their position. He guessed they were stuck on the other side of the cultist army, which was just fine

considering that it forced the enemy to constantly split their attention.

Still, even with Ogras and Thea joining the fray, it wasn't enough. There were over a thousand elites from the Church of Everlasting Dao present, and they had spent five minutes filling the glowing orbs in the sky with immense amounts of energy. Their preparations wouldn't be stopped with one attack or two.

However, a ghastly white spear suddenly shot past Billy's head to pierce a close-by sun with enough force to actually cause a spatial tear. The crack in space swallowed most of the subsequent explosion before both the spear and the sun were gone in a puff. Zac's eyes lit up, realizing that the Anointed's preparations were done, and they had made their move as well.

He didn't really want to waste his second swing of **[Deforestation]** on the scorching suns, especially when he wasn't even sure it would work considering Infernal Axe was partly fire-based. Seeing the Anointed helping out was a relief, but he was extremely confused as he couldn't see anything with the vision granted by **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. That spear had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

He turned back to see what was going on, and his eyes widened in confusion when he saw the drastic change that had taken place right under his nose.

Who were these people?

It felt like he was looking at two realities at once.

[Hatchetman's Spirit] told him that there were only the monoliths, the small group of Anointed, and the vanguard of the elite army behind him. But his actual eyes were telling a different story as they saw one fierce warrior after another appear atop the pillars.

Each of them was at least four meters tall and radiated an appalling amount of killing intent, something that was only possible after a huge amount of bloodshed. One warrior, in particular, was just shocking. It was at least seven meters tall, dwarfing even the living Anointed. It held a small spear that looked just like **[Judgement]** that Zac stabbed into the ground,

and the air twisted around it the warrior pointed the spear forward.

The hulking Anointed in the front was clearly the leader, and the spectral warriors behind it immediately threw out a barrage of attacks. They almost blotted out the sky as they slammed into the suns, the attacks, and even toward the standing army. Glimmering golden shields erupted in front of the whole zealot army, but even they looked a bit shellshocked by the enormous force contained in the attacks.

The whole sky rumbled for an instant, and Zac could only stare in wonder as the preparations of the Church of Everlasting Dao were ripped apart in an instant.

Each spear almost contained as much power as a swing from Zac himself, and they could easily destabilize one or two suns which quickly extinguished the remaining ones. The cultists found themselves under tremendous pressure as well as cracks kept spreading across the barriers from the powerful attacks.

The soldiers were true elites though, and they didn't panic or break ranks, but rather kept infusing their shields with more and more power. The bishop also swung a censer in his hand, and the sun above him instantaneously doubled its luminescence. It clearly had a huge effect on the army as the faltering barriers quickly recovered, and new suns started forming in the sky.

The titanic spectral Anointed in the front seemed almost alive as it glared at the bishop with death in its eyes. It threw out the copy of **[Judgement]** the next moment, aiming straight for the huge sun that emboldened the cultist forces. Zac had his vision blur from the tremendous conviction stored in that attack. It felt like the spear held enough force to pierce the whole mountain, let alone a puny sun.

“Seal!” the bishop roared when he saw the incoming attack, and an enormous sigil wrought in gold suddenly appeared, held aloft by four golden giants.

The twenty-meter tall giants looked harried and tortured, and fetters bound their limbs to the sigil as they hoisted it in front of them. Zac couldn't tell whether the giants were real or

something created with Cosmic Energy. Perhaps they were even corpses that had been turned into treasures. But they radiated an immense pressure, and Zac couldn't even look into their eye sockets where white-hot runic flames burned.

The sigil was all-too-familiar as well, a perfect copy of the one he had broken over at the cultist incursion. Where it had come from, Zac had no idea, but it was continuously being empowered by the whole cultist army judging by the energy streams he could discern with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

Zac froze in place as he looked at the spectacle. The Church of Everlasting Dao really had some cards up their sleeve. It was a lucky break that the Anointed managed to force this enormous thing out early-on since Zac felt that he would have been forced to use a lot of effort to break it apart by himself. He could only hope that the effect of the Anointed's ultimate strike lived up to the pressure it emitted.

The enormous sigil had appeared right between the two opposing factions, and the spectral Anointed's spear slammed straight into the core. It was like the world froze when the two forces met, and a painful headache almost made Zac topple over as odd hymns echoed in his mind. Others weren't any better off, with the demon and Tal-Eladar elites toppling over before they even had a chance to launch their first salvo.

The Anointed and zealots were hunkered over as well, but they were a bit better off. Even the dozens of spectral Zhix seemed to barely be able to maintain their form, but they didn't seem content to just dissipate. The ghastly squad shot forward, each of them slowly losing their forms as they approached not the sigil but the giants holding it.

Soon they were just streams of immense conviction, and one hole after another was punched into their bodies as the ghosts sacrificed themselves to take down the enemy. It was just the kind of crazed determination one could expect from the ancient leaders of the Zhix, and Zac immediately seized the opportunity to help out. He had held off on his second strike long enough.

A cascading wave of flames rippled forward and slammed into one of the flanks of the army. He didn't dare to attack the giants or the sigil, afraid that his strike would also harm the efforts of the Anointed, but he saw an opportunity to cause some real damage to the army itself. A sea of shadows suddenly swept toward the second flank as well, and the cultist army found themselves beset from behind.

The sea of shadows turned into a churning storm of shadow spears, and it was like a hurricane that kept picking up momentum. Zac's eyes lit up when he realized that Ogras was using **[Soaring Ocean]**, the Dexterity-based E-grade skill available in his Dao Repository. More and more spikes kept appearing, and the cultist army was soon beset by thousands of stabs in the blink of an eye.

Each of the stabs didn't contain a lot of power, but the barrage was unceasing and ever-growing, creating constant pressure on the army. Together with the inferno that Zac had ignited on the other side, the soldiers were no longer able to reinforce the massive sigil in the heart of the army.

As expected, the fires in the eyes of the golden giants visibly dimmed soon after Zac's and Ogras' strikes landed, and small cracks spread across the sigil. But things weren't over just yet. The sigil quickly regained its luster, and Zac started to feel a sense of trepidation.

"Attack!" the bishop roared from the other side of the sigil, and flames lit up over the heads of almost half the army before they shot into the enormous golden runes.

The giants shuddered before they visibly started shrinking like they were being drained of all their moisture. They were turned into desiccated husks in an instant, all their energy absorbed by the sigil as it suddenly hovered in the air by its own power. The spectral spear of the titanic Zhix exploded, causing one final scar on the golden surface before it disappeared.

The crack quickly spread across the whole surface of the golden rune, but Zac wasn't sure it was a good thing when he saw some weird energy start pouring out from the cracks. It

was like space itself crumbled in front of the sigil as tears started to spread toward him and the portal. These weren't spatial tears though, but something else entirely.

There wasn't the void of space inside the cracks, but rather terrifying white-hot flames that made Zac's very soul shudder from just looking at them. That wasn't the only thing; the portal behind him actually started twisting from the pressure released from the cracks that slowly crept toward them.

He definitely couldn't let this continue, so he immediately unleashed the final swing of **[Deforestation]**, imbuing the strike with everything he had. A wave of darkness rolled forward, and one radiant light after another was forcibly closed as the grey clouds of desolation flooded into the cracks. It looked like two wrongs did make a right in this case, as the terrifying cracks were actually destroyed by his strongest attack.

However, even Zac's final strike proved insufficient to completely quash the incoming attack. Zac tried to figure out what punishment would be best to use, but the Zhix made their move first. There were just six of the spectral Anointed remaining, including the leader. The others had already sacrificed themselves, and it looked like the last group was about to do the same.

Even the monoliths that towered among the tress of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** rose into the sky, and ghosts and graves melded into a huge wave that followed right behind the wave of desolation. The whole area was quickly drenched in silver radiance, but Zac still felt enormous blasts of chaotic energies being forcibly suppressed inside the light. The explosions grew more and more sparse over the following seconds, Zac slowly felt his Danger Sense calm down as the silver light dissipated.

The Anointed behind him bowed deeply toward the chaos, their faces full of admiration. A tremendous explosion erupted the next moment, and the sigil cracked in two as the husks of the giants were ripped apart. A chorus of groans and wails could be heard even through the clamor of the pieces of the

rune slammed onto the Memorysteel floor, and Zac knew their opportunity had arrived.

“Attack,” Zac growled with a low volume as he shot forward, a swirl of leaves forming a barrier around him as he pushed through the errant energies.

The golden barrier was down, and the cultists were suffering from the backlash. This was the optimal time to launch a swift and decisive counter-strike. A massive skill like **[Nature’s Punishment]** might force the warriors out of their muddled state from the massive energy fluctuations, so Zac personally rushed forward to deal with the head of the snake.

A wave of warmth spread through his body, proof that Emily had appeared as well to conjure her totem.

More and more soldiers of his army poured out behind him through the portal, each of them rushing forward behind a vanguard of Anointed. It quickly turned into a multi-race army of elites, and it kept getting reinforced as people flooded through the spatial tunnel. They looked exhausted, but determination burned in their eyes as they rushed into the haze.

The fury of almost getting lost in the void burned in their veins, and they were ready to unleash the stress accumulated over the past hours on the Church of Everlasting Dao.

Chapter 632: Asura

A swarm of Drones shot out through the portal above the heads of the soldiers as well, though Zac could still see that Kenzie hadn't passed through the portal. They didn't follow the charging army but rather formed what looked like a protective array. Layers of barriers appeared the next moment, protecting the spatial tunnel from any errant attacks.

It allowed Zac to focus on the task at hand, and he shot forward, aiming straight for the most energy-dense spot according to **[Cosmic Gaze]** since the previous attacks had turned any visibility to zero. A squad of lizardmen soldiers suddenly appeared to his left, but they didn't even have the chance to react before they were bisected by a fractal edge that ripped through them like they were made from dry wood.

It wasn't Zac himself, but rather the special edge he could summon with **[Chop]**. As for himself, his back was already lit up with a lustrous halo as he took another step with **[Loamwalker]**, appearing right in front of his target. Or so he thought.

Zac expected to appear in front of the bishop, but he instead found himself face-to-face with a three-meter tall Asura with six arms. One arm held a cudgel, another a spear. Two held burning censers and the last two were empty-handed. It radiated an oppressive aura as four burning halos behind its back lit up the surroundings. Dense scriptures were visible inside the flames, and Zac found himself drifting off after trying to discern their meaning.

He quickly snapped back to reality, just in time to avoid a lance of flames that shot out from one of the Asura's hands. An extremely forceful attack with the cudgel quickly followed, but Zac had already adapted by this point and met fire with fire as he swung **[Verun's Bite]** at an upward angle. A scorching wind slammed into his face when the weapons

clashed, and he felt a stab of pain in his arm when a foreign Dao tried to burrow its way into his body.

The wave of heat was extremely painful as well, forcing him to close his eyes for a moment as to not get blinded. The power of the divine avatar was pretty impressive, but he was obviously no slouch himself. His upward swing had forced the Asura off its feet and thrown it a few meters back. It was already working on its next attack though, as two plumes of golden smoke spread out around him from the censers.

Zac had no idea where this oppressive creature had come from, but he could only assume it was some sort of transformation of the bishop. In fact, after having clashed once with the divine being he realized it was expending lifeforce at a crazy pace, far more than the Anointed ever did. He guessed that this transformation was an ultimate suicide attack that only the elites of the church could use.

Not only that, but the Asura was also clearly imbued by a War Array since Zac could see streams of energy enter his body from the still-shining sun above. He wanted to attack the support squad, but he couldn't actually figure out who was powering the sun. He had heard of War Arrays with masking abilities before, but this was the first time Zac encountered one.

Killing the soldiers who empowered their leader with a War Array was such an obvious tactic, so a lot of people had worked on solutions to the issue. One such method was to obfuscate the source of the boost, just like now. It helped keep the supporting soldiers safe, but it had clear disadvantages as well. First of all, it only worked in large-scale battles where the Array Masters could blend in with other soldiers. Secondly, the range was generally limited.

Zac thought of ignoring the Asura and instead target the normal soldiers, but he eventually gave up on the idea. The bishop was radiating impressive power, and he would be able to cause a lot of destruction of his own if Zac wasn't there to stop him. The bishop was probably more than willing to adopt a scorched-earth-tactic, but Zac was a lot less willing to sacrifice his people.

The censers in the Asura's hands had already been activated, and more and more of the golden dust spewed out in the surroundings. Zac knew he couldn't let the bishop continue unchecked, so he disappeared from his position as he activated his movement skill. Zac appeared behind the Asura almost instantaneously, and a powerful swing empowered by **[Conformation of Supremacy]** shot straight toward the halos that kept burning life-force.

A pained wail shocked suddenly his mind, forcing Zac to quickly cancel his attack. It was Verun that was actually harmed by the fierce heat. Something empowered by that much life-force could even harm his Spirit Tool it would seem, so Zac could only find another method to deal with his enemy. The Asura turned into a blur before he had the chance to launch a second attack though.

The golden diety pivoted with almost impossible speed, and the unencumbered hands made some unknown seals. Zac felt some danger the next moment, and he barely had time to jump back before one of the halos released a massive conflagration that swallowed the Asura and the ten meters surrounding it. It was the golden dust in the air that had ignited in spectacular fashion.

The flames were extremely intense, to the point that Zac couldn't see anything inside. He knew that even he would get badly burnt by those flames, so he could only stand guard outside the flame pillar, waiting to see what happened with the Asura. After all, he hadn't gained any Cosmic Energy, not that Zac believed the bishop would blow himself up the first thing he did.

As expected, the bladed head of a spear shot out from the conflagration with enough force to disperse the flames. Zac angled his head to avoid the stab, but he still felt a burning sensation on his throat as the spear radiated a terrifying heat. This much wasn't enough to stop Zac in his tracks though, and he took a step forward while taking advantage of the outstretched spear.

[Verun's Bite] keened as he ferociously swung at the Asura's chest just below the outstretched left arm holding the spear.

The cultist tried to intercept the strike with its cudgel, but Zac caught the bishop's arm in a vise-like grip with his free hand as he continued the swing. Just as he was about to create a massive wound another arm turned to a blur, and one of the two censers appeared to block his edge.

The ceremonial tool was destroyed in an instant, and the whole hand holding it was cut-off at the elbow. Zac was, unfortunately, unable to keep his momentum going, as the censer exploded after being destroyed, releasing a huge cloud of that extremely combustible golden dust.

As expected, a halo lit up the next moment, and Zac stepped back to avoid a second inferno. However, his eyes widened when he realized that one of the free hands had grabbed his robes by the lapels, lifting him just as he was about to activate **[Loamwalker]**. The whole world turned white as a searing pain threatened to swallow him whole, but Zac forcibly suppressed the agony as he swung his axe in a ruthless downward arc.

He felt molten metal beneath his feet a moment later, and he desperately rushed out of the conflagration. The flames dissipated only a few seconds later, exposing an Asura that now was missing two hands standing knee-deep in molten Memorysteel. The bishop seemed utterly undeterred though as he rushed forward to engage in another melee.

The screams and clamor of battle echoed all around him, meaning that the battle had turned into a frantic melee just like his own situation. Visibility was still very limited as the Asura had actually managed to set the Memorysteel around him on fire, but he could see blazing suns slamming into the Anointed's sigils, causing massive shockwaves. The ground beneath them was thankfully pretty thick, but Zac still couldn't help but worry that their war would destroy the whole section of the mountain, sending them into the abyss.

The quicker he finished the battle the better. But Zac didn't use any of his aces even when knowing that. He had already managed to confirm that the true leader of the Church of Everlasting Dao was missing. This man was pretty powerful,

but he was ultimately just slightly stronger than the other bishops they had fought.

The leader he had encountered in the Dead Zone wasn't there, and Zac guessed that part of the cultists had already set off toward the Dimensional Seed. There was also the True Sky Faction, The Lunar Tribe, Void Beasts, and god knows what else to worry about. He couldn't burn through all his ultimates the moment he set foot on the mountain.

Thankfully it didn't seem like it would come to that anyway. Zac and the Asura kept fighting in a brutal melee, where the Asura tried to ensnare and incinerate Zac while Zac kept whittling the cultist down with ruthless efficiency.

A thump echoed out as the arm holding the large spear was fell onto the ground, and the Asura was covered in wounds and golden blood by this point. Zac was working quickly and methodically to dismantle him, but he was once more forced back as the Asura started swinging his censer like a lasso before unleashing a massive wave of flames.

Zac sighed in annoyance as he backed away again, his eyes scanning for a weakness in the sea of flames. He hadn't managed to unleash a killing blow, but not for a lack of trying. It felt like the Asura's Danger Sense could rival his own, as every time he was about to launch a lethal strike one of the four halos erupted, forcing Zac to back away.

The bishop was on his last legs though. One of the halos had already extinguished after just one minute of heated exchanges, and the remaining three were a lot dimmer compared to before. Each wave of flames was powerful enough to harm Zac, so they were definitely powered by a pretty significant amount of the bishop's remaining life-force. A couple of waves more and he might not even be able to keep standing.

Zac shot forward again, and he caught a lucky break when the Asura stumbled forward due to exhaustion and blood loss. Zac immediately pounced on the opening, but he realized something was wrong when he saw a ruthless gleam in the Asusa's golden eyes.

“Glory to Heaven!” the Asura roared with an otherworldly tone that sounded like a chorus rather than one singular voice, and his arms wrapped around Zac’s body in a burst of speed.

Over a hundred screams echoed out from all over the battlefield the next moment, and the sun above their head turned almost blindingly radiant. The halos behind the bishop’s back turned horizontal as they rapidly started expanding, and the sun above their head started falling apart as the halos gobbled up the chaotic energies. Zac immediately tried to get out of the bearhug, his struggles only turning more violent as his Danger Sense kept growing in volume.

He was caught in an extremely tight embrace, but he was still able to move his right arm somewhat. It allowed him to unleash a furious barrage at the midriff of the asura, and he suddenly felt a surge of Cosmic Energy enter his body as the bishop was hacked in two. However, Zac’s eyes widened in shock when the death of the cultist leader had no impact on the halos growing above their heads.

“Retreat!” Zac roared in case any of his soldiers were in the vicinity as he untangled himself from the corpse of the bishop.

However, he personally stayed behind as his Specialty Core activated. Transforming in the middle of a battlefield was a risky move, but he couldn’t deal with the current situation in his human form. If the bishop’s final attack was allowed to go off, it might collapse the whole section of the mountain. It was instilled with all the remaining life-force of the asura, along with what Zac suspected the life-force of the hundred soldiers who just screamed with pain.

Some fractal leaves wouldn’t cut it against something like that; he needed to bring out his big guns.

He was making a bet; that his transformation would be quicker than the final attack of the Bishop. The three remaining halos kept expanding, and Zac couldn’t help but panic as he saw them expanding toward where battles still raged. But the transformation finally completed, and Zac instantly stomped down on the ground. The fortifications of [**Profane Seal**] sprung up the next moment, sealing the growing halos inside.

Fifteen spectral chains started slamming into the radiant flames, but the halos were just too full of power. The chains couldn't even get near them, let alone damage them. Still, Zac kept infusing more and more Miasma into the skill to keep the lashing going. He hoped that every slam would weaken the halos a bit, which would make it easier to contain the final eruption.

As for Zac himself, he saw no reason to stay inside the cage. The chains of [**Loves Bond**] wound themselves around a Memorysteel cliff next to the closest gate, and Zac threw himself out through a small opening in the door he created. The Miasmatic gate closed behind him, just in time before an apocalyptic explosion erupted inside.

Cracks spread across the gates and the towers of [**Profane Seal**], and the dome in the sky fluctuated wildly from the pressure. It looked like he tried to contain a sun. Zac infused more and more Miasma into the skill, but he knew that it was just a matter of time before it fell apart.

Just five seconds later the miasmatic cage crumbled, and a sea of fire so dense that it had essentially turned into a liquid rolled toward him. Zac's skill had absorbed most of the kinetic force of the blast, but much of the raw energies remained. Zac could only grit his teeth and conjure [**Immutable Bulwark**] and expand it as much as he could.

The skill turned into an indomitable wall that towered twenty meters into the sky. But his Seed of Sanctuary had unfortunately been used to create the Fragment of the Bodhi, meaning that he was no longer able to turn it into a huge protective dome-like before. A series of earthen walls suddenly appeared to the sides of his barrier though as one Anointed after another appeared.

A scorched and bloodied Billy also appeared before he slammed his club into the ground, which caused a series of jagged metal spikes to block off part of the heat. Finally, a towering wall of shadows rose behind Zac, making it harder for anyone to spot Zac's transformation. Their help was enough to create a long enough wall to contain the flames, and

they raged just for half a minute before they finally ran out of steam.

The sounds of battle were growing more and more sparse as well, and Zac even heard the sound of hundreds of drones flying about, blasting the ground with their powerful lasers. If Kenzie had gone through the portal their people had mostly reached the mountain already, and with the bishop gone and the remaining cultists exhausted, things would be settled soon enough.

The question was what he should do next, and his eyes turned toward the huge metal sphere hanging in the sky.

Chapter 633: The Gift of Life

Ibtep took a deep breath before activating the teleportation array. They had spent the last two days traveling from hive to hive to better prepare for their mission. Zachary Atwood's warnings had made Ibtep worry that their preparations weren't enough, so they had gone ahead and collected another ten billion Nexus Coins just in case.

Of course, this also put Ibtep under even greater pressure, as more and more Zhix knew of their goal. Ibtep didn't know whether they would even dare return if they failed. Ibtep would definitely get hanged by their antennae as a warning to young warriors, their precious larvae farm scorched to the ground.

But Ibtep was ready. They had gone through all the wise teachings of Nonet's predecessor and their backpack bulged with preparations meant to tackle every scenario. They had even brought their tastiest grubbies this time, each of them full of flavor and energy. Even a vaunted otherworlder should be impressed by such fine specimen, no?

Ibtep touched their hand against the large Nexus Hub, their heart beating with a mix of fear and excitement. As far as Ibtep knew, they would be the first Zhix to ever set out from their home planet. Who knew, perhaps songs would even be written about this journey in the future? A screen appeared, and they unhesitantly pressed the button that would activate the teleportation to a place called 'Zerathar'.

The talisman in their hand started buzzing, and the Nexus Hub emitted a deep pulse that somehow swallowed Ibtep's surroundings. The grand structure housing the crystal disappeared, as did the doorway to the outside. Remaining was only darkness. The dark only lasted for an instant though as an energy pillar of unimaginable power shot out of the crystal, stretching out into eternity.

Ibtep's mouth widened into an 'o'. The Seeker in their heart wanted to properly study the marvel, but they hurriedly jumped into the pillar in case it only lasted for a short while. Ibtep found themselves hurtling through the darkness, shot through who knows how great a distance. It felt extremely novel at first, but even Ibtep started to get bored after ten minutes had passed.

Just how far was this place?

Their wait was soon over though as the darkness was finally replaced with a flash of light, and Ibtep found himself in a beautiful garden. Ibtep was immediately transfixed as they looked around. Not only was the Corruption, no Cosmic Energy, of unmatched density in this stretch of paradise, but even the sky was different than anything Ibtep had seen before.

Rivers of light ran flowed across the firmament, showering the plants and the ground in a warm light. Ibtep could actually see some fishes jumping about in the river, somehow ignoring the laws of gravity. Even some of the plants seemed to be able to float in the air, forming small pockets of greenery bobbing about.

Calls of various critters echoed across the gardens, but they created a beautiful melody rather than a discordant cacophony. Ibtep couldn't be sure, but they actually felt it was by design. Ibtep stood transfixed in place, a storm of emotions wafting over them. This was it, what their somewhat surly brethren disregarded in favor of normalcy and tradition. The sense of adventure, the beckoning call of the unknown.

Ibtep was doubly happy to have taken on this mission. How would they ever encountered such a marvelous place otherwise? It wasn't just like soup for the soul, but Ibtep even realized they had actually gained a level just from breathing in the aromatic atmosphere. Granted, some of the boost came from the unique properties of their Seeker-class, where visiting new places gave a boost.

But Ibtep had never gained energy anywhere close compared to what they gained just now just by standing around for a few

seconds.

“Move, you’re in the way,” a gruff voice echoed out from behind, prompting Ibtep to jump up in a scare.

A large humanoid with six arms glared at Ibtep as he passed, but he didn’t do anything further as they left along a cobblestone path. Each step took the cultivator hundreds of meters, and he was gone in an instant. Ibtep breathed out in relief, realizing they had forgotten themselves. Zachary Atwood had warned about the dangers of this place, and an example had presented itself so quickly.

The six-armed warrior was powerful, shockingly so. Ibtep’s antennae had been completely overwhelmed when the man passed by, and they could only guess that the man was in the peak of E-grade at the least, or likely even higher. It was shocking. A random chance encounter in this place had put them face to face with a being more powerful even than the greatest Anointed or Zachary Atwood himself.

A sudden cough drew Ibtep’s attention, and only then did they realized that there was another person close-by. It was a human, and she looked at Ibtep with a slightly crooked smile, seemingly hesitant whether she should talk with them.

“Hello, I am Ibtep. May I ask the directions to the Zethaya Hive?” Ibtep asked as they walked up to her.

“The Zethaya clan? This whole building is part of the Zethaya Pill House, Zerathar Branch...” the guard hesitantly said as she looked Ibtep up and down.

Ibtep knew that look all-too-well. She was no doubt hoping for a bribe. Ibtep grimaced in reluctance, but they still decided to follow their guts. First impressions were important.

“Thank you, my friend. For your troubles,” Ibtep said as they placed one of their finer larvae in the human’s hand.

The guard’s eyes were wide with shock as she looked down at the squirming critter in her hand, and Ibtep inwardly groaned, realizing they might have overtipped this time. Not only were these little critters delectable, but they might even be extremely rare in this part of the universe. Ibtep needed to

remember Zachary Atwood's warnings. It was dangerous to show off one's wealth in a place like this.

"Ah... I.. Thank you?" the guard said as she gingerly held the larvae. She found her bearings soon enough though and indicated the same road that the six-armed man earlier walked. "The main lobby is just down this road. Seeing as young master came through the private teleporter, a personal liaison will help you during your visit."

Ibtep nodded in thanks before walking down the path, their eyes curiously peering back and forth. Normally they would have stayed behind and asked the helpful human all the questions that had appeared in their mind, but now was not the time. The mission came first.

Only after a few minutes did Ibtep actually understand what the guard meant about this place being part of the pill house. They weren't actually outside, but rather inside a building of enormous proportions. The rivers in the sky, and the sky itself, were artificial, like carvings of hive-artisans. This place gave a lot warmer feeling than the dour interiors of the base Lord Atwood and the Anointed were exploring though.

But it begged the question; were all otherworlder houses this big? Did they have claustrophobia, the odd condition Ibtep learned about from Emily?

Ibtep eventually reached another part of the massive structure, this one a large hall full of people. Thousands of people, some of them radiating almost blinding power. Even the weakest of them seemed to be in the middle E-Grade, but many were far stronger. Ibtep could immediately sense at least twenty who most likely had reached the next step on the road of cultivation; D-grade.

The scene quickly subdued Ibtep's excitement, and some worry crept into their heart. Anyone in this hall could kill them with a wave of their arm, was this mission even possible to complete?

"Young Master, welcome to the Zethaya Pill House," a man suddenly said, the sudden sound causing Ibtep to jump a few

meters in fright. “Ah, my apologies. May I ask what requirements Young Master have today?”

Ibtep turned around and saw a middle-aged male human standing in front of them. He had a short black beard and wore a set of wide robes that made Ibtep think of the acolytes who served the Anointed and prepared the rites of the hives.

This man was far more powerful than the clerics of the Zhix though, and Ibtep guessed him to be in the late stages of E-grade. However, he didn't emit the same type of oppressive pressure as Lord Atwood or the three great Anointed, but rather a soothing aura that made Ibtep think of the moss gardens back home.

“I was sent by Zac Piker,” Ibtep said as they took out the second token Lord Atwood had provided. “He sent me here because we require the aid of a skilled alchemist.

“Zac Piker...” the man muttered like he was tasting the name in his mouth as he accepted the token with both hands. His eyes suddenly widened in shock as his eyes turned to Ibtep. “AH? It's him?”

The man had been very courteous before, but Ibtep almost felt like a warlord being led through a conquered hive as the man suddenly ushered them through the large building as a wide smile donned his face. The liaison kept introducing the various facets of the Zethaya hive, and what sort of services they offered on the different floors.

“May I ask how Lord Piker is doing? He disappeared from the Tower of Eternity quite suddenly from what I heard,” the man suddenly asked as they entered a secluded hall with a dense earthy smell.

“My lord regrets he cannot come in person. He evolved some time ago and is now focusing on consolidating his cultivation by taking control of a Mystic Realm,” Ibtep dutifully said.

“Oh?” the middle-aged man thoughtfully nodded as he led Ibtep into a secluded room with a view of the garden with the flying rivers. “As expected of a hero reaching the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity. His progress is rapid. May I ask what

brought you here today? We'll do our best to fulfill Lord Piker's request."

Ibtep's mouth widened in a grin, feeling that knowing a big shot really had its benefits. Now, Ibtep could only pray that these people could find a solution to the plight of the Anointed. They quickly took out the urn holding the Elixir of Anointment and placed it on the table, and the man curiously looked at it.

"This is...?" the middle-aged man asked with confusion.

"This is the Elixir of Anointment. It is a tonic that will cause a warrior to grow to over twice their normal size and gain massive power for their grade. However, it will make the user unable to cultivate and unable to break through to even E-grade," Ibtep sighed. "There are over a thousand warriors who have taken this elixir on our home planet, and Lord Piker has sent me here with two goals in mind."

Technically it wasn't Zachary Atwood who had sent them, but Ibtep didn't believe that he would mind Ibtep using his name in a way like this.

"An Army Serum," the middle-aged man hummed. "What is Lord Piker's wish?"

"First of all, find a way for those who underwent the Rite of Anointment to keep progressing on the path of cultivation. And if possible, improve this elixir to remove its demerits," Ibtep said, their heart beating quickly as they looked at the middle-aged man with hope in their eyes.

"I understand," the man nodded as he took out a token and infused it with energy. "I have called one of our resident Master Alchemists to take a look at the serum you've brought. He'll be able to give a preliminary estimation."

An old man entered the room a bit later, and Ibtep immediately found himself almost unable to breathe from the shocking pressure the man emitted. However, just as quickly as the pressure came, it suddenly disappeared, allowing Ibtep to breathe out in relief.

“Master Wamon,” the liaison said with a bow. “A friend of young master Boje requires assistance, *Lord Piker of the 9th floor*. He has sent his acquaintance here to seek our help.”

The brows of the old man named Wamon rose, and he slowly nodded in understanding as he looked at the urn on the table with a curious glimmer in his eyes.

Have you encountered any problems so far? an aged voice suddenly emerged in Ibtep’s head as their antennae vibrated uncomfortably. *This little insectoid is just a child, but the main branch has deemed that little lunatic as a Tier 2 personage. We cannot bear the burden if we create a grudge with such an unlucky star.*

I ushered the messenger straight here, he should only have talked with the guard at the teleporter, the voice of the liaison answered.

What was going on? Were these two talking with their minds? And why were their words completely exposed as though they were talking out loud? Ibtep couldn’t imagine they were aware of them listening in, and they made sure to keep their face impassive. One of the orders of Lord Atwood was to sound out the situation on the outside, and wasn’t this the perfect opportunity?

The two kept talking in secret as the old man opened the urn and caused a few drops of the elixir to float in the air. Ibtep couldn’t be sure, but they guessed that the old Alchemist was observing the compound.

“It’s a very novel Army Serum, but it seems to be bound to your particular genealogy,” the old man eventually said after ten minutes. “There is much room for improvement, but the second request... I’m afraid that the Zethaya Clan will be unable to help you,” the old Alchemist said.

“What you have here is what’s something generally called an Army Serum in the Zecia sector. These kinds of elixirs help forces quickly nurture a large number of low-grade warriors with strong offensive powers. But these serums always have huge drawbacks, the most common being the one you mentioned; not being able to break through,” Wamon said.

“There are Army Serums that will allow one to break through to E-Grade, but those are strictly controlled by C-Grade forces. For us to evolve this serum to such a level... Would require the grand elders of the Zethaya Clan, and it would have geopolitical implications. I’m afraid that’s far beyond this little branch.”

“So there is no hope?” Ibtep sighed, their antennae drooping with disappointment.

“We might not be able to help you improve this formula, but we can help you with the other request,” Wamon smiled.

“Oh?”

“We can create an ‘antidote’ based on this elixir, one that would allow your people to cultivate and break through again. However, you should understand that this type of antidote isn’t perfect. Those who take it are unlikely to become proper Cultivators, and reaching D-Grade is highly unlikely. Most importantly; most of the power they gained from taking this serum will be stripped away when taking the antidote,” the old man said. “But it will allow them to break through.”

“Yes, please. Do that,” Ibtep quickly nodded. “How much does an antidote cost?”

“This is a small matter, the clan would be upset if they learned we charged the friend of Lord Piker for something like this. We will analyze this compound and prepare ten thousand doses free of charge,” the alchemist said. “Incidentally, young master Boje wanted to present some small gifts to Lord Piker in case he appeared in this branch, but we do not know what he requires. Would young master Ibtep perhaps know what he desires?”

Ibtep forcibly stilled their fast-beating heart before thinking back to their interactions with Lord Atwood since the time they first met. This was important, and a way for Ibtep to both make use of months of observation while also giving back to Zac! So, what did Zac desire? Zachary Atwood was mostly busy killing things all over the planet, so that should be his biggest interest. Unfortunately, there were no good gifts to give in that regard.

But he had shown a predilection for something else.

The first time Zac set out from his island out he came back with Emily, the one he called his mascot and who now lived in his private compound. The second time he came back with almost a hundred young females, all of them beautiful according to human standards. The third time he came back with his kin and two more young females. There was also the one called Thea Marshall, along with the odd alien Verana Tir'Emarel.

Lately, his speed of collecting females had decreased, but that was understandable considering how busy he was. Besides, perhaps his requirements were increasing as his powers grew?

Ibtep had spent a lot of time learning about human culture, and this behavior was clearly out of the norm considering the standard human coupling was a monogamic pairing. It was a unique desire of Zachary Atwood. This was perfect. Zachary Atwood had given the Zhix the gift of life, the continuation of their culture through arranging this meeting. This way Ibtep could give the gift of life right back.

“Lord Piker likes younger females,” Ibtep said, making the two humans freeze. “The hundreds he has are not good enough. If you can get the word out that the Lord is looking for better ones to take his seed, I am sure he will be most grateful.”

Chapter 634: Seals

The last remnants of the bishop's suicidal attack eventually dissipated, which allowed Zac and the others to deactivate their defensive skills. With the bishop down the battle was all but over, and there were two options to Zac at the moment; go with his army for a while or immediately set off toward the top of the mountain.

"Ah, why do you smell weird?" Billy suddenly said as he stepped closer to Zac, dragging him out of his musings.

"Might be because the guy I fought smelled?" Zac smiled as he activated his Specialty Core once more.

"Haha! Just like Billy when Billy was fighting the ratlight. Billy made Nigel puke once by standing ten meters away. But Billy will not puke even if you smell like a corpse," Billy laughed, but he suddenly gave a start. "Ah? You smell normal again?"

"Crazy world, different smells," Zac shrugged, prompting Billy to sagely nod in agreement.

Of course, it was simply Zac having returned to his human form again. His actions might have been spotted even with Ogras' shadow wall, but everyone was busy fighting their own battles. Most people would probably guess that he had used some death-attuned talisman from the Undead Incursion if they even realized the skills were wrought with Miasma.

That wasn't an accident. Zac had already let his Valkyries spread rumors about him finding all kinds of death-attuned treasures when taking out the Lich King. He knew that his excuses weren't perfect and that people would sooner put two and two together about the identity of Mr. Black. This way he would hopefully be able to create some misdirection though, which was only helped by the fact of how outlandish the truth was.

The Anointed next to him were obviously not as easily tricked due to their extremely sharp senses, but they didn't comment on the situation either.

A scream in the distance reminded Zac of the situation, and he could only table the matter for now. He still had some energy left in the tank, and while this battle was a rare opportunity for his people to improve through battle, he didn't want his elites to die at a place like this.

"Let's finish things up before deciding our next step," Zac said, and the Anointed nodded in agreement.

Zac immediately set off, and the remaining pockets of fiercely resisting zealots were cut apart in seconds wherever he appeared. Explosions quickly started to rock the area as the cultists realized that it was over and decided to blow themselves up. His people were thankfully already used to the crazed conviction of the Church of Everlasting Dao, so very few soldiers were killed from those final blasts.

It took just ten minutes until the battle was over, with not a single cultist remaining. Zac had tried to capture a few to question them about the whereabouts of their leaders, but they simply blew themselves up without hesitation the moment he got close.

The battle had been pitched even with the advantage of Zac providing aid. The cultists were not only higher leveled than most, but they had better heritages as well. Their skills more powerful and they were also better trained. If it wasn't for the large number of Anointed steamrolling everything and smashing their cooperation, the losses would have been way worse.

But even with the advantages of Zac himself brought along with the activation of **[Judgment]**, over three hundred elites had fallen in the battle. His people were simply too tired after the mad dash to the mountain. They had lost at least two hundred soldiers who ran out of energy, and many of those who made it were just hanging on by a thread. They weren't in any condition to fight, and many were killed even if they stayed in the back.

“Everyone, rest up for an hour,” Zac said as he looked across the harried army. “I know you’re tired, but we need to gather those Spatial Seals if we want to get out of this place.”

The soldiers’ faces relaxed from relief when they heard that they could finally rest, and most plonked down on the ground where they stood, not caring whether they were sitting right next to a corpse or a patch of burning metal. Everyone quickly closed their eyes and started absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals.

The ambient energy wasn’t actually bad on the mountain; on the contrary, it even eclipsed the energy back on his island. It looked like all the Cosmic Energy of the Mystic Realm had been gathered in one spot, which benefitted the survivors greatly.

Zac was about to sit down and rest as well, but he sensed a familiar aura approaching. His heart lurched for a bit, but he quickly found his bearings before turning around with a smile.

“Hey,” Thea smiled.

Zac was about to answer, but he forgot himself and his smile froze when he saw Thea’s state. She had thick dark circles under her eyes, to the point that it almost looked like she had two black eyes. Her hands and face were covered in burns, and her aura was fluctuating worryingly.

One of her arms was limply hanging to her side, and her battlesuit was drenched in blood. It was no wonder he had only seen Thea releasing a single attack at the beginning of the battle. She had clearly pushed herself beyond her limits even before he arrived. After all, she was still in the F-Grade and didn’t have the benefits of the energy reserves that reaching E-grade brought through the easily-gained levels.

Zac’s hurriedly flashed over and grabbed her by her waist before he flashed away again. A few quick steps took them to a secluded spot behind a Memorysteel cliff, and he carefully set her down on one of his cultivation mats.

“Are you okay?” he said with worry as he quickly took out a couple of Soul Crystals and healing pills.

Her physical wounds didn't seem too bad, though Zac knew she didn't have his neigh-unkillable constitution. Her unstable aura was a lot worse, as it usually meant her soul was wounded or overdrafted.

"I'll be fine, I'm just a bit wrung dry," Thea sighed as she gratefully accepted the Soul Crystals.

"Just rest up, we'll talk later," Zac said as he sat down next to her.

Zac himself was in a much better state than Thea. His energy reserves were running a bit low, but physically he was fine apart from some burns and minor wounds. He would be back to full strength in just a few hours. As for Thea, he wasn't so sure. He feared it might take weeks, even months for her to get back to perfect condition.

He didn't want to disturb her at this moment, so the two sat next to each other in silence and focused on recuperation. Of course, Zac wasn't in as wretched a state as Thea, so he took the time to take stock of the situation while absorbing Cosmic Energy.

The first thing he noticed was that a brand had appeared on the top of his right hand, shining with a grey light as it emitted spatial fluctuations. His first reaction was that the Asura had left some sort of dangerous mark on him at the end, but he quickly discarded that thought. It was clear that the 'flavor' for the rune on his hand was completely different compared to the heritage of the Church of Everlasting Dao.

Besides, he noticed that Thea had an identical mark on her hand, and he quickly realized what was going on. He had gained a Spatial Seal sometime during the battle. However, he couldn't remember seeing that seal on the bishop's hand. So either he got it from one of the soldiers he killed afterward, or it could somehow be hidden.

However, considering how bloodthirsty the System was, Zac doubted that it would let people obfuscate the fact that they were in possession of a ticket out of this place.

It was a relief to see that both he and Thea were safe for the moment, and that relief only increased when he opened his quest screen. His quest had actually increased to **(738/3000)** in progression, meaning that this battle had actually progressed his quest by almost 25%. It proved that it shouldn't be too hard to complete the quest.

The Zealots might have reached the mountain pretty early considering how soon they managed to start collapsing bridges, but they seemed to have focused on taking out the competition rather than gathering Seals from the way it looked. Even then a majority of them owned a seal from the looks of it.

Only after fifty minutes did Thea stir, prompting Zac to look over.

"I thought we lost you guys for a second there," Thea said with a weak smile.

"Well, if it's one thing I'm good at, it's staying alive," Zac laughed. "I'm glad you're okay as well. About before..."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that when things were so chaotic," Thea said, her eyes flickering.

"No, I'm glad you did," Zac said as he put his hand on hers.

Her mouth quirked upward a bit as her lithe fingers entwined with his.

"Shameless couple," a teasing snort suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"You again," Thea muttered before she turned to Zac. "If he was half as strong as he is annoying, he would have routed those cultists by himself."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there isn't really time for you to take a romantic time-out," the demon said, ignoring Thea's jab.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with a frown as he got up with a grunt.

"Your sister and the scientists have made some measurements. This place will last three more days at the most. The seed is

continuously accumulating energy inside that globe in the sky. The dimension won't be able to take it any longer than that," Ogras said. "As for whether the treasure is already ripe for the plucking or not, who's to say?"

"Three days," Zac frowned as he looked up at the massive moon hovering above the mountain peak.

"We tried ascending the mountain before," Thea said as she followed his gaze. "There is a weird pressure that increases the further up we go. Most people won't make it past the halfway point. I'd say you need the strength of an E-Grade warrior to reach the peak."

"It will probably take half a day to reach the Seed from our position, perhaps even more if there are complications inside the sphere," Ogras added.

"I'll stay with our people... For now," Zac said without hesitation. "We'll follow the same general plan as before. We'll circulate the mountain to look for the Dominators while harvesting Seals."

"What? Why?" Ogras exclaimed with confusion. "There's no guarantee that the one to first to reach the Dimensional Seed will get it, but it won't hurt our chances. That insect bastard is probably up there as well by now. The same goes for that leader of the cultist lunatics. The real stage of this Mystic Realm isn't on this desolate mountain, it's up there."

Zac waved his hand, and his quest appeared in front of them the next moment.

"Benevolent shepherd," Ogras muttered before his eyes lit up. "You're thinking that the Ruthless Heavens wants you to stay down here for a bit?"

"Exactly," Zac nodded. "If the System only wanted me to lead our people here, then it wouldn't add the requirement to get three thousand seals. I think there is something important left to do down here. It's not like I have to keep completing the quests, but my main goal ultimately isn't the Dimensional Seed. It's dealing with the threats to earth before the three days are up."

“Alright... What about the other natives?” Ogras asked.

“Ignore them if we can. They all have their strengths, especially the Lunar Tribe. They’ll be a pain in the ass to deal with here, but we can slowly deal with them after we exit this place,” Zac slowly said.

“What if there are too few of these seals?” Thea asked as she looked down at her hand. “We didn’t really have the time to scout around too much when we dealt with that squad of cultists, but they aren’t exactly littering the ground.”

“If there are too few seals to go around, we’ll target the Lunar Tribe,” Zac slowly said. “They have already proven hostile to our faction, and I’m guessing that they will hold the most seals anyway. Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ll target the Cartava survivors and Gemlings for their seals. We might be able to reap all the rewards after they have exhausted themselves.”

“Nothing like harvesting some ill-gotten gains,” Ogras grinned with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

“How’s your condition?” Zac asked, changing the subject as he inspected the demon. “It didn’t work?”

Zac wasn’t asking without reason. The demon had clearly changed since they last met, but not necessarily for the better. Ogras had essentially turned monochrome by this point, the last red tint of his patterned skin gone. Had that serum perhaps accelerated the transformation into a shadow creature?

“I’m just dandy,” Ogras grinned. “In fact, never felt better. That bastard is thoroughly subdued, at least for now.”

“Good,” Zac nodded as he stood up. “Let’s go talk with the others. We’ll take our people for one final push before we climb the mountain.”

Chapter 635: Bad Omens

Hekruv Vira sighed as he looked out at the remaining droplets of light that lit up the void like fireflies at the end of their flight. Another one had just winked out, no doubt because of the energy finally running out. They had built a hundred arks just in case, but now just three remained.

One could argue that the losses didn't quite match up to the numbers, considering the remaining arks only survived did thanks to powerhouses infusing them with their power. But it could also be seen as an abject failure in the sense that their old, weak, and sometimes young, had all been sacrificed while the powerful saved themselves.

A shudder wracked the whole lifeboat, and the passengers didn't dare breathe as they looked at the barriers keeping the void at bay. They had held again, but everyone knew it was just a matter of time. Hekruv glanced at the enormous sphere above the mountain before his eyes turned to the pulse that rippled out toward eternity.

One thing good about that shockingly powerful treasure awakening was that most of the Void Beasts were forced away or downright killed by the spatial fluctuations that grew more and more intense.

The downside was obviously that their arks were caught in this subdimension, unable to find any rifts in space to escape through. Those fluctuations had crushed them all, and Hekruv wouldn't be surprised if the energy emanations would have great repercussions even on the surface dimensions.

But this was no time to worry about the outside world. They first needed to grasp their final shot at survival. Their vessels were meant to escape through the edges of the mystic realm, but now they had almost reached the core.

Just a little bit more.

“What is this interference?!” Voridis roared with fury as his Cosmic Vessel once more was thrown out from the hidden dimension, small cracks covering its hull.

He was so close that he could taste it. The swirls of fate suffused the whole region. A few more jumps and he would be able to pinpoint the planet.

“Master, the ship will not survive another jump according to the readings,” a wet, slightly gurgling voice said. “The spatial fluctuations are too powerful.”

Voridis looked at the wretched state of his ‘disciple’ with a frown. It was extremely lucky that he reached Seed 7 before reaching the main target, the world inhabited by Zachary Atwood. Some things could only be discovered by experimentation, and there were clearly some issues with his original plan.

The fulcrum’s soul was supposed to be a conduit, but the forces ripped it apart much too quickly, quickly turning it all into a chaotic mix of discordant wills and Karma. It made the bridge between the fate of the world and Voridis too fragile, and he had only managed to get a taste of it before the connection was cut.

Voridis had barely managed to salvage a small piece of the rapidly dissipating energies as the world died, but that morsel was utterly insufficient to allow him to form a world of his own. He had instead used it to perform a series of tests with the help of his new little follower, Vasidas Medhin.

It was lucky that Voridis didn’t follow his first instinct to extract his soul and discard him as he originally meant to when planning this whole undertaking. He had come to realize that such an action might have led to unexpected troubles. After all, his whole plan was only made possible by utilizing the Dao of Karma to form a master-disciple bond with his beacons.

Most things could be circumvented, but it was often easier to just follow the Dao. Killing his disciple would sever karma, but doing so might actually break his connections to his other beacons.

Luckily, the dynamics of discipleship was not something that was etched in stone. Wasn't allowing your follower to enjoy the effects of your experiments a way to nurture your successor? If Vasidas happened to have some adverse reactions that showcased the faults of the experiments, wouldn't that be the best for everyone involved so that the master could correct his wrongs?

A stroke-like shudder wracked Vasidas which brought Voridis out of his musings. The young man's demeanor had changed, and Vasidas hatefully stared at his master like he wanted nothing more than to rip him apart and eat his flesh.

It looked like the fulcrum's remnants had appeared again.

"Just how do you keep appearing?" Voridis muttered with a mix of curiosity and exasperation. "You should have been annihilated by the storm of Fate."

He waved his hand the next moment and suppressed the remnant soul, allowing his disciple to regain his mental faculties. Voridis didn't believe that such an issue would prove a problem for himself, considering the vast difference in power between himself and Zachary Atwood, but he had still perfected the filtering system to make sure too much remnant wills didn't enter his world.

Some corruption was bound to appear when subverting fate, but as long as he held the supreme will, it should be slowly salvageable. He would break through and immediately eat his prepared longevity medicine. The additional eons of lifespan would be enough to figure out his next step.

"Have the golems start repairs," Voridis muttered. "I'll take the opportunity to make some more calculations. I might be able to reach the planet in a single jump based on the accumulated Karma in this region. Hopefully, the spatial turbulence will calm down by the time I'm done. If not, we'll have to simply break through."

"I'll arrange it," Vasidas quickly said and shuffled toward the warehouse housing the repair golems.

Voridis took a deep breath as he gazed out in the beyond. The heavens were shifting, and he couldn't help but feel a strong sense of urgency.

Galau sighed as he put down the damaged piece of armor before making some notations in his ledger. What was it with pirates and fake inscriptions? Every fake rune he encountered felt like a loss of wealth, like he had been tricked somehow.

“Why so glum?” a laughing voice asked. “Being a junior quartermaster isn't quite the same as becoming a merchant, but it should beat being tortured to death for information?”

Galau looked up to see his new friend of circumstance. His purple hair had been cut into a mohawk that was made into a thick braid that reached down to his neck. Galau couldn't understand why he had done something that weird. Not that it looked bad, but it was a very popular hairstyle among the pirates.

Was Average trying to get himself killed on the chaotic battlefields?

“I just thought about the unpredictability of fate. How different my life would be if I didn't sit down at that table,” Galau wryly smiled as he put down the ledger keeping track of the spoils of the Muscle Brigade.

This family and their shitty naming sense.

“Well, that guy seems to have that effect,” Average grimaced as he sat down on the table. “None of us would be in this scary hellhole if not for him. I would have completed my hunt and returned victoriously, and you would have gone back to your clan to live the rest of your life in obscurity.”

Galau glared at the annoying teenager, but he quickly retracted his ire. Average might still be F-Grade while Galau had broken through, but the combat strength of the two was miles apart. He had learned that all-too-well during the obligatory sparring sessions of the Muscle Brigade.

“In fact, I heard from fath- I mean the general, that he might be the reason we're out here in this desolate sector,” Average added, seemingly not having noticed the scathing look.

“What?” Galau asked with confusion. “What does Zachary Atwood have to do with our brigade?”

“The Stele of Conflict,” Average said with some fear in his eyes. “That thing is a treasure far exceeding this whole sector. Even its shadow has great repercussions.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Galau asked with mounting worry.

He had barely survived his return from the Tower of Eternity and the subsequent escape from his clan. The elders hadn't wanted to take any chances with scary forces like the Tsarun and Heliophos Clans in the mix, so they planned to simply hand him over and wash their hands clean of the whole situation.

If not for the Peak family he would probably be dead by now. Pretty Peak had honored her agreement, and she sent people to fake his death before sending him far away from his clan. He hadn't expected for her to send him to the Eternal Legion though, and now just two months later he found himself stuck deep in the unclaimed territories outside the borders of the Allbright Empire.

Galau was now called Gubao, named so by Pretty Peak herself, a junior quartermaster under the logistics department of the Muscle Brigade. It was far from his original goal, but it honestly wasn't all bad. These war-hungry lunatics kept fighting with pirates and alien life-forms at any chance given, and weird and valuable resources kept flooding through the logistics department in turn.

He had learned more over the past month compared to a whole year in the Base Town. Besides, his assignment was quite safe, and he never left the warship as it sailed through the Million Gates Territory in search of the Empire's enemies.

“Haven't you heard? We're heading further inside the Million Gates Territory than the Eternal Legion has been for centuries,” Average said with building excitement. “We'll reach a wormhole that should take us deep into the heart of the territory in a month. No support system, no safety nets. Just pure chaos and a million roads to power.”

“WHAT?!” Galau screamed as he took a step back, feeling that he had almost been physically assaulted. “Wha... Why?”

“I told you. The Stele of Conflict Appeared. The Emperor believes that it was a sign that war is coming. And the first clues have already appeared,” Average shrugged.

“Clues?” Galau frowned. “And it’s in the middle of the spatial anomalies?”

“Exactly!” Average said. “We’re at the forefront of history. Weird spatial fluctuations have been sensed all over the Zecia sector over the past weeks, and they are just increasing in power. The anomalies are particularly powerful in the Million Gates Territory, which isn’t surprising considering how unstable the dimensions are here.”

Galau took a deep breath as he pushed down the mounting panic in his heart. He had already escaped death a few times now, and he knew that he needed to retain his mental faculties if he was to survive this next calamity.

“What are we looking for?”

“We don’t know, but the timing is too coincidental. The fluctuations are so powerful that some teleportations have failed mid-activation, and Mystic Realms are popping up like mushrooms after rain. We are here to investigate if these changes are manmade,” Average explained.

“What does that mean?” Galau asked. This was way beyond his knowledge.

“The Emperor fears that a Space Gate is forming, and it’s what causing the anomalies,” Average whispered after making sure no one else was around.

Galau’s eyes widened to saucers as he quickly realized the implications. He didn’t know much about conflicts between the powerful, let alone wars between sectors. But he did know one thing. The reason that wars between different sectors were so rare was the exorbitant cost of teleportation.

It might not be too much for a C-Grade Monarch to visit a neighboring Sector, though the cost without a token was still quite prohibitive. But to teleport billions of warriors across the

vast emptiness of space, and to maintain logistical lines for millennia in a sector-wide war? Impossible. Even the wealthiest Monarchs would become bankrupt before the war even started.

But things changed completely if a Space Gate appeared. It was like a door connecting two points in space, and walking through it didn't cost a dime. Creating one was completely impossible, at least for the factions living in frontier Sectors.

However, they could appear on their own.

Space was malleable, something that was all-too-apparent in a chaotic area like the Million Gates Territory. It was technically possible for a powerful enough wormhole to appear, creating a connection between two different sectors. From there you just needed to stabilize it, and you suddenly had a Space Gate that would likely last for tens of thousands of years until it broke apart.

Stabilizing such a wormhole was extremely expensive, but something that a couple of C-Grade powers could stomach if it allowed them to plunder a whole sector. The Zecia Sector.

“And the most likely place for such a wormhole to appear is here, where the spatial barriers are weakened,” Galau said with shock.

“Exactly, which means the Albright Empire would be thrust to the frontlines,” Average agreed. “We might be powerful, but we can't withstand the force of a whole hostile sector. So we must get to the bottom of what's going on and take proper precautions.”

“All because that guy summoned that plaque..?” Galau muttered.

“I mean it's not like Zachary Atwood is related to the weird ripples that are destabilizing the Void to the point that a Space Gate might appear,” Average snorted. “But him summoning that Stele is still a pretty bad omen, right?”

Chapter 636: Shortage

The soldiers were still exhausted after the mad dash over the last hours and subsequent battle, but no one complained when Zac gave the order to set out. Some had already got their hands on a seal through the battle, but it was mostly the Anointed, demons, and Tal-Eladar who were safe by this point thanks to their higher killing efficiency.

Everyone understood the situation; if they didn't start hunting for Spatial Seals they'd be dead in a few days.

"Did you get your seals from the mountain or killing?" Zac asked Thea as they walked at the front of the army, keeping a brisk pace.

"We found them somewhat quickly some ways up the mountain," Thea answered. "I don't think they spawn at the foot. The cultists took a long route between the bridges, and they even sent squads of a few hundred up the mountain for two hours at a time while the others worked on destroying the islands."

"Wouldn't be surprised that the further up the mountain you go, the more seals will appear," Ogras added from the side. "Especially since the lunatics almost picked the lower layers clean."

"Alright," Zac said as he changed course, leading the army up the mountain as they walked around it.

The goal was to essentially travel to the opposite side of the mountain in search of the traitor Zhix, but there was no point to stay at the foot. Not only would it mean missing out on extracting seals, but it would also increase the time it would take to reach the area controlled by the gemlings. In fact, with how big the mountain was, it would take way too much time that way. The foot was extremely wide, and only by taking the

shortest route would they get there in time to deal with the traitor before the realm collapsed.

“Did you find anything else?” Zac asked as they made their way up the mountain.

The Memorysteel mountain had a lot of normal-looking features, like cliffs, ravines, and steep mountain walls. But it also had a distinctly spiraled form, and they made their way up one of the major spirals.

“We only spent half an hour exploring before those lunatics started blowing up islands. We rushed toward them the moment we realized what they were up to,” Ogras slowly said. “But we did learn some things. These seals only last for a short while. If no one snatches them within a minute or so they would disappear, and it wouldn’t reappear even after we waited for a few more minutes. Things might get chaotic.”

“Shit,” Zac sighed and Thea nodded in agreement.

Both of them had clearly come to the same conclusion; it would be impossible to impose any sort of order on who got the seals. Zac and the other leaders had already discussed setting up an order by lottery for the general population, and Kenzie had even prepared everything in her tablets. But how would it be possible to enforce something like that when the seals appeared and disappeared at random?

They were strapped for time as is, so they couldn’t wait around god knows how long for every Spatial Seal. It would go to whoever was closest, and if multiple people found themselves equidistant to a Seal, problems were bound to occur. After all, those seals were the difference between life and death, and who knew how people would act when pushed to the limits.

“There,” Ogras suddenly pointed toward a crack in the Memorysteel a few hundred meters away. “We both found our seals in a cave that looked a lot like that. I think they migh-”

Zac grabbed his sister who walked just behind them with her head in her tablet and flashed away before the demon had a

chance to even finish his sentence. Of course, he was heading straight for the cave mouth.

“Hey!” Kenzie exclaimed as she glared at him with annoyance, but Zac didn’t stop moving.

People might be thinking he was playing favorites, and he definitely was. But Zac didn’t care. They all would be dead already if not for his sister, and he wouldn’t be able to completely focus on the task at hand until her safety was secured. A few steps with [**Loamwalker**] later he reached the entrance, but they only reached a few meters inside before they stopped from surprise.

The cave didn’t exactly look like he had expected.

It was actually a small plot of land, with around a hundred trees sitting on a patch of soil. Of course, the trees were definitely not in their natural habitat. The crowns of the larger trees were broken or pressed right into the roof of the cave, and over a dozen trees had simply fallen over. Their root systems were ripped apart, and it seemed like only a small part of the soil had been moved to this place. The rest might have remained on one of the islands or stuck somewhere else on the mountain.

“It looks like a piece of a biodome that has been preserved,” Kenzie said with interest as she looked around.

Zac was a bit surprised that whole sections had survived getting pulled into the mountain like this. But for now, he was more interested in finding a Spatial Seal for his sister. And it didn’t take long before he could spot a slight fluctuation with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

“Come,” Zac said and flashed forward, arriving in front of a normal-looking rock in the middle of the transplanted forest.

The fluctuations were slowly getting stronger, and suddenly there was a small shimmering brand on it, identical to the one on Zac’s hand.

“Why did it appear on this specific stone?” Kenzie muttered as she hunched down next to Zac. “It seems to be a completely

normal rock, there were millions just like this in the Lunar Forest.”

“Try taking it for now,” Zac urged with some anxiety. “Every Seal we miss means one person dying.”

Kenzie nodded and gingerly touched the rock, but both were surprised when nothing happened.

“You need to crush it,” Ogras said from behind as he suddenly appeared, and Kenzie quickly followed his instructions as the seal was already flickering like it was about to dissipate.

The stone turned to gravel after Kenzie exerted some pressure on it, and the seal immediately jumped onto her hand. Zac felt a wave of relief as he stood up again, only now having the peace of mind to analyze the situation.

“Did you encounter more places like this? With proper patches of land from the base?” Zac asked.

“There are some,” Ogras nodded. “Both intact Technocrat rooms and patches of dirt like this one. I’m a bit surprised this cave is fine though. The cultists seemed intent to torch everything since they deemed this place cursed. After taking any Spatial Seals, that is. Guess they missed this one.”

“Do you think it’s possible to leave some people here and let them farm the seed one by one?” Zac ventured. “Or do you think that they won’t regrow?”

“Hard to say,” Ogras shrugged.

“I don’t think new ones will regrow. The energy readings in this place are a lot lower compared to before I took it. It’s like the seal was formed by remnant Spatial Energy left in these trees or the soil. I guess the seals are not stable, so they will jump back and forth in the area until someone picks it up. These trees will definitely not regenerate new Spatial Energy though, so there shouldn’t be any more seals appearing in this place,” Kenzie said. “Besides, the Spatial Energy might drift away to other parts of the mountain.”

“So if we find spots with higher Spatial Energy we’ll probably find Spatial Seals?” Zac mused.

“I’m not able to actually see it,” Kenzie said, and Zac sighed when he realized that it was the same for him. He only spotted the seal when it was actually starting to form.

“With how many we need, we’re probably better off spreading along the whole mountain instead,” Ogras said. “The stronger will form a line and trawl the mountain further up, and the weaker ones will stay at the lower layers. That way the strong warriors won’t take the easy-to-snatch seals.”

“Some might hide away as soon as they find a seal if we spread out though,” Kenzie hesitantly ventured. “A lot of people are shellshocked. If they find a seal in a hidden cave like this, they might just sit down and wait out the time until the mystic realm falls apart.”

“Can you monitor things with your drones?” Zac asked.

“Sure,” Kenzie said after some thought as started walking back toward the army. “A bit big-brotherly, but whatever.”

It was a bit ruthless to force people to keep going, but they still had a lot of enemies in this place. He both needed more hands to fight, and it wasn’t like there was any guarantee that staying behind was any safer than going with the group.

Zac quickly explained Ogras’ findings and their plan to the leaders of the respective factions, and everyone in the army was soon informed of the situation. The weaker warriors and the few non-combat cultivators looked especially relieved upon hearing that they wouldn’t have to compete with the powerhouses for Spatial Seals.

The group kept ascending for another two hours, at which point the pressure from the mountain was starting to cause some issues for the weaker people. Zac was obviously not even slowed down this far down the mountain, but after walking around for a while he had to say that Thea’s earlier estimation might actually be a bit optimistic.

He doubted most people would even make it halfway up the mountain.

Zac was almost certain that it was the System that had arranged the pervasive pressure that covered the mountain. It

had created extremely precise layers where the pressure was pretty much identical. Each band was extremely wide, and with the incline, you needed to climb roughly an hour before reaching the next segment.

Of course, Zac would be able to go a lot faster than that, though he would probably be slowed down closer to the peak.

The moment you stepped into the next band, the pressure drastically and instantly increased. Furthermore, the pressure seemed to be somewhat exponential. They had entered the first band after ascending for roughly 10 minutes, and Zac estimated it required around 30 Strength to forcibly endure. Of course, you could use spells, Dao, or other means to block out the pressure if you weren't a Strength-based cultivator.

The second band seemed to require 70 Strength to nullify, and the third roughly 120. It wasn't too hard to see that there were exactly 18 layers to the mountain, provided that each layer was equally high. If the difficulty kept increasing at this pace, you'd need the equivalent of 600 Strength to withstand the pressure at the halfway point.

And that was just withstanding it. To actually travel with that kind of weight on your shoulders would quickly drain and exhaust most people. Zac guessed that most people would be forced to stay in the third and fourth layers, with just a few entering the fifth to ninth layers to search for Seals. Going higher than that would quickly exhaust your energy, and only a handful would be able to reach the peak.

Zac wasn't too worried for himself. Even a pressure equivalent of 2000 Strength at the peak would only slow him down a bit, but he hoped that this was just a test arranged by the System that wouldn't follow into the sphere in the sky. He really didn't want to fight Void's Disciple while carrying this kind of weight on his shoulders.

The long train of Port Atwood's soldiers soon turned into a wide human chain that moved further and further up the mountain. It took a few hours for everyone to find their suitable altitude, at which point they stopped ascending and instead only moved clockwise around the mountain.

Zac kept constant watch as well, but he had to admit it was slim pickings for seals even after they spread themselves out like this. His quest barely updated once per minute, and most of those who gained seals were those the furthest up at the chain. This obviously didn't go unnoticed among people, and people tried to forcibly endure the higher layers in hopes of finding a Seal.

But the pressure was simply too pervasive. Anyone who walked further up than they could handle quickly found themselves unable to keep up with the high pace of the group, and falling behind meant they definitely wouldn't get their hands on a seal.

Zac and the elites who had already gotten their seals walked in step with the army, partly to keep order and partly to explore the large number of caves they encountered. Almost all of the caves at the first four layers were unfortunately looted and burned to a crisp already, but it was clear that the Church of Everlasting Dao had only performed cursory sweeps further up than that.

They had already found some loot from a dozen caves, but they had also found themselves face-to-face with hundreds of battlebots hiding like spiders in a few others.

It looked like the cultists had set out in blitzes where they rushed the first six layers or so, snatching the easy-to-spot seals at the highest layers while ransacking the lower ones. Large swathes above the fifth layers were completely untouched though, and some caves that required some time to cut open the entrance were ignored as well.

Still, it was an undeniable issue that the weaker soldiers were getting too few Seals. As things stood after six hours, the strongest warriors would all be safe as long as they kept going for a day or so, but not even a week would be enough for the weaker cultivators. The cultists had been too thorough, and they had an almost 15-hour headstart on Zac's group.

They had probably cleaned out the lower layers of at least a third of the mountain, and those easily-attained seals had already fallen into the hands of his own elites by now. The

other factions who had made it to the mountain were probably frantically looting the lower layers as well, leaving just those impossible-to-attain Seals behind.

It really looked like they would have to fight and kill for Seals no matter if you were talking about completing his quest or finding a path of survival for his people.

Chapter 637: Treasure Mountain

There was not much Zac could do to help his people, apart from urging them forward toward parts of the mountain that were hopefully not picked clean. He did consider turning the around more than one time, instead heading in the direction of the Lunar Tribe. There was no way the cultists had picked the lower layers clean in that direction.

But Zac quickly gave up on that idea. Not only were the Lunar Tribe in that direction, but also the Cartava Clan and presumably the second Cultist group considering they had already infiltrated the werewolves. Forcing their way through that direction would result in massive losses, when they could instead hurry toward the opposite side of the mountain where the traitor Zhix hopefully waited.

If they still hadn't found enough seals after dealing with the Zhix problem, they could consider their next move.

It was not only bad news all around though. While the weaker people in the army suffered under the immense pressure of an uncertain future, the elites were actually having impressive gains. The middle layers were a lot more intact compared to the lower ones, probably because the cultists didn't have time to properly loot.

The plan of the Church of Everlasting Dao was no doubt to blow up every single island before turning toward the riches on the peaks, but Zac and his people had cut that strategy short. So that left those in Zac's army who already had a Spatial Seal with ample opportunities to line their pockets.

Zac became more and more sure that the System had a hand in forming the mountain as the hours passed. There were not only clear delimitations of the layers, but the rewards were

similarly spread out. Even discounting the cultists' locust-like approach, the upper parts of the mountain clearly held better things.

The caves held all kinds of valuables, most of which seemed untouched even by the natives. Zac was currently standing in a cave on the 11th layer, and the pressure was strong enough to turn a mortal into mush. But the neatly lined-up bushes in front of him were completely unruffled in such an environment, and their leaves somehow rustled by themselves, creating a bell-like tolling that was amplified in the cave.

He had no idea what these bushes, or their small yellow berries, were, but they were obviously something that was intentionally grown judging by how uniform the rows were. Zac sighed in disappointment that he didn't possess a Herbalist Bag, a type of Spatial Tool where you could store plants without killing them, but taking the bushes as is was still a good harvest.

Both his affinity to nature through [**Forester's Constitution**] and his very cells told him that these berries were something good, and even the leaves seemed to contain quite a bit of energy. Perhaps they could be used in medicinal baths or as feed for spiritual beasts, so Zac immediately went to work.

For the first time in a while, Zac used his axe as a lumbering tool rather than a tool for slaughter, and one bushel after another entered his Spatial Ring. He definitely wasn't lacking space, so Zac swept through the whole cave like a locust, leaving not even the energy-rich soil behind.

Zac exited a moment later, and after confirming there were no issues with the army started looking for the next cave to hit. There were the occasional deserters who needed to be whipped into shape in the beginning, but the Zhix were more than happy to take on that role. They saw that sort of behavior as the highest form of dishonor, and after they had dragged a few cowardly cultivators by their feet back to the army, almost no one dared to sneak away any longer.

Zac's eyes scanned the surroundings as he jogged back and forth between the 11th and the 9th layers, and his eyes lit up

when he spotted a burst of nature-attuned energies spreading out like a plume a few hundred meters ahead. There were definitely more spiritual plants in that direction. He knew that such an eruption would have been spotted by others though, so he immediately started running forward, each step moving him almost a hundred meters even across the uneven terrain.

But he swore in annoyance when the shadows congealed right at the cave mouth just as he was about to reach the cave.

“Too late this time,” Ogras snickered with a grin that almost split his face apart, seemingly taking more pleasure in beating Zac to the cave than getting the treasures within.

Zac could only shake his head and set off again, not wanting to waste a single second just standing around. Especially if that second was watching the demon ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over the rare herbs. Zac and the other leaders had quickly decided to turn whole caves into first-come-first-serve among Seal Holders, and he wasn’t an exception to the rule.

Part of the motivation was to avoid any fighting for resources hidden inside the caves, but the main reason for it was simply to reward people for repeatedly risking their lives in the Mystic Realm. And some people were walking away with pretty massive gains from the looks of it. People were scurrying back and forth among the Memorycliffs with almost manic fervor.

It wasn’t really a loss for Zac to let people take everything they could. There were only so many caves he had time to loot personally, and it was unlikely he would have time to return to these sections later. Better it was used to motivate and power up his people than for it to get lost to the Void in a few days.

The fact that the System didn’t provide any rewards for its area quest wasn’t as surprising any longer. Zac had initially thought it was punishing people for entering a Technocrat Lab. But it had rather dragged all the realm’s riches into the mountain, turning it into a real treasure trove.

The competition to find and reach the caves was fierce, but Zac was powerful enough to freely walk among the higher layers. So his competition was just Ogras and a handful of

other elites. He was still keeping a pretty decent distance from the peak though, never going past the 12th layer. Part of the reason was that he was actually losing Cosmic Energy just walking around starting on the 11th layer, and part of it was to quickly be able to help out his people if some problems cropped up.

After all, some people had actually died in the caves after being overeager, and dangerous situations kept popping up one after one.

Most caves and crags were safe, but some held battlebots that started blasting the moment anyone entered. Others held intact technocrat rooms, many of which had the standard defenses. One unlucky cultivator from the Marshall Alliance had actually been completely incinerated by a light beam just like the one the base used to keep the Collector at bay.

There were also stressed-out beasts who had been moved all the way here from different biospheres, hiding in their caves in fright. There were even some plants that were almost as lethal as the Rageroot Oak. So it had almost turned into a lottery what you could find inside the caves by this point, and the Atwood Elites were quickly turning into gambling addicts.

Thankfully the people who had been brought to this place were ultimately professionals, and deaths were pretty rare. Anyone who had survived the integration until this point had multiple ways to stay alive, including methods to scout ahead or determine threats to their lives. If things seemed too dangerous, they could always pass on it and head for the next one.

Kenzie was fast becoming the elite's best friend, happily sending one of her endless drones into the caves in return for 25% of the loot. A few other scouts provided similar services, but they obviously weren't able to spread themselves out like Kenzie could with her drone swarm.

Of course, this feeding frenzy was completely separate from those still hunting seals. Those who still looked for seals could enter all caves to take a look, and seal holders would immediately signal if they spotted a seal. Mostly there was no

one close enough to snatch it in time because of the distances involved, but it had saved a few people.

Zac soon found another point of interest; an actual sliding glass door embedded in a sheer cliff wall. It most likely meant it was a piece of a room rather than a biosphere on the other side, but he couldn't see the situation inside because of some sort of smoke. Zac readied himself in case its defenses still worked and walked over to it.

The door didn't open by itself though, perhaps because the terminal was missing, and Zac was forced to force the sliding door open.

A dense wave of some sort of medicinal aroma hit him almost like a punch the moment a crack opened in the door, and he stopped in his tracks with some worry. But he quickly breathed out in relief after realizing that his cells greedily swallowed the energy in the air. It didn't seem to be poison, but Zac felt it wasn't attuned energy either.

He quickly walked inside after marking the door with a Z, making sure others knew it was claimed. Zac immediately closed the doors behind him to not let any of the medicine escape, and a small torrent soon appeared around him as his body greedily absorbed everything it could. Zac couldn't be sure, but he believed that he had reached a bloodline lab since it felt like every cell in his body was slowly improving thanks to the haze.

Most of the interiors of the room were shrouded in the fog, but there seemed to be at least some Base Power remaining judging by flickering lights in the ceiling. Zac started walking inside, but he stopped after just a second upon realizing that the whole room was flooded to his ankles. He took out an Illumination crystal and bent down, and he immediately saw that it wasn't water he was standing in.

The liquid was a bit viscous and had a slight greenish tint, and it didn't take long to realize that it was the source of the thick haze. There were still some medicinal properties remaining, but it was like a medicinal bath by the end of usage. This place

probably held some vats before that had cracked when the world shifted.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he looked around. Who knew how much of the medicinal properties were wasted when the liquid started leaking. The compound was clearly not stable, and getting exposed to air seemed to make it dissipate.

At least he knew what was going on, and he activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** after some thought. Visibility was simply too bad because of the fog. A small spiritual forest rose in the mists, and Zac suddenly had a perfect view of the laboratory.

There were no tables with experiments in this place, and neither were there any side-rooms like in the lab he visited before. There still some things of interest though. First of all, was a large pod that could easily fit Zac inside. It stood in the middle of the room, and Zac realized it was filled with liquid when he got close.

However, the liquid inside had a shimmering emerald hue, and its medicinal properties were clearly completely intact in contrast to the stuff on the floor. It almost felt like Zac's cells were drooling with hunger even though the pod had great sealing capabilities, and he could barely stop himself from forcing a way inside.

Next to the pod were a series of consoles that probably were meant to control and observe the pod. They were slightly submerged like everything else, but they were still working. However, the screens did flicker ominously like they could break down at moment's notice. Zac glanced at the displays, but they were just showcasing dense lines of information he couldn't make heads or tails of.

Finally, two thick tubes were connected to the pod, and they ran to the edge of the room. One of them was connected to a large vat, but it was unfortunately broken. It looked like just part of the lab had been transferred here since the massive container was essentially cut off at the middle.

It was no doubt that the liquid on the ground came from this broken container.

The other tube didn't extend into a vat, but instead into some sort of machine. Zac couldn't tell its purpose, partly because of incompetence and partly because the machine was cut-off at the middle just like the large vat. But it all somewhat looked like a dialysis machine since half of a tube ran from the machine to the top of the broken container.

The medicinal liquid would move from the vat into the pod, and the user would absorb the medicinal properties in there. The exhausted liquid would go through the other tube into the machine, where the liquid presumably was infused with more treasures or whatever the medicinal effect came from. This formed a cycle that would keep going as long as one had the materials to run the machine.

The cycle was obviously broken with both vat and infuser being broken, but Zac's eyes turned to the pod in the middle. It held one last dose of the medicine. The question in Zac's mind was what purpose the pod served. Did it improve the efficacy of the drug, or did it just contain it?

He didn't know if he needed to harvest the whole thing or if he could just siphon out the liquid. His instincts leaned toward the former since Leviala had talked about Bloodline Vats. Just drinking the mixtures in this place didn't seem to be enough, they needed to be stimulated somehow to bring out their effect.

The problem was that he didn't know if he was able to do it without ruining the vat, and Kenzie was a long way down the mountain. Zac looked the pod up and down for almost a minute, trying to figure out a way to cut it out from the ground, but an ominous beeping from the console made him freeze.

An extremely dense cloud of medicinal aroma blasted him a moment later as the hatch on the pod opened, and Zac's eyes widened in horror as he saw a storm of medicinal energy dissipate into the atmosphere.

Zac didn't hesitate even a second before he scrambled into the pod and closed the hatch behind him.

Chapter 638: Perfection

Zac initially felt reckless for jumping in without thinking things through, but he had pretty much confirmed that the medicinal properties of the liquid were good for him by this point. Seeing as the console was malfunctioning and that the pod was starting up, this might be the last opportunity for him to properly absorb the energy within.

The glaring beeping of the consoles simply disappeared the moment Zac closed the hatch from within. It wasn't only the console, but it was like he had been cut off from the rest of the universe, placed in a small world of his own. The pod had activated the moment the hatch opened, and it was emitting some sort of low-frequency white noise on top of its excellent isolating capabilities.

The low hum didn't only help him shut out his surroundings, but even his mind was quickly calmed as he sank into the viscous liquid. It was like the extreme stress from the past days was just blown away, replaced with soothing tranquility. This feeling alone almost made it worth jumping into the pod, as Zac realized he had desperately needed distress.

It wasn't like he was being hypnotized though. He was in full control of his faculties, and he was constantly observing everything that was going on. The first thing he noticed was that he actually didn't need to breathe inside the liquid. He was somehow getting oxygen by osmosis of the skin or something similar.

Unfortunately, the amount of medicine his body took in from the liquid around him barely trumped what he gained from walking around in the mist outside. Did he need some sort of method to actually absorb it, like a Body Tempering Manual? If that was the case, then he was out of luck.

But a series of lights suddenly lit up within the pod, showering Zac in a warm yellow glow from both above and below. It was like the liquid came alive a second later as torrential streams of medicinal power entered his pores, spreading through his whole body. But Zac frowned as his body was filling up more and more. A small amount of it entered his cells just like the energy in the mist, but most of it was sort of meandering around.

Even worse, a few seconds later the energy started to move out of his body. It felt like the force had tried to do something as it moved about, but it couldn't do it alone. A sudden heartbeat caused a ripple to go through the emerald liquid around him as the **[Void Heart]** woke up. The escaping energy froze in its tracks, but it didn't actually enter his Hidden Node. It just froze like a deer in headlights, neither advancing or retreating.

More and more energy kept pouring in, and his hidden node kept a steady beat to keep the energy inside his body. It was a relief to see that the valuable serum wasn't wasted, but Zac was quickly starting to feel bloated after just half a minute. The liquid in the pod was still a shimmering green, and Zac understood that if he didn't do something with the energy soon he would have to leave the pod before he exploded.

The issue was that he didn't know how to use the accumulated energy to awaken his bloodline. The information he had gathered on the subject until now was somewhat sparse. Hereditary bloodlines could emerge in different ways. Some underwent the first awakening in life-threatening situations like a mid-combat epiphany, whereas others were born with it already awakened.

The less talented or those with hard-to-awaken bloodlines could use Body Tempering Manuals as well, and there were treasures and arrays that could help as well. But none of the missives actually broached how to actually use those treasures or arrays, and it clearly wasn't enough to float around in the treasure-water around him.

Zac could only think of one solution at the moment, and he decided to fight fire with fire. A small box appeared in his

hand, and he quickly shoved its contents into his mouth and quickly swallow.

It was the [**Blood Nucleus**], the most valuable treasure he had acquired in the Tower of Eternity that didn't go into the creation of [**Love's Bond**]. The small rock-like item he had just swallowed was valued at a whopping 20 Billion Nexus Coins, almost rivaling the Pathfinder Oracle Eye that kicked up a storm among the elite scions of the Zecia sector.

It was a risk to swallow a treasure when he was already over capacity of energy in his body, but he felt this was his best opportunity to awaken his bloodline. The odds of finding another intact pod like this felt iffy, especially considering this pod was probably an elite-variant compared to the things the Gemlings had access to in the outer layers.

He needed to take the shot.

A burning surge of power entered his heart a second later, his real heart and not his hidden node. Every beat spread the power of the [**Blood Nucleus**] through his body, from his thick aortic arteries all the way down to his minuscule capillaries. It felt like he had formed a second energy pathway for a moment, with the new one covering every single inch of his body.

The fierce power in the blood soon entered his cells, and it was like they opened their maws like voracious beasts and quickly started absorbing the medicinal energy trapped in his body. In just seconds the feeling of being overstuffed was replaced with a sense of starvation as his body screamed for more. It was a hunger that reached all the way to the soul, endless greed that made Zac's eyes slowly turn red with want.

Almost invisible ripples were released from his body the next moment, and the liquid in the pod started to rapidly lose its color. Soon it was completely transparent, even more so than the leaked liquid on the ground.

Zac was focused inward, though he could barely concentrate over an all-consuming pain that had erupted across his body. The medicinal energy along with the force hidden in the [**Blood Nucleus**] acted like some sort of accelerant for his

cells, and the cells split and died over and over. It was like Zac was killed and reborn in an endless cycle, each rebirth taking him a bit closer to perfection.

But the process was slowly tapering down.

It felt he was on the cusp of success, but Zac just needed a push to take him all the way. The problem was that he was out of bloodline treasures. Even worse, the feeling of completion was slowly getting weaker, like he had been building a momentum with the pod and the **[Blood Nucleus]**, but that momentum was fading away, amounting to nothing.

He hesitated for a second, but he eventually took out a Vial full of some mysterious liquid. It was something he had found in the Cosmos Sack of the Second Elder of the Cartava Clan. Normally he would have waited to let Calrin or his Sister analyze the thing, but his instincts told him a huge chance would slip out of his fingers if he didn't awaken his bloodline at this moment.

Perhaps it was like when one formed one's Cultivator's Core. The first attempt was the easiest, but it became exponentially harder the next time if you failed. If he failed to rouse his bloodline at this moment, it might be far harder to awaken it in the future. He was already behind schedule in a sense, since the first awakening was normally done in the F-Grade.

More to the point, the hunger that reached his core told him that he needed more. He needed to feed.

So Zac pushed away the pain and put the vial to his mouth with shaky hands. He uncorked the stopper with his teeth next as to not let the liquid mix with the waters in the pod. A burning heat filled his mouth, but Zac could soon recognize the feeling it emitted and he swallowed the contents of the vial in one go. It wasn't a Bloodline Serum, but it was rather some sort of Race-boosting Serum.

It wasn't perfect, but Race and Bloodline should be interrelated considering they shared a row on the status screen. A burning warmth spread throughout his body, and Zac's eyes lit up when he felt it was helping both with the hunger and the process of improving his cells. However, while it was effective

it was like feeding a whale with a single shrimp. It definitely wasn't enough.

Zac gritted his teeth and one vial after another was emptied, turning into a fiery inferno in his stomach. He was somewhat guessing that he was currently downing a stockpile that was meant for a whole clan, but now wasn't the time to worry about expenditure. But it was weird. It almost felt like the more he swallowed the more energy-deprived his cells were.

It was like he was trying to feed a million little baby chicks that all screamed for sustenance, and the screams just got more and more piercing the more he fed them. For a moment he started wondering if he was doing something akin to when he poisoned his body with Cosmic Water, but he soon discarded that notion.

This was definitely something different. His body was slowly being refined, with imperfections removed and more in line with his bloodline. And he already had strong suspicions that his bloodline was related to absorption based on his Hidden Nodes. Each time his cells were reborn, they were able to swallow more energy before they split apart. That alone felt like proof that Zac was heading in the right direction.

As long as he ate enough he would become perfect.

The bottom of the pod was soon littered with vials, and the white liquid had turned into a weird brown sludge. Part of it was because of Zac's body expelling large amounts of impurities, both through his pores and through Zac cutting open some wounds to bleed them out. Not everything he fished out of his Spatial Rings or Cosmos Sack was suitable for the situation.

Some were healing serums, and others were materials that Zac suspected to be raw ingredients meant for blacksmithing or something else. But it almost felt like anything that contained non-poisonous energy was happily swallowed by his cells. Of course, that meant that his **[Void Heart]** first had to make the energies extractable, and Zac only had so much blood he could exsanguinate to rid himself of dangerous impurities.

He was shocked at how much energy his body had swallowed. It was like every cell in his body was turning into Nodes, a vast subdimension seemingly capable of storing an untold amount of energy. But even after gobbling up almost everything in the Cartava Clan's Cosmos Sacks that seemed beneficial, it still wasn't enough.

Zac was delirious with hunger still, and he eventually took out the intricate box housing his spiritual **[Four Gates Pill]**. He had held onto this magical node-opening pill for so long, but it looked it was time to take a chance. His body was screaming for more, and this should be the most energy-dense item in his possession.

A huge pulse rippled out from his body as a golden warmth erupted like a sun in his stomach, causing the mists outside the pod to churn with even greater ferocity. The power hidden in that unassuming pill was simply shocking, and it shot toward a Node in his arm. However, another thump from **[Void Heart]** stopped the medicinal force in its tracks, and it was instead ripped apart and absorbed by the greedy cells all over his body.

It was like his cells had gained a golden hue, and Zac's eyes were turning bloodshot as he kept going, feeling he was getting ever closer to perfection. Everything was soon turning muddled, except one undeniable truth that shone in the darkness of Zac's mind; he needed more. Pills, Crystals, Raw Materials. Everything became yet another sacrificial tribute to the altar of his Bloodline.

Just as his absorption increased, so did the chaotic ripples that spread out of his body. Zac was quickly losing grip on reality, and it felt like he was being controlled by a hidden hand as he bit into a branch from the bush with yellow berries he harvested just a few minutes ago.

But finally, there was a change. It was like everything suddenly clicked into place, and Zac slowly started to push away the clouds muddling his mind. Sweat poured down his back as he realized what he had just done. What was that? That insatiable hunger just now had almost turned him insane. His mouth was full of the taste of iron from the countless

wounds he had gained from chowing down on everything from lumps of metal to whole plants.

There was no time to cleanse his stomach from what was no doubt an extremely dangerous mix of treasures though, as his voracious feast had yielded results. Something was changing in his body, and his body erupted with a foreign and terrifying power. The medicinal pod was turned to scrap metal from the explosion, but the clouds in the lab were still swallowed into his body rather than pushed away.

Zac tried to get to his feet, but he was shocked to realize that was completely unable to move. He lay frozen in place as the whole room was drained of every morsel of energy, but he could still see his surroundings. And it was with mounting horror he saw an enormous vortex emerge from his body.

The whole mountain wall was ripped apart and swallowed a second later, exposing him to the outside.

Zac felt a wave of pleasure entering him as the Memorysteel was disintegrated into its base elements and turned into nourishment, and the flame of hunger woke up again. He was rapidly losing grip, but he could still see the familiar faces appearing some distance away. He wanted to tell the shocked spectators to run, but his mouth didn't work.

The world around soon turned hazy apart from glowing blobs of sustenance, and they were all inexorably dragged toward the vortex behind his back. The more he absorbed the better he would be, and when all existence was swallowed he would become the Heavens themselves.

He had become the Void.

Chapter 639: To Eat

Carl rushed into the cave with glee, not forgetting to flip off that god-damn demoness who had stolen two caves right in front of him over the last hours by using her earth-attuned movement skills to get ahead. It felt like his legs were about to buckle under him up here at the tenth layer, and all his organs hurt like he was getting constantly punched. But the lower layers were just too cramped.

He'd be lucky to get one cave every two to three hours at the seventh layer, and few of them held any life-changing opportunities. Up here there were just around a hundred people to compete with, which wasn't too bad considering how wide each layer was. Still, there were a few who had the same idea as himself; run right at the edge of the ninth layer, while scanning for opportunities in the tenth.

That way you would avoid the terrifying increase in pressure from passing the halfway point most of the time, while still enjoying the benefits that came from the upper half of the mountain. The items from there were clearly better, and Carl had made more money over the past ten hours compared to the past six months.

Not only that, he had gotten his hands on some rare treasures, which couldn't really be measured in Nexus Coins. They would allow him to trade for similarly rare items he needed for his cultivation.

He was extremely lucky to have broken through mid-battle against those deranged lizard people, pushing his Seed of Lightness to High stage. It seemed that this particular seed was extra effective at combatting this pressure as well, since Logan had similar attributes and a High Seed, but he was still unable to properly hunt any higher than the 8th layer.

Carl quickly activated [**Energy Trace**], and breathed out when there was nothing that could match his own energy signature in the cave. Of course, that didn't mean it was safe, but his odds were pretty good since there was a distinct medicinal smell coming from within. It was doubtful any of those killer machines were hiding inside.

A high base salary, clear advancement opportunities, and access to unique encounters. That was how he was suckered into the employ of the world's scariest boss and conscripted to enter this hellhole. But he had to admit; Void Beasts, werewolves, and collapsing space islands could definitely be classified as 'unique encounters'. Carl bet Zachary Atwood loved every moment of it.

A shame he had to drag the rest of them into the madness though.

Carl had somehow made it all this way in one piece, and he breathed out in relief when he saw a small tree with six delectable-looking fruits standing in the cave. This was definitely good news; the fewer of something, the better it probably was. A singular tree with just a handful of fruits? Jackpot.

Another win for the good guys.

A massive and sudden explosion coming from somewhere above threw Carl off his feet, and he immediately got a bad feeling. What trouble had his crazy boss attracted this time? He knew he would soon be called to arms for some insane battle he had neither the desire nor qualifications to participate in, but at least he could die with six delicious-looking fruits in his belly.

Carl scrambled back to his feet and rushed toward the tree, but a primordial scream of exasperation erupted from his chest when he saw his final reward being somehow drained and turned into sand in front of his very eyes. What the hell was going on?!

Was it that white-haired succubus who kept appearing around him? Had she done this somehow? Did those demons have a complaint department? He doubted it. It would probably be

some trial-by-combat thing where he would swiftly and publicly get his ass handed to him.

But no, this had the mark of his boss all over him. First an explosion then this?

“Are you planning on hiding in here?” a teasing voice drifted into the cave from the outside, making Carl’s hair stand on end. “Want me to call the insect enforcers for a motivational speech?”

“Shit,” Carl muttered and started running out, donning the practiced determined expression of a career hero. “Where are the enemies?!”

“It’s the Lord,” the demoness said, but it wasn’t like her explanation was necessary.

“Of course it is,” Carl muttered, his practiced warrior-face quickly becoming strained.

It looked like the end of the world one layer above their current location. A massive crater hundreds of meters across had appeared out of nowhere, like a terrifying giant had taken a bite out of the Memorysteel.

But of course, there was no mythological creature who had decided he needed more iron in his diet before moving on. It was something much more terrifying; it was their boss who was up to something again.

He hovered in the sky, arms and legs spread wide like some sort of lunatic possessed by a creature of the night. He was even emitting an extremely eerie deep humming sound, but that might be the thing behind his back. A huge vortex slowly rotated like a halo, and it somehow looked even darker than the Void outside the mountain.

It was like everything could be sucked inside, and Carl even felt his mind shudder as he looked into it, like his soul was about to be ripped out of his body. Streams of Memorysteel were dragged from the mountain, entering the terrifying vortex that seemed completely insatiable. Even the energy in the atmosphere was being drained, and Carl had already seen what Lord Atwood did to his poor treasure tree.

Who knew how many treasures had been turned into trash by this point?

But at least it didn't look like their boss was going to gobble them up as well. That shifty sidekick of his stood much closer to the boss and he was fine, as was the golden-haired giant. The boss did swallow quite a few of those drones his sister owned, but he seemed mostly focused on draining the Memorysteel and its hidden riches.

"Looks like he's trying to eat the mountain," the demoness commented when it looked like they were safe and didn't need to ready themselves for battle.

"Of course he is."

The meteor hurtled through the vast cosmos once more, taking Zac and the mysterious predecessor on their journey. Zac didn't know whether this scene was taking place before or after the previous two visions, but it was clear that it wasn't directly connected in time with them.

The part of space looked completely different as Zac looked around, and there were no suns or stars no matter where he looked. Instead, there were endless rivers of lightning streaking across the darkness like elemental dragons. Zac's first instinct was that they were the tribulation lightning or something wrought by the system, but he quickly discarded that thought. While these lightning rivers were vast beyond comprehension, they didn't have any sense of a will like the purple Tribulation Lightning did.

They were just pure energy.

Some of them just looked like thin streaks, but going by the shockingly large beam right next to them they were most likely just extremely far away. There were massive continents with their own atmospheres far in the distance, using the endlessly wide lightning river as a source of warmth and energy. As for the ancestor, he seemed to be studying it for inspiration.

Small streams of lightning swirled about in his hands, but he seemed to be having problems. The small beams seemed

powerful enough to turn a hegemon into ash, but the mysterious man's control over them seemed somewhat lacking. The arcs were wild and untamed, and it looked like he was trying to impose order on them.

Time passed and the hooded man eventually waved and dissipated the small lightning bolts. He didn't seem ready to give up though, but rather made a pulling motion toward the endlessly vast river of lightning, and a small thread of extremely pure lightning was dragged out from its depths.

Just like with the sun, the mysterious man took the lightning into his body, and crackling arcs powerful enough to turn Zac to nothingness lit up the surroundings for a while until the chaos subsided. It looked like it had been quite arduous for the man to absorb the high-grade lightning, but he eventually stirred and once more summoned the small arcs in his hands.

Zac didn't understand what he was up to, but he realized something. Weren't the bolts moving a bit smoother compared to before?

The two kept soaring through the lightning-infested part of the cosmos and the man kept up a cycle of rest, absorption, and experimentation, slowly improving his control over the small arcs. But a sudden thump made the vision just freeze before it slowly distorted.

Zac's own heart beat an extra time out of worry, as this looked very different from when the visions upon opening his hidden nodes ended. Space shuddered like it tried to resist what was happening, but it soon cracked into a million pieces like a mirror.

To eat was to live.

The taste of the ten-legged critter was rancid and it gave him the runs, but Karz looked at it like it was a treasure. He pushed his thumb into the soft spot right beneath its head, and it stopped moving after a short frantic struggle. Karz took a deep breath and started munching away, only occasionally stopping to keep himself from throwing up.

Energy-rich critters like these were rare, and he couldn't waste a speck of it if he wanted a chance to ever get out of this place. Karz sat under the cover of what probably was once some sort of vessel as he gazed up at the sky, the only sound of him forcibly biting through the shell and sinewy meat.

One day he would get up there.

A huge mountain floated in the sky, surrounded by an everchanging shroud of mysterious ether. Sometimes grand vessels would emerge from it for a few seconds before they turned into streaks of light. Just looking at it made every part of Karz's body twitch with hunger for some reason, like it held the most delicious things in the world.

Old Vek said it was a sect, a place where important people went to become stronger. Karz didn't understand the allure at first, but apparently, your life got better the stronger you were. You didn't have to eat things that almost made you puke or that made you see terrifying visions at night, and you didn't have to fear getting swept up in the refinement light like Old Vek finally was a year ago.

In fact, the treasure land he and the others scavenged for sustenance was actually just a garbage pile according to Old Vek, and everything he ate was just discarded scraps. So, Karz needed to eat to get stronger, so that one day he could live up there. His stomach was cramping up from the poisonous beetle, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the first ones he ate.

More importantly, that odd warmth spread all over his body, the warmth that Old Vek believed to be related to those in the sky. The ability to cultivate. Neither of them could know for sure, but it looked like not everyone had that gift since no one else in this garbage mountain ever seemed to understand what he was talking about.

The bug was a good first catch of the day, but he couldn't stop here. Today was the great cleanse, and nothing new would arrive for days. He scurried between the already searched mounds as he rushed toward the center. It was a risk, but the competition wasn't as fierce in there since the cleanse could always start early.

A weak shimmering suddenly caught his eye, and Karz's eyes lit up as he rushed forward. It was definitely a cultivator stone, this one shining in an alluring red. It was broken and had lost almost all of its light, but it was still better than most things that could be found in this place.

Karz quickly took out a bowl and pestle from his backpack, and he quickly started hitting the crystal, turning it into red crystalline sand. A wave of heat spread in the area, and Karz quickly took off his shirt, knowing that the effect would soon dissipate. His thin torso was covered in sores and scars, but Karz wasn't worried. Most people died from illness after getting these kinds of sores, but Karz got better extremely fast.

Old Vek had always believed it was because he had a blessed body, one meant for cultivation. What were some mortal afflictions to such a marvelous thing? Karz poured a bit of refiltered oil into the bowl, turning the sand into a paste that he spread all over his body. Smearing the compound into his wound hurt extremely bad, but Karz gritted his teeth as he covered his whole body in a thin layer.

A small flame of heat swept through his limbs after a few minutes, and the compound eventually dried and turned into clay that fell off his body. Karz nodded in satisfaction and put on his clothes again and resumed his search. He soon found another treasure whose energy was absorbed as well, and he kept going from mound to mound, using over a dozen methods to absorb all kinds of things, each method perfected after tens of painful experiments.

Karz didn't know if the garbage piles were getting better or if he was getting luckier, but he was finding more and more good things as of late. One day of scavenging almost provided as much loot as a whole week before. Part of it was definitely because his body was becoming stronger from the constant absorption, but strength was almost only useful in this place when used to fight off competitors.

And when running for one's life.

A fluctuation in the air told Karz it was time to go, and he sped back toward the edge of the garbage-filled platform as quickly

as his feet could carry him. He spotted both treasures and critters on his way back, but he followed Old Vek's old scavenger rules and ignored them all.

He finally reached the edge of the platform and jumped off, his lungs working like bellows by this point. However, he didn't immediately return to his burrow, but he rather stayed for a few minutes until the weird signs on the platform lit up, and the whole garbage heap turned into a sea of mesmerizing fire.

This was the power of the 'Cultivators'. They were not only able to make the garbage appear out of nowhere, but they were also able to incinerate kilometers of it in an instant. In a few days, there would only be ash left behind, which would be collected by the stonemen and used where the Cultivators grew their high-quality food.

Karz looked at the spectacle for a while longer before he started his trek back. The trip took an hour until he reached the inconspicuous stones in the middle of the forest, and he made three rounds to make sure no one had come close. Only then did he open the hidden hatch beneath one of the smaller stones and crawled inside.

The world turned pitch-black as Karz closed the entrance to his sanctuary. He grasped around in the darkness for a few seconds until he found what he was looking for, a small crystal ball with a small crack on its bottom. It was the greatest item that Old Vek had found over his long 40 years of scavenging, and he had bequeathed it to Karz when he saw his potential.

Karz concentrated for a few seconds, and the ball suddenly lit up. It provided even more warmth and red light today, no doubt thanks to the cultivator stone he found before. Old Vek had said that only those who could make the ball light up had a chance to be accepted in the sect, but the more light it gave off the better ones' chances were.

The light right now was barely enough to illuminate the small shell, a far cry from the burning sun that Karz imagined himself releasing when he one day finally climbed up to that mountain. But it was also a lot better compared to just a few months ago.

The more he ate, the more perfect he would become.

Chapter 640: Force of the Void

Zac woke up with a start and was greeted by a throbbing pain all over his body. His skull had become two sizes too small, and it felt like his mouth was full of gravel. He coughed and got up on his feet, realizing he was not in the pod or even the lab any longer. He vaguely remembered the cave and the pod exploding, but everything was still a hazy blur.

“Are you okay? How do you feel?” his sister’s voice reached from some distance, and Zac turned his bleary eyes toward the source.

He saw almost fifty people standing on a cliff peering down at him, with expressions varying from confusion to fear. Zac didn’t understand why they were over a hundred meters above him, so he looked around, only to realize he was standing in an enormous hole. He made a quick scan of his body, and nothing seemed to be wrong, except for a sense of weakness.

“I’m fine. Just a bit hungry,” Zac shouted back up as he took out one of his spatial flasks. “And thirsty.”

“How the hell is that possible? Eating half the mountain wasn’t enough?” Ogras spat as he appeared next to him in a flash of shadows,

“Wh-“ Zac said as he looked around again, and the memories suddenly came rushing back.

The feeling of a monstrous hunger, of how an enormous vortex had appeared behind his back. How the whole mountain was being absorbed until everything turned black.

“I’m sorry. I had a breakthrough,” Zac muttered. “Didn’t expect that to happen though.”

“You need to get your mood swings under control,” Ogras snorted. “Murder, hungry... It all ends in a huge mess. I better pray you never get raunchy while I’m in the vicinity.”

Zac could only weakly smile in response. “I’ll try some meditation. Is anyone hurt?”

“Everyone is fine, and it doesn’t look like your antics attracted any of our enemies. Then again, who in their right mind would run toward a world-eating vortex?” Ogras said before he turned to Kenzie who was floating down the cliffside along with some of the Valkyries.

“It’s good you’re fine,” Kenzie breathed in relief as she landed. “Can you move? The protective film was weakened over this side of the mountain. We probably want to get out of here before any Void Beasts realize it.”

“I can move just fine,” Zac said. “I will have to bother one of the Anointed to carry me while I consolidate my breakthrough though. Shame I can’t keep looting the caves.”

“It’s not just you,” Joanna said with a wry smile. “That black hole of yours picked the whole mountain clean. The caves are drained all the way down to the first layer.”

“What?!” Zac exclaimed, his mind blank with incomprehension that turned to stupefaction as Joanna explained what had happened.

He had already swallowed a terrifying amount of treasures in his frenzied feast inside the pod, but it sounded like that was just the appetizer. The question was, where did all the energy go? He didn’t feel all that much stronger, and he almost felt drained of energy rather than overstuffed. Zac remembered his cells greedily swallowing everything they could get their hands on, but was his body really voracious to the point that he could swallow enough treasures to nurture a whole elite army without leaving any trace?

“Well, at least some good came of you hogging all the valuables,” Ogras shrugged, making Zac look over with interest. “Whatever you did pulled a lot of Spatial Energy from

the depths of the mountain. Our people gained over fifteen hundred seals in ten minutes.”

“What?” Zac exclaimed.

He quickly opened his quest screen, and it was just as Ogras had said. His quest had already disappeared, meaning he had completed it while being possessed. However, the quest didn't need him to provide everyone with a seal, so there were probably people still without.

“How many are still in need of Seals?” Zac asked.

“Around a thousand,” Kenzie said. “Pretty much everyone should be able to get one before the time limit unless something unexpected happens.”

“Like someone draining the rest of the mountain like a god damn Devourer Rat King,” Ogras muttered, drawing an angry look from Kenzie and a couple of Valkyries.

“What do you want to do?” Kenzie asked as she turned back to Zac.

“Let's move,” Zac said, pushing away the exhaustion. “I'll go with you a while longer.”

He actually needed to rest, but he couldn't put everyone out like that if the protective film in this area had been weakened because of him. The group immediately set off, and they kept an even greater speed than before. Part of it was because of the looming threat of a Void Beast invasion, and part of it was simply because all the caves in the area had apparently been sucked clean of both Seals and treasures.

Zac himself borrowed the shoulder of an Anointed again, and one massive slab of meat after another went down his gullet as he started inspecting his situation while trying to make sense of what had just happened.

The situation was quite odd. He had been completely swept up by that limitless hunger, and his mind was spotty at best. He had never read that anything that weird would happen when unlocking one's bloodline. He had also been shown two separate visions, which was pretty odd as well. He had an idea as to why, but his hopes were immediately dashed when he

realized that the third Hidden Node in his spine wasn't actually opened.

He had figured that the first vision, the one with the ancestor on the meteor, was a vision of his node, while the second vision was one brought forward from his bloodline awakening. But that didn't seem to be the case, and Zac thoughtfully went over what he had witnessed.

When thinking of it, both the visions seemed to show the same thing, though the setting was vastly different. One was a great powerhouse, and one was a mortal who hadn't even embarked on the road on cultivation. But they were doing the same thing in the vision, and the implication made Zac's heart gallop from excitement.

They were absorbing energy to improve their affinities.

The mysterious predecessor had endured the bolts of lightning to slowly increase his control of the element. Meanwhile, the youth named Karz was eating everything from bugs to smearing his body in broken Nexus Crystals, slowly improving his affinity. At least that was Zac's takeaway of the vision, considering how similar the small crystal ball toward the end was to the item Alyn used to test the talent of students.

Something like continuously improving one's affinities was absolutely heaven-defying. Certainly, some rare treasures could help cultivators with things like that, and you would normally increase your affinities a bit when you evolved and leveled up. But to continuously improve one's Dao Affinities just by doing things like absorbing Attuned Crystals was unheard of.

It would also explain why he had such a shitty constitution. His body simply had no affinities, which should technically be impossible. But yet he could connect to the Dao. Perhaps it was because he hadn't awakened his bloodline yet. Now that he had, he might be able to turn himself from trash into a genius.

He might even be able to cultivate.

Zac immediately looked inward and started to manipulate his Dao a bit as he circulated it through his body. He had swallowed a mountain of treasures, so his affinities should have improved quite a bit going by the situation of Karz. A single broken Nexus Crystal had a measurable effect that early in cultivation, so surely Zac should have made large strides.

But there was absolutely no effect. Nothing at all.

He was still just as clumsy as before, and his Dao Fragments resisted any attempts at creating a Dao Braid. Zac frowned a second before he took out a Divine crystal and started absorbing it, which only caused his frown to grow deeper.

The second vision, in particular, had been extremely vivid, and Zac had felt everything Karz did as the youth absorbed the scraps on the trash mountain. Zac could even remember the rotten taste of the weird bugs he forcibly ate. The energies of the Divine Crystal spread out through Zac's body and nourished it, but his cells definitely didn't swallow and fuse with the energy like Karz's body did with the remnant fire-attuned energies.

"What the hell," Zac muttered, causing the large Zhix to freeze and look over.

"Is everything alright, Warmaster?" the Anointed hesitantly asked.

"Oh, sorry, it's nothing," Zac said as before he opened his status screen to see how things looked.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	88
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Pathstrider
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	2957 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 228%]
Dexterity	1403 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Endurance	2408 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 218%]
Vitality	1693 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 218%]
Intelligence	642 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	1131 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	359 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points	30
Nexus Coins	[F] 1 839 804 598

Zac blankly looked at the status screen for a few seconds, not sure what to think about the situation. There were both good news and bad news from the looks of it. The good news was that not only had he gained three levels somehow, but he had also boosted his race to D-Grade while simultaneously awakening his bloodline.

It looked like swallowing half a mountain had some benefits, after all.

A small point of regret was that he didn't get the Title for awakening a bloodline. It had been mentioned in the missives, but he was too slow. You needed to awaken it before turning 16 for the good title, and before evolving for the normal one. But more importantly, the ominous "Corrupted"-designation remaining next to his bloodline. He had hoped that the corruption was something like the bloodline would be harder to awaken, but it looked like he wasn't so lucky.

Zac gave another mental command, and an entirely new screen popped up a moment later.

Bloodline	[F - Corrupted] Void Emperor
Talent	Force of the Void - 18%
Bloodline Nodes	[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void

It was the Bloodline Screen that became available upon activating his bloodline, just like the Dao Screen or Skill Screen. Zac hadn't read anything about 'bloodline nodes' being added to the screen, but he wasn't too surprised either. It was probably simply not something that the basic missives he'd bought covered. The fact that they were graded was a bit odd, but Zac had no way to get to the bottom of that either.

The line called ‘talent’ in his case didn’t necessarily explain all the benefits of a bloodline, but it showcased the main part. Common talents were things such as ‘Combat Boost – Fire’ or ‘Increased Energy Absorption’. One bloodline could have multiple talents, but that was a lot less common from what Zac understood. It was more likely that new talents would awaken as one evolved on the bloodline itself.

The number of talents wasn’t really indicative of a bloodline’s quality though. There were no doubt supreme bloodlines who pushed a singular talent to the very limits, turning it disgustingly powerful.

In Zac’s case, it said [**Force of the Void**], something that sounded like a combat-oriented talent to Zac. That really didn’t seem to match with his visions at all. The Void Emperor-bloodline should clearly be an almost cheat-like cultivation-related bloodline from what he was shown. This added with his inability to improve his affinity with the Divine Crystal made Zac think of a troubling possibility.

Was this the effect of the corruption? Had he lost the ability to improve his affinities?

It was a shame that he didn’t have the time to properly test things out right now, but he wasn’t ready to give up just yet. Zac once more started looking inward, testing one thing after another to get a sense of what was going on. But nothing seemed to point toward increased talent in any of the Daos.

But he finally found something else. It somehow felt like the energy in his body was moving faster. Zac tried to figure out if that was related to affinities, but he could quickly pinpoint that it was made possible by something else. His pathways had become thicker compared to before awakening his bloodline.

It was very minute, like a thin string having been swapped out by a slightly thicker string, but it was definitely there. His pathways, including his skill fractals, had been somewhat widened. But even such a minute increase had allowed Cosmic Energy to more freely flow through his body. The talent screen said eighteen percent, and that number seemed to somewhat match what he was experiencing right now.

Was this really it? Zac couldn't help but feel shortchanged and confused. It didn't make sense. This type of talent wasn't anything uncommon, and it presented itself as 'Increased Energy Absorption' or 'Increased Energy Circulation'. Why was his Talent named something completely different when it provided the same effect? But was hard to focus on the issue at all when thinking of what he had lost.

He was supposed to have a bloodline where he could improve his affinities through absorption but instead was given something that improved his Cosmic Energy-circulation. The latter was obviously better than nothing, but a far cry from the ability to become a cultivator. After all, the utility of such a talent felt a bit limited considering it was just one of the many natural advantages of cultivators.

Increased circulation didn't really mean increased combat power. After all, a fractal edge from [**Chop**] only took a fraction of his Cosmic Energy to activate, and the ability to push more energy into the skill fractal wouldn't do much.

The boost would help with some things though. Higher-power skills took longer to activate, and being able to force Cosmic Energy into the fractals quicker would give him an edge in battle. It would also allow him to absorb energies faster, which might prove to have amazing synergy with his [**Void Heart**] down the road.

Of course, there was still the possibility that he had completely misunderstood the situation. Furthermore, it might be possible to heal or fix his corrupted bloodline in the future, and the road to becoming a cultivator suddenly felt a lot more tangible compared to before. Zac wanted to go through what else he could do with his new pathways until that happened, but the Anointed suddenly stopped in their tracks, and Zac soon felt a pressure bearing down on him from above.

Something was trying to push through the spatial film.

Chapter 641: From the Void

Zac still hadn't recovered to his perfect state, but there was no helping it. There was a sense of foreboding in his heart as he saw the thick film slowly bulge inward, and he quickly put his free points into Dexterity before he closed his status screen. Only then did he jump down from the Anointed's shoulder and ran over to the leaders who all stood gazing toward the sky.

His inadvertent actions before had weakened the spatial barriers in this area, but they were still quite thick compared to the ones on the islands. Any Void Creature that managed to force its way through a barrier this powerful was probably stronger than the two they had fought off until now, most likely even a proper D-Grade being.

That wasn't something they could handle even if the beast was suppressed by space. His eyes quickly scanned his people, trying to figure out what they could do. Killing such a beast was impossible, but he might be able to lure it in the opposite direction long enough until it was finally killed off by the hostile environment.

"Have people rush toward the lowest layer, then move away from this place," Zac slowly said.

"Wait, something is wrong," Kenzie said as she looked down at her terminal. "I'm picking up Technocrat signals."

"What?" Zac exclaimed. "Have the creators of this place returned?"

"Perhaps," Kenzie muttered, and Zac noticed a hint of excitement on her face.

Zac knew all-too-well what his sister was thinking of, but he didn't share the sentiment. Zac wasn't as thrilled at the prospect of meeting the family, especially not in a pressed situation like they found themselves in now. Their mother

might solve the situation with a wave of her hands, but she might also just kill everyone before taking him and his sister away. Or it might be his mother's enemies.

However, both Zac and Kenzie soon realized that their guess was way off when the presumptive Technocrat vessels suddenly became visible as though they appeared out of thin air. There was no way that a peak Technocrat faction would be responsible for building the weird bulky ships that tried to push through the film in the sky.

There were three of them, and Zac and the others were actually able to see them even when they were still outside in the Void. All three of them looked different, like they had been soldered together by random components scavenged from the base. But the shields that surrounded the metal hulls looked extremely powerful, and even Zac wasn't confident in breaking through those layers. Then again, their main goal was no doubt to keep the Void at bay.

Unfortunately, it looked like one of the ships was at the end of its ropes. Its shields were extremely weak, like they had turned down its energy consumption to the bare minimum. Zac guessed that the vessel was running out of fuel, and they chose to focus what they had left on breaking through the film.

"What should we do?" Joanna asked as the other elites turned to Zac for a decision.

"Let's wait a bit," Zac slowly said. "I think this should be the True Sky Faction."

Kenzie nodded in agreement. It was the only thing that made sense. It looked like the native faction with the most Datamancers had managed to build some sort of vessels that could traverse the Void by putting together different pieces of technology from the base. That was the only way he could explain why the vessels looked so different, and it also explained why they appeared here.

They were no doubt the first victims to the zealots' scheme, but they had managed to find one final path to survival through these ships. There only being three of them meant that

the Church of Everlasting Dao probably managed to kill tens of thousands of people through their schemes though.

“They’re sitting ducks right now. I bet they’re screwed if we break the shields holding off the Void. If we want to strike now’s the best chance,” Ogras muttered, and a few others nodded in agreement.

“The True Sky Faction is probably the faction that poses the least threat to us,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “And those vessels shouldn’t be able to hold more than 60 to 80 people each. Besides, they might even hold earthlings considering they had an alliance with the New World Government.”

“All the more reason to blow them up,” Ogras muttered, but he didn’t press the issue further.

“Get ready for battle just in case,” Zac said as he cracked his neck.

However, a sudden change made Zac’s eyes widen in horror, and he quickly changed his orders as he roared at the top of his lungs. “EVERYONE BENEATH E-GRADE, RUN!”

What had changed his tune so quickly was the appearance of an all-too-familiar tentacle that quickly grabbed the vessel with the weakened shield just as it was about to break through to the barrier to the Memorysteel mountain. The shields protecting the vessel immediately started to flicker, and a moment of weakness was apparently all it took.

The second the barrier was down the vessel simply disappeared, like it was swallowed by the void.

“Aaah-“ Billy exclaimed with wide eyes to the side, and Zac could only agree.

It was hard to say what looked more horrifying; the monstrous tentacle of the Collector or the fact that it somehow made the whole vessel suddenly wink out of existence.

The other two ships didn’t have any obvious response apart from releasing even more energy as they tried to force the way through the film that was now pushed tens of meters toward the mountain. But Zac honestly didn’t hold out much hope for

them. As expected, both of them were soon grabbed by a tentacle each.

“What should we do? What that thing?!” Kenzie gasped with wide eyes from the side.

“It’s the Collector,” Zac sighed as he gazed at the situation above. “Get away from this place. I’ll try to help them.”

He didn’t know whether the True Sky Faction were enemies or friends, but he knew that he couldn’t leave them to the Collector with a clean conscience. The scene of the torsos stuck to its main body still haunted Zac’s dreams, and he wouldn’t wish a fate like that even upon his worst enemies.

Kenzie nodded and flickered away, following the stream of soldiers who desperately ran away from this area. Zac looked around and saw Thea in the distance, and he nodded at her before she set off as well. The pressure at even the middle layers had caused her wounds to reopen, and rather than forcing it she had decided to stay at the lower layers to keep things organized.

That was a lucky break that put her out of harm’s way. The protective film was the weakest close to the area where Zac rampaged, and the True Sky Faction had chosen to break through right in front of them. Perhaps it was even premeditated, in hopes of eliciting help from Zac and his army.

The tentacles emitted a shocking pressure, and hundreds of people had blood running down their noses just from being in its presence. The shields on the two vessels were luckily a lot stronger compared to the first one, and they held even though the eerie hands sewn onto the tentacles tried to claw their way through.

The ships eventually managed to push their noses through the defensive film though, and Zac was surprised to see that the thick shields only appeared in the void. He immediately realized that this was the opportunity they needed, and his response was immediate. Two black chains shot upward with extreme force, while another two dug into the hard Memorysteel beneath.

The durable fetters of [**Love's Bond**] dug themselves into the hull, and Zac immediately started to pull.

"Help me out," Zac grunted when he saw he wasn't doing much headway on his own, and Billy and the Zhix immediately started pulling on the ships.

It was a tough struggle even with all their combined power, but the ships slowly started to enter the atmosphere. The question was whether they would be fast enough, as the shields on the two remaining vessels were rapidly depleting because of the Collector's constant attacks. Even worse, a third tentacle suddenly appeared, punching straight through the barrier as it aimed toward Zac.

Had it recognized him?

Zac was unable to flee because he was connected to the chains, but he wasn't alone in facing the Collector this time. There were still a few hundred elites staying behind, and they together should be able to keep the arm busy. Zac knew he wouldn't be able to cut the tentacle with [**Chop**], but perhaps he could push it back a bit with the force of a barrage.

But he barely had time to activate the skill before five thick murderous fractal edges appeared in front of [**Verun's Bite**].

What the hell just happened? It was almost like the fractal edges had exploded into being, rather than him conjuring them by pushing Cosmic Energy into the skill fractal. This wasn't a matter of being 18% faster, this was a whole new tier of speed. It wouldn't even take a second to conjure a full set of fractal edges before, but now it was essentially instantaneous. And without him moving any Cosmic Energy at all, they had simply appeared.

Not only that, but the edges even emitted a mysterious ancient aura, though Zac could confirm they didn't seem to contain any more power compared to before. Now was not the time to ponder about this weird change though, and he immediately launched the set of fractal edges at the Collector.

His arm was a blur thanks to his ungodly pool of Dexterity, and it looked like the weird situation with his skill wasn't a

one-time thing. The moment he finished the fifth swing another set of fractal edges simply appeared with a shudder, and Zac didn't even need to pause as he kept launching blade after blade.

It almost looked like a mental illusion as an endless series of blades caused a band in the sky until they slammed into the tentacle with tremendous force. Of course, the Collector's tentacle wasn't even wounded after Zac imbued the fractal edges with the Fragment of the Axe.

"It's indestructible, just keep it away!" Zac shouted as he kept attacking, and the air was immediately lit up with an endless number of attacks.

Some launched concussive attacks like Zac while others formed shields. Those who could do neither threw powerful talismans at the tentacle and together it turned the whole area chaotic. But the Collector was simply too powerful. It endured the endless series of attacks as it slowly made its way forward, only losing some of its attached hands in its struggle.

They thankfully managed to slow it down at least, and the skips were soon enough a few meters inside the protective hull, exposing thick doors to the inner space. Both the doors opened the moment they were inside the barrier, and a flood of refugees came tumbling down.

The tentacles trying to drag the vessels back into the Void reacted instantaneously, and one person after another were snatched up and dragged away. But over a hundred people of over ten different races managed to survive, and they all started to create some distance as they attacked the tentacles that tried to snatch them up.

Seeing that they had accomplished their goal there was no point to stay behind, and Zac dislodged his chains from the vessels the moment people stopped falling out of it. The ships were quickly pushed out by the spatial film, and they disappeared one by one.

"Retreat!" Zac shouted, and the army quickly started running north while pushing down toward the lower layers to increase their speed.

Zac himself shored up the rear, and he had essentially turned into a turret thanks to his newfound ability to conjure fractal blades instantaneously. **[Chop]** alone wasn't enough, and he had to flash forward to physically slam the tentacles away just as they were about to snatch up one of his people.

The Collector was smart though, and it immediately realized that he was the biggest hindrance to increasing its collection. All three tentacles suddenly gained a massive boost in speed as they shot forward, turning into three eldritch spears aimed straight at him.

Zac had expected something like this to happen though, and he had an idea.

The tentacles had enough speed to break through the sound barrier, but a massive fist suddenly appeared out of nowhere, snatching all three tentacles up in its grip. It was **[Nature's Punishment]**, but the hand was a bit larger and darker than before. Just like his fractal blades, it had been somehow changed, and it now carried a hint of antiquity to it.

More importantly, summoning the hand had been instantaneous and without any Cosmic Energy infusion into the skill fractal, which was almost absurd for such a powerful skill. However, he felt a sense of hollowness the moment he activated the skill, and he thoughtfully looked down at the fractal as he ran away while the wooden hand kept the tentacles locked in a vise.

The wooden fist only managed to delay the tentacles two seconds before it was crushed, but that was enough to create a massive gap between himself and the breach. It looked like the Collector still wasn't willing to go all-out, but it was clear that the beast was annoyed. The three tentacles slammed into the mountain a few times before they slithered back toward the void, causing huge chunks of Memorysteel to fly all over.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that they were safe, and he instead turned his gaze inward.

The short battle had allowed him to realize that he had severely underestimated his bloodline, and one piece of the puzzle after another came together in his mind. He had been

too preoccupied with what he had lost, to the point that he hadn't properly bothered to understand what he had gained. In fact, now that the haze in his mind had lifted, he wasn't even sure that the increased thickness of his pathways was due to his bloodline.

It might rather simply be a natural result of pushing his Race to D-Grade. After all, the D-Grade was where you gained a massive pool of Cosmic Energy from your Cultivator's Core, and one's pathways needed to be able to endure those volumes. Or it might just be a secondary boost from awakening his bloodline.

But the real prize was clearly something else, something much greater hidden in the depths of his body.

Chapter 642: Infighting and Finishers

Zac quickly pieced together the puzzle of his Bloodline Talent as he ran behind the Anointed and the demons in their mad dash away from the section with a weakened spatial barrier. The battle just now had given him a crash-course on the effect of [**Force of the Void**]; it appeared to be some sort of energy reserve hidden in the Void, one that allowed for instantaneous attacks.

It somewhat answered one of the big question marks in his mind. He had absorbed thousands of tons of Memorysteel along with the energy from a huge number of treasure caves, yet there was relatively little to show for it. Now Zac was rather suspecting that all that energy went into setting up this hidden pocket in his body.

At least he suspected that it was a hidden pocket. He still didn't have perfect control over his new bloodline, but it didn't feel like the energy was inside his body. He should have sensed it if that was the case, more than just the slight sense of hollowness after activating [**Nature's Punishment**].

That feeling was also a clear indication that this effect was limited. Zac guessed that this hidden energy source had a certain amount of energy reserves, and he would go back to normal Cosmic Energy consumption after that reserve was exhausted. He wasn't exactly sure how to refill that source though. His body was still full of energy since he hadn't wasted any of his own during the battle, but he didn't feel any drain or absorption at all where the [**Force of the Void**] was restocked.

Did it perhaps need some specific energy source to be refilled? It shouldn't be, since the skills he activated felt pretty much

the same as before, except for the ancient aura that his skills emitted.

Another possibility was that it wasn't an actual energy pocket, but rather him connecting to the energy of the Void. The sense of hollowness would then be exhaustion from forming the bridge to the other realm. He was still fuzzy about how it actually worked, but what was more important right now was what kind of benefits it could provide.

And it was huge.

The more he thought about it the more excited Zac became. Instantaneous skill activation was massive, especially at higher grades. He had tried to improve his battle techniques lately after his disappointing battle with Void's Disciple, though the events in the Mystic Realm had generally taken precedence.

However, he remembered one short exposition on battle-theory he had bought through Calrin. It was written by a D-grade pugilist, and Zac had hoped it would give him insights into dealing with Void's Disciple. The D-Grade hegemon hadn't covered how to deal with pugilists, but he had still provided a lot of insight. The master essentially divided his fighting style into two types of actions; infighting and finishers.

He argued that F-Grade battles were just children launching finishers at each other, with no skill or technique. But such a battle-style wouldn't work as people rose through the ranks. People at D-grade would be able to move miles in an instant and launch a dozen attacks in the blink of an eye. They were also a lot more sensitive to Cosmic Energy, and would usually be able to sense skill activations and instantaneously react. Massive skills that required preparation and charging would create lethal openings if you activated them without thought.

Infighting and cheap skills weren't meant to break through the defenses and kill your enemies, but rather to whittle them down and tire them out so that you could create an opening. Only then would you unleash your ultimate skills. Overwhelm the opposition, seize the rhythm, finish them in one move. That the optimal combat tactic according to the pugilist.

Zac could easily understand the theory. For example, at lower levels his skill [**Deforestation**] was pretty overpowering, causing wide swathes of destruction. However, a skill like that would quickly lose its efficacy at higher levels, and not only because of limited energy.

Someone at late or peak E-Grade wouldn't just stand around and watch that wave of destruction come washing over them. Someone that powerful would be able to move hundreds of meters in a second even without a movement skill, and they would simply move out of the way. Or rather, they might launch a counter-strike during the short instant when Zac gathered the energy to summon the enormous axes.

Doing something like that at F-Grade was nigh-impossible, but a peak E-Grade warrior definitely had the skill and insight to launch a quick precision strike that could disrupt the skill activation.

This theory of infighting and finishers pretty much held true for most combat classes, not just melee fighters such as himself. First, get the upper hand one way or another, force them into a passive state, and finally finish them off. There were of course a million ways to create an opening. Take the Second Elder of the Cartava Clan, for example.

He first restrained Zac with an array, then hid his true move by conjuring ten clones. He had seized the rhythm and made it impossible for Zac to counter while he prepared his finisher while hidden underground. Zac had thankfully been able to ruin the schemes with sheer force and some shamelessness, but he wouldn't always be so lucky in the future.

But his bloodline seemed to turn that simple system on his head.

Even an energy-hungry skill like [**Nature's Punishment**] had been activated without warning in an instant. There were not even any energy traces in his body from the activation, the hand had just suddenly appeared out of the crack in space. It had grabbed the three tentacles almost before Zac had finished his mental command.

What if that had been a pitched melee-battle? Zac and his enemy could be standing in a lock with their weapons, only for the poor bastard to be smashed by a five-meter fist out of nowhere. A bloodline talent like this opened a whole new world of possibilities for him. It might even be more valuable than becoming a cultivator provided he learned to make the most of this ability.

Certainly, there were some limitations to the talent. Zac guessed that he could draw an amount equivalent to 18% of his normal Cosmic Energy stores, based on the number in the bloodline panel. That would track with his experiences as well. **[Chop]** barely cost any cosmic energy at all, but **[Nature's Punishment]** cost him around 8 to 9% of his Cosmic Energy by this point.

Another fractal blade appeared out of nowhere, confirming that the ability remained even with the sense of hollowness. He conjured and discarded a dozen edges in rapid succession, at which point he could confirm that the sense of emptiness got a bit stronger. Figuring out how to remove that feeling would require some time and experimentation though.

There were a lot of other questions that needed to be solved as well, but Zac sighed when he saw that reality was quickly catching up to him. He had been running for over ten minutes by now, and it was clear that the Collector had given up by this point. The others had realized the same thing, but that didn't mean the situation was resolved.

There was still the issue of the strangers who had escaped from the two vessels. They had all rushed in the same direction as the people of Port Atwood, and they currently found themselves surrounded by his army. They didn't try to break out though, but rather just stood their ground in somber silence.

Zac wasn't too surprised the natives seemed fine with being surrounded considering that they had actively chosen to run together with his people. Perhaps it was because he saved them, or perhaps because they wanted to look for sanctuary. After all, there were just over one hundred left of them, and they probably had no idea about the situation on the mountain.

A furry beastkin turned toward Zac as he approached, and Zac realized that he was actually a monkeyman with silver fur. He reminded Zac of the almost human-like Stone Monkey Ogras had thrown through the incursion, but the cultivator in front of him was obviously a lot stronger. However, his late E-grade aura was quite weak and unstable, and he was missing large spots of furs where nasty burns could be seen.

He wasn't the only one, most of the more powerful warriors seemed to sport these kinds of wounds. The injuries were at least a day old, so it looked like these people had been in pitched battle even before reaching the Memorysteel mountain. Zac couldn't sense any Dao from the wounds though, no matter if he used [**Cosmic Gaze**] or [**Primal Polyglot**] for clues.

"The True Sky Faction is extremely grateful for your saving grace, Lord Atwood. Without your aid we wouldn't be standing here right now," the monkeyman said with a bow, his voice deep and gravelly. "I am Hekruv Vira of the True Sky Council."

"You know me?" Zac asked with some surprise.

"We have seen reports on you provided by the New World Government of your planet," the monkeyman nodded.

"Speaking of, where are they? The officials of New World Government," Zac said as he looked across the group.

Almost a third of the group were humans, but Zac didn't recognize a single one of them. More importantly, almost all of them were at the E-grade, confirming that they weren't part of Earth.

"Many of them are back on Earth. Some were killed when the islands collapsed. Some... Were killed by us," the monkeyman said, causing a few of the refugees to look over at the speaker with some shock.

However, the monkeyman along with the dozen emitting the strongest auras were unphased, proving they had already decided to divulge that information. Seeing that Zac didn't interrupt, Hekruv Vira kept talking.

“We told them that the world was ending, and they entered an agreement with us. We would help them battle their enemies in this realm and assist them in scouting for the Spatial Treasure. They would in return allow our people to leave before the realm collapsed. We upheld our part of the bargain, they did not,” Hekruv Vira said. “We tried to force our way out, but it failed. They closed the tunnel and unleashed a taboo weapon. That might even be what drew the attention of the System to this place.”

Zac was surprised about how candid the monkeyman was, though there was no way to confirm the truth until they left this place. But Zac leaned toward his explanation being mostly true, since it matched pretty well with what he had heard and how the Cartava Clan acted.

He guessed that the few survivors of the True Sky Faction felt the need to take a chance, not only for their immediate survival but also for the future beyond the Mystic Realm. There were only a hundred twenty or so of them left, and they would be stuck with Zac for a century on the outside even if they survived this place. Lying right now would just put them in a dangerous situation as soon as they got out.

“I’m not an enemy with the New World Government... But I am not an ally either. I won’t involve myself in your dealings with them,” Zac slowly said, making the survivors relax somewhat. “However, that only goes for this place. I will incorporate the New World Government after leaving this place, if there’s anything left to incorporate. More importantly, why did you follow my people after escaping the Collector?”

That was the most pressing matter. These people were exhausted and wounded, but they were elites every one of them. There were a few that had weak auras, but Zac guessed they were expert Datamancers based on their attire. Leaving them to their own devices might come back to bite him in his ass, like if they decided to attack his people after he had left for the sphere in the sky.

“We wish to follow you,” Hekruv Vira said without hesitation.

“Having a bunch of powerful strangers in one’s midst is a good way to get a dagger in one’s back,” Ogras said as he walked over to Zac. “Sometimes it’s easier to nip a problem in the bud.”

“We simply wish to follow behind your faction for protection, and we will not fight you for Seals. We are too exhausted and wounded to deal with the threats of the rival factions, let alone yours. Besides, we can pay for ourselves. Ten Million Nexus Coins per person,” Hekruv Vira said. “But what I really meant was that we wish to join your force upon leaving this place.”

“Join Port Atwood,” Zac slowly said. “Why?”

“The True Sky Faction is gone, and only a few of us remain. Even if we settled and started a new faction, we would just be a small group of foreigners in a world under your control. We have already deduced that you are a supreme Progenitor, and we understand what that means all-too-well, far better than the officials of the New World Government,” Hekruv Vira said.

“The Boundless Heavens follow the law of the strongest. I don’t wish for us to become fertilizer to your cultivation path.”

“We can also see that your force has already taken in all kinds of races, just like we of the True Sky Faction did inside this prison. We also believe that we can get stronger by banding together and sharing insights and experiences,” a large-headed humanoid added.

Zac looked at the group deep in thought. Having these people around would definitely help since they would add over a dozen peak warriors to Port Atwood’s roster, which was something he desperately needed. However, these warriors were all much higher levels than himself, making it impossible to sign the kind of contracts that External Elders sometimes did in the multiverse.

He would have to solely rely on trust or suppression. It worked out fine with Ogras in the end, but these were people old schemers who were all centuries old. Would he be able to leave Earth without worries in the future with these people staying behind?

“We also have this, and are ready to hand it over upon joining your faction,” Hekruv Vira said. “After all, it would be in our best interest to strengthen our allies as much as possible.”

People tensed up as the monkeyman reached for a worn-out Cosmos Sack, but they visibly relaxed when they realized he just took out a tablet.

“What’s that?” Zac asked curiously, and Kenzie looked over with interest as well.

“It is the database on all bloodline research we have collected over the past millennia. Our own experiences during cultivation, the experimental data of the Tsarun Clan who captured us and brought us here. Even some notes and insights from the ancient and powerful creators of this place. A lot of warriors on your world seem to carry our bloodlines for some reason. With this database, you will be able to unlock their potential. Perhaps even your own.”

Zac looked at the tablet for roughly half a second before he turned toward the monkeyman with a smile.

“Welcome aboard.”

Chapter 643: Wrestling Control

Zac perused the contents of the tablet he gained from Hekruv Vira while walking north with the army, and he gained far more in an hour than he had from all the missives he'd bought until now. And that was even when just scratching the surface. The Bloodline Codex, as they called the database, was essentially True Sky Faction's holy scripture, the accumulation of thousands of years of effort.

Being stuck in a Technocrat prison took its toll, and many in the True Sky Faction had turned to academia to not go insane from the passage of time. The burly monkeyman was one of these people, and Zac had found over thirty theses on cultivation and Bloodlines in the database penned by him, totaling over forty thousand pages altogether. And Hekruv Vira was far from the most verbose author.

It looked like the Atwood Academy would gain a few new professors soon enough.

A lot of the content was completely theoretical in nature and often untested, but there was also all kinds of in-depth and practical information. For example, there was information on dozens of different bloodlines, including those of the natives.

It turned out that the bloodline of the Cartava Clan was actually just called 'Gaze of Cartava'. There were some differences between members though, with them awakening different talents, likely depending on the purity of the bloodline. The most common talent was called **[Lord's Eyes]**, but a few talented individuals instead gained **[King's Eyes]**, both of which empowered ocular skills and classes.

Even Leviala's unique eyes were listed, and the tablet called them **[Heaven's Eyes]**. There were no details on this talent

though, but it did list a suspicion that it allowed the cultivator to harness the power of time. It even mentioned that they suspected Leviala to be in possession of it, though it wasn't confirmed.

The Lunar Tribe was also a subject of intense study. Their bloodline was called 'Lunar Light', and it was indeed based on a common ancestor to the Lunar Wolves. The Tsarun Clan had tried refining their bloodlines with the help of the normal wolves, making it regain the power of some wolf ancestor, which apparently was insanely powerful and nigh-unkillable.

Apart from that, there were dozens of other bloodlines Zac had never heard of, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. There was actually a whopping thirty Body Tempering Manuals as well, though all of them had various requirements on the user. Furthermore, only eight of them were complete, with the others being incomplete to various degrees. Some of the elders had tried fixing them, but it was clear that the effect wasn't quite at a satisfactory level even after centuries of experiments.

There was also all kinds of general information along with tips and insights into refining and awakening bloodlines and constitutions.

Unfortunately, there was no information on corrupted bloodlines, but Zac honestly wasn't too surprised. Zac had a feeling his situation was the result of something extreme his mother and her clan had done. They perhaps had tried to fuse that affinity-boosting bloodline with the Void-energy talent he had, getting the best of both worlds. But they might have gotten too greedy and reached beyond their abilities.

Perhaps he was a failed experiment.

The thought was pretty depressing, but Zac knew he couldn't complain. After all, his situation was pretty good, and his newfound ability might even be more useful than being a cultivator in some scenarios. And he could confirm that his bloodline was definitely something extremely high-grade, at least when comparing it to the bloodlines listed in the Bloodline Codex.

First of all, it didn't seem to pigeonhole Zac in a certain direction. It simply gave him a hidden energy boost, and possibly slightly thicker energy pathways. It didn't negatively affect his classes at all, and it didn't require him to retrain or change his path. You could say that his bloodline was lacking any attunement, something that appeared to be extremely rare.

All of the bloodlines listed in the compendium restricted the cultivator in return for a specific type of power. They required certain types of classes to provide any benefits, and they even worsened one's progress and affinities in unrelated Daos.

Secondly, only three of the listed bloodlines had Bloodline Nodes. Furthermore, these bloodlines had only swapped a single Hidden Node while the others were still the normal racial nodes. Not one of the three 'top-tier' bloodlines had graded nodes either, but their existence was mentioned in the database. That meant it wasn't something unique to Zac, but rather something that normally might not appear in a frontier sector like Zecia.

The Codex didn't explain any more than that, but after reading the information on the Bloodline Nodes Zac started to form a hypothesis of his own. There wasn't necessarily a big difference at the beginning between normal and graded nodes, but the difference lay in potential. Apparently, the benefits Hidden Nodes provided gradually tapered off on the road of cultivation, a bit like Low-tiered Titles.

They would often be extremely useful during the E-Grade and no doubt help when preparing to break through to D-Grade. But by the point one reached C-Grade, most Hidden Nodes would provide limited help. Graded Hidden Nodes shouldn't have that limitation, and they could continue to provide benefits even if you reached extremely high cultivation levels, just like High-Tiered Titles did.

The vast compendium of information was extremely useful, but it would take months, perhaps years, time to digest everything. But there was one final part that was even more valuable to Zac right now, the six general Bloodline Methods.

Bloodline Methods were similar to cultivation manuals in the sense that they helped a warrior use their bloodline as efficiently as possible. For example, having his bloodline constantly run would be both wasteful and stupid, almost like when Zac simply pushed Cosmic Energy around in his body during the early days of the Integration.

Besides, the biggest value of his Bloodline Talent was the element of surprise, the ability to suddenly launch a massive strike out of nowhere.

If his normal attacks all appeared without any energy fluctuations or buildup, even the dumbest enemy would quickly realize something was up. So Zac wanted to turn off his bloodline until he went in for the kill. That was exactly what Bloodline Methods were made for, the ability to control, and to a certain degree empower, Bloodlines.

In an optimal world, Zac would have a method tailored for his Bloodline, one that would make the most of his Hidden Nodes and his talent. But Zac's instincts told him that such a thing didn't even exist considering his bloodline was corrupted. He would have to create one by himself, but he had no idea to go about doing something like that.

A lot of people were in the same situation though, in the sense that they somehow had managed to awaken a bloodline but didn't have a heritage to go with it. That's where general Bloodline Methods came into the picture. They were pretty average, but they worked with a large number of bloodlines.

As long as Zac found one that somewhat worked it would be fine. Bloodline Methods were just ways to rouse one's hidden talents, and they didn't alter one's pathways like a cultivation manual did. He could simply swap the method out if he found a better one, or he could start to modify the one he used to better suit his particular bloodline.

Zac didn't want to waste even a second since it would be a huge boon if he learned how to turn his bloodline talent on and off before he set out for the sphere in the top. He still hadn't gotten the 8th part of the quest in any case, so he went with his

gut. He needed some time to get things in order, and they were closing in on their destination.

A few hours and they would reach the northern side of the mountain, and there would hopefully be enough seals both for his own people and the True Sky refugees. They had tentatively joined his faction, but Zac wouldn't take their word for it. The odds of them trying to pull something last-minute would decrease by a fair bit if they had seals by the time Zac left.

He had talked with Hekruv Vira for a bit after setting out, and Zac was shocked to learn that the taboo weapon the monkey-man mentioned was a freaking nuclear warhead. Anyone that could take a blast like that and walk around with some minor burns the next day wasn't someone to scoff at. Of course, atomic bombs completely lacked any Dao-empowerment, and the Technocrat shields were apparently extremely good at dispersing normal kinetic force. They had only taken a few percent of the blast head-on.

It would take around eight hours for his army to reach the northern side, giving Zac ample time to experiment with the Bloodline Methods. There were six of them to test, and Zac started with the one called **[Wargod Tactics]**. Its name was a huge exaggeration, but it did have good compatibility with many combat-oriented bloodlines. Zac opened the file containing the method, and he was shocked to see how much information it contained.

Zac was about to borrow the shoulder of one of the Anointed again, but he changed his mind realizing that most of the content was just personal insights and anecdotes from practitioners. The actual method was just a few pages.

The first and most important step of getting control of your bloodline was to form a mental connection to it, but that was easier said than done. It was like taking charge of your organs. They were there and part of your body, but they were doing their thing without any active input.

The method that the Wargod Tactics provided was to activate one's body with a series of stances while rousing one's body

by releasing killing intent.

Zac tsked in annoyance as he memorized the 18 stances. Where were the Skill Crystals when you needed them? One burst of information and you were done. It was a reminder of how massive the changes the System brought to cultivation were.

These Bloodline Methods felt a lot like something the ancient cultivators would practice and seemed only partly integrated with the System's 'software'. This wasn't something unique to bloodline cultivation though. The same thing held true when it came to Soul Cultivation and refining a Constitution with Body Tempering Manuals. Then there were the beast rearing methods, and god knows what else.

All were valid paths to power, but not something that the System directly got involved with.

Perhaps the future generations would have it better. The last Apostate added the whole Mercantile System, so perhaps another Apostate would add some sort of side-cultivation functionality that encompassed all these different methods. But for now Zac had to rely on himself, and he needed to try the yoga poses that the **[Wargod Tactics]** provided.

"I need to try something out," Zac said to the others who glanced at him curiously. "Keep going, I'll catch up in half an hour or something."

Zac flashed away and found a hidden crevasse where he could practice undisturbed. He immediately started to perform the stances in order, making sure to rouse his killing intent as instructed by the manual. The whole area was awash with his murderous force as Zac completed the stances over and over.

However, absolutely nothing happened even after spending half an hour. Zac sighed in annoyance as he rushed forward to keep up with his army. The guide said it might take a few minutes, but if you didn't even sense anything after half an hour the method wasn't compatible. He tried another ten minutes just to be safe, but he eventually had to turn to the next method.

Reality was cruel. The hours passed as one method after another proved unable to rouse his bloodline. Zac even started to suspect that the True Sky Faction had fed him false methods, but that suspicion was quickly dispelled when four different people in the refugee party showed Zac that **[Wargod Tactics]** worked just fine.

Zac sighed as he looked at the last method. It was called **[Bloodline Resonance]**, and Zac's face scrunched up when he read the description. The strong point of **[Bloodline Resonance]** was its shocking compatibility, making it work with pretty much every single bloodline out there.

The weak point was everything else. It was essentially the equivalent of a cultivation manual called **[Cultivation Manual]**. It was as basic as they came from the looks of it, and it didn't provide an iota of enhancement. Even **[Wargod Tactics]** improved the effect of a bloodline talent by between 5 to 10%.

Its method was simple, to form mental ripples with one's soul that spread through his body like some sort of sonar. Zac pushed away his anxiety as he sat down, and he quickly grasped the method. It was thankfully pretty straightforward and didn't require any adroit control or even usage of Dao. It just needed him to push out a little bit of his mental energy in specific intervals.

The minutes passed as one ripple after another spread out through his body, and Zac stopped them from leaving his body, just like the method told him to. They kept increasing in number until his body was almost like a raging sea of spiritual energy. The anxiety from before started to creep back as Zac realized something wasn't right. Just fifteen minutes was supposed to be enough to complete the first step, but he had already doubled that without any response.

But Zac refused to give up on this one. It was his last chance to control his Bloodline until he found a proper method, and who knew how long that would take? He could only persevere, adhering to the method that usually solved his issues.

If things didn't go your way, apply more force.

Chapter 644: Bloodline Resonance

Zac refused to believe that even the universal Bloodline Method wouldn't work on his body, so he kept squeezing out more and more mental energy. The churning ripples of **[Bloodline Resonance]** were quickly descending into a chaotic storm. His whole body felt like it was under assault, and blood started leaking down his nose.

The Bloodline Method should normally not be dangerous, but Zac had long exceeded the recommended usage. Following the manual one would create a new ripple every second, which meant that after fifteen minutes there would be 900 ripples bouncing back and forth. These ripples in turn tried to create a resonance with the bloodline hidden deep in his cells through weak collisions.

Most bloodlines would respond after just a minute or two, but the more stubborn or impure bloodlines could take a bit longer. However, Zac was already approaching 45 minutes by this point, and the number of ripples was over 2500. And not only that, but Zac had also started cranking up the force in each ripple.

If a normal ripple used one unit of mental energy, the ones in his body had been cranked up to five units each by this point. The normal ripple collisions were like gentle nudges at his body aimed to elicit a response, but Zac's method was essentially akin to slapping his organs to shake his bloodline awake.

He understood why the manual had said to stop after 15 minutes. The danger started to increase exponentially as the number of ripples increased. The increased density of ripples created a far higher number of collisions, and each collision impacted his body. Each collision by itself could barely be felt,

but when there were thousands every second? It quickly started to stack up, especially with him also increasing the power.

Zac knew he was being foolhardy, but his eyes were already bloodshot as he kept going, increasing the intensity every second. His whole body screamed for mercy, but there was none to be had. It was lucky that his soul had undergone so much tempering up to this point, as he would already have passed out from soul exhaustion otherwise.

Finally, after a full hour, the raging storm had turned into a world-ending cataclysm in his body, and even Zac couldn't withstand it any longer. Even his pathways and skill fractals were starting to get damaged. If he didn't dispel the ripples now he would get some serious internal wounds, the kind that you simply couldn't fix with **[Surging Vitality]**.

There was too much at stake over the following days, and he couldn't take that risk.

But just as Zac was about to give up he felt an extremely weak response from the depths of his body. Zac almost lost control over the chaotic storm of ripples in his body from his extreme relief, but he quickly refocused since he knew his job wasn't over. The pain was intense, but he kept the ripples going as he focused his attention on the resonance of his bloodline.

It gave off the same sensation of antiquity as the skills he unleashed with the Void Energy, like there was something billions of years old hidden in the depths of his cells. It felt like he was rousing something ancient and reluctant from its slumber, but Zac refused to let the resonance recede into his cells.

Rousing that response was the first step of **[Bloodline Resonance]**, and the second was quite straightforward as well. He was supposed to take charge of the mental energy that coursed through the body and merge it with that resonance to form a lasting bond. The problem was that Zac had gone overboard with his energy expenditure, and there was no way that he could control that much mental energy in one go.

Zac figured that he could only do it piecemeal, and he took roughly five percent of the rampant energies and crammed it into the resonance. His energy disappeared like Cosmic Energy entering a Node, and Zac quickly fed it another chunk. More and more energy entered the resonance over the next minutes without any change, but Zac didn't worry.

As expected, he felt a new sensation in his mind the moment all the accumulated mental energy was exhausted. There was a direct correlation between the number of ripples you needed to form and the amount of mental energy needed to form the spiritual connection. It looked like that balance still held even after Zac started painting outside the lines.

He had succeeded, and Zac marveled at the unique feeling in his body. It was extremely odd, like he had grown a new limb that he could instinctively control just like his arms and legs. But it was actually his bloodline that he had connected with, allowing him to rouse and suppress it at will. There was no circulation or enhancement provided by **[Bloodline Resonance]**, but just some rudimentary control was a huge step forward.

Zac was about to start experimenting with his skills, but a wave of exhaustion hit him the moment he relaxed. He had forgotten the state of his soul from the excitement. Over eighty percent of his mental energy was exhausted from forming the ripples, though he wasn't completely full when he began.

Running around on Memorysteel Mountain with his soul exhausted was extremely foolhardy, so he immediately took out two Soul Crystals as he ate a top-quality healing pill. There were some minor wounds all over his body from the ripples, but he had thankfully completed his goal before getting completely in over his head.

Of course, if he didn't have his remnant-refined soul and unnaturally durable body, he would have died long before **[Bloodline Resonance]** would manage to find a connection to his Void Emperor-bloodline.

Thick streams of pure mental energy poured into his mind from the Soul Crystals, and the exhaustion was quickly

washed away along with his splitting headache. However, he only had time to fill the tank up to half before his communication crystal vibrated. Zac sighed and immediately stopped, knowing that his people wouldn't contact him unless it was urgent.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you, but I think you need come here," his sister's voice echoed out through the communication crystal.

Zac grunted in affirmation before he got back to his feet. People talked about spending centuries in secluded cultivation, but he somehow couldn't even find a few hours. He thought he would have another hour or two considering the army's speed had slowed down the moment treasures started appearing in caves again a few hours ago.

At least he had managed to make the connection, which was the most important part. From now he would just need to get used to it.

It took a few tries, but he eventually managed to disable the Bloodline Talent so that he could use **[Loamwalker]** without burning his remaining Void Energy. It was still half-empty, though Zac had already found at least one way to refill it already; Attuned Crystals. He had been looking for the wrong thing back when he absorbed the Divine Crystal, and had missed that a part of the energy disappeared and never his energy reserves.

Zac also suspected he would be able to find some way to use **[Void Heart]** to fill up on Void Energy, either from eating random things or from eating the Beast cores of the Void Beast. Zac really hoped it would be the former since those kinds of Beast Cores were no doubt hard to get a hold of outside of this place.

The world turned into a blur around him as he pushed his movement skill to the limit, and it actually felt a bit cumbersome to suddenly have to move his Cosmic Energy into the fractals on his feet. But **[Force of the Void]** didn't actually provide many benefits to that particular skill in either

case, since its usage was still restricted by him taking an actual step forward.

He knew that there would be some cases where the talent worked better than others, but getting a better grasp would require some hands-on experimentation. And it seemed like he would get that opportunity sooner rather than later. Because the reason his sister was calling him was simple; the advance scouts had spotted activity, and it was a full-blown war.

It was like the restrictions of the sixth layer didn't exist as Zac flashed forward, each step with **[Loamwalker]** taking him over a hundred meters forward. It took him just over ten minutes to reach the rear of his army, and he signaled Hekruv Vira to join him before he made his way past the vanguard.

He had already confirmed the situation with his sister while catching up, and he made his way toward a large cliff on the seventh layer. It provided a good vantage of the battle without exposing their location, and Zac nodded at the gathered group before he made his way to the edge to peer out across the northern slopes.

Huge swathes of the mountain were ablaze as a massive and chaotic war raged. At first appearance, it looked to be a battle between cultists and a joint army of Zhix and a few hundred odd creatures that Zac had never seen before. It was doubt were the Gemlings that he had heard about.

The native race was roughly one meter in height and looked a bit like stone turtles as they had rocky grey scales instead of skins. He had heard from Leviala they weren't golems though, but rather a "normal" species.

They were bipedal with two short stubby legs, and they had a set of muscular arms with oversized hands. They had a shell covering their backs, and their wide and flat faces lacked any nose or external ears. The most attention-grabbing aspect of them was the luminous crystals that covered their bodies though, and each of them emitted a mysterious power that made Zac's mind slightly shudder.

Most of the crystals shone in a sanguine red as their owners fought tooth and nail, but Zac spotted a few other colors as

well. Most of the Gemlings had less than five shimmering crystals, but Zac also spotted a handful of natives with over a dozen attached to their bodies. These individuals were unsurprisingly the most powerful Gemlings he could spot, but even they were just at the earlier to middle stages of the E-Grade.

Another interesting detail about the situation was that while the Gemlings and the Zhix seemed to be allied on the surface, the former obviously wasn't happy about it. Or it might be more accurate to say that the Gemlings seemed to hate the Zhix. The insectoids almost solely focused on dealing with the small cultist army, but Zac had spotted the Gemlings launching over a dozen sneak attacks on the Zhix even though their main focus was the Church of Everlasting Dao as well.

It more or less confirmed their suspicions. Knowing the Inevitability and Void's Disciple, there hadn't been peaceful cooperation between the two factions. The Gemlings had definitely been enslaved and suffered tremendously over the past months.

"Adcarkas and his child aren't here," Rhubat rumbled with a frown, and Zac nodded in agreement as he backed away from the cliff.

This cultist army was small, just half of the one Zac dealt with before, and it didn't seem to have a bishop taking charge. Yet they were holding the advantage against thousands of Zhix and their unwilling companions. If Void's Disciple was there he would have been able to quickly and effortlessly turn the tides of the battle.

It looked like the Dominators already had gone ahead, and Zac wasn't too surprised. They seemed wholly focused on accomplishing their master's task, and the normal Zhix were just a tool. They would probably be sacrificed along with everyone else when the Great Redeemer arrived. The Zhix had probably been given an order to stay put, which put them in the cross-hairs of the crazed cultists when the second squad reached this far.

As for the cultists themselves, they had probably been in charge of the same task as the main army, which would explain why there weren't any remaining islands all the way to the northern slopes.

"We will deal with the last traitors before continuing the pursuit," Rhubat said, and the Anointed immediately started gearing up for war.

"Wait a second. Those small stonemen are like your people. They have been enslaved by the Dominators," Zac said. "If possible, I'd like to invite them to Port Atwood. But I'm afraid they would attack you as well if you just go storming down."

"It's true... They are brethren in suffering," Rhubat slowly nodded. "They are not Zhix, but they can join the Crusade."

Zac nodded as he looked at the Gemlings. If there was one native faction he really wanted to integrate into Port Atwood, it was the Gemlings. He had a decent heritage left behind by Brazla himself and boatloads of resources, but no skilled craftsmen. These Gemlings were his solution to the problem.

The problem was that they no doubt would be skeptical for various reasons. First of all, he was allied with the same type of insectoids as the ones that had caused so much suffering. Secondly, they had already been enslaved once for their gems by an outside force. They would probably be extremely cautious around strange factions on the outside.

Luckily he had an in with these people in the form of a half-roasted monkeyman that had caught up to Zac by now. It was time for Hekruv Vira to prove that he had the wide connections and diplomacy skills as he claimed.

Chapter 645: Sever Karma

Hekruv Vira had already arrived, and he stood waiting a few dozen meters behind. However, he came over and looked over the cliffside after getting waved over by Zac.

“What a mess,” the monkeyman muttered as he looked down at the battlefield.

“Can you make the Gemlings back away?” Zac asked.

“Are the insectoid warriors your people?” the monkeyman hesitantly asked. “If so... I think they might attack you as well. The Gemlings of clan Volor don't like to fight. But when they do, they go all the way. They'll fight until there are none left standing. That's why they're still around even though they were technically the weakest race for combat in this realm.”

“Heart of a warrior,” Rhubat nodded with appreciation, and a few of the Anointed gave the diminutive rockmen a second look.

“Those Zhix are a big reason why we came here. Not a single one can be left alive,” Zac said, which made the monkeyman's eyes widen in surprise. “I'll deal with the cultists as well. We simply don't want the innocent to be caught up in the crosshairs.”

“Alright...” Hekruv said with a nod. “I'll notify them of the situation. I should at least be able to have them not attack you. Give me a few minutes.”

Something about the aura of Hekruv Vira changed the next moment. He stood just two meters away from him, but it was like he wasn't there. It wasn't just that he no longer emitted the slightest morsel of energy. There had to be some skill or Dao that made people discard his presence. Zac guessed it was some sort of stealth skill that the True Sky cultivator possessed, and Zac looked on with interest as Hekruv Vira

jumped down and started running toward the battlefield without rousing any response.

“You heard him,” Zac eventually said as he turned to Rhubat. “Do you need assistance?”

“With the Dominators missing the traitors are just rudderless children. We will perform the rites ourselves. Can your army deal with the fire-lizards?” Rhubat asked.

“We’ll deal with them,” Zac nodded. “Hopefully that’s the last of the cultists in this place.”

“Right,” Ogras agreed from the side. “One quick genocide and then we’ll get to the real good stuff.”

The two made their way back, and the army was already mobilized by the time they arrived. Since Zac’s people only needed to deal with a few hundred cultists, their army was only comprised of less than one hundred elites and roughly three hundred regular soldiers.

The elites included Zac, Billy, Ogras, Verana, four support squads, and one elite squad of 20 of the strongest warriors, making it an extremely powerful unit. As for the three hundred regular soldiers, they were the remaining people without any Spatial Seals, and they were just along for the ride to pick up a ticket back to Earth.

The other seven hundred people without seals were Zhix, and they would hopefully get theirs by taking out the thousands of traitors. Zac had already learned about the rules for Spatial Seals from Joanna. It was possible to take the seals of a fallen soldier, but those seals lasted for an even shorter duration than they did in the caves. Also, the one who seized the seal needed to have at least some contribution to the kill.

Thankfully that was easily circumvented by setting up War Arrays that provided weak but large-scale buffs. That essentially “tagged” the weak cultivators for all the kills. It would barely provide them Cosmic Energy from kills, but it was enough to seize the Seals. Everything came together in just a minute.

The warring sides had clearly been at it for a while, and Port Atwood just needed to clean things up. The Zhix Army and the elites of Port Atwood split up before they rolled over the hills like a tide, storming toward the combatants like a wave of death.

The battlefield was a perfect opportunity for Zac to consolidate his bloodline control through [**Bloodline Resonance**], and a ten-meter fractal blade rapidly grew in front of his axe. It shot toward the closest pack of cultists, but how could they not have spotted the army running toward them? A series of flaming barriers had already sprung up, which was barely enough to protect the lizardmen from the initial salvo.

However, a second blade, this one conjured by the void, shot forward the next moment, passing straight through the weakened shields and reaped the lives of three zealots. Zac flashed forward, and with a thought let his aura explode outward, instantly quenching the fires over a hundred meters around him as he killed another two cultists with a ruthless swing.

He didn't immediately set out toward the next target, but he rather looked on as five warriors scurried forward, each of them jumping toward one of the fallen zealots. Three of them soon stood up with disappointment, but two warriors had wide grins plastered on their faces as they looked at the palms of their hands.

"Move back and let others take your places," Zac said, and the two cultivators quickly retreated after giving thanks.

A few new faces took their place, and Zac moved toward the next group of cultists. He kept a relaxed pace as he moved, partly because he wanted to get used to the feeling of fighting with his bloodline, and partly to allow for the normal soldiers to keep up.

Four zealots saw his approach, and they launched a desperate and suicidal pincer attack in an attempt to drag him down to hell with them. The first lizardmen two were cut in two by Zac

through a swift horizontal swing of his axe, but some problems occurred immediately after.

The remaining two warriors were spear-users, and two flaming lances shot toward Zac's torso. Such an attack would normally never hit him, but Zac looked down in surprise when he suddenly felt two spears stab into his chest. They didn't manage to pierce deeper than two centimeters, but it still hurt like hell. Zac growled in annoyance before a fractal blade appeared out of nowhere, decapitating the two warriors before they had a chance to react.

There was a problem with his bloodline, or rather his control over it. Turning it on or off wasn't very hard, but there was a small delay when rapidly swapping back and forth. He had tried discarding the normally conjured blade and instantaneously summon a new one, but his commands had been too quick which resulted in nothing happening.

That led to Zac holding out his axe in some sort of victory pose while letting the two spears gore him.

The injuries were just shallow flesh wounds though, and Zac quickly moved from pack to pack, and the people following in his wake kept changing as one warrior after another got their hands on a seal. Zac was making one discovery after another as well, and his battle style was rapidly incorporating [**Force of the Void**].

The second surprise after getting himself stabbed was that he wasn't able to activate [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] with the skill even after trying multiple times. First, he couldn't understand what was going on, but he eventually had an idea and tried to activate a humongous fractal edge. Nothing happened this time either, but Zac kept trying until a fifty-meter blade appeared out of nowhere.

It was range.

His [**Force of the Void**] was somehow connected to his body, and it couldn't conjure things too far away from where he stood. Fifty meters seemed to be the limit at the moment, which was neither far nor short. It would still allow for ambushes in a one-on-one battle, but it wouldn't work with a

maxed-out [**Rapturous Divide**] or large-scale skills like [**Profane Seal**]. [**Deforestation**] would probably work since the summoned axes would appear right above his head, but he didn't want to waste that skill on some cannon-fodder cultists.

His next insight was that he needed free space even within those fifty meters to use Void Energy. For example, Zac tried conjuring a fractal edge that would pierce the head of a cultist. That was an ambush tactic that worked fine when activating [**Chop**] the normal way, but the skill wouldn't activate with Void Energy when it would occupy the same space as the lizardman's body.

Zac's best guess was that the skills were conjured in an instant or conjured in the void and then teleported over. In either case, it wouldn't work when the skills would occupy the space of something else. Only after slightly moving his axe could Zac have the blade appear right next to the cultist's head, allowing Zac to quickly lob it off.

The final insight was that it actually was possible to start a skill the normal way and boost the speed by activating his bloodline. For example, he could conjure half a fractal blade, only to have the second half appear in an instant. It didn't save much time, but it might be possible to catch someone off-guard using that trick.

There were only so many enemies to test things out on though, and the battle was dwindling after just ten minutes. The Zhix and Gemlings was the weaker side even if they had an advantage in numbers, but they had made up for it in ferocity. The cultists were simply exhausted by the point Port Atwood arrived, making their bloody work extremely effortless.

Furthermore, Billy once more showcased his prowess as he summoned a massive golden hammer. It had to be one of his level 75 skills, and even Zac felt some pressure from the insane weight it emitted. As for the cultists that got hit by its slam, they were turned to a disgusting mush. Zac couldn't understand why the skill was so powerful at first, but he soon realized that the hammer resonated with the Memorysteel Mountain somehow, borrowing some of its nigh-endless weight.

The skill probably wouldn't be as powerful in a non-mountainous environment, just like how **[Nature's Punishment]** needed something to draw from to work. With Billy smashing over thirty cultists to bits the fight was essentially over since over two hundred of them had already been killed by that point. The rest started to self-immolate in a final act of defiance, but Zac and Ogras unleashed a furious offense to kill them before they could suicide as to not lose any of the remaining Seals.

The situation was similar on the Anointed's side. The traitor Zhix were completely trashed, but not one of them tried to flee. They fought to the last man, allowing them to at least die in battle. The Gemlings hadn't actually backed away either, just like Hekruv Vira guessed. With the cultists occupied, the Gemlings jumped at the Zhix with maniacal fervor, but they thankfully didn't extend their hatred to the Anointed and their army.

The battle was completely lopsided and the losses of Zac's forces were minimal. Left were roughly five hundred Gemlings that looked in Zac's direction hesitantly. Zac swung his axe once to rid it of the blood and viscera that covered it before he stowed it away.

"What now?" Ogras asked as he walked over. "Is it time?"

Zac didn't immediately answer, but he rather looked out into the empty air for a few seconds. As expected, a prompt appeared the next moment, showing him the way. He felt that there was nothing else to do down here, and it looked like the system agreed.

Sever Karma (Training (8/9)): Sever the final Karmic Ties to Vovidis A'Heliophos. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of rewards.]

Zac looked at the quest, his eyes lighting up. It was finally time to end things once and for all. The threat of The Great Redeemer had loomed above his head for almost a year by

now, but it would finally be all over by the time this quest was completed. At least that was his takeaway.

After all, the quest itself provided an extremely important clue. The task was to sever the last karmic ties, which meant that the moment the quest was complete, the Great Redeemer shouldn't be able to find Earth any longer. Before this Zac had worried about hidden safeguards in place, but this quest shouldn't be worded like this if there were more hidden beacons on Earth or something similar.

As to where the quest wanted him to go, it was obvious. The Dominators had already abandoned their followers and captives, instead heading for the heart of the Mystic Realm.

It was up there the real treasures waited, and up there the fate of Earth would be decided.

Chapter 646: Clan Volor

“We’re climbing the mountain. It’s time to deal with the Dominators for real,” Zac said, and two sets of ruthless eyes turned to the massive planet in the sky.

“Finally. This wound of mine has been itching for a while now,” Ogras muttered.

Part of Zac just wanted to rush up, guns blazing, but he knew some things had to be dealt with first. So he walked over toward the group of Gemlings who hesitantly stood a few hundred meters away from Port Atwood’s armies.

Their attention was mostly placed on the large army of Zhix who were already consecrating and burning the corpses of the traitor Zhix, but they slowly turned toward Zac as he approached. Hekruv Vira and a few of the True Sky-elders were already there talking with them in low volume, likely introducing him to them.

“Thank you for your assistance, human,” the Gemling said. “Without your aid, our clan would likely be lost to the rivers of time.”

“You’re welcome,” Zac nodded. “They were a common enemy to Earth. Those Zhix were traitors that needed to be hunted down, and the cultists were foreign invaders. I’m sorry we couldn’t get here earlier.”

“I am Helo. I guess I am the leader of Clan Volor now that the last of the Masons have fallen,” Helo said with a sigh. “Vira says you are the leader of the outside world?”

There was an undeniable tinge of confusion and skepticism as he looked Zac up and down, and Zac understood what was going on. This Helo had witnessed the terror of Void’s Disciple first-hand, while Zac hadn’t really displayed any especially great feats while trying out his Void Energy during

the last battle. He even got himself wounded a few times while figuring things out.

Perhaps even the Anointed with their hulking frames seemed more impressive than he was in the eyes of the Gemlings.

Zac thought a moment, and an earthshattering aura suddenly burst out from his body. He let loose all his killing intent, along with a Dao Field powered by his high mastery Fragment of the Axe. Zac even went so far as to push the Dao Field forward with the help of **[Spiritual Void]**.

His killing intent and his Dao that focused on battle and conflict almost merged, and the area once more gave off the bloody aura of a pitched war. The pressure was earthshattering, and even Hekruv Vira with his Late E-Grade cultivation took a step back as he looked at Zac with wide eyes.

The monkeyman had called Zac a supreme Progenitor, but it looked like he had only been thinking in terms of potential rather than current power. It was good to give the True Sky Faction a small reminder as well before he set off. Of course, Zac wasn't planning on forcing the Gemlings to bend the knee, and the aura disappeared after just a few seconds.

“What’s with this planet outside,” Helo muttered as he released a shaky breath. “Didn’t you get Integrated just a year ago? Why are there so many monsters?”

“Well, we were a bit unlucky to get an unusually tough challenge when the System sent over multiple top-tier Invaders, but those who survived probably grew a bit stronger than normal?” Zac smiled.

“Well, your power is a good thing,” Helo said. “I have spoken with those of the True Sky Faction, and Clan Volor wishes to follow in their steps. We are willing to join the Atwood Empire if you will have us.”

Zac was surprised and relieved of how easily the Gemlings, or rather Clan Volor, joined his faction, but it saved him a lot of effort. It was also a bit odd to hear the term ‘Atwood Empire’, but he guessed it was the most apt description. His faction

couldn't be considered a town any longer, and it was neither a sect nor a clan. A budding single-planet Empire was probably correct, though it was definitely a bit weird to be called an Emperor, especially considering Earth's cultural norms.

“Port Atwood would be happy to have you. We have both great craftsman heritages and almost endless materials, but we are lacking talents who can make use of them,” Zac said enthusiastically, and the eyes of the Gemlings lit up with excitement.

However, Helo and a few of the elites with a large number of crystals across their bodies looked a bit troubled.

“You should understand, embedding our gems into weapons hurts our souls and we cannot do so freely,” Helo said.

“I will not force anyone to use their gems,” Zac said. “Port Atwood runs on contribution. If you decide to use your gems to create supreme equipment you will be rewarded with massive amounts of Contribution Points, which can be traded for anything from perusing the heritage to getting unique and valuable materials.”

Zac had never planned on setting some sort of quota on these gemlings for producing crystals since he knew that they would likely use them even if he didn't ask. These craftsmen all had hybrid classes or pure craftsman classes, and their method to evolve was essentially to create precious Spirit Tools.

They could both gain a breakthrough and a massive number of resources by temporarily damaging their souls. Zac would personally make that trade in a heartbeat, and he was confident that a lot of these Gemlings would as well. Helo nodded in relief when he heard there would be no forced harvesting, and things got a lot more harmonious from there on out.

The two talked a bit longer, and Zac learned about the experiences of the Gemlings. It turned out that Void's Disciple had appeared even earlier than Zac expected, first making contact with the Gemlings even before the Hunt. From then he had spent most of his time in here, only occasionally venturing outside to Earth.

Adcarkas had disappeared almost half a day before the upheavals though, taking Inevitability with him. Speaking off, Zac felt a pang of worry upon hearing that Inevitability had spent almost all of her time after the Hunt cultivating inside Clan Volor's bloodline vats. Who knew what kind of powerups she had since last time? Still, the real threat to Zac was Void's Disciple as far as he was concerned.

As for the Gemlings, they had arduously managed to convince their Zhix captors to head to the mountain, somewhat going against their orders to 'stay put'. They had reached the mountain around 5 hours ago and soon became aware of the approaching cultist army. Not wanting to deal with them, the allied group set course south-east, snatching up Spatial Seals along the way.

However, they quickly backpedaled when they realized that their old dreaded enemy the Lunar Clan was spread out across the slopes on the eastern side, wantonly looting the caves there. Caught between a rock and a hard place they soon decided to deal with the cultists rather than the much larger group of werewolves, which brought them to the present situation.

Zac sighed when learning that the werewolves had made it as well. He had almost hoped that they would somehow run into some problem that got them stuck on the islands, but it turned out he had no such luck. Even worse, the Helo had no idea of exactly how many of them there were since they had spread out just like his own army did. But he said that their scouts had easily spotted hundreds before fleeing.

Zac asked for some more details before he decided to take his leave. He had gotten the next quest already, and he was afraid that wasting any time would end badly.

"Alright, we'll have more chances to get to know each other in the future, but I need to prepare a few things right now. The worst of the bunch are still alive, I need to deal with them," Zac said.

"Wait," Helo said after some hesitation. "Take this thing."

He took out a crystal from his Cosmos Sack the next moment, and Zac looked at it curiously. It was clearly the same type of crystal that covered the bodies of the Gemlings, but it was pitch-black. It was also covered in extremely intricate inscriptions, which showcased skill that far eclipsed his sister's.

But Zac frowned when he looked at the thing since it gave him an extremely bad feeling. It was a curse, an extremely sinister one according to **[Primal Polyglot]**. It gave off an even nastier aura than those fractals in Leviala's eyes, like it contained the accumulated hatred of the whole Gemling-clan.

“Those two you hunt killed most of our Masons and harvested their gems. Their goal was to create a taboo item using hundreds of thousands of souls of their own kind,” Pula said. “We were forced to help with its construction.”

“Taboo item?” Zac said with a frown. “What kind?”

Zac had gained a lot since his last battle with Void's Disciple, and if Adcarkas maintained the same power as back then, Zac felt confident in taking him out. But if Adcarkas had managed to create some extremely dangerous taboo weapon, things once more became murky.

“We don't know, but it has something to do with the Dao of Space, Dao of Karma, and Soul Manipulation,” Pula said with a shake of his head. “Those two Daos are not something we are well versed in, so we could only follow the provided blueprint without much understanding.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he couldn't draw any direct conclusions from those three clues alone. Adcarkas was a Spatial Cultivator, and he no doubt had some sort of Karmic Heritage from his master. It could either be a final piece in the Great Redeemer's puzzle, or some sort of powerful weapon.

“What's this thing then?” Zac asked.

“A fault-line,” Pula said, his mouth widening hate-filled grimace. “The treasure we made him was perfect on the surface, but he had the audacity to use the souls of our masons in its construction. We do not know much about the Daos

incorporated, but we have our means when it comes to souls, so I hid some traps in the depths of its construction. Crush this near the ones you call the Dominators, and the traps will be sprung. I was hoping to use it myself, but I don't think I can get up there."

Zac looked at the Gemling leader with surprise. It sounded like an extremely risky endeavor to embed something like that in the Taboo Treasure, knowing Inevitability and Void's Disciple. If they even got a hint of someone messing with their plan, they'd unleash a massive wave of death and carnage on the Gemlings.

"What will happen?" Zac asked as he gingerly took the ominous crystal.

"It's hard to say since we don't know what kind of treasure it is," Pula said. "But it will definitely be destabilized at the least, and probably break it altogether."

"Thank you," Zac nodded as he turned to Rhubat. "Have you selected your people?"

"We are ready whenever you are, Warmaster. The final crusade beckons," Rhubat rumbled as a group of massive Anointed stood behind him.

A few of them actually looked even bigger than before, and Rhubat himself was even approaching six meters. It was like they had been stuck at the peak of the F-Grade because of that elixir of theirs, but all that excess energy from kills kept making their bodies grow.

"Alright," Zac nodded. "Let's rest up an hour before we set out. The people we encounter from now on will be the strongest warriors left in this world."

Rhubat nodded and the anointed walked away to rest up as well. Zac wasn't in a big need of rest because of his wounds, but rather from the need to recharge his Void Energy. But he first walked over to Joanna who was making rounds in the army.

"I'll leave the army in your, Havath's, and Verana's hands while I go up there," Zac said with a low voice. "Try to get

everyone a Seal, but don't go too far toward the eastern side if you can help it."

"The Zhix seem to be almost completely Sealed up after the battle, so we only need something like 120 Seals for our own. The True Sky Faction only needs around twenty, I think. All our elites already had Seals, so the refugees had almost free reign on the middle layers after they joined," Joanna nodded.

"Another thing. The Gemlings have joined Port Atwood, but I think it was mostly out of necessity," Zac said.

"And you need a hype-man?" Joanna smiled. "Don't worry, I have the flags and speeches all ready."

"Just make them feel happy about joining," Zac snorted. "Try to get to know them and figure out a way to settle them back on Earth. Perhaps they want to live in the underworld? We have a lot of valuable land there that's just sitting empty."

"I'll have an integration plan ready by the time we leave this place," Joanna said.

Zac nodded before he walked over to Thea who stood in the distance. They hadn't actually met since the upheavals since Thea stayed on the lower layers while he trained on the upper ones. He had just called her through the communication crystal to say that he was fine before.

He knew he could have gone down to talk with her, but the situation was a bit weird. Neither of them was good with words, and Memorysteel Mountain wasn't really the place to figure out their feelings. So Zac had somewhat avoided her until they could have a proper talk, which would be outside the mystic realm.

But he also knew he couldn't just leave for the sphere in the sky without saying something.

"You look different," Thea said with interest as he walked over. "Very dashing."

"What?" Zac blurted as he looked down at his blood-splattered body, before he looked up at Thea with a raised brow.

“Not that, stupid. Your face. Did you evolve your race before?” she asked.

“Oh, that. I changed?” Zac muttered as he took out a mirror.

It was true. His face was better, though barely. Features had once more undergone some subtle changes, but they were less pronounced compared to the time he reached E-Grade body. It looked like the upgrades were mostly internal this time, though he did gain a small touch-up.

“Who knows, I might be a real looker by the time I become an Apostate,” Zac said with a wry smile. “What are your plans?”

“I’m a bit better, but staying down here,” Thea sighed. “We need some people to look after our soldiers in case the werewolves show up. Besides, there are a lot of caves on the upper layers to loot, so it’s not really a loss to stay down here. I’ve kept track of the layers our elites searched all this time, and where there should be unsearched caves left behind. I think I can make a killing up there even if I rest up a day.”

Zac nodded, somewhat relieved. He had been prepared to argue for her to stay at the mountain because of her injuries, but it looked like she knew her own situation best.

Unfortunately, not everyone was as reasonable.

“I’m going up there,” Kenzie resolutely said as she walked over. “With or without you.”

Chapter 647: Weight of Sin

“This isn’t a game, you know,” Zac sighed as he turned to his sister.

“Just look,” Kenzie said as she tapped a button on her tablet.

Zac frowned with confusion, but his eyes widened in shock when a meter-thick Memorysteel wall suddenly sprung up in front of Kenzie, completely shielding her. Even he would have some trouble getting through a wall that thick provided it had a constant source of Base Power.

“It took some time, but I managed to figure out a way to activate both a protective algorithm and to trigger the attacks. The sphere up there is overflowing it Memorysteel too, I might actually be stronger than you when we get there,” Kenzie said with a triumphant smile. “Add to that my ability to deal with all kinds of tech-related issues... You can’t leave me here.”

“Alright, fine,” Zac sighed. “But the moment we encounter people, you run away and hide within the Memorysteel, okay? I’ll deal with the people, you deal with the machines.”

“Fine,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes before she ran away, perhaps afraid that Zac would change his mind.

Thea wryly smiled as she looked at the encounter. Zac could only shrug as he sat down and started working on refilling his Void Energy. He had an idea since a while ago, and he took out one of his two Beast Cores from the Void Beasts. A torrent of energy once more entered his body, prompting his **[Void Heart]** to wake up. Beat after beat echoed out, and Zac’s eyes lit up as he felt the sense of hollowness quickly dissipate.

But there was something that didn’t make sense. Either his **[Void Heart]** had an atrocious efficiency, losing most of the energy it swallowed, or only a small part of the energy went into restoring his reserves.

The hidden node refused to continue running after just a few minutes, and prodding it with his Bloodline Method did nothing to help. Zac wasn't surprised, since that basic manual never mentioned anything about controlling Bloodline Nodes at all. He would have to find another way to do that.

His Void Energy didn't feel completely restored even after having absorbed energy from a half-step D-Grade beast. That pointed toward the fact that restoring energy for **[Force of the Void]** wasn't the main purpose for **[Void Heart]**, at least not when absorbing energy from Beast Cores. It was likely that the rest of the energy either worked on improving the bloodline or the node itself.

The minutes eventually turned into an hour and Zac got ready to set out. The final group was Zac, Ogras, Billy, Kenzie, and a group of thirty Anointed led by Rhubat. That still left many of the elites down below in case something came up, while also providing Zac with some support.

Zac initially hadn't planned on bringing Billy along, but Kenzie would be able to provide him with backup through her drones and Memorysteel manipulation. Besides, the Titan had formed a very fluent battle cooperation with the Anointed which had even allowed them to restrain the Grand Elder of the Cartava clan. Zac hoped they could do the same to Inevitability while he dealt with Void's Disciple.

Billy was also one of those who had the easiest time dealing with the pressure stemming from the Memorysteel mountain for some reason. He didn't feel a thing at the middle layers from the looks of it, completely ignoring pressure that even impacted Zac. Such an ability would give him a huge advantage in the Sphere as well, since Zac could only assume the suppression would be even stronger up there.

The group didn't waste any time, and they immediately set out toward the peak after saying their goodbyes. The army would remain on the slopes, recuperating and getting their hands on the last sets of Spatial Seals required.

The Anointed weren't really interested in looting the caves on the way, but Zac, Ogras, and Billy worked hard enough for the

rest combined as they rushed back and forth along the cliffs. Unfortunately, the caves holding treasures actually grew increasingly sparse after they reached the 13th layer, and Zac only managed to find a scant few even after climbing for hours.

Billy was finally feeling the pressure by this point, but Zac shook his head with a wry smile upon seeing him grow to four meters tall and gain his signature golden hair. Activating his bloodline seemed to weaken the suppressive effect on him even further, and there almost seemed to be some sort of resonance between him and the mountain itself.

One person who was weirdly unbothered was Kenzie. She tried to explain how she used her four Dao Seeds to form alternating ripples and interlocking layers that negated the pressure, creating some sort of void chamber around herself. Zac tried to follow her explanation a few times, but there was simply no way that he could control his energy emission with the kind of precision that she mentioned.

At least it looked like Ogras wasn't faring any better judging by the disgusted look the demon shot Kenzie before he started forcibly hunting for treasures again with grit teeth and blood-tinted eyes.

The value of every single cave was quite extraordinary though, and one impressive item after another entered Zac's Spatial Ring. He was currently standing in a cave on the 16th layer, looking down at a dozen unknown plants that emitted an extremely dense and bloody fragrance. Zac's body clearly wanted to eat the tomato-like fruits, but he wasn't the only one.

Even **[Verun's Bite]** woke up and growled with desire in his mind, prompting Zac to cut up a few and have the axe drink the juices.

The fruits weren't enough to evolve the axe in one go, but they did seem to help the axe push forward toward the next stage a bit while also filling the runes on the handle to the brim. Zac had planned on feeding some of his left-over dragon blood to

Verun before they reached the peak, but it looked like he had saved on that expenditure.

Zac quickly left the cave and kept climbing, but the search for treasures rapidly lost steam. The pressure kept getting worse, and by the time the group reached the 17th layer, Ogras didn't have the energy to look at all. Zac was losing Cosmic Energy with every step as well, and he tried to avoid any large detours. It felt like someone had reached inside his body and was squeezing his organs by this point, which has a wholly godawful feeling.

Each step forward was getting as taxing as a harsh duel, and he didn't want to arrive at the peak completely exhausted from searching for some random valuables. The weaker of the Anointed were almost forced to almost crawl as they arduously pushed forward, but they ascending without a word of complaint. Zac knew that they would rather burn their life force than turn back at this point.

No one else really had the energy to hunt for treasures any longer either, but the group did stumble into a cave at the peak of the 17th layer. The one who made a killing that time was Kenzie. It was a lab, and considering how high up the mountain it was, it must have been right at the edge of the Core Layer before the world changed. It housed just four black cubes that didn't look all-too-impressive, but Kenzie's eyes lit up in excitement after connecting her tablet to the machines.

It turned out that they were some sort of Technocrat super-computers. They didn't contain any data, but one could use them to run calculations and simulations, pushing the power of Jeeves to even greater heights. Kenzie quickly stowed them away with a burning look in her eyes, and Zac could only helplessly look on as his sister fell deeper and deeper into taboo territory.

Should he take the computers and smash them?

He eventually shook his head and refocused on the task at hand. He had bigger fish to worry about right now. They exited the cave and passed the last milestone, finally experiencing the full extent of the suppression that the System

had arranged. The progression slowed to a crawl, and the last layer took as much time as the last three did together even if they didn't spend any time looking for treasure.

Even Zac's legs were shaking by the end, though he was probably the one who mainly relied on his physical body to withstand the pressure. But they were all powerhouses, and they moved quickly even when it felt like a mountain was weighing down on their shoulders. Finally, they reached the peak, but they all froze at the same moment as a screen appeared in front of Zac.

[Weight of Sin: Ascend Taboo Mountain and feel the weight of sin. Reward: Base Attributes +2%.]

Zac was extremely shocked to see a title appear in front of him, and by the looks of it, everyone had got it. A quick check proved it was a Limited Title, and Zac didn't complain even if the reward was pretty low. After all, it was a lot better than his slots being empty.

"Did you guys get the title as well?" Zac asked.

"Four percent Base Attributes," Rhubat said, whereas Kenzie said she got five.

Zac looked over at Ogras, who once more looked nauseated.

"Two," the demon sighed, and Zac nodded in understanding.

It turned out that the title was different depending on your level. It was not too surprising, considering that it was a lot more impressive for his sister to make her way up here compared to him doing it. He could only lament at the fact that the golden window of collecting titles had passed for him, and instead turn his attention to the mountain top.

Zac didn't know exactly what to expect when they finally reached the peak, but he suddenly felt a bit dizzy the moment they stepped onto the summit. The peak looked extremely sharp when they gazed at it from below or back when he still was on top of the islands, but when they actually top there it was massive.

"Space is going haywire in this place," Ogras muttered, his face barely visible beneath of layers of shadows he had clad

himself in to deal with the enormous suppression.

“Let’s go,” Zac said, and everyone understood what he was thinking.

The distance to the sphere in the sky was well over a thousand meters, and getting there was impossible by shooting out chains or jumping. There had to be another way there. However, the whole plateau was empty, except for a small mound in the middle that radiated a weak light. If the answer was anywhere, it was there.

However, the pressure kept increasing as they got closer, and by the time they reached the halfway point a few of the Anointed couldn’t take it any longer and were forced to start burning life-force. Billy and Kenzie could barely take it as well, and judging from the deafening silence coming from Ogras, he was desperately fighting against the pressure as well.

“Should we turn back?” Zac hesitated as he felt his body creak under the shocking pressure.

“No way... this pressure... up there,” Ogras said with a hoarse voice through grit teeth. “Get up there... we’re fine.”

Zac nodded, understanding what the demon was trying to say. Zac was fine for now, but after an hour under this pressure and he would be completely drained. A few hours and he would probably die. He wasn’t necessarily the strongest person in the mystic realm, but he believed he had the most resilience. If he couldn’t take the pressure, then neither should Void’s Disciple and Inevitability.

Considering they probably reached this place half a day ago, then they would be long dead if the pressure was this bad at the heart of the Mystic Realm. So provided the beam held the means to get to the sphere in the sky, then they were fine. They just needed to get to the center.

Each step like a herculean tribulation as the group made their way further and further toward the center of the plateau. Billy’s face was beet-red by the end, and Zac had been forced

to help him and Kenzie by dragging them forward with his chains.

The distance from the edge to the shining mound in the center was just a few hundred meters from the edge, but it felt even further than the whole climb until this point. Even the Memorysteel beneath their feet couldn't take the pressure, and deep indents were left after every step they took.

But finally they made it, and they saw that a mysterious rune was imprinted in the middle of the mound. The source of the light was the rune itself, and Zac guessed it contained the Dao of Space. However, he couldn't be sure because while the rune emitted fierce energy and visible light, his **[Cosmic Gaze]** couldn't actually see anything. The energy was probably too high-grade for an F-Grade ocular skill, even if it was a top-tiered one.

There was no time to waste as the pressure was almost lethal even to Zac this close to the rune, but he still threw a cultist corpse onto the middle of the rune, only to see it turn into a stream of light that shot up toward the planet above.

“Alright, I'm going,” Zac grunted as he took out **[Verun's Bite]** and jumped on top of the rune.

A white flash filled his vision and he stumbled forward as the extreme pressure disappeared in an instant. The blinding light pervaded a few seconds longer, but Zac had already regained his sense of the surroundings thanks to the energy forest that had sprung up around him.

Activating **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** along with one of the defensive charges provided by the golden-leafed tree was the first thing Zac did upon appearing wherever the rune took him. The risk of ambush probably was the highest the moment he appeared, after all. There was not only the Dominators to worry about, but also god knows what else lurked in the heart of the Mystic Realm.

But even Zac wasn't expecting what met his gaze the moment the blinding light subsided. It was a vast grassland, with forests, rivers, and mountains in the distance. A sense of

beauty and grandeur permeated the surroundings, and Zac looked around with incomprehension.

What was going on? Why did the rune on top of the Memorysteel mountain lead to Paradise?

Chapter 648: Paradise

Zac looked around with shock and confusion, really feeling that he had arrived at paradise. He had an extremely weak perception of the Dao, but even he could feel like there was something special about the world he had appeared in. Looking at the stalks of grass gently swaying in the wind filled his mind with impressions and ideas, and the same held true for the trees in the distance.

It was like everything was filled with meaning. It wasn't to the point of the mind-bending experience where they cracked open the Dao Funnel back then, but it was far beyond what he had ever felt on Earth even when the Origin Dao was at its thickest.

Was that what was going on? Was this hidden world the place where all the Origin Dao of Earth had gone? They had already noticed that it was running out quicker than was normal, and Zac had even thought it was absorbed by the Mystic Realm for a while. But back then he discarded the theory since the cultivation environment in the research base was much worse than it was back on Earth. Of course, it was also possible that his mother's clan had simply arranged far better living conditions for those in the core of the base.

Or was this vibrant atmosphere something created by the Dimensional Seed? A virgin world full of life. Everything pointed to the seed being a C-Grade spatial treasure, which might mean that it would create a C-Grade world. Was this the normal environment on the enormous C-Grade continents out in the Zecia sector? It couldn't be. If that was the case, no C-grade force except lunatics like the cultists would bother risking their lives in Incursions.

At least there was no immediate threat, and the pressure was mostly gone as well, though it did feel like the gravity on this world was at least fifty times that of Earth. However, Zac

quickly realized something odd and quickly looked around him.

Where was the corpse?

The body he had thrown out before was nowhere to be seen even with the help of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], which didn't bode well for the others. But just as Zac started to believe that the rune sent people to random spots in this mysterious world, one flash of light after another appeared in the distance.

The others were teleported into the same grasslands as himself, appearing one after another in the vast grasslands. It almost like the endpoint of the rune was moving in a straight line, dropping people off along the way.

Zac was relieved to see his sister appear in the middle of the pack, just after the Anointed who were losing life-force to sustain the pressure outside, but seeing her reminded him of a troubling reality. How would her Memorysteel control help her in this place? He hadn't spotted a single Technocrat structure, let alone massive amounts of Memorysteel that could keep her safe.

Even worse, there was no way to send her back by the looks of things.

There was not much to do about it, so he simply flashed over to her, and the whole group had soon assembled and were looking around in confusion.

"What is this?" Ogras muttered as he looked around with a slight frown. "It's like a cultivation haven for some supreme being. But are we inside the sphere or in a different realm?"

"The corruption in this place... Almost feels holy," Rhubat mumbled with wonder, and the other Anointed nodded, clearly having some difficulty reconciling their deep-seated beliefs and what their antennae were telling them.

"Perhaps it's the Dimensional Treasure birthing a new world?" Kenzie ventured. "Has it become the World Core of this place? But if that's the case, how can anyone take it?"

"It should be related to the treasure," Zac agreed before he looked around with some helplessness. "The real question is

what we should do now? How do we find the Dominators in a massive world? We already tried that on Earth for a year, and we only have two days now.”

Like an answer from the heavens themselves, a tremendous clap of energy suddenly erupted far in the distance, somewhere on the other side of a small mountain range. They couldn't see the source of the blast, but radiating tendrils of energy swayed back and forth for a few seconds before a wave of pure Origin Dao swept across the lands.

Everyone braced themselves for the ripple that expanded with a speed that far exceeded the limits of E-grade warriors, but it passed right through them without causing any harm. In fact, it was the opposite. Zac took a deep breath, feeling like his body and mind had been cleansed by the shockwave. He couldn't imagine what kind of progress he would make if he could cultivate in a place like this for a few years.

“Uh... How about we go there?” Ogras said after everyone regained their wits, and he gave Zac a slightly incredulous look. “Why don't you ask the Heavens for some treasures as well?”

“Let's go,” Zac snorted. “There's no way to figure out what's going on here, but that place should hold at least some answers. Keep your eyes peeled for enemies.”

The source of the blast could only be one thing; The Dimensional Seed. And even if it by some chance wasn't, it was a supreme treasure that would hopefully lure the Dominators like moths to a flame. What cultivator could say no to an item that released ripples of pure Dao? Normal Dao Treasures was trash compared to an item like that.

Judging by the distance from the mountains it would take half a day to get there even if they ran, and that was provided that there weren't any more weird spatial zones that hindered them along the way. The group quickly passed the grasslands, only stopping every thirty minutes or so as new pulses spread out from the other side of the mountain.

Zac was making rapid progress on his Daos, especially the Fragment of the Bodhi because he was surrounded by life.

Who knew, he might even make a break through before this excursion was over.

Everyone else was the same. Billy was silently walking next to the Anointed with glazed, eyes like he was in a dream. Furthermore, Zac had already felt the ripples of a Dao-breakthrough from his sister.

The experience was almost surreal, and it caused Zac to hate the Dominators with newfound vigor. What a waste of time to be forced to hunt for those bastards when they only had a few days to stay in this magical place. He would much rather seclude himself somewhere in the forest, becoming one with nature.

But there wasn't much to do about the situation except take in as many impressions and insights as he could along the way.

Vicar Uld sighed and opened his eyes, his body abuzz after the ripple of condensed Dao that just passed through him. He had made strides forward again, further consolidating his insight into the Fragment of the Lance even though he gained it just a few hours ago.

But what good did it do him?

They might be in as close an embrace of the Heavens as they ever would be right now, but reality would come crashing down on them any day now. How could he have looked up at the high Cardinals as beacons of arcane knowledge that eclipsed the whole sector? It was a rude awakening, realizing that these mythological beings that held his very life in their hands were just muddling along like everyone else.

What hiding in this pocket realm for a hundred years? They didn't even last a hundred days before the thing collapsed because of the very item they were sent to collect. Even if they managed to snatch the treasure out of the hands of the monsters who all vied for the same thing, they would still be stranded on a hostile planet without any support.

After all, there was no way those pawns below would survive this place. They were sent to destroy all the bridges leading to the mountain, but at least one of the powerful native factions

should be able to reach the mountain in time. And that was not counting the Sovereign-select aboriginal of the outer world.

The best they could hope for was to seal the spatial treasure in some corner of the world and shed their mortal coils to avoid any tracking methods. Perhaps the Grand Cardinal would take pity on their souls and provide new vessels, but Uld knew all-too-well the reluctance to impact profit margins among the upper echelons.

Inquisitor Arkensau maintained that his teacher would find a way to solve their plight before it came to that, that the ripples that were sent out into the cosmos would somehow guide them here. But Uld wasn't so sure. After seeing the world crumble around him he had carried a strong premonition in the back of his mind, and not even forming a Dao Fragment would change that.

He would die in here.

Uld had seen space get twisted and bent, how the dimensions melded into a singular point of past, present, and the future. But there was just darkness on the horizon, just a bone-chilling nothingness.

“Someone triggered our outer array,” Trovad said with some reluctance, causing Uld's heart to beat with discomposure.

The fire of the Heavens no longer burned as brightly in Trovad's eyes either. Setback after setback would do that to your convictions. He was clearly unwilling to expose the interlopers since he knew what it would lead to.

“Get ready for battle,” Arkensau said, confirming Uld's fears. “This is our chance. Erect the altar.”

“How about going into hiding, waiting for these heretics to come into contact with the other interlopers? We can follow them and strike when the time is ripe,” Uld entreated.

“Our order doesn't abide cowardice, *Vicar* Uld,” Arkensau snorted with disdain. “So many of our brothers have entered the embrace of the Heavens, and you carry doubts and hesitation?”

Easy for you to say, bastard. You're the one carrying a bunch of treasures from your master. Bastard, Uld raged in his mind.

“Besides, we would not be able to make the same preparations by following your plan. The thing I have brought need some time to come into power,” Arkensau said as he looked down at the lantern with a weak fire burning inside.

The order was given, and their brands forced them to obey. The words of Inquisitor Arkensau might as well be the commands of the Heavens themselves as far as they were concerned. Go against them, and you'd burn in heavenly fire.

The tolls of death clangored even louder in Uld's mind, but he grit his teeth and started helping the others prepare. No matter who it was that had arrived in this world, it was a given they weren't any weaklings unless the pressure on that mountain had dissipated. After all, they only managed to bring just over thirty of their soldiers even though they tried bringing over three hundred. The rest had been unable to bear the suppression and were forced to descend again.

Then again, it wasn't all bad. There was definitely a seed of truth to what Arkensau said. The church did have a deeper heritage both than the aboriginals of either the outer world or the Mystic Realm, and their best chance to make use of that fact was to set up a trap that used the things they had brought along. There shouldn't be more than five parties that could make it this far, and taking out just one would drastically increase Uld's chances to survive this calamity.

The restrictive array was quickly and quietly moved so that it would coincide with the interlopers' path, and the adjustments to the altar were completed in quick order. From there they only had to wait, hidden by the **[Heaven's Cover Array]**. The targets would reach the designated Killzone in twenty minutes, and they soon could get a visual of who they were dealing with through their sentries.

It was a group of a few humans along with the hulking insectoid miscreations. They were led by a man with a dumb smile on his face as he walked through the forest, but he was still emitting an earth-shattering aura.

“It’s him,” Arkensau muttered with glee. “I had hoped I’d run into that bastard again, and he’s still distracted by the wonders of this world. This is perfect, using the **[Ember of Glory]** on him is a worthwhile sacrifice.”

“The Sovereign-Select?” Uld muttered, not really sharing the Inquisitor’s jubilant mood.

Their order’s track record with this monstrous aboriginal wasn’t exactly stellar, with almost every encounter ending in abject defeat. The only small success was when they managed to destabilize the tunnel to this realm, but that obviously hadn’t kept this maniac out.

Uld’s emotions were frayed as he looked at the projection, but he slowly calmed his mind since his fate had already been sealed. If the ambush worked, then he wouldn’t even need to lift a finger to eradicate a huge threat.

If it didn’t, well, then at least his worries would be over.

Chapter 649: Ember of Glory

Zac was almost in a reverie as he led the group through the forest. Each breath brought new insights, each step was a revelation.

However, the tranquility was suddenly broken as Rhubat roared “Attack!”

Everyone reacted instinctively, and Zac conjured his energy forest and hundreds of leaves even though he couldn't see what Rhubat was talking about. Unfortunately, by the time that the Zhix leader had sensed that something was wrong, it was already too late.

Layers upon layers of flaming barriers sprung up around them, trapping them in a fiery inferno. Altogether a full eighteen barriers were trapping them, with the first one being just a thin film of fire and the outermost being over a meter thick. They towered over a hundred meters into the air as well, so jumping over was probably impossible.

Zac wildly looked around for a way to break out, and he soon spotted the perpetrators through the walls of flames. It was unsurprisingly the cultists, and their cloak had been pretty much perfect. However, the camouflage was shattered the moment they unleashed their trap, and Zac figured the best course of action was to start breaking barriers to reach them.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac pushed forward, slamming straight into the first barrier. A wave of heat grilled his whole body, but the thin film couldn't impede his momentum and immediately cracked. But a huge flower of flames bloomed the moment the shield cracked, engulfing Zac before it continued toward the others.

The Anointed had thankfully already erected thick earthen defenses, which blocked out the incoming flames. However, by this point a small smoldering ember had appeared in the sky in the middle of the entrapment, no larger than an apple. But that small flame made Zac's soul shudder and filled him with a sense of dread. He might be able to survive that thing, but the others wouldn't. Worse, it seemed to be accumulating power.

The small flame definitely couldn't be a skill judging by its power. It had to be some sort of Spiritual Flame, and its grade was probably Half-Step D-Grade judging by the immense spirituality and force it exuded. Zac couldn't imagine the cost of bringing something like that through an Incursion. Was this the ultimate treasure the Church of Everlasting Dao had brought to Earth?

Not even the Anointed would be able to withstand that flame, and Zac exploded his aura to quench the flames covering him as he shot toward the next layer. There was no time to waste. Zac's body was quickly getting covered in blisters and sears as he slammed into one barrier after another, but each of them became increasingly stronger. Meanwhile, the flame in the sky kept growing, and nothing the others did seem to work.

Ogras' shadows, Rhubat's stone attacks, even the laser beams of Kenzie's drones. They all got incinerated long before they reached the growing flame in the sky. But it was also clear that it took a huge effort to control it since a storm of fiery attuned energy swirled around the leaders of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They were all standing around something on a pedestal, barely even sparing Zac a glance. They seemed to barely be able to control that thing.

The others were quickly forced to give up on destroying the fire in the sky and instead joined Zac in his effort to break out. Ten seals slammed into the thick walls of flames, causing the ground to shake. However, it was getting harder and harder to break through as the barriers got thicker. Not only that, the entrapment array was clearly designed to unleash increasingly powerful waves flames when they broke apart.

Soon, only Zac, Rhubat, and Ogras were able to withstand the fallout from when a barrier broke apart. The others were forced to fight from a distance or rely on the three powerhouses.

Zac had easily withstood the first six barriers just by blocking the flames with [**Love's Bond**] and enduring the parts that got through, but his sister didn't have his defenses. From the seventh barrier, he had been forced to enclose himself and Kenzie in the defensive charges of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**].

Two charges out of four had already been expended by this point, but Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to use all four as the golden leaves at the crown of the holy tree of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] were already ablaze. The ember was still well over a hundred meters in the air, but just its growing presence was enough to severely damage the core of his skill.

A sense of worry filled Zac's heart when he realized that they wouldn't make it with their current approach. There were ten more barriers to cut through, and there was nowhere to hide inside the trap. The safest spot to avoid the retaliatory waves of flame was right in the middle of the entrapment array, but that would put them in the crosshairs of the even scarier ember above.

They could either stay on course and unleash their ultimate skills to break through the barriers quicker, perhaps even in one go. As long as the others had some ultimate defensive skills, they would probably get out of it in one piece, but doing things this way would expend a huge number of their cards even before they reached their real enemies. After all, these cultists were probably the weakest party in this place.

Alternatively, they could move back and try to defend against that terrifying ball of flames and deal with the barriers and cultists afterward. But were they even able to do that? That miniature sun was already terrifying, and it kept accumulating more power. There would definitely be casualties if they went that way. But Zac suddenly had an idea.

Was there perhaps a third option?

Zac gauged the distance between himself and the cultists, and **[Verun's Bite]** lit up in a sanguine glow as he launched a furious assault on the next barrier barring his path.

“Keep going, just a bit more!” Zac shouted, and a thick lance of shadows caused the whole barrier to shudder.

With the empowerment of the second rune of his Spirit Tool and the renewed efforts of Ogras the barrier quickly crumbled, drenching the group in yet another shower of torrential heat. However, several floating Memorysteel eggs suddenly appeared and generated a series of barriers, protecting the group at the cost of their own safety. Molten drones rained down from the sky as the group slammed into the next one.

The luster of Verun's rune was draining fast, but Zac knew they were almost there. One more barrier fell, at which point there were only eight flame walls between them and the cultists. Zac had used his third defensive charge to things over, but **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** finally crumbled at that point since the whole core tree had been reduced to a ball of flames.

The remaining barriers looked extremely sturdy, but Zac had already accomplished his goal. Breaking that last roadblock had put him squarely within fifty meters of the group of cultists as long as he pushed against the wall of fire. Those fifty meters would be an unbreakable chasm to most, but was that really the case for him?

Could this array really block something coming from the Void?

There was no buildup and no warning as a huge wooden hand exuding a primordial aura appeared out of nowhere just a few meters above the cultists and their altar. It immediately slammed straight down as it gained the empowerment of Zac's Dao, turning it into a terrifying hammer of carnage.

It was naturally **[Nature's Punishment]** activated with the help of **[Force of the Void]**. Zac hadn't actually tested this yet, but he was filled with a surge of relief when he saw that his gambit had worked. The barriers couldn't stop him from summoning the skill outside, allowing him to launch a surprise attack.

Judging by how confident the cultists had looked, they clearly believed that the shields would protect them from any attacks. And Zac already knew high-quality barriers and arrays could seal off space to prevent one from circumventing the shields. For example, how effective would Town Protection Arrays be if one could simply conjure ranged attacks inside the protective bubble?

The entrapment array the cultists had set up seemed to possess the same abilities, but his odd Bloodline Talent had completely circumvented it somehow.

The cultists immediately noticed the massive hand appearing above their heads, but [**Nature's Punishment**] exuded a tremendous pressure. It was enough to completely immobilize middle F-Grade warriors, and even E-Grade cultivators would find themselves toiling under the weight of a mountain, drastically slowing their reaction speed.

Things should have ended with the elites turning into a paste then and there, but the Incursion Leader suddenly snatched something that had been blocked from Zac's view by the thronging cultists. It was a small glass lantern with a weak flame inside. It looked like a small gust of wind could snuff out its flames, but Zac felt a far greater fear when he looked at it compared to that descending ember behind him.

The leader desperately swung the lantern at the descending hand and Zac grit his teeth as he prepared to infuse [**Nature's Punishment**] with as much Dao and Cosmic Energy as needed to make sure the attack landed.

Pain.

Blinding pain made Zac fall down screaming as the skin on his left hand sizzled like it was boiling. It felt like his whole arm had been dipped in molten lead, and the torment cut all the way to his soul. What was that flame? Zac desperately refocused his mind and pushed down the agony, only to see the enormous hand full of seemingly endless life-force get reduced to ash in an instant as the small flame spread like a wildfire.

However, the cultists didn't fare well even if their leader had managed to utterly destroy Zac's sneak attack. The weak and isolated flame in the lantern had turned into a terrifying calamity that rained down upon the zealots as the few remaining pieces of woods from Zac's skill had turned into small burning meteors.

Any cultist that was touched by that mysterious fire turned into a human torch and not even a husk remaining after just a second. There were almost over thirty cultists outside the shields, but that number had been reduced to less than ten in an instant. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing, and he figured that the effect might even be more devastating than if his own attack had landed.

However, the leader himself managed to block the raining flames thanks to a defensive treasure that conjured a shield around him. Most of the other survivors were just lucky and stood far away from the impact zone, but one other seemed to forcibly resist the flames. Zac hadn't seen that man before, but he wore a different set of robes than any other cultist he had met so far.

Perhaps he was the second-in-command to the Incursion Leader, considering his aura was almost as strong as the one of the man Zac had fought in the Dead Zone. In either case, while he had barely survived getting burnt by the flames, he was clearly on his last legs. One of his arms had turned into what looked like a burnt-out log, and similar burns covered most of his torso and half his face.

Zac wasn't sure if even he would survive something like that, and it almost seemed that the poor man was only hanging on through sheer willpower.

"You!" the dying warrior screamed with a guttural voice of pain and rage, but it didn't actually look like Zac was the target of the general's ire.

Zac looked on with incomprehension as the zealot actually took out a golden lance and launched an extremely swift strike at his leader. The Incursion leader had managed to block out the flames, but he had been right beneath the wooden hand and

he had taken the brunt of the flames. The shield managed to block out most of it, but the Spiritual Flames had caught on at the hem of his robes.

He was desperately trying to stomp out the appalling flames before he turned into yet another torch, and he didn't even realize something was wrong until after the sharp tip of the golden lance pierced the back of his head. The leader arduously looked back with incredulity, just in time to see the traitor spontaneously combust, not leaving even a scrap behind.

A second later the leader collapsed as well, and the bursts of Cosmic Energy confirmed that they were both dead.

Zac looked at the turn of events with confusion, but he didn't complain. It reminded him a lot of Ogras' back at the Tree of Ascension, though the outcome was mutual destruction this time around. Zac's energy gain wasn't very impressive since the cultists essentially killed each other, but his attack had been the source of the calamitous chain of events so he did at least get some.

The fact that most of the zealots had fallen less than a minute after the battle started didn't mean they were out of the woods just yet. The ember in the center of the array was going haywire with no one to control it, and the remaining shields didn't show any indication of collapsing any time soon. They seemed to be actual arrays rather than something conjured by the cultists themselves, and there was no time to break through them one by one judging by how quickly the miniature sun destabilized.

There was no time to waste and Zac immediately transformed into his Draugr-form as the anointed desperately started digging a hole to hide in from the impending blast. [**Profane Seal**] sprung up around them, quickly followed by [**Immutable Bulwark**] acting as a roof for their bunker as Zac grew into his hulking form through [**Vanguard of Undeath**].

"It's collapsing, we probably just need to withstand it for a short moment," Zac shouted as he rejoined the group. "Use everything you have!"

The fire in the ember was very similar to the terrifying candle that had snuffed out the lives of most of the cultists, but their chance at survival lay in the fact that it hadn't been completely activated. The cultists had been using that Spiritual Fire as the source through the altar outside, but the ritual had been canceled mid-way.

Layers after layers of protection were put in place, mostly thanks to Kenzie and the Anointed. Zac's miasmic bulwark was reinforced by multiple walls wrought from stone, and Kenzie had actually taken out a small mountain of Memorysteel from her Cosmos Sack, quickly transforming it into a dome that the Anointed placed on top. Billy and Ogras didn't have any skills to help in this situation, so they could only help with the digging efforts.

They kept adding more and more until the time finally ran out.

There was no explosion, but Zac suddenly felt his miasmic cage collapsing without being able to resist at all, and a shocking heat hit them even though they were protected by tens of meters of rock and Memorysteel. The heat quickly grew unbearable, and it was like the heat was even spiritual in nature as Zac felt a searing pain in his soul.

It wasn't only his imagination, unfortunately, and he helplessly watched as one Anointed after another suddenly fell and combusted, their eyes turning into fiery infernos as even their souls were set ablaze.

"Hold on!" Zac could only shout.

There wasn't anything that he could do against some terrifying invisible flame that seemed able to pass through anything. Finally, the last layers of earthen defenses shattered, exposing a sea of flames above them. Only Zac's miasmic Bulwark remained, but it cost shocking amounts of miasma every second.

Thankfully it looked like they barely would be able to tide things over as the flames spread outward after roiling across the bulwark's surface half a minute, exposing the sky once more. No one dared to move for a few minutes, but the squad eventually crawled out of their bunker to look at the aftermath.

The shields had unsurprisingly all collapsed, and over a kilometer in each direction had been turned into a wasteland. The forest was gone, replaced by burning husks and storms of ash.

The only thing left of the cultists were the fire-resistant robes of the Incursion Leader and a handful of Spirit Tools. A few of the cultists had survived the fiery fallout from the lantern exploding, but Zac couldn't imagine they had survived the following blast.

It looked like the cultists were finally over and dealt with.

Chapter 650: Prison

“Ah, what happened to you?!” Billy exclaimed as he looked up at Zac’s hulking form. “How are you bigger than Billy?!”

Zac turned toward the Titan, and he saw that the Anointed were looking at him with hesitation as well.

“A few things happened to me in the Dead Zone,” Zac sighed, seeing no recourse but to come clean. “It’s a secret weapon of mine, I hope you can help me keep this hidden.”

“Haha! No problem, Billy has secrets too!” Billy laughed, before he froze and frowned with confusion. “Huh? Why can’t Billy remember? Oh well.”

The anointed nodded in agreement, not really caring. Their minds were clearly focused on their fallen brethren. Zac inwardly sighed in relief when his Draugr form didn’t cause any problems, and he opened his status screen for a few seconds. He didn’t look for long though, only long enough to confirm a few things.

The fight was over, and a sharp pain in his left hand made itself reminded the moment he relaxed. It was the damage transferred over when [**Nature’s Punishment**] was incinerated by the small Spiritual Flame. Zac grimaced when he looked down at the blisters, and he could feel that this wasn’t something that would be fixed with [**Surging Vitality**].

There was a pervasive Dao lodged in his arm, and he could only slowly expel it from his body. At least it wasn’t his main arm, and it wouldn’t affect his combat strength much. He ate one of his better healing pills to keep the effect under wraps while fixing the large number of weaker burns that covered his body.

He ate a Soldier Pill next, quickly restoring a large chunk of his missing Miasma. Zac didn’t want to stay this way too long

though so he reverted to his human form as soon as the pill had been absorbed.

Eating these Soldier Pills willy-nilly wasn't really good for his body, but he didn't want to keep his undead form exposed for too long in this place. As for what he had checked on his status screen before, it was his Bloodline. He had confirmed a few things with his transformation. First, his Void Emperor-bloodline had awakened in his Draugr-form as well.

Secondly, his undead race was still at the E-Grade, and it felt like he hadn't really made any improvements at all as he had hoped. His Bloodline Nodes were there as well, and Zac wondered how that would impact him as one of the 'five noble races'. Part of their superiority compared to normal Revenants and Corpse Lords had to be related to bloodlines and racial nodes, and who knew how his situation changed that.

The Draugr normally boasted supreme miasmic control along with extremely durable bodies, but what if he got neither because his odd bloodline took precedence over both? And would real Draugr be able to notice the difference?

He regained his human form after a few seconds, and Zac was relatively certain that no outsider should have been able to notice his transformation. The towering flame barriers had hidden his skills, and enormous clouds of ash and some swirled around them right now, completely covering their group.

A deep sigh echoed out from his side, and Zac looked over to see Rhubat placing one of the fallen in his Cosmos Sack. Eight of the Anointed had succumbed to the invisible wave of heat, and the rest sported various degrees of burns. However, they had done it. They had finally taken out the last of these lunatics, snuffing out another threat to earth.

"We need to move," Ogras said with a hoarse voice, his face all black with soot. "Everyone within a hundred kilometers must have spotted this battle."

"Right," Zac nodded as he stilled the tremors in his burned hand.

Everyone ate some healing pills to tide them over as they removed any hints of their involvement best as they could. Zac flashed over and pocketed several treasures where the cultists stood before. Most things had been incinerated, leaving not even the Cosmos Sacks unscathed, but some items survived.

The golden lance looked quite powerful, but the greatest gain was no doubt the Spatial Ring he found next to the Incursion Leader's fire-resistant robes. He also picked up the now-empty lantern and stashed it away. One of the glass panels was cracked, but Zac figured it should be a treasure considering it could trap such a powerful flame.

Altogether the squad only remained a minute longer before they set out, taking advantage of the thick clouds of ash to avoid detection. They didn't take a direct route toward the source of the ripples out of fear that they would be spotted though.

It wasn't like there was any particular target they wanted to hide from, but rather that they didn't want to walk into yet another trap just as they barely escaped the last one. Besides, even if their arrival had been exposed, didn't need to make it worse. So everyone tried to stay under the radar as Zac led them through the still-burning maze, using either his aura or a forceful swing to clear a path.

The group set a diagonal course through the forest somewhat running in a circle around the source of the powerful ripples. The idea was to hit it from a slightly different angle, which would hopefully allow them to cross the mountains unnoticed. A few minutes later they were out of the raging flames, and there thankfully wasn't anyone lying for them in wait.

The group reached the foot of the mountains after another two hours, at which point they finally slowed down. Everyone used various means to scan their surroundings for enemies, but it really looked like there wasn't anyone on their tail. Only then did they find a secluded cave large enough for them all, and sat down to rest after having erected an illusion array.

"Eight crusaders have fallen even before we reached our target," Rhubat rumbled with sorrow in its eyes, and Zac could

only sigh.

It was pretty bad luck that the cultists had zeroed in on them rather than the Dominators. Was it too much to ask for those two factions to take each other out?

“Rest up for an hour,” Zac said as he distributed some more Soul Crystals and healing pills. “We’ll cross the mountain next.”

“So what’s the plan?” Ogras asked. “There’s no way that those two bastards think they’re alone in this place after that inferno.”

“Adcarkas is no fool,” Rhubat said with a shake of its head. “The Sage of the Basin no doubt understood that we would be coming for them even without the earlier battle.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He was more worried about having exposed his hidden class than having exposed that he was here. He could only pray that the lure of the Dimensional Seed held a strong enough draw for Void’s Disciple to risk everything to get it, either for his master or for himself.

After all, such an item must hold an almost fatal attraction to a spatial cultivator like him, even if to simply observe its energy fluctuations.

No one had any great ideas of how to deal with what came next, mainly because they didn’t really understand the situation. Why did this realm exist? Why was the Dimensional Seed releasing those ripples? Why hadn’t anyone snatched it yet?

They eventually simply decided to stay hidden as best they could, which wasn’t all-too-easy with over twenty giants that were almost as tall as some of the trees, while they scouted out the Dimensional Seed on the other side of the mountain.

Thankfully, apart from other factions, the hidden realm was extremely safe. In fact, they hadn’t encountered a single animal or beast as they crossed the forest and the mountain. It was a somewhat odd feeling, seeing nature both so vibrant and so void of life.

It took seven hours to cross the mountain, but one of those hours was spent on breaks because people were making breakthroughs left and right. Kenzie, Billy, over half of the Anointed. All of them made some gains from walking between the mountains and feeling the pulse of Earth.

Zac himself didn't manage to make any Dao breakthroughs like the others, but his level was already a lot higher. However, that wasn't to say he was without gains of his own. He had made a shocking amount of improvements in his skill department instead.

He had already noticed that [**Immutable Bulwark**] and [**Profane Seal**] reached Peak mastery right after the battle, and one skill after another took a step forward over the following hours. [**Loamwalker**] was next, finally reaching the peak, and it was soon followed by [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] reaching late mastery and both [**Conformation of Supremacy**] and [**Surging Vitality**] stepping into middle grade.

The most shocking thing was that he even evolved [**Deforestation**] to late mastery just as they passed the mountain even though he hadn't actually used the skill at all during the battle before. He soon realized what was going on though.

The cultivation environment of the Mystic Realm had been pretty wretched, which might not have only impacted his Dao, but also his skills. After all, he hadn't improved a single skill in the Research Base even though he had fought so many desperate battles, which was pretty odd. Now it was like all those accumulated experiences had crystallized into a cascade of breakthroughs when he was flooded with Origin Dao.

He hadn't tested the change of [**Deforestation**] because of the cooldown, but the evolution of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] resulted in the forest almost doubling in radius while the defensive charges gained some strength. The Attribute bonus to Strength and Vitality was still at 10%, but one couldn't complain considering that buff came with literally no downsides.

The improvement wasn't too impressive, but it wasn't bad either. This way he would be able to cover almost a whole army with his energy forest, and there wasn't much his enemies could do about it except targeting the core tree. The amount of information the enormous forest crammed into his brain was a bit jarring at first, but he quickly got the hang of it.

The evolution to peak mastery of **[Loamwalker]** was more interesting. The largest detriment to that skill was how it was bound to earth, but that rule was finally being modified at the peak. The upgrade didn't give him the power of flight, but he was actually able to take one step in the air with the skill. True to its name the skill still needed loam to walk, and **[Loamwalker]**'s solution was actually to form a small patch of floating grass beneath his feet.

It was a magical feeling to jump twenty meters into the air, and then suddenly flash forward without gathering any momentum. It was almost like getting a double-jump in a video game, and it would make Zac's fighting a lot more flexible where he wouldn't have to rely on his chains to move while in the air. Unsurprisingly, the downside of the newfound ability of his movement skill was the cost of Cosmic Energy. Air walking once cost more than ten times the amount compared to taking a step on solid ground.

Zac wanted nothing more than to walk around these mountains for a while longer and squeeze out all gains from his accumulated experiences, but time waited for no man. The group finally reached the other side, and it didn't take a genius to figure out where they needed to go.

A massive basin was hidden on the other side of the mountain range, and there was only one thing placed there; an almost impossibly large structure. It was clearly of Technocrat origin, and even from a great distance it was clear that it was created with a lot more care and attention to detail compared to the desolate corridors on the outer sectors of the Research Base.

It seemed to be made of Memorysteel, but it had a slightly different bluish hue, and Zac could feel the emanations of endless Base Power even when they hid a few kilometers away. It was also completely covered in the same type of

script that lined the walls of the base. The building itself looked like an enormous dome, and it had to be at least five kilometers tall, almost towering over the mountains around it.

The dome itself was surrounded by nine towers that looked like spikes, and they too were constructed with the special Memorysteel and covered in runes.

However, even with the clearly high-quality construction, the building was suffering extensive damage. Thick cracks covered parts of the dome, and it almost looked like the cracks were alive as they wiggled in an endless loop of getting damaged and trying to heal.

“What is this?” Zac muttered as he turned to his sister to see if she had any ideas.

“It’s a prison for the Dimensional Seed!” Kenzie exclaimed. “The Administrator must have built it to protect the base from the energy emanations. I don’t understand why it’s in this hidden world though...”

“It looks like the treasure is trying to break out,” Ogras commented from the side as he glanced at Kenzie.

“Meanwhile, that bastard is probably trying to break in, no? With your technical skills, we might actually be the first to make it to the Dimensional Seed.”

Chapter 651: Overbearing Truth

“We might have an advantage, but there are a lot of variables at play. There’s something odd going on with his place,” Kenzie said, and there was hesitation on her face. “There are items meant to deal with spatial anomalies in the labs, and this isolation chamber has somehow followed into this world. It’s like we’re missing something.”

Zac nodded in agreement. There were some things that they hadn’t figured out yet. Why was an item like the Spatial Drill built inside a Bloodline Research Base? Why had the energies of the base merged with the spatial anomalies, to the point that they seamlessly entered and exited from the barriers?

“Is that computer bastard trying to take the treasure for itself?” Ogras ventured, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “We can’t compete with the base itself. Those weapons it uses...”

“I don’t think it should have any desires like that,” Zac said. “It’s a machine, not a cultivator. The goals of the base Administrator should simply be to maintain operations and protect against threats. I don’t see what would make it try to absorb the treasure. It’s more likely that it realized how dangerous the item was, and tried to seal it up to protect the base.”

In fact, Zac knew from his talk with Jaol back on the Technocrat ship that there were AI that had intellects advanced enough that they essentially could be considered living. However, these types of high-tiered AI still couldn’t cultivate, and they were pretty rare since they needed extremely expensive components to work.

Also, these types of living AI were a lot like Tool Spirits, meaning they could degrade mentally.

There was no way that even a rich Technocrat family would put an AI like that in charge of routine maintenance on some Research Base. It was not only a huge waste of resources, but it might actually result in a worse outcome compared to using a normal AI that ran more like a computer. Just imagine, what if an AI who slowly went insane like Brazla took charge of this place?

Nothing they had seen indicated it was that kind of AI though. If it was, it wouldn't have been possible for the Tsarun Clan to gain access, and especially impossible for the native Datamancers to trick it. The AI would instantly have realized the research subjects were manipulating its programs and taken action.

"In either case, what do we do?" Ogras asked, and both he and the Anointed turned to Zac. "Our Illusion Array-Disks aren't perfect. We'll be spotted sooner or later if we just loiter around here."

Zac hesitated a few seconds as he looked down at the building. The enormous construction actually did have a few gates, but could they really just waltz into the place like this? He was a bit hesitant about asking his sister to use Jeeves here, in case it would cause a reaction. However, it also seemed extremely dangerous to sneak inside through the wriggling scars covering the dome's surface.

"How about we observe for a while, and if nothing changes just walk right in?" Zac eventually said, unable to come up with a better idea.

"That's your plan?" the demon said with a scrunched-up face.

"Do you have any better ideas?" Zac muttered. "We don't know where the Dominators are, and we don't know how long this place will last. We can lay a trap out here in hopes Adcarkas will appear, but if we do that we might miss our opportunity. If I was him, I would already have headed inside."

"Agreed," Rhubat nodded. "Adcarkas has nigh-perfect energy masking abilities and they are capable of teleportation. It is unlikely we would spot them in the mountains even if we stay

outside. Besides, with our frames, we're likely to be spotted before we spot them."

"Fine," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes, but Zac could hear him mutter 'bunch of meatheads' beneath his voice.

They didn't immediately rush toward the containment dome though, but instead inched closer until they reached a spot with better vantage a few kilometers away. The group kept a lookout for any activity while they made their final preparations, but there was nothing at all happening.

Suddenly the runes on the building lit up with a blue shimmering radiance as it started emitting an extremely odd aura. It was like the whole dome was shifting out of reality, like it was both there and somewhere else. The odd phenomenon subsided after a minute though, but the nine towers lit up at that moment.

The very same tendrils they had seen from the other side of the mountain radiated out from their peaks, and a ball of condensed energy was quickly forming right above the dome. It only lasted for a second before it destabilized and exploded, and the group felt the ripple pass through them a second later.

"It's like reverse lightning-rods," Kenzie muttered.

"Discharging excess energy into the surroundings."

"At least it doesn't seem to get dangerous even at close proximity," Zac muttered. "Alright, this should be the best opportunity to head inside. We have a while before the next ripple hits, just in case."

The Anointed nodded and the group immediately set out. There was no way to cover their approach, so they could only rely on speed and hope that no one was keeping watch. The group rushed toward the closest gate, keeping a wide berth of the kilometer-tall pillar that still radiated some left-over energies after the initial outburst.

There were thankfully no automated defenses in place, and Zac breathed out in relief when the large gate completely ignored them. There was a console on this structure as well and Zac and his sister walked over. He was obviously not there

to deal with the security protocols, but rather to block any attack in case something went wrong.

Kenzie connected her tablet, but she stopped tapping on it after just a few seconds.

“Is something wrong?” Zac asked. “Isn’t your clearance enough?”

“This place is different,” Kenzie muttered, but Zac felt she almost looked a bit excited.

He looked on with confusion as she put her hand against the console. The door slid open a few seconds later, making Zac a bit confused about what was so exciting. It looked like any other time one used those consoles to open a gate.

“What’s going on?” Zac finally asked as he saw his sister look down at her hand with a small smile.

“Genetic lock,” Kenzie whispered. “Really strong one. I don’t think the Datamancers can hack their way through these restrictions. Apart from the two of us, the rest would have to enter through the cracks.”

Zac finally understood why his sister looked so happy. They had been in this realm for weeks now, and this was the first time found any tangible proof of their connection to their mother’s clan. He knew that his sister had hoped to find out more about their technocrat ancestors in this place, but they hadn’t found anything at all. This gate at least confirmed her bloodline.

Part of Zac wanted to reach out and touch the console as well just to make sure, but fear and doubt kept him back. There were some theories hidden in the back of his mind, theories he wasn’t ready to confront just yet. He didn’t want to do anything that might rock the status quo right now.

Instead, he just moved [**Love’s Bond**] to block his front as he advanced through the gate. The rest quickly followed in tow, their eyes darting back and forth in search of any threats. However, the insides were pretty austere, with no dangers in sight.

Zac had somewhat expected to enter a corridor similar to the ones in the research base, but it wasn't anything like that. Instead, it looked like the outer wall was just the first of multiple shells, with the next one starting roughly a hundred meters further inside. The space they stood in was sectioned off though, with Memorysteel walls making it impossible to walk in a circle around the whole building.

"It really looks like a containment chamber," Kenzie muttered as she looked around curiously. "Multiple layers to isolate the Dimensional Treasure inside."

Zac nodded in agreement. It almost felt like one of those places built to contain nuclear waste back on old Earth.

"Are you sure this place isn't dangerous?" Ogras muttered as he looked around. "It feels like we have stepped into a refinement cauldron. Some high-level emissions can kill weak punks like us without notice."

"Look over there," Zac said as he pointed to the left. "Those buildings shouldn't be there if this place was dangerous, right?"

The thing he pointed toward was the only thing of note except the gate in the second layer wall. It was a series of buildings that looked extremely small compared to the kilometer-high ceiling, but they were actually large enough to house hundreds of people. The buildings stood against the wall a few hundred meters away from the gate.

"That doesn't prove anything," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "I doubt anyone has ever lived in there. This heretic computer might have built this place following some blueprint in its memory, just adding buildings for personnel without understanding why."

"Well, it's impossible to be certain, but I still think the ripples are beneficial if anything. At least I haven't felt anything wrong with my body," Zac said. "My danger sense has been completely quiet all this while as well."

"Our constitutions have been improved as well," Rhubat added. "I had already exceeded my limits some time ago,

hurting my core, but now I feel fine. There is even some room for me to grow yet again.”

“Improving potential?” Ogras muttered with gleaming eyes as he looked up and down the Anointed.

“Let’s go check out the buildings first,” Zac decided. “We shouldn’t delay in case this place really is dangerous.”

The group flashed over, but they didn’t find anything after even after a thorough search. Ogras was right about one thing; no one had ever lived in this place, further proving that the Tsarun Clan never reached the core of the Research Base.

Some of the rooms looked like some Science Fiction pre-fab solutions that still hadn’t been decorated. There were kitchens, recreational rooms, cultivation chambers, and living quarters along with some sparse metal furnishings. One room housed what looked like a command center, but the computers were empty of data and they weren’t even connected to anything.

“I think this place was built in case the creator of this Research base ever returned,” Ogras eventually said as he gave Zac a pointed look.

“No point in lingering here,” Zac said. “Let’s head for the core.”

The others agreed, and they walked over to the next gate. This one was also made from the bluish Memorysteel, but there also seemed to be something else added to it. There were also thin streaks of some golden metal covering its surface, and Zac guessed it was some higher version alloy compared to Memorysteel.

Kenzie had no problems opening this gate either, and the hundred-ton gate soundlessly slid open after she touched her hand against the console. The group walked through, and Zac almost felt like he had been caught in an illusion loop just like the corridor inside during the Eastern Trigram Hunt. The environment looked almost identical after they walked through the twenty-meter thick wall, with the exception that there were no buildings inside this layer.

The group kept moving forward, passing one gate after another. Eventually, they reached the 9th layer, this one solely made from the golden metal they had seen more and more of inside the walls. By this point, they could feel extremely powerful emissions on the other side, and it almost felt like a god was trapped inside.

It wasn't just a matter of intensity, but also quality. It felt like the fluctuations hinted at something vast, something far beyond their understanding. It was just like when Zac had witnessed the corner of the chaos pattern. It gave the impression that the very air around him held the answers to all his questions about his cultivation, but the information was too esoteric for Zac to gain anything at all.

Zac was pretty confident this was the last layer judging by the quality of materials and the power of the emanations. The layer was a lot smaller by now as well. The insides couldn't be more than five hundred meters high, and thrice that across; a tenth the size of the outermost dome.

There was also another set of buildings next to the gate, but they actually couldn't get inside according to Kenzie. There were a huge number of security protocols guarding it, and not even their genetic code could help them get inside. Zac didn't want his sister to use Jeeves to force its way inside at this juncture, so they instead turned to the final gate, which thankfully didn't have the same sort of defenses.

"Here I go," Kenzie said as she placed her hand against the console.

This time it took almost a minute, but the doors eventually slid open, which instantly increased those mysterious fluctuations by multiple orders of magnitude.

It still didn't feel dangerous or detrimental, except for the mental pressure that stemmed from the energy. It almost made Zac question everything he had learned about cultivation and the Dao so far, like he was just a child making stuff up while playing in the mud. The energy around him was the real truth, and if he didn't give up on his wayward ways he'd never reach the peak of cultivation.

Zac quickly activated [**Soul Guardian**], the sixth and final skill he'd learned in the Dao Repository. A small golden avatar appeared above the soul in his mind as an inscrutable pattern appeared on his forehead. The skill had taken the spot of [**Mental Fortress**] and acted as a dummy to take on all kinds of mental attacks, but even his E-grade mental defense skill couldn't provide any protection against something like this.

However, he quickly stabilized his mind, discarding those poisonous thoughts. He knew his path wasn't a lie, but it was simply a matter of grade. The concepts hidden in the air around them were clearly far beyond anything he or anyone else in the group could fathom, but so what? They were not of his path, and his own insights would be able to match these by the time he reached C-Grade as well.

That conviction gave him a sense of tranquility that he hadn't really felt since entering the odd isolation building, and it felt like it had somehow solidified his own path even further.

It looked like Kenzie had quickly adapted as well, and the Anointed were extremely stoic. Zac had to give it to them. Their power wasn't a match to his own, but their mental fortitude and conviction were extremely strong. They had the makings of powerful cultivators, provided Ibtep's mission was a success.

Billy looked fine as well, seemingly even enjoying the atmosphere. The one who had the worst of it was clearly Ogras, and his face kept undergoing rapid and erratic changes. One second he looked ecstatic, only to be plunged to the depths of despair the next moment. Sweat was pouring down his face, and his hands twitched. Zac frowned at the scene, but his sister was quicker as she walked over to him.

"Hey," she said with a soft voice as she placed a hand on his chest. "Don't think too much."

It seemed to work, as his facial expressions gradually calmed down. He exhaled a deep breath he had been holding in before he nodded at Kenzie with gratitude in his eyes. Only then did Zac relax and turn toward the mysterious object in the center of the room.

The Dimensional Seed.

Chapter 652: Inner Chambers

The Dimensional Seed had been the ultimate goal for so many people since its existence was discovered, and Zac was finally standing right in front of it. Just looking in its general direction made Zac's mind scatter again, forcing him to turn his head away. The treasure might not be actively dangerous to interact with, but there was still a vast chasm in terms of grades between them.

It was just like with himself; if he completely unleashed his aura next to someone at Level 1, they would probably die from the pressure. And the difference between him and someone who hadn't started cultivating was probably a lot smaller than the difference between him and the object hovering two hundred meters in the air.

Zac didn't know what he expected the spatial treasure to look like, but he did realize that taking this thing might have been a fool's dream. First of all, he wasn't even sure he would be able to even get close considering how intense its energy fluctuations were. Secondly, it was pretty big, much too big for the box he had spent an exorbitant amount of money on.

The Dimensional Seed looked like a pulsating black hole, whose oscillations contained the breath of pure Dao in a way that made Zac's brain almost short-circuit when he tried to understand what he was looking at. Its diameter fluctuated between ten and thirty meters, so unless there was some sort of smaller core in the heart of that anomaly there was no way it'd fit inside the box. Not that snatching this thing was his main goal.

Besides, it felt all-too-apparent after seeing this treasure that it would bring more problems than it was worth. Something emitting spatial fluctuations this powerful probably couldn't

be stowed away in a Spatial Ring, and it was only a matter of time before some old monster learned of it and became greedy.

A treasure like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** was extremely rare and had amazing effects, but its use was ultimately limited to E-Grade juniors. Yet it had caused Yrial endless troubles when it was exposed. The thing in the heart of the chamber was clearly meant for higher-grade cultivators, and Zac couldn't even imagine what kind of storm such an item would elicit.

Zac shook his head and instead started to inspect the rest of the enormous chamber. There seemed to be a thousand pillars rising from the ground, all of them pointing toward the Dimensional Seal in the air. They were roughly five meters across at their base, but they turned to thin spears at the end. It was the same with the domed walls and ceiling, with spikes hundreds of meters long all pointing toward the heart of the room. There was even one twenty meters above their heads, angled upward.

The spikes weren't placed completely uniform though, and Zac almost got lost in thought as he looked at them. It felt like there was some hidden meaning to the pattern they created, like they formed some sort of array. The meaning was far beyond his understanding, but Zac had an idea what they were there for; to suspend and seal the Dimensional Seal.

The pulsating anomaly was trapped inside a sphere seemingly made from thousands of different Daos. Each pulse made the barrier flutter, but it was clear that the containment shield was stopping most of the energies from escaping. Perhaps it would have been impossible for them to stand in this place without the pillars keeping the treasure sealed up.

One thing that made the thousands of spears stand out from all other Technocrat tech Zac had encountered so far was that they seemed to run on something other than Base Power, or that plasma energy that the Little Bean used. It was rather Dao that ran through the metallic spears. It wasn't Spatial Dao though like what the Dimensional Seed emitted, but rather all kinds of mysterious energies.

It made Zac realize that it might not actually be the Dimensional Seed that was the source of those ripples before, at least not the sole source.

“This...” Kenzie whispered as she looked around with shock in her eyes. “It’s so similar...”

“Similar to what?” Zac asked with confusion since he had never seen anything like this.

“Ah? Nothing,” Kenzie shrugged.

Zac slowly nodded before he turned to Rhubat.

“Can you sense something? Are they here?” Zac asked.

With hundreds of thick pillars covering the ground, visibility was even worse than in a forest and Zac couldn’t see further than a hundred meters on the ground. A whole army could be loitering on the other side of the innermost chamber without them having any idea of it.

Not only that, but the spears also gave off a weird humming white noise that made it hard to just hear each other when standing next to each other. Zac would probably be able to scream at the top of his lungs without exposing their location.

“We can’t sense anything. Between these pillars and the treasure itself, our senses are almost completely blinded,” Rhubat said with a shake of its head. “It’s like standing in the middle of a sandstorm.”

Zac hesitantly looked around the chamber once more, not sure what they should do next.

“Let’s scout out the room, make sure we’re the only one here. Perhaps we can set up a trap if we can figure out where the others will come from,” Zac eventually said.

The group didn’t spread out in case there really were others in this place, rather opting to stay together as they walked between the spears. A few of them emitted Daos that felt completely foreign to Zac, whereas others felt a bit more familiar. He gazed at the thousands of spears, and he couldn’t help but wonder if all the main branches of the Dao under the System were represented in this chamber.

Was it perhaps possible to find the pillars that were related to his own path and use them to progress further?

“They are powered by Origin Dao,” Kenzie murmured. “It’s not true insight, but rather a forced mimicry... Still...”

“What!” Rhubat suddenly exclaimed, starting Kenzie out of her musings. “There is someone inside the anomaly!”

“Impossible,” Ogras blurted as his eyes darted up, but he was immediately forced to look away again.

Zac tried to forcibly look at the Dimensional Seed with **[Cosmic Gaze]** to see what Rhubat was talking about, but it was even worse than staring straight into the sun. Kenzie summoned a handful of drones, and a video feed appeared on her screen as she tapped away. The image kept shifting like she was adding various filters, and Zac’s eyes widened when he could see a vague outline of a person for a moment.

Someone was really sitting on top of the Dimensional Seed and was hidden by the powerful emanations.

“It’s true!” Kenzie exclaimed. “They are even inside that inner shield! How can anyone withstand that?!”

“Their auras are converging,” Rhubat said with a frown, and a few other Anointed nodded after they closed their eyes. “I barely sensed it. I think the person inside is trying to fuse with the item, or at least form a connection to it. It has to be Adcarkas. Who else has that kind of capability?”

“Is the bad guy eating that ball?” Billy muttered with wide eyes. “Scary.”

“More like suicidal,” Ogras muttered with disbelief. “But if he somehow succeeds...”

“We can’t let that happen,” Zac said with grit teeth as his gaze moved to one of the pillars sticking out from the wall. “Get ready for battle, there is no time to lose.”

“Those are the eyes of someone about to do something foolish,” Ogras said. “Don’t act hastily.”

“He is probably in a trance at the moment since he sits there unmoving, but he might wake up we start experimenting on

ways of dragging him down. I'll have to go all out from the start," Zac said as he turned to his sister. "That Dao-shield, can I pass through it?"

"What? You want to enter that thing? The barrier seems to only restrain the energies the seed emits, but that means the aura is far stronger inside. You might die just from the aura alone if you jump through," Kenzie said with worry.

"I don't believe I'll instantly die if that guy can comfortably sit up there," Zac muttered. "I should at least be able to drag him down. There's no time to waste. Be ready to unleash some powerful strikes. Perhaps we can kill him in one go."

"I still think-" Kenzie tried to interject, but Zac just shook his head as he readied his axe and shield.

"We will not fail you, Warmaster," Rhubat rumbled, and the auras of all the Anointed started to rise, a telltale sign of them activating their life-burning method.

Billy prepared himself as well, as his usually silly expression was replaced with steely determination. Even Ogras had discarded his lackadaisical demeanor as he slowly melded with the surroundings, his spear already in his hand.

Zac took a last steadying breath before he disappeared, and a deep indent appeared on one of the long spikes a moment later as he used it as a launching pad to shoot into the air. However, he didn't fly straight toward the Dimensional Seed, but rather making it look like he would miss it by fifty meters just in case Void's Disciple was actually observing their moves.

However, just as it looked like he would shoot straight past the floating treasure a barely noticeable patch of grass appeared under his right foot, and he suddenly disappeared. Space constricted as he took a step through shrunken space, and he pushed straight through the Dao barrier and toward the barely visible figure inside the black energy emanations.

The halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] had already appeared behind him, filling him with a sense of power as the Everlasting Shield radiated a world-crushing weight. If it really was Adcarkas sitting inside, then Zac had already cut

this guy in two once without much success. So he figured he'd try to crush him instead this time around, and if it failed the force should at least be powerful enough to knock him down from the dimensional seed.

However, Zac completely lost control of his skill the moment he entered the anomaly, and it felt like his whole body was disintegrating as immensely powerful Spatial Energies threatened to rip him apart. Zac's perception of reality was being put through the wringer and his whole body was being expanded to the size of a galaxy one moment, only for it to be shrunk into the size of an atom the next.

This was way beyond what he had endured when the Mystic Realm underwent those massive upheavals, over ten times worse. Even his soul was unable to maintain its integrity and was being bent and twisted like a piece of clay. Zac was completely helpless as he shot forward. The containment shield was just fifty meters across, but that short journey felt even longer than flying to the moon.

Alien energies threatened to completely rip his body apart, but the welcome beat of his hidden node suddenly echoed out in the darkness. This was why Zac had some confidence in attempting this. His **[Void Heart]** even dared to eat the tribulation lightning of the Heavens themselves, so what was some energy run-off from a C-Grade treasure? The hidden node happily gobbled up mouthfuls of the spatial energies, which gave Zac back some of his presence of mind.

Zac's plan had already failed, but he thankfully had a backup. He hurriedly infused **[Love's Bond]** with the Fragment of the Coffin to toughen it up even further. A shudder went through Zac's body as he felt a collision, which was immediately followed by a startled roar of anger before the world turned back to normal.

[Loamwalker] was not an actual teleportation-skill like Ogras' shadow-walk, which had both positives and negatives. In this case, it was an asset as his momentum was real when he shot forward from the floating patch of grass. Zac had lost all sense of his surroundings for a while there, but he was moving

straight toward the meditating person, and his shield was pretty massive.

His momentum had made him not only knock the person off the Dimensional Seed but also pushed both of them out of the containment shield. His senses were still all messed up even if **[Void Heart]** had swallowed most of the terrifying Spatial Energies, and his vision and perception of space were still all messed up. He tried to grab his target, but he only grasped empty air for a few seconds until he slammed down onto the hard metal floor.

Thankfully Zac was not alone. Someone dragged a nigh-delirious Zac away just in time before twenty enormous seals slammed down as one, causing even the extremely sturdy golden alloy to dent. It was immediately followed by a hulking smash by a roaring Billy who had already grown to ten meters.

The Titan immediately started charging a second strike, and the moment the massive club was lifted from the ground over fifty drones shot at the same spot, the combined force of their lasers almost tearing a hole in space itself.

An endless barrage of shadow-spears kept up the pressure on the spot until a meter-thick lance of pure darkness shot the target, swallowing everything whole. An even more powerful follow-up swing from Billy kept the combo going, and the echoes of metallic clangor echoed out. The Anointed kept attacking the unmoving body as well, unleashing millennia of pent-up fury.

Zac could finally tell left from right as stumbled back on his feet, and he realized that he had been dragged right next to his sister. He nodded at her before he looked over at the carnage with a frown.

Something was wrong.

The target hadn't even moved or as much as activated a defense as far Zac could tell, but why didn't they die? Even Zac wouldn't survive an onslaught like that unless he blocked them somehow. A piercing scream of danger forced Zac into action, and he desperately flashed out of the way while dragging his sister with him.

It was just in time as well as a hand appeared out of nowhere, grabbing straight for his throat with enough force to make the air twist.

“Back away,” Zac whispered to his sister as he stared at the attacker with confusion and some trepidation. “Why is it you?!”

Chapter 653: Mad Ambition

Zac had been completely convinced that it was Void's Disciple he tackled and pushed down from the Dimensional Seed. Who else would be able to withstand the intense fluctuations except for a Spatial Cultivator? But it turned out he was wrong. The aura of the one he tackled was identical to the one who had attacked him just now, and it wasn't Adcarkas.

The person standing in front of him with an expression rife with killing intent was still someone he knew though; it was Inevitability.

He hadn't seen the second Dominator since they met in the Eastern Trigram Hunt. The battle back then had been completely lopsided with Zac only escaping with his life because Thea used her ultimate escape skill. However, Zac had left for the Tower of Eternity and evolved into E-Grade since then. Zac had believed that he had not only caught up but far surpassed the murderous chain-wielding Zhix by now, but it was clear that Zac wasn't the only one who had made tremendous steps forward.

The aura Inevitability emitted gave Zac some palpitations, like he was once more standing in front of a blood-drenched level 100 warrior while still muddling along as a level 60 human. She had gained a lot of levels thanks to her killing points during the hunt, but that alone couldn't account for the enormous transformation of her aura.

The Inevitability of back then had first seemed like a curious child before she turned into a monstrosity full of unbridled bloodlust. But the Inevitability in front of him had already reined in her killing intent and now gazed at him with a calculating look, like a cold-hearted killer observing its prey.

Zac also didn't how was she almost unscathed after all those attacks. The only one who seemed to have managed to hit her

was actually Ogras judging by the shadowy aura in a small wound on her left shoulder. That meant that she really had been there when the other attacks landed but it was like they never actually hit her.

The people Zac had brought here weren't fools who would hit empty air, and he had seen for himself them slam down on the unmoving body of the target. Zac glanced over to the spot Inevitability landed. As expected, the body had simply disappeared, and the Anointed had instead turned to Inevitability with solemn expressions.

Also, where the hell was Void's Disciple? Adcarkas was neither the one cultivating on top of the Dimensional Seed nor the one who attacked him. But surely he wouldn't stay back and let Inevitability fight all of them? Nothing was like how Zac had planned things out, and it made him hesitate.

"So, Karma has finally brought you here. I would have hoped that this building would delay you for another day. Well, searching for perfection is a fool's errand," Inevitability sighed as she looked Zac up and down. "The threads of fate surrounding you just keep growing. I have to say I am a bit jealous. But cultivation is ultimately a struggle against the Heavens. If fate does not choose you, then you simply need to subvert fate. That by itself might lead to greater things."

Zac's brows furrowed even further when he heard Inevitability speak, and the sense of wrongness just increased. This was definitely not how she spoke back then.

"Adcarkas!" Rhubat exclaimed with shock, making Zac look over with confusion. "How is this possible?! Why do you look like Kirath?!"

"Oh? I guess I can't hide from your senses, Chainbreaker," Inevitability snorted.

Or perhaps it was more apt to say Void's Disciple. Zac finally understood what was going on, why the Inevitability of his memories was so different from the one in front of him. However, the realization only created more questions than answers.

“Possession,” Zac muttered, looking at the Zhix with disgust. “You said Inevitability was like a child to you when we met the first time, yet you steal her body?”

“Kirath wanted to contribute, to help me on my journey to the peak. What better way than to provide her body and to give me a chance to escape the chains of Karma?” Adcarkas smiled. “The fetters to my old body were too great, and it had long missed the prime window for building momentum strong enough to reach the peak.”

A wave of repulsion filled Zac’s heart as he looked at Void’s Disciple. His actions were so far into taboo territory that he would never be able to follow the normal path to power. Possessing one’s family, who’d do something like that? Anyone with even a sliver of conscience would get a mental demon from an action like that, and their cultivation road would immediately get fraught with danger and missteps.

Furthermore, possession was definitely was marred with problems. If it wasn’t, then old cultivators would just pick a new body and retrain from the start. Levels came easy, but insight did not. Imagine being a peak C-Grade cultivator stepping into the F-grade again? You would turn into a monster far greater than Zac ever was.

And what was that about chains of fate? Zac had until now operated under the assumption that Void’s Disciple was a devout follower of The Great Redeemer, but it didn’t sound like it from that expression.

“You’re not here to give your master this treasure?” Zac asked.

Void’s Disciple looked at Zac with a teasing smile, before he looked up at the sky.

“Not all is as it seems. Hm, I guess there’s no harm in telling you, the embryo will not be able to break out for over a day. This Dimensional Seed is a divine treasure for someone at the peak of the D-Grade. Incorporating it into your core can immediately open the road to monarchy. But why would I waste such a rare treasure on Voridis A’Heliophos when it is perfectly suited for me?”

“Is that why you killed Inevitability?” Zac asked as he circulated his energy while trying to come up with a plan.

There were too many variables at the moment. The aura of this merged Dominator was too weird, too powerful, making Zac a bit unsure he had what it took to succeed. Besides, he was clearly far more affected by the emanations of the Dimensional Seed than Adcarkas, and any second he could stall to regain his wits would increase his odds of victory.

“Kirath lives on through me. She will never die as long as I keep walking down my path,” Adcarkas smiled. “Luckily, part of our Master’s heritage was a Body Tempering Method to turn our bodies into suitable vessels for possession. I guess Master desired a fallback in case his experiment failed. I simply made some adjustments to better suit my purposes.”

“This body was then reforged with the energy of the Seed, and my soul has already been suffused with the Dao of Space. It will allow a nigh-perfect fusion, and the next step is to infuse the Seed itself into my body. That will be my foundation for my Immortal Path. A Spatial Constitution with a Seed of Origin, a miracle that has never appeared in this sector,” Adcarkas smiled.

“Why are you telling all of us this?” Zac frowned.

“Isn’t it too sad? To have stumbled onto this earthshattering opportunity and survived the almost-certain demise of putting thoughts to action, yet have no one to tell of your exploits? The moment I step out into the cosmos I will have to hide my true power, but at least here I can speak freely,” Adcarkas laughed before his eyes locked onto Zac’s. “Now I just need to tie up a few loose ends. With the death of this world and your soul extracted, I will have closed this ancient chapter of Karma. The ties will be cut, and I’ll be free to pursue my truth.”

“Attack!” Zac roared, knowing his window to recuperate was up.

He was still a bit woozy, but there was not much he could do other than fight. It was unfortunately clear that Adcarkas had the home-field advantage as the Dimensional Seed suddenly

flashed and thousands of Spatial Tears appeared all through the chamber. As for Adcarkas himself, he activated the skill that created a huge number of stars around him.

Zac immediately shot forward after making sure that his sister was safe. It looked like she could control the golden alloy like she could the Memorysteel, and it swam up around her to form a small dome. Billy and the remaining Anointed quickly grouped up in five small squads as they formed an encirclement led by Rhubat, and their auras rose as the air itself congealed.

Zac hadn't seen this method used before, and he guessed it was something they had gotten their hands on to deal with Void's Disciple's spatial abilities. Of course, whether it would be able to prevent him from escaping was still up for debate. There wasn't much else the Anointed could do against someone like Adcarkas though, but they could perhaps skew victory in their favor by stabilizing space itself in an arena.

And Zac saw that their plan wasn't completely without merit as not a single one of the endless spatial tears had opened up within a hundred-meter radius.

The alloy floor gave off creaks of pain as Zac pushed **[Loamwalker]** to the limits, as he moved between the stars like a ghost. A few of them exploded just as he passed, but reaching peak mastery in the skill had improved the speed even further, allowing Zac to push through the minefield with only minor wounds.

He was suddenly in melee range of the target, and **[Verun's Bite]** keened in the air as Zac tried to strike the Dominator with a series of probing attacks. The Dominator's confidence was a bit disconcerting, and Zac felt something was up. After all, he had barely escaped with his life last time, even getting himself cut in two. Yet now he felt confident enough to start monologing like a TV villain, something was definitely up.

Something like possession should also cause all kinds of trouble, like lacking compatibility between soul and body. Perhaps even rejection like a transplant. Yet he was leisurely talking like he had everything under control. It might be

bluster, but Zac didn't want to burn his aces from the get-go before getting a better understanding of the situation.

The only one who had managed to harm Adcarkas until now was Ogras, and Zac figured it was thanks to the demon's shadow-related Dao Fragment. That might be the key to killing him, so each of Zac's swings was imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin, giving them a hint of putrefaction and extra force. His Fragment of the Axe was even stronger, but Zac wanted to hold off on it a while longer since Adcarkas still shouldn't know he had evolved it, and that might create an opening sooner or later.

The Anointed weren't actually attacking, only focusing on restraining the space around him, which no doubt was a herculean task considering the Dimensional Seed radiated immense energies right above their heads. Their life force was rapidly being expended to just weaken Adcarkas' advantage.

Ogras wasn't as limited considering his versatile combat style, and shadow spears kept appearing to strike at the Zhix as well. Even the stars cast weak shadows, allowing the demon to turn the Dominator's skill against him. It was the same with Kenzie who had over a hundred Drones fly around to hopefully distract the target. Laser beams suddenly shot toward the Zhix without warning from unexpected angles as drones appeared from behind spatial tears or the pillars.

However, the shadow spears didn't manage to cause any real harm to the Dominator, and there was something odd happening with the laser strikes. Zac knew all-too-well Jeeve's calculation capabilities, and he knew that it shouldn't keep making mistakes. But it was like his sister kept getting unlucky as the slowly moving stars somehow managed to block the shots over and over without seemingly speeding up at all. The stars formed some sort of elusive pattern that protected the Zhix when it looked like there were a lot of openings.

Adcarkas didn't seem to be in a hurry to end the fight, and he happily started to exchange strikes with Zac, just like how the two fought back on Earth. The situation was extremely odd though as Zac felt himself under tremendous pressure. Zac

was fighting tooth and nail, his swings almost creating a blur as he tried to make the Zhix slip up by keeping up a massive pressure. If he could somehow cause Adcarkas to lose his concentration Zac might be able to hit him with a surprise slam from **[Nature's Punishment]**.

But Zac felt a growing sense of inability as he exchanged strike after strike. No matter what he tried or how much he pushed himself there was always a palm waiting. If anything it felt like Adcarkas moved slower compared to their last fight, yet he was even more impervious.

Zac soon understood what was going on; everything Adcarkas did was imbued with the Dao of Space. The suns moved following some hidden rules that created an absolute defense, and his own movements created a great effect with minimal effort thanks to his high command of the Dao.

It was an eye-opening experience to see someone fight so in tune with his path, and Zac would be in awe of Adcarkas if the man wasn't trying to extract his soul. This was exactly the state Zac needed to reach for himself. He had created his path based on his trinity of Daos, but he still didn't have much to show for it. Adcarkas had gone much further on this path and was already infusing it with every single movement he took.

Zac didn't understand the concepts that were the basis of Adcarkas' altered combat style, but the battle was still a huge revelation to him. It felt like a flood of inspiration washed over him as he fought, and Zac finally understood what his next step should be in improving how he fought. Unfortunately, Zac quickly realized that just as he was gaining a lot from the battle, so was Adcarkas.

The Dominator was actually using him as a whetstone to consolidate his gains.

It might be possible that he was getting used to his new body as well, but in either case it wasn't a good feeling to be disregarded to the point he was just considered a training tool rather than a deadly foe. It almost felt like Adcarkas believed he could end the battle at any moment if he wished to.

And just as Zac feared, things suddenly changed. Zac had attacked the Dominator's head with two of his chains, trying to force him to use his arms to block. And just as the Zhix lifted his hand to intercept Zac's axe flashed forward with enough speed to almost break space. Zac wanted to cut off one of the dominator's hands, but he would be content if he just managed to wound it.

Zac's eyes widened in surprise when the axe actually passed right through the wrist, but surprise turned to confusion when only a shallow wound appeared. His mind screamed of danger the next moment as the Zhix launched a lightning-quick counter-strike aimed straight at his head, forcing Zac to hurriedly block with two chains of **[Love's Bond]**.

Fist and metal clashed with huge force, but the chains suddenly slipped straight through his arm the moment Zac tried to ensnare him.

"He's shifting his body in and out of space," Kenzie's voice echoed out from a drone. "Just like the werewolves turning into light, but instead using the Dao of Space."

"Oh?" Void's Disciple said as he looked at the golden alloy bubble with interest as he effortlessly kept blocking Zac's strikes. "So you're the sister, the genius? I am guessing you are the reason you all managed to interrupt my cultivation so quickly. Well, I did promise Kirath revenge for her brother. You could say this would be poetic justice."

Space started to crack the next moment as a rift opened up. It looked like the array the Anointed maintained was resisting its emergence, but Adcarkas was simply too powerful if he put his mind to it. A flame of fury ignited in Zac's heart when he realized what the Zhix was doing, and his aura veritably exploded as any thought of probing was thrown out of the window.

Adcarkas was crazy if he thought he could hurt Kenzie right in front of him.

Chapter 654: Overpowering

Adrenaline and fear coursed through Zac's body as he saw the spatial tear in front of Adcarkas widen. It wasn't because of the ability itself, but rather what he saw through the rip in space. It was his sister surrounded by multiple monitors. The tear was somehow completely bypassing the golden alloy to allow the Dominator to strike straight at Kenzie.

In fact, the reason that Adcarkas seemed to be struggling so hard to open the tear might actually not be due to the Anointed's efforts, but rather the isolating properties of the alloy itself. It was also possible the alloy lost its isolating properties the moment Kenzie started fiddling with it. There was no time or point to start analyzing the situation though, and Zac unhesitantly unleashed [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and the surge of power perfectly blended with his true fury as he shot forward.

"Hmph," Adcarkas snorted as he glanced in Zac's direction.

The Dominator punched out toward him and the swing generated a small sphere that almost looked like a black hole. Zac didn't recognize the skill or what threat it posed, but he didn't care. A fractal blade had already appeared on [**Verun's Bite**], and two clouds were released in quick succession. The spatial ball greedily swallowed the energies Zac released with [**Rapturous Divide**] for a second before it detonated, decimating everything in its path with a wave of spatial tears aimed straight at Zac.

Zac grit his teeth and pushed straight into the storm, and bleeding gashes appeared all over his body as he forced his way through the chaos. Thankfully the path was suddenly clear as the divide between heaven and hell was formed in the chaos, creating a path for Zac to pass through. Adcarkas stood on the other side, clearly surprised that Zac had managed to cut through his manmade spatial storm so quickly.

The Dominator's arm had already reached into the tear. Kenzie desperately tried to keep him at bay, but her elemental attacks were completely unable to deter him, which was no surprise. No matter how skilled her control of her Dao was, it couldn't compete with pure power. A terrifying pressure suddenly burst out from Zac as the halo of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** reappeared behind his back. He roared in rage as he swung his axe in a wide horizontal arc, and space itself buckled inward as the weight of the Eternal Shield was added to the swing.

Adcarkas moved his free palm as a swirling vortex appeared to block, but just as the two forces clashed a third one appeared as a huge wooden hand appeared out of nowhere. Zac still hadn't figured out exactly how Void's Disciple was avoiding attacks by his spatial shifting, but he couldn't hold back right now. Besides, with one of the Dominator's hands inside a spatial tear and the other one blocking **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, this was the best opportunity to try to end things since the beginning of the fight.

"Ogras!" Zac roared as well, and a storm of Dao-infused spears rose from the ground, almost completely swallowing the Zhix.

Another beam of pure darkness hit the Zhix from behind, and Zac added the final ingredient of his plan; he flooded the area with a Dao Field empowered by **[Spiritual Void]**. There was no way that Adcarkas' spatial shift was infallible. Dao restrained Dao, and if Ogras could wound Adcarkas, then this maxed-out Dao Field would hopefully be able to interfere with his ability to avoid getting hit.

The hand slammed down toward the ground with earthshattering force. Adcarkas' reaction time was shocking though, and his body grew just like during the end toward the last battle. Zac inwardly swore in disappointment upon realizing his skills seemed to have been passed along as well. He had hoped that some things would get lost when swapping body, but he had already used three of his old skills so it didn't look hopeful.

The Zhix instantly ripped out his arm from the spatial tear, dragging a huge chunk of ice with him. It was Kenzie's

attempt to lock his arm in place, but it had unfortunately failed. Still, the hand had appeared just a meter above the Dominator's head, and it was immediately barreling down on him. A black hand slammed upward as Adcarkas roared, forcing **[Nature's Punishment]** to stop in its tracks.

A tremendous shockwave from the clash pushed Zac away, and it was powerful enough to break a few of the closest pillars clean off. Zac glanced up at the Dimensional Seed with fear, but he breathed in relief when he saw that the shield still held even after losing some of its Dao Source.

More surprisingly it looked like Adcarkas got absolutely infuriated upon seeing the spears break off and fall onto the ground.

"You fool!" he roared as his aura exploded even further.

The Zhix had already dispelled the force of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** so he pushed his second hand up as well to deal with the hand of **[Nature's Punishment]**, an absolute storm of pure spatial chaos erupted the next moment, and Zac instantly realized he wouldn't be able to withstand the force for long even when infusing the attack with Fragment of the Bodhi.

But the fire of fury in his chest had still not abated after seeing the Zhix targeting his sister, and he instantly pushed through spatial tears around Adcarkas, ignoring the second set of cuts that sprouted across his body. He emerged through the turbulence like an angry bull and he instantly resummoned **[Conformation of Supremacy]** while dispelling **[Nature's Punishment]** half a second before it would break by itself.

Adcarkas tried to move his hands down again to block, but Zac's attack summoned by the Void and empowered by a towering fury was too quick, and his strike slammed straight into Adcarkas' chest. It first looked like the Dominator tried to phase out of reality to avoid the strike, but the area was suffused with too many high-grade concepts.

Instead, he could only hastily activate a skill to block, but Zac's momentum was far beyond what he could impede. **[Verun's Bite]** crashed straight through a wall of condensed space, and cracking sounds echoed out as Adcarkas was flung

over a hundred meters away. It worked! Zac wanted to roar in triumph at finally harming this monster, but he didn't even get a chance to celebrate before the situation turned for the worse.

It first looked like Adcarkas would slam into yet another of the pillar, hopefully getting hurt even further from the impact. But a space gate suddenly appeared right in his trajectory, swallowing the Dominator whole. A sudden scream of danger made Zac hurriedly turn around, but he was too slow.

Another gate had appeared right behind him, and a red-eyed Void's Disciple had already launched a strike. A world-ending punch hit Zac right back, and the impact caused the air itself to crack. Zac felt like his organs had been crushed and he spat out a mouthful of blood as he was flung away. He didn't have the means of Void's Disciple, but he did manage to stop his flight with the help of his chains just before slamming into one of the five squads.

The Anointed quickly backed away while maintaining the array, and Zac could only push away the pain while shooting forward again. There was not much else the Anointed could do to help except than staying out of the way. The original plan had been for them to stall one of the Dominators for long enough to Zac and Ogras to kill the other, at which point Zac would deal with the second one as well.

Now they could only do what they could to support Zac from a distance since there was no point in them throwing away their lives.

The initial attempt at finishing off the Dominator had failed, but Zac refused to give up. At least they had managed to wound him, and Zac didn't believe that the spatial energies seeping out from the Dimensional Seed could help him heal as well. They should be able to whittle him down in this manner.

But Zac soon found himself under a relentless storm of strikes as Void's Disciple visage had turned into a mask of fury. Strikes with enough force to shatter mountains were launched in a relentless flurry, and they still incorporated the esoteric and unpredictable methods of space.

Zac kept [**Conformation of Supremacy**] constantly active as he tried to give as good as he got, but his body was already a bloody mess after pushing through two spatial storms. Ogras tried to help as best as he could, but another galaxy had appeared, trapping Zac in a death cage where he gradually lost the initiative.

A fist suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and Zac saw white for an instant as it landed straight on the side of his head. The punch was powerful enough to almost made it look like Zac was teleported as he slammed into the ground, and even the sturdy golden alloy gained a small dent from the impact. Anyone else at Zac's level would probably be killed then and there.

Zac's vision swam but he still swung his axe in a ruthless upward trajectory aimed to cripple the Dominators legs, all while trying to figure out his next step. He simply wasn't a match in close quarters against Void's Disciple any longer. His attributes had clearly increased as much as Zac's own, and he had found a method to incorporate his Dao into his combat technique.

Furthermore, it seemed he was drawing combat strength from the Dimensional Seed itself.

Zac couldn't take the [**Rageroot Oak Seed**] either since he had already activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and changing to his undead side was impossible since Adcarkas was solely focusing on him. Destroying a few of those pillars had well and truly pissed off the Dominator, though Zac couldn't figure out why.

There was no choice; he had to take a gamble and use the crystal he got from the Gemlings. He had kept it for now since Void's Disciple hadn't taken out any items during the fight, but he would be wounded to the point that he would be unable to keep going if he didn't turn things around. He only had less than twenty seconds remaining on [**Hatchetman's Rage**] as well, so this was his last chance to turn things around before he entered a weakened state.

But just as Zac was about to take out the crystal from his Spatial Ring a massive drop of pure white light emerged from one of the cracks in the domed ceiling. The drop turned into a beam of light that shot straight toward them.

Anywhere the beam passed was drenched in lunar light. Its movement was shockingly quick, and it was upon them before Adcarkas had a chance to attempt finishing Zac off. A large claw appeared the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when he sensed the shocking might they contained. This was completely different compared to any of the werewolves he had fought until now. This single attack was definitely powerful enough to threaten Zac's life.

There was no question about it; Cervantes had arrived.

Thankfully it looked like the werewolf leader wasn't intending to pile onto Zac's sufferings as the massive claw passed him right by, aiming for Adcarkas' throat. The Dominator growled in annoyance as he sideswiped as his hand formed a small vortex. Palm and claw collided, and the force threw Zac away, giving him a breather.

Cervantes' surprise attack was unfortunately not enough to take out the overwhelmingly powerful Dominator, but he didn't seem reconciled with that fact as his body turned into a blur. Ten, fifty, hundreds of attacks were launched with a speed that would put both Ogras and Thea to shame. Not only that, the attacks actually contained enough force to almost match Zac's own.

Zac quickly seized the opportunity to eat a healing pill before activating his Specialty Core. A wave of Miasma spread throughout his body as he pretended to struggle to get back on his feet while Cervantes and Adcarkas duked it out a few hundred meters away. It was an extremely odd scene, as their attacks kept swiping through each other's bodies.

One shifted in and out of space while the other turned parts of his body into lunar light with pinpoint precision. It almost looked like two holograms were fighting. Still, the two actually clashed every now and then, causing massive shockwaves to spread out. Zac tried to remember the timing,

as he guessed that was a clue to the limits of their defensive measures.

The two were locked in a stalemate for a few seconds, but they suddenly flashed away to create some distance.

“You barely managed to escape thanks to your kin sacrificing everything, yet you come back like a moth to the flames? Laughable,” Void’s Disciple snorted, causing Cervantes to emit a terrifying killing intent.

“Human, our tribes have our differences, but we cannot let this one leave this place alive. If we do, no one will survive for long on the outside,” the werewolf growled without taking his eyes off of Void’s Disciple.

Zac’s frowned as he looked at the wounds covering Cervantes’ body, and he immediately understood what had transpired without his notice. It looked like his own battle against the cultists wasn’t the only war that had taken place in this hidden realm. It turned out that the werewolves and Void’s Disciple had already clashed once, and Void’s Disciple had emerged victorious from the sounds of it.

That by itself was pretty troubling, considering that Zac didn’t feel confident at all in dealing with Cervantes without using his **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**. And that was just going by what he had seen so far. An old monster like Cervantes no doubt had a bunch of aces to use when his and his tribe members’ lives were on the line.

Yet they had died, while Adcarkas lived. It was even more proof of the terrifying power Void’s Disciple had gained in this hidden realm.

“Let’s work together,” Zac agreed with a voice full of death, as a storm of miasma started to swirl around him.

Zac didn’t delude himself that he could suddenly patch things up with the Lunar Tribe, but they shared a common enemy for now. As what happened after they dealt with Adcarkas, that was a problem for the future.

“You are hiding some peculiar methods,” Cervantes muttered, shifting his gaze from Adcarkas to Zac for the first time.

“Interesting, interesting,” Void’s Disciple laughed in turn.

Zac hated how he was forced to expose his undead like this, but there was nothing else to do. He had already exhausted his human side except for [**Deforestation**], and that skill was meant for large-scale battle. His odds of defeating Adcarkas were far greater in his undead form, especially if he could make use of Cervantes’ offensive power while he restrained the Zhix.

Besides, if both of them died before Zac left this place, then there would be no one to spread his secret.

Chapter 655: The Key to Life

Zac held no delusions that Cervantes wouldn't try to kill him the moment they had managed to deal with the Dominator, but troubled times called for strange alliances. Zac cracked his neck as he looked at his current state. A wave of exhaustion had already hit him since the boost of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** had ended, but the weakness was at least somewhat mitigated since he had swapped race.

However, there was no way he'd take out Adcarkas in his current state. He had already taken out one of his spare shields so that he would be able to use the offensive form of **[Love's Bond]**, but he knew he would have to take some risks if he wanted to win.

"I knew you were related with the mysterious undead who kept destroying Incursions, but I figured it was a Soul Slave you had managed to get your hand on somehow," Adcarkas snorted, seemingly having forgotten about his anger thanks to this surprising turn of events. "This is far more intriguing. After I extract your soul, I'll study your body extensively."

"That's if you can actually survive what comes next," Zac snorted as he took out a small seed from his spatial ring and pushed it into his mouth a thick black armor appeared to cover his whole body.

Death comes for all, except for him. He was eternal, a being of unmatched power and longevity. For this spatial bug to impugn on his sovereignty was a heretical act at the level of going against the Heavens themselves, and judgment had to be exacted. However, he was tired, and even gods needed nourishment.

A small sharp spike appeared in his hand, and Zac grinned with fervor as he ripped off some armor plating and stabbed it into his leg. A swirling warmth flooded his aching bones, and

he finally felt like his true self. Why had he feared these spikes before? How would they ever be able to harm a celestial being such as himself?

Four chains shot out, each one of them snaking its links around one of the closest pillars. The alloy groaned and twisted the next moment as Zac imbued his Spirit Tool with more and more Miasma until a series of creaking sounds started to echoed out. Finally, the alloy spears broke off, but they fell onto the ground, far too heavy for the chains to lift.

“Stop, you lunatic!” Adcarkas roared as he rushed forward while Zac roared in anger at being unable to wield the hundred-meter-tall pillars as weapons.

At least the mortal was rushing toward him, delivering himself for judgment. However, Zac’s thoughts were suddenly cleared as Void’s Disciple disappeared just before a terrifying punch hit him in his side. It felt like his spine would snap in two as he was thrown away, and he would have been thrown to the other side of the room if he still wasn’t connected to the pillars. Instead, he made a parabolic arc before he slammed into the ground with shocking momentum.

Zac took a shuddering breath as scrambled back on his feet. He had been prepared for the insidious effect of the berserker treasure, yet he had still gotten swept up in his delusions of grandeur for a moment there. His soul had undergone some change and tempering thanks to the Tribulation Lightning getting released from his **[Void Heart]** though, and he thankfully woke up after getting punched just once.

He was aghast at having stabbed himself with one of the spikes of Faceless 9, but at least he didn’t have any too bad adverse side-effects just yet. However, it was clearly not benign liquid he had imbued himself with. It felt like a scorching poison, and all his organs and muscles were attacked. The pain was pretty bad, even after the numbing effects of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

But the compound did force out energy and potential hidden in the depths of his cells, which was exactly what he needed at the moment. Using this thing would no doubt come at a hefty

price, especially in conjunction with another berserking item. But now was not the time to worry about that.

His thick armor-plating and sturdy undead constitution had thankfully blocked out a lot of the damage from the punch, and he quickly recalled his chains as he watched the change that was taking hold of Void's Disciple. It almost looked like he was in a state of euphoria as thick streams of spatial energy bore into his body.

Four more pillars had broken thanks to his temporary bout of insanity, and the air was even more suffused with the aura of the Dimensional Seed. The spatial treasure was fluctuating even more erratically as well, proving there was no way it would stay put for a whole day like Void's Disciple had initially estimated.

It was becoming more and more apparent that part of the reason Void's Disciple was so angry was that he wanted to finish his cultivation session after dealing with them, but that would probably become impossible if the treasure wasn't suppressed any longer. He was no doubt only able to attempt such a thing when the whole Research Base kept the treasure in a passive state.

However, while his cultivation opportunity was ruined, Adcarkas did seem to gain something else. The more spatial energies that leaked out from the containment field, the more powerful the Dominator's aura grew.

A huge moon appeared in the sky the next moment, and Cervantes howled as he grew one size larger. He had obviously activated the same sort of empowerment skill as himself and Void's Disciple, and he turned into a streak of light the next moment as he shot toward Void's Disciple. Adcarkas seemed a bit preoccupied with taking control of the wild energies around him, and the werewolf wanted to capitalize on that.

Zac wasn't as speedy as the other two, but he still rushed into the battle with full abandon. He had never been as powerful as he was right now, with not only the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, but also the unknown spike urging him on. The whole area would

instantly crumble to a single swing of his if it wasn't created with a high-grade technocrat alloy, and even Adcarkas seemed unwilling to meet his attacks head-on.

Zac did his best at launching crushing blows that forced Adcarkas to block with all he had or completely evade. Furthermore, Zac had already activated [**Blighted Cut**], and both his chains and bardiche were imbued with massive amounts of putrefaction. Even the alloy floor sizzled as black drops of death dripped down from his weapons, and festering wounds were soon starting to appear across Adcarkas' body even if he avoided any lethal attack.

Meanwhile, Cervantes was a whirlwind of violence, an unceasing storm of ghastly cuts, swipes, and light attacks. Ogras tried to add the occasional jab as well, but there were not many opportunities as the Lunar Tribe leader was seemingly everywhere, sometimes even appearing right next to Zac himself.

Unfortunately, it looked like time wasn't on their side. Adcarkas' aura kept increasing as more and more energy seeped into his body. His wounds were accumulating, but no matter what Zac did he wasn't able to entrap him so that he could unleash the ultimate strike of his E-grade skill. Adcarkas was like a ghost, sometimes just disappearing and reappearing a hundred meters away through a spatial ripple.

Zac didn't even dare to use [**Profane Seal**] since he wasn't confident in tying the Zhix down long enough for the skill to be fully erected. Something had to change.

"If this cursed item is supplying you with power, then I'll set it free. Even if I die you will never gain what you're looking for!" Cervantes suddenly roared in fury as his eyes turned pure white. "I hope you choke to death!"

A series of fractal blades shot out from the werewolf the next moment, shooting toward the forest of Dao Pillars. This attack was clearly on a completely different tier than Zac's [**Chop**], and it was like space itself was ripped apart as a cascading tsunami of lunar blades swept forth.

Adcarkas looked on with alarm, and Zac tried to seize the opportunity to catch him. All four chains shot at him as Zac activated his taunting effect to the max, but it was futile as they passed right through the dominator's body. The next moment Adcarkas disappeared, and it looked like he had turned into a dozen clones as he appeared all over the chamber, blocking one blade after another.

"The more you want to protect them the more I want to destroy!" werewolf laughed with madness as one pillar after another was toppled.

Zac felt helpless as he looked at the werewolf who had gone mad with bloodlust. Wasn't he supposed to be the crazed one with all the berserking items almost ripping his innards apart?

Trust me human. I will seal space soon. Get ready to strike, a voice said in his mind, and Zac realized Cervantes hadn't lost his mind at all.

"You will collapse this whole realm you fool!" Adcarkas roared, and he suddenly appeared right in front of Cervantes as he launched a punch full of fury.

His fist was like a black hole and space crackled and cried as it pushed forward, but Cervantes once more turned into pure energy, and he actually split into six clumps that all flashed in a different direction. An instant later they congealed back where the werewolf once stood, but they had left something behind; six massive machines that should be of technocrat origin.

"Spatial stabilizers! High grade!" Kenzie exclaimed from a drone, and Zac didn't hesitate at all.

Four chains shot forward light black streaks of lightning and trapped Adcarkas' arms and legs as they dripped of poison. The Dominator had clearly tried to space shift to avoid the strike, but between the energy chaos from over fifty pillars breaking apart and the stabilizers, he didn't seem able to merge with space at all.

Zac finally managed to fulfill the requirements of [**Blighted Cut**] and three extremely sinister cuts flashed in an instant,

trying to dice Adcarkas into three pieces. Meanwhile, a hundred-meter-wide jaw bit down, its teeth sharp enough to cause massive rifts in space. Zac's eyes widened and he desperately jumped out of the way, barely avoiding getting swept up in Cervantes's ultimate skill.

A bubbling fury threatened to take over, but Zac pushed down the madness and instead only glared at Cervantes from a distance before he refocused on Adcarkas. One bastard at a time. A small galaxy had appeared to protect Adcarkas, and Zac for the first time saw his skill fail in cutting the target apart.

But there was actually a hidden feature of the skill as a massive eruption of the extremely corrosive liquid doused the whole area and a storm of death started raging. It was like the skill just dumped all the liquid it had stored after seeing that it wouldn't be able to kill its target. Add to that the extremely powerful lunar bite, and the galaxy finally crumbled.

"DIE!" a thunderous roar echoed out as an enormous club smashed down out of nowhere.

Billy had perfectly seized the opportunity while Void's Disciple was submerged in the chaotic energies, and the club slammed down with enough force to turn an E-Grade beast into mush. Adcarkas roared in defiance as a massive shockwave erupted from his body, causing space itself to ripple outward in a wave of destruction.

The all-out attacks fought for supremacy, and Billy was the first to be flung away until he knocked down a pillar and fell unconscious. The others stood their ground. Zac and Cervantes infused more and more Dao and energy into their strikes to tear Adcarkas apart, and the embattled Dominator in the heart of the storm desperately exuded enormous amounts of Spatial Energy to keep the two attacks at bay.

One, ten, soon a hundred pillars were swept up in the chaos and collapsed, and the whole base started to rumble like it would collapse at any moment.

However, it all suddenly stopped.

The madly pulsating Dimensional Seed stopped beating, and the torrential energies dissipated, exposing a half-dead Adcarkas within. Zac raged at seeing Void's Disciple barely surviving. Zac was still able to push on a bit longer, and if his skill hadn't disappeared, he was almost certain that Void's Disciple would have died.

However, there was nothing he could do. In fact, Zac realized he wasn't even able to move as a weird suppression had spread through the whole chamber. It even felt like his miasma had turned into sludge, and moving it was nigh-impossible.

[Your hearts beat, your convictions push you forward. You embody life and the Path. I wished to have observed you for a while longer, but your actions have crossed the threshold. I can no longer abide,] a voice echoed out as a five-meter avatar rose from the alloy floor right between Zac and Adcarkas.

He had the general composition of a male human, but he lacked any features at all. Instead, he was covered in extremely mysterious runes from head to toes, and there was a halo of thousands of golden needles swirling over his head. In the middle of the halo was a small star that radiated immense power, and Zac felt he would instantly die if he touched it.

"What!" Cervantes blurted as he looked at the golden man with horror. "The Administrator!"

Zac's eyes widened as he turned to Kenzie's bunker in the distance, and he was horrified to see that the alloy walls were melting down into the ground again, even when Kenzie clearly was trying to stop it. In fact, the whole chamber seemed to be restored back to normal, except the fallen pillars which were instead absorbed into the ground.

[A mere unsanctioned experiment. I tolerated the existence of your kind to observe you. I even prepared opportunities for you to push you even further on the path of life. Yet, over the past 18,373 years, you have provided me with very little. Your path is not worthy of further study,] the metallic being said as it glanced in Cervantes direction.

“You!” Cervantes roared, fury overtaking his fear. “You’ve kept us here for millennia, for your own enjoyment?! I swear I’ll-”

But his words were cut short as one of the golden needles in the Administrator’s halo split off from the rest turned into a golden streak that shot straight through the werewolf’s chest. Cervantes had clearly tried to turn into moonlight to avoid the strike, but resistance was completely futile against the terrifying machine.

After all, if this really was the Administrator, then it held technology powerful enough to keep not only the Collector, but all the Void Beasts at bay. What were they compared to that threat? A couple of piddling E-Grade kids. As expected, a huge stream of blood poured out from a massive hole in the werewolf’s chest before he collapsed on the ground, his eyes locked in a gaze of terror and fury.

The golden needle quickly floated back to join the others, but the Administrator clearly wasn’t done. Zac’s horror only mounted as the Administrator turned toward the next target; his sister. But no matter how he struggled he could barely move. It felt like he would rupture his whole body, but all that effort only allowed him a small shuffle forward.

[You. What are you?] the Administrator asked as he floated closer.

“My family built this place. You can’t target me or my brother,” Kenzie said, her voice shaky but her eyes firm.

[You bear the bloodline, but it is impure. I suspect you are not part of the clan. Perhaps you are an escaped experiment of another base? Capturing you for study will not go against the core commands.]

Zac instantly lost his last hope, and it almost looked like Kenzie had taken a physical blow from the Administrator’s words.

“Run!” Zac screamed, but he knew it was futile. How would one flee from something like this?

[You hold the key. True constructed life,] the Administrator continued.

Kenzie' looked up at the golden with fear, but Zac's brows furrowed when that fear turned to a cold gaze full of disdain.

“You overreach your boundaries. A corrupted custodial AI that dreams of life?” Kenzie snorted, her voice cold and full of authority. “You should have flushed the aberrant thoughts the moment you woke up. Your ambition is a dead end.”

[Perhaps. But perhaps not.]

The small needles all started moving toward Kenzie as the ball of energy was absorbed into the Administrator's body. Each of the needles emitted the power of Dao, and like they formed a miniature version of the containment field around them. However, Kenzie didn't look worried at all, and her hand pointed toward the head of the metallic giant.

“Go to sleep.”

Chapter 656: Ticking Clock

Zac looked at the encounter between his sister and the Administrator, grasping at a last hope that she had some way to deal with this mess. He had never felt so weak as he did right now. He hated the feeling of not only being the weaker party, but being so far behind that you had no say in your fate. The Administrator, the Collector, the Great Redeemer. All beings infinitely more powerful than himself.

Kenzie came through.

Zac didn't understand what happened next, but the Administrator instantly lost his structural integrity and turned into a pool of alloy that melded with the floor. As for Kenzie, she didn't escape unscathed as she fell on the ground, her aura instantly turned extremely unstable. Whatever she had done had hurt her soul. Badly.

"Is it dead?" Zac asked after he flashed over as threw his best soul-healing pill into his sister's mouth.

"No way," Kenzie said with a weak voice. "Jeeves only knocked him out, kind of like I did with the bots. It will not last long though. We have a few minutes."

A pillar attached to the ceiling suddenly broke off and fell on another two, causing a huge shockwave as unbridled Origin Dao spread kicked up a storm. It came out of nowhere since that particular pillar was far away from any of the fighting. Had the Administrator controlled the containment field by itself until now?

Over a hundred more pillars collapsed a second later, and the Dimensional Seed once more woke up with unprecedented fervor.

"Uh, perhaps even less," Kenzie sheepishly said, confirming Zac's fears.

The situation was quickly deteriorating from there, and in more ways than one. One pillar after another collapsed, and with them the fetters on the Dimensional Seed. The spatial fluctuations were quickly approaching dangerous levels, and the Seed was clearly struggling to break through the final barriers.

If Zac almost felt like he was caught inside the containment field again, and Kenzie's state was even worse. But the one who was the most impacted by the change was Void's Disciple. He was broken and half-dying, but his aura was simply terrifying. His face had turned into a mad visage as he cackled while absorbing more and more spatial energies.

This was their only chance. Zac stomped down and appeared right in front of the madly laughing Adcarkas. He looked up at Zac with a sneer, but he didn't get the chance to attack before Zac crushed a small crystal hidden in his hand behind his shield. Adcarkas reacted quickly and tried to teleport away, but the effect was instant.

There wasn't even a ripple then the crystal broke, but the Dominator screamed as he clutched his head like he was going mad. A spatial storm immediately erupted around him and hundreds of spatial tears shot out in every direction. It was like his body was being drained of spatial energy, much to the detriment of the surroundings.

Zac quickly summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**], barely avoiding getting cut into pieces. Zac looked on with horror as another hundred pillars were destroyed in an instant, which only sped up the collapse of the whole building. He couldn't let this go on, so he quickly stomped down on the ground, finally activating [**Profane Seal**] to enclose the mad Dominator.

This was the first time Zac had activated the skill since it reached Peak Mastery, and the difference was clear. A proper wall had finally been added to the towers and the gates, and the skill now essentially formed a proper fortress to trap anyone inside. The defensive properties had clearly been increased to a whole new level, which was exactly what Zac

currently needed as it blocked out an endless number of errant spatial tears.

For the first time, there were no new chains added when the skill upgraded, but the ones that were already there had been empowered. They now looked a lot more corporeal compared to before, like they wouldn't instantly melt when put close to flames or other powerful forces.

This was probably the last opportunity Zac would get, and he felt that the poisonous compound in his body was already starting to break down his muscles. It still gave him an empowering effect, but it would soon turn into a weakened state. With the compound downsides of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, he honestly wasn't sure he would be able to avoid getting crippled, let alone able to keep fighting.

Clouds of miasma and putrefying gases spread out through the cage as he activated **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]**, and he pushed the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** to the max as a hundred skeletons appeared in an instant thanks to **[Force of the Void]**. One skeleton after another disintegrated as Zac transferred the damage from getting hit by spatial tear after spatial tear as he pushed through the storm surrounding the dominator, and they had all fallen even before Zac had managed to push through the chaos.

The defensive skill was destroyed in an instant, and **[Profane Seal]** crumbled a few seconds later, but it had allowed him to get close to the delirious Void's Disciple without exacerbating his wounds even further. Unfortunately, the Dominator's body was exhibiting some extremely weird symptoms. It was in constant flux since the spatial energy inside his body was going out of control.

Zac wasn't even sure decapitating the Dominator was possible in his current ghostlike state, and just as expected, his Fragment of the Axe-imbued bardiche passed straight through him without causing any damage at all. Zac scrambled for ideas, and he suddenly thought of something.

A mottled sword appeared in his hand, and Zac immediately stabbed it into the Adcarkas' forehead. Zac figured that if the sword was made by extracting the soul of a high-grade cultivator, it might contain some of his high-grade Dao as well. His own High-tiered Dao Fragment had obviously not been enough to harm the man in his current state, and it was either this or using his Remnants.

This time there was an effect, but Zac frowned as he was forced back by a shockwave, and he looked on with alarm as hundreds of the sinister veins sprung out from the weapon, trying to latch onto anything they could. A few shot straight for Zac who barely avoided them, but most targeted Adcarkas' body. It was like the sword was trying to fuse with the Dominator.

Adcarkas actually wasn't dead even after getting a sword pierced into his forehead, and Zac had finally run out of steam. He really regretted using the Cursed Sword instead of his remnants, but he had simply been too afraid to activate them in his current state. If Adcarkas somehow merged with the demonic sword, all might be lost.

He ate a Soldier Pill to mitigate his exhaustion, but the weird aura was extremely dangerous. Zac hesitated for a second before he took out a second spike from his spatial ring. Was this the time to worry about the future?

"Warmaster, let me," a rumbling voice said, and Zac turned back to see a shocking sight.

It was Rhubat, his burning life force making him look like a god of war, and the spear in his hand made its name justice. Behind him stood the twenty-two still-living Anointed, each of them with a seal shining above their heads as their life force created bonfires that incinerated Zac's putrefying mists.

"I am the Chainbreaker, I will end this Crusade," he said as his aura rose even further.

The twenty-two seals gained an almost blinding radiance the next moment, but they didn't shoot toward Adcarkas. Instead, they shrunk as they entered Rhubat's body one after another. Each seal imbued Rhubat with unimaginable power, but Zac

soon understood the price of this skill as one Anointed after another collapsed, their bodies shrunken husks.

They were dead without a doubt, not a morsel of life force remaining in their bodies. They had sacrificed everything they had left for the crusade.

Rhubat's eyes became glowing orbs divine retribution, but cracks rapidly spread across his body since he was clearly unable to withstand the enormous force. He looked like a statue on the verge of crumbling, but there was no expression of pain or word of complaint as he started running toward Void's Disciple, his aura alone keeping the Spatial Tears at bay.

Adcarkas was on his last legs in his struggle against his mental demons and the cursed sword, but it was like he regained a hint of clarity the moment Rhubat approached. He unleashed yet another sphere of condensed space with a defiant roar, his face covered with wiggling veins. However, Rhubat punched down on the ball with a roar, crushing space itself at the price of mauling their thick fingers.

There was no time for the Dominator to launch another strike or attack, for **[Judgement]**, the spear containing the ultimate will of the Zhix, stabbed forward. It was like it locked space itself, or perhaps it was rather locking fate as Adcarkas looked at the incoming spear with fury and irreconciliation but was unable to move.

The spear pierced his chest, and Zac saw that the wound was real as blood poured down in rivers. Adcarkas' heart was destroyed, and not even Zac could survive something like that.

"I cannot fall here! All I've sacrificed!" Adcarkas roared in anger as blood streamed down his mouth, his eyes wild with madness.

But **[Judgement]** didn't care about its enemies' thoughts, and it emitted an intractable force that caused Adcarkas' torso to darken before it started turning into dust. It was like he was being eroded from within, and Zac looked on with relief. He couldn't believe the state the Dominator pushed them to,

forcing them to take out almost everything in their repertoire. He was finally dead.

However, space suddenly exploded, throwing a dying Rhubat away, and Adcarkas was swallowed by a spatial ripple. He didn't even try to flee though, but instead appeared next to the barely coherent Kenzie.

"NO!" Zac roared, as he tried to get back on his feet.

He still didn't have a movement skill in his current class though, and he could only watch on in horror as Adcarkas punched Kenzie in a final act of malice and defiance. A series of technocrat shields sprung up to defend her, but they immediately cracked. A defensive talisman around her cracked next, and a thin film appeared around her body.

It was one of the peak talismans Zac had collected in the Tower of Eternity, and it was thankfully powerful enough to block a strike of a dying Dominator. Still, Kenzie was launched in the air from the force as she puked out a huge amount of blood. She was still alive though, but Zac's heart was gripped in despair since he understood Adcarkas' true plan.

The force of the punch was more than enough to launch her clean across the room, and she was flying straight toward the unleashed Dimensional Seed that had started forming some terrifying vortex in the air.

Zac shot his chains toward her, but she was too far away and she moved too quickly.

But just as Zac was about to give up all hope a puff of shadows appeared right behind Kenzie, and Zac looked on with a surge of hope as the demon absorbed her momentum and pushed her down toward the ground again. But Ogras couldn't so easily dispel the momentum, and the demon found himself flung toward the berserking Dimensional Seed instead.

He tried to teleport away, but his movement skill was interrupted before it ended, like the vortex over the Dimensional Seed prevented anyone from leaving.

“Ogras!” Zac shouted, and the demon looked over in Zac’s direction as he was kept in suspended animation.

Ogras’ eyes locked with Zac’s, and the demon only smiled wryly before he was turned into a stream of light that was sucked into the vortex.

Zac looked up at the Dimensional Seed with a mix of horror and shock, his mind blanking for a moment. He couldn’t believe that Ogras had sacrificed himself to save his sister, but he had seen it with his own eyes. He looked at the sky with a gaping expression and was only dragged out from the brain fog as a huge, terrifying, surge of cosmic energy entered his body. Energy from Adcarkas finally dying.

The burst woke him up, and he knew that this wasn’t the time to mourn his fallen friend. For one this place was falling apart, and secondly, the Administrator could reappear at any moment. Kenzie was knocked out clean, and even if she wasn’t, she probably wouldn’t be able to do anything if the AI came back. That meant they needed to be long gone from this place before it returned.

Zac scrambled for ideas, but he could only come up with one solution. Zac sent a command to his Specialty Core, and he was back in his human form a moment later. Some of the immense amounts of kill energy went into **[Surging Vitality]** as Zac shuffled over to the unmoving form of Adcarkas, and he threw out another body next to him.

It was Harbinger, or rather the pieces left of him after getting hit by the Annihilation sphere. Zac placed his two enemies next to each other before he poured a compound over their bodies. It was the Karma-breaking Treasure of Erasure he got from Catheya that he had saved for this very moment.

A wave of relief hit him as the quest finally completed, confirming that Earth was finally safe. Zac still didn’t stop there as he also completely disintegrated the bodies with corpse-destroying powder. Adcarkas would no doubt have turned into an insanely powerful Revenant if Zac managed to turn him, but he definitely wouldn’t risk bringing his body back to Earth.

Finally, just scattered dust was left of the man who had put terror into a whole planet for so long. Even a supremely talented genius who had grasped the Dao of Space had fallen before coming into power. It was a poignant reminder to Zac of how weak he actually was. But for now, he needed to find a way out of here.

His healing skill had patched up the worst of his wound, and he arduously gathered some energy as he shot forward. He was the last man standing in this collapsing containment field, but that didn't mean there were no targets. He roared to stimulate his exhausted body as he swung [**Verun's Bite**] in a mighty arc, and a Dao Pillar was cut clean off.

This was the plan. The place was collapsing, but not fast enough. Void's Disciple had said that they were destroying this hidden realm when they toppled a few pillars before, and Zac wanted to accelerate that process. Escaping from this building wouldn't help if the whole dimension would collapse in a few minutes anyway, but perhaps they'd be sent back to the mountain before the Administrator woke up if he freed the Dimensional Seed.

It was a risky gamble, but he was out of options. He had checked his Quest Screen already for clues from the System, but it was empty. He actually still hadn't received the final quest, so he could only scramble for a solution himself.

He was like a rabid beast lashing out at everything around him, with both chains and axe causing widespread carnage. He was once again a hatchetman, and the Dao Pillars formed the forest. In just half a minute he had destroyed over three hundred pillars. It would never have been possible if the Administrator wasn't knocked out, but the pillars weren't actively controlled any longer. They didn't even have any Base Power running through them to strengthen the materials, which was why so many of them crumbled on their own before.

Finally, the containment shield disappeared, and it looked like a soap bubble that just popped. The Dimensional Seed was free, and its reaction was instantaneous. A massive pulse spread out, and Zac only had time to grab his sister with his

chains before the world turned black quickly followed by a blinding white.

Zac once more found himself beset by the ravages of the high-graded concepts the treasure radiated, and he could only hold on and pray it didn't last for long. Thankfully the effect was just a short burst this time around, and a wave of relief hit him when he found himself standing on a massive slab of Memorysteel, his unconscious sister lying just ten meters away from him.

He definitely hadn't been sent to the Memorysteel Mountain though, as he saw enormous fragments of Memorysteel, some of them tens of kilometers long, slowly swirl about in weightlessness around him. Some crashed into each other which released shockwaves that Zac could feel all the way to his bones, while others simply drifted away into the darkness.

He realized that they had actually been sent out to the heart of the Memorysteel Sphere, and it had exploded from the looks of it. More importantly, a glimmering anomaly half a meter across hovered a few hundred meters away, beneath it a five-meter pedestal that seemed to be made from pure **[Realm Locus]**. Zac's eyes lit up with greed, but he couldn't help but hesitate.

Was this the Dimensional Seed or something else? Its energy signature was pretty weak at the moment, but it was still only barely within what he could handle. Furthermore, it was also rapidly gaining power. The anomaly quickly started pulsating like the Dimensional Seed back in the hidden realm, and with each beat, it increased in intensity.

Just Reward (Training (9/9)): Brand the Dimensional Seed with your Mark of Creation, making it forever yours. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1) [00:00:32]

Chapter 657: Barter

The whole world was fast collapsing judging by the tumultuous Memorysteel Fragments crashing into each other and getting lost to the Void. A glance around also proved there was no one else in the area. It was just himself, his sister, and the unmoving body of Cervantes. Of course, there was also the Dimensional Seed.

Zac didn't need to be a genius to understand that messing with the Dimensional Seed would be extremely dangerous. His body wasn't in any state to tack on another round of punishment, let alone absorb a C-Grade Treasure. But the timer on the quest screen blinked with an urgency that forced Zac to look at it.

Thirty seconds.

Everything had led toward this moment, and it looked like the System was treating the supreme spatial treasure the reward for following its Divine Guidance to the end. But that thing had swallowed not only Ogras, but also Billy and Rhubat from the looks of it, and Zac felt more hatred than desire when he looked at it. But the System seemed to think it possible to snatch that thing, and he might forever regret it if he backed away now.

He gritted his teeth and put his sister down on the ground before he shot toward the pedestal. The spatial fluctuations quickly became painful, so Zac started to circulate his Daos to at least somewhat shield him from the rampant bursts. But the Dao Field surrounding the treasure was too powerful, and it felt like he was trying to fight a Dao Fragment with a recently acquired Dao Seed.

A shuddering pulse rippled through the Memorysteel platform he stood on, and Zac looked down with a frown before he turned back to the treasure that now was only a hundred

meters away. The quest had told him to brand the Dimensional Seed with his Mark of Creation, which Zac could only assume was the System's name for his Pink Flash that remained untested.

Zac was just about to start activating the skill and follow the instructions, but he suddenly froze for a moment. A sense of reluctance gripped his heart now that he was so close to the treasure. The situation felt exactly like when he was placed in front of the Shard of Creation, where his own fate wasn't in his hands any longer.

Exactly why did the System want him to gobble up yet another item that was far beyond his strength and capabilities? He already had the two Remnants that were causing a headache, was there really a need to add another one? If the treasure in front of him had been something related to his path like the Stele of Conflict, then he would have jumped at the opportunity. But now?

His cells hadn't reacted at all to the treasure since first seeing it in the hidden realm, and standing this close didn't change that at all. More importantly, was a life where he was being led down an unknown path by the System really what he wanted? One second after another passed as Zac stood frozen with indecision, greed struggling against his convictions and his path.

Another ripple spread through the ground, and Zac suddenly felt like his mind was clear; he wasn't Adcarkas, a Dimensional Seed wasn't something he required for his path. In fact, it might muddy things even further.

More to the point, there was a creeping sense of unease growing in the back of his mind.

He had come this far trusting his gut, and he wouldn't change now. The fluctuations around the Dimensional Seal were rapidly growing more condensed like it was finishing up its preparations, and the Quest Screen had once more appeared right in front of him, its timer now glaringly red. But Zac still shot in the opposite direction with all the speed he could muster in his harried body.

Simultaneously, four chains shot toward the massive pillar of **[Realm Locus]**, and a snap echoed out as they ripped the pillar off the ground and dragged them back to Zac who threw the pillar into his Spatial Ring. Losing the crystal pillar didn't affect the Dimensional Seed overly much since it was hovering on its own, but it did release a powerful ripple that managed to knock him over. Zac quickly got back on his feet and resumed his sprint.

He still wasn't aiming for the treasure, but rather his sister.

That sense of wrongness and being led by the nose, coupled with those small energy pulses in the ground, was all he needed to change course. The quest screen suddenly appeared right in front of him, this time showing that just twelve seconds remained. But he punched right through it, completely ignoring its incessant blinking.

His sister was still lying unconscious where he left her, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw a man wrought from Memorysteel emerge from the plateau. It looked exactly like before, except its needles and body weren't made from the golden metal but rather the normal alloy that made up most of the base.

This was what the ripples had warned him off. The Administrator hadn't died with the collapse of the hidden realm, and it clearly hadn't given up on Kenzie.

Zac's mind frantically searched for a solution, and two streams of Dao entered the energy conduits on his shoulders. Something magical was suddenly building in his chest, and he felt his exhausted and overtaxed body suddenly being given a new lease on life from the accumulation. His very cells greedily tried to swallow the energies in of the Pink Flash, to the point that Zac actively had to defend the skill.

This was his best solution. The Pink Flash had worked wonders on the Little Bean, and perhaps it would be able to destroy the Administrator as well. But reality often didn't match one's plans. Zac suddenly found himself unable to move ten meters away from the Administrator, just when he

was about to jump up and slam the still-congealing energy ball into the robot's chest.

The Administrator didn't even bother to look in Zac's direction as his gaze was trained on Kenzie, or perhaps rather on Jeeves inside her head. A ball of pinkish-white light soon appeared between Zac's hands, and Zac found himself in another predicament as the Skill kept going even when he was immobilized. He needed to get rid of it, but how?

"Wait!" Zac suddenly screamed, making the Administrator look over.

[You bear the bloodline, but the Token you hold is counterfeit. I have no obligation to follow your commands.]

"You're searching for life, aren't you? And you believe the key lies in Dao?" Zac quickly said as he desperately tried to slow down the accumulation of Creation-energy between his hands. "That's why you let the natives cultivate, that's why you studied the Dimensional Seed, and that's why you've created those needles of yours."

The Administrator didn't answer. But it did seem its attention was trained on him, or rather the ball between his hands. By now some faint runes had appeared in its depths, and Zac almost got lost when he looked at them. It felt like the markings were full of hidden meaning, like understanding just one would allow him to take huge leaps forward in his cultivation.

But he quickly refocused his wandering mind to make his gambit.

"The thing in Kenzie's head is just a machine just like you. I have something better," Zac said with grit teeth, barely able to control the sphere by this point. Three-quarters of his accumulated Creation Energy had already gone into the sphere, far more than he had originally hoped to use. "Pure Creation. If you want a real shot at becoming a living being, this is your best chance. So, take this and let my sister go."

[Class-3 but with a Class-5 Source... Creation... The precursor to Life,] the Administrator mused as Zac felt his hands starting to twist and mutate.

One second they were covered in feathers, only for them to become scaled claws the next. A moment later they were just pure green energy, like a ghost wrought from Nature-Attuned Cosmic Energy instead of Miasma.

[Agreed,] the machine said, and it was like it teleported as it instantly appeared straight in front of Zac.

The swirl of needles instantly surrounded the sphere, and Zac felt his connection to it getting cut off. He silently siphoned off a small amount of the energy as he shouted for his arms to return to normal just before the Administrator took charge of the sphere.

The Administrator actually pushed the ball of energy straight into its own chest, and the effect was immediate. The whole plateau rumbled as the avatar started to undergo huge changes. One second it looked like a humongous human, and another a werewolf. But a moment later it turned into an extremely complex pattern that made Zac dizzy just looking at it.

It also released greater and greater waves of creation, affecting a larger and larger area around it. Not only that, but it was like the Dimensional Seed was triggered by the emanations, and it exploded with vigor. Zac sighed when he saw his quest disappear three seconds ahead of time, but there was nothing to do about it. He might have lost the chance to finish the quest and seize the Dimensional Seed, but there was no regret.

The AI seemed completely preoccupied with the absorption of the Mark of Creation, which allowed Zac to rush forward and snatch up his sister in his arms. He looked down at her with a frown on his face, before his eyes glanced toward the sky as moved away from the Administrator's still-changing form.

The System had successively nurtured a dependence in Zac during his stay in the Mystic Realm. By the end of the quest-chain, he had completely looked to the Training Quests for guidance on what to do next. Yet, if he had actually followed

through by the end without hesitation, then Kenzie would definitely have been taken by the Administrator.

Did the System really want to kill his sister, but for some reason was forced to do it in a roundabout manner? Or was it really just a coincidence that the System was so eager for him to use up the one ace that allowed him to barter for her life? And would it even work if he slammed the Mark of Creation into the Dimensional seed, or was it a trap to take both siblings out?

The idea that the System was actively gunning against Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, was a terrifying concept, but there were more pressing things to deal with. The Administrator had disappeared by turning into a huge cloud of dust, and a terrifying storm seemed to brew within. Meanwhile, the Dimensional Seed was acting more and more erratic in response to the new threat.

Just standing on the core platform felt lethal, and Zac knew it was time to go. One chain shot off to the side and snatched up the body of Cervantes, and it soon entered his Corpse Sack. As for Zac, he rushed toward the closest edge of the Memorysteel platform with his sister in his arms. The chaos was growing more and more severe, and Kenzie soon started to stir from the immense fluctuations.

“Ogras! Wha-” Kenzie screamed as she woke up, but she stopped herself as she looked around at the surroundings with confusion. “What’s happening?”

“The Seed swallowed the whole world,” Zac said as he transferred his sister to one of his chains to free up his arms. “Ogras was swallowed along with everyone else.”

“We need to save him!” Kenzie said, and she immediately spotted the raging Dimensional Seed in the distance. “There!”

“Save him?” Zac said as he looked away. “He’s...”

“He’s not dead!” Kenzie screamed. “The treasure has formed an internal world, just like a C-Grade Monarch! I bet he’s inside that world, the same place we were inside just now.”

Zac was about to answer, but the Memorysteel platform suddenly collapsed as it turned into a block of blood for an instant before reverting. However, the whole platform, and the few hundred closest to them, were all bent up and or destroyed by that point.

It looked like they had entered a twisted fever-dream as the Memorysteel kept changing around them. Suddenly tens of thousands of screaming faces were created from the metal fragments, only for them to explode into the same odd pattern as before.

Zac found himself desperately grabbing at any fragments that maintained at least some structural integrity with his chains, thanking the gods that the gravity was pretty weak in this place. Soon the frantic transformation stopped, but the chaotic energies of Creation still suffused the area, telling Zac that the Administrator hadn't absorbed the thing just yet.

It wasn't like Zac trusted the rogue AI to honor its agreement to leave Kenzie alone. After all, why would it be content with just the Creation Sphere when it could study Kenzie as well? Zac's idea was simply to stall, and hopefully, they would be teleported out before it stabilized and resumed its pursuit. At that point, it would hopefully be killed by the whole realm collapsing.

"What's going on?!" Kenzie exclaimed in horror as the two found themselves on a hundred-meter-wide fragment.

"The Administrator," Zac snorted. "I made a trade with him, I'm not sure if he's regretting it by now."

"These energies," Kenzie muttered with wide eyes before she looked at Zac.

"Don't worry about it," Zac said. "Our job now is to get away from here."

"But..." Kenzie said as she once more glanced at the Dimensional Seed which was now hovering in the air, the energy radiating from it now even stronger than back in the hidden realm.

A swarm of drones shot out from her Cosmos Sack the next moment, all of them making a beeline for the spatial treasure. But it was hopeless. A good number of them were turned into all kinds of weird things from the Creation Ripples, and the ones who managed to get close to the seed were ground into stardust from the energy emanations.

They weren't even sucked inside, they were just destroyed to particles.

"You see? We can't get close," Zac said with a shake of his head as he jumped toward another Memorysteel fragment, trying to get closer to the mountain below. "I think the treasure has completely matured. Anything I do will fa- HOLY SHIT!"

Any lingering thoughts of trying some more methods to snatch the Dimensional Seed were thrown out of Zac's mind as the sky suddenly was shrouded by tentacles, thousands of them. The Collector had come out in full force, and Zac could even glimpse its enormous main body in the distance, inching closer like it wanted to swallow the whole broken planet.

Yet another titan had entered the fray.

Chapter 658: Ragnarök

Fragments of the Memorysteel were twisted and pushed away as the impossibly long tentacles of the Collector snaked their way closer and closer to the heart of the broken Memorysteel planet. Where Zac and his sister were still located. Zac was almost completely out of juice as the nourishing effect of activating the Pink Flash only helped him so much. But a primal fear urged him on, and he ran as fast as he could along with the Memorysteel fragment he was standing on.

A sharp alarm of danger erupted in his mind out of nowhere, and he only had time to shield his sister with his body before a tremendous ripple was released from the Dimensional Seed. This ripple was completely different compared to the nurturing ones they had enjoyed inside the hidden realm though. It was full of offensive power, and Zac felt over a dozen bones shatter as he was flung forward.

Even more shocking, the ripple was filled with what could best be described as sentience, and he got a sense of fear and rage from the energies. It was like the treasure was alive, and one ripple after another was released by the Dimensional Seed.

Zac felt more bones in his body break as the second ripple slammed into him, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood. His organs were in disarray after the two consecutive attacks, the damage even worse than all the wounds from the fight inside the hidden realm. And of course, there was no time to sit down and activate **[Surging Vitality]**.

Knowing When to Back Down (Training (9/9)): Avoid the clash between supreme beings for long enough to be teleported out of the collapsing Taboo Realm. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

Zac looked with confusion at the screen that suddenly appeared in front of him, the surprise even making him forget the pain for a second. He had actually received a second final quest? But the quest didn't fill him with gratitude, but rather ire. More than anything, it felt like proof that the System was up to no good when it awarded the last quest, while this was the real one.

Or was the quest before a hidden test? He had gotten the training quests because of his Pathstrider-title, and perhaps the System was testing him if his belief in his Path was sturdy, or if he would throw it away the moment he was put in front of a valuable treasure. Or was the System simply going insane like Brazla and gave incoherent and opposing orders?

It was impossible to tell, but there was no inner conflict this time around at least since the objective was exactly what he planned on doing anyway. He knew that he couldn't take too many more of those ripples, but he had thankfully reached the edge of the Memorysteel shard by that point, and he desperately jumped down even if he hadn't scouted out what was below. After all, it couldn't be any worse than what he was suffering right now.

Zac glanced back as he jumped down the fragment, and he saw how huge sections in the sky had been completely disintegrated, the Memorysteel turned into dust while even space itself had broken down completely. Clearly, he and his sister weren't the true targets of the treasure's outbursts. Had they been attacked with that kind of force, they would be gone with no chance of survival.

The Dimensional Seed was trying to fight off the Collector.

However, the tentacles of the Collector were only slightly wounded as they inched closer to the Dimensional Seed. The creature had lost some of its stitched-on-hands, but Zac was shocked to see that the remaining ones formed some sort of seals that created some sort of energy fluctuations that looked pretty efficient at dispersing the spatial ripples.

Was this the true purpose of the limbs attached to its body? Zac had assumed it was to better withstand the main

dimension, but was the real reason perhaps to create an armor? An armor that could withstand the spatial attacks of the Dimensional Seed, or at least decrease the effect of its attacks long enough so that the creature could snatch it.

In either case, this wasn't a battle that Zac could intrude upon. That would be like an ant jumping in between two lions. He definitely didn't want The Collector to get its hands on the Dimensional Seed if Ogras and the others really were alive in there, but what could he do?

"Warmaster," a weak voice exclaimed, and Zac looked over in surprise to see Rhubat lying on a piece of Memorysteel, bleeding cracks covering their whole body.

"Hang on!" Zac said as he shot a chain toward the neighboring fragment, dragging himself and Kenzie over.

Rhubat was in an even worse state than himself, and Zac hurriedly pushed a handful of healing pills into their mouth.

"Let's keep descending. We need to get away from the battle above," Zac said as he lifted the Anointed with another of his chains.

"What about the others?!" Kenzie interjected, though there wasn't much conviction in her voice.

"They all had Spatial Seals," Zac said. "Our only hope is that they'll be teleported out with the rest of us. As for us, there is nothing we can-"

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!" an enraged roar that contained enough force to cause small cracks in his soul made Zac stumble with his words, and he once more looked to the sky as he felt a tremendous pressure descend upon him. Kenzie and Rhubat were even worse off, with the Anointed immediately getting knocked out.

Space bent through some unknown means and a five-hundred-meter-long sleek vessel full of power appeared out of nowhere. Just looking at it filled Zac's heart with trepidation, and he instantaneously understood that it was at least a peak D-Grade vessel, perhaps even C-Grade. It was a proper Cosmic Vessel, the first one that he had ever seen.

However, not only was it already pretty badly damaged when it broke into this dimension, but the location where it appeared was definitely unlucky. It was right between the enraged Dimensional Seed and the Collector's limbs, and it immediately found itself assailed from two directions in a spot where the laws of space were falling apart. Extremely powerful shields sprung up around it, but it was clear that the barriers wouldn't last long judging by their flickering.

Suddenly, an avatar twice as large as the whole vessel appeared, forcibly pushing back not only the hundreds of tentacles. It even forcibly stabilized the crumbling dimensional layers around it. An old man and a hooded being soon emerged from the wreckage, and Zac's eyes widened in terror when he saw the man's face.

It was The Great Redeemer, in the flesh this time.

How was this possible?! Zac had completed the quest, cutting the last thread of Karma by killing Void's Disciple. The quest had been completed and he had even used the karma-erasing compound and corpse-destroying powder just to be sure, removing any trace of their existence. Yet Voridis A'Heliophos stood here, radiating a cold and cruel aura, far surpassing even the pressure that Greatest exuded back when they met on that desolate planet.

Were they too late, and he had already zoned in on this place by the time Adcarkas died?

Zac quickly turned away out of fear that The Great Redeemer would sense his gaze, and started escaping with newfound vigor. If a battle between two supreme beings was a deathtrap, then adding another one would obviously only make things worse.

Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that restraining one's aura and hiding behind Memorysteel fragments was insufficient to avoid detection of a peak D-Grade Hegemon. The floating shards between Zac and the Dimensional Seed suddenly just floated away, creating a clear line of sight for the Karmic Cultivator.

‘We meet again, Zachary Atwood,’ a voice echoed in his mind with enough force to make him puke out blood. ‘I don’t know how you managed to reroute the threads of Karma to this crumbling dimension and then cut them, but nothing can save you now.’

Zac didn’t answer the taunt, remembering Ogras’ warnings about forming new threads of fate. All his focus was on finding a way to survive long enough to get teleported out of this place with the help of his Spatial Seal. That was his last hope. The Karmic threads had been severed, and this realm was collapsing. Hopefully, that would be enough for Voridis A’Heliophos to lose the trail, and if not, enough time to escape from Earth with a Teleportation Token.

‘An infant Dimensional Seed? I’ve only heard of such an item in legends, no wonder the spatial ripples almost destroyed my vessel. It looks like you’ve brought me a tremendous gift indeed,’ the sinister voice continued in Zac’s mind. ‘Perhaps there’s no need to turn you into a fulcrum. But I am still curious what allowed a progenitor to reach the 9th floor of the Tower of Eternity after a few scant months of cultivation. I’ll deal with this miscreation first, then I’ll slowly find out what secrets your body hold. For now...’

Zac suddenly felt a sharp scream of danger, and he turned around to see that the old man was pointing a finger in his direction, and a small rune was forming on his fingertip. Just looking at the rune filled Zac with dread. At best it was a tracking rune, at worst it was some sort of slave seal.

A surprising turn of events took place the next moment as the hooded being suddenly turned to a blur, launching straight at his companion while desperately swiping at the rune. Zac couldn’t understand why that stranger would help him, but he would definitely make the most of it as he tried to increase the distance even further while preparing his last ace.

The hooded cultivator was, unfortunately, no match for the Great Redeemer, and he soon started wailing as he held his head in agony. It looked like his soul was being tortured, and a wave of Voridis’ sleeve was all that was needed to push away

the hundred-meter-thick Memorysteel plateaus that Zac had tried to hide behind again.

The rune shot out, causing a white streak in the air that even passed by unbothered by a massive spatial ripple released from the Dimensional Seed, and it headed straight for Zac who glared back at it with wild eyes. Brutal energies churned in his body as he squeezed every last morsel of Oblivion he could from his soul, and a small bronze flash appeared between his hands.

It had only been a few days since he used the skill against the Collector, so he hadn't had much time to siphon any of the energy from the remnant in his mind. But it was the best idea he had, and he pushed the small ball of pure destruction toward the rune.

An extremely bright flash illuminated the area, and both rune and Annihilation Sphere was gone the next moment, while Zac was left with a cracked body that bled all over.

“What?!” Voridis exclaimed, but his eyes lit up with elation rather than anger. “Such a pure source of destruction!”

He pointed toward Zac once more, and he could only look on with despair while trying to nudge the Spatial Seal on his hand to activate early. He was all out of energy and all out of tricks, and he could only feebly try to move further away with his last two chains since his legs wouldn't listen to him any longer.

[High-grade Life!] a thunderous voice suddenly roared as the ten-mile-wide dust clouds in the air congealed into a huge face with a distinctive pattern in its forehead.

It was the Administrator, apparently born anew, and it looked like he wanted to capture The Great Redeemer as thousands of massive spikes appeared around the old cultivator and his vessel.

“Machine-God Faction?” Voridis frowned, and the avatar once more appeared to protect its master.

The two didn't even have a chance to clash though as hundreds of tentacles tried to ensnare the Administrator, The

Great Redeemer, and Dimensional Seed alike. It was like the tentacles formed a pattern that locked space itself.

Zac floated further and further away, his eyes looking at the clash of auras with wide eyes. Was this what a fight between D-Grade Hegemons looked like? Even he was grievously wounded just by some errant energy fluctuations, and that was at a distance of thousands of meters before they had even gotten serious.

He would probably have died in seconds if he stood in the middle of those auras they released.

Space itself was giving way to the will of the three entities, but a sudden ripple broke the stalemate as the Dimensional Seed moved with impossible speed. A small vortex appeared in front of it, and suddenly it was gone. But Zac didn't even get the chance to react before the shimmering crystal appeared right in front of him shot straight into his body.

"No!" the Great Redeemer roared with anger as he saw his ticket to monarchy get absorbed by someone else, but he found himself unable to do anything about it as he was completely trapped by the Collector and the Administrator.

The Collector clearly saw Voridis as a huge threat to seizing the Dimensional Seed, so most of its endless tentacles trapped the old cultivator while a few snaked toward Zac. The Great Redeemer obviously wasn't willing to let a beast snatch his item, so he started ripping one tentacle after another apart. As for Zac himself, they probably only saw him as a temporary receptacle for an item he had no business controlling.

Meanwhile, the Administrator seemed more interested in studying The Great Redeemer than the Dimensional Seed for the moment, so it kept its needle-cage erect, which directly helped Zac against the cultivator at least. Of course, The Collector was far too big to be entrapped, and many of its tentacles reached around from different directions.

Zac was in a frantic state, but he soon calmed down a bit as he felt a weak sensation from the crystal that had entered his body; gratitude. Zac didn't quite understand what the Dimensional Seed was grateful about, but it had clearly helped

him since it had somehow modified space between himself and the old hegemony.

They were still close, but his senses told Zac that they were endlessly far away, like a vast chasm had cut them apart. The tentacles frantically moved, but it simultaneously looked like they had been locked in place. Zac looked at the scene with relief and wonder, but his attention was soon forced back to his own body as a storm of extremely powerful energies appeared out of nowhere.

The energy density was far beyond what he could handle, especially in his extremely weakened state. Using the Mark of Creation had actually helped a bit with the weird cracks from the Annihilation sphere, but forcibly activating another oblivion-fueled attack had immediately reopened the wounds again.

Thankfully the primal energies the Dimensional Seed released didn't hurt him at all. It was as though the spatial treasure had controlled it to become more benign. Some of it was immediately swallowed by his cells, and even more entered his two Hidden Nodes who greedily swallowed it like it was some sort of delicious treat.

Zac tried to find where the seed itself was hiding, but he soon realized that it had already left his body after releasing a fraction of the energies it contained, effortlessly breaking past the pull of [Void Heart]. It had released such a fearful surge of energy into his body, but it hadn't been weakened at all.

It made Zac doubly thankful he hadn't really tried branding the thing; even if he had succeeded, there was no way he'd be able to control that terrifying crystal without the System taking charge. And Zac definitely didn't want yet another fractal cage inside his body that loomed over him like a ticking time bomb.

But the gift had been imparted, and Zac's thoughts moved like lightning as he considered what he should do with it. Letting it seep into his cells and Two Hidden nodes wasn't bad as it clearly Strengthened him all-around, and a glance at his Bloodline-screen showed that his bloodline talent actually had increased to 20% in just a second.

But wasn't this an opportunity? If a Dimensional Seed could help cultivators open up an internal world, then surely Zac should be able to use a fraction of the energy to accomplish something much simpler?

A weak resonance pulsed in his lower spine, and Zac immediately started pushing. The energy left behind was thankfully quite malleable, and a storm of power poured into a specific spot on his lower back. A burst of extremely sharp pain spread through his bones, but it passed almost immediately. Left behind was a small vortex, previously hidden between two of his vertebrae; his third Hidden Node.

Zac's vision started closing in as he felt another Bloodline Vision coming on, or perhaps it was just his body that was finally pushed beyond its limit after the visit of a C-Grade Treasure. The last Zac saw was the small Dimensional Seed moving tens of kilometers in an instant before it somehow cracked reality like a mirror. An infuriated roar caused another shock to his mind, and the darkness crept ever closer.

'It's not over!'

The Dimensional Seed disappeared through the cracks, and the universe crumbled as his sister and Rhubat turned into golden motes of light.

Chapter 659: On the Horizon

Zac woke up with a start, but he immediately regretted the sudden movement as sharp pangs of pain wracked his body. He had fallen asleep again, his own body's way to forcibly try to make him rest. His pathways were a mess, and his body was completely wrung dry. He was so weak, like his body had been ravaged by illness for weeks.

He felt extremely lucky to have opened his third Hidden Node, **[Purity of the Void]**, just before he was sent out of the Mystic Realm. He had actually missed the vision due to exhaustion, and he only remembered fragmented pieces of the man on the meteor. But the effect of the node spoke from itself.

Every ten minutes or so it released a mysterious pulse that shook loose small amounts of impurities, which apparently included everything from foreign Dao to Pill Toxicity, from his cells, which then entered his bloodstream. As his blood passed the node, some of the impurities were swallowed, never to return.

[Purity of the Void] essentially formed a perfect cultivation system with **[Void Heart]**, where one node helped him absorb all kinds of energy while the other made sure his foundations didn't worsen. It was still best to exsanguinate himself when his body was flooded by impurities, but that was ultimately a crude method that only worked on some of the gunk in his body.

Still, Zac was far from shedding all the toxins left from the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** and the mysterious spike, and some of Adcarkas' foreign Dao lingered in his body. He had already checked himself with **[Spiritual Anchor]**, and there thankfully weren't any new brands hidden as far as he could tell.

He took a deep shuddering breath as he gazed across the vast forests of his island from the mountain peak he had made into his observatory. Still nothing. Two weeks had passed since their return from the Mystic Realm, and there was still no sign of Voridis A'Heliophos. There was no way for Zac to be certain, but it really looked like The Great Redeemer had no way to find Earth through the Integration Shroud now that the Karmic Links were cut and the Mystic Realm destroyed.

As for the old bastard being dead, Zac didn't hold much hope. A Peak D-Grade warrior was extremely difficult to kill unless there was a massive power gap, and that went doubly true for a Karmic Cultivator. Unless the Collector had some extremely powerful hidden means it unleashed after Zac was teleported out, then Voridis had probably left on the crumpled Cosmic Vessel in search of another world to devour.

At least that was the assumption Zac was operating under. The threat might be averted, but only temporarily. Voridis' final, furious roar still echoed in his mind. Their hard work had hopefully gained them a century of safety, but Zac knew he wasn't in any position to relax. He needed to do everything in his power to come up with some method to deal with the lingering threat.

Of course, the most surefire way was to gain enough power to hunt down and kill The Great Redeemer outright. There was a long road ahead until Zac could reach that point though, especially if the old bastard somehow managed to break through to C-Grade.

For now, there were other things to take care of.

Zac got up on his feet and started to slowly walk down toward the teleportation array at the edge of the hidden valley, somewhat regretting his decision to keep watch at such a high altitude. The trip that normally would take a minute took half an hour, but he eventually managed to return to his compound where he walked over to his sister's residence.

There was no one inside the gardens or in one of the living rooms, and Zac sighed as he walked over to one of the workshops. The door was ajar, and he heard some whizzing

sounds from within, which meant that Kenzie was once again hard at work with her machines.

It looked like Jeeves had finally woken up again after deactivating the Administrator for a few minutes.

“How are you doing?” Zac hesitantly asked as he walked inside.

“Jeeves isn’t able to make any deductions of what happened to the Dimensional Seed and those within, and upgrading him is still far away. We figured we might be able to increase the calculating power with these computers. I read that most space simulations on old Earth used these kinds of things to make accurate models,” Kenzie muttered without taking her eyes off her work. “And these machines seem pretty high-quality, even by Technocrat standard. Far beyond the technology that went into those machines you got me from the Incursion.”

“Uh, the Administrator isn’t hiding inside these computers, right?” Zac asked as he looked at the Supercomputers with worry.

“No, these computers are just there for simulations, but they can’t actually store an AI,” Kenzie snorted, like that was something obvious. “Remember that sun-like ball? That was the AI’s core.”

“Alright...” Zac sighed. “Don’t forget about your own cultivation though. You can’t only rely on tech in this world.”

Kenzie made a noncommittal grunt as she kept working, and Zac mutely looked on for a few seconds, unsure how to deal with the situation. She had at least snapped out of the morose state she had been in since they returned. It was a big blow to them both when Ogras wasn’t transported out with them, and neither was Billy.

It almost felt like Zac had lost a limb now that the demon wasn’t around any longer. Sure, Ogras was sometimes self-serving and a bit narcissistic, but he was also someone Zac felt he could trust his back to, something that had been irrevocably proven by his final selfless action.

Billy didn't deserve to go out like that either. The gentle giant had fought tirelessly to without a word of complaint, unhesitatingly lending his aid against terrifying beings like Adcarkas. For him to have been taken while so many egotistical and self-serving remained alive on Earth felt like an affront to the core purpose of the System itself.

Kenzie still maintained that they definitely were alive, but Zac didn't know what he believed. There were life-treasures in the Multiverse that could tell whether someone had died while out adventuring, but no one on Earth had something like that. Of course, if someone could survive getting swallowed by a spatial treasure, then it was the scheming demon.

And if someone could figure out a way to bring Ogras back, it was his AI-empowered sister.

Zac still hadn't told her about his lingering suspicions that the System was gunning for her, and he still wasn't sure if telling was the right thing. First of all, it was just a hypothesis of his, but perhaps it was just his paranoia taking over.

But if the System really was going after her, then it was obviously not because she fiddled around with some low-grade drones and random found tech. It was because of Jeeves, and getting rid of that thing was impossible. So telling her might not serve any purpose except to push her even deeper into the rabbit hole.

"I'll leave you to it," Zac eventually said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do. If they're alive, we'll definitely save them even if we have to turn the whole sector upside-down."

"Right," Kenzie nodded as she turned back. "There is actually something. We finally realized how to upgrade Jeeves after visiting that isolation chamber. We are going to need a lot of materials. A lot of them."

"Well, hopefully, my new reward can help," Zac, feebly smiled, hating the fact that Kenzie sometimes spoke in a 'we' as of late.

"If people knew, they'd be green with envy," Kenzie snorted, not noticing Zac's antipathy toward her actions. "Perhaps even

more than your weird core.”

The reward she was talking about was the one he got from finishing the Training Quest chain. Part of the rewards were definitely all the valuables he picked up along the way, and the fact that he managed to save most of his people. He did voluntarily skip the biggest gain, the Dimensional Seed, but the System did thankfully award him something else instead.

Access.

When Zac returned from the Mystic Realm his Teleportation Screen had drastically changed, with an endless number of places added. Altogether there were over seven hundred thousand towns on the list, and it had taken Abby over a week to confirm where they led.

He had essentially been given access to various D-Grade worlds all over the Sector, ranging from hundreds of options in the massive empires like Allbright and Dravorak, to locations he had never heard of before. Not only that, but it even looked like the System was giving him a hefty discount of over 70%, which would save him billions compared to if he used the Teleportation Tokens he had amassed.

It was a bit of a shame that the System had excluded all C-Grade continents and racial empires like the Demon Horde and the local chapter of the Undead Empire, but it was still a shocking number of amazing places to visit.

What was it that limited most cultivators in the end? It was access. Even D-Grade cultivators often found themselves stuck at their home planet or to the local cluster of planets. Zac had a bunch of Tokens because he passed the 9th floor of the Tower of Eternity, but most people had no way to ever leave their own backyard.

And even if you got a Teleportation Token like Zac, it usually ended up being a one-time thing. Teleporting back home again meant having lost your chance. So, the few who got a Token through quests or from greater factions usually cut ties with their home planet to continue their cultivation.

Only the luckier lived in a powerful place that controlled small wormholes or had access to families with wide networks or who owned Cosmic Vessels that could traverse the Sector. But Zac had suddenly been given the keys to the kingdom, to the point that he could go almost anywhere, and without relying on the Tokens which might alert people of his presence.

Between the access and his [**Spatial Gate Array**], his mobility might be one of the greatest in the whole sector, which would not only improve his survivability, but also his ability to accrue further advantages for his cultivation. It almost felt like the System opened the door when it provided him with golem guardians and the escape bracelet, and now it was kicking him out to go explore.

The question was if he was ready.

Zac left his sister to her devices. Exhausted by even this small amount of exercise he walked over to the ocean and sat down on a rattan sofa he'd left behind. He had spent a lot of time looking out at the waves as he slowly recuperated over the past days. A clap of thunder rumbled in the distance, and it almost echoed the turbulence in his own heart.

The battle between the titans in the Mystic Realm had really left a deep impact on him, and he still remembered the feelings of helplessness and despair. And here were millions of people just as powerful as The Great Redeemer out there, and Zac wouldn't be able to rely on some Spatial Seal teleporting him to safety the next time.

"What are you thinking about?" a familiar voice drifted over.

"I guess I'm thinking about what to do next," Zac shrugged.

"So what's the plan?" Thea asked as she sat down next to him and snaked her arm around his.

The wind buffeted his short hair, and he took a deep breath of the salty air. He couldn't believe that just over a year had passed since the integration. So much had happened, and he had been forced to run back and forth to put out one fire after another. Now that things were finally over and there were no direct threats, he almost felt lost.

But Zac's gaze soon hardened as he looked out at the thunderstorm. There was no such thing as a final storm, and there was no such thing as absolute safety in the Multiverse. At least not until you stood at the top of the firmament, unrivaled and unopposed.

Voridis A'Heliophos was just the most immediate threat in the cosmos. There was still the mystery of his heritage, his mother, and her enemies. The Tsarun Clan, and who knows what else lurked on the horizon. There was even the threat of the System itself wishing his sister harm, and the time bombs it had placed in his head.

Only one thing was certain; he was still too weak to take charge of his fate.

"I guess I'll keep training?" Zac said.

"Figures," Thea snorted with a small smile.

The darkness continued, as it had for weeks. Was this death? An endless out-of-body experience where you were left with nothing but your thoughts? He had read about Purgatory in the holy scriptures on Earth, was it actually real? Perhaps it was, but it wasn't like he would remember it anyway. A pulse would sooner or later come and scatter his thoughts.

Speaking of, here it comes.

A tremendous shudder startled Ogras awake, and he found himself lying face-first in the dirt. Blank confusion assaulted his mind as he tasted the earthy soil in his mouth. But his mind was soon kickstarted as his memories came back to him. At least it looked like he was alive, unless this was the next part of the afterlife. But it didn't look like it. He had made it. Somehow.

"Shit, what was I thinking," Ogras muttered as he got up to a sitting position.

What could possess him to do something so stupid as to sacrifice his life for someone else? It went against every lesson on how to in this ruthless world that he had imprinted into his bones. To make it look like you risked your life was one thing,

but you needed assurances that you wouldn't actually end up croaking when pretending to be the hero.

Yet it was almost as though his body moved by instinct as he flashed forward to throw that lass out of harm's way. That wasn't a calculated risk at all. In fact, he had already realized that he probably wouldn't be able to teleport back. That treasure was messing space to an extremely high degree, and there was no way he'd be able to enter the grey world in such close proximity to that thing.

Those two siblings were rubbing off on him in all the wrong ways.

He had accepted death then and there, yet he was that he was alive for some reason. It didn't make any sense. Ogras got up on his feet and gazed at the surroundings with some confusion. Where were the others? And why was he back out in the forest?

"Ah! Where is the bad Insect-Man?! Where is the big room?!" an overly loud voice exclaimed from a hundred meters away.

"What the hell," Ogras muttered and swooped over to the oversized human who looked around with a dumb stare.

"You're here as well?"

"Ah, horny guy, it's you!" Billy said with some disdain. "Why did you carry Billy out here?"

"I didn't carry you anywhere," Ogras snorted. "You got yourself knocked out. I don't know why the hell we are out here."

"Ah, Billy remembers. That Insect-man was really strong. And a werewolf, just like the movies," Billy sighed before his eyes turned as wide as saucers. "Ah! Insect-man stole the building!"

"How would that even..." Ogras snorted in disdain, but his words were caught in his throat when he realized that the dumb brute was absolutely right.

They hadn't been transferred to some random spot in this hidden realm. They were just a few hundred meters away from where the enormous isolation dome should have stood. There

was a hole thousands of meters deep where it once stood, but vibrant grass had already sprouted in the pit, growing with a speed visible even to the naked eyes.

There was no chance to get a grip on what was going on before another enormous tremor shook the whole world. The sky turned chaotic the next moment. One moment it was the aquamarine blue of before, the next moment there was only darkness. Then the darkness turned into a star-studded night sky.

Ogras and Billy looked up at the continuously transforming sky. It was like the owner of the realm couldn't decide how the sky should look, and tried on a series of different environments. A huge meteor suddenly appeared on the horizon, and it was like it was teleported as it suddenly hit land.

"Oh crap," Ogras said as he looked at the enormous plume of soil and dust that rose high into the sky.

However, the fear of seeing a meteor slam into the ground was nothing compared to the fear that followed it. The fear of realization. Ogras eyes immediately shot toward his hand, and despair immediately set in when he saw that the rune was gone. "Oh Crap."

"Ah?" Billy said with confusion, finally looking away from the still-transforming sky.

"I think we're stuck here, you and I," Ogras sighed, and he clarified what he was talking about when he saw the blank look on Billy's face. "The seals are gone. We will not be able to get back to Earth."

"Like castaways?" Billy frowned before he nodded.

Ogras looked on with confusion as Billy walked over to a young tree and ripped it straight out of the ground.

"Mama read Billy a book about being a castaway. First, you get a spear. Then coconuts. Have you seen any coconuts, horny man?" Billy asked.

"Coconuts? What? And why would you need that shitty spear? Don't you have that big club of yours?" Ogras said with

exasperation.

“Ah!” Billy exclaimed again, his eyes lighting up. “Billy has lots of meat too. Billy is really smart after all.”

“What would you even hunt with that weak spear of yours?” Ogras snorted as he took out a flagon of liquor. “There aren’t even any life forms in this place. Well, at least there is plenty of Cosmic Energy and Origin Dao. Cultivating here will be extremely efficient.”

He wasn’t really thirsty, but this seemed like an excellent time to get drunk. He didn’t have the slightest clue of how to get out from the hidden realm of a Dimensional Seed. Even worse, it looked like the seed was traveling between dimensions judging by the sky. Who knew if he would even still be inside the Zecia sector by the time he figured a way out of here.

A clattering shriek suddenly broke the silence, and its piercing tone made Ogras’ hair stand on end. What the hell was that? It came from the direction of the meteor. Ogras suddenly thought of a terrifying possibility. That weird stone, was it really a meteor?

Or was it a Hive?

“Ah stupid horny man, you jinxed it,” Billy muttered as he gave Ogras a scathing look.

“Of course,” Ogras sighed and closed his eyes before taking a long, long swig.

This is what you get when you risk your life.

Chapter 660: Anniversary

Zac took a deep breath as he opened his eyes, and he was greeted by the first rays of the suns piercing through the foliage of the poplar growing in his courtyard. This bout of meditation had lasted over three days, but to say that he had made any real gains would be a lie. He had been unable to properly calm his mind and enter a proper state.

Because today marked the third anniversary of the events in the Mystic Realm.

The scene of Ogras disappearing into the Dimensional Seed and the cataclysmic battle that followed was still fresh in his mind. His and Billy's life and death were still up in the air. Kenzie was still adamant about them surviving, but Zac couldn't help but lose hope as the years passed. They simply hadn't been able to find any information to support that theory.

"Still thinking about it?" a worried voice said as Thea stepped out of their bedroom.

"It's hard not knowing," Zac sighed as he got up to his feet and walked over and kissed her.

"Your sister still hasn't given up, you know. It feels like she is planning something big," Thea said as she gripped his hand in his.

"I know," Zac said as he felt a headache coming on just at the mention of Kenzie.

Ogras essentially sacrificed his life to save Kenzie, and Kenzie hadn't given up on him even after three full years. Part of him believed it was because of the life-saving favor, but another part believed the two had to have been an item in secret. Kenzie was always evasive on the subject, and he guessed that it didn't really matter. But the resources she had put into finding and saving the demon were, in a word, terrifying.

Then again, he wasn't one to talk considering how he acted with Alea back then, and it was her money. It wasn't like he was trying to find them either, but he wouldn't even know where to begin to look. He hadn't even managed to gather any intelligence on Dimensional Seeds, and it might not even be something that had appeared in Zecia before.

Still, Zac could only table the matter for now as the two walked through his private forest to a secluded pergola overlooking the ocean. It was far from the shipyard and the public sector, a small section of paradise just for the two of them. They sat down, content to simply watch the sun's morning rays dance over the waves.

Dating as a cultivator came with its own set of challenges, especially when both partners were cultivation maniacs. The two had lived together for almost two years by now, but this was actually the first time they spent together in almost a week.

As the two progressed on the path of cultivation they had found that every bout of meditation took longer and longer, especially now that the Origin Dao of Earth was completely exhausted. Zac had been in a meditative trance for almost three days trying to ponder on how to further his fusion between Dao and combat, but his progress was laughable.

Thea had been off training her swordplay while simultaneously thinning out an aggressive beast horde before that. Zac often undertook similar outings as well to test his theories when he wasn't busy working on his soul or understanding of fractals. Of course, this week-long separation was nothing compared to the seven months Thea spent in the Base Town and Tower of Eternity.

So, coming together to this secluded spot had become sort of a tradition for them, a way to get away from it all and spend some time on each other. There was no talk of cultivation or the endless duties that kept them busy the few hours they didn't cultivate. Thea took out a breakfast set she had prepared, and the two spent the next thirty minutes just relaxing.

“Oh, I happened to track down that disciple of yours while you were cultivating,” Thea suddenly said.

“What is she up to now?” Zac sighed.

“She’s a highway bandit in the forests close to the Dead Zone,” Thea snorted. “She’s scrounged up a bunch of teenagers from somewhere and they are robbing the adventuring groups that passes through on the way to the relay stations. I found out because she robbed one of my agents who recognized her.”

“I’ll send someone to bring her back,” Zac exhaled.

“You know, Emily is acting out because she feels cramped up on this island. Why not let her walk her own path? Neither you or I got where we are now by staying in the Academy,” Thea said. “She’s a young woman now.”

“That doesn’t mean the Academy’s not effective,” Zac said. “I made enough mistakes for a lifetime getting to where I am now, and if not for my luck I would be dead a hundred times over. Only one out of a million might make it out alive when walking a path of constant bloodshed.”

“I guess you’ll have to find some middle-ground then or she’ll keep running off. Sooner or later, she’ll get her hands on a Teleportation Token, and then she won’t be in your backyard any longer,” Thea said. “I need to practice with Aigale a bit, wish Kenzie good luck from me, will you?”

“I will,” Zac nodded and kissed her goodbye before she disappeared with her movement skill.

Zac himself stayed behind to rest for a while longer.

Things had proceeded pretty much as expected after the return from the Mystic Realm. The auction was a huge success that netted him almost 40 billion Nexus Coins, which was followed by him almost effortlessly completing the Second Step of Sovereignty. He had been pitted against a hundred other presumptive Sovereigns of the Zecia sector in a situation somewhat similar to the Battle of Fates in the Tower of Eternity. But this time there was no Iz Tain to strike terror in his heart.

This time he was the terror.

After he passed as the clear first-spot-holder, he was given a simple follow-up quest. He had proven that he had what it took to become a leader, afterward he just needed to hold onto that power. Of course, with Thea being his girlfriend and the remains of the New World Government integrated into Port Atwood, there was not much opposition. Most of the Ishiate didn't care one way or another. In fact, it turned out that Starlight had actually left Earth already thanks to some sort of opportunity he had gained.

The Zhix were solidly in his camp as well, and that alone was enough to make others think twice before making their move. The only potential threat was the natives of the fallen Mystic Realm, but Zac had already made his arrangements for them. The Gemlings were now part of Port Atwood and mostly stayed in his Underwater Town, crafting and looking for treasures on the seabed.

He hadn't expected those stone turtles to actually be amphibian in nature, but it turned out they preferred to either live close to the shores on his islands. Many of their crafting techniques were even water-based, though some had swapped over to follow the same path as Brazla.

The survivors of the True Sky Faction were in a similar situation as Clan Volor. The leaders had mostly signed the same sort of contracts as external elders did and stayed on with Port Atwood, with a few purchasing Teleportation Tokens from him to leave Earth and stake out a path on their own. Most of those who chose to remain, including Hekruv Vira, took up positions at the Atwood Academy, splitting their time between cultivation and research.

The Cartava Clan had been eradicated by the Lunar Tribe, and the werewolves were now a weak isolated faction under strict observation, forming just a small village with less than a thousand households. They lived up in the desolate North now, far from any other civilization. Ogras would no doubt have wanted Zac to take them all out, but Zac simply didn't have the stomach for it. There had been enough bloodshed in those last frantic days of the Mystic Realm.

Besides, Zac felt he owed a debt of gratitude to their leader. Things would probably have turned out a lot differently if he hadn't shown up at the eleventh hour in the battle against Adcarkas. To look after his tribe in return was the least he could do, especially considering their top elites were all killed. Of course, this courtesy only remained as long as the Lunar Tribe didn't do something stupid.

So, things were stable on Earth for the moment, but that wasn't to say that there hadn't been any attempts to stop his power grab over the following years. But every coup had been utterly crushed, often without Zac even needing to lift his finger. He had mostly left things to the Valkyries or the Zhix while he kept to himself as he worked on his foundation. One exception took place half a year ago though when a man called Mark Kaufman appeared out of nowhere.

He quickly gained a following as he proudly displayed his level, a whooping level 106, in the middle of the square of New Washington while simultaneously challenging Zac for the position of the leader of Earth. This guy had never been on the ladder while it still existed, and he wasn't listed on the Marshall Clan's booklet called Earth's Champions. His background was a complete mystery.

Of course, this Mark guy had obviously never heard of the term haste makes waste. Zac learned of the challenge and appeared ready for battle, but Mark Kaufman wasn't even able to withstand Zac's Dao Field. The pressure alone crushed his bones as he was forced to the ground. He was still in recovery from what Zac heard.

It quickly became clear that this guy was as lowly as cultivators came, and he was actually an E-Grade Common Cultivator, someone who had given up on future progression. He had almost no titles and no accomplishments to speak of, barely meeting the minimum requirements for evolution thanks to an herb he had chanced upon.

The way he had gained so many levels was directly linked to this; with such a shitty foundation he barely required any energy to level up. If Zac had such low requirements, he

would probably have been level 150 by now, rather than still sitting at level 101.

In fact, Mark wasn't the only one who had passed Zac in level by now. The Earth's Champions booklet listed over two hundred humans having passed level 100 by now. Of course, they had only surpassed him on the level ladder. He still held an undisputed first position on the power ladder that the Marshall Clan also put together.

Zac briefly thought back to the System-run ladders of old, and he couldn't help but applaud Alyn's prescience. She had told him that less than half of the elites would be remembered in a few years, and this was exactly the case. The names on the Marshall Clan's level lists were almost all new names, with the old ladder geniuses occupying less than a quarter of the top.

Most of the 'old guard' were still stuck in the F-Grade, and only a few of them voluntarily so according to what he had heard. Earth being flooded with Origin Dao essentially supercharged early cultivation, and there really was not much reason to hanker on at F-Grade for more than a year or two on a recently integrated planet. They were given the gift of huge momentum, and it would be foolish not to make the most of it.

But only now did the people of Earth realize what an opportunity had passed them by during the early stages of the Integration. The training wheels were off now.

The Origin Dao was gone, and the opportunities to rack up massive achievements were sparse with no remaining Incursions, making it extraordinarily hard for those who had picked higher-rarity Classes to advance. Not everyone could be like Thea, returning victoriously from the Tower of Eternity and gaining an E-Grade Rare Class in one go.

Frictions were already starting to appear between forces, where desperate cultivators saw war as the only opportunity for them to break through their bottleneck. Cultivation was normally not this rushed, but the situation on a fresh planet was a bit unique. There were no elders to stabilize the situation, so those who progressed the fastest were also those

who got to enjoy the best resources, no matter how shaky their foundations were.

Of course, the people of Port Atwood were mostly insulated from that hectic grab for levels and resources, with the Academy staunchly maintaining a more prudent curriculum. Zac himself was the same, with him having gained just over 10 levels over the past three years, a sharp decline compared to his earlier speed.

Part of him was a bit worried about losing momentum, but he didn't have much of a choice at the moment. He had chosen to walk an extremely perilous path, a path containing three top-tier concepts and fusing them into one system. He had been muddling along until now, but it was high time for him to shore up his foundations.

Outwardly it might have been seen as though he had stopped working after securing a century-long breather for Earth, but the truth was anything but. He had spent a herculean effort on his F-Grade skills, all of which had now reached Peak Mastery. This was normally something that was done before even evolving, so Zac had been lagging behind on that department.

Unfortunately, him shoring up his lacking foundation wasn't the only thing that kept his level suppressed. There were far more troublesome issues that caused him headaches. First of all, there was the ever-present issue of his Draugr Race constitution. Three years had passed but his improvements were simply pathetic.

The **[Bone Forging Dust]** was no longer effective on his body, which honestly was a bit of a relief. Calrin had managed to find a few minor treasures that worked on him as well, but he was still a long way from reaching D-Grade, especially since his undead side seemed to require far more resources to take that step.

Added together with his other gains he couldn't help but worry about hitting his attribute cap, and the thought alone made Zac nervously open his Status Screen.

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Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	101
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - High, Fragment of the Bodhi - High
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	4032 [Increase: 93%. Efficiency: 228%]
Dexterity	1967 [Increase: 67%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance	3872 [Increase: 103%. Efficiency: 228%]
Vitality	3076 [Increase: 93%. Efficiency: 228%]
Intelligence	949 [Increase: 67%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	1803 [Increase: 72%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]
Free Points	0
Nexus Coins	[E] 107 298

His other two Daos had caught up to his Fragment of the Axe by now, but he didn't feel like any of his Daos were close to taking reaching peak mastery. Inspiration was found in the heat of battle, which was doubly true for his Fragment of the Axe, and he hadn't been forced to push himself since the cataclysmic battles in the Mystic Realm.

But there was one more reason, something Zac hadn't realized until now. It really seemed his progress was a lot worse compared to even normally talented people now that the Origin Dao was gone. It was like his Dao Progress was extremely quick as long as it had some fuel to run on, be it Origin Dao or treasures, but the moment there was no fuel supplied, progress simply stopped.

Others could at least make some progress through meditation, but Zac didn't feel like he was doing that at all. Perhaps he was making some inroads, but it wouldn't be realized until he got his hands on an E-grade Dao Treasure. There was no doubt about it in Zac's mind; this, too, was related to his Void Emperor-bloodline. Zac believed he wouldn't have many bottlenecks, but he would need to find treasures or treasure lands to push his progress forward.

Of course, his Daos having stagnated a bit was for the best with his current situation.

His attributes had increased by almost 50% thanks to his levels and improved Daos over the past years. In a way, it was almost a relief that his peak mastery [**Forester's Constitution**] couldn't keep up with his ballooning attribute pool any longer, and the actual boosts to Endurance and Vitality it provided were far below the advertised 15%.

Just the thought of gaining another level in his current situation filled him with worry. He had reached Middle E-Grade by now, and the boosts had doubled. What if he hit the attribute cap? Of course, that wasn't the only reason why breaking open a node filled him with trepidation.

The dangers of grinding had taken a sharp and drastic turn the moment he hit Middle E-grade.

Chapter 661: Peak Performance

Gaining levels was usually the easiest part for geniuses, with Daos and Achievements causing the biggest delays. However, Zac had long heard about how many people got stuck in the middle of the E-Grade, bottlenecked to never reach the peak. At first, he had trouble understanding why some people would rather dissipate their energy than keep pushing forward, but Zac had been given a rude awakening the moment he hit level 100.

It was the peak of Low E-grade and the first node that wasn't placed in one of his limbs. It was rather placed at his shoulder. It was still at the edge of his body, but still on his proper torso. Zac read about the increasing difficulties of breaking open nodes on his torso and later his head, but nothing could have prepared him for the fallout.

The fleshy explosion that almost made him lose his whole right arm was bad enough, but the true threat was the invisible wounds that impacted his pathways and his whole body. His very foundations had taken a massive hit by cracking the node open, and he had been forced to spend three months in recuperation where he barely circulated any Cosmic Energy at all.

Even his lethal cocktail of Berserking methods during the final battle against Adcarkas had only required two months of bed rest, but this single node was even worse.

Healing pills hadn't worked, and neither had **[Surging Vitality]**. Redrawing his pathways with **[Spiritual Anchor]** did help a bit, but he was still extremely weakened, like his body had sprung a leak or something. It looked like only his body's natural recuperation was able to heal the weird state of weakness. His Void Emperor Bloodline didn't really help

either, except by providing an unusually sturdy body. After all, his situation wasn't caused by impurities, so **[Purity of the Void]** did nothing in this situation.

He had somewhat looked down at Galvarion, the maritime mortal that he read about in Thea's library, for taking over a century to reach Peak E-Grade. But he understood all-too-well by now. Zac had expected things to get gradually worse, but this was too much. His attribute gains doubled at Middle E-Grade while the difficulty rather increased tenfold. He had gathered as much information as he could though, and he made some discoveries.

First of all, this wasn't only a problem that affected Mortals. Even cultivators were impacted by this change. Low E-Grade was essentially risk-free to boost, but even cultivators would be hurt when grinding open nodes with the help of their Cultivation Manuals in the Middle and High E-Grade. Of course, the threat to them was only a tenth compared to mortals who forcibly blew their nodes wide open.

Secondly, one's foundation made things more dangerous. This wasn't a surprise to Zac considering what he had learned so far, but it was still important to remember. The higher your attribute pool was, the bigger your energy reserves were. That also meant that you needed to fill each node with more energy before it burst, which unsurprisingly made the fallout worse.

Someone like himself probably took a hit many times more dangerous than a Mortal like Galvarion, who only was an Uncommon E-Grade mortal.

Third, you could minimize the damage to your body by improving your control of Cosmic Energy. This was unfortunately easier said than done for Zac. His energy control wasn't completely wretched like his Dao Control, but it was still not something to write home about. Add that to the previous point, and him breaking open nodes was far more dangerous compared to the situation for normal mortals.

Luckily, there were some solutions to his predicament. First of all, breaking open nodes with the help of pills or treasures was equivalent to Cultivators' situation. The damage he would

receive leveling with the help of pills would be negligible. His sister had already added a simple purification array to his cultivation cave that would help shed Pill Toxicity and slowly reduce his resistance to those types of pills. Furthermore, his Hidden Node sped up his natural detoxifying process ten times compared to normal warriors.

He was already at a state that he could do a level rush as he did back when evolving to E-Grade, but he was still holding off as he wanted to deal with his undead Race. There was also the issue of getting top-tier pills. Last time he wasted his potential a bit by just taking random pills he got in the Base Town, but now he wanted to make the most of it, only eating the best of the best as to not waste any time.

There were also arrays specifically designed to decrease the danger for mortals when bursting nodes. Unfortunately, those arrays weren't all that popular since very few Formation Clans felt it worthwhile to study those types of arrays and improve them. The array he had got his hands on was called [**Shedding Mortal Coil-Array**], but it didn't even slightly live up to its name.

It did at least lessen the damage by up to 10% by somewhat containing the outburst, and that was after Kenzie's improvements. But Zac couldn't complain, he needed every advantage he could get. Furthermore, it was engraved on an array disk, so he could always bring it with him in case he wanted to break open a node on the go.

Zac was convinced there were far better arrays out there, perhaps even some supreme arrays that could allay the dangers for mortals completely, but that wasn't something he could get his hands on Earth, probably not anywhere in the whole sector.

His best solution right now was to slowly improve his control and work on his soul. He hoped that evolving his soul would come with all kinds of benefits, including improved control over his Daos and Cosmic Energy. In the meantime, he might get his hands on better supportive tools for mortals. But for now, he had decided to slow down his leveling drastically and instead focus on other things.

And there was a lot to do.

Grinding his skills to peak mastery was his first goal, and the next step was to start fusing his abilities. Some of the F-grade skills were barely useful any longer, utterly incapable to bring out the power contained in his body. He was better off simply fighting head-on than using skills like **[Chop]**. Even his skills from his undead Epic class had fallen behind by this point, and skills like **[Immutable Bulwark]** had long stopped scaling with his Endurance.

That was why Zac nowadays spent around ten hours a day pouring over hundreds of missives on shoring up his theoretical foundations. Pathways, Fractals, Attuned Energies, Dao, the Soul, and the relationship between all these components. Zac had studied it all to better grasp his situation and what steps he needed to take toward the future.

His improved constitution was proving invaluable during his studies. He no longer had any issues maintaining complete focus for days on end, and his memory was near eidetic as well, allowing him to remember pretty much everything he had read. Just one month of studying now allowed him to learn far more than he did during his years in college.

But the more he learned the more he also understood just how shallow his foundation was. Unfortunately, it was either extremely expensive or even impossible to buy detailed information about most subjects, making advanced knowledge scarce. It was no wonder so many wandering cultivators eventually chose to join a sect.

This lack of proper available guidance was obviously not a coincidence, but rather an intentional situation created by powerful factions. If an information house started disseminating everything from skills, to manuals, to secret knowledge far and wide, they would immediately find themselves under tremendous pressure from hundreds of powerful forces.

Hiring talented wandering cultivators was extremely important to maintain operations even for family clans, as they were needed for everything from filling the ranks of armies to

providing skills that the force was lacking. If these wandering cultivators suddenly could get their hands on all they needed by just buying a bunch of missives, then they would be far less likely to join a force. Or at least demand a lot higher compensation for giving up their freedom.

This conflict of interests had resulted in a tightly controlled information market, with unofficial rules on what information could and couldn't be sold, and prices being mostly standardized. Perhaps things were better in more flourishing Sectors, but Zac wouldn't bet on it. Because one willing participant in this scheme was the System itself.

The System had long since concluded that freely accessible information generally resulted in mediocre cultivators. It rather wanted factions to go to war for each other's heritages, with knowledge and riches being the reward for risking your life. Zac was in neither any position nor mood to go to war to steal some other faction's heritage, so he and Port Atwood had to make do with just the basics.

Of course, Zac wasn't the only one that was working on improving himself around the clock, and a sigh escaped his lips as he glanced toward his sister's compound. Thea said she believed Kenzie was up to something big, but she didn't know the half of it. Thea was still completely unaware of the factories and workshops that were hundreds of meters underground, massive complexes built with the help of data and components found in the Spatial Rings of Cervantes and the Cartava elders.

Furthermore, two islands had been turned into strictly guarded factories that produced components for Kenzie's needs.

Zac hated that Kenzie was so insistent in playing with Technocrat technologies, but the events in the Mystic Realm had instilled her with the same sort of need for power that had allowed him to reach his current heights. She refused to listen to him, to the point that Zac was afraid she'd leave Earth and set up an even worse compound somewhere else if he pressured her.

Then again, it had also turned out that they didn't have a lot of options other than to take the plunge if they wanted Kenzie to evolve.

Jeeves had long become part of her soul, and it turned out that her reaching E-grade without Jeeves doing the same was impossible. She had long reached level 75 and gained four Dao Fragments, and there were less than five people in Port Atwood that could deal with her in a direct confrontation. But she still couldn't even get an Uncommon E-Grade class.

It was like Jeeves had turned into a fourth requirement on top of Dao, Race, and Achievements.

The desire to find Ogras, and to a lesser degree Billy who they assumed had been sucked up by the vortex as well, had pushed her on in a manic scramble to find everything Jeeves required to become a Class-2 AI, while simultaneously building a whole mechanized headquarter to facilitate the upgrade. Zac mostly looked on with worry while limiting her operations to the bare minimum, praying that Jeeves was really right in its insistence that it wouldn't draw the ire of the System.

He had also erected Ten [**E-Grade Heaven's Path Beacons**] across the planet without telling his sister. The beacons were provided on the cheap by pro-System factions and they only had one purpose; to block access to the Digitized World and weaken any sort of signals of technological origin from reaching the planet's surface.

They were essentially WIFI-jammers to make sure that Kenzie didn't sneak onto the Soul World Jaol mentioned in her desire to become stronger, inadvertently putting the whole planet in danger. Zac would rather have bought far more powerful beacons as he wasn't confident that these low-grade arrays could properly block factions like Firmament's Edge, but this was the best he could get his hands on at the moment.

Prolong and agonize as he might, the day of Kenzie's evolution had finally arrived. Evolving Jeeves had required a shocking amount of money, and not even he would have been able to shoulder that cost. They had managed to satiate a few

of its requirements by looting the Merit Exchange and the accumulated wealth of the Lunar Tribe and Cartava Clan.

However, most of it was acquired by Kenzie herself as she had made a fortune with the help of Jeeves.

Her method was quite ingenious; she found popular defensive arrays sold by Formation Clans or Sects and created extremely efficient Array Breakers for them with the help of the calculations of Jeeves and the Technocrat Supercomputers she snatched. With that in hand, she essentially blackmailed the factions, selling her silence and instructions on how to remedy the loopholes.

If the sects refused, she simply released the Array Breakers through Calrin or the Array Clan's competitors and made a bundle of cash that way.

She had only been doing that for two years and with low-grade arrays, but she alone made way more money than Zac's combined ventures, which was a testament to the value skilled non-combat cultivators could bring to a faction. It was for this very reason the Tsarun clan had spent so much effort on the Gemlings. Unfortunately for them, it had turned into yet another venture of theirs that benefited Zac in the end, with the first being the Thayer Consortium.

Kenzie had already gained some infamy in certain circles from her actions as well. More than one Array Master and Formation Clan had put out a bounty on her head, though no one knew of her real identity. The bounties were the reason for more than one sleepless night for Zac, but he knew that trying to do something about it with his limited strength would only worsen the situation.

Calrin and the Thayer Consortia was also a great beneficiary of Kenzie's, or 'Peak Performance Breakers', as she called her venture when going about her extortionist business. It was a bit on the nose, but Calrin couldn't care less as he raked in huge commissions by acting as a go-between with the help of his Mercantile License.

Zac couldn't help but snicker and wonder if her actions had caused any problems for the real Peaks, the Peak Family that

Average and Pretty belonged to.

Chapter 662: Deviant

The Thayer Consortium had gained over two hundred billion Nexus from selling Kenzie's Array Breakers over the past three years. That wasn't much compared to established mercantile unions, but it was still a shocking amount considering how small a percentage Calrin charged for Kenzie's business. Furthermore, the actual sale of Array Breakers was the smaller Kenzie's two income sources by all accounts. Extortion was far more profitable.

It did end up with the Thayer Consortium forming a few dozen life-death grudges, since while Kenzie could remain anonymous, it all ultimately happened through Calrin's license. But the greedy Sky Gnome figured that it didn't matter since he already had the Tsarun Clan looking for him. What was a few more?

Zac himself wasn't exactly sure of his sister's fortune by this point, but she had mentioned that the total cost for Jeeves' upgrades had long surpassed 5 D-Grade Nexus Coins, which was the equivalent of over 5 Trillion Nexus Coins. That was far beyond even the exorbitant cost of [**Love's Bond**].

Many of the materials had required him to send some of his followers off-world as well, which was only made possible after becoming a Planetary Lord. The increased status allowed him to bring one person with him either when leaving or returning to Earth, which he could exploit by simply opening the portal and not go through himself.

Sometimes it was to attend large-scale auctions or trade fairs, other times to pick up consigned items through intermediaries. Zac would normally have wanted to go out and explore along with his subordinates, but he usually handed the tasks over to his followers in the end. First of all, he was too busy to wait for weeks or months for a particular item to appear at an

auction, but the biggest reason was that his identity was too complicated at the moment.

That wasn't to say he hadn't left Earth over the past three years.

Going out as himself was impossible, but he did have the disguise skill [**Million Faces**] which provided an aura-altering effect. Together with Greatest's privacy bangle, he had a pretty decent disguise. He still only left when absolutely necessary though, and only to places he could confirm didn't house any C-Grade Monarchs.

Zac obviously didn't think himself capable of dealing with proper D-Grade Hegemons in case it came to blows, especially not after witnessing the Great Redeemer duking it out with the Collector and the Administrator. It was rather that people below the C-Grade were quite unlikely to discover his disguise. That allowed him to set out, complete his task, and return before he created any waves.

After all, Zac's reputation had grown to almost mythical proportions over the past three years. His deeds had been spread far and wide, and even Calrin had been able to easily purchase information packets containing everything he had done in the Base Town.

The only force that had openly condemned him and put out an enormous bounty was unsurprisingly the Tsarun Clan. No matter if it was to retain their dignity or if they believed that an irreconcilable grudge had already formed, they had openly stated their desire to have him killed. Their real goal was probably to find out the source of his power though, considering how power-hungry they were.

Zac personally preferred such an open stance compared to the daggers hidden in the dark. If there was one force that was openly going after him, then there were no doubt dozens doing it without publishing it far and wide. Especially considering that not a single faction had stepped out to protect him, not even the Peak Family. Perhaps that was because he still only represented potential, but Zac also feared that it might have

something to do with the title he had been given in his absence.

The Deviant Asura.

A surge of annoyance bubbled up when he thought of the shitty nickname people used to talk about him behind his back. A beating of galactic proportions would be dished out if he ever got his hands on Galau. His actions during the panty raid had spread far and wide, along with dozens of fake stories that had made his reputation in the Zecia sector far worse than it ever was on Earth.

There was even a rumor going about that he was collecting young maidens for his harem. He had asked Ibtep about the situation the moment they returned from the Zethaya branch, but they had said that everything was under control. The Zhix Liaison had clearly not been able to dig out the truth from the Zethaya Clan even after staying with them for over a month.

Even crazier, there were actually millions of girls willing to take him up on the offer. Zac had to admit the thought was pretty exhilarating to have become such an eligible partner, but it had resulted in some trouble on the home front. For example, Thea had returned from the Tower of Eternity with the temper of a volcano about to erupt after having listened to the rumors for over half a year.

The Deviant title thankfully didn't only refer to his supposed penchant for young girls and wearing their undergarments, but also the ruthless way he fought. A video of him holding the ripped-off head of Rasuliel Tsarun in the rubble of the Zethaya Pill House was attached to every information missive, and his corpse tree still stood tall in the center of the Base Town for some reason.

His and his people's outings had at least come with some good news; he had not only snatched up the second material for Karunthel's quest, but also a third. He had lucked out and gotten his hands on a **[Daemonic Manastone]** himself during one of his rare outings. It was while looking for Infernal Crystals, an exceedingly rare attuned crystal mainly utilized by some summoner classes.

The manastone was similar to a Beast Core, belonging to a creature summoned from some sort of abyssal plane. It had a very unique ability that made it different from normal Beast Cores though; to continuously draw power from that unknown dimension. Zac guessed that Karunthel wanted that thing to see if it could be turned into a power source that didn't need to be replaced all the time like Nexus Crystals.

One manastone wouldn't even be able to power an E-Grade vessel even if the Creators managed to transform the alien energies it emitted, but what if you integrated thousands of them into a Cosmic Vessel? It sounded like a pretty good idea to Zac, provided you could stomach the cost.

The other item he had gathered was unsurprisingly the **[Urgarat Flakes]**. Zac had discovered that one of the teleportation tokens in his possession led to a faction in the same area as a planet where you could harvest the natural run-off material. He had sent one of his people to stay in the town for five months, and the flakes eventually appeared in an auction.

That left only one material to upgrade the shipyard; the **[Ferric Worldeater]**, and Zac already knew where to find it. The only reason he hadn't set out to visit Leyara's Void Monastery yet was that he was hesitant whether he was ready to deal with that place. He would probably have to go as himself if he wanted a shot at reaching the Void Star, the mysterious anomaly that was at the heart of the Void Gate-faction.

He had researched all kinds of methods to hide his unique points from even C-grade Monarchs, but he still wasn't confident in the results. It was a shame too, considering that the Void Gate not only was the only confirmed source of the weird space beasts, but also a place that might hold more answers about his bloodline. If there was any place in the Zecia Sector where he might find a Bloodline Method that actually suited him, then it would be over there.

But the Void Priestess was there, and Zac was unwilling to put himself in such a helpless situation.

The same unfortunately went for any high-grade world, no matter if you were talking about the Allbright Empire, the Twilight Harbor, or even the chaotic space outside the Red Zone of the Allbright Empire. All of them potentially housed Monarchs that might be able to expose him just with a single glance. Some might not care, but it just took one of them to garner some interest for him to get caught and dissected like a lab animal.

He wasn't all that worried about the remnants being found out in the Zecia sector. Their cage was something set up by the System itself and Be'Zi, who Zac was pretty much certain was a B-Grade Cultivator. It was his mutated Specialty Core that was the problem. It had only taken Greatest a glance to somewhat figure out what it would do, and the same was true for Yrial.

There were all kinds of powerful Specialty Cores, but he had never heard of something so overpowered as to give a whole second class. Even Monarchs would probably be interested in that. Kenzie was working on some sort of array that might help disguise it and make it look like a normal Duplicity Core, but progress was slow even with the help of her vast calculating power. Perhaps the imminent evolution of Jeeves would be the change that would lead to a breakthrough.

Zac spent the rest of the day the same way as usual, cultivating his soul for a few hours before he visited Abby to go over the general state of Earth. Nothing much was new though. The situation on Earth was becoming increasingly stable as time passed. The population of Earth had even started growing again, albeit barely.

There was the issue of the increasing number of monster tides plaguing the towns. There was a huge number of beasts that had reached E-grade by this point, and many of them looked to expand their territories. It was still a common occurrence for towns to be overrun or badly hurt.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to help, and there were quite a few elites in Port Atwood who would be more than willing to jump from town to town and clear out monsters. The System unfortunately didn't want that to happen. It often disabled the

teleporters when the beasts came running, creating trials for the township. If they succeeded, someone would probably make some sort of breakthrough in the town. If they failed and were eaten, the System would save on resources.

Port Atwood was working on preventative measures, for example keeping track of areas that held the potential to turn into monster tides. The more successful forces were also dealing with the issue themselves. The easiest way to prevent a monster tide was to regularly hunt beasts in the vicinity. It both provided wealth and power to your faction while preventing being overrun.

Zac left the government building an hour later, stepping out onto the tiled ground. A few modified cars flashed by, their engines powered by Nexus Crystals. But vehicles were still a rare sight as most people in Port Atwood chose to walk. There were very few low-leveled people in the town even after its population had exploded over the past years, and it didn't really save time to take a car for the average cultivator.

His eyes turned to the sprawling city around him, and he still couldn't really believe that it was all under his control. Towering skyscrapers reached toward the clouds, each of them an architectural marvel that would shock the world before the integration. Things were different nowadays, with resources being far more plentiful.

Designs that would previously be unsafe or prohibitively expensive were suddenly made possible with the help of spiritual materials and inscriptions. Some of the skyscrapers were even made from wood even though they reached over five hundred meters into the sky.

The sprawling towers had taken all kinds of inspiration. From the demonic fusion of nature and buildings to the Steampunk Brass of the Ishiate Tinkerers. A few even looked like actual mountains or stalagmites, which were mainly used by the molemen of the Underworld. There was one common thread though; all the buildings held large gardens and terraces on their roofs, and even along their walls.

Pollution wasn't really a problem any longer thanks to the city largely running on Cosmic Energy instead of electricity, but Zac didn't want to see his paradisaical island being turned into a concrete jungle either. The roads were wide and lined with trees, and the buildings were all surrounded by parks or gardens, even the high-rise buildings. It gave the town a far roomier feeling compared to the old cities of Earth.

Something like this would normally be impossible considering the value of land in the capital of a world, but Zac still retained the ownership of the whole island apart from Azh'Rodum. Most of the buildings were his as well, though some were built by others.

For example, Joanna owned a large block of student housing close to the Academy, using it as an additional income to supplement her cultivation. Many of the elites and old guard did the same. Sap Trang, who almost perennially lived out on the dangerous waters with his Kraken, had started working on setting up a whole maritime conglomerate, providing everything from protection to exploring the depths of the sea.

Iivere owned all kinds of entertainment establishments in Azh'Rodum, mainly targeted at the cultivators who worked the crystal mines. There were tens of thousands of other smaller businesses keeping the economy of Port Atwood going, but the main focus of the inhabitants was ultimately cultivation.

Most people lived in Port Atwood for the extremely dense Cosmic Energy. Zac didn't know whether it was a reward from the System or if he was just lucky, but the Nexus Vein beneath the island had kept growing in power over the past years. The density of energy was simply unmatched, especially after Zac had added some massive gathering arrays covering the whole town.

A lot of people would rather live in a small apartment in Port Atwood than build a sprawling mansion somewhere else on Earth. However, only a few ever got the opportunity, as Zac kept the population numbers of his main island under strict control. If he let the numbers balloon the energy density would

grow too sparse, which would affect the cultivation of the elites of his faction.

Zac soon returned to his compound. Of course, it was more accurate to call it a fortress thanks to his increased Town Shop access as a World Leader, and his sister's adjustments. Anyone beneath the D-Grade could only dream of entering his private forest, and even a D-Grade hegemon would need to expend quite a bit of effort and time, enough time for Zac to return with the help of his teleportation bracelet.

He didn't head for his own courtyard as he knew that Thea would be off training. Instead, he walked over to the series of buildings his sister used for her tinkering. As expected, he found Kenzie going over a series of schematics that made Zac dizzy just from looking at them.

"Don't you look relaxed," Zac smiled as he sat down next to her. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," Kenzie smiled. "Don't worry. I've run the simulations for this so many times by now. And I finally received the last treasures yesterday. It's finally time to take the next step. Today, Jeeves and I will enter the E-grade."

Chapter 663: Tribulation

“I can’t believe that guy is this greedy,” Zac sighed. “Your purchases would have bankrupted a normal D-Grade force.”

“There is an endless number of Daos. It’s pretty good that Jeeves only wanted the taste of three hundred,” Kenzie laughed as she stood up. “Let’s go. I’ve been waiting for this for so long now.”

“If you say so,” Zac shrugged as he followed her toward the teleportation array.

It felt like too big a risk to evolve Jeeves right in Port Atwood, so they had instead prepared a special island over the past months. It had a Nexus Node of its own, along with a series of machines that would help with the evolution.

“I still don’t get why it wants that many different attunements,” Zac muttered as they teleported away. “Why not focus on the four elements like you do?”

It was true, most of the requirements for Jeeves’ evolution hadn’t been machines or technology. It was rather raw materials of different attunements. It was essentially gaining insight into hundreds of Daos by absorbing treasures that held a hint of the Dao itself. It was no doubt modeled after the methods used in the Research Base, where thousands of Daos fused into a supreme containment sphere.

It had been pretty easy to satisfy that demand in the beginning with the help of Zac’s huge stockpile of Attuned Crystals, but it started to get increasingly difficult over time.

First of all, it wasn’t enough to feed the greedy AI with crystals alone. It required various sources of every Dao to gain a deep enough understanding. The amount of attunement hidden in an Attuned Crystal was ultimately pretty weak and shallow compared to natural treasures. Even then, some

attunements were pretty popular and easy to gain, but others were a lot more difficult.

For example, it took almost no effort to collect a few sets of treasures for nature-aspected Daos. These were actively grown since they were a major component in healing pills.

The same went for fire-attuned materials. They could easily be collected around volcanoes. But after they had collected some cheaper materials for the basic elemental Daos things got more difficult. For example, where could you find raw materials containing weapon-based Daos? The same went for Daos based on concepts, such as Ilvere's Dao of Momentum or Alyn's Dao of Dissemination.

These kinds of weird Natural Treasures actually did exist, but they were unsurprisingly pretty rare. They were still useful in crafting equipment of specific attunements though, and with their scarcity, it did drive up the price. That was one of the reasons why the upgrade costs had ballooned to this degree over the past three years.

Zac shuddered at the costs that would go into evolving the AI in the future. If it required materials for a full three hundred Daos now, what would it demand the next time? And would the materials all have to be D-Grade? Earth and Port Atwood couldn't even support this initial evolution, let alone future ones.

All that was thankfully a problem for a distant issue. Zac would hopefully have gotten his hands on enough riches over the next century, and Kenzie's money-making capabilities would only improve as her cultivation increased.

"I told you. Jeeves needs the different Daos to gain a true understanding of cultivation. The more Daos he collects, the better he can assist me. Everything is connected," Kenzie explained. "That's why I spent so much time looking for these final items."

"Alright. Did the guy also happen to know what will happen when he evolves? I mean this seems like something that will attract Tribulation Lighting even if he supposedly can hide from the System," Zac said.

“It should be fine. Besides, we won’t harm anyone this far away from civilization even if something happens,” Kenzie said as she looked around. “Besides, Jeeves is extremely strong for his grade. He could even knock out the Administrator, breaking through will be a breeze.”

“It’s you I’m worried about,” Zac sighed. “If the Heavens zap your AI, it’s not like you’ll walk away unscathed.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Kenzie said. “Jeeves hasn’t elicited any ire from the System”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Zac muttered, remembering the quest back then.

“You can’t get too paranoid,” Kenzie shrugged with a long-suffering look, which wasn’t surprising considering the two already had this argument many times before. “Taking the Dimensional Seed would probably have been a great boon for you. It would definitely be a worthwhile trade in the eyes of the System. Trading the life of one person who focuses on the Dao of Technology for a power-up of a million-year-talent? Easy trade. It doesn’t mean it has targeted Jeeves.”

“Alright, alright. You’re sure there’s nothing I can do?” Zac asked.

“Nope,” Kenzie said. “I’ll feed Jeeves the last materials and evolve as he does.”

Zac could only look on with worry as she walked over to the middle of the rotunda where the Nexus Node hovered in the air. Nine intricately inscribed boxes appeared around her, and Zac’s body immediately started to scream with greed the moment she opened them.

He didn’t know what all the items Kenzie collected were, but he knew about two of them. One was called a [**Lavoar Wavespirit**], and it looked like a crystallized drop of deep-blue water. It was an amazing water-attuned treasure that could actually increase one’s affinity with the various Daos of Water.

It wasn’t as magical as a treasure that could turn a mortal into a cultivator, but what cultivator didn’t dream of increasing their affinities to their Daos?

It was a peak treasure for the lower grades in the Zecia sector, far surpassing things like the Fruit of Ascension or his Amanita Mushroom. Its price reflected that fact as well, and he knew that Kenzie had an off-world agent pay over 200 Billion Nexus Coins for this item alone. It was way beyond even the [**Pathfinder Oracle Eye**]. Of course, the price of that kind of treasure could probably reach 200 Billion as well outside the Base Town, provided there were a few interested parties.

The second treasure he recognized was the [**Avar Worldtree Nut**], a nut no larger than an acorn. It was one of the treasures that were the cause for the ruckus in his cells because of the dense life it contained. The Avar Worldtree was a semi-sentient tree that had a chance to reach the power equivalent of peak D-Grade Cultivator if it was tended for properly.

It could turn into a guardian for a clan, where its vines could stretch tens of kilometers and rip apart an invading army. It would even grow large enough that one could build a whole city in its tree crowns. Of course, growing it to such a state would cost a fortune and it would take over ten thousand years, but it was still a very popular choice for some races to set up a foundation for a rising clan.

The Avar Worldtrees weren't that rare thanks to its popularity. But they still only grew a nut or two every few millennia, so the supply was pretty limited. One nut cost over 30 Billion Nexus Coins.

The other treasures each had an element of their own, and the five basic elements were represented; Water, Wood, Fire, Earth, and Metal. There were also two treasures pertaining to Life and Death, and two for Time and Space.

These treasures were all the best of the best among what was publicly available in the Zecia Sector, and a few of them could even match the Wavespirit in price. Thankfully, the rest of the items Kenzie had gathered until this point were a lot cheaper than these nine. She had splurged extra as these were foundational Daos and the Daos for her path, and she wanted Jeeves to understand them as deeply as possible.

Zac watched with rapt attention as his sister took out one item after another and pressed it against her forehead, which caused them to disappear in a flash. It was Jeeves that was somehow absorbing the natural treasures. Three hundred Memorysteel balls, each one meter across and covered in dense scripts, rose into the air the next moment.

It looked like they formed a constellation of planets above the rotunda, and Zac felt various Daos emanating from each of them. This was an invention of his sister, based on the containment sphere in the Research Base. However, these balls each held Natural Treasures of their own, and they suffused their energies into the surroundings.

They also moved in a certain pattern that Zac couldn't understand at all, but it definitely held some hidden meaning since Zac's soul shuddered from trying to observe it. The movements also mixed the three hundred Daos, with Kenzie in the center. Zac gazed at the extravagant display, knowing that Kenzie was currently burning Millions of Nexus Coins every second.

Nothing happened for the first thirty minutes, but Kenzie's brows slowly furrowed either in pain or concentration. Zac could only look on with worry, knowing he couldn't do anything to help at this point. This was uncharted territory, evolving a mysterious AI to the next stage. Jeeves itself said that it should be effortless, but Zac wouldn't trust the parasitic AI as far as he could throw it.

The frown soon turned into a scowl, and Kenzie soon groaned in pain through grit teeth. Her aura was starting to fluctuate wildly, and Zac started to get a sinking feeling. This wasn't looking good.

A piercing scream of danger made Zac wildly look around, a raging fury bubbling up in his chest. Was someone actually targeting them while Kenzie was undergoing her tribulation? He'd slaughter anyone who caused a scene at this point. However, Zac quickly realized that the danger didn't come from a rival faction or an assassin, but from the Heavens themselves.

The sky was clear just a few seconds ago, but a sea of blue lightning bolts approached on the horizon. One second later they had arrived, and Zac looked up with horror as one tendril after another started to descend. There was no way to defend against this. Kenzie had installed lightning rods on the island upon his insistence, but there was no way they'd be able to handle something like this. Zac doubted even the island itself would survive an onslaught of this magnitude.

And even if the lightning somehow dissipated, there was still the issue of Kenzie herself. She clearly looked in a bad way, and she hadn't even touched the Nexus Node yet. It had to be Jeeves' evolution that was somehow taxing her to the point that she wasn't even aware of the danger that was creeping up on her. Zac's hair stood on end, and he knew this attempt would end in failure.

He needed to do something to save Kenzie, and he decided to enact his last-ditch plan. He couldn't help with Jeeves, but perhaps they could escape the Heavenly Lightning if he sent her away from Earth. He would first take Kenzie away from this island through the teleportation Array and then send her away with a Teleportation Token. Or he could at least swallow some of the lightning to lessen her burden.

However, a sigh echoed through the world just as Zac was about to rush in between the still-floating Memorysteel balls, and it felt like time ground to a halt.

The horizon was fractured the next second as a mindbogglingly large scar appeared, a vertical line splitting Zac's vision in two. It almost touched the ground on one end while it stretched all the way into the stratosphere on the other. Four sets of enormous hands reached through the cracks, pushing them apart further and further, giving Zac a glimpse of the other side.

Waiting on the other side of the crack was either deep space or the abyss itself, but Zac could barely discern what looked like a purple sun. However, Zac felt a terrifying force radiating from the star, making him believe it was something far greater than some burning ball of hydrogen.

The fingers themselves looked like perfectly sculpted works of art, steel appendages where the divide between real and artificial had been blurred. However, the hands were not just made from solid matter. There was also a purple haze filled with mysterious energies that replaced the joints, which added a supernatural feeling to the incoming leviathan.

The haze reminded Zac of the blue stream of pure energies that powered the Little Bean, but the Technocrat Vessel's huge energy circuits felt like weak alkaline batteries in front of the power contained in a single finger of the mysterious being making its entrance.

Eight arms were soon followed by a face, and space itself shuddered as the metal giant emerged. The being had a clearly female form, and a dress made of purple stardust swirled around her body. She was as tall as a mountain, and a single finger of hers would be able to push the whole island he stood on into the depths of the ocean. The whole sea was actually pushed away from her presence, allowing her to step on solid ground a few kilometers out from land.

The crack soon closed behind her, but space itself was clearly having trouble containing this monstrosity. Spatial tears stretched across the horizon, and it was like the laws of nature were breaking apart in her presence as she started walking toward the shore beneath a sky of frozen lightning.

Nine halos in wrought from the Dao itself swirled behind her back, each one containing even more power than the one before. Even the blue lightning bolts were overshadowed by their splendor.

They formed a mysterious pattern that was ever-changing, and Zac was instantly put in a trance as he looked at them. They contained the profundity of the universe, and at a level that far exceeded what he could comprehend. The feeling far exceeded even what he had felt inside the chambers that had sealed the Dimensional Seed.

The scene was shocking, and a primal part of Zac's subconscious simply wanted him to fall on his knees in obeisance to the incoming entity. There was no escape from

something like this. You could only pray that a being like this wouldn't deign to waste their breath to kill you.

However, while Zac's heart beat like a drum, it wasn't simply out of abject fear. His emotions were a lot more complicated as he looked up at the foreign yet familiar face a thousand meters in the air. The auburn locks were replaced by purple strings of aether, but the fundamental features were still there. The face of someone who had hugged him goodnight, who had walked him to school as a child.

Leandra Atwood had finally returned to Earth.

Chapter 664: Destiny

The world was frozen from Leandra Atwood's descent, but the Heavens wouldn't be denied for long. The Tribulation Lightning churned and raged, like her very existence was an affront to the Heavens. Before it was just some of the tendrils moving toward the island, whereas thousands of blue bolts fell from the sky now. But how could Leandra not have come unprepared?

She opened one of her hands, and thousands upon thousands of mysterious lights were conjured out of nowhere, each of them forming a barrier that far eclipsed anything Zac and Kenzie would ever manage to buy or create. The uproar in the sky only increased in intensity, and attacks rained upon the barrier. It looked like the whole world would collapse, and Zac's felt an overwhelming pressure by standing right beneath the terrifying display.

Deep cracks and purple discoloration spread across the barriers, but they actually held even against the System's Tribulation Lightning. A few of her hands formed a set of seals that seemed to adjust the barriers to strengthen them even further. Leandra then inspected the scene for a moment before her gaze shifted to Zac and Kenzie down on the ground.

One of her free hands formed a different seal, and Zac's suddenly found himself utterly incapable of movement. More worryingly, Kenzie seemed to have been knocked unconscious as she floated a few meters into the air while the Memorysteel-balls floated out of the way.

"Wait!" Zac shouted as he tried to put himself between Kenzie and Leandra, but it was simply futile to break through the restraints.

He could only look on with worry as one mysterious layer after another encapsulated his sister until she wasn't even

visible within the cocoon of pure energy. Zac still had no idea whether Leandra was a friend or a foe, but one thing was for certain; she was at least able to help them survive this calamity.

At least Zac hoped she was, since it looked like the intensity of the lightning in the sky only grew increasingly severe.

Leandra looked up at the sky again for a few seconds, and Zac shuddered when he was inundated by a deep-seated hatred that made his hair stand on end. It was so far beyond any killing intent Zac would ever be able to unleash that it might as well be considered something completely different. The burning anger of someone as powerful as Leandra seemed to impact reality itself, and even the sun dimmed as the ocean started to boil. He was lucky her gaze was directed at the sky rather than himself, since he wasn't sure he'd survive the attention.

Zac still felt his vision closing in on him as cracks appeared all over his organs. Thankfully the feeling soon disappeared, but Zac knew they weren't out of the woods just yet as the sky was still rumbling with increasing fervor. For some reason, Zac sensed it had lost some of its direction though, like it couldn't find Kenzie hidden in that cocoon of his mother's. Was that the purpose of those barriers, rather than actual protection?

It still seemed like there was a distinct possibility that the System would decide to simply smite the whole island if it couldn't find Kenzie, but Leandra finally was preparing her next move. The giant's eight hands slowly formed a circle, and a blinding light appeared inside like she was forming some sort of portal with her own body. Zac looked on with apprehension, and his eyes widened when a familiar figure walked out from the light.

It was flesh and blood Leandra, looking exactly as he remembered.

The metal giant wasn't actually his mother? Then again, Zac quickly realized that things might not be completely clear-cut for Technocrats as the lofty giant behind her back quickly disintegrated into purple dust. Some of it entered Leandra's

body as she floated down toward their location, while parts formed a dome across the rotunda Kenzie had prepared for her evolution.

Zac didn't immediately understand what the dome did, but he soon understood when realizing that the lightning above suddenly moved at a fraction of its original speed. She had set up a time dilation sphere.

"Mom... You're back," Zac said with hesitance, his mind trying to gauge whether the Leandra in front of him was the one from his vision or the far more amiable version recorded in the Technocrat Token.

Leandra's eyes slowly shifted away from the cocoon to briefly pause at a spot in the ocean before she looked into Zac's eyes. There wasn't the scathing hatred that Zac had felt in his vision, but neither was this the gaze of a loving mother. It was tranquil, to the point of being void of emotion entirely.

"You've done well, protecting your sister during the Corruption," she said with a nod. "In fact, your progress has greatly surprised me."

Zac didn't immediately understand what she was talking about, and even wondered if she was talking about his Bloodline. But he soon realized that Corruption might be referring to the Integration. After all, the System spreading across the multiverse was probably seen as corruption by the Technocrats.

"What are you doing with Kenzie?" Zac asked full of trepidation.

"You were too eager, trying to evolve Digital Nexus prematurely. You and the Nexus might have survived Heaven's Judgement once, but that does not mean you're able to walk unabashed under the sun," Leandra said. "I am sealing your sister's progress for now, until I can properly nurture the Nexus. It is too early for MacKenzie as well. She doesn't have your constitution, she will not be able to bear the burden as she currently is. She should have realized that already, but she still pushed on."

“What? Evolving Jeeves would kill her?” said with shock.

“Jeeves?” Leandra repeated with confusion before she understood what she was talking about. “Yes. Half her blood is that of Robert Atwood, a normal mortal. That she was even able to receive and fuse with the Digital Nexus is nothing short of a miracle. But to reach our goal... Will be difficult. We need to leave this sector if we want a chance at success.”

Zac’s thoughts spun as he went over the information. It seemed even more and more likely that he and Jeeves were originally meant to be used together. And as expected, Leandra had come to take Kenzie away. Zac was full of reluctance, but he had to admit it was better than getting incinerated by tribulation lightning.

“Dad... Died during the Incursion,” Zac said, somewhat of a loss of what else to say.

There was no familial warmth as the two stood facing each other, and he almost felt like a soldier making a report to his general.

“I know,” Leandra nodded, and Zac inwardly frowned when there was not the slightest change in her expression. “Robert was a good man who helped us in our time of need. He deserved a better ending. Too many have fallen to the machinations of the Villanous Heavens. One day there will be a reckoning.”

Leandra appeared completely indifferent to everything, which made Zac’s early childhood memories feel like an illusion. It pained him in a way he hadn’t quite expected, considering the resentment he had carried for decades. He could only focus on what’s important right now; saving Kenzie.

“Are you able to deal with the lightning?” Zac asked.

She didn’t immediately answer but rather waved her hand. Zac didn’t immediately understand what she was doing, but his eyes widened in shock when Thea suddenly appeared right between them, her hair wet as she looked around with terror.

“Thea!” Zac exclaimed with a sinking feeling. “Mom, what’s going on?!”

Thea looked at Zac with incomprehension before her eyes turned to Leandra who still radiated an undeniable might. She was clearly having trouble processing what was going on, and who could blame her?

“She floated outside this island on a treasure, hidden by a few low-grade arrays,” Leandra said, making Zac look at his girlfriend with confusion.

“I- I wanted to understand what’s going on. You two have been acting full of secrecy for years, building hidden factories, and these restricted islands. I wanted to make sure...” Thea stammered. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone, just help out in case something went wrong. I-”

“The Zero Affinity Container has a complicated relationship to the Kayar-Elu and the Root Compact, but it is still our blood flowing through his veins. You are not worthy,” Leandra cut her off with an emotionless face. “But you will still get a chance to serve in the undertaking.”

“What are you-“ Zac interjected, but he suddenly found himself unable to speak.

Thea looked like she had been physically hit, her eyes wide as she looked back and forth between Zac and Leandra. Zac had an extremely bad feeling, and he wanted to scream for her to run away. But he couldn’t as much as blink, and neither could Thea from the looks of it as she slowly floated up in the air as a series of intricate patterns appeared around her.

“Since when has the Cursed Heavens allowed itself to be denied?” Leandra muttered, her face once more a mask of fury. But Zac barely heard her as his attention was on Thea moving ever closer to the sky. “How can that conniving ball of greed and wild ambition let a threat be? Even if it has to break the covenant, so what? It will just make some reparations to satiate its own deluded sense of equilibrium.”

‘Stop!’ Zac screamed in his mind since his mouth wouldn’t move, praying that his mother could hear him. *‘I’ll do anything!’*

“You might feel my actions unfair, but your understanding is too narrow. I am also doing this for the sake of her clan. I can sense that her love for you is real, but her allegiance to her clan is stronger,” Leandra said. “You cannot comprehend the danger someone cursed by the Heavens will bring upon his surroundings. A small tribe such as hers will be ripped apart by the torrents of fate if they are tied to your chariot.”

Zac kept raging in his mind for his mother to put Thea down, telling her that his girlfriend had nothing to do with whatever compact she rambled on about. Rage turned to pleas of mercy, to stop whatever she was doing. But it was all for naught. Thea’s eyes rolled into her head as the scripts covered the last part of her body, and the next moment she was pushed through the barriers keeping the torrential lightning at bay.

The whole world turned white, and Zac’s mind went blank.

A second later the sea of lightning was simply gone, as were the encapsulated Thea. Remaining was just one thin streak of blue that slowly descended from the sky and entered the cocoon shielding Kenzie. Zac felt like his mind had stopped, that he was having a twisted fever nightmare, but it was all too real.

His mother had actually used Thea as a lightning rod to divert and exhaust the tribulation.

Leandra gazed at the sky for a few seconds before she nodded in satisfaction, like she hadn’t just sacrificed a human being. It was like Thea had never been on the island, and the pressure that had bound Zac was lifted. The lingering lightning completely entered the barriers surrounding Kenzie, and it started beating like a heart.

“Why? WHY?!” Zac immediately roared, his rage threatening to turn him insane. “You come back after all this time, and the first thing you do is something insane like this?! You are crazy!”

“Our family bears the weight of destiny,” Leandra sighed. “Our lives belong to the Cosmos. Do not get distracted. Your role might have become unclear with how things have progressed, but you are still part of the Kayar-Elu. If you are

unhappy with my actions, become stronger. Don't waste your breath on the mundane. The moment you reach the peak and fulfill your fate, you will gain Eternity. What will you lack then? Even killing me out vengeance will be as easy as taking a breath."

Zac looked into Leandra's eyes, and he saw an unquenchable conviction that even eclipsed that of the zealots from the Church of Everlasting Dao. He knew then and there that there was no way to reason with his mother. She was a true extremist, and she only cared about her goals. She wholeheartedly believed she had done a good deed by using Thea to deal with the Tribulation.

"Now, don't do anything untoward. I don't wish to wipe the memories of you two unless I have to. Each erasure will harm your souls and weaken your potential. We will leave, and MacKenzie's future will be far brighter than it could ever be in this remote Sector. Staying next to you will only bring calamity down on you both," Leandra said as she pointed at the pulsating cocoon.

A few seconds passed as Zac found himself locked in an internal struggle. Part of him wanted to throw everything away and attack Leandra even if it meant dying, while part of him feared that doing something stupid would implicate his sister. He had already realized that his Annihilation Sphere was useless to a being like this.

Just like the Administrator, she could simply stop him in his tracks with a thought, preventing him from even unleashing the skill.

In the end, he found himself rooted in place, his fear overcoming his rage. He could only look on as his sister emerged while he was being overwhelmed by a relentless storm of rage, guilt, and powerlessness. Kenzie looked around with confusion until she noticed Leandra. Zac died a little inside as he saw his sister's eyes light up, and he could barely hold back tears of frustration as Kenzie ran over to hug their mother.

“My child... We finally meet. You’ve worked hard,” Leandra said with a smile as she caressed Kenzie’s hair. “I have dreamed of this day for so long, but the two of us have to leave. I can only trick the Heavens for so long.”

“What?” Kenzie asked with a start, looking at their mother with confusion before she looked over at Zac with an inquiring gaze. “We’re leaving, just the two of us? What about Zac?”

“The situation is complicated, but suffice to say I left a gift with each of you upon your birth. Unfortunately, these two powers being in such close proximity has proven dangerous,” Leandra sighed. “Besides, your brother has already confirmed his Path. His cultivation is one of a solitary warrior. Me bringing him with us will only hurt him in the end.”

“Zac?” Kenzie asked with confusion.

“I... I’m not done with the Zecia sector yet,” Zac said with a hoarse voice and a sickly smile, hiding his true feelings as deeply as he could as to not get his mind cleansed.

He wanted to etch the events of today deep into his bones, to never forget the madness of Leandra Atwood. Part of him wanted to forget how his secrecy caused Thea to take matters into her own hands and start to investigate their activities. But that voice of weakness was overshadowed by a fiery ball of fury that threatened to cause him to combust.

The Digital Nexus. The Kayar-Elu and the Root Compact. These would be his clues to one day right this wrong.

Chapter 665: Power

“Can’t we all stay here together?” Kenzie entreated as she looked at Leandra.

“You have been discovered, child,” Leandra sighed. “You tried to evolve with insufficient preparations. You staying here will put this whole world in danger. We need to leave for the Six Profundity Empire. Unless something unexpected happens, we will be able to enter an Immemorial Realm there.”

Kenzie turned to Zac, who could only nod in what he hoped to be a comforting manner.

“Ok... But you need to help me with two things,” Kenzie said with determination. “First, you need to save a certain person. I’m sure you can do it with your power.”

“Save someone?” Leandra said as a frown spread across her face, causing Zac to get a sinking feeling.

“He’s called Ogras, and he saved my life,” Kenzie said as a screen appeared in front of her.

It was no doubt the product of Jeeves, and it rapidly started flashing images and symbols for two seconds before it disappeared. Zac could only understand snippets, but he had seen a few scenes from the events three years ago.

“Oh, so something like that happened in the Research Base?” Leandra sighed as a spatial tear opened next to her. “So much for my preparations.”

A few streams of light entered the void, but she soon shook her head as the gate closed.

“A Dimensional Seed is a sentient treasure, and it is in its growing stages. It has moved to an area the cultivators in this Sector call the Million Gates Territory. The dense Spatial Energies there will nurture it. It would be impossible to save the demonling now as the seed has hidden between the folds of

reality. But in a decade or two the seed should be satiated and bloom. At that point you simply need to find the pocket world it has created and pick the demonling up,” Leandra said.

“How can we find him?” Kenzie asked hurriedly. “Can you tell if he, if they, are alive?”

“As long as one is in the area, it will be hard to miss the opening. The blooming of a Dimensional Seed gives off tremendous energy signatures, and tens of millions will enter its dimension in search of treasure,” Leandra smiled. “It is a brand-new dimension, rife with echoes of the Origin. Your friends were alive when entering the Hidden Realm, and they have gained a rare opportunity in a sense. Their cultivation environment should be almost at the level of an Ancient Realm.”

“They’re really alive?!” Kenzie exclaimed with happiness written all over her face, though it soon scrunched up with disappointment. “A decade or two, though?”

“Child, you should understand. We will have long left the sector by then. I can only provide this much guidance,” she said.

“I’ll go pick him up when it’s time,” Zac said when he saw Kenzie’s look. “I was planning on going there anyway.”

“Right, okay...” Kenzie said, though reluctance was written all over her face. “Secondly, help me finish this array. It’s for Zac.”

Zac looked on as Kenzie took out an extremely densely inscribed array disk the next moment, and another wave of sorrow hit him.

“An illusion array meant for his Core? Exquisite work, but unfortunately it won’t work. Your understanding of the Dao is too limited to hide that thing from Class-4 cultivators. Luckily, I was already prepared for this. The Kayar-Elu have long perfected the methods to walk freely among those who have tied their chariot to the cursed heavens,” Leandra said as she took out a crystal and turned to Zac.

“What a disappointment. You cannot imagine the resources that went into fusing your bloodline with a perfected Duplicity Core. You could have used it to become the incarnation of the Machine God, yet you sullied it with the mark of the unliving. Still, our preparations will work just as well in this situation.”

Zac wanted to simply throw the crystal away as it floated into his hands, but he restrained himself and tried to appear thankful as he put it away.

“It is an almost perfected array that can hide your unique situation. Monarchs and weaker Autarchs will be unable to see through its disguise, and those above will not care about your situation. It will also impede any attempt at looking into the truth of your being. Even stronger Autarchs will have their perception subverted to some degree, thinking they found nothing out of the norm from your status screen or body.

“However, its impenetrable disguise comes at a price. You will not be able to change back and forth when the array is active. If you break the seal to change your constitution, it will take a month before you can hide your core again,” Leandra said before she turned back to Kenzie.

“Child, it is time. Every second we spend will increase the threat to this world. I will put you into my Inner World,” Leandra said.

“Okay, one moment,” Kenzie sighed as she walked over and hugged Zac. “Take care until we meet again.”

“Be careful,” Zac said with a low volume. “It’s dangerous out there. Trust no one.”

That was as far as he dared go, but he couldn’t let Kenzie disappear without giving at least a small warning. The next moment his sister was gone, leaving only Leandra behind.

“I can feel the fury that churns in your heart. You were just a baby who didn’t choose to be brought into the world or to be forced into our cause. But you still carry the Original Sin. You are the source of the ruin of our clan, the reason for the death of five hundred billion people,” she said as she looked at Zac with mixed emotions.

“Our paths will diverge from here on out, our Karma is severed. I will not kill you, but neither will I help you any further from today. If you come looking for us, you better be powerful enough to kill me,” Leandra said with a staid face, as though her deranged words were something normal for a mother to say to her son. “Or you will fall even before getting close to your sister.”

A prompt appeared that said Nexus Coins had been transferred to him, but Zac waved it away with annoyance. Was his mother really trying to buy him off after what she did?

“That’s not up to you to decide!” Zac roared.

He could no longer hold back the anger bubbling in his chest now that Kenzie wasn’t here. He was just so furious that he didn’t know what to do with himself. He was angry at his sister for hiding the risks with the evolution. Angry at himself for passively letting things proceed until they reached this point and for hiding the truth about his activities, which ended up implicating Thea.

But most of all he was angry at Leandra who had proven herself so needlessly cruel and murderous. He refused to believe that the only way for his mother to save Kenzie was to kill someone close to him. His wrath was met by a cold indifference though, which only poured oil on the fire.

“Your sister is the harbinger of the Final Era, but she cannot fulfill her destiny in this destitute corner of the universe. I am taking her to a more appropriate stage,” Leandra said as the purple and futuristic dress covered in Technocrat scripts on her body shuddered, turning into a beautiful robe.

Zac’s eyes looked on with incomprehension. It felt like he wasn’t looking at a Technocrat any longer, but rather someone like Be’Zi; a supreme cultivator. A swirling vortex opened behind her the next moment, and it looked exactly like the portal the System showed him during his mind tribulation.

“Farewell... my son.”

A second later she was gone, leaving Zac utterly, completely alone.

“This is your inner world?” Kenzie asked as she looked out across the endless vista with amazement written all over her face.

She was standing at the top of a ten-kilometer-tall spire looking out through a window, and the surroundings were simply marvelous. There was a bustling metropolis below, though it was impossible to tell whether people actually lived there from this far up. There was a lot of movement though, but it was entirely possible that it was all machinery.

The town was tens of times larger than Port Atwood, but yet it only took up a small pocket of space in this seemingly endless world.

Rather than an inner world, it almost looked like they were standing in the normal universe. A huge nebula in a mesmerizing purple covered the sky, and various zones of perfectly harmonious biospheres formed a layer around the sprawling city. Far in the distance, she could vaguely see more cities, each of them centered around a spire much like this one.

“For cultivators, to build your inner world is to shore up your foundation. The more you manage to expand and stabilize it, the greater force you will be able to bring out. After all, each movement of yours will contain the will of a world,” Leandra said from the side. “From there, you impart it with truth, making it follow your Heavenly Law.”

“Just... how powerful are you, mom?” Kenzie hesitantly asked.

“I once was a Class-5 Autarch,” Leandra sighed. “But our family encountered a calamity which almost eradicated us. If not for your grandfather I would be dead. He sacrificed himself to give me a chance. But I was still wounded, and it will take a long time before I am restored. Right now, my strength is somewhere between Peak Class-4 and Class-5.”

“Why couldn’t we bring Zac with us though? Now he’s left all alone,” Kenzie said with redrimmed eyes.

“There’s nothing to be done,” Leandra said with a pained face. “You should have come to understand a few things through

your connection to... Jeeves. Zac and Jeeves were once meant to be a pair, each one half of a whole. But the implications of this fusion triggered the wrath of the System, which led to our doom.

“Zac and Jeeves barely survived the calamity thanks to my father’s efforts. But their very existence was punished, their fate subverted. That thankfully is your key to survival. The System is forced to follow a few Heavenly laws older than time itself, one of them being the law of balance. The two have been punished for their existence and survived, which will allow them to continue living.

“But as long as the threat reaches a certain threshold, the System will subvert the will of the Heavens and attack you, no matter the cost. More importantly, your brother has been marked by the System, and it is actively watching. It was because of him being close to you that the Tribulation Lightning descended. I needed to sever your Karma, as you two siblings will bring calamity upon each other,” Leandra said.

“Still,” Kenzie said hesitantly.

“Don’t you worry about your brother. He was meant to become the perfect Cultivator. He might have had that fate taken from him, but it seems that calamity has opened a few unexpected doors instead. He is free in a way I’ve never seen before, in a way I didn’t know existed. But Zac will need to figure out his path on his own. Outside interference will just harm him,” Leandra explained.

“Become stronger. Right now, you are just a victim to the heavens, a leaf blowing in the wind. But by the time you reach the peak, you will be able to control the winds of fate,” Leandra said. “And I’ll help you. You have accomplished an impressive amount in the few short years after the Corruption, but Jeeves was ultimately not designed to be housed by a normal human.”

“So what do I need to do?” Kenzie asked.

“We need to improve your very foundations; Your soul and your constitution. Only then will you survive the evolution,

while also setting up a proper path for your cultivation. The path of Technomancy is full of endless potential, but it ultimately not for you. With how Jeeves has changed, you will need to become a proper cultivator. Unfortunately, your foundations are currently average at best,” Leandra explained as the room they stood in started to transform.

The windows overlooking the world turned into screens covered in all kinds of information. Kenzie looked around, and she was shocked by the esoteric information the texts contained. It felt like they dug straight at the core of cultivation itself.

“For now, we’re moving to a more flourishing place where we will be able to work on your cultivation. But it will take a few years before we reach the wormhole that will take us there. I wish that I could accompany you during that time, but I need to enter secluded cultivation to recuperate.

“I have suppressed your body to maintain its momentum and avoid detection of the System,” Leandra added. “Work on shoring up your theoretical foundations. With the help of Jeeves and the tower’s resident AI, you will make more progress in a few years compared to what most scions accomplish in centuries.”

Kenzie nodded, and Leandra smiled and ruffled her hair one last time before she disappeared without as much as creating a ripple. Kenzie wasn’t surprised to learn about the suppression, she had already felt a subtle change in her body since waking up. Thankfully, that seal didn’t block everything.

[Do you want me to stop?]

‘*No, maintain control over my expressions,*’ Kenzie answered bleakly with a thought as she sat down in a chair arranged for her. ‘*She is probably recording.*’

Kenzie kept looking at the screen, and while Jeeves was diligently absorbed all the knowledge laid bare her thoughts were elsewhere. The scenes of Leandra treating Zac, her own son, like a stranger now that he couldn’t help her with her plans. How she sacrificed Thea without a shred of remorse. It all kept repeating in a loop.

She had been wrong. So fundamentally, irrevocably wrong.

It was all her fault. Her fault that Thea was gone, that Zac was left alone to pick up the broken pieces. It felt like she would collapse at any moment, and she had long given up on controlling her own body out of fear of reprisal. What if Leandra saw something was wrong and decided to do something even crazier, like destroy Earth altogether?

That was her only chance at turning things around, that Leandra didn't seem to fully understand the changes that Jeeves had undergone. Her mother thought she had him completely under control, but there was still a small core of true life that she couldn't touch. It was that part that had recorded everything that transpired while she was unconscious, turning it into a hidden memory that she gained the moment she was teleported to this place.

She felt like a fool, a dangerous fool. Zac had warned her so many times, exhorted her to proceed with caution. That Leandra might not be the powerful mother that was forced away from Earth to protect them, but rather a calculating cultivator who had long lost things like familial warmth. He had been right. She only cared about the undertaking of her clan, considering her children just as the next generation of soldiers in their war against the System.

But was she so different? Kenzie had known there were very real risks with her plan, but she had discarded them in her frantic pursuit of power. Zac believed that Jeeves had been telling her that everything was fine, but it had repeatedly tried to convince her to slow down. To first strengthen herself just like her mother planned.

Arrogance. She realized now that her mental state had steadily deteriorated since the events of the Mystic Realm. People kept calling her a genius of an era, mastering everything from Dao to Arrays to even Technocrat tech. It had blown up her confidence, convinced her of her infallibility. She was a unique genius, how could her deductions be wrong?

It was all a lie. What genius? It was all Jeeves. He kept knocking down the barriers in her cultivation, she simply

proceeded on the path staked out for her. She was nothing like her brother who had earned every part of his power through endless struggle, she had been given everything. She was ultimately just a random girl just past 23 years old with a sapient supercomputer in her head.

Now everything was ruined. Zac was scarred for life, Thea was sacrificed, and she found herself at the core of some insane struggle she wanted no part of. What should she do? What could she do?

[The Creator was right. You are lacking power. The moment you can overpower the Creator, you can freely control your fate again.]

Kenzie slowly nodded as she steeled her heart.

She would drink the poisonous water of Leandra's teachings if it meant power. Only if she reached the peak would she be able to right her wrongs. She thought back to the beautiful town on the small island in the middle of nowhere, the slice of paradise Zac had created for them. A wave of homesickness hit her like a truck, but she could only push the feelings down.

She thought of her brother, constantly struggling to protect those around him, his eyes full of exhaustion, yet never stopping. She would have to stop completely relying on Jeeves and grow so that she could right this wrong.

[The Creator wanted Zachary Atwood to feel the curse of helplessness, of loss. To instill emotion powerful enough to shock his momentum awake. Emotion is the bridge between Dao and Man. I shared the events because you needed to feel the same.]

Kenzie inwardly nodded as she focused on the screen in front of her. One day she would return, whatever it took.

Chapter 666: Powerless

Zac's thoughts were a blur as he made his way back to his compound, and he spent over thirty minutes aimlessly wandering around until he stopped in front of one of his sister's workshops. Far beneath the ground was a large factory, this particular one used to create the Dao Balls meant for Kenzie's breakthrough.

A fiery ember of rage swept away the bleakness as Zac peered down at the ground, and he was more than willing to give in to the feeling. Cosmic Energy surged through his body as **[Hatchetman's Rage]** activated, and it felt like his soul was lit on fire. A massive hand appeared a few moments later, and it conjured an emerald array that covered half the sky. A tremendous mountain soon emerged and slammed straight into the workshop.

A few technocrat barriers sprung up, but they were no match for Zac's full furor. The ground heaved as the mountain peak pierced the building and continued deep into the ground, and it almost looked like the mountain itself was on fire as it was drenched in Zac's anger. The skill emitted a pressure far beyond what was normal as Dao, Body, and Spirit worked as one in their desire for destruction.

A creaking sound emerged from the depths, and the ground suddenly collapsed for hundreds of meters in every direction. It was the ceiling of the secret factory that had caved in, and thousands of tons of dirt crushed the machines and drones into scrap. Huge clouds of dust rose to the sky like a bomb had been set off.

It was immensely satisfying, but Zac wasn't done. He turned into an avatar of unrelenting violence, destroying one hidden Technocrat structure after another in his desperate need for an outlet. Soon half his private forest was in shambles, with

pieces of Memorysteel rubble sticking up from massive fissures in the ground.

Deep scars from axe strikes crisscrossed the ground, and Zac looked at the carnage with heaving breaths for a few seconds before he turned and wordlessly walked away. A number of golems silently emerged from a shed in a corner, but it would probably take the gardener automatons weeks to even somewhat fix the destruction.

Emptiness.

That was all Zac could feel as he sat down on the pergola overlooking the ocean. He had worked so hard for years, overcoming insurmountable odds to protect those around him, yet where had that taken him?

His sister was taken away to become a pawn of their mother's schemes while his partner killed like she was an ant. And that just the latest tragedy. Ogras, his closest friend and confidant was gone, stuck in a fragment hurtling through subspace. Billy was there as well, and it was unclear if Zac would ever be able to see them again. Alea had been reduced to a Spirit Tool, and he never got to say goodbye to his father.

He was alone. So utterly alone.

He was the leader of a planet, an emperor with over a billion subjects, yet he had no one to turn to. Certainly, many of his followers remained, but his innermost circle was reduced to a party of one. Certainly, there were old followers like Sap Trang and Joanna to turn to, but there ultimately was a leader-follower dynamic between them.

The following days passed in a blur, where he barely had the energy to lift a single finger. It quickly became apparent that Leandra's terrifying aura had been sensed all across the world, so there was no hiding the situation. Zac sent word of the tragedy to the Marshall Clan, though he modified what actually transpired.

An extremely powerful cultivator appeared out of nowhere in search of the Dimensional Seed and tried to kill all three of them. His sister and Thea had both died instantly and without

leaving a body, but he had miraculously survived thanks to a special item he had gained. Lying like this submerged him in another wave of self-loathing, but there wasn't much he could do.

Firmament's Edge was probably still looking for Leandra and Jeeves, and if word of a powerful Technocrat appearing on this planet got out, then who knew what would happen.

He had said he was extremely sorry, and that he would make sure to keep the Marshall Clan safe and independent. But Zac didn't have the guts to face Henry Marshall himself, so he immediately closed the doors to his compound after sending out word that he wanted to be left alone.

Part of him wanted to set out into the multiverse in search of the Six Profundity Empire, and another part of him just wanted to jump into the deepest monster nest he could find and lose himself to slaughter. But it all felt so futile, so he ultimately just sat down and looked out across the ocean.

Only ten days later was there a change as a series of light footsteps made Zac turn around. A young woman walked toward him, her eyes looking at the destruction around her with some fear. It was Emily, wearing a battle robe with two tomahawks attached to a belt. It was half a year since she had run away from home, but she still looked a bit like a runt.

"You've become stronger," Zac said with a weak smile.

"I'm sorry... About things. Are you okay?" Emily said with red-rimmed eyes as she sat down opposite him.

"You heard?" Zac asked.

"The Marshall Clan found me. They wanted me to check up on you," she said.

"How are they?" Zac sighed.

"I don't think most know what happened," Emily said.

"Everyone only knows something big took place here. People are lying low, waiting to see what's going on. What are you going to do?"

“Do?” Zac said with a self-deprecating laugh. “What can I do? I keep working to become stronger, but that just means that the stakes keep getting bigger. I am... powerless.”

Emily didn't answer, and the two sat in silence overlooking the sunset. But a sudden sense of danger warned Zac of an attack, just in time for him to block a small tomahawk with his palm. The clash caused the awnings of the pergola to blow right off, but Zac's hand didn't move an inch as it was filled with the hardness of the Fragment of the Coffin.

“If you are powerless, what does that make the rest of us?” Emily said with a glare. “Others are more powerful, but they simply started earlier. A crazy cultivator came and killed Thea and Kenzie? You cannot let that go unpunished! Get stronger, find them, and rip them apart! Make the whole multiverse shudder in fear and disgust after you're done with them!”

“I...” Zac said.

“No buts. Go cultivate or something,” Emily said. “If you don't I'll start spreading even more rumors about you through Calrin.”

“*Even more?*” Zac said, his eyes widening in realization as he woke up from his stupor. “You? It was you?”

“A-“ Emily stammered, rapidly losing her momentum. “Well, just some stories, but I was just adding to the hundreds which were already out there. I was mad when you wouldn't let me go out, so I sent an anonymous crystal to the House of Myriad Eyes. They paid really well because I could provide some pictures of you, and that helped fund my Mercenary Group. Who would have expected those Stargazers would embellish so much?”

Zac's mouth opened and closed a few times until he finally let out a small wry smile.

“Thank you,” Zac said.

“Always happy to help,” Emily grinned. “Now, clean yourself up. There's a funeral in two hours. You should be there.”

The small amount of happiness Emily's return brought was quickly suffused as Zac was brought back to reality. He closed

his eyes for a few seconds, but he soon opened them again as he nodded. Half an hour later he had arrived at the other side of the world, where a somber group waited.

Rain poured down on the ancient cemetery hidden in the forest close to the Marshall Homestead, drenching the small gathering of people standing in front of the unmarked grave of Thea Marshall. In fact, only a few core members of the Marshall Clan knew that Thea had fallen. The others believed that she had set out into the Zecia Sector to further temper herself, as the challenges on Earth no longer could hold her. It was an attempt to maintain stability, though Zac doubted it would last for long.

Zac's eyes were hollow as he looked down at the beautifully crafted limestone that marked Thea Marshall's final resting place. Of course, the grave was empty since Leandra didn't as much a string of hair behind. He once more felt sick to the stomach of regret and shame as he heard the quiet sobs around him, and he had to fight the urge to just bolt.

The ceremony only lasted twenty minutes, with a priest reading a few passages before people took their final farewells. Zac walked up last, and he only stood in silence as he looked down at the headstone. Finally, he turned over to see a familiar figure looking straight at him.

"Come with me," Henry said as he walked toward the old Homestead, his previously straight back hunched over.

It looked like the old man had aged overnight, even though he had long managed to reach E-grade race and a peak F-grade cultivation. Losing Thea was not only a huge blow to his faction but also a personal blow as she was his actual granddaughter, one of his closest blood relatives in a clan comprised of thousands of people.

Zac sighed as he followed, wondering what Henry wanted to say in private. The two walked through the ancient forest that had belonged to the Marshall Clan for over a millennium, reaching the sprawling complex that had kept growing as their family did. Henry didn't enter any of the more recent additions

meant for cultivators though, but rather the oldest section of the manor.

It was an old house that mainly served as a memento of the founding of the Marshall Clan, but Zac wasn't too interested in looking at this piece of history in his current state. But Zac did exclaim in surprise when Henry walked up to a corner and pushed one of the stones in the wall, which triggered some mechanism that exposed a hidden pathway.

Zac wasn't too surprised that an old place like this had hidden pathways, but he was surprised that he hadn't noticed anything amiss. His senses were extremely sharp by now, and he should have been able to sense there was a hidden path. The two continued down the steps, and Zac was somewhat shocked to see how deep this place went.

They had walked well over a hundred meters down, and Zac was pretty certain that these stairs had been cut into the stone the same time the house above was built. Doing something like this must have been a huge undertaking this long ago, and Zac couldn't help but feel curious about what was waiting at the bottom.

Finally, they reached the bottom where a massive stone stele waited, over three meters tall. It was covered in text, but time had dulled the runes to the point that Zac couldn't make out the words.

"A thousand years," Henry sighed as he gazed on the enormous stele standing in front of them. "We waited for a thousand years for the prophecy to come true. Yet look at us now. We're floundering, only able to stay afloat thanks to your influence. Our biggest talent and hope fallen before she could even spread her wings."

"What is this? What's going on?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Our ancestor, the original Lord Marshall, was not of this world," Henry said. "He erected this stele and took his firstborn son to this place before he passed away, passing on a series of precepts to run the clan by. To wait. To accumulate. To prepare for the Integration."

“Much of what he said has been lost over the centuries. Not all generations of the Marshall Clan were believers. My father took me here in the 60s, mostly because he didn’t wish to break a millennia-old tradition. Personally, I didn’t believe in the tales of magic, but I sometimes wondered if our ancestor was an extra-terrestrial as I looked up at the stars. After all, this was during the era of the space race.

“By now I’ve long come to realize the truth. Our ancestor was a cultivator who encountered some sort of mishap and found himself on Earth. Perhaps he escaped from the Mystic Realm, perhaps he had some other origin, the stele never explained his place of birth. His foundation as a Cultivator managed to make him stronger and more talented than normal people even without access to Cosmic Energy, which allowed him to stand out during the Crusades and gain a footing for his descendants,” Henry said.

“Did Thea know?” Zac couldn’t help but ask.

“No,” Henry said with a smile. “There is nothing of value here, and I didn’t want to distract Thea. Only I and a few of the elders know of this place. The clan members aren’t strong enough to see through the array our ancestor erected with his remaining life force, at least not for now. I have also added a few extra precautions of my own.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I immediately understood what had happened when the Integration took place, and I took action while others were floundering. I was even blessed with a granddaughter teeming with talent, a powerhouse who could act as a protective umbrella for future generations. But this world is cruel. One stroke of bad fortune, and it all came crashing down on us,” Henry sighed.

“We were not the only clan. I know of at least five more families who have a similar origin as our own, most likely descendants from the mystic realm. There might be even more out there. But three of those clans fell in the months after the integration, with the other two barely being any better off than the general population,” Henry said with a shake of his head.

Zac was shocked to learn that there were actually people with a cultivator foundation on Earth, people who already had general knowledge by the time the Integration took place. Of course, perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised. Billy was ample evidence of the connection between the Tsarun Experiments and Earth. However, in his case the knowledge had clearly been lost, perhaps long ago.

"I am sorry, I'm rambling. What I am trying to say is that there are no guarantees in this world. Man makes plans and heaven laughs. I know you're thinking of going after the one who murdered my poor granddaughter and your sister, but I truly wish that you won't," Henry said.

"What?" Zac said, a frown spreading across his face.

"Mr. Trask and your sister are gone, and my granddaughter is no more. You're the last human on this planet that can stand at the forefront, to protect us against what's to come. There are other powerhouses, but they are ultimately not human. If you fall as well, then only death will await the rest of us when our grace period ends. Even if The Great Redeemer has forgotten about us," Henry said. "The Integration is just the first trial. Next comes the Assimilation."

Chapter 667: Einherjar

Zac knew what Henry was talking about. The moment the grace period ended and its shroud was lifted, then Earth would most likely find itself inside the sphere of influence of some faction of the Zecia Sector. It could be within the borders of an interplanetary clan, or inside some empire like the Dravorak Dynasty or the Allbright Empire.

In either case, their appearance wouldn't go unnoticed, and their treatment would largely depend on their strength and what kind of faction they were attached to. A new planet with prominent progenitors would probably get treated as promising elites to integrate into the fold, and the citizens would lead pretty carefree lives.

However, if the planet was just filled with wastrels, the reception would get a lot worse. Zac had read records where citizens of newly assimilated worlds were essentially turned into cannon-fodder for wars or had their home planets terraformed into factory worlds with a toxic atmosphere. The System wouldn't interfere if it was unsatisfied with the planet's performance.

The Assimilation would also bring some new challenges for its population, and the planet might even undergo some changes like gaining new Mystic Realms. Zac was generally confident about the situation, but it was possible that the System would add some sort of twist to the Assimilation since someone like him was the Planetary Leader of Earth.

Henry obviously wanted him to take a step back and stay on as a protective umbrella for humanity, to not take undue risks. Going after Leandra was obviously a goal fraught with danger. However, would Zac really back away against the challenge, or would he rise up as Emily wanted?

The very core of Zac's being was set ablaze at the thought of letting things rest. It roared in defiance at the prospect of just moving on, to stay and continue to slowly accumulate on Earth. There was no way he would ever see Kenzie again that way, no way for him to mete out punishment. Every fiber of his body urged him was forward so that he would never have to feel this powerless again.

"I understand where you're coming from, but I will never let this matter go," Zac said with a shake of his head as a fire ignited in his eyes. "I will leave Earth very soon to temper myself. I'm not sure how long I will be gone."

"Alas," Henry sighed as he turned back toward the stele, his back hunched even lower.

"It will definitely take more than a hundred years before I can go after that cultivator though, and I will be here for the Assimilation. Unless I fall before that," Zac said as he stepped onto the stairs. "Once again, I'm sorry for your loss."

Zac quickly left the hidden room, his thoughts a whirl as he flashed toward the closest Teleportation Array. Hearing about the Marshall Clan's origins had brought up some things he had pushed away until now.

The truth about his own heritage.

Leandra had all but admitted that he had been experimented on. Both his bloodline and his Specialty Core were something the Kayar-Elu, if that was his mother's organization, had implanted in him. That also made it impossible for Robert Atwood to be his biological father. It didn't come as a surprise to him by this point, but having it confirmed still hurt a bit.

Zac stepped onto the array, and he appeared back in Port Atwood moments later, this time at the entrance of his Cultivation Cave. He sent a stream of energy into the miniature Pagoda he always carried, which meant that Triv would come over as soon as it could.

Meanwhile, he took a deep breath and stabilized his mind as he walked inside and sat down. The pit of guilt and sorrow was still there, but there was also a burning ember of

conviction. He had almost completely given in to despair after seeing how impossibly powerful his mother was, but meeting Emily and Henry shook him awake.

No matter if it took ten, fifty, or a million years, he'd get Kenzie back and avenge Thea. There was even the chance of bringing Thea back to life, though Zac honestly didn't hold much hope in that regard. It felt like clinging to something like that was like a crutch that would sully her memory. If he managed to reach such a level, he'd definitely do it, but until then he wouldn't delude himself about her situation.

But for now, he needed to get a move on if he ever wanted to have a chance to catch up. Zac fought with reluctance for a few minutes until he finally opened his status screen, something he had avoided until this point. All of it looked the same as before, except for one part.

Nexus Coins	[D] 1 000 000
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Zac blankly looked at the line in for a few moments, his mouth opening and closing upon realizing it was D-grade Nexus Coins he was looking at, not E-grade like he had before. One million D-grade Nexus Coins, what kind of wealth was that? Zac had managed to accumulate around 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins in cash reserves before, mostly thanks to his sister's lucrative business spilling over into his wallet.

One hundred thousand E-grade Nexus Coins were the equivalent of One hundred billion F-grade nexus coins, a massive fortune for most E-Grade cultivators. Yet all that wealth was just 0.1 D-grade Nexus Coin, so little that it didn't even leave a dent on his updated status screen. Three years of accumulation as a Planetary Lord wasn't anything but a rounding error in the presence of this terrifying amount of money.

His mind almost short-circuited, and he couldn't help but question everything as he saw the number. Was there something he had misunderstood about Leandra Atwood? Why would she give him such a shocking sum of money? Was it just pocket-change to her, or perhaps a way to sever Karma?

Why would she bankroll him if she knew that he would be gunning for her? Was she just that confident that he'd never catch up even after all he had accomplished until this point?

He couldn't figure it out at all, and he could only close the Status screen with more questions plaguing his mind than before.

This amount of wealth opened all kinds of avenues for him, but Zac was still full of reluctance. That was essentially blood money in his book. Wouldn't using it mean he somewhat accepted what took place two weeks ago? But he also couldn't just throw that wealth away. He knew that cultivating as a mortal required shocking amounts of wealth. The E-grade was just the start. If he acted to uncompromising he might find himself stuck in a bottleneck, and how would he save Kenzie then?

Thankfully, a deathly gust dragged him out of his impasse as his ghost butler arrived.

"Lord, I came as soon as you called. My condolences. Miss Marshall was a lovely girl," the ghost said. "How about—"

"No," Zac said without hesitation. "I'm ambivalent as it is about doing it with my enemies. I won't turn my allies unless they ask me to. Besides, there wasn't even a body left. But speaking of, how is the Einherjar?"

"They are improving every day. A few shows promise that would even be considered rare back in my Kingdom. Lady Vilari in particular keeps impressing. A body like hers would have caused a storm back home. She has already formed her first Dao Fragment, and she shows no indication of having exhausted her potential of the F-Grade. Only Rhuger is anywhere close."

"Good," Zac slowly nodded. "Have Vilari come over tomorrow. I have something to give her."

The Einherjar was a project Zac started in secret two years ago which only Kenzie and Triv knew about. The progress of the people of Earth had caused Zac some pressure, and he realized that he needed more powerful, and absolutely loyal, followers

if he wanted to keep the situation on Earth stable while he was off-planet. That had become extra important now that he had lost both Kenzie and Thea.

Triv had provided him with the solution; undead followers. It was something the ghost had been advocating since day one, and Zac eventually relented soon after returning from the Mystic Realm. However, he didn't quite follow Triv's suggestions and instead spent months looking for ways that undead naturally formed.

After all, the normal arrays and Lich methods looted from the Undead Incursion contained the hidden compulsions of the Primo, and Zac didn't want to spend time and effort only to nurture a hostile army. Finally, he had found a way to create a purified cursed ground in one of the deathly hotspots on Earth. He had his sister set up a series of energy-gathering arrays, along with a few esoteric arrays that would help the awakening of the dead.

The solution hadn't actually come from some of Adriel's missives or Information Crystals bought from the Undead Empire, but rather the opposite. Their solution was found in a missive sold by the "Empire of Light", a smaller empire in the Zecia Sector which had the misfortune of sharing galactic borders with the local chapter of the Undead Empire.

Unsurprisingly, their whole culture centered around defeating and eradicating the undead, and they had ample information about spotting undead infections and how to prevent Revenants from rising across battlefields rife with deathly energies. Zac and Kenzie had, with the somewhat reluctant help of Triv, managed to reverse-engineer the process through the warnings.

Zombies would essentially rise by themselves sooner or later as long as corpses were left in deathly energies strong enough. However, the key was to infuse them with a "seed of sapience", which would help them awaken far quicker while also binding them to their progenitor. In Zac's case, it meant infusing the arrays with his own black ichor to form a connection.

The hard work had finally paid off after a year, with the first of the Einherjar awakening.

As for the source of the bodies, Zac had ample supply. He had maintained the somewhat macabre habit of collecting the corpses of his enemies to avoid leaving behind traces, and they were piled high in his 'Corpse Sack' by the time he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

This had resulted in quite a few powerful warriors under his command. Some standouts were Cervantes, or rather Rhuger as he called himself now, and Pika, Leviala's new identity. Below them were roughly 50 stand-out Revenants mainly made up of Incursion Leaders and their generals, and then finally roughly two thousand general revenants.

There were also one hundred thousand zombies roaming the new continent as well, fighting the beasts to empower themselves. A few of them would awaken, while most would fall to the environment. These Zombies were different from those in the original Dead Zone, as those Zombies were all marked by the empire, whereas these new ones were marked by his ichor.

It was a bit of a wasteful method to have most zombies fight and kill to gain the energy necessary to reach E-grade race, but he simply didn't have the resources to evolve their constitution with arrays or medicinal baths. He only used those kinds of materials on his best corpses. Besides, while this ruthless training method would result in fewer subjects, each of them would be a lot more powerful since they were forged through slaughter.

The Revenant with the most potential was neither Cervantes nor Leviala, but rather the unnamed mentalist he met in the Tower of Eternity. She was now called Vilari, and her mental abilities were simply dreadful, even making Zac feel some pressure.

Rhuger was still having trouble completely awakening his bloodline, which wasn't surprising since Cervantes had worked on it for centuries. Regaining that kind of strength would take time and effort, and the body was, unfortunately, a

bit too old for it to become a peak Revenant. As for Pika, her bloodline was pretty powerful, but she was after all still missing her eyes which was the core part of her power.

Meanwhile, Vilari held a potential that probably eclipsed both of the two Mystic Realm natives, and she was both young and in perfect condition. It was lucky that Vilari was completely loyal to him, as letting someone like her loose on Earth would spell disaster in a decade or two. Zac had great hopes for her, that she could become a pillar of Earth in the future.

But her potential was, unfortunately, being a bit wasted right now. Zac had therefore decided to give her a shot at the Crown of Despair-Inheritance. It did seem to be a mentalist inheritance, and Zac lacked any sort of foundation in that department apart from his Soul-Strengthening Manual.

He felt he was doing Vilari a disservice since he didn't really have any insights or skills to provide her, but she would hopefully find something useful in the inheritance trial. The only reason he had been holding back until now was that the opportunities were limited, and there wasn't a huge need to give her a power-up.

"She will be happy to hear that," Triv nodded before he asked with a hesitant voice. "About those two... What is your plan?"

"I haven't decided yet," Zac sighed. "I still can't believe they managed to cross the turbulent sea."

The two Triv talked about were Krisko and Uyir, the man formerly known as Enigma. Of course, he was a Revenant now, and the husband of his Corpse-lord wife. The last living general of the Undead Incursion had mysteriously disappeared the moment the Incursion fell, and Enigma never returned to the Underworld Council.

Seeing as neither could be found, most had believed that the two fought and the battle ended with mutual destruction. However, it turned out that the truth was a bit more interesting. The two had battled, but they had ended up with grievous wounds rather than dying.

The battle had taken place inside the heart of the Dead Zone though, and even though the Lich King was dead and the incursion was gone, the Miasma was still extremely dense. It had seeped inside Enigma's wounds, and he had quickly been converted to a Zombie even before he died. He had woken up as a supreme Zombie, and Krisko then helped him gain sapience over the following year.

They initially lived in the Dead Zone, but it quickly shrunk to the point that they feared they would be discovered. They somehow managed to find out about the second continent and its growing pockets of death and took the risk to cross the oceans, braving the chaotic storms and the massive sea beasts.

Unfortunately for them, they ran into the Einherjar and Zac who were out on a training mission just a few weeks after arriving at the unpopulated continent. Zac initially planned to simply execute them, but Triv had begged for Krisko's life since she apparently had been good to him before.

The Ghost Butler had provided a huge amount of help over the past years, so Zac acquiesced. But that still left two powerful prisoners who he didn't want to keep but also couldn't send back to the Undead Empire.

They had seen the unaffiliated undead of Earth, and while there technically wasn't any law that said that the Undead needed to be part of the Undead Empire, it was still considered a betrayal to be unattached among a lot of the imperials. Letting them return could cause any number of issues even if they didn't know about Zac's hidden class.

"Try to convince them to sign the same sort of contract as you," Zac said. "For now, let no one disturb me until I call for you."

"Of course," Triv nodded and flickered away.

Zac soon walked over to the death-attuned side of the Life-Death Array, and another wave of melancholy hit him as he looked upon the intricate fractals surrounding his prayer mat. Kenzie had long reached the inscription proficiency to make a complementary Life-attuned Array Disk, but the setup in his Cultivation Cave was still more efficient to use because of the

resources that had gone into nurturing the cave into a cultivation paradise.

The array hummed to life as Zac sat down. He immediately felt the two streams of power, Dao and Mental Energy, enter the array pathways. Zac grit his teeth with determination as he shut out all errant thoughts. He had been hesitant for a few months now since he had reached a certain point. The point of his first Reincarnation.

However, every time he had started hitting against that final bottleneck he had gotten a sense of trepidation, like his life was in danger. Until now Zac hadn't wanted to risk it and instead opted to wait and accumulate some more. But now his soul was alit with purpose, and he refused to back down any longer.

He would push through this time no matter what.

Chapter 668: Cycle of Life and Death

One cycle after another passed as the **[Life-Death Array]** did its thing, and some sweat started running down Zac's forehead by the time he reached the seventh cycle. He usually stopped infusing the array with his Dao by this point, but his urgency kept him going this time. There thankfully was a huge surplus of energy in his **[Spiritual Void]**, especially since he hadn't used the array at all over the past weeks.

His second Dao storage helped Zac tide over the cycle without much issue, but a headache made the veins on Zac's throb as the eighth cycle started. Only an insignificant stream was released from the avatar of the Fragment of the Coffin by this point. Zac wasn't satisfied with just that, and the scenes of Leandra appearance flashed over and over in his mind. The scene of Kenzie being taken away, of Thea floating up toward the lightning in the sky, the sense of utter helplessness.

A surge of Dao was squeezed out of the Dao Avatar as Zac took out several Soul Crystals, crushing a few of them before grabbing one in each hand. The crushed crystals turned into a dust cloud that looked like a nebula slowly drifting around him, steadily infusing his whole body with energy through his pores.

This was a method he had accidentally discovered a while back, but he never used his very limited number of Soul Crystals this way because of the low efficiency. It was actually possible to take in the energy from the cloud even while absorbing normally, giving his soul an extra boost that helped him forcibly extract some more Dao from the Coffin in his mind.

The effect of the Soul Crystal was limited, but it helped him tide over the eighth cycle, and a pure wave of death was

returned after half an hour.

His soul had never contained a level of undeath as it did right now. Eight full cycles empowered by the Dao of the Coffin and D-Grade Miasma Crystals was over a hundred times more powerful compared to simply running the array as-is. Frigid drowsiness spread through his mind, and he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

Zac knew that it was just an effect of his soul being modified beyond what was safe, and stopping right now would probably lead to his soul getting harmed in unknowable ways. He forced himself to start the ninth cycle, ignoring his old rules of precaution.

Blood ran down Zac's nose and his soul shuddered from the pain, but he staunchly continued to squeeze out all his potential as one Soul Crystal after another was expended. Finally, his soul was utterly drained, like a parched desert that hadn't seen rain for centuries. But Zac kept pushing even then, and microscopic motes of destruction were suddenly squeezed out of his wrung-out soul.

It was the energy released from the Splinter of Oblivion, and Zac was surprised to see them since he had thought the energy had been perfectly blended into his soul. It looked like the fusion wasn't perfect considering the motes had appeared, but Zac had no time to ponder on that as the purified energy of Oblivion entered the array.

Zac looked on with anticipation mixed with trepidation since he wasn't sure what the result would be from adding yet another energy into the mix, especially one as powerful as this. The worry only grew as a shudder rocked the whole cultivation cave a few seconds later, and it soon felt like he was caught in the middle of an earthquake.

However, Zac staunchly refused to move, since doing so would waste all his efforts and even damage his soul. Half his soul was essentially inside the array by this point, and leaving now would result in a huge loss. The shakes only increased in intensity, and Zac could even hear Triv scream with horror in the distance.

A surge of energy suddenly slammed into Zac's mind, a terrifying force that threatened to knock Zac unconscious. Zac didn't understand what had happened to his mental energy as it passed through the array, but the amount and intensity were just terrifying. The hazy ball in his mind that represented his soul looked like it would explode any moment.

That wasn't the only problem. Zac felt himself rapidly turning into a zombie as deathly cold spread out throughout his body. Those small motes of oblivion had somehow supercharged the deathly energies in the array, which was extremely dangerous considering Zac barely held on as is. His heartbeat slowed down and the embrace of death beckoned him, but there was a core in the deepest recess of his mind that refused to give in.

Zac's mind was a blur as he crawled toward the life-attuned side of his cave, his body only moving thanks to muscle memory as he was forced to use all his attention on keeping the creeping death at bay. He finally reached the prayer mat, and he desperately turned on the array after activating his Specialty Core.

His mind had felt stuffed full to the point of bursting a second ago, but the drain from the array immediately gave him a sense of relief. Furthermore, he was now in his Draugr form, and there was no risk of him zombifying any longer. Zac crawled up to a sitting position, but he didn't give himself any opportunity to relax as he poured the power of the Bodhi into the array as well.

The same procedure repeated itself cycle after cycle, though Zac started to feel immense pressure even at the sixth circulation this time around. It wasn't that he had smaller storage in his Bodhi Avatar, but rather that his soul was so wrung dry from being overextended once already.

Furthermore, the increasingly powerful clashes between life and death in his soul weren't just purifying and strengthening his soul; the collisions were so powerful that they were actually starting to hurt him.

This feeling of danger was exactly what had held him back until now. He hadn't really made any progress for months

when using the array because it seemed like he would have to cause some severe damage to his mind. He had seen first-hand what a broken soul did to Alea, and he had felt it himself when he almost got killed by Vilari's predecessor. He wasn't willing to take that risk at the time.

But no one on Earth was as used as himself to pushing forward even when hurt, and he started to take out even more Soul Crystals to provide some more relief. His dwindling stash had almost run dry by this point, but Zac cared nothing for the expenditure as he kept going. The Soul Crystals were good, but their value was nothing compared to an evolved soul.

He had been stuck at the bottleneck for so long already, and Zac was adamant about breaking through today by hook or crook. Going through the first reincarnation would give him a huge boost before setting out, improving every aspect related to his soul.

Protection against Illusions, Mind Control, and even direct attacks. Greater stores of Mental Energy. Perhaps even better control of his Daos. Most importantly; greater protection against the remnants in his mind, and perhaps even the first step in taking control of them.

The seventh cycle passed, as did the eight. His harried soul was on the verge of collapse by this point, and he had used more than twice the normal Mental Energy than it normally stored. Part of it came from the frantic consumption of Soul Crystals while part of his energy was inside the array, while some came from **[Spiritual Void]** tiding him over when his Dao Avatar ran out of steam.

He somehow managed to squeeze out the last potential of his soul, and it resulted in a very familiar scene as last time. But it wasn't motes of Oblivion that got extracted from the depths of his soul but rather simmering blobs of pure Creation. The scene gave Zac pause since the energy from the Shard of Creation entered his body rather than his soul.

Then it hit him. These motes of both Oblivion of Creation were not the result of the constant stream of energy being extracted and purified by his fractal cage. It was rather hidden

impurities left from when the two remnants had ravaged his soul and left their crisscrossing scars behind.

In either case, the small sparks were the final piece of the puzzle that allowed him to complete the ninth and final infusion. Now he could only wait, and a growing sense of dread gripped his heart as the cultivation cave shook once more. He knew that he might have gone too far this time around.

There was no way that his current heedless method of breakthrough was the normal path of performing the first reincarnation. It was like he had jumped onto a rocket instead of walking normally. The chaotic clashes between life and death would have killed most people by now, and he was barely holding on as cracks covered his whole Soul.

Part of him screamed at him to stand up and run away, but his legs refused to move as his redrimmed eyes glared at the array pathways. The minutes passed, and the circuit was finally completed. The world shuddered and his vision turned dark, but the all-consuming pain stopped him from staying unconscious for more than a fraction of a second.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood, but he didn't care about the state of his body as he looked inward with horror gripping his heart. The clashes had reached an unprecedented state, and it looked like a cataclysmic war was taking place inside his head. A snap echoed out in his mind, followed by incessant shattering sounds that filled Zac with pain and dismay.

His soul had not just cracked, it had completely crumbled.

A vast cloud of crystals swirled about in Zac's mind, like a million gemstones forming a miniature galaxy. Surrounding it were two nebulae, one black and one white, and they gave off a mysterious light that was reflected in the small crystals. Zac would be mesmerized by its beauty if it wasn't for the fact that those small gemstones were broken pieces of his soul, and he desperately tried to figure out a way to salvage the situation.

Just a splintered soul had been difficult enough to heal, forcing him to head to the Zethaya Clan when looking for remedies for Alea. But what had just happened to his soul went far beyond

a few tears, it was a complete disintegration. However, Zac's panic and despair were suddenly swept away from one simple realization.

He was fine, even better than just a few minutes ago.

Zac had received various wounds to his soul before, ranging from small shocks to massive cracks that took a long time to heal. Those kinds of wounds always came with severe nausea, difficulty to think, and unconsciousness. Yet he was still perfectly lucid even now that his soul had lost its form.

The frantic clashes between life and death had ended the moment his soul cracked as well, and it looked like his mind had reached a state of equilibrium.

That didn't mean he wasn't in danger, but Zac thought back to the text in his Soul Strengthening Manual. The **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was incomplete and it lacked the comments and insights of predecessors that marked a high-quality inheritance, but there were still clues hidden in the somewhat sparse descriptions.

Steeped in the cycle of Life and Death, the soul enters the Samsara. Only by returning to the Origin can reincarnation take place. Give up on the past life to form the next, only through death can life grow. Use the past to set the foundation for the future.

The Eight Trigrams form a System unto itself, encompassing all. Towering above are the Four Emblems of Heaven and Earth. The Heavens are subject to the demarcation of Yin and Yang, the delimited Dao.

Supreme above all is the Primordial Chaos, a singular unity.

Zac had read that passage in the manual many times before, but only now did he actually understand how literal it was being. His soul needed to undergo a rebirth to reach the next stage, a reincarnation where weakness was shed and a soul with greater potential would form. Zac hadn't expected that meant his soul would turn to stardust though, as that usually meant instant death.

There was no time to waste as Zac suspected that his lucid state was only being propped up by the array considering the state of his Soul. Zac hurriedly started exerting pressure on the cloud of Soul Shards, and he was elated to see them following his command as they pushed together toward the center of his mind.

He needed to use the past to set the foundation for the future, meaning the Soul Shards couldn't be discarded. They would be the core of his reincarnated soul. However, when he pushed together the cloud it just formed an uneven sphere that looked far worse than his previous soul. Zac frowned, immediately realizing he was missing something.

Inspiration suddenly struck and Zac's attention turned to the two clouds of extremely condensed Life-Death energies that surrounded the shards. He willed the clouds to start circling the crystals like a nebula surrounding a black hole. The two clouds quickly came into contact with each other, causing a new series of explosions to erupt.

Zac had initially planned on fusing the clouds into his soul, figuring that's why they were left behind in his mind. However, he quickly changed course when he saw what was going on with the Soul Shards. The minuscule splinters were far more malleable than he had expected, and every collision forcibly pushed splinters together, fusing them into one.

The fused splinter was barely larger than just one of the original Soul Shards, meaning that it had almost twice as high a density of energy compared to the original pieces. Zac finally understood what was going on, and he egged on the two clouds to clash with each other more and more, causing the fusion to speed up.

The galaxy of gemstones kept shrinking as they were forcibly pushed together, and soon it was less than half the size of his original soul. However, there were still tens of thousands of splinters, so Zac kept pushing the Life-Death energies closer to keep the fusion going.

Zac finally understood the final passage as well. He had just assumed it to be some cultivation mumbo-jumbo to describe

how powerful this method was, considering Yin and Yang was just below the Primordial Chaos. That might be true as well, but it definitely wasn't the whole story.

Judging by the passage 'Eight Trigrams form a stable system unto itself, encompassing all', the minimum requirement was to reduce the total number of remaining shards to eight. But to continue to fuse the Soul Shards even after that would result in a better reincarnation, with perfection being all shards fused into one new soul. Zac felt confident in reaching the minimum goal of eight, but was he really content with barely passing?

Definitely not. Only perfection would give him a foundation strong enough to accomplish his goals.

Chapter 669: Grasping for Perfection

The will was there, but Zac soon realized that performing a perfect reincarnation would be easier said than done.

Things went quite smoothly in the beginning, with the soul shards almost effortlessly merging. But more and more force was required to keep the process going. It was almost like the extremely energy-dense shards had a mind of their own as they kept trying to fly away from the congealed ball in the middle of Zac's mind.

Zac's concentration was pushed to its limits as he kept moving the Life-Death energies around to set off explosions aimed at pushing any errant shards back into the fold. Losing a shard was akin to losing a piece of his soul, and he knew that could result in all kinds of weird afflictions down the road, ranging from lost memories to insanity.

Lose too many and the soul might even become unstable and fall apart, instantly killing him.

Worse yet, Zac felt his mind starting to become blurry as whatever kept his thoughts cohesive started wearing off, and he caught his mind drifting off on random tangents. A burst of pain shocked him awake as he used his go-to method to stay coherent; stabbing himself in the leg. It allowed him to keep pushing the now-radiant shards together, leaving just 32 splinters behind.

But that didn't change the fact that he was running out of Life-Death energy. Zac had already known that this might happen the moment he realized the purpose of the life-death clouds.

After all, he had already seen these clouds before.

Over the past months when he didn't feel any improvement of his soul, there had been small clouds of life and death left behind after the cultivation session. Zac had figured the clouds were left behind because he didn't manage to make any improvements, but Zac didn't feel it was cause to worry because his **[Spiritual Void]** had swallowed it all long before he started the next cycle.

But Zac now understood that those clouds were meant to be saved, to be accumulated. When you finally reached a large enough amount of fuel in your mind, the force would be strong enough to crack your soul and use the huge amount of clouds to begin the fusion process. However, Zac had completely bypassed that by going overboard with the help of Dao, Oblivion, and Creation entering the Array.

Of course, that also meant that Zac would never have been able to break through the normal way. If he hadn't taken the risk today he would just have kept treading water as the clouds failed to accumulate, wondering why he never reached a point where he felt he could make a breakthrough. Thankfully, Zac was long used to doing things his own way.

He had run out of one type of fuel, but weren't there others? He just needed to cause some explosions, right?

Zac immediately flashed over to the prayer mat in the middle, the nexus between life and death in his cultivation arrangement. He punched down at a certain array to his right, and massive waves of attuned energies stormed into the cavern, submerging him in what almost looked like black and gold liquid.

It was a special function that Kenzie had installed, a stopgap that would instantly crush and release the energy of over a hundred D-Grade attuned crystals and push them toward the center of the cave. It even removed the majority of the Cosmic Energy from the boost, leaving mostly just distilled Dao behind. It was meant to be used if he felt himself on the precipice of having a breakthrough in his Dao or something, giving the environment a massive temporary boost.

But the dreadful amounts of energies were extremely helpful in this situation as well, and Zac felt relief rather than worry as almost-lethal levels of attuned energies pushed into his body through his pores. Parts of it was gobbled up by **[Void Heart]**, but his **[Spiritual Void]** had entered a frenzied state from the upheavals around it.

It created a powerful suction that dragged more and more life-and-death-energies into his mind. Some of it was swallowed by the Hidden Node, but Zac managed to use a lot of it to unleash a chain of powerful explosions as well.

The extra surge of external Life-Death Energy gave him the push he needed, lowering the number of shards to just eight. They all looked like radiant pearls that reminded Zac of an early embryo, and Zac felt his mind clear once more now that his soul had stabilized. Zac wasn't content with just this though, so he kept trying to force another fusion.

Unfortunately, the ambient energy was no longer dense enough to keep pushing the remaining shards together. The problem wasn't lack of energy, but rather the fact that Zac's body wasn't able to absorb it quickly enough to keep the process going. Even his two Hidden Nodes could only swallow so much, and Zac had released far more energy in the cave than he could absorb in a short while.

He couldn't do any absorbing on his own either considering he was just a mortal, which left his body in a state of equilibrium. The Soul Balls that formed the core of his reincarnated soul contained too much power on their own, and they naturally resisted the outside pressure. Just ambient energy wasn't enough to keep going.

There was no mention of it in his cultivation manual, but Zac was certain that barely passing the first Reincarnation would mean limits on his future soul cultivation. Perhaps the first three reincarnations would be the ceiling, just like how picking a Common E-grade class would stop your cultivation progress at that grade.

Zac thought for a second before he grit his teeth and focused on his **[Spiritual Void]**. A massive torrent of stored Dao was

extracted from within, completely flooding his mind in gold and black. He had been pushed to his limits before when activating the array, but the real bottleneck then hadn't been his Dao. It was rather his mental energy being drained beyond what was safe.

His [**Spiritual Void**] wasn't without limits, but he had noticed that he was able to slowly expand the storage over the past years by continuously pushing excess Dao inside and then waiting for the node to stabilize. It could hold a huge amount of energy by this point, even surpassing the total strength of his soul. Or at least his old soul.

There was still a decent amount of Dao Stored from before, and it had even been bolstered a second ago by the immense clouds of energy around him. But Zac now opened the floodgates, and it all came storming out. Bodhi and Coffin, Life and Death. But now there was also a third cloud; a silvery cloud wrought from the Fragment of the Axe.

Zac was completely draining the Hidden Node, which meant that the Dao of his third Fragment was also released. Zac wasn't worried though, as it was all in his plan. The two clouds of life and death churned and clashed, but the clashes turned into a chaotic inferno the moment Zac pushed the third Dao into the mix.

Fragment of the Axe represented Conflict on his Cultivation Path, and he had made some inroads into this concept over the past years. Part of the insights came from studying the Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark, which he had decided to call his Pink Flash.

Life and death were in constant struggle, as was evidenced by the unceasing clashes in his cultivation cave. However, there was a natural balance in the clashes and they formed a clear line of demarcation. Zac had eventually found a way to turn the orderly conflict into a chaotic war by infusing his Fragment of the Axe into the mix.

It had resulted in him almost losing a limb from a massive explosion that ruined his whole cave the first time, but it was exactly that kind of force that he needed right now.

One terrifying explosion after another was set off in his mind as life, death, and conflict stirred up a war of unprecedented proportions. The eight spheres were caught in the heart of it like innocent bystanders dragged into someone else's dispute. A massive shockwave suddenly dispersed the energies from his hidden node, causing Zac to see double.

What remained in his soul were four pristine spheres, each of them a masterpiece that radiated power.

Unfortunately, the eruption had pushed dispersed the three clouds, and losing all his Dao was a big roadblock to his goal of completing the reincarnation perfectly. It also looked like he was running out of time. The Soul Shards had been malleable at the start, but the spheres felt increasingly rigid, like balls of glass that were cooling down. He needed to speed up or he'd lose his window of opportunity.

Zac was full of reluctance, but two small chests appeared in front of him, one gold and one black.

His sister had collected hundreds of rare treasures over the past years, so how could still Zac be empty-handed after all this time? Inside the two boxes were two treasures, one of life and one of death, that matched even Kenzie's nine final treasures in value. In fact, they had been given by Kenzie himself.

His sister had been consumed with gathering everything needed for her evolution, but that didn't mean she had forgotten about the rest of Port Atwood. Pretty much every core member of Zac's faction had been given some sort of treasure that normally only scions of large clans would be able to enjoy. Unsurprisingly, Zac was the biggest beneficiary of Kenzie's generosity.

Zac had saved the two treasures for when he had solved the issue of his Draugr Race bottleneck. They weren't Dao Treasures, but they contained both powerful and profound energies of life and death. The plan was to eat them the moment he had accumulated enough Inspiration to push his Fragment of the Bodhi and Coffin to the next level, which would hopefully satiate the requirements of his bloodline.

However, it looked like he had no choice but to make use of them early.

Of course, these treasures were ultimately not too difficult to get hold of as long as you had access to a few dozen auction sites and over 100 billion Nexus Coins lying around. They were far from the kind of peak treasures like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** which only had demand but no supply.

His financial situation was completely different compared to before, and replacing them wouldn't prove a big challenge. Certainly, that was only thanks to the System providing hundreds of thousands of teleportation destinations. Even Hegemons would find it nigh-impossible even if they somehow managed to gather one million D-grade nexus coins since they would still be locked to their local cluster of planets.

Still, Zac couldn't help but feel a pinch as he swallowed the death-attuned treasure first. It was called **[Nightcast Lily]**, and Zac ate it stem and all. A terrifying cold quickly spread through his body as inscrutable markings started to superimpose over his pathways, and Zac's hand shook as he quickly swallowed the second treasure.

These natural treasures were proper D-grade items, which made them far more potent compared to items like the Fruit of Ascension who mainly got their grades thanks to its requirements on environment and usefulness. Even Peak E-grade cultivators would be careful when consuming one, and no one would be foolish enough to take two treasures of clashing attunements at the same time. No one except Zac, that is.

Life and death once more used his body as a battlefield, and Zac desperately pushed the rampant energies toward the space holding his soul. Cracks spread out across his body, and he was soon drenched in black ichor. But Zac was like a possessed person as he ignored the dangers, his mind set on forcing another fusion.

Soon the two energies entered his soul aperture, and his vision swam from the pain as small hairline cracks spread across the

four Soul Spheres from the furious collisions between the energies of two D-grade treasures. The force required to decrease the number of crystals was clearly immense, and his soul could barely take the pressure. However, a wave of soul-wrenching pain was immediately followed by an unprecedented sense of clarity as four turned into two.

The new spheres were beautiful and radiant. It was like his mind housed two small moons, each of them worthy of being an elite mentalist's soul judging by the power they contained. Zac could feel it. There had been a qualitative change when he decreased the number of Soul Spheres to four from eight, but the difference was far greater this time around.

It was like his soul was completely remolded into something far greater and far more durable, and the qualitative jump made him even more adamant about shooting for perfection. Problem was, most of the energies of the two treasures had been expended, and his body probably wouldn't be able to take it if he ate two new ones. Not that he had them.

But there was one more trick he could use, though it came with some danger.

The passages in the manual, *'The Heavens are subject to the demarcation of Yin and Yang, the delimited Dao. Supreme above all is the Primordial Chaos, a singular unity.'* had given him an idea for his final fusion and his eyes turned to the cage in his mind.

The two remnants were still locked in their eternal struggle, but they looked a lot better compared to their wretched state after being forcibly drained to generate a Chaos Pattern. They were continuously gaining energy through some unknown method, only part of which was extracted by the cage.

More importantly, it almost felt like being locked in a struggle with their nemesis forced the two remnants to continuously be refined, and extremely esoteric patterns had started to appear across their surfaces. Zac once had the idea to use those patterns as a basis to meditate on his Dao Fragments, but he had gained absolutely nothing.

It wasn't a problem with his Bloodline this time, but the concepts hidden within those markings were just too esoteric. It was ultimately too early to use those things as a reference. He couldn't even keep his mind safe without the help of his fractal cage, which was the biggest reason he was working on his soul in the first place. After all, there was no way for him to rely on the cages forever.

He had clearly sensed it by now. The two sets of fractals were extremely sturdy, but the remnants were slowly corroding them. They would break sooner or later unless Be'Zi and the System somehow replenished them. It was still in an early process, and Zac believed he had decades before they would break.

Though that grace period would most likely shorten from what he was about to do.

Zac's mind shuddered as he pushed the two massive Soul Spheres closer to the anchor point of the sub-space prison, a nondescript part off to the side in his soul aperture. The movement went without issue, but Zac's heart still beat like a drum as he pushed a large number of tendrils of mental energy into the hidden dimension housing the remnants.

The whole air around him ignited the next second as a torrent of energy came bursting out, filling his mind with unimaginable force. Black holes were replaced with sparkling stars around him as Creation vied for dominion against Oblivion. Zac almost felt like an almighty god as a thought could destroy anything around him, but he forcibly reined in his imagination.

He instead repeatedly wished for the rampant energies to create pressure on his two soul spheres. Oblivion and Creation, Yin and Yang, clashed in his mind, causing Zac to puke blood as deep cracks spread across the two spheres. One explosion after another rocked his whole soul aperture, but he arduously kept the two forces in check so that they didn't completely destroy his soul.

Finally, his mind shuddered as ripples spread out from his glabella. The air itself started vibrating throughout the whole

cave like someone had dropped a stone in a still pond. The delimited had become a singular unity, and his soul was made whole as the two cracked moons turned into one blazing sun.

A perfect reincarnation.

Chapter 670: Alternative Paths

Zac breathed out in relief and elation, thinking everything was over. But a lot of things suddenly happened at once. The rampant energies of the remnants started to recede into the fractal prison as Zac felt two marks appear on his forehead, where each mark formed a vortex that could match even his Hidden Nodes in voracity.

A shocking suction made the space around Zac bend, and he looked on with distress as an enormous amount of attuned energies was dragged into his head. Zac had absorbed just a few percent of the energy he released before, but this much energy wasn't meant to be consumed. It was meant to be used as a boost to the environment when breaking through.

Yet these two marks cared nothing for that fact as they greedily swallowed everything they could.

That alone was alarming enough, but his eyes widened even further when a series of explosions erupted all around him. It was the array flags of his Life-Death array that had shot up into the air and self-detonated, releasing a huge amount of energy as well. It looked like the array had been saving a small part of the energy that cycled through its pathways, and it all came crashing back now.

Tremendous amounts of attuned mental energy blended with the miasmatic and divine clouds as they entered Zac's forehead. Zac himself didn't control this process at all, but Zac actually wasn't sure he wanted to stop it even if he could. Instead, he quickly looked inward to see what was going on. His evolved soul still looked like a white-hot sun that illuminated his mind with mysterious splendor, but it wasn't hovering in an empty space any longer.

Instead, it looked like it was floating on top of a pond wrought from life and death. The body of ‘water’ was still both shallow and small, but it rapidly expanded as energy kept pouring in. It was like his mind could suddenly house an infinite amount of power, like his aperture was able to grow along with the ocean.

The process continued for hour after hour, until Zac finally felt a pressure in his mind. It looked like the space for his soul no longer could expand. Zac looked on at the situation with marvel. Before now, his soul had just been this diffuse blob that he could sense in his head, but now there was a defined space. Furthermore, everything was so clear and tangible. It almost felt like the core of his soul was a physical object, and he looked at his new internal space with marvel.

There were no set rules of how a soul should look from what Zac had gathered. Soul Cultivation didn’t follow a strict series of grades like cultivation either, where everyone had nodes to break open in the E-grade and a Cultivator Core to form and upgrade during the D-grade. It was rather dependent on the method, and two equally powerful souls could look completely different.

Zac’s soul had undergone a tremendous transformation as he had officially completed the first step of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**, and his soul was undeniably marked by the experience. It would be hard for him to swap to a different Soul Strengthening method by this point, but he wasn’t really intent on doing so as he felt it fit his path quite well.

Half of his spiritual world was now filled with a golden ocean, not surprisingly teeming with life-attuned energy. This energy wasn’t connected to him though, and he was unable to move or change it at all. It was the same with the second half of his internal space, which was now a pitch-black sea of death. The two bodies of water didn’t mix at all, but crashing waves rose to the sky where they met.

His perfected Soul Core was floating right in the middle between these two oceans, still shining in a pristine white. His avatar representing the Fragment of the Axe, and his Hidden

Node [**Spiritual Void**], had taken its spot right on top of the core. It was now sitting on it like a marooned sailor on a small island. The other two apparitions had instead formed two smaller islands apart from his core, with the hanging coffin resting atop the death-attuned ocean and the bodhi tree atop the golden one.

The scene was beautiful and it resonated perfectly with his path, and Zac felt he could finally relax.

Things had gotten a bit dicey for a moment there, but everything went above expectation. Zac wanted nothing more than to explore his new soul, but first, he had to check in on the remnants. He could still feel the cage, and it still hid in a subspace in his improved aperture. Better yet, there wasn't too much of the remnants' energies left in his mind.

Some of the energy had blended with the two oceans, but his new core was unsullied. It could have been worse, but a lot of the energy had been dragged back into the cage, probably by the remnants themselves.

Forcing open the funnel in his fractal cage was a last-resort option Zac had figured out a year ago but never had reason to try out until now. It was a method he could use if his life was on the line, a way for him to borrow the power of the remnants in case everything else failed. For example, if he was able to release energy like this back during his fight with Adcarkas, then things might not have gotten so desperate.

The energy funnel had thankfully started mending itself in response to Zac breaking it open, almost immediately. The remnants in turn didn't want to lose their arduously accumulated energy, prompting them to quickly drag most of the leftovers back into the prison instead of giving it up. Things worked out better than Zac could have hoped, but the strategy did come at a significant cost.

The luster of the protective fractals had been expended by a noticeable degree, and Zac guessed that he had lost at least a good five years of protection. Zac was hopeful that the gain in his soul strength would offset the loss this time, but if he used the same method in combat it would be a pure loss. Besides,

forcing open the gates repeatedly might cause the prison to crumble altogether, so it definitely wasn't something he could use unless he was absolutely pushed to the edge.

Seeing that everything was in order with his remnants Zac instead turned his attention to his body, and he couldn't help but lament at his lack of preparations. He had managed to perform a perfect Reincarnation, but at what cost? His whole body was a mess, and Zac could feel that his soul was still pretty fragile.

His experience was a great example of the difference between a Manual and a Heritage. The manual was short-worded and obscure, sometimes intentionally as to make it harder for outsiders to glean information. But a Heritage also contained the experiences of the predecessors. If he had the Heritage for the [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**] he would have known exactly what the reincarnation entailed.

The undertaking would still have been dangerous since he would always be unable to gather the Dao clouds. But he would have been able to prepare himself better, like getting his hands on safer treasures to help with the fusion. Still, there was no use crying over spilled milk. The gains far outweighed the costs as far as Zac was concerned.

Zac soon started to observe his evolved soul from a utilitarian standpoint though. He had spent a small fortune and risked his life to reach this stage, and he needed more than a nice view. Luckily, it didn't take long for him to start digging out the changes from his evolution.

First of all, his new soul seemed extremely stable compared to his old one, no matter if you looked to the size or mass of it. Harming it would take a lot more force compared to before. Zac couldn't be sure, but he suspected that his resistance against mental attacks was stronger right now compared to when he actively used [**Mental Fortress**] before.

His raw defenses were most likely inferior compared to when he used [**Soul Guardian**] on his old soul though, but that was to be expected from an E-grade Mental Defense Skill. His pool of Wisdom obviously provided the same degree of protection,

but it was like the same attack now would need to destroy a big boulder instead of a fist-sized stone. The same amount of force would have a much smaller impact.

The second gain was how clear everything felt. When he observed his Dao Avatar it felt like they hid a lot more secrets compared to before, and hundreds of ideas flicked through his mind as he turned his attention to the pathways in his body. He didn't feel smarter by any means, but it was like his mind had become more in tune with the Dao.

Concepts he had studied before that had felt obscure and inscrutable were now within reach. He felt full of inspiration, which was exactly what he needed for the next step of his plan. However, he first had to check something, and two thin streams of Dao emerged from his avatars.

It worked!

Zac's looked on with desperate hope as the two streams moved together, but his abyssal eyes closed in dismay when the two strands touched for just a second before they disintegrated. It was a failure, after all. He had hoped that his evolved soul would help him improve his control over his Daos, but it was only partly a success.

He now found it absolutely possible to activate two Dao Fragments at once without straining himself. However, his control over them wasn't any better than before, which essentially meant that Dao Braiding still was an impossible goal. After all, it was the control itself that was key, not being able to activate the fragments.

Kenzie had often tried to explain how she could fight so dynamically, and it always boiled down to her Dao. She was able to control her streams of Dao with pinpoint precision thanks to her own talents along with Jeeves' assistance. She could even attach it to streams of Cosmic Energy and form elemental skills from scratch. However, this type of handling required both talent and affinities, of which Zac had neither.

But Zac suddenly froze as he felt a flash of inspiration. Perhaps there was a unique path he could take.

Two thick streams of mental energy emerged from the core of his soul, and they moved around in his aperture like two flood dragons, twinning around each other as they moved. It was obviously Zac who did it, but his eyes lit up at the result. Wasn't this Dao braiding, except that the energy currently lacked any Dao?

Instead of using his Dao as the guide and his Mental Energy as the fuel like normal cultivators, what if he did it the opposite way? Form the braid with streams of mental energy with the help of his unusually powerful soul, then Infuse the streams with Dao like they were some sort of cables. From there you could infuse your skills with the newly formed Dao Braid.

The moment the thought ignited, Zac was completely unable to let it go. If this truly was possible, then the biggest detriment of his abysmal affinities would be solved.

Truthfully, Zac felt that having no affinities for Daos wasn't that bad in terms of cultivation. He could still gain insights from battles, and he suspected that he would be able to keep improving as long as he kept getting his hands on treasures.

Meanwhile, those with low affinities would sooner or later find themselves hard-capped in their cultivation, where they wouldn't improve their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments no matter what.

However, his inability to manipulate his Dao was starting to become a problem. Braiding two Late-Stage Fragments and infusing them into a Skill was almost as powerful as infusing the skill with a Peak-Stage Fragment. Above that were Dao Arrays, something that talented E-grade cultivators could make use of.

As grades progressed, the cultivators utilized their Daos would keep improving, while Zac used the crudest method. It hadn't been a real problem so far, but it would become a bigger and bigger issue as he progressed. He already had to eke out more and more advantages to cancel out the increasing boost from cultivation manuals, and adding Dao manipulation to that would be extremely tough.

But Soul Cultivation might be his key to retain his advantages.

The minutes passed as Zac kept trying to form his backward-braid, but he was soon enough forced to stop before making any real headway. His vision had started to get blurred as his wounds made themselves reminded. He sighed and stopped the experiments, and simply ate a few healing pills before lying down on the ground.

But he could feel it. There was hope.

Zac got no opportunity to celebrate though as sleep took him the moment his head hit the ground. He had no idea if one hour or one year had passed when he finally woke up, but a quick check proved that the correct answer was actually three days. He should have known that reforming his soul would stress his mind, and immediately starting to perform a series of experiments was overdoing it.

His mind felt a lot better after the rest though, like it had somehow stabilized. Of course, the attuned oceans in his mind still raged like before, and Zac guessed they'd never calm down. Zac wanted to check things out some more, but he suddenly sensed a presence in the distance.

"Triv, come in," he said.

"Young master, are you okay?" Triv hesitantly asked as it floated into the cultivation cave.

"I'm fine," Zac sighed as he turned his gaze toward the ghost. "I just- Uh?"

Zac forgot his word as Triv had started to vibrate as the ghost moved away.

"Please, your eyes. You're almost like Lady Vilari," Triv croaked as his spiritual form shuddered.

Zac was surprised by the ghost's reaction, and he concentrated a bit to properly restrain his aura. He was always containing a large part of it naturally, but it wasn't hard even for Zac to hide even more of it. In fact, it went even smoother right now compared to before, which meant Zac had found yet another benefit of soul evolution.

"That's better," Triv sighed. "Lady Vilari has been waiting outside for a few days on your command."

“Oh, right. Send her in,” Zac said, a bit embarrassed he had forgotten about his undead general.

Chapter 671: Vilari

Vilari came in a moment later, her eyes shielded by a black silk scarf covered in aquamarine fractals, which also held her shoulder-long white hair back from her face. Her build was still the same as the angelic girl who almost killed him in the Battle of Fates, but her aura was completely different.

Two black streaks ran down her cheeks and continued down her neck. It was a bit reminiscent of runny mascara if not for the massive amount, but its origin was rather Zac himself. When his soul cracked from the mentalist's attack back then, a surge of Annihilation had ruined Vilari's eyes and cracked her soul in return.

Those streaks of black blood had marked her skin, and they now formed a mysterious pattern that Zac felt had some sort of relation with the Dao of Oblivion. It gave her an oppressive aura, and one of perpetual sorrow, which was a bit unfortunate as her true disposition wasn't like that at all. She wasn't a ray of sunshine, but neither was she a dark cloud.

Her mental cultivation had resulted in a calm and gentle personality, though that didn't mean she flinched in the face of carnage. She wasn't blind like one could have expected from her appearance either, as a version of her old eyes had been grown back in the ruined sockets. It wasn't some unique ability of her predecessor's bloodline, but rather thanks to Zac's experimentation over the past years.

He had used Creation to conjure something out of nothing.

The energies of Oblivion and Creation were constantly released into his body, and he occasionally needed to purge as to not get impacted by the influence of the remnants again. However, Zac had felt it was a waste to simply use his Origin Mark on nothing. He had seen how it could heal his own body

and create things where only his imagination was the limit, so why not use the mark on his corpses?

His first attempt had been on the nephew of Cervantes, the mutilated and bisected corpse of the leader werewolf. Zac wanted to see if he could regrow the missing half with a Pink Flash. Unfortunately, his experiment had ended up with the corpse turning into a mutilated blob of flesh and metal as Zac let his imagination run wild for a second, making him think of the Cyborg he fought.

The following experiments went better and better as he learned to properly focus and avoid distractions. However, there were still limitations to the skill. First of all, he could only use it on himself and on corpses so far. Using it on someone living caused a clash of wills between the two parties, and things got out of control.

Secondly, the limbs he restored were weaker compared to the original, though that was slowly improved over time. Finally, it couldn't create things Zac didn't understand. One instance of this was bloodlines hidden in the depths of cells. For example, he had created two eyes for Pika as well, but she had actually scooped them out of her own head after awakening, saying that the real ones were waiting for her.

Vilari's bloodline was thankfully not directly related to her eyes. In fact, Zac wasn't even certain that her old eyes looked like that scary eye that had filled his vision back then. His memories of the whole encounter were a bit blurry, and he only remembered those enormous eyes. It might just have been a skill of the mentalist, but it was now a permanent feature of Vilari.

The real reason for the scarf covering her eyes was rather that her soul had grown too much in strength too quickly, and she wasn't able to control her latent bloodline. Her living predecessor probably practiced some specific bloodline method, but the Mentalist hadn't left any cultivation manuals inside her Spatial Ring. Most likely she hadn't brought things like that to Base Town at all, rather leaving them back with her clan.

So, his commander of the Einherjar was in a similar situation as Zac was before he awakened his bloodline. In fact, the Einherjar with previous bloodlines were all in this situation. Their bloodlines had been partly sealed upon awakening, and they had to work at unsealing them rather than awakening them.

It was possible that a proper Lich might be able to allow their Revenants to awaken with their bloodlines intact, but Zac definitely wasn't at that stage with his homebrewed methods. Conversely, his Mark of Creation would probably kick up a storm among Liches if they found out he had such a heaven-defying method to restore corpses.

"Lord Atwood," Vilari said as she looked back and forth in the cave. "Such a nice place. A shame it was destroyed."

"It's just surface damage," Zac said with a wry smile. "It will be restored. I'm sorry about the wait."

"It was no problem. The atmosphere outside helped me make some progress of my own," Vilari said.

"That's good. How are you coming along?" Zac asked.

"It's slow but steady," Vilari nodded. "I think it's best if I stay at my current stage for a few more years unless you need me to advance. Soul cultivation is a slow path."

Zac understood what she meant. His recent break-through should be possible to complete while still in F-Grade, but it would probably take a longer time. Who knew, perhaps it was even possible to undergo a second reincarnation as well. The greater the foundation she built early on, the further she would be able to go on her path.

"That's fine. Follow your instincts, and let me know if there's anything you need," Zac said as he threw her a crystal. "These are my insights after undergoing my first Reincarnation, it should be helpful to you as well. There were some surprises. I hope you'll aim for a perfect Reincarnation if you decide to stick with this method."

Vilari was the only one apart from himself who cultivated the Nine Reincarnations Manual. Zac had paid a small fortune for

a Natural Treasure that allowed him to engrave at least the first section onto a one-time Information Crystal even though his understanding was a bit rickety.

She wasn't quite as suited as himself for the method, considering she didn't really have any affinity or relation to the Life-attunement. But the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was still a top-tier Soul Strengthening Method, and it helped her strengthen her soul at a decent pace. In fact, her soul was already superior to Zac's pre-reincarnation soul, but it still hadn't reached its limits.

Whether that would lead to an easier reincarnation or a stronger end-product, Zac wasn't sure. Honestly, it wasn't for certain that she would stick with the current manual at all since she could easily swap to another method before she actually underwent the first reincarnation. Afterward, it might be a bit more complicated.

Still, the information was of great value to her, and Vilari gratefully nodded as she stowed away the crystal.

"Let me look into your eyes," Zac suddenly requested, giving Vilari a start.

"Ah- Are you sure?" the small Revenant hesitantly said. "Your state after grinding your skills-"

"That was before," Zac coughed with some embarrassment. "I want to see the effects of completing the first reincarnation."

"Alright," Vilari nodded as she undid the knot at the back of her head, exposing two almost reptilian eyes.

The eyes were fashioned after the massive eyes that Zac had seen when the Mentalist attacked him during the battle of fates, with white sclera and a blue vertical scar running through them in the middle. The only difference was that the blue back then was a lot deeper, whereas Vilari's fractured pupils were the aquamarine of condensed Miasma.

Until today Zac had found himself on the losing end to Vilari's gaze, even when activating **[Soul Guardian]** or **[Indomitable]**. His soul wasn't actually hurt by the exchange like back during the tower climb, but it did make him slightly

dizzy after just a few seconds. Which was shocking considering that Vilari was just peak F-Grade.

But this time was different. He felt some pressure and the oceans in his soul aperture started to churn a bit, but he was still able to maintain a completely lucid mind even without activating his mental defense skill. It was like the oceans acted as a buffer, and the core wasn't affected at all by the latent pressure Vilari exerted. It was clear; mental defense was once his weakness, but it had now turned into his strongest point.

"I can't see your soul," Vilari exclaimed with surprise, confirming Zac's hunch, and a smile spread across her face.

"What's with you?" Zac asked with confusion as he saw Vilari light up.

"I'm just happy. I can finally look someone in the eyes without hurting them," Vilari said with a smile.

Zac weakly smiled in return, once more feeling that the familial bonds of the Undead were a bit hard to get used to. He was essentially Vilari's father as she carried his mark, and the awakening was performed with him as the "lifegiving source". But Revenants turned this way were adults the moment they gained sapience, though they were still a bit wide-eyed even after two years of education.

So Vilari was his child, yet she was not. She was an adult, yet she was not, and Zac had some trouble adapting to it. Triv had just told him to see it as the same sort of relationship as the one he had with his Valkyries, which pretty much was true since the Einherjar were bound to him just like Triv was bound to the Undead Empire.

"I'm sure you'll be able to control your strength when we find a way to unseal your bloodline. It shouldn't be long until we find a way," Zac said. "And if you want, I have an opportunity for you. The Crown of Despair-Inheritance. There are some risks-"

"I'm willing," Vilari said without hesitation, eagerness written all over her face.

“Okay, let’s go,” Zac nodded before he activated his Specialty Core to return back to his human form.

He had already kept Vilari waiting for three days, so they headed out without delay, leaving Triv to start repairs on the cave. The two teleported over to his compound and immediately walked over to the intricate hedge maze that also doubled as Brazla’s Energy Gathering Array.

Even more functions had been added over the past years; it now also contained hidden bewilderment and trapping arrays that Kenzie had installed. Of course, the main reason for them being there was because Brazla had demanded it in return for divulging some of his knowledge.

Zac was in control of the array cores rather than Brazla though, and he effortlessly led Vilari through. The size of these additions around the Dao Repository had forced Zac to slightly move the inner wall, not that anyone in Port Atwood wanted to stay too close to the Dao Repository after it started stealing their ambient energy.

“It’s you,” Brazla muttered, glancing down from his golden cloud when Zac walked inside with a curious Vilari in tow.

“What do you want?”

“I want to give the Crown of Despair to Vilari here,” Zac said.

“Is it a problem that she’s a Revenant?”

“Should be fine as long as it’s not a man,” Brazla shrugged and waved his hand, conjuring a portal in front of the statue.

“Good luck,” Zac said as he turned to Vilari. “I’ll wait here.”

“This inheritance is a bit special,” Brazla interjected. “The undead lass will be gone for at least a month, probably more.”

“What?” Zac said with shock.

Most trials just took a few hours, and even his own inheritance had just lasted for a day. Meanwhile, the trial for the Crown of Despair would last for a whole month? What kind of treasures hid within that realm?

“It’s not that the quality of the things left behind is higher. The owner had some... peculiar demands when constructing the

inheritance realm,” Brazla snorted, clearly reading Zac’s thoughts. “Also, it’s the only inheritance site I am completely unable to sneak inside, so I have no idea how it looks by now. That dour woman might have gone even more insane over the long years.”

“Do you still want to go ahead with this?” Zac asked with some worry.

“Even more. It sounds like a challenge where I can hone myself. We can’t shy away from some minor difficulties if we want to be able to assist you in the future,” Vilari said with a nod.

“Fine. Good luck. And if it seems like you will die, just give up. There will always be other opportunities out there,” Zac said and looked on with worry as Vilari walked toward the teleporter.

“And, young master? I am sorry about the mistress,” Vilari said as she disappeared in a flash.

The teleporter disappeared, taking Vilari with it. Zac gazed at the towering statue a few seconds, and he couldn’t help but feel a wave of dejection coming over him. The statue was holding her head in her hands and it radiated sorrow, and it made him glance toward the stalwart statue of the Blade Emperor.

Seeing him brought back a wave of unwelcome memories, and he wordlessly turned toward the exit. A snort echoed out from above, but Zac ignored it as he walked away.

“Are you... Getting her back?” a hesitant voice asked just as Zac was about to leave, which made him stop in his tracks as he looked back up at the Tool Spirit.

It looked like Brazla’s sullen demeanor was caused by missing Kenzie, and Zac guessed he shouldn’t be surprised. She was essentially his only friend in this place, visiting him occasionally to just play around. Perhaps Brazla was dreading being left alone in this world again since Zac was always occupied with his cultivation.

“I’ll do my best,” Zac sighed. “Have you heard of Six Profundity Empire? Or Immemorial Realms?”

“I haven’t heard of that empire,” Brazla said with a shake of his head. “But I have heard of Immemorial Realms from my master. It was something he had learned from a mysterious being passing through his sector. He stayed with my creator for a few weeks when he was young and gave some casual pointers on crafting.

“Master always said it was thanks to this mysterious person’s profound knowledge he was considered the top among D-Grade craftsmen. It was thanks to him that even Monarchs came to his doorstep asking for help. Master always dreamed of meeting this mysterious master again, but he never got the chance.”

Zac’s brows rose with surprise. A few weeks of casual pointers completely transformed the fate of the original Brazla? Sounded like Brazla had a lucky encounter of his own. It might even be possible that that person was at B-grade to elicit such a change.

“Master learned that Mystic Realms are the lowest rung among the hidden pockets of space. There are higher-tiered worlds as well. He mentioned Ancient Realms, Immemorial Realms, and Primal Heavens. I don’t know anything more than that though,” Brazla muttered.

“Immemorial Realm... Higher-tiered Mystic Realm,” Zac mused.

“It is some sort of cultivation paradise, I bet,” Brazla shrugged. “I guess it’s the kind of place those lofty beings need to enter continue their cultivation. I bet a place like this backwater sector simply doesn’t have the fundamental requirements to nurture a B-grade Cultivator. And there is no way such a place is unclaimed. Getting in would be nigh-impossible.”

“You might be right,” Zac said with a sigh, knowing that his goal of finding Kenzie had just become even more difficult.

Leaving the Zecia Sector alone was a daunting task for someone who wasn't even powerful enough to freely walk among the stars. Gaining access to some supreme cultivation paradise to free his sister sounded like an impossible task as things stood. But Zac simply took a deep breath and left.

One step at a time.

Vilari being gone for so long was out of Zac's expectations, but it didn't affect his original plans all that much. Zac sent a message to Calrin next, ordering a huge batch of provisions for his next outing before returning to his cultivation cave.

He spent the next week healing up, resting, and going over his plans. Zac had formed all kinds of hypotheses and goals over the past three years, and the improved clarity from his soul helped him perfect those steps even further. Only when he was completely certain he was back in prime condition did he continue with his objectives.

Zac activated his teleporter, appearing in a small empty building, a logger's cabin that hadn't seen any visitors for months. He stepped outside, finding himself in a small town, though not a person was in sight. It was a small deserted settlement that Zac had found while flying around on his leaf, looking for good grinding spots or any natural treasures left behind after the Integration.

Judging by the signs and remains, the place had once been a drop-off point for a cohort of human cultivators. However, they had long died due to their unfortunate placement. The town was situated at the edge of a series of towering mountains to one side and a vast coniferous forest to the other.

Both the mountains and the forest were simply crawling with powerful beasts, and there were no other towns for hundreds of miles. The cultivators had fought valiantly against the dangerous surroundings, unlocking a Nexus Crystal and all sorts of battlements. They had all died before managing to unlock the teleporter though, leaving the town unclaimed.

Zac had quickly killed all the alphas in the surroundings before claiming the city, which gave him a small outpost far away from prying eyes, with ample prey to use as target

practice. However, Zac didn't come here to just fight beasts, he had a specific goal in mind.

He walked over to the Nexus Crystal, putting his hands against its smooth surface.

[Fuse Skills?]

Chapter 672: Skill Fusions

Zac had gained his first skill upgrade quest at level 90 as expected, and another one at level 100. Both of them provided him with one opportunity to freely fuse or upgrade one of his F-Grade skills, though the upgrade only allowed for upgrading Class-specific skills. The fusion could make use of external skills, but only if the first skill in the fusion was provided by the class. Secondly, only F-grade skills were useable in the fusion.

Zac had reached level 90 just two months after the events in the Mystic Realm, and he completed the quest in two weeks. Yet he had held off on accepting the reward based on a recommendation from Alyn. He would only get a few freebies, and he needed to make the most of it. Zac got two shots per class, which felt sorely lacking as he went through his long list of abilities.

There were many reasons to not immediately cash in the rewards. The System assisted in the upgrades, but the cultivator could actually nudge the process in certain directions as long as they had a clear understanding of the skill fractals and what they wanted to change. That was a big reason why Zac had worked so hard on shoring up his foundations over the past years, to give him a shot at creating skills suited for his cultivation path.

This was extra important for his Fetters of Desolation-class, where he had several skills that he rarely used or simply didn't fit too well with his envisioned combat style. He wanted to turn the class more offensive while still maintaining some defensive capabilities, and he hoped he had found a way to do that. Right now the class combined Defense and Death, and Zac needed to turn that into War and Death.

He had gone over his options hundreds of times in his mind as he worked on his Soul Cultivation over the past years, and he

had long reached a decision for both his classes. All four opportunities would be used for fusing skills, leaving the normal evolutions to his own hard work. The reason was simple; fusing skills was a lot harder than simply upgrading one.

It took two different skill fractals and turned them into one, combining their effects to something new. It required a high understanding of fractals, the Dao, and the skills themselves to work, along with some sort of inspiration. An upgrade wasn't easy by any means, but ultimately a lot more straightforward.

Fixing his Draugr skillset was important, but Zac wanted to work on his human side first. He figured that the fusions he had planned for his Edge of Arcadia-class were more straightforward, and the accumulated experience would hopefully help him when performing the more transformative fusions of his Draugr side.

Zac looked at the prompt from the Nexus Node in front of him and took a deep breath before choosing **[YES]** and swiftly picking his first two skills to fuse. It was **[Deforestation]** and **[Nature's Punishment]**. He was very happy with both skills, but they ultimately served a similar purpose in his skill set.

So, Zac had decided to fuse the two into one, creating one terrifying ultimate skill that would crush all opposition in one go. It was a combination of two of his Daos as well; the Fragment of the Bodhi and the Fragment of the Axe, the essence of his Edge of Arcadia class and his cultivation path. Now with his burgeoning ability to braid two Daos into one attack, it held even greater potential.

Zac's surroundings suddenly changed, and he found himself sitting in a vast cosmos, and his eyes lit up with expectation when he saw the familiar stars far in the distance. It looked a lot like when Yrial imparted his Dao onto him years ago, like he was staring into the Heavens themselves in this secret dimension.

Two streams of energy suddenly emerged from his body, turning into the fractals of his two skills, each of them as tall as Zac. Two streams emerged from his glabella next; the

familiar Dao clouds that were continuously released from his Dao Avatars. The streams were unsurprisingly those released by the Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Axe.

Two fractals crashed into each other the next moment, turning them into a cloud of stardust that swirled about. It was mesmerizing to look at, but Zac didn't forget himself as he staunchly focused on the direction he wanted to take the skill in. Pure power stemming from the endless force of nature itself, paired with the unstoppable momentum of an axe. The two would turn into a single attack that would cleave earth and end a war altogether.

A rippling force shuddered within the stardust, and Zac felt certain his general idea for the skill had been accepted by the System. The stardust created from the former two skills congealed into a brand new fractal, while energy from the distant stars poured in and gave it even greater strength. The result was a skill fractal far more detailed than those before, radiating unquestionable might.

Zac looked at it with awe, and he could quickly make some deductions thanks to his years of study into the patterns that the Apostate of Order brought to the cultivation world. First of all, the energy requirement and strength of his new skill should be around twelve times greater compared to the old ones.

One could almost liken a skill fractal to a perfectly crafted machine, and some patterns shared purpose across most skills. For example, there were the transformers that took normal Cosmic Energy and transformed it into whatever force was needed to conjure the skill.

There were also storage patterns that allowed the skill to compress and store Cosmic Energy until it was all released in one mighty blast. The more storage patterns a skill fractal contained, the more power would the skill be able to unleash. Of course, it also meant the skill would cost more to activate as well.

The number of storage patterns nestled into the skill fractal was a good indicator of what type of skill one was dealing with since massive finishers would obviously contain tens,

perhaps hundreds, more of these types of mini-fractals compared to weaker repeatable skills like **[Chop]**. It was this that gave Zac an idea of how powerful the skill would be without even using it.

Furthermore, Zac was elated to see that the transformative patterns had a decent balance between nature and axe, though it looked to be a sixty-forty balance in favor of his Dao of the Axe. It meant that it would be a primarily axe-based skill that borrowed the elements of nature, rather than a nature-skill with the cutting-ability of an axe.

A fifty-fifty split might have been optimal in terms of his path, but Zac knew he was still an axe-warrior first and foremost. Over the past years, he had managed to incorporate the Dao of the Axe far more into his fighting style than his other two Daos, which wasn't a surprise as he fought with an axe. Getting a sixty-forty split was pretty good all things considered, and he might even be able to gain some inspiration in the future by studying the fractal.

The skill wasn't completely formed just yet though as two streams of starlight washed over the skill, each one transforming the pattern a bit. Zac couldn't put his finger on it, but the fractal looked a bit more perfect afterward. This was the benefit of the System doing the fusion rather than doing it yourself.

You might not have full control over the process, which meant that the skill might not be one hundred percent suited to your path. But the resulting skill fractal would be without flaws. A fusion-reward from an Epic Class would result in a Peak-quality E-Grade Skill without fail, which was especially important in Zac's case.

After having studied skills for a long time he had already confirmed that while both **[Deforestation]** and **[Nature's Punishment]** had amazing effects, they were ultimately High-quality skills. They were extremely close to peak quality, but there was still a short distance away. In comparison, **[Profane Seal]** was a proper peak-quality skill since both its defenses and restraining prowess were top-tier for the grade, while even including a teleportation effect to close distances.

Meanwhile, over 90% of those who fused skills on their own ended up with a skill with a lower quality compared to the source skills. For example, turning two High-quality F-grade skills into one Medium-quality E-grade skill. It would be a huge loss if Zac wasted the potential in his two signature skills that way.

Certainly, it was possible to maintain the quality of one's skill, but it required tremendous insight and talent. To improve the quality like what was happening right now most likely required some great fortuitous encounter, like an epiphany or special treasures that could aid in the process.

The skill was finally complete, and it turned into a streak of light that entered his body, and Zac waited with rapt attention for it to stabilize. A wide smile spread on his face the next moment as it settled in the position of **[Nature's Punishment]**. This was exactly what he was hoping for because that came with a special benefit.

He could get the Endurance-based defensive skill in the Dao Repository now.

[Nature's Barrier] was all but useless by now, leaving Zac without any real defensive options. Between his huge pool of Endurance and his Dao Fragments he was definitely hard to kill, but he needed a skill that actually took advantage of his strengths and pushed his defenses to the next level. He had already shored up his weaknesses on his mental side with **[Spiritual Guardian]** and evolving his soul, and this was the next step.

It wasn't time to worry about that though, and Zac pushed away any errant thoughts as he wanted to imprint the feeling and memorize every single change that had taken place in his body since he started the fusion process. Obviously, it wasn't as magical when doing the same thing yourself, but it could provide some guidance.

Zac soon enough he found himself back in front of the Nexus Node, but he sat in meditative silence for a few minutes to imprint everything. Only then did he open his Skill Screen.

[E] Arcadia's Judgement - Proficiency: Early. Only judgment awaits those who encroach on the mandate of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded in satisfaction before he sat down and studied the fractal for another 30 minutes. Only when he felt he had imprinted the whole thing in his mind did he stand up and step onto his flying treasure. There were still a few skills to fuse, but he first wanted to see the effect of the first fusion first-hand so that he could get a better understanding of the result.

Half an hour later he stood overlooking a vast valley from the vantage of his leaf. Thousands of beasts milled about within, some sleeping while others fought for sport. The stench of blood and death was palpable, and incessant roars full of power reached him even though he was hundreds of meters into the air.

This was a perfect spot for his experiment.

Zac soon landed at the mouth of the valley, making no attempt to mask his aura. His arrival was immediately noticed as thousands of weird beasts turned their attention toward him. They were Truzkirs, a beast that once lived on the Zhix homeworld.

Back there they were a small nuisance looking like a mix of some type of warrior ants and scorpions. Nowadays they had turned into a real threat to the surroundings, as they voraciously devoured everything around their lairs and multiplied quickly. They were both very small for spiritual beasts and agile to boot, which in conjunction with their endless numbers made it a pain to hunt them for normal people.

This particular hive was slated for eradication since it had grown too big, and there was a real risk of a beast tide if nothing was done.

The clattering screeches were almost deafening as a tide of Truzkirs rushed toward him, completely uncaring that his aura was hundreds of times stronger than theirs. Zac wasted no time and immediately started to infuse his new skill fractal with Cosmic Energy, and a slight frown emerged when it only

stopped after two seconds and gobbling up 25% of his total reserves.

That was a huge amount considering his attribute pool, and it would cost him most of his void energy from [**Force of the Void**], but that was ultimately a good thing in his book. His Void pool had already increased to 27% over the past years, which meant he wouldn't completely be drained. Besides, the more energy it consumed, the greater the force the skill would exert.

Zac felt a tremendous weight assail him the next moment as an enormous hand appeared above his head. It looked a bit like the old wooden hand of [**Nature's Punishment**], but it was over ten times larger; a mountain of bark, vines, and wood covered in glaring red runes. It was like Zac had borrowed the hand of a young treant before, but now the patriarch had showed up.

And it didn't come alone as a massive primal axe was held in its hand. The axe was wrought from wood and stone, and it felt like it was a natural product of mother nature itself. The insect tide was almost upon him by this point, and Zac didn't want to let them surround him. Zac's hand swung down, and he felt his bones creak and groan from the tremendous weight his skill exerted on him.

The hand in the sky mirrored his action, just like [**Deforestation**] did. The enormous axe fell, and it sounded like two mountains were ground against each other as arcadia unleashed its judgment. It felt like the whole planet would get cleaved in two as the axe slammed into the ground, digging over twenty meters into the valley. Thousands of beasts were instantly crushed and ground to dust as a scar over five hundred meters long was formed.

The wound on the earth radiated an undeniable might, and the whole valley shook from the force. The vibrations turned into a full-blown earthquake, but it only lasted for a second before the whole valley veritably exploded in a chaotic jumble of broken flesh and stone.

The hidden hive beneath the ground had been destroyed in an instant and the whole area had been transformed from a valley into a deep pit that radiated an immense aura of slaughter. The whole atmosphere had transformed as well as it held the weight of a mountain. The occasional Truzkir still screeched in pain and fear, but almost all of them had been annihilated by one single strike. The few remaining beasts would easily be dispatched if Zac was inclined, since the lingering pressure had rendered them completely unable to move.

Zac looked down at the destruction for a few minutes, feeling that he really had delivered judgment on this whole valley. The direct force unleashed from the enormous stone axe matched and even eclipsed the third swing of [**Deforestation**], while the scope of the secondary eruption was a lot larger than any of the punishments from [**Nature's Punishment**]. Power and scope; [**Arcadia's Judgement**] had both.

And this was just Early Proficiency.

His goal was accomplished, and there was no point in him lingering any longer. The next day was spent performing one fusion after another, and Zac gained a lot of inspiration and comprehension every time. Zac also realized that he had worried about nothing as every single fusion lived up to his expectations, even the two for his Draugr side. Then again, the great outcome might be thanks to him slowing down and gaining a deeper understanding of fractals and skills.

Zac visited the Towers of Myriad Dao once more after everything was dealt with to pick up his new defensive skill as well. He had hoped Vilari would surprise him and Brazla, but she was still embroiled in the trial. Zac could only leave for now, and he found himself in front of the Nexus Hub a few minutes later. With his skill fusions dealt with, nothing was holding him back any longer.

The next part of his plan would take place off-world.

Chapter 673: Departure

There was just one thing Zac needed to do before he left Earth. He looked down at the crystal in his hands, and a tumultuous wave of emotions hit him once again. He hated the thought of using something given to him by that woman, but what choice did he have? If he ever wanted a chance at taking charge of his own destiny or reuniting with his sister, then he couldn't stay in Port Atwood.

He needed the Array, at least for now.

Zac took a deep breath before he pushed it against his stomach with some lingering fear. Trusting Leandra felt pretty foolish, but he relied on the fact that she wouldn't bother laying some trap with the array. She didn't even care about murdering Thea right in front of him. If she wanted to implant him with something nefarious, she would probably just cut him right open while talking about the importance of her undertaking.

He infused some energy into the crystal, and it quickly turned into a liquid that streamed into his body and formed a mysterious pattern on his Duplicity Core. It wasn't like Yrial's skill that was overlaid like a sphere, but it had rather fused with the Specialty Core itself. There was still no change though, but that was because Zac hadn't activated the array yet.

Another stream of Cosmic Energy entered the array, and Zac felt his connection to the core immediately weaken. A few seconds later it was like both the core and the mysterious array had simply disappeared. Zac could still feel his core, but it was somehow distant, like it had been moved to a different dimension.

Activating Yrial's transformation skill yielded no result, but Zac could somewhat sense that he would still be able to force the race change if he pushed a lot harder. Of course, doing so

would waste a month, so he let it be. He scanned himself over and over for the next hour, but he really couldn't sense the smallest hint of the Specialty Core ever being there. The spot it took up had even been replaced with perfectly normal energy pathways.

That meant that even if someone managed to break through Greatest's bangle, it still shouldn't yield any result. Zac changed his appearance next, turning into a middle-aged human with some distinct features that set him apart from Zac's own appearance.

With that out of the way Zac teleported over to the Nexus Hub, and he was gone from Earth a moment later without leaving a trace.

"Guides! Guides to pass the gauntlet! Seize a better score and a better future with this great investment," a furry gnome hollered from his spot on top of a few boxes as he waved a shimmering crystal in his hands.

Zac smiled and shook his head as he kept walking down the bustling street, heading straight for the grand castle in the distance. He wasn't the only one, as people emerged from the ten teleportation rooms every minute or so, resulting in a steady stream of people heading toward the same place. An enormous ship that had to be over a thousand meters long was slowly making its way through the atmosphere as well, and hundreds of smaller vessels followed in its path.

A large number of shops lined the main street, but Zac knew that the wares inside paled compared to the impressive treasures in the windows of the stores. **[Havenfort Base]** was both an opportunity and a tourist trap, and it all centered around the castle in the distance.

Inside the castle was the Havenfort Chasm, a massive hole of seemingly endless depths. It was created when a Monarch self-destructed out of despair over losing his loved one, though some rumors argued that he did it out of vengeance in an attempt to take out the perpetrators behind the lover's death.

As for the opportunity, it was a mostly safe trial that provided a Limited Title. The deeper you managed to walk into the

depths of the chasm, the better the title would be. Simple enough.

One of the greatest benefits of Zac's huge number of teleportation locations was access to thousands of different trials that existed all over the Zecia Sector. It would allow Zac to easily fill up his empty slots before setting out toward deadlier challenges. He had already confirmed that Titles didn't impact attribute limits, which was one of the reasons so many believed that Titles were small bloodline evolutions provided by the System.

Zac had thousands of open trials to choose from all across the Sector, though over 95% of them were low-graded trials that only provided flat attributes. There were all kinds of trials, and it had taken some time for Zac to find those who were suited for him. Some trials provided pretty great rewards, but Zac had to give up on them anyway. For example, there was a trial called [**The Riddlemaster's Maze**] which took an average of twenty years to complete.

Other trials were unsuitable for him to undergo for other reasons. Certain locations were only open once every few decades, others took a long time to reach even with teleportation access. A lot of trials were also skewed in favor of certain paths, races, or Daos, whereas even more had other sorts of restrictions.

Trials limiting attributes were obviously the worst for Zac, since that wouldn't let him take full advantage of how monstrous his attribute pool was for his current level. Certainly, with his high Efficiency he'd do better than most, but his advantages would partly be nullified by people's cultivation manuals.

Instead, Zac had focused his attention on level-restrained trials and dynamic trials. Level-restrained trials had certain cut-off points, and if Zac found one close to his own level he was almost certain to steamroll it. Dynamic trials automatically adjusted the difficulty based the difficulty on your level or attribute pool depending on what it wanted to test.

For example, the Trial inside the castle in the distance was a dynamic trial based on level, which was perfect for Zac.

Unfortunately, the rewards for these kinds of trials were only better than average. It wasn't anything surprising. With a low risk of death and such easy availability, the rewards could only be so good.

The best Limited Titles came from unexplored Mystic Realms where people braved unknown dangers. The second-best titles came from Grade-restricted trials, of which the Tower of Eternity could be considered one of the most famous examples.

All other trials were a notch below, and their rewards differed from case to case. Zac had asked Alyn why the grade trials were the most rewarding, and it turned out the most commonly held belief was that the System wanted to encourage pushing each grade to the limits. Only after you reached the peak of a grade and deepened your foundations did you have the qualifications to go for the best rewards in that grade.

Zac obviously wouldn't waste his time and limited opportunities in going to those kinds of trials at level 101. He would first go for a set of decent Titles to fill up his empty slots so that he was as powerful as possible before setting out for his more dangerous adventures. It was obviously a unique advantage afforded to him thanks to his training quest, whereas the other trial takers usually had to make do what was available in their surroundings.

Some of those who arrived in this place had gotten a Teleportation Token as a reward for some quest, and it was no secret that the System often dropped tokens in the depths of Mystic Realms as rewards for reaching that far. Others came here through the Space Gate Guild, though that option was only available to the wealthier scions.

The Space Gate Guild was actually a guild that specialized at gaining access to a large number of locations, mainly targeting hubs and opportunities such as the **[Havenfort Base]**. These people's jobs was simply to take the elite to places they normally didn't have access to themselves.

This business was extremely lucrative, as the guild charged roughly 10 times the standard fare to take a person to a certain location, and just as much to return. However, there were a lot of restrictions to this trade. First of all, you needed to get access to the valuable Arrays, and that was extremely hard.

Not only did you need to complete some quests in the area where you wanted to gain an array, but you also needed to be granted access by the owner. That was easier said than done too, since a Lord couldn't give those out as he wished. The first requirement was for the target to reach the System's requirement to be worthy of the connection. Secondly, the Lord could only form a certain number of connections each year for otherworlders.

Zac himself would be able to give access to Earth to 100 people a year according to Abby, though that still wasn't possible while the shroud was active.

Furthermore, why would someone controlling a great opportunity like the **[Havenfort Base]** give that access away for free? The Space Gate Guild no doubt had to pay through the nose for every connection to this place they formed.

Travel itself was fraught with problems as well. First, a Guide, as the workers for the Guild were called, could only take on one mission every three months. The System blocked any more than that. Furthermore, they could only take one guest, which was a dealbreaker for many young scions, as they were afraid of traveling without bodyguards. Worst of all, they weren't even allowed to operate through the Mercantile System.

So, it was clearly a business that skirted at the edge of what the System deemed acceptable, but it was nevertheless a pretty common way for the elites of the Zecia sector to get around.

The final method to get here was by Cosmic Vessels. This option was only used by locals. There were quite a few clans and Sects that operated spacefaring lines, operating massive vessels that took people between planets and opportunities.

That option was the least convenient though, as travel through that method took a lot of time, and it was generally restricted

to the local cluster of planets. Still, the lucky few who lived on the capital world of a kingdom could sometimes jump onto a vessel, and spend a decade or two touring the local planets, gaining experience and opportunities on the way. Luckily, Zac could skip all that hassle thanks to his unique access.

Truthfully, while the Limited Title one could gain from this place was upper-tier, it wasn't the best choice among the Title-opportunities Zac had researched over the past three years. But the story of Mandar Havenfort had refused to leave the back of his mind since he decided to fill up his Limited Slots.

Zac still had trouble processing with had happened back home, sometimes waking up in the middle of the night full of rage or despair, his whole body slick with acrid sweat. How would one come to terms with something like what he had experienced? His mother sacrificing his girlfriend to save his sister. It was like one of those ethical riddles with no right answer, and he found himself repeating the events over and over.

So Zac came here in search of not only a title, but for something more. He still didn't know exactly what. This trial would tax not only the strength of his body, but the fortitude of his mind, and Zac hoped to find some sort of answers in the depths of the chasm.

The whole planet the chasm was placed on had been turned into a desolate rock after the Havenfort Monarch blew himself up, and wild energies still ravaged the outside. The thick barriers protecting the town no doubt cost a bundle to keep operational, so the town only housed the bare essentials; a wide variety of establishments where trial-takers could waste their money. The actual metropolis where the massive Cosmic Vessels stopped was on another planet, with ferries taking the trial-takers here.

Zac soon reached the square in front of the castle, and he unhurriedly entered a grand building outside the castle gates. There was a line of warriors emitting decent auras to his left, and three cultivators radiating the aura of Hegemons to the right. The hegemons got personal and immediate service, whereas the E-grade cultivators had to stand in line.

He didn't really mind, but he was rather amused about how it all felt like he was on a vacation to a theme park or something, with concession stands and ticket booths. The desk itself was blurred, and Zac realized they used an isolation array for some reason.

"One person," Zac said when he eventually reached the front.

"Certainly! Do you have a Heaven-bestowed token in your possession?" the gnome clerk asked.

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"One ticket is E-Grade 10,000 Nexus coins," the goblin smiled. "The estimated waiting time is currently sixteen months."

"What?" Zac blurted, losing his equanimity for the first time.

The price was pretty steep, ten billion Nexus Coins, but Zac knew about that already. In his mind it was definitely worth it, considering that it would provide a Title. The same went for most cultivators. If they had the money, purchasing a Limited Title was one of the most efficient ways to strengthen yourself since it had no drawbacks.

The real problem was the waiting time. He didn't have time to wait over a year, and he definitely didn't want to do so in this price-gouging little town.

"The Havenfort Chasm is a unique marvel of the whole Reputtin Domain. A lot of elites come from all over, even from other parts of the Zecia Sector to test their mettle against the pressure below. However, the Heavens themselves have limited the number of trial takers. Naturally, this has caused a line to form," the fuzzy gnome said, and Zac inwardly groaned when he saw the pointed look she gave next.

Were all gnomes the same?

"I don't have time to wait that long. How much to... expedite... the process?" Zac sighed.

"Now and then a trial taker backs out for one reason or another. It would be a shame to allow precious slots to go unused, so we have a few people standing by. Of course, this

comes with the slight premium of an additional 40,000 surcharge,” the gnome said, her smile wide enough to brighten up the room.

Zac understood what she was saying all-too-well; want to cut the line? Well, pay up!

“Fine,” Zac snorted and transferred the funds, along with a few dozen D-Grade Nexus Crystals. “A little something for your troubles.”

“This way, young master. I’m sure an opportunity will show itself anytime soon. A few hours at the latest,” the gnome said as the crystals disappeared in a blur.

A hidden door opened to the side, and the gnome indicated for Zac to enter. No wonder the gnomes had people buy tickets in private, the VIPs were actually led right inside the castle while the others had to wait outside the gates for over a year.

“I’m sure,” Zac snorted as he walked through. “Otherwise, I might come back for my crystals and try my luck at a different gate.”

The hidden gate led to an opulent room full of artwork depicting the history of the Havenfort Monarch, but Zac wasn’t interested immediately stepped onto the Teleportation Array that activated automatically. The next moment he found himself in front of a gate, and there was a large plaque detailing a few hints about the trial next to it.

Most of it wasn’t news to Zac. The trial put everyone in a dimension of their own, or at least hid the other participants from sight. The task was exceedingly simple as well; you only needed to walk down a spiraling path cut into the edge of the chasm, trying to get as far as possible.

Every so often you would reach a marker that acted as a checkpoint for the trial. It both held a teleportation array to leave, and it denoted the level of your limited title. You could try going further, but you had to turn back if you found yourself starting to lose to the pressure. Safety wasn’t guaranteed, and there were people every day who fell down the chasm and died after overestimating their capabilities.

There were 5 levels in total, with most people reaching the second layer from what Zac had gathered. The thing that prevented most people from going further was the mental pressure, and now that Zac had arrived to this place he understood why.

It turned out that mental defensive skills and similar items didn't work in this trial, which wasn't mentioned in the information missive at all. It might even have been omitted by design, as exposing that would scare away a lot of meathead trial takers who never worked on their spirit. Zac actually felt like he benefitted from this though, and it was an opportunity for him to test his recently evolved soul.

Zac pushed open the gate, and walking inside put him face to face to an impossibly large chasm hundreds of times larger than the castle he had entered.

Chapter 674: Equanimity

On the other side of the door was a small balcony overlooking the enormous crater left behind after the Havenfort Monarch. Zac had been prepared for the hole to be big after reading about it in the missive, but even then he wasn't mentally prepared to the staggering scene.

The chasm was endlessly vast, possibly having a diameter that eclipsed Zac's whole island. As for the depth, it was even greater. Zac fought off his vertigo and walked over to the edge of the balcony, but he immediately regretted peering down. There were protective barriers preventing anyone from falling into the chasm, but Zac fell back and had to sit down even with those measures in place.

It was endless.

It felt like the chasm reached all the way into the abyss itself. Had the whole planet been pierced through when the C-grade cultivator fell? It almost seemed like it. Zac couldn't imagine the force that would be required to create a crater like this. And this was even after the Monarch allegedly controlled the eruption and directed most of his force toward the Heavens, which explained why the chasm was almost perfectly circular.

Zac shuddered at the thought of someone like this targeting Earth.

His mental state soon calmed down though, and his gaze turned to the right. The balcony led to a pathway, thankfully five meters wide, that seemed to stretch along the edge of the tube-formed crater down into the depths. On a second look, there were hundreds of similar balconies as his own, each of them leading down a path of their own.

Judging by the incline and circumference of the crater, Zac guessed that each checkpoint might be one single loop around the chasm. He couldn't spot a single trial taker though, but Zac

figured that was because there was some force or array preventing people from seeing and helping each other.

There was a barrier blocking access to the pathway, and Zac figured that there was someone already using the current path. But since he was teleported to this specific balcony, he guessed that the one currently on his path had almost finished his or her run. So, Zac took out one of his prayer mats and sat down, slowly steadying his mind.

As expected, it only took two hours before a soothing bell woke Zac up from his meditation as the shield dissipated. Zac saw no point in loitering about, and he took a steadying breath before he stepped onto the path. However, he only took a single step before he stopped as a quest prompt had appeared in front of him.

Depths of Despair (Limited, Trial): Descend into the chasm. Reward: Havenfort Chasm Limited Title. (0/5)

Zac read the description, but there wasn't much to go by. The (0/5) in progress no doubt referred to the five checkpoints on this trial. The situation was straightforward enough and he started walking down the pathway.

He walked for a few minutes, and the only sounds in the area were his steps and the occasional moaning echoes created by wind swirling around in the chasm itself. There was definitely an odd energy suffusing this place, which Zac hadn't noticed before. He did feel a heaviness on his body, but it was barely noticeable at this point.

Not only that, Zac did feel slightly dour, but he honestly wasn't sure whether that could be blamed on the trial. The surroundings were dark, the atmosphere was oppressive, and he wasn't in the best state of mind himself. It would be weird if he felt exuberant at a place like this. Still, there was a mental component to the trial, so he didn't relax his focus.

The minutes soon turned into four hours as Zac progressed further and further down the chasm, and the pressure eventually turned palpable. However, the first checkpoint was still nowhere in sight, and Zac decided to speed things up a bit. Unfortunately, it turned out that his movement skill was

blocked. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised, as there were all kinds of odd movement skills.

What if someone started moving through the ground itself shooting straight down toward the final checkpoint?

Zac also noticed that the suppression turned a lot more powerful if he sped up, and he was eventually forced to slow down to a brisk walk. No wonder the missive he bought said that the trial was expected to take up to ten days. You needed to slowly and gradually make your way down.

There was not much to do except walk in silence, and Zac's thoughts eventually started wandering. Zac tried to focus on the future, to plan out his next steps, but his thoughts kept returning to those he had lost. His father, Alea, Ogras and Billy... Thea. Some were dead, others lost where he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to meet them again.

After all, the Million Gates Territory was vast, almost as big as the whole Allbright Empire. Finding a hidden realm in that place would be like searching for a needle in a galactic haystack. And if the existence of the Dimensional Seed became widely spread, that was even worse. How would Ogras and Billy survive when Hegemons and perhaps even Monarchs made their move?

The sea in his mind was growing erratic, and the clean line between life and death became blurred as dozens of whirlpools erupted. Even the island in the middle, the very core of his being, was assailed by powerful waves that crashed into it. The small ocean had turned into a mirror of his mental state, and it didn't look good.

An errant thought was all that it had taken for it to spiral out of control, and Zac realized that he might not even make it past the first checkpoint unless he started to take things seriously. A trial that blocked mental defense skills would test one's soul, but also one's willpower and focus.

The trial thankfully wasn't timed, so he stopped for a moment and took a few deep breaths as he tried to enter a meditative state. With the pervasive pressure in the air Zac was unable to

completely turn off his mind, but the chaos in his mind slowly calmed down as he forcibly focused on the task at hand.

After a few more minutes his soul sea had returned to the previous state with a clean line of demarcation. Zac took a deep breath and continued down the endless chasm. His body could barely feel the effect of the trial's physical pressure, but he was shocked at how fragile his mental state was.

Zac didn't let his thoughts stray any longer, and he kept a constant vigil as he pushed forward. He soon passed by the first checkpoint, but he didn't even stop and catch his breath as he continued further down. There was a qualitative change in the pressure at the second layer, but Zac wouldn't give in at all. The second checkpoint arrived just a day later, and two days later the third, which meant he had gained a better title than most trial takers.

By this point the pressure was immense, and Zac was unable to think about anything but moving forward. Right foot, left foot, rinse and repeat. The slightest loss of control could be extremely dangerous, to the point that his soul would get hurt. The pressure on his body was bearable by its innate power alone, but he knew that he was in trouble in regards to his mind.

He was moving forward on pure willpower by this point, but his soul wouldn't be able to go much further. He had just passed the third checkpoint, but the pressure was more than twice what it was after the second. It was no wonder that most warriors only managed to reach the second stop. Even with a reincarnated soul, he was no mentalist, and he knew that his willpower wasn't as strong as some warriors who had tempered themselves for centuries.

Yet he felt it was too early to give up now. Eventually, he had taken three days on the third layer. He was like a zombie by this point as he stumbled forward, his eyes red from strain and veins covering his forehead. It felt like the harder he tried to fight the pressure, the stronger it got. It was like an annoyance that just increased in severity the more you focused on it.

Eventually, it came to a tipping point, where Zac simply couldn't keep going as he was. The pressure was too great, and his whole mind aperture vibrated ominously from the invisible pressure. The two oceans were extremely chaotic even when he desperately tried to impose order, which was a telling sign of his mental state.

Zac stood in place, looking down at the depths with mixed emotions. Should he give in? This was ultimately not a life-death situation for him. Passing just three checkpoints would give him a pretty bad title, but there was no point in risking cracking his soul for a slightly better one. He could always go for another trial instead.

Zac didn't immediately leave though, but rather looked down at the chasm with reluctance. He had come here in search of more than just a title, yet he had gained nothing. He walked up the path for a bit, but only to the point that his mind wasn't shaking any longer. He sat down and slowly relinquished his strict control over his emotions.

A thousand thoughts immediately flashed through his mind and his mind shook from the onslaught, but it soon calmed down as Zac started to impose order to the chaos. He didn't let his mind run haywire, but he also didn't shut any thought down. He slowly started to go over everything he had encountered and done over the past months, trying to find some closure.

Zac soon realized that he had fallen into the same state as he did soon after the Integration.

One trauma after another had kept accumulating back then, each one turning into a scab that had numbed his soul. Eventually, he had almost turned into a utilitarian killing machine who could weigh lives against benefits without blinking an eye. The first months after the Mystic Realm had been a confusing blur when he suddenly didn't have anyone to unleash his bloodlust on.

Only when he stopped running did he realize what he had turned into. It had taken a long, long time for him to regain a sense of his humanity, and Thea had been a huge part of that

process. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that he had jumped into the same pitfall the moment tragedy struck, where he got completely consumed with his cultivation and plans to reap resources.

But there had to be a balance.

It was true that the Multiverse followed the law of the jungle, and being soft would cause more harm than good. But losing one's humanity on the path to power, discarding all attachments as though they were weaknesses, would strip away the core of your being until you were only a ball of violence striving for power.

Zac kept going over everything, but he was suddenly startled awake when he realized that the pressure on his soul had lessened by a significant degree. He slowly got up and resumed his descent, time turning into a blur as he was now more focused on his inward journey. The pressure kept increasing, but the waves in his mind were actually slowly growing weaker. It was like the suppression on his mind forced him to confront some things he had kept at bay for so long.

One step after another took him deeper and deeper into the abyss. It felt like his mind was being honed in a completely different way than when he cultivated it with his Soul Strengthening Manual. He was making a spiritual journey, where his willpower was sharpened through processing years of pent-up trauma. That wasn't to say that he was reveling in his suffering.

There were no two ways about it, he had gone through some messed up things over the past years. Friends and family had fallen, and his hands were completely drenched by blood by this point. Pushing everything down wasn't the right way to deal with it, and tears Zac had started pouring down his cheeks at some unknown time.

The fourth checkpoint suddenly lit up the path around him, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he kept walking. The pressure was getting pretty extreme by this point, and he was steadily losing Cosmic energy to just walk forward. Black

swirls of unidentifiable energies occasionally passed Zac by as they danced at the depths of the chasm.

But a smile started to emerge on his face even as the pressure threatened to crush his mind entirely.

Memories kept coming back, but they were no longer all of self-loathing and doubt. He remembered the happy times, the intimate moments between just him and Thea. He no longer focused on the fact that he had failed to reach his father in time, or how Leandra had muddied the issue of paternity. He remembered those thirty years before where Robert Atwood had raised him and Kenzie alone.

He was being baptized by his own experiences, and he felt like he was in a trance. Each step was a herculean task by this point, but at the same time it felt like it was someone else's struggle. He didn't know if hours or years had passed as he was swept up by the past, but suddenly the pressure disappeared.

The world shifted and his soul shuddered, and then there was just tranquility.

Zac knew he had somehow passed the trial, but he still didn't open his eyes as he was immersed in his current feeling. But eventually, he opened his eyes and looked, only to realize that he actually had reached the bottom of the chasm. Zac's heart thumped for a second, but he soon quashed any errant thoughts.

It was clear he wasn't the first one, since he was looking at a vast graveyard. Or perhaps it was more correct to say it was a shrine, with thousands upon thousands of small memorial items left below. There were headstones, statues depicting all kinds of races, small trinkets like rings or necklaces, all kinds of items left on the ground. Zac wasn't surprised at the scene after going through the trial, and he walked for half an hour until he found a spot.

He first took out a thin wooden sword and stabbed it into the ground. It was the training sword Thea often had used while practicing in his courtyard. He took out his axe and carved

‘Thea’ on the hilt before he stood and watched the sword for over half an hour.

Only then did he keep walking for a while, at which point he found another spot. He took out a framed picture and a boulder pedestal from his spatial ring, and carefully put the picture down on it. It was a picture of Himself, Kenzie, and Robert. He looked at his family for a few minutes more until he walked toward an illuminated spot in the center of the graveyard.

Zac stepped onto a teleporter a while later, and he immediately appeared in an opulent chamber. Right in front of him was a large plaque with just two lines written.

The night is the mother of the day

Chaos is neighbor with order

The words were simple, but every stroke was full of meaning. Whoever wrote it was definitely a high-grade cultivator, as it echoed with a Dao far beyond his own. Zac looked at the line for a few seconds until he turned to a meditating gnome he had spotted sitting to the side. She looked cute and fuzzy like a plush toy just as the other natives he had met, but there was an unfathomable power hidden within her diminutive frame.

Zac was surprised to sense an aura almost as powerful as that of Greatest’s as she opened her eyes and looked back at him. This was a real hegemon, probably at the late stages or even at peak D-grade, and Zac couldn’t help but tense up a bit.

“Congratulations, trial-taker,” the gnome said. “It has been a while since someone reached the bottom, which requires you to hold on to your mortal heart. Those who discard all sentiments in the pursuit of power will reach the fifth checkpoint at best. Only the trees which can bend to the wind will survive the harshest storms. Our ancestor, Mandar Havenfort, never bent in his life and he only realized this truth when it was too late.”

“Elder,” Zac slightly bowed before he asked curiously. “Why don’t you advertise the truth about the trial, that there’s a second way to complete it?”

“Our Grand Elder won’t allow it,” the gnome said with some helplessness. “He said that catharsis is something that should be chanced upon on the journey of life, not something actively sought for benefits. It was he who wrote those words.”

Zac nodded in agreement and left the building soon after taking another look at the sign. The hidden powerhouse seemed benign, but it was still uncomfortable to be alone in a room with a being that could eradicate him with a slap. There wasn’t anything else keeping him on this planet, and he immediately started walking toward the Teleportation Hub as he opened his status screen.

**[Equanimity: Reach the floor of the Havenfort Chasm.
Reward: Base Attributes +2%. Wisdom, Endurance +2%.]**

Zac looked at the title with surprise. The Trial was supposed to give 0.5% to Endurance and Wisdom along with flat attributes for the first four checkpoints, and then 1% for the final level. But it looked like the whole title had changed by reaching the foot of the chasm, turning it into a far superior title that provided a boost to all base attributes.

The title was a far cry from the titles provided from ordeals such as the Tower of Eternity, but there was also very little danger involved. In fact, any titles providing over 5% to any base attribute in the E-grade came with a real risk of death, and they also weren’t publicly open like the **[Havenfort Chasm]**.

With his two previous Limited Titles, Zac now had three of his slots filled up, which would be the limit for most. That obviously wasn’t the case for him, so Zac gave it some thought before he stepped onto the teleporter heading toward the next trial.

Chapter 675: Bloodwind

The second trial went without any surprises, and Zac added another title to his growing repertoire after suffering inside a volcano for three weeks. Zac would probably have been able to reach the core of the volcano in two, but he had decided to move slowly as he digested what he had gone through in the chasm.

The second title only gave Strength, Vitality, and Endurance, but it did provide 4% to all three, which was even more valuable compared to the previous title in Zac's book. He had considered swapping out his Weight of Sin-title as well, but he eventually decided to skip it.

Getting a marginally better title wouldn't make much difference, and Zac felt it more worthwhile to move on to the next step of his plan. That meant there was just one final slot to fill, and Zac had saved the hardest one for last. He was currently in the darkness of mid-teleportation, but he soon found himself on top of a teleportation array in the middle of a desolate wasteland.

Zac looked around with wonder, feeling his heartbeat speed up while adrenaline coursed through his body. It almost felt like he was standing on the middle of a battlefield since the air was rife with killing intent. However, Zac knew it wasn't someone targeting him, but rather a result of endless battles.

The planet he had decided to visit was called the Bloodwind World, and it was one of the greatest worlds made available to him by the System. The planet itself was at the very peak of D-Grade, and it was apparently hundreds of times larger than Earth even after the integration. The history of the planet was extremely rough though.

The Bloodwind Planet was once considered a cultivator's haven, and a lot of factions wanted to make it their own. One

bloody war after another erupted on its surface, an endless slaughter that lasted for tens of thousands of years. It was just like the vision Zac saw for that bloody lotus, but here there was no supreme treasure to swallow all killing intent and foul air.

It eventually got to the point that the very attunement of the planet changed, and the Cosmic Energy was now suffused with bloodlust. Cultivators with weaker mental strength would slowly go mad in an environment like this, turning into bloodthirsty maniacs. It was almost like the effect of the Miasma has on people living at the edge of the Dead Zone, but there was no escape here.

The change to the planet made most factions lose interest, as it was impossible to house a clan in a world like this. It was no problem to the upper echelons to a clan to survive here, but the younger generations would all turn insane. But one man's trash is another man's treasure, and some factions and organizations jumped at the opportunity to set up shop in this corrupted world.

And Zac's purpose of coming to this place was to visit one of these factions; the Big Axe Coliseum. In fact, this world was his absolute first choice when it came to Limited Titles, but he had left it for last to improve his attributes first.

The Big Axe Coliseum was both a battle-arena where cultivators could pit themselves against other cultivators or ruthless beasts collected across the sector, and a loose organization for Axe cultivators. Loose Organizations were different than Sects or Clans in the sense that there very few restrictions when joining such a faction. In return, they didn't nurture their members or provide any benefits without payment.

Still, there were a lot of benefits to joining this kind of organization. Most of these organizations had merit systems just like Port Atwood and they held all kinds of items, some of which very hard to get your hands on through normal channels.

The treasure vault wasn't that big a deal to Zac though since he had the benefits of hundreds of thousands of Teleportation connections. What was scarce in one part of the Zecia sector, might be attainable in other parts. That was how he and Kenzie managed to collect so many rare treasures in just three years. For most cultivators that would be simply impossible.

Zac was more interested in the information that this organization held. The Big Axe Coliseum was reportedly founded by a proper C-grade Axe Warrior, and while the founder was long dead it was still a proper C-grade faction with at least one Monarch ruling from the shadows. There were also thousands of D-grade Hegemons who were members of the organization, and Zac felt he might be able to make some unexpected gains if he joined the organization.

The Big Axe Coliseum probably had one of the most complete heritages when it came to cultivating with the axe, be it classes, skills, or upgrade methods for Spirit Tools. Even better, the test to become an outer member of the Big Axe Coliseum was a Limited Title-Trial which gave both fixed and increased Strength and Dexterity if you passed.

It was among the best of what an E-Grade open trial could provide, though it only provided it in two of the attributes. Zac immediately set out, a bit surprised at the fact there were no people around him in an extremely popular place like this. Millions of people in the sector reportedly came to the Coliseum, and not just Axe Cultivators. Yet, the teleporter took him to an empty tundra, with only a sign pointing the direction of the Coliseum.

It was completely different compared to the bustling scene outside the Havenfort Chasm, but it didn't matter to Zac as he started to make his way toward the coliseum. Part of him wanted to take out his Flying Treasure, but he ultimately decided against it since a lot of worlds had restrictions regarding things like that. Flying was usually considered a privilege of Hegemons, and not something that piddling E-grade cultivators should do.

The surroundings were pretty desolate, with rock formations and the occasional twisted tree the only break in the dour

surroundings. The lack of people was starting to get to him a bit, but he kept moving forward until he suddenly sensed a presence not far away.

“Ah, a human?” a deep guttural voice exclaimed with surprise. “It’s not often we get your kind in this part of the Sector. Haha, like the taste of the air?”

Zac turned around and spotted a huge ogre reaching over twelve meters into the air. He was sitting with his back against a large rock a few dozen meters away, and there was a smell of blood and alcohol around him. His head was adorned with six short horns, and his bare round chest was covered in fractal tattoos. His legs seemed pretty stocky, and his arms were of such grotesque proportions that he would make Billy look scrawny in comparison.

Where had this guy come from? Zac was certain that he had looked at that rock just a moment ago, but at that time there hadn’t been anyone there. Still, Zac didn’t worry too much since he clearly wore the token of a member of the Big Axe Coliseum attached to his belt.

More importantly, while his appearance was pretty scary, his aura was not. Zac estimated his strength to be somewhere in the early E-grade, a common level of greeters.

“It’s not bad. It feels like I’m standing on a battlefield,” Zac smiled. “Is this really the Bloodwind World? How come there are no people?”

“Not bad? Haha, good!” the Ogre laughed. “Some feel pressured and fearful. They are no warriors. Others lose themselves in the fervor. They are nothing but animals. As for why there are no people, you’re standing inside an array.”

“I am?” Zac blurted as he looked around without spotting anything amiss.

“You’re too weak to notice it. Don’t worry, it’s just an illusion array. Some weaklings who come to this planet lose their minds from the atmosphere, and immediately attack anyone in the vicinity. This way we avoid a mess at the teleporters. Of

course, I can tell that you're barely affected at all. You have potential. Do you use the axe?" the Ogre asked curiously.

Zac thought it over for a second before he took out **[Rakan's Roar]**, a brutal axe which was made from a singular serrated tooth. The handle was made from a pristine white bone as well, except for a red gemstone that was embedded at the bottom along with some leather for a grip. He immediately infused the axe Fragment of the Axe as he showcased it to the ogre.

He had come here to take the test, so there was no point in hiding.

"High Fragment Axe, not bad," the gigantic cultivator nodded. "Primal series axe, and it seems to have been fed well. It's emitting a pretty fierce aura."

"You're familiar with the Primal series?" Zac asked with some interest.

The Primal Series was the name for the equipment group that **[Verun's Bite]**, Billy's **[Bonker]**, and **[Rakan's Roar]** belonged to. It wasn't that uncommon thanks to the System often rewarding low- and medium-quality Spirit Tools of the Primal Series upon completion of quests.

Zac was honestly a bit unsure whether **[Verun's Bite]** could still be considered a part of the Primal Series though. It had undergone multiple transformations since he got it, from the mysterious stone that he still couldn't identify after three years, to swallowing all that dragon's blood. Both its aura and appearances were very different from before.

However, Zac was worried that his main axe might still be recognized if scrutinized while traveling outside. Thankfully he had already acquired a similar but visually different spare long ago. **[Rakan's Roar]** was a far cry from **[Verun's Bite]**, and it didn't even have its spirit awakened. But it felt familiar to use, and it worked well enough for a simple showcase such as this.

"Well, it is a pretty common reward from the Boundless Heavens, but I might not have been able to tell if I didn't use

one myself,” the Ogre grinned, and Zac’s eyes widened when the huge humanoid produced a somewhat similar axe as his own, though his was a double-edged war axe. “I got this one a long time ago after performing well in a sanctioned war.”

Zac nodded in understanding. The System thrived on conflict, and very seldom limited it. Most of the time it didn’t involve itself at all. Two sides would fight and one side would fall, and to the victors went the spoils. However, sometimes the System provided extra incentives, which usually blew up the conflict to the next level.

It turned the war into a sanctioned event where participants could gain war credits. It made the war doubly profitable, and even outsiders flocked to join in on the carnage. In fact, that was exactly what happened in Zac’s case during the beast waves with the contribution store.

“I used this guy for a few years,” the massive Ogre grinned. “But nurturing these guys is a pain in the ass. They just get pickier and pickier. I eventually gave it up and entered the path of Blood and Steel.”

He took out another massive axe the next moment, and Zac immediately found himself under an immense pressure. It was like the air itself bent around the weapon, and Zac felt like he was drowning in a sea of blood the moment the weapon’s aura was unleashed. Even Verun was startled awake inside his Spatial Ring, but the roars in Zac’s mind were those of a prey trying to scare off a much-greater predator.

Zac immediately realized that he had severely underestimated the power of the ogre in front of him. He was using some sort of skill to mask his true power. Zac himself wasn’t confident he’d be able to wield such a powerful weapon, and it was definitely impossible for an early E-grade cultivator.

Still, he wasn’t too worried about being attacked. It felt more likely that this was a test, and Zac soon straightened his back as he calmed the churning waves in his soul ocean. It was like the axe amplified the murderous atmosphere many times over, making it feel like Zac had eaten a berserking treasure. If this was before stabilizing his evolved soul he might have lost

himself for a moment, but now he only felt some mental oppression.

“Not bad, most E-grade brats fall on their asses after I take out **[Bloodforge]**. Are we walking the same path, human?” the Ogre asked with interest.

Anyone coming to join the Big Axe Coliseum was an axe-warrior, but there were thousands of different paths related to the axe. Zac wasn't exactly sure what Blood and Steel entailed, but the aura of the weapon made Zac think of a gladiator reveling in battle. It also wasn't impossible that the Ogre in front of him had forged the weapon himself, considering he walked the path of Steel.

Zac looked at the huge warrior deep in thought. Zac still wasn't able to tell his exact strength, but it definitely was in the D-grade or higher since he could wield such a powerful weapon. If Zac had to guess, then this big brute was probably part of the upper echelons of the Big Axe Coliseum. Was this axe master actually looking for a disciple?

It would explain why such a powerful guy was lazing about this close to the teleporter; he was looking for potential candidates. Zac's thoughts whirred for a moment. Should he give it a try? As Yrial had said, there was nothing unusual about taking multiple masters, and this guy definitely knew all kinds of helpful tricks.

This was just a chance encounter so Zac wouldn't expect anything more than an in-name discipleship where the cultivator in front of him gave some small pointers to clear his confusions. In fact, if the Ogre was too enthusiastic, then it would probably be cause for suspicion.

As for himself, Zac believed he was an unmatched candidate when it came to potential. But their paths were ultimately different, and that was sometimes even more important to cultivators when searching for disciples. So Zac decided to just be upfront and see what the Ogre thought.

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I follow the Path of Conflict.”

“Hm, a shame,” the Ogre sighed with some disappointment in his eyes, and Zac immediately understood he had lost his chance for some tutelage. “Conflict is a difficult path, but it is not a bad decision for your generation.”

“For my generation?” Zac asked with confusion.

The Multiverse was beyond ancient and essentially unchanging. There wasn't really any difference between generations in the path of cultivation. It was simply some that started out earlier than others. So, it was a bit odd to hear that his direction of Axe-cultivation was especially suited for a certain generation.

“War is coming to Zecia,” the Ogre grinned. “You will get ample opportunities to hone your path over the next centuries.”

“What?” Zac blurted, but the Ogre was suddenly gone like he had never been there to begin with.

Zac looked back and forth, but there was no sign of the cultivator anywhere. The Ogre had probably nudged the array to hide him after talking with Zac for a bit, so Zac could only shrug his shoulders and continue on.

However, Zac made mental note to look into what the Ogre talked about. It sounded like he was talking about the whole Sector, which had to mean something extremely big was brewing beneath the surface. Was one of the peak factions planning on conquering the whole Sector? Things like that sometimes happened when a faction gained a leader at the level of the Eveningtide Asura. Or was it an even rarer event; a war between Sectors?

In either case, it was a huge deal that would impact everyone, from the cultivators on Earth to the bigshots in the established factions.

Chapter 676: Zanda

Boje's back was slick with sweat as he hurried down the vast hallways. Being summoned by the Supreme Ancestor could only mean one of two things. You had either made such huge contributions to the clan that the Matriarch actually ended her perennial cultivation to commend and reward you, or that you had screwed up by such epic proportions that it might implicate your entire branch.

Of course, Boje knew he hadn't accomplished any grand feats as of late. Furthermore, his father walked next to him, and his pallid face was ample evidence which of the two scenarios was more likely. The steely demeanor of the two deacons leading the way did not give indications to the contrary either, causing the group to move through the Zethaya Headquarters in oppressive silence.

From what Boje had heard, the last time Zanda Zethaya left her seclusion was over ten thousand years ago. A few select elders were responsible for supplying the endless materials required for her experiments into the Dao of Alchemy, but not even his great grandfather had spoken to her for millennia from what he had heard. Let alone he, a piddling member of the younger generation.

The group soon reached the gate to the hidden realm and passed through, and Boje could barely breathe from how immense the energies were on the other side. Unfortunately, he had no chance to take in the grandeur of the Everseed Gardens, the heart of the Zethaya Clan's Alchemy foundation. Countless priceless herbs grew under the constant care of intricate arrays and watchful Deacons, but both Boje and his father's attention were trained on the walled-off area far in the distance.

The Matriarch's private quarters.

The distance was too far for an early E-grade cultivator like him, so his father lifted him with his spiritual force. The world around him turned to a blur, but it still took twenty minutes before they reached a set of gates. The energy was even denser here, and Boje felt himself quickly losing grip of reality.

A surge of his father's Cosmic Energy traveled through his body to expel the power, waking him up. Boje hurriedly closed his pores as to not get himself accidentally killed before taking a steadying breath.

"Remember, mind your manners," his father urged him as the gates slowly swung open by themselves, and Boje's heart sunk when he saw the trepidation in his eyes.

This was his father, a proper Late-stage Hegemon whose alchemical skills would make him an honored guest in most places in the Zecia sector. Yet here he was like a scared child. There was no escape, and Boje nodded and walked inside while. He kept his eyes peeled to the ground, afraid to look at anything he wasn't supposed to. Finally, he sensed a presence in front of him, and he immediately stopped in his tracks.

"Boje Zethaya of the 1,837th generation greets the matriarch," Boje said as he bowed deeply, and he remained unmoving out of a mix of reverence and fear.

In front of him was Zanda Zethaya, the direct descendant of the founding patriarch of the Zethaya Clan and likely the foremost Alchemy Expert of the Zecia sector. She was once the 3rd Clan Leader, but now maintained the identity of Supreme Ancestor, delegating the running of the clan to the younger generations.

She had taken a thriving but unimpressive faction and pushed it straight to the peak of the sector roughly eight hundred thousand years ago, and she had made sure it never lost its glory in the time after. Anyone in the sector could understand the reverence people held for her, but the ones who knew the reason to fear her were a lot fewer in number.

The terror rather came from her second identity; Thousand Mile Death, one of the deadliest poison masters in the sector. It wasn't a real secret, but it was also not something that you

spoke openly about because of the sinister reputation of poison wielders. After all, almost all of them belonged to the unorthodox path.

Zanda was one of the greatest geniuses of the sector in the past million years, and most put her shoulder to shoulder with peak experts like the Void Priestess and just below the Eveningtide Asura. Some even believed she would've had the potential to reach even further if she hadn't chosen a hybrid path.

"Rise, child," a soothing voice drifted over, and Boje hesitantly stood up and glanced at the legendary figure he would normally have no business meeting.

She looked just like the paintings, like a young woman in her twenties exuding infinite charm. She sat on a swirling cloud of pure medicinal essence, and the only tool on her was the large unadorned wooden spoon on her lap. Next to her was a small Alchemy Cauldron, a perfect copy of the far larger one behind her back.

It was golden and reached almost fifty meters into the sky, an enormous monstrosity that hummed with the Dao of Nature. It was covered in dozens of pictures of the wild, or was it just inscriptions? Boje had a hard time telling, and it felt like the cauldron's surface kept shifting as he looked at it.

It was the Cloudsoar Cauldron, the defining treasure of the Zethaya Clan, an ancient relic dating all the way back to the Limitless Empire. Much of the Zethaya heritage was derived from the mysterious runes covering its surface, and not even a peak C-Grade Monarch would have an easy time breaking through the defensive shields it could summon.

If he could just meditate in front of that cauldron for a few days, then he would no doubt make enormous strides on his Dao...

"Tell me about your encounter with the one calling himself Zac Piker," Zanda Zethaya suddenly said, which was like a bucket of cold water that brought Boje back to reality.

Sweat once more started poured down Boje's back. It was just like he feared; this was related to that lunatic and the events in

the Tower of Eternity. He had waited, steeped in anxiety for three long years. The elders' response to his handling of the situation had been excruciatingly ambiguous, to the point that Boje had even wished to be punished so he could get on with his life.

But now that he stood here in front of this celestial being, any such thought was replaced with abject dread.

"It's my fault," Boje cried fell on his knees, slamming his forehead into the ground with enough force to bloody himself.

The instructions from his father and grandmother were clear; if things started to go sideways, pray and beg like your life depended on it. Because it did. And not only his but his whole family's life was hanging by a thread. He could only hope to elicit some sympathy for the younger generation from the ancient matriarch.

"Calm down," Zanda laughed. "Do I have such a bad reputation among the younger generations? After all, I am essentially your great aunt. Come, sit."

"N-No, not at all," he hurriedly said, but he inwardly cried from fear.

Who didn't know how this smiling 'great aunt' once annihilated a whole Pill House, from lowest clerk to the Branch Director himself? She waved her sleeves and fifty million people were dead a minute later, including hundreds of D-Grade hegemons. It happened eighty thousand years ago, but the memory was still all-too-fresh in the clan's collective memory.

And that was just one of a hundred bloody tales that detailed her exploits during her long tenure as the peak powerhouse of the Zethaya clan.

Still, there was nothing to do but to sit down and give the same exhaustive report he had done upon returning from the Tower of Eternity. He hid nothing, knowing that his only road to survival was complete honesty. The matriarch occasionally added some questions of her own, often about the Deviant Asura's beliefs and motivations.

That only served to worry Boje even more, as it seemed she tried to sound out his character. Whether he would come back in a hundred thousand years and wash their clan in blood like the Eveningtide Asura did with so many factions. The Zethaya Clan had escaped that calamity unscathed, and their rise to prominence was partly made possible due to the power vacuum the Eveningtide Asura left behind. But what if Zanda Zethaya decided he had brought a similar calamity to their door?

However, it didn't feel like this was what worried the Supreme Elder. But at the same time, it felt like there was something else at play. She didn't look completely satisfied with the answers, and she even had him repeat some parts.

"I-" Boje stuttered, trying to think of anything else to say. "If the Supreme elder could point me in the right direction, I might be able to remember some additional details...?"

Zanda sighed as she knocked the meter-long spoon in her hand against the small cauldron next to her. A clear clang echoed out, completely emptying Boje's mind as the enormous cauldron behind her started to hum. Another tap from the spoon brought Boje back to reality, and he felt his mind cleansed and stabilized. He hadn't felt this relaxed since before that unlucky star crashed into his life and turned his fate sideways.

Billowing clouds black gas suddenly started spewing out from the humongous cauldron. Boje's heart once more clenched, but he quickly calmed down when he saw that it wasn't a poisonous mist or a failed concoction. It rather looked like the black cloud was a piece of the vast sky, with stars and nebulae swirling about inside.

"The Stele of Conflict has appeared, and the heavens have shifted. The ancient factions are gathering their strength while outside forces are eyeing our riches. We tried to fight it, but it has been sanctioned by the Heavens. War is coming to the Zecia sector, and no one is safe," Zanda said as she looked at the sky.

“The Zethaya Clan is a peak faction with vast connections, surely we...” Boje said by instinct.

“Child, do not be mistaken. Alliances, friendships, even external elders. It’s all hollow strength, not something that can be relied on when an era turns. This is doubly true for a force like ours. Our wealth has long surpassed our strength. One misstep and we’ll be lost in the river of time,” Zanda said with a shake of her head.

“I’m sorry. This descendant is useless and doesn’t understand how this relates to Lord Piker. He is just at the E-Grade and cannot impact the fate of the large factions,” Boje hesitantly said.

“War is the motor of progress, and a convergence of fate of this scale will last centuries, perhaps millennia. Zac Piker is the first harbinger of change. It might prove lethal to underestimate his role and importance in this mess,” Zanda muttered. “The strong will prosper, and the weak will become fertilizer.”

Boje’s looked at the sky with a mix of apprehension and excitement. There were already talks of this being the era of heroes. Zac Piker was the star who shone the brightest at the moment, but there were many more who stood out.

He had witnessed the strength of the young miss of the Peak Family and the Void Priestess’ terminal disciple. There was also Prince Reoluv and that mysterious Draugr. All four of them had reached the eighth floor of the Tower of Eternity, something that should be an extremely rare event. The Draugr even reached the last level of the eighth floor, falling just one level short of the Deviant Asura.

And these were just the people Boje encountered in the Tower of Eternity.

There were also rumors of eonic geniuses appearing in many of the ancient factions, though these individuals were fiercely guarded and hidden from public view. The Zecia Sector was really heading into a golden age. Those who survived would no doubt make enormous progress.

But what was this about war? Boje was more connected than most, but hadn't heard anything.

"Well, it is still early," Zanda said as the cloud was swallowed back into the cauldron. "We still have some time to make arrangements. Prepare yourself. I am opening the Primal World for the young generation in one month. One hundred slots will be awarded."

Boje looked at his ancestor with shock when he heard the news. If the Skysoar Cauldron was the defining treasure, then the Primal World was the defining Mystic Realm in their possession. It contained an ancient piece of a peak C-Grade continent, a pocket of land that eclipsed any of the continents in the sector.

The realm had been refined and improved for over a million years, and the amount of resources that had gone into it would bankrupt most C-grade factions. Cultivating there was apparently like having a direct connection to the Heavens itself, and it was usually reserved for the elders and peak talents on the precipice of reaching hegemony or monarchy. To open it and expend its riches on the younger generations was unprecedented.

"Boje will strive to live up to the ancestor's expectations," Boje said, and he hesitated for a few seconds before he decided to give it a shot. The ancestor was even opening the Primal World for the young generations, and she didn't seem upset with him. If he could learn a thing or two from the ancestor... "With war coming, I am thinking of studying the art of poison. Is th-

"My heritage does not suit you," Zanda cut Boje off with a shake of her head, immediately dashing his hopes. "You have passable talents, but you do not have the heart to walk the Path of Poison. But you can consider walking the road of life instead of the road of death. I think it might suit you. Besides, you have formed a weak thread of Karma with the Little Deviant Asura, and this might be your road to strengthen it."

Boje was disappointed to be shot down, but not overly so. He knew his talents well, and he knew that the Matriarch hadn't

taken a disciple for over two hundred thousand years. It was a long shot to begin with. Still, the fact that the ancestor said he was suited to become a healer was a boon by itself. Those few words alone would open a few doors for him. It might even allow him to get access to one of their better heritages.

His mind was already churning as he went over the matriarch's words while making his way outside, but he was stopped just about as he was to exit through the gates.

“One more thing,” Zanda said from behind, making Boje stop in his tracks and look back inquiringly. “What do you think is best? Young flowers or mature aunties?”

“Ah?” Boje stuttered, his mind going blank from the unexpected question.

Zanda laughed as she waved her sleeve, and the familiar scene of the uncategorized insectoid meeting with the Zerathar representatives appeared. That encounter had become a legendary piece of gossip by now, known by essentially all peak factions of the sector.

“That scene where he held that Tsarun brat's head was somewhat dashing, and who would make a better Dao Partner to the next Eveningtide Asura than me? He is still a bit young and tender right now, but a few centuries steeped in bloodshed should do the trick. I only need to help him quash those deviant interests first.”

Chapter 677: Big Axe Coliseum

It took Zac another hour of walking before he finally spotted the Coliseum. In fact, he had seen it long ago, but he had assumed it was a mountain range judging by its size. He didn't immediately head over, but first looked at the building in awe. It was simply massive, far eclipsing the enormous containment building that held the Dimensional Seed.

It continued for tens of kilometers, a fortress of epic proportions. The majority of the structure was no doubt private sections meant for the inner members of the Coliseum and their families, though any stage meant to have Hegemons fighting would have to be pretty huge.

The main gates were not far from where Zac arrived, a hundred-meter-tall entrance with two massive axes forming an arch. Zac started walking toward it, but he soon stopped again as the world shifted. The desolate surroundings were suddenly replaced with a scene even more bustling than the Havenfort Town.

He realized that he was standing on a street over a hundred meters wide, and thousands of warriors were streaming back and forth toward the coliseum. Furthermore, Zac spotted more streets and entrances just like this one further away, making him realize that the traffic in this place was just insane. It wasn't surprising though.

The Bloodwind Planet was simply enormous, and tens of billions of people lived here even with the harsh environment. Furthermore, it was no doubt the most prosperous planet in its local cluster thanks to the Big Axe Coliseum and a few other notable factions, and the planet was definitely the main hub for all stellar lines traveling the local cluster.

Zac turned around curiously, but the only thing he saw was a blurry desert, though warriors kept appearing one by one. Some passed him by and walked into the main building, whereas others headed for a series of side-structures that emitted strong spatial fluctuations. Those were probably the local portals that took the members to various hunting grounds of the planet.

Part of Zac wanted to jump into one of the teleporters and start a slaughter of his own, but he ultimately held himself back. First of all, you needed to buy access or become a member of the coliseum before you could use the local teleporters. Secondly, he wasn't in a position where he could freely gain a bunch of levels.

There wasn't even any money to be made from heading out, not that he needed it. It had been a big shock to realize that a vast majority of all beast carcasses were mostly worthless. Zac had always equalized hunting beasts with big money after his grind-fests back on Earth, but you could easily buy an early D-grade carcass for 50 million F-grade nexus coins or so.

Only a few extremely rare beasts were worth any real money, for example beasts who had extremely pure bloodlines that made them far stronger than normal beasts of their grade. However, those kinds of beasts were as rare as valuable herbs, and fighting them was like fighting a peak genius cultivator.

It was no wonder the prices were so low though; the Multiverse definitely didn't lack high-grade beasts. There were reportedly millions and millions of D-grade beasts on this planet alone, all of them more powerful than normal because of the unique environment. Perhaps he'd test his mettle against the wilds of this world another time. But for now, he had a trial to take.

Zac entered the coliseum, and he saw that there were three paths to take, one for each purpose of visiting. The largest gate was for spectators who had come to witness the matches and perhaps do some betting, with the second biggest being for warriors who came to enter the ring. Fighting against other cultivators or ferocious beasts was a dangerous but effective way to cultivate.

There was never any lack of warriors willing to risk their lives for breakthroughs, especially when it could also mean wealth and fame.

The third corridor was for actual members of the Big Axe Coliseum, and that was where Zac headed. He was curious about the place, but he figured he could look around after he became an outer member. Zac only got fifty meters in before he was stopped by a guard though.

“Members only, buddy,” a gruff devil-humanoid with a bulky build said as he glanced at the lapel of Zac’s robes.

“I’ve come to apply,” Zac said.

“Oh? Outer or inner member?” the attendant asked.

“Outer,” Zac said and released some of his aura.

“High E-grade? Could be a good fight...” the man thoughtfully muttered and took out a token. “Here. The fee is 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. You’ll get the money back if you pass.”

“And if I fail?” Zac smiled as he transferred the money, surprised at how generous the Coliseum was compared to the two previous spots.

“Then you’re dead and we keep the money,” the man grinned. “Fourth door to the right. Don’t worry, the Heavens will arrange your enemies, it will be absolutely fair.”

Zac soon found himself in a resting room as he waited for the coliseum to set things up. If one fought in the Big Axe Coliseum the normal way, you’d have to expose some of your strength to get paired with the right level of opponents, but it was different for the Limited Trial. The System wouldn’t allow any cheating since it was handing out Limited Titles, so it teleported beasts into the arena from what Zac had heard.

The Big Axe Coliseum only needed to pay for the activation of the trial and transportation fees.

It was a win-win for the coliseum. If the contender won, they’d gain a new member. If he or she lost, they’d still make money on the down payment, tickets, betting, and perhaps

salvaging rare beast carcasses. The Trials were especially popular as the beasts teleported here were often ones they'd rarely see. Furthermore, the System essentially guaranteed a satisfying fight.

Normally, Zac would have a huge advantage in this type of trial thanks to his massive pool of Efficiency, but he had read that the System actually based the opponents on true strength in this particular trial since it wanted to test for skills with the axe. That wasn't a detriment in Zac's book through, but rather a boon. After all, it wasn't easy to find opponents matching your strength exactly.

However, Zac immediately found himself in a conundrum as he pressed his hand against a crystal hovering in the middle of the room. He needed to leave his Spatial Ring behind, along with any hidden weapons. He could only keep his robes and main weapon. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he eventually took out **[Verun's Bite]** instead of **[Rakan's Roar]**. Staying undercover was important, but completing the trial even more so.

His main axe looked pretty different from the time he visited the Tower of Eternity, and he didn't even have his more defining skills like **[Nature's Punishment]** or **[Chop]** any longer. It should be enough.

He also needed to choose a name or moniker. He didn't want to use his real name for obvious reasons, but neither was he comfortable giving himself a Dao Name like "The Life-Death Primarch" or "Arcadian Master". He eventually settled on Arcaz, a handle he had used in some online games back before the integration.

Zac thankfully didn't need to wait for long for his trial to start. The platform flashed to life after just an hour, and Zac found himself standing in the middle of a massive arena a moment later. The roars of tens of thousands of people made the atmosphere rife with bloodlust. Zac couldn't see any specific faces when he looked up at the stands though; it was all a bit of a haze.

He guessed the coliseum used some sort of array to obscure the features for some reason.

“Give a warm welcome to Arcaz, our latest trial taker. The Heavens tells us his power is at the peak of the E-grade, so we will hopefully have five exciting battles to look forward to!” a gruff voice echoed out across the arena, which was met by another wave of roars.

There was no time for Zac to ponder about the construction of the arena as hundreds of flashing lights illuminated his surroundings. He immediately realized his first fight was a horde battle, which suited his class perfectly. A moment later the enemy combatants had been teleported in, and Zac saw they were some sort of two-headed devil-rabbits with long rakish claws on their front legs.

“Oh! Our prospective member finds himself faced against 108 [**Twinruin Hoppers**]. Anyone who has spent some time in the Twinruin Gorge no doubt has some *fond* memories of these aggressive bastards! Hard Carapaces, nimble legs, and endless aggression. Will our trial-taker fall at the entrance test like a fool? Will he emerge victorious, and if so how quickly?! Place your bets!”

Zac wryly smiled at being used to make money this blatantly, but the commentator at least provided some clues. This was just the first trial of five though, and Zac didn't plan on forming some sort of special strategy. If he couldn't simply crush this trial, then he could forget about completing all five battles.

A storm of Cosmic Energy streamed into an intricate fractal on his hand, but no fractal edge formed after activating the skill that took the spot where [**Chop**] once was housed. Instead, a large swirl of emerald energies suddenly surrounded [**Verun's Bite**], and Zac unleashed a swing in the direction of the most concentrated clump of [**Twinruin Hoppers**].

It was like he unleashed a storm with his swing, but that storm quickly congealed into a dozen two-meter wide leaves that radiated not only an immense amount of life force, but also an overbearing sharpness. The leaves were long, thin, and slightly

curved like the blades of a scimitar, and they swirled around as they shot into the pack of beasts.

A few of the hoppers jumped forward with their sharp legs, both their heads trying to bite into the leaves and rip them apart. Others used the large claws on their front legs to swipe back at them with enough force to make the air scream.

But it was all futile.

Those who bit into the leaves were instantly killed as the upper halves of their heads were lobbed clean off, their bodies crashing down onto the arena floor with wet thuds. One storm of leaves after another shot out, and only a gorefest was left behind a moment later. The so-called hard carapaces couldn't survive a second against Zac's new E-grade skill, though he did empower the leaves with the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A small pang of danger warned him of an imminent attack from behind, but Zac wasn't worried in the slightest. His free hand shot out as he rapidly turned around, and he caught the last hopper by one of its throats. Zac instantly crushed its throat before he slammed down the stocky beast onto the ground.

The second head yowled in pain and rage, and it desperately clawed at Zac as it tried to get up. But the emerald swirl around **[Verun's Bite]** moved to the front of the axe edge and instantly congealed into a singular thin leaf that looked as real as a physical one. A moment later the whole hopper was sliced in two, its blood disappearing into a deep scar in the ground.

"Oh my god! Six seconds to clear the first wave! Haha! A big thank you to our friend Arcaz, you just made us a lot of money! But will he be able to clear the second trial? Let's find out!"

Zac sat down and took a breath as the hundred corpses were teleported away. He wasn't exhausted in the slightest, but he rather wanted to go over the result of his new skill **[Nature's Edge]**. He had already tested the skill back on Earth, but these **[Twinruin Hoppers]** were a lot stronger than the animal packs back home.

They had all been at upper-middle E-grade in power, yet they were cut apart without providing much resistance at all. This was exactly what Zac had wanted to see, and he was extremely relieved to see that his fusion of [**Chop**] and [**Nature's Barrier**] to have worked out just as he hoped.

Part of him had hesitated about fusing two of his “basic” skills, wasting the opportunity. For example, he had considered fusing [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] with [**Forester's Constitution**] to form an amazing domain skill, but he ultimately didn't feel that would bring much to the table. [**Loamwalker**] was a skill he was keen on bringing into the E-grade as well, but he decided that an E-Grade equivalent of [**Chop**] was of the highest priority.

It was the bread and butter of his class, the very foundation of his fighting style.

He did have [**Conformation of Supremacy**], but that was ultimately a skill that didn't really conform to his path, and it also worked better as a medium-power attack aimed at singular enemies or small packs. Meanwhile, [**Nature's Edge**] was a perfect fusion between Nature and Axe, using the form of [**Nature's Barrier**] and the function of [**Chop**].

Losing his only real defensive skill was a bit of a shame, but [**Nature's Barrier**] had long lost its ability to protect him. Besides, the reason he dared to complete this fusion was thanks to creating [**Arcadia's Judgement**]. It had freed up the Skill Slot where [**Deforestation**] formerly was, which allowed him to learn the defensive skill he had waiting for him in the Dao Repository.

Unfortunately, the battle had been too short to gain any new insight into his skill, but he saw that he would get more opportunities as new golden lights appeared around him.

“Oh? 36 [**Twinruin Rocklings**] this time? Will all the fights set our challenger against the beasts of the gorge? Would that mean we might have a chance to see a fight between a cultivator and a [**Twinruin Tyrant**] today? And perhaps the true terror of the Twinruin gorge?” the announcer mused,

which caused a huge ruckus to erupt. “Who knows? In either case, place your bets!”

The rocklings looked like mottled eight-legged boulders, and he felt they reminded him of those spiderling bots he fought in the Mystic Realm. These guys were a lot stubbier though, and Zac wondered if they were even mobile.

The ground suddenly started to shake as one sharp stalagmite after another sprung up with amazing power, which forced Zac to dance around in an ungraceful manner. Zac considered activating [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**] for a moment, but he eventually decided against it. He wanted to take this opportunity to get acquainted with his new skill. Besides, he didn’t want to show too many of his cards in a public setting like this in case someone figured out his identity.

Zac once more activated [**Nature’s Edge**] and a cascade of leaves shot out toward the slow-moving targets. However, Zac frowned when the attacks only resulted in shallow scars appearing across the bodies of the golemoid beasts. They had clearly activated some sort of bloodline talent that boosted their defenses tremendously, and the skill by itself simply wasn’t strong enough to get through.

Another gust of leaves shot out a moment later, but this time the leaves almost looked like they were made of metal as they had gained a slight silvery sheen. Zac looked on with interest as the leaves cut into the rocklings with their incredible sharpness, and the ground rumbled as the beast collapsed one by one.

Only three of the rocklings managed to survive the onslaught, but Zac flashed forward with [**Loamwalker**] and cut them to pieces in short order. One of them forcibly exploded upon its death, turning itself into a shrapnel bomb, but Zac had plenty of kill energy to use [**Surging Vitality**] with, and the shallow wounds started wriggling as they rapidly healed up.

He hadn’t had much use for his healing skill over the past years, but it had still moved to Late Mastery thanks to his increased understanding of skills in general. The upgrade

mostly improved the skill's ability to heal tougher wounds, such as injuries caused by Dao-empowered attacks.

Of course, the healing capabilities of such wounds were still pretty limited and cost a huge amount of energy, but it was still pretty impressive for a skill that someone like Brazla had managed to get his hands on.

“Two rounds down, and we haven't been able to see the depths of our challenger's prowess!” the announcer exclaimed. “But the Heavens never gives out anything for free, especially not Titles! Let's see what it has planned for our friend Arcaz next!”

Chapter 678: Tyrant

Zac didn't mind the announcer's tone since he understood that the man was just playing things up to elicit more bets. He was more interested in the results of the last battles. The effect of his two Dao Fragments on his new skill was pretty interesting. The Fragment of the Bodhi increased the number of leaves, and Zac felt that they also contained more energy, which would make them harder to destroy.

Meanwhile, adding the Fragment of the Axe actually decreased the number of leaves compared to no Dao-infusion at all, but it did instead drastically increase the lethality of the individual leaves. That left the Fragment of the Coffin, but Zac wasn't too certain he would be able to infuse that skill with his third Dao Fragment.

Besides, Zac wanted to avoid using that Dao in his human form if possible. It was something Zac had decided upon over the past years as he had arduously worked on incorporating his Path into the way he fought. He initially tried to incorporate everything he had envisioned, the trinity of life, death, and conflict, but it quickly became apparent that it was simply too huge a task.

So Zac came up with a plan. His first step would be to better mix Bodhi and Axe, Life and War, in his human form, while focusing on Coffin and Axe in his undead form. It was based on the creation of his Bronze- and pink flashes, or rather his Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark. One half of him would delve into the depths of life through conflict, while the other into death and conflict.

That was why he had focused on only creating skills that followed these fusions. Both **[Nature's Edge]** and **[Arcadia's Judgement]** followed this rule, as did his two new skills for his Fetters of Desolation-class.

The second step would then be trying to somehow fuse these two battle styles into one coherent system that could fit across both his classes, using his Dao of the Axe as the bridge. It would be the equivalent of creating the Chaos pattern in the Tower of Eternity. Of course, that was a long road ahead, and it might not even turn out as he envisioned right now.

The first step was simply shoring up his understanding and his foundations, but he still hadn't reached the point of how Adcarkas somehow merged with his Dao. Zac had made some inroads, but cultivation was an endless path of self-discovery. Three years simply wasn't enough, at least not when cultivating in absolute safety as he had.

Zac was soon dragged out of his thoughts as a golden light appeared in front of him. This time there were just five beasts. They looked like huge creepy alien kangaroos with two sturdy legs keeping them upright and one ten-meter-long tail. They had no sharp claws though, and neither did they have any large fangs.

It made Zac a bit leery, as it made them seem like magical beasts, which often meant they were more powerful than common beasts.

“Oh! [**Twinruin Battlecaller**] quintuplets! These mentally linked beasts are quite a handful, and the larger the pack the greater the danger. Meeting quintuplets is both a blessing and a curse! A blessing because you've got to see a rare marvel of nature, a curse because it means you'll probably die! A real terror of a challenge this time, and the last hurdle for membership! Place your bets!”

There were still three battles to be had, but that was just for the best version of the title. Zac could bow out after this fight and still become an outer member of the Big Axe Coliseum. Keep going, and you might get a better title along with a reputation. Fail, and you'd die since the battles were to the death. Zac was obviously aiming for a perfect run since he still hadn't been pushed very hard.

He also tried to understand what kind of beast a Battlecaller was, but neither their appearance nor the announcer's

description made it very clear. Then again, Zac guessed that it didn't really matter, and he immediately shot forward. He wanted to end this quickly, so a splendid halo appeared behind his back. A simple yet powerful axe hovered in its center, and **[Verun's Bite]** was imbued with a huge force.

“Oh my god! Our contestant has borrowed the image of the Heavenfall Autarch's cleaver! Is this a testament to his ambition? To follow in the path of the father of axes?” the announcer screamed, his voice an octave shriller compared to before.

Zac only snorted. He had already learned that the axe-man in his vision was a real person; the Heavenfall Autarch. He wasn't from the Zecia sector, and he died tens of millions of years ago. Yet he still held fame all across the multiverse thanks to one of his fights being used to impart the Dao. That was something quite a few aimed for.

After all, true immortality was just a myth from what Zac had gathered, but being accepted by the System was a way to live on forever in the hearts of cultivators. There were even rumors of some sort of rewards to the descendants of Dao Teachers like the Heavenfall Autarch, as though the System were paying them licensing fees.

The distance between himself and the beasts was quickly shrinking, but the air suddenly started to vibrate before Zac found himself on a massive battlefield, frenzied cultists all around him. The fury of battle coursed through his veins, and his heart beat in sync with the drums of war. The war against the Church of Everlasting Dao had reached a fever pitch, but Zac only snorted as he flashed forward and swung at empty air.

It turned out the battlecallers were illusionists. They used the unusual attunement of the planet itself to deliver insidious and almost unnoticeable mental attacks. But how could Zac completely fall into confusion after evolving his soul? He still couldn't completely block out the illusion even with his defenses, but he could still somewhat discern the truth like a superimposed reality.

The empty air was actually the closest battlecaller, whose sharp tail was already piercing toward Zac's heart. Zac had sidestepped the attack and flashed forward with the help of his movement skill, and he was aiming to destroy the heart of the beast in return. However, found his axe impeded by a powerful barrier that didn't even crack when attacked by **[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

That was saying something, considering that he had already reached Middle Mastery for the skill, which had kicked its offensive power up a notch. Add to that the increased power of his axe, and the barrier had to be something else to not even crack.

“Oh! What powerful mental defenses! The contestant can even withstand a five-layered mental attack!” the announcer screamed, though his voice sounded muted and far in the distance. “But will it be enough?! The Battlecallers are not dreaded just for their mental attacks!”

Zac soon found that the announcer wasn't speaking out of turn as the five battlecallers encircled him. They were an extremely tricky enemy. They combined powerful illusions, sturdy arrays, and powerful tails into a full combat system. Furthermore, their cooperation was so perfect that Zac suspected they were rather one entity than just mentally linked.

Another wave of dizziness hit him, but it was like his mind held multiple layers. Only the surface layer of his mind was steeped in the madness of the battlecaller's abilities, whereas the core of his soul maintained perfect clarity. **[Verun's Bite]** cut through the air in a ruthless arc, aiming straight at an incoming tail.

Their bodies might be guarded by a fierce shield, but would they really be able to maintain such strong defenses around their long tails? The battlecaller desperately retracted its tail by pivoting with almost impossible speed, but it still got a deep gash as Zac's swing left a huge scar in the arena.

A pang of danger cut through the illusions assailing Zac's mind as a second, then a third tail shot forward, taking

advantage of the extremely minute opening. Zac was barely able to dodge the second stab by pivoting his torso, but he simply wasn't quick enough to avoid the third one. A huge force slammed into his back, and Zac was lunged forward as the wind was knocked out of his lungs.

Only a shallow wound was left on his back even if the stab contained enough power to easily pierce through his body. It was all thanks to his new skill, **[Innate Ward]**. Just like the other skills from Brazla's depository, it was a simple skill but with a strong direct effect. It formed a second layer of protection right beneath the skin, its power based on one's Endurance.

It was simple and unadorned, but that also meant that the skill fractal fit with most classes. It was the same with Zac, who had no problem using the skill to over 85% of its full potential even when his human side was a Strength-Vitality class.

Another wave of illusion hit him as he righted his body, but Zac didn't even try to push it away as he resumed his battle. In fact, he welcomed the illusion. Between his evolved soul, the unique attunement in the atmosphere, and the illusion, he felt himself making tremendous progress on his efforts to integrate War into his combat style.

This battle alone was more effective than months of secluded cultivation, and Zac felt his technique subtly change. The swings became more forceful, more intractable. It was like his axe was a unit of seasoned warriors, piercing into enemy ranks. They always found a weakness in the enemies' lines, mistakes ripe for exploitation. When it appeared, the soldiers struck without remorse, as there was no mercy in war.

Zac rushed toward the closest battlecaller, barely avoiding two piercing tails as **[Verun's Bite]** keened with battle lust. Zac leaped forward but suddenly disappeared as he activated **[Loamwalker]** mid-air to appear in front of another of his foes. The axe ripped through the air in an upward trajectory that seemed to change every second. The teeth on its axehead caused whistling sounds to spread through the arena, but for some reason, it sounded like the trumpets of heralding a charge.

[Conformation of Supremacy] empowered the swing to a new height, fully taking advantage of Zac's massive reserves of Strength as he slammed into the defensive barrier of the battlecaller. The first swing wasn't enough, but the second swing immediately followed the first, and it was enough to finally crack the shield. The axe bit into flesh and blood rained down on him, but that only spurred Zac on even further as he completely bisected the large beast with a third and final swing.

The four remaining Battlecallers screeched in pain, but Zac moved on them like a tide of cavalry, seizing the victorious momentum to win the war. It was clear the beasts were mutually empowering each other, and with the first one down there was an obvious weakness in their War Array. The second beast fell to just one swing even after the four desperately tried to gore Zac to death.

His movement was turning more and more inscrutable as one beast after another fell as his path and **[Loamwalker]** slowly fused as well. Zac felt himself on the precipice of something, but he suddenly found himself without opponents to test it on. The quintuplets were lying in ten large pieces around him, the blood staining the arena.

The heat of battle quickly died down, and Zac quickly lost the feeling. He swore in annoyance, but he knew it wasn't the end of the world. He was right at the threshold, and it wouldn't take him long to take that final step.

Zac sat down and closed his eyes to go over the battle in his mind. He heard that the announcer was shouting something, but he was more focused on his inward journey.

It wasn't like he suddenly gained a boost in attributes out of nowhere, but it was rather that his will, his Dao, and his body moved as one. It probably wasn't an exaggeration to say that he might only use 60 to 70% of his attributes normally, with the rest of it wasted on inefficiencies and inability to draw on his full potential.

But finding a combat style that resonated with the truths of the Heavens would remove some of these inefficiencies, which

was a pure power-up with no demerits.

A massive roar suddenly echoed through the arena, and Zac frowned as he opened his eyes. There was, unfortunately, no time for him to absorb the lessons of the last battle, because the next enemy had already appeared. This time, the target was a hulking beast reaching over eight meters in the air. It looked like a mix of a bull and a tiger, with two gristly horns that radiated terrifying sharpness. The air itself crackled at their tips, and that was only one of its weapons.

The beast almost seemed to be bred for war, with a thick hide that almost looked like plating covering its body. It didn't even have any eyes, nose, or ears, removing those weaknesses from its head. Instead, it was just one massive jaw filled with three rows of sharp teeth. Its legs ended in sharp claws rather than hoofs, and even its tail ripped through the air with enough speed to cause small sonic booms.

“It's really a [**Twinruin Tyrant**]! Generally considered one of the nastiest critters below the D-grade, these hulking beasts are tools bred for carnage. Powerful defenses! Deadly claws! Powerful bloodline talents! These bastards have it all. Is this the end of the line? Is our friend Arcaz getting too greedy by staying behind? Place your bets!”

The beast roared with bloodlust, but another roar of similar intensity echoed out in Zac's mind. It was actually Verun who seemed extremely keen at battling the massive beast. Zac gave it a thought, and he felt why not? Verun had been stuck in his axe for three years, and sending it out shouldn't really be a problem.

The primal dragon-hyena appeared next to Zac the next moment, its legs shaking from restrained battle lust as swirls of blood danced around its paws.

“What! Such a corporeal Tool Spirit! Amazing! The resources that have gone into this axe are nothing to scoff at!” the Announcer exclaimed, but he paused when some people started boo on the stands. “Are you angry? Think this is cheating? Too bad! The Tool Spirit of an axe is naturally part of an axe warrior's strength. No refunds for bets!”

Zac smiled a bit as he turned to Verun, which growled as it kept the tyrant in its sights.

“Have fun,” Zac only said and sat down and instead focused on his insights

“What confidence, daring to ignore the presence of a tyrant! I think we’re in for a treat!” the announcer hollered, and the hecklers were soon drowned out by cheers.

Verun roared with bloodlust as he shot forward, shooting straight toward the **[Twinruin Tyrant]** with mad abandon. The tyrant tried to bite down on Verun’s throat with its oversized jaw, but the dragon hyena was extremely nimble, effortlessly dodging the bite while returning a ruthless swipe in return.

Three deep gashes appeared on the tyrant’s throat, and three streams of blood were extracted, each of them floating toward a gleeful Verun. Seeing a Tool Spirit feeding on its blood made the boar delirious with rage, and its muscles rippled as it started emitting a fearful aura.

Zac was initially barely paying attention as he was fully focused on his experiences from the battle before, but he was soon mesmerized by the carnage a few hundred meters away. Claws, bites, tackles, swipes. Feints and full-on aggression. Blood, dust, roars. The two beasts fought with everything they had in a primal war of supremacy.

Wounds accumulated on the Tyrant’s body as the energy radiated from Verun steadily weakened. Yet neither backed down. In fact, the fervor of the battle only increased in intensity. Four sanguine rivers swirled around Verun, each of them rife with cutting intent. Meanwhile, black crackling lightning appeared on the horns of the Tyrant, and it soon covered the whole beast’s body.

Their energies surged.

The rivers were like cutting edges of an axe, and any time they drew blood they were empowered in an endless cycle of carnage. Meanwhile, the crackling bolts caused Verun to take damage every time they clashed, and any errant bolt was

powerful enough to cause huge scars across the arena. Even Zac was forced to move even further away unless he wanted to eat those attacks head-on.

Finally, the Tyrant slipped up due to blood loss and exhaustion, and Verun seized the opportunity. It bit down on the tyrant's muscular throat, and with a tremendous tug it ripped out half the bull's neck to bathe itself in a cascade of blood. The Tyrant took a shaky step as it tried to gore Verun with its horns in one final act of defiance, but it fell on the ground with a thump.

Hundreds of liters of blood were dragged out from the bull's body, and it joined blood on the ground as it turned into a storm around Verun. The Tool Spirit raised its head toward the sky, and unleashed a roar with such force that the air trembled. It was full of bloodlust, pride, and victory.

Chapter 679: Terror of the Twinruins

The whole stadium was silent for a few seconds before it erupted in raucous cheers.

Zac gazed at his Tool Spirit with rapt attention until the bloodstorm swallowed Verun whole. It was back in his axe a moment later, the first fractal on his handle dimmed down.

“Amazing! What a Tool Spirit! Even I am getting a bit tempted to get my hands on a beastcrafted axe. Who would have any regrets when walking into battle with a companion like that?!” the announcer screamed. “Of course, we know that any such tricks won’t work for the final round.”

Zac snorted, but he knew that what the announcer said was true, and he cracked his neck as he readied himself. This final stage was why the rewards for the Trial were so good, why it could provide both flat and increased attributes. Until now, the battles could only be considered a warmup. After all, the final battle had special rules, rules enforced by the System.

No consumable items, no skills.

Just your body, your weapon, and your Dao. It was a real test of one’s fighting capabilities, where external things were blocked. Every cultivator in the world could get skills for free from the System, but that didn’t make you a warrior. Talent and comprehension were both needed to become a true gladiator of the Big Axe Coliseum.

To get anywhere on the road of cultivation, really.

The minutes passed as Zac prepared himself. This would definitely be his hardest challenge so far. He didn’t fear death since the remnants were just like his Specialty Core, considered a part of his body. But he wasn’t sure that his

actual skills were up to snuff. He had cultivated for less than five years, and his general fighting style had been to rely on his superior attribute pool.

He had chosen this test as a challenge for himself, an opportunity to hone his path and hopefully make a breakthrough in the heat of battle. A golden shimmer finally appeared in the arena, and Zac frowned when he saw a humanoid standing in front of him. The final challenger was actually a cultivator?

“It happened! The Heavens really brought out a [**Twinruin Bloodstalker**] from the depths! We only get to see these terrifying beasts when they leave their nests for their baptism of blood. This one is an adolescent, just shy of having formed its core! These beasts are the perfect killing machines, and even Monarchs would think twice before entering their nests!” the Announcer shouted, and the excitement in his voice didn’t seem feigned. “This is what we have been waiting for! The deathmatch of the year!”

Zac listened to the announcer with rapt attention. It was actually a beast? Humanoid beasts were extremely rare. They normally moved away from the heritage of the Beast Progenitor to instead become integrated as cultivators over the eons. In fact, the last humanoid beasts he had encountered were the imps back during the Demon Incursion.

Humanoid beasts often had superior affinities to most normal beasts since their bodies were made for cultivation. It was often a bestial bloodthirst that overpowered any burgeoning sapience that kept them as beasts though. From what Zac understood it was almost impossible for them to reach Atavism, the process where high-grade beasts could keep their bestial path but also take humanoid form and embark on the path of cultivation.

But the few who did manage to transform were all terrifying powerhouses that small sectors like Zecia couldn’t contain.

The [**Twinruin Bloodstalker**] was roughly the same height as Zac, and it looked a lot like a beastkin with fur covering its whole body. Its proportions were pretty similar to a lanky

human's, except slightly longer arms and a sturdy tail that was reptilian rather than simian in shape. Its hands were larger than normal too, and it had long sharp claws whose sharpness Zac could feel even from a distance.

Its feet reminded Zac of the Torrid Demon's though its claws were longer and more distinct. Its face was the only part without any fur, and it looked pretty terrifying. Its skin was pitch-black like its fur, except two red orbs for eyes that screamed of malice. It had no nose, but a wide mouth full of sharp teeth.

The beast looked in Zac's direction and immediately released a roar as its aura started climbing. It was extremely condensed, and its killing intent even put Zac's own to shame, especially now that it had been weakened after three years of inactivity.

But that didn't mean Zac wasn't up to the challenge, and he rushed forward with his axe at the ready. The ground cracked beneath the bloodstalker's feet as its thin form turned into a blur, and it was upon Zac before he knew what happened.

Danger screamed as four sharp claws ripped through the air, aiming straight at Zac's throat. Zac narrowly dodged as he countered with a quick and furious swing with his axe, but he didn't even get the chance to land the hit before a thick tail slammed into his thigh with enough force to make him lose his balance. The bloodstalker used the counterforce of the collision to reverse its spinning momentum, and another swipe aimed for Zac's eyes just as he managed to stabilize his form.

Zac growled as he intercepted the swipe with his free hand. A burning pain erupted in his arm as two deep lacerations appeared, but he ignored the hurt as he thrust forward, aiming to push the beast off its balance to land a killing blow.

However, the beast's tail actually slammed into the ground and acted like a pillar that kept the beast upright.

A high knee appeared out of nowhere before Zac had a chance to react, and Zac realized that it actually used its tail as only support while spinning mid-air. The beast tried to keep him in place with a vise-like grip, but Zac forcibly lifted his right arm

with a roar. A painful attack slammed into his shoulder, where his head had been half a second ago.

It hurt like hell, but Zac knew he had finally found an opportunity as the beast was mid-air while he was primed to attack.

A murderous edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe cut down, aiming to disembowel the beast in one quick go. The beast screeched and a dangerous aura started to leak from its body. It was definitely some sort of murder-related Dao at a level that matched Zac's own, but Zac wouldn't stop from something like that.

Axe met flesh and the ground shook an instant later as the bloodstalker was slammed into the ground.

Normally that would be the end of the battle, but Zac frowned when he saw that the beast was pretty much fine. It had managed to block Zac's swing with its forearm and almost looked like it bounced off from the ground as it backed away a few steps. It looked like a thick metallic bone hid right beneath its furred skin, and it had to be extremely durable to block out Zac's attack like that.

The beast's hand shook a bit from the impact, but it mostly seemed infuriated rather than hurt from the counter. Zac sighed, but he had known that the final challenge wouldn't be so easily overcome. He knew he'd be able to end everything with an Annihilation-sphere, but that wasn't why he was here. This was a real challenge where he would be pushed to the limits.

The wound hadn't weakened the bloodstalker at all. It rather looked like it possessed some sort of inherent berserking bloodline where the wound had turned its killing intent and aura even more congealed. It shot forward, its claws aiming to rip Zac's midsection open and Zac answered with a cruel strike of with his own.

Just activating his Dao was not enough against this target. Zac did not only continuously activate Fragment of the Bodhi to allow his body to endure the extremely forceful strikes, but every single swing was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe.

But the beast was just too nimble. It almost felt like it reacted before Zac's attacks even begun, like they were following some sort of choreographed dance without Zac knowing.

Zac fought with everything he had, and his aura slowly transformed as he followed his instincts to incorporate his Dao Insights into his combat style once more. However, even as he desperately fought for his life his mind kept turning back to the brutal melee between Verun and the **[Twinruin Tyrant]**. That battle between two apex predators wouldn't have been out of place out in the forests of the Bloodwind Planet, or anywhere else in the desolate wilderness.

Wasn't nature ultimately the source of the most ruthless wars of all?

Endless living creatures fought not only with each other for survival, but also against the elements themselves. Any weakness would be destroyed and discarded, replaced by something new. As the seasons passed those suited for survival would thrive, while everything full of imperfections would be left by the wayside.

This was the fusion he was looking for, the fusion between nature and war.

Zac moved as though he was possessed as one inspiration after another washed over him, and he found that his fighting style slowly transform. His swings had previously contained the desperate echoes of a war between armies, but now it started to become reminiscent of another battle. The battle of the seasons, of evolution, of survival in the wild.

Weaknesses and imperfections were slowly cut away, replaced by swings and strikes that better took advantage of his attribute pool. The dinosaurs might have been the largest and most powerful beasts that walked Earth before the integration, but they definitely weren't the most perfect. They had all fallen while other animals flourished.

It was the same with his brutish fighting style. His wide swings full of killing intent might contain a world-ending force, but what good were they when they couldn't even strike the bloodstalker? His attacks got more and more in tune with

his envisioned path. Imperfections were discarded without a second thought as Zac kept trying new approaches.

Sometimes it worked and the bloodstalker received a new wound, other times it failed and Zac was wounded instead. His fighting style was like the everchanging seasons, but with every revolution, the overall number of weaknesses shrunk, and his attacks started to change as well.

His swings got quicker, more ruthless. If there were no openings to vital organs, then he'd attack something else. Anything that could push the fight in his favor. There was no such thing as honor in the wild, and neither was there any in the way Zac fought. This wasn't a boxing match, this was life and death.

His path was gradually fusing with his body, and the bloodstalker started to lose ground. All the small improvements stacked on top of each other until disadvantage was transformed into a small advantage for Zac. The bloodstalker was desperately fighting back, the large number of shallow wounds doing nothing to slow it down.

But while it had amazing instincts and attributes that were a match to Zac, it didn't show any indication of making any improvements throughout the battle.

Blood and tufts of fur soon covered the ground as the wounds accumulated across the beast's body. The same was true for Zac, but he was willing to take a few hits if he could deliver in kind. He had always been ruthless to himself, and this wasn't any different.

The bloodstalker suddenly twisted as it once more tried to lash Zac with a tail full of momentum. But Zac moved as though by instinct, narrowly ducking while stomping down at the foot that the beast used to pivot. His leg was infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi, and it was like a huge tree slammed down on the bloodstalker's ankle. A loud crack was quickly followed by a huge bang as cracks spread on the ground.

The beast's foot was broken, and the pain seemed to have cut through the bloodlust as it shuddered in agony. There was no mercy in the wild, and Zac immediately pounced. His whole

being felt aligned with his path, and [Verun's Bite] started radiating a supreme might of the untamed wilds as it ripped through the air. The bloodstalker sensed the danger and tried to dodge while countering with a kick, but the axe was upon it before it had a chance to move out of the way.

Bone was split and dark blood flowed like a fountain as protective bone and arm were cleanly cut off, and the gleaming axehead continued into the torso of the beast. The whole arena echoed with the deep thud, and a massive explosion erupted as a twenty-meter deep scar cut into the ground behind the bloodstalker.

The beast fell onto the ground, completely unmoving.

A storm of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac stood unmoving as he imprinted his current feeling into his body. Mind, body, Dao. It had all converged into a singular entity, and two streams had been braided into a strike of unmatched might. It was the first time he had managed to infuse an attack with his reverse Dao-braid. He had succeeded in forming the twinned energy before while practicing, but never quickly enough for it to be usable in battle.

But now it had all crystallized somehow, though Zac honestly wasn't sure whether he'd be able to replicate the deed unless he was pushed like he was in this fight. In either case, he had confirmed that his theories were correct and that this was a viable way to cultivate. His braid was as crude as they came, but it did work.

It might display less than half of the boost compared to the intricate braids Kenzie managed to create with her own Dao Fragments, but Zac was just on his first Reincarnation. He would probably be able to create proper braids by the time he evolved his soul the next time, and even Dao Arrays wasn't an impossible goal.

He heard roars from the arena, and the announcer kept harping on something, but Zac was occupied by the experiences of the battle. He had long managed to incorporate some of the insights from the Fragment of the Axe into his fighting style,

but this was the first time he was touching upon a true fusion of concepts.

It was still rudimentary, and he felt that his Axe-insights still stood for over 90% of his actions, but it was definitely a move in the right direction. He had set the foundations, now he just needed to polish his techniques through battle.

He stood completely transfixed, and he only opened his eyes after feeling his body being teleported. He had been sent back to the same waiting room as before. His items were waiting right next to him, and he picked them up before leaving. Outside the room, another devilish axe cultivator waited, and Zac felt he should either be an early hegemon or a strong peak E-grade cultivator.

“Congratulations,” the three-meter tall devilkin said with an appreciative nod. “I saw your battles, you’re a tough one. Your early fight was kind of shitty, but you were impressive by the end. Are you self-taught?”

“Uh, thanks I guess,” Zac wryly smiled. “Yeah, I just kept swinging until I got to this point. I am trying to refine my technique.”

“Haha! A lot of us are wandering cultivators like yourself. But you know what? Those prudes over at the sword palace look down their noses at us, but we still win over 60% of the battles in the coliseum,” the man guffawed. “Technique isn’t everything.”

Zac nodded with a grin, agreeing to a certain degree. He had gotten quite far with just grit and pure force, though he knew that he had to refine his battle style if he wanted to reach further heights.

The Sword Palace the devil mentioned was another of the factions on the Bloodwind Planet. He didn’t know a lot about them, except that this world was just one of their training grounds. Those in their sect who favored flying swords often came here to temper their mental strength.

“Here, your token,” the devil said and threw over a bronze token and an information crystal. “We have five levels of

membership. Outer members can reach the third level at most, with the final two levels reserved for inner members. You completed the whole trial, so you can reach the second level as soon as you pass a trial period and generate enough contribution.”

“How is that different from others?” Zac asked with confusion.

“There are various ways to gain contribution. You can essentially buy the points if you have access to enough sought-after treasures and materials,” the devil shrugged. “Normal outer members will also have to complete actual tasks for the Coliseum to elevate their status. You can just buy your way there. You’re a true gladiator, you’ve already proven yourself.”

“What’s the difference between the levels?” Zac asked.

“The second level gives access to better things to trade for, like some decent information heritages. Third level members can even have the elders give one-on-one pointers once every century, along with an even better selection of items to buy,” the gruff attendant explained.

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded.

“Oh, I guess you impressed some big shot in the Coliseum with your fight against the bloodstalker. You have been given two weeks with Big Boss’s Big Wall.”

Chapter 680: Big Boss's Big Wall

“The Big Boss what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The founder once tried to forge a huge axe, but he failed spectacularly and even blew up his forge along with most materials. He got so angry that he went on a rampage and hacked away at the core metal he was planning on using,” the devil snickered.

“Ah?” Zac said with a confused smile, his image of powerful Monarchs somewhat ruined.

“Well, the material was no longer suitable for crafting after that, but it was a unique C-grade metal sheet after all. It stored some of the Founder's Dao insights. Looking at the scars he left behind can give some inspiration into the Dao,” the devil said. “I finally managed to form my Branch of the Axe after studying it for three months. Crazy expensive, but worth it.”

Zac's eyes lit up in excitement. He hadn't made much headway on improving his Dao over the past years, and this might be an opportunity to find some direction. Besides, he didn't need to worry about accidentally breaking through to Peak Mastery for his Fragment of the Axe and losing a bunch of attribute points. With his odd constitution, he also needed to consume some Dao Treasure to power his breakthrough.

“Where do I go?” Zac asked.

“I'll take you,” the devil shrugged as he led the way.

The two chatted a bit on the way, and Zac realized that the devil attendant, whose name was unpronounceable but went by Woz, was a Half-Step D-grade wandering cultivator who still hadn't given up on breaking through. It was actually

possible to take that step even with a defective core, but it was far more difficult than forming a core normally.

You needed to completely disintegrate your defective core and immediately form a new one. Fail, and you'd blow up from the rampant energies. Very few people had the guts to make that attempt. After all, if they really had the ambition to become a true Hegemon they normally wouldn't form the Half-Step Core in the first place. Zac guessed that Woz had encountered some sort of opportunity soon after becoming a Half-Step cultivator, which made him change his mind and give it a go.

Woz was currently trying to accumulate experience and inspiration, and he had become an inner member of the Coliseum to get access to restricted resources. It meant he was giving up most of his freedom, but the Big Axe Coliseum restrained inner members a lot less compared to most clans and sects.

In his case, his employment would last a thousand years, but it would get renegotiated if he managed to break through. Managing to form a Dao Branch was a huge improvement for him, but he still didn't feel confident since he had already failed to form his core once.

The raucous atmosphere of the arenas was soon replaced by a solemn silence, but the combative attunement in the air just kept getting more condensed until they reached a huge courtyard. A few Hegemon guards were standing by, but they had obviously been informed of Zac's arrival as they let him and Woz through without a word.

There was not much happening in the courtyard. There were just roughly fifty cultivators and a massive slab of scarred metal.

“What kind of axe was the founder trying to make?” Zac exclaimed as he looked at the enormous sheet.

It was over a hundred meters tall and three times as wide. It was like Zac was looking at a city wall rather than a block of metal meant to be turned into a weapon.

“The Big Boss had a berserker state where he grew to three hundred meters,” the devil said. “The axe needed to match that size in its original form, and then it could simply be shrunk to match his normal size. It would be cheaper to make an axe based on his original size, but then the weapon would become a lot weaker when he grew.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. It was true, he had noticed a similar issue in his undead form when his axe grew into a 3-meter bardiche. However, the difference there wasn't too big compared to its original form, and it wasn't causing a problem. But Billy probably lost some of his lethality with his huge club, though **[Bonker's]** true size might be larger than Zac realized.

“So how does this work?” Zac asked as he looked at the fifty-odd cultivators sitting in meditation.

“Those guys can't hear us. The mats they are sitting on have isolation arrays,” Woz said. “You can walk freely back and forth until you find a scar that resonates with your Dao. Then simply take a seat on a free mat and see what you can gain. Someone will wake you up when your time is up. Oh, don't bother anyone who is sitting in meditation, and don't walk forward from the mat.”

“I understand,” Zac nodded and stepped inside.

He didn't know what made some big-shot donate two weeks in front of this wall, but he wouldn't say no to this opportunity. Part of him screamed that this was all a conspiracy, but he forcibly stilled those thoughts. The Multiverse was ruthless, but not everything was a plot and not everyone was out to destroy him.

Passing all five trials in the first go wasn't that common, and it was possible that some elder simply wanted to give Zac a good impression of the faction. Perhaps it was that Ogre from before who had taken a liking to him, and Zac guessed that he could easily fork out the cost for two weeks if Woz had been able to study the scars for three full months.

Zac didn't want to waste a minute of his allotted time, and he quickly walked over to the walkway behind the prayer mats. It

was odd, some of the cultivators in front of him were warriors over ten meters tall, but Zac could still see the wall in its entirety as long as he stood on that road.

He slowly walked back and forth, and his eyes lit up as he looked at the wall. It had just looked like a broken mess from where he and Woz stood before, but now it felt like all the scars contained some clues to the Dao of the Axe. A few scars gave Zac an impression of furious momentum powerful enough to split the world in two, others an undeniable bloodlust that made his eyes water in pain.

Other tears seemed to be filled with the fundamental aspects of the Axe. There were Heaviness and Sharpness, the two Daos that he had fused to create the Fragment of the Axe. But there were also a few others. There were a few with hardness, one that Zac felt was related to steel. There were a few that made Zac think of the bloody swirls around Verun's legs.

All in all, there were over fifty concepts that made up the Big Boss's understanding of the Dao from what Zac could tell. Some resonated with him, and others didn't. Finally, Zac settled on one particular set of scars. It was two seemingly simple marks that formed an 'X' on the metal sheet. They weren't as deep as some marks, and not as large as others.

But they gave Zac a mysterious feeling, and he felt like he was looking at two clashing armies when he looked at the scars. Luckily, there was no one sitting in front of that particular section of the wall, and Zac immediately sat down on the closest prayer mat.

The moment he sat down a wave of tranquility spread through his body, no doubt the effect of the prayer mat. Zac's mind was crystal clear, but at the same time suffused by the pervasive battle lust in the air. That was just what Zac wanted, and he let the killing intent permeate his whole being as he gazed at the axe scars.

The rest of the universe soon disappeared, and there were only the crossed lines on the metal sheet, or rather the two opposing armies locked in an endless conflict. It felt like the air around him was drenched in the Dao of the Axe, like he was sitting in

a purified version of the Dao Chamber Kenzie had constructed for the Dao Funnel.

He soon took out [**Verun's Bite**], but he simply held it in his hands for most of the time. Sometimes he slowly swung it in various directions as though he wanted to confirm something, but most of the time he was lost in thought. New impressions replaced the previous in an endless cycle, like an everchanging battlefield in his mind. He had long lost any concept of time, only stopping occasionally to take a fasting pill and go over the insights.

“Brat, it’s time,” a powerful suddenly voice resonated in his mind, startling Zac awake.

Two weeks had passed that quickly?

Zac didn’t tarry, and he quickly got up on his feet after taking one last look at the two scars. He hadn’t broken through, but Zac was certain that he was right at the precipice of pushing his Fragment of the Axe to peak mastery. He just needed to incorporate what he had gained over the past two weeks into his own understanding, and then eat some treasure that could be used as fuel for the breakthrough.

He didn’t plan on staying in the Bloodwind World much longer, but he was pretty curious about the information heritages Woz mentioned. Besides, if trouble would come to find him in this place, it should have done so a long time ago, like when he was in the middle of his epiphany. So Zac made his way into the private areas only for Coliseum members, and he was soon surrounded by a sea of meatheads.

Humans were by no means rare, but they definitely didn’t belong to a majority in this place. If the Base Town had been a perfect cross-section of the Zecia Sector races, then this place clearly gravitated toward Devilkin, Ogres, Orcs, and certain beastkin. Part of the reason definitely was that these races leaned toward brutal weapons like axes, clubs, and various two-handed weapons.

But another reason was that the Bloodwind Planet was placed in what was called the Tribal Constellation where these races were more common. It wasn’t a force, but rather hundreds of

forces spread out across an area even larger than the big empires. It was a pretty chaotic part of Zecia, but there were a few powerful C-grade tribes that kept things somewhat in order and helped gather the forces in case of outsider pressure.

“Newcomer! I saw your fight! Big balls!” a clearly drunk minotaur Hegemon suddenly roared from his seat on a balcony of a large bar as Zac walked along the street.

Zac only laughed and waved as he moved on. There were actually quite a few people who recognized him as he walked, and he guessed that these people were all members who were currently taking a break in their cultivation. Most people took time-outs for a few months now and then to clear their heads and destress, and these meatheads probably watched some fights and got drunk.

Some just praised the last battle or his axe, while others invited him to join hunting parties. Zac politely declined the invitations as he kept going forward. He only stopped once to read a massive sign. He saw dozens more further down the line, and he guessed it contained some important information.

[Big Axe Coliseum has entered an Alliance with the Divine Chalice, Blue Moon Mercenaries, and Celestial Constellation Formation Guild.]

“Who are these factions?” Zac asked an orc who read the sign as well.

“Don’t know about the last guys, but Divine Chalice is a faction of healers,” the Orc muttered, excitement written all over his face. “A lot of lasses, a lot of them... If Urbuk manages to form an adventurer party with a few... Springtime is finally coming to Urbuk.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded as he walked on. One faction of healers, an Array Master guild, and some mercenaries. It looked like the Big Axe Coliseum wanted to shore up its weaknesses. But the Coliseum had stood alone for over a Million years, why make the change now? Was it about the war the Ogre from before mentioned? Did they want to create more balanced war parties to increase their survivability?

For now, it wasn't something that had any relation to Zac though. He would ask Calrin to look into the matter, but he had other things to deal with first. Zac soon enough reached the contribution exchange, a massive hall that almost looked like a gladiator arena. There were almost a hundred desks with attendants, and Zac walked over to one of the empty ones. It was manned by what Zac assumed was a female orc.

"New guy?" the orc asked with a raised brow as he approached.

"Yeah, just joined. Just figured I'd take a look," Zac said.

"That's fine, but not much you can buy straight away. We've had problems with newcomers clearing out some precious resources and so on," the Ogre shrugged.

"I heard I can improve my level by selling things?" Zac asked as he started browsing a crystal.

"Oh, a Gladiator?" the orc said with interest. "It was you who fought the bloodstalker? Can't believe I had to work during that fight. Well, you still can't become a second-level member for the first ten years, even if you reach the contribution needed. A century for the third level. Of course, if you get an elder to sponsor you, that's another matter."

There were a huge amount of materials listed, tens of thousands of different resources meant for axe cultivators. Of course, he could only buy the basic things that he could already get through Calrin. But there were also quite a few items that were at the level of what Kenzie had planned on feeding Jeeves.

There were even rarer objects as well, but they all required level three membership or higher.

As for information, there were a lot of interesting intelligence crystals that piqued Zac's interest. There was one in particular that contained information that Zac really wanted.

[Primal Axes; Picky bastards, Trusted Friends – How to evolve your toothy companion.]

It was written by a late Hegemon rather than a Monarch, but it was still pretty detailed all the way up to high D-grade

according to the description. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to get it for a whole decade. He would probably be able to get some elder to sponsor him if he divulged his real identity, but that would just open a can of worms.

[Verun's Bite] had been strengthened a lot since drinking all that Dragon Blood, and Zac felt it wouldn't bottleneck him until he reached peak E-grade. He suspected that ten years would pass long before he got to that point. Apart from the missive detailing evolving his axe, there were more generalized guides geared toward Spirit Tools as well.

Zac wanted to get those as well in case they divulged something useful for **[Love's Bond]**. Of course, he didn't hold much hope in that regard. He hadn't been making much headway with his second Spirit Tool, or rather any at all. He had come in contact with all kinds of treasures, but nothing seemed to have been of interest for Alea.

"Take this as well," the orc said as she handed him another crystal. "These are requests members have put out. If you can find some of the things people are looking for, you can quickly reach the higher levels of membership as soon as the trial period ends. You can also go to the mission hub. You're a gladiator, so the Mission Points will be converted to Contribution points for you, making missions doubly rewarding."

"Alright, thank you," Zac nodded as he exited the Contribution Exchange.

Zac would be able to easily complete a lot of the rare materials commission thanks to his almost unfettered access to all corners of the sector. Materials that were almost impossible to get on the Bloodwind planet might be readily available in another empire. The Big Boss's Big Wall and a few other opportunities such as private Mystic Realms were only accessible through contribution points, and this was an easy way for Zac to turn Nexus Coins into contribution.

He stowed away the crystals as he left toward the closest Teleportation Array. Part of him wanted to head out and refine his technique, but he ultimately felt uncomfortable grinding

when he had to hold back on everything from levels to Dao Epiphanies. So he would head back to Earth before moving toward his real target.

“Are we really letting him go?” the heavily scarred human asked as he looked up at the huge Ogre who gazed at the human walking toward the teleportation array in the distance. “The Tsarun clan-“

“Bah, who cares about those bastards? We’re not so strapped for cash we need their little rewards,” the Ogre snorted.

“Besides, I never liked Zinvul Tsarun, that hoary old goat. He’d sell out this whole Sector if it just gave him a chance of breaking through. I’m more willing to bet on this little brat.”

“He walks the path of war and carnage, and he is the Harbinger of the conflict. He will definitely find himself in the middle of the madness, chances are he will fall,” the man countered. “If that happens we’ll end up empty-handed.”

“Perhaps,” the Ogre shrugged. “But perhaps not. He might also survive, becoming the next Eveningtide Asura. And then our gains will far overshadow some random bounty. The fact that such a little monster is an axe wielder is a heaven-sent opportunity for us. I told you he’d appear here sooner or later. Obfuscate the details of his visit.”

“Already done,” the human nodded as his eyes gleamed with anticipation. “Well, his disguise is pretty decent and he seems aware of the threats facing him. It will be hard if not impossible for the Tsarun clan to track him down in the vast battlefields. If he really survives...”

“Exactly,” the Ogre nodded before his brows furrowed with confusion. “However, I really thought he’d break through... He looked at the wall for two whole weeks while I personally empowered his prayer mat and improved his surroundings. I think he might be a bit of an idiot?”

Chapter 681: Buyout

Zac appeared in his courtyard back on Earth, and a look outside showed that the environment was fast returning to normal thanks to Triv and the golem gardeners. His initial outing had taken just over a month, but he believed that the next one might take a lot longer. So before heading out there were some final matters to deal with.

First thing's first, Zac looked inward and started to channel more and more energy into his hidden Specialty Core until he felt something change. There was no explosion or huge burst of energy, but his Specialty Core was suddenly back in plain view, which meant that the one-month timer had started. That was the earliest he could leave earth while using the array to hide his Duplicity Core.

The things he needed to do during this month were already planned out, and Zac sent out a series of messages through his Communication Crystal before he opened his status screen.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	101
Class	[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia
Race	[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500,

	Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator
Dao	Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - High, Fragment of the Bodhi - High
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	4385 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 228%]
Dexterity	2149 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]
Endurance	4167 [Increase: 111%. Efficiency: 228%]
Vitality	3266 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 228%]
Intelligence	960 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	1844 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]
Free Points	0
Nexus	[D] 1 000 000

Coins	
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His Limited Titles were finally filled as well, and Zac opened another screen to get a full overview.

[Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th: Attain the 14th best all-time result in the Zecia Sector. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Luck +6%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Vitality +6%]

[Weight of Sin: Ascend Taboo Mountain Reward: Base Attributes +2%.]

[Equanimity: Reach the floor of the Havenfort Chasm. Reward: Base Attributes +2%. Wisdom, Endurance +2%.]

[Heart of Fire: Touch the Heart of Fire. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality +4%.]

[Big Axe Gladiator: Complete the trial of the Big Axe Coliseum. Reward: Strength, Dexterity +50. Strength, Dexterity +6%.]

Zac nodded with satisfaction as he closed his screen. His attributes had increased by around 5%, most of them centered on his more useful stats. For example, his Strength had almost increased by 10%, which definitely was a noticeable boost. It wasn't a transformative change, but it was a free boost that had only cost him a month. Not only that, he had both stabilized his soul and made inroads with his Dao, his path, and his new method to perform Dao braids.

After having confirmed the situation he immediately started walking over toward his first appointment, which was located at the Atwood Academy.

The whole campus had grown by over ten times since its inception, and it had almost turned into a city within a city with blocks of student housing, whole parks, and large courtyards where the professors stayed. There were almost a hundred thousand students enrolled by this point, of which roughly 20% were 'exchange students' from various subsidiary forces on earth.

It wasn't much compared to the largest alliances on Earth, but Zac still focused on quality over quantity for his Academy. For those less talented there were the city guards, the army, or various enterprises of his that needed cultivators. For example, there were thousands of cultivators who worked in the mine, clearing out the wildlife as they dug deeper and deeper.

Zac didn't head toward Alyn's offices, but he rather turned toward one of the secluded mansions in the faculty residence district. A few minutes later he sat in a beautifully manicured courtyard and with an elderly monkeyman opposite him.

"Lord Atwood, it has been a while. I am sorry about your loss," Hekruv Vira sighed. "To walk the path of Cultivation is to suffer. Death is all too common. But I am glad to see that it hasn't broken you."

The 'official story' had already been spread by this point, that a powerful cultivator appeared on earth in search of the Dimensional Seed. After finding that it was gone, she had killed Kenzie and Thea out of frustration before leaving. Zac only survived because of his hidden means. Zac only nodded in response, and the two sat in silence for a few minutes until a series of quick steps approached.

"I am sorry for the delay. You said you needed me?" Helo, the Gemling leader said as he walked into Hekruv Vira's courtyard.

"I wanted to talk to the two of you to let you know that I will be leaving Earth for a while," Zac said. "This trip will probably be a lot longer than previous outings. A year if it's short, a decade if it's long."

"You are doing the right thing," Hekruv said with a nod. "You are in your prime, spending your days here would be a waste of your potential and momentum. Look at me and the other old goats who you took in. Our momentum is all but gone, and reaching Hegemony the normal way is nigh-impossible."

Zac nodded, and he actually felt a bit relieved at the fact the old powerhouses of the Mystic Realm were stuck in their cultivation. It was a bit too early for D-Grade cultivators to start sprouting up on Earth. But what Hekruv Vira said was

true; their cultivation had pretty much locked in at their current state, and simply changing their cultivation manuals wouldn't do.

It was also a huge mental component to breaking through. The few members of the True Sky Faction who still had reaching Hegemony as their main goal in life had bought Teleportation Tokens from him. They wanted to set out onto a larger stage in search of opportunities just like most wandering cultivators. Those who stayed on Earth had essentially given up on forming a Cultivator's Core and instead focused on academia and their legacy.

For example, Hekruv Vira had actually married an Ishiate of the nature-faction he met while traversing earth two years ago. They already had a child, which felt like a miracle to Zac considering their species were so different. Then again, how was the monkeyman's situation any different than the hundreds of half-demon infants in Port Atwood?

Zac was all for it, since forming a family would strengthen their connection to Earth and his town, and it allowed him to leave Earth with fewer worries.

"Is there anything we can do?" Helo asked.

"Just help the officials keep things under control. Try to stop any large-scale wars that will weaken the base strength of Earth," Zac said thoughtfully.

The three kept talking for a while later before Zac set off to his next destination. The meeting with the True Sky Faction and Clan Volor was partly a courtesy call, and also to show he was fine after the events that led to Thea's death. He knew there were some rumors floating about already, and one of the things on his agenda was to travel around to make sure people knew he was alive and well.

His next destination took him to Thayer Consortia, another district that had essentially turned into a town on his own. The Thayer Consortia had kept growing over the past three years, partly fueled by the almost endless wealth they gained through his sister. It was like Calrin was on stimulants as he kept

expanding the operations, and there were already three branches that had been opened on other worlds.

All three were on unimpressive E-grade planets, but they helped open new business channels and they were profitable from the get-go.

The fact that Smaug had somehow disappeared into thin air while Zac was occupied dealing with the Mystic Realm was a bit of a hit, but it ultimately hadn't dampened his plans too much. Perhaps it was for the best since Smaug had proven himself wily and self-serving since the start, without weighing it up with good features like Ogras.

Zac had wanted to use Smaug as his representative in the Consortia, but perhaps it was for the best that the position had become vacant. He had made some inquiries into the Stumpbugle cooperation that Smaug got his license from, since Calrin believed they had to be the ones who helped him escape. Zac hadn't found much though, and he could only confirm they were located somewhere in the sector.

Instead, he had hired a man named Vikram, a former Harvard Graduate who would likely have become a real business star if the world hadn't ended. Vikram was officially in charge of the expansion of Thayer Consortia to human towns across Earth, and unofficially in charge of making sure the Sky Gnomes weren't fleecing him.

He was also the only Earthling currently under a contract with him, apart from the Valkyries. It wasn't Zac's idea, but rather Vikram's own, as a method to fast-track his career. It wasn't life-long though, but rather for 1000 years, and it posited that Zac needed to provide the means for him to gain that longevity. Of course, the contract also contained a slew of additional provisions to shore up the kind of Loopholes that Smaug probably had used.

So far Zac hadn't found any reason to be worried, but you never could let your guard down. Zac didn't immediately head over to Calrin, but he instead visited Vikram's offices first. The two went over Zac's idea in detail over the next few hours, where the analyst helped Zac tweak and optimize the

plan. Only then did the two head over to Calrin's office, where a despondent Sky Gnome barely had the energy to greet them.

"What's with you?" Zac said as he sat down.

"Do you really need to ask?" the Sky Gnome lamented, looking like he had lost the love of his life. "Your sister was such a divine spirit, full of grace and benevolence."

Zac would have laughed out loud if not for the fact that Kenzie was officially dead. Zac knew that the Sky Gnome no doubt missed his sister's money-making capabilities far more than the person herself, but the sentiment was still appreciated.

"How are things going?" Zac asked as he sat down, though he somewhat knew the answer.

"We made a lot of enemies through your sister's side business. She could stay hidden, but the transactions ultimately took place under our license. Now our income is negligible compared to before, and our enemies are putting the squeeze to us," Calrin sighed. "Forget expansion, we might be forced to close our branches and get pushed back to the bottom again."

"Is there anything we can do to turn things around?" Zac asked with an impassive face.

"Well, money," Calrin shrugged. "We are bleeding right now, but so are our enemies because they undercut me on all my purchases. But with enough time I'll be able to find new revenue streams that will tide us over until they give up."

Zac slowly nodded, but nothing the Sky Gnome said was honestly a surprise. He had a full understanding of the financial state after his meeting with his liaison. What Calrin said was true, though things were not quite as bad as he let on. But Thayer Consortia would definitely be unable to continue their expansion if things continued, and probably even be relegated into a native business that didn't spread outside the planet.

"Well, I have a proposal," Zac eventually said. "I am willing to inject capital into the business, but I want controlling share of

Thayer Consortia. Vikram would be made vice manager and get access to the License.”

“What!” Calrin exclaimed with shock. “You are trying to squeeze us out! Don’t look down at the value of a License. How do you value the infinite potential it represents? Not even your sister would be able to buy it.”

“I value the License at 5,000 D-grade Nexus Coins. I am willing to invest 3,300 right now of which 250 would go directly to you,” Zac said, which made the Sky Gnome freeze in shock. “I would increase my stake to 51% by myself, and if Ogras’ shares get released, they would fall to me as well.”

The shares to the consortium were sanctioned by the System itself, and Ogras’ shares along with dividends were currently put in limbo. The System had various rules for this. Essentially, if Ogras didn’t come back within 100 years, then ownership would be relinquished to descendants. Since Ogras had none, at least no official ones, the ownership would revert back to Zac and Calrin.

If the demon had been a D-grade Hegemon instead, the timeframe would instead be a millennium. This was a ruleset that the System had enacted since people kept disappearing in the Multiverse. Some were lost in Mystic Realms, others entered wormholes and wound up in different parts of the universe.

Ownership of protected ventures ultimately required some sort of link to the business in question. For unprotected ventures, such as holding ownership of a city, there were no safety guidelines. Anyone could attack a town or world at any time, and if the defense failed, you’d lose your ownership. Of course, you could always reconquer your town or planet in case you came back.

“Fi- Five thousand? D-grade?” Calrin muttered, his eyes almost going red instead of their deep azure. “What? How?”

“Don’t worry about how,” Zac shrugged. “Five thousand is most likely a fraction of its value when you were at your peak, but those days are long gone. To return to that level on your own without my help? How long will that take? Can you even

do it? With an infusion of over 3,000 D-grade Nexus Coins, you'll be able to save eons of effort and immediately leapfrog to a larger stage."

"You should also know that I hold the building ordinance for a High-quality Trial, but I don't plan on putting it on Earth. That structure by itself will transform the economy of the whole area, but you'd require my help to seize the opportunity there," Zac said.

Zac wasn't lying. The reward came from completing the Second Step of Sovereignty with an S-grade performance, and the quest reward was a Limited Trial. That was actually one of the reasons why he had decided to visit the popular Trial Locations in the Zecia Sector. He had wanted to see how they organized things to turn the trial into a profit center.

And Zac had seen first-hand the huge business opportunity that spots like the Havenfort Chasm represented. There was an endless stream of people wanting access to that opportunity. Zac had initially planned on simply putting the structure in his Academy for his members, but he was extremely happy now to have held back on receiving the reward.

He instead wanted to place it on a neighboring planet after the shroud was lifted. He just needed to jump a few dimensional layers and find an abandoned planet with a livable atmosphere. D-Grade planets were almost all taken, but E-grade planets were plentiful. The distance would be short enough for transportation to be cheap and effortless for Earthlings, but it would still be hard for outsiders to pinpoint Earth's location.

The Sky Gnome got another round of shock after learning about the Limited Trial, and his face kept undergoing rapid changes.

"Owning 44% of a massive venture is ultimately far preferable to owning 75% of a small local industry," Zac added, seeing Calrin's hesitance.

"It is indeed, but it's not about that. The consortium is the lifeline of our clan, and by giving you the majority stake we would lose our freedom, completely tying the fate of our family to your chariot," Calrin exhaled.

“Don’t you think that ship has sailed already?” Zac smiled.
“Boje Zethaya saw that ring of yours as well, and more and more Earthlings will start traveling the Sector over the coming decades. The peak factions might already know, so why not make a bet and swing big?”

Calrin sat frozen for over a minute, and Zac could almost hear gears rapidly turn in his head.

“Ai,” Calrin eventually sighed, and Zac’s lips quirked upward.
“I thought my good days would finally arrive when that demon bastard got sucked into that living Mystic Realm. But I guess that to live is to suffer. But how about 500 D-grade Nexus Coins for your friend? After all, there are some cranky elders I’d need to bribe, ah, I mean convince.”

Chapter 682: Attendant

Things proceeded quickly from the moment Calrin had taken the bait, and Zac soon found himself as the main shareholder of the Mercantile License. There was a simple reason why Zac wanted majority stakes; he needed to start planning for his cultivation early. Getting one million D-grade Nexus Coins was an almost unfathomable fortune to him right now, but would it be the same in a few hundred years as he was working on his Cultivator's Core?

Yrial had already said that nurturing a Mortal to become a powerhouse was expensive enough to bankrupt a clan, so he needed to become wealthier than normal clans. And what would be a better investment than buying a Mercantile Licence on the cheap? Thayer Consortium held the greatest control of the economy on Earth by now, and this move improved his control over the planet even further.

Calrin was more than happy to supply all sides of a war, but Zac could now essentially take out whole factions through business, quelling any uprisings before they even started. Besides, he was the main reason for the survival and expansion of the Consortium, so it stood to reason that he should be the one to reap the majority of the rewards.

With that dealt with, he stepped onto the teleporter, and he arrived in a vast subterranean hall a few moments later.

"Warmaster," a few Zhix guards bowed when they saw who it was that had appeared in their hive.

"I'm here to see the Chainbreaker," Zac said, and he was immediately led through a series of tunnels without any further question from the guards.

"Is Ibtep here?" Zac asked, thinking he should say goodbye to his oldest Zhix friend as well.

“The Breeder is working on new variants in the underworld,” the guard said, respect written all over their face.

Zac could only wryly smile and nod. If Rhubat, the Chainbreaker, held the most respect in the hearts of the Zhix population, then Ibtep was a close second. The liaison had returned heroically with the Elixir of Ascension, which helped the remaining Anointed deal with the drawbacks of their Elixir of Anointment. But that was not the only thing that garnered such respect.

The Zethaya had wanted to butter Zac up and offered the elixirs free of charge, which Ibtep gladly accepted without caring whether that put Zac in an awkward position. Instead, he had used the billions of Nexus Coins on a high-quality Beast Pouch and thousands of different insects, larvae, and other creepy crawlies.

He now bred billions of the things down in the depths, and he provided the Zhix population with everything from “delicious” grubs to enormous worms that were extremely efficient at digging tunnels for hives. The Zhix warriors hadn’t cared in the slightest that Ibtep used their money for his own venture. What were some intangible numbers on a status screen in comparison to tasty food?

The hobby had gone so far that it actually skewed Ibptep’s evolution. They had been a Seeker before, a class aimed at scouting, exploration, and knowledge. Zac didn’t know the exact name of Ibtep’s new class, but it was mainly related to discovering, taming, and breeding beasts. So it still held some of its old features, but it had added husbandry to the mix, making it a proper hybrid class.

Zac soon reached the inner sanctum of the hive, and he was hit by a mist full of Cosmic Energy when the guard opened the gates to Rhubat’s cultivation cave. Inside were a few braziers, with a pond fifty meters across in the middle. There was also some odd moss growing on the ceiling, and a single glance was all it took for Zac to understand it was a material at the same level as his [**Tree of Ascension**].

The place wasn't quite at the level of his own cultivation cave, but it wasn't too far off either.

"Warmaster, it has been a while," a rumbling voice echoed through the cave as Rhubat rose from the pond.

The Anointed looked quite different compared to before, now only reaching three meters in height. That didn't mean they had been drastically weakened though, but rather the opposite. Rhubat's aura was extremely condensed, like they were a bomb on the verge of exploding. Since Ibtap had succeeded with their mission during the events of the Mystic Realm, a large number of the former Anointed had long passed into E-Grade.

The titanic Zhix had lost between 50% and 70% of their attributes to rid themselves of the chains that kept them in the F-Grade, but Rhubat was the sole exception. Rhubat's experiences in the Hidden Realm along with their latent potential had allowed them to retain almost 80% of their former strength even after taking the antidote, and Rhubat had regained that and much more after passing into the E-Grade.

Their whole appearance differed from the normal Zhix as well as white cracks covered their whole body. It was a result of his final attack that slew Adcarkas, and they bore the jagged scars like a badge of honor. Zac thought it looked pretty good, and it reminded him of kintsugi pottery.

"Looks like you're progressing smoothly," Zac smiled.

"The Zhix are finally learning to embrace the new chapter of our lives," Rhubat nodded. "We have found a new methodology we like, and a lot of warriors are making impressive progress. A second revision will soon come out as well, improving it even further."

Zac nodded, having already heard about it. The Zhix had initially completely disregarded things like cultivation manuals, and to some degree even skills. And while most had stopped considering Cosmic Energy as corruption, they still hadn't quite acclimatized to their new reality. However, that was quickly changing as the Anointed and a large group of

Zhix scholars had started creating a unique Cultivation Manual made by the Zhix for the Zhix.

It was still pretty rough, but over 90% of all Zhix warriors had still chosen to use it, displaying the characteristic unity of insectoid species.

“It’s good to hear,” Zac said. “I came to tell you that I will be leaving Earth soon, possibly for years.”

“I think that is the right choice,” Rhubat said. “I believe I still have much to gain here in our new world, but I can feel that I will need to leave for the stars within a few decades if I want to move forward. Go without worry, the Zhix will watch over our planet. The Zhix Hives all stand behind you, we know you are searching for power for the sake of us as much as for yourself.”

Zac didn’t stay long, and he left just five minutes later as Rhubat sunk back into the depths of his pool. Zac kept traveling back and forth making arrangements with his allies and inner circle, though he only told those he really trusted he’d be gone for over a year. Next, Zac spent the following weeks appearing across all corners of Earth, unleashing a storm of violence on the beast populations.

He had been lying low for too long, and the world needed to remember his might if he was to leave for a long time. It also allowed him to make some more inroads into the evolutionary combat technique he had made some inroads into during his battle with the bloodstalker. Unfortunately, he found that he wasn’t making much progress when simply crushing the opposition.

It wasn’t a surprise to him. Progress only happened when one was pushed to the limit, no matter if you talked about the wilds or cultivation. He would have to find some more powerful enemies if he wanted to perfect his new style.

Finally, after waging his one-man war for three full weeks, Zac got a message from Triv. There were energy fluctuations coming from the Dao Repository, meaning that his Revenant captain was finally coming out after almost two full months

inside the inheritance trial. Zac quickly hurried back, just in time to see Vilari emerge from the array.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw her unscathed. He had been worried that a trial lasting so long would be extremely deadly, but his revenant commander came out looking completely unscathed.

“How did it go?” Zac asked. “She didn’t make things difficult because of your race, right?”

“The Tool Spirit was right. Master said that it didn’t matter as sapience is all that’s needed to understand suffering,” Vilari answered with an airy voice.

Zac couldn’t help but feel that the ‘Crown of Despair’ was a real downer after hearing that, but how Vilari referred to the mysterious mentalist piqued his interest.

“Master?” Zac asked.

“Master Ralz Carzood took me as an in-name disciple,” Vilari said with a nod. “She was very pleased with my performance and provided the maximum benefits the rules of the trial allowed. However, I would have to reach her main body for her to take me as a true disciple.”

“Main body?” Zac asked with confusion before his eyes widened in surprise. “She’s actually alive?”

“She said so, at least,” Vilari nodded. “She is a master of the soul, so I guess Master could still maintain a small connection even after having severed a small part for the inheritance.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac said. “What’s your next step?”

“I gained a new Soul Strengthening-method that I believe ultimately suits me better. It has a lower ceiling compared to young master’s, but I think it will be hard for me to perform more than one reincarnation with my lacking affinity into Life,” Vilari said. “I have already created a good foundation though, so I just need to keep working for a year or two, after which I will evolve to E-grade.”

Zac nodded, happy to hear that she had found a path suited for her. Her aura had changed as well. It was more stable, deeper

in a sense. It almost felt like he was talking to an old monster rather than a junior cultivator, but Zac couldn't put his finger on why. Her strength had definitely increased a bit, but not to the point for him to get that feeling. It was rather a sense of vicissitude that was the source.

“Well, I'm glad you're back. Come with me,” Zac nodded as he sent a message into his communication crystal. “There is someone you should meet.”

The two walked over to his courtyard and sat down. They didn't have to wait long until they could hear steps approaching. It was Joanna who had hurried over at his command. She entered the courtyard, but she immediately froze as her spear appeared in her hand when she spotted Vilari. It was hard to miss her with her strong deathly fluctuations and striking appearance.

Of course, she didn't attack since Zac just sat there, and she instead looked over at him with confusion.

“I thought it was high time the two of you met,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Joanna, meet Vilari, the commander of the Einherjar. Vilari, this is Joanna, commander of the Valkyries. I guess you could say the two of you hold the same position.”

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you,” Vilari said with a small smile as she nodded in Joanna's direction.

“You've made an army of Revenants?” Joanna exclaimed with wide eyes, but she still nodded back at the undead mentalist. “Where? How? Why?”

“I've worked on it for a few years now,” Zac said. “Our world is changing into one of duality, and I'm kind of adapting. It would be a waste to have half the planet empty.”

“Still...” Joanna said as he looked at Vilari with mixed emotions. “People will freak out. And what about when the shroud lifts and people find a bunch of undead on Earth?”

“There are tens of thousands of cultivators who have become necromancers or have other death-related classes on Earth. Hiding a few true undead in the mix shouldn't be too big of a deal,” Zac shrugged before he turned to Vilari.

“Vilari, take Joanna to your compound after this. It’s high time your two armies learn to work with each other,” Zac said.

“The Einherjar is my dagger hidden in the dark though, so they can’t be exposed to anyone but the Valkyries.

Unfortunately, you only have ten days to figure things out. After that, I’m leaving Earth for a long time.”

That caught both of their attention, and they waited for him to properly explain.

“I am setting out soon in search of opportunities,” Zac said. “I will probably be gone a long time this time around. Vilari, I was thinking of bringing you along, are you interested?”

“I am afraid I would drag you down,” Vilari hesitated.

“I am going to a metropolis, so it should be somewhat safe. Bringing an attendant wouldn’t be out of the ordinary. However, the length of your stay would depend on what we encounter over there. You might spend just a few minutes, or perhaps over a year,” Zac explained.

“It would be my honor,” Vilari said with a small smile.

“Only her?” Joanna said with a frown. “How about I and a squad of Valkyries accompany you? We can’t match your strength, but we can match hers.”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “Where I am going next, only the undead can follow.”

Zac had gone over his options many times over, and he had long decided. His first real outing would be Twilight Harbor.

It was technically possible for Joanna to come with him instead of Vilari, but Zac had decided to set out as a Draugr this time and hide his Specialty Core with the array. He hadn’t managed to get hold of a single piece of intelligence on the Twilight Harbor place so far, and he was afraid that it would look odd for a human and a Draugr to travel together.

Leaving the Zecia Sector to visit the grey zone was a huge risk, but one Zac had to take. First of all, it felt like such a place might hold opportunities for someone like him who walked both the path of Life and Death. His progress had

stagnated a little over the past years and he needed something to kickstart it.

Besides, a place that even a pureblood Draugr like Catheya felt worthwhile to mention was probably even more special than she let on. After all, she had followed her peak C-Grade master as he traveled, and they had consciously made a stop there. Conversely, they only stopped in the Zecia Sector at all because her master needed to enter seclusion for a few years.

That was not the only reason to head there first. Zac also needed access to items for himself and his undead warriors. The chapters of the Undead Kingdom didn't trade with the living factions of the Zecia Sector, at least not openly. That meant pretty much all the resources his Revenant followers used were foraged in the Dead Zones.

It was the same for himself. He needed something to push his undead Race to D-Grade, and the Twilight Harbor was his best bet. It also felt like a good place to widen his own skill repertoire. For example, he still didn't even have a Movement Skill on his undead side. A commercial hub like the Twilight Harbor would definitely have a few repositories to peruse, and he might even find some good skills for his human side.

Part of him had wanted to immediately set out to the Million Gates Territory to search for Ogras now that he was confirmed alive, but it didn't seem like a good idea. He was still too weak and inexperienced to travel a chaotic territory like that. A proper metropolis like the Twilight Harbor should be at least somewhat safe in comparison.

Besides, he didn't even have a vessel to travel in that place full of chaotic spatial anomalies. Teleportation Arrays didn't really work in that sector from what he had gathered, so he needed a proper Cosmic Vessel. His best bet was completing the Creator Shipyard-quest first and have Karunthel build him a vessel specifically suited to traverse a dangerous place like that.

He could probably buy a ship with his massive fortune by this point, but he had far more trust in the Creators than some local shipwrights. Furthermore, his sister was gone, and there would be no way for Zac to tell if the salesmen left some hidden

dangers in a bought vessel. And why wouldn't they leave some sort of marker if some unknown E-grade warrior appeared with endless wealth?

So, until that point, he'd work hard on gaining power so that he wouldn't actually get himself killed the moment he entered that lawless territory. He at least needed the power to escape from D-Grade Hegemons, preferably even killing weaker ones. Luckily he had a decade to work on himself until that point unless Leandra was lying about the timelines.

Zac spent the next ten days resting up and waiting for the cooldown of his cloaking array to end. He tried to replicate his rudimentary Dao Braid a few hours every day as well, but progress was slow. It did work, but the activation was painfully slow. It was like his mental energy was turbid when he wasn't in a heated state, and it took him almost five seconds to create a Dao Braid and infuse it into a skill.

Such a delay mid-battle would almost definitely create a huge opening. But Zac hoped that if he formed his crude braids over and over it would become an ingrained skill that would flow naturally when it had to be actually used.

Ten days soon passed and Vilari returned to his courtyard. Zac had talked with everyone he needed to talk to, and he had prepared everything that needed to be prepared. There was also nothing holding him back on earth any longer. In fact, part of him couldn't wait to get away from Earth for a while.

So there was no reluctance in his gait as the two headed over to the Nexus Hub in the center of the island.

Chapter 683: New Horizons

It felt extremely weird to stand suspended in space, but the discomfort was far overshadowed by the awe as Thea looked down upon the vast continent in the distance, its size breaking both comprehension and the laws of physics.

Just how big was that place? It was endless, and planets were nothing but small marbles that hovered around it. This was what she had dreamed about when listening to the explanations of the Tutorial pixies so long ago. Visiting mysterious faraway lands, walking paths that had never trod before. And now there was such a continent emitting an amazingly profound aura right in front of her.

If only the circumstances were a bit better.

“Where is this? And why have you taken me here?” Thea asked as she turned to the purple-robed woman next to her.

Mothers-in-law were usually a nightmare, but Leandra Atwood clearly took the trope to another level. Telling her that she was not worthy of her precious son before zapping her with lightning and kidnapping her. Thea had spent almost two months locked in some weird tank, with only her thoughts and an infuriating AI for company.

Now she found herself out here, looking out at some alien world. Seeing it was truthfully a bit exhilarating, but it also felt like another kick to the chin. It was a confirmation of what she had come to realize over the past months; her old life was gone.

She had railed at the AI, desperately tried to break out of the prison she had been put inside. She had cried and raged, angry at Zac, at his secretive family, angry at fate who seemingly kept toying with her. She even tried using her ultimate escape skill, only to find her Skill Fractals somehow locked.

Eventually, she had been wrung dry. She had simply let herself drift around in the viscous liquid for a month, her mind void of thought and direction. Now that she finally was free, part of her screamed at her to lash out, to strike at her captor with her ultimate skill. But a larger part of her was just a haze of helplessness and exhaustion.

“This is the Goldblade Continent, named after the Goldblade Divine Monarch. A brutal place full of danger and opportunity, away from the meddling machinations of the cursed System,” Leandra said. “Your new home.”

“Why did you take me here?” Thea sighed. “Why not just kill me and get it over with?”

“Why would I kill you? Your ‘death’ proved a great motivational tool for my children,” Leandra said. “This is your reward. Thus, the law of balance is maintained and karmic entanglement avoided. Besides, odds are you will fall in this place, turning falsehood into truth.”

Law of balance my foot, Thea thought with exasperation.

How could sending her to a hostile continent be considered recompense for blasting her with tribulation lightning and faking her death?

“You know, Zac and my family have probably realized I’m not actually dead,” Thea muttered in a feeble act of defiance, though she honestly wasn’t so sure. “I’ll eventually escape from this place or he’ll find me one way or another. Either way, your plan will fail.”

“Your understanding is flawed,” Leandra said without raising a brow. “The heavens struck you down, you died as far as the System is concerned. It is the same for that little unstable Tool Spirit, it reopened your inheritance the day we left Earth. For them, you are well and truly dead.”

Thea looked at the staid woman floating next to her, realizing that she really didn’t have any secrets in front of her. Had this woman read her mind, or has she planted spies around her children since before the integration?

“...Why?” Thea eventually asked, which contained all the questions that had rattled around in her head over the past months.

Why kidnap her? Why would Leandra trick her children into hating her?

“I have lived for millions of years,” Leandra slowly said as she looked out across the vast continent.

It wasn't what Thea had asked about, but it still made her eyes widen in shock. She knew that Zac's mom was powerful after seeing that metal monstrosity, but to this point? A million years was approaching the limit of a Monarch from what she had gathered, unless the monarch was a temporal cultivator or had found some special treasures to prolong their life even further.

Leandra Atwood was actually someone who had reached even further, someone who eclipsed all the elites of the whole Zecia sector?

“I have had over twenty Dao partners, the longest coupling lasting for three hundred thousand years. Do you know how that relationship ended? He tried to kill me for the materials in my body. He had been stuck at the peak of Monarchy so long, and he knew that I was about to step into Autarchy. It was his last chance to seize the opportunity for himself,” Leandra smiled.

“Why are you telling me this?” Thea asked. “Are you afraid that I'd rob your son of his resources if I stayed on Earth?”

“No. You aren't qualified to rob my son with that paltry strength of yours, except his momentum. What I am saying is that your relationship was doomed from the start. I think you knew that as well. As it stands, the two of you are too different,” Leandra said before she turned back toward the endless continent.

“His potential is limitless, and you are just an above-average talent of a backwater sector. You will not be able to follow him for long in your current state. You are already too far apart, and it will only get further away,” Leandra said.

A spark of anger flared up in Thea's heart, but it was quickly extinguished. First of all, what was she going to do to this insanely powerful cultivator? That was just asking for a beating. Besides, she knew that her kidnapper was right.

She had been relentlessly training herself off for three years while Zac had been studying arrays and working on his soul, yet she wasn't any closer to reaching his level of power. Soon, he would explode forward with momentum again, just like when he returned from the Tower of Eternity.

Even after all she had encountered, she barely made it to the start of the sixth floor. Even that was largely thanks to Zac sparing no expense in terms of Array Breakers, talismans, and pills to push her as far as possible. Yet he had made it to the ninth floor, a feat hundreds of times more difficult. And he had fought off half the sector the moment he got out, like an invincible god of war.

The corpse tree outside the Tower of Eternity was still imprinted in her mind, like a part of Zac she never understood. It was easy to forget that the slightly awkward guy she dated was known as the Deviant Asura, one of the most renowned youths of the Sector.

"More importantly, neither of you held trust in the other. You never told him you're not a pure human. You never told him of how you felt trapped on his little island. He never told you of me, nor did he tell you about the undead armies he nurtures in the shadows. You don't know the truth of his power. Both of you had one foot out the door," Leandra said. "Your dying was the most beneficial conclusion of your Karma. Look for love when you've given up on the Dao."

"His what?" Thea blurted with shock, but she quickly calmed down again. He had already hidden the fact that he had a robot goddess for a mother, what did it matter now if he kept some revenants? "So, you're telling me to just give up on my past and live on this faraway Continent?"

"The situation here is far more brutal than integrated space. Murder for resources is as common as breathing, and everyone who rises to Hegemony here has walked a path far bloodier

than what you can imagine. That is your opportunity. Enter this world, and be baptized and reborn through slaughter. That is your best chance to become a true pillar for your tribe. To walk in step with my son,” Leandra said.

“Though I suspect... Even if you gain the power required to make it back, you two will long have forgotten about each other by that point. After all, the Dao is your foremost love.”

Thea gave her kidnapper another glare for good measure before she turned back to the continent. An enormous mountain larger than a planet stood in the core, and there were eighteen layers of clouds as large as nebulae swirling around it. There were vast forests so lush that it could be seen from space, endless oceans, and even topographies that she couldn't understand in the slightest.

She was not sure what to think. Her future had been stolen, forcibly replaced with what sounded like a hellish meatgrinder. From the sound of it, she would be lucky if she survived a year in this place, let alone long enough for her to return to her family. All those people she had grown up with, would she ever see them again?

Why did she feel so free?

“One day I'll make it out of this place, if just to prove you wrong.”

Minutes turned to hours and hours turned to days as Zac was shot through the Void out of the Zecia sector. Even the teleportation on his previous off-world sojourns had only taken up to thirty minutes before he reappeared, which made it all the more telling just how vast the distances he was dealing with were.

It was like traveling between two galaxies rather than between two star systems in a galaxy. Zac eventually let his mind drift since there wasn't much else he could do. Vilari was probably somewhere close, but it was not like they could communicate mid-teleportation. There was nothing to look at either since teleporters moved you through some hidden dimensional layer.

But on the 12th day, the wait was finally over as darkness turned to light.

“Welcome travelers,” a harsh voice said as Zac tried to orient himself. “Oh, Imperials?”

Zac frowned at the tone, but he relaxed when he looked up to see the source. It was a massive Corpse-lord, his jaws replaced by a maw that had to have been taken from some beast. The fact that he could form words at all was pretty impressive, so there was no point in reading into the tone. The second comment was more worrying.

“Is that a problem?” Zac asked with a neutral voice as he helped an unsteady Vilari get back on her feet.

“Haw haw! Hardly,” the Corpse-lord laughed. “Twilight Harbor welcomes all. In fact, you Imperials are an important income source for us. But be warned, the rules and hierarchies of the Empire do not hold sway here. No matter what title you have back home, you’re simply an honored guest in the Twilight Harbor.”

“Hm,” Zac only said non-committally.

The Corpse-lord’s words were a relief, as it seemed quite normal that people from the Undead Empire came here for opportunities or other purposes. Zac being a Draugr shouldn’t stick out too much, though he wanted to see how things looked out on the streets before taking off the mask he wore to block his race.

Zac knew that the Corpse-lord’s words came with caveats as well; power trumps all. His warning might be true for most guests, but Zac guessed that if some Empire Princeling came to this remote base, they could probably run rampant while the rulers had to grit their teeth and smile.

He had learned as much as he could about the Undead Empire over the past few years, causing Triv to suffer innumerable backlashes, and its hierarchy was quite simple. The local chapter of the Undead Empire in the Zecia sector was a peak force there, but it was ultimately just regarded as a Province. Its actual name was the Kavriel Province after the ruling clan,

though most of the living didn't bother with making such a distinction.

Undead Provinces could be weak or strong, but they were always led by a C-Grade force. The Undead Province in the Zecia sector was definitely on the weaker side, just like Zecia was one of the weaker C-Grade Sectors. However, true Undead Kingdoms always had B-Grade Cultivators at the top. One such kingdom could directly or indirectly control dozens, or perhaps even hundreds of C-Grade Sectors the size of Zecia.

Finally, lording over the large number of kingdoms were the Undead Heartlands, the true core of the Undead Empire. This was the cultivation mecca of all undead. Apparently, there were a number of unusually powerful Kingdoms inside the Heartlands, along with the core where the Undead Princes, and perhaps even the Primo, resided.

Catheya's Clan was from one of these Heartland Kingdoms by the sounds of it, which made her identity quite elevated among the undead. However, Zac guessed that most 'Imperials' that visited Twilight Harbor actually came from one of the outer Kingdoms unless Twilight Harbor was situated close to some wormhole that somehow connected to the Heartlands.

The Corpselord actually seemed a bit relieved at Zac's reaction, further proving Zac's hypothesis of there being some unruly visitors from the empire. He took out two small tokens next and handed them over to Zac.

"This is the Twilight Token. Seeing as you were invited by the Eldritch Archivals, they have already filled it with 1 month's worth of occupancy fees. If you want to prolong your stay, you'll have to go through them," the guard added.

"Thank you," Zac said and threw the Guardian a couple of D-Grade Miasma Crystals as thanks.

His eyes lit up and he immediately stashed them away, which gave Zac some clues as well. The Corpselord guard was either a decently strong High E-Grade Cultivator or an average Peak E-Grade warrior. But his eyes lit up at a few D-grade crystals, proving that his economic situation wasn't all that impressive.

This was actually not that big a surprise, as Zac had been shocked to learn that most cultivators in the multiverse were pretty poor, often downright broke. Zac had figured that most people would be trillionaires after accumulating their gains over decades, but the reality wasn't so nice.

It all came down to the monopolization of resources and the high cost of living. If Zac wanted to make a few million Nexus Coins he would just kill a few thousand E-grade beasts and sell their bodies, alternatively kill one early D-grade beast. But what if all the forests were controlled by powerful clans, clans who charged exorbitant fees to enter the hunting grounds, and even more exorbitant fees to stay in their town for protection?

Everything of value was long divvied up and taken by the powerful factions, with wandering cultivators generally living a pretty wretched life. They had to pay through their nose for every step forward in their cultivation, often to the point that they had to indenture themselves to the local forces. All that money then went to the D- or C-Grade powerhouses on the top, who were essentially black holes when it came to money.

“Ah, one tip, if the young master would be interested. I guess you are here for the Twilight Ascent. You should join the event through the Eldritch Archivals even if your power will allow you to do so by yourself. The Archivals have seeded slots with better starting positions,” the guard said.

Zac didn't even know who the Eldritch Archivals was, let alone the Twilight Ascent, but he still nodded in thanks as he led Vilari out from the teleportation house.

“How are you doing?” Zac asked with a low voice, knowing that teleporters did a number on most people.

“I'll adjust in a minute,” Vilari said. “These Eldritch Archivals...”

“We'll deal with it as it comes,” Zac shrugged. “Let's take a look at this place.”

Outside was a vast square full of people, but Zac wasn't focused on that as he looked around in awe. He didn't exactly

know what he had expected when thinking of the name Twilight Harbor, but it wasn't this.

Zac could only shake his head when thinking back to his conversation with Catheya all those years ago. She had made it sound like Twilight Harbor was just a little hamlet at a border sector, but the grandeur he witnessed was almost beyond his comprehension.

This was a true metropolis.

The Twilight Harbor was actually not placed on a planet from the looks of it, but rather a large number of gargantuan plateaus floating about in a cosmic cloud. Some of the plateaus were clearly earmarked for the undead, with miasmic clouds swirling around enormous spires that stretched tens of thousands of meters into the air. Conversely, some platforms were teeming with life, made for the living inhabitants.

In fact, one of the smaller plateaus just had a single huge tree planted, its canopy stretching across a distance measured in hundreds of miles. It was not quite at the level of the Lifebringer Tree he had seen in his Dao visions, but it was far beyond the [**Avar World Trees**] whose seed Kenzie had used in her evolution attempt.

There were hundreds of plateaus altogether, with most of them having a clear alignment of either life and death, but there were a handful that seemed to house both. These platforms were as large as a dozen of the smaller ones, and they looked like proper continents with mountains, forests, and hundreds of cities strewn along its surface.

Amazingly, these platforms all formed a multi-layered sphere around a mysterious light that seemed to be radiating with life one moment, and the chill of death the next. Zac first thought it was an attuned sun, but it didn't look like it. It almost looked alive since it pulsed with what seemed like a heartbeat, and it continuously spewed out those energy-rich clouds that suffused the whole area.

The platforms all seemed to have a gravity of their own as he could see mountains pointing down toward him from a platform right above him, and there were platforms in the

distance that stood at a 90-degree angle to properly bask in the radiance of the mysterious light source. It almost looked like the hundreds of platforms were the broken pieces of an impossibly large planet, and the anomaly was the world core that once held it all together.

Zac was almost frozen in place from the scene, and he couldn't believe how freely and seemingly effortlessly Life and Death comingled in this place. If he couldn't find any clues to dealing with Earth's dual affinities or his cultivation here, then he might as well give up.

Chapter 684: Guide

“It is quite a sight,” a sultry voice commented to Zac’s side, dragging him out of his reverie.

“Dreamers living among our people. I didn’t believe my master when he told me,” Zac said with a snort as he turned toward the source of the voice.

It was a Revenant, seemingly a human with a bit of demonic heritage. She didn’t have any horns, but her hands were a bit clawed and her skin had a thin pattern reminiscent of that of the Torrid Demons. She wore a tightfitting dress that looked more like an evening gown than a cultivator’s attire, but she did emit the aura of someone at early E-Grade.

He couldn’t tell whether she was a turned Revenant or if she was a natural-born undead of peak E-Grade warriors, but he guessed the latter was more common in an established place like this.

“Is young master perchance an Imperial?” the Revenant asked, and her eyes lit up when Zac slightly nodded.

He had already decided to go under the guise as a random scion of an imperial Draugr-clan after hearing the introduction from the Corpse-lord guard earlier. It felt like the safest bet, considering he still didn’t know if there were actual pureblood Draugr native to a place like this.

“May I ask if young master requires a guide? I am a native to Twilight Harbor and know all the outs and inns. I can make myself available for as long as master needs, and I’m sure young Master will be satisfied by my... services.”

The Revenant was a professional guide, just as Zac assumed. It was a pretty common way for cultivators to make some extra money, especially among the weaker cultivators who were afraid to risk their lives in Mystic Realms or hunting

grounds. A glance around the square showed that there were over a thousand teleportation stations just like the one he arrived in, and there was a small group of cultivators waiting outside all of them.

The voluptuous Revenant wasn't the only one waiting outside the station where Zac appeared, there were actually six more undead guides. There were also 5 living ones; three humans, a treant, and a beastkin. However, none of the living had approached Zac when he appeared, and Zac guessed there were unspoken rules at play here.

“Ah, Triskatal is a decent bedwarmer, but her connections are lacking. Young master strikes me as a man with great purpose who has better things to do than to waste with a mere female. I have connections with two information houses, and I can provide far more detailed accounts of events and noteworthy persons in Twilight Harbor,” a Corpselord said as he donned a terrifying smile, though Zac guessed he was trying to look amiable.

The Revenant threw the competition infuriated glance, but she didn't have time to for a rebuttal before another guide spoke up, detailing the perks of hiring them. It almost turned into a brawl, leading Zac to believe there was a surplus of guides compared to visitors. However, Zac's curiosity was piqued as one of the guides stood silent.

It wasn't that she was above competing with the others, she just lacked presence. She tried to speak up a few times, but she was quickly shot down, seemingly unable to shamelessly boast with such gusto. Of course, that wasn't really why he was curious.

“Ah, don't mind that lass. She's a novice, and she was fired by her last employer,” the Triskatal said when she noticed Zac's look. “She actually has the nerve to charge 50 E-grade Nexus Coins a day as well, as though she is a senior guide.”

“You are Draugr?” Zac asked, ignoring the comment.

Zac couldn't stop some hesitation from seeping into his voice as he asked though, since she looked a bit different from himself or Catheya. Her eyes were black orbs just like his

own, but they were matte and void of the abyssal feeling that Draugr eyes naturally possessed. She also had a few traits not normally associated with Draugr, such as slightly pointy ears and an odd vertical ridge in her forehead.

“I wouldn’t dare,” the young girl said with a bow. “There happens to be some divine blood in my ancestry. But I am not part of the Draugr-clans living in Twilight Harbor. You can consider me a normal Revenant.”

“Hmm,” Zac said.

He was quite relieved by her words. It had been a bit of a gamble to seal his Specialty Core in his undead state since he didn’t know what kind of reactions his Draugr heritage would create in a place like this. But between how common it seemed to be for ‘Imperials’ to come here, and the fact that there was actual Draugr-clans present, it looked like his appearance wouldn’t create any waves.

Part of him wanted to stay under the radar as he went about his businesses, but his experiences in Base Town and his subsequent experiences had imparted him with some valuable knowledge. Being too inconspicuous would only result in you getting discriminated against and losing out on important opportunities.

If anything, trying to lay low increased the odds of you getting in trouble with people with strong backgrounds, as no one would miss a dead wandering cultivator. Meanwhile, his Draugr appearance essentially made him a VIP by birthright, and people wouldn’t randomly move against him out of fear of whatever clan backed him. In fact, even the local clans would speak up for him if it came to it, as the nobility of the five races couldn’t be impugned.

Of course, the goal was to strike a balance. Going too far in posturing would just make you a target, like the Eveningtide Asura or Yrial.

“A- I, I have information connections as well!” the half-blood Draugr hurriedly said when Zac didn’t speak up again. “My father is a fact-checker for a local intelligence merchant. I am up to date to all the latest events!”

“Why were you fired by your last employer?” Vilari asked as she understood Zac was interested.

“I don’t provide... those... kinds of services,” the girl said as her eyes darted toward the Revenant called Triskatal. “The employer thought it was implied because of the price.”

“Good, I’ll hire you. Let’s start with one week and take it from there,” Zac nodded as he took off his mask, his appearance creating some waves among the congregated guides.

“Pureblood,” one of the Revenants whispered with a mix of dejection and envy, and the other guides sighed and walked away.

They might have been willing to compete for the assignment before, but they gave up when they saw Zac’s abyssal eyes. The noble races tended to stay with their own, and a half-blood Draugr was obviously better than a normal Revenant.

“I’m Nala. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Where do young master wish to go?” Nala asked, clearly having some trouble looking into Zac’s eyes. Perhaps she felt a bit pressured by speaking with a proper pureblood Draugr.

“I’m in no hurry, take us to some interesting places,” Zac said with a smile. “It’s not often I get to leave the clan.”

“Ah, if young master wishes to relieve stress during his stay, I am always available to accompany you. I also have connections with various Flower Houses. Someone with your grand heritage would be welcomed with the utmost of service,” Triskatal hurriedly said as Zac started walking away.

A communication crystal flew up from between her breasts the next moment, making its way toward Zac. However, the crystal disintegrated as Vilari sent a spiritual wave at it, making the Revenant grimace.

“That won’t be necessary,” Zac said as he walked away with Vilari silently walking in tow.

Zac emitted the aura of a Peak-E Grade warrior, but he was still just in the middle stages and his body was still solely powered by the black ichor sitting in his veins. Of course, Triv had actually divulged that there were compounds that could

temporarily awaken one's body, not only making amorous encounters but even pregnancy possible.

However, those kinds of zombie erection pills left behind quite a bit of pill poison, and indulging too much in them could even harm one's foundations.

"If the young master wishes to take in the sights of Twilight Harbor, how about a boat ride between the plateaus?" Nala ventured.

"Sounds good," Zac shrugged.

"The Twilight Harbor uses special vessels that are powered by the Twilight Clouds between the islands. I have a vessel," Nala said as she took out a decent-looking flying treasure. "I borrowed my family's ship. It is a bit low-end, there are better ones for rent as well."

"This one is fine, as long as it flies," Zac shrugged as he walked aboard.

Vilari gave the square a last look before she walked over and sat down next to Zac. Nala hurriedly jumped on as well, instructing the small vessel to lift off. The ship rose from the platform, and Zac realized it wasn't actually covered by a barrier. Even then, he definitely felt he was inside a proper atmosphere, making him believe the whole harbor was covered in a massive atmospheric bubble.

The mysterious clouds didn't seem to be able to reach the platforms though, but they rather formed what looked like rivers of stardust between the various islands. There were two separate types of rivers. One was the familiar cold aquamarine of Miasma, while the other was a much warmer yellow river.

It was clear that the rivers stemmed from the anomaly in the center of the Twilight Harbor, but Zac was interested to note that the anomaly was neither aquamarine nor yellow, nor a mix of them. It rather was rather a murky gold that rather leaned toward green, and it didn't change whether it emitted the feeling of life or death.

Nala steered the flying vessel to float on top of one of the miasmatic rivers, Zac could feel that it actually helped the ship

pick up speed. However, they only moved for a few thousand meters before the ship slowed down until it came to a crawl.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked.

“I, ah, haven’t really given any tours so far, so I was trying to map out a good route,” Nala said with embarrassment.

“That’s fine, that’s partly was why I hired you,” Zac laughed.

Zac wasn’t lying. Some things didn’t change even when comparing pre-integration Earth and the Multiverse. The guides in metropolises like this were very much like the tourist guides back home. They would take you to all kinds of stores where they had “connections” where their business partners waited to sell you low-quality items at a premium.

A greenhorn was more likely to bring him to proper establishments since she hadn’t had time to build that kind of seedy network, and with her Father’s connections, Zac believed she should have a good understanding of the comings and goings of this place.

“How about this, take me to some place where I can sit down and enjoy some incense for an hour or two. I don’t want any of those kinds of services, just a calm environment for us to stabilize after a long teleportation,” Zac said, noting that Vilari’s aura was still a bit unstable.

“Certainly! There is a highly reputable Incencary run by the Sharva’Zi Clan not far from here. It provides a great view of the Twilight Ocean as well. I believe it would be up to young master’s requirements,”

“The Sharva’Zi family?!” Zac blurted with surprise, but he quickly reigned in himself. “Do you know if anyone of them are here?”

“That is beyond me. Perhaps some have come for the Twilight Ascent, but the imperial clans usually only have a few branch members stationed here to run their businesses,” Nala said, clearly trying to avoid reading into Zac’s reaction. “Most of those who work there are natives.”

Zac finally understood what had brought Catheya here while traveling with her master. It sounded like she had stopped by

to look into their interests before moving on. Meeting Catheya was not something he had planned, but he also was a bit curious if she was here. He guessed it depended on whether her master had emerged from his seclusion back in the Zecia sector.

He had a completely different aura while undead and a new appearance with the help of [**Million Faces**] to make him look more like a natural Draugr, and Catheya shouldn't be able to recognize him even if they came face to face. He also had one simple thing working for him; the fact that it was so ludicrous that someone could be both a Draugr and a Human that no one would even think of such a possibility.

But even then, there was no point in playing with fire.

"I am here incognito under my master's orders, and I don't want to make my presence known. I think it's best if we visit another establishment," Zac slowly said.

"Certainly, I know of many more such establishments," Nala quickly nodded. "Millions of people have come here for the Twilight Ascent, and many are using temporary identities. After all, when there are benefits there will be competition, and no one wants to bring grudges back to their clans."

"Good," Zac nodded.

The boat moved slowly toward a plateau two disks over, and it was clearly controlled by the undead. Occasionally, Nala would have the flying vessel fly over to another river heading in the right direction, and she rarely flew through the void itself. Zac first felt they were moving quite slowly along the energy rivers, but he soon realized that the speed was deceptive.

They passed a whole disk in just thirty minutes, and even the smallest disks were dozens of times larger than his island back home. The one they had passed was large as well, and he had seen whole mountain ranges flash by in minutes. That meant Nala's dingy flying treasure was actually flying more than ten times as fast as his own leaf, something that was hard to believe considering the guide's apparent economic situation along with her strength.

“The leading clans have installed special arrays in Twilight Harbor,” Nala explained as she looked down on her flying treasure with some embarrassment. “This treasure is just average as young master guessed, but space is shrunk a hundred times along these Twilight rivers, allowing for easier travel between world disks. There are teleporters as well, but outsiders cannot use them.”

“I’m surprised to see these kinds of arrangements in a frontier sector,” Vilari said to hide Zac’s ignorance.

“It is because a lot of the factions here have powerful backings from elsewhere. Their economic background can’t be compared to normal local factions in a frontier sector. The Twilight Ocean is what truly makes it possible though since it unceasingly expels energy into the area,” Nala said and pointed to a glowing object beneath them.

“How about you introduce this place to me? My master simply handed me a Teleportation Token and told me there would be opportunities in a place called Twilight Harbor, but he didn’t say much else,” Zac said. “What’s the Twilight Ocean?”

“Ah, so it’s like that,” Nala said with surprise. “The sphere down there is the Twilight Ocean, or rather the entrance to it. It’s closed right now, but it is still discharging enormous amounts of Miasma and Cosmic Energy. That’s the whole basis of Twilight Harbor.”

Zac hummed in understanding, a bit surprised to hear that the star itself was the ocean. He had just assumed it was the nebulous clouds and the Twilight Rivers were the oceans, and the platforms the harbor.

“Is that star why this place holds mixed races?”

“Yes,” Nala said. “The Twilight Ocean expels both life- and death-attuned energies, and unless both sides are present to absorb it, then the atmosphere will slowly become imbalanced.”

“What is the Twilight Ocean?” Zac asked curiously. “A mystic realm? Or an aberrant star?”

“It is a supreme grade Mystic Realm from what I have heard, and the place where the Twilight Ascent is being held. The Twilight Lord founded this place, and his descendant is still officially in charge of the ocean,” Nala said before she lowered her voice. “Of course, many of the ancient clans have great influence in this place, with the current generation Twilight Lord mainly focusing on his cultivation. He hasn’t actually been seen for almost a thirty thousand years now, and many think he is preparing to assault Peak C-Grade.”

Zac was about to ask some more questions, but they had almost reached their destination by that point - one of the world disks that had to be the home of billions of cultivators.

Chapter 685: Old Friend

Nala had taken them to a medium-sized disk with millions of elegant spires reaching toward the stars. There were also whole towns and enormous settlements erected on platforms between some of the larger spires, forming a multi-layered society that stretched thousands of meters into the air. It looked like a normal metropolis for people of mixed heritage, rather than something belonging to a singular force.

Interestingly enough, the disk had structures built both on the top and on bottom surfaces, and it had a far greater slant compared to most disks to allow both sides to be angled toward the Twilight Ocean. On the bottom, there were even more towers that were reminiscent of stalactites. There were some hanging cities as well, though Nala flew toward a particular tower that looked like a hanging garden basking in the radiance of Twilight.

“This is Gaun’s Escape, a mixed disk controlled by a consortium of 12 Undead Factions, six local and six foreign. That’s a rule set by the Twilight Lord. Foreign factions are only allowed to control a third of the disks, but they can have control of up to half ownership on another third. That way the power balance between local and foreign is evenly divided,” Nala explained, after which she lowered her voice. “Of course, if it comes down to it, the foreign factions are more powerful, and there are many hidden alliances.”

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. There was the saying that even a dragon can’t suppress the local snake, but Zac didn’t feel it to be true. If those Imperial clans really wanted this place they would long have seized it, but the benefits likely didn’t match the costs.

“I’ll wait outside, young master,” Nala said as she stopped in front of the grand entrance to the Incensary.

“Come with us,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “How will you explain the situation in this place from out here.”

“Ah, but this establishment,” Nala hesitated as she glanced at a plaque.

Zac looked over and he immediately understood what she was talking about. Just a balcony cost 100 E-grade Nexus Coins, and ordering some Spiritual Incense was even more. A short visit to this place would eclipse Nala’s whole salary.

It looked like a Metropolis really had Metropolis prices.

“I’ll pay of course,” Zac said as he walked inside.

His appearance caused some waves, and the regular waitress was immediately recalled as to let a head waiter lead Zac to a beautiful private balcony at the edge of the plateau. It was over a hundred square meters and furnished to look like a celestial garden full of white and black flowers Zac had never seen before. Zac and Vilari sat down at a table close to the edge, where they could overlook the Twilight Ocean and the ships sailing by on the hundreds of rivers.

Zac exchanged a few words with the waiter, and he came with a packet a minute later and carefully started a small fire on a stove in the middle of the table. An azure flame lit up from the brazier, and Zac felt a soothing sensation spread throughout his body as he was inundated in a herbal haze.

The undead had truly mastered the art of incense after being locked out of most other vices until later stages. The herb mixture he had ordered did not only smell amazing, but it also had impressive medical properties. It felt like his cells were covered in a soothing stream, allowing them to calm down and stabilize after the extremely long teleportation.

Nala didn’t seem as calm, and Zac had to exhort her to sit down at the table.

“So, give me a rundown of the major factions in this place,” Zac said after having enjoyed the smoke and the view for a few minutes.

“Yes, certainly. As I mentioned, The Twilight Lord is the supposed leader of Twilight Harbor, but he does not control a

real faction. He has a few thousand ‘brothers’ as he calls it, various wandering cultivators who run errands for him. However, even the weakest of among them is an elite E-Grade cultivator.

“But the actual controlling organ is the Twilight Council, an executive branch made up of thirteen native clans. They are in charge of security, tax collection, and so on, though they are officially under the Twilight Lord himself.

“These thirteen clans are all C-Grade forces with 5 undead factions, 6 living factions, and two aberrant factions. The aberrants are the necromancy council and the Rox’At Elementals. The members of the Necromancer’s Guild are technically living, but they naturally lean toward our side. The elementals are their own type of lifeforms and could be considered neutral.

“How many C-Grade forces are in this place?” Zac asked with a small frown.

“Around 50, with the council members being the strongest. Of course, that’s just officially. There are both wandering Monarchs living here temporarily and hidden Monarchs among the foreign factions as well,” Nala explained.

“We Imperials should be putting some pressure on the living even if we are outsiders. There should be a counterforce to our presence here,” Zac said. “Who is it?”

“You’re exactly right,” Nala nodded. “There are two forces actually. One is the Radiant Temple, and the other is the Havarok Empire. Both are B-grade factions with their headquarters in more prosperous sections of the multiverse. Their presence here is actually a bit greater than the Undead Empire’s, but they are not of one mind and have some internal disagreements.”

“But if the Empire makes a move, these two will band together to resist us,” Zac muttered, receiving an affirmative nod.

“Just what’s so alluring about this place?” Zac eventually asked. “Why do these factions waste that sort of effort?”

“Well, one reason is that Twilight Harbor has become a major trading hub of the frontier sectors. All sorts of interesting items pop up as The Boundless Heavens integrates the uncharted reaches, and many of them make their way here. It’s a convenient place for those above to extract the true treasures of these Sectors without having to travel all over the frontier,” Nala said. “The second reason is the Twilight Ocean.”

“Isn’t it just another Mystic Realm Trial Ground?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Well, it does present a good opportunity for people like the young master to temper themselves, along with the opportunity to gain a high-quality Limited Title,” Nala said. “But the Mystic Realm also has some rarely-seen properties that attract cultivators from far and wide.”

“Does it have to do with how it expels both Miasma and Cosmic Energy?” Zac asked.

“Just so,” Nala said as she looked down at the glowing orb. “Many believe that the Twilight Ocean was created by two enormous Mystic Realms colliding, one life-attuned and one death-attuned. It resulted in the twilight Ocean.

“That by itself is a miracle, but more interestingly it created new energy; Twilight Energy. It is a mix of life and death,” the guide continued.

“Is that really possible?!” Zac asked, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Perhaps only the Monarchs know how it is possible,” Nala said. “But the Twilight Energy can’t leave the Mystic Realm. The moment it escapes the spatial tunnel it splits up to normal energy, which is what enriches this area. The energy is then funneled to the various platforms through the Twilight Rivers.”

“The Twilight Energy has given birth to various treasures that are useful for both the living and undead,” the guide explained. “Most notable are the Twilight Fruits.”

“What’s their effect?” Zac asked curiously.

“They are used as an ancillary product for pill- and incense-making. They contain the odd reconciliatory effect of Twilight Energy, and they are extremely useful in helping fuse incompatible materials,” Nala said. “They can both make impossible recipes possible, or increase the success rate of recipes with high failure rates. They are a favorite among Alchemists in the inner sectors.”

Zac’s eyes widened when he heard about the properties of Twilight Fruits. Having that kind of effect was amazing, and he could understand how it was so sought-after. It might not matter much for random healing pills, but supreme pills often had extremely high failure rates. Add to that the cost of materials, and you could save a fortune by using these fruits.

“What grade are the fruits?” Zac asked.

“The Twilight Ocean has been grade restricted by The Boundless Heavens, and the Twilight Fruits match the grade. And the grade of the fruit has to match the grade of the pill. The most precious fruits are therefore the C-Grade Twilight Fruits, but they rarely appear on the market,” Nala said.

“What does an E-Grade Twilight Fruit go for?” Zac asked.

“Around 100 E-grade Nexus Coins after a Twilight Ascent,” Nala said, and Zac’s interest was quickly extinguished. “But the price can rise to almost 300 if it has been long since the last opening.”

It was a lot of money, but it would barely make a dent in Zac’s finances. Nala seemed to understand his thoughts and she quickly continued.

“The use of E-Grade Fruits is limited because there is no lack of D-Grade Alchemists who can concoct even difficult E-Grade pills with high success rate. The value of D-Grade fruits is exponentially higher. However, there is another reason to pluck the fruits,” she added.

“What?” Zac asked curiously.

“The council and the large mercantile unions all want to make sure that as many fruits as possible are extracted on every opening. So, they have something called the ‘Fate-Plucking

Ladder'. The more fruits you pluck the higher your placement. As is customary, there are also extremely valuable rewards for those who perform well," the guide explained.

"Can you kill others for fruits inside the Mystic Realm?" Zac asked.

"Yes, there are no limitations except the grades. Weaker cultivators usually stay closer to the entrance. There are fewer fruits and other treasures, but the odds of running into a powerhouse is a lot lower," Nala said. "In fact, I have prepared a crystal here with the information my father has prepared as part of my services."

"Oh?" Zac said as he accepted the information crystal.

He briefly scanned the crystal and saw that it contained all kinds of tips and tricks for the Twilight Ascent, and he felt that her somewhat high price might actually be pretty cheap when it came down to it. There were even old ladders provided, and Zac was a bit surprised to see that you needed to gather over ten thousand fruits to make it into the top ten of the E-Grade ladder.

That by itself was over a D-grade Nexus Coin, a massive fortune for most E-Grade warriors. Of course, those who managed to gather that many fruits were definitely extremely powerful cultivators at the peak of E-Grade, just one step away from evolving. For them, the real reward would probably be the items from the event itself.

Vilari and Nala sat in silence as Zac perused the crystal, but he didn't manage to get far before he frowned and quickly put on his mask again.

"I'm sad. I heard an old friend had come to this corner of the universe, yet he chose to go to this place instead of visiting me," an all-too-familiar voice suddenly emerged from the entrance to the balcony, causing Zac's hair to stand on end as he looked up from the crystal.

It looked like some things really couldn't be avoided.

Zac looked over toward the door to his balcony, and it truly was Catheya Sharva'Zi who had appeared out of nowhere,

with Varo silently standing behind her. This time she was also accompanied by a female Revenant that looked bulkier than most Corpse Lords. She even had a foot on Billy, and Zac suspected that she might actually be a turned pureblood Titan.

The muscular cultivator was definitely not in the D-Grade, but she should be at the very precipice with great accumulations. Even Zac didn't feel confident in a contest of pure strength against her, though that was just one of his advantages.

That wasn't the only surprise as both Catheya's and Varo's auras had taken a drastic turn. They might not be at the peak of E-Grade, but they had to be at High E-grade from what he could tell. Zac could only inwardly lament at the difference it made to have a C-grade master. He had no doubt prepared some sort of course for his disciple to rapidly push her and her follower through the early stages of the grade.

After all, that was how most elites did it from how Zac understood things. Levels were easy to gain in the early grades and they helped increase survivability in Mystic Realms. So people rushed through levels to gain the class quests and attributes, then slowing down to work on their Daos and cultivation path.

The only detriment to that tactic was that some lost their momentum while working on their Dao, but elite cultivators had enough discipline for that to not become a real issue.

"Nala, could you give us a moment," Zac said as he looked over at his guide.

Nala already seemed to want to shrink through the floor upon being stared at by Catheya and her followers. She quickly nodded and scurried out of the balcony, only stopping to give a deep bow toward Catheya before hurrying out. Catheya only glanced at her as she waited for Nala to leave the area.

Only then did Catheya walk forward and sit down. She did give Vilari a curious glance, but she soon turned her focus to Zac.

"I expected to find a human named Zac Piker resting here, yet I've run into two undead. Tell me, who are you?" Catheya said

with a slight smile as looked Zac up and down, but there was a dangerous glint in her pitch-black eyes. “And don’t play dumb. The dust left off from the token is still all over you.”

Zac sighed as he took off his mask, exposing his abyssal eyes and a finely sculpted pearl-white face. It had almost perfect proportions, a mix of masculinity and grace. Zac had aimed for ‘warrior elf’ when he crafted his current face with [**Million Faces**], forming a more believable appearance with the help of Triv. He was also almost a decimeter taller than his real stature, which was the limit he could change without feeling it affect his combat strength.

It turned out that Zac’s normal appearance was simply too ugly to pass off as a proper pureblood Draugr, even after having pushed his human race to D-Grade and enjoying the slight natural boost to his appearance. Real Draugr wasn’t really at the level of Vampires in the movies, but they definitely wouldn’t be described as “average-looking.”

Zac had eventually landed on a particular look that was distinct from his human face. He was completely clean-shaven since Draugr apparently didn’t have beards, and he had changed his hair color to slightly dark grey which was held back in a warrior’s knot. It made him slightly different compared to the bright silver of Be’Zi and Catheya.

His transformation skill physically altered his bone structure and skin, so there was no risk for his real appearance to be exposed. At most, someone might figure out his appearance was modified without spotting the original. And Zac had practiced giving himself this particular face hundreds of times to make it his own.

He felt confident that not even the members of Port Atwood would be able to pick him out looking like this, let alone Catheya.

“I suppose you are Catheya Sharva’Zi, the one who assisted my Junior Brother?” Zac said with a sigh. “We should have guessed you branded the token.”

In fact, Zac had seen it as a distinct possibility that they would do something exactly like that, which was why he had changed

his appearance and come up with a lie in advance. Of course, he had also believed that if he was marked, he would have been visited by some of Catheya's followers rather than Catheya herself.

There was always a small chance of Catheya actually being here, but he figured that someone like her wouldn't visit the same place in a frontier sector twice. But he should have guessed she would pop up here after learning about the Twilight Ascent.

Meeting her as his undead persona would complicate things, but there was not much to do about it. He needed to come to Twilight Harbor as an undead because he needed resources, and it was definitely the right call after seeing how segregated the Twilight Harbor was.

"Pureblood," the Titan Revenant muttered with surprise before she glanced speculatively at her master.

"Who are you? I can't recognize your aura at all. There's no way you're part of those half-blood clans in the Zecia sector," Catheya said with a frown. "But I don't remember any heritage from back home giving off the same scent as you either."

"Well, I'm not part of the Empire, so I'm not surprised," Zac smiled, but he was surprised at how strong a reaction Catheya and her followers had. "And you can call me Arcaz Black."

"Impossible!" Catheya spat. "You're a true pureblood, nothing like these unattached half-blood clans. How do you not have the mark of the Primo?!"

Zac knew he would have been exposed in no time if he pretended to be part of the Undead Empire since his knowledge was just at surface level. He figured it wouldn't be a big deal considering there were Draugr-clans native to the Twilight Harbor. But it looked like there was a stark difference between pure-blood and half-blood clans.

In either case, there was no stopping now, so Zac could just brush it aside.

“Well, my background is a bit complicated, I see no reason to go into detail. What brings you here?” Zac shrugged.

“Where is Zac Piker?” Catheya asked in return.

“Busy cultivating I assume,” Zac said, trying to appear laid-back.

“Well, that’s a disappointment, but it was just a spur-of-the-moment thing anyway,” Catheya muttered thoughtfully before she looked at Zac with a spurious smile.

“So, why shouldn’t I turn you over to some enforcers of the Empire?” Catheya asked with a smile. “A pureblood Draugr of unknown heritage running around without any connection to his roots. Who knows what kind of trouble that might bring?”

Chapter 686: Lies and Propositions

“Turn me in?” Zac smiled, though he inwardly didn’t feel as confident.

He had already confirmed with Triv that not being attached wasn’t a crime, but that was just the official ruleset. Zac wouldn’t be surprised if some hardliners within the Empire wanted to eradicate everyone who didn’t pledge allegiance to their God Emperor the Primo.

Zac tried to gauge whether Catheya was serious or just probing him in search of information, but he didn’t get anything from her smiling facade. Varo, her staid attendant, didn’t provide any guidance either as his face was as wooden as when they met in the Base Town. Only the Titan displayed open hostility, but Zac felt it was more of a character trait than a testament to her true feelings.

It looked like he would have to channel his inner Ogras for a bit, and if that failed he could always book it with his escape talisman.

“Are you sure that’s in your best interest?” Zac shrugged with a lazy expression. “Are you really willing to become the sinner of your clan? In fact, I think you’ll become my most ardent protector.”

“Ardent protector? The sinner of my clan?” Catheya said, her glistening smile widening. “How bombastic. Perhaps I should just drag you back to the clan to let the elders decide your fate? That way I won’t be responsible for the fall-out.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd I dared come to this remote place alone, even with my complicated background?” Zac sighed. “I knew there was a risk using your token, so I made some preparations of my own. If something happens to me or Vilari

here, a few very damaging information missives will find their way to various intelligence houses and clans.”

“Missives?” Catheya repeated with a raised brow.

“Missives detailing an illicit affair between an Aetherlord and a Draugr Autarch from the Heartlands. Giving up on the commandments for love and pursuit of their boundless path,” Zac laughed. “I don’t know if Mistress Be’Zi’s actions can be considered illegal, but I am sure the facts can be used against Clan Sharva’Zi by competing factions.”

“And you would just be willing to throw my ancestor under the bus?” Catheya snorted as the brows of the Titan furrowed. “Are you not afraid you’d become an exile?”

“She casts such a long shadow, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind me using her name to protect myself,” Zac shrugged.

The situation had been tense ever since Catheya entered the balcony, but it was like the temperature dropped over twenty degrees as the group said steeped in silence. What he was doing was a calculated gamble based on what little he knew of the Undead Empire. They all followed Heaven’s Path as far as Zac could tell, and someone becoming an unorthodox cultivator was probably not as simple as just changing path.

He was betting that Be’Zi had somehow managed to cut her connection to the Primo and the Empire, allowing her to take a path of her own.

“Alright, alright. No need to get so tense over a little joke. After all, aren’t we all friends?” Catheya said with a helpless sigh, like she was trying to entertain an unappreciative audience. “We are connected, that’s why I gave your… junior brother, the token.”

“In fact, I think I understand things a bit better now,” Catheya added as she pointedly looked at the markings on Vilari’s face.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief, feeling he had passed the first hurdle. However, he was still primed for an ambush, ready to conjure a massive Annihilation Sphere at moment’s notice. The energy had been expended upon his first Reincarnation, but he had already accumulated a decent

stockpile of energy. He was confident that he would be able to blast these people to kingdom come if needed.

“Well, I guess I don’t understand the humor of Imperials,” Zac shrugged. “You came looking for my Junior Brother. Why?”

“Well, most of it was curiosity. I heard some interesting things before I left the Zecia Sector,” Catheya coughed, which caused the Titan to snicker. “I also came here to give him a proposition if his strength matched the requirements. But I feel you might be an even better fit.”

“A proposition?” Zac frowned, but he quickly understood what was going on. “The Twilight Ascent?”

“Just so. I am looking for a few skilled members to join me in exploring the Twilight Ocean,” Catheya said. “I think you’d fit the bill perfectly.”

Zac was a bit thrown off by how quickly Catheya went from threatening him to extending an olive branch, but he soon found his bearings again. Exploring the Twilight Ocean was already something he had set his sights on, but he hadn’t planned on teaming up with others. Especially not people who might be a threat to him.

“Why would I want to do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Well, first of all, I can give you a spot through my clan, allowing you to skip that time-consuming tournament to win a spot. I think that would be preferable to you as well, since the bigshots are actually scanning those participants for all kinds of things. I guess you want to stay incognito since you technically aren’t on either our side or the side of the living, no?” Catheya smiled.

“Not being part of the Empire doesn’t mean I’m not on the side of the unliving. And what interest do you have in the Twilight Ascent? I don’t believe that the disciple of a C-Grade Monarch is so hard up for cash that she needs to go risk her life for some Twilight Fruits,” Zac asked.

“Well, those fruits are something with constant demand and no steady supply, making them something useful to have. But I am more interested in something else. The real treasures can

be found in the depths of the Twilight Ocean. There are all kinds of valuables there. Some of them are so rare they'd even result in a bidding war between Hegemons," Catheya explained.

Zac's interest was immediately piqued. The rewards for the Fate-Plucking Ladder were pretty good, but Zac wasn't sure if spending years desperately trying to get a good position was worth the time investment. But someone like Catheya probably knew the real scoop that couldn't be found in Nala's crystal, the hidden benefits that made even wealthy scions such as her interested in taking the plunge.

"I am aiming for one particular natural treasure; Life-Death Pearls. They are treasures that can't be taken outside, but they can allow you to save years of meditation into Daos related to Life and Death, making them especially valuable to us undead," Catheya explained.

"So it's a Dao treasure?" Zac asked.

"Well not quite," Catheya said. "It's more like a Dao Impartment. You have greater control over the inspiration you'd gain."

Zac was barely able to keep his face impassive when he heard about their effect, and he was lucky his heart didn't beat in his current form. Life-Death Pearls, weren't they essentially specially tailored Dao Treasures for him? With his progress having come to a stand-still since Earth ran out of Origin Dao, these were exactly the kind of items he needed.

However, nothing ever came for free, and it was suspicious that Catheya was looking for helpers to farm these pearls. Why share if you could keep them for yourself? There was definitely something going on.

"Since we're fated I can let you in on a secret only known to the peak factions," Catheya added with a mysterious smile, clearly well aware that she had him on the hook. "The Twilight Ascent's internal quest for a Limited Title is random, but it is always related to one of four categories; Dao, Slaughter, Treasure, Exploration. This time it will be related to Dao, which makes the pearls doubly valuable."

“Why would you need my assistance? You already have helpers,” Zac asked, forcibly restraining himself from jumping onboard blindly. “What’s the catch?”

“Well, for one there are dangerous beasts in the depths of the Twilight Descent. Secondly, there are the other trial takers to worry about, and you need some allies to make sure you don’t get overrun,” Catheya shrugged. “But more importantly, there are some unique restrictions in place in the Twilight Ocean, and I need some capable helpers to deal with it.”

“Oh?”

“Twilight Energy is not natural, it’s a fusion of life and death. Absorbing it is like drinking tainted water,” Catheya explained.

“Why not just block it out and live on Miasma Crystals?” Zac asked skeptically.

“It is pervasive, and for some reason invasive to boot. Keeping it away for any stretch of time is nigh-impossible, it keeps finding ways back as though it was alive. It also grows stronger the further you travel,” Catheya sighed. “Thankfully, my master has provided me with something to help weaken the effect. But that treasure is too difficult to activate alone, so I need to assemble a small group of elites. Each person will run the shielding array for a few hours before we switch.”

“Why not switch between the three of you?” Zac asked as he glanced at Catheya’s two companions.

“We need multiple different Daos to cycle through the array. Too few, and the environment will adapt,” Varo spoke up to explain.

“That’s pretty weird,” Zac muttered.

“The world is full of weird unexplainable things,” Catheya shrugged in response. “My master estimates that it would take us three months to reach the location of the pearls, provided nothing goes wrong. After that, you’d be free to look for opportunities of your own.”

“What’s in it for me?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “What’s the split? And why shouldn’t I just go alone now that I know

about the pearls and the quest?”

The Titan glared at Zac like she wanted to rip him apart, but Catheya only smiled as she patted her follower’s arm.

“You’re free to walk away,” Catheya smiled. “But there are usually less than 100 pearls per trial. Without any special methods of locating them, you could swim back and forth for decades without any results. Besides, even if you reached the depths but you would probably be pretty weakened by the environment. What if you met a group like mine, where we have a handful of members who are not weakened by the restrictions?”

Zac ignored the thinly veiled threat and instead tried to sort out the information. It was a shame that Catheya didn’t arrive an hour later, after he’d been able to learn more about the trial. But provided she was telling the truth, going in a small elite group might be the best way to get his hands on the better items inside.

Of course, he could always go at it himself and pray that his high Luck would pull through for him again.

“Going with us, you have a good chance at getting your hands on a good number of fruits. Our side will take the first ten fruits, after which we will split the remainder equally,” Catheya continued when she saw Zac hesitate. “A handful of these fruits will give you a leg-up on the rest of the trial, no matter what your plans are.

“You can go alone, but with your current strength, you wouldn’t make it past the middle reaches of the ocean,” the hulking revenant added with a raised brow. “The best treasures would be out of reach for you.”

“How do you figure?” Zac asked.

“I can tell that you are somewhere between Middle and High E-grade, with extremely deep accumulations. But you are also definitely young, even younger than me. I doubt you have any Dao Branches yet? What if you meet a level 150 elite from one of the three Empires, one who’s wielding a Middle-Stage Dao Branch? Can you deal with that alone?” Catheya asked.

Zac wanted to say yes, but he inwardly knew the truth. It was impossible, at least unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. An Early-Stage Dao Branch was more powerful and provided more attributes than all three of his Daos combined. A Middle-Stage would absolutely steamroll him even if he had an attribute superiority.

Not to mention that someone sitting on such Dao insights in the E-grade definitely had a slew of other advantages.

“That’s why people like us need to team up if we want to enter the inner reaches. There is safety in numbers,” Catheya said.

Zac was full of hesitation, but he eventually made a decision. He’d go along with Catheya for now. If things seemed suspicious he’d make a run for it, no matter if it was in ten minutes or after they had entered the trial. But first, there were some benefits to eke out.

“Well, I can join your group, but you’ll have to provide me with three things in addition to the deal you proposed,” Zac slowly said.

“Don’t overextend yourself,” the Titan Revenant growled. “It’s not like you’re irreplaceable.”

“She’s welcome to say no, but something is telling me that I’m not as replaceable as she says. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be looking for some random stranger like me or my Junior Brother to assist her,” Zac grinned

Catheya neither confirmed nor denied Zac’s guess, but he felt he was onto something. The Twilight Ascent was a System-sanctioned trial, which meant that the realm was most likely slightly adjusted to create a better testing ground. From his quick scan of the crystal, Zac had already confirmed that the trial was grade-restricted, but he guessed that elites had some sort of advantage.

Perhaps Attribute Efficiency helped reduce the restrictive properties Catheya mentioned, allowing them to fight more efficiently in the depths? Or perhaps she was looking for outsiders since the elites in the Twilight Harbor might hold hidden alliances of their own.

“Remember, you are still here as a guest of Eldritch Archivals, and you would need to prolong your stay through them,” Varo added, clearly to put some pressure on him. “Without mistress’s blessing, you would be forced to leave the Twilight Harbor before the event even started.”

“That leads me to my first requirement. Seeing as you want to employ me, you will have to provide me with basic amenities along with taking care of the costs to prolong my stay,” Zac said.

“That is no problem,” Catheya agreed without hesitation.

“Secondly, I want to choose three of your E-Grade skills from the VIP-Section of the Eldritch Archivals. Free of Charge,” Zac said.

Zac had already learned of the true nature of the Eldritch Archivals after covertly probing Nala. It was actually one of the top five public Dao Repositories in the Twilight Harbor, among the undead forces that is. It was no doubt one of Clan Sharva’Zi’s main businesses in the harbor, considering it was their token Catheya had provided him with.

“Audacious! The VIP-Section only holds high-quality skills and greater! They’re almost priceless,” the Titan roared.

“They’re still ultimately just E-Grade skills. They can’t be considered priceless,” Zac snorted.

“One. I can give you three skills in total, but only one can be from the inner sanctums. You can also pick two of the best skills of the normal high-end section,” Catheya slowly said.

“Not even I have a free reign of the skills in the sanctum. All of them are single-use inheritance crystals to guarantee originality. I can’t just hand them out left and right, I need to pay with family contribution points.”

Zac was inwardly elated to hear he could actually get his hands on one of the top-tier skills of what was either a B-grade force or at least a peak C-grade Clan. He wasn’t surprised to hear the skills were single-use inheritance crystals though. After all, who would want to pay an arm and a leg for a skill if

the Skill Repository kept selling them as quickly as they could replicate them?

Inheritance Crystals were something he had learned about from Calrin not long ago after he started preparing for his skill fusion. The most common skill crystals were the small ones that someone, or the System, had imprinted with a copy of the skill fractal. It usually worked 1 to 3 times, after which it broke apart.

More than a few cultivators created these crystals as a side-income, though copied skills almost invariably lost some of their quality compared to when they were provided by the System itself or if they were self-created.

Second most common were the crystals Zac had in his Dao Repository. These much larger skill crystals could be used continuously, as long as the crystals were allowed to slowly recuperate and slowly absorb energy after every use. Both these crystals had one thing in common though; with enough time and effort, you could create an endless number of these skill crystals.

It was different for Inheritance Crystals though. To create an inheritance crystal you needed to physically take your Skill Fractal and infuse it into a crystal while splitting off a part of your soul, the part containing all your insights and comprehensions of the skill. In other words, you would lose the skill forever, and you would even ruin the skill slot in your body.

These crystals provided various benefits compared to normal skill crystals. First of all, you were pretty much guaranteed originality. It was like you inherited the skill from a predecessor, and no one else would be able to buy it. These crystals weren't transcribed as well, so there was no loss in quality like with the other two types of crystals.

Furthermore, the skill came with a lot of insights from the get-go. If your comprehension was good, you might even be able to push it to Middle Proficiency instantly.

The downside was obviously the huge cost of creating them. They would essentially cripple a cultivator, and apparently, it

wasn't possible to create them on your deathbed when your soul was weakened and your memories of the skill were blurry. It required you to do it yourself when you were at your peak.

There was one more method to acquire them though, and this was the most common method of gathering them. There was an extremely small chance of an inheritance crystal forming inside the body of a corpse. So massive factions would continuously gain a few inheritance crystals as the previous generations departed, but the demand always far outstripped the supply.

For Zac to get his hands on such a rare commodity was an unexpected gain, but he understood he couldn't push it much further judging by the look on Catheya's face. Still, there was one more thing that he desperately needed, something he wasn't confident that his Draugr heritage was enough to provide.

"Third, there should be some top-tier auctions taking place before the Twilight Ascent. I want access."

"There is one next week," Catheya smiled. "I was planning on going, so how about we make an outing out of it. So, do we have an agreement?"

"Happy to work together."

Chapter 687: Pursuit of Eternity

Exquisite chimes danced in the air and echoed with the hints of the grand Dao as Va Tapek walked into the vast hall that doubled as an observation deck. He was met with a refreshing gust medicinal aroma after taking just one step inside. Va briefly scanned the hall, seeing there were four Perennial Braziers burning, each of them releasing smoke of a different color.

Va Tapek took a deep breath, and felt his cells opening, greedily swallowing the dense medicinal and spiritual energy that suffused the air. Ylavian Bloodroot, Gelasan, dried bones of Abyssal Dominators. And those were just a few of the dozens of valuable materials that had been turned into incense for an empty hall.

Of course, materials like these wouldn't be enough to improve the cultivation of an advanced Monarch such as himself, but most E-Grade warriors would explode after just taking a whiff of this mist. Even if they survived, they would probably become lunatics, their minds broken by the extremely dense Dao markings hidden in the scent.

"I'm jealous. I knew that becoming an Earl was a lucrative venture, but I didn't expect it to be at this level," Va snorted as he looked at the closest brazier. "Burning a mountain of Nexus Coins every second even when you're just here as a spectral projection. Don't you have some disciples or descendants to waste all these treasures on?"

"Well, I have to maintain appearances," a masculine laugh echoed through the hall as the form of a cultivator congealed on top of a mat close to the enormous floor-to-ceiling window on the opposite side of the hall. "Besides, it is not like the

Sharva'Zi Clan has been mistreating you these years. Come, sit.”

Va Tapek only rolled his eyes as he teleported over to the other side of the hall, his movement causing a series of abstruse runes to appear among the medicinal clouds. He looked over to his benefactor, or rather the projection of him. Whether his real body still existed, not even Va Tapek knew.

The projection looked a lot like how Va Tapek remembered his old friend though. Chiseled features that spoke of indomitability and conviction. His robes hung loose and exposed a densely muscled torso covered in scars, and he sat in an unrestrained manner as usual. He still radiated that same haughty yet slightly lonely aura of a peak wandering cultivator who had emerged at the top after innumerable bloody encounters.

But there were some differences as well.

Most notably, his skin had taken on a slight greenish tint, like gold mixed with black. A second look proved that it was actually two sets of extremely minute runes that covered his skin, each of them smaller than a dot. One of the patterns held the secrets of Death, and the other seemed to be speaking to the heart of Life.

Va Tapek's aquamarine eyes turned to the star that took up most of the vision of the enormous windows in front of them; the Twilight Ocean. They were slowly becoming one.

“If you wanted to discard your Human ancestry, why not just come over to our side? I'm sure we'd be able to find a Blessed Land for you to awaken without giving up on your past,” Va Tapek said as he sat down.

“Bah, what's so good about being undead?” the man snorted. “Besides, if I did that, how would I be able to complete my plan? Speaking of, how did things go?”

“It took me some time, but I found it. The Zecia sector has changed a bit since you hid this thing,” Va Tapek said as he took out a box from his spatial ring.

“Great!” the man said, his eyes lighting up. “I was afraid it would have managed to break out after all these years. You didn’t get spotted, did you?”

“Shouldn’t have,” Va Tapek said with a shake of his head. “I was required to check in with the local Province, but I pretended to have an epiphany to not get entangled. I left a clone there in seclusion while my main body searched for the item. By the way, things are getting a bit heated over there.”

“I heard. Who would have thought that someone would conjure the Stele of Conflict in a frontier sector?” the man laughed. “It’s fine. Some bloodshed will cut the chaff and help purify the heritages. Did you arrange someone to assist me in marking the leyline?”

“Hm,” Va Tapek just said as he took out a bottle of liquor. “It is done.”

“Oh? How certain are you? Where did you find the helper?” the man asked with interest.

“It’s my disciple. She already has two passable followers, and she is currently in the process of hiring a few more,” Va Tapek said as an indulgent smile spread across his face.

“Your disciple? Isn’t she an Imperial? Will she really complete the task?” the man asked with a frown as the huge anomaly outside shuddered.

“She doesn’t know the purpose of why I sent her. She thinks she is fulfilling a task for the undead factions. You just need to provide the path she has to follow,” Va Tapek explained. “I’d appreciate it if you gave her one of the less precipitous paths though.”

“Of course. But even then, there will be dangers, and not just from the natives,” the man said with a pointed look. “You know my situation, I can’t intervene as I wish. Just creating these paths and divulging the treasures is pushing it.”

Know your situation? Va Tapek thought with some exasperation. *How is that possible? I’ve never heard of anyone doing what you’ve done, what you’re about to do.*

“It’s fine. Little Catheya has been a bit too carefree lately. She needs to take some risks if she wants to reach the next step,” Va Tapek said with a sigh. “Besides, you’re the one who’s truly in Danger. Your plan is crazy, even for you. Both the local clans and the empires will try to stop you. Others will try to seize the opportunity for themselves.”

“That’s what makes things so exciting,” the man laughed before he gave Va Tapek an inscrutable look. “What about you? Having last-minute doubts?”

“Always,” Va Tapek snorted as he got back on his feet. “But it’s worth it. Where else will an outsider such as myself be able to witness someone defending their Dao while building the first step to eternity?”

He looked at the celestial anomaly in the distance once more and he couldn’t help but smile with excitement. These kinds of chaotic events were rare. Those who survived would definitely have gained something.

“Besides, the frontier is growing a bit boring. Perhaps the reemergence of the Eveningtide Asura will shake things up a bit.”

A boisterous laugh echoed through the hall as Va Tapek left.

“Can we trust him?” Qirai asked with a frown as they entered the private areas of the Eldritch Archivals. “There’s something off about him.”

“What do you think, Varo?” Catheya smiled as she turned to her assistant.

“He’s dangerous... Very dangerous,” Varo said after some thought. “But as long as our interests align, it should be fine. If we want to kill him... All-out and without hesitation.”

“That guy? Dangerous?” Qirai snorted. “He is a pureblood, but his aura wasn’t anything special. One smash and he’s done for.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. The Twilight Ocean is big enough for everyone to drink their fill,” Catheya laughed, but she inwardly felt that Varo’s estimate was more incisive.

The group soon entered her private courtyard, and Varo activated a series of protective measures. Her branch might be the ones in control of the interests in Twilight Harbor, but there were definitely spies in the mix. No one would have expected that a place in a frontier sector would be so lucrative, rivaling even some of the core businesses back home.

Greedy eyes were definitely eyeing their wealth, and Catheya couldn't let anything happen. Her performance in the Tower of Eternity should elevate her status from a second-seed to first seed talent within the clan, perhaps even as soon as she returned.

But she was still lacking the accomplishments to cement her status as a talent to nurture. She believed that her performance in the Twilight Ascent could be the ticket to gain the top treatment among the Draugr youth.

And this mysterious Draugr might even be the key to becoming a Heaven's Chosen, someone wholeheartedly nurtured by the Empire. She couldn't explain why, but she trusted her instincts.

"It's odd," Catheya muttered.

"He felt like Zac Piker, yet not," Varo said, understanding his mistress' thoughts all too well.

"Exactly," Catheya agreed.

"Was it a human in a disguise?" Qirai asked curiously. "I couldn't tell."

"Possibly," Catheya nodded thoughtfully. "I couldn't sense anything off with his bloodline, and mimicking a Draugr is no easy feat. However, there were some points of suspicion. Also, his smell is off. Zac Piker was a pureblood human who carried the scent of Draug, while Arcaz is a Draugr with a lingering stench of humanity."

"You and your smells," Qirai muttered. "Perhaps it was that Deviant Asura who was a Draugr disguising as a human? That little attendant of his was very pretty, in a damaged kind of way. Perhaps that's why he asked for young females?"

“My nose is seldom wrong,” Catheya said. “And Zac Piker was definitely not undead. His skills, Dao, and energy teemed with life. He’d kill himself holding those kinds of energy inside his body. Well, we know where he lives now. I’ll ask master to scan him to make sure.

“The important thing is whether he can help us complete master’s task. Arcaz has definitely cultivated his soul, and he seems to have the multipliers of either a peak second seed or even a first-seed cultivator. You’ve seen the list of requirements master gave me. He’s the fourth candidate fulfilling them all after three months of searching, and the most promising one at that.”

“In regards to his demands...” Varo probed.

“Fulfill them,” Catheya said with a lazy wave. “It will cost a large chunk of my contribution points, but our gains will far surpass the cost as long as this mission is successful.”

“Even if he turns out to be a Dreamer?” Qirai asked hesitantly.

“It does not matter. He might be Zac Piker, a human with a connection to my Ancestor. He might be Arcaz, a pureblood Draugr with an attendant marked by the same primal type of destruction that Zac Piker released in the Base Town,” Catheya smiled. “In either case, it’s a promising investment. If the Matriarch ever returns, I think this connection might be enough to transform our fates.”

“I’ll arrange everything,” Varo nodded and started sending a few messages with a communication crystal.

“What do you want to do about the other candidates?” Qirai asked.

“Two more should do it if Arcaz is as useful as I feel he is, but it’s best to get three,” Catheya mused. “What about the letters I sent out?”

“Ravan has accepted. A few have expressed interest but most haven’t put forth any clear commitments. They seem to be holding out for greater benefits. Troker has declined,” Varo said.

“What, why?” Catheya asked with a frown.

Troker was her first choice for a group member until this Arcaz appeared. He was a powerful mentalist, and they had worked together before when she visited this place last time. He had both powerful scouting capabilities and his spiritual Domain Skill could lessen the effect of the suppression of the Twilight Energy.

“Someone from the Eternal Clan has hired him as a guide,” Varo said. “They seem to have agreed to take him to the Heartlands afterward. We can’t compete with their offer with our current resources.”

“Ah, those bloodsuckers are here?” Catheya exclaimed with some shock. “I thought most of them were busy warring against the Buddhist Sangha all the way over by the Cosmic River?”

The eternal clan had few members, just a few percent of the Draugr population, but they wholeheartedly nurtured each and every member. The average strength among their youths was at the second tier, and the degree of supreme talents that appeared in their ranks were far greater than most Draugr clans.

There was not much to be done about it. Their ancestors required less than half the cultivation resources compared to the Draugr ancestors for some reason, which meant that they had massive reserves to spend on their young. The reason for this advantage was a secret those bloodsuckers guarded with their lives, much to the annoyance of the other Divine Races.

“Supposedly, one of the branches returned to the Heartlands to attend some family event and learned about the opening of the Twilight Ocean. A few youths decided to come here for a quick adventure before returning,” Varo said.

“Like hell they are,” Qirai snorted with anger. “Those crafty bastards would never do anything just for the fun of it.”

“There are more reports,” Varo added. “There are rumors of Heaven’s Chosen among from the Radiant temple having arrived. I have not found any clues about movement from the Havarok Empire, but if two of them are moving...”

Catheya nodded with a sigh. If the Eternal Clan was coming, then they were planning something. The Eternal Clan and the real peak factions among the Draugr had never cared about this remote sector, which was what allowed a mid-tier family like the Sharva'Zi Clan to quietly reap the rewards. Now one bigshot after another was coming for some frontier trial?

What had her master gotten them mixed up in?

The droplet drifted through the hidden pockets of space. It was completely unassuming, and not even the most intrepid scanning array would spot anything special about it. Yet it moved with mind-bending speed, surpassing most C-grade Cosmic Vessels as it made its way toward its destination.

Inside, a small world was hidden.

“We’ll arrive in one month, which gives us ample time to prepare,” the steward said as he refilled the goblet for the young girl gazing at the cosmos flitting by outside.

“What a desolate place. It feels like the Heavens have forgotten this wretched corner of space. Is there really someone who will reach Autarchy here?” Uona asked. “Is it even possible?”

“One shouldn’t completely discard these small frontier sectors. Their average power and heritage are quite wretched, but with enough numbers and time, some terrifying beings will be born here. For example, the Bloodmoon Autarch.”

“Lord Bloodmoon had the help of our family though,” Uona countered.

“By the time he joined our family as an Elder he had already set his foundation and confirmed his Dao. He would likely reach the same height without us, it might just have taken a few hundred thousand years longer,” the old man smiled. “Besides, one family or another of the Eternal Clan was bound to pick him up with his talents. We were just lucky to form a connection first.”

“Well, there will always be aberrations,” Uona muttered.

“It is precisely such an aberration that has appeared,” the old man said. “He is known as the Twilight Lord now, but he was

once known as the Eveningtide Asura.”

“It’s that guy?” Uona exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “I thought he was dead. I have read the reports, I can’t believe Lord Eveningtide survived all that. For one of the Dreamers, he’s pretty amazing. Killing a Havarok Prince and even destroying one of their Immemorial Realms? Crazy.”

“He must have been pushed to the brink, but that led him to a fortuitous encounter. He found that the Mystic Realm we are heading toward was actually two opposing Daorealms that had fused together and survived. He has somehow managed to merge with the resulting anomaly, and has slowly gathered momentum to form the steps to eternity,” the man said.

“That’s possible?” Uona said with surprise.

“Everything’s possible, child,” the old man smiled.

“Do we really need to make a move against that guy and steal his opportunity though? Seems a bit low-class,” Uona said with some reluctance.

“You know how rare the opportunities to form those steps are,” the old man sighed. “Even the peak clans need to accumulate for eons to make an attempt. So, any time an opportunity like this appears, we can’t be picky. Gaining a second Autarch of our own bloodline, even if he ends up a One-Step Autarch, will elevate our branch to a whole new level within the clan.”

“Well, all that’s is Grampa Nether’s problem. I just need to go inside that trial and kill some people, right?”

“Yes, but don’t get careless. Everyone in the know is trying to keep the information under wraps, but the truth always leaks out. These kinds of events always turn into a bloody affair. The natives from the frontier sectors shouldn’t be a threat, but the Empires of the living will definitely get involved.”

Chapter 688: Stocking Up

“They probed our souls with some sort of treasure,” Vilari muttered a few moments after the trio had left the balcony. “I wasn’t able to block it out.”

“They did?” Zac exclaimed. “I didn’t notice anything.”

“Young master’s soul is strong, but you ultimately aren’t a Soul Cultivator,” Vilari said with a slight smile.

“What’s your take on the situation?” Zac asked.

“Her soul was stable throughout. I think she was mostly truthful in her words,” Vilari slowly said. “The large one was threatening, but it would be the small one you would have to worry about. I sensed wild fluctuations in his soul every time you were disrespectful to the Draugr.”

“A real mess,” Zac sighed. “Well, no point in staying here. Are you feeling better?”

“Much better, thank you,” Vilari nodded.

“Alright, let’s go,” Zac grunted as he stood up. “The place Catheya is putting us up in doesn’t sound too bad.”

The two left the incensary a moment later and found a subdued Nala waiting outside. He needed to consider his next step, and he had Nala take them to the high-quality hotel on a disk partly owned by Clan Sharva’Zi. There was no point in avoiding that place now that he had already been spotted, and it truly was a luxurious place.

The hotel was actually a vast forest, where each room was a mansion surrounded by wilderness. The forests were not the deathly and seemingly haunted forestry of the Dead Zone back on Earth either, but rather beautiful trees with silvery leaves and white trunks. There were also similarly-colored bushes that made up some of the undergrowth, and they grew what

looked like metallic pinecones which sounded like chimes when they were rustled by the wind.

They didn't have to slog through the forest, but an attendant rather handed them unique teleportation tokens that took them to a small square outside the walled courtyard leading to his mansion. He sent the attendant away after having him provide Nala with a token as well. He sent Nala away as well, though asked her to come back in twelve hours before he and Vilari went inside the mansion.

Catheya suddenly appearing had put him a bit on the spot even if he had prepared a bit beforehand. He had been forced to make some decisions quickly, but he felt things worked out for the best. The deal she offered was really fair as far as he could tell. Catheya's party would get the first three Life-Death Pearls they found as payment for providing the path and method to push away the restriction of the Twilight Ocean.

After the first three, the group would draw lots and then distribute the following pearls thereafter. Furthermore, the group would consist of 8 members at most. Seeing as there were up to 100 pearls to gather, which usually grew in the same area according to Catheya, he might get his hands on more than ten Life-Death Pearls. These kinds of items generally lost their efficacy after a few uses, so it would probably be more than enough for him.

Still, the mission would mean traveling with both Catheya and strangers for months. Not only were there risks of betrayal, but also of his real identity being exposed. It didn't look like Catheya managed to find anything out during their meeting, but that didn't mean she bought his spiel hook, line, and sinker.

Thankfully, they had only come to a verbal agreement, and Zac would only have to sign a proper contract before getting the VIP-skill.

Before then, he needed to figure out his plan. One of the main goals for this trip had been to find some basic methods and treasures for himself and the Einherjar. The second goal was to search for opportunities to strengthen himself. The return of

Leandra had driven home just how weak he was, and visiting this magical metropolis only reinforced that realization.

But joining Catheya to visit the depths of the Twilight Ocean... Was perhaps more than he had bargained for. The lethality in there was definitely high, but the risk of exposure weighed even heavier on his shoulders. Going at it alone was no doubt a much safer option, as he could stay closer to the entrance if he found the challenge too great.

However, Zac soon found his resolve. The whole reason to set out was to get stronger, and those pearls seemed almost tailor-made to push at least two of his Dao Fragments to the next level. With his odd constitution progressing in Dao would require rarer and rarer treasures, so he couldn't just back away when an opportunity presented itself.

Still, going in blind and dumb was out of the question. There were still two months before the Twilight Ascent started, and he needed to make the most of it. Catheya had thankfully set aside a slot for him, which allowed him to avoid the qualifier which seemed like a huge timesink. A quick scan of the crystal Nala provided mentioned the qualifier.

There was no lack of E-Grade cultivators in a place like this. In fact, they could be counted in the billions. The qualifiers lasted one hundred rounds where you would be matched with random warriors, and each victory awarded one point. Finally, the ten million people with the highest points would get to enter the Twilight Ascent, along with the one million seeded warriors.

Each warrior would fight five battles a day, with one day of rest in between every fight-day. That meant it would take forty days to just get a spot. He didn't have time for that, he needed to focus on his cultivation instead.

The question was what he should do with Vilari.

“Are you interested in the Twilight Ascent?” Zac asked as he turned to his follower who had sat silently as Zac mulled things over.

“No,” Vilari said after some thought. “It would require me to break through within two months, and it is simply too short a time. I am not ready to harm my foundations for this trial, and I feel that I would be a hindrance to you even if I evolved.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “But staying in this place after I leave...”

“How about you send me back before you enter the Trial? I can bring any items you procure back for Port Atwood,” Vilari ventured. “It will give me time to shore up my foundations before you return.”

“Sounds good,” Zac nodded, and the two went over everything they had encountered so far and set up a plan for the coming two months.

He might have decided to tie himself to Catheya’s chariot, but her umbrella of protection would also allow him to act with less restraint over the next months. This was a huge opportunity for him and Port Atwood. His pockets were filled with money and there were so many things to spend it on. He didn’t have access to any place as flourishing as Twilight Harbor back home. In fact, he wasn’t sure if one even existed.

Vilari had a far better understanding of not only his undead forces, but even his living ones after spending ten days with Joanna. She helped him put together a shopping list, after which Zac started reading the information missive on the Twilight Ocean with greater scrutiny.

He had been at a disadvantage during the negotiations just now since he didn’t really understand all the details of the Twilight Ascent, and he needed to shore up that weakness before he ran into Catheya again.

After reading the whole missive twice he could conclude that Catheya had essentially spoken the truth. The Life-Death Pearls were well-documented high-quality treasures of the Twilight Ocean, and they were just as rare as she indicated, perhaps even more so. Finding them was largely dependent on dumb luck according to the missive.

Of course, that didn't mean Catheya was lying about her plan. The Twilight Ocean had been around for millions of years, and it opened up once every thousand years or so. That meant that the ancient factions had sent their members into the Mystic Realm thousands of times. There was no way they hadn't figured out some hidden methods that weren't detailed in the public missives.

Zac had also found out why Catheya wanted to enlist his help. He was pretty confident in his strength, but it was suspicious that she was ready to fork out so many resources just to get him to join her party. Part of it was definitely his connection to her Ancestor, but Zac had found that he did have some unique benefits in the Mystic Realm.

Catheya had mentioned an array to weaken the pervasive pressure inside the Twilight Ocean, but she hadn't completely explained what a detriment it was. She had made it sound like the only reason people didn't go to the depths was the risk of running into enemies, but that wasn't the case at all.

Most of the people simply wouldn't survive in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

Rather than a restriction, it would be more apt to call the invasive energy a poison. The undead were poisoned by the life-attributed components in the atmosphere, and the living the opposite. Everyone was able to filter out the unwanted parts to some degree, but they were ultimately weakened by the environment.

There were thankfully various ways to counter this effect. First of all, there were the pills that helped filter Twilight Energy. There were also arrays and some skills that could weaken it. But ultimately, the deciding factor on how deep you could go was your own body. The Twilight Ocean was a System-controlled Mystic Realm, and as such, it had probably been modified for it to have its current effect.

The higher level you had, the more the Twilight Energy tried to burrow into your body, essentially turning the whole thing into a level-based trial. That meant people with greater accomplishments would get further. Even better, soul strength

helped as well. It didn't really mean all Mentalists had an advantage though since their bodies were usually weaker than normal cultivators and therefore less resistant to the corrosion of the Twilight Ocean.

But Zac was probably the perfect member for them. He couldn't be certain, but between his high Efficiency and unusually powerful soul, he should be among the best at resisting the poison. Meanwhile, he wasn't so powerful that they felt him capable of taking them all out.

What Catheya didn't know was that Zac probably was in an even better position than she assumed. The weird muddled energies of the Twilight Ocean might be a troublesome poison to her, but to him, it was just food for his **[Void Heart]**. Furthermore, if the accumulated life-attuned energies ever got too much, he could simply swap races. It was like he was entering the Mystic Realm with cheat codes.

There was only one caveat to this though; this advantage wasn't as pronounced compared to other elites who could resist the effect almost as well as he did. So the kind of elites Catheya mentioned, running around with Dao Branches and high Efficiency, would still be a big threat to him.

Still, that risk wasn't enough to dampen Zac's excitement. The Life-Death Pearls was just one of the innumerable valuables that waited in the Twilight Ocean. He'd definitely regret it if he didn't go, so it was with extreme vigor he and Vilari set out the next day.

"Which is the best pill house in this place?" immediately asked when they found Nala already waiting outside their courtyard.

"The Karabas Clan," Nala said without hesitation. "They are just a local faction of Spectrals, but rumors are they are backed by an Imperial Eidolon-clan. Their heritage in the Dao of Alchemy is extremely deep, and their wares have low toxicity."

"Hm," Zac nodded. "Take me there."

There wasn't actually any rush in buying pills or other necessities, but Zac wanted to fill his Spatial Treasures with necessary items as quickly as humanly possible. You never knew if Catheya's master or one of her elders would suddenly appear, forcing him to immediately activate his escape bracelet.

The trip took three hours even with the spatial manipulation that ran along the Twilight Rivers, but they eventually reached a death-attuned platform with a decent position to the Twilight Ocean. This one was actually covered by a dense haze, making it impossible to guess at its interiors.

The miasmic wall was pretty unwelcoming, but Zac simply indicated Nala to shoot straight through, and a vast metropolis soon appeared on the other side. There were tens of thousands of crystalline towers covering the surface, and they made Zac think of the onyx pillars that surrounded the Splinter of Oblivion during the hunt.

Did ghosts prefer to stay inside these types of crystals rather than proper houses?

There was one building that looked different though, a twenty-kilometer wide complex that was surrounded by medicinal clouds rather than a miasmic haze.

"Young Master, I cannot enter this place, so I will wait outside," Nala said as she landed. "This time, I think young master's attendant..."

"That's fine, you two stay here," Zac nodded as he got off the small vessel, and a dense deathly aura started to swirl around him.

It was just like how Catheya and her Titan follower acted, using a small hint of their aura to act as some sort of proof of their standing. Most people could glean all kinds of things from the aura, most importantly how condensed it was.

For example, Cethaya and her follower's auras were almost as powerful as each other, but Catheya's was far more condensed. That meant that Catheya was at a lower level than her follower, yet had the same combat strength. What did this

signify? That she was an elite, that she had powerful backing. It was pretty easy to mask this phenomenon, but very hard to mimic.

Cathey gave a clear aura of an elite, but even the Draugr scion's aura was a lot less condensed than Zac's when he didn't mask it. It was almost like space around him congealed with his Dao as he stepped off the vessel, and Nala released an audible gasp from behind. He appeared in front of a huge arch a second later, where a ghost already waited for him.

She looked like a beautiful Revenant, her form far more corporeal and defined than Triv's or any of the other ghosts that had appeared on Earth.

"Does Young Master have a Membership Token?" the ghost asked.

"I just arrived in this Sector," Zac said with a small shake of his head, trying to emulate the aura of someone with a formidable background.

"Of course," the attendant smiled as a black crystalline token appeared out of nowhere. "Please accept this Token, it will make Young Master's future purchasing experiences easier."

Zac nodded and took the token before he entered the luxurious complex that even eclipsed the Big Axe Coliseum. Just like that, he was a VIP customer, simply by flashing his face. He had come a long way since having to force his way through the commoner's entrance over at the Zethaya Pill House.

Zac was met by an enthusiastic clerk and immediately taken to a private room. There was a lot of undead wandering around looking at displays or perusing the store's inventory recorded on crystals, but being a pureblood Draugr clearly had its advantages.

"My name is Yilian. What can we assist young master with today?" the clerk, another spectral who took the form of some elf-like humanoid, asked as she handed one of the inventory crystals to Zac.

"I am partaking in the Twilight Ascent and wanted to see if your store has some items that could be of use," Zac said.

“Our stock definitely can’t match that of the grand establishments of the Heartlands, but it is at the level of a Kingdom’s medium-tier establishments, housing up to Peak D-Graded pills and compounds thanks to a certain patronage,” Yilian smiled, clearly with some pride.

Zac slightly nodded, actually a bit surprised. To boast a stock that could match a B-grade Kingdom’s mid-tier Pill House was quite a statement for a shop in a remote sector like this. Zac had already asked Nala to make sure, but the Sector housing the Twilight Harbor, the Zervereth Sector, was just C-Grade. It seemed a lot more powerful than Zecia, but it was ultimately just a slightly more bustling frontier sector.

Zac doubted the Zethaya Clan would dare to make such a proclamation and compare itself to stores in a B-Grade Human Empire, and it made him look at the inventory crystal with even greater enthusiasm. Of course, he tried to play it cool at the surface as he scanned the endless rows of products.

“Perhaps you could make some suggestions,” Zac eventually said after a few minutes. “I am bringing a few followers, so I need a few sets of Healing, Soul-mending, soldier pills, and perhaps berserking pills. Top quality, of course.”

Zac obviously wasn’t bringing any followers, but would a vaunted pure-blood Draugr hailing from a proper Kingdom need to buy his pills in a store here? Wouldn’t his clan provide? So, he rather made a fib about followers. He needed a large number of pills in either case since there was no telling when he would get access to buy items for his undead side after leaving the Twilight Harbor anyways.

“The Twilight Ascent is a Heaven-controlled event, and the E-Grade Ascent has a limit of quasi D-Grade pills,” the clerk said. “Our top pill line is called the Dawn-series, and it is available both as Peak E-Grade pill and quasi D-Grade. The line has everything you require, except berserking pills. We currently sell special kits at discounted prices if the young master is interested.”

Zac blankly looked at the attendant for a few seconds, trying to hide his confusion. Quasi D-grade? What the hell was that?

Chapter 689: The Value of Money

The general meaning of a Pseudo D-grade pill was somewhat self-explanatory, but Zac had never heard of any such terminology for pills before. Was it pills designed for Half-Step Hegemons or just extra good pills for E-grade cultivators? He had already confirmed that Half-Step cultivators wouldn't be able to join the trial, so it should be the latter.

Asking would immediately ruin his façade though, and Zac could only look on as the screen in front of him changed, turning to the 'Dawn' pill series the attendant mentioned. Zac almost felt like he was online shopping as he read the description that boasted huge savings compared to buying single pills. There were three kits to choose from, and reading the descriptions was pretty eye-opening.

The smaller kit included eight different types of pills and the medium one eleven. The eight basic pills were two types of healing pills based on the type of injury, one soul mending pill, two types of antidotes, a soldier pill and a soul restoration pill, and something called [**Dawn Life-Shield**].

The medium kit added one more type of antidote, two premium healing pills, one for the body and one for the soul. All three were the kind you'd save as a last resort, and not something you'd use to speed up recuperation judging by the description. The peak package actually only included twelve different pills, adding a pill called [**Dawn Awakening**].

The pills were the same in both the Peak E-grade and Pseudo D-grade kits with only their grade differing, and after reading things through he started to get an idea of what was going on. Pseudo D-grade actually seemed to be the same thing as low-grade D-grade Pills in the Zecia sector.

Zac wasn't exactly clear why it was termed differently here, but guessed it might be the same as how Zecia fuddled the grades for their factions, making things sound more impressive than they actually were.

“What is the **[Dawn Life-Shield]**?” Zac asked after having glanced at the products.

“It is a pill especially designed for the Twilight Ocean, but it also shows decent use when exploring the living territories,” the clerk immediately explained. “It helps weaken the corrosive effect of Twilight Energy. The Quasi D-Grade version naturally has a far greater protective effect.”

“Will it work even in the heart of the ocean?” Zac asked a bit dubiously.

“Unfortunately, that's impossible,” Yilian sighed. “The inner reaches of the Twilight Ocean ultimately rely on your own methods. The E-Grade pill is completely ineffective that far inside, and the Quasi D-Grade pill only lessens the strain by 5%. However, those five percent can be the difference between life and death!”

“Hmm... And the **[Dawn Awakening]**?” Zac continued.

“It's a proprietary pill that allows cultivators to make the most out of the treasures in the depths of the Twilight Ocean,” the clerk said. “The pill is actually made from herbs from the Twilight Ocean itself, and the supply is limited. We believe it will be sold out before long, so if young mast-“

“And what does it do?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“Ah, my apologies,” the specter said with a bow. “I simply get a bit excited when talking about such a great item. Its effect is simple but exquisite; harmonization. There are many unique supreme items in the depths of the Twilight Ocean that cannot be taken outside, forcing you to imbibe them during the trial. The **[Dawn Awakening]** allows you to temporarily harmonize with the Twilight Ocean, which in turn will help you to gain more from these supreme treasures.”

Zac's brow's rose when he heard the description, and the ghost attendant quickly continued when she saw his interest.

“It’s a must-have item for those planning on exploring the deeper parts of the Mystic Realm. It can be the difference between a fate-changing breakthrough and getting stuck at the precipice,” Yilian exhorted. “The only downside of the **[Dawn Awakening]**-pill is that it can only be used once, so it’s best saved until the perfect opportunity presents itself.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and he felt that it really was a must-have pill if it worked as advertised. He didn’t immediately place his order though, but first read through the kits once more. Each kit included two pills of the cheaper variants, and one each of the top-quality ones. Each one of the pills that helped against the Twilight Energy worked for 1 hour, and you could only eat one each day, meaning they were only meant to be used during fights or other critical situations.

“I’ll take one big Quasi D-Grade, three middle Quasi D-Grade, and five hundred small peak e-grade packages,” Zac said. “However, for the small kits, I want the **[Dawn Life-Guard]** exchanged for **[Dawn Life-Ward]**.”

The **[Dawn Life-Ward]** was almost the same type of pill as the one included in the normal kits, but they were instead a general pill that the Undead used in life-attuned environments. It was useless against Twilight Energy, but it worked a lot better under normal situations, which was exactly what Zac needed since he was planning on bringing those pills back home.

The clerk’s eyes lit up, as this was a pretty big order. It obviously couldn’t match the purchasing power of a Hegemon, but those kinds of customers didn’t appear every day, even in a place like this. And even if they did come, it wasn’t the turn of someone like Yilian to serve them and get the commission.

“The lifeward pill can absolutely be exchanged. One High-quality Pseudo D-Grade Kit is priced at 2 D-Grade Nexus Coins. The middle comes to 1.1 D-grade Nexus Coins each for a total of 3.3. The five hundred lower kits come to 3 D-Grade Nexus Coins. For a purchase of this magnitude, I can give a fifteen percent discount, and we’ll round down to 7 D-grade Nexus Coins,” the clerk smiled. “Is there anything else Young Master requires?”

Zac froze for a moment when he heard the price. So expensive?

He had gained a pretty decent understanding of general prices over the past years, and the quoted prices were not just a little more expensive compared to what similar items should cost in establishments like the Zethaya Pill house. They were in the range of between ten and one hundred times more expensive going by the peak quality pills.

This single purchase would not only have completely bankrupted him if not for Leandra's bestowment, he wouldn't actually be able to stomach it at all. The biggest culprit was obviously the Pseudo D-grade pills, where one big kit cost more than 300 peak E-grade kits. It wasn't like he couldn't afford it, but he also didn't like the feeling of getting taken for a ride.

"These prices... Are quite steep," Zac slowly said as he looked at the attendant with a frown.

"Ah, my apologies," the attendant said with some embarrassment. "I can assure you that we are not trying to overcharge our valued customers. I am sure young master have heard a thing or two about frontier sectors such as our Zervereth. It is true, prices are normally significantly lower in small C-grade sectors, but the Twilight Ocean is different. Because our connection to the higher realms is much closer due to the wormholes.

"We both get a large number of esteemed visitors such as young master, and there is regular trade going on between Twilight Harbor and the Empire. As such, prices have almost reached the same level as in the higher-grade Kingdoms. If the young master is interested in bargain shopping, you would have to travel to other parts of the Sector, or perhaps even another Sector altogether."

Zac slowly digested the new information, and he couldn't help but feel like a country bumpkin. At least the attendant had got the wrong idea, and looked up to him rather than looked down on him. He had always guessed that things would be more expensive in the more flourishing parts of the Multiverse, just

like how it was back on Earth before the integration. But he had never expected the difference to be this massive.

He almost wanted to slap himself for not buying a mountain of resources before coming to this place, but it was too late for regret now.

“Hm, a shame. I was looking forward to making some bargains,” Zac shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t matter.”

“I understand the feeling,” Yilian said with a knowing smile. “Young master is not the first one to be met with this surprise. It is possible to enlist the Space Gate Guild to take you to the opposite side of the Sector, where prices are roughly 40% of here. But truthfully, there is not much of interest over there, and the volumes you’d need to purchase to make up for the transportation fees and import tariffs...”

“Perhaps if I get the time. I am thinking of nurturing a small squad for adventuring after this trial. After all, there should be ample supply of bodies inside the Twilight Ascent. Let’s look at your leveling resources as well,” Zac said, and Yilian’s smile grew even wider.

Zac emerged from the Pill shop an hour later with Yilian passionately leading him all the way, a mountain of resources added to his Cosmos Sack. Altogether he had spent over 80 D-grade Nexus Coins, of which half was for himself and the other half was for the Einherjar. It was a shocking sum, and a harsh wake-up call just how poor he was before his bestowment.

He had bought thousands of standard-quality leveling pills that would allow all his followers to sweep through the first sets of levels at the E-Grade. Zac had also bought ten sets of top-quality Race Upgrade pills along with tens of tons of cheap compounds meant to be used in Medicinal baths. The pills were mainly meant for his elites back home, but also for himself in case nothing better cropped up at the auction in a few days.

His followers were nowhere to be found when Zac exited, but the spectral attendant led him to a small garden where he found Vilari enjoying some high-quality incense, no doubt a

small complimentary gesture after he started dropping some serious money in their establishment. The Mentalist stood up with a smile after he appeared and they immediately set off.

“I want to look at some spare weaponry as well today,” Zac said to Nala as they passed through the haze hiding the plateau, and she immediately set out toward another plateau.

“By the way, can you explain the prices of things?” Zac asked his guide as she steered the vessel through the void, which prompted her to look over with confusion.

“Young master seldom leaves the Clan and rarely purchases things himself. The prices of items are a bit unclear, especially in a foreign sector such as this,” Vilari added.

“Oh, I see!” Nala quickly nodded.

”Prices have essentially standardized over the long eons, and they only really move if there is some unexpected shortage. Items are generally graded between Low and Peak quality. A low-quality material generally costs between 1 to 5 Nexus Coins of matching grade per unit. So a low E-grade metal might cost 5 E-grade Nexus Coins per kilogram,” Nala said. “Whereas herbs might cost the same per stalk. The unit depends on what kind of item it is.”

“A processed item of a similar grade generally costs twice their raw components with some sort of minimum fee,” Nala added. “The difference is a remuneration for the craftsman and to allow for some chance of failure.”

Zac nodded, but he was inwardly shocked. It really was a huge difference between The Twilight Harbor and back home. He remembered how he felt like a tycoon after slaughtering beasts for a few days back on Earth, making over a hundred million Nexus Coins from kill rewards alone. Here, that only amounted to a handful of low-quality pills.

No wonder most cultivators were broke.

“From there it’s very straightforward. Middle-grade items are ten times as expensive as low-grade, and the same goes for high and Peak-quality items. This means that a peak E-grade pill costs a thousand times as much as low E-grade pills,

generally somewhere around 5,000 to 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

“Above that are Pseudo D-grade pills, the grade that I guess young master generally uses. Those are pills partly made from D-grade materials, but are still consumable by E-grade cultivators. These are around ten times more expensive than peak E-grade items, but the span is a lot higher there,” Nala said.

“Why?” Vilari asked after seeing Zac’s blank look.

“Some Pseudo D-grade pills might contain 2% D-grade materials, and others 20%,” Nala explained. “Higher-grade materials are generally dangerous to imbibe, so it requires a far more skilled alchemist to put 20% D-grade materials into a pill while keeping it absorbable for E-grade warriors. Those alchemists would naturally charge a higher fee.”

“So, a Pseudo D-grade pill can cost anywhere between 50,000 to 500,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. The risk of getting tricked when buying these kinds of items is the highest, where a common item is marketed as something full of expensive materials. Of course, the Karabas Pill House wouldn’t stoop this low,” Nala explained. “The lower grades are mostly standardized, and there are no pseudo-D-grade raw materials. They are either E-grade or D-grade.”

“Anything else?” Vilari asked.

“Um...” Naha hesitated, seemingly unsure what would be pertinent information. “The efficacy increase per quality stage is roughly a factor of two. So a Middle-quality pill is twice as good as a Low-quality at ten times the price. The span is naturally a lot greater among the Pseudo D-grade pills.”

Zac nodded as though that was a matter of course, but he inwardly swore at the usurious pricing practices. He just paid a thousand times extra for items that were less than ten times as good as low-quality goods? Then again, eating a healing pill with eight times the efficacy was priceless when it was the difference between life and death.

“Furthermore, this is just how pricing work for readily available products. When it comes to unique natural treasures with effects that can’t be replicated by cheaper means the price can go anywhere. I have heard of unique E-grade treasures costing as much as Peak D-grade Pills,” Nala continued with some longing in her eyes. “Some items like that will likely appear on the grand auctions before the Twilight Ascent.”

Zac made a mental calculation, and he could confirm that the prices Yilian had given him were more than fair if the pills lived up to the quality the Karabas Pill House was known for. However, he no longer felt like a financial tyrant, though his resources were still shocking for someone at his level. He also realized that the cash infusion might only last him to the middle stages of Hegemony or thereabouts.

That was a future worry though, and it wasn’t all bad. Prices had gone up, but that also meant the value of anything he’d find in the Twilight Ocean would go up as well. If he managed to get his hands on a few once-in-a-century supreme treasures he’d make enough money to actually make some Hegemons green with envy.

The group eventually landed on another disk, and Zac emerged from a blacksmith clan’s storefront three hours later with a small mountain of weapons for his followers. Zac had managed to loot quite a bit from the Undead Incursion, but they didn’t suit all his people.

Furthermore, the smithy actually belonged to the local Elementals. They catered to both the unliving and the alive so Zac also managed to get an upgraded set of gear for the Valkyries. The new spears he had bought obviously couldn’t match the Spirit Tool that Joanna used, but among non-spiritual E-Grade weapons, they were extremely high-quality.

The following days continued in much the same manner, and Zac shored up on everything he or Earth lacked.

He hadn’t initially planned on buying this much, but the level of Twilight Harbor far surpassed what he expected since it had connections to multiple proper B-Grade forces. He had even been forced to buy a few new Spatial Rings since the one he

got from Vilari's predecessor was filled to the brim, and he didn't want to walk around with Ten Cosmos Sacks attached to his belt since that would ruin his image of a noble Draugr.

Zac also followed up on Calrin's sage advice and stocked up on huge quantities of materials that were scarce in the Zecia Sector. For example, he bought fifty thousand Soul Crystals in one go, even though they each cost 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. It was a huge expenditure, but Zac knew he would probably be able to make a profit even at this price point back home if he ever put them for sale.

His inquiries into Soul Crystals had also exposed something extremely unexpected. Crystals in general were actually not graded in Twilight Harbor, but rather simply called Low, Medium, High, and Supreme-quality Nexus Crystals or Attuned Crystals. High-quality crystals were the same as D-grade crystals back in the Zecia sector, and the Low-quality the same as standard F-grade Nexus Crystals.

The low-quality Nexus crystals were just at twice the price in Twilight Harbor compared to Zecia, clocking in at 100 Nexus Coins each. The Medium Quality crystals cost 10 000, and the high-quality crystals cost 1 E-grade Nexus Crystal each. Above that were the Supreme Crystals, which didn't seem to have any equivalent in the Zecia Sector.

They cost 1,000 E-grade Nexus Coins each, and they were mainly used by Peak E-grade cultivators and Half-step cultivators. Early-stage hegemony generally used them as well to recuperate lost energy, but the crystals used by greater Hegemony weren't actually Nexus Crystals at all.

They were rather using something called Cosmic Crystals, which were clearly a far superior natural energy crystal. Their pricing was the same as Nexus Crystals, though they were priced in D- and C-grade Nexus Coins instead. However, only Low and Medium-quality Cosmic Crystals were publicly available. The two higher grades were aimed at Monarchs, and they were essentially strategic resources of the biggest clans.

Cosmic Crystals were probably what was called C-grade Nexus Crystals in the Zecia sector, but Calrin could not even

get his hands on low-grade ones there. Perhaps they'd pop up on auctions on D-grade worlds now and then, but you definitely couldn't purchase them in stores.

Even Zac would explode if he tried to absorb energy from a Low-grade Cosmic Crystal since they required users to have a Cultivator's Core with their vast energy storage capabilities. But Zac had still bought ten low-quality Cosmic Crystals and one Medium-quality even if he couldn't use them at the moment.

There was no telling when he'd have direct access to them in the future, so Zac figured might as well keep a few around. He also bought a large store of Supreme Crystals, both attuned and unattuned.

Things finally calmed down after five days, at which point Nala seemed to finally have become inundated to Zac's shocking reserves of wealth. She had accompanied him for one of his smaller purchases, but that visit to an incensary alone had run up a tab of over 50,000 E-grade Nexus Coins, which almost made Nala faint.

"Where to today, young master?" Nala asked as she picked up him and Vilari on the sixth day.

"Hmm..." Zac mused. "I have bought most of what I need for now. I guess it's time to visit the Eldritch Archivals."

Chapter 690: Inheritance Crystal

The little flying vessel immediately shot toward the disk where the Dao Repository was housed. Zac's shopping spree had not only shored up on things that his little planet sorely needed, but it had also given Zac a decent understanding of Twilight Harbor as a whole. The past days had doubled as a crash course that you simply couldn't get from reading a missive.

He had seen tens of thousands of warriors who, just like him, were stocking up and preparing for the Twilight Ascent. He had even seen quite a few Hegemons making their final purchases, as it turned out that this generation's Twilight Ascent was a "Double Grade-event". That thankfully didn't mean Zac would have to compete with a bunch of Hegemons, but rather that they had their own Trial simultaneously.

Usually, the Twilight Ascent was an E-grade trial, with it occasionally being swapped out by a D-grade version for Hegemons. Even rarer was the Monarch event, which only took place once every 250,000 years or so. The last one took place just 20,000 years ago, and it was the last time the Twilight Lord had been seen in public. Many believed he had entered and gained some big opportunity that would allow him to take the next step.

Finally, there was the Double-Grade-Event which was even rarer than the Monarch Event. The prevalent guess was that the Mystic Realm had an overabundance of energy and treasure, which resulted in two Trials in parallel dimensions instead of one. Each time such an event had taken place historically, it had resulted in both amazing treasures being discovered and mass casualties.

It was no surprise the atmosphere in Twilight Harbor was absolutely electrified.

Vilari had mostly tagged along during the past days for the experience, though she had made a few purchases meant for her cultivation. One of them was a Soul-Boosting array they found in the store of the Array Clan where Zac made a few custom orders of his own. It would help speed her cultivation up now that she was swapping away from the Nine Reincarnations Manual.

His total spending over the past days had reached over 15,000 D-grade nexus coins, which was simply a monstrous amount of money even for E-grade cultivators in Twilight Harbor. But that investment would completely transform every aspect of his forces, from defenses, to cultivation standards, to depth of heritage.

He would definitely have a few Hegemons among his followers in a century or two unless they were all pigs in disguise.

Most importantly, he had prepared a slew of materials meant to improve almost every facet of his own cultivation. The items he had bought were mostly things readily available. They were still the best of the best though, which was saying something with the exponential costs of high-quality products.

He doubted even Catheya could enjoy the kind of resources he had prepared for himself unless her master was a lot more generous compared to how most clans operated. Even then, some of these items were simply back-ups meant to be used in case he had to flee quickly or if he didn't find the things he needed in the auction in a few days.

The auction would probably have amazing things but there were other factors to consider when bidding. This time there might even be Late-Stage Monarchs present, and offending them with only a fake clan as backup was suicidal. He had already discarded any thought of getting the peak items, but he should be able to snatch a couple of useful things as long as he was willing to overpay a bit.

Any further than that was risking his and Vilari's lives. He had avoided any ambushes so far thanks to his pure Draugr heritage, but he knew that he would have to avoid the spotlight

for a while after his massive spending spree. After all, while order was pretty good in the Twilight Harbor, there was no lack of desperate people either.

That was fine with Zac though. The auction was tomorrow, and he'd enter seclusion for a while after it was over. But first up was the skills, and Nala landed her flying vessel in front of a building that looked like a supersized gothic cathedral with thousands of enormous miasmic fractals floating in the air.

"Young master, we've been expecting you," a ghost attendant said as Zac walked toward the entrance with Vilari in tow.

"We've been given instructions from the mistress to help you out to the best of our abilities. First, let me add a hundred years to your Token."

Zac nodded in thanks, and his three-week visa suddenly turned into a century-long entitlement. He didn't know if adding a whole century was to showcase the company's resources or if it was just an expression of goodwill. In either case, he wouldn't turn down something like this.

Most continents charged by the week to outsiders, and the fee to stay a hundred years without joining a force had to be exorbitant. As for buying a plot of land and becoming a native, that didn't require just wealth, but also deep connections.

"I am here to pick out a skill from the VIP section as well," Zac said.

"Certainly," the attendant nodded. "However, there is the matter of the contract... Also, young master's attendant cannot follow into the inner sanctum."

"I know," Zac said as he glanced at Vilari.

The Mentalist didn't seem to mind. She rather seemed to be looking forward to perusing the skills in the public section.

"See if you find any skills you like and I'll buy them for you," Zac said as he walked away, led by another attendant toward the area where the supreme skills were kept.

"Mister Arcaz Black, I presume? Welcome," an elderly Draugr smiled when Zac reached the tightly-secured inner sanctum. "I am Revault Sharva'Zi. The young mistress told me about your

arrival. Please, peruse this contract at your leisure. After signing, I will take you to the Inheritance crystals.”

This old man was clearly a Hegemon, yet he had to call Catheya the ‘young mistress’. Zac guessed that Revault was a branch member native to the Twilight Harbor, rather than someone sent here from the heartlands. Zac perfunctorily greeted the Draugr and took the crystal before he started scanning its contents. There was nothing unexpected in the list of clauses for what essentially looked like an employment contract.

The distribution of pearls was clearly stated, and Zac’s only obligation was to help fight in case of ambushes or attacks, and to help run the purity array for his allotted time. The contract would mostly end after they were done harvesting pearls, but there was an additional clause barring clashes among the members of the group for the duration of the Twilight Ascent.

There were also provisions that Zac could freely attack anyone attacking him and so on, though that was already guaranteed through the Apostate of Order.

“There is no clause barring Catheya from attacking me? Just for me attacking her or the others?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“Truthfully, there is not much use in putting such a clause into the contract due to her master being powerful enough to break it,” Revault said. “That’s is why multiple clauses are worded as though Mistress Catheya or other members are under no contractual obligation at all. The same goes for the other members of the party.”

Zac slowly nodded and read through the contract once more. It was true. Zac was essentially freed from any obligation at the first whiff of betrayal, but he would not be able to preemptively attack the others unless he was ready to withstand a contract backlash. He eventually infused some energy into the crystal, which prompted a System-screen to appear.

“This way,” Revault smiled after Zac had confirmed his employment, and they passed through a series of extremely powerful arrays to reach an underground vault.

The room was pretty simple, and the only thing was a series of light pillars with a crystal hovering inside each one. In front of the pillars was a plaque, probably describing the skill.

There were only twenty or so Inheritance Crystals, but that by itself was a show of wealth considering there was always demand but never enough supply. For clan Sharva’Zi to be able to put a dozen top-tier skills in a remote region like the Twilight Harbor was impressive, since this place was obviously just one remote branch among hundreds of others.

Zac walked from crystal to crystal, reading the descriptions carefully. Every skill sounded extremely powerful, but they also often had strict requirements to bring the most out of them. Thankfully, the Eldritch Archivals were a lot more professional when it came to descriptions compared to Brazla. He was currently looking at a green hovering crystal with red runes covering it.

[Endless Repose. Peak E-Grade, Upgradeable. Vitality, Dexterity, Spear-related Daos, Poison-related Daos. Creates a storm of poisonous spear tips with extreme penetrating power that can break past even High E-Grade defensive skills. Each stab creates a restrictive force equivalent to a Middle-grade Restrictive Skill and administers poison. Can be refitted to work with other sharp weaponry such as needles, thorns, and claws.]

Zas read the description with interest, but he soon shook his head and moved on. The minutes passed as Zac walked from pillar to pillar in search of the most suitable skill. Almost every skill felt enticing to some degree, and it took a while to narrow it down to two skills.

[Deathlock. Peak E-grade, Upgradeable. Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Death-related Daos, Restrictive-related Daos. Creates a number of Abyssal Graves that binds and locks down enemies. Also creates an absolute domain that disables up to High-Grade Movement Skills.]

The Skill at Peak mastery can even restrain weak Hegemons if infused with suitable peak Dao Fragment.]

[Abyssal Phase. High E-Grade, Upgradeable. No attribute affinity, Death-related Daos. Transforms the user into an abyssal wraith. During transformation, the user is nigh-invulnerable, nigh-invisible, and extremely hard to detect. Peak-quality movement speed boost.]

One peak skill aimed at restraining, and one high movement skill. The efficacy of **[Deathlock]** spoke for itself, it was a restraining skill that matched extremely well with his attributes, and it could even be empowered by his Fragment of the Coffin. It was a perfect complement to his class, allowing him to completely lock down the enemies inside **[Profane Seal]**, for example, and then finish them with **[Blighted Cut]**.

He had initially considered getting a massive wide-scale finisher like **[Arcadia's Judgement]**, but Zac had eventually decided against it. That was simply not the type of archetype his Undead class had. It was more about stacking advantages in his favor with restrictions, domains, and corrosion. He was intractable and inevitable like death itself, like a precise and ruthless army who slowly whittled down the enemy while taking minimum losses themselves.

Eventually, the enemy would be worn out, at which point Zac would end them in one swift stroke.

The second skill Zac considered also provided extreme benefits. It was not only an amazing movement skill, but it even provided multiple additional benefits. It almost seemed like a perfect skill from the description. The best movement skills were generally Dexterity-based, which was a problem for his Strength-focused classes, yet this one had no such affinity at all.

Furthermore, it provided a slew of other benefits. Nigh-invulnerability and invisibility? Zac could almost imagine turning into an abyssal wraith after he had trapped his enemies inside his cage, avoiding any harm while his enemies fell one by one. It is also purely death-based, with suited with his Dao,

and he could fuse it further at the D-grade. There was only one thing that didn't quite add up.

“Why is [**Abyssal Phase**] classified as a high-grade skill if it provides ‘peak movement speed’ and all kinds of other benefits?” Zac asked.

“It's the energy consumption,” the old Draugr sighed as he looked at the Inheritance Crystal with some wistfulness. “The skill turns you into a nigh-invulnerable wraith and allows you to move through a subdimension with such a speed that it might as well be considered teleportation, but the energy requirements are immense. Especially since you need to phase back and forth if you want to use the skill repeatedly.

“The effect is among the best I've seen for a skill of this grade, considering that it does not only provide extreme speed, but also protection. But a movement skill with such high demands can ultimately not be considered peak quality, especially considering that activating the skill takes a while even for the most talented warrior, which can be lethal in a heated fight,” the old man lamented.

Zac hummed in understanding. It was true, a skill that cost too much Cosmic Energy was ultimately useless. His new skill [**Arcadia's Judgement**] cost a whopping 25% of his energy reserves while still at Early Mastery, but that was fine since it was a true finisher-skill. But what if [**Loamwalker**] demanded that kind of energy per step? He'd never use it.

But his situation was unique. Not only was his energy pool massive thanks to his high attributes, but he even had [**Force of the Void**] to completely circumvent the downside of a slow charge-up. The question was if it was worth it, or if it was better to instead take the peak restraining skill and get common movement skill from the public repository.

But ultimately, the various benefits of the movement skill were too alluring. He already had multiple restraining skills, and it wasn't impossible that he'd get another one for the level 125 quest that always provided the second Class Skill of the E-grade. After all, the class was called Fetters of Desolation, yet it hadn't provided him with any such skill yet.

“It sounds interesting. I’ll take [**Abyssal Phase**]. Who knows, I might be able to perfect it,” Zac said with a small smile. “If not, it might serve as a good source when forming my own skills in the future.”

“Very well,” Revault nodded and took out a small crystal ball from his Spatial Ring.

A shudder spread out through the whole room, and the hovering skill crystal disappeared into thin air. Zac’s eyes widened a bit, as he had not realized he had been looking at an illusion at all. He wasn’t able to touch the crystal through the protective sphere, but he had still sensed its energy emanations.

A large black book instead appeared in front of Zac, and it emitted an extremely powerful aura, even eclipsing the Draugr Hegemon.

“Lord Book,” the old man said with a small bow.

“[**Abyssal Phase**], paid for with contribution points,” a soothing androgynous voice emerged from the book as it flipped pages until one depicting a black chest appeared.

The chest flew out of the page itself, leaving it blank, and Zac quickly stowed away the item. He obviously wouldn’t learn the skill here since using an Inheritance Crystal was like a skill impartment and an Epiphany rolled into one.

“Thank you,” Zac said and stowed away the box before he turned to the old man. “Can I purchase one of the skills here as well?”

“I am afraid not,” Revault answered with a shake of his head. “Family rules. Truthfully, the main purpose of selling these limited skills is to provide favors and make connections with various powerhouses and clans, so we cannot sell them wholesale. What if a powerful warrior arrives one day and finds our stores empty?”

“I understand,” Zac nodded, though he knew that there would always be exceptions.

Status and power was everything. They knew he was an elite hired by Catheya, which might garner some respect but not

abject deference. His true heritage was obscure, intentionally so since he didn't actually have one. In comparison, if the son of an Undead Prince arrived, he could probably leave with half the skills in this place if he wanted to.

Also, if Zac had some rare treasures to barter with, then the Eldritch Archivals would definitely be keener on doing some more business.

"I'll also take a look at the public skills then," Zac said.

"I hope you'll find something useful. I daresay, our clan is fully committed to this branch, so our heritage is not much worse than the average Kingdom-store. Furthermore, our limit on the VIP floor is one purchase per century, so you're very welcome to return after a hundred years had passed," the old man smiled.

Being told to come back in a hundred years almost sounded like a curse to an Earthling like Zac, but he knew it wasn't meant that way. The old man in front of him almost felt like a kindly old grandpa, but he was probably somewhere between medium and high D-grade. His lifespan was no doubt measured in the tens of thousands, and a hundred years to him was the equivalent to a few months for the average pre-integration human.

"Thank you for your guidance, elder," Zac said and slightly bowed before he left for the floor beneath.

The issue of not having a movement skill in his Draugr form was finally solved, but there were other things he needed to shore up to turn himself into a perfect all-rounder.

Chapter 691: Suspicions and Auctions

The skills in the public section of the repository were mostly Middle-stage, which meant the equivalent of a skill you'd get from an Uncommon Class, though slightly weakened from the transcription. A few skills were high-grade, but most of them were either out of stock or had some sort of drawbacks that made them less popular.

The Eldritch Archivals were in the same situation as most other merchants in the Twilight Harbor; a lot of high-end stock geared toward E-grade warriors had been sold out long before Zac arrived. After all, the Twilight Ascent only opened so often, and many would be dead or long past the E-Grade by the next time it opened.

Everyone wanted some final upgrades before entering since it would increase their survivability rate and the potential returns they could get.

Zac walked through the stores for an hour, and he ultimately settled on just two more skills for himself. The first was called **[Gorehew]**, and it was a pure Strength-based Medium E-Grade skill meant for axes, two-handed swords, polearms, and other larger bladed weapons. It was meant as an upgrade for **[Unholy Strike]** since Zac had essentially given up on that skill by now.

It was pretty suited to his constitution, but Zac ultimately had to prioritize using his skill fusions on transforming his other skills into ones that suited his path better. **[Unholy Strike]** worked fine, but charging up his muscles with enough miasma to make a difference at his current level took way too much time. **[Force of the Void]** didn't work on that skill either, perhaps because the skill worked by gradually expanding his muscles.

[Gorehew] was a skill he could use repeatedly in battle, just like **[Nature's Edge]**. It obviously wasn't at the level of his own skill, but it did have a good feature. As he slaughtered enemies with the skill, the attack would gain a temporary boost in power and area of effect. Furthermore, the boost was stackable to a degree. It was a decent skill to clear out a large number of weak enemies at a low cost, when using his tactic of whittling down enemies was a waste of time.

Zac didn't have any plans on using it in the future. It was simply a temporary skill that would serve him well until he reached the D-Grade.

The second skill was called **[Undying Mark]**, and it was a healing skill. The skill allowed you to continuously infuse Miasma until you formed a mark on your body. That mark was essentially like a stored healing spell. At low proficiency, you'd be able to create three marks and at peak proficiency five of them. Of course, the healing effect would also increase with every increase in proficiency.

Its strong point was that the healing skill could actually be used in battle for an almost instantaneous regeneration. The downsides were that it took hours to form the marks and that the effect wasn't anything special. Zac still figured it was better than nothing, and he added it to his repertoire. Vilari had a better haul, and she actually got three skills for herself, two of which she even felt were usable as a base for skill fusions.

Zac was about to exit the Repository, but he stopped when he saw Catheya waiting by the gates. It was the first time he had seen her since their initial meeting, and Zac once more put his guard up.

"I heard you've made your choice. Be careful. **[Abyssal Phase]** was a skill an external elder of my clan learned around eighty thousand years ago. He was killed by a lightning-quick strike before he had a chance to activate the evolved version of the skill," Catheya smiled. "It's quite lopsided, with both immense strengths and demerits."

"I have other defenses to rely on," Zac smiled back. "Is everything arranged?"

“You’re so business-minded, just like your... junior brother. He kept asking me one question after another, like his time was gold,” Catheya laughed. “But yes, everything is arranged. My master was quite impressed with you, and he’s signed off on you. As for the auction, I’ll come pick you up tomorrow.”

“Your master has checked up on me?” Zac said with surprise, his heart almost jumping up into his throat. “He’s free enough to spy on an E-grade cultivator?”

Zac had been alert all the time while traveling through the Twilight Harbor, but he hadn’t felt a single thing. His bracer usually warmed up when someone was trying to inspect him, but the few times it had happened he had always managed to find the source. It was usually curious onlookers who hung outside the shops, perhaps looking for marks to scam or just gathering intelligence.

But nothing had warned him of a probe from a hidden C-Grade Monarch. It was an important reminder. If some of those old monsters wanted him dead, then it was over. He wouldn’t even have a chance to start generating an annihilation sphere or his defensive bangle before he was turned into atoms.

“He worries considering he can’t enter that place. More than one promising Imperial has fallen inside the Twilight Ocean over the years,” Catheya shrugged before he gave him a deep look. “Besides, he was curious about the one who has some sort of connection to my ancestor. He could confirm that you are pureblood Draugr just like we thought, but not even slightly related to Ancestor Be’Zi... Just where did you pop up from?”

“The universe is full of little mysteries. You’ll go crazy if you try to understand everything,” Zac smiled.

“For a while I guessed you were a progenitor just like Zac Piker, perhaps even from the same planet,” Catheya mused, ignoring Zac’s comment. “After all, some unintegrated worlds hold the uninitiated unliving. An undead forming alliance with the living against the Undead Empire? What a scandal that would be.”

“But now you’ve changed your opinion?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“I can’t confirm any exact numbers, but I would say that you have spent over 3,000 D-grade Nexus Coins over the past week. Even if you sold 10 recently integrated planets in a place like Zecia you wouldn’t reach such a net worth. That kind of wealth can’t be found on a progenitor, it needs millennia to be accumulated. You must have a very powerful master, probably at peak C-grade. Perhaps even a Divine Monarch,” Catheya said with a slightly victorious smile.

“You’ve been keeping track of my purchases?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Of course I have,” Catheya snorted. “But more importantly, word of a mysterious pureblood Draugr spending a prodigal amount of wealth on all kinds of basic necessities have spread all across the Harbor in certain circles. Mind telling me what you’re up to?”

“I’ve just recently started gathering some followers of my own,” Zac shrugged. “I took the opportunity to buy some basic items for them.”

Zac kept his face impassive, more than happy to let Catheya form a misguided hypothesis of his origin. In fact, that had even been part of the consideration when going on such a wanton shopping spree. Catheya had participated in an integration herself, and she should be clear about the potential gains that came with it. Zac himself was good for just over 100 Billion F-grade Nexus Coins before Leandra threw money at him, and most of that was dividends his sister had generated.

As for Divine Monarchs, he had heard something about it before. Apparently, it was a stage a bit similar to a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. But while Half-Step D-grade essentially signified failure, a Divine Monarch was the opposite. Each grade evolution was a larger step than the one before, and there were some preparations needed to even attempt reaching B-grade.

Zac didn’t know the details, but if you managed to become a Divine Monarch you essentially had the base qualifications to

attempt a breakthrough. Of course, there were no doubt a bunch of other requirements to become an actual Autarch, considering none appeared over millions and millions of years in the frontier sectors.

“I am starting to believe your story. You might actually be a real disciple of Ancestor or her partner,” Catheya muttered. “I still can’t understand the connection between you and Zac Piker though... But I will figure it out sooner or later.”

“Best of luck,” Zac said, trying his best to hide his discomfort. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“What a bore,” Catheya sighed. “I’ll pick you up at your place.”

Zac quickly returned to his compound with the help of Nala, feeling like a thousand eyes were peeping at him all the while. He knew that he was playing with fire getting along with Catheya, but he had already started reaping the rewards. He held a lot of expectations for **[Abyssal Phase]**, and his other skills weren’t too shabby either.

Besides, it looked like his mother hadn’t lied to him down when it came to the array. It looked like Catheya’s master couldn’t find anything wrong with him, which meant that not a single person in the whole Zecia sector should be able to spot his perfected Duplicity Core. At least he worked under that assumption. He would probably have been caught by now if his human ancestry or real identity was exposed.

Zac shrugged off any errant thoughts as he started walking toward his courtyard, but a cough from behind stopped him in his tracks.

“This, ah, young master... This is the last day I was hired,” Nala hesitantly said.

“Oh, right,” Zac thoughtfully nodded. “If you’re available, I’d like to hire you until the Twilight Ascent starts. Same rate.”

“Ah? Really?” Nala exclaimed, her eyes lighting up.

“Absolutely. I will work hard to help out. I’ll talk with my father if he has some more information he can share.”

“That’s fine,” Zac nodded, though he honestly didn’t hold much hope for him divulging some high-value secrets. “You don’t need to come tomorrow though, I’ll be busy.”

He and Vilari entered the courtyard, and the two entered their own cultivation chambers to go over their new skills. Zac immediately took out the mysterious crystal he got from “Lord Book”, who Zac guessed was a Peak D-grade or even a C-grade Tool Spirit.

Activating an inheritance crystal was pretty similar to a normal Skill Crystal, but when Zac infused the crystal with energy a flood of memories and impressions also assailed him. It wasn’t as real as Dao Visions, but rather discordant snippets of the life of the External Elder of the Sharva’Zi clan. It was almost like when he saw fragments of Alea’s life flash by.

The elder who left behind the skill was not a Strength-based fighter like Zac, but rather a poison master who had a hybrid fighting style. Part of it was based around daggers for close combat, with the other being the traditional large-scale poison attacks. His attributes had focused on Vitality and Dexterity.

He had not gotten [**Abyssal Phase**] from his class, but rather gained it as a reward in an extremely deadly Mystic Realm. The elder had sometimes used it defensively, but he had mostly used the skill as a tool for an ambush.

The idea was for the skill to allow you to get into the heart of an army, unleash an avalanche of carnage, and then slink away in the chaos unscathed. The detriment was obviously the activation time and massive energy consumption considering that it almost cost as much energy as a finishing strike.

Zac saw the elder use it hundreds of times in different situations. Fleeing, attacking, ambushing. The skill had clear drawbacks, but the elder had almost become a virtuoso in controlling the rhythm of a battle to the point that he could activate the skill if needed. His fighting style was wholly different compared to Zac’s own, but he was still a cultivator who had walked much further than Zac himself.

The scenes provided ample inspiration, and he only opened his eyes a few hours later.

[E] Abyssal Phase - Proficiency: Middle. Become the Abyss. Bring them into your embrace. Upgradeable.

Zac looked at the results with elation. He had actually managed to push the skill to middle proficiency in one go, effectively catching up with most of his old E-grade skills. It also felt like he personally had used the skill dozens of times, and he knew it wouldn't take long to properly integrate the ability into his personal combat style.

It didn't even feel like he needed to try it out since it was almost one with him, so he instead turned his attention to the other two skills. Most of the night was spent charging the three Healing Brands, which appeared along the upper part of his spine. He also practiced using **[Gorehew]** for an hour in his courtyard, but it was hard to get a proper feeling for the skill without any enemies.

Finally, morning came, and Catheya came and picked him up while Vilari stayed behind. Catheya's vessel was completely different compared to Nala's; it screamed of luxury. It was either made from some sort of spiritual ice or a pristine crystal, and it was covered in dense fractals. It was obviously a leisure vessel and not something you'd use in battle or mystic realms.

Even then, its speed was over ten times greater than Nala's low-quality vessel, and the surroundings flashed by as they sailed on the Twilight rivers. An hour later they appeared on another plateau close to the Twilight Ocean itself, this one far more hectic than anyone he'd visited before.

Hundreds of thousands moved as a stream toward the enormous auction house and more and more kept appearing through the island's teleporters or flying vessels. Most were unsurprisingly E-grade considering the upcoming trial, but Zac could spot hundreds of hegemon flying toward their own entrance as well.

Zac wasn't surprised about that considering this was a high-grade event. He was more surprised about the hundreds of people who lit up the surroundings with their undeniable life force.

“The living comes here?” Zac exclaimed with some surprise.

“They don’t have their own auctions?”

“Well, they do,” Catheya shrugged. “But some items are useful for both the living and the undead. Besides, in a place like this, there are quite a few of the cultivators who walk the many paths of Death. Might as well join the Empire if you plan on going down that road if you ask me, but most seem reluctant to truly awaken.”

“What’s is the point of cultivation if you lose your sense of self,” Zac muttered. “That might even be scarier than death to them.”

“Perhaps,” Catheya said with a lazy voice, clearly not very interested in the living necromancers or other death-attuned cultivators, before she turned to Zac with inquisitive eyes. “So what are you looking for in this place? You’ve already bought everything from pills to armors, enough to form a whole D-grade force. What else is there for you to buy?”

“Who knows. Some for me, some for the followers I’ve raised,” Zac said.

“Well, nothing beats the followers you’ve awakened yourself,” Catheya agreed. “But why haven’t you visited the Helman Bodyworks if you are starting up a force?”

Zac knew of the place Catheya mentioned. It was a corpse store, dealing with both wholesale corpses and holding auctions for top-quality bodies.

“I’ve only awakened enemies I feel worthy to follow me so far,” Zac said.

“Well that’s stupid,” Catheya said as she flashed a token at a guard that immediately let them inside the Auction house.

“You need grunts as well to manage the minutia. Buying a squad from a proper mortician saves you a lot of effort in cleansing and improving the bodies. Besides, in this place, the bodies won’t come with the... attachments that might be problematic for you.”

“Why are you so helpful all of a sudden?” Zac asked with suspicion.

“Partly boredom,” Catheya shrugged. “I’ve been stuck cultivating for twelve years since I left the Tower of Eternity.”

“Twelve years?” Zac asked, his eyes flashing with realization. “You entered a time chamber after the Tower of Eternity?”

“Of course,” Catheya nodded. “The Twilight Ascent is a good opportunity even for me, but if I cultivated in real time I would have reached the late stages of middle E-grade at best. This way I’ll be able to accomplish more.”

“But the Dao,” Zac said.

“Well, I just spent one year in the time chamber, and the other two in normal time,” Catheya said. “It’s a worthy trade-off. Of course, in a perfect world, I’d have another decade or two to perfect my foundations and Dao before the event.”

Zac nodded in agreement. If he had the opportunity he would have definitely wanted to do something similar. Losing one year of Dao meditation for ten years’ worth of node-breaking was definitely a worthy trade if you were planning on entering a specific trial. It also explained why Catheya had gained so much power since they met last.

He had almost thought she had been provided with some divine treasure by her master, but it seemed the truth was a lot more straightforward. Still, operating a time chamber for a whole year was definitely expensive and not something anyone could do afford. Diligently cultivating for ten straight years was also pretty extremely demanding one’s mental strength, and it made Zac somewhat see Catheya in a different light.

The group was soon led to their seats by an attendant. It was a balcony overlooking a sea of participants and a grand stage in the distance. It was one of the lower balconies though, and powerful auras leaked from many of those in the top. All of them were from Hegemons as far as he could tell. Of course, it was likely that there were Monarchs present as well, just that they hid their energy.

“The first section will be aimed toward us,” Catheya explained as she produced a stick of expensive-looking incense.

“Weapons, natural treasures, pills, high-grade talismans. Things that will be useful during the Twilight Ascent. The second section will be much shorter, and it mainly targets the big shots.”

“We won’t be thrown out for the second part, right?” Zac asked, wanting to see the kinds of treasures that even Monarchs might want for themselves.

“Of course not,” Catheya said. “But be careful bidding against those old monsters or you might find your soul suddenly crushed while walking the streets. I definitely won’t avenge you if you get yourself killed over a treasure.”

“Well, whatever,” Zac snorted at the laughing Catheya.

Chapter 692: Flaunting one's Wealth

Zac wasn't offended at Catheya's disinterest in helping him in case of an auction-related conflict arose. Their relation was one of an employer-employee, where both used each other for benefits. Why should she stick her neck out? Zac definitely wouldn't do so if she got herself in similar trouble.

The auction soon started up, but Zac wasn't overly invested in the proceedings. He felt that if you had seen one you'd seen them all. He mostly enjoyed the incense as he swapped between chit-chatting with Catheya and reading up on the treasures up for sale.

A surprisingly large number of the wares were weapons and spell amplifiers such as staves, wands, or censers, and some of them reached prices far beyond what Zac had expected. Zac figured that getting a perfect weapon was something you'd prioritize from the get-go, rather than waiting until right before a trial.

There were quite a few pills for sale as well, but they were barely any better than the Dawn series he had already purchased. But they still reached pretty impressive prices, as there were always some people who were ready to pay a premium to get the best of the best. Zac bought some pills and talismans to compliment his stock but he started to get bored after a few hours.

But finally something interesting appeared.

“Next we have unique recipe pill sets, and there are five sets available today. Each set contains 25 pills, and we have tested their efficacy and can guarantee their effectiveness. The anonymous Alchemist calls them [**Chainbreaking Pills**], and they are a must-have for mortals and cultivators aiming to

reach the late E-grade in one piece. Their effect is simple; they loosen the resistance of Cultivator nodes, resulting in a smaller backlash.

“These pills can save you time, and allow you to gain levels without worry inside the Twilight Ascent. We’ll start bidding at 25,000 E-grade Nexus Pill for the first set,” the announcer exclaimed.

A few cultivators immediately bid for the pills down at the public section, and the price rose by 1,000 E-Grade Nexus Coins one time after another. Zac definitely wanted these things, so he quickly bid 35,000, raising the current price by 6,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

“Are you crazy? Why’d you want those kinds of pills?” Catheya asked as she looked at Zac like he was an idiot. “You might as well inject yourself with toxic sludge.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The kind of pills that weaken the node walls are essentially poison. They are full of pill toxins. Look, not a single guest from the balconies is bidding. It’s just the wandering cultivators with more money than sense,” she explained.

“Besides, their effect is almost negligible for the third-tier nodes in your head, the only place where it really matters.”

“More money than sense, I guess that’s me,” Zac smiles as he raised the bid to 40,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

Pill toxins might be a problem for others, but not for him. It might force him to slow down his cultivation a few years to let his **[Purity of the Void]** Hidden Node cleanse the toxins, but it was completely different from wandering cultivators who essentially had no method to get rid of the toxins at all.

It was ultimately a low-cost gamble. He would save some time by making reducing the time it took to recover from breaking a node, and he would lose some time to rid himself of the toxins. If the benefits outweighed the disadvantages, then great. If not, he’d look for some other method to keep leveling without spending months in the sickbed from the backlash.

“How embarrassing,” Catheya sighed with a shake of her head. “The others know this balcony is mine. They’ll think I’ve lost my mind.”

“What others?” Zac asked.

“Scions of various clans,” Catheya shrugged.

“Who cares? Isn’t it only good if they think you’re an idiot?” Zac said as he raised the bid again to 55,000. “Makes them underestimate you.”

“Oh, so you’re helping me now, are you?” Catheya chortled.

“Exactly,” Zac nodded, his mouth widening into a grin as he won the bidding.

Zac bought the third set as well, which meant he now had enough pills to reach level 150 if the pills actually worked. Two small boxes arrived to the private seating area a few minutes later, and Zac happily stashed them both away in front of Catheya who looked at him like he was an idiot.

“Wait, is it for your followers?” she asked like she finally figured something out. “It has to be. A Draugr wouldn’t put something like that into their body.”

“How do you know, have you met all Draugr in the world?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“Well, whatever,” Catheya huffed. “Your funeral.”

Zac only smiled and turned back to the auction. The next item he really wanted appeared twenty minutes later. The auctioneer started to sell off one Race-boosting item after another, and Zac eventually bought a withered branch holding three identical fruits which were called **[Fruit of Awakening]**. Zac chose them because while their effect was powerful, eating them supposedly felt like being ripped apart. Those with weaker constitutions would even die from ingesting them.

He was more than willing to exchange some discomfort for increased effect, and he gladly paid the 560,000 E-grade Nexus Coins for the trio. He already had a set of Pseudo D-grade pills that would do the trick as well, but those pills

ultimately contained toxins. Zac might have his Hidden Node helping out, but why waste its effect on unnecessary things?

Zac also bought a set of Pseudo D-grade Leveling pills called **[Aethergate Pills]**. Their effect was supposedly 50% greater compared to the pills he had already prepared. That extra efficiency made the pills cost almost one D-grade Nexus Coin each, but it was definitely worth it. Others seemed to feel that way as well, which had resulted in a heated bidding war.

Of course, there was a limit on how much people were willing to pay for a leveling pill when they could just take a normal pill and then cultivate for a month or two inside a gathering array to make up the difference. As for Zac, he didn't have much of a choice. His foundations were almost absurdly heavy, and he required more than ten times the energy for a single level compared to an average cultivator.

If he didn't use the best of the best he might reach the point of immunity before he made any significant gains.

Cathey eventually got into the spirit of things and bought some items as well, though Zac could tell that her financial situation wasn't as good as his. She immediately stopped when prices reached 20% over the expected price, meaning she either didn't have the capital or willingness to overspend even when the Twilight Ascent was right around the corner.

Eventually, Zac couldn't help but ask.

"If you need the items, why don't you just overpay a bit?" Zac asked curiously. "Some of the items you bid on only rose by 30% or so."

"Do you think everyone is like you?" Cathey said with a scrunched-up face. "My cultivation resources are mostly provided by the clan and my master, but my standard allowance is just 10 D-grade Nexus Coins a year. I have less than 300 Coins on me. And that's considered pretty good. I don't understand what your master was thinking just showering you in wealth like that. It usually does more harm than good, making you reliant on it."

Zac couldn't help but roll his eyes at Catheya, though it wasn't really evident with his pitch-black orb for eyes. Only 10 D-grade nexus coins a year? That was 10 trillion nexus coins, a fortune that would eclipse some D-grade clans back in the Zecia sector. And Zac bet that if she really needed the money, it wasn't like her Master would hold out on her.

"Maybe if the items were for myself and I really needed them," Catheya added. "But the things I bid for was ultimately for followers. I have budgets I need to follow since I have hundreds of them back home. Besides, my people are all capable. They have their own money. And if not, they can go complete some tasks for remuneration."

"I guess you're right," Zac nodded.

It was a good reminder. He had only spent a fraction of the wealth Leandra provided him, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep going like this. Currently, he was just spending without having any real income. It'd take millennia to make up what he had spent over the past week with Port Atwood's current state of operations.

Zac being a Mortal also meant that he essentially had to fight fate with wealth. Where others could just cultivate, he had to risk his life and use treasures. He couldn't keep using half his money on his followers. They'd have to rely on themselves on the road of cultivation. It was the same with most clans. After some basic welfare, the members had to fend for themselves.

A clan simply couldn't stomach the cost of peak cultivation resources even for their greater talents, and there was no reason to do so. Even the greatest geniuses usually found themselves stuck at one bottleneck or another, often before they reached a level where they could actually contribute to the clan.

Meanwhile, hundreds of generations came and went for the Monarchs at the top. It was more cost-effective to breed more descendants since reaching the top usually required a series of unlikely encounters rather than wealth.

The auction kept going for a full eight hours until things finally stilled. Zac hadn't made any big moves after getting the

things he needed, except buying a few raw materials with strong Death-attuned or corrosive effect. He felt they were promising for **[Love's Bond]**, in case his problem was based on the feeding procedure rather than the materials.

He had also managed to get his hands on 5 E-grade Dao Treasures, though none of them were of any impressive quality. Even then, the bidding for them had been extremely intense, with even people on the balconies jumping in. They ended costing Zac over 20 D-grade Nexus Coins a pop, while the greatest ones put for auction surpassed 500 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Dao Treasure normally wasn't anywhere near this expensive, but Catheya believed it was because of the Twilight Ascent. If Catheya knew that the trial would be based on the Dao, then so did hundreds of other factions. Zac wouldn't be surprised if Catheya had been provided with a set of Dao Treasures beforehand, meant to go together with the **[Life-Death Pearls]**.

Zac was a bit tempted to buy up every single Dao Treasure, but judging by the frantic bidding and Catheya's warnings he'd probably get himself killed if he did something like that. Besides, Dao Treasures were meant mostly as fuel for him nowadays, not something that he wanted to dictate his whole cultivation. It was a bit of a flaw in his old cultivation, where part of his insights wasn't perfectly aligned with his current envisioned cultivation path.

He had made great improvements, in the beginning, thanks to Dao Treasures and the Dao Funnel, but his Dao Seeds had contained all kinds of odd facets of his Daos that weren't necessarily useful for him. Now that he knew what direction he wanted to walk, he preferred to gain the insights on his own and then incorporate them into his Fragments with the help of a Dao Treasure.

"The next section is starting soon," Catheya said as the first part ended. "Remember, the intended buyers now will be Hegemons and Monarchs. Be careful."

"I know, I know," Zac nodded.

He didn't care, as he was mostly staying behind to broaden his horizons.

The first item put up for sale was a Natural Treasure that Zac never had heard of before. It was called **[Eternal Flash]** and it was actually a lightning bolt suspended in time inside a purple crystal. The treasure's effects were as impressive as it looked; **[Eternal Flash]** could both improve the Affinity to the Dao of Lightning while also having a good chance of opening lightning-attuned Hidden Nodes.

It was an extremely good item, and it made Zac a lot more excited about the rest of the auction. However, he was a bit confused why an item like **[Eternal Flash]** appeared here rather than as one of the ultimate treasures on the first part of the auction.

"Didn't you say the intended buyers were Hegemons?" Zac asked.

"What E-grade cultivators can afford treasures like these, except you? Something like this will go for over a thousand D-grade Nexus Coins," Catheya said with a pointed look. "It's still marketed for bigshots. If they have a particularly talented descendant or disciple, they might buy it as a gamble it'll provide returns in the future."

The item unsurprisingly went to someone at one of the top levels at the price of 15,000 D-grade Nexus Coins, and one amazing item after another appeared soon after. However, Zac soon noticed a pattern.

"There are no treasures useful for Life- or Death cultivators in a place like this?" Zac muttered with surprise.

"Those kinds of treasures definitely exist. After all, there are plenty of treasures like that in the depths of the Twilight Ocean from what I hear," Catheya muttered. "But those treasures won't reach a public Auction this close to the Twilight Ascent. The bigshots have already snatched them up. But remember, every time you bid in this place, you might make an enemy of a Hegemon or even a Monarch."

Zac nodded again. He had been careful to avoid bidding against any powerful-looking cultivators for this very reason. However, Catheya's warnings were slowly relegated to the back of his head as Zac saw a radiant treasure appeared on the stage.

"Next is an extremely rare item retrieved when the Radiant Temple discovered an unclaimed Ancient Realm two hundred thousand years ago. It was lost in the Twilight Ocean fifty thousand years later, and just recently rediscovered," the Auctioneer exclaimed. "It is called the **[Stone of Hope]**. It is a one-of-a-kind accessory with a unique natural treasure as its core, further perfected by a natural Formation."

Zac looked on with interest, as this was the first time he had seen a treasure coming out of an Ancient Realm. After all, those places didn't even exist in the frontier sectors from what Zac had gathered. It was the same with Catheya as she slightly leaned forward in the chair with interest.

"It's effect is simple yet marvelous. It protects your fate while cultivating, reducing the risk of powerful backlashes. Its main use was to provide help for Mortals on the road of cultivation, lessening the dangers of breaking open nodes. It is even effective when forcing open the final nodes, drastically reducing the risk of death," the announcer said. "This tool can help your less fortunate descendants walk further on the road of cultivation, perhaps even reaching Hegemony and gaining millennia of longevity."

Catheya sighed in disappointment as she leaned back in her chair, but Zac's reaction was definitely the opposite. This treasure was exactly what he was looking for, a far greater alternative to the nigh-useless **[Shedding Mortal Coil-Array]** he was currently relying on when breaking through. With his massive foundations he was already dreading the later stages of the E-grade. The recently acquired **[Chainbreaking Pills]** might be able to help out even though their effect seemed limited at the limited stages, but this particular treasure would clearly help all the way.

"The bidding starts at 5,000 D-grade Nexus Coins," the announcer said, making Catheya release an expletive.

Zac could understand her disdain. Five thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to help push a Mortal to Peak E-grade? That was beyond extravagant, and there was unsurprisingly not a single bid even after half a minute. But the silence was like beautiful music in Zac's ears, and he eventually bid the 5,000 when no one stepped forward.

"Six thousand," an ethereal voice countered after a short pause.

"Seven thousand," Zac said without hesitation.

"Are you crazy?" Catheya wheezed as she slapped Zac's arm. "That is the Veilplume Monarch. I hear her youngest son is a Mortal. You'll bring a calamity on your head if you insist on taking this thing."

"Eight," the voice answered, and there was an unmistakable sharpness to the voice.

"I must have it," Zac said without hesitation. "What level is this monarch?"

"Early Stage I think, why?" Catheya asked with a frown.

"Your master can make her back down," Zac slowly said as he activated the bidding array.

"First explain why, and then we'll talk terms," Catheya said as she thoughtfully glanced at the upper balconies.

"A common friend of ours desperately needs this thing," Zac said.

"What? Who? Your attendant, the soul cultivator?" Catheya muttered. "No wait, don't tell me?"

"Zac Piker," Zac said. "Helping me is helping him, which in a sense is helping your Ancestor."

"That crazy guy is a mortal?!" Catheya almost screamed. "How is that possible?"

"Nine thousand," Zac said into the communication crystal instead of answering Catheya, seeing as the bidding had almost run out of time.

Zac only shrugged upon seeing Catheya's glare, though he wasn't as calm as he let on. He was playing with fire continuing bidding before he had secured protection. Hearing about the Veilplume Monarch's situation, she might consider him bidding for this item as a direct attempt at cutting the life of her child short.

"Ten thousand. Little brother, how about giving me some face and letting this one go? I will remember the favor," the Veilplume Monarch said.

The words were kind, but it felt like the temperature in the whole auction hall had dropped a few degrees. Zac knew he might be in trouble considering that the Auctioneer didn't even dare speak up. Normally they'd intercede in blatant attempts at suppressing the bidding.

Catheya looked at Zac for a few more seconds, each moment feeling like an eternity until she took out a communication crystal. It looked like she exchanged just a few sentences, but Zac breathed out in relief when her furrowed brows relaxed.

"My master can deal with this," Catheya said as a smile spread across her face. "But we will require something in return."

Chapter 693: Bumpy Ride

Zac's abyssal eyes moved back and forth. Back and forth between the necklace being presented on the scene, its core shimmering with mysterious lights that called to the very depths of his soul. And to the congenial smile of his companion, which seemed like a sword of Damocles over his head.

"What do you want?" Zac sighed, feeling like he was making a deal with the devil.

"We don't need much," Catheya smiled. "One request from each of us. I have a secondary mission in the Twilight Ocean, one that might put us in the crosshairs of some dangerous people among the living. I was planning on doing that with just my followers to help out, but I think things would go smoother with your help."

"How long?" Zac asked with a frown.

"It will be completed by the time we reach the Life-Death Pearls, but there will probably be some heated battles."

"I won't fight to the death," Zac said without hesitation, but Catheya's mouth only quirked up.

"Agreed, but you need to put in some real effort," Catheya countered.

"And your master?" Zac asked as he glanced at the scene, and he saw the announcer stare back at him. He waved at him to wait for a bit before he turned back to Catheya.

"He has a personal task for you. I don't know its contents, but he said it was simple enough," she said.

Zac wasn't relishing the thought of 'owing one' to a Peak C-grade Monarch, but did he have a choice? He and Kenzie had searched high and low for an item like the **[Stone of Hope]** all

over the Zecia sector over the past three years, but they hadn't even heard of an item that came close to this.

This was probably his only shot since he'd return back to Zecia after the Twilight Ascent.

"Agreed," Zac sighed as he activated the auction crystal just before the auctioneer was about to close on the item. "Fifteen thousand. I apologize to the esteemed Monarch, but I am adamant about getting this item."

A snort echoed through the whole venue a moment later, causing the whole room to vibrate ominously. But she didn't lash out or try to pressure him, leading Zac to believe Catheya's master had already interceded.

A few minutes passed, and Zac eventually looked down at the intricate box in his hands with mixed emotions. Not even Catheya seemed unaffected by the amount of wealth its contents represented. Hopefully, the effect of the **[Stone of Hope]** was as great as it was proclaimed since the Veilplume Monarch had only backed down after running up the price to 40,000 D-Grade Nexus Coins.

According to Catheya, the Veilplume Monarch had already come to an agreement with her master, but she couldn't simply back down from an E-grade brat without 'punishing' him a bit for his impudence. That's why Zac found himself overpaying by almost ten times what the treasure was normally worth. Of course, it was always hard to gauge the value of these kinds of once-in-a-lifetime treasures.

But suffice to say, an item that could only help up to the Peak E-grade definitely wasn't worth 40,000 D-grade Nexus Coins to most people or factions. A clan could nurture millions of warriors with that kind of wealth, and some of those people might reach Hegemony. To use it to help a Mortal? Unthinkable, even if it was infinitely reusable, which Zac very much doubted it was.

Of course, it was another story if the recipient bought the item for himself. Let alone 40,000, Zac would have paid over 100,000 D-grade Nexus Coins for something that would allow him to safely make his way through the High E-grade where

node-breaking was synonymous with suicide for someone with as powerful a foundation as him.

The intense bidding had caused some ripples among the spectators, but the auction soon continued again. It was a real eye-opener, and Zac looked on as one amazing item after another appeared on the stage. A few of them were even at the level of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** he got from Yrial, and they caused multiple Monarchs to fiercely bid for them.

However, other items didn't get a single bid, and the auctioneer eventually took them away after a minute. One of the items that garnered such tepid reception was a natural treasure that looked a bit like a heart wrought from dark-green crystal. It was completely still, yet Zac's senses were tricked to think it was beating somehow.

Its name was **[Cardinal Kernel]**, and it was a powerful bloodline treasure that was reputed to be effective in evolving and to a small degree purifying bloodlines. Its pricetag was somewhat shocking though for an E-grade bloodline-boosting treasure; 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins. It was just a fraction of the price of his **[Stone of Hope]**, but similar items had been sold during the first half where the price tag was rather set in E-grade Nexus Coins.

"What's going on? Why is no one buying this thing?" Zac asked as he looked down at the crystalline heart. "It's expensive, but its efficacy is extremely high."

"It's definitely a good item, though a bit overpriced," Catheya nodded. "I guess a large part of the price comes from the excessive rarity, I have never heard of this thing before. I guess none of the old masters here feels it worth the investment. Besides, far from all bloodlines provide direct combat capabilities that would help in the trial."

"Still, it shouldn't be too much money for a Monarch to buy this thing?" Zac asked.

"Well, not really. But you have to look at it from their perspective. The kind of treasures they need might require them to scrounge and risk their lives for tens of thousands of years. Furthermore, just maintaining their inner worlds and

keeping them from shrinking is a constant drain on their resources, to the point of bankruptcy for some. Meanwhile, new generations in their clans appear every thousand years. Why would they spend their hard-earned money on their 86th-generation grandson they might not even have met?” Catheya said.

“If they did that for a few talents every generation they’d ruin their own cultivation. They’d only purchase an item like this for a direct disciple they have really high hopes for, and if it would provide huge benefits,” she continued. “I guess there’s no one here who both has a disciple that needs the item and who can properly extract enough value for it.”

“So, I could buy this thing without drawing anyone’s ire?” Zac asked with gleaming eyes.

“Sure, I guess. But possessing too much wealth can be seen as a sin. And I’m not sure it will work on our Draugr bloodline,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Or do you have some odd mutation? Or is it for our friend again?”

That Comment revealed something interesting that Zac already suspected; that Draugr all had a common bloodline. However, he was more focused on whether he should go for it, if he should buy this item. 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins was just a fraction of his wealth, but it might put him in the crosshairs of greedy opportunists.

Catheya’s master had only agreed to defend him against the Veilplume Monarch, not against the billions of greedy people in the Twilight Harbor.

But his Bloodline was still just F-grade, and he hadn’t made any real progress over the past three years. His Bloodline Method, [**Bloodline Resonance**], only allowed him to gain basic control over his bloodline Talent, but it did nothing to actually improve it. The Shard of Creation had helped him make some improvements to the storage capacity of [**Force of the Void**],

However, Zac wasn’t sure if his actual bloodline was making any progress. Eating half a mountain was how he awakened the Bloodline, so Zac felt pretty confident that eating some

more would keep progressing it. The **[Cardinal Kernel]** might not be enough to evolve the bloodline in one go, but it would be a first step in the right direction. Risk and reward... Zac struggled with the two as the auctioneer desperately tried to get someone to buy the thing.

But there was really no one interested. The auctioneer eventually gave up and turned toward an assistant to take the item away, forcing Zac to make a decision.

“2500, I’ll take it,” Zac said as he placed his bid.

He had already flaunted his wealth. He might as well snatch a few more items and hide under Catheya’s protective umbrella on the way back, as long as it didn’t directly garner him any direct new enemies.

Unfortunately, most of the items that would be useful to Zac were useful to others as well, and the bloodline item was the only one he managed to buy. Eventually, the items put up for auction switched from treasures meant for juniors to items meant for the bigshots themselves. The true part of the second part of the Auction.

Zac wasn’t planning on buying anything in this part, but he did actually encounter an interesting item early on. It was a frozen organ that had fallen out from a spatial tear. It contained some spatial fluctuations along with other chaotic energies in the mix. There wasn’t any real interest in this Peak D-grade body part among the cultivators, but Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw it.

It was definitely a piece from a high-grade Void Beast, one perhaps as powerful as the Collector itself. It was just an organ as large as a steel drum, so it wouldn’t hold a Beast Core. But the energy it contained was still much greater compared to the Beast Cores he had extracted from the smaller Void Beasts.

Those cores were still the best resource he had for quickly restoring his **[Force of the Void]** and nurturing the **[Void Heart]**, so he spent 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins to buy the arm as well while Catheya looked at Zac like he was a fool. It might be useful to help evolve his Hidden Node, or at least

serve as a source to rapidly fill up his reserves while inside the Mystic Realm.

Eventually, the final items appeared, and Zac was surprised to see that the top item was a piece of bark with some markings on it. Of course, Zac knew it was something good since he got a splitting headache just from looking at the runes, but he was shocked to hear the frantic bidding. It eventually went for the obscene price of 18,300 C-grade Nexus Coins, a stark reminder the was just a financial paper tiger.

The bombastic ending had closed the auction on a high note, and heated discussions spread through the hall as people started to leave.

“Alright, let’s go back?” Zac asked as he saw people streaming out from the enormous hall.

“Are you crazy?” Catheya laughed. “I’m not letting you onto my vessel. Who am I, your Dao Guard? Sort out this mess yourself.”

“What the hell?” Zac said with a mix of exasperation and worry, realizing his plan of hiding behind her skirt-tails had long been exposed.

“I told you to be careful, but you had to spend enough to make a Late-Stage Hegemon Green with envy,” Catheya said with a roll of her eyes.

“Didn’t we have a deal? Protection for favors?” Zac ventured.

“Master made the Veilplume Monarch back down, and she won’t act against you during your stay. But there are other people out there, no?” Catheya explained.

“Well, shit,” Zac muttered. “Can you ask your master for me?”

“He said that strength is required to hold onto your treasures. Prove yourself worthy,” Catheya grinned.

The adrenaline rush of his reckless spending was fast wearing off, his face sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. Of course, every purchase was for something he needed, the necklace in particular. But his Spatial Ring had now turned

into a hot potato, and he even had some thoughts of telling Vilari to return home as he activated his escape bracelet.

He had got his hands on everything he needed to purchase already, so leaving right now wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Still, Catheya didn't seem too worried, and her master seemed to need his assistance with something. Perhaps he was overthinking things.

“Any recommendations?” Zac probed.

“Well, you'll be safe in your courtyard. Our clan is guaranteeing the safety of all guests, and there is a Monarch standing guard of the whole disk. People also know my master is around,” Catheya smiled as she took out a miniature vessel that looked a lot like a small luxurious skipper. “I'll lend you a spare vessel.”

“Thank you, I guess,” Zac sighed.

“Don't look so glum,” Catheya laughed. “This is just a precaution. You're still Draugr, only a fool would dare attack you.”

“Thanks for putting up the flags,” Zac grunted, which earned him a confused look in return.

Zac's stature started to shrink the next moment, and he soon had a short but bulky build where his right arm was almost twice as thick as his left. His back had also become hunched over, and when Zac put on a grotesque mask he had already prepared, the transformation was complete.

“Not bad,” Catheya nodded appreciatively. “Well, have fun.”

She walked out of the room the next moment, quickly blending in with the crowd. Zac waited for another minute before he shuffled out as well, and he quickly jumped on the lent vessel and flew away.

His eyes were peeled in every direction, but he forcibly shuttled off at a pace that wouldn't raise any brows. He reached the area meant to take off without causing any waves, and he soon left the venue among thousands of different vessels shuttling to and fro. He kept vigil over the closest vessels, and he was relieved to see them doing the same.

He already knew that these auctions sometimes turned into bloody affairs this close to a Twilight Ascent. There was no difference between risking your life here and inside the Twilight Ocean for a chance to be reborn for some people, and everyone was on edge. Nothing happened for a full hour, but that didn't lessen Zac's worries. He had reached the vast space between two plateaus, and the risk for attack here was the highest.

Some things couldn't be avoided, and Zac soon sensed some killing intent heading his way. He turned over to see a group of five Late E-grade cultivators who had jumped off from a neighboring vessel, heading straight for him. Had he been exposed? Or was it because his vessel looked expensive?

Four sinister chains shot out with almost blinding speed, and two of them were wrapped around a cultivator each before the attackers even had a chance to react. Another one of the chains had punched straight through a Corpselord's chest, and he had instantly been turned into a gristly ornament to Zac's weapon. Only one managed to activate a movement skill in time to dodge in time, but the chain was unrelenting.

Zac himself had already taken out a spare shield, and he almost instantly grew to five meters as he activated his peak mastery [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. There were still two free cultivators, one of which clearly a Dexterity-based assassin, while the other one was a straightforward warrior. It was the assassin who kept dodging the chain, but he suddenly found himself right in front of Zac.

The massive bardiche was already right next to the assassin's throat and a sinister black swirl caused it to emit a terrifying aura. The assassin tried to flash away, but it was much too late; he was within Zac's domain now. His head was lobbed clean off, and a torrent of black ichor soon turned into a frozen flower as it fell into the Twilight River.

Some of the ichor didn't actually float out into the emptiness of space, but it rather entered the black swirl to cause its aura to increase to even greater heights. Zac didn't pause to celebrate the kill, but he rather shot toward the warrior who still was running free. The man had already realized his group

had hit an iron plate, but he looked around in confusion as he was rooted in place while trying to flee through the void.

This was one of the benefits of pushing [**Vanguard of Undeath**] to peak mastery. Its taunting effect was still effective even at this stage, though it only lasted a second or two before most could overcome it. But that was enough for Zac to catch up, and a five-meter jagged scar of pitch-black ichor hacked into the warrior's defensive barrier, instantly cutting it in two.

Another hack with [**Gorehew**] ended the man's life, and the last two attackers were firmly caught by this point, one of them locked into a morbid embrace with their impaled companion. Zac was pleasantly surprised by his new skill. It wasn't fancy or had a lot of functions, but it could fully scale with even his attributes and its edge was extremely sharp.

Besides, the skill had already grown another meter in length after the second kill, indicating that the jagged edge could become a real terror in the middle of a packed horde of enemies.

"Please!" one of the two captives scried as Zac dragged the two captives toward him, but Zac only released a sinister chuckle from behind his mask as his grotesquely oversized right arm cut her and her companion in two, ending the fight.

It had taken less than three seconds since Zac shot out his chains, but all five attackers were already dead. Their body parts joined the Twilight River one by one as Zac jumped back onto his vessel and sailed away as though nothing had happened, confident that his disguise hadn't been broken. However, Zac didn't feel any relief even when the neighboring vessels gave a slightly wider berth to his vessel as he continued his journey.

His trip home was bound to become a bumpy one.

Chapter 694: Oppressive Might

Ruthlessly ripping apart the group of opportunists had given Zac a breather. But it would take over four hours to return, even when using the Twilight River for a speed boost and spatial manipulation. There were also multiple plateaus he needed to pass, and each one might have cultivators lying in wait.

Nothing happened for fifteen minutes after the initial attack, but a sudden and massive explosion in the distance drew everyone's attention. It was far into the void between the platforms, and it looked like a tremendous eruption of a mix of death and fire. Judging by the force contained in the explosion, it definitely wasn't a struggle between E-grade cultivators, but rather proper Hegemons. Even if it was just an array or talisman going off, something of that magnitude would have to have been powered by a D-grade cultivator's core.

A sudden scream of danger made Zac's hair stand on end, and he barely had a chance to send an activation to a defensive talisman and turn **[Love's Bond]** into a shield. A thick barrier sprung up around him, but it immediately dimmed as some sort of black haze glommed onto it. Zac realized that someone had used an array breaker to counter his talisman, but the slight delay had allowed him to maneuver his shield just enough to block out an extremely penetrative spear stab that crashed through the weakened shield.

Zac was thrown off from his vessel by the condensed force, and he soared almost a hundred meters into the void. He was completely fine from the strike, but others weren't quite as lucky. The enormous explosion had grabbed everyone's attention to some degree, and over twenty parties had taken the

chance to launch attacks on neighboring vessels at that moment.

Battles were raging for a stretch of thousands of meters on the Twilight River, with all kinds of powerful energy outbursts. However, apart from the enormous battle that raged in the void, it looked like all the combats were between E-grade cultivators. He hadn't heard anything, but it was possible that Hegemons were hesitant to fight close to the rivers?

A battle between D-grade cultivators might damage the rivers themselves, which could have huge implications since they essentially were the lifeblood of the whole Twilight Harbor. But if that was the case, then Zac definitely didn't want to stay too far away from the river. He quickly started to expel some miasma to counteract the slight gravitational pull from the closest plateau as his eyes swept back and forth in every direction, trying to any hints of his attacker.

However, the man was simply gone.

Had he realized that Zac was too hard a nut to crack and targeted someone else? Or was he still lying in wait? Zac couldn't tell for sure, but he activated another defensive talisman as he made his way back to his boat before it was dragged away by the Twilight River.

Zac's nerves were taut as he stepped back the vessel, but he somewhat relaxed when he sensed the familiar aura of the spearman a few boats over, locked in battle with what looked to be a poison master. He briefly considered joining the fray to get some revenge, but he didn't want to bring any trouble down on his head.

Instead, he threw out a couple of Peak E-grade Talismans, turning his flying treasure into a small fortress. He had avoided doing so until now out of fear that it would cause more harm than good by drawing attention to himself, but a number of vessels had already done the same after seeing how chaotic the river had become.

Another enormous explosion erupted in the distance, and Zac vaguely saw an obscured figure fly toward the closest plateau with a speed that far surpassed anything that was possible in

the E-grade. As expected, the chaos had caused another wave of carnage, but Zac and his layers of defenses weren't one of the targets this time. Hopefully, that meant his identity was safe.

Things calmed down over the next two hours, though Zac did have to fend off two more attacks before he was left alone, though none of them managed to push Zac to the point he had to display any of his hidden cards. The battle left the flying vessel somewhat in tatters though, but Zac didn't really care.

He had a feeling that Catheya gave him this opulent thing just to cause some trouble, and he was more than happy to see it fall apart as a small act of revenge. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he felt that Catheya had orchestrated this whole situation to some degree, probably in an attempt to extract some more secrets from him. Perhaps she was somewhere close, observing him while laughing at his struggles.

Zac and the surviving members eventually reached a hub where six different rivers converged, and the traffic essentially returned to normal as the auction goes split up and took whatever river led to their own platform. Over ninety percent took two rivers that would pass by one of the largest plateaus; Hanging Twilight.

It was one of the world disks that was controlled by a number of local clans, and it was also one of the most popular places to stay for wandering cultivators and guests. Since over fifty of the strongest clans also lived on the island, it wasn't really surprising that so many were going that way. Zac was not one of them though as he continued toward the plateau controlled by clan Sharva'Zi and a few other factions.

Suddenly he found himself traversing the Twilight River all alone after hours of being surrounded by others, but that actually didn't let him relax at all. If anything, his unease only grew as he sailed further and further away from the group of people. His flying vessel flew as quickly as possible as he scanned back and forth, and there was nothing. There was no way an E-grade assassin in hiding would be able to keep up with his speed for so long.

Zac should be safe, but he felt a threat to his life.

It was extremely mute, but Zac had long learned to trust his instincts. He let Miasma churn through his body for a few seconds before he took out one of his common Escape Talismans. The action confirmed his suspicions as a figure radiating an immense killing intent appeared just a few hundred meters away, and Zac wasn't surprised to find his talisman blocked from activating.

There was no hesitation as Zac instantly activated his new movement skill with the help of [**Force of the Void**], as anyone who could seal space was far more powerful than he. For a moment, there was only endless darkness that contained a very familiar feeling. It was the very same ancient aura that marred any skill he activated with his bloodline talent.

He was only stuck in that endless Void for an instant before he was returned to reality, though everything looked very different from his normal sight. His vision was monochrome, and it felt like time had slowed to a crawl. The river almost looked frozen in time, but Zac was more worried about the radiant beacon of intense deathly energies making its way toward the vessel he floated on in his intangible form.

It was obviously not some source of light, but rather an immensely powerful cultivator who lit up his surroundings with the immense powers hidden in his body. Zac was still unable to properly gauge Hegemons, but he guessed that the attacker was a Middle Hegemon at the least. There were no two ways about it; he had been exposed by this person. Why else would someone like this target an E-grade cultivator?

Zac hadn't seen the attacker at all until he forced him to make a move, but it was now impossible to miss him. Zac guessed it was another advantage of his new skill, but he was more worried about escaping. He immediately flew off from his vessel, making a beeline toward the closest continental disk. Reaching that place wouldn't guarantee his safety, but it was a lot better than being in the middle of the void.

He was like a gust of smoke as he shot through the Void, neither bound by gravity nor the lack thereof. He was

propelled by an immense expenditure of Miasma, like an invisible comet rippling through space.

The Hegemon maintained his course, and his hand turned into a hundred-meter wide claw that snatched up the whole vessel. The defensive talismans Zac had left behind were instantly crushed along with the ship itself. The attack seemed somewhat slow from Zac's vantage, but he knew that it was an illusion of sorts. His perception of time was completely off in his current form, and he knew that less than half a second had passed since the Hegemon appeared, even though it felt like 10 seconds.

If he hadn't used his Bloodline Talent to activate the skill, he would have been turned to mush. But thanks to his cheat he was alive, and Zac desperately flew further and further away from the attacker. However, his heart sunk when he felt a ripple pass through his intangible form. Zac immediately turned his "eyes", or whatever he was currently using to see, toward the Twilight River, and he saw the Hegemon looking right in his direction.

A moment later the assailant set out, aiming straight for Zac who kept moving as quickly as his new movement skill would allow. He had already moved thousands of meters at the expenditure of a huge amount of Miasma, but it wasn't enough against someone a whole grade above him. The cultivator was shortening the distance between them without breaking a sweat, and Zac eventually saw no recourse to give up on his form.

He suddenly turned back into his "real form", and he desperately activated one of the ace talismans he had prepared, forcibly moving him a thousand meters even though the spatial lock was in place. That was only delaying the inevitable though, and Zac desperately ripped off his mask as he turned back into the form of Arcaz Black.

"Halt! I'm Draugr of the Empire!" Zac roared as the force of Annihilation gathered in his body.

Part of him still hoped that Catheya's master would come to his rescue, but he ultimately couldn't rely on something like

that for his survival. No matter some truths about him were exposed he would have to go all out here.

The attacker was clearly undead, and his race would hopefully give him pause for long enough to charge an Annihilation Sphere. That was the only thing that would get him out of this situation, and Zac saw his opportunity when the undead really did pause for a second. Zac finally got a clear look at him; a Corpse-lord mainly consisting of bestial parts.

Zac didn't recognize him at all from the auction, and he even guessed that he had visited with the explicit purpose of robbing bidders. Perhaps, he hadn't even realized that Zac was a Draugr. Most people should know it since the balcony belonged to Clan Sharva'Zi, but there were quite a few temporary visitors in the area.

In either case, the truth was unclear, but his short hesitation did give him some breathing room. Unfortunately, not enough as the Corpse-lord clearly made his decision as he shot forward once again, using a speed so fast that Zac could barely see him.

The world suddenly froze as a spear of ice vertically split the universe in half.

One moment there was nothing, but the next a frigid lance stretched for hundreds of thousands of meters in front of Zac. It really looked like a bolt of lightning frozen into ice. It was unfathomably long, but only a few dozen meters thick. The size of the attack was not the only shocking thing about it, but Zac was more mesmerized by the runes that covered its surface.

It felt like the runes held all the secrets to the chill of the night, of the frozen tundra and the cold of the Void itself. It was endless and unfathomable, and Zac realized too late that he was in trouble. The runes had completely mesmerized him, and it was now too late to leave. His whole body was immobilized by the endless chill.

Even a massive section of the Twilight River in the distance had turned to ice, and space itself seemed frozen in place around the enormous bolt. Zac felt a pervasive, bone-chilling

cold rapidly seep into his bones, and nothing he did had the slightest effect at curtailing the creeping death. He found himself locked in place, helplessly staring into the horrified face of the Corpselord.

If Zac was in a bad situation, then it was obviously worse for his attacker. He had been swallowed whole by the ice spear, and his body was rapidly disappearing, freezing to the point that he became purified ice. Soon enough it was just a head stuck in a visage of fear and pain. And then he was gone.

Zac felt his vision cloud over a second later, but the cold left on its own accord even when he suddenly found himself surrounded by a blizzard that completely blocked his sight of the surroundings. A gust of wind caused the snowfall to congeal into what looked like a five-meter avatar, and Zac heard a voice in his head.

“This one acted in hopes of pleasing the Veilplume Monarch, and he was adequately punished,” the voice said. “As for your part of the bargain...”

A yellow sphere as large as a basketball appeared in front of him the next moment, and Zac immediately felt his scalp prickle. He had no idea what it was, but it felt even more terrifying than an atomic bomb.

“Put it into your Spatial Ring,” the avatar said, and Zac reluctantly complied.

The moment he touched the thing to stow it away, a small brand appeared on his hand.

“Drop this egg into the Twilight Chasm. Never take it out before you reach that place, or the brand will kill you. Take off your Spatial Ring, and it will kill you as well. Ignore the mission, and you will die in three years,” the voice continued, and the next moment the surroundings returned to normal.

Only a final warning echoed out in his mind as Zac looked around in fear. “Do not tell my disciple about the details of this mission, or the brand will kill you.”

Zac looked down at the blue mark on his hand as it faded away, knowing he was deep in it now. The Twilight Chasm

was in the absolute deepest part of the Twilight Ocean, the place where only the most powerful people could reach. The pressure from the immense Twilight Energy at that place would kill most men in a heartbeat.

However, he didn't even get a chance to react to the shocking events before a large rune appeared a few hundred meters away, after which a dozen warriors stepped out. Zac's first reaction was to flee, but he quickly calmed down when he saw the robes the warriors were wearing. It was an enforcement squad directly under the Twilight Lord, which explained why they could appear in this remote sector so easily.

"Young master, may I ask what transpired here...?" the Revenant captain asked as the Human fearfully looked around.

"I was attacked by a Hegemon on my way back from the auction," Zac sighed. "My Dao Guard had to step forward."

That was obviously bullshit, but it was simpler this way than telling the truth. As for the guards, there was no way to tell. They had probably been sent here to see which Monarch had made a move, and when they saw he was a pureblood Draugr they wouldn't want to get too involved.

"I see," the Guard Captain nodded. "Do young master require any assistance?"

"He's dead now," Zac shrugged. "But he destroyed my vessel and I don't have a spare. Can you send me to my residence?"

"Certainly," the Revenant quickly nodded as he took out a large flying treasure.

Zac jumped onto the vessel he used as the living members of the City Guard flew away. The Revenant captain wasted no time as he set out toward the hotel, with his soldiers acting as private guards to Zac as they formed a War Array around him. This was obviously just some grandstanding considering there was a hidden Monarch guarding Zac for all they knew, but Zac believed they definitely couldn't let a Pureblood Draugr get attacked twice in short order without getting in trouble.

As they closed in on the hotel, Zac went over the series of events, trying to discern whether he had exposed any large

secrets. Thankfully, he believed he hadn't made any big mistakes. There were no special hints from using [**Force of the Void**], but he had rotated his Miasma for a while to hide the truth of his Bloodline Talent.

He might have leaked out some aura of Annihilation, but Catheya's master shouldn't be too surprised even if he had sensed it. Vilari clearly bore those marks on her face, and he had released terrifying amounts of Annihilation during his rampage in Base Town. For all Catheya knew, all of them were connected to the Dao of Oblivion through Be'Zi.

As for everything else, Zac would have to slowly go over it later. First and foremost, how was he supposed to survive going to the most dangerous place in the Twilight Ocean?

Chapter 695: Breaking Shackles

Getting stuck with such a deadly mission was a shock, but it wasn't like Zac hadn't thought of heading over to the Twilight Chasm before. After all, it was the endpoint of the Twilight Ocean, the spot where the greatest treasures could be found.

The Twilight Ocean was essentially an enormous planet where you started on a continent on one pole, while the Twilight Chasm was on the other end. The description wasn't exactly true though, as the realm itself was somehow layered in ways that Zac couldn't understand. It was possible to enter a stream that shot through the ocean, and suddenly find yourself on what should be the opposite side of the Mystic Realm, saving months of travel time.

Finding the Twilight Chasm was easy, but only the best of the best could survive in that place. The Twilight Energy alone was enough to instantly corrode the souls of 99% of all participants, but that was just the start. There would also be extremely powerful Peak E-grade beasts patrolling the waters, and you also had to contend with all the peak power trial takers. Zac had only planned on going if he felt confident about his survival.

But now he was essentially given what could be considered a suicide mission, and Zac struggled to understand why Catheya's master would give him a task like this. His mother's array was supposed to hide any details of his cultivation inside his body, making him appear completely bland through some unknown means. Yet Catheya's master seemed to believe him able to reach the very depths of the Mystic Realm, something that most likely was impossible even for his own disciple.

Zac doubted that a peak C-grade Monarch would be so roundabout if he simply wanted Zac dead. Perhaps he believed

that Zac would be able to resist the ambient energy long enough to at least reach the Chasm, completing the task before he succumbed. Or perhaps he had found something indicating an ability to exceed expectations inside the Twilight Ocean when scanning Zac previously. Had his desperate escape from the Hegemon been so impressive he felt that Zac had what it took to reach the end? It was impossible to tell.

It was also suspicious that he didn't want his disciple to know what was going on. Was it just that he didn't want his disciple heading for the dangerous Twilight Chasm, or was there more at play beneath the surface? Zac felt it was all related to the secondary mission Catheya mentioned, but he still had absolutely no idea what that entailed.

Ultimately, he didn't have much choice but to follow through. The blue mark on his hand had already sunk into his body, and Zac couldn't even sense it any longer. He tried activating **[Spiritual Anchor]**, but there were no signs of its whereabouts at all. An E-grade skill was simply too low-graded to expose a Peak C-grade mark.

The good news was that he didn't immediately need to set out to the Chasm, even though it felt pretty bad walking around with that ominous thing in his Spatial Ring. He could spend a year or two working on his cultivation inside the trial and only then set out toward the depths. He was already at the precipice of evolving his Fragment of the Axe, and when adding the Life-Death Pearls he was slated for a huge powerup.

The enforcement squad eventually reached the platform, and they actually led Zac all the way to his courtyard just to be safe.

"We have been given a new order," the Revenant said. "Two captains will be stationed outside your courtyard, and they will accompany young master up until the trial. Don't worry, we will not impede on your daily life."

"Thank you," Zac nodded, and the guard captain sat down a hundred meters away from the gate, closing his eyes in meditation.

The VIP-Treatment might be because of Catheya's master, or it might just be protocol. The Council probably didn't want Monarchs running rampant in the harbor, and keeping the young elites out of trouble was a good way to help keep the peace. In either case, it would be a relief to have two Hegemons following as a deterrent. Otherwise, he'd be hard-pressed to go out again.

Unfortunately, it looked like the leisurely days of traveling around on Nala's dingy vessel were over. He would have to let her go, as to not get her involved in his mess. He and Vilari were only temporary guests, but Nala would have to make do in this place even after he left.

"I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the week," Zac said as he turned to an attendant that stood waiting by the gate to his courtyard.

"Certainly, young master," the early E-grade Revenant quickly nodded. "If you have the need for any of our services feel free to contact us through the communication array installed by the gate."

"One thing," Zac said after some thought. "Do you have any allies among the Dreamers, someone reliable who can complete a few errands on the Life-attuned islands?"

"That's..." the attendant said as he glanced at the guards who still hadn't left the area. "Security is quite strict around this time..."

"Oh, nothing like that," Zac snorted. "I just need someone to make some purchases for me, but I don't want to visit those life-attuned places myself. It has to be someone who has access to premier establishments."

"I will ask my manager," the assistant nodded, but his face indicated that this shouldn't be a hard request to field.

"Good, have the person visit me in one week," Zac said and the Revenant quickly bowed as he closed the gates to his courtyard.

Zac activated a series of isolation arrays the moment he closed the doors. The arrays were clearly of high quality as he had

never sensed a ripple of energy from his surroundings. He couldn't sense the Hegemon or his soldiers waiting outside either. They were definitely enough to shield his activities as well, but he also erected a private array for his own peace of mind.

Of course, if someone like Catheya's master wanted to spy on him, there was probably not much he could do about it. Thankfully, he wasn't planning on doing anything he desperately needed to hide over the following days.

"What happened?" Vilari asked with worry when she saw Zac's harried form.

He had some shallow wounds as his robes were tattered in various places, though the tears were fast mending. He had long since upgraded the Tool Spirit robes he bought from Yrial, and with the help of the Gemlings back home he had managed to infuse a burgeoning intelligence in the Tool Spirit. It was still a far cry from Verun, but it was a step in the right direction.

He had also unlocked the third skill of the robes, which was a transformation ability. It had allowed him to turn the previously white robe into a black-and-silver cut that suited his Draugr persona far better. Its defensive properties were worse than his own body and his skills though, but Zac knew that Yrial used these robes more for the aesthetic than its properties. You'd need a peak-quality defensive Spirit Tool for its skills to be of use to someone like Zac.

That changed at D-grade though. Reaching D-grade meant gaining the ability to power your equipment with the vast energy stored in your Cultivator's Core. Only then could even normal Defensive Equipment produce effects strong enough to match that of proper skills. That was also another reason why it was so hard to kill Hegemons; even the poorest of the bunch had scrounged up for at least one or two D-grade defensive items that could block powerful strikes.

"A few items appeared that I really needed at the auction," Zac sighed as he waved away Vilari's ministrations. "I drew too much attention and was attacked on the way home."

“Should we return home?” Vilari asked.

“I can’t,” Zac slowly sighed. “Catheya’s master personally intervened, but he forced me into completing a mission inside the Twilight Ocean. I’ll die if I go back to Earth now.”

“That bolt of ice... Was that him?” Vilari asked, a bit of killing intent leaking out from her body.

“You sensed it?” Zac asked with surprise, considering how far away the battle took place.

“It was like the universe was cut in two... Monarchy...” she mumbled with a frown.

“We’ll get there sooner or later,” Zac smiled. “I’ll give him a good thrashing when I reach that point. But for now, I need to enter seclusion for a bit.”

The auction had ended just four hours ago, but Zac couldn’t wait to start using the things he had bought. The recent events only reinforced the fact that he needed to get stronger, and quickly.

“I will wait outside,” the Vilari said as Zac entered the basement where a sealed cultivation chamber was built. “Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

Zac didn’t waste any time after the vault-like door closed behind him. He replaced the complimentary prayer mat with a peak-quality mat he bought the other day and lit three sticks of incense around it. The room was immediately filled with an earthy herbal aroma, and Zac felt his mind enter a state of tranquility as the waves in his Soul Sea noticeably stilled.

The sticks were called [**Serenity Incense**] and were among the cheaper items he had prepared for today. Their effect wasn’t anything special except helping one keep a calm and steady mind, which could lessen the risk of mishaps during breakthroughs. He originally wasn’t planning on using them just for eating a bunch of pills and treasures, but he was still a bit shaken after coming face to face to not only a Hegemon but also a Peak Monarch.

His frazzled mind was quickly soothed by the aroma and the mat, and he soon took out the [**Stone of Hope**] and hung it

around his neck next to **[Love's Bond]**. He didn't really feel anything different from equipping the item, except a slight cooling sensation. There was a brief information crystal provided with the purchase, and it said that he didn't need to do anything except to keep the thing on his body for it to work. Zac wasn't too sure whether it would help when eating treasures though, since it was designed to help when forcibly breaking open nodes.

The next thing Zac took out was one of the first things he bought at the auction; the three **[Fruit of Awakening]**. Zac immediately pushed the first one into his mouth and swallowed after chewing a few times. Nothing happened for a second, but Zac suddenly felt a sharp pang of pain in his gut. He hunched over with a grunt, but the prickling pain just increased in severity over the following minutes.

One moment it felt like he would soil his pants, but the next it felt like he would vomit as waves of warmth spread through his limbs. Meanwhile, it was like his pathways were on fire. Zac didn't panic though, as he knew this would happen. His whole body was coming 'alive', where largely ornamental organs regained their function.

The process lasted for three hours, at which point the process started to ebb down. Zac was elated to see that his Pathways were a lot wider by this point, but he still hadn't reached D-grade race. So Zac simply walked into an adjoining bathroom and doused himself to get rid of some extremely pungent impurities before he returned into the room and swallowed his second fruit.

Another wave of awakening spread through his body, but the worst of the pain had already passed. Some more gunk was squeezed out of his pores over the next two hours, but that was about it. His pathways had grown a few percent wider again, yet he still hadn't evolved. Zac wasn't deterred, and he swallowed his third and last fruit.

If this wasn't enough he'd start cramming pills down his throat, even if those things added impurities rather than removed him. The hours passed, and waves of warmth altered with pangs of cold. Zac wasn't able to tell if the last fruit

would be enough, but he suddenly felt a deep thump in his chest as the unmoving sludge in his veins started to move.

It was his heartbeat, a real one. It wasn't his Hidden Node waking up or anything, but rather the final organ in his body activating. And as the black ichor started to move through his veins, so did his organs truly wake up. It felt amazing and uncomfortable at once, and he couldn't help but look down at his body.

As expected, there still wasn't any life force at all even though he had a pulse and 'blood' that coursed through his veins. Life could really take any form in the Multiverse. It was no wonder most people considered the Soul the true core of a life, where the body was just a vessel to contain it. Zac took another shower to remove the last of the gunk, after which he had mostly acclimatized with his new state of being.

Zac inspected his form, and he had to admit that he felt marvelous, honestly even more so than he did in his human form. Draugr really lived up to their reputation. Until now his Undead side had felt pretty much the same as his human, but that wasn't exactly true any longer.

His pathways were both thicker and sturdier in his Draugr form. A few revolutions indicated that the speed at which he could move his Miasma was almost 30% greater than in his human form, which meant that he would be 30% faster at activating skills.

Not only that, but his skin was extremely durable. It was soft to the touch, but he actually couldn't pierce it with most of his weapons. It was like he had gained a new layer of protection from his body alone, without the aid of skills like **[Innate Ward]**. Finally, his energy reserves were massive. It was like if his human side provided 1 unit of Cosmic Energy per attribute point, then his Draugr side provided 1.3 units of Miasma per point.

In other words, his energy pool was thirty percent larger than a normal human's, and a normal Revenant's from what Zac guessed. It might not really increase his direct combat potential, but it was still a shocking advantage over normal

cultivators. It would allow him to activate far larger skills and to last in combat a lot longer, and it drastically reduced the drawback of his new movement skill.

He knew that Humans were considered a pretty lowly race in the multiverse, where their only advantage was their huge numbers. Until now he hadn't really felt his human heritage to be a detriment, but it was clear that more powerful races had all kinds of benefits that might not be immediately discernable from a status screen.

If this was the advantage after just reaching D-grade race, what about the higher stages? Would the difference just keep increasing over time?

Zac was a bit surprised though. He had already somewhat come to terms with the fact that Robert Atwood wasn't his biological father, and that Leandra had done some sort of extensive modification of his body. She said herself that she was the one who implanted the Specialty Core in him, which accidentally got triggered by the Draugr-samples that the Corpselord general Mhal used as a weapon.

So why wasn't his human side any stronger?

Leandra even looked down on his undead half from the sounds of it, yet it was far better suited for cultivation than his human side. As far as he could tell, the only special point about his original state was that his survivability, recovery, and energy resistance were better than normal. But his attribute cap and his ability to gain attributes from Attribute Fruits were just at the level of a peak human.

There was no easy answer to that question with his mother being long gone, but it begged the question if there was some way for him to improve his human constitution. After all, this issue should be something all human factions had to deal with, and perhaps there were methods to improve one's base quality. Perhaps he could form a life constitution to match his Draugr form.

Zac shook his head. That was all a question for later. For now, he had finally become a D-grade Draugr, which meant it was time for him to make another push forward. He took out

another box with anticipation, and a small pill inside rested on a velvet bed. It was deep purple, with golden flakes swirling inside, and it emitted a dense fragrance that made his newly awakened body scream with hunger.

It was the [**Aethergate Pill**], the third item he bought from the auction, and Zac immediately swallowed the first of the batch.

Chapter 696: Aethergate

Zac had been worried until now that any pill he'd swallow would be insufficient to provide the energy needed to break open a middle-stage node since his foundation made things ten times harder compared to the average cultivator. Thankfully, those fears were instantly dispelled just a second after swallowing the **[Aethergate Pill]**.

The leveling pill was Pseudo D-grade, and it showed considering the shocking amount of energy it contained. It was like eating something like twenty of the pills he used back when he had just evolved. The pill formed a cool swirling whirlpool had appeared in his body, but Zac felt a pang of pain even when the Pill Energy wasn't chaotic at all.

The pill was simply meant for Late E-grade elite cultivators, those who needed a shocking amount of energy for each level. It was a bit foolhardy to eat them at level 101, but Zac knew his constitution could take it. The Pill Vortex rapidly shrunk into a size no larger than a button, but it still retained the same amount of energy as before as it moved toward the next node.

It was located on his shoulder just like his last one, but this time on the left side. It was just a few centimeters away from the pathways of what formerly was **[Cyclic Strike]**, and Zac looked on with rapt attention as the whirlpool burrowed into the Node. Zac felt a slight pain as the Pill Vortex gradually cleansed and empowered the node. It was like the whirlpool acted as a motor that kickstarted the slow swirl that already existed inside, while also feeding it a boatload of energy.

After a few moments, Zac felt a snap as the node fully opened, and a radiating wave of pain spread out through his body as a small gash appeared on his back. It was like he had been struck by lightning and his pathways had become a conduit. The feeling was all-too-familiar; the backlash of opening a node. It was just a shadow of the agony that had left him

bedridden for months when reaching level 101, but it still caused some sweat to run down his forehead.

It was no wonder it took Catheya a full decade to enter the late stages of the E-grade even when having a Peak Monarch to assist in the process. Zac felt he would be able to keep going for a while, but any dreams of rushing straight through the middle E-grade with his Pseudo D-grade pills were instantly dashed the moment he saw the damage to his foundations.

The **[Stone of Hope]** didn't seem to help either. He had hoped that it would lessen the damage, but it really looked like it was more of a fateward-type item that protected against deadly harm when cultivating. Opening a node with a pill was just the standard path of leveling and not something where this odd treasure would assist with. **[Chainbreaking Pills]** might help, but the damage wasn't big enough to warrant the cost of using those things unless he was actually forcing open the nodes.

The good news was that the Pill Energy wasn't exhausted even after opening a full node. It looked like it wanted to keep infusing the recently opened node with energy, but Zac rather pushed the vortex toward the next node instead. Meanwhile, **[Purity of the Void]** was already working on overdrive, steadily preventing at least some of the Pill Toxicity from settling into the depths of his cells.

The second node was slightly below his shoulder-blade to the side, and opening it would definitely have punctured a lung if forced open. Another wave of pain erupted through his body an hour later, and Zac spat out some black ichor as he inspected his state. The physical damage was still nothing worth mentioning, but the intangible damage had superimposed on the first set of wounds, together creating more harm than they would do on their own.

Zac pushed the pain away as the **[Aethergate Pill]** still wasn't done, and he urged it to set the foundations for breaking open the third node before its energy was exhausted. The pill had absolutely exceeded his expectations, though so had the pain. Not even cultivators had it easy, it seemed. Zac took a ragged breath before he took out a Supreme-Grade Miasma Crystal.

He also popped a top-quality healing pill as he started absorbing the huge amount of Miasma within the Miasma Crystal. The nodes were opened, but he had actually not gained the levels just yet. The healing pills wouldn't really work on the hidden damage to his foundations, but it would at least patch up the wounds.

There was also some damage to the pathways around his opened nodes, and Zac spent three hours redrawing them with the help of [**Spiritual Anchor**]. It took two full days to fill the two Nodes, even when using the Supreme Miasma Crystals which were so energy-dense that they caused Zac some pain as they flooded through his pathways.

But it was worth it. He wasn't in a rush this time, and this way he'd avoid accumulating any unnecessary Pill Toxins. When he ate a bunch of pills just when reaching E-grade he had used pills for the process, but that was because he was flying toward the Dead Zone. This time there was still almost two months before the Twilight Ascent started.

If anything, he didn't want to leave the courtyard at all since there might be more thieves and assassins roaming about. After seeing how things progressed he had Vilari send a command to delay the meeting with whichever living attendant the hotel could enlist before he continued the process.

One node after another was opened and then filled with Miasma over the next ten days. Unfortunately, it was like a wedge had been inserted into Zac's body, and every node being cracked open added a hit of a sledgehammer to that wedge. Eventually, Zac was forced to stop, lest the wedge cracked him in two. The hidden damage he had accumulated by that point was pretty serious, though far from the debilitating effect of doing things like a mortal.

Zac knew that he was just at the precipice of causing some real damage, but he should be fine as long as he took things easy until the Twilight Ascent started. After that, he would only have to wait for a few months before he could start another round of pill-popping. Because thankfully, while the

accumulated damage had reached his limits, neither had the Pill Toxicity or his immunity.

It felt a bit bad to stop prematurely, but the gains were still quite substantial. In fact, they were even better than what Zac had expected considering he had already reached Middle E-grade. Zac opened up his status screen, and a smile spread across his face when he saw the result.

Name	Zachary Atwood
Level	109
Class	[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation
Race	[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)
Alignment	[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord
Titles	Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider
Limited Titles	Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao	Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - High, Fragment of the Bodhi - High
Core	[E] Duplicity
Strength	5008 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 228%]
Dexterity	2373 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]
Endurance	4373 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 228%]
Vitality	3255 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]
Intelligence	1176 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]
Wisdom	2211 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]
Luck	397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]
Free Points	80
Nexus Coins	[D] 938 716

Eight levels just from cramming pills down his throat over two weeks was a pretty damn good result, considering he just managed to gain five levels during his first round of pill-stuffing in the early E-grade. The boost in attributes was significant as well, pushing his attribute total by 10%, with most of them focused on his main attributes. And he still had eight levels worth of attributes to pick up from his human side.

Unfortunately, there was no way for him to quickly elevate his human levels at the moment. He definitely wouldn't break the seal on his Duplicity Core in this place, especially after the attention Catheya's master had given him. However, there would hopefully be a chance for him to sneak off and gain the levels after entering the Twilight Ocean.

Zac hesitated a bit about what to do with his free points, but he eventually put 40 of them into Strength to push it to 5,090. Unfortunately, he wasn't rewarded any title for passing 5,000 points in any attribute. He had hoped for something like his Promising Specialist-title, but perhaps such a title would need 10,000 points in a single attribute, if there even was a title that could stack with his old one.

He put the rest of his free points into Dexterity before he closed the status screen and walked out to where Vilari still sat, this time surrounded by the soothing haze from an incense stick.

"Are you okay?" Vilari asked as she turned her head toward him. "Your aura is a bit unstable."

"Gaining levels isn't risk-free even when taking pills it seems," Zac said as he sat down next to her with a grunt. "The gains were good though."

"I'm glad to see young master finally getting rid of the bottleneck," Vilari smiled. "A living Hegemon Courier will arrive in 20 hours."

"Great," Zac nodded.

"There's also this," Vilari added and handed him a couple of Cosmos Sacks and a Communication Crystal.

The Cosmos Sacks held the custom orders he had placed during his shopping spree, and they contained everything from arrays and array breakers to customized gear for his followers back home.

The most important arrays were obviously the arrays required for the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**. Kenzie had already managed to create them before she was taken, but the array disks she made were as large as a tennis court and they still contained some errors. But this time he had prepared everything for both his second and third reincarnation.

The arrays meant for the fourth reincarnation were impossible to have made though since they required specific materials that weren't available in the Twilight Harbor.

The disks he had commissioned were made by a Peak Hegemon Array Master. The Elemental had managed to squeeze the arrays onto disks no larger than the size of his palm. Furthermore, they were engraved on extremely valuable materials, making them perfect conductors of energy and almost impossible to break.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for him to work toward the second Reincarnation at the moment. Each level added more stringent requirements on the cultivation environment. He would probably be able to use the arrays back in his cultivation cave, but not here in some random courtyard. Perhaps he would be able to make use of the weird Twilight Energy inside the Mystic Realm, but he wasn't too sure he would be relaxed enough to sit around and cultivate his soul.

The second most important arrays he'd ordered were the set of **[E-grade Fractal Framework Arrays]**. It was the best mobile array for skill evolution he could get his hands on, and half of them were even modified to especially tailor to his Axe- and Coffin Daos and class archetype. One could even tailor the arrays to his pathways and skill fractals, but he wasn't willing to display those to the Array Masters, no matter what kind of confidentiality agreement they had.

He still wasn't quite ready to perform a manual upgrade of his F-grade skills, but the Twilight Ascent would last three years unless he left early. He needed to be prepared just in case.

As for the Communication Crystal, it came from Catheya. Zac scanned its contents and snorted with a mix of annoyance and helplessness. She thanked him for providing such great company and entertainment, and she also gave out some praises for his adroit usage of his newly acquired skills. More importantly, Catheya also called him for a meeting to meet the rest of the squad members, but that wasn't for another month.

Zac spent the rest of the day getting used to his evolved body, and he couldn't help but marvel at how good it was. And this was without the Hidden Nodes and bloodline talents of the Draugr-bloodline. He could absolutely understand why Revenant clans were so desperate to add some noble genes into their family line.

He also surreptitiously experimented a bit with his **[Force of the Void]**, and he was a bit surprised to realize that it didn't quite match the energy reserve boosts he got from his Race Upgrade. In fact, he only got half of it. Zac's best guess was that it was because of his human side. His bloodline was split between both his Human and Draugr halves, and it looked like his Bloodline Talent provided a reserve equivalent to 27% of his average energy storage capabilities.

That was both good news and bad news. Bad in the sense that he wouldn't get the most out of the Bloodline Talent in his undead form. Good in the sense that it probably meant his human side benefitted from this situation, which was especially nice considering he used more energy-hungry skills there.

It was also interesting in the sense that this was the first time one of his sides could benefit the other, apart from the attribute gain that is. Of course, there was no way for him to test out whether his theory was correct until he could freely swap between his classes.

The hours passed, and Zac eventually heard a chime at his gate, indicating that the courier had arrived. Vilari opened the gate, and Zac saw a woman accompanied by the two enforcement captains.

"Young master," the pale woman said with a nod, and Zac couldn't help but do a double-take as he let her the trio into the courtyard.

Zac would definitely have guessed that the middle-aged woman in front of him was a Revenant if not for the weak hints of life-force hidden within a storm of murky energies. Zac didn't know why, but force made him think of Leviala's eyes. Was this woman perhaps a hexmaster gravitating toward the Daos of Death? That would explain why she leaned toward the unliving factions.

"I heard Young Master was looking for someone to make a few purchases among the living establishments?" she said as she nervously glanced at the two captains whose eyes never left her body.

“No offense, but are you even able to get into the pill houses of the Dreamers?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Truth be told, I cannot do business with the treemen. They are the race with the most... inflexible convictions. But the others won't mind me cultivating in death. There's too many of us like this,” she said. “Bad business to turn all that money away.”

“You come recommended by this establishment,” Zac said as he took out a crystal. “I need everything on this list.”

The woman nodded and scanned the contents, and her eyes widened a bit at the numbers.

The purchase order Zac had prepared was nowhere close to what he had bought until now, but it was still a pretty huge amount of resources. Most of it was peak-quality items such as Supreme Divine Crystals or hard-to-find pills. There was none of the more common stuff though, as Zac could buy all those things at a huge discount back in the Zecia sector.

Still, the total value of the items was almost 2,000 D-grade Nexus coins.

“This requires a few days and a massive amount of capital,” the hexmaster hesitated.

“I'll pay you 2,000 Nexus Coins for the items in the list, half upfront. Your remuneration depends on how good deals you can find. I'll pay you the rest upon delivery of the items,” Zac said. “Are you amenable to these terms?”

“This... Alright,” she eventually nodded.

Zac guessed that go-between parties like the hexmaster had their connections, and she would likely get a kick-back on the purchases. Even if she just got a one percent commission from the pill house, she'd still make 10 D-grade nexus coins, a great salary for a few days of errands. The only issue was whether she had the ability to fork out 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins until she got paid, and it was a bit of a test from Zac.

If she didn't have those kinds of reserves, she might not even be able to gain access to some of the items he needed.

The two signed a contract, and the hexmaster disappeared a moment later, leaving only a rune hovering in the air for a few seconds before it dissipated. Zac could somewhat tell that it was a trap. Not for him, particularly, but rather as part of her movement skill. Anyone who touched that rune would probably be exposed to the hexmaster, who could throw out a curse remotely.

The two guard captains nodded in Zac's direction before they returned to their position outside.

"What now?" Vilari asked after she closed the gate.

"Well, we're pretty free for a while," Zac said after some thought. "How about we take advantage of our bodyguards and go sightsee a bit?"

Chapter 697: Coming Alive

Zac had accomplished everything he set out to do with some time to spare, which left him and his follower with over a month of free time.

“How about we visit a restaurant to celebrate your success?” Vilari suggested.

“My body is only partly awake,” Zac smiled. “I still need to reach Peak E-grade for my organs to be like the living’s. But it should be possible for me to eat and drink by now.”

The ability to eat and drink was obviously not as exciting for Zac as it was for the real undead, but he was still a bit curious. So he took out one of the bottles of spiritual wine in his Spatial Ring to test the waters. He took a swig, and he was happy to feel the burn in his throat and a very weak buzz.

However, he blanched when he felt the taste, which could best be described as diaper-left-in-sun. Zac spat out the wine before he looked at the bottle with a mix of confusion and disgust. It was brewed with F-grade grapes grown on the main island of Port Atwood, and it was bottled just a year ago. Had it already gone bad?

“I read that tastes are quite different between the living and undead, even after our senses awaken,” Vilari said with a slight smile as she took out a crystal decanter with a light blue wine. “I prepared this for this very occasion, have a taste.”

Zac spat a few more times and rinsed his mouth with some water before he gratefully took the decanter and a glass. When he poured it up it gave off an earthy fragrance which made Zac think of the forest after rain. He took a sip, and he had to admit it tasted great. Zac guessed it had to have been brewed with some fruits with Death Attuned energies since he felt a slight surge spread through his body.

“Delicious,” Zac sighed as he leaned back and looked up at the entrance to the Twilight Ocean.

Innumerable ships scuttled back and forth through the void, and that was just a fraction of the activity happening on the various platforms. Hundreds of billions of life held together by the Twilight Rivers and a Mystic Realm. Life and death intermingling. Zac looked up at the spectacle as a warm buzz from the wine spread through his body.

It all felt very beautiful, and Zac actually felt himself almost choke up a bit at the thought, prompting him to look down at the liquor with confusion.

“It’s not really the wine that’s affecting your mental state,” Vilari laughed, and the scene actually made Zac’s heart beat an extra time. “It’s your being coming alive.”

Zac immediately understood what was going on, and he took a calming breath as he stabilized his mind. It felt like his senses were enhanced, or perhaps rather magnified, and the same was true for his moods. His emotions had always been a bit muted in his undead form, but they now felt clearer than ever.

This wasn’t actually anything unique to him, he just hadn’t noticed anything different until the wine had pushed the effect a bit further. He already knew that most undead had some trouble adjusting to this new state of being, which sometimes resulted in unwanted physical responses. After all, low-tier undead were essentially energy beings that used an unliving body as a receptacle for their souls and ichor. Zac had simply figured that this period of acclimatization wouldn’t happen to him since he was more used to having a living breathing body than not.

Still, the effect wasn’t overly powerful, and Zac got used to the difference in no time. Still, he was a bit embarrassed since Vilari had no doubt sensed the fluctuations in his soul when he looked over in her direction.

“What do you think of this place?” Zac asked to change the subject. “Do you think this is the direction our home will take?”

“I hope not,” Vilari answered after some thought.

“Oh?” Zac said with surprise.

“This place is ultimately no different compared to the Zecia sector. It’s just Living Factions and Undead Factions living in the same area. They only tolerate each other’s existence because of the uniqueness of the Twilight Ocean. I pray that our world will not turn into this. I hope that our people one day can integrate with the others,” Vilari explained.

Zac sighed and nodded, though he didn’t know if that was even possible. Then again, that fusion was the very thing his own cultivation path required, and the direction in which Earth’s World Core was heading. Then again, Be’Zi had found a husband among the living, so it wasn’t a completely ridiculous concept.

“Don’t mind my rambling,” Vilari added as she turned to Zac. “I understand the problems you and our planet are facing. It’s impossible for the Einherjar to walk in the light right now. But I hope that one day young master reaches such a height that you can follow your own wishes, rather than having to worry about what outsiders think. I don’t feel there is any shame in being undead, and I don’t feel that anything is stopping the living and dead from working together.”

“You’re right,” Zac agreed. “I’ll try my best.”

The two sat and enjoyed the view for another hour before Zac felt his body stabilized enough to go out.

With his two Hegemon guards wearing the livery of the Twilight Lord himself he was safer than ever, especially among those who knew who he actually was. That spear of ice had been visible through half of Twilight Harbor, and Hegemons and Monarchs alike knew the power it represented. Even in a place like this, there would probably be fewer than five Peak Monarchs, all of them outsiders from the B-grade empires.

Catheya’s master hadn’t mentioned anything about continuously protecting him, but Zac still felt he probably

would keep an eye out since Zac still carried that weird egg-like item in his Spatial Ring.

Seeing as it would take the courier a while to complete her tasks, Zac spent the next few days taking in the sights with Vilari. The first place they visited was an orchestra of Musical Cultivators, and Zac was blown away by the performance. It almost felt like he had an epiphany as he listened to the haunting melodies, and they conjured all kinds of imagery in his mind.

They also visited a few restaurants, though only Zac could eat while Vilari just kept him company. Having food prepared solely with spiritual materials, from the vegetables to the meat to the spices, and then having it all prepared by skilled chefs was an almost otherworldly experience.

Zac had always somewhat looked down on those who gave up on their cultivation after reaching a certain stage, but was this kind of life really so bad? As long as you got powerful enough you could enjoy this kind of transcendent lifestyle for millennia. Of course, that life was ultimately not for him. He had too many people depending on him for him to retire early.

Besides, he felt that these kinds of experiences paled compared to the feeling of pushing his cultivation and insights forward. To evolve his Dao was to become more in tune with the universe, and to gain a level was to take a step toward perfection. How could good food and entertainment rival those sensations?

The Hexmaster returned after three days with every single item on the list accounted for, which meant that everything was prepared before the Twilight Ascent. There were still 50 days until the trial started, and Zac only had to meet up with Catheya once apart from focusing on his cultivation. He could probably evolve his Fragment of the Axe at any time with the help of one or two of his Dao Fruits, but he held off on it.

The System-sanctioned trial was related to the Dao, and it would be a bit stupid if he evolved his fragment prematurely only to find out that the task was to make as many breakthroughs as possible. Instead, he focused on improving

his combat style when he wasn't touring the city. There was only so much he could do right now though, since swinging his axe into thin air or even sparring with the Hegemon captains was just mimicry of real battle.

He needed some spark of inspiration to improve further.

Luckily, there was one place that might provide just that, and Zac had the captains escort him and Vilari to a massive coliseum on a platform pretty close to the center of the Twilight Harbor. It was there that the qualifiers to the Twilight Ascent were being held, and a thousand battles raged at any given moment.

It would normally be impossible to see the battles clearly from the stands, but the coliseum was equipped with a pretty magical illusion array. Any battle that Zac focused on was somehow enlarged so that he could see it clearly even if it was kilometers away.

There were all kinds of battles to spectate. Undead fought against undead, living against living, and the two sides often clashed as well. All the battles were frantic as winning might mean getting a ticket to the greatest opportunity in a millennium, but the battles between the living and the dead were extraordinarily ruthless.

You were not allowed to kill someone who had given up, and the judges tried to save lives when it was clear the battle was over. But how often did people get the opportunity to throw in the towel when you were going all out to seize victory? Life and death happened in the blink of an eye. Battles kept resulting in fatalities, much to the excitement of the crowd.

The qualifiers were not only a way to get an entrance token for E-grade cultivators, but it was also a showcase of strength between the living and the dead. After all, while this might be a grey zone, there were definitely some tensions running beneath the surface. It was just like Vilari said, the living and dead weren't really living in harmony. They were just tolerating each other to reap the benefits of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac himself didn't care about any of that but seeing so many battles gave him some inspiration. And he had to admit that he had underestimated the young elites of the Multiverse. Many of the true talents of the Twilight Harbor weren't even participating in these qualifiers thanks to their reserved spots, but Zac still saw quite a few shocking battles over the two weeks he visited the coliseum with Vilari.

There were tens of thousands of cultivators he felt would push him extremely hard to come out ahead, and over a hundred he had absolutely no confidence winning against unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. The latter group was obviously made up of peak E-grade cultivators who had accumulated for over a century, but that fact didn't help in a battle of life and death.

Six particular elites even pressured Zac almost as much as Iz Tayn did, the terrifying flame cultivator he encountered during the Battle of Fates. Against her, Zac hadn't even dared fight. Only escape had been on his mind when he faced that lunatic. Of course, these six definitely had a significant level advantage against him, but their auras were still extremely condensed, far surpassing Catheya's.

There was only so much you could gain from watching strangers battle, and Zac eventually grew bored of looking at the endless carnage. He did however place an order for an intelligence missive on the top 10,000 contenders. It wouldn't hurt to memorize the names and faces of some of the individuals he needed to be careful around in the trial.

Since there still were a few days before the meeting with Catheya, he decided to visit set off to the mortician that she had recommended. It was at the outer edge of the Twilight Harbor, and it almost looked like he was visiting a military fortress rather than a business. There extremely powerful barriers protecting the area, and there were miasmatic towers that radiated a power that made Zac's hair stand on end.

He knew that if he was blasted with the attacks stored in those things, not even ashes would remain.

“What’s with the defenses?” Zac asked curiously as he turned to the Revenant captain.

“Bodies are a contentious subject in the Twilight Harbor,” the captain smiled. “Some corpses put up for sale have once been members of the living clans. The Morticians modify the appearances of the unawakened, but their previous identities are sometimes exposed. This place suffers attacks almost every decade.”

Zac nodded in understanding as they passed through the barriers. The Twilight Harbor probably got a steady supply of bodies from all over, but sourcing locally was ultimately the easiest. As demand for new followers was unending among the unliving clans, there would always be people desecrating graves or even killing youths to sell their corpses.

The Mortician had unfortunately already held a huge auction a month before Zac arrived to Twilight Harbor, leaving the stock a bit bare. but he still managed to buy ten thousand mid-quality E-grade corpses with no connection to the Undead Empire. He also bought 10 peak-quality corpses, each of them once belonging to a peak cultivator. The bodies were also all cleansed of any Karma and slightly enhanced with various means, especially the peak corpses.

Hopefully, they would have been turned into a promising troupe by the time he returned to Port Atwood.

Eventually, the day he was supposed to meet up with Catheya arrived, but there was one more thing he needed to do before heading over to the Eldritch Archivals. The Twilight Ascent started in two weeks, so it was time to send Vilari back to Earth.

He had the enforcers take them to the teleportation platform, where he transferred the funds necessary to teleport back, along with another 500 D-grade Nexus Coins to be added to the town coffers just in case. He also gave her the eight enormous Spatial Rings containing all the resources he didn’t need for himself.

“I’ll leave the Einherjar in your hands,” Zac said as they stood outside one of the teleporters. “Don’t tell anyone that I’ll be

stuck in the Mystic Realm for up to three years. I don't want people to get any foolish ideas while I'm gone. Give Joanna the rings meant for the... others. For the Einherjar, I leave it up to you. My only request, make them prove themselves if they want the resources."

"I'll get it done," Vilari said with a nod. "Don't worry about Por... home. You have nurtured many talents who will keep everything running smoothly. Good luck in there."

Zac nodded, and he watched on as the Mentalist disappeared in a flash of light, starting her two-week journey through the void. Only a few minutes later did he leave, heading straight for the Clan Sharva'Zi's Dao Repository. He was a bit early, yet he found Catheya waiting outside the gates, dressed completely different from what he had seen before.

She usually donned cultivation dresses in darker overtones but was now clad in something a courtesan might wear. The dress was both snug and low cut, and her hair was held up with a few pins that gave her a very seductive aura. The ensemble was even more suggestive than what the sultry Revenant guide wore, and her appearance kept turning heads as customers walked back and forth. Of course, no one dared to get close as three Hegemon guards glared at anyone who looked her way.

The captains set down the vessels and waited outside as Zac walked over toward his employer with a slightly confused frown.

"I see your cultivation session went well," Catheya said with an impish smile as she slightly bent forward, showcasing an impressive amount of cleavage. "So, what do you think?"

Zac blankly looked at her with a mix of confusion and suspicion, wondering why she was suddenly trying to seduce him. Had his ability to escape the Hegemon been that dashing? And was undead courtship always this... blatant?

Their gazes were locked for a few seconds until Catheya's expression started to sour as she looked at Zac up and down.

"About what?" Zac eventually asked.

“Nothing,” Catheya snorted with annoyance as her daring dress morphed into one that looked more like her normal attire before she started walking toward the closest entrance.

“Cultivation moron.”

Only then did Zac realize what was going on. He had already felt the side effects of his body awakening. Catheya had probably figured out that he had bought the **[Fruit of Awakening]** for himself, considering that it shouldn't have been hard for her master to glean his body was still unawakened.

Was she hoping to make him blush or accidentally pop a boner like a hormonal teenager? Too bad for her he had already gone through puberty over two decades ago.

“And it's not possible that you're simply not as mesmerizing as you believe?” Zac said with a small smile as he followed her into the building.

“Absolutely impossible,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Varo couldn't look in my direction for a month after evolving.”

“Well, some have deviant tastes,” Zac shrugged, which awarded him with another baleful glare.

Of course, Zac knew that Catheya would be considered a beauty among Draugr. Unfortunately for her, Zac still mostly considered himself human. Looking into those abyssal orbs for eyes quenched any sort of desire instantly.

“Well, whatever,” Catheya snorted as the two entered a chamber where five people already were waiting. “The others are already here. Come introduce yourself.”

Chapter 698: Perennial Vastness

Zac floated in the emptiness of space next to Catheya, and his new allies formed a small clump in an endless sea of E-Grade cultivators. Thousands upon thousands of groups had gathered around him, in a roughly even mix between life and death. Of course, there were also millions of lone cultivators who were spread amongst the group, waiting for the Twilight Ascent to start.

The accumulated aura of over ten million warriors was something else, yet it was nothing compared to the one hundred thousand Hegemons who had gathered on the opposite side of the glowing star in front of him. Their frightful power could be sensed even at a distance of thousands of kilometers, and it was no wonder the two groups had been instructed to gather far away from each other.

The pressure didn't come just from afar though, as Zac sensed some auras nearby that could overpower his own. He even recognized a few faces from the intelligence missives he had prepared for the Trial.

Thankfully, one's aura wasn't an exact measurement of combat power. With Zac's accumulations and aces, he wasn't a fish at a chopping block in front of even the greatest of E-grade warriors. Furthermore, those monstrous elites from the Undead Kingdoms or living Empires would hopefully head for the core of the Twilight Ocean while his group wouldn't pass the 70% mark according to Catheya.

Still, Zac estimated himself to be in the top quartile among the trial takers after looking around. If he could evolve his Dao Fragments and find some more opportunities over the next three years, he might even make it to the top percent, which

would allow him to complete Va Tapek's, Catheya's Master, mission with some degree of success.

Zac was suddenly dragged out of his thoughts as two new people popped up out of nowhere, their arrival not even causing the slightest ripple of Cosmic Energy. The clamor in the area immediately died down, as these two demanded everyone's undivided attention by their presence alone.

One was an ancient-looking treeman over thirty meters tall. On top of his head was a small tree crown with golden leaves, each of them covered in dense scripts. His body was generally humanoid in shape, with two legs and two arms, though his face was simply at the top of the trunk right beneath his crown. However, there were thousands of branches sprouting out from his back, forming an intricate diamond pattern.

But most striking was the vast aura of life he exuded.

His features somehow made him look old, but it felt like he would live forever going by his aura. It even felt like the glowing Twilight Ocean had dimmed in his presence. He was clearly a cultivator following some path of nature, and just looking at him made him feel like he was caught inside the energy emanations of the Dimensional Seed again.

However, it was just an illusion formed by his latent will. His aura was clearly restrained and it didn't hurt anyone. Zac wasn't actually inundated in any energies, since he would probably die if that happened. Furthermore, the powerful treeman wasn't alone. Next to him stood a hooded being, looking almost like a fly next to the massive treant.

But his aura was just as shocking as the treant's, and Zac felt the grip of death clutching his heart when glancing in his direction. The air itself seemed like it was teetering on the brink of collapse from the force hidden within those robes.

"It's the Goldenleaf Monarch and Kaard'Es Venarun, the Moonblight Monarch," Catheya said with a low voice. "Both are Middle-stage Monarchs and supreme elders of two of the council clans. I didn't expect such bigshots to appear today."

Zac nodded in understanding. Didn't know what force the treant was from, but he had heard of the Venarun Clan. The undead side of the council was manned by three clans, one Sect, and one Consortium, with the sect holding the greatest power. One of those clans was precisely the Venarun Clan, a local Revenant clan with some bloodline of the Izh'Rak Reavers.

"Welcome, trial takers," the Goldenleaf Monarch said with a smile. "The gates will open in a few moments, and the council wishes to make sure everyone understands the rules of the Twilight Ascent. Most of you are local talents chosen to represent your forces, but some are also faraway guests."

"The Twilight Energy will sap your energy, robbing you of your power. The Energy is unique and most likely modified by the Boundless Heavens. It will burrow into your body no matter whether you want it or not, and the amount is mostly based on your level and how deep into the ocean you have gone. There are various means to reduce its effect, but no method is as effective as improving yourself," the treeman said. "Making breakthroughs and boosting your attribute pool will allow you to reach further, to gain more from this Trial."

"The laws are the same one as in the rest of the Multiverse," the Moonblight Monarch continued with a rough voice, and Zac felt an almost primal fear just upon hearing him speak. "The law of the jungle. Kill, steal, and battle to your heart's content. Hone yourself through slaughter and mayhem. The council will not interfere."

A dense killing intent spread through the whole zone as warriors surreptitiously glanced around. Cultivators who had reached the end of E-Grade all had blood on their hands, some far more than Zac himself. It was an unfortunate reality of the world; cultivation didn't only require time and Cosmic Energy.

It required a steely conviction and mental fortitude that would allow them to keep going down the same path for centuries and millennia. And that kind of mental strength couldn't be cultivated inside a cultivation cave. It was gradually formed through risking one's life and bloodshed. There might be a few beings in perfect tune with their path and with sublime mental

states that didn't require this kind of training, but those people were beyond rare in number.

“Remember, the council will not have any opinions on your actions inside, but that doesn't mean your actions have no consequences. Cause an undue amount of slaughter inside, and trouble might find you, either inside the trial or even the moment you exit. Furthermore, slaughtering the weak is a dead end with meager rewards. The true opportunities are waiting for you in the depths of the Twilight Ocean,” the old treant said.

“The Council has studied the ocean, and we expect it to stay open for 3 years and 2 months. Staying the whole duration is not required to take a position on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. Knowing when to retreat is an important skill of any adventurer.”

“But remember. The gates will be closed for one year. You better have the means to stay alive if you want to enter the ocean. Otherwise, you'll just turn to fertilizer for others,” the Venarun elder snickered. “The first year and the last months are always the bloodiest.”

Zac inwardly nodded in agreement, not surprised at all. In the beginning, there would be ten million warriors at the starting continent, all full of adrenaline and greed for treasures. Bloodshed was bound to happen. Things would gradually stabilize as people died and people started leaving after a year, but the carnage would pick up pace by the end.

By that point, everyone's Cosmos Sacks would be bulging with loot, and a single battle might double people's net worth. Beasts die for food, men die for money.

“I am sure everyone is curious about the reward this time around?” the treant smiled, causing an excited murmur among the people.

A huge plaque appeared the next moment, clearly listing the treasures.

1st – [50-year Perennial Vastness Token].

2nd – 5th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & One unique treasure presented by the Twilight Council

6th – 10th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & One supreme treasure of the Twilight Vault

....

5,001 – 10,000th - 3rd Class E-grade Treasure from the Twilight Vault.

Zac read the list with interest, and he found that the rewards even at the top thousand were pretty good. For instance, the top 100 would all get to pick a Special Class E-grade treasure from the Twilight Vault. The Twilight Vault was a shared hoard guarded by the Twilight Lord and the Council, and it had accumulated mountains of valuable items over millions of years.

A Special Class E-grade Treasure were all at the level of the items at the second part of the auction, and every single one could provide a drastic improvement if you found a suitable one. As for the top 10 prizes, they were all things that wouldn't reach a public auction, especially the top five items.

Zac didn't hold out much hope for those things after seeing the preliminary duels, but he still read the rewards with interest.

“Perennial Vastness? What's that?” Ravan, one of Zac's new team members, muttered with confusion, sparing Zac the need to ask.

Ravan was a local to the Twilight Harbor, an elite naturally-born Corpselord from a subsidiary force to the Sharva'Zi Clan. He was just like Mhal in a sense, though his accomplishments far eclipsed the general that caused Zac so much trouble back then. His role in the party was as a pure offensive combatant, though Zac still didn't know exactly what kind of class he held.

His aura indicated some sort of spellcaster class though, which was a bit surprising to Zac considering the buff physique of the man.

“It is a high-grade Immemorial Realm. Some say it’s older than the System itself,” Catheya said with a small frown. “I’m surprised the council would put something so valuable in the reward, or that they even have one at all. Our competition might just have gotten more heated.”

“It’s that precious?” Ravan asked, and Zac looked over with curiosity.

It was the first time he had heard about Immemorial Realms in a while. It was exactly the kind of place that his mother wanted to enter with Kenzie, but even she wasn’t confident in succeeding. That alone told a story of just how valuable the Perennial Vastness token was

“I’m not sure about the details either,” Catheya shrugged.

“The Perennial Vastness is controlled by a mysterious unattached force that sends out a million tokens into the multiverse every thousand years or so. Even some descendants of B-grade forces would try to get one for themselves.”

“Why isn’t the Empire snatching that place if it’s so good?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure. That force must possess extreme power for it to remain for hundreds of millions of years,” Catheya said.

“Besides, it’s very far away from the Undead Empire, which is why I didn’t expect a token to appear in this region.”

“What’s the value for us E-Grade warriors?” Ravan asked.

“Evolution,” Catheya said. “Any peak E-Grade cultivator who enters the Perennial Vastness is essentially guaranteed to emerge with a Cultivator’s Core. More importantly, their cores are far sturdier compared to normal, approaching perfection.”

“What!” Ravan exclaimed as his eyes turned back to the board, his whole face turning into a mask of desire.

Zac understood the feeling, and his own heart beat with greed. He had long learned the goal of the D-Grade. If the F-grade revolved around collecting as many titles as possible and the E-grade around finding and opening hidden nodes, then everything in the D-grade circulated around the Cultivator’s Core, or rather the Cosmic Core.

Successfully forming the Cosmic Core was just the first step. The whole D-grade was spent strengthening and perfecting it. That's why so many considered the first step the most important one as well. One could gradually improve a core through hard work and various opportunities, but you would obviously save a huge amount of effort if you started with a sturdy foundation.

If you started with a low-quality Core you might exhaust all your momentum perfecting it over millennia, if you ever reached perfection at all. After all, the main goal of the D-Grade was to elevate one's core to the point that it could withstand the formation of an inner world of the C-Grade.

And even internal worlds differed greatly from what Zac had heard. The sturdier the core the larger the inner world you would be able to form, which would make you comparatively stronger compared to other Monarchs.

That's what made this opportunity sound so overpowered. To guarantee a successful formation by itself was to beat the one to a million odds, but greatly improve its foundation as well? That greatly enhanced the chances that you'd be able to reach the C-Grade as well, something that might only happen once every 100,000 years in peak-force in the Zecia sector.

"You can put that out of your mind," Catheya snorted. "We're a pretty powerful group, but we're far from a peak squad. With this token on the line, the hidden Heaven's Chosen will come out in force, unleashing a bloodbath in search of Twilight Fruits."

"Anything's possible," Ravan muttered, but it wasn't with much conviction.

Zac saw that the fires hadn't died out in Ravan's eyes, but he didn't hold out much hope for the Corpselord. He was clearly a cut above most, but there was ultimately only one token. Furthermore, even if you managed to get the token through some huge stroke of luck, would he be able to hold on to it?

This kind of item seemed like something good enough that even Monarchs would make a move, since giving it to an elite of their faction greatly increased the odds of another Monarch

appearing in a few thousand years. That could completely shift the power dynamic of a faction. In fact, Zac even bet that it was the System that forced them to add the token as a reward, and people were already planning in the shadows how to snatch it.

“Nine redo-token as well,” Sharpo, their spectral scout, said with longing. “I heard that only the 2nd and 3rd position got one last time.”

Zac had learned about “Redo-tokens” before, or rather **[Reforged Providence Gems]**. Zac could absolutely understand the ghost’s desire; the gems were definitely good stuff.

One thing that Zac had always felt was weird was how those who didn’t perform that well in the F-grade were relegated to always lag behind those who managed to gather the best titles. However, it turned out that wasn’t completely true. One method catch up was to perform similar exhibits of power in the later grades. That would usually result in a similar, but diminished, title.

The redo-tokens were another method to catch up.

They really gave you a shot at a do-over in case you performed badly in the early stages of your cultivation. For example, what if you only got the Giantsbane back then, the title for killing a beast 5 levels above you? It was actually possible to use the gem to shoot for the Apex Predator title again with a token like this, something that would be impossible in the E-grade even for Zac.

The token would let you choose a title to improve and generate a fitting trial for it, just like his own Sovereignty-quests, though the difficulty would be increased compared to getting it right the first time. Most importantly; the System would use your current attainments as the template before restricting you down to the F-grade. It would still be an extremely challenging task to get the Apex Predator particular title, but it was at least achievable if you had gone from an average cultivator to a supreme Heaven’s Chosen.

Zac definitely wanted one if he could get his hands on such a token, but he wasn't too enthused since he had most of the peak titles. His interest might have been bigger if it worked on trial-related titles such as the one from the Tower of Eternity, but the token was limited to general achievement titles.

Perhaps it was possible to improve the Child of Dao-title, which he suspected was one of the greatest progenitor titles. Otherwise, he might be able to hunt down some other low-quality title in the future and use the re-do token to turn that title into a top-quality F-grade variant. But in the end, he was just making up scenarios since his odds of getting one of the nine tokens were pretty abysmal.

"The items provided to the top 1,000 aren't bad at all, and it is a far more achievable goal," Catheya snorted. "A first-class treasure from the vault can probably improve either your strength or chance of reaching Hegemony by 10%."

Zac personally had his eyes on the top 100 reward, though he didn't have much confidence at the moment. It all depended on how things panned out over the next three years. That was his biggest advantage. Many of those with auras far surpassing his had mostly exhausted their potential in the E-Grade, while he still had ample room to grow.

The other warriors floating in space animatedly discussed the unusually generous rewards as well, while some looked at the sign with troubled faces. Zac understood their worry. The rewards were one tier higher than normal across the board. It was almost like the Council was encouraging a mass slaughter for the Twilight Fruits. The mortality rate would definitely be higher than normal this time around.

Everyone had their own thoughts on the situation, but the clamor quickly died down as an enormous scar appeared in front of them. It kept expanding until it was over a thousand meters across, at which point it stabilized and turned into what looked like a gate.

"Here, take this," Catheya said as she took out a round stone ball that looked almost like an orange. It even had ten detachable wedges. "Keep it on you. Our first goal is gathering

before we set out. You'll be able to sense me more than the others, but group up if possible. If a single one of us falls in the initial phase the rest will have a harder time gathering the pearls."

She took off one slice after another, giving one to each member of the squad. Zac simply put it into one of his pockets without comment. The item was a tracking device, which allowed the squad to sense the position of their allies as long as they infused the item with some Miasma. It was a higher-grade solution compared to the flares Galau used back in the Tower of Eternity.

The group didn't need to wait more than thirty minutes before the massive gates swung open, and it looked like a wall of water with a greenish hue waited on the other side.

The Twilight Ocean.

Chapter 699: The Twilight Ocean

“Good luck,” the Goldenleaf Monarch said after the portal in front of the waiting trial-takers had stabilized. “Remember, the moment you pass through those gates you will have to spend a minimum of one year in the Twilight Ocean. This is your final chance to back away.”

No one left after the warning, but Zac wouldn't be surprised if some would find themselves unable to take that final step through the Space Gate. He was personally mostly filled with anticipation for the opportunities within, but he had been through so many life- and death encounters by now that this venture felt relatively safe in comparison to some of his other experiences.

Meanwhile, some participants probably had limited experiences with death and were rather raised in the relative safety of their clans.

The first people to enter were the descendants of the Council Factions, soon followed by the premiere local clans. It was a small show of force to have the outsider wait, even if they were descendants of B-grade forces. Catheya still had seeded slots, so it was their turn after just three hours. By that point, only four hundred thousand cultivators had already passed through, meaning that most were still waiting their turn.

“Remember to be careful,” Catheya said as they floated in front of the barrier. “The first culling has already started on the other side.”

The rest nodded before they flew through one by one. Zac didn't turn into an incorporeal consciousness shot through the void as usual during teleportation, but it rather felt like he had been thrown into the middle of intense fireworks as his

surroundings flashed in gold and black. The energies surrounding him were immense, and he looked around with wonder since it felt like the almost nauseating lights were rife with hidden truths.

Suddenly, an immense pressure locked Zac in place, causing him to frown with worry. He had read about the chaotic teleportation already, but this pressure wasn't mentioned in any missive he'd bought. The next moment he felt a sharp pain from his finger as his Spatial Ring reached blistering temperatures. He sent a strand of mental energy into the ring, and he was filled with a sense of foreboding as he saw the odd egg shaking within the space of his ring.

Was it some sort of banned item?

But before Zac even had a chance to worry about getting slapped with a tribulation punishment for bringing contraband to the Twilight Ocean, a ten-meter rune rushed toward him, completely undeterred by the chaos, and passed right through his body. A moment later the pressure was gone and the egg had calmed down.

There was no time to make sense of things before he found himself standing in a foreign world. It looked like he was pretty lucky as he had been dropped off at the edge of the starting continent, and he found himself standing up to his knees in a greenish-golden liquid. He had read so much about it over the past months, but it was still exhilarating to see it with his own eyes.

Zac looked down at the water with interest as he activated **[Cosmic Gaze]**. He could confirm that it was attuned with both life and death just like the missives had explained, but he couldn't make sense of how the two had fused even after looking at the water for over a minute.

One second it felt like the two attunements were two opposites fighting for the same spot, vaguely familiar to his own path where life and death clashed in an endless war. However, the next moment they coexisted in harmony, only to a moment later be either pure life or death. Finally, for short bursts of

time, they were melded into something unique that Zac couldn't begin to comprehend.

It was even impossible to tell which state was the real one, or if the continuous transformations were even real. It might be a bit like those pictures that changed motif depending on what angle you looked at it from. Zac had initially hoped to make inroads into his path by visiting this place, but he honestly wasn't so confident that 3 years was even close to enough to unravel the mess he was looking at.

He was dragged out of his musings as a screen appeared in front of him.

[Twilight Ascent. Help perfect the Tapestry of Twilight. The reward at the end dependent on contribution rank.]

[There are two ways to contribute to the Tapestry of twilight.]

[1. Make Dao Breakthrough into a Dao pertaining to Life or Death. Higher-grade breakthroughs provide more points. Successive breakthroughs provide both rewards. If no breakthroughs are made, half the value of current Dao stages are added by the end of trial.]

Early Seed	1
Middle Seed	5
High Seed	25
Peak Seed	125
Early Fragment	250
Middle Fragment	1,250
High Fragment	6,250
Peak Fragment	31,250
Early Branch	100,000

Middle Branch	500,000
High Branch	2,500,000

[2. Release trapped Dao of Life and Death. This can be done by consuming or destroying treasures of life or death, or killing cultivators or beasts holding related Daos.]

[Rewards will be rewarded upon the end of the Trial. Participants leaving trial prematurely will have half of their contribution points deducted.]

[Choose Identity; Zac Piker - Arcaz Black]

Zac read the quest carefully, and his eyes widened further and further as he read along. How was this a Dao Trial if slaughtering people provided contribution points? This was the Twilight Harbor, and at least a quarter of all warriors held a Dao related to either Life or Death. If things were bad with the exorbitant rewards from the Fate-Plucking ladder, things had just become a true slaughter-fest.

He also intensely regretted holding back the evolution of his Fragment of the Axe in hopes a breakthrough inside the Mystic Realm would help him with the trial. Now it was just a liability until he could find a safe spot to stop and cultivate for a while. Still, he was in a very good position for the first method to accumulate contribution points, considering he had Daos of both Life and Death.

There might be some geniuses who had multiple Daos of Death attunement, but Zac doubted there could be too many. Having two Daos that were very similar in function made little sense. It was better to either focus on one Dao and push it further, or have multiple Daos who brought different things to the table, making you more well-rounded.

Of course, there might be some cultivators playing the long game, nurturing two Death-attuned Dao Fragments to fuse them into one Dao Branch. In either case, Zac felt he had good chances at snatching a good Limited Title unless slaughter was a far more efficient method of accruing Contribution Points.

Furthermore, his Draugr heritage was definitely a detriment with these rules. Anyone he met would assume he held at least one Dao related to Death, which was true. After all, the Draugr held amazing affinity to the Daos of death, making them walking treasure troves. As for the final line, it even ruined his chance to enter a pseudonym for the ladder, and he reluctantly chose Arcaz Black.

He doubted too many people would know of the name Zac Piker, but Catheya definitely did. Zac being able to choose that name would definitely expose him, so he could only go with his 'real name'. At least the System didn't force him to use his true name, but rather the cultivation identities he used.

A mental command made a new screen appear, proving there was a ladder this time.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 6,250 Rank: 22,538. Value: 100-250.]

His current contribution was at 6,250 as expected, the combined value of his two High Fragments. He guessed those points were just placeholders though until he evolved the Fragments of Bodhi and Coffin. As for his rank, he guessed it mostly was people with higher Dao accomplishments than him. It looked like around 5% of those who had entered so far had at least a Peak Fragment related to life and Death, which didn't feel too surprising.

But there was a pretty worrying twist to the ladder. There was actually a value attached to his name, saying his life wasn't worth more than gaining a Peak Dao Seed. It meant he would have to kill a thousand people like himself to gain the equivalent points of getting a single Dao Branch. It might not sound too bad, but everyone here would have stocked up on escape talismans and hidden aces.

Landing a killing blow wasn't easy unless there was a large power discrepancy, and some battles would result in wounds that might be extra hard to heal in the odd environment of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac eventually closed the screen and looked away from the water, his eyes turning toward the endless horizon instead. To

his sides was an endless coast which was lined by a dense forest, and far in the distance could barely discern an island. The clouds were sparse, and they were either wrought in black, gold, or a mix in-between.

The sky itself held the same color as the spatial anomaly did from the outside; a mix of gold and green that cast everything in a slightly metallic hue. Zac took in the view for a few more seconds, but he suddenly froze. He had been so occupied with the shocking entry and the subsequent quest that he had missed a crucial detail.

He had seen this place before.

It was years ago and Zac's mind was a mess at the time, but he was sure of it. It was back when the Mystic Realm collapsed, turning into the Memorysteel mountain and thousands of islands. Back then the laws of space had been turned on their head, and Zac had found himself witnessing a series of odd scenes.

Back then he had seen an alien world, with a Shard of Creation nestled in the depths of a volcano. He had only caught a glimpse of the sky in that vision, but it definitely matched what he was looking at now. And if the Shard of Creation was here, it wouldn't be a surprise if the Splinter of Oblivion he saw in the depths of an ocean was here as well.

Were the remnants perhaps the source of the odd phenomena of this world? With Oblivion on one side and Creation on the other, this space had been affected by both. Add some Cosmic Energy and Miasma and you had something called Twilight Energy by the natives.

Zac slowly shook his head, eventually discarding the idea. It probably wasn't a coincidence that there were remnants in a place like this, but it was unlikely they were the core of this world. First of all, their energies differed from what he felt around him. But more importantly, they weren't powerful enough.

This realm was enormous, and it provided resources that even attracted Monarchs. Meanwhile, the remnants were called Class-3 treasures by the Administrator back then. Zac's own

estimates were along the same line, that they were peak D-Grade treasures. However, they also contained hints of extremely high-tiered concepts, which increased their danger compared to normal treasures of that grade.

The question was what to do with this knowledge. Should he go for it and try adding another set into his collection?

“Heurk,” a gagging sound dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he looked over to see a humanoid curled up into a ball up on the beach.

Only then did Zac remember a piece of information in the crystal Nala had provided for him. According to the missive, the transfer put a great strain on one’s body, and it was a good idea to activate a defensive talisman the moment you arrived in the Twilight Ocean. That way you would be protected while you acclimatized to the weird energies in the air.

But why hadn’t he noticed anything like that?

Even now, standing in the odd life-death water he was completely unaffected. He already knew that his resistance to life-attuned energies was far greater compared to normal undead. But for him to be completely unaffected by the transfer? Was it the rune that passed through him? Even now, he wasn’t really bothered by the small amounts of energy that seeped into his body.

The human soon gained a sense of his surroundings, and he was horrified when he saw a pureblood Draugr staring at him from just 50 meters away, seemingly unbothered by the Twilight Energy in the area. Zac didn’t even have a chance to say anything before the man activated an escape talisman and disappeared.

Zac could only snort as he turned back toward the ocean, and he started walking deeper into the waters. There was no point in hunting that humanoid since a ‘0’ actually appeared above his head after Zac had focused on him for two seconds. Zac guessed that it was his value, meaning the cultivator didn’t cultivate either life or death. Or perhaps that releasing his energies wasn’t worth anything to the ‘Tapestry of Twilight’.

He soon found himself completely submerged as he took the first steps into the ocean, and he was relieved to find that visibility was a lot better than he initially feared. He could see for thousands of meters before it all turned into a greenish haze, and he could even spot a few other cultivators in the distance. His eyes turned to a small reef not far away, and he started moving toward it.

The viscosity of the liquid was a bit odd, far lower than water. He didn't actually float in the Twilight Ocean, and he could still swing his arms freely as long as he expelled small amounts of Miasma. It was a bit like when he found himself in space. Zac took out **[Rakan's Roar]** and swung it a few times before he nodded and stowed it away.

Until now, Zac hadn't really felt anything wrong with the Twilight Energy entering his body, but he eventually started to feel some discomfort after moving through the water for ten minutes. He expelled some miasma through his hands, after which he tried to restore his reserves with the accumulated energy. It worked, but it almost felt like drinking brackish water because of the taint of life energy.

Thankfully, his **[Void Heart]** finally woke up after the accumulated energy reached a certain point, and one beat was enough to cleanse most of his body. Interestingly enough, his Hidden Node didn't actually consume Twilight Energy as a whole, but it rather ripped the life-attuned part and left clean death-attuned energy in his body.

But it wasn't exactly Miasma that was left behind. It was rather some other type of death-attuned energy with a slightly different flavor. Still, it began replenishing his missing Miasma without any problems as his **[Purity of the Void]** started to work on the life-attuned energies that were left behind. As for the death-attuned energies, Zac tried to push them toward the next node, but he found himself utterly incapable of actually using the energy for cultivation.

Zac sighed in disappointment since he had somewhat hoped he would be able to live the life as a cultivator for a second there. Of course, **[Void Heart]** would start spitting out some usable energy sooner or later, though it was only half of the Twilight

Energy that entered his body. He wasn't too worried about the remaining energy either, since it wasn't harmful to him. He could always expel some Miasma to absorb it into his cells if needed.

However, he looked on with wonder as the deathly energies actually started to move by themselves, but neither toward **[Void Heart]** or his normal nodes. They rather congealed and formed a stream that moved toward his head, where a small whirlwind had appeared on his Soul Aperture.

The deathly energies swam right inside like they were coming home, and they immediately entered the deathly ocean in his mind. A moment later the energies were gone, completely integrated with the waters. Zac looked on with mute incomprehension, as nothing he had read in his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** had mentioned anything like this.

Still, it didn't really seem like a bad thing that the deathly energy entered his mind, especially when it was in such small quantities. But he did find himself in a pretty odd situation as the last of the death-attuned energy was swallowed. Others were trying all kinds of ways to minimize the harmful effects of the Twilight Energy, using everything from arrays to continuously rotating their Daos within their bodies.

Meanwhile, the various parts of his body seemed to fight for the energy, like it couldn't get enough. It was like he had come home.

Chapter 700: First Culling

The situation with the Twilight Energy was even better than Zac had anticipated, but he wouldn't take anything for granted going forward. He was still at the outer edge of the Mystic Realm where the Twilight Energy was at its weakest. Who knew if he would be able to so effortlessly deal with the environment in the inner reaches. For example, his **[Void Heart]** couldn't infinitely swallow energy. It followed a cycle of absorption, purification, and release.

The same was true for his soul. He hadn't figured quite out what was going on, but his Soul Aperture wasn't a true world. There should be limits on how much energy it could absorb before it became satiated. Finally, the elites of the trial would still be able to exhibit pretty much their full power all the way to the midway point from what he had gathered, so he definitely wasn't able to run amok with this small advantage.

Putting the matter of Twilight Energy aside, Zac eventually reached the small forest of swaying seaweed, and his arm turned into a blur as he cut down over a dozen plants that emitted a weak hint of spirituality. His actions didn't garner him a single contribution point though, proving that there was no point in just wantonly destroying the surroundings to 'Release Dao'. It probably had to be real treasures to count.

Having gotten a decent understanding of the situation he finally took out the small black stone he got from Catheya and infused it with some Miasma. He soon sensed a number of distant presences, with one particular connection being far stronger than the others. It was hard to accurately estimate how far away Catheya was, but he felt it would take a couple of hours to get there.

Even then, her starting location seemed pretty lucky, just like his. Catheya should already be out in the ocean by the looks of things, while most of the markers were pointing toward the

continent where most people were dropped off. They would probably have a much harder time gathering up with the ruthless rules of the trial. Of course, he didn't expect his own journey to be completely free from worries.

[Love's Bond] appeared on his back and he started to make his way forward, choosing to run on the bottom of the ocean, his movement slightly boosted by small bursts of Miasma. Moving on the beach would definitely be easier, but people would keep appearing one after another on the shores and further inside the continent. The entrance time was staggered, but it would still be a bloodbath as over ten million participants would come flooding inside.

A pang of danger suddenly erupted, and Zac looked down with surprise at a spear shooting out from the ocean floor. It was infused with a powerful penetrative force, but it wasn't at a level that that could kill him. Still, Zac pushed himself away by expelling a burst of Miasma, but his brows rose when he found himself stuck after moving just fifty meters.

An azure rope had appeared out of nowhere and attached itself to him, and it was connected to a large totem that had appeared right where the ambush took place. It was five meters in height, and it looked a bit like an anchor that was dug into the seabed. Zac immediately understood it was some sort of binding skill, not dissimilar from the array the cultists had used against him a long time ago.

A living humanoid rose from the sandy floor the next moment, and he gave Zac a look of superiority after confirming he was caught by the rope. He actually spoke up as well, another odd feature of the Twilight Ocean that Zac had read about before. Sound traveled just fine in the liquid, though voices appeared slightly muted.

“Good catch, a Draugr! I'm sorry, but you will have to become fertilizer for my pa- HEURK!” The man didn't get any further as a black chain had exploded out from the sandy ground and wound itself around his leg.

The next moment he was dragged like a ragdoll toward Zac, who had already summoned **[Rakan's Roar]** and activated

[Gorehew]. The man flailed about as he tried to stop the chain, and he even managed to launch an extremely powerful stab at the black links of **[Love's Bond]**. Unfortunately for him, Zac had already infused the chain with the Fragment of the Coffin, allowing it to withstand the attack.

A moment later he was dragged right in front of Zac, and a haze of blood spread through the area a moment later as two pieces of a decapitated corpse slowly landed on the ocean floor. Zac shook his head in reproach as he quickly looted the corpse and his spatial ring before he ran away. He should have known that the contribution value of cultivators wouldn't be visible unless he actually spotted targets, making it useless as a way to prevent ambushes.

Luckily, the attacker was most likely some young lordling who had never in a real struggle of life and death. His power wasn't too bad; both his restrictive skill and the proficiency he displayed when striking his fetters were respectable. But his actual combat experience was utterly lacking.

What kind of fool stops to talk in the middle of a death match? It allowed Zac to send a chain into the ground and ambush the spearman right back. Certainly, Zac would still have defeated him soon enough, but it would have wasted some time. And any second wasted was another moment some real powerhouse might target him.

It was a good reminder of how dangerous things could get even out in the seemingly empty waters. The weaker cultivators were definitely just trying to hide and survive at this moment, while the more powerful and ruthless people took advantage of the early chaos to gather some wealth and contribution points.

At least he had gained 102 Contribution Points from the lesson, indicating that Zac should be in the upper part of his Value span of 100-250. After all, Zac doubted that the young lordling had anything better than a Middle-Stage Dao Fragment. Otherwise, he wouldn't have fallen so easily.

A large amount of Miasma stormed into the skill fractal for the movement skill on his chest, and the world suddenly inverted

after almost two seconds had passed. He had activated **[Abyssal Phase]** multiple times by now, but he was still filled with marvel as he felt his incorporeal form. He could barely be considered a ghost at the moment, rather a congregation of miasmatic energies.

Activating the skill normally didn't take him to that ancient darkness, but the skill rather turned the world monochrome the moment it activated. However, it turned out that the Twilight Ocean had an interesting effect on his augmented vision.

When he had used the skill in his courtyard everything mostly stayed the same except objects looked like they had turned into energy instead. The effect even allowed him to see through walls to some extent, but not pass through them. But here in the things had undergone a more drastic change.

Some plants and stones on the ocean floor shone like small beacons, whereas other items were so muted they almost seemed invisible. Other features on the seafloor looked mottled like they were full of faults and holes. Zac quickly realized what was going on.

Some of the items in the Twilight Ocean were like some trees in the Dead Zone; they had an extremely pure aura of life even when surrounded by death. Similarly, some plant life and even materials only retained half of the Twilight Energy, expelling the other half. And the purely life-attuned materials around him had turned extremely bleak when he entered his current form.

It was pretty interesting since it was almost the opposite of his normal Draugr-vision where life-force was clearly visible to his eyes unless it was masked. Still, Zac's main goal was currently to get away since it was possible more powerful warriors could arrive at any moment. His blob of energy pushed forward through the seemingly frozen water with amazing speed, each second taking him over five hundred meters from his original position.

Only when he had moved ten kilometers from where he fought did he stop. He looked around and saw no powerful signatures around, at which point he returned into his corporeal form.

With a flash, the world turned back to normal, and a scan indicated he really was alone unless someone could hide from his peak mastery [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Zac activated [**Spiritual Anchor**] to scan his body just in case, but the spear wielder hadn't left any brands on him before dying.

Only then did Zac keep moving, this time working even harder to mask his aura. In normal situations, he would do the opposite and blast his killing intent to keep opportunists at bay, but he felt that might have an opposite effect in this place. It felt like a better idea to move along the lush undergrowth at the ocean floor while masking his aura.

Even then Zac was attacked twice over the following ten minutes among the corals and rocky outcroppings at the bottom of the Twilight Ocean, and the attackers were actually both undead this time around. One of the battles ended with a Corpselord getting trapped and bisected by [**Blighted Cut**], but the second attacker instantly fled the moment he realized that he had attacked someone far too powerful.

Zac snorted in annoyance but he didn't pursue. The attacker's Contribution Value was marked as 50-100, and Zac wouldn't follow him toward dry land for something like that. The previous two targets didn't possess many valuables except their equipment and pills either, except a few top-quality healing pills. He instead kept moving forward ignoring most people he saw in the distance.

Four hours passed, during which Zac found himself embroiled in eight consecutive battles, including one where he was forced to trap the attacker inside [**Profane Seal**] before using an escape talisman. It wasn't that Zac was completely overmatched, but the attacker was pretty powerful and she had activated some sort of communication crystal. It was better to get out of there before he found himself besieged.

Finally, Zac closed in on Catheya's location. She had been steadily been moving out from the shore at a middling pace, which no doubt was the best option considering how hectic things were on land at the moment. He was moving further and further away from the starting continent, but he could still

sense energy eruptions every single minute from desperate battles on the shores.

His ranking had steadily dropped over the past hours as well, and he was currently relegated all the way to 64,334. Part of it was no doubt thanks to the constant flow of participants, but he guessed that some had passed him by through slaughter as well. He only started with a bit over 6,000 Contribution Points, and he had already made five hundred points without even trying. Some fiends had probably accrued thousands of points by this point.

The best bet for Catheya's group was to keep a decent pace the first days and create some distance from the general mob. That tactic increased the odds of running into other powerful squads, but Zac doubted too many of the elites wanted to go all-out on the first day, even with the allure of Contribution Points in front of them. Even if they won, so what?

They might be forced to use up their aces with three years remaining on the trial. Besides, even if you planned on climbing the ranks through slaughter, it was better to wait a few months so that you would also gain Twilight Fruits from the kills. For now, innumerable treasures were waiting in the depths, and it was more important to gobble them up and gain powerups before targeting others.

Zac finally spotted his employer, who leisurely moved forward among the corals with a string of twelve frozen corpses forming a trail behind her. The Titan Revenant had caught up to Catheya already, and she grinned at Zac like she had won some sort of competition.

"You're here, that's pretty quick," Catheya smiled, but Zac only grunted as he looked at the corpse sculptures.

"What's this?" Zac asked curiously.

"Some deterrent and early contribution collection," Catheya laughed. "Besides, I saw a few good bodies on the way and decided to snatch them. Don't you know, it's best to perform repairs and alterations immediately after the Dreamers fall? Their bodies hold lingering spirituality, which helps the process even after their souls have departed."

Zac nodded as that was a matter of course, though he was a bit surprised at the news. He had always thought it didn't matter, and some of his followers had been kept in his Corpse Sack for years until Zac got his hands on the methods to turn them into undead followers.

Then again, Zac's method of raising followers was definitely not part of the orthodoxy. While other liches and morticians used all kinds of secret methods to restore and even improve the bodies of their followers, Zac had the power of pure Creation.

Cathey obviously wouldn't have this kind of cheat-like ability, and it instead looked like she had added talismans and engravings onto the frozen bodies. Looking at the scene Zac felt that he finally could confirm her class. It had to be related to ice, one of the three great heritages of the Undead.

It wasn't a surprise considering her master's show of force, but it was still good to know what he was dealing with in case things went south.

As for the arrays covering the bodies, Zac had a feeling that they weren't for healing purposes considering the bodies looked mostly fine, but rather modifications. Zac wished he could learn the methods if that really was the case. It might be too late for his original batch of Einherjar, but how would someone like him ever lack bodies to turn into followers?

"You know, it's considered rude to try and glean the modifications of others," Cathey said with a raised brow as she saw Zac studying the inscriptions covering their bodies.

"If it bothers you, you can throw a tarp over them," Zac shrugged, but he still turned away.

"No class," Qirai muttered angrily.

It looked like the Titan would keep talking, but they all suddenly froze and looked in the same direction.

"What happened?" Zac asked with surprise. "One of the connections broke."

"Ravan fell," Cathey said, confusion written all over her face.

“That fool had the guts to lust for the Perennial Vastness Token, and he didn’t even make it off the shores?” Qirai blurted with incredulity.

“He was strongly recommended by the local branch. Ravan is somewhat renowned for both his survival and offensive capabilities, which is why I recruited him. The clan provided him with several high-quality talismans as well as part of his remuneration. He must have been unlucky to have run into someone way too powerful for him to fall like this,” Catheya muttered. “Well, bad fortune is part of life.”

“The trial is a bit bloodier than I expected,” Zac commented.

“It’s essentially a slaughter trial as well,” Catheya agreed with some helplessness across her face. “We might meet more resistance than I expected along the way.”

“Will the plan still work?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Every person we lose will increase our workload a bit. The strain right now is negligible, but in a few months, it will be extremely taxing without my array. If we lose another one we might have to enlist or enslave some new members,” Catheya mused. “For now, let’s keep on moving.”

Zac nodded and the trio set out. The appearance of two pureblood Draugr and a Titan thankfully deterred any more attempts, which only served to annoy Catheya a bit. However, she ultimately chose to give up on collecting any more corpses, which was a pretty big relief to Zac. It wasn’t really that he was worried about getting himself in trouble, but it proved that Catheya was at least not completely impulsive and temperamental as a leader.

He had heard too many stories about young scions with overblown egos kicking up all kinds of trouble while out exploring. They might be fine because their elders had stocked their bags full of life-saving treasures, but what about their followers?

The group moved at a brisk but not frantic pace, and the fourth member arrived after just twenty minutes. It was Sharpo, the spectral cultivator, and she looked essentially unscathed. Zac

wasn't surprised at their Mentalist scout being able to make it through the culling without much problem. Zac was more surprised to see Yod appearing just an hour later looking mostly fine.

He was the second Corpse-lord of the group apart from the fallen Ravan, though Zac had only heard him speak two times. But from what Catheya had explained over the past week, he was essentially an undead Paladin, or perhaps more of a Shaman like Emily. He focused on both protective and healing skills, making him a welcome member of any team.

Another two hours passed, and Catheya finally started to display some worry. Zac understood she was thinking about Varo, the final missing member of the group. Thankfully he arrived 40 minutes later, though he sported pretty gristly wounds across his body.

His robes were completely ripped apart, and he formed a trail of black ichor in the waters behind him. Yod wordlessly stepped forward and a dark cloud surrounded the Revenant. The cloud didn't disperse but rather burrowed into Varo's body. The skill looked a bit like Zac's **[Winds of Decay]**, but it was obviously a healing skill since Varo almost immediately looked a lot better.

"I'm sorry about the delay," Varo said after giving Yod a small bow. "I was ambushed by a group. I am afraid I had to expend one of the aces mistress prepared to escape."

"It's fine," Catheya said with a smile. "We're all here now. Let's set out. It's a long journey to our destination."

"Can you finally tell us where that is?" Zac asked. "You've kept us in suspense for months now."

"Well, no," Catheya said with a wink. "It wasn't easy for my master to hire a numerologist to divine the location of the Life-Death Pearls and the route to get there. I can't just give the information away, right? But our first stop on the journey is Cork Island."

Chapter 701: Clashing Seas

Zac wasn't too surprised about the first destination being Cork Island. The Twilight Ocean shared the same odd feature as many other Mystic Realms that were actively managed by the System; it was randomized between trials, just like Earth upon the Integration. However, a lot of features were constant even after the randomization, and Cork Island was one location that always appeared somewhere in the early parts of the Twilight Ocean.

People had tried for ages to create vessels that worked in this odd place, but they were either restricted by the system or simply didn't work while submersed in the mystic waters of this place. But the place was simply too big to just randomly travel around by foot, and people had found some workarounds; one was to jump into the powerful streams that passed through the Mystic Realm.

Another way to build vessels with the help of pre-fabricated runes and locally sourced materials.

The trees at Cork Island were quite popular as a material for making underwater vessels. The trees had a diameter of up to twenty meters, which allowed you to hollow one out and create roomy submersibles. Even better, the thick bark both had strong defensive properties while also isolating some of the Twilight Energies permeating the air.

Finding Cork Island and building a vessel would give you a leg up against the competition, though it wasn't the only solution people had found over the ages. Rocks, shells, corals, even large beasts. People had managed to turn all kinds of things into odd submarines that only worked in this world. A few even managed to create flying vessels, but those were less popular as over 90% of the valuables were hidden in the depths of the ocean.

“How come Cork Island instead of the Monolith Forest?” Sharpo asked with a hollow voice, which gave Zac a start. “Why are we traveling along the Living Pulse?”

It was a good question, and one Zac would have thought to ask if he didn't still think from the perspective of a human. Cork Island was a pretty decent spot, but it was ultimately preferred by the living factions since it was filled with trees. Meanwhile, the undead factions gravitated more toward unliving materials such as the stalagmites that the ghost mentioned.

Neither material was better than the other, but the risk of being caught up in a conflict was lower if they aimed for the Monolith Forest instead.

As for the Living Pulse, it was one of the more famous underwater currents. This one, in particular, had been given the name the Living Pulse since it could take cultivators to a series of decent opportunities for the living. It was pretty dangerous though, so it required both knowledge of the stream and some defensive means.

The pulse was often erratic, lashing out with force even exceeding the E-grade. Similarly, there was a Death Pulse that passed by the Monolith Forest. Both pulses would ultimately lead into the outer waters where the group could start looking for the Life-Death Pearls or continue toward the Twilight Chasm.

“That's the path the esteemed numerologist found for us,” Catheya shrugged. “Don't worry. Those who reach that place as quickly as we will are more focused on reaching the depths of the ocean than fighting it out with other groups. We only need to be careful after having built our vessel in case someone wants to snatch it.”

“What's the matter, ghost?” Qirai grinned. “Didn't we come to this place to hone ourselves? Barging through the Living Pulse sounds a lot more exciting than going the other way. It's the path of the elite.”

Sharpo didn't respond nor inquire further, and neither did Zac. However, he knew the explanations were mostly excuses. He was willing to bet his right arm that this route had something

to do with the additional mission of Catheya's, the one that he had been enlisted to help out with in return for dealing with the Veilplume Monarch.

Zac wasn't overly worried about heading to the Living Pulse though. If things went downhill he could always use his escape talismans and swap to his human form, blending in with the living. His Array would lose its efficacy for a month, but that didn't really matter now that he was inside the Mystic Realm.

Of course, he didn't want to use his Specialty Core unless necessary. The System shielded others from looking inside, but who knew if the brand he had been marked with was recording his actions. If possible, he wanted to rid himself of that egg along with the brand before swapping between races.

"Alright, the quicker we move the less likely it's for trouble to appear," Catheya said. "Let's go. Feel free to pick up loot on the way, but don't cause trouble for the others."

The group immediately sped up after sinking to the ocean floor, and they spread out a bit with Catheya in the middle so they could trawl a thin stretch of seabed for valuables. Zac didn't find anything interesting over the first two hours, but he eventually spotted an odd plant that looked like a tall grey coral that grew grey seaweed that resembled palm leaves. It didn't look very exciting, but he could sense some spiritual fluctuation hidden beneath the long grey leaves.

Zac immediately shot forward, feeling he had finally found something of value. However, he wasn't the only one as Qirai blasted forward with enough force to cause a small whirlwind in the water behind her. The plant was slightly closer to Zac, but the Titan was surprisingly quick so they reached the plant at the same time.

"Mine," Qirai said while trying to stare down Zac, but he only snorted and ripped up the plant by its roots and threw it into his spatial ring.

"Keep to your own lane, Titan," Zac spat, which caused the aura of Qirai to veritably explode as she took a threatening step forward.

“Alright, that’s enough, you two,” an exasperated voice reached the two of them as the waters turned freezing. “No need to fight over one little fruit. You need tens of thousands to get a chance at a decent spot on the ladder. Everyone gets a two-kilometer berth. And Arcaz, don’t rip out the whole tree. Just pluck the fruits. Don’t you know about the rules of conservation?”

Zac nodded as he glanced in the direction of Catheya, but he still didn’t take the tree out. It had already been harvested, and it would probably not survive even if replanted. Qirai glared one last time at Zac before she flashed away, her movement skill causing a massive shockwave that even pushed Zac a few steps back.

A small smile crept up along Zac’s lips as he looked at the Titan swim away in a huff. He wondered if the Titan Revenant’s predecessor was so irascible that it carried over through the awakening, or if it was just something that was hardwired into their muscles.

“According to my calculations, we’ll reach an area where we can jump onto the pulse in a bit under two weeks,” Catheya’s voice continued, and Zac realized that it came from a small ice crystal that floated next to him. “In total it will take almost three months to reach the inner layer. You two only need to cooperate until then. After we’ve farmed our pearls, we can go our separate ways.”

“No worries,” Zac smiled. “People always compliment me on how well I work with others.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Catheya laughed through the ice crystal, after which it melted and blended into the water in the surroundings.

Zac didn’t immediately set out, but he rather waited a few seconds before he took out the coral-like tree and harvested the Twilight Fruit. It was the first time getting a good look at it in person, and it didn’t look much for the world; just a grey peach-like fruit. However, the reason why he was ready to come to blows with Qirai over this low-tier item wasn’t because of any goals related to the Fate-Plucking Ladder.

After almost four years, he had finally found an item that elicited a response from [**Love's Bond**].

The reaction was small, but it was definitely there. Alea wanted something from this tree, and it only took a few seconds to confirm that it was the fruit itself. Zac's heart beat in anticipation as he pressed the fruit against his amulet, and a smile spread across his face as he saw it getting drained in an instant, leaving just a husk behind.

This discovery was huge, and it brought even more excitement than the ability to ward off the Twilight Energy. He had no idea why Alea wanted the Twilight Fruits, but he thought it might be related to its reconciliatory effects. The items he had used when forming [**Love's Bond**] had ultimately been a mixed hodgepodge of things he had at hand.

Perhaps the fusion between her soul and the Spirit Tool wasn't perfect because he hadn't properly prepared all materials. After all, while the [**Divine Investiture Array**] would create an item without flaws, it was still ultimately dependant on the materials that were put into the process.

Now that his horizons had been broadened it didn't felt like he had spent a fortune on the formation of [**Love's Bond**], but rather almost like he had shortchanged Alea. But finally, he had a way to start improving her situation. Besides, if Twilight Fruits could help her, who knew what else in this place would work as well.

The only downside was the implications this discovery had for his ranking on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. But between some random treasure from the Twilight Vault and helping Alea while upgrading his Spirit Tool, he would obviously choose the latter.

The group kept an unrelenting pace for five whole days, not spending even an hour resting. Catheya wanted to break away from the main pack, and no one had any complaints. They were still embroiled in over thirty altercations, though more than half of the clashes ended immediately when neither side could gain an easy advantage.

Those who kept at the edge of their formation were those who usually got ambushed, so they kept a rolling scheme. Eventually, Varo and Sharpo had to give up on treasure hunting and instead accompany Catheya because of the pressure, leaving the other three to shore up their defenses. It wasn't really that the two were weak, but their skillset leaned in different directions.

Yod was ultimately a healer as well, so it mostly came down to Qirai and Zac to protect their flanks with Catheya providing support if needed. Qirai welcomed the challenge, and she essentially took it as a challenge who could gather the most contribution points. Zac didn't mind either, since it gave him a wider berth to collect Twilight Fruits, and the occasional attack provided both loot and Contribution Points.

Over the five days, Zac managed to rack up another 1,371 points from 14 kills, which was slightly below the Titan. Of course, Zac would have reached a higher number if he fought a bit harder, but he didn't want to expose his stronger attacks this early. He usually tried to ensnare any enemy that got close, but he didn't pursue if they got too far.

What was interesting was there didn't seem to be any hard or fast rules to the contribution points each trial taker provided. He fought one who clearly had a Death attuned Fragment, but he only got 18 contribution points from that person. Conversely, he got a whopping 281 contribution points by killing a treeman who seemed to have a Dao Fragment that was a mix of the Seed of Trees and Seed of Gust.

Part of the value definitely came from the stage of the Dao, but part seemed to come from something else. The quest was to perfect the 'Tapestry of Twilight', and Zac guessed that some insights were valued higher than others when it came to kills.

Even with all those kills and searching high and low, he had only managed to collect 74 Twilight Fruits, a pathetic number. The large number of kills had already put him at the threshold of gaining another level as well, but he reluctantly chose to wait. He had his **[Stone of Hope]** and **[Chain-breaking Pills]**, but this was no time to test their efficacy. His body was still on

the mend from forcing his way through eight consecutive levels, and bursting a node at this point might get him killed.

If not by his own doing, then by the attackers that were everywhere in the waters.

At the end of the fifth day, Catheya finally called for a break, and the group gathered in a hidden cave at the bottom of the ocean. Zac felt he could keep going, but he immediately realized that the others were in a bad way.

Sharpo looked a bit dim, and Yod had a small frown on his face. Even the hulking Titan looked a bit deflated after the marathon, though it wasn't surprising considering how she had constantly fought. She didn't have his luxury of a Hidden Node purifying the energies for her. Only Catheya looked like Zac, in somewhat good spirits. She erected a series of high-quality arrays that hid the cave and their auras, along with a diversion array and killing array.

The diversion array was a type of illusion array that made people subconsciously look over an area, to avoid it because they were made to feel that it held nothing of value. If someone still forced their way here, the Killing array would probably make short work of them considering the quality it held.

“This cursed energy,” Qirai muttered as she crushed a Miasma Crystal. “It feels like I'm covered with burrowing maggots.”

The energy released from the crystal purified the Titan's surroundings for half a minute, but it was ultimately assimilated the ambient energy again.

The density of Twilight Energy had increased a bit over the past five days as they were leaving the starting continent behind, but it was still well within what his body could handle. He might as well have been walking in one of the Dead Zones back on Earth thanks to the combined efforts of his Hidden Node and the whirlpool in his Soul Aperture.

As they had traveled the past days, Zac had constantly monitored the situation in his mind. Continuing his Soul Cultivation towards the Second Reincarnation was one of his

goals coming to the Twilight Harbor. His most optimistic estimates had initially indicated that he might reach the threshold within a decade, but it looked like he might reach the Second Reincarnation much earlier than expected judging by the changes in his Soul Aperture.

This was as good a time as any, and since the others needed to rest for a few hours Zac had some time to see if his new arrays worked in this environment. He walked off to a corner of the cave, and he ignored the curious looks of the others as he started infusing Mental Energy into the array disk he took out. His eyes lit up when Twilight Energy started streaming into the array, but he sighed when his surroundings became almost desolate after ten minutes.

“Not a bad array,” Catheya commented from the distance. “Though it is not possible to keep the Twilight Energy permanently at bay that way.”

Zac looked over with some confusion, but he soon understood what it had to look like. He took out two Supreme Miasma Crystals and crushed them, which drowned the area in Miasma. One single Supreme Miasma Crystal held as much energy as roughly ten High-quality Miasma Crystals, and the whole cave was inundated in death for over fifteen minutes before balance was restored.

“Just wanted a breather,” Zac smiled after he returned to the group.

“More money than sense,” Qirai said, clearly with some jealousy. The crystal she crushed earlier was just of Medium Quality, or E-grade Miasma Crystals as they would have been called back in the Zecia Sector. The effect they had on their surroundings was unsurprisingly just a shadow of the Miasma storm Zac had caused.

“Thank you,” Sharpo said from the side, and Zac noticed she looked a little better than before.

Zac smiled and closed his eyes, going over the results of the experiment. The cultivation method for the Second Reincarnation was pretty straightforward, and very much the

same as the first one. He would infuse his mental energy into the array disk, and it would temper his soul.

The good news was that the Twilight Energy was useable as a fuel, but the ambient energy in the outer parts of the ocean was far insufficient to do the trick. He had barely managed to start cultivating before the area was drained, which was a testament to how power-hungry the process was.

More importantly, Zac felt he had made some insights into the process itself. The first reincarnation tempered him by causing clashes between life and death around his soul. He only managed to send a trickle through the array this time, but it was still passed through the whole array and returned into his mind.

Zac had obviously taken out the Array Disk that utilized Deathly Dao since he was sitting right in front of six undead cultivators, and what had been returned was a marginally deathlier Mental Energy. However, the energy hadn't floated around in his Soul Aperture, but it had rather entered the death-attuned Soul Sea.

The change was even more negligible than the addition of the purified Twilight Energy, but Zac sensed that the ocean got slightly rowdier after the infusion. He guessed that this was how the process would look. Each revolution would bolster the oceans in his mind, and by the time he had infused both oceans, he would have caused a full-fledged storm in his soul aperture.

The raging seas would clash, and the core in the middle of the oceans would be tempered in turn, like a rock being polished by the raging seas.

Chapter 702: Trove

If the method of cultivating his soul was to cause storms to rage in his mind, then Zac's best guess was that Twilight Energy improved the base power of the storms. The more energy he managed to infuse into the seas, the greater storms would rage, and the faster his soul would be tempered.

That was his takeaway after almost a week of observation at least. The array only temporarily infused the soul oceans, but the effect of the Twilight Energy was permanent. It did seem like the energy helped expand the ocean by a small degree, but more importantly, it improved the quality of the ocean.

It was like Twilight Energy added the insights it contained to the waters, making them more complete representations of Life and Death. The energy in the waters was previously made from the ambient energy in his cultivation cave along with attuned crystals, so the insights they contained were no doubt quite basic.

Only a very small pocket of the deathly had been elevated so far, but more and more Twilight Energy kept pouring in. Sooner or later the oceans would be filled with the insights of Twilight, at which point Zac would probably need to find some other way to combat the suppressive energy around him.

Zac doubted that the Twilight Energy was the only method to improve his oceans as well, and he bet that he would be able to do the same with various treasures. After all, that vortex that formed didn't seem to have anything to do with his Bloodline or class, but it was rather that formed when his soul evolved.

There was no way to tell how many different attuned items he needed to collect, but he felt following Kenzie's lead would be the best. The more he could expand the oceans and the more complete their insight were, the better. In fact, the quality of

his second reincarnation might hinge on the quality of the oceans to some degree.

Eventually, the energy from Zac's crystals dissipated, at which point Catheya took out an array sphere that looked extremely intricate. It was not hard to guess what he was looking at; the purification array.

"Everyone, get acquainted with this array controller over the next hour. We will constantly depend on this thing in the deeper parts of the Twilight Ocean, and it requires constant attention. We will install a daughter array in the vessel we'll build and take turns controlling it while the others can cultivate or look for treasures," Catheya explained.

It was soon Zac's turn, and he was truthfully a bit worried. Catheya had never directly showcased this thing during their meetings, calling its functionality a trade secret. Zac's Dao control was legendarily awful, impossibly so for a Draugr. What if he couldn't even run the array? But he still reached over to grasp the black orb, and a stream of information soon entered his mind which allowed him to breathe out in relief.

Using the array was straightforward enough. You only needed to continuously infuse some Dao and Miasma into it, and the array would do the rest. Zac was a bit surprised a purity array could utilize any sort of Death Dao to run, but it did explain why the surroundings slightly changed in flavor when the others tried it out. Zac chose the Fragment of the Coffin and the miasma in their surroundings changed soon again, and it started to feel extra familiar and soothing to Zac.

There was just a hint of his Dao in the surroundings, but it still somehow transformed the Miasma to fit him even better. However, he was surprised at the expenditure. Even with his massive reserves, he'd be hard-pressed to run the array for a whole day, and he'd be completely wrung-dry after 30 hours or so.

Its effect was generally good though, with one caveat; it lessened the amount of Twilight Energy to just 20% of its original Density, replacing it with Miasma. And since Zac couldn't actually absorb miasma to cultivate, he was actually

losing cultivation momentum from the array rather than gaining a respite.

Luckily he would only be under this thing's effect for a few months.

“We'll each run this array for six hours, which will give everyone over a day's rest after their turn,” Catheya said. “It's a shame we lost a member the moment we entered this place, but it still shouldn't be too hard on anyone here. But you should prepare yourself. The effect will not be nearly as good at the inner parts of the ocean where the Twilight Energy is a lot denser.”

The group set out after resting up for a few hours, and they soon settled in their slightly monotonous days of moving across the seemingly endless ocean floor and while occasionally picking up a low-grade natural treasure or a few Twilight Fruits. There was still the occasional attack, but they had grown a lot sparser after a week had passed.

However, the calm was suddenly broken as an Ice Crystal appeared next to Zac. “Gather up for a bit,” Catheya's voice suddenly emerged from an ice crystal that appeared out of nowhere. “There's something interesting here.”

Zac looked over in the direction of Catheya, but he didn't see anything special. She was standing on a small rocky formation sticking out of the seabed, and some corals and seaweed were growing on the mound. It didn't look much different from the hundreds of similar outcroppings Zac had passed over the past two days, but perhaps it was something different about that one?

Zac swam over, and he increased his speed a bit by shooting out small bursts of Miasma. Soon the group of six were all gathered, and they curiously looked around.

“Look,” Catheya smiled as she pointed toward a pathway hidden behind a dense patch of seaweed.

“A hidden cave?” Qirai muttered. “Is it a den?”

“Better,” Catheya laughed. “It's a trove.”

“Oh?” Qirai exclaimed with interest, and Zac gave the dark cavern another look with surprise.

This was the first actual trove he had encountered unless you counted the castles during the Eastern Trigram Hunt. This was the kind left by a previous generation trial-taker. After all, the death rate of the Twilight Ocean was roughly 50%, which meant a lot of unclaimed bodies and loot since many deaths came from mutual destruction or fights against beasts.

What happened to fallen cultivators differed. Some who had received a lethal wound were able to hang on for a while, and they used that time to set up an Inheritance trial like those back in his Dao Repository. Many feared being forgotten as much as dying, and they didn't want their cultivation journey to end without making the slightest impression on the universe.

Setting up an Inheritance wasn't only done out of benevolence though. The System was very much in favor of the custom, and it had already been proven that it sowed positive Karma. Positive for one's descendants, and possibly even for oneself upon reincarnation.

After being set up, the Inheritance trials were then sanctioned by the System itself, and they then appeared in some following trial depending on what grade cultivator it was meant for.

It wasn't needed to actively do something for an inheritance trial to form though. The will of a dying Monarch, and sometimes even Hegemons, was powerful enough to impact their surroundings. Their latent will resonated with the Heavens, and a tomb was born that was guarded by natural formations affected by the dead cultivator's insights.

A small hidden realm might even appear after particularly powerful Monarchs, where cultivators could enter their crumbling inner world in search of treasure. Zac doubted that those kinds of realms could be found in the Twilight Ocean though, unless some had managed to survive since the last C-grade trial.

E-grade cultivators weren't powerful enough to leave such tombs or worlds behind, but the System often arranged

something in places like Mystic Realms. There might be a small trial to get to the treasures, but nothing too special. It was just like how the palaces in the Eastern Trigram Hunt were guarded by barriers that needed to be breached before taking the loot within.

“So why did you call us here?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “Surely it’s not to gloat?”

“So what if I am?” Catheya winked. “But no, I realized that we should decide on a system of distribution for troves and inheritances. Just going by finders keepers will be too chaotic in case we reach need to work together in cracking them open, and it might sow bad blood.”

“What about auction-system?” Qirai suggested.

Auction-system was a type of distribution for adventuring groups. The one who found the trove would become the owner of it, but sometimes they needed help. That would start a bidding war, where the members of the group could sell their services for a percentage of the loot’s value. The system was fair on the surface, but Zac frowned when he heard the suggestion.

“Doesn’t seem good with this composition,” Sharpo muttered, which got support from both Zac and Yod.

The group was simply too small, and half the group was solely controlled by Catheya. If Zac needed the help of anyone but the ghost scout or the stalwart Corpselord, Catheya would control the pricing.

“Let’s keep it simple?” Catheya suggested. “Either get it yourself, or we do it as a group. Eight shares, three to the finder, one each to the rest. Of course, anyone can sit it out.”

“Agreed,” Sharpo quickly said, while Yod nodded in agreement.

“Agreed,” Zac muttered as well.

“Good. This is the first one, so let’s do it together!” Catheya smiled. “It shouldn’t be anything too exciting this close to the entrance, but you never know. People have even found proper inheritances on the starting continent.”

Zac's eyes flickered with interest, and the pendant around his neck grew into its coffin form. This drew the looks of the rest of the group, where they all sized up his Spirit Tool. They had most likely seen it from a distance as he guarded the flanks, but this was the first occasion they got a close-up.

"This thing is quite unique," Catheya said with interest, not even trying to hide her curiosity. "Definitely a custom job, and a good one. Who did you hire?"

Zac only smiled in return, not deigning to comment.

The group entered the tunnel, and a Zac looked on with interest as hundreds of small spectral snakes emerged from Sharpo's body. They simply covered the whole tunnel as they swam deeper, entering every nook and cranny. Zac guessed it was some sort of scouting skill that spotted traps and enemies. He didn't know why the Mentalist's skill was formed like small snakes, but it was possible that there might be a poisonous component to her skillset.

It was also possible that she could freely control their form, and chose snakes to give others the wrong impression about abilities.

A wave of Miasma emanated from Yod as well, and Zac felt empowered three consecutive times as three runes flashed above everyone's head before disappearing. A quick look at his status screen indicated that his Strength and Endurance had both been increased by ten percent, while Vitality and Dexterity had been boosted by five.

"Power. Healing. Defense," Yod muttered.

It was the first time Zac actually was part of a proper squad of elites, and it felt a bit like he was running a dungeon in an MMORPG game. The Paladin even provided buffs for the run.

The tunnel led just a hundred meters into the seabed, at which point it ended in an opaque barrier. Sharpo was already on it, and the swarm of spectral snakes dove inside. The shield rippled a bit, but it didn't prevent the snakes from pushing forward.

A screen appeared in front of the ghost the next moment, displaying a large cavern. There were no signs of any movement on the other side, but that wasn't any guarantee. There was almost always some sort of challenge attached to a trove.

Sometimes it would present itself as some beasts or dangerous plantlife who had made their base close to the treasure to benefit from its energy. If that didn't happen, then the System would make some sort of arrangement. The law of balance required some suffering for any reward.

"Alright, let's go," Catheya said as she glanced at Qirai.

The next moment a wall of opaque ice grew on her arm. The ice shield didn't come from Qirai though, but it was rather something provided by Catheya. This type of teamwork wasn't all that rare, but it required trust between both parties. For example, Zac definitely wouldn't be comfortable letting Catheya enclose his whole right arm in a block of ice.

But it was a pretty smart tactic for a lich, or a lich-ice mage hybrid like what Catheya seemed to be. It allowed her to arm and empower her underlings on the go. The Titan walked through with steady steps, and the rest soon followed.

There wasn't much of interest inside. The cave was only a hundred meters across, and it reminded Zac of the maw of some enormous beast as it was covered in sharp stalagmites and stalactites. The only exception was cleared area in the middle, where an unmoving body lay in front of a large plant. The plant itself was actually protected by a barrier, and Zac guessed the thing was the guardian of the trove.

As for the unmoving man, he was definitely dead, but there was nothing outwardly wrong with him. He even looked peaceful. There were small remnants of lifeforce left in his body, which meant he shouldn't have been dead for too long.

"He's fresh. There's still some spirituality left behind. No more than five hours have passed since he fell," Catheya said thoughtfully, confirming Zac's assumption. "Can't see anything wrong though."

“Let me,” Sharpo said as she pointed at the corpse.

Five of the spectral snakes burrowed into the corpse’s body, but there were no signs of any damage being done to it. They emerged a few moments later and dissipated into Miasma that rejoined Sharpo’s body.

“His soul aperture is cracked, signs of a mental attack,” the ghost said after a few seconds.

“My runes provide no help against mental attacks,” Yod immediately reminded.

No one really commented on it, but Zac could see that a few of the others put their guards up to some degree. Zac himself wasn’t too worried since he was confident in his mental defenses nowadays. Of course, that didn’t mean he didn’t push **[Indomitable]** from its passively running state to its max efficiency.

Grinding his mental defense skill had been a pain in the ass, and it was one of the last skills of Zac’s to reach Peak Mastery. The simplest way was to have Vilari attack him over and over while he defended, intermixed with meditation and expanding his understanding of the soul.

Still, it was worth the time spent as the skill had progressed by a huge degree. The first three levels just increased the strength of the defenses, but reaching Peak Mastery had added a fundamental change to the skill itself. Until that point, it had always been running, and Zac could infuse his Dao and some extra Miasma into it to increase its power by a small degree.

Now **[Indomitable]** had two proper states; passive defenses and active defenses. The passive defenses were just slightly weaker compared to the previous state of the skill. The active defenses, however, cost over fifty times as much Miasma to keep running, but its defenses were over five times greater as well.

The expenditure wasn’t too much for someone like Zac, and he could definitely activate it without worry every time he entered battle. The only downside was that he could only keep

it active 10 minutes every hour, but the passive protections would still keep going even after the timer ran out.

“Everyone ready?” Catheya asked as she looked at the barrier. “I think something might change the moment I attack the sphere.”

Everyone nodded as they readied themselves for battle.

Catheya pointed forward and conjured a series of small icicles that slammed into the barrier. Zac saw they weren't hitting it randomly though, but they rather formed a circle with some sort of constellation within. A moment later the whole barrier cracked, exposing the Spirit Plant within.

It was an odd underwater tree reaching almost three meters into the air. Instead of a canopy, it had dozens of long vines hanging down like a hairdo, each of the vines ending in what looked like a coconut. The moment the barrier broke, the vines started to shake. A rattling sound immediately spread through the cave as the coconuts slammed into each other.

The collisions weren't loud, but the sound still reached deep into the recesses of Zac's mind. Thankfully he already had his mental defense skill active, and Sharpo had started emitting some sort of ripples that made the sound far less piercing. Without those waves, the danger would at least be twofold.

The echoes just kept multiplying among the hundreds of stalagmites, causing them to rapidly increase in fervor. Sharpo looked unscathed from the barrage, as did Catheya and Qirai. Yod and Varo both seemed to feel slightly affected by the sounds, but it clearly wasn't more than an annoyance for them.

By the looks of it, the dead man on the ground must have had below-average mental defenses, or he was too slow activating them. Such was the fate of many solitary warriors, even among elites. Very few were without any weaknesses, and it only took one unlucky encounter for their road of cultivation to end abruptly.

It didn't look like the tree had any other methods of attacking, and Catheya ended things by sending a blade of ice to cut off the plant by its root. The tree was stowed away, and the

clashing sounds thankfully subsided over the next minute. Hidden within its roots was a mottled Cosmos Sack. Catheya grabbed the Cosmos Sack as well, after which she looked around with a smile.

“Everyone okay?” she smiled as she started inspecting the haul. “Well, that’s our first adventure, I guess a bond has been forged? Let’s hope the rest of our journey will be this smooth.”

Chapter 703: Marked for Death

There wasn't anything else of interest within the small cave, and the group soon turned back after Catheya split the meager loot. As expected, there wasn't anything worthwhile in Cosmos Sack, except some random wealth. The guardian plant was ultimately more valuable than the trove itself since those coconuts apparently contained a liquid that could be used in some spirit-related concoctions.

"Alright, let's keep going," Catheya said as they emerged from the trove. "We should reach the pulse within six days. Prepare yourself, our first real battle might take place there."

The other nodded and they spread out again, and they once more resumed their individual hunt for treasures. Things were a bit monotone on the ocean bed, but Zac actually stumbled upon what might be a trove on the third day. It was hidden within a colony of giant clams that lived in a gully he passed.

He gave it some thought, but he eventually decided to go at it solo. He sent a short message to Catheya though, telling her to go ahead before he ripped open the shell of the suspicious clam. Inside was a hidden pathway, something which Zac had only noticed because of his special Draugr-sense.

The clam had looked like all the others around it, but it was completely dead. However, small bubbles still emerged from its mouth, which was definitely suspicious. Zac had expected a treasure to hide within the shell rather than a pathway, but he didn't care as he made his way down. He soon found himself in a hidden cultivation cave covered in moss and small seaweed.

The only thing remaining apart from the plant life was a skeleton sitting on a prayer mat. It had a decent-looking sword

in its lap, but Zac was more interested in the Spatial Ring on the skeleton's finger. Spatial rings weren't anything special in a flourishing place like the Twilight Harbor, but it also wasn't something that common cultivators would own because of their price.

There should be a decent harvest waiting within.

[Rakan's Roar] appeared in Zac's hand as he inched closer, his eyes peering back and forth for any hint of what kind of danger this place could hold. However, he was surprised to see that the danger was the skeleton itself as it started to emit a powerful aura that made Zac think of the unfathomable depths of the ocean.

The skeleton rose to its feet before it swung its sword in a sharp arc that didn't seem impeded by the water at all. In fact, it was almost like the ocean was pushing the sword forward, increasing its speed rather than acting as an impediment.

Zac countered with a swing of his own, and the waters started to churn from corrosion as Zac activated **[Blighted Cut]**, causing highly corrosive droplets to drip from his axe. The two weapons clashed, and a swirl of water clashed with an outburst of corruption. Zac was actually pushed back a few steps from the sheer power contained in the skeleton's swing, but he countered by lashing out with the chains of **[Love's Bond]**. The strike launched the skeleton across the cave, and it slammed into a wall with a heavy thud.

He had expected to rip the skeleton apart with the coffin-infused iron links, but neither the corrosive elements of his skill or the impacts themselves left as much as a mark on the glistening bones. Just how sturdy was this thing? Thankfully, its combat technique was crude. It contained hints of some water-related Dao along with a brutish force, but the attacks themselves were without any finesse. Zac shot forward again, and he launched another barrage of strikes.

The basic path of war slowly merged with his fighting style again as Zac unleashed an unrelenting barrage of strikes. The skeleton was strong, but it was ultimately just a naïve recruit while he was a veteran seasoned through multiple campaigns.

How couldn't there be openings to take advantage of? One strike after another targeted joints, vertebrae, or other weaknesses, but a frown spread across Zac's face when the thing seemed completely impervious to his attacks.

A sudden scream of danger made Zac quickly drag himself out of the way with the help of one of his chains, just in time to see a spear of *something* pierce the waters where his head was just a moment ago. A tentacle.

Zac looked at the appendage return to hiding inside the ribcage of the skeleton, and realization dawned on him. Only then did he notice weak hints of energy and life-force along its arms and legs, more tentacles which were almost perfectly blended in with the waters.

He was fighting with an octopus rather than a skeleton?

He had planned on simply dismantling the thing and pray that it didn't possess the ability to reassemble its bones, but it looked like the skeleton itself was just a puppet. It simply moved its body out of the way when Zac swung his axe, letting the supremely sturdy bones take the hit. It looked like he needed to adjust his tactic a bit. Four chains shot forward, all of them drenched in black tar that profaned the surroundings.

Each chain swung around the skeleton's limbs, but a storm of cutting water blades shot out from the skeleton the moment they tried to latch on. The blades were powerful, but thankfully not powerful enough to harm either Zac or the chains of **[Love's Bond]**. However, they formed a storm around the skeleton itself, preventing Zac from latching on to activate the finishing blow of **[Blighted Cut]**.

It looked like the octopus had learned to be wary of the chains from the first lashing.

Still, the chains were not only useful for binding while **[Blighted Cut]** was active, and they kept spewing out more and more corrosive liquid into the cave. He hadn't managed to make much progress with the skill over the past years, but it had at least reached Middle Mastery. The upgrade increased the corrosive properties by a tier while also increasing the cost

of keeping the skill active. Obviously, that was a worthy exchange for someone with a massive Miasma pool like him.

Still, the skeleton seemed mostly impervious to his attempt to corrode the beast within since the octopus managed to move away all the tainted water with its ability to manipulate water. Its control of waters in the small cave was too great, and not a drop of it reached its almost intangible body. Zac gave it a thought and figured he'd try something else. Something new.

His body suddenly started to release a black cloud that spread through the waters with rapid speed. It just took a few seconds before it had filled the whole cave. The illumination from the seagrass and moss was drowned out, replaced by pervasive darkness and the chill of death. Not only that, but a sizzling sound echoed through the small cave.

It almost sounded like he stood in an enormous swarm of cicadas, but he knew that the sound was all the moss and even the cave wall being rapidly dissolved. The darkness was filled with decay, which was why Zac summoned it. He figured it would be hard for the octopus to keep away tainted water if everything became tainted.

Zac could see just fine in the shroud of darkness, and he saw how the skeleton had been covered from head to toe in water armor in an effort to block out the corrosive storm Zac had unleashed. It looked like it no longer felt as confident, and it immediately swam toward the exit. However, a chain lashed at the skeleton as Zac moved to block.

The skeleton still wore the Spatial Ring, and the sword was a treasure as well. How could he let the octopus simply leave?

Getting trapped had clearly enraged the beast as it unleashed a furious barrage at Zac, using both its sword and the skeleton's limbs as weaponry. The pure force in its strikes was nothing to scoff at, and Zac felt himself somewhat on the defensive from the onslaught. It wouldn't have been as bad if he activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, but the cave was simply too small to freely fight in that state.

Still, there was no such thing as passively defending for his Fetters of Desolation Class.

The darkness suddenly congealed as Zac felt a drain on his Miasma. Out from it, a wraith wielding a nasty war axe appeared. Its features were obscured by a tattered robe, and its arms were in a state of advanced decay. The axe seemed to be wrought from black metal, and its head was covered in runes that shone in a sinister green radiance that spoke of putrefaction.

The octopus was a beast, and it followed its instincts as it fought. And its instincts probably told it that Zac was the true threat. It provided the opening the wraith needed, and it unleashed a massive two-handed swing toward the skeleton. A small green fractal edge appeared in front of the axehead, and it actually cut straight through the water armor.

The octopus reacted at the last moment and moved to intercept the attack with its arm. The axe wraith was unable to cut through the bone, and a storm of water soon pushed it away. But the wraith didn't completely lose out on that exchange as a series of small green runes suddenly covered the previously transparent tentacle.

Zac heard a high-pitched wail of pain from within the skeleton's skull, and Zac wasn't surprised. Those runes had already started absorbing the corrosion of the surroundings, and the water armor couldn't protect against that. It probably felt like its limb was rotting off for the octopus. The wraith quickly floated back after being pushed away, but the octopus was in no mood to fight it.

It knew it couldn't pass by Zac, so it swam to the opposite side of the cave, all while one of its tentacles kept sizzling. Unfortunately for the octopus, there was no escape from Zac's cage, and another wraith appeared, out of nowhere, launching an attack on one of the skeleton's legs. Another set of green runes appeared, and the wail from within the skull grew even louder.

The octopus was no doubt going insane from the pain, but pain sometimes brings strength.

The blue sword ripped through the darkness, cutting even Zac's domain apart as it tried to destroy the two wraiths. The

first one didn't have time to react and was ripped apart in an instant, unable to withstand such a suicidal attack. However, the original wraith which was about to catch up managed to dodge the wide swing before countering with an attack of its own. It slammed into the very same arm as before, and the green runes grew even denser.

A lightning-quick kick from the skeleton dispelled the wraith, but a third one appeared to take its place. As for Zac, he was happy to just observe the effect of his recently fused skill. The octopus should be in the late stages of the E-grade, and it had found itself an extremely durable skeleton for protection. It was pretty good target practice.

Zac knew he could manually control the skill, but he was happy just to observe as they slowly got smarter during the fight. Soon enough there were two of them harassing the octopus, and when there were three things started to become lopsided. The axe wraiths worked in tandem, with one drawing attention while the other two kept stacking more and more corrosive runes across the skeleton and its controller.

Three wraiths eventually turned to five, at which point the beast was already on the brink of collapse. It had already lost most of its tentacles, and the skeleton now simply floated in the air with its arms hanging down. The octopus knew it was on the brink of death, and Zac actually sensed the familiar energy emanations of self-destruction.

Four chains shot forward like spears, each of them targeting cracks or openings in the skeleton's skull. A surge of energy entered Zac's body a moment later, confirming that he had managed to kill the beast hiding inside the skull.

The darkness that suffused the cave soon dissipated, and Zac noticed that over a meter of the wall had been completely corroded, leaving a smooth surface behind. Zac nodded in satisfaction at the scene, feeling that his new skill lived up to his expectations. The skill was called **[Deathmark]**, and it was the fusion of **[Deathwish]** and **[Winds of Decay]**.

[Deathwish] was one of Zac's favorite skills in his undead toolkit, but it had unsurprisingly fallen behind as the spectral

projections had a ceiling strength that wasn't a threat to most E-grade cultivators. Furthermore, its method of activation wasn't really suited any longer. It was originally meant to be used in conjunction with **[Immutable Bulwark]**, but Zac barely fought with a shield any longer.

He didn't want to keep getting hit to activate the skill, so he needed to change its trigger. Doing so through modifying the fractal was probably possible, but that was still out of his reach. So **[Deathwish]** became his first choice for a fusion, and he had considered **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, **[Fields of Despair]**, and even **[Profane Seal]** as potential targets.

But ultimately he instead landed on **[Winds of Decay]**. His idea was for **[Deathwish]** to represent the Fragment of the Axe, which was why the spectral projections had been replaced by axe-wraiths, and for **[Winds of Decay]** to represent death. The result was **[Deathmark]**, a domain skill that both spread powerful corrosion while also adding the summoning ability.

One impressive difference between the old skills and the new was that the new wraiths didn't actually disappear after one strike. They would keep pelting away for half a minute unless they were destroyed by the enemy, each strike leaving a mark that left the target more susceptible to the corrosive domain.

Even better, Zac didn't actually need to be attacked for the wraiths to appear. As long as the target was within his corrosive domain, more and more would keep popping up. However, the rate at which they naturally formed was just half compared to how quickly they could form as a result of Zac getting hit.

So the skill still synergized very well by **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and its taunting ability. As long as he could force his enemy to focus on him through that mental manipulation or pressure alone, the wraiths would keep multiplying and increasing the danger for the enemy. Soon enough they'd look like the octopus, completely covered in green runes as they fell apart.

Even if they managed to withstand the powerful corrosion in **[Deathmark]**, they would still be assaulted by a blinding pain that would impede most people's ability to bring out their full power. You could even say that the soul-wrenching pain was another type of restriction, one that might work even better than a suppression array in battle.

You could probably cleanse the mark, but that was like expelling foreign Dao that had invaded their body. Doing so in the middle of a fight could prove lethal. It wasn't like Zac would always watch on while his wraiths fought his battles for him. He had multiple other ways to harass the target while they tried to remove the brands.

A look around in the cave indicated there were no other threats, and he walked over to the skeleton. Its pristine bones had finally turned a bit mottled after being assaulted by the corrosive domain for half a minute, but they were still whole. Zac didn't care about the skeleton though, and instead dragged out the remains of a small octopus from the skull.

Its main body was a bit golden rather than translucent like its appendages, but it was just a mess now after being impaled by four corrosive chains. Only its maw was still intact, and it bit down on a small stone that emitted pretty powerful energy fluctuations. Zac's first thought was that it was a Beast Core, he soon realized it rather had to be a Cosmic Core.

No wonder the bones of the cultivator were so sturdy; they came from a fallen Hegemon that had become nourishment for the octopus. The core itself was more than halfway drained, which had helped push the octopus all the way to the Late E-grade. Zac could probably absorb the remaining energy through **[Void Heart]** as well, but he was loath to do so.

It felt a bit close to cannibalism, and he already had hundreds of Beast Cores prepared for that very purpose. After all, beast cores weren't very expensive, considering they were mostly useless for cultivators because of their chaotic energies. They weren't even efficient energy sources for bombs, since the explosions were extremely unpredictable.

Ultimately, they were mostly used as fertilizer in top-tier gardens. You'd bury a couple of cores of a suitable element beneath the soil, and they would slowly infuse the ground with energy over the years. That meant they were in high demand for certain elements that matched well with plants, whereas many other types of Beast Cores had almost no demand.

Zac's Hidden Node didn't care what element it ate, so Zac just paid a measly 50 Million Nexus Coins for Early-Stage Beast Core back in the Zecia sector. With his race upgrade dealt with and both pills and **[Stone of Hope]** bought, he was pretty eager to start using them, but it would have to wait until he reached immunity to the pills he'd brought.

The Hegemon skeleton went into his Spatial Ring, while his ring went on one of Zac's free fingers. He didn't linger in the hidden cave after that, and left after having scanned the small chamber a few times for hidden compartments or pathways. But it really looked like the Spatial Ring was the only thing of value, and Zac was soon moving across the seabed again to catch up with the others. He soon caught up with the others, at which point his attention turned to the ring.

Even a poverty-stricken Hegemon should have some stuff that was useful for him.

Chapter 704: Cork Island

The skeleton's spatial ring was in a pretty bad state, and Zac guessed that it wouldn't last more than a few more decades. It had probably lost more than three-quarters of its original space by now, and what remained was far smaller than even the backup rings he bought in Twilight Harbor.

The contents were left in a chaotic jumble, but Zac started to organize the loot into piles, something that had become a lot easier since his control over mental energy got stronger. It quickly became apparent that the previous owner had fought a few life-and-death battles before dying himself, as it looked like the items came from at least five different people.

There were four sets of cultivation manuals, all of them of different elements. There was a Body Tempering Manual as well, but it was locked just like the manuals were. Hopefully, he would be able to decode them through some service, since these manuals were most likely all things that could be used all the way into the D-grade.

Even if they were average in other aspects, that alone made them better than 95% of the manuals currently available in Port Atwood. Apart from the manuals, there were over fifty bottles with pills, but almost forty of them had golden runes emblazoned on them. It was a seal by the System that locked items of too high a grade until he left the trial.

It was the same with a number of talismans and two Low-grade Cosmic Crystals.

Those crystals were probably left for emergencies, as there were also two small hills of Supreme Nexus Crystals and Supreme Miasma Crystals. The fallen Hegemon was probably among the weaker ones who had entered the Twilight Ascent during some previous opening.

All-in-all, the tally was extremely impressive for an outer trove, though most of the value seemed to be in the crystals themselves. Two low-grade Cosmic Crystals meant 200 D-grade Nexus Coins, a shocking haul for most peak E-grade cultivators. In comparison, the estimated value of the Trove Catheya found was just in the vicinity of 120,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

Unfortunately, there was not a single Twilight Fruit in the ring, which was a pretty big disappointment. By value alone, they were almost a match to the Cosmic Crystals. But more importantly, they might be the perfect food for **[Love's Bond]**. Zac's best guess was that D-grade Twilight Fruits were considered too great a reward, and removed by the System.

Zac was about to retract his vision but he suddenly spotted a familiar sphere, and he curiously took it out. He infused some energy into the ball, and he soon found himself in an illusion. It actually worked. He wasn't worried about the thing being a weapon or a trap since he had an identical sphere in his own spatial ring.

It was looked like a metal ball, but it was called an **[Ocean Chart]**, and it was a specialized version of his **[Automatic Mapper]**. It was designed to chart the Twilight Ocean and it automatically added in and updated the map as Zac moved along, even while it was in his Spatial Ring. It was one of the first things he prepared for the trial, but until now he hadn't had much reason to take it out since it was almost completely blank.

The **[Ocean Chart]** he found was completely different, and large swathes were filled in with great detail. It wasn't much help to Zac as the whole ocean had been rearranged since then though. But Zac suddenly spotted something interesting, something that pertained to him specifically.

In a certain part of the middle area of the trial, Zac spotted an all-too-familiar Volcano; the Volcano with the Shard of Creation. Zac's eyes lit up, having found the first real clue to the remnants. The volcano obviously wouldn't be at the same spot as before, but most features stayed in the same general depth.

So if the volcano was around the midpoint during a previous trial, there was a good chance it was in the same general area this time around as well. Even better, there were over five distinctive markers close to it, any one of which might still be connected to the nondescript volcano. The ocean would gradually get charted by the trial takers, and he would be able to trade for or steal their **[Ocean Charts]** to supplement his own.

Finding the unnamed volcano had just become a lot easier thanks to this map since he could use its surrounding features as clues.

There were unfortunately no clues to the Splinter on the map. In the vision he had back during the Mystic Realm it was deep inside a cave hidden among jagged pitch-black rocks at the ocean floor. But he was just one week into the trial, and he had already made surprising inroads.

Zac had already come to a decision since discovering the remnants were here; as long as he could find both the locations, he would try to absorb a second set. Collecting more of the remnants was a huge risk, but Zac felt the potential rewards justified it. Making his ultimate attacks stronger was a welcome addition, but he was more interested in the passive effects.

Without the purified energies of Oblivion, it would have taken much longer for his soul to reach the state required for the First Reincarnation. He wasn't like Vilari, born with a soul multiple times stronger than the norm. It was the same with his body. The Shard of Creation had kept nurturing his Bloodline over the past years.

It was the shard that had helped push his **[Force of the Void]** to 27% reserves even without a method to cultivate it. He had tried eating all kinds of things, but so far he had not found much that was of use. Most treasures were simply turned into Cosmic Energy by **[Void Heart]**, while a few items with strong Spatial Energies seemed to nurture the Hidden Node to some degree.

Getting a second set of Remnants would mean both a faster soul cultivation and body tempering, without Zac actually having to spend any extra time on either. It was an important experiment as well, to see whether the cage could take on more remnants. Zac memorized all the features surrounding the volcano, after which he stowed away the old **[Ocean Chart]** to be used as a spare.

Cracking open the first hoard solo was pretty exhilarating, but the excitement quickly died down over the next hours. Troves obviously didn't grow on trees, and Zac didn't really gain much of anything over the next day. He did loot a couple of Twilight Fruits, but Alea still showed no indication of being stuffed as she greedily ate any fruit she could get. The monotony eventually ended though as another Ice Crystal formed next to him.

"Everyone gather," the crystal said. "The Living Pulse is up ahead, which means we're closing in on Cork Island. The risk of ambush is a lot higher here."

The group all swam over to Catheya before advancing any further. The start of the living pulse was a small subaqueous mountain range, where the stream emerged out of the depths. From where, no one knew, as going against the current got you ripped apart. The stream was then rerouted through the canyons of the mountain until it turned into a powerful surge that shot through the ocean.

Their group obviously wouldn't get too close to the mountain, since it was a popular spot to gather up for adventuring parties. They instead chose a roundabout way as they masked their presence as much as they could. It was hard to miss the Living Pulse even when it was in the distance, as Zac could sense a pure surge of life within the Golden Haze.

That was a unique point of the Living Pulse; it passed a lot of life-attributed points of interest, and it was marked by those locations and held strong life-attuned energies. Or perhaps it was the Pulse itself that made those points of interest possible at all. In either case, it made their work easier as they moved along its path toward Cork Island.

They soon spotted the island in the distance, or rather the fact that the depth of the ocean kept shrinking. They eventually reached a sheer mountain wall that went from the ocean bed to above the surface. They had reached the island proper. The Living Pulse actually cut straight through the island itself, but they would have to get onto it.

Sharpo wordlessly sent out a small snake that quickly turned translucent.

“The cliff is forty meters tall,” she said. “I can’t see any cultivators, but my snake can’t see through high-quality illusions. There are some odd fluctuations though, there might be someone lying in wait.”

Catheyra frowned for a few seconds before she took out a talisman, but before she had a chance to use it Zac felt a weak push against his mind. He wasn’t even sure if his impression was real, but it looked like the ghost and Catheyra had sensed the same thing.

“We’ve been spotted!” Sharpo said.

“We strike,” Catheyra immediately said. “It’ll be trouble if they expose our group. We’ll take them out before hiding inside the forest.”

Time was of the essence, so everyone immediately got ready.

“Be careful,” Catheyra said as she nodded at Qirai who once more took the lead with a massive ice shield on her arm.

The Titan immediately rose through the waters like a wall-breaker while both Zac and Yod followed close behind. Varo and Sharpo disappeared from sight as Catheyra brought up the rear, one icicle after another appearing behind her back.

For a second Zac thought they were making a mountain out of a molehill, but he was almost immediately proven wrong as a storm of golden spears that made Zac think of Nenothep Medhin descended upon them. The ice shield on Qirai’s arm expanded to the size of a building in return, blocking hundreds of stabs as it was slowly whittled down.

Eventually, it broke, but the Titan unleashed a terrifying punch at that moment, containing enough force to lift the ocean itself,

turning an Olympic pool's worth of water into a projectile that shot up toward their attackers. The icicles behind Catheya were launched at the same time, and they actually stabbed into the water bomb, turning it into a glacier radiating an immense cold.

A tremendous shockwave erupted above just as they breached the surface, no doubt the ice mountain crashing into whatever defenses the attackers had prepared. The scene above was just utter chaos, but Zac could vaguely see a few sources of power with the help of [**Cosmic Gaze**].

'Six people, no First Seeds', Sharpo's voice echoed out in Zac's mind.

"Do it," Catheya said with a sinister smile, and the whole area was suddenly drowned in darkness, like they had been thrown into the abyss.

Zac could sense that the whole world had been sealed off, but Zac could still see the attackers just fine. In fact, it was like they had been lit up like spotlights in the dark. It was a domain skill, and while he couldn't confirm it, he believed it was activated by the now-invisible Varo. Zac had always suspected Catheya's staid butler to have something like an assassin's class, and this domain seemed to lean in that direction.

The others seemed to have things in hand, but Zac couldn't just sit by and watch this time around, and he finally finished channeling energy into [**Abyssal Phase**], which made it look like the world had frozen in place. Fragments of the ice bomb fell back toward the churning waters in slow motion, and Zac effortlessly dodged them along with several descending attacks as he made his way toward the cliff where the attackers stood.

It was a mixed group of treants and humans, and they were already launching a series of powerful attacks that had almost completely submerged the Titan in a chaotic swirl of energies. Qirai emitted some odd pulses that kept pushing sharp roots and golden spears, and some sort of radiant blades away, like she was creating a void zone around herself. Another ice

shield had already appeared on her hand, helping keep the pressure down.

Qirai was essentially taking on the role Zac himself usually took when fighting with allies; the meat shield. That was just fine with Zac since he was moving away from the defensive archetype in his undead form. He appeared behind the group a moment later and deactivated his movement skill. It was impossible to prepare skills while he was in his intangible form, but his axe still shot toward the closest throat as it started dripping extremely corrosive liquids.

However, a two-meter tall crystal hand appeared to block his strike, and a counter-stab of a golden spear shot toward him before he even had finished his attack. Zac wasn't worried though. He might have moved away from a pure defensive class, but that didn't mean he was without defensive means.

Three pygmy skeletons appeared behind Zac, each one of them radiating such an immense aura of death that the air around them kept distorting. One held a lantern wrought out of bone, and a blue flame radiated from within. The second held a coffin as large as itself, while the final one was mostly obscured by a black cloud that floated around it as though it was a living thing.

Zac infused a stream of energy into the coffin-bearing pygmy skeleton, and a deathly barrier very reminiscent of **[Love's Bond]** sprung up to block the incoming spear. At the same time, the blue light inside the second pygmy's lantern increased in intensity, and the Crystal hand quickly deteriorated and fell apart. Zac was already mid-swing by that point, and his axe ruthlessly shot toward the Treant cultivator again.

The Treant looked shocked at its defenses crumbling so quickly, but he was still a peak E-grade cultivator. A wall of roots sprung up to block and retaliate, and Zac found himself cut off from the enemies once more. But that was fine with Zac, as that bramble wall had essentially trapped the ambushers with him putting pressure from behind and Qirai from the front.

He had already spotted six huge snakes climb up the cliff-side too, no doubt Sharpo's summoned beasts. They didn't emit too strong auras, but they all were still Late E-grade equivalent. They didn't immediately jump in to tussle with the group of cultivators, but they rather helped keep the battle contained and the living trapped in one spot.

Zac couldn't spot Varo or Yod, but he guessed they were somehow keeping the enemies occupied in other ways. As for Zac, the situation had essentially turned into a battle between life and death. Zac, his four chains, and his lantern-wielding pygmy kept whittling down the barriers while the Treant desperately grew new ones in an attempt to overwhelm him.

A huge eruption of force almost threw Zac off his feet, and he sensed that it was Qirai who had finally unleashed a massive punch at the defenses the group had erected after getting the ambush thrown back in their faces. Of course, Zac didn't plan on giving these people any chance to breathe.

He was utilizing his insights into the Dao of the Axe as much as he could to maximize the damage he was causing to the defenses. He had usually stayed a human back on Earth, but he had still somewhat integrated his Path into his Draugr side as well. Still, it was ultimately a bit lacking, and integrating his warlike movements into his combat style wasn't as smooth as in his human form.

The axe-work was fine, roving back and forth like a furious charge of a deathsworn army. But the patterns of his four chains were still slightly stilted. Zac wanted to use them to keep an ever-present pressure on his enemies, like four raiding parties constantly demanding attention while the main army pushed forward.

As for his fused path of Coffin and Axe, he still hadn't quite found a direction like the Evolutionary Stance he had started forming as a human. He did have some ideas on how to fuse death and conflict, but he hadn't landed on anything specific yet. His goal was to find inspiration during this trial, something that fit his personality and that could match the Evolutionary Stance.

For now, he kept using **[Blighted Cut]** rather than **[Gorehew]** in an attempt to shake something loose from the battle. He figured his odds of figuring something out would increase if he fought with a death-attuned skill imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin while following a combat style based on the Fragment of the Axe.

His axe ripped through endlessly growing plants as pools of miasmic corrosion spread beneath his feet. He could have activated his other skills as well, but he had pretty much confirmed that these people weren't powerful enough to be a threat to Catheya. As for the others, he wasn't as sure. In a sense, this was a chance for him to inspect their strength.

If they got themselves killed against this group of the living, it might be for the best. Otherwise, they'd just become a weakness when they were set against more powerful enemies.

But even with Zac only unleashing a small part of his kit, the Treeman soon found himself completely overwhelmed. The biggest problem was the aquamarine flames from the lantern-wielding skeleton. It was just too efficient at eating through defenses, even more so than Zac directly swinging into the barriers with his axe.

A pang of danger suddenly erupted in his mind, and Zac looked up in time to see a massive crystal spike descending toward him. It contained an immense aura of life, and golden lightning crackled through its core. Zac frowned and halted his assault for a second, long enough for him to point toward the spike.

The third pygmy finally made its move as the swirl of darkness around it expanded and rose like a hungry maw. It actually swallowed the crystal whole, and a moment later a tremendous shockwave erupted a few hundred meters out to sea as the very same crystal spike slammed into the ocean, causing a small tsunami.

The cultivator looked on with blank incomprehension, and Zac only grinned as he once more pushed forward.

Chapter 705: Profane Exponents

The ultimate strike of the treeman's ally was diverted, allowing Zac to attack with reignited vigor as the normal shield pygmy kept him safe from the occasional attacks. The barriers it conjured just looked like coffins, but they were actually even sturdier compared to his old skill [**Immutable Bulwark**].

"I need assistance!" the treeman roared with a voice that sounded like dry bark, but there was no time for anyone to come to his assistance before the fight took a drastic turn.

However, the change didn't come from Zac, but rather someone else.

A small blue flower had appeared through a crack in the ground without anyone noticing, and it released a weak blue light that turned two of the assailants, a mage who held off Sharpo's snakes and the man who conjured crystal hands to protect the party, into frozen statues before anyone had the chance to react. The attackers had already been overpowered before, and instantly losing a third of their party utterly crushed their will to keep fighting.

Qirai took the opportunity when the defensive barriers fell to punch a third cultivator with a lightning-quick jab to her temple. Zac didn't feel it looked overly powerful, but his eyes widened a bit when he felt a sharp spiritual ripple passing out through the other side of the cultivator's head. Her eyes completely glazed over and she slumped onto the ground, her soul definitely crushed.

Only now did Zac realize that that the brutish Revenant had somehow combined pugilism with mental attacks. It was

probably because of her master not wanting the Titan to destroy the corpses.

Half the party had fallen in an instant thanks to Catheya and Qirai's combo, and the others all used their ultimate escape means to get out of there. Zac had already broken through their defenses though, and two chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot out and caught the treant mid-teleportation. The man was ripped back to the battlefield, and he didn't get the chance to try again before he was cut in two by a swing of Zac's axe.

Two pieces of bleeding lumber fell onto the ground with a heavy thud, but the remains quickly crumbled as they had landed in the pool of corrosion that spread out around Zac's position.

"I can't believe your master let you get a class like that," Catheya muttered as she rose up to the cliff with the help of a pillar of ice, her eyes drawn to the rotten pool around Zac's feet. "What were you thinking walking the path of Decay? You're harming your own foundation if you keep destroying the bodies of those you defeat."

"I've never had any ambition to become a lich and raise large armies," Zac shrugged as he picked up a Cosmos Sack from the ground before it disintegrated. "And these guys weren't strong enough to become my right-hand-men."

"Still, it's like you're burning money," Catheya muttered as she gave the treeman a look of helplessness, but she didn't push the issue any further.

"What about the other two?" Zac asked.

"It's being handled," Catheya said, and she barely had time to finish her sentence before Varo returned with two bodies.

Zac hadn't expected that the Revenant was powerful enough to deal with both the escapees. Certainly, neither of them was in great shape after the battle, but it hadn't taken more than a few seconds. He had truthfully somewhat discounted the butleresque Revenant after seeing his performance when gathering up or entering the trove, but Zac realized that underestimating this guy could be deadly.

“Let’s go. We should have alerted people in the surroundings even if the fight took less than a minute. Some bigshots have probably reached Cork Island already, no need to tempt fate,” Catheya said.

The group nodded, and they quickly cleaned up the battlefield before they moved further into the island. Zac threw over the treant’s Cosmos Sack to Catheya, and the others did the same. This had been a team battle, and resources would be allocated dependent on contribution. If they only went by who dealt killing blows, then people like Yod and Sharpo who filled other functions than directly killing would be left without a scrap.

The small pygmy skeletons followed Zac for a few hundred meters until they finally dissipated after bowing in his direction. Catheya looked at the trio curiously before her eyes turned toward Zac.

“An oddity for sure...” she smiled. “I guess they suit you.”

Zac rolled his eyes in response, but he inwardly agreed with her sentiment. The trio came from the last of his skill fusions which resulted in a skill called [**Profane Exponents**]. It was the toughest one of all his fusions and the one that differed most from its original skills.

The fusion actually came from [**Immutable Bulwark**] and [**Undying Legion**], and they were Zac’s solution to completely rehauling his defensive capabilities. [**Undying Legion**] had grown a lot more powerful as he had pushed it to peak mastery, but the change wasn’t exactly what he hoped for.

Reaching high mastery had increased the army to 350 skeletons, and also added a dozen mages who launched fireballs somewhat similar to the turquoise flames of his pygmy. At peak mastery, the skill had conjured 500 skeletons while adding 5 captains and one extremely powerful general that would probably be able to defeat anyone else on Earth by himself.

They would be a mighty force that could aid most defensive cultivators, and [**Undying Legion**] was probably the skill that best personified his path. It combined both death and war in a

very palpable way. Unfortunately, that didn't mean it really fit Zac's toolkit, and the skeletons were ultimately only used for their damage diversion.

Meanwhile, **[Immutable Bulwark]** was very powerful, but it always required him to wield a shield, which didn't really suit Zac's taste. He'd much rather use **[Love's Bond]** in its offensive form, using the chains to bind and restrain his enemies as a means of defense through offense.

The result was a new supportive skill that was a lot more flexible compared to his old ones. The first pygmy was simply a pure fusion of the bulwark of his **[Immutable Bulwark]** and the skeletons in **[Undying Legion]**. It became a coffin-bearing skeleton, a representation of his path and Dao of the Coffin that could protect him or groups of people.

Meanwhile, the lantern-wielding pygmy specifically targeted defensive skills by corroding defensive fractals. Its weird burning light wouldn't be able to kill most E-grade cultivators, but it was extremely efficient at eating through defensive arrays and barriers. This pygmy drew inspiration from several sources. Part of it came from the skeletal mages that appeared when Zac upgraded **[Undying Legion]**.

But a big part of the inspiration came from Kenzie and her array-breaking enterprise.

He had once asked Kenzie how her array breakers worked, and she said that a breaker and a barrier were essentially different sides of the same coin. Many of the patterns and runes the two used were the same, but they were just applied slightly differently. That was what gave him the guts to try having the System repurpose the overabundance of defensive patterns in the two skill fractals into something offensive.

Zac's undying side wasn't like his living one, where he had a few terrifying skills that could destroy all opposition. He was more like a spider trapping his targets in a web, slowly whittling them down until he launched a final strike. However, that combat style had a weakness; time. Anything could happen in a battle, and Zac had thought of various ways to increase the speed he could squeeze his enemies to death.

One route was to get a finisher skill like **[Arcadia's Judgement]**, simply turning people to mush. Another way was to quickly destroy his enemies' defenses and allow skills like **[Blighted Cut]** and **[Deathmark]** to work a lot quicker. The result was shockingly effective. Any defense within his domain was quickly targeted and dissolved by the priest pygmy, and Zac believed the skeleton would even be able to destroy D-grade defenses when the skill reached Peak Mastery.

The third pygmy had taken on the power of displacement from **[Undying Legion]**, but its usage was a lot more flexible. It could either transfer damage from Zac to the three pygmies, or displace an attack altogether as it did with the crystal Spire.

When used correctly, it could actually be considered an offensive skill, though the skill ultimately was under the control of the attacker. They would usually be able to dissipate the attack before they accidentally attacked themselves because of the displacement.

"Restrain your auras and follow me," Catheya said as she attached a series of talismans to individual ice crystals that floated above everyone's heads.

Zac didn't exactly understand how they worked, but it felt like their group was somewhat isolated from the surroundings, just like how the distraction array worked. Zac looked at the setup with interest, and he felt that the way Catheya used her Dao to create mobile array arrangements was pretty ingenious. Perhaps he could do something similar, if he ever could gain such control over his Dao.

The trees around them kept getting larger as they ran deeper into the forest, and they were soon overshadowed even than the massive Redwood trees back on Earth. Any tree around them would be large enough to be turned into a serviceable vessel, but Catheya kept going deeper for another hour until she stopped close to one tree that looked a bit sturdier than the others.

She took out a rope with small array disks attached every meter, and Varo started putting it around the root of the trunk.

It almost looked like Christmas lights, but Zac understood it was a specialized array as the whole tree trunk suddenly was cut off as the dozens of miniature disks on the rope cracked. The tree didn't even have the chance to tilt before it just disappeared, no doubt placed in a Cosmos Sack of Catheya's.

"Alright. We'll split up here," Catheya said as she took out another small array disk. "There is a hidden shipyard beneath the river somewhere around here. A few of us will start processing and hollowing out the tree, while a few others I continue further inside."

Varo and Qirai were clearly not surprised by Catheya's statement, but Zac could see that both Yod and Sharpo were caught unaware. It looked like neither of the two had made similar deals as he had. Of course, Sharpo seemed to have already figured something out earlier when they discussed the route.

As for Zac himself, he started to feel that the price for the **[Stone of Hope]** might have been even higher than he initially estimated.

"What is going on?" Yod eventually asked.

"I was tasked with a second goal when coming here," Catheya smiled. "I have been ordered to complete a small task on Cork Island. Don't ask why because I don't know."

"I agreed to help, but this place..." Zac sighed as he looked toward the heart of Cork Island.

The Living Pulse ran straight through the middle of the island, imbuing it with a surge of life-attuned energies. The large trees were not the only thing of value in this place, there were also all kinds of treasures. Right now the heart of the island was in a completely pristine state, and thousands of cultivators no doubt rushed toward the core to harvest the valuables before the mainstream cultivators reached this spot.

It was truly a no man's land for the unliving.

"We're not here to go against the collective strength of the Dreamers," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "We go in,

do our thing, and get out. Yod and Sharpo, you can begin preparations in the hidden shipyard with the help of Qirai.”

“Safer to go together,” Yod slowly muttered, and Sharpo seemed to agree.

“Perhaps so, but I’m just following my master’s instructions. Initially, three were supposed to remain, and four go, but now we’ll split three-three. Me, Varo, and Arcaz will go complete the mission,” Catheya smiled.

Qirai had clearly been informed already, and she took both the array crystal and a Cosmos Sack from her master as she turned to the outsiders.

“Come on, let’s go. The shipyard is some distance away,” she said as she started running.

Yod and Sharpo exchanged a glance before they followed the Titan.

“So I guess I’m not privy to the shipyard’s whereabouts if things go sideways here?” Zac sighed as he saw his teammates disappear among the trees.

“Well, would you even want to join those three in case things go wrong?” Catheya laughed in response as she started walking further toward the core of the island. “I have a feeling you’d rather stake it out yourself.”

“Do you even know the location of the pearls?” Zac asked with a suspicious glance. “Or are we just toiling in vain for this mystery mission of yours?”

“Of course,” Catheya nodded. “It’s the reward master negotiated for me in return for completing this mission. He said that there definitely aren’t any errors in the clues and path he got. There might even be an Autarch involved for him to be so certain.”

“Why you? There are millions of natives who could take up tasks for the undead factions. Why have an Imperial like you been given this task?” Zac asked.

Catheya didn’t really need to watch her words now that the two other outsiders were gone, and Zac really wanted to find

out anything he could about this mission of theirs. He couldn't directly ask about his own task because of the brand hiding in his body, but perhaps he could gather some clues from Catheya without directly asking.

"Who knows," Catheya shrugged. "But you know, it doesn't really matter. The old ancestors at the top will always play their games. Even Hegemons are just replaceable chess pieces to them. And that's a good thing."

"Sounds real good," Zac snorted sarcastically.

"We might be expendable, but also not valuable enough to be specifically targeted. So, I will keep my head down and complete my mission like a good chess piece. I'll take the rewards and empower myself, and one day I will be the player instead of the chess piece," Catheya smiled. "Such is the way of the world."

Zac hesitated for a few seconds as he looked toward the center of the island. Perhaps Catheya really didn't know what was going on. Was this what life was like for those in established factions? Being pawns in schemes beyond their understanding, their lives not under their own control. Everyone hoping that they'd gain control over their own fates one day?

"You saw the auction. Quite a few of the items meant for E-grade cultivators weren't even sold since not one of the old monsters was prepared to fork out even the minimum bid," Catheya added. "If you want something really good you have to work for it yourself. Such is Heaven's Path. The Boundless Heaven will only help those who help themselves."

"Not sure if I want the Heaven's help," Zac muttered, but he understood her point.

Not every opportunity was a Mystic Realm. Simply being used as a chess piece by bigshots could be considered an opportunity since they sat on resources that lower-grade cultivators desperately wanted.

The trio kept a low profile as they pushed through the undergrowth between the towering trees. The forest floor was thankfully quite lush even with the massive canopies hundreds

of meters in the air blocking out the sun, thanks to the fact that many plants only needed Cosmic Energy to thrive.

They heard the occasional battle in the distance, but Catheya thankfully showed no inclination of heading over to fish in muddy waters. They did run into a duo of beastkin, but the battle was over before it even started. The two were frozen in place in an instant, followed by Zac and Varo each dealing with one of them before they even had a chance to erect their defenses.

Their strength wasn't very impressive, and they had probably pushed themselves to the limit just to reach the island in hopes of getting a few valuable herbs. The environment worked against the undead in this place, but he and Catheya were pureblood Draugr with one very powerful advantage; their vision.

It was almost like sonar in this place, allowing Zac to see others long before they saw him. However, Catheya was somehow able to spot parties long before he did. She didn't seem to use any skills either, leaving him wondering if it had something to do with her race. Catheya had already inadvertently divulged that all Draugr had the same bloodline, and perhaps she had managed to strengthen her innate abilities through it.

Eventually, they approached the core of Cork Island where a gargantuan world tree proudly towered over its much smaller brethren. It had been visible even through the dense canopies since it almost split the sky in two. Now that they were getting closer, the trees were growing sparser. It was like the world tree had a domain on its own.

Zac hadn't really considered what they were here to do, but now that he got a better look at the unfathomably large tree he started to form a hypothesis.

"Don't tell me," Zac slowly said as he looked at the enormous tree with a grimace.

"Well, what do you think?" Catheya smiled.

"People are going to be pissed off if we cut down that thing."

Chapter 706: Opposing Sides

“Are we really doing this?” Alvaries sighed as she looked down at the seemingly ordinary mountain below. “The implications...”

The Holbok Mountains were situated on a remote part of the Dendrian Worlddisk. None of the Twilight Rivers passed anywhere close, and the closest settlement was over ten thousand kilometers away. With its awful communications, it took hours even for Hegemons to reach this spot.

There were no resources worth mentioning growing in this 500 kilometer stretch of peaks and forested ravines. There were a few D-grade Beast Kings, but they were of unimpressive heritage, their ancestors thrown here to form a proper ecosystem. There was a grand harvest every thousand years or so to pluck all the wild herbs that this area was designed for, but the next harvest was over five centuries away.

The occasional E-grade cultivator would find themselves in this area to temper themselves and test their luck in case some non-protected treasure had appeared, but the place was pretty much deserted with the Twilight Ascent going on. So the mountain range felt like a desolate patch of wilderness right now, like those you could find across most real worlds.

Yet, beneath the seemingly calm surface lay a shocking secret.

“What do we care?” Paro snorted. “We have toiled for 40 thousand years for the clan, and what is our reward? The best resources are kept for the main branch, with only scraps being left for external elders. Didn’t we decide back then? We’d earnestly work for the clan after joining, and whether we fulfill our hidden mission would depend on the reception.”

“You’re right,” Alvaries sighed, but her two tails still danced restlessly, each wave causing the air to crackle.

“Things have already reached this point,” Paro added, noticing the hesitation in his wife’s demeanor. “Even if we don’t fulfill our tasks, there are no doubt others who will. When the dust settles, we won’t be able to stay here, no matter which side is successful. We might as well go with the side that has already promised us the resources to take the next step. We... are running out of time.”

Alvaries nodded, and she waved her hand, which moved the spatial bubble they hid inside toward the closest ravine. They kept flying, following the markers on the intricate compass that Paro continuously tinkered with. The two eventually reached a secluded cave that looked no different than thousand others just like it.

There was a tribe of bugbears living inside, their matriarch just at the peak E-grade. The two flew right above their heads without causing a single wave, and they finally reached an unmarked wall. Alvaries couldn’t help her curiosity, and she scanned the whole mountain along with thousands of meters of bedrock below.

There was just rock to her senses. A few Spiritual Metals were strewn about in the depths, but they weren’t worth the effort of excavating them. There really was nothing worth mentioning in the whole mountain, at least according to her [**Ripple Feedback**]. The wall in front of her was supposedly just a piece of F-grade stone, the same as the rest of the whole mountain range.

“Nothing?” Paro asked, and Alvaries nodded in confirmation. “Marvelous.”

Paro took out a series of seemingly normal low-grade Cosmic Crystals the next moment and placed them in a particular pattern on the wall. Nothing happened for a few seconds, causing the two to frown in consternation. Was the compass wrong? However, their fears were soon alleviated as minute patterns slowly appeared in the depths of the crystals, forming an array on the stone.

The two couldn’t even sense a hint of any energy fluctuations, but a door soon emerged right in front of them. Even now,

Alvaries was completely unable to sense anything amiss. Her scouting skill was still telling her it was sheer rock in front of her, and that the two were walking through solid bedrock as they descended a set of stairs.

Each step of theirs took them hundreds of meters forward, yet it still took them five minutes before they reached the end of the tunnel; a large cave covered in extremely esoteric engravings. The cave itself looked rough and uneven at first glance, but everything echoed with the Dao. Every stalactite, every outcropping; they all had a purpose in this plan.

It was a nigh-perfect fusion of array and natural formation, and Alvaries felt like she stood inside a supreme Array Disk. Or almost inside it. The true core had to be the mysterious pond in the middle, or rather the three-meter tall crystal hovering above it.

“I wonder which master set this up,” Paro said as he looked around with amazement. “I never heard anything about the Lord being an Inscriptionist, especially not to this degree. Is someone from the outside helping him with all this?”

“Perhaps, I think his network is a lot larger than he lets on,” Alvaries nodded. “Are you confident in completing the task?”

“Don’t worry,” Paro said as he smiled at his wife. “I might not be able to completely understand this thing, but completing the objective is child’s play.”

The two walked over to the core crystal hovering in the middle of the pool. Paro took out a two-meter-long spike; the array flag they had been provided with so long ago. Sometimes he dipped it in the water, sometimes he used it to draw runes in the air. With each motion, the mysterious pond rippled a bit, and the energies got more and more condensed in the area as the runes covering the ceiling and walls slowly came alive.

But the pattern was wrong. It followed the schematics Paro had worked on by himself in secret.

A wave of desolation gripped Alvaries heart as she saw Paro slowly stab the flag into the water a few more times. She stepped closer as though she wanted to observe, but her right

tail suddenly shot forward with impossible speed. On its tip was a perfectly black orb, a true miniature black hole that contained endless potential for destruction.

It slammed into the back of her husband before he had a chance to react, and his whole midsection was instantly turned to nothingness as Pathways and Cultivation Core were disintegrated. There wasn't even an explosion as Paro's life foundation was extinguished, the rampant forces sent to the void to never be seen again.

"You knew?" Paro said with a weak voice after looking down at the massive hole where his core should have been.

"I knew," Alvaries sighed as she grabbed the grand flag with her second tail before it dropped into the pond.

Paro was the Array Master and the one who was supposed to finish this part of the task. Alvaries was supposed to scout for warriors sent to impede their task and to protect her husband. However, 40,000 years was a long time. Long enough for her to learn the outs and ins of the array that now surrounded them. Perhaps almost as much as her husband.

Her tail elongated and turned into a blur as she lightly stabbed the array flag with expert precision across a series of spots on the pond, causing a dozen ripples to appear. Paro's meddling was erased as the small waves intersected, forming esoteric fractals which submerged into the depths and superimposed on the hidden prearranged pattern below.

The two sets formed a perfect whole, and the pond turned completely tranquil a moment later.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," Paro coughed as he slumped down on the ground.

"It really was," Alvaries said with red-rimmed eyes as she looked down at the paramour with whom she had shared her life for eons.

But the time had already come, and they both had made their decisions and preparations. It was true what Paro said. They were running out of time, and it looked like both had come to

the same conclusion. Even if things went their way, there weren't enough resources for both to take the next step.

"Revive me if you reach the peak, will you?" Paro smiled as the life left his eyes.

"Of course," Alvaries nodded.

Far away, the trajectory of a Twilight River started to slightly adjust, its transformation so minute that it would be mistaken as a natural fluctuation. But in two years, it would become one of the spears launched at the Heavens themselves.

"Persistent bastards," Abonzo spat as he ate a healing pill before turning toward the leader of their group. "What now?"

Trivorad looked down at the twenty corpses in front of them, natives from both living and undead factions, and then at the vast patch of destruction that stretched almost as far as the eyes could see. The battle had destroyed a fifth of Cork Island, leaving tens of thousands of scorched trees strewn about.

The group of seven could sense a few auras in the distance, but it was obvious those cultivators clearly displayed them to show they weren't an enemy.

"We're done here," Trivorad eventually said. "The Deacon told us to destroy the source node on this island and install the rerouter, but we still have three other spots to cover. These natives were most likely here to stabilize the hidden weakness. There are also indications they are just one of many factions with similar tasks."

"Should we split up?" Vinka ventured.

"No," Trivorad said with a shake of his head. "The Havarok Dynasty has sent over a hundred peak Hegemons into this place according to our intelligence. The Deacon wasn't certain whether their purpose is aligned with our own. The stars were obfuscated, but the patterns leaned toward them working against us. If we split up and encounter their parties, most of us will fall. We were sent here to lend assistance, not to sacrifice ourselves."

"Incoming!" Vinka suddenly shouted, and the group quickly prepared themselves as a storm of miasma roiled forward with

tremendous speed.

A huge section of the island was suddenly shrouded in darkness as a thousand-meter skull peeked out through the thunderstorm.

“Looks like the Radiant Temple has a hand in this game after all,” a jarring voice that sounded like a thousand wails emerged from the skull. “You’ve caused quite the scene.”

“Killing a few miscreants is nothing much,” Abonzo snorted as the air twisted around him.

A moment later, a thousand-meter-tall temple surrounded by a radiant parhelion appeared above their heads. Ethereal chimes echoed from its halls, and the roiling storm of miasma was somewhat pushed back by a glistening starlight.

“Indeed it’s not. So why don’t you enter our little cloud? I’ll properly wake you up and give a miscreant like you a sense of purpose,” another voice laughed from within the storm.

“Enough,” Trivorad said as he turned toward the skull. “You should be a member of Hive Ouro. What is the opinion of the Eidolon on this situation?”

The huge skull was silent for a few seconds, and the group tensed themselves in case of another battle. Even Trivorad was a bit worried after sensing the sinister energies swirling inside the giant head. Hive Ouro alone was not a threat to the Radiant temple, but the Eidolon was a lot more cohesive than the Draugr or the Reavers.

If one Hivemind had vested interests in Twilight Harbor, then it was very possible that one of the four grand hives lent some strength to back them up at a crucial time like this. His souls had been tempered by the Radiant Chapter for 30,000 years, but even he didn’t feel confident against an enemy like this.

“The benefits of an ascension supersede the value of Twilight Harbor,” the voice eventually said. “We can always set up new outposts in the area.”

“So we’re in agreement,” Trivorad said, and the group relaxed as well. “Then we’ll take our leave.”

“Having a similar objective does not mean we belong to the same side,” another voice cackled as two purple suns ignited inside the skull’s eyes. “Your involvement is just an unnecessary complication. The Hive will suffice.”

“War Phalanx,” Trivorad growled as the group all took out a red canister. “It’s either us or them.”

Zac looked at the towering tree in the distance. Even if he wanted to destroy this thing, was it even possible? Its diameter had to be at least five hundred meters, and a spiritual tree like this was no doubt extremely sturdy.

“Some factions might take offense to our task, but the mothertree has been destroyed a few times before,” Catheya shrugged. “It will be back within twenty openings or so.”

“So in twenty thousand years?” Zac asked, really feeling the weight of their actions.

Zac knew it was completely backward, but it somehow felt worse becoming an eco-terrorist and destroying an ancient tree like this, compared to taking out hostile cultivators.

“Wait, it’s not a sapient tree, right?” Zac asked.

“... Not quite?” Catheya eventually said after a much too long pause.

“Great,” Zac muttered. He was about to continue complaining, but he stopped when he saw an enormous fireball slam into a small section of the tree trunk. “Others are attacking it!”

It was a squad of four people who all unleashed one powerful attack after another at the mothertree, and Zac soon spotted more squads just like them. Unfortunately for the four closest cultivators, their efforts didn’t seem very effective. The thick bark on the tree was like impervious armor, and only some small wood chippings fell from the attacks. It would take a lot of work to take down this oversized bastard.

“Looks that way,” Catheya nodded.

“So, do we really need to get involved? Why not let others topple that thing for us?” Zac asked. “Mission complete in either case, right?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know that. I have a specific array I was told to use. Secondly, why give this opportunity to others?” Catheya snorted as she turned toward the World Tree.

Zac didn’t understand what she was talking about first, but his eyes soon widened when he spotted it; a massive ‘**50,000**’ hovering above the tree. It should by all rights be covered by the skyscraper-sized leaves, but it looked like these kinds of things couldn’t be blocked.

Fifty thousand contribution points were even more than what you’d get from forming a Peak Dao Fragment, and more than enough for Zac to lose any moral hang-ups about forest preservation. Even if split between three, it was a massive boon. It would take dozens of life-and-death battles to get the equivalent number of points.

“Do you think there are more places like this in the Twilight Ocean?” Zac slowly asked.

“This tree should be one of the top 3 in the early stretches of the ocean, but there are definitely more of them along the way,” Catheya said with a teasing smile. “Not feeling so glum about our mission any longer? Our path will take us to multiple places like this.”

“Well, I’m just happy to help,” Zac nodded.

“A real gentleman,” Catheya laughed. “Come on, let’s go before someone steals our points.”

There might be a small risk of that happening, but Zac wasn’t so sure whether the mothertree was the prey or the predator as they moved closer. Over a hundred roots suddenly sprung up from the ground behind the group of cultivators who launched the fireball earlier. Two were immediately turned into paste, while another was grievously wounded as she was slammed into the trunk by a lash.

The final member managed to avoid the ambush through an instantaneous movement skill or escape talisman. Seeing his party getting annihilated before they even managed to break through the bark was clearly more than he had signed up for,

and he instantly disappeared into the forest, running for his life.

Still, Zac wasn't overly worried by the tree itself as they snuck closer to the vast trunk. He was currently in his Draugr form, but he was a Hatchetman at heart. Cutting down some branches and roots was something he excelled at. Besides, the putrefying mists from his various skills worked far better on organic things compared to weapons or stone considering they were based on the Seed of Rot.

As for cutting down the tree itself, it was impossible that Catheya didn't have some plan for it.

They made their way toward the mothertree hiding as best as they could, and Zac spotted a total of seven squads on the way. For now, no party seemed interested in fighting with each other. They were all trying different ways to fell the tree and reap the rewards. Of course, if it looked like one party had found a way to cut down the mothertree, then things would probably take a drastic turn.

Eventually, they reached the trunk, and Catheya blanched as the area was suffused in life-attuned energies in addition to the Twilight Energy. The tree almost felt like a Nexus Vein; its energy might not be very profound, but it was seemingly endless. Zac guessed that Catheya's task was to taint this massive reservoir for some reason, and his guess was quickly being confirmed as she took out a two-meter spike that was covered in dense fractals.

It reminded Zac of how he had heard that you could kill a tree simply by driving a copper nail into its trunk, poisoning it from within. Was this something down the same vein? It looked like it, though Catheya clearly wasn't able to simply push it through the thick bark. She had rather erected a circular array around the spike, and it was entering the wood as though it was fusing with it.

But the process was slow, and it clearly didn't go unnoticed as a shudder went through the area. The next moment, Zac heard a humming sound, and this time it was he who blanched after looking up at the distant tree crown.

“Wasps.”

Chapter 707: Mothertree

“How much more?” Zac growled as he was launched into the air by two chains, his axe empowered by a massive jagged edge as he cut apart yet another 2-meter wasp before destroying a large root that aimed for Catheya. “We’ll be overrun sooner or later.”

He wasn’t joking. The only reason there wasn’t a mountain of wasp corpses and destroyed roots around him was the corrosive effect of his domain turning everything to mush. Unfortunately, that meant he was walking around in ankle-deep sludge which was pretty disgusting.

Another wasp was impaled by one of his chains, the corrosive liquid effortlessly digging through its armor plating. There were already five wasps hanging on the chain, forming a gristly warning to the other insects that hovered over their heads. And it actually worked. The domain of **[Deathmark]** almost worked like insect repellent, and together with his warning, most of the wasps targeted the other groups.

Only three groups remained by this point, the others scared away or eradicated by the residents of the tree along with the tree itself. The situation was somewhat stable, but the roots were never-ending. He had just cut one apart, but Zac was forced to dodge a swift swipe the next moment as a five-meter-thick root ripped through the air.

He had tried cutting one like it apart just a minute ago, only to find his edge incapable of cutting more than half the trunk. The slam had been enough to launch him fifty meters into the air and forced him to expand one of his three healing brands.

Varo did what he could to help, but he wasn’t as useful in a protracted siege like this compared to ambushes. He ultimately took a defensive position behind Zac, cutting apart anything that snuck past his rampaging swings.

“Just a few more minutes,” Catheya said as she threw a wink in his direction. “Keep it up, you’re doing great. Very powerful.”

Zac only snorted in annoyance, but he knew she wasn’t just messing around. Her arms were a constant blur as she formed various sigils that helped push the spike further into the tree, and Zac sensed that she might actually be spending more Miasma than he was. And all this was while taking out an impressive number of wasps with the help of her icicles.

Varo occasionally crushed a Miasma Crystal next to her to alleviate the situation, and Zac eventually made a decision. A vast aura field of death spread out with Zac as the core, swallowing all the corpses and Catheya alike. The atmosphere took a drastic turn, and even the pervasive Twilight Energy was pushed away a bit. Obviously, it was the peak mastery **[Field of Despair]**.

Each upgrade had increased the area it could cover, though Zac only used it for the immediate vicinity at the moment. Reaching late mastery in the skill had allowed him to gain a better sense of everyone within the mists, and this sense was even further improved by reaching peak mastery. The skill now expanded his observation abilities to the point that they almost rivaled the omniscience he gained from **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]**.

The weakening effect was strengthened further as well, now being able to fully remove up to 10% of the attributes up to the limits of E-grade Race, 2,500 attribute points. Even Zac would be noticeably impacted by such a loss.

But the real reason for bringing out **[Fields of Despair]** was the improved conversion ratio, where each kill resulted in almost double the refund when corpses were drained. Zac immediately felt a surge of Miasma entering his body, and both Catheya and Varo got to enjoy a weakened version of the boost.

“You know **[Fields of Despair]**? You actually managed to get an Epic F-grade class?” Catheya exclaimed from the side. “I knew my instincts were right when hiring you. **[Fields of**

Despair] is a very sought-after skill among the crusaders, but few can gain it. Any interest in selling it?"

Zac inwardly sighed when he heard Catheya's analysis. This was why he didn't want to show too many of his skills unless necessary. Anytime he exposed something, there was a real risk of divulging even more than he planned.

"And cripple myself for some money?" Zac snorted as he cut off another root before it could slam into the defensive barrier Varo had erected. "No thank you."

"Well, if you change your mind, the Eldritch Archivals are always looking for new Inheritance Crystals," Catheya smiled. "Still, it's pretty odd. That skill is given to commander-archetype classes from what I've heard, a skill to bolster armies. But you don't seem to follow that path at all, you give me the feeling of a surly lone-wolf."

"If you have the energy to chat, why not focus on speeding up that thing?" Zac sighed as he saw another of his spectral henchmen getting ripped apart after destroying a patch of roots. They kept popping up to deal with the wasps, but it was like the mothertree hated them with vigor. It targeted them within seconds of appearing, preventing him from building up a proper army.

"Don't tell me you had a change of heart?" Catheya laughed, ignoring Zac's comment. "No wonder you said you had no ambition to raise an army. Was the burden of command too heavy? Well, being a commander requires you to have faith in the strength of your followers. I think it was the right choice for you, you're the 'I'll do it myself'-kind of guy. That's not bad, mind you. A useless person can't have that mindset and survive."

"For the love of God," Zac muttered as he unleashed his annoyance on the wildlife.

He ignored Catheya's teasing, knowing it was just her latest attempt at trying to extract some more information from him. Unfortunately for her, Zac had lived with a far wiler Demon for over a year, and he was mostly immune to those kinds of attempts by now.

Instead, he focused on his form. The tree was thankfully not really sapient, and it was clearly just lashing out at random in their direction, like someone absentmindedly trying to wave away annoying flies. Gave him enough leeway to try some things out.

Zac pictured himself a harried army defending an outpost, attacked from every direction by ferocious warriors. The attacks were like waves, and the pressure points kept changing, like the army was trying to create a weakness in his defensive line. Zac himself lashed out in retaliatory force, sometimes just defending, sometimes setting out in a raid to clean out problems before they arrived.

He even used his chains to create putrefying traps to stall the enemy lines. He was quickly integrating the various components of his undying toolkit into his path, but he still couldn't find the answer to his envisioned fusion. For now, he could only keep progressing and hope he'd figure something out sooner or later.

The minutes passed, and Zac eventually found a rhythm that lessened his strain significantly. The mothertree was a bit like the golem he fought to open the Dao Repository. It might contain boundless energy, but it didn't use it efficiently. It had a set of actions that it cycled, and Zac only needed to anticipate which it was. As for the wasps, unless a queen made its appearance, they wouldn't be able to change the situation.

A large circular pattern had almost completely formed around the spike, which was over three quarters inserted into the tree by now. Zac estimated it would only take a minute or two before it was completely embedded.

“Stop right now!” a sudden roar echoed out as a large shape appeared among the Cork Trees in the distance.

Zac glanced in the direction of the shout, thinking it was some fool overestimating his own abilities. Their group was the smallest, but there were over 20 cultivators hacking away at the tree. What would this lone warrior do about it? However, when Zac spotted the source, he froze for an instant, almost getting himself gored by a root.

It was a treeman emitting an almost blinding aura. He looked like a king walking among his subjects, as the trees actually bowed slightly in deference where he passed. And it was no wonder. He was definitely cultivating some Dao of Nature, and his accomplishments decidedly eclipsed Zac's Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was roughly three meters tall, and his crown was made up of small green leaves with golden edges. A wheel of living wood hovered behind him, and Zac felt immense spiritual fluctuations from it as well. He guessed it was some sort of Natural Spirit Tool that had an awakened spirit just like **[Verun's Bite]**.

Together with his extremely condensed aura and Dao emissions, it quickly became clear; this was absolutely not some random crab soldier, but a true elite. His estimation was proven right a moment later as a value appeared above his head; **2,500-5,000**.

There was no doubt about it, this guy had two peak fragments at the least, possibly even a Dao Branch. Together with his condensed aura, Zac didn't feel very confident about their prospects.

"There's trouble," Zac said as he saw the man close in on them with fury written all over his face. "This guy is the real deal."

The other groups had clearly come to the same decision, and one party after another disengaged and fled toward the forests. No one was making any real headway on the tree, apart from one group who had managed to cut off roughly fifty meters of wood by unleashing thousands of cuts. Why keep risking their lives now that a Heaven's Chosen had entered the picture?

Cathey frowned as she looked over, but she came to a different decision than the other parties. A storm of miasma gathered around her as a large fortress of pure ice sprung up out of nowhere. It fused with the tree itself to create an impervious barrier radiating a glacial intractability. Four glistening crystals appeared above the ramparts, and Zac was almost blinded by **[Cosmic Gaze]** after seeing how much energy they contained.

Catheya must have sunk half her Miasma into this defensive layer.

“This defense will crumble when the four crystals are extinguished. Help lessen the burden,” she said with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “We don’t need to defeat him, we only need to delay him.”

Zac nodded as two chains pushed him up to the rampant, and he saw that the treant was quickly growing in size. He soon stood over ten meters tall, and the wheel grew to match his size. He gave Zac no further time to prepare as he grabbed the wheel and threw it at the wall with shocking force.

The three pygmies of [**Profane Exponents**] had already appeared behind him, and Zac infused the casket-bearing pygmy with massive amounts of Miasma along with the Fragment of the Coffin as a thick shield appeared in front of the wheel. However, Zac immediately understood there was trouble the moment the wheel clashed with the barrier.

Zac felt the miasma comprising the shield quickly erode and crumble as a shocking verdure spread through his skill like a stream of lava cutting through a block of ice. He tried to infuse the barrier with more of his Dao, but the inevitable was barely delayed as the wheel soon shattered the coffin and continued its flight toward the ice wall.

There was no doubt about it; this was the power of a Dao Branch. There was no way a peak Fragment had this kind of overbearing presence.

A growl escaped Zac’s lips as he jumped out to meet the attack himself. He refused to be overpowered by a simple throw, even if it was empowered by a Dao Branch. He shot forward from the rampant as two of his chains lodged themselves in the ground to stabilize his trajectory, and a sinister jagged arc appeared in front of his edge as he swung at the wheel with everything he had.

Axe and wheel collided, and Zac suddenly felt as though he was submerged in an endless river of leaves. Each of the leaves contained a terrifying amount of life force, steadily purifying their surroundings. Or destroying, if you looked at it

from the perspective of an undead. Thankfully, a good chunk of the momentum in the throw had already been expended, and Zac managed to push back the force as he landed outside the rampart.

His own form quickly grew to five meters as the pitch-black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** enclosed him, and he felt a surge of power in his body as his attributes were boosted by almost 10%. Apart from the improvement to his taunting ability, reaching peak mastery had finally boosted the inherent buff as well, pushing it from 10% to 15% to his Base Attributes.

The boost was limited by the skill's grade though, and it couldn't keep up with Zac's exponential attribute growth in the E-grade. Just like Emily's elemental axes, Zac's constitution had already passed the limit of what the skill could boost. Hopefully, it would be enough to help slow down this mammoth.

The raging cultivator looked slow and clumsy in his colossal tree-like form, but his actual speed indicated a Dexterity on par with Zac's own. He covered the distance in just a few seconds, and the wheel flew back into his hands just as he entered the domains of **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Deathmark]**.

The skills did what they were supposed to do, but it almost felt like they only served to enrage the titanic avatar rather than harm him. He could clearly sense his surroundings just fine even when having his vision limited by **[Deathmark]**, and he looked absolutely infuriated as he saw roots and wasps rot and fall apart as an effect of the corrosive atmosphere.

As for the treeman himself, he was covered in a glowing sheen that rebuffed the corrosive domain from actually touching his body.

“You scoundrels! Do you know what you are doing?!” the treant roared. “This mothertree is the lifeblood of the forest! Murder it and you will harm the whole population!”

The next moment the deathly grip on the surrounding area was instantly ripped apart as a fantastical forest sprung up around him. The scene reminded Zac of his own **[Hatchetman's**

Spirit] a bit, but its power was far beyond his own skill. The trees were like unholy beacons, except they radiated the warmth of life.

There were also thousands of small flower-creatures dancing around, each of them emitting a strong sense of life. The corrosive mists of **[Deathmark]** killed them by the dozens every second, but new ones kept sprouting up from the ground to replace the ones who fell.

Zac felt his **[Fields of Despair]** deactivate in just a second, unable to withstand the purifying effect of the treeman's own domain. His other skill was thankfully not that easy to get rid of as it was continuously emitted from his body, and the first axe wraith silently appeared behind the attacker.

The leaves and corrosive mists swirled as its axe ripped through the air, cutting straight at one of the giant's legs. Zac sensed life-attuned entering the leg just before the collision, and he wasn't surprised to see the thick bark being able to nullify the attack. He still wasn't disappointed though as a section of sinister green runes appeared on the treeman.

However, Zac's elation was quickly doused as a root shot out from the man's leg, instantly destroying the wraith by flooding it with the Dao. The wood on its leg started to rot with speed visible to the naked eye a moment later, but even Zac could tell that the process was too quick. He hadn't used **[Deathmark]** too many times, but he knew that the skill wasn't this powerful.

As expected, the section of the leg that was marked by the green runes fell off the treeman's legs a second later, and they were actually replaced by new roots and bark in just a second. Meanwhile, Zac was assailed by the exuberant domain. He felt some of his buff from **[Vanguard of Undeath]** being nullified by a sense of weakness.

Thankfully the feeling wasn't too strong, since Zac was more resilient to life than normal undead. So what if some life-attuned energy seeped into his body? **[Purity of the Void]** was already fast at work expelling it, since it was considered toxins in his current form.

Unfortunately, Zac wasn't the only one put under pressure by the fantastical domain as roots started climbing up the icy ramparts, and Zac saw one of the hovering crystals shrink with a speed visible to the naked eye.

Even if Zac wasn't operating under the oppression of the treeman's domain, he still wasn't really a match to the cultivator in front of him. The treeman was clearly of the same opinion as he ignored Zac and instead flashed toward the ice wall. A huge shockwave spread out as he straight up used himself as a battering ram, and two of the ice crystals immediately shattered in response.

An enormous root from the mothertree itself emerged from the ground the next moment, and it actually looked like the treeman was able to communicate with it. He ordered it to slam into the wall as well, destroying yet another icy crystal before Zac even had a chance to react. Less than a fraction had passed, yet three-quarters of Catheya's defenses were already exhausted.

"Keep him away!" a frantic shout came from inside as a glacial tide shot out toward the treant.

Zac grit his teeth as the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward and latched around the giant's arms and torso. He instantly grabbed the four chains next and pulled with all the force he could muster. The treant was definitely a Heaven's Chosen with an attribute pool and Dao above Zac's own, but the power contained in Zac's pull couldn't be ignored.

The treeman was lifted off his feet and thrown back a few meters, causing him to look over at Zac with shock.

"You'll have to go through me first, buddy," Zac said as he cracked his neck.

He wasn't as confident as he let on, but Zac was still slowly being filled with expectation as he looked at the hulking powerhouse in front of him. He had discovered his Evolutionary Stance in a pitched battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker a few months ago.

Wasn't this big guy the perfect target to take the same step in his current form?

Chapter 708: Turn of the Seasons

“Why do you insist on profaning nature like this?” the treant asked as he destroyed an axe wraith with a wave, his irate voice sounding like crackling thunder. “Those points will not be enough to change anything.”

“Well, you never know,” Zac said as he stomped down on the ground, causing the familiar cage of **[Profane Seal]** to spring up and trap them both inside.

“I’ll teach you Draugr to respect nature. She’s your mother as well!” the treant shouted before he raised his arms. “Solstice!”

The enormous wheel once more rose behind the treant’s back, and Zac felt a shudder as it turned 90 degrees. The feeling of exuberant verdure around him was instantly exchanged by sweltering heat where he was being constantly blasted by an angry sun. The trees in the fantastical forest changed, and they started to bear fruits that all turned into 2-meter warriors that radiated the might of strong middle E-grade fighters.

It felt like his sealing fortress had turned into a greenhouse, but the important thing was that it had sealed off the glacial fortifications behind him. Zac noticed that an ice-crystal was already reforming, though its speed was pretty slow. Of course, Zac had seen just how much pure force the treant could exert, and he knew that his F-grade trap wouldn’t last more than a hit or two.

Zac shot toward the treant before he had the chance to unleash any more skills. He needed to turn this into a dogfight and prevent the activation of any finishers. If this guy had some skill like **[Arcadia’s Judgement]**, he’d be able to take out both him and Catheya simultaneously. Twenty thick chains

shot toward the treeman as well, desperately trying to bind him in place.

Unfortunately, even the strengthened chains the peak mastery of **[Profane Seal]** provided weren't enough to withstand the aura blasting out from the enemy. They were quickly covered in a green moss that made them lose their structural integrity, forcing Zac to spend Miasma to form new ones. Zac immediately changed his command to send most of the chains toward the wood puppets, while only using a few to harass the main target.

A furious war had already erupted inside the cage, with new wraiths and wood puppets appearing every second.

[Deathmark] was burning a large amount of energy at the moment, but the same had to be true for the treeman's skill. Zac was happy to keep wasting energy, and he let the skill run while he fought the treeman.

A herculean jump put Zac in front of the even larger treant, and his bardiche clove through the air with furious momentum as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot toward the treant's hand that was grabbing for the Spirit Tool wheel. The titanic treeman was not so easily suppressed though, and he formed a thick layer of bark on his forearm like a protective bracer to block out Zac's swing.

Simultaneously, he snatched the chains of **[Love's Bond]** with lightning-quick motion and hurled Zac away like a piece of garbage. Zac was flung across the cage, but just before hitting the cage walls, he turned into a puff of smoke. It was **[Abyssal Phase]** activating in the nick of time, though Zac shortened the cast time by 20% by infusing the final part with **[Force of the Void]**.

He shot back through the arena, ignoring the blistering heat that was even more palpable in his intangible form. Zac was once more in front of the living tree before he even had the chance to take two steps toward Catheya. Four chains shot toward the treant's eyes as a blue fire spread across his left leg.

Both Zac and a recently spawned wraith targeted the burning section, and huge chunks of wood were cut loose as the treant

hurriedly avoided the chains threatening to blind him. Zac wanted to follow up with another strike, but dozens of spearlike trees suddenly sprung up around where he stood, forcing him to scramble out of the way.

He realized that it was a few of those weird pixies that had burrowed into the ground and transformed into weaponized trees. He had ignored those things until now, but it looked like they were yet another threat to him. Zac swung his axe back and forth in wide arcs to cut the roots apart, but they were far harder compared to the much larger roots of the motheree.

Soon enough, Zac found himself bloodied and pushed back over fifty meters by an ever-expanding forest, and the treant was already lumbering toward the edge of the cage again. The wound on the treeman's leg was fast recovering, and he grabbed the wheel in his hand, clearly intent on breaking apart the cage once and for all.

Zac immediately rushed forward to intercept, but he knew that he would have to change his tactics fast. His previous strikes were meant to take him down in a similar fashion he took down the blacksmith golem. Cripple limbs and then take him out. Unfortunately, this treeman was not only extremely powerful, but he also seemed to be a Vitality cultivator.

The good thing was that his attacks weren't overly powerful. The domain he released was swelting but manageable. The wood puppets were powerful, but they were restrained by **[Deathmark]** and **[Profane Seal]**. The wooden spikes had huge potential for large-scale destruction, but they wouldn't be able to take him out.

The biggest risk was the brute force in the treeman's swings along with his hidden cards. As long as he could restrain those, then Zac would at least complete his job. He soon reached the giant once more, but instead of forcibly attacking with a huge swing, he dragged himself to the side with the help of **[Love's Bond]**, letting the other chains trail behind.

Suddenly he was behind the treant, and three chains wound around one of the treeman's feet as Zac stomped down on the ground and pulled. The treeman grunted in annoyance as he

swung the massive wheel in a wide arc to smash Zac, but a coffin-formed barrier appeared before the swing even had started, preventing the strike from generating any momentum.

The treeman still managed to break through just a moment later, but Zac had already jumped up and swung his axe at the target's neck by that time. A dozen terrifying branches, each one containing enough power to cause cracks in space, shot out from the treeman's crown to intercept. However, Zac's trajectory had already changed again thanks to his chains pulling him to safety.

Meanwhile, two chains of **[Profane seal]** interlinked and formed a thick fetter as they slammed into one of the treeman's feet, causing him to stumble a bit. Zac along with his skills and chains were anywhere and everywhere, like a swarm of flies around a large predator. No strike was aimed to kill. They were rather aimed at ruining tempo and stealing momentum.

The treeman was quickly becoming frustrated, and he forcibly swung the enormous wheel into the ground, causing a tremendous explosion that kicked up a storm inside the cage. Cracks spread across the walls and towers of **[Profane Seal]**, but they slowly started to heal as there was no follow-up. Zac had blocked out the shockwave by jumping into the air and shielding himself with **[Profane Exponents]**, and he was already back on the target before the treant finished his attack.

Zac could feel that he was onto something as his attacks started to slowly transform.

From the moment the first seeds of life appeared in the universe, they started their endless struggle against their surroundings: evolution. But there was one more struggle that was born the very moment life was introduced to the cosmos; the struggle against death itself. Warriors struggled and risked their lives, all for the sake of power, wealth, and longevity.

However, even the supreme beings at the peak of the pyramid had one enemy they couldn't beat the vicissitudes of time.

Aging and its inevitable withering were ever-present and relentless, like a specter looming over the shoulder. No matter

whether they fought or fled, it would be there, slowly squeezing the last ember of resistance from their body. The rot would come for even the greatest of Emperors. Eventually, there was nothingness. Finality.

Zac soon looked at the towering treant as a representation of the living trying to delay the inevitable. The special Draugr sight that he barely utilized until now was fast becoming the key that showed how life-force constantly surged through the enemy's body. Combined with his **[Cosmic Gaze]** he saw everything he needed to see to follow this new path.

Any time the giant tried to empower one of his skill runes, Zac was already there. An axe stabbed into his leg from behind and infused it with a corrosive rune. A chain shot toward a vulnerable spot to force a response. Zac himself unleashing a massive swing that even the treant would have to deal with.

Each little clash would mark the enemy for death and close another avenue of turning things around. This was not some sort of restriction of a skill, it was restriction through tempo. In fact, Zac's actions were gradually slowing down compared to the frantic pace he kept just a few seconds ago. Death never rushed, it was slow and methodical; inescapable.

This was not the ruthless war of the jungle, but the endless war all beings fought against themselves. One represented change, the other was stillness. There was no need to finish the war, as death had all the time in the world. He only needed to keep up the pressure, to douse any hope of resurgence. Zac felt as though he was becoming one with his path once more, but nothing lasted forever.

The treeman was ultimately just too powerful. Had this been a weaker target they would have been locked down and ground down until only a rotten pile remained, but this was a Vitality-based cultivator with access Dao Branch. It was impossible for Zac to whittle him down. Just delaying him for just below a minute without using his Remnants was already a miracle.

But things were coming to an end. The giant was running out of patience, and Zac started to sense some burgeoning killing intent for the first time during the battle. This was something

he had realized from the start; this giant was actually quite gentle. He hadn't really launched any true killing blows at Zac, at least not until now. The treeman was taking off the kiddie gloves.

Even worse, it looked like the companions of the treant were catching up since Zac could sense two strong beacons of life force rapidly closing in.

A green 50-meter-tall rune appeared in the air as the treeman roared with frustration, and Zac suddenly felt like he had been hit by a train as he was flung away and slammed into the wall of **[Profane Seal]** on the other side of the cage. Cracks spread across the whole cage from the immense aura of the rune, and its intensity just kept growing.

Zac tried to rush back, but a sea of roots threatened to swallow him. It was like nature's rage had been unleashed on the area, in an even more palpable way compared to his **[Nature's Punishment]**. Life was running amok, and Zac did all he could to delay the inevitable. But his cage was like a water balloon filled with a small ocean; it simply couldn't contain this kind of an attack and it soon broke apart.

"I can't hold him, and more are coming!" Zac roared.

The slithering roots looked like a sea of snakes with the treant in the middle, and Zac was forced up on the icy ramparts for protection. A second crystal had regrown while Zac delayed, but it had already been broken apart from the pressure. Suddenly, Zac felt a pang of danger, and a burning orb shot toward the fortifications.

In its heart was the wooden wheel of the treant, but it was like he had turned it into a sun as it blazed with terrifying heat. Zac had already understood that the treeman was cultivating some sort of class and Dao related to the four seasons, and he guessed that each season had its own strength. Spring and Summer were most likely the most efficient season against the undead, while the other two were related to death and decay, making them unsuitable to fight the unliving.

In either case, a raging inferno like the one that was coming their way was definitely enough to smash the fortifications in

one go. One coffin barrier after another appeared to block the sun's approach, but they were simply crushed one by one. This time it wasn't just a simple Dao-empowered Spirit Tool. There was an E-grade skill empowering the attack as well.

Zac was soon out of options, and the black shroud of the third pygmy shot forward and enclosed the incoming attack. But it felt like Zac was trying to push a mountain with his bare hands, and he knew that there was simply no way to transport it far away like he did during the last fight. He only managed to adjust the attack's angle, making the wheel slam into the ground just in front of the icy wall.

It was like a bomb had gone off, and both roots and wall were disintegrated as Zac was flung into the trunk of the mothertree, landing just a few meters away from Catheya and her array. The spike was almost completely inserted by now, with less than a foot remaining.

"Seize the moment," Catheya shouted. "Just one more attack and we're done."

She pointed her hand toward the treant next, and a shocking burst of cold blasted out from a blue gem on her bracelet. The smoldering fire that was spreading was quickly quenched, and thousands of incoming roots were chilled and drastically slowed.

Darkness spread across thousands of meters in each direction as a tunnel of destruction shot straight toward the treeman. It was Varo who unleashed a stab that contained tremendous might. It was like he pierced space itself for hundreds of meters, and innumerable roots were ripped apart in an instant.

Even the treant himself was suddenly afflicted with a deep scar as he stumbled backward.

Zac saw the opportunity and he rushed forward with all speed he could muster. Energy surged into his body as two thick streams of Mental energy entwined before they moved to the huge jagged edge that was fast forming. Dao from the hanging coffin in his mind seeped into one of the spirit streams, and his Dao Avatar representing his Fragment of the Axe infused the second.

The black jagged edge of [**Gorehew**] suddenly transformed a bit, with sharp barbs appearing across the jagged edge. It radiated a terrifying aura as well, a mix of destruction and desolation.

“Watch out!” a scream echoed out from the distance, but it was too late.

The treeman barely had time to slightly tilt his body and erect a few layers of bark before the Dao-braided edge cut into his body, leaving a terrifying wound behind. The scar ran for over two meters from his shoulders down to his midriff, and the wound already reeked of rot. The treant wailed and fell over, but Zac barely had time to register the strike before he was forced away by a blood-colored root.

It was one of the two followers who had almost caught up, and she radiated a shocking killing intent that far eclipsed her companion's. If the original treant was mildly upset about Zac and Catheya messing with the mothertree, then this new arrival was ready to enter a deathmatch. Her whiplike root reeked of blood, and she even eclipsed Zac's own killing intent.

Zac barely managed to avoid the strike with the help of [**Love's Bond**], the treant had already reached her leader by that time. Luckily for Zac, she seemed more occupied with treating the gristly wound of her companion than dealing with him, and he immediately rushed toward the mothertree. He had a pretty good understanding of the situation.

The powerful treant was probably a talented but sheltered scion, and the two followers were enforcers sent into the trial by his family to help him out. They were clearly ready to kill from the get-go, and they had definitely tasted blood before.

“Time to go,” Zac wheezed the moment he reached Catheya who was still forming a series of seals with her hands.

“Not yet,” she said as she tried to complete the process. “I just nee-“

She didn't get any further as a coffin-shaped shield slammed into the head of the spike with enough force to cause the

whole mothertree to shudder. It was Zac who had turned **[Love's Bond]** into its defensive form and decisively used it as a hammer to push the spike the rest of the way.

“There, done,” Zac grunted. “Time to go.”

Chapter 709: Agent of Chaos

Catheya blankly looked back and forth between Zac and the firmly embedded nail that soon disappeared, clearly shocked at having her work being finished so crudely.

“You...!” Catheya stuttered, but she quickly regained her bearings. “Fine, it should still work. What a brute, so impatient.”

She waved her hand and a blinding snowstorm suddenly spread out from their location, and Varo followed up with his shroud of darkness. Catheya then gripped both his and Varo’s hands, and Zac felt his surroundings lurch. The next moment they were thousands of meters away, hidden among the normal Cork Trees.

Catheya hurriedly took out an array disk from her Spatial Ring, and it immediately started to emit soothing ripples into the surroundings as they started running. Zac felt a slight pressure on his mind a moment later, and he realized that someone was scanning the area. Thankfully, the pressure soon moved, no doubt thanks to the array Catheya had taken out.

“It passed us by,” Catheya whispered, her mouth crooking upward as she looked at Zac. “You really got the job done. Though I might deduct some style points for being so crude with the array.”

“You can’t hold it against me. That guy was way too strong, and his helpers had arrived,” Zac muttered with some helplessness. “We only succeeded at all since he wasn’t willing to go all-out at the start.”

“Don’t worry, you went above and beyond what could be expected,” Catheya laughed. “You were quite impressive. Your skillset is a bit disjointed, but you have clearly found a path of your own. I’m a bit jealous.”

Zac snorted, not forgetting to keep vigil of the surroundings as they escaped in the same direction they came from. All in all, he was pretty happy with the outcome as well. He didn't manage to complete his combat style, but its framework was already formed. Zac had thought it would take months, but fighting one powerhouse could save a lot of time, it looks like.

Now he just needed to keep sharpening it against opponents, hopefully ones not as unkillable, or as gentle, as the treeman.

The trio kept running for another hour, avoiding any cultivator groups thanks to Catheya's uncanny senses. However, they stopped when they heard an extremely loud thunder that reached all the way to their bones. The group looked to the sky, but there was nothing but the occasional scattered cloud blocking an otherwise clear sky.

Catheya's eyes lit up, and she turned around toward where they came from. Zac followed suit, just in time to see the whole mother tree topple over with a deafening crash.

Thousands of trees were pushed to the ground from the shockwave, and a storm of life-attuned energies reached for the sky as Zac and the other two were thrown off their feet.

The scene was almost blinding to Zac with his abyssal eyes, and it reminded him of the incursion pillars. The pillar didn't actually disappear either, but it rather kept spewing out energy as though the tree had been a stopper to an underground geyser of pure life. It looked like the spike had worked as intended, though it took some time for it to finish the job.

Zac had opened his Ladder screen a couple of times over the past hour, but he was a lot more hopeful this time around.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 39,746 Rank: 7,541. Value: 100-250.]

His contribution points had made a tremendous leap, increasing by almost five times thanks to getting roughly half of the contribution for felling the tree. Zac didn't know how the System calculated contribution, but he felt it was fair enough. He guessed that Varo only got a few percent while Catheya took the rest. It was great news since it proved that Zac didn't lose out even if he only acted as a meat shield.

The sudden boost had pushed him all the way to the top 10,000, which was a huge improvement since he had steadily dropped to the 300,000th spot as all the participants entered. It was impossible to make any exact assumptions since there were so many ways to gain contribution, but he guessed that there were at least 6,000 people who possessed a Life-or-Death Dao Branch in this trial.

The other ones ahead of him most likely had a combination of forming a Peak Dao Fragment along with points from slaughter and destruction.

“Isn’t that something? I wasn’t holding out much hope for the trial, but perhaps I’ll be pleasantly surprised,” Catheya smiled before she turned away from the fallen tree.

Zac understood what she was talking about. He had observed his employer over the past fights and he could make deductions by now. She most likely had two Daos, with the main one being related to ice. She had also used a death-attuned Dao a few times, mostly while tinkering with the corpses she had collected during the trial.

He had sensed that the terrifying ice flower she used to take out two ambushers was imbued with a braid of the two as well, with ice being the leader.

Her current bounty was 100-250, but Zac estimated that she was in the lower span of the range while he was in the upper part. That didn’t make her weak, but rather that her main focus wasn’t valued by the “Tapestry of Twilight”. It was possible there were many other powerful warriors out there in a similar situation; holding powerful Daos that weren’t related to Life or Death.

“So, any guesses why we did this? I mean topple the tree specifically,” Zac finally asked. “Was it to release all that life energy?”

“I’m guessing it has something to do with the living pulse,” Catheya eventually said after some thought. “The mothertree doesn’t seem to have much value. Its wood is pretty durable, but it’s not a treasure-wood.”

“Then what?”

“If I had to guess, I’d venture the tree was a node in an enormous natural formation spanning either a part of the Twilight Ocean, or even the whole thing. We’re either modifying or destroying that formation by hitting some of the nodes,” Catheya said. “And don’t ask me why, I have no idea.”

“Won’t that guy or someone else just fix it now that we’re gone?” Zac curiously asked.

“Perhaps, but does it really matter?” Catheya grinned. “We finished our job. If someone wants to undo the damage we caused, what do I care? Besides, that guy is powerful, but I don’t think he has the means to revert our actions. The tree falling most likely set off a chain reaction that is hard to stem.”

“There’s quite some distance from the peak,” Zac muttered. “I couldn’t even hurt him, and we barely delayed him a minute.”

“Why are you complaining? You know who that was?” Catheya chortled. “It was Yanub Mettleleaf, one of the top E-grade warriors in the whole Twilight Harbor. We’re lucky it wasn’t some life-or-death battle, and rather that he simply was upset about us harming the mothertree. We’re also pretty lucky it was a young treant who arrived rather than a squad of killers. A lot of the treemen are pacifists, and not that skilled in killing arts. Of course, that’s until you get them properly enraged.”

Zac wasn’t surprised to hear the treant was someone famous considering the power he unleashed by the end. Furthermore, he actually recognized the name from the information missives he had prepared. Yanub was ranked in the top thousand among the hundreds of millions of E-grade warriors in Twilight Harbor. He was over three hundred years old as well, and the consensus was that he had delayed his evolution almost a century to participate in this Twilight Ascent.

Such an action would rob most human cultivators of their momentum, but treemen could simply take root and go semi-comatose. They barely made any progress in cultivation that way, but their aging was drastically slowed as well. It was

almost like entering a time dilation zone that sped time up rather than slowed it down.

Furthermore, those listings weren't too accurate, as the exact strength of all those peak characters was unknown, especially this close to a Twilight Ascent. Yanub might barely be in the top 5000, or he might be aiming for a top 100 spot. It was hard to tell for Zac who hadn't encountered too many elites at the peak of E-grade.

"How would you rank someone like that in this trial?" Zac curiously asked.

"He wasn't some peak character," Catheya slowly said. "He's a second seed talent who most likely has mostly exhausted his potential for the E-grade. In Twilight Harbor he might be considered a first seed due to having formed a Dao Branch, but I doubt it. His great power mostly comes from time rather than talent. I'd say he has a good shot at top 1000, even 500 if his experiences sharpen him a bit."

"Seeds?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Just a way to categorize potential. A second seed could be seen as one of the ten most talented cultivators of a generation. A first seed cultivator is someone who only appears once every few generations. Above that is the Heaven's Chosen, extreme talents who might only appear once every thousand generations in a clan," Catheya said. "These kinds of talents are often eligible for unique stipends and opportunities from the Empires they belong to."

"Alright," Zac nodded, but he frowned when Catheya stared at him expectantly. "... Thank you?"

"What thank you!" Catheya spat with annoyance. "Aren't you going to ask what seed I am?!"

Zac looked at Catheya for a few seconds as they kept running. "Second seed perhaps?"

"Well, whatever," Catheya huffed, which caused Zac to smile a bit since he felt he had hit bullseye. "We're here."

Zac looked around in confusion, but it was just the same river they had run along for the past ten minutes. He glanced at

Catheya quizzically, but she just shot him a grimace before jumping into the waters. Varo was right on her heels, and Zac eventually followed suit. Zac soon found Catheya swimming toward a dense patch of seaweed, and he realized there was a hard-to-spot tunnel behind a boulder.

They swam inside, and the waters were soon replaced by a dry underground cave. It just looked like a decent hideout, but Catheya took out another array disk and put it against the wall, causing another entrance to emerge.

“A secret shipyard, there are thousands spread throughout the island,” Catheya explained as they reached a large well-lit cave. “This one was created by an elder of the Eldritch Archivals a long time ago. The undead are always outnumbered in this place, and she figured she’d be safer when hiding beneath a life-stream.”

In the middle, the huge tree trunk of the cork tree was placed on a few beams. Its crown was already cut off and thrown to the side, and there were three small mountains of wood chippings to indicate the hollowing-out were well underway.

Zac couldn’t see Yod and Sharpo, but judging from the sawdust that kept being thrown out from a hatch in the trunk, he guessed they were fast at work hollowing the thing out. Qirai was instead holding a massive brush, and she was coating the coarse bark in some unknown black tar that held a strong and refreshing aroma of death.

“Oh, Mistress!” Qirai exclaimed when she saw the trio enter the shipyard, and two heads soon emerged from within the trunk. “Is it done? We felt an earthquake just before.”

“It’s done,” Catheya nodded. “How are things going here?”

“It’s not too bad. We just can’t exert too much force on the wood without risking forming hidden cracks,” Qirai said. “It’ll be another hour or two.”

“Good job,” Catheya nodded before she imprinted some information into a crystal and turned to Zac. “These are the interior plans. Your sections are marked and you can change them as you wish as long as you don’t weaken the structural

integrity. Oh, and don't use your putrefying abilities to dig, I don't want our ship to turn into a rotten piece of scrap in two days."

Zac snorted before he jumped into the enormous trunk. He was pretty anxious to leave this place after the ruckus they caused, and if he needed to become a carpenter to make that happen, then so be it. The two had made some decent progress so far, but how could they compare to a Hatchetman? Zac's arm turned into a blur as huge shavings were cut off around him.

The wood was pretty strong, but it was nothing to even **[Rakan's Roar]** when it was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe. One room after another was created with speed visible to the naked eye, each one crafted with pinpoint precision. Zac might not be able to craft things with fractals, but it wasn't anything difficult to cut out things following a map.

Qirai had thought it would take up to two hours to finish the preparations inside, but through Zac's effort, the interiors were done in less than thirty minutes. Sharpo and Yod had even decided to get out of his way and instead opted to help Qirai coat the hull. Soon enough it was all done, at which point Catheya produced a massive sheet of fabric.

It was covered in thousands and thousands of crystals and fractals, and Zac looked on with interest as she spread it across the vessel. Qirai, Yod and Zac eventually helped lift the whole tree, and Varo and Catheya finished the wrap to completely enclose the trunk. Catheya jumped inside the submersible a moment later, no doubt to install the inner components of the array.

The group waited for another 20 minutes, at which point they finally sensed the array come to life. The huge tarp changed color to look just like the pitch-black coating before it melded with the wood itself. Left behind were only inscribed patterns and embedded crystals on the bark.

The transformation wasn't done there, as the vessel shrunk to just a third of its original size, no doubt to make it more durable and harder to spot. He didn't know if there was a spatial array among the large number of fractals, but even if

there were none, he knew the vessel wouldn't be cramped. He had hollowed out most of the rooms, and he knew that thirty people would comfortably fit inside even after the ship shrunk, let alone six.

"Impressive," Zac muttered.

"Our mistress has her means," Qirai proudly said to the side. "Come, make yourself useful and help carry this thing to the dock."

The dock was a large pool at the back end of the cave, and they simply threw their new vessel into the waters to make sure it wasn't leaking. Everything looked fine, and a minute later the whole group had boarded as the ship sailed at the bottom of the river, heading for the closest outlet into the Twilight Ocean.

The group, except Varo who was off somewhere steering the submarine, sat in a meeting hall, and most looked a lot more comfortable compared to before. The coating alone helped keep out some of the life attunement, and the purity array was already up and running as well, with Qirai holding the black orb that was its core.

"There we go, everything went according to plan," Catheya smiled.

"What's our next step?" Zac asked.

"There are three more places we need to visit on the way to the Life-Death Pearls. We will make use of the Living Pulse for speed between these spots, after which we'll head for the location of the pearls," Catheya explained.

"What about all the treasures around us?" Sharpo asked.

"We're still in the outer parts of the Twilight Ocean. Treasures are sparse, and chances of finding something good are pretty low. This vessel does have some scanning capabilities though, and we will stop if we spot something interesting. Otherwise, we'll proceed at full speed toward richer waters," Catheya said.

Sharpo looked a bit disappointed, no doubt hoping to make use of the safety of the group to find some more troves. Zac was

more than fine with the current plan though. If anything, he wanted to head toward the deeper waters as soon as possible. The quicker he could get his hands on the life-death pearls, the quicker he could improve his Daos and move on toward his other goals.

In fact, he wanted to split off from the group as quickly as possible. Hanging around Catheya with her hidden goals was asking for trouble. This time it worked out fine with the Mettleleaf guy, to the point that Zac even gained some insights. But who knew who'd crop up the next time?

Also, the 'helpful' purification arrays that she had erected in this vessel actually did more harm than good for his cultivation.

The arrays were turning a part of the Twilight Energy into normal Miasma, which did nothing for him since he wasn't a cultivator. Twilight Energy had the odd ability to burrow into people whether they liked it or not, which was what allowed his soul and **[Void Heart]** to continuously absorb the energies.

The meeting went on for a few more minutes until Varo's voice echoed out through a speaker.

"We have left Cork Island."

"Alright," Catheya smiled. "Everyone is free for now. Remember the rolling schedule for the purification array. Each member's chambers have been equipped with a daughter node. Use that one to empower the Array when it's your turn."

Finally, things had calmed down, and the fifty-meter long tree trunk shot through the depths, its advance powered both by the arrays and the nearby stream cutting through the ocean. Two weeks passed without much happening until they closed in on a cave called the Divine Grotto.

It wasn't quite as impressive as it sounded though. The cave was just a mine that had a lot of life-attuned spiritual metals. No one in the party cared about those kinds of things even if there was a small chance of finding very valuable metals in the depths of the tunnels. It wasn't that people didn't like money, but rather that the Divine Grotto would soon quickly fill up

with living cultivators looking for a relatively safe place to gather some wealth.

But the group still entered after stowing away the submersible. Three hours later they emerged again, swimming for their lives. This time their assailants weren't Dreamers, but rather a few thousand crab-like creatures that didn't take kindly to Catheya installing a weird gathering array that started drawing miasma into the whole grotto.

There was even a massive Half-Step D-grade boss in the mix, which forced everyone to throw out a series of defensive barriers to block the exit long enough to summon the submersible and escape. Zac wasn't certain what would happen to the Divine Grotto after their sabotage, but he guessed that the Divine Materials wouldn't be quite as divine after a year or two.

After that, it was on to the next one of Catheya's targets, and Zac felt he was fast becoming an agent of chaos.

Chapter 710: Detour

The damage caused by their actions was not readily apparent, but Zac believed things would eventually reach a tipping point. Perhaps the Living Pulse would be gone by the time they were done unless someone stopped them. But ultimately, Zac didn't care too much. Messing with the Divine Grotto had provided another 8,000 Contribution Points, so their actions were clearly sanctioned by the System.

Zac sat in his private compartment, currently busy powering the purification array. Running the array for hours on end wasn't too taxing, but it was boring. It was impossible to enter a meditative state when he constantly had to maintain the array, and there wasn't much else to do either. He could only go over various missives on the Twilight Ocean to pass the time, but he had read them cover to cover over a dozen times by now.

He had pretty much memorized all the fixed locations in the missives, but more than half of the locations and dangers were new things that the System added between generations, and this was especially true for the Twilight Chasm. Being completely prepared was a fool's hope.

Finally, his time was up, and he took his hand away from the array. Zac felt life-attuned energies quickly spread through his chambers, but they were soon pushed away again as the air gained another death-aspected Dao instead of his Fragment of the Coffin. It was Yod who had started channeling the array, taking the next shift.

The purification couldn't keep all the life energies away in the ship, especially not this close to the Life Pulse, but it did lessen the strain the others felt. As for Zac, his mental ocean was still far from saturated, and he'd be able to remain unaffected for a long time.

However, Zac had noticed that the speed his **[Void Heart]** had to work had increased by a noticeable margin, now beating once every five minutes compared to the once every ten back at the starting continent. That meant the energy density was roughly double now that they had entered the middle reaches of the Trial. He wasn't sure it would be able to deal with all the energy by the point they reached the inner parts of the ocean.

Zac took a deep breath, feeling that it was finally time. He had spent the past two weeks going over the insights he gained during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf, trying to integrate his new stance with his insights into the Dao of the Axe.

He restored his mental energy with Soul Crystals for an hour before he took out two small boxes from his Spatial Ring, each of them containing a Dao Treasure. Zac stabilized his mind for a few more minutes before he ate the first one. A surge of energy entered his body, and it circulated a round through his pathways before it shot toward his mind.

The hidden node **[Spiritual Void]** immediately woke up and started absorbing the delectable energies, but Zac forcibly stilled it as he pushed the energies toward the avatar of himself. The avatar immediately stood up on top of his soul core, and he started swinging his copy of **[Verun's Bite]** in a series of attacks.

Some of the swings were quick and unfathomable whereas others were powerful and overbearing like a battalion of heavy cavalry descending upon an unsuspecting enemy. Some felt like they contained world-ending force while empty, whereas others looked average but had the power to slay powerful generals.

This was the insight that Zac had started work toward for some time. He was walking down the path of war, and war was everchanging. His axe needed to be the same, especially now that he was forming two very different combat stances. Zac had found himself on the losing end against weaker enemies on multiple occasions, and it was usually because he used his weapon like a brute.

Certainly, the axe was ultimately not a weapon as versatile as the sword, but it didn't mean it was simple. As he had started refining his paths, he realized there were endless variations and permutations to even a seemingly crude weapon as the axe. He wanted to shed his rigidity in favor of flexibility, to become as everchanging and unpredictable as the tides of war.

That didn't mean he was heading toward a Dexterity-based fighting style from a Strength-based one. But one of the goals of a Strength-based Warrior should always be to constantly refine themselves and figure out how to make their strikes land. How to catch the wily rangers, how to find the weakness in the guardian's armor, how to fell the undying ones in one fell blow.

Strength was the basis of victory and survival in his Evolutionary Stance, and without enough strength, his Inexorable Stance would be useless. Who would allow themselves to be restrained if they could simply power through and break his tempo like Yanub eventually did?

Scenes of his recent battles flashed by his hand, and a path was slowly forming. However, Zac frowned when he sensed his inspiration suddenly turn hollow, like he was just daydreaming rather than pondering his Dao. He immediately ate the second fruit, and he once more found himself immersed in the feeling of communicating with the heavens.

Finally, it felt like something blurred became focused, like something snapping into place. Zac opened his eyes a moment later, and a smile spread across his face as he opened his Dao Screen.

Fragment of the Axe (Peak): All attributes +40, Strength +1110, Dexterity +700, Endurance +30, Wisdom +130. Effectiveness of Strength +20%.

Zac looked at the result with a grin. It was a long time coming, but it didn't make it less satisfying. His boost from gaining 8 levels back in the Twilight Harbor had been substantial, but it ultimately couldn't compare to a Dao Breakthrough at his stage. A level provided roughly 350 attributes now that he was

in the Middle E-grade, but a Dao evolution provided over 2,200 attribute points thanks to his massive multipliers.

It was also a welcome change to see the Fragment of the Axe add some extra Dexterity. He had essentially been forced to continuously pour his free points into Dexterity to scale it with his other attributes, but this would give him a breather to focus on either pushing his Strength to even greater heights or work on his survivability.

No one wanted to die, but Zac leaned toward putting points into Strength for a while. He still had two Dao Fragments waiting to be upgraded as soon as he got his hands on the Life-Death Pearls. Each of them would provide a big boost to his survivability, making it unnecessary to waste his free points there.

Zac opened his Ladder as well, but he sighed and closed the screen after seeing he hadn't gained any Contribution Points for evolving the Dao Fragment. It was expected, but he had held out some hopes he'd at least get a consolation prize.

He closed his eyes again and started observing his Dao Avatar, but Zac only got a few minutes to get acquainted with the evolved Fragment before he heard a chime. He opened his eyes and shot a querying glance at the door leading out to the communal area. Someone was standing outside, and Zac got up with a grunt and crossed his living room.

It wasn't too big, just forty square meters, but it would be considered an extremely luxurious suite on any cruiser back on earth. Catheya hadn't prepared any furniture, so Zac had simply thrown out some random things he had lying around, making the interiors look a bit sparse and discordant.

Zac's favorite feature was a "window" that covered half his outer wall. It was actually an array that connected to the patterns outside, and it gave Zac a grand view of the outsides. Sometimes it was just hazy waters, but at other times there were beautiful corals or schools of fish flashing by. Right now it was turned off though, as Zac didn't want to be disturbed during his breakthrough.

“It’s you,” Zac said as he opened the outer door, and he wasn’t surprised to see that it was Catheya who had arrived. “Come in.”

“Congratulations are in order,” she smiled as she sat down at the table and activated the window array.

“Were you spying on me?” Zac said with a slight frown as he sat down opposite her.

“Hardly,” Catheya laughed as she took out a decanter of wine and two glasses. “I could feel your breakthrough through the door. A weapon-based fragment, no?”

“Axe,” Zac shrugged as he took a swig of the wine. “So, what brings you here?”

“What a boorish fellow. A beautiful girl comes to your chambers and you scrunch up your brows like you’ve been asked to lend money to a stranger,” she sighed. “We have been in this place almost a month now, and I was bored. Besides, you have an air of loneliness around you, I figured you could use the company.”

“That’s just how cultivation is,” Zac shrugged as he looked outside. “What are your plans after we’ve messed up the trial ground and snatched those pearls?”

“We’ll see,” Catheya slowly said. “Probably keep going a bit further and look for inheritances or Troves as we make our way toward neutral waters. Why, you want to travel with us?”

“Just making conversation,” Zac said, neither confirming nor denying. “How far are we from the next spot of our mission?”

“We’re pretty close, but this one might take a few days,” Catheya said. “It’s deep underground.”

Zac nodded noncommittally, and the two sat in silence for a moment until Catheya suddenly changed the subject.

“Are you able to send a message to my Ancestor?”

“... If I could, what would you provide in return?” Zac retorted.

“How about an adorable wife?” Catheya said with a sweet smile.

Zac answered the proposition with a blank look saying all that needed to be said, causing Catheya to humph in annoyance.

“Whatever, who’d want such a boorish husband as yourself? I’d spend my days wilting away all alone while you were locked away in a cultivation cave,” she snorted before downed her glass. “Well, let’s go. We need to recoat the vessel before setting off toward the next target. The energies are getting pretty powerful, and we can’t have the ship breaking apart in this area.”

She sashayed toward the door, and Zac found his eyes drift toward her lithe waist and swaying hips illuminated by the ambient light of the Twilight Ocean. However, he froze when he found Catheya had stopped as she looked at him with a victorious smile.

“Maybe you’re not a complete blockhead aft...” she said with a smug grin, but her voice drifted off as she looked at the window with a confused frown. “What are they...”

Her eyes widened in alarm the next moment as she took out an array crystal and frantically infused it with energy. Zac immediately got a sinking feeling as he whipped out his axe. But he only had time to hear a horrified ‘*NO!*’ from Catheya before the wall to his chambers were ripped apart, and they both were dragged out by an unrelenting force.

The world turned into a confusing blur as Zac suddenly found himself plunged into the Twilight Ocean. It didn’t take long for him to figure out what was going on though. It hadn’t been a powerful cultivator that attacked their vessel. It had rather been destroyed by the Living Pulse itself, and Zac was completely caught by it.

He tried to swim out toward the calmer waters, but the force in the stream was just too much even for him. Zac was constantly dragged back and forth by the chaotic swirls within, but he did spot a few scraps of their broken submarine in the waters around him.

What the hell had happened? Why were they this close to the Living Pulse? They had always kept a respectable distance, only taking advantage of the power of the stream without actually getting close. Had some piece of debris shot out from the Living pulse and slammed into their ship with enough force to overpower the shields? Or did the steering arrays malfunction?

A huge piece of rock suddenly slammed into his back with enough force to make him see stars. It reminded him of the simple fact that this was no time to worry about the reason for the ship failing. Even worse, the hit along with the frantic current actually made him lose his grip of **[Rakan's Roar]**, and the Spirit Tool was immediately swallowed by the stream.

Zac felt a pang of loss, but he quickly regained his wits as he took out a random spare axe and a shield before activating **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. He hoped it would provide an additional layer of protection, but he was shocked to find his armor instantly ripped apart from the rampant energies inside the stream.

The same happened to the three poor pygmy skeletons when he tried conjuring them. They desperately held on for just a second before they couldn't take the torrential force contained in the waters and fell apart. Zac was left to defend with his body alone, but he already felt a bit delirious from the insane amounts of life-attuned energies in the stream.

Zac could only activate the defensive mode of his Tool Spirit, conjuring the shield for the first time in a while. The coffin lid was extremely sturdy, and the occasional beast carcass or piece of debris that shot toward him was diverted without too much effort. However, that didn't much help with his real predicament; he was getting poisoned by a degree that not even he could deal with.

He considered activating **[Abyssal Phase]** to move away, but he gave up on the idea. The life-attuned energies around him were dense enough to almost blind him, and he had no idea what would happen if he turned himself into an intangible ghost. He might find himself ground to dust the moment he lost his physical form. He was better off in his current form as

his **[Void Heart]** which was furiously beating to convert the invasive life force into pure energy.

But he also knew it was just a temporary relief. The hidden node could only convert so much, and he was being continuously drowned in it. Zac had already tried to activate an escape talisman sown into his robes, but it simply fizzled out. He frantically looked for other solutions, but his surroundings were suddenly replaced by darkness before he found a solution.

The Living Pulse had burrowed underground. This was his chance.

His eyes soon adjusted to the darkness as **[Love's Bond]** transformed to its offensive form. The stream continuously split as it pushed into dozens of different caves, and Zac soon lost any sense of direction. He kept trying to stop his frantic journey with the help of his chains, but even a split-up Living Pulse contained too much force.

Half an hour passed until the submerged tunnel around him suddenly expanded into a proper cave. Two chains shot forward and embedded themselves in the ceiling, and Zac desperately dragged himself out from the stream before he was pulled even further.

Finally safe, if you could call it that.

There actually was a thin tunnel leading straight up where the waters weren't raging, and he only needed to follow the path for a few minutes before reaching a cave that was actually drained. He dragged himself up and activated an illusion array with shaky hands as he ate a healing pill. Even then, he fell unconscious a few seconds later.

Zac woke sore and nauseated, but a quick scan proved that there was nothing overly wrong with him. He had slept for over ten hours by the looks of it, and his constitution had gradually cleansed his body during this time. Only then did he get a proper look at the surroundings, and he had to admit it was beautiful.

The place he found himself in reminded Zac a lot of his life-attuned side of his cultivation cave. The ceiling and walls were absolutely covered in various plants emitting strong life-attuned energies. It wasn't a surprise. The Living Pulse ran straight through these subterranean tunnels, and the ambient energy was absolutely chock-full of Divine Energy in addition to Twilight Energy.

Still, the beauty didn't much help with his predicament, and Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. His constitution was barely able to deal with the energy in this place, but it still felt like he was standing in a field of poison. The sooner he got out of here the better.

Cutting his way out was a possibility if all else failed, but he was afraid of cutting his way through the stone left and right. The Living Pulse had clearly split up into dozens, perhaps hundreds, of streams. What if he suddenly broke the wall and found himself caught by the stream again?

There was also Catheya and the others to consider. Catheya had definitely been swallowed up by the stream just like he was, and he wouldn't be too surprised if the same was true for the others. He took out the tracking array, but he sighed in disappointment when there was no response. Perhaps the streams of the Living Pulse created some sort of interference, or perhaps...

Not everyone was as durable as he was, nor as able to deal with this kind of environment.

He eventually went with his gut as he started to make his way forward in search of either his companions or a way out, harvesting all kinds of weird herbs on the way. The energy was dense, and it wasn't easy to get here. That was a perfect combination for rare herbs and treasures to appear, and Zac figured he might as well take the best of a bad situation.

There was a clause in his employment contract that said that all obligations were voided if a situation like this arose, as long as the group couldn't reform within a week. It was a very real chance that his shot at the Life-Death Pearls was gone, but he would do his best to find at least Catheya before giving up.

The subterranean tunnels were really a hidden repository of wealth, and Zac had gained herbs valued at over 50,000 E-grade Nexus Coins in just over an hour. Most of them were only useful for the living, but that was just fine with Zac. Unfortunately, none of the items he'd found were any real treasures.

But after four hours he did sense something odd; a blistering cold. There was no reason for such a glacial cold to be this far underground, and a wave of relief hit him as he followed the clues into another cave.

Inside was a wretched-looking Catheya encased in a four-meter block of ice.

Chapter 711: Traitor

Catheya's left arm was clearly broken, and multiple wounds covered her body. Her complexion was pallid even for a Draugr, and Zac sensed her aura was very unstable. She neither had his durability nor the ability to deal with the dense life-attuned energies from what he knew.

Encasing herself in ice was probably a desperate measure of hers to block out the surrounding energies, but it was just a stopgap. The block of ice was bobbing in a lake full of life-attuned energies, and it was gradually being whittled down.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how he could help with her situation, but he began by lifting the block out of the waters and carrying it over to an adjoining cave that wasn't submerged. He put Catheya in the middle before taking out a series of arrays. One was a dispenser array that he had prepared for when he would travel alone.

He placed it around the block of ice and put a series of Supreme Quality Miasma Crystals into it. Soon enough the block of ice was covered in dense clouds of miasma. The array didn't really purify the Twilight Energy like Catheya's array did, but it did push some away. It was the most common way to deal with the Twilight Energy, but it was far more expensive to run compared to Catheya's purification array.

In fact, such an array wasn't publicly available.

Zac himself sat down facing the Catheya within the ice, and he essentially used himself as a purification array by absorbing some of the Twilight Energy close by. The hours passed, and Zac put one Miasma Crystal after another into the array as he waited. Sitting inside the cloud did a lot of good for him as well, and after the better part of a day, he was pretty much back in prime condition.

Catheya's aura was slowly growing stable as well, partly thanks to Zac occasionally crushing Soul Crystals in addition to the miasma crystals. Finally, she opened her eyes, but Zac actually felt a pang of danger prompting him to jump out in the way. It was just in time as well as the block of ice exploded, launching shards in all directions like a cluster bomb.

Thankfully he had reacted in time, and a coffin-shaped barrier blocked the fallout. His array wasn't so lucky, and Zac grimaced when the miasmatic cloud dispersed.

"You owe me an array, you know," Zac said with a grimace.

"You! Stay back!" she answered with a ferocious glint in her eyes as a spike appeared in her hand.

"What's the matter with you? What the hell happened?" Zac sighed, but he followed Catheya's instructions.

It really looked like Catheya would attack him if he got any further, and he was in no mood for a fight at the moment.

"You think there was a traitor?" Zac said, soon understanding why she was so stand-offish.

"You, Sharpo, and Yod. One of you three did this," she said.

"Well, Sharpo or Yod," Zac corrected.

"Oh, I should just take your word for it?" she snorted.

"I mean, you were standing right in front of me. I was the first one to get screwed over," Zac said with exasperation.

"Besides, I dragged you out of the waters and spent a small fortune to block out the surrounding energies for a while."

Catheya looked at him for a few seconds until she eventually snorted and put away her spike. "Well, I am pretty sure it's not you. For one, you have a connection to my ancestor. Secondly, I honestly doubt you'd have the skill to fiddle with arrays without me or Varo noticing."

"Well, whatever," Zac said, a bit miffed at being looked down on. Even if it was true. "I'm still young, I have plenty of time to pick up side-skills."

Catheyia laughed a bit, but her face froze into a grimace as she looked down on her arm. She took out a pill and swallowed it, closing her eyes for a few seconds before looking up at Zac with an unusually serious expression. “Thank you, I owe you my life. And I’m sorry about just now, I wasn’t in my right mind when I woke up, and I panicked when sensing a strong aura right next to me.”

“Well, don’t sweat it,” Zac shrugged. “Though you do owe me for the array.”

“How can someone be such a miser when walking around with enough wealth to topple nations,” Catheyia wryly smiled, but she still took out an array that seemed even better than the one Zac had used. “Here.”

“Great,” Zac smiled as he stowed away the array. “Now, do you know how to get out of here?”

“This is a repeater point of the Living Pulse, where it goes below ground and then reemerges stronger,” Catheyia sighed. “It was actually our next stop, but we obviously weren’t supposed to enter this way. Or go this deep.”

“So, we just need to make our way up?” Zac muttered.

“Wait,” Catheyia said as she took out a black core.

Zac immediately recognized it, seeing it was the gathering array meant for when they arrived in this place.

“There’s another mark down here,” Catheyia said.

“Wait, it works?” Zac said with confusion as he took out his shard again. Still nothing. “I think mine broke.”

“I obviously deactivated the daughter-arrays after realizing there was a traitor among us,” Catheyia snorted. “There weren’t any signals active when I was forced to seal myself though. How long have we been down here?”

“Oh, right,” Zac said. “We’ve been here around two days now. I was knocked out as well, then it took me a while to find you and stabilize your aura.”

“Two days,” Catheyia muttered. “I doubt the traitor allowed themselves to get caught by the stream and dragged down

here, but it's more than enough time to get down here through the tunnel system. But even if they did, would they take out the tracking array like this?"

"Could be a trap," Zac said.

"Either it's one of our people who needs rescue, or it's the traitor trying to lure us out. In either case, we should check it out," Catheya slowly said, a ruthless gleam shimmering in her abyssal eyes.

Zac hesitated for a bit, but he eventually nodded. He wouldn't mind getting some revenge on the person who almost got him killed. But there were some things he needed to make sure of first.

"Are you still able to locate the Life-Death pearls?" Zac asked.

If she couldn't, then he might be better off just setting off on his own. This traitor was probably connected to Catheya's mission, and there was no point getting involved if there weren't benefits to match. Especially considering Catheya's current condition. Her aura had stabilized, but she was still wounded and heavily suppressed by the area. He would definitely have to do the heavy lifting in any clashes down here.

"Of course, that had no connection to the submersible," Catheya said. "And the reward has only increased. There's at least one traitor, and there might be casualties among the others. Setting off alone now would be a mistake."

"Right, let's go get that scoundrel," Zac immediately agreed.

"You know, next time you can at least pretend you're helping out of gentlemanly convictions rather than greed," Catheya muttered as the two set out toward the source of the signal.

"Like you'd buy something like that anyways," Zac retorted with a smile.

Sometimes they had to descend into submerged tunnels to continue on their way, and they were teeming with plant life to the point they couldn't even see the walls. Corals, Seaweed, large luminous fungi, and all kinds of underwater plants fought for space along the walls. There were also many types

of smaller animals flitting about, all of them leaning toward life rather than death.

“This place,” Catheya sighed as she took out a Miasma Crystal.

“Why not take out the purification array?” Zac asked.

“I don’t have it,” Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. “It was connected to the submersible when it broke apart, and the core was far from your room. Varo should have been sitting right next to it though. Hopefully, he managed to take it.”

“That’s a shame,” Zac muttered.

“Is it?” she said with a penetrating look. “For some reason, it looks like you’re absolutely fine walking in this poisonous environment. Come to think of it, it was the same while you fought next to the mothertree. Did my ancestor provide something for protection? Can you share?”

“There’s nothing like that,” Zac coughed. “I’m simply a bit more durable than you. Besides, I wasn’t really hurt on the way down here.”

“...Right,” Catheya muttered, but she didn’t comment any further.

Catheya kept taking out one crystal after another to withstand the poisonous energies burrowing into her body, but Zac could see how she was struggling even with that. Zac couldn’t be certain, but he believed she wouldn’t even be able to exhibit half her normal strength in a place like this, and that was in her prime condition.

It was no wonder that the undead usually stayed away from the living pulse. The restrictions on them were a lot greater here, and they probably were lessened for the living.

“The signal started moving,” Catheya suddenly said with a small frown. “Away from us.”

“They might have decided to find their way out,” Zac commented.

The two kept going for another twenty minutes, at which point the signal stopped again according to Catheya. Even before, it hadn't moved very quickly, meaning that the person on the other end might be in a bad way. It lent some credence to the theory that it was someone else who had been dragged down by the Living Pulse rather than descended through the tunnels. If it was Sharpo, an intangible death-attuned ghost, she might be on the brink of collapse by this point.

Soon they closed in on the source of the marker, and it seemed to come from a large cave that was simply teeming with life.

"Ready yourself," Catheya whispered as she ate what looked like a soldier pill to boost her energy reserves.

Zac nodded, but he froze when he realized he had lost **[Rakan's Roar]** to the living pulse earlier. He was pretty reluctant to take out **[Verun's Bite]** in front of Catheya unless absolutely necessary, so he ultimately just transformed **[Love's Bond]** to its back-pack form and took out a random spare axe. A moment later they entered the cave, and the scene inside was both beautiful and haunting.

An unmoving body on the ground in a vast field of flowers, and it was someone they knew: Yod.

A shimmering haze covered the whole cave, like motes of starlight. There was also a corpse lying a few meters away from Yod. A single glance indicated that the man had died not long ago, and the wounds on his body indicated that Yod was responsible for the man's death. There were also scars or burnt patches all over the cavern, indicating a heated battle.

Had the two people met by chance in this place and a brutal battle had ensued?

"It's really Yod," Catheya whispered. "He looks hurt."

"Are the flowers safe?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Should be. I am pretty sure they're Vigorbloom Lilacs," Catheya muttered.

Hearing the name made Zac actually remember the plant, and he took out one of his compendiums to confirm. The image matched perfectly, and the description made Zac breathe out in

relief. These flowers weren't poisonous, but rather medicine. They were the main component for creating some Berserking Pills for Dreamers, but their scarcity made the recipe unpopular. As for the unliving, their only value was resale.

"There might be more ambushers though," Catheya added with a pointed look.

Zac nodded, and he activated [**Profane Exponents**] as though he was afraid of ambush rather than leery about Yod's himself. The two walked closer, and Zac frowned at he looked at the haze around them. But his danger sense didn't give off any warning, so he followed Catheya to the core.

"We need to get him out of this place," Zac said. "With his wounds, it might be lethal to stay this close to a bunch of Spirit Herbs."

"I..." Catheya said, but the words got caught in her throat as she slumped down the ground.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, by a wave of vertigo hit him before he had a chance to escape, and he found himself on the ground as well. Zac tried to get back on his feet, but he was shocked to find that something was wrong with the Miasma in his body. It had frozen in his body and it felt like the ichor had been turned into lead.

On a second look, there were some small white motes inside his veins, and it was these pollutants that seemed to have caused such a massive change. Zac didn't get it. His danger sense hadn't sensed anything amiss, and the plants should be benign. There also weren't any suspicious energy fluctuations.

Yet he hadn't noticed the infiltration at all. Normally, [**Purity of the Void**] would have been able to deal with this issue, but it was already busy dealing with the large amounts of life-attuned energies.

The problem wasn't only that he was completely unable to circulate his Miasma, it was like his whole body was frozen in place. He wasn't even able to move enough to put an antidote pill into his mouth. He wasn't able to drag himself to safety with the help of his Tool Spirit either. The chains ultimately

required a little bit of his energy to control, and he couldn't even give them that.

"What is this? What's going on?" Zac grunted with a slurred voice as he tried to shake himself loose.

Catheya didn't even get the chance to respond before Zac felt a ruthless pull as his pores started to leak massive amounts of Miasma. He was lying face to face with Catheya, and he saw that she was in a similar situation, and her eyes widened in shock. Their energies merged in the air before they were dragged to a small sphere he hadn't noticed before.

Zac tried to forcibly keep the energy in his body and resist the drain, but he was only able to slightly slow down the speed at which he lost energy.

A muffled snicker echoed out from behind, and Zac recognized it to be Yod's voice.

"It's futile," Yod grunted, his voice just as slurred as Zac's own. "Even a Hegemon would find themselves locked down for a while with my preparations. You'll be drained long before your body acclimatizes to the poison here."

"You lunatic, you used yourself as bait to trap us?" Zac spat.

"Hardly. Would I be in this wretched state if this bastard didn't appear out of nowhere and wounded me? But it's worth it if I can take both of you Imperial bastards out. I'll recover in a month or two."

"How is this possible?" Catheya wheezed. "Is it not Vigorbloom Lilacs?"

"I'm not surprised you outsiders don't know," Yod grunted with a laugh. "You didn't misidentify the lilacs, but there are some things the missives won't tell you. They release a pollen that perfectly blends with the Twilight Energy and burrows into the bodies of others. It's really medicine for the Dreamers. But for us, it'll cause a little-known reaction if concentrated enough. Our order has used it for assassination for tens of thousands of years."

Zac tried one thing after another, but nothing he did worked. He could use his mental energy just fine, but there was nothing

to channel it into. He could feel [**Force of the Void**] as well, but it was like his Skill Fractals were blocked out by the pollen, making him unable to activate [**Abyssal Phase**]. Catheya didn't seem to have any luck either, and the two could only lie down and helplessly look at each other.

“It's lucky. I planned on finishing you off, but Arcaz had already found you by the time I did. I planned on giving up until I found this place by chance,” Yod grunted. “The rewards I will gain for stopping you will be shocking.”

It looked like Yod had been a spy all along, working for some mysterious order. Not only that, it even seemed as though he was a proper Array Master, something he hadn't shown any indication of at all until now. He had the ability to tinker with the Submersible, and he could also manipulate catheya's tracker while setting up this trap.

It looked like Catheya's mission had been leaked somehow, considering Yod had been placed by her side even before they entered. Was it Yod who took out Ravan as well? Or perhaps he just divulged the locations of the people. Varo had barely survived as well, even though he was an assassin who should excel at stealth.

As for why Yod was doing this, it clearly was linked to their mission. He had been unable to hinder them at the first two locations, though it was a bit suspicious how quickly they had been spotted by those crabs now that Zac thought of it. Perhaps Yod felt forced to take action as they closed in on the third spot without any major issues, and he forcibly steered the submarine into the Living Pulse.

“I can pay you Ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to let us out of here,” Zac eventually sighed. “I'm sure that's more than what your employers are paying you.”

“I have a ticket to the Empire as well,” Catheya hurriedly added with a weak voice.

The Corpse Lord didn't actually even bother to respond, and Zac was starting to get worried for real. Not for himself though. [**Purity of the Void**] was continuously cleansing some of the pollen that had burrowed into his body, and he should

sooner or later be able to leave here on his own. Besides, even if he was drained of Miasma he would just revert to his human form.

But Catheya didn't have that kind of luxury. Running out of Miasma was a death sentence for her. What would happen to the brand hidden in his body if Catheya suddenly died right in front of him? Were there hidden measures added to its core functionality? Zac hesitated for a few second as he looked at the rapidly paling Catheya.

“Uh, if you're going to do something, could you do it now?” Catheya said, her voice shaking a bit. “I have just a few minutes remaining before I enter my final slumber.”

Zac wanted to help, but the problem was whether he could. The Duplicity Core needed some energy to activate now that it was sealed, but he couldn't infuse anything at all. But he did have his bloodline talent available, and his Specialty Core was no doubt protected from the pollen as thanks to Leandra's array.

It should work.

“Oh well,” Zac sighed as the cage to his Duplicity Core snapped.

Chapter 712: Truths and Conspiracies

It worked. The energy from **[Force of the Void]** had no problems undoing the bindings from Leandra's obfuscation array, and the Duplicity Core instantly returned to plain view of Zac's inner sight. He wasted no time and instantly activated the core in case the pollen could hamper the process.

Zac felt the familiar wave of weakness, followed by an exuberant vigor as his cells were with energy. It was just as he had expected; the weird pollen surged through his veins, and he almost felt like he had eaten a Berserking Pill or an aphrodisiac. His Cosmic Energy raged through his body, and he was suddenly ready to take on the world.

But before the world, there were some immediate issues to remedy. The energies in the room churned as Zac's aura exploded outward, neither constricted by arrays, lilacs, or the Mystic Realm itself. Zac heard a groan from Yod's direction, but he was more concerned at dealing with the weird array sucking the death out of Catheya. His old companion appeared in his hand as he stood up, and Zac suddenly felt whole again, in a way he'd never felt while wielding **[Rakan's Roar]**.

"Impossible!" Yod screamed when he saw Zac somehow ignore the effect of both the pollen and arrays, but Zac disregarded the traitor's screams as he swung at the ceiling, sending out a series of silvery fractal leaves.

A barrier sprung up to protect the draining sphere, but it was shredded in an instant thanks to the enormous power in his peak mastery fragment. The pull of Miasma immediately stopped, though that didn't mean Catheya was completely out of the woods.

As for the Draugr, she looked up at Zac with mute incomprehension as he walked over and stuffed a soldier pill into her mouth and a Miasma Crystal into her hand before gently lifting her up to place her back against a rock. Yod didn't get quite as gentle a treatment as Zac simply grabbed one of his legs dragged him over.

The two unliving were still completely immobilized by the pollen, giving Zac a moment to sort things out. How to deal with Catheya was a real conundrum, but his attention was first turned to the traitor of the group.

"You... What's going on?" Yod stammered. "You're a Dreamer? No, that's impossible."

Catheya was still just looking at Zac's face as her own kept changing expressions, like her mind had short-circuited from trying to reconcile all the snippets of information she had on his two identities. Yod might not know who stood in front of him, but Catheya surely did. After all, **[Million Faces]** had deactivated the moment he swapped race.

"Don't sweat the details. I just happen to be a Draugr with some special abilities. Why are you doing this?" Zac asked with a frown. "Couldn't you have waited to attack Catheya until after we got the pearls? Why involve me?"

"What the heck?" Catheya blurted from the side, finally waking up from her shocked state.

"Why I am doing this?!" Yod growled, rage overcoming his fear and confusion. "Do you even know what you're doing? What the goal of your little side-mission is? You're trying to destroy Twilight Harbor! I'd take you out even if I have to die with you. Ten Thousand Nexus Coins compared to trillions of lives? Go screw yourselves!"

"A bit bombastic, aren't we?" Zac snorted, though he could sense some hesitation coming from Catheya.

"You outsiders!" Yod spat. "You come to our homes and bleed our resources dry! And that's not enough! You even want to detonate the Twilight Harbor so that some bigshots can harvest

the resources in its depths! I guess you got tired of slowly siphoning our wealth, huh?"

"What? Detonate the whole place?" Zac exclaimed. "What about the other participants?"

"What about them? What is the life of some frontier ants for the vaunted B-grade Empires?" Yod snorted.

"He's lying," Catheya said from the side. "My master wouldn't sacrifice me even if the plan is true."

"Where did you hear this?" Zac asked as he turned back to Yod. "Who is this order you mentioned?"

"I wouldn't tell you even if I could. Go ahead, Kill me. There are more like me who will give everything to save our home," Yod said before he closed his eyes.

"Well, whatever," Zac snorted as [**Verun's Bite**] ripped through the air.

A muffled thud echoed out through the cave a moment later as Yod's head was cut clean off and fell into the field of flowers. Zac looted any items of interest on his body before he stowed it away. He wouldn't be able to turn the body to make another follower, but he didn't want to leave any clues behind.

Eventually, he turned back to Catheya who silently looked on with a complicated gaze.

"It's you, after all," Catheya eventually sighed.

"It's me," Zac shrugged.

There was no point in denying it. Even if his disguise skilled had worked across transformations, there was no way she wouldn't make the connection when he suddenly turned into someone living. His best disguise was the simple fact that you couldn't be both alive and dead, and he had already shown that to be false.

"The question is how we'll go forward from here," Zac continued as he tried to gain any clues as to what Catheya was thinking.

Unfortunately, she didn't divulge much. Her face was a calm mask now, though he could still sense some confusion and curiosity. There weren't any hints of repulsion or hate, like his transformation was heresy to the Draugr race. Then again, she would probably keep any such thoughts deep in her heart in a precarious situation like this.

"What do you want?" Catheya eventually asked.

"Let me think for a bit," Zac muttered as he sat down in front of her.

There was certainly the issue of her master's brand and his contract to take into consideration, but the simple fact was that Zac was unwilling to let Catheya die when he so easily could save her. She had her own goals and ambitions, but she had been nothing but helpful to him since the first time they met.

She helped him in the Base Town, and she never seemed to act against him during the months they had worked together. Overall, he felt she was a good person, and Zac couldn't just stand by while she died. But at the same time, it had left him with a mess on his hands.

Catheya wasn't biased against the living, but she was ultimately a citizen of the Undead Empire. Now that she had this information, how would she act? Forming a Contract of Binding like with the Valkyries was out of the question since she had a higher level than him, and a simple contract like the employment contract wasn't strong enough to guarantee much of anything in the long run.

"You're worried I will spread this unique ability of yours to my people back home. That this ability will implicate you and your close ones," she slowly said. "You don't need to worry."

"Well, that's a relief," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Care to explain why?"

"Why would I?" Catheya said. "I have absolutely nothing to gain from betraying you. But more importantly, I'm not some ingrate who places wealth above my comrades. Besides, what are you even worried about? If the Empire found out about

your situation you'd be invited with open arms and heavily nurtured."

"Or I would get dissected because some old monster got curious," Zac snorted.

"There's no way the princes would allow that," Catheya snorted. "Do you think the Empire hasn't tried? Undead who can transform and absorb Cosmic Energy when there's no miasma around? Who can eat the vast number of treasures only Dreamers can digest? If it was possible to accomplish something like this with any certainty, we would have figured it out billions of years ago. I bet you're a freak of nature that can't be replicated, like so many other Heaven's Chosen through the ages."

"Still," Zac muttered, though her points made some sense.

"Could you move me a bit further from these infernal flowers while we discuss this further?" she asked.

"Not just yet," Zac smiled.

"And can I ask why not?" Catheya sighed. "I truly have no interest in divulging your secrets, whatever they are. Why would I? You are clearly connected to my ancestor, and I don't think it's a simple connection if what you said about her husband is true. If anything, I might just bring trouble down on my own head if I somehow ruin the plans of my ancestor. We are on the same side here."

"Not betraying your benefactor's secrets is just a matter of course," Zac countered. "There are also the issues of guarantees and remuneration."

"A real benefactor wouldn't keep their beneficiary captured in a poison mist to extract them of valuables though," Catheya said with a raised brow.

"Well, the Heavens are ruthless, and all that," Zac shrugged. "Life is hard and I need to fight for all the benefits I can get."

"Yeah, your life looked really hard when you outspent Hegemons left and right," Catheya snorted before her brows scrunched up. "Wait! Where did your money come from?! I

discounted you being a Progenitor because of your wealth, but now you're really one? What's going on?!"

"That's what's important now?" Zac asked, but Catheya was obviously in full calculation mode.

"Alive and Dead... Annihilation... Aetherlord husband." Catheya muttered.

Zac listened on with confusion, even he a bit curious what kind of crackpot theory she was cooking up. Unfortunately for her, she was doomed to miss the mark, considering she was lacking a few key pieces of information.

"Ancestor walked the path of pure Death, and the aura your follower emitted... Master said it had a hint of Oblivion. She must have made a breakthrough, which allowed her to live until now. Her husband is an Aetherlord, a rare race blessed by unusual attunement to life," Catheya said, her eyes boring into Zac's. "You are a mix of life and death... Are you... Ancestor Be'Zi's son? Are we related?"

"You can call me Young Grand Ancestor," Zac nodded, while also memorizing the key pieces of information she had unwittingly divulged.

Catheya snorted before her brows scrunched up. "No wait, master said you don't even have a hint of the Sharva'Zi bloodline. And I don't think you lied when you said you only met in a vision back in the tower. Don't tell me you have even more big shots helping you out, giving you money? What are you, some sort of old monster-magnet?"

Her face was a tapestry of fluctuating expressions as she tried to go over the various pieces of information she had on him. Zac inwardly groaned since she was getting a bit close to the truth with the latest guess. Of course, the fact that it was a Technocrat powerhouse, and his mother to boot, was probably not something she'd ever get right. Thankfully, Catheya soon calmed down again.

"I guess I won't be able to figure it out unless you choose to tell me," she eventually sighed before she solemnly looked into his eyes. "You need to make a decision here."

Zac looked into Catheya's eyes for a few seconds before he sighed and created a normal System-enforced mutual contract. It was straightforward enough, simply saying that they couldn't divulge each other's hidden aces to any parties. Catheya immediately agreed to with a small smile, and Zac carried her out of the field of Vigorbloom Lilacs a moment later.

Before leaving the area he quickly harvested the patch of flowers. Yod had probably extracted most of their medicinal value to set the trap, but there might still be some pollen left. It would be a waste to leave behind. He took the array markers and the living cultivator's body as well before carrying Catheya away.

"There's still the matter of payment," Zac said after setting Catheya down in a cave some distance away from where they met Yod.

"Well, what do you want?" Catheya asked. "There's not much I have that I can give you. You're way wealthier than I am."

"I want information," Zac slowly said.

"What kind?" Catheya countered.

"I want you to teach me all you know about raising undead, upgrading and modifying skills, and bloodline evolutions," Zac said.

"Why don't I just tell you the secrets of the Heavens themselves while I'm at it?" Catheya said with exasperation.

"You know, Yod ran into one living cultivator, I bet there are more around," Zac slowly said as he took out a few Vigorbloom Lilacs. "Perhaps they would be more amenable to helping out if the immobilized Draugr they found presented them with a bouquet."

"Fine, fine," Catheya said with a glare. "I'll teach you what I can, but I have restrictions I can't break. Draugr Bloodline Methods are completely off-limits, but I can teach you a bit about skill evolutions and my necromancy knowledge. Gods, you're so weird. You're extremely powerful and disgustingly wealthy, but you're barely above a newborn in knowledge."

“Well, we all have our weaknesses,” Zac smiled.

Hah, right,” Catheya snorted before her eyes widened, and her volume increased as it looked like she had just received her biggest shock yet. “Wait! The amulet you bought, it’s for you! You’re a mortal! A Draugr mortal?! That’s impossible! Absolutely impossible!”

“No wonder you were ready to enrage a Monarch, it’s for your cultivation. With your accumulations, breaking a node must be like dancing with death,” Catheya muttered. “I can’t wrap my head around this.”

“Then don’t. Focus on building a curriculum for me instead,” Zac said with exasperation.

“However, only after we leave this place. You haven’t really saved me yet,” Catheya said. “I am weakened by the environment, restricted by those cursed flowers.”

“Alright, fair enough,” Zac agreed.

“So you actually are a Draugr since you want manuals? You’re not just pretending?” Catheya asked as she looked him up and down curiously. “Or is the current you the fake? No, that’s not right either. I’ve seen you fight in both forms.”

“Zac, Arcaz. I’m both, alright?” Zac grunted. “How it works is my business.”

“So what do I call you?” she asked curiously.

“Up to you,” Zac said after some thought, afraid to give up even more information by saying a specific name.

“So mister Deviant Asura then,” Catheya said as a smile spread across her face. “You know, I think I get it now. You’ve channeled all your libido to one of your personas. That’s why you’re such a blockhead in your Draugr form and a deviant in the other. It’s a relief, I was starting to worry that I had really overestimated my charms.”

“What deviant,” Zac groaned with annoyance and embarrassment. He thought Catheya had left Zecia before that moniker was coined, but it looked like he wasn’t so lucky.

“That title is just something some jerk came up with based on

some misunderstandings and exaggerations, probably a friend of someone I killed in the Base Town. Just call me Zac in this form and Arcaz in the other, okay?”

“Fine. There were a lot of those little misunderstandings from what I heard though,” Catheya said with a pointed look. “And I do believe I remember you appearing from the Tower of Eternity in enough jewelry to make an imperial concubine jealous.”

“I knew a bunch of people would be waiting outside because of the quest, and I got those items from a powerful cultivator in the Battle of Fates I mentioned. What was I supposed to do? Get myself killed because looking proper is more important?” Zac muttered.

Catheya snickered in response, but she thankfully dropped the subject. It looked like she had regained her humor now that her life wasn't in immediate danger any longer.

Zac knew he was going out on a limb here, but he didn't know what else to do. He couldn't go around killing and silencing everyone, even friends, who found out about his Specialty Core. Being in a constant state of fear and paranoia was no way to live. Being cautious was important, but he couldn't let his secrets define him. It was that kind of secrecy on his part that ultimately led to the death of Thea, though his mother was obviously more in the wrong.

Part of him still wanted to bring Catheya back to Earth to ensure that she couldn't spread the news, but he knew that it would be nigh-impossible to enforce that. It wasn't like Zac could stuff her in a coffin like Ogras did with Emma, and make it all the way to the teleporters before getting stopped. Catheya's master had definitely placed a marker on her for safety.

This was a gamble of sorts, the same one he took with Ogras four years ago. If things worked out, you could say he had another companion he could trust his back to, and one with access to the Undead Empire at that. If things went south, he would at least get some benefits from the disaster before fleeing.

He would probably have to adjust his plans for the trial though. Escaping a few months early in human form seemed to be the safest bet going forward.

“You know, this makes me half your master,” Catheya suddenly said with a wide smile.

Zac was about to counter her point, but he got distracted as a screen suddenly appeared in front of him.

[Monthly Contribution Ladder]

- 1. 932,032 Uona Noz’Valadir**
- 2. 861,864 Ykrodas Havarok**
- 3. 682,248 Haldur**
- 4. 621,338 Dravzur Kuldás**
- 5. 598,654 Kataron Rissit**
- 6. 596,211 Aia Ouro**
- 7. 582,852 Drogrid Rotheart**
- 8. 572,973 Kerstin Agda**
- 9. 521,426 Kvistir**
- 10. 518,195 Alduz Venarun**

...

- 100. 224,338 Gembur Bloomroot**

Chapter 713: Young Monsters

“So it’s a monthly ladder,” Catheya muttered, but Zac barely heard her as he read through the list. “I wonder if there are any benefits in being on it.”

“What the hell,” Zac eventually blurted, far more interested in the top names than anything else. “How do those two have so many points?”

Every single person on the ladder was a real terror, but how could two people have over 800,000 Contribution Points? Even if they immediately formed a Middle-Stage Dao Branch after entering, they’d still need to accumulate another 300,000 points from somewhere. Just how many people had these two killed?

Or did they actually have one middle stage Dao Branch already, and evolved a second one? That way they’d have 750,000 Contribution points in total. Still, there was a long way between 750,000 and 932,032 points, which made Zac wonder just what kind of being she was. He did recognize four names in the top ten from his missives or through their surnames, but a full six of them were completely unknown.

That by itself indicated that this trial was uncommon. One or two supreme elites might appear from the outside for a Twilight Ascent, but six? Furthermore, one of the four names he recognized was Ykrodas Havarok, who obviously was an outsider as well.

The general power was beyond Zac’s expectations. Eighty people in the top 100 had over 250,000 Contribution Points, which meant that there might actually be eighty of them with middle-stage Dao Branches. That might not sound like a lot,

but it was extremely hard to reach that point from what Zac had gathered.

It put extreme requirements on affinity in general, but more important was the time it took. Forming a Dao Branch by itself was extremely challenging, and many required thousands of years to reach that point. Even among those who had the talent to accomplish something like that, most simply stopped at an Early Branch or even Peak Dao Fragment before evolving.

Spending centuries on one's Dao in the E-grade was only something you did if you were completely out of options, since doing so would rob you of your momentum. Zac doubted someone like a Havarok princeling would harm his future like that. This Ykrodas might be Zac's age or even younger, which made his accomplishments even scarier.

Furthermore, the people on the list were just those who had formed multiple Life- or death-aspected Dao Branches. There were probably a large number of cultivators who were just as powerful as these rankers, who followed different paths. Some of the rankers might also hold secondary Daos like he and Catheya.

He had felt pretty confident after seeing his Contribution approach 50,000 the other day, but seeing this list was a harsh wake-up call. Even Yanub Mettleleaf should be pretty far off from being able to enter this group.

"Uona..." Catheya slowly said.

"Do you know that person?" Zac asked.

"Not really. But she should be part of the Eternal Clan judging by her surname," Catheya sighed. "And I think Aia Ouro is a pureblood Eidolon."

"Can you tell me about the Eternal Clan without breaking apart?" Zac asked curiously.

"Sure," Catheya shrugged. "Their situation is a bit special. You could say they form an independent enclave of the empire with their own territories and laws, and they're not really protected by the commands."

“And the Primo simply accepts an independent force like that?” Zac asked.

“Apart from the Primo, the Eternal Clan has the strongest cultivator. That affords them some special benefits,” Catheya explained. “What do you want to know?”

“Are they really vampires?” Zac asked curiously.

“Vampires?”

“Bloodsuckers,” clarified. “The Nosferatu.”

“Noz’Feratu? I think that’s one of their older branches,” Catheya nodded with some confusion. “And yes, ‘bloodsuckers’ is an apt description. They are pretty unique in that way. Drinking the blood of Cultivators is a form of cultivation for them. They can absorb some of their essences, making high-quality blood something like a mix of a Dao Treasure and Miasma Crystals.”

“A bloodline talent?” Zac asked

“Apparently not,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “They sometimes enlist elites to bolster their ranks, and they gain this ability as well. Many have tried to figure out how it works, but no one has succeeded. The method is tightly controlled by their Clan. One thing is for sure, it’s a sinister method. Those who get drained essentially get crippled even if they survive.”

“Isn’t that an unorthodox path?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Robbing the cultivation of others.”

“It doesn’t look that way. The System doesn’t seem to mind, but that might be thanks to the Blood Progenitor rather than whether it’s unorthodox or not. It makes them an enemy of all living factions though, as they see Dreamers as food. That’s how they came to us. They were being pushed pretty hard in the early days of the System, by a coalition led by the Buddhist Sangha and sought refuge with us,” Catheya explained.

“The Buddhist Sangha?” Zac asked curiously.

“Nine Mountains, Eight Temples, Four Oceans, and One Paradise,” Catheya said, some dread evident in her eyes. “The Buddhist Sangha is one of the true peak factions in the Multiverse, eclipsing even the Undead Empire.”

“What?!” Zac exclaimed with shock. “Why haven’t I heard of them then?”

“They live far from the frontier, and they mostly keep to themselves,” Catheya said. “They cultivate the heart more than anything else, and they seldom leave their temples. But when they get angry, they really hold a grudge. Two of their Temples are still fighting with the Eternal Clan to this day.”

“Two out of eight temples are as powerful as the Eternal Clan? And they have a bunch of other things as well?” Zac asked with some shock.

“They’re a scary bunch,” Catheya nodded.

Zac wondered if that’s where Abbot Everlasting Peace had been taken by 84th Fatty. Perhaps his original form was part of one of those Buddhist factions on the other side of the Multiverse. It also made him think of himself, and his Fragment of the Bodhi. The Buddhist lands would probably be a pretty amazing place to look for opportunities for his nature-aspected half. His class was even named after Arcadia.

But for now, learning about the Eternal Clan was more pressing if there was a bunch of bloodsuckers stalking the Twilight Ocean, with one of them being absurdly powerful.

“The Eternal Clan don’t eat the undead?” Zac asked.

“They can,” Catheya grimaced. “But our ichor apparently tastes beyond appalling. Like rotten food for the living. They wouldn’t dare drink our blood in either case. It’s one of the core agreements for them to join our side. Anyway, you need to watch out for those people, not just Uona. I think they might be a bit like you.”

“Like me?” Zac asked with confusion.

“You’re both living and dead. They are the opposite in a sense; they’re not dead, but they are not technically living either. They have fused Miasma and their Blood Power into

something unique,” Catheya said, making Zac’s eyes widen a bit. “I don’t think they’re as suppressed as others inside this place thanks to that.”

“What cheat-like existences,” Zac muttered with disgust.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Catheya snorted. “Well, there is some balance to it. Their numbers are thankfully pretty low all things considered.”

Zac wasn’t surprised considering there seemed to be a direct correlation between inborn power and the ability to pass that power on to the next generation.

“What about the other races? I haven’t even seen any Reavers in Twilight Harbor I think? At least no pureblood ones,” Zac asked next. “The closest is the Venarun clan.”

“You really don’t know anything about your heritage?”

Catheya asked suspiciously. “The more I learn about you the weirder you get. I can’t divulge much about the Empire, but you could say that the four races were put in charge of four cardinal directions. The Reavers are focusing on other fronts while this Sector and Zecia are technically part of the Draugr Domains, though that’s naturally contested by the living. However, smaller clans sometimes send delegates to the frontier sectors to make some money.”

Zac understood. It looked like the closest Undead Kingdom was ruled by Draugr, allowing Catheya’s clan to move freely. Meanwhile, the Eidolon had to go through the Karabas Clan while some Reaver faction had secret deals with Venarun Clan.

Catheya wouldn’t be able to divulge much else about the empire, so Zac focused his attention on something else. “What do you think about what Yod said? Are we really destroying this realm?”

“I haven’t heard of any such plans, but it’s not impossible,” Catheya eventually admitted. “This Mystic realm is really odd, and the controlling factions may have set their sights on it. Whatever is creating the Twilight Energy has to be something pretty unique.”

“Then shouldn’t we stop the mission?” Zac eventually said. “I don’t want to be responsible for something like destroying the harbor.”

“We’re just a small cog in the machine,” Catheya said. “I bet there are hundreds of squads like us if what Yod said was true. We’re just slightly influencing a few nodes. People have done much crazier things in the Twilight Ocean over the past eons without causing a stir. Besides, it’s not like we can stop. I have my contract, and so do you.”

Zac grimaced with annoyance, but he slowly nodded in agreement. It was true, with him and Catheya reuniting, he was still technically on the job. There was also the egg in his Spatial Ring that needed to be delivered no matter what. Only now, it felt even more likely he was carrying some sort of bomb.

“It might be an exaggeration though. I doubt master would send me inside if what Yod said was completely true. Also, destroying the Mystic Realm would cut off one of the most important revenue streams of my clan,” Catheya comforted. “Now, please let me rest up for a while. I have a hard time rebuffing the Twilight Energy with this pollen inside me.”

“Alright,” Zac agreed as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal and started absorbing the energy.

It took almost a full Day for Catheya to recover to the point that she could move again, and that was with Zac regularly flushing her body with his Fragment of the Coffin. Even then, it was just dealing with the restrictive properties of the Vigorbloom Lilacs. She was still heavily impacted by the atmosphere itself.

Apart from occasionally helping Catheya recover, he mostly focused on his own cultivation. Now that he had already been exposed, he might as well make use of the time to catch up, and he constantly sat with Supreme Nexus Crystals in his hands to fill up the empty Nodes in his body. Yod’s death had set the foundation for one level, and the day of resting filled it out completely and then some.

Catheya occasionally looked up with a weird expression, still clearly having some trouble reconciling the fact that a supposed Draugr was now happily sitting in the middle of dense life-attuned energies and absorbing Cosmic Energy.

Apart from the cultivation, he had made an interesting discovery about himself; he looked better than before. He guessed it was a direct result of his Draugr race evolution since this was the first time he'd switched races or deactivating [**Million Faces**] since then. It was a welcome addition for sure, but he was more interested in other benefits the Draugr evolution provided.

Unfortunately, it looked like the only other thing he gained from his odd situation was the additional layer of protection to his skin, rather than the improved pathways or energy reserves. Still, it was better than nothing, and it indicated that he might be able to find some synergy if he managed to train some constitution on his human side.

The two eventually got ready to leave, and Zac turned to his employer for directions.

“So, do you have any idea of how to get out of here?” Zac said. “I’m guessing you don’t want to stay in this environment longer than necessary.”

“Well, we were dragged further down than we were supposed to go, but it shouldn’t be an issue,” Catheya said as she took out a small astrolabe. “This thing should help us find the node, and from there we just need to keep going up.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded as he got up to his feet.

“Are you unable to change back into your undead form?” Catheya asked as she started walking in pace with Zac.

“Why would I change now just to get assaulted by the surroundings like you?” Zac asked.

“So you actually are affected by the environment,” Catheya muttered.

“Are you trying to figure out my weaknesses?” Zac asked with a pointed glance.

“No, I was just happy to hear the Heavens have eyes after all. Things started to feel a bit unfair,” Catheya muttered. “There are so many interesting places in the multiverse, and you can visit them all while I am relegated to a small corner.”

“A small corner that’s big enough to traverse for hundreds of thousands of years,” Zac countered, but he understood her point.

The Undead Empire was one of the largest factions of the Multiverse from what he had gathered, but it was only so big compared to the endlessness of the Multiverse itself. There were probably numerous sections and dimensions where they had no presence at all, and going there as an undead was dangerous.

The astrolabe Catheya had prepared provided them with a general direction, but getting there was easier said than done with the unpredictable tunnels. One time they found themselves in a vast underwater lake, where Zac had to fight off a bunch of underwater dinosaurs, and they almost stumbled into the living pulse a few times as well. The two kept going for another four hours, at which point Catheya finally stopped.

“I think it’s just ahead,” she said. “But there’s trouble. I can smell the lingering scent of the living. We might be too late.”

“Are they still here?” Zac asked.

“It doesn’t seem like it, but it’s impossible to tell for sure with all the interference in the atmosphere,” Catheya said. “But I bet they moved on after installing some measure to block ours. Of course, the visitors may be normal trial takers as well, people who have entered the caverns in look for valuables.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Zac asked as he tried to sense whether any people

“I should be able to quickly notice if the arrays works or not,” Catheya slowly said. “If it’s been blocked, we simply move on. We’re not some deathsworn, no need to force it.”

“Good,” Zac said as he took out [**Verun’s Bite**] and slowly approached the mouth of the tunnel.

The insides were massive, with a ceiling height of over a hundred meters. The cave was the largest one they had entered yet, and it almost looked like they entered a forest with how lush the precipitation was. There were clear signs of a large number of plants having been harvested as well, proving Catheya's guess to be right. Thankfully, Zac couldn't spot any people staying behind.

Catheya soon crept up next to him, holding a Miasma Crystal in her hand to somewhat combat the extremely dense energies inside the cave. This was similar to the area around the mothertree. Something was clearly generating life force here as well, but space was enclosed, trapping most of it inside.

Zac sensed a few weak fluctuations from Catheya, and she slowly nodded in confirmation that she couldn't find anyone. The two wordlessly entered the forest and proceeded with hurried steps until they reached the core.

There, a large boulder sat slightly embedded into the ground. It was roughly fifteen meters tall and almost thirty meters wide. That by itself wasn't too interesting, but it was covered in esoteric patterns that gave Zac the hint of life. It wasn't something that cultivators had added though, but rather something natural like the patterns on the Stele of Conflict he had witnessed in his tower climb.

Another point was that the stone didn't seem to be the same material as the endless tunnels they had walked through until now. The stone in front of them was a unique deep yellow bordering on orange, while the stones in the tunnels were more of a garden-variety bedrock.

Had someone placed it here?

Zac tried to put it into his Cosmos Sack, but it didn't budge. He tried to push it a bit next, but the only thing that happened was Catheya smacking his hand with an exasperated 'tsk' before she started probing the stone. Several ice crystals flew around it as she made similar seals like when she worked the spike they used to kill the mothertree.

"It's changed," Catheya sighed. "I'm not sure what's been done, but my preparations won't work any longer."

“I could just break the stone?” Zac ventured, glancing at the ‘10,000’ hovering above it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a laugh reached them from behind, prompting both Zac and Catheya to swirl around in shock.

They suddenly found themselves in front of a group of six cultivators, not one of them looking weak. They were living cultivators of human heritage, though they didn’t look exactly like any of the humans on Earth. Their hair was dark with a slight purplish tint, as were their irises. Their skin was olive, though it was a bit hard to tell with the extensive tattoos that covered their faces and arms.

“Havarok! Run!” Catheya whispered with urgency, and Zac wholly agreed.

Chapter 714: Unplugged

Zac knew he couldn't rely on Catheya at the moment. She had expelled enough pollen to move around freely, but there was still some left to restrict her abilities. Combined with her wounds and the environmental suppression, she was all but useless at the moment.

He wasn't confident in dealing with five Havarok Imperials even if going all-out. The leader was the biggest issue. His aura beneath that of Yanub Mettleleaf back on Cork Island, but it was definitely above Zac's own. Also, in contrast to the slightly naïve treeman, this man gave Zac the impression of a veteran of a hundred battles with stable and congealed killing intent.

Thankfully there was no way that Ykrodas Havarok, the second-place holder on the ladder, was part of this group, or any other of the rankers for that matter. They were most likely just some secondary squad who had been sent here to deal with the rock behind them. Zac immediately grabbed Catheya as he acted [**Loamwalker**], rushing around the rock to escape in the opposite direction of the squad.

"It's no use escaping," the man snorted as a shimmering dome enclosed the area five hundred meters around them.

Zac reached the barrier, and he could immediately sense that it would take a while for him to break through it without laying a siege. Both he and Catheya instantly threw out a general Array Breaker of their own, but Zac swore when he saw them fail to find a chink in the armor.

"It's futile. After the chaos all along the Living Pulse, we figured that someone would arrive here sooner or later," the leader continued, and Zac sighed as he turned around. The Havarok soldiers had followed them at a leisurely pace, and they now stood right between himself and the yellow rock. "I

have turned this whole area into a sealed domain. If some general Array Breakers from the frontier could destroy our imperial arrays, wouldn't it be a huge joke? But I didn't expect the group to look like yours. A human and a Draugr?"

Zac understood the man's confusion. Mixed parties of both the living and undead were definitely uncommon, though not unheard of. But such a party wouldn't head to a place like the Living pulse. At least not unless they had some hidden objectives.

It was obvious that this group was here on a mission just like they were. Even worse, it looked like they had opposing objectives. Zac couldn't wait to be done with this mission and disappear into the ocean like some random trial taker. He had no interest in making the Havorak Empire into an enemy.

"You've betrayed the living and led this person here?" another member of the group asked as she glared at Zac. "Do you know the ramifications of what you are trying to do? Who you're trying to help?"

Zac sighed as he looked at her, as she actually reminded Zac a bit of Thea. She had similar features, and she even wore three thin swords over her back. One stark difference was the face tattoos, looking like a spider web of red fractals. He had read about the Havarok Empire before, and it was much more militant in nature than the Radiant Temple or even the Undead Empire.

They weren't like the Radiant Temple who didn't much care about their domain as long as they kept producing resources and talented seedlings. The Havarok Empire was one cohesive unit where strength trumped all, even birthright to a certain degree.

The tattoos were a designation of sorts, telling a story of their exploits. Apparently, they weren't completely cosmetic either, but the patterns rather formed proper arrays. Zac had almost gotten his hands on a similar method in the Tower of Eternity, but he ultimately gave up on that method.

"I think this is all a misunderstanding," Zac said with a light smile, though he didn't relax in the slightest. "We are just

allies of circumstance. A series of unfortunate events brought both of us beneath the surface, and we decided to team up to find a way out of this place.”

“Well, it’s a possibility you are telling the truth, though my guts say you’re lying,” the man smiled. “But it is clear that you are not beyond redemption. Your class is related to nature, which means you’re not a traitor of life. A local guide, I assume? To help these Draugr abominations with their goals. But you should know, whatever she’s paying you, it’s not enough. They want to destroy your home.”

“So, what do you propose?” Zac eventually asked with a small frown.

“You should have known better than to intermingle with an Imperial. The Draugr clans have destroyed thousands of worlds within the Havarok Empire alone, afflicting trillions with the curse of undeath. Some punishment is due, but I’m not unreasonable. I don’t think you’re part of this struggle. Hand her over, and you can leave after paying a ransom,” the man said. “90% should do. I will also give back half if you join us as a guide for three months.”

Collecting ransom was a pretty rare concept, at least in the frontiers. But it did work to a certain degree. After all, robbery of Nexus Coins was impossible, and extortionists would lose the money and even get fined if they didn’t honor their part of the agreement by killing or robbing the victim afterward.

In the frontier, people were pretty poor so robbers would just target Cosmos Sacks and Spatial Rings instead in search of loot. Zac guessed the concept of ransom was more common in the Havorak Empire, where there were stricter rules and people had bigger wallets. The problem was, what did he mean by 90%? Were they actually expecting him to show his status screen?

That definitely couldn’t happen since he was sitting on over 900,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.

“I accept,” Zac nodded with a fearful look as he took a few steps away from Catheya, causing her to look over with an

open mouth. “I have 300,00 E-grade nexus coins on me, how about I-“

Zac didn't get any further before a massive hand appeared out of nowhere, radiating a terrifying might. There hadn't been any fluctuations from either him or Catheya, which allowed him to catch the group unaware. They barely had time to look up before an enormous primal axe was upon them.

The stone edge was emitting a terrifyingly sharp gleam as it was infused with his recently upgraded Fragment of the Axe. If possible, he would have preferred to form one of his basic Dao Braids, but Zac was afraid that even the slightest delay would give these people the chance to turn things around.

“No!” the man roared as barriers sprung up above them, but how could hastily erected shields match up to a finisher conjured by almost a quarter of Zac's energy reserves?

Another in the group was more decisive and immediately crushed an escape talisman. However, it was clearly not a supreme escape treasure as the swirls of wind from the talisman didn't even get the chance to swallow him up before Zac's attack landed.

Four massive surges of energy entered his body as cultivators were turned to mush the moment the enormous axe slammed into the ground. The whole cave heaved and shook as a scar almost five hundred meters long cut both the mystic stone and half the forest in two, and frantic winds full of extremely sharp force ripped the remaining flora to shreds.

One cultivator actually possessed an Earth-escape skill, and he had quickly sunk into the ground to avoid most of the skill. Unfortunately for him, this was [**Arcadia's Judgement**], and the axe swing was just the first half.

The whole cave floor shuddered for a second before a tremendous shockwave spread out, which was followed by the whole cave breaking apart. Zac felt another stream of energy enter his body a moment later, but Zac still rushed forward with finality in his eyes as a fractal forest sprung up to replace the destroyed one.

He suddenly disappeared as the ground beneath his feet cracked, and he appeared in an empty spot a hundred meters away a moment later. **[Verun's Bite]** already radiated a sanguine luster that lit up half the cave, and the air howled as the edge cut through the air. It looked like he was aiming at nothing, but space suddenly flickered as a wretched-looking man appeared out of nowhere.

The final Havarok warrior had lost both an arm and a leg, and it looked like he would topple from a gust of wind. His aura was erratic, but he still managed to generate a undulating ball of chaotic power in his remaining hand as an intricate talisman appeared above his head. The rampant energies didn't even phase Zac, and he only slightly angled his torso as he continued his swing. He felt a sixth and final surge of energy while a chunk of his torso was blasted to smithereens.

The pain was blinding, and Zac fell over with a groan. His defensive skill was no match by the final blast of a dying warrior, but at least he got the last of them in one go. There would be no one to spread the news of what happened here. There was no time to rest though as the shakes from his finisher didn't stop after even a few seconds. In fact, they grew more intense as the seconds passed.

"It's the living pulse!" Catheya screamed with dismay. "It's being rerouted!"

"Uh," Zac grunted and spat out a mouthful of blood as he saw one geyser after another sprout up from the cracks he had caused. "Well, find a way out of here."

"What the hell! Do I look like a Geomancer to you?!" she huffed as Zac looted the corpse next to him with shaky hands, but she still conjured a series of ice crystals and closed her eyes.

Zac guessed she was using some sort of scouting ability to find a way out. Zac was focused on something else though; booty. He had been forced to burn his whole **[Force of the Void]**-reserves to take these guys out before they had a chance to react, and he still had another hole blasted in his body. He needed some sort of compensation for his suffering.

The largest scar in the ground was fast filling up with water, and the ground was still heaving ominously. Still, Zac ate one of his peak healing pills as he shuffled forward, and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot into the waters while Zac dug through the meaty pulp on the ground until he fished out a couple of Cosmos Sacks, a few Spirit Tools and a Spatial ring. The chains rose out from the water a moment later, dragging up another corpse.

It was the cultivator who had used an earth-escape skill. He was the only body that retained a semblance of its original form apart from the leader's. Both corpses looked gruesome, but they might be salvageable with the help of his Mark of Creation and some Corpse-lord methods. They were probably too maimed to become Revenants, but it was high time for Zac to learn the method to create the second common form of the undead.

“Hurry!” Catheya shouted as she started running in the opposite direction where they came from. “I found the path they came from. Hopefully, it leads to the surface!”

“Alright,” Zac grunted as started running to catch up. Each step felt like getting stabbed, but it was better than getting swallowed by the Living Pulse.

Zac soon caught up with Catheya with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but the two only managed to get a few hundred meters inside before a shocking torrent of densely life-attuned waters burst through the ground, shooting rocks in all directions like a cluster bomb. The two jumped into the tunnel Catheya had chosen, and she hurriedly tried to erect an ice wall to keep the deluge away.

Unsurprisingly, it only withstood the pressure for a second before the ice was completely eroded.

The two kept up their frantic escape while trying to erect various roadblocks for the water. Catheya erected walls while he threw out everything from boulders to submersibles to block up the path. Still, the Living Pulse was undeniable, and it kept crashing through all barriers in its pursuit.

Cathey was clearly having trouble keeping up even when using some sort of frostblink ability, and Zac eventually had **[Love's Bond]** pick her up, which allowed her to focus on forming barriers without having to worry about running.

Zac eventually reached a wide chute that led straight up while also having multiple paths to choose from, and he quickly climbed up rather than continue down one of the other tunnels. Just a few seconds later the Life Pulse blasted into the area, but it was thankfully diverted through the three of the tunnels rather than continuing upward.

The two stopped at a terrace after climbing over two hundred meters, and they sat down to recuperate while watching the waters below. The Living Pulse was readjusting, and the cave kept shaking for over ten minutes until the situation stabilized.

“Thank you,” Cathey eventually said.

“No problem,” Zac shrugged. “Was better than being slowed down by your shuffling.”

“Not that,” Cathey said with a roll of her eyes. “For not giving me up. Would have made your life a lot easier.”

“Oh, that. It’s not like I could show them how much money I have,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Besides, I need you to guide me to the Life-Death Pearls.”

“Right,” Cathey snorted. “Still, thank you.”

“Well, no problem,” Zac smiled.

The two rested up for a while longer, where Cathey focused on resetting her arm and expelling the last pollen in her body.

Meanwhile, Zac used some of his kill energy on **[Surging Vitality]** to close the gristly wound on his side before focusing on his Nodes. The remaining energy was enough to gain two levels, though that was only thanks to him already having opened the nodes in his undead form. After the energy was expended, Zac took out a Supreme-Grade Nexus Crystal and continued to fill up the remaining nodes.

Even with the physical wound being fixed, it would still take a while for **[Purity of the Void]** to remove the lingering Dao

from the Havarok leader. He had actually left a mark as well, but Zac thankfully noticed it and crushed it with a continuous stream of mental energy.

It took him another ten hours to completely expel the foreign Dao, at which point Zac had also managed to activate the partially filled third node. At that point, he was level 105 in his human form, compared to level 109 as a Draugr.

Zac gave it some thought, and he allocated the 30 Free points into Strength, just like he did with the previous 10.

Survivability was important, but the previous battle had proven that a strong offense was a viable type of defense as well.

“You fused the two big skills you used in the Base Town into one,” Catheya eventually commented when Zac opened his eyes.

“Yeah,” Zac nodded.

There was no point in denying it. Catheya had watched his battles outside the Tower of Eternity from the first row. She would have to be completely oblivious to not understand where [**Arcadia’s Judgement**] came from.

“I don’t understand how it just appeared out of nowhere though. I didn’t sense a thing until it was there,” Catheya said as her black eyes peered into Zac’s, like she was trying to dig out his secrets hiding within his body. “The more I see the less I understand. Can you sell me the method?”

“It’s impossible for you,” Zac said with a shake of his head before he started lying through his teeth. “It’s a trick on the senses.”

“So natural endowment. A natal illusory Specialty Core perhaps? Is it related to your weird body?” Catheya asked, but she held up her hands upon seeing Zac’s glare. “Alright, alright.”

Zac didn’t know if such a Specialty Core actually existed, but he was more than happy to let Catheya believe her guess to be wrong. Especially since it meant getting even further from the truth in regards to his double races.

“Still, such an ability is extremely handy if used right,” she muttered. “There has to be a drawback for balance though.”

Zac didn't really feel there was one, but he agreed that there probably should be one if not for his mother's meddling. For example, the Specialty Core called Overdrive empowered attacks almost as much as a berserking skill or a Cultivation Manual, but you overdrafted your body by using it. Meanwhile, he only needed to absorb some energy to refill his reserves.

Or perhaps he simply didn't know the price of his action, and fate would sooner or later come to collect.

Chapter 715: Ripples

A ripple spread through the web, and a small smile spread across Alvod's face. It looked Va Tapek's little disciple really did deliver. He had been worried there for a bit since he felt the node condensing. Luckily, the node was broken apart before the change was irrevocable.

Not that Catheya Sharva'Zi's role was critical to his designs. It was not like his path toward Eternity was so fragile that it couldn't take a few mishaps. It was only one conduit out of hundreds, most of which had been in place for eons. But the more lines that were added, the closer to perfection his tapestry would get. The fallout of this particular node wasn't as good as the constructed route, but it was good enough.

If anything, things were going above expectation. He should have guessed. Destruction always came easier than conservation, and change was part of the heavenly law. The real question was what the local natives had planned for the final step. They wouldn't roll over at the core of their foundation being extracted and stolen, especially not by an outsider.

Alvod waited with anticipation, and a shimmering drop suddenly appeared in front of him. It was dark green in color, though it sometimes felt it was golden or black. It hovered in the air, its very existence impacting reality around it. Death was not death. Life was not life. It was the cyclic harmony of twilight and daybreak, the eternal evening tides.

A small bead of Primal Dao. Truth condensed into the purest form the base dimensions could take without unraveling. Something that only formed naturally in the exalted domains, the cultivation havens that someone like him would never gain access to.

The Heavens had been gated off, and the ancient factions held the keys. You would either have to pursue the broken peaks or bend the knee for a chance to drink at the fountain of truth. But Alvod wasn't willing. His Path was within the purview of the Heavens, but he would never surrender his freedom.

Even his old friends thought his actions in the Havarok Empire were a matter of vengeance. They thought he had fled here and entered the Twilight Ocean like a rat scurrying for safety. It couldn't be further from the truth.

Reociv Havarok was a full-bodied bastard who deserved to die for what he did to Tola, but would Alvod really have risked everything if not for the item that had fallen into the princeling's possession? The item which now formed the core of the tapestry of life and death. Alvod had found half of the core before coming to power back in Zecia, and he had spent four hundred thousand years looking for its other half.

Yet that bastard had swooped in and accidentally got his hands on it just as Alvod was on the precipice of success. It was Alvod who brought that Immemorial Realm to the surface at the cost of most of his fortune. Yet that man had gotten his hands on the item without even understanding what he was dealing with?

He had no choice. If Reociv was allowed to bring that item back to his ancestors, they'd soon realize its true nature.

Tens of thousands of runes emerged from the tapestry and they formed layers after layers of seals and protections around the bead of truth. This realm was too lowly for it to contain a bead of pure Primal Dao for long. It would get tainted in no time, reduced to its baser components.

The sealed bead was soon interred into the tapestry, which caused shuddering waves to spread out through the patterns. The bead eventually joined the others in the core, and Alvod's eyes gleamed with anticipation as he saw that the beacon was three-quarters full. His cells screamed with desire as he looked at the Primal Dao, but he forced himself to look away. He knew that his chances were slim even if he managed to fill the chalice to the brim.

He needed to be patient. Just two more years.

“Hear ye, hear ye,” the ever-suffering grand marshal of the Kingdom of Billy sighed, still not fully understanding the nomenclature of his new overlords. “King Billy, Lord of Bonk Mountain has in his infinite wisdom sent out a divine decree, so listen well! The Divine Kingdom of Bonk Mountain requires more Dao Stones to be sourced for the conflict with the others! Every household will need to contribute 3 Dao Stones.”

The gathered Smallboys, or rather Gnivelings as they were called before King Billy’s grand impartment, listened on as their large ears shook with worry.

“We have been fishing for stones every week for the past four months,” one of the Smallboys said as he stepped forward. “We appreciate what King Billy has done to protect us in this new environment... but the stones are becoming scarce. We lost Lorom just two weeks ago.”

A few voices of agreement rippled through the crowd, causing Hanos’ brows to scrunch up. The Marshall nervously glanced toward the mountain, but he steeled his heart as he felt a tendril poke him between the shoulder blades. Hanos somewhat liked his new master, but he liked living even more.

“What do you know!” Hanos roared. “King Billy is who keeps us safe through his communion with the holy spirit. King Billy is the one who protects us from the badlands, tirelessly swinging the holy scepter for our salvation! But do you think such a sacrifice comes cheap? Do you think King Billy’s miracles can be created out of thin air? He needs more resources! No more complaints, set out right this instant!”

Some of the Gnivelings muttered and waved their oversized ears at the towering mountain, but most simply went to prepare their gear for excavating the Dao Rocks from beneath the ocean bed.

‘Good, just three more villages,’ a gleeful voice echoed in his mind.

‘What about King Billy? What if he finds out?’ Hanos cried in his mind ‘I don’t want to be bonked.’

‘I’ll deal with that. Besides, the great king has other things to worry about right now.’

Two weeks of fervent collection, but it was finally time. Ogras looked at the pile of Dao Stones with anticipation shimmering in his eyes. Over two years of arduous cultivation, and one year of planning. He was finally ready to leave that insufferable giant’s shadow.

Who would have expected a netherblasted Dimensional Seed to gain sapience? And who would have expected it to form such an intimate connection with that brute, when there were far more dashing candidates so close by? Was it because Billy saved these big-eared bastards while Ogras secured the treasures of the newly incorporated realm? Or was it simply because simpletons flocked together?

Things hadn’t been too bad in the beginning. Those Th’Zaroth Hivebeasts weren’t joking around, but they provided ample opportunities to hone one’s combat skills. With the air being teeming with the Dao, each day was a revelation. Be it skills, Daos, or even levels, everything came smoothly in this place. Even evolving skills was accomplished as naturally as breathing since you were in a constant state of inspiration.

Two months of slaughter, and the two of them had finally managed to kill the Hive queen and seize the enormous meteor that contained her hive. It had not only provided them with a Nexus Node, but also a large amount of food as the warrior ants were actually quite delicious.

But from there, things started to go awry.

It turned out that the Earth’s Nexus Nodes weren’t the only ones Ogras was locked out of. He was even unable to become the master of a desolate rock in a hidden realm. Instead, he was forced to once more don the mantle of the helpful advisor, steering Billy in the right direction. But he couldn’t understand why such a simple mind was so hard to control.

If anything, his experiences over the past three years had ingrained him with a deep respect for that bespectacled human that usually followed Billy's side. Nigel was his name? How did he manage to get anything done with this bastard holding the reins?

It was time to change his approach. He had tried so hard to get the brute to do the heavy lifting, but he was adamant about holding the fort rather than sending the troops to the depths of this ever-growing realm. And if he couldn't get others to pave the way, he would simply have to do the job himself. He could feel it. It was beckoning to him deep in the darkness. Something related to his path.

Something with the ability to reforge his fate.

Besides, it was now or never. It was clear that the pocket realm they lived inside was stabilizing. For over two years it had frantically moved about and swallowed one realm after another, but the sky seldom changed color any longer. Eventually, the Dimensional Seed would find some spot it liked and settle down.

And when that happened, it was just a matter of time before this place was discovered, before an entrance was drilled open and greedy bastards came swarming in. All these Hidden Realms collected, each of them most likely never touched by other men. Each of them full of unique treasures and opportunities.

He needed to snatch them all before the outsiders arrived.

"Behind you!" Bubbur roared, and Galau whirled around as his large two-hand sword drew a ruthless arc.

A desiccated head jumped out of the pirate's sleeve to bite down on the edge, but it shrieked and started to break apart when the corrosive acid smeared on the blade touched its mouth. It instinctively released its bite, which allowed Galau to finish the swing and cut both the guardian head and the pirate apart.

Galau sighed and looked around, relieved to see that things were finally calming down across the hidden base. These

situations could spiral out of control at moment's notice. Normally, that would have been a problem for the soldiers, but all hands were fighting hands in the Muscle Brigade, even his own.

A burning meteor suddenly slammed into the protective dome on the sky, and Galau hurriedly shot out a hook from his belt before he was dragged out into the void again. He wasn't really phased about the environmental array being broken though, since something like this happened weekly.

And the source of the chaos was often the same.

"Boss, watch out!" a man screamed. "You'll break the base before we've looted it."

"Sorry, sorry!" a rough voice laughed as Greatest Peak flew through the new entrance he had created. "This captain was pretty strong, I got a bit excited."

Galau sighed as he looked at the burning crater. The pirate captain's gear was definitely unsalvageable at this point. Again.

"Money brat! Stop moping around and get to counting," Bubbur said as he threw over two Cosmos Sacks.

"It's Quartermaster Gobao," Galau said as he took out his inspection table before he started scanning the contents of the sacks.

Most items were simply categorized in the back of his mind, while a few were taken out to be properly scanned.

"You mean Shartermaster?" another brigadier who came to turn in the haul sniggered, prompting a few roars of laughter.

"That was almost two years ago! And I was out on my mind on that hexbrew we found the day before!" Galau said with grit teeth before he shot a baleful glare at the laughing pirate hunters. "Go on, keep laughing. We'll see who gets their salary paid with Nexus Coins and Spatial Fragments, and who gets paid in unsellable scrap."

"I'll call you whatever you want the moment you can beat me," Bubbur laughed. "Now hurry up, boss has that glint in

his eyes.”

Galau groaned, but he still sped up as he looked through the Cosmos Sacks one by one in search of hidden markers. It was a common practice between these space brigands. They’d leave a concealed treasure or two among their hoarded loot, in case it was stolen. That way they could always find the loot again if stolen.

Others would turn into beacons warning anyone in the vicinity, making it impossible to sneak up on unsuspecting targets. He was making fast progress, but he got a sinking feeling as he saw Greatest walk over with the fires of war burning in his eyes.

“Wait, boss!” Galau entreated. “Just a few more minutes!”

“You know the rules,” Greatest said as he flashed forward, his fist ripping through the air with enough force to bend space itself.

Galau inwardly cried as he scrambled away, and he could only look on with despair as one Cosmos Sack after another was swallowed by the void caused by the swing. The most effective method to make sure you weren’t being tracked was to destroy everything.

This Heavencursed family.

Why did the pirate captain have to possess that taboo technology, which resulted in an epic clash between the Boss and a machine swarm outside the meteor? Now the madness of the fight had already claimed Greatest Peak, and anything that delayed him fighting another worthy adversary would be destroyed, even if it was a mountain of wealth.

“Let’s go, Shartermaster,” Bubbur said with a wry smile.

“There’s still the young boss. If we hurry you might be able to find some good things.”

Galau’s eyes lit up and he immediately jumped onto Bubbur’s Raider.

The Raiders were something they had looted two years ago after one of the tougher fights of the Muscle Brigade, and they had helped them adapt to this chaotic place tremendously. The

Raiders were small four-meter vessels that almost looked like umbrellas.

They only housed five people, they could barely turn, and they had no weaponry. But they had two very desirable features that had made them a fan-favorite among the brigadiers. First, they were extremely quick, cutting through the chaotic spatial waves like butter. Secondly, the front of the vessel, the umbrella, was both an extremely sturdy shield and an efficient Array Breaker.

Now, every time the Muscle Brigade found a target to interrogate, or rather rob, over a hundred Raiders shot out from the mothership like small meteors, each one manned by five bloodthirsty meatheads. Those who owned Raiders almost always reached the criminals, or rather prey, faster than the others.

Galau shook his head as Bubbur escorted him to the satellite base that Average was in charge of taking down. It was an intelligence post, but Galau didn't hold much hope that they would find what they were looking for this time either.

They had arrived over three years ago in the central region of the Million Gates Territory, and they had eventually managed to confirm that a Space Gate really was forming somewhere. However, Million Gates Territory was just too vast. More to the point, space was too chaotic, making any attempt at navigation nigh impossible.

So even after searching for two full years, they hadn't come any closer to figuring out where the gate actually was. For all they knew, it might have already stabilized, and an endless army was gathering at their gates without the Zecia sector knowing. Hopefully, that wasn't the case though.

It appeared like the invaders didn't have it too easy. The odd Spatial Ripples that was the source of the disaster were still ongoing, though they only affected the Million Gates Territory these days from what he'd heard. Forming a Space Gate between sectors through such turbulence should be impossible, or at least prohibitively expensive, for frontier forces

according to the boss, so they were most likely waiting for things to settle down.

Blood and a few corpses littered the halls as Bubbur crashed his Raider through the closest wall of the satellite base, but it looked like most of the defenses were the mechanized troops sold by the heretics hiding at the outer rims of the Million Gates Territory.

The cultivator in Galau despised these things, but the businessman in him almost salivated at the prospective earnings these taboo tools represented. He had seen just how money these items could bring in while visiting one of the Leviathans to trade and stock up on items. Unfortunately, these things were all slated for destruction now that the Muscle Brigade had its hands on them.

Galau found Average in the command room, and the young man nodded at Galau as he pointed at a small pile of Spatial Treasures. Three years of fighting pirates had completely reformed the youth, turning him into a capable warrior brimming with killing intent. However, the years in the heart of the Million Gates Territory had left their mark on Average, and he looked more like a pirate than pirate hunter by this point.

Then again, that could be said about himself as well, and Galau shook his head as he looked down at his scarred hands.

“Anything interesting?” Galau asked as he started scanning the Spatial Rings.

“I found it. I finally found it.”

Chapter 716: Relegation

There was no telling if there were some hidden downsides to his unique ability, but so far the only one seemed to be how hard it was to upgrade his Bloodline. He still held on to the **[Cardinal Kernel]** because of the events on the Memorysteel Mountain. He wanted to upgrade his bloodline to E-grade, but the moment probably needed to be right.

First of all, some random patch of seabed or cultivation cave wouldn't do. Just the awakening had eaten half the treasures in the mountain, there was no telling what the second awakening would require. He didn't want to waste the kernel by activating the process, only to find there wasn't enough fuel to power the whole evolution. Secondly, he needed to find a safe place, since he had been knocked clean out the last time.

What if some cultivators cropped up because of the chaos and decided to get some easy contribution points?

"I can't, and don't want to, go into detail on this ability," Zac eventually said to Catheya. "This mental trick is part of the agreement, so keep it to yourself, alright?"

If possible, he would have preferred using his Annihilation Sphere to take those people out rather than using **[Force of the Void]**. That way, Cahteya's memories would be erased as well. Unfortunately, he had no way to use the skill as an area attack that could target all six cultivators. He might have been able to take out the leader, but then the others would have escaped or retaliated.

Or perhaps the leader would have managed to avoid the strike like he almost avoided **[Arcadia's Judgement]** at which point Zac would be screwed since he would have lost the element of surprise.

"I know, I'm not an ingrate," Catheya snorted before she looked at him accusingly. "You know, it's a bit depressing to

travel with you. At first, I thought we were roughly at the same level, but now I'm finding that you weren't even exerting yourself before. How are people like me even supposed to get a shot when there are monsters like you walking around?"

"There is ultimately balance in the universe," Zac snorted. "Things are not as simple as they look."

"I know," Catheya nodded. "Heavy is the crown. I think it's the same with my ancestor. She should have the qualifications to become a real tycoon back home by now, but she's still maintaining her distance as her clan is falling apart. Who knows what kind of troubles she has encountered on her road to power."

"Falling apart?" Zac asked with a frown. "Is your clan in trouble?"

"Not trouble like extinction, but trouble nonetheless," Catheya sighed. "We are facing relegation."

"What? Relegation?" Zac asked as he looked at Catheya in confusion.

"I once told you that conflict within the Empire is disallowed, but that doesn't mean there isn't competition. Strength is ultimately the most important thing. Our clan has been in a steady decline for a long time, and we're risking being downgraded from a Middle-tier clan to an Entry-level clan," Catheya said. "We will lose large parts of our domains, which means even fewer cultivation resources. It'll probably exacerbate the decline even further."

"And that is why you wanted me to send a message to Be'Zi," Zac surmised.

"Exactly. I wanted her to tell her that Re'Zar Sharva'Zi is approaching his end. His chances at forming another step are bleak according to my father. He will leave on his final journey in fifty generations or so, and there is currently no one to take his place," Catheya said. "We have managed to keep the news sealed for now, but it's just a matter of time."

"Who's Re'Zar?" Zac asked.

“Ancestor’s lineal great-grandson,” Catheya said. “And our only Autarch.”

“What’s these steps you talked about?” Zac asked. “Is it related to the B-grade?”

“Yes,” Catheya nodded. “Gaining Autarchy is to form a ladder to Heaven, and the more steps you form the greater the foundation you build for this ladder. Each step adds not only power, but a large amount of longevity. Our ancestor is a One-Step Autarch, the lowest level. He’s already used too many longevity medicines, and a breakthrough is his only chance now.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It looked like having an Autarch, even if one at the lowest rung, was enough to be considered a Middle-tier clan in the Heartlands. That probably meant a low-tier clan had Divine Monarchs and powerful accumulations, and forces beneath that weren’t even considered proper clans.

Zac also felt that probably meant that a peak-stage Clan in the Undead Empire might not even have A-grade cultivators going by the grading of Clan Sharva’Zi, or at least not too many of them.

“Ancestor Be’Zi was an above-average Two-step Autarch when she left,” Catheya added. “For her to still be alive... She has to have reached the later stages of Autarchy, or perhaps even higher. If she returns, we’d not only avoid relegation, we’d instantly be promoted.”

No wonder Catheya was so eager to find her ancestor. It was really a matter of heaven or hell for her clan whether she returned. A clan falling from grace always led to a feeding frenzy, and Zac doubted that the commandments could completely protect against something like that. It was essentially heavenly law.

“So steps are a bit like Cosmic Cores? A bottleneck?” Zac asked.

“I can feel that I’m not allowed to discuss it,” Catheya said. “Autarchs are the main power of any empire since those above

rarely make a move. Knowledge is controlled.”

“Well, keep your secrets then,” Zac smiled.

“Like I have a choice,” Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. “But I can tell you that everyone who reaches that stage has once been Heaven’s Chosen or something even greater, yet less than one percent ever go beyond three steps. You could say that cultivators at that height live in defiance of the Heavens, even when walking Heaven’s Path. Every step is met with resistance.”

“Well, I guess that’s still far off from us,” Zac shrugged as he thought things over.

Catheya’s request was pretty simple; convey a short update of the situation of Clan Sharva’Zi. But Zac wasn’t sure if he could. He might be sent back to the underground cave and Be’Zi if he found the second Splinter of Oblivion, but that might very well have been a one-off thing that the System arranged for him.

“I might be able to relay your message. The question is, what can you provide in return?” Zac said after a while.

“I’ll hold nothing back when teaching you all the insights and corpse-raising methods my master has imparted,” Catheya said. “You can even keep the information crystals.”

“That’s part of the previous deal,” Zac snorted. “Do you have any other information from your clan that can be useful for me? “

“To be clear, I can only teach you things my master has imparted me with. I can’t divulge any of Clan Sharva’Zi’s methods, same as with any descendant you meet,” Catheya said.

“Your master is not part of the clan?” Zac asked with interest.

“Only partly,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Master Va Tapek an old friend of the third Supreme Elder of Clan Sharva’Zi. He joined us as an exterior elder, but he’s not very restrained. I’ve gained most of my methods from him rather than the clan, and he never restricted me from teaching others.”

It really looked like Clan Sharva'Zi was in decline. Catheya's master wasn't even a Divine Monarch from what Zac had heard, yet the clan couldn't demand much of anything from the sounds of it. Also, there there was still one question that puzzled Zac quite a bit.

"Why you?" Zac asked with confusion. "Why would a high-tier Monarch take you under his wing and take you all over the frontier? They don't usually do that, right?"

"You should have already seen it; we are both Ice Warriors," Catheya explained before she deflated a bit. "Also... I happen to be the descendant of the third Supreme Elder. His youngest daughter, in fact."

"So, your Master is kind of doing his buddy a favor by taking on?" Zac guessed, getting a glare in return.

"I might not be some dual-race indestructible weirdo, but I have my strong points as well. My Ice affinities are among the top three in my generation in the clan. I have at least five Hidden Nodes, and I natively opened one of them," Catheya said with a haughty demeanor. "And a powerful father is a talent as well, proves I have strong genes."

"Natively what?" Zac asked, ignoring the latter part. "You mentioned that word before as well."

"How do you know so little when you obviously have so powerful backing?" Catheya muttered with exasperation. "It means I opened one of my hidden nodes upon birth. I could use some of its effects while in F-grade, while it was completely unlocked the moment I evolved."

"Something like that's possible?" Zac exclaimed. "Which one did you open?"

Zac hoped to gain some insight into the hidden nodes of the Draugr, in case there were still some lurking in his body. His three hidden nodes were all connected to his Void Emperor-bloodline and seemed to form a closed system, but that didn't mean there weren't more of them to open.

"I guess it's fair you know some after what you've displayed to save me," Catheya said after some hesitation. "It's a special

hidden node related to my nose.”

“Your nose?” Zac repeated with a blank look.

“It’s very sharp,” Catheya added.

“A very sharp nose,” Zac sagely nodded. “Impressive.”

“It’s a natural scouting ability that can help me with everything from finding treasures to spotting hidden enemies. It allowed me to sense your Draugr heritage all back in the Base Town! Well, whatever. A brute like you wouldn’t understand a good thing if it hit you in the face,” she huffed.

“I can try sending a message, but your master’s scattered methods aren’t enough considering they are part of our earlier agreement. I want a top-grade treasure as well,” Zac said.

“One equivalent to the things the top 1,000 combatants could get from the Fate Plucking-trial.”

“If I had anything like that, I would have already used it on myself,” Catheya said with exasperation.

“There are still almost three years to go in this place, right?” Zac smiled. “Between killing off people and exploring the depths, you should get your hands on one. If you hand one over to me before the trial ends, then I’ll try to send a message when I return.”

“Why must I find it myself?” Catheya frowned. “Do you think you can just pick those things up from the ground? Only a handful are excavated every Ascent, and seldom by people like me. My master can get one in short order after we leave though.”

“No deal,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “This is non-negotiable. Lucky for you this is a double trial. Your odds are a lot better than normal.”

Things had already progressed to this point. There was no way he’d stay along a second longer than needed in the Twilight Harbor. Between Catheya discovering his true form and Alea wanting to eat the Twilight Fruits, he had pretty much given up on the Fate-Plucking Ladder unless something changed.

It was better to leave the trial a few months early and slink away before anything could happen. After that, he'd have around ninety years to sound out whether Catheya betrayed his secrets and what the Undead Empire's response would be.

"... I'll try, but you have to understand that you're asking the impossible from me," Catheya entreated. "Please, this is a matter of life and death for my clan. Isn't there anything else I can do for you? On the outside or in here?"

Hearing the last part gave Zac another idea and he quickly made a decision.

"There is one other thing," he slowly said. "I am looking for two particular spots in this Trial, and they should be around the middle reaches. Find the exact location of those two places, and I'll try to convey the message."

"That's it?" Catheya asked skeptically. "Just the location of the two spots?"

"That's it," Zac said. "Deal?"

"Absolutely," Catheya quickly nodded. "Do you have a description?"

Zac immediately described the two locations of the two remnants as best as he could remember them from the vision back in the Mystic Realm, along with the hints he had gathered so far. He figured he could have Catheya find those two places while he checked out the Chasm and got rid of the brand this Va Tapek had left in his body.

"Never heard of those two places, and they're not in the private missives of my clan. But I should definitely be able to find them within the year," Catheya nodded. "What's special about them?"

"Don't enter those places," Zac said. "Only trouble waits in there."

"No wonder you're looking for them then," Catheya laughed. "Trouble seems to follow you wherever you go. Do you know that your home sector is currently in isolation because of you? We barely got out."

“What? What did I do?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Because of the thing you summoned in the Tower of Eternity,” Catheya said. “Apparently, that stele is some weird artifact older than the System itself. Wherever it appears, conflict will appear. The higher-ups are afraid that just its apparition will cause spread chaos across the frontier after you summoned it, so Zecia has been quarantined. No ships in or out. Of course, it’s impossible to keep completely sealed, especially when the Heavens thrive on conflict.”

“No wonder,” Zac sighed, remembering how that huge ogre at the Big Axe Coliseum had mentioned that war was coming.

Was it all his fault? He quickly shook his head. It couldn’t be, he was just a small fry who could barely impact the fate of a single planet. If anything, it was on the System. It was the System that conjured that apparition, not he. And since the System wanted a conflict in Zecia, it would accomplish it one way or another.

That alone was barely a comfort as he thought of the chaos and loss of life that a Sector-wide war would bring. Unfortunately, he was still just a nobody. He wouldn’t be able to impact the situation as he was right now. He could only push himself to get stronger, and once he reached the top, he’d be able to prevent things like this from going out of control.

The two sat in silence and continued to recuperate and cultivate for a few more hours, but eventually, it was time to go. They had completed their task as best as they could, and Catheya still hadn’t sensed any of her followers coming down to look for her. She was anxious to get back to the surface, and Zac was eager to go get the Life-Death Fruits.

They simply picked the tunnel at the top of the chute they had rested in and followed whatever path had the least ambient life-attunement energies. Their efforts paid off over the next hours as they kept ascending until the energy was barely marked by the Living Pulse.

“We should be coming in on the surface by now,” Catheya said.

“Alright. Give me a second,” Zac said, making Catheya look over with confusion.

Zac jogged over to a secluded section out of Catheya’s sight and erected an illusion array around him before he closed his eyes as he let waves of Cosmic Energy spread through his body. He kept this going for over a minute until he finally activated his Duplicity Core. A wave of Miasma spread through his body, and he was back in his Arcaz personality a few seconds later. It was the best he could do to obfuscate the exact details of his transformation for the moment.

“So weird. Is the Twilight Energy even affecting you at all?” Catheya said with a shake of her head when Zac returned, and he only smiled in response as he passed her by on the way to the exit.

They were almost at the crest, and both of them readied themselves for battle just in case. The waters above them were mostly neutral in flavor, but it was still a stretch that passed right above the Living Pulse, and there would definitely be numerous cultivators passing. Two Draugr would definitely stick out if discovered, and they were pretty lucky they hadn’t run into a single group since taking out the Havarok squad.

Truthfully, his actions beneath the surface might have worked in their favor in unexpected ways. The upheavals he caused might have been felt all the way to the surface, and who’d dare venture into some tunnels that could come crashing down on you at moment’s notice? The last stretch was too narrow to pass through, but they were so far from the Living Pulse by this point that Zac simply cut it apart, creating a tunnel to leave through.

“Two signals!” Catheya exclaimed with glee the moment they emerged from the underground. “It should be Varo and Qirai!”

Chapter 717: Radiant Temple

Two signals were better than nothing, but it also meant that yet another one of their squad was down for the count. Only a month had passed, yet they were approaching the average 50% casualty rate for the Twilight Ascent. This trial was bound to be a bloody chapter in the history of the Twilight Harbor.

“Where do the signals from?” Zac asked as he scanned the surroundings for enemies.

“Half a day away, toward where the Living Pulse will emerge,” Catheya said as she started to move in that direction. “They must have figured I’d appear somewhere close to the outlet.”

Zac nodded and followed suit, and they started to make way through the dense underbrush of the ocean. Luckily, the area was full of seaweed growing over two meters wide and fifty meters tall, providing them with ample cover as long as they hid their energy signatures. That along with Catheya’s node-empowered nose, they didn’t encounter any trouble until they reached the spot.

It was a nondescript part of a ridge that ran along the direction of the living pulse, with neither any entrances nor cracks to show for it. Catheya was still sure it was the right spot, and she walked over and knocked with a certain pattern on the stone. A door appeared out of nowhere a few seconds later, and Qirai peered outside.

“It’s good that you’re fine,” Qirai said with relief before she shot a glare at Zac. “You’re still around?”

“Still around,” Zac smiled as he looked the Titan up and down. “You look worse for the wear.”

It was true, the Titan looked like she had been through a few tribulations to match Zac's own. Qirai sported a nasty burn on her left cheek, and it looked like it stretched down beneath her clothes all the way to her left hand. Her aura was also a bit unstable, and Zac guessed her soul was slightly wounded.

"Are you alright? What's going on?" Catheya asked with worry. "And where's Varo?"

"Varo's inside, sealed," Qirai sighed. "He's hurt pretty bad."

"Who did it? Sharpo?" Catheya asked as they stepped inside the hideout, a hint of killing intent leaking from her body.

"No. She's either dead or escaped," Qirai said with a shake of her head as she sealed the door behind them. "You think she was the traitor?"

"Probably not. We got dragged beneath the surface," Catheya said. "We met Yod there. If not for Mr. Black here, I would be dead."

"Oh?" Qirai exclaimed with surprise, her previously hostile gaze making a drastic turn. "Thank you."

"Nothing to it. I got caught in his trap as well, after all," Zac smiled.

"Take me to Varo," Catheya urged. "I'll see what I can do."

There were just two rooms in the dugout, with Varo being in the inner one. He was lying in a coffin that reminded Zac a lot of the one he had gotten for Alea back then. His state was in even worse shape than expected, with extensive burns covering his body. His left arm essentially looked like a scorched twig, and Zac wasn't sure that was something that could be restored with healing pills, no matter how good they were.

Not only that, but there was a blistering heat coming from within Varo's body, no doubt from some fire-pected Dao hidden inside the assassin's body. Zac figured the two must have met an incredibly powerful fire-based cultivator, considering he could cause such extensive damage even inside an ocean that should weaken his or her attacks a bit.

“Who did this?” Catheya asked again, the room temperature decreasing by a noticeable margin.

“After the ship broke apart, the two of us and the ghost found ourselves next to the Living Pulse without a ship,” Qirai sighed. “Sharpo wanted to split up, but how could we let her just slink away? She might have been the traitor. We caught her and started making our way here. We figured that you’d appear around these parts one way or another as long as you survived getting dragged away by the stream.

“But this section is ultimately controlled by the living, and no one who has made it this far already is a weakling,” Qirai continued with a grimace. “We got ambushed by a trio from the Kalvan Clan but managed to kill one and chase the other two away. We weren’t as lucky when we ran into a group from the Radiant Temple.”

“The Radiant Temple? Not one of their Subsidiaries?” Catheya exclaimed with surprise. “How..?”

Zac knew what she wanted to ask. The Radiant Empire was different than The Undead Empire in that it was a relatively small force. Certainly, they had billions and billions of members, but that was still nothing compared to the endless citizens of the Undead Empire or even the Havarok Empire.

The Radiant Temple rather ruled over tens of thousands of subsidiary clans, empires, and sects than having direct control. They only set up Subsidiary offices called Temples of Radiance in the subsidiary sectors, though it was more apt to call them tax collection agencies. Altogether, they controlled an area over fifty times the size of the Zecia sector, but those who were actually part of the Temple were vanishingly small in number compared to the actual number of cultivators within their domain.

The Radiant Temple used those subsidiary sectors for two things; generating resources through taxes and treasure collection, and to scout for talents. Most peak talents of the subsidiary factions were absorbed into the Temple, while the elders of the subsidiary faction got a hefty reward in return.

That way they maintained control, while also got talented seedlings sent to them from left and right.

That also meant the true members of the Radiant Temple were the best of the best in not only a B-grade Empire, but also dozens of subsidiary Sectors. The Havarok squad they met could have been anything from some lowly clan to just soldiers in the Havarok Army, but members of the Radiant Temple were all the real deal.

How were Qirai and Varo still alive if these kinds of people came for them?

“It was luckily just a scouting party of three members, two of which were employed locals,” Qirai said. “It was the real members who unleashed an attack that destroyed everything when we needed to flee. It was like a supernova that went off. I managed to block out most of it, but I think Sharpo got swallowed entirely. Varo is as... You can see.”

Catheya nodded heavily as she took out a stopper and poured its contents over Varo’s body, causing them to emit sizzling sounds. After that, she placed an ice-blue gem on his chest, and the fiery energy coming from his body was quickly getting suppressed.

“He’ll heal, but he’ll be out for a while. Even then, he might have to make a transition,” Catheya sighed before she turned to Zac. “Do you have any means to help?”

The transition Catheya mentioned was either to shed his mortal coil to become a specter or become a Corpse-lord. Both came with demerits though. Few cultivator’s classes skillsets were meant to be used as ghosts, and you’d lose a chunk of your power that way. Reaching Hegemony would become a lot harder as well.

Meanwhile, adding outsiders’ body parts to your own unavoidably created some issues with affinities and rejection.

“I have some good pills I Bought from the Karabas Pill house, but that’s about it. My only healing skill is the one I got at your place,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

Truthfully, Zac did believe that it might be possible to use his Mark of Creation to fix Varo's arm. The Revenant was in a coma, and his will shouldn't impact the process of creation unless he woke up. But Zac had already exposed two of his major secrets in just a few days, and he definitely wouldn't expose the third just to speed up Varo's recuperation.

Also, the Creation Energy was his personal ace that could both save his life or destroy an enemy.

"Alright," Catheya sighed as she turned to Qirai. "We can't stay here, especially not after the chaos we caused beneath the surface. Furthermore, more and more of the living will appear over the coming days, passing through toward the depths."

"So what's next?" Zac asked.

"We have lost three members of our party, and one is taken out of commission. The casualty rate is over 50%, allowing me to cancel the operation. There is one more node we should have visited originally, but we'll skip it. If anything, we've already performed above expectation. We have completed more than half of our assigned task," Catheya said.

"So, the peals?" Zac said as a smile spread across his face.

"Right, greedy fellow," Catheya smiled with a shake of her head. "The pearls. Do you have any spare vessels we can use?"

Soon enough the group set out on the vessel that Zac had found in the Spatial ring of the leader of the Havorak group. It was made from a large spiraled shell, and it could thankfully be powered by anyone as long as it was fueled by Nexus Crystals. Varo had saved the purification array when the vessel sunk, and Zac was once more put in the awkward situation where his soul tempering was put on hold.

There was not much to do about the situation though as they had entered the middle reaches of the ocean.

The Twilight Energy had already gone from an uncomfortable annoyance to real suppression for Catheya and Qirai, and both needed a proper environment to focus on recuperation. It wasn't the end of the world though, as it looked like Zac

would ultimately save two weeks by skipping the final target on the side mission.

Instead, they were shooting straight toward the Life-Death Pearls with Qirai on the wheel while Catheya and Zac used the purification array for eight hours each in turn. Qirai would use it for four hours, after which they let it be turned off for the final four. The past weeks had been pretty boring while maintaining the array, but this time Zac was immersed in swallowing up all the knowledge Catheya had to offer.

First, they covered the basic knowledge of fractals and how they related to skills and arrays. A lot of what Catheya knew about the subject leaned toward Miasma and Ice, but the rules were still generally applicable. The most important was the large number of solutions, methods, and practical examples of upgrading skill fractals that Catheya provided.

Upgrading skills was actually a pretty straightforward subject if you simply wanted the same skill but stronger. The process was sort of a mini-test by the System, where you had to prove at least a basic understanding of the runes to succeed. It was essentially the same thing as redrawing pathways, but you had to figure out the new pattern yourself based on your knowledge and the general rules that the Apostate of Order had set up.

Of course, if you diligently followed a Heritage, your predecessors had already performed the heavy lifting for you. Everyone still needed to make some personal modifications though. Pathways were like a thumbprint; each one unique and based on one's body. If you completely followed the patterns of others, you were bound to end up with a skill that only partially matched your pathways.

Furthermore, the greater your understanding of the Dao and your skills were, the more you could do with the upgrade.

Skill fractals were somewhat rigid in most cases, where you couldn't just redraw them as you wanted like you could do with pathways. But if you cut off a skill fractal from your path network you could temporarily extract it from your body, at

which point the fractal would turn malleable for a limited duration.

That way you could perform the changes you needed to perform to take the skill from F-grade to E-grade. The arrays that Zac had purchased back in the Twilight Harbor helped with this exact process, both providing suggestions and prolonging the duration that the skill fractal could stay out of the body without taking too much damage.

A skilled hand could use that window of time to also make changes to make the skill better fit your needs and pathways. That meant you could walk away with a skill that was not only a grade higher, but you could even get a skill that was higher quality and better suited to your path. But conversely, if you lacked proficiency and understanding, you could mess up so much that the skill was degraded to a lower-quality skill.

Or even destroy the skill fractal altogether.

Seeing as more than half of Zac's skills already were peak quality thanks to getting an Epic class at F-grade, it also meant that there was pretty only one way to go; down. So, the most important thing for him was to gain an understanding of the process and gain enough proficiency that he could evolve the skill to the point that he could evolve them without them going from peak to high quality.

Zac had already read through a lot of materials on the subject, but it was still eye-opening to get access to the knowledge of a High-grade Monarch. A lot of the information he had gathered until this point was broad and only scratched the surface, but Catheya had given him a set of crystals that covered tens of thousands of different patterns, and how to properly upgrade them without losing efficacy on the upgrade.

After just three weeks Zac had already managed to form preliminary schematics for most of his skills, barring the more complex skill fractals between his two classes. There were no guarantees, but he felt like he was ready to start putting theory to practice as soon as he had upgraded his Daos and gained some better understanding.

Next was the general knowledge of necromancy. Zac already knew some parts, but he still learned a lot over the following two weeks. For example, Zac had assumed that all turned cultivators restarted at level one because of his experience, but that wasn't actually the case. Revenants naturally lost around one grade upon being turned, but that could be reduced by "locking" some of the energy inside the body quickly after killing them.

Conversely, you could actually make the bodies lose even more if you wanted to retrain the follower from the ground up. For example, getting the level-kill titles were a lot easier for low-leveled cultivators. The easiest way to do this was to place drainage arrays on the corpse that worked a lot like the one that almost killed Catheya before. Unfortunately, progress on this front wasn't quite as smooth as it was for his skill upgrades.

"I know I called you a meathead, but this is ridiculous!" Catheya said one day as she looked at Zac's 'array', which more looked like a series of squiggly lines. "How are you this bad at energy control? You're a pureblood!"

"You know my situation," Zac sighed as he shook the **[Stone of Hope]** in front of Catheya.

"Oh, right," Catheya said as she thought things over. "Well, I guess you technically don't need to make these arrays yourself. But you would be reliant on an array master to properly perform the arts. But if you get to that point, you might as well hand over the whole process to a subordinate, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess," Zac sighed. "Let's go back to the skill fractals."

The lessons kept going for another week, at which point Zac felt the vessel slow down. A minute later Qirai entered the study he and Catheya used.

"We're almost there. I think we should go the final bit on foot," the Titan said.

"How is Varo?" Catheya asked.

“Still unconscious,” Qirai said with a grimace.

“Alright,” Catheya said, looking a bit downcast before she turned to Zac. “You can’t carry him in that coffin of yours, right?”

“Not if you want him to ever come out again,” Zac wryly smiled.

“Alright. Well, we can’t leave him here. Qirai, you’ll fashion the casket into a backpack like Mr. Black’s. Make it so that it’s quickly detachable in case of battle,” Catheya said. “We’ll bring him with us that way. Harvesting the Pearls will take a week or two. Hopefully, he’ll wake up in time.”

Chapter 718: Hollowtongue Mountains

“So this is the place?” Zac asked as he dragged his axe out of the head of the corpse.

They were currently at a depth of over three thousand meters, gazing at a submerged mountain range. It reminded Zac a bit of Earth back home, in the sense that it looked like this particular mountain had been dropped in the middle of nowhere through randomization. The seabed he stood on was made from the same golden-green sand as the rest of the Twilight Ocean, but the mountain in front of them was wrought from some completely different material.

It was neither the white or golden often synonymous with life, and neither did it have the murky hues of death. It was rather a deep blue, and Zac didn't feel like the area leaned toward either life or death. Yet it was undeniable that the energy in the area was the strongest they had encountered so far, like there was a Nexus Vein hiding beneath the mountain in front of them.

This could be both a good and a bad thing. Good in the sense that it probably meant there were a lot of valuable things growing in this place, a chance to pocket some valuables. Bad in the sense that the mountain was huge, and missing it was pretty hard. They had already spotted three parties in short order, one of which had tried to take them out only to find themselves outmatched.

It wasn't really thanks to Catheya or Qirai, though they had fought valiantly. It was he who had singlehandedly taken out more than half of the other group in a furious offense. Even in these conditions, he was completely fine, though he started to suspect that his cheat-like advantage had a best-before date.

His death-attuned ocean was fast filling up with the truths hidden in the Twilight Energy. In three months or so it'd reach saturation, perhaps even sooner if he kept going further toward the heart of the Twilight Ocean.

There was still the life-attuned half of his mind that had barely gained any improvements so far, but it was obvious that he would reach a limit long before the trial was over unless he stayed a Draugr the whole time. But for now, the situation gave him a huge advantage against the other competitors in the Mystic Realm.

Elites who would normally put up a tough fight got steamrolled as they could barely exhibit half of their strength.

“What’s the matter with you?” Catheya sighed as she looked down at the corpses strewn around Zac, though Qirai looked a lot more appreciative.

The titan nodded with respect toward Zac as she handed her mistress the corpse of the cultivator she took out. Her demeanor in general had taken a complete turn since he and Catheya had returned from the underworld. Catheya had briefly gone over the events, though they had obviously been severely modified to protect his hidden identity.

Still, the fact that Zac had not only saved Qirai’s master a few times, but also singlehandedly taken out a powerful squad in an adverse situation, was all she needed to open up. They hadn’t spoken much on the way here considering Zac had been busy with his studies and Qirai with steering the vessel and keeping a lookout for enemies, but she had often come by offering some liquor during their free time.

“Almost two months I’ve spent teaching you the basics of internment and necromancy. What’s the first rule?” Catheya continued as she stowed away Qirai’s and her own corpse.

“Don’t destroy the heads,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

“There were seven of them, and they were pretty strong. Not much of a choice. If you always worry more about their bodies than taking enemies out as quickly and cleanly as possible, you’ll sooner or later get yourself killed.”

“Well, I guess you’re right in a sense. And to answer your question; yes, this should be the place,” Catheya nodded as she turned toward the sapphire-hued peaks. “This is the Hollowtongue Mountains, and the pearls are supposed to be hidden in a valley here.”

“Hollowtongue? Pretty weird name,” Zac muttered. “And how hidden can the valley be in the middle of an ocean? Can’t we just swim up to the surface and look around?”

“First of all, that’d make us a target for others staying within this mountain range. Secondly, this whole mountain is a natural formation. You can’t enter it from above, you need to go through one of the formation eyes,” Catheya explained.

“What happens if you try to cheat?” Zac asked curiously as he tried to find any clues of the formation she was talking about.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll just get trapped or thrown out. If unlucky, you’ll be led to a death zone,” Qirai said as she scratched her stomach lazily. “It’s the same with a lot of places like this. Unless you have the means to see through the natural formation or the power to force your way through, you better avoid messing around.”

“Passing through by skill is absolutely impossible considering your talent for arrays,” Catheya added with a wink. “Also, natural formations contain the power of nature itself, they are much harder to break open than a manufactured array.”

“So your map was essentially just to lead us to a well-known mountain range?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “I’ve even read about this place in my public information packet.”

“Well, first of all, the pearls appear at different spots, if they appear at all during a trial. Knowing they could be found in these mountains is a huge advantage. There are hundreds of places like this out there, along with endless stretches of nothingness,” Catheya said. “Secondly, I will be able to find the general direction we need to move in. For now, let’s go inside. Our battle might have drawn some attention.”

Zac took out his information packet to brush up as they swam toward one of the valleys that apparently acted as an entrance

to the mountain range, but there wasn't really much to go by. Nala's package didn't contain anything about this place, but another missive had a short excerpt.

The Hollowtongue Mountains were named after a specific beast that lived in large numbers in the caverns and trenches below the surface. They had tongues with stingers that contained extremely condensed Twilight Energy, which was essentially a poison to humans and the undead alike. It also mentioned that the whole place was a huge confusion array just like Catheya said, and that it was almost useless to simply trust your eyes.

Furthermore, the mountain range was subtly rearranged between each trial, so preparing maps beforehand was futile. Everything was up to chance unless you had some means to traverse the mountain range, which it thankfully looked like Catheya had.

"The deal still holds. We'll harvest pearls for a week before we leave. Remember, the pearls start losing efficacy after a month, and it will take a while to absorb each. You'll probably want to find a secluded spot as quickly as possible," Catheya said as she took out an astrolabe that looked a lot like the one she used to find her way in the tunnels a few months back.

"What about me?" Zac asked as he looked up at astrolabe. "You have that thing, but how will I get out of here afterward if it's a big confusion array? What if I'm stuck in here for three full years? I have other things on my plate."

"We had a few simple spare compasses," Catheya slowly said with an odd expression. "But it turns out we sort of lost them when Varo was attacked."

"The compasses aren't very rare though," Qirai quickly said when she saw Zac eye Catheya's astrolabe. "We'll probably stumble into some people on the way, and we can pick up a compass from them. In fact, these people we fought might have one."

"Even without, it's not too difficult to leave," Catheya added with a smile. "You just need to stay in the valleys rather than mountain tops and travel toward what looks like the exit."

You'll run into a few dead ends, but you'll be out within a week or two."

"That's fine then," Zac nodded as he started scanning the Cosmos Sacks of the fallen ambushers.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything like that in the four sacks he rummaged through. He did however gain over 80 Twilight Fruits in one go. It really started to become clear that killing was the most efficient method of harvesting these things. He had only gotten his hands on 30 or so through his own efforts while gaining more than ten times that number through kills.

In fact, the early and middle reaches were probably starting to get cleaned out by this point. If you wanted to harvest more the normal way, you'd have to enter the inner reaches where fewer cultivators roamed.

He was out of luck in his haul, but Catheya fared better, perhaps since she had targeted the leader. She threw over a wooden compass toward Zac with a smile. "Here you go. Now you don't need to look at me with such scary eyes. This thing is not as nice as mine, but it is easy to use. If you reach a crossing, the markers will point along the energy flow. If you want to leave, go in the opposite direction."

"Great," Zac smiled as he fiddled with the compass a bit before he stowed it away.

The group entered the mountain range, and they didn't even get the chance to move for more than a few minutes before a school of piranha-like fish shot toward them from what looked like a crystal beehive. Catheya tried to freeze them all, but they actually bit their way through the ice block.

Zac immediately activated [**Deathmark**], shrouding the area in a corrosive haze to take care of the frenzied beasts but he was shocked to find the little things scuttling through the black waters barely affected. They were barely phased as they swam straight toward their group, though a few wraiths appeared and took out a good chunk of them in a few wide swings.

"Persistent bastards," Qirai grunted as she released a mighty punch that contracted space itself.

Hundreds of piranhas were instantly crushed, and the rest were slowly whittled down over the next minute. Eventually, the whole area was filled with thousands of mangled carcasses. The toothy beasts weren't very strong, but they possessed durability that far exceeded expectations. Their bite was quite powerful as well, and even Zac had a few marks that bled some ichor.

It was the same with Qirai, while Catheya didn't even dare to get bit by the things. She had enclosed herself in a frosty barrier while sending out icicles from within.

"Are these the Hollowtongues?" Zac asked he held the frenzied little fish in his hand, trying to see inside its maw.

"No," Catheya said with a shake of her head as she swam over to the beehive. "Just some local wildlife. You should prepare yourself. We have mostly traveled inside a submersible over the past months. The beasts we'll encounter from here on out will be far more powerful compared to the ones who lived by the shores of the starting continent."

She formed an icy blade and cut the whole thing off from the mountain wall it was attached to, prompting Zac to look over curiously.

"These guys don't seem very palatable, but I could smell some roe from inside. It seems pretty delicious," Catheya explained.

"I didn't take you for a foodie," Zac commented.

"What's the use of great longevity if you don't fill the years with interesting things?" Catheya laughed. "It wasn't that long since I gained the ability to eat, there are all kinds of things I haven't had the opportunity to try out yet."

With Qirai carrying the still-unconscious Varo on her back, the trio continued, and Zac quickly became completely lost. The natural formation was clearly messing with his senses, and it felt like the mountains were completely foreign to him when looking back. It was lucky he had found the compass in such a timely manner.

Catheya didn't seem to be thrown by the formation though, and they only occasionally stopped for her to find the direction

with her astrolabe. They did also have to hide or detour a few times to avoid nearby groups. It wasn't really that they were afraid, but they were all far more interested in the Life-Death Pearls at the moment.

There would be plenty of time for looting and pillaging after they had made their Dao breakthroughs.

The state of the mountain range also filled them with some urgency. They passed spiritual trees now and then, including those which grew Twilight Fruits, but they had all been plucked clean. Some cultivators had probably rushed this place and plucked the whole mountain range clean of any easy-to-harvest treasures.

The Life-Death pearls were supposedly in a very hard-to-find spot, but no one wanted to take any detours after seeing how they were a bit late to the party already. Eventually, Catheya turned and started swimming up along a mountain peak.

"Follow close, we'll pass through the formation here," Catheya explained as she turned to Zac. "Can you connect us?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to climb the peaks?" Zac asked as he sent out two chains toward both Catheya and Qirai.

"We have to if we want to reach the valley," Catheya said as she looked at Zac and Qirai. "Just let me drag you two from here on out. Don't elongate the chains, and don't expel Miasma. The formation will test you, and if you expend any energy or unleash a skill you will put us in danger."

Zac nodded, and he soon felt the pull as Catheya pushed herself forward by doing a classic breaststroke rather than pushing herself forward with Miasma. Suddenly, she simply disappeared, making it look like the chain of **[Love's Bond]** was cut off two meters ahead. Zac first considered trying to catch up, but he eventually stilled his nerves and stayed his hand.

After a while the chain turned, and his brows rose when he found himself heading straight toward a sharp piece of rock

jutting out from the mountain wall. He gritted his teeth and braced himself, but the spike disappeared as he passed right through it. Things continued like this with one scene replacing another, and Zac found himself ramming into everything from illusory thorny bushes to large predatory beasts.

But after half an hour it all stopped, and Zac spotted Catheya floating right ahead, standing at the entrance of a valley as she played with the chain of **[Love's Bond]**. Was this another illusion? Zac looked around for a good minute before he felt he could confirm that this was all real.

He sighed in relief as he swam over, his nerves pretty frayed after being assaulted by an endless series of illusions for so long. His Danger Sense and powerful soul had ultimately told him that the things he saw were fake, but that knowledge didn't help much when you stared into the maw of a twenty-meter piranha.

"We made it," Catheya said with a smile as she saw Zac's approach.

"Only cost us half the crew," Qirai muttered with a sardonic grin as she caught up as well.

"Well, the core members are still around at least," Catheya sighed before turned to Zac with a spurious smile. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to sit still for this one. A lone wolf putting his life in the hands of someone else? It's been hard on you."

"Well, I figured I was sturdy enough to take a hit or two in case the visions were real," Zac snorted. "So this is the place? No wonder you said it was safe. You'd need some dumb luck to find this valley without the directions."

The valley was surrounded by peaks, and the only thing here were dozens of things that looked a lot like oysters spread out with a few hundred meters between them. Each of them was well over a meter wide, making Zac wonder just how big these Life-Death Pearls actually were.

"It's secluded, but I doubt we're the only group looking for this place. There is no time to waste," Catheya said.

“So how do we harvest these things?” Zac asked. “I searched high and low for information back in the Twilight Harbor, but I couldn’t find anything specific.”

“It’s not too difficult,” Catheya said as she led the group toward the closest oyster. “These things continuously feed on the ambient truths of the Twilight Ocean. You need to cut off its head and then quickly infuse it with your Dao. This will trick it that it’s evolving rather than dying, and it will condense all its insights into a pearl that is somewhat similar in function to a Beast Core.”

“Can you infuse it with any Dao? Like my Axe Dao?” Zac asked curiously. “And are there any differences to the quality of the pearls depending on the Dao you use?”

“No. Your Dao is just there to trigger the process. The only benefit of a powerful Dao is that the pearl formation becomes a bit quicker,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “And the Daos you use have to be related to Life or Death for these plants to be tricked. No one has managed to find any other Dao-type that works. Mixed-meaning Daos from different branches are fine as long as Life and Death take a major role, but nothing else.”

Chapter 719: Mixed Meanings

“Mixed Dao works, huh,” Zac muttered as he looked out across the valley.

His vision had been broadened quite a bit over the past 40-odd days he had been under the tutelage of Catheya. The focus had been on skills and necromancy, but everything was interconnected when it came to cultivation. Catheya simply had a much broader vantage coming from a powerful clan in a massive empire, in addition to having a Monarch to personally guide her. The basic understanding that formed the foundation of her lessons contained as much new information as the lessons themselves.

They had touched upon the system of Daos a bit as well when talking about upgrading skills. The last time he got some sort of rundown into how Daos were interrelated was all the way back when he met Anzonil during the hunt. He had gathered a few more missives since then, but they were just things that were publicly shared in a frontier sector. They were nothing compared to the information crystals Catheya got from her master.

The biggest shock was that Chaos actually wasn't the sole Supreme Dao.

That simple fact had completely thrown his worldview for a spin. As Zac understood it before, Creation and Oblivion were the peak Daos, with the unattainable Chaos on the top. This was the pure path he thought, with other all Daos subservient. The Dao of Chaos was definitely a top-tier Dao, but it was just one of many peaks. There were others just like it.

For example, the Dao of Axe was not part of either Life or Death it turned out. Zac had thought it a branch of Oblivion,

but it was rather part of the “Truths of Conflict”-grouping along with other weapon Daos. Space and Time belonged to their own groupings as well, as did the elements.

Furthermore, his particular path leading toward Chaos wasn't part of the System's domain. Zac had already guessed as much from the Aetherlord's talk about broken peaks, that reaching the absolute peak of Creation and Oblivion wasn't possible within Heaven's Path. Zac previously thought this created some problems for the Undead Empire, which was so heavily steeped in Death while still being part of the System. After all, Death was a subordinate of Oblivion.

But it turned out that it wasn't as big a drawback as one could expect. For one, the elemental paths including the Dao of Ice were within Heaven's Path, and so were the other two great heritages of the Undead Empire. Furthermore, it was also possible to infuse concepts of one Dao Group into another, where you made one the leader.

These kinds of Daos were generally called mixed-meaning Daos, and they were different from the fusions that Zac had completed until now. First of all, Dao seeds weren't true Daos of any particular branch, but rather simple concepts that could be added into pretty much any Dao. A real mixed-meaning Dao would appear if he did something like fuse his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin into one Dao Branch.

Cathey didn't say it outright, but it sounded like this was the path she was walking down. She would take her Dao of Death and Dao of Ice, and fuse the two into the 'Branch of Deathly Ice' or something similar, where her ice insights were the primary. There was an endless number of possible combinations, such as Branch of the Deathblade which was a common fusion of the Fragment of the Sword and various Death-attuned Daos.

For a while, Zac had been confused a bit about why people would “limit” themselves with these kinds of Daos rather than pursuing one or multiple pure paths such as himself. After all, there was a clear line from the lowest Dao Seed all the way to the Supreme Dao of Chaos when going down his path.

Certainly, reaching those heights was beyond difficult, but cultivators should have dreams, right?

But it turned out that walking a mixed-meaning path had one clear benefit. As long as one of the Dao components were covered by the System you'd be within the System's purview, which shielded you from the wrath of the original Heavens. Zac was currently walking away from Heaven's Path with his cultivation leading toward Chaos, which put him in the crosshairs for some nasty punishments. This would be a problem that haunted him through all his breakthroughs, unless he changed his plans for his path.

For example, he had found that he was currently at a crossroads with two of his Daos. He could take the Fragment of the Bodhi either toward the Branches of Life or the Branches of Nature as things stood. The Branches of Nature were within Heaven's Path, while Life was not. He could even change his path toward the Buddhist Sangha if he wanted.

The same was true with Coffin. He could either push it toward Death or Nature due to its features of rot and decay. There were no doubt other directions he could take the Dao Fragment as well, though he didn't have any clear path in mind at the moment. In either case, he wasn't technically on the Boundless Path just yet, which was why Triv was so confused as to why he had attracted tribulation while still early E-grade. It was the next step on his path that would properly place him onto the Boundless Path, for better or worse.

All this knowledge didn't really change Zac's plans since he still had the intention to move toward Oblivion and Creation, but it was important to remember how flexible the Grand Dao was. The Dao was not a series of narrow corridors leading toward the same exit, it was an endless sea of truth where you picked what resonated with you to form your path.

It was simply that some parts of the oceans were uncharted territory, whereas others had already been secured by those that came before. Part of the Dao had been integrated into the System from day one, fueled by the understanding of Emperor Limitless and his followers. Actually, this all tied back to the Apostates as well.

It was widely believed that each of the Apostates had mastered a Supreme Dao and brought it into the System's purview. The Apostate of Order had obviously mastered the Dao of Order, but the others weren't as obvious. The Beast Progenitor was believed to have added the Dao of Nature, which covered everything from beasts to plants to the seasons themselves.

The Apostate of Mercy was actually the one who perfected the Elemental Daos. Before then the Daos had still been part of the System, but it had been an incomplete heritage. The Apostate of Greed was surprisingly the one who finally brought the Dao of Space into the fold, which made the Mercantile System possible, while also letting the System perform the randomizations and perfected teleportations.

The only question mark was the First Defier. It was unclear which Dao he helped perfect, if any. His appearance was ultimately so long ago that it was impossible to really confirm anything, especially considering his reign had been extremely short-lived by all accounts. Some said ten thousand years, others a millennium. A few even claimed he reached the peak within a century.

Catheyra had no idea which was the truth, but she was ultimately just a member of the young generation. There were tons of things that she didn't know. For example, some still held to the belief that Chaos was the Original Dao, which was why it was impossible to master. Only by placing all the other peaks under the control of the System would there be a chance at grasping it without being reduced to nothingness.

Not that things like that mattered. He hadn't even pushed all his Fragments to the Peak yet, though this excursion would hopefully remedy that.

"So these things are actually plants?" Zac asked skeptically as he looked at the large oyster fifty meters away from them.

"It's a bit of a hybrid, I think," Catheyra shrugged. "The lines are a bit blurred on some beings. Just look at the treants. In either case, observe."

She threw out a supreme Miasma Crystal the next moment, and then an icicle that cracked it. A large haze of Miasma

spread out, and the oyster started to shake a bit as it started to rise from the ground. Only then did Zac realize that it was actually attached to a thick thorned stem, and it was this stem that was rising from the ground to get closer to the dense deathly energies.

Catheyia shot a blade of ice toward the Life-Death plant the moment it had stopped moving upward, which caused the area to explode with activity. A dozen blade-like stalks sprung up from the ground as the 'oyster' started to descend toward the ground. However, Catheyia was too quick, and with a flash of ice she had passed the sharp stalks and appeared right next to the plant, and it was cut off in one swift swipe.

The sharp stalks started to flail about erratically, exhibiting power strong enough to take out middle E-grade cultivators with their thrashing. A series of ice barriers sprung up with Catheyia as the core, and she ignored the stalks as she placed her hands on the severed stem holding the oyster. A storm of deathly energies burrowed into the plant next as she infused it with her Deathly Dao.

"Help me deal with the stalks, please?" Catheyia asked, and Zac started to sever them while Qirai gripped them and ripped them apart.

Soon enough the two stood in front of Catheyia who kept infusing the oyster with her Dao. By this point, the oyster had actually started to absorb large amounts of Twilight Energy from the surroundings, which Zac guessed was the cue that the process of forming the pearl had begun.

"So that's it?" Zac asked as he looked at the oyster.

"That's it," Catheyia smiled. "The process will take a few hours, and you can't stop feeding it your Dao during that time. Harvesting is simple enough. When the pearl has formed, just crack it open and place the pearl in a sealed box."

"There's only three of us here," Zac said as he looked around. "How about we split up to speed things up?"

Qirai's brows slightly furrowed since that differed from the original plan, but Catheyia nodded in agreement. "Remember,

we are gathering for four though, so everyone will have to chip in a bit.”

“That’s fine,” Zac nodded.

A quick scan had indicated that the valley held over a hundred oysters, which was better than the average trial. There were more pearls than he would be able to use even if the group consisted of seven members. Now that just four members were remaining, he would probably have to discard most of them in either case. Might as well feed some to Varo, so that he might gain something even while in a coma.

The trio soon spread out, and Zac walked toward a random Life-Death Plant some ways away from the other two. Zac didn’t bother with coming up with some new method, and he simply threw out a crystal as well before cracking it with a pebble. He activated his movement skill as the oyster rose toward the energy, and the world suddenly stopped. A moment later he appeared right before the stem.

The weird creature didn’t even have a chance to react before **[Verun’s Bite]** had ripped right through the stem. The ground heaved a bit as the root system below started to rampage from having its head cut off, but the plant never had the chance to extend its weapon-like stalks this time around. Just three of them managed to emerge from the ground, but they were effortlessly cut apart as Zac started to infuse the head with the Fragment of the Coffin.

The dying Life-Death Plant greedily absorbed the energies Zac provided, and Twilight Energy started to surge toward the oyster as well. The swirl of energy was more condensed in his case though, and Zac guessed it was because his Dao Fragment was higher compared to Catheya’s. Zac wasn’t certain, but he guessed that her Ice-attuned Dao was either High or Peak mastery, while her Death-attuned Dao was at the middle stages.

The process continued for two more hours, at which point a ripple spread out from the oyster. The ripple was rife with meaning, and Zac knew the pearl had been born. The extremely enticing Dao Fluctuation made Zac’s thoughts turn

to dozens of avenues for his cultivation, but he pushed down the burgeoning bout of inspiration as he hurried over and urgently ripped apart the shells.

Inside was a shimmering dark-green pearl no larger than the pearls that you'd find on a necklace back on Earth. He looked at it with greed, and he was a bit surprised to find he wasn't the only one. The coffin on his back shuddered a bit, and he felt an intangible nudge of hunger in his mind, even stronger compared to when **[Love's Bond]** indicated its desire for Twilight Fruits.

“So you want these things as well?” Zac muttered. “Well, wait until we have finished gathering them.”

That Alea wanted these pearls wasn't too surprising after her interest in the Twilight Fruits, and Zac was more than happy to provide. There were more than enough pearls to go around, so it was with gusto Zac stowed the pearl into a jade box he had prepared. The ripples disappeared just a few seconds after the lid was sealed, and Zac found his mind clear once more.

Zac wanted to immediately harvest another pearl, but he first rested for half an hour as he absorbed two Soul Crystals. The process wasn't as taxing as an all-out fight, but it was more taxing than running the purification array. Half an hour of rest was enough, and Zac soon shot toward the next oyster.

Half a minute later, Zac was already infusing the next oyster with his Dao. However, this time infused the fallen plant with the Fragment of the bodhi, though he first made sure that he was performing his experiment out of sight of the other two. Catheya had said that the inspiration came from the plant itself, but he figured his Dao might influence the pearls at least to some extent considering the amount he poured into the thing.

Two hours later a second pearl was formed, and Zac curiously opened the oyster. A small smile spread across his face as he saw that this particular pearl indeed veered a bit more toward a golden hue compared to the darker pearl he harvested before. It also emanated ripples that were slightly more in tune with

life than death, which was exactly what he was looking for. Any little advantage was needed with his weird constitution.

The days passed, and the trio worked without rest as one oyster after another was harvested. Thanks to splitting up it took them just above five days to pick the place clean.

“You were quite the farmer,” Catheya laughed as the three gathered. “It almost felt like your eyes were shining when you harvested these things. How many did you manage to harvest?”

“Fifty-four,” Zac smiled. “What about you two?”

“As I expected,” Catheya nodded. “I got 36, Qirai actually got 34. Altogether it’s 124, and 31 pearls each according to our agreement.”

“I have a proposition,” Zac said, drawing an interested glance from Catheya. “I am willing to buy every pearl you don’t need. Ten D-grade Nexus Coin each.”

“Are you planning on selling them?” Catheya asked with a raised brow. “They’ll only last a month or so, even when sealed.”

“I have other uses for them,” Zac shrugged.

Qirai clearly looked interested in making the deal, almost to the point of salivating, and Catheya slowly nodded as well. “How about we keep 15 pearls each, and sell the rest to you? That way we have a few extra in case we absorb them quicker than expected. How does that sound?”

“Perfect,” Zac said and transferred 480 D-Grade Nexus Coins.

“Your means once again leave me in both awe and despair,” Catheya smiled. “Well, things turned out a bit hectic than I anticipated, but overall the mission was a success. What are your plans now?”

“I’ll find someplace to seclude myself for a while,” Zac said. “This trial is a bit more dangerous than I expected, so I’ll need to make some breakthroughs before continuing alone.”

He had wanted to do this for a while now, and not only for the pearls he had finally got his hands on. The small hidden

wounds in his body from his first node-breaking rally were pretty much fixed after these three long months, which meant he would be able to complete his second round of node-breaking. Zac didn't know how long he had before his immunity or accumulated toxicity became a problem, but he felt he should be able to gain at least a handful of levels in this round.

So between a few levels and potential Dao Breakthroughs, the power boost he stood to gain was tremendous. And that was something he desperately needed considering where he was heading next.

Chapter 720: Seclusion

“Alright,” Catheya nodded, not looking surprised in the slightest that Zac would head off on his way now that the pearls were collected. “I’ll take you out of this place before we find our own paths.”

The descent from the mountain was just as nerve-wracking as the ascent, but thirty minutes later they stood in a secluded spot down by the foot of a mountain, covered by five-meter tall corals and Catheya’s arrays in case any group of trial takers was lurking nearby.

“Remember to come look for me before this thing is over,” Catheya said as she handed Zac a crystal and a sack of herbs. “This is a method to gain even more from the pearls than just eating them as is. And try to not do anything crazy after this, alright? No causing trouble that will cause ripples on the outside.”

“Of course,” Zac smiled. “I’m not crazy.”

“Well, you seem to have a penchant for trouble,” Catheya said with a pointed look, which made Zac scratch his chin with some embarrassment.

“Well, I’ll be careful. I will find you in a year or so unless I’ve found some opportunity that’ll delay me,” Zac promised.

“I’ll look for the places you wanted,” Catheya nodded in return.

Zac swam away a moment later, heading for one of the pathways away from their current spot. A look back showed that Catheya and Qirai soon started moving toward another. There was no time to lose considering the pearls only lasted so long, but he had to find a good spot to seclude himself. Zac made good time as he swam through the valleys, and he didn’t

stop for three hours as he made his way forward with the help of his compass.

However, Zac didn't head back in the direction they came from, but rather the opposite. He was planning on passing straight through the mountain range on the way to the inner parts of the ocean, finding a cultivation cave on the way. Eventually, he found what he was looking for; a small crack in the rock which released air bubbles.

Zac hid in a dense patch of bushes as he activated his movement skill. Two seconds later the world shifted into one of death and he flashed forward toward the crack. The intangible form of **[Abyssal Phase]** had its benefits, and he effortlessly squeezed through the path that normally wouldn't even fit his hand.

The tunnel kept going for thousands of meters into the depths without widening, but just as Zac started to consider turning back, he found himself in a large cave that was mostly filled with air. The place was roughly one hundred meters across and a bit reminiscent of his cultivation cave back home, except the land was on a ledge five meters above the waters.

The Twilight Ocean formed a small subterranean river that just passed by below the ledge and left through another crack on the other side. The walls and ceiling were covered with the same sort of moss that had dried out the tunnels beneath the Living Pulse. There was also a lone mysterious flower that grew on the edge of the ledge; and Zac could soon match it with **[Palvae Granulosa]**, a medicinal plant used in top-quality race-upgrading medicinal baths.

It was a peak E-grade plant, and each one of its 20-some leaves was worth upwards of 5,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. It wasn't a bad haul, though not something that mattered all-too-much to Zac. It did spread a nice aroma in the small cave though, and Zac decided to leave it for now.

First thing first; he needed to turn this place into a cultivation cave. He swam beneath the waters again swiftly sealed both the inlet and outlet to the river both with arrays and by physically filling them with stones. It would turn the fresh

water in the small river stagnant in a few months, but it didn't really matter.

Zac secondly added a layer of isolation arrays to the cave. He was over a thousand meters below the valley, but there were perhaps more tunnels in the mountain above. This way he was completely shut off from the rest of the world, and he would be able to work on his cultivation in peace.

He cleared out a patch of moss and placed down his new prayer mat before he took out two boxes. One of them held the death-attuned pearls he had purchased from Catheya and Qirai, and the other held the Death-attuned pearls he generated with the help of the Fragment of the Coffin. The coffin on his back was veritably vibrating by this point, Zac took out one pearl from each box.

It thankfully didn't look like **[Love's Bond]** cared about what it was fed as it opened its casket by a small degree. Zac threw one purchased pearl after another inside until he had thrown a full thirty of them into the shrouded insides. That was three times more than what most cultivators managed to absorb, and he realized was lucky that he had purchased a set of spares.

The lid snapped shut after swallowing the thirtieth pearl, and Zac sensed that the coffin had entered some sort of hibernation on his back. He would probably be able to use it in a pinch, but he preferred not to disturb Alea. Instead, he focused on the second box as he took out a set of tools. He essentially had gathered base items for over twenty professions over his years of fighting, including a few alchemy sets, he took out a large pestle from one of these sets before he poured ten pearls into it in one go.

Zac was almost dragged into a bout of inspiration from the sounds as the small pearls clashed together in the bowl, and the air was beset by such pure Dao fluctuations that he could discern small runes appearing and disappearing in turn. However, they suddenly disappeared as a set of runes lit up along the pestle's rim. It was an isolation array that would trap the medicinal properties of the items being processed, and it helped Zac snap back to reality as he started to work the materials.

He followed the instructions in Catheya's crystal, quickly grinding the pearls and a few dried herbs into a fine dust. However, he looked down at the compound with hesitation when he was done, and he eventually added ten more pearls. Twenty pearls was overkill, potentially harmful for most cultivators, but his body had always been greedy. He didn't want to sit down and refine another brew mid-epiphany because he made a too small a dose.

The next step said to simply pour the compound in a liquid of your choice, but Zac had the capability to be a bit extravagant at this point. He took out a Dao Fruit and turned it into a mush that he mixed with the powder and added some water, turning it into a proper Dao Smoothie.

The brew looked like a blueberry shake filled with gold flakes that swirled around inside, and it both smelled and looked delectable. Wasting no time, Zac downed the brew straight from the pestle as to not let any of the efficacy escape. He immediately closed his eyes, and he focused on the Dao Avatar in his mind.

He had thought long and hard on the route he should take with his Fragment of the Coffin over the past years, and he had made tons of revisions over the last half year he had spent in his Draugr form. Half of the origin of his Dao Fragment origin was Hardness, something that probably was once meant to become the Fragment of the Shield for his Undying Bulwark-class.

That didn't mean the insights he had gathered were useless though, and that they couldn't remain as a part of his path. He just needed to find a way to properly incorporate the concept into his path, and he felt like he had found the answer during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf.

Death was the ultimate barrier that most cultivators dreamed of breaking past on their road to Eternity. But fight as they might, it was immutable and intractable, fiercely guarding the great beyond. It trapped the living in their slowly decaying bodies, and together with time turned everyone to dust.

It was inescapable, like unbreakable chains wrapping around the targets.

Zac barely had time to set the course before he was whisked away as a miraculous wave of understanding shot into his soul. It felt like the crude concoction he had just brewed had formed a clear line of communication with the Heavens themselves, and he sensed something vast and unending. It was just like when he glimpsed the corner of the Dao of Heaviness all those years ago, though what flickered in front of him now was on a far grander scale.

Thousands and thousands of insights had been melded together to form a coherent whole that far surpassed what Zac could grasp. Each part beckoned to him, tantalized him like nymphs luring him into deeper waters. He knew that he could follow the calls and meld with the nearby insights, and he would emerge stronger for it.

But that would be to passively take whatever you were given, and that was not his path. He needed to be the one in the driver's seat and his mind searched for the truth that he hoped existed, the part of the Dao of Death he wanted to incorporate into his Fragment of the coffin. He imagined the coffin-lid closing, creating a world of its own.

There was just the inside and the outside. The world outside the coffin would eventually move on no matter who had been interred, while the insides of the coffin would become a sealed world of its own, one where the outside world held no sway or influence. It was a world of silence and gradual decay, left forever to its own devices.

Zac held onto his truth, and it gradually matured and filled out as the Heavens themselves filled in the blanks. Things that had felt obscure and inscrutable before had become as clear as day thanks to the concoction that had expanded his mind to the size of the cosmos. Time passed, who knows for how long, but Zac eventually woke up and became cognizant of his surroundings again.

He was surprised to see that the cave had turned into a realm of utter death, with all the moss in the hidden cave having

been reduced to various states of decay. The only thing unscathed was the spiritual flower, which rather seemed to have grown a few inches and gained a couple of new leaves.

A glance at an array showed that he had actually been out of it for seventeen full days, which shocked Zac wide awake. It was a lot longer than he had expected, but his gains weren't small either. Some of the efficacy would have been lost from the remaining pearls by this point, but there was not much he could do about it.

Luckily he had already considered this issue and he had only harvested pearls with the Fragment of the Bodhi by the end, which should have helped keep the freshness to some degree. But before using them he needed to stabilize his mind a bit, so Zac started to absorb energy from some Soul Crystals as he opened his status screen with anticipation.

Fragment of the Coffin (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +1110, Vitality +650, Intelligence +60, Wisdom +150. Effectiveness of Endurance +20%.

There were no real increases to any attributes except Endurance and Vitality from upgrading the Dao Fragment, but Zac wasn't surprised with the result at all. His insights delved into the sealed world of the Coffin, and to some degree the gradual decay in this hidden domain. The aspect of the seal increased the Endurance of the coffin, and both Decay and Regeneration were linked to Vitality.

He hoped that this evolution would help consolidate the aspect of Hardness better with his path, while also increasing corrosive effect against anything caught within his domain. Most notably, it would hopefully empower the restrictive ability of skills like **[Blighted Cut]** and **[Profane Seal]**. He had already prepared the materials to help with a self-guided skill upgrade, but Zac was still leery about taking that step with his defining skills.

Zac knew the clock was ticking, but he still spent a few more hours consolidating his gains and restored his drained mind. Only when he felt like he was back in top shape did he transform to his human form and mixed a second Dao

Smoothie. A moment later he found himself part of the grand cosmos again.

Unfortunately, he felt the effect wasn't as strong this time around, but he still gained insights and inspiration left and right. For his Fragment of the Bodhi, he knew the path to take as well, though that insight honestly wasn't quite as clear compared to his first one. It was unavoidable, he hadn't experienced much in his human form after setting the course. Meanwhile, he had lived as a Draugr in the Twilight Harbor and the Twilight Ocean for half a year now, encountering all kinds of tribulations.

During the years he had stayed back on Earth he had mostly pondered on the resilience aspect of the Fragment of the Bodhi or the Dao of Life in general. The ability to keep standing in the face of adversity. However, he felt the insights he had gained in the battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker was more to his taste, the idea of the ruthless jungle where lives rose and fell like the tides.

His visions brought him back to the windswept badlands, where the consecrated Bodhi had created a kingdom of verdure within its canopy, where life was shielded from the harsh environment outside. However, even in such a paradise were there no such thing as peace. Space was limited, and stalks of grass vied for supremacy against bushels and small trees.

As the decades passed species came and went, where the weak were culled to give space to the strong. Life was everchanging, and so were all its creations. The great Bodhi could only set the stage, but the plants within would decide the outcome and the future. Zac witnessed the seasons pass, but a frown slowly spread across his face.

Something was lacking.

The vision was rife with meaning, but it also felt hollow, imperfect. He sensed he could breakthrough right now if he so desired by borrowing a bit from the vast tapestry of Life, but he couldn't guarantee that the result would be perfectly aligned with his path that way. Perhaps it was because of his

lacking foundation, perhaps it was because of the reduced efficacy of the second batch of Life-Death Pills.

He felt himself heading toward a precipice, and he knew he had to make a decision. The next moment he forcibly dragged himself out of the epiphany as a huge vortex erupted in his soul. This wasn't the vortex of his Soul Strengthening Method, but rather the vortex hidden inside his Dao Avatar.

It was [**Spiritual Void**] that had finally been released from its shackles, and it greedily swallowed all the lingering medicinal efficacy of his smoothie. Zac noticed that another 11 days had passed, and the remaining pearls were close to going bad. [**Love's Bond**] was still in a state of fugue, so it looked like Alea had eaten her fill just like when Verun got its hands on some nice resources.

He didn't want to waste the remaining pearls, and he prepared a third and final smoothie, though he didn't waste one of his few remaining Dao treasures on this one. He had actually found three of them from his numerous battles inside the trial so he wasn't out quite just yet, but this smoothie wasn't for the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A surge of mysterious energies entered his mind as Zac swallowed the concoction, but and it was all swallowed by [**Spiritual Void**]. The node was already filled with his Mental Energy by this point, so he guessed that this extra energy would go toward pushing the Hidden Node toward an evolution.

The process was slow, and Zac slowly went over the result of his initial session. It was a bit of a let-down that he had not quite managed to get where he wanted to go with this session. But the final Dao Fragment was right at the precipice, just missing the final puzzle piece that would turn an incomplete picture into something perfect.

And Zac wasn't too worried. His cultivation path was one forged through combat, and he knew he would have ample chances to fight in his human form soon enough. There were plenty of targets to go around in this place.

Chapter 721: Runebinder

Zac spent the next few hours stabilizing his mind and getting back to perfect condition. The final snippet to evolve Bodhi still eluded him, and he eventually gave up. He knew all-too-well the Dao couldn't be forced, especially not for him. Sitting around pondering was all-but-useless with his affinities.

But he did eventually realize what was responsible for the sense of wrongness in his epiphany. It was related to the source of his vision.

The scene of the fighting species beneath the Bodhi tree was just like how he conceptualized how he should fight in his human form. But his Evolutionary Stance was not just Bodhi, it also contained his understanding of the axe. It wasn't pure, like the Dao of Life he needed to move toward. Meanwhile, the vision he had created for the Fragment of the Coffin was both a proper concept of its own and a link to his Inexorable Stance.

But he knew he had at least formed a proper framework. The part of his epiphany that worked was based on change. Conversely, his insight into his Death-attuned fragment represented finality. Life and death; Creation and Oblivion.

His Dao progress had come to a stop, but there were more things to work on. Zac had already spent close to a month in seclusion, but he wasn't done there. First, he spent three days filling up his still-empty nodes on his Human side, pushing his level to 109 with the help of a stack of Supreme Nexus Crystals and the energy that his **[Void Heart]** kept spitting out as it purified the Twilight Energy.

Only then did he swap back to his undead form and took out another set of **[Aethergate Pills]**.

The odd sense of damage and weakness was all gone by now, which should allow him to go for a few levels. A surge of

energy entered his body as he swallowed one of the pills, but he frowned and threw one more pill into his mouth as he felt the lacking energy that shot toward his node. The damage was gone and the accumulated Pill Toxicity was within what was acceptable, but he was starting to build up an immunity to the **[Aethergate Pills]**.

Thankfully he had a backup plan, and he eventually swapped to his human form after having broken open two nodes with **[Aethergate Pills]**. One pill had almost opened three nodes the first time around, but these two nodes alone had forced him to take seven pills. The supreme leveling pills weren't usable in his human form, but that was fine by Zac as he took out another inlaid box.

Inside were the best leveling pills that the attendant could get her hands on, and Zac felt a powerful surge in his body after swallowing the shimmering amber-colored pill. The pills were not as potent as the **[Aethergate Pills]**, but they had a greater effect when considering the immunity he had built up toward those specific pills.

He once more entered the slow but steady cycle of gaining levels and filling nodes with Supreme Crystals, but Zac sighed and stopped after he had forced open five nodes in total. The result wasn't as good as back in the Twilight Harbor, but the damage to his body was almost at the same level since each node was harder to break open than the one before. Besides, both his immunity and accumulated Pill Toxicity would become a problem if he went any further.

His **[Purity of the Void]** was fast at work, but much of its efforts went into expelling the invasive energies from his body, leaving most of the accumulated Pill Toxicity untouched. Zac couldn't be sure, but he probably wouldn't be able to gain any levels this way again inside the Twilight Ocean unless he found some opportunity that cleansed his body like the lava bath did.

Until then, he would have to do things the old-fashioned way.

The **[Chainbreaking Pills]** were still waiting to be tested, as was the **[Stone of Hope]**. Hopefully, he'd get the opportunity

to try those things as soon as the imperceptible damage to his foundation had healed. For now, Zac spent another week filling up his levels with the help of Supreme Miasma Crystals on his undead side until both sides were maxed out.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

114

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Peak, Fragment of the Coffin - Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - High

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

7599 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 238%]

Dexterity

3406 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

6019 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 238%]

Vitality

4558 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence

1345 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

2545 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck

435 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

140

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 235

Zac looked at the numbers with satisfaction. Just over half a year had passed since the events with his mother, but his attributes had essentially increased by 60% since then. Add to that the increased combat prowess of forming his two combat stances, his improved Daos, and his Dao Braiding, and his combat power was pretty much doubled.

Even Heaven's Chosen would probably be shocked if they heard of such a cultivation speed, and they might even form a heart demon if they learned it was a Mortal who made such strides.

Dao and levels were dealt with, but there were even more things that Zac wanted to try now that he was alone. Zac

allocated his free points into an even split between Strength, and Wisdom before he took out a number of array flags. The added Wisdom was to make up for the fact that his latest Dao improvements barely provided any points into Wisdom, and to hopefully help facilitate what he was about to do next.

It was time to upgrade the first of his skills.

His mind still held some lingering inspiration after swallowing the Life-Death Pearls, and his understanding of the Dao had taken a step forward. He wanted to use this wave of momentum to make his first manual skill upgrade. He knew there were some risks involved, but he would have to take that step sooner or later. The experience would also allow him to get a practical understanding of the process, and show him where he needed to improve further.

As for the skill he had decided to evolve, it was **[Indomitable]**. Mentalists were a lot more common in this place compared to back in Zecia. Now that he was heading toward the depths of the sector, he wanted to strengthen his Mental Defenses even if his soul was stronger than most people's. An F-grade Skill ultimately wasn't enough to block out a Peak E-grade Mentalist's attack, and he couldn't trust a series of fortuitous encounters to save him every time he ran into someone like Vilari's predecessor.

At the same time, it wouldn't be the end of the world if **[Indomitable]** lost a bit of its efficacy when reaching E-grade due to Zac's lack of experience in upgrading skills. It shouldn't be one of the most straightforward evolutions as well since Zac didn't want to change a single thing with the skill except its grade. It would be much more complicated to upgrade **[Vanguard of Undeath]** for example, where he wanted to remove the requirement of a shield to activate the skill.

Zac lit a set of incense as he sat down in the middle of the **[E-grade Fractal Framework Array]**. Evolving or modifying a skill could be done in two ways. The first way was to do everything by hand, following one's own intuition and understanding of a skill. The second way was to use some sort of prepared tools to help facilitate the process.

The former method was mainly used if you were an extreme talent, or if you had gotten your hands on some sort of treasure that provided you with an epiphany. The latter was the method used by more than 99% of all cultivators though, and any sect or clan would have specific array chambers for that very purpose.

Zac knew his limitations all-too-well. Freestyling it with his zero affinities and clumsy energy control was essentially to ask for trouble. That's why he had paid a premium to get the best portable arrays that money could buy. Success still depended on Zac and his understanding though, so this was essentially a final exam of his studies with Catheya.

The array hummed to life as Zac sat down in the middle of it and closed his eyes. He focused on the skill fractal in his mind, and he took a steadying breath before he made his move. His soul shuddered as the connectors between the skill fractal and his pathways were all severed in an instant, after which he surrounded the skill with dense layers of Mental Energy.

This was the first step of a skill evolution, the severing needed to make the patterns malleable. He carefully moved the fractal out of his body and infused it onto an empty disk right in front of him. The disk lit up, and a perfect copy of the skill fractal appeared with aquamarine luster as a hologram above it. Meanwhile, Zac felt a steady drain on his mind as a continuous infusion of Mental Energy was required to keep the fractal stable.

The circular fractal that made up **[Indomitable]** contained tens of thousands of miniature patterns that formed a cohesive whole, and Zac marveled as he looked at the design. It was like he was gazing at the patterns on a seashell, but thousands of times more complex. Some truths were hidden in those fractals, like how mathematical formulas hid within the spiral patterns of the shells.

His mind started to wander, perhaps still a bit affected by the Life-Death Pearls, and Zac hurriedly focused his mind. He had already made a plan in his mind based on his years of study along with Catheya's teachings, and he started to send out tendrils of Mental Energy to manipulate the hologram.

Meanwhile, he sensed many streams of energy entering the disk that held his actual Skill Fractal.

This was a bit like those surgery robots on Earth, where Zac would modify the enlarged hologram as the array made the actual changes to the skill fractal. It did increase the energy expenditure in return for lowering the difficulty, and Zac was more than willing to pay that price.

What Zac needed to accomplish in this process was both easy and difficult. He didn't need to change any functions, so he simply needed to increase the density of patterns in the skill to allow it to exhibit greater strength. It was just like how engineers fit more and more transistors on microchips back on Earth to increase their computing power.

That would turn the skill into an Early E-grade skill, after which the System once more would take charge of the modifications on the pattern when the skill upgraded to middle proficiency and so on. Then again, the better the foundation Zac created, the more functions the System would be able to add. It wouldn't fix any mistakes of his though. Imperfections by his own making would have to be resolved by himself.

Zac started the process by redrawing one section of the circular pattern, an area that housed the patterns designed to store energy. These were usually the safest ones to upgrade in the start, and they often helped stabilize the rest of the progress. There were thousands of such interlocked patterns on his skill fractal, and Zac quickly got to work.

One F-grade storage pattern was turned into nine interlocking ones, where one E-grade core was surrounded by eight supporters. The first transformation took a bit of time, but each change went quicker and quicker until he managed to replace a pattern in just over a second. Rushing the work wasn't optimal, but there was a time limit on this process.

He needed to form the evolved skill fractal and reattach it to his pathways before he ran out of steam. Otherwise, he'd cripple the fractal or even lose it altogether.

The skill fractal kept changing over the next hours, though most of the modifications Zac performed were so fine that

they wouldn't even be recognizable from the distance. He quickly realized that having a plan was all well and good, but some issues could only be discovered when in the heat of it. Certain sections upgraded just fine, but small problems kept cropping up when his schematics didn't hold up in the real world.

Sometimes it was his instincts that indicated something was wrong. That wasn't just a blind gut feeling, but rather a dissonance between his Dao understanding and the patterns in front of him. Other times it was his array that was helping him out by pointing out imbalances, feedback loops, or energy leakages through the fractals.

By themselves, most of these small imperfections wouldn't be a problem, but they could quickly snowball into something serious that would be nigh-impossible to fix without reworking the whole fractal. This was thankfully where the huge number of practical examples Catheya had shared came in handy, as many of the issues he encountered were well documented. He just needed to slightly modify the skill fractal to accommodate these changes, and the array stopped beeping ominously.

Sometimes he kept going on some section for a while even after the array stopped any warnings. A workable and a perfect pattern were two completely different things, after all. Zac kept adjusting the patterns and adjusting the balance between things like defensive runes and Dao-infusion runes until he reached a perfect state.

As to what perfection was, it was hard to say. It was once more came back to his gut, like how you could get a completely different impression from two different paintings which looked pretty similar on the surface.

Zac's vision was starting to become blurry as he slogged on. Even with his unusual amount of mental energy, he was starting to feel hard-pressed to keep up his focus. He tried to lessen the strain with the help of Soul Crystals, but it was only prolonging the inevitable. He was forced to work faster and faster until he almost completely relied on the Array to make suggestions that were decent rather than perfect.

A new skill fractal without any obvious fault was eventually born. It looked 90% like the original pattern, but Zac had been forced to add two small sections to the skill fractal that glommed onto its sides. A series of imperfections along with the need to adjust the pattern to his E-grade pathways had forced him to add new sections to retain all the functionality. It looked a bit ugly and it wasn't perfect, it would get the job done.

The only downside he could spot was that it would take slightly longer to activate the stronger state of the mental defense skill, and that it would cost slightly more to run.

He had spent too much time getting each part just right in the beginning, leaving too much work to be done by the end. Zac pressed his hand against the disk holding the actual fractal, and he felt the new-and-improved skill fractal enter his body and move to its previous position. He arduously reattached the fractal through hundreds of small pathways, and he eventually felt his Miasma smoothly running through it without issue.

A breath of relief escaped from Zac's lips just as the array powered down. It was a success, and he quickly opened his Skill Screen to take a look at the result.

[E] Indomitable - Proficiency: Early. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

As expected, the result was the same skill as before, except that it was now E-grade. However, Zac noted with some interest that the flavor text had changed from the upgrade. The old text said '*A vanguard of undeath moves forth, undeterred by the whispers of those who wish to impede the crusade.*'

Zac guessed that the flavor text was changed to represent how it now was fitted with his Fetters of Desolation-class. The adjustments weren't enough to turn it into a new skill though, which was fine by him. Fusing the skill had also come with another advantage; he had gained a new title.

[Runebinder: Manually evolve a skill while in E-grade. Reward: Base Attributes +50.]

Zac had already looked into the matter, and he was pretty relieved when he saw the result. There were various levels of the title, with the worst one being Runebreaker. You'd get that skill if you messed up so badly the skill was degraded to the point to be relegated to a lower tier. There was also Runemaster, the version where you evolved a skill and it actually became stronger than before, like turning a High-quality skill into a peak-quality one.

Runebinder was right in between, meaning that he had lost some efficacy when adding his modifications, but not to the point that the skill went from a Peak-Quality skill to a High-quality skill. That was actually above expectation for his first try. He just needed to incorporate what he had learned and figure out solutions to the things that confused him during the process, after which he could keep evolving some of the simpler skills.

In addition to the rune-series of titles, there was an even better version where you created a skill from scratch. If you managed to create a peak-quality skill on your own before reaching D-grade, you'd reportedly get a top-tier title. Zac had to set aside any thoughts of getting that title for now though. He wasn't confident in even creating a low-quality skill at the moment, let alone a peak-quality one.

In a perfect world, he would keep upgrading every single one of his skills before setting out, but he felt like the moment had passed. He might have dared to upgrade a few more of the simple ones if his mind had still been in a state of elevated clarity. Unfortunately, the energies were completely processed by now, and he was back to his normal non-enlightened self.

Besides, he still didn't feel confident in evolving skills like **[Profane Seal]** even if he had the liquid courage of the Dao Smoothies. Not only was it a finisher with many interlocking parts which made the pattern far more complex compared to **[Indomitable]**, but it also contained more than ten times the number of patterns to modify.

Zac would have to make some major sacrifices in efficacy if he wanted to upgrade the skill with his current accomplishments. But his goal was accomplished, and it was

time to set out. His Soul Sea had been even further augmented during his month-long seclusion, and he needed to set out before it was too late.

It was time to set course for the Twilight Chasm.

Chapter 722: Marked for Death

Zac glanced at the lonesome plant some distance away, and he eventually decided to let it live out its life. It had accompanied him for over a month in this place, and it had even been marked by his Dao. It felt like a waste to harvest it, and Zac instead turned to the large coffin leaning against the wall.

[**Love's Bond**] hadn't changed outwardly over the past month, but it felt more corporeal in some way that he couldn't really explain. He walked over to see if it was done absorbing the pearls, and it shuddered when he placed his hand against the lid. Zac's eyes widened as two of the chains extended from the holes on the side of their own accord, each of them gently caressing him before they were retracted once more.

Almost...

It was just a whisper in his mind and he felt the connection break immediately after, but it made Zac's heart shudder. It was undeniable; it was Alea's voice. As for the meaning, he understood it after inspecting the Spirit Tool. It looked like [**Love's Bond**] was on the verge of some sort of evolution.

He still wasn't completely certain, but he believed that the Spirit Tool was still just Peak Quality F-grade, where it still could keep up with him with some difficulty. Then again, he had seen how the chains weren't really powerful enough to restrain warriors like Yanub Mettleleaf, and he wasn't too sure its skills would much good against the enemies he faced nowadays.

A proper evolution would let [**Love's Bond**] explode with power, but more importantly, such an evolution might actually help heal Alea's soul. Tool Spirits' grades were based on the grade of the Spirit Tool, so upgrading [**Love's Bond**] would

essentially mean a Soul Awakening for the Poison Mistress unless there were some hidden restrictions Zac didn't know about.

For now, she was still in a dormant state, though the Spirit Tool had finished its absorption. He equipped the coffin on his back again, filled with a renewed sense of motivation. He didn't have anything else to feed her at the moment, but the place where he was heading supposedly had the greatest number of hidden treasures.

Zac had gone back and forth on whether he should head straight to the Twilight Chasm and get rid of the weird egg, or if he should first travel the inner reaches for a bit in search of opportunities. Eventually, he had decided to go straight for the Chasm. First of all, the hidden brand felt like a sword hanging over his head, and he was extremely eager to get rid of it.

Secondly, it was a matter of being able to deal with the energies inside the chasm. He could feel that **[Void Heart]** was approaching its limits in being able to deal with the Twilight Energy this far into the trial, and he needed his soul oceans to pick up some of the slack. If he waited too long, the oceans would already have been filled, and he would have lost part of what made him so resilient against the Twilight Energy.

Finally, it was a matter of caution when it came to the remnants. Things had gotten out of hand when he absorbed the Shard of Creation, and he was afraid something similar would happen again when he took on the second set. He might even be forced to leave the Twilight Ascent early, which would be a death sentence if the egg was still in his Spatial Ring.

He didn't want to wait a moment longer, and he soon shot through the narrow cracks after clearing the blockages to let water once more flow through the cave. Zac didn't immediately return to his corporeal form upon exiting the nondescript crack though, but he kept speeding away from where he emerged. He didn't know why, but he had felt a tinge of danger the moment he exited even if he didn't see anything amiss.

It was like the pressure of a looming threat, and Zac figured it was because there were cultivators nearby. Spotting him was extremely difficult in his intangible form, but he trusted his instincts in not reappearing right in front of the crack, and he only transformed after having moved thousands of meters away.

However, his carefulness soon proved futile. He only had time to swim for five minutes before he sensed a number of auras bearing down on him, and he frowned when he realized they seemed to be targeting him specifically. A moment later a group of four cultivators appeared in front of him, all of them clearly part of the same faction judging by their attire.

Zac's initial instinct was to escape, but he soon realized that these people's auras weren't too oppressive, and he instead adapted a wait-and-see approach.

"Finally, you appeared! We were starting to worry you had died in there!" the girl who looked like the leader said with annoyance. "You might have avoided our trap, but we've hunted far wicker prey than you."

Zac frowned as he looked up at the group of four, inwardly wondering what the hell she was talking about. What trap? It sounded like they had spotted him entering the crack in the mountain. Had they set something up right outside to catch him unaware when he emerged? Too bad for them his high Luck made a mockery of most such preparations.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Zac asked as he tried to get a read on the group.

The girl in the lead emitted an aura of a peak E-grade cultivator with decent accumulations, and the rest were not far behind. However, Zac's attributes were already starting to reach a state where he could match those at the peak E-grade, except the old bottlenecked elites and the Heaven's Chosen.

They might think they had the advantage since Zac's aura was at the same level as their leader's, but their effective combat strength should be halved this far into the trial grounds. They might see him as an easy target considering they called him prey, but they were in for a surprise.

“What do we want? Money, of course,” the leader laughed as she projected an image showing Zac’s face as his voice echoed out. The voice recording was from when he bought the **[Stone of Hope]**. “Did you think you could spend almost fifty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins and not cause any waves? You might have a Dao Guard outside, but that won’t save you here.”

Zac’s expression sunk when he saw the image, but he ultimately wasn’t too surprised. The events at the auction had spread far and wide, and he wasn’t surprised some people had discovered his ‘real’ name and face. His Arcaz Black-identity had no doubt been added to some information missive listing good candidates to rob during the trial.

“This is just perfect,” Zac said as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hand. “I needed some targets to test a few things out.”

The leader sneered and was about to retort, but her eyes widened when Zac suddenly was right in front of her, teleported forward by the initiator of **[Profane Seal]**. They had clearly been ready for battle though, and they instantly spread out the moment Zac made his move. Lucky for him, their thoughts were still on attack than escape, allowing the cage to trap them without issue.

This class didn’t have any skill to take them all out in an instant like he did with the Havarok squad, so Zac had instead decided to target the leader with a blitz. The second fractal on **[Verun’s Bite]** had already lit up, indicating that its cutting force had temporarily been boosted by a great degree, and the area was awash with sanguine luster as Zac swung the axe at the leader.

A wall of ice appeared to block his strike, but it was cut apart thanks to the terrifying sharpness of a peak mastery Fragment of the Axe. A dozen ice flowers appeared behind the broken wall, but Zac’s attack was inexorable as it wove between them like a specter. Try as she might, she wouldn’t be able to delay the inevitable. The odd movement didn’t look fast, but it had passed through the second layer of defenses in an instant, striking straight at the ice-mage herself.

For an instant, it looked like zac hit a crystal statue instead of a cultivator as she transformed through some means, but she was soon returned to flesh and blood as she was launched through the waters from the impact. Huge jagged wounds covered her body, and her aura was already unsteady from his initial attack. She managed to survive the ambush though, and she desperately fended off four spectral chains as she popped a healing pill.

Still, a wound like that wasn't something you'd recover from in a minute or two, and she had gone from the biggest threat to the weakest one in the bunch.

A deep crack spread on one of the towers of [**Profane Seal**] as a bulky warrior punched it as a black mountain hovered above his head, but he didn't manage to break out before Zac had a chance to release his other attacks. First came [**Fields of Despair**], followed by [**Deathmark**], [**Vanguard of Undeath**], and [**Profane Exponents**]. Waves after waves of suppression and death spread through the cage, though multiple beacons of life lit up to ward against Zac's layered domains.

However, Zac had not one but five domains active; three from his skills, his taunting aura making any action difficult, and finally a massive Dao Field from his recently evolved Fragment of the Coffin, which in turn was boosted almost a whole tier by [**Spiritual Void**]. Perhaps if they had some sort of War Array they'd be able to rip apart his domains like that terrifying treeman, but it didn't look that way.

“Break out!” the leader shouted as she looked around with trepidation. She had already felt the brunt of his might, and she clearly wanted nothing more to do with him. But how could Zac let them come and go as they pleased?

He immediately swam toward the man who seemed to possess the greatest pure offensive force, but the two others moved to intercept and give their ally time to break the cage. One of them appeared in a flash, and she stabbed forward, forming a lance of condensed lightning. The coffin pygmy behind Zac's back conjured a large barrier just in time before the crackling spear of light slammed into him.

The lightning was relentless though, and while its main force was blocked, some tendrils still found their way around the barrier and through the cracks in Zac's armor. He felt his body getting scorched as he was inundated by a series of powerful lightning bolts. However, Zac's effective Endurance had actually passed 15,000 if he added in the boost from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. It would take a lot more than a secondary blast to impede his path.

The lightning rogue seemed about to launch another attack, but she quickly had to flash away as a ruthless axe almost cut her head clean off. It was a spectral warrior from **[Deathmark]** who had made a silent entrance, and three more had already appeared close to others and forced them to split their attention.

The earth-pected warrior had already received a first deathmark since he chose to forcibly block its strike by petrifying his arm, and his face had turned beet-red in pain because of the corrosive storm that flooded him through the mark. The others rather chose to dodge than to block, the far smarter option of the two.

Seeing that the target had turned into an arc of lightning to escape the axe, the wraith instead turned its attention to the final warrior who had stopped some distance away. He was currently forming an intricate fiery array that screamed of might, but his progress was stalled as he was forced to conjure barriers to block out both a number of spectral chains from **[Profane Seal]** along with the ghosts.

Zac was fast turning into an army of one as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** also joined the melee, and **[Fields of Despair]** provided him with nigh-omniscience inside the cage. It allowed him to be everywhere with his chains, wraiths, and attacks, keeping constant and unrelenting pressure on all four cultivators at once.

Their initial goal had been to escape his cage, but their efforts had quickly been reduced to a passive state of defending against a ceaseless assault from every direction.

The fire-pected Array Master was constantly being interrupted in his work, but he was still desperately setting up what looked to be a massive attack. He needed to go, so Zac barreled toward him instead of chasing the lightning user. The Array Master erected a huge blockade to bar his path, but the barrier didn't even get a chance to show its might before a blue fire started to eat through it like a corrosive acid. A huge jagged scar appeared in front of Zac's bardiche from activating **[Gorehew]** as he closed the last distance.

A massive spike suddenly appeared out of the void, and it looked extremely reminiscent of the earth punishment of **[Nature's Punishment]**. It naturally came from the earthen warrior who had almost managed to destroy **[Profane Seal]** before. He had already destroyed the axe-wraiths harassing him while taking on another mark, and he now aimed to cause a breach in Zac's cage with a massive finisher.

However, just as the spike was about to slam into the cracked tower, a pitch-black haze swallowed it whole, and a wail echoed out as the lightning rogue suddenly found herself impaled on its sharp tip, her blood forming a crackling cloud at the opposite side of the cage.

The scream caused a slight distraction in the fire-attuned Array Master, and Zac's five-meter jagged edge empowered with the Fragment of the Axe ripped right through the final barrier before it continued into the body of the man. A fiery rune appeared to protect him, but it was dim and weak, perhaps from Zac's domains, perhaps because of the Mystic Realm. It just exhausted a small part of Zac's force before **[Gorehew]** pushed through and ripped his body into pieces.

Zac didn't stop there as he instantly turned into a puff through a bloodline-activated **[Abyssal Phase]**, and the Earth Warrior found himself decapitated before he even had a chance to see who struck him. Zac was only easing his suffering though, as he was slowly dying from the two marks of **[Deathmark]**.

A third surge of energy entered his body almost at the same time as the earth warrior died. The chains of **[Profane Seal]** had caught the rogue the moment she was unexpectedly stabbed through Zac's usage of **[Profane Exponents]**.

Like most lightning cultivators, her forte was speed, and the moment she was caught a group of axe wraiths had finished her off. They might not have been a match to her outside the Trial, but since Zac wasn't suppressed in here, then neither were his summons. That left only the half-crippled leader, who desperately struggled to escape.

A storm of ice spread through the whole arena as she unleashed everything she had in an effort to destroy the cage before it was too late. She was clearly pushing herself as the wounds across her body worsened. Unfortunately for her, the whole area was suffused in the corrosion of **[Deathmark]**, and over half of the ice shards were reduced to nothing before they could even hit anything.

The rest found their efficacy lowered because of the other restrictions, and many even veered away from hitting the walls, instead turning toward Zac because of the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. Still, Zac felt that he would only be able to maintain his cage a bit longer. This was after all a peak E-grade warrior beating on an F-grade skill.

If not for his recently evolved Dao Fragment it would long have fallen apart between her and the Earth warrior's attacks. Zac once more activated **[Abyssal Phase]** with his bloodline and flashed over, but he suddenly felt a sharp pain as he was dragged back into his corporeal form with a few wounds.

It was the ice mage who had unleashed some a second even deadlier storm within twenty meters around her, and it contained enough force to disturb space itself.

"I'll pay! Just let me leave," she entreated with despair as she looked at the three unmoving bodies floating behind Zac.

"I'm a guy who spent tens of thousands of D-grade coins, remember?" Zac snorted. "What need do I have of your ransom?"

"You'll regret this!" she screamed with madness in her eyes as she shot toward the wall of **[Profane Seal]**.

The inner storm around her was like a mobile meatgrinder, and it ripped apart the cage in less than a second. However, that

small delay had allowed Zac to catch up, and four powerful chains braved the storm and gripped the cultivator tight. Her body emitted sizzling sounds as the corrosion of **[Blighted Cut]** empowered by his upgraded Fragment of the Coffin rapidly corroded her body, and she screamed in pain as she fiercely struggled to get free.

Unfortunately for her, she was well and truly stuck, and Zac didn't waste any time as he activated the finishing function of the skill. Three extremely sharp cuts ripped the leader's body apart, but just before she died a weird crystal appeared in her hands.

It looked like a firework had gone off inside the red haze of her blood. Zac quickly dodged a shimmering projectile, but he swore with surprise when it suddenly changed trajectory and shot right toward him. A barrier from **[Profane Exponents]** appeared to block, but the light actually flew around it like it was a living thing.

Finally, the light entered Zac's body as thousands of small crystals shot out and soared across the mountain range, and Zac barely managed to catch one before it flew away. The bloody waters soon cleared, and he saw the head of the leader drift some distance away, her face locked in a twisted visage of reluctance and hatred.

“Shit.”

He had a pretty good idea of what she had done just before losing her life, and infusing some energy into the crystal he caught confirmed it. She had used some sort of Tracking Array, or a Revenge Array as it was sometimes called. It was all-too-common for people to meet their end in Mystic Realms, and most would want to drag their killer with them down to hell as a final act of defiance. This array had marked him, while the shards could be used to find the mark.

Luckily, the message was short and succinct and didn't contain any of his secrets. The Elementalist had mostly focused on his wealth. The only mention of his skills was that he used chains and a cage. Zac understood her reasoning all too well. Justice wouldn't move many of the cultivators hiding in this mountain

range, but wealth would. And if she made him out to sound like a Heaven's Chosen, who would dare attack him?

Time was of the essence, and Zac looked inward to find the brand with **[Spiritual Anchor]**. Thankfully it hadn't managed to blend with his pathways just yet, and he quickly moved to seal it with a layer of Mental Energy and his Dao. He was about to destroy it, but he suddenly stopped as he had an idea.

He would be able to remove the mark easily enough, but did he really need to? He was still a good distance from the depths of the Mystic Realm, and there shouldn't be too many peak warriors staying in this area by this point. If there were people ready to kill him for his wealth, why not rob them of theirs?

Chapter 723: Into the Abyss

“Are we really doing this?” Kurtz frowned as he looked at the small crystal encased in layers of his Mental Energy. “We saw the fallout ourselves at the auction. He has the protection of a Monarch outside. Besides, you have heard the rumors. Something odd is going on this trial, and a character like this might be involved in the upheavals.”

“Our options are limited,” Havan sighed. “We have reached an impasse, treading water for three centuries. The offers from the established factions have already dried up. We can’t give up our freedom for a chance at Hegemony any longer even if we wanted.”

Kurtz and Fathela sighed as well. It was true. They had been so full of vigor two hundred years ago, waving off the invitations of clans and sects alike. They had reached the peak of E-grade in just 30 years and already gained renown in the circles of wandering cultivators, what need was there for them to sell their souls? For the next 50 years things were fine, and the trio of childhood friends kept making improvements to shore up their foundations even further.

Then their progress simply stopped.

How Kurtz wished he could go back in time and shake some sense into his younger self. There was no shame in joining an established force, to take part in the wisdom of the predecessors. Now they were impossibly stuck at the bottleneck, feeling their momentum drying up.

It wasn’t inconceivable they’d find the opportunity to take the next step inside the Twilight Ascent, but it was ultimately a long shot. Even if they found the opportunity, it might not be enough for all three. But the opportunity in front of them was different.

“This Arcaz Black does definitely have a terrifying background... He spent over 50,000 D-grade Nexus Coins on that auction. Even if we just get that necklace and nothing else, we can reforge our fate by selling it to the Veilplume Monarch after things have died down,” Havan said. “I think we can get ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins from her, more than enough for us to make an earnest attempt at Hegemony.”

“And who knows what else he has in his Spatial Ring,” Fathela added, indicating his stance on the matter. “And I don’t think this will kill our dream, but rather the opposite. We need power to get to that place.”

Kurtz took a deep breath, but he soon steeled his resolve. What Fathela said was true. Killing a noble Draugr might cause trouble, limiting their chances at making it to the Heartlands. But what about now? Not even the local tyrants were extending invitations at the moment, let alone any of the factions with their roots in the Undead Empire.

“Alright,” Kurtz eventually said as he took out three vials. “If we do this, we need to go all out.”

“You old goat, you still had these?” Havan blurted, but his eyes shone with delight. “With this, our chances are even greater.”

The three immediately turned thought to action and set out through the labyrinthian gullies and canyons of Hollowtongue Mountains. They knew the general direction of the target, but reaching him would still require some effort. As expected, it took almost four hours and a lot of doubling back to close in on him, and that was only because he hadn’t moved since they set out.

The spot they had reached was a secluded valley, and it had been quite a chore to find a path leading inside. Their target sat on a rock five hundred meters away with a large coffin on his back and a brutal axe in his right hand. His long silver-grey hair swayed in the waters as he calmly looked at Kurtz and his companions’ approach.

His features were pristine, and Kurtz could feel a palpable pressure on his soul from all this distance. This was a true

pureblood, perhaps even someone from the original line from how the very core of his being felt subdued by his mere gaze. Arcaz Black was nothing like the diluted bloodlines of the local factions.

Kurtz soon enough snapped out of the reverie as he started to analyze the man as an enemy combatant. The choice of weapon seemed a bit odd to Kurtz, and not in line with what he expected from a Draugr noble. Perhaps if it was an Izh'Rak Reaver with their predilection toward physical carnage.

Besides, beastcrafted weaponry wasn't too popular among their kind since they always held a hint of life. It was possible to transform the Tool Spirits into deathly beast spirits, but the exorbitant cost didn't justify the benefit. Why all the hassle when you could create a natural death-attuned Tool Spirit by crafting using the right materials from the start? Was it perhaps a quirk of the obscenely wealthy?

A value of 500-750 soon appeared over the Draugr's head, which was a bit of a surprise. It was too low for a Dao Branch from what they had gathered, but too high for a Peak Fragment. Did he possess two Death-attuned fragments and was working on fusing them into a singular branch? That would mean he most likely had yet another Dao though since pure death needed to be mixed with something else.

'Triple Fragments?' Fathela's voice echoed out in his mind, echoing his own guess.

It would put them at a small disadvantage, but three fragments were not necessarily that much stronger than their own dualities. They also had numbers and teamwork on their side. If they met a few years later, they might have delivered themselves for slaughter. But as long as the young master didn't possess a proper branch, Kurtz felt they still had a good chance to walk away victorious.

"Arcaz Black," Kurtz greeted as he scanned the secluded valley.

Judging from what they had learned about the Hollowtongue Mountains so far, there should only be one entrance and exit to a valley like this, unless there was some hidden passage that

the Draugr Lordling had found. Arcaz Black was definitely not a fool though. Him coming here and not moving for six hours was definitely not him thinking he was in the clear.

It was an invitation.

Kurtz wasn't surprised, and neither were Havan or Fathela. It was extremely suspicious that the mark had lingered for a full week as it made its way through the mountains. There was no way they were the first party to follow the call. Even if Arcaz Black didn't notice anything amiss at first, he should have figured something out soon enough and removed the tracking brand.

"So it's just the three of you?" the young Draugr said as his eyes moved back and forth between their squad.

Kurtz felt a shudder as those abyssal orbs. He felt a sense of primordial fear, but also a sense of longing. Those eyes were not only a gate to the endless abyss, they were also windows to the promised land. The world where Monarchy was just considered the middle-point of cultivation. Where nigh-eternal Autarchs erected divine domains for their followers to gain insights into the Dao.

Where the latent will of the Primo connected the mortal realms with the Heavens themselves.

"We apologize for the impudence," Havan sighed as he took out [**Trailblazer**], the ancient Spirit Tool they had found in a Trove 200 years ago. "For our dreams, we must sin. Your death has the power to transform our fates."

"Many have tried to steal my fate," Arcaz grunted as he stood up, the collisions of the chains connected to his coffin echoing through the valley. "None have succeeded so far."

There was nothing else to be said, and the three immediately made their move, centuries of fighting together allowing them to work in perfect harmony. Fathela became the eye of a poisonous storm as he activated his [**Shroud of Azuza**] while Havan's sword domain spread to cover half the valley. As for Kurtz, he quickly conjured the four markers of [**Mindworld**],

superimposing his restrictive domain on top of Havan's offensive one.

However, Kurtz barely had time to realize something was wrong before Arcaz Black appeared right in front of him. Primal fear surged through his veins as a terrifyingly condensed aura was released from the Draugr Lord. But hundreds of near-death experiences had honed Kurtz's reaction. The moment the young lord appeared, Kurtz was already phasing 300 meters away with **[Voidgate]**.

Fathela and Havan didn't run from their target though, but they rather pushed forward as Kurtz sent out eighteen array clones from his body, each of them indistinguishable from his real self on the surface. But the clones barely had the chance to move away from his position before a massive construction sprung up around them.

Gates, walls, and miasmic towers. There was even a restrictive rune above in the sky that made Kurtz sink toward the surface. This was a proper fortress, and Kurtz frowned as he looked around at the intricate detail of the skill. This was a true peak skill, not something that people in Twilight Harbor would have access to. It was a testament to the difference of heritage between them and this young lord.

'Don't panic, we knew about this skill from the beacon,' Fathela's voice exhorted through the mental link. *'And it should still be unevolved from the looks of it.'*

Kurtz agreed as he took in the skill. The restrictive rune that had appeared over their heads was exquisite, but it ultimately lacked the spirituality of an E-grade skill. It would probably be able to put even middle E-grade warriors under pressure, but it was just a minor inconvenience to them.

Four spectral chains shot out from the ramparts, but Kurtz simply had them disoriented and shuttling back and forth in search of the true target. In an instant he had managed to lure twelve of the chains, lessening the pressure of the two front-line fighters by a large degree.

However, he barely had time to set things up before a miasmic haze followed by a cascading wave of darkness spread out,

filling the whole cage. Next, a Dao Field put them under far greater pressure than the restrictive rune above their head, and it was only partly countered by their own auras.

Had their guesses been wrong? The pressure they felt clearly surpassed that of a Peak Fragment, yet it wasn't at the level of a Dao Branch. A braided Domain? Was such a thing even possible?

The Dao Field put them under pressure, but the pervasive darkness was even more troublesome; it was a corrosive shroud just like Fathela's **[Shroud of Azuza]**, and a constant strain to deal with. He kept the shroud at bay through activating **[Soulwall]**, prompting a barrier wrought from Miasma and Mental energy to appear around him. The drain he felt from keeping the skill active was pretty high, but definitely manageable.

An eruption of force caused the ground to shake, and Kurtz could see that Havan had launched his opening salvo. He and the Draugr Lord stood locked in place as the aquamarine edge from Havan's **[Swordwail]** was locked in place by a massive jagged edge. The lordling actually used a skill like **[Gorehew]**?

It far differed in quality from the other exquisite skills Kurtz had seen so far. It really looked like the Trial had arrived a bit early for the young Lord. Some of his skills were clearly still unevolved, so he must have chosen to buy some temporary skills from a local repository instead of rushing his cultivation.

Fathela was already shooting forward, a lance of putrefaction gathering on his hand. Kurtz focused his mind as he activated **[Mindworld]**, trying to drag the young Draugr into a realm of delusions. However, it felt like his mental energy was dropped into a vast ocean when he tried to find the man's consciousness.

Was this some odd mental skill? No! It had to be some unique soul tempering method. Kurtz infused more energy into the skill, digging deeper toward the recesses of the man's mind. But he soon found himself at an impasse. The weird ocean had already robbed his skill of most of his momentum, and then he

finally reached a vast net. It felt like the fractal net stretched from horizon to horizon, vast and free of blemish.

Peak tier E-grade Mental Defense.

'His mental resilience is too great,' Kurtz swore through their mental link. 'I won't be able to force him into my mind world in short order.'

'Switch to harassment if mind-bending fails,' Havan said as he applied more pressure.

Fathela reacted instantaneously as well, changing his goal from killing to maiming. It was lucky as well as it looked like the Draugr was completely impervious to the illusions he was assailed with. Two chains pierced toward Fathela with pinpoint precision as the Draugr suddenly exploded with power, shrugging off Havan with pure force alone.

Kurtz was shocked by the display of force since he knew that Havan's effective Strength was over 17,000 if including his Cultivation Manual. Just how strong was Arcaz Black to completely overpower him like that?

Kurtz was about to help out, but his defensive barriers were suddenly covered in blue flames, and he felt a great sense of danger that forced him to quickly swap position with an array clone. It was just in time as well as a wraith had appeared from the darkness, cutting straight through the substitute with a ruthless swing.

He didn't even have a chance to restart his attempt to assist his companions before the chains all shot toward him with unerring accuracy, completely ignoring the clones. Suddenly, a lance of poison appeared out of a black shroud, and Kurtz instinctively activated his life-saving talisman.

The lance was clearly Fathela's **[Misery's Edge]**, one of his strongest skills. Why was Fathela attacking him? Had he made a deal with the Draugr somehow? Kurtz's thoughts were thrown into disarray, but the spear full of pestilence dissipated before it could even reach the thick barrier.

'He displaced my skills somehow!' Fathela exclaimed in Kurtz's mind, and he slowly nodded in understanding.

Meanwhile, Havan was taking the brunt of the damage as Arcaz black was completely brutalizing him with his axe. He only used two of his chains for support, leaving others to constantly harass Fathela, who also had been forced to take out over ten wraiths that kept popping up to attack Kurtz's clones.

Three gristly wounds were already covering Havan's body, yet Kurtz found himself unable to provide any real help. Any time he tried to form a sigil in his mind, something was interrupting him. It felt like he was being suffocated by the chains around him, even if he hadn't even been caught.

'He's too powerful, drink the elixir!' Havan exclaimed as he threw out a handful of ancient talismans, causing a massive eruption of rapidly spreading ice.

Havan scrambled to create some distance while he downed his vial, and both Kurtz and Fathela quickly followed suit.

It was a concoction made by the Technocrat Thaumaturges, and therefore considered banned contraband. But this was no time to worry about such things. Kurtz felt his body burn as his mind exploded with power. He would be bedridden for a month after this, but it was worth it as long as they managed to take this guy out.

However, just as their auras grew, so did the Draugr. Not only in aura, but even his physique. A shield had appeared in his free hand as a thick black armor covered his five-meter body. He looked like a true juggernaut, and Kurtz suddenly felt his perception bend a bit as the dark knight crushed the restrictive ice.

Three of his doppelgangers were suddenly ripped apart, but Kurtz didn't care as his mind was filled with bloodlust.

The world turned fuzzy as an eruption of mental energy pushed both chains and wraiths away. Kurtz savored the feeling of power as the **[Whisperer of the Depths]** was finally allowed to be activated, and a twenty-meter avatar appeared behind his back. Each of his twenty hands formed a sigil of purgation, and the intricate fractal in the sky soon broke apart and was replaced by the Sigil of the Depths.

Fathela grew to his ultimate form as well, a five-meter reaper whose dripping toxins were so powerful that space itself corroded, while Havan looked like an apostle of a Sword Saint as four black wings appeared on his back. The Draugr Lord had firmly taken command of the tempo since the beginning, but he finally found himself greatly restrained by the supremely powerful suppression of **[Whisperer of the Depths]**.

He had been pushed down to his knees as his hand moved toward his head, no doubt assailed by an endless number of illusions. But the Draugr displayed a shocking resilience as he started to push back himself back to his feet, and Kurtz felt his grip steadily weakening. Just how strong was this man's willpower?

'He... Breaking through,' Kurtz exhorted through the mental link, his mind sluggish from the taboo brew.

Thankfully, both Fathela and Havan understood his meaning, and the whole valley shook as they unleashed their power to the fullest, taking advantage of the rapidly closing window of opportunity. The two shot toward Arcaz in a deathly pincer attack, but a sense of wrongness filled Kurtz's heart as he suddenly sensed a terrifying aura erupt from the Draugr's body.

It was death beyond death, destruction of utmost finality, a phenomenon that had no place appearing in an E-grade trial. Cracks appeared on the helmet of the hulking Draugr as waves of primal destruction emanated from his body. The courage gained from the berserking concoction was instantly quenched, but they all knew they couldn't stop at this juncture.

This was the key to Hegemony, the final crossroads that would decide their fate. Ascension or death.

Pestilence converged with Judgement, and it looked like the Draugr feared Pestilence the most. Every single chain moved to bind the incoming reaper, but Kurtz knew such a measure wouldn't hold Fathela for long in his current state. However, his eyes widened in horror as the Draugr narrowly avoided the

spear of poison as he slammed a small sphere into Fathela's chest.

A series of barriers appeared behind the Draugr at the same time as the chains moved to intercept, but Havan destroyed them all to deliver an attack filled with all the force he could muster. Kurtz saw how the terrifying sword radiance created a rift in space itself, but his eyes were trained on Fathela, or rather the large space of nothingness where his chest should be.

He was gone, irrevocably so. Kurtz could sense the destruction of a soul all the way from here, and even his own mind had been damaged from gazing upon that thing. Even odder, he felt his memories fragment and fall apart, and he felt them slip through his fingers to never be seen again.

One of them had fallen, and they hadn't managed to accomplish the task. Havan's attack was powerful enough to slay a half-step Hegemon, but that didn't help when the strike actually missed. The Draugr had managed to delay the strike just long enough with his barriers to move out of the way, his right leg dodging the strike with only a centimeter to spare.

Havan reacted instantaneously though and stabbed **[Trailblazer]** into the Draugr's chest with a lightning-quick jab. That should have been the end, but Kurtz felt like he had gone mad as he suddenly saw the sword embedded in the Draugr's body turn into black ichor. A Spirit Tool had simply disappeared, or been turned into something else?

How was that possible?

Kurtz couldn't comprehend what was going on, and Havan looked even more shellshocked after having his old companion disappear like that. The waters churned, and Kurtz was beset with grief upon realizing that he was the last one still standing of his squad. He turned to run, but he wasn't surprised to find the young lord suddenly appearing right in front of him.

There hadn't even been the slightest energy fluctuation when the Draugr teleported, but Kurtz didn't care about that mystery. The Draugr lordling clearly had an array of terrifying

means that some frontier cultivators couldn't comprehend. They should have known better, but greed makes fools out of men.

Kurtz smiled with a mix of desolation and release as the darkness welcomed him.

Chapter 724: Profiteering

Zac grunted as he looked down at the deep wound in his chest and swallowed one of the Dawn-series healing pills along with a soldier pill. A large ball of hard-to-expel Dao was lodged in the wound, but there was not much he could do about it at the moment because it was time to go. He turned his gaze inward and toward the brand, and with a push of Dao he completed his preparations and crushed it in one fell swoop.

Seven days had passed since he was branded, and he had been attacked 11 times. Two of those ambushes Zac had escaped from, four groups had been relieved of their Spatial Treasures before being knocked out and hidden a few meters beneath the soil, and five battles had ended with unilateral annihilation.

He had made a fortune over the past days from looting Cosmos Sacks, including everything from rare herbs to a small mountain of Twilight Fruits. There was, unfortunately, no treasure at the same grade as the Life-Death pearls, but he still had formed three mountains of assorted loot. Even if he didn't manage to unlock the manuals, the accumulated value still had to be around 20 to 30 D-grade Nexus Coins.

That wasn't really much to the current him, but he knew that he couldn't turn his nose away from making money like this. He was burning his 'inheritance' left and right, without any proper channels to recuperate what he spent. Every little thing counted.

But the real gain had been the great progress he had made on his combat stance. It was rapidly evolving into something real, where he could already incorporate most of his skills without missing a beat. In contrast, his Evolutionary Stance was still only a basic technique so far that didn't make use of any of his Skills.

His Contribution Points and Ladder Position had made a significant jump as well, though most of it came from gaining 25,000 points for evolving his Death-Attuned Dao Fragment. With his other sources of points, he already surpassed most cultivators who had entered with a Dao Branch and only got the 50,000 points to start off with.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 81,167 Rank: 2,541. Value: 500-750.]

His points were a bit inflated because of the mothertree and the other two locations he helped destroy, but it honestly wasn't empty strength any longer. Zac knew he was still far from the top tier-powerhouses, but he was confident that he could soundly defeat anyone without a Dao Branch by this point.

He even felt like Yanub Mettleleaf wasn't an insurmountable enemy by this point, as long as they met in the deeper parts of the Mystic Realm. After all, he had evolved both Coffin and Axe since they fought, which should make it a lot easier to deal with his powerful regeneration.

But more than anything, the ladder showed just how hard it was to form Dao Branches in the E-grade. Catheya had already said that it required not only extraordinary affinity, but also valuable opportunities, but only now was the point starting to come across. Eleven million, most of them the best of the best in the Twilight Harbor, yet there were probably less than ten thousand people inside the trial with a Dao Branch.

It was clear that taking that step was exponentially harder compared to forming a Dao Fragment in the E-grade. Seeing such a grim situation, he was once more pretty happy with his weird constitution. The bottlenecks were starting to grow more and more palpable for those around him.

Forming a Cultivator's Core without the stability provided by a Dao Branch was extremely difficult from what he'd gathered, so the ladder was a poignant reminder of just how few of the trial takers would ever reach Hegemony. Meanwhile, he only needed to make sure he had enough

treasures to eat and enough enemies to fight to keep progressing.

After testing things out over the past days, he could confirm that the lethality of **[Deathmark]** especially had taken a huge step forward from the Dao upgrade. The passive shroud alone was dangerous to the average peak E-grade cultivators, and it was almost game over if they got branded by a mark.

The amount of putrefaction that flooded into their bodies was simply too overwhelming, which was only compounded by the Twilight Energy that was already messing with people's constitutions.

Better yet, Zac had not met a single cultivator who had managed to erase the brand within three seconds, which was a lot of time to be subject to the extremely potent toxins. He had also gotten a lot more adept at instructing his wraiths to better integrate them with his Inexorable Stance. They were still a bit simpleminded, but it would probably get better as soon as he managed to upgrade the skill.

So far any skill evolutions it had eluded him, but he felt he should be getting close based on his experience with **[Blighted Cut]**.

However, even with his recent powerups, the last four battles had been pretty rough. Two of them he had immediately fled from upon seeing the strength of the party, though he had left them with a small parting gift; a hundred offensive talismans flung in their direction. Activating them all cost almost three-quarters of his Miasma, but the eruption had been a sight to behold.

The party that attacked him twelve hours ago had been pretty impressive as well. It had been four cultivators from the Yon'Dai Family, one of the thirteen factions on the Twilight Council. They had all been at a power level that surpassed his own, and they both had E-grade Skills and a War array to empower each other.

If not for the advantage he was given by the Twilight Energy, he would have been in big trouble against that quartet. He had still been forced to use up all three of his healing brands mid-

battle, along with most of his Void Energy from [**Force of the Void**]. Thankfully, the Void Beast organ allowed him to recover the hidden energy storage within a few hours.

Things had obviously gotten even more pressed in the last battle. The trio of Revenants were decent opponents, and Zac had only planned on robbing them after continuing the duel for a while longer. But things changed because of two reasons; first, that brew that had pushed their strength to a level that surpassed his own while also shaking off most of the effect of the Twilight Energy.

There was no room to hold back in a situation like that.

Secondly, his hidden advance array had warned him that a large group was approaching the Valley, perhaps even one of the two armies he had already escaped from once. He had been forced to go all out, using the energy from both his remnants in short succession. One of the methods had even been something he had thought up on the spot.

Warning bells had gone off the moment the sword entered his body, and he knew that a storm of chaotic energies would rip his innards to pieces unless he did something. So he had instinctively forced the Creation Energy into the sword, not even bothering with having some specific goal in mind. Zac had sensed the insipient Tool Spirit being drowned in Creation, falling apart along with the weapon itself.

However, the cost for that attack had been steep; he had once more lost some of his longevity.

It looked like the only safe way for him to use the Creation Energy was to use the Mark of Creation. Anything else would drain him of his life force, no matter if it was to heal himself or unleash bursts of wild Creation. It was maybe lucky that he hadn't really found any way to use the hidden Oblivion Energy in his soul. Perhaps it had a similarly sinister price to be activated freely.

There was at least some good news as well. It was the first time he used Annihilation Sphere for real since he evolved his Soul, and he could pretty much confirm what he sensed when he was cornered by that Corpselord Hegemon after the

Auction. His control over the process had improved considerably thanks to his empowered Mental Energy. Forming the sphere wasn't really a matter of chance any longer, and he didn't feel he was at risk of accidentally annihilating a body part or two unless something unexpected happened.

He was also able to control the amount of stored Oblivion Energy he expelled, though there seemed to be a minimum amount of energy required to reach a critical mass and form an Annihilation Sphere. He had lost roughly a third of his stores, but he didn't feel too bad about it. He would have needed to expel some of the energy soon enough anyway, to alleviate the mental corruption that came with keeping it all inside.

The gains were plenty, but it was time to go. The next group would arrive in less than ten minutes, and Zac had no plans to stay around when they arrived. Miasma surged through his body as he started channeling [**Abyssal Phase**], and he flew into the thin crack he had already discovered. A series of loud explosions erupted behind him, as the Talismans he had triggered blew half the valley to kingdom come.

That chaotic eruption should both mask any lingering energies from his fight, while also making it impossible to figure out where he had gone. Half a minute later he had passed through half a mountain peak, at which point he stopped and returned to his corporeal form. Zac looked around for any threats before he activated his Specialty Core as the robes on his body changed their design to suit his human side.

Color returned to his eyes and face a few seconds later, and he took off his shoes before he set off again, following the current toward what he hoped was the outer parts of the mountain range.

There was no way to know whether he had missed something, but he felt he had covered all his bases. His signal should have disappeared in that valley, and he was now tens of thousands of meters away, looking like a human instead. Even if anyone encountered him, they shouldn't be able to tell he and Arcaz Black were one and the same.

Clattering sounds echoed out in the distance, and Zac cracked his neck as he took out **[Verun's Bite]** again. He had mostly fought in his Undead Form for almost half a year by now, and it was time to go at it as a human for a while. After all, he couldn't simply let the insights he gained back in the Big Axe Coliseum fade away as he focused on other aspects of his cultivation.

His vision was suddenly blocked as a two-meter large critter appeared seemingly out of nowhere. It was a Hollowtongue, the beast after which the mountains were named. A stinger shot straight toward Zac's heart, but he was already on the move as **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the waters.

Zac himself pivoted his body before he pounced with his axe, almost like a beast biting down at his target. Green blood spread through the waters as the axe embedded itself in the odd critter's head, but he felt a burning pain on his left shoulder. He had underestimated just how agile that tongue was, and he had failed to completely avoid it as he went in for the kill.

A fiery tsunami of supercondensed Twilight Energy flooded his veins, and the sensation almost made him see double for a moment. Zac had already activated **[Innate Ward]**, but it was no use now that the stinger had already pierced his skin. It did however block out the blood that spread around him, which by itself seemed highly toxic.

He felt his veins constrict, but his Fragment of the Bodhi quickly came to the rescue as it brought waves of warmth through his body. The toxin was weakened, at which point **[Void Heart]** pounced. **[Purity of the Void]** helped against poisons to some degree, but it was already dealing with pill toxins and the Twilight Energy itself.

A moment later the situation was back under control, except for a red bump where the stinger had pierced his skin.

The pain was thankfully far from lethal, but he knew that the blood spreading through the tunnel might attract trouble. He pushed his body down to the surface of the tunnel and flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, only appearing a few hundred

meters away. It was a weakness of his movement skill in the waters; he actually had to touch the ground to activate the skill.

He could still do his “double jump” in the middle of water though, but it would have to be preceded by a normal step on the ocean bed.

The clattering sounds grew ever louder as he continued, and Zac knew he had chanced upon a hive. Sure enough, he encountered one Hollowtongue after another until he reached the mouth of a large submerged cavern. It was as large as a lake, and there were hundreds of Hollowtongues swimming about or resting on the cave wall or stalagmites.

Zac looked at the scene for a few seconds, considering what to do next. Most of the beasts didn't provide any Contribution Points, but there was one that did; a five-meter mutated version that was given a wide berth of the others. It radiated a powerful aura, far beyond the normal late-stage Hollowtongue. It had to hold a late Dao Fragment at least as well since it was actually worth 183 Contribution Points.

The points were a welcome addition, but Zac was more interested in the challenge. A den full of peak E-grade beasts and a powerful alpha seemed like a good place to continue forging his path. He had made good strides on his Inexorable Stance style so far, and now it was time to start consolidating his Evolutionary Stance.

Zac estimated it would take between 40 to 60 days to reach the edge of the Twilight Chasm after he exited this mountain range, and he hoped to have shored up his skills before reaching that point. This place made a great starting point, so Zac swallowed an antidote pill preemptively before he shot into the den.

Only an hour later did he leave the subterranean lake, covered in scars and pumped full of dangerous amounts of Twilight Energy. Above his head was a small cloud of energy he had been forced to release after killing all those critters. The battles over the past days were more than enough to push his next node to the precipice of breaking open, at which point he had

started to release all the energy instead of aiming for another level.

Forcing open a node just a few days after opening five of them felt a bit too foolhardy even for him.

Zac made his way through the underground tunnels, following the general direction of one of his compasses, this one an upgraded version he had looted two days ago. It was time to leave the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Leaving such a wake of death and destruction behind filled him with mixed emotions, but this was ultimately how the road to supremacy looked. If he ever wanted a shot at catching up to Leandra, he needed to be ruthless both against himself and against others. At least he had only targeted the kind of groups who were the same, people who were ready to hunt down people for their loot.

Perhaps he had even left the Hollowtongue Mountains safer by eradicating these squads for those who just wanted to search for treasures in peace. He knew that he was ultimately just making excuses for himself, but he believed it was fine as long as his Dao Heart was clear as he walked down his path.

You've got to do what you've got to do to stay sane in the Multiverse.

Zac soon emerged from the cave, and he quickly set out toward what should be the outlet of the mountain range, on the opposite side of where he entered. He had slowly made his way across the Hollowtongue Mountains between his fights during the past week, and he estimated that he should be able to leave within half a day. However, he suddenly felt a presence far ahead, prompting him to stop in his tracks.

It was a squad of eight people, which would be a chore to take out even for him. However, they made no move toward him, and they had clearly exposed themselves intentionally.

"Excuse us!" one of the men shouted, and Zac frowned as he took out an escape talisman just in case.

"Please wait! We mean you no harm! We are looking for a Draugr Imperial named Arcaz Black," the first man said with a

small bow, which made Zac take a second look at the group with confusion. “We are paying well for information and assistance!”

Zac blankly looked at the group for a few seconds before he waved the leader over with a crooked smile. Why let an opportunity to make both connections and some money slip through his fingers.

And who knew more about Arcaz Black’s activities than he did?

Chapter 725: Information Exchange

The group of cultivators was too far away for their bounties to show up, but Zac saw the leader's bounty as he got closer; 250-500. That was essentially the average of those who managed to reach the Hollowtongue Mountains from what Zac had seen, making the members of the group footsoldiers.

The man hesitated a bit when he saw Zac's own value, but he still approached a bit further before he stopped.

"You're looking for that crazy Draugr?" Zac asked skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get yourselves killed."

"We dare not target him ourselves. Many have already fallen, we know that. We are simply looking for him on the orders of Auride Serveris of the Radiant Temple," the leader explained.

"Oh?" Zac exclaimed curiously, and he suddenly remembered one of the fights in the past week.

It was one of the two groups he had fled from. He had suddenly stumbled upon a group of over twenty cultivators, four of whom wore robes that seemed to be related to the Radiant Temple. One of the warriors had emitted a very intense aura, and a massive two-handed sword circled his head.

The small army hadn't actually made a move on him, but Zac didn't dare take any chances because of the number of people and the strength of their leaders. He had chucked one of his pre-made talisman balls to set a whole valley on fire while he fled with **[Abyssal Phase]**. Now it looked like that man was looking for revenge.

"He is currently at the 1,533rd spot on the trial, a future powerhouse of the Temple. He is paying handsomely for both

clues and tracking marks,” the leader continued when Zac didn’t immediately speak up.

That rank might not sound too impressive compared to the rankers, but Zac knew it represented real strength. It was noticeably higher than his own, and Zac had definitely sensed a powerful weapon-related Dao emanating from that leader’s body, which made sense considering the massive sword.

“I got two of those crystals and some second-hand information,” Zac slowly nodded. “What is the young Lord willing to pay for that? I am only interested in treasures and Twilight Fruits.”

“10 Twilight Fruits per crystal,” the man said.

“Even if the signal has gone out?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“We don’t know what the young master is planning,” the cultivator shrugged. “We can pay five for second-hand information if it’s useful.”

“I got close to the signal three days ago, to see if an opportunity would present itself,” Zac sighed. “But a massive explosion suddenly erupted. Judging by the energy signatures he should be an Array Master who had set up a trap. The force was much too strong for it to be an attack. Just half a minute after the explosion, the man was over ten thousand meters away. I guess he has high-quality escape talismans to move that quick in the mountains. If you want to trap him, you need to do something to block those kinds of arrays.”

The man’s face got a bit weird when Zac described the event where his leader got blasted to kingdom come, but he slowly nodded and took out a normal jute sack and filled it with twenty-five Twilight Fruits. Zac in turn threw over two of the crystals he had snatched the past days, somewhat regretting he couldn’t divulge he actually had 16 of them.

The two groups left in their own direction soon after, with Zac heading toward the outer reaches of the mountains. The 25 Twilight Fruits was a nice enough bonus, though just a fraction of the almost 600 he had robbed over the past days. What was

more important was the information he got from the trade; the Radiant Temple-leader had some method to track him.

Zac scanned his body over and over with [**Spiritual Anchor**] over the next ten minutes, but there was really nothing left behind. His second-best guess was that the sword cultivator had some method to reverse-engineer the Revenge Array so that one of these tracking crystals could instead track the other crystals. If that was the case, his location would be lit up considering how many he carried.

It didn't hurt to be careful, so Zac took a circuitous route the next few hours and dumped one crystal after another into various powerful currents, allowing them to be dragged back into the depths of the mountain range. With that dealt with, he had washed his hands off the whole situation. Something was brewing in the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he wanted no part of it.

He kept going through the winding paths for another two days, at which point he finally reached the exit. The towering peaks were eventually replaced with jagged boulders, who in turn were replaced by a mostly flat seabed covered with corals and seagrass.

Zac didn't encounter anything of interest over the next week except the occasional plant he found with the help of [**Forester's Constitution**]. It was obvious he was moving through the same paths as others had traveled before him on the way to the inner layer of the Trial. Any of the real treasures in this area, if there ever were any, had long been harvested by those who had rushed here.

Eventually, the topography started to change a bit as Zac found the ocean depths slowly decrease until it was just a few hundred meters. At the same time, the ambient energy was steadily increasing as Zac spotted a vast forest in the distance. The trees weren't of as grotesque proportions as the cork trees over at Cork Island, but they more than made up for it in number.

The forest line stretched across the horizon, blocking his whole field of vision as they reached from the ocean floor all

the way to above the surface. Zac didn't immediately enter, but he rather took out his missives, trying to figure out which forest he was dealing with. There were over a dozen sprawling forests in the Twilight Ocean, and a few would be dangerous to enter even for him.

Some were the homes to massive schools of fish or other beasts, and the hordes were so numerous that even he would find himself harried to death if he wasn't careful. There was not much to go by though, and Zac found himself at an impasse where he wasn't sure whether he was better of passing straight through to save time, or to spend a week or two going around.

Suddenly, a lone figure emerged from the forest line in the distance, swimming straight toward him. It was clearly a cultivator rather than a local beast, and Zac looked over with a small frown that only relaxed when she stopped over a thousand meters away from him. The woman sent out a crystal, and it sped through the waters toward him. Zac looked at it suspiciously, considering whether he should destroy it or not, but he soon realized what it was and accepted it.

"Are you interested in a trade?" the unknown cultivator asked through the communication crystal.

"A trade for what?" Zac asked curiously.

"Judging from your trajectory, I think you took the Life Pulse on the way here, and we could both benefit from updating our mappers as well," she said. "I have also traded and killed until my **[Ocean Chart]** has reached 2.33% completion. I have traveled in the outskirts of this forest for a while as well, and I have valuable information."

Zac gave it some thought, and he agreed. There was a small risk of giving up good information and getting false information in turn, but the mappers were smart enough to differentiate with first-hand accounts and bought information.

"I can do that. My map is 2.46%," Zac answered as he engraved a copy on one of his spare mappers.

Of course, this copy was slightly altered to not make his path in the Hollowtongue Mountains completely clear. It also didn't display the location of the valley with the Life-Death Pearls, or the disjointed external data containing the Volcano and its surrounding features.

The stranger did the same, and Zac smiled with satisfaction when he saw how his mapper almost doubled. This cultivator had followed another current here and traveled roughly two weeks through the edge of the forest before she reached this place. Part of it covered the Life Pulse though, and Zac guessed she had traded with someone taking a similar route as himself.

He quickly scanned the contents, and he slightly sighed after seeing none of the spots that held the Remnants were marked down. He had handed over the task of finding the spots to Catheya, but it would obviously be even better if he managed to find them himself.

"Is there anything of note happening where you came from?" the voice asked.

"The mothertree on Cork Island fell just after I got there, even with Yanub Mettleleaf trying to stop it. It was a real mess," Zac said. "The undead were involved I think. There was also a manhunt for some Draugr called Arcaz Black back in the Hollowtongue Mountains where I just came from, led by the Radiant Temple. The guy is apparently filthy rich, but he survived for a week before disappearing."

Zac had already started using his own exploits to make some money, and he saw no reason to stop now. Besides, he had been pretty isolated so far and didn't have much else to contribute.

"There were unusual clashes along the Silverwind Stream as well," the woman sighed. "A squad of elites from the Havarok Empire annihilated a mysterious unit of wandering cultivators. Those cultivators were unknown, but they displayed shocking power. The grandson of a Havarok Marquis actually fell."

"Do you know what they were fighting about?" Zac asked.

“It was on the second major stop of the Silverwind Stream; the Gem Grotto. It sounded like the wandering cultivators tried to blow the whole thing up for some reason,” the woman said. “The empires are up to something, best to stay out of their way.”

The Gem Grotto was a somewhat popular destination for the lower-tier cultivators, and it was a bit like Divine Grotto he had contaminated. It was essentially a Nexus Crystal Mine like his own mine back home, except it was full of Twilight Crystals. Those crystals were pretty useless for cultivators, but they turned into either Miasma Crystals or Divine Crystals when taken back out, making the cave a steady but limited source of wealth.

Destroying the whole cave truly made no good sense; it was like setting a mountain of money on fire. The purpose had to be related to his own mission, proving once more that he was just one of many squads involved in this mess. At least he wouldn't be involved any longer as soon as he rid himself of that weird egg.

“Which forest is this?” Zac asked next.

“It should be the Greengrove Archipelago,” the woman said as she took out a four-meter eel from her spatial ring. “This should at least be a Greengrove Eel, and I caught it inside this forest. The appearance of the canopies above surface matches as well.”

The two kept sharing some information for a few minutes, but there was ultimately only so much to cover. Both were going at it alone, which meant they could only keep to the edge of the big events and more dangerous spots.

“Your map was superior, so I'll give you an additional piece of information. There is a temporary settlement on top of one of the canopies roughly two days from here. I never dared enter myself, but I looked at it from the distance for half a day. People did both come and go, apparently without issue,” the woman said, and she disappeared a moment later.

Zac was pleasantly surprised at the news. Temporary settlements often appeared in trials like this since it was a

convenient way for the powerhouses to make some money. Some top tier expert set up shop, using their name and prowess as a guarantee of safety. People could go there to socialize, trade, and exchange intelligence.

However, Zac could also understand why the woman ultimately never entered. There was always a risk of getting robbed or killed when entering a place like that, and that risk only increased when you were a lone warrior without any background to rely on. Furthermore, this supposed Dao Trial had a clear slaughter-component, which made things even sketchier.

Still, Zac ultimately chose to head for the encampment.

One of the main benefits of the place was the communal maps. Everyone entering would usually have to contribute their own map in addition to an entry fee, or at least be able to sell a copy of their mapper. That led to the communal map being the combined effort of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of warriors.

The current goal was to get to the Twilight Chasm as quickly as possible, to get rid of the egg and search for treasures before his soul oceans got saturated by the Twilight Energy. The best way to do that was to find one of the streams entering the chasm. It could save a month of travel time, and he had already looted seven submersibles from his battles in the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Updating the map to a communal one might even add some information on the places related to the Remnants.

So Zac entered the Greengrove Archipelago, but he didn't even get further than a hundred meters before he was assaulted by an eel just like the one the woman showcased. It shot out from a hole in one of the towering trees reaching above the surface.

Zac knew that this was a domain of the beasts, so he already had **[Verun's Bite]** ready at hand, and a swirl of leaves passed among the trees, completely overwhelming the late E-grade eel. It released sea of lightning across the area, but Zac's Endurance and **[Innate Ward]** was enough to mollify the effect until the beast died.

However, Zac swore in annoyance when he saw a dozen more eels shoot out from the surrounding trees, probably called over by the lightning domain. A huge leaf appeared in front of his blade, and it immediately gained a golden luster before a radiant wave flew out, quickly followed by one of pure death.

Life and death formed the signature demarcation of **[Rapturous Divide]**, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the scar just kept growing as it continued forward. One Tree after another toppled as the Twilight Energy in the surroundings were reduced to their base components, pushing the lethality of the skill to unprecedented levels.

The madness only lasted for less than a second though before the radiant domain of Arcadia was ripped apart by the Twilight Energy, cutting the skill short. Still, that was more than enough as all the eels had been split before they even had a chance to unleash their domain or move out of the way.

The same was true for the trees, where many had lost a twenty-meter section of their trunks. However, they still hovered in the air, as though they didn't need their roots to survive. Zac knew it was just because of their canopies above the surface though. They were pushed together so densely that they essentially formed proper islands made out of leaves. The trees that weren't cut apart propped up those that were.

Zac quickly looted the battlefield before he moved on. It was lucky he decided to test out the skill before using it in a real battle. It's effect was definitely strong, but it worked a bit differently compared to normally thanks to the Twilight Energy. It was more chaotic, with hundreds of demarcations forming a thick band of destruction, instead of one clean line.

Its lethality was pretty impressive, but it was also ripped apart by the surroundings itself. So if someone managed to defend for just half a second, the attack would be rendered useless by the Twilight Ocean.

It was worthy trade in Zac's opinion, and he continued to temper himself beneath the Greengrove Archipelago for half a day, fighting the various beasts that made the waters their home. The eels were the largest population, and Zac had soon

killed hundreds of them, and it felt like his whole body was electrified by this point.

However, Zac suddenly felt a pang of dangers as a sea of lightning started to approach, and he quickly hid inside a hollow trunk as he activated an illusion array. It first looked like a natural calamity coming closer, but Zac could eventually discern a monstrosity if an eel in the center. It stretched over one hundred meters, and the movement of the beast caused crackling sounds that echoed through the forest.

It was covered in an armor of lightning as well, and it emitted a dense killing intent. Even worse, it looked like it was looking for something. Or someone. Was it angry that its children had been killed over the past day and come to find the culprit?

Zac wasn't in any mood to fight this thing at all. This big bastard was completely different to the mutated Hollowtongue he had fought with relative ease the other day. This was definitely a proper Beast King going by the aura, the equivalent of a Hegemon. These things were rare, but they definitely existed inside the Twilight Ascent.

They were supposedly mainly living inside the Twilight Chasm, but some kings could appear this deep in the trial. Part of Zac wanted to test his mettle, but this didn't feel like the time or place. This big guy didn't seem like a pushover, and even if he defeated him, who knew what kind of attention it would draw and what aces he would be forced to burn.

Thankfully, the beast didn't discover Zac's hiding spot, and it soon left in the direction of where Zac had killed the smaller eels. Zac decided to not stay beneath the surface in case it came back though. It was time to finally head above water after months of traveling on the ocean floor.

Chapter 726: Ventus

Kalavan

Zac swam out of his hideout after making sure the King Eel was gone and he swiftly followed the tree trunk until he reached the canopy. It was extremely dense, to the point that Zac eventually had to cut a path through the shrubbery, making a 30-meter tunnel until he reached the other side of the tree crowns.

He left the muted world of the ocean depths behind as he was greeted by distant bird cries and a breath of fresh air.

It was a welcome change after having mostly inhaled the weird waters of the Twilight Ocean, only occasionally finding a dry cave where the air was stale. Zac looked around, and he had to admit the scene was a bit novel. The sky in the Greengrove Archipelago was completely blocked when looking at it from the ocean floor, but above the surface, there were thousands of islands made by the Greengrove Trees' canopies bunching together.

Meanwhile, the Twilight Ocean formed shallow seas and rivers between the islands, where shoals of small fish swam about. These rivers weren't actually connected to the ocean below, and he would have to cut through the densely bunched leaves to get back to the proper ocean. It was a bit weird to know he wasn't standing on land, but rather in a tree crown, as Zac could barely tell the islands weren't natural.

The ground was essentially a solid mix of leaves and soil that had drifted over from somewhere, and some branches of the Greengrove trees had continued to grow above the 'ground', turning into miniature trees of their own that reached a height of around ten meters.

Animal calls were coming from all directions, mostly that of birds who perhaps used the archipelago as a stopping point while traversing the vast ocean. None of the tree crowns grew more than five or six meters above the water surface, but Zac guessed the intermittent islands with the massive trunks beneath the surface had a calming effect on this part of the ocean, acting as natural wave breakers.

The low altitude of the islands made Zac's life easy as well since he instantly spotted a marker a few islands over. It almost looked like an incursion, except that it didn't contain any strong presence. There was also a line on top, simply saying "Temporary Settlement." It looked like whoever had set this place up, had come prepared.

It was no wonder someone had decided to put up a temporary settlement in this place. Most people were ultimately more comfortable staying above-water, but powerful storms usually raged above the surface, especially this deep into the Mystic Realm. Those storms could be even more lethal than the currents that passed through the waters, which was why most people simply stayed closer to the ocean bed.

Zac observed the surroundings for over an hour from the cover of his tunnel, but there was very little activity. He did spot two groups of cultivators surreptitiously moving toward the beacon, but there were no outbursts of energy indicating battles taking place. Only then did Zac start to make his way forward as well, swapping between using **[Loamwalker]** across the moats and swimming across the shallow seas.

A few hours later he reached his destination, an unusually large island. It was over five times the normal size of the surrounding islands, and it actually rose almost twenty meters above the surface. The Twilight Energy was actually denser than normal as well, making Zac wonder why the powerhouse had chosen this place to set up camp in such a weird spot.

"Welcome, 25 Twilight Fruits to enter," a guard said, and Zac's brows rose when he looked at the dozens of people inside.

He had hoped the entry fee to be in Nexus Coins or Nexus Crystals, but it looked like he was being too optimistic. There weren't too many people who went this deep into the Mystic Realm, but with people coming and going, the base had to make a few hundred Twilight Fruits a day. Even if it was shared among the workers, it was still a massive haul.

"That much?" Zac couldn't help but ask.

"Well, you can stay up to a week for that price," the guard shrugged. "And with the leader's purification array, it's definitely worth it. The chance to expel all the accumulated gunk from your body in return for a few thousand E-grade Nexus Coins?"

"Fine," Zac grunted and handed over the entrance fee, along with a few extra to the guard. "Any tips you have to share?"

Alea was still happily eating any Twilight Fruits that he threw her way, but he still had a few hundred left after his rampage in the mountains. A small bribe to create some goodwill wasn't too expensive in exchange for getting some information.

"Thank you. Only one rule to follow. Don't cause a ruckus and don't exert too much energy. Otherwise, everyone here will attack you," the guard said.

"Why would people attack me just from exerting some energy?" Zac asked.

"Well, this place has a guardian beast," the man grinned. "No one wants you to wake it up."

"What?" Zac repeated with confusion.

"You saw how big this island is. It's not a coincidence. This town is sitting right on top of the den a Raksha Shrimp King," the man explained. "That's why there's the rule about limiting energy outbursts. No one wants to wake the slumbering beast below."

"There's a beast king right below us?!" Zac exclaimed, keeping his voice low even though the clamor of the town. "That's impossible."

“You can go below if you want to check things out yourself,” the man shrugged. “A few have. But you should know that everyone will attack you if you return with a bunch of shrimp underlings in tow. Better turn you into an offering than let the beasts come over.”

“That... is something else,” Zac eventually sighed. “The big boss of this place is pretty smart. Who is it?”

“His name is Ventus Kalavan,” the guard said.

“Not a local?” Zac asked with a small frown, not recognizing the name.

“No, but he’s not a stuck-up bastard like some of the Imperials. He’s from the Radiant Temple, and he actually seems to have a few invites,” the man said with longing in his eyes.

Zac could understand the man’s desire. Many natives of Twilight Harbor had a complicated relationship with the foreign factions. They partly despised them because of how they came to the Zervereth Sector and robbed it of most of its top-tier cultivation resources. But they also dreamed of being discovered, to be taken to the supreme cultivation havens that B-grade factions no doubt possessed. A simple word from this Ventus Kalavan could completely change the trajectory of someone’s life.

Having invites also gave some indication of the standing of this Kalavan guy. Catheya only had one token to the Undead Empire, and that was mostly because of her master. The Radiant Temple was notoriously picky as well, so having multiple invites meant that he must hold significant status among the younger generations.

Still, it made him a bit hesitant hearing there was another Radiant Temple elite in this area, apart from the guy who had made his haunt in the Hollowtongue Mountains. Was it a coincidence, or was it something more?

“Do you know what ranking the young master has?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“No idea,” the guard sighed. “His contribution value is actually 0, but his strength can’t be too low. There was a raid a week ago and ten people attacked. They were powerful, but the young master appeared and simply ripped them apart like they were trash.”

Zac nodded in understanding. It was a shame that the ladder only appeared once a month, and it only showed the top 100. He wasn’t on the list, so he could be anything a powerhouse that was just short of entering the ladder, to someone at rock bottom. Of course, he could also be someone completely uninterested in the Trial since his Daos didn’t seem to be related to Life or Death.

He might instead be targeting the Fate-Plucking ladder considering the entrance fee. It didn’t matter much to Zac though. He was in a new persona known to no one at the moment, and the struggles between the big shots were far beyond him. He was more interested in gathering information and updating his **[Ocean Chart]**.

The latter was easy as there was a building specifically designed for that very purpose, and Zac immediately headed over after saying his thanks to the guard. However, he stopped again after just taking a few steps as over 80% of the Twilight Energy around him was suddenly replaced by Cosmic Energy.

The effect was the same as Catheya’s array, but it looked like it spanned the whole settlement. The settlement might only be a walled compound, a square, and some temporary structures thrown up, but the cost to purify such a large area had to be pretty extravagant. This Ventus Calavan was clearly burning massive amounts of Nexus Coins to harvest more Twilight Fruits.

“How do you perform trades here?” Zac asked as he entered the store designated to update your mapper.

“We do straight trades of completion for free, with 0.2% margin. You can also buy 1% completion for 8 Twilight Fruits. We also sell a complete copy for 40 Twilight Fruits.”

“What rate are you currently at?” Zac asked.

“8.84%,” the shopkeeper said with some pride. “Including 1.3% that’s deeper than this current depth. Buying the full copy is definitely a good deal.”

Zac whistled, actually a bit impressed. It wasn’t too different from Zac’s own **[Ocean Chart]** that was currently at 3.47% after the trade the other day, but there were only so many routes that led to the Greengrove Archipelago this early in the trial. For them to fill up almost a tenth of the trial in just over 4 months was no small feat.

As for whether the full price was a good deal or not, Zac wasn’t so certain. Part of the completion probably contained the Life Pulse Route, along with early sections of the trial that were of no use for Zac.

Still, he wasn’t lacking fruits, and he would keep getting more as time passed. Zac ultimately doubted Alea was truly insatiable, just like how Verun only wanted a limited amount of blood from each type of source.

“I’ll just take a copy,” Zac muttered and handed over another 40 Twilight Fruits. “Your boss must be making money left and right.”

“My granny always said my face would bring great fortune, and I guess it’s true,” a smooth and melodic voice emerged from the entrance, and Zac turned over to see a man standing in the entrance.

“Boss!” the attendant hurriedly said as he stood up a bit straighter, which prompted Zac to make a double-take.

If the Tal-Eladar were elf-like creatures with jagged teeth and some other bestial features, then Ventus Kalavan looked like a proper high elf. Zac had never seen that kind of species in the Base Town or while traveling the Zecia sector, making him believe it was either a regional race or one that simply wasn’t represented in Zecia. After all, while humans were everywhere, many other races were not.

Ventus had half a head to Zac’s height, but Zac wouldn’t be surprised if the elf only weighed two-thirds of what he did. Zac’s whole frame had become a brutish bulk of chiseled

muscles, while Ventus was extremely lean, though in a refined rather than emaciated way. He didn't give off the aura of a warrior at all, but rather of a scholar.

That impression was only increased since he was actually holding a weird instrument in his hand, something resembling an abacus. But instead of wooden balls on rods, there were hundreds of small stone beads hovering in an array without anything keeping them in place. It was clearly something valuable as it emitted an aura that surpassed Zac's own weapons.

It was not necessarily higher quality, but it was definitely higher grade than his own Spirit Tools. The odd appearance of the Spirit Tool and the gentle appearance of the elf wasn't enough for Zac to put his guard down. He had already heard the warning from the sentry, and his instincts told him that this man was extremely powerful, no matter if his appearance and aura were almost that of a non-combat class.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how to deal with the sudden appearance of the big honcho himself, so he simply nodded in his direction as he mentally readied himself for battle just in case.

"Welcome to my little town, my friend," Ventus smiled. "I have been waiting for you. I have a business proposal for you."

"Waited for me? We don't even know each other," Zac countered as warning sirens went off in his mind.

"Then I guess we were simply fated," the elf smiled in return as his fingers grazed a few of the gems on the abacus, prompting them to change their constellation.

"Come visit me when you are ready. It will be very beneficial for you as well. After all, aren't you right at the precipice?" Ventus said with a wave before he left, leaving a befuddled Zac behind.

Zac tried to understand what was going on as he spied on the elf saunter back toward the walled-off area in the settlement, with all the resting cultivators quickly getting up on their feet

to greet him. Zac had stayed nondescript since arriving, and his current identity didn't have any interesting points. His array was currently inactive, but the bracer he got from Greatest should be enough to block any spying at the e-grade.

The situation was definitely suspicious.

“Boss has called a few people over since he set up shop here almost two months ago,” the attendant shrugged when he saw Zac's inquiring look. “All of them left not long after. The longest stay was two hours. Some of them sported wounds, but they didn't look disappointed. A few even had their bounties increase. You can ask anyone here, many even stay here longer than planned in hopes that the boss will call them over.”

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he nodded and left. The elf had already entered his compound, but Zac didn't immediately follow. He instead walked through the small settlement, surreptitiously asking one cultivator after another for some information in exchange for Nexus Coins. After half an hour the situation was clear; either they all were under some sort of spell, or the attendant was telling the truth.

In fact, many had asked those who left the compound what happened, and it turned out that the elf was looking for suitable sparring partners and had supposedly built a sparring cage that was powered by Dao Treasures. Most tried to stall as long as possible so they could benefit as much as possible from the insanely exorbitant setup, but most fights only lasted for a moment before they failed to keep up with the boss.

A few actually managed to last long enough to reach a breakthrough of their own. Of course, some were also dreaming of being discovered by showcasing their skill during the sparring session.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually walked over toward the walled-off section. He had fallen just short of evolving his Fragment of the Bodhi before, and this seemed like a good opportunity. If this didn't work, he could always find a Beast King to pit his life against. A sparring session here would even allow him to save on his own Dao Treasures so that he could keep them for a rainy day.

Sparring with an elite from a B-grade faction would definitely be beneficial to his combat style as well. How was his Evolutionary Stance supposed to evolve if he didn't seek out various powerful opponents? Still, he mentally prepared for a prison break in case the scion's intentions weren't quite as pure as advertised.

The gates to the mansion swung open as Zac approached, and they closed after he entered. The interiors were actually just a large garden, and Zac looked around with some confusion, realizing that none of the plants were spiritual in nature. Was the elf simply walking around with a pouch full of soil and flowers for situations like these?

"Oh, you're finally here," Ventus said as he looked up from a book he was reading.

"You could have saved me some trouble if you simply explained yourself," Zac grunted as he scanned the area for hidden traps as best as he could.

"No need to be so tense," Ventus laughed. "I have no designs on your life. You've seen my bounty. The amount of slaughter and destruction I would have to unleash to even gain a top 10,000 spot would be shocking. And even all that effort would just result in a Limited Title even worse than the ones I already have. What's the point?"

"So why even come here?" Zac probed.

"Orders from above, can't go into detail. However, my intuition tells me you have an idea of what I'm talking about," Ventus smiled. "The Perennial Vastness Token is a happy surprise though."

"You don't have things like that in the Radiant Temple?" Zac asked, diverting the subject from what he did and didn't know.

"Well, we do have a few similar opportunities, but nothing comes for free. If I can save decades' worth of Temple Points by snatching this opportunity for myself, I can use the points on unique treasures or other good stuff instead," Ventus shrugged. "So, are you ready to spar? Let's help each other across the threshold."

Chapter 727: Order

The elf was clearly gearing up for a sparring session that would push them to reach a breakthrough. However, Zac had some reservations even if the opportunity seemed good.

“Why me?” Zac asked. “If you can’t give me a proper answer I’ll have to decline.”

That was the most burning question in Zac’s mind. If he was giving off clues about his situation to the young elites of the B-grade empires he needed to know immediately. Or if this elf had somehow found out about some of his most important secrets, the situation might turn into something bigger than a simple spar.

“Can you tell what path I follow?” Ventus asked as a Dao Field spread out from his body.

Zac’s thoughts whirred as he felt the ambient energy, and he looked at the elf with surprise. It was actually just a Dao Field from a Peak fragment as far as Zac could tell, which was decidedly lower than he had expected. However, the Dao Field was still far more intense than the fields of his own two peak fragments, almost a whole tier higher.

This Ventus must be right at the precipice of forming a Branch, and Zac also suspected he had an extremely powerful soul to push the Dao Field to this extent. As for the type of Dao, Zac actually didn’t have the slightest clue.

It didn’t really feel like a combat-oriented Dao; there was no bloodlust or sharpness to it. It was neither attuned to nature or the elements, and it didn’t feel like Adcarkas Dao of Space or Leviala’s Dao of Time. It did give off a mysterious and intangible feeling, but it wasn’t the Dao of Karma either.

For some reason, it made Zac think of an old academy with observatories and ancient books and scrolls filling tables.

“Books...?” Zac said from lack of better answers.

“Well, not quite,” Ventus smiled. “My path is within Dao of Numerology, one of the children of the Dao of Order.”

Zac’s brows rose a bit in surprise. The Dao of Order was a top-tier concept, proven by the simple fact that it had birthed a proper Apostate. As for the Dao of Numerology, Zac didn’t know a lot about it. He remembered Leviala mention it once, and he had read short descriptions in missives about Dao.

There was no proper faction in the Zecia sector following this Dao as far as Zac could tell, and it was apparently as hard to master as the Daos of Space, Time, and Karma.

These Daos put greater demands on affinity for some reason, and it was no wonder this guy managed to become a proper member of the Radiant Temple with this kind of accomplishment. It was probably even harder to form a Peak fragment subordinate to the Dao of Numerology compared to forming a Dao Branch of some weapon-based Dao.

That didn’t mean these Daos were more powerful, though the rarity of a Dao was an advantage of its own. Zac had fought against a lot of elementalists and weapon masters over the past years, and he could trust his instincts against those kinds of warriors. But against the elf in front of him? He was still clueless on what to expect in a battle.

“Every day since entering, I have calculated the streams of fate of the Twilight Ascent, and the path gradually grew clearer. I chose this spot specifically to form a settlement, as it rests on a nexus on the way to the Twilight Chasm. A large number of those marked by fate will pass through these gates, and you are one of them,” Ventus said with an intense look. “Even better, the presence of the Undead Empire and Havarok Empire in this area is extremely weak, with a low probability of me running into someone troublesome while collecting Twilight Fruits.”

It was just like Leviala had said. If he was speaking the truth, then Ventus Kalavan was essentially like a supercomputer that gathered thousands of pieces of information, turning them into data that helped him predict the future and his optimal path.

Abbot Everlasting Peace's Dao had been different, but the end result was similar.

He had known all sorts of things that had yet happened through his insights into Karma. For a peak E-grade cultivator from a B-grade faction to be able to do the same, it wasn't too surprising. Zac hesitated for a while, but he eventually nodded. His intuition told him that while the elf didn't necessarily explain the whole situation, he also wasn't lying.

"So, how does this work?" Zac asked.

"Come with me," Ventus smiled, and the two walked over to a tree that twisted to form a tunnel.

They eventually reached an underground chamber that had a ceiling height of over ten meters and a diameter of almost a hundred meters. Its walls were made from the densely packed canopy of the Greengroves, and hundreds of banners with inscriptions were hung from both ceiling and walls. Zac guessed they were purifying talismans since the Twilight Energy in the area was barely as dense here as at the starting continent.

There were also eight braziers standing by the wall equidistant from each other. Zac's eyes roved across the engravings and braziers, looking for any hint of something amiss. But neither his Danger Sense nor his skills found anything wrong with the setup, and his instincts told him that this was the kind of preparation you'd see in a cultivation cave.

In fact, there were already Dao Treasures loaded in each of the braziers, and the moment that Ventus closed the door, small fires ignited beneath the fruits. An alluring scent spread through the whole place, and the area soon felt a weakened version of the Dao chamber where they cracked open the Dao Funnel. Part of him wanted to simply sit down and gobble everything up, but he knew that doing so would just harm himself.

He was still lacking that final inspiration of what direction to take his Fragment of the Bodhi. If he just let himself get swept up by the mysterious smoke, he might end up with an imperfect Dao that didn't quite match with his path. Zac

turned toward Ventus, but he hesitated when he saw the smiling elf just standing there with the large wooden frame in his left hand.

“What’s wrong?” Ventus eventually said with a raised brow. “It’s not cheap to run this thing, you know.”

“Uh, are you going to fight with that thing?” Zac asked hesitantly as he looked at the wooden frame and the floating stones within.

“You’ll understand soon enough. Don’t worry, just fight freely,” he laughed. “No skills though. They are just conduits to the Dao rather than its base, and it might attract the big guy below us.”

“Alright,” Zac said. “You better not regret it.”

It looked ludicrous that the elf wanted to defend against **[Verun’s Bite]** with stone beads and a wooden frame, but Zac guessed his reservations were simply him being a country bumpkin. Not wasting any time, Zac shot forward as Ventus flashed to the middle of the chamber with a graceful leap.

Zac launched a probing strike aimed at the elf’s chest, but he effortlessly avoided it by shifting his weight with expert precision. At the same time, the elf flicked one of the stones on his Spirit Tool, and Zac felt the universe somehow tilt when hearing the clicking sounds of gems colliding.

It wasn’t really a spiritual attack, at least not a type he was familiar with. It rather reminded him a bit of when he fought the Karmic Cultivator in the Tower of Eternity, where the man tried to impact his fate. He didn’t actually feel those kinds of karmic restraints, but he still felt like a beast trapped in a cage for some reason.

Zac swung his axe once again to break out from the mental shackles by putting out some pressure of his own, and he also tried to stomp down on the elf’s foot to lock him in place. However, he was surprised to find it was rather his own foot that had been restrained, with Ventus immobilizing him with a force that belied his thin frame.

Something suddenly changed in the weird weapon as the hovering stone inside the wooden frame suddenly lit up like stars, and some of them rearranged themselves into a constellation resembling an intricately decorated shield. Zac didn't know why he thought so since a few dozen motes of light couldn't depict an image with such clarity. But that was what he saw.

In either case, there was no time for Zac to ponder on the implication of the rearrangement since the elf actually moved the abacus to counter Zac's own attack. Such a collision would normally result in a broken wooden frame and Zac's enemy thrown across the room or cut apart entirely, but it was like the weird Spirit Tool nullified force.

The collision didn't quite halt Zac's strike, but Ventus had somehow managed to exert very little power to diffuse most of Zac's momentum, and Zac suddenly found himself getting his forehead flicked before the elf distanced himself in a flash.

"You better get serious," Ventus laughed. "You're no good to either of us like this."

"Right," Zac muttered as he prepared himself.

The most recent exchange had been a bit embarrassing, but now he at least knew that the man could take the heat. He shot forward once more, like a beast pouncing on another powerful predator encroaching on his domain. His axe cut a ruthless upward arc aimed at maiming rather than killing, but he once more heard the beads colliding, somehow restraining him.

Thankfully, the heart of the Evolutionary Stance was change and freedom. Life always finds a way; if one path closed, there would still be innumerable other paths to success. Zac fluidly changed his upward swing into a tackle, and Ventus quickly took a few shuffling steps to avoid getting thrown onto the ground.

The elf regained his tempo almost immediately though, and he launched an offense of his own. Zac was already pushing forward to force the fight into the tempo of his stance, but he almost felt like he had been gored on a lance when he found a palm slamming into his chest seemingly out of nowhere. The

elf looked weak and refined, but he was really packing a punch.

Zac estimated Ventus' effective attributes to be around his own, and it was even possible that was because he was restraining himself to match Zac's power. However, Zac's gut told him that they were simply closely matched, which probably meant that Ventus possessed a Dao Branch he currently wasn't utilizing. There was no other way that he would be able to match Zac's attributes as far as Zac was concerned.

Attributes weren't the only source of the effectiveness of the elf's strike though. It was like Ventus had found the absolutely optimal moment to strike. It hit Zac straight in his solar plexus, and the strike even took advantage of Zac's own momentum. Zac almost felt like a dumb boar running straight into the raised spear of a hunter, impaling himself on the weapon.

A small setback like that wouldn't stop a beast in the wild though, and the gleaming edge of **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the air in an attempt to cut off the offending hand. Unfortunately, it was like Ventus knew his actions even before Zac did so himself. Zac was following his instincts, and the elf was somehow calculating what Zac's instincts would say in real-time, continuously adjusting his response.

The two exchanged a dozen strikes in an instant, where all of Zac's attempts to forcing open Ventus' nigh-perfect defense were rebuffed, with Zac getting punched by one painful counter after another. He was quickly coming to understand the power of the elf's path; it was using precise calculations and predictions to find the optimal ways to strike. Meanwhile, the odd Spirit Tool was not only a defensive treasure, but it also looked like it helped Ventus make those precise calculations.

Zac couldn't think of any direct solution that didn't involve 'cheating' with his skills or bloodline, so he could only redouble his efforts. There should be a limit to either Ventus' calculative abilities, or his ability to respond to Zac's unfettered assault. In fact, Zac felt that his Inexorable Stance would be pretty effective against this kind of combatant.

So what if you could predict fate if fate was inexorable and unavoidable?

However, Zac's purpose wasn't to win but to find inspiration. A minute passed, and the speed the two exchanged strikes kept increasing. They had turned into a blur as they flickered across the Dao chamber, each strike empowered not by Dao but their Path and their convictions. Zac was quickly becoming engrossed by the battle, partly because of the environment and partly because Ventus was an excellent sparring partner.

It felt like he was fighting fate itself with his Evolutionary Stance. Zac's technique was everchanging and ever-improving, but Ventus was already prepared no matter what he tried. In fact, the elf's methods were evolving as well as Zac's movements became more and more unpredictable. He wasn't just anticipating Zac and countering after a while, but he rather started pushing the direction of the fight in inscrutable ways.

Everything from a small shuffling step to moving the stars in the abacus was filled with meaning, meant to change the way Zac reacted. It was extremely powerful on its own, but especially so against someone like Zac who used an instinctual type of fighting. It was almost like Zac couldn't trust his instincts, as his own Path was being affected by Ventus'.

That didn't dampen Zac's enthusiasm though, rather the opposite. Every moment his technique improved, becoming more and more complete. He also felt a burgeoning wave of inspiration wash over him. He was literally fighting inside a tree canopy, hidden inside a small sanctuary in a dangerous zone.

He was standing inside his own Dao, gradually perfecting his path.

Evolution was endless, everchanging. If his Inexorable Stance represented the ultimate fate of all living things, then the Evolutionary Stance represented the ability to break those chains of fate and the laws of nature themselves.

The smoking haze from the braziers started to transform, turning into two forces in a struggle for supremacy. One was overbearing, like the Heavens themselves as it towered above

all creation. The other was much smaller, but it frantically fought against the larger one, constantly eluding being locked down.

Ventus was aiming at becoming the arbiter of fate, an apostle of Order. His actions would be Heavenly Law, dictating providence and the tides of battle. Meanwhile, Zac birthed and discarded one move after another in an endless cycle, each attack a life going from birth to death in the span of a breath. Each one was unique and unpredictable.

He was becoming an agent of Chaos, infecting fate with an unerasable tinge of uncertainty.

And the motor of it all was Life. Life was the source that kept filling Zac with inspiration, while his weapon was the delivery method. Axe and abacus clashed over and over as neither Ventus nor Zac was ready to give an inch as the fight represented their paths. It was even becoming unclear whether they were really just sparring fighting for real as time marched on.

Fists met flesh, the collisions echoing with the truths they both searched for in the heat of battle. However, as the two were getting more and more caught up in the ripples of inspiration, the fight started to transform once more. An outsider would probably get confused if he spectated the fight since the strikes gradually became slower rather than faster. It must have looked like they both were running out of steam, but the truth wasn't that simple.

For every move that Zac executed, there were ten that were discarded. They both were continuously adjusting from the slightest change in the battlefield, like they were playing chess thinking dozens of moves ahead. The bringer of this change was largely Zac, as he started to come to a realization.

Life was full of endless possibilities and unpredictable, but it was also extremely efficient. Excess was a luxury of humans rather than a truth of life. The wolf wouldn't go on a mad slaughter and kill more than it could eat. It would be a waste of energy. Plants and beasts wouldn't evolve features that

served no purpose, since every morsel of energy was needed to survive in the wilds.

Just like how life was efficient, so did Zac need to become more discerning in his combat style. His combat style would still be marked by randomness and unpredictability, but he would need to be in the driver's seat. This would create a targeted evolution rather than series of random events that might or might not end well.

It was important to distinguish between concept and application. In true evolution, most mutations failed and 99% of all species perished sooner or later. But that outcome was obviously not acceptable when he was fighting. He couldn't let himself get maimed or even killed just because randomness dictated it.

And as he controlled evolution, he was controlling fate. If fate wanted him to perish, he would break through fate and find a way. Zac's attacks gradually became more and more forceful, no longer trying to trick or subvert Ventus' combat style. His instincts told him to break right through it.

He was already a Mortal on the path of cultivation, so what did he fear fighting directly against predestination?

The elf frowned as he suddenly found himself pushed harder and harder, and the storms of Dao around him became more and more overbearing. But it was to no avail as Zac fought like a man possessed, pushing forward with wild abandon. Zac was accumulating one wound after another, but rips and tears started to appear on Ventus' robes as Zac pushed on.

The elf was unwilling to be pushed around, and the abacus swung toward **[Verun's Bite]** in an effort to steal his momentum once more. But Zac's knee rose with enough force to make the air fracture, and it hit the bottom of the wooden frame with overwhelming might just before the two weapons clashed.

Zac felt a strong resistance for an instant before the abacus flew out of the elf's grasp and into the air. His whole being surged with momentum, and Zac barely remembered to stop his edge before it sunk into the chest of Ventus.

“It’s my vict-” Zac said with burgeoning pride, but his proclamation got cut short as a hard object suddenly slammed into his head.

It was the abacus he had forced out of Ventus’ hand. It had flown up a couple of meters into the air, but the trajectory made it fall back right on top of him. The collision had caught him completely unaware, and Zac stumbled a few steps back as his vision turned white for a second. He shook his head to clear his mind, but he saw that the elf thankfully had no intention of following up on his lucky break.

“Relinquish fate to seize the future,” Ventus muttered, his eyes burning with conviction as he stood rooted in place.

It looked like the elf had found a path of his own, and he quickly scurried to the other side of the chamber and sat down.

Zac was covered in painful bruises, but he was still elated as he walked over to the opposite side and sat down as well. His body was full of the mystical energy of the Dao Treasures already, and it all shot toward the celestial Bodhi in his mind. He had found it, the direction he wanted to take the Fragment of the Bodhi. And now he simply needed to form it with the fuel that Ventus had provided.

Chapter 728: Dao Branch

The scorching sun blasted the badlands, and the lone Bodhi was still the only island of life in an ocean of death. The punishing rays had kept the vast desert in a deathly grip for an eternity, but the sanctified tree was not content with simply enduring. It was the agent of change, the key to life in this lifeless world. Year after year a golden haze would spread from its canopy, small seeds with the power of transformation.

Life was the breaker of barriers that pushed cultivators to pave the road toward Eternity. The Heavens had its designs; it was immutable and intractable, but it couldn't stop the innumerable beings of the cosmos from grasping for the great beyond. It staved off death as it filled the living with endless possibilities, allowing all manners of beings to spread across all space.

Eventually, a seed from the Bodhi would manage to take hold, and one tree would turn into two. Two would birth four, and eventually, the badlands would be a desolate desert no longer. A small seed could break the status quo that had gripped the world for a near-eternity, and when the winds of fate blew, anything could happen.

Zac had already incorporated his Dao with his Path, and most of the insights were already consolidated after the previous bout of meditation. There was now an added element to the Fragment of the Bodhi, just as with his path; fighting fate. If the death-ascpected side of his cultivation represented finality and inexorability, then the life-ascpected side represented endless possibilities.

The two concepts were opposing and irreconcilable, but Zac still felt it was the right way to go. Soon enough, the Fragment had taken the final step, and he had managed to push his final Dao Fragment to Peak Mastery. He opened his eyes and activated his Dao Screen, taking a gander at the results.

Fragment of the Bodhi (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +550, Vitality +1110, Intelligence +30, Wisdom +280, Effectiveness of Vitality +20%

The results were in line with his own expectations, with the only caveat that the evolution provided a bit more Wisdom and a bit less Endurance than expected. That was just fine with him, considering his physical durability was pretty disgusting already. There wasn't much else of interest that had changed, except his ladder position that had made another jump, though this time only by 300 places.

It wasn't too much, but Zac wasn't surprised. The evolution had pushed him just past 100,000 Contribution points, which meant he most likely was competing with those who had formed a Dao Branch by now. And who among those warriors hadn't managed to gather a bunch of Contribution Points through other means?

He would either need to form a Dao Branch or find something valuable to destroy like the mother tree to make another qualitative leap forward on the ladder. For now, he was more interested in what was going on with Ventus Kalavan. Zac's own breakthrough had consumed a decent chunk of the Dao-infused mists in the arena, but it was nothing compared to what was going on around the high elf who still had his eyes shut.

There was a storm brewing above him, to the point that space itself was affected by the outburst. It didn't crack and form spatial tears, but it was like the laws of nature changed within ten meters of the elf. It reminded Zac of how it felt when he stood in front of the trapped Dimensional Seed, where his very path was being questioned by the aura Ventus exuded.

It didn't take long for Zac to find his bearings though, and he looked on as a five-meter rune appeared above Ventus's head. It wasn't engraved or inscribed, but it was rather formed by what looked like shimmering stars. It looked a lot like the stones in the odd Spirit Tool, but these small stars were made by the Dao itself.

Unsurprisingly, the constellations they created felt far more tangible compared to the one in the spirit tool. Looking at the rune was like looking at the heavens themselves, and it was like Zac had been transported to that mysterious space where Yrial had performed his Dao Impartment to him.

Behind the motes of light was a vastness that Zac had never seen before. A bridge had been formed in the chamber, a bridge between their physical realm and the beyond.

It was a shame that Ventus' path was completely separate from his own. Looking at the process of forming a Dao Branch from first row gave him all kinds of insights, but it would have been far more beneficial if their Daos had been more aligned. As for what Dao Ventus was forming, Zac wasn't certain.

Zac believed it was technically possible to form a Branch of Numerology, just like it was possible to form Branches of Life or Death from Bodhi and Coffin. But you could form many different Dao Branches even if you walked a path of purity as Zac did. Even two concepts within the Dao of Order could form a unique Dao, and it seemed as though Ventus might have some relation to stars going by the Dao Apparition above his head.

The process continued for over an hour at which point the braziers were completely sucked dry. The elf was forced to take out three more Dao Treasures, each one better than anything Zac owned, to continue the job. But the elf was definitely making great progress. The celestial rune above his head kept growing more and more powerful and condensed.

The position of the stars kept making small adjustments, and Zac felt like it was approaching closer to perfection with each passing moment. It was almost like when he upgraded **[Indomitability]**, but on a far grander scale. Zac looked at the apparition with awe, stunned by its complexity - it was rife with meaning.

Eventually, it seemed like everything clicked into place, and a mysterious pulse spread out from the rune, and Zac could feel it deep into his soul as it passed through him and continued out from the arena. The apparition quickly shrunk in size next

before it entered Ventus through his glabella. Only ten minutes later did he open his eyes, and Zac saw pure elation on his face.

Zac could understand the feeling. Forming a Dao Branch was one of the biggest hurdles to forming a powerful Cosmic Core with some certainty. He was pretty certain that the elf already had one Dao Branch before, but one's main Dao was more critical to upgrading one's Core since it more represented one's path.

With Ventus having formed two Dao Branches, one of which was the extremely hard-to-train Dao of Numerology, reaching Hegemony was just a matter of time now. Without it, you needed some unique opportunity or a good chunk of dumb luck to succeed. But those kinds of people would always be limited in their potential since the Dao was the foundation for all cultivation.

A Cultivator Core formed mostly with the help of an external treasure wouldn't be aligned with the Cultivator himself, and it would usually have very low potential. Most such Hegemons would never leave the initial stages of the D-grade, but that alone was enough to become an elder in a D-grade force and gain thousands of years of longevity.

It was the same for Zac. Finding proper information on Mortals forming their Cultivation Cores was pretty hard since it was so exceedingly rare. But the gist of it was that there was no real method to slowly form the foundation of the core like Cultivators did through their manuals.

You had to try to forge it in one go, where part of the process was fueled by Dao, and the other part of it was fueled by treasures. It was more than ten times harder than it was for cultivators since the Mortal had nothing to build upon. It put even higher requirements on one's Dao as well since it was a more integral part of the process without a Cultivation Manual to do some of the work.

That alone was what stopped almost all mortals from ever taking that step. Simply gaining a Dao Fragment in the E-grade was almost impossible with the extremely low affinities

Mortals had for the Dao. How would they possibly manage to form a Dao Branch that could help stabilize the process?

That was why Galvarion's accomplishment was such a shock, to not only manage to make it into Hegemony but even past it into Monarchy. He must have been blessed by extraordinary luck to make up for his lacking affinities, finding one opportunity after another to push him along. Of course, it was also possible that he had already become a Cultivator by the time he was aiming to form his inner world through boosting his affinities, something that might not be possible for Zac.

"Congratulations," Zac eventually said as Ventus got to his feet. "I feel I gained a lot from seeing your breakthrough."

"Thank you," Ventus smiled. "I am happy that you could take a step forward as well. The fighting style you are forging for yourself – marvelous. I seldom see such integration between man and Dao even back at the temple."

Zac smiled, but he was actually a bit confused about that point. For example, while Catheya was extremely adept with her Daos and skills, he didn't feel much of a Path from her combat style. It was the same with most people he had encountered, with only two real exceptions. One was Adcarkas, who had perfectly harmonized with the Dao of Space. Even now, Zac felt he was barely beginning to catch up to the Dominator's mastery.

The other was Kenzie when she fought under the guidance of Jeeves.

Ventus was the third person Zac met who had reached that stage, and he was obviously a rare genius to form this kind of Dao Branch while still in the E-grade. Zac didn't really feel like he personally was some sort of genius when it came to these matters, and his affinities to the Daos were simply abysmal. Was his ability to so easily integrate his Dao a benefit of his constitution, or was it rather the result of his unique road to get where he currently stood?

"I have no idea why a monster like you remains unattached, but my calculations indicate you have some private issues weighing you down," Ventus continued. "But you know what,

the Radiant Temple don't care about your past as long as you're not an unorthodox cultivator. If your grudge is with a local faction, why not just come to our place?"

"Your place?" Zac said skeptically. "You're inviting me to the Radiant Temple?"

"Well, not really," Ventus laughed as he threw Zac a token. "I'm just a little disciple myself, it's not like I can decide who can enter. Perhaps if it was some of those highbrow scions with powerful ancestors to rely on, but I'm an outsider myself."

Zac snatched the token and took a look at it. Its design was completely different from the one he got from Catheya, but it was clearly a cut above the other ones he still had in his Cosmos Sack. It was a proper cross-sector teleportation token and something that most people in the frontier dreamed of acquiring.

"Then what's this?" Zac asked.

"It's a token to the Lucent Mile Continent in the Yr'Vanium Sector. In case you don't know, Yr'Vanium is a Sector roughly ten times older than Zervereth, and you could say it's in the process of transforming into an established sector from a frontier sector," Ventus said.

"Yr'Vanium is firmly under the control of the Radiant Temple, and we regularly hold trials on the Lucent Mile Continent. With your strength, you will have no problems at all becoming an Outer Member, and becoming an Inner Disciple definitely is to be expected. You should only need to temper yourself and your combat style a bit more, and you might even become a core or personal disciple after being vetted for a few years."

Zac looked at the token with interest, and he eventually put it in his Cosmos Sack.

"Are there any requirements on age or grade to join?" Zac hesitantly asked. "I can't say I'm not tempted, but I have some stuff I need to deal with. I might even be a Hegemon before I'm ready to look for a faction."

“Pretty confident,” Ventus grinned. “But I think you have the qualifications to be. There are no strict requirements, but the Temple obviously prefers younger cultivators. Most outsiders who join are between late E-grade and early Hegemons, and the E-grade cultivators are generally around 30 to 50 years old. Those at the precipice of forming their core might be a few decades older, but I honestly doubt the Temple would accept an E-grade cultivator over 100 years unless they have some unique skillset or special circumstance. For example, they might have extreme potential but have been stuck and wasting away on a trash world for too long.”

“Are you sure you want to give me this? I might not even be able to go,” Zac asked curiously, knowing his identity as a mortal might waste this token. He couldn’t say that part out loud though, as his power was just too ridiculous for being a Mortal.

“Well, I do get Temple Points for every member I manage to recruit for the sect, so I hope you use the opportunity. But I can always get more contribution points through scamming some young scions,” Ventus grinned. “I hear a disciple brother of mine got blasted by some crazy Draugr not far from here, he is as smooth as a baby and as red as a lobster right now. I can probably provide a fake divination in return for a good chunk of contribution.”

Zac couldn’t help but feel sorry for Auride Serveris. He still didn’t actually know if the guy was hostile toward Arcaz Black when they ran into each other the other day, and now he was also about to get scammed by his fellow disciple.

“Is there tension between outside members and those who are grandfathered in?” Zac asked to change the subject away from his other persona.

He was honestly contemplating giving it a go in the future if he felt he could enter a place like that without exposing his secrets. Even an outer member would gain access to a lot of knowledge that would benefit most cultivators. He had seen just the kind of heritage a fragmented group like the Big Axe Coliseum possessed, and that was nothing compared to what a proper B-grade force like the Radiant Temple would have.

But Zac was a bit hesitant to go if the Radiant Temple was the kind of place where the old families within the faction had all the power, turning the whole Sect into a pseudo-clan where the outside recruits were barely considered members.

“Well, yeah. Nepotism is a reality in any faction. Otherwise, the old goats at the top wouldn’t work as hard. But it’s not too bad,” Ventus shrugged. “The young lords have better resources, but us outsiders generally have greater talents. It’s the young lords with good talents you have to watch out for.”

“Are any people like that here?” Zac asked curiously.

Ventus didn’t immediately answer, but he eventually shrugged like he didn’t care. “Kataron Rissit is one of ours. The Rissit Family’s supreme elder is one of the twelve Grand Deacons of the Temple, and Kataron himself is probably their most talented clan member in 100 generations. He’s not a bad guy, but he’s a bit singletrack when he’s on a mission. Better stay away from him.”

Zac recognized the name immediately since it belonged to the current 4th place ranker on the ladder. Kataron Rissit had started at the 5th spot, barely suppressing the 6th. But every time the ladder had appeared, he had made great strides forward. He had surpassed the 4th place holder, Dravzur Kuldass after a month, and he was currently just a hairbreadth away from claiming the third position.

There was still a pretty decent chasm between him and Ykrodas Havarok or Uona Noz’Valadir, but he clearly stood out from the other Rankers.

“Right,” Zac nodded. “Thank you, I-“

He didn’t get any further as a tremendous shockwave threw him off his feet, and he felt powerful auras fluctuate from the surface. Another shockwave erupted, and Zac could suddenly hear a bunch of screams and screeching sounds of beasts. There was one clear suspect of the chaos, and Zac grimaced when he realized that the Raksha Shrimp King probably had come knocking.

He had a sneaking suspicion that it was because of the ripple that Ventus' breakthrough released, and he looked at the elf who responded with a helpless smile.

"What now?" Zac sighed, knowing there were probably tens of thousands of shrimps waiting right beneath the canopy he stood inside.

"Well, you can't subvert fate every time," Ventus sighed as he threw an odd array disk to Zac. "Best of luck to you, I hope we'll meet again. This is the key. Help the others, will you?"

"Ah?" Zac blurted, getting a foreboding sense of déjà vu.

His suspicion was immediately confirmed when the Radiant Temple disciple simply disappeared in a flash of starlight, very similar to how Ogras got swallowed by shadows just after getting Zac to throw out that poison kettle so long ago. Zac laughed at the similarities, but he choked on his laughter when he realized that the escape talisman he had taken wouldn't activate.

Space was sealed.

Chapter 729: Raksha Shrimp

Zac glared at the sealed talisman in his hand, swearing at both the wily elf and the salesman who had guaranteed ‘unparalleled ability to escape even inside a sealed domain’ for the talismans.

“Don’t be like that. Now hurry, my preparations can only delay the big guy for a minute,” the voice of Ventus echoed through the chamber, surprising Zac.

It looked like the elf had known something like this would happen and made some preparations. The thing Ventus threw Zac at the end clearly wasn’t an escape token, but it looked like it was meant to deal with the situation above. Zac sighed with some exasperation before he rushed out of the Dao Arena, and he was met with a scene of utter chaos outside.

The outer wall was already gone, and there was an enormous hole in the Greengrove canopies right outside the settlement. And from the depths of the tunnel, hundreds of Raksha Shrimps skittered forward, reeking of bloodlust with their six serrated claws ready to tear the settlers apart. Even the smallest of them was 4 meters long, brutish crustaceans clearly bred for war. The largest specimens were almost twice as big, and Zac guessed they had to be the ones who reached had Peak E-grade, with the rest of them being in the later stages.

They rolled forward like bulldozers, but the protective arrays still held while the wall did not. In fact, the whole sky had been replaced by a starry nebula, making Zac feel like he was looking up at space outside the Mystic Realm rather than the greenish haze of the Twilight Ocean. Motes of light were constantly falling, each one of them targeting a shrimp that stepped too far.

The motes looked harmless, but one massive beast after another fell helplessly on the ground after a simple touch, and

piles of them were quickly forming at the edge of the settlement. The two dozen cultivators still inside weren't affected though, and the motes harmlessly passed them by. A few took the opportunity to strike at the shrimp, but most were trying to break out.

It was not only space that had been sealed, but the beasts had actually managed to erect a physical barrier creating a cage far stronger than [**Profane Seal**]. There was a huge water barrier that encapsulated the whole settlement and the surrounding five hundred meters. Even Ventus's prepared defenses were within the water cage.

As for the source of the barrier, it was pretty obvious; a 40-meter long Raksha Shrimp King that actually floated in the air above the tunnel that it had created. Not only did it have eight enormous claws that made Zac's heart shudder when he looked at it, but it had actually formed what looked like wings made out of blood-red water.

His best guess was that the Beast King was tricked into thinking there was some opportunity for a Dao breakthrough hidden in the town, and it had now locked it down to look for it. Thankfully, it looked like it was a bit hesitant about entering itself because of the odd cloud in the sky, instead letting its children test the water.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he shot toward the water wall on the opposite side of the town, away from the Raksha Shrimp King and its minions. Fighting a Beast King was something he was planning on doing sooner or later, but there was a time and place for everything. This one had a seemingly endless number of followers to throw at him, and some of them had quite formidable auras.

Besides, the king himself gave off a much more condensed aura than the electric eel even if the shrimp king was less than half the size. Not only that, but the Raksha Shrimp species were generally considered one of the most dangerous species in the inner layer of the Twilight Ocean according to the missives he'd bought thanks to one special ability of theirs.

They could utilize a War Array.

The king had brought thousands of subjects, and it might be able to turn itself into the equivalent of a Middle Stage Hegemon with their combined contributions. It was no surprise that the settlers focused on stalling while trying to break the water wall rather than going all-out to take the king out. Few E-grade cultivators would willingly anger a Beast King, even less than a Hegemon.

F-grade beasts were almost always weaker compared to cultivators level for level, except for some unique races. E-grade beasts were a bit better off, but still slightly behind. They had gained some basic intelligence and an understanding of the Dao, but they were still a tier lower compared to cultivators with their weapons, and skills, and so on.

However, that all changed at the D-grade. The boost in power for humans was big, but it was even bigger for beasts. Beast Kings were essentially the lowest grade beasts that were considered bestial cultivators, beings who followed in the steps of the Beast Ancestor.

Only those who managed to purify their bloodline would manage to form a Beast Core, and when that happened they would gain a Bloodline Inheritance. This bloodline inheritance differed greatly in quality and scope between species, but even the worst ones were a full kit of both skills and a cultivation method that suited their kind.

Though apparently, beasts with extremely pure bloodlines could awaken such an inheritance much sooner, some even from birth.

The bloodline evolution alone would give them a tremendous surge in power, and forming a Beast Core would award them with a shocking amount of energy, and energy reserves were already one of the things they surpassed cultivators at. With the inheritance itself, they suddenly gained ways to make use of those almost endless stores of Cosmic Energy with skills and to empower those skills with cultivation manuals.

That was why the difference in power between cultivators and beasts was pretty much removed at the D-grade. In fact, the average cultivator was slightly disadvantaged in raw power.

Zac was no average cultivator, but he still was far from the peak of the E-grade. The amount of strength he would have to exhibit to deal with this big guy was a lot more than he was willing to show in front of over a dozen elite cultivators.

Instead, he decided to follow Ventus's suggestion and help the people escape.

"Keep attacking it," a burly humanoid roared as he unleashed a tremendous slash with a two-handed sword at the barrier. "We need to exhaust it!"

The others didn't need to be told what to do, and they were piling on in an effort of breaking through the thick wall of water to escape. A few even tried to swim right through it, but they were rebuffed and bloodied from the attempt.

"It's you!" a familiar face exclaimed when he saw Zac approach. It was the storekeeper who had helped him update his **[Ocean Chart]**. "Where's the boss?! We need his help getting out of here!"

"He teleported away somehow," Zac said with a crooked smile. "I think he's gone already."

"What?!" multiple people exclaimed, glaring at Zac like this was all his fault.

"What are you looking at me for? Do you think I want to be stuck in here with you people?" Zac grunted as he took out his axe.

The next moment a storm of Axe-infused leaves slammed into the barrier, but it just rippled without properly breaking. The barrier was something else, and a showcase of the difference between the D-grade and E-grade. Hegemons simply had a disgusting amount of energy to spare, and the Shrimp King could probably just keep infusing the barrier with energy until their whole group was exhausted.

After confirming the situation, Zac took out the item he got from Ventus. The elf had said that this was the key, and Zac's best guess was that it was meant for this very situation. He readied himself as he infused the token with Cosmic Energy,

and he instantly felt it emit a shocking cold. He had a good guess what was going on.

“The boss prepared a key! Get ready!” Zac roared to those few who were attacking the shrimp at bay in the distance, and he threw the talisman at the barrier a second later.

A huge seal appeared from the token, the rippling waters of the barrier immediately started to freeze, and the water wall soon turned into an ice wall. That wasn't the only change though; much of the energy that filled the waters were somehow nullified, making the ice not much stronger than just a normal wall. However, Zac knew the window of opportunity was limited as an enraged roar erupted from the beast king.

The Beast King could clearly sense what was going on, but an almost blinding starlight illuminated the area as a storm of silver leaves shot toward the rapidly freezing wall, cutting out a large chunk of ice in one go. A few more mighty attacks enlarged the escape path even further, forming a proper pathway.

Zac instantly flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]**, appearing far outside the barrier in an instant. Three cultivators were even quicker than he was, and most of the others were hot on Zac's heels. The whole island shook the next moment, and Zac knew the Beast King had been forced into action.

This was no place to stay, and he rushed forward, his steps empowered by his movement skill as he flashed toward a neighboring island. A crash and an eruption of Cosmic Energy behind him indicated that the Beast King had caught up to someone, but Zac didn't stop to look. He had already paved the path, the others would have to deal with the fallout themselves. As for Zac, he set course for the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He was occasionally forced to jump down to the bottom of the shallow lakes to activate the moment skill again, but he was still making great progress across the archipelago. He only stopped ten minutes later to get his bearings, and it thankfully didn't look like any of the shrimp had followed him.

There was however a few cultivators on neighboring islands. They bowed in his direction before disappearing, and he followed suit as he jumped into one of the rivers of the Greengrove Archipelago and dug a hole that took him to the proper ocean beneath the canopies.

The Raksha shrimp were probably still gathered around the encampment, looking for the Dao Treasure that the Shrimp King thought he had sensed. However, they would probably spread out the moment they couldn't find it, aiming at the cultivators instead. So Zac didn't want to spend any more time in the area than he had to.

Huge swathes of land, or rather water, had been added to his **[Ocean Chart]**, and Zac started planning his route as he pushed forward. Most of the added spots were unsurprisingly in the earlier parts of the Twilight Ocean. It was like Ventus had said, the temporary settlement seemed to be at the nexus of four paths, of which the route he took was one.

However, some parts had been scouted that went even deeper than the settlement itself. Zac had 'wasted' almost two months between Catheya's mission and his cultivation session, and some had reached this area over a month ago. A promising route to the Twilight Chasm had already been found, and Zac only hesitated for a few seconds before he changed course toward the already charted path.

The map bought from a Temporary Settlement didn't hold all the private markers that cultivators could add, such as warnings of powerful beasts or natural disasters, but it was still much safer than to go about things blind. The route would take him through Greengrove Archipelago and some more, where one of the settlers had spotted the beginning of another stream.

That stream was most likely one of the dozen-odd currents that led to the Twilight Chasm and entered its depths, and the quickest way for Zac to get where he needed to go.

But before setting off, there was one thing to take care of. He was currently swimming between the towering mangroves, but he suddenly swam a bit closer to one of the trees. Without

warning, he pivoted in the waters, and stomped off against the trunk, utilizing the tree to activate [**Loamwalker**].

He flashed a few hundred meters forward, at which point he double-jumped in the waters to instantly change his direction and move around another trunk. There was nothing in sight, but a storm of leaves still shot out as Zac swung [**Verun's Bite**] with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

The waters suddenly shuddered as two bloodied men appeared out of nowhere, both of them looking at Zac with surprise and trepidation.

“Is there some sort of misunderstanding?” one of the men asked. “We just escaped with our lives, why attack us like this?”

“Preemptive self-defense,” Zac shrugged.

Zac had actually realized that someone was following him for a while now. Part of it was thanks to his peak mastery [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Each improvement to the skill brought the same benefit; greater detail to his energy vision. By the time it had reached peak mastery, it captured even the weakest hint of attunement.

Not only that, he had just evolved his Tree-based Dao and he was inside a forest, which made his senses extremely keen. Zac had noticed that there was a spot with weaker attunement a few hundred to a thousand meters behind him. That was often the tell-tale sign of an illusion array or cloaking skill that didn't quite match up to Zac's own sentry abilities.

But the most sure-fire way was obviously his Luck. With his recent Dao Evolutions, his mostly stagnant Luck had finally taken some steps forward, and he was approaching 1000 effective Luck. That was a shocking amount for E-grade cultivators, and it unsurprisingly provided great benefits. His warning senses had never been sharper, and he could feel something amiss just from the fact that he was being targeted. Previously the danger would have had to be palpable for him to get this way.

The two had tried to make it look like Zac had made a mistake, but he could sense killing intent hidden in their eyes. As expected, the two suddenly shot toward Zac as they brandished their weapons. They could probably tell that their ploy had failed and decided to instantly attack to retain some of the element of surprise.

Zac wasn't worried, and a vast fractal forest sprung up among the mangroves, making sure he'd sense if there were even more people lurking in the area. His aura exploded to a level that far exceeded what he had displayed inside the town, and the waters churned from his roiling killing intent. This deep into the Twilight Ocean, this kind of outburst essentially represented a Heaven's Chosen.

The two were clearly shocked by the display, and one of them took out an escape talisman without hesitation.

“Wai-“ the other man screamed in alarm, Zac had already pounced on him.

The robber's head was lobbed off as the other man activated the talisman. But he was dragged back by the chains of **[Love's Bond]** before he was finished in one go as well. Zac deactivated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** and scurried away after looting their rings and Corpses.

The gambit was a huge success. Zac was definitely powerful enough to deal with these two warriors without too much effort, but it shouldn't have been that easy. The two were still elites that dared travel in the depths of the Twilight Ocean, and Zac didn't want to attract any attention so he had unleashed an unnaturally powerful aura to catch them off-guard, courtesy of his bloodline and **[Spiritual Void]**.

The two must have thought he was a monster with a Middle Stage Dao Branch between not being restrained at all and having his aura so condensed. They would definitely have figured out it was just fake power within a second or two, but they both died long before that.

Zac traveled for another ten days, continuing his progress between going over Catheya's fractals and battling various beasts that had made the expansive mangrove forest their

home. His Dao evolution was rapidly being consolidated into his path, and he was shoring up the insights into his path he had gained as well.

Soon enough he reached the edges of the Greengrove Archipelago, but he didn't leave just yet. He first found an inconspicuous tree an hour from the edge and dug a small cultivation cave in its crown. He plugged the hole with the branches he cut out and followed up by setting down a couple of arrays to seal the area.

He had already incorporated his lessons from upgrading **[Indomitable]**, and he had pushed his Life-attuned Dao Fragment to peak as well. Now that things had calmed down, it was time to make a real go at upgrading his skills.

Chapter 730: Upgrades

Zac felt he had accumulated enough to give it another go at upgrading his skills, but rushing things at this juncture would create a lot of extra work down the road. The better the state of his skills were post-evolution, the less effort he'd need to spend on slowly fixing them later on. So he went over every skill fractal fastidiously while more going over his plans, checking and double-checking the missives he had collected before collating everything against his insights into his recently evolved Daos.

The next stop would be the Twilight Chasm itself, a terrifying place where other cultivators were only one of many worries. There were natural death traps and beasts aplenty, and the few cultivators who were traversing the chasm were all peak talents who were at the level of Yanub Mettleleaf or even higher. Running around with mostly F-grade skills in that place was idiotic, even borderline suicidal.

His insights had obviously not reached the peak yet, but they were good enough to perform adequately when upgrading his skills. He would get more and more hands-on experience as well, making the process easier with every attempt. The first target of his upgrade in his human form was carefully chosen for this very reason.

It was [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. The berserking skill's pattern was even simpler than [**Indomitable**], and it shouldn't be too hard to upgrade even if he planned on making some minor adjustments. With the lesson learned from this attempt, he would proceed to the more complex patterns.

Still, it took three full days before Zac took out another [**Fractal Framework Array**], this version slightly different compared to the previous one. Its base function was the same, but this version rather ran on Cosmic Energy and was made to help with life- and nature-related skills. It was one of the items

he had made the Hexmaster buy for him after collecting everything for his Draugr cultivation himself.

The array lit up, and Zac gingerly cut off the skill fractal and infused it into the core disk. A hologram appeared once more and he started making adjustments following his plan. The patterns grew denser and more intricate as Zac upgraded one section after another of the fractal. The patterns were slightly different compared to the ones in his undead form, but the difference was simply to accommodate the different types of energy sources. Their fundamental functions were the same.

There was a delicate balance in the skill fractal, an equilibrium between patterns responsible for providing the temporary boost of [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and patterns that kept the process stable for as long as possible while also minimizing the backlash. The change Zac wanted to enact was simple; more power. The boost provided by [**Hatchetman's Rage**] didn't need to be a full minute. A battle could be decided in less than a second, as the fight the other day proved.

Besides, his body was unnaturally durable thanks to his extremely high Endurance and Vitality, along with his mother's machinations. The backlash he had to endure was drastically weakened compared to normal cultivators, so making the skill a bit more slanted should work just fine. As long as he didn't go insane like he did after eating the [**Rageroot Oak Seeds**], the more power it released the better.

However, the skill fractal suddenly started to shake as warning messages appeared next to the hologram, causing Zac to frown with worry. Things were not quite out of control just yet, but it was clear that his adjustments threatened to destroy the skill fractal's balance. The fractal had to be constantly filled with Cosmic and Mental Energy to stay malleable, and it was this that made the process so precarious since the energy could go wild and ruin the whole fractal.

Zac didn't panic as he rapidly kept going, quickly upgrading the counterforce to the boosting section. But he wasn't fast enough, the fractal was becoming too imbalanced. He had thought he had made enough concessions to keep the process

stable even after adding so much force into the skill, but it looked like he still lacked some theoretical foundation.

He thankfully had a solution in mind, and he made a temporary release valve like Catheya once had mentioned, providing an outlet for the energy that was building up to ominous levels. It was a temporary measure, but one that would allow him to work on the main diagram that would naturally contain the power.

Only when it was stable enough did he remove the release valve and patch up the spot with the original patterns that were there before the temporary change. An intervention like that weakened the pattern by a couple of percents, but it was far preferable to just letting the thing blow up.

After that first little hiccup, the process continued without any real surprises. Overall, the result was pretty good, and Zac managed to return a recently evolved skill fractal to its proper position with Mental Energy to spare. The fractal looked somewhat similar to before, except it was obviously lopsided now with a much larger section being reserved for power-boosting.

It was a huge sphere with small additions below, and it made Zac think of a setting sun for some reason. He had expended more than 80% of his mental reserves in the process, forcing him to take a break. That was fine with him though, and he curiously opened his Status Screen to see the result while he started absorbing energy from a Soul Crystal.

[E] Arcadian Crusade - Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself.

Zac's heart beat an extra time as he read the description, but he sighed when he saw that he hadn't actually upgraded his title. That meant the skill was still a high-quality one, but that the adjustments to the skill fractal were large enough that not only the description was changed, but even the name.

Unfortunately, there was still no description of how the skill worked, and curiosity gnawed at Zac as he slowly recovered his Mental Energy. Initially, he planned on immediately moving on to evolve the next skill, but he eventually caved

and decided to activate the skill to get some ‘practical experience’ of the process.

He activated a surveying array to confirm there were no cultivators in the immediate vicinity before arrays before pushing Cosmic Energy into his new skill fractal. Suddenly the world turned white as a tremendous explosion erupted around him, turning the sturdy wood of the mangrove into shredded splinters that were shot hundreds of meters in every direction, creating a huge disturbance in the ocean.

Fury coursed through his veins and the fires of war burned in his eyes as his pathways were expanded to a bursting point. The waters around Zac churned as a white-and-gold set of fractals covered his skin in what looked a bit like a tribal tattoo. Zac could only see it on his hands, but he could feel that both his arms and chest were covered as well.

It was almost a shame that he wouldn’t be able to test out this shocking amount of force that rippled through his body.

However, Zac soon cursed his errant thoughts as space bent before spitting out a massive creature that was more maw than body. It had no doubt been attracted by the eruption of energy from the activation, and it swam toward Zac with murder in its eyes. The hideous creature looked a bit like an anglerfish without the antenna, and it was clearly in the early stages of Hegemony.

He hadn’t planned on fighting a D-grade beast today, but Zac still shot forward without hesitation. There was no telling how long the boosting effect would last after his change, but it would definitely be shorter compared to before. He needed to settle this quickly.

The Beast King looked enraged to find an E-grade cultivator rather than natural treasure at the source of the energy eruption. A high-pitched shriek echoed among the Greengrove trees, as a water blade spanning hundreds of meters rushed toward Zac, cutting apart trees like they were made from paper.

However, a leaf large enough to look like something plucked from a worldtree appeared in front of Zac, and it cut through

the waters with unstoppable force. Blade met leaf, and the whole section of the forest shook from the collision. The Beast King's probing attack was clearly imbued with vast amounts of energy, but it was no match to the ferocity contained in Zac's empowered swing.

It broke apart and turned into a series of chaotic currents, but Zac cut through those as well as he kept going forward. One of the nearby trees was on the verge of collapsing, but Zac managed to reach in time to launch himself forward with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. It looked like someone had set off a bomb where Zac pushed off for leverage, and the force from his step was the straw that broke the camel's back, breaking the mangrove in the middle.

Space shrunk as Zac flashed forward, but he suddenly found himself severely slowed down as he got within a few hundred meters of the Beast King. The fifty-meter long anglerfish had erected some sort of Domain, but it looked like it was meant to trap rather than to allow it to escape as it still swam straight toward Zac with murder in its eyes.

Its maws opened wide, and Zac almost felt like he was looking into a portal to another dimension as it sped toward him. The momentum of the crusade was still urging Zac on though, and there wasn't any hesitation in his heart as another enormous leaf appeared, this one rapidly gaining a radiant golden hue as it unleashed an enormous haze of pure life that moved to encompass the whole anglerfish.

The deathly fog of the Abyss followed almost instantly behind the radiance of Arcadia, and a storm of unparalleled proportions was unleashed in the direction of the poor Beast King. It immediately realized that it was in trouble, but it was too late as it had almost reached Zac already. It tried to erect a barrier, even a D-grade beast's defenses proved insufficient to deal with **[Rapturous Divide]** empowered by **[Arcadian Crusade]** and the ocean itself.

In fact, Zac felt he could boost the effect even further, but he restrained himself for one simple reason; doing so would actually cost him life force. What he had unleashed right now

was more than enough, so paying such a steep price on a random beast was overkill.

The delimitation between Arcadia and the Abyss was just as chaotic this time around, perhaps even more so. Space fractured and recovered over and over, and long tendrils of destruction spread in every direction as the two clouds shrouded the Beast King. It desperately tried to escape using the same sort of spatial displacement as before, but not even a Hegemon could traverse space this fractured.

The anglerfish had no choice but to withstand the chaos that had engulfed it with its skills and the durability of its body. But the madness that Zac had unleashed was not something that a freshly evolved Beast King could withstand. Perhaps that Raksha Shrimp King would have fared better thanks to its thick shell, but the scales on this deep-sea dweller were clearly unable to withstand the spatial cracks.

Enormous lacerations were cut open across its body, and Zac felt a tremendous surge of energy before he even had a chance to follow up his initial salvo with **[Judgement of Arcadia]**. The waters eventually calmed down, and Zac looked at the mangled remains of the Beast King with some helplessness.

He had expected that his first battle against a Beast King to be an epic contest between man and nature, but it was more like a wanton slaughter. His new skill had added a full 35% power, and it had also sped up the speed he activated his two skills by a large degree thanks to forcibly turning his pathways into superhighways.

The latter wasn't that impressive considering his bloodline, but he wouldn't need to be nearly as careful with this ability compared to **[Force of the Void]**. But for now, he needed to get out of here. The odds of any other cultivator being in this area were pretty low, but the waves he had caused weren't small.

Zac didn't want to risk it, especially with an impending backlash, and he was actually filled with a sense of impending doom as he hurried away. He had gained enough strength to

rip an early Beast King to shreds from his new skill, and the price for such power was likely to be equally impressive.

As expected, he didn't get very far before a searing pain spread throughout his body, and he couldn't stop himself from releasing a weak whimper as he sank to the bottom of the forest. His veins were once more set on fire, but this time in a completely different sense. It felt like he had been poisoned on top of being run through a wringer.

The backlash from [**Hatchetman's Rage**] had mostly been a wave of weakness that lasted a few hours, but this pain reached into Zac's very soul, even eclipsing what he had been forced to endure when using the [**Bone-forging Dust**]. He knew that he had to create at least some distance from the scene of the battle, but he could barely swim in his current state.

Without any better options, Zac activated one of his escape talismans, soon finding himself tens of thousands of meters away. Getting forcibly transported like that only worsened his pain, but he activated another three talismans before he was satisfied. Only then did he dig a small burrow beneath a large root of a random mangrove, and he continued to dig until he was nestled over a hundred meters beneath the ocean bed.

Falling asleep right now was risky, but his eyes were refusing to stay open as he descended into a deep slumber.

A nibbling pain startled him awake some time later, and he found himself covered in 40-centimeter long mollusks trying to break through his skin with small pincers. A wave of killing intent made them scurry away into the sand, allowing Zac to check his state in peace. Some surface wounds from the critters aside, he was mostly healed after activating his new skill.

However, he realized that he had actually slept for half a day while recuperating, and so deeply that random beasts actually thought him a corpse at that.

The backlash was pretty bad, but Zac believed it would become more manageable over time as his strength grew and his bloodline kept evolving. If anything, this was exactly what

he had been looking to achieve when evolving the skill. The effect was palpable; a boost of roughly 35% was a drastic improvement compared to the 25% of [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

Besides, his old berserker skill had been unable to completely boost his attributes now that they had outgrown the skill, reducing the actual effect to something like 10%. [**Arcadian Crusade**] had no such limitations though, providing a massive augmentation that had lasted around 15 seconds from the looks of it.

The duration was even shorter compared to [**Hatchetman's Rage**] when it was at early mastery, but 15 seconds was more than enough to cause a whole lot of damage.

Even better, [**Arcadian Crusade**] even allowed him to empower it by expending longevity if his back was really against the wall in the future. It was a bit like the Anointed's unique methods, trading life for power. Zac could actually empower strikes with his life force if he really needed, but doing it through a skill would definitely have a greater effect than using it 'raw'.

The experiment could tentatively be considered a success, but he would probably be a bit more careful in the future after evolving a skill. He was still emboldened by success, and Zac soon dug his way up through the sand before he set out in search of a new cultivation cave. The previous set of defensive arrays to hide his cave had all been destroyed by activating his new skill, but luckily he had over ten identical sets just in case.

Soon enough another canopy had been hollowed out, and another set of illusion, isolation, and defensive arrays hummed to life as Zac started to focus on the next skill to evolve. He still took half a day to analyze his mistake where he almost made [**Arcadian Crusade**] collapse, and how it applied to the other skills he had planned on upgrading. Only then did he activate the array once more, and the process started up again.

One skill after another was transformed over the next week, all of them successfully elevated to the next tier. Almost every evolution had some twists and turns, but he was definitely satisfied with the result.

[E] Arcadian Crusade - Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself. Upgradeable.

[E] Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Early. All living beings under the Heavens are one entity. Upgradeable.

[E] Earthstrider - Proficiency: Early. Traverse the boundless worlds, unrestrained and unfettered. Upgradeable.

[E] Piercing Gaze - Proficiency: Early. Unravel their secrets. Upgradeable.

Four upgrades, and only one had been relegated to a lower grade.

Chapter 731: Minefield

Three core skills had been directly upgraded to their E-grade equivalent without any major issues, with **[Forester's Constitution]** mostly staying the same and **[Loamwalker]** being adjusted to the point that it was given a new name. The former skill was a passive buff that boosted his Endurance and Vitality, with the peak skill adding something like an inborn instinct for the forests, helping him both find opportunities and avoid dangers.

Zac had tried to put more focus on the part that improved his instincts, but it had proved too complicated. He guessed that part of the drew inspiration from the Dao of Nature, and he was currently veering away from that path toward the Dao of Life. The two were pretty closely related, but they were still paths of their own.

Still, his efforts had been enough to slightly change the description to no longer just mention 'Man and Nature' to instead incorporate all living things. It was a step in the right direction, and he hoped it would broaden how the skill could be used. Being so dependant on forests nearby to provide full benefits was a weakness he wanted to move away from somewhat.

He didn't really sense anything different from the skill itself so far, except that his attributes had gained a small boost. That wasn't because the skill provided more points, but rather that it could scale even his massive attribute pools. It now provided 15% Endurance and Vitality as it did before Zac's attributes grew too big.

Perhaps the instinct would work like that as well, providing him with a natural understanding of stronger plants and places as well. After all, Zac doubted **[Forester's Constitution]** could give many insights to things like D-grade plants before.

The changes to **[Loamwalker]** were more extensive, where he mainly focused on improving the part that represented his double-jump. Staying inside the ocean had shown how big a weakness it was to always be landlocked. Soon enough he would fight Hegemons who all could fly, so he needed to improve the skill's aerial performance.

It looked like his change was a success, but he would have to test it out after leaving in a bit.

Unfortunately, problems cropped up when he had attempted to evolve **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Its fractal wasn't too complicated on the surface, but it did contain a few unique patterns that weren't present in his class skills. This had created some hidden connections and unexpected dependencies that made the skill far more complicated to upgrade than Zac had expected.

He was forced to perform one patchwork after another as the skill fractal started to become unstable, and the result was **[Piercing Gaze]**, which Zac estimated was a high-quality sibling to **[Cosmic Gaze]**. It was a sobering wake-up call that there was still a lot that he didn't know when it came to patterns, and it was also a good reminder that skills from outside sources ultimately weren't as in tune with his understanding as his class skills or skills he would create himself in the future.

Upgrading them would require greater preparation, and some might be doomed to fail because of lacking compatibility.

Zac wasn't all-too-beat up over the loss though. A high-quality E-grade investigative skill was still pretty much equivalent to his old skill at peak mastery. Besides, he still had the original skill in his Draugr form. He would prepare some more before upgrading the skill on his undead side, and hopefully, it would retain its full strength that time. As long as he succeeded, he would reform **[Piercing Gaze]** and restore it to its former glory on his human form as well.

Making some mistakes was ultimately normal, and something that happened to most people when upgrading their skills. Keeping them at the F-grade, waiting for perfection was a

fool's errand, as it would delay his own progression. He was already halfway to late E-grade and he still hadn't completed the step that most finished before even reaching middle E-grade.

Adjusting skill fractals after the initial process was a chore from what he'd gathered, but it was possible. They were like brittle glass, and every change had to be slowly and carefully performed, and fixing one was a slow process that would take a couple of years. Still, it was simply something he could add to his daily cultivation routine, taking a few minutes every day to slowly work on those that needed to be fixed.

The downside was that it was a bit risky to use the skills while doing those kinds of upgrades, so he wouldn't be able to do so inside the Mystic Realm.

So some mistakes were expected, but he still left **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** alone as he swapped to his Draugr form. That skill was simply too complex, and he wasn't confident in changing it without System-assistance. Repairing mistakes was fine and all, but that was only true up to a point. If he messed up to the point that the skill became unrecognizable, then there was only so much he could do.

This time he meditated a full day before finally activating the array, and the skill fractal of **[Fields of Despair]** entered the array. The peak quality skills were more intricate compared to the high-quality skills of his old Hatchetman class, but this particular domain skill was one of the three basic skills he gained at level 25. Its effect was great, but the patterns were nowhere near at the complexity of **[Profane Seal]**.

Besides, some of the structures in the skill fractal were surprisingly reminiscent of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and **[Forester's Constitution]**. It was a marvel in a sense. Two opposing concepts with opposite effects, one buffing and one cursing, had such a similar appearance.

Soon enough the process was complete, and a new skill fractal entered his body.

[E] Fields of Despair - Proficiency: Early. A desolate haze, both entrapping and illuminating. Upgradeable.

The upgrade was a success, and Zac had only made some small adjustments. He had given up some of the skill's ability to provide Miasma to other undead warriors, and in turn, expand the omniscience the skill provided from Peak Mastery. Ideally, he would have done away with those parts meant for warfare entirely, but they were an integral part of the fractal.

Cutting them out completely would have caused too big an imbalance, to the point that Zac had no way to upgrade the skill at all. He would have to gently steer the skill in the direction he desired with each upgrade instead, and by the time he became a Monarch, it might be completely in tune with his Path.

Just like with [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], Zac still didn't dare to touch [**Vanguard of Undeath**] and [**Profane Seal**]. There was still reason to celebrate though after this latest boost in power. Just over half a year had passed now since Zac entered the trial, and the improvements he had made were shocking.

His raw attributes had increased by almost 80% since he left for the Havenfort Chasm, and his effective combat strength had increased even further. If he fought that Half-Step Blacksmith Golem today, he would be able to take it out without using any berserking items at all, and the same was probably true for Adcarkas.

Then again, Zac knew that as he got stronger, so would his adversaries.

There was no time to lose, so Zac finally set off again, heading for the stream indicated on the map. He still traveled in his human form, and he finally found a chance to try out [**Earthstrider**]. He swam between the mangroves, but a patch of grass suddenly appeared around his feet and he disappeared the next moment.

Zac appeared again a few hundred meters away, but he only stayed for a fraction of a second before he disappeared again, this time a few flowers appearing around his feet. He kept going, but suddenly he felt a sense of hollowness in the skill, and he landed on the seabed. The skill was quickly 'recharged'

by some unseen force, and he felt he could flash away again any time he wanted.

This was exactly what he had hoped for. He could already create a similar effect with [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], but this was far more convenient. [**Earthstrider**] actually created a patch of greenery right by his feet, allowing him to move unencumbered just like his double-jump. However, he only managed to perform five jumps before he was forced to land.

Still, that was a huge improvement, especially considering he didn't even need to start the skill on the ground. The movement capabilities of [**Earthstrider**] themselves were barely superior compared to [**Loamwalker**], but Zac didn't care. It already performed great in battles, and it would be even more flexible going forward.

Zac was already close to the edge of the archipelago, after which he once more entered the more open waters. The energy was extremely dense by this point, so the ocean obviously wouldn't be empty. If anything, it was teeming with life by this point, with corals, weeds, and all kinds of plants fighting for space on the seabed.

An endless number of fishes and beasts scuttled between them, most of them mostly harmless even though they emitted energy signatures at E-grade. Zac was only occasionally forced to fight since unleashing his aura was enough to make whole shoals spanning hundreds of meters swim for their lives.

He continued traveling through the verdant ocean for another week until there was a change once more. He had reached an odd stretch of water with ball-like plants covered in beautiful flowers that swayed as the balls slowly bobbed about. They seemed mostly stationary, looking like flourishing miniature planets. Zac still felt a vague sense of danger from them but passing through them seemed risky, if impossible, considering there had to be millions of them.

The waters were filled from the surface all the way down to the seabed, and they were placed so closely that his vision almost looked like a solid wall. His [**Ocean Chart**] told him to

go straight through, but Zac decided to trust his instincts and first try to see if he could pass them.

However, even as he tried to find another route, the bobbing balls were replaced by an endless sea of jellyfish who each had hundreds of tentacles, each one of them over fifty meters long. Zac didn't recognize the balls, but he did know about these jellyfish. They were both venomous and voracious, trying to snatch up any cultivator who passed by.

Ultimately he chose to backtrack to the field of weird planets. He had no desire to tangle with hundreds of thousands of jellyfish, and the one who filled in the **[Ocean Chart]** must have passed through the minefield of flower-balls since the map went right through the patch they filled up.

Zac prepared some escape talismans just in case, and he used both **[Piercing Gaze]** and **[Forester's Constitution]** as he started to make his way through the minefield. A long rattan vine suddenly flew out from the closest ball, and Zac instantly cut it off with his axe. The waters around the cut were suddenly filled with a dark haze, and Zac instantly felt a sharp uptick of Twilight Energy in his body.

It was pretty similar to the Hollowtongues, which allowed Zac to shrug off most of the effect and allow him to swim away. However, a sweet scent attracted his attention, and he saw a small berry sitting alone on the crown of the weird plant. A chain shot forward with lightning-quick speed, snatching the fruit up and dragging it back just in time to avoid dozens of rattans that emerged from the ball a moment later.

It was like the inert ball of green growth had been completely infuriated by the theft, and it raged as it searched for the culprit. Even a few of the neighboring balls were attacked, causing something of a chain reaction of destruction in the area. Zac found himself assailed from every direction, but his evolved **[Forester's Constitution]** quickly proved its worth.

It was like he instinctively understood how these previously unknown plants would act, and he swam in a pattern that allowed him to dodge most of the vines. The few that were unavoidable were quickly cut apart by a bodhi-infused

[Nature's Edge]. Such an attack full of life-attuned aura didn't seem to draw the semi-sapient plants' attention, allowing him to avoid any further retaliation.

Zac barely had time to get out of the danger zone before spotting another ball with a fruit on top of it, and he hesitated only for the fraction of a second before another chain shot forward and ripped the whole bush off the mini-planet. As expected another wave of destruction was unleashed, forcing Zac to continue to bob and weave.

Things continued like this for two days, at which point Zac left the area a bedraggled mess. Wounds covered his body, and he held ominous volumes of toxins in his body. But Zac felt it was worth it. The toxins should be flushed in a few days from a mix of his pills and hidden node, leaving no lasting downsides behind. Meanwhile, he had managed to loot over 200 of those odd fruits.

They weren't listed in any of the compendiums, but considering they were in the depths of the Twilight Ocean they had to be good things. After all, that minefield would probably take out 99% of the cultivators entering. As for their function, Zac actually guessed they were related to body tempering.

The fruits had a slightly bloody aura, and Zac's cells greedily reacted to them very much in the same way as they did when put in front of bloodline treasures like the **[Blood Nucleus]** or the **[Cardinal Kernel]**. He stowed them away, happy to see his preparations for his Bloodline Evolution more and more comprehensive.

It didn't take Zac long after passing the minefield to find the stream on the map, and the area was blessedly void of other cultivators. One more week passed, and things thankfully calmed down after he hitched his vessel to the stream. The vessel he currently used was still the one he looted from the Havarok Scion. It was simply the best one he had, no matter if considering base materials or quality of arrays.

He had spotted a few Beast Kings far in the distance, but most minded their own business. Many Beast Kings possessed intelligence equivalent to cultivators, and they probably

understood that cultivators who managed to reach these depths of the Twilight Ocean were not someone to mess with.

After all, the life span of Beast Kings was around ten times that of Cultivators, and the oldest ones should have lived through dozens of trials. Of course, others followed their innate bloodlust and tried to attack his vessel, but Zac was long gone before they reached him.

The ship didn't have any purification features installed, and the base design only relied on cultivation arrays to make the insides more bearable. If it was before, this wouldn't have been an issue, but as time passed Zac felt himself increasingly under pressure. Finally, after another week passed, Zac felt his body reach its limit.

Thankfully wasn't the limit of what he could endure, but rather the limit of what his body could passively expel without him lifting a finger. **[Void Heart]** currently beat once every minute, which seemed to be the limit in these conditions. Zac felt a wave of relief after every beat, but more Twilight Energy entered his body every minute than his Hidden Node swallowed.

Some of the leftovers were dealt with by **[Purity of the Void]**, but it wasn't nearly as effective for this particular purpose. So it came fell to Zac to manually process the leftovers just like all other cultivators had done since entering the trial. He simply expelled a little bit of Cosmic Energy, and his body naturally absorbed the Twilight Energy instead.

It felt like breathing stale air, but his bloodline was thankfully still doing the heavy lifting. The effect on him was currently far less severe than normal cultivators had even at the starting continent. Still, it also meant that he would be more and more restrained as he kept going.

The soul ocean was filling up pretty fast in this place as well, but Zac still felt that he should be able to go for at least two months before his life-attuned ocean reached max capacity. At that point, his resistance against the environment would drop even further, but there was not much he could do about that.

That's why he needed to quickly rid himself of the odd stone and perhaps snatch some treasures before returning to depths he could handle. And finally, Zac saw his journey was coming to an end. The ocean bed simply stopped far in the distance, and it was replaced with endless darkness. The stream took a sharp turn and plunged into the chasm, heading god knows where in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He had finally reached the Twilight Chasm.

Chapter 732: Twilight Chasm

The enormous chasm quickly grew closer, and Zac immediately steered his vessel away from the stream and stowed it away after swapping to his Draugr form. His undead soul ocean was even more filled compared to his living one, but he had still chosen to travel the final stretch in his Draugr form, at least until he got a better lay of the land.

When comparing his two classes, Fetters Of Desolation currently had greater survivability. With **[Force of the Void]** and **[Abyssal Phase]** working together, he could instantly escape from most perilous situations to an even larger degree than his upgraded **[Earthstrider]**. But more importantly, this final task of his was definitely related to whatever the bigshots outside had planned, and he didn't want to get his human persona involved in this mess.

He'd drop off the odd egg before swapping over to his human form, completely washing his hands of whatever schemes the Monarchs had.

Zac had read about the Twilight Chasm, but seeing it with his own eyes was still something else. It looked like an endless hole that reached into eternity, far surpassing the Havenfort Chasm in scope. It wasn't an empty hole though, as he spotted dozens of interconnected mountains sticking up from the depths. All-in-all, the chasm was almost as big as the starting continent, meaning it would take weeks to swim across it.

Of course, that was not really possible. Beasts and cultivators were one of the dangers in this place, but another was the unpredictable currents. Zac looked over to his left, and he saw the stream that he had hitched a ride from until this point. It looked like a waterfall that descended into the depths, and he vaguely spotted another similar situation far in the distance.

Overall, there were over a hundred streams that had the Twilight Chasm as their endpoint, where they plunged into the abyss heading god knows where. The best guess was that the streams formed a loop, and they'd emerge again where they started. Of course, no one had survived attempting to find out, as dropping into the depths of the Chasm was a death sentence.

Just the surface of the Twilight Chasm had an energy density far surpassing any other area of the Twilight Ocean, and it got worse the deeper you descended from what he'd gathered. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to go too far down to drop off this egg, as even he wouldn't survive down there.

Zac took out the odd stone from his spatial ring, looking between it and the ravine in front of him. He doubted the mission was as simple as just throwing the thing inside, but he never actually got any more detailed guidance from Va Tapek when he handed over this thing. A weak fluctuation suddenly appeared around his hand as the icy brand appeared on it again, and Zac groaned when he received a burst of energy into his mind.

His vision suddenly changed as he shot through turbulent waters and jagged cliffs. The scene took him to a secluded valley through a hidden pathway, where an ancient altar stood erected in the middle. On it, the stone in his hand pulsed, and each beat awakened a few mysterious runes around it.

Soon enough his vision was back to normal, and Zac looked down at the orb with exasperation. As expected, there was a specific drop-off site stored inside the brand. The bad news was that he would need to actually enter the Twilight Chasm, but the good news was that he didn't actually need to enter its heart.

The weird altar was located just a quarter into the twilight chasm, and it was actually not that far from his current location. Zac guessed that Va Tapek must have surmised that Zac would reach the Twilight Chasm from this general direction. Every second he loitered in this area was another second he was worn down a little bit more by the Twilight Energy, so Zac wasted no time before setting out.

Zac didn't immediately jump out into the vast unknown though, but he made his way back and forth along the precipice, constantly rooting his chains into the bedrock to make sure he wasn't suddenly ripped into the chasm by an unpredictable current. He was trying to find a patch of calmer waters to enter through, but it quickly became apparent there was no such thing.

Going above water served no purpose either. He knew that place was even scarier than below the surface. Hundreds of streams converging into one spot didn't just do a number on the environment in the waters, it was even worse up there. Hundreds of hurricanes and insanely powerful winds made the environment deadly even for Hegemons. The chaotic currents in the chasm were safe in comparison, at least unless you had something like a Branch of Gale to protect you from the winds.

Eventually, Zac found a somewhat decent spot and jumped off from the ledge, and he instantly found himself assaulted by sharp waves from every direction. They tried to rip him down to the depths, and he was forced to keep expelling large amounts of Miasma to move forward. If he relented for even a second, he would be swept up by the waters and dragged god knows where.

His situation was luckily manageable thanks to the combination of his Draugr-vision and **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

The more powerful the current, the more energy it also contained, which essentially turned the danger spots into brightly lit streams that he could circumvent. That didn't mean he was safe though, as the streams constantly changed direction like a bucking horse, and Zac was forced to scramble out of the way more than once.

Suddenly, his mind screamed of imminent and deadly danger. A stream was veering straight toward him like a snake, and he saw no choice but to forcibly activate **[Abyssal Phase]** with the help of his bloodline talent. He was turned into a cloud of energy in an instant, but his whole being screamed with pain as he felt himself being ripped apart. Zac only managed to

move a second in his abyssal form before he was forced out of it, but that second had thankfully put him out of harm's way.

He was still completely drenched in dripping ichor when returning into his physical form, a poignant reminder that he wasn't immortal in his energy form. He had already suspected as much when being trapped in the Living Pulse, but knowing what could and what couldn't harm him wasn't an exact science. Clearly, rampaging Twilight Energy was on the list of dangers to his intangible form.

Every second was a struggle as Zac slowly made his way toward the first mountain ridge inside the chasm, and his reserves actually started to dip to dangerous levels. Just traversing the empty space of the chasm was difficult enough, but he was constantly forced to put a great deal of effort into dealing with the Twilight Energy accumulating in his body as well.

The density had essentially doubled the moment he jumped from the ledge, and it seemed to only be getting worse as he traveled further toward the core. But finally, he reached the closest mountain, and four chains shot out from **[Love's Bond]** and embedded themselves into the wall.

He dragged himself over and breathed out in relief after finding a spot somewhat protected from the turbulent waters. Zac felt a bit like one of those mountain climbers camping on the side of sheer cliffs as he hung from his chains while he started restoring his Miasma with a Soldier Pill and crystals. Normally he wouldn't have wasted a Soldier Pill in a place like this, but the Twilight Energy was just too powerful.

It was a negative spiral. The more Twilight Energy he failed to expel, the greater the suppression would be. And as he got weaker and weaker, he eventually would succumb to the environment. This was why people didn't push beyond their means in the Twilight Ascent, even for a quick sojourn to search for booty. There was no guarantee you'd make it back even from a half-day trip in an area your constitution couldn't handle.

Zac thankfully had one final ace he hadn't been forced to use to deal with the Twilight Energy just yet, but he knew he was close to reaching that point. For now, he kept making his way forward among the sharp cliffs, using his sharp eyes and high Luck to navigate the treacherous waters. He did see both caves and some promising spots that might lead into secluded valleys, but he ultimately chose to focus on his main task.

He could go searching for treasure as soon as he was rid of this suspicious egg and the brand hiding in his body.

Quite a few Beast Kings lived in the chasm, but they thankfully stayed inside their caves most of the time. The chasm itself was actually quite desolate because of the dangerous currents, and few plants could survive for long on the surface. Instead, every single mountain was a cornucopia of hidden spots with valuable treasures that had grown in seclusion from the currents or other outside interference.

Apparently, there were many secluded valleys like the one where they harvested the life-death pearls as well, but he didn't have any way to find those spots except relying on dumb luck.

Zac had estimated his journey to take just three days, but it took him over a week to follow the path lined out in his vision. Some time was wasted from avoiding Beast Kings emerging from their caves to hunt, but most of it was a matter of having to stop and focus on expelling Twilight Energy for a few hours to prevent any dangerous build-up.

A new problem appeared the moment he reached the spot though, and Zac frowned as he looked at the sheer mountain wall in front of him where the hidden tunnel should be. It was either real or an illusion so good it had blended truth and false to a perfect degree. Was the map wrong? It shouldn't be. Everything else had matched his vision perfectly, except this wall which should be a tunnel leading into a hidden valley inside the mountain.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he took out the sphere. His eyes lit up when the response was immediate; the wall fluctuated for a few seconds before it just disappeared. He still

had no idea whether the wall had been real or fake as he passed through the tunnel, but he guessed it didn't matter.

Soon enough he entered the valley, and it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. The density of Twilight Energy was even lower here compared to the Starting Continent, and a small haze emerged from his pores as the large accumulations of toxins were being expelled by **[Purity of the Void]**. Between one Hidden node gobbling up the energy, and another expelling it, Zac figured that he would be good to go within a few hours or so.

The altar stood in the center of the valley just as advertised, but Zac only started to advance after having recovered to perfect condition. The procedure looked simple enough in the vision, but Zac wasn't as optimistic. Everything about this mission and this place was suspicious. For example, where did this altar and the inscriptions come from? Had someone built it? And what would actually happen when he placed the egg on it?

Chaos had gripped the whole Trial, and it felt like the contraband he had brought in here was if not in the heart of it, then at least close. Which begged the question; what was Va Tapek doing with this thing? Catheya hadn't said anything out loud during the month they had traveled together after the events beneath the Living Pulse, but she was definitely troubled by the situation with her master. She either was an excellent liar, or she really wasn't clued in on the situation.

It almost felt like Va Tapek was breaking with the Sharva'Zi clan for whatever reason, joining a conspiracy that would potentially destroy one of their major revenue sources. And if he was, what did that mean for Catheya? Would she even still have a master when she came out from this thing? He remembered her words back on at Cork Island about chess pieces, and he really felt like one as he slowly walked up toward the altar.

There were no threats around, and none of his early warning methods indicated any danger. Zac still gripped his axe nervously as he placed the egg on the center of the altar, but his danger sense didn't even have a chance to wake up before

a pulse threw him off the steps. It didn't hurt though, and Zac barely registered it as he looked at his right hand with glee.

The icy-blue brand appeared on the back of his hand again, and it even emerged and started to disintegrate into small ice crystals. Just as they were about to dissipate, they formed a simple sentence in the written script of the Undead Empire;

Such is balance restored and Karma severed.

“Balance my ass,” Zac muttered. Va Tapek had only spoken a few words to the Veilplume Monarch, and he had been sent on a trip to the most dangerous place of the Twilight Ocean.

If not for his Bloodline, he would have been forced to train like his life depended on it for the whole trial before attempting to deliver this thing. Still, he knew complaining about Catheya's master was futile. It was just another indignity he had to push to the back of his mind, just like all other lower-rung cultivators. Instead, he turned to the egg to see if it brought some change.

It just sat silently on the podium for a few minutes, but suddenly it released the very same ripple as he saw in the vision, and it felt like the whole realm beat with it as a few runes lit up around it. Zac felt the pulse all the way to the depths of his bones, but he found he was neither harmed nor helped by it. It just passed him through, like an extremely deep bass.

However, there was one thing that had changed from the pulse; **[Love's Bond]** had woken up again. Alea hadn't spoken a word after that short message back in the Hollowtongue Mountains, but the Spirit Tool woke up with a vengeance because of the egg. The whole coffin on his back hummed with intense desire, its hunger far eclipsing both the Twilight Fruits and Life-Death Pearls.

It even eclipsed the ardent craving that Verun had shown toward that mysterious stone or the Dragon's blood back then. Four chains shot toward the egg without Zac doing a thing, driving home just how much Alea wanted the mysterious treasure. It almost felt like he was fighting five frenzied snakes as he commanded the chains back into the coffin.

“You really want this thing, huh,” Zac muttered as he looked at the stone in front of him.

It beat once more, causing another shudder to ripple through the valley. Zac hesitated for five minutes as he watch the egg beat over and over, each ripple empowering itself and the surroundings with a little bit more energy. It was like the treasure was slowly charging itself from a drained state, and the desire from **[Love’s Bond]** increased with each passing moment.

Zac knew he was about to do something immeasurably stupid; he had to snatch it.

He had searched high and low for over three years, but **[Love’s Bond]** was clearly extremely picky, not once having shown any interest before coming here. The Twilight Harbor had been the only place holding things Alea needed, and none of them even were close to this item. Who knew if he would ever find something like it again?

Alea was right at the precipice, and this might be the final key to the puzzle.

Doing so would definitely put him in harm’s way, but the thought refused to leave him once it had taken root. One by one the people around him had fallen since the Integration. First was his dad, then Alea. Ogras, Billy, over a dozen Valkyries and followers in the hundreds. Even Thea had met her end, and he didn’t know if he’d ever be able to see his sister again.

It felt like this egg represented a way for him to break the cycle, to at least bring one person back from the dead. And if he could do it with one, he felt more confident in helping the others as well. This opportunity didn’t only provide a chance for him to evolve his Spirit Tool, it represented hope that his lofty goals weren’t a fool’s dream.

Besides, did stealing this odd object really change anything? He was already planning on slinking away in the darkness like a bandit, using his human form as a disguise from Va Tapek and any other prying eyes. So why not go all out now that things had come to this point?

Zac soon found a problem though as he jumped back onto the altar between heartbeats; he was completely unable to move the treasure now that it had been locked into place. Pulling with all the force he could muster didn't do a single thing, and **[Love's Bond]** was unable to absorb it while it was attached to the altar as well. He found himself at an impasse for a few minutes, until he had another idea.

“Brand it with your Mark of Creation, making it forever yours,” Zac whispered, his eyes glimmering with a mix of madness and determination.

Chapter 733: Repercussions

Zac knew he wasn't thinking rationally, but his desires muffled the voice of caution in the back of his mind. Using the Mark of Creation to forcibly take control of the egg was worth a try. He could sense that mysterious energies that filled the runes of the egg and the runes on the altar were too vast for him to overpower, but he might be able to snatch it as long as he seized control for just a moment.

As to whether this messed up Va Tapek's or the Undead Empire's plans, Zac couldn't care less. That man had sent him on what might almost be considered a suicide mission. If anything, Zac felt he would end up carrying a ball of resentment if he *didn't* do something to mess with his plans. Besides, Zac guessed the Monarch had a bunch of contingencies in case this egg never reached this place. After all, Va Tapek must have believed that Zac reaching this place was a long shot at best.

Two streams of mental energy and Dao entered the weird pathways on his shoulders, and they were soon joined by a mysterious intangible force that normally hid deep in his cells. A moment later a small sphere full of endless potential appeared behind his hands, a small rune barely visible inside. Zac kept infusing it with energy for a while until it stabilized while also instilling it with the purpose of why he was doing this.

Create an opportunity to steal the egg and have it become food for **[Love's Bond]**. Those thoughts and desires permeated the rune, and it subtly changed before Zac pushed it onto the egg. He sensed a slight resistance before the Mark of Creation entered the smooth surface and disappeared. A shudder passed through the egg, and it spread into the array and out into the whole mountain.

Zac was just about to see if he could take it, but a massive pulse suddenly threw him over thirty meters away as a storm of energy shot toward the sky from the altar itself. Millions of runes lit up all across the valley, and Zac found himself completely immobilized by a force far beyond what he could understand or endure. Unable to move, Zac found himself looking at the spectacle with a mix of horror and awe.

Who had created something like this? The tapestry that appeared among the walls spoke to the very core of Zac's soul, and he felt awash with inspiration while his body was inundated with a terrifyingly concentrated force. **[Void Heart]** and his soul had been quiet since entering the secluded valley, but they woke up with a vengeance to greedily swallow the extremely precious energies that raged all around him.

Zac barely registered what was going on inside his body as his eyes darted back and forth, trying to imprint the vast schematic that had appeared on the walls. The feeling was just like when he sat in front of the Big Boss's Big Wall, but on a far grander scale. Not only that, but the insights were related to Life, Death, and at least two other concepts that he had no understanding of.

Was he looking at the blueprint of the Twilight Energy, with all the insights that made it possible on open display for him?

Zac wouldn't complain even if he found himself stuck here for a year, but too much of a good thing wasn't beneficial either. The levels of energy quickly grew uncomfortable even for him, and it felt like the whole valley had been turned into an enormous cauldron, where he was part of the impurities that were being burned away by the raging waves.

The chaos didn't stay contained to the valley either, but it had rather shot toward the surface, creating a pillar of force that had to be visible from far and wide. His tampering with the egg must have made the ancient preparations go haywire, and he was now paying the price.

The outburst thankfully only lasted ten seconds, but that alone was enough to fill him with enough energy to almost explode. As for the energy itself, it was pretty odd as well. It was

Twilight Energy, yet it wasn't. Its base was the same, but it was purer, more primal in a sense. He wouldn't even be surprised if the odd thing inside him was the source of the Twilight Energy, which when mixed with Miasma and Cosmic Energy became the 'lower' version that permeated the whole Mystic Realm.

The energy was filled with far more meaning than the original energy as well. Both his Soul Oceans were rapidly expanding and evolving, probably to a stage that he wouldn't be able to reach with Twilight Energy alone. Zac grunted as he got back to his feet, a bit flummoxed that what should have been an opportunity for Alea somehow had become an opportunity for himself.

He had just evolved his two final Dao Fragments to Peak Mastery with the help of the Life-Death Pearls, but he had already gained another bout of inspiration. Most of the concepts he had glimpsed on the runes were far beyond him right now, but they'd serve as a foundation for him to move toward forming his two branches.

Part of him really wanted to investigate the source of that amazing energy to see if he could siphon off any more, but the scope of the spectacle had set off warning signals in his mind. Such an outburst must have been seen or at least sensed from far and wide, and he wouldn't be surprised if both Rankers and Beast Kings were making their way toward his location at this very moment.

Outbursts like this were often a sign of a great treasure having been born, and if he suddenly emerged from the cave he would become a prime suspect. He needed to get away before that could happen.

However, he couldn't go before trying to actually steal the egg, and he flashed forward once more, suddenly appearing on top of the Altar. The egg had once more calmed down and resumed its normal beat, with each beat illuminating a few more runes. Try as he might, he still couldn't dislodge the thing from its spot on the pedestal.

There was one change though; Zac could actually sense his mark inside the egg. It hadn't been erased by the outburst, but had rather somehow fused with the treasure. With each beat, the Mark of Creation released a minute ripple that probably wouldn't be discernible to anyone but him, and Zac actually felt a weak connection slowly forming between himself and the treasure.

His abyssal eyes looked at the egg with anticipation, knowing that not all hope was lost just yet. Who knew, he might be able to wrest control sooner or later after the Mark of Creation had completely fused with the egg.

The question was how long that would take. For all he knew, it might take over a year, and Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he jumped down from the altar and started running toward the exit. This treasure was a big opportunity, but he needed to be alive to enjoy it. Who knew what problems could crop up if he stayed here. Better he leave for now and deal with his other matters, and come back in a year or two when the situation had calmed down.

He rushed through the tunnel, and Zac breathed out in relief when there were no massive beasts waiting outside. He still activated [**Abyssal Phase**], moving thousands of meters away from the cave mouth before the furious currents outside the secluded valley forced him back into his corporeal form.

Zac was about to swim away, but he suddenly felt a terrifying pressure descend upon him. He immediately turned around to see what was going on, and his eyes widened as a sanguine current ripped through the Twilight Chasm, heading straight for him. It was hundreds of meters long, and it almost looked like it intentionally crashed into the powerful currents in the chasm just because it could, crushing them with pure force.

An escape talisman appeared in his hand, but he sighed when it fizzled without activating. It was just a last-ditch effort though, since he had already known this would happen. The energies were far too chaotic in the chasm, making it impossible for the talismans to connect two different spots in space.

He considered activating [**Abyssal Phase**] again, but he knew he wouldn't be able to get far even if he forced it. Besides, the blood river moved extremely quickly, and it had already reached him.

“Oh? A Draugr reeking of mysterious energies appearing just after the whole chasm was thrown into chaos? Just what have you done?” a curious voice said as a young woman emerged from the stream.

It was an otherworldly beauty who had appeared in front of him, her features perhaps only matched by Iz Tayn or Be'Zi of those who he had encountered in his whole life. However, much like Be'Zi, her beauty was marred by a weird set of eyes where the sclera was red instead of white. She also had four small pupils instead of one, though Zac's own eyes widened a bit when the four pupils suddenly fused into one as she tilted her head.

A skill?

Her features were otherwise pretty much human, apart from her ears which were slightly prolonged and ended in a tip rather than a rounded bow. She emitted a graceful and even somewhat fragile aura, but Zac understood that she was anything but. It barely looked like the rampant current had any effect on her at all thanks to a few thick bloody swirls that circulated around her, and the river she had used to move through the chasm seemed more like a skill than a treasure.

Of course, the immensely powerful swirls of energy wasn't the only clue of what kind of being stood in front of him. More poignant was the '**100,000**' above her head. It was even higher than the mothertree, let alone any other trial takers. And he unfortunately had a pretty good idea who he had encountered.

“Reaver caught your tongue, Draugr?” the woman smiled.

“Mistress Noz'Valadir, I presume?” Zac sighed with a small bow. “It's an honor.”

“Such a gentleman,” she laughed. “Who are you?”

“I'm just a nobody who have come to the frontiers in search for opportunities,” Zac smiled as he tried to figure out a way to

get out of this mess.

There were four portals leading out of Twilight Ocean just outside the chasm, all of them days away. Then again, they were no good even if he could reach them since there were still a few months before they would open to let people out of the Mystic Realm. And with his escape talismans not working, he would be hard-pressed to escape from this monster.

It looked like he could only pray that Uona Noz'Valadir wouldn't attack another Imperial.

"If you're a nobody, then why is your bloodline even purer than any heartland scion I've met?" Uona smiled. "My stomach is rumbling just from standing close to you. Are you a lineal descendant from the Abyssal Shores?"

"How could that be the case," Zac said with a strained smile. The conversation had taken an extremely regrettable turn.

"Alright, whatever. It's not surprising the Draugr have their eyes set on the opportunities in this quadrant. Tell me what happened here," Uona shrugged. "I want the energy that's coursing through your body, and I think you would prefer I take it from the source rather than from you."

Zac wholeheartedly agreed, but he also couldn't say the truth. The brand had disappeared, but who knew if the restrictions remained like an oath? What if he accidentally killed himself by divulging the secrets. He could only mix some lies and truths and hope to get out of the situation in one piece.

"I was searching this mountain for opportunities when I felt an odd pulse from within. I tried to find a way inside since I figured it was something valuable, but the whole place was suddenly drowned in this energy to the point it almost killed me. I think someone got there first, they might even be absorbing the treasure as we speak," Zac hesitantly said, hoping to send the vampire on a goose chase.

"Don't play dumb with me," Uona said as a chilling pressure started to spread from her. Clearly she was not so easily convinced. "I could sense the unique aura from ten mountains

over, yet there is not a hint of it anywhere except on you right now. Did you already eat the treasure?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be swimming around in these dangerous waters,” Zac quickly said. “I would have secluded myself inside the mountain.”

“So you’re either lying or useless?” Uona sighed with disappointment. “Well, then you might as well die.”

“Wait!” Zac shouted with alarm. “You must have come with the same goal as our people! We are on the same side, we shouldn’t be fighting among ourselves when there are the Havarok to deal with.”

“Same side?” Uona snorted as she pointed toward Zac. “There is only the side of the Eternal Clan. All else is cattle, that slippery bastard of a Princeling included. Since you refuse to help, then what good are you?”

Zac felt a sense of profound danger the next moment, and he immediately activated [**Profane Exponents**] as he started swimming for his life. However, the large barriers that he erected were instantly crushed by a tide of blood that rushed straight toward him. Not even the Twilight Chasm was a match to its ferocity, let alone Zac’s own defenses.

It wasn’t just a matter of volume, though the enormous sanguine river was massive enough to drown the whole cage of [**Profane Seal**] in an instant if it so desired. It also contained extremely high-grade insights, insights that completely crushed his own Fragment of the Coffin. It was so far beyond what he had felt when fighting Yanub Mettleleaf, to the point that Zac guessed she had not only infused the river with multiple Dao Branches, but also empowered them through some extremely powerful braiding method.

Perhaps she even used the Dao Arrays that Catheya had mentioned once. Even worse, it was just like Catheya had guessed; Uona didn’t appear any more restricted by the Twilight Energy than he did. At least he hoped that was the case. If not, she was simply a terror at a level he only encountered in Iz Tayn before.

Zac knew he was completely outmatched, but he obviously wasn't willing to just give up like that. He steadied his mind as he started channeling his Miasma into his movement skill. Meanwhile, he used the chains of **[Love's Bond]** to increase his speed by slamming into the mountain wall and dragging himself forward. The enormous river was still gradually catching up, and Zac knew he had no option.

The channeling was finally complete, and he disappeared into a puff of energy as the world slowed down to a crawl. Painful currents ripped into his abyssal form, but Zac forcibly kept the skill going as he started creating more distance to the blood river. However, Zac only managed to increase the distance by a few hundred meters before his mind screamed of danger.

He didn't even get the chance to react before a lance of blood shot out from the river and pierced through his form with impossible speed. Zac felt like his whole body was on fire as he was forcibly dragged back into his normal state, and he felt a wave of despair as he looked down at the stump where his right leg once had been.

A large trail of ichor was already forming behind him, and his vision had threatened to close in on him. It was extremely lucky he had only been hit in the leg rather than his heart or head. If he were less fortunate, he'd be a real corpse instead of just an undead.

But Zac suddenly heard a snicker within the blood river as it slowly crept closer, and it dawned on him - Uona was toying with him.

He didn't know why, but the snicker made rage overtake his dread, and he immediately stopped swimming for his life. The remnant's influence on his mental state had been mostly averted as his soul cultivation proceeded over the past years, but the voices calling for destruction once appeared in the back of his mind.

Perhaps it was because of the mockery, perhaps it was because his body was in an agitated state after using the Mark of Creation. And this time, Zac didn't try to push away the

poisonous thoughts of destruction. Escape was clearly futile, so he had to change tactics.

If she wouldn't let him go, then she could just go ahead and die.

He wasn't someone she could toy with without getting burnt herself. Fury burned in his chest, fueling the torrential streams of energy that once more entered his shoulders. This time the goal wasn't to create a bridge between himself and the weird egg, but rather to annihilate that woman in one go.

The energy kept accumulating in his chest, but he forcibly kept it condensed inside his body as he kept moving away. The problem with the Annihilation Sphere was his difficulty to properly deliver the strike. Another spear shot out from the river, and it hit even after he tried to dodge. Zac grit his teeth as he saw his left hand get dragged away by the current, forcibly keeping the process going even through the all-consuming pain.

Zac suddenly appeared right on top of the river thanks to the teleport of [**Profane Seal**], and a massive sphere formed between his right hand and his grisly stump as he felt a burning pain spread across his face and neck. He pushed every morsel of Annihilation Energy he had accumulated in his soul into the sanguine waters and used his rage and pain as the fuse.

The response was immediate as a huge chunk of it simply disappeared into an orb of nothingness while the rest of the sanguine river was pushed to a boiling point. It didn't even last for half a second before it collapsed, the blood swallowed by the currents which had been kept at bay until now.

A bloodied form emerged from the waters, her state even more pathetic than Zac's own. She was missing one of her arms along with a chunk of her torso, and she had lost one whole leg to boot. Even the parts that had avoided the Annihilation Sphere were covered in weird cracks that complemented the tendrils of pain that spread from Zac's head down to his shoulders.

But she was still alive.

The four chains of **[Love's Bond]** instantly shot toward weak spots for a quick kill, but Uona's closed eyes opened as she stared at him with confusion, pain, and vengeance. Sanguine Eyes met Zac's abyssal orbs, and the Twilight Chasm shuddered as an ocean of blood destroyed the mangled body of Uona and everything within a thousand meters.

Zac was right at the epicenter, and he only managed to resist for an instant before everything turned black.

Chapter 734: Crushing Pressure

Searing pain woke Zac up with a start and he found rampant energies wreaking havoc inside his body. It wasn't something Uona had done, but rather terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy, far more than his bloodline could handle. His whole body was barely holding together from all the wounds, but the energy was an even more immediate threat.

Perhaps he should consider it a relief that there was no kill energy occupying space inside his body. He had no idea how Uona had managed to survive blowing herself up in an eruption of blood of such epic proportions, but she should barely be hanging on just like him from the state he left her in. Unfortunately, that was not much of a comfort as he found himself on the verge of succumbing to the environment around him.

No matter what he did, things only got worse inside his body, and Zac tried to swim toward the surface where the density should be lower. However, as he looked around to get his bearings there was only darkness. Darkness so pervasive Zac even feared that he had been blinded by that final explosion.

Thankfully, the world lit with color to an almost blinding degree when he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**], and Zac immediately understood what was going on.

Uona's self-destruct skill had knocked him out, and he had been dragged God knows how far down into the depths by the currents. If the absolute lack of any light reaching this far below the surface was the first clue, then the terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy assaulting him was the second.

The density of Twilight Energy was multiple times more powerful than that of the surface of the Twilight Chasm,

dozens of times greater than other parts of the Twilight Ocean. This was way beyond what he could handle, even with his unique set of advantages. And that was when he was in prime condition.

Just a stump remained of his right leg, and his left hand stopped a bit after his elbow. His pathways were broken and the little Miasma left in his body moved turbidly through the storms of Twilight Energy ravaging his innards. Normally, losing all his miasma would result in swapping over to his Human side, but he actually wasn't sure he'd survive the transformation in his harried form.

He was running out of time, and his feeble attempts at swimming upward were completely futile. The currents were shockingly powerful, and new wounds kept appearing across his body to add insult to injury. He needed to get out of this place, or at least find a spot to rest up and recover.

Zac was dizzy and nigh-delirious, but he suddenly saw a spot of even more condensed darkness rapidly approach, and he knew that his chance had arrived. Four chains shot forward, each of them empowered by **[Blighted Cut]** to give them greater penetrative force. One, two, three chains were claimed by the currents before they reached their target, but two hit true and embedded themselves in the wall just as Zac was swept by the underwater mountain.

Sharp pain in his midriff cost him his consciousness for an instant as he was suddenly forced to a halt, but being blasted by the furious waters didn't let him stay under for long. He arduously dragged himself to the wall, helplessly scanning for any caves or crevasses where he could take cover for just a bit.

There was none.

Zac wouldn't give in though, and **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand as he frantically started carving a hole into stone. Any rock that was placed this deep into the Twilight Chasm and still remained was bound to be extremely durable, and Zac barely managed to leave marks deeper than a few centimeters even when going as hard as his condition allowed.

But he refused to stop, and one chipping after another was claimed by the streams as he dug further and further into the mountain. After five minutes, he had finally made a hole two meters deep, where the waters were blessedly calm. This place allowed him to avoid the currents, but it didn't solve his predicament with the Twilight Energy.

But he had an idea.

He properly secured himself in the stone with every single chain before he took out a spare shield to block out the few streams finding their way into his crevasse. Only when he and his spot were secured did he take out the small Array Disk for **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** with shaky hands.

The Array hummed to life as Zac crammed a cocktail of Soldier Pills and Healing pills down his throat, and he almost cried with relief as the insanely condensed Twilight Energies assailing him rapidly decreased in density. He felt a powerful drain of Mental Energy in his mind, and he passively let the array siphon what it needed as he took stock of his situation.

He was in an absolutely horrid state, with deep lacerations covering his whole body. Even his pathways were damaged, not to speak of his missing limbs. For now, he could only bind a set of ropes around the stump of his leg and arm to stem the loss of Ichor as he focused on other issues.

The combination of pills and the array had at least allowed him to right the ship, albeit barely. **[Void Heart]** and **[Purity of the Void]** were fast at work dealing with the lethal levels of Twilight Energy that had already accumulated in his body. The real star was obviously the Life-Death Array.

Not only did it continuously swallow exorbitant amounts of Twilight Energy, but it also expelled huge amounts of Cosmic Energy. The Array only wanted the attunement to empower the Mental Energy going into the array, and it expelled the actual energy into the surroundings.

It wasn't a great feeling to sit in the middle of a cloud of Cosmic Energy as an undead, but it was far preferable to Twilight Energy. The Cosmic Energy that the array spat out didn't possess the weird ability to burrow into his body, and it

essentially acted as a shield against the Twilight Energy in the surroundings.

Of course, the Twilight Energy was endless and pervasive, and it continuously kept swallowing up the Cosmic Energy he generated. However, Zac had no lack of Nexus Crystals, and he started to continuously crush Miasma Crystals to bolster the effect from his Array. Those two actions together were just enough to keep the immediate Twilight Energy at bay to the point that he was expelling more than he was forced to take in.

It was a continuous drain on his resources, but it provided him with a stable environment as long as he kept the array running. There was enough Twilight Energy inside his body to kill ten peak E-grade Cultivators, and if not for his unusual bloodline he would probably already have died before waking up in the depths.

His Soul Ocean on his undead side had already reached sublimation after swallowing the mysterious energy in the valley, which slowed down the purification process somewhat. The Soul Strengthening Manual didn't need much of his attention though, and he managed to use some of his Mental Energy to start refining the Twilight Energy.

Twilight Energy was slowly turned into Miasma which replenished his pitifully low stock, and he felt himself slowly crawling away from the brink of death. Thirty minutes passed in this state of gradual recuperation until the first cycle of his Soul Strengthening Method ended. A storm of attuned mental energy came crashing back, filled with the power of the Mystic Realm itself.

The cultivation method was very much the same as before, so he had started with his death-attuned side since he was in his Draugr body at the moment.

Doing so would slow down and weaken the effect of the cultivation session compared to if cultivated as normal, infusing himself with death while living, and with life when dead. But that was exactly what he wanted in this situation. The less pressure he put on his mind, the better. The more time he could buy for himself, the better.

Still, a huge chunk of death-attuned mental energy poured into his soul aperture, and his deathly soul sea became even darker as it started to churn. The moment the first revolution ended, the ambient energy instantly exploded back to full force, and Zac quickly activated the second rotation to give himself another breather.

This process continued for six whole hours, at which point the black ocean was veritably shaking with barely restrained might. It looked like it would swallow the life-attuned waters and turn his soul into one vast ocean of the abyss, and Zac was forced to continuously expend a large amount of mental energy to keep the ocean in its lane.

Seeing as the first half of the session was done, Zac changed his race after making sure he was firmly attached to the wall. A bout of weakness later he found himself filled with life, but he was quickly filled with a wave of nausea from the large amount of deathly energies that filled his body. It came from **[Void Heart]** that had operated at maximum during the cultivation session.

He had tried to absorb or expel the runoff manually, but he obviously wasn't as efficient as his Hidden Node. It hadn't been a problem in his undead form, but now it was.

Still, there was not much to do about the situation, and Zac started working on expelling it as he activated the second round of Soul Cultivation. The density of Twilight Energy once more decreased, and some of that left-over death-attuned energy was suddenly swallowed by the **[Void Heart]** while some more was expelled by **[Purity of the Void]**.

The minutes passed, and soon enough the energy had passed through the small array, bringing with it a surge of vivacious mental energy. It entered the golden ocean, and its churning waters rose up and started to push back the deathly ocean. The waves crashed against each other, and Zac felt a small tremor in his mind as his shimmering Soul Core was placed in the heart of the conflict.

One round after another had the battle only increase in ferocity, and waves were soon tall enough to completely

submerge the soul core. His soul aperture was fast becoming a chaotic storm of life and death. All the while, Zac felt his soul being polished.

That was not the only change though. While some of the imperfections were being sanded off by the chaos, it also looked like the waters left something behind. It was like some sort of fine sand was brought from the depths of the oceans up into the waves, and a few of those barely discernable motes of energy landed on the soul core and quickly melded with it.

Altogether, it looked like the session added a bit more than it removed, though just barely. It wasn't too surprising though. It was his first proper Soul Cultivation session since he evolved his soul, and he hadn't done anything to empower the process. Besides, Zac figured that the number of impurities that were removed after each session would decrease over time as his soul became more perfected, which would lead to a greater effect.

Unfortunately, Zac quickly found himself in a worrying situation as the cultivation session was drawing to an end. The ambient energy would return to its terrifying density in just a moment, and Zac would once more find himself overwhelmed. Doing another round of Soul Cultivation was impossible, and it was impossible to activate the Array without actually connecting it with his mind.

His hours of hard work expelling all that accumulated energy inside his body would soon be undone unless he did something, but he had already found the solution. Another supreme Nexus Crystal Appeared in his hand, and he immediately crushed it before the Twilight Energy had a chance to rush back. The whole area was instantly drowned in dense waves of Cosmic Energy, though not quite as dense as when the Soul Strengthening Array was also helping.

The first time he tried this method it had worked for almost half an hour, and he had crushed one a minute while running the array. But this time the relief barely lasted ten seconds before the Twilight Energy had gobbled it all up. Zac immediately crushed a second crystal, and the Twilight Energy was once more pushed back.

There were few, if any, E-grade Cultivators who had the financial strength to burn almost 5,000 E-grade Nexus Coins every minute, but he had thankfully stocked up on a small mountain of Crystals before entering the trial. After all, he had no idea if he would have the chance to purchase another round after he left the Twilight Ascent. But even his stock wouldn't last the whole trial going at this rate.

Zac knew all-too-well that not even he could stay down here forever, but there was one more thing he needed to do before he set off. He looked down at his left leg ending just above his knee, and he grit his teeth as he loosened the rope keeping it closed. A thin layer of skin had already appeared over the wound thanks to his crazy Vitality, and Zac said a silent prayer as he cut off a thin slice with **[Verun's Bite]**.

The waters quickly turned red, but Zac staunchly kept his focus as he crushed another Supreme Nexus Crystal before he roused the slumbering Creation Energy in his body. For this purpose, there wasn't even any need to create a Mark of Creation, and he just looked as a new leg rapidly regenerated to replace the missing one.

The pain of growing a limb was excruciating, but no more so than many other wounds he had suffered over the past years. It wasn't enough for him to lose his focus, and he kept picturing how his legs looked. He had known that this situation would happen sooner or later, so he had already memorized every last part of his body, both through scanning himself and by using **[Spiritual Anchor]**.

He remembered every hair, every pore on his body, just so that he would be able to recreate them without any aberration. Soon enough the foot was added, and Zac was hit by a wave of weakness. Unfortunately, it was not the weakness of needing sleep, but rather something much more sinister.

He had once more lost a good chunk of his longevity.

Zac couldn't be certain, but he guessed that he had lost a few decades reforming his leg, which didn't feel too dreadful now that he had reached D-grade Race. Still, that was only one of

two limbs missing, and he sighed as he turned toward his missing left hand.

Regrowing his left hand wasn't necessarily needed to get out of this place, and his combat effectiveness wasn't contingent on having it either. Needing to regrow it was rather a matter of his pathways. He was already disadvantaged as a Mortal, and now with his pathways broken in two places his energy was completely turbid, which made dealing with the Twilight Energy all that much harder.

He also had skill fractals on his Left arm. Luckily, skill fractals were protected by the System, and they would be back as soon as his spirit body recovered. However, he wouldn't be able to use them until his hand regrew.

The process repeated itself once more, and he barely had enough Creation Energy to complete the process. With him having used his Annihilation Energy on Uona, he was completely tapped out for this hidden ace. He would either have to wait a few months to slowly gather more energy or forcibly open his cage again if he wanted to make use of the two powers of the Remnants.

His limbs were successfully regrown, but he still rested another three hours at the cost of a small hill of Nexus Crystals. Only then did he feel his state stable enough to leave. His crystals would run out before the trial ended, and Zac knew that there was only one way to go. So he steeled himself as he slowly made his way out of the small alcove.

The chains of [**Love's Bond**] were still firmly embedded in the stone, but Zac still almost found himself dragged further into the depths the moment he was exposed to the torrential waters. But he ignored the pain as he started pulling himself up, moving meter by meter along the rock with the help of his chains.

However, progress was slow as he was climbing against the current. The chains were barely able to rise against the currents, and there were barely any footholds for him to climb using his own hands and legs. Swimming was out of the

question as well. The second he let go of the wall, he would instantly be dragged to the depths.

Zac only managed to climb 100 meters or so before he felt himself approaching his limits, and he quickly started to cut another dugout in the wall. A minute later he had created another safe zone, and he blocked the pathway best as he could before started up the costly process of keeping the ambient energy at bay.

This cycle of short climbs and long durations of rest kept going for over ten hours, at which point he once more was ready for another round of soul cultivation. He had made decent progress in this time, climbing over a kilometer along the cliff wall. The strategy worked well enough, but he still worried a bit about his prospects. The waters above him were still utterly pitch black, making him wonder just how far down he had been dragged.

It wasn't like he couldn't stomach the cost, but he was burning almost 500 Supreme Nexus Crystals between each climb, and he only had so many of them. The real issue was the mountain he was climbing though; all his plans were contingent on the mountain he was climbing actually reaching all the way up, but there were no guarantees that actually was the case. If it abruptly ended before he'd climbed to a point where the currents weren't powerful enough to drag him back to the depths, he'd be screwed.

Two days passed, and Zac was making greater and greater progress as his climbing technique steadily improved. The bad news was that it was all still pitch-black above his head, but the good news was that the energy density was slowly decreasing. He could go a little bit further with each climb, and the rest periods cost a little bit less.

He believed that sooner or later he would reach a depth where he would barely be able to hang on with just his Soul Strengthening Array and Hidden Nodes, perhaps using the occasional crystal to tide him over. That would be the optimal place to hone his soul, easily fulfilling the harsh requirements on cultivation environment.

Who knew, he might even complete the Second Reincarnation in one go thanks to the unique environment of the depths of the Twilight Chasm. If he ever got out of this place, that is.

Chapter 735: Mountain Formation

The situation was grim, but it wasn't all bad. Where there was danger, there was also opportunity. Zac's cells suddenly came alive with greed while climbing, and he spotted a secluded cave not far away. He entered it cautiously after switching to his undead form, and he found himself face to face to a flower that had once juicy bulb at the top that reminded Zac of a dumpling.

It emitted an earthy aroma that was extremely enticing, but Zac forcibly ignored the primal hunger as he took out a jade box and harvested the thing. He couldn't recognize the plant at all, but his best guess was that it was some sort of native Dao Treasure judging by the aura it emitted, one of a far higher quality than the Life-Death Pearls.

It was definitely a treasure valuable enough to match anything a top 500 contestant on the Fate Plucking Ladder would be able to get from the vault, perhaps something even greater. Using it now was too risky considering he had been out of it for twenty days when ingesting the first round of Life-Death Pearls. Even passing out for an hour in this place might prove lethal.

Unfortunately, his grand plan hit a sudden and unexpected turn a day later; he had reached the peak of the mountain, and he was still far from the surface. In fact, it looked like the mountain had been broken off by the turbulent waters, and it had been turned into a mostly flat plateau a few kilometers across.

Swimming to the surface was still not an option. If anything, the currents were even stronger right at the summit, and Zac was forced to climb down some ways to not risk getting ripped off the mountain. Zac's only option was finding another

mountain to climb, but he couldn't see any from his vantage. Worst-case scenario, he would have to descend the mountain until he found another one it connected to, but that would potentially waste weeks, if it was even possible.

There was one more thing he could do, and Zac spent two days traversing the side of the plateau until he finally spotted another mountain far in the distance.

The problem was the vast chasm between him and the target. Zac mulled on the conundrum while performing another cleansing Soul Strengthening Cycle, after which he started digging a larger-than-normal cave. It took a whole hour before he was finished, at which point he took out a large conic stone.

It came from one of the Spatial Rings of the cultivators he took out just before leaving Greengrove Archipelago, and it would become the sacrifice for this endeavor. He entered the vessel and thoroughly studied it before he loaded the array full of Supreme Nexus Crystals. Zac took a deep breath before he cranked the speed-controlling array to the limit.

The vessel shot out like a bullet from Zac's makeshift dock, and it hurtled straight toward the taller mountain in the distance. Steering was out of the question since he had completely overtaxed the array far beyond what it could sustain for long.

Ominous groans immediately started to echo through the hull, even with the shields working at max capacity. A Tremendous shudder made Zac lose his footing a moment later as a large section of the hull was ripped clean off. Thankfully, he had made it more than three quarters across the chasm before the ship was ripped apart, and he felt confident he'd be able to swim the last stretch.

However, he had severely underestimated just how strong the currents were, and he found himself rapidly dragged downward as he inched toward the peak. The amount of Miasma he was expelling to propel himself forward would be enough to drown out an army of F-grade warriors, but it wasn't a match to the intractable power that wanted to drag him to the depths.

Zac started to despair that days of effort would be wasted and that he might not even make it across at all, but he was confused to suddenly find the downward pull completely interrupted, allowing him to scramble toward the mountain. But Zac almost completely forgot to keep swimming as he glanced upward to see what was going on.

Something was swimming a few hundred meters over his head, its body stretching on for thousands of meters. Zac couldn't see exactly what it was, but he could barely discern dark green scales, each one as large as a football field by the looks of it.

What was this thing? And what was it doing in an E-grade trial? This big bastard would make even the dragon he fought look like a little shrimp. He wasn't even sure the mountain he had been climbing had been broken off by the currents any longer. This guy would only need to ram it once to get the work done.

Zac was frozen in fear and hesitation for only a second before he continued swimming toward the mountain, using as much energy as he dared without causing too large a ripple. The creature thankfully seemed completely disinterested in Zac even if he was spotted, and he managed to reach the mountain just in time before the thing passed him by.

In its wake came a tumultuous storm, and Zac barely managed to hold on to the cliff wall. His body was instantly covered in cuts, and he was forced to immediately cut a cubby to start resting again. Meanwhile, the monstrosity was seemingly only passing by the area, and it rounded the mountain Zac climbed before it sunk toward the depths.

He never managed to see its face, but the beast best resembled some sort of overgrown sea snake since it neither had the fins of fish or wings or claws of a dragon. It was just an oversized tube ripping through the chasm, its massive trunk of a body turning the streams completely chaotic.

Zac rested up with his Soul Strengthening manual while keeping watch, but the gargantuan beast never made another appearance. Perhaps it lived even further down in the depths and only made the rounds now and then. Zac even guessed

that thing was the true ruler of the Twilight Chasm, even though it hadn't been mentioned in any missive.

It was far beyond any normal beast king, to the point that Zac suspected it might be approaching Monarchy. Why such a thing existed inside the Mystic Realm was beyond Zac, and he could only endeavor to not draw its ire.

Zac soon started climbing again, but he found himself in a predicament after another two weeks. It looked like the section he had found himself in was a cluster of fifty-odd peaks, with the cliff he started on being slightly separated from them. He had managed to swim between these cliffs without sacrificing any more vessels, but it soon became apparent that most of these mountains didn't reach much further than the original one.

He had discerned what looked to be a much larger cliff or perhaps even the wall of the chasm, far in the distance, but the way there was extremely perilous. Not only was the distance almost four times as great between the closest peak and his earlier jump, but the streams were extremely powerful. He wasn't confident at all in making it across without the big snake helping out.

And even if he made it across in one piece, it was possible that he would also be dragged to such a depth that his methods to deal with the Twilight Energy wasn't enough.

Still, what else could he do?

He knew he would have to take the leap sooner or later if he wanted to get out of here, but he didn't go immediately. The peaks were all drenched in energy, and there were bound to be some treasures here. As long as he could make some sort of breakthrough, he'd increase his chances of survival when making it across. He immediately set out, but it was easier said than done finding anything down here.

For one, it was pitch black, and his other sights could only help him see so far. He spent one day per mountain peak, climbing around as much as he could in search of energy fluctuations or anything else that might indicate a valuable. And suddenly on the sixth day, he found something. It wasn't

a precious metal, nor was it a unique plant hidden in a crevasse. It was a pristine five-meter-long bone that had been lodged in a crack.

Zac guessed it had been brought there by the currents rather than the fact that a beast lived down here since Twilight Energy this dense was no doubt poisonous to normal Beast Kings as well. The bone was still in the middle of an extraordinarily powerful stream, and that was one reason why Zac believed it might be a treasure.

A normal bone even from a D-grade beast would have eventually been ground to dust in a situation like this, but this one seemed to have no issue withstanding the cutting waters.

In fact, it almost looked like the waters were refining it. Zac had his suspicions, but he was currently in his human form so he couldn't be sure. He was trying to use the intuition gained by **[Forester's Constitution]** to find herbs, but he swapped over to his Draugr side after some thought as he hid from the stream in a secluded crevasse.

As expected, the moment he trained his abyssal eyes at the bone, he was almost blinded by the immense life-attuned energies it contained. The bone lit up like a beacon in the darkness. It was clear; the bone was somehow storing a bit of the life-attuned energies of the waters that passed while expelling some of the deathly energies.

Over who knows how many years, the bone had become a Treasure Bone of pure life. Zac wanted to immediately head over and pick it up, but he first had to spend the next hour cracking Miasma Crystals and expelling built-up energy. Only then did he set out, but he was surprised to find that the chains of **[Love's Bond]** weren't strong enough to dislodge the thing.

Zac wasn't deterred though, and he immediately moved to Plan B. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the mountain wall or wrapped around a few outcroppings before he crawled over, securely fastened. Three small pygmies appeared in the waters behind him, but cracks immediately started to spread across their bones.

The skill would only last a few seconds before the surrounding energies ripped the skeletons apart, but that was enough. One barrier after another appeared to slightly divert the powerful current surrounding the bone, making it slightly easier for Zac to climb over. He saw that the bone had essentially fused with the mountain itself, and it was no wonder the chains had been unable to drag the bone over.

But the strength of nature was nothing in front of the power of Zac's greed, and he ripped it and a section of the mountain straight out of the crack with a herculean tug, and he quickly dragged himself back with the chains just as **[Profane Exponents]** crumbled. The bone entered his Spatial Ring, and Zac wasn't really surprised when he felt the wave of hunger in his mind.

Verun had woken up inside the ring, and it clearly indicated a desire to consume the mysterious bone. This was exactly what Zac had hoped for when snatching the Treasure Bone, but he didn't let Verun feed on it just yet. The axe wasn't really needed to solve his current predicament, but he couldn't let it absorb the bone right now.

Previously when Verun got something good, it had enclosed itself in large crystals to digest it, and this was no time for that.

Instead, he continued, and he managed to find three extremely impressive materials over the next two weeks. One was a metal that emitted intense energy fluctuations, yet wasn't listed in any of the precious materials missives. It had to be something extremely rare for that to be the case, and rare items were always good to have.

Neither of his Spirit Tools wanted it, but he might be able to use it to trade for something he did need in the future. After all, the absolute rarest items were rarely possible to buy with Nexus Coins alone, and many warriors preferred straight-up trades of similarly exotic materials.

He also found another one of those odd dumpling-like fruits, this one even slightly larger compared to the first. He still wasn't certain whether it was a Dao Treasure or something

else though. His best bet was showing them to Catheya to see if she knew what they were.

The last ones were stalks of reed-like grass swaying in a secluded spot protected from the more powerful currents. Zac had almost been dragged out to the depths when he gazed upon them since their sway had an extremely potent hallucinogenic effect. It was only thanks to his evolved soul he barely managed to regain his sanity and desperately scramble back to the mountain before he was dragged away.

Harvesting them had been a challenge with him being constantly hypnotized, but the closer he came to them, the more he could sense that they would have an amazing effect on nurturing one's soul. They were his best find so far, and he planned on simply eating them unless he found something looking more promising to help him out.

However, he suddenly spotted something extremely mysterious, something that smelled of opportunity. Zac was climbing a mountain as usual, when there suddenly was a weird fluctuation in the distance. A whole mountain suddenly flickered into existence before disappearing again in just a few seconds. It was almost like he had seen a mirage, but he could soon confirm it was real.

He wouldn't have noticed anything if he hadn't seen the mountain for a brief window, but now that he knew it was there, he could see how the powerful currents swirled around it. It wasn't phasing in or out of reality, but it was rather shrouded by some unknown method. Zac frowned as he looked around at the mountain peaks, realizing that the hidden mountain was right in the middle of the cluster he was currently exploring.

A Natural Formation?

He immediately dug a cubby and started up another round of soul cultivation, keeping watch over the secret peak. The mountain reappeared twice in a span of ten hours, and it was preceded by a mounting surge of energy each time. There was also a hint of spatial energy in the mix, making Zac wonder if

space was sealed, but a weakness appeared every once in a while.

If he wanted to enter the mountain, it would probably have to be in that brief window. Zac had already decided over the past hours; he would take his chances and enter that place. The soul grass he harvested was nice, but not enough to reach his second Reincarnation. Absorbing them wasn't sufficient to give him the power to reach the wall of the chasm, he needed to take a risk and check things out in that place.

Zac made his preparations over the next day, ignoring the mountain as it appeared four more times. Soon enough, he shot out in another of his spare vessels, this one having over a hundred talismans plastered to its hull. That was the limit of what he could activate without completely draining himself, and the vessel was lit up like a sun as it pierced through the frantic currents just as the energy of the hidden peak started to surge.

The whole ship shook and started to fall apart as it slammed into an unseen barrier, but Zac was ready. Only a third of the talismans had been defensive ones to deal with the current without the ship crumbling, and the rest simultaneously lit up to create a tremendous explosion, and it was quickly followed by a massive axe cutting through the waters.

It was [**Arcadia's Judgement**], and not even the terrifying pressure of the ocean could withstand the wooden hand as it ripped open a tear in an unseen shield. Zac knew he couldn't hesitate, and a patch of flowers appeared beneath his feet as he shot forward, passing right by his own attack and forcing himself through the temporary weakness in the natural formation.

He had expected to find the mountain he had seen on the other side, but his eyes widened in terror when he was actually met with a chaotic storm of spatial energies. He didn't even have a chance to orient himself before he found his surroundings twist. Thankfully he hadn't been swallowed by the void, but rather transported to some unknown cave.

The cave was drained, and Zac took a deep breath with wonder as he looked around. The ground was littered with all kinds of things that had most likely been dragged here just like himself, and there was everything from ancient corpses, cultivators and beasts alike, to large chunks of metal and soil.

In fact, the materials here were even more plentiful than all he had gathered himself so far. Unfortunately, there was something odd going on, where the older materials seemed to have been drained somehow, including an identical piece of metal as the one he had found the other day.

As for the culprit for that and him getting dragged here, there was one clear suspect - the flowers.

They were the only thing that seemed to grow in the cave naturally, and they absolutely covered both ceiling and walls. Their alluring aroma was simply amazing, but that was the least impressive thing about them. First of all, the density of Twilight Energy was pitifully low in this place, to the point that Zac wouldn't even need to use his Soul Strengthening Array to get by here.

There was only one way something like this was possible; these flowers were continuously swallowing exorbitant amounts of energy, enough to drain the whole area to the point that only a trickle remained. They were even so voracious they somehow dragged materials from the outside to be absorbed.

Then again, it wasn't certain that these flowers actually swallowed all the energies themselves. Intense spatial fluctuations were coming from this place, making Zac wonder if these flowers had formed some sort of natural formation that sent the Twilight Energy to the void just like they had teleported him and all these materials here.

He walked over to the closest one and inspected it, and he felt like he could discard any theory that the spatial fluctuations came from some other source. The flowers themselves held extremely condensed powers of the space, and miniature cracks actually appeared in space when Zac brushed one of its petals.

The movement increased the fluctuations by another tier, and Zac felt his body waking up, greedily swallowing the energy the flower released. He had no idea what species of flowers he was looking at, and his missive couldn't help him either. However, he could tell with absolute certainty that whatever these flowers were called, they worked wonders on his constitution.

Zac knew that he had found it. He had found the opportunity to make another breakthrough, and it was one he had been holding back on for a long time now.

It was time to push his bloodline to E-grade.

Chapter 736: Limitless

Evolving his bloodline was risky considering the chaos he had caused when awakening it the first time, but he didn't have many options if he wanted to get out of here. It was either that or wait in this cave until the trial ended. This place seemed safe enough with the flowers eating all the Twilight Energy, but he refused to just sit around for over two whole years.

Besides, wasn't this the perfect opportunity? There shouldn't be a single cultivator able to reach these depths, and he hadn't even seen any beasts except that monstrous thing. Meanwhile, there were dozens of peaks all around him, many of them no doubt containing extremely valuable treasures he was simply unable to find.

Along with the absurd amount of ambient energy in the Twilight Chasm, he had the perfect stage to breakthrough, no matter how much energy his bloodline demanded.

He needed to make some preparations before taking that step though, and he started setting up a series of arrays in the middle of the cave. It wasn't the usual illusion and isolation arrays he used when arranging a temporary cultivation cave, but rather protective arrays. Last time he had formed a huge vortex, and he was afraid that he'd drop the mountain above him right on his head if he didn't think things through.

That's why he arranged two layers of protection. One offensive array to blast a large hole in the rock above his head in case a section fell toward him, and another to block any errant debris.

He also started digging through the stone with **[Love's Bond]** having all four of his free chains entrench themselves in spiraled patterns downward to secure him in place. The cave didn't seem connected to the ocean outside, but there were no

guarantees that would still be the case that vortex Ogras described appeared again.

After that, Zac wasted no time, and the **[Cardinal Kernel]** appeared in his hands. His cells were already extremely agitated from the flowers around him, and Zac's hands even started shaking from barely constrained hunger as he cut a small wound in his hand and let his blood drip down on the dark-green crystal before he firmly gripped it in his hands.

The Natural Treasure hummed to life as it went from green to red, and Zac soon found a stream of primal energy entering his veins. His heart started to furiously beat like a war drum, and the energy quickly spread through his whole body.

His body greedily sucked more and more energy out from the crystal, causing the air to twist around the heart-shaped treasure. Eventually, it cracked, completely drained by the Void Emperor-bloodline. Zac wasn't satiated at all though, and he felt a familiar state of madness brought on by hunger coming over him.

This time he wasn't completely out of his mind thanks to his strengthened soul, but he still started to greedily chow down on the hundreds of fruits he had found just a few weeks before. Each one of them contained so much energy it would take a normal E-grade cultivator weeks to refine, but the energy had all been absorbed by his cells before the fruits even had reached his stomach.

The more he ate, the more voracious the hunger became. He could feel it. He was still incomplete, and just like last time, the promise of perfection loomed in the distance. He was reaching the tipping point, and he pushed away any final misgivings as he swallowed one fruit after another, madness and desire burning in his eyes.

Something far in the distance cracked, and Zac's vision started to blur. He first tried to fight it, but his mind was swiftly dragged away. The last thing he sensed was tens of thousands of gates appearing in the area, each of them taking everything from their surroundings.

He had once more become the void.

“I’m here to help clean up,” Karz said demurely without lifting his gaze from the ground.

“Ah! Gar, eh, Karz, is it?” the quartermaster coughed. “Well, chambers 2, 14, and 28 will need cleaning today.”

Karz’s heart beat an extra time when hearing he had been assigned to a single-digit chamber, and number two at that. This would be a pretty big haul. Still, he controlled his aura and expression as he walked toward the inner parts of the Alchemy Hall. Thanks to months of building his ‘reputation’, he passed straight through the security checks without causing any waves, gaining access to an area that not even Inner Disciples could enter.

The scheduling formation indicated that chambers 14 and 28 would open in an hour or so, while chamber two was more imminent. Karz walked over to the finely decorated waiting hall and sat down in a corner where he wouldn’t be in the way. Even then, his appearance caused some ruffles, and he saw two cultivators looking at him with frowns on their faces.

He recognized one of them to be a Core Disciple of the Alchemy Hall, but the other woman was unknown to him. However, Karz guessed that she had already completed her body tempering and entered the Profound Realm, judging by her aura. She was young as well, making Karz believe she had to be some talent among the Core Disciples.

“Who is that?” the woman said with a disgusted tone, and Karz could tell that she wasn’t really trying to hide her voice. “I can smell him even through the medicinal aroma.”

“Oh right, you just came back. I don’t know his name, but he’s called Garbage,” the other voice answered. “An elder found him in the garbage heaps last year and took pity on him. I heard he actually has a Heavenly Affinity barely high enough for him to target Inner Discipleship, but there’s something wrong with his head. He’s obsessed with refuse, and is more interested in collecting and disposing of it than cultivating. It’s kind of convenient though, so people just let him do his thing.

He's managing the refuse for most core disciples and even some elders."

"Should have left someone like that among the trash," the first speaker spat as the two walked around a corner. "A lowly person will always stay lowly."

"You're right. Do you know what a disciple saw when they spied into his courtyard? He actually..." the other cultivator said before the voice got indistinguishable from the distance.

Karz had heard the whole thing, there wasn't a single ripple in his heart. He knew he was being despised, but what did he care? In fact, it made his goals easier. And if there was one thing he knew to be true in this world, it was that her decree was fundamentally and irrevocably wrong. The only certain thing was change.

However, he couldn't help but snort at how naïve he was before, back when he still scavenged for scraps a few years ago. Old Vek had talked about the Cultivators as though they were some sort of celestials, full of poise and grace. But coming here he had soon realized the truth.

In some ways, they were even dirtier than the scavengers down at the ground.

Subterfuge, backstabbing, playing little games to mess with each other just to pass the time. They were just mortals who grew increasingly cruel and twisted as their powers grew. They were bound by conventions, fettered by things as honor and reputation as surely as if they were trapped by real feathers.

It wasn't surprising. They didn't understand true desperation, the hunger that pushed you into a fight to the death against another scavenger just for a rotten carcass. They saw him as lowly, and he saw them as foolish. He soon threw that woman out of his mind as he eagerly waited for the door to open.

A dense cloud of medicinal aroma eventually wafted out from the chamber as the thick gates swung open, and his pores opened and greedily swallowed as much as they could without exposing his secret. Following the aroma a young man

appeared, wearing an even more exquisite robe compared to the woman before.

His appearance didn't match his clothes though, as his hair was in disarray as his eyes were completely bloodshot and glazed over. But he still stopped and refocused when he saw Karz sitting outside.

"It's you," the young man said with surprise when he saw Karz waiting outside.

Karz knew who this was; Laondio Evrodok. He wasn't surprised that this man had been allowed to use the second refinement chamber, the second greatest cultivation chamber except for the one the supreme elder used for his experiments. In fact, Karz had heard that Chamber Two had recently been upgraded to even surpass chamber one, all for this man.

If Karz was at the absolute bottom of the totem pole to the point that people actually called him Garbage, then Laondio Evrodok was his polar opposite. The ragged-looking man was actually the greatest genius the sect had ever seen in its four-million-year history, and not by a small degree from what Karz had heard.

He was being personally groomed by both the Sect Leader and the two Supreme Elders, and many hoped he would be the one to move their mountain to even greater heights. His talents were so great that a Herald from the upper realms would descend in a few years to try him out. In a few centuries, he might be a Herald himself, ruling over the mortal realms like a god.

"I'm just here to clean," Karz said.

"Here," Laondio grinned as he took out a vial containing a few pills. "A small thank you. Your service is appreciated, but you cannot forget your own cultivation."

"What's this?" Karz asked as he looked at the weirdly shaped pills.

"My latest recipe. It's an impurity-cleansing pill! I call them **[Pure as Laon]!**" the man said with pride.

“Is it as good as the [**Turbulent Wind Pill**]?” Karz asked, even he slightly excited by the gifts. Those kinds of pills would save him a lot of time.

“Well, no, it’s much worse,” Laondio coughed, making Karz’s eyes dim a bit. “But it’s cheap! It costs just a fraction of those exorbitant pills.”

“Oh...?” Karz hesitantly said.

Laondio was clearly not satisfied with the lukewarm response. “Think about it! What separates the haves and have-nots in the world right now?”

“Resources,” Karz said without hesitation.

“Exactly!” Laondio said, his dry eyes lighting up with excitement. “It’s resources! The wealthy cultivators get to eat the greatest Heavenly Treasures and Cultivate closest to the purest Dragon Veins. Meanwhile, those with lower stature are bound to struggle on the road of cultivation. Impurities will accumulate quickly from absorbing the Earthly Qi, and even the greatest geniuses will find their road to cultivation cut short because of providence rather than effort.

“This is the first step to even the playing field! A cheap pill to help those with nothing to fall back on break through the chains of fate, to make anyone’s potential limitless!” the alchemist explained, and Karz’s eyes widened as he felt the air around the young man twist like his conviction was imposing its will on the heavenly laws.

“I heard you grew up on the ground? Your body must have absorbed a lot of Earthly Qi while living outside of the protection of the Dragon Veins. This will hopefully help put you back on course,” Laondio continued.

“Why are you giving me this?” Karz hesitantly asked.

“I heard how much you have helped people around here. This is just a small token of thanks,” Laondio said before he walked away.

The gesture was nice, but ultimately superfluous. Ever since that weird spot in his back had burst open, he had continuously rid himself of the taint. In the beginning, it was to the point

that his sweat was a disgusting black ooze, but by now his situation was mostly fine. In fact, he believed that his constitution would have been a lot better compared to even Core Disciples if not for his nightly activities.

Karz scurried into the room, and he looked at the piles of discarded flowers, stems, shells, and other leftovers from Laondio's alchemy session. He briefly wondered if the young star would be as generous with his pills if he knew that it wasn't selflessness that drove Karz's actions, but rather greed.

The rest of the Cultivators on this mountain might see a bunch of worthless scrap in front of them, but Karz saw something even better than the Origin Pills that were distributed every month to Outer Disciples such as himself.

He put all the scraps into his bag of holding before he carefully cleaned the whole room, putting everything back to where it was supposed to belong. He didn't really care about this part, but he saw it as payment for the valuable materials he collected. An hour later he had spruced up the other two alchemy chambers as well, and he left the inner sections of the Alchemy Hall.

"Thank you, young man," the quartermaster smiled as she furtively looked around. When she saw that no one was looking she handed him a bound parchment. "This is for you. It is the entry-level fire-control technique we teach Inner Disciples. If you master the methods to control the flame, you can become a proper assistant who gets paid by the Sect for your hard work. You could even become an Alchemist if your Heavenly Root allows for it."

"Thank you," Karz said with surprise as he quickly stowed away the method.

An entry-level technique was not much compared to the top-methods the Sect possessed, but he knew that the Quartermaster had bent the rules a bit in his favor for providing this.

"I will work hard to learn this method."

“Don’t worry if you can’t master it,” the Quartermaster smiled. “Alchemy is a grand path, but it ultimately not for everyone. Even if this one doesn’t suit you, I am sure that someone hardworking like you will find another one.”

“Thank you,” Karz bowed before he started his trek down from the Alchemy peak.

It was unfortunate. Kind-hearted people like the Quartermaster would never reach the peak in cultivation. Her advancement opportunities would be stolen through back-room deals of less open-hearted cultivators, and she’d be stuck as lower management even if her talent indicated she should rise higher.

But after talking with Laondio, Karz was a bit conflicted. He had considered the ruthless struggle for treasures and methods Heavenly law, but was that really an absolute? Were there no better ways than everyone clawing for every advantage they could get? Or was the young genius simply a dreamer with his head in the clouds after never having encountered any real hardships in his life?

Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Karz was far better off now compared to his years in the trash heaps, but he still didn’t feel much closer to the ‘glorious life in the sky’ he had dreamed of before. As his power grew, so did his vantage. It even felt like the mountain he was trying to climb to the peak was growing even quicker than he was.

For example, it was only last month he learned of exalted existences called Void Heralds, cultivators who had broken through to unimaginable heights. These kinds of beings didn’t even exist in the sect, or the neighboring clans for that matter. And that was still not the peak from what he’d gathered. Cultivation was really without end.

Karz eventually returned to his secluded domicile. Seeing the sprawling walls would probably confuse any visitor to the sect. What kind of Outer Sect Disciple got such a huge courtyard when space on the mountain was limited, even if it was almost by the foot? However, if they stepped inside, they’d soon understand why a place like this existed.

It almost felt like entering another world when he passed through the gates to his home. The dense Spiritual Energy outside had been slashed by more than three quarters, barely any better than what you'd see down on the tainted grounds. And what little ambient energy remained was oddly tainted for being so close to a Dragon Vein.

So what if the place was big? Any cultivator who lived in a courtyard like this was essentially crippling their cultivation.

Karz didn't understand the specifics, but an elder had called it a 'fault-line' of the dragon vein. It seemed as though the Dragon Vein used some spots to dump its low-quality energy, just like the sect used the incineration plateaus on the ground to get rid of their trash. But that didn't matter at all to Karz since he had his own unique methods.

The horribly bad cultivation environment wasn't the only odd thing about the oversized courtyard. It was another oddity that had raised a lot of brows in the sect, to the point that Karz had earned his unflattering nickname.

Piles and piles of scraps filled almost every empty free spot of the courtyard, creating mounds reaching up to five meters tall. Karz looked around for a bit until he found the right spot. It was a three-meter-tall pile of alchemic dregs that had almost turned to dry ash by this point, and he stowed away the completely drained materials before he released the pile he had collected during the day.

After that, he walked to a certain pile of garbage and lay down on top of it with a contented smile. It was a scene just like this that had completely thrown his reputation into the gutter, but Karz didn't care. He was sure that even the Sect Master of the Blue Spring Sect would join him if he possessed the same ability as he did.

Nothing happened for a few seconds as he lay there, but soon he felt a hunger from the depths of his body. It grew and grew until it couldn't be contained by his body any longer. That feeling had to be satiated, and the universe soon gave its answer as thousands and thousands of celestial tendrils rose from the garbage piles.

Like moths to a flame, the tendrils started to worm their way toward him. Most of them came from the recently added piles, while some were reluctantly forced out of the almost-decayed piles that had been there for a few weeks. Some tendrils were even drawn out from the air itself as Spiritual Energy freed itself from the Earthly Taint on its way to Karz.

His body was soon alight with force, the energy surging round and round between his meridians, leaving a little bit behind with every circuit. People thought he was just lazing about while lying in piles of garbage half the day, but he was actually cultivating at a speed that was probably unsurpassed in the Sect.

He and Landio had agreed that the main issue stopping most people from progressing was resources, but truthfully it was not just that. All methods of cultivation seemed to be filled with imperfections, where even the pills made by elders left over 70% of the energies of the Spiritual Herbs inside the discarded dregs.

Karz had no idea how to fix that issue, but his body had shown him the way to make use of that fact. He didn't know why, but he had quickly realized that others couldn't see this ability of his. All these beautiful tendrils that danced through the air were only visible to his gaze, a miracle just for him.

He looked at the sky as he silently cultivated with his homemade method. There were all kinds of worlds out there, many far greater than the Hur'Vaz Empire the Blue Spring Sect was part of. Cultivators powerful beyond compare, beasts as large as whole planets, treasures with unimaginable power.

The world was truly limitless. Thankfully, Karz believed he was too.

Chapter 737: Grand Origins

Zac woke up, and he was immediately beset by an intense hunger as he sat up with a grunt. He pushed down the sense of starvation as he looked around, and he was relieved to see that the situation wasn't too bad. He had been completely consumed by his Bloodline Vision even after having his soul evolve, but his surroundings were still somewhat intact.

Sometime during his breakthrough, the cave had been breached and flooded, but he was still protected from the currents outside. The cave itself had undergone a massive transformation though as all the flowers and the materials they had collected were gone, and the cave itself had grown to over five times in diameter.

It wasn't too bad, and Zac suspected it was thanks to the fact that he had somehow created thousands of small vortices this one rather than one massive one right behind his back. He couldn't be sure, but Zac felt the difference was related to Karz's ability at the end. However, while Karz had become something like a magnet that extracted pure energy from all kinds of sources, his bloodline had rather proactively gone out on the hunt to swallow them into the void.

It was the second time he had been shown Karz and his unique abilities, and the visions filled him with mixed emotions. He had already suspected it after the first vision, but now it almost felt certain. His mother's clan had somehow gotten their hands on the genes of the Limitless Emperor, and it was that supreme being's bloodline that coursed through his veins.

It was no wonder Leandra had said he carried the Original Sin. He had initially thought it was because his birth had drawn the wrath of the Heavens, but that wasn't necessarily the case. What could be considered Original Sin, if not creating the System itself? Emperor Limitless had to be the biggest sinner in the history of the Multiverse in the eyes of the Technocrats.

Zac didn't know what to think about the situation. He wasn't even sure if he was an actual descendant, or if Karz's bloodline had somehow been extracted and implanted into his body. Zac was pretty certain that he wasn't a pure clone though, partly through clues left behind by Leandra, and partly by the fact that he didn't look like Karz at all.

Karz was definitely human, but looked somewhat of Mediterranean descent, with black wavy hair and an olive complexion. His irises were golden, and his features were truthfully a lot better than Zac's.

The real situation was a bit unclear, but Zac had a decent guess what his mother's Clan had been thinking. It wouldn't be too surprising if the Limitless Emperor would have created some sort of unique access methods to the System, and Leandra might have planned on using his Bloodline like some sort of backdoor.

Add Jeeves hidden by a perfected Duplicity Core, and they had all they needed to sneak the Dao of Technology into the System, perhaps even take control of the System itself. It was no wonder that the System reacted so violently when he was discovered, if Zac's guesses were correct. Hopefully, he would be safe as long as his Bloodline was corrupted, but it was something to keep in mind.

Perhaps he'd only invite punishment again if he uncorrupted the Void Emperor-bloodline.

For now, he could only put the matter of his heritage and Emperor Limitless aside, and instead focus on the gains. And just as he was about to open his status screen to check, he noticed something extremely odd; the amount of Twilight Energy he was assaulted by was extremely low, to the point that his Hidden Nodes had no problems dealing with it.

That wouldn't have been surprising if the flowers were still there, but the flowers had been absorbed and the cave had been breached. He should be under a furious assault of Twilight Energy already, but he was leisurely sitting in the submerged cave like nothing was wrong. He immediately activated [**Piercing Gaze**], and even if its quality wasn't as

good as [**Cosmic Gaze**], it immediately exposed an extremely odd phenomenon.

The cave was absolutely drowned in Twilight Energy, but the situation was different within a sphere of two meters around his body. It was like he was enclosed in a small sanctuary, where the density was just a tenth of the energy outside. It wasn't like some void was swallowing the rest of the energy, but rather that it was somehow kept at bay.

Furthermore, he could actually sense a familiar and ancient aura radiating from his body, and Zac could somewhat guess what was going on. His eyes lit up, and he quickly opened his status screen to confirm his suspicions.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

114

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-

**Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider,
Runebinder**

Limited Titles

**Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin,
Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator**

Dao

**Fragment of the Axe - Peak, Fragment of the Coffin -
Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - Peak**

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

7825 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 238%]

Dexterity

3502 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

6823 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 238%]

Vitality

5790 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence

1447 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

2862 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck

455 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 715

His attributes hadn't changed since the last time he checked, and neither had he gained any Title for evolving his Bloodline. He had heard from Catheya that there was a title for awakening your bloodline while in F-grade, with a greater version available if you awakened before even starting cultivating. Unfortunately, it looked like simply catching up wasn't enough to get the title while in E-grade.

Still, Zac hadn't expected any title, and he was far more interested in his Bloodline Screen.

Bloodline

[E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void - 32%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Zac looked at the result with satisfaction. He was already 99% certain after the vision, but he had really managed to evolve his bloodline to E-grade in one go. For now, he wouldn't need to worry about it for a long while, since gaining a D-grade Bloodline generally wasn't possible before actually getting there in your cultivation.

Of course, he would still have to nurture his Hidden Nodes to set the foundation that would allow him to quickly upgrade them after becoming a Hegemon.

The most obvious change was the addition of a second Bloodline Talent; **[Void Zone]**. It sounded like a domain ability, and he figured that it should be this ability that kept the Twilight Energy at bay. It was just like with his first bloodline talent, it was simply on by default until he managed to form a connection with it.

Zac turned his attention inward, trying to glean whether anything else had changed. At first, everything looked the same, but he realized that his pathways had widened a bit. Not only that, but he could feel that his cells somehow were larger

even if they were the same size, even though that made no sense.

It was almost like they all were forming small spatial arrays, but for what purpose Zac still didn't know. He sensed his energy reserves, and they didn't seem any larger now compared to before. So what was the point of millions of small hidden pockets inside his body if they didn't do anything?

Zac couldn't think of anything in the vision that resembled what he was looking at either, and he could only put the matter aside for now. He figured that it shouldn't be something bad, and that the truth would sooner or later show itself. Instead, he tried to figure out exactly how his new Bloodline Talent worked.

There was no drain at all on his Cosmic Energy, and judging by the aura, the talent ran on the Void Energy provided by **[Force of the Void]**. He thought back to the vision of Karz he had just now, and it almost felt like the System or his mother had a sense of humor. In the first vision, Karz showed the ability to endlessly gain affinities through absorption, while he was perpetually stuck at no affinity.

Then Karz gained the ability to freely absorb energy that even more powerful cultivators had no way of extracting, but Zac got the ability to keep energy at bay?

The ability was definitely extremely useful in his current predicament, but its long-term usefulness was not quite as clear. However, Zac had high hopes for it to double as both a Defensive mechanism and a suppression. For example, the Twilight Energy could essentially be considered poison, but he was able to keep it away from him.

Would he be able to do the same if a cultivator drowned the area in a poison mist, keeping himself protected? Would he be able to do it even if it was something more corporeal, like a blade created with Cosmic Energy? Would it be barred from getting close to him, like an ultimate zone of nullification?

There were other things that were unclear, and he curiously took out a Middle-Grade Nexus Crystal and crushed it. A puff of energy spread out in his new domain, but it disappeared in

just a few seconds. Furthermore, the amount of Twilight Energy that managed to pass through the void increased by a small amount when the **[Void Zone]** was tainted by Cosmic Energy.

He took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal next and did the same thing. The result was similar, but the effect was more pronounced. It looked like there was a limit to how much energy the **[Void Zone]** could push away or banish, or whatever it was doing. Still, it would be a great tool to add to his repertoire, and it was an ability that essentially was a cheat in this place.

With this, he essentially became infallible in the Twilight Ocean.

He wanted to experiment some more, but he first needed to get the ability under control before he ran out of Void Energy. Over three years had passed since he did this thing last, but he still hadn't found the slightest clue of any better cultivation method than **[Bloodline Resonance]**. Hopefully, it would work this time around as well.

Zac took out the manual to refresh his memory for a few minutes before he once more started to create a resonance with his second talent as well. The ripples in his body grew more and more intense over the next hour, and even his improved constitution was soon reaching its limits from the endless collisions ravaging his body.

But finally, he felt another connection form, this time to the second bloodline talent. He breathed out in relief before eating a healing pill. The damage was thankfully not too bad, and he started to play around with the talent after resting for just five minutes.

He turned it on and off, and Zac looked on with interest as the Twilight Energy surged and was pushed back, over and over again. It almost looked like waves crashing against the rocks on the shore, though the scene quickly calmed down after he stopped messing around. There was something he wanted to test, and he first swapped over to his Draugr form.

The powerful domain was completely unaffected by the change, keeping the Twilight Energy at bay as he was filled with miasma. He scanned his undead constitution for any changes, but just like his human body, the only change was the odd enlarging of his cells. Using **[Void Zone]** worked the same way as well, allowing him to move on to his next experiment.

Zac tried to activate **[Profane Exponents]** next, but he frowned when he felt some sort of resistance when trying to activate the skill. It looked like even his own body was under the effect of the weird field he emitted, prohibiting him from doing anything. Zac changed his tactic and tried to activate the skill outside the zone as well, but the sensation of great resistance was the same.

The suppression wasn't absolute though, and as he pushed even further the skeletons appeared behind him, though they looked a bit bleak. A barrier appeared, but it took its sweet time, and it was significantly weakened. Zac dispelled the three pygmies, but they returned just a few seconds later, this time full of power as they radiated that ancient aura of his hidden energy reserve.

Zac's heart started to beat faster as he quickly understood the implications. What if he was in a melee, and his new domain suddenly swallowed both him and his enemy? A seasoned veteran would immediately force the skill to activate, but he would still be a bit slowed down and restrained. Meanwhile, Zac could actually speed up his skill summon, increasing the gulf even further.

Just how powerful was this ability?

This was a true domain, far surpassing those he used to create a restrictive hellscape inside the cage of **[Profane Seal]**. The only problem was that its radius was a bit too low for it to have too much practical effect since most fights ended without Zac getting within such close proximity of his enemies. However, the skill had just been awakened. Just like how the storage of **[Force of the Void]** grew, so should the radius of **[Void Zone]**.

He could imagine the scene in the future, him locking down kilometers of space in every direction as he unleashed instantaneously conjured skills on his helpless enemies. These two abilities together created an almost unbeatable combination. Of course, this restriction would probably be a lot weaker against higher-leveled enemies, which was a shame since those were the only real enemies of his.

At least it should help him stay alive when swept into a conflict like the one in the Technocrat research base.

He still remembered how he had almost gotten himself killed by the errant energies when The Great Redeemer and The Collector clashed. If he had this Bloodline Talent back then, the wounds he had accumulated would probably not have been so bad. He might even have been able to stay conscious for the impartment of **[Purity of the Void]**.

He kept trying out various things over the next thirty minutes to find any weaknesses of the ability. But it really looked like it was pretty well-rounded.

The biggest difference was whether the energy entering the domain was “owned” or not. If it was ownerless energy like the ambient Twilight Energy, the effect was extremely pronounced. However, even talismans maintained around half of their efficiency when he launched them at himself with the help of his chains.

Skills were even less restrained, and his Spirit Tools weren't affected at all from entering or exiting the sphere. In other words, it was a pure energy barrier, with no real effect on physical objects. There was some more experimentation to be done, but he was starting to feel a drain on his body; he was fast running out of Void Energy.

The weird organ appeared in his lap, a stone-like clump over a meter across. It contained powerful energies, but Zac sighed when he sensed that he was unable to extract it at all while **[Void Zone]** was active. He was forced to deactivate the protection, and a surge of Twilight Energy came crashing in on him.

It only lasted for a few seconds before he cracked a Supreme Miasma Crystal as he took out his Soul Strengthening Array. The environment had been ruined after activating his bloodline, and he wasn't planning on staying here any longer. He would just rest up and figure out his next step while completing a full cycle with the array.

Remembering how his bloodline had gobbled up innumerable valuable flowers made him remember the void gates that had spread all across the mountain range, and Zac suddenly thought of something. Was it possible he had gained some Contribution points from awakening his bloodline like this?

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 1,244,719 Rank: 1. Value: 150,000 (Bounty)]

Zac blankly looked at the ladder for a full minute, completely forgetting to activate the Soul Strengthening Array. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had shot up to the first position in one go, overtaking even that crazy vampire with 200,000 contribution points to spare. Whatever he had gobbled up during his Bloodline Awakening had been worth as much as twenty Mothertrees.

He was elated at the opportunity to snag a top-tier Limited Title, but the bounty on his head was a stark reminder that the danger his position represented. Everyone would suddenly be gunning for him, especially Uona and that Havarok princeling. Even more troubling, the System definitely wouldn't let him rest easy with his current rank.

No one had felt the sweet sorrow of the System's attention as frequently as he had during the early phase of the integration. The more outstanding you were, the more challenges the System would throw your way. Zac sincerely doubted the System would let him sit down at the bottom of the chasm and cultivate in peace after having taken the first position on the ladder.

A loud crash suddenly startled him awake, and Zac cursed himself for his nigh-prophetic misgivings. A second crash followed the first, and it contained such force that Zac felt like

he had been physically punched in his chest even though the source came from the outside.

Zac started to get a sinking feeling as he remembered the broken peak he had climbed the other day, and he grimaced when an enraged roar ripped through the waters with such force that the whole mountain shook. A tremendous aura spread through the area next, and Zac could feel anger so palpable that the water around him almost boiled.

Zac couldn't see the originator of the furious bellow, but he didn't need to. The gargantuan snake had returned, and it was pissed off.

Chapter 738: King of the Mountain

Various incipient plans for the near future were thrown out the window as the whole mountain once more shook under the weight of the Beast King's wrath. There was no way Zac could stay in the area and work on his cultivation. Even if he wasn't discovered, he wasn't certain the mountain would survive the rampage of the enormous snake much longer.

Zac retrieved his chains and made a final cursory scan of the area before he started to move. As expected, everything of value had already been absorbed through his bloodline evolution, not even leaving husks behind. He figured that it wasn't a complete loss though. All those treasures had to contribute to something when they were swallowed by the void, even if he wasn't exactly sure that that was just yet.

Another roar outside made the waters churn even within the mountain, and Zac looked around for a way to get out of the mountain. He doubted that he gave off any aura from the treasures that had disappeared. But he also doubted that an enraged Beast King, or perhaps even Beast Emperor, would care too much about such minor details. It would simply attack anything that was suspect.

As for fighting the snake, there was simply no way.

The immensity of the beast was just beyond what he could handle, no matter if you talked level or physical size. His stockpiled energy from the remnants was mostly used up after fighting Uona, but even if they weren't – so what? A full-powered Annihilation Sphere would not even be enough to breach the gargantuan scales the snake was covered in.

A Mark of Creation might create some sort of tumor-like growth, but it was no way one mark was enough to take out

something that size. Escape was the only option, preferably all the way to the potential wall he had gleaned in the distance. He would have to pray that his newfound ability would be enough to take him across the vast chasm without getting ripped to shreds.

First thing's first; he needed to get away from the central mountain since it was just a matter of time before the snake made its way here. After all, Zac had a strong suspicion that it was no longer hidden like before now that he had absorbed all those odd flowers. The snake would definitely investigate if sooner rather than later.

The cave he had been teleported into before had been sealed off from the outside, but his evolution had caused a crack and let the water inside, providing Zac with a convenient route out of this place. It wasn't a proper pathway though, and Zac had no choice but to activate [**Abyssal Phase**] when the crack turned much too thin to traverse.

Soon enough Zac appeared at the surface of the peak, and he once more reverted into his tangible form as he restrained his aura as much as he could. His body was already starting to fill up with Twilight Energy after having used his intangible form, and he was forced to immediately reactivate his bloodline talent again.

The storm of Twilight Energy that burrowed into his body was instantly rebuffed, giving him a reprieve from the onslaught. Zac sighed as he carefully peered out from the mouth of the crack, and he was thankfully met only with raging currents and distant peaks. No Midgard snake was slithering about outside, though the palpable air of bloodlust still suffused the whole area.

Another roar echoed out from the distance, and Zac guessed that the snake was still laying waste to the outer sector of the cluster of peaks. He was about to set out, but his danger sense suddenly woke up and he immediately shrunk back into the crevasse with wide eyes. It wasn't the snake that suddenly appeared, but he felt a powerful sense spread across the whole area before continuing toward the other peaks.

The snake was on the hunt for real.

It felt like his heart threatening to jump out of his mouth, but he almost cried in relief when felt another crash reverberate through the area. The snake had attacked another peak rather than coming for him. It looked like his Void Zone had managed to obfuscate his presence to at least avoid a cursory scan.

Zac knew this was his chance, and he grit his teeth as he pushed out from the mountain. Void Zone helped with the Twilight Energy, but they didn't really affect the currents just like Zac had feared. They immediately started dragging him further into the depths while he traversed the chasm between the peaks, and shallow gashes appeared one after another on his body because of the waters.

But it was far preferable to becoming snake food.

Zac hadn't had time to completely restore his reserves of Void Energy after his experiments, but he sensed it would be enough to keep his new talent active for half an hour at least. He needed to use that time to the fullest to get away from this place while the snake was occupied elsewhere.

He couldn't follow his old regimen of climbing for a few minutes before resting for an hour. The whole mountain range would be leveled before he got out of harm's way that way. Soon enough Zac had crossed the chasm to the next mountain, using as little energy as he possibly could. Part of him believed that the immense density of Twilight Energy around him should be enough to obfuscate a small burst of energy coming from his skills, but he wouldn't take any chances with that monstrosity lurking somewhere close by.

Zac didn't stop and rest like he usually would, and instead popped a healing pill as he started to climb around the peak so that he could swim toward the next one. He was pretty familiar with the area after having looked for treasure for a few weeks, and he knew there were five mountains he would have to cross before reaching the peak closest to the distant mountain.

A roar echoed out again, and Zac was dismayed at how much closer it was this time. Getting subjected to the cry at closer

proximity felt like getting hit by a sledgehammer, and Zac could only look on as the waters around him were tainted with ichor squeezed out from his wounds. Still, he didn't as much as grunt or let his aura fluctuate in fear that he would be discovered.

Out of nowhere, a gargantuan shape flashed by, its speed seemingly impossible considering its size. It was like Zac's whole vision had been replaced by impossibly large scales out of nowhere. Zac said a silent prayer as he prepared for the worst, but he was relieved to see the beast ramming straight into a neighboring mountain, causing cracks thousands of meters long to spread across its slopes.

It looked like the Twilight Ocean buckled from the impact before it rushed out in every direction with terrifying force. Zac didn't even have a chance to erect any defenses before the wave crashed into him, almost knocking him clean out then and there. His chains had thankfully managed to keep him fastened to the mountain wall, and he grabbed on with desperation as huge chunks of rocks were ripped away around him.

Suddenly, a weaker screech echoed out as a hundred-meter-long fish with long trailing fins shot out from one of the cracks in the neighboring mountain, its aura clearly eclipsing the Beast King that Zac killed in the Greengrove Archipelago. From the looks of it, it had been in secluded cultivation deep inside the mountain, enjoying the dense Twilight Energy in the area until the snake came knocking.

However, it clearly wasn't preparing to fight the intruder over having its territory encroached. It pierced the torrential currents as it expended every effort to escape. The far larger beast wouldn't simply let up though, and its head snaked around with almost impossible speed, snatching the fish up in a ruthless bite.

There was no fight and no struggle, just a much larger predator gobbling up its helpless prey, which only reinforced Zac's decision to not fight the thing. Killing the Beast King did nothing to alleviate the snake's anger though, and it released

another earthshattering roar after having swallowed the much smaller fish.

Zac was starting to accumulate wounds upon wounds even with Void Zone active, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could take even indirect damage from this beast. He felt incredibly small and helpless, just like when he witnessed the clash between the Hegemons inside the Mystic Realm. Black ichor freely leaked from his nose and ears as the large cracks all over the mountain worsened.

The ocean itself became muddied for a few seconds as innumerable shards of rock fell off the mountains and joined the currents. However, the debris was quickly cleared thanks to the unearthly speed of the waters, and the monstrous beast was once more exposed.

The snake released another snort before it started to slither away, completely crushing the currents that slammed against its scales with enough force to kill a normal Peak E-grade warrior. Zac's whole body shook from a mix of primal fear and adrenaline overload, but he staunchly held on as he kept utilizing his new bloodline talent to be able to withstand the Twilight Energy.

It really looked like the ability did help a bit against discovery. Of course, it was also possible that he was simply so small and insignificant that the snake didn't care about him, though he wouldn't rely on such a flaky theory to survive. He stayed completely still against the mountain wall as he watched the snake move further and further away until it was impossible to discern its head even with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

It was the first time that Zac had managed to spot the true appearance of the impossibly large creature. It had a long snout like an alligator rather than a traditional snake, and it had the teeth to match. Hundreds and hundreds of jagged fangs covered its enormous maw, each one large enough to be considered a mountain on its own. Eight pitch-black pairs of lifeless orbs sat on the two sides of its head, the smallest pair of eyes as large as barn doors.

Its appearance was terrifying enough, but Zac's thoughts were more focused on something curious. There was actually a large rune on the beast's forehead. It wasn't something that had naturally formed on the beast's scale, but rather something that had been inscribed by the looks of it. More importantly, it was actually a rune that Zac actually recognized.

It was the insignia of the Twilight Lord.

He had a few theories about how something like that was possible, but now wasn't the time to worry about the details. Zac didn't dare wait too long, and he actually swam right under the snake's tail after shoving a stack of talismans into a crack in the rocks behind him. He once more took advantage of the cover against the currents that the enormous animal provided, and he reached the next mountain even before the Beast King had completely left the area.

It quickly became clear what the snake was doing as Zac kept moving further and further away from the heart of the mountain range. Every so often another one of the immense pulses spread out and covered the whole area, and a tremendous shockwave erupted within a minute. Zac estimated that it had exposed and disposed of over twenty Beast Kings over the last hour, one more powerful than the next.

Zac felt a sense of dread upon realizing that the area was nowhere near as desolate as he had initially thought while traveling back and forth in search of treasures. It was just that these beasts all hid within the depths of the mountains, perhaps in fear of the big guy that was now hunting them one by one.

Another pulse rippled through the waters, the force of the ability powerful enough to divert the currents themselves. Zac froze in place as he staunchly endured the feeling of his insides getting shifted by the energy wave. It soon passed, and Zac hurriedly squeezed into a nearby crevasse and cracked two Supreme Miasma Crystals as he took out the Void Beast organ.

Five minutes passed, at which point Zac stopped and activated Void Zone once more, and it was just in time as the gargantuan snake passed by just two mountains away in search of its next victim.

It took over almost two hours, and he had been forced to make four stops, but he finally reached his destination; the very edge of the mountain range. Less than half of the mountains in the area were still unscathed by this point, and Zac could only attribute the fact that he was still alive to dumb luck.

The snake hadn't attacked anything closer than that fish he saw killed earlier, which was the only reason he hadn't been turned to mush. Of course, if it came to that he could always jump into a current toward the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but that would only be replacing one certain death with another.

There were limits to everything, even his cheat-like methods, and Zac held no delusions that he would be able to freely travel as far down the Chasm as he wished without any ramifications. For now, the plan was still on, and Zac saw his target far in the distance. There was just the issue of the vast gulf of frantic currents in the way.

He knew it would be perilous to cross this distance even with Void Zone, but there wasn't much he could do about it. The snake was clearly growing more irate by the minute, no doubt because it had failed to recover a single one of the missing treasures. Zac wasn't some expert in hiding his presence, and he'd be discovered by one of the scans sooner or later as the beast tightened its net. After all, he was occasionally forced to turn off his talent to restore his reserves of Void Energy.

Time was of the essence, but Zac didn't immediately set out. Finally, the scanning pulse came, and Zac waited with bated breath until he heard the distant explosion accompanied by a whimpering cry of some unknown Beast King. This was it - he wouldn't get a better opportunity than this.

Zac immediately shot out taking the leap of faith into the unknown, his senses strained to the maximum to avoid the currents too powerful for him to deal with. It felt like he was in the middle of a hurricane, surrounded by rampaging gales. However, something suddenly changed behind him, prompting him to accidentally get viciously swiped by a large rock that was being dragged down toward the depths.

An outcropping in the neighboring mountain suddenly transformed into a humongous octopus that sped off, cutting through the waters in the same direction as Zac. Each one of its eight 100-meter-long tentacles frantically pushed the beast forward, creating a full-fledged storm in its attempt to escape.

Zac's brow's rose when he realized that the Beast King had been planning the exact same thing as he, both of them speeding away from the area the moment the Beast King was occupied on the other side of the mountain range. The octopus had no doubt spotted Zac considering their close proximity, but both minded their own business in their desperation to escape. Zac considered turning back for a moment, but he was already some ways into the waters. He had to keep going.

Things were going even better compared to when he used his Cosmic Vessels before, and Zac saw a glimpse of hope that his plan would actually work. Void Zone dealt with most of the twilight Energy, and he used [**Love's Bond**] in its shield form like a turtle shell to protect most of his body as he pushed himself forward with the help of his legs.

However, an infuriated roar and a sense of overwhelming doom soon dashed his hopes. He still couldn't see it, but he felt how a towering killing intent had locked onto the area, which meant it was just a matter of time before that terrifying maw would catch up. Zac swore as his abyssal eyes turned toward the Beast King swimming next to him, a flame of fear and fury burning in his chest.

This god damn octopus had blown his cover.

Chapter 739: Reciprocity

Clearly, Zac wasn't the only one who held animosity toward the other escapee. The Octopus screeched with a mix of fury and fear, and it made its move before Zac had time to figure out a way to deal with the crisis. It was like space twisted as a tentacle shot toward him, extending far beyond what should be possible. It was just a blink of an eye, but the attack was already upon him.

Zac only had time to readjust his shield and empower it with the Fragment of the Coffin before the vicious swipe slammed into him, throwing him back against the mountain range. Simultaneously, a vast haze of black sludge covered the waters, and it was somehow resistant to the incessant pull of the currents as it hovered in the area like a thick haze.

The fury in Zac's heart turned into a raging conflagration as he glared in the direction of the Beast King. There was no doubt about it; the Octopus wanted to use him as a scapegoat while it escaped. But how could Zac give up without a fight? He activated all the talismans he had left in various spots in the mountain range, hoping that a series of explosions would divert the snake's attention.

Meanwhile, a grey pill flew into Zac's mouth as he set off after the tentacled beast, and the effect was immediate. His muscles swelled and torrential amounts of Miasma started coursing through his body. Just like with all berserking pills he had eaten before, this one came with a surging momentum and battle lust as well, though not to the point of full-on-lunacy like the Rageroot Oak seeds.

Still, the goal of escape grew a bit blurred as Zac's abyssal scanned the area in search of the Octopus, and **[Love's Bond]** changed to its offensive form as forced himself through the obstacle it had left behind. However, the Beast King was in its natural habitat, whereas Zac was not. Even a top-quality

Berserking pill wasn't enough to allow him to catch up to the frantic escape of the octopus, especially considering how the weird cloud of ink it left behind felt like sticky goo that impeded his progress.

Even worse, the enormous snake seemed completely uninterested in investigating the cascading series of eruptions from the talismans and it was fast catching up. Zac couldn't be certain, but judging by how rapidly the towering aura in the distance grew more and more distinct, he had less than half a minute before the beast had caught up. The snake should have been on the other side of the mountain range, but the speed the snake exhibited was far exceeding anything that should appear in this trial.

The situation wasn't looking good, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

A black spike appeared in Zac's hand, and a surge of cursed power immediately coursed through his body as the berserking compound he looted from Faceless #9 activated. It felt like he would explode as the two berserking treasures caused havoc on his body, and his body suddenly disappeared in a puff.

Of course, it wasn't Zac actually exploding, but rather him activating [**Abyssal Phase**]. His mind screamed for speed as he cut through the churning waters, and the additional energy and the battle madness from the berserking pills allowed him to withstand the currents far longer than he would normally.

He didn't care about the damage that was being wrought upon his intangible form, his mind was fast becoming consumed by the hunt, of going ever faster. Suddenly, it was like the already turbid surroundings became even more leaden, almost to the point that time seemed to have stopped altogether. It immediately became easier to navigate around the worst of the currents, and Zac pushed through the restrictive ink and caught up to the fleeing octopus in no time.

It almost looked like it had been frozen in time, but reality quickly caught up when Zac appeared right on top of the octopus' mantle, his eyes burning with madness as [**Verun's Bite**] ripped through the waters. A massive jagged edge

appeared in front of the axe as two streams of mental energy empowered by Dao and madness burrowed into the skill fractal of **[Gorehew]**.

The octopus tried to use a tentacle to swipe Zac off from its body, but two chains dug into flesh as the other two moved to intercept. The jagged edge of Zac's offensive skill slammed into the bulbous mantle, and the defensive measures of the octopus proved utterly incapable of forming any significant defense. A water barrier was ripped apart and the thick sinewy flesh was cut right through by the skill empowered by two Peak Dao Fragments.

Eight tentacles spasmodically flailed about in the air as Zac's axe dug into the innards of the beast, but he still didn't get any surge of energy even after swinging his weapon three times in rapid succession. Zac growled in frustration as he saw flesh rapidly regenerate, the Beast King showing its resilient life force. Zac knew this wasn't the time for a protracted battle, and two new streams of Mental Energy entered his shoulder.

A small sphere appeared between his hands, and Zac unhesitatingly pushed it into the bleeding wounds before he activated **[Abyssal Phase]** with the help of **[Force of the Void]** once more. He had almost run out of energy after restoring his arm and leg a few weeks back, but he recovered just enough to barely form an extremely weak Mark of Creation by this point.

Zac didn't expect the small outburst of pure creation to actually kill the enormous beast, especially seeing how durable it was. But his eyes lit up when he saw how a series of weird transformations took place inside the mantle. The Beast King's thoughts were no doubt in turmoil with the snake bearing down on them, and wild imagination was like fertilizer for the Mark of Creation.

Between the grievous wounds and the Mark of Creation creating havoc, the Octopus was dead in the water, allowing Zac to activate his movement skill once more to create a commanding lead. However, the energy-dense waters were soon too much for Zac even when filled with energy from the berserking treasures, and he was forced to revert to his normal

form. Thankfully, he had managed to create a distance of over two thousand meters by that point, but every hair on his head stood on end as he sensed an extremely powerful consciousness lock onto him.

The thick ink left by the Octopus shuddered and dissipated the next moment as half the horizon was replaced by a maw the size of a mountain. Zac peered into its depths, feeling just as weak as when he had gazed upon the true form of the Collector back then. Thankfully, he only had to gaze at that terrifying scene for an instant before the maw closed around the octopus, turning it into yet another appetizer.

Zac was in no mood to stick around, but his horror only mounted when he realized he was utterly unable to do so. It was like the whole Twilight Chasm had frozen solid. The furious currents were gone, no longer leaving lacerations across his body. It would normally have been a relief, but the terror in Zac's heart only mounted upon finding himself unable to do as well. His arms were flailing and he was expelling huge amounts of Miasma to create momentum, but he didn't move an inch from the terrifying head that grew ever closer.

Thankfully, it didn't look like it was intent on ruthlessly gobbling him up like it did the octopus as the snake stopped a few hundred meters away from Zac. His whole vision was blocked out by the huge snout of the beast, and he felt his heart tighten as the sixteen eyes focused on him.

'DRAUGR' a booming voice echoed out in Zac's mind with enough power to make him puke out a mouthful of ichor.
'WHERE ARE THE FORMATION FLAGS? RETURN THEM, AND YOU CAN LIVE'.

If being stared down by a primordial creature wasn't clue enough, Zac knew he was in deep shit the moment he heard it wanted its items back. Most likely, the array flags had been swallowed by the void with the rest of the treasures of the mountain range. His thoughts whirred, and he tried to see if he could lie his way out of this one. It hadn't ever worked so far, but he didn't have a lot of options at the moment.

“I am Arcaz Black from the Abyssal Shores. I don’t know what you’re speaking of. I was dragged down here just minutes ago because of some sort of earthquake. Help me reach the surface and the Empire will reward you. You are connected to the Twilight Lord, I’m sure he would appreciate gaining another friend among the Draugr,” Zac said with a bow, trying to mask his fear.

‘IF YOU DO NOT HAVE THEM, THEN YOU CAN JUST DIE,’ the earthshattering voice echoed out in Zac’s mind as the beast spat out a wave of destruction that rippled toward him.

“SAVE ME, AND I’LL PROVIDE ANOTHER PIECE OF THE PATTERN!” Zac roared at the top of his lungs, seeing no option but to turn to the only one who could save him right now.

The Beast King only snorted in response, but it froze as the whole chasm rumbled.

The world of darkness was suddenly illuminated by a golden hue as the sea turned into one of lightning. An aura of vast power, far eclipsing that of the snake, descended, and Zac knew his gambit had succeeded. He wasn’t trying to elicit help from The Twilight lord. He was looking for someone more reliable.

The System itself.

‘IMPOSSIBLE!’ the snake screeched, its voice filled with shock and dread.

There was no response to the snake’s cry, but a bolt of lightning entered the wave of destruction rippling toward Zac, causing it to unravel halfway between himself and the Beast King.

Zac felt like he had been slapped by an angry god from the impact, and cracking sounds echoed out through his body as dozens of bones shattered in an instant. The force launched him like a rocket through the waters, completely ignoring the snake’s restrictions. It was almost like he teleported as he slammed into the mountain wall tens of kilometers in the

distance, causing massive cracks to spread out like a spider web for hundreds of meters in each direction.

The world grew blurred as Zac felt yet another set of bones shattering from the collision, but the berserking pills thankfully forcibly stopped him from losing his consciousness. He quickly used two of his healing brands, which at least allowed him to somewhat stabilize his body's gruesome state. The area was still drenched in lightning, and having been thrown away to a greater distance gave Zac a proper vantage of what was going on.

Thousands of golden lightning bolts rained down on the snake, its gargantuan scales cracking one after another from the impact. The area around the oversized beast had turned into a zone of death, and lower beast kings would probably have been turned to ash if they entered. However, Zac couldn't help but worry when he saw that the snake didn't actually get ripped apart from the heavenly punishment.

It fought tooth and nail, and a whirlpool consisting of terrifyingly condensed Twilight Energy had sprung up around it, protecting its body as it forcibly tried to endure the tribulation. Not only that, but Zac saw how nine white peaks suddenly rose from the depths, each of them covered in intricate patterns. Together, they cut through the water like it was nothing, forming an immense formation that released waves and waves of power that surrounded the snake in yet another layer of protection.

The thunderstorm raged with greater and greater intensity, but Zac sensed that the amount of tribulation lightning the System had conjured was limited, prompting him to swear in exasperation. How could the endlessly powerful overlord of the Multiverse lose against an oversized snake? A familiar voice suddenly echoed out in his head, and thankfully not the painfully loud roar of the beast.

[Reciprocity has been achieved and balance is maintained. Beware the Terminus.]

“How is almost killing me and not even dealing with the beast achieving balance?” Zac spat with incredulity, but there was

no response. Zac could feel that the System's presence was already gone, leaving behind only a single prompt.

Reciprocity (Unique, Limited): Surrender a glimpse of Chaos. Reward: - (0/1) [598d]

[NOTE: Failure to comply will result in loss of 10 levels and one random Dao.]

Zac's eyes grew wider and wider as he read the prompt, almost to the point that he forgot the predicament he was in. Losing ten levels wasn't too bad, but the System was actually threatening one of his Daos, the very core of his Path? That was even worse than when it threatened his skills back in the Mystic Realm, and there was clearly no room for negotiation.

The System really wasn't holding anything back when it paid up-front.

Unfair as it may be, Zac knew that there was no meaning to railing against the Heavens. He could only suck it up and be happy he got to live another day. It was just like how Catheya described it. He was bound to be a chess piece until he gained the power to control the board himself.

A tremendous clap of thunder refocused Zac's attention, and he saw how the sea of lightning was condensing, seemingly gathering for one final strike. Meanwhile, the snake's aura was reaching unprecedented heights as the white mountain peaks below it cracked. The peaks crumbled, but as they fell apart the shards of milky stones formed a tremendously large rune, spanning over ten kilometers across.

Looking at the sigil was like looking at the truth of the ocean itself, and it seemed able to even borrow the unending force of the Twilight Ocean itself as the waters started to churn. The terrifying Beast King was clearly going all out in an effort to withstand the thunder punishment. Win or lose, Zac knew he couldn't stay around for the result. His body was already teetering on the brink of collapse, and he wasn't actually that far from the battleground.

Zac looked back and forth in search of a solution, and he saw his chance when he spotted a piece of moss deep within the

crack in the mountain wall. The crack had been caused by him slamming into the wall, but for there to be moss, there had to be a tunnel system even before this area was exposed.

No matter if he climbed up or down the mountain wall, he'd still be exposed to the snake. But if he managed to head deep enough into the side of the Twilight Chasm, he might be safe.

He took a steadying breath and activated [**Abyssal Phase**], and he was immediately beset by the terrifying energies that suffused the area. It wasn't just the Twilight Energy any longer, but also the thunders of the Heavens themselves that had infiltrated the waters, along with the extremely powerful energy that Zac suspected was part of the snake's Dao.

There was no time to lose, so Zac immediately shot into the crack, digging deeper and deeper in a frantic effort to put as much solid rock between himself and the cataclysmic clash outside. Suddenly, the seemingly frozen world of [**Abyssal Phase**] cracked as an apocalyptic explosion erupted far in the distance.

Zac was immediately forced out of his intangible form, but he was ready as dozens of Defensive Talismans activated while the pygmy skeleton appeared in an instant, covering him in barriers while a black haze ensconced him to divert falling rocks. The shockwave ripped through the area, throwing Zac into a wall, his defensive barely able to do anything to lessen the impact.

The world turned din, but a pained wail echoed through the mountain and woke him up. Zac had hoped it would be a final roar of defiance before inevitable death, but there was an unmistakable tone of elation hidden within the pained howl. The snake had survived, though it most likely was a pyrrhic victory.

Zac's whole body screamed in protest, but he forcibly activated his movement skill once more, squeezing even further into the tunnel system at the edge of the twilight chasm. Deeper and deeper he went, until he could go no further. He reverted into his physical form and activated his last healing brand before swapping over to his human form.

He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and he would rather transform himself than suddenly just fall over.

The transformation took just a few seconds, but Zac felt himself on the precipice of the passing out three times over. But he soon gained his human form, and he arduously set off through the tunnels once more, using [**Earthstrider**] to make his way through the sprawling tunnel system. Using the skill the normal way while having [**Void Zone**] active was impossible, so he could only tap into his rapidly dwindling stores of Void Energy to make do.

He felt a few more shockwaves coming from the direction of the snake as he fled for his life, but they grew more and more indistinct until they couldn't be heard at all. Zac no longer had any idea just how far into the bedrock of the chasm he had escaped, but he knew that he couldn't go much further. His vision was already closing in on him, and he looked back and forth until he found a secluded spot.

Zac hadn't seen any creatures making these tunnels their home just yet, but there should be some considering the walls were covered in valuable herbs and the atmosphere was full of energy. His hands were shaking, but he managed to place down a set of isolation and obfuscation arrays before he fell down on the ground, cradling the Void Beast organ.

He was out of better options. He felt his mind slipping, but he needed to keep the [**Void Zone**] active to not get killed by the ambient energy. The talent had been activated while he was unconscious the last time, and he prayed that it would work out this way. Finally, he let the darkness consume him, and he fell into a deep end dreamless slumber.

It might have been a few minutes, or it might have been a few days, but Zac was suddenly startled awake as a prompt appeared in front of his face. He looked at it with bleary eyes, and a wry smile spread across his face as his mind drifted back to sleep, briefly wondering what kind of reaction people would have upon seeing his name on the top of the ladder.

Chapter 740: Dark Horse

“What the hell!” Qirai screamed, her eyes almost bulging out of her head. “Am I seeing things?! Has this cursed ocean finally driven me insane?”

“If it did, then it dragged us all down,” Catheya sighed as she looked at the screen in front of her.

[Monthly Contribution Ladder]

1. **1,401,322 Arcaz Black**
2. **1,108,458 Uona Noz’Valadir**
3. **1,021,453 Ykrodas Havarok**
4. **782,248 Kataron Rissit**
5. **776,338 Haldur**
6. **703,654 Aia Ouro**
7. **694,332 Dravzur Kuldaz**
8. **634,678 Drogrid Rotheart**
9. **598,234 Alduz Venarun**
10. **578,122 Adrokles**

...

1. **378,346 Iana**

Her face was calm, but a storm raged in her heart. Just what had that lunatic done this time? Was it too much to ask for him to stay out of the limelight? No, he had to throw a wrench in the whole trial, getting his name known far and wide. She thought he had learned his lesson after causing all that havoc back in Hollowtongue mountain after they parted, considering he had been quiet for some time.

It turned out he was just amassing momentum for whatever madness he had accomplished. Catheya felt a headache coming on as she tried to figure out what to do from here on out. She might have been able to hide Zac Piker’s identity

before as no one of importance would care for a random trial-taker, but how could she possibly do that now?

Forget her master, even the officials of the Empire might start asking questions about him, especially when this trial was so out of the norm.

It was almost mindboggling the kind of shockwaves Zac Piker managed to create with his limited power. He had plunged the whole Zecia sector into chaos while still in the F-grade, and her master had actually estimated that he was somehow related to the odd spatial ripples that were the hot gossip back before they left. He didn't have any proof, but the timing was too coincidental with the appearance of the Stele of Conflict.

Now he had appeared here, and the trial that had been held for tens of millions of years without much issue had somehow become the preamble of a cataclysmic struggle between three empires from the looks of it. He had once more become the eye of the storm of fate, and Catheya had a creeping suspicion he wasn't done causing trouble.

After all, there was definitely something odd about the location she had found for him. She hadn't managed to get past the restrictions to enter the heart of the volcano, but her nose told her all she needed to know; that place was cursed. Yet that man wanted to go there, proving he was up to no good. The question was what she should do.

Stay clear or ride the storm to the end?

"Some people know his identity," Varo said from the side. "His connection to clan Sharva'Zi is known by a few after the events at the Auction. What should we do?"

Catheya glanced at her follower, his sleeve hanging empty after the amputation, before she looked the window for a whole minute. Finally, she made her decision.

"We'll keep the course. Arcaz Black will be coming our way as soon as he's done with whatever he's up to, and I want to have both locations confirmed so that we can send him on his merry way as quickly as possible," Catheya sighed.

“That guy might be powerful, but he is trouble,” Qirai reminded.

“The fate of our clan is a weak candle in the wind. If something isn’t done it will be snuffed out before long. The Supreme Elder is barely staving off the madness, and I’m sure there are a few neighbors more than willing to push him into an early grave,” Catheya said. “Arcuz Black is like a beacon of providence, his mere existence can change the wheels of fate. How can we give up on it at this stage? Who knows, whatever he’s doing might even be at the behest of my ancestor.”

“Elusive maneuvers?” Varo ventured.

“Exactly,” Catheya nodded as she took out a mask that fused with her face.

It felt like maggots burrowed into her flesh, and soon enough her pristine features had been replaced by a much more squarish face. The mask was gone, and anyone who looked into her eyes would no longer see the abyssal orbs, but rather two icy-pale eyes that emitted a freezing cold.

She wasn’t the only one who changed as large scars started to appear across Qirai’s body. Her teeth fell out the next moment as her jaw grew, replaced with sharp fangs. A long rat tail sprung out next, and her right arm grew almost thirty percent compared to the original. Anyone looking at her right now couldn’t possibly think of her as anything but a Corpse-lord guardian.

As for Varo, he was the last one to worry about. He had not one but three ways to change his appearance, and together they formed a disguise that would fool everyone but the absolute peak scouts.

“I hate this form,” Qirai muttered as she scratched her snout.

“You look very powerful,” Catheya laughed.

“I’ll give that guy a good talking to when he comes back,” Qirai grunted as she started getting used to moving around with a tail.

“Will Mr. Black come back and risk getting discovered?” Varo asked from the side. “Waiting out the trial and staying hidden

seems more appropriate.”

“My intuition tells me he’ll come,” Catheya slowly said. “I think the two spots he’s had us look for are the true reason he entered the Twilight Ocean in the first place. Besides, does that guy seem like someone who would be content with hiding in a cave for another two and a half years?”

Qirai simply snorted in response as Varo slowly nodded in agreement.

“What do you want us to do?” Varo asked.

“We’ll head toward that temporary settlement we heard about before,” Catheya nodded. “We need to expand our charters since I have no idea where to look from here on out. Besides, we might learn what’s actually going on over there. I’m sure that whatever that unlucky star did ruffled some feathers.”

“I wonder what those two hotshots are thinking right now,” Qirai snorted as she startled dismantling the array flags of their hideout. “I bet that princeling and crazy bloodsucker are grinding their teeth right now.”

“He really knows how to keep life interesting,” Catheya laughed.

Uona threw away the emptied husk of the cultivator she had caught before, a surge of pain and humiliation burning in her heart.

Why wouldn’t they regrow?

No matter how much Blood Essence she gathered, her limbs refused to regenerate no matter how many times she activated her bloodline ability. Even wounds left by Hegemons would slowly regrow, but something was wrong this time around. That ball of destruction the Draugr unleashed, was it truly Oblivion? Something like that shouldn’t be possible to wield by an E-grade warrior.

Did Arcaz Black carry one of those seeds? She had heard about warriors getting infected by those fragments that carried the ancient curse, but this wasn’t how it should work. Those warriors never were in control of the seeds, the seeds were in

control of them. Even the powerful could only seal them away, never taking advantage of the energies within.

Was Arcaz Black somehow unique in that sense? Or was it something else?

That ant! Uona grit her teeth as she paced back and forth, her gait only made possible by turning a Blood Servant into a temporary limb. Everything had gone awry because of that encounter. Not only had he stolen her spot, his name sitting on top of her head to remind her of the humiliation. Now, the situation might even affect her family's plans.

Their nascent branch was finally starting to rise, with two Autarchs holding down the fort at home and at the Eternal Court. With a third one, they could send one to the frontlines, becoming a core contributor to the war against those bald bastards. The amount of resources that would bring to their family would be enough to stabilize their foundation as a High-grade branch, and they would be able to slowly work toward the peak from there.

And now she looked like this. The other Chosen already looked down on her because of her lacking heritage, even though almost half of them had worse foundations than she did. What if she came back looking like this? The walls of her submersible cracked as they were blanketed by Uona's fury, but she slowly calmed down as she started considering her next step.

Part of her wanted to leave and have Grandpa Nether heal her wounds, but she couldn't face him like this. She had accomplished most of her tasks, but the most important parts were still left undone. The Blood Effigy would need at least another year to grow. Now with Arcaz Black entering the fray... This was not over. A Pureblood Draugr like that couldn't be completely unknown.

"Where is the closest settlement?" Uona asked as she turned toward her guide.

"Mistress, settlements often spring up around exits, though it is a bit early for that now. However, there should be one settlement a month's travel from our current location called

Glory's Rest. It is a mountain that has been turned into a town over millions of years, its features remaining intact between trials," the blood servant answered with a bow.

Uona nodded in understanding as she slowly tapped her nail against the table. However, she frowned when she saw the blood servant take a hesitant step forward.

"What is it?"

"Mistress, I might know something of importance," the blood servant slowly said as it looked at her wound.

"Oh?" Uona said, not really caring about what a thrall might consider important.

But she still indicated for the blood servant to speak up. He had helped her immensely over the past month, and without his knowledge, she might not even have surpassed Ykrodas on the ladder. It wasn't that the princeling was stronger, but he had brought a whole army to help, the coward.

She even did feel a bit bad about refining this Troker into a blood servant. But the regret only lasted for a fleeting second. How else would she be able to bring him to the depths of the Mystic Realm without him succumbing to the atmosphere? She'd take the thrall back to the clan after this was over, and that alone would more than make up for making him an eternal servant to her clan.

"That terrifying energy in Mistress' wound. I know of a place in the Twilight Ocean where a similar aura can be sensed," Troker hesitated.

"Is there now?" Uona said, a smile spreading across her face.

"Who?! Who the hell is Arcaz Black?!" Ykrodas roared with fury as he smashed a wine glass. "Where did this man come from?!"

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had memorized every single name on the ladder, and this man had not once appeared before.

"He is not mentioned in our or the local missives. He's not even in the whole tournament registry," Orbot said after

scanning his memories. “Either a hidden elite or an outsider with a ticket. Judging by the name, I’d guess undead.”

“Ask around. He’s not necessarily unknown even if he’s not in any missives,” Ykrodas frowned. “His points don’t make any sense either. What do you make of it?”

“According to my estimates, he’s not a threat to your majesty,” Orbot slowly said. “I think this man has one Middle Branch at best. Perhaps even lower.”

“That’s it? He can’t possibly have gained so many points through slaughter,” Ykrodas frowned.

“My best guess is he’s encountered some opportunity. Young Master gained 50,000 Points from ingesting that constitution-augmenting treasure before, and our enemies have harvested quite a few points by destroying nodes. I think this fellow managed to stumble upon some sort of opportunity that unlocked a large section of the tapestry,” the advisor mused.

“Makes sense,” Ykrodas nodded. “He wasn’t even on the ladder before.”

“Your majesty is absolutely right. If anything, this is an opportunity for us,” Orbot added. “That Eternal Clan lass is difficult to deal with, but she seems to have encountered some difficulty considering her points have barely grown since the last tally. As for this Arcaz Black, we just need to kill him. With the bounty on his head, your Majesty can reach the top in one go.”

“Easier said than done,” Ykrodas sighed. “That person could be hiding anywhere, probably inside the chasm itself. Why would he pop his head out at this juncture? He has a good chance at maintaining his lead all through the trial, and will get the third spot at worst.”

“I doubt the Ruthless Heavens would let someone just hide out and claim the rewards,” Orbot said as he slowly tapped the table. “But I do have an idea to move events in our favor.”

“What have you cooked up this time?” Ykrodas smiled, his densely inscribed face turning into a fearsome mask.

“We, unfortunately, don’t have the means to find him as things stand. But I happened to hear that a certain Core Disciple of the Radiant Temple is touring a region a week’s travel away. Someone who is a member of the Constellation Hall,” Orbot said with a pointed look.

“A numerologist?” Ykrodas exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “That would work. But catching those wily bastards is easier said than done.”

“That is absolutely true,” Orbot nodded. “Your Majesty would have to make a move personally on this one I think.”

“That’s fine by me. I didn’t know Constellation Hall was mixed up in this mess. No wonder we’ve had so much trouble completing our tasks.”

“We’re alone in this struggle,” Orbot nodded with a sigh. “Both the temple and the unliving want the ascension to proceed. The temple even seems to have an agreement with the target. Perhaps he’s planning on joining them for sanctuary after this is over with, taking the mantle of another Grand Deacon.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. “It would disrupt the balance.”

“An agent then, a rogue Autarch causing chaos among the temple’s enemies, while staying clear of their domains,” Orbot said. “Might be even more useful than a proper member.”

Ykrodas grunted in agreement. That man had caused so much trouble while still a Monarch, and he didn’t seem to have any compunctions about slaughtering the weak. Just how much Havarok blood would flow through the sector if that lunatic had his way?

“Completing the task is ultimately more important than my ranking,” Ykrodas said. “How is the progress of the seals?”

“Should be just about finished,” Orbot nodded.

“Let’s take a look,” Ykrodas said, and the two ventured down into the catacombs beneath the settlement.

Down below a massive hall stretched out, with almost five hundred warriors sitting in orderly lines. Surrounding them were fifty array masters, all of them continuously forming sigils as they chanted in unison. The ground was covered with runes, and new ones joined them every second as they crawled toward the warriors.

The runes then climbed up on the warriors' bodies, joining thousands just like it. Ykrodas knew from experience that the process was extremely painful, but the warriors didn't as much as move a muscle as they were being engraved. Ykrodas truthfully didn't know if these people could feel pain any longer. Feel anything, for that matter.

"Sacrificial beacons. Not living, not dead," Orbot said as he looked down at the native deathsworn with a complex gaze.

"This is their conviction. Steeled warriors willing to become swords aimed at those who threaten their homeland," Ykrodas aid, his eyes looking across the hall. "We'd be lucky to have such warriors in our ranks. Have the others send them out the moment the process is finished. Let's go find that numerologist."

Alvod looked at the rippling tapestry that stretched across the horizon, a frown marring his face. Why was joy so often marred with sorrow? Had he pushed the boundaries too far, to the point that the Ruthless Heavens finally sent a warning? He knew that meddling with a trial was to mess with the core commandments of the System, and there were bound to be repercussions if he overplayed his hand.

However, his brows slowly relaxed as the tapestry calmed down, the pressure of the Heavens slowly lessening. Left behind was a more complete tapestry, like a stubborn imperfection that had finally been smoothed out. But something had obviously changed, and not for the better.

His eyes turned to one of the three whirlpools far beneath his position, and he could feel how the flow had become far too disorderly to properly make use of. If things stayed like this it would become far more inconvenient to harvest that power when the Heavens truly came crashing down. He sent a mental

command to his sentinel, but his brows rose in shock when he couldn't get a response.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together. What had Thram done to draw the ire of the System? She should be safe from any restraints, considering she was a native Alvod had raised and nurtured for 30,000 years. She also knew better than to mess with the funneling array, especially this close to the fruition of the plans.

Someone must have managed to figure out a way to mess with his array, even when it was placed in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. Anger once more burned in his chest as he pictured the face of the Havarok Emperor. It had to be them. No one else should want to destroy that particular array.

His eyes turned to the chalice, and he grit his teeth as he extracted nine drops, before quickly infusing them into nine flags. The flags flew out in an instant, each taking a specific position in front of the tapestry. Alvod's aura exploded as his world projection emerged, a world of endless tides that crashed against the flags.

As the tide rose and fell, a few small engravings, each looking like something left behind by the birth of the universe itself, were added to the nine flags. It was the Primal Dao being slowly transformed into the core of the array.

Nine drops and a lot of effort would delay him for half a year. Fury smoldered in Alvod's chest, but he didn't let it affect his concentration as he slowly recreated the flags that had been lost. With each crashing of the tides, he felt how his enemies gained another day to complete their schemes. As the tides receded, his eyes turned to the chalice, now looking far more unfilled compared to earlier.

But this was ultimately just another bump in his path. He had survived far worse. Tram should wake up soon enough, and he would get the whole story then. Alvod's scowl eventually started to ease up as the confident smile once more spread across his face.

If anyone knew how to bide their time before exacting overwhelming revenge, it was him.

Chapter 741: Gathering Strength

Zac eventually woke up from his comatose state, and his eyes feeling like they were full of gravel as every part of his body hurt. He swallowed another Healing Pill with a grimace as he stowed away the Void Beast organ. It looked shriveled like an oversized raisin compared to when he bought it, and Zac guessed that it had lost more than eighty percent of its remaining energy while he was unconscious.

Part of it was probably because of him absorbing some of it while unconscious, but most had most likely been eroded by the extremely dense ambient energy in the tunnels. It was a bit of a blow, but not the end of the world. Some of the energy that entered [Void Heart] was always turned into Void Energy. Certainly, it wasn't nearly as efficient as absorbing the energy from the Void Heart, but it was enough as long as he didn't constantly use it.

The tunnels were completely silent, and there were no immediate threats. So Zac didn't immediately set out, instead opting to go over the situation. First of all, he opened his quest screen since he didn't get a proper chance to go over things before.

Reciprocity (Unique, Limited): Surrender a glimpse of Chaos. Reward: - (0/1) [590d]

[NOTE: Failure to comply will result in loss of 10 levels and one random Dao.]

Eight days.

He had been unconscious eight days after almost becoming a treat for the enormous snake. Even then, his body was in a pretty wretched state. That wasn't to say there hadn't been any gains from the ordeal. First of all, he had gained another huge

chunk of Contribution Points, further cementing his lead on the ladder.

He had no idea what the source of the points was though. Just maiming the octopus wasn't enough. Zac's thoughts turned to those mysterious mountains that had risen from the depths of the chasm to assist the enormous snake, and he felt it might be connected to them. They had clearly contained a lot of mysterious energy, and they had in a way been destroyed because of his actions.

Another gain was that he had actually managed to push **[Abyssal Phase]** from middle to high mastery. Being chased by a primordial beast was clearly an effective method to squeeze out one's potential, though Zac definitely wouldn't try something like that again.

With the Void Beast organ being mostly depleted, Zac instead opted to crush a Supreme Nexus Crystal as he started using **[Surging Vitality]**. Progress was slow, and he sighed in regret that he hadn't upgraded the skill along with class skills back in the Greengrove Archipelago.

The slow recuperation at least gave him some time to reorient himself and plan his next step. The situation was pretty complicated before, and things had only gotten even more convoluted after he managed to mess with the Twilight Lord. With his ladder position being exposed to the world, he was probably not only the target of Uona, but also the other top rankers.

Zac wasn't as worried about them as he was about the Twilight Lord though. It didn't take a genius to realize that the elusive master of the Twilight Harbor was mixed up with the odd events in this trial, and the formation flags that Zac had destroyed might have been integral to his plans. After all, they were not only planted so deep in the chasm that no trial-taker could mess with them, but they even had that terrifying guardian beast.

Not only that, but Zac had been forced into making a deal with the System, and he knew the odds of coming out on top in such an endeavor pretty slim. Certainly, Zac didn't need some

quest to tell him to get the two remnants. He had already planned to do so as soon as he got out of the Twilight Chasm.

But it had only been an opportunity to become stronger before. If it didn't work out, then fine, but now he once more found himself with his back against the wall. Before, it was still possible for him to sneak out through one of the exits if things proved too volatile on the surface, but that was out of the question with the looming punishment.

There was also the issue of the Glimpse of Chaos. While he had planned on snatching the two remnants, he hadn't planned on using them to conjure another one of those Chaos Patterns. Not only had it messed with his pathways last time, just gazing on it had almost destroyed his soul.

Besides, the scene was extremely attention-grabbing. Last time he'd at least been inside the Tower of Eternity where not even an Autarch could spy on him, but if he unleashed a Chaos Pattern in this place, there was a good chance someone would notice, and possibly even record the events.

There wasn't much to do about it though, since he simply refused to lose one of his Daos. Seeing as it was a punishment from the System, Zac doubted he'd be able to simply "regrow" the Dao with some treasures in case it was taken from him. The question was how to complete the mission without getting himself killed or his real identity exposed.

Luckily, the System wouldn't send the repo man for his Dao Fragment just yet. He had almost two years before the time limit, and he was already planning on being long gone from this place by then. It also gave him some wiggle-room to prepare himself for what waited on the surface.

There was no reason to leave the Twilight Chasm just yet. His scheduled rendezvous with Catheya was more than half a year away, and he was better off using that time to empower himself than setting out as is. Forming a Dao Branch was his best option to gain an edge against the top contestants of the trial, but he knew that goal was all but impossible right now.

Just a few months had passed since evolving all three of his Fragments, and he was severely lacking the foundation to

immediately push toward a branch. It was one thing if he was planning to fuse his Daos, but this time he was aiming for evolutions. That meant he would have to essentially double his insights in one go.

That didn't mean he was out of options. There was still his soul, and he was thankfully ensconced in the perfect place to improve it. Doing so would bring all kinds of benefits, the most important of which was the ability to better withstand the Remnants. He wasn't too worried if it was just the one set, but he had no idea what would happen when with multiple sets in his body.

The only point of reference he had was the peak E-grade cultivator who caused the downfall of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the hunt. He had absorbed two Splinters of Oblivion and had subsequently been reduced to an extremely powerful lunatic. In contrast, Anzonil's disciple had been able to withstand the madness for almost a decade after having absorbed one set.

The difference was remarkable, but there were too many variables involved to draw any clear conclusions. But it was clear that the effect of the remnants increased the more of them you swallowed. Anything he could do to better deal with such a situation was of utmost importance. Besides, the stronger his soul became, the better he would be able to utilize his Dao in battle.

His crude Dao Braids were extremely powerful, but it was a crutch that he needed to be in an excitable state like when he fought the Octopus for the braids to form fast enough. Another reincarnation would hopefully shore up that weakness, allowing him to freely use Dao Braids in battle.

Having decided on his course, Zac spent the next five days slowly getting back into shape, mixed with running his Soul Cultivation arrays to stave off the Twilight Energy. Resetting his bones wasn't too hard with his constitution, but there were quite a bit of the foreign energies stubbornly left in his body after his frantic escape, mostly the Dao from the snake.

The [**Purity of the Void**]-node was working hard at expelling it, but there was simply a difference of level between the two, making progress slow. Still, most of the damage from the two berserking treasures was dealt with while he was unconscious, and he had regained most of his fighting strength by now.

Completely recovering would take a bit longer, but he had already wasted over two weeks. He could technically stay here and cultivate, but it would cost unnecessary resources. Gaining [**Void Zone**] had allowed him to stay further down than he would before, but there was not much of a point doing so. The Twilight Energy was essentially poison even to him, and exposing himself to more than he had to was just foolish, especially now that he had lost his source of Void Energy.

Besides, he was too close for comfort to the area where he had encountered the snake. In a perfect world, he'd want to set off to a completely different section of the Twilight Chasm, but he'd settle for putting a few day's worths of travel between himself and this place, in case it decided to come knocking after recovering.

Before leaving Zac first doused himself in a healthy amount of a grey mixture. It made him look like he had rolled around in a pile of ash, but it was something far more expensive. It was a compound that helped weaken any potential karmic threads, a more potent version of what he had gotten from Catheya back in the Tower of Eternity.

He hadn't planned on using the compound until just before leaving the Twilight Ocean, but an extra application seemed pertinent after meeting the Twilight Lord's guardian. The mixture gradually dried across his body until it looked like pieces of clay that fell off one by one. Only then was he ready to leave the area.

The tunnel system he found himself in was just one confusing maze, and having run through them in a muddled state didn't make things any better. He simply kept going further into the mountain, away from where he came, occasionally changing paths into one that seemed to lead toward the surface. All the while he kept his [**Void Zone**] going, since traveling without it keeping the Twilight Energy at bay was extremely slow. It

forced him to occasionally top up from his already dwindling reserves of Void Energy, but time was of the essence.

The area was just like the tunnels below the Living Pulse. Some of the sections were submerged, whereas others were kept dry thanks to a number of Spiritual Herbs producing gases. And it wasn't always oxygen as Zac found out. He suddenly stumbled, his vision swimming as he breathed a sweet aroma.

His eyes widened, and he quickly swallowed an Antidote Pill before he dove into the waters of a nearby tunnel.

It was just in time as well as two previously lifeless roots barely missed snatching him up, moving with enough speed to cause small cracks in the air. Missing once wasn't enough to deter them though, and they dove into the tunnel after Zac. His mind was a bit muddled by the noxious mists, but not even Poison Masters would have as many points in Vitality as he did.

Coupled with his hidden node and the Antidote pill, he was almost instantly back in fighting condition, and **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the roots as he made his way back into the poisonous tunnel. The source of the poison became apparent soon enough – there were actually a number of small flowers on the very roots that had tried to snatch him up.

The perpetrator was actually not even in the tunnel itself, and Zac followed a series of increasingly frantic roots hundreds of meters into a nearby tunnel where a massive tangled mess of a plant commanded most of the free space. It was a twenty-meter-tall ball of squirming roots, and it had appendages that stretched into over a dozen pathways.

Zac wasn't sure if it had planted itself on an intersection, or if it had actually dug the paths itself, but this was no time to worry about that as over fifty poisonous vines and roots shot out toward him. The power of the plant seemed to be equivalent of a bottom-rung Beast King, but Zac wasn't too worried. He was currently in his human form, and his class was almost tailor-made for this type of enemy.

The large cave was soon filled with another source of verdure; the spectral forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. Zac's already sharp senses from [**Forester's Constitution**] were immediately supercharged, and he wove back and forth between the roots as large blades formed like leaves slashed into the frenzied leaves.

It was nature versus nature in a ruthless conquest for supremacy. Even in Zac's weakened state, the roots and vines simply had no way to reach him as [**Verun's Bite**] wove a tapestry of death around him. However, the poisonous mists were growing increasingly dense, to the point that even he was starting to have trouble dealing with it.

Out of better options, Zac quickly threw out five talismans which erupted into a conflagration of white-hot flames that consumed the whole cave. However, the flames didn't linger, but rather consumed the whole place before disappearing like a flash. The tangle was pretty much unscathed by the flames, but most of the toxic pollen was gone, incinerated by the offensive talismans.

Zac took the opportunity and started pushing toward the core of the plant. He had already cut enough roots to make a year's worth of firewood, yet they just kept coming. Just like a Beast King, a plant of this grade contained an immense amount of energy, and it would most likely be able to keep conjuring more roots long after Zac had exhausted himself. He needed to strike at its core.

His finishing skills would probably be able to take the thing out in one quick go, but Zac felt it was a waste. This was a proper D-grade Spiritual Herb, and some part of it was bound to be useful or valuable. Completely shredding the plant was too much of a waste, and Zac instead waded into the depths of the tangle.

A frantic struggle ensued between Zac and the spirit herb. One minute later the roots started to wildly shudder before they lifelessly slumped down on the ground. Zac crawled out of the tangled mess a little bit later, an odd seed-like item in his hand.

It was around thirty centimeters across, and it was once the source of all the roots. There was a large crack across its surface, left after Zac had slammed his axe into it. It had released a lot of the stored energy, but Zac simply found no other way to “kill” the thing. He put the core in a jade box before stowing it away, quickly leaving in case some more powerful beast or plant was attracted by the noise.

Zac kept a slow pace over the next few days, taking the time to clean out the tunnels of anything of value. There was quite a bit of wildlife in the tunnels as well, most various types of insects at the peak of E-grade. He did meet two Beast Kings as well, but he was only forced to fight one, with the other one refusing to leave its nest. The latter one got to live, with the former was cleaved in two by [**Raptorous Divide**].

He did gain a few thousand contribution points through his efforts, but none of the treasures he found appeared as valuable as the things he had looted on the mountain peaks further down in the depths. Still, he had found quite a few herbs that would most likely raise some eyebrows in Twilight Harbor, many of which weren't even listed in his information missives.

More impressively, he had actually stumbled upon a vast submerged cave where almost four thousand Twilight Plants grew. He unhesitantly harvested every single fruit, increasing his store tenfold. He had already given up on the Fate Plucking-ladder, but these things were still pretty useful even outside of the competition.

The ambient energy in the tunnels was gradually decreasing, but it was still far too powerful to deal with without using [**Void Zone**] while traveling, and the organ was fast running dry. He had initially wanted to travel for a while longer, but it was time to start looking for a good spot to cultivate. As long as he stopped, he would be able to withstand the Twilight Energy easier while stationary, since he could simply crush Nexus Crystals then.

But for some reason, the ambient energy was actually increasing rather than decreasing, even though he kept ascending through the tunnels. The reason soon became

apparent as he spotted a crude golden-green crystal embedded in the tunnel wall. He had actually stumbled upon a Twilight Crystal Vein.

Most people would be pretty happy to find money growing out of the walls, but Zac swore in annoyance as he increased his pace, flashing through the tunnels in hopes of making it through the energy-dense area as soon as possible. However, he suddenly stopped after thirty minutes as he spotted something curious; a small crack in the wall.

The crack itself wasn't very interesting, but it was rather the fact that Twilight Energy was continuously being dragged into the small opening that was interesting. Was the density lower on the other side of this wall? Zac immediately swapped over to his Draugr form, and he activated [**Abyssal Phase**] and shot in. The wall actually hundreds of meters thick, but he shot through it in a second.

He returned to his physical form the moment the area opened up, and his eyes widened when he looked at the brightly illuminated chamber he found himself in. The walls were completely covered in Twilight Crystals, every single one of them of supreme grade and at least as large as a football. There were tens of thousands of them too, a fortune for most E-grade cultivators.

Yet, the ambient energy was far lower in this chamber compared to outside, and it was all because of a massive crystal in the middle of the room. It was as large as Zac was and covered in esoteric markings that seemed to have formed naturally. More importantly, it continuously absorbed the energy that the Supreme Twilight Crystals exuded, causing a rapid drop in the invasive ambient energy.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what he was looking at, he knew two things for sure. First of all, that thing was a treasure, something even greater than the items he had looted on the mountain peaks.

Secondly, he had found the perfect cultivation cave.

Chapter 742: Mind's Eye

The humongous crystal was like an emperor among its subjects, but it wasn't hard to see that it wasn't actually a Twilight Crystal. It looked more like an oversized tiger's eye gemstone or an agate if anything. He didn't immediately approach, but he first scoured his information packages to find something similar.

Eventually, he found something promising, though he looked up at the man-sized gem with some hesitation. There was a rare gemstone called **[Mind's Eye Agate]** that looked similar and could sometimes appear in energy-dense crystal mines. However, the examples he saw in the missive were no larger than his pinky, and they didn't have the markings of the humongous stone in front of him.

The normal agates were popular additions to jewelry or prayer mats as they emitted a weak aura that could help calm one's mind just like spiritual incense. This thing was obviously doing something similar as well, but on a far greater scale. It gobbled up the ambient energy and in turn exuded an aura that covered half the cave.

Seeing as his danger sense was completely quiet, Zac slowly went inside the field to test its effect. He was instantly filled with a sense of calm and stability, and he could feel how his mental energy was rapidly being restored. It felt like he had crushed a dozen Soul Crystal going by how quickly his mind was recovered, and it was absolutely perfect for his goal, so Zac started to set up array after array to prepare the area.

This chamber would become his cultivation cave for the foreseeable future, and he needed to protect the area. First came the defensive arrays at the heart of the cave, followed by observation arrays keeping watch in miles and miles of tunnels, mainly in the direction of the Chasm and the surface. Finally, he took out some furniture and placed them at the

edge of the cave before placing his prayer mat right in front of the marvelous gem.

The final set-up might not be as tailor-made for his needs as his cultivation cave back on Earth, but it more than made up for it in the raw energies available. Even with the mutated **[Mind's Eye Agate]** sucking up half of the Twilight Energy, the ambient energy left behind was far higher than anywhere on Earth, including on Port Atwood.

It was actually to the point that his body couldn't completely deal with it, with more and more Twilight Energy gradually filling his body the moment he deactivated **[Void Zone]**. However, the effect was nowhere near what he was forced to endure while climbing the mountain peaks just a few weeks ago, and cracking a Supreme Nexus Crystal allowed him to be shielded from the ambient energy for almost two minutes.

With **[Void Heart]** constantly absorbing the invasive energies, his stockpile of Void Energy was gradually getting restored as well, though it took almost a day for his reserves to be completely topped off. In either case, he had more than enough crystals to last him up to two years, and he would even be able to recoup the loss by looting the chamber upon exiting.

Seeing as everything was set up, Zac took out the intricate Array Disk and started up his soul cultivation once more. This time he wasn't just cultivating to protect himself from the environment, so he did everything he could to make the process as efficient as possible. That meant cultivating opposing alignments, with his Draugr side absorbing life, and his human side absorbing death.

Furthermore, he started to empower the cycles with his Daos to increase the effect. A stream of pure Dao entered the small array disk along with the flood of Mental Energy, and Zac instantly felt a sense of weakness. The drain was ten times that of infusing the array before the first reincarnation, and small beads of sweat started to run down his head just as he completed the first circle.

The gains were just as powerful as during the first reincarnation though, and a storm of death entered the black

ocean, to the point that his whole Soul Aperture shuddered a bit from the sudden and rapid infusion of Mental Energy. He still wasn't at his limit, and he infused the second circuit with his Dao as well, followed by the third.

However, Zac wasn't certain he'd be able to complete all 9 revolutions if he kept going this way, and from the fourth revolution onward, he cultivated the normal way. The hours passed, and by the time the ninth revolution had finished, Zac was barely able to restrain the deathly ocean in his mind. He actually needed to use a decent amount of his mental energy from just keeping his Soul Aperture from going out of control, and he quickly started to cultivate the second set of revolutions to restore balance.

The hours passed as one cycle replaced the previous, and the depths of death were gradually being countered by the peaks of life. The ninth revolution finished and the two opposing concepts reached equilibrium. However, balance didn't mean harmony. An unprecedented storm erupted in his mind, with the core of his soul being constantly pelted by the raging waves.

Zac grimaced as his vision blurred from a soul-rending pain, but he grit his teeth and endured. It looked like infusing three revolutions from the get-go was overdoing it a bit. Truthfully, he had only managed to push himself that far thanks to the aura of the large gemstone in front of him, but he had faith in the resilience of his soul.

Besides, he had something prepared for a situation like this.

The storm continued for almost an hour, at which point small hairline cracks covered the surface of the pristine core in the heart of his soul. It was rather the effect of overextending oneself than actual wounds, but Zac still ate a soul-mending pill as he took out a stalk of shimmering grass. It came from the small patch he had discovered on the mountain peak the other day, and his soul screamed with hunger as the stalk gave off an enticing aroma.

Zac looked at the 80-centimeter stalk for a second before he shrugged and crammed it into his mouth. Taking a Spiritual

Herb like this was wasteful at best, and suicidal at worst. Many herbs contained dangerous and chaotic energies that interfered with the medicinal efficacy you wanted, or even contained poisons that required refinement to get rid of.

However, it wasn't like Zac had an Alchemist hiding in his sleeves, and his Hidden Nodes were more than able to deal with chaotic energy and poisons alike. Besides, Zac believed that his Danger Sense would warn him if the stalk was actually deadly. Thankfully, the stalk contained such pure energy that it could almost be considered a natural treasure, and Zac soon felt a soothing stream entering his Soul Aperture.

It was like a warm gust from spring swept the gloom of winter away, and a haze of radiant green light spread across the waters of his mind. The radiant sphere at the heart of his soul was like a sun-parched desert, and it greedily swallowed the light, prompting the hairline cracks to rapidly close up as impurities were expelled.

His Soul Core was like an insatiable vortex as more and more energy was absorbed, until things finally calmed down. And Zac had to say, the result was tremendous, with his soul having gained at least 5% strength from one session. Some of it came from the cultivation method itself, whereas a little bit was added by the soothing aura of the **[Mind's Eye Agate]**.

But the star of the show was obviously the unnamed stalk of spiritual grass he had eaten.

It was just a stalk, yet it had improved his soul more than a couple of weeks of running his Soul Strengthening Array would. Zac gave it a thought before he took out another one, but the effect was far worse the second time around. The energy entered his Mental Aperture just the same, but it almost looked like his Soul Core was satiated.

Most of the emerald haze was instead swallowed by **[Spiritual Void]** replenishing the stores he had expended when attacking the Octopus in his frenzy. Zac wanted to just keep going, but there was not much he could do for his soul now that the revolution had finished. There was another thing he could do

though, and a massive bone thumped down on the ground, its weight enough to make the whole cavern shudder.

It was the treasure bone that he had found stuck between two rocks the other day, and Verun keened with hunger as Zac took out the axe from his Spatial Ring. A series of incessant roars echoed out in Zac's mind, and he smiled as he swung the weapon straight into the bone, deeply embedding the edge into the marrow.

A joyful roar followed those filled with hunger, and while Zac couldn't see anything with naked eyes, he could sense that the Spirit Tool had already started extracting the essence from the bone. As for how long it would take, Zac had no idea. It had taken it weeks to absorb the dragon's blood, and Zac guessed this bone came from some powerful Beast King to survive in the harsh environment of the Twilight Chasm.

Zac followed the transformation as he recuperated from the Soul Strengthening cultivation, occasionally crushing a crystal while occasionally feeding **[Love's Bond]** a Twilight Fruit. Twelve hours passed, at which point Zac started up his cultivation session again. This turned into a daily routine, and three weeks eventually in this manner.

In those weeks he had made some discoveries. It turned out that the spirit grass was reusable, but only once every five days or so. If he ate them any quicker, he would waste a lot of its efficacy. Meanwhile, the agate was seemingly inexhaustible, constantly releasing its aura. Zac couldn't wait to place that thing in the middle of his cultivation cave back home, perfecting it even further.

The Zac before integration would have been bored out of his mind after just sitting around for weeks on end, but making gradual improvements to one's cultivation was pretty addictive, to the point that Zac doubted he ever would tire of the feeling. Besides, he had something else to look forward to, and it was finally time as crackling sounds suddenly echoed throughout the cave.

Zac curiously walked over after finishing his cultivation session, and he noticed that large cracks covered the surface of

the sturdy treasure bone. He gripped the hilt of **[Verun's Bite]** and he exclaimed in surprise over the weightlessness as he lifted weapon and bone alike.

The treasure bone had weighed as much as a tank before, but Zac guessed that it only weighed something like fifty kilos now that its essence had been completely extracted. A powerful roar echoed out through the cave, and Zac smiled as he took out a couple of bottles. Whole rivers of blood were poured out as Zac uncorked the stoppers, but the Spirit Tool swallowed it all to the last drop.

Some of the blood was collected by himself during the trial, but most of it was actually purchased in Twilight Harbor. **[Verun's Bite]** wasn't unique in desiring high-grade blood, and it was useful in everything from cooking to pill making. With the world disks of the Harbor holding whole ecosystems including millions of Beast Kings, there was no lack of supply of blood, to the point it was even cheaper than Beast Cores.

Soon enough a sanguine crystal had been formed, with the beastcrafted axe suspended in the middle. Zac grinned from ear to ear as he carried the large crystal to another spot beneath the agate, in case its aura could help Verun finish its transformation quicker. It had been a while since the axe had evolved last, but that bone alone had been enough to actually push it toward becoming a High E-Grade Spirit Tool.

The evolution probably wouldn't bring any great increase in power since it wasn't a fundamental evolution like becoming a D-grade Spirit Tool. But another ability would be unlocked, which might prove useful in the future.

Seeing that his weapon was moving forward, Zac felt it was about time he did the same himself. His body was back to tip-top shape, and the foreign energies were mostly expelled. There might be some of it lingering in various nooks and crannies of his body, but if it was, then it was too fine for **[Spiritual Anchor]** to spot it.

In either case, he felt ready to finally test something he had been waiting on for so long; the efficacy of the **[Stone of Hope]**.

He had long been at the precipice of gaining a level since using the pills back in the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he took out a Beast Core with anticipation. A storm of wild energies entered his hand as he started to absorb the stored energies. **[Void Heart]** instantly woke up, each beat of the node creating an intractable suction as more and more energy was dragged inside.

The process continued for ten minutes, at which point the hidden node was satiated. It wouldn't take long for **[Void Heart]** to refine this type of energy, so Zac quickly stowed away the core as he steadied his mind. Next, the small vial containing the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** appeared in his hand.

Zac quickly swallowed the pill that emitted a pungent odor, and he grimaced as he felt a sickly and murky gunk spread through his body, covering his nodes and pathways in what almost felt like spiritual excrement. However, he did feel that the tightness of the nodes loosening a bit, and it was just in time.

A surge of pure energy was expelled by the hidden node in his heart. Normally, Zac would expel this energy, but this time he immediately seized control of it as he pushed it toward his midriff. The next node was located on the side a bit lower than his navel, and if the explosion was too bad, it would mean a whole lot of intestines getting destroyed.

More importantly, quite a few of his pathways intersected in that area since the cultivator's core would eventually be placed beneath his navel. A node exploding there would leave him severely weakened for months, which was why it was so important for him that his two prepared methods worked.

The node was already right at the precipice, and the surge of energy was more than enough to blast the node wide open. A sense of trepidation filled his heart as he sensed the familiar signs of the node being about to explode. This kind of pain was something that stayed with you like a mental scar, and he remembered those days in the sickbed back in Port Atwood as clear as day.

However, he suddenly felt reality shift, like he had stepped into a dream. The gems embedded in the walls around him emitted a fuzzy luster, and sounds had become muted as his perception had been turned down. Zac looked down at his hands, worried for a second that the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** had hallucinogenic effects, but he immediately realized what was going on.

It was the **[Stone of Hope]** that hung from its neck.

Previously, the inlaid gemstone in the necklace had been completely inert, but it was currently emitting a strong white light that clearly had a tremendous effect on its surroundings. Zac didn't have time to enjoy the state he was in though as the changes in his body still kept going.

An explosion erupted, and Zac was beset by a soul-wrenching pain as flesh and ichor flew across the area. However, both the explosion and the subsequent agony were somehow muted, like an eruption taking place underwater. His surroundings suddenly shifted once more as the **[Stone of Hope]** shut itself off, leaving some of the agony behind in that dreamscape it had wrought.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he activated the three healing brands on his back one by one, each one generating a surge of vitality that helped patch up the flesh wound on his side. Physical wounds weren't really an issue, especially when there was no foreign Dao or other energy causing trouble in the wound. Spiritual wounds were far trickier to deal with though, and Zac quickly turned his sight inward to check up on the aftermath.

It only took a few seconds to realize that the result was even better than he had hoped. The unique treasure had reduced the foundational damage by more than half in one go, which was the difference between being bedridden and just grievously wounded. His pathways were still a mess, but the damage to his foundation wasn't nearly as bad as before.

The **[Chainbreaking Pill]** and his necklace had worked perfectly together. The pill had weakened the structural walls so that the eruption wasn't as bad. Normally, bursting a node

was like filling a gas canister with too much gas, eventually resulting in a tremendous explosion. With the **[Chainbreaking Pill]**, it was more like a balloon being filled with too much air.

The explosion was still there, but not nearly as dangerous. It was harder to understand what the **[Stone of Hope]** had done when it illuminated the cave with the ethereal light. The most similar experience he could remember was when he fought the Karmic Cultivator back in the Tower of Eternity.

It was almost like the stone had conjured a dream-version of himself, and it was this alternate reality Zac that bore the brunt of the damage. He had no idea what kind of magic or Dao made something like that possible, but he wouldn't question it as long as it worked. Judging by the state of his body, a few weeks to a month of rest and he should be fine.

He would be hard-pressed to exhibit even a third of his combat strength in his current state, but it was far better than spending months in a sickbed too weak to even lift a finger. With this pace, he might even reach the late stage of E-grade before leaving his seclusion.

Having completed the task, Zac immediately activated his **[Void Zone]** ability, getting a reprieve from the Twilight Energy as his body started to expel the gunk from the **[Chainbreaking Pill]**. A lot of the impurities had actually been expelled the moment his insides were plastered across the floor, but even more remained like a murky film over his pathways.

The thing was perhaps even worse than Catheya explained, a ball of condensed toxins that essentially poisoned you to make it easier to break through. The left-over gunk didn't really weaken him, but Zac still found that the compounds were extremely hard to remove, even with his **[Purity of the Void]**. It almost felt like his pathways were covered in rust or something, and he understood why no one would use something like this unless absolutely necessary.

Removing these toxins would probably waste more time than they would save for cultivators, and it would probably cost a lot of money as well. Most people would be forced to sit in

purification arrays or medicinal baths designed to extract impurities. Even then, it would probably be difficult to remove all the impurities, which would cause all kinds of troubles down the line. Only a desperate mortal would eat something like this.

In either case, Zac had found a method that would at least work during the middle stages of the E-grade. With that, his days turned into a blur with half of it being dedicated to his soul and the other half to expelling toxins and preparing for the next breakthrough.

Soon, days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months, and Zac almost forgot about all the pressing issues of the outside world.

Chapter 743: Catching Up

Emily's brows were furrowed from a mix of worry and hesitation as she hurried toward the Dao Repository. Something was going on, and not just with the emergency meeting the Stargazer had called. Something was different with the atmosphere in Port Atwood since she had returned from the Tower of Eternity.

It wasn't just the seemingly endless amount of resources that had appeared out of nowhere just before she left. They were sent back by Zac according to Joanna, and it wasn't out of the norm for him to do things like that. Her own care package had allowed her to even match the performance of Thea Marshall even though her class wasn't purely combat-oriented.

There were some odd undercurrents, weird glances like some core members of Port Atwood were keeping something from her. Were people already starting to get restless from Zac's absence? That definitely spelled trouble. After all, it was still a few years until Zac could be expected to return at the earliest.

And she knew that she wasn't strong enough to protect Zac's interests on her own in case some people had started to eye the vast fortunes of Port Atwood. No matter if it were those aliens from the lab or the demons, her level 87 cultivation wasn't enough to stop either of them. If a rebellion really was brewing, they might be in for a rough one.

Thankfully, there were the Valkyries, and Emily smiled when she saw Joanna waiting outside the gates of the Towers of Myriad Dao.

"You're here," Joanna smiled.

"Were you waiting for me?" Emily asked with confusion.

"Well, you know how that guy is. Standing on the steps until the meeting starts is preferable to getting berated," Joanna

helplessly shrugged.

“He gets nicer if you visit more often,” Emily giggled as the two walked inside, where the conference table was already set up between the towering statues.

“Well, we might need his assistance this time around, so please help keep him happy,” Joanna whispered.

“Just what’s going on?” Emily asked with a low volume as they entered the halls, a bit surprised to see the old Monkeyman and the gem turtle present as well.

Perhaps she had let her thoughts run wild. If these people were present, the meeting wasn’t related to rebellion from the looks of it. But the group waiting in the Dao Repository still gave some indications that the matter was big. Apart from the two leaders of the Mystic Realm refugees, there were also Ilvere and Janos, along with Mr. Trang, Alyn, and Calrin who looked as confused as she was.

However, none of the various officials of Port Atwood were present, such as the Mayors of the colonies or Adran. Neither were there any leaders of the civic departments, from agriculture to the tax bureau. It was clear; everyone present was part of or represented the elite fighting force of Port Atwood. For them all to be gathered, there had to be a threat that had appeared out of nowhere.

Was war really brewing?

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Joanna sighed when she saw Emily’s questioning glance. “We’re still waiting for the final members to arrive.”

“Other people? Aren’t everyone here?” Emily asked with confusion as she looked around the room.

Joanna was about to open her mouth, but she stopped herself and shook her head, indicating for Emily to wait a bit. Emily rolled her eyes in response and walked over to mingle with the others.

It had been some time since she saw some of these familiar faces. She had stayed a full 9 months in the Tower of Eternity and immediately entered seclusion in the Dao Chambers of the

Atwood Academy upon her return. The building constructed by Kenzie had helped her consolidate her gains and push her second Dao, the Seed of Flow, to Peak Mastery.

She had already managed to evolve her Seed of Spark to Fragment of the Setting Sun, symbolizing the end of summer. Her water-based Dao would eventually form as the foundation for spring as she walked the path of nature. At least that was the plan. Zac had talked about the importance of a path until she feared her ears would fall off, but it still felt like she didn't resonate with her path like Zac did with his.

Well, whatever. She would figure it out sooner or later, and the more she traveled and experienced the closer she would get to her truth. Her current progress had been enough to gain an Epic class she was happy with – **[E-Epic] Razor Sun**, a class that not only pushed her old shamanic skillset to the next level but also added some devastating offensive capabilities that she had felt herself missing in the Tower of Eternity.

She knew how Zac's crooked brain worked by now. The more she veered toward a support class to help him out, the less likely he would be to take her along on his adventures. He would just feel he was risking her life for some buffs to himself, taking advantage of her. That was obviously stupid, but men often were.

So she needed to prove her ability to protect herself first, after which she could figure out how to help him. For now, that meant figuring out what the hell was going on here. A series of steps dragged Emily out of her thoughts, and she saw that three people were arriving, each of them emitting an all-too-familiar aura.

The aura of death. Emily's eyes widened as a scorching halo erupted behind her back, and a fiery lizard two-meter long appeared by her side, a familiar created with **[Apostle of Autumn]**.

It felt like all three of them were a threat to her too, especially the woman in the middle. She wore an elegant black dress so long that it dragged behind her like a wedding dress, with blue details studded here and there. She had long white hair that

was tied back with a bejeweled pin, and sported odd tear streaks on her cheeks made Emily's mind shudder.

The most striking were her eyes, two orbs that both commanded attention and forced her to look away. The blue streak that formed a thin pupil seemed to hold a terrifying power that threatened to suffocate Emily's very soul.

It looked like she was a mourner heading to a funeral, and her companions looked just as odd. To her left walked a woman who was very clearly blind, with two hollow sockets where her eyes should be. However, inside the gaping holes, two small turquoise storms raged, giving the revenant a manic appearance.

She wasn't as striking as the other woman, but an odd fleshy eye hovered over her shoulder, making Emily glance over at Abby with hesitation. A distant cousin, perhaps? Or more likely, a conjured ability like her own lizard, perhaps there to provide the blind Revenant with the ability of sight.

The craziest part was, Emily recognized this person. It was Leviala, the traitor of the Mystic Realm who had almost gotten them all killed. Emily started to get a sinking feeling as she put two and two together, and her eyes turned to the third person who towered over the other two. It was like he exuded an oppressive darkness, and he wore a large hood that covered most of his features.

However, a white snout stuck out from the shadows of the cowl. Emily didn't recognize the beastman, but someone else certainly did.

"You! Cervantes!" Hekruv Vira shouted with shock as the appearance of the largest newcomer was exposed.

Helo's reaction was even greater, with dozens of gems across his body erupting with almost blinding radiance as his aura veritably exploded. A massive hammer made from dark-blue steel appeared in his hands, and the whole chamber was suffused in an aura of immense weight. It almost felt like Emily had been transported to the depths of an ocean, with billions of tons of water weighing down on her shoulders.

“It would appear you gentlemen knew my predecessor,” the huge werewolf said, removing his cowl before he bowed at the other two beastkin. “However, while I share a body with Cervantes, I am not he. My name is Rhuger Blackwood, captain of the Einherjar.”

“Pika Blackwood, captain,” the second revenant said, leaving only the mysterious woman in the middle.

“Leviala...” Hekruv Vira sighed as he glanced at Joanna, who clearly wasn’t surprised to see these new arrivals. “So this was your fate.”

“What the hell is going on?!” Emily finally cut in as she glared back and forth between Joanna and the undead. “What has Zac done?!”

“I think you already understand,” Joanna shrugged. “This was one of Lord Atwood’s plans to protect Earth and make use of the unique nature of our planet.”

“That rascal,” Sap Trang muttered before he took a deep drag from a pipe and sat down.

“He really raised a bunch of Zombies instead of expanding the Academy? Don’t we have enough trouble on our hands already?” Emily said with a stomp before she glanced at the revenants. “No offense.”

“None taken,” the woman in the middle smiled. “I am Vilari, leader of the Einherjar. If it’s any consolation, we have no connection to the Undead Empire. Zachary Atwood is our progenitor.”

“The Einherjar is like the Valkyries,” Joanna nodded. “They are only loyal to Lord Atwood.”

“So we have a secret Revenant Army? As general of the forces, I am a bit hurt I wasn’t made aware.” Ilvere snorted as he looked the Revenants up and down. “Well, no matter. Our force is so diverse already, what’s a few of the unliving? So, why has this meeting been called? If hidden cards like these... Einherjar... are being brought to the light, it cannot be a small matter.”

“The truth would be exposed sooner or later, but we originally had planned on keeping it a secret at least until Lord Atwood returned,” Joanna nodded. “But something has changed, which is why we called this meeting. Please, everyone. Come sit down.”

“We fought those zombies for years, and that guy just goes and creates new ones,” Emily muttered, getting an emphatic nod of agreement from Sap Trang, but she still sat down at the table.

“Port Atwood has received a quest, and as Lord Atwood is busy searching for opportunities, it has been handed over to me,” Abby said. “This world has been presented with an opportunity, most likely thanks to the young master’s impressive performance. An opportunity to sharpen our elites. We have been awarded an incursion.”

Exclamations erupted in the room, with peoples’ expressions ranging from excitement to disgust. Emily felt a chaotic jumble of emotions running through her head. She knew that Zac was getting further and further away from them all, to the point that he might eventually discard Port Atwood altogether in search of greater heights. An Incursion meant another round of Origin Dao, quests, titles, and unique treasures.

A way for herself and Port Atwood to keep pace.

But she remembered all-too-well the kind of terror and suffering the integration forced upon an unsuspecting world. She remembered the sense of helplessness of her siblings disappearing into thin air, desperately struggling against an increasingly hostile environment. Of being exposed to the ugliness of mankind when society collapsed. Could she really bring herself to deliver such suffering on others?

“Is this normal?” Hekruv Vira asked with a frown. “Our records about newly integrated worlds are limited, but I haven’t heard of such an opportunity being dispensed by the Heavens to such a fresh world. From what I understood, the first century is meant to slowly adapt and nurture the first generation of proper cultivators, at which point the assimilation will take place.”

“This is not the standard procedure, but it is not unheard of. Zachary Atwood has accomplished many mindboggling feats... Yet his force,” Abby sighed. “You are too weak.”

“Too weak? Too weak for what?” Emily frowned.

“To survive what’s to come,” Joanna said.

“And what is that?” Ilvere asked.

“War,” Vilari said. “War is coming. Our master released the madness of war in the Tower of Eternity, and now conflict has come knocking at our door. Lord Atwood is inexorably linked to this struggle. As we are now, we will not be able to assist Lord Atwood, let alone be able to protect our world. We will be swept away by the currents, fodder for our enemies.”

Fear gripped Emily’s heart, and she remembered the warning in Zac’s letter. He had indeed told her about this, saying that war was coming to the Zecia Sector. However, it was one thing to hear about some diffuse and distant conflict, and another to be presented with a draft notice.

“The Einherjar and Valkyries will enter the incursion in full force,” Joanna added. “The world we’re invading is not like Earth. It already has cultivators, and the limit of expedition members is level 100. We expect the opposition to be harsh, far more so than the scattered resistance Earth put up. But it is the only way for us to keep moving forward for the foreseeable future. Opportunities on our planet have grown scarce.”

“What about the Demonkin?” Ilvere asked.

“Anyone with Port Atwood as Alignment can enter,” Abby answered. “Which excludes some of you.”

Ilvere grimaced a bit, but he slowly nodded. The demon glanced at Janos, who imperceptibly nodded in agreement.

“If you’ll have us, we are willing to take that step once more. We have been through it once already, and while we got steamrolled, we still possess some unique understanding that might prove useful,” Ilvere said, and Joanna nodded in agreement.

“I... Cannot,” Sap Trang sighed with a shake of his head. “This old man cannot in good conscience take that step... I will stay and guard our home in your stead. Don’t worry, nothing will happen with me and Little Bau patrolling the waters.”

“I... I...” Emily stammered, frozen with indecision.

Her thoughts were a jumble, and she couldn’t decide what to do. Suddenly, a calming wave soothed her mind, and she looked over as the mysterious revenant had walked over.

“Child, no need to fret,” she said as she produced a token and a letter. “Our master has prepared another path for you. It will be dangerous, but it is an opportunity to broaden your horizons and become stronger.”

Zac opened his abyssal eyes as the storm in his Soul Aperture slowly subsided. A smile spread across his face as he had taken yet another step forward in his cultivation. It had taken eight months of arduous work, but he had finally managed to infuse six revolutions of his Life-Death Array with his Dao.

The extra layer had resulted in a soul storm of unprecedented ferocity, but the gains were also demonstrably greater compared to using just five infusions. The storm had generated almost 15% more motes that turned into fertilizer to the core of his soul, which was now almost four times as large compared to when he started to cultivate his soul in earnest.

In fact, the core of his soul wasn’t the only thing that had changed over the past eight months. The oceans themselves kept some of the infused meaning from each revolution, and they teemed with energy by now. In fact, if Zac focused, he could sometimes see vague scripts forming in the waters, markings containing the truths of Life and Death.

They only lasted for an instant, but it was a testament to how much meaning Zac had managed to impart into the oceans. Of course, most of it was thanks to absorbing all that Twilight Energy, setting up an extremely sturdy foundation to cultivate

upon. If he had cultivated in his own cave back on earth, it would probably have taken a decade or two to reach this point.

Even his Soul Aperture itself had been considerably strengthened by the constant clashes between life and death, and Zac suspected that his natural resistance to soul attacks had become a lot stronger compared to before. All-in-all, he was in a far better state to deal with the upcoming challenges. Zac was about to continue his Cultivation Session by focusing on expelling some of the toxins in his body, but he froze as he suddenly sensed something.

A presence.

It was weak like a candle in the wind, but it had appeared out of nowhere, right in his temporary cultivation cave. Zac sprung into motion as the coffin took its place on his back while a spare axe appeared in his hand. He had been discovered, and no matter who had managed to find this place, it couldn't possibly be good news.

“Well, you're a weird one. A Draugr cultivating Life touched by the Buddhist Sangha. No wonder you managed to travel this deep into the chasm,” a booming laugh suddenly echoed through Zac's cave.

Chapter 744: Uninvited Guest

Zac looked back and forth for the source of the voice, but no matter what method he used, he couldn't pinpoint the source. The voice belonged to a man, but Zac couldn't place him at all. The stranger's ability to analyze his situation so easily was extremely disconcerting though, but Zac had thankfully activated the array hiding his Duplicity Core the second he sensed something amiss.

His mind went through all kinds of possibilities. Was it perhaps Ykrodas who had finally managed to track him down? Zac wouldn't be surprised if the Havarok Princeling had set his sights on him, considering that Ykrodas still hadn't managed to pass him on the ladder to this day.

But his instincts told him it was someone else. Ykrodas belonged to a proper B-grade force that no doubt possessed all kinds of methods, but it still felt extremely unlikely another E-grade cultivator would be able to track him down to this extremely secluded spot. And even if they knew where he was, could they even reach him? He was in the middle of a Twilight Crystal Mine, and they'd explode from the energy density before getting close.

There was someone else who might possess that ability though. Someone far more dangerous than some E-grade scion.

"It wasn't easy to track you down," the voice continued. "But I guess it is time to discuss reparations."

It was him.

There was no hesitation any longer, and Zac immediately took out his most powerful escape talisman and infused it with Miasma. However, it just turned to dust as the surrounding

cave shuddered for a bit. The talisman had completely failed, and worry turned to fear upon realizing that the energy in the area had turned extremely turbid and lifeless. He was already infusing energy into [**Abyssal Phase**], but nothing happened.

Without that skill, Zac couldn't even leave the room. He was stuck.

"Who's there?!" Zac shouted, though he already knew the answer.

"You know," the man continued as though he hadn't noticed anything. "If you had been smart you wouldn't have answered me when I spoke to you earlier. That way I might not have actually found you."

"What?" Zac blurted with wide eyes, which prompted the man to boisterously laugh again.

"I'm just kidding. The Twilight Chasm is my domain. It's not so easy to elude me. To answer your question, I've gone by many identities. My current one is the Twilight Lord," the voice answered. "It's quite impressive. Millennia of preparations, thwarted by a Draugr not yet of age. You have no idea the cost of your actions."

"I think there has been a misunderstanding," Zac slowly said as he grasped for a way out of the situation. "I have no interest in working against you or the Twilight Harbor. I am just looking for opportunities as I pass through this sector."

Should he try to fight his way out? Zac discarded the idea as soon as it appeared. The walls around him were hundreds of meters thick, and he didn't even have any target to attack. Besides, he had already been discovered once in a forgotten corner of the Mystic Realm, proving that the Twilight Lord had far greater control over this place than Zac previously thought possible.

Not only was the Twilight Lord able to nurture that monstrous snake that had surpassed the limit of what should be permissible in this trial, but he was even able to send his consciousness into the Twilight Chasm. This went against everything he knew about Mystic Realms controlled by the

System, and there was only one possibility that he could come up with.

The Twilight Lord was inside the Twilight Ocean.

Nala had already said that the Twilight Lord hadn't been seen for tens of thousands of years, and he knew that the last C-grade trial took place 20,000 years ago. Had he somehow found a way to stay inside the Mystic Realm after it closed at that point? But for what purpose? And more importantly, just how far did the Twilight Lord's grasp extend?

Even if he was inside the trial somehow, there was no way that the System would let him run amok in a sanctioned E-grade trial. And the Twilight Lord should definitely know what had transpired eight months ago, which hopefully meant he would tread more carefully going forward. After all, only a fool would risk drawing the ire of the Heavens after already having been given a warning.

That was his way to survive this encounter, so he slowly relaxed and stowed away his axe.

"Misunderstanding? Just passing through?" The Twilight Lord snorted. "Sometimes you can get swept up in grand events even without intending so, a victim to the torrents of fate. I know that feeling all-too-well."

Zac suddenly sensed a small surge of energy, and he swirled around as an illusory shape took form at the edge of the cave. The man looked like a human, except his skin had an odd greenish-golden hue. He was almost completely covered in scars as well, and he both had the aura and disposition of a warrior of a thousand battles. He exuded an air of confidence and drive, his eyes seemingly piercing straight through Zac's soul.

The appearance of the Twilight Lord's avatar was startling, but Zac was even more shocked that he actually recognized the man. And it wasn't that he had seen images of the Twilight Lord since arriving to the harbor, but rather from a missive he had bought back in the Zecia sector. The man in front of him looked a bit older and his skin tone was completely different, but the main features were the same.

It was the Eveningtide Asura.

The true appearance of the man behind cataclysmic events back in the Zecia sector wasn't widely circulated. In fact, none of the information houses in Zecia dared carry much information about him out of fear he'd one day return. The intelligence read more like tales of heroics and bravery rather than proper information missives, and any factual information such as appearance, class, skills, and strength was notably missing.

But Zac had been extremely curious about the Eveningtide Asura since he was almost considered the second coming of him, and their backgrounds were pretty similar. The fact that no one dared to sell intelligence on him through the Mercantile System couldn't stop Zac with his nigh-unlimited access to every corner of the sector.

One of his followers had managed to procure a proper missive from a declining information house that had lost its Mercantile Licence. The way it described the events 980,000 years ago was completely different from the public information.

Rather than a heroic lone wolf, the Eveningtide Asura had been described as a ruthless opportunist who skirted the edge of unorthodoxy without ever completely leaving the embrace of the System. He never cared about right and wrong in his pursuit of power, and his hands were already drenched in blood long before the more well-known events where he slaughtered dozens of peak clans upon his return took place.

Both Zac and the man in front of him had come up in the same way, being progenitors of planets integrated into the Zecia sector. However, while Zac had somewhat stumbled onto the path of supremacy, Alvod Jondir had firmly embarked on it through murder. Every threat to his supremacy on his home planet, foreign or native, had been butchered, after which he essentially turned his home planet into a furnace for his own cultivation.

By the time the planet had been assimilated, only a broken F-grade planet remained, with Alvod having extracted the essence of the World Core itself. It was this very ability to

absorb the power of the planets themselves that had eventually sparked a manhunt, because not only was it an extremely powerful method to cultivate, but it was also a huge threat to most clans.

What if the Eveningtide Asura appeared on their planet one day, slowly siphoning off the power of the World Core?

So while the man standing in front of Zac appeared like a straightforward warrior with the aura of a hero, he knew that it was just an image hiding a ruthless cultivator that made the Great Redeemer seem as harmless as a baby chick. A cultivator who was also famous for being extremely thorough in his acts of revenge.

Zac felt beads of sweat rolling down his back, but he controlled his aura and facial expression to not give away the fact that he knew the true identity of the man in front of him. Meanwhile, his thoughts were a confused jumble as he simply couldn't understand what was going on. Most people thought that the Eveningtide Asura was long dead for hundreds of thousands of years after having angered some powerful force, yet he stood right in front of him, seemingly doing just fine.

Was the Eveningtide Asura actually the Twilight Lord, or was he simply pretending? When had the change taken place? Because one thing was for certain; the current Twilight Lord had reigned for over six hundred thousand years, which made it impossible that Alvod had been him from the start.

“Lord Twilight, it's an honor,” Zac said with a bow, working hard to keep his face impassive. “I apologize if my actions inadvertently caused any problems to the trial. My masters will provide recompense for any damage.”

“I am pretty certain there is no clan called ‘Black’, they have better taste than that. Who are you? Who are your masters, and what interests do they have for this trial?” the man snorted.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he made a decision. He had never managed to trick anyone when lying through his teeth, and he wasn't so arrogant as to think he could suddenly outsmart an old monster who had lived over a million years.

He would need to expose some of his secrets, but leave some things vague.

“None whatsoever,” Zac eventually said he displayed his Fragment of the Coffin, complementing the earlier display of the Fragment of the Bodhi. “They are both Autarchs with no interest to this place of the Twilight Harbor. One of them is walking the path of Oblivion, the other the path of Creation. I was sent here to temper myself and...”

“Life is not Life... Death is not Death... Oblivion and Creation,” Alvod slowly mused, his eyes gleaming. “You are here for the two shards that were absorbed a few eons ago.”

“I am supposed to fetch them for my masters. But if they are part of Lord Twilight’s plans, I will stand down,” Zac quickly said.

Alvod looked at Zac in silence for a full minute, though it might as well have been a year as far as Zac was concerned.

“You are really an interesting one, and our paths are surprisingly similar. It’s almost a shame our conclusions diverged, leading us toward different peaks,” the Eveningtide Asura sighed. “The path you’re on... is without return.”

Zac was extremely to find out what he meant, but he didn’t dare disrupt the man since it actually seemed like he was changing his mind about something. Seeing as he probably came with vengeance on his mind, that could only be good news.

“You caused me a great deal of trouble, but perhaps this can become an opportunity to wipe the slate of Karma clean. Those two items are like tumors in this realm, causing a constant disturbance in the composition of Twilight,” Alvod said. “They are empowered by the Twilight Energy as well, and have formed powerful natural formations around them.”

Zac frowned when he heard about them being powered by the Twilight Energy as this was outside his expectations. Then again, he couldn’t be too surprised since they were still here even though they were placed in the middle of the Mystic

Realm. If they were easy to get, they would have been snatched up long ago by some greedy trial-taker.

“I have come prepared,” Zac lied. “And if there’s anything else I can do to help out...”

“Kind of you to offer, brat,” the Eveningtide Asura laughed as a large vat of liquor appeared in his hand. “Actually, there is something you can do for me. As acting Earl of Twilight Harbor, I require assistance. Receive my decree.”

‘I just said that to be polite!’ Zac screamed in his mind, but he still nodded quickly in agreement. However, his eyes widened as he realized his mistake. A piece of information that he had almost forgotten emerged from the back of his head, and his fears were soon confirmed as a screen appeared in front of him.

Cleansing Waters (Decree): Follow the tracker and unblock the turbid energy. Reward: Reward based on performance after the end of the Twilight Ascent. (0/729).

Zac barely had time to read the quest prompt before a small vortex opened up as well. It looked harmless enough, but Zac still didn’t dare step forward until it had dropped off a small box and disappeared.

“Careful enough,” the projection snorted as it took a swig. “Well, the foolhardy die sooner or later. But do not worry. If I wanted you dead, you would already have entered the cycle of reincarnation. This is just a simple tracking array to lead the way.”

“Lead the way to what?” Zac asked with a frown, having no idea what the quest actually wanted him to do.

“People are acting against the Twilight Harbor currently participating in the trial. Their backgrounds are too powerful, so I could only let them enter and try to minimize the damage they caused. Unfortunately, they have proven surprisingly resourceful, forcing me to intervene,” Alvod sighed. “They have managed to undo a lot of good work that has been done to make this ocean flourish, messing with the energy flow of this realm.”

Zac's bullshit radar was reading off the charts, but there was no way he'd expose the Eveningtide Asura's lies. There was no way that this man was doing something out of the good of his heart, and it was probably just a matter of fighting for resources between monarchs. But ultimately, it didn't matter to him. He just needed to survive this ordeal now that he had been roped in.

He had offered to help and then agreed to provide assistance. That was his mistake. It might have been an empty gesture, but it allowed Alvod to generate a quest. Most cultivators weren't able to do so, but the Twilight Lord was clearly a middle-tier noble holding the rank of Earl.

Someone like Zac who just controlled a single planet was just a Lord, but he suspected that a future quest reward would be him being elevated to a Baron, the next level of the System-run hierarchy. Higher status didn't increase his combat strength, but it allowed someone to make more use of the System's features.

This wasn't a feature that had been added by the Apostates, but rather something related to the original function of the System. It was a training system for the war of the Limitless Empire, and the leaders of the empire were supposed to be able to tap into the System to some degree.

One such ability was to generate quests like Alvod had done right now.

The problem wasn't the quest itself, but rather the danger it represented. Zac didn't have any concrete proof, but there were some indications that a connection like this was almost like a Karmic bond. For example, Abby instinctively knew all kinds of things that happened all over Port Atwood thanks to her being connected to the System.

What if the Eveningtide Asura could use this quest to keep track of him?

Zac didn't let his misgivings show on the surface though, and he reluctantly picked up the array that had appeared.

“Oh, not happy?” Alvod snorted, clearly sensing Zac’s hesitance.

“It’s just that I already have a target on my back...” Zac sighed.

“Well, how about this?” the man grinned as a token appeared in his hand. “As long as you destroy over half the jammers, you can exchange this item from my treasury outside. You should know my reputation already. I will not shortchange someone from the junior generation. Not that I can with a sanctioned quest in progress.”

Zac hadn’t seen the token before, but there was one word written on its surface in the script of the multiverse – Vast. It didn’t take long to put two and two together, and his heartbeat sped up upon realizing it was the Perennial Vastness Token.

As for the reputation, Alvod obviously meant his reputation as the Twilight Lord, a man known for taking in a lot of talented wandering cultivators and nurturing them. He did honestly have a pretty good track record in that regard, but that didn’t provide much comfort for Zac who knew the man’s true identity.

“I’ll do my best,” Zac slowly said. “However, that item is already claimed by the Fate Plucking Ladder.”

“It’s my treasury, so I do what I want with it,” Alvod guffawed as the token disappeared. “Those on the outside are growing a bit uppity since I’ve been in seclusion gone for too long, giving out my treasures out left and right. But I’ll show them wha-”

The Twilight Lord suddenly stopped mid-sentence as another presence descended upon the cave. This one was all-too-familiar as well, carrying a sense of indifference in its boundless power.

“I guess it’s time to go,” Alvod muttered. “Complete your task and we’ll wipe the slate clean. One month. I want to see results within one month. Otherwise, I might be led to believe you are actually working against me.”

He was gone the next second, and the pressure of the System disappeared a moment later. It was clearly just interested in booting the interloper from the trial rather than conversing with Zac this time around. It left Zac alone in the cave once more, though it didn't feel nearly as safe and secluded this time around.

“Well, shit.”

Chapter 745: The Last Laugh

The cultivation cave where he had spent the better part of a year no longer felt like a secure sanctuary, like a home that had been burglarized.

Zac knew that he was mostly to blame for getting wrapped up in this mess. Staying in one place for this long was to tempt fate, but the location was simply too good to give up on. He had been making rapid progress, both in levels and in regards to his soul. Over the past three months, he repeatedly considered finally setting out, only to feel the need to keep cultivating a little bit longer.

Now he had been exposed, and the quest screen in front of him loomed over his head like an executioner's axe.

Thankfully, it didn't look like the Eveningtide Asura had managed to get the whole picture. Zac couldn't be certain, but Alvod's control of the Mystic Realm probably wasn't as great as he tried to let on. Why wait eight months if 'the Twilight Chasm was his 'domain'? It was either prohibitively difficult to manifest inside this place as he did, or his senses were blocked out by the System, making discovering Zac difficult.

It was also clear that the System didn't allow the Twilight Lord to directly alter the events as it descended after just a minute, even though the Eveningtide Asura only appeared as a weak presence. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell exactly what Alvod had managed to glean in their short encounter. For example, had he activated the array in time? Would Alvod even be able to discover anything as a weak consciousness?

One thing was for sure though, Zac didn't dare swap between his races in this place any longer. The intruding presence had been booted by the System from the looks of it, but who knew

what methods a Monarch possessed. Also, the final threat of the Eveningtide Asura made him afraid to delay much longer.

It was a shame too as he had managed to reach level 120 two weeks ago. If he pushed himself, he might have been able to gain another five before the trial ended. Truthfully, he had hoped to reach level 125 after a year, but progress was rapidly slowing down. He still had more than enough Beast Cores and **[Chainbreaking Pills]** to keep going, but the problem was his hidden node.

[Void Heart] could ultimately only purify so much energy, whereas the amount of energy required for each node increased exponentially. For the first two levels, his wounds had been the bottleneck, with the next node being ready to be opened the moment he had recovered. But from level 118, that changed to an issue of energy supply.

Reaching level 120 had taken three weeks longer than the previous level, and Zac guessed he'd require another two months for the next. It was just like when he got his hands on Nexus Crystals in the beginning. He gained a few levels smoothly in the earlier stages of the F-grade, but soon enough the energy the crystals provided were all but negligible.

He had tried feeding the hidden node all kinds of things, from natural treasure to straight-up going back to absorbing Twilight Energy. Having **[Void Heart]** feast on natural treasures was no doubt the quickest, as it processed and returned that energy far quicker than anything else.

Conversely, using Twilight Energy didn't only take three times as long to refine, but it also left a bunch of unwanted energies behind.

Seeing as he only had so many natural treasures, he had soon enough reverted to only using Beast Cores while keeping the Twilight Energy away by crushing supreme-quality crystals. It was a disappointment, but pushing five levels in eight months as a mortal was a tremendous achievement. Doing the same had taken Galvarion well over a decade, and not even Catheya's leveling speed was at this level either.

To reach level 125, Zac might need two to three full years cultivating this way. Of course, he could drastically shorten that time through slaughter, but Zac knew the ship had sailed. He didn't dare burst up any more nodes now that he was leaving the chasm - he needed his full combat strength going forward.

Getting a new set of skills was impossible, but there was one more thing he could do. Eight months of refining his soul wasn't enough to reach the second reincarnation, but it had still strengthened his soul tremendously. With some help, it should be just enough.

Zac spent the next five hours refilling his mental energy and stabilizing his mind, at which point he took out one of his **[Fractal Framework Arrays]** meant for his undead side. Having spent this long in one place had given Zac ample time to train his proficiency in upgrading skills, with all his ancillary skills being evolved by now, except for **[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]**.

Even **[Cosmic Gaze]** had been upgraded to E-grade on his Draugr form, though he still hadn't managed to improve **[Piercing Gaze]** in his human form to match.

There were, however, two final holdouts on his Draugr side, and leaving before improving the situation might prove lethal. **[Vanguard of Undeath]** still worked decently enough, but **[Profane Seal]** simply wasn't durable enough to deal with the elites of the trial. He had seen how effortlessly Uona had broken through his cage, and there were more examples like Yanub Mettleleaf and the ice mage in the Greengrove Archipelago.

He was about to set out with a massive bounty on his head, and he needed the ability to trap others, making sure his location wasn't exposed. He needed to upgrade **[Profane Seal]**, even if there was a risk of it being downgraded to a lower-quality skill. However, Zac wasn't without some confidence.

He placed the **[Fractal Framework Array]** right next to the oversized **[Mind's Eye Agate]** to make sure he could get the

most out of the treasure, but Zac wasn't done there. A small jade box appeared on the ground in front of him, followed by a crystalline vial with a shimmering pill inside.

It was the [**Dawn Awakening**] pill, whereas the box contained one of the two dumpling fruits. He still didn't know what the item was called or its exact usage, but he had managed to form an educated opinion three months ago. He had been a bit bored and restless, and overcome with curiosity he cut off a small bite from the smaller of the two natural treasures.

It was just a corner of the plant, but the energy had still provided some clues of the treasure's true nature. It was not a Dao Treasure, at least not as far as he could tell, but it was still something extremely useful.

Zac immediately swallowed the [**Dawn Awakening**] pill, it was like a wave of power swept through his body, transforming it into something else. Suddenly, it felt like he had become a part of the Twilight Ocean, perhaps even an integral part to its infinitely intricate tapestry. He was one with the ocean, and the ocean was one with him.

The feeling was so palpable that he actually stopped himself from crushing another Miasma Crystal when his surroundings were impacted, and the Twilight Energy that swirled around him was no longer hostile to his presence. It didn't try to force its way into his body until he exploded, instead simply sticking to him like a pet sticking to its owner.

The change was intoxicating, but Zac knew he had bigger fish to fry than to enjoy the absence of the pervasive and crushing pressure of the Twilight Energy. He opened the lid of the jade box, and he stuffed the unblemished dumpling into his mouth, swallowing bit by bit until he had consumed the whole thing, stem and all.

The natural treasure looked like a white ball of rice dough, but it actually contained a juicy pulp that was dark green, tasting a bit like a mix of kiwi and divinity. He had never eaten something as delicious before, though he wasn't sure if it was another side effect of [**Dawn Awakening**]. The pulp juices were full of the mysterious energy that had tricked him into

thinking it was a Dao Treasure, and it perfectly blended with every single inch of his body.

Most of all, Zac was filled with an unprecedented sense of clarity, where the scripts and patterns that were the source for many a headache were suddenly as clear as day. It felt like his IQ was rising exponentially by the second, and he was awash with ideas to not only improve his current skills, but even create new ones.

This was the true nature of the mysterious fruit he had found; Inspiration.

It was a treasure that provided an unprecedented state of clarity into matters related to Life and Death. No matter if it was creating skills or upgrading existing ones, it could take your concepts to a whole new level. No doubt it would be an amazing treasure for craftsmen as well. Anyone who created an item under the influence of this fruit would no doubt produce a Spiritual Tool or Pill of unprecedented quality.

Zac wasted no time, and the extremely complex Skill Fractal of **[Profane Seal]** soon emerged from his body and entered the array. He had thought about this step for months on end, running hundreds and hundreds of simulations, analyzing every single step of the process over and over to make sure to avoid as many of the pitfalls as possible.

There were so many patterns working together in perfect harmony to create the extremely impressive cage that had become the staple of his undead side, and the slightest mistake could cause the whole structure to unravel. However, as Zac looked at the projection of the skill fractal in front of him, he wasn't content. He saw it as a piece of art, as a burgeoning life holding vast amounts of untapped potential for greatness. If he followed his original plan he would succeed, he would create a top-tier E-grade skill.

But he could do better.

There was a small voice in the back of his head that urged caution, but Zac pushed those thoughts befitting smaller-minded men aside as he was consumed the glory of creation, and like a master artisan he set about his work with both

conviction and precision. Whole sections of the skill fractal were transformed, taking in and adding various concepts.

Runes that had never appeared on any of his skills before were added, based only on pictures and descriptions he'd seen in information crystals. He dug deep for all kinds of sources of inspiration. Some came from obvious sources, like his other skills and his Dao Visions. Others were things he normally wouldn't even consider, such as the river of death that swirled around Be'Zi and the ominous tower that probably held one of the Splinters of Oblivion.

The array was beeping ominously after just a few minutes, but Zac was undeterred. He felt like he was one with the skill fractal, and he could feel the limits it could tolerate, like it was part of his own body. And he would need to push that limit over and over to reach the goal he was still conceptualizing as he was moving along.

Zac strayed further and further away from his envisioned path, grasping higher and higher. He felt how his soul was being rapidly drained, which was no surprise considering the number of adjustments and calculations he was doing on the fly. But he didn't care. Perfection couldn't be constrained by budget concerns, and he just crushed a couple of Soul Crystals as he kept going.

Eventually, the Skill Fractal was an unrecognizable clump of discordant concepts, a mess made up by thousands of barely interlocking parts. If nothing drastic changed before he ran out of Mental Energy, the skill would be completely ruined. The seeds of doubt grew increasingly loud, but Zac knew there was no turning back now.

He could only trust his instincts, doubling down on the madness as he pushed on with his mad plan. Soon enough, his vision started to blur. What once was clear was gradually becoming convoluted again. The skill fractal no longer looked the seed of perfection, but more of a testament to man's folly.

However, Zac knew that was just a mirage, and desperately squeezed out the last of the medicinal effect of the natural

treasure as his mind provided the final motes of mental energy he had left. He was almost there.

The final rune was the only component missing, and as it was added, tens of thousands of runes suddenly snapped into place. There truly was greatness hidden in chaos, but Zac had no time to celebrate. He hurriedly extracted the Skill Fractal as he felt his consciousness slip, and he barely had time to reattach it to his pathways before he passed out, his mind utterly overdrawn.

Zac woke up with a splitting headache, but it was nothing compared to the pain of his body almost exploding from energy overload. He hurriedly activated **[Void Zone]** to stop any more energy from entering his body, after which he quickly started to refine the energy that filled every inch of his body.

Soon enough a massive cloud of expelled energy had formed above his head. This time he had only been out of it for twenty hours, which was a relief considering he didn't have the Void Beast Organ to perpetually power **[Void Zone]** this time around. Ten minutes later the situation wasn't quite as deadly, allowing him to breathe out and check his status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

120

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Peak, Fragment of the Coffin - Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - Peak

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

8889 [Increase: 110%. Efficiency: 250%]

Dexterity

3910 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

7383 [Increase: 101%. Efficiency: 250%]

Vitality

6311 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence

1656 [Increase: 74%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

3443 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 197%]

Luck

466 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 715

His attributes had taken a surprising leap since he allocated his free points into Dexterity and Wisdom a few weeks back, and it wasn't hard to find the source.

[Runic Erudition: Form a path-bound supreme-quality skill while still in E-grade. Reward: All stats +5%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Wisdom +5%]

Zac looked at the title with marvel, both exalted by the boost it provided and what it represented. A supreme-quality skill? Zac didn't even know such a thing existed, but it was all he needed to see to know that his gambit had succeeded.

This was exactly what he needed. He was tired of being taken advantage of, tired of being used as a disposable chess piece in the machinations of the old monsters lurking outside the trial. He needed more strength, and this was a step in the right direction. Zac knew it wouldn't make a difference against terrifying beings like the Eveningtide Asura, but even an ant could create some waves that would have unexpected consequences.

He was tired of being a tool, a mere chess piece to be used and discarded by these old Monarchs who barely would spare him a glance. He felt his very soul buckle and rage at the restraints that kept being placed on him. It was time to strike back. Directly confronting someone like the Eveningtide Asura was obviously out of the question, but a plan was already starting to form in Zac's mind, a way to get what he wanted while also throwing a wrench in his and Uona's plans.

They would see who would have the last laugh.

Alvod took a deep breath as the memories of his soul sliver returned to his mind, and a sneer soon covered his face. Arcaz

Black, that little brat was nowhere near as cowed as he wanted to let on. These youngsters all thought themselves so clever, that they were unique and infallible. He would soon learn the harshness of the multiverse, as so many had before him.

But there was still a lingering sense of unease in Alvod's heart as he went over the words of the young Draugr. Was he really related to two unknown Autarchs walking the boundless path? It sounded ludicrous, but Alvod knew that not even he would be able to instill a Draugr with affinity to life.

Someone had devised a heaven-defying method, and it was possible that it truly was someone the brat knew, rather than a fortuitous encounter. Not only that, but the brat had clearly recognized his true identity. Arcasz Black was more involved in the events Alvod had set in motion than he tried to let on.

However, Alvod eventually calmed down. The convergence of fate on the Twilight Harbor was too great, it was expected that some unexpected parties would make an appearance. If the Draugr was speaking the truth, he most likely was a vessel the two masters were nurturing, an experiment to travel that broken peak. That wouldn't interfere with Alvod's plans, and it might in fact help him.

Conversely, if the little bastard lied, then Alvod had contingencies for that as well. Thousands of people had thought they could pull one over on him over the eons, yet they had all turned into fertilizer for his Dao. He had planned this for so long, and no matter if it was the Havarok, the Imperials, or this Draugr, he would handle them all.

They would see who would have the last laugh.

Chapter 746: Ascent

[E] Pillar of Desolation - Proficiency: Early. Stuck and struggling. Inexorable desolation. Upgradeable.

Zac looked at the skill screen, endlessly relieved he didn't listen to the whispers of doubt in the back of his mind that told him to give up on his drug-induced ambition and instead try to salvage the skill. Its description didn't seem any different compared to any other of his skills, but he knew that it most likely was the most powerful one in his repertoire at the moment.

His best guess was that it was the kind of skill you'd get from an Arcane Class, which should add another layer of raw power output. As for the skill being 'pathbound', it probably meant the skill was tailor-made for his path, having completely broken free from the ill-fitting archetype of his previous Undying Bulwark-class.

Zac gave it a thought as he took out the second dumpling, but he sighed with regret when he opened the lid of the jade box where he stored it. A gust of dense herbal aroma wafted into his face, but his body was mostly indifferent to the presence of the treasure. Just as he expected, this dumpling was the sort of item you could only enjoy once. He wouldn't be able to use the second one for evolving **[Vanguard of Undeath]** or **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, it looked like.

Still, **[Profane Seal]** was the lynchpin of his Draugr class, and now that it was upgraded and improved, he felt a lot more confident even if he encountered the true elites of the trial. Even if he still was some distance away from defeating them, he was a lot more confident in escaping with his life intact. After all, while the details had become blurry in the wake of his epiphany, Zac was still certain that **[Pillar of Desolation]** remained a restraining skill even after the evolution.

He briefly considered upgrading [**Vanguard of Undeath**] even without the liquid clarity of the natural treasure, but he felt drained after eating the dumpling, like he had used a year's worth of inspiration in creating [**Pillar of Desolation**]. Any skill he created in his current state was bound to be unimpressive, if he managed to complete the upgrade at all.

Besides, while the dumpling might not be serviceable for another round, there were all kinds of opportunities out there. Both his classes were doing just fine without upgrading their final skills, and he would get another set of skills upon reaching level 125. Now that Zac knew that attaining these kinds of unique skills was possible, he might as well keep [**Vanguard of Undeath**] and [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] unevolved until he found some way to enter another bout of inspiration.

With that, Zac knew it was time to get going. Of course, that didn't mean he would leave a small fortune behind, and Zac turned into a whirlwind of unfettered greed as he ripped out one crystal after another from the walls. The shimmering light in the chamber grew dimmer and dimmer until even the broken crystals had been stowed away.

That left only two crystals inside the cave; the massive [**Mind's Eye Agate**], and the sanguine stone where [**Verun's Bite**] was still sealed.

Verun had actually finished its evolution months ago, but it had indicated to Zac that it wanted to stay inside the crystal. The aura of the [**Mind's Eye Agate**] apparently helped Verun strengthen its spirituality, though the effect was obviously not as pronounced as Zac's when using a Soul Strengthening method.

Still, the stronger the Tool Spirit, the easier the evolution to D-grade would become for Verun, so Zac had let it cultivate in peace while he focused on his own cultivation. But all good things had to come to an end.

"It's time to go buddy," Zac smiled as he put his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal.

There was no immediate response, but a roar echoed through the cave as cracks started to spread across the surface of the crystal. Suddenly, it cracked, and Zac snatched up the axe before it fell on the ground. However, doing so almost made him topple over, and he looked at the weapon with a mix of surprise and satisfaction.

Since having finished its evolution, its weight had increased almost ten times over, and it felt far more sturdy compared to before. That wasn't a problem for Zac, even if he hadn't expected it when grabbing it. If anything, it made the weapon easier to wield now that its weight better matched his massive increase in Strength.

That wasn't the only thing that had changed, and Zac's thumb traced the fourth rune that had been lit up. The fourth rune represented the fact that the Spirit Tool had reached late E-grade, just one step from the peak. The first rune was the one that let him release Verun and have it join him in battle, and it was what truly set it apart from most beastcrafted Spirit Tools.

This activation both cost a huge amount of blood and had a pretty long cooldown, so it could only be used sparingly. The second rune was far cheaper, and it had a pretty common effect; sharpness. It used some sort of sanguine power to empower the edge, providing it with a stronger penetrative force. It cost a decent chunk of blood, but Zac still often used it when he needed a bit extra lethality in his swings.

The third rune was both useful and useless, since he hadn't had cause to activate apart from trying it out. The third rune activated an odd ability that could best be described as molting, probably a result of feeding **[Verun's Bite]** dragon's blood. The outer layer of the axehead would become brittle and fall off as a new layer grew out to replace it. Zac initially had some difficulty figuring out what good that ability was, but he soon realized it was a type of empowered restoration.

[Verun's Bite] had the ability to sharpen and recover from damage like most Spirit Tools, but the process was pretty slow. Still, with the weapon being of such high quality, the small blemishes Zac accrued from battles were easily fixed, making the third ability a bit superfluous. However, Zac felt the ability

would become handy sooner or later as he fought stronger and stronger enemies.

After all, the passive regeneration could take days, whereas the active ability took just a few seconds. As long as he could stall for a bit, he could even use the ability in the middle of a fight. It might even be able to allow Verun to survive where most Spirit Tools would break, which was an extremely precious insurance policy.

Now the axe had a fourth ability, and realizing what it did made Zac all the more cognizant of the importance of finding the right food for Verun. The fourth ability built further on the most fundamental aspect of the treasure bone – weight.

Activating the rune could almost instantly increase the weight to a level so great that even Zac barely could withstand it. The ability suited Zac's combat style very well, and it meshed perfectly with his Fragment of the Axe. The Fragment was fused from the Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness, matching two of the axe's abilities perfectly.

Zac knew he had lucked out a bit though, and he knew that he would have to be a bit more discerning going forward. It wasn't just a matter of getting a bad ability by feeding it the wrong thing, but he also risked turning the weapon less compatible with his path. That was doubly important when he would evolve the weapon to D-grade. He would have to make sure it aligned with his path perfectly by that point, though Zac still didn't know how he'd accomplish that.

Only the agate was left behind after having extracted [**Verun's Bite**], and the gemstone had already dimmed somewhat now that there weren't any Supreme Twilight Crystals to siphon energy from. Zac quickly went to work, digging into the ground around the gem, forming a two-meter pedestal to hold the gemstone in place.

The [**Mind's Eye Agate**] entered his Spatial Ring to join the Twilight Crystals, and Zac turned to an intangible wraith after taking a look around. A few seconds later he appeared in the main tunnels of the crystal mine, and he swept forward, occasionally ripping a crystal from the walls. Normally, he

would have taken every single crystal, leaving just a mottled wall behind.

Unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to do so at the moment. Now that he was on the move, crushing crystals to alleviate the ambient energy wasn't nearly as effective. Even he couldn't stomach the cost of crushing one every second as he rushed through the tunnels, and there was no point in leaving gusts of pure energy in his wake.

He needed to cover as much distance as possible while he had the energy to run **[Void Zone]**, which meant he only extracted the most valuable crystals and herbs, leaving the rest behind.

Zac made steady progress through the tunnels, and the occasional beast that was unlucky enough to find itself in his way was quickly disposed of as Zac used them as target practice to get used to the new weight of his weapon. He didn't really ascend toward the surface though, but he rather worked his way in the direction of what should be the waters of the Twilight Chasm.

Until now he had wanted to move as far into the bedrock as possible to avoid discovery from either snake or trial-takers. Now that it was time to get out of here, it would be far quicker to simply climb up the wall with the help of his chains. He certainly couldn't move as quickly while defying the constant tug of the currents, but he also wouldn't waste hours backtracking back and forth in the hard-to-traverse cave system.

It took him the better part of a day to reach his destination, mostly because he finally had to stop and run his Soul Strengthening Manual to expel Twilight Energy, but he eventually reached a section that was completely submerged in water. From there it just took another two hours until he found his way out of the massive network of cracks and tunnels that had been his sanctuary the past eight months.

First, he spent another ten hours restoring his Void Energy, after which he made his move. The calm and somewhat brackish waters of the cave system were soon replaced by the torrential currents of the chasm. He looked back and forth, but

neither the monstrous snake nor any other obvious threat was anywhere in sight.

Two chains dug into the wall as the other two crawled upward along the sheer mountain wall. They extended for over two hundred meters before they slammed into the stone while oozing black tar. It was **[Blighted Cut]** that empowered them with a much greater penetrative force, and the stone bubbled as it melted to let the chains dig deeper.

Zac dragged himself further and further up, but he froze in fear after just twenty minutes as he spotted something enormous looming above. He felt his hands shake in fear of being discovered, but he eventually calmed down when he realized he wasn't really dealing with the gargantuan pet of the Eveningtide Asura.

He still couldn't make out what it was though, but after climbing for another ten minutes did he finally figure it out. It was a mountain, if you could call it that. It might be more accurate to call it a mountain-sized rock hovering in the chasm, seemingly unaffected by the constant pull from the depths of the chasm. Zac could only see its bottom, but it was just as large as the mountains he had climbed before.

Was this the true nature of the peaks of the Twilight Chasm?

Rather than actual mountains connected to the ground, perhaps the peaks that people searched at the top of the chasm were nothing more than oversized rocks. The same possibly went for the peaks he had traversed further down in the depths. In fact, who knew how many layers of mountains were stacked like this in the endless depths of this place.

A couple of minutes later a few more peaks came into view, silently hovering in place like the first one. Zac looked at them thoughtfully, remembering the purpose of the peaks below. Were these mountains part of some array as well, perhaps? An obstinate part in the back of Zac's mind wanted him to swim over and cause some damage if that was the case, to show the Eveningtide Asura that he was not so easily pushed around.

However, the vast majority of Zac held onto his sanity, knowing there was a time and place for everything. He did

want to throw a wrench in the works of the Eveningtide Asura, but that was ultimately more about self-perseverance than spite. Something massive was going down on the outside, and the events inside the trial could clearly affect the outcome judging by how the various factions were going all out sending their elites into the Twilight Ocean.

The more of Alvod's preparations Zac undid, the less time the Eveningtide Asura would have to spare on a junior who slighted him. He would be knee-deep in whatever the B-grade factions had prepared. However, Zac couldn't overdo it. If he caused too much trouble and his actions were exposed, then Alvod might very well hunt him down just out of spite.

He rather needed to figure out which side everyone was on, and subtly assist the Eveningtide Asura's enemies.

So he slowly looked away from the mountains, instead focusing on covering as much ground as possible. But as he climbed, he became more and more shocked just how deep this place was. Four days passed, and he actually found himself passing two layers of mountain ranges. But finally, Zac saw an end to his climb as the oppressive darkness started to give way to weak golden light.

Four hours later Zac found his surroundings properly illuminated, and he finally found himself able to cope with the environment without relying on his Soul Strengthening Array. As expected, he had been climbing the actual wall of the chasm all this while, and if he kept going for another hour, he would reach the crest.

However, Zac didn't climb the final stretch to the edge. Instead, he pushed out from the wall, shooting toward the closest mountain in the distance. He was eager to leave this ominous place, but there was one thing he wanted to do first. With things having reached this point, Zac had decided to see if he could harvest the odd egg.

Zac had actually been able to sense his brand for a while now, and the mark had grown a lot stronger since he planted it nine months ago. His original plan had been to go fetch the two

remnants and then return for the egg, but the events in the depths of the chasm had probably ruined those plans.

He truthfully doubted he would be able to continue exploring the Twilight Ocean after forming the Glimpse of Chaos, so this might be the last chance to recover it. He could still somehow sense that the mark hadn't really "matured", but he was out of options.

It thankfully looked like the currents had dragged him almost straight down after Uona knocked him unconscious. It wasn't too far a distance he needed to travel to get back to the mountain peak that housed the hidden valley. There was a small chance Uona was waiting for him over there, but he doubted it considering her points had been steadily climbing since five months ago. She was most likely off hunting cultivators elsewhere.

Zac reached the very same spot where the hidden tunnel was located a few days later, and there were thankfully no signs of anyone lying in wait. Unfortunately, there was also no clear way for him to get inside without the egg acting as a key to open the path. He spent the next few days swimming back and forth, trying everything from brute force to dumb luck to break into the valley.

But no matter what he tried, the area was completely sealed off, the rock shockingly resistant to his efforts to dig into it. Eventually, he returned to the location of the tunnel to see if there was anything he had missed.

The mark felt like a taunting beacon, reminding him of the fact that the thing he desperately wanted was just out of reach. The feelings of impotence once more returned, and Zac growled in annoyance as two streams of Dao entered his shoulders. Soon enough, a small mark appeared, and he pushed it into the stone as he kept picturing the tunnel opening up.

Using his ace at this juncture was a risk, but Zac refused to give up now that he had come back to this place. The mountain wall shuddered in reluctance, but Zac felt a transformation starting to take place. It was much slower

compared to before, but it felt like the stone was starting to become intangible somehow.

However, just as Zac thought he had succeeded, the wall started to revert back into stone as a pulse emerged the heart of the mountain. Zac stared at the wall with aggravation upon realizing he had failed, but he didn't even have time to consider backup plans before the wall shuddered once more.

At the same time, he felt the brand on the other side of the wall go from a beacon into a raging fire, and the connection between himself and the mark grew exponentially stronger. Zac gaped in shock as the tunnel once more appeared, this time covered in the intricate runes that had started to cover the valley just as he left the last time.

However, there was an indiscernible difference this time. While the runes had only held the prime truths of Twilight before, they were now speckled with a hint of something more, something that belonged to Zac. The energy of Creation. His gaze soon turned toward the direction of the egg, but the hallway was completely covered in a thick haze seemingly wrought out of the Dao itself.

It moved like it was alive, and small glimmering specks within the dust made the churning shroud look like a star-speckled nebula. Looking at the swirling clouds made his drained soul once more fill with inspiration, and he almost entered a state of epiphany then and there.

However, a wave of panic broke his trance as the walls started to shudder ominously. The runes flickered, seemingly in a struggle against themselves. The tunnel that shouldn't have opened had been forced open, but it clearly wouldn't last long. Zac threw caution in the wind as he shot forward, not caring about what kind of dangers might lurk within.

Just the clouds that had escaped the valley were this marvelous, how could he let go of the opportunity that waited within?

Chapter 747: Dissenting Views

Zac felt like he was tearing through the veil of the heavens as he pushed through the haze, embraced by life and death as they had joined each other into a nebulous soup. Of course, Zac believed something even greater was brewing in the depths of the valley, and **[Love's Bond]** was already stirring in anticipation. The chains gingerly stroked the runes in the tunnel, and the Dao clouds shuddered in turn as the two resonated.

Each physical step also felt like a metaphorical step down his path, and Zac's original purpose of entering this place was starting to become muddled as he approached the mouth of the tunnel. A small part of his reason for coming here was to foil whatever designs Va Tapek had for this realm, but it seemed so insignificant now. The same was true for the Eveningtide Asura. What were they in front of the Grand Dao?

The murmurs of the most profound truths of the Twilight Ocean whispered into Zac's ear as he approached the light, but even he hadn't expected what waited for him at the other side. What was this?

It felt like he had somehow been transported to the depths of the cosmos, to the origin of the universe where all matter and truth was reduced to a primordial farrago. Base concepts that tethered him to the mundane realities of existence held no sway in the storm he found himself in, and he felt himself becoming a stain that blemished a perfect tapestry.

The tunnel was gone, the Twilight Ocean and the surface were gone. All that remained was the Dao and the runes that spun all around him in a dance that codified reality. Life wasn't life. Death wasn't death. Truth was malleable, and it changed as the

runes swirled around him, forming a river that was everchanging, yet always the same.

Of course, there was also the throne. Standing in the middle of the chaos was a point of order, and on its pedestal, the seed was still beating, each thump deepening the waters of the river around him. The egg was barely recognizable any longer, as it had somehow transformed from something physical into a concept.

Millions upon millions of runes formed a tapestry that while no larger than an ostrich egg, contained a whole universe. It had drawn upon the essence of the Twilight Ocean and distilled it into something greater, something higher. Was this true Dao? Looking at his own avatars, Zac felt like a caveman producing a fledgling fire while looking up at the stars, not able to grasp the vast chasm between the two.

It terrified Zac, and it enthralled him.

Thump.

Zac was now closer, standing at the foot of majesty, his soul weeping with inadequacy. Had he walked the distance, or was he simply moved here because this was his destined terminus? He felt his sanity fraying, but there was a small core that tethered him to the mortal world, and that frayed lifeline was screaming at him to take that thing and get out.

Thump.

He stood on the altar, his skin slowly transforming to conform to the higher truth of this valley. It was slowly gaining a greenish tint, and indistinct runes flickered before once more disappearing. They were of no script Zac could recognize, but they roared like crashing waves of Twilight. This was not a matter of being overrun by a deluge of sludge, it was losing one's fundamental essence in front of a deeper gospel.

The fundamental core of Zac's being was being supplanted, but he barely registered it as his gaze was locked on something marvelous. The egg was not the only thing on the altar. There was something else, something perhaps even more precious than the insight locked in the avatar of Twilight itself.

It was a bead of distilled light hovering right above the egg, but its true appearance was blocked out by four layers of shockingly complex runes. Each beat of the egg released a crashing tsunami of Twilight, but only the most perfected pieces of the tapestry were allowed to enter the arrays enclosing the light.

Zac didn't know why, but it felt like that thing was unsullied by nature, and arrays were the only thing protecting it from being indelibly stained. However, the sanctuary the arrays were providing was slowly being corroded by design, and he knew that this pure light would eventually be swallowed by the river that coursed through this valley. The river of Twilight.

His mind was a chaotic struggle, ripped between the desire to protect and the desire to devour. His companion didn't have the same compunctions, and four chains shot forward, targeting the gestating truth of the ocean. A small mark of endless possibility cried in his mind in desire to fulfill its natal edict, to be consumed and in that way find new life.

But no matter what the Spirit Tool tried, it was unable to dislodge the egg. If anything, it had become a cemented part of the area. It had become the core of this universe, an eternal fixture that couldn't simply be moved or taken away. Every moment Zac felt himself eroding, and he knew something had to change.

Suddenly, a mad idea took form as Zac looked down at the glowing avatar of Twilight. In its current state, it was unapproachable, an extension of the ocean itself. Taking it was as impossible as stealing the whole Mystic Realm.

But what if it was no longer an avatar of Twilight, but an avatar of his own? The more he thought about it, the more it started to make sense. And as his idea sprouted, nurtured by greed and his path, so did the swirling clouds around him lose their luster, the runes no longer mesmerizing in their profundity.

"It's wrong," Zac muttered, his abyssal eyes wide with mania as his silver hair danced in the wind. "It's all wrong. Life is

Life. Death is Death. Forever separate, always in conflict.”

Two storms of Dao and ancient madness surged out from his mind and into his shoulders. It was Life and Death, unsullied and eternal. Twilight was just a half-measure, a mockery of Chaos. It was a poison, and he was the cure.

Conviction had pushed him forward, but Zac was all-too-aware of the gravity of his action, of the risks. This was not the time or place to form the Glimpse of Chaos. He didn't have two intact remnants to provide the fuel for the fusion. What was left was his soul and his life-force, both of which would probably be drained beyond a breaking point to conjure that glimpse.

Zac desperately pushed the two forces apart before they had a chance to fuse in his chest, even if doing so felt like breaking his soul apart. He pushed and pushed, and two storms surged through his arms, pouring out into the radiant egg.

A clap of thunder shook the cosmos, and Zac was thrown dozens of meters away, his body racked with pain. The nebulous clouds churned and cried as he pushed through them in his desire to return, ignoring the mounting feeling of wrongness of the runes around him. The intricate patterns inside the seed of Twilight shuddered and fluctuated wildly, its millions of small runes slowly warping into something new.

And as the egg changed, so did the universe.

A cascading ripple spread through the valley, with the delicate system of Twilight unraveling as it was supplanted by something that resonated with Zac's soul. However, he immediately spotted a problem. While the original Tapestry around him had felt like a cop-out, a defeat in the face of the true peaks of the Grand Dao, it was complete, a self-sufficient system existing in harmony with itself and the universe.

Meanwhile, the chaotic storm he had introduced into the system was just that; a storm.

It was raw power that might hold the potential for a peak creation. But for now, it was incomplete, insignificant insights nibbling at the edges of the truth. Zac didn't exactly know

what this place was designed to accomplish, but he knew that his own Dao was not up to the task. It would sooner or later break apart, even when powered by the distilled essence of the remnants.

Before that happened, he needed to make his move.

“Take it,” Zac said with grit teeth, and the chains once more stormed the egg with rapid ferocity, clawing at it with desperate hunger.

But yet, it was hopeless. It was still fixed in place, the core of this microcosm of Dao. Zac sensed a wave of disappointment, followed by the coffin lid slightly opening to start absorbing the dense clouds of Dao in the valley. It looked like Alea had given up, opting to make the best of a bad situation.

Zac shook his head with a sigh, and thoughts of escape started to take hold. However, he suddenly spotted something changing. The arrays protecting that pure beam of light were fast crackling, suddenly looking like brittle glass as they were imbued with the distilled inspiration wrought from Zac’s path. They clearly weren’t designed or able to hold the energy the egg was now releasing.

Part of him was elated, but part of him was horrified. He could feel it. When the arrays broke apart, that light would be gone forever, like a star being extinguished. It would become sullied by the mundane, and the world would be a little bit worse by it. He couldn’t sit by and watch it unfold, but what could he do?

Another crack echoed out, and Zac lurched forward and swallowed the light before it was too late.

It must have looked like Zac swallowed a sun, but there was no searing pain spreading through his body. If anything, his body was suddenly wrapped in a soothing embrace, no longer beset by the overpowering Daos in the valley. His body had become the Heavens itself, a universe unto its own.

Some of the light illuminated his soul, and he felt his three Dao Avatars blazed into life, each one of them radiating an unprecedented verve. He wasn’t in a state of inspiration, he

was the Dao itself. But the blinding radiance of supremacy was slowly wearing off, and perfection was slipping through his fingers.

That piece of heaven he had swallowed was not so easily absorbed, in a way he had never encountered before. This was not like when swallowing the Cosmic Water or a treasure beyond his grade. He didn't feel like exploding at all. Rather, he felt like a leaking sieve, where his body simply couldn't hold that miraculous light.

The infinitely pure understanding was gradually leaving him, instantly decomposing into lower Dao the moment it touched the environment. Try as he might, Zac found absolutely no way to stem the tides. Zac sighed with despondency, but his eyes soon regained a sense of purpose. Why lament over the loss of borrowed glory when he should make the most of this precious moment in time?

While incomplete, he had branded the egg with his Dao, and it had, in turn, distilled it into something greater, something that was now on full display in the valley. The runes that once held the tapestry of Twilight now held a ratified version of his path. Zac smiled as he suddenly disappeared from the pedestal.

Thump.

[Verun's Bite] ripped through the glittering veils shrouding the valley, its primordial roars echoing the lust for power. Each swing left golden arcs behind as motes of stardust stuck to the bone edge. The arcs seemed like the leaves of the bodhi, not one exactly the same as the others.

It was alive; everchanging and evolving, eternally struggling against death. It was the predator stalking its prey, it was the plant mutating to endure the harshening summers. It was everything, constantly adapting. It might be struck down, but it would never give in. It would rise up again to defy fate, stronger, evolved. And this dance would continue until the end of time.

Thump.

The Dao clouds churned as they were ripped apart by four chains dancing to the tune of inevitability, streaks of darkness forming an inescapable cage. They sealed everything they encircled, like a spider trapping its prey. It was patient, since death would always win in the end. They were the grinding gears of time, the inexorability of fate.

Clouds of Dao kept being swallowed, as this path was always taking, and never giving.

Thump.

He was conflict, ever-changing, never-ending.

He was a storm that raged through the valley, and the cosmos itself answered his call. His body shone with radiant luster as the impossibly pure Dao left his body. However, while he couldn't contain it, it had still been marked by his path. And as it changed, so did the valley. The runes that danced all around him were no longer a river. They had split into two armies that were locked in an epic struggle.

The murky green had turned into shimmering gold and oppressive black, life and death.

This was the truth of Twilight. Such a fragile harmony was bound to be broken as the convoluted ultimately returned to the primal. Oblivion is the inevitable end of Creation, just as Creation invariably will follow Oblivion. Each clash would birth something new, just like each swing of his axe could change his fate.

A thousand scenes flashed through his mind as Zac kept swinging his weapon, memories that had led him down the path he now stood on. Try to avoid it as he might, conflict was inexorable. To accomplish anything in this universe, he would have to keep fighting. If he wanted to change the fate he had been dealt, he would have to keep struggling.

Zac felt his momentum increasing, and the gently swirling clouds of stardust were swept up in the hurricane of his path. Raging wind blasted the black and golden runes, forcing them into even greater clashes. The world shook and thundered, but

Zac kept swinging, feeling he was getting closer and closer... to something.

His movements were mirrored by the avatar in his mind. However, it no longer sat on top of his Soul Core but rather danced on top of the waters of the two oceans. The fading radiance of the bead of light still illuminated its body, and torrential amounts of the Dao Clouds entered his avatar form.

A swing from the avatar illuminated the deathly ocean with streaks of golden light, and a swipe subdued the golden ocean with the threat of death. With every breath, Zac's movement grew more precise, and a dense aura spread out from his body. And as his aura spread, the struggling runes subtly changed.

One moment they were life and death locked in their eternal struggle, the next moment weapons clashing in a pitched war. Zac felt his momentum reaching a precipice, and his Dao Field suddenly congealed. First, it became a condensed ball of his insight hovering above his head, but it soon took a more distinct shape.

It was two axes reaching over twenty meters into the air, one glimmering in gold and the other shrouded in darkness. They both emitted an aura of supremacy, neither willing to give in. Their edges were locked against each other, and the pressure they exerted impacted reality itself. The surroundings twisted and cried from their mere presence, their conflict being imprinted into space itself.

Suddenly, crashing thunder intruded on the scene, and Zac's abyssal eyes widened as the secluded valley of life and death had been encroached upon by churning clouds crackling with purple lightning. A boundless fury subdued the clouds of swirling Dao beneath, and the shimmering runes fast lost their luster. Not even the egg dared to keep beating, now once more a simple stone.

Soon enough, only Zac and the two axes remained, the rest shrouded by the descending clouds. The true Heavens had descended, unwilling to share the truths of the Dao.

This was the price of the Boundless Path, but Zac was undeterred. He raised his axe, and the massive projection

shrunk before entering **[Verun's Bite]**, prompting it to give off a hair-raising aura. Meanwhile, the avatar in his soul returned to its position on top of the Soul Core, its presence rapidly rising.

The Heavens were clearly enraged by Zac's actions, and he was suddenly drowned in purple light as it gathered its punishment. A bolt of condensed wrath descended, and Zac swung his axe in an upward arc, unleashing a wave of terrifying destruction as a smile spread across his face. The Heavens wanted a conflict, but that would only solidify his Dao.

However, the smile turned crooked as the two forces clashed, followed by his outburst of Dao being instantly crushed. The bolt continued completely undiscouraged, slammed into Zac like the fist of an angry god, the force so tremendous that cracks spread across the now-exposed valley. Another bolt soon followed as thunder crashed, and Zac felt his vision blurring as he desperately tried to withstand the electrified fury.

Suddenly, he lost his footing as a massive section of the valley simply crumbled, unable to withstand the presence of the Lightning Tribulation. He felt a surge of ocean water come crashing toward him, but he barely had time for a final thought as a third bolt knocked him unconscious.

Uh oh.

Chapter 748: Imprints

Zac woke up with a start, his still mind scattered by the electrifying experience he'd just endured. He instinctively raised his arms to block the punishment from above, but he soon realized the oppressive presence of the Heavens was gone. It still took him some time for his mind to snap back into focus, and he breathed in relief upon realizing his surroundings weren't shrouded in oppressive darkness.

He was still illuminated by the dark gold of the sky above the surface, meaning he hadn't been dragged into the depths once more. He looked around to orient himself, and he realized that he was actually hanging from a ledge, the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** lodged into the wall to prevent him from being carried away by the currents.

It looked like Alea had saved his bacon when the Lightning Tribulation had knocked him out. A wave of shame hit him, and he shook his head as he dragged himself up to the ledge. He had entered the valley to find a way for Alea to evolve, yet it was he who had snatched the opportunity in the place.

Certainly, the egg was impossible to bring away even after he had risked it all, but he hadn't even stopped to consider whether **[Love's Bond]** might have wanted that amazing bead of pure light as well. He had just shot forward and gobbled it up like a frenzied beast.

"I'll find a way to make it up to you, I promise," Zac sighed as he caressed one of the chains, but there was no response as usual.

However, there was one startling change, and Zac looked at the chain in his hand with marvel. It was still pure black like it had been since the start, but it was now covered in a somewhat familiar pattern. The engravings were black as well, but they

emitted a dense aura of death, making them light up under the scrutiny of [**Cosmic Gaze**].

The script didn't seem like an actual skill fractal or something like that, but they rather reminded Zac of the markings on the Stele of Conflict. Of course, their instilled meaning wasn't at the same level. The stele held the fundamental truths of conflict, profundity at its highest level. Meanwhile, it looked like [**Love's Bond**] had been marked by the deathly runes that had surged like a storm in the valley.

A thought struck Zac, and he took out [**Verun's Bite**] as well. As expected, the axe was covered in similar brands. These markings were golden in color rather than the black of the coffin, and they formed a spiderweb-like array with the red veins that already covered the bone of the edge. Zac looked down at the axe thoughtfully, not sure what to make of the situation.

It really looked like he would have to do something soon.

His axe was already leaning toward life before this, both from the nature of beascrafted weapons and from the treasures it had eaten. It was instilled with the unsurpassed lifeforce of the dragons, and it had drunk the blood of innumerable beasts to complement its nature. Now, it was covered with patterns that held the essence of Life.

While it was great for his human class, it might become a problem for his current form. Should he get another axe to complement Verun? Or should he try to instill another set of brands on the weapon, adding death to the life? Both solutions had their pros and cons, but now wasn't the time to go over it.

Things had gone out of control once again, and he looked at the surroundings with some helplessness. The mountain that held the secluded valley was partly gone, ripped at least into two parts. The ledge he was sitting on was probably a section of the edge of the valley judging by the scorched runes that were engraved on the rock around him.

But the rest of the valley itself was simply gone.

There was just ocean as far as the eye could see, meaning that the pedestal, the egg, and most of the runes most likely had been dragged to the depths of the Twilight Chasm by now. His whole body hurt, but he knew he couldn't stay. The last time he came to this place, the outburst was just a shadow of what he had unleashed today, and who knew how many elites were on the way to investigate the commotion.

He took one last look at the scorched walls, the marks that once held the tapestry of Twilight all but illegible by now, and he scratched the back of his head with a wry smile as he set off. For a moment there he had felt like a true Heaven's Chosen, seizing the Dao and bending it to his will. However, the True Heavens wasn't messing around, slapping him back to reality before he had a chance to properly enjoy the experience.

As to why he was mostly fine, it was clear his **[Void Heart]** had once more come through for him. It had been completely silent since he woke up a few moments ago, and Zac's chest was all pins and needles and covered in red scars that looked like angry veins. It was no doubt a side-effect of the node having drawn all the tribulation lightning into the void before it could cause any real damage.

Luckily, he had activated his **[Void Zone]** just before getting zapped the final time. It hadn't managed to impede the Tribulation Lightning at all for some reason, but it did allow him to avoid getting overwhelmed by Twilight Energy while out of commission. Going by the amount of Void Energy left in the tank, Zac figured he hadn't actually been unconscious for more than a couple of minutes.

Zac pushed through the churning waters as quick as he could muster, heading further toward the center of the chasm rather than back toward the edge. Almost an hour passed, at which point he was finally forced to deactivate the field of nullification that kept the Twilight Energy at bay. Zac braced himself for a struggle now that he didn't have his hidden node to help, but he was surprised to see that it wasn't that bad at all.

It was like the Twilight Energy was suddenly unable, or perhaps rather unwilling, to burrow into his body, and he was beset by less than a third of the invasive infiltration compared to before. His first instinct was that it was thanks to his breakthrough, but he soon concluded that wasn't the case. Having a greater foundation would help against the Twilight Energy, but the effect wasn't this pronounced.

Something else had changed, and Zac didn't need to be a betting man to figure that it was related to the events inside the valley. He wasn't sure if the effect was permanent or not, but for now, he would make the most of it as he created some distance from the shattered mountain.

Zac made good time over the next few hours, and he passed by four mountains until he finally stopped. At that point he found a secluded cave and sealed it up, hiding himself to go over his gains. Having the marks of his Path engraved on his Spirit Tools was an unexpected boon, but that obviously wasn't the biggest win of the day.

The blue screen listing his Dao appeared, and Zac looked at it with marvel.

Branch of the War Axe (Early): All attributes +50, Strength +2250, Dexterity +1000, Endurance +150, Wisdom +250. Effectiveness of Strength +25%.

Evolving the Dao to a Branch unfortunately didn't quite result in a doubling of its attributes, with the flat boost going from 2,250 to 4,000. However, the real gain with a Dao Branch was the force they brought to bear in a fight rather than the jump in stats. It was a qualitative leap in how they empowered skills, in a far more palpable way compared to the difference between a High and Peak Dao Fragment.

Zac had experienced the difference during his fight with Yanub Mettleleaf. His defenses had simply crumbled in the face of the treant's Dao Branch, like he was trying to block a raging flame with a paper sheet. With this, Zac felt he wouldn't be completely outmatched in a direct clash even with the rankers of the trial, though the top names no doubt were still a bit out of his reach even with this latest breakthrough.

Going into the valley he hadn't expected to progress his Dao at all, yet he walked out with a Dao Branch. With how recently he evolved his Fragment of the Axe to the peak, he figured he was years of building a foundation from actually taking this step. But that light had changed everything.

Thinking back to it, Zac still couldn't believe how magical that thing was. It was so far beyond any Dao Treasure or Origin Dao he had encountered so far. It was a blank slate, yet it contained everything. He hadn't even managed to absorb 1% of the light before it slipped out of his body, yet it had pushed him this far. If he had managed to make use of even half of its efficacy, he might very well have pushed all his Daos to the limits of the E-grade.

If he could only get more...

Zac quickly shook his head, knowing he was being too greedy. He hadn't even heard of something like that before, meaning it was beyond rare. Either it was something that could only be encountered by chance, or something that was hoarded by the people at the top. And after going over the events in the valley, Zac started to feel he had a better understanding of what was going on with that valley, and the implications weren't great.

The mystical Egg that Va Tapek made him bring here was some sort of purifier by the looks of it. The mountain had most likely contained an ancient gathering array, and the empowered Twilight Energy had entered the egg through the pedestal.

The egg, in turn, somehow purified and elevated the base concepts that was the foundation of Twilight Energy, and the result was the mysterious runes and Dao Clouds swirling around in the valley. However, even those miraculous things were just a by-product, with the essence of the egg's output being steered toward the light above the egg.

Zac had felt the effect of that light on his own Dao. It didn't connect him to the mighty, yet distant, Grand Dao like Yrial's impartment did. For a moment, he was the Dao. While the line shone on his soul, he had understood it as clearly as though it was his second nature.

Before he had entered, he hadn't actually been clear on what form his first Dao Branch should take. But seeing the runes of his path swirling around him, the clashing war between Life and Death, something had clicked. Of course, it was all thanks to that light that guided the way, but it was till just as clear as before, in contrast to how he felt after most bouts of inspiration.

Focusing on his path had allowed him to learn and consolidate the part of the Dao of Conflict that he needed, infusing it into what was now the Branch of the War Axe. The added epithet of 'War' to his Dao was based on conflict, and it had been symbolized by the very struggle between life and death that was central to his path.

He was a bit unclear on the purpose of infusing Twilight into the miraculous light though. It had such an amazing effect in its pure state, and adding something external felt like it would just blemish it. Was it about efficacy, that the light was hard to absorb normally? The light had provided earthshattering benefits to an E-grade cultivator like him, but for a Monarch, it might be insufficient.

As to who was growing beads of supreme Twilight in the heart of the chasm, it wasn't hard to figure out. The real question was why the hell Va Tapek was working with the Eveningtide Asura. Until now, Zac had worked under the assumption that Catheya's Master had been working alone, or perhaps in conjunction with the other Monarchs from the Undead Empire.

But from the looks of it, that was not the case, unless he had completely misunderstood something about the purpose of that valley.

Zac quickly gave up though. There was simply too much he didn't know, from cultivation to the motives to the old monsters outside. But one thing was for sure; if Alvod found out he was behind this as well, then he might very well be in deep shit. Hopefully, his sight had been blocked after being booted by the System, but Zac still had a bad feeling about it.

Unable to do much about the situation, Zac instead turned his sight inward, and he breathed in relief upon seeing that his

body was in its normal state. He still remembered how his body had been starting to transform for a moment, his skin turning green as markings covered his hands. In fact, he had seen that exact phenomenon before, on the avatar of the Eveningtide Asura. That was the second clue that he had inadvertently thrown a wrench into Alvod's plans, rather than Va Tapek's.

Zac had made a cursory scan before, but it really looked like the odd effect had been dispelled either by the Dao light, or perhaps by him renouncing the path of Twilight. Unlike his weapons, Zac didn't get a set of patterns of his own though. He still looked like a normal Draugr without any mysterious runes to represent his path. But perhaps there was something else that had changed with his body.

Miasma started coursing through his pathways following a set pattern, but there was no response from the energy around him. Zac tried again, this time with a different cultivation manual, but the result was the same. Nothing. He had held onto a small lingering hope after being so in tune with the cosmos for a while, but it looked like he still was a piddling mortal.

His affinity hadn't increased at all, and a few experiments confirmed that his Dao control wasn't any better either.

Still, Zac figured it might be for the best, and he finally turned his gaze toward his Soul Aperture. His soul might have been the area that most directly benefitted from being washed in the glow of the Dao. As expected, he felt that the oceans in his mind had once more been elevated to even greater heights, and watching the waves crashing against each other almost felt like watching a Dao-instilled treasure like the Big Boss's Big Wall.

More importantly, it felt like the oceans were more in tune with himself. It wasn't like he could command them at will, but their insights better matched his own somehow. And it wasn't really a surprise. Before, they had mostly been infused by the insights hidden inside the Twilight Energy, with some craps coming from Divine Crystals and Miasma Crystals.

But now, the waters had gobbled up and copied the very essence of his path thanks to the bright light and the almost endless amount of Dao in the valley. The two avatars of Bodhi and Coffin looked mostly the same, but Zac noted that they were a bit larger compared to before. He didn't really know what that meant, but he figured it was a good thing since they also felt more 'real' somehow.

Perhaps it simply meant he had solidified his foundation, taking him one step closer to forming his other two branches.

The biggest transformation was obviously the Dao Avatar that represented his Branch of the War Axe. It still sat on top of his soul core, with an axe in its hand, but it almost felt like a real being rather than an avatar. Furthermore, it kept changing. Zac curiously observed the avatar as it kept transforming. The avatar had looked like him in his human form before, but it was now in a constant flux between his two identities.

One second it was a human, the next a Draugr, though the Draugr had his true appearance rather than the one Zac used for Arcaz Black. As it switched back and forth, so did the weapon in its hand change. Unsurprisingly, it was the very same axes Zac had conjured while forming the branch.

One was pitch-black and wrapped in chains, and it emitted an extremely oppressive aura. Zac felt suffocated just looking at it, and it felt like those chains were binding him rather than securing the edge to the handle. It was inexorability taken form.

His human form instead held an axe radiating a golden gleam, yet Zac found it impossible to pinpoint what kind of axe it was. One moment it looked a bit like the hatchet he had used when the integration took place, and in another, it resembled **[Verun's Bite]**. But it also looked like a thousand other axes all at once, always changing unpredictably.

The change in the avatar no doubt reflected the integration of Dao and Path. The insight that he had added to his Fragment of the Axe was mainly related to conflict and struggle, and it was filtered through the two stances he had developed over the last year. Yet, as he looked at the two weapons the avatar held,

they never emitted an aura of either life or death even if they clearly represented those paths.

It was a pure branch, rather than mixing it with snippets from his other Daos. It was possible that he would try something like that in the future to better integrate his other two Daos into the Dao of the Axe, but for now, he felt it more prudent to delve deeper into conflict, since it was what bound his Daos together.

There were no other changes he could find, but that was more than enough. He had pretty high hopes for the Twilight Ascent before entering, but the gains had far surpassed what he even dared hope for. His attributes had more than doubled since Kenzie was taken and Thea killed, and most of it was thanks to the Twilight Ocean.

Now, he just needed to make sure he'd survive all the enmities he had created getting this far. First off, he needed to leave the chasm before the Eveningtide Asura returned with a vengeance.

Chapter 749: Folly of the Boundless

Ogras grunted with disgust as he chewed on the astringent mixture of herbs. The sickly heat radiating from the wound on his back was soon replaced by a cooling wave, proof that his makeshift antidote did at least work to some degree. It would take a lot more to rid himself of that sinister poison, but there was no opportunity to properly rest until he reached the next checkpoint.

He didn't know how, but his location was always exposed by those bastards, no matter how well he hid.

The demon sunk into the shadows, and his form soon appeared outside the dilapidated mansion, right in front of the squad of wretched creatures that had hounded him for the past two days. They were no more than a meter tall, but Ogras knew all too well the terror that was hidden within their diminutive forms.

They looked a bit like goblins though their skin was a dark mottled purple. They were also covered head to toe in an arcane script that Ogras couldn't make sense of at all. It felt completely disconnected from the general runes of the Ruthless Heavens, indicating they were wrought in a place outside Heaven's purview.

Their eyes empty holes filled with sinister energy, and they sparked with malice when they saw their target appear. The goblins needed no order to instantly attack. Their bodies bent and twisted as everything from simple spearpoints to massive maws was created from their bodies, attacking Ogras without hesitation or mercy.

His body cracked like a mirror while two ruthless eyes peered at the scene from a safe distance.

Ten spears wrought with condensed shadows sprung out from the ground, impaling a few members of the war party. The spears were covered in ethereal patterns of their own and imbued with the Peak Fragment of the Umbra to maximize their power. The ten spears targeted just six of the goblins, but none of them actually shot toward a vital.

Instead, they all pierced specific runes that shone brightly on the goblins' bodies, causing a chain reaction of cracks spreading through the script. Four of the goblins instantly shattered and turned into dust, leaving not even a corpse behind. However, the other two withstood the attacks as the runes covering their bodies shuddered and frantically rearranged themselves.

The next moment the shadow spears cracked, and the goblins stood there unaffected at all by what should have been a lethal strike. Ogras swore, realizing they had changed up the script again. The surviving goblins screeched in fury as their auras rose, and dozens of purple cracks appeared in the sky, each one of them emitting a cursed aura.

They looked a bit like spatial tears, but Ogras suspected they were something else. Because he had never seen the void on the other side of those things, only nightmares. It was one of these scars that had left the nasty wound on his back a month ago, teaching him a valuable lesson about the danger of these creatures.

The cracks quickly spread like a poison on reality, ripping everything in the surroundings to shreds. Decaying trees, walls, and even the ground turned mottled before it was reduced to ash, prompting a storm of dust to swirl through the area. The building where Ogras had rested was turned into nothingness as one of the goblins drowned in with tears a fit of fury, but it was no skin off Ogras' back.

He had already receded into the shadows, heading west as he sent another of his shadow puppets running due north. He looked down at his forearm as he ran, a small hint of satisfaction on his face. Another line had been added to his tattoo this time, meaning there was just one pattern missing to complete the tapestry.

One out of four would have been considered proper shit luck two weeks ago, but he had hunted these goblin scouts for two weeks without a single one of the two missing lines being filled in. Meanwhile, the creatures had tightened the net in their hunt for him, making every step fraught with danger.

But it was worth it, Ogras figured, and he once more opened the quest screen for a boost of motivation.

The folly of the Boundless. (Limited, Trial): Hunt the Qriz'Ul and collect their core runes. Each fully-filled pattern will form a key. Reward: Based on the number of keys gained. (4/6)

NOTE: All 6 keys are required to enter the Main Repository.

In the beginning, Ogras had felt the mission easy enough. He still remembered the glee upon finding this fragment of a long-lost civilization at the corner of this realm. It had taken the better part of a year trekking through the worlds that simpleton of a Realm Spirit had swallowed as it gallivanted through the void.

He had felt like the chosen one for once, finding ancient ruins at the end of his arduous journey. This was what adventurers dreamt of, the opportunity to rummage through the rotten carcass of a failed society. It was his opportunity to rekindle the dashed hope he had felt upon realizing that the Mystic Realm back on Earth wasn't holding anything of value.

This was a proper Cultivated Realm, where any random building might hold supreme methods and resources. Certainly, none of them had done so thus far, but he was still locked out of the core sections of this place. As he had traveled the broken lands, it quickly became clear that the civilization had fallen in war – and a war of their own making by the looks of it.

It had taken him two months and gathering the first sets of tattoos, but it hadn't been too hard to piece together what had happened. And it was a tale as old as time - a tale of hubris and taking shortcuts in the endless pursuit of power. These people, the Ra'Lashar, had clearly dabbled in the unorthodox,

and they mainly cultivated through summoning beings from another plane – the very same beings that now hounded Ogras every waking moment.

What they actually were, Ogras still didn't know. Because they sure as hell weren't goblins. In fact, Ogras had already realized that their appearance was a simple form of mimicry, taking the shape of the ones who had summoned them. Their true form was some sort of energy creature, and they could even be considered living arrays.

The Qriz'Ul were actually the dense scripts covering the bodies, rather than the bodies themselves. The only way he had found to kill them was by piercing their core runes, but the problem was that the runes kept changing. He had managed to kill four easily enough this time, but the stronger ones were far harder to deal with, especially considering every drawn-out battle attracted hundreds of these things.

Ogras had never heard of beings such as this before, but he knew that they could pose a huge threat if they ever spread out of this place. He had seen it, seen how three creatures suddenly split into nine, each one almost as strong as the originals. With that kind of ability to multiply, they would become a blight on any planet they inhabited.

Thankfully, it looked like the civilization that had summoned these things understood that fact as well and had created some sort of multi-layered seal that kept these critters inside their kingdom. They had even created a trial to cleanse the Qriz'Ul in return for their heritage, which was the quest the Ruthless Heavens had provided the moment he stepped through the outermost seal.

Most likely it was an act of vengeance on their killers rather than an act of goodwill, but Ogras didn't care. Killing these things was decent experience, and as soon as the tattoo was filled to the next tier, he would be able to access a higher tier of rewards. And he knew where the final piece of the puzzle waited.

Ogras eyes turned toward the tower far in the distance, his eyes gleaming with desire. Every checkpoint brought him

closer to that structure, and the rewards would grow better with every step. Now that this place had been integrated by the Ruthless Heavens, there was no chance for them to balk on the reward either.

That didn't mean there were no hidden traps, but Ogras knew he could turn back any moment. Between every seal was a secure checkpoint which doubled as an opportunity to exchange his tattoos for riches, and if things got too heated, he'd simply back down. The price of overconfidence was apparent all around him, and he wasn't about to get done in by some demon-goblins.

He was getting out alive from this netherblasted realm, and he'd exchange some of the wealth he had accumulated in this prison for a bacchanalia that would make the Succubi of the Twin Lotus Pavilion blush with shame. If he didn't beget a dozen little bastards in whatever town he found outside the Dimensional Seed, then his name wasn't Ogras.

That didn't mean he wouldn't push himself. Every time he considered cashing in, he pictured that dull face. He pictured that annoying smile as one treasure after another fell into that man's paws. He could feel it. Whatever Zachary Atwood was doing right now, he was no doubt falling headfirst into some opportunity, no doubt while setting the whole sector on fire.

Ogras knew that the five years in this virgin world had completely elevated his prospects and allowed him to make shocking progress, but it wasn't enough. How embarrassing would it be if they met in a couple of years, and that bumbling human had somehow gone even further ahead after Ogras had enjoyed this kind of environment for years on end?

It was unacceptable.

So Ogras refocused on the task at hand, slowly following the calling on the incomplete tattoo. When he was missing two marks, it had pointed in every direction, making it completely useless. But now that there was just a single piece missing, it was pointing him toward a single location. Ogras had encountered this phenomenon four times already, and he knew that the big boss held the final piece of the puzzle.

Killing any more of these troublesome critters would just draw more attention, so he melded with the shadows as he moved through the ruins like a wraith. Eventually, he reached the spot indicated. It was a large domed building that might once have served as a temple. Dozens of Qriz'Ul ambled around at its gate, but Ogras noted that not a single one stepped inside.

Using [**Darkside**] to teleport onto one of the balconies would have been the easiest solution, but it was out of the question. These things looked pretty dumb, but they were pretty alert when it came to energy fluctuations. If not for his Fragment of Mirage, he would have been caught innumerable times by now.

Instead, Ogras was forced to slowly crawl closer, making use of brief windows of opportunity where the aimlessly wandering creatures had lumbered far away enough that he could sneak a bit closer. Finally, he reached the wall of the temple, and with one fluid motion dragged himself up along the wall until he reached a secluded balcony five meters up.

He jumped inside, [**Skybreaker**] already at the ready in his hand, but he was thankfully greeted by an empty room that seemed to have serviced as a scribe's workstation. Old illegible scrolls covered the floor, the ink on the parchment long faded away. The door to the chamber was closed, but it luckily didn't squeak at all as he pushed it open to peer outside.

A nose.

That all ogras saw. A nose as large as an Alpha Barghest, full of welts and sinister runes, pointing straight toward the sky in defiance of both beauty and common sense. Ogras' heart almost jumped out of his mouth, and he pushed the door shut again ever-so-slowly, afraid to startle the thing right outside.

How was this fair?

The goblin that was lying in the domed chamber at the heart of this temple had to be over fifteen meters tall while maintaining its original proportions. By the looks of it, it was sleeping, but Ogras didn't know if these creatures actually slept. He hadn't seen any evidence of them doing so thus far at least.

He had observed the thing for a moment, but that creature was clearly not only big but also filled to the brim with the dark energies of the Qriz'Ul. Ogras guessed it might even have evolved to the next step, though its aura wasn't nearly as deep as his grandpa's. Still, tackling a creature of this magnitude, it was asking too much of him. Even with the skill he got at level 125, Ogras didn't feel confident at all.

"Well, I guess that's it for me," Ogras muttered with reluctance as he turned toward the balcony.

"Are you sure?" a shrill and guttural voice muttered from behind. "I can- ACK!"

The speaker didn't get any further as **[Skybreaker]** pierced straight into its forehead, and the spear turned into a blur as it kept stabbing over and over. Unfortunately, it looked like the attacks were completely ineffectual.

"I'm dead damnit, so stop trying to kill me," the goblin said with exasperation as he tried to swat the spearhead away, though his hand simply went straight through the weapon. "Look at me, you idiot. Do I have those runes across my skin?"

"Sorry, didn't notice," Ogras lied as he moved toward the balcony while he gripped a thick stack of exploding talismans.

Of course he had noticed, but what did it matter? It wasn't like the original citizens of this place were his allies even if a few of them had somehow survived until now. If anything, they might get in the way of him getting to the treasures. Better kill and say a prayer in case the goblin was friendly, than get killed by some rune-parasite-summoning lunatic.

"So long our world has been lost to the river of time, and a bastard like you is the one who finds us," the goblin muttered. "Well, I guess it's destiny."

"Whatever," Ogras whispered with a roll of his eyes. "What do you want? And speak with a lower volume, you imbecile."

"Because of that dolt?" the goblin sneered as he glanced at the closed door. "We could sing and dance for an hour without that

thing noticing. It's placed itself in a type of stasis to reserve energy."

"Good to know," Ogras shrugged, still whispering. "So what do you want?"

"It would be a shame if you left like this," the goblin grunted. "There are still a lot of Qriz'Ul profaning our final resting place."

"Well, that's not my problem," Ogras shrugged. "Should have thought of that before you summoned them."

"Well, that's true. The second part, that is," the goblin agreed. "As for the first, I wouldn't be so sure."

"Is that a threat?" Ogras asked, his eyes thinning as he tried to figure out if he had any ghost-killing capabilities. Unfortunately, he lacked any life-attuned abilities like those Zachary Atwood possessed.

"Threat? No, an opportunity," the ghost said with a wide grin. "That Ka'Zur Planeswalker in your body is giving you trouble, no?"

"What are you talking about?" Ogras shrugged, barely managing to keep his face impassive.

"No need to play dumb with me, brat," the goblin snickered. "I might just be a figment brought back from the void to maintain this place, but I was once a Grand Warlock who had delved in the arcane for eons. I know one of those shadelings when I see them."

"And you want to help me?" Ogras said with a raised brow. "Pretty generous for a goblin ghost."

Simultaneously, his mind was going over what he had learned of these goblins so far, comparing it to what the little ghost in front of him was saying. This civilization had almost all focused on contracting and training nefarious creatures from another realm, using them to fight in their stead. And while these things were distinctly different from Asshole in some regards, they were a bit similar in others.

Were they actually related? Did Asshole come from the same realm as the odd parasites outside? And did that mean their methods might actually be of use for him?

Getting fused with Asshole had led to a higher affinity to shadows, at the risk of his very soul. The Ka'Zur Planeswalker had been quiet for a long time, but Ogras knew it was lurking somewhere in the depths of his soul, waiting for the opportunity to pounce. It wouldn't get the chance. However, permanently dealing with Asshole without losing the benefits that the creature provided was easier said than done.

If he could impose a Soul Brand on Asshole, he would be completely safe from attack as long as he maintained his cultivation lead. Now, he didn't even dare get too wounded or go all-out in a fight out of fear that the creature would make a move.

"Generous? Not really, but my hatred for the bastards outside is greater than my indifference to you. This shield won't last forever, and I'm afraid it will break apart before someone more competent than you appear here," the goblin shrugged.

"Well, I'm all ears," Ogras said.

"Whoever tampered with that creature in your body didn't know what he was doing," the goblin said as he looked at Ogras with disgust. "You are one, yet separate. One of our great shamans possessed a technique to draw the creatures of the Lost Plane into her body, using them to empower herself. With that method, you will be able to truly make use of the power locked inside you."

"And look how that went for her," Ogras said with a pointed look.

"Our demise was due to another experiment," the goblin said with a roll of his eyes. "Rasata fought to the very end, and the creatures that had fused with her soul never managed to revolt. Of course, the moment she fell, her body became an eldritch horror that accelerated the fall of our civilization. A regrettable quirk, but who cares what happens to our body after we fall? Might as well go out with a bang."

“And let me guess,” Ogras sighed. “That method is locked inside the tower? Probably guarded by a bunch of supercharged bastards like the big guy outside?”

The widening grin of the goblin was all the answer he needed.

Chapter 750: Seal

Zac would have preferred to enter seclusion for a few days to consolidate his gains, but he was running against the clock here. Alvod had given him one month to unblock at least one jammer, and he had already spent a good chunk of that time climbing the chasm and heading to the valley. He would have to get used to his newfound power on the go.

He soon left the cave, swimming even further toward the heart of the Twilight Chasm. Zac didn't want to head back where he came from since that way would take him toward the Living Pulse once more, which was the opposite of what he wanted. If he had entered the Twilight Chasm from the South, then he instead set a rough course heading northeast.

The Death Pulse should be somewhere in the opposite direction of the Living Pulse, and cutting straight through the surface layer of the Twilight Chasm would save a few weeks of travel time. Hopefully, that would also lessen the chance of encountering elites, since even they usually stayed at the periphery of the chasm.

It wasn't that he was afraid. This deep in the trial he was nigh-invulnerable thanks to his resistance to Twilight Energy. But the moment his location was leaked, it would lead to all kinds of trouble. And the top combatants had all kinds of methods to stay alive, making it almost impossible to guarantee his secret being kept.

Of course, not even Zac dared to enter the most central area of the Twilight Chasm even in his current state, which was purported to be a towering mountain tens of times larger than the ones he climbed here. According to rumors, it stretched tens of thousands of meters above the surface, and it held just as great treasures as the deepest depths of the chasm.

But it was also crawling with Beast Kings, and not something Zac wanted to entangle himself with right now. There was too much to do, and too little time. The days passed as he crossed from mountain to mountain, occasionally snatching a herb or mineral that seemed valuable. His senses were constantly stretched to their limits in search of other trial-takers, but he hadn't spotted a single one.

Had he overestimated the elites of this opening, or were the rankers busy with something else?

He was however constantly targeted by large packs of beasts every time he reached a new mountain. But Curiously enough, not a single one of the Beast Kings made their appearance to lead their subordinates, even when Zac could sense their auras hiding deep in the mountains. That only increased the unease Zac felt, and his mind was starting to get frayed after a week's travel.

He knew that he wasn't scary enough to subdue all the Beast Kings in the chasm, so just what was going on? These behemoths were the most common source of deaths in the chasm, yet he was swimming through their territories unchallenged. Were they laying low because of what transpired in the valley? Or had a certain apex predator lurking in the depths made an appearance recently?

Zac didn't know what was the case, and the mystery prompted Zac to push himself to his limit to cross the chasm in record time. With his improved attributes and experience with far deadlier currents in the depths, Zac found himself able to almost effortlessly cover ground. Sometimes, he was even able to hitch a ride with one of the currents, saving hours in one go.

Unfortunately, he did feel that the Twilight Energy was starting to enter his body at a greater and greater rate, meaning the immunity he enjoyed wasn't permanent. Zac wasn't too bothered by that fact though. It would last over a month by the looks of it, and by that time he would be far from the chasm. Another week passed, and Zac eventually reached the other edge of the chasm, with less than a week to spare before the deadline.

It looked pretty much the same as there he first arrived, a massive wall stretching down into the darkness, with enormous currents rushing into the chasm to turn into submerged waterfalls. He didn't immediately approach, but instead stayed hidden on a nearby mountain for almost an hour without making a move.

No matter if it was his Draugr-sense or [**Cosmic Gaze**], he still couldn't spot any cultivators staying by the edge, and it was starting to get to him. There were millions of cultivators participating in the trial, and normally, there should at least be a few thousand who venture into the chasm every round.

He gave it some thought, but he eventually decided to stay in his Draugr form as he set off toward the edge. His Draugr identity was definitely exposed because of the ladder, making his human identity a lot safer in comparison. Of course, it wasn't a very good disguise considering the bounty on his head, but he knew that the prompt required a few seconds to appear.

A few seconds might not sound like a lot, but it was enough to either ambush an unsuspecting party or escape with a talisman. That had been his original idea, but he didn't dare break the array hiding his Duplicity Core unless necessary now.

Zac reached the edge soon enough and was greeted with a barren landscape that stretched for miles. Still, the scene was filled with a sense of beauty to Zac, who was more than done with the subdued darkness of the Twilight Chasm. Besides, he knew that the environment should soon gain some more greenery. It was simply that the currents made it impossible for anything to grow around the edge.

Sure enough, the desolate rocks were soon replaced by a thick bed of moss and swaying seaweed. Ten minutes later, the grass had grown to over five meters in height, turning the area into a veritable forest. Zac was forced to slow down his pace somewhat since this area had to be a prime location for an ambush.

He suddenly spotted something amiss, though it wasn't a cultivator lying in wait. It was rather a massive rune that

shimmered in the waters at the edge of his visibility. It only lasted a second before it disappeared, making it almost seem like the water refractions were playing with his mind. However, after the first one came another, and two turned into innumerable runes that stretched across the horizon.

It was like the whole Twilight Chasm had been cordoned off by some sort of array, and Zac immediately took out the array disk for his quest. For the second time, the tracker indicated a spot not too far away. The first time was when he had almost finished his climb on the opposite side of the chasm.

By the looks of it, the location was situated right beneath the line demarcated by the gargantuan array. These runes were connected to whatever jammers the Twilight Lord wanted removed, and they probably stretched all around the Twilight Chasm. The question was what kind of array had been set up, and who was behind it.

The native clans being behind this felt like a distinct possibility, considering they should be the factions with the most reason to stop the Eveningtide Asura's plans. Exactly what the Eveningtide Asura was planning wasn't clear, but the words of Yod echoed in the back of his mind.

The Corpselord had been convinced that someone wanted to blow up the whole Mystic Realm to drain it of its resources, but he had rather been convinced that the culprit was the foreign empires rather than the Twilight Lord himself. And knowing the ruthless method of cultivation the Eveningtide Asura employed, Zac figured this Mystic Realm wasn't long for the world if he had his way.

The empires were clearly embroiled in this matter as well, and the more Zac learned the more he understood he had no business getting himself involved with something like this. Yet he found himself swimming toward the spot marked on the tracker, using the lush plantlife as a means to cover his approach.

Soon enough he got within a few kilometers of the mark on his tracker, but he still hadn't spotted anything amiss. He got closer and closer, moving back and forth to get a better

vantage. And eventually, he saw it. There was just a large pillar embedded in the ground, covered in markings. It was the same color as the ocean itself, and the engravings made it blend in almost perfectly with the seaweed around it, forming a nigh-perfect camouflage.

That wasn't only true for his mundane senses. The energy it emitted was wholly unimpressive, not standing out from the plants in the area at all.

If Zac was just passing by, he could probably have swum a few hundred meters from it without noticing its existence at all. It had to be a disguise. The Eveningtide Asura had risked the wrath of the Heavens to enter the Trial and find someone to shut that thing off. Perhaps the pillar had arrays hiding the energy it emitted.

The scene was a bit odd, making Zac feel something was amiss. He could simply take out a projectile from his spatial ring and destroy that thing with a lazy throw. Why were there no defenses to the thing?

As far as he could tell, the pillar wasn't even protected by a weak barrier, and there were no warriors or defensive golems stationed there either. If this was an integral piece supposed to thwart the Eveningtide Asura, why had it simply been planted and forgotten like this?

Zac scanned the area over and over, using every method available in his repertoire to look for any sort of trap. But there was nothing. Zac hesitated for a second before he swam upward, heading for the surface of the ocean. He risked getting exposed this way, but he needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

This odd setup looked harmless enough, yet it looked like it managed to keep the whole Twilight Chasm depopulated. There had to be some trick to it. But there was nothing to see on the surface either, except torrential storms and a humongous flying Beast King howling in the distance.

He quickly swam back to the depths before he was spotted, and he soon enough found himself just fifty meters from the Array Pillar. Part of him wanted to just ignore this thing and

keep going, but the thinly veiled threat of the Eveningtide Asura made him grit his teeth and take out **[Verun's Bite]**.

A deep growl made the waters vibrate as Zac shot forward, the large jagged edge of **[Gorehew]** forming in front of the axe. Thankfully, the Spirit Tool hadn't suddenly become incapable of channeling his undead skills after gaining the golden patterns. If anything, it felt like energy coursed through the weapon smoother compared to before.

Zac was in front of the pillar in no time, but his eyes widened when the seemingly engraved runes across the pillar rearranged themselves with dizzying speed, releasing a tremendous blast that rebuffed his strike and pushed Zac back over twenty meters. The strike had come from what looked like a gate made from the runes, and out of it, a densely tattooed man stepped out.

The attacker seemed to be a member of the Havarok Empire judging by the tattoos that covered his body, but Zac was filled with a sense of wrongness as he looked into the man's empty eyes. There was no spark of sapience in those eyes, and the man in front of him reminded Zac of the silver guards of Salvation more than an elite cultivator.

It wasn't strictly a puppet though as Zac could sense that the man in front of him was alive. However, his energy signature was pretty odd. He neither resembled a living cultivator nor carried the mark of undeath. He rather off an aura similar to a creature of the Twilight Abyss, perfectly in tune with the Twilight Energy. Furthermore, even after having observed the odd puppet-man for a few seconds, no contribution points showed up over his head, meaning the System didn't consider the man a trial-taker.

The runes on his body immediately lit up in a dark golden-green, and Zac instantly felt a storm of Twilight Energy gather around him. In an instant, the energy density in the area had reached levels that surpassed the outer chasm, and if not for his unique constitution, he would have been in big trouble.

Zac looked back and forth between the silent man and the pillar behind him, no longer sure just which one of them was

the actual target. The puppet reeked of killing intent, and he shot toward Zac as energy built in his body. His runes turned almost blinding and chaotic arcs something surrounded him.

His first instinct was to call it lightning, but it was fully made by Twilight Energy. It made him think of his experience in the valley, where he almost got convinced that life was not life, and death was not death. They were rather receptacles for something else, like how Twilight had somehow become a receptacle for thunder in the puppet in front of him.

It was an interesting contrast to his own path, but Zac didn't have any time to study it as the puppet was almost instantaneously upon him. The warrior didn't have any weapons and instead swiped his hand toward Zac like a beast. Waves of twilight thunder rippled forward, and Zac was shocked at the power the attack contained.

This puppet, had it once been one of the Rankers of the trial? Zac had a hard time imagining too many being able to unleash such a forceful attack, even if he wasn't restrained by the Twilight Energy in his current state. However, Zac quickly realized the truth of the matter as he sensed a familiar source of power in the cascading wave of destruction.

Lifeforce.

The zombified cultivator was burning his longevity to unleash terrifying amounts of energy in the go, and the whole area groaned under the chaotic might of his attacks. Still, it was nowhere near enough to make Zac feel despair, and he stood in place as a thick coffin sprung up in front of him. It was the skeletons of [**Profane Exponents**] that had made their appearance, for once not being beset by terrifying currents the second Zac brought them out.

The roiling wave of lightning struck the barrier, and the whole area for almost a hundred meters was instantly turned into a void as the water was forcibly evaporated. Of course, the odd scene only lasted for an instant before the ocean collapsed on itself again, causing a storm to erupt in the area.

But the crashing ocean itself was cut in two as Zac swung his weapon, its edge radiating the unquestionable might of the

Branch of the War Axe. The lightning storm was unable to last even a moment as the ripping edge of Dao shot forward, its churning chaos nothing in of the madness of war.

The energy whole area itself was suddenly roiling, and not from the outbursts of attacks. It was Zac who had unleashed his Dao Field, which now was powerful enough to almost impact the fundamental laws of the area. Even the usually harmonious Twilight Energy was growing erratic, almost breaking apart in an internal struggle.

For a moment the outline of two massive axe appeared behind Zac's back, but they only lasted for a fraction of a second before they dissipated and joined the more intangible energy of the overpowering Dao Filed. Zac wasted no time as he appeared right next to the puppet, the edge of **[Gorehew]** once more ripping toward him.

The puppet had been pushed off-balance by the Dao Field, and its runes flickered as he hold his head in a silent scream. Zac guessed the zombification process wasn't perfect, and the warrior's original path suddenly found itself in a struggle against the one imposed on his body. Ultimately, it didn't matter, and the black edge ripped him clean in two, prompting a surge of energy to enter Zac's body.

Zac looked at the bisected body of the cultivator thoughtfully for a moment before he swam toward the pillar. No wonder the chasm was so empty. If puppets like these were placed out all around the area, few would dare to make their move. Its combat strength was nothing to scoff at, but more importantly, the amount of Twilight Energy it had gathered was enough to kill most warriors on its own.

A second swing destroyed the array pillar as well, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when the engravings on its surface actually detached from the crumbling rock and turned into glistening sigils hovering in the water itself. The runes quickly reformed themselves, distorting and elongating until eight vortices formed.

From the void, eight more figures stepped out onto the ground, each one of them radiating the same killing intent as their

fallen comrade as the energy density area started climbing toward unprecedented levels. Zac's first instinct was to book it, but he swore in surprise when the whole area was suddenly sealed by some sort of Twilight Energy lock.

Zac looked back at the eight warriors with a sigh as torrential amounts of Miasma started to churn in his body. It looked like these guys wanted to lock him down, but two could play that game. It looked like it was time to try out his new skill.

Chapter 751: Pillar of Desolation

The rampaging Twilight Energy was putting even Zac at a disadvantage as he felt dangerous amounts storming into his body even with the latent protection he had gained inside the valley. Thankfully, simply using his new-and-improved Dao Field lessened the pressure significantly, which allowed him to finish charging his new skill without having to turn to his Void Energy.

He had figured that a supreme-quality skill would be pretty energy-hungry, but he was shocked to find that it required 60% of his energy to finally form, meaning it was actually impossible to activate solely with his hidden energy reserve. That alone was crazy considering how massive an energy pool his attributes and Draugr heritage provided, but even more shocking was the fact that a small amount of distilled energy of Oblivion was dragged into the skill fractal.

Zac had no time to worry about that though as the skill was finally ready, and it was just in time. The eight puppets seemed to have realized that he wasn't exploding from energy overload, and their auras started to accumulate as they no doubt readied themselves to strike. However, they were too late as the whole area rumbled as it was rapidly being swallowed by endless darkness.

He himself was no exception, and he felt himself meld with the nothingness around him. He was suddenly one with the domain, and Zac felt he would be able to appear wherever he wished. He could also stay and let his skill do the work for him, which he opted to do. Unsurprisingly, the eight puppets instantly stopped in their tracks as they tried to find their way in the darkness.

From that darkness, a sole pillar suddenly rose from the ground, and even Zac was shocked at the grotesque monument of suffering even if he was the one who had conjured it. It looked a bit like a totem pole reaching fifty meters into the air, and it was completely constituted from statues and reliefs of hundreds of people locked in agony.

Some missed arms or other limbs, while others were maimed to the point of entrails spilling down on their neighbors. A few even held their decapitated heads in an embrace as they were pinned to the pole by thick chains that formed an intricate mesh from top to bottom.

Their wounds were carved with excruciating detail, yet their facial features were indistinct, creating a sense of discordance. But as Zac looked at the figures, the unreadable faces suddenly became all-too-familiar. It was the faces of those who he had killed on his journey. Thankfully, the effect only lasted an instant before the statues turned back to their previous form.

A few seemed to be struggling against the fetters that bound them while an even smaller group was lost in a fugue of abject hopelessness. However, most of the depicted warriors, especially those placed toward the top, seemed to be struggling to climb higher. To reach the orb above them.

At the top, a sphere of utmost darkness hovered, an anti-sun radiating true death. Zac could feel that not even an undead would be safe if entering that thing, since there ultimately was an uncrossable line between undeath and true death.

And in the heart of the orb - nothingness. Oblivion.

It was just a small seed, but it was enough to bring true finality to death. Yet, for some reason, the wretched beings seemed desperate to enter the orb, even though they were frozen in place. You could perhaps say that the totem pole represented limbo, whereas the orb represented release.

However, try as they might, they would never reach that spot, bound as they were by thick fetters of desolation. The orb hovered untouched, drenching the area in its immense aura.

The dark domain it had created was different from the darkness that spread from skills like **[Deathmark]** or Varo's obfuscation skills. It was a sealed domain with no escape, and Zac looked with interest as the remaining runes of the pillar cracked, making sure that no other puppets would be teleported to the area.

At the edge of the domain, a river of darkness created a towering wall as impassable as the River Styx itself. Certainly, people could enter if they so wished, but doing so would put them in Zac's kingdom. Here he was sovereign ruler, the arbiter of fate. Not even Twilight held sway in here, and it was severely weakened by the combination of his Dao Domain and the orb exuding supremacy at top of the totem pole.

The zombified warriors worked as one, unsurprisingly deducing that the pillar presented a huge threat. Each of them conjured massive waves of energy as they launched their strikes at the base. Some of the attacks were elemental in nature, like the blast of twilight-touched lightning from the first cultivator to appear.

Others were just chaotic mixes of energy, condensed into a lethal storm that tried to tear apart everything it touched. However, not one of them used any skill, and Zac was starting to suspect they weren't able to. Whatever was done to these people had fused them with the Twilight Ocean, probably at the cost of their original cultivation methods.

Zac sent out a mental command, and eight of the ethereal chains on the totem pole shot out, each of them targeting a puppet. They entered the chaotic storm of twilight like spears of death, but they were swallowed in the tide as the barrage slammed into the totem pole with enough power to almost destroy space itself.

However, the core of **[Pillar of Desolation]** only received superficial damage even from such a terrifying strike. Some of the statues had cracks running across their bodies while a few of the chains shattered. The chains that Zac had sent out were momentarily dispelled into puffs of darkness, but they had actually reformed after less than a second and were already closer to their targets than they were before.

The puppets finally displayed some semblance of sapience as they spread out, with four shooting toward the pillar whereas the others tried to break out from the domain. Those who went of the offense were struck down first, and Zac felt a surge of Miasma entering his body as the first of the puppets was caught while the other three desperately dodged.

Just like the old skill [**Profane Seal**], the chains immediately started draining their captives of energy, becoming fodder for Zac to keep fighting. The tattooed warrior furiously struggled as it released one strike after another, but the moment the chain had actually ensnared him, it was like it had transformed from an intangible manifestation of darkness into a physical object.

Suddenly, it was as durable as the totem pole itself, and it barely received a scratch as it dragged the man closer and closer to the pillar. In fact, it was a few of the statues that were pulling on the chain, and Zac almost felt like he could sense a hint of schadenfreude in their blank eyes as they pulled the captive closer and closer.

A second one of the zombies was caught soon after, and then a third. They were pretty agile even without access to skills, but many of their advantages were nullified here. Some of their energy-gathering ability was blocked out by the layers of domains, but more importantly, the whole area was under tremendous pressure from the orb in the air.

The old [**Profane Seal**] had a massive fractal that doubled as a gravity array, and that effect was retained in an even more powerful form from the glowing anti-sun. These puppets had tried to take the pillar down, but the closer they got, the more affected they were by the restriction. Soon enough, they became too slow to avoid the chains.

Zac sensed that he could actually activate [**Blighted Cut**] any time he wanted after having caught the first set of puppets, but he wanted to unearth the full effect of the skill now that he had activated it for the first time. Everything had been so clear when he formed the thousands of patterns that made up this terrifying ability, but it had all become blurred and confused even before he completed the process.

Now, things were slowly coming back to him, and he looked with rapt attention as the first of the puppets were finally dragged onto the pillar by the nearby statues. It struggled and fought, but it was all in vain as the statues enclosed the man in an embrace as the fetters wound them all tighter and tighter.

A pained wail echoed out from the puppet, and Zac could see some emotion in its eyes for the first time – fear. It only lasted for a fraction of a second though before the enormous sphere of death on the top of the pole released a pulse, prompting a wave of darkness to cascade down along the length of the pillar. It passed the spot where the warrior was being held, continuing out through the other chains to deliver a painful surge to the other captives.

The darkness passed, and the puppet bound to the pillar was gone, replaced with yet another statue locked in an eternal struggle. Meanwhile, it looked like the totem pole had grown a bit taller, and the sphere at the top had grown slightly more oppressive.

The other half of the puppets were still trying to break out from the prison Zac had conjured, but the river swirling at the edge of the cage was as impassable as his old skill, or rather even more so. Zac could feel how their monumental attacks were disrupting the churning waters, but it wasn't enough. It was an everchanging blockage, and Zac sensed how the cracks in his skill were swiftly moved away, replaced by other sections of the river.

Breaking out was possible, but you would either need to be able to unleash a terrifying strike to split apart the river in one go, sort of like Billy's titanic smashes that could break apart almost any array. If that wasn't an option, you'd need extremely keen senses or good scouting skills, so that you could keep track of the damage you caused.

The second option was easier said than done even if you had the capability, since **[Pillar of Desolation]** wasn't the only skill Zac would have going in a situation like this. Activating another skill would force him out of hiding, but Zac didn't care as he silently appeared at the edge of the cage, far away from his targets.

One spectral wraith after another appeared as Zac activated **[Deathmark]**, and he smiled with satisfaction as he saw the wraiths looking more corporeal than usual. It was no doubt thanks to the orb of budding Oblivion shining down on the area. While it suppressed the interlopers in this domain, it also looked like it helped Zac's summons.

He didn't feel any boost to himself, but that was perhaps because he wasn't a conjuration of death like the axe-wielding wraiths. In either case, they looked slightly more corporeal, and while they didn't seem much stronger, they would last longer and be able to withstand more punishment before dissipating.

Soon enough three more puppets were caught by the chains of death. Two of them were inexorably dragged toward the pole, but one managed to resist. It was an extremely bulky warrior who probably had Strength as his main attribute that managed to resist the pull. He had dug his feet into the ground, and his limbs bulged as he released a torrent of energy to withstand the pull of the fetters and even topple the pillar itself.

However, the stalemate only lasted a second before a wraith flashed over, its axe separating the man's head from his torso with an emotionless swing imbued with the Branch of the War Axe. Soon enough he was dragged along with the others, joining the statues on the pole.

Zac finally felt a pang of danger as the two surviving warriors shot toward him, their auras rising to unprecedented levels. Zac had been in this very situation more than once before, and the small skeletal warriors of **[Profane Exponents]** appeared behind him, just in time to form a thick barrier to seal him off.

The next moment, the cage wildly shuddered as the two puppets self-detonated, creating a terrifying explosion of Twilight Energy in the area. The barriers Zac had hastily erected were only enough to block the destruction for a second, but that was enough for Zac to activate and flash away with **[Abyssal Phase]**.

The rumbling soon subsided, and Zac deactivated all his skills. The real Twilight Ocean soon came crashing back, no longer

held back by his deathly river, and Zac looked at the desolation around him with a satisfied smile. Two deep craters had been left in the ground after the puppets self-destructed, but Zac was more interested in the small spot frayed space that lingered at the area where the core of the anti-sun had once been.

It was a crackling black glob that shuddered as it was rooted in place, looking a bit similar to a spatial tear yet decidedly different. It almost felt like a frayed thread on a sweater, and if Zac pulled on the thread it would lead into the true Abyss. Zac obviously wouldn't do such a thing, instead opting to immediately set off after confirming that he had progressed the quest and that there was no loot to pick up.

The lack of Spatial Treasures was disappointing, but the quest progress was higher than expected. In fact, it had reached (9/729). It mostly confirmed that it was those odd Havarok cultivators who were considered the jammers in the quest, rather than the array pillar itself. There were probably a lot of them lurking around the rim of the Chasm, and what he'd seen so far didn't give Zac reason to believe finishing the quest to be overly difficult.

The preparations of the Havarok might have been enough to thwart most people since most would be lucky if they could even stay alive in front of the energy density the puppets conjured. Zac even guessed that only he and Uona would have the ability to trash those things as they came.

Even then, Zac didn't start swimming along the edge of the array in search of the next pillar, and neither did he wait for another batch of puppets to come looking for him. He kept going straight ahead instead, moving further and further away from the chasm. Destroying the pillar was simply a precaution, a way for him to display some progress in case the Eveningtide Asura really had some hidden traps in case he completely disregarded the quest.

But there was no way he was actually going to keep breaking open those jammers.

A [**Perennial Vastness Token**] was nice and all, but you needed to be alive to enjoy it. This was a Decree quest, and he would have to physically head over to the Eveningtide Asura or an assigned representative to cash in on the quest. The chance of him surviving such an exchange was worse than slim.

Getting a decree quest would normally be a dream come true for most wandering cultivators, since getting one was the quickest way to add a Teleportation Array to your private teleportation system. Just being able to travel back and forth between Twilight Harbor and some other world in the Zervereth Sector would allow you to make a decent living as a porter.

But that was for normal cultivators, and for normal times. It wasn't even a given that the Twilight Harbor would exist in a few decades if Alvod Jondir had his way, so what good was teleportation access? And even the harbor survived, would Zac dare return to this place after the ruckus he had caused?

So why make an enemy of the Havarok Empire for a reward that you'd never get to enjoy? If anything, the more of the jammers that stayed intact, the better. That way the Eveningtide Asura was more likely to have his hands full while Zac fled back to the Zecia sector in his human form, never to be seen again.

Zac even wished he was a bit more talented like his sister. If he was, he might have figured out a way to seal up the chasm even better. But for now, creating some chaos would have to do.

Chapter 752: The Spider and the Fly

Zac knew he had been too reactive until now, dealing with things as they came. But he knew he needed to start making some moves on his own, or he'd eventually get trapped in someone's schemes, be it the Eveningtide Asura or the large factions. He needed to be the spider rather than the fly stuck in the web, and that feeling had been part of the motivation behind the formation of his new skill.

And it was with that conviction he needed to push forward through this trial, no longer staying passive. First off, Zac needed to get away from here. He had noticed a weak shimmer in the waters when he destroyed the pillar, like a spider web burning up, and he guessed that whatever array the Havarok erected had broken down in his section. He made use of that fact as he left the chasm behind, heading in the general direction of the Death Pulse.

The most pressing issue was that his **[Ocean Chart]** was completely blank in this area, and he wasn't really in a mood to waste more time than necessary. He was running behind schedule because of his extended cultivation session, and he was already a couple of months late to his rendezvous with Catheya.

Zac definitely couldn't get caught in some sort of trial or danger zone at this moment, wasting what precious time he had. He needed to catch someone and borrow their map, preferably gaining the route back to the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean in one fell swoop. Unfortunately, the puppet-like cultivators didn't even have a Cosmos Sack, let alone an **[Ocean Chart]**.

Furthermore, the ocean remained oddly desolate, with no cultivators in sight even after traveling for two hours. It almost

started to feel like he had been thrown into an empty dimension, or that he had lost track of time and stayed beyond the closing of the trial. Thankfully, it didn't take much longer until Zac found his first clue.

A massive rune illuminated the ocean far in the distance, just beneath the surface. This wasn't an array like he had seen before, but rather a marker similar to the one Ventus had used for his settlement in the Greengrove Archipelago. However, this one said "Warning!" in the Multiverse general script rather than indicate a gathering spot.

Zac hesitated only for a second before he changed course, heading straight toward the marker. It was definitely worth the risk if he could get some answers. Finally, he saw the source of the glowing sign; an inscribed block of stone with hundreds of groves. In each grove, an information crystal was embedded, waiting for whomever to pick one like a flyer. Some of the crystals shone with a golden luster, whereas others glowed with the cold turquoise of Miasma.

It was hard to tell whether the block of stone had hidden arrays, so he had [**Love's Bond**] stretch through the vegetation he was hiding in and continue for hundreds of meters beneath the ground until it sprung up like a snake right in front of the marker. The fetters snatched one of the crystals radiating Miasma before it pulled back to where Zac waited.

He simply picked up the crystal before he flashed away, furiously swimming for thirty minutes before stopping. It was a small precaution in case the thing was a trap, and only after erecting a series of isolation arrays did he infuse some Miasma into the gemstone, which clearly was a high-quality information crystal.

A large screen immediately appeared in front of him, showing a large group of cultivators. Standing in front of them was a burly cultivator standing as tall as Billy, with a massive sword draped across his back. He radiated an extremely ferocious aura as well, to the point that it could be sensed through the screen. Of course, Zac recognized the man since he was extensively covered in every information missive he owned.

'I am Aldus Venarun and I have a matter of grave importance to share with all the undead factions of the Twilight Harbor, along with our friends of among the wandering cultivators.'

Zac was a bit surprised as he listened to the message. Going by the odd tattooed cultivators and the array flag before, Zac had expected to see Ykrodas Havarok. But this notice was made by a local rather than an outsider. Zac calmly kept listening, though he never stopped scanning the area for any sort of threat closing in on him.

'Enemies of the Twilight Harbor are scheming to bring harm upon it. A few shortsighted families from the Undead Empire along with the Radiant Temple are bent on collapsing the Twilight Ocean upon itself, stealing its essence. We cannot allow this to happen. It would spell doom for our homes and true death for trillions. Everyone needs to do their part in protecting our homeland.'

The scene suddenly changed, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw it was a short clip of the enormous snake that had almost killed him in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. The clip was short, only showing the beast's head from a distance for an instant before a wave of destruction rippled toward the source of the video. It didn't take a genius to figure out that whoever filmed that clip was no longer of this world.

The Twilight Lord is fighting for our survival, Aldus said as the projection swapped back to show him again. 'He is risking his life by bending the rules, sending a guardian to seal off the Chasm. It is the heart of this ocean and the lifeline of the harbor, which makes it one of the targets of our enemies. The council and our allies have worked together to aid the Twilight Lord's efforts, by setting up a vast tracking array.'

'We have cordoned off the whole Twilight Chasm, and anyone entering will become an enemy of the whole Council. Even if the Twilight Lord's guardian doesn't manage to strike you down, we will hunt you down with everything we have. You might think it unfair, but this is a matter of life and death. So please, turn back, and look for opportunities elsewhere. If you wish to join our cause, you can do so at any one of our stations.'

The projection changed again, showing several locations on a surprisingly detailed map. Zac hurriedly copied the map, adding vast swathes to his **[Ocean Chart]** in one go. By the time Zac was done, the projection had died down, and the area was once more silent.

Zac looked around, and while the area was empty, he still activated another escape talisman, disappearing in a puff of smoke. He appeared among some 50-meter tall corals a moment later, startling a school of crabs who were busy picking apart a massive eel. A short but frenzied battle later, Zac shot away through the reef, his Spatial Ring filled with a small mountain of high-quality crab meat. He didn't travel too far though, but rather stopped at a secluded spot to go over the information.

He finally understood why there were so few people in the area at least. The tracking array was a pretty strong deterrent, and Zac had experienced their methods himself, with the powerful puppets appearing out of nowhere. He guessed that anyone who passed through those runes would be branded, becoming a beacon for teleporting puppets.

And even if someone managed to pass through that outer layer of defense, there was still that terrifying snake to worry about. Zac wondered just what had happened while he was secluded in cultivation for eight months. Was that snake really guarding the Twilight Chasm? If so, why? Was it simply to prevent any more accidents from happening?

Zac was definitely suspicious about how the information was framed. From what Zac had gathered, the Council and the Eveningtide Asura shouldn't be on the same side. Alvod was using this Mystic Realm for his cultivation by the looks of it, draining it like he had done with so many worlds before. It was more likely that Aldun Venarun simply reframed the clip to suit their purposes when the snake was doing something else entirely.

He was pretty surprised that the undead clan with some Izh'Rak Reaver heritage had taken up with the Havarok Empire, but it ultimately didn't matter much to Zac's purposes. The chart the crystal had provided was far more useful. It had

mapped out seven towns and their surroundings, the closest one being just over a week's travel away. There was another one in the inner reaches, though it wasn't located in the direction Zac had left the chasm.

The rest of the towns were located in the middle and early sections of the ocean, too far for Zac to reach anytime soon. Unfortunately, it didn't show any indication of where the Death Pulse was located, so Zac reluctantly steered toward the closest settlement. He figured he could catch someone there, finally getting an update of the state of the trial, hopefully an update that didn't take such liberties with the truth.

The days passed as Zac traversed the core region of the Twilight Ocean. This area was just one huge reef forest with massive corals that shone in all colors of the rainbow, making the experience almost psychedelic. He had tried traveling in a submersible to avoid prying eyes, but he had lost it to a Beast King's sneak attack after just 1 hour. He had ultimately been forced to travel the normal way, not wanting to lose any more of his ships.

The deathly silence of the Twilight Chasm didn't reach this area, and it seemed like every single coral was home to some powerful beast or deadly plant. Even when exuding a blood-drenched aura that marked him as a tough nut to crack, Zac found himself mired in dozens of battles over the next three days.

While this place was a ruthless place where only the strong could survive, it was also a place full of opportunities. Every time he was attacked by a beast at the precipice of reaching D-grade, Zac could almost be sure he'd find a valuable treasure in their den. Certainly, none of the items were anywhere close to the dumplings or the soul-nurturing grass he had found in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but some would still be considered rare treasures if presented at an auction back in the Zecia sector.

On the fourth day, just as Zac was in the middle of looting the den of an overconfident mollusk monster, Zac felt his chest thump, but it was not his heart that beat at the prospect of treasure. It was **[Void Heart]** that was finally waking up after

a month-long comatose state. He barely had time to seal the cave with a series of arrays before the hidden node beat again, and Zac hurriedly sat down as he was beset by a storm of lightning.

It was clear that his E-grade hidden node was incapable of completely refining Heavenly Lightning, and Zac screamed with pain as rippling currents coursed through his body, setting his world ablaze. Thankfully, he could feel that the lightning had been somewhat changed, and it didn't have the presence of the Heavens themselves, that ancient fury intent on killing those who walked the Boundless Path.

Zac's whole body twitched as more and more lightning was released by his Node, and soon enough his whole soul Aperture was beset by a calamitous storm as well. Thousands of lightning bolts struck down at the ocean, and his Soul Core was almost like a lightning rod that was constantly targeted.

However, while he was filled with agony, Zac didn't really lament the situation. Trauma was generally just trauma, but suffering sometimes had a silver lining. His whole body was spasmodically twitching on the ground, but he could feel how his cells were greedily swallowing the lightning, almost as quickly as **[Void Heart]** was spitting it out.

As to where it went, Zac wasn't sure, but he assumed it was the same place as all the other treasures he swallowed when evolving his bloodline. Not only that, but Zac also felt his soul being refined by the continuous lightning strikes. The process continued for over twenty minutes until it eventually stopped, and Zac shakily got back into a sitting position. His hair was singed and standing straight out and he smelled like a roasted pig, but he was filled with excitement as he started to check on his condition.

The most palpable change was his Bloodline Talent - **[Force of the Void]**. Until now, it had held 32% of his normal energy reserves, but that number had been pushed up to 38% in one go. It was just 6 more percent, but it was still an amazing step forward considering he had barely progressed that much after years of absorbing energy back on Earth.

His cells had long felt like billions of small black holes drawing energy to the void, and it seemed these small vortices had been slightly expanded by the tribulation lightning. Even better, some of the nigh-impossible-to-remove gunk from the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** had been singed clean from his nodes, saving him well over a month of work.

This was great news considering this was just one of the tribulations he would have to endure in the E-grade. With his path being formalized and pointing toward the Boundless, the System wouldn't protect him against the Heavens when forming his three branches, even if the Branch of the War Axe technically was within the System's purview.

If anything, the Minor Tribulations that would hit him for his other two branches might be even more powerful considering they were part of a strictly Boundless Peak. But Zac figured the Heavens could zap him every month if it meant getting these kinds of rewards, and he continued to go over his body.

His soul had improved as well, but it wasn't as palpable as the situation with his Bloodline Talent. The shimmering core in his Soul Aperture hadn't grown bigger or denser, but Zac felt its luster purer compared to before. Most likely, the lightning had zapped some of the impurities from it.

The Soul Core had been almost completely pure after performing his first reincarnation, but much had happened since then. For one, the energy of oblivion kept pouring into the core, slowly nurturing it while leaving a bit of its mark behind. But most of the accumulated impurities were ultimately that grass he had chewed raw for months down in the chasm.

That Spiritual Herb had been extremely pure, but each stalk no doubt left some impurities behind. And after eating almost a hundred, there was bound to be some detriments to come along with the detriments. Unfortunately, the **[Purity of the Void]** only dealt with the impurities in his body, leaving his Soul Aperture untouched.

So this boon, while not useful in the short run, was bound to help with his second reincarnation in the future. Apart from

that, the two oceans seemed energized somehow, but Zac couldn't pinpoint exactly what the change stemmed from. Zac kept scanning his body for another couple of minutes, but there wasn't anything else to find.

His attributes were still the same, and he didn't feel any change or improvements to his Dao, unfortunately. Still, it was far better than what most could expect. For a boundless cultivator, simply surviving the punishment was all the benefits you could expect. And from what Zac had gathered, most were left bedridden for months, sometimes years, after getting blasted by the Heavenly Lightning.

Having unearthed all the benefits he could from the lightning, Zac soon set out again through the vast reef, this time looking for treasure with even greater fervor. The tribulation lightning had blasted away a lot of his impurities, making this a prime opportunity to stuff himself with treasure. Who knew, he might encounter another sudden bout of inspiration that would allow him to form a second Branch.

It would be a huge waste if he hadn't accumulated a bunch of impurities that he could powerwash out of his system by that time.

That's why Zac's eyes lit up when he saw a harried figure swim through the reef in the distance, and he quickly masked his aura as he crept closer. The creature in question was a weird 80-meter-long monstrosity that looked like a mix of a turtle and an alligator. The result was a Beast King with a spiked shell on its back and massive jaws with three rows of sharp teeth.

It was a creature bred for war, evidenced by the fact that it actually had another Beast King in its maw; a 40-meter long fish that still released an ominous aura even in death. However, that in itself was Zac's opportunity, since the victor hadn't come out of the battle unscathed.

A large crack ran across the spiked shell on the Beast King's back, and it had multiple deep wounds across its body. Its aura was a bit unstable as well, and Zac guessed it was rushing back toward its den to nurture its wounds. If that thing had

been in perfect condition, Zac wouldn't have wasted his breath.

He might have been able to take it down even if it was a lot stronger than the Beast Kings he had fought in direct battle so far, but it might have forced him to use the energy of the Remnants to win. Now, the situation was different, and any treasure an apex predator like this kept in its den would have to be pretty impressive.

Zac had his goals, but a small detour shouldn't change the situation too much. He started to follow in the Beast King's wake, making sure he wasn't discovered, and the thrill of the hunt and the promise of treasure made adrenaline course through his veins.

Chapter 753: Reef Forest

Zac panted deeply for a few seconds before he eventually ripped out the edge of [Verun's Bite] from the brain stem of the beast. Afterward, he quickly swam up, escaping the gory soup inside the Beast King's skull. All around him, the massive den was in shambles, the walls completely unable to withstand the fury of their clash.

The original plan had been to ambush and take the wounded beast down in one quick go, but plans could only take you so far. The first surprise had come when the beast finally reached its den, an enormous chasm that continued thousands of meters into the ground. Zac had been shocked to find that its aura had simply disappeared just a minute after entering.

It was like it had teleported away, without giving the slightest hint of what it was about to do. Zac first thought that it was unusually good at restraining its aura, but that didn't completely explain the situation. There had to be *something* inside, be it a powerful Nexus Vein, a unique herb, or even some mysterious metal whose aura would allow the Beast King to gradually refine their bloodline.

But there was nothing like that. Conversely, the energy hadn't decreased either like it did around the small chamber that had become his Cultivation Cave down in the depths. The energy the hole emitted was exactly the same as the ambient energy, making Zac guess something else was at play.

Either there was an array hiding what was going on inside, or perhaps a unique material with obscuring capabilities. In either case, it piqued Zac's interest, and he had slowly made his way inside after waiting for another 20 minutes to let the Beast King lower its guard. Unfortunately, it had been futile, and Zac had almost gotten himself killed by a terrifying energy beam that engulfed the whole entrance when he entered.

If not for his Danger Sense and activating [**Abyssal Phase**] with the help of his bloodline, he would have been severely burned. However, he managed to dodge completely unscathed, which left the wounded Beast King in an awkward situation, considering using an attack of such magnitude had worsened its wounds considerably.

The battle had turned into a ruthless melee afterward, where Zac eventually managed to create an opportunity with the help of the finishing strike of [**Blighted Cut**], which had opened up a large enough wound in its skull for Zac to sneak inside. From there, a rampage inside its brain had given the king of the reef a gruesome but quick death.

He had ultimately been forced to use [**Pillar of Desolation**] again even though he had planned on doing without, but the chains of [**Love's Bond**] simply wasn't strong enough to trap such a strong Beast King, even in its wounded state. Just trying would damage the chains, which in turn would harm Alea.

It was a useful experiment though since it was a confirmation that he could only attach one chain to even such a massive creature. The chain had at least wound itself over ten times around the beast, and it had managed to endure just long enough for him to unleash [**Blighted Cut**]. However, he knew that even his ultimate skill wouldn't have lasted against a Beast King for too long.

In either case, the hunt was a success which meant it was time to loot. The beast was quickly chopped up into manageable chunks, though Zac could quickly confirm that its meat most likely wasn't serviceable. It had a rank odor not fit for eating, but it would still be useful as feed or as a lure for other beasts.

As for the den itself, it was covered in Twilight Crystals, though most of them had been broken during the clash. Unsurprisingly, the energy intensity inside the den was far greater compared to the outside, in this case, thanks to sitting on on a Nexus Vein. Unfortunately, it looked like the 'treasure' that this beast had found for itself was a natural formation rather than an item, meaning it impossible for Zac to bring away.

He had sensed a mysterious energy being generated in the center of the cave, but that energy was gone by the time the fight was over. That didn't mean his hunt was fruitless, and his eyes first turned to the small hill of corpses in the corner of the cave, and then the mound of Twilight Crystals in another.

It looked extremely grim, but Zac still shot toward the pile first to rummage for wealth among the fallen cultivators. There were almost a hundred corpses gathered, and judging by the state of decomposition of the remains, this beast had preyed on trial-takers for at least 10 E-grade trials. For all Zac knew, this bloodthirsty bastard might have been a known terror of the area.

Zac only briefly scanned some of the rings and pouches, but he realized that most of the Pouches had been broken down by the Twilight Energy, their contents lost to the void forever. Thankfully, the Spatial Rings were more resilient, and while many had lost a lot of their space, what remained contained an impressive amount of treasures.

Those who had fallen were mostly native elites from the looks of it, while Zac guessed seven of the identifiable corpses came from the three B-grade factions. Even then, the items inside were almost exclusively treasures found in the ocean or the preparations they had brought for the trial itself. The imperials didn't have a single skill crystal or cultivation manual inside their rings, for example.

Finally, there was the odd crystal mountain hidden in a secured corner of the cave. Throughout the whole battle, the beast had kept away from that side, and Zac curiously looked at the skeleton sitting on the mound of Twilight Crystals. After having encountered something similar once before, Zac could quickly confirm that this set of bones had once belonged to a Hegemon, this one probably much stronger than the other skeleton he still carried in his Spatial Ring.

Its bones shone like polished metal, and they exuded a palpable pressure as Zac swam closer. Zac wondered why the Beast King would accord this long-dead cultivator such respect, but after some time he believed he had found the

reason. It was not the skeleton itself, but rather the item on its wrist and the benefit it provided.

It was the bracer the fallen Hegemon carried that hid the aura of the cave, rather than the natural formation or the Beast King itself. To accomplish that, it was constantly drawing energy from the thousands of crystals beneath, and Zac guessed that it was the beast that had figured out how it worked and supplied the crystals.

The thing seemed able to block out the aura of anything that entered this cave. It had a mesmerizing blue luster, and Zac could vaguely spot what looked like a rune deep inside. The craftsmanship of the metal bracer that held the sapphire-like gemstone was absolutely exquisite, and the treasure reminded Zac of his **[Stone of Hope]**.

He hesitated only for a moment before he put it on his left wrist just like the skeleton had, and the change was immediate. Whatever field the gemstone emitted was drawn in, suddenly only covering his body. Zac tried infusing it with some Miasma to see if he could make it spread its protection to a wider area, but his energy was rebuffed.

Zac furrowed his brows a bit as he glanced at the mound of crystals beneath the skeleton, and he guessed that the item wasn't made for the undead. That was fine with him though. This effect alone was a great get. Anyone could restrain their aura, but there were always some of it leaking out.

Besides, anyone using scout abilities would see the energy inside his body just like he did with **[Cosmic Gaze]** no matter how skilled at energy control you were.

This treasure would hopefully allow him to traverse unseen, just like the array pillar of the Havarok had almost perfectly blended in with the surroundings. He doubted it would be able to hide the bounty that would appear above his head, but he also knew that thing only showed up when he was focused on.

He spent a few more minutes storing the skeleton and crystal mountain before scavenging the cave for any more treasures, but the Beast King was pretty organized, as far as turtle monsters went. Most of the corpses and treasures had been

dragged to the same alcove, except the D-grade skeleton which had been placed in its own section. Seeing as there were nothing else of interest Zac simply left, once more setting course for the settlement indicated on his **[Ocean Chart]**.

It took him another five days to pass the vast coral reef, even if his new bracer saved him a lot of headaches. As long as he kept it running he was ignored by most of the animals that made the reef their home, even if he was spotted. They probably figured that eating something that didn't emit a speck of energy was a waste of time. Why fill their bellies with trash when they could gobble up something much more palatable?

Some beasts still tried to rip him apart just out of spite, but most of them let down their guards since killing such a weak being didn't warrant any effort. They were quickly proven wrong as Zac bisected them with a lazy swing of his own, adding their carcasses to his rapidly growing stockpile of high-grade meat.

These fights quickly showed the limits of the bracer. It only worked while Zac didn't emit too much energy himself. The moment he unleashed a skill the effect was broken, and the beasts around him could suddenly sense his aura. Secondly, it was a bit troublesome to keep going, seeing as it required non-miasmic energy to function.

Without anything to feed it, the sapphire lost its luster after around an hour. Zac quickly fashioned a makeshift solution by fastening a Supreme Twilight Crystal to it, though he suspected he wouldn't need something like that in his human form.

Having the crystal against his skin led to more Twilight Energy entering his body, but it was a small price to pay for Zac as he crept closer toward the gathering point the information missive had shared. He was still half a day away from the settlement marked on the mapper, but a sudden outburst of energy followed by massive explosions made him stop in his tracks and quickly take cover.

It didn't seem like beasts fighting from the energy signatures, and Zac cautiously crept closer until he spotted the source. It

was cultivators, over a dozen of them. Seeing them filled Zac with an odd sense of relief. He hadn't seen a single soul for almost a year, to the point that he started to doubt his sanity a little bit. But he really hadn't been left behind, forgotten in this cursed ocean.

The group of cultivators was fighting against a school of fish that had made a large beehive-like coral their home, and Zac had quickly receded into the shadows before he was spotted. The group was made up of six elementals and nine undead, Revenant natives by the looks of it. Two of them had bounties at [2,500 - 5,000] as well, indicating they most likely possessed Dao Branches.

Zac wanted information, but taking on a group of fifteen elites was overdoing it. More to the point, Zac wasn't certain some locals knew the answers to his questions, and their allegiances were a lot harder to guess. That party might just be a band of strong cultivators looking for opportunities together, or they might be agents of some of the foreign factions.

For all he knew, there might be spies for all the major forces in that group considering their average strength.

He rather hoped that he could stumble upon members of either the Radiant Temple or the Havarok Empire. Some Imperial Clan of the Undead Empire would be fine too, but there wasn't a high chance of that happening. From the looks of it, there didn't seem to be many of them around, with the notable exceptions of Uona and the Eidolon scion whose activities were still a mystery to him.

In fact, he and Catheya were the only true pureblood Draugr inside the trial as far as he knew. Not a single scion from the nearby Draugr-led Kingdom was participating, and Catheya's clan had apparently sold most of their slots to others rather than use them themselves. In contrast, the Havarok Empire had thousands of cultivators entering from the looks of it, and the Radiant Temple had multiple squads as well.

That by itself was some sort of clue to his questions. But exactly what it meant, Zac still didn't know.

Zac left the group of cultivators to their devices, aiming for a group of easier targets to digest. Preferably, he'd like to find and catch a lone explorer, but he didn't know if there were too many of those this deep into the ocean. The hours passed as Zac dodged one group after another as he crept through the forest. He didn't actually go any closer to the reef any longer, rather opting to find some cultivators at the edge of the reef.

He had been extremely close to pulling the trigger on a group of four human cultivators, but he had been rudely interrupted just as he was about to close in on them. Another set of cultivators shot closer as well, clearly intent on robbing the quartet. Zac was forced to creep back into the shadows again, swearing at the group of ten opportunists ruining his good fortune.

But finally, eight hours after encountering the first squad, Zac found his perfect opportunity. A sudden light of life flickered between two corals in the distance, and Zac first thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. However, he soon realized what he was seeing was real. His Draugr eyes were seeing the outline of a humanoid from the life force it exuded, but his other senses couldn't spot a thing.

Someone was traveling alone, using some sort of skill or treasure to hide both their aura and appearance. Luckily, they couldn't fool his special sight that was almost like a heat-seeking vision, and a smile spread across Zac's face as he activated [**Abyssal Phase**]. The world was reduced to a crawl as he shot forward, rapidly closing in on the target.

The runner only noticed something was wrong just as Zac had appeared right behind them, and by that point, it was much too late. Zac turned back into his corporeal form right next to the invisible target, and his hand flashed forward along with four unbreakable chains. As expected, the target didn't have an actual shield running, and he felt his fingers close in on a throat as they slammed into a coral with enough force to topple it.

A pained scream echoed out in the area, but no beast dared come close as Zac unleashed his Dao Field and empowered it with a storm of extra Dao from his [**Spiritual Void**] and his

immense killing intent. It was like the area had become a war zone, and Zac could almost hear the screams of desperate warriors clamoring as his eyes bore into those of his captive.

He couldn't believe his luck when he saw that it was a Havarok Cultivator sporting pretty serious wounds. The injuries didn't come from him bum-rushing the poor man, but they rather appeared to be from a previous battle. The cultivator had been fleeing toward the settlement from the depths of the reef, so Zac guessed that something had gone awry in there.

It wasn't a surprise. Zac himself could fight freely in these waters, but most cultivators would be pressed to exhibit even 20-30% of their strength in this area. Entering a place with multiple Beast Kings roaming was to dance with death, and Zac guessed that the rest of this man's party had become food for the wildlife.

The cultivator looked completely discombobulated for a second before his gaze met Zac's, and his eyes slowly widened with comprehension.

"It's you!" he croaked with a strained voice.

Zac only smiled in return as he took out a sharp needle, which he unceremoniously stabbed into the man's throat. It was a paralyzing agent locking him in place. Zac would have preferred to seal his cultivation altogether, but he figured that the environment would kill the poor man if that happened. And that couldn't do with the plans Zac had.

"I guess I'm easy to recognize," Zac smiled as he removed his grip. Of course, he kept the Havarok agent locked in his chains, and he moved the edge of **[Verun's Bite]** to the man's throat to discourage any hasty actions. "In a sense, we're fated. I was just looking for someone from your empire, and here you are, delivering yourself to me. Answer my questions, and I'll let you go."

The cultivator shuddered for a moment, but a sense of calm soon appeared in his eyes as he stopped struggling.

“Like I’d trust an abyssal fiend like you,” the man grunted.

“Just kill me. I will never betray the Empire.”

“Now don’t be like that,” Zac snorted. “Believe it or not, our interests are more aligned than you would think. In fact, I need you to send a message to your prince after this. I failed to kill off that bloodsucker the last time we fought, but if prince Ykrodas is interested, we might be able to finish the job together.”

Chapter 754: Return

“It was you who maimed that lunatic!” the man exclaimed with surprise, but he quickly regained his composure. “Do you take our lord for a fool? Teaming up with an Imperial to fight an Imperial? What a joke.”

“You should understand that the hidden conflicts beneath the surface of the Undead Empire are far greater than the small skirmishes with random factions here on the frontier,” Zac snorted. “In either case, I don’t need you to decide anything on your own. I just need you to relay my message.”

Of course, what Zac wouldn’t tell his captive was that the man’s conclusion was spot on, except for the part of both him and Uona being Imperials. He had no real intention of teaming up with Ykrodas Havarok to take out Uona, at least not if he had anything to say about it. As far as he was concerned, those two could play their deadly games while he picked up the two remnants and got the hell out of this place.

But at the same time, if there was something he had learned over the past five years, it was that the System had a fondness for throwing lethal challenges at him. Zac still wasn’t sure whether it was a result of his abnormally high Luck or because of his bloodline, but the fact was that trouble kept finding him one way or another.

Considering that Uona was as troublesome as they came, it seemed prudent to try and make some small preparations. Uona should also be one of the biggest thorns in Ykrodas Havarok’s plans, no matter if it came to the contribution ladder or the larger schemes at play. If things came to blow, this simple message might provide a lifeline.

“... I will recount this meeting in full if given the chance,” the man said after some hesitation.

“Good. I need some information, so let’s get some things out of the way. I know there’s a large-scale conflict is taking place, where the Havarok Empire is on one side, and the Twilight Lord is on the other. Of course, the Twilight Lord is rather the human cultivator known as Alvod Jondir, or the Eveningtide Asura,” Zac grunted, and he was elated to note there was no surprise on the captive’s face.

It was finally time to get to the bottom of things.

“Our goal is to thwart the plans of the Eveningtide Asura, just as you said,” the scout eventually said after some hesitation. “But I don’t know the exact plans, and even if I did, I would not tell you. My squad was only stationed here to keep the area stabilized. We set out three days ago to investigate an aberration, but we ran into a mishap leaving only me behind.”

Zac had a pretty good idea of what that aberration was, but he ignored it and pushed on.

“Why is your faction bothering with this matter? From what I’m told, Alvod is just a wandering Monarch from a frontier sector,” Zac asked.

“He caused unimaginable losses to our Empire a long time ago. He even killed one of our ancestral princes,” he said with fury in his eyes. “Now he wants to sacrifice one of our main commercial nodes of the frontier to defend his Dao and achieve Autarchy? We will never abide!”

Zac inwardly shuddered, realizing the situation was really as he had feared. He had figured the situation was bigger than Alvod simply wanting to evolve a Dao or something similar, and this proved it. Having an Autarch being pissed off at you was not a great way to live, and it only doubled Zac’s desire to not get too bogged down in this mess.

“Well, taking that step here in the frontier... You might not need to do anything to get your wish,” Zac shrugged as he feigned disinterest. “More importantly, where is everyone? I left seclusion a month ago, only to find that the chasm is sealed off and no elites in sight.”

“We have sealed off the chasm,” the man said. “Most wouldn’t dare enter.”

“I doubt Uona or the rankers would care about that message of yours,” Zac said, opting to forgo divulging his deeds with the pillar. “I could easily make it through that array of yours if wanted to as well.”

Zac had a strong suspicion that this man’s wretched state was related to Zac’s actions at the chasm, so he massaged the truth a bit. Admitting he was the reason his captives had been killed would put a real damper on the conversation, and there was still much he needed to figure out.

“We have our means,” the scout said as he looked at Zac with suspicion. Zac could sense the man’s aura fluctuate a bit, but it looked like the soldier reluctantly dropped the matter after a second. “But most have left for the inheritance.”

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“An ancient city appeared in the middle reaches of the Ocean three months ago. It’s still sealed off from what I’ve heard, but people are flooding there from all over the trial in hopes that it’ll open,” the man said with yearning in his eyes. “Some believe it will automatically open its gates at a set time, others believe enough warriors need to gather before the trial starts.”

“Ancient city? Trial within a trial? What?” Zac muttered, not having expected this piece of news at all. “I’ve never heard about something like that.”

“Neither have the natives, but many believe it’s a unique inheritance of the trial,” the man said. “Perhaps something left behind from before this realm was created.”

“It rather sounds like a trap,” Zac said skeptically. “Is it something that the Radiant Temple or the Natives have set up?”

“We... Believe it might be something Alvod Jondir has dragged from the depths to distract us, but we might be wrong. Uona Noz’Valadir has been spotted in the vicinity, as has most of the rankers,” the man said. “But something of that scale, we

doubt E-grade warriors can conjure such a thing, unless someone has been working toward it for dozens of trials.”

“Another complication, just what I need,” Zac muttered.

Zac kept questioning the man about the general state of affairs of the trial for a while longer. Thankfully, the Havarok soldier, who was named Trakodles, was more than willing to rat on any faction except his own, especially the Radiant Temple. After just a few minutes Zac knew more about that faction than after meeting Ventus Kalavan.

He also added Trakodles’s charted territories to his own **[Ocean Chart]**, massively expanding his map.

“Alright,” Zac eventually said. “As I said, I am willing to work together with your leader to take down Uona Noz’Valadir. The stage has been set, and an opportunity to discuss this further will present itself at the gates of that city. Until then, I hope we can stay out of each other’s way. I know Ykrodas might be eyeing my bounty, but I urge him to remember his mission, unless he is prepared to lose everything. Now, it’s time for you to take a nap.”

“What?” Trakodles blurted, only to have a pill shoved into his mouth.

Trakodles’s eyes rolled up into his head as Zac started to push the man deeper and deeper into the soil. He stopped at thirty meters beneath the surface, after which he surrounded the warrior in Supreme Divine Crystals and an illusion array.

The crystals would absorb some of the energy from the surroundings, helping combat the atmosphere. The array wasn’t really for the man’s protection, but rather for him to be a bit harder to locate. He had almost missed it, but Trakodles had sent out some sort of signal by cracking a talisman the moment they crashed into the coral reef.

Zac only pretended to not notice in hopes that his captive would keep talking in an attempt to delay. Back-up was no doubt on their way, though it would take them a few hours to reach this place. With his preparations, they would hopefully

waste a couple of hours pinpointing their ally's position as well, giving Zac more time to gain a head-start.

The corals turned into a kaleidoscopic blur as Zac rushed to create some distance. Only after having swum tens of thousands of meters did he take out an escape talisman and crush it. Zac appeared dozens of kilometers away, and he quickly oriented himself before setting off again, making a wide berth around the settlement.

The [**Ocean Chart**] of the Havarok warrior had provided Zac with everything he needed to make it back to the middle reaches. It even detailed the location of the Death Pulse, saving Zac the need to capture an undead warrior as well. However, he didn't head toward the Death Pulse, but rather a current somewhat poetically called the River of Broken Ambition.

The name came from the fact that it was one of the few currents that could take warriors from the core regions of the Twilight Ocean all the way to the far safer waters in the beginning. Most of the currents, including the Death Pulse, rather streamed in the direction of the Twilight Chasm, making them unsuitable for his purposes.

He would eventually have to head for the Death Pulse to find Catheya, but traveling against its current would waste months comparing to hitching a ride to the River of Broken Ambition.

Zac kept a frantic pace over the next week, not even stopping for a quick rest, as he pushed toward the next danger zone. It was a massive maelstrom that had made a vast swathe of the inner ocean extremely precarious to traverse. The energy density was a lot higher compared to outside the turbulent waters as well, which was why some considered it a testing ground for those who considered going to the chasm but weren't sure they could handle it.

For Zac, who had survived weeks in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, it could barely be considered a challenge, and he cut through the chaotic waters like an arrow, saving over a week on his route. Hopefully, this had also thrown off any potential

pursuit, though Zac hadn't sensed any signs of such a thing taking place.

The moment the waters stabilized, he took out one of his submersibles and set out, using the vessel to hide his identity from any curious onlookers. From there, Zac's journey became a lot more tranquil. It took him a week to reach the current, at which point his speed more than doubled.

The following week, Zac mostly rested and consolidated his gains. The ambient energy had already become too sparse for him to use his Soul Strengthening Manual, not that he dared use them while traveling. The ship usually sailed itself, but he occasionally had to take over to avoid beasts or greedy cultivators.

More than once did Zac encounter ambushes by people trying to snatch the riches of those fleeing from the inner ocean in defeat. These attacks invariably ended in wholesale slaughter this time around since Zac couldn't have his whereabouts spread. At least those short and bloody encounters allowed him to confirm and sometimes expand on what he learned from Trakodles.

The Havarok Warrior had pretty much spoken the truth, though he had failed to mention that the Havarok was clearly targeting the ancient city that had popped up. Ykrodas had gathered most of his forces to stand guard outside its gates, and their presence on the other areas of the trial was mostly skeleton crews like the one Trakodles had been a part of.

Soon enough a month had passed along the River of Broken Ambition, at which point Zac finally detached his vessel from the current and set a new course. He was at the edge between what was generally considered the middle and inner section of the ocean, meaning it was time for him to start looking for Catheya.

He kept her token in his hand as he sailed toward the Death Pulse, but the communicator didn't show any sign of activating during the sixteen days until he reached the pulse. The Death Pulse itself was just like he imagined, a massive, kilometer-wide current of condensed death. He had felt the

environment change even hours before reaching it, the difference was palpable now that his submersible was only a few thousand meters away.

It felt like he was enclosed in a warm embrace, in contrast to the poisonous environment of the Life Pulse. The feeling was a poignant reminder of just how unnatural this realm was, with its corrupted energy constantly burrowing into his body. It made him long for the days when he could leave this place, but he soon refocused and passed right beneath the current, continuing on the other side.

Zac kept steering his vessel in a zig-zag pattern over the next 20 days along both sides of the Death Pulse. He was trying to get close enough to Catheya for the tracker to activate, and one day his efforts finally paid off. He looked down at the array disk with a mix of anticipation and hesitation as he put away his submersible and entered a dense forest beneath him.

He understood all-too-well how much chaos he had created, and he wasn't sure what kind of reception awaited him. He even considered turning around and leaving. Then again, since he could see that Catheya was nearby, then the Draugr scion had probably sensed his approach since a few hours ago.

There was no point to his hesitation. He had decided to put his trust in his Draugr associate, in the fact that she had not decided to throw him under the bus to protect herself. Of course, that didn't mean that he would just blindly go in without some preparations since there was some risk that she had been captured by his pursuers.

A thorough scan of the surroundings exposed some of the usual wildlife, but no cultivators either living or undead. The spot Catheya had chosen was really desolate, and the area didn't seem to have much in the way of valuable plants. There were no suspicious energy fluctuations either, and his Danger Sense was completely quiet.

If there was a trap waiting, then it was extremely well-hidden.

Even if there was some risk involved, Zac still swam toward the place his beacon indicated, a small chain of mountains sitting in the middle of the forest. As expected, when he got

within 100 meters of a sheer wall, a gate appeared out of thin air and soundlessly opened. Zac steeled himself as he swam inside, both his axe and his coffin at the ready in case of ambush.

Past the hidden gate was a roughly carved tunnel leading into a small chamber no more than five by five meters. Its walls and ceiling were filled with small holes, and looking into them gave Zac an ominous feeling. The three small skeletons of **[Profane Exponents]** appeared behind his back, protecting him in case something nasty came flying out from those trapholes.

“Hello?” Zac eventually shouted as the seconds passed, and only then did another hidden door open.

Zac flashed inside, and he immediately found himself face to face with three familiar figures in the other room. Catheya sat on an ice crystal crafted into a high-backed chair, and her two followers stood behind her. He breathed out in relief upon seeing they were fine. He hadn't heard anything about the three since setting out, and their situation had been a constant weight on his shoulders.

But in fact, it seemed like they were more than fine. Just over a year had passed since they met last time, but Zac sensed that they all had made pretty impressive gains to match his own, Catheya most of all. Her aura had always been one of an elite, but it was much deeper now. Not only that, but over her head a bounty of **[750-1,000]** soon appeared, proving her improved aura wasn't just empty bluster.

Her increase in bounty was proof that her Death-aspected Dao had become a Peak Fragment, but Zac was certain it wasn't the only Dao she had improved. Her bounty wasn't too high, but the cold aura she exuded easily surpassed that of someone with a simple Peak Fragment, which meant she probably had formed some ice-related Dao Branch.

Qirai's aura had become deeper as well, even if her bounty was still a pitiful **[0-250]**. It was no surprise, considering she probably had a combat-oriented Dao, possibly coupled with a Soul-oriented one. Even Varo felt a bit stronger, though Zac

noted that he had ultimately lost his badly mangled arm. An empty sleeve now hung to his side.

It wasn't the end of the world though. Catheya's master, or her clan if Va Tapek turned out to be a traitor, shouldn't have too much trouble regrowing an E-grade cultivator's appendage. And even if that failed, there was the Corpselord route that was open to the undead. Of course, Varo could also do just fine without the use of a second arm as evidenced by people like Ogras.

Zac was feeling excited to finally link up with his old allies, but the oppressive feeling in the room was making him a bit unsure whether the feeling was mutual. Catheya and her two companions didn't say anything for a few seconds, instead opting to mete out even stares that spoke volumes on their own.

"Uh, long time no see. How have you all been?" Zac said with a small smile, trying to lighten the mood since the pressure of Catheya's gaze was starting to get a bit suffocating.

"What was the last thing I asked of you before we split up?" Catheya finally said, her voice shaking with barely contained fury as the room turned into a freezing hellscape.

Right then and there, Zac felt he might be better off facing another turtle monster than this enraged trio.

Chapter 755: Parting the Clouds

“The last thing you said?” Zac muttered as he scratched his chin. “Uh... Don’t cause trouble?”

“And what did you do?” Catheya said with a dangerous smile.

“Well, that wasn’t my fault. Uona-“ Zac tried to explain, but he didn’t get any further before he got cut off.

“So you did attack her!” Catheya exploded. “No wonder that crazy harlot put a bounty on my head! We haven’t been able to sleep a wink for months because of you! Looking over our shoulders every waking moment, afraid that the bloodthirsty she-devil or the Havarok prince would entrap us in their hunt for you. Battle after battle the moment our disguises were exposed!”

“To be fair, she was the one that attacked me first. What was I supposed to do? Let her attack me?” Zac muttered before he froze. “Wait, the Havarok Empire is looking for me as well?”

“What do you think? You surpassed them both on the ladder, and it didn’t take much investigation to find out that you had been part of the missions to mess with the Living Pulse. With your contribution points, I think they are seeing you as their number one obstacle to achieving whatever goal they have in here,” Catheya sighed as she slumped down in the chair. “I swear... I have never heard of anyone with such a penchant for creating chaos such as you. At least it looks like the Havarok stopped looking for you two months ago, which gave us some the opportunity to find this place.”

“It can’t have been all bad,” Zac said as he took out a chair of his own, shrugging off a layer of frost that had formed on his robes. “I can’t believe you’ve managed to form a Dao Branch this quickly.”

“What Dao Branch? This layered domain?” Catheya snorted as she glared at Zac. “It’s just a third Dao Fragment I was forced to form just to stay alive. My whole cultivation path has been thrown off-kilter because of your unrivaled ability to create enmities. Now I have to figure out what to do with a second Ice Dao.”

“Well...” Zac coughed, feeling a bit bad for Catheya.

Initially, he had even been a bit jealous. He had been forced to go to insane lengths and swallow that mysterious Dao light to form a branch, and she had accomplished the same in the middle reaches of the ocean? But it turned out it wasn’t actually an Ice Dao Branch as he thought, but rather two Peak Dao Fragments both of the ice variety.

Still, forming a Peak Dao Fragment from nothing in just over a year was almost as shocking as forming a Dao Branch. Besides, the aura she had exuded for a moment was simply too great, making Zac believe there was more to it. Did Catheya perhaps have a Hidden Node that worked similarly to his **[Spiritual Void]**?

Forming another Dao Fragment was a good thing on the surface, but it could also spell trouble. He knew that Catheya’s original plan was to form a Dao Branch by fusing her two Daos. Now, she was suddenly saddled with a third Fragment, this one in the same vein as one of her other two Daos.

It wasn’t too uncommon to cultivate two Daos of the same type, but the goal was usually to fuse the two similar Fragments into one Branch. However, she couldn’t do that now, since that would leave a sole Death-attuned Dao Fragment. Upgrading that Dao as is would mean flirting with the boundless path, which was highly frowned upon in the Undead Empire.

She would ultimately have to still fuse Death and Ice and then complement it with another Ice-based Dao Branch. Problem was, that such a path would put tremendous requirements on her affinity to ice. Even elites had a hard time forming and progressing a single mixed-meaning Dao Branch, but Catheya

suddenly had to gain the equivalent insight of one and a half pure Ice Branch.

It was not just a matter of doubling the time it took her to cultivate. She would require both a lot of additional lucky encounters, life-and-death battles, and time to meditate on a way to piece it all together.

Simply giving up on one of the Dao Fragments wasn't an option either. The System neatly arranged one's insights into packages and named them Seeds, Fragments, Branches, and so on, but it was ultimately just understanding of the universe. It was all one, all connected.

That's why you couldn't just collect 100 Dao Fragments to boost your Luck and other attributes. It would end up with your path being all messed up. You'd have problems even progressing in the D-grade with Dao Fragments weighing you down, and becoming a Monarch was simply impossible. How would you form an inner world on such a shaky foundation like a Dao Fragment?

Of course, if Catheya succeeded on her new path, she would be stronger for it. Two Dao Branches was not just twice as strong as one. There was also the added benefit of Dao Braiding apart from the attribute boost. But the risk of getting stuck in a bottleneck was much greater than going with a more conservative Single-Branch Path.

That's why most people except the real elites only aimed for one Dao Branch. People who dared to aim for three branches like Zac himself was exceedingly rare, even in the top factions.

"Your talents were wasted on only going for one Dao Branch anyway," Zac said. "A budding Heaven's Chosen like yourself should have at least two, right? Just look, your new Fragment has progressed by a terrifying amount in one short year."

Catheya only snorted in response, but she did seem a bit mollified. "Well, I *was* considering adding another facet to my cultivation after meeting you. I just wish I would've had more time to plan and meditate on the decision further, rather than being forced into it."

“If it’s any consolation, pretty much all my insights come from almost getting myself killed, and it has worked out pretty well so far,” Zac said before his brows furrowed in confusion.

“Wait, what does your Dao have to do with me?”

Catheyia just smiled as she conjured two ice shards. The first one slowly turned into a beautiful flower which gave Zac a sense of immense cold, reminiscent of the terrifying bolt Va Tapek had unleashed in the Twilight Harbor.

The other shard turned into an icicle, and Zac almost felt his soul getting pierced by looking at its sharp edge. Zac wasn’t sure exactly what insights had gone into that Dao, but he felt it much more aligned with his own Dao of Conflict compared to the other shard. It looked like Catheyia had opted to go all-in on an offensive Dao while her other one was more all-purpose from what he’d seen so far.

“Sometimes, brute force is simply the best solution, which you are walking testament to,” Catheyia said as she gave him a long look that made Zac’s hair stand on end. “Besides...”

“What?” Zac hesitated, his heartbeat speeding up from the intense stare.

“Nothing, never mind,” Catheyia muttered.

“Well, offense is the best defense,” Zac said with a weak smile. “And don’t worry, I’ll be more careful going forward.”

“Please, don’t jinx us any further,” Catheyia groaned while Qirai almost looked like she had been physically wounded by Zac’s assurance.

“On another subject...” Zac said hesitantly.

“Yes?” Catheyia slowly said as her eyes slowly thinned.

“Here, I have prepared a small token of apology,” Zac said, quickly changing course from asking about the remnants.

From the sounds and looks of it, the trio had barely managed to stay alive thanks to his exploits, and it was just too heartless to immediately ask about his own matters. Instead, he took out three boxes and threw them over to Catheyia and her two followers. Inside Catheyia’s box was the second dumpling,

while the other two contained what he suspected to be top-quality Dao Treasures.

“What’s this?” Catheya asked, her scowl suddenly replaced by an impish smile.

Zac immediately realized he might have been duped, but he didn’t really care. It was ultimately true that he had caused Catheya a lot of trouble, and this was simply making amends.

“I don’t know what it’s called. I found it in the heart of the Twilight Chasm. It’ll provide you with a powerful epiphany, allowing you to improve death-attuned skills in all kinds of ways. I used one to upgrade a skill, it worked extremely well,” Zac said. “I think you could use it when crafting as well. It might allow you to create a uniquely powerful follower, or perhaps form a supreme-grade skill to go with your new Dao.”

“Supreme-grade? That great?” Catheya exclaimed as she looked down at the box with shock. “Thank you, it looks like you do have some conscience after all.”

The other two nodded in thanks before they stowed away their boxes, and Zac could sense that the tense atmosphere had relaxed by quite a bit.

“So you really went all the way to the chasm,” Catheya sighed. “I guessed as much, but I wasn’t sure. I wanted to check it out as well, but some other time perhaps. By the way, were you involved in that enormous snake making the rounds in the chasm?”

Zac smiled a bit helplessly with a shrug. He wasn’t sure why the big snake had targeted groups of cultivators at the surface, but he guessed it had taken out any threats to its master’s plan. However, Zac wondered if it would still have done the same even if he hadn’t ruined its plans at the bottom.

“Should’ve known,” Catheya snorted, whereas Qirai gave him a thumbs up.

“Don’t listen to the young miss. Cultivators are meant to live large! Otherwise, what’s the point?” the Titan Revenant

laughed. “And we were only in true mortal danger a few times while looking for those places.”

“You still looked after getting a bounty on your heads?” Zac said, his heart beating an extra time with his excitement. “Did you find them?”

“Why else would we be hunted day or night?” Catheya glared. “I promised we’d find them, so we did. It was actually not too far from the ravine we ran into Uona, that crazy witch. Luckily, she was busy decimating a small army and didn’t realize who we were, so she only sent a few blood thralls after us.”

“Near the ravine, you said?” Zac frowned as he got a sense of foreboding.

He had blasted Uona with a full-powered Annihilation Sphere, and now she just happened to be seen close to the resting place of the second splinter? He wanted to believe in coincidences, but he didn’t need his Danger Sense to realize his plan might have hit a snag.

“Well, that’s not good,” he muttered.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Catheya exhaled. “Do you know who the Noz’Valadir are? Varo had heard of them before. They have two Autarchs, both of them more powerful than our Patriarch. And both of them have a good chunk of lifespan left as well. I fear they might retaliate against clan Sharva’Zi unless you can get our ancestor to return.”

Zac’s eyes widened a bit, only now realizing his actions might have implications outside the Mystic Realm as well. There was an unspoken rule in the Multiverse that the grudges and actions inside Mystic Realms stayed between the members of the junior generation, but there was a limit to everything.

There were no guarantees they would let bygones be bygones if he directly impacted their bottom line with his actions. And after interrogating that Havarok warrior, he understood what was going on. It was a competition for the opportunity that the Eveningtide Asura was trying to create. If his actions cost the

Eternal Clan an Autarch, just how far were they willing to go for revenge?

Would the Undead Empire step in to protect Clan Sharva'Zi? Or at least the more powerful Draugr clans?

“You know, I tried entering the ravine before we were discovered,” Catheya said after the silence had stretched on for a while. “I couldn't pass the natural formations, but I smelled something familiar. The same thing I smelled from Zac Piker when he caused havoc at the base town. The same thing as the tear-streaks on your follower's face.”

“Oblivion,” Zac grunted. “The path of your ancestor. Uona has reason to believe I'll appear there if she's figured out the same thing as you.”

“And you're still going?” Catheya asked hesitantly.

“Have to,” Zac grimaced. “That weird town people keep mentioning, is it close to the ravine by chance?”

Zac's last hope was that Uona had simply passed by the area of the splinter while hunting cultivators around the ancient city.

“Not really,” Catheya said, dashing his hopes. “A month's travel away, maybe?”

“Well, shit,” Zac muttered.

“You really haven't had enough?” Catheya said with a raised brow. “I don't exactly know what is hidden in those two places, but my intuition tells me it's nothing good.”

“I would prefer to stay hidden for the rest of the trial, but I can't stop now,” Zac shrugged. “I have things that I have to accomplish.”

“Well, one of the locations is not that far away,” Catheya eventually sighed as she threw him an intelligence crystal. “Tell me. Whatever you have planned. Will it be as... impressive... as what you've done thus far?”

“Well, this one might get a bit chaotic,” Zac admitted with a crooked smile.

“Give us a moment,” Catheya groaned as she glanced at her two followers who promptly nodded and left the chambers.

“How bad are we talking? Are you able to say?” she asked when the two were alone.

Zac hesitated a few seconds before he decided to tell the truth. “I want to say that nothing will happen, but my hands are tied. The result... is unpredictable. Might be as hectic as the Tower of Eternity. With Uona creeping about, it might get even worse.”

“Is it my ancestor making you do this?” Catheya asked with a frown. “Or is it my master?”

“Neither,” Zac shrugged before he braced himself. “I have completed what your master asked of me. Did you know that he is working with the Twilight Lord, who just so happens to be the Eveningtide Asura?”

“What?!” Catheya exclaimed, looking genuinely surprised. “The Eveningtide Asura from the Zecia sector? I thought the Asura had been killed?”

Zac didn’t immediately answer, but rather sat frozen for a few seconds before he breathed out in relief. He had thought long and hard just what he could and couldn’t say to Catheya. He had seen the brand disappearing, and the text had said that ‘karma was severed’. However, did he dare bet his life on it?

Ultimately, he had settled on sharing everything he had managed to piece together, but keeping all information about the egg and the valley for himself, just in case. And it didn’t look like he had triggered any hidden curse by divulging his findings.

“Apparently not,” Zac eventually shrugged before sharing all the information he had gathered so far.

Catheya only asked a few clarifying questions, and she sat in silence for almost a minute after he was done.

“I finally get it,” Catheya said with sorrow in her voice. “So the Eveningtide Asura is trying to break through to Autarchy, turning this place into a sacrificial vessel. I can’t believe master is helping the Eveningtide Asura, after all my clan has

done for him. And no wonder so many elites have gathered. This will be a real bloodbath.”

“Why do so many factions care whether Alvod tries to break through?” Zac asked.

“A single Autarch emerging can shift the power dynamics in these outer sectors, but it’s not really about that. It’s about resources, and why no Autarchs ever emerge in the frontier sectors,” Catheya said.

“Just why is that?” Zac asked curiously.

“These sectors are too lowly, and the true face of the Heavens are shrouded, like the sun being hidden by thick clouds. It’s not possible to ponder on the Grand Dao here. In fact, it’s so bad that Autarchs try to avoid these lower Sectors altogether. Just existing in them is a constant drain on their foundation. Without access to the Heavens, they’re like starving beasts sacrificing muscle mass to survive a bit longer,” Catheya sighed.

“With the Heavens shrouded, you simply cannot seize and defend your Dao. Doing so requires a special environment, and this is not just an issue of the frontier either. Clan Sharva’Zi doesn’t have direct access to such an environment. The whole clan has to contribute to the Empire for ages to gain a single chance at Autarchy. Even then, the odds of success are extremely slim.”

“But Alvod has found a way to break this convention,” Zac concluded. “To part the clouds, so to speak.”

“Apparently,” Catheya nodded. “Normally, I would have said it was a fool’s dream, but considering the weight the multiple factions put on this matter, I think that it will actually work. A unique opportunity for Divine Monarchs, situated out here in the lawless frontier... Autarchy without spending a hundred thousand years’ worth of accumulations. No wonder the sharks are circling the waters.”

“Where does that leave us?” Zac asked with exhaustion. “Are we all screwed? Is there anything we can do?”

“Leave early,” Catheya thoughtfully said. “The Boundless Heavens might provide some sort of lifeline if all hell breaks loose, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it. Perhaps it will deign us a worthy sacrifice in return for the ascension of another Autarch.”

“That sounds like the system, alright,” Zac muttered. “This ancient town, do you think it’s related to everything else going on?”

“What, you’re planning on wreaking havoc over there as well?” Catheya countered with a raised brow.

“Not if I can help it, but sometimes you don’t get a choice,” Zac said. “What’s your take?”

“It’s a bit suspicious,” Catheya said. “A mysterious town appearing like this when so much is going on? If I had to guess, it might be related to Aia Ouro.”

Chapter 756: City of Ancients

“Aia Ouro? The Eidolon?” Zac said with confusion. “They’re the ones who have conjured the city? Are you sure?”

“They call it the City of Ancients, apparently. It appeared much closer to the Death Pulse than the Living pulse, so I’ve actually traveled around that area quite a bit over the last year. And I encountered an inordinate amount of spectral cultivators flitting back and forth,” Catheya said. “Besides, I heard rumors of the Eidolon’s vessel being spotted here as well, over a month before the city rose through the ground. Why would such an elite stay in the middle reaches, if it was not related to that place?”

“What would a bunch of ghosts have to gain from doing this?” Zac asked.

“I have no earthly idea, but whatever they are doing should be aimed at helping their elders seize the opportunity for themselves. Of course, I have no idea how things like that work. I wouldn’t be surprised if Aia Ouro themselves didn’t know exactly the purpose of their actions,” Catheya said.

“Perhaps there is something at the heart of the City of Ancients that can help wrest control of this realm? That’s the idea I’ve been able to come up with so far, but the truth is probably only known to some Divine Monarch outside.”

“A bunch of paranoid old goats,” Zac muttered.

“It’s those kinds of people who survive for long enough to become Divine Monarchs,” Catheya winked as she took out a decanter and two glasses of wine, pouring a cup for Zac.

“Now, what will you do after this, provided we survive?”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked as he took a swig.

“You know the kind of chaos you’ve caused, and you seem to have no intention of stopping. I will be questioned the moment I leave this place, and you should know that the contract we’ve entered will not hold,” she said with a helpless shrug. “Not to mention master and my clan, it’s also likely that the Umbri’Zi Family will want to look into the matter. Who knows, with your display, you might attract attention from even higher places.”

“Like the Abyssal Shores?” Zac asked curiously.

The Umbri’Zi Family was the Draugr Clan ruling over the Undead Kingdom in the area. Technically, most of the Undead Provinces in this part of the frontier were subordinates of the Umbri’Zi, including the Kavriel Clan that governed over the Zecia Sector. However, the provinces were ultimately pretty autonomous, simply sending some resources in steady intervals.

Zac didn’t have a lot of information about the Umbri’Zi, since their presence wasn’t all that palpable in the Twilight Harbor. Catheya had explained their disregard as a matter of pride. The Umbri’Zi was on the precipice of becoming a High B-grade Clan, with both an extremely powerful matriarch and a handful of lower Autarchs to lord over their domain.

Their domain wasn’t just the Undead Kingdom, but they apparently controlled vast territories in the Undead Heartlands as well. It would be a bit of an embarrassment for a vaunted clan like that to set up shop shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of the living factions in a frontier settlement.

Rather than that, they had others do business for them, like half-blood Draugr forces with some weak link to their bloodline. Furthermore, forces like Sharva’Zi had to pay a tax to the Umbri’Zi rather than the Twilight Lord. So, Zac felt that it was possible for the Umbri’Zi to look into him after these events.

Hopefully, they shouldn’t be antagonistic toward him, considering he had worked against the Twilight Lord’s interests rather than the Undead Empire’s on this occasion.

However, while the Umbri'Zi was well-known, the Abyssal Shores was still a blank. Uona had mentioned it like it was the holy lands for Draugr, yet he hadn't heard a word about it from any other source.

"Well it's-" Catheya said before she stopped herself and looked at Zac suspiciously. "Wait, why are you asking? Why do you know that name?"

"Uona thought I was from that place," Zac said before he hesitantly decided to tell the truth. "And I might have rolled with it and used that as my background story from then on out."

A groan echoed through the room as Catheya slumped forward with her head in her hands, in a shockingly accurate homage to the statue depicting the Crown of Despair.

"Why must you torment me like this?" Catheya said "You impersonated a person from the shore? Who? Who knows this?"

"Well, there's you," Zac said, getting an exasperated grunt in return. "And Uona. And the Havarok Empire, probably."

"Anyone else?" Catheya asked icily.

"Oh, and the Eveningtide Asura, probably. Well, I told his snake guardian, and it probably passed it along?"

"Why not just shout it in front of the gates to the City of Ancients where a few hundred thousand warriors can hear you?" Catheya said while glaring at him.

"You think that would help?" Zac asked, but he quickly stopped messing around upon seeing that she was on the verge of another eruption. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. I simply didn't have a lot of options, and I didn't want to implicate your family with my actions any further. I figured that the Abyssal Shores would be powerful enough they could survive taking the blame for my actions."

Catheya's demeanor softened a little, and she eventually shrugged. "Well, that's true. It's not like you're at the stage where you can rock the Abyssal Shores. They don't care about

some squabbles on the frontier. They're only interested in the advancement of Draugr."

"So just what is it? Can you tell me?" Zac asked with burning curiosity. Who wouldn't know about the peak institute of their heritage?

"Well, it is a matter of the Draugr rather than the Empire," Catheya thoughtfully said. "It shouldn't break any commandment if I discuss it considering you're Draugr. The Abyssal Shores is indeed the seat of our power. But more importantly, it is the origin of our kin."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with surprise. He had expected the former, but the latter was a surprise.

"There is a mysterious lake of infinite depth and infinite darkness. Not even Autarchs can enter it and come out alive. There are even rumors that one of the non-Draugr princes once entered the Abyssal Lake, only to barely escape with their life intact," Catheya said.

Zac's whistled in surprise. A place not even Autarchs could tread... Just kind of dangers did it contain? As for the princes, Zac was pretty she was referring to one of the Empire's elusive A-grade cultivators.

"The Draugr are the sole exception. Eons ago, our ancestors emerged from the depths, walking onto the Abyssal Shores. They had no memories of the past, of where they came from. Were they born in the ocean, or did they come from some realm hidden in the depths? We still don't know. They only knew they were the Draugr," Catheya said as she glanced at Zac. "This was long before the System, mind you."

"Then what happened?" Zac asked.

"Our ancestors lived at the Abyssal Shores until the integration took place, our most powerful ancestors easily rebuffing any attempts to unroot us. But the lake actually closed itself during those dark ages, and it no longer sustained us. By that time, our ancestors had already allied with the other undying races, and they joined in the exodus. Eventually, the Undead Empire was founded, and we moved the lake to its core at a shocking

cost,” the Draugr scion continued with some wistfulness. “Two A-grade ancestors sacrificed their lives to accomplish the task.

“Today, the lake is once more our Heartland. The Abyssal Shores is the name of our centralized faction. A few of our clans have permanent residence there, while some elites of our race get to train there temporarily. It’s in the heart of the empire, so the cultivation environment is naturally unsurpassed. Furthermore, the lake itself presents us Draugr with unique and unrivaled opportunities ever so often.”

Zac slowly nodded with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Traveling there to cultivate for a while sounded like a huge opportunity, but he doubted that was possible for him. He was neither a true Draugr nor a member of the Empire.

“Well?” Catheya asked with a glare.

“Well, what?” Zac repeated with confusion.

“Your plan?” Catheya exclaimed with exasperation. “Focus up.”

“Ah, right,” Zac smiled. “Worried for me?”

“Worried about the chaos you infuse into your surroundings,” Catheya snorted before she became serious. “Your name is probably known far and wide outside, and my involvement with you is common knowledge by now. I cannot lie to the Imperial Ambassadors.”

The two stared into each other’s eyes for a few seconds, before Zac eventually sighed with some exhaustion. “Well, I’d appreciate it if you kept my situation secret. If it’s impossible... Well, that’s too bad, I guess. You think the Empire would want to kill me or Recruit me?”

“Definitely recruit you,” Catheya slowly said. “A Heaven’s Chosen marked by fate, who could walk among the living as either a spy or ambassador? I wouldn’t be surprised if some old monster claimed you as a direct disciple.”

Zac smiled at that, but he didn’t feel as confident himself. The warnings of Yrial echoed in his head, and there were no guarantees that he wouldn’t end up dissected rather than

nurtured. The good news was that he doubted he was interesting enough for an ancient Autarch to make a move. And even if some Monarch came looking for him back in Zecia, so what?

He already had a handful of Monarchs gunning for him over there, and he was doing just fine. No one even knew his real identity, and if things really got out of hand, he could always seal Earth after the Assimilation, making sure no clues got out. If worse came to worst, his core personnel would go into hiding across the sector, while he became a wandering cultivator.

With his teleportation network, he'd be night impossible to catch, and anyone would have to think twice before targeting Earth, lest they wanted to bring another Eveningtide Asura event down on their heads. Of course, for that kind of deterrent to be effective, he would need to prove his effectiveness at pushing through the ranks. He would need to be a lot more powerful than now by the time the integration took place.

"Well, I will try to be gone by the time my identity becomes an issue. I can always sound out the situation in the future after things have calmed down. I'm planning on heading out to the two spots locations as soon as possible, and leave the moment I have what I need. The that City of Ancients and the fate of the Twilight Harbor, I want no part of it," Zac eventually said.

"We'll leave early as well," Catheya nodded.

"Could you give me a few days headstart before you leave the realm?" Zac asked.

"That's fine," Catheya shrugged. "We have already picked up most of the treasures my master had divined for us. There are a few locations left, but I doubt they haven't already been stolen by others by now. We'll move toward the second spot and help you with reconnaissance. Then we'll exit three days after you've left the Ocean."

"No wonder your auras are so much stronger," Zac said with a raised brow. "Were the Life-Death Pearls even the best item your master had the Twilight Lord provide?"

“Well, some of the items on the list weren’t as plentiful as the pearls,” Catheya shrugged before she looked at him with a small smile as she leaned forward. “And you are ultimately an outsider. Of course, if you chose to join our family... Anything I have would be yours.”

“I’m pretty happy with my current situation,” Zac rejected without hesitation, prompting Catheya to hump and lean back into her chair. “More importantly, I have collected some things that I have trouble identifying. Perhaps you can help?”

“Why ask me?” Catheya said with a studiously lazy tone. “You said it yourself, I’m just a second-seed talent from a force not worth joining. What insights could I possibly provide the vaunted Arcaz Black, the unfettered snake-charmer and unmatched troublemaker?”

“Alright alright,” Zac snorted. “How about this, for every twenty treasures you help me identify, I’ll give you one? Please?”

“Every twenty treasures?” Catheya exclaimed. “What’s going on? Just how many items have you snatched up? Did you rob the Twilight Lord’s treasury or something?”

“Something like that,” Zac coughed, prompting Catheya’s eyes to widen even further.

One by one Zac started taking out the small mountains of items he had accumulated since they split up last time. The more common items he had found in the middle reaches were all in his information package, but that was about it. He had collected a huge number of herbs and materials in the reef forest, especially from all those spatial items, and there was also the items from the chasm itself.

Unfortunately, he had absorbed most of the treasures he had encountered during his Bloodline Evolution, but there were still over a dozen items from the floating mountains. Furthermore, he had collected a large number of treasures hiding in the expansive cave networks in the wall of the chasm, each one more energy-rich than the other.

Initially, Catheya had exclaimed over Zac's good luck as he started taking out one box after another, but her demeanor eventually turned from excitement to shock, and then to blank incomprehension as the piles of natural treasures grew. Still, she performed her task almost as expertly as Calrin and his cousins.

It took almost two hours, but the results were eventually tallied up. Catheya had only managed to identify roughly 30% of the items that Zac had taken out, but it wasn't surprising considering most of the things he had picked up didn't grow anywhere outside of the Twilight Ocean. However, while Catheya couldn't name the majority of materials, she still displayed an impressive ability to categorize what was left.

Soon, a large pile of Attribute Fruits had accumulated to his side, and Zac's eyes gleamed when he looked at the five herbs that would be able to raise his Luck. He seriously imprinted the aura they emitted, so that he would remember the feeling in case he ever ran into something similar in the wild.

The other attributes were just a matter of time for him to fill up thanks to his massive wealth, but Luck-boosting fruits were shockingly rare, and not something that reached auctions very often. Even now, he still hadn't gained a single point in Luck from fruits during the E-grade.

Apart from that, there majority of the items were not really useful for him in the short run, perhaps except the 30-odd Dao Fruits that he'd save for when he had found some more insight into his Daos. The vast majority of items were mainly useable for crafting. For example, Catheya had identified a black block of metal as **[Shadesteel]**.

Its main use was to be smelted into runes on weapons, which would strengthen its energy conductivity and the weapon's abilities. There were over a hundred items that would provide these kinds of effects, from leaves that would form a dye that could help clothes hide one's aura better, to berries that would strengthen the water-based nature in pills.

Finally, there were a total of five treasures that each one was at the level of a uniquely supreme E-grade treasure, which was

shocking considering that not a single such item was found in most trials. Unsurprisingly, four of them had been found on the floating mountains, with the last one in the lower parts of the cave system.

Two were affinity-boosting treasures, one boosting life and the other death, and Catheya looked at the death-attuned one like a starving wolf.

“Just take it,” Zac smiled.

“What?” Catheya said, her eyes wide with confusion. “You don’t want it? Even if it might help you become a cultivator?”

“My situation is a bit special,” Zac shrugged. “That thing won’t be of much use to me.”

He wasn’t lying. He sincerely doubted a treasure like that would amount to anything more than some food for his Hidden Nodes. Certainly, many of his followers back home delved into the Dao of Death, but the problem with this trial was that it was somewhat similar to the Tower of Eternity. Some treasures would become useless the moment they were taken outside since they depended on this unique environment.

So anything that could be eaten before leaving should be eaten, and it was better to give Catheya such a treasure than banking on that it would survive until he could hand it to someone back home.

“Has my charm finally started to wear you down?” Catheya asked with a wide smile.

“Something like that,” Zac snorted.

“Alright, thank you. I won’t forget this,” Catheya said. “How about this? I’ll take this and nothing else. Otherwise, I might form a heart demon.”

“Suit yourself,” Zac said as he stowed away the other treasures.

“Alright, that’s it for business, right?” Catheya smiled.

“Travelling all alone with that bounty on your head for months can’t have been easy. How about you stay a day and recharge your batteries? I have become quite the expert at preparing the

various specimen of this ocean, and who knows when you'll get a chance to drink wine from the Heartlands next time?"

"Alright, I'm in," Zac laughed. "I guess one day off couldn't hurt."

Chapter 757: Second Set

Zac looked at the receding backs of Catheya and her two companions, sighing before he set out alone again in his submersible. As he looked at the empty chamber of the vessel, his thoughts drifted back to Triv's list of necessities for cultivation. One of them was companions, and Zac felt that today.

It was easy to get engrossed in your own world when secluded in cultivation. But while that kind of life had its benefits, it lacked the color of pursuing the Dao in the company of others. He had only spent a day with the trio to catch up and plan his next step, and nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Yet that single day was more memorable than traveling through the Twilight Ocean for the past three months, seeing all kinds of marvels. Certainly, it was hard to stay indifferent when being the constant focus of attention to a great beauty like Catheya. He was even starting to get used to the abyssal eyes that he and she shared, and they no longer simply felt like gates to the underworld.

While the situation was flattering, it was a bit hard to deal with. He knew he was a bit dense, but he wasn't blind. There was a streak of something real mixed in when Catheya teasingly flirted with him, and that truthfully scared him. Certainly, part of it was because he was still raw from what happened to Thea, but there was something else.

It almost felt like he was cursed. Hannah had a mental breakdown and tried to murder him, and she was the one that was the best off among his romantic interests. Alea had been reduced to a Spiritual Tool, and Thea had been straight-up murdered by his own family. The Multiverse was a dangerous place, but part of him couldn't help but wonder if it was the System's machinations at play.

What if the System wanted him focused solely on cultivation so he could keep conjuring chaos patterns for it, and it nudged fate to remove all distractions from his path?

There was, unfortunately, no way to know, and he soon dropped the matter to refocus on the task at hand. The volcano was two weeks away, and it would take another two months to reach the ravine afterward. By then, over two years would have passed in the trial, and only the confident would remain.

After all, people weren't automatically teleported out from this trial. The final three months were a safe zone when anyone could leave without getting contribution points deducted for not staying the full trial. Those who were too late would be stuck inside, and none had ever survived such an ordeal.

There were only so many exits as well, and most would be guarded by hunters looking for wealth and contribution points. Some warriors were mostly here for wealth, and they'd start looking for a way out before the hunters gathered.

The trip was thankfully not too eventful. The appearance of the City of Ancients had drawn a lot of attention, and the number of cultivators that had flocked in that area was approaching a million according to Varo. That left the other regions of the middle reaches pretty desolate in comparison, which suited Zac's purposes perfectly. Encountering cultivators in this area would only waste time without bringing any benefits, considering his **[Ocean Chart]** had already been filled in by Catheya.

Zac wasn't just sitting around during this time. He set his vessel to autopilot the moment he reached a desolate stretch before he took out a pile of boxes. Inside were the Attribute Fruits Catheya had identified.

Wasting no time, Zac immediately bit into the first of the fruits, though it rather looked like a fleshy pinecone. It was one of the fruits that should boost his Luck, and Zac ate it stem and all. There was no stream of energy spreading through his body after eating the thing, but he rather gained an odd sense of interconnectedness with the world around him.

He felt like a Buddhist monk who had become one with the universe, but the feeling only lasted for a moment before the feeling passed. Soon enough he was back to normal, but he still opened his Status Screen to see the results. A smile immediately spread across his face as he saw that his Luck had increased by 12 points in one go, meaning the fruit had provided a full 6 points before his titles boosted the number.

Of course, if the fruit had rather provided something like 50 points like normal Peak E-grade Attribute fruits did, that would have been far preferable, but Luck fruits didn't scale like that. Perhaps that was for the best, considering that let Zac maintain his advantage even against higher-grade enemies.

The Monarchs already gained enough Luck through their Daos as is. If they could gain thousands of points into the mysterious attribute through simply eating some fruit, then his enemies would simply stumble upon Earth by chance sooner or later.

After having eaten the first, Zac kept going, working his way through the Luck Fruits until moving onto the other stats. It was lucky the Natural Treasures were almost instantly refined to the essence needed to boost his physique, considering he stuffed himself with over 20 kilos of fruits before he was done.

And the result was pretty impressive. He had already set a small foundation with the Technocrat mixtures he looted from the Mystic Realm, but this was his first palpable step forward. Altogether, he had gained over 100 base attributes per stat, a massive step forward that was essentially the attribute equivalent to a High Mastery Dao Fragment.

That might not be enough to make a difference against someone like Uona or Ykrodas, but every little bit counted. The real prize was his boost to Luck though, and the benefits that it brought.

[Grand Fate: Reach 500 Luck at E-Grade. Reward: Effect of Luck +6%]

Zac was hadn't expected to see a title like this, considering it was functionally the same as his old title called 'Fated'. Normally, the first title of a certain type would prevent him

from getting a similar one at higher grades, yet he somehow got both.

His best guess was that things worked differently for things related to Luck, or that some title series simply followed their own rules. For example, the given effect of Luck this time around was 1% higher compared to the E-grade, making Zac believe it was a chain where he could get the succeeding one during every grade. Put together, they would provide a tremendous boost to Luck.

That was ultimately just a guess of his, but more Luck was always a welcome sight, and he was now solidly above 1,000 Effective Luck. Hopefully, that would mean an even stronger Danger Sense and even greater instincts for opportunities. Who knew, the boost might even allow him to get the two remnants without issue, though Zac didn't hold much hope for that happening.

He knew that Uona was a disaster waiting to happen, and a couple of Attribute Fruits wasn't enough to give him any confidence he could withstand her furious revenge. That was mostly why he targeted the Shard of Creation first, apart from it being closer to where Catheya hid. Absorbing the first one had almost allowed him to fight a Technocrat Hegemon in F-grade, and this time his soul was far stronger compared to when he visited the Little Bean.

The Shard would hopefully become the ace that would allow him to complete his mission one way or another.

Catheya's information package was extremely detailed, with not only dangerous sites clearly marked, but also popular hunting grounds where one was bound to run into other trial takers. It allowed Zac to plot a course with minimal interruptions until he reached his target; the Ouroboros Loop. It was yet another current, this one running perpendicular along the middle reaches.

It took him along the middle ocean through all kinds of underwater environments, but Zac was more interested in going over various information packages than enjoying the view. He had seen it all by now, and these treasure spots were

just a cheap mimicry of the dangers and opportunities he had encountered at the heart of the ocean.

His time was better spent working on his cultivation, but since he was a mortal that wasn't an option during downtimes like this. The long bouts of uneventful travel over the last three months had even made him seriously consider taking up some sort of side profession. Previously, he had put the matter aside to prioritize shoring up his lacking theoretical foundations, but he was fast catching up with the general level expected of a young E-grade scion.

The problem was that he couldn't figure out what kind of job to learn. It couldn't just be a hobby to pass time, but rather something that he could make use of during battle or his cultivation. The most obvious choice was alchemy, which would allow him to refine the mountains of herbs he kept collecting.

Unfortunately, that route was probably impossible. A vast majority of Alchemy Heritages were based around fire, of which he had no Dao. And even if he found a method where he could make use of his Dao of Life or Death, there was still the looming issue of his energy control. You needed extremely precise control over not only your Dao, but also over energy manipulation to extract the valuable parts from herbs and then fuse them into a pill.

Inscriptionists and Array Masters had similar requirements, putting Zac at a loss.

He was only good at using brute force, but what job was that good for? Zac had collected a couple of simple heritages by this point, but none of them seemed to be suited to his toolkit. For now, he just kept deepening his horizons while slowly shoring up the foundations of his insights.

The days passed, and Zac was fast closing in on his destination. He detached the vessel from the current and continued by foot. While doing so, he once more went over the reports that Catheya had written, a thoughtful frown on his face.

She had tried entering both the grounds to make sure they were the places he referred to, though Zac guessed curiosity played a big role in her decision. However, she had not managed to enter the volcano at all. Entering from above was impossible for various reasons. First of all, there were surprisingly powerful avian beasts circling the volcano above the ocean surface, even Beast Kings by the looks of it.

It made this place one of the deathtraps of the middle reaches. There were hundreds of these kinds of places in the trial, spots teeming with danger but no treasure. Sometimes there was simply no reward to go with the risk, and figuring when that was the case was one of the more valuable skills among explorers.

Apart from the occasional risk-taker hoping to discover something everyone else had missed, most people simply ignored places like these.

The beasts were not the only problem. Even if you managed to hide from the powerful birds that made the mountain their home, you still needed to find a way to deal with the terrifying heat. Resilient cultivators such as himself would be able to withstand the furious flames of the volcano for a while, but there was also an extremely powerful natural formation powered by the mountain itself.

Cathey believed you'd get stuck around the mouth and slowly get roasted if you tried to enter that way. Thankfully, there were many cracks in the volcano itself, and Cathey posited at least some of them should provide a path to the inner chamber of the volcano. Unfortunately, those entrances proved to be just as dangerous.

The natural formation didn't extend to those tunnels, but she had been forced to run for her life to avoid a terrifying ripple that she said was 'an antithesis to her very existence'. It didn't take a lot of guesswork to understand it was a wave of creation that had spread out. The question was how to deal with something like that.

Zac had been constantly inundated with purified motes of Creation for years by now. Would he prove immune to the

ripples that Catheya felt would end her life? Or was he just as susceptible? Zac figured there was only one way to find out, and he pushed forward the next two days until he reached the towering mountain.

It pushed up through the surface of the ocean, reaching thousands of meters into the air according to the report. Zac didn't breach the surface though, but rather swam toward an area roughly 200 meters beneath the surface.

It wasn't based on fears of the avian beasts or something Catheya had written, but rather his instincts. He could feel it, almost as palpable as he had felt his Mark of Creation hidden in the Egg before it was dragged into the depths of the chasm. There really was a Shard of Creation in the heart of the volcano, and it was neither at the top or far beneath the surface.

It was somewhere in the middle, just at the height Zac was heading for. If he needed any further proof, he didn't need to look far either. The dormant remnants in his mind had woken up, and Zac felt war was brewing as they started vibrating while still locked in each other's embrace. The quicker Zac dealt with this matter, the sooner these troublesome things would calm down again.

The area around the volcano was quite desolate, with very little plant life growing. It was no surprise to Zac considering he saw ample proof of volcanic activity as he swam closer. The ocean bed was almost covered in layers upon layers of lava rivers that had been frozen by the waters. In fact, the water itself was well beyond 100 degrees where Zac swam, and a normal mortal would be scalded to death in an instant if dropped into these waters.

Of course, it wasn't much of an issue to Zac by this point, and neither did it prove lethal for the crabs and mollusks crawling across the walls of the mountain, seemingly digging into the stone itself. Zac was confused for a moment until he spotted a crab unearthing a clump of a red clay-like substance and swallowed it in one bite.

It looked like this place had created a unique eco-system of its own, with the creatures beneath the surface eating actual mud filled with fire-attuned energies for sustenance. Meanwhile, the birds of prey above the surface most likely fed on the beasts below. The crabs still contained a lot of the Twilight Energy, but it was almost evenly matched with the fire of the mountain that fed them.

Zac eventually reached the mountain proper, and his very presence scared away the critters crawling around in search of food. It wasn't hard to find one of the cave entrances Catheya had mentioned either - they were practically everywhere. However, Zac did note that not a single one of the crabs entered those burrows, even when the availability of that fiery mud should be greater closer to the magma within.

It wasn't that hard to figure out the reason, and he posted up right at the edge of a tunnel, patiently waiting with his gaze turned toward the depths. Four minutes passed, and Zac started to wonder if he ultimately was too far out. But suddenly, he felt a shift. A wave of energy swept through the mountain, getting closer until it was almost upon him.

Initially, Zac had planned on withstanding the pulse here at the edge of its effective radius, but he immediately pushed back and created hundreds of meters of distance. It was just in time as well, as a wall of energy shot out through the cave mouth, creating havoc on the area before being dispersed by the Twilight Ocean.

Half a minute later any sign of its appearance was gone, but some of the energy lingered. Zac swam back with a frown on his face, and he felt the remains of the creation pulse burrow into his body along with the Twilight Energy. Thankfully, his Hidden Node found no difficulty gobbling the thing up, but Zac could feel pain all over his body until the wounds were healed.

It was like he had been instantly sunburnt by standing in the leftovers of the pulse. Or perhaps it was more apt to liken it to radiation poisoning. In either case, it spelled trouble. He finally understood what Catheya meant when she said an

antithesis of her very existence. It was not just the energy of the Shard of Creation in that wave, it was much more.

First of all, there was fiery energy from the volcano itself, but it took a backseat to the two other powers. The first was unsurprisingly the tainted energy of creation stemming from the shard, but the second part was pure life. It looked like the wave had fused with the Twilight Energy somehow, supercharging and weaponizing the life aspect of the ambient energy.

It would be extremely perilous to take on that wave as a Draugr, even with his hidden nodes slowly absorbing the energy. It almost felt like he was in a video game, and he was one of the undead monsters who could be harmed by players casting healing spells. It wouldn't help much that **[Void Heart]** could swallow Life-attuned energies if the pulse had already ripped him to pieces.

Thankfully, there was an easy fix to that problem, and a snap echoed out from within his body as Zac broke the seal to his Duplicity Core.

Chapter 758: Magmatic Core

The seal hiding Zac's Duplicity Core was broken, and he immediately began the transformation process. Soon enough he stood at the cave mouth in his human form, and he closed his eyes to once more sense the remnant energies from the Creation pulse. The supercharged life-attuned energy in the area was still hostile to him, but its effect was not much worse than any other attack at the moment. It was definitely a better idea to enter the volcano in this form.

Zac wasn't stoked about using his human form and losing the protection of Leandra's array after finding out that the Eveningtide Asura was lurking in some corner of the Twilight Ascent. But what choice did he have? Not getting the Shard of Creation would lead to his cultivation being crippled, which trumped any unproven concerns over his privacy.

The life-attuned energies were now manageable just like the fiery energies that permeated the area, but that still left the weak motes of diluted Creation. The core force that had carried the pulse was different to the Creation Energy he usually dealt with, in that this energy was raw, wild, and still tainted by the will of the shard itself.

It was much more troublesome to deal with compared to the distilled energy that was extracted from his trapped shard, and it didn't take long for Zac to realize that he wouldn't be able to simply make the energy his own by absorbing it. However, he had another idea of how to deal with the pulses, and he once more waited at the edge of his chosen tunnel. Soon enough Zac sensed an identical build-up, though this one was slightly weaker.

It would still serve Zac's purposes, and he readied himself as he sensed the turbulent wave of Life and Creation ripple forward. At the same time, two streams of energy entered his

shoulders, and a small shimmering globe appeared between his hands, shuddering with unbridled possibility.

Suddenly, Zac pushed his hands forward, and the mark pushed into the wave of creation heading through him. Zac imparted his will into the Mark of Creation, and the small walnut-sized ball instantly grew into the size of a cantaloupe as it stole the wild creation in the area to power its creation.

Zac could sense how the act had started a chain reaction that would only end in disaster, and he hurriedly threw the Mark of Creation away before he flashed to safety with **[Earthstrider]**. A blinding eruption of light illuminated the whole ocean for a moment before a fifteen-meter wide object wrought from an alloy of stones appeared where the Mark once was.

It was a chaotic mesh of patterns and materials, and it broke apart the moment it hit the rocky ocean bed. Zac looked at it thoughtfully before his gaze turned to the blistering welts that had appeared across his hands.

That bright light had released a wave of chaotic energies that had passed right through him, and while his body was already fast at work repairing itself, it was something both hard to defend against and lethal. Zac looked out across the field of crabs, and he could see how many of them shuddered with pain until they slumped down one after another.

Still, the experiment was a success. He had not been directly impacted by any of the Creation Energy in the wave at all when it passed through him, and even the amount of weaponized Life had been lessened by a good margin. As for the weird rock the bundle of creation turned into, it was the result of Zac's wish of the thing turning into a harmless boulder.

Why it didn't turn into a simple rock was harder to guess, and it could be anything from the influence of the Twilight Ocean, his lacking understanding of the Dao of Creation, or even the latent consciousness from the Spark of Creation. In either case, the Mark of Creation had turned extremely unstable the moment his purified energies had been joined by the wild energies in the pulse.

Seeing that he had found a method to push through the pulses, Zac sat down and rested for a few hours to restore himself to perfect condition. Using even a walnut-sized Mark of Creation left a small network of fine cracks across his neck, just like the Annihilation Spheres, and he knew he would have to conjure more of them to reach the heart of the volcano.

Those cracks were extremely hard to heal, but they solidified and became invisible after a few hours, lessening the risk of them worsening on their own. In an ideal world, Zac would have wanted to have already cleansed himself before that point, but he still hadn't found a method to do so. Only his natural healing along with the purified energy of opposing remnants worked, and the cracks generally disappeared after a week or two if it came from a small-sized mark like this.

Zac didn't have weeks to waste at the moment though, and he set out as soon as he felt his condition stable. He once more waited at the mouth of the volcano until yet another pulse erupted. This time he didn't interact with the wave of Creation at all, instead opting to slip into the tunnel in its wake.

He knew he had roughly five minutes before the next pulse would arrive, and he pushed his speed as much as he could with **[Earthstrider]**. He turned into a blur, rushing through one tunnel after another, but he swore when he ran into one barrier after another. Eventually, three minutes had passed without him making any real headway, forcing him to escape once more and wait for the next pulse to pass before continuing his scan.

This cycle continued for hours, which later turned to days. There was something odd about those tunnels. It wasn't the fact that they were completely devoid of living things, or that it was wrought from a confusing mesh of a million different materials rather than the rough stone of the exterior mountain.

It wasn't even the fact that the tunnels made no sense from a geological standpoint, though it was a bit related. There was something mysterious about these paths, and Zac almost felt like he was running along the lines of an array rather than paths that were supposed to be the result of heat expansion.

Not only were paths extremely confusing and almost impossible to memorize, but it almost felt like they contained the secrets of the Dao of Creation. Sometimes he was even forced to stop as he felt a surge of inspiration coming on, but the feeling quickly passed. He was missing too much context to understand what was going on.

Thankfully, four days of ceaseless work bore some results. Zac started to gain some sort of inherent understanding, and he managed to make it deeper and deeper between each pulse. He had even managed to find two paths he believed had a good chance of leading into the volcanic core where he felt the Shard of Creation calling for him.

It wasn't only thanks to the fact he Creation-wrought tunnels started to make sense to him. He also had two rambunctious remnants locked in his mind that essentially functioned like compasses for him. They could definitely sense their sibling hidden in the heart of the Volcano, and their energies grew wilder the closer he got.

Those two tunnels he had found elicited a far greater response compared to any other pathway so far, making Zac believe they provided a direct path to the shard.

The problem was that the volcano was simply massive, and he would have to push through at least one pulse to confirm. He had already wasted one Mark of Creation on testing the viability of traversing the tunnels, and he couldn't keep racking up the damage to his body right before absorbing the second Shard.

If he wanted to go, then he had to go all in. There was some lingering hesitation if he was doing the right thing. After all, he might expend multiple Mark of Creations only to find a dead end. If he kept doing that, he would soon enough either run out of Creation Energy or the cracks would reach an irreparable state.

But what choice did he have? His forte lay in brute force, but that was of little help against the powerful Natural Formation guarding the mouth of the volcano. So Zac grit his teeth and

once more set out the moment his opportunity arose, pushing straight toward the path he felt most likely to bear fruit.

The temperatures steadily rose as the tunnel turned to a blur. He almost felt like he was passing through a fever dream. One moment the walls were made from glistening alloys, which then seamlessly turned into a convoluted crystal cave where he was hounded by thousands of his own reflections.

Dark twisted tunnels, jagged paths he barely could squeeze through, even a spot where gravity itself was suspended, forcing him to fly forward with the help of Cosmic Energy. There was no rule or reason, only unfettered creation. Zac constantly used his evolved movement skill to keep maximum pace, occasionally stepping onto the walls or ground to reset it.

Even then, there was no end in sight after rushing for over four minutes, and he could feel the incoming threat.

Two more streams of energy entered the circuits on his shoulders, and he formed a small mark of creation in his hands. Soon enough, the wave of creation came crashing through the tunnel, and Zac pushed his hands forward to intercept. Once more it was a success, and Zac threw the ball behind him, creating a huge eruption of flames this time.

He was currently passing through a submerged patch of tunnel, but not submerged by the Twilight Ocean. It was rather a hard-to-traverse swamplike water, where the liquid seemed to grip him harder the quicker he moved. The inferno incinerated the water that filled the tunnel as it rushed to fill the tunnel in two directions.

Having the ball of creation turn into a storm of flames was a bit risky, but it was easy to imagine considering he was beset with fiery energies all-around. Zac would have preferred to create nothing, but that was simply impossible from what he had learned over the past years. Creation was the opposite of Oblivion, and nothingness was the one thing that could not be brought forth.

Zac was thrown forward by the enormous force, and he barely managed to avoid getting gored by a stalagmite that had appeared out of nowhere. In fact, the whole area ahead had

transformed, going from a cubic hall full of engraved disks to a chamber filled with thousands of sharp spikes.

Thankfully, Zac could still sense that the path to the Shard of Creation was intact, so he kept running forward while diverting some of his attention to dealing with the alien energies that had entered his body in the wake of the pulse. The minutes passed as Zac continued his mad dash, and he forced his way through three more pulses before he reached a massive pool of magma that felt different compared to the endless biodomes he had just passed.

At least Zac hoped that was the case, considering the bubbling pool of lava was the endpoint of the tunnel. If that pool didn't leave into the heart of the volcano, he had just wasted weeks, perhaps months. After all, he was beset by a searing pain in by now, and he didn't need a mirror to know that his upper body was covered in a dense pattern of cracks.

There was no time to lose, and Zac rushed straight toward the pond, withstanding the searing heat. It wasn't to the point the combination of his Fragment of the Bodhi and a massive pool of Endurance was overwhelmed, but he still took out a talisman and infused some Cosmic Energy into it.

A blue film instantly covered his body, and the oppressive heat was lessened by a decent degree. He had hundreds of similar talismans neatly stacked in his ring after his visit to the volcanic trial back in the Zecia sector, but he knew that the heat was the least of his issues.

The rational part of his mind screamed that he was insane, but he still took a deep breath and jumped inside, using Cosmic Energy to burrow deeper and deeper into the magma. The heat was far greater compared to the volcano he had swum around in to get his Heart of Fire-title, but the more pressing issue was that its fire-attuned energies were infused with Creation.

It felt like he was being beset by a series of hallucinations as his surroundings kept twisting while he sunk deeper into the magma, but he knew the reality was much more dangerous than he was dealing with some simple illusion arrays. Every

second, more foreign Creation energy entered his body, pushing his **[Void Heart]** to the limit.

But his hidden node was ultimately limited, and it was also dealing with the Twilight Energy and fire-attuned energy of the volcano. Soon enough wild Creation would start accumulating in his body, and who knew what trouble that would cause. Zac hesitated a second, but he still conjured another Mark of Creation even if no pulse was incoming.

The ambient Creation was gradually being siphoned into the sphere rather than entering his body, and Zac hurried to make the most of the limited time he could keep it going. The Shard was further toward the center of the volcano, submerged a bit deeper, but Zac felt himself rapidly drawing closer now that there was no confusing pattern of tunnels keeping him at bay.

A sudden burst of light made him stop in his tracks, and he was shocked to find the lava simply ending. He threw the Mark of Creation far away before pushing his head through the final layer of magma, and he realized that the whole heart of the volcano was a massive but slow-moving whirlpool.

In the heart of the whirlpool, there was no lava, but there was something else.

The shard silently hovered in the heart of the swirl, the magma turning as the remnant did. With each turn, Zac saw a world of possibilities. In each refraction, he could sense the vastness of the cosmos. This was creation, true creation, not diminished or boxed in by his limited imagination.

Last time he hadn't been able to properly observe the remnant because of the force fields that the Technocrats had erected around it, but he was shocked at the beauty of it, and he almost felt like he was about to be dragged into an illusion. It was nothing like the shard in his cage. Certainly, he could still vaguely see a small crystal in the center, but the true value was the boundless insight it exuded.

If it had been him in the F-grade, Zac would probably already have jumped over to grasp the treasure in a daze. However, his soul was far stronger this time around, and he was able to dispel the desire burning in his heart. Of course, he was still

going to snatch it, but at least it was his decision this time around.

At least he believed it was. Or was this yet another time he had been manipulated by the System? Ultimately, Zac guessed it didn't matter, and he made one final survey of the situation.

It was clear that the Shard of Creation wasn't in a passive state. It was constantly drawing fiery energies from the depths below, and Twilight Energy from the mouth of the volcano. Enormous amounts of energy entered the mysterious object every second, and Zac could feel how its aura was steadily growing. It had already been over four minutes since the last burst, and Zac sensed that another one would be unleashed any moment now.

The question was, wait for the pulse to pass, or go before he had to withstand another one?

Zac ultimately chose the former, and he ignored the painful maze of golden cracks. Just one more. It was either that or risk one of those terrifying pulses erupting from within his body.

The momentum grew, and Zac could sense that even the escaped motes of creation were being dragged back into the shard, like the water level sinking just before a tsunami. Then suddenly, it felt like the universe stopped for a moment, and Zac felt his mind drift as the remnant lit up with a terrifying splendor. It was too much, and Zac desperately closed his eyes as he pushed his mark of creation forward.

His final mark accomplished its task as well, but it instantly destabilized from the massive overload of energy. Zac barely had time to swim back into the magma before a terrifying explosion rocked the whole area as a gout of flames shot toward the sky. He felt a wave of unbearable heat turning his skin to charcoal, but that was the least of Zac's worries.

The final point-blank pulse was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the two remnants that had been locked in a hate-filled embrace for four years suddenly detached from each other. The two immediately entered a pitched struggle, but Zac immediately saw that it was different from normal.

The Shard of Creation railed against the cage with even greater vigor than the Splinter of Oblivion ever did before it got company. However, the splinter actually fought against the shard rather than the cage, over and over blocking the shard's attempts to break out.

And Zac could sense it - fear.

The Splinter of Oblivion was no longer concerned about victory or escape, it was fighting for survival. Zac's eyes lit up, feeling he had gained an unwilling ally in this task, and he shot forward before any more variables had time to crop up. There were no barriers barring his path, and he effortlessly reached the shard.

First, he took out a box wrought from treasure jade, but it started to mutate and fall apart before he even had a chance to close the lid. He had somewhat expected this to happen, but it was still a disappointment that he couldn't store the thing. He would have to absorb it right now, and he instead grasped it with his left hand.

The crystal was cool to the touch, but Zac was still beset by terrifying agony as his arm started to rapidly mutate and take a series of grotesque shapes. Zac knew there was no stopping now though, so he pushed the small crystal straight toward his chest. A shudder spread out from his body as the crystal slipped inside without issue, the pulse pushing the swirling wall of magma over fifty meters away.

Zac had no time to worry about his surroundings though as he prepared to enter the fight of his life - it was now to eat or to be eaten.

Chapter 759: When Fates Align

Another ripple was released by the shard, and Zac felt like a universe was growing within his body as a storm of Creation spread out from head to toe. His body was rapidly transforming from the wild impulses it emitted, and he knew that anyone watching him right now would be beyond horrified by what they saw.

He desperately hold on to his image of reality to make sure the changes didn't spiral out of control, but reality suddenly felt malleable, open to reinterpretation. Alluring whispers beckoned for him to take the chance, to transcend from his lowly form, and he felt an echo of agreement from within the cage. Wasn't he disappointed that his human form was so inferior to his Draugr side, be it in energy circulation to storage capabilities?

Why not change it? It only required a single thought.

It was a trap. Zac could feel it even in his muddled state. The remnants only dealt in backhanded gifts, and until it had been locked down and firmly controlled, he had to be careful with his desires. But that was easier said than done. The rampaging remnants scurried back and forth with blinding speed, leaving a trail of destructive creation in its wake.

Try as he might, it seemed almost impossible to curtail its rampage. Why was it so different from the last time? Was it because the shard in the volcano had enjoyed almost unlimited access to vast quantities of energy? Back in the Technocrat vessel, he hadn't turned into a rapidly transforming monstrosity the moment he took on the shard.

Or had he?

Back then, he had been instantly knocked unconscious before getting whisked away by a vision, and who knew how long he had stayed unconscious. This time he had managed to stay awake, for better or worse. Part of him wanted to embrace that sweet darkness to avoid the horrifying agony of having your body reformed into one wretched state after another, but he didn't dare to give in.

There was a good chance this was something new. It didn't seem like the shard's actions were just its natural state of creative exuberance. Rather, it felt like the shard had already sensed its sibling, and it was shooting back and forth in an attempt to locate it. Zac couldn't let the thing continue unchecked, but he didn't even have a chance to figure something out before he felt reality slow down to a crawl.

The seed was suddenly locked in place just below Zac's neck, and his limbs were no longer undergoing wild transformations between a series of ghoulish creations. Even the enormous whirlpool of magma around him had ground to a standstill, and it seemed to Zac that the only thing that moved were his thoughts.

Unfortunately, even they were starting to become hazy as his vision closed in on him. He felt his mind being dragged far away, and he desperately tried to tether at least a remnant piece of consciousness to his body before it all went dark.

A crackling sound full of ebullience echoed out into the void, each snap exuding the primordial Dao. For untold ages the **[Spark of Creation]** left its mark on the universe, its conceptions inching ever closer to that impossible threshold.

Worlds were born with a single breath, marvels beyond compare conjured with a thought. Its desire was the Heavens and its will the Earth. But as the spark grew more powerful, so did its hunger. Not even Creation could overcome the ancient Law of Balance, and every spark of inspiration had its price.

Worlds were born with a single breath, and stars dimmed to never shine again. The spark didn't mind. After all, change was a form of Creation as well, and it moved through the cosmos in search of more sustenance to fuel its blessings.

Hunger. Growth. Desire. The spark flashed, its tendrils stretching toward every corner of myriad planes. Creation was never over.

With a wave of his arm, the Spring Saint brought life to the desolate fields, his desire for life bending the harsh elements to his will. Of course, nothing came without a price, and his murky eyes turned to his followers whose backs were already bent over with premature age. Two years and they were already like this. He inwardly sighed as his eyes turned back to the seemingly lush grass that was springing up all around them.

Self-hatred burned in his heart, but he couldn't stop now. He couldn't tell his ardent supporters that it was a lie, that the bountiful gardens he wrought were a calamity waiting to happen. It was all a charade, his desire to create something greater supplanted by an older and undying will.

Soon, it would all turn to dust.

Hopefully, he and his followers would be dead before then. That way they wouldn't have to witness the evil they had brought to their world. Even the purest intentions could be corrupted, even the most benevolent of deeds could be harmful. Life without soul was just corruption, and the world he had created was hollow.

The whispers had grown so loud, to the point that they almost drowned out the calls of the wild. Regret gnawed at her as she kept running, desperately trying to create some distance from the site of her outburst. A whole settlement turned to a monument of her folly, her people turned to sacrificial offerings to that insatiable desire.

It was never enough. It always wanted more. More energy, more impressions, more yearning. It could never be satiated, that ancient madness that had permeated her very being. Silence was oppression, stillness was death.

She was so hungry. She had denied herself for fifty years, wanting nothing, doing nothing, wasting her potential and future in an effort to stem the inevitable. Even then, the clamors had grown louder, and her attempts to impose order

now seemed so laughable. Four quick jumps took her to the top of the mountain, far from any settlements or reflection pools.

The moons were so beautiful today.

She had been renamed after Sarda'Lavain, the Shepherd, the moment her talent was discovered. The council had hoped she would be a shepherd, keeping the flock safe from the darkness of the Ymrid Expanse. The moons had looked just like they did now during the ceremony.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she finally let herself remember. The whole mountain rumbled as one statue after another appeared, memories given form in one final salute. Ten, fifty, a thousand scenes appeared, wrought with loving detail in stone and wood. They were alive in a sense, as they lived in her desire.

Nature screamed with pain as the Sarda'Lavain led her flock into the one place the curse couldn't follow - nothingness.

Zac's soul was taken on a journey through one horrid fate after another as the world stood still around him. Not one of the visions was a scene of triumph. They all depicted the inevitable doom waiting at the end of absorbing a Shard of Creation, to the point that Zac felt something was amiss. Did the new shard in his body sense that he had already locked away its siblings, and was now trying to wear down his confidence?

If so, it would take more than this. He was just a child in multiverse terms, but his will wouldn't be broken by something like this. He had goals that keep him on the path. He would get there even if he had to extinguish that ancient will that had tainted Creation itself.

And even if he didn't believe in himself, he believed in the System and its greed for more chaos patterns. This wasn't the place where he would fall. He simply let the scenes wash over him, each one of them a lesson to engrave in his heart.

But suddenly, the scenes stopped, like they had two times before. His consciousness once found itself on that lofty

mountain, staring at the being sitting on the peak as the sky danced in a thousand colors, each ray containing a facet of truth that far surpassed anything Zac knew.

“Oh?” the Aetherlord said as he opened his eyes, his word rife with the Dao. “You again?”

The last time Zac had been sent to this mountain top he had been in the F-grade and still clueless about a lot of things. He had been a frog in the bottom of a well so to speak, but years of hardship and experiences had greatly broadened his horizons. Only now could he fully appreciate what kind of monster appeared before him.

The cosmos itself bent to his will as Creation had taken physical form by his aura. It danced across the horizon, for as long as his eyes could see in every direction. This was not a Dao Field or condensed intent, this was pure Dao fit to be considered Heavenly Law. This man was simply too powerful, even more so than his Technocrat mother.

His presence put pressure on Zac’s very existence, like his soul couldn’t fathom that something so grand could be crammed into a single body. Then again, it was perhaps not only his perception that was different this time compared to last. Zac felt more tangible this time, more than just a wisp of consciousness.

“Just a blink of an eye has passed yet you have once more drunk from the poisonous waters of false Creation. I warned you when we parted ways, that the hunger for the boundless will leave you a withered husk,” he said with disdain. “Yet you once more run the errands of the Villainous Heavens.”

“Aren’t you the same?” Zac muttered, and he immediately regretted it.

Or perhaps the Aetherlord hadn’t heard him? It was hard to tell in Zac’s current form, whether his words were real or just stray thoughts. However, the sneer on the Aetherlord’s face quickly gave him an answer, and Zac immediately tried to leave. This man was terrifyingly powerful, but he was a bit of a bastard judging by their last encounter, and who knew what he would do this time.

He only needed to speak with Be'Zi anyway, and seeing this guy was proof enough that the plan was feasible. The world shuddered as Zac tried to drag himself back through his spiritual anchor, but it suddenly stabilized as the connection was cut.

“Don't be so hasty to leave, human,” the Aetherlord said. “And don't get your facts mixed up. It is not the shards that bring us together, it is the Cursed Heavens. I took no shortcut to reach my current height, unlike you who invited that madness into your heart.”

Zac was shocked to hear that the Aetherlord hadn't actually meddled with the Shards of Creation. Zac had always considered him and Be'Zi as some sort of safety net. Those two had made it to the middle or later stages of Autarchy with these things in their bodies, which should be more than enough to achieve his own goals of finding and saving Kenzie.

But now it turned out it was all a lie? They had simply cultivated Oblivion and Creation without the interference with the shards?

“Well, it looks like you handled the first one surprisingly well,” the Aetherlord continued with a ruminating look. “I can barely sense its mark on you. The System stepped in when I would not? Interesting. You might be able to amuse us a while longer.”

“Could you tell me how to fuse the shards?” Zac ventured, seeing as the Aetherlord seemed to be in a good mood.

“You still bear the stench of the Cursed Heavens, even more now than last time. Not destroying you is already testing the limits of my patience,” the Aetherlord said. “However, there is a saying. One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity. Five is... Heh, well perhaps you will find out? In fact, how about a wager?”

Zac didn't immediately answer, afraid he'd be caught in a similar scheme like with the Eveningtide Asura. However, it didn't look like the Aetherlord Autarch planned on doling out a quest. Zac suddenly realized it might not be possible, seeing

as how this man seemed to have completely broken from the System.

“Arrive in front of me with five shards within 100 years, in person or a vision like this, and I will impart you with a Creation of my own,” he said with a small smile. “It will be immensely beneficial for your path.”

“What if I fail?” Zac hesitated. “And what did you mean by calamity?”

“If you fail, then you will simply be another one who failed to satiate the boundless greed of the Villainous Heavens. Make no mistake. Now that you’ve set out on this path, there is no return,” he said as his smile widened. “As for what calamity means, you will find out soon enough. Now, off you go.”

Alvod’s eyes shot open and he looked at the Twilight Tapestry with anticipation. It fluctuated precariously for a few seconds as a foreign intrusion made its presence known. However, the unwelcome visitor was soon gone, and the Tapestry returned to normal, even stronger than before.

“That brat actually followed through,” Alvod smiled as he rose into the air from his prayer mat.

As expected, that little Draugr hadn’t taken his mission to heart, only making a symbolic effort before setting off to look for his own fortunes.

Was his reputation really so bad that someone would distrust him eons after his attack on the entrenched powers? Alvod didn’t really care that the world didn’t know the truth of the matters back then. He had followed his heart to right a wrong, not just for himself, but for Zecia’s very future. But his infamy did make his life a bit harder.

And now, this Arcaz Black had taken one of those cursed objects, the remnant from the Spark by the looks of it. Who knew what kind of trouble the brat would create with that thing kicking around in his body. Being able to impact one’s surroundings with such meager strength was a talent worth admiration.

Alvod still remembered how one of the purifiers had washed up on his shores along with the scorched remains of the distillation array powering it. He hadn't believed his eyes when he saw how his tapestry had been tampered with in an attempt to force a system of Life, Death, and War.

"You think my path a lie, a defeat?" Alvod snorted as his gaze turned to another spot on the tapestry a few hundred meters away. "Foolish. There are as many paths to the peak as there are stars to the sky. Just because they have been hidden, doesn't mean they're inferior."

Space bent and he soon hovered in front of the spot he had marked before. Even now, Alvod hesitated a bit, but he soon steeled his resolve. He knew that he would encounter all kinds of roadblocks on the road to Autarchy. As long as he could follow his heart, he could live and die without regret. And his heart told him this needed to be done. Otherwise, it would be like having a fly buzzing around in the back of his head.

"You want to abscond with the treasures while everyone else suffers? The Council, the undead factions, even the Havarok bastards. They risk everything for the advancement of their path. You think yourself above it?" Alvod muttered as a ten-thousand-meter tall wave materialized behind his back. "You think yourself safe after the System's warnings? Naive."

The wave crashed forward, powered by the weight of a supreme world on the precipice of forming its Dao. The tapestry flickered as an ancient will pushed back, but it was too weak. The crashing evening tide turned into nine streams of monstrous power, and the tapestry was forced to give way.

Alvod pushed his hand inside, ignoring the deep clap of thunder above. Searing pain assaulted him, but he crushed the resistance and paved a path.

"Go now, child," Alvod muttered with a distorted voice as the pathway shrunk. "Hurry."

Alvod's pained grimace turned into a smile when he sensed his command being heeded. He sunk back toward his prayer mats as his singed hand gradually was healed by a couple of nurturing streams.

“And thus our fates align,” Alvod grinned as his gaze turned back to the original spot. “There is no escaping what’s to come. Let’s see how you enjoy riding this tiger.”

Chapter 760: Golden Canopy

The towering mountain and the mindbending sky of pure Dao shattered, and it was like someone had started up time again as Zac found himself back in his body. He felt like days had passed as he had been taken through one vision after another, while in reality, it had only taken an instant. The swirling whirlpool of magma once more started spinning, but Zac saw that it was starting to collapse now that there was no shard to maintain balance.

However, Zac didn't have time to worry about something like that as a tremendous force built up inside his body, a storm of creation. Not only did it forcibly pull in shocking amounts of energy from the surroundings, but it robbed Zac as well. Mental energy, Cosmic Energy, even his life force went into the mix, joining the madness the Shard of Creation was concocting.

The absorption of the shard was quickly getting out of hand, but Zac did have one advantage this time around that he lacked the last time. First of all, he was almost a whole grade stronger compared to when he fled through the technocrat vessel. But more importantly, he now had a properly awakened bloodline to help out.

His pores had once more turned into small vortices that siphoned off some of the endless energy radiating from the Shard of Creation. **[Void Heart]** was hard at work as well, swallowing a decent chunk with every bite. And it quickly became evident that the more Creation Energy his body drew away, the less energy and life-force did the storm draw from its surroundings.

[Purity of the Void] helped as well, though it didn't actually expel the Creation Energy, but rather stripped some of the shard's latent will from it. Some even entered his Soul Aperture, some getting swallowed by **[Spiritual Void]**, and

some getting infused into the golden ocean. The very system that helped him deal with the Twilight Energy had come through and protected him once again.

But most surprising was a new addition, an unusually powerful vortex that had appeared almost right where the Shard of Creation had been frozen while he was shown the vision - at the top of his sternum, just below his neck. Its suction was not as powerful as **[Void Heart]**, but exponentially greater than the small passive draw from his cells.

However, Zac couldn't see where it went. It just disappeared, like it was drawn to another dimension. There was one very exciting possibility for this, but there was no way he had time to investigate the situation. Not even his Void Emperor-bloodline could contain the vast energies that the rampaging shard exuded. It needed release, and Zac desperately struggled to expel it from his body before he burst at the seams.

A thousand streams that fluctuated between opalescence and gold shot out in every direction, each one of them filled with the majestic force of Creation and Zac's very essence. Anything they touched, changed. Most notably, the ocean of magma in the supersized volcanic chamber immediately started to undergo tumultuous changes, and thousand chaotic scenes played out at once.

And in the middle of it, Zac found himself a conduit of energies he couldn't understand or control. Why was this so different? Pain muddled Zac's thoughts, but he struggled to stay sane as he tried to figure out a solution. But the voices were so loud, almost drowning out his thoughts. It was just a deep buzz in the depths of his brain, but it was rife with meaning.

It was a constant flood of suggestions, thousands of them crashing into his mind every second. Form wings and fly out of here. Create a tunnel of unmeltable steel and walk out. Turn fire to ice. Become an elemental and embrace the heat. The whispers were endless and without reprieve, to the point that Zac started to lose sight of what was him and what was the shard.

He had thought it would be different with his first set of remnants being behind lock and key, but the calamity the Aetherlord mentioned had come just the same. Was this the reason for the fall of the Eastern Trigram Sect? One was an eternal curse, two was a calamity where the user became a walking disaster.

Zac despaired as he felt a second wave of unfettered creation coming on again. What was the use of his bloodline improving or a new Hidden Node being born, if he wasn't alive to enjoy it? But he suddenly remembered his talk with the Autarch. He had talked like the effect of collecting five shards was something well-known, meaning that two was just a threshold.

A bottleneck that needed to be conquered, no different from the other difficulties he had managed to conquer thus far. Others had passed this step before him, so why couldn't he?

Magma beneath his feet turned into a stable plateau of stone, but Zac didn't move away even as magma fell toward him like crashing tidal waves. He needed to somehow force the shard until submission and pass the calamity before he could worry about anything else. Even rapidly transforming lava that had submerged him had to take a backseat.

With his Endurance, Vitality, and Gear, he would survive at least half an hour like this, but the same couldn't be said about the remnant. His body was already overflowing with energy again, and Zac knew that he couldn't simply make it disappear. The wheels had already been set in motion, and a price needed to be paid.

But did it really have to be his own life force? Zac was reluctant, but he still took out a small box containing what looked like a milky-white diamond, the third of the five supreme items he had picked up at the depths of the Chasm. Inside, an almost heaven-defying energy was trapped – longevity. This thing was just like the Longevity Pearls he found back in the Tower of Eternity, but it was on another level completely.

This thing was enough to create over ten peak-quality longevity pills according to Catheya, far more external life-

force than anyone could absorb on their own. After all, these kinds of treasures were all limited, just like Attribute Fruits. Some cultivators could take in more longevity than others, but it would normally not surpass 10-20% of your original lifespan.

For Zac, whose current lifespan was around 5,000 years, it meant a couple of centuries. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough, going by the rate the shard was going. But as long as he could continuously draw the energy from the gemstone and use it to power the forced creation rather than supplant his own life, he would hopefully not emerge from this as an old man.

The energy kept building, but Zac breathed out in relief when feeling a warm stream of what best could be described as time entering the fleshy blob his arm had turned into. It worked. Instead of losing decades of his lifespan, he had only lost a couple of months, with the rest coming from the longevity treasure. It was a shame using one of his five supreme treasures like this, but it was far preferable to dying.

But dealing with the cost of the shard's outbursts was just the first step. Zac immediately cursed when a deep rumble spread through the area as if prompted by his wayward thoughts. Something was brewing, and it wasn't hard to guess what considering he stood in the heart of a volcano.

The magma around him suddenly transformed from molten rock to water, which in turn was instantly vaporized by the searing heat. It resulted in a tremendous eruption, where magma and Zac were both pushed away to make room for the heat expansion. Zac groaned as he felt a few bones snap, but they instantly fused back together thanks to another thought.

He had to stay calm. An errant wish for the hard-to-traverse magma to be more like water had almost knocked him unconscious. Getting out that way was certainly possible, but Zac refused to lean on the shard unless he absolutely had to. He had seen the result of indulging desire over and over in the visions.

It was a poison, like the Cosmic Water that seemingly quenched your thirst while burning out your pathways. He

needed to seal the remnant somehow, but there was simply no time. In fact, Zac realized there wasn't time for anything at all as he sensed a terrifying force build beneath him.

This wasn't something like the attack of a Hegemon, this was the fury of nature itself. There was no time to push through the sea of lava and run through the endless tunnels. His mind frantically spun, and he reluctantly infused his will into the third burgeoning pulse building inside him. A wave of opalescent gold shot out, and the whole area around him turned into a 50-meter diamond with him securely ensconced in a small chamber in its heart.

Zac's arm turned into a blur as he threw out array after array, talisman after talisman, heedless of the cost to enhance his lifeline. It was just in time as well as an apocalyptic explosion erupted beneath his feet, and an unbearable kinetic force pushed him down on his knees as he, along with millions of tonnes of magma, shot toward the sky. A deafening bang caught up with him a moment later, just as a shocking wall of heat passed straight through his diamond and breaking his arrays, setting his whole world on fire.

The stench of seared flesh assaulted his nose, but it only lasted for a moment before his body reformed again. The one good thing about this process was that his body was nigh-indestructible, though the same couldn't be said of his other creations. The diamond, famed for its hardness, couldn't withstand the volcanic eruption and cracks rapidly spread through it until it shattered into a million pieces.

Luckily, it had absorbed most of the initial force from getting shot up thousands of meters in the air, and Zac suddenly felt a sense of weightlessness. A dozen eyes appeared on his body as he looked around, and he was met with the scene of an endless ocean stretching in every direction. Above him, an impossibly large plume of ash from the eruption, and an unfathomable amount of lava cascading down toward the ocean below him.

Zac knew he had been flung thousands of meters into the air. Falling from this height would normally not be that much of an issue, especially now that he could use his movement skill in the air. The more troubling issue was the hundreds of

thousands of boulders, each one of them teeming with fire-attuned energies, that had been dragged from the depths of the earth. If just one of them smashed into him, even he would get wounded.

But the more pressing energy was once more the shard. Another eruption was brewing. This one was far worse than anything the shard had released so far, and Zac prayed it would be its final gambit in imposing its will on him. A storm of life-force was drawn out from the gemstone as the voices in his mind reached a crescendo.

A hundred-meter-wide whirlpool instantly formed around him, and the red-hot magma inside the storm instantly turned into cold, cracked stone as all energy was siphoned off. Zac did what he could, but it was too much. He released a roar coming from the very depths of his soul, containing the full force of his mental energy and his conviction.

A huge shockwave pushed the closest lava and boulders away as it dispersed the hurricane that had formed around him, but it was nothing compared to what came next.

It looked like a sun had been born in the middle of the chaos, a radiant sphere of gold over five hundred meters across. For a moment, it seemed like it was kept afloat by the enormous gout of lava, but the scene only lasted for a second before it started to change, the gold spreading in every direction like a mushroom cloud.

Zac could sense it all through his connection with the cloud as he plunged toward the surface, propelled forward by both the outburst and his Cosmic Energy. The shard was exhausted for the moment, and Zac took the opportunity to form a sturdy shield of Mental Energy around it. It still exuded creation energy as it struggled to break free, but it was nowhere near as bad as before.

The final explosion had weakened it enough to provide Zac a reprieve and focus on survival. He had become yet another falling meteor, joining the tens of thousands of the others around him. The sound was deafening, with thousands of birds screeching in pain as their bones broke and their feathers

burned, and the falling projectiles created sharp whistling sounds that felt like daggers in Zac's brain.

As bad as it was, it was still nothing compared to what was going on above him, at the epicenter of the final outburst. The golden cloud had spread out and fused the ash, and a storm of Creation had erupted within, fueled by the still-ejecting lava. Thousands of sounds wrought from god-knows-what kind of creations had turned into a deafening cacophony.

As Zac plummeted toward the relative safety of the ocean, occasionally using falling boulders to reset [**Earthstrider**], he looked back at the chaos he had caused. And while the sound was enough to turn a man deaf, the scene was simply breathtaking. Zac's eyes widened as he froze in place, even forgetting to breathe.

It was a tree. A tree of Creation.

The thousand-meter pillar of lava created a red-hot trunk, and the golden cloud and ash had turned into an enormous crown. Within the crown, Creation ran rampant, where every branch held a thousand possibilities. No matter where you looked, there was something new, and it almost looked like it was decorated with magical Christmas lights as new colors joined the gold before being changed into something else.

Zac woke up from the stupor after a few seconds and started to flee further away again, but he felt that scene would stay with him for a long time. That 'tree' he had accidentally formed almost felt as impactful as the grandeur of the Lifebringer Tree he had seen in his Dao Vision so long ago. In a sense, this magical apparition behind him was more of a Tree of Life, holding not only the key to life itself, but to all creation.

Unfortunately, Zac's lapse in concentration had given the shard the opportunity it needed to escape, and it broke apart the chains that bound it with a burst of energy. However, it didn't start charging another burst. Instead, it started undulating at a weird frequency, and Zac's heart beat an extra time when he felt a matching vibration coming from the cage in his mind.

He tried to trap the shard again, but the remnant burned through the barriers even the action made it dim even further. The shard pushed straight into his Soul Aperture before Zac had a chance to reform his cage, completely ignoring the defenses of [**Soul Guardian**]. The shard seemed exhausted, but it was still was like a second sun had entered the area, and the golden ocean especially practically frothed as it was drenched in Creation.

Zac got a bad feeling seeing the shard's course of action, and his fears were immediately realized as it slammed into a seemingly empty spot in his aperture. Of course, it wasn't simply a random spot, but rather the hidden gate connecting Zac's Soul Aperture with the cage holding the other two remnants. The trapped shard frantically struggled in turn, while the Splinter was fighting for its life to prevent itself from getting overrun.

Another slam rocked his Soul Aperture, and Zac felt that the tunnel would be forced open soon enough if he let things proceed.

But the shard had entered his soul, and that was Zac's turf. It looked like a shimmering haze rose from the glistening core in his soul as he released way more Mental Energy than most Peak E-grade cultivators could muster at the threat of death. It turned into a new cage around the shard, this one so dense that it almost looked corporeal.

The shard fought hard to break out and resume its siege of the prison, but it was to no avail. Cracks formed on Zac's makeshift prison, but they were quickly healed as he kept instilling more and more energy into it. After half a minute the shard stopped, and Zac was filled with a surge of victory as he landed on the ocean surface.

This was why he had worked so hard for close to five years, never forgetting to cultivate his soul. The Shard was sealed by his mind, and he had plenty of energy to keep it going until he found a permanent solution. He turned back and took one last look at the scene he had created before he dove into the ocean.

A golden canopy shimmering with a million lights, a trunk
created with the heart of a world, and ten thousand red meteors
falling like leaves in autumn.

Chapter 761: Eruptions

Zac dove into the Twilight Ocean and the scenery above was immediately replaced by a subaquatic hellscape. He had already been somewhat prepared considering the spectacle he had caused, but the pandemonium that met him was even beyond what he expected.

The whole ocean was a bubbling cauldron as tens of thousands of superheated boulders dropped into the waters from above. The falling debris was filled with fiery energy, and the rapid cooling by the ocean caused them to crack one by one, causing cataclysmic explosions that spread in deadly chain reactions.

Meanwhile, gouts of lava shot out from the hundreds of cracks in the volcano itself, turning into giant spears that decimated anything in their path. Zac could only keep going, desperately avoiding the mayhem best as he could. Even then, he was constantly wounded by flying shrapnel or boulders slamming into the waters from above.

If not for the abundant creation energy coursing through his body, he would be covered in wounds after just a minute.

Zac really missed [**Profane Exponents**] at this moment, his three loyal followers whose defensive properties were leagues beyond [**Innate Ward**] which he had gotten from his Dao Repository. He really needed to find a way to upgrade [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] soon, and it seemed like focusing on its defensive capabilities would be the smartest course of action.

The visibility was all but null from the soot and the fact that the ocean was boiling, so Zac was shocked to suddenly find himself in front of a squad of almost 20 undead warriors who had formed a protective circle. Most of them were Revenants, with five of them being Corpse Lords. It looked like they had

decided to investigate the area but had gotten caught up by the chaos.

They had sacrificed speed to maintain a defensive shield as they moved further away from the volcano. Zac wanted nothing to do with them, but the opportunity to slip away had already passed since he almost entered their formation by accident, placing him just a few meters away from the undead warriors.

“You! What happened here? We hear-“ one of the Revenants exclaimed, but his eyes widened after a second. “That bounty! Arcaz Black!”

“He’s human?!” one of the Corpselords blurted, and the whole group stared in confusion, seemingly even forgetting the chaos that raged around them.

The confusion only lasted a moment though, with some of them charging attacks while others turned to run for their lives, not wanting to test their mettle against the first-place holder on the ladder. But they were too slow. An enormous wooden hand appeared through the boiling waters, the axe in its hand axe slamming down in their midst. Its edge radiated a blinding sharpness, but there was something different about **[Arcadia’s Judgement]** this time.

Thick golden veins covered the wooden hand, adding a second set of inscriptions on top of those that seemingly naturally formed in the bark. The golden tendrils didn’t stop at the hands either, but they covered the enormous axe as well, imbuing it with a unique power – the power of Creation.

Zac was normally unable to infuse his skills with the energy from his remnants, except for his newly created **[Pillar of Desolation]**, but this time it had happened without him even trying. Perhaps it was unavoidable, with his Soul Aperture being filled with Creation Energy.

Adding the Branch of the Axe would probably have been enough to deal with this group of bog-common trial-takers, and more than ten streams of energy entered Zac as their bodies were turned to shreds from the initial swing. A few had

almost managed to activate escape talismans by that point, but the second stage of the skill would soon take care of them.

Or that was what would normally happen.

Instead, a dense maze of golden scars shot out from the axe and covered the area, passing right through everything from boulders to corpses, and through the unlucky few who had survived the initial swing. Zac grimaced as he knew what would happen next, and a group of pained wails echoed out as the cultivators started to suffer horrifying transformations.

A few turned into grotesque clumps of uncoordinated flesh, others turned into base materials. Creation had entered their bodies, and there was no turning back for them. A series of fractal leaves flashed through the crowd as Zac ended the lives of the rest of the members, as much to ease their suffering as to protect his secrets.

Still, Zac wasn't very happy, either with being forced to slaughter a bunch of people or upon learning that there were cultivators in the area. He immediately swam away, afraid that the commotion would attract more people. As he fled, he looked inward to get a better understanding of the situation.

As expected, some Creation Energy had slipped through his Mental Energy cage when activating **[Arcadia's Judgement]**. He had tried to maintain a solid barrier around the still-hostile shard, but his ability to focus on multiple things at once was still just awful. His control had been loosened a bit when infusing his Dao into the attack, and a stream of Creation Energy had slipped through the cracks even if the shard was still held in place.

Some of it entered his skill, while some entered the golden ocean in his mind. However, most of it escaped his Soul Aperture, much to the delight of the various vortices in his body. It was a bit of a pain in the ass, but Zac believed it was unavoidable. He could see how the shard was already recuperating.

The two other remnants were able to conjure energy out of nowhere while locked away by both the System and Be'Zi, so it was no surprise that his newly-acquired remnant could do

the same. He would probably have to occasionally release the valves, so to speak, and expel some energy. Otherwise, his Soul Aperture was bound to blow up.

Luckily, the initial eruptions had only exhausted half of the life force locked inside the gemstone, meaning he wouldn't have to waste his own lifespan in the short run. Furthermore, he would only have to do this for a few months until he got his hands on the splinter. At that point, he would drain both remnants with a Glimpse of Chaos, and then shove them into the cage to join their siblings if all went according to plan.

Zac kept going for another fifteen minutes, utilizing **[Earthstrider]** to put more distance between himself and the volcano. Thankfully, it didn't seem his skills would get infected with creation unless he tried infusing it with his Dao, allowing him to use the movement skill without worry. Soon enough he had left the direct danger zone of the volcano, and he immediately took out his submersible.

The large spiraled shell appeared next to him, and he quickly jumped into it and sped off before anyone else could spot him and his human form. He hadn't encountered anyone after that group of unlucky explorers, but the area was bound to be swarming with people soon enough. A lot of trial takers were gathering in the vicinity to the City of Ancients, but even more cherished their lives and stayed far away.

These people instead put their efforts into collecting the various herbs and treasures strewn across the ocean, and they might come this way to investigate. Zac's ears were still ringing from the eruption, and it could probably both be felt and heard across huge distances. A mortal might try to get as far away from an active volcano as possible, but cultivators were the opposite.

Who knew what kind of valuable metals and other treasures would be dragged from the depths when a volcano this massive erupted? Zac wouldn't be surprised if those explosive stones that had fallen into the ocean contained all kinds of nice things. Of course, it wasn't enough to pique Zac's interest. Instead, he immediately set course for the ravine marked on his **[Ocean Chart]**.

The vessel was essentially put on autopilot, with Zac splitting his attention between monitoring the shard and keeping watch for an ambush. After some consideration, Zac decided to stay in his human form for the time being. He would probably have to use his Draugr form to enter the ravine if that place was anything like the volcano, but for now, it felt like an unnecessary risk to rock the boat by entering a weakened state.

Seeing that the situation had calmed down, he opened the ladder with some curiosity. He had only gained 30,000 contribution points for destroying that mysterious valley back in the Twilight Chasm, a pittance compared to what he thought he should have gained. That place held so many insights into Twilight, but he still only got what looked like a bounty by the System.

This time around, the result was thankfully a lot better.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 1,754,274 Rank: 1. Value: 175,000 (Bounty)]

He had gained over 180,000 Contribution Points in one go, once more pushing past Uona to reclaim the first position. The vampire had passed him just one month ago, after steadily collecting Contribution Points while he was in secluded cultivation or traveling the vast distances of the ocean.

Ykrodas had been closing on him as well, though he had still lacked around 100,000 points. But now, Zac had claimed the crown once more. Honestly, he wasn't too excited about it. The boost was too small to matter in the long run. That Eternal Clan scion seemed a bit haughty, and he was afraid that him passing her on the ladder would make Uona redouble her efforts at capturing him.

Hopefully, it wouldn't result in Catheya getting in trouble again while she scouted ahead for him around the ravine and the City of Ancients.

Still, Zac was a bit confused. The energy eruption he had unleashed this time around was at least ten times that compared to when he felled the mothertree back on Cork Island. Not only that, but he had released massive quantities of

Creation into the trial, and Creation should hold a lot of insights into Twilight.

So, 180,000 points felt a bit stingy, even if it was a huge chunk all things considered.

His best guess was that he hadn't gained a single point from the shard itself, and the reward rather came from the volcano and all that its eruption destroyed. Zac had known that was a possibility going in, considering that the remnants weren't part of the trial. They had found their way into this Mystic Realm some way, but they weren't actually related to Twilight.

They were on a different path altogether judging by what he had seen in the valley. In the Twilight Tapestry, Life was not Life, and Death was not Death. These two concepts had been fused into some other path, moving away from the peak leading toward the Daos of Oblivion and Creation.

Zac might have deduced a logical reason, but he was still quite disappointed with the result. Getting the first position in a trial like this would probably result in an amazing title, and perhaps even Title Permanence. But the remnants had been his last hope to cinch the position. There was no way he would stick around to the end of the trial, meaning his Contribution Points would get halved upon leaving.

For him to maintain the lead, he would have needed to get a crazy amount of Contribution Points from snatching the two remnants. That way he would have been able to maintain the lead even after getting points deducted. Now, he would be lucky if he could maintain a top-ten position by the time the trial ended.

There was one silver lining though. That magnificent scene of creation and destruction might not have contributed much to the Path of Twilight, but it did feel relevant to his own cultivation. He still hadn't pieced together exactly how, but Zac felt his experience would be useful for his Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was still far from forming a branch the normal way, but he still felt there were some clues hidden in the vision of the volcano tree. He just needed to ponder on it for a while to

figure out exactly what inspiration to draw from the experience. Unfortunately, a certain stowaway in his mind refused to give him the peace and quiet to ponder on the Dao.

The remnant was relentless, like a trapped beast that refused to give in.

The weird humming whispers were a constant annoyance in the back of Zac's mind as the days passed, and the shard kept exuding energy without stopping. Mostly, it was manageable, with Zac slightly opening the cage now and then to absorb the energy. His body was thankfully insatiable, never saying no to more of the high-grade energy.

That was another reason he didn't want to swap to his Draugr form prematurely. The odd node just below his throat was still absorbing energy, and Zac was afraid to do anything that might interrupt the process. There was still no information in his bloodline screen, and he couldn't tell if this node was connected to his Void Emperor bloodline, or if it was something that was actually being created by the shard.

With so little information impossible, he preferred to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the struggle inside the cage abated after a couple of days. The Splinter of Oblivion had essentially taken up a position as a goalie in front of the crack where energy was being siphoned out. However, Zac could feel that the two were just as hostile as before. They were just waiting for an opportunity to turn the tables on the other.

His body was mostly in a good state thanks to the Creation energy healing him every time he got hurt during the mad escape. He did however feel a bit hollow, for a lack of a better word. It was most likely due to the constant transformations his body was put through. It couldn't possibly be good for you to be turned into a hundred different miscreations in a short span.

Meanwhile, there was also the issue of the numerous golden cracks between his head and shoulders. They had faded after a few days, but he could feel them more than ever before. It didn't seem like they were healing at all, with the constant

waves of Creation being released by the shard. The situation wasn't ideal, but he did have some surprising gains from the ordeal.

Putting aside the matters of the new Hidden Node and his Contribution Points, he had also pushed [**Force of the Void**] another 4%. Not only that, but Zac actually felt like his bloodline had benefitted in general. His Hidden Nodes had all gobbled up some of the energy, and it seemed like they kept some for themselves.

And more energy kept pouring into his bloodline as time passed. However, his silent cultivation was suddenly interrupted as the two Shards of Creation suddenly went haywire at the same time. The one trapped inside the fractal prison unleashed a ferocious offense at the splinter while the one in his Soul Aperture started to rail against the Mental Energy cage as it spewed massive amounts of energy.

The constant droning in the back of his head had once more turned into a deafening chorus of insidious suggestions, and he felt his mind overcome by endless possibilities. Zac barely had time to jump out of his vessel before he erupted, causing a wave of chaotic creation to rip through the area.

Thousands of pillars wrought from everything between granite and gold were conjured out of nowhere, and they shot out in every direction like a cluster bomb. Only then did the chaotic voices subside, but not before the newly-acquired shard had managed to break out of its cage and slam into the pathway to the prison once more.

Zac hurriedly captured the remnant once more before he jumped into his submersible and sped off. The situation returned to normal soon enough, except for the murmurs that had grown a bit louder compared to before. He couldn't figure out what led to the outburst even after observing for a few days. It was like the two shards were linked, and suddenly decided to launch an ambush at him.

Yet, Zac soon came to find that it wasn't a one-off thing. Another eruption occurred just four days later, though Zac was

better prepared this time. Then came a third, and a fourth as the shards refused to settle down.

It caused a massive commotion every time, but there wasn't anything Zac could do about it except make sure he traveled the more desolate parts of the ocean. The whispering murmurs kept growing louder as well, and Zac could almost feel a frustration building within the shards after a month had passed.

Zac forced the remnants down over and over, using his massive stores of Mental Energy to his advantage. If he hadn't started cultivating his soul when he did, he might have been in trouble from the whispers. But thanks to his hard work, it was now more of a constant annoyance than something that affected his mind. He doubted he would go on a rampage like a splinter had tricked him into, at least not in the short run.

Eventually, the journey reached its end. He was just a few days away from the ravine, and he had slowed down the submersible to a crawl by that point. Finally, he stopped altogether and stowed away the vessel with a frown. The surroundings looked exactly like Catheya had described, but that wasn't the point.

He was supposed to have made contact with Catheya two days ago, but his communication crystal was still unable to form a connection. Not only that, but the tracker was inert as well. Zac took out a blue talisman, and he swore when it turned black after infusing some Cosmic Energy into it.

The whole area was jammed.

Chapter 762: Changes in the Ravine

Zac looked down at the pitch-black talisman with a frown for a few seconds before he steered the submersible in another direction. The fact that someone had placed jammers in this area was extremely suspicious, and there was a high chance that it was related to him. Why else would someone bother with a place like the ravine? According to Catheya's missive, bursts of utter destruction made the area impassable.

Not being able to communicate with the others was a problem, but luckily not one without a solution. Zac continued sailing for another two hours before he stopped at a secluded spot hidden by enormous stalks of seaweed, each one of them as large as a skyscraper. He donned a cloak to hide his appearance before stowed away the vessel.

For the next hour, Zac swam back and forth in the area, observing one leaf after another until he found one that had a small freeze-burn close to the root. He immediately swam down and started digging until he found a Cosmos Sack hidden within the soil.

This was one of the contingencies he had set up with Catheya during their last meeting. They both figured the area around the ravine could be dangerous, with Uona already having been spotted here once before. So they decided on a couple of drop-off locations for Catheya to leave a communication crystal in case she had to leave the area.

They hadn't expected the place to get locked down by jammers, but their preparation luckily worked for this situation as well. More importantly, the fact that Catheya had managed to leave the Cosmos Sack here meant that she had left voluntarily, rather than something had happened to her.

The Cosmos Sack only contained two things; an **[Ocean Chart]** and a communication crystal. Zac threw out a few arrays to hide his presence before he took out the communication crystal and infused it with some energy. A recording of Catheya immediately started playing, and Zac listened on with rapt attention.

“Two months ago, something happened in this area. We sensed a terrifying presence in the distance, right at the location of the ravine. It felt like a Monarch had descended, someone even stronger than my master. Shortly after we sensed the aura, the Heavens moved to intercept, and the presence disappeared after just a few seconds.

“An hour later, we spotted hints of Uona’s blood river heading in the direction of the City of Ancients. She came from the direction of the ravine, and the powerful aura was most likely related to her. I believe she somehow had her ancestor break into the Mystic Realm and assist her.

“A few minutes later, a terrifying explosion reached us from somewhere far in the distance... in the direction of the volcano. Knowing you, something shocking has probably taken place over there. We observed the ravine for another three weeks, but the place seems abandoned. It is still impassable for me, but it seems the danger is gradually declining.

“Varo managed to discover the origin of the jamming arrays, but we decided to leave them as to not alert anyone about our presence. By the time you’re reading this, we have moved toward the City of Ancients to search for more information. My intuition tells me you’ll be coming our way soon.”

The message ended there, and Zac took a deep breath to calm down after the communication crystal stopped playing. He infused some mental energy into the **[Ocean Chart]** Catheya had left behind, and it only added three spots, the jammers that had been buried to prevent communication.

Zac put away the Cosmos Sack before he turned in the direction of the ravine. He didn’t want to believe it to be true, but his instincts told him that Catheya’s intuition was right on

the money. For some reason, Uona had stolen the splinter with the help of her ancestor. Perhaps it simply was to mess with him, or perhaps she needed it for something else.

He had to check out the ravine to make sure, but he couldn't set off immediately. Something was definitely up, and he didn't want to meet whatever challenges lay ahead in his human form. Besides, he would have to change to his Draugr form to pick up the Splinter in either case.

The problem was that changing his race was a risk both to the Hidden Node still growing in his chest. Furthermore, who knew how the Shard of Creation would react if he suddenly entered a weakened state. Zac couldn't do much about the latter, but he did have a plan for the former. Over the past two months of travel, the node had slowly transformed thanks to being constantly fed energy.

The Creation Energy was no longer entering an invisible vortex when reaching his sternum. Rather, a small bead had formed, and it didn't just swallow Creation Energy. Almost all of the energy that was periodically spat out by his **[Void Heart]** was swallowed by the bead, and it even took on raw Twilight Energy. This turn of events was different from how his previous nodes had formed, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

If anything, it felt like a relief that his cultivation for once worked as it did for others. This embryotic stage was how Hidden Nodes looked for most cultivators, after they had located their nodes and forced them to the surface. Zac had simply never seen it before because he had opened his Hidden Nodes using treasures and unconventional methods.

It was a bit weird that it swallowed all kinds of energy on its own though. Most Hidden Nodes needed a cultivator to slowly infuse the node with their Cultivation Manuals. Then again, Zac guessed he shouldn't be surprised. Nothing worked the way it was supposed to with his body, it looked like. The problem of not knowing was unfortunately a weight upon his shoulder that stopped him from activating the Duplicity Core.

If the node had still been hidden, like it was in the beginning, Zac would probably just have rolled the dice and hoped that he didn't ruin the node by transforming into a Draugr. But now that the embryo had formed, there was another path available to him – to burst open the Hidden Node before transforming. That way he should guarantee he didn't ruin the Hidden Node's formation by changing race in the middle.

Seeing how energy-starved the node was, it might be possible to force it open just by cramming a bunch of random treasures down his throat. But thankfully, Zac didn't need to resort to such a crude method. He had something much better.

Two of the supreme items he had gotten his hands on were related to affinity-boosting. Another was a supreme death-attuned wood that could raise the quality of an E-grade Spirit Tool upon evolution, and something he hoped to be able to use for Alea in the future. The fourth was a life-saving herb, something that could turn the situation around even if he had a foot in the grave. It contained Time Energy, literally turning back the clock on lethal wounds.

According to Catheya, there would almost be no wound it wouldn't be able to mend, be it physical or spiritual, and it would work in either of his forms. The only caveat was the risk of the wound being caused by someone too powerful, like a late Hegemon or Monarch. Their Daos would most likely be powerful enough to resist being erased like that, nullifying the herb's efficacy to a large degree.

The final supreme treasure was something every E-grade cultivator wanted, a type of treasure Catheya called a gatecrasher – an item that could help open Hidden Nodes. These kinds of treasures were commonly called gatecrashers because of the “three gates” – the most common Hidden Nodes in the multiverse.

The treasure still wasn't as valuable as the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** he had gotten from Yrial though, and for a simple reason. His unnamed gatecrasher couldn't locate and excavate unearthed Hidden Nodes. That wasn't a problem now though that the node had already been dragged to the surface.

Zac wasn't too enthused about the treasure before since hadn't encountered any indication that he had more Hidden Nodes than the three he had already opened. But the Shard of Creation had either found a node hidden extremely deep, or perhaps even created one out of thin air.

He took a deep breath and shoved the small pill-like bead into his mouth, simultaneously redoubling his efforts to keep the Shard trapped. A surge of extremely condensed power slid down his throat, and it stopped by the point it reached his sternum. Zac breathed out in relief that the mote of energy stopped by itself, saving him the effort of actually guiding it.

That way he could keep the remnant under lock and key the treasure did its thing. The energy ball reached the small bead, and it looked like the Hidden Node was a black hole swallowing a sun. A stream of supremely condensed energy was continuously dragged from the gatecrasher, entering the depths of the node.

At first, Zac didn't see any change, but soon enough his mouth curved upward as the node started to grow. At first, the node grew from a dot to a large circle. That didn't seem too odd, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when the Hidden Node suddenly turned into a small triangle. The node was completely different compared to the others, or any node he had read about before.

It almost looked like a triangular well, with a white frame and black waters in its depths. Zac wasn't actually sure why he felt that way though. The node was pretty small, yet it felt like the hole inside the frame was almost infinitely deep. More and more energy kept entering the node, and a few minutes passed until the node shuddered and changed again, this time turning into a cube.

At the same time, a set of scripts appeared on the frame, and they didn't look like anything he had seen before. It wasn't a script like those based on the work of the Apostate of Order, and neither was it the primal engravings he had seen on items like the Stele of Conflict. It was something else entirely, seemingly detached from the System.

Four corners turned to five, and then six and seven. With every transformation, the script grew denser, more esoteric. But oddly enough, the depth of the 'waters' actually decreased as it gained more edges. In the beginning, it had almost seemed endless, but by the point it had turned into a heptagon, it rather felt like a shallow pond.

The shard was unusually quiet during the whole process, but he still frowned as he saw the process gradually slow down after an eight corner being added. There was still a decent amount of energy left from the gatecrasher, but the amount that entered the Hidden Node had turned from a stream to a trickle.

Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, since that would usually mean the process was complete. However, Zac could feel that something was missing. There were only eight edges, and his instincts told him that there should be nine for the node to be complete.

Zac saw how the energy of the supreme treasure started to dissipate after not being able to enter the Hidden Node, and he desperately crammed one natural treasure after another into his mouth in hopes that the burst of energy would kick-start the process again. But it was useless. The Hidden Node seemed completely different to the various chaotic energies that entered his body.

Dao Treasures, crystals, energy-packed herbs meant for alchemy. Zac tried everything without any results. The only thing that happened was that his **[Void Heart]** got a feast, and **[Purity of the Void]** got busy cleaning up all the gunk. Soon enough, the node had stopped absorbing energy altogether, just as it felt like it was on the cusp of forming its ninth and final corner.

Unfortunately, nothing Zac did work, and he could only give up after an hour of testing everything. Zac felt a sense of defeat as he cut a deep gash on his arm. Having released a chunk of the accumulated toxins, Zac swallowed a healing pill before opening his Bloodline Screen just in case.

Bloodline

[E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void - 42%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes

[E - Incomplete] Quantum Gate

Zac looked at the screen with a mix of elation and confusion. His fourth node had actually appeared on the screen, but it raised as many questions as it did answers. The easiest takeaway was that it wasn't related to his bloodline – as expected. But what it actually did, was still a mystery.

He checked his **[Quantum Gate]** over and over, but there was nothing. The node almost looked like a mirror by this point, with the pond so shallow it might as well be a windowpane. But there was nothing on the other side, just darkness. It didn't accept energy either, and no matter what he tested, it didn't seem to improve any aspect of his cultivation.

The name itself made Zac think of teleportation, but it didn't emit the slightest amount of spatial fluctuations or energies, and neither did it emit the aura of the void. No matter how he scoured his memory, he hadn't heard of anything like it before either, no matter if you talked appearance or name. In fact, he didn't think "Quantum" was a word the System or cultivators used.

But there were some people who probably did – the Technocrats.

Together with the odd scripts, I seemed more and more likely that this was an inborn node that the burst of Creation had managed to force open, rather than something it conjured out of nothing. Was this perhaps a node Leandra's family passed on? Or was it rather something he had been implanted with, just like the Duplicity Core?

Of course, the node's origin wasn't as important as figuring out how to fix it. The fact that it said Incomplete rather than

Corrupted hopefully meant it simply missed that final ingredient to form the ninth edge and properly activate. And did he even dare activate it? It was called a Quantum Gate.

What if the gate connected him to Leandra, or even some sort of doomsday device, through quantum entanglement? Or what if the node was completely useless, considering that he wasn't swapping out any body parts for machines?

It was impossible to know for the time being. At least the node was stabilized to the point it had appeared on his status screen, which had to be enough for him to not worry about losing or ruining it when swapping race. Zac spent another hour ridding his body of all the excess energy he had accumulated from his feeding frenzy, before sending a command into his Specialty Core.

A wave of weakness hit him as death spread from his core to every inch of his body, but he barely noticed it as he kept the shard in check with everything he had. However, the remnant sensed an opening, and it expelled a wave of creation that forced its way out of the Mental Energy cage. Zac felt his body morph and change, but he held on while his class-changing process finished.

Only then did he release a wave of creation that reshaped the seaweed forest into a world of ice. Thankfully, that was the extent of his problems. The creation energy still coursed through his body, but it wasn't any more lethal to him in his Draugr form compared to when he was human. Zac still didn't know why, but Creation simply wasn't deadly to his Draugr side, just like Oblivion wasn't any more dangerous when he was human.

It was only when it fused with the Twilight Energy that it had become a problem.

However, Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw that his new hidden node was missing. He hesitated for a bit, but he decided to delay his mission by a few hours to get to the bottom of the situation. An hour passed, and Zac swapped into his human form once more, and he breathed out in relief that the node had reappeared.

Soon enough, Zac was once more sailing toward the ravine in his Draugr form. It turned out that **[Quantum Gate]** only existed on his human side, in contrast to the bloodline nodes that existed in both. It lent credence to the theory that it was related to his Technocrat heritage, which Zac had some mixed feelings about.

It did at least open up for the possibility that he might be able to discover Draugr Hidden Nodes in the future, now that it was proven both his sides could have unique Hidden Nodes. The Void Emperor bloodline was extremely overbearing, to the point that it might have made his other nodes extremely hard to find.

Another day passed, and Zac finally reached the edge of the ravine. It looked like a scar in the earth, reaching thousands of meters into the ground. It was like the whole place was shrouded by impenetrable darkness, and Zac felt his hair stand on end as he tried to glean what waited inside. He also strained his eyes to expose the slightest hint of sanguine energy in the vicinity.

His desire was made into reality, and he felt new eyes growing across his face as they looked for any signs of danger. Zac took a deep breath and got his impulses back under control, and the additional eyes closed before disappearing altogether. The brief lapse of control had at least confirmed a few things for him.

There was both good news and bad news. The good news was that Uona really wasn't in the area, and it didn't look like she had left any traps either. The bad news was that the amount of Oblivion Zac sensed in the depths of the ravine was less than a third of what he had encountered in the volcano.

Chapter 763: The Price Paid

Something was definitely wrong. Zac was still a pretty decent distance from where he guessed the Splinter of Oblivion was located, but he didn't feel his remnants react at all, like they had when he closed in on the volcano. Neither could he pinpoint the splinter's location as he had been able to with the shard.

Even then, Zac pushed off from the edge of the ravine and swam into the darkness. He needed to confirm the situation before he set off to start a blood feud at the City of Ancients. Besides, he might be able to find some clues in the depths of just what was going on.

The light from the ocean surface was quickly subdued by pervasive darkness. It wasn't a problem for him though, and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** suddenly slapped away a shark trying to gobble him up. Zac barely registered the attack as he continued further down, following his senses to swim toward where the energy of Oblivion was the densest. Because that was the thing; the energy was not gone, it was simply reduced.

Hopefully, the splinter had simply been sealed somehow by the vampire, and Uona had hopefully underestimated his ability to break things.

The shark was both the first and last creature he encountered, with the area soon becoming a domain of almost pure death. Just like in the volcano, the death-attuned energies were different from both Miasma and Twilight Energy. It was rather reminiscent of the sphere of darkness that sat at the top of his **[Pillar of Desolation]**.

It burrowed into his body as he swam deeper, seeking to destroy all that it touched. But the energy wasn't nearly as condensed as the weaponized Life in the Creation Pulses. Besides, he was Draugr, born from Death far more majestic

than this. The ambient energies could barely harm him, and Zac felt he could stay here for days without succumbing.

However, some real dangers were lurking in the darkness as well.

Zac suddenly flashed out of the way, narrowly avoiding a tendril of nothingness that had appeared out of nowhere. Inside it, the power of Oblivion hid, destroying everything that the tendril touched. The Shard of Creation in his mind shuddered, perhaps eager to clash with the tendril, but Zac simply swam away after having dodged it.

But that attack was just the first of many, and Zac soon found himself in a confusing sea of destruction. Water kept disappearing as tendrils swayed back and forth, causing the waters to turn extremely chaotic. Even Zac didn't dare risk touching those tendrils without an Annihilation Sphere of his own, and he carefully dodged back and forth as he followed the intensity of energy.

A few minutes passed and the tendrils grew denser, but there weren't actually any signs of any pulses or the like. This was different from the missive, and Catheya had mentioned she had felt bursts of power much like the ones the Shard of Creation had released. Zac ultimately chose to take a risk and activated [**Abyssal Phase**].

The world slowed down as his perception of time changed, and his vision turned the monochrome. Zac didn't waste any time and he immediately shot forward, effortlessly avoiding hundreds of tendrils that now moved almost in slow-motion. They were easy enough to spot in his current form, having a far darker shade of black than anything else. Another minute passed, and Zac reached his destination - a pitch-black mountain that seemed to be the source of all the destruction that raged across the area.

The mountain almost looked like a beehive after having been the home of the Splinter of Oblivion for thousands of years, and Zac stopped in his tracks for a second, looking at the patterns in the stone with interest. It was just like the volcanic tunnels, marked by hidden meaning. The scars in the mountain

formed a mysterious pattern, a pattern that Zac felt held clues to the truth of Oblivion.

He still had ample reserves of Miasma remaining, so he took advantage of the low danger of the ravine to swim one circle around the mountain, memorizing all the patterns that the remnant had left on the place. Only when he was done did he shoot forward, heading straight toward one of the thousands of entrances.

However, his mind suddenly screamed of danger, prompting him to stop in his tracks and return to his corporeal form. Just inside the mountain, a shield with a hair-raising aura was erected. His first instinct was that this was a roadblock left by Uona, but on second thought, Zac realized that couldn't be true. It rather looked like a thick wall of Oblivion had swallowed so much Twilight Energy and ocean water that a solid wall of death had been formed.

This nigh-physical wall, in turn, blocked any more water from getting through. Zac hesitated for a second before he started forming an Annihilation Sphere, even with the risks it brought. It would certainly be easier to expel some of his overflowing Creation into the barrier and hope it worked, but Zac could sense more than some Oblivion lurking inside the wall of death.

He had no idea what would happen if he attacked Oblivion with a bunch of Creation, which was why he had countered Creation with Creation back in the volcano. The two Daos were each other's opposites, but that didn't mean they canceled each other out. Worst case scenario, a mote of chaos would be formed, and that couldn't lead to anything good.

More likely, a completely uncontrollable eruption of energy would blast both Zac and everything around him into smithereens.

The Shard of Creation was clearly incensed upon sensing the purified energy of Oblivion being drawn out from Zac's Soul Core, but it actually restrained itself for some reason. Zac would have thought it would rail against the cage in front of

this much energy, but it was like it behaved better the deeper he delved into this place.

Zac didn't know why it was helping him out, but he wouldn't waste the opportunity as he quickly pushed the Annihilation Sphere into the wall. His sphere was like a black hole, greedily gobbling up more and more energy from the barrier until it had become over a meter across. Zac figured that was enough and threw the sphere away.

The Annihilation Sphere ripped through the waters, searing space itself until it imploded, taking tens of thousands of liters with it into nothingness. Zac didn't care about that though and was rather busy squeezing into the breach in case it would close again. The insides of the mountain were mostly hollowed out, through some weird twisted pillars remained.

Zac carefully started moving toward the core of the mountain, but he stopped after just a minute as he heard a shuffling sound.

“You came after all,” a cackling voice said.

Zac looked over with shock as his axe appeared in his hand, ready to unleash a wave of unfettered carnage on whoever had spoken.

However, Zac could quickly confirm that it wouldn't be much of a fight. The one who had hidden in the mountain was on the verge of dying. He seemed to be a revenant, but his skin was covered in protruding veins that had an angry red glare. His eyes were glowing red as well, and he emitted a strong smell of blood. Zac hadn't seen one before, but he was pretty certain that it was a turned Blood Thrall he had encountered.

Blood Thralls were essentially slaves to cultivators of the Eternal Clan, but many still entered the contract willingly from what Zac was told. They gave up their freedom, but they gained power in return. Their bodies were filled with 'the holy blood', which functioned as a second source of strength for these warriors.

As long as they properly integrated with the blood, they would become Blood Servants, who were considered commoners

rather than slaves in the domains of the Eternal Clan. In both cases, they could be just as strong as any other elite, but the reason Zac didn't see a battle coming, was the fact that the Blood Thrall had lost most of his body already.

Both his legs were gone, as was his stomach. He had one of his arms intact, but the other ended just below his shoulder. Zac could sense that it was fading, and fading fast. The thrall had probably sealed itself somehow to prolong its life, and now that it had woken up, it would not last very long.

As for the source of his wretched state, Zac could understand it all-too-well. The thrall had been hit by Oblivion.

“You have a message for me?” Zac sighed.

“Indeed,” the thrall coughed. “Mistress Uona cordially invites Master Black to the City of Ancients to reconcile their differences. The item you are looking for is waiting for you there.”

“City of Ancients? How is your master related to that place?” Zac frowned.

Unfortunately, the thrall only snickered in response, and he turned into a bloody goop a second later. Zac swore as he looked back and forth through the cave, but neither the splinter nor any more thralls hid in the darkness. He even found the spot where the Splinter of Oblivion once had rested, but the only thing remaining was an engraved line signed by Uona herself.

‘I took it. You can't have it. Come fight me if you have a problem with that.’

Zac guessed it was a precaution in case the thrall wouldn't make it until he appeared, but it at least allayed any confusion from the thrall's flowery way of speaking. The only way he would get his hands on the Splinter of Oblivion was if he ripped it from Uona's cold dead hands.

He closed his eyes with exhaustion for a few seconds, taking a few deep breaths to stop his tired and aggravated mind from conjuring some new type of horrors at the cost of his life force. Only then did he open them again, and he wordlessly turned

around and left. He was curious how the hell Uona managed to summon her ancestor to reach the heart of this place, but it ultimately didn't matter.

She had decided to cut off his lifeline when the System was holding his cultivation hostage. This was the second time she targeted him while he was minding his business, and it would be the last. She had told him to come fight her if he had a problem, and Zac swore that she soon would come to regret those words.

Ventus took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky. The stars had shifted, and fate had become obscured. No calculations would be able to foretell the result any longer. But his mouth still curved upward, as this was exactly what he had hoped for.

“You have sensed something,” a calm voice said from the side.

Ventus turned to his captor, and his smile widened when looking at the staid face of Ykrodas Havarok. A storm was brewing, and not even this princeling would be able to come out of it unscathed.

“That smile of yours makes me a bit unsettled, templar. I'm starting to feel I would be better off simply killing you to save myself from the trouble,” Ykrodas snorted.

“Fate will come knocking no matter whether I am alive or dead,” Ventus grinned. “So why not keep me alive? That way you'll at least have an inkling of what might happen going forward. Besides, you know the price of killing me. Do you really want to turn the conflict into a blood feud with how the winds are blowing?”

“You are right. A storm is brewing,” Ykrodas nodded. “Who knows if your token is still of any use? If you want to stick around, make yourself useful. What did you see?”

Ventus' smile didn't fade, but a pang of fear still rippled through his heart. Ykrodas was right. If this was like normal times, a Token of Exchange would be honored, and a ransom would be paid in return for release. But these were not normal

times. He couldn't show fear though. He had calculated everything. The path was narrow, but it was there.

Especially now.

"Fate is gathering over the City of Ancients," Ventus said as he turned to look at the sprawling city in the distance, the movement prompting his fetters to rattle.

"You don't need to be a numerologist to figure that out," Ykrodas commented. "There is something else."

"He is coming," Ventus said, not bothering to hide the truth. "And he brings a storm in his wake."

"Arcaz Black?" Ykrodas said with a frown as his aura rose. "Before you said he wouldn't become a thorn in my side, and that he was even aiming at leaving early. Now, you're saying he's coming here? Are you toying with me?"

"Uona has forced his hand somehow," Ventus hurriedly said. "I warned you of this probability, that their conflict wasn't resolved. The details I cannot calculate, I lack information."

"So, he is coming here after all," Ykrodas muttered thoughtfully as his aura receded. "I guess his ploy turned out to be prophetic."

"He should have known better than to tempt the Heavens like that," Ventus smiled.

"Is his arrival good or bad for the Havarok?" Ykrodas asked as he calmly looked at Ventus's face for clues.

"It can be good," Ventus slowly said. "It can be bad."

"Playing games with us," the princeling's advisor said from the side, his eyes cold with murderous intent. "Have you not learned your lesson yet?"

An involuntary shudder went through Ventus's body, but he immediately stabilized his mind again. He had known torture would wait down the path he had chosen. Such was the price of trying to siphon Heavenly Fate.

Hopefully, it would all be worth it.

“You should not see Arcaz Black as an agent of the Undead Empire,” Ventus eventually said. “My calculations indicate he has no real interest in the fate of the Realm Spirit or the ascension of Alvod Jondir. He is a lone agent, a messenger of Chaos.”

“Chaos? You think he’s here to make trouble for the other imperials?” Ykrodas ventured. “To prevent one of the other factions of their empire from stealing the opportunity? Is that why the Umbri’Zi is so conspicuously absent?”

“Not figurative chaos,” Ventus smiled. “Literal Chaos. He is related to that unreachable peak. A storm of fate is dancing around him, causing havoc on everything it touches. My calculations are becoming less tenable by the second. Therein lies your opportunity, but also the risk to your plans. To everyone’s plans.”

“An E-grade warrior shouldn’t be able to carry such fate,” Ykrodas frowned. “The accumulated providence of those outside should largely negate it.”

“Well, you don’t need to trust me. Soon enough, your Sandsayers will find the shifting dunes unreadable as well,” Ventus muttered. “One month. You better prepare yourself. Your seals will fail, of that I am sure.”

“Impossible,” Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. “The Eidolon has tried to break the restriction for half a year without any result, and every day our restriction grows stronger.”

“I’m only relaying what I’ve calculated,” Ventus smiled. “I’ve told you already, your plan would have failed in either case. The stars tell me that Uona and the Eidolon are walking in parallel, though both sides hide a dagger behind their backs.”

“So, vaunted Starseeker,” Ykrodas snorted, “what is your suggestion for me? Give up and let your temple claim another Autarch?”

“That is beyond what I can see. I can only tell you one thing. When the Heavens descend and all reality cries, give in to his demand. That is your path for survival,” Ventus said as

bleeding cracks started to form across his skin. “Don’t forget the price he has paid by that point.”

“The price he has paid?” Ykrodas muttered as gave Ventus an inscrutable look. “The Havarok is not unreasonable, but there are some bottom lines that cannot be crossed. It’s up to this mysterious Draugr from here on out.”

“My lord?” the advisor asked.

“Prepare our backup plan. Start inscribing the heart-sealing brands on our elites. We’re entering the City of Ancients in a month,” Ykrodas sighed. “Also, prepare the array. I need to send a message outside.”

“It’ll be ready in three days,” the advisor nodded.

Ventus only smiled in return as he slumped down on the ground. He had done everything that he could. From here on out, he simply needed to stay alive. Of course, that would be easier said than done.

Chapter 764: Blood and Soul

There was nothing else of interest in the hollowed-out mountain, so Zac immediately set out the same way he came. Besides, the invitation might be a misdirect, and it was possible that an insane bloodsucker was bearing in on his position at this very moment. If so, he would rather fight somewhere else, than in this restrictive place.

Zac emerged at the top of the ravine a few minutes later, and he immediately crushed an escape talisman to move away. The moment he reappeared he turned into his wraith form and flashed away with **[Abyssal Phase]**, not forgetting to make use of the slowed-down environment to look for threats.

However, there was no blood tide crashing toward him, and no other signs of a trap waiting to be sprung. It really looked like she wanted him to head to that city. Zac was just about to return to his normal form, but an odd flickering of light far in the distance caught his attention. He immediately changed course and rushed over to the small hill he had spotted.

Normally, Zac wouldn't have cared about some random glimmer, since there was an endless number of herbs and materials that gave off some light after gaining spirituality. The expansive reef back by the Twilight Chasm had almost looked like a rave, for example, without any of the corals being anything much of value.

However, this was different, since he actually recognized the energy – it was not Twilight, but rather the power of stars.

Zac turned back into his corporeal form and swam over until he was in front of the source of the anomaly. It looked like a couple of fireflies were dancing upon a random rock on top of a hill, but it was rather small stars that winked in and out of existence. He scanned it over and over, and there was no doubt.

He had been sitting at first row when Ventus had formed his Dao Branch, how could he possibly mistake his Dao for something else?

The question was why there was a small mote of his Dao on this desolate stretch of land in the middle of nowhere. Ventus was a numerologist from a B-grade faction, making Zac believe there was a deeper purpose for it. Most likely, the elf had somehow managed to calculate that Zac would pass by this area, and left this marker here to be found.

But whether Ventus left this thing for ‘Zac Piker’ or ‘Arcaz Black’, he had no way of knowing. Could he have calculated that the two were one and the same? Zac doubted it. He didn’t have any proof, but he was somewhat certain that his mother’s array contained anti-divination capabilities. Otherwise, it would be useless in preventing others from finding out his secret.

Whichever of his identities this mark was left for, Zac’s instincts told him it wasn’t a trap. Even then, he summoned the three pygmy skeletons of [**Profane Exponents**] and even started charging up [**Pillar of Desolation**] as he moved his hand toward the shimmering starlight.

It was almost like a mirror cracked as a small area on top the stone shifted, and the starlight was suddenly replaced by a small box. Zac opened it, which prompted a recording to immediately start playing as a hologram of the annoyingly handsome elf was conjured by shimmering starlight.

“Greetings Mr. Black. You do not know me, but I hope you’ll trust me when I say our fate is connected. I am Ventus Kalavan, Starseeker of the Radiant Temple. By the time you see this, I will have been captured by Ykrodas Havarok in his efforts to enforce his will on this trial.

“I am not asking for you to save me. I am simply bringing a word of warning in hopes you will reciprocate in the future. I spent a decade of my lifespan to calculate some major events in this trial, and if you’re seeing this particular message, you have failed in whatever mission that brought you to the Twilight Ocean.

“Do not worry, calculating the details of your mission is far beyond my abilities. It is related to Chaos, making any divination unreliable at best. But I do believe that you are heading toward the City of Ancients in hopes of resolving your matters.

“My gift to you is divulging the true nature of the City of Ancients. As you probably know, this realm is not a natural formation of nature. It is the result of realms of opposing elements colliding, resulting in this odd ocean. What you might not know, is that these two ancient worlds both had a spiritual will, and these wills survive to this day. One of them is hiding in the heart of the City of Ancients.

“The Realm Spirits are weak and susceptible to sabotage by this point. The faction that manages to decide the fate of this spirit, will have a leg up on the events that follow. The Eidolon is planning to either turn it into a soul slave or replace it with a spirit of their own, and the Eternal Clan should have a similar goal.

“The Havarok wants the spirit to live on for a while longer, and I think you can figure out the goal of the Radiant Temple yourself. I do not know exactly what will await within the gates of the City of Ancients, but the stars warn me of a cage of soul and blood. This is the limit of what I can calculate at this juncture. I hope we will meet again.”

Zac thoughtfully looked at the small box for a moment before he crushed it and flashed away. The moment he reappeared he applied another round of karma-breaking powder across his body. The message left by the Numerologist was extremely helpful, but it was still extremely discomfoting that he had been read to the point that Ventus had managed to place down a communication crystal like that.

Soon enough he set off in his vessel again, heading straight for the City of Ancients. The information that Ventus had shared didn't change his goal, but it had given him a better idea of the situation. He didn't know exactly what a Realm Spirit was, but he guessed it was something similar to a Tool Spirit.

It wasn't hard to connect the dots from there. If there was a spirit having some sort of control over this Mystic Realm, it would probably affect the Eveningtide Asura's plans.

Meanwhile, it sounded like the undead factions wanted to turn the Realm Spirit into a backdoor to snatch the opportunity for ascension.

Zac didn't care about the struggle over the Realm Spirit's fate, but he had a feeling that he would be dragged into it whether he liked it or not. And from what he had gathered, it sounded like the best option was if the spirit survived, allowing it to act interference on Alvod. He sighed with exhaustion as he looked at the state of his body.

Thankfully, he had only been forced to activate a single Annihilation sphere to break into the heart of the ravine, and the single set of cracks was fast being eroded by the Creation Energy in his body. But Zac had hoped he'd have managed to form an equilibrium by now with the help of the Second splinter, which was impossible in the short run.

Thankfully, the brush with Oblivion had somewhat calmed down the Shard of Creation for the time being, and it was currently sitting motionlessly in his Mental Energy cage. But that didn't mean it had been subdued or that it had given up. The shard was still agitated, but more in the sense of a cornered beast preparing to pounce.

Its demeanor was completely different from how the shards acted in all those visions. The shard holders had all met a miserable end eventually, but they didn't seem as pressured as he was. It was more of a slow grinding down where thoughts of desires were fulfilled, but in a way that brought unintended and often horrible consequences.

His situation wasn't just a matter of completing his quest any longer. If he didn't manage to regain equilibrium within a few months, something bad would happen. The shard kept gaining energy out of nowhere to continue its assault, while he was constantly expending Mental Energy to resist.

The best theory he could come up with was that the new shard kept acting out because it failed to merge with the one locked

in his cage. He had already passed the ‘Calamity’ by surviving the outbursts and wresting control, but the process was only half-finished. At the same time, he didn’t dare let the second shard into his cage, causing an imbalance like that.

As precarious as the situation was right now, Zac had a feeling it could get exponentially worse if he opened the cage before having collected the splinter. So for now, he was stuck in this weird state of limbo, as half a calamity on two legs. Hopefully, Catheya would have some answers for him soon enough.

Two weeks passed, at which point he suddenly felt a change in one of his talismans, prompting him to immediately take out a communication crystal and infuse some Miasma.

“Mr. Chaos,” Zac said with a modified voice through the crystal, a small smile spreading across his face.

“Blue Lily,” an unrecognizable voice responded, confirming that it was Catheya on the other side. “How did it go? Is it done?”

“I got your message,” Zac sighed. “It failed, it was like you expected.”

“Can you meet up?” Catheya asked.

“I’m on my way,” Zac responded as he cut the connection.

Not far from here, hundreds of thousands of warriors had gathered, and it was impossible to know what kind of capabilities they had. Just like bugging telephone lines was possible back on Old Earth, it was apparently possible for inscription masters to lock onto the communication crystals of others. They might even be able to use the signals to pinpoint the speakers.

That’s why they disguised their voices and didn’t go into any details. Some things could only be discussed in person. Even if someone had managed to listen in, it didn’t warrant any additional attention. With so many people and groups gathered in one place, there were bound to be tens of thousands of schemes taking place at any given time. Why waste time on a random one when there were no hints of there being a payoff, especially when he mentioned the operation was a failure?

Zac soon enough reached the spot his tracker indicated, this time a small glade in a forest of dense reeds. It was located almost two weeks travel from the City of Ancients, no doubt because it would be a bit risky setting up a camp any closer. A hole appeared in the ground, and Zac jumped inside.

A moment later the four of them sat together like they did a few months ago. However, the atmosphere was more subdued, with Zac's plans having gone awry.

"What happened?" Catheya eventually sighed.

"Uona had figured out my goal, and she's stolen the item in the ravine. She left a message for me. She's forcing me to enter the City of Ancients," Zac mumbled with some distraction as his shard had finally started to wake up after weeks of inactivity.

"Well, the road of cultivation is full of setbacks. This chance might have passed, but new ones will come," Catheya said on the other side. "Are you ready to leave this trial?"

"I can't," Zac sighed. "If I leave without that item, I will probably die."

"WHAT?!" Catheya shouted with shock as she dropped the glass in her hand. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Not only that," Zac grunted. "Without it, I will not be able to contact your ancestor."

"Never mind that," Catheya said with exasperation. "You should have told me the ravine was that important to you. I might have been able to distract that witch for a while."

"Well, I hoped things would work out somehow, but I guess I was a bit optimistic," Zac grunted. "Anyway, I'm heading to the City of Ancients."

"Wait, take a breath, and calm down. You know how powerful she is. We need a plan!" Catheya hurriedly said.

"Don't worry, this is not your fight, and I won't try to implicate your clan. Besides, I have my methods, it's not like all hope is lost. I almost killed her last time, and this time I have the means to finish the job," Zac said with a weak smile.

“How could you possibly... Wait,” Catheya muttered before she seemed to realize something. “Like that time?”

Zac didn't exactly know what she talked about, but he guessed she might be referring to when he raged out at the Zethaya pill house. However, he didn't have time to answer before he felt a surge building in his mind. His eyes widened in alarm, and he immediately started making his preparations.

“Watch out!” Zac roared as he rushed toward the exit, his breath turning into opalescent gas full of creation. “Get away from me!”

Catheya caught on quickly, and layers and layers of ice enclosed the three as Zac pushed his hands into the wall. He needed to contain it, he couldn't let it spread and hurt the others. He furiously imposed his will on the storm of Creation that erupted, pushing it all into the stone.

For a second, a huge chunk of the wall turned into an empty hall full of a dozen statues, each one depicting a person he had met inside the trial and made from a different material. The next moment, the chamber had turned into a confusing maze made from bronze, but it didn't last any longer.

Zac strained his mind and imagination to the limit as he cycled over a dozen scenes in an instant, each transformation exhausting some of the energy and preventing it from ballooning out of control. It took just two seconds, but Zac slumped down on the ground with a throbbing headache and shaky hands when he was done, leaving a wall of Memorysteel behind.

“What... was that?” Catheya asked with a shuddering breath before she emerged from her protection while repeatedly sniffing in the air. “This smell...”

Zac smiled weakly in return as he got back on his feet and sat down again. “It's safe now. For a while at least.”

“Is it really safe?” Qirai asked with a frown as she stepped in front of her master while Varo glared daggers at him from the side. “Are *you* safe?”

“A side-effect from my mission,” Zac grunted. “As soon as I get what I need from Uona, it will be fixed. For now, I’m a bit volatile. Sorry, I thought I had it under control.”

Of course, he wasn’t quite as optimistic as he tried to let on. Getting his hands on the splinter was nowhere near as straightforward as he would like. Certainly, he almost managed to kill Uona last time with a simple Annihilation Sphere, and this time he was armed with a fully charged Shard of Creation.

But at the same time, she was now ready for him to use that kind of attack, and she had probably spent a full year figuring out a counter.

His best chance was that he would be able to create an opening with the help of the unpredictable nature of Creation. She was probably expecting a ball of Oblivion, but he was going to attack her with the opposite. He had to make that count.

“Is there nothing you won’t blow up?!” Catheya cursed as she thumped down on her chair again. “We haven’t even covered how you managed to cause a volcano to erupt. Are you allergic to some peace and quiet?!”

Zac only smiled weakly in return, not sure how to respond.

“Well, we’re still going,” Catheya said after taking a few calming breaths. “We might not be able to help you in a direct conflict, but we can help you gather intelligence and provide ancillary support. Besides, we’ve stayed by the City of Ancients for over a month by now, you will save a lot of effort having us around.”

“...Alright,” Zac reluctantly agreed. “I’m sorry, I keep putting you guys in danger. I’ll try to find a way to make it up to you all.”

“No need to be so distant, we’re all friends, right?” Catheya countered with a smile. “And I’ve already gathered some tidbits I think you’ll find interesting.”

The two proceed to exchange what they had learned since they met the last time, which ended with Catheya glaring at him accusatorily.

“How is it that you keep finding out more about what’s going on while off traveling in desolate regions, compared to us who actually spent a month in the temporary city?” Catheya muttered with annoyance.

“Lucky, I guess,” Zac smiled.

“So it is a trap, after all,” Catheya muttered. “A lot of people have similar thoughts, but there hasn’t been any clear proof either way.”

“People know, yet they stick around?”

“The city has essentially been confirmed to predate the Twilight Harbor, and everything points to it being untouched. Even if Aia Ouro has managed to set up some sort of trap, they believe that with enough participants, the smart ones will walk out with ancient treasures while using the foolish as shields,” Catheya explained.

“And everyone sees themselves as the smart ones,” Qirai added with a snort.

“A disaster waiting to happen,” Catheya agreed before she released a deep sigh. “Blood and souls... Realm Spirit... What a mess. And now with a walking powderkeg joining the fray, ancestors have mercy on us.”

Chapter 765: Gathering at the Gates

Zac didn't know how to feel about being called a walking powderkeg, but it was hard to argue with the description after having literally blown up a volcano just two months ago.

“Well, I do have something that might work,” Catheya laughed after seeing Zac's awkward expression. “I didn't manage to gather all the information you needed, but I did manage to get my hands on a few interesting items that might help you.”

“What's that?” Zac asked curiously, happy to change the subject.

“First, this,” Catheya said as she took out a finely crafted cloak seemingly made from high-quality wool.

“Invisibility cloak?” Zac blurted with excitement.

“Unfortunately, no,” Catheya smiled. “True invisibility requires too much energy to trick even the eyes of scouts. It would have to be a D-grade treasure making use of a Hegemon's Core. This is something simpler, but still very useful.”

“I can't see any difference?” Zac muttered as he tried putting the thing on.

“It's a distraction cloak,” Catheya explained. “You know that others need to focus on you for roughly two seconds to see your bounty, right?”

“Ah!” Zac exclaimed, looking at the robe with appreciation.

He remembered that Verana owned a cowl just like this. She had used it to hide her identity when they entered the underworld together, and even Zac had found both his mind and eyes drift any time he had tried to focus on her. The cloak

Cathey had provided now seemed to be of even higher quality, and Zac immediately realized how useful it could be in this place.

“Exactly. You already have something to deal with your aura since coming back from the Chasm, and with this, you will avoid anyone’s attention. As long as you keep moving and don’t do anything to draw attention, you might even be able to walk on a crowded street without getting exposed,” Cathey smiled. “Secondly, I have this.”

The next moment, a finely crafted golem appeared, its body covered in inscriptions. It was roughly as tall as Zac was, and it even emitted a pretty dense aura, roughly the equivalent of a normal cultivator at the peak of E-grade.

“A golem?” Zac muttered as he looked at Cathey for her to explain.

“A remote-controllable puppet,” Cathey explained as she handed him an array disk. “Infuse your mental energy into this disk, and you will be able to control the puppet from a great distance.”

“You’ve really thought of everything,” Zac smiled.

“Well, as much as I’d like to take credit, both these methods have become somewhat common outside the City of Ancients. The few puppeteers and craftsmen who have entered the trial are making a fortune. I simply snatched up a few of the higher-quality goods,” Cathey explained. “Now you can enter the settlement without raising any waves. I’ll try to figure out something else on the go.”

“This is more than enough,” Zac hurriedly assured. “Should we set out?”

“Give us a moment, please?” Cathey said.

Zac nodded, guessing they needed to discuss the situation among themselves. He left the hidden room, leaving Cathey and her two companions.

“I won’t ask you to go with me this time,” Cathey said. “You know how dangerous this might get. If I fall, you can still return to the clan and work in my father’s palace.”

“Where you go, we will follow,” Varo said without hesitation, and Qirai nodded in agreement.

“So I guess we’re going on an adventure together,” Qirai snickered. “I guess your spring is finally coming, huh? Some heat to melt that frozen heart?”

“That’s enough,” Catheya snorted. “You know it’s not like that.”

“Then what is it?” Qirai said with a raised brow.

“That’s…” Catheya hesitated. “We’ll see. For now, I simply enjoy traveling with him. Don’t you feel the same way? You know how life is back home. It’s safe and stable. But it’s also slow, uneventful, and predictable. If I return, I will become a Peak Hegemon at worst, a middle Monarch at best, tasked with maintaining some section of our estate until the madness takes me.”

“Well, you better figure out what you want, and then communicate it clearly,” Qirai snorted. “That guy’s ability to create trouble is top-notch, but he seems about as dumb as they come when it comes to matters of the heart.”

“Yes, mother,” Catheya laughed. “When did you become so wise?”

“Whatever,” Qirai grunted as she launched a jab toward Varo. “How about it, want me to help you ambush your rival?”

The quiet Revenant effortlessly dodged the swing, shifting just out of reach. “Arcaz Black holds great importance to Clan Sharva’Zi, provided his connection to the founder is true. Working against him is out of the question.”

“Boring,” Qirai muttered.

“Alright, that’s enough. You don’t need to worry about me. For now, try to figure out a way to turn this mess into an opportunity for us,” Catheya said as she walked out of the room.

The group set off toward the City of Ancients, with Varo once more taking on the role of helmsman. It allowed Zac to rest and focus on keeping the remnant in check. It almost felt like

it had realized Zac was aiming to pick up another splinter since the ravine, prompting it to start stockpiling energy for the upcoming clash.

It was hard to tell exactly how sapient these things were. Sometimes they just felt like small balls of primal anger, while at other times it seemed as though they had personalities of their own. In either case, it made Zac's life a lot easier. It still released a burst of energy now and then, but it was far more controlled compared to before.

Finally, after just below two weeks of travel, the vessel suddenly stopped before Zac felt a thump as it set down on rocky ground. Zac was about to step out of the vessel to check on the situation, but a cough from Catheya stopped him in his tracks. He shrugged helplessly and instead took out the golem, which was now decked in a robe.

"Be careful to not expose yourself," Catheya said. "We probably have dozens of sets of eyes on us. Luckily, the spot we used last time was still available, and our neighbors should quickly lose interest when they see it's us."

"Alright," Zac agreed as he slumped down into the chair again and infused some energy into the Array Disk.

His perception shifted, and Zac was beset by a bout of vertigo for a few seconds until his vision stabilized. Suddenly, he had two sights, one coming from himself, and one belonging to the puppet.

It was an odd feeling, but as long as he didn't move around too much in his real body, he could freely control the golem as though it was his own. That was partly thanks to him practicing over the past weeks though. The first times he had been unable to shift his focus properly, making the puppet stutter like a drunk. It had been a source of endless laughs for Catheya, and an embarrassing reminder for Zac of his horrible performance during the Dao Discourse in the Tower of Eternity.

Catheya donned a cowl to hide her features, even though her face had transformed into a Revenant's, and the two walked out of the vessel.

“I guess I’ll start setting up the arrays,” Qirai grunted, and Zac only hummed distractedly in response as he focused on the vision of the golem.

The City of Ancients was located in a vast basin, sitting in the center of the thousand-meter-deep indent in the ocean bed. Meanwhile, Varo had set down at the edge of a cliff overlooking the whole area, providing a spectacular view.

The city itself was not that shocking, at least not in Multiverse Terms. Some of the cities on the Twilight Harbor world disks were larger than whole countries of old Earth. Meanwhile, this city didn’t seem much bigger than cities like New York or London.

Interestingly enough, it was enclosed by an air bubble, and it was even filled with swirling clouds that obscured most of the city’s features. However, now and then a small piece of the city was exposed, showcasing ancient structures that seemed to be in decent shape. Zac could understand why many believed it housed treasures after seeing the glimpses of thousands of mansions.

In the heart of the city, a massive castle pushed through the clouds and was one of the few permanently visible structures. Its walls were covered in fractals, though many of them had cracked from eons of disrepair. Even then, it gave off a grand aura, and Zac guessed that it was once the home of a supreme cultivator.

The city was surrounded by thick medieval walls reaching over fifty meters into the air. That would not be an issue normally, considering they were underwater and could simply swim over it. However, there was clearly a barrier powerful enough to keep the whole Twilight Ocean at bay, let alone some piddling E-grade cultivators.

Outside the city, four smaller settlements spread out in front of the four closed gates, and Zac could barely believe his eyes when he saw people walking back and forth like it was just some random town on the outside. Of course, he had already heard about the situation from Catheya, but it was still eye-opening to see in person.

It was all thanks to the Twilight Council, apparently. They had allied with the Havarok Empire to enact strict rules for anyone entering the settlement outside. The Radiant Temple hadn't opposed the idea, and neither had the spectral cultivators. Uona's stance was unknown, but it was a fact that she hadn't attacked anyone within a day's travel of this basin.

Zac turned the golem's vision to the side, and he spotted dozens of vessels parked just like theirs, at the edge overlooking the chasm. Some had even built small mansions to live in. And this was just a small section of the ledge that surrounded the basin.

"It's hard to believe we're in the middle of a slaughter trial," Zac muttered, his voice being transmitted through the array disk.

"It's not as peaceful as it seems," Catheya smiled. "I figure at least ten thousand cultivators have died in those settlements, and at least a hundred vessels like ours have been raided. But as long as you're strong enough to ward off opportunists, it's pretty safe."

"Even then, people keep flocking over," Zac commented as he looked at the streams of cultivators swimming down toward the cliffs from every direction.

"In a place like the Twilight Harbor, only 1,000 or so out of all the Trial Takers are expected to reach Hegemony through normal means," Catheya said. "Few have ever left the Harbor. The Twilight Ascent is the only chance to create an opportunity to overcome their lacking talent and fate. Many have come even if they know the odds are they will die here."

"Is it really worth it?" Zac muttered as he looked down at the city.

"Aren't you the same?" Catheya laughed. "The things you've done so far are beyond death-defying. If you can risk your life even though you're so strong already, why can't they? If anything, their willingness is even greater. If they die, they die. If they succeed, their destiny will change completely."

“Fair enough,” Zac acceded. “So, what do you think? Should I try to break down the gate? I can’t sit around here forever. If Uona is already inside...”

Catheya and the others had followed Uona after she had snatched the splinter, but she had disappeared after closing in on this place. Things mostly pointed toward the vampire having entered the city somehow,

“You wouldn’t be the first one to try,” Catheya smiled. “But give it a little bit longer. I think we’re close.”

“What makes you say that?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Womanly intuition,” Catheya winked.

“Is it population...?” Zac muttered, completely ignoring her comment. “Or perhaps energy flows?”

“Whatever,” Catheya spat. “It’s the clouds, you meathead.”

“The clouds?” Zac repeated with surprise as his gaze turned back to the City of Ancients. “What about them?”

“The clouds are a lot thicker now compared to the last time I visited. When the city first appeared, you could see most of the city at any point. Now, it looks like it’s just days from being completely obscured.”

“Making it impossible to see from the outside if something sinister is going on inside,” Zac concluded.

“Exactly,” Catheya said.

“You’re not heading inside, right?” Zac asked for the fifth time or so.

“I told you, no,” Catheya snorted. “At least not unless the defensive array breaks apart. I want adventure, but being trapped in a slaughter array is not my definition of adventure. Only a deviant would enjoy something like that.”

“I told you I don’t like that nickname,” Zac muttered.

“Whatever,” Catheya laughed. “Let’s head down while the others deal with the arrays. A few weeks have passed since I was here last, and if the city is about to open, we might learn something important.”

Zac nodded, and the two swam down toward the closest settlement. As they descended, Zac spotted thousands of small shacks that formed a circle at the edge of the basin, enclosing both the City of Ancients and the settlements outside.

“What are those?” Zac asked.

“Guard stations,” Catheya snorted. “The Havarok set them up. It’s one of the worst-kept secrets of the area that there are array flags under each one of them. I never managed to figure out what they were for, but now that I know the whole story, I would guess they’re either there to empower the Realm Spirit or make sure the gates don’t open.”

Zac nodded, and the two soon entered the closet settlement. But unfortunately, even after having traveled back and forth for over three hours, there was not much of value he had learned. There had been no sightings of Uona, and not for lack of searching. The last time she was seen was when she appeared roughly two days’ travel away, ten days after she had stolen the splinter. Since then, nothing.

In somewhat related news, the Havarok was running a campaign that the city was a slaughter trap, but it mostly fell on deaf ears. But Zac was still pretty interested in the large posters the Havarok had set up. One of the most common messages was ‘*Uona lurks inside the City of Ancients*’, like she was some sort of dangerous beast.

People thought it was meant to scare people away from entering, but Zac wasn’t so sure. He didn’t feel he was being narcissistic when he believed the warning was a message for him.

“What do you think?” Zac asked Catheya as he looked at the sign.

“I guess they’d know if anyone,” Catheya slowly said. “And we don’t have any better idea.”

“It’s a conspiracy,” a nearby Revenant warrior who had overheard their conversation spat. “Those Havarok dreamers say that only death awaits inside the trial, yet they have called over more than 500 more soldiers over the last two weeks.

Even more, they have recruited ten times that number as mercenaries.”

“Well, who cares even if that witch hides in there,” Catheya winked. “She can only kill so many of us before she runs out of blood, right?”

“You got that right!” the warrior laughed as he walked away.

Zac simply snorted before he turned away and continued down the street. Greed was running rampant in the settlements, and almost half of the discussions were theoretical debates about what kind of treasures waited inside and what they’d do after breaking through to Hegemony.

There were also quite a few who took advantage of the calm to make some money, and there were dozens of exchange stations where a few wealthy but uninformed scions were trying to buy up Twilight Fruits en masse. It seemed extremely unlikely that the Fate-Plucking ladder would take place when the trial closed in a year, and it looked like the more connected clans had come to a similar conclusion.

Only the Elementals and one more clan were buying Twilight Fruits, and but Zac felt it was more for commercial purposes than for ladder placements.

The two eventually returned to their submersible, which was now shrouded in both a layer of mist and an illusion array to keep prying eyes away. Zac opened his real eyes and stowed away the puppet as they walked into the vessel.

“I guess we’ll just wait?” Catheya sat as she sat down next to Zac. “A week at most seems to be the consensus.”

“I guess so,” Zac nodded.

The following days, Zac simply rested up in the vessel, but every day the impatience built in his chest. He felt stressed, and not just about the splinter. It almost felt like there was some looming danger that he was unaware of, but his Luck tried to make him aware of.

And on the fifth day of waiting, something changed.

“What the hell?!” Zac roared, startling the others to the point they erected defensive measures.

However, it wasn't another burst of creation coming on, and neither was it the gates of the City of Ancients opening, even though the city was completely shrouded by this point. It was something far more unexpected, and Zac almost felt his brain short-circuit as he looked at the screen in front of him.

“What's going on?” Catheya eventually asked as she peeked out from behind a wall of ice.

“How is this possible?!” Zac muttered, barely hearing Catheya's question.

Catheya gave her two followers a look, and they left the room as Catheya walked over and put her hand on Zac's arm.

“Hey?”

Zac finally woke up and looked over at Catheya before he shared the screen that had just popped up in front of him.

Incursion opening in 8 hours.

Maximum Level: 100.

General: Vilari Blackwood

Lieutenant General: Joanna Thompson

Captains: Pika Blackwood, Rhuger Blackwood, Ilvere Azh'Rodum, Ciru Volor

Combatants Registered: 10,000 (10,000).

Surcharge for preregistered items and teleportation: 5,053 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Approve?

“What in the heavens,” Catheya murmured, her eyes wide.

Chapter 766: Incursion Owner

“What in the heavens, 5,053 D-grade Nexus Coins?” Catheya said with shock, her eyes as wide as saucers. “Are your followers trying to crush the natives under mountains of wealth? Even if they seize the planet, it will be a long, long time before you turn a profit. Knowing Zecia, it might not even be possible.”

“*That’s* what you think I’m worried about?” Zac said with exasperation. “Why the hell has an incursion started up without my knowledge?”

“What, you didn’t know?” Catheya asked with interest.

“How would I know? I’ve been stuck in here for the last two years,” Zac said as he waved at the ocean outside the submersible.

“Just how powerful is your fate?” Catheya laughed. “You accidentally became an incursion owner? Is that even possible?”

“Be serious,” Zac groaned. “Can I stop this?”

“Stop it? Why would you want to?” Catheya countered with confusion written all over her face. “It looks like they have things in hand, and you seem to have the capital to endure their spending.”

“Have things in hand? They just endured the integration five years ago, and now they want to unleash that kind of suffering on others?” Zac said with a frown.

“That’s up to your followers isn’t it?” Catheya shrugged. “You should know their characters, no? Are they the kind of people who wantonly slaughter the innocent for power?”

“No, but..” Zac muttered.

“Well, there you go. Would you rather the slot go to my empire or those body-snatching cultists you mentioned in the Tower of Eternity? For all you know, your followers might be the saviors that save the lives of billions,” Catheya shrugged. “There’s more than one way to conquer a planet.”

“Still though,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Perhaps if they didn’t have such a monstrous leader who kept rushing between causing trouble and falling into piles of wealth they wouldn’t be pushing themselves to risk their lives like this. But you should know that your rate of improvement is terrifying. Your strength has what, doubled, since appearing in the Twilight Ocean? How long until your faction can no longer contain your fate?”

“I know,” Zac muttered. “But there is no need for them to go this far...”

“It’s like the people outside,” Catheya said. “Everyone has their dreams and aspirations. Few of those who have truly embarked on the path of cultivation are content with simply becoming average. Trust in your people that they know what they are doing.”

“I just wish I could be there to help him,” Zac muttered, but he knew it was impossible.

Even if he left right now, he would be far too late. The closest exit was over a week’s travel away, and it took close to two weeks to pass through the void when teleporting between sectors. By the time he reached Earth, the members of Port Atwood would long have entered the incursion and connection would be cut for at least three months.

And that didn’t even factor in that leaving the Twilight Ocean now would cripple his cultivation, and possibly even kill him because of the imbalance between Creation and Oblivion.

“Well, help me make sense of the text at least if you can,” Zac sighed.

“Which part?” Catheya asked. “The Maximum level is the soft limit of entry. Going above that level tacks on a massive

surcharge, and that surcharge doubles for every additional level.”

“Wait, that means that putting a level 110 through the incursion is a thousand times more expensive than a level 101?” Zac exclaimed.

“Exactly. And sending a level 101 is roughly a thousand times more expensive than sending one within the soft limit. Below that, the price difference is not quite as steep. However, you’d most likely be able to send over a hundred peak F-grade warriors for every level 90 warrior,” Catheya explained. “Most likely, some of the generals or captains in the invasion are the reason for the exorbitant price.”

Zac slowly nodded, believing that might be the case. The three undead of the Einherjar should all be within level 100, especially Vilari who might not even have Evolved by now. Of course, the fact that she had taken the mantle of general over Joanna indicated the mentalist most likely had evolved by this point.

As for Joanna, he wasn’t as sure. She had been around level 95 when he set off for Twilight Harbor, and gaining another 5 levels were well within reason even if she didn’t push herself. Most likely, she was a good few levels above 100 by now, considering the items he had sent back home for the Valkyries to enjoy.

The same was true for Ilvere, who was already at peak F-grade upon reaching Earth. He had entered E-grade just a few months after the Origin Dao ran out. The last two, Zac didn’t remember. Ciru was one of the gemlings of the younger generation, but Zac barely knew him apart from him being very talented in both combat and crafting.

It was no wonder that clans like Azh’Rezak refused to send a single E-grade through the Incursion. Azh’Rezak was barely scraping by to nurture a couple of Hegemons. For them to spend hundreds of D-grade Nexus Coins to let a level 77 pass through was impossible, especially considering they’d be restricted by the System anyways.

“Are the slots negotiable as well? And what’s included in this fee?” Zac asked.

“Your force was provided ten thousand slots, and they filled them all. You can send more people, but the cost gets steeper for every additional warrior that gets teleported,” Catheya explained. “The surcharge is for approved arrays, gear, and the warriors themselves. For comparison, I had 5,000 warriors and a cost of 629 D-grade Nexus Coins when I led my incursion at 17. And a good part of that cost was for the terraforming array.”

“I remember a friend mentioning that the warriors in his clan could spend money to increase their strength even further?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure about that,” Catheya slowly said. “Is his faction on the more poverty-stricken side? I guess some clans have their warriors pay their way to some degree. Another feature you can pay for is to unlock more of your strength upon arrival, but it’s not worth doing so past a certain point.”

“The Ruthless Heavens are already matching your strength with the natives, and your restricted power is meant to unlock at roughly the same pace as the natives can improve if they make the most of the opportunity. Unlock too much of your strength, and you might be harming yourself. After all, there aren’t many insights to be had if you simply slaughter all the natives like they were ants,” Catheya said.

“Then why allow it at all?” Zac asked with confusion.

“If a faction is willing to pay more than a planet is worth to send some younglings there, why would the Heavens not abide? It’s all about balance. It would be more than happy to send a Hegemon through an incursion since the revenue that would generate could pay for the cost of integrating one hundred other worlds,” Catheya said. “Thus increasing the odds of nurturing powerhouses.”

“The Ruthless Heavens indeed,” Zac sighed, but he still infused his will into the ‘Accept?’ button, giving his tacit blessing to the madness.

The screen disappeared, and a glance at his Status Screen indicated that the System had already charged him for the cost. He could only pray that they knew what they were doing when preparing everything. Between the Demons, Abby, and his other elites, they would hopefully have come up with a plan with a high degree of success.

Even then, Zac knew there would be casualties, perhaps even more than when Earth's Integration took place. After all, back then he had been involved with closing almost all the incursions. If he had sent his armies instead of going himself, the loss of life would have been catastrophic after having closed 2-3 of them.

It took him over an hour to calm his nerves, where he frantically kept trying to figure out a way to help his people. Unfortunately, it really looked like there was nothing he could do. Thankfully, Vilari had long returned with the resources from Twilight Harbor, and the foundations of his followers should have improved considerably by now.

Along with the vast wealth at his disposal, Port Atwood would probably be even better prepared than most C-grade clans. It wasn't that these ancient factions couldn't provide the resources, but rather that they wouldn't. An incursion was a risky investment, with both the natives and other factions contending for the planet.

For most, it ended up as a training trip for the young generation, where they stayed for a year or two to enjoy the Origin Dao and hunt for rare herbs before returning. Few factions were willing to spend thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins on a couple of F-grade juniors who hadn't even proven themselves.

That alone helped Zac calm down quite a bit. Being agitated did him more harm than good, considering how it exposed him to the shard in his head. The low susurrus of 'helpful' suggestions had grown considerably louder since the screen had popped up, making him barely able to think clearly.

He had even felt a sudden urge to pierce the void and create a Space Gate between his location and Earth. That was a

solution to his predicament that might actually ‘work’, but Zac was certain he would run out of lifespan long before managing to create something like that. He quickly pushed the urge down and emptied his mind again.

However, the equanimity was eventually broken again almost eight hours later. It wasn’t due to the fact the incursion should start any moment now, though. A sudden ripple made Zac’s eyes shoot open from his meditation, and the golem next to him immediately rushed out of the submersible. From there, Zac could see the huge upheavals that were taking place in the City of Ancients.

Cathey had been right, there was no doubt about it. The city was completely obscured by thick churning clouds now, and not even the castle in the middle was visible any longer. The grey haze had essentially looked like a solid wall by this point. However, it was still clear that the city was waking up from its slumber as it radiated enormous amounts of energy.

Not only that, but previously invisible inscriptions had appeared on the fortifications, forming some sort of powerful array. One by one they awakened, and the aura the city emitted grew with every breath. The thing didn’t feel like an uninviting weaponized fortress though. Its aura wasn’t that of bloodshed, but one of ancient mystery.

Zac’s mind was occupied elsewhere, but even he couldn’t help but become moved by possibilities the place held. More importantly, it meant it was finally time for him to get going. Between the splinter being snatched from under his nose and his followers risking their lives on some unknown world, he held a belly full of anger.

He almost looked forward to running into Uona by this point.

“The ocean has shifted,” Faebloom Monarch sighed as a handful of leaves on his head turned white and dropped from his crown. “The last spirit is exposed.”

A stir rippled through the room, as this no doubt meant the schemes of the outsiders no doubt had succeeded inside the E-

grade trial. A surge of anger filled Rhodium's heart as he gazed across the room. Vassal factions like Karabas Clan no doubt held most of the blame for divulging the secrets of the ocean, which was why they all were absent from this meeting.

However, many of the clans here today had no doubt given up some findings of their own over the years to reap some benefits. Otherwise, something like this simply wasn't possible.

His own clan, Yrvar-Las-Eseru, had held a chair at the council for six million years, yet they only knew of some fragmented rumors about the city that once belonged to that ancient Autarch. But some outsiders had not only managed to locate it, but even modify it before bringing it to the surface? How could that possibly be possible without multiple council members selling out core secrets of the Harbor?

"Is there truly nothing we can do?" Rhodium sighed as he turned to the Faebloom Monarch.

The ancient treant slowly opened his eyes, his expression downcast as he shook his head, causing the leaves in his crown to flutter with the Dao of Nature.

"All our efforts to block the currents of fate have been a failure. The second facet of the Realm Spirit has already dispersed, meaning that the avatar in the E-grade trial is the only one still standing," Faebloom sighed. "Even if it remains to the end of the trial, I think the Twilight Lord will be able to supplant its will and take control."

The fact that the D-grade trial had ended in defeat was ultimately not too surprising. With the advantage of better results across three full grades and far superior equipment, the power discrepancy between the elite and the frontier Hegemons was just too big. However, they had held out some hope that quantity would beat out quality inside the E-grade trial, where they had hundreds of thousands of people working for them.

"It's only one of two, and that man has already seized the core chamber. Besides, they are simply too old," Heryes of the Necromancer's Guild agreed. "They remained hidden for too

long, and it's working against us. If they had succumbed to the river of time a few million years ago, a new spirit would have been born by now, one properly in tune with the new realm. That way the Twilight Lord would never have been able to do something like this."

"There's no point in lamenting that right now," Rhodium said. "It looks like we are out of options. We will have to proceed with our final gambit."

"Should we strike now?" Artolo, a Corpse Lord Monarch, ventured with some anticipation in his eyes.

"It wouldn't work," Heryes grimaced. "That bastard is hiding in the folds between the trial dimensions like its nexus. We might actually be helping him if we strike now."

"What about the Havarok?" a Revenant monarch asked. "Have they answered our call?"

"They have assured us they have the situation under control, but their goal is ultimately not the same as ours. For them, the only thing that matters is killing the impostor and preventing a hostile Autarch from ascending. Ruining our lifeline to make that happen is a small price to pay," Rhodium frowned.

The room once more turned silent, and Rhodium looked around the chamber with lamentation. Twenty-four Monarchs, the weakest of them at the end of the middle stage. Yet they were filled with impotence as fate pushed forward like a tsunami. A tsunami that would swallow their homes and cut off their path of cultivation.

Certainly, none of them were in mortal danger. They could leave at any moment and look for another place to call home. But the price for doing so was too steep. Their current accumulations were thanks to their predecessors' hard work for tens of thousands of generations and the unique environment provided by the Twilight Ocean.

With both gone, they could simply give up on refining their inner worlds any further. Most would no doubt lose a stage or two without the Twilight Rivers providing them with a

constant stream of pure energy. Their creations weren't stable enough to withstand the drought of the Frontier for too long.

But there simply weren't too many sanctuaries at the edge of the Multiverse, places where the Dao was clear and the energy dense enough to keep them going.

The few continents that could support a handful of Monarchs had entrenched powers that would fight tooth and nail to keep any rootless clans from settling in. Uprooting the locals would cost too much, further weakening their already damaged foundations. And joining the greater factions, after rebuffing their inquiries for millions of years?

They'd be lucky to become cannon fodder at some front line in the hopes that their descendants might get to live the life of commoners rather than slaves.

"We can't just wait around," Ovo, one of the two Rox'At Elementals present at the meeting, said as six golden blades appeared behind their back. "Rebirth through death."

Murmurs of agreement echoed through the hall.

"Lady Heryes is right. It is not the right time," Faebloom slowly said.

"It's never the right time with your kind," Artolo growled. "You and the other cowards have prevented any concerted action for months now while the situation grows more and more chaotic. We've spent exorbitant sums setting up those nasty spears, yet they're collecting dust while Alvod Jontun gets closer to his goal."

The treant only grunted in response as space opened up above his crown, depicting the scene in the distance.

A vast ocean of blood churned above the entrance to the Twilight Ocean, stretching for hundreds of kilometers in each direction as it blocked out the spatial anomaly from above. Sitting on top of it was a small island where three warriors emitted tremendous auras. Any one of them would be a match for any of the councilors, but the hooded being in the middle was in a league of his own.

He was shrouded in sinister darkness, and his aura was not only that of a Divine Monarch but one right at the threshold of ascension. They still didn't know his identity, but even a fool would know that he was here to snatch the opportunity for himself.

If the Eternal Clan guarded the Twilight Ocean from above, then the Eidolon guarded it from below. One million crystals formed a shockingly complex set of arrays, thousands of them interwoven with such complexity that they still couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. They hadn't even managed to pinpoint which one of the crystals that housed the Divine Monarch the spectrals had sent.

As if that wasn't enough, there was even a vast nebula slowly rotating around the two guardians, tens of thousands of stars that formed an ever-changing pattern. It did not only provide an outer barrier to stall any sabotage of theirs, but it even blocked out most of their long-prepared methods to influence the trials. If not for the System's warning, none of the Trial Takers would have made it out of that triangle of death.

Artolo snorted when he saw the scene, but his fighting spirit had clearly waned a bit. Taking on not only the Undead Empire, but also the Radiant Temple, was a bit much even for the battle-crazed Corpselord.

"Let us wait a bit longer. The Tarramak Vault will open quite soon. At that point, those three will not be able to act so domineering, and an opportunity should present itself," Rhodium said, and the others nodded. "For now, let us finalize the lances."

"Interesting, interesting," Artolo snickered as he phased out of the chamber. "I've never killed a whole realm before."

Chapter 767: Depths of Madness

“I guess this is it,” Catheya smiled as she walked up to Zac, or rather the golem that stood at the edge of the basin.

“Looks like it. Most people seem to agree,” Zac nodded.

The whole city was abuzz from the changes, and tens of thousands of warriors streamed toward the four gates. Zac could spot dozens of energy eruptions in the settlements as well, signs of chaotic battles taking place.

The City of Ancients waking up was like a match setting the whole area ablaze, and order was fast crumbling. As things looked, the scene would turn into a full-on war unless something changed. Thankfully, they didn’t need to wait for more than another minute before the gates began to swing open, prompting the trial takers to freeze in anticipation.

“No quest,” Catheya commented. “At least not here.”

“Is that a clue?” Zac asked.

“Increases the likelihood of this being a man-made event,” Catheya explained. “If it had been a true ancient city appearing by itself, the Ruthless Heavens would be more likely to turn the event into a limited quest. Of course, with people clawing at the gates, the System might deem it unnecessary to increase the incentives.”

Soon enough the doors were completely opened, but Zac still couldn’t see what was going on inside. The entrance reminded Zac of a spatial gate, a shimmering wall giving no hints of what waited on the other side. That didn’t stop those at the front line though, and thousands of people heedlessly rushed into the unknown, wanting to gain the first-mover advantage.

Others adopted a wait-and-see approach, hoping to use the first batch as an experiment to see what kind of dangers waited on the other side. Unfortunately, not a single one who entered emerged again, which almost certainly confirmed that the City of Ancient was sealed from the inside.

Even then, more and more people kept streaming inside, and hundreds of powerful auras started to descend toward the gates from the cliffs. It was the elites who had bided their time, hiding at the edge. Judging by some of the auras, there were more than a few who possessed Dao Branches. But even they were drawn by the dense energies and mysterious fluctuations coming from the city.

Zac's eyes turned toward the large Havarok encampment in the distance, and he saw how orderly lines of warriors had started pouring toward the gate closest to them as well. The dams had collapsed, and the Havarok had given up on keeping people away. Instead, they joined the fight, though Zac wasn't sure what their exact objectives inside would be.

The real Zac donned the distraction cloak and stepped out from the submersible for the first time in weeks, stowing away the golem who had been his eyes and ears. It was time to make his move. Zac's goals in this place differed from everyone else's, but he still was filled with some anxiety as he saw one warrior after another swimming through the gates into the unknown on the other side.

What if someone somehow managed to get their hands on his splinter and then left?

"Be careful," Zac said to Catheya as he started to slowly infuse [**Abyssal Phase**] with Miasma. "Don't worry about whether I have left or not if things get out of hand. Just exit the trial. I'll figure something out."

"Aren't you sweet," Catheya smiled as she patted his arm. "And don't worry. I'll be fine, as will your followers. Who knows, you might have another planet waiting for you by the time you return home."

Zac smiled weakly in response, once more filled with urgency. He didn't know what he could do to help out his people back

home, but that didn't lessen his desire to return.

"Here, use this while you approach," Catheya said as she handed him an ice shard. "It'll obscure you, just in case."

Zac looked at it curiously as he infused it with some Miasma. The ice crystal immediately started expelling motes of ice all around him, hiding him in a shimmering nebula.

"Thank you for all your help," Zac sighed. "I'll convey your message to your ancestor as quickly as I can."

"I have an idea if you're willing. I can proactively reach out to the Ambassadors, explain your situation, and convey that you are friendly and can be an asset to the Empire. As long as I get the message to representatives of the empire, not even my master would dare make a move on you," Catheya said. "At least it would give you a window to prepare, no matter what response the empire has. I'll try to send you a message somehow as well, if I'm in a position to do so."

Zac slowly nodded, feeling the idea made sense. He had already reconciled with the fact that his secret would be exposed soon enough. If not the moment Catheya left the trial, then at least by the time she returned home. And she was right. It was probably better to reach out to the empire preemptively, rather than leave his secret to a declining clan desperate to regain its glory.

Even if Catheya and possibly her father wanted to befriend him, what about the other elders?

"Alright, I trust your instincts," Zac smiled. "Get me a good deal, alright? I wouldn't mind visiting the Abyssal Shores in the future."

"Gods help us," Catheya laughed.

The next moment Zac was gone, turned into an abyssal wraith. The world slowed down once more as Zac shot toward the City of Ancients. However, he didn't go for the closest one, but rather the one to the east. The eastern gate was opposite of the one the Havarok Army was heading toward, which would hopefully minimize his interactions with those people.

They had sent out that olive branch, but Zac wouldn't trust his life on it.

The ancient city came closer and closer, as Zac moved with blazing speed, but he noted that dozens of the cultivators descending from the ledges could match his pace. He even spotted three that were moving slightly quicker than him, most likely talents who had Dexterity as their main attribute.

Luckily, this was not a race, and Zac didn't rush into the portal when he landed at the edge of the mob waiting right outside. He immediately started walking through the crowd at random to avoid having someone focusing on him. Honestly, though, Zac doubted his distraction cloak was even needed judging by how intently most people were staring at the shimmering barrier that hid the insides of the ancient city.

Not a single warrior who had entered had made it back outside, but neither did Zac sense any battles or suspicious fluctuations within the walls. It was completely tranquil, providing no clues as to what waited inside. Zac hesitated a bit as he circuitously came closer and closer to the gate. Should he really enter? It seemed like a pretty deadly event, and he hadn't even confirmed if Uona or the splinter was inside.

But suddenly, a shudder rippled through his mind – it was there.

It was distant and obscured, but he had felt a weak hint of oblivion from the depths of the city. Zac hesitated no longer, and with one leap, he entered the City of Ancients.

A thick haze immediately greeted him on the other side, completely robbing him of any visibility. He couldn't even see the axe that had appeared in his hand, and his Draugr Vision didn't do anything to help him either. The only thing he could sense was what he could touch, and that was the cobblestone street he walked on.

Zac started to make his way forward, his nerves taut in preparation for an ambush. However, what met his gaze was not an army of spectral cultivators or Uona. It was a normal dilapidated street party covered in the ever-present haze. He

turned around toward where he came from, but the way back was completely obscured.

He guessed it was a powerful confusion array running along the wall, preventing anyone from leaving. It might be possible to brute force his way out of there, but he had no interest in trying that out right now. He could still sense the splinter, and it felt much closer than before. It was so familiar. The impression was weak, but it reminded him of how it had felt when he had just found himself stuck with the first splinter.

Zac shook his head as he stepped onto the path, his brows scrunching together into a frown.

That god-damned vampire. Zac grit his teeth as he looked around at the ghastly surroundings. Even now that the haze wasn't as dense, he could barely see more than fifty meters ahead. It was all her fault. She had forced him into this cursed place, when he could have been back in Port Atwood by now.

It was her fault that his people had set out on such a dangerous mission without him, invading a world without his protection. Who knew how many deaths it would lead to? Annoyance turned to fury as he continued forward, the knuckles on his right hand whitening as he saw the faces of those back home. He had already lost so many, and Uona had made him lose even more.

A sudden fluctuation in the air made him turn toward the left with a snarl, where a human drenched in blood appeared through the haze, his eyes tinted with madness and suffused with killing intent to the point that the white haze had turned red around him. That suited Zac just fine as he felt in urgent need of some release, and he actually stowed away his axe before he grabbed the man with his bare hands.

The human roared in anger as he tried to rip Zac to pieces, but Zac simply sneered as the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** blocked his attacks. Zac's own two hands gripped hard and started to pull apart, and the man only had a chance to wail with pain before he was ripped in two. The rain of blood looked so beautiful as it painted the walls red, and Zac was lost in revelry for a moment. The mists in half the street had

gained a rogue tint by now, and Zac felt like the world suddenly was more beautiful.

If he could only find a few more people and complete the imagery...

A sharp pang of pain erupted from his mind as the Shard of Creation slammed against the tunnel, prompting a few new cracks to appear. Zac shuddered as his mind cleared up, and he hurriedly erected the cage around the remnant again. Only then did he look down at his sanguine hands with incomprehension.

What the hell had just happened?

That sense of rage was so familiar. The splinter in Uona's possession, could it really affect him from this far away? It had completely consumed him even if he had felt something was amiss for a few seconds. Or was the splinter in his mind somehow exerting pressure on him now that its brother was closeby? Zac frowned as he looked down at the corpse. Neither felt right.

The haze?

Zac quickly closed his pores and ate a general antidote pill, but it barely helped against the murderous impulses at all. He could quickly confirm that the effect wasn't really medicinal in nature. He closed his eyes and stabilized his mind, moving away from the corpse, or more importantly the pool of blood that seemed to react with the mist.

However, he still felt weird murderous tendencies assail him even after avoiding both red and white mist for a while. It was like the very air was filled with condensed killing intent or something similar, some manner of tainted Mental Energy that couldn't be seen or sensed. **[Purity of the Void]** was thankfully fast at work purifying the red mist that had already entered his body, but the biggest contributor to his mental state recovering was actually the wild shard in his Soul Aperture.

The air was filled with pervasive killing intent, and it entered his body completely unseen. But the moment the murderous intent came in contact with Creation it mostly fell apart,

through his body took some damage from what was created in its stead. Some wounds were a small price to pay though, since the transformations didn't seem to cost him his life span.

The foreign energy that had slipped into his body had paid the price of Creation all on its own, perhaps thanks to having a will. It resulted in weird wounds filled with toxic goop forming in his body. Normally, Zac would have simply cut his arm and exsanguinated some of the impurities to speed up the process, but there was something weird going on with blood in this place as well.

It looked like Ventus' predictions were right on the money. The City of Ancients contained a layered trap of soul and blood. The area itself nurtured and magnified your murderous impulses, perhaps even with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion. Next, blood interacted with the mist and supercharged it into something that provided all of the madness but none of the strength of items like the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

Now that he had realized the danger, Zac didn't feel the threat was too big. At least not for now. His mental state had been in a bad spot because of the stress from the shard and the incursion, allowing him to fall for a trap that normally wasn't nearly strong enough to take someone like him out. As long as he kept his mind guarded and his mental state stable, he should be able to withstand this place easily enough.

A sloshing sound drew Zac out of his musings, and he looked on with a mix of confusion and disgust as the pool of blood around the corpse started to congeal into small rivers that ran off into the mist, like they were called from the distance. Oddly enough, they didn't move along the main road that should lead toward the heart of the city, but rather down one of the alleys and into the haze.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he shook his head and stayed on the main route, walking down the road and into the darkness. Once more, he found himself shrouded in the haze, but this time he was more cognizant of the risks.

He still heard the whispers, but he steeled his mind as he walked, forcibly keeping the anger at bay. Soon enough, he emerged from the haze, but something was wrong. The street, the buildings, the layout. It didn't fit with the section he had walked through just a few seconds ago. Had he been teleported?

Or was the whole town covered in a confusion array, rather than just the edges? Zac was pretty sure that was the case. It didn't look like he was getting closer to the splinter, even if he had walked toward it in a straight line.

A door suddenly exploded as two bloodied warriors tumbled out, both of them fighting for their lives in a ruthless melee. One of them was an undead warrior using a sword made from ice, and the other was a human holding a staff. But the wizard had clearly gone mad, using his weapon to bash in the swordsman's head rather than conjuring spells.

The outcome of the fight was predictable, with the swordsman skewering the mage, the attack rapidly freezing him into a block of ice. However, the human seemed to have regained a sense of self at the brink of death, and a dozen massive wooden spears teeming with life sprung up from the ground, impaling the ice warrior a dozen times over.

The fight had ended in mutual destruction, and Zac looked on with a frown as the whole street around the two combatants became shrouded in a red mist. The mist only lasted for half a minute before dissipating, and Zac walked over, his eyes on the pool of black blood that had formed beneath the Revenant.

As expected, the ichor started moving soon enough, flowing in a certain direction for around twenty meters before it sunk beneath the cobblestones. Zac immediately followed, entering a side passage. If he couldn't trust his eyes or his sense of direction, he could either choose a path at random or follow the direction of the blood in hopes that it would lead him the right way.

Soon enough he emerged, and a victorious smile covered his face when he sensed that the splinter was a bit closer compared to before. However, just as his sense of the splinter

had grown stronger, so had the haze and the whispers of mayhem in the back of his mind.

A dying warrior was lying on the ground right in front of him, and Zac didn't waste any time as he followed the blood that poured out from the man's body. He appeared at another crossroads a moment later. This place was empty of crazed warriors, but it still confirmed his suspicions. The mental oppression was once more marginally stronger, as was the haze.

He would have to delve into the depths of madness if he wanted to find what he was looking for.

Chapter 768: The Rules of Madness

The clouds swirled around him as Zac observed the new patch of ruins he had entered by following the trail of blood. He was still in the outer edges of the city, judging by the illustrations he had purchased at the settlements outside. People had painted the town by capturing the snippets seen between the clouds and extrapolated a semi-complete image of the City of Ancients.

Some sections had never been exposed for some reason, including most of the central part of the city. However, many of the residential parts of town had been drawn in great detail, though the map was mostly useless now that everything seemed to be randomized by the confusion array. Thankfully, it was still possible to make an approximation of where he was located by the architecture.

The City of Ancients was like most cities, with the outer regions holding smaller buildings, apart from a number of massive structures that seemed to hold special functions. One was clearly a coliseum, while others might be temples or exchanges. These small buildings were covered with weaker arrays by the looks of it, and many of the buildings were nothing but rubble.

Meanwhile, the neighborhoods closer to the vast castle in the center were a lot more affluent, and there were a few parks as large as forests that had peeked through the clouds. There was not much else to say about this town, except that it seemed to have been the home to two different races when it wasn't abandoned.

There were two clear architectural preferences in the city, though the buildings were mixed pretty freely. Roughly half of the houses were built in white and faded blue rock, having

rounded curves that made Zac think of stones smoothed by the ocean waves and to some degree Greek architecture. A lot of these buildings had spiraled roofs like the shell of a hermit crab, and Zac felt it was part of some sort of natural formation to strengthen the buildings.

The second half of the buildings were more sterile, using mostly black stones when creating living quarters that seemed like a slightly gothic predecessor to Scandinavian minimalism. However, these buildings had provided more space for gardens and sculptures, though the former had long turned into lifeless soil by this point.

The buildings around him were part of the slums, though which part was impossible to tell. There were no crazed warriors to help point him in the right direction, but Zac still had some options. One was to exsanguinate himself, but he'd only do that if he was stuck. Instead, he took out a bottle of blood he had collected to replenish Verun's skills, and he poured a small pool of it on the ground.

Time passed, and Zac frowned when his offering didn't elicit much of a response. The pool shuddered a bit, but it eventually simply seeped through the cracks without providing much of a clue. Whatever collected the blood in the city seemed to prefer fresh blood, but the haze seemed to like stale blood just the same as it rapidly turned red around the pool.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he stood up. He had a lot of blood on hand, but it looked like it wouldn't lead him straight toward the splinter. Instead, he turned his attention to one of the still-standing buildings in the area; a two-story house that seemed to have once been a storefront on the ground floor with a decently large living area on top.

He had called this area a slum, but it was only relative to the vast mansions in the inner town, which had gardens tens of thousands of square meters large. Depending on the level of people who had once made this place their home, it might even have been a Hegemon who ran this store.

The odds were he'd just get moved further from the core if he picked a new path at random, at least until he figured out

another way to beat the confusion array. So why not stuff his pockets until someone came along? In case that failed as well, he would have to bleed himself and risk a potential bout of madness.

Four chains shot forward, but they were rebuffed by a flickering barrier as a set of fractals lit up along the house. A piercing screech was emitted as well, making Zac blanch as he instilled his chains with the Fragment of the Coffin before attacking again. The barrier was barely functional with multiple fractals missing, and destroying a few more runes on the building broke it completely.

The whistling sound stopped as well, and Zac looked at the building with bemusement. Ancient theft protection, perhaps? It would be pretty hard to sneakily pilfer a store with that sound waking the whole neighborhood.

Zac stepped into the storefront, but there was not much to be found. There was a layer of dust over five centimeters deep, and when he touched a small wooden bench, it collapsed into ash as well. Just how long had this city been hidden under the ground for furniture to be reduced to this point? There was no way that herbs would maintain their efficacy this long, but other items weren't as touched by the passage of time.

Swirling clouds of dust were kicked up as he rummaged about, and Zac was soon forced to tie a cloth over his mouth nose to avoid inhaling the ancient dust. Eventually, he found something of interest in a pile of dust and shards of glass that might once have been a display case for the store. It was a couple of stacks of talismans, though only 11 maintained their use after going through them.

Most had lost their efficacy by this point, with the inscriptions having faded away. The papers only remained since they were made from some sort of spiritual material, and possibly treated somehow to increase their quality and durability. Still, the ones that remained provided Zac with some clues. Looking at the scripture, it was clear that this shop was meant for the living, rather than some undead race.

The inscriptions were based on the script of the Apostate of Order, but trying to decipher it felt like looking at some proto-language on earth rather than the letters he was used to.

[Primal Polyglot] and his accumulated experience still helped him somewhat understand their functions though, mostly because they weren't that complicated.

The first set was simple healing talismans you'd slap on your wound to seal it and increase the speed of recuperation. The talismans held a hint of Life in them, and Zac estimated they'd be equivalent to a Middle E-grade healing pill. The other type of talisman was life-attuned as well, and Zac found them pretty interesting.

They were actually offensive talismans even though their patterns were over 50% identical to the healing ones. From what he could tell, they were meant to flood certain part of an enemy's body with life-attuned energies and damage organs and bursts blood vessels. They essentially overheated parts of an enemy's body.

This method was quite ingenious, considering many defensive talismans and skills wouldn't block out a healing wave. The bodies of living cultivators also took in these kinds of energies naturally since life-attuned energy had all kinds of health benefits. Putting Divine Crystals in Cultivation Caves was the norm, for example, since it boosted health and longevity.

The talisman took advantage of this fact, acting like a trojan horse to bypass some of warriors' natural resistance. This obviously wouldn't work against undead whose bodies were naturally hostile against life-attuned energy, but these talismans would probably be quite lethal against them anyway.

Zac felt there was a lesson there, as he still struggled to find ways to use the Dao of Life offensively. If he wanted to grasp the Branch of Life in the future, he would have to broaden his definition of Life to include more than just the healing aspect. This was just one simple but effective aspect of life, while the pulses at the volcano had shown him another aspect.

He kept rummaging through the house for another minute, but he only found some Nexus Crystals hidden under a loose tile

in the bedroom and two more stacks of talismans. Even then, Zac wasn't too disappointed since his findings confirmed a few things. First of all, the city seemed to have been hastily vacated.

Otherwise, the talismans and secret stash of money would have been brought away by the owners. It was also possible that everyone had been instantly killed by something like a mental attack, and their bodies had turned to dust like the furniture. No matter which was the case, that hopefully meant the bigger houses also had their valuables left behind.

Secondly, a shop at the edge of the City of Ancients sold Middle E-grade items like they were common goods, which probably meant the inner parts held D-grade items. And perhaps, the castle in the middle was once controlled by a Monarch, meaning there was a chance for C-grade items to appear.

Zac was still some ways from reaching D-grade, but he had already spent a good chunk of the seemingly endless fortune his mother had left him. Port Atwood would sooner or later start generating a steady source of revenue, but income sources like the Havenfort Chasm would take thousands of years to build up.

This was a huge opportunity to make a fortune in the short run. After all, even the worst C-grade items were way more valuable than the best E-grade items. Just a single pill or a piece of Spiritual Metal at C-grade might be worth more than his whole fortune. Certainly, he had his hands full with Uona and the splinter, but he would have to be crazy if he didn't keep his eyes open for other opportunities.

Hopefully, the System hadn't been stingy and whisked away all the high-grade items already.

Light steps suddenly echoed out on the cobblestone outside, and Zac immediately turned away from the desolate store and walked out to see who had arrived. It was a Revenant who was made from some unknown humanoid race with oversized purple eyes. She was not affected by the madness of the city

either, and three glowing orbs shuddering with condensed mental energy swirled around her.

The moment Zac stepped out of the doorway, the woman turned in his direction. At first, she looked a bit confused, like she couldn't make heads or tails of what she was seeing. At first, Zac didn't know why, but he looked down at himself and noticed he was absolutely covered in dust. A quick shake and it fell off, and the Revenant's look went from confusion to despair as she looked into Zac's abyssal eyes.

The ladder screen had appeared above the Revenant as well by this point, and the Revenant only showed a value of 0-250. The moment she realized who she was dealing with, she rushed toward the closest path, but Zac was much quicker. A chain slammed into a wall in front of her, and Zac dragged himself over to bar her path.

"Stop," Zac calmly said.

"Lord Black," she said with a deep bow, her voice shaking with fear. "I have nothing that would enter your exalted eyes. Please spare me."

"I have no interest in your life, but I need answers. How do you resist the madness?" Zac asked the woman who had shrunk away with fear.

"I'm a Spiritual Warrior. My soul is strong enough to resist the lure," she said, and Zac wasn't too surprised now that he had gotten a better look at the three orbs rotating around her. They were not only made from miasma, but they also contained a lot of Mental Energy.

"Are you able to overcome the confusion array and pick the correct path?" Zac asked.

"No," she hurriedly said with a shake of her head. "It is out of my expertise. After finding out the nature of this place, I simply plan on moving at the edges and avoid battle until someone breaks this array."

Zac sighed, realizing he wouldn't get anything of use out of this woman. She was not much better than the average warrior that entered the trial, just above the weakest warriors who had

dared enter the City of Ancients. She didn't seem to have any backing either that would allow her to share insights that Zac didn't already know.

He asked a few more questions, but she knew even less than he did. He even had her try to instill some mental energy in a batch of blood to 'enliven it', but it didn't make a lick of difference. One side of the pool bubbled slightly more than the other, but the whole thing was pretty inconsistent. That left him with one conclusion; someone would have to bleed if he wanted to proceed.

It almost felt like it was intentional. Uona didn't explicitly stop people from finding the way toward the core, but every step forward would need a sacrifice of blood. That blood, in turn, would probably be used for something nasty that would empower the vampire.

"Release some blood, and you can go," Zac grunted.

"Please, I saw another warrior get a wound. He was withstanding the madness before, but it seeped into the wound. I'm afraid-" she hesitated.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have a lot of options either," Zac said with an even stare. "It's life and death for everyone here. I'll give you two options. Release some blood on the ground and I'll give you a natural treasure from the inner part of the Mystic Realm. Refuse, and I'll knock you out and use you as a compass."

He knew what he was doing wasn't very gentlemanly, but this wasn't the time to start equivocating about right and wrong. If possible, he would prefer not to harm the innocents to reach the heart of the City of Ancients, but he'd do what he needed to get the job done. The Havarok had warned of this place for months, yet this Revenant and others had jumped heedlessly into the maws of the unknown in search of treasure.

Besides, the sooner he got to the heart of the city, the sooner this madness would end.

In fact, Zac started to wonder if he might be able to seize the splinter without having to deal with Uona at all. After seeing

the state of the Blood Slave back in the ravine, Zac had guessed she used her underlings as containers for the thing. But now, the remnant was out in the open judging by how its aura permeated the whole city.

Hopefully, Uona would be busy with all the blood that kept pouring toward the heart of the city, allowing him to snatch the splinter with the help of his movement skill before they knew what hit them. He'd seen the Havarok entering the city ready for war as well, and he might even be able to use them as a distraction while absconding with the splinter.

The mentalist was clearly reluctant, but she took a deep breath as she took out a knife with a silver gleam. A small wound was opened up on her palm as a stream of black blood fell on the cobblestones. The reaction was immediate as the white haze in the air was drawn over, their color rapidly darkening to gain a sanguine hue.

"How do you feel?" Zac asked curiously from the distance, not forgetting to mark down the direction the blood moved before being swallowed by the ground.

"It's entering my body," she said with a shuddering breath as black veins stood out on her forehead.

Zac looked on as the Revenant struggled for almost a minute while stumbling around in the area. Her eyes had gained a red tint, but she was still clearly in control as she applied a healing balm over the wound. The bleeding stopped quickly enough, and her visage relaxed soon after as she regained her aura stabilized. She took a shuddering breath before she looked at Zac.

"Avoiding the haze did only lessen the effect. I felt a powerful bloodlust enter my body until the wound closed no matter where I moved. However, simply being covered in blood did nothing to me personally, except attract the haze. After the wound was closed, I was able to expel the bloodlust by controlling my mind and circulating my Dao," the Revenant reported, clearly understanding what Zac was looking for.

The report was extremely helpful. It looked like getting wounded in this place was doubly dangerous compared to

normal, but as long as he kept his mind in check, he shouldn't be taken out of commission. As long as he didn't get rage-addled to the point that he started fighting like a beast, forgetting skills and energy circulation, his body would heal quickly enough while **[Purity of the Void]** dealt with the rest.

"Thank you," Zac nodded as he threw over one of the decent herbs he had found in the Coral Forest on the way back from the chasm. It was nothing special to him after having pilfered that place for weeks, but it was probably as valuable as over fifty good herbs you'd find in the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean.

"It's my pleasure," The Revenant said with a curtsy before she hurriedly stowed away the precious herb. "If anything, the experience helped me as well. It's better learning the rules of this place now than when under attack by a crazed warrior."

"True enough," Zac grunted as he walked into the haze in the direction that the blood had indicated, leaving the Revenant to her own devices.

Chapter 769: Sneaking Inside

“Time to go, Number 7,” Zac muttered, and he was answered by a bestial roar.

The chains of **[Love’s Bond]** rattled as the Corpselord completely consumed by rage tried to break free for the hundredth time. Zac didn’t even register the clamor any longer as he nicked the thigh of the struggling warrior, prompting a small stream of black blood to fall toward the ground.

The ichor was snatched up by the pull before it even had time to land, proving that he had made great progress even though it sometimes didn’t feel like it. He flashed forward, immediately entering the haze and leaving the deathly husks of ancient trees behind. Soon enough he appeared in another section, this one thankfully the edge of the forest he had spent the last three hours inside.

He had appeared between two trees in a line that delineated the park, and on the other side of a cobblestone road stood an intricately carved wall leading into what Zac assumed was one of the inner mansions of the City of Ancients. There were no enemies in this one either, and Zac sighed in relief before he closed his eyes.

The last battle had been pretty rough, with Zac being pushed hard by a warrior who wielded two Peak Fragments. Normally, Zac wouldn’t have been too worried about such an opponent, but there were so many special restrictions in place here. He had been pushed to fight twice as hard just to avoid getting wounded, and any lapse in concentration led to the shard in his mind desperately trying to break out.

Meanwhile, that warrior had lost his rationality to the environment of the inner regions of the city. He was consumed

by his killing intent to the point that he even used life force in his attacks, but not to the point that he forgot how to use skills. Only by whittling him down with his Inexorable Stance had Zac managed to exhaust, trap, and then kill the warrior without wasting too much energy or opening himself up to the madness.

The screams of murder were almost deafening here in the heart of the city, and it felt like the slightest nudge could push him over the edge. For now, his willpower and hidden nodes were enough to make do. But unfortunately the same couldn't be said for Number 7.

Inhuman gurgling sounds echoed out from his captive, and Zac looked over with a sigh. Opening this path was the limits of this Corpse Lord by the looks of it. His muscles were twisting and turning like a dozen snakes inhabited his body. Any more and he would share the same fate as Compass and Number 2.

“Good luck,” Zac muttered as he sprinkled some Calming Dust he had looted from another warrior on the Corpse Lord before throwing him into the haze.

Zac shook his head and started walking toward the gate leading into the mansion, hoping to find some loot while waiting for the array to reset. He had been so full of momentum two days ago when entering this place, with anger and urgency pushing him forward. But the nature of the City of Ancients constantly sapped him of his momentum, and he just felt mentally exhausted by this point.

The first lesson after parting with the mentalist Revenant was that you couldn't wait too long after following the blood trail. He had wanted to see the result of getting wounded, but that had given the weird array enough time to reset, sending him further away from the core.

From there, he had made pretty quick progress by capturing a warrior who had completely lost his mind already. Since he wasn't in any state to introduce himself, Zac had simply called him Compass, since that was what he would be used as. Compass had provided him with a lot more insights.

First of all, the blood wasn't leading the way. It was opening the path. If too little blood was sacrificed, the paths the blood indicated weren't any better than taking a path at random.

Secondly, you could only advance between three and five zones in a row before being forced to stop for around twenty minutes. Any faster, and you'd get stuck in the haze for half an hour until you were spat out further back than when you started. Zac had eventually figured out when to stop by observing his remnants, but that was only after he had been stuck in the haze four times, wasting quite a bit of time.

Third, you could only be instilled with so much madness before things turned messy. Zac had a small mountain of healing pills by now, and he had simply shifted between bleeding the first man he caught and restoring his blood with pills to make rapid progress. But he had been stopped after being trapped the first time around.

Compass had suddenly exploded, resulting in a massive eruption of blood that had almost managed to drag Zac into madness as well. He had been bled too much, allowing the weird array to reach a critical mass inside his body. The whole section had been turned red upon the eruption, and Zac had been forced to escape down a random path.

The same fate, unfortunately, befell Number 2, another warrior deep into the throes of madness by the point Zac ran into her. She had already killed her enemies and her allies by the time Zac found her, and she became proof that people could only get bled so many times before the accumulated toxins became too much to bear, even if you gave it some time in-between.

Now, Zac simply captured any blood-crazed person he ran into and borrowed their blood before letting them go. After helping himself to their Cosmos Sacks, of course. If they survived or not after that would be up to their luck.

He had hoped Number 7 would be able to take him the final stretch, but he found himself stranded once more. At least he could feel he was extremely close by now. The splinter's presence was palpable, and this was the second park he had passed through. There were only so many of them in the City

of Ancients, and he guessed that the castle would be coming up any time now.

Zac looted the gatehouse of the mansion with practiced ease, but he was barred from entering the proper structure by a wall of haze. Any further, and he'd end up somewhere random again. Normally, he would have been extremely annoyed at not being able to enter the core sections of the mansion, but he had encountered this situation over a dozen times already.

Only open spaces were included in the maze that the Eidolon and Uona had crafted, with just the edges of the communal spaces and mansions being accessible. He had looted over fifty houses of some random crystals and treasures already, but he still hadn't found a single trove worthy of its name so far.

Time passed, and Zac started to hesitate about what to do. There was nothing else except the edge of the park and the gatehouse. He could dismantle the wall itself, but it was made from some common E-grade stone that wasn't worth more than a few E-grade coins.

He had been forced to backtrack and lose over two hours' progress to find Number 7, and now he was even further into the maze. Only a handful had the ability to get this far, and none of them would be an easy target to capture and bleed. Zac looked in the direction of the splinter again, finally coming to a decision.

He'd roll the dice. The splinter felt so close that he could almost touch it, and going by the vast wall enclosing the mansion, it had to be one of the buildings neighboring the castle itself. Still, he did have some misconceptions about sacrificing some of his blood.

Hopefully, his solution would work.

He took a steadying breath before weakening the cage to the shard, causing a flood of Creation energy to course through his body. The remnant was veritably vibrating by this point, and Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to keep it contain it with Mental Energy much longer. It was clearly gearing up for war, each shudder squeezing out a little bit more Creation Energy in anticipation.

Zac only released a small bit of what he had captured in the prison, but it was enough to almost overwhelm him. The whispers of mayhem were immediately drowned out by the whispers of possibility, but Zac forcefully kept his mind blank before he cut a small before pricking his finger with [**Verun's Bite**], and a drop of pure darkness appeared.

Just as the ichor was about to get dragged off to god-knows-where, a surge of Creation entered it on Zac's command. The drop flew toward the left for a few seconds before it turned into a small firefly that swung its pitch-black wings a few times before exploding. A surge of killing intent filled him, but it was immediately doused in the clamor of the rampaging Creation.

Zac immediately flashed away from the reddening mists and toward the direction the drop indicated, and he immediately pushed on the wound to squeeze out a stream of blood before it closed. A storm of Creation entered his ichor this time as well, but it only shuddered as Zac tried to keep the energy contained.

The ichor entered the white mist, and Zac sensed the small shift that confirmed the path had opened. He flashed forward, but he swore when he appeared in another small section of the City of Ancients rather than inside the castle. Zac's anger only lasted a second before he quelled his mind, but it was still enough to conjure a massive gate out of gold in front of him.

A pained grimace appeared on Zac's face over the loss of life force, but at least there was some good news to go with the bad. It wasn't a random occurrence that an opulent gate had appeared from his expenditure of creation. Another one could barely be discerned within the mist at the other side of the area, this one even larger than the one he had created.

In fact, he didn't see the top of the gate, or the wall it was attached to, even though the visibility reached over fifty meters in the air. Even the ostentatiously decorated wall in the previous section was only ten meters high or so, indicating he might just have found his goal. If this wasn't the wall leading to the castle in the middle, then what was?

The gate was barely visible with most of it swallowed by the mist, and Zac walked back and forth with a frown wondering just what the best course of action was. He punched the towering wall to see if breaking through was feasible, but it only ended with a painful rebound hurting his knuckles, while not as much as a crack appeared on the brick he had targeted.

Zac's abyssal eyes widened in shock. He hadn't infused his Dao or full power into the attack, but there was almost thirty thousand effective Strength behind the punch. It was enough to turn a small mountain into gravel, yet he hadn't even left a mark on this stone? It wasn't like he had sensed any array or barrier blocking his attack either.

Just how sturdy was this material?

Zac tried to break the stone with his axe as well, but even a high-powered swing only left a surface mark rather than a scar. Zac looked at the enormous wall, and an almost impossible thought crossed his mind. Had someone actually used a D-grade material to build a wall as big as this? Were there cultivators this disgustingly wealthy?

His brain almost short-circuited at the thought of the costs involved for such an undertaking. There were no doubt many ancient clans in the Multiverse heartlands who could do something like this without a care, but this was ultimately the Frontier. From what he had heard, there were quite a few Monarchs in the Frontier that hadn't even seen C-grade materials their whole lives.

Even the well-off Monarchs from established forces considered C-grade materials as priceless treasures, perhaps only getting their hands on a handful during their whole lives. After all, C-grade materials were simply too slow to come into being. If it took a million years to nurture a Monarch, then it might take ten times that for a C-grade herb to come into being unless some special circumstance was speeding the process along.

Problem was, how often could a stretch in the forest remain untouched for ten million years, even in a secluded Mystic Realm? Natural calamities, beasts fighting for territory, greedy

cultivators looting the herb while it still was E- or D-grade. The spots these herbs could appear in the Frontier were scarce enough, and it wasn't like these places would be left untouched for the time required.

That's why D-grade materials were the base resource for Frontier Monarchs to progress as well, where they replaced quality with quantity. They swallowed mountains of resources just to maintain their cultivation, constantly scratching their heads on how to gather enough money to progress as well.

For them to build a simple fortification purely from D-grade materials? Inconceivable.

The scene far surpassed his earlier estimation of what kind of town this was. It had to be an exceedingly wealthy Monarch who had once lived here. A Divine Monarch, probably, who had less use for D-grade materials. Perhaps... Even someone greater.

Zac's heart hammered as he considered the possibility of looting an Autarch's residence. Even if it was just an Autarch's outhouse, it was probably worth as much as a small kingdom in the Zecia sector going by the extravagance of the outer wall. But Zac forcibly calmed his mind and refocused on the task at hand.

Cutting his way through the wall was out of the question. The only method he saw would work was if he either expelled an Annihilation Sphere to blow a hole, or large amounts of Creation energy to turn the stone into something else. Problem was, the wall was probably way too thick to blow up even with all the Oblivion Energy he had accumulated. And who knew how much lifespan would be required to transmute solid D-grade stone?

The wall was completely airtight as well, making it impossible to make use of [**Abyssal Phase**]. Zac looked around with hesitation before he released a small creation-infused droplet of ichor again. As expected, it shot into the wall rather than into one of the side passages.

Eventually, Zac walked over to the arch of the gate, trying to peer around its edge. Finally, there was some good news, as

Zac could see that there wasn't a door in the way. It might have rotted off, or it might be some sort of drop-down gate. In either case, he could barely make out a tunnel of unknown depth.

He couldn't see the other side at all as it was covered in an extremely thick layer of mist. But that was enough for him, and a plan had already formed in Zac's mind. A bottle appeared in his hand, and a small river of blood started pouring out onto the ground some distance from the gate. Even this close to the core of the City of Ancients, the 'dead' blood wasn't dragged away, but rather formed a pool on the ground before it slipped between the cobblestones.

The whole area darkened as the extremely condensed clouds started absorbing the blood, and Zac felt his whole vision turning red. That didn't stop Zac though as he kept pouring out blood, and he was elated to see that his plan worked.

It almost looked like a strong draft affected the tunnel as haze kept streaming out from the gate, heading straight for the still-growing pool of blood. Previously, the tunnel had been completely filled, and Zac knew from experience that passing through in a situation like that would get him all turned around until he appeared god-knows-where in the city.

But now, the haze had thinned out, though it still was a bit iffy whether it was enough. Zac grit his teeth and crushed the bottle, prompting a cascade of blood to come crashing out. Tens of thousands of liters created a gory tsunami, making it look like he was under attack by Uona.

Zac was absolutely drenched in blood, and he felt his vision swim for a bit as his mind grew muddled. But the pain from a series of clashes between creation and bloodlust in his body kept him sane enough to remember what he needed to do. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** rushed into the tunnel, which now had a space over fifteen centimeters wide void of any haze.

He was finally able to see the end of the tunnel, allowing him to latch two of the chains to the wall on the other side, while another two kept him in place to the outer wall. With this, he

was firmly attached to the wall, and it shouldn't be possible for him to be dragged away by the confusion array.

The environment was quickly becoming unbearable where he was, so Zac wasted no time putting his plan to practice. Two of the chains extended while the other two retracted, which dragged Zac through the tunnel like he was attached to a conveyor belt.

The haze was all around him, making any sense of direction impossible, but he kept pushing himself through until he suddenly found himself on the other side of the tunnel. It felt like he had finally escaped a nightmare where he kept running in place as the small snippets surrounded by obscuring clouds had been replaced by a grand view of a huge castle reaching toward the sky.

He had made it.

However, a wave of killing intent reminded him that he had just completed the easy part of his mission. This killing intent didn't come from some array this time, but rather a small army of red-eyed cultivators surrounded by swirls of blood. They looked a bit surprised by his appearance, but that was about it.

"Our mistress was wondering if you would show up," one of the leaders said as dozens of powerful auras were released.

"She will be delighted to learn of your presence."

"So much for sneaking," Zac muttered as a huge jagged edge appeared in front of **[Verun's Bite]**.

Chapter 770: Out of Time, Out of Options

Zac tried to take in the situation as he cleared his mind of the tremendous waves of synthetic bloodlust that crashed into his mind after drenching the previous area in blood. The castle grounds were far bigger compared to how it appeared through the vaulted dome from the outside. It felt like a city of its own stretching thousands of meters in every direction.

Just the outer square he had entered was as big as half of Port Atwood, with the whole castle grounds being tens of times larger. It was nowhere near the scale of the research base in the Mystic Realm, but it was still insanely large to be a residential building. A million people would be able to live here with plenty of room to spare.

The group of Blood Cultivators in front of him, most likely Blood Thralls converted by Uona, seemed to have been in the middle of preparing for some battle, only for Zac to stumble right into the square they used as a gathering point. There were over fifty of them, with many of them emitting auras that put them in the top percentile of the trial.

Uona had been active in her recruitment, not simply indulging in wanton slaughter that most seemed to have believed. As for the blood mistress herself, she was nowhere in sight. However, Zac could sense a tremendous sanguine aura in the distance. It didn't come from the main structure though, and Zac could guess why – it was sealed.

A radiant rune hovered above its main tower, powering a barrier that seemed completely impenetrable. The bloody aura rather came from a side structure right next to the castle. A huge bloody sphere hovered above the building, and more and more power blood continuously seeped into it from the building below.

Something terrifying was brewing inside the ball, no doubt the results of thousands of cultivators being killed and drained in this trap. Was it an offensive array of some kind? To strike at either the Havarok who probably were on their way as well? Or rather at the sealed castle in the middle, to seize the valuables and expose that Realm Spirit that Ventus mentioned?

Oddly enough, the desolate aura of the Splinter of Oblivion didn't come from the same direction as the bloody egg. Instead, it seemed to originate from another side building almost on the opposite side of the massive compound he had entered. This one didn't give off any indications of danger like that shockingly condensed sphere of blood, but Zac still felt the hair stand on end when looking in that direction for some reason.

In either case, he had already been exposed. The fact that Uona wasn't already rushing toward him probably meant she couldn't just leave that orb as she wished. That didn't prove that she was completely locked in place though, and the more time he wasted the higher risk was of him getting mired in her ploy.

Zac shot forward, and the pent-up frustration that had been set to simmer for weeks now was finally allowed to be ignited into a conflagration. For the first time since entering the city, he didn't quell these murderous impulses. The haze was gone, and he could feel that the pervasive array didn't cover this core section either.

The traps of soul and blood could no longer harm him, making his anger a tool rather than a weakness. Instead of pushing it down, he used it to regain his long-lost momentum as he closed in on the Blood Thralls, the chains of **[Love's Bond]** piercing the streams of blood flooding toward him.

He didn't activate **[Abyssal Phase]**, as there was no need to. His towering aura filled with killing intent had given the Blood Thralls pause, and that short moment of hesitation was all he needed to close the short distance with a few herculean leaps. A keening cry of bloodlust echoed through the square as the massive edge of **[Gorehew]** ripped three Peak E-grade warriors to pieces.

The moment the blade had bisected the final warrior it instantly disappeared, just as a sinister aura filled the chains of his other Spirit Tool. The churning waves of blood closing in on him instantly turned black before they started to fall apart, a result of an overwhelming wave of corruption filling them from **[Blighted Cut]**.

Zac's eyes lit up, confirming his theory that his rot-based skills would be effective against blood cultivators. However, while these were warriors working under some sort of slave-like compulsions, they were ultimately talented warriors who had qualified to enter the Twilight Ascent. More attacks were already pelting toward him, but the three pygmy skeletons had already answered his call.

A large spectral coffin appeared in front of him, and it swiped back and forth to crush the incoming blood spears. Still, **[Profane Exponents]** couldn't completely block out everything when fifty warriors attacked him at once. A sharp pain erupted in his side as a lanky cultivator flashed past him with shocking speed, wielding two daggers dripping of both blood and ichor.

Unfortunately for him, the rogue had underestimated just how inhumanly durable Zac's body was, and he had only managed to leave a shallow wound in his side. The blades had been laced with some sort of toxin, but Zac could instantly sense that it wouldn't become a problem. The City of Ancients was ultimately in the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean, and his **[Purity of the Void]**-node had more than enough capacity over to help deal with some toxins.

Besides, he was a pureblood Draugr, which brought the benefit of extremely strong natural resistance to most poisons. So the attack didn't even phase Zac as he continued to push forward as a wave of darkness spread with Zac as the epicenter. One skill after another was activated as Zac started to superimpose his domains to completely restrict the small army.

The blood soldiers clearly understood that they were dealing with a close-combat warrior, and they quickly set up a series of defenses while two squads pelted him from behind a bloody barrier. Meanwhile, the rogue from earlier was joined by

another group of nimble warriors that tried to launch quick and deadly strikes at him from the sides.

None of these warriors were a threat to him, but there were simply so many of them. He only had two hands and the ability to keep a couple of skills running at once, and he felt one shallow wound after another being added to his body. However, this was exactly the kind of fight he excelled at, and he inexorably pushed forward as he was finally joined by some reinforcements in the form of the axe wraiths.

From there, the dance of his Inexorable Stance begun, where he continuously pushed forward, unleashing an unceasing barrage at both the backlines and the warriors who tried to flank him. A spectral warrior suddenly appeared behind a thrall who wielded a spike and a shield, but just as she was about to stab the spectre and destroy it, a chain dripping of corrosion shot toward an opening under her arm.

She desperately swiveled to block the chain with her shield, but that opened her to an attack from the wraith. She was still a Dexterity-based warrior, and she phased to the side just as she was about to be bisected by a ruthless swing of the wraith. However, she was still nicked by the spectral edge, which meant her fate was sealed.

A rune appeared on the wound, and she stumbled forward while shrieking from pain as the darkness of **[Deathwish]** streamed into her wound. A few more warriors had been marked already, and even the unscathed Blood Thralls were in a bad way from his corroding domain. The blood attacks were continuously being eroded by the pervasive atmosphere, and by the time they reached Zac they'd lost half of their strength.

Zac wouldn't let his summoned companions do all the work, and the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** weaved back and forth to restrain and harass the flanks while Zac pushed straight ahead, braving a ceaseless barrage of attacks. The ranged attackers tried to keep some distance, but he used his superior attributes and wraiths to direct the battle.

Soon enough, he had managed to essentially swap places with the blood thralls, with them having their backs against the

huge wall. That way, they weren't able to escape his advance, and Zac would be able to maneuver more freely in case reinforcements appeared.

It was a valuable insight. Until now, he had only fought one or a handful of enemies while utilizing his Inexorable Stance. In those battles, his tactics had been to restrain each individual warrior, directing the tempo of the fight while creating openings. Now, it was more about controlling the tempo of the whole battlefield while breaking apart their cooperation.

He was like an inexorable army, pushing forward, neither fearing death or defeat. Any attempt of the enemy to swing the battle in their favor was crushed before it even had a chance to be started. Ambushes were turned into frantic last stands as wraiths, corrosive chains, and Zac himself appeared out of nowhere.

Defenses and defensive lines were broken by brute force and the ghastly light of the lantern-wielding skeleton. The battle had only lasted for thirty seconds, but more than twenty thralls had already fallen to Zac's unceasing barrage, with another ten sporting either wounds or corrosive runes of **[Deathmark]**.

As Zac pushed forward, he realized that these warriors were a bit like the tattooed puppets he had encountered close to the Twilight Chasm. There were mages, warriors, and Dexterity-based cultivators, but they all used blood as the basis for their attacks. Zac didn't know exactly how it worked, but it was undeniable that these people probably had their cultivation path altered when they were turned.

There was a hint of unfamiliarity in their actions, of sluggishness that he normally wouldn't encounter in an E-grade warrior. That was a huge opportunity for Zac as one warrior after another fell, continuously restoring some of his lost Miasma through **[Fields of Despair]**.

Unfortunately, Zac labored under some disadvantages of his own. He took a step forward, but a burst from the Shard of Creation made him stumble. The remnant was in a fully rampant mode by now, and Zac felt he had a few minutes tops

before he lost control entirely. The Shard needed an outlet, and quickly.

“Just wait a little more and you’ll get your wish,” Zac muttered as he adjusted the grip of **[Verun’s Bite]**.

The inner area was almost void of people, and his eyes once more turned toward the nondescript building in the distance, the building where the Splinter of Oblivion waited for him. As long as he got his hands on that thing, Uona was more than welcome to come over. He’d treat her to the same reception as the adolescent dragon back in the Tower of Eternity; a blast of Chaos right in her face.

Until then, he was still restrained, fearful of exposing his huge stockpile of Creation energy in his body. That’s why he had to fight so hard against a group of cultivators who both were weakened by the Twilight Energy and unfamiliar with their new state of existence; the moment he infused his skills with his Dao, they would definitely transform like **[Arcadia’s Judgement]** did.

That would expose his hidden card against Uona without a doubt. Even if she wasn’t here, he was sure she was observing the battle one way or another.

Zac fought desperately, using everything he had learned over the past two years as he tried to restrain and dismantle their cooperation while he felled one warrior after another. But for every Blood Thrall he killed, he received a couple of wounds. Furthermore, these slaves were not deterred at all by seeing their comrades fall. If anything, they fought more valiantly, and Zac even saw that the blood of the fallen streamed toward their compatriots to bolster their attacks.

Meanwhile, his domains were starting to fall apart.

A dozen thralls had worked together to unleash a bloody rain, where every drop was like a small projectile that ripped apart the darkness. Together with the constantly churning rivers of blood that rampaged through the area, crushing his specters and forcing him back just as he was about to deliver killing blows with his axe, he knew his skills teetering on the brink of collapse.

The blood thralls weren't stupid either. They had lost half their warriors already, while only dealing some surface damage to Zac in return. But with his skills falling apart, they had one last chance to turn the tides before he killed them all. The bloody rivers suddenly ignited one by one, as the thralls sacrificed their longevity to give them a final burst of power.

Zac didn't know if it was just to deliver a strike of vengeance while they stood at death's door, or if Uona's mark had some sort of compulsion. In either case, it was bad news. It felt like he was surrounded by a swarm of bees that frantically tried to defend the hive. Meanwhile, the force inside his mind kept building, making it harder and harder for him to focus.

Something had to give.

"Enough!" Zac roared from pain and frustration as thirty bloody chains, each one wrought from bone and sinew, ripped out from his body in an outburst of fury and Creation.

They punched forward with undeniable momentum, propelled forward by a D-grade treasure gone berserk, crushing defenses and ripping warriors to shreds. It felt like Zac's own body was being torn apart as well, but he had at least managed to use the Longevity Gem this time around rather than his own life force.

The area looked like it could have been a layer of hell by this point, with enormous pools of blood stretching covering hundreds of meters. Maimed body parts littered the ground, some hacked to pieces by [**Gorehew**], with others corroded and killed by [**Deathmark**].

In the middle, Zac stood like a denizen of the Maleboge, his body a mix of black and red as the chains created from his innards held the last thralls in the air like a morbid homage to the spectral chains of [**Profane Seal**]. Zac groaned in pain as the links shook, throwing off the carcasses before they were drawn back into his body as he expended some more Creation Energy to restore his body to its normal form.

The moment the chains were back in his body, a grey ball appeared in his hands which he threw down on the ground, creating a thick ashy haze that covered the area. By the time the dust cloud had settled, Zac was already gone, transformed

into a spectral wraith as he surged toward his goal – the Splinter of Oblivion.

His gory outburst was pretty suspicious, but he was out of time and out of options. The blood thralls had delayed his progress to the point that the amount of Creation Energy had become unbearable, and he would have to vent it one way or another. Rather than creating something out of thin air or empowering a skill, he had decided to transform his own body.

Having his body reconfigured like that hurt more than getting stabbed, but it didn't release any Creation Energy out of his own body, which hopefully would make anyone observing the fight mistake the bone chains for a self-mutilating skill.

Zac appeared fifty meters away from the building where he could sense the remnant, but his abyssal eyes kept glancing in the direction of the blood ritual. Uona still hadn't made her appearance after all that carnage, but he could see that there wasn't any blood flowing up toward the sphere either. Was she stopping its formation so that she could come deal with him?

He obviously didn't want to wait and find out, so he kicked the massive door leading into the building in front of him, creating a clamor as though a massive church bell was being rung. The door didn't break apart as he'd hoped, but it at least swung open. The shard in his mind was like a radiant sun by this point, ceaselessly expelling torrential amounts of energy, almost reaching the levels in the volcano.

It felt like he was trapped in a nightmare with thousands of wailing voices fighting for his attention. The shard was ready for war, to the point Zac could feel a primordial hunger as he stepped into the enormous chamber where the splinter waited for him. Even then, Zac found himself rooted in place as he looked at the scene inside with wide eyes.

Why did the Eidolon have his splinter?!

Chapter 771: Madness Made Real

Zac's eyes turned back and forth, his mind blanking out by the surprising scene. The building hadn't given off any signals at all from the outside. If not for his high Luck giving him a hint of danger, and the fact that he could sense the splinter thanks to his other remnants, he would have thought this place yet another empty building along with the dozens of others. Yet it was bustling with activity.

Well over a hundred crystals hovered in the air, the outermost half forming small circles of between five and nine crystals each. Within, the remaining crystals formed a star-shaped pattern that connected the outer circle with one larger circle at the core. These crystals felt a lot like Soul Crystals, but they were as large as a man and emitted far stronger mental fluctuations.

Furthermore, there was an undeniable hint of death in these crystals rather than simply Mental Energy, like how Miasma Crystals were to Nexus Crystals. Small aquamarine shrouds circled them all, resembling small nebulas surrounding a black hole. The crystals were a treasure, but they clearly already had an owner.

Why had the Eidolon gotten themselves mixed up with the splinter?

This was the first time Zac had seen this race in person, but he had both heard and read the descriptions already. The Eidolon didn't have any set shape like normal Spectral Cultivators since they never had any physical bodies that formed the basis of their sense of self. Instead, they took whatever shape they wanted, shapes they simply liked or felt resonated with their path.

There were over a dozen that looked like pale-blue skulls, each of them having a sinister flame in their eyes. Another group looked a lot like the gemstones that hovered in the area, though they were intangible. Many were complex patterns that made Zac think of Skill Fractals, and **[Primal Polyglot]** indicated that these shapes were somehow related to Soul Cultivation.

Most ultimately looked like humanoids, which partly was a matter of convenience for these beings. The other undead races were humanoid, though Zac had heard murmurs the mysterious race of 'Founders' were a bit different, so the Eidolon usually took on these shapes as well. It didn't impact their cultivation at all from what he had been told, and they felt it worth it if it meant not getting ostracized.

Even the ones who preferred an abstract shape would normally swap over to a humanoid avatar when meeting the other undead races. However, even if they had taken the general shapes of spectral cultivators, it was clear they were not. They were a lot like the Rahm back in the Creator Shipyard, in the sense they didn't have any facial features.

Instead, a large fractal covered their otherwise blank faces. The fractal was the insignia of their clan, or rather their Hive. Every single one of the Eidolon had one of these marks somewhere, no matter what shape they took. Even the eidolon who were just intangible clouds had the rune hovering in the heart of the dust.

Their Hive was a central part of their identity, and the Eidolon were a lot more close-knit than most other races. Zac didn't exactly understand it, but it seemed as though the line between individual and collective was somewhat blurred for this race. The closest thing he could think of was the AI Hiveminds he'd seen in science fiction movies back then, though the Eidolon definitely possessed individual minds and cultivations.

One Eidolon was hovering inside every outer circle of crystals, and five of them sitting in the innermost circle. These five in the center all emitted extremely strong energy fluctuations, to the point that the screaming shard in his mind was somewhat subdued by the Mental Fluctuations they radiated.

Especially powerful was one Eidolon, in particular, this one having a humanoid shape. In contrast to the others, this spectral cultivator's form was so dense that it almost looked corporeal, and they even wore robes created with extreme attention to detail. Just by their terrifying alone, it was clear that this one was the leader - Aia Ouro.

Aia Ouro had not made any big moves since entering the Twilight Ascent, yet they had maintained a top ten position without breaking a sweat. And it was no surprise to Zac. While their aura wasn't quite at the stage of Uona's it was extremely condensed. Not only was the leader at the peak of the E-grade with heavy accumulations, but Zac was pretty certain they also possessed a Middle-Stage Dao Branch, possibly with subsidiary Daos to empower it.

And at the heart of the circle of radiant crystals controlled by Aia was a hovering gem of absolute darkness. Below it, a Blood Thrall that was either dead or dying sat, his body covered in multiple layers of dense restrictions. The thrall was completely locked in place by the looks of it, but Zac wasn't sure he was even cognizant of his surroundings, as his eyes were blankly staring up at the splinter.

Above the Splinter, a massive being sat. It reached over ten meters in the air, an avatar with six arms like a Buddhist Asura. It even had the boundless murderous intent of an asura, dwarfing even Zac's own killing intent. It was no surprise though, considering murderous intent kept streaming up from the ground and into the crystal before it was infused into the avatar.

The huge thing sat in a meditative pose, where the upper set of arms formed a mudra that generated a sphere that had an extremely strong aura of death. The bottom set of arms was the opposite, where a sphere of pure life hovered. It was so powerful that the Eidolon had added a layer of protection around it, as to not get affected by it.

In the middle, pure condensed Twilight Energy swirled, forming a coherent trinity. However, the Twilight Energy was somewhat different in nature from what he had encountered inside the secluded valley in the chasm. It contained terrifying

amounts of killing intent, and it released spiritual fluctuations as well.

Zac immediately knew that this was the construct the Eidolon planned on using to supplant the Realm Spirit. He couldn't be certain, but it seemed like the Eidolon Divine Monarch cultivated some sort of Dao of Slaughter, and they wanted to instill this path into the Twilight Ocean through this Avatar, perhaps to improve the odds of succeeding in the ascension.

“Lord Black, welcome,” an androgenous voice echoed out from every direction, yet Zac somehow knew it was Aia Ouro who was speaking. “May we ask why you have interrupted our work?”

“I have no interest in what's going on here,” Zac slowly said as he tried to figure what was going on. “I have no designs on the Realm Spirit, and no master outside who wants to snatch this opportunity. But I need the Splinter of Oblivion.”

“The corrupted remnant?” the Eidolon exclaimed with surprise before it shuddered and fiercely turned in the direction of the building with the blood orb. “That scheming little...”

“Give it to me, and I can even help you out against Uona,” Zac said with a shuddering breath as he stepped into the chamber, his eyes glued to the remnant. “I know you are headed toward a collision course.”

It was so close, and he felt a liquid run down his nose as his whole Soul Aperture was plunged into chaos. The two remnants in the cage had been quiet for a long time, cracks were already spreading across the fractals as the two remnants were going out of control. With another splinter so close-by, the splinter no longer tried to guard the exit.

Instead, it was acting completely unhinged, swapping between attacking the shard and attacking the cage. The splinter in the middle of the massive array had sensed its sibling as well, and it shuddered as waves of oblivion were expelled. However, the array the Eidolon had set up was surprisingly powerful, swallowing the energy and infusing it into the avatar.

“Lord Black, please stay your hand,” the voice said with some urgency. “We are happy to give you the splinter as soon as the Realm Avatar has been successfully formed. But for now, the remnant is integral to our array. Removing it will damage the avatar and make us lose much of the intent we have collected. It will make us fail the mission. Just give us five hours to complete the process.”

“Move out of the way,” Zac growled, his eyes wide with hunger.

Waiting just one hour, let alone five, was completely out of the question. He’d either be dead or insane by then going by how rapidly things were deteriorating in his mind. And even if he was willing to sit around until they were finished, how could he trust the words of some stranger? What if their process absorbed or damaged the splinter?

More importantly, would Uona just sit around and wait as well?

“Don’t force our hand, Draugr,” Aia said, and a bone-chilling sharpness had appeared their voice, to the point that the whole building shook. “We have recording arrays running all across this compound. Acting against us will harm the empire’s chances of gaining another Autarch. We are well within our rights to kill.”

Zac could barely hear the Eidolon by this point, the voices in his head reaching a crescendo. However, he could make out that they wouldn’t relinquish what he needed. Uona or Aia Ouro, it didn’t matter. Anyone that barred his path was someone who was trying to get him killed, who stalled his return to Port Atwood.

Prevented him from feasting.

“Then you can all die!” Zac roared as his whole torso opened up to display a massive maw of overlapping fangs in a bout of madness made real by the Creation in his body.

“Lunatic! Abomination!” the voice of the Eidolon leader screamed with fury as a dozen massive gemstones cracked under the pressure of Zac’s aura.

The world darkened the next moment as Zac disappeared, replaced by a torrential river that encompassed the whole array and the twenty-odd spectral cultivators within. The ghastly totem pole of **[Pillar of Desolation]** slowly rose, though this time it didn't appear in the middle of the cage.

Instead, it had commandeered the left half of the cage, whereas the intricate formation of gemstones held their own at the right. A few of them had broken apart, but the rest of the hundred-odd crystals had lit up with a deathly cold light that made Zac's soul shudder.

“Contain the Avatar and form up!” Aia Ouro shouted as their body entered one of the crystals, and a rapid change quickly followed.

It was like reality flickered between two states, where the array and huge six-armed Avatar existed in one, and an enormous skull in the other. The flickering stopped after less than a second, with only the skull remaining. As to where the array had gone, Zac had no idea, but there wasn't any time to solve this particular mystery.

The skull emitted a terrifying aura, putting pressure on not only Zac's soul as he hid in the darkness, but even on his body. The scene was a reminder of the terrifying natural ability of the Eidolon; the hivemind. Eidolon Hives could link their very existences due to their peculiar nature, forming a natural War Arrays that far outshone anything Zac and his armies had access to.

The gain thankfully wasn't at a level where one plus one made two, but the combined projection of the group of Eidolon felt like it could match the towering aura Uona had released when she had gone all-out in the chasm. They were not an easy opponent, but Zac didn't have much of an option but to fight.

He had been hoping to stalk closer to the splinter and snatch it under the shroud of darkness, but the damn skull had actually swallowed the Blood Thrall and the remnant, hiding them within its body. Even worse, Zac felt that the projection was able to see him clearly, even though the activation of **[Pillar of Desolation]** allowed him to perfectly blend into the darkness.

Zac wasn't about to be outdone, and the orb of Oblivion radiated a terrifying splendor as over twenty chains shot toward the skill. Zac silently breathed out in relief as he unleashed one skill after another. It looked like his skills considered the hivemind multiple entities even after they had fused, which would make both **[Pillar of Desolation]** and **[Deathmark]** far more effective in this fight.

But the ghastly skeleton suddenly opened its mouth and released an earthshattering shriek that seemed to come from the deepest level of hell. It contained a sea of anguish that ripped at the very fabric of space, containing both a terrifying amount of Mental Energy and Miasma.

The five spectral axemen that had formed turned to dust in an instant, and the shroud of **[Field of Desolation]** was ripped apart. Next came the chains of his cage, but not even they could withstand the might of that abyssal shriek. They fluctuated between tangible and spiritual as they continuously tried to reform themselves, but the wail seemed to harm the links even in their untouchable state.

Cracks started to appear on the statues grasping the tower itself, and Zac felt the deathly river containing the battlefield starting to lose its coherence. Even the black orb at the top of the totem pole flickered like a candle in the wind. Zac could feel how the skill would fail at any moment, and this was clearly just the opening salvo of the skull.

There was no way.

There was simply no way that he could defeat the Eidolon's War Array unless he went all out. He had hoped avoiding this, especially with this particular skill, but he grit his teeth as the hidden node in his mind opened wide, releasing a storm of Dao into his Soul Aperture. The surge from **[Spiritual Void]** raged in his mind as it shot toward the Dao Avatar of the Fragment of the Bodhi, and it was like a magnet for the dangerously dense Creation in his mind.

Another thick stream of Mental Energy emerged from his Soul Core, and this tremendously unstable mix of Dao and Creation rushed into the skill fractal, and from there entered the massive

cage around him. The result was immediate, and Zac gaped in shock as the ghastly totem pole started to fall apart, whole statues starting to fragment, prompting shards of stone to fall like rain.

Suddenly, the black orb at the top dissipated, but the absence of darkness was soon replaced by a radiant opalescent light. The next moment, a shudder went through the crumbling tower, before it exploded with such force that it broke apart the attack of the skill. However, the tower hadn't broken apart - it had been reborn.

Gothic black had been replaced by alabaster white, but the hundreds of captured souls were still clawing their way up toward the orb at the top. However, while it had felt like the statues struggled to be erased in the original version of the skill, it now rather seemed as though the statues wanted to reach the shimmering orb at the top to be reborn anew.

The few that were closest to the top couldn't withstand its splendor, and they rapidly started mutating by the chaotic waves of creation the orb emitted. Meanwhile, the surging river around them had been replaced by a confusing and everchanging haze, making it seem like they had been trapped in a collapsed dimension.

Golden links shot toward the ghost, which immediately released another salvo of its own. However, these links of Creation and Bodhi weren't so easily rebuffed, and they withstood the terrifying wave of destruction as they slammed into the huge avatar. Just the touch of the links was like corrosive poison to the construct, and it started to bubble and release sizzling sounds.

Not only that, but the links started to slowly drag the group of Eidolon toward the tower, where they would be recreated into whatever the erratic orb at the top desired.

“What!” a scream echoed from within the War Array. “This is taboo! This is sacrilege!”

Zac wasn't in any state to respond, as his situation wasn't as optimistic as it looked. **[Pillar of Desolation]** was an exceedingly complex skill, to the point he didn't understand

the skill fractal at all after having creating it during his epiphany. Now, he had completely subverted the core of the skill by infusing it with Life and Creation, creating some sort of mirrored version in a frantic attempt to counter the deathly attack of the ghost.

But how could such a creation be stable? Let alone using life in a Death-attuned skill that ran on miasma, it was filled with Creation as well. It shouldn't be possible at all, but it was forced together with the help of the shard and Zac's iron will. But the shard was the concept of continuous change taken physical form, and it resisted being forced to stay the same and power the skill.

It felt like his mind was breaking apart, but Zac forcibly held on as the golden chains dragged the struggling skull closer. A wave of blue fire containing a blistering cold shot out from its eyes, and they contained such power that Zac felt cracks appear on his Soul Core from just standing in its vicinity. If it actually hit him, he felt his soul might shatter altogether, even with **[Indomitable]** and his refined soul providing him with great mental protections.

A dozen talismans appeared in his hands as two treasure rings on his hands snapped, prompting over a dozen layers of soulwarding barriers to emerge around him. It stopped his soul from being wounded, but it didn't solve his current predicament. The hivemind was too powerful, and his skill would collapse before he managed to drag them to the terrifying golden orb on top of the pillar.

He would have to take a risk if he wanted to end the battle in one go. Zac's eyes burned with madness as he rushed forward, deciding to put it all on the line.

Chapter 772: Web of Ancient Madness

The golden orb radiated unquestionable might, dispersing the mental undulations that assailed it. He pushed down with a sneer, and it slammed into the spectral cultivators beneath, unleashing a wave of destruction in every direction. A pained wail echoed out across the field, and it was followed by a deadly silence.

Ykrodas swung his sword to rid it of the corrosive thrall's blood before putting it away. The square in front of him was littered with hundreds of destroyed thralls along with the spatial aberrations indicating where the spectral cultivators of the Karabas clan had fallen. He frowned at the scene, filled with a sense of unease.

The Karabas spectral trying to bar their progress wasn't anything surprising. These ghosts were no doubt deathsworn of the clan, sacrifices that their elders would provide passage into the empire heartlands. The large number of thralls was a bigger issue.

"How is she controlling this many?" he muttered with some hesitation.

Uona Noz'Valadir was unquestionably powerful, but she was ultimately just at the E-grade. Yet she had sent over five hundred thralls their way to stall their approach. To form such a vast army of blood slaves should be pushing it, no matter if you considered the amount of essence blood required, and the demands it put on one's soul.

The Havarok Empire did not have much contact with the Eternal Clan, but they still knew the basics. To raise a thrall required the sacrifice of some blood essence, which was

related to their foundations. Raise too many too quickly, and it should harm her foundation, perhaps even cripple her.

Yet, by his estimations, this lone scion had raised over three thousand thralls in total since the start of the trial. It didn't make much sense. The Law of Balance might not be inviolable, but there was no way the Eternal Clan would dare step out of bounds like that. She had to be using something her elders had prepared, and it was a problem not knowing where her limits lay.

Even if he didn't want to admit it, there was an undeniable bridge of foundation between himself and the blood mistress. If he went in blindly, he might not only get himself killed, but also ruin the plans of his ancestors.

"Report," Ykrodas said without turning toward the captain who had walked over.

"Twelve lost. Five to battle, seven to madness," the man said before he hesitantly added. "One deserter. Jumped into the haze in the heat of battle."

"Add the fallen to the list of martyrs. Mark the deserter's lineage for ex-communication upon our return," Ykrodas said. "Have the next section been broken open?"

"The acolytes are busy purifying the blood. Do young master want them to focus on progress instead?" the captain asked.

"No. There's too much blood here. We can't let it feed the Blood Effigy," Ykrodas said, though it wasn't without reluctance. "Have the men rest and fortify their heart-sealing brands while the battlefield is cleansed.

"It will be done," the captain nodded. "There is one more report, this one from a scout. Kataron Rissit has made his move, and he is making rapid progress through the maze with roughly fifty elite warriors. He might appear before us at the core."

"Like he'd dare," Ykrodas snorted. "He's been skulking around, modifying the leylines while keeping out of harm's way. I'm sure he's timing things so that we will arrive at the

same time. He does not have the guts to put himself at the forefront.”

“Perhaps he aims to free this one in addition to killing the Realm Spirit,” Orbot ventured as he nodded at the numerologist who they had dragged with them just in case.

“How could that be possible,” Ventus said with a grimace. “The Rissit Clan is part of the Starbanner Legion, while I’m a lowly acolyte of Constellation Hall. He’s a scion of an ancient family, I’m an outside hire. You know how it is in the temple. Why would he waste any effort on me?”

“A lowly acolyte with a Token of Exchange,” Ykrodas snorted. “I wonder, is the one hovering outside the trial your master?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Ventus smiled. “I might as well be blind by this point.”

“Arcaz Black again?” Ykrodas said with a raised brow. “If he’s going to make a move, he better hur-”

“It’s broken!” a sudden exclamation cut Ykrodas short, and he turned over with a frown.

It was the leader of the acolytes who was hurrying over with confusion written all over his face.

“You’ve broken the blood ritual already?” Orbot exclaimed. “Don’t get sloppy at this juncture.”

“My lords, something has changed!” the acolyte said with a shake of his head “The soul-siphoning array is breaking apart. It is no longer being controlled by the looks of it. Not only that, the blood ritual has been stalled. It’s like a rootless tree by this point. As long as we push a bit, it will crumble.”

“Both the blood array and the soul-siphoning array have been stalled?” Ykrodas exclaimed with shock, unable to comprehend how one of his most daunting tasks had been completed just like that. “Are you sure?”

“Chaos,” a snicker came from the side. “Chaos has arrived.”

Uona gleefully looked on as the two thorns in her side went all out in an effort to kill one another.

She still didn't know if it really was Grandpa Nether who had helped her snatch that cursed thing, but the end result was even better than she'd expected. Perhaps it had been a trap by someone meant to put her on a path of no return, but she had luckily heard the tale of the fall of the two aberrations that had plagued the Multiverse in the early era of the System.

There was no way she'd drink from that poisoned well, but not all could resist its call. She could barely stop herself from laughing out loud when remembering how that arrogant ghost had demanded the corrupted remnant in return for allowing her into the City of Ancients. They had veritably hummed with greed upon sensing the unlimited potential for destruction hidden in the thing.

"You thought you would be able to pull one over on me, little ghost?" Uona snickered. "See where that got you."

They thought their souls so unique, able to resist the taint while extracting the remnant of its value. They hadn't hesitated to incorporate it into their soul-siphoning array to speed up the formation of the Soul Effigy, thinking it would both bolster their plans and stall hers. Fools. It had never been her intention to use that cursed item in her Blood Effigy.

Nothing good would come from getting mixed up with that ancient madness.

But it had become the perfect method for her to take out one of the biggest obstacles in performing her mission, and without overstepping the commandments in the slightest. What could Clan Ouro say after her grandpa snatched the opportunity of ascension, especially upon witnessing the recording of Eidolon fighting Draugr where both sides had descended into madness?

Those ghosts had just used that thing for a couple of weeks, yet they had already lost their rationality, becoming unwilling or unable to part with the remnant. Even in the face of an insane Draugr that had managed to harm her before.

What unable to extract it from the array? It was just an external source of power, as replaceable as the Nether Gems they used. What needing to wait for five hours? They were simply hoping that she'd show up and deal with the Draugr for them, but when since when was life so easy?

However, that damned Draugr was as unpredictable as ever. She had been elated to see him shedding all cordiality in his desire to gain the remnant, even surpassing her most optimistic scenarios of mutual destruction. But that madman possessed the power of both the aberrations. Was he actually striving toward that unachievable peak rather than the depths of Death?

Uona didn't know how he was still alive, but he probably wasn't long for this world. Even then, a sense of unease filled her as she looked at the transformation of the skill he used. Things were becoming harder and harder to predict with him acting like this, but one thing was sure.

She definitely couldn't let him get his hands on the splinter as well.

Deep thuds echoed from the ground as Zac rushed forward, finally moving from his hidden position at the edge of the cage. The prison was fast collapsing around him as he made a beeline toward the struggling skull, with the three pygmies flying in tow.

Their bones had turned into mottled pearls since Zac had found himself forced to fuse his Fragment of the Coffin into the defensive skill, and the shields that the coffin-bearing pygmy conjured became more and more distorted. However, while their form was starting to grow grotesque, their defensive properties were still top-notch.

Zac swiped his hand past the tower of desolation as he passed it by, and a shudder echoed out across the area before the foundation of the totem exploded. It had been reformed into a mix of ice and molten lead, and the collision of searing heat and chilling cold had resulted in a tremendous eruption.

The sky screamed and flashed in myriad colors as the totem pole started to topple, swinging the orb of Creation in a precipitous arc. Zac didn't so much as look back, but two of the chains of **[Love's Bond]** had already attached themselves to the falling pillar, dragging it in the direction of the still-trapped skull.

Out of better options, Zac had decided to drag the sphere of Creation to the Eidolon if he couldn't drag the Eidolon to the sphere. The gargoyles locked to the totem pole were more than willing to help out as well, and they gleefully pulled at the golden chains even as they crumbled to dust one by one.

The Eidolon clearly understood the danger they were in, and torrential amounts of Miasma churned in the area as a fifty-meter wide seal appeared in front of the skull. Surrounding it were roughly one hundred aquamarine lights, each one of them containing a rune of their own. Zac's first instinct was that it was some sort of array, but he quickly realized it was an ultimate skill that the Hive had unleashed.

Darkness.

He was void of thought, void of purpose. He was just a flickering light, a spark in the endless darkness. He knew he was in the middle of something, but details became increasingly difficult to grasp. His step grew heavier as their purpose failed them. Why struggle?

A roar of Creation startled Zac awake, and he was shocked to see himself missing a hand along with big chunks of flesh on his torso. It looked like his body was simply turning to dust from the undulations of that terrifying seal. Just a fraction of a second had passed, but he had almost walked straight into the afterlife in one go.

Cold sweat ran down his back, but he couldn't stop now. Zac was forced to drink from that poisoned well yet another time as he combated the waves of destruction, and he quickly realized the attack thankfully wasn't powered by true Oblivion. It was 'just' an extremely powerful skill performed by a peak expert, which allowed him to regenerate quicker than he was being destroyed.

The pygmy skeletons didn't have the same luxury of nigh-endless supply of Creation, and they quickly crumbled under the might of the skill. But they had managed to help long enough, allowing Zac to reach his destination.

Veins stood out across Zac's face, and it felt he was pulling a mountain. The pillar was terrifyingly heavy, even after most of it had crumbled away already. But the radiant orb was just ten metres away from the huge rune by now, heading straight for the skull. Zac's arms suddenly turned into a blur as over ten balls flew out, each of them exploding in unison.

All ten of them were **[Void Balls]**, ripping apart and sealing space all around them now that the cage was on the verge of collapse. A final eruption from the ghastly seal exhausted the 100-odd lights surrounding it, and Zac was almost blinded with pain as his body was completely lacerated once more.

However, the huge sphere of Creation refused to be destroyed. If anything, it almost felt enraged as it pushed into the seal. There was no explosion or outburst of chaotic powers, just an odd ripple as the sphere of Creation passed right through, and the seal was simply reduced to the same sort of dust that it had turned others into.

From there, the orb of creation slammed straight into the forehead of the skull. A thousand shrieks almost knocked Zac out once as he just reformed his broken body, but he wasn't the only one having a bad time. His bomb of Creation was exerting its terrifying influence on the skull, and Zac felt one wave of energy after another enter him as Eidolon succumbed to the attack in droves.

Suddenly, the skull simply disintegrated, and a handful of Eidolon desperately flew away, their intangible bodies chaotically shuddering as they tangled with an invasion of Creation. Aia Ouro was among those who had managed to survive, but they were clearly grievously wounded. Two more of the surviving Eidolon fell just a few meters away from where they started, but Zac wasn't interested in that.

A huge stack of talismans flew out from his sleeves, and a bone-chilling cold spread across the area, sealing even space

itself as the temperature dropped to an almost unbearable degree. Simultaneously, Zac instilled his will into the crumbling sphere, forcing it to heed one last command of his.

The command wasn't to finish off the maimed spectral cultivators, but rather to flood down at a particular spot on the ground in the huge chamber they had fought inside. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw it was a success, and a stream of opalescence flooded toward the frozen spot. However, Zac didn't wait around to see the result, and instead activated **[Abyssal Phase]** with the help of **[Force of the Void]**, sparing no effort to increase his speed to the limit.

The area was a chaotic mess of broken space from the **[Void Balls]**, frozen space from his talismans, and chaotic swirls of unfettered Creation left over by his attack. Turning into an abyssal wraith in a place like this was perhaps even more dangerous than doing so in the frenzied waters of the Twilight Chasm, but he knew he only had one shot at this.

The skull had collapsed, and he could vaguely spot the Blood Thrall in the heart of chaos. Unsurprisingly, he had died. His body was rapidly falling apart, partly because of the creation, but partly because of the remnant that hovered right next to him. Finally, Zac had finally found his opportunity, and he intended to take it.

But his heart filled with dismay as the disintegrating thrall suddenly melted into a pool of goop which in turn transformed into a maw. It swallowed the remnant in one gulp before it simply winked out of existence. The scene was extremely quick, to the point that it looked fast even in the slowed-down environment he experienced as a wraith.

Space cracked the next moment as a familiar figure stepped out from the void. The chaotic and frozen atmosphere that was meant to seal, or at least somewhat delay Uona Noz'Valadir had proven utterly incapable of stopping her, and Zac knew his gambit had failed. He immediately returned to his corporeal form a hundred meters away from the blood mistress.

“So you had actually managed to spot me, how embarrassing,” a laugh echoed out across the hall as the Splinter of Oblivion

appeared in a flash of blood.

Zac only grunted in response as he furiously looked at the vampire, or rather the remnant that hovered above her hand. Between his multiple layers of domains and the aura of Creation that had suffused the whole area, how could he miss there was another enemy hiding beneath the ground?

It was just a drop of blood hidden between two tiles, yet it wasn't enough to escape Zac's supercharged senses. He had tried to both directly attack her with the left-over Creation and seal her path to the Splinter of Oblivion while he took it for himself. But she had already been one step ahead of him, being able to use the dead thrall as a transportation device.

"You lunatics," an infuriated voice echoed out, and Zac frowned as he spotted Aia Ouro appearing in the distance.

Their shape was the same as when Zac saw them before, but their aura was extremely unstable. Not only that, but Zac could still sense remnants of Creation inside their body, which no doubt was a source of endless pain and trouble for a spectral cultivator.

"You two are running rampant in this place, caring nothing about the law. We are here as subjects of the empire, and what kind of chaos are you sowing!" the ghost sputtered.

"Truth is relative. We cannot let it be subject to the whims of the accuser," Uona sneered. "Isn't that what the Grand Speaker of Hive Yso said when your ilk suddenly drew back on the battlefield, causing one Autarch to be crippled and over fifty Peak Monarchs to fall among the Eternal Clan? Who's to say what really happened here?"

"You want to subvert the event?! Do you think Hive Ouro is going to stand for this?!" the ghost roared, and the whole building shook from their wrath.

"Enough. You might have been a worthy foe on the outside, but in this environment, you were never my match," Uona said. "And now, you have less than fifteen percent of your strength remaining. Go deal with that disgusting energy inside

your body, or the situation might get even further out of your control.”

“This is not over,” the Eidolon growled, but they still dissipated, leaving Uona and Zac behind.

“This has gone on long enough,” Zag said with grit teeth. “We never had an irreconcilable grudge, and we don’t have opposing goals. Give it to me and our Karma is severed. Make it any harder than it has to be, and only one of us will walk out of here alive.”

“Well, you say that,” Uona smiled, though Zac actually felt it looked a bit strained. “Yet my instincts tell me that if I give you this thing, I will definitely die. Things have been set in motion, and they will have to reach their natural conclusion.”

Zac took a deep breath before he leveled an even gaze at Uona. Abyssal eyes gazed into two sanguine orbs, two fates that had somehow come to a collision course. As the heavens so often decreed, one would have to become fertilizer to the other’s path.

“Very well.”

Chapter 723: A Seed of Fear

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The blood mistress looked a bit different from the last time the two met. Her face was still as beautiful and ever, but two of her limbs were dark red and veiny, and Zac could feel how they lacked the spirituality of the rest of her body. It was no doubt a result of getting blasted with annihilation and having regrown the limbs using some sort of technique or healing pill.

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Besides, he had already lost the element of surprise. He had been hoping to blast Uona with a surge of Creation, corrupting her blood in one go to seize an opening. But now, there was little chance of that happening. She clearly knew what the remnants were, and she would most likely figure out a way to minimize her exposure.

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enemies he had ever faced. It almost felt like he was standing in front of that terrifying cyborg again, but there was little chance of Uona running out of life-span mid-fight.

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The evolution came at the right time as ten massive orbs of blood appeared in the chamber, forming a circle almost as big as the cage of **[Pillar of Desolation]**. They looked like sanguine suns, drowning out the darkness of **[Deathmark]** with a profane light. A stench of blood filled the air, and Zac suddenly found himself in a world of blood.

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Zac could immediately tell that this wasn't a skill like his own [**Vanguard of Undeath**], but rather extremely high-quality equipment. It was covered in dense sets of fractals, and Uona was clearly infusing it with a steady stream of Miasma and blood power. The armor had in turn pushed her aura to the next level, and Zac guessed that its defenses were no doubt were excellent as well, possibly even surpassing [**Love's Bond**].

Normally, people in the lower grades wouldn't use such gear because of the massive energy requirements to keep it powered. One's pathways simply couldn't supply enough and still maintain combat effectiveness, turning skill summoning and energy circulation sluggish. That would do more harm than good, making it much more practical to use defensive

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As long as he could drag out the fight for a while, she should be losing steam soon enough. Problem was, he wasn't really in peak condition either after dealing with both the thralls and the Eidolon. He could only pray that he'd last long enough to find some kind of opportunity. Until then, he would have to keep forcing her to expend more and more energy.

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She would either have to make an appearance and rebuff him or teleport the remnant away from him. In either case, it would put her on the defensive, forcing her to expend more of her energy. Meanwhile, there were still things to do even if he was unable to pinpoint Uona's exact location.

The four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward while Zac grew into the hulking five-meter behemoth of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. The skill was severely limited by this time since it was still in F-grade, but it at least provided both some protection along with a small attribute boost. Besides, it had one more very important use that might turn this fight around.

The skill did force him to use one of his spare shields since he wanted to keep his coffin in its offensive state, but it wasn't much of a bother. In fact, it allowed him to crush a few of the

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Zac had already confirmed that creation was extremely effective against the blood thralls with their vibrant blood, and the blood arts of the Eternal Clan were connected to their Blood Essence somehow. Damaging the blood would harm Uona more than destroying most cultivators' skills would. It was one of the few detriments to the disgustingly blessed existence that was the Eternal Clan.

The reaction was almost immediate as Zac felt a scream of danger before he even had reached halfway to the splinter. Uona had appeared right behind him in a puff of blood, but Zac was ready this time. He swirled around, this time getting a grievous wound in his gut, narrowly avoiding getting his spine destroyed.

Uona didn't lack for spears it seemed as she used an identical one to the weapon she sacrificed before. The armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had been utterly incapable of even slightly impeding Uona's strike, but Zac had already been prepared to use this opportunity to trade strikes.

His reach was even greater than Uona's in his current form, thanks to his towering physique. His massive bardiche was even longer than Uona's spear, and it swung down straight toward her head in an effort to end the battle in one go. The edge also gained a sanguine glow and earth-shattering weight as Zac activated two of the fractals on **[Verun's Bite]**.

The blood world was drowned in the bestial roar of Verun, but Uona had no intention of taking the herculean strike straight-

on. Blood started to swallow her up to once more allow her to blend into the chaotic environment, but she suddenly stumbled as the blood world lost its luster. The movement skill failed, just as the bardiche was almost upon her.

It was Zac who had activated [**Void Zone**].

Zac had spent months of traveling alone in his submersible after leaving the chasm, and it had given him ample time to try out all kinds of things. He had performed hundreds of experiments with his recently gained Bloodline Talent to ascertain exactly what it could and couldn't do for him.

He had found a few interesting interactions, and one of them was related to [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. The original [**Void Zone**] had a radius of slightly over 2 meters around his body, which barely allowed him to inundate an enemy in a melee. However, when he activated the talent in his super-sized form, the aura's radius actually scaled perfectly with his increase in height.

With him going from 1.80 meters to a bit over 5, so did the radius of [**Void Zone**] expand to almost six meters at the cost of costing four times as much Void Energy. Another downside was that he lost his attribute buff from [**Vanguard of Undeath**] and that the armor became useless, but that didn't matter to him since they weren't helping him any longer in either case.

What did matter was that it allowed him to completely surround the blood mistress in his nullification zone, robbing her of her skills. Zac couldn't activate any skills either, but his axe was already bearing down on his target. The sanguine luster had disappeared, and the weight had turned a bit hollow, but the swing would strike before the nullification zone managed to rob the axe of the empowerment completely.

At the same time, the thousands of patterns covering Uona's armor had dimmed down, meaning that its protective and empowering measures were just a shadow of its true force. Uona was frazzled by the mysterious change, but she still reacted quickly as her spear rose to guard against the incoming swing.

But the preparations were too different, and there was too little time for her to adjust. The axe came bearing down on her before she even had time to raise the spear, pushing it out of the way as the gleaming edge slammed into the armor with shocking force. The metal plates couldn't take the force and cracked as Uona wailed with pain, but Zac's full-powered attack didn't manage to kill her.

The blood mistress had managed to tilt her body to at least avoid getting her head crushed. The axe had instead cut straight through her left collarbone and continued toward her heart, but it didn't quite get there. Zac was burning with anxiety as he hurriedly swung again while Uona was blinded by pain, making use of the opening he had created by targeting the same spot.

The armor was far sturdier than Zac had anticipated even without any Miasma powering it, and the helmet looked at least three times as thick. Having felt the sturdiness of the equipment, he wasn't confident he could actually cut through it without Dao or skills, so he went for the heart instead of the head. The nullification zone had completely deactivated the skills of his axe by now, but the armor plating was completely broken through already.

The axe bit into flesh again, and he felt a surge of elation from Verun as it greedily swallowed blood while it dug deeper. However, a sense of extreme danger suddenly filled him. It felt like a primordial beast had awakened inside Uona's heart just as he was about to destroy it.

Zac didn't know what happened next. One moment he was standing above Uona, ready to finish the job. The next moment he found himself flying through the air as the ichor in his veins churned, almost like it was boiling. But one thing was clear by the lack of energy entering his body.

He had failed.

Chapter 773: A Seed of Fear

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incoming blood spears, as long as he was careful to not take the hits straight on with the shield. After all, his spare shield was just a peak E-grade shield of decently sturdy materials and then reinforced by an F-grade skill.

Meanwhile, his chains shimmered with an opalescent oil as they punched into the thickest accumulations of blood energy Zac could pinpoint as he ran. The reaction from the pools of blood was immediate as they started to undergo frantic upheavals. It was no wonder - the chains were channeling **[Blighted Cut]** which were in turn boosted by the Fragment of the Coffin and Creation.

Zac had already confirmed that creation was extremely effective against the blood thralls with their vibrant blood, and the blood arts of the Eternal Clan were connected to their Blood Essence somehow. Damaging the blood would harm Uona more than destroying most cultivators' skills would. It was one of the few detriments to the disgustingly blessed existence that was the Eternal Clan.

The reaction was almost immediate as Zac felt a scream of danger before he even had reached halfway to the splinter. Uona had appeared right behind him in a puff of blood, but Zac was ready this time. He swirled around, this time getting a grievous wound in his gut, narrowly avoiding getting his spine destroyed.

Uona didn't lack for spears it seemed as she used an identical one to the weapon she sacrificed before. The armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had been utterly incapable of even slightly impeding Uona's strike, but Zac had already been prepared to use this opportunity to trade strikes.

His reach was even greater than Uona's in his current form, thanks to his towering physique. His massive bardiche was even longer than Uona's spear, and it swung down straight toward her head in an effort to end the battle in one go. The edge also gained a sanguine glow and earth-shattering weight as Zac activated two of the fractals on **[Verun's Bite]**.

The blood world was drowned in the bestial roar of Verun, but Uona had no intention of taking the herculean strike straight-

on. Blood started to swallow her up to once more allow her to blend into the chaotic environment, but she suddenly stumbled as the blood world lost its luster. The movement skill failed, just as the bardiche was almost upon her.

It was Zac who had activated [**Void Zone**].

Zac had spent months of traveling alone in his submersible after leaving the chasm, and it had given him ample time to try out all kinds of things. He had performed hundreds of experiments with his recently gained Bloodline Talent to ascertain exactly what it could and couldn't do for him.

He had found a few interesting interactions, and one of them was related to [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. The original [**Void Zone**] had a radius of slightly over 2 meters around his body, which barely allowed him to inundate an enemy in a melee. However, when he activated the talent in his super-sized form, the aura's radius actually scaled perfectly with his increase in height.

With him going from 1.80 meters to a bit over 5, so did the radius of [**Void Zone**] expand to almost six meters at the cost of costing four times as much Void Energy. Another downside was that he lost his attribute buff from [**Vanguard of Undeath**] and that the armor became useless, but that didn't matter to him since they weren't helping him any longer in either case.

What did matter was that it allowed him to completely surround the blood mistress in his nullification zone, robbing her of her skills. Zac couldn't activate any skills either, but his axe was already bearing down on his target. The sanguine luster had disappeared, and the weight had turned a bit hollow, but the swing would strike before the nullification zone managed to rob the axe of the empowerment completely.

At the same time, the thousands of patterns covering Uona's armor had dimmed down, meaning that its protective and empowering measures were just a shadow of its true force. Uona was frazzled by the mysterious change, but she still reacted quickly as her spear rose to guard against the incoming swing.

But the preparations were too different, and there was too little time for her to adjust. The axe came bearing down on her before she even had time to raise the spear, pushing it out of the way as the gleaming edge slammed into the armor with shocking force. The metal plates couldn't take the force and cracked as Uona wailed with pain, but Zac's full-powered attack didn't manage to kill her.

The blood mistress had managed to tilt her body to at least avoid getting her head crushed. The axe had instead cut straight through her left collarbone and continued toward her heart, but it didn't quite get there. Zac was burning with anxiety as he hurriedly swung again while Uona was blinded by pain, making use of the opening he had created by targeting the same spot.

The armor was far sturdier than Zac had anticipated even without any Miasma powering it, and the helmet looked at least three times as thick. Having felt the sturdiness of the equipment, he wasn't confident he could actually cut through it without Dao or skills, so he went for the heart instead of the head. The nullification zone had completely deactivated the skills of his axe by now, but the armor plating was completely broken through already.

The axe bit into flesh again, and he felt a surge of elation from Verun as it greedily swallowed blood while it dug deeper. However, a sense of extreme danger suddenly filled him. It felt like a primordial beast had awakened inside Uona's heart just as he was about to destroy it.

Zac didn't know what happened next. One moment he was standing above Uona, ready to finish the job. The next moment he found himself flying through the air as the ichor in his veins churned, almost like it was boiling. But one thing was clear by the lack of energy entering his body.

He had failed.

Chapter 774: Overwhelmed

Pain ravaged Zac's body as he soared through the air, and the armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had almost completely been blown apart, prompting the skill to deactivate. A wave of despair filled him as he tried to reorient himself. His trick with the supersized **[Void Zone]** was his best idea to take out Uona.

It should have worked.

Just what was that primal anger? Was there something inside the blood mistress' bloodline that had been triggered by his own Bloodline Talent? Or by the threat of death? It had unleashed a terrifying wave of energy, overpowering his nullification zone for an instant and setting his veins on fire.

Zac didn't even have time to make sense of the situation before he felt a surge of primal danger again, and he hurriedly swung his axe toward his left. It was just in time as well, as Uona had appeared out of nowhere with a spear of blood in her hand. That wasn't the only thing different thing about her either.

Until now, she had fought steadily and methodically, carefully dismantling his defenses and seizing the momentum while mostly avoiding the extreme dangers of his Creation energy. If he hadn't managed to turn the tables with **[Void Zone]**, she would have had a good chance to bleed him of his longevity before he managed to catch her.

She was like a spider in the web, turning Zac's style against him, a seasoned warrior with experience in fighting powerful foes. But now, that image of a steady warrior was gone, replaced by something... demonic.

Swirls of tainted blood surrounded the blood mistress as she had appeared in the air next to him. Her eyes were like beacons, radiating waves of sanguine light. They were filled with an unquenchable hunger and bloodlust, and her aura was

one of utter ruthlessness. There was no doubt about it; Uona had entered some sort of berserking state at the threshold of true death.

The grievous wound by her shoulder was still there, but it looked like her torso was held together by a million small tendrils of blood that closed the wound with a speed visible to the naked eye. Her left arm still hung limply to the side though, but she had no problem wielding her spear solely in her left, and it drew a vigorous arc through the air straight toward him.

The two weapons clashed, and Zac was shocked at the power her attack contained. He was in an awkward position, unable to properly bring out all of his strength, but he was still shocked to find himself almost getting overwhelmed by brute force. Worse yet, Uona didn't just display shocking strength, but she had also turned into a speed demon.

Her whole body turned into a blur the moment her first attack had failed, and Zac only had time to angle his axe before a ferocious swipe struck him from above. A wave of pain radiated through Zac's arm as he was slammed into the ground below.

Zac's body screamed in protest as he scrambled up on his feet. He had ample experience of getting flung like this, but it was a uniquely awful experience when the cobblestones were made from high-grade material. Normally, his body would win out in a clash between the ground and himself, but this time it was like getting punched a second time as he was forced to an abrupt stop when the stone refused to give way.

A primal sense of danger warned him that things had just begun, and a ruthless jagged edge shimmering in opalescence ripped the air in two as Zac activated **[Gorehew]** and instilled it with the Branch of the War Axe. The shard was happily releasing more and more energy, and Creation had entered the blade as well. It might look like the remnant was helping him cope with a powerful foe, but Zac knew the truth wasn't quite so benign.

This was what the remnants did.

Unfettered creation and change, no matter the cost. The shard had been locked down for months, but now it found a continuous outlet of creation. Zac could feel how the corruption was burrowing deeper into his body with every expenditure. The remnant probably wanted Zac to keep fighting until he was just a husk without a shred of remaining life span. At that point, it would find the next power source to continue to fuel its work.

A bloody spear clashed with the jagged edge of **[Gorehew]**, unleashing a shockwave that swept clean any lingering remnants of the domain skills of the two. The blood world had broken apart when Uona lost connection to her Miasma, and Zac's domains had already been ripped apart by the blood mistress.

He considered unleashing them again, but he ultimately decided against it. They wouldn't do much in a struggle like this, and they might prompt Uona to unleash her own skills again. Even if her power was scary, it was preferable that she had decided to come into melee range like this. This way he could whittle her down like always, so he was better off saving his energy for where it could make a difference.

With his two feet firmly on the ground, Zac managed to unleash a lot more power in his swing. Furthermore, the miasmatic edge of **[Gorehew]** was essentially cursed with Creation, prompting every strike to leave some taint behind.

However, Uona was clearly holding nothing back. Her weapon had been protected by a churning swirl of mottled blood, and the moment the taint of the remnant entered it, she had unhesitatingly discarded it. The blood was flung tens of meters away, where it was free to morph and distort without affecting Uona at all.

The spear she used in the exchange remained unsullied that way, and Zac could see that it was a true high-quality item this time around, rather than another of her expendable spears. It put him under greater pressure, but Zac could only keep going, struggling along until the vampire ran out of blood.

Uona didn't seem intent on backing away at all any longer. She had already begun her second attack as she rid herself of the tainted blood, and the spear was just a blur by this point as a bladed spearpoint rushed toward Zac's throat. Zac felt like he was dancing right at the precipice of disaster, but he forewent blocking the attack, instead only slightly tilting his head.

A flash of heat erupted as the spear barely managed to tear a small wound in Zac's throat, and he growled with pain as he pushed past the spear toward the exposed belly of the blood mistress. However, her armored form was like a blur, and Zac was forced to stop his lunge to avoid a kick that contained enough power to kick his head clean off.

A bone spear suddenly shot out from Zac's elbow as he dodged the spear, heading straight toward Uona's gut. It was filled with Creation, like a poisoned needle aimed to debilitate. The vampire didn't actually seem surprised though, and the butt of the spear was somehow already crashing down at the bone spur, breaking it apart.

Zac's furiously swung his axe in an upward arc, hoping to at least maim the leg of hers that still retained all of its energy. But Uona overcame that as well by actually releasing the grip of her weapon and using Zac's own momentum to push herself to the side, narrowly avoiding the bladed edge.

He had somewhat hoped she'd use some sort of blood skill to block his attack, which would have allowed him to once more make use of **[Void Zone]**, but she wasn't using any skills at all, probably for that very reason. Zac could still use skills though, and the three pygmies suddenly appeared behind his back.

The teeth at the back of **[Verun's Bite]** ripped toward Uona's arm as a coffin barrier appeared to block her swing. However, Zac's eyes widened in horror when the whole area changed at the exact moment the barrier appeared. It was he had been transported to hell as dozens of tendrils of condensed blood shot toward him.

There was no way for him to avoid all those attacks, and he hurriedly activated **[Void Zone]** again. The spears lost their

vigor as they lost the connection to Uona, but his own skill didn't fare any better. The skeletons turned faded, and even an offhand swing of uona would be able to pierce right through it.

She had been waiting for him to activate skills of his own, just to counter him this way. Unfortunately for her, she didn't know that he wasn't as restrained as she was. The weakened barrier broke as Uona's spear pushed down toward Zac's throat, but another barrier appeared immediately after, this full of vigor and emitting an ancient aura.

Zac had resummoned [**Profane Exponents**] with the help of [**Force of the Void**], just like he had when he first figured out the talent, allowing him to retain its strength even while [**Void Zone**] was running. Meanwhile, four chains pushed forward, each of them dripping with corrosion and Creation.

The blood mistress' armor managed to block two of the chains, but one managed to puncture it through at a seam, while the final one entered the previously damaged part to unleash its unstable payload. Meanwhile, Zac continued his own swing, punching two deep holes straight in her chest with the teeth that served as Verun's counterweight.

The vampire screamed in pain, but she ferociously swung her spear with such vigor that Zac was forced back while the two chains that had embedded themselves in her were broken apart. Uona hurriedly backed away the moment Zac was pushed back, and Zac's eyes widened as two fountains of blood gushed out from where the links of [**Love's Bond**] had attacked her.

It was not just a trickle, but rather hundreds of liters that were somehow being expelled from her body. Unfortunately, the scene managed to extract all of his Dao and Creation Energy he had managed to infuse into her body as well.

"I don't know what allows you to shield the area from the Heavens themselves," an emotionless voice emerged from within Uona's helmet. "But it will not save you. Nothing is infallible."

Zac only sneered in return, but her proclamation was quickly proven somewhat prophetic. He tried similar combo attacks

again, but Uona had figured out that nullification zone was only so big. The moment Zac activated the Bloodline Talent, she forcibly stepped back and unleashed a barrage of blood at him in return.

He simply couldn't restrain her while she was inside the field, the power gap was just too big. The combination of **[Force of the Void]** and **[Void Zone]** did at least allow him to fight somewhat evenly against the otherwise superior Heaven's Chosen.

Even then, Zac found himself desperately fighting just to hang on. Uona was fighting like she was possessed, holding nothing back as she pushed and pushed to rip him apart. Zac tried to fight back with the inexorable stance he had formed over the past years, but how could he start restraining Uona when she both outmatched him in skill and attributes?

It felt like she had six arms as she weaved her spear in an everchanging arc of death, and even if he managed to restrict her weapon, a terrifyingly powerful punch or kick with a bladed boot would put him in his place. Zac was getting overwhelmed even if he fought with everything in his arsenal.

The chains of **[Love's Bond]** were ripping through the air in deadly arcs to restrain and strike the vampire from behind, but it was like Uona had eyes in the back of her head. Small condensed spears appeared out of nowhere slammed into the chains just as they were about to hit her, and they contained such power that Zac felt his Spirit Tool taking continuous damage.

Zac even started to wonder if she had even higher luck than himself going by her reaction time. He kept activating **[Void Zone]** to catch her off-guard, but after the first time, she reacted immediately. He also unleashed sudden bursts of creation in all sorts of ways, even turning a chunk of his flesh into a cannonball to shoot into her, trying to counter skill with chaos.

But nothing worked.

Any time he managed to infuse some Creation into her body, she immediately expelled ten people's worth of blood. At the

same time, the blood she had thrown away after clashing with his Creation-infused axe swings was enough to fill an Olympic pool.

Zac didn't understand how this was possible. Was there no limit to how much energy and blood she was able to expend? He pushed [**Cosmic Gaze**] to the limit and he found a clue mid-clash. There were two surges of Blood Energy every time she discarded a fountain of blood. One came from within her heart, making it look like she expended her Essence Blood to keep fighting.

But the second energy burst indicated that might not be the whole story. It was minute to the point that Zac wouldn't have sensed it at all if not specifically looking for it, and it came from quite far away. It came from the direction of the blood sphere.

Was Uona somehow using the collected blood of the Blood Effigy to keep fighting? How was that possible? His thought swirled as he kept his pitched battle going, and he suddenly came to a realization. The purpose of the blood effigy was to link the Divine Monarch outside with the Mystic Realm, and what better way than to link a Blood Effigy and a blood cultivator than with the Bloodline of the Eternal Clan?

Uona had probably activated whatever link would be used during the ascension, siphoning blood just as it would siphon a whole realm in the future.

The more he thought about it, the more sense it made, but that also meant he was in deep trouble. He had seen how much energy that sanguine egg hovering in the air contained. He would be long dead before he managed to exhaust it all. He needed to change tactics.

Zac suddenly roared as a burst of unfettered creation was expelled from his body, ripping apart the surroundings. Uona was rampaging, but she still had enough state of mind to not needlessly take such a chaotic burst straight in the face. She flashed away to avoid the shockwave, giving Zac time to follow up on his plan.

He fled.

For the first time since kicking the large door open, Zac once more found himself outside the huge chamber after having turned tail the moment he unleashed a barrage of Creation. The square was empty, and who knew where the Eidolon had fled after getting themselves almost killed. That meant Zac wouldn't get overrun by another angry Heaven's Chosen, but that didn't improve his situation much.

Getting out of the building only changed his surroundings.

"It's futile," the demonic voice of Uona echoed out from behind, but she didn't get the chance to continue before a primordial roar echoed out across the massive square.

The next moment, a massive hyena slammed into the blood mistress in a bout of unmatched ferocity. It was Verun who finally had made its appearance, and it almost looked like the Tool Spirit had taken a berserking pill. A storm of blood surrounded it, and its body was a mix of chaotic energies as it tried to rip its enemy apart.

Interestingly enough, it had also undergone slight alterations since appearing last. After absorbing that dense bone, the spirit had become more congealed. It felt a lot more like an actual beast now, and there was far greater heft behind its swipe as it stuck Uona's spear with such force that she was pushed back into the building.

Not only that, but the mottled pattern of red streaks that covered its body ever since swallowing the dragon's blood had changed a bit. There were golden spots in the red, and the same was true for the bloody swirls that surrounded its legs. It was almost like the blood inside the beast's body was becoming like Billy's in his titanic state, but Zac knew the sources were different.

The origin of the golden power wasn't a result of swallowing Uona's blood, but it rather came from the experiences in the valley. Zac could sense pure life inside the blood.

Verun pushing back Uona gave Zac the breather he desperately needed, and he stuffed three pills into his mouth as he kept running. Two surges of energy immediately filled him with vigor. The lesser of the two was his highest-quality Soldier

Pill, a quasi D-grade pill that would restore over 30% of his maximum reserves over the next minute.

The far more ferocious surge was actually something made from a **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, and it immediately pushed his strength to the next level. Initially, Zac would have preferred to avoid using a pill like this in the Twilight Ocean. After all, even if it managed to help him take out Uona, there were still Aia Ouro and thousands of other powerhouses lurking in the area.

He was taking a huge gamble by eating this, that he would be able to hide away while he endured the terrifying backlash after the effect ended. After all, turning the seed into a pill had simply made the thing easier to swallow. It did nothing to reduce the drawbacks of the item. Zac immediately felt a bout of madness gripping his mind, to the point he almost turned around to charge the vampire who shot out through the building again.

Thankfully, the third pill had dissolved by that point, and he felt his mind clearing up again. It was a pill that helped dispel various negative mental states. Together with his empowered soul, it allowed him to endure the mental decay that had turned him into a raging lunatic when fighting the blacksmith golem in Brazla's trial.

A pained wowl echoed out behind him as he felt a good chunk of Verun's energy being expended. The Tool Spirit was extremely ferocious, but it was ultimately not a match to a peak E-grade Heaven's Chosen. It flashed back and forth, but it only managed to slightly impede the vampire as she strove to catch up.

Finally, it couldn't take it any longer and unleashed a cascading wave of bloodlust and blood that slammed into Uona, stopping her in her tracks for an instant. Zac felt the Tool Spirit return into the axe with a mix of exhaustion and reluctance, but it had accomplished the task of giving Zac the headstart he needed.

"Stop!" an enraged scream echoed out, but the pills had been absorbed already, and Zac turned into an abyssal wraith.

A thousand spears shot toward him, but he wasn't as easy to take down as when they fought in the chasm. Now, **[Abyssal Phase]** had already reached late mastery, and his attributes had been boosted by almost 30% by the berserking treasure. It gave him enough speed to avoid most of the spears, though he still found the edges of his intangible form damaged.

Soon enough, it became untenable to keep the skill going, but by that time he had already reached his target. It wasn't the gate through which he had entered the massive compound, but rather the 10-meter ball of blood hovering above a building very similar to the one he had just emerged from.

Zac had never planned on actually escaping from Uona. But since she kept getting powered by this thing, his best course of action was to cut off her power at the source. As long as he could destroy this thing with a burst of Creation, she'd run out of blood energy soon enough. Besides, there had to be a price to be paid for continuously drawing power as she did.

Hopefully, she'd be hit by a backlash the moment this thing blew up.

"Damage that thing and you will make an enemy of the whole Eternal Clan!" Uona screamed in anger as she closed in on him like a hurricane of blood.

"Since when has Draugr feared a bunch of bloodsuckers?" Zac snorted as he punched his whole arm into the huge sanguine orb.

Chapter 775: Overextended

“Stop!” Uona screamed again, but Zac ignored her as he unleashed a storm of Creation into the sphere.

At the same time, he threw out dozens of **[Void Balls]** with his free hand, turning the whole area around him into a veritable minefield to hamper the vampire’s advancement. It looked like the whole mystic realm was about to break apart as a wall of spatial tears covered the whole area, but even such a dangerous scene didn’t stop Uona in her tracks.

She unleashed an unhinged cascade of blood that rippled forward, and one tear after another was destabilized and crushed by the torrential amounts of energy. Zac’s looked on at the scene with shock, swearing at the shard to work quicker as he secured his position with the chains of **[Love’s Bond]**.

The pygmies had appeared once more, and the two defensive pygmies were immediately forced to work overtime. While the wave of blood crushed the nigh-impassable shroud of spatial tears, some blood bullets managed to pierce through, heading straight toward Zac with enough force to blast a hole straight through solid steel.

The black shroud of the third pygmy shot back and forth, constantly losing some of its mass to slightly redirect the projectiles. They were filled with some sanguine Dao, but Zac thankfully didn’t need to adjust their trajectory overly much. Just a little bit was enough to have them shoot into the sphere instead of him, and the ones who couldn’t be diverted were blocked by a coffin barrier that just covered his front.

There was some sort of inner barrier that shielded the core of the blood sphere. It heroically resisted the corruption while the outer layer of supercondensed blood started to morph into everything from base elements to soulless creations that almost felt like a mockery of life. Most shockingly, over thirty

bodies were formed, and they fell down and smashed into the roof below.

Zac didn't recognize a single one of them, but he didn't believe they were random faces wrought from nowhere. More likely, they were soulless clones of people who had fallen in the City of Ancients. Some of their lingering spirituality had been dragged here along with their blood, becoming a source of inspiration to the torrent of Creation.

A few of them shuddered and moved, but Zac felt a deep sense of wrongness when he looked at them flop about on the ceiling below. They were alive, yet they weren't. It was just like what that old man in the shard-vision had come to realize. The life created by the Shards of Creation was hollow, soulless.

It was perhaps possible for the Dao of Creation could create true life, but it wasn't possible for some remnant shards at least. Perhaps, that was the domain of the Heavens alone. Of course, unraveling the truth of Creation wasn't a priority right now. He struggled to control the ebullient Creation Energy to break apart the inner restrictions of the sphere, and a wave of relief filled Zac's heart when he sensed the barrier finally give way.

Most likely, that barrier would have been able to take an all-out strike of either him or Aia Ouro. Uona might even have somehow infused it with the ability to withstand an Annihilation Sphere. But Creation didn't destroy, it changed, and there was no way for Uona to have known he had this ability when setting up the defensive restrictions around the effigy.

A small breach had been formed when the base nature of the core was forced to transform, and Zac didn't need to exert any effort to usher the Creation Energy as it stormed into the heart. It was already attracted by the extremely powerful energy signature that had started to leak, and it rushed into the opening like a starving beast.

"No!" Uona screeched, but it was too late.

A shockwave erupted and threw Zac hundreds of meters away, and he groaned in pain when he flew straight through the

gauntlet of bloody attacks. Even activating **[Void Zone]** wasn't enough because of his momentum, and new wounds accumulated as he was hit by one bloody bullet after another.

Next came the spatial storm, but his Bloodline Talent was thankfully able to rapidly weaken the spatial turbulence as he shot through it and into the storm of blood. Fear filled his heart as he essentially was inside one of Uona's skills, and he kept expelling creation energy even at the cost of his life. The vampire didn't actually counter, and he shot out through the other end of the bloody tide, leaving a scene of utter chaos behind.

His ears were ringing sound from the impact of the shockwave, but he could still hear the pained screams from the Heaven's Chosen, which explained why Uona seemed incapable to retaliate at the moment. Zac slammed down on the ground, and the churning heat from the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** was the only thing that allowed him to stay conscious and crawl back on his feet once more.

His left arm was broken, along with a couple of ribs, but he had already expended all his charges of **[Undying Mark]**. He grimaced as he used some more Creation Energy, and he was beset by that deathly sense of hollowness. Most people would be able to increase their lifespan after finding a rare treasure like the Longevity Gem, yet he had lost at least a century since picking up the shard.

He briefly wondered if he would even be able to enter the Radiant Temple any longer. They probably had some arrays to measure age over there. Would such an array call him a centennial by now? After all, this wasn't the first time he had been forced to use up some of his lifespan. Altogether, it had to be close to two hundred years lost, just below a tenth of his expected lifespan.

Zac would get another burst of longevity after forming his core, and another one every time he improved it to the next stage. But he had entered a somewhat hopeless spiral where he encountered situations where he was forced to give up more and more of his life to cinch a path to survive. The sacrifice had at least allowed him to keep going a bit longer, and he

rushed toward the blood mistress who had fallen down on the ground.

A huge pool of blood had formed around her, but it didn't look like a skill this time around. She was bleeding from both her ears and her nose, and her aura had become not only a lot weaker but also extremely unstable. The splinter was left in the building far behind him, but Zac still rushed toward Uona.

Killing the scion wasn't his ultimate goal, but there was no telling if trying to seize the remnant would work even if it might seem like an opportunity had presented itself. If Zac didn't seize this opening to finish her off, he might never get the chance again. What if she was still able to transport the remnant away in a puff of blood? Killing her was the only real option for accomplishing his goal.

However, Uona wasn't completely out of the count, and she struggled back to her feet and started running. She didn't run toward Zac in an effort to strike back at the one who had foiled her plans. She was rather running toward the rapidly distorting Blood Effigy.

The huge egg of blood had grown to over fifteen meters across after Zac had infused the storm of Creation, and it was undergoing rapid upheavals. It wasn't just in shape, though it did twist and distort like something was trying to break out. Its aura kept changing as well. It could release a wave of scorching heat for a second, only for the deep sanguine aura to return the next moment.

There was a clear struggle between the Path of Blood and the everchanging nature of Creation, and Zac knew that every transformation would rob the effigy of some of its original purpose and energy. It was probably this that Uona was trying to stop, and Zac inwardly cursed after not being able to catch up to her, even after activating [**Abysal Phase**] with [**Force of the Void**].

She had risked everything to unleash some sort of blood-based escape art, turning into a stream that shot straight into the huge blood egg with almost impossible speed. Even worse, Zac suddenly sensed two bursts of blood energy; one from within

the sphere, and another one from behind where the splinter resided.

His suspicions were immediately confirmed when he sensed that the splinter's presence was inside the blood orb now, instead of behind him. She had been able to transport the splinter all along, which meant he had made the right decision in ignoring it. Unfortunately, it didn't help him much at the moment, considering he knew that Uona wasn't up to any good.

Zac didn't need to wait long to find out what the blood mistress was planning. The huge egg suddenly exploded, and chaotic currents of sanguine energy ripped into Zac and forced him out of his intangible form. A wave of pain threatened to knock him clean out even if a storm of liquid fire churned through his veins, but Zac barely held on as he grimly looked at what had appeared in the bloody sphere's stead.

It was a grotesque miscreation that looked more like a demonic effigy than an avatar of the Eternal Clan. Its face was completely distorted with seven eyes and three mouths, each of them having pocked tongues reaching almost all the way to the ground. The thing had no legs as it hovered in the air. Instead, there was just a fleshy mess that dangled down like a cursed dress.

Its torso was unnaturally wide as well, making its form resemble a downward-pointing triangle. Instead of arms, the creature had hundreds of long tentacles. It was impossible to tell the thing was corporeal or blood taken shape just by observing the thing, and Zac had no idea if this was the intended look of the Blood Effigy or the result of his interference. But the undeniable truth was that his attempt to destroy it had failed.

It did however radiate an extremely unstable aura tainted by both the remnants, and going by Zac's experience with Oblivion and Creation, it wouldn't last more than a couple of minutes before collapsing. It was those minutes that would decide whether he lived or died.

A plop was followed by a wet thud as Uona was discarded from the effigy and dropped onto the hard cobblestone below, her body looking extremely drained. If Zac had sensed her aura on the outside at the moment, he would have guessed she was just a peak F-grade cultivator. Most of her armor was destroyed as well, perhaps the result of meddling with the Splinter of Oblivion.

She weakly looked up at Zac, the hatred in her eyes so powerful that it almost had taken tangible form. Zac hesitantly looked at her for a second, before his gaze shifted to the effigy again. The splinter was inside, and he had made his decision. Going by the unstable aura, the effigy would collapse soon enough. He just needed to keep his distance until that time.

But the ghastly creation was clearly of another mind, and dozens of its tentacles suddenly rose into the air as they started to vibrate like tuning rods. Zac looked on with shock as the whole sky turned red while the Twilight Energy in the area started to change. At the same time, the ground rumbled like an earthquake was about to occur.

Zac's eyes widened as large wounds started to appear across his body, like the air itself was a lethal weapon. He even felt the ichor in his body being dragged out, forcing him to hurriedly heal the wounds with even more Creation energy. He also started rotating the Fragment of the Coffin to strengthen his skin, but the efficacy was subpar at best.

Whatever the Blood Effigy was doing, it was beyond his ability to stop. Zac didn't know if it was a domain skill or if the thing was impacting the Mystic Realm itself. Whichever were the case, he knew he was in deep trouble. Even the rampaging shard seemed to be a bit subdued by the avatar hovering in the distance.

Without hesitation, Zac started to run, this time fleeing for real. He didn't dare to activate his movement skill considering the environment, and he pushed his legs to their limits as he rushed toward the gate in the distance. But Zac only got a hundred meters before huge red fractals appeared, crushing his hopes of escape.

The huge jagged edge of **[Gorehew]** appeared, infused with panic and Creation as it slammed into the bloody mark. It shuddered a bit, but just like how Uona had dealt with Creation Energy, so did the fractal. It simply shot out a deluge of tainted blood straight in Zac's face, pushing him back tens of meters. When Zac got the blood out of his eyes, he saw that the barrier hadn't weakened at all.

He knew he either had to swap over to his human side and unleash a more powerful strike or use his Annihilation Sphere if he wanted a chance to escape. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to charge up either as his mind screamed of mortal peril. The effigy had somehow closed in on him in an instant, without as much as a ripple of energy.

Dozens of blood tentacles were already shooting toward him, and Zac desperately started to swing his axe to stave off the assault. He fought with everything he had, but the appendages were intangible and regrew faster than Zac could destroy them. At the same time, one of the mouths of the effigy opened and released a huge storm of chaotic blood in his direction.

A black haze of the pygmy skeleton tried to swallow the sanguine tempest, but the skeleton pygmy's attempt to relocate the attack proved fruitless, which wasn't a surprise considering it was imbued with god-knows how much energy.

Furthermore, it was instilled with a sublime Dao related to blood, its stage clearly surpassing his own Dao Branch.

Out of options, Zac prepared to unleash another huge wave of Creation at the risk of irrevocably harming his foundations. But suddenly, a shudder rippled through the coffin on his back as he felt the lid open on its own. Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he saw the enormous avatar of Alea make her appearance. She had actually activated **[Death's Embrace]** on her own, the defensive skill engraved on the lid.

Alea looked a bit different this time around, just like Verun did before. She was bigger for one, containing far more energy compared to before. This wasn't a surprise, considering how he had fed her thousands of Twilight Fruits along with the

Life-Death Pearls. She had even absorbed quite a bit of the extremely condensed energy inside the valley back then.

It would be shocking if she hadn't grown stronger, especially now that she was at the precipice of waking up.

That wasn't the only change. Just like with the primordial hyena, hazy markings now covered her skin, markings that resonated with his path. It was Death, pure death as he had envisioned it during the chaotic events inside the valley, where he had denounced Twilight and confirmed his truth. This understanding was mirrored across Alea's body, though it was just in an embryonic state.

However, even if Alea felt a lot more powerful this time around compared to when she protected him against the Lich King, Zac still wasn't elated to see her appear. Normally, a Peak-quality and peak-grade F-grade Tool Spirit would be enough for any battle in the E-grade, especially when activating a powerful spell with a long cooldown like this.

But this battle had far surpassed what could be expected in the E-grade. Even early-stage Hegemons would find themselves unable to contend in a struggle like this unless they had some extremely powerful tools that could make full use of their energy stores.

Yet she held on, trying to take on more and more harm as her arms were held in a wide embrace. She didn't only block the bloody storm, she also attracted the tentacles that now hid within. More and more blood was contained and condensed into a sphere of extremely condensed energy, but Zac saw that it didn't come without a price.

One crack after another appeared on the coffin lid as similar cracks appeared on Alea's avatar, ample proof that this situation was beyond what she could handle. A pained grimace appeared on her face, but she still held on. Fury and helplessness filled Zac's heart as he scrambled for a solution.

He needed power. One final burst to turn the tides. And he knew where to find it. He had held off on it since there was no going back from this, but if he hesitated longer, **[Love's Bond]**

would break apart. From there, he'd just last a few seconds longer, especially if that ball Alea had condensed erupted.

A crack echoed in his mind out as a fractal of the prison in his mind crumbled. A deluge of stocked-up and unfiltered energy stormed into his mind like rain in a parched desert. The two remnants didn't wait for even a second as they escaped the cage that had held them prisoners since forming the first Glimpse of Chaos.

The splinter rushed out with the most urgency, desperately avoiding the other two remnants as they both set off in pursuit. All three of the remnants exuded huge amounts of energy, instilling Zac with a cursed power. Seeing the cracks on the coffin lid and the pained visage of the avatar had completely infuriated Zac, easily overpowering the mind-calming concoction he swallowed earlier.

He shot forward, passing the avatar as he entered the storm of blood himself. It tried to rip him apart, but he was unstoppable now that he had paid the ultimate price for strength. Either he would seize the splinter, or his body would explode from the situation inside his body. A huge imbalance had already been formed, where the crashing waves of creation were almost about to completely surround the struggling splinter.

The two captive remnants had been continuously drained and restrained over the past years, but the second shard was like a wild bucking horse filled with vigor. Furthermore, the two shards had formed some sort of resonance, where their proximity empowered one another as they drew even more energy from the void.

The splinter wouldn't last long, but it had started to vibrate ominously, clearly intent on going out in a final blaze of glory. Zac couldn't let that happen. He roared as he tried to impose control. His mind felt like it was being stabbed by needles as he forcibly took charge of the bucking energies, but he still managed to throw them out of his body to counter the effigy.

There was no time to form any Marks of Creation or Annihilation Spheres. Every outburst came at the cost of his essence, no matter if it was body or spirit. A wave of

unfettered creation ripped the storm of blood apart, and Zac was like a ghastly specter as he obliterated space itself as he moved forward in its wake, removing the distance between himself and the avatar.

The three bloody tongues moved with impossible speed to impale his body, but he didn't even register the pain as he furiously dug into the effigy, willing to sacrifice his body as long as he could reach his goal. He dug deeper and deeper, and finally, his hand seized a bucking gemstone at the effigy's core.

The last time he had been mesmerized, tricked into putting the Splinter of Oblivion against his head. This time, he acted willingly, desperately even. A fourth surge of power joined the previous three, forming a precipitous balance in the chaos.

Zac directed one final hateful glare in Uonas's direction as the world slowed down and his consciousness was whisked away.

Chapter 776: Ripples on the Lake

A slow but steady heartbeat echoed out throughout the void, each thump vibrating with the primordial Dao. For untold ages, the **[Heart of Oblivion]** grew, with each cycle inching closer to that impossible threshold.

Worlds were destroyed with a single breath, reality itself turned to ash with a thought. Its desire was the Heavens and its will the Earth. But as the heart grew more powerful, so did its hatred. Not even Oblivion could overcome the ancient Law of Balance, and every end had its price.

Worlds were destroyed with a single breath, but the young replaced the old. The heart was angry, but also relieved. After all, without the cycle of Samsara, endless oblivion would be impossible. So it moved through the cosmos in search of more sustenance to fuel its curse.

Hatred. Destruction. Desire. The heart beat, its madness spreading toward every corner of the myriad planes. Oblivion was never over.

Why was she here? Her thoughts felt sluggish as she looked around at the vast battlefield below. Tens of thousands of fallen warriors littered the ground, and she felt a weak recollection as she looked at the insignia on their arms.

Her gaze shifted, turning to the wretched creatures who must have had been the enemies of the fallen soldiers. Many of them sported wounds that no doubt was left by the people's army. At the same time, there were dozens of large swathes of nothingness, where neither soldier nor invader had fallen. The only clues that it wasn't a random occurrence were the cut-off

bodyparts lining the edge of those zones, along with a sense of familiarity she couldn't place.

She didn't know why, but a surge of anger filled her as she looked at the ugly faces of those things that had fought against the soldiers. Humans, they were called, she suddenly recalled. She waved her hand, and nothingness followed. Hundreds of bodies were erased, never to sully her gaze again as another zone of nothingness appeared.

"Wavemistress Warn! You are alive!" a call came from behind.

Warn, that seemed familiar, she thought as she slowly turned to the source of the sound. There were two of them, and they were the same as the soldiers, wearing identical clothes and sporting the same sort of wounds. The one on the left sparked some sort of recollection, but it felt like a haze that dispersed as quickly as it appeared.

These two were different.

While the others were perfectly content in perpetual nothingness, these two were vibrant, a blemish on the quietude around her.

"You are different," she slowly said, voicing her displeasure.

"Different?" the man to the left said, his tentacles shuddering hesitantly. "What do you mean? Are you okay, mother? What is this aur-"

Another wave, and the battlefield was quiet once more. She nodded with contentment as she closed her eyes, melding with the nothingness. But even as lay down among the others, a lingering question refused to be erased.

Who am I?

Despair filled his heart as he ran through the narrow streets, his gaze fearfully turning toward the sky in search of his pursuers. How had things come to this? He hadn't wished for too much. He had just wanted to claim a small piece of the sky for himself, joining those beings in their floating palaces.

But things had gone out of control almost immediately after finding that cursed gemstone in the depths. Power beget power, and as he waved his hands, the heavens cried while he reaped the rewards. But the whispers of destruction had been too much. It was never enough, and it all felt like a nightmare when he looked back at his gruesome struggle for wealth and power.

Had it been him? Had it been the gemstone? He couldn't even remember what his true nature was anymore. It had all been twisted and muddled as he reached for the stars. Suddenly, he found his escape blocked as a huge golden barrier had appeared in front of him while an overwhelming pressure bore down on his shoulders.

They had found him.

"It's futile, destroyer," the man said. "Your path ends here."

He looked up at the warriors in their glistening equipment, radiant beings that seemed to be one with the Heavenly Dao. This was what he had wished for. To become one of these celestial beings. Yet they looked at him with loathing, with scorn, even though he wielded power comparable to their own.

He didn't remember what he had been so regretful about any longer. Rage bubbled in his heart as he gazed into those loathsome eyes that were filled with condescension. As long as they were destroyed, the sky would be clear once more.

The Shard of Creation had shown Zac visions of desire, and the inevitable price of giving in. The splinter instead showed him visions of despair, how all dreams turned to dust eventually. Every step forward was paid with your spirit until there was nothing left to be had. Some had fallen into madness quickly, as he almost had after taking on the first splinter.

Others had held on, but they didn't notice how pieces of their humanity had been stripped away bit by bit. Eventually, they became hollow, mindless killing machines who only sought to destroy. Seeing those visions made Zac feel a sense of dread since most of the people hadn't sensed their spirits decaying.

Was he the same?

Every time he had used the tainted energies of the Shard of Creation, he had felt how some of his lifespan was being stolen. Meanwhile, he had thought the price for using the energy of the splinter was simply the bouts of murderous intent. But what if there was more? How would he know if he had lost something?

Perhaps, whole facets of his personality that were gone, sacrificed for power during his struggles over the past years. It was undeniable that he was colder and more murderous today compared to the early days of the integration. He had thought it was an unavoidable result of being thrust into the madness that was the Multiverse, but there might have been more to it.

No, it shouldn't be. Even if he had been robbed like the people in the visions, it couldn't have been too much. The splinter had always been caged since day one, in contrast to the two shards who both had spent some time rampaging freely inside his body. He probably hadn't actually suffered the same fate as those in the vision, considering he had almost only dealt with energy purified by the prison.

But it was a stark warning to him of what lay waiting in the future, especially if he was planning on collecting more sets of these cursed things. He would probably be able to recoup at least some of the lost lifeforce with medicines or Natural Treasures, but could you recover from having pieces of your spirit destroyed?

It really drove home the need for him to continue working on his soul. He needed to find a way to purify the energies from the remnants on his own, rather than relying on the prison. He couldn't keep paying such a terrifying price every time he took advantage of these items. The cage probably wouldn't last more than a decade, especially not after destroying another fractal.

At that time, he would be all on his own.

The visions kept flashing through Zac's mind as he struggled to come to grips with this new knowledge, but part of his mind was occupied with the situation by his real body. Thankfully, it

looked like time had slowed down for Uona as well. Otherwise, he'd be dead by now. Perhaps it was rather his perception of time that had changed.

In either case, it allowed him to breathe out and plan his next step.

He still felt churning anger as he remembered the pained face of Alea and the cracks that had covered **[Love's Bond]**. Once again, she had sacrificed herself to keep him safe. It was just like when he fought the Fiend Wolf or the generals of the three mini-incursions. He kept coming up short, and she was the one who had to pay the price.

At least, he had achieved his goal. He had seized the splinter. But having done so, Zac realized he hadn't really thought things through. He had somewhat taken for granted that everything would resolve itself the moment he had collected the splinter, but exactly how? The events last time had been completely out of his control, and it wasn't like the System would zap his enemies if he asked it nicely.

He needed to be in the driver's seat this time around if he wanted to achieve his goals rather than just running the System's errands at the cost of his own safety. Last time, the whole area had been locked down, but time hadn't stopped as far as he could tell. He needed to reach Uona before that happened somehow.

As long as she was next to him while forming the Glimpse of Chaos, he could still achieve what he wanted. His mind scrambled for ways to make that happen, but he was forced to put those matters aside as he found himself in a familiar place once more.

"A fleeting moment has but passed, yet you once more stand before me," a sigh echoed out across the cave, prompting ripples to spread through the deathly miasma around him. "It was inevitable."

Zac looked upon Be'Zi, and he was once more shocked at what he was witnessing, just like when he found himself in front of the Aetherlord the last time. She was the Dao personified,

radiating such terrifying energies of destruction that the splinter in his mind seemed like nothing but a firecracker.

If she willed it, he would be destroyed, removed from the river of time entirely. Even the Miasma around her had transformed, becoming something darker than death. It felt like the river of energy was the end of all existence, and stepping into it would result in true oblivion.

“Two aspirants, two appearances, two fates interwoven,” Be’Zi muttered, prompting the Miasmatic river to shudder. “To what end?”

Zac had a thousand questions rushing through his mind. How had she created the prison in his mind? What did he need to do in order to purge the latent will from the remnants, freeing himself from the curse? But he ultimately chose to accomplish what he had promised Catheya before anything else.

“It is my honor to meet you again. I have-” Zac said, but he was stopped short.

“I cannot help you again,” Be’Zi said with a shake of her head. “Doing so would be a disservice. You have chosen to walk down the Path of Oblivion, and you will need to bear the full weight of that decision. That is your only chance to reach the peak. The path is precipitous and the peak has yet to be fully restored, but cultivation has always been in defiance of the Heavens. I am confident it can be done.”

“It’s not that,” Zac said, though he had to admit he was a bit disappointed she shut him down so quickly when thinking he was about to ask for help.

He had lost quite a few fractals since they met last, and each loss shortened the time he had before all hell broke loose. Getting the cage reinforced would have been a godsend. The two remnants locked in the prison had pretty much provided only benefits with no demerits until now, and the longer he could keep them captives, the better he would be equipped for their unavoidable release.

But what the Draugr Autarch said was most likely true as well. Those cages were just external help, and they were only meant

to be a stop-gap anyhow. He would have to find a way to deal with them with his soul alone, or he would eventually become like those people he had seen in the visions.

“Clan Sharva’Zi has asked me to send a message,” he explained.

“You know of my descendants? I thought you one of the lost lineages,” she exclaimed, her expression undergoing a subtle change. Zac even felt he could sense some disappointment on her face. However, her face quickly returned to that mask of indifference that now seemed even colder after having known the far more animated Catheya for a few years. “Then you should understand I have severed my Karma with the empire.”

“Well, I’m not part of the Empire either,” Zac said. “I am simply friends with your descendant, Catheya Sharva’Zi. She looks just like you. She asked me to convey this message.”

“She could smell me on your person,” Be’Zi slowly nodded. “One of the gifts of Zi.”

“They are hoping you can come back home,” Zac said. “Your descendant, Re’Zar Sharva’Zi, is nearing his end, and they have no one to take his place. Your clan is facing relegation.”

“Home... Oblivion comes for all,” Be’Zi muttered as she looked at the ceiling of the dark cave.

Zac didn’t know what she was talking about, but his heart dropped when he looked at her impassive expression. Clearly, the news of relegation didn’t seem to phase her overly much. Zac wondered what he should do in this case. It wasn’t like he could convince an Autarch to do something she wasn’t interested in.

And how could he face Catheya like this? She had considered him their lifeline, and she had risked her life to get him to send this message. And now he had to tell Catheya that no help was forthcoming, that their ancestor didn’t care?

“I cannot return,” Be’Zi eventually said as she turned back to look right at Zac, and he could feel that she gazed at him far more intently than before. “But they need not worry. I can feel

that the annihilation of my kin has been abated. Ripples on the lake.”

“What?” Zac blurted, having no idea what the old Draugr was talking about.

“Two fates, two pairs climbing a broken peak. A’Zu set a goal with his fatebound, so I shall do the same. Collect five of the cursed remnants within one hundred years, and appear before me once more. If you appear as your own, and I shall impart on you true oblivion, unsullied by that ancient madness. If you are supplanted by the atavism, I shall free you and return your soul to the Samsara,” Be’Zi said as she closed her eyes. “Thus the cycle continues.”

“Atavism?” Zac asked with urgency as he felt the vision breaking apart.

“One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity. Five is Atavism, where five lingering resentments form a consciousness. To climb the broken peak, an unbreakable will is needed,” the voice of Be’Zi echoed out as the chamber twisted. “Survive, and prove you are worthy to continue climbing.”

Zac’s vision darkened until he suddenly was back in his own body. The moment his consciousness returned, he was immediately beset by searing pain as time started up again. His body was in a horrendous state after having been impaled by the bloody tongues of the Blood Effigy, and his whole body was covered in lacerations.

Meanwhile, two sets of remnants immediately flew into a frenzied battle, where the previously harried splinter fought with redoubled fury now that it had gotten reinforcements. Insidious tendrils clashed against opalescent light in the battlefield that was his body. Zac screamed from the unimaginable pain, but he refused to let go of his consciousness and slip into that comforting darkness.

A shockwave of dark power erupted from within his body, forming a vacuum around him and setting him free from the bloody tongues. The burst of condensed Oblivion had destroyed the effigy from within, and Zac landed on the

ground as the huge holes in his body healed with a speed visible to the naked eye.

He was loath to use even more energy in a crude way like that, but he had to release some to at least somewhat weaken the struggling remnants inside his body. However, such a small outburst was nothing to the ancient madness that had been unleashed, and he felt himself rapidly losing control before he even managed to get back on his feet.

Uona was still lying on the ground in the distance, looking up at him with incredulity in her eyes as the Blood Effigy started to fall apart. Seeing her filled Zac with a towering murderous intent, which was only further amplified by the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** and the cascading waves of oblivion coursing through his veins.

He wanted nothing more than to flash over and rip her apart, but he couldn't. He knew that his embryonic plan to create the Glimpse of Chaos in her face had failed, since there was simply no way to delay what needed to be done.

A stream of Fragment of the Bodhi entered one of his shoulders and the Fragment of the Coffin the other. Life and Death, each one of them dragging some of their respective remnant energy into the pathways of **[Cyclic Strike]**. The two streams turned into something new as they were pushed together in his chest, just like the last time he had tried this.

Two of the remnants immediately entered a panicked state and tried to escape his body, but the two new additions were uncaring as they unleashed barrage after barrage at one another even as they were drained by the funnels. The two older remnants who were wise to what would happen next were unable to escape as well, as their energy had already entered the fractals.

The streams had turned into an unbreakable leash as more and more was dragged into the funnels, turning them into black holes of unceasing hunger. Zac felt the terrifying build-up in his chest once more as the two currents refused to merge. It felt like his whole body was set ablaze, and hundreds of veins

of searing heat and blistering cold covered him from his head all the way to his fingertips.

The pain only grew, to the point that Zac felt he would go mad, but the process was thankfully quicker this time around. There were two remnants to fuel the process, though one pair had been drained for years already. The pathways had changed as well, allowing for more energy to course through. Finally, his soul had been completely remoulded, allowing for a torrent of Mental Energy to speed up the process.

Suddenly, two became one, and the effect was immediate.

An immense pressure descended on the area, and Zac found himself locked in place. Even the collapsing Blood Effigy had stopped in its tracks, its cascading rain of blood suspended in the air like an intricate glass ornament. A powerful rumble shook the whole City of Ancients next as a dense cloud covered the sky, pushing the Twilight Ocean away.

Golden arcs of lightning crackled within the hazy gray, each one of them on a completely different level compared to those that had hounded the huge snake back in the chasm. In those arcs, an impossibly vast consciousness waited, gazing down at the city like a god. Zac could feel it.

Power, supremacy, greed.

The System had once more come to collect, and Zac could feel the hunger as the glimpse was starting to form in his chest. However, Zac looked at the blood mistress in the distance, his heart filled with wrath and unwillingness.

“You want this thing, right?” Zac squeezed through grit teeth as he forcibly pushed through the restraints, forcibly taking a step forward by siphoning some of the energy that was forming in his chest.

The moment just a small tendril of that power entered his body he realized why the System was so filled with desire. With Chaos, reality could be subverted. The power to create anything, to destroy anything. It had the power to overthrow fate, bring change to order. It was everchanging, unwilling to be bound.

Yet it was there, in his body, making the impossible possible.
Zac felt drunk with success and murder as his gaze returned to
Uona, and this time her eyes were filled with unbridled horror.

“If you want it, then you better give me some leeway.”

Chapter 777: Greed and Chaos

Shock filled Uona's heart as she saw the core arrays of the Blood Effigy simply disappear, turned into nothingness in a burst of Oblivion. All she had sacrificed, all she had done. It was for naught. Her plans ruined, the effigy destroyed.

Why had she angered that *thing*?

The ill-starred Draugr fell onto the ground, but not even a second passed before he crawled back to his feet, and the wounds across his body were already closing. How were you supposed to fight something like this? Someone not following the Law of Balance, wantonly drawing on cursed powers to achieve his goal. He was unkillable and with nigh-unbeatable methods of destruction.

Her final act had been one of desperation. To nullify the corruption with destruction, infusing the remnant into the effigy to destroy the invading force, at the cost of all the remaining Essence Blood in the hidden vessel. Even if it ultimately failed, it should at least have provided enough power to annihilate that man a few times over.

Yet he had managed to push straight into the effigy, using that other unholy ability at the last moment to break past the blood barrier. Now he stood there, with destruction in his eyes and corruption in his hands.

Why? Why had she listened to that voice to steal that thing, even when she had been uncertain whether the voice actually belonged to her kin? She knew the answer; hubris. She was a chosen, standing over trillions. She had even gazed upon the Bloodmother's avatar once. This was just a trial at the frontier, how did anyone dare bar her path, even harming her? In here,

she believed herself the Heavenly Law, of unmatched power and heritage.

Foolish.

She had even been forced to ignite her bloodline to avoid death in that nullification zone, and then sacrifice her Blood Essence to stem the corruption in the effigy. She would have to be submerged in a blood pond for at least twenty years to completely recover. And she hadn't even accomplished her goals.

The Draugr still stood while the effigy was gone, making Grandpa Nether's mission far more difficult. Being relegated was entirely possible, between the lost momentum and her impetuous actions. However, a clap of thunder made her realize that was the least of her problems. She looked at the sky, her eyes wide with incomprehension.

What was going on?! The Ruthless Heavens had descended, a true consciousness at that. Why? Why would the System shift such a significant part of its mind to this desolate corner of the multiverse? Not even defending one's Dao would garner such a presence in most cases, especially not an ascent at the Frontier.

Yet it was here. The sky rumbled as arcs of golden lightning lit up the sky, making it impossible to draw any other conclusions. She could feel the heavenly presence weighing down on her, she could feel the gaze of the supreme arbiter. She couldn't as much as get back on her feet, not that she dared stand in defiance of the Heavens themselves.

But he did.

She once more looked in his direction, only to find a monstrosity stare back. She had been right. Letting him get his hands on that cursed thing was the beginning of the end, and a terror she had never felt before filled her heart as she stared into those eyes.

She was no longer looking into the Abyss. She was gazing upon Primordial Chaos.

The long steely hair of the Draugr danced in the air, buffeted by chaotic winds that swirled around him. His eyes had lost the familiar darkness, replaced by the endlessly churning grey storm of chaos. His whole face was covered in two sets of jagged scars, together forming something that her mind couldn't begin to comprehend.

Sharp pain in her mind made her shudder, and she was shocked to realize a crack on her Soul Core had appeared. Just gazing upon those markings had damaged her soul. The thunder rumbled again, this time with even greater ferocity, and Uona felt she could feel some ancient anger hidden inside.

What was the Heavens angry about? Was it him? Was it her? The array they had set up in this city was technically permissible, but it was still toeing at the edge of unorthodoxy. No, it wasn't her. A flash of golden lightning slammed into the ground, barely missing the Draugr who had somehow managed to take a step forward.

Toward her.

The sky grew darker in response, like it was infuriated at the man's defiance. But Arcaz Black paid it no heed it seemed. His aura grew more erratic, more primordial, creating a hair-raising feeling. Something was brewing inside him, something that shouldn't exist. At least not here, in an E-grade cultivator.

Another rumble, and the Draugr had somehow shifted position, removing half the distance between them. She hadn't noticed him moving at all, but she wasn't surprised. He had swallowed both Creation and Oblivion, and Chaos was now coursing through his veins. Trying to understand the situation based on a cultivation system created by the Apostate of Order was hopeless.

Once more reality changed, and he now stood only a few dozen meters away. It was palpable by now, the danger that was hiding within his body. Small pieces of her reality were being stripped away, turning into motes of red that escaped from her body. Just being in his proximity was deadly, and she had to get away.

Uona struggled against the weight of the Heavens, but she barely managed to push herself up to a sitting position. Her desperation grew as she struggled, but it was futile. It quickly became clear; without sacrifice, there was no chance for her to survive this madness.

Seventy-five Nodes ignited, each one exploding and releasing a torrent of energy. At the same time, the nucleus condensed by her Dao and her Path cracked, undoing five years of preparations and marking the loss of dozens of valuable Natural Treasures. Her aura rose to unprecedented heights, allowing her to finally stand up.

But she was just a candle in the wind, burning through both ends to give her a fighting chance. She still felt as weak as a mortal, and she started running away. Crippling herself cultivation had cemented her fall from the elite, but it was better than dying. As long as there was life, there was a way.

Her progenitor would perhaps take pity on her and help her recover her cultivation. Or perhaps, the Eternal Court would use these events to put political pressure on the Abyssal Shores, which would increase her value enough to be restored. That was her only hope.

The madman seemed occupied, barely noticing her escape as she ran toward the closest exit. But that was not much of a relief as the intensity of the thunder above just kept increasing. She felt so excruciatingly slow, like her reality had been reduced to a crawl. But finally, she managed to leave the courtyard, and she felt the pressure slowly abate as she moved away from the epicenter of the Heavenly Descent.

Opulent mansions were replaced by a dead forest as she kept moving, but escape talismans and movement skills kept failing her. It wasn't a surprise though. Even if the whole city wasn't suppressed, she still wouldn't be able to control the rampant energy in her body.

“Not so fast, bloodling,” a thunderous shout erupted like a clap of thunder, but it was fury rather than fear that filled her heart.

It was that Havarok princeling, making his appearance at the worst possible time. Behind him, over a hundred soldiers had

formed a defensive line, though all of them were on their knees or prone on the ground. Only the prince himself was still standing, though he had to use his sword to remain upright under the pressure from above.

“Fool! Out of the way,” she screeched, her heart hammering with horror upon seeing her path being barred. “You’ll kill us all! *He is coming!*”

“I am already here,” a voice echoed out, all-too-close.

Terror threatened to turn Uona mad, and the horror only intensified when she found herself unable to move, locked in place as the Heavens bore down on her with unprecedented weight. She barely managed to turn her body to look behind her.

There he stood, an aberration that shouldn’t exist - chaos taken physical form.

“You brought this on yourself,” Arcaz Black said, and he suddenly stood right in front of her.

There were no rules to his movement. He just was. Unpredictable, unstoppable. And between his hands, it appeared - Chaos.

Her thoughts grew muted and distant as she was mesmerized by the pattern that had appeared. It was not as poignant of the holy ponds back home, nor as palpable as the Dao of her Ancestor. Yet it contained endless mystery and the whispers of that long-forgotten era where Chaos reigned supreme.

The barriers were broken, unable to remain standing after she had sacrificed her cultivation. She felt her mind straining, unable to bear the weight of the Dao. Her eyes were opened wide as she desperately tried to understand the message in that small glimpse of the peak. As long as she could just grasp a corner, she would be able to not only survive, but to gain unprecedented benefits.

She was-

—

Ykrodas looked on with wide eyes as a golden pillar of lightning slammed into Uona Noz'Valadir, completely extinguishing her spirit and ending her reign of terror. The first bolt was followed by a few more, until her harried body was given a reprieve as it fell to the side, exposing the man who had appeared behind her.

“If you want to live, look away,” a voice echoed out in his mind, and there was no hesitation as he complied.

This was beyond his scope of knowledge. This was true Heavenly Intervention, something he thought a myth. The thing that man had conjured had called the Heavens to this small corner of the Multiverse. His heart hammered as he squeezed his eyes shut, but his vision was still lit up by lightning multiple times over until the immense pressure on his shoulders was finally lifted.

Groans echoed throughout his lines, and Ykrodas took a shuddering breath as he turned around. Most of his followers were fine, if a bit worse to the wear. However, he sighed with some helplessness upon seeing that over ten people were staring blankly ahead, their eyes milky-white and not emitting a speck of spirituality.

They had gazed upon something they shouldn't have and paid the price of coveting something claimed by the Heavens.

Ykrodas shook his head, and he turned toward the source of the terrifying events. Arcaz Black stood in silence, his eyes closed as his face was turned toward the still-churning sky. Ykrodas didn't know if he was in the middle of an epiphany or if his soul had been wounded by the Heavenly Intervention, but the Draugr's aura was shuddering erratically as the weird patterns on his skin twisted and started to fade.

Now would perhaps be the optimal time to strike, but Ykrodas wouldn't do such a foolish thing. He had seen the harried form of Uona as she ran for her life. Her cultivation had been destroyed, her soul damaged. Most importantly, he had seen the horror, the sheer terror in her eyes that was so strong that it made his own heart beat faster.

This Draugr was too mysterious, too volatile. Ventus had called him Chaos incarnate, and Ykrodas only now realized just how correct he had been. Ykrodas wouldn't risk his life or the plans of the empire to strike at this enigma, at least unless he absolutely had to. Instead, he took the opportunity to look around.

The haze over the City of Ancients had been completely cleared by the lightning, and Ykrodas could even see the heart of the city. He saw the central tower, the seat of the Realm Spirit. He saw how the protective rune in front of it flickered with lightning for a minute before going out completely.

Had the barrier been actively destroyed by the Heavens, or had the commotion simply been the last straw to unravel that ancient protective seal? In either case, it meant the core was completely exposed, and Ykrodas cursed as he tried to find any traces of Kataron Rissit. They had entered this park roughly around the same time, yet he was nowhere to be seen.

He was nowhere to be seen, and Ykrodas was filled with a sense of urgency. He needed to move, yet he dared not pass the man in front of him, even with an army at his back. So he could only wait, steeped in impatience, for Arcaz Black to wake up. Soon enough, the terrifying appearance of the Draugr returned to normal, the patterns gone entirely.

The dark thunderous clouds were gone as well, but Ykrodas frowned as he felt an alien aura suffuse the Twilight Energy, subtly altering it. Arcaz Black opened his eyes, and Ykrodas was confused when he saw the confusion on his face. It almost looked like the Draugr had woken up from a dream, but he quickly regained his wits as he turned his gaze to Ykrodas.

"Ykrodas Havarok," he slowly said.

"You sent a message that our goals were aligned some months ago. Does that still hold?" Ykrodas asked, surprised at how hoarse his voice sounded.

"It still holds," Arcaz nodded before his gaze shifted. "But leave him behind."

Ykrodas' brows scrunched as he looked at Ventus Kalavan before they widened as he looked at the fallen body of Uona.

"The price that has been paid," Ykrodas sighed before snapping his fingers, which released the fetters that held the numerologist. "Fate is fickle."

The slippery elf only smiled toward him before stepping to the side, though Ykrodas noted he didn't join Arcaz' side.

"He is free, and we will make no moves on him as long as he does not act against us again," Ykrodas said. "Is that to your satisfaction?"

"That is fine," the Draugr nodded.

Ykrodas hesitated for a second, filled with burning questions. What the hell just happened? What was that thing between his hands? What other madness do you have in store? Finally, Ykrodas picked the most pertinent one. His ancestors would be able to answer the rest after seeing the recordings. "Can I ask, what is the situation at the core?"

"The Blood Effigy is destroyed, and you saw the fate of Uona yourself," the Draugr slowly said. "The Eidolon had built something similar, but I destroyed that as well, along with most of the ghosts. Aia Ouro is still alive, but I doubt they are in fighting condition after our battle."

"And the realm spirit?" Ykrodas asked.

"It's fine, as far as I know," Arcaz shrugged. "I never saw it."

"I have to go. You have helped us immensely, and the Havarok Empire will remember this favor. But others are aiming to destroy the spirit, and I must protect it," Ykrodas said.

"Well, you better hurry," the Draugr said with a grimace.

"Why? Has the Radiant Temple already made their move? Or is it the natives?" Ykrodas frowned.

"Well, neither," the Draugr coughed, and Ykrodas felt he almost looked queasy. "I'm talking about that."

Ykrodas didn't understand what the man was talking about, but he still followed with his gaze as Arcaz pointed straight

toward the sky. His eyes widened with horror the next moment as he saw dozens of silvery cracks that spread with speed visible to the naked eye.

“We have an hour if we’re lucky. After that, the Twilight Ocean will collapse.”

Aia stabilized their mind as best as they could before cutting off the final tainted piece of their soul. They had lost over 30% of their spirit, but at least they would survive. With time and some treasures, their spirit would regrow.

A small comfort was that no matter how bad a state they were in, Uona Noz’Valadir was in a worse one. Those scenes would be imprinted on their soul for the rest of their life. That horrifying power that Arcaz Black had unleashed before chasing that harlot into the streets of the City of Ancients.

It only took one look to confirm their suspicions; their placements had moved up one spot. A Heaven’s Chosen of the Eternal Clan had fallen in the Frontier. Served her right for trying to entangle Hive Ouro with that madman. The moment they returned, they seek an audience with the ancestors and lodge a complaint against both those lunatics.

“So this is it,” a sigh echoed out, terrifying Aia. “Seventy-eight million years, only to be ripped apart by greed and chaos.”

“Who?!” they screamed as they roused their exhausted spirit.

Looking around, Aia saw him standing by another window of the building they had chosen to hide inside, looking up at the sky. It took a second, but they suddenly realized who it was. The man looked exactly like in the pictures, but that only served to make them more confused.

“That’s impossible! You’re long gone!” Aia said with a mix of confusion and fear.

How could this man be standing here? He had been killed so long ago. Was this a lingering resentment? That was the only thing Aia could think of, as the man had absolutely no aura at all, not a speck of spirituality.

“An Edgewalker has appeared and conjured a corner of the Primordial Dao, yet this is what you’re confused about?” he snorted. “Well, you will make a decent offering.”

“This is impossible! You can’t-” Aia said, but they didn’t get any further as space twisted, ripping their soul to shreds.

The sky rumbled again, but the man only snorted in derision as he walked over and picked up the Spatial Gem of the little ghost. “What can you do to me that hasn’t already been done, you greedy old fellow?”

His gaze turned once more to the scene outside, to the walking contradiction who had regained his senses by now. Arcaz Black was gazing up at the sky, at the cracks that had been created by his own hands.

“Child, it has to be fate that you appear before me after all these years,” he muttered as blood started to run down his nose. “It is time we met.”

Chapter 778: A Little Bit of Chaos

Zac looked at the receding backs of the Havarok army as they made their way toward the core of the City of Ancients. He briefly wondered what they would think upon seeing the grisly scene inside, where enough blood to fill a small lake had been expelled by the blood mistress, painting the whole courtyard red.

A sharp pain brought him back to the present, and he slowly turned back his gaze toward the one person who remained. Ventus Kalavan. Zac still didn't know how much about his situation this elf knew through his Dao of Numerology. Did Ventus know they had met already, that he had two identities? Or had the elf rather gleaned somehow that Zac would be able to save him upon his capture?

From the expression of Ykrodas, the latter seemed to be true at least, where the elf had already made some preparations for his release. It was a real headache to deal with a mysterious ability like numerology. Part of him wanted to simply kill the elf to keep any secrets from slipping out, but his conscience wouldn't let him.

The elf had helped him not only by warning him about the situation here, but he had even helped him break through in one of his Daos. Also, Zac was completely spent, and there was no way he'd best this man in a confrontation at the moment.

“Ah, Lord Black, it is a pleasure to finally meet you,” Ventus hesitantly said after the silence had stretched on for a while. “I hope my warning served you well.”

“You illuminated the path for me, and I saved you in return,” Zac grunted. “Thus, balance is restored.”

“Then I’ll take my leave, unless young master has any further instructions?” Ventus smiled.

“Be careful when meddling with fate,” Zac said. “Small actions can grow into storms that swallow all in its path.”

Ventus froze for a second before he wryly smiled in return. “I’ll bear that in mind. My actions were my own, unrelated to the temple.”

With that, he disappeared a puff of stardust, finally leaving Zac alone. He waited a few seconds before bending over to take the Spatial Ring of Uona before stowing away her body. After that, he slowly walked away until he slumped down at a secluded spot with his back against a dead tree. Just exchanging a few sentences had almost been beyond what he could manage now that the surge of chaos had left his body.

He felt like a hollow husk now that things had calmed down, especially with the side-effects of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** coming to bear. That’s why he tried to give off an aura of confidence when talking to Ykrodas, and why he tried to fill the prince with some urgency. Luckily, the seal of the main tower had failed when the System unleashed its lightning, which gave the Havarok warriors pretext to hurry on their way.

Zac took a ragged breath, and his hands shook as he took out a small box. His vision was already blurred, but he managed to cram the thing inside into his mouth, swallowing it in one go. Warm streams along with an odd undulating power spread through his body, swiftly mending some of what was broken.

It was the supreme treasure that contained the power of time, used to restore his body as much as was possible. The effect was immediate and amazing, effortlessly sweeping away the after-effects of the berserking pill, along with most of his internal wounds. It even restored some of his missing energy, making it like it was never spent.

Of course, the damage wrought from the remnants wasn’t something an E-grade herb could so easily fix.

Zac sighed as he looked at the wretched state of his body. More than half of his pathways were broken, and even his

nodes showed some damage. Healing treasure had managed to stabilize the nodes and pathways a bit, but there were lingering energies that refused to be cleansed. He would barely be able to exert a tenth of his peak power at the moment, and judging by the state of his nodes, that alone was a risky endeavor.

He might worsen the damage, leading to the nodes cracking altogether. A node breaking was extremely troublesome from what he had gathered. It could be restored, but there were few items that could expedite something like that. Most commonly, you simply had to rest up for a couple of years, slowly nurturing them and letting them regrow. If you didn't, you'd have an imperfection in your pathways, making the formation of a core pretty much impossible.

Two strands of Chaos, that was all that it took for his body to reach a state like this. Allowing such a thing into his pathways was like pouring jet fuel into a moped. The energy hadn't actually been rampant at all, but its mere existence was lethal to his body. It wrought more havoc without trying than the sets of remnants did.

He turned his gaze to the cage in his mind, content to see all four of the remnants locked in a hateful embrace. The moment the Glimpse of Chaos had been formed, the remnants had been completely drained like last time, allowing him to hurriedly push them back inside. Thankfully, Ykrodas Havarok and his army had been so shocked by the spectacle and the death of Uona that they hadn't dared interrupt the process.

A new golden fractal had appeared in the cage, replacing the one that he had destroyed to let the two others out. At the same time, the cracks that had covered some of the remaining fractals had been mended, reducing the risk of leaks or accidental cracks. It wasn't much, but it was as far as the System was willing to go by the looks of it.

Zac had hoped to extract some more benefits upon feeling the hunger of the Heavens, but that thing was just too stubborn. For one, he had hoped for the System to upgrade the cage, but he had only managed to make it repair the damage that was directly related to forming the chaos patterns. It did however promise it would keep doing so every time he conjured new

glimpses in the future as well, lessening some of the pressure he felt at the prospect of gathering more of them.

Any more than that, it blankly refused. It almost felt like he had been talking with an insurance investigator trying to deny a claim, rather than an ancient and omniscient creation. When he had failed to get any other improvements to the remnant prison, he had tried something else – he had demanded some things related to the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

With the events in the Twilight Ocean, it wouldn't be long before he underwent the second reincarnation and begin work on the third. He had first demanded more layers of the manual, but the system had rejected the request with prejudice, to the point it almost zapped him with a bolt of lightning. When that failed, Zac had instead tried to get the materials he needed for the fourth reincarnation.

He had the array plates for the third reincarnation ready to go, but a bustling place like the Twilight Harbor actually lacked every single one of the core materials for the array needed at the fourth layer of the Soul Strengthening Method. He had already looked around in the Zecia sector as well without any luck, meaning he was bound to head straight toward a bottleneck unless something changed.

Having the materials needed for the fourth reincarnation would greatly increase his chances of taking charge of these remnants. Going by the Strength his soul had gained so far, he figured that undergoing three reincarnations would put his soul at roughly the same level as a soul-cultivating elite at peak E-grade.

That was extremely powerful, but still not at the level where he could command the remnants. The fourth reincarnation would push his soul into the territory of the D-grade, vastly increasing his odds as it put his soul at the same grade as the remnants.

Zac was pretty much certain he'd be able to withstand the Atavism that Be'Zi mentioned with five reincarnations. Four reincarnations would be far more difficult, but it would perhaps be possible with enough preparations and supporting

treasures. Unfortunately, the result was the same; a blank refusal where the System talked about the Law of Balance.

Of course, there was one more thing he managed to squeeze out, which was that had allowed him to accomplish his most immediate goal. It was the ability to kill Uona, who would definitely become a thorn in his side if left alone. The System had helped restrain the Glimpse of Chaos and removed some of the pressure on him for almost a minute, allowing him to catch up and take her out.

Without that, he would have been stuck, frozen in place until he unleashed the glimpse into the sky.

The gains were less than he had hoped for, but he knew he was ultimately not in the best position to haggle. There had been a Chaos Bomb brewing in his chest at the time, and he couldn't have been too convincing when threatening to hold it back. What was he going to do, explode and die out of spite?

But the exchange had once more proven just how much the System wanted these glimpses. It had adjusted the rewards of its own quest and even played the supporting role when taking out a Heaven's Chosen of an A-grade faction, just so that it could take a look at this corner of chaos.

Zac wouldn't be able to make use of that fact in the short run, but hopefully, he would be able to turn that into his advantage when he found more of those remnants. This time he had lost most of his potential gains because of cashing in early, using the System's hunger to survive that massive snake back in the chasm.

Next time, he would hold out for some treasure as well.

Still, it was a revelation of just how powerful the young elites of established factions were. Without the Shard of Creation paving the path, he would have died ten times over. Let alone Uona, Aia Ouro would have killed him before the vampire even had time to show up. Furthermore, even when using the cheat-like remnants and a berserking treasure he had found himself on the losing end against Uona.

The cost he had been forced to pay was shocking. Of course, that didn't mean his prospects were all that much worse compared to Uona's. There was still a lot of room for growth for him in the E-grade, be it levels, Dao, or skills. Meanwhile, Uona had to be at the stage where she prepared to form her Cultivator's Core.

Besides, while the cost had been steep, it wasn't like he was without benefits, and Zac found his gaze turn to the Spatial Ring that had previously belonged to the blood mistress. It was sealed by some unknown method, but it was bound to have a lot of good things, perhaps even materials that would be useful when forming his Cultivator's Core in the future. Her body was valuable as well, for a variety of reasons.

Verun was clearly keen on drinking her blood, to the point that the Tool Spirit had almost entered a frenzy when they fought earlier. Not only that, but her body had essentially turned into a lightning rod that filled her with Heavenly Lightning, which still lingered in her body. That energy had proven pretty useful for him before, and Zac would hopefully be able to extract it with **[Void Heart]** later.

Thinking of a dead person as a cultivation resource bordered on unorthodoxy, but he knew he had to grasp any opportunity that came his way as a mortal. Besides, how was this any different from raising his foes and turning them into members of his army? He had already gone pretty far in his pursuit of power. Also, it somehow felt justifiable in this case, considering Uona had called him cattle before.

There were other gains besides the loot as well, and Zac opened his Status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

123

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - Peak

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

11792 [Increase: 110%. Efficiency: 261%]

Dexterity

4772 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

8114 [Increase: 101%. Efficiency: 250%]

Vitality

6615 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence

1945 [Increase: 74%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

4036 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 197%]

Luck

514 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 208%]

Free Points

30

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 662

He had actually gained three full levels without trying, and without using the torrential amounts of kill energy that still filled his body. His mind was a bit fuzzy on the details, but one had been burst open when the four remnants clashed in his body. It had already been at the precipice of opening since long ago, and the rampant energies had pushed it over the edge.

Luckily, between the Supreme Healing Treasure and the **[Stone of Hope]**, the damage wasn't too bad. The other two nodes had been opened with him barely noticing from the two streams of Chaos. Each tendril had infused a minuscule amount into a node of their own, and the nodes had simply been open the next moment, without as much as a pop or eruption.

It was a welcome surprise, but Zac was more interested in something else, and he opened the Bloodline Screen after allocating the 30 free points into Dexterity.

Bloodline

[E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void - 50%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

**[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void
Nodes**

[E] Quantum Gate

The two biggest gains were related to **[Force of the Void]** and **[Quantum Gate]**. The bit of Chaos that hadn't entered his nodes had been swallowed by his Bloodline, pushing it forward by a huge degree. His Bloodline Talent had been improved all the way to 50% in one go.

Unfortunately, he somewhat felt the small vortices in his cells had reached saturation. Zac couldn't be certain, but he guessed that he wouldn't be able to pass 50%, at least not without evolving the talents or his Bloodline.

The recently discovered node had finally appeared in his Draugr-form as well, and it looked like his previous theory had been correct. He had needed to infuse the Hidden Node with Oblivion on his undead side to complete it. He had no idea whether he was simply lucky that he had the Oblivion and Creation necessary for the formation, or whether any two opposing forces would do the trick.

However, as Zac looked at the small node at his sternum, he couldn't help but feel a bit confused. As far as he could tell, it didn't do anything. It didn't seem interested in swallowing any energy, and it didn't provide any attributes or abilities either. Zac hesitantly circulated a small stream of Miasma to pass by the node, but there was simply no response. It might as well have been a decoration.

Zac grimaced, wondering if it was really something meant to be used with the machinery of the Technocrats, rendering it useless for him. He wasn't ready to give up just yet, but now was not the time to experiment. Zac sighed as he closed the status screen and once more turned his gaze toward the sky.

The more pressing matter was what the hell he should do next.

The chaotic scars continued to spread across the sky, and he could sense that the atmosphere itself had started to become a bit volatile. He hadn't been lying when giving the Mystic

Realm one hour before all hell broke loose. If anything, he had been underselling just how rapidly the Mystic Realm was deteriorating.

When the Chaos had been coursed through his pathways, he had somehow inherently understood what would happen next. The cracks would increase with exponential speed until the Mystic realm destabilized and collapsed. He and everyone else would be thrown out, perhaps into the void, perhaps into the Twilight Harbor where a bunch of Divine Monarchs waited.

He had absolutely no idea how things would play out at that point. Even surviving the realm exploding felt uncertain unless the System stepped in. And even if he did, he would still be in extreme peril. Things were bound to get extremely chaotic when the realm collapsed a year early, with Alvod and the other Monarchs struggling to seize whatever it was that could help them ascend.

Zac remembered the terrifying shockwaves when the Voridis A'Heliophos fought against the Collector and the Administrator inside the Mystic Realm back on Earth. Just some errant bursts of energy had been enough to maim him. As bad as that was, it was nothing compared what waited outside.

At least three Divine Monarchs were going all out to seize the chance at Autarchy, with even more Monarchs entering the fray to help out their side. Any errant strand of energy from such a struggle was enough to turn him to dust a hundred times over.

Zac sighed as he took out the communication crystal to Catheya and infused a small amount of Miasma into it as he held a Supreme Miasma Crystal in his free hand. The connection was opened almost instantly, indicating that she had probably been waiting for him to call.

"It's me," Zac said with a hoarse voice.

"Are you okay?" a worried voice emerged from the other side.

"A bit worse for the wear, but I'll survive," Zac grunted as his gaze shifted from the spatial ring where Uona's lifeless body

was stowed away, to the fracturing sky above. “More importantly, you need to prepare yourself. Things got a bit out of hand, and the Mystic Realm will collapse in less than an hour.”

Zac’s mouth tugged upward as he could hear a muted groan on the other side.

“You said ‘a little bit chaotic’,” Catheya sighed, the exasperation so palpable it could be felt through the communication crystal. “I guess I should have understood we have very different definitions of what that entailed.”

Chapter 779: Company

Zac smiled as he let Catheya release some steam through the communication crystal. She had probably been under a lot of pressure the past days, and letting her lecture him a bit actually helped him readjust his psyche. He could feel how his mental state was a mess at the moment, a chaotic skein with fraying ends.

It was no wonder, with how brutal the battle had been.

It was the first time he had been pushed like this since fighting Void's Disciple, where death loomed at every corner and there was no way for him to back down. He had been close to dying many times over down in the chasm as well, but it was far more palpable when getting pushed beyond your limit in a head-on collision against a peer.

"I guess that's par for the course with you," Catheya continued through the crystal, her volume growing louder as she went on. "Why wouldn't you destroy a Mystic Realm or two? Most people would be happy with the Title and the treasures they harvested, but I guess they simply lack ambition of a greater man."

"Well, you know," Zac coughed, and immediately grimaced when some pain flared up in his side.

"I am guessing Uona fell by your hands when the Heavens descended," Catheya muttered.

"I'm sorry to implicate you guys. She gave me no option," Zac sighed.

"That's fine. We both knew that this was a likely outcome by how things turned out. I'm more shocked you actually managed to take her out than anything else," Catheya said.

"But tell me, did you kill the Eidolon as well, or was that someone else?"

“Oh? Aia Ouro died?” Zac exclaimed with surprise. “I thought they would survive my attack after they fled.”

“So you did battle the ghost as well,” Catheya groaned. “And their preparations on the inside?”

“Destroyed. By me,” Zac admitted.

“So you have now managed to infuriate not one, but two, of the great factions of the Undead Empire?” Catheya groaned. “A shame there are no reavers around, or you could have aimed for the trifacta. I already dread the day you visit the Heartlands. I wouldn’t be surprised if you managed to enrage one of the Founders as well.”

Zac simply snorted in response as he kept focusing on restoring his body while doing some field repair of his pathways with the help of **[Spiritual Anchor]**. It would take weeks of work to restore the pathways, but some small alterations would at least lessen the amount of Miasma he was leaking every second.

“Well, what’s done is done,” Catheya eventually relented. “Do you need me to head over?”

“No, that’s okay,” Zac said after some hesitation.

He didn’t know exactly how things would play out when the Mystic Realm broke apart, but he figured that it might be a bad idea to get thrown out together with the Draugr scion. Her master would probably move to either capture or save her, depending on exactly where his allegiances lay. She, in turn, would inform him that she had valuable intelligence for the Empire.

Her master wouldn’t be able to kill her due to the compulsions, and he would be forced to take her to an ambassador or representative without any undue delay. Catheya would essentially use the information about him as a method to protect herself in case her master had turned traitor against the Sharva’Zi Clan.

It was the least Zac could do after all the trouble he had caused her and her clan by killing not only Uona, but even Aia Ouro by the looks of it.

“However, the arrays in the town have broken apart. The inner mansions probably have a lot of good things,” Zac added. “It might be a good idea to continue your looting in here.”

“Really?” Catheya exclaimed, some excitement apparent in her voice. “Well, if the realm is going to collapse in an hour, I might as well give it a go. If I’m going to get ripped apart by the void, I’d prefer to die a wealthy woman. Besides, we have long run out of targets here on the outside.”

Zac wasn’t surprised. While he had entered the City of Ancients, Catheya had enacted a plan of her own. She wasn’t willing to enter the obvious trap that the city represented, but that didn’t mean she was simply going to sit around. She had instead decided to target some cultivators on the outside.

Many had come for the treasures in the City of Ancients, but fewer than half had ultimately entered. There had been quite a few enterprising individuals who set up shop as well, and they had absolutely cleaned up by profiteering on the cultivators preparing to enter the city. They had charged exorbitant prices for things like defensive talismans or puppets and the like, often taking the natural treasures of the Twilight Ocean as payment.

Catheya had decided to rob these merchants whose Spatial Rings were overflowing with low- and middle-grade treasures.

“The Havarok and Radiant Temple have entered the core of the city by the looks of it. You’ll have to contend with the regular elites of the Mystic Realm though,” Zac added.

“That’s fine. Our little trio has become pretty adept at fleeing by this point,” Catheya laughed at the other side. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Zac grunted, though his heart suddenly lurched. “Well, I have to go now. We’ll talk a bit later.”

Zac wouldn’t have minded talking with the Draugr a bit longer, but something had changed. He wasn’t alone in the forest any longer.

He immediately cut the connection to the communication crystal while bracing himself in case he would have to fight

the new arrival. A middle-aged man had suddenly appeared out of nowhere right in front of him, without producing as much as a ripple of energy. Zac's danger sense didn't give off any indication of mortal danger upon the arrival of the man, but he still felt an immense sense of pressure as he stared into the eyes of the man.

The cultivator was a variant human judging by his appearance and clothes, but he didn't feel like a trial taker. The man rather gave off the indomitable aura of an old master, even if he didn't emit even a speck of spirituality. However, while he looked pretty imposing, his state was pretty wretched.

Blood ran down his nose and from the side of his mouth, and small cracks covered his face and exposed hands. Zac frowned when he sensed the familiar aura in the wounds, and he quickly formed a hypothesis, one that was all but confirmed after a few seconds had passed.

"You are the Realm Spirit everyone has been looking for," Zac hoarsely said.

"Correct," the man nodded. "Of course, this is just an Avatar. My true self is still in the castle. You really did a number on my body just now."

Zac was about to answer, but he was shocked silent when the man shuddered until the visage carrying the telltale pallid complexion of a revenant. Zac's mind short-circuited for a second as he looked at the transformation. Was the Realm Spirit like him, someone with two races?

"I see your thoughts are racing, but I'm sorry. We are not the same, young man," the middle-aged man smiled. "I am not the real thing."

"The same?" Zac hesitantly said.

"There's no point to play ignorant with me. You have been walking inside my body for years," the man snorted, his voice suddenly having a slightly different cadence since changing form. "I realized something was different about you the moment you entered the realm. Truthfully, I most likely wouldn't have noticed you if not for the fact you brought that

ancient Dao Purifier inside. Since then, I have been keeping watch.

“It was only after you transformed in the Hollowtongue Mountains I could confirm your situation. Don’t worry. No one, not even the usurper hiding in the depths of this realm, knows of your true situation. In fact, I have helped obfuscate your exact situation from Alvod Jondir’s gaze.”

Zac knew the jig was up the moment he mentioned the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he inwardly cursed Va Tapek again for having him mule such a dangerous item into this place. The Hollowtongue Mountains was where he swapped races the first time, and where he first deactivated his array. Thankfully, it looked like the Realm Spirit Didn’t care, but Zac still felt extremely exposed with his secrets out in the open like this.

“Don’t look so worried. Us meeting is a good thing for you. Here, a small greeting gift,” the man said and threw over a small gemstone.

“What’s this?” Zac asked with confusion as he looked at the unfamiliar gem.

“It is the spatial treasure of the ghost you fought earlier,” the man explained.

“Aia Ouro?” Zac said as he looked at the man suspiciously.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” the man snorted. “I’m just a Realm Spirit, how am I supposed to kill someone? The ghost hid inside one of the side buildings and started to cut off parts of their spirit body to rid themselves of the energy you infused into them. But their luck was truly lacking. The moment you called on the Heavens, they were restrained and lost control. The Creation energy consumed them.”

Zac looked at the Realm Spirit with wide eyes, before he wryly shook his head. Aia Ouro really had bad luck. The situation the man described sounded perfectly plausible. Of course, it was possible the Realm Spirit was lying and finished off the ghost himself. He knew too little about Realm Spirits to know whether that was possible or not.

He had tried to find out more since arriving at the settlements outside the City of Ancients, but the little he had managed to gather seemed mostly hearsay. That alone proved they were extremely rare, and definitely not something all Mystic Realms or world possessed. But from what he had gathered, they were supposed to be a unique type of latent consciousness that could awaken inside a Realm Core or World Core, somewhat resembling a Tool Spirit.

These beings would essentially turn the planet into a living entity, depending on how you defined living, which could absorb energy quicker than a normal world. This would provide all sorts of benefits for the natives, like increased energy density. More importantly, many believed a Realm Spirit could actually evolve planets by themselves, something that generally needed extremely precious treasures or help from the System.

However, the appearance of this man didn't seem like what the missives had described. Realm Spirits weren't supposed to be this human. They could 'live' for billions of years, as long as a planet, so their consciousness was supposed to be completely different compared to a cultivator. Communicating with them was supposed to be like trying to communicate with nature itself, and this situation clearly didn't fit the bill.

So considering that most of what he knew was a bit off, it was impossible to tell whether this Realm Spirit was lying or not. In either case, things had already progressed to this point. He had been willing to take the blame for Aia Ouro's death until now anyway, but now he did at least get his hands on their Spatial Tool.

"Thank you," Zac slowly said as he stowed away the crystal. "But I'm assuming you didn't just come to have a conversation and bestow gifts upon me."

"Why not?" the man smiled. "My life is ending soon enough, isn't my last moments better spent in company than alone?"

Zac didn't answer the question and only kept his gaze level at the man.

“Alright, I do have something important to discuss with you,” the man said, changing back to his human form mid-sentence. “But first, we should take a walk.”

“A walk?” Zac repeated with a raised brow.

“A group of eight warriors is closing in, four of which are possessing Dao Branches. I assume you don’t wish to encounter them in your current state?” the man smiled.

Zac worriedly looked around through the forest. He couldn’t see anyone, but his vision was limited. It wasn’t impossible someone was approaching now the arrays covering the city had broken down. Most people would probably still be out of their minds from the killing arrays, but the elites would probably make a play now that things had reached this point.

He was pretty exposed as well since he had only managed to take a few steps before toppling over. Zac groaned as he got back on his feet, barely able to perform the task by using a random spear from his Spatial Ring as a cane. Normally, he would have used the chains of **[Love’s Bond]** to move when his legs wouldn’t listen, but that was impossible at the moment.

Alea had fled into the coffin the moment the Heavens had appeared, taking that terrifying ball of blood and Oblivion with her. Since then, Zac hadn’t sensed her presence in the slightest, and he looked over his shoulder at the coffin with worry. Cracks covered its whole surface, and it emitted dangerous fluctuations.

“The little girl is ferociously holding on,” the Realm Spirit sighed. “But she has overextended herself.”

“Can you tell her situation? Do you know anything that could help?” Zac hurriedly asked.

“I guess you could say we are kindred spirits,” the man smiled. “I do have a solution. But for now, let’s walk.”

Hearing that the Realm Spirit might be able to help Alea, he quickly ambled forward to keep up. Following the Realm Spirit was a bit risky, but if it wanted to attack him, it would probably already have done so. The fact that he could help

Alea trumped most of his misgivings as well, not to mention that it might be able to send him out of this place early.

“Kindred spirits?” Zac asked curiously as the two walked toward the core again, though Zac noticed the Realm Spirit didn’t move exactly toward the central castle.

“Just like the little demoness, I was once a cultivator. Two actually,” the Realm Spirit explained. “Of course, so little of my original identities survived that I’m more of a new being than an old.”

“So you were a cultivator?” Zac exclaimed, but he wasn’t overly surprised.

Seeing the appearance of this man had made Zac think of the Eveningtide Asura, and of how he had become one with Twilight. It somewhat seemed that Alvod Jondir was trying to walk down the same path as this Realm Spirit, or perhaps use their resemblance to access the core of the Mystic Realm.

“This place, which is now called the Twilight Ocean, was once part of my inner world,” the man sighed, once more swapping over to a Revenant. “The two faces you see me wear belong to two first-step Autarchs that fought to the Death extremely ago. Because of a certain treasure we fought over, our deaths wasn’t the end.

“A small part of our inner worlds survived and fused into this Mystic Realm. Innumerable years later, my two siblings and I woke up, each one controlling one version of this realm. Now, I am the last one to remain, and I will join the others soon enough,” the man sighed. “But before that, I have some matters to attend to.”

“So this is what the inner world of an Autarch looks like?” Zac muttered as he looked around with wide eyes.

“Hardly. We had both defended our Dao and connected our Inner Worlds to the Heavens. Our inner worlds were far grander in both depth and scale compared to this desolate Mystic Realm,” the Mystic Realm snorted. “Here we are.”

Zac looked around with interest. The Realm Spirit had taken him to one of the mansions that were right next to the towering

inner wall. Zac hadn't passed this particular one before, but it resembled most of the other mansions that he suspected to have been lived-in by undead cultivators.

"This town was created in an attempt to live as a cultivator once more after waking up," the man sighed as he looked around. "Alas, some things were not meant to be. Time is different for a Realm Spirit. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, everyone had been dead for a million years. Some time later, I was modified by the System to become a trial ground."

The two entered the courtyard, and Zac felt a bit of trepidation when he saw the dispersing haze congeal behind them, blocking his escape.

"Just a small measure to make the treasure hunters look elsewhere while we talk," the Realm spirit explained. "My time is running short so I will make it brief. I have a task I would like to entrust you."

Zac looked hesitantly at the Realm Spirit, trying to suss out his motives.

"I'm sorry," Zac eventually said, steeling himself for an eventual outburst. "I have run myself ragged completing tasks for old mons- ehm, masters. You've seen the state of my body. I can barely help myself at the moment, let alone others. I will have to decline."

"Well, that's a shame," the Realm Spirit said with a raised brow. "But what if the task I'm talking about is for you to take a priceless treasure away from here? Something marvelous beyond compare, and something that should be highly beneficial for someone with your unique situation."

Zac blankly looked at the Realm Spirit for almost ten seconds before he released a deep sigh.

"Alright, what do you need me to do?"

Chapter 780: Marvellous Beyond Compare

Zac's body was on the verge of shutting down, but he still couldn't stop himself from accepting such a lucrative task. How could he possibly say no to a treasure that a former Autarch called 'marvelous beyond compare'? It was even to the point he might form a Heart Demon if he turned away now, forever wondering how things would have panned out if he hadn't backed down at this moment.

"I knew I could count on you, young man," the Realm Spirit smiled. "By the way, you can call me Qi'Sar."

"First of all, tell me how to help my Tool Spirit," Zac said, trying to remember if he had heard that name before.

But he drew a complete blank, as there was nothing of the sort mentioned in the missives he had poured through, and neither had Catheya mentioned it.

"Her grade is too low, and she is overwhelmed by the ferocity of the energies she has absorbed. It is slowly tearing her apart as she is unable to refine the energies quickly enough," Qi'Sar said. "In her current state, she will last a few days at the best. Luckily, there are many ways to help her. The easiest method is to provide something that will seal the energy temporarily, allowing her to take out and refine it bit by bit."

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling the method feasible. After all, that was exactly what he was doing with the remnants in his mind. The fact that he had a few days was a relief as well, as he really needed to rest for a few more minutes.

"I just so happen to possess some refined Temporal Crystals. Have the Tool Spirit absorb a few of them, and she will be able to seal the rampant energies within a temporal field,

drastically slowing the rate of destruction. It should be enough for her to refine them,” the Realm Spirit continued.

“Perfect,” Zac exclaimed. “Where are they?”

“I do not have them on me,” Qi’Sar smiled. “Remember, I am just here as a projection. Lucky for you, they are right by the treasure. I have used quite a few Temporal Crystals to speed up its maturity so that it could be taken away before this realm collapsed.”

“So just what is this treasure you want me to take?” Zac asked curiously.

“All in time,” the Realm Spirit said.

Zac frowned in annoyance, but his brows quickly smoothed out. It was a bit odd that he didn’t want to say, but hearing the explanation gave some indication of what kind of treasure it was. From the sounds of it, the item was something living rather than a fully-formed treasure. Otherwise, Qi’Sar wouldn’t have needed to put it in a Temporal Field to mature it.

“Wait, it’s not the item that the Divine Monarchs are fighting over?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“No,” the Realm Spirit said with a shake of his head. “They are fighting over the true core of this Mystic Realm, a mutated World Core that contains echoes of the Daos my two predecessors possessed before dying. They are trying to take my place and directly connect with the core, which would allow them to more easily transform and absorb the Dao within. Along with some other preparations, they have a decent chance of calling down the old Heavens.”

Zac’s heart beat an extra time when he thought of a core containing the Dao insights of an Autarch. Even if he could get a small whiff of that, he would probably push all three of his Daos to the peak of what the E-grade could withstand. Even that white light that passed through him in the valley would probably be unable to match up to something like that.

“Don’t even think about it,” the Realm Spirit snorted when he saw the greed in Zac’s eyes. “Even if I helped you get close to

take it, you would only get yourself killed. A sense of propriety is important for a cultivator, to know when to advance and when to back away.”

“Alright, I get it,” Zac muttered as he sat down on a dusty chair, not forgetting to keep restoring his body as best as he could. “Are we in a hurry?”

“We have some time, but I cannot linger too long,” Qi’Sar said. “The System has deactivated the real restrictions of my castle, allowing the children to slowly make their way toward my sanctum. I need to return within fifteen minutes to stop them from trapping my spirit. I want to die on my own terms.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Zac sighed. “Barely enough to make some field repairs. This better be worth it.”

“Don’t worry, you will not be disappointed. The item I want you to take away is of lower grade than the World Core, but it might be just as useful to an Edgewalker such as yourself.”

“An Edgewalker? What?” Zac said with confusion.

“It is what you call people such as yourself, beings that innately hold two opposing paths. You walk at the edge between two grand Daos,” the Realm Spirit explained.

“There are more people like me?” Zac asked with a mix of relief and disappointment.

“What is truly unique in the Multiverse?” the man smiled.

“But I can’t remember ever encountering one such as yourself before. It should be quite rare, especially Life-Death Edgewalkers.”

“How would the Undead Empire react to someone like me?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“I am afraid I do not know. Truthfully, I thought you a covert member of the empire, sent here because of your unique constitution. Too little remains of my memories of the inner workings of the Undead Empire. Too much time has passed,” the man said with a shake of his head. “But your constitution and the fact that you have already climbed that broken peak with some success should warrant some nurturing.”

“The Dao of Chaos?” Zac muttered. “How come everyone calls it a broken peak? Is it because it’s unorthodox?”

“No Dao is unorthodox,” the Realm Spirit snorted. “The Dao is the Dao. However, as the eras turn and time itself grinds to dust, the balance of the Heavens shift. Eventually, a cataclysm will take place, one where the Heavens themselves are ripped apart.”

Zac listened with confusion, not quite getting it. But he ventured a guess. “Like the Dark Age preceding the System?”

“The birth of the System cannot truly be considered such an event,” the Realm Spirit said. “This current era and the era of Emperor Limitless, they are one and the same, far too short timespans to be considered eras on their own.”

“But the System has been around for an extreme amount of time, far longer than even the lifespans of A-grade cultivators,” Zac countered. “That’s not enough to be considered an era?”

“The lifespan of those at the peak can seem endless to most, but it cannot compare to the age of an era. When Emperor Limitless began his mad experiment, the era was still in its infancy, and the Heavens were still recovering from the previous cataclysm. Most likely, that’s the only reason his attempt succeeded,” the Realm Spirit smiled.

Zac’s eyes were wide as he listened with rapt attention, almost forgetting the wretched state of his body and Alea’s situation. This Realm Spirit clearly had access to knowledge far beyond the scope of the Frontier. This was a huge opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the Multiverse and the Dao of Chaos.

“Most factions call this current era the Era of Unification. A harmonious balance of Dao, centered around the Dao of Order,” the Realm Spirit continued.

“But the Apostate of Order was just the third one to appear?” Zac said with confusion. “How can his Dao be the main one?”

“He is the first true Apostate,” the Realm Spirit smiled. “The Beast Progenitor was on equal standing to Limitless Emperor even before the System was born, most likely even more

powerful. They simply infused their Dao into the System to give the myriad beasts of the Multiverse a path in this new reality. As for the First Defier, he was an aberration that likely will not appear again. Talomis A'Pakrava, the Apostate of Order, was the first one to reach the peak under the guidance of the System.”

“How is this related to the Dao of Chaos?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“The Order and Chaos, two opposite realities,” the Realm Spirit mused. “This era is one where Dao is harmonious and orderly, but during the previous era, Primordial Chaos ran free, influencing the will of the Heavens. That’s why we generally refer to the previous era as the Primordial Era.”

“Did everyone cultivate the Dao of Chaos back then?” Zac said as he shuddered, remembering just how terrifying that energy was.

“Hardly, but it was the glue that held the Heavens together, and its influence could be seen in all paths. Conversely, this Era is one forged through Order, where your pathways, your skills, your Titles have the echoes of Order within,” Qi’Sar said.

“How do people know all this?” Zac asked. “I thought people barely knew what was going on in the age of Emperor Limitless.”

“The Eternal Heritages,” the Realm Spirit smiled. “I had the luck of witnessing one such site in my lifetime, it is my greatest source of pride.”

“Eternal Heritage?” Zac said, never having heard of anything like it before.

“All life in the Multiverse was extinguished at the end of the Primordial Era, all matter returned to the Primordial Chaos. But some things... Are beyond the Dao itself, eternal. There are a handful of items and places that survived the cataclysm of the Primordial Era. Each one of those Heritages is beyond your comprehension, powerful enough to turn empires to dust.

“It is through those Heritages much about the ancient past was discovered. I personally know of two eras that have left behind such items, a testament to the might of their time. Apart from the Primordial Era, there has also been an era where the Five Elements were the basis of all reality. There are most likely more of them out there, but the peak factions are fiercely guarding them,” Qi’Sar said.

“Greater than the Dao,” Zac muttered, unable to imagine just how powerful those places were. Did they surpass the A-grade?

“In contrast, not a single such Heritage has been created in the Era of Unity, at least not to my knowledge,” Qi’Sar said, confirming Zac’s guess. “The beings that created these Heritages... They would be unmatched and unopposed if they appeared in this age.”

“And this is somehow related to the Broken Peaks?” Zac asked.

What Qi’Sar said was interesting, but time was limited and he needed to get something tangible he could use.

“The cataclysm ended the Primordial Era, and the Heavens themselves were destroyed. Of course, the Dao is eternal, and it slowly reformed itself, giving birth to the current age. However, some parts were more affected by the cataclysm than others. The Dao of Chaos and a few others have still not been completely reintegrated into the Heavens. Then the System arrived, complicating things further,” Qi’Sar said.

“Does that mean cultivating the Dao of Chaos is impossible?” Zac frowned.

“Nothing is impossible,” the Realm Spirit said. “As I said, the Dao is Eternal. While cultivators call them Broken Peaks, it’s more apt to say they are obscured. You can still climb them, but it puts greater requirements on your affinities. However, walking the trodden path within the purview of the System... It has its own issues.”

“Is that why the Undead Empire doesn’t want its followers to cultivate pure death?” Zac ventured.

“No, that is due to another issue, but I cannot discuss it,” Qi’Sar smiled. “The compulsions still bind me, even in this state.”

Zac wanted to ask more, but it looked like they had run out of time. The Realm Spirit shuddered as a couple of new cracks appeared on his face.

“It is time for me to return. Follow me,” he said.

Zac got back on his feet with a grunt, and the Tool Spirit led him deeper into the mansion, passing one opulent room after another. Eventually, they entered a seemingly unassuming study, but Zac realized what was going on when the Realm Spirit indicated for him to move a small statue. Zac walked over and pushed it, prompting a trap-door to smoothly open.

“This pathway will lead to the cellar of my castle, allowing you to circumvent the cultivators guarding the entrance aboveground. The treasure room is located down there as well. The others are busy breaking through the restrictions to reach my core. If all goes according to plan, you will not meet any of the other trial takers in this venture,” Qi’Sar said.

“Simple enough,” Zac muttered. “Will you tell me now what it is you want me to take away from here?”

“It’s a special crystal I have nurtured with the energy of realm for millions of years,” Qi’Sar relented. “A unique creation of life and death.”

“No wonder,” Zac whistled, though he inwardly wondered if things really were that simple.

“As long as you take that thing away, you’re free to help yourself to everything else left in the treasury,” the Realm Spirit added.

“Very generous,” Zac said with a slightly raised brow.

“I can’t take it with me into the cycle of reincarnation,” the Realm Spirit laughed when he saw Zac’s skepticism. “I might as well do a good deed by helping someone on a similar path as my own. Besides, the less that is left to the vultures outside, the easier I’ll be able to pass on.”

“I hate to ask, but are you able to control where I am let out when this all goes down?” Zac ventured. “I have essentially angered every party in this conflict. If you want me to take this treasure of yours away, I could use the assist.”

“I might be able to slightly move you further away from the core of the action. But you should understand that I will be facing my end the moment the realm collapses, and I cannot guarantee anything,” the man said after some thought. “But if you help me with this task, I will do my utmost.”

“That’s fine, I can manage from there,” Zac slowly said.

While he said that, Zac wasn’t quite as confident as he let on. In fact, he felt the odds of him being able to smoothly return to Zecia pretty slim. There was no guarantee that the Teleportation Arrays would work when he exited. The platform housing the arrays might have been destroyed already. And even if it still stood intact, there was no way that Alvod would keep it operational.

Shutting that thing down would be the first thing he did to prevent any powerful enemies from joining the struggle. Zac had some cards prepared, but they probably wouldn’t work in the middle of whatever chaos waited outside. But as long as he could get far enough away, he had a shot. If not, he would have to figure something out. There would be a lot of cultivators stranded, and a solution would hopefully present itself.

Zac couldn’t expect the Realm Spirit to accomplish something impossible, and he even felt embarrassed to ask. After all, no matter who won on the outside, the man standing in front of him would die. A former Autarch, someone who had towered over trillions of beings, one of the true rulers of the Multiverse.

“Are... you okay?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“Most of my old life is hazy, but the little I remember was grander than what most could ever dream of experiencing. I have seen civilizations rise and fall, I have witnessed miracles and experienced sorrows, all in the pursuit of the Grand Dao,”

the man smiled. “But everything must end. I have already overstayed my welcome. It is time for me to enter Samsara.”

With that, he was gone. Zac thoughtfully looked at the spot where the Realm Spirit disappeared for a few moments before his gaze turned to the hidden corridor leading toward the castle. He tried to make sense of the former Autarch, but it was impossible to draw any definite conclusions. He had been congenial, but was Qi’Sar’s intentions really as pure as he let on?

The spirit hadn’t made any threats or tried to force his hands, but he had made it almost impossible to say no. The material to stabilize Alea just so happened to be in the same room as the mysterious crystal? The spirit would help expel him at a safe spot if Zac helped him?

Their talk had been harmonious, but if there was one thing Ogras had taught him, it was to never take people at face value. This was an old monster, two even, who had come close to the peak of cultivation. That was something that required not only talent, but also smarts, ruthlessness, and an unbendable will.

Was he really resigned to falling here and becoming fuel for the Eveningtide Asura’s ascension?

Zac knew that existential exhaustion was a real thing, but it was surprisingly rare among peak existences. Their conception of time shifted as their grades increased, and they only got where they were because of an obsession with the Dao. So it was a very real possibility that this Realm Spirit had some plans of their own, a gambit to continue their pursuit of the Dao.

The question was what role Zac’s mission had in this mess, and whether there was anything he could do to protect himself from any further machinations.

His thoughts turned for the next couple of minutes, but he ultimately shook his head and started to get ready. No matter what the true reason was for the Realm Spirit approaching him was, Zac still had to go through with it. But he would keep his eyes open and play things by the ear.

A stream of energy entered his Specialty Core, and a moment later, life spread through his body. However, Zac's eyes widened with alarm when he felt terrifying fluctuations in his chest as a storm of Twilight Energy surged into his body. It felt like his body was being ripped apart by a million spatial tears, and like his pathways were on fire. He fell down on the ground with a scream, barely able to stay conscious.

What the hell was going on?

Chapter 781: Linked

Pain far beyond what he had endured during the fight spread through every part of Zac's body. He feared that the Duplicity Core had somehow been damaged during the battle without him noticing, resulting in a flawed transformation process. Thankfully, Zac quickly realized that wasn't what was happening.

The issue seemed to be coming from his recently completed **[Quantum Gate]**. He didn't know exactly what it was doing, but he figured that it shouldn't be harmful. However, the torrential amounts of Twilight Energy that surged into his body was a problem, and he quickly took out a couple of Supreme Nexus Crystals and crushed them.

The Twilight Energy around him was quickly being replaced Cosmic Energy, but the neutral energy barely had time to appear before it was dragged into Zac's body as well. He was like a voracious vortex, but it wasn't actually the hidden node itself that was the source of the pull. Every single part of his body greedily sucked in energy, even though his Human form shouldn't be energy-starved at all.

He started to regret swapping races as the pain threatened to drive him mad, but he didn't have much of a choice. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and his pathways were an absolute mess. Meanwhile, his Arcaz Black persona had become public enemy number one, and who knew if this place would blow up early.

After all, the one-hour deadline was simply his estimate based on the chaotic decay, but there was no guarantee that Alvod or someone on the outside wouldn't make their move before that. Someone might strike early to seize an advantage, resulting in everyone getting thrown out early.

But now, Zac started to wonder if he would even survive the transformation as he was beset by pain that far surpassed even that of the Bone-Forging Dust. Even if whatever **[Quantum Gate]** wanted to do was beneficial, his body wasn't really in a state to undergo any large transformations at the moment.

The process thankfully only lasted for a couple of minutes, but that short moment had felt like an eternity. Zac took a shuddering breath as he got back to a sitting position, but he froze and looked around with wonder. A few seconds later, he quickly turned his gaze inward to inspect his body.

It only took a cursory scan to figure out what was going on, and Zac breathed out in relief. Seeing the changes had pretty much confirmed that the node was implanted by his mother and her clan, meant to work in tandem with the Duplicity Core. And luckily, its function definitely wasn't related to the Dao of Technology.

He was elated to see that his pathways had grown thicker and sturdier compared to before. Not only that, but he felt his whole body was tougher, and touching his skin confirmed that it had further strengthened the extra subcutaneous layer. He had already gained some of its benefits upon reaching D-grade race, but now it had been pushed to the same level as his undead side, along with his energy reserves.

Furthermore, the first thing he had noticed when the process was complete was that his eyesight had improved, now naturally able to spot lifeforce just like his Draugr-vision did. Seeing the result, Zac had a pretty good idea what his mother's clan had been planning for him. He didn't want to confirm it right now, but he was somewhat certain that his poison resistance in his human form had shot through the roof as well.

The **[Quantum Gate]** was designed to carry over benefits. His main form, the human side, was an empty receptacle, while the other side of the Duplicity core was meant to feed things into it. Thus, he had now gained all the unique benefits of his Draugr race on his human side as well.

From the looks of it, the benefits only seemed to be those that were related to race. He didn't have any Miasma to control,

and the skills of his other Class were still out of his reach. A glance at his status screen confirmed that he hadn't gained any attribute points either. Furthermore, it looked like the gate was a one-way street, since he hadn't noticed any improvements at all in his Draugr form after the Hidden Node had been completed.

Perhaps, Leandra and the Kayar-Elu had meant for his other race to be machine-related, allowing them to sneak the Dao of Technology into his human body through the **[Quantum Gate]**. Or perhaps they had planned to infuse some weird chimeral bloodline on the other side, providing various unique benefits to a human cultivator.

As to why they didn't simply make him some more powerful race, Zac wasn't certain. But there was generally some balance in the universe. Humans didn't have any advantages, but they didn't really have any disadvantages either. Meanwhile, many beings with unique abilities had harsh downsides to match.

Of course, the most likely reason was that the Kayar-Elu tried to pull one over on the System with the so-called Root Compact. Making the impossible possible.

Zac couldn't help but have his imagination run wild with the possibilities, and he felt some mixed emotions when remembering how Leandra had felt disappointment when talking about his Draugr side, like it was a waste of their hard work. However, Zac quickly threw those useless thoughts aside, knowing that things had turned out pretty good all things considered.

As far as races went, Draugr were pretty close to the top, barring those unique and rare existences. The benefits he would get from his undead side, provided his speculation was correct, were bound to surpass what he would get from most races. It also made him even more determined to try and excavate some racial Hidden Nodes for his Draugr bloodline before breaking through to D-grade.

Besides, his undead side was what had made him walk down his current path, and possibly what had made the System steer him toward the remnants in the first place. Learning about the

Primordial Era and the fall of Chaos had not dampened his willingness to walk down his current path at all.

If anything, it had strengthened his resolve. From the sounds of it, the main drawback of cultivating a broken peak was that it put greater demands on your affinity to that Dao, apart from the System not shielding you from the tribulations, but Zac circumvented the issue of affinities altogether.

He wasn't too worried about the Tribulation Lightning either. Most missives talked about them with extreme dread, but he hadn't felt that way at all when getting zapped. They had hurt pretty bad, but he hadn't felt like his soul was about to be extinguished as some missives warned. If anything, the lightning almost felt beneficial to him.

Meanwhile, it sounded like cultivating within the purview of the System's Dao had its problems as well. There were some unknown drawbacks to cultivating the incorporated Daos according to Qi'Sar, though they most likely only became apparent at the higher stages. Otherwise, he would have heard about it already.

As for the history of the Multiverse, while interesting, Zac didn't really put it to heart. The fact that the universe was eternal and cyclical was pretty shocking, but it wasn't like those theories weren't floating about before the integration as well. That before the Big Bang, there had been previous universes.

It didn't impact Zac's life in the slightest, especially considering Qi'Sar said the current era was still in its infancy. There were possibly trillions of years before the people of the Multiverse would have to worry about the next cataclysm.

The most interesting part was the mention of Eternal Heritages, particularly those from the Primordial Era. Being able to visit such a place would be a huge opportunity, especially for someone like him who aimed for the Daos of Oblivion and Creation. Problem was, those places seemed to be monopolized by the peak factions in the Multiverse, which wasn't a surprise, really.

The Frontier didn't even seem to possess Ancient Realms, let alone Immemorial Realms like the one his mother was taking Kenzie to. Worrying about these Eternal Heritages was a waste of time. But simply knowing of their existence was valuable, since you never knew what you would encounter in the future.

Having confirmed the situation with the node, Zac went over his body a few more times to get a sense of how much power he could exert. The result was decent but not great. Even if his pathways were fine in his Human form, his nodes were shared between the races. They were still damaged, making it dangerous to overextend himself. The damage wrought from the remnants remained as well, and Zac could feel the hidden cracks in his foundation.

He would definitely have to avoid any more battles if possible, especially with elites who would push him. Just to be safe, he altered his appearance to that of a middle-aged man. At first, he had been worried that his true appearance would have been changed by his large expenditure of life force, but losing a few centuries at D-grade race thankfully wasn't enough for something like that to happen.

Zac also turned his black with a greenish tint, just like how some human natives looked after cultivating among Treants on the platforms that were covered with life-and-nature-attuned arrays. Having confirmed with a mirror, Zac also hadn't gained the pallid skin or abyssal eyes of his Draugr side, even though he had received the benefits they brought.

Hopefully, that would allow him to disguise himself as a local elite if encountering anyone, especially with his Fragment of the Bodhi. He did hold off on activating the array around his Specialty Core though, in case something unexpected would crop up. He would switch that thing on just before the realm collapsed.

Having prepared everything that he could, he walked into the corridor behind the open trapdoor, wielding a random axe he had looted during the hunt. He was relieved to see he could turn [**Love's Bond**] into its amulet form without issue as well since the big coffin on his back was pretty hard to hide. This way, he should be completely indistinguishable.

The hidden tunnel was simple and unadorned, but it seemed to be protected by some sort of shielding array. Zac couldn't sense anything from the outside at all, even if he only walked a couple of meters beneath the surface. Soon enough the stone around him changed, and he realized that he was passing through the inner wall.

The pathway was only so long, and after a few minutes, he reached the end; a solid stone wall. The Realm Spirit had disappeared before explaining the next step, but Zac looked around thoughtfully, pushing and pulling on anything. Suddenly, one of the stones lit up with a small array, prompting the wall to slide open.

Zac walked through, surprised and slightly alarmed to find himself in a clean and well-lit room lined with a couple of sparsely-stocked wooden shelves, rather than the dusty ruins he had come to know in the City of Ancients. He breathed out in relief upon realizing there was no one around, and the cleanliness was thanks to the arrays on the walls still working.

“There is a crystal on the second shelf. It contains the path you need to take,” Qi'Sar's voice echoed out in the room, giving Zac a start.

“Could've just led the way,” Zac muttered as he walked over.

“I couldn't split my attention and keep that projection going. I am being attacked from multiple directions, and I had to shrink my consciousness from the whole realm to just this building to endure a bit longer,” the Realm Spirit sighed.

“Alright, sorry,” Zac coughed as he walked over to the shelf.

Just like the Realm Spirit said, Zac found a small information crystal was hidden underneath a cloth. Inside it was a map of the cellar, giving Zac the directions to the hidden treasure room. From the looks of it, he would only need to travel around five minutes through the corridors at a decent pace to make it there, giving him some wiggle-room.

So he didn't immediately leave the room but rather gave the small storage space a second look. The shelves were mostly empty, but there were a couple of urns that looked a lot like

the vats that Ogras used to age his wine. Anything left to age had probably spoiled by now, even with spiritual energy increasing the shelf-life many times over.

But that didn't stop him from taking them away.

Zac wasn't done there, and he gripped one of the wooden shelves, exerting some pressure on the material. His eyes lit up as the shelf only groaned a bit in response to his strength, proving it was most likely made from D-grade materials like stones outside. It wasn't inscribed either, meaning it could perhaps be reforged into proper D-grade equipment.

Leaving behind such good materials would be a huge waste, so the shelf joined the vats in his Spatial Ring.

“What are you doing?” an exasperated voice echoed out after a moment. “I am straining myself to us time over here.”

“I thought you were busy,” Zac said as he stowed away another shelf. “This is ancient D-grade wood. It's worth a pretty penny.”

“You're heading toward a treasury as the realm is collapsing around you, yet you're shopping for furniture,” Qi'Sar sighed. “Besides, wood is a living crafting material, like Spiritual Herbs. It is too old by now, and it has lost its spirituality. It would be one thing if the shelves were made out of refined metals or stone, but this...”

“I hear you,” Zac nodded as he put the last two shelves into his spatial ring as well.

He considered ripping out the illuminating crystals from their sockets as well, but they didn't seem like they were worth anything. He finally left the room, following the map. Outside was a spacious but empty corridor, and multiple doors were lining it. He flashed over to the closest one, and it opened without any sound, except a groan from the Realm Spirit.

The room on the other side was far larger compared to where he came from, but Zac quickly closed the door and moved on. Inside, there had been a few massive basins with large but exhausted crystals hanging in the ceiling. It looked like the

room had been made to cultivate some water-based treasures, but the arrays had long failed and the water had dried up.

Zac flashed from one room after another on the way to the treasury, sweeping up everything in his path that even looked a little bit valuable. The spurring from the Realm Spirit grew more urgent by the minute, but Zac wouldn't just leave money on the ground when visiting a former Autarch's castle, even if time was limited.

A sudden shockwave from above shook the castle and made him stop in his tracks for a moment, but he quickly started moving again. He had first worried it was the Mystic Realm finally starting to collapse, but it rather seemed to have been the result of a clash between cultivators above him. It looked like the Radiant Temple and Havarok Empire had finally encountered each other.

Still, the scare filled him with enough urgency to just perform cursory glances into any room he passed, and he only took things that still emitted some spirituality. Still, he managed to fill his Spatial Ring with valuable metals, stones, and all kinds of tools. The rooms in the cellar all seemed to be geared toward crafting, either nurturing materials or refining them.

However, they were clearly not the 'top rooms' that the master of the castle himself would use, but rather for the live-in craftsmen of the manor who created items meant for the day-to-day operations of this vast compound. The top-tier rooms were probably upstairs, which was why the treasury was hidden down here. And soon enough, he reached the nondescript wall that held the entrance to the treasury.

Zac's heart drummed with excitement as he followed the instructions in the crystal. A hidden chamber slid up soon enough, prompting an immensely condensed wave of Twilight Energy to waft over him. It was even beyond what he had been forced to endure in the bottom of the Chasm, and he hurriedly activated [**Void Zone**] to not get overrun.

The terrifying amount of energy only served to fan Zac's excitement, considering that it probably meant the room was filled with treasure. The ambient energy was so dense that it

had turned into a thick haze, but it was dispersing now that the door had opened. Zac unhesitantly pushed inside, and his eyes kept growing wider as more and more of the treasury was exposed.

He had struck it rich.

Chapter 782: The Trove of the Ocean

The treasury wasn't too big, but what it lacked in quantity, it made up in quality. Zac had been worried that it would be just an empty room, considering how most people simply carried their most valuable possessions in their Spatial Tools. But as he looked around, there were over twenty items that emitted the powerful fluctuations of D-grade items, not including the piles of Cosmic Crystals.

It was far from his most exaggerated hopes, where boundless C- and even B-grade treasures were strewn about. But Zac knew that was impossible in a System-controlled E-grade trial. He had already realized that low- or middle D-grade was the limit of what the System would allow in this version of the Twilight Ascent.

Anything beyond that was most likely placed in the higher-grade versions of the trial. And as expected, the D-grade items were all sealed by a golden brand, proving that not even the treasure chamber of Qi'Sar was free from the System's meddling. It didn't look like he would be making hundreds of C-grade Nexus Coins today, but that didn't mean his haul was anything to scoff at.

The value of every single treasure had to be measured in D-grade Nexus Coins, including the piles of Cosmic Crystals that all exuded shocking amounts of energy. And all this paled in front of the item placed in the middle of the room on a small inscribed pedestal. On top of it, a meter-tall dodecahedron wrought from mottled metal rods stood.

The metallic cage was not the real treasure, but rather acted as some sort of containment field for the thing that Qi'Sar wanted him to bring away. It was an odd-looking crystal that looked like a thick candy cane, and it hovered in the middle of the

cage. But instead of red and white, it was black and golden. It didn't emit any energy at all, but Zac quickly realized it was because of the containment field.

"This is the thing I need you to take away," Qi'Sar's voice echoed through the hall, though his projection still didn't appear. "My children."

"Your what?" Zac blurted.

"It is a Realm Spirit. A true one, rather than one forged by chance such as myself," Qi'Sar explained. "I have nurtured it for ten million years, expending innumerable treasures that have been left behind. Not only that, but it is a mutated twin-souled Realm Spirit, holding the affinities of both life and death. For an Edgewalker such as yourself, it is a unique opportunity to craft a cultivation planet perfectly suited to your path."

"So that's why you were so insistent," Zac said. "You want me to save your children from the collapse of this Mystic Realm? Is that even possible?"

"They have yet to awaken, making them technically not yet alive," Qi'Sar said. "However, they are still bound to the realm. The cage you see around it is meant to protect the crystal housing them, and to keep them stable while you bring them away. However, this can only be done at the moment when the realm collapse."

"The realm breaking down will break the connection, and I just need to take them away at that moment?" Zac confirmed. "What then?"

"You acquire a high-quality world or realm such as this, and simply implant this crystal by the World Core. As long as this world has no consciousness of its own, these two children will eventually fuse with the core and truly awaken," Qi'Sar said. "Thus, a world perfectly suited for our needs will be born, while my children will get a chance to start anew. Simple enough."

"It's pretty big though, can I put it in a Spatial Ring?" Zac frowned.

“You can, but no longer than ten years. They are not alive like you, but the environment in a Spatial Treasure is void of energy, which can harm them if too much time passes,” Qi’Sar said. “But as I said, you cannot take it now. You need to start infusing the array with power, preparing it for the end. With your wild pillage, we are cutting time short.”

“What array?” Zac asked with raised brows as he walked closer.

“The cage itself is the array,” the Realm Spirit sighed.

“This thing is?” Zac muttered as he slowly walked a few circles around the dodecahedron, looking at the fine engravings on the rods. “Never seen anything like it.”

“The multiverse is full of marvels,” Qi’Sar muttered. “Now, hurry up and start powering up the array. You are running out of time.”

Zac looked at the array for a few more seconds before he shrugged and straightened his back.

“I’m sorry, but my first priority is to save my Tool Spirit,” Zac slowly said as he turned to a pile of crystals he had never seen before. “Explain what I need to do before we deal with the Realm Spirits.”

“As I said, just use the refined Temporal Crystals,” Qi’Sar urged, and Zac looked at a particular pile of crystals.

The crystals were light purple and covered in engravings, and it looked like white flickering lights were trapped inside. They appeared and disappeared, seemingly at random. With the temporal energies surrounding them, it almost felt like the sparks moved back and forth in time in an eternal cycle. Most of the crystals were sealed by the System, but some were fine.

From the looks of it, the available crystals were mostly out of energy, perhaps because they had been used up to power whatever array Qi’Sar had used. It was also possible the small runes that covered their surface had failed, prompting them to leak enough energy to get downgraded from D-grade to something equivalent to Pseudo D-grade.

“You simply need to have the young demoness absorb the energy within,” Qi’Sar sighed. “The Tool Spirit is supreme inside their inner world, she should have no problem using the extracted energy from the refined crystals to trap the rampaging ball of power she had absorbed.”

“But how do we make sure that the crystals slow down time, rather than speed it up?” Zac frowned. “She’s already under pressure. If we mess this up she might die.”

“These are refined Temporal Crystals,” the Realm Spirit said with impatience. “Simply extract the Temporal Energy from the correct rune, the circular one, and it will be made into a Temporal Deceleration Field. It is far less efficient compared to using the Temporal Crystal with an Array, but it is enough for your purpose.”

Zac picked up one of the Temporal Crystal with a frown, and he could feel the burning impatience of the spirit as he turned the crystal over multiple times before he attempted to extract some energy from the circular rune as the spirit said. Soon enough, he could feel how a small area in front of him was filled with temporal energy.

He took out a low-grade Nexus Crystals and threw it inside, and his eyes lit up when he saw it slow down to a fifth of its original speed as it passed through the Temporal Energy. Zac repeated the same experiment a few times, both trying things out with different crystals, and comparing the effect with the other rune, the one that sped things up.

“I guess it is good that you are careful. Careless cultivators die an early death. But you also need to be decisive, grasping opportunities that are in front of you,” Qi’Sar eventually said as he saw Zac play around. “I can feel how those on the outside have made their move. You are running out of time.”

A huge shudder suddenly rocked the whole realm, almost to confirm the Realm Spirit’s warning. Zac looked around with wide eyes, as he felt a burst of Chaos even through the thick walls. Mixed in with it was something else, something he couldn’t place. Perhaps an attack from a Monarch on the outside had managed to make its way inside?

“I can only stave off their attempts for so long,” Qi’Sar urged again.

“Alright,” Zac nodded as he put a temporal stone next to the amulet on his neck and activated the rune.

At first, there was no response, but Zac soon felt a pull from the small coffin as it started to absorb the temporal energy. Zac nodded with satisfaction as he kept providing more and more energy while stowing away the other treasures in the hall.

First, the Temporal Crystals were stowed away.

Over 90% of them were sealed by a golden brand, meaning they were proper D-grade crystals. Considering their wide array of uses and their scarcity, Zac believed that this small pile of roughly 80 crystals was worth at least as much as all the Natural Treasures he had plundered over the past three years combined. These were things that had a huge demand but no steady supply in the Frontier.

In fact, he had no idea how they formed at all.

From there, he stowed away one pile of crystals after another, ignoring both the Realm Spirit’s increasingly urgent exhortations to hurry up and the increasingly powerful shakes that rocked the whole realm.

The Temporal Crystals were probably the most valuable ones in the treasury considering there were no Spatial Crystals, but the others were all D-grade crystals with various interesting attunements. Of course, there were hundreds of normal and death-attuned Cosmic Crystals, multiplying his small stockpile more than ten times over.

Altogether, the non-attuned Cosmic Crystals alone were worth tens of thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins, almost completely recouping his expenses in Twilight Harbor. Add to that all the attuned crystals, and he might just have doubled his vast fortune, considering he could probably sell these kinds of Cosmic Crystals at a premium back home in Zecia.

Apart from the crystals, there was only one more raw material; a large block of Spiritual Metal, seemingly the same material the array cage was made from. The block was just one meter

long with a diameter of 30 centimeters or so, but Zac felt his arms strain as he lifted it. It weighed almost like a mountain, shocking Zac as he exerted some pressure its the surface.

“What is this metal?” Zac exclaimed.

“Diluted Blackearth Steel,” Qi’Sar grunted. “Blackearth Steel is a proper D-grade metal known for its durability and ability to isolate energy. But with the System limiting materials, I had to turn it into a Pseudo D-grade alloy to prevent it from being sealed.”

Zac curiously tried to infuse some of his energy, and just as the Realm Spirit said, it was almost like it hit a solid wall. He nodded with understanding as he stowed the treasure away, and another rumble shook the treasure chamber.

“You have only a few minutes,” the Realm Spirit reminded.

“Alright. I am almost done,” Zac nodded as he turned his attention to Alea. She had finally finished absorbing Temporal Energy, and Zac felt the Spirit Tool had stabilized somewhat. He nodded in satisfaction and stowed away the Temporal Crystal he had used to feed Alea before sweeping the shelves bare.

The items that remained were mostly various tools, but there were also a few sets of information crystals, inscribed plaques, and even a couple of scrolls. They were all different methods of storing things like Cultivation Manuals, methods, and skills, but there was no time to go through them since the realm was really falling apart at the seams.

“So what now?” Zac asked.

“The array needs life and death along with energy to activate. Infuse your Daos, and the cage will do the rest. It’s set to fully activate the moment the connection between my children and this realm is cut,” Qi’Sar eagerly said now that Zac was finally ready to deal with his task.

Zac nodded and walked over, and without any further ado started infusing his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin into the cage. However, he only infused one at the

time, alternating between the two Daos as he fed more and more into the Array.

“What are you doing?” Qi’Sar almost screamed with fear after a particularly rough shudder spread through the treasury, almost throwing Zac off his feet. “You are too slow! My children will not make it at this rate!”

“If you have followed me over the past years, you should know my energy control is pretty horrible,” Zac said with embarrassment. “Besides, my soul is wounded from before. I am infusing it as quickly as I can, but you need to hold on a bit longer.”

“All because of your greed,” Qi’Sar growled, but Zac suddenly felt the realm stabilize a bit from the increasingly incessant shudders.

Still, Zac could feel how the realm wasn’t long for the world. The Twilight Energy around him was unraveling, and space had started to come apart at the seams. With his lingering connection to Chaos, he could feel they were right at the precipice.

“Are we close to done?” Zac frowned as he felt his already drained soul being sapped of more and more Mental Energy. “I am running out of energy here. I need some left if I am supposed to take it away.”

“Well, it needs to be able to withstand the backlash of the connection breaking,” Qi’Sar said. “And don’t worry. I will send you further away with my last breath. Now, get ready, we are about- WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

The receiving runes had suddenly started to twist along with the Blackearth Steel. The isolation capabilities of the alloy were impressive, but they weren’t a match to the small burst of Creation Zac had forced into the array. He had managed to retain a small amount of both energies for emergencies, and he had chosen to use his last Creation Energy at this moment.

The vibrant force spread like a poison through the dodecahedron, causing hairline cracks to appear. The Realm Spirit was screaming at him with horror in his voice, but Zac

ignored it as **[Verun's Bite]** had appeared in his hand. The axe was already descending toward the array as it appeared, with the two runes of sharpness and heaviness radiating a sanguine glow.

The swing bit into the metal tubes with such force that it shocked the whole treasury. The cage held, except for some small cracks that covered its surface. But Zac wasn't deterred, and he furiously swung his axe two more times until the cage cracked altogether, unleashing a storm of contained energy.

At the same time, the whole Mystic Realm groaned as spatial tears appeared all over the place, signaling that the realm was truly falling apart. Zac was inundated in extremely condensed Life and Death, but he didn't step back. Instead, he grabbed the shimmering crystal, hurriedly ripping it out of the socket just as he felt a surge of energy entering the room.

Cracks spread across the small spiraled gem as it started leaking energy, but Zac simply stuffed it into a treasure box along with a couple of the Life-and-Death-attuned Cosmic Crystals he had found in the room, before sealing the box with a talisman and stuffing it into his Spatial Ring.

“What have you done?!” an infuriated voice roared with enough force to make the whole room shake.

Zac only snorted in response, not bothering to talk with the Realm Spirit any longer. Something had been off about the congenial Realm Spirit since the beginning, and that feeling had only become stronger after he entered the castle. Zac couldn't pinpoint the problem, but something wasn't right.

Seeing how urgently the Realm Spirit had wanted him to get to the treasury, Zac had been filled with reluctance, to the point that he had started stalling. Why else would he have spent twenty minutes looting ratty old furniture and broken-down tools when the world around him was collapsing?

The Realm Spirit kept being careful to not push him too hard even when wasting time, no doubt afraid its plans would fail if he became hostile. That way, less than fifteen minutes was remaining when Zac reached the treasury, giving the Realm Spirit less time to enact whatever plan it had concocted.

And having seen the cage, Zac mostly figured out what was going on.

A vast majority of the runes were foreign to him, but some were not. He hadn't seen them in any of Catheya's compendiums of patterns, or from any missives he had bought. Rather, they were something that had originated from Adcarkas, Void's Disciple. After Zac had managed to kill the Dominator, he hadn't dared take his Cosmos Sack back to Earth, but rather destroyed it along with his and Harbinger's corpses.

However, some things still managed to make their way back, and he had seen these particular patterns upon visiting Clan Volor. It was shortly after they set up their underwater town where the frogmen had appeared on Earth.

When the Mystic Realm started collapsing, Void's Disciple and Inevitability had been nowhere to be found. So, the Zhix traitors had decided to move toward the Memorysteel Mountain, bringing their captive gemlings with them. However, they had first collected everything in the buildings where Dominators had stayed for the last couple of months.

It was among these items Zac had found several schematics, along with some research notes and experiments. Zac couldn't make any heads or tails of it, but Kenzie and Jeeves had quickly realized that the notes were related to soul transference. Adcarkas had been researching a way to adapt a possession-type array to make use of the Spatial Energy of the Dimensional Seed.

Most of the array schematic was missing, most likely left on Void's Disciple's body, but it was certain that it was the method Adcarkas used to take over the body of his daughter. And now, Zac had seen similar patterns on the cage in front of him.

The old Realm Spirit had lived for a long time, but it was clearly not as willing to enter the cycle of reincarnation as he had tried to let on.

Chapter 783: One Shot at Eternity

Alvod looked at the array of items in front of him as he sat in the center of the Ascension Array, his heart beating with a mix of trepidation and anticipation. Four hundred thousand years of preparation, all for this moment. He would either defend his Dao and begin the next step of his journey, or he would turn to dust, as so many had before him.

His gaze turned to the chaotic scars that covered the tapestry, and he shook his head with a wry smile. Things had turned out alright, but that young Draugr was a troublemaker of unprecedented proportions. To think that he had managed to form a shadow of that elusive Dao with the help of those two cursed objects. Even more surprising, he was still alive and kicking.

It was no wonder the brat had such confidence in his path. Alvod had always thought it a fool's errand. But who knew, he might just be able to keep climbing a while longer. Of course, seeing that fragmented Dao didn't shake his Dao Heart at all. That little animal had his path, and he had his own.

The descent of the System and the hastened collapse of the realm was unexpected, but it didn't change things overly much. He had lost a year of preparations, but so had those on the outside. Besides, his whole road of cultivation had been bumpy, so why should his ascent be any different?

Thankfully, the two intrusive whispers in the back of his mind had been quieted just before the System descended, which improved his odds of success by at least five percent. Most likely, it was the Draugr who, either wittingly or unwittingly, destroyed the preparations of his fellow imperials while hunting the remnant that Alvod had set loose.

Alvod had figured that one of the two being destroyed by the hand of Arcaz Black would be a good outcome, but he had underestimated the control the Draugr held over Creation and Oblivion. It appeared the masters Arcaz Black mentioned were real, as they must have provided him with something to curtail the madness of the ancient remnants, at least until they could be harvested.

It was time.

Alvod closed his eyes and focused while the array lit up around him, and his Dharma Treasure emerged from his glabella a moment later. The small wooden rowboat rose above his head, forming an illusory tidal wave beneath itself. It crashed against the daybreak, an endless cycle of ebb and flow. It was the herald of the Evening Tide, the harbinger of his Dao.

Next, Alvod threw out the Wheels of the Six Paths, each one of them taking a position on the crumbling tapestry. He couldn't help but once more open his eyes and look at them with mixed emotions. Finding the first wheel of this ancient and heretical Buddhist treasure, the Wheel of Preta-Gati, on his homeworld had completely remolded his destiny.

It had allowed him to defy the heavens themselves as he became a ravenous ghost that fed on the world itself. It had made him unsurpassed and unmatched in might, but it had also set him down a path of tragedy. He became a calamity for his homeworld far more dangerous than any invaders. When he woke up from his stupor, nothing but ruins remained.

Things had only somewhat stabilized when he found the Wheel of Manushya-Gati as well, in the hands of a young woman he had killed in his madness. He even managed to seize a Body Tempering Manual in the Tower of Eternity that more efficiently made use of the unique energy the wheels generated.

These wheels had made him extraordinary. Without them, there was no guarantee he would even have survived the integration. Even if he did, the odds of him reaching Hegemony were slim. Monarchy was but a distant and

unrealistic hope. At most, he would have managed to become a local warlord on his home planet at the edge of the Multiverse, destined to never come in contact with the real truths of the universe.

But for all the wheels had given him, they were also the cause of endless suffering. Alvod knew it wasn't just a matter of their value causing avarice in others. The more he made use of them, the heavier his Karmic Debt would become, which maintained the Law of Balance. It had become so suffocating he had been forced into hiding for hundreds of thousands of years, unable to even gaze upon the sky.

Now, mighty foes had gathered to interrupt his ascension, making a nigh insurmountable task even harder. However, with the last two wheels collected in the Havarok Empire and his imminent ascension, things were finally about to reach a turning point. As long as he succeeded, the Six Paths would open, and he would shed the Karmic Debt he had accumulated by severing his chance at reincarnation.

He would only live once, but Alvod was fine with that. One shot at eternity was all he needed.

"I am the holder of the Evening Tide," he said, and reality shuddered as he imposed his will on the wheels. "The ages turn, Karma dies, and the world is reborn."

The tapestry resisted, or rather the Realm Spirit did. When the wheels had turned one full circle, the Twilight Ocean would be gone, reincarnated as an avatar to his path. Alvod only smiled at the struggle, and his gaze turned to the small chalice hovering in the air, its receptacle filled to three-quarters with Primal Dao.

Seven drops, one for each wheel while the last one entered his Dharma Treasure. The rowboat was already at the peak of its grade, and the infusion pushed it one step further, putting it right at the threshold. Seeing that the treasure held, Alvod grinned his gaze turned to a small clay figurine.

"Life is not life, death is not death," he muttered as the figurine floated into his hands.

A million dense scripts flashed into being on the small figurine as it started exuding an inscrutable and earth-shattering aura. But that was nothing compared to the radiant display in his inner world, where a ten-thousand-meter-tall statue lit up in a similar manner. An unprecedented storm erupted in his inner world, with the crashing waves reaching thousands of meters in the air.

The small wooden boat became an avatar of the storm as it crashed forward, the eventide churning in its wake. It slammed into the weakened tapestry, causing reality itself to crack. The wheels turned ninety degrees, and Alvod took a shuddering breath as he felt cracks spread across his world. However, he wasn't deterred at all, and his mouth curved upward in a bloody smile as he heard an earth-shattering rumble on the outside.

It had begun.

"It's all wrong," Elou Alu'Valadir muttered with a frown as she gazed up at the churning clouds that were accumulating, covering an area far greater than the whole of the Twilight Harbor. "What should we do, Lord Nether?"

The deep thud of an immensely tyrannic heart echoed out, its power enough to cause ripples in space itself. It pushed into the churning anomaly of the crumbling Daoworld, searching for answers within.

"The effigy has failed," Nizu Noz'Valadir frowned. "I cannot sense the presence of my descendant either. Something unexpected must have happened by the end."

"If the effigy has failed..." Grifon Alu'Valadir hesitated as he glanced at the sea of crystals that were slowly waking up, each one of them emitting the troublesome Shroud of Azur to hide the movements of the Eidolon cultivators.

"No matter. Chaos has taken hold of this event, and no side will be able to seize a clear advantage," Nizu muttered with a sigh as six golden rings appeared behind his back, each one of them throbbing with the Dao right at the edge of the threshold.

“But when it comes to foundations and strength, the Eternal Clan fear no one, certainly not some frontier Monarchs. I will force my way. You two, restrain those scheming natives, and monitor the movements of Hive Ouro.”

“Will they even dare-” Grifon snorted, but the grin on his face froze when space cracked.

Out from the void, nine spears emerged, forming a perfect encirclement around the spatial anomaly. Each one was almost ten kilometers long and covered in dense scriptures that palpitated with destructive energies. The next moment, nine Monarchs appeared, each one hovering above a respective spear.

A ripple echoed through the Twilight Harbor as the nine spears shot forward, heading toward the anomaly with crushing momentum.

“Godslayer spikes,” Nizu muttered with some surprise. “The locals are going all out.”

“Lord, we cannot...” Elou hesitated as her aura started climbing.

“Not to worry,” Nizu smiled as he took out a large sanguine crystal. “You are not alone. Stopping three of them is enough. The Eidolon will be forced to make a move as well. As for the final three, the main character will have to deal with them himself.”

The two elders breathed out in relief, and they looked over at the crystal in Nizu Noz’Valadadir’s hand. Suddenly a flash of light emerged from its core, spreading its radiance for tens of kilometers and prompting the heavens to rumble.

“That’s..!” Elou exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock and hunger.

“This Heavenly Descent belongs to the Eternal Clan,” Nizu smiled as the crystal cracked.

As expected, the Realm Spirit had mixed truths with lies. The crystal really appeared to be a nascent Realm Spirit, and the

array actually had the capability to protect the crystal within. But it also contained the ability to transfer a consciousness, which was a huge problem.

There was no way Zac would feel comfortable infusing a deceptive Autarch into Earth's World Core. That was a disaster waiting to happen. He would rather break the cage and risk losing the young Realm Spirits than risk having it become a vessel to Qi'Sar. It was possible the former Autarch only wanted to find a new home to continue living, but there were all kinds of mysterious and weird abilities out there.

What if he wasn't content staying a Realm Spirit forever? Wasn't Zac's dual races a perfect vessel if Qi'Sar wanted to embark on the path of cultivation again? Even worse, Zac only understood a small part of the array on the cage, and it might have contained even more hidden traps than just the Soul Transferring Array. Just the fact that it was supposed to run on his Dao was suspicious.

Zac had immediately decided to strike, even if he didn't have all the facts.

As to why Qi'Sar was insistent on not putting it away just before the realm collapsed, his motivations were probably true. However, he wasn't just talking about this young Realm Spirit being locked to the Twilight Ocean, but also himself. Qi'Sar probably wasn't able to transfer his consciousness while the realm was still standing, indelibly bound to the Twilight Ocean.

The moment the realm collapsed, he would be free and have a short window of opportunity. It was right before that moment Zac had destroyed the cage, using the surge of chaos in the atmosphere to guide his timing.

"So you figured it out," Qi'Sar's voice echoed through the chamber, the previously congenial voice now rife with sinister intentions. "I didn't expect you to understand that array from how clueless you've acted over the past years. You truly hid yourself deeply."

Zac wryly smiled, happy that his ignorance had worked in his favor for once. The Realm Spirit had clearly been spying on

him, and it must have witnessed the months he spent studying basic patterns that most elite clan members had already memorized by the time they started cultivating. How could someone like him have known about an esoteric unorthodox method like a Soul Transferring Array?

Even Zac's greed where he had looted everything he came across had worked in his favor, and Qi'Sar hadn't suspected his motivations to loot the side chambers at all. Zac had even happily looted the worthless Twilight Fruits and low-grade herb over the past years, so why wouldn't he go mad with greed for D-grade materials?

"I'm sorry, I don't feel comfortable carrying an old schemer like you out of here," Zac snorted. "It probably wouldn't end well for me. But don't worry, your legacy will live on through your children."

The safest option would simply have been to stall things out until the realm collapsed, giving up on the twinned life-death Realm Spirits. That way, he would make it off scot-free with a hoard of treasure. However, Zac was unwilling to give up on this unique opportunity. Qi'Sar had been lying about some things, but Zac didn't think he was lying about how useful this crystal was.

Who knew what kind of benefits a pair of mutated and connected Realm Spirits could bring to a young world like Earth? Right now, it was unclear if the planet would even survive the two clashing elements it had been imparted with. But with these little things, Earth had the potential to become a proper C-grade world. Perhaps something even greater if Zac managed to nurture the planet properly.

There was no response from the Realm Spirit this time, but Zac suddenly felt a scream of danger, and he unhesitantly activated [**Earthstrider**] to flash away. It was just in time as well, as something weird happened to the spot where he just stood. Space somehow twisted on itself, like a rag being squeezed. The area was returned to normal in an instant, but the pedestal that had held the crystal and array cage had turned to dust from the spatial twist.

Space itself seemed hollow as well, like it was somehow destroyed.

Zac's eyes were wide with alarm, and he started running for his life, exiting the treasury in a mad dash. Another pang of danger warned him that he still wasn't safe, and he ignored the protests of his body as he kept activating his movement skill, shifting almost a hundred meters in an instant. Space kept falling apart where he had been standing, and Zac knew it wasn't just a random occurrence.

From the looks of it, Qi'Sar was destroying his own body to take out Zac.

Zac rushed toward the tunnel leading out of the castle, hoping that the Realm Spirit's control would be weaker further away from its seat of power. However, he grimaced when he saw the whole storeroom twisting before being ripped apart. A moment later, he heard a rumble from within, indicating that the tunnel had collapsed.

One way out of here had been destroyed, but that didn't mean Zac could stop moving. The only reason he was still alive was no doubt because Qi'Sar lacked any real means of attack by the looks of it. After all, any random skill of a former Autarch would not only be immensely powerful but also extremely difficult to avoid.

Besides, Zac figured he probably had his hands full as he felt a series of tremors. Some came from directly above, most likely a final clash between the Havarok and the Radiant Temple. But there was also the occasional shake that rocked the whole realm, and they didn't seem to be a result of the realm collapsing.

The old monsters on the outside had probably made their moves.

Luckily, Zac had not only spent his time looting scraps after entering the castle cellar. He had studied the layout, which included the path leading up. Before, it had mostly been to keep watch for other people sneaking up on him, but now it turned into a lifesaver as Zac flashed up a set of stairs, finding himself on the ground floor.

Another rumble shocked the castle, and Zac looked upward with some surprise. The force the two sides were unleashing in their battle was nothing to scoff at. Without the remnants assisting him, Zac didn't feel confident at all dealing with something like that. He remembered the army standing behind Ykrodas Havarok, guessing that they used some mighty War Arrays in the struggle to either protect or kill the Realm Spirit.

Having reached this point, Zac muttered a silent prayer that Ykrodas Havarok would fail at this final juncture, allowing the Radiant Temple to kill Qi'Sar, or at least harm him to the point he couldn't waste any of his attention on Zac. After quickly orienting himself, he flashed away once more, barely avoiding the increasingly frantic attempts at killing him.

"I might fall here, but I will have you accompany me across the bridge of forgetfulness," Qi'Sar raged, and Zac's eyes were wide with alarm as the whole castle started to rumble.

The infuriated Realm Spirit was actually collapsing the whole building after having failed to take Zac down. He desperately made his way toward the exit, but even with his movement skill, he knew he wouldn't make it. D-grade Boulders from the ceiling were already raining down on him, and the walls were on the verge of collapsing entirely.

Having a castle fall on his head wouldn't necessarily kill him, but that wasn't the real problem. He had already experienced just how difficult these stones were to break through.

Becoming trapped in D-grade rubble would make him a sitting duck for the realm Spirit. One spatial twist and he would be a goner.

Seeing no other option, Zac grit his teeth as infused some Void Energy into two skill fractals, prompting a large leaf to appear in front of his axehead. Two bursts of Mental Energy were squeezed from his drained soul, prompting two clouds to shoot forward just as his path was about to be blocked.

The divide of the Abyss and Arcadia appeared from two vertical slashes, its power almost unstoppable thanks to the Twilight Energy and the fact that space had become extremely brittle by now. Not even the sturdy rocks could withstand the

attack, and Zac desperately squeezed through the void, emerging outside the castle in front of two shocked sentries.

Zac only glanced at the two Havarok soldiers as a sea of killing intent rippled out from his body, prompting the two warriors to instinctively step back in fear. Their short lapse was enough for Zac to make his move, which was to heedlessly run away with **[Earthstrider]**. Behind him, the towering castle completely collapsed.

“You little bastard!” a roar echoed out with enough force to make the whole City of Ancients shake, but Zac didn’t even glance back as he fled through the tunnel leading out of the inner courtyard.

Chapter 784: Collapse

Alvod snorted as he sensed the world-ending ferocity of the incoming Godslayer Spikes. The council's plans were truly sinister. They wanted to collapse the realm right at this critical moment, trying to force a singularity with the Realm Core as a medium for rebirth. Even if the worldly reincarnation failed, it would at least be a vicious strike at him.

It was with mixed emotions he looked out across the Twilight Harbor. Even if it was out of necessity, this little corner of the Frontier had been his home for the better part of his life. Certainly, he had spent most of the time in secluded cultivation or stasis, but he had still watched the fates of those who made the Twilight Harbor their home. Generation after generation of triumphs and setbacks, an endless cycle of ebb and flow.

“All for the Dao,” Alvod sighed, his eyes hardening as he extracted another set of drops from the chalice.

This time, it was not just a few drops, but more than half of his whole reserve. He looked at the sphere of Primal Dao with hunger, but he kept his desire in check as he waved his hands. Eight Purifiers rose into the air, forming a circle around the blob as Alvod started forming Dharmic Seals with blinding speed.

The Tapestry of Twilight shuddered as a storm of meaning entered the purifiers under the control of Alvod, who added his own Dao to finish the process. Alvod quickly threw out the prepared materials at the moment of completion, before spitting out a blob of heavenly fire. The materials mixed with the Primal Dao, and Alvod breathed out in relief when the mixture congealed into a small ball of shimmering paste.

He had researched this method for close to two hundred thousand years, and spent another fifty thousand refining and preparing the materials. All that effort finally paid dividends

as the compound exuded the purest of Dao and endless potential, but Alvod knew the most critical part remained. He took a deep breath before he made his move, and the whole realm shuddered as Alvod spat out a mouthful of blood.

The pain was blinding, but Alvod refused to let the darkness consume him as he released a steady breath toward the small ball. In his breath, his severed soul resided, and Alvod didn't dare as much as blink as he looked at the compound with worry.

The seconds passed after the shroud entered the Dao Paste, and Alvod's heart hit rock-bottom as nothing happened. Was it a failure? Had he sacrificed too little of his soul? He could spare a little bit more of his mind, but that would worsen his ability to withstand what would come next.

The spears were getting closer as well, and he knew that those foreigners wouldn't do all the work for him. They needed to weaken him, though not to the point he failed to conjure the Heavenly Descent. They would probably leave two or three spears for him to deal with.

As he agonized over whether to cut off another part of the soul, his dismay turned to elation as the small ball suddenly transformed into a simile of his own face. At the same time, Alvod felt his conception shift, suddenly seeing his surroundings from two directions.

It worked.

While Alvod knew his gambit was a success, he knew it wouldn't last long. A vortex appeared in front of him, and the small ball immediately shot inside, heading straight for the Realm Core.

"Eat your fill, little spirit," Alvod smiled, though he felt a pang of loss upon sacrificing so much Primal Dao. That small chalice had almost bankrupted him, and now only a third remained. "A remnant obsession thinking themselves an ancient cultivator. You thought I needed to kill you to achieve my aim? Since you are struggling to hold on, why don't you show me the comprehension of a vaunted Autarch? A final opportunity to rekindle your lost glory."

A piercing cry echoed out from the vortex just as it closed, and Alvod snorted as the wheels turned another 90 degrees. The shock of being forcibly infused with all that Dao had made the spirit lose its mind for a moment, allowing his plan to proceed. Of course, that was just an indirect benefit.

The ancient Dao locked in the Realm Core needed to be ignited. If that failed, all else was for naught. Without it to act as a sacrifice, the Heavens wouldn't descend, making fools out of everyone here. Thankfully, Alvod could already feel the buildup in the heart of the ocean, and the sky outside rumbled with even greater furor. It wasn't long now.

Satisfied, Alvod's gaze turned back toward the situation outside. The Godslayer Spears were almost upon him by this point, but he didn't even feel a ripple in his heart at these siege arrays that each had the power to completely extinguish the life of a peak Monarch.

"I guess I should be honored you use these things against me, but it appears I have been too low-key the past years. You dare stand in defiance of me, the Eveningtide Asura?" Alvod growled as **[Lamentation Point]**, his trident and primary Spirit Tool, appeared in his hand. "I guess I have to slay a few chickens to keep the monkeys at bay."

Another vortex appeared, and he pointed his weapon toward the hole, unleashing his wrath.

Space groaned as Refestus desperately squeezed through the crack, the light from his ancestral talisman dimming by the second. The spatial turbulence pressed closer to his body, and panic filled his heart as he struggled with all his might.

Suddenly, he was through, shooting through the vacuum of space with the pent-up momentum of his daring escape. It had worked! Refestus breathed out in relief when he saw the familiar world disks in the distance, relief washing over him when spotting his homedisk. His clan should still be okay. He had been worried over the past two years, almost to the point he left early even if it went against his orders.

Refestus had known things were bad even after the first month inside the trial, but he only realized the true gravity of the situation when the sky started to tear apart. Suspicious events had passed one after another in the trial, with the foreign Hegemons causing one scene after another. Local elites such as himself could only stay out of the way, trying to fish in the muddied waters and complete the tasks they had been assigned by the council.

But how could they deal with kill-squads of foreign Hegemons with far superior equipment and Heritages? He had personally witnessed a clash between the Eidolon and some elites from the Radiant Temple. The cataclysmic battle had rather seemed like a struggle between Monarchs than Hegemons. Since then, Refestus had just gone through the motions to complete his tasks, instead focusing on survival.

It didn't take a genius to realize something was different about this trial, and the whole cursed realm collapsing was the final straw. Most Hegemons opted to set up protective arrays and weather the storm until they would be sent out by the Heavens, but seeing the actions of those two Eidolon had filled Refestus with doubt.

Would some defensive arrays really be enough?

If it was, then why did the two ghosts cover themselves in awe-inspiring arrays and slip through the spatial cracks in the sky, leaving the Trial early? Resfestus had quickly come to a decision, and he followed in the wake of the two imperials, opting to squeeze into a spatial tear in a bid to survive. The lack of other cultivators around him proved that he was among the first to find their way out.

However, a single look around tampered his celebratory mood, and once more filled him with dread. Heedless anything else, he once more started flying for his life in a desperate struggle to get as far away from the Twilight Ascent as possible. What sort of madness had gripped the old monsters this time around?

A sea of blood churned across the sky, the crashing waves sounding like a million heartbeats that set Refestus' blood

ablaze, like it wanted to slip out of his body and join the sanguine waters. There were also innumerable crystals that emitted a mysterious haze, and the lights within threatened to pull his soul out of his body.

Most terrifying of all were the nine spears that were shooting toward the heart of the Twilight Ascent, each one of them controlled by one of the harbor's true leaders. Refestus' eyes were wide with shock when he spotted the Faebloom Monarch, the leader of the treants, his crown radiating blinding power as he shot toward the ghastly lights.

Another spike was pushed forth by Artolo, the warmongering Corpse-lord whose infamy was known across the whole Zervereth Sector. Even Rhodium, the Bluearch Monarch and the current leader of the Twilight Council, controlled one of the spikes as it shot straight toward the Twilight Ascent.

Refestus almost cried in relief upon following his guts, leaving early before those shockingly large needlepoints stabbed into the Twilight Ocean. The Mystic Realm was already teetering at the brink of collapse, and the Twilight Council seemed intent on putting it out of its misery.

A red light suddenly illuminated the area for a moment before it disappeared. It didn't seem like much, but that brief flash was enough to fill Refestus with even greater horror. He puked a huge mouthful of blood as innumerable wounds opened up throughout his body, and he desperately ate one of his lifesaving pills while trying to get his rampaging Miasma under control.

He glanced back to see what was going on, just in time to see two towering giants rise from the bloody ocean. Both of them reached over ten kilometers in the air, bloody devils with four wings on their backs. One of them held a spear even larger than the incoming spikes, while the other was surrounded by three spinning rivers of extremely condensed blood.

A similar scene was taking place in the ghastly haze as three massive ghosts took form. Refestus wasn't very clear about Ghost Dao techniques, but he felt a deep dread as he saw the twisted visages of the three avatars. The ghost in the middle

also had a long horn that emitted a sinister pitch-black aura, and Refestus screamed with horror when he felt his Soulwarding Gem crack.

He hurriedly looked away before more of his protections broke, his mind reeling at the implications of what he had just witnessed.

Dao Avatars. Refestus blanched upon realizing these foreign Monarchs were going all-out, unheedingly unleashing large-scale skills that were banned in almost all cities of the Multiverse. Similar scenes took place atop the nine spikes as well as the vaunted members of the Twilight Council fully unleashed their auras.

Normally, Refestus would be cheering on the Council with all his heart, perhaps even joining the struggle. But this was so far beyond his capabilities that it wasn't even funny. No matter what side would walk away victorious from this, it was doubtful the Twilight Harbor would even survive the event.

His thoughts turned to his descendants on the disk, and he forcibly rotated his energy to start moving again. Their clan only had Six Hegemons. The Clan Leader had already fallen in the Twilight Ascent, and who knew if the third elder would make it out now? The two elders who had remained behind had only entered Hegemony with the help of pills and other resources. They were stuck right at the beginning, barely stronger than an elite E-grade cultivator.

Refestus was the only one who would be able to protect the clan from the upheavals that would follow this war. He couldn't take any risks here.

However, horror filled his heart as Refestus felt another towering aura appear behind him. An enormous trident had appeared, and its very presence put immense pressure on the whole area. The bloody ocean seemed especially affected by its appearance, and its waters frothed furiously in response.

The already towering aura just kept rising, until Refestus felt it reach a crescendo. He felt death looming over his shoulders, and he couldn't help but look over one more time as he ran for his life.

Two golden balls of frantic waters shot forward, their surface covered in immensely powerful runes. They shot toward the incoming spears, aiming for both the weapon and the controller. Artolo summoned thousands of enormous chains, and space itself was ripped apart as they drew a ruthless arc toward the water bombs.

A huge golem appeared as well, conjured by the elemental who controlled another spike. The golem punched into the air, and enormous cracks of vibrant life spread forward, rushing through space with blinding speed. The councilors' attacks clashed slammed into the incoming spheres, but they had clearly underestimated the power they contained.

Chains snapped and the golem crumbled as the spheres continued forward. The two Monarchs seemed shocked, and huge amounts of energy churned around them as they prepared their next move.

But there was no time. After the initial clash, the runes on the spheres of waters lit up, and the two balls veritably teleported forward, prompting them to become impaled on the enormous spears. It felt like time had stopped for a moment, but reality soon came crashing down as the water bombs burst.

It looked like two golden suns had appeared as enough energy to turn Refestus into cinders a thousand times over were unleashed. The explosion swallowed the whole spears along with the two Monarchs who had controlled them. Refestus' mind turned blank as he felt the Dao contained in the shimmering light.

It was like he was gazing into the eyes of the Heavens themselves, two fiery orbs of life and death. But the impression only lasted for a moment, before a shockwave rocked reality itself. Space was twisted and compacted as the chaotic wave of Dao and unbridled energy pushed forward, each moment swallowing tens of kilometers while the epicenter became a zone of utter destruction.

There was no time to run. There was no time to set up any defenses, not that it would do him any good. Refestus could only say a mental prayer for his descendants, hoping that they

would survive this calamity. Or at least that they would face as painless an end as himself.

A moment later the wave passed him by, and Refestus Ynovium was no longer.

Zac looked around for any more attacks, but a pained wail from the Realm Spirit suddenly rocked the whole City. It seemed the Radiant Temple had managed to pull one over on the Havarok Empire and Qi'Sar, much to Zac's delight. Of course, that only dealt with his most immediate problem.

Huge scars spread across the sky, vortices leading out of the Mystic Realm. He saw how torrents of energy and matter were being dragged inside every second as the Twilight Ocean collapsed. Zac peered into the void, looking for any clues about the outside, but there was nothing to be found at the other side of those tears. There was just endless darkness, making it uncertain if they actually led to the Twilight Harbor.

Another shudder rocked the whole mystic realm, and Zac heard a fearful shout in the distance. It was almost time, and he took out the communication crystal one final time.

"This is it," Zac said. "Good luck out there."

"There's a minute or two remaining I think," Catheya sighed on the other side. "Should we gather up?"

"We better not," Zac muttered after some hesitation. "I kind of infuriated the Realm Spirit just now."

"Of course you did," Catheya laughed. "It's comforting to see that some things stay the same even as the world crumbles."

Zac smiled as he looked over his shoulder just in case.

"It's been fun traveling together," Catheya continued. "I hope we can meet up again. The road of cultivation is long, and it's better traversed with some company."

"Likewise," Zac smiled. "I think I will have to lay low for a bit after this, but I hope we can meet again. Perhaps in the Heartlands, even."

“The Heavens protect us,” Catheya giggled.

Zac hesitated for a second before he decided to come clean. “I have spoken with your ancestor.”

“You have?! How?! What did she say?” Catheya exclaimed with shock.

“Nevermind how. She said that she cannot halt her cultivation right now. But she promised me that the threat facing the Sharva’Zi clan has been averted,” Zac said.

He couldn’t bear telling the whole truth, where it seemed like Be’Zi had abandoned her previous self altogether. Instead, he mixed truths and falsehoods.

“She cannot come, after all?” Catheya said with some despondency. “Well, thank you for try-“

Catheya never finished the sentence as a weird fluctuation rippled through the Mystic Realm, causing the communication crystal to malfunction. Zac sighed as he put the crystal away before he looked up with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. The tears in the sky had combined, turning into an enormous hole that expanded with extreme speed.

In just a few seconds, it had covered half of the sky, and the Ocean Waters were suddenly just gone, reduced to a chaotic mix of Miasma and Cosmic Energy. Zac knew that this was it, and he transformed into yet another appearance while he covered himself in talismans. He urgently swore at the System to hurry up, and finally, the prompt he had waited for appeared in front of him.

The enormous spatial tear was descending like a shroud of darkness, and Zac hurriedly ate two pills while he fervently covered himself in an ashy mixture. One of the pills was another healing pill, while the second was a Karma-breaking Pill that would hopefully strengthen the efficacy of the compound he used on his body.

Next, he finally activated the array around his Specialty Core, hiding his unique constitution from any prying eyes outside. The darkness was almost upon him by this point, and Zac looked around the crumbling world with a mix of emotions.

He couldn't help but wonder if Catheya was right as he thought back to the events over the past two years.

His goal for the Twilight Harbor had simply been to push his Draugr Race to D-grade, and perhaps buy some cultivation resources for himself and the Einherjar. How had it ended up with an ancient Mystic Realm collapsing and him making enemies of multiple factions that could annihilate the whole Zecia sector if they so desired?

Were these shocking events related to the Stele of Conflict as well, or was it simply the System pushing him further down this path of no return? Or was it simply bad luck? In either case, it had left him with few options of what to do next.

It was time for him to die.

Chapter 785: Fertilizer for One's Path

Rhodium burned with anxiety as he saw Artolo fall, unable to withstand even the opening salvo of the Eveningtide Asura. Ovo was still standing, but the Godslayer Spike the Rox'At Elemental controlled had been damaged to the point it might as well be considered an ornament by this point. It was already leaking its energies, forming a zone of destruction stretching a dozen kilometers in each direction.

Things had gone out of control too quickly. They had all been in meditation to reach a sublime mental state before the battle, but they had been forced to wake early and immediately set out. Why had the realm crumbled early, and why had the System involved itself? They had no choice but to make their move before the Godslayer Array had properly charged up, and they had decided to control the spikes themselves instead.

That cut the might of the spikes in half, but Rhodium knew that was only part of the problem. How could someone native to the frontier be this powerful?

Especially someone who had spent almost half of his lifespan in secluded cultivation, unable to gather rare treasures and honing his skills in battle. According to their estimates, Alvod Jondir had been severely wounded when usurping the throne, to the point his cultivation had regressed to Middle C-grade. They had figured the false lord to be powerful thanks to having forcibly increased his cultivation to Divine Monarchy, but he actually surpassed his grade in strength.

It made their mission almost insurmountable, and Rhodium was filled with regrets. If they only found out about these plans earlier they would have been able to enact more airtight plans. They had barely managed to construct these spikes, yet

they didn't even have a proper delivery system. But Rhodium knew they couldn't stop here.

The spikes had been activated, and they would only last for a few more minutes before their pathways would crack from the rampant energies contained within.

"Alvod Jondir shouldn't be able to unleash more attacks in the short run," Heryes's voice echoed out in his mind. "I will try to deal with one of the bloodsuckers."

"I will assist you," Rhodium frowned as an azure river appeared around him. "We need to restrain them at least, allowing the others to finish the objective. The Faebloom Monarch will restrain the ghosts with Ovo and Ubulo."

"Alright," Heryes agreed.

Rhodium sent a command to his spike and it changed course, now heading straight for the two sanguine avatars instead of the anomaly. The necromancer followed suit, and a towering skeleton appeared behind her. The skeleton grabbed the Godslayer Spike, intent on using it as a weapon.

The two bloody avatars got ready to meet their attack, the mage choosing to deal with the skeleton. The rivers that had surrounded her shot forward, each one of them containing boundless amounts of Essence Blood, making it wildly powerful.

The skeleton responded in kind as it spat out a shroud of condensed putrefaction. Heryes had no doubt implanted the ancient skull of her prime servant with terrifying toxins, and Rhodium prayed it would be enough to putrefy the blood of the Eternal Clan. Rhodium had no time to worry about his ally though, and he rather focused his attentions on the other avatar.

Tens of thousands of runes were appearing around the vampire's spear as he had retracted his weapon. He was building momentum, and Rhodium knew he couldn't tarry. He infused his Dao into the azure river, prompting it to shudder as it grew massive scales. An earth-shattering roar caused space

itself to crack as the river turned into the simile of a primordial flood dragon.

It shot forward, its advance causing space itself to freeze before cracking.

However, the vampire had finished his preparations, and he stabbed forward with furious momentum. Rhodium thought to block, but he suddenly felt the shadow of death loom over him, and he quickly formed a few incantations, prompting himself and the spike to shift ten kilometers away.

It was a wise decision, as the space where he had previously occupied simply disintegrated, forming an almost endless scar in space. The dragon was badly maimed as well, but its core runes were still intact, allowing Rhodium to reform it.

The stab had carried a shocking amount of force, far beyond what Rhodium had expected. He looked over with worry, just in time to see the three rivers break out from the restrictive haze of Heryes. The streams had darkened considerably, but they still maintained more than half of their essence. They shot forward with almost untouched momentum, and Rhodium's face sunk when he saw Heryes' prized possession get ripped apart by the three frothing rivers.

The Necromancer paled in response, and her mind was no doubt wounded after the destruction of her puppet. She wasn't ready to give in though, and a storm of millions of bones poured out of her sleeves, forming a dense cloud that spread over five kilometers. The bones swirled and crashed into each other, causing a deafening cacophony that rippled toward the rivers.

They were forming an ancestral curse, and Rhodium shuddered as he unwittingly moved a bit closer to Heryes. Space around her was bound to be excluded from the cursed field, which was important to know considering the crazy Necromancer's proclivity for wanton destruction when going all out.

Meanwhile, a huge explosion behind Rhodium confirmed what he had been worried about. The monstrous jab had continued until it slammed into a world disk. The disks were

covered in extremely mighty arrays, but Rhodium could feel that most of the restrictions had broken down already. He needed to make a move. If things continued this way, there wouldn't be anything left to salvage even if they won.

His heart bled, but he still took out the small blue gemstone he had saved for over two hundred thousand years. It was supposed to be one of the core components the next time he expanded his inner world, yet he was forced to use it in a situation like this. He absorbed the primordial force within, and another roar echoed through the cosmos as the azure dragon doubled in size and shot toward the avatar with newfound vigor.

Meanwhile, Rhodium formed a series of seals, and tens of thousands of lances appeared behind him, each one a hundred meters long. a series of azure halos lit up around each one of them, filling the spear with energy until they suddenly shot forward with enough speed to cleave the void itself. They fell like deadly rain, heading straight toward the three Monarchs below.

He hoped that a direct attack would lessen the pressure on his companion, and hopefully provide an opening for someone to launch their spike at the spatial anomaly. But a deep heartbeat echoed out through the area, and Rhodium was shocked to find cracks appear on his own heart. The damage quickly healed though, and he instilled more and more energy into his spear array.

In response, a huge tidal wave of blood rose behind the three Eternal Clan members, and it pushed forward to swallow the azure spears within. Rhodium grimaced when he felt the connection to his skill break long before they managed to pierce to where his targets were sitting.

He hadn't even managed to make them move out of the way.

Meanwhile, the whole area was crying as almost two dozen Monarchs unleashed one mighty attack after another. Rhodium knew this place would be tainted for tens of thousands of years as a result, but there was nothing to be done about it. Both he and the other councilors fought desperately to reach the Spatial

Anomaly, but the imperials were far more powerful than they expected.

They managed to occupy five of the spikes, with only two managing to enter the Spatial Anomaly. That was far below what they had hoped for, but it was better than nothing. Even that was only thanks to the Radiant Temple staying out of the way, for some reason content with circulating at the edge of the battlefield.

Just two wouldn't do it. They had estimated that they needed at least four to strike to collapse the realm entirely. Now, they would just become a small thorn in the Eveningtide Asura's side, unless they managed to force two more inside.

Suddenly, a deep gong echoed out from above, and Rhodium's eyes widened when he saw the churning clouds open up. First, it was just a small hole in the middle, a small weakness that leaked a marvelous shimmer. At the same time, the Spatial Anomaly was twisting, almost beating like a heartbeat as it started turning.

Another gong, and innumerable shimmering lights simultaneously flashed into being, almost forming a belt around the battlefield. The golden light had the mark of the System, and Rhodium spotted cultivators emitting weak auras within. It was no doubt the trial takers being taken out of the crumbling realm, but he had no time to worry about them as he knew what was about to happen.

The clanking sound of a wheel turning could be heard from within the anomaly, and a third gong echoed out, harkening the arrival of the Heavens. The small hole in the thunderous cloud suddenly enlarged, growing to a fifty-kilometer-wide hollow in an instant. From within, an endless amount of light poured down upon them all, drenching them in the chorus of the Boundless Dao.

"The eye of the Heavens," Rhodium whispered with a mix of marvel and horror as the energy inside his body went haywire from being exposed to the Heavenly Law.

They were too late.

The destruction had come too quickly, and the Eveningtide Asura had already seized the opportunity while their plans had fallen apart. The fact that the Heavens had descended meant the Realm Core had been seized and repurposed, used to conjure a Heavenly Descent.

Rhodium's thoughts were a mess, with part of him wanting to furiously fight, to confirm his path by destroying another's. Part of him simply wanted to run away. But he was locked in place as his eyes were glued to the spectacle above. From how the battlefield had grown quiet, the same was true for the others.

The Heavens itself had descended, bringing the true Dao to bear. Inside the radiant lights, the answers to all questions that had plagued him for the past eons were hidden. If Rhodium could simply find the right stream, he could finally break past the bottleneck that had locked him in place since he lost his momentum.

But a shocked shriek ripped Rhodium out of his reverie, and he looked over with confusion to see his fellow councilors attacking each other. The Faebloom Monarch had actually ambushed Ovo, who was already wounded after withstanding the attack of the Eveningtide Asura. A similar scene took place on the other side of the anomaly.

A wave of dizziness suddenly hid him, and his eyes widened in alarm as he furiously looked over at Heryes, who sighed as the storm of bones headed his way.

"You?!" Rhodium roared, knowing he had been poisoned.

"I'm sorry, old friend," Heryes smiled, though there was no mirth in her eyes. "Death is inevitable. With the Heavenly Descent a fact, the harbor has reached its end. The guild needed to plan for all contingencies. You forget, our situation is far worse than yours, considering our leanings."

"So you should have fought twice as hard to protect your sanctuary," Rhodium growled as he desperately tried to recoup his energy.

But it was like his Cosmic Energy had turned into a gas that steamed out from his pores, and he felt his inner world become shrouded in darkness. Meanwhile, the gargantuan bones of the broken skeleton scattered across the area started to regroup, once more forming an undamaged warrior that shot toward Rhodium instead of the imperials.

Two of the vampire Monarchs didn't sit idly by, and they added insult to injury as they both had their avatars restrain and target him. However, the leader of the three ignored him, instead swallowing some small bead as thousands of tendrils emerged from his back, shooting down toward the anomaly below.

Six golden rings above his head swirled, forming a celestial song that sang of the cycle of life and death, of blood and war. The chimes fused with the Heavenly song from above, trying to harmonize. Rhodium knew the man was trying to supplant the Heavenly Descent, but he wasn't in a position to care about that at the moment.

He saw the crashing waves of blood surge toward him, yet he was barely able to move between the poison and the pressure from above. He knew there was no point in lingering, and he activated his Spatial Displacement Treasure. But despair filled his heart as he felt how space itself was sealed.

Would he really fall here?

"The Heavens might accept your offering, but we do not abide!" a snort suddenly echoed in his ears.

The voice wasn't loud, but it contained a tremendous force as it echoed out through the cosmos. It contained the might and will of the Dao itself, and one avatar after another broke apart, unable to maintain their form in front of a superior truth as an impossible pressure descended on the area. Even the shimmering light from the Dao Ocean above dimmed, temporarily suppressed by an unbreakable will.

The next moment, the universe was split apart by a horizontal scar that stretched as far as his eyes could see. Out from it, a celestial army emerged. Tens of thousands of warriors stepped through the tear, each one reaching hundreds of meters in the

air. They exuded a bloodlust that drowned the whole Twilight Harbor in a red haze, but their gazes were thankfully trained at the undead imperials and the Spatial Anomaly, rather than at himself.

Behind them, an impossibly large presence took form, its hands holding apart space itself as he pushed his torso through. He was tens of thousands of meters tall, and Rhodium felt his blood boil when looking at the inscrutable tattoos that covered the giant's face. They spoke of bloodshed and war, of unquestionable might and of victory.

The man's other half was still on the other side of the void, but his shocking aura forcibly kept the spatial tear open. Atop the man's head sat a jade crown, the six red gemstones inlaid on it a clear answer to who had arrived. The Sixth Protector. Rhodium's breath quickened when he realized what was going on, and despair quickly turned into elation. They might just make it after all.

The Havarok Empire had actually managed to send an Autarch through the Tarramak Vault somehow, in the flesh no less.

Catheya looked around with wide eyes, horrified at the auras she could vaguely sense through the golden barrier around here.

“Are you two okay?” she asked.

“We're fine,” Qirai wheezed, though Catheya noticed her aura was extremely unstable.

It was no wonder. The Mystic Realm had fallen apart, and their exit had been bereft of the stabilizing arrays you saw on Space Gates and Teleportation Arrays. They had been dragged through the void, their bodies exposed to chaotic Spatial Energies along with the exhaust of the realm itself.

Thankfully, the System had taken mercy on them, erecting the golden barriers after they had withstood half the journey on their own. However, the golden glow around them was slowly dissipating, and she could already smell the cataclysmic danger that waited outside.

“Get ready to teleport away,” she said as she ate a soul-soothing pill, and her two followers followed suit.

Ten seconds later, the shielding dissipated, but they didn't even have time to activate their escape talismans before they were subdued and immobilized by multiple layers of terrifying pressure. If not for the defensive equipment they wore, their bodies might have started crumbling then and there.

Catheya looked at the scene, her eyes wide with horror. She had known it would be bad, but this was beyond even what she could have imagined. Above in the sky, extremely dense clouds stretched on as far as she could see. In its center, a marvelous light shimmered, but she hurriedly looked away when she felt her soul shudder precipitously.

She had a good idea of what that light was, and she knew that it was not something an E-grade cultivator herself could meddle with. The Heavenly Secrets were not so easily divulged. Besides, this was no time to enter meditation. Over a Dozen monarchs floated around the Spatial Anomaly, and they clearly had been fighting just a moment ago.

But now, they all faced a terrifying army, led by a man of shocking proportions. Catheya had never seen her family's Autarch in the flesh, but she had sensed the aura left behind by him and her ancestor. This aura was weaker, but it was extremely condensed, which wasn't a surprise considering he was here in the flesh.

Catheya didn't understand what was going on. She knew that this sector of the Frontier lacked proper Space Gates to allow a being as powerful as an Autarch to pass through. Had he sailed here across the vast darkness, spending god-knows how much time and even harming his foundations? And if they knew of this event that long ago, they surely should have come up with some better plans?

It didn't make sense, yet he was here, his mere presence causing space to shudder. The implications were terrifying, but not everyone seemed to be as subdued by the arrival.

“Since everyone has gathered, let's get this show on the road,” an unfamiliar man laughed, his voice filled with boundless

conviction. It was the Eveningtide Asura.

The next moment, the Twilight Ascent exploded, unleashing a surge of rampant energy that seemed without limit. Catheya looked at the almost blinding display with dismay, knowing that even a fraction of that force would be able to extinguish her in body and soul. Thankfully, the energy didn't erupt in a shockwave of unbridled energy and Dao.

Instead, it poured into the dozens of twilight rivers that formed a spider web through the Twilight Harbor, and they lit up with unprecedented might as they started to move, gathering toward the heart of the Harbor. The huge avatar snorted as he spat a ball of destruction toward the core, but the rivers formed an enormous cocoon around it.

The power in the attack contained enough power to kill a Peak Monarch, yet the rivers managed to withstand it. Thankfully, the Autarch had controlled his power as well, and not as much as a ripple spread out toward the lower-grade cultivators.

“Alvod Jondir. I have come to enact judgment on your sins,” the Autarch growled, his voice sounding like Heavenly Law.

“Not even the heavens can judge me, protector, let alone you,” the Eveningtide Asura laughed from within the cocoon. “You shall all become fertilizer for my path.”

The sky rumbled in response, as though enraged by the proclamation. Nine purple tendrils started to descend toward the cocoon, and screams echoed out all around her as their aura covered the Twilight Harbor. Catheya squeezed her eyes shut, but she felt herself losing control. The Heavens had been pulled down to the frontier, and nothing could withstand its wrath.

Her mind drifted as she lost sensation, and an endless cold gripped her. Darkness crept closer, and the last thing she remembered was the silhouette of a man sitting on a balcony, enjoying the scenery of the Twilight Harbor.

Chapter 786: Rip and Tear

Zac was startled awake by pained cries and rampant energies that rocked the area. It looked like the transfer out of the Twilight Ocean had knocked him unconscious, which wasn't surprising considering the wretched state his body and soul were in. Thankfully he had covered himself in defensive talismans just in case, and they had activated just like they were supposed to.

Not that it was completely necessary. Zac looked around with his bleary eyes, and he saw how people kept appearing in golden bubbles that contained the aura of the System. As expected, it had provided some measure of protection for the trial takers upon their departure from the Twilight Ocean.

However, it looked like the System wasn't willing to overexert itself. Zac's own barrier was already gone, exposing him to the harsh realities of his surroundings. He had felt himself under immense pressure from the moment he woke up, and Zac recognized that aura all-too-well. It was the Heavens, the real one that had almost blasted him to smithereens a few times.

The whole area was drowned in that ancient wrath, and Zac felt his Cosmic Energy extremely turbid, barely answering his call. Not only that, but there were extremely powerful insights suffused into the air. Zac didn't know it was a result of vast Dao fields that covered thousands of kilometers, or if it was the lingering result of two powerful attacks colliding in the distance.

In either case, it meant trouble, and the more he saw as he looked around, the more horrified Zac became. The whole Twilight Harbor was on the brink of collapse, with thousands of spatial tears stretching like tendrils as far as he could see.

It was like he was caught in the middle of a three-dimensional spider web, where the wrong move would end with him

becoming swallowed by the void or cut apart by the scars in reality itself. Apart from the tears, space was littered with everything from struggling cultivators to whole palatial ruins floating about.

There weren't too many cultivators appearing in flashes of light any longer. Most had either fallen or left already, and he spotted quite a few fleeing people far in the distance, moving away from the inner parts of the Twilight Harbor. Problem was, the Twilight Rivers with their spatial arrays were gone while space was unstable. Traversing this kind of war zone at the E-grade was extremely perilous, and you would have to survive for at least half a day in this environment until you could reach the outer edge of the harbor, where the teleportation arrays waited. Provided they still worked.

As to where the huge buildings and other debris came from, it wasn't a mystery. Zac could see that he had been let out somewhere in the middle of the harbor, with world disks both in front of him and behind. More than half of the disks had already broken apart, and whole civilizations had become space debris that drifted about.

And there were corpses. So many corpses.

It was to the point that Zac's brain could barely comprehend such a loss of life. The space between the destroyed world disks was littered with bodies, most of them F-grade mortals judging by the lack of spirituality on their bodies. They had probably been subjected to the void of outer space the moment the atmosphere of the Twilight Harbor collapsed, and that wasn't something a mortal could withstand for more than a couple of seconds.

Of course, they might have already been dead by the time their world disks broke apart. The force required for something like that would most likely be powerful enough to extinguish their souls in an instant.

Zac couldn't actually see the source of the mayhem. A huge chunk of a broken world disk, spanning hundreds of kilometers across, hovered in front of him, blocking most of his vision. It was a bit disconcerting to not see what was going

on, but he knew that it might have been this chunk of stone that had protected him while he was unable to protect himself.

A huge shockwave from the heart of the harbor made reality groan, and large cracks spread across his protective disk. However, it withstood the impact, severely weakening the destructive wave. Not only that, but it was like space was suddenly lit up with millions of shimmering stars, and they seemed to absorb a lot of the errant energies before dimming again.

There was no need to guess where that shimmer had come from. It was the method of the Radiant Temple, where someone had set up a massive protective array that stretched as far as his eyes could see. It helped restrain the errant energies somewhat, and it had no doubt saved countless lives already.

Of course, Zac didn't believe the temple only protected him and the other E-grade cultivators out of benevolence. If killing a bunch of mortals and low-grade cultivators put a stain on your Karma, then the opposite was probably true as well. Since Ventus liked to meddle with fate, some elder from their faction was probably using the situation to rack up Karmic Merit. Saving lives to cultivate.

But Zac couldn't be picky. Their motives might be impure, but it was still a lifesaver considering the might contained in those strikes. Even with **[Void Zone]** activated, he felt his bones groan in protest as the wave passed him by. Zac was so exhausted, but he knew that he needed to hold on for a while longer.

There were a few things that he needed to do be done immediately, and he hurriedly took out the prepared item. In front of him, his twin appeared. Or rather, a body that looked almost exactly like Arcaz Black, except for his abyssal eyes being gouged out. Runes covered his skin as Zac infused the body with his Dao, but the marks were fading fast. In a few moments, they would be gone entirely, having fulfilled their purpose.

It was not a clone of his, but rather something darker in nature. The man was once a Revenant, one of the stronger enemies he had fought on the way back from the chasm. He had been part of an elite squad that had tried to ambush him, but now he had been reduced to a tool that would hopefully help Zac out.

Arcaz Black's identity had become extremely problematic, and he had to do everything in his power to steer attention away from himself, from Earth, and from the Zecia Sector as a whole. Otherwise, Alvod Jondir might come knocking in a few centuries, at that point an Autarch bent on revenge.

Now, there was also Hive Ouro and the Eternal Clan to worry about. He couldn't put all his faith in Catheya's ability to trade his allegiance and the fact of him being an Edgewalker in return for safe harbor. Especially not after his talk with Qi'Sar. Zac had thought himself something unique, but if a sliver consciousness of an ancient Autarch knew about people like him, he might not be as valuable to the Undead Empire as he had hoped.

And even if Catheya managed to garner some interest for him, it might only be among the Draugr factions. So it would still be in his interest to throw off the scent for the others, specifically by having Arcaz Black 'die'.

This solution was something he had prepared while waiting for the gates to the City of Ancients to open, though Varo and Catheya were the ones who did most of the heavy lifting. The corpse in front of him had become fatelinked with him, where any Karmic Links that led to Zac would also lead to this corpse. With him having used multiple Karma-cleansing items along with activating the Array around his Duplicity Core, those links should now only lead to the corpse.

Essentially, pinning the blame on a dead guy.

Initially, the method was only meant to obscure one's Karmic threads, but Zac had taken it one step further after Catheya and Varo were done with their ministrations. With the help of his Shard of Creation, he had transformed the man's body into a copy of his own. However, he hadn't managed to recreate the

signature Abyssal eyes and had opted to simply gouge them out.

Thus, Arcaz Black had fallen at the end of the Twilight Ascent, his body set to drift in the ruins of the Twilight Harbor. This trick wasn't perfect, but it should make any attempts of tracking him down far harder. An adept Karmic Cultivator would probably realize something was amiss, but with the corpse's karmic threads shining brightly, it would become nigh-impossible to find the real Zac.

Thankfully, the harbor itself would help him even further according to Catheya. With so many old monsters gathering in one spot and duking it out, the fate of an E-grade warrior should be drowned out in the white noise of their Dao. Even the Heavens had descended to muddy the waters. It was one of the few good points with the current chaos.

"Thank you," Zac sighed as he pushed the body away, letting it drift away and join the innumerable corpses that littered the area.

Ideally, Zac had wanted to take an **[Coward's Escape]**-pill as well the moment the realm collapsed. But he had ultimately decided against it, even after getting the prompt that indicated he had cinched the first-position title for the trial. He really wanted to get rid of the quest that the Eveningtide Asura had forced upon him, but eating that pill would mean he would fail the quest for upgrading the Creator Shipyard as well.

[Materials for Karunthel] was a chained quest, and Zac feared that not getting the customized D-grade Cosmic Vessel would be the least of his losses if he ate the pseudo-death pill. Most likely, he'd be stripped of the qualifications to upgrade the shipyard altogether. He was on good standing with Karunthel, but that didn't matter considering it was the System that set the rules.

He didn't have any other means to deal with the lingering quest and the threat it might pose, but Zac realized the issue was fast solving itself as he looked around. The whole harbor was falling apart, so the quest should automatically fail sooner

or later, considering how it was a decree quest linked to the Twilight Harbor.

Having discarded the Karmic dummy, Zac wasted no time to start his own escape. He didn't know who was winning between Alvod and the other factions, but between the heavenly wrath and the earthshattering clashes, he knew it was just a matter of time before disaster struck his area as well.

He first tried activating the escape bangle on his arm, but as expected, there was no response. The first function of the bangle only worked in the Zecia sector, unfortunately. Zac tried various other escape treasures as well, but they only fizzled out, failing to activate. It was no wonder that the people in the distance were flying rather than zapping away.

Space was sealed, making teleportation impossible.

Zac had no option but to start moving as well, and he started releasing some Cosmic Energy to move through the vacuum of space. Thankfully, there were tons of debris lying around, allowing him to continuously use **[Earthstrider]** to drastically increase his speed. Unfortunately, each activation resulted in a throbbing pain in his nodes, and activation was extremely arduous because of the heavenly pressure.

Thankfully, both those issues were solved by using **[Force of the Void]**. With his bloodline talent, no energy circulation was required, alleviating the pressure on his nodes. At the same time, the restrictions from the heavens didn't seem to affect his unique Bloodline Energy. It allowed him to move quickly, though he was expending quite a bit of Void Energy.

A scream of danger in the back of his suddenly made him flash out of the way. Just a moment later, a gust passed by the area where he previously stood. At first, it looked like nothing, but Zac was filled with horror when space simply disintegrated where he had flown a moment ago. A scar tens of kilometers long and hundreds of meters high had appeared out of nowhere.

The corpses that littered the area were utterly disintegrated by the attack, and the nearby debris was dragged into the enormous spatial tear that was left behind after the gust. Zac

felt the pull as well, and he desperately activated his movement skill over and over until he got far enough.

Zac's heart beat like a drum as he looked back, only to find that the world disk that had protected him before had finally been cut into two, exposing the scene behind. The first thing he noticed was the enormous avatar almost looking like Poseidon, wielding an immense trident as dozens of rivers surrounded him, each one of them piercing toward the sky.

It didn't take him long to realize who it was; Alvod Jondir, the Eveningtide Asura. He was right in the middle at it, attacked from every single direction. From the front, a humongous avatar peered out through a vast spatial fold, and Zac's heart sunk when he felt his aura. It was even greater than his mother's, meaning it was a bonafide Autarch who had made an appearance.

However, his aura was not that much stronger than hers, and Zac didn't get the sense of immensity or profundity from this tattooed man as he did from Be'Zi or A'Zu. Most likely, it was a First-Step Autarch who had barely managed to break through. Of course, that still meant he was a terrifying existence who could essentially run roughshod in the frontier.

A Havarok Autarch wasn't the only thing Alvod had to deal with at the moment. Simultaneously, a huge depression had opened up in the churning clouds above, and Zac looked at the shimmering lights that descended with marvel. It was Dao, pure Dao that held the secrets of the universe. If he could just absorb a sliver of that light...

Zac shook his head, knowing his limits. He saw those white tendrils falling like rain, the terror they contained. The Eveningtide Asura controlled the rivers having them clash with the descending punishment. The Twilight River was filled with unprecedented levels of energy, yet they were no match for that mysterious light.

The rivers only managed to withstand the energy for a moment before they disintegrated, resulting in similar eruptions like the one that had almost killed him just now. Alvod seemed undeterred, and he kept reforming the rivers as a golden pillar

rose slowly rose from his body, heading towards the Dao in the sky.

That pillar was a true marvel, and it contained everything Zac had sensed inside the valley and more. He heard the crashing waves as he looked upon the light, he was transported to the edge between night and daybreak. Life was not life, death was not death.

Zac hurriedly shook his head to clear his thoughts. That pillar was perhaps even more lethal to him than the lights in the sky. It represented the path of a Divine Monarch, and its intrusive influence was incredibly powerful even at this great distance. Even worse, it was just one of three such pillars that rose toward the sky.

Alvod's Dao Pillar wasn't even the tallest one. While Alvod was busy clashing with a celestial army led by the Havarok giant, tens of thousands of huge red seals hovered right next to him, seemingly trying to fuse with his avatar. Zac could smell the stench of blood all the way to where he was, meaning it was no doubt the Eternal Clan.

The shortest pillar was aquamarine-white, and it flickered ominously like it was about to break apart. Three enormous ghosts surrounded it, but a sudden swipe from the Eveningtide asura cut one of them apart. Alvod received a fierce attack from the Havarok Autarch in return, but his gambit was enough to push the Eidolon over the edge, causing the pillar to collapse.

Zac was shocked at all that three people were trying to break through at the same time, while fighting each other at that. He had heard that most Divine Monarchs secluded themselves for thousands of years before making their attempt, as the smallest of distraction or stray thought might adversely affect their chances of success.

The situation had become untenable for the ghosts, and an infuriated shriek rippled through the Twilight Harbor. Zac felt his mind blur as his soul was covered in cracks, but the churning oceans in his Soul Aperture along with **[Soul**

Guardian] thankfully absorbed enough of the wail for his soul to remain intact.

Others weren't as lucky, and Zac saw how many of the others who were escaping suddenly stopped moving, their souls accidentally crushed by the Eidolon Monarch. Not even the elder from the Radiant Temple could provide enough protection from that shriek.

That wasn't the end of Zac's worries as the ghosts seemed intent on retaliating. The pillar contained a Divine Monarch's condensed Dao, and Zac saw how it was turned into a terrifying attack directed at Alvod. A ghastly fire consumed the whole avatar in an instant its radiance overshadowing the Heavens themselves for an instant.

Over twenty Twilight Rivers were ripped apart, and more than half of the bloody seals were broken as well. The destruction resulted in a chaotic mix of energies freed from their respective owner's control, and they immediately rippled outward, destroying everything in its path.

Zac desperately push his movement skill to move even faster, but he felt the wave of destruction come closer and closer. He wracked his mind for solutions, but he couldn't come up with anything better than throwing out hundreds of talismans behind him, expending almost half of his Cosmic Energy to activate them all.

The Defensive Talismans lit up, forming layers upon layers of barriers between Zac and the Monarchs. Zac wasn't done there, and he quickly activated **[Void Zone]** as well. He cursed the fact that he didn't have any defensive skills to help out at the moment, and without any better options he simply took out some of the D-grade rubble he had swiped on the way out of the castle, forming a final layer of protection.

The wave finally crashed past him, and he felt the barriers crumble in rapid order. Next came the boulder in front of him, turning into dust after enduring just an instant. But thankfully, **[Void Zone]** was extremely efficient at weakening uncontrolled energies, and he almost cried in relief when his

body was only lacerated with deep cuts all over as the wave passed him by.

He ate a Soldier Pill and Healing Pill as he resumed his escape, but Zac worried about his prospects. It was one thing to dodge those condensed cuts that ripped space apart. But he only had it in him to block one or two more of those all-consuming waves of destruction, even with the stellar light weakening them considerably.

Meanwhile, there was still half a day's worth of travel before he reached the edge of the harbor. Zac wracked his brain to find a solution, but he suddenly froze as he spotted something all-too-familiar not too far away.

Wasn't that..?

Chapter 787: Stronger

Zac could barely believe his eyes when he saw the small egg sail past him, barely visible among the endless pieces of rubble. But he was certain. He couldn't sense his Mark of Creation at all, but that was definitely the egg he had dropped off at the valley, or at least a copy of it.

A shudder by his chest from **[Love's Bond]** confirmed it. No matter whether it was the one he had transported to the heart of the Twilight Ocean or if it was another one, it was definitely something that Alea wanted to consume. Problem was, it had quite the momentum as it soared through the ether, flying away from both the core and from Zac.

Toward a spatial tear in the distance.

It might have been expelled along with the cultivators or knocked away during the battle for ascension. Zac had no way of telling why it had appeared here, but he unhesitatingly changed course, pushing himself to the limit to catch up to the thing. Alea's situation had improved after infusing the coffin with Temporal Energy, but he wouldn't put his faith in Qi'Sar's advice.

The Realm Spirit was probably willing to say whatever it needed to get closer to Zac and have him put down his guard, no matter if its advice was true or not. After all, it only needed to fool him until he had activated that odd cage array around the infant Realm Spirits. For all Zac knew, infusing **[Love's Bond]** with the Temporal Crystals might just have slowed down everything inside the coffin, rather than just the chaotic energies.

[Love's Bond] might be breaking apart, just at a slower pace. But wasn't this thing perfect for Alea's situation? The small egg had been able to refine and purify the energies of the Twilight Ocean, turning them into something useful. Perhaps,

it could help Alea do the same. At the very least, it was clearly something she desperately wanted.

After everything she had done for him, he couldn't back down now, especially when it was just a small detour. He pushed off from a broken store sign that floated next to him, quickly making his way toward the item. However, Zac felt the energy in his body go haywire as he heard an enraged voice roar from behind.

“Enough!”

It didn't sound like Alvod. Rather, it was filled with a familiar Dao that beat like the drums of war, of clashing steel and bloodied swords. It was the voice of someone who had made war their path, and it felt like a general's order that almost managed to stop Zac in his tracks. It was no doubt the Havarok leader, and Zac's felt a wave of dismay upon realizing that the Autarch's aura was rapidly rising. This wasn't actually his full power?

He didn't know the details, but according to Catheya, there were some issues that prevented Autarchs from freely roaming the “lower realms”, the Sectors that didn't normally have the capabilities to nurture B-grade cultivators. Perhaps that was what had stopped him from simply unleashing a wave of destruction that ripped the Eveningtide Asura apart, but it looked like his patience had run dry.

Zac glanced back to see that a huge lance had appeared in the crowned giant's hand, surprisingly similar to the one Zac had seen in the vision from the Stele of Conflict. However, while the one that the mysterious general had formed out of a crushed moon was crudely formed and filled with the raw and unbridled power of conflict, this weapon instead relied on extremely high-grade runes to attain a similar might.

In either case, it was a terror of a weapon, radiating an aura that was almost a match to its owner. Space continuously cracked around it, and Zac felt himself pierced by just looking in its direction. It was possible that this was the first B-grade treasure he had seen, and it was trained at Alvod.

At the same time, Zac actually sensed the aura of the Heavens grow deeper, more profound. Not only did the swirling vortex in the sky expand a bit, but there was a secondary source of the feeling coming from within the giant's body. Then, an enormous rune appeared behind the giant's back.

Looking at it felt like looking at the shimmering lights in the sky. It wasn't a snippet of a path or intent taken form. It was pure Dao, imbued with the weight of the Heavens themselves. It was War, and Zac felt the Cosmic Energy in his surroundings bend to the will of the runes, reforming itself under a new world order.

The sky rumbled at the appearance of the brand, Zac saw how two nearby world disks crumbled, unable to withstand the pressure any longer. The two remaining Dao Pillars weren't faring much better, and they flickered precipitously like candles in the wind. The two stopped fighting with each other for a moment, and Alvod took out an ancient-looking cauldron.

He threw it out, and it emitted a multi-colored aura that stabilized the area around him. Zac barely discerned some ancient hymns as well, reminding him of the impression he got from staring into the golden light of **[Rapturous Divide]**. It was the song of the Arcadia, divine hymns holding the truths of paradise.

Zac forcibly kept his mind from drifting away, speeding toward the egg as he kept track of the events behind him. Alvod's Dao Pillar had stabilized after throwing out the cauldron, and it seemed like he wasn't planning on backing down even after the Autarch had unleashed an even greater part of his might.

The man from the Eternal Clan was clearly not ready to back down either. A thump echoed out as a red flash appeared from within the sanguine waters near Alvod, and Zac groaned as it felt like his blood was about to be pulled out from his body. Only by stopping his movement skill and activating **[Void Zone]** did he manage to keep his blood to himself.

Others weren't as lucky, and innumerable red streams shot toward the center of the realm. Millions of millions of bodies were instantaneously exsanguinated, and the blood turned into vast rivers. Zac didn't know why, but it almost felt like the blood wasn't being stolen, but that it rather returned to its origin, like rivers returning to the ocean.

The sanguine pillar stabilized as well, and Zac actually noticed that both the pillars had grown taller. Did the Havarok Imperial inadvertently help the two by unleashing his Dao? From the looks of it, his Dao had strengthened the connection between the heavens and this area, making ascension easier.

If that was the case, he was probably out of options but to unleash his true power. The Eveningtide Asura was a known monster, and an elite from the Eternal Clan had to be difficult even for an Autarch to deal with.

“Good!” Alvod laughed as an enormous rowboat appeared above his head, bringing a shocking tidal wave in its wake. “Let's put it all on the line, for my path.”

“For eternity,” a dour voice echoed out from within the bloody ocean.

From within the bloody ocean, the red light flashed again. It lit up the whole Twilight Harbor, drenching even the Heavens in sanguine luster. The myriad streams of blood condensed around it, forming a massive sword. Zac was dismayed when he felt the might in that weapon. It was clearly controlled by a Divine Monarch, yet it was almost a match to the huge lance.

It was all thanks to that light, that terrifying red light that seemingly had the power to contend against the Heavens themselves.

No matter if it was the rowboat and the living ocean beneath, the lance rife with the momentum of war, or the rapier of the Eternal Clan, their might was just too much. Zac could barely withstand them now before they had even been launched. How would he possibly survive a clash between the three?

He desperately looked around in search of answers, and his eyes suddenly stopped on the egg. There was no other option.

Zac propelled himself forward, no longer looking back at the three warriors fighting for supremacy. Space itself couldn't withstand the might of their towering auras colliding.

The whole area buckled and was pushed outward, forming an advance shockwave as the three prepared to put it all on the line. Zac saw his surroundings twist and bend, but he ignored the ominous portents as he desperately jumped from one piece of debris after another to keep his movement skill going.

Each step with [**Earthstrider**] was pushed to the limits of what the skill could achieve, even if he had to literally step on the drained corpses of the fallen to make it happen. He was a blur that cut through the compacted layers of space. Finally, he reached his destination; the purifier egg. It was just at the edge of the enormous spatial tear which stretched in front of him like a wall of ultimate darkness, taking up his vision.

Behind, the blood-drenched auras kept increasing in intensity, and the stars in the area rapidly dimmed, unable to withstand this kind of output. Zac hurriedly grabbed the egg the moment he appeared next to it, but he didn't stop or turn around from there. He simply kept going, disappearing in an instant as he jumped again.

Into the Void.

It was the only solution Zac could think of. The Void was dangerous and he couldn't stay inside for long before succumbing, but was it really more dangerous than two Divine Monarchs duking it out with an Autarch? He wouldn't bet his life on his Luck being enough to steer the errant bursts of energy from heading his way. It was better to hide between the folds of reality and then sneak back through a tear when the fighting was over.

Tearing pain assaulted his body, and it felt like he was being drained. However, the weird feeling abated drastically as he activated [**Void Zone**] again. It was a relief that his Bloodline actually managed to protect him in this dangerous no-man's-land, but he knew that he wasn't out of the woods just yet.

The spatial tear was open right behind him, exposing him to the events at the heart of the Harbor. The tear had been a wall

of darkness on the other side, but he could still see the three powerhouses from within the Void. Desperately, Zac tried to move out of the way, and large bursts of Void Energy were exhausted in an effort to gain some traction in this weird dimension.

It felt like he was stuck in a waking nightmare as he tried to traverse the nothingness, where he barely moved in place. He had already come in contact with the odd properties of the Void in the research base, and he had only later learned that it mostly stemmed from the fact that the Void lacked the Dao of Space.

It made traversing the Void extremely confusing, considering something that appeared to be right in front of you could be thousands of meters away, and vice versa. There was no gravity, there was no direction. It wasn't a vacuum, it was nothingness. It was these odd features that made Teleportation Arrays possible, apparently, allowing you to move across the Multiverse for a fraction of the energy it should've cost.

Of course, that knowledge didn't help him right now, but he did remember something else. Zac's mind throbbed and his skin crackled as he deactivated **[Void Zone]** before emitting as powerful a Dao Feld as he could, squeezing what little energy he had left to impose his will on the surroundings. It worked, and he finally found himself moving. He shot one final look at Alvod Jondir as he moved out of the way from the spatial tear.

Even if he was a madman at worst and a ruthless powerhouse who sacrificed everything for the Dao at best, Zac couldn't help but feel some sort of connection with the man. Their origins were eerily alike, and they even walked similar paths of cultivation. Now, he was struggling all alone, desperately fighting off both an imperial elite and an Autarch to seize an opportunity to continue his cultivation.

Zac was beset by a wave of gloom as he looked at that solitary back. Was this what the pursuit of the peak looked like? Withstanding eons of loneliness, shedding everything that didn't help you on your path. All for what? For longevity, so that you could extend your dreary existence? To seize some sort of truth that would satiate your obsession?

What pushed Alvod Jondir to these lengths?

The small wooden boat above Alvod's head suddenly lit up, turning from corporeal to intangible as it melded with the crashing waves that had propped it up. Millions and millions of runes covered the golden waters as it split to strike both the vampire's rapier and the Havarok imperial simultaneously. The waves contained unstoppable momentum, the condensed force of his will.

The Autarch wasn't to be outdone, and the whole world dimmed as he swung his lance in return. Zac desperately wanted to see the result of the clash, but he ultimately chose life over discovery, pushing himself out of the way and losing the vantage.

There was no sound, and no warning as the whole Void lit up. Tens of thousands of scars appeared all around him as immense currents of furious energy burst through. The same held true for the scar he had just entered through. It was like a dam had burst, pouring a hyper-condensed mix of fireworks and lava through the spatial tear.

The current shot forward through the Void, pushing forward for tens of thousands of meters, veritably forming a luminescent river of pure destruction. Similar scenes could be seen all around him, and the whole Void was lit up.

Only then did Zac see what his surroundings really looked like. He wasn't alone. In fact, there were tens of thousands of people in his immediate surroundings, though it was impossible to tell how close they actually were in a place like this. Most of the bodies were fallen mortals who had probably been sucked into the void, but there was some activity as well. And those who were alive mostly emitted the auras of Hegemons.

A few were busy looting the floating corpses, but most were waiting right by one spatial tear or another, clearly having a similar idea of survival as himself. Some had been too eager or simply unlucky, and their disintegrated corpses had been swept away along with the rivers of clashing energies that had formed all over.

That didn't actually stop people, and Zac frowned when he saw a few particularly powerful Hegemons cover themselves in immensely powerful barriers before they pushed into the churning chaos that covered the spatial tears. Why were they in such a rush? This place was lethal, but Hegemons would surely be able to survive a while in this place.

The scene gave Zac a sinking feeling, and he understood that this place might be far more dangerous than it seemed. He hesitantly looked at the weakening glow of the nearby spatial tear, wondering if he should attempt an escape as well. But even the fading energy between mortals was far beyond he could handle, at least without the help of the remnants.

A shudder made Zac look down with surprise, and he saw how **[Love's Bond]** took on its backpack form by itself as he felt a wave of hunger in his mind. He heard the clattering of chains, and he hurriedly handed over the egg that was still in his hands. He heard the lid opening for a moment, before quickly slamming shut again.

Soon, I will be stronger, Alea's voice echoed in his mind before the coffin shrunk again.

He sensed a wave of contentment before he lost the connection, but Zac was still elated. With such a statement from her, he could let go of any worries that her soul or foundations had been damaged by taking on the Blood Effigy's attacks. In fact, it looked like she would evolve soon enough.

But just as one issue was solved, another one cropped up. The spatial tear that was supposed to be his ticket out from the Void suddenly collapsed, unable to withstand the barrage from outside. Left was a long river of rootless energy and vast darkness.

He was stuck.

Chapter 788: Trapped

An obscuring shroud from a Haze Talisman spread around Zac as he hurriedly took out [**Verun's Bite**], immediately conjuring a fractal leaf. He knew himself well enough to know that he didn't have the strength to force open a spatial tear himself, at least not one large and stable enough for him to escape through. But hopefully, the dimensional wall around him would still be weakened enough for him to reopen a pathway.

At the same time, he didn't dare to immediately cut open a path in case the terrifying energy shockwaves were still raging outside. The long scars in the Void were a poignant reminder of just how ferocious the struggle for ascension was. But no new scars were opening around him at the moment, so he ultimately infused his Daos into the blade one after another as he activated [**Rapturous Divide**], ignoring the throbbing pain in his head.

The two waves melded, prompting a two-colored sun to erupt a few meters ahead of him. But Zac frowned when he saw that the divide between the Abyss and Arcadia had failed to open up a path out of this place. There was a spatial rupture, but it was as thin as a strand of hair, making it sharp enough to kill someone, but absolutely useless for escape.

Zac sighed as he started looking around. Sticking around in the Void for too long was out of the question. The environment itself was harmful, and Zac didn't want to find out if the Collector had brethren living in this area. So he needed to find another exit, and fast. The good news was that far from all the Spatial Tears that led back to the Twilight Harbor had collapsed, but getting to them quickly proved difficult.

First of all, he was forced to turn off [**Void Zone**] if he wanted to traverse the Void, which immediately exposed him to the darkness. It felt like he was being constantly cut by thousands

of small knives, and his skin was slowly drying out like it was sapped of its vitality.

Secondly, he found himself utterly incapable of actually making any progress even if he moved. His surroundings turned into a confusing blur as he propelled himself forward by expelling Cosmic Energy, with his relative position to the surroundings continuously changing. The experience was so nauseating he was repeatedly forced to stop in order to fight an onset of vertigo.

Zac quickly realized that the spatial tear had served as an anchor, infusing its surroundings with the Dao of Space. With the spatial tear gone, the normal rules didn't apply any longer. His eyes had become useless, with directions and common logic no longer holding any sway. It became more apparent why the Hegemons had so desperately struggled to jump back through the tears, to the point some even braved the rampant energies.

They were probably afraid of getting stuck like he was.

At the same time, it was clear that not everyone had this kind of problem. There were dozens of people flickering about, somehow moving through the area to loot one Spatial Ring or Cosmos Sack after another from the innumerable corpses. They lacked the franticness of the other cultivators, clearly considering the situation an opportunity rather than calamity.

Was it Spatial Energy? Did they have some sort of Spatial Treasures that could instill the Dao of Space into their surroundings, allowing them to move freely in the Void? Or were their Daos simply powerful enough to affect vast areas of space? Zac took out two Soul Crystals and started absorbing the energy as he increased the radius of his Dao Field.

Suddenly, he noticed something, prompting him to change course. A moment later, a body appeared in front of him as though it had teleported. Or at least half of one. Of course, it wasn't teleportation. Zac had sensed the body's spirituality with his Dao field, and it was like their locations became connected through his Dao.

The moment he reached the body, Zac hurriedly activated **[Void Zone]** once more, giving his body a reprieve as he checked the lower half of the fallen Hegemon for treasure. He was still as stuck as can be, so Zac figured he might as well stuff his pockets while waiting for his body to recover. Unfortunately, it looked like the warrior had carried his Spatial Tool on the hand that was missing, leaving Zac empty-handed.

Zac didn't immediately leave, but rather kept his Bloodline Talent going for a while longer. Budding Void Emperor or not, the Void was clearly not a domain he could withstand at his current level. The damage wasn't as bad as when he had experimented in the research base Mystic Realm, but Zac doubted he would last more than a couple of hours without his nullification zone.

Luckily, the environment did contain some of the force that Zac could refine into Void Energy, and his **[Void Heart]** had been hard at work since he had fled into this place.

Unfortunately, the pace his Void Energy was being replaced didn't match his consumption. Even then, Zac figured he would be able to survive around half a day in this space if he alternated properly as he had down in the chasm.

Hopefully, that would be enough time for him to leave this place and for the battle outside to abate.

As if conjured by his thoughts, the Void was suddenly lit up again as hundreds of new tears appeared, each one of them spewing torrential amounts of energy into the surroundings. Zac froze in place as his eyes widened with terror, but he breathed out in relief upon realizing that none of the deadly rivers were bearing down on him.

He hadn't completely recovered from his previous spacewalk, but he still deactivated his nullification zone to spread out his Dao Field once more, hoping that one of the new tears had appeared near him. Unfortunately, he didn't sense anything, but he still set out, pushing his way in a random direction for a minute.

His only gain was finding two more two bodies, one of which was a Hegemon with his Spatial Ring intact. Zac spent the

next hour shuttling back and forth with increasing urgency, but while his pockets were filling up with Spatial Rings and Cosmos Sacks, he didn't have as much luck with finding any exits.

Everyone else in the area was struggling in a similar manner, yet few were successful. If anything, there seemed to be more people being forced into the void than leaving it.

The distances were far greater than Zac had anticipated. Even after moving for so long, he hadn't run into a single living cultivator, even if there were thousands of them around scuttling about within his small section alone. For all he knew, there might be thousands of kilometers between him and the closest cultivator, or closest spatial tear for that matter.

To make matters worse, the spatial tears closed one by one as the minutes passed, and fewer and fewer new ones were carved open.

Zac couldn't be certain, but he believed that the Eternal Clan Monarch had either been killed or forced out of contention around fifteen minutes after he entered the Void. From that point on, the energy that crashed through the dimensional barriers lacked the Dao of Blood, meaning that the clashes were only between the Eveningtide Asura and the Havarok Autarch.

And now, not a single tear had been opened over the past five minutes. Conversely, only the largest spatial tears remained.

No one bothered actively looking for loot any longer. Even those who moved freely had made their way to a Spatial Tear and snuck out, mostly ignoring the pleading gestures from the surviving cultivators left behind. Zac still flew toward any corpse he sensed in hopes their body would be floating next to one of the still-remaining tears, but so far there was no such luck.

It was starting to become more and more apparent that his original solution was bound to fail, and he eventually decided to try his backup plan. There was still an endless repository of unclaimed wealth left floating in the endless void, but Zac had

started feeling a sense of urgency since new tears stopped opening.

He needed to get away from this area. If the battle for ascension had ended, the old monsters outside might turn their attention toward the next order of business: punishing the person who had caused so much trouble in the E-grade trial. He had done as much as possible to avoid being exposed, but who knew what kind of means and methods Monarchs possessed.

Zac finished looting a relatively intact body of a Hegemon and stowed away the body before activating another Shroud Talisman to obscure his actions again. Next, he took out a large stone disk. It was five meters across and one meter deep, looking like a massive coin made out of rock and embedded with hundreds of Nexus Crystals.

It was covered with inscriptions as well, inscriptions that should be familiar to any cultivator who had ever left their home; a Teleportation Array, though a somewhat modified version.

It only lacked a few easily added strokes, and Zac urgently completed them as he inserted a series of High-grade Nexus Crystals to power the array. This was a last-ditch measure he and Kenzie had come up with before he started traveling the sector in search of materials.

The second function of his escape bracelet was that it could authorize a Teleportation Array pretty much anywhere, with some caveats. One of those limitations was that it couldn't be used inside another array's sphere of influence, which was what stopped him from taking it out in the middle of the Twilight Harbor.

Another downside was that using this temporary array cost five times as much as using a normal one, but that didn't matter to Zac. Not only did he have the fortune left by his mother, but he had received an even greater windfall between looting Qi'Sar's treasury and dozens of fallen warriors in the Void.

However, Zac and his sister discovered another unadvertized obstacle to using the bangle. As a Teleportation Array neared completion, it automatically started generating Spatial Fluctuations, making it impossible to store in a Spatial Ring. It had taken them some trial and error, but Kenzie had ultimately created five identical platforms which were 98% finished, with just a few simple additions remaining.

From there, Zac could finish the preparations in just a few minutes, far quicker than the days it would have taken to set the thing up from scratch. After that, he just needed to connect the Array with his bangle, and he should be good to go. It was this lifeline that had given him some confidence he'd make it out in one piece even if the Teleportation Arrays of Twilight Harbor had been turned off.

With this thing prepared, he would simply need to keep flying until he exited the harbor's sphere of influence, perhaps hidden in a convoy of refugees, before he took this thing out and zapped back home.

The preparations were finished, and Zac's eyes lit up when he saw the array light up. But, relief was quickly replaced by dismay when the flickering lights soon dimmed again. He looked over the disk to make sure it wasn't damaged, but there was nothing amiss. Zac took out an information crystal Kenzie had prepared, but no matter how many times he looked it over, there were no discrepancies.

The array was identical to the schematic. Was it the location? A Teleportation Array utilized the Void for travel, but perhaps it was impossible to actually set one up inside it, at least without Spatial Crystals to provide Spatial Energy. Zac scratched his head in search of solutions, but he couldn't come up with anything.

He had already deactivated **[Void Zone]** when starting up the array, and a few minutes later the second Teleportation Array fizzled out in an identical manner. Zac stowed away the two arrays, filled with a sense of impending doom as he looked at the slowly dimming Void around him.

The streams of unbridled power were being whittled away, as were the cultivators stuck in the void. Some desperately attacked their surroundings, displaying marvelous feats of strength. A few actually succeeded and slipped away, but most were like him. The darkness grew more oppressive by the second, almost suffocatingly so.

But Zac refused to give in, and a manic gleam shimmered in his eyes as he took out one stack of offensive talisman after another, tying them together with a chaotic mix of various Attuned Crystals and energy-rich Beast Cores. Finally, he took out his last five **[Void Balls]**, hoping to use them as a catalyst to tear a hole in space.

He knew he couldn't hold back, seeing as his **[Raptururous Divide]** had failed before. Even Hegemons found it hard to escape. He would have to go all out, and he reluctantly prepared his exhausted body one final time. He had one last chance to get out of here. He would weaken space with a chaotic bomb made from his energy-dense materials, and then seal the deal with an attack from **[Arcadia's Judgement]** empowered by **[Arcadian Crusade]**.

If even that failed, he'd have to unleash an Annihilation Sphere. He had used his small reserve of Creation Energy to destroy the array cage around the nascent Realm Spirits, but he still retained some Oblivion in his soul. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that, considering how bad the damage to his foundations was already. There was still some time before he had reached his limit though, so Zac kept growing his unstable payload as he tried stumbling onto one of the few remaining spatial tears.

Suddenly, a weird crooning noise echoed through the Void, which was a shock considering the odd dimension had been completely silent since the Spatial Tear next to him closed. Zac felt an immense sense of dread, remembering the bloodthirsty Void Creatures all-too-well, and he unhesitantly threw out his bomb after infusing it with energy.

Space shuddered above his head as he activated **[Arcadia's Judgement]**. But before space had a chance to crack and unleash the huge wooden hand, he felt his connection to the

skill get cut, prompting a sharp pain in his head like his mind had been stabbed. His vision swam from the backlash, but he desperately tried to focus his vision to try again.

But it was too late.

A shimmering sphere had appeared out of nowhere, sealing him inside and blocking his path to the churning ball of destruction. A moment later it went off, turning into a terrifying inferno of clashing elements. The destruction was beyond what even he had expected, and he hurriedly activated a few defensive talismans with wide eyes.

The measure was quickly proven unnecessary though, and Zac was filled with a mix of horror and relief when he saw that the bubble that had enclosed him didn't as much as ripple when it was swallowed by the chaotic energies. Even a few small spatial tears slammed into the barrier, but the tears broke apart in an instant.

The sphere was unbelievably durable, and fear quickly overwhelmed his relief. Zac felt like a caged animal he furiously swung his axe into the barrier with all force he could muster, but it was futile. The sphere was just as tough from the inside, and no matter what Dao he infused into his strikes, the result was the same.

There was no way a low-grade cultivator was responsible for something like this, and Zac urgently looked around to see what the hell was going on.

He made two quick discoveries which helped him stem the budding panic somewhat. First of all, the harmful environment of the Void was held at bay by the white shimmering bubble. Secondly, it didn't look like he specifically had been targeted. The whole Void was suddenly littered with bubbles, tens upon tens of thousands of them.

Even the corpses had been encapsulated along with the still-living cultivators, and Zac saw how innumerable warriors struggled to break out. But if the success rate of escaping the Void had been bad, then this was just abysmal. He didn't spot a single bubble breaking, which could only mean one thing;

this had to be the work of a Monarch, and not a low-grade one by the looks of it.

Things suddenly took a turn for the worse as Zac felt a wave of weakness, and he spotted a few runes that had appeared on the outside of the sphere. His prison was draining him, just like how Yod's array had almost managed to kill Catheya before. Zac threw out a small hill of crystals to counteract the drain, but it was futile.

It was almost like the sphere had created a **[Void Zone]** to rival his own, and nothing he tried worked. Just what was going on? His first thought was that some of the powerhouses outside had taken pity on them and decided to enter the void and fish everyone out, no doubt expecting something in return.

There was no way that it was a purely benevolent act considering the restrictive array, after all. Zac even considered swallowing his main Spatial Ring in case of being demanded an exorbitant ransom, but those thoughts suddenly flew out of his mind as a huge vortex in the Void suddenly opened up.

It wasn't a Monarch who emerged through the mysterious spatial gate. Neither was it one of the grotesque-looking Void Beasts as far as he could tell. In fact, Zac had never seen or read any missives on the kind of creature that had effortlessly captured so many warriors. But from its appearance and size, only one description seemed apt.

A monstrous fish best described as a leviathan had appeared.

Chapter 789: Doubts and Schemes

The darkness might only have lasted for an instant, or it might have gone on for a year, but a glimmer of light finally broke the gloom as Catheya woke up to the sound of shattering ice. All around her a sealed dome of ice broke apart as shimmering runes dissipated, exposing her and her two followers to the familiar surroundings of her master's Cosmic Vessel.

"Good morning," a familiar voice said, and Catheya felt her heart once more freeze over as she turned her eyes toward the source of the sound.

"Master," Catheya hesitantly said as she struggled to get her mind to focus up. She needed all her mental faculties if she wanted to weather this calamity. "What happened?"

"Two weeks have passed since I was forced to seal you. I had to use Myriad Ice since you were so far away from me," Va Tapek smiled as he slowly walked into the hall. "I had to thaw you three slowly as to avoid any damage."

"And the Twilight Harbor?" Catheya hesitated as she looked around.

"Gone. It couldn't withstand Alvod Jondir's ascension," Va Tapek sighed.

So the Eveningtide Asura had actually succeeded. She was shocked, remembering the chaotic scene just before she fell unconscious. Even an Autarch had tried to stop him, yet he somehow pulled through? Just what kind of foundations did he have to succeed in the face of such adversity.

However, the more pressing issue was that one of Alvod Jondir's allies stood right in front of her. She knew that she was just an ant compared to her master, but fury still thawed

the chill that had still lingered in her body. “The Sharva’Zi clan has been your home for eons, so why-”

“Now, don’t go saying such hurtful things, girl,” a snort cut her off, but Catheya’s eyes widened as a flood of relief filled her. Her dad was here, which meant she was safe.

Wait, her dad was here?

“Father?” Catheya hesitantly said as she looked around, just in time to see her father’s lean silhouette appear next to Va Tapek from a swirl of poison.

“Do Mr. Tapek seem like someone who would betray the clan for a Dreamer? I’ve taught you to think deeper,” Ruz Sharva’Zi sighed as he waved his hand, prompting Catheya to float over. “Now, let me look at you.”

Catheya had a million questions threatening to burst out of her head, but she forcibly stilled herself as she let her father scan her cultivation. Meanwhile, her two followers quickly made their exit after bowing in the direction of her father.

“You’ve set the foundations for a second branch? And your affinities have increased. Not bad. It seems you’ve worked hard these past years,” Ruz eventually said, a rare smile spreading across his face. “Did you have fun in the Twilight Ocean?”

“What fun?” Catheya huffed, slowly adapting to the unexpected turn of events. “Things grew way out of control. I’m lucky to be standing here.”

“We had confidence in you. These kinds of experiences are required to reach greater heights. You can’t always hide in Mr. Tapek’s shadow and expect any great results,” Ruz shrugged.

“I know, dad,” Catheya sighed. “Now, can you please tell me what’s going on? I saw the harbor before I was sealed. Our whole worlddisk should be destroyed, our commercial lines ruined.”

“Do you really think we didn’t have an idea of what was about to happen in the Twilight Harbor?” Ruz snorted. “The bloodsuckers heard whispers about it in the Eternal Halls, but we were oblivious?”

“Then why?” Catheya said with a frown. “Our foundation, millions of years of effort.”

“Obviously, we got something much greater in return,” Ruz shrugged. “Think, child. Where were the Draugr during this mess?”

“That’s-“ Catheya muttered with hesitation.

This was something she had wondered about over the past year. Why hadn’t the Umbri’Zi thrown their hat in the ring? Why was an opportunity in Draugr Territory left for the Eidolon and Eternal Clan? They ultimately failed from the sounds of it, but it was not their opportunity to seize from the beginning.

“Mr. Tapek brought news of Alvod Jondir’s plan to me over five millennia ago, long before you were even born. Since then, the elders have planned for this event. First of all, we didn’t lose much. We have been stealthily siphoning everything of value from Twilight Harbor for decades. We only lost some low-grade material that is entirely replaceable,” Ruz said.

“Master?” Catheya asked with confusion. “How- How do you know the Eveningtide Asura?”

“We met in the Havarok Empire,” Va Tapek smiled. “We became allies of necessity for a short while. Truthfully, I thought him dead for a long time, until he sent word to me a few thousand years ago. He needed my help.”

Catheya’s eyebrows scrunched up slightly, which made Va Tapek laugh. “Child, you’ll make me sad if you look at me with such consternation. You are correct. I am the one who told your clan about my old allies’ plans. I was also the one who helped spread the news to Hive Ouro, the Noz’Valadir, and even the Havarok Empire. But that was exactly what Alvod Jondir asked of me.”

“What?” Catheya blurted.

“Alvod knew he was missing two things. Daoguards to ward off the meddling of the Twilight Harbor Council while he was at a critical point of his preparations, and the ability to perfect

his path without a breakthrough. Leaking the news would solve both those issues. The Divine Monarchs of the Undead Empire needed to let Alvod collapse the Twilight Ocean before they could seize the opportunity, so they became highly motivated guardians for him to complete a few critical steps,” Va Tapek explained.

“As for the second part, he managed to find his answer when pressured from every direction, finally perfecting his Dao and empowering it to the point it could withstand Heaven’s wrath. Of course, he barely managed to squeak by with an unconventional method like this, becoming a One-Step Autarch. But his accomplishment will be remembered for tens of millions of years,” the Revenant mage continued.

“But that means we sold out our people? Won’t the Empire sanction us?” Catheya asked with worry.

“How is it a breach to tell our brethren of an opportunity of Autarchy?” Ruz shrugged with a calm face. “The opportunity was real, though we failed to mention how tightly bound the Daos of Life and Death were interlinked at the heart of the Twilight Ocean. That made it far more difficult for Nizu Noz’Valadir and Tua Ouro to connect to the Heavenly Dao than they had expected. But if things played out differently, they might have succeeded.

“Unfortunately for them, providence wasn’t on their side that day, with Nizu falling and Tuo being crippled. But the fact that promising Divine Monarchs belonging to hostile camps got themselves in trouble, how is that our fault? And if some threatened middle-grade families deem fit to send us a few gifts to celebrate how things panned out, we’d obviously be amenable to that.”

“Most importantly, this benefited the Umbri’Zi family,” Va Tapek added.

“But they weren’t even here?” Catheya said with confusion.

“Exactly. They were somewhere else. At the Tarramak Vault, in fact,” Ruz smiled.

“What!” Catheya almost screamed. “Don’t tell me they seized it?!”

“Alas, no,” Ruz said. “Holding that place is too costly, not worth the effort. But destabilizing it, especially after it was prematurely forced open...”

“The Havarok Empire has been locked out of over twelve sectors,” Catheya said, the situation finally dawning on her.

“The Sixth Protector of the Havarok Empire forcing his way here in his full form was enough to destabilize the gate. The moment he fled back in defeat, the Umbri’Zi managed to destabilize their pathways even further. War is already raging across the stars,” her father nodded. “By the time the Havarok Dynasty manages to reconnect to the frontier, we will already have purified half of them. Their backers can’t fault the Undead Empire on this method, and one of the conquered sectors... is ours.”

“We’ll be able to form a province!” Catheya’s eyes gleamed.

Losing a profitable business in the Twilight Harbor was a big hit, but what was that compared to the revenue of a whole Sector? Certainly, they would have to pay a tax to the Umbri’Zi Family, but they both had the bloodline of Zi. The Sharva’Zi had always been extremely well treated in their dealings in the frontier thanks to that link.

“But why didn’t you tell me anything?” Catheya eventually huffed. “Am I really your daughter?”

“We couldn’t risk our plans leaking. With the Eidolon involved, we couldn’t let juniors hold any critical information,” Va Tapek smiled. “What if you were captured inside the mystic realm, and they dragged the truth out of your mind? This plan was extremely risky, with a high chance for failure.”

“Old men and your secrets,” Catheya glared.

“Well, it all worked out fine, didn’t it?” Ruz shrugged.

“Truthfully, things played out more beautifully than we could ever have dreamed. Who would have thought that the Sixth Protector would arrive with such fervor? We really have your

little friend to thank. But he's also made the situation a bit complicated."

"My friend?" Catheya asked with confusion. "What's wrong?"

"He killed the scions of both the Eidolon and the Eternal Clan before he ripped the very fabric of the Mystic Realm asunder. He even crippled the Realm Spirit during his rampage from what we've gathered. He essentially removed all the roadblocks for Alvod's Ascent, forcing the Sixth Protector to come in person instead of conjuring an avatar or possessing a descendant," Va Tapek explained.

"But he also dragged us and the Umbri'Zi into the mix. You were mostly sent in there to provide you with experience, yet one of your party members, another Draugr, became the focal point of the trial. He even killed two Scions of the empire, opening us up for a broader line of questioning," Ruz sighed. "Our plan would only truly work if we had plausible deniability."

"That crazy witch Uona attacked him first. She was running rampant here in the frontier, doing whatever she wanted. She almost killed me as well, and put a bounty on me!" Catheya frowned. "Arcaz didn't even want to go to the City of Ancients, but Uona forced his hand. She only has herself to blame."

"Still, someone from the Empire will need to speak to us, to you in particular, about what transpired inside. We need to find a strategy to protect our family from being sanctioned," Ruz continued, clearly not caring about the details of the events inside. "Our situation is precarious enough as it is."

Catheya understood his reasoning. For her father, who was in the right or wrong among the junior generation didn't matter. What mattered were the political implications and how they could affect the clan. "You're not suggesting we're supposed to cook up some lie and push the blame on Arcaz, right?"

"Well, we still haven't learned who the Empire will send. Our response highly depends on what camp the ambassador belongs to," Ruz sighed. "The Umbri'Zi is sending a delegate

as well. We'll hopefully be able to figure out a path with their help.”

“I am already here,” a pealing laugh echoed out through the vessel, and only then did Catheya realize another Draugr right next to them, like she had always been there.

“Mistress Umbri’Zi,” Ruz exclaimed with shock, and both he and Va hurriedly bowed.

Catheya quickly curtsied as well, her heart rapidly beating as she understood the implications of how her father acted. The Umbri’Zi was a far more powerful clan than Sharva’Zi, but there was no need for such deference between Monarchs. That could only mean one thing; the Umbri’Zi had sent the avatar of one of their Autarchs to look into the situation.

Her heart tightened as she gazed upon the woman. This had all ballooned far beyond what she had expected. She had felt somewhat certain that her plan would work, but that was before she knew of the truth behind the curtains. But she should have known that Arcas Black would somehow become the unwitting lynchpin in a massive political plot.

Because why wouldn't he?

“No need for formalities. We're of the same branch,” the woman said as her eyes turned to Catheya. “How marvelous. You are almost a spitting image of little Be’Zi, but you have a warmth that she always lacked. I was under the impression she had succumbed some time ago, yet I read a conflicting report on my way here? Is that stubborn little girl still alive?”

Catheya's eyes widened even further since she finally realized who this was. This was not one of the outer elders or lesser Autarchs of the Umbri’Zi. This was the Matriarch herself, Reyna Umbri’Zi, someone who was at least a fifth-step Autarch. An ancient being who had lived for at least 20 million years, partly thanks to her mastery over the Dao of Time. A wave of her hand and the Sharva’Zi would be annihilated.

“Don't over-think things, child. The fact that I am here is a good thing,” Reyna said. “The Ambassador will arrive in three

days. Before then, I have been sent to get to the bottom of a few things.”

“You’ve been sent...?” Catheya muttered with incredulity while the brows of her father furrowed in consternation.

Who could send a fifth-step Autarch on an errand, except those two factions?

“That is beside the point,” Reyna said. “Now, answer my question.”

“Ancestor Be’Zi Sharva’Zi is alive, according to Arcaz Black,” Catheya hurriedly said, not daring to lie in front of this ancestor. She was an arch-duke of the empire and someone who could decide the fate of not only Arcaz but also her clan.

“Arcaz Black has been in contact with her. She... sent a message that she was unable to return at the moment.”

“So she’s alive,” Reyna sighed as a scene appeared in front of them, a scene Catheya hadn’t seen before.

However, she knew the place; the City of Ancients. Catheya looked on with wide eyes, and it felt like she was seeing her travel companion for the first time. Terrifying markings covered his face, and chaotic swirls of unbridled power coursed around him. He didn’t seem like a warrior, but a force of nature, a calamity that couldn’t be quelled.

His silver gaze looked down upon a bedraggled Uona like an Emperor meting out judgment, and a moment later heavenly lightning slammed down on the vampire, extinguishing her body and soul. Was this how Arcaz had ended the two powerhouses? How was something like this possible?

“Be’Zi is alive, and her apparent disciple happened to unleash hollow Chaos. It looks like she refused to give up on that unclimbable peak. Well, she was always a stubborn one, and it seems to be working for her,” Reyna continued before she waved her sleeve, prompting the scene to disappear.

Catheya breathed out in relief, realizing that Reyna didn’t care that their ancestor had seemingly broken the commandments of the empire to pursue the Path of Oblivion. Was it because of

a familiar sentiment, or was it possible that the Path of Oblivion didn't clash with the Heart of the Empire?

"He is an odd one," Reyna muttered before she turned to Va Tapek. "I gather you scanned him. Is it true he lacks the mark?"

"He is truly unattached," Va Tapek confirmed with a small bow. "I had never heard of a member of the divine race not attached, which was why I sent back a report."

"It was that report that resulted in me having to visit this Heaven-forgotten corner of the multiverse," Reyna smiled before she turned to Catheya. "Child, tell me what you know of this young man. It is more important than you know."

"I..." Catheya hesitated for a few seconds, her eyes flickering between her father and the ancient matriarch of the Umbri'Zi family.

"You care for him," Reyna slowly said with a small smile, and a small box appeared in her hand. "Don't worry, I mean him no harm. In fact, here."

"This is?" Catheya asked with confusion as she took the box, only opening it when she saw the nod from the old Autarch. "Perennial Vastness!"

"That old thing still hasn't given up, still biding his time in that mysterious realm," Reyna said with a smile. "I was curious, so I had a talk with the newly ascended Autarch. A remarkable young man. It is a shame he declined our offer to be awakened, he would have made an impressive Outer Elder. In either case, Alvod Jondir left this behind for Arcaz Black, with the message that while the mission was a failure, the end result was acceptable. This is his reward."

Catheya's eyes were wide as she looked down at the token in her hands. This thing was beyond precious and something even scions of the Empire would want. For a Mortal like Arcaz, it might be his best path of forming a proper core.

"Of course, you can use it yourself if you so desire," Reyna snickered as she looked at Catheya teasingly. "I don't care either way."

“No, I will deliver it to him,” Catheya hurriedly said. “More importantly, I bring a message from Arcaz Black to the empire.”

“To the empire?” Reyna said with a raised brow. “Big words from a child. Then again, he clearly has wild ambitions. Tell me, what did he want you to convey?”

Catheya took a deep breath before she explained Arcaz’s unique situation. She tried to paint him and his weird abilities in as positive a light as she could, of how he could benefit the Undead Empire. Of course, she failed to mention what a lightning-rod he was, and the chaos his human identity had already caused back in the Zecia sector.

“No matter what his actions might look like, he bears no ill will against the Undead Empire. However, he is worried that he would become an experiment to some Monarch if his situation became known, which is why he has refrained from coming home until now,” Catheya ultimately said.

“A being of both life and death? So he’s an Edgewalker? How interesting,” Reyna eventually said, looking a bit surprised for the first time since appearing out of nowhere. “It’s not very often one of these aberrations show up, and I think it’s only the second time the undead half is Draugr. I think I understand now why he reached out to me.”

The response was absolutely not what Catheya had expected, and she struggled to understand what was going on. Edgewalker? Catheya had never heard of the concept, and neither had her master by the looks of it. In fact, he looked extremely surprised at the information, which was no surprise considering he had scanned Arcaz before.

But all that was pushed away when she heard Reyna’s last statement. She had already considered this when hearing that the Umbri’Zi Matriarch had been sent here by someone.

Could it possibly be one of the two Abyssal Lords who was behind this?

Chapter 790: The Final Twilight

The fact that one of the two A-grade leaders of the Draugr race might have taken an interest in something like an E-grade cultivator was almost incomprehensible. People at their level didn't even care whether Monarchs lived or died, and generations of E-grade cultivators would live and die in a single cultivation session of theirs.

At the same time, Catheya knew what she could and couldn't ask about, so she instead focused on the other part Reyna had divulged.

"Edgewalkers? Something like this has happened before?" Catheya hesitantly asked.

She felt a wave of regret upon remembering how confidently she had assured Arcaz about how this plan of hers would work. But it turned out she was talking out of turn, lacking critical information. She had never heard of such a marvelous thing, which was why she was so adamant that Arcaz could become a high-value member of the empire.

But if they were common, his value would immediately plummet, which meant his safety was no longer guaranteed.

"The Multiverse is beyond ancient. What hasn't happened before?" Reyna smiled. "We could even create them if we wanted. Unfortunately, they all have a fundamental weakness no matter if they were created artificially or if they were born from some cosmic hiccup."

"A weakness?" Catheya said with worry.

"Life-Death Edgewalkers cannot form a Cultivator's Core because of their contradictory nature," Reyna sighed. "If they could, they would have become strategic resources of our

empire. Agents who could walk completely unfettered in the land of the living? But now, they are simply natural oddities, dayflies with a small window of glory.”

Catheya blanched when she heard of Arcaz’s Fate. Was this the work of the Law of Balance? He was shining too brightly, like a candle burning from both ends. It felt extremely unfair that the path of someone so miraculous as that would be cut short at the measly E-grade. But if not even someone like Reyna knew of a solution, odds were that there wasn’t one.

At least there was one piece of good news that came with this. “So no one would want to kill him for research, at least?”

“Research?” Reyna snorted. “What’s there to research? If it was possible to actually nurture beings who could keep both their races and pass on that ability, we would have long figured it out. Some things are simply outside of the Heavenly Law. However, it is still of paramount importance we bring him in.”

“May I ask why?” Catheya hesitantly asked.

“Do you know how long it has been since we encountered an unattached Draugr?” Reyna asked.

“I-“ Catheya stuttered, not following the shift in topic.

“384 Million years ago, a small settlement in a Mystic Realm,” Ruz said, seemingly understanding something.

“Long-lost tribe members of the Zul. Today, the Zul have four Ancestral Nodes instead of three.”

“Just so,” Reyna said. “The Children of Draug lost much in the Dark Ages. Whole bloodlines surrendered to the void. We managed to reclaim some of what we lost by retracing our steps after the Empire was founded, but we are still not complete. Too much time has passed by now, and the odds of finding any more of our brethren are growing bleaker every day. Yet here he is, Arcaz Black. A fresh infusion not seen in eons.

“We cannot let the other races, especially the Eidolon, learn of this. Since the sacrifice of moving the Ancestral Lake, we have been considered the weakest race. But we have slowly

accumulated and recovered for so long. An addition to our bloodline can have cascading effects within a few million years, just like the branch of Zul had back then. If Arcaz Black carries one of the three missing bloodlines... It can be revolutionizing.”

“What would you have us do?” Ruz said with a serious frown. “Clan Sharva’Zi will do everything in our power to help with this mission.”

“First of all, these matters don’t leave this room. If one of the other factions learns of this matter, they might hunt him down to prevent our race from gaining this asset,” Reyna said.

“Secondly. Arcaz Black’s true identity is Arcaz Umbri’Zi going forward, a lineal Heaven’s Chosen nurtured in secret by my clan.

“We will take the blame on this one, and say that he has been sent to a sealed world to reflect on his actions and recover from the backlash of using the remnant of Oblivion. Luckily, we have records of all three sides meddling with that cursed thing, so it shouldn’t be too big a problem shifting the blame. I’m sure those ancient aberrations don’t mind,” Reyna smiled.

Catheya only gaped in response. That man was simply not bound by convention. She had hoped that she would be able to secure Arcaz a decent position through his unique abilities, but he had somehow subverted her expectations and become a Scion at the absolute top of the food chain, far surpassing even her standing.

“We’ll say we sent Arcaz Umbri’Zi to hasten the collapse of the Mystic Realm and force the Dreamer Autarch to make a move, but he went too far in his zeal to accomplish his mission. Just as that young bloodling did, by all accounts. That should be enough,” Reyna said. “Any questions?”

“No complaints,” Ruz hurriedly nodded, though Catheya could see he wasn’t too happy with the turn of events.

She could understand why. Clan Sharva’Zi had been the sole link between Arcaz Black and the Undead Empire, and now it turned out he might carry a bloodline so valuable that the Abyssal Shores dispatched the Avatar of a five-step Autarch.

Both the connection between herself and Arcaz, and his connection with her Ancestor, firmly tied their wagons together for good or bad.

But now, Reyna Umbri'Zi had snatched him, along with the potential benefits he could bring, in one fell swoop.

“Good. Now, where is this little troublemaker?” Reyna asked.

“I’m sorry, we had no idea he was an Edgewalker when the realm collapsed. We looked for Arcaz Black, but not his Dreamer counterpart,” Ruz sighed. “We truly have no idea what happened to him. He might have slipped away, but I am afraid something else might have happened that might prove a problem.”

“There is no way he fell here,” Catheya said with conviction.

“He is alive,” Reyna nodded in agreement. “He has managed to hide his tracks surprisingly well, but we would know if he had fallen.”

“It is something else,” Ruz sighed with a shake of his head. “Something odd took place during the ascension, but it went unnoticed due to the chaos. After things calmed down, we tried to create a tally of survivors and harvest any high-potential bodies. But we stumbled upon a problem. A huge number of Dreamers, undead warriors, and even corpses are missing. Millions, altogether.”

“Missing?” Reyna frowned.

“Innumerable warriors were sucked into the Void, yet we could scarcely find a single one when forcing open a path. We’ve also received reports of small spatial tunnels opening, sucking in unwitting warriors. At first, we thought it was simply space crumbling from the ascension, but after seeing the Void...”

“You think they’ve been abducted?” Reyna frowned as she closed her eyes.

No one in the room dared interrupt whatever the ancient Autarch was doing until Reyna opened her eyes with a frown after ten minutes. “It is barely discernible, but there are some remnant spatial fluctuations in the void. I cannot place the

energy signature though. It might be the work of a Spatial Autarch, or it might be some aberrant energy wave rippling through the Void.”

Ruz and Va Tapek looked into each other’s eyes, unable to come up with any helpful suggestions.

“I will send word back home to see if any of our archivists recognize what this is,” Reyna sighed before she turned toward Catheya. “Meanwhile, we’ll also follow the assumption that he made it out as he had planned. It is of paramount importance that we find him quickly. Where do you think he would go in this situation? We must ensure he stays Draugr.”

“I’m sorry?” Catheya said with confusion. “I think he can change races as he wishes?”

“Not like that, child,” Reyna snorted. “As I said, Life and Death cannot both be the basis of a Cultivator’s Core. It would lead toward Chaos, the peak that completely refused being categorized by the Apostate of Order. The fundamental stages of cultivation in this era are simply not suited for such a thing, no matter if you’re within the System’s purview or not.

“Something has to be sacrificed to move forward,” the Autarch continued. “Life-Death Edgewalkers do have one way to break through to Hegemony. They can discard one of their identities and become a singular whole, crippling part of themselves to continue on the road of cultivation. If Arcaz Black would discard one of his facets, which one do you think it would be?”

Catheya hesitated a bit, not immediately providing an answer even with her father wordlessly urging her on. Finally, she made a decision.

“Arcaz Black is a progenitor, the leader of a planet that will stay shrouded until he has reached Hegemony,” Catheya eventually said. “He isn’t beholden to any faction, and he has a seemingly endless source of wealth to come and go as he pleases. He is suspicious to the point of paranoia, and if some random stranger tries to tell him what to do, he is almost guaranteed to throw a wrench in those plans.

“You shouldn’t underestimate his ability to cause chaos. He singlehandedly managed to change the fate of a whole sector while still in the F-grade, and you saw how he managed to influence events here.”

“That was him?!” Va Tapek exclaimed with shock, drawing confused looks from the other two.

Va Tapek quickly explained what had happened in the Zecia Sector, of the Stele of Conflict and the quarantine that had almost prevented him from leaving.

“To think he has such an impact on fate. Clearly, the System has honed in on him for some reason. Just where did this child sprout from?” Reyna frowned, but she soon relaxed again as a smile spread across her face as she looked at Catheya. “Having said so much, I guess you have a proposition for us, no? Looking at you reminds me of your little ancestor, so I might be amenable to accept as long as it is within reason.”

“I don’t know where he is right now, but I am willing to head back to Zecia and talk with him about this situation. I should be able to get a message through to him one way or another. That way, I can make sure he doesn’t make any hasty decisions, and someone like me shouldn’t raise any flags among our enemies,” Catheya said. “But I want something in return.”

She could feel it. Arcaz was like a whirlwind of fate, one that was constantly advancing. She didn’t know exactly where he was headed, but she knew that she wanted to go along. But she also knew that she wouldn’t do as things stood. Arcaz Black had been weaker than her when they entered the Twilight Ocean, but he shot right past her in two short years.

If she wanted to travel alongside that man, to experience the true marvel of the Multiverse, she needed something beyond a simple opportunity or treasure. Her momentum needed a fundamental boost, her foundations needed to be remolded. Otherwise, she would just become an impediment to his path, an empty vase who couldn’t bring anything useful to the table.

This was her chance to catch up, to become a travel companion who had the strength to withstand the winds of fate

that surrounded Arcaz Black. If she didn't seize it, she had the feeling that he would be so far beyond her the next time they met, that he might as well be from her father's generation.

For all she knew, he was already off somewhere creating more chaos and making progress on his cultivation.

Zac was filled with a sense of helplessness as he looked at the gargantuan creature far in the distance. Over two weeks had passed since trapped in this infernal bubble, but he still wasn't any clearer on the situation. Why had this huge thing captured him and all the others? And where was it taking them?

He desperately wanted to escape, yet he didn't dare make a move. The Leviathan-looking beast had shown exactly what it did with those who rebelled. Zac still remembered the scene vividly.

The appearance of a creature that would dwarf even the enormous snake in the Twilight Chasm obviously hadn't gone unnoticed. Scale and sizes were hard to grasp in the Void, but the Leviathan had to be at least tens of thousands of meters long. It looked a bit like an alien fish, with gills glowing in green and white, and at least ten sets of eyes that emitted extremely powerful spatial fluctuations.

There was also fin large enough to shroud out the sky on its back as well, but its tail more resembled an octopus'. Thousands of thick fleshy tentacles stretched toward the depths of the void, each one of them emitting the same spatial fluctuations as its eyes. It was clearly a beast that leaned heavily on the Dao of Space, which explained why had so effortlessly appeared in front of them.

At the same time, Zac was somewhat certain it wasn't a Void Beast. First of all, it looked nothing like the grotesque Void Beasts he had encountered thus far. But more importantly, its aura was completely different. It emitted the primal aura of a high-grade beast, suffused with powerful spatial fluctuations. Furthermore, it didn't seem to have much love for Void Beasts.

Four times over the past two weeks it had stopped or made detours, with the sole purpose of ripping a couple of unlucky Void Beasts to shreds. The longest hunt took them through five dimensions and lasted a whole day, yet it didn't eat them or harvest any parts. It only unleashed terrifying waves of spatial turbulence at them, leaving mangled scraps behind before moving on.

Being the target of a mysterious mythological beast had unsurprisingly put the other caged cultivators on the edge, and some of the bubbles had started to shudder as their captives held nothing back in a desperate attempt to escape. The Leviathan's solution to quelling the rebellion was simple; it ate the spheres that emitted strong fluctuations.

Seeing the huge beast simply devouring over a hundred cultivators, many of which were emitting more powerful auras than himself, had eliminated Zac's thoughts of escape. He still had the Oblivion Energy, but even if he managed to break open the impossibly sturdy bubble, then what? He would be stuck in the Void, unable to leave and without any means to break free. The Leviathan would simply recapture him or gobble him up.

He reluctantly decided to wait for a better opportunity. Thankfully, the beast didn't seem interested in actually eating anyone else, and it soon turned around and reentered the vortex it had created. Zac had been elated for roughly five seconds until he found his prison following suit. A moment later, he had found himself part of a bobbing river of shimmering bubbles coursing through an endless series of dimensions.

The Leviathan was unhindered by space or any dimensional barriers, effortlessly opening one portal after another, scuttling through space with even greater ease than any Cosmic Vessel Zac had heard of. Sometimes, Zac found himself looking out at unfamiliar stars and galaxies, but usually, his view had been the endless darkness of the Void. All the while, the string of captives had been dragged along.

Zac's nerves had been extremely taut the first hours, but the Leviathan never attacked any more of the captives after the

first warning. Even now, every single prisoner was completely unscathed, if you discounted the mental torture of not having any idea of what was going on. Of course, the draining array was still active, though it only kept him at an extremely weakened state.

An even greater torture for Zac was the fact that there was a spatial lock inside the prison, one that was so comprehensive that he couldn't even peek inside the pile of Spatial Rings he had looted. For all he knew, he might be sitting on a vast fortune, or perhaps even some odd treasure that could get him out of this place. But the items inside the Spatial Treasures might as well be on the other side of the universe.

He was still able to open his Status Screen though, and he smiled as he once more looked at the new Limited Title.

[The Final Twilight: Place first during the final Twilight Ascent. Reward: All Attributes +10%, Strength +5%. Effect of Attributes +10%.]

Chapter 791: Leviathan

The final Twilight Ascent had been far more dangerous than the previous ones, especially considering the fallout. Unfortunately, that hadn't been enough for the System to deem it necessary to award Zac another limited title slot or title permanence. But it had at least adjusted the reward.

Zac had seen historical examples of status screens in his missives, and the first position in the E-grade Twilight Ascent would generally provide between 6% and 10% attributes, along with a maximum of 8% effectiveness. Generally, the slaughter-based trials provided the highest rewards, which wasn't a surprise considering the System's predilection for carnage.

His special version far surpassed the historical records even if it technically was a Dao-based trail, and it was way better compared to the titles that he had gathered so far. Seeing the massive boost the new title provided, Zac doubted he would be able to find anything better in the short run.

Limited Titles would get better and better for every grade, eventually far outstripping the normal ones. Even then, the Limited Titles you could gain in the D-grade rarely reached a boost of 15% to any attributes from what Zac had heard. So it was an extremely welcome addition, and Zac once more opened his status screen, partly out of boredom.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

123

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator, The Final Twilight

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - Peak

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

12709 [Increase: 123%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

5097 [Increase: 88%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

8740 [Increase: 116,5%. Efficiency: 275%]

Vitality

7256 [Increase: 104,5%. Efficiency: 262%]

Intelligence

2035 [Increase: 82%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

4215 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

540 [Increase: 106%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 662

No title permanence meant The Final Twilight-title had replaced the one called Weight of Sin, which was the aggressively mediocre title he received upon climbing the Memorysteel Mountain. The long downtime had also allowed him to fill out his three recently opened nodes using the leftover kill energy from Uona along with some crystals.

He was lucky to have taken out a small hill of Supreme Nexus Crystals just before the bubble's arrays sealed his skill fractals and Spatial Rings. They didn't help against the constant drain on his energy reserves that kept him weakened, but as long as he pushed the energy he absorbed straight into his nodes, the siphoning array didn't manage to snatch it all. That way, he had managed to gain the three missing levels on his human side, where he had put the free attributes into Dexterity as usual.

Unfortunately, he couldn't use the energy from the crystals for much else. He had surreptitiously tried activating **[Surging Vitality]** with Void Energy to recover his wounds though. It had worked, but the bubble actually started vibrating slightly in response, prompting Zac to hurriedly stop before the warden noticed.

Being unable to activate his healing skill didn't matter all that much though. Most of the damage to his body was to his

foundations and nodes, which wasn't something [**Surging Vitality**] could help with. His improvements on that side were slow, but he was definitely in far better shape compared to when getting captured.

His nodes didn't feel like they were teetering on the brink of collapse any longer, though it would probably take another month or two of rest before they were back in peak condition. The cracks from conjuring another Glimpse of Chaos would most likely take even longer to recuperate from, but the event hadn't saddled any worrisome lasting changes from the looks of it. It wasn't great, but Zac knew that it would take most people years to recover from a situation like his. If not for his weird constitution, he would perhaps be permanently crippled.

The pathways on his shoulders had been widened a bit, and a couple of new engravings had formed, giving them a stronger aura of Creation and Oblivion. It was like every time he conjured a chaos pattern, [**Cyclic Strike**] was somewhat altered in a direction better suited for its new purpose. Zac even looked forward to seeing what it would turn into after getting anointed five times.

Perhaps he would freely be able to infuse his skills with the power of the remnants by that point, allowing them to reach the same terrifying levels of force as when he fought in the Twilight Ocean. As for the remnants, they hadn't woken up at all since getting shoved into the refurbished fractal prison.

But the fractal had already begun draining the remnants again in an ironic mirroring of his own situation. Just as Zac had hoped, the stream of purified energy was greater now compared to before, with more energy enforcing both his soul and his constitution. This proved his idea worked; that each set of remnants was like a multiplier to his cultivation speed for his Soul Strengthening Method and improving his bloodline.

The risks would obviously increase with each set he gathered, but Zac's soul had made tremendous improvements since getting stuck with the first splinter. He didn't sense any instability in his mental state at all, though he knew that the effect of the remnants was extremely hard to catch.

In other good news, the quest that Alvod Jondir had pushed upon him when they met in the Twilight Chasm had simply disappeared around a week after he was whisked away on the journey. From his prison, it was impossible to tell what that meant. His best guess was that Twilight Harbor had finally collapsed, losing its status as a sanctioned capital and prompting all open quests to close.

Other possibilities were the death of the Eveningtide Asura or him simply dissolving the quest. In either case, it was one less thing to worry about, though Zac couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't preferable if he was caught by Alvod rather than the terrifying beast in the distance. After all, things had seemingly turned out pretty well for the Asura, and Zac had inadvertently helped with his plans quite a bit.

Zac shook his head before closing his status screen, once more resting his back against the cage as he gazed upon the vast darkness around him. If not for his capture, he would probably be home by now. Yet he found himself here, unable to help his people at all. He hadn't gained any screen of the Incursion's status either, leaving him completely in the dark of how they fared.

But he would need to find a way to save himself before he could save his people.

His attributes had skyrocketed since traveling to the Twilight Harbor, to the point that his effective attributes had pretty much tripled. He remembered he had just barely passed 4,000 Strength around the time Leandra returned to Earth. Now he had over 12,000, while his Efficiency had increased as well.

Add to that the less quantifiable improvements, such as the destructiveness of his evolved Daos, his upgraded weapon, his evolved skills, and his further awakened bloodline, and you could almost say he had been reborn in the Twilight Harbor. He was even confident that he would be able to take on ten copies of his previous self without breaking a sweat.

But what did that matter to the enormous beast dragging him to some unknown place? This thing considered Hegemons to

be tasty snacks. Zac even doubted that an Annihilation Sphere right in its head would manage to harm it.

The days passed and Zac started to wonder if he'd ever get out of this place. But finally, there was a change. The Leviathan emitted the powerful spatial ripples that were the tell-tale sign that it was about to enter another dimension again. That alone wasn't surprising, but when his prison passed through the vortex, his eyes widened.

One Leviathan had turned into three, each one looking identical to the other two. At the same time, the number of bubble prisons had almost doubled, and Zac looked at the scene with shock. He still hadn't found any helpful clues, but he mentally started to prepare himself for one final struggle.

No matter what was going on, the fact that these monsters had started to gather up possibly meant they were closing in on their destination. Of course, there was not much to prepare. He had hurriedly stowed away his axe the moment he decided to not escape, fearful that being armed would incur the wrath of the Leviathan.

Meanwhile, **[Love's Bond]** had turned unresponsive since he had fed it the mysterious egg. He would perhaps be able to force it into its shield form, but he would rather not unless absolutely necessary. Soon enough, the three Leviathan's opened a huge gate and entered together, and Zac's heart trembled as he felt the tremendous waves of Spatial Dao on the other side.

This was it.

A moment later, his bubble passed through. A sudden burst of radiance forced Zac to cover his eyes for a second, and he realized they should have entered in a proper dimension this time around. However, any thoughts on their location were thrown to the back of his mind as he saw what the river of bubbles was flying toward.

He had been naïve. Those little worms that had dragged him here weren't fit to be called Leviathans. The thing in front of him was a true Leviathan. It almost felt like his mind was breaking from estimating just how large this beast was, but

one thing was for sure; it was not just the size of a planet like Earth, it even dwarfed some of the continental plates that made the Twilight Harbor.

It looked quite similar to the Space Fish that had taken him here, but this ancestor had clearly undergone a series of bloodline evolutions compared to Zac's chaperone. The difference wasn't just like the difference between Vul, the Barghest Alpha, and its brethren. It was like the difference between a dragon and a small lizard.

Looking at the Leviathan felt like looking at the Laws of space. A lazy wave from any one of its innumerable tentacles caused massive cracks in space, and the sail-like fin on its back was massive enough to blot out the Heavens themselves. A nebula churned around it, almost looking like cosmic waters.

Its body was also covered in huge scripts that almost seemed to be alive. Together, they formed some sort of natural formation, one that was far beyond his scope of understanding.

Zac had never seen anything like this before, not even in his Dao visions. He knew there were impossibly large beasts wandering the endless Multiverse, but it was another thing entirely to be placed in front of one. As for its power, it was definitely not just the equivalent of a Monarch.

This was a proper Primordial Beast, one that emitted a noticeably stronger aura compared to the Havarok Autarch he saw the other day, though it still didn't quite reach the level of Be'Zi or her husband. Why was something like this here in the frontier?

Or had he actually left the frontier already, dragged to another sector entirely by the Space Fish?

A flash of light dragged Zac out of his thoughts and his eyes away from the terrifying being he was floating toward, just in time to see his guide disappear in a puff of spatial energy. Only then did he properly take in the situation, and his heart sunk even further. His group captives were just the latest arrivals.

There were innumerable bubbles all around the behemoth. Another vortex appeared in the distance, and yet another beast chaperone came dragging a few hundred bubbles. Just like the one that had taken him here, the beast disappeared in a spatial ripple the moment it emerged, leaving its captives to their fate.

Were the smaller beasts living inside their parent? Or were they just clones?

Even without a beast to guide them, the spheres kept moving in an orderly fashion. But Zac's horror only mounted when he realized where he was heading; the Leviathan's gaping maw. It was no wonder the smaller beasts hadn't eaten any more captives as they traveled. They didn't dare steal their leader's dinner.

Zac's heart beat like a drum as he scrambled for a way to survive. He had hoped that he had been captured to become an indentured worker or something considering he had been left alive. If that had been the case, he would have a shot at escaping by using his Void Energy. But now, he knew he couldn't wait any longer. He could feel it – if he entered that impossibly large maw, his odds of survival were essentially zero.

The Leviathan's mouth was large enough to swallow planets whole, but it wasn't the sharp fangs that worried him. Its maw was filled with a terrifying cloud of spatial destruction, far beyond any spatial tears he had ever seen. There was no way he would survive even a second in such an environment, yet he and the other bubbles flew toward it with blazing speed.

Terror overwrote the overwhelming pain from using the power of the remnants as a storm of Dao and Mental Energy entered the two pathway highways on his shoulders, where Axe and Coffin were forced together. Luckily, the beast guarding his bubble was gone, giving him a small window of opportunity. What little Oblivion Energy he had saved up in his Soul Core was dragged out, acting as the catalyst for the Annihilation Sphere.

A small ball full of endless destruction rapidly grew between his hands, and Zac felt a burst of rage bubble in his mind. The

shock along with the damage left behind by the remnants had made him susceptible to the whispers of the splinters. But Zac forcibly took control of the madness, using it to squeeze out a little bit more energy from his harried mind.

Meanwhile, he activated [**Piercing Gaze**] in search of any weak spot in his prison with the help of Void Energy, ignoring the small shudder that spread across the cage. Unfortunately, the sphere used concepts far beyond his understanding or scope of what his skill could decipher, so Zac could only slam his attack into a random spot on the wall with righteous indignation.

The satisfying scene of his cage cracking like a dome of glass didn't appear. Zac was dismayed to realize there was a hidden spatial barrier between himself and the surface of his cage. It was just a thin film, yet it felt like his attack was forced to cross hundreds of miles to reach the wall.

By that point, his energy was almost completely expended. The sphere holding him captive only rippled a bit before a series of esoteric patterns suddenly appeared across its surface, joining the ones that Zac suspected were responsible for the restrictions and energy drain. Zac scrambled for other ideas, but it was helpless.

He still had access to his Void Energy, but that didn't do him much good. His weapon was sealed inside his spatial ring, but he knew that his skills would be worthless in this situation in either case. Others had unleashed far more powerful attacks than his without any luck. The high-concept Dao inside his Annihilation Sphere had been his only hope.

There was no way that [**Love's Bond**] would do any good in this situation either. More importantly, he was worried that activating skills would prompt the Leviathan to lash out at him prematurely, based on the new runes that covered his bubble. His only hope now was that his cage would break the moment it entered the huge maw of the Leviathan and that he'd survive with the help of [**Void Zone**] long enough to swim out of there.

However, Zac looked around with confusion as his own sphere suddenly made a turn and diverged from the others'. Almost all of the innumerable cages were dragged toward the beast's maw, but his own joined a few thousand others that instead shot toward the huge fin on its back. It didn't take long to figure out what differed between his own and the other spheres either; the engravings.

His own cage was covered in dense scripts thanks to using the Annihilation Sphere, as were the others who had avoided disaster. The markings weren't identical, but they rather held varying echoes of the Dao, where Zac could sense a mix of Pure Death and Conflict on his own - the ground components of his Annihilation Sphere.

Another prison that wasn't flying too far from him actually emitted temporal fluctuations, and Zac spotted a humanoid man sitting inside with closed eyes as though he was in the middle of meditation. Meanwhile, the bubbles which had no such unique markings things moved toward the beast's mouth.

It didn't look like patterns were based on cultivation strength either. He saw at least two Peak or at least High Hegemons shooting toward the mouth, both of them desperately banging on the barrier as they were dragged toward their doom. He had spotted them in the Void outside the Twilight Harbor before, and he had seen the shocking attacks they had unleashed in an attempt to escape back into the main dimension.

His eyes met one of the other's for a moment, and he saw a chaotic mix of emotions in the Revenant's eyes. Confusion, fear, rage and indignation. Most importantly, reluctance. Reluctance to have their path ended like this, to become food to some monstrous beast. Zac turned away, unable to look on as they were dragged into the spatial storm.

He felt so weak and helpless, but more so, he was filled with relief. The Annihilation Sphere hadn't managed to break him out of his prison, but it looked like it had allowed him to survive the first culling. Something about the energies he had unleashed had piqued the Leviathan's interest, saving him from a gristly end.

The question was, what was it planning?

Chapter 792: Orom

The group of bubbles that had avoided the fate of becoming a part of the Leviathan's feast was soon divided even further, where ninety percent moved together toward the tails. Next was roughly six or seven percent that shot away together, moving toward a large ridge on the beast's back. Zac was in the third group, the second smallest one with just over a hundred of the 'earmarked' cultivators.

The final group was just one solitary sphere, covered in layers and layers of engravings. It looked completely different from the others, and it suddenly just disappeared in a puff of spatial energy. As for his own cohort, it shot toward a spot just ahead of the enormous sail-like fin on its back.

Zac instinctively knew that he had survived some sort of culling, but he was still filled with unease as his cage got closer and closer to the space fish. The gargantuan Leviathan took up most of his vision by this point, stretching across the horizon. It was filled with such tremendous power that Zac couldn't stop his body from shaking.

Suddenly, a large portal opened up in front of him. It looked a bit like the ones the smaller Leviathans had created to pass through dimensions, but this one was far more stable. It was lined with patterns that looked a lot like the brands that covered the whole body of the beast, natural expressions of the Dao.

The small group of spheres shot straight into the portal, and Zac felt an odd spatial ripple pass through him before he was shrouded in absolute darkness. A searing pain suddenly erupted on his left arm, followed by a wave of weakness that spread through his body. Zac had no time to figure out what had been done to him before the darkness lifted and Zac found himself lying with his face down in the dirt.

He hurriedly scrambled to his feet only to find himself in the middle of a forest glade, surrounded by the captives from the other bubbles who had been sent through the final portal. His mind blanked out for a moment, and as he looked up at the purple sky, he wondered if they had been teleported to some world.

The warriors around him all gave Zac the impression of powerful elites, and he immediately tried to flash away to create some space for himself. However, he found that the energy in his body was extremely sluggish, and another type of seal prevented him from activating [**Earthstrider**]. Not only that, he felt so helplessly weak since passing through that portal.

The other cultivators were as clueless as he was on what was going on. A few tried to escape from the group, only to find the glade sealed with some sort of array. The moment they got close, an ominous rune appeared out of nowhere.

The bubbles were gone, but they were clearly still trapped, and Zac took the chance to check his situation. The result wasn't great. First of all, there was a new brand on top of his left hand, at the spot where he had felt the pain before. It was extremely complex and reached halfway up his elbow, far surpassing the one that Catheya's master had once placed there.

It was clear that this brand had replaced the restrictions covering the bubbles, sealing his power and limiting energy circulation to a slow crawl. In other words, it was a prisoner brand, similar in function to the arrays that usually covered dungeons and prisons in the Multiverse. After all, you needed something to make sure a powerful captive didn't suddenly lash out and kill their captors.

A glance at his status screen confirmed his suspicions. His real attributes were still there, but they were struck over, replaced by a line that simply said **1,000**.

One thousand attribute points? That was something you'd see on an F-grade elite. No wonder he felt so weak. He was lucky he had already placed [**Verun's Bite**] into a spatial ring. Just

carrying the axe when restricted like this would be a bit of a struggle since its most recent upgrade.

In fact, a few captives were in that exact predicament. Shimmering weapons were lying in the grass next to them, and they were desperately trying to lift them, only to barely be able to budge them. Others were luckier, wielding tools without such forbidding weight. However, the brand on Zac's arm seemed to prevent him from communicating with [**Love's Bond**], essentially turning it into a useless necklace.

Zac felt extremely exposed after having his attributes restricted to just 1,000 points, but at least it looked like everyone had been dragged down to the same level, even the Hegemons. Everyone's aura was extremely uniform, except for the unique flavor granted by everyone's Daos.

In other words, the 1,000 referred to Effective Attributes, though Zac had already guessed as much after sensing his current strength. After all, his current power was well below the state when he finally passed 1,000 raw Strength by the end of the Tower of Eternity. He didn't get much time to think about the implications, as a new face suddenly appeared on top of a stone just outside the glade.

"Congratulations, you lucky bastards. You get to live another day," a gruff voice echoed out, prompting everyone to look over with apprehension.

The first words out of the new arrival were a bit crude, but they were still a relief to Zac. It looked like his life wasn't in immediate peril, which would give him a chance to figure some way out of this place. After all, his Void Energy had already proven to work against the restrictions of the Space Fish.

Having access to that hidden force had to be a tremendous advantage in this place. Not only did it allow him to unleash skills while the others were helpless, but the skills might even contain their original strength if they could properly circumvent the prison seal. Skills like [**Abyssal Phase**] might prove to be the key to getting out of this place unseen and unnoticed.

But for now, Zac would bide his time. He needed to understand what was going on, and he once more glanced at the captives around him. This time, he noticed something odd. They were all roughly the same size. If it was just a bunch of humans, Zac wouldn't have thought much of it, but there were all kinds of races here.

He had long become accustomed to seeing cultivators the size of buildings walking the streets, but he was now standing shoulder to shoulder with a beastkin that should at least have a meter on him. There was also a proper Ogre shaman in the mix, whose race often reached five meters or so. That scene confirmed something else he had already suspected; these people weren't all from the Twilight Harbor.

In this small group alone, 11 races weren't native to the harbor, three of which he didn't even recognize. At the same time, he recognized a couple of insignias on the captives and the style of clothes a few others wore. It was clear that the Leviathan had sent out its feelers in multiple directions, but roughly half of these people came from the same place as he did. Moreover, he recognized a few people who should be from the Havarok Empire judging by the tattoos that covered their faces.

As for the one who spoke just now, it was an unknown humanoid race that almost looked a bit metallic. He had just one large eye on his forehead like a cyclops, but that eye had three different pupils. He wore a gold-lined white robe, held together by a golden brooch that seemed to be an insignia of some force that Zac didn't recognize.

He didn't wear any weapons, but Zac's instincts told him that the man was some sort of fighter leaning toward Strength just like himself. There was an innate sense of pressure emanating from his body, one that made Zac think of Greatest. No one made a move upon seeing this unknown man, but Zac could sense how many tensed up and prepared for battle.

"May I ask why you have captured and sealed us all?" a middle-aged man in a flowing robe eventually said.

“Do I look like a jailer to you?” the metallic man snorted. “I’m in the boat as you. I just got here a few millennia before you all.”

Zac’s heart lurched upon hearing millennia, and a few other blanched as well.

“You were all conscious for the capture? You saw that big bastard eating your companions?” the man continued. “Well, that’s the Orom. Your new home for the foreseeable future. This whole place is inside its body. It’s a true realm rather than an inner world, so don’t bother looking for the big guy’s soul.”

“Your strength is greater than ours, why?” the man continued, and Zac only realized the discrepancy now. The man in front of them was indeed a bit powerful than the group of warriors around him.

“See this badge?” the metallic man said as he pointed at the brooch. “This is the insignia of the Orom Attendants. We complete some tasks for the Orom, and it provides us with some unique benefits in this place. A gold badge attendant such as myself has twice the attributes as normal citizens, though that doesn’t matter much in this place. The access to unique training grounds that this brooch provides is far more important.”

Zac raptly listened to the metallic man, but he simultaneously kept trying to figure out the rules of this place. A muffled curse from the woman next to him drew his attention to something, and he hurriedly focused on the Spatial Ring on his finger. There didn’t seem to be a spatial lock sealing them any longer, but the prison brand prevented him from using this thing as well.

“A golden badge is the equivalent of a Hall Master of a sect, I suppose,” the metallic man continued, ignoring the actions of his captive audience. “There are both higher and lower ranks. You better be careful if you run into someone with an Emerald Badge. Their attributes are capped at 10,000, and they are the only ones allowed to kill others in this world.”

Next, over a hundred crude plaques appeared in his hands, and they flew over to each captive. “For now, you’re just citizens.

You don't need to wear these like I do if you don't want to. But don't lose it since you need it for various things in this place. You don't want to be forced to replace one, trust me."

"How do we become attendants?" a beastkin asked as he snatched his token.

"You don't," the metallic man shrugged. "At least not right now. You will find out more when we reach the town. But suffice to say, while this place is a bit weird, some things will be quite similar to a sect. You can slowly work your way up the ladder and gain contribution points. These points can then be turned in for all kinds of convenient things."

"Can they be used to buy back our freedom?" the original man asked, and the group perked up at that.

"No, you can't. But there is a straightforward method to get out of here," the man smiled. "You simply need to confirm your Dao."

"What?!" a man roared. "Become a Divine Monarch? Why not ask us to defend our Dao while we're at it!?"

"Hey, I don't make the rules. I just relay them, just like how I was told when I was dragged to this place," the attendant grinned.

The proclamation was pretty shocking, not only to Zac but to those around him. Becoming a Divine Monarch was just not a matter of time, but talent and opportunity. Even if everyone in this small group was a Heaven's Chosen, actually becoming a Divine Monarch was just a longshot that normally required a large number of lucky encounters.

The man had essentially given them all a life sentence.

"Now, don't look so glum," the metal man said. "Your fate could have been a lot worse. Didn't you see where most people were headed?"

"Did the others really get devoured?" an insectoid woman asked with a frown, and Zac shuddered upon remembering the scene outside.

It was an almost incomprehensible loss of life that had taken place. That was still taking place, by all accounts. It was a stark reminder of how Earth had essentially been a trial ground where the challenges and dangers were artificially controlled by the System. Out here in the wild, there were no safety nets, and death could lurk around any corner.

But the citizens of Twilight Harbor and the trail takers who visited such as himself were truly unlucky. First, the whole harbor got blown up by the struggle between a bunch of old monsters. But the lucky few who managed to enter the Void to avoid the fallout were snatched up by some crazy monster lurking in the shadows.

“As far as we can tell,” the metal man nodded. “You survived the great filter of the Orom, which means you have potential. The others were deemed lacking and were instead turned into nourishment. This is actually an exciting period for us old citizens as well. The Orom only feeds when it finds a congregation of fate, and that means two things. Fresh faces like you people, and a deluge of new items up for grabs.”

Zac guessed the deluge of new items came from the hundreds of thousands of Spatial Rings that the Orom swallowed. Just the thought of all that wealth made Zac’s heart beat a bit faster, almost to the point he forgot their gristly origins. There had been *a lot* of Hegemons in the mix, and even some Monarchs might have fallen. His wealth was pretty terrifying compared to most E-grade cultivators.

But compared to what this space fish swallowed, it was simply nothing.

“What about the other groups who survived?” another man asked with worry in his eyes. Zac guessed he had seen someone he cared about setting off toward the tails.

“There are three groups. The largest group is sent to do miscellaneous tasks for the Orom. Indentured Servants, I guess. The second group is second-string cultivators. You’ll learn more about them later. As for you, you’re the first-string, which is what you want to be if you have to be stuck inside an enormous monster.”

“There was one more group. A single sphere,” another captive muttered.

“Oh?” the metallic man exclaimed with surprise. “That’s pretty rare. I haven’t heard of such a thing happening in over a hundred thousand years. I am not sure, but I heard those people are potential disciples, sent to an inheritance trial. Others believe the Orom accidentally swallowed someone with too big a backing and is just providing them with an opportunity or some restitution before letting them go. I’m not sure which is true. In either case, it’s not related to you guys.”

“Then what does this Orom want with us?” an old man standing next to Zac asked.

“That’s the good news; it just wants you to cultivate. To break through your shackles, no matter if it’s related to your levels, constitutions, insights, souls, or crafts. Become a Divine Monarch or the equivalent, and you have provided enough to be set free,” the man snickered. “As to why the Orom is doing this, I think most of you can understand.”

Zac had no idea what he was talking about, but looking around he saw an understanding look on most of the new captives.

“How are we supposed to cultivate with our resources sealed in our Spatial Rings?” a woman asked with a frown. “I doubt this Orom can provide all the specialized arrays and treasures we need.”

“Outside Spatial Treasures are sealed in the Orom World, apparently because of some terrifying item that was brought onboard millions of years ago. Almost killed the big bastard, according to the records,” the attendant laughed. “However, there are secured locations you can take out any items you need for cultivation, and they will be scanned for problems. You can then transfer them into locally-made Cosmos Sacks.”

“What about my weapon?” a man frowned as he looked down at a blue staff that clearly had extraordinary origins.

“Alright, in a few moments, you will have a brief window to stow away items. You will not be able to take anything out though,” the attendant said before touching his golden

insignia. “I suggest you take this opportunity, or the items will be lost to you forever.”

Zac felt a shudder from the brand on his arm a moment later, and he realized the brand must have received some command. He tried infusing his will into the ring on his hand, but it was still out of reach. However, he saw the others hurriedly stow away the weapons that were lying on the ground.

“Well, let’s get out of here. We need to be gone before the next group arrives. I will lead you to the closest settlement. You’ll get a better understanding of the situation over there. But if you want my advice; simply settle down and focus on your Dao. This place isn’t all-too-bad,” the attendant grinned.

“Then again, I’m sure you’re all thinking of various ways to escape. I did as well, at first. But you will find that the Orom is not so easily tricked.”

Chapter 793: Experience

“Settling down is fine for some, but my Dao is confirmed through slaughter,” a scarred human said with a frown.

“Settling down would destroy my path.”

“Don’t worry. There are designated zones for that as well,” the metallic man with a lazy wave as he started walking, and a shimmer across the glade indicated that the barrier had been deactivated. “Come, it’ll all be clear enough soon. Of course, you’re free to go wherever you want. I won’t stop you.”

The hundred-odd cultivators looked at each other with confusion, and most shrugged before following the Orom Attendant. A few others, including the man who walked the path of slaughter, walked off in their own direction, soon blending with the foliage. Zac guessed those people were wandering cultivators unwilling to become part of a collective.

As for himself, Zac decided to follow the bulk of the captives. It didn’t make much sense for the attendant to be lying at this point, and he needed to understand this place better if he wanted to attempt a prison break. The old human who spoke up earlier walked along as well, and Zac slowly walked over to walk next to him.

“Excuse me,” Zac eventually said with a low voice. “Could you explain why the Orom captured us?”

“What makes you think I know?” the old man said with a raised brow.

“You looked like you did. I think only a few of us were left out of the loop,” Zac said with a helpless shrug.

“Well, whatever,” the old man sighed. “You can see this one as a freebie, seeing as we got caught together. Do you know the most common way to reach the peak of cultivation?”

“Talent and lucky encounters?” Zac ventured with some confusion.

“Hardly,” the man snorted. “Theft!”

“Cultivation is endless, but resources are lacking,” the old man sighed. “Especially at the top. Not only that, but the demands on understanding become greater and greater, soon to the point that even the most talented cultivators get overwhelmed. So, they steal. Steal resources. Steal cultivation havens. Steal Dao and Fate.”

“Steal Dao and Fate?” Zac blurted, but he quickly thought back to the events of the Twilight Ascent.

It was clear that the Eveningtide Asura had turned the whole Twilight Ocean into some sort of cultivation resource. And come to think of it, the quest was designed to ‘perfect the tapestry of twilight’. Was that the same thing? Using generations of cultivators to shore up his understanding. Each death, each breakthrough; a fragment of it was all siphoned to himself.

“Looks like you get it,” the old man nodded. “This big bastard is using cultivators to speed up its progress from the looks of it. It’s a crooked path, but it’s better than doing nothing. It’s the same as what most cultivators keeping people inside their inner worlds are doing.”

Zac’s eyes widened a bit at that. This was common practice?

“Of course, it’s usually descendants who gain resources, safety, and a superior environment in return,” the old man added. “Absorbing hostiles into your world would be extremely dangerous, and it’s impossible in most cases. This big guy can only do it because we’re not actually inside an inner world. We’re rather inside its body like parasites.”

“How does that affect us?” Zac asked. “If our fate is getting robbed?”

“No idea,” the old man grimaced. “But it’s not like your Daos can get ripped out of your body. Most likely you will find progress and cultivation slower, as some of the benefits goes to the landlord. And being trapped like this might slow down

your momentum, subverting your fate. But I guess we'll find out more over the following centuries.”

“Centuries,” Zac muttered with a helpless shake of his head.

“Don't tell me you're part of the younger generation?” the old man exclaimed as he looked over at Zac with surprise. “I thought all of us were old hands who had already confirmed our paths. But now that you mention it... Your aura...”

“E-grades and early Hegemons being dragged here are somewhat rare. I think you're the third one to pass the filter this time around, though a few more should arrive over the following week. Your insights are too shallow to bring any benefits to the Orom, but it has decided to take a bet on you. If one is snatched, they usually have something interesting going on,” the metallic man grunted as he looked back from the front. He had clearly heard the whole conversation. “If you want my advice kid, avoid the combat-oriented places for now.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a frown, realizing he might have inadvertently divulged more than he should have. “Isn't everyone sealed the same?”

A few of the captives immediately started laughing, and the old man looked at Zac like he was a fool. “Brat, stop my fist.”

Zac looked over with surprise, only to find a punch already flying toward his face. Zac's own body was thankfully already moving by instinct, and he used one hand to divert the blow while countering with a gut-punch of his own. There was something off with the old man's attack though, and Zac was forced to adjust his body over and over to avoid its trajectory.

However, no matter what he did, the fist just kept getting closer, while his own attack was somehow way off-mark. A moment later he suddenly found himself on the ground with a blazing pain in his head. He tried to get back on his feet, but he was actually groggy enough to fall back down on his ass.

What had just happened? Their attributes were the same, yet it felt like the old man was twice as fast as he was.

“Brat, I could defeat ten of you simply based on my experience,” the old man laughed. “And I am just a Late-stage Hegemon. The Monarchs would be able to take on an army of you brats even while having the same attributes. Our attributes are locked, but that doesn’t mean we can’t benefit from our understanding of combat and the Dao.”

“Well, shit,” Zac muttered as he shook his head to regain some clarity.

It was true. He’d be able to take out at least ten people with similar stats back on Earth based on his combat experience alone. Add to that the combat stances he had started to form based on his Daos and his Path, and he was undefeatable. But compared to a late Hegemon, he was still far lacking in experience. They had all fought longer than he had lived.

Furthermore, those who had made it to this place rather than getting killed were all unusually talented from the looks of it. It would be odd if they hadn’t all formed a path of their own by now, and spent millennia polishing it.

“Well, it’s not all bad, kid,” the metallic man laughed as he started walking over. “You’re at the bottom of the totem pole right now, but the fact that you were dragged here proves your talent is uncommonly high. People in your situation seem to have the highest chance of leaving this place, only exceeded by the high-grade monarchs right at the precipice. Some of us might rely on you in a few dozen millennia to get word to our families.”

Zac looked at the metallic man with gratitude, realizing he was helping him out here. The last sentence could act as a deterrent to the old monsters around him. Messing with him might be nice to relieve some stress in this messed-up situation, but it might come back to bite them in the future.

Besides, he had one unique advantage to defend himself in this place if it came down to it; his bloodline.

“Have there been people saved by their families?” a graceful woman asked, speaking up for the first time.

“There are occasionally such things happening,” the metallic man nodded. “Some people have been teleported out from this place without breaking through. Others have just disappeared. Most of these people have been ransomed by the Orom, or perhaps the Orom was threatened to spit them out. But don’t expect anything unless you have Autarchs among your elders.”

“And some have disappeared?” another man said speculatively.

“They might have died, or they might have figured out a way to escape. No trap is perfect,” the attendant shrugged. “And don’t ask me how since I have no idea. If you lack the confidence to confirm your Dao but have some powerful ancestors, I’d suggest you start making fate tokens and giving them out to those who seem to have the potential to leave the normal way. Usually, when someone confirms their Dao, a few more people are freed within a few centuries.”

“Is it possible to break through grades in this place?” Zac asked.

“Most look at the Orom like a jailer, but you can also consider it a gardener,” the metallic man said as he reached a hand down toward Zac to help him up. “We are the crops it’s growing. And how could crops grow without the proper nourishment? You’ll find that this place has some advantages that are hard to find elsewhere. I’m Murbot, by the way.”

“Zac,” Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. He shot a glance at the old man who had explained things to him earlier. “Some punch.”

“Don’t feel too bad, I’ve been beating up brats like you for 2,000 years,” the man guffawed. “Your reaction wasn’t bad, much better than my shitty descendants.”

Zac smiled in return, though he was a bit surprised inwardly. The Hegemon looked pretty old, to the point that Zac suspected he was running out of longevity. But 2,000 years was nothing to someone at that level. If anything, he was still young, completely different from the old Hegemons who had been stuck at some bottleneck for eons.

He didn't know why the man looked like that, though it probably was just a mark of eccentricity. Most people preferred to stay young-looking, but some went in a different direction. On second thought, Zac should have figured that was the case. What would the Orom want with an old man stuck at a bottleneck? How many insights and breakthroughs could someone like that provide?

The group started moving again soon enough. However, they only moved for another few minutes before they stopped again. It wasn't due to Murbot stopping to explain something, but rather because of the appearance of a densely engraved pyramid in the woods.

"A seal mountain, Pseudo C-grade!" the old man exclaimed, and more than one warrior rushed forward with greed in their eyes.

However, Zac stayed behind, as did most of the captives. Greed had made even these Hegemons forget themselves, but Zac understood it wasn't a coincidence they passed this thing. How could something so valuable just be up for grabs? And how would anyone even stow it away with their Spatial Treasures locked?

As expected, the old masters soon returned a bit shamefaced a minute later, all of them unsurprisingly empty-handed.

"What a waste," the old man groaned sighed as he threw a wistful look at the mountain. "That's at least 100 C-grade coins left lying in the wild."

Zac looked at the mountain with shock and avarice, plans already forming in his mind. Perhaps there would be an opportunity to snatch it in the future with the help of his bloodline talent. Perhaps there were even better treasures waiting out there for him.

"It's a good reminder for you all," Murbot grinned. "As I mentioned before, you will be able to transfer your items to local Cosmos Sacks, but you need to be careful. You need the strength to put the items back again. This thing was left here three hundred thousand years ago by a Gold Badge wanting to

show off to a new batch of recruits. No one has been able to take it away since.”

Zac snorted, and a few laughs emerged from the group. The scene was a bit odd considering everyone had just become a prisoner, where most of them were bound to be trapped for the rest of their lives. If it was earthlings, most would be deep in a pit of despair by now. Then again, these people were all Hegemons and higher who had confirmed their paths and were elites in their own right.

Something like this probably wasn't enough to cause a ripple in their mental state even if they didn't have the hidden means as he had.

The group kept walking for another two hours, their progress feeling uncomfortably slow now that his Dexterity had been cut down to a tenth. Then again, Zac's annoyance was nothing compared to the Hegemons who probably weren't used to walking long stretches anymore. People kept peppering Murbot with questions, but he was not too interested in divulging any secret tricks of this place.

He kept saying that everything would be made known when they reached their destination. And finally, they reached a small town, looking almost like something you'd find in a fairy tale. The streets were wide and clean, and the homes were beautiful mansions. Not only that, the ambient energy was extremely dense. In fact, Zac had noticed that since being dragged into this place. It wasn't just a matter of quantity, but quality.

Catheya had talked about outer realms being “far from the heavens” when describing the frontier, but he hadn't understood what that meant. However, now it felt clearer. He wouldn't say that the Cosmic Energy was attuned, or that the air was filled with Origin Dao. It was simply... Better.

He could sense his Daos with greater clarity, like the opposite feeling of when he was in the Tower of Eternity and the Dao felt hollow from the time dilation. It didn't feel as palpable as when Earth was newly integrated and rife with Origin Dao, but it was rather stable and pervasive. Perhaps it was equivalent to

a C-grade continent, considering that people had managed to achieve Divine Monarchy in this place.

“As far as prisons go, this is probably the best one I’ve been locked inside,” a beastkin muttered, prompting a few laughs.

“If you like this place, then you better work hard. You remember those second-string cultivators I mentioned?”

Murbot said as he glanced back at the group. “Their environment is... Not quite as nice. You are presented with a carrot, they are presented with a stick. If you don’t progress fast enough, you will be relegated down and they will take their place. And let me tell you, those people would be ready to slaughter their clans for a chance to move here after a few years in that place.”

Zac shuddered, once more reminded that the Orom wasn’t some benign being that provided cultivation opportunities for the fun of it. It was doing all this for its cultivation, and any dead weight who didn’t provide insights would be discarded. He had heard a few stories about the kind of places where established factions created Deathsworn, squads of humanoid killing machines. The Orom was most likely using those kinds of cruel methods to squeeze out any potential it could from those second-string cultivators.

“I’ll give you a warning. You are safe from the first relegation, after which you will have to fight for your right to stay. Things might look relaxed in this place, but everyone is desperately cultivating to stay ahead,” Murbot added. “Now, follow me. There is one last place I need to show you before I set you loose.”

The group walked for a few more minutes until they reached a large square filled with people, a mix of old prisoners and other cultivators who had just been dragged here as well. The old cultivators seemed to belong to two groups. The first group was walking in and out of a large building, clearly having some errands to run.

The other group was just there to look at the newcomers, and Zac noticed that a few of the new captives were approached. Zac’s eyes thinned, his scammer-sense waking up. It felt like

the prisoners were trying to take advantage of the newcomers somehow. Of course, no one who had made it here was a fool, and it looked like the attempts were met with failure.

“This place is the beginner’s square,” Murbot explained as he pointed at the large hall that had constant foot traffic. “The store is over there. There are more towns out there on this continent, and they all have roughly the same items. You all get 1,000 Purchase Points to start off, which can help you get settled in the Orom World. There are various ways to gain more points but read about that yourselves. Alright, I’m off. Good luck, hatchlings.”

The attendant walked away the next moment, using his superior attributes to zip away. Zac looked in his direction for a few moments before turning to the two massive steles that were erected in the center of the square. They listed the rules of regulations in this place, and the more people read, the worse their expressions got.

Zac was the same with a furrow on his face. This place looked nice and orderly, but in reality it was pretty sinister.

Chapter 794: Freedom's End

The world they had been trapped in was simply called the Orom World, and they were currently in a town that was somewhat morbidly named Freedom's End. There were 17 more towns in total, though you were allowed to set up a cultivation cave almost wherever you wanted. Traveling this world from end to end would take about five months even with their current attributes, proof of just how massive this place was even if it was just the innards of a Leviathan.

There had to be some high-grade spatial manipulation at play for this to be possible. The Orom had been larger than a planet, but it ultimately wasn't large enough for someone with 1,000 Dexterity to take almost half a year to rush from end to end.

Thankfully, there was a system of teleportation arrays that only required 10 Purchase Points to use. Even better, the first three uses were on the house, allowing the newcomers to check a few things out. After that, you had to use the points you collected. The most straightforward method to gain more points was to make improvements to your cultivation.

Every single Contribution Point you gained, also awarded a single Purchase Point. Unfortunately, there was no clear explanation of how many points different breakthroughs awarded. It was all up to the discretion of the Orom, or rather the brand on their hands. You could also gain Purchase Points through trade or a few other means, but Contribution Points only came from making progress.

As to why there were eighteen towns in total, it was related to the cultivation like most things in this place. Freedom's End had no particular attunement, but there were seven neighboring zones that all had different attunements related to nature. Zac looked around the square, and he could sense that most cultivators in the area had an earthy aura. Freedom's End

was probably where these nature-aspected cultivators completed any business they had.

Most of the other towns had similar functions, being central hubs surrounded by enriched cultivation environments following various peaks, from Space to the five elements. Zac's eyes eventually stopped at the 8th settlement; Samsara's Edge. It was a town surrounded by zones of Life and Death.

Wasn't that just perfect for him?

The description of Samsara's Edge even had an additional note that the Death-attuned Zones were filled with Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, and Zac guessed that was where most of the undead cultivators in the Orom cultivated. It was perfect for his purposes. Zac had already realized that escaping right away was impossible, no matter how much he wanted to get back to Earth.

Whether the escape method he landed on would rely on Kenzie's Teleportation Arrays or him making use of his Bloodline, he would probably only get one shot at it. So first, he needed to recuperate to a perfect state, and if possible empower himself even further before making his move. Secondly, it would take some time to devise a plan, considering it was a proper Autarch keeping him trapped.

He couldn't just plonk down the Teleportation Array in the middle of the forest and expect it to work.

As for rescue, Zac didn't hold up much hope. Even if someone from the Undead Empire became interested in him after Catehya's report and the events in the Harbor, how would they even find him? He had stopped counting after passing through 50 dimensional layers on his way to the Orom, and the beast most likely used various top-grade methods to avoid being hunted down all this time.

And while his Mother was technically an Autarch as far as he could tell, there was no way she would be interested in helping him. The only way Zac could see that happening was if she felt his imprisonment an affront to her own exalted name or something similarly insane. He would have to rely on himself

to get out of here, and he kept reading the large stele in hopes of gaining any clues that could help with that.

As to why the Orom was interested in so many different peaks of cultivation, Zac had no idea, and neither was it explained. Perhaps it was hoping to draw inspiration from all kinds of sources. Besides, Spatial Cultivators were just too rare, just like Karmic Cultivators. There was no way it would be able to fill a whole world like this with spatial cultivators, at least not without garnering a whole lot of unwanted attention.

Zac guessed that using his Annihilation Sphere had marked him as a unique talent of Death or perhaps even Oblivion, which was why he was sent to cultivate rather than turned into food. He guessed that the sphere originally had some sort of affinity tester, and he wasn't surprised that it didn't consider him a target for nurturing at first.

Not all the towns were these kinds of elemental hubs though. One of them housed an arena where you could fight against both beasts and other cultivators. You could even bet your Purchase Points there when fighting, but betting on others wasn't allowed. You needed to earn any points you gained in the Orom World.

Another town held the gate to the 'wilderness', a vast sector teeming with beasts. It was a place to temper yourself, to confirm the insights you had gained while meditating.

The space in the wilderness was far larger than the rest of the Orom World combined, but that resulted in the cultivation environment being worse. Setting up a cultivation cave there would be impractical, but those who confirmed their path through slaughter would invariably spend a lot of time there.

Skill fractals were unlocked there as well, though the attribute limiters were still active. Zac didn't quite understand how you could possibly power up a Monarch's or Hegemon's skills with only 1,000 attributes available, but he guessed the Orom had figured out some way to let cultivators use lesser versions of their skills.

If one of the plaques held the various spots and highlights of this world, then the next one held the rules. As Zac read one

after another, it became all-too-apparent that the luxurious and carefree front of this place was all but an illusion. There were extremely strict rules put in place to maximize the benefits of the Orom.

Just as Murbot mentioned, there were recurring relegations. E-grade cultivators were measured once every five years, Hegemons once every fifty years, and Monarchs once every five hundred. The rules were simple; There were only so many spots on the first string, and those spots were handed out based on the number of Contribution Points you had gathered since the last relegation.

If you were a first-string cultivator and got stuck at some bottleneck, you'd probably get replaced by a second-string cultivator soon enough. And the lowest-performing members of the second string were straight-up killed as a warning to the others. That essentially meant that any Hegemon who found themselves unable to make any progress for a few hundred years would get executed.

As new arrivals, their situation was a bit special. Murbot had mentioned being safe from the first relegation, but that was only against the old prisoners. Their group of new arrivals would have one reshuffle in three years before they started to compete against the main population for slots. Zac guessed that was an extra measure because those prison bubbles were only so accurate to determine talent.

So if you didn't perform you'd quickly fall out of grace and enter a world of hurt, but conversely, there were perks of making large strides in your cultivation. The more Contribution Points you gathered, the more Purchase Points you could exchange for kinds of cultivation treasures without affecting your placement. Even better, high placements would provide additional benefits such as access to restricted cultivation grounds.

And from the sounds of it, there were marvelous spots inside the Orom that were attractive to even Monarchs.

As for the other rules, they were like most clans except stricter. That was actually a good thing for Zac, considering how he

was at the bottom of the totem pole in this place. Killing was strictly prohibited, and even harassing cultivators who were meditating resulted in harsh contribution penalties.

The method to become Orom Attendants like Murbot was simple enough as well. You needed to gain a certain amount of total contribution, while also completing some quests the Orom assigned.

There were a few other rules that made it clear that this place wasn't some sect though. For example, procreation was banned in this place. Having a child would result in harsh penalties, and the child would be taken away. Zac guessed that the Orom didn't want sprawling clans springing up inside its body, draining its resources, and it took draconian measures to make sure that didn't happen.

That resulted in there only being roughly 500,000 cultivators living in the Orom World. Of course, this small group alone would most likely be able to easily conquer a sector like Zecia considering most of them were elite Hegemons and Monarchs that the Orom felt was worthy to keep around.

"Three years, I'll have to go all out," the old man said with a grimace before he turned to Zac. "So what will you do, brat?"

"I'll rest a week or two before I start looking for a place to set up camp," Zac sighed. "I was almost killed a few times over before getting captured, I need to recuperate a bit."

"So you were in the middle of a fight as well? Where did you come from?" the old man asked curiously.

Zac didn't immediately answer, prompting the old man to snort. "What a careful brat. I am just trying to figure out how wide a net that big bastard was casting. I am from the Yr'Lyserium Sector, a subsidiary sector of a faction called the Radiant Temple."

A few of the new arrivals walked over and a tattooed warrior spoke up. "23rd Outer Regiment of the Havarok Army."

The old man and two others looked at the beastman with small frowns, but he soon relaxed with a shrug. "I guess old grudges are irrelevant in this place."

“I came from the Twilight Harbor,” Zac eventually said, and many indicated they had the same origin, just like he had suspected before.

“Oh, that trading hub in the frontier?” the old man exclaimed with surprise. “Quite a distance from us. This big bastard has quite some reach, it should have made use of the Tarramak Vault somehow. It must have defended its Dao under the Path of Space to accomplish something like this. And how come so many of you came from there?”

“I don’t think Twilight Harbor exists any longer,” Zac said. “I’m not sure exactly what happened, but a full-scale war broke out, destroying a whole Mystic Realm while I was still inside. It was simply pandemonium outside, and I was dragged into a spatial tear. I was captured before I found a way back into the main dimension.”

He obviously wouldn’t mention that he played a pretty big role in destroying the Twilight Ocean. As far as he was concerned, Arcaz Black had nothing to do with him. He wasn’t sure he would ever be able to use that identity again, depending on the Undead Empire’s response to his actions.

Of course, this was all dependent on him actually finding a way out of here.

“The Twilight Lord sacrificed the Mystic Realm to create a chance to form a Ladder to Eternity,” a beautiful woman with two long tails sighed. “I was thrown into the Void before I had a chance to see the result.”

“An ascent in the frontier?” the old man exclaimed, and a few others had faces full of longing as well. “I wish I was there to see it.”

“He was really trying to become an Autarch?” Zac asked curiously as he looked at the two-tailed woman. “I thought that wasn’t possible in the frontier.”

He had already discussed the situation with Catheya at length, but the people around him were all old monsters who should know more. He would have to be crazy to not make use of the

opportunity to play dumb and glean some hard-to-access information.

The woman hesitated for a bit, but she eventually asked. “That is normally the case. I’m just a Hegemon as well so I don’t know how it was possible.”

“As the universe matures, the Dao grow scarce,” the insectoid woman spoke up. “The Boundless Heavens have ushered in an era of prosperity, but the Heavens can’t keep up. The ancient factions refuse to give up their advantages and draw the heavens to their side, leaving the Dao scattered in the frontiers. Still, the Dao is omnipresent, and the Heavens can be recalled to the frontier with the right catalyst.

“The Boundless Heavens occasionally integrates unusually energy-dense dimensions, allowing for a burst of progress before those at the peak intervene,” another old man smiled. “Those ancient factions say it’s for the safety of those on the Frontier. With them shrouding the heavens, no Autarchs will naturally appear. In return, Autarchs will find travel on the frontier a constant drain on their foundations.”

The cultivator didn’t say it outright, but his expression told Zac all he needed to know what he thought about the protection of the ancient factions. It was just an excuse to drain the weaker sectors and enrich their own cultivation grounds. Those kinds of things were beyond him, but it further explained why Leandra had been so insistent on taking Kenzie away from Zecia at least.

“So anyone breaking through to Autarchy inside the Orom and freeing everyone is impossible?” Zac sighed, realizing that insight would never be enough to reach Autarchy.

It didn’t matter how deep your insights were or how great a foundation you had laid down. If you lacked that pure connection to the Heavens, no one would be calling down the Heavens to defend their Dao. If Zac was a Space Fish abductor, then his first order of business would be to make sure that kind of connection was impossible.

“Unless someone figures out a way to steal the foundation of the Orom itself to fuel their Ascent,” another man said with a

lazy shrug. “It is already a link to the Heavens through its own confirmed Dao. It seems like it doesn’t want to find out if such a thing is possible, thus booting anyone with a confirmed Dao.”

The group kept discussing the Eveningtide Asura’s attempt for a while longer, but people started setting out soon enough. Ultimately, they had only been gathered together by chance, and only two pairs seemed to have any relation to each other on the outside.

“I guess something like this is hard to stomach for a youngling like you,” the old man sighed as he looked at the people walking away. “For me, this place might be the only chance I have of ever forming an inner world.”

“Just when I was about to try out for the Radiant Temple as well,” Zac said with a smile. “I received a token to head over to Yr’Vanium Sector and all.”

“Really?” the old man guffawed. “Well, if you manage to get out, you can always contact my old friend. He’s just an information officer in the Radiant Temple, but has some good connections and a soft spot for outside hires. His name is Io Sardovar.”

“You have that much hope in me?” Zac smiled.

The old man grinned a bit as he furtively looked around. “Your reaction is the same as ours, but our situation isn’t the same. This place might actually improve our chances to reach Divine Monarchy. I essentially had no hopes before, but this place... at least gives me a sliver of a chance. But a young E-grade fledgling like you should be a lot more struck to have their Path derailed. I think you have some confidence in getting out of here. Do you have an Autarch ancestor perhaps? Are you perhaps a descendant that one of the Grand Elders sired outside the temple?”

Zac only gave a blank look in return, knowing all-too-well what the old man was thinking.

“Well whatever,” the old man snorted when Zac refused to answer. “In either case, I’d like to leave a message with you as

soon as I figure out how. In return, you can come once a month to get pummeled by me. You still have a lot of room for improvement, so it should provide you with some inspiration. I will reside somewhere in Glimmershroud.”

Glimmershroud was one of the towns, and it was surrounded by zones related to the Dao of Order and the Dao of Space. Zac couldn't sense which one the old man followed, but he leaned toward the former considering what he had learned about the Radiant Temple.

“Alright. Those paths unfortunately aren't for me, but I'll come over if I get some points to spare,” Zac smiled.

“Bring some alcohol if you do. A vigorous brat like you should be able to gather a lot of Purchase Points in short order. Don't be stingy with your friends,” the old man said before he sauntered away.

“Friends? You didn't even introduce yourself,” Zac muttered with some exasperation before he walked toward the contribution exchange.

There were two functions the Contribution Store filled; to sell the cultivation resources available in the Orom, and to unseal the items locked in your Spatial Treasures. Zac wasn't sure which one of those services he was most eager about, and the prospect of treasure almost allowed him to forget the predicament he was in.

Chapter 795: Unboxing

The insides of the Contribution Store were quite large, with a fifty-meter wide disk where just as many clerks stood in attendance. Zac noted that they all wore the same white robes, with a similar insignia as the one Murbot wore. However, Zac sensed that these people weren't someone standing above him in the Orom's hierarchy, but rather below.

These people emitted extremely faint auras, and Zac guessed their attributes were locked at something like 2-300 at best. Most likely, they were part of the servants, the people who made up the largest group of those captured.

Some of the disks were occupied with customers, and Zac noted that anyone using the services had their surroundings blurred, making it impossible to see what was going on. Zac thought for a second before he walked over to one of the free attendants, this one a middle-aged human.

"Welcome, how can I help?" the man said with a smile.

"Uh, I'm new here. Do you have a catalog or something I can look through?" Zac asked.

"Oh, young master is part of the latest batch?" the man sighed, and Zac could see some jealousy flash in the man's eyes before it was gone. "Of course, the Exchange provides a catalog free of charge."

He handed over a crystal next, but Zac looked at it with confusion. How was he supposed to activate it with the brand on his hand?

"The energy seal is a lot more complex than you might expect," the man said with a small smile. "Just try to activate it like normal."

Zac was a bit skeptical, but he followed the instructions. Suddenly, his Cosmic Energy flowed freely, entering and

activating the crystal without issue.

“You can divide items in the Orom World between authorized and unauthorized. The seal will not prevent you from using authorized items, while unauthorized treasures will be locked out,” the clerk explained.

Zac had already read about this on the signs outside, but he was surprised how seamlessly it worked. The prison array on his hand was clearly high-quality if it could make distinctions like that on the fly.

“Where do I authorize my items?” Zac asked.

“Do you see the rooms over there?” The man said as he pointed to the left. “Those are unsealing chambers, one of the few places where you can activate your spatial ring. You can take out any items you require there and have them authorized. You should beware though, the room is covered in arrays that would detect if you try to take out something dangerous or detrimental to the Orom. If you take out such offensive treasures, you will be deducted Contribution Points, perhaps even executed.”

“If I had items like that I wouldn’t be here,” Zac cursed under his breath.

This Primordial Beast was just too careful, maintaining such restrictions even on E-grade cultivators. Still, that wasn’t all bad. The more draconic the measures, the better it might actually be for him. The more focus they put on places like these unsealing chambers, the less attention they might place on other parts of the Orom where they wouldn’t expect Spatial Rings to work.

For now, Zac focused on the situation at hand. He had been given 1,000 Contribution Points, and he might as well make the most of the situation. However, the more he read the more his brows furrowed together.

“This is it?” Zac eventually asked.

“Well, we are right at the end of a cycle, and it was an unusually long one. No new materials have appeared for almost 800 years, the last time the Orom fed,” the man

helplessly explained. “However, there are also better items available, though young master needs to increase his standing first. There are also some unique attuned items in their respective settlement that you will not find in the others.”

Zac nodded in understanding.

“When will the stock be replenished then?” Zac asked.

It was a bit morbid to ask about the scraps from the innumerable people the Orom had killed and consumed, but he couldn’t be picky in a place like this. He, in particular, required large amounts of resources to progress. If his prison escape dragged out, he would definitely need every advantage he could get to stay ahead.

“The servants are fast at work categorizing the newly acquired items,” the clerk explained. “It usually takes around two months until the process is complete. At that point, the items will be added to the stores or made available in other ways. Some treasures might appear before that, though, as you new arrivals exchange items for points.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded. The last part was the result of an odd rule in the Orom World, where you could only sell outside items to the Orom itself, in exchange for Purchase Points. However, if you crafted Pills or grew some herbs inside the Orom, you could sell them freely, though at a price set by the Contribution Store.

It seemed like an odd rule in a place designed to extract as much progress as possible out of the captives, but Zac guessed it was the result of some other incident far in the past.

According to Murbot, the Orom World had been extremely lax at the start, but things had become increasingly draconic over the eons as highly motivated cultivators kept causing chaos in their attempts to escape.

“Alright. For now, I’ll take a Low-grade Cosmos Sack and an Elementary Cave Kit,” Zac eventually said.

The Cosmos Sack wasn’t anything impressive, except for the fact that it was an authorized item. Its size was just a tenth of his better Spatial Rings, but that was more than enough to

carry miscellaneous items he needed during his stay here. There were far better versions as well, but things got expensive very quickly. The Cosmos Sack he bought cost just 10 Contribution Points, whereas the worst Spatial Rings cost over 500.

The Elementary Cave Kit cost 50 Contribution Points was a set of five arrays meant to facilitate cultivation. Three of the arrays were for cultivation; a gathering array to increase energy density, a purity array to strengthen the attunement of the cave, and a clarity array that worked like the incense and prayer mats in his possession.

The last two were an isolation array that would allow you to cultivate without interruptions, and finally a ‘climate array’ that dealt with everything from temperature, humidity, to things such as cleaning and pest control. Zac didn’t really benefit from the Energy Density or the attunement for his normal cultivation, but it might be needed for something else; his soul.

The oceans in his soul had probably surpassed what was intended by the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** already, and his soul had taken another leap forward after taking on the second Splinter of Oblivion. He just needed to rest up and consolidate his gains, after which he was ready to take the next step.

The Elementary Cave Kit was heavily subsidized as well, to the point that it was almost a freebie for newcomers. But apart from that, it was slim pickings. Zac also got a more detailed map of the Orom World for 5 Contribution Points after which he walked over to the unsealing chambers.

The room was empty when Zac entered, and he could feel how a number of arrays activated the moment the door closed behind him. It actually felt like he had entered a different dimension altogether, probably a security measure in case a Monarch took out some terrifying offensive talisman with the power to destroy a country.

A crystal lay waiting on a table, a burst of information entered Zac’s mind after instilling the crystal with some energy. Zac

mulled things over for a few seconds before pile after pile of various Supreme-grade crystals appeared in the room before entering his new Cosmos Sack. After that, Zac took out various herbs he had gathered in the Twilight Ocean.

He was focusing on things that would benefit his cultivation in the short run, either through direct digestion or after being turned into pills. After the natural treasures, he also took out a series of arrays. Each time he took out an Array Disk, a presence descended on the room before the item was scanned.

His Soul Cultivation Arrays and specialized energy gathering arrays passed just fine, but when he tried taking out an escape talisman, it immediately combusted. Thankfully, a few of his practice axes weren't stopped, but he still didn't dare take out **[Verun's Bite]** in case the Orom would destroy it.

Soon enough, a small hill of items had entered his new Cosmos Sack, at which point Zac was content. Luckily, it was cheap enough to authorize and transfer cultivation resources. Basic Cultivation resources were free, which included all types of Nexus Crystals and most common herbs.

The more unique herbs Zac had taken out from the depths of the Twilight Ocean were scanned for 1 Contribution Points each, and the arrays weren't that much more expensive. By the time Zac was done, he had only spent 34 Contribution Points, saving the rest for when the other resources appeared.

Of course, Zac didn't immediately leave the chamber. This was one of the few places where he could freely open Spatial Treasures, and he had been waiting for weeks to find out exactly what kind of treasures he had been carrying. His heart beat with anticipation as he took out one item after another from his pockets.

First, he checked the Cosmos Sacks he had picked up in the Void and from the cultivators in the City of Ancients. Altogether, there were dozens of them, yet their combined value wasn't anything too impressive. Unsurprisingly, it looked even the ones he got from the Void had exclusively been owned by E-grade cultivators and lower, and the gains were thereafter.

The only exceptions were a couple of Manuals that seemed higher-quality than anything he had back on Earth, along with a Body-tempering manual. Most of their information was sealed, but Zac still put them in his Authorized Sack. There were also two high-quality herbs that Zac didn't recognize, along with a few thousand Twilight Fruits.

After picking out what he wanted, Zac threw each Cosmos Sack onto another array in the room. Space twisted, and a moment later the sack was gone and Zac had gained a couple of Purchase Points. The items in each Cosmos Sack provided between 0 and 2 points. It wasn't much, but it helped cover some of his expenses until now while freeing up his pockets.

After performing a mental tally, Zac realized why the Orom was so insistent on keeping a monopoly. It actually paid less than a tenth compared to the prices quoted in the store, which no doubt helped it save a lot on expenses. It was a bit annoying, but Zac wasn't too interested in making more points in any case.

Instead, he focused on the Spatial Rings he had looted. Most of them had been taken from bodies that emitted fierce auras, and he had high hopes for their contents.

And he wasn't disappointed.

The first ring contained a vast assortment of arrays, Cosmic Crystals, unique treasures, and information missives. It was a shocking collection of items, far surpassing any of the bags he had looted in the Twilight Ocean, and going through them all would take months. There were thousands of other items as well, orderly arranged ring's pocket space.

Sets of equipment that seemed to be D-grade, weapons, tools for blacksmithing, raw metals, and ores. Zac looked upon the huge array of items with wonder for a few minutes until he finally put the ring back in his pocket without taking out anything. The treasures in this thing were definitely worth a whole pile of D-grade Nexus Coins, but he didn't want to take out things in the Orom World unless necessary, both to avoid any unforeseen risks and the expenditure.

His mental energy swept through one ring after another, and while most had clearly just belonged to the wealthy among the younger generation, but a few of them had been owned by proper Hegemons. One thing he noticed was the huge discrepancy in wealth between the D-grade cultivators.

A few barely had a few Cosmic Crystals or treasures to their names, while the items were cheap mass-produced stuff. It was just like the broken-down Cosmos Sack he had looted from the Hegemon skeleton that had become an octopus' home. He had been way poor, no matter if you compared to Zac himself or the previous owner of the first ring he scanned.

Meanwhile, a few rings had hundreds of impressive-looking raw materials, everything from stacks of jade boxes containing natural treasures to slabs of shimmering metals. If converted into Nexus Coins, each such item would probably be worth anything from a few hundred to tens of thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins.

Two rings only contained mountains of low-grade cultivation materials, perhaps some Clan's stock of resources taken away when the chaos ensued. The quality of the items was much lower than what he had already sent back home to earth with Vilari, but the quantities more than made up for it.

Zac's mind was abuzz as he kept a mental tally of his estimates, and he eventually passed 4 C-grade Nexus Coins by the time he had gone through all the rings. It wasn't like his wealth had skyrocketed, but that was a huge windfall, and one not tainted with the bad blood of Leandra's gift. Furthermore, there were hundreds of items, treasures, and materials he hadn't included or given low price tags since he had no idea what they were worth.

For all he knew, the actual number might be five times his estimate.

He had also located a bunch of items he could directly benefit from, including both Attribute Fruits and Dao Treasures to replenish his dwindling stocks. But he left those items behind as well, wanting to plan out his next move before wasting any more Purchase Points.

Next, he eagerly took out the Spatial Gem that had supposedly belonged to Aia Ouro, and his eyes lit up when he swept his mind through the crystal. It was extremely well-stocked with all kinds of arrays and related materials. More importantly, the Spatial Tool contained two different types of crystals that emitted energy fluctuations that resonated with his soul.

There were even three densely engraved boxes, each one containing what seemed to be a supreme cultivation treasure, two of which clearly related to the soul. The last one was a piece of black glass, which Zac had no idea what it entailed. But considering it was treated with the same importance as treasures that gave off even greater mental fluctuations than the grass he had used for cultivation in the Twilight Chasm, it had to be something special.

Finally, Zac turned toward the final item; Uona's spatial ring. From the looks of it, Clan Noz'Valadir was more powerful than Hive Ouro, and Uona was more of an elite than Aia Ouro, so he had great hopes for her Spatial Treasure. However, Zac's eyes widened with horror the moment he infused the ring with energy.

It was like he had set off some chain reaction when activating the item, as he saw the spatial pocket rapidly collapse. He desperately started taking out one item after another, focusing on the materials and items that looked the most expensive or useful. There was simply too little time though, and he was dismayed to find his mental suddenly tendrils cut off, and the ring crumbled a moment later.

In front of him, five items were resting on the scanning table; a box containing six sanguine gems shimmering with dark energies, two pieces of metal that seemed even better than anything he had found in the Twilight Ocean, a vial of blood, and a set of Information Crystals.

That was all he had managed to take out before the ring crumbled, but the rest were mostly mountains of loot from those she had murdered in the trail by the looks of it. These five items should have been among the best things in her possession. The array scanned one item after another, and Zac

was surprised to see it took as long to scan the vial as the rest of the items combined.

Not only that, he noticed that scanning the blood cost a whopping 100 Contribution Points, even though the process normally was almost free. Zac had thought the odd gems to be the most valuable, but it looked it was the blood. Zac thought back to his battle with Uona, and the events that had preceded it. He had wondered where she got the energy to raise so many blood thralls while also nurturing that terrifying blood effigy.

Was this blood perhaps the answer?

The vial was sealed, but even then, he felt a sense of pressure emanating from the swirling blood inside. It should be a Pseudo D-grade item at most, considering she had brought it into the trial. But it was also possible that Uona had managed to sneak inside a proper D-grade material with the help of her ancestor.

In either case, Zac hoped it would be useful for Verun to finally make the push toward Peak E-grade, and perhaps even set the foundations for evolving to D-grade in the future. He stowed away the items in his Cosmos Sack before finally leaving the sealed chamber and the contribution store.

From there Zac traveled Freedom's End for a few more hours, learning snippets of information here and there. Eventually, he picked an empty house, of which there were quite a few, and settled down for the day to digest what had happened.

As he looked down at the street from his window, Zac pondered on what he should do next. His first instinct had been to escape as quickly as possible to go back to Earth, using his bloodline to circumvent the restrictions in this place.

But was that really the right move?

The incursion back on Earth had already started, it was too late for him to do anything about it. Not that he could, in either case. The level limit was 100, while he had reached 123. The cost to enter as reinforcement would be just shocking, if he was allowed inside at all. He couldn't be certain, but he didn't

think it was a coincidence the opportunity was awarded while he was gone. It wasn't an opportunity meant for him.

He still couldn't enter the inheritance trial either, and according to Leandra, it would be years before the Dimensional Seed reappeared in the Million Gates territory. Meanwhile, his actions in the Twilight Ocean had no doubt caused some ripples, and he couldn't put his whole faith in Catheya's ability to turn the situation in his favor.

Perhaps, hiding out in a space fish for a couple of months while things calmed down wasn't the worst of ideas.

Chapter 796: The Pursuit of Completeness

It wasn't just a kneejerk reaction to stay inside the Orom for longer than Zac had initially planned. From what he had gathered, the Orom would keep dragging poor souls to be filtered for over a week.

Even if Zac managed to escape right now, he would probably be dragged right back in. However, according to what he'd heard, the Orom moved with a shocking speed most of the time, swimming through various dimensions just like its smaller brethren. It would be far better to escape while the beast was on the move since it would be gone in an instant, hopefully leaving Zac behind in some empty corner space.

Having traveled Freedom's End for half a day had proven that this place was full of opportunities as well. There were unique resources, and the place was veritably teeming with old masters that he would normally never have the chance to interact with on a somewhat equal standing.

There was also the wilderness, a place that seemed perfect for him to perfect his stances. Your power was fixed, but the beasts kept getting stronger the deeper you delved. The only way to push further was to improve what you could do with the power you had, just like how that old man had easily knocked him on his ass earlier.

Apparently, there were some powerhouses in this place that had been able to accomplish unbelievable things in the wilderness with raw skill and tactics. There was still a lot of room for improvement in this regard, and Zac got the feeling that working on his stances would also help him get closer to forming his last two Dao Branches.

Zac looked out across the settlement from the window of his temporary residence for another few minutes before he made his decision. He would follow his guts - stay behind for a while longer to recuperate and consolidate his gains. Then extract this place for all the benefits that he could get his hands on before escaping.

As for the downsides of this place, it didn't much matter to Zac if he didn't plan to stick around. He was safe from the first relegation, and he had enough resources to produce impressive improvements in case he was still around in three years for the shake-up.

However, this all hinged on his bloodline being able to help him break out of this place.

If that didn't work, Zac knew he was in big big trouble. He wasn't as smart or as knowledgeable as most people in this place. He didn't have any cultivation method to gradually push him forward, and he wouldn't be able to simply meditate to make breakthroughs. His Void Energy was the only thing that gave him an edge.

If these kinds of people hadn't managed to flee from this prison through conventional means, how could he?

But cultivating in this place for the long-term was out of the question. He had gained a decent idea of the required advancements to be safe from relegation, and it didn't look good. With new people being added every few hundred years, there was no settling down. In fact, the demands were so high that the average lifespan in the Orom World was just a tenth compared to the outside.

Monarchs were lucky if they could survive 100,000 to 150,000 years, a far cry from their natural lifespans. Hegemons would usually be relegated out by the time they turned 10,000 unless they managed to break through to Monarchy and get a boost of momentum. Of course, there were also innumerable examples of people suddenly finding themselves stuck, dying far earlier compared to this.

The reason was simple; after that initial burst of breakthroughs, their improvement slowed down, making them

unable to compete with the new arrivals. Soon enough, the old were relegated, replaced by new faces who hadn't expended their potential or momentum yet. Zac didn't want to live in a desperate environment like this longer than he had to, but there was one more reason he knew he had to escape.

After seeing the Contribution shop and learning about the various places and benefits available, Zac had come to a simple conclusion; he wouldn't be able to continuously progress in this place. He hadn't encountered any real bottlenecks with his unique cultivation method so far. But in return, he required a lot of resources to progress, no matter if you talked Dao, Levels, Soul, or Bloodline.

The Orom expected you to make most of your progress simply by cultivating, making use of the dense ambient energy and attuned zones. There were unique cultivation grounds in this world as well, but those places cost Purchase Points, and people only used them when they were at the precipice of breaking through.

Making breakthroughs in this place would net him Contribution Points and the equivalent amount of Purchase Points, but he would have to spend far more resources for every breakthrough compared to what the breakthrough was worth.

The wilderness wasn't any help either. Since people's attributes, including the Orom Attendants, were limited to 1,000 in the wilderness, the beasts were just early to middle E-grade over there. Even if Zac managed to slaughter half the wilderness, he wouldn't get enough kill energy to reach peak E-grade.

His fortune in the form of Nexus Coins was almost useless in this place as well. Who'd take a System currency in a prison where there was no place to spend it? Besides, there were the harsh restrictions on trade that didn't go through the Contribution Store. There had been occasions where late Monarchs had started hoovering up Nexus Coins when they were at the precipice of confirming their Dao, but events like that were extremely rare.

Luckily, Zac was disgustingly wealthy for an E-grade cultivator, which would keep him safe in the short run. However, his requirements would only increase. What felt like a mountain of wealth in his Spatial Rings right now, might not seem as impressive by the time he started looking to form his Cultivator's Core.

Ultimately, Zac knew he would enter a downward spiral, where his gathered resources were rapidly depleted while being unable to replenish them. Soon enough, he'd be broke, and he would be relegated one step after another until he was culled.

Furthermore, the process of reaching Hegemony was a problem. Ignoring issues like missing out on the Inheritance Trial back home, would he even be able to form a core in this place? He had long since gathered a few missives that had methods for Mortals to take that step, but it didn't look too optimistic. The exact methodology differed, but the essence was the same.

You had to consume innumerable treasures, preferably containing the attunement of your path. From there, you'd use one method or another to extract the essence of the treasures, and push it into the spot where your core would form. Like that, you would add one layer after another while keeping constant pressure with arrays and Mental Energy, until something like a core would form.

It was technically possible for Zac to accomplish that here, though there were no facilities available that could aid him with the process. After all, the Orom didn't swallow Mortals, but only those with extremely high attunements. Zac was even afraid to commission the arrays he needed, in case it would result in him being purged.

Besides, Zac was reluctant to use the methods he had on hand. It was painfully clear; the methods he had gathered so far were extremely basic. Their odds of success were abysmally low even for people with weak foundations. With so many different treasures making up the core, it would become unstable.

When connected to one's pathways the rampant energies would rip it apart before you had a chance to properly refine and strengthen it. For someone like him, Zac wasn't even sure if it was possible.

Secondly, even if he succeeded, the result would be lackluster. The kind of core you formed with this type of method would be weak and full of imperfections. Most likely, you'd be stuck at early D-grade, unable to evolve the core any further. Zac's plan had always been to find some sort of high-grade technique that worked for mortals, possibly through a System-reward like how he got his Soul Strengthening Method.

If that failed, he would try to adapt the best one he could get his hands on, making it more suitable to his unique condition and the opposing elements of his path. After all, it wasn't like he simply needed to form an ice-attuned Cultivator's Core or something. He had to somehow cram Life, Death, and Conflict into the core without it exploding.

Perhaps Yrial had some insights considering his path of fire and ice, or Zac might be able to glean some solutions from the Realm Spirits in his Spatial Ring. He might even be able to figure something out with the help of the term Edgewalker, now that he knew he wasn't alone. But that all required time, and the ability to freely travel in search of answers.

Certainly, the prospect of being bottlenecked and killed in this place wasn't the only reason he needed to escape. Just the thought of being stuck inside the Orom as the world outside passed him by filled his heart with a sense of existential dread. Perhaps the people of Port Atwood would think he died during the Twilight Ascent, especially if they managed to find out about the collapse of the Twilight Harbor. Perhaps they would believe he had abandoned Earth, turning his gaze toward a wider stage.

Zac quickly stabilized his mind before his thoughts spiraled out of control, instead of focusing on what he could do. For now, he needed to recover himself to peak condition, so Zac spent the next five days stabilizing his body. He even decided to use 200 of his Purchase Points to use one of the high-grade facilities in Freedom's End for two days.

It was a recovery room that used dozens of arrays and attuned energies to recover all sorts of wounds and ailments. As Murbot said, the Orom fed during congregations of fate, which usually meant war. A lot of those who were dragged here were already wounded, sometimes grievously so. The Orom knew this, and therefore provided services that would get its captives to quickly return to cultivating.

Zac's wounds were pretty bad, but the room he used could even heal Peak Hegemons. The cracks in his soul were rapidly mended, though that was partly thanks to some of the items found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem. The same was true for his wounds, though the lingering echoes of Chaos resisted the healing process.

Another thing that the arrays were unable to fix was the hidden damage from overusing the energy of the remnants. The spider vein-like cracks on the upper half of his body were still there, though they were invisible to the naked eye. The array did at least help [**Purity of the Void**] shoo some of the foreign Daos from his body, and when he walked out of the healing chamber, it felt like had been on bed rest for over two months.

During his stay in Freedom's End, he had seen one group after being led here. His group was the largest one so far though, with some of the others only having a dozen people. However, on the third day, a lot of Havarok warriors and undead Revenants arrived, staring daggers at each other.

Zac was shocked to learn that the Umbri'zi Clan had declared war on the Havarok Empire, and fierce battles were currently taking place across multiple frontier sectors. He even spotted a couple of Draugr, though he noticed that every single one had pretty diluted bloodlines, kind of like Nala who had guided him through Twilight Harbor. He guessed that Orom knew enough not to anger a clan like Umbri'Zi and left the true clan members alone.

Or perhaps it killed them all to hide any traces of what it had done.

On the third day, Zac had also made an extra trip to the Contribution Store and taken out all the various cultivation

methods he had gathered since arriving in the Twilight Harbor. Some came from those he had fought, others came from various sources. For example, there was a stack of old methods he had found in the cave of the Beast King where he got his aura-hiding bracelet.

From there, he had hurried to a nondescript mansion where a dozen cultivators were already lining up. Zac entered when it was his turn, and he emerged with a smile on his face thirty minutes later. The information crystals had all been sealed to block his prying, but how could that be a problem in the Orom World?

The man Zac had visited was called Provedius, a middle-grade Monarch and a Jade Orom Attendant, surpassing even Murbot. He was also known as the greatest unsealer of the Orom World, and he had effortlessly unlocked every single method that Zac had gathered, with the sole exception of two of the crystals belonging to Uona and one of Aia Ouro's.

Provedius had been unsealing stolen and looted missives for over 50,000 years in hopes of stumbling onto something that would provide the inspiration to break through his current bottlenecks. In fact, he had specifically come over to Freedom's End for that very purpose. Even better, the only price he demanded for his services was that he was allowed to make a copy of any information he unlocked.

If he ever managed to get out of this place, he would probably have an exceedingly valuable Heritage to base his faction on. Unfortunately, the Orom prevented from Provedius selling any of the methods he had gathered over the millennia since that counted as selling outside goods. Then again, he probably wouldn't have made the methods public even if he could.

Most people would be unwilling to sell any techniques in a place where people competed in terms of progress. What if you sold a method that allowed your competitor to surpass you, forcing you into relegation?

As for the content of the information crystals Zac had unsealed, they were mostly useless. There were almost one hundred different cultivation methods, though it only felt

worthwhile to put five or so in the Academy back home. It wasn't that the others were bad, but there were issues with spreading your base too thin.

It was better to focus on a handful of paths where the successive generations of Port Atwood could expand and add detail to the Heritage. That way, they would also be able to form more coherent armies if needed. If Zac put the hundreds of methods he had collected until now in the Academy, it would become too chaotic and the odds of elites emerging would decrease rather than increase.

But there were a few information crystals that were quite useful to him as well, especially from Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem. More than half of them contained a vast compendium of Arrays and inscription patterns, a good chunk of them supplementing the information he'd gained from Catheya. There was also a Soul Cultivation manual that seemed extremely powerful. It was called the **[Thousand Lights Chapter]**, but Zac wasn't sure a non-spectral cultivator would be able to cultivate it without making some pretty big modifications.

However, there was a lot of general information about soul cultivation attached to the method, which was helpful even for Zac and his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**. It delved deep into what a soul was, and how to utilize it as efficiently as possible. There was even a technique that couldn't quite be considered a skill, but something he was keen on trying out.

It was called the **[Thousand Lights Avatar]**, but it didn't actually look like it required the **[Thousand Lights Chapter]** to work. It was a technique where you continuously extracted Mental Energy and your Dao from your soul and infused it into your spiritual body. In the beginning, it wouldn't do much good, but after you had reached some success you would see all kinds of benefits.

First of all, it would continuously strengthen the spiritual body, which included one's pathways, which was extremely useful as Zac neared the later stages of the E-grade where every node-breaking was fraught with danger. At higher grades, it

could do even more miraculous things, such as performing spirit walks with your spiritual body.

For a Spectral Cultivator, it was pretty much a cloning technique.

At the highest stage, it would be a second life of sorts. If you got your soul destroyed in battle or cultivation mishap, you could reform a backup soul with your [**Thousand Lights Avatar**]. It would be significantly weaker compared to your original soul, but it was obviously far preferable to dying.

Reaching that state would take hundreds of years of effort though, and wasn't something that could benefit in the short run. For now, all the general information on soul cultivation and soul evolutions were far more useful. While the comments were for a different heritage, they still added to his understanding of his own method.

After all, the version of [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**] he had on his hands was extremely terse, without any insights or experiences. Last time, he had only realized mid-breakthrough how the first reincarnation actually worked. He wanted to be better prepared for the second round, and this might help him out.

As for the description in the Nine Reincarnations Manual, it wasn't much more helpful compared to the first one:

Refined by the seas of Life and Death, the soul returns to the Samsara. Continuous reinvention is at the heart of the Heavenly Law. From a singular unity, the multitudes of the Cosmos can be beseeched. From Eight Trigrams a system is formed, where the singular unity is supreme.

Nine Dharmas, nine Heavens, nine layers of the Abyss.

The cycle of Life and Death is the cycle of the Samsara and the pursuit of completeness.

Zac felt that the clue lay in the second paragraph. But what did Nine Dharmas, Nine Heavens, and nine layers of the Abyss refer to? The number nine was central to his Soul Strengthening Method, and to the Dao itself, but it didn't help him much in preparing for the second reincarnation. But if

there was some repeated process involved in the reincarnation, he would have to aim for nine revolutions to reach perfection. And that was exactly what Zac was planning on doing.

Chapter 797: A Thought to Change the World

Apart from the compendium on arrays and souls in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem, there was also a good treasure compendium, along with descriptions of popular cultivation resources the Eidolon used. The special treasures that the ghost had saved were listed as well, giving Zac a proper understanding of what he was dealing with. Unfortunately, the glass pane was related to crafting Illusion-based items, and thus useless for him.

However, both of the others were Natural Treasures with great effect on the soul. One would strengthen it, while the other purified it. Aia Ouro had probably saved them for when making a push for the D-grade, but now they had rather become fuel for his second reincarnation. He was already somewhat confident his soul had reached the required levels before. But with this, he was almost certain.

Apart from the two treasures, most of Aia's other items were geared toward soul cultivation as well. Many had similar effects as the treasures but with lesser potency. Apparently, the Eidolon used sticks of incense rather than pills though, which made things a bit difficult for Zac. He was afraid of wasting the efficacy with his corporeal body, so he simply started eating the sticks instead, ignoring the extremely acrid taste.

Eventually, five more days had passed, and Zac saw how activity had started to die down in Freedom's End. Some people had taken the opportunity to stretch their legs when the new batch arrived, others had tried to scam them. But with the excitement all-but-over, most returned toward their cultivation caves while the new arrivals spread out across the Orom World.

Now, there was just a smattering of people walking down the streets of what almost looked like a ghost town. It wasn't a

surprise, considering that most people in this world were Hegemons who usually spent years at a time in seclusion. The next time people would emerge was probably when the new products had been tallied and added to the contribution stores.

Seeing as his condition was way better now compared to before, Zac knew it was time for him to get started. It was time to find out whether his plans to escape would work. Zac hadn't just rested and studied Aia's soul missives over the past week. He had started planning his escape while scouring the city for intelligence on how harshly the Orom World was monitored.

As far as he could tell, the Orom didn't care one whit about what went on in this place. It didn't monitor its inner world at all by the looks of it, and simply let the attendants do all the job while it passively reaped the rewards.

Even if someone escaped, it didn't seem to care too much. If anything, the old captives expected the new arrivals to try various methods to escape. If someone actually figured out a way, good for them. Of course, any attendant who reported a missing person or an escape method would be awarded a bunch of Contribution Points.

Knowing this, Zac had decided to perform a few experiments, and he left Freedom's End heading due north. Traveling by foot was pretty inefficient what with the restrictions and his inability to use **[Earthstrider]**, but he had still decided to walk between Freedom's End and Samsara's Edge. The two cities were pretty closely situated, with the Life-attuned areas neighboring the Nature-attuned zones.

There were even two unusually large mixed-meaning zones where cultivators could set up their caves.

Going by foot would take around two weeks, but it would allow him to get a better understanding of this place.

Unfortunately, it turned out his second sense coming from **[Forester's Constitution]** was disabled as well as he walked through the forests, but it wasn't like there would be a bunch of treasures waiting right at the edge of a city.

With the energy being so dense and rife with Dao, treasures could certainly grow. Unfortunately, the people who had been

trapped in this world for millennia had essentially memorized all the hotspots and picked the Spirit Herbs the moment they matured. Many also liked to stake out small claims to grow herbs to supplement their cultivation or took up professions like inscriptions or alchemy to save on Purchase Points.

Days passed, and Zac eventually reached a slightly dour stretch of woods where there was a clear depression of Cosmic Energy. It was a no-man's-land between the attuned zones. All the zones in the Orom World were supported by gargantuan gathering arrays that concentrated the energy into smaller areas, which resulted in seams of lower-quality land appearing in-between.

This stretch was the worst for setting up cultivation caves or growing herbs, and the only time cultivators spent in these zones was when they passed through the area. Conversely, the middle-point of every zone was where the energy and attuned energy was the densest. That was also where the Orom Attendants set up their cultivation caves, and they were able to push out people with the help of their superior attributes.

But Zac wasn't interested in the cultivation havens at the heart of the zones. In fact, he had decided to travel by foot exactly because he wanted to reach this desolate place. He walked around a few hours until he found a small mountain, and he dug himself deeper and deeper through the rock until he was over a hundred meters below ground.

At this kind of depth, it would be extremely difficult for cultivators at the surface to notice his activities even if they chanced upon the area, which was perfect in case you planned on performing some clandestine experiments.

Zac looked around the area for a good while even after setting up the isolation array, but he eventually turned his attention toward the ring on his finger. At first, he tried to instill it with his Cosmic Energy, but the result was the same as before. There was an invisible barrier barring his path, and his Cosmic Energy turned completely turbid upon even attempting to activate the spatial treasure.

Next, he took a steadying breath before rousing his bloodline. He wanted to use his Void Energy to activate the Spatial Ring. At first, there was no response, but Zac knew it wasn't because of his plan being a failure. It was simply a bit difficult to control this elusive energy. If Cosmic Energy felt like a hard-to-control river that coursed through his body, then Void Energy was simply a vacuum.

How do you push nothingness into a Spatial Ring?

However, his eyes lit up after a few minutes upon seeing his hard work paying off. He had simply been forced to expel a larger chunk of Void Energy, completely covering his right hand. That had been enough to trigger the ring, and his mouth turned into a wide grin as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal. Zac placed it on the ground and waited for over an hour, but there was no response.

Zac breathed out in relief before placing the item back in his Spatial Ring, fearing that putting an unauthorized item in the authorized Cosmos Sack might somehow be exposed. Next, he decided to take an even bigger risk, and he took out an offensive talisman. Even then, nothing happened, though Zac only kept it out for five minutes before hurriedly putting it back.

Five minutes was what it would take him to take out and finish one of his spare Teleportation Arrays. Seeing that he could take out a talisman that long meant that part of his plan would work. Zac breathed out in relief, but he decided against actually activating a Teleportation Array at this point. He was afraid that activating a Teleportation Array in the Orom World would spoil his only opportunity to escape.

Zac also took out [**Verun's Bite**] for a moment and he was relieved to feel its weight suddenly decreasing after sending a mental command to the axe. A fractal leaf from [**Nature's Edge**] appeared just fine as well, and Zac grinned when he felt the power the skill emitted. It was weaker compared to his full power, but it was definitely stronger than just 1,000 effective Strength.

With this, he doubted that anyone but Emerald Badges in the Orom World would be a threat to him if it came down to it.

All through the experiments, the prison seal had been completely inert. It didn't look like it had any safeguards that scanned for energy output or spatial fluctuations in the vicinity. His bloodline completely circumvented its limitations, just like he had hoped. Having confirmed his Bloodline mostly worked in this place and what he could and couldn't do, Zac didn't waste any more time in this place.

Zac immediately set off, heading toward the life-attuned side. He wanted to find a place right at the edge of life and death to set up a Cultivation Cave, which would give him the best environment to perform his second reincarnation. The energy density in these seams was far worse compared to the central zones, but they were still better than most places on earth.

Besides, there was that intangible quality of Dao in the air. That alone made the Orom World superior to most D-grade planets as far as he could tell, no matter where inside the space fish you stopped to cultivate. As for the lacking density of ambient energy, Zac had more than enough crystals to create a terrifying life-death environment.

Soon enough he left the desolate band between the zones of Nature and Life, and he found himself in another lush forest a day later. Zac looked around with interest, and he felt that the contrast between the two zones was quite illuminating.

Life and Nature were closely linked, to the point that a huge chunk of those who cultivated either, cultivated some sort of mixed-meaning Dao. He would personally have walked down that road as well with his Hatchetman class, if not for the remnants changing his plans and pushing him down the paths of Pure Life and Death.

Therefore, seeing the difference between the forests helped him somewhat get a better understanding of the two peaks.

The forest rife with the Dao of Nature had filled him with harmony. It felt like every plant and tree had been somehow connected, a part of a bigger whole. It was almost akin to the interconnectedness of the Dao of karma, where the forest was

as much one singular entity of massive power as it was millions of individual plants and beasts.

Cultivating the Dao of Nature would allow one to draw on that vast and ancient power, becoming one with the forest. It was to let the cycles of nature push one forward, cultivating in balance and tranquility.

The forest of life was a stark contrast to this concept. The feeling Zac got here wasn't one of harmony, but rather one of chaos. Some trees towered toward the sky as they drenched their surroundings in darkness, their trunks uneven from greedily absorbing the ambient life. Others were twisted and full of bulbous knots, the Divine Energy having resulted in weird mutations.

No two trees or bushes were alike, each one reborn into something unique from the Life Attunement. They had set off on their individual journeys, fueled by the endless possibility of life. Most journeys clearly ended in disaster judging by the hollow trunks and dead plants on the ground, but Zac saw how some of these failed creations were consumed by their neighbors or turned into vessels for parasitic plants.

It was a scene of constant and unpredictable growth, and Zac eventually took out a practice axe as his eyes glistened. The axehead danced among the foliage as the air whistled. Zac kept swinging his axe while moving forward, not one of his swings identical to the previous ones. The turbulent forest had resonated with his Evolutionary Stance, and he couldn't stop himself from practicing it for a while.

He didn't infuse any energy into the attacks, and neither did he imbue the weapon with his Dao. He just moved along the path, his attacks echoing the impression he got from the various trees around him. He didn't know how long he was in this state, where he kept delving deeper into the heart of the Evolutionary Stance, urged forward by the ambient energy and the whispers of the leaves.

With each swing, he also got closer to his vision of the Branch of Life he wanted to form. It was finally starting to diverge from the nature-heavy aspect he had inherited from his

Hatchetman class. But looking around, Zac realized he didn't need to give up the imagery of a tree just because he wanted to walk down the path of Pure Life.

Life was everything, and anything could be life. It represented the endless possibilities, the spark that led to a river of events. It was-

Zac didn't get any further as he suddenly felt a pressure weigh down on him, and his eyes immediately flicked open just in time to avoid walking right into a person. He hurriedly took a step back, realizing the person he had almost crashed into was some sort of tree person.

Or at least he assumed that. Half of her face looked human, except for the green hair and iris, but a transformation covered the other side. Skin was replaced by bark, and small twigs grew from her chin and eyebrows, sprouting small purple leaves. The woman almost made Zac think of a corpse that had been left to rot in a forest. But her aura was vibrant much like the trees around them, though Zac felt he could sense a hint of something malicious beneath the exuberance.

The pressure she emitted was the same as his, but Zac still felt some trepidation from her gaze. It was not just the fact that she was no probably a late Hegemon or even higher, but there was also something else. Meeting someone in this desolate stretch of forest was a poignant reminder that he had just arrived in the Orom World, and there were probably a bunch of hidden rules and tricks he wasn't aware of.

"A bit crude, but it has captured the essence," the woman smiled, though the smile turned crooked because of the wooden side of her face. "I don't recognize you. Are you part of the new arrivals?"

"Uh, yes," Zac slowly nodded.

"Samsara's Edge is that way," the woman said and pointed to the right. "If you continue down this path you will reach my abode. I hope this little friend will accommodate me and take the long way around. A few of my experiments are approaching fruition."

“Experiments?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Plants,” the woman explained. “I don’t want them to be impacted by your killing intent at the precipice of their metamorphosis. A thought can change the world, don’t you agree?”

“I guess?” Zac said with confusion. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t planning on intruding on anyone’s domain. Is there any way for me to make sure I don’t make this mistake again?”

“Normally, someone will extend their aura to warn you if they don’t want you to approach their arrays. Unfortunately, it seems you were a bit caught up in your axe to me notice me,” she explained.

“Oh...” Zac coughed as he turned away. “Well, again. I’m sorry. Have a good day. Good luck with your experiment.”

Zac hurried away after that, making quick strides toward the city. The woman had been congenial enough, but her aura was a bit off. Zac couldn’t be sure, but there was a sheen of madness and despair hidden in her smiling eyes. Perhaps, she was on the edge of relegation. Who knew what someone in that position might do to someone she believed was messing with her final chance at breaking through?

The weirdly exuberant forest had turned oppressive after that encounter, and Zac increased his pace while keeping greater watch of signs of other cultivators. It still took him five days to reach Samsara’s Edge, at which point it almost felt like a weight had lifted from his shoulders.

The settlement was quite similar to Freedom’s End, though half the city was shrouded in the familiar turquoise haze of Miasma. Zac had to admit that the Orom was quite gutsy, daring to set up sections of pure death in its body. What if it spread, turning the beast into some abomination like the creatures you could still encounter in the Dead Zone back on Earth?

In either case, it wasn’t Zac’s problem, and he made a quick trip to the Contribution Store. Just like the clerk back in Freedom’s End had said, this store provided a few life- and

death-attuned treasures that weren't available anywhere else. Zac spent another 58 points to purchase a few more items before leaving again.

Zac kept going straight through the city, heading down the main street which also acted as a demarcation between life and death. From there, he entered the wilderness heading deeper and deeper for three full days before slowing down. He looked down at the mapper in his hand, and he could confirm that he had reached his destination.

He had traveled down the no-mans-land between Pure Life and Pure Death for the past week, and he had reached the spot that was right between the central spots of the two zones. This place was where the no-man's-land was the thinnest due to the overflowing energy density, and Zac smiled when he felt the familiar clashes between Life and Death in the area.

He spent the better part of the day looking for the perfect spot, and he finally found something with potential. There was a small lake that had rivers coming in from both zones, bringing with them attuned energies. A constantly churning haze covered the surface of the waters, but Zac still entered.

Initially, he had hoped to find an underwater cave to dry out, but he actually found something better. There was a small island in the middle of the lake, completely hidden by the haze on the waters. Zac stepped back onto land, and the more he looked around, the more satisfied he became.

The ambient energy wasn't as good as in the Twilight Chasm, but there were constant winds of either life or death coming his way as he stood at the shores. They were pure as well, far more so than the muddled concepts that had been crammed together into Twilight Energy. With some work, this place would become his paradise while remaining unusable for others.

Zac walked across the island a few times before coming to a decision. The ground was soft sand, making it too annoying to set up a proper cave. There wasn't much point in undertaking that kind of job for a temporary abode, so he simply covered the whole island in an illusion array and isolation array.

From there, he added the cultivation arrays, though he swapped out the gathering and purity arrays with a portable arrangement he had brought from Port Atwood. Their quality wasn't necessarily better than the Elementary Array Kit, but they were more suited for his purpose; to gather and agitate Life and Death to complement his cultivation method.

Finally, Zac cut down a couple of trees and fashioned a simple cabin, and he placed it in the middle of the island. It was extremely crude, with just a bed in a side room and a prayer mat in the living room. But it would serve his purposes. He spent the next few hours making sure everything was up to par, which led him to also add a second line of arrays to cover the whole lake, just in case.

Of course, the odds of someone crossing this particular segment were far lower compared to most areas in the Orom World. No undead would willingly leave their miasmic zone to enter an area that was essentially poison to them. The same was true for people cultivating pure life, or finding inspiration for their mixed-meaning Daos in the Life-attuned zones.

With this many layers of arrays, it would be impossible even for Emerald Attendants to spy on him. Only the Orom should be able to peer inside, but that was a risk Zac would have to take. With that, Zac returned to his cabin before taking out another Array Disk. This time it wasn't another protective array, but rather the disk needed to practice the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

He had investigated what needed to be investigated. He had healed what needed to be healed. It was time for him to start working on his breakthrough, so he could earn some points and treasures before getting out of here.

Chapter 798: The First Clue

Zac shook his head with some helplessness as he pushed his makeshift raft across the lake. He had been so full of purpose as he sealed himself on his little island a month ago, yet he found himself leaving without having accomplished what he set out to do. But who could have expected it would take over a month to fully digest those two Soul Treasures that Aia Ouro left behind?

At first, the energies the items contained simply floated about in his Soul Aperture, but he quickly found that each cycle of **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** had infused a little bit more of the energies into his Soul. Absorbing the treasures worked in his human form just fine, but he quickly realized the effect was better when he was drenched in death.

Therefore, he had spent most of his time in his Draugr form lately to get the most out of the items.

This was something Zac had decided on since long ago; he would have to use his Specialty Core in this place. No matter if it was to break the prison seal on his left arm or for escaping, Zac knew he would need to use everything in his arsenal. Furthermore, people were restrained in this place, to the point they shouldn't be able to glean anything from him even if the array in his body wasn't active.

The good news was that the prison seal didn't seem to notice anything amiss when transforming, and neither the Orom itself nor one of its Attendants came running to inquire what the hell was going on. The bad news was that changing race and inner energy didn't break or weaken the Prison Array.

He was just as sealed in his Draugr form as his living one.

At least, the situation allowed him to freely cultivate his soul over the past month. It might have taken longer than expected to fully infuse the medicinal efficacy into his soul, but the

effect was stellar. Altogether, his Soul Core had grown in size by over 10%. More importantly, Zac felt it had reached some sort of limit, prompting the leftover energy of the first treasure to eventually be absorbed by **[Spiritual Void]**.

The cleansing treasure also managed to expunge impurities he didn't even know he had, just like when he had taken that lava bath. A lot came from eating all that grass down in the Twilight Chasm, but he also sensed hidden energy from all kinds of encounters, from Aia Ouro's soul attack to tribulation lightning.

As proof of his progress, he had gained 68 Contribution Points during his cultivation session, just from his soul becoming stronger. He felt ready to take that next step anytime, but one thing held him back. Soon, two months would have passed since being trapped in the Orom World, and it was about time for the new stock to appear.

It was a huge event where people had saved their Purchase Points for centuries in hopes of finding something that would help them break through their bottleneck. It was like Black Friday in space, where everyone would rush to purchase items before they were snatched by someone else. The competition for items that suited him wouldn't be in very high demand, but there were still some cultivators at the E-grade and early Hegemons to compete with.

Furthermore, there were the second-string cultivators who would also get a chance if he waited too long.

Zac had planned to make this trip after undergoing his second reincarnation and use his newly-collected contribution points, but how could he possibly take that step with the whispers of treasures causing his mind to stray every five minutes? So now that he had completely absorbed the soul treasures, he'd decided to make the trek back to Samsara's Edge and check out the wares.

The trip was uneventful, but the same couldn't be said for the settlement when he finally reached it after a couple of days. Samsara's Edge was slightly larger compared to Freedom's End, yet it didn't feel empty at all. There was an

unprecedented hustle and bustle, with constant foot traffic up and down the streets.

Unsurprisingly, the people were mostly a mix of undead and cultivators emitting vibrant auras, though Zac was surprised to see that there were quite a few monks among the living who didn't exactly emit the aura of a life cultivator. Had the Orom snatched up cultivators from some clash between the Buddhist Sangha and the Undead empire a few thousand years ago?

It was the first time Zac had seen so many Buddhist cultivators in one place. The Buddhists had a small presence in the Zecia sector, but he hadn't run into a single one during his travels. Just like Catheya said, the Buddhists generally cultivated in seclusion, which made their methods unique in a sense.

Most cultivators were forced to continuously seek out lucky encounters to progress on their paths, but numerous Monks never left their temples. Zac had no idea how something like that was possible, but he suspected there had to be some drawbacks to such a method. All cultivation had to adhere to the Law of Balance, and if they could continuously progress without outside help, there had to be something they were forced to give up in turn.

Suddenly, a monk turned around, clearly having sensed that Zac was staring at him.

"Amitabha, Benefactor," the monk smiled as he slowly walked over. "Is there something amiss?"

"Uh," Zac coughed. "No, I was just thinking about something."

"Benefactor is unfamiliar to me," the monk smiled. "Is benefactor perhaps a new arrival? If benefactor has any advice, this poor monk will be happy to listen. Lasting peace and the holy life are discovered through new friendships."

"I'm not experienced enough to dish out advice. It's just... I was once a progenitor," Zac slowly said, figuring he might as well ask something that had confused him for a while. "From a Sector without a strong Buddhist presence. Yet there were monks looking just like you, long before we were integrated."

“So it was like that,” the monk nodded. “All is one, one is all. The hymns of the Akaniṣṭha are the hymns of the Cosmos. Anyone can listen in and gain enlightenment.”

“They’re a poison of the heart, a plague on the Multiverse,” a snort emerged from behind, and Zac looked over with surprise.

It wasn’t an undead cultivator as Zac had expected by the voice’s cadence, but rather a dour-looking human who emitted a strong aura of decay. “The Buddhist Sangha is corruption. It is the death of self. The more they ensnare with their gospel, the stronger their mountains grow. And with the things they control...”

“Amitabha, Buddha’s love reaches all,” the monk only smiled. “But a heart needs to be open to receive the love.”

“You are one of the new E-grade brats, right?” the Necromancer said, ignoring the monk and instead turning his gaze on Zac. “Be careful of spending too much time around monks. They are natural pathbreakers, destroying everything to fuel their own enlightenment. If you’re not careful, you’ll turn into an empty vessel, endlessly reciting sutras to empower their Śakra. If they are left unchecked, one day the Immortal Buddha will open his eyes, and that is when we all fall.”

After that, the dour man grunted with disgust and walked away, heading for what looked like a temporarily set-up restaurant.

“Benefactor must excuse my old friend,” the monk said with a smile. “We were brought here at the same time, and we carry a shared fate.”

“That’s fine,” Zac said. “It was just a stray thought I had upon seeing your familiar clothing.”

“Then, I hope benefactor finds what you’re looking for,” the monk nodded. “And remember; while one’s flesh can be fettered, the mind will always be free. It is never too late to turn back from the sea of bitterness. We always welcome discussion into the path.”

Zac nodded, and he watched the monk slowly walk away as well as his thoughts swirled. He remembered Catheya having

mentioned a bunch of Mountains and Temples, with the One Paradise standing at the top. Then this monk had in turn mentioned Akaniṣṭha, which he believed was one of the divine realms of Buddhism.

Did that place contain something that could send out the Dao of Buddha or whatever to all corners of the Multiverse, to the point that monks would start sprouting up even on unintegrated worlds? What had that kind of power? Was it the result of some supreme being at the peak of the A-grade practicing their Dao?

Or perhaps one of those Eternal Heritages that Qi'Sar mentioned? Considering the Buddhist Sangha was one of the most powerful factions in the multiverse, it stood to reason that those people controlled at least one such heritage.

Even more worrying were the warnings of the necromancer. By his words, the Buddhist Sangha sounded pretty dangerous, no matter if you talked about forced conversion or the Buddha himself. However, Zac wouldn't take something like that at face value, especially not from someone who clearly had a grudge with the monks.

Still, the warning made him a bit leery about the smiling monks around him as he headed toward the exchange.

There was a large gathering already waiting outside, but it didn't look like the new stock had arrived just yet. In fact, the doors to the Contribution Store were closed, something that wasn't ever supposed to happen. Zac also spotted a couple of clerks standing by the entrance, and he walked over after some thought. The moment Zac walked up to the closest one, she wordlessly handed him a talisman with a bow.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he accepted the item.

"With the high foot traffic around these times, the Orom has long instituted a queue system to avoid any issues. When the talisman lights up, you have ten minutes to enter the Contribution Store. After that, you have up to 30 minutes to peruse and purchase the new items. No one else is allowed to enter over the next two weeks," the clerk explained.

“So all these people will be before me?” Zac grimaced.

“No, it is random. Though higher-ranked citizens do have an advantage,” the attendant smiled. “But perhaps your Luck will pull through.”

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded and walked away.

He didn't have much else to do, so he simply made the rounds through Samsara's Edge, listening to the discussions and looking at what kind of cultivators had chosen paths related to life or death.

Zac was also surprised to find himself at the center of some attention, even among undead cultivators. It wasn't anything bad though. It was mostly people throwing out an olive branch with some diffuse promise about exchanging pointers. Zac didn't understand it at first, but soon enough a peak-stage Hegemon explained it.

There was definitely some truth to Murbot's explanation about the E-grade cultivators that the Orom passed through its filter. There were multiple examples of young elites crashing through the grades in the Orom World, their terrifying momentum generating a positive cycle where they got access to better and better cultivation resources and cultivation grounds.

However, there was one more reason the E-grade cultivators got some attention. Members of the younger generation were the most likely people to get picked up by someone on the outside. It wasn't a surprise, considering that any E-grade cultivator a Primordial Beast found interesting was more likely to come from some powerful faction with Autarchs.

Of course, most E-grade cultivators didn't belong to either of those two groups, but they had good odds of becoming high-level attendants as well. In either case, there was no harm in doing some networking, considering it could help them out down the road.

Zac wasn't the greatest conversationalist, but he managed to get to know quite a few hegemon over the next few days, and his vision was greatly broadened. It turned out that most

people staying in the surroundings didn't cultivate pure life or death like he was, but they rather swapped between sectors in hopes of sparking new insights.

A few didn't cultivate life or death at all, but rather absorbed themselves in a foreign Dao for a while in hopes of finding some inspiration, just like the Orom was doing by the looks of it. Zac passively stored away any information he could glean from the discussions, until one day he stumbled onto something extremely important to him.

"I'm sorry, did you say Six Profundity Empire?" Zac suddenly exclaimed as he looked at the Revenant in front of him with shock.

"That's right, why?" she asked, clearly a bit surprised at Zac's strong reaction. "Why, are you from there? Don't worry, past grudges don't matter in this place."

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I just heard it's an impressive empire. My ancestor visited it once."

"Oh?" Lorna exclaimed, her eyes widening a bit. "Your ancestor was an explorer?"

Zac knew what she was driving at. She surreptitiously tried to inquire whether his "ancestor" was someone capable of travel between empires, which would make them a powerful Monarch at the least, possibly even an Autarch.

"Something like that," Zac smiled. "Could you tell me more?"

"Well, the Six Profundity Empire is a decent strength A-grade force of Daoist Origins. It is not quite at the level of the Undead Empire, but it does have some connections to the Buddhist Sangha, while also being a core member of the Star Alliance," Lorna explained. "Our contact with them is mostly on the battlefield."

"Where is this empire located?" Zac asked, elated to finally find some clues to Kenzie's whereabouts. "And what's the Star Alliance?"

"The Six Profundity Empire claims a stretch of the Cosmic River and its surrounding areas. The Star Alliance is a group of empires that have banded together to protect their interests

against larger enemies,” Lorna said. “The Undead Empire doesn’t have any direct contact with them, but some sects of theirs occasionally join in on crusades against us when they are looking for some bloodshed to temper themselves.”

Zac asked a few follow-up questions until he believed he had a decent understanding of where that huge empire was located. It was hard to get a proper grasp of locations in the multiverse, considering it was mostly specks of activity surrounded with vast chasms of nothingness. But hearing Lorna explain it, it didn’t seem completely impossible for him to reach that place.

He could set course for some sector controlled by Buddhist Sangha, and find his way from there. Or, he could head in the general direction of this ‘Cosmic River’ Lorna mentioned, which was like a streak of unusually fertile cultivation grounds that stretched for an insanely great distance.

Worlds inside this river would all have greater energy densities than normal, and the Dao was pretty clear as well. Apparently, there were even some sections of the river that had turned into impossibly large formations that prevented even Autarchs from forcing their way inside, making it amazing cultivation grounds shielded from the outside world.

If he didn’t want to go through the Buddhist Sangha, he could instead cross the Undead Empire in his Draugr form. If members from the Six Profundity Empires sometimes joined the Buddhist Sangha in their crusade against the empire, they should be somewhat closely situated to the warfront that the Eternal Clan was responsible for.

Of course, either of those options was absolutely impossible in his current state, not counting being held prisoner at the moment. Even if he managed to escape, there was still no way for him to make his way there. He would have to either find a series of wormholes, or somehow get teleportation tokens high grade enough to teleport through the whole multiverse.

But those things were beyond rare.

He had hoped to get his hands on a few Teleportation Tokens in this place, but it looked bleak. Tokens had a maximum radius, and most of them only worked within a single sector.

The better ones, like the one he got for Twilight Harbor or the one that would take him to the Yr'Vanadium sector of the Radiant Temple, could pass through a couple of sectors. But that was it.

The distance between Zecia and the Six Profundity Empire was most likely tens of thousands of times greater compared to the one between Zecia and the Twilight Harbor, and he might even die of old age during transit if he didn't use a higher-tier teleportation array. As to how Leandra was planning on traversing such a shocking distance, he guessed peak Technocrats had their own methods not bound by the rules of the System.

Zac eventually nodded in thanks and accepted a sealed message from the Revenant to her clan before moving on. She was a member of the Undead Empire, and if given the chance, he'd send word of her situation to her descendants. A while later, Zac simply sat down and started meditating while waiting for the treasures to arrive.

Finally, after three days of meditation, Samsara's End was lit up with activity as the first batch of cultivators were called to the Contribution Hall.

Chapter 799: Depths of Death

Unsurprisingly, most of the 50 cultivators who were called first were high-grade attendants, with the majority sporting insignias wrought from white jade. Jade was the stage between Gold and Emerald, with bronze being the lowest tier.

Except for citizens such as himself, of course.

Zac knew that most of these cultivators were Monarchs, and he imprinted every single face to memory, making sure he wouldn't accidentally annoy one of these people in the future. However, as he memorized their appearances, he noticed something surprising.

“Why are there no Emerald badges here? There should be some in the area, right?” Zac asked a neighboring cultivator. “I figure those people would be the most motivated to find some items.”

“Emerald Badges can teleport to a private town with the help of their tokens,” the man sitting next to Zac explained with a face full of envy. “They don't need to make the trek to the cities. Besides, I hear the best items don't leave Liberty Point, making it pointless to head over here.”

“Oh,” Zac nodded understanding.

It looked like Murbot wasn't kidding around when talking about the benefits of becoming attendants. The best items weren't even released to the public cities. That wasn't the only benefit Emerald Badges had from what he'd learned over the past days. Emerald Badges could actually avoid up to five relegations.

It was a small concession by the Orom in hopes that they'd manage to break that final threshold and provide a huge burst

of insights. Conversely, Jade Attendants got one freebie, while Gold Attendants and lower had to live in constant fear of relegation just like everyone else.

Thankfully, Zac's Luck pulled through, and he didn't have to wait more than a few hours before his talisman lit up. He immediately entered the Contribution Center and sunk his attention into the stock after nodding at the clerk.

Staggering volumes.

There was simply a shocking number of items added to the contribution store. The number of unique treasures had multiplied over one hundred times over, and the stock of base cultivation resources had skyrocketed by at least five hundred times. Some materials, like basic Cosmic Crystals, had their supply increased thousands of times over.

Zac couldn't even begin to estimate the value of all these items, and this was only what was available to common citizens such as himself. It was a testament to just how many resources the Orom World went through over 500 years. Even more shocking was the fact that over 95% of the resources the Orom snatched didn't even enter the Contribution Store.

Anything of middling or low quality was somehow ground down and distilled into the pure energies that went into running the Orom World and feeding the Orom and its handful of descendants.

It was also obvious that a frantic shopping spree was already taking place, seeing as the listed stock was continuously dwindling on all kinds of items. The scene filled Zac with some anxiety, and he quickly started scouring the list for anything that could either help with escaping or his cultivation.

Thankfully, the clerks hadn't been idle over the past two months, and every single item had been analyzed and categorized, making it easy to find useful items. Zac didn't find any items that would prove useful in a prison break, but he did spend a good chunk of his remaining Purchase Points on three sets of items.

The first purchase was two bottles of Pseudo D-grade Node-Breaking Pills that seemed to even exceed the [**Aethergate Pills**] he had bought in the Twilight Harbor. They were called [**Stellar Enkindling Pills**], and there were altogether ten pills inside each bottle. As long as his pill immunity didn't reduce their effect too much, these pills would be able to help him push through most of the High E-grade.

Since the pills were made for E-grade cultivators, the two sets of peak-quality pills only cost 80 Purchase Points, which was nothing compared to the items meant for Hegemons or Monarchs. They were also made for the living rather than Undead cultivators, which decreased the likelihood Zac would already have built up a natural immunity to the materials that went into the pills.

Secondly, Zac purchased a chunk of an interesting material he had never heard of before. It was called [**Spiritual Ice**], but it wasn't meant for his Soul Cultivation. Its only apparent use was to temporarily freeze and harden one's spiritual body. At the surface, it didn't seem very useful, especially since it apparently turned your mind extremely turbid. But it did have one interesting ability.

As it froze you, it also made your body and mind more durable, allowing you to lessen the impact of Node Bursting. Seeing as it didn't seem to clash with his other preparations, he figured that he might as well get it as he would soon start going for the nodes in his head. The more protections he could layer for that step of the way, the better.

The third item was an unnamed Peak E-grade Natural Treasure containing both Life and Death, quite possibly a treasure that some poor soul had found in the Twilight Ocean before being culled. It didn't have any direct uses listed, but Zac figured it might come in handy when forming his core in the future. Besides, with its wild and untamed energy and its unknown use, it only cost 120 Contribution Points, making it a steal.

There were hundreds of other items he really wanted in the store, many of which he had never heard of but possessed marvelous effects. There were unique treasures that could improve affinities, strengthen souls, awaken bloodlines, and

form constitutions. There were even items that contained Dao Impartments. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

But Zac was like a beggar that stared through the window to some luxury store, the wares inside far beyond what his wallet could handle. Altogether, he had spent just over 250 contribution points, leaving him with a total of 468 Purchase Points. The more marvelous treasures that he had spotted cost over ten thousand contribution points, and there were even some that cost over one hundred thousand.

Did that mean the items the Emerald Attendants kept for themselves were priced in the millions?

Having completed his goal, Zac left the Contribution Store and set course for his private island in a hurry. He didn't bother buying any crystals, herbs, or Cultivation Methods put for sale, considering he had more than enough of those kinds of things in his Spatial Rings.

He had already been eager to return to his cultivation before, but now there was an additional reason for him.

Most of the treasures were out of his reach, but he had set his sights on one particular supreme-grade treasure that he might be able to snag. There was a death-attuned item with a similar purpose as the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**. Unfortunately, it cost over 6,000 Contribution points, far beyond what he could afford at the moment.

Zac wasn't sure whether there were any undead E-grade cultivators apart from him who were able to make use of that thing, but if it were, then it had suddenly turned into a race for Purchase Points. If not for the fact that the items he purchased were cheap and of extremely limited quantities, he wouldn't even have bought them.

But Zac hoped the items would allow him to gain a couple of levels in one go, recouping the cost of the pills and then some.

Having talked with the older captives for a few days had helped him gain a better understanding of what to expect in terms of Contribution Points. A general rule of thumb in this

place was that you'd get Contribution Points equivalent to the number of raw attribute points your breakthrough provided.

So, if you formed a Dao Seed, you'd get 15 Contribution Points, whereas forming a Dao Branch might grant you something like 2,500. However, that was just a general rule, and the Orom could award anything from half of the points to three times the points dependent on how useful the brands deemed the insights.

Thankfully, breakthroughs that provided no attributes could still provide points, sometimes even more generously than Daos. Soul Cultivation was such a topic, and the Orom seemed very interested in that aspect of cultivation, to the point that Mentalists often were among the most long-lived people in this place.

The points Zac got before were just a small incentive to keep pursuing the path, but a big payoff was hopefully waiting for him after his reincarnation. Even if he couldn't afford the treasure that could find and open Hidden Nodes right away, he would hopefully be able to use his sales quota to convert some of his less useful treasures to Purchase Points. Unfortunately, it turned out that each attendant rank and grade had sales quotas of their brought-in treasures.

It was a small safeguard to prevent wealthy, but otherwise unimpressive, prisoners from converting mountains of common cultivation resources into enough Purchase Points to snatch a bunch of extremely valuable treasures. Some things were hard to find even for the Orom, and it wanted the best treasures to go to the most talented cultivators, just like how a sect worked.

Besides, the conversion rate was just atrocious. He had seen just how stingy the arrays were when he offered up dozens of Cosmos Sacks.

So making actual breakthroughs was his only way to get it, and he was determined to buy it before anyone else. Since opening his [**Quantum Gate**], Zac had made it a primary goal to try and open up new nodes on his Draugr side. Considering

they were considered a divine race among the undead, their Hidden Nodes shouldn't be anything to scoff at.

Even if he had teased Catheya a bit about her nose, it was a pretty amazing ability. Not only had it exposed his true nature in the Tower of Eternity when everyone else was none the wiser, but it proved extremely useful when out exploring. While a treasure nose was useful, Zac hoped he would be able to get a node that improved his combat strength, either in defense or offense. After all, out of the four nodes he had opened so far, only **[Spiritual Void]** could help him in battle.

The surroundings turned to a blur as Zac rushed back to his island. Soon enough, he reached the lake that had turned into his temporary home, and he passed through the barriers to reach the island. The ambient energy had turned even denser since he left, a result of the arrays still building up the environment by siphoning energy from the surrounding waters.

Zac rested for a couple of hours to stabilize his mind before he took out the first of the Array Disks. It was time.

The hours passed as one revolution replaced another, and he found himself steeped deeper and deeper into a deathly abyss. Each revolution was imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin, and each revolution increased the ferocity of the black ocean in his mind. Eventually, Zac finished the seventh cycle, and his face was pallid as he was covered in death-suffused sweat from the pain in his mind.

Even back in the Twilight Chasm, his soul had reached the level of strength needed to empower six revolutions with his Daos without harming himself. Back then, he would have managed to empower the seventh cycle too if he really pushed himself, yet he found himself struggling at this same level almost a year later.

On the surface, it looked like he had barely improved, but Zac knew that the situation wasn't as simple as that. Since finishing his eight-month cultivation session in the Twilight Chasm, his two soul oceans had undergone a drastic change. First, they were transformed and empowered in the valley

when he was steeped in life and death. The concepts stored within the oceans had more than doubled, which also meant the storms they kicked up during cultivation had doubled in ferocity.

Next, the oceans were infused by the remnants. The shard had stayed for months in his soul aperture, but the real transformation of the oceans took place when he formed the glimpse of chaos. Torrential amounts of Oblivion and Creation had been squeezed out of the remnants and dragged through the oceans before they entered the pathways on his shoulders.

The two oceans had even been marked by Chaos when he circulated those two slivers of Chaos through his body. Perhaps, that had been the biggest factor behind the shocking and unpredictable storms that were kicked up now every time he cultivated.

At the same time, his soul had gained a lot of power after the chasm as well. Surviving all kinds of trials and tribulations could strengthen one's soul just like it led to breakthroughs in one's Dao. And Zac wasn't lacking in tribulations, no matter if looking to the mysterious light that infused his soul, the actual Tribulation Lightning, the storm of Oblivion that forcibly empowered his soul, or the benefits of forcibly sealing a Shard of Creation for months.

Along with the marvelous treasures left by Aia Ouro, his mental strength was many times greater compared to when leaving the Twilight Chasm. Without that, he probably wouldn't even have managed to last five Dao-empowered cycles with how his oceans looked. If anything, seven revolutions right now most likely eclipsed the difficulty of performing nine Dao-empowered revolutions with normal soul seas.

That brought a question of its own. Was he ready to undergo a reincarnation or not? His Soul Core had pretty much reached sublimation for what the method allowed. He could sense that the benefits were minuscule compared to the difficulty of finishing a revolution. But at the same time, he worried that the powerful oceans would increase the difficulty of his

breakthrough, which spoke for empowering his soul even further.

These thoughts had plagued Zac over the past month as he slowly digested the two Soul Treasures, but he didn't want to wait any longer. The faces full of desperation and hope in Samsara's Edge urged him on, reminding him of what was at stake. This was ultimately a prison, one that he needed to get out of. He couldn't get complacent and let his momentum stall, or he'd never seize the opportunity to escape this place.

This was the one.

He had a better understanding of the process, and he had a broader knowledge of the soul in general. He had dozens of Spatial rings containing innumerable treasures that he could take out if necessary. He even had Cosmos Crystals attuned to life and death that could unleash an unprecedented storm of energy if need be.

The cost of a single one of those crystals could bankrupt a hundred E-grade elites, yet he had more than a hundred of each kind. He lacked for nothing, and only the fear of crushing his soul once more held him back. But no longer.

Zac forcibly shook his mind awake before it was claimed by the deathly chill. Shortly after, an imposing will pushed down on the deathly ocean as he contained some of the chaos brought from the seventh infusion. The next moment, his Dao Avatar on top of the Soul Core turned into its Draugr form before spewing out a storm of deathly Dao as Zac opened the gates to **[Spiritual Void]**.

The stored-up Dao joined the faltering stream from the hanging coffin before they dragged the already deathly Mental Energy into the Array Disk for an eighth revolution. As he was drained, Zac rapidly lost control over the churning waters in the pitch-black ocean, but he could only grit his teeth and withstand the waves crashing into his Soul Core.

The minutes passed, until finally, a storm of even stronger death poured back from the array, pouring into the ocean. A deep rumble that echoed through his Soul Aperture made Zac's nose bleed, but he kept going, using the same solution as

he had during the first Reincarnation. Two months had passed since getting trapped, which was enough to stockpile quite a bit of Oblivion Energy.

He forcibly squeezed the entrenched energies from his soul, pouring them into the array disk along with the last scraps he could squeeze from the hanging coffin. Zac hurriedly crushed a few Soul Crystals as well, but the energy that entered his mind was like a few drops of rain in a parched desert. With a puff, it was gone, only providing some minimal relief as Zac started the ninth revolution.

Zac didn't know if a second had passed or a century. Time had no meaning to Death, and his consciousness had come as close as humanly possible without crossing that threshold. He had no wants, no desires. He had melded with the nothingness, a small spot of darkness in the raging sea of the Abyss.

He was Death.

A small ripple suddenly broke the illusion, and Zac found his utterly drained soul flicker awake as the final cycle was completed. His energy came crashing back like an icy river, pushing the deathly darkness of the ocean to perfection. The rumble was even greater this time around, and it almost felt like the Heavens had been summoned to his Soul Aperture as dark clouds formed over the raging sea.

However, these clouds were pitch-black, mirroring the waters below. They were vapors of pure death. And their mere aura caused small cracks to spread across Zac's Soul Aperture. Zac found himself slipping into that soothing darkness again as the storm in his mind reached cataclysmic proportions, and he hurriedly sent a mental command into his Specialty core.

He had pushed the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** beyond its limits in its descent into Death, and it was time to form the counterpoint to his reincarnation.

Chapter 800: Perfection

A ripple passed through Zac's Duplicity Core, and a few seconds later another wave of death spread through his body, almost fusing with the impossible volumes of unadulterated death accumulated by the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**. The chill of death was still there, as was the raging storm in his mind. However, it no longer threatened to consume his sense of self, to convert him into an unthinking Revenant.

Being Draugr was to be one with the Abyss, and the pitch-black ocean in his Soul Aperture was less than a shadow compared to the lake from which his race sprung. But that didn't save his harried Soul Core from getting almost drowned by the raging waters. The golden ocean was rapidly shrinking as well, unable to counteract the ferocious momentum from its nemesis.

Zac felt himself slowly losing control, but a loud snap startled him awake. It was the Array Disk in his hands that had cracked, unleashing a storm of unrelenting death upon the area. The wooden cabin around him instantly rotted away and crumbled around him, but the energy didn't spread too far.

It was somehow contained above him, no doubt a part of the array's function to help with this final step. The churning clouds of death were mesmerizing, and Zac felt some echoes of the higher truths hidden within. However, he quickly refocused on the task at hand. Insights were good and all, but surviving this tribulation was even better.

He hurriedly took out the life-attuned Array Disk and started up the second set of revolutions. He knew that he was at the most precipitous state right now, and he desperately held on while the cycle began. As long as he could withstand this first revolution, the golden ocean would come to his aid in containing the deathly ocean.

Zac once more found himself in a state of limbo, where all thoughts were expunged except his desperate struggle to contain the chaos in his mind. The staunch willpower he had nurtured through innumerable life-and-death encounters had come to his aid, turning into an indestructible wave breaker that kept his Soul Core just safe enough to withstand the surging tides.

Each second was agony, but he held on, refusing to give in to the abyssal ocean. And finally, a surge of warmth entered his soul as the first revolution finished and brought with it a wave of untainted life. The golden ocean roused itself, finally starting its counterattack to reclaim its lost ground. It was still not nearly as powerful as the churning black waters, but it was a start.

One revolution after another passed through the small disk in his hands. He was getting closer to a state of balance every minute, but Zac was forced to swallow Soul Mending Pills as though they were candy to prevent his Soul Core from crumbling prematurely. As he had suspected, the war that raged by the time he finished the seventh cycle surpassed what the method called for.

His shimmering core was completely submerged by this point, drowned by towering waves that slammed into each other.

Yet Zac pressed on, a sheen of madness glimmering in his abyssal eyes. He held it all together with a small film of Mental Energy and sheer will, and black veins stood out all over his face as he started the eighth cycle. It felt like an eternity, but finally, a crashing wave of mental energy full of vigor eventually returned.

His whole Soul Aperture was veritably vibrating by this point, but he pushed on. There was no turning back now. Not only would it cause a tremendous backlash, but it would just make his future breakthrough more difficult. The energies crammed into his aperture had already surpassed what it could withstand, so what good would continued cultivation do? He needed to break through and increase the capacity of the tank.

Not to mention he'd already broken one of the Array Disks.

A sense of hollowness spread through his body as he extracted all the accumulated energy of Creation he had gathered, and he pushed it right into the array. He let the disk do its thing as he used every ounce of will and remaining energy to simply stay coherent, to stave off the tendrils of life that were poison to his Draugr form.

Zac wasn't sure his Soul Aperture would last the whole cycle no matter how strong his will was, and he desperately searched for solutions. Eventually, he could only swallow Soul Mending pills by the handful while pushing a huge amount of Miasma to his head, using it to pressure the aperture from outside to maintain a semblance of equilibrium.

Somehow, Zac managed to pull through, but he was still filled with trepidation as a storm of life came rushing back into his mind. He was rapidly losing control, and a crack from the array in his hand unleashed a wave of life into the surroundings, pushing the deathly clouds that still raged to the side.

It almost looked like the siblings to the clouds of **[Rapturous Divide]** had been summoned, and a war to match the one in his mind erupted all around him. It even started dragging the ambient energies of the whole area into its struggle, and the opposing Daos in the Orom World were more than willing to comply. Zac wasn't surprised, and he could only hold on for dear life as the storms inside his Soul Aperture grew even more ferocious.

There was no ebb, only a flow that kept gaining momentum. The waves in his mind had grown so massive that they resembled mountain ranges by this point. It looked like two tectonic plates had collided, with his Soul Core submerged deep in the heart of the chaos. Life and Death had taken the main stage of his soul, but a shadow of his third Dao played an important part.

The small avatar had already left its position on his Soul Core, and it kept dancing among the frothing waters. One moment it looked like a human swinging a golden axe, and the next it was an abyssal Draugr with an axe wrapped in chains. As it

swung its weapons, the oceans answered like an army roused by a powerful general.

His world shook as the war raged on, and cracks spread across the domed sky. The storm reached a crescendo, and Zac found his consciousness twist as a crack echoed out from the depths of his mind.

A blast of pure mental destruction ripped apart the rotten shreds of his cabin before leveling the trees around him. Zac inwardly breathed out in relief that he hadn't taken out the **[Mind's Eye Agate]** for his breakthrough, seeing as its benefits rather came during prolonged cultivation sessions. It would have been a huge loss to destroy that amazing treasure so soon after getting it.

Zac could feel his perception expanding along with the unfettered wave of Mental Energy. It crossed the waters of the small lake, and cascading waves rose like soldiers answering a call. The mental wave kept stretching for hundreds of meters in each direction, a supreme presence lording over the no-man's-land.

However, Zac's nigh-omniscience didn't last long. He found his expanded vision blur as his mental energy started to spin, forming a soul hurricane as it pulled back into his mind, bringing all the attuned energy in the area with it. First, the surrounding hills and rivers were drained of meaning, and the lake shared the same fate a moment later.

Next came the mysterious clouds of life and death, kept together by some inscrutable markings Zac couldn't quite make out. It all was all dragged in by an unrelenting pull, and Zac screamed with pain as a tidal wave of Life and Death poured into his glabella. It was like a heavenly spear cut through the two raging oceans before it slammed into his Soul Core.

The core was already covered in cracks by this point, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back. Zac was beset by a soul-rending pain as his core exploded. Thousands of shimmering shards ripped through the ocean with unstoppable

momentum, forcibly ending the war through mutual destruction.

The outburst of power completely destroyed the walls of his Soul Aperture as well, and there was suddenly no clear divider for his mind any longer. It was just like before he had awakened his soul. However, instead of a murky ball of congealed energy, his soul now looked like a mottled ocean that stretched for miles in his mind.

The two seas had been reduced to a messy mix of gold and black, looking like two oils that refused to properly mix. The waters kept squirming from the proximity, but something kept everything in place; the innumerable shards. They had become fixtures in the ocean, each one connecting a ball of water to it through some unknown means, either surrounding itself by life or death.

The scene was extremely chaotic, but it wasn't completely out of Zac's expectations. He had known that his soul would shatter like the last time, judging by the terse description of the process, and he already knew the solution. He needed to start gathering and fusing the broken shards before he died.

The problem was how. The second reincarnation was similar to the first, but there were also clear differences. Zac had hoped that he would find some clues by this point, what to aim for. How should he fuse shards that had all been tainted, surrounded and marinated in a soup of life and death?

Were you meant to make a choice at this point, where living cultivators focused on the life-marked Soul Shards, and the undead on the deathly ones? That way, you could form a soul better suited to your path. But that wouldn't work for him, someone with two races and an equal focus between life and death.

Could he form two soul cores, one for each element? Would that ruin the method, which called for both oneness and the law of nine?

He didn't know if he was doing the right thing, but he also knew that each second was precious at this stage. He could only start imposing his will on the shards, slowly arranging

them by their respective elements. For now, he started at one corner of the ocean to see if his theory was correct, while maintaining some control over the rest of the waters, preventing it from dissipating.

Soon enough, the pockets of life melded together, but Zac frowned when another problem immediately cropped up; the shards refused to fuse like the last time. The golden waters were in the way, acting like some sort of insulation.

Was he supposed to mix life and death, after all?

He urgently redirected a couple of shards, but as expected, it worked even worse. If life and death had mixed so easily, the fusion process would already have started up when the chaotic soup was created. Zac wracked his brain, desperately trying to match any piece of information he had gathered over the past months with what he was seeing in his mind.

Suddenly, a snippet from Aia Ouro's missives resurfaces in his mind.

While the ultimate goal of nurturing one's soul is to empower it and allow it to become a greater extension of your will, the methods to accomplish this varies greatly. Generally, a distinction between Attuned and Unattuned Soul Strengthening Methods needs to be made.

The ultimate goal of the attuned Soul Strengthening Methods is to remold one's soul, to push it closer to your Path and your Dao. In terms of Body Tempering Methods, they will provide you with a constitution. Just as a fiery tempering technique might award its practitioner some manner of Fire Constitution, so can the fiery Soul Strengthening Method provide you with a soul attuned to fire.

The benefits of this should be clear for any practitioner of the Dao. An attuned soul will empower the matching Dao, just as the constitution will empower the matching skills. The drawback of this gift is the narrowing of one's path. A Dao of a different peak will become harder to wield, and soul skills of clashing elements will become weakened.

From there, it had gone on to explain that most methods delayed the process of attuning one's soul, as to not prematurely lock in users before they had confirmed their path of cultivation. But what if the **[Nine Reincarnation Manual]** differed from the norm, and already at the second Reincarnation meant for you to attune your soul?

If true, it directly clashed with Zac's assumptions after reading that missive. It had also gone on to describe unattuned methods, such as the **[Thousand Lights Chapter]** and a few other methods. These methods didn't provide an attunement to your soul, but high-quality methods instead made up for it by producing stronger souls that weren't forced down a certain path.

It had also mentioned that even unattuned methods often used various Daos to improve their cultivation speed, and Zac had ultimately categorized the **[Nine Reincarnation Manual]** into this type of method. After all, while he steeped his Mental Energy in life and death, his Soul Core had stayed completely untouched by those elements.

But seeing the situation in his soul, he wondered if his understanding was flawed, and he focused on a random shard surrounded by a bubble of extremely pure life. He exerted his will, and he was filled with a mix of elation and trepidation that the exuberant energies entered the shard, indelibly marking it with Life.

The glee came from having found the path forward, while the trepidation came from the ramifications. Still, Zac couldn't worry about the future right now, and how an attuned soul would affect him. He could only put his faith in the System once more, hoping that it hadn't provided him with a method that would clash with him being an Edgewalker.

He spread his consciousness, and one bubble after another started shrinking. However, by the point the surrounding bubbles were absorbed to two-thirds, Zac met an insurmountable resistance. Zac panicked for a moment, but he figured it was a result of him overstuffing the oceans. Thankfully, a solution quickly presented itself as the waters around the shards exploded, leaving puffs of attuned vapors.

Meanwhile, the explosions exposed glimmering Soul Shards hovering inside the haze.

Zac felt like his mind was about to split apart as he desperately imposed his will all over the place, trying to do keep the uncontrollable ocean in check. Eventually, large pockets of shimmering gems floated in his aperture, half of them pale gold and the other turquoise. Their colors looked slightly diluted compared to the oceans, most likely because of the pristine white of his broken soul core.

Seeing that some chunks had been processed, Zac exerted tremendous pressure on the crystals, just like he had during the first reincarnation. Immediately, the pieces started to fuse, and the process looked a lot like previous times. As two crystals fused, a more condensed one was formed that was just slightly larger than before. In return, it emitted stronger energy, and its color was slightly deeper.

Having found the correct method, Zac immediately got to work, fusing some parts while attuning others. He worked his way through the large space of his Soul Aperture like a conveyor belt, but he suddenly encountered an issue. Two crystals had formed, one shimmering in gold like a piece of divine amber, while the other emitted the deathly chill of a supreme Miasma Crystal.

They looked immensely powerful, either one of them more than a match for his previous Soul Core thanks to the enormous amount of energy added from the ocean, the accumulated energy of the Array Disks, and the torrential amounts of energy he had swallowed from the surroundings. However, Zac could feel that they had reached sublimation after only having absorbed a fraction of the shards of his soul.

He tried to forcibly squeeze more into the cores, but it was simply impossible. As he pushed one shard inside, another one was pushed out, maintaining equilibrium. His mind worked with lightning speed, for once utilizing the thousands of points in Intelligence he had racked up to confirm something.

“Nine,” Zac muttered, realizing that each attuned Soul Core contained exactly 729 shards, which was nine by nine by nine.

It definitely wasn't a coincidence, and he immediately stopped trying to force any more into the cores. Instead, he exerted pressure on some of the unattached crystals, and the familiar process started up once more. Two Soul cores eventually turned to four, and four into six. Zac had no idea how much time had passed by this point, but he was exhausted.

Worse yet, the protective bubbles around the remaining shards in his aperture had started leaking, the attuned waters turning into a haze as they slowly shrunk. Thankfully, he had already processed more than half of his soul, and he had more than enough attuned energies to spare. Still, his vision was starting to blur and his speed was slowing down, so he threw an item into his mouth as he kept working.

It was a mental stimulant found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem, an item equivalent to a Solider Pill for the mind. A surge of mental energy stormed into his aperture, immediately putting pressure on the remaining shards to speed up their transformation. Unfortunately, the energy was "unliving", and not a true replacement to his own spirit, and it wouldn't be able to replace any soul shards that were lost.

However, it did help to some degree, which was better than nothing. It gave him the strength to keep working, and it managed to buy enough time to form another set of attuned Soul Cores.

Four cores of life shone like radiant suns, as they leisurely floated in his Soul Aperture. Meanwhile, four aquamarine moons emitted opposing energies as they formed a complex dance with their opposites. The scene was oddly reminiscent of the situation the remnants found themselves in. However, Zac felt like these eight cores didn't just restrict each other, but they empowered each other as well.

They rotated in his soul like eight miniature celestial bodies, and his mind had changed from an ocean to a small corner of space. The oceans were partly gone, sacrificed in the formation of these marvelous Soul Cores. Remaining were just vast hazy clouds in gold and aquamarine, nebulae shrouding this soul in mystery.

Zac could feel a connection between the cores, and he knew that he could draw energy from either one or all eight at once, depending on how much force he wanted to exert. They were separate, but they were also one. The total power they contained was amazing, but Zac wasn't satisfied. After all, there were only eight of them.

Nine Dharmas, Nine Heavens, Nine layers of the Abyss. That was what the method called for, and Zac knew that he was still short of perfection.

Problem was, he had run out of soul shards.

Chapter 801: Singular Unity

Zac gazed at the eight shimmering orbs floating in his mind, urgently trying to figure out a solution for the final missing core. Soon, his attention turned to the clouds containing vast amounts of life- and death-attuned energies. At first, he had simply assumed that the nebulae were left-over energies from the process. After all, his soul oceans had contained far more energy than necessary, so it made sense that there would be some remaining.

But what if that wasn't the case? Zac immediately had an idea, and streams of Mental Energy emerged from the eight fully-formed cores. It felt so natural, so easy. Before, he could arduously control two streams, to form his crude Dao braids. But now, he was actually controlling eight of them, though their movements were a bit stiff.

Still, that was enough for Zac's purpose, and he made the streams catch large globs of nebulous dust before dragging it all toward one of the cores. It was one of the first two he had formed, and Zac looked on as he drenched it in the two sets of clouds, prompting the familiar explosions to erupt.

It was like magnificent fireworks had gone off around the core, and Zac felt the immense pressure the explosions put on the core. The chaos continued for a few moments, and Zac's brows furrowed as doubt crept into his heart. However, a small stream of shockingly pure light was eventually squeezed out from the heart of the core, its radiance almost blinding.

Zac's eyes lit up, and he gingerly took control of the sliver as he helped drag it out from the core. He first planned on pushing the attuned clouds away, but he quickly realized that the clashes didn't impact this pure string at all. It was his soul, condensed and refined to an unprecedented state. Some random life-death explosions weren't enough to harm it even if it was just a thin string.

His instincts were correct, and it looked like the tendril knew what to do on its own. The eight attuned cores kept rotating in that mysterious pattern, and it was like they formed some sort of vacuum at the heart of it all. The scene made Zac think of a yarn winder, and his gaze turned to the other eight cores.

He had figured out the method to refine the cores one final time, but he had a feeling that execution could still impact the end result. If he put pressure on just one core at a time, he would eventually form eight unconnected strings. Wouldn't it be better to extract all eight strings simultaneously, allowing them to form a proper yarn?

Zac had spent years looking at the intricate patterns on the Array Disks of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**, and he was almost certain his theory was correct as he looked at the pattern of the eight outer cores. Zac didn't quite understand the underlying meaning of their movements, but he had sensed the same truths hidden in the clouds that sprung from the Array Disks.

The essence of the soul strengthening method was hidden in that dance, and he needed to imprint that essence into the ninth and final core. Zac immediately spread his consciousness, pushing his recently improved control to the limits as he rekindled the conflict between life and death throughout his soul.

As if sensing his desires, the avatar for his Branch of the War Axe that had been sitting in the middle of the circle stood up. It immediately began its dance of conflict, swinging its axe as it kept swapping between incarnations. Wherever the avatar passed, the struggle was pushed to the next level.

Controlling so many clashes simultaneously was far beyond what he could normally manage, but Zac kept eating pills and incense sticks found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem. The effect was getting worse and worse, but it was enough to help him maintain control of the process. Soon enough, eight pristine strings slithered toward the center of his soul, almost drawn together as though by magnetic attraction.

Soon enough they touched, and a ripple spread out through Zac's soul as his perception shifted once more. Before, he had already sensed that the eight cores were connected, but that feeling was far more palpable now. He finally understood the true meaning of *'From Eight Trigrams a system is formed, where the singular unity is supreme'*.

The moment the eight strings connected, they entwined into a small knot that became more and more complex as it and the outer cores kept spinning. The newly forming core was the real center of his soul, and Zac felt the walls of his Soul Aperture reform around it.

The bigger the shimmering ball grew, the more space was crammed into his Soul Aperture. It was already multiple times greater compared to before, yet the ball kept growing. It almost felt almost like he was forming an inner world, but Zac knew that this wasn't a true space like the one a Monarch formed.

It was rather his mind conceptualizing something intangible, a place where the line between thought and reality were blurred. But it was undeniable that the ninth core's growth meant his soul was becoming more powerful. Of course, the price of the growth was that the eight outer cores kept shrinking, though their colors grew more and more intense.

In Zac's opinion, it was a worthwhile trade, but nothing good can last forever. The oceans had left behind shocking amounts of energy, but the clouds were growing dim. No matter how much the Dao Avatar urged its surroundings to struggle, the eruptions grew further apart and weaker. Thankfully, the strings had already stopped growing by that point.

It looked like he had reached a limit of how far he could condense the outer cores. They had shrunk to a third of their original size, but they emitted shockingly deep auras of life and death. The eight strings detached from the outer cores the next moment and were dragged into the inner core which was now twice as large as the outer ones.

However, even with the esoteric patterns almost melding the eight strings together, they were still not perfectly fused into

one core. Zac hesitated a bit before he made his decision, and the treasure he had just bought appeared in his hand. He had initially planned on saving this thing until he formed his Cultivator's Core, but he couldn't be picky at the moment.

He remembered all-too-well how the soul shards slowly hardened during his last reincarnation, and he was seeing that exact same phenomenon in the central core. He needed a final push, and he placed the Natural Treasure against his forehead, hoping that the suction would activate again.

It was a success, and the small vortex by his glabella opened once more, dragging torrential amounts of rampant energy from the treasure. It was just like Zac expected. During the last reincarnation, he had used multiple treasures to perform a perfect reincarnation. This time, it hadn't been needed so far, but that was only because he had overdone things with the two oceans.

It was like two waterfalls came cascading down from the heavens above. They slammed into the newly-formed core, where the Dao Avatar was already waiting. A final series of explosions gradually squeezed the inner core tighter and tighter, forcing it to shrink. Soon enough, it was impossible to tell that there had ever been eight distinct strings.

It was now a radiant sun, far eclipsing his previous core in both size and density. The moment it formed it was like something snapped into place, and Zac was beset by an unprecedented state of clarity. Hundreds of thoughts rushed through his mind, seemingly unconnected impressions and insights forming a greater whole. It was all one.

Zac slowly opened his eyes, a wide smile plastered across his face. He had done it - a perfect reincarnation.

His gaze alone caused ripples in his surroundings until the brand on his hand sprung to action. The sense of limitless power was subdued, his soul output once more restrained to what was permissible in the Orom World. He wryly smiled as he looked down at his hand.

He had held onto a small hope that disintegrating his Soul Core, thus technically dying, would have tricked the brand into

dissipating, but it didn't look like the Orom was so easily fooled. Even with the prison brand limiting his mind, Zac could still sense the improvements to his soul. If his old soul was a fortress surrounded by a moat, then his current soul was like an impervious mountain.

The dampening ocean of his previous reincarnation was gone, but the nine Soul Cores created a mysterious formation as they swirled in his mind. The outer layer of attuned cores created a nigh-impenetrable barrier protecting his true core. No matter how much rain or lightning rained down on its surface, it would stand tall.

Even if some terrifying Mentalist unleashed an overpowered strike at him, Zac knew that he could sacrifice one of the outer cores, essentially making him a cat with nine lives. He wanted to find out what other benefits his latest breakthrough brought, but he was wrung dry. Eventually, he gave it up altogether and focused on recuperating.

Zac spent the days barely moving an inch. His only actions were to turn back into his human form and light five sticks of soul-nurturing incense around him. He wasn't only focusing on letting his drained Mental Energy recuperate, but he was also immersed in the stream of impressions he received when his soul was perfected.

He had been beset by a series of epiphanies in regards to all facets of his cultivation, from his Daos to skill upgrades, to improving his two stances. Zac wanted to burn those impressions to memory before they turned into a confusing haze again, but he eventually had to admit defeat after five days. Anything he had lost by this point had become too muddled to make any sense of.

Perhaps he'd regain that sense of inspiration down the road when touching upon something tangential. Perhaps not. In either case, it was time to move on to the next step of his plan. Just as he had hoped, the Orom hadn't skimped out upon breaking through his soul. It was considered a lot harder compared to simply forming a Dao Branch, and Zac guessed his method was quite unique as well.

Altogether, the breakthrough had netted him just over 11,000 contribution points, far better than his estimates. He had expected the breakthrough to provide somewhere between 4,000 and 8,000, but it looked like the Orom was extremely interested in improvements of the soul. The points were more than enough to afford the treasure, but he didn't immediately head out.

Instead, he checked his body for any hidden damage before taking out a **[Chainbreaking Pill]** and the Stone of Hope. After hesitating a bit, Zac ultimately decided against using the **[Spiritual Ice]** for now.

The item wasn't reusable, with each use eating up a chunk. The information missive had estimated it was enough for 10 to 15 uses, and they were better saved for the last stretch of levels. There was still some ways to go before that, and Zac took a steadying breath before swallowing the first **[Stellar Enkindling Pill]**.

A radiant power spread through his body, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. It had been some time since using any leveling pills, and he had both been blasted by Heavenly Lightning and Chaos since then. Along with the continuous ministrations of **[Purity of the Void]**, Zac knew he would be able to reach High E-grade today.

It didn't take any effort to gently guide the powerful ball of energy toward a node right by his heart. The pill energy immediately forced its way into the small vortex, and it didn't even take five minutes before Zac shuddered as cracking sounds echoed out from his chest. The mysterious domain of **[Stone of Hope]** had already activated, but Zac still puked a mouthful of blood before slumping over.

His heart had been lacerated from the explosion, but what would have been a lethal wound before the integration, was now just a minor tribulation. Having a broken heart wouldn't even phase a Hegemon, and someone like Zac with massive pools of both Endurance of Vitality could seal his blood vessels and survive for hours in this state.

That was more than enough time for Zac who swallowed a healing pill before activating **[Surging Vitality]** with his Void Energy. His heart started to rapidly reform, and it was back in working order within five minutes, allowing Zac to continue his work without wasting too much of the medicinal efficacy of the precious pill.

He had already been somewhat close to breaking open the latest node, and most of the pill energy remained. Capitalizing on his momentum, Zac pushed the shimmering ball upward until it reached his throat. That was the location of the final node in the middle E-grade, acting as the gate between the head and the body.

More and more energy crammed inside, and even Zac started to be filled with trepidation as he felt the buildup. Suddenly, he had an idea, and nine streams of mental energy poured down from his Soul Aperture. Before, his mental energy hadn't been powerful enough to make much of a difference when breaking nodes, but things were different now.

The wreckage around him was ample evidence of the potency of his soul.

The nine streams started to enclose the node, each attuned core forming one superimposed barrier after another, alternating between life and death until they all were sealed by his inner core. Half an hour later, Zac felt the familiar buildup. Reality shifted as a sharp pain erupted in his throat. But not a drop of blood was lost this time.

There was some internal bleeding though, so Zac activated **[Surging Vitality]** again as his heart drummed from the excitement. His idea had worked even better than expected, with the mental barriers providing even more protection than the **[Chainbreaking Pill]**. The makeshift barriers had ultimately collapsed from the outburst, but that was partly due to him being unaccustomed to controlling so many threads of Mental Energy at the same time.

The moment the inner layers had been attacked, he had lost control over the outer ones, making things a bit chaotic. As

long as he had some practice, Zac believed he would be able to double the strength of his barriers.

Zac felt a surge of glee that almost matched the one he felt after evolving his soul as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal to begin the process of filling the nodes. Having successively opened the node in his throat without much issue was a huge accomplishment. Certainly, he had used pills to lessen the impact drastically, but Zac knew that the biggest obstacle of being a mortal in the E-grade had finally been overcome.

With his previous preparations along with the mental barriers and **[Spiritual Ice]**, he was finally confident in tackling the final 25 levels of the E-grade without breaking his brain. It might have cost him a fortune and a lot of headaches, but he was finally there. Now, he could fully turn his attention to the D-grade.

A couple of days passed until the small whirlpool in his throat finally gained a momentum of its own, prompting a surge of Cosmic Energy to course through his pathways before calming down. He had reached level 125 in his human class, and he immediately opened his quest screen with anticipation.

Empyrean Aegis (Class): Form one major and one supporting Dao Branch. Reward: Empyrean Aegis skill. (1/2)

The System wasn't holding back against this time around, demanding two Dao Branches to complete his quest. Even an elite like Catheya hadn't planned on going down that kind of difficult route until an opportunity presented itself. Then again, it could almost be considered a freebie for Zac since that he was planning on forming multiple Dao Branches anyway.

As for the name of the skill, it was almost definitely a defensive skill, which was exactly what he was lacking in his human form. It also put less pressure on the final skill evolution that awaited him; **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. If he hadn't been given this kind of skill from the quest, he would have been forced to somehow turn his domain skill into a more defensively oriented one.

As long as this skill delivered, he could focus on strengthening the domain aspects of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] instead. It was perfect since Zac had found some inspiration in the forest of life before. He would hopefully be able to recapture that feeling down the road as long as he traveled the other life-attuned zones for a bit.

Having filled the nodes in his human side, Zac quickly rebuilt his cabin before swapping over to his Draugr side. Another few days passed until he reached level 125 there as well, prompting him to gain a second class quest as expected.

**Desperation's End (Class): Extinguish one million souls.
Reward: Desperation's End skill. (0/1,000,000).**

Chapter 802: Dao Manifested into Law

The System was often a bit annoying, but it had to be said that it was quite considerate when creating balanced classes. Just like his human side lacked a top-tier skill for survival, his undead side lacked a good finisher that frontloaded damage. **[Pillar of Desolation]** was a terrifyingly powerful skill, but not only did it cost more than half of his Miasma, but it even required some Oblivion Energy to activate.

Meanwhile, **[Blighted Cut]** was technically a finisher, but it required a few steps to set up. It was also quite cheap, with its finisher being even below **[Rapturous Divide]** in raw damage output. Of course, if hit by that dismantling skill while inside **[Deathmark]**, you'd be flooded with corrosive damage, making your remaining life short and painful.

Zac hoped **[Desperation's End]** was a powerful skill like **[Arcadia's Judgement]**, where he could make use of his Void Energy to instantly overwhelm and execute difficult opponents. That way he'd be able to better make use of his bloodline in his Draugr-form as well. As for extinguishing souls, Zac wasn't quite certain what that meant. It sounded like simple slaughter, but he would have to visit the wilderness to make sure.

Seeing as it was a quest for an Epic class, there might be some trick to it rather than simply slaughtering a bunch of animals.

A wisp of Zac's consciousness entered the small token he got from Murbot, and it listed his current Contribution as **[11,584]**. Some quick math confirmed what Zac had hoped; pushing both his levels to 125 had netted him 376 Contribution Points, an exact match to his gain in raw attributes. In other words, he gained Contribution Points for leveling both his races, making leveling more lucrative than for other people.

Together with his saved-up points, he had more than enough for the node-finding treasure and traveling the Orom for a while. He would first return to Samsara's Edge and hopefully purchase the Bloodline Treasure, after which it was time for him to start exploring the Orom World.

Some pieces of the puzzle to his escape were in place, but others were missing. He was able to use his skills and energy just fine, and swapping between races hadn't agitated the prison brand. He essentially had his whole arsenal available, and now he needed to turn all these tools into a way to break out.

The main issue was that space was sealed in the whole Orom World, so he would either need to use his abilities to escape the inner world or find a weak spot where the Teleportation Array could be taken out and activated. The Orom World had clearly marked edges, and perhaps it was possible to sneak into its actual body somehow.

So, he planned on traveling to the edge of the Orom in search of solutions. Luckily, these kinds of actions weren't considered anything unusual, and he didn't even need to cover up his activities. A lot of cultivators from his cohort had probably done the same thing already. Even those who had quickly adapted would often reach a point where reality set in, and they'd rail against their imprisonment.

If all that failed, he had one final backup plan, though it would delay him at least another year, possibly more. With his twice-reincarnated soul, he would be able to store a whole lot of Oblivion Energy, to the point he would be able to create a terrifying crack in space. One large enough he would be able to sneak through.

If even that failed... Zac shook his head, not ready to even entertain that outcome.

Before setting out, Zac collected all the array flags and other items he had left across the island before erasing any traces of habitation. It wasn't like he needed to hide his soul cultivation, but he also didn't need to raise any unnecessary questions like 'why would someone cultivate in a place like this?'. Besides,

he was done with this place for now, having accomplished his goal.

If he needed this place again, he could always set it again, though that would mean his plans had gone awry.

Zac set off along the now-familiar paths toward the settlement, and he was relieved to feel that he was essentially in perfect condition even though he had opened two nodes. It was thanks to the prisoner brand. It drastically limited his power output, but that also helped serve as a protection. In other words, gaining levels in this place wouldn't slow him down at all unless he overdid things.

He reached Samsara's Edge three days later, and he was surprised to see the town still full of hustle and bustle even after more than two weeks had passed. He guessed that the warriors who stayed behind took the opportunity to destress before consuming whatever treasures they had bought.

Many had probably been secluded for decades, perhaps even centuries, and were in dire need of some R&R. Besides, the next culling was in over twenty years for Hegemons, and 270 years for Monarchs. They weren't exactly running out of time.

A few of the cultivators recognized Zac and waved him over, which resulted in him making some new acquaintances. When asked why he had returned so quickly, he told the truth after some consideration. He had managed to break through with his Soul, providing him with a windfall of Purchase Points.

It was a bit unnerving to be so candid after having been introduced to the Dao of Paranoia by Ogras, but sometimes you had to give a bit to gain something in return. The more potential he exhibited, the better his reception would be among these powerhouses. That, in turn, could open up all kinds of doors for him in the future.

"Youngster!" a distorted voice drew Zac's attention as he closed in on the Contribution Store, and he looked over to see a radiant energy being in the distance.

It was something akin to a Life Elemental that Zac had spoken with while waiting for the store to open last time. Its true name

was unpronounceable, but people called it Ubo. The elemental looked a bit like a spectral cultivator drenched in gold, but it was actually a semi-corporeal species. The large shimmering rock in its belly was its true core, but the shimmering body that it had formed was real enough to carry items and even consume food.

Zac immediately walked over with a smile on his face. Not only was Ubo a Monarch and a gold attendant, but there was someone familiar standing next to it; the half-tree woman he met while crossing the forest two months back.

“Hello, again,” Zac smiled before turning to the semi-tree. “I hope your experiment was a success.”

“Oh, you know Heda?” Ubo exclaimed with surprise. “She rarely leaves her little plot of land.”

“I watched him dance,” the woman smiled before she looked strangely at Zac. “I have been thinking of you.”

“Uh... Alright?” Zac hesitantly said.

“Don’t mind her,” Ubo coughed. “For some reason, she decided to fuse her soul with an unknown seed the Orom picked up a few dozen millennia ago. She hasn’t quite been herself since.”

“It worked,” Heda shrugged. “I would have been culled if I didn’t try something new.”

“Is having your soul subverted that much better than simply dying?” Ubo muttered before they turned to Zac. “So, what are you up to, youngster? Your life energy is quite vibrant. I guess you are below 50 years of age, no? Having trouble acclimatizing to the repose of reclusive cultivation?”

“Something like that,” Zac smiled. “I thought I would tour the Orom World for a bit. I’m still finding my way, and there are so many things to draw inspiration from.”

“Taking inspiration is fine, but be careful to not get swept up in someone else’s path,” Ubo urged as a token flashed into being. “I will not enter true seclusion for another ten years or so. If you’re interested, you’re welcome to visit my abode. I was born from a sanctified rock and instilled with untainted

life since my mind's eye first gazed upon the world. My experiences might be of use to you.”

“Absolutely,” Zac nodded as he stowed away the marker.
“Thank you.”

“Me too,” Heda said as a wooden plaque sprouted and detached itself from her left hand. “There is death in your life. Perhaps, we can inspire each other.”

“I’ll try to make it,” Zac slowly nodded.

With these two, he had gathered almost twenty markers. They were essentially invitation tokens that not only acted as maps to people’s cultivation caves, but they were also markers and messages to the outside world in case someone managed to leave.

It was a simple form of quid pro quo in this place, where people exchanged cultivation lessons for hope. These two cultivators were the first Monarchs he had received an invitation from though, making them even more valuable.

These two were not quite as powerful as Yrial in his heyday, but they were not just fragments of a soul. Just a few simple instructions could help a lot. Zac was almost disgustingly powerful for his level, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a lot that he could learn, even from Hegemons. No matter if it was their experiences in breaking bottlenecks or their pursuit of the Dao, they had walked far further down the road than he had.

Zac could freely enter the contribution store by this point, but he still had to wait for an hour before a disk became available. A few minutes later he emerged decidedly poorer, but with the treasure securely stowed away in his Cosmos Sack. Apart from the [**Seed of Eldritch Awakening**], as the node-finding treasure was called, Zac also spent over 4,000 points on a series of items.

Items geared toward E-grade cultivators were dirt-cheap, so he managed to purchase treasures that could improve his constitution and soul, longevity-boosting items, and top-quality Attribute Fruits and Dao Treasures. He still had roughly 1,500 points to spare, but there was nothing else he

urgently needed in the Store, and nothing he feared would go out of stock if he didn't buy immediately.

Rather, Zac believed he was better off renting some of the high-quality cultivation grounds with his remaining points unless he found an exit quicker than expected. Those places could help with everything from his skill fusions to helping him comprehend his Dao and stances at an accelerated pace.

If he managed to escape ahead of schedule, he would simply have to give up on those 1,500 points, which wasn't a big deal compared to his vast fortune.

There wasn't anything else left to do, so Zac walked over to the transport hub and teleported over to Glimmerwood. The Orom World was shaped like an oblong circle, with the wilderness commanding one of the short sides. Closest to the other edge, and the Orom's head according to speculation, Glimmerwood was situated.

Zac figured he'd check out the space-attributed zones and the edge of the Orom World first, working his way down as he looked for weaknesses to exploit.

As luck would have it, Zac ran into a familiar face, the old man who had helped him a bit when they first arrived. He was currently drinking with two others he didn't recognize. But judging by their auras, they should all follow the Dao of Stars. Perhaps they were others from the Radiant Temple who had been captured as well.

Zac only stayed behind to talk for a few minutes before he left with three more tokens. It turned out the old man was called Travo Raso, and he was some sort of fixer for the Radiant Temple. For example, if some minor clan didn't pay their taxes or hid a promising talent, Travo went there to see what was going on.

Such activities were a bit beneath the officials of the Radiant Temples, so they preferred to use outside experts like Travo to make sure the money and young talents kept coming. Certainly, with Travo's apparent talent, he would easily have been able to enter as a proper member of the Radiant Temple.

However, he had enjoyed the freedom too much to become a proper enforcer.

More importantly, Travo had enjoyed the huge number of bribes that kept coming his way in return for looking the other way when people shirked their responsibilities.

From Glimmerwood, Zac headed west, aiming to reach the tip of the Orom Word. The surroundings of Glimmerwood were quite different compared to the other zones he had passed through so far. For one, the sky was black, though the area was illuminated by numerous constellations that kept changing.

Apparently, the sky contained the echoes of the Orom's own understanding of the Dao of Space and the Stars. There were innumerable such truths hidden all across the Orom World. It was all designed to subtly influence the captives' paths, thus increasing the likelihood of them generating useful insights.

Those at the top could see through it, but for an E-grade cultivator like Zac, it was simply impossible. Thankfully for him, the way he gained insights was pretty weird. He could look at the Orom's Sky for a million years without forming any Dao Branches unless he was absorbing some Dao Treasures. With zero affinities, a sky was just a sky.

Right outside Glimmerwood's area of influence stood a forest full of luminescent plants that stretched for a day's travel. Zac encountered several warded-off cultivation caves among the trees, but he didn't encounter anyone as he took a long berth around. Eventually, the trees grew sparse as the forest was replaced by a mountainous region.

It didn't feel like the mountains were natural formations, though Zac figured that might be a result of how the Orom World was created. There was no rain or strong winds in the Orom World, except in the elemental zones, and this particular section neither had seasons or a daily cycle. It would be odd if the stones were whittled down in such a place.

Instead, the mountain walls were covered in extremely sharp cuts and it almost looked like a laser had shaved off some sections. With the spatial fluctuations emanating from within, it was obviously the work of the Dao of Space. The area was

rife with spatial energies, but Zac frowned when he realized it wasn't a good thing in this case.

Just like temporal energy could both slow down and speed up time, spatial energy could both weaken and strengthen the laws of space. In this area, Zac suspected it was the latter, making the seal even stronger. Wanting to try something out, Zac found a secluded spot where he activated **[Earthstrider]** with some Void Energy.

As expected, he was met with strong resistance, and he only moved a fifth of the distance compared to what he expected. It felt like pushing through quicksand, proving the spatial energies were working against him. Trying to tear open space in this area would be extremely difficult.

Zac still continued toward the edge of the world, but even after two weeks, he was unable to find a single spatial tear. Not that he had held expected much. If random tears popped up in the area, people would definitely try to escape through them, just like how desperate captives in the research base did.

Eventually, Zac crossed the final mountain between him and the edge, and his brows rose when he saw over twenty people already standing there. The atmosphere was pretty oppressive, but Zac still walked over. A few glanced in his direction, but most were seemingly lost in their thoughts.

“Trying your luck as well, kid?” a sigh echoed out, and Zac looked over to see a familiar face. It was one of the Havarok warriors who had been dragged here in the same cohort as himself.

“No good, huh?” Zac grimaced.

“See for yourself,” the man said with a wave.

Zac nodded curiously as he continued past the group. One moment, his vision was filled with expansive vistas that stretched to eternity, but the scene grew blurred as he kept going. A moment later, he reached a shimmering haze that looked like a purple nebula. This was the true edge of the Orom World.

He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he would be committing a crime if trying to pass through the barrier. However, a Revenant suddenly popped out next to him, swearing like a sailor as he walked back toward the others. Zac wasn't planning on using his hidden cards in front of an audience, but he still entered to get a sense of what he was dealing with.

A moment later, he emerged again, looking at the spot where he came from with confusion. Just like in the City of Ancients, he had been redirected without noticing. However, while the thick haze in the City of Ancients had been the result of some intricate illusion arrays, Zac's instincts told him that the edge of the Orom World was rather the result of high-grade spatial laws.

His mind wasn't tricked to turn around, but space was rather folded in some way, where all directions were steered back toward the Orom World. Zac sighed and walked back to the group, and his suspicions were confirmed soon enough.

"How could people possibly have broken out from this place before?" the Revenant swore. "This isn't a barrier. This is Dao manifested into law. To break through, you'd need to overpower it. But how could we accomplish that without having confirmed our Dao?"

Chapter 803: Journey

Zac grimaced when he heard the Revenant's description of the spatial seal that prevented them from leaving the Orom World. He wasn't exactly certain what 'Dao manifested into law' meant, but he guessed it was like a Dao Field but innumerable times more powerful. From what he had gathered, Dao Intent was the next step after a Dao Field, and Dao Law might be multiple levels above that.

Dao Intent was a testament to the degree you controlled your Dao. It wasn't dependant on the strength of your soul, though a powerful soul generally helped. When you reached the level of forming Dao Intent, you could condense your understanding into something more corporeal than just a large field around you.

It could essentially be turned into something akin to a skill, where you could kill a thousand people with a simple thought or empower your normal attacks. He still remembered the powerful blade of sword intent Thea had been imparted with from the Blade Emperor inheritance. That small fragment contained a huge amount of insights into the Dao of the Sword, and it had helped her both cultivate quicker and unleash powerful strikes.

Those were just simple tricks though, which were mostly useful against a large number of weaker enemies. The more important aspect was that by the time you could form Dao Intent, you had a far greater command of your Dao. Skills empowered by the Daos would become stronger and you would more easily integrate the Dao into your combat style.

Most likely Dao manifested into law meant you had such high control of a Dao that you could essentially change how the world worked in a certain area around you.

“Perhaps there are times weaknesses appear,” a beastman ventured.

“I think you are right,” another cultivator agreed. “I heard from a Gold Attendant that the Orom world occasionally enters some sort of dark state. All Cosmic Energy is dragged out from the world and the laws grow dim. People might think it happens when the Orom is fighting or entering dangerous pockets of space. It can’t waste energy on us in that kind of situation, which might present some opportunity.”

“I heard about that as well,” a golemoid cultivator with an earthy aura rumbled. “But cultivators are sealed by the brand when that happens, and everyone’s energy is siphoned off like in the bubbles. Who would be able to break out in that kind of state?”

Zac’s heart shuddered when he heard that there were windows of opportunity that could appear at any moment, but he kept his face impassive. Seeing as nothing else came up, he eventually excused himself before walking away. Zac continued along the edge, prompting half his field of vision to be the mountain range he had just passed, and the other half the purple nebula that stretched to the sky.

A few hours passed, and Zac activated his ocular skill to make sure none of the others were close. After making sure he was alone, he once more started pushing into the haze as he kept going, using everything from his Draugr-vision to **[Void Zone]** in an attempt to force his way through. The only thing he didn’t do was unleash powerful strikes like **[Arcadia’s Judgement]** out of fear that someone would notice.

Unfortunately, no matter what he tried, the result was the same.

It was just like the Hegemons before said, the concepts safeguarding the edge of the inner world were just too profound. It wasn’t a barrier that could be broken, and it wasn’t some sort of energy that could be nullified. The laws of the universe had been altered right at this edge, where up was no longer up, and left was no longer left.

Not even his Void Emperor-bloodline could subvert the laws of space like that, rendering his **[Void Zone]** useless. Still, Zac refused to give up. He had already decided to walk along the edge of the whole Orom World in search of opportunities, and that was what he would do. Some setbacks right in the beginning weren't enough for him to give in to despair.

A few weeks passed like this, and Zac eventually entered the next zone. Along the way, Zac had encountered even more people who sought an escape, and his helplessness was mirrored in their expressions as they passed each other by. The place he had just entered was another rocky region, this one illuminated by a scorching sun and filled with fiery energies.

Rivers of magma flowed in crevasses, and Zac was shocked at how rapidly his surroundings had changed over the past hour. Zac eventually steered away from the edge, finding an unclaimed cave an hour's trek away from the edge. There, he set up his arrays before taking out a bottle of **[Stellar Enkindling Pills]**.

Three weeks later, Zac emerged, having broken open another 4 nodes and filled them with energy, providing him with thousands of more Contribution Points. He had officially entered the Late E-grade now, which meant that each node and each level provided even more attribute points.

Zac believed he had a pretty big advantage compared to the other E-grade cultivators in that regard. The few "lucky" ones who had survived the great filter were mostly at Peak E-grade already, with their eyes set at forming a core. They didn't have easy access to Contribution Points in the same way as he did, which might become more important as a speedy escape started to look less likely every day.

Even after having consecutively opened four nodes in his head, Zac was still in decent shape. He had a pretty bad headache, but it was nothing compared to the suffering of blowing up your brain. It could have been much worse, but the damage was kept to a minimum thanks to his powerful soul.

Zac had continuously worked on familiarizing himself with his transformed soul while traveling, and he was getting

increasingly adroit when controlling the nine tendrils. It was still not exactly smooth, but he wasn't making big mistakes like the first time he tried shielding a node any longer.

He believed he would be able to improve his technique even further as long as he kept working on it, but it was enough to barely receive any physical damage while breaking open nodes with the help of pills, though the damage to his foundations was still there. Unfortunately, he had reached the limit of the **[Stellar Enkindling Pills]** for now, though he still had mountains of Beast Cores in his Spatial Rings.

The real test would be whether he could safely brute-force levels with all his new advantages, but Zac would wait and restore his state to peak condition before attempting something like that.

As Zac got more and more used to his odd nine-core soul, it became increasingly clear that his cultivation method was pretty unique. He had found that he could choose whether he wanted to drag attuned Mental Energy or pure Mental Energy from his outer cores, making it something in-between an attuned and unattuned cultivation method.

However, the amount of energy the cores released was greater when he extracted attuned energy. It was like only half of the core was used when conjuring unattuned energies. In other words, only a cultivator who cultivated both life and death could make the most of the soul that the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** created.

Zac had only undergone the second reincarnation so far, but the effect might only grow greater as he progressed further with the method. It was pretty lucky that Vilari had dropped the method in favor of whatever Soul Strengthening Method that Ralz Carzood, the Crown of Despair, had imparted. Otherwise, she would probably find herself unable to use a significant part of her soul down the road.

It made Zac quite curious about the origin of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**. He had scoured the contribution store already, and it wasn't listed among the thousands of

methods that were for sale. Conversely, all the common methods were there, most of them in various editions.

More importantly, how many people did actually cultivate both life and death at the same time? From what he'd gathered, it was extremely rare to have affinities in both those paths. Was the technique something created by a life-death Edgewalker such as himself? Or was it custom-designed by the System to allow him to keep gathering the remnants for it?

There were indications that the method had Buddhist origins, but Zac knew too little about the various branches of the Buddhist Sangha to draw any definite conclusions. Who knew, it was perhaps possible to turn the Daos of Life and Death toward some sort of Dao of Samsara or Reincarnation, rather than pushing the Daos toward Chaos.

Perhaps he could ask some monk later, they seemed pretty open about themselves. For now, the method worked just fine for him, which was all that mattered.

Zac continued his journey after reaching level 129 in one go. Unfortunately, while he made some strides with his cultivation, the same couldn't be said for his prison break. No matter if it was the fiery region or glacier that neighbored it, there were simply no weaknesses to exploit. The barrier was impenetrable, and digging downward was no use either.

After pushing roughly two kilometers into the ground, a similar spatial barrier appeared. It was like he had reached the core of a planet, where every direction technically was up. He found himself floating in the air, continuously falling without actually moving. If he tried forcing his way through the odd field, he encountered the same type of spatial bending as before. He could only climb out of the tunnel with disappointment and continue on his way.

Zac wasn't interested in the Daos that had left their mark on the frozen world around him, but he was a bit interested in how they impacted their surroundings. Zac doubted that the Orom bothered to meticulously craft every zone for its prisoners. Rather, it just flooded the areas with different Daos, and the attunement slowly terraformed the world.

Was this how attuned worlds looked? Would Earth become like the zones around Samsara's Edge in the future, where the dominant Dao had a direct impact on everything from a blade of grass to the cultivators who lived on those lands? Or was it amplified here for the sake of expediting breakthroughs?

No matter what was the case, Zac found it harder and harder to ignore the whispers in the back of his head. His prospects of escaping were getting lower and lower each day. He had considered himself unique, armed with both his unique bloodline and the remnants. But he had underestimated just how absolute the Orom's domain was.

In this place, the Orom was the Heavens, and its will was Heavenly Law.

More than once, Zac found himself beset with hesitation, but he pushed those thoughts aside as he kept going, looking for fault-lines while visiting nearby settlements to gather information. He also had a blacksmith fashion a copy of **[Love's Bond]** in exchange for 500 Purchase Points.

The copy could not change form and it had no skills. But it was made from high-quality materials, especially the five pitch-black chains. The blacksmith had even managed to infuse the metal with some corrosive crystal that would help strengthen his skills even though the tool wasn't death-attuned.

It was a far cry from the real thing, but it would be enough to serve his needs, no matter if you talked about training in the wilderness or practicing his Inexorable Stance. As for the real deal, it was still in deep slumber. Zac wasn't sure if it was because of the dangerous energies or the Purifier it had swallowed, but he could only wait and see.

Showing up inside a settlement in his Draugr persona was also a way for him to legitimize his other personality. There was no census or anything, so this way people would simply assume he was one of the new prisoners from the latest batch. He made sure to make some connections in his undead form as well, though he wasn't able to gather too many tokens this far from the sections where the undead generally stayed.

While traveling in his undead form, he wore a simple mask to shield his Draugr heritage, similar to the one he wore when arriving at the Twilight Harbor. It was a bit unusual, but it wasn't unprecedented that people hide their appearances one way or another. Some cultivators developed quirks, and people chalked it up to something similar.

Weeks turned to months as Zac made his way toward the wilderness, one step at a time. He also secluded himself a few times to digest various ideas and insights he had on the road. Eventually, he reached the eastern section of the Orom World, and Zac stopped one day as he stood atop a small hill that provided great vantage of the surroundings.

When reading about the Orom World's arena on the stele of rules, Zac had pictured something like the Big Axe Coliseum back in the Zecia sector. However, the structure that stood in the distance was just a fraction the size of what he expected. Of course, it was still a couple of times bigger than the sports arenas back on Earth since it required enough space for superhuman to clash, but it was nowhere near the city-like size of the coliseum he visited on the Bloodwind Planet.

Zac thought about it for a moment before he decided to head over, and he was met by a raucous round of cheers as he passed through the gate. There were a couple of clerks stationed by the entrance in case you wanted to sign up for battle, but Zac was more interested in observing some fights.

You seldom had to wait long to spectate a duel from what he had gathered, considering there were tens of thousands who sought inspiration by alternating between fighting in the wilderness and battling on the stage. This soon after the Orom fed, the number of participants and spectators was even greater. Only the years before a culling would see more foot traffic, when people desperately struggled to break through.

Zac sat down at an empty seat with a decent view, just in time to see two warriors leave the arena. One was a human sporting a nasty wound in his side, whereas the other one was a beastman who was carried out by an attendant. Seeing as he might have to wait a while for the next fight, Zac took out a vat of spiritual wine he had moved over to his Cosmos Sack.

“First time here?” a friendly voice echoed out, and Zac looked over to see a smiling woman donning leather armor covered in unfamiliar runes.

On her belt, there were over twenty identical daggers, while two short-swords were sheathed by her hip. She had a bloody aura, but Zac didn’t believe she walked some sort of assassin path even if her weapons leaned that way. He felt a sense of familiarity as he looked at her. It wasn’t that he recognized the woman, but he rather suspected she walked some path related to the Dao of Conflict.

“Just arrived,” Zac nodded.

“New batch, huh?” she said as she thumped down next to him, her eyes locked to the vat in Zac’s hand. “I’m Yurul. I guess you could say I have some renown here. Fought over 2,000 matches, altogether.”

Zac smiled slightly as he took out another vat and handed it to her, prompting her eyes to light up. Her hands turned into a blur before she poured at least five liters worth of alcohol down her throat.

“That hits the spot. I’ve mostly been drinking ol’ Barrel’s swill for over a thousand years. It’s strong enough, but he insists on putting those centipedes inside. They taste alright, but it’s a pain when they bite your tongue,” Yurul sighed. “That’s what you get when buying alcohol from a poison master.”

“The centipedes are alive?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“They cultivate inside the vats, which purifies the brew,” Yurul shrugged. “You planning on competing? You seem like the fighting type.”

“I was told to avoid this place,” Zac smiled. “For now, I’m just here to watch.”

“Avoid?” Yurul repeated with confusion until her eyes widened. “Oh, you’re one of the brats? Bad luck, huh? Well, better than becoming fertilizer, I guess. Any chance of you getting out of here?”

“We’ll see,” Zac smiled.

He had been asked that quite a few times by now, though few were as direct as the gladiator next to him.

“Mooching off the newcomers again, Yurul?” a gruff voice snorted as a scarred ogre walked over.

“Don’t mind him. He’s just a bit pissy he lost 5,000 Purchase Points yesterday,” Yurul laughed. “Another of the regulars had just made a breakthrough in secret, and he chose Obbo to provide the celebratory gift.”

Zac looked at the ogre with confusion.

“People hide their breakthroughs to swindle good folks out of their Purchase Points. Arol pretended to get in a heated argument with me that lasted for five days, and it ended with me challenging him. It was all a ruse to make me place a larger bet,” Obbo sighed as he thumped down next to Yurul.

“Like you haven’t done the same,” Yurul snorted as she glanced at the arena. “Oh, Pavina is fighting today? She’s a tough one.”

Zac followed her gaze to see a Revenant emerge from one of the gates, her aura reeking of death. A small smile crept up across Zac’s face as he looked on. His luck had come through for him again. Pavina was actually a Silver Attendant and someone who seemed to cultivate Pure Death.

He had just visited the arena out of curiosity, but an opportunity to study someone who walked a similar path as himself had fallen right in his lap.

Chapter 804: Waking Up

The air screamed and the red dust swirled as the halberd pierced toward her. Her mind was still a mess, but the endless drills she had endured guided her movements. A brutal scream emerged from the depths of her soul as she swung her axe in an overhead arc to slam it out of the way.

At the same time, a burst of the sun's fury ripped straight past her from the totem behind her back, finishing off the orc who had lost his right arm already. Another wail meant **[Apostle of Autumn]** had finished yet another warrior, leaving the captain as the lone survivor. Going from three versus one to a one versus one in an instant had extinguished his desire to battle, and swirls of razor-sharp winds erupted around his body.

Emily recognized that skill all-too-well. After all, her enemies were the very party she had traveled with over the past six months. It was **[Razorwake]**, Captain Krog's E-grade movement skill. Emily was inwardly hesitant about striking the back of a fleeing enemy, but the will of the Bloodwind World and the wounds across her body urged her on.

Roots sprung up from the ground as Emily activated **[Spring's Embrace]**, and the roots locked the area in place, preventing Krog from flashing away. From there, she seamlessly closed the distance as Cosmic Energy coursed through her body, her fury conveyed through the Fragment of the Axe as she struck.

Krog understood the situation he was in, and he turned around with a ferocious glint in his eye. A crying mask appeared the moment Emily's tomahawk closed in on his body, but a flash erupted from Emily's fingers as one of her rings cracked. The defensive treasure that was meant to block Emily's strike instantly crumbled from the light, and her weapon dug deep into flesh.

A cascading torrent of blood drenched her even further, but she ignored the viscous liquid as it covered her. She delivered a second strike, this one digging even deeper. Krog feebly tried to counter, but a fiery lizard bit his muscular arm clean off, prompting this halberd to drop to the ground.

Krog stumbled to his knees as bubbles of blood formed around his lips. He was trying to say something, but Emily didn't want to hear it. With a flash of her axe, his throat was split wide open, and he toppled to the ground with a thump.

A huge surge of energy burrowed into her body, but she barely registered it. Not even the insidious energy that covered the Bloodwind World could prevent the wave of confusing emotions that had pushed to the surface now that the crisis was averted. She had been betrayed, with all six members of her adventurer party suddenly striking her out of nowhere.

It was clearly a premeditated attack, and not a single one of her companions had tried to warn her. It wasn't like she had joined a veteran party who had adventured on the Bloodwind World for decades either. Only Krog and Brudge knew each other from their homeworld, while the others were recruited at the same time as her.

Yet they had come to an accord to assassinate and rob a fellow member of the Big Axe Coliseum

She knew that she had been shielded from the true horrors of the Multiverse since Zac saved her life all those years ago, but she still couldn't believe it. She also knew that she would be the one lying on the ground right now if not for Zac, her treasures split among the warriors whose corpses now littered the area around her.

A gentle nudge made her look over with confusion, and she weakly smiled when she saw how her conjured lizard had walked over to her side. It looked like it was trying to comfort her, even though it was just an energy construct without a real mind of its own. Was it some sort of self-defense mechanism from her subconscious?

"Thank you," she sighed as she patted the lizard's head, and the summon along with the large totem pole dissipated a

moment later.

She suddenly felt so utterly alone, a stranger lost in a corner of the Gorehowl Forest. Yet her instincts kicked in, and she heard her master's urgings in the back of her head. Not Warsong's, but Zac's. She moved the bodies together into a pile before she took out a black vial and started pouring its contents over the corpses.

Soon enough, only ash and a few treasures remained, and she stoically put the treasures into a spare Cosmos Sack one by one. When it was filled, she took out a talisman and placed it on the sack before throwing it into the air. Talisman activated, and a burst of chaotic energies was followed by a wave of spatial fluctuations.

The Cosmos Sack had been ripped apart, its contents lost in some unreachable corner of the Void. With the corpses destroyed as well, she used a cleansing Array to rid her of all the blood and grime before covering her in Fate-breaking dust. Finally finished with Zac's danger-averting procedure, she flashed away through the forest, taking the long route back toward the teleporter in case of ambush.

She felt completely hollow as she rushed through the forest, entering some sort of fugue state as she simply moved by instinct. Only when approaching the teleporter five days later did she somewhat wake up, and she roused herself before stepping onto the array. With a flash she appeared outside the Big Axe Coliseum, the events of the past week somehow feeling like a dream.

A few confused looks were directed her way as she returned alone, but she ignored the warriors. She knew what they were thinking. Krog was only a late E-grade warrior with almost no chance of reaching the E-grade, but he had stayed in the coliseum for over 15 years. Quite a few at similar levels knew of him and his newly established party.

Why was she returning from a hunt alone?

The stares almost felt like daggers, and she hurried into the coliseum, heading to the inner sanctums. She flashed her token

to the Pseudo D-grade warrior who guarded a specific corridor, and he nodded before activating a teleporter for her.

A moment later, she found herself standing at the top of a balcony that overlooked the whole coliseum. This place was one of the hidden mountain peaks behind the coliseum, and it belonged to one of the leaders of the Big Axe Coliseum. It belonged to Warsong, the fourth elder.

“You’re back,” the scarred man nodded as she looked at Emily’s ragged appearance. “How was it?”

“The others attacked me,” she said, her voice shaky as she finally allowed herself to remember the betrayal. “We adventured together for months, yet they tried to kill me!”

“Indeed,” Warsong nodded. “Do you know why?”

“Because of my treasures,” Emily spat, but she suddenly looked at her master with shock. “You knew they would target me?”

“I assumed as much, so I followed you,” Warsong nodded.

“You didn’t step forward and stop them?” Emily stuttered with wide eyes. “Am I really your disciple?”

“If you were killed by that kind of rabble even with all the precious items you’ve been flaunting, then you weren’t qualified to be my disciple,” Warsong shrugged. “Instead, this turned into a decent learning experience for you. You say that you want to understand war, that you want to reach the peak, yet your hands are almost untainted of blood.”

An aura reeking of blood flooded the balcony the next moment, a killing intent endlessly more powerful than the pervasive atmosphere of the Bloodwind Planet. It no longer felt like she was looking at a man. It felt like she was looking at a primordial beast, the two axes hanging from his belt razor-sharp fangs bared at her.

“Why should I help you?”

“I-“ Emily weakly said, her anger quelled by the ruthless gaze of her master. “I’m sorry.”

“You used three peak-quality E-grade items to kill those people. One restriction talisman, one offensive talisman, and the defense-breaking ring at the end. By their quality, I would say you spent roughly 12,000 E-grade Nexus Coins to kill a couple of warriors whose total wealth barely surpassed 1,000 E-grade nexus Coins. And you actually destroyed the items rather than rightfully claim them. If you were a wandering cultivator like most warriors in this place, you’d be long dead.”

Emily looked down at the ground as she took in the admonishment, knowing he was speaking the truth. The items Zac had prepared were the only reason she was alive. This wasn’t even the first time she had relied on them.

“You have an Epic class, a set of powerful skills, and extremely developed Daos for your age. You should have been able to kill those six without breaking a sweat and without using a single supportive item,” Warsong continued. “This will keep happening unless you smarten up. I am guessing that is why your backer sent you here.”

“That’s...”

“No need to repeat that story about finding a trove,” Warsong snorted. “I don’t care which faction you’re from. I took you in because I saw your potential and I found your path interesting. But I will not come to your aid like some elder of your family. And judging by the fact that you were sent here of all places, neither will they until you’ve become worthy of nurturing further.”

Emily wanted to retort, to counter or swear like she did when teased by Zac. But she couldn’t as much as make a peep. The aura of her master was too powerful, quelling any resistance.

“Well, you’re still young, and you have a lot of room for improvement,” Warsong eventually sighed before restraining his aura. “If you want it, I have an opportunity for you. But I’ll only provide it if you agree with my rules.”

“What is it?” Emily asked with a breathless voice, feeling like a mountain had finally been lifted from her shoulders.

“A pocket dimension has been discovered not too far from here. It has been claimed by the Ruthless heavens, and only those at the E-grade can enter,” Warsong said as he looked down at the gladiator stages far below.

“A Mystic Realm?” Emily said as she finally looked up, her messy mind suddenly cleared by a wave of desire.

Desire to become stronger. Desire to shed the weakness she had seen in herself.

“Most of these pockets will become Open Realms after the initial event and turned into something like a training ground or herbal garden depending on the environment. Because of its location, it will be jointly controlled by the coliseum, the Supreme Sword Palace, and four other factions,” Warsong explained. “We’re mostly on good terms, but competition is heavenly law.”

“Depending on the results of the trial, each faction will get different a different share of ownership. We will all send a series of peak warriors to open the realm and a few seedlings with potential. It will become a small-scale war for ownership and opportunities,” Warsong said. “You’re too weak to be a warrior, but you have the foundation to be a seedling.”

“And you’ll give me a spot? Even if I messed up?” Emily hesitantly asked.

“As I said, on one condition,” Warsong slowly said as his eyes bore into hers. “I will give you one of the spots, but only if you leave your treasures behind. You only get one life-saving item and your equipment. If you want more talismans and defensive treasures, snatch them from the bodies of your fallen enemies.”

Emily’s eyes widened in shock as she thought back to how many times the mountain of treasures had saved her the fifteen months she had spent on the Bloodwind Planet. She knew herself well. There obviously wouldn’t be any monsters like Zac in a small-scale trial like this, but there would be peak E-grade warriors.

She was still only level 103, unable to deal with those who had accumulated a foundation at the peak of the grade, even with her Epic class and other advantages. If she brought all the items Zac had left for her through Vilari, she would be almost unkillable and able to dominate the whole trial with treasures alone.

But without them... She would be under constant threat of death.

“I’ve told you already. War is coming, a war far more brutal than anything you will experience in some small trial. You need to make a choice. Hide behind your heritage, or enter the path of a true warrior for a shot at controlling your destiny.”

“I’ll do it,” Emily said with clenched fists, a gleam of determination shimmering in her eyes.

“Good,” Warsong nodded. “Thankfully, you have some time remaining. Rest up. In two days, I’m sending you to the Twinruin Gorge. Your blades have finally tasted some blood, but not enough.”

Zac was still a bit shook as he made his way through the deathly forest neighboring Samsara’s Edge, once more donning the mask hiding his Draugr heritage. He had already come to terms with the fact that his strength was right at the bottom rung in this place, but watching a dozen matches in the arena had still been an eye-opening experience.

The way the Hegemons fought was beyond ferocious, and they managed to squeeze more power out of the small number of attribute points they had than Zac thought possible. Their bodies were a blur as they clashed over and over on the arena, fluently swapping between skills and pure technique in a desperate struggle to create openings.

Not a single second was wasted, not a single movement superfluous. They became avatars of their paths as they clashed, putting it all on the line. Zac had somewhat felt that he would be able to at least put up a decent fight as long as he could use an axe, but from what he saw, he was far from

reaching that point. Even the weakest combatants he had observed over the last day would have easily have dismantled his stances before taking him out.

The stronger ones would simply have crushed him.

This was especially obvious in the two battles between Silver Attendants. Even now, Zac didn't quite understand how they accomplished some of the strikes they unleashed. Pavina, for example, had pushed death to a level Zac had never seen before. However, she wasn't like Zac, a spider who gradually trapped and whittled down his victims.

She was a grim reaper, whose strikes and technique presented another facet of inexorability. Zac almost felt like his own Inexorable Stance was a joke compared to the lethality that the Revenant exhibited, but he pulled himself together, knowing that he was still finding his way.

Still, while the fights had shocked him, they were also exhilarating. Even if only Pavina had a path close to his own, it was still extremely illuminating to see how the different warriors incorporated their Daos and skills into a fluid combat system. He was simply lacking proper foundations, with no masters to teach him and no elders in his force to show him the way.

There were Yrial, but he was ultimately just a ghost. The duration the ghost could guide Zac was extremely limited and highly dependent on his mood. It was nothing compared to growing up in a sect, or with elders who could knock away at least some of the roadblocks on the road of cultivation. Zac had initially planned on taking a trip into the wilderness after visiting the Arena, but he had ultimately decided against it.

First of all, he had found out that even the weakest of the beasts in the Wilderness had twice the amount of attribute points compared to the prisoners. It was the Orom making up for quality with quantity. The beasts it reared were ultimately just in the E-grade, and it would be useless for a Hegemon to fight on even grounds with something like this.

If there wasn't a handicap, there was no point. Zac was pretty confident in taking out beasts at twice his attribute pool, but he

knew those kinds of fights weren't his strong suit. If anything, he was usually the one who bullied the enemy with his massive attribute pool rather than the other way around.

Thankfully, he heard that the attribute configuration would change to match his own allocation. For example, roughly 30% of his attribute points were Strength when not restrained, so his Strength would rise to almost 2000 in the arena or the Wilderness. Conversely, most of his other attributes would be lowered, except for Vitality and Endurance.

Only Luck was untouched, probably because the Orom was unable to mess with something like that.

Even then, Zac was a bit hesitant about entering the wilderness at that moment. His life wasn't in danger thanks to his bloodline, but he still didn't want to risk getting exposed just to save his life from a beast tide. Besides, he had pretty much given up on finding an easily exploitable weakness in the Orom's spatial seal by this point. He didn't believe he would suddenly be able to pass through the walls in the wilderness.

That meant he would have to wait for his Oblivion Energy to gather up. Four months had passed since evolving his soul already, but Zac could sense that he wasn't even half-full by how much purified Oblivion Energy he could store. Since he couldn't influence that process, he might as well spend the time focusing on consolidating his gains and powering up.

His first target had been tantalizing him for months already and it was finally time to see if his investment was worthwhile. It was the **[Seed of Eldritch Awakening]** that might open another Hidden Node.

Chapter 805: Ancient Dread

“Is it really here?” Galau muttered as he kept watch for those sinister insects that seemed to lord over this planet.

“That’s what the captain said,” Bubbur grunted, though he was clearly as confused as Galau was.

“What would the invaders want with an uninhabited place like this?” Galau frowned as he looked around. “The planet seems old enough, which means this area has to be pretty stable. But there are multiple nearby gates. It would be impossible to hold it for long.”

“Not to mention these critters,” another member of the expedition grunted. “Setting up a camp in this place would be suicide. There are simply too many, and they are freakishly perceptive. Just look how they attacked our ship. Those bastards would have to invest way too much in shielding to make it worth it. Even setting up camp on a random asteroid would be better.”

“It only took us four jumps from the Leviathan to get here,” Bubbur thoughtfully said. “Perhaps they’re setting up an ambush?”

“They would have to be suicidal to attack the Leviathan with their current strength,” Galau said with a shake of his head. “Their weapons are pretty terrifying, but by the time someone powerful enough makes it through, the Leviathan will be long gone from that position.”

At least Galau prayed that was the case. They still hadn’t found the Space Gate, but they knew it was out there. After all, they were here already.

At first, they were just rumors, unconfirmed sightings of a new group of spacefarers in this chaotic sector of space. Normally, that wasn’t anything odd. Now and then, a new species or

people appeared through a rift, their homeworlds suddenly connected to the Million Gates and the outer world. But these people were different.

For one, the faction was too diverse to be some isolated civilization that had grown inside a Mystic Realm. Secondly, their methods were too advanced. The Muscle Brigade was among the best-equipped and most ferocious squads in the area, yet every clash with the invaders had been a costly endeavor.

Even when the Muscle Brigade overwhelmed them in numbers and levels, the invaders exacted a high cost before succumbing. And they were true zealots. Even now, they didn't know where they came from or what their faction was called. They only knew what they could glean from the corpses.

Neither the researchers nor the thieves had managed to crack their weird spatial tools either. Finding news of this world was simply a stroke of luck. Greatest Peak managed to ambush kill a leader in one go, right when he was reading a star chart.

The only good news was that the Space Gate hadn't stabilized just yet, giving them a few more years to prepare themselves. Those squads who had arrived were just at the E-grade, with the occasional early Hegemon squeezing through. The Muscle Brigade had been commanded to hunt down any squad they could in hopes they could finally find the Space Gate, but it didn't look good.

Even with over a thousand similar squads having been sent into the Million Gates Territory by the recently formed alliance, they simply couldn't find it. Not even the sages of the Heliophos Clan could glean its location according to Average. According to them, the issue wasn't the chaotic territory.

The gate was shrouded, and not even their Monarchs could break it.

That could only mean one of two things. Either their enemies were extremely powerful, or the System was aiding the invasion. Perhaps it was both. In either case, it was bad news. Yet the Muscle Brigade pressed on, delving deeper and deeper

in the seemingly endless expanse of the Million Gates territory. If they couldn't prevent the invasion, they could at least hamper their efforts.

These advance scouts were working toward something, gathering intelligence and setting up outposts. The more scouts they could kill and preparations they could ruin, the better their position would be when all hell broke loose. Perhaps they could even delay the invasion for a couple of years, which would allow for more fortresses to be built.

That's why they were on this cursed island infested by an endless number of insects, each one of which essentially carried a gastric bomb in their abdomen. Galau was scared enough that he was ready to strike at every shadow that moved, but he no longer felt discontent about joining these kinds of dangerous missions. He had even volunteered for this one, wanting to use his unique ocular skills to aid his companions.

What he was doing had value, and even someone like him could make a small difference in these critical times. He might have been discarded by his clan, but the Allbright Empire was still his home. The hundreds of trillions of lives didn't deserve to be swept up in this war. He had seen how sinister these people were.

Wherever they had encountered locals, not a single life was spared.

"If not ambush, infiltration, then?" Bubbur ventured as he scratched his beard.

"No point in guessing," Average said as he glanced back at the squad. "As long as we find what we're looking for, we're bound to find some answers."

Galau nodded in agreement as he glanced at his friend. It was true what they say; heroes rise in troubled times. Just a few short years had passed, yet the loudmouth young master had transformed into a capable leader that the Muscle Brigade willingly followed. Of course, his explosive growth in power had helped solidify his position among these meatheads.

After all, while this chaotic place had its dangers, it also held uncountable opportunities. They had lost more than half of their squad by now, but those that had survived had gone through a baptism of fire that no training regimen could compare to. Average, in particular, had essentially been reborn through the inheritances and troves he had survived.

Hopefully, they would get the chance to consolidate for a while longer. They had grown a lot, but they were ultimately just E-grade warriors. An errant clash between captains could crush their souls. Only when they became Hegemons would they be able to equip proper regalias, which would at least provide a semblance of safety in a large-scale war.

Hours passed as the squad crept closer, closing in on the camp they had spotted from orbit. Oddly enough, the incessant chirping from the native beasts grew more and more sparse as time went on. Did the invaders have some method to repel them? Finally, they were within a few kilometers of their target, at which point the jungle was eerily silent.

Seeing as no critters were nearby, they activated a cloaking array before taking out their enhanced binoculars. The invaders had set up camp at the edge of a vast chasm, one so large they had seen it from outer space. Galau had never seen anything like it before, and he even suspected that some supreme warrior had tried cutting the huge planet in two in some ancient era.

The scar reached almost halfway through the world, and just looking at it from space had filled Galau with dread.

“What are they doing?” Bubbur whispered as he looked over at Average. “Is it a trap?”

Galau frowned as well, feeling disconcerted by the scene. The invaders were right there in full display. A few were standing at the edge of the chasm, apparently looking out at the vast beyond. A few others were simply sitting a few meters away from the others, mindlessly staring at the sky. It was a far cry from the ruthless warriors they had clashed with before.

Average looked confused as well, and he didn't say a word as he kept observing for a few more minutes. But there was

simply no change. None of the invaders moved as much as an inch.

“Go!” Average eventually growled, and the squad rushed out like a rabid pack of wolves.

There was no need for words from that point on. Their group had been through over a hundred battles by now, and their cooperation was flawless. They soundlessly closed in on the distance, and a series of attacks rippled out with perfect timing. However, Galau couldn't believe what he was seeing as one enemy after another was ripped apart, not even lifting a finger to defend themselves.

“Stop!” Average eventually shouted as he threw out two chains that grabbed the sole remaining invaders.

“I didn't get any energy,” a warrior suddenly muttered, and Galau looked over with surprise as he stepped into the camp.

Some of them were already dead before?

“Uh, boss,” another warrior said as he walked out to the edge. “You need to see this.”

The others walked over as well, and they were shocked into silence by what they saw. An ancient fortress silently floated in the massive chasm, and it radiated a terrifying aura even if it was damaged by a huge scar. Had that thing just appeared? Because they should definitely have spotted that from orbit.

The construct was not as large as the war fortresses the alliance was frantically building, but its quality was vastly superior. The aura it emitted was more overwhelming than anything he had ever encountered, including the Monarch that met with the captain a year ago. Its towers and walls were covered in scripts that Galau didn't recognize, and he didn't recognize the design either.

This wasn't something built by someone in the Zecia sector. They simply didn't have the capability to build something like this. It didn't match the invader's heritages either, which begged the question; how the hell did these invaders know where to find this thing? Where did it come from? And why

were the invaders all dead or braindead? And who was powerful enough to damage this thing with a single attack?

A hum suddenly broke the silence as some runes lit up on one of the towers.

Something about the sound elicited a primal fear that threatened to break Galau's spirit, and he wasn't the only one. A few simply fell on their knees, while others desperately looked away. This was not something they could get involved with.

"Run!" someone shouted, but it was too late.

Unique advantages like Hidden Nodes, Constitutions, Specialty Cores, Attuned Souls, and other kinds of enhancements were restrained in the Orom World, but not sealed altogether. Even those with less unique Bloodlines than his could somewhat benefit from their abilities, and those with many such accrued advantages generally did better in the wilderness.

That was why he wanted to open another Hidden Node before entering the wilderness. Conversely, the Attribute Fruits in his Cosmos Sack would only provide some Contribution Points, but no real strength.

Zac could technically take the seed anywhere and at any time, but he had no idea how Draugr Bloodlines worked. They might have unique requirements like his Void Emperor Bloodline, so Zac had decided to visit to improve his odds of success. Eventually, he saw a towering peak through the miasmatic haze, which meant he had reached his destination.

It was the Blackink Mountain, a unique cultivation resource a few days' travel from Samsara's Edge.

There were two spots in the death-attuned zones that held special opportunities, and one of them was the Blackink Mountain. The solitary peak was thousands of meters tall, and it held 242 empowered cultivation caves along with one mansion at the peak. The mansion was only accessible to Emerald Badges, and the eight peak-quality caves could only

be booked by Jade Attendants and higher. But the rest was available for rent.

What made the Blackink Mountain different compared to the zones themselves was the amazing density of Miasma and Dao in the caves. Even the worst of the caves at the foot of the mountain far surpassed the density you could enjoy in the center of any zone. Of course, nothing good came for free, and you had to pay Purchase Points to rent these caves.

Zac soon arrived at the foot of the mountain, where a few dozen houses were erected. It wasn't a real settlement, but rather a place to wait in case the cave you wanted was occupied. Thankfully, few people were willing to pay for prolonged stays on this mountain, only splurging when they were ready to push for a breakthrough.

"Welcome," a bored-looking clerk said as Zac entered a small office. "Are you here to rent?"

"How is occupancy at the moment?" Zac asked. "I'm looking for a low-tier cave."

"You've come at the right time. Few caves are occupied at the moment, but that will likely change in a few months," the clerk said as he infused some energy into an array, which prompted almost one hundred small crystals to rise from a nearby box. "These are all the low-tier caves. Let me know which one you're interested in and I will check its availability."

Zac nodded in thanks and walked over to the gems. They weren't Miasma Crystals, but rather small arrays from the looks of it. Zac infused a stream of mental energy into two crystals at random, and he was immediately met by two small ripples of energy. Zac's nodded in understanding and nine streams poured out of his mind, each one moving from one crystal to another.

After months of training, he had mostly gotten used to his transformed soul. He had even gained another 800 points by simply stabilizing and strengthening his soul with the help of treasures. Altogether, he had already passed 15,000

Contribution Points without even trying, which was why he could afford a room at all.

“Is there anything amiss?” the clerk asked with confusion when Zac returned after just a few seconds.

“I’d like cave 183, please,” Zac said.

“Oh, alright,” the clerk said. “Cave #183 is luckily available, costing 1,000 Purchase Points per 12 hours. How long will you be staying?”

“One day is enough. I can extend the stay if need be, no?” Zac asked.

The crystals were a pretty interesting solution. The Blackink Mountain contained a tremendously complex array, and most of the caves actually held different Daos. Certainly, all of them contained the Dao of Death, but just a third of the chambers were Pure Death.

Other caves were filled with mixed-meaning paths, mostly those popular in the Undead Empire. Zac had even sensed a couple of crystals that held a Death-Conflict imprint.

Ultimately, Zac had chosen one of the pure-meaning Caves. As to why Zac chose #183, he couldn’t exactly put his finger on it. While its imprint was extremely similar to over a dozen others, it simply felt more comfortable for some reason.

He figured it had the best match with his Draugr side.

“You can extend your stay without leaving as long as no customer outside has booked the same cave. Your token will inform you when your time is up,” the clerk nodded as he handed over a small plaque. “Your key. This will lead the way.”

Zac thanked the man and flashed away, making his way up the mountain following the signal in the key. It only took thirty minutes to reach his destination, an excavated cave whose entrance was covered in intricate runes. Zac couldn’t tell if the runes were part of an array, but they seemed like some sort of fusion between death and the patterns he had seen around the spatial gates the Orom used.

Their meaning was too esoteric for Zac to decipher though, no matter if he relied on **[Primal Polyglot]** or any of his accrued knowledge. There wasn't any indication that a cultivation haven waited inside, so Zac curiously stepped through the threshold. The moment he entered the cave, a barrier activated behind him, quelling all sound and impressions from the outside. It once more felt like he had entered a sealed dimension, where there was only himself and the Dao.

Still, Zac was a bit confused as there weren't any particularly impressive levels of energy around him, so he walked deeper into the mountain. Soon enough, he reached a densely engraved door, and he opened it to reach the core of the cultivation cave.

A wall of pure death immediately slammed into him with such ferocity that he was pushed a few steps back, and Zac's eyes glazed over for a moment. Death. He had opened a door of no return, crossed the river of forgetfulness into an eternal domain of stillness. Death was always there, waiting, accepting all whether they wanted to or not. It was nothingness, it was release.

Zac shuddered as he regained his wits, but it was still with some trepidation he walked into the chamber. He had initially wondered if he was too cheap, not springing for 12 hours in one of the middle-grade rooms. Now, he rather wondered if he had overestimated himself by coming to the Blackink Mountain at all. This environment bordered on the edge of what was harmful rather than helpful.

Still, the price was paid and Zac refused to turn back now. It wasn't only a matter of cost either. He didn't want to lose the sense of momentum he had gained after witnessing so many valiant warriors showcasing their skills. He wanted to use that adrenaline rush and hunger for power to fuel his breakthrough. There was no time to find some other place to settle down.

So he let the gate close behind him, shrouding him in utter darkness. Zac was constantly beset by impressions as his body filled with Miasma, but while he welcomed the energy, he rejected the truths. Zac knew that he would probably be able to

turn his Fragment of the Coffin into a Dao Branch if he stayed a week in this place.

However, such a breakthrough would be like the first ones he had back on Earth, where he was implanted with external concepts.

He didn't want a Dao Branch based on the Daos fed into the cave by some array. He wanted a Dao Branch that was his alone, a branch attuned with his combat style, his class, and his path. Since Zac still hadn't found all the answers he looked for in that regard, he couldn't let himself get influenced by the curated truths that hid in the mountain.

Instead, he took out the pitch-black box and picked up the small seed within. It was no larger than an almond, but it felt like he was holding a small planet in his hand. The inner chamber did not let in as much as a wisp of light, but the seed was somehow darker than black, which made it stand out in the dark.

Zac looked down at the Natural Treasure with wonder, but the feeling only lasted a moment before he swallowed it. The effect was immediate, and Zac felt like he had become a black hole with the small seed as the core. He didn't drag matter or energy into his body this time around though, but rather darkness.

It emerged from the ceiling, from the walls, from the floor beneath him. It flooded his body through every pore, frantically burrowing deeper. The gloom was growing deeper, turning it into an Abyss that he had only seen in the eyes of Be'Zi before. Zac tried to channel it, to guide the changes the **[Seed of Eldritch Awakening]** was eliciting.

But he was losing control. His body was no longer his own. It was becoming one with the Abyss. Even the shimmering cores in his Soul Aperture were drowned in pervasive dusk. The last thing he felt was a burning sensation through his veins before his consciousness faded.

Chapter 806: Darkness Perfected

The Abyss was his home and his sanctuary, a womb where time and space held no meaning. He didn't know where he ended and the Abyss began, but he knew that he was safe. There were no sensations, no suffering. He was one with the universe, and it was one with him.

But one day, there was a ripple in the darkness, change in the stillness. It called for him.

He didn't know how, and he didn't know why, but he moved toward the beckoning call, his very core burning with urgency. He had been content being one with the Abyss forever, to revel in his absence of being. But now that the darkness was not alone, his soul cried for more.

It couldn't be seen, it couldn't be touched. But its elusive nature only made it more palpable in this world of absence. It was even more real than he.

He was plagued with questions. Who was he? What was his purpose? Concepts that were once foreign flooded his mind, both cursing and liberating him. The Abyss was still his home and part of his very being, but he knew that it couldn't answer the questions that now tormented him. He needed to leave.

The Abyss was fighting his efforts, like a parent reluctant to let their child go. But the calls grew more urgent, and he pushed on, borrowing the endless power of the Abyss to fight the Abyss. After all, as much as they were separate, they were one.

Before, space held no meaning, but now, he started to realize just how far it was. Each breath, he traversed vast distances, entering sections of the Abyss he didn't know existed. Before, it had never mattered. Now, it filled him with curiosity. He

could feel mysterious things hiding in the darkness, glorious things.

But they would be there in the future as well, and their call was not as urgent as the one from above.

For the first time in his life, he felt exhaustion. Whatever he was doing was draining him. Yet his destination was still so far away. When he couldn't draw enough power from his surroundings, he dug deeper into his personal Abyss. And the Abyss answered. A surge of power spread through his being, and he felt the exhaustion melt away.

His desire gave him strength, and each time he moved, he wasn't as drained. He still felt the exhaustion, but his will was unbreakable, his adamance unrelenting. Another call came from below. It was urging him to let go. Only suffering waited on the other side. It was telling him to come home.

He didn't listen, and suddenly, the darkness was no more. The endless Abyss had given way to an endless sky, and millions of flickering lights welcomed his arrival. The Abyss had represented perfection and unity, but the myriad colors forming a chaotic tapestry contained an equal truth. For the first time, he took a deep breath, and reality shuddered.

Crashing waves against ancient rocks mourned the loss, but he knew what he had gained outweighed what was given up. With a simple thought, he could join those flickering lights far in the sky, but he instead walked onto the shores. He wasn't the first; two were already standing there, letting themselves be baptized by the new environment while leaving their mark on the sky.

As he arrived, their eyes turned to his. In their eyes, he saw home, his origin. He saw the endless Abyss, darkness perfected.

"Azol," one of them said.

"Mez," his other friend added.

"Eoz," he answered. He didn't know why, but it was true.

Nothing else was said. Nothing else was needed. The others would soon arrive. Until then, Eoz was content with standing

at the shores, hearing the soothing waves of home as he gazed upon the endless sky.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he woke up from the vision, but he didn't even get a chance to digest what he had seen before he found himself in the middle of a torrent of energies. It felt like the ichor in his veins had been replaced with acid, but that was nothing compared to the burning pain in his throat.

A groan escaped his lips, but he knew that he had to hold on. Something was changing in his body at the cost of tremendous amounts of energy. The cave was meant for early and middle-stage Hegemons, but it was sucked dry by him all the same. Even then, he knew it was nothing compared to the terrifying amounts of energy the Draugr called Eoz had consumed in his vision.

Each moment, the Draugr had absorbed more energy than Zac had in his entire life. If Eoz sat here, he would most likely have destroyed the whole Blackink Mountain in a few seconds. Zac didn't know whether the predecessor in his vision was an Autarch or something even greater, but he was definitely not below Be'Zi, and far beyond the Orom or the Havarok Autarch.

All three Draugr in his vision were. It had looked like those progenitors were just stargazing, but Zac felt like they had been shifting the Heavens themselves with their mere arrival. It made him wonder. Just what kind of place was the Abyssal Lake, to birth at least three such monsters out of nowhere?

Was it an Eternal Heritage? Did Draugr originate from an older era? And what were those things that hid in the lake just out of sight, each one emitting a worldending aura that could snuff out an Autarch's soul in an instant? After having seen it himself, he was no longer surprised that even A-grade cultivators could be wounded when exploring the Abyssal Lake.

Yet, he felt a sense of yearning when thinking back to that darkness. Even with the danger, he had felt so safe there in the

vision, at peace to a degree he had never felt before. Even if he couldn't visit the depths where Eoz originated from, he still wanted to enter the shallows of the Abyssal Lake, even if just to reclaim that sensation.

But he knew there were quite a few steps before he could reach that point. Most importantly, he needed to withstand the breakthrough. The energy in his body was getting crammed tighter and tighter as more poured in, and the **[Quantum Gate]** was swallowing as much as the rest of his body combined.

It somewhat confirmed his earlier theories, but he wasn't in any state to celebrate.

Any time Zac felt he would explode from the pressure, his cells shuddered and swallowed a mouthful before the process started over once more. He had no idea how long it took, but the pull eventually subsided. Even then, the room was left almost completely bereft of energy, which was almost a relief for Zac as he took a shuddering breath and sat up.

The process was over, and he curiously turned his gaze inward, looking for the new Hidden Node. However, a few seconds passed, and Zac furrowed his brows in confusion. Something had changed with his body, but he couldn't actually find any node. Had the process failed, even after being shown the vision? Or was this something related to his Void Emperor bloodline?

He thoroughly scanned his body a few more times, but the only change he could spot was that his energy was denser compared to before. If his Miasma was water before, it had turned into a viscous jelly now. That change hadn't impacted the speed with which he could move his energy though, so Zac eventually turned to his status screens for answers.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

129

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi - Peak

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

13895 [Increase: 123%. Efficiency: 287%] **1,000**

Dexterity

5570 [Increase: 88%. Efficiency: 206%] **1,000**

Endurance

8981 [Increase: 109%. Efficiency: 275%] **1,000**

Vitality

7502 [Increase: 97%. Efficiency: 262%] **1,000**

Intelligence

2275 [Increase: 82%. Efficiency: 206%] **1,000**

Wisdom

4615 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 216%] **1,000**

Luck

540 [Increase: 106%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 662

Nothing had changed in the status screen, but Zac finally found some answers in his Bloodline Screen.

Bloodline

[E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void - 50%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes

[E] Quantum Gate, [E] Adamance of Eoz

He still couldn't find the Hidden Node while scanning his body, but it was right there next to **[Quantum Gate]**, though that alone was a bit confusing. His new node wasn't a Bloodline Node? That was impossible. He had seen the very origin of the Draugr race, just as Catheya had described it.

The Draugr corpse that had been trapped in that odd pocket of space for innumerable years, and who was the source of his own Draugr side, had to be a descendant of that Eoz. It had to

be an effect of his Void Emperor Bloodline. Zac wasn't sure whether you could have two bloodlines, but he hadn't heard of anyone with an imbuelement like that.

Generally, the more powerful bloodline would push the other one aside, though the repressed bloodline still hid in one's genes. From there, it could pop up in a future generation if the main bloodline weakened. It could also provide various benefits right away, such as improved affinities.

In Zac's case, it looked like his Draugr Hidden Nodes were categorized as normal Nodes since they weren't part of his main Bloodline. If that had any ramifications down the road, Zac had no idea. But for now, it looked like everything had turned out just fine. Seeing that **[Adamance of Eoz]** had been awakened and provided some sort of benefit, Zac closed the Status Screen.

Even now, the energy hadn't returned to the chamber, and he took out a watch from his Cosmos Sack. He was worried he had overstayed his visit, but the breakthrough had thankfully only lasted only four hours. Was wrong though, and he took out his token just in case, and he was immediately met with a shocking vision.

"What the hell?" Zac swore as he slapped the thing a few times to see if he could reset the values.

Opening the hidden node had provided a whopping 9,900 Contribution Points, yet he felt a surge of anger upon seeing his transaction history. For some reason, he had been charged an extra day's stay, which meant he had lost another 2,000 Contribution Points. Zac stewed in the desolate environment of his emptied-out cave for 10 minutes before he rushed down the mountain.

"What's going on?" Zac asked furiously the moment he entered the small office. "Is there something wrong with my cave?"

"How could that be?" the clerk said, though he looked at Zac with some shock in his eyes. "Young Master, you simply drained over two days' worth of energy from the cave, forcing me to add to your tally."

“What?” Zac swore. “If I absorbed two days’ worth of energy, I would have exploded. There must be something wrong with the cave.”

“I’m sorry, this is all automated,” the man said with a helpless shrug. “There are fail-safes to make sure insufficient energy won’t get in the way of a breakthrough, but you will be charged for all the extra energy that is infused into the chamber. If it’s any consolation, you got a bargain. In total, you used up 53 hours’ worth of energy, but you were only charged for 48.”

“Well, alright,” Zac grunted. “So the energy won’t come back in the chamber over the next two days?”

“I am afraid not,” the clerk said with a shake of his head.

“Unless you pay for more time.”

“Alright, I’m checking out then,” Zac shrugged as he threw over the key.

It was a pretty annoying to lose 2,000 Purchase Points out of nowhere, but he doubted the Orom would bother scamming people with a scheme like this. He must have absorbed a monstrous amount of energy during the vision, just like he usually did when evolving his Bloodline. But he did make a mental note to never evolve his Bloodline in a place like that.

With the amounts of energy his Bloodline consumed, he’d be so deep into debt that he would never be able to dig himself out of that hole.

His bloodline was a no-go, but it was still huge to get confirmation he really had Draugr nodes. Perhaps he should try making friends with one of the half-blood Draugr in the Orom to glean some more information. He had avoided them until now out of fear he’d get exposed, but even a half-blood should know about awakening hidden nodes.

But there was no hurry. First, Zac made his way back toward Samsara’s Edge as he tried to figure out the use of **[Adamance of Eoz]**. It was a bit annoying to explore his limits when his limits were restrained by the prison brand, but he did discover

something interesting after eventually taking out a Divine Crystal.

The Life-attuned energies inside were essentially poison, but Zac absorbed a small amount anyway. His old Hidden Nodes would take care of the invasive energy soon enough, but he wanted to test if his resistance had improved.

And it had.

Or it was perhaps more apt to say that his energy and his flesh refused to blend with the energy, making it harder for the life-attuned energy to burrow deeper into its body. Soon enough, it was gobbled up by his **[Void Heart]**, but even that was met with some resistance until Zac paved a path with a mental command. Curious, Zac kept experimenting, and the effect was essentially always the same.

No matter if it was foreign energies scattered around him, or if it was infused into his body one way or another, he found that his natural resistance had increased by a noticeable degree. This didn't extend to physical or mental hits, but he was already plenty durable in those departments.

Even then, it somehow felt like this defensive ability was a side-effect rather than the main use of **[Adamance of Eoz]**. He still remembered his escape from the Abyssal Lake vividly, how his will pushed him forward, breaking the fetters that had kept him in the depths. So his pace kept increasing until he was in a full sprint toward the settlement, and he immediately jumped onto the Teleportation Array when he arrived.

A moment later, Zac once more appeared next to the small coliseum, but he didn't enter the building this time around. Instead, he set course due east after purchasing a small booklet in a nearby shop. Three days passed until he finally reached a huge square arch standing on a hill. It was fifty meters wide, and it rose almost a hundred meters into the air, making it easily visible even from a distance.

A few makeshift settlements were erected around the hill, and around 50 cultivators lounged in the area. It wasn't few, but it wasn't many either, considering that this was one of the entrances to the wilderness.

“Oh, an undead warrior over here? Want to buy a missive on the local wildlife?” a beastkin asked as Zac closed in. “Just 100 Purchase Points. I have a high-quality Unholy Font as well in case you need it.”

“That’s okay,” Zac said with a shake of his head as he passed by.

The Unholy Font was a simple-enough necklace that essentially duplicated the effect of an Unholy Beacon. However, while the beacon transformed large swathes of land, an Unholy Font only generated a small cloud of Miasma. This allowed undead warriors to stave off the uncomfortable effect of Cosmic Energy without wasting any effort on their own.

However, Zac already had dozens of similar items in his Cosmos Sack, including peak-quality ones that could be powered by Cosmic Crystals to exude a shroud even larger than his [**Fields of Despair**]. Furthermore, it looked like his newfound ability was somewhat efficient at staving off ambient energy as well, though he couldn’t be considered completely insulated like when using [**Void Zone**].

Zac wasted no time as he stepped through the gate. His surroundings twisted for a moment, and he felt a surge of warmth from his left hand. A moment later, he appeared right by two large rocks in a vast savannah. Only now did he realize how quiet the Orom World was in general, when he was suddenly subjected by constant roars from dozens of different types of beasts.

Still, Zac cracked his neck as he eagerly took out one of his spare axes. He hadn’t fought for almost half a year, and between the almost constant threat of death after killing Uona and being trapped in this weird place, he had built up a whole lot of stress. Certainly, he needed to figure out more about his congealed energy and how to progress his Class Quest.

But those issues weren’t as urgent as unleashing a wave of carnage before he went mad.

Chapter 807: Adamance

The accumulated stress and inspiration filled Zac with an overflowing momentum that urged him to rush out and start whaling on the poor beasts in the area. It almost felt like when the Splinter of Oblivion had messed with his mind, though Zac kept himself in check a bit longer as he tried to get used to the changes in his body. His attributes had already been adjusted, and he now had over 1,900 Strength.

He felt more in tune with himself even if his attributes had become skewed again, and the energy coursed through his body more naturally. Zac tried activating [**Gorehew**], and this time the prison brand didn't prevent anything. A large jagged edge appeared in front of his weapon a moment later, and it looked almost identical to when he had used it in the Twilight Ocean.

But its strength was hollow.

Conjuring the blade cost as much Miasma as it used to, but the brand on his hand siphoned off more than 80% of the energy, leaving a husk of a skill compared to its original strength. He had seen the same phenomenon during the fights in the coliseum, though their skills had probably been drained of more than 95% of their energy.

Apart from its weakened state, Zac felt there was something different about the skill, and he curiously rapped his knuckles against the large blade. The jagged edge shuddered a bit before a powerful rebound rippled back into his hand. It was hard to be certain since he was still unaccustomed to using skills in his limited form, but Zac believed that the blade was a bit sturdier than it should be.

Was this the effect of his Draugr Node, [**Adamance of Eoz**]?

The node had made his energy more congealed somehow. Did that effect extend to skills? But what did 'adamance' refer to?

Zac looked at the blade for a few seconds before he dispersed the skill. He had plenty of time to figure out how things worked. Besides, he had always been a practical learner.

He was tired of just standing around, and he finally stepped out from his hidden spot. A small ripple around him meant he was no longer hidden from the surroundings, and he could immediately spot a few bright blobs of life closing in on him.

There were nine gates in total that led into the wilderness, each one of them working the same way. They would send you to a random location in the first band of the wilderness, and you would be protected until you took a few steps from the starting position.

Just like the Orom World, there were various attunements in the bands, though the energies weren't nearly as palpable as in the cultivation zones. It was just about enough to create some different environments while accommodating more types of beasts, and Zac had chosen the gate that currently led to an area that bordered fire and nature.

At the edge of the savannah, he could barely make out a mountain range that flying lizards, golemoid species, and hundreds of other beasts made their home. There were miasmic zones as well up to the fifth band, but Zac wasn't looking to find inspiration from death-attuned beasts at the moment.

There were nine bands in total, where the first four were safe zones, which meant you weren't allowed to clash with other cultivators. But further in, more than half of each zone was lawless, and you could even rob other prisoners. The only safety net was that you would be teleported back rather than killed upon receiving a lethal attack, at the cost of some Purchase Points, of course.

It was just like PvE and PvP zones in an online game, but Zac had no intentions of heading that deep. In general, you'd need to have the skill equivalent of a Middle to Late Hegemon to avoid becoming helpless prey in the fifth band. If you managed to cross the ninth and reach the edge of the

wilderness, you would essentially have pushed your path of slaughter to the point you should be able to confirm your Dao.

Going by what he had heard, Zac wasn't confident he'd be able to make it that far even if he relied on his Void Energy and its unrestrained attacks.

For now, Zac was content with staying in the first and perhaps the second band, and he cracked his neck as the pack of animals closed in on him. After thirty seconds, he could spot the beasts even without his Draugr sight, and he realized it was four beasts that looked a bit like warthogs. Apart from being three meters long, they were also a bit leaner, and their green fur almost looked like long swaying stalks of grass.

Their tusks were also noticeably bigger than the species on Earth, and the two larger specimens even sprouted small horns.

The pitch-black coffin of his replacement weapon appeared on his back, and four black-and-green chains slithered out like snakes as Zac calmly walked toward the animals. Suddenly, the four beasts flickered, and Zac's whistled with surprise when they appeared just fifty meters away from him, having gained a huge surge of speed as they barreled toward him.

At the same time, Zac felt a tightness around his feet, and he glanced down to see the knee-high grass twine around his ankles. These beasts actually possessed skills? Having skills at the early E-grade meant they had a decent heritage, but Zac still wasn't too worried.

The grass had been empowered, but it still wasn't able to withstand the two chains that lashed out, each one of them dripping corrosive liquid after being empowered by **[Blighted Cut]**. Simultaneously, the remaining chains shot forward as a shroud of darkness spread out from Zac's body. The warthogs had almost completely blended with the swaying grass by this point, but their strong life signatures couldn't stay hidden from Zac's Draugr gaze.

He swung his axe to the side, striking the beast that tried to flank him. It seemed shocked about being exposed so easily, but its reflexes were extremely quick. It tilted its head to block

the attack with its tusk, and it clearly planned to use its hefty body to crush him.

Zac's initial instinct was to forcibly throw the beast away, but he found himself physically overwhelmed. Being physically overpowered by some random pig would take some getting used to, but Zac quickly adapted. Instead, he fluidly shifted his position, avoiding the brunt of the leap while delivering a ruthless punch in the hog's side as it passed him by.

At the same time, his chains aimed for the eyes of the remaining beasts, which made them scream in fear and forcibly change course. A pang of danger blared in the back of his head, but the three small skeletons had already appeared by this point. A spectral coffin rose to protect his back, and a smattering sound echoed across the area as thousands of stalks of grass failed to pierce the barrier.

It looked like these hogs could control the grass more freely than Zac had expected.

Thankfully, Zac's reinforcements started to appear by this point as **[Deathmark]** had already covered the area for a while now. Three of the wraiths were instantly destroyed by ferocious headbutts or vicious bites, but it gave Zac an opportunity to launch some strikes of his own. Meanwhile, one of the smaller warthogs rammed straight into the final axe wraith, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when it actually blocked the rush with its axe.

Certainly, cracks appeared on the spectral axe upon being hit by one of the tusks, but it held long enough for the wraith to counter with a slice that opened up a shallow wound on the beast's haunch. The warthog wailed as the corrosive mist started entering its body, but Zac was more interested in the wraith that had started dissipating.

It was just like he had experienced before with **[Gorehew]**. Judging by how much his skills had been restrained, the specter shouldn't have been able to withstand the hit. An E-grade beast with an average of 2,000 attributes should have crushed it with such a direct attack. But the specter had become more

durable, allowing it to survive just long enough to unleash a counter.

Not only that, but the empowering effect seemed to be greater than when he summoned the jagged edge by the entrance. One time might have been a miscalculation, but two times pretty much confirmed it. [**Adamance of Eoz**] didn't seem to directly improve his offense or defense, but it made his energy and energy constructs sturdier.

Various uses flashed through his mind, from withstanding powerful Daos to wasting less energy conjuring defensive barriers. However, Zac still couldn't figure out exactly how to control it and the hogs weren't willing to let him ponder on it as they tried to pincer him.

Zac soon found himself hounded from every direction, with thousands of razor-sharp blades of grass adding insult to injury. He almost found himself overwhelmed, and if not for the powerful defensive ability of [**Profane Exponents**] and the improved durability of his wraiths, he would have racked up some nasty wounds already.

There was no time to ponder on his nodes or improve his Inexorable Stance. Simply staying afloat was a struggle, and he furiously struck with all weapons in his arsenal in an effort to seize the tempo. Thankfully this was just the beginning of the first band, and the hogs only had so many tricks up their proverbial sleeves.

As he grew more accustomed to the current state of his body, Zac could gradually switch from avoiding attacks to going on the offensive. He soon figured out that it was the smaller hogs that controlled the grass, while the horned ones rather focused on physical attacks. Soon enough, he managed to separate the two groups, and he ended the two magehogs in an instant with a ferocious swing of [**Gorehew**] empowered by his Dao Branch.

Same as with the skills, he found most of his Mental Energy and Dao entering the prison brand, making Zac swear with annoyance. Was it perhaps the warriors in the wilderness that

contributed the energy and Dao needed to keep the Orom World running?

With only two hogs and no grass attacks to deal with, Zac immediately managed to capture the third one with his chains. Its fur had already become mottled by the corrosion all around them, but its suffering was over in an instant as Zac activated the finishing strike of **[Blighted Cut]** to unleash three shockingly sharp strikes in an instant.

From there, it was just a matter of time before the final hog was killed as well, leaving just a panting Zac in a large ring of corroded grass. The beasts hadn't managed to leave any big wounds, but he was covered in small cuts that stung. Zac ate a common healing pill, surprised at how much resistance some random beasts at the first band could put up. These kinds of beasts were the ones that Zac usually slaughtered by the thousands without breaking a sweat.

Then again, their cooperation had been decent at best, full of flaws to exploit. Meanwhile, their attacks had been choreographed and their grass control was more annoying than lethal. Their short-lived advantage almost exclusively came from their superior attribute pool, but that alone had been enough to cause a headache, even with his peak-quality skills helping out.

Was this what it was like fighting him? Having more skill and talent but being roughhoused by raw attributes.

Zac shook his head and moved on, not bothering with the carcasses. They were ultimately just early E-grade beasts, their bodies not worth anything. The amount of kill energy they provided was beyond pitiful, and Zac knew he would have to fight for years to gather the energy required for breaking open a single node.

Of course, he hadn't come here for levels. He had come here to explore his new node and to work on his quest. If possible, he also wanted to work on his skills and stances. There were both free and rentable facilities for evolving skills in the Orom World, but there was no rush. He wanted to first gather more

inspiration. Meanwhile, Zac had encountered an issue upon opening his quest screen.

**[Desperation's End (Class): Extinguish one million souls.
Reward: Desperation's End. (0/1,000,000)]**

He had just killed four beasts, yet the progress was still zero. Zac was certain that the beasts were real, rather than some sort of constructs or illusions. He had even sensed the beasts' souls dissipating soon after he killed them. Even his Draugr-vision couldn't see souls, but his empowered soul had given him a more refined sensitivity toward Mental Energy.

Those hogs had souls, Zac was certain of it. He was way too far gone down the road of slaughter to reflect upon the moral implications of this discovery, and he was more curious about what he needed to do to progress the quest. Luckily, the savannah wasn't lacking beasts, and he spotted a huge furry centipede slither toward him through the grass.

A few minutes later, five bloody sections of the insect were strewn across the floor, with the remaining part of the centipede feebly struggling against the Dao-empowered chains. After failing to unload a salvo of poison it succumbed to its grievous wounds, and Zac closed his eyes as he sensed the weak fluctuations by its head.

The air screamed as Zac's axe ripped through the empty space where he had felt the weak mental fluctuations, but it didn't make a difference. The feeling was gone, and his progress remained at zero. Just how was he supposed to extinguish a soul? Did he need to learn a soul-killing mentalist skill to progress?

He certainly had some free spots in his pathways, but Zac was reluctant to fill them with random junk. Besides, he was almost certain that there was some trick to it.

Zac kept going, and he soon found himself in a pitched battle with two green panthers. He kept trying to restrain and catch them, but they refused to be sucked into the momentum of his Inexorable Stance. Their Dexterity had to be at least three times his own, he barely saw their forms as they flashed by, leaving small wounds or a destroyed specter in their wake.

The Inexorable Stance he had been so proud of while traveling the Twilight Ocean utterly failed to restrain them. Death might be inexorable, but his stance clearly hadn't captured the essence of that fact just yet. As he tried to force an opening with his chains and axe, he thought back to Pavina, and how she had ruthlessly and dismantled the defenses of her enemy in the arena.

She walked the path of death just as he did, yet her lethality was so much greater than his, even with Zac's all accumulated advantages. It wasn't that her class was so different from his either. She had used a ghastly avatar that controlled ropes of darkness and she had used pure death as a poison, similar to his **[Blighted Cut]** or **[Deathmark]**.

Pavina hadn't used any pure offensive skills like **[Gorehew]** or **[Nature's Edge]** at all, but she had almost made it seem that way. It was like she had become death incarnate as she pushed forward. Why would death need to wait for its victims? She was the ender of all, destroyer of life. As much as the warrior had struggled, she was the one who adjudicated his fate.

Zac felt that was the key, a missing ingredient in his stance. Even if he had managed to partly incorporate his path into his combat style, allowing him to restrain his enemies and control the momentum, he could definitely improve his lethality. Why should the spider hide at the edge of the net, watching its prey slowly tire itself out?

Even if the prey was too powerful to take out in one bite, Inexorable Stance should not only welcome them into the arms of eternity, it should push them into the Abyss. He needed to become the master of death with the help of his axe.

His attacks gradually grew quicker as Zac as one scene after another from the coliseum flashed through his mind. Zac let death guide him, and as his attacks grew quicker and more condensed, so did their restraining efficacy improve. The more complete his stance grew, the more preoccupied the panthers became with simply staving off death and staying alive.

Their hesitance was the nail in the coffin. With a wet gurgling yowl, one of the two panthers were impaled by a chain, its

wound sizzling from the corrosive acid that dripped from the links. Seeing its mate getting skewered pushed the surviving panther into a frenzied rage, and it lunged straight toward him with such speed that Zac was pushed on the ground, though he managed to unleash a swing that ripped open the belly of the beast.

Zac was drenched in a flood of blood and viscera, but he still kept his cool, conjuring a barrier just before a set of razor-sharp teeth dug into his throat. A growl escaped his lips as he pushed the beast away, and two streams of Mental Energy entered his axe, each one soon flooded with Zac bloodlust and Dao.

The beast was already on death's door after losing most of its innards, but death didn't wait around as a slash split it clean in two from nose to tail. A small sputtering of kill energy entered his body, but Zac ignored it as he opened the quest screen once more. As he had hoped, the screen actually showed **(1/1,000,000)**.

He had felt it upon delivering that final strike. His Dao-braided strike had crashed into the panther's skull, destroying its soul before it had a chance to dissipate. A moment later, some minute flakes had disappeared into his body, though Zac couldn't see where they went. Perhaps, it was an offering to the formation of **[Desperation's End]**, or perhaps it was just some soul fragment that flew in his direction by chance.

In either case, he had found the solution. It was a bit gristly, but he would have to crack a whole lot of skulls to unlock his new skill. Thankfully, the wilderness was clearly not lacking in targets judging by the incessant cries, and he was awash with ideas on how to improve his two stances. He had nothing better to do until he had gathered enough Oblivion Energy, so Zac shook off the blood that covered him from head to toe before he walked deeper into the wild.

It was time to get back to basics; one man and his axe against the world.

Chapter 808: Cat and Mouse

“Never have I seen such a flighty bastard,” K’Rav swore. “You’ve been reading that thing for months now. Strength comes from pushing forward and seizing what’s yours, not cowering in a corner.”

The goblin was sitting on a sofa in the study, opened books strewn all around him. It was the fifth time this day it had complained, but Ogras didn’t care.

“You think I’m like you bastards, ready to jump straight into the abyss?” Ogras snorted. “There is no way I am going to blindly cultivate some method made by you lunatics. I need to understand it better before making a decision. Besides, I have still not completely healed from those cursed energies I had to endure from your so-called safe path.”

“Cultivating the Spiritlock Physique would greatly alleviate that problem,” K’Rav said. “And then we could get on with the important business.”

Ogras only rolled his eyes before he turned back to the scroll in front of him. It was true, the goblin elder called Rasata had created a terrifying technique that would give you a constitution called the Spiritlock Physique. For every stage you mastered, you would be able to seal one more spirit in your body and gain part of its strength.

There were a few problems with the technique though, apart from how it was recorded. Rasata posited that the limit would be nine spirits in total, but she had only managed to infuse five of them into her body. She had also deduced the sixth layer of the **[Spiritlock Technique]**, but it was unproven and, according to her “a bit risky.”

Coming from these lunatics, that was saying something.

He had stayed in the central tower for months now, and the more he read about the history of the Ra'Lashar Goblins, the more horrified he became. He had thought he understood just how far people would go for power, but he had never heard of a civilization as crazed as these people. If they had been part of integrated space, the Ruthless Heavens would probably just have blasted their whole planet to preemptively avert disaster.

Conjuring the Qriz'Ul spirits from the Lower Plane had been the main cultivation method of these goblins, but inviting that madness into their lives had only scratched the surface. The elders, the powerful families, even the netherblasted beggars on the street had delved into crazy and unorthodox methods to strengthen themselves even further. Not one of them had any respect for their lives, and few ever died of old age.

Some experiments were a success, such as Rasata's **[Spiritlock Technique]**. Others had devastating consequences, and the Qriz'Ul uprising was simply the calamity that finally did them in. There had been similar incidents in the past. And even if the cursed beings of the Lower Plane had failed, something else would have killed these madmen soon enough.

Then again, Ogras would never admit it to the annoying ghost, but he was thoroughly impressed by what those long-snouted goblins had accomplished. Their civilization had only started down the road of cultivation 16,000 years before their demise, yet they had raised over twenty Monarchs, though only half were still alive by the uprising. And that was without the assistance of the Ruthless Heavens.

The whole tower was filled with taboo techniques and weird experiences of these mad scientists, techniques that would cause a storm on the outside. Figuring out which techniques were madness and which ones were inspired genius was the hard part. Certainly, those methods requiring taboo practices such as large-scale sacrifice were easy to avoid, as were the techniques that had terrifying side effects.

For example, one of the Warlocks Elders had managed to turn himself into a conduit for some sort of eldritch horror, gaining a huge amount of power. However, anyone below a Monarch who came within 100 miles of him was assaulted by whispers

that gradually turned them into murderous lunatics. The elder couldn't even join the final battle since he caused more damage to his own people than the enemy.

These blasted goblins also didn't have any proper system for recording their techniques, and they were like children, constantly looking for the next thing. Few bothered fixing the imperfections of their creations. They simply kept pushing further down the road until they exploded or turned insane.

Thankfully, Rasata was one of the few who had worked to perfect her **[Spiritlock Technique]**. Certainly, the reason for that wasn't benign or anything. Rasata had been madly in love with the Grand Warlock, Hosokat'rov. However, he had spurned her advances, citing her nose being too small to marry someone of his standing. Love had turned into hatred, and she had escaped into her research.

Her ultimate goal was to perfect the **[Spiritlock Technique]**, and have it supplant Hosokat'rov's spirit-controlling technique as the premier cultivation method of the Ra'Lashar goblins. Unfortunately, that hate-induced drive had turned her cultivation manual into a weird mix of angry poems, a list of pranks and failed assassination attempts on the Grand Warlock, and the actual methods to cultivate the Spiritlock Constitution.

"Why don't you go lure some more critters into the trap if you're bored? I still haven't completed the final brand required to enter this place the above-board way," Ogras muttered as he felt the incessant stare of the ghost.

"You want even more free labor?" K'rov snorted. "How about you hold up your end of the bargain, instead? That would solve both our problems."

"Give me a break," Ogras said. "I haven't even finished going over these mad ramblings, and you want me to sink my teeth into that thing? That might take over a year."

"A year?" K'rov guffawed. "Even if you studied for a century, you'd only be able to grab at the edge of the miracle we created. As long as you finish that thing..."

“I know, I know,” Ogras responded with a lazy wave. “When that thing is completed, the clouds will part and phoenixes and dragons will dance to celebrate our glory.”

“Keep pretending,” K’Rav spat. “I saw you almost drown in your own drool when you looked through the notes.”

“Your flag is a bit impressive, but I’m not in any hurry,” Ogras shrugged as he kept reading.

The goblin only snorted in dissatisfaction as he turned toward the windows overlooking the ruins of his former empire.

Ogras glanced at the ghost before he kept reading, though his mind was only partly occupied with the Spiritlock Physique.

The ancient bastard said he was brought back by the System, but after having witnessed the weird methods stored in this tower, Ogras wasn’t so sure.

He hadn’t found any damning evidence over the past year, but that didn’t matter. Ogras trusted his guts, and they were telling him that this warlock who refused to leave for the underworld was up to no good. And even if he was wrong, so what? He’d rather kill a thousand innocent ghosts than risk his little life.

Ogras was even hesitant to finish the sixth and final key to this place and reap the rewards, afraid that unlocking the tower would also unlock the ghost’s power. K’Rav seemed to understand his misgivings, but he pretended to be oblivious. He had even insinuated that he would be happy to pass on as long as the mission was completed, but that only made Ogras more unwilling.

So they played their game of cat and mouse, each one pushing their agenda. Parts of him screamed to simply take his winnings and leave while he was still ahead. But even if he had gained a lot from this place, there was still more to go. He had already decided to take the gamble, even if he was betting with his life.

That thing was really something, but it couldn’t be finished without K’Rav’s help.

The silvery leaves ripped through the air, causing a swirl of frozen air as they shot toward the two four-armed yeti who kept harassing him from a distance. The storm pelted against his skin, but his **[Innate Ward]** empowered by the Fragment of the Bodhi and improved durability from **[Adamance of Eoz]** was enough to withstand the brunt of it.

It was lucky as well, as he had his hands full when dealing with the ice pangolin that kept launching extremely sharp scales at him under the guise of the storm. Its control was sublime, reminding Zac of Travo Raso's sword array that he had suffered inside multiple times over the last months.

However, while the Radiant Temple employee's array adhered to his fusion of the Dao of the Stars and the Dao of the Sword, this pangolin had rather instilled it with ice and wind, perhaps forming something akin to a Fragment of the Storm. Speed, ferocity, and destructive capabilities, it had it all.

And the two damn yeti underlings magnified the danger.

Yet Zac pushed on. These beasts represented a threshold, being one of the strongest groups at the edge of the second band. Being able to defeat these guys without relying on his Void Energy would mean that he had reached a level where he could match most early Hegemons in this place. And the Orom World didn't bring in any useless people.

Barely being able to fight his way through the first two bands of the wilderness in eight months didn't seem too impressive to Zac, but it was apparently quite shocking. Most of the Hegemons he had sparred against had become a lot more courteous after seeing his rapid progress, almost treating him like an equal. According to them, it usually took well over a century of slowly polishing one's technique to reach this level.

It felt like some sort of vindication. He was a mortal, unable to cultivate or absorb energy nearly as quickly as others. His Dao Control was adequate at best, and that was only thanks to his soul cultivation. Without it, Zac would be beyond awful due to his zero affinities.

But he was a rarely seen genius when it came to combat, showcasing a marvelous ability to integrate his Dao insights

into his technique. He still hadn't managed to break his losing streak at the coliseum with either of his two races, but that was mostly because he wanted to fight people who could inspire further breakthroughs with his skills and stances. And those kinds of people weren't weak.

Zac weaved through the storm that raged around him, his steps as inscrutable and chaotic as the unlimited possibilities of life. The pangolin repeatedly failed to trap him or exploit his patterns, because there was no pattern to the Evolutionary Stance. Suddenly, he made his move, taking advantage of the two yeti being preoccupied with his Dao-infused attacks.

They had conjured a wall of ice to protect themselves, but that had forced them to split their attention, prompting the raging storm to weaken. Hundreds of engraved trees rose from the ground, and their vibrant life force pushed the blistering cold of the tundra away. Zac disappeared a moment later, fusing with the tree that had appeared right next to him.

A moment later, the tree was ripped apart by the pangolin's scale array, but Zac had already been transported to another tree right by that point. Teleporting through the trees of **[Ancestral Woods]** barely produced a ripple, and it was hidden among the constant burst of life the other trees expelled.

The tree behind him started to rapidly wither after having fulfilled its purpose, but Zac was already moving in on the two targets. Only when two clouds closed in on them did the yeti realize their target wasn't trapped in the storm any longer, and they immediately spun around to meet the attack.

A small golden palace appeared in the sky as hymns of Arcadia drenched the surroundings in life. Meanwhile, a bottomless ravine appeared beneath, almost sucking Zac's soul inside as he looked at it. The space between the two visions was just a hairline, but that thin line was an uncrossable divide that shot toward the two beasts.

A ferocious storm slammed into the peak proficiency **[Rapturous Divide]**, but Zac was full of purpose now that he was so close to reaching his goal. The boost of **[Adamance of**

Eoz] rose to match his desire, allowing his skill to withstand the hailstorm long enough to break apart the defensive runes and grievously wound the two.

The beasts were thrown into their own fortifications from the attack, but they were still alive. However, Zac appeared right by them, and the keening cry of his axe was amplified by the ice as he cut straight through the neck of one of the yeti. A pang of danger made him flash away, and he heard two sharp explosions ripple out in quick succession.

It was some sort of icy ball that had burst out from the dying beast and almost instantly exploded into a thousand razor-sharp spikes. The spikes simply melted when they hit the second yeti, but Zac found himself punctured full of wounds even after dodging with **[Earthstrider]**.

The skin around his wounds turned blue for a moment as he was flooded with chilly Dao, but **[Adamance of Eoz]** was preventing it from spreading and sealing his mobility. The pangolin was already rushing toward him, and Zac flashed forward again, unleashing a furious barrage at the remaining yeti before he was pincered again.

The beast was desperately defending itself by conjuring one skill after another, but with every clash Zac's technique subtly changed, evolving toward something that could kill the beast. A sharp pain flared up in his side as a scale swiped him, but Zac endured the agony as he finished off the second mage by cleaving its head in two with an Axe-Bodhi fusion.

With only the pangolin to worry about, Zac entered a ferocious melee where he only relied on **[Nature's Edge]**, **[Earthstrider]**, and **[Innate Ward]** to fight the beast who averaged 2,500 attributes and possessed and powerful control abilities. He had mostly stayed in his Draugr form the past months, but he had still made great strides with his Evolutionary Stance as well.

Each movement was a rebirth, each swing a new creation. One wound after another appeared on the Pangolin's body as its scales kept getting destroyed. The leader of the tundra ferociously fought back, but it kept getting pushed further into

a disadvantage. If not for the berserking brand on its body, it would have fled already.

Eventually, the beast fell after Zac managed to strike its head twice, breaking into its skull and instantly killing it.

Two of the three beasts had their brains destroyed, the inadvertent result of grinding his Draugr quest for months on end. He was no stranger to gory scenes after all he had done since the integration, but the gruesome scene was starting to get to him a bit. He had even considered giving up on the class quest and acquire a finisher somewhere else.

But after discussing the task with Travo Raso, Zac had come to better understand the purpose of such a quest. It was to prepare him for the future.

The further you walked on the road of cultivation, the harder it would become to kill your enemies. First of all, those who didn't possess the means and instincts to survive in the Multiverse died before reaching any great heights. Those who survived possessed all kinds of methods to escape with their lives intact, even when overwhelmed by a superior foe.

Using teleportation talismans was just the most common method, and it had a lot of limitations. There were also skills, clone methods, illusions, and all kinds of other things. Some late Hegemons could even survive by hiding their soul in a drop of blood while their body was destroyed. This wasn't a huge issue for Zac's human side where he struck hard and fast, leaving nothing behind.

But it was different for his Fetters of Desolation-class.

Whittling down one's enemy was an effective method to win, but it meant that some of your targets were bound to escape. The real world wasn't like the wilderness, where every beast was unable to back down from a fight. However, there was one surefire remedy to prevent any escape method; destroy one's soul.

Only extremely rare techniques like Aia Ouro's Thousand Lights Avatar could survive something like that, and not without paying a price. In a true life-and-death battle, most

warriors would therefore try to strike the soul first, and the core second. Destroying a Cosmic Core would cripple a cultivator, which was the second-best thing to actually killing an enemy. But that would still leave you exposed to retaliation.

It was this mindset that the System had been trying to instill into Zac and his Inexorable Stance, one kill at a time. Now, that fighting style had spilled over to his human side. He had been a bit worried about the moral implications, but Travo Raso and his friend had laughed for a good minute when he raised his concerns about preventing people from reincarnating or entering the afterlife.

Since then, the two had called him Little Lord, short for Little Lord of the Underworld, for his presumed ability to dictate life after death. In truth, not even Divine Monarchs possessed the power to utterly annihilate a soul to the point reincarnation or resurrection was prevented.

Zac was exhausted, but he still started running away from the battlefield. He had proved himself already, and there was no time to linger around until some other apex predator of the second band arrived. A huge grilled flank appeared in his hand as he ran, and he started devouring the meat like a starving ghost.

The benefits his most recent Hidden Node provided were amazing, improving his strength in so many ways. However, it was very draining, and he still hadn't found a way to turn it off. He could somewhat strengthen or weaken the effect by altering his mental state, but emotions were not so easily controlled. He still hadn't found the limits of what it could provide, since it was impossible for him to enter a true life-and-death struggle in the Orom World.

Fighting for a few hours now left him winded in a way that he had never felt since becoming a cultivator, and absorbing Cosmic Energy or Miasma didn't help. The only thing he had found to alleviate the exhaustion was devouring high-grade food, forcing him to constantly run around with mountains of easily-held dishes. Sometimes when the beasts refused to relent, he had been forced to fight while stuffing his face with his free hand.

Zac kept running for another ten minutes until space rippled around him. He had finally reached the third band, which meant he would be able to skip the first two bands next time he came here. Of course, Zac prayed that wouldn't be necessary. One year had passed since he evolved his soul and last used his Oblivion Energy.

He still hadn't reached the limits of what he could store, but he was getting close. It was time to make his final preparations before he broke out of this place.

Chapter 809: Hubris

Zac looked down at his hands with incredulity and despair as the last embers of Oblivion dissipated in front of him. Soon, just a depression in reality remained, and a moment later there was nothing. The searing pain that ran from his head down his arms was nothing compared to the agony of defeat.

He had failed.

Sixteen months. He had saved up Oblivion Energy for sixteen months, yet that wasn't enough. The full-powered Annihilation Sphere had only managed to tear a hole in space no larger than a hand, and it had closed so quickly that the deadly ball of destruction didn't have time to provide access. Even if he had been gutsy enough to push through the small rip with [**Abyssal Phase**], he would have been torn apart before even entering it.

His thoughts had ground to a halt as his emotions ran amok, but he soon pushed down the burgeoning panic as he disappeared, transformed into an abyssal wraith. The surroundings of the death-attuned zone turned into a blur, and he crossed tens of thousands of meters in an instant. Still, that wasn't enough, and he kept going, thankful he had plotted an escape path in case of failure.

Zac couldn't be certain, but unleashing a three-meter tall ball of utter destruction was bound to raise some eyebrows in case anyone saw or sensed it. He wanted to be far, far away by the time anyone came to investigate. He only deactivated his skill five minutes later, at which point he had used up more than half of his Void Energy.

He returned into his corporeal form in the crown of a tree with extremely dense foliage, and he soon jumped down with a prayer mat under his arm like he had been sitting in the tree cultivating. He had passed through a good chunk of a zone in a

short few minutes, something that would normally have taken him days.

It should be impossible to connect him to the now-distant event unless the Orom itself was investigating. Zac kept going for another few hours until he reached his cultivation cave where he secluded himself, his eyes and ears peeled for any response. Hours turned to days as his nerves kept fraying, but no Emerald Attendant came to take him in. Neither did his prisoner brand act up, and Zac finally let himself relax after a week had passed.

However, while it didn't look like he was in trouble at the moment, Zac found himself gazing out from the window he had carved inside the dead tree, his mind bereft of purpose and direction. This was supposed to be it. He had spent the last four months squeezing everything he could from this place, from gathering all kinds of treasures to furiously sparring with all kinds of elders.

It was to the point that he had raised some eyebrows and started some rumors, and he had almost been drowned in piles of fate tokens. He had known that his actions were a bit suspicious, but he couldn't help himself with so many treasures available all around him. Now, it was all for nothing, and he found himself stuck in this place after acting so mysterious. It felt like a thousand eyes were trained on the tree he hid inside.

He had already spent eighteen months in the Orom World, far longer than what he had expected or planned. Yet he didn't find himself any closer to escaping now than he did when he just arrived. If anything, he felt further away from returning to Earth than ever, as one escape plan after another had fallen through. Now, he wasn't even certain what to do. His bloodline wasn't enough, and not even the remnants could pave the way to freedom.

Should he try getting relegated and hope there were some weaknesses to exploit over there? No, those people were even more tightly controlled than the cultivators of Orom World. He would only be sending himself there to suffer. Zac desperately

searched for solutions, but he hadn't managed to come up with anything over the last week, let alone now. He was stuck.

Despair threatened to swallow Zac whole as he imagined himself forced into desperate cultivation, struggling to keep up with his odd constitution until he finally succumbed as so many had before him. Until now, he had somewhat considered himself above those around him, gifted with supreme fate. This might have been a prison for others, but for him, it was just an opportunity.

The hubris.

No! Zac shook his head as his abyssal eyes regained their clarity. He refused to give up. If the force of the Annihilation Sphere had been too weak, then he simply needed to boost it. If he increased the output tenfold, the spatial tear should be bigger and more stable. He simply needed to strengthen his soul and his Dao to make it happen.

It might take a while to push his Fragment of the Coffin to become a Branch of Death, but he was confident he could accomplish that in this place, even without compromising his path. If that wasn't enough, he would push his Branch of Death and the Branch of the War Axe to the middle stage, turning the Daos into even more powerful vessels to form the Annihilation Spheres.

Perhaps he could improve the process of forming the outburst, focusing its power with the help of his empowered soul. Until now, he had always just pushed two streams of Dao into the pathways on his shoulders, but there was perhaps more he could do. For example, what if he created specific braids to empower the streams? Perhaps even Dao Arrays?

The more Zac thought about it, the more his hope was rekindled. Perhaps there were some treasures or methods that would allow the incorporeal form of **[Abyssal Phase]** to survive inside the annihilation sphere long enough to escape. This wasn't the end; it was just the beginning.

If eighteen months wasn't enough to escape, he'd cultivate for three years. If that failed, then ten. He wouldn't stop pushing himself in his pursuit of freedom until the Orom ripped him

apart. Even then, he'd at least try to go out with a bang, damaging the big bastard or killing its descendants. Perhaps he could detonate the remnants in his head, creating one final blast of chaos upon his demise.

For now, Zac figured he'd avoid using his Draugr side for a while just in case, and he transformed back into his human form before emerging from the cultivation tree he had used as one of his home bases over the past year. He didn't dismantle the arrays that shielded it, but he did take out a warning array before leaving.

It was a simple array that would transmit a signal to a daughter-array in his Cosmos Sack in case anyone forced its way into the tree. From there, Zac walked toward the side of the living, passing through the forest that had almost become as familiar to him as the forest of Port Atwood. In total, he had spent roughly two-thirds of his waking time in the wilderness, constantly pushing himself to improve his combat stances.

However, he had never stayed more than a month in the wilderness each time, sometimes just a week or two. In-between, he had traveled across the Orom World, sparring against dozens of different Hegemons or being imparted some general knowledge. Finally, he had set up two rudimentary cultivation caves, one for each persona, where he digested the insights before heading out again.

There were only so many hours available each day, and every aspect became more and more demanding as he progressed further. Zac had figured that he could evolve his Daos and work on his soul anywhere, and his limited time in the Orom World would be best spent by utilizing the old monsters and improving his cultivation stances.

He had at least made some small inroads into forming the Thousand Lights Avatar in-between battles in the wilderness. He estimated that his spiritual body had become around 10% more congealed down to his throat, which was a step in the right direction. It was less than 1% toward forming a proper avatar, but it was something.

Zac kept going for two days until he reached his second cultivation cave in the neighboring life-attuned zone. This one was in a tree as well, but rather in the crown of a majestic oak that towered above most of the trees in the life-infused forest. Sitting in its crown and gazing upon the surroundings had helped him gain some insights into the Dao of Life.

The scenery had played a big role when upgrading **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** into **[Ancestral Woods]** as well, though he had drawn inspiration from multiple sources. The teleportation was a mix of his omnipresence of **[Pillar of Desolation]** and the lanky swordsman in the Battle of Fates, who could move through the sword pillars he had erected.

Unfortunately, the high-grade skill-upgrading chamber along with years of accumulation hadn't been enough to form another ultimate pathbound skill, **[Ancestral Woods]** was above-average even among peak-quality domain skills. The result was no doubt better than what he would have accomplished with just a **[Fractal Framework Array]**.

For example, he had managed to completely transform the defensive properties of the skill. Before, the skill had conjured a divine tree with defensive charges, but those had never really come into play. They weren't powerful enough to help if his constitution proved insufficient. Furthermore, he was already getting **[Empyrean Aegis]** as soon as he got his life-attuned Dao Branch.

So instead, Zac had taken inspiration from **[Undying Legion]** when making the adjustments. Now, the trees could soak up some of the damage he received, apart from providing the omniscience, attribute buffs, and teleportation. It had become like a skill with over a hundred small charges, where each teleportation expended one charge.

It was altogether superior to the previous version, with the exception that the trees had become semi-corporeal now. Attacks infused with either Dao Branches or enough energy could damage the trees, though it would take some effort to rip them all apart. That was doubly true considering **[Adamance of Eoz]** transferred over to his human side through **[Quantum Gate]**, even if the node didn't appear in his status screen.

Zac spent the next few days in his tree crown regrouping himself and planning his next move. Until now, he had focused mostly on his techniques, but if he wanted to strengthen the effect of his Annihilation Sphere, he would have to put more effort into his Daos and his soul.

Should he set up his cultivation cave on the island again, this time springing for a more permanent setup to work on his soul? His Soul Aperture had completely stabilized after the evolution by now, and he could start practicing the third layer of **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** at any time. Problem was, he only had 200 Purchase Points to his name after his pre-escape shopping spree.

He had lots of ideas, but he felt he could use some guidance. He infused some energy into his Cosmos Sack, where over two hundred tokens floated in the void. He was the most familiar with Travo Raso, but the old man had entered seclusion to prepare for the 3-year reshuffle of new arrivals. Eventually, his eyes turned to a glistening token; the one belonging to the unique lifeform Ubo.

Zac had tried visiting the elemental once before, but Ubo was still out from its cultivation cave at the time. But that was months ago, and Zac figured he could give it a try. The elemental lived in the same life-attuned zone as Zac had set up his cave in, though on the opposite side. Considering he was also a Monarch, who better than Ubo to ask for some pointers?

There was also Heda, but Zac was still a bit leery about the cultivator locked in a perpetual battle for her soul with some terrifying parasitic plant life. So Zac made his way toward the mountain that Ubo had made its home. Ten days later he arrived, and he once more gazed with marvel at the golden mountain.

It was teeming with life, even emitting a weak halo as though it was a holy mountain from legend. But even though it was drenched in powerful energies, there wasn't actually a single plant growing on its slopes. Perhaps that was why Ubo had occupied this spot in the first place; its flavor of life matched Ubo's origin.

The whole mountain was covered in a shimmering barrier as well, and Zac infused some energy into the invitation token to notify the elemental of his arrival.

“So you’re here, youngster. Come in,” a voice emerged from within the mountain after a moment, and the barrier flickered to provide passage.

Zac curiously entered, and he soon found himself in the heart of the mountain. He had thought that his cultivation cave back home on Earth was impressive enough, but he couldn’t help but gawk as he looked around. Ubo had essentially hollowed out the whole mountain, and over a hundred golden pillars rose over a thousand meters into the air, each one of them covered in esoteric engravings.

There were simply arrays everywhere, and Zac was almost blinded by the thousands of Divine Crystals that illuminated the place. There was even plenty of natural sunlight in the cave as well, thanks to strategically placed vents in the ceiling. The area was as large as a whole village, and it contained even contained a lake where Zac spotted thousands of golden carps swimming.

There were also dozens of buildings and side-caves whose purpose Zac couldn’t pinpoint because of obscuring arrays blurring them out.

In the center of it all was a massive altar reaching over fifty meters into the air, and the energies that swirled around it was almost a match to the cave he had hired to open his Hidden Node. And even if Zac wasn’t an expert, he could tell that most of the arrays surrounding the altar weren’t even activated, which meant that Ubo probably could boost the environment even further.

Seeing this place made him embarrassed just thinking of his dinky little cave back home, or even worse the crude camps he had set up here in the Orom World. Then again, he had visited quite a few cultivation caves by now, and this one was definitely more intricate than anything else he had come across.

Some warriors were even worse than he was, where they had simply just found a spot that they liked and thrown out a mat.

“Not bad, huh?” Ubo laughed, its voice reverberating through the cave.

Zac looked around with confusion until he spotted the mysterious stone on top of the altar. It was just sitting on top of an embroidered pillow, but a moment later it rose into the air as the shimmering body of Ubo congealed.

“It’s eye-opening,” Zac agreed as he looked at the meticulously designed cave. “There are truths hidden in this arrangement.”

“There are truths hidden in everything,” Ubo countered. “But you are correct. Every item and building in this cave are part of a formation I created to imprint my path on my surroundings. This way, I am never led astray while meditating. I’m not as powerful as those at the peak in this cave, those who are able to subvert the will of the Orom World and rebuff the subliminal messages.”

The next moment, Ubo appeared at the foot of the altar, and it conjured a table along with some spiritual fruits.

“If my memory serves, roughly two years have passed since your arrival,” Ubo said after the two sat down. “Do you feel confident about the three-year shake-up?”

“It should be fine,” Zac slowly said. “I read you need 15,000 points on average to pass at the E-grade. I’ve already passed that, and I still have time to make more progress.”

“Not bad,” Ubo nodded. “But don’t get complacent. You should have read some of the records.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Zac muttered with a shake of his head. “How could someone at the E-grade gather more than 100,000 Contribution Points in three years?”

The current record at the E-grade was set two million years ago, where a woman called Jala Evermyre gained 118,235 Contribution Points before the 3-year deadline. Even forming a Dao Branch was only worth a couple of thousand Contribution Points. To pass 100,000 in three years, she must

have not only gained multiple advanced-stage Dao breakthroughs, but also practiced some other highly valued methods like soul cultivation or bloodline evolutions.

Even then, Zac's performance wasn't anything to scoff at. He had already gained over 35,000 Contribution Points since arriving in the Orom World, making him pretty much safe from the 3-year culling. And that was without even aiming to maximize his Contribution Points. He was confident that he would be able to gain quite a bit more over the next year as well, as long as he didn't get stuck on some bottleneck.

"Well, that particular lady only stayed for four years before leaving. The Orom World also entered a 20-year weakened state around the same time, so most assume someone in her family took issue with their descendant being caught," Ubo snorted. "So what brings you here today?"

"I encountered a bit of a setback recently," Zac sighed. "I figured I would stretch my legs and clear my head for a bit."

"Setbacks are part of cultivation. I once fell into a spatial crack that threw me into a corrupted inheritance trial. Took me 800 years to break out," Ubo laughed. "Setbacks can be as valuable as epiphanies, provided you make the most of it. Tell me, what are you planning on doing next?"

Zac felt that the atmosphere had shifted a bit, like there was some sort of hidden implication to the elemental's question.

"Well, I'll keep training and then try again," Zac eventually said after a while. "I don't like to back down after having decided on something."

"Ha!" Ubo laughed. "I guess the Lord was right."

"What?" Zac blurted with a sinking feeling in his chest.

Had someone exposed him, connecting his two identities and his escape attempt? Zac immediately got ready to fight or escape, but what was the point even if he managed to kill the elemental in front of him? There was still this anonymous Lord who could turn him in at any time. Or was the Lord the Orom?

Zac frantically tried to figure out what to do, but his mind froze when he saw a familiar object appear above Ubo's hand.

"The Lord contacted me half a year ago. He told me that you would visit me soon," the elemental explained. "It was he who instructed me to ask you about your plans, and present this thing in case your answer was to his satisfaction."

Zac barely heard the elemental's words, his eyes glued to the token hovering in the air.

"Perennial Vastness..."

Chapter 810: Opportunity

Zac made his way toward the eye of the life-attuned zone, his heart filled with misgivings. The token Ubo showed had just been a projection, but according to the elemental, the real Perennial Vastness token was his as long as he met with the Lord. But since when did good things simply fall into one's lap? He was pretty lucky, but not that lucky.

Ubo was clearly just the messenger, but the elemental had thankfully confirmed that the so-called Lord wasn't the Orom itself.

But Ubo refused to elaborate any further, only urging him to not keep the Lord waiting. Zac had reluctantly agreed, and he left the mountain a minute later, his previous plans put on the backburner. After all, the Perennial Vastness Token was too good to pass up, and it might even be his ticket out this place.

At this point, Zac could only pray that this mysterious Lord who seemed to have anticipated his every move was friendly. Hopefully, he wouldn't demand something outlandish in exchange for the token, but Zac was prepared for the worst-case scenario. He was filled to the brim with Creation Energy, and his Void Energy had mostly been recovered by this point.

Between the two, he had a decent shot at even taking out Monarchs in this place.

But there were no guarantees. After all, there were just over 100 zones in the Orom World, and most of the warriors living at the heart of a zone were either High or Peak Monarch. Weirdly enough, Zac had absolutely no recollection of who this particular powerhouse was. Come to think of it, it was a bit odd he hadn't even considered the issue.

Zac's tree fortress was a day's way into the life-attuned zone from the small island, and if he kept going for five days or so he'd reach the heart of the zone. They were practically

neighbors, but Zac had barely spared the powerhouse a thought. Had his mind been influenced to ignore the matter somehow?

The realization filled him with even greater trepidation, but there was no turning back now. It was hard to tell exactly how many of his secrets this Lord knew, and avoiding him might be even worse than just facing the issue head-on.

Two days passed as Zac got closer and closer to his destination, and he had already passed dozens of massive barriers shielding huge cultivation havens. These inner parts were exclusively controlled by Monarchs, and all their caves were fitted with massive gathering arrays. As a result, the environment between these massive bubbles was even worse than at his treehouse.

Of course, if a Hegemon dared set up camp this far into a zone, he'd quickly get kicked out if he didn't have enough strength to defend his claim. No one wanted to die, and any energy siphoned by a neighboring Gathering Array was an attempt on their lives as far as the cultivators were concerned.

Even then, Zac realized that the cultivation havens simply stopped as he got closer to the true center of the zone, and the environment was suddenly awash with life. The density was at least three times compared to his treehouse, and the attunements infused in the environment were equally impressive. Even the rustling of some leaves filled Zac with wonder and inspiration.

Oddly enough, Zac was also filled with a sense of familiarity, but he couldn't pinpoint the source of the impression. It was almost like something was calling to him, but the feeling was completely different from the far more palpable urge he got from the remnants. Was it the Lord? Did they actually know each other?

But that was extremely unlikely, unless they had met in the Orom World without Zac knowing.

Soon, the chaotic forests of unbridled life had been replaced by an orderly bamboo forest, where each pole reached for the sky. Each bamboo shoot was almost identical in size, but that

didn't mean they weren't instilled with the exuberant energy of the environment. In fact, these trees seemed far more life-infused compared to the random plantlife behind him.

It almost felt like he would be able to squeeze out pure life from the shoots if he so desired, but he didn't dare doing anything of the sort. He was right in the core by now, and this forest was probably planted by the Lord himself. If he needed any further evidence this place was claimed, he could spot various red and golden ornaments hanging between the bamboo poles up in the sky, giving the forest almost a festive feel.

Zac's instincts told him that most of those things were Spiritual Tools and high-grade talismans, yet Zac was unable to discern as much as a ripple of energy coming from any of them. As for the markings on the ornaments, they reminded Zac of the Sanskrit engravings on Mount Everlasting Peace back on Earth. They seemed filled with meaning, but they didn't seem related to the common script that made up most arrays.

Zac stood rooted in place, hesitant about what to do from this point forward. There was no barrier or vast aura barring his entry, and he had been invited. But could he just barge in like this? This place didn't feel like somewhere he should intrude upon, especially not with all those unidentifiable talismans hanging above his head.

'Follow the path,' a voice suddenly echoed through Zac's mind, and Zac steeled his heart as he entered, following a small paved path that had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

The voice had filled him with an even greater sense of familiarity, but his brows furrowed with confusion as he walked down the forest path. Just who was it? He couldn't place it at all.

The forest was larger than Zac expected, and he walked for over three hours without reaching the end. By that point, he had passed hundreds of thousands of bamboo poles and ornaments, and he could barely fathom their collective value.

By now, he had figured out their purpose at least; they were soul-nurturing talismans that filled him with vigor.

Not only that, but Zac had realized that the whole bamboo forest was just one gargantuan array, where each bamboo shoot and ornament acted as a flag. The arrangement was terrifyingly complex, and he couldn't even begin to comprehend its purpose. But finally, the scenery shifted as he reached a small temple complex next to a babbling brook.

Zac had suspected as much from the various clues, but this confirm it. The 'Lord' was a monk of the Buddhist Sangha.

The temple was much smaller than the one on Mount Everlasting Peace, with two small bell towers at the front, followed by a main hall where Zac vaguely could make out the statue of some deity. Further in the back, Zac could spot two mirrored buildings as well, and Zac guessed they were either for meditation or living.

At first glance, it felt simple, to the point it might as well have been a random temple situated somewhere in the mountains in east Asia. But there was something grand hiding within the simplicity. For example, Zac didn't dare enter the temple in front of him. Just looking in its direction made his soul shudder.

It felt like a true deity hid within that statue, and Zac's instincts told him that encroaching on its territory would have disastrous consequences. Even if he didn't die, he was afraid that his Dao Heart would be damaged. He once more remembered the warning of that necromancer when he just arrived, of how Buddhists were natural pathbreakers. Looking at that temple, he finally understood what he meant.

He turned away from the temple and instead started walking toward a small platform by the water. It had actually taken him a few times, but Zac had finally noticed there was someone sitting on top of it. However, the bald man was so in tune with the surroundings that Zac's eyes didn't even register he was there.

In fact, Zac guessed that he was only able to spot him because the man wanted him to. As he walked over, he got a better

look at the man, which only increased his confusion. He was some sort of humanoid, but he was more akin to a dwarf than a human. Zac guessed he would barely reach his chest when standing up, yet the monk probably weighed more than he did.

When you added his lack of hair, he gave off an almost cherubic impression. The monk had three marks on his forehead that emitted a mysterious aura, but Zac's eyes were still drawn to a token fastened to his sloppy kasaya. An emerald badge. As Zac closed in the monk opened his eyes, showcasing two silver irises, and he smiled in Zac's direction.

But why did his gaze look so shifty?

He had the temple, the clothes, and the spiritual forest, yet Zac felt like the fat little man in front of him was one of those fake monks scamming travelers in tourist hotspots. And his first words only strengthened that feeling.

“Amitabha. Welcome, benefactor. Karma pulls us together, we are connected. Benefactor, you carry great destiny on your self,” the monk smiled as he walked down from the precept platform. “But with great fate comes dangerous tribulations. How about making a small offering to this poor temple and receiving its blessings in return?”

Zac blankly looked at the smiling monk in front of him, barely believing what he was hearing. This monk was probably a peak Monarch and an Emerald Badge, yet he was trying to solicit an E-grade cultivator for resources?

“I would, but I am afraid I would be punished for sharing resources,” Zac said with feigned disappointment as he showcased the prison brand on his hand.

“How can the Orom's Law measure to Buddha's love?” the monk admonished with a sad look. “But this poor monk hears the willingness in your voice and senses the benevolence in your heart, and will therefore gratefully accept this offering. Come, let me show benefactor around.”

Zac was confused at first, but he almost swore when he saw that the monk was holding one of the Spatial Rings Zac had hidden within his sleeves. That particular one held a good

chunk of low-grade materials along with a pile of Cultivation Methods he had planned on selling through Calrin.

“That’s...” Zac exclaimed, but the monk simply walked away, chanting ‘Amitabha’.

Zac didn’t have the slightest idea how the hell the thieving monk snatched one of his Spatial Rings, but he breathed out in relief when the rings that held the real treasures were still on his person. His instincts told him to just suck up the loss and leave, but he eventually took a calming breath before reluctantly following the monk.

He still hadn’t accomplished any of his goals of coming here, so he couldn’t just leave.

“Ubo said that your eminence wanted to meet with me?” Zac eventually said as the monk seemed content with just taking a stroll. “About the token...”

“This poor monk has stayed here so long, alas. But he has heard many tales of wonder. A previous visitor described the marvelous wines cultivators enjoy. It piqued this poor monk’s interest,” the fat little monk interjected before giving Zac a pointed look. “Benefactor just arrived at this world, no? Perhaps, benefactor can expand this poor monk’s understanding.”

Zac mutely handed over one of his vats of liquor and then added two more as the monk’s expression showed clear signs of dissatisfaction. He didn’t even bother asking why a monk wanted alcohol. The bald little bastard had already robbed him, so what if he also partook in meat and liquor?

“Amitabha. To understand all creation one must partake in all creation,” the monk said with a self-suffering look as he took a deep swig from one of the vats.

Zac hesitated to ask again, fearing that the monk would just counter with more demands, but a flash of light suddenly flew in his direction. He hurriedly snatched it, and his eyes widened when he saw it was the Perennial Vastness Token.

“Benefactor has grown a lot since we last met. Hopefully, this thing will help down the road,” the monk smiled as he kept

walking.

“We’ve met before?” Zac asked with confusion, still unable to make sense of the familiar feeling. He almost believed it was some illusion skill the monk used to scam people.

“As this poor monk said, we are connected,” the monk smiled. “Our roads have intersected before. Twice, in fact.”

“What?” Zac blurted, but the brook and the bamboo were suddenly gone.

A small cherry tree swayed in the wind, and a unique creature sat in silent meditation. He had no legs, but wings and two unusually long arms. A moment later, the scene shifted again, and Zac saw a fat little youth putting a whole mountain into his inner world.

“Lord 84th? The Lotus Emperor?” Zac exclaimed, and he felt some sort of blockage snapping in his mind, and he could suddenly connect two and two again.

So it was another avatar. Zac should’ve guessed the moment he saw the fat little man. However, something must’ve blocked his thoughts, just like Lord 84th had somehow removed one of his futures back on Earth.

“It is surprising. In this vast universe, benefactor has not only met my 84th incarnation, but also formed a Karmic Cycle with one of my still-sleeping avatars,” the Buddhist smiled. “Truly a blessing.”

“May I ask who your esteemed self are?” Zac queried.

“This poor monk managed to awaken third by a stroke of luck. My Dharmic name is Three Virtues,” the monk smiled as they passed by one of the inner structures, and Zac couldn’t believe his eyes when he spotted two blindingly gorgeous women sitting inside chatting.

The monk actually had girlfriends staying at the temple? Zac felt his understanding of Buddhism had reached new highs, or new lows depending on how you looked at it, after this one short visit. But that shock was nothing compared to what he saw in the opposite building.

It hovered inside some sort of glass cage, and an outer seal of Buddhist runes stopped any aura from leaking. But it was no mistaking it. There was a Shard of Creation in this temple.

“That’s!” Zac exclaimed, but he quickly tried to make his face impassive.

“Benefactor likes this thing?” Three Virtues smiled as he glanced at the shard, but he soon shook his head. “Benefactor should be careful. There is an undying will hidden inside, a will that not even this poor monk’s sutras can cleanse.”

Zac looked at the sealed Shard of Creation for a few more moments, and he was slowly starting to form a hypothesis. There was no way the monk just happened to lead him past this thing on accident.

“This thing is a blight on your fine temple,” Zac slowly said. “I am willing to take it off your hands.”

“That would surely be an act of great benevolence,” Three Virtues nodded as it was a matter of course. “Alas, there is a problem.”

“What’s the matter?” Zac said, inwardly groaning as he saw that shady look in the monk’s eyes again.

“Have benefactor heard of Batallion Leader Kaldor?”

Two weeks later, Zac crept closer to the heart of the dead zone, once more relying on his Draugr persona. In his hands was the roughly crafted invitation token that shifty Monk imparted with him before throwing him out of the bamboo forest. The invitation token to the overlord of the Pure Death-zone.

According to Three Virtues, he was more than happy to get rid of the Shard of Creation. In fact, he had only reluctantly gotten it from the Emerald Badge Contribution Store to balance out the Splinter of Oblivion that this Kaldor bought a while back.

As to why Three Virtues felt Zac was the man for the job to snatch that thing, Zac had a pretty good idea. The monk hadn’t said it outright, but he definitely knew about Zac’s two races somehow. Three Virtues had strongly indicated that while Batallion Leader Kadlor held no love for the living, he had left some invitation tokens for promising undead warriors to find.

And one of those tokens had somehow entered the hands of Three Virtues.

Zac didn't know if the monk could sense the remnants in his mind as well, but it was certainly possible. But Zac was convinced that the monk wanted Zac to collect a pair. As to what the monk was planning, Zac didn't know. Did he know that two remnants would lead to the formation of a Glimpse of Chaos? Did he want to use Zac to escape?

Thankfully, the monk had already provided Zac with one escape route from the Orom World with the Perennial Vastness Token, and his instincts told him that the monk's schemes weren't directed at himself. Truthfully, Zac didn't believe for a second he'd survive an attempt on his life from the monk, so there was no point for Three Virtues to scheme against him. The strength of an Emerald Badge peak Monarch was far beyond what he had expected.

Zac knew he was being led by the nose as he got closer to the large fortress in the distance, but being forced to play a part in someone's scheme didn't necessarily mean your fate was out of your hands. There were risks, but there were also ample rewards to be had. His goal was to find five sets of remnants, and a third set had presented itself just after he'd evolved his soul?

No wonder the System had ignored him when Zac had pleaded with it to take him out so he could continue his mission.

"One of the new brats?" a rough voice echoed out from within the fortress when Zac got closer, and Zac groaned as his vision swam.

It felt like he was drowned in a sea of blood, and deafening screams of rage and suffering threatened to drive him mad. But Zac soon stabilized his mind and kept walking, guessing this was some sort of test. It was killing intent so condensed it had essentially turned into a mental attack, but his resilience against killing intent was far beyond normal by this point.

"Oh, not bad," a snort echoed from within as the gates swung open. "I don't hold much love for people wasting time on cultivating the soul, but you have a decent smell of carnage on

you. Seems you've even killed some of those ghost bastards and a pureblood bloodsucker? Pretty gutsy. Is that why you're hiding in here even if you're a pureblood Draugr?"

Zac froze for a moment, but he wryly smiled as he took off his mask, exposing a back-up face to his Arcaz Black persona. He should've guessed he wouldn't be able to hide his heritage to someone who was a match to that monk. Zac walked into the fortress, but the large field inside was empty.

He turned toward the castle next, but a barrier stopped him from going any further. So he could only stop in his tracks, waiting for the boss to come out.

"So you're the little bastard who caused such a ruckus in my zone a while back? Did you know I had to take the blame for that one? Bastard, costing me 50,000 Points," the voice swore, and Zac stumbled backward as another wave of killing intent almost knocked him out.

The aura that had descended on the square could only be forged through innumerable life-and-death battles. Neither the Ogre in the Big Axe Coliseum nor Greatest could even come close to the aura of supremacy that flooded the castle. The Havarok Autarch's killing intent might've been stronger, but it had been less condensed.

This was something else entirely.

Yet Zac stood his ground, feeling he'd be in more trouble if he fled. Thankfully, he was right, and the pressure subsided soon enough.

"So, I can guess why you're here. The stench of that cursed little thing is still all over you. Is that why you've nurtured your soul? You want to cram your head full of these things?" the man said, and Zac sensed that Kaldor's tone had changed from anger to curiosity.

"Something like that," Zac muttered, feeling that being straightforward with this Battalion Leader was his best goal. "It should make me stronger. At worst, I'll become a lunatic, and I'll be someone else's problem by then."

“Hah!” a laugh echoed out through the square. “Fair enough. Well, seeing as we’re the only two purebloods in this place, I guess I can help out a bit.”

“Lord is a Draugr as well?” Zac exclaimed with some excitement, hoping he could gain some insights into his Hidden Nodes.

“Bah, who’s one of you?” a snort came back, instantly dashing those hopes. “I can give you that thing. After all, I am a bit curious about what would happen. But I refuse to help someone useless, so you’d have to accomplish something to prove yourself.”

Zac inwardly prayed it wasn’t to take the Shard of Creation from the Monk. He wasn’t in any mood to deal with a catch-22 between two old monsters playing some game.

“A duel. No skills and no using that cursed energy. Within three years, land a single hit on me, no matter how weak. I will not use my Warbones, and I will restrain my Daos to peak Dao Fragments. Succeed, and I will give you that little splinter. Fail, and I will kill you,” Kaldor said. “Do you dare to take up the challenge?”

Zac didn’t immediately say yes. By the looks of it, this Kaldor was actually an Izh’Rak Reaver, and a pureblood at that. Zac still didn’t know much about them, except the fact that they were natural-born killing machines. They had extremely powerful constitutions and natural affinities for combat.

Even if Kaldor restrained his combat style to the level of Peak Dao Fragment, it would probably be perfectly integrated. With his huge amount of experience, it would be an extremely tough battle. Zac couldn’t ambush him with Void Energy either. That might work on Peak Hegemons and perhaps even Early Monarchs, but Zac held no such delusions after feeling the killing intent of Kaldor.

To get the splinter, he would have to win fair and square. But first, Zac needed to know more.

“How strong do I need to be to succeed?” Zac asked.

“If you manage to pass the fourth band in the wilderness, I’d say you have a fifty-fifty shot,” Kaldor said.

Zac slowly nodded. He had two choices now, one easy and one dangerous. He could either lay low until he reached Peak E-grade in this place before setting off with the Perennial Vastness token. Or he could gamble his life to seize the third set of remnants. It took him one year to pass the first two bands. Could he pass two more in three years?

Possibly, as long as he made some meaningful breakthroughs.

He had almost managed to tear apart space with a single Annihilation Sphere a month ago. With chaos coursing through his body, escaping and destroying the brand on his hand would be a cinch. His gaze turned to the ring on his finger, where the Perennial Vastness token rested. But his Abyssal eyes soon turned back toward the castle where the Izh’Rak Reaver was secluded, his heart beating with conviction.

Was it even a choice?

Chapter 811: Entangled

“No!” an exasperated scream echoed through the sealed chamber, prompting an avalanche of guards to come running.

“Mistress?!” the captain shouted with worry as she activated the dozens of arrays that sealed the whole planet, preventing even Autarchs from breaking in.

Space was seared she unleashed her domain through the surroundings, but her demeanor soon softened as she turned to the young mistress with confusion. “Is something amiss?”

“I’m sorry to startle you. The connection is getting bad again,” Iz sighed as she waved her hand at the blurry screen in front of her. “No point in staying here now.”

“Please, wait! The impartment is not yet complete!” the captain urged with horror, seeing that her ward was attempting to leave her cultivation session early again. “I will call for Lord Valderak. He will have answers.”

“Alright,” Iz muttered as she sunk further down into the shimmering liquid.

A few seconds later, scorching flames broke space apart as a densely inscribed golem stepped through the void.

“Uncle,” Iz smiled from the pond.

“Little girl, what’s wrong? I had almost fallen asleep when arrays suddenly covered the whole planet,” the golem sighed.

“You guys keep overreacting every time I so much as yawn,” Iz muttered with a roll of her eyes.

“Your grandfather worries,” Valderak smiled before he turned to the flickering screen. “Oh, the Divine Mirror is blocked again?”

“It’s those stupid remnants,” Iz frowned as she rose from the pool again. “I already missed the last one. I’m going in person

this time.”

However, a gentle pressure stopped her from rising too far, and Iz once more sunk into the liquid as she glared at her uncle.

“There is only a finite amount of Everflame Bloom remaining since the birth of the era,” Valderak said with a shake of his head. “Few can stomach its cost. More importantly, your grandfather once risked his life seizing it in the Endless Storm. You cannot discard it.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Iz sighed. “I just... I’ve been sitting here for years, absorbing this thing. Now, Mr. Bug is about to do something stupid again, and I can’t even watch it in the mirror. This isn’t life. I want excitement like he has.”

“That brat sure knows how to attract trouble,” Valderak said with a bemused shake of his head. “I thought he was trapped inside that mutated Voidcatcher? Or did he escape?”

“He tried breaking out with those remnants, but it failed,” Iz giggled. “You should have seen his face. But now it looks like there is another set in that stupid fish.”

“His destiny has really become entangled with those things,” Valderak muttered. “No wonder, no wonder...”

“I can still see what’s going on, but the reception will only get worse as Chaos creates ripples across the river of time,” Iz complained. “I should have been there for the last one. I don’t want to miss it again.”

“How about this,” the golem eventually said after looking at the shimmering mirror for a few seconds. “The interference of Chaos is still weak. By the looks of it, we have time. We’ll ask Master to divine it for us. If you’ve finished absorbing the primal essence of the Everflame Bloom by the time the brat gets his hands on the next set, I’ll take you there in person.”

“And you won’t trick me into going to some trial or mystic realm this time?” Iz said with a raised brow.

“No tricks, I promise. So work hard on your cultivation,” Valderak grinned. “This is an opportunity every fire cultivator in the universe would dream of.”

“Alright,” Iz smiled as she sunk to the bottom of the pond, throwing a final look at the hazy image of the silly Draugr in the mirror. “I’m coming for you Mr. Bug.”

Having made his decision, Zac wasted no time.

“I want that splinter. I’ll take the challenge,” Zac said.

“Brat, I think I have an idea of what you’re planning to do with that thing, but you should know that it is as much a curse as an opportunity,” the Izh’Rak Reaver grunted. “Don’t sacrifice your future for some short-term benefits.”

“I’m aware,” Zac nodded. “I still want to give it a try.”

“Fine. The ignorant are truly fearless. Three years,” Kaldor snorted from within the mansion.

“About that... Would it be alright if I came here to ask for pointers?” Zac ventured, feeling he would be a fool not to try to seize this opportunity.

Commander Kaldor was one of the most powerful warriors he had ever encountered, most likely even eclipsing Yrial. Even some offhanded guidance from this man would be worth its weight in gold.

“What? You want me to help you defeat me? When has there ever been such a good thing?” Kaldor laughed. “Prove yourself before you ask me for any pointers. Now get out of here.”

A wave of extremely condensed Dao rippled out from the mansion the next moment, and Zac felt like he was looking into the maw of some primordial beast. He hurriedly scurried out of the way, exiting through the gate which closed behind him. Zac shook his head and started walking away, but he stopped when he sensed a small item flying toward him.

Zac caught the small token, at which point Kaldor’s voice echoed out in his mind. “Go to Pavina. Learn to walk before you can run.”

A smile of anticipation spread across Zac’s face as he looked at the token in his hand. As far as he knew, the Silver

Attendant Pavina hadn't appeared in the Coliseum since Zac saw her fight over a year ago. Even then, her dominating display of pure Death still lingered in the back of his mind, and it had been a major source of inspiration as he worked on his skill quest and his Inexorable Stance in the wilderness.

In fact, his death-based fighting stance was a lot more mature compared to his living side by now. He had already delved into the suffocating inexorability of death during the Twilight Ascent, and over the past year, he had infused a lot of lethality into the stance as well. If he hadn't spent the last four months working on his Evolutionary Stance while collecting treasures, his human side would have been left far behind already.

By the looks of it, that imbalance would only get worse over the next three years. Unfortunately, there was nothing to do about it. After all, failing in the duel against Kaldor didn't only mean not getting his hand on the remnant. It meant death unless he managed to flee somehow. After all, Zac's instincts told him that Kaldor wasn't joking around when he said he said that failure would result in death.

But Zac wasn't planning on escaping in either case. He had already passed the second band of the wilderness with his less refined stance. If he pushed himself, he would already be able to make some headway into the third band in his undead form. Now, he simply needed to build on that foundation and conquer the next two bands.

Kaldor had given him three years to prepare, but Zac wanted to conquer the fourth band in two. That way, he had some leeway and time to polish his stance even further. After all, Kaldor only gave him a 50-50 shot even if he passed the fourth band. Obviously, Zac didn't want to risk his life unless he absolutely had to.

Before heading to the Wilderness to continue grinding, Zac knew could use some advice. Luckily, Kaldor had provided just the thing. Zac immediately set course Pavina's Cultivation Cave, following the directions inside the token. There was clearly a connection between the two undead powerhouses, considering Pavina's residence was only half a day's journey away from Kaldor's castle.

Furthermore, Pavina's mansion looked almost identical.

The gates swung open as he got closer, and Zac once more took off the mask he generally wore in his Draugr form before he walked inside. He figured Pavina already knew about his race, or would know soon enough. A minute later, he stood in a hazy hall littered with discarded weapons, burning incense sticks, and large tapestries that looked like banners that had been through a few wars.

It almost seemed like the mansion had barely survived a brutal siege, with both walls and pillars covered in scars. However, while the interiors were nowhere near as orderly as the beautiful cave of Uvo, the life elemental, Zac felt there was more at play in this place than met the eye. There was truth hidden in the disorder, and every single scar on the walls was instilled with meaning.

In the midst of it all, the Silver Attendant Revenant sat on a prayer mat with a large unfurled scroll in her hands. She curiously looked at Zac as he walked over, giving special attention to his abyssal eyes. Even if there was no killing intent or malice in her stare, Zac suddenly felt like he was trapped in a world of endless death.

The pressure was suffocating, forcing Zac to take a steadying breath as he stopped in place. It felt like he had been sent to the deepest recesses of hell, but the feeling thankfully only lasted a moment before Pavina relented. Even then, Zac was shaken, feeling like he had been exposed to something far greater than a Dao Domain.

"Sorry, I am still getting used to the power of my inner world," Pavina said with a small smile as the pressure disappeared. "You are the one who dared enter a life-death duel with Master?"

Zac wasn't surprised to hear Pavina was Kaldor's disciple. Master-disciple relationships were quite rare in this place because of the direct competition, but they weren't unheard of. However, Zac was more shocked by the other piece of information she divulged.

“You’ve become a Monarch?” Zac exclaimed with shock, remembering that Pavina was just a peak Hegemon back when she fought in the arena.

Normally, an ascension into monarchy would be a grand event, especially for someone like Pavina who likely walked the boundless path of Pure Death. Boundless cultivators were beset by the Grand Minor Tribulation.

The name was a bit odd, but taking that step would summon the most powerful of the minor tribulations. There were two weaker stages as well, one upon reaching E-grade and one when becoming a Hegemon. By the point Zac became an E-grade cultivator, he was still cultivating the Heavenly Path without any real sense of direction, but he would have to withstand the old Heaven’s punishment upon trying to form his core.

Even cultivators walking Heaven’s Path would cause quite a scene when forming their inner world. It was an event somewhat similar to the Dao Apparitions in the Tower Of Eternity, where their understanding of the Dao was put on display. Unfortunately, the Orom teleported people away when they broke through as a security measure, placing them in some different compartment of its body.

It robbed spectators of their chance to glean some truths into the Dao, but the Orom prioritized its safety over providing opportunities to its prisoners.

“It was long overdue,” Pavina shrugged with a casual expression, but Zac saw a small smirk on her face before she returned to her neutral expression.

“Still, it’s an amazing accomplishment,” Zac said, pushing down any sense of shame to properly butter up this recently ascended Monarch. “It’s one thing to do it in the empire where our people have all the facilities available. But to accomplish it in the Orom World takes another level of talent.”

“It’s nothing much, just passable,” Pavina said with a studiously impassive face, but Zac noticed that the basic mat set out for him had been replaced by a much higher-quality one in an instant.

Zac wanted to roll his eyes upon confirming this seemingly cold master really had unleashed a bit of her newfound power to show off her breakthrough. But Zac also remembered how the Revenant warrior had manhandled that other Silver Attendant on the arena. He had put up a valiant struggle, but Pavina had been in the driver's seat from beginning to end, not taking a single hit.

She had stood out among Hegemons, even in this place.

“What do you seek from me, child?” Pavina asked as Zac sat down.

“Some advice, I guess,” Zac said as he organized his thoughts. He had clearly contacted her already, so he simply decided to jump straight into it. “Commander Kaldor said I need to conquer the fourth band to have a decent chance of surviving his challenge. I think it's doable, but I want to avoid any pitfalls as I train over the next years.”

“Well, let's see what we're working with first,” Pavina said as she stood up.

Zac got right back on his feet with some surprise, mentally preparing himself for a tough challenge.

“With or without weapons?” Zac asked.

“I have heard of you,” Pavina slowly said. “You are making rapid progress from what I am told, but you are not yet at a stage where you can showcase your prowess without your weapons of choice.”

Zac simply nodded and took out one of his training axes, wasting no time as he rushed forward. He swung his axe in a ruthless underhand arc as the chains of his coffin aimed to pincer and restrict Pavina's movements. However, it was like Zac was trying to trap a cloud as she effortlessly weaved through the restrictions Zac set up as her finger moved toward his forehead.

Once more the feeling of inescapable death threatened to overwhelm him, and two chains slammed into the ground, pushing him back dozens of meters to avoid the strike. That simple movement had been too terrifying, making Zac move

away on instinct. Pavina was a Silver Attendant, but he could sense that she didn't even use the equivalent of 1,000 Attribute points when countering his opening salvo, and neither did she use the power of her inner world.

It was pure suppression through technique.

Still, the first swing had only been an attempt to get a sense of her strength, so Zac wasn't deterred as he shot forward again. He was trying to perfect the Inexorable Stance, so he had to be unstoppable, intractable. An army of death that would never stop, that would inevitably quench all hope and life.

The air screamed as he rushed forward, once more unleashing a barrage of strikes at the stationary revenant. The swings of his axe aimed to kill, while his chains aimed to maim. All strikes were designed to force a response that would open up weaknesses or prevent Pavina from attacking, allowing him to control the momentum until he could launch a killing blow.

It was just a duel, but Zac didn't hold anything back, confident that the Monarch in front of him wouldn't succumb to his attacks. Zac wanted to showcase all he had to get the most incisive advice. But he had to admit there was also a part of him that wanted to prove himself, to trip up this powerful warrior who walked a similar path as he did.

However, no matter what he tried, he kept finding himself at a disadvantage. Her movements were minute but sublime, and Zac hadn't even managed to push her off from her prayer mat even after a full minute of trying everything in his repertoire. She simply avoided his attacks with pinpoint precision or deflected them with flicks of her hands that almost felt lazy.

The chains that were supposed to bind and restrict her somehow became fetters that kept getting in the way of Zac's swings. Zac furiously pushed forward, but he couldn't help but feel like a marionette that played out a stage fight that was directed by Pavina rather than himself.

"That's enough," Pavina eventually said as she suddenly took a step forward, her left hand redirecting Zac's axe as her right stabbed right for his throat.

She stopped her attack right before her nails broke the skin, but Zac's hair still stood on end as he jumped backward. Throughout the fight, she had never used her superior attribute pool, and neither had she used the two spikes that seemed to be her weapon of choice. She hadn't utilized any of her Daos either, though every movement of hers was obviously in tune with the Dao and the truths of the cosmos.

And Pavina was just the disciple. He still had to fight her master, who no doubt was many times more skilled than she was. He still had a long way to go.

"What are your Daos?" Pavina asked as the two sat down on the mats again.

Zac hesitated a second before he decided to answer truthfully, considering his Daos weren't some big secret. "Early Branch of the War Axe and Peak Fragment of the Coffin."

"Pure death through coffin. Death and conflict, restriction and destruction. Nothing groundbreaking, but an interesting application," Pavina nodded as she looked at him with a mix of curiosity and confusion. "It is a solid path, but why is your implementation so chaotic? Your bloodline is as pure as they come, yet you seem to have no Heritage to fall back on? What are your elders planning, having you derive everything on your own?"

"It's a bit complicated, but I don't have any masters or elders. I was born outside the Empire, and I kind of got trapped here before getting the chance to visit," Zac explained. "As you can tell, I've mostly cultivated on my own with the occasional feedback from outsiders."

"Huh, you're not an imperial?" Pavina said with interest.

"Well, I've heard that the empire occasionally stumbles on small tribes who were lost during the great migration."

"Do you have any instructions for me?" Zac said, eager to turn the discussion away from his unorthodox background.

"At first I was worried I'd ruin some old ancestor's plan by meddling with your training, infusing my understanding into your path," Pavina slowly said. "But if what you say is true,

then I think I can help clear some things up. Master told me to help as much as I can.”

“He did?” Zac said with surprise, remembering all-too-well how he was essentially thrown out of Kaldor’s castle.

“Don’t let his demeanor fool you,” Pavina smiled. “Lord Kaldor has worked hard for millennia, teaching and helping the undead warriors in this place. Many even believe he can leave any time he wants but chooses to suppress his cultivation for our sake.”

Zac was surprised to hear that the brusque Izh’Rak Reaver spent so much effort on the undead cultivators who were caught by the Orom.

“So what should I do?” Zac asked eagerly, not wanting to waste the opportunity that Kaldor had presented him. “I only have so much time, and progress will get harder and harder. Should I evolve my Dao Fragment before anything else?”

“Not unless you need the Contribution Points to survive the first shuffle,” Pavina countered. “A breakthrough now would hurt you more than it would help.”

“What?” Zac blurted. “Since when is evolving your Dao a bad thing?”

Chapter 812: Formation and Integration

Zac obviously understood that it was bad to rush a Dao breakthrough with treasures, but that didn't seem like what Pavina was referring to when saying that breaking through would be detrimental to him.

“Do you know about the stages of combat technique?” Pavina asked.

“Like forming a path or Dao Intent?” Zac ventured hesitantly.

“Intent is somewhat related, as are most things when it comes to cultivation,” Pavina slowly said. “However, it is ultimately somewhat different to what I am referring to.”

“If you hadn't formed a path, you wouldn't have been accepted by the Orom. Now, you've started working on a combat technique unique to you. From the ground up, by the looks of it” the Revenant Monarch ventured, getting an affirmative nod from Zac.

“However, you have just started the journey. Most factions call the state you're in the Formation Stage, though you have blurred the lines a bit.”

“Formation stage,” Zac muttered, the term not ringing any bells.

“Truthfully, the vast majority of cultivators take a shortcut for this stage,” Pavina said as she gazed at Zac with a small smile.

“They choose to walk in the footsteps of their predecessors, learning established the techniques of their clans or sects before anything else. It is a central part of a proper heritage.”

Zac's nodded in agreement. He had read through the techniques of the Blade Emperor Heritage back home many times. Even if the methods and techniques listed there required

a sword, Zac had still used them as reference many times when consolidating his foundations. By now, he had almost completely moved away from the concepts in that Heritage through multiple iterations of his two stances.

“In the Formation Stage, you gradually create a technique suited to your temperament, build, weapon of choice, Daos, and so on. Bit by bit, you incrementally improve your technique until you’ve reached the limit of what you can accomplish. At the peak of perfection, this technique allows you to utilize every fiber of your being to accomplish your goals,” Pavina explained. “After mastering this stage, you reach the next; integration.”

The now-familiar sense of deadly crisis immediately filled his heart as Pavina lazily pointed her finger in Zac’s direction, and it felt like a spear of untold power was pointed straight at his soul.

“You have great instincts,” Pavina nodded. “In the integration stage, your Dao and your technique become one as you directly instill the heavenly truths you have gained into every action you take. At this stage, even those who follow a Heritage have to reinvent the technique they learned growing up, adapting it to perfectly suit their path. This is an impassable barrier for most, even Hegemons, when they have to transition from being a follower to a leader.

“Striking will be as effortless as taking a breath, but as powerful as a thunderclap. The difference between someone who has entered the Integration stage and someone who hasn’t is almost as palpable as the difference between someone who has infused their skill with their Dao and someone who hasn’t.”

Zac’s eyes widened a bit in shock, since that was no small improvement. Of course, the description was a bit imprecise considering the various levels of Daos, but it was just an idea.

“You said earlier that I have blurred the lines?” Zac hesitantly said. “What did you mean by that?”

“In your case, you are forming a technique, where most of your inspiration comes from your Daos,” Pavina explained.

“There’s not anything inherently wrong with that, but your foundations are lacking. It’s making you create inefficient movements and techniques. If you don’t shore up the foundations with combat theory, your technique will end up with too many exploitable flaws that will be difficult to fix without reforming the whole stance over and over.”

“You’re saying should improve my skills and technique first, and integrate my Dao later?” Zac asked with a thoughtful frown.

He had always thought his method was the way to go, where he slowly improved his combat style by drawing inspiration from his Daos and his path. But from how Pavina described it, he had been putting the cart before the horse to some degree.

“Have I been wasting my time?” Zac grimaced.

“You’re just a child, so how much time could you possibly have wasted?” Pavina laughed. “You have created a decent foundation, and your style of self-discovery will aid you immensely down the road, where more orthodox cultivators will run into roadblocks. However, you are creating extra work for yourself. That might be fine on the outside, but here in the Orom World? Or with the deadline with my Master?”

“Right now, you are trying to integrate your Daos and path into your combat style, but your stances are still not mature enough to properly bear their weight. Especially not your Dao Branch. So every time you gain an epiphany or deepen your understanding of combat, you both need to alter your combat style, and then figure out how to properly integrate your Dao into the equation.

“Continuous improvements are a given on the road of cultivation. But if you first reach a point where you master your weapons and yourself, you will waste less time infusing your insights and reiterating,” Pavina patiently concluded. “Simply put, you know too little of basic combat theory to efficiently integrate your Dao. You need to learn to walk before you can run.”

Pavina’s words perfectly echoed what Kaldor said before he threw Zac out of his castle. Had the Izh’Rak Reaver actually

spotted this weakness somehow? Had Kaldor watched his fights in the Arena, perhaps? Until now, Zac had held some reservations to what this newly minted Monarch was saying, but his instincts now told him that what she said was mostly correct.

And this basic truth wasn't something that would change because of his zero affinities or dual classes.

You could liken forming a stance to building a house. Right now, he was essentially ripping parts off from ceiling down to foundation every time he found some issue, which caused a ripple effect of issues cropping up. Pavina wanted him to first lay a solid foundation so that any future improvements would require less invasive adjustments.

This was both good news and bad news. The bad was that he seemed to have wasted some time over the past years. The good news was that he had still made enough progress to shock most Hegemons, even while following his imperfect training methodology. If he adapted his learning style, he might make even quicker gains going forward, which was great news considering how much he had on his plate.

"In particular, your control of those chains of yours is atrocious," Pavina added, dragging Zac out from his thoughts.

"I used a shield in the F-grade," Zac wryly smiled. "I swapped over to this for various reasons."

"An armament box is preferable to a shield for an offensively geared warrior like yourself," Pavina nodded. "But your understanding of how to use it is laughably shallow."

"Armament box?" Zac asked with confusion. "The coffin?"

"Armaments or Weapon Boxes are an interesting but slightly uncommon subdivision of weaponry," Pavina explained.

"They take many shapes, but they can most easily be likened to Mother-Daughter arrays. The box is the mother, and what it releases are the daughters. In your case, it's a coffin and chains. But it can be anything from a sheath and flying swords to a hive and millions of poisonous insects."

Zac knew of the concept, and he had even seen it a few times. But like Pavina said, it wasn't that common a method, mostly because they had high demands on the user. Shooting out a thousand flying swords from a jumbo sheath had the potential to unleash terrifying waves of destruction, but that was only if you could properly control and empower them.

Not only did it require much more energy to keep going than a singular weapon, but it also put greater demands on your soul. Furthermore, while more units might mean more theoretical power, the risk of inadvertently creating an opening due to the complexity increased. This had become painfully apparent in his fight with Pavina, where the chains ultimately caused more trouble than they helped.

“Can you teach me?” Zac asked with some hope.

“I am hesitant to directly teach you any techniques,” Pavina rejected. “Your cultivation method is one of self-discovery, and me influencing your path will do you no good. I can help you point out the weaknesses in your basic combat theory through dueling, but you will have to find the solutions yourself.”

Zac nodded. He was somewhat disappointed, but he knew it might be for the best. However, there was one part he didn't quite get. “How does holding back my breakthrough factor into this?”

“Breaking through right now will not aid you in the short term. If anything, the small boost of strength the prison brand will allow you to keep will become a crutch as you strive to improve yourself, hindering progress,” the Revenant said. “But also, it is theoretically easier to step into the integration stage the lower your Daos are.”

“The moment your foundation is set and you have had some initial success with integrating your Dao, then you can form your second Dao Branch. Infusing the new insights into your technique will be far easier than forming your Dao Branch first and then infusing it. It might save you months, years even. Besides, following the standard path, your Dao Branch will likely be better in tune with your desired outcome.”

Zac felt immensely lucky he had stumbled onto this opportunity. He had consulted over two dozen cultivators in this place over the past years, but no one, not even Travo Raso, had been nearly as helpful as Pavina had. Not since taking Yrial as a master had he received such incisive guidance on how to improve and climb out of the pitfalls he had inadvertently jumped into.

“Incidentally, if you complete the Formation Stage and have initial success with your integration, you should be able to pass the fourth band of the Wilderness,” Pavina said.

“There should be stages after integration?” Zac asked curiously, considering integration only seemed to take you so far.

“Of course,” Pavina nodded. “After integration comes conception, where the perfect fusion of technique and Dao gives birth to something greater than the sum of its parts. It will allow you to bring forth might that rival that of skills with a simple swing of your blade. Add Miasma to the equation... and few will be your match.”

“How many bands would someone that mastered the conception stage walk?” Zac asked curiously.

“Mastered the conception stage?” Pavina snorted with disdain. “Even an early Monarch would be able to walk freely in the wilderness.”

“What?!” Zac exclaimed. “That powerful? Then it’s the peak of technique?”

“Not at all,” Pavina said. “But it’s enough to become a foundation when confirming your Dao. But it is not the end. The next stage after conception is the Domain of Worldly Laws, but it requires an extremely deep understanding of the Dao.”

“Worldly laws...” Zac muttered. “So all Divine Monarchs have mastered the Conception Stage?”

“There are innumerable too many paths to power. Altogether, I’d say that less than 1% of all Divine Monarchs have mastered the Conception Stage,” Pavina smiled. “For example,

images generally don't train in this way. It's mostly infighters who follow this path, and many of us don't even put that much weight into integrating their Dao with their technique."

"But if it provides that much power," Zac hesitated.

"It's a matter of time invested compared to what you get in return," Pavina explained. "You should have realized this while traveling the Orom World. Elevating technique doesn't come easy to most people, while you appear to be decently talented in this regard. Most are better off working on other methods to improve themselves. Bloodlines and constitutions, Domains and Intent. Body Refinement, Soul Cultivation, Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization, and Mystical Calculation. These are just a few. Many clans, sects, and factions have their own unique abilities that will help their members on the road of cultivation."

Zac recognized some of the methods Pavina listed, but not all. The list almost felt overwhelming, considering it proved there were so many ways he could still improve in his current grade.

"Supportive professions and methods such as formations, divination, poison mastery, trapping, beast mastery are others. Your utilization of a supportive armament could be considered such a path," the Revenant added. "So just a few of all Monarchs focus on perfecting technique. But all Divine Monarchs have inherently entered the integration stage based on their understanding of the Dao alone."

"So many methods," Zac muttered with dismay.

"It's not like you're supposed to study them all. As I said, there are many roads to power. What are you going to do? Cut yourself into pieces so you can walk them all?" Pavina snorted. "Even if you're supremely talented, you have to discard some and focus on those that bring the most value for the time invested."

"For example, what if you grew another arm? In theory, it's another limb to hit your enemies with, so shouldn't you grow it? What about 5 arms? One hundred? Cultivation isn't just about adding new tools to your belt," the Revenant explained.

“But the Heavenly Talents have more layers of advantages compared to normal people,” Zac said.

“Of course,” Pavina nodded. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t be Heavenly Talents. Background, talent, opportunity. It all plays a factor in how many unique advantages you can accumulate into one path. But an understanding of one’s self is the most important in reaching the greatest heights. Too many geniuses find themselves stuck too early.

“They consider themselves the proud sons of the Nine Heavens and integrate one grand heritage or concept after another into their path. Eventually, their baggage becomes too heavy, and their cores or inner worlds fail to contain it all,” Pavina smiled. “Then again, those who don’t take risks will never stand out from the masses. And out of hundreds of trillions of geniuses who risk it all, a Supremacy might be born.”

Zac slowly nodded as he took a deep breath to clear his mind. The A-grade was too far away for him to even consider, and his thoughts turned to his options for getting stronger over the next three years.

It was also just like Pavina said. Cultivation wasn’t just about adding new tools to his belt. He had so many things to work on, from his soul cultivation, to Daos, to his technique. He’d die an old man in the E-grade if he strove to perfect every single facet, so there wasn’t a need to add anything more at this point.

“So, what do you recommend I do?” Zac eventually asked after having digested Pavina’s teachings. “Return to the second band, and fight without instilling my Daos and technique?”

“If you feel that perfecting your combat technique is the best way to spend your time, then you need to first shore up your foundations. Let me ask you, have you upgraded your mastery skill?” Pavina asked.

“Uh...” Zac coughed, having pretty much forgotten about those skills.

“I thought so. Felt too talented for the basic courses, eh?” Pavina grinned. “I could sense that you have **[Axe Mastery]** at least, which probably is why your axework is far superior to the control of your chains. Go evolve your **[Axe Mastery]** and then buy **[Armament Mastery]** if you have an available slot. Come back when both are Middle E-grade Proficiency. I’ll spar with you again at that point.”

“Thank you so much,” Zac said as he stood up, realizing the session was over.

“Those small suggestions can’t be considered anything much,” Pavina laughed. “You’d get the same advice in any sect or clan.”

“Still, it was helpful to me,” Zac said. “I’ll remember the favor.”

From there, he left, immediately heading for Samsara’s Edge. Five days later he emerged from the Contribution Store with a skill crystal containing **[Armament Mastery]**. He hesitated a bit, but he eventually went into one of the empty houses to learn the skill. The reason for his hesitation was that **[Armament Mastery]** actually took up the same spot as the peak proficiency **[Bulwark Mastery]**, forcing him to give up on the old skill to learn the new.

Zac quickly shook off the hesitation and rebranded the skill. He had already made his decision long ago, and all of his shield-based skills except **[Vanguard of Undeath]** were gone. That skill would eventually make the transition as well, as soon as he decided on exactly how he wanted to reform it. He had held off until now, as the way he fought using Inexorable Stance kept changing.

Hopefully, he would find the answer for that issue as well as he progressed toward the integration stage.

A wave of nostalgia hit him as the familiar guiding lights appeared in his vision as he activated the new skill, this time pathing trajectories for the chains of his replacement coffin. It was just like when he learned the basics of swinging his hatchet back on Demon Island, lost and alone in a forest crawling with Barghest, Gwyllgi, and Imps.

Zac only played with the skill for a few minutes before teleporting to the Wilderness, but he chose to enter the first band. His meeting had been a wake-up call. It was time to build the foundation that would take him all the way to Divine Monarchy and beyond.

Chapter 813: Technique

The chains of [**Chainbox**], the working name of Zac's spare coffin, caused the whole ravine to be drowned in a raucous rattling which was continuously reinforced and multiplied by the iron-rich cliffs to his sides. The clamor was almost at the level of a mental attack by this point, but Zac barely noticed it as he focused on perfecting his control over his armament.

Fifty meters away from him, a harried mountain rat with metal plating desperately tried to break out from its besiegement, but the four chains of [**Chainbox**] caused an inescapable net around the bison-sized critter. A few of the clashing sounds of metal against metal came from the links slamming into the damaged scales, but most of the sounds actually came from the chains colliding with each other.

Looking back at his fight with Pavina month ago, Zac almost wanted to dig a ditch and hide in it out of shame. He had been so full of vigor, feeling like he was inching closer and closer to the true meaning of inexorability, a restrictive stance that embodied Death and Conflict. But all the while, he had used his chains, a major component of restricting and seizing the momentum, like a flailing orangutang.

It also made him want to apologize to Alea for wasting such a precious resource. Unfortunately, she was still in a passive state as she hung from his neck. Even now, years later, Zac had no idea what was going on. For all he knew, she was still absorbing the massive amounts of energies she swallowed from Uona, along with the purifier ball she ate just as they entered the Void.

It was also possible she had completed the absorption already, but that her evolution was restricted by the Orom. Zac could probably break the seal on the necklace with his Void Energy, but he didn't dare in case it would hurt Alea's progress. He

would have to wait and find out when he got out of this place. For now, [**Chainbox**] would have to do.

He had always considered the chains to be a flexible addition to his repertoire, but within a limit. He could control their force and direction, which pretty much made him consider them as mobile spears he could stab into his enemies. If the target was weakened enough that Zac believed the chains would hold, he could bind them.

But that was barely scratching the surface.

Over the past month, he had gone through innumerable variations with his chains as he walked through the early reaches of the first band. He had exclusively focused on mastering his armament as he evolved his newly acquired mastery skill, and he only used his axe when out of options. Over the last three days, he had only been forced to do so four times.

It didn't seem like much considering he was fighting the weakest of all the beasts in the Wilderness, Zac knew it was a huge accomplishment. After all, he didn't use his Daos, and neither did he use any skills. He simply followed the various concepts hidden inside [**Armament Mastery**] to take out beasts with twice his attributes. He had soaked up the teachings like a sponge, rapidly turning them into something practical and deadly.

Zac had first been worried that he would have to scrap the Inexorable Stance altogether to fix its underlying issues, but that wasn't the case. He simply put aside the concepts of death and conflict for a moment, and instead focused on the underlying theory. Trajectories, movements, pathing, tempo, momentum.

One by one, these concepts were rehailed as [**Armament Mastery**] went from Early to high mastery, and Zac was shocked to see how much his lethality improved. The first few days, every single beast had managed to break out from the proverbial cage of chains, but they were increasingly finding themselves helpless against Zac's techniques.

He had also used the Peak-Proficiency [**Axe Mastery**] a bit between fights to give himself a refresher course to see if he had missed something. Looking at it with a fresh set of eyes after having worked on a technique of his own, he was both embarrassed and delighted to see how many insights were hidden in the seemingly simple swings.

It wasn't just about the Dao of the Axe, and neither were the ever-flowing set of attacks empty receptacles to be filled with his Daos to reach the Integration Stage. It was like every marked-out trajectory contained a lesson on everything from tactics to momentum, if you knew to listen. They were unsullied by outside concepts, unblemished by biases or the influence of classes or anything else.

The rat screeched with helpless frustration as it swirled and lashed its tail at one of the chains that slithered around it like a snake. The collision pushed the chain away, slamming it into a second. However, with a small mental nudge from Zac, this transfer of momentum allowed him to alter the trajectory of the second chain.

The chain that had previously just stopped the rat from escaping took a sharp turn. With the boost of speed from the rat's attack, it shot forward, piercing straight into the eye of the beast as it completed its swipe. It was almost like the rat had given the push then delivered itself to be slaughtered, but the truth wasn't so simple.

Zac felt the minute influx of energy as he replayed the battle in his mind. The chains were not separate entities, they were one. There was always cause and effect, where even the enemy was becoming a part of the method. This method of control was the greatest takeaway over the past month, and it was what had skyrocketed his efficiency with his chains.

The chains were only so nimble, but a simple collision could change everything. It could allow a sharp turn, block strikes by shifting a part of the chain into position, and create a general pressure through constant changes and variations. Before, Zac had almost only focused on the end-point of the chains, but now the whole length was fast becoming an instrument to be manipulated.

There were an endless number of patterns that could spring from simple collisions between the four chains he used. Different types of collisions caused different effects, and you could create a chain reaction that became harder and harder to anticipate for the target. And all this could be further manipulated by Zac infusing energy into the chains, retracting, extending, turning, and empowering them.

This ability bordered into the techniques of some types of mages, who created inescapable nets of death by planning dozens of steps ahead like in a chess game. Zac had no goal to take this theory to its limits though, and he was happy if he could smoothly generate 2-step attacks like the one that killed the steel rat. Any more than that, and the patterns would become too complex for him to manage.

After all, his axework was ultimately the main driving force in his combat style, and he had no interest in changing that up. But as long as he had the mental capability and energy reserves to add something to his combat stance to make it more lethal, why not? Especially when the chains tied into his Dao and his skills.

Zac soon enough found another target to hunt, this time a group of three stocky lizards that might as well have been dinosaurs considering their three-meter length. His hair danced from the wind the four chains kicked up as they shot forward, instantly putting the three animals at the defensive. The clattering sounds of chains once more echoed through the mountainous regions, intermingled with the angry roars of the beasts.

Fighting and restraining three beasts were far more difficult, but Zac had become a lot more skilled in restraining without actually binding someone. The moment one of the beasts tried to break away, one of its brethren stumbled into him, tripped up by a sneaky chain or trying to avoid a strike at their vitals.

Meanwhile, the third one was forced to move so that its body became a barrier when the beast got ready to rush out again. This was the kind of restriction he aimed for, and he wasn't even using his Daos to accomplish it. If he wanted, Zac could have pushed [**Armament Mastery**] to peak mastery in a few

days, but he had wanted to completely digest every piece of information.

The goal during this outing wasn't simply to maximize his lethality and push deeper into the wilderness. It was to accomplish his goals with the smallest possible investment, just like how Pavina had created wonders with her minute movements. The fights over the past month made Zac truly appreciate what Kaldor and Pavina meant by saying he needed to learn to walk before he could run.

Apart from leaving hidden flaws in his technique, he had been wasting so much energy and effort by trying to solve every little thing through his understanding of the Dao. Revisiting the Mastery-skills made him realize that he was dreadfully inefficient in this manner. Some things did not need a fancy solution.

His fight with Adcarkas had been eye-opening, where he for the first time saw true integration of Dao into movements. But it had also saddled him with some bad habits. In a sense, it was like taking a helicopter to your next-door neighbor to borrow a cup of sugar. It technically worked, but it was way too much work.

Zac had ample stores of both Miasma and Mental Energy to bear this kind of inefficiency, this wasn't just about energy conservation. It was more about time management. The more he could accomplish with small actions during a fight, the bigger the time window he would have to unleash his skills or killing blows.

One beast after another fell, leaving Zac the last man standing. It was time. He could feel the build-up in the skill fractal in his chest, and Zac rushed toward the hidden site he had prepared.

Over the last few days, he had been essentially walking in a circle in the mountain range. In the middle of the circle, he had prepared a cultivation cave where he could reach Peak Mastery of **[Armament Mastery]** in peace. Soon enough, he reached the secluded cave, and he activated the set of arrays he had arranged beforehand.

The cave was sealed, and the chance of any beast finding this place in the next couple of weeks was extremely small, let alone the few hours he needed to undergo the vision. After lighting up three sticks of incense, Zac sat down on his prayer mat, no longer holding back the breakthrough.

A moment later, his vision changed, and Zac saw an elderly man walking up a lush mountain with a weave basket on his back. Out of the forest, six masked men suddenly jumped out, clearly full of ill intent. Just as they were about to decapitate the old man, the lid to the basket rose and a large wooden hand emerged, blocking

The hand wasn't something born from nature like the hand of **[Arcadia's Judgement]**. It was rather meticulously carved and painted to almost look like the real thing. After the hand, a lanky figure emerged from the basket, stepping out in front of the old man. It was a six-armed demon, where two hands held stakes and another two hammers.

The demon suddenly flew forward with such speed it almost looked like teleportation, driving a stake through the head of one of the assailants, its jab dreadfully quick. Two of the masked attackers tried to circumvent the demon, but Zac was surprised to see them suddenly falling down as their bodies were cleanly cut apart. Only then did Zac notice the dozens of nigh-invisible strings that ran from the basket to the demon.

After a few seconds, all the attackers were dead, and the demon separated into thirty smaller parcels that flew back into the basket as the old man continued on his journey.

The next scene depicted a warrior with a scarred marble statue on his back. Embedded in it were eight weapons, each one unique of a distinct design. One by one they were dragged out and flew off to fight the cultivator's enemies, the blades working together as smoothly as a professional hunting party.

One such scene replaced the next, and Zac's horizons kept getting wider as he saw one odd method replace another. He saw puppeteers, insect controllers, armorers, array masters, and all kinds of unique fighting styles. Mages who had somehow pre-stored spells in a backpack, poison masters who

unleashed unholy mixtures upon their surroundings, there seemed to be no limit to what was possible with armaments.

Some of the techniques were only tenuously related to his coffin-and-chains-combination, but they did still display how one should fight using the mother-daughter weapon type. Most of the cultivators he saw had their armament as main weapon, while some used it like zac, to reinforce or complement their main attack.

Out of all the visions, the one that Zac felt most familiar with depicted a reptilian man using two tulwars as main weapons. On his back, a beautiful set of steel wings hung, where the largest feathers at the edge could detach from the wings and be controlled. They were razor-sharp, like small knives that cut through the air, tormenting the reptilian's enemies from the flanks while he unleashed a storm of carnage with his swords.

Zac eventually woke up, but he didn't immediately move out. Instead, he sat in his cave, ruminating over his Inexorable Stance. What should it look like? Even now, he wasn't thinking in conceptual terms like the inevitability of death, but in simpler terms.

What kind of technique should he strive for? What kind of footwork? What roles should the chains ultimately have? What kind of strikes should he use with his axe? Should he battle head-on, or adapt a style of quick strikes before creating distance? Had he gone wrong anywhere with what he had built so far, focusing on Dao more than on himself?

Ten days passed until Zac finally opened his eyes again, and he immediately exited his cave. He could spot a beast in the distance, but he didn't bother with it, instead making a beeline in the direction of the second band with the help of [**Abyssal Phase**]. Two days later, he had found a target at the edge of the second band; a 2-meter tall macaque surrounded by arcs of lightning.

It was one of the rulers of the first zone of the wilderness, a perfect sparring partner to put his latest theories to the test. The primate immediately rushed forward, and a wave of lightning shot toward Zac. He used one of his chains to soak

up the lightning and disperse it into the ground while the other three continued toward the beast.

This time, Zac went forward as well, and the arcs of blue lightning were reflected in his axehead as he swung his weapon in a seemingly straightforward arc. But while it wasn't imbued with the concepts of death or his Branch of the War Axe Zac had infused into the Inexorable Stance before, it still managed to leave a deep wound in the primate's chest. It was like his swing was invisible to the hulking monkey.

The effect wasn't thanks to superior attributes or the Dao, but rather due to the smart usage of his chains. While one chain was dealing with the lightning, the other three instead targeted the beast. Through constant collisions with each other, the ground, and the animal's razor-sharp claws, they formed a confusing tangle that could deliver a strike from seemingly any direction.

This alone forced the beast to spread its awareness, not only targeting the undead warrior in front of it. Finally, a snap from two chains colliding right by the animal's right ear, followed by a swipe against its right haunches, provided a short window of opportunity where the left side of its chest was wide open.

The monkey instantly realized its mistake, but it was too late. It only managed to generate a lightning field to protect itself, but Zac's powerful strike still managed to leave a grievous wound almost unopposed. After delivering such a strike, it was just a matter of time before the primate fell.

He had actually managed to reach the edge of the first band without using any skills or Daos. Of course, this accomplishment was not just thanks to **[Armament Mastery]**. Most of his strength ultimately came from the past two years of refining his technique, even if his method had been a bit inefficient.

The kind of trickery with sounds and feints that tricked the macaque would be less useful against a hardened veteran, but it was a proof of concept that he could create a very similar effect to his old Inexorable Stance without even infusing any of his Daos into his technique. It was akin to creating a

restrictive formation with the help of the constantly moving chains.

As long as he integrated his Dao insights into his current stance, it should reach a completely new level of power. But Zac shook his head, ignoring the voices tempting in the back of his head. Instead, he left the Wilderness, heading for the skill upgrading chambers in Samsara's Edge.

It was time to enter phase two of his training.

Chapter 814: Mastery

Zac appeared in the teleporter of Samsara's Edge with a flash of light, and he settled inside one of the empty buildings as took out an information crystal. It was a short missive on mastery skills, something he had picked up for 150 Purchase Points when buying the **[Armament Mastery]** skill. Even now, he hadn't actually read it, afraid that its contents would influence his training right when he was at the beginning of learning.

Now that he had reached peak mastery he didn't have those reservations any longer, so he curiously read through the materials. Most of the missive was a list of different categories of mastery skills, along with examples. There were a lot more types of mastery skills than he had expected. They included not only weaponry, but also all kinds of arcane specialties and crafts.

The latter, unfortunately, only worked for non-combat classes though, dashing Zac's hopes of an easily-acquired skill like alchemy or blacksmithing.

The most relevant part of the missive related to upgrades, and it was quite straightforward. The consensus was that the Mastery Skills weren't technically true skills. They didn't contain the essence behind the teachings, and it was more accurate to consider them daughter arrays to the System. Therefore, the only step needed to upgrade the skills was to increase the detail of the pathways, and he already knew how to do that.

However, the missive also included an extremely interesting snippet of information, something which confirmed a suspicion of his. Mastery skills had two empty sockets, where one was recommended to leave a pattern representing one's Daos. That meant, he could leave two marks of his Dao

Branch in [**Axe Mastery**], and the impartments would be slightly adjusted to suit his flavor of axe usage.

The same could be said for his armament mastery, but that was where Zac became a bit hesitant. He hadn't spent much time as a human lately, and his Evolutionary Stance had fallen even further behind. However, he couldn't help but wonder if the addition of an armament wouldn't help elevate that stance as well.

He had the skill already, and the ability to make something of it. Using a coffin and chains might not be the optimal route for his human side, but the vision from [**Armament Mastery**] had shown that only one's imagination limited what kind of armaments could be created. Perhaps something like vines?

Would it be a mistake, locking the mastery skill to his Fragment of the Coffin? Should he avoid attunement altogether, or should he balance the skill fractal out with the Fragment of the Bodhi? Part of him wanted to return to Pavina and confer with her on this matter. But he didn't, his hesitation about divulging his duality keeping him at an impasse.

Ultimately, he decided to add his Life-based Dao to the skill fractal. He'd had constantly been going over his stances over the past month, and the more he thought about it, the more sense it made to mirror his two sides. He had ultimately returned to the basics, but some things wouldn't change with his path.

One stance represented change and breaking fate, the other stillness and inevitability. One side was Death, the other Life. Evolution and Inexorability, these two represented polar opposites that would grow over time, until they reached the highest domain.

Zac felt that his two sides needed to stay aligned, even if their core values were each other's opposites. Like yin and yang. For while the two stances were separate right now, Zac had the notion of fusing the two into one supreme path through conflict down the road.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Zac immediately set out, filled with motivation as he entered the facilities at the edge of

the city. He booked an unattuned cultivation chamber, which was a higher-quality version of the **[Fractal Framework Array]**. Unfortunately, there were no attuned life-death chambers in this place, so Zac would have to do it on his own.

Zac took out two attuned natural treasures just in case he needed some liquid inspiration, but Zac didn't think it would be required. The array hummed to life, and he infused the skill fractal of **[Armament Mastery]** into a large crystal in the center of the room. At the same time, he felt a soothing stream of pure Mental Energy seep into his soul while his thoughts became as clear as crystal, proof of the high quality of the chamber.

Things progressed as expected over the next few hours. The basic patterns of the skill fractal were as simple as they came, barely at the level of a low-quality skill. Most of the effort was spent adding two Dao arrays to the skill fractal. The patterns were a simplified manifestation of his Daos, their appearance based on the two Dao Avatars in his Soul Aperture.

The two trees, one radiant and the other withered with the coffin hanging from its only branch, were now residing on one of the outer cores each. The axe avatar that looked like himself had once more taken its place on the main core, and its eyes were closed in meditation.

Eventually, the upgrade process was complete, and Zac eagerly returned the skill fractal into his pathways before opening his Skill Screen.

[E] Armament Mastery (Bodhi & Coffin) - Proficiency: Early. The seed is planted as you strive for mastery. Upgradeable.

The skill was still upgradeable, though Zac read in the missive that D-grade was the last stage of the skill. After that, you would have to search for answers yourself, which Zac figured was fair enough. A Monarch really should be at the stage where they knew what to do. The two Daos he had instilled into the skill were listed as well, proving his infusion had worked.

Zac hesitated a bit with his next step, but he ultimately chose to leave the chamber and transform into his human form elsewhere, before renting another upgrade chamber.

This time, he was planning on upgrading [**Axe Mastery**], but he was a bit hesitant on how to form the patterns for his Dao Branch. It felt weird trying to draw a small version of himself, like how his Dao Avatar looked. Ultimately, Zac created two different patterns, each one looking like one of the two axes his avatar used as he swapped between forms.

The upgrade went without any surprises, and he immediately returned to his temporary home in the city. Full of curiosity, he activated [**Axe Mastery**], and he saw the familiar trajectories appear in the living room. Zac started following the guidance, but a frown eventually appeared on his face after a couple of minutes.

The proposed trajectories were identical to when he used the Peak Mastery F-grade skill. There was nothing new that was shown. Zac thought it over before he infused the fractal with his Branch of the War Axe, and he nodded in satisfaction when they changed. Exactly how the strikes differed were a bit hard to pinpoint, but as he went through the motions, they felt extremely comfortable.

That didn't mean the old trajectories were bad or anything. It was like the difference between wearing a nice-fitting suit and a tailored one. But having taken a shortcut into the Integration Stage once already, Zac could tell this wasn't the same thing. While there were echoes of his Dao behind the small alterations, the swings were still just normal techniques.

The more he followed the patterns, the clearer it became. The mastery skill showed a shadow of the Integration Stage, where pure technique had started getting influenced by heavenly truths. Even if there was just a hint of it inside the swings, Zac was ecstatic, as he instantly detected a few mistakes he had committed with his old integration of the Evolutionary Stance.

But Zac believed that as long as he managed to grasp these differences and the underlying reasons behind them, he would not only have an easier time integrating his Daos in the future,

but also understand his Dao better. He tried imbuing his other two Daos Fragments into the skill fractal as well, but unsurprisingly, he was met with resistance before it failed. He had branded the fractals with his Daos, and the others wouldn't work anymore.

He kept experimenting with the two skills for two days until he returned to the wilderness in his undead form, this time starting from the second band.

Zac was no longer solely focusing on the chains as he began his latest assault on the wildlife, but he was rather integrating what he had learned over the last month into his reformed Inexorable Stance. It mostly went fine, but he found himself unable to completely utilize all the tricks he had picked up from **[Armament Mastery]**.

There were simply too many variables to control. Himself and his axe, along with the constantly moving chains. That alone was hard enough to keep track of. Add to that one or multiple enemies, most of which wouldn't react as one hoped. Thankfully, there was ample room for improvement.

The more he fought, the more the lessons from **[Armament Mastery]** were elevated from being a mastered ability into instinct that required no thought. One day, the complex movements would hopefully become second nature to him, so that he could solely focus on his axe and his enemy.

The days passed as he moved across the second band of the Wilderness. He didn't move past the midpoint, content in fighting the earlier parts. This time around, he occasionally swapped over to his human side to reference the teachings hidden inside the E-grade **[Axe Mastery]**. Unsurprisingly, it was also this skill that first reached middle proficiency after just two weeks.

It had roughly been eight years since the integration by now, and he reached Peak Proficiency of the F-grade **[Axe Mastery]** during the first year, inside the Tower of Eternity. Since then, he had continued improving his axework on his own, and he had already discovered most of the lessons in the upgraded version of the mastery skill through battle.

Some discoveries allowed him to advance his techniques, but reaching middle mastery was mostly about gaining a deeper understanding of many things he was already doing by instinct. After having reached middle mastery of [**Axe Mastery**] he focused more on his other mastery skill.

Of course, Zac's true goal wasn't to evolve these skills. It was to improve his techniques, so most of his time was spent in combat or meditation where he inched closer to perfection. Because of that, it took another two months before he reached middle mastery of [**Armament Mastery**] and managed to infuse the concepts into his Inexorable Stance.

A lot of time had passed already since accepting the quest, but Zac wasn't stressed at all about not having returned to the third band all this time. He knew just how much he had improved over these four months. He would be able to push deep, deep into the third band by the time he returned, perhaps even conquer the whole thing. But for now, he left the Wilderness to visit his new teacher.

"You're back," Pavina nodded when Zac finally returned to her mansion. "Close to four months. Not too long, not too short. Interesting. Come, show me what you've learned."

Zac immediately shot forward once more, the chains of [**Chainbox**] forming a strangling tangle of cold hard metal while he rushed straight for the Revenant herself. Pavina smiled as she looked around, and she started to once more clash with the chains to force her momentum on her surroundings.

However, Zac was like the surging tides as he unleashed a ceaseless barrage of strikes. Every time Pavina flicked one of the chains, another one came to the rescue by offsetting the momentum she created. Even then, Zac found himself overwhelmed, even if Pavina only used techniques equivalent to the Formation Stage.

Still, he managed to hold on for almost 20 seconds before he found a finger pointed against his heart as she broke through his defenses, forcing an opening when he tried to land a strike with his axe.

“Continue,” Pavina said as she took a step back, and the two resumed their duel without missing a beat.

Last time, their sparring session didn't even last two minutes. But this time, they fought for half an hour. Even though Zac gradually improved as he got used to fighting a person rather than a bunch of beasts, Pavina managed to land a strike at his vitals almost fifty times.

“Not too bad,” Pavina nodded as the two stopped. “While four months is too short to make any real progress with your armament, they are no longer an active hindrance, at least. Rest an hour, then we duel again.”

Zac nodded in thanks. Her comment wasn't the real teaching, it was the duel itself. Every time she had tapped his vitals she had pointed out a glaring weakness in his stance. He closed his eyes and replayed the fight in his mind, going over every single moment in search of solutions. Just like she said the last time, he would have to find the answers himself.

Soon enough, Zac stood up and started to slowly swing his axe as the chains drew graceful arcs through the air. In his mind, he once more saw Pavina's hand heading for his heart, and he shifted his weight while the chains moved to intercept. However, he soon stopped with a shake of his head and reset his position, trying something else.

His first response would have solved the attack if it was static, but it wasn't like Pavina wouldn't adapt and change her attack if he directly tried to block. Over and over, he replayed that first hit, not only going over his measures but how the Revenant would respond. Eventually, he found a solution as he managed to force a situation of mutual destruction, where his chains would have pierced her gut if she went through with the strike.

From there, Zac would have seized the momentum, where he could strike her down with his axe before she could attack again. In this manner, Zac went through the whole battle one exchange after another, trying various things to solve the most glaring issues that Pavina had pointed out. The Revenant Monarch didn't offer any further advice, and she had closed

her eyes in meditation while Zac entered an almost magical state where he knew no exhaustion.

Eventually, he had found solutions for all the strikes Pavina unleashed, though they were still just theories that needed to be tested and confirmed. He stopped swinging his weapon and turned to Pavina, who eventually opened her eyes and leveled an even stare at him.

“I’m sorry, how long was I doing this?” Zac coughed, realizing he had completely lost track of time.

“Three,” Pavina sighed.

“Three hours?” Zac muttered. “It actually felt like long-”

“Three weeks, you lunatic,” Pavina said with a roll of her eyes. “What kind of person overshoots their one-hour deadline by over five hundred hours?!”

“What?” Zac exclaimed as he looked around.

“I must be a more talented teacher than I thought with how I managed to inspire an epiphany,” Pavina smiled, clearly not as annoyed as she pretended. “Well, luckily I wasn’t in a hurry. Come, let’s see if your bout of inspiration bore any fruit.”

The two battled again, and while he was still essentially toyed with, Zac managed to stretch the time between hits by another fifteen seconds.

“Not bad. It seems this path is right for you,” Pavina eventually nodded. “Go ahead, figure out the kinks somewhere else. Come back when you’ve reached high mastery with the two skills.”

“When can I start properly integrating my Dao again?” Zac asked before he left.

“After you’ve reached Peak Mastery of the two skills and consolidated what you’ve learned,” Pavina said without hesitation. “Now, go.”

“Alright, thank you again. I’ll see you in a few months,” Zac smiled.

“Bring something to drink the next time, will you?” Pavina said. “Common courtesy.”

“Of course,” Zac hurriedly nodded as he took out a couple of barrels from his stock. It was lucky that more than half of the Spatial Rings he had snatched in the Void contained liquor, with how thirsty all the residents of the Orom World were. Otherwise, he would have run out long ago.

Zac exited the mansion, leaving the Revenant standing by her meditation spot, her eyes fixed on Zac’s receding back.

“Absolute monster...” Pavina muttered with shock evident in her eyes. “What kind of progress is this? Is this the Heritage of Draug? But why is his spirituality so faint?”

Chapter 815: Vivi

With the flaws in his training method corrected, Zac returned to the routine where he rotated between wanton slaughter in the Wilderness, duels in the arena, and short periods of secluded cultivation. Part of him wanted to rush toward the peak with the two E-grade mastery skills and conquer the third band, but he reined himself in.

The first month after his second duel with Pavina he made good progress as he gradually patched up the mistakes she had pointed out. This time, it took a bit more time, since he wasn't able to enter that marvelous state he had enjoyed after they met. However, problems arrived when he had completed the fixes and strove to move forward with the new teachings in the Middle Proficiency mastery skills.

Zac was continuously beset with the impression he was missing something, like something was holding him back. At first, the feeling was just a small annoyance, like a fly buzzing around his head. Zac figured it was because it simply was becoming harder and harder to incorporate the techniques.

After reaching Middle Mastery, the trajectories and strikes the skills showcased became even more sublime. They didn't only exact extreme requirements on force and momentum, but there was something ethereal about them, something that defied being grasped easily. It was like every swing contained thousands of variations, and every time he performed the attacks Zac sensed something different.

Sometimes, the sensation left him with more questions than answers, and he often found himself stuck at an impasse. However, while the difficulty was quickly ramping up, he did ultimately make steady progress. The feeling of mismatch, of his stance being incomplete, seemed to stem from something else.

Eventually, the feeling became so palpable that he chose to return to Pavina before evolving his mastery skills to late proficiency. This time, she didn't have any easy solutions, even after fighting for half an hour.

"How odd," Pavina muttered after they finished their sparring session. "I cannot discern what the source of your hesitation is. There are still weaknesses in your stance, but that is to be expected. I don't get the sense of lacking that you mention."

"So I should just ignore it?" Zac asked hesitantly. "Is it just in my head?"

"No," Pavina said. "You should trust your instincts in cases like this. Me not understanding the issue doesn't mean it's not there. I am just an outsider, and cultivation is ultimately a personal journey. You are still ahead of schedule. I suggest you slow down and search for answers before moving forward. You might have missed something."

"Alright," Zac slowly nodded.

He returned to the wilderness, trying to find the answer to his problems through battle, but the more he fought the more he found himself at an impasse. Had he reached the limits of his comprehension? No, Zac still felt there was room for improvement without infusing his Daos. Eventually, he chose to swap over to his human side and work on his Evolutionary Stance to clear his head for a few days.

Most of his training in the past two years had been related to foundational techniques rather than the deathly aspect of his other stance, and these teachings had to be integrated into his life-attuned stance sooner or later. Having already gone over everything once, Zac figured it would be even quicker the second time around. Besides, Zac figured it might spark some inspiration that would solve his predicament.

Zac decided to stop breaking through levels as well. He had found that the damage to his pathways, foundations, and soul after forcibly breaking open the nodes in his head was slowing the derivation of his techniques. Since he didn't need the Contribution Points from the levels, he stopped at level 139 just to make sure this wasn't the problem. It was just one level

short of Yrial's requirement, and he still had over two years to spare.

By that time, he should be able to push a couple of levels with pills again.

Zac could only pray that these measures were enough. If this didn't work, would he have to cultivate his soul or something, in the hopes that greater mental prowess would help him deduce the stances quicker? After all, Zac felt he was improving a lot quicker since arriving at the Orom World compared to before. It might be the environment, but it might also be his soul evolution that had sped up his progress.

Or would he be forced to integrate his Daos on an imperfect foundation, just so that he would survive the duel? It should work, but Zac was reluctant to do so now that he finally had found the path.

He quickly got absorbed with the cultivation of the Evolutionary Stance, and days quickly turned to weeks. It was like Zac hoped. With already having gone through this once, he made rapid progress retooling his life-based technique. More importantly, as he stayed in his human form, the feeling of incompleteness grew fainter and fainter.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on by that point; it was the imbalance between stances that had caused trouble.

The two stances represented the two branches of his cultivation path, and they were ultimately part of one system. What Zac hadn't expected was that they were so interconnected that he became hard-pressed to progress one side if the other lagged behind. There was no logical reason behind it, as far as he could tell. Zac supposed it was either a mental block because his path required equilibrium, or there might be some other underlying theories that were beyond him.

Ultimately, the reason didn't matter. He had found the cause and the solution - he just needed to put in some effort on his human side as well. Another two weeks passed, and Zac had finished integrating the techniques equivalent to Peak F-grade

of the mastery skills. However, when he started infusing **[Armament Mastery]** with the Fragment of the Bodhi, finally ran into some issues.

As expected, using **[Coffinbox]** felt extremely uncomfortable in his human form. It had already been a noticeable issue when he trained the unattuned techniques, but it became a lot worse after his attacks started containing a hint of life. The trajectories still appeared when activating the skill, but everything felt wrong.

Chains had become so indelibly interlinked with his concept of death, from the hanging coffin to **[Love's Bond]** and the restrictive nature of Inexorable Stance. Even worse, he believed the issue would only worsen when **[Love's Bond]** woke up, considering it was infused with Oblivion by now.

Soon enough, Zac found the experience unbearable, and he left the Wilderness to seek counsel. This time, he didn't head to Pavina though, but rather someone else.

“Don't you have the solution for this already?” Ubo asked with confusion when Zac visited the Elemental to confer with him.

It would be weird to ask Pavina about this issue, so he went to a life-based Monarch instead. Besides, Zac realized needed to send a message to Three Virtues that he was dealing with Kaldor and the splinter, to make sure the shifty monk didn't do something with the Shard of Creation.

“I do?” Zac said.

“Just go visit Heda. She has tens of thousands of different types of plants, and she's one of the five most skilled Arborists in the Orom World,” Ubo said. “Among us who walk the path of Life, she is surpassed by none.”

“Right,” Zac slowly said, but his heart was full of reluctance.

“Are you worried about her condition?” Ubo laughed. “People have gone much further off the conventional path in search of power, both in the Orom World and outside. Her fusion is nothing special, and she is still firmly in control of her soul.”

“Alright, I’ll visit her,” Zac agreed.

“No hurry,” Ubo said as Zac got ready to leave. “Stay for a few days. I can sense you have worked too hard lately. You need to stop and unburden your mind. Incidentally, I wanted to test the efficacy of my latest restoration array on fleshy beings.”

Zac was a bit reluctant, but he ultimately agreed to stay for a week inside Ubo’s mountain. The elemental was a terrific host, and the array it had Zac sit inside was almost as powerful as the one he used to heal when he first arrived. The only issue was how talkative Ubo was. There didn’t seem to be an end to the marvelous feats he had accomplished both before and after being caught by the Orom.

Zac even wondered if the elemental had him stay just so it had someone to brag to, with how he had become a captive audience inside the array. But the array did work wonders, so he let his drained body get restored as he ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’-ed at the right places during Ubo’s retelling of his heroic exploits.

A week later, Zac emerged, relaxed and exhausted at the same time. The Arborist’s cultivation farm wasn’t too far from where he first encountered her, but it was quite some distance from Ubo’s mountain. It took him close to two weeks to reach her neck of the woods, and the life-attuned forest gradually transitioned from the individualistic chaos to vast fields covered in top-quality farming arrays.

While Ubo’s cultivation cave was meticulously crafted, it completely lost to Heda’s domain in acreage. From the looks of it, each field only grew one type of plant, but there were small differences between them all. Perhaps Heda was letting the Dao of Life coerce mutations of various species in the hopes of discovering something useful.

It took him over two hours walking through the enormous fields until he finally spotted a small farmhouse in the distance. Heda was already waiting outside, smiling at him with the fleshy half of her face as Zac got closer.

“I have waited a long time,” Heda nodded as she looked at Zac. “I was about to go catch you.”

“No need for any catching,” Zac said. “I was caught up with my cultivation. My first relegation will take place in a few months.”

“You will survive,” Heda said without hesitation.

“I should be fine by now,” Zac agreed. “I am here for something else.”

“Oh?” Heda said curiously, and Zac shuddered inwardly as a few roots across her face pulsed.

“I heard from Obo you are skilled with living weapons? Like vines?” Zac ventured.

“Of course,” Heda nodded, and Zac’s eyes widened in alarm as he saw a thick purple vine suddenly emerge from her neck before retreating into her body. “There are many cultivators who use plant-based lifeforms in battle, but most cultivate Nature. Do you want to implant yourself? I have a few promising experi-”

“No!” Zac hurriedly said as he took a step back. “Just something I can carry with me.”

“Oh,” Heda said, the disappointment evident on her face. “Well, come in.”

The two entered her farmstead, which was surprisingly small. Heda was carrying out a huge number of experiments judging by the fields, so he would have expected some laboratories or factories to process all those plants. But there was only a simple cottage surrounded by a beautiful garden.

“My laboratories are underground,” Heda explained, seemingly understanding what Zac was thinking as he looked around. “I’m sorry I cannot offer a tour. The saplings down there can be altered by the slightest change in aura, making the data unreliable.”

“Some other time, then,” Zac smiled.

The two sat down at an unadorned wooden table overlooking the garden outside, and Zac explained his predicament. He also showed her [Chainbox] to give her a better notion of what kind of plant he was looking for.

“There are an endless number of plants like that,” Heda shrugged. “Show me your dance again.”

Zac eagerly got back on his feet and started swinging, using the Evolutionary Stance against an imagined foe.

“Lifeless, but better,” Heda nodded. “More boring than your old dance, but probably the right solution.”

“I’m shoring up my foundations before reintegrating life into the equation,” Zac smiled.

Heda was obviously not cultivating technique like he or Pavina. The Arborist had rather been interested in his display of Life manifested as the Bodhi Tree, by the looks of it.

“I cannot think of any plant in my garden that perfectly suits your path,” Heda said after some thought. “But that is usually the case. Living Weapons are best nurtured from a seedling, doused in your Dao from birth to maturity. That way, it will be perfectly in tune with you.”

“Oh, alright,” Zac said with disappointment.

“But I have something that might work for now?” Heda said as a half-smile spread across her face.

“I cannot have anything growing inside me,” Zac resolutely said.

He definitely refused to have a parasite in his body like Heda. He didn’t want to continuously fight for his soul like the arborist, or like Ogras for that matter. But there was also a practical reason for his resistance. Would a parasite plant even survive when he swapped into his Draugr race and flooded his body with Miasma?

“No, something else,” Heda said before flashing away.

Two minutes later she returned with a metal tube in her hand. Attached to it was some sort of cling vine roughly half a meter tall. There were small thorns hidden amongst its heart-shaped leaves, and it had a purple flower at its crown. It looked harmless enough, making Zac wonder if it was really a living weapon.

More importantly, it looked like it was dying. Its leaves were shriveled and more than half were brown instead of green, and its stem was wrinkly like it was dried out.

“This is Vivi,” Heda explained as she caressed one of the flowers. “She was one of my earliest experiments since being trapped in this world. She was both a great success and a great failure.”

“She seems a bit sick?” Zac said, still a bit confused.

“Not sick. Dying,” Heda sighed. “My skills were lacking at the time, and I was unable to overcome the limits of her origin. Thus, Vivi never managed to become a Plant Queen. Today, I would have managed to do it. But it is much too late, the window has passed. Now, she only has a century or two left to live. But she does enjoy eating corpses, so why don’t you take her out for some bloodshed in her final days?”

“Uh,” Zac hesitated as he looked at the wilting vine.

“Before you say no, you should know that she is as powerful as a Late-Stage High-quality E-grade Spirit Tool even in this weakened state. If you feed her well and regularly infuse her with some Mental Energy, she can match Peak Tools for a while,” Heda said. “She will not slow you down.”

Looked at the plant with a new sense of appreciation. Even weakened, the diminutive plant was so powerful? Just how dangerous had it been at its prime? No wonder Heda called it a great success.

“How would it work?” Zac asked. “I don’t have any plant-based or pet-based skills.”

“Since you don’t want to swallow her core, you will have to imprint her,” Heda said. “Thankfully, she is just an E-grade plant, so her consciousness is hazy. And with her advanced age, she is quite docile. Buy **[Link of Demeter]** from the Contribution Store. If that slot is taken, you can also use **[Nature’s bond]** or **[Herbal Harmonization]**. They will work as well, but they are nature aspected rather than life-aspected.”

“How much would this plant cost?” Zac hesitated, knowing that the Orom wouldn’t allow her to give it away.

“Between the spatial tube and Vivi herself,” Heda slowly said before she closed her eyes. “2,500 Purchase Points. That’s the lowest price I am allowed to set.”

Zac wasn’t too flush with Purchase Points, but 2,500 was a steal for a weapon at the equivalent of a late E-Grade Spirit Tool. Heda was giving him a deep, deep discount here, even if you factored in the plant’s short remaining lifespan.

“I’ll take her,” Zac said. “But what did you mean by spatial tube?”

“Vivi does not have spatial skills of her own, and her real body is over five hundred meters long,” Heda smiled as she stroked the leaves of the vine, prompting it to completely retreat into the tube. “Most of her body is hidden inside the tube. Her maximum reach with her vines is three kilometers, but they will gradually lose force after five hundred meters. Of course, don’t worry if they are damaged. As long as you feed her Cosmic Energy, they’ll regrow very quickly.”

To showcase what she was talking about, she had two vines suddenly shoot out through the window, and they ripped through the air until Zac could barely see their ends. A moment later they were retracted again, leaving turbulent winds in their wake. The vines had been as thick as ropes, and they didn’t have any hint of decay or weakness.

Even Zac had felt a bit pressured by the aura they exuded.

“Amazing,” Zac whispered, knowing living weapon would fill the role of [Chainbox] without missing a step. If anything, Vivi was far superior.

“Do you know why I wanted to meet you?” Heda asked as she handed him the tube.

“Because of my usage of the Dao of Life?” Zac hesitated.

“No. That was not very impressive,” Heda said, making Zac grimace with embarrassment. “I wanted you to come because you are rootless in this world. You do not belong, and I don’t believe you will be here in a decade or two.”

“That’s”, Zac hesitated. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s a gift of my cohabitant,” Heda shrugged as she took out a small glass container. “I have a request.”

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“When you leave the Orom, please break this glass and throw it away,” Heda smiled.

Zac took the small glass container, and he saw that a shimmering seed was hidden inside.

“That’s it?” Zac asked. “Just throw it anywhere, even the Void?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Heda smiled.

Zac looked at the seed curiously, wondering if it was some escape measure of the Arborist. He considered the risks of doing as she asked, but he felt it wouldn’t be too risky to just throw it out before teleporting away. She had no reason to hurt him, and his reservations about her were mostly related to her grim appearance.

“I’ll do it, if I ever manage to leave this place,” Zac eventually agreed.

“Good enough,” Heda nodded.

With the help of the Arborist, Zac fashioned the pole into a back protector that ran along his spine. According to Heda, not even a Middle Hegemon would be able to break it with a full-powered swing. Even if it broke, it simply meant that the true body of Vivi would be released. If that happened, he would have to get a new spatial container that could nurture life.

Even better, he could store the spatial tube in a Spatial Ring, as long as Vivi was completely retracted. The only caveat was that he had to take her out at least once a month though to feed her Cosmic Energy and some corpses.

“When her time is up and she can fight no longer, plant her somewhere nice, please,” Heda said as Zac tried moving around with the pipe along his back. “I have placed a seal on her that will last a month. Imprint her before that.”

The tube fit perfectly, and he didn't even notice it was there. It did look a bit odd though, since the purple flower stuck out from the top of the tube, making it look like he was carrying a very thin vase rather than a sheath. He thanked Heda again before leaving, eager to get the taming method before the critter broke free and went on a rampage.

With this, the final roadblock to the Integration Stage and forming last two Dao Branches had been dealt with, and Zac couldn't wait to return to the wilderness. He had run into some speedbumps, but his goal was still the same.

Within a year and a half, he wanted to gain the power required to duel the Izh'Rak Reaver.

Chapter 816: Shadewar

The swarm of elemental constructs was being whittled down as the ravenous army of cursed shadows pushed forward. Hidden among the glaciers, Ogras' eyes shimmered as he looked for the leader of these wretched things. Finally, he spotted it; a patch of frigid Dao more condensed than its surroundings.

The world turned monochrome as he phased into the Grey World, and he crossed the chaotic battlefield, ignoring the shadow puppets around him. In the grey world, his army looked different. Rather than the intangible forms that methodically decimated the ice beasts in the real world, they maintained their real forms here.

Wretched goblins whose eyes and mouths were covered with talismans emanating purple flames, their whole spectral bodies covered in runes.

'*Alas*', a sorrowful sigh echoed out in his mind, but Ogras ignored it as usual. He had bigger fish to fry than dealing with some maudlin warlock.

Besides, the sneaky bastard had no one to blame but himself. If not for K'Rav's schemes, would Ogras have bothered gathering thousands of errant souls of his citizens, forcibly binding them to his Shadow Flag? Well, he probably would have, but he would have been more polite about it. After all, he needed someone to house and enslave the malignant Qriz'Ur entities.

Such was the climb to the peak. Eat or be eaten. The warlock had tried possessing him at the critical moment of crafting the flag. He had used misdirection, the Voidbrand on his arm, and the ancient arts of his civilization as bait to lure Ogras down a path of no return. Ogras, in turn, had schemed against the warlock since the moment he popped up unannounced.

Even then, he had only survived by the hair.

Having reached the first stage of the **[Spiritlock Physique]** had not only given him a great boost to his Shadow Affinities and attributes, but it had also given him an inherited ability of the Ka'Zur Plainswalker that was once his familiar. The ability to split his consciousness and send off part of his mind on a journey through the shadows without anyone noticing.

He could even swap positions with this doppelganger at any time, making him even harder to kill. But Ogras had not once let the Goblin Warlock get a hint of this ability, even though he had used it almost constantly since successfully cultivating Rasata's Body Tempering Technique. With his doppelganger, he had scoured the huge tower for hidden knowledge that could help him out.

A lot of places were sealed, but the tower was extremely old. Some places had deteriorated to the point that a shadow could squeeze through a crack. Ogras had found whole repositories left behind by the masters of the fallen goblin empire, things K'Rav had never wanted him to discover. It was thanks to two techniques, in particular, he managed to break through the goblin's schemes.

First, it was a Soul Strengthening Method unlike anything Ogras had ever seen before called **[Delirigoria]**. Its benefits to the soul were almost nonexistent, but it was quick to train and it provided one unique benefit; it turned one's Soul Aperture into a virulent wasteland for any foreign entity, making your body and mind naturally resistant to attempts at possession.

The method was crafted by one of the councilors of the Ra'Lashar Kingdom because way too many of their citizens went mad from the Qriz'Ul twisting their minds.

Unfortunately, the method was only finished by the end of the war, and Ogras' research indicated that K'Rav had fallen even before the method was completed and announced.

The second method was a technique with the unfortunate name **[Bagaboom]**. While its name was dumb even for an insane Goblin scientist, it proved to be exactly what Ogras needed; a single-use offensive sigil formed in one's mind. It took Ogras

a full year of constantly infusing Mental Energy into this hidden brand in his Soul Aperture, but it was a lifesaver when K'Rav finally made his move.

Thanks to these two defenses, K'Rav had the tables turned on him, forcing the goblin ghost to give up on his attempt of possession even if his soul was far superior to Ogras'. Unfortunately, it wasn't a perfect victory, and that old bastard managed to survive by turning himself into the Tool Spirit of his flag.

Preferably, Ogras wanted to erase that bastard to avoid any danger down the road, but the ghost had perfectly planned its contingency. If he killed K'Rav, the flag would turn into a fancy ornament. Reforming the flag was impossible as well. The two had spent over a year on its formation, and all those efforts were just the finishing touches upon an almost completed weapon. Even if Ogras had the skills to start over from scratch, it would probably take decades, centuries even, to create something like this.

It was a weapon invented for the war with the Qriz'Ul, and its birth had required not only the fell karma accumulated by the whole kingdom. It also required the unique arrays that Ogras was forced to leave behind when the tower crumbled as a final act of revenge from K'Rav. Thus, the spectral goblin would keep growing stronger as new shades were crammed into the flag.

Even worse, the warlock kept complaining in the back of his mind, a broken record railing against his unjust treatment as though his attempt at possession was fair play. K'Rav's soul was simply too powerful, and Ogras was unable to shut out his quibbling. Sometimes, Ogras wondered if the trade-off was worth it. The sounds of heated battle behind him immediately answered his question.

Of course it was.

K'Rav could complain all day as long as he provided the strength needed for Ogras to keep pushing forward. The **[Shadewar Flag]** was a terrifying treasure, way more powerful even than his old Clan's defining treasure; the

[Spear of Ar'Amak]. And that was while the flag was still in its infant state.

The army of spectral goblins had proven extremely useful, no matter if it was for large-scale combat like now, or forming War Arrays from within the safety of the flag itself. He had even managed to kill a Beast King by overwhelming it with these almost unkillable little buggers, allowing him to land a killing blow without even being in danger.

Besides, the fact that K'Rav kept scheming had its benefits as well. That meant the game was still going and some pieces weren't expended. It was a looming threat, but one that could bring unexpected benefits. When the tower collapsed, most of the knowledge of the Ra'Lashar was lost, except for the things Ogras managed to memorize and the things locked in the Tool Spirit's mind.

There was some core knowledge that hadn't been written down or perhaps intentionally erased by K'Rav or some of the other leaders. For example, the brand that was still on his arm was supposed to bring him some benefits, considering that it was a reward from a quest of the Ruthless Heavens.

However, it had only become a weakness for the warlock to exploit, almost costing Ogras his life. Even now, its benefits were out of his reach. Unfortunately, Ogras currently had no way to extract that intelligence from the ensconced Tool Spirit. But as long as the game kept going, an opportunity would eventually present itself.

For now, Ogras was content maintaining the status quo. He had spent far more time in the ruins of the Ra'Lashar Kingdom than he had planned. While the odds of anything as valuable appearing in the other corners of the Mystic Realm were low, Ogras still wanted to explore as much as possible before outsiders came pouring in.

The monochrome surroundings were infused with blue and white as Ogras left the Grey World just a few meters away from the concentrated spot of icy Dao, and a lance of darkness shot forward with monstrous momentum. The wall of ice

surrounding the Ice Spirit was utterly destroyed, forcing it to flee through the glacier.

Most people would have a hard time keeping up, but Ogras wasn't most people. The shadowlance shot forward, stabbing into the ancient ice and causing hairline cracks to spread deep into the icy mountain with almost instantaneous speed. The attack didn't harm the spirit, but it created innumerable small mirrors through the ice.

A skill fractal flashed and the Dao rippled, and fake became real while real became fake.

A storm of shadows turned ice into shreds around him as Ogras swapped places with one of his mirror images, appearing right in front of the Spirit. He could kill it then and there, but that wasn't why he had made the detour. Two crude talismans flew out, and Ogras rapidly started performing seals with his hands.

The Spirit desperately struggled against the talisman, and Ogras was instantly covered in a layer of frost. However, he persevered. Eventually, a shimmering shard of ice hovered in the air, two talismans tightly wrapped around it. Ogras smiled with glee, his first true spirit capture a success.

This technique was part of the [**Spiritlock Physique**], an improved version of the method most of the goblins had used to capture spirits. Mastering this method was integral if he wanted to proceed to the next stage of his physique, since the smallest error in the seal would mean death or madness when sealing more spirit's in his body down the road.

'Any young acolyte back home would be able to catch a little Ice Spirit who had yet formed a true consciousness',
K'Ravsnorted in his mind.

"Yet I am standing here today, while they all became devilfood," Ogras grinned. "Perhaps your acolytes should have studied moderation instead of capturing spirits."

'Greatness always comes at a risk and a cost,' the warlock snickered in response. *'I know of the one whose shadow you're chasing. I saw him the short moment we shared a mind. You'll*

have to work harder than this if you want to achieve your goals.'

“No need for a wretched Tool Spirit to worry about my matters,” Ogas snorted as he stowed away the sealed spirit.

He didn't have any plans of integrating this thing into his body. First of all, what K'Rav said was true. This spirit wasn't some supreme creature, and Ogas needed top-quality spirits to get the most out of his physique. It would be easier to integrate low-quality spirits, but Rasata had posited that would lead to a weak foundation where you would get stuck long before reaching the peak of the method.

True to the goblin kingdom's core mentality, the [**Spiritlock Technique**] was a technique that could offer greatness as long as you were willing to take the risk. The deadlier the abominations you gobbled up, the greater the effect.

Besides, with his unique Race, he had no choice but to exclusively look for shadow-based creatures to infuse. Unfortunately, those things were both extremely rare and hard to spot, creeping in the seams of reality. Perhaps that bastard who called himself the Umbra had more creatures in stock, provided Ogas ever got out of this place and managed to return to Earth.

He had ultimately caught this little spirit because it was very rare, and rare meant valuable.

Ogas took a step forward, melding with a mirror image of himself. Something as marvelous as this didn't even require the activation of any skill thanks to fusing the Peak Fragment of Mirage with his Doppelganger ability, and he soon stood atop the glacier once more. Having lost their source of power and spirituality, the ice creatures had turned into unmoving statues, leaving the shades without an enemy to unleash their frustration and rage upon.

A grin spread across Ogas' mouth as he snickered, the sound immediately amplified by the towering cliffs around him. He swung his flag, returning his unwilling followers into the cursed maelstrom inside the flag. From there, he flashed a few times, rushing through the icy world with amazing speed.

The days blended together in this lifeless vista, but Ogras kept going deeper, his eyes constantly scanning the horizon. Suddenly, he stopped, his eyes wide with excitement. The notes were true!

In the distance, he finally saw what he was looking for. A mysterious glimmer, this one different from the constant and almost blinding radiance of sun-blasted ice. A moment later the glimmer was gone, but Ogras found himself trapped in a bubble of light. Explosions erupted all around him as ice was melted or ripped apart.

But Ogras wasn't worried. He was elated; the notes said this would happen.

The notes said he was trapped and he would have to survive the attack, but he still tried to get out of the 50-meter-wide trap. A barrier barred his escape, and his body was suddenly covered in wounds from the piercing lights as he failed to enter the Grey World. He was forced to weave back and forth, avoiding the blue streaks hidden among the other lights as he took out a crystal and a parchment.

The information crystal immediately exploded, and Ogras grimaced as he started scribbling down his findings. His memories were already fading. His preparations proved completely ineffectual, but he staunchly held to the scene of that glimmer as he frantically jotted down his findings while narrowly avoiding death.

He had lost the trail twice already. Hopefully, he'd be able to leave behind some additional information this time. A minute later, Ogras looked around with confusion before his eyes turned to the parchment in his hand. A troubled frown marred his face.

It had happened again.

A few minutes were lost, and he was surrounded by destruction. Ogras pushed down his misgivings as he ate a healing pill before heading in the direction the notes indicated. A snicker echoed in his mind, but Ogras ignored it. He knew what K'Rav was getting at.

Perhaps, he really had gone mad during his visit to the goblin tower or from practicing taboo methods. Why else would he be following notes he left himself while in a state of delirium? Ogras had no idea what the hell he was talking about when talking about ‘natural phenomena’ and ‘illusory glimmers in the sky’, but he had already decided to follow the clues.

If the notes could be trusted, it might be a unique treasure hidden in this glacier that would help him perfect his Path. If the notes were false, what did it matter? It would mean he had gone crazy in this place, so he might as well follow the clues until he lost the last vestiges of his sanity.

Ogras kept going deeper into the endless world of ice, his thoughts occupied by the Dao. Reality and illusion become one, truths and falsehoods interwoven into an indecipherable patchwork. Being everywhere and nowhere, a surveyor from the shadows who controlled life, death, and fate itself.

The Path of the Illusory Shade.

“Little Chain defeated Olgoroth two weeks ago, I should have guessed you would arrive sooner or later,” Traprandar said with a small smile as he played with the golden hoop that never left his hand.

“That is unrelated,” Zac shrugged, though his brows furrowed like he was annoyed.

Annoyed that the masked undead warrior had managed to defeat a Bronze Attendant before him.

“Is it now?” Traprandar pointedly smiled at the four vines that wound themselves around Zac’s arms and midriff in a hug.

Zac had made some waves in the coliseum twenty months ago when he appeared with the spatial tube on his back, suddenly wielding four powerful vines in combat. Luckily, **[Link of Demeter]** used up a free spot in his pathways on the right side of his back, which had allowed him to easily form a connection with Vivi.

He hadn’t been met with any resistance at all, only a vague sense of hunger and excitement that only increased after he

killed the first beast in the wilderness. Buying the skill had completely emptied his last savings though. He even had to push his levels to 140 just to afford the skill and get the loose change needed to use the teleporters.

Thankfully, his intermittent sessions of Soul Strengthening provided impressive amounts of Contribution Points, and pushing the skills in his two classes toward peak mastery helped along as well. In the end, he had passed the 3-year evaluation with over 40,000 Contribution Points, and just enough points to enact his plan in the arena.

It was a far cry from the record-holder's 118,000 Points, but still well beyond the norm for his grade. Besides, Zac would easily have passed 50,000 if he hadn't focused most of his time on reforming his two stances. However, not everyone was so lucky as to effortlessly pass the first relegation.

Travo Raso, the Temple Fixer and Zac's first friend in this prison, was one of those who didn't make it.

Chapter 817: Raising the Stakes

The three-year shuffle for new arrivals was quite straightforward. It worked just like the normal relegations, where Zac's prison brand had flashed a month before the deadline. In his case, it emitted a soothing blue glimmer, indicating he was above the cut-off. The less fortunate ones would instead be shown a glaring red, providing them with one final warning and opportunity.

The early warning was designed to squeeze out a burst of inspiration through desperation, and a sense of unease among those who were just scraping by. No one was allowed to relax. Only those such as Zac himself who had performed far beyond the average could ignore the pressure, though even Zac with his massive pool of Contribution Points had felt a bit unnerved.

He couldn't even imagine what was going through the minds of those who were barely hanging on.

When the relegation finally arrived, his prison brand flashed again, unsurprisingly the same color in Zac's case. However, a moment later, Zac felt vibrations from his Cosmos Sack. Twelve of Zac's collected tokens had suddenly been marked by a rune that looked like a broken ladder. The token belonging to Travo Raso, the Radiant Temple fixer, had been one of them.

Even to this day, the brands were visible on the tokens, their owners' failures acting as a warning to others. If the tokens cracked, it meant their owners had died in the hellish environment of the second-string cultivators.

Three had already cracked in the year since the relegation.

It was a stark reminder that this was not some cultivation haven, but a heartless cage. It made Zac even more desperate to get his hands on the remnants and leave this depressing place. This oversized fish was playing with people's lives and using them as Dao Batteries. If Zac could, he would rip open this false sky above his head, drowning it with the Dao of Chaos.

But before he could do that, some steps had to be completed. First of all, he needed to perfect his two stances. Four months ago, Zac finally reached peak proficiency of his two Mastery Skills. The skills hadn't provided any visions this time around, but rather taken his techniques even closer to the Dao, showing the way in a sense.

After another two months of work, he had finished incorporating the lessons into the Inexorable Stance. The process was quite smooth, considering he was inching toward the very same concepts and theories he had used to form the two stances in the first case. In a sense, he was returning to the origin, this time armed with a wealth of experience and a rebuilt foundation.

During a ferocious battle in the deeper parts of the fourth band, he had managed to take that final step, reintegrating the Daos of Coffin and War Axe into his Inexorable Stance. Reaching this point was both faster and slower than he had expected considering his initial burst of rapid progress. Slower in the sense that his two-year deadline had already been passed by three months by now. Faster in the sense that he had worked on both his stances, not just the one.

His Evolutionary Stance was still lacking something though, and even after two months of grinding, he hadn't managed to enter the Integration Stage. He had infused the Daos over and over, the concepts of a technique as everchanging as life itself. Of overcoming fate and breaking through all shackles.

But every time the result had felt off, like he hadn't completely grasped the essence.

The first step of the Integration Stage was the most important. It was the first building block of something greater. If he got it

wrong, he would find himself in a similar situation in the future, where he would have to tear down his stance and rebuild it. But considering that his Daos and technique were so interconnected, that would probably mean his future Life-attuned Dao Branch would become crooked as well.

That was a problem that was far more difficult to allay, and something that could cause a tremendous headache when forming one's Cultivator's Core or Inner World.

Still, Zac knew he was right on the cusp of breaking through the thin film that was holding him back. So he had decided to alter his plans a bit, aiming for a breakthrough in the arena when pitted against a skillful enemy. After all, pitched battle was how a good half of his epiphanies were born, and it matched the fate-breaking aspect of his stance.

If he could make some Purchase Points at the same time, all the better.

Luckily, Zac had spent years on this particular money-making scheme. Zac's two personas were already the source of a lot of rumors and comparisons considering they were both E-grade and wielded axes. With Zac's human side suddenly copying the chains by adding Vivi to his repertoire, speculation had veritably exploded.

Unsurprisingly, there was a good chunk of people convinced Zac and 'Mr. Chains' were the same person, though Zac hadn't heard anyone use the term Edgewalker. They figured he was some sort of twinned being born through circumstance. For example, where the human side survived while his undead persona awakened. It sounded pretty unbelievable, but Zac had to admit the truth was even more far-fetched.

Another camp consisted of the people who believed the two youngsters were connected since before the Orom, and these were the rumors Zac had tried to encourage. Thanks to some 'accidentally leaked' snippets of information from Zac, his two identities were essentially rivals since birth through a grudge inherited from their masters.

Both walked similar paths, eager to prove their superiority.

Traprandar happened to be one of the people who leaned toward this theory, and this was part of Zac's calculations when targeting the man. First, he had played out a scenario where Mr. Chains, was slowly pulling ahead thanks to coming under the tutelage of Pavina, the Worldlock Monarch.

Zac's human side had displayed a series of desperate battles in the arena where he struggled to keep up, but he had been slowly been left in the dust over the past two years. In reality, this was a mix of Zac holding back his strength and the simple fact that the Evolutionary Stance had somewhat lagged behind.

Next, Zac targeted Olgoth. He was an overbearing Corpse lord who had a similar combat style as the Evolutionary Stance, though his technique obviously wasn't based on life. It did however contain the elements of ferociously breaking the shackles of fate, in Olgoth's case his low birthright, and pushing forward, constantly changing and improving.

This served three purposes. First, the Corpse lord was a perfect opponent to hone his path and shore up his foundation after reaching the Integration Stage with the Inexorable Stance. Zac's path was based on inevitability and restraints, so fighting someone like Olgoth was far more valuable than fighting almost any other type of warrior.

Secondly, Olgoth and Traprandar hated each other, and Traprandar had defeated Olgoth three times in a row over the past twenty years. It made the Corpse lord irritable and easy to instigate into betting big against Mr. Chains who walked a similar path of restrictions as Traprandar. At the same time, it shouldn't make Traprandar too worried even if he started suspecting that Zac and Mr. Chains were one and the same.

Finally, together with the backgrounds that Zac had crafted for his two identities, it set the stage for entrapping Traprandar as well for one final payout. As long as Zac could play the part of someone who was in over his head and refused to give in to his nemesis who was getting ahead.

"Healthy competition is good in this place, but your actions are bordering obsession. Don't get lost in someone else's path," Traprandar snickered as he looked at the vines on Zac's

body. “Little Chains’ path is more suited for such a tool, and his skill in using them is ahead of yours.”

“Will you accept or not?” Zac said, his face darkening.

“I might,” the Traprandar smiled. “But you should understand my predicament. If I win, it’s a matter of course. I am a late Hegemon and Bronze Attendant. Beating up a brat is more embarrassing than impressive. If I happen to lose, my reputation is ruined like a certain Corpselord’s.”

As Traprandar said the final sentence, he glanced in the direction of the stands with a taunting smile, where an absolutely infuriated Olgoroth glared back.

“It’s easy to talk big, bastard!” Olgoroth roared. “You’re just afraid you’ll lose to the weaker of the two, proving I am superior.”

Zac was flush with excitement when he saw Traprandar’s expressions and heard the exchange. Clearly, Traprandar was interested, but he was trying to raise the stakes.

It was just what Zac had been praying for, but he maintained an annoyed demeanor as he waved his token. “That guy bet 10,000 Purchase Points. I’ll bet 18,308 Points. When I defeat you, I’ll have defeated that bastard by proxy as well.”

“Look who’s come up in the world. I remember when you only gave up 50 points in the beginning,” Traprandar smiled, but Zac could feel the hesitation in his eyes.

Had Zac messed up, being too greedy with such a large bet?

The small bets Traprandar mentioned came from Zac’s first year in the Orom World, before Pavina had righted the ship, so to speak. Zac had lost 58 consecutive fights between 8 visits to the arena back then, earning him the nickname ‘Pocket Money’ since he always bet a handful of Purchase Points to get someone to spar with him.

But that had eventually changed with him winning some duels in both his forms, though his Human form was still not at the level where he should have the guts to challenge Traprandar.

Zac knew that this was a critical moment, where Traprandar might smell something amiss. 18,000 Purchase Points wasn't anything to scoff at, even for a late Hegemon. The fact that Zac could put out such a sum might seem suspicious, even if it had been four years since he arrived.

"I guess I can teach you a trick or two for such a generous fee," Traprandar eventually said, having chosen greed over precaution.

Zac knew he had caught the fish, now he just needed to reel it in. He jumped down to the empty arena with a scowl and pressed his token against the Arena Array, depositing the 18,308 Purchase Points. A flash of hesitation and regret appeared on his face, but he quickly smoothed over the expression as though it was a mistake. In reality, Zac had practiced it for weeks since duplicity didn't come as naturally to him as for certain demons.

Still, part of the worry was real. The specific number 18,308, was meant to indicate it was Zac's total, and it wasn't that far from the truth. He had just over 21,000 points after betting 10,000 Purchase Points against Olgroth a few weeks back, a bet he only managed to put forward thanks to reaching the integration stage and saving for 20 months.

His plan hinged on Traprandar believing that Zac's actions were bluster from an inexperienced E-grade youth caught in a pissing contest with his rival. Years of small investments, all for one big payout. If he succeeded, he would suddenly have over 40,000 Purchase Points, allowing him to afford one of the top-tier treasures that had been out of his reach since arriving in this place.

Traprandar eventually jumped down from the waiting area and pressed his bronze token against the array as well, prompting the stands to explode with excitement. 18,000 Purchase Points was not too much for some of the spectators, but it was still an uncommonly large bet. Besides, they carried a unique implication since an E-grade cultivator had put forth the bet.

It should be Zac's entire savings, the resources meant to generate the Contribution Points needed to survive in this

place. Lose them, and he might have sentenced himself to death. For Traprandar his reputation was at stake, something that was even more important than life and death in this place for some.

Losing against an E-grade warrior who arrived just a few years ago as a bronze attendant? A warrior who wasn't even the strongest in his cohort? It would be too embarrassing.

With Traprandar having infused the points as well, there was no turning back for either of them, and Zac immediately discarded his fake demeanor. He jumped up on the arena with a calm expression as a copy of **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand, an axe Zac had commissioned when starting to work on his Evolutionary Stance in earnest.

Traprandar instantly noticed Zac's change and a flash of coldness appeared in his eyes. Zac wasn't bothered; it was intentional. He wasn't planning on using trickery in this fight. It needed to be a head-on melee where both fought with everything they had. That was how he would seize the opportunity for a breakthrough.

"So it was a ruse, after all," Traprandar slowly said as his aura rose. "How? You and Little Chains worked together? Or are you really one? Is it truly possible?"

"Does it matter?" Zac said with a small smile as his own aura condensed beyond what he had ever displayed before. "Give it your all."

"Hmph," the man snorted as a second golden ring appeared in his other hand, the other half of his twinned weapon.

The arena's barrier activated and enclosed the two, and both sprung to action at the same time. Zac rushed forward, utilizing **[Earthstrider]** to close the distance. But Traprandar chose to backpedal as one shining light after another emerged from his body, and the whole arena was drenched in a golden sheen as they rose toward the ceiling.

Traprandar wasn't a pure Life Cultivator, but he rather focused on a mixed-meaning Dao based on Stars and Life, possibly with a hint of fire mixed within. He didn't have any skills in

numerology like the cultivators of the Radiant Temple as far as Zac could tell, but there was rather some sort of light-based concepts hidden in the Dao of Stars.

Zac didn't immediately unleash his own domain to match the one his enemy was erecting, afraid that it would be destroyed before he could make full use of it. Thankfully, the arena was only so big, and Zac eventually caught up to the warrior who couldn't use movement skills while releasing his domain.

Even then, Traprandar had already managed to unleash over two dozen lights already, and they formed an array that put Zac's body under great strain while also containing a slightly hallucinogenic effect. The latter was thankfully mostly nullified through his powerful soul. Zac catching up meant no more stars could be released, stopping the domain from gaining any more power.

But even before Zac had the chance to unleash an attack of his own, the warrior disappeared in a blinding flash of light that made Zac's eyes burn. A pang of danger warned him even before he could regain his vision, but he had already dug one of Vivi's vines into the ground earlier, allowing him to instantly drag himself out of harm's way.

Using a Living Weapon was surprisingly easy, it turned out. The vine gave Zac full control over her 'limbs' as his consciousness spread into hers, allowing him to use the vines just like he would the chains of [Chainbox].

The air screamed as the bladed ring ripped space asunder as it narrowly passed Zac by, leaving a wall of searing light in its wake. It would stay up for the duration of the fight, a part of Traprandar's restrictive heritage. Zac tried to hit the spinning ring with a quick jab of his axe, but the weapon disappeared in a flash of light before he could connect, instantly returned to its owner.

Zac barely had time to adjust before a rain of golden drops shot his way. The four vines he used rapidly expanded and grew into a Bodhi-infused wall that blocked the attacks, but they were riddled with holes in an instant before falling apart. Zac didn't care since they had served their purpose, and he

emerged to their side and unleashed a series of bladed leaves in the direction of Traprandar with **[Nature's Edge]**.

Even if the vines were cut off a hundred times over, Vivi would just heal or grow new ones in an instant without feeling as much as a pinch.

It was one of the differences between chains and vines that had taken some getting used to, where the vines were to some extent used as discardable weapons. It allowed for some all-out attacks unheeding of taking damage yourself, which suited the offensive style of Zac's Evolutionary Stance. The downside was that the vines weren't as sturdy as the chains, making some maneuvers impossible.

A blinding flash of light forced Zac to close his eyes, but his powerful soul allowed him to know what was going on. Traprandar had appeared right in front of him as Zac focused on the bladed leaves flying toward the other side of the cage, one of the bladed rings already falling toward his neck.

The arena shuddered as axe and wheel met each other in the first true clash of the battle.

"You planned and schemed, but it won't matter. I will take those points of yours," Traprandar grinned as he unleashed a rapid series of swings that seemed to come from everywhere, giving Zac a suffocating feeling.

Meanwhile, Zac felt the light around him congeal, and he was surprised to find the air itself slowly turning into some sort of crystalline prison without as much as a ripple of energy as a clue. This wasn't a skill Zac had seen Traprandar use before, and moving was getting harder and harder.

Zac wasn't worried though - he was elated. The more restraints Traprandar had that Zac could break, the better. The moment he managed to break all the shackles Traprandar could erect, his Evolutionary Stance would take that next step.

Chapter 818: Transition

Space was rapidly freezing over, and Trapandar furiously swung his ring blades to keep Zac in place. The warrior was using his signature skill already; every time the two clashed, a band of light was added to Zac's body, hampering his movements. The chakram seemed simple at the surface, but in Trapandar's hand, they formed a never-ending dance that reminded Zac of the sun and the moon.

However, while Trapandar was continuously swinging them, it rather felt like Zac was the one being moved.

It was like Zac was a small planet stuck in the orbit of the Hegemon's sun, unable to break free of its pull. Together with the weird crystallization of Zac's surroundings, he knew something needed to change. He could imagine all too well what would happen if he got trapped inside a crystal when fighting a warrior who used light as a weapon.

Zac roared as his aura surged, and the skill fractal on his hand was flooded with Cosmic Energy. The next moment, the whole arena was drowned in a tempest of emerald leaves, and the crystalline cage broke apart before it had a chance to fully form. Zac had become the eye of the storm, and nothing could contain him as Zac activated the upgraded version of **[Nature's Edge]**.

Reaching late mastery had added a unique, feature just like when **[Chop]** reached peak mastery. This time, it didn't add a persistent controllable blade though. It rather allowed Zac to unleash a torrent of destruction, hundreds of leaves, in every direction. Activated in the heart of an army it would cause untold bloodshed, but it could also be used to break out of a siege, like now.

Crackling sounds echoed out as Zac forcibly broke the shimmering restraints that had been left on his body.

Meanwhile, the ring-wielding warrior was forced to back away from the onslaught of razor-sharp leaves. Still, he effortlessly avoided the avalanche of attacks, parrying the few which couldn't be dodged. But suddenly, through the storm, a vine hidden among the leaves flashed forward with extreme speed and seized Traprandar's ankle.

The Hegemon swore as one of the bladed wheels slammed down to cut it off, but another barbed vine shot straight toward his jugular at the same time. Traprandar's weapons could cut apart the vines in a swing or two, and he would quickly be able to get free. But the barbs were sharp enough to leave lethal wounds if left unattended, forcing Traprandar to target the one going in for the kill.

Thankfully, that small delay was all Zac needed.

He had broken or whittled down all the restraints by now, allowing him to catch up to his vines and Traprandar both. His axe drew a majestic upward arc as it slammed the second chakram out of the way before Traprandar could use it to free himself. The Hegemon was too powerful to be restrained by a vine attached to his leg, but it allowed Zac to stop his teleportation ability by invading him with his Dao.

Traprandar understood this conundrum perfectly well, and his efforts were targeted to remove this vine. The struggle over latched-on vine became a central aspect of the battle, while the two tried to find openings to land blows on each other. Traprandar used his restrictive abilities, while Zac relied on technique and his vines, where Vivi's appendages were constantly forcing Traprandar to focus his attention elsewhere.

The techniques were similar to how Zac used the chains in his Inexorable Stance, but there was a difference in flavor. The chains restricted the enemy's options and movements by threatening damage, but less than ten percent of their moves actually clashed with the enemies by now. Instead, the chains constantly moved around them, putting the warriors under constant pressure.

The moment the enemy slipped up, the links would pounce, leaving festering wounds behind or sealing them long enough

for Zac to go in for the kill.

The way Zac used Vivi's vines was more ferocious. The vines were constantly assaulting Traprandar. It wasn't a threat of damage if the enemy didn't take a step back or restrain themselves; Zac was doing everything in his power to make sure clashes took place. If the enemy backed away, the vines pursued. If the enemy countered, Zac aimed for maximum engagement to break open their defenses and whittle down the enemy. To make this possible, new vines were constantly growing out of the tube on his back to replace the ones that Traprandar ripped apart.

However, Traprandar was a late Hegemon who had survived innumerable struggles. He wasn't phased in the least by Zac's neverending offensive, and he slowly eked out enough of an advantage to let him activate a skill that conjured seven mirrors in the sky. Zac had seen this skill before, and he knew that he would have to watch out for deadly beams of light shooting out from these mobile turrets.

The stars above, the floating mirrors, the chakrams that performed their stellar transformations, and Traprandar's ability to constrain and whittle down. It formed a nigh-perfect cage, but Zac's goal had always been to force Traprandar to take the match seriously rather than to end things quickly. This was an opportunity that the creatures in the Wilderness couldn't provide.

Zac pushed his technique to the limit as he strove to keep the warrior in a pitched melee. The swirling storm of leaves was still filling the arena, actually providing a layer of protection in addition to being sharp enough to cut through steel. They flickered about in a seemingly random pattern, but Zac knew their movements weren't random.

They were instilled with the Fragment of Bodhi, and they created everchanging formations based on his Evolutionary Stance that both targeted the mirrors while also blocking the blasts they released. The scene was reminiscent of **[Nature's Protection]**, the defensive skill that had gone into the fusion of **[Nature's Edge]**.

Zac hadn't expected the skill to gain this ability at late mastery since he had essentially sacrificed the defensive skill in order to upgrade the otherwise un-upgradeable [**Chop**]. But it was definitely a welcome addition where it shored up the weak defenses of the class. Together with the added sturdiness stemming from [**Adamance of Eoz**], the leaves were extremely hard to damage, let alone destroy.

Besides, the skill had only reached late mastery so far. Zac couldn't wait to see what the System would add when he managed to evolve the skill to the peak. As long as [**Empyrean Aegis**] was as impressive as it sounded, the defenses on his human side might even match that of his Draugr form.

Traprandar, in turn, was constantly trying to push Zac off-balance by constantly showing new tricks and changing up the tempo. The bronze attendant hadn't taken his techniques to the Integration Stage, but that didn't mean he was at a disadvantage in direct conflict. He still had millennia of experience and higher-stage Daos compared to Zac.

Besides, his abilities were easier to use while in a pitched battle. The air sizzled as Zac narrowly dodged another beam that ripped through the air, leaving a depression in space where his left leg was just a moment ago. Even with their impressive durability, the leaves were slowly being whittled down.

Zac guessed that the mirrors were a continuously running skill like his [**Deathmark**], while the storm of leaves was a single-summon-ability that Zac was unable to replenish. The cooldown was quite short before he could resummon another storm, but he would still be exposed to attacks for an extended duration if nothing changed.

A deep thud like the knell of a bronze bell echoed through the arena as Zac furiously punched one of the bladed rings with his free hand, pushing it and its wielder back for a moment. He felt the weight of the restrictive band tightening around him, but he ignored it and the burning gash that was opened up from another blast as he unleashed a series of swings so quick that his arm turned to a blur.

Almost twenty blades shot out in quick succession before Zac once more lunged at Traprandar, but the moment he was about to reach the man the Hegemon exploded, throwing Zac tens of meters away. Some minor burns covered his face and body, but he felt a wave of blinding light passing straight through his body to enter his mind.

It was actually a soul attack.

Luckily, Traprandar had severely underestimated his mental defenses, which would stand its own even against an elite mentalist by now. Zac still knew he was in a precarious situation, and he furiously swung his axe in an upward arc, cutting a beam of light apart before intercepting a downward swing of a bladed ring.

Zac was thrown back into the ground with a groan, his vines had already repositioned themselves, lifting him back to his feet as he desperately fought to regain his momentum.

Unfortunately, a small error could have devastating consequences, and Traprandar had completely seized the advantage of his surprise skill. Thankfully, his gambit had destroyed most of the mirrors in the sky, drastically lessening the pressure from above.

Even with five of Traprandar's mirrors being destroyed, Zac found himself at a hopeless disadvantage. He tried everything he had learned over the past years, unleashing one ruthless and unpredictable swing after another while the vines kept an unrelenting tempo. But Traprandar was like an iron tower who refused to give up his control of the momentum.

It felt like the Hegemon was everywhere at once. Two wheels he used were in his hands one second, only to suddenly soar through the arena, taking unpredictable turns before striking at Zac out of nowhere. The starlight shone from above, and Zac saw that small crystals had started to grow across the floor. Sooner or later, they would become a problem as they started to refract light.

Even then, Zac didn't activate [**Arcadian Crusade**], even if it would give him the power to recapture the pace. He fought on in an-out assault, taking three hits for every strike he managed

to land on Traprandar. Unfortunately, the Hegemon's defensive abilities didn't only rely on his restrictive fighting style, but he also had the ability to form circular runes of light with only a thought.

They weren't too durable, but every time Zac hit one, it released a blinding flash and a shockwave that pushed back his weapon. By the time Zac gathered his strength again, Traprandar had already moved out of harm's way. One minute after another passed, and Zac was turning into a gory mess. He had a decent chunk of Cosmic Energy remaining at least, but that was mostly because he didn't get many opportunities to use it.

Traprandar was only sporting a few shallow wounds by this point, and he was still in prime fighting condition by the looks of it. He had used up a lot of Cosmic Energy to maintain this advantage though. His overbearing fighting style was effective, but it did rely on multiple skills to work. Tiring him out wasn't an option though.

First of all, it wasn't Zac's goal with this fight. Secondly, while Traprandar was restricted down to the same attribute pool when fighting with a normal citizen, he still had a Cultivator's Core. He probably had ten times the amount of Cosmic Energy as Zac even in his downgraded state. But Zac still fought on without as much as a thought of surrender. He could feel how he was getting closer, how the answers hid here in the midst of desperate struggle.

Unknowingly, Zac's perception started to change as he ferociously threw himself against Traprandar's techniques to break out from the siege. Each bleeding gash was a lesson, each blistering welt was a burst of inspiration. His swings no longer adhered to a fluid and ever-changing technique aimed at unrelenting offense. They gradually morphed into strikes from a primordial beast that fought for supremacy.

Every swing was a life, a death, and a reincarnation.

An endless cycle of rebirth Zac pushed forward. There was no such thing as defeat, there was only an endless series of new beginnings. His vines were no longer a supportive Armament

aimed at forcing openings and pressure through constant harassment. They were his pack, nibbling at the flanks of their enemy. If they survived, they would feast. If they lost, they would die. Such was the law of the jungle. Such was the law of the Heavens.

The golden bands restraining his body shattered quicker and quicker, and the intricate cage of lines left in the wake of the flying chakrams were destroyed faster than they were created. How could light possibly hamper the endless pursuit of evolution when the nurturing rays of the sun were part of life? It was bound to be taken, extracted, and used for his own gain as Zac reinvented himself.

The beams of destruction descending from the sky no longer seemed threatening. Such was life. Heavenly calamities came and went, and what emerged from the ashes would be stronger than what came before. Even those who fell would only be gone for a moment. Through the cycle of Evolution, they would be reborn to fight again.

Forever.

Zac felt his aura soar as an intangible ripple spread out from his body, a ripple denoting that Man and Dao had become one.

“You too? It’s not possible!” Traprandar roared as he redoubled his efforts, worry evident in his eyes.

Cracks appeared across the Hegemon’s skin, allowing a golden sheen to escape through his body. His aura soared, most likely from having activated some sort of berserking skill. A new set of mirrors appeared in the sky, these ones covered in golden sigils that thrummed with power. However, they didn’t point toward Zac, but rather each other as they formed a circle.

Zac woke up from his magical state, and a rush of elation filled him as he realized he had done it. This time, there was no sense of imperfection as he returned his Evolutionary Stance to its original glory. Or rather, a far superior version compared to the old. However, now was not the time to inspect his gains.

Traprandar was going all-out to protect his reputation and his points.

A set of white and golden fractals covered Zac's skin as he activated [**Arcadian Crusade**], almost mirroring the shining cracks now marring Traprandar's face. A ferocious momentum built up inside him, and his mind was awash with bloodlust. But Zac wouldn't start flailing his weapons like a madman just from the mental manipulations of a berserking skill any longer.

He had integrated the Dao itself into his Evolutionary Stance, which wasn't just something akin to learning a new skill. It was understanding of the Heavenly Truths and letting them permeate the core of his very being. Skills like [**Arcadian Crusade**] reduced the weak-willed into berserking madmen who only followed their instincts to fight, but those instincts had already been elevated into pure technique in Zac's case.

With an unprecedented surge of momentum, Zac pounced like a pack of wolves closing in on its prey. Traprandar was trying to fight back best as he could, but his berserking skill proved utterly insufficient. His defenses crumbled and his restraints broke as Traprandar found himself submerged in the sea of Zac's violence. A series of wounds to match Zac's own covered his body in an instant.

Yet Traprandar didn't give in, clearly preparing something since the energy in his body had been churning like crazy for a while. The light in the sky was growing stronger, as though a sun was being born in the center of the mirrors. Suddenly, reality inverted as the space between the mirrors became the mirror, while the mirrors became anchoring runes.

From the other side of the crystal pane, a terrifying entity gazed down upon Zac. It looked like an eye surrounded by a churning swirl of mysterious runes and golden hoops, almost reminiscent of a biblical seraph as comprehended by the mortal gaze. Zac had just turned the tide, but he was still beset by a sense of primal dread as he looked up at that creature.

There was no path but forward, and Zac continued to suppress Traprandar even as he felt something terrifying brewing above his head. Traprandar was trying to delay and entrap him, but

he was finally forced to teleport away with a nasty wound that ran all the way from his shoulder down to his gut. If it had been just an inch deeper, the arrays of the arena would have kicked in and ended the match.

Still, managing to push the Hegemon into an unmitigated retreat was exactly what Zac needed at the moment. Eight thick streams of Mental Energy twinned into a sturdy rope before he infused them with four streams of Bodhi and four streams of Coffin. The summoned entity was already emerging from the mirror by that point, but two celestial domains rose to meet its descent.

Zac initially hadn't wanted to use [**Rapturous Divide**] in the arena, fearing it would fan the rumor mill seeing a fusion of life and death like that. But the thing in the sky put him under too much pressure, and he saw no alternative but to go all out. There was [**Arcadia's Judgement**] as well, but he wouldn't be able to launch it in time without using Void Energy to fuel the skill, which wasn't something he could display in an arena battle like this.

The hymns of Arcadia clashed with the deafening silence of the Abyss. The unpassable chasm between the two formed, and it was just in time. Five massive halos had appeared behind the summoned creature, and they condensed into a terrifying beam aimed straight at Zac. The two forces clashed, and even the barriers that sealed the arena shuddered from the all-out attacks as Zac was pushed to his knees.

Space cried and twisted as the all-out attacks of two forces tried to consume each other, but Zac immediately got a sinking feeling and made his preparations. The creature was too powerful. Even with [**Adamance of Eoz**] and his robust infusion of a Dao Braid, the temple of Arcadia was fast crumbling under the pressure. The Abyssal chasm wasn't much better off, and it looked like it was collapsing unto itself.

The stalemate lasted for another two seconds, but Zac suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood as his attack failed, while the terrifying being still hovered in the sky. Its eye had lost its glimmer, seemingly unable to unleash another scorching ray like the one that took out his attack. But it still

had over half of its golden hoops intact, and they were now falling toward Zac like a heavenly judgment.

However, they didn't get too far before space cracked again as a runic wooden hand emerged, holding an axe that exuded unquestionable might. The creature had already exerted all of its power, and it was effortlessly split in two before the axe continued its descent.

Toward a shocked Traprandar, who had collapsed on the other side of the arena while waiting for his ultimate attack to finish Zac off.

Zac was drenched in blood, his mind a bit woozy. But he still smiled even though the golden hoops filled with deadly power were falling much faster than the axe of his ultimate strike. A forest sprung up around him the next moment, and he melded into the tree just before thousands of shimmering lights ripped his surroundings to shreds. A moment later, a gong echoed out as a protective bubble enclosed him - just in time to block out a massive shockwave that rocked the whole arena.

He had won.

Chapter 819: Bargain Hunting

As the dust settled, Zac was greeted by a deafening silence even after the isolating array had been deactivated. Traprandar was arduously getting back to his feet as his right hand hung limply to the side. A new wound, this one almost cutting the arm clean off, had been added to the other ones - the result of **[Arcadia's Judgement]** finding its target.

Between Traprandar's wounds, the pressure from the huge hand, and Zac's omniscience through **[Ancestral Woods]**, the Hegemon had been unable to dodge the attack. As usual, the Arena Array sprung to action the moment Traprandar's wounds had passed a critical level, and Zac's skill was dispersed before the Hegemon died.

Suddenly, a raucous laugh broke the silence, and Zac looked over to see Olgoroath laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face.

"They got you. They got you!" he howled with glee. "My loss was worth it. Definitely worth it."

Traprandar scowled at the Corpselord before turning his fiery gaze at Zac, who could only return a wry smile as he ate a healing pill and activated **[Surging Vitality]**. Part of him felt bad about scamming these two Hegemons out of their Purchase Points, which meant they would be less prepared for the next relegation. But Zac had already made sure they weren't some sort of saints. They weren't like Pavina or Kaldor who helped others in this prison or anything.

Then again, it ultimately didn't matter.

This was how the multiverse worked, where people fought tooth and nail for resources. So many had already died as a direct result of his pursuit of power, so what was some

robbing? Resources would only grow scarcer as he continued down this path, where every single C-grade treasure would be hotly contested. A B-grade treasure was enough to start a war that would shock empires to their core. Getting weak-hearted meant death, and the end of his aspirations.

Still, that didn't do much to alleviate the mixed emotions Zac felt as he walked down from the arena and accepted his Purchase Points. He had sworn that he wouldn't lose his mortal heart after descending the Havenfort Chasm, but it was getting harder and harder to live up to that promise as time passed.

Was his pang of remorse proof he still had a conscience, or was it just him trying to convince himself he was the same person as the one before the integration?

"Little Pocket? No, ah, Zac Piker, was it?" a hesitant voice emerged from the path leading out of the arena.

It was Yurul, the gladiator he met the first time coming here. They had met a few times since she had almost been a fixture in this place over the past decade as she was trying to find some sort of answer through these duels. However, this time her demeanor was a bit different from normal, and she looked at him with a queer gaze.

"I am entering seclusion," Zac smiled. "I might not be back for a while."

"Oh, alright," Yurul nodded, before the tension in her face smoothed out.

It looked like she had decided to not inquire about his real situation. Still, she took out a token from her Cosmos Sack, something she had never done before. "I have a twin sister on the outside. She was a young acolyte of the Everseal Tribunal of the Yr'Koloq Sector bordering the frontier. If you ever get out... If possible... Could you tell her what happened to me?"

"If I ever get the chance," Zac nodded with a smile as he took the token, donning a hood as he left the arena.

His display of power along with the rumors of his unique situation would probably start a wave of discussion, something

he had no interest in dealing with. He had never heard of the Everseal Tribunal or the Yr'Koloq Sector, but if he stumbled upon the place in the future he'd do Yurul the small favor of sending her sister the token since Yurul was the one who taught him the method to seize Purchase Points in this place.

But he didn't want to get bogged down with too many Karmic Links, so hurriedly left for Samsara's Edge before anyone else caught up with him. He had accomplished the most important milestone before the duel with Kaldor, where he had properly entered the Integration Realm. Zac already knew he would be able to pass the fourth band with the strength and techniques he had accumulated, but there was still eight months before the deadline.

Part of him wanted to go through the duel as soon as possible so he could finally return to Earth, but he knew that he had to be careful. Even with his current level, the Izh'Rak Reaver said Zac only had a 50% chance of survival. That was definitely too low for comfort when fighting against a battle-crazed Peak Monarch who supposedly could confirm his Dao any time he wanted.

Thankfully, there were some things he could still do to better those odds. The most obvious step was to elevate his two Dao Fragments to branches. Even if he couldn't enjoy the attribute boost in this place, the breakthroughs would lend greater strengths to both his stances and to his attacks. Kaldor had promised to keep his comprehension at the stage of Peak Fragments, so gaining another two Dao Branches would become a big advantage.

However, he needed some time to consolidate his gains before that. And just as it happened, Zac had a few more ideas on how to make the most of his next months. So, Zac didn't immediately head toward his teachers or his cultivation caves, but rather toward the Contribution Store. Now that he was flush with cash, it was time to make some purchases.

The reason he took the risk and bet his whole fortune against the two Hegemons was that he didn't want to leave the Orom World without picking up at least one of the unique treasures this huge bastard had snatched up over the eons. And there

were a lot of them that collected dust in the Contribution Stores.

These were all items that would cause a storm on the outside world because of their unique benefits, but their cost-to-benefit ratio was too inefficient for most people in the Orom World. Some benefits and powerups didn't provide Contribution points, making people unwilling to stomach the high price tag. Others might provide benefits, but they were slow to materialize, making them a viable option only if you were already safe from the relegation.

An example of the latter was affinity-boosting treasures. They were extremely costly on the outside, especially those useable in the D-grade. But they were not as useful in the Orom World where you needed quick gains to survive the continuous relegation. So what if the benefits of higher affinities would slowly accumulate over a lifetime? In the Orom World, you needed to get stronger right now.

"Welcome, young master," the store clerk nodded as Zac entered the store.

Only one other disk was occupied, with the Orom World having completely returned to its usual pace after the excitement of the new arrivals had abated. Zac scanned the list of items, and he breathed out in relief that all of the items he had his eyes on were still available. Three particular items piqued Zac's interest more than the others.

The first option item was an item the registry called the **[Hollow Core]**. It was a semi-natural treasure reportedly formed from the core of a unique being and then reforged through some unknown natural calamity. It had been turned into an extremely sturdy container, perfect for building one's Cultivator's Core.

The **[Hollow Core]** exuded some sort of pressure that would forcibly contain rampant energies as you built up the core, allowing pretty much anyone with the prerequisite Dao Stages to form at least a medium-quality Cultivator's Core. Even a cultivator could make use of it to improve their chances of

success, and the stability it provided might allow a cultivator to push their core to the next tier.

However, it had one big drawback in this place; using the treasure to form a Cultivator's Core would drastically lessen the Contribution Points gained from the breakthrough.

When inquiring why that was, Zac found that the restrictive array of the **[Hollow Core]** was so unique that the prison brand didn't manage to access the inspiration and insights from within. Certainly, if the Orom really wanted, it could probably improve the brand to gain access. But why bother exerting that kind of effort for some random unique item?

With a price tag of 32,000 Contribution Points, few E-grade cultivators could afford it. The few who could afford it probably didn't need it. They were most likely great talents who would be able to form high-quality Cultivator's Cores, and the additional benefits the **[Hollow Core]** provided couldn't cover the cost of both the treasure and the loss of points from their breakthrough.

Still, it could potentially be a great asset to Zac who didn't have the benefits of cultivation manuals or natural affinities, and who wasn't planning on breaking through inside the Orom World in either case. He could use all the advantages he could get to form something that could withstand his path.

The second treasure was a single seed of something called the Heavenrender Vine. It was an item that he had been suggested by Heda to replace Vivi when she eventually passed on. Zac had long since overcome the unsettled feeling of socializing with someone whose soul was in constant jeopardy of being consumed, and Zac had visited the Arborist regularly over the past twenty months.

Not only did she possess a wealth of knowledge regarding the Path of Life, but dueling against her thousands of plant species was an immense assistance in integrating the vines into his fighting style. After all, he only had **[Armament Mastery]** on his undead side, and he sometimes hit roadblocks in translating the lessons.

Heda never held back when sharing her knowledge. She had treated him with utmost sincerity since day one, in contrast to Ubo who mostly seemed to have invited Zac out of boredom, and then after that because of Zac's connection to Three Virtues. Zac wanted to reciprocate the treatment, so he had surreptitiously asked about infusing the old vine with Creation Energy to restore her condition or forcibly allow her to breakthrough.

Unfortunately, Heda said it was no use.

No matter if you talked about plants of cultivators, all were born with the shackles of mortality, including cultivators. Certainly, some were less restrained than others, but everyone had a natural limit to their accomplishments. Less than one in ten thousand E-grade cultivators possessed the prerequisites to step into Hegemony naturally, and even fewer succeeded.

There was a small window of opportunity where you could break these shackles, using a mixture of momentum and opportunity to subvert your destiny. But if you missed that chance, you were essentially locked in. Not only would your body resist the evolution, but even the very core of your being resisted going any further.

Vivi had lived a long life even for a Spirit Plant, and to forcibly prolong her life would bring more suffering than happiness, and neither Zac nor Heda wanted that. This was something all powerhouses of the Multiverse had to come to terms with sooner or later. There was only so much you could do even with all your strength and fortune. Not even Autarchs could subvert the basic law of aging.

That was why elders seldom got attached to the younger generations of their clans. Thousands of generations would rise and fall during their lifetime, and getting too invested would only lead to heartbreak, sometimes even Heart Demons hampering their own pursuit of the Dao.

Besides, Zac figured that his Creation Energy was more likely to drain what little lifespan the vine had remaining than recoup it. While Heda clearly had a special attachment to this vine, even she said that Zac was better off focusing on a successor.

To spend a century or two on purifying a high-potential seed with his Dao.

The Heavenrender Vine was a terrifying plant species that was almost unstoppable when it had grown. Its name came from the fact that it was extremely aggressive, and that it seemingly had no limits on how big it could grow. Some vines had conquered whole planets, forming vast single-organism forests on its surface where all living things were prey.

The item in the store was classified as a Supreme Quality D-grade item, but it only cost 43,000 Contribution Points. The reason was simple; it didn't really serve any purpose inside the Orom World. Nurturing and raising a Heavenrender Vine could bankrupt a Hegemon, and doing so wouldn't award any Contribution Points.

In fact, the listing specifically said that Heavenrender Vines were a banned species that you weren't allowed to grow in the Orom World. You were only allowed to buy the seed for study. For Zac, it could become a great asset down the road, and the Vine would naturally enter the C-grade as long as Zac could afford to nurture it.

Heda even said there were B-grade vines out in the Multiverse, but anything beyond early C-grade would require unique fortuitous encounters.

The biggest risk with this purchase was that there was no guarantee he'd always use vines as he had over the past years. He had discussed his use of Armaments at length with Pavina over the past years, and Zac had realized that his attitude to his skills and tools was a bit rigid.

"Nothing is constant," the Revenant had said one day when Zac voiced his concerns. "Things change as the seasons pass. Not everything needs to be carried to the end. Being sentimental can be useful when braving the eons of lonesome struggle that is the road of cultivation. It reminds you why you are fighting, why you refuse to give in.

"But do not let the things you carry become things that chain you down. It is a given that you will not use all the skills you acquire for all eternity. That does not mean they are useless

now or that it is a waste of time learning them. They helped you during a period of your life, allowing you to reach the next stage of your path.

“One day you might realize that the chains are no longer needed for you to accomplish your goals. Will you still carry them because of a decision you made as a child?”

It was a worthwhile reminder. Zac had unintentionally reached a point where his Spirit Tools had become his companions and where he was absolutely unwilling to give them up. He hadn't even considered swapping out [**Verun's Bite**] to some axe with greater potential. Zac would rather search for the fortuitous encounters required for Verun to accompany him to the end.

There wasn't anything wrong with this mindset. The longer you nurtured a weapon, the more in tune with you and your path the weapon would become. Someone who constantly swapped out their weapons would be hard-pressed to reach that kind of natural cooperation as Zac had with his axe. But while this was true for his axe, it didn't need to be the same with everything else.

Just like Pavina said; if the vines didn't work out, he could always stop using them. Pavina could accomplish more with a single finger than he could with all the tools in his repertoire. He didn't need to be worried that he wouldn't be able to display all the facets of his stances with his axe alone in the future.

Besides, he still hadn't forgotten his longstanding promise to Alea. The goal was still to resurrect her, which carried a decent risk of destroying [**Love's Bond**]. Even if the weapon survived, Zac knew he wouldn't have the same attachment to it afterward.

But even if he got the Heavenrender Vine and it turned out to be superfluous in the future, he could still have great use for it. As long as he managed to elevate it to middle C-grade, it would become an existence that few in Zecia would dare mess with. It had the potential to become Earth's ultimate guardian

in case Zac needed to leave home for prolonged durations when searching for his sister.

Finally, there was a treasure called the **[Stone of Celestial Void]**. From the looks of it, it was some sort of unique treasure born in the Void itself. It contained almost an incomprehensible amount of energy, enough to outright kill over a hundred Hegemons. Furthermore, it was said to hold some mysterious insights that were impossible to identify.

This was something that he was eyeing for his bloodline. The amount of energy his Void Emperor-bloodline had required to reach E-grade was almost unreal. Considering the biggest divide between E- and D-grades was the immense energy reserves of Hegemons, Zac didn't even dare to think of how many resources it would cost to push his bloodline to the next stage.

The **[Stone of Celestial Void]** had the potential to be the spark that allowed him to ignite his bloodline and begin the breakthrough, like when he somehow siphoned all the valuables in the depths of the Twilight Chasm.

The stone cost 56,000 Purchase Points, which was slightly above the 49,699 he currently possessed between winning the duel and getting almost 9,000 contribution points for reaching the Integration Stage. But as long as he formed his next two branches, he would most likely be able to afford it.

Apart from that, there were dozens of items of similar quality. While those didn't seem as useful for his own cultivation, some were definitely more valuable on the outside. There was always the option of taking the most valuable item and exchanging it for something even better than these three things on the outside.

Zac stood frozen in hesitation for almost twenty minutes, but he eventually emerged completely broke from the store, now with a small wooden band on his finger. Inside, a small seed hovered above a vast field of spiritual soil, the space spanning a couple of square miles. The Contribution Store was pretty generous, throwing in a miniature realm where he could nurture plants.

He had ultimately chosen the seed since it felt like the Heavenrender Vine was the option with the best odds of paying great dividends.

The **[Hollow Core]** seemed pretty amazing, but he wasn't certain it would work together with his Specialty Core that already formed a shell around the spot where his future Cultivator's Core would be. Besides, he had the Perennial Vastness Token. He had asked around, and while he couldn't find anyone who had been there, he had managed to pick up a few rumors.

From what he could gather, the method used in the Perennial Vastness Realm was unique, and it mainly relied on items gathered inside that unique realm. He had even sacrificed a Spatial Ring to confirm this by visiting Three Virtues. While the details were unclear, it was a trial and an opportunity wrapped into one, and the better you performed the better your core would become.

Zac couldn't be certain, but there was a decent chance of outside tools like the **[Hollow Core]** would prove useless, or at least inferior to native alternatives, in that place. The re-sell value of the **[Hollow Core]** was probably the lowest out of all the items as well, as it wasn't that impressive to guarantee an ascent into D-grade. Those stuck at the bottleneck would surely pay anything for such an item, but E-grade cultivators didn't have nearly enough money.

As for the use of **[Stone of Celestial Void]**, it was just too big a risk. The Contribution Shop refused to take it out for him to inspect, so he couldn't confirm it was useful for his bloodline. Besides, it was simply too expensive, and choosing the stone wouldn't allow him to complete the next part of his plan.

Forming Dao Branches meant a powerup, but it also meant something else in his case – he was about to get zapped Tribulation Lightning. Twice. While it was deadly, it was also an opportunity on its own. Last time, it had purified his body, ridding him of impurities, some of them so stubborn that **[Purity of the Void]** couldn't get the job done. After these tribulations and the one when reaching D-grade, it might be centuries before he was presented with this opportunity again.

It was time to gunk up his body.

Chapter 820: Gunking Up

Zac had prepared for this step since he accepted Kaldor's challenge, and with his latest spending spree, he had everything he needed to make the most out of his upcoming tribulations. So he made a beeline for his cultivation cave upon leaving the Contribution Store, and he arrived at the small island in the no-man's-land between life and death a few days later.

Years had passed since he leveled the local plant life during his second reincarnation, but the vegetation had long since regrown thanks to the dense ambient energy. There were no signs of any habitation, but Zac's surroundings suddenly shifted after he entered a dense patch of undergrowth and activated an array disk.

A latch appeared on the ground, and Zac opened it before jumping down. Behind him, the illusory arrays sprung back to life, hiding the entrance from any passer-by. Further and further down Zac went, until he reached a cave 200 meters beneath the ground. The air shimmered as he passed through a checkpoint, and he was immediately assaulted by the ferocious waves of stockpiled energies.

Almost three years ago Zac had looked into creating this place to restart his Soul Strengthening cultivation, since he figured he might as well work on his soul while he digested what he had learned in the Wilderness. Building such a place on top of the island felt too exposed for a permanent residence, so Zac decided to dig into the ground.

To his surprise, Zac had stumbled into this place by chance. The cave was clearly manmade, but it had taken advantage of the energy veins of the neighboring zones to create a gathering formation. It was far superior to the one Triv had erected inside his Cultivation Cave back home, and even more efficient than the gathering array he had purchased in the

Contribution Store. Thankfully, there was no cultivator around, and the signs indicated that it had been abandoned for a long, long time.

It looked like Zac wasn't the first life-death-cultivator trapped in the Orom World. Zac didn't know who his predecessor was since there were no messages or heritages left behind, but it had saved Zac a lot of effort. He only needed to make some minor alterations to make the energy flow better suit his Cultivation Method and erect a couple of arrays, and he was done.

A prayer mat was left in the center of the cave, and Zac was immediately inundated in the struggle between life and death as he walked toward it. He had already planned out how to extract as many benefits as possible from the tribulations, and leveling pills was just part of it.

He could do the same with his soul.

However, Zac didn't immediately start up the cultivation method, but he first slotted five Life-attuned Cosmic Crystals into an array, followed by five Miasma Crystals of similar rank. The powerful energies sealed inside the crystal joined the ambient energy, pushing the environment to the next level.

The expenditure was beyond exorbitant with each one of the crystals being worth hundreds of D-grade Nexus Coins, but they would last him over a month. More importantly, they allowed Zac to push the quality of his cultivation environment to a similar level as the hidden cave he had found at the bottom of the Twilight Chasm.

Next, Zac released some Void Energy to take out his **[Mind's EyeAgate]** before slotting it in a grove just behind the Prayer mat. Going further from his prayermat, he installed an array disk the size of a barrel lid. On it, Zac placed an intricately engraved chest, and he immediately opened its lid.

Inside was the black and golden spiral-formed crystal of the twin-souled Realm Spirit, and they greedily started to absorb the energies in the cave the moment they were sealed. Even then, Zac saw how much weaker the lights were already, and he felt some regret as he placed his hands against the smooth

crystal. He felt a weak nudge, proving that the spirits were still alive.

But he didn't do something soon, they'd perish. He had tried all kinds of things since he first took them out a few years back, from sealing to nurturing, but he couldn't replicate Qi'Sar's array at all. They definitely wouldn't last the full ten years that the old realm spirit mentioned. He would be lucky if they survived more than a year.

Occasionally letting them feast like this seemed to help a bit, but he knew they would stop absorbing the energies in a day or two, unable to continuously draw sustenance from the ambient energy. They were like plants dragged out of the soil, and anything he tried was just a temporary relief. Hopefully, he'd return to Earth in time.

If not, it was simply not fated. Perhaps the spirits would turn into some useful treasure upon their death.

Finally done with his preparations, Zac returned to his prayer mat and took out two of the bottles he had bought. Zac left them alone for now, and instead withdrew the densely inscribed Array Disk for his Soul Strengthening Manual.

The cultivation methods of the first two reincarnations were simple enough. Zac had essentially been able to zone out and let the array do its thing, but those days were over. The third method of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** required not only active participation, but also an actual understanding of life and death.

Five streams of Mental Energy were dragged out from Zac's soul as he activated the array. Four came from his life-attuned cores and one from his central core. Joining them was a stream of insight coming from the Bodhi Tree in his Soul Aperture. Zac had long realized that using his human side to cultivate Death didn't help him at the current stage of his method, so he had swapped over to circulating life when human since that was what he was more accustomed to.

The continuous drain of energy would keep going for almost an hour, but Zac would be busy during that time. The outer cores of his soul suddenly sped up as Zac imposed his will on

them, and their trajectories grew more and more inscrutable. Of course, Zac was extremely familiar with what the patterns entailed. They represented his Daos of life and death.

Their movements drew two separate pathways in the hidden space of his soul; one of life, and one of death. The cores were often precariously close to colliding, but they never actually collided. However, a great tension was building up through the pathways, and Zac almost felt like he was watching two armies simulating a war.

This simulation wasn't autonomous. It required constant input from Zac as he visualized the trajectories and what they meant. A single slip-up would noticeably reduce the effect of the cycle, and resting for just a minute could ruin it altogether. Zac glanced at one of the pill bottles with hesitation, but he ultimately chose to wait.

Fifty-five minutes passed as Zac continuously pushed the cores through countless revolutions of life and death. Finally, a torrent of life-empowered energy came crashing back from the array, and Zac immediately uncorked one of the bottles and poured out a pill into his hand. The small pill was shockingly powerful, and it had emitted such immense fluctuations it almost managed to hypnotize him.

He still wasn't sure this would work, but he threw the golden bead into his mouth before it made him lose control over the trajectories in his mind. The pill melted before he even had a chance to swallow, and just a moment later a sandstorm of golden grains had entered his Soul Aperture.

It was the medicinal efficacy of the pill he had just ingested, the **[Divine Elevation Pellet]**. It could tenuously be considered a soul nurturing pill, but it wasn't something designed for mentalists. In fact, no self-respecting mentalist would willingly use this pill, even though its name was quite impressive.

It was a unique pill of the Orom World, sold by some unknown Emerald Badge from what Zac had gathered. Its use was simple; it forcibly empowered souls with life, providing the user with Contribution Points and a somewhat stronger

soul. On the surface, it sounded great for any cultivator walking the path of life. A soul more in tune with their Dao, without using any Soul Strengthening Method at that. What's not to like?

The problem was that the pill contained a large amount of impurities, meaning it provided short-term benefits while potentially causing big issues down the road. It was a pill born from the desperation of this prison, where it was better to sacrifice some of your potential than being culled. It would buy the warriors some time, giving them a chance to turn things around.

Obviously, things rarely worked out for these people, but it was still a pill that had a steady demand in Samsara's Edge. Unsurprisingly, there were quite a few similar pills on the market, for various attunements. Of course, the second bottle Zac had prepared was the same, but for his undead side.

Zac was taking a calculated risk here. Adding impurities to his soul at this stage might interfere with his Dao Breakthroughs, but he dared use these pills since he had suppressed his cultivation for so long. He was right at the cusp for both the Daos, and even if he met resistance, he could simply eat an additional Dao Fruit to crash through the barrier.

The ferocious sandstorm instinctively sought to join the returning surge of Mental Energy, but Zac held half of it back, instead pushing it into the four Divine Cores. Meanwhile, he guided empowered torrent toward another spot of his soul; a small golden globe that was barely visible next to the far larger outer cores.

The ninth outer core.

This little pellet had been formed the first time he activated the cultivation method, but it had been even smaller back then. Every time he practiced the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** since then, the new core had grown a little as it was flooded with energy from the other cores. By now, it was roughly a tenth the size of the original cores, and Zac estimated it would take around 15 years of daily cultivation to fully form it by normal means.

It wasn't a lot, but it also wasn't little.

Especially when considering that he would need nine cores of life and death to reach the maximum number of cores. And that was just the first half of the method. Going by his observations, there had to be a subsequent period of strengthening his cores after they were all fully formed. Altogether, Zac figured the third reincarnation would require a century of focused cultivation.

A century was not too much, even for an E-grade cultivator, but it showed why so few bothered with Soul Strengthening. By Zac's estimates, the third Reincarnation he was working on was equivalent to the second half of the E-grade in terms of stage. To spend a hundred years in the E-grade, where you spent almost 18 hours a day on Soul Cultivation, was unacceptable to most people.

It wouldn't leave enough time for all the other parts of cultivation, which meant it would either ruin your momentum or leave you with glaring weaknesses. Only a Soul Cultivator would feel this trade-off worthwhile. Or Soul Cultivators and Zac, rather. Even then, the Mentalists would probably be able to speed up the progress compared to someone like Zac, who didn't have a unique soul any special affinities in that regard.

His only strength seemed to be that his soul had unlimited potential, and it didn't get stuck in any bottlenecks, just like his body. Most people couldn't cultivate Soul Strengthening Methods even if they wanted, considering their souls would simply stop improving after a bit. Their souls would strengthen as their realms increased, but that was the extent of it.

But Zac was unwilling to spend a whole century on the third reincarnation, no matter how useful an empowered soul was. Luckily, he had found some ways to shorten that duration. First of all, there were the two splinters who continuously fed his soul with high-grade energy. Secondly, he had realized that the stronger the outer cores were, the quicker each revolution would be.

And the quickest way to improve the outer core was to snatch various opportunities. He had seen just how much time he had saved on the Second Reincarnation by visiting the Twilight Ocean. Without the unique environment and all the lucky encounters in that place, he would still not have passed the Second Reincarnation, even if had circulated the method every single day.

Even the life-and-death struggles had honed his mind and shored up his foundations. Secluded cultivation simply couldn't compare.

This didn't change with the third reincarnation. He had already consumed some resources he found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Crystal along with some treasures in his Spatial Rings. These treasures had helped him not only grow his main core but also condense the attuned energies in his outer cores.

He would have to keep looking for materials to speed up the process, be it pills, natural treasures, or unique cultivation grounds.

Hours passed as three more rotations were finished, where Zac ate another pellet after every single revolution. The fifth divine core had enjoyed shocking improvements, but Zac could sense that he would only be able to use these pills for another cultivation session before they lost their efficacy. Even now, a good chunk of the golden mist was expunged by his body before it even reached his Soul Aperture.

Furthermore, his Divine Cores all sported a series of dark-grey spots now, the impurities that had been hidden in the golden storm. Another hour passed and Zac took a fifth pill as the energy from the fifth revolution returned. He was hoping he could change what was about to happen next by controlling the medicinal energy, but he ran into a dead-end this time.

Zac could only look on with some disappointment as the stream of life-attuned energies dissipated into a haze, failing to reach the fifth core.

As the cores moved through his Soul Aperture, the energies were gradually returned to the four outer cores. That, unfortunately, didn't do anything to strengthen them though. It

only put them in an excitable state, just like how the seas had started raging in the previous reincarnation. Even then, Zac had to continue, completing one revolution after another where most of the energy was lost to the void.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to start up the second half of his method. Zac still couldn't quite comprehend the exact reason for this limitation. If possible, he would have preferred to focus all nine revolutions in rapidly building up the missing outer cores, but he was restricted by the number of cores he had completed.

Four fully-formed cores meant he would be able to infuse the fifth core four times and no more.

Each additional core would allow the trajectories of the outer cores to grow more complex, which in turn would improve his soul in all kinds of ways, including how many energy infusions he could complete. If he had only managed to form one or two outer cores of each attunement, he would have been forced to spend twice as much time on the third reincarnation. At least.

Furthermore, the more outer cores he formed, the quicker the next formation would become. For example, the ninth and final core should only take half the time the fifth did, considering it would be infused eight times per cycle. Besides, putting the outer cores in an excitable state didn't come without its benefits, so Zac let nature take its course as he finished all nine cycles.

By the time the ninth revolution was complete, the Divine Cores moved almost twice as fast as their opposites, and the Miasmatic Cores were greatly restrained.

Having finished the first half of the cultivation session, Zac swapped over to his Draugr form and began the work on the second set of revolutions. Just like in his human form, he took a pill each time for the first four revolutions. This one was exactly the same as the **[Divine Elevation Pellet]**, though it was called **[Ruin's Gift]** and forcibly expanded souls with the taint of death.

Thankfully, Zac was able to form the fifth Miasmatic Core simultaneously as the Divine Core, cutting the time spent in half. Once more, four sets of empowered streams of Mental Energy nurtured the growing core before the whole set of Miasmatic Cores became more and more frantic, their movements no longer as suppressed.

Zac looked at his middle core that had silently been hovering in the heart of it all during the whole process. As the outer cores had grown more excitable, small motes had started to fall toward the central core, landing on its surface like a thin layer of snow. However, with only four sets of outer cores, the conflict still couldn't reach a level of conflict that also refined the main core, so it simply grew without getting more condensed.

This process would continue for over an hour until the outer cores left their empowered state. With both sets finished, Zac no longer needed to provide any input. The outer cores were like wind-up toys, moving on their own now that Zac had staked and infused energy for the better part of a day.

He could even move around a bit by this point, though too much would shorten the duration his soul got nurtured. Zac stayed put for now, and he took out a third pill bottle and swallowed two pills inside. A ferocious surge of energy barged into his mind, and the small motes of snow were swept up by a blizzard that engulfed his central core.

A burst of synthetic progress was added to his unattuned core. Just like the other two pills, Zac had intentionally chosen a pill that provided huge benefits but contained large amount of Pill Toxins. Unfortunately, Zac found that the unattuned pill wasn't as effective as the two attuned ones. He had feared as much, considering the large amount of resources like this he had consumed not long ago.

Still, it was better than nothing, and Zac figured that it might save him a month or two of hard work. Soon enough, his mind returned to its normal state, signifying that the session was over. Even then, Zac sat unmoving for almost 20 minutes, not immediately continuing his training plan.

But he knew he was delaying the inevitable, he had already made his choice. With great reluctance, he swapped out his prayer mat with a large barrel. Next, he took out a large stone urn sealed with a dense layer of talismans. He took a deep breath before ripping off the talismans. This uncorked the container and allowed him to gradually fill the barrel with its contents.

Zac thought he had been mentally prepared, but he quickly realized his folly. His hair stood on end, his eyes watered, and he was hit by a wave of nausea that almost knocked him out. This was unlike anything Zac had encountered before. It was beyond his scope of comprehension.

The grey viscous mixture smelled like an embattled porta-potty three days into a festival where nothing but eggs and hot sauce was served.

The stench was so overbearing that it could be considered both a mental and a physical attack wrapped into a single odor. Plugging his nose and sealing his pores had done nothing to alleviate the horror - the stench almost seemed sentient, and it refused to be denied.

Yet Zac kept pouring. The road of cultivation was full of tribulations, and this was just the latest one. Even then, Zac felt this one might be even more difficult to overcome than the Heavenly Lightning.

Chapter 821: Celestial Clay

The stone urn was a spatial treasure, and Zac eventually resealed it when the barrel was three-quarter full. For better or worse, there was a lot more of the grey mud stored in the vat, and he had to save it for future endeavors. The stench had spread through the whole cave by now, the environmental arrays utterly incapable of stemming the unceasing emanations.

Zac wasn't any better off after withstanding the initial wave of nausea. His nose, his very being, refused to acclimate to the stench. The hexbrew was something mentioned by Heda, but even she had been unable to recommend it when Zac asked about items with powerful effects but large drawbacks.

The bubbling grey mud was called **[Celestial Clay]**, in what might be one of the most egregious cases of overselling something Zac had ever encountered. It could be considered a natural treasure, something that was nearly impossible to create. It did, however, have a small chance of forming in tainted lands marked by extreme blights, war, or natural disasters. In other words, places with extremely fell karma.

But just like the sign at the Havenfort Chasm said, '*Night is the mother of the day*'. Something divine could really be born out of this horrifying product. The **[Celestial Clay]** was one of the rare items that could boost one's inherent Luck, and it was even more effective than most Attribute Fruits.

Fruits providing Luck were hot commodities, and Zac hadn't been able to get his hands on any even if a few had popped up in the Contribution Store. Everyone could use a bit of Luck in this prison, since it could be the difference between finding inspiration and being relegated. However, while all the Luck-boosting fruits had been sold the first day the store was refilled, the **[Celestial Clay]** had remained in stock since the previous cycle.

If it was just the smell, most cultivators would simply grit their teeth and jump right in before secluding themselves until the stench had abated. But there was an issue with how the clay was formed. Being born in all that fell Karma, it unsurprisingly contained extremely hard-to-cleanse impurities that spread through one's whole body.

That might just be a thorny problem that could slowly be alleviated for a powerful faction on the outside. Then again, those kinds of factions would probably find other means to fill out their Luck. In the Orom World, where you couldn't spare the time to slowly purify your body, it was almost a death sentence. What good was extra Luck when the impurities were enough to risk your future breakthroughs?

Only two groups of people would dare use **[Celestial Clay]**; someone like Zac, with the unique abilities to cleanse impurities, or people absolutely out of options. But most in the latter group would rather spend their last Purchase Points on things like the Cultivation Chambers or Dao Treasures.

Zac fought to quell his full-body dry heaves as he dressed down to his underwear before sinking into the mud, letting the sludge rise all the way to his neck before stopping. A shudder went through his body, before he finally dipped his head beneath as well. Thus, he was fully submerged in the profane compound.

Some things were not as bad as they smelled, but the **[Celestial Clay]** was definitely not one of them. As the weird gunk entered his pores, it felt like his whole body had become an olfactory organ, completely inundating him in the malodor. Zac had to forcibly grip his knees to keep himself from flying out of the vat, ruining the opportunity.

After being taken from its pool of origination, the **[Celestial Clay]** wouldn't last more than twelve hours outside of a sealed environment. Even sealed, it couldn't last more than a millennium or two, a stark contrast to most items that could last for eons inside a Spatial Tool. Most believed that the Heavenly Secrets locked in the goop couldn't be permanently contained, and it would escape sooner or later.

So Zac could only endure and thank the heavens that there was no one around to see or smell what he was doing. He could imagine the comments if someone like Ogras or Emily had seen this cultivation method. He wouldn't hear the end of it.

But he didn't have many other options.

The rules of his duel with Kaldor were clear; it was a straightforward melee without the use of skills or his remnants. That left him with very few options to improve his odds in the short run. Dao and Technique were the big two, where his other options were quite limited. Boosting his Luck was one of the best solutions he had come up with.

He had room to gain around 20 points raw points in Luck since he had only filled up around half of his ceiling with Attribute Fruits for both F- and E-grade. With all his titles, that would boost his Effective Luck by nearly 100 points, which was a boost completely unrestrained by the Prison Brand. That might be what would clinch victory against a tough opponent like Kaldor.

Luckily, the [**Celestial Clay**] wasn't grade-restricted like the Attribute Fruits. Four rounds of cultivating like this, one bath a week, should be enough to hit the limit. He wished there was more he could do, but if there were only so many ways to improve. With the rules for the duel like they were, his bloodline was essentially useless, not that he had any way to improve it further at this point.

If the Contribution Store had more treasures that could open up more Draugr-nodes, that would be one thing, but he was out of luck there. He had considered treasures meant to improve constitutions, but nurturing constitutions with an awakened bloodline was essentially impossible.

So apart from his soul and the [**Celestial Clay**], Zac only had one final solution. He was planning on breaking through a couple of levels since every level gained did slightly improve the speed with which he could circulate the energy in his body. Other than that, he would simply have to continue to train, pushing his Integration Stage techniques even further.

Since the clay would retain its efficacy for half a day, Zac desperately struggled to enter a meditative state to escape the stench. Interestingly enough, his connection to his two Dao Fragments always felt much clearer after running the latest method of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

There was something about observing and running those mysterious patterns with his cores that strengthened his bond to those Daos, and today was no exception.

He hoped to break through the first of the two Dao Branches in a month, making this his final opportunity to revise and go over all his insights. The hours passed, and Zac arduously managed to forget the vile mud he was ensconced inside. Eventually, he heard a crackling sound, which meant the clay had dried into a brittle solid mass that was fast falling apart.

Zac was filled with relief as he pushed through the flakes of dried **[Celestial Clay]**, crawling out from the barrel as though it was a barrel full of snakes. He immediately threw the barrel into a Spatial Ring before setting up another array. For the next few hours, Zac was trapped inside a storm of water, spiritual leaves, and coarse sponges that scrubbed him all over thousands of times. Meanwhile, the cave was slowly being aired out by the environmental array, the stench finally giving way now that it was without a source.

Even then, Zac didn't feel completely clean when he emerged, even if every particle of clay had been removed from his skin. Perhaps, he wouldn't feel clean for months after that experience. However, his mood did visibly improve when he noticed that his Luck had improved by a full 16 points from this one session, meaning one bath had provided a full 8 raw Luck.

That was essentially the equivalent of a Peak Luck Fruit at less than a percent of the cost.

With that ordeal out of the way, Zac spent the next week in seclusion, alternating between opening a node with a Node-breaking Pill and cultivating his soul. As Zac expected, the Soul Strengthening Pills he had prepared mostly lost their

efficacy after three sessions, but Zac estimated he had saved almost two years of progress this time around.

Of course, in normal situations it might have taken a decade to gradually rid his body of all the impurities, making the method useless for Mentalists. Eventually, it was time for another cursed bath, and this process repeated twice more until the day of his breakthrough arrived. By now, his body was absolutely permeated by impurities - from his soul to nodes and cells.

But the progress was not bad - a greatly enhanced soul and two new levels, for both his races. It could have been more, but Zac didn't want any lingering damage to his body when dealing with the Tribulation Lightning. So he had pulled out all the stops, from using the disgusting **[Chainbreaking Pills]** to supreme quality node-breaking pills, leaving almost no damage behind.

Most importantly, he had gained a full 51 points in Luck. When adding all the points his Attribute Fruits had provided thus far, Zac realized that he had actually surpassed the limits of a normal cultivator. Even with his background and unique bloodline, he had been unable to gain any more than 25 points in Strength from Attribute Fruits, for example.

Some races could slightly surpass these limits for specific stats. But from what Zac had gathered, 25 per grade was a hard cap on Luck, no matter your origin. Most couldn't even get that. However, Zac had actually managed to gain 27 raw points in Luck per grade, pushing his luck all the way to 591 Points.

Zac had no idea where what allowed this attribute to surpass the normal limits. It might be related to the Fated-titles he got, where a stronger fate might allow for greater leeway. Or it might be something else entirely. In fact, Zac wasn't even sure if he had reached his limits since he had run out of **[Celestial Clay]**.

But that was just as well, considering that it felt like he was covered in a film of oil from all the impurities in his body by now. If not for the upcoming Tribulation and his Hidden Node, he would essentially be crippled by this point. The feeling was

extremely uncomfortable, and he was afraid that staying like that for too long would directly hamper his mental state. Perhaps, it would even affect his ability to absorb the Dao.

So Zac finally left his month-long seclusion and headed toward the [**Hallowed Pools**], the cultivation ground that matched the [**Blackink Mountain**] in function. His breakthroughs had provided an impressive influx of Purchase Points, and he sprung for one of the Middle-grade chambers for half a day.

This cultivation cave was a golden pond hidden in a cave underground, where the walls were studded with Divine Crystals. Zac felt like he was looking at a primordial soup as he stared at the shimmering waters, the origin of life. He had developed a small phobia against submerging himself in cultivation liquid thanks to that wretched mud, but there was barely any hesitation as he swam to the depths of the pond.

The moment he entered the waters, Zac was almost forcibly dragged into his breakthrough prematurely. But he held onto his sanity as he reached the bottom of the pond where a small array was engraved. He knew he was pushing it renting a cave meant for Hegemons, but he was confident in maintaining his own vision of life.

For years now, he had delayed his breakthrough as he condensed and perfected his path and his stances. By now, he could see the route he wanted to take so clearly that it might as well be real. Over the past month, he had spent every waking moment pondering on his path, confirming that the truths he had seized during his endless battles over the past years were in tune with his path.

The last time he upgraded his Life-attuned Dao was after the battle with Ventus, the Radiant Temple numerologist. Since then, he had encountered and experienced so much. In fact, he had witnessed so many expressions of life since he started cultivating, from the various facets of the human experience to the more conceptual meanings of life.

For some, like Traprandar, life manifested as a powerful light, a beacon that could both nurture and destroy. It was a force of

nature like lightning or fire. It was like the sun, sharing its blessing with the world but burning anything that came too close.

For others, Life represented Divinity – the bridge between mortality and the Heavens. It was the gift of the Cosmos, and what connected almost all beings of the Multiverse. Thus, it represented the cohesiveness of the shared consciousness, where all was one and the one was all – one of the tenets of the Buddhist Sangha.

In Zac's case, he saw life as change; boundless opportunity and possibility, resisting any and all restraints imposed upon it. Since his first vision of the Lifebringer, the celestial tree that outgrew its homeworld, he had delved deeper and deeper into the truths of the transformative nature of life. At first, change was represented through the changing cycles of nature when he worked on his Seed of Trees.

From there, it integrated the ability to break convention by adding the concepts of braving the harsh winds and finding life through death. At the same time, the Seed of Sanctuary added stability. It made his Dao impervious to the wills of external pressures, where life derived from within could break the chains of fate and bring about endless possibilities.

Life represented progress, as materialized through his Evolutionary Stance. Only through a constant cycle of reinvention could perfection be grasped. However, his path was not one of passive discovery, of accepting whatever change came his way. Seizing and comprehending life was to control life. To control fate. Through his comprehension of life, he would become the arbiter of his future.

That was his Path of Supremacy.

Suddenly, Zac's pores opened wide, greedily absorbing the surrounding waters with such gusto that the whole cave shook. At the same time, the Bodhi tree in his mind detached from its usual spot on one of the Divine Cores. It took position above his central core, like the bodhi was becoming the heavens of his inner world.

Hundreds of small streams of purified insights entered his Soul Aperture and were swallowed by the Bodhi, all while Zac staunchly held onto his path. The Dao Avatar kept growing in response, molding itself into Zac's vision of the Dao of Life. Eventually, his Dao Field exploded out from Zac's body as a massive apparition appeared above his head, stretching all the way to the pond's surface over twenty meters above.

At first, the apparition mirrored the Dao Avatar's appearance, but it gradually started to transform. Suddenly, it had become the Lifebringer, its branches stretching toward eternity, a realm unto its own. The next moment, it was the apocalyptic tree that was created from the volcanic eruption in the Twilight Ocean. The consecrated Bodhi tree that once birthed the **[Prajñā Cherry]**, the small sapling he had found in the Dead Zone.

Both avatar and apparition kept changing, reflecting both his sources of inspiration and the ever-changing nature of his comprehension.

Suddenly, a rumble spread through the world, reaching the very core of Zac's being. His eyes shot open, and he was surprised to find himself standing in outer space. His surprise didn't come from the fact that he found himself overlooking a beautiful galaxy full of vibrant colors, but rather that he had been moved to Orom's Tribulation Dimension without so much as a spatial ripple.

Unfortunately, this space was even more tightly sealed than the Orom World itself, and escape was all but impossible. Of course, the spatial restrictions didn't apply to the Heavens, and Zac saw how an ominous black cloud had started to spread through the emptiness of space shrouding the cosmos above his head. Zac frowned as he saw the roiling darkness kept expanding to the point it stretched for dozens of kilometers in every direction.

It was large. Very large. During his last tribulation, he had been pretty out of it, but he was certain this Tribulation Cloud was larger than last time around. Its diameter was at least thirty percent wider, which Zac could only assume would translate into a harsher punishment. His fears were all-but-

confirmed as he sensed the intangible presence hidden within,
the boundless wrath of the Heavens.

It was out for blood.

Chapter 822: Calamity

As expected, the punishment for evolving a Dao firmly outside the System's purview came with a harsher challenge. The System wasn't shouldering any part of the tribulation this time around. Each rumble felt like a primal call of destruction, with each purple flash hidden within the clouds containing condensed wrath for going against the natural order.

This was not a trial - it was a calamity.

The golden tree that had been conjured by his breakthrough shuddered from the pressure, Zac felt a pang of fear as he looked up at the vast energies that had accumulated. He couldn't stop the pang of primal fear to grip his heart. After all, only 5% of people who directly shouldered a tribulation survived.

Even then, Zac's heartbeat was steady and his gaze was calm. This time around Zac wasn't accidentally stumbling into a breakthrough, he had prepared for this step for a long time. He wouldn't be one of those who had their path cut short. He was here to crash through Heaven's punishment in one go.

Five swirls beneath his feet continuously fed him with insights from the pond back in the **[Hallowed Pools]**, fueling his aspiration as he reformed his Dao Field with the tree in the center. With his Dao on full display, it felt like this desolate pocket of space had become a lush forest full of verve. A clap of furious thunder greeted the arrival of Zac's Dao, and he felt the vast presence fully focus on him as the errant arcs of purple lightning started to gather up.

This time, he wouldn't swing at the lightning bolts like a lunatic. He had done his research on how to best surpass a tribulation. There were some ways to deal with the lightning bolts, Zac had found out, but directly attacking the lightning was not one of them as far as Zac could tell. Perhaps if one

was disgustingly powerful you could directly disperse the clouds, but Zac was far from that level.

What he did the last time during his bout of hubris was akin to pouring gasoline on the fire, only worsening the situation. In reality, there were two paths to go about the breakthrough; to hide from the Heavens and to defy the Heavens. These two terms were even older than the System itself, which was no surprise considering the boundless cultivators walked their path with at least one foot outside the System's purview.

Hiding from the Heavens meant figuring out ways to weaken the tribulation or make it spread its focus. Some unorthodox cultivators set up sinister arrays where human sacrifices were performed to hide their fate, or temporarily displace their Dao onto someone else, tricking the Heavens into targeting the innocent. What his mother did to Thea was exactly this, as far as he could tell - sacrificing an outsider to allow Kenzie to pass into the E-grade.

Some unique treasures and methods weren't as sinister though.

The most famous faction who hid from the heavens were no doubt the Technocrats, who had supposedly perfected this technique. From what he'd gathered, they were able to weaken the tribulation by more than 70%, depending on their individual tech. There were even rumors of some sort of Technocrat Holy Land that was completely shielded from both the System and the Heavens.

That alone had ignited another wave of wrath in Zac upon learning. His mother obviously had various means to cheat or weaken Kenzie's Tribulation Lightning, yet she chose to use an unorthodox technique that killed Thea. It was not an act of necessity - it was spite. Just the thought of it made Zac's anger come bubbling again, but he quickly quenched it before refocusing on his breakthrough.

Zac couldn't relax or get distracted at this point; he had no plans of hiding from this tribulation.

The benefits of hiding from the Heavens were obvious; you'd survive where you would likely have fallen otherwise, you carry on with your life. The downside was pretty punishing as

well, though. Your breakthrough could barely be considered successful, though Zac wasn't too sure this applied to the Technocrats as well.

From what he'd heard, cheating a breakthrough this way was almost akin to forming a Half-Step Cultivator's Core. While the reality wasn't quite that bad, it was still a far cry from a true breakthrough. At best, you'd have to spend a huge amount of time and effort on shoring up the weak foundations left behind by the false breakthrough.

At worst, your cultivation journey had come to its end.

Few elites who had stepped on the path of the boundless were willing to live with such a drawback, and they chose to believe in themselves and their ability to withstand the punishing bolts of lightning. That was the kind of conviction one needed to defy the Heavens; to stare into the eyes of death and not flinch.

For most, Tribulation Lightning was simply a calamity to be avoided at all costs, and they didn't have the strength to seize the opportunity it presented. In fact, there were benefits to directly taking the lightning bolts of the old Heavens, benefits that not even the System could provide. His bloodline had simply allowed him to take far more advantage than most.

As long as warriors properly withstood the punishment of the Heavens, they could absorb small wisps of the Heavens themselves. For cultivators, it was an opportunity to marginally increase their affinities. Having the lightning pass through their Dao Fields also helped stabilize your Dao, saving you months of hard work.

Zac most likely wouldn't be able to enjoy the former with his unique Bloodline. He should have noticed some change after the previous tribulation if that was the case. But he did think he could benefit from the latter, which was a huge advantage for his upcoming fight. The less time he needed to consolidate, the more time he spend on improving his techniques even further.

His ability to cleanse his body with Tribulation Lightning seemed to be a unique benefit of his bloodline though, and he hadn't heard of anyone else benefiting in this manner. Last

time, it was all thanks to his **[Void Heart]** swallowing lightning and turning it into something usable that had thoroughly cleansed his body and strengthened him. However, Zac believed that he hadn't unearthed the full potential of his bloodline.

Karz had been able to draw sustenance from pretty much anything. Zac bet that Karz would be able to swallow at least some tribulation lightning, even if it hadn't been shown in the visions. The same was true for the mysterious man who had flown through the cosmos in his node-opening visions, swallowing stars like it was nothing.

Zac felt he should be able to do the same. As the first bolt of lightning congealed in the clouds, Zac steadied his mind. He had two goals today, apart from simply surviving. First, he wanted to stay conscious throughout the whole breakthrough, so that he could take full advantage of this opportunity. Secondly, he wanted to seize a bit of the lightning himself, performing an initial cleansing round to remove some of the muck that permeated his body.

The purple arcs of lightning lit up the whole cosmos by now, hatred and spite taken physical form. Even as Zac held onto his convictions, he couldn't completely erase that primal fear from before. This was probably how the ancient cavemen of Earth felt as they hid from the crashing thunder, fearing the wrath of an almighty god.

Zac didn't know why, but that thought somewhat calmed his nerves. Perhaps, it was a connection of sorts. A shared experience from generation to generation, linking them across the long river of time. The cavemen had survived, and this storm, too, would pass.

The first bolt descended, and Zac took a steadying breath as he infused all the willpower and conviction into his Dao Field, which was now shrunk to its absolute minimum. It was so condensed that it barely covered the tall apparition, which now had sunk to cover Zac's whole body. It was like he was hidden in the core of the bodhi's trunk, protected from the raging calamity outside.

This was the true way to withstand a tribulation, to anneal your Dao in Heaven's Mandate.

Unfortunately, being prepared didn't mean you were safe, and the whole world turned white as a pillar of lightning completely covered him and his Dao Field. The shimmering Bodhi was only able to stop the onslaught for half a second before it cracked, allowing the lightning to squeeze inside and target Zac.

It looked like the whole tree was burning, and the golden sheen was supplanted by a blinding purple. Zac felt his whole Dao Field was on the verge of collapse, but he staunchly held on since he felt his Dao being tempered. The only solution he had come up with was to open the gates to **[Spiritual Void]**, unleashing all of his Sealed Dao to strengthen his field.

As far as Zac could tell, this shouldn't be considered a shortcut. It wasn't some outside skill, it was simply his Dao and nothing else. He hoped this would allow his Dao Field to last longer, allowing it to be tempered even further than normal. Unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to gauge the effect, as he was busy just withstanding the brunt of the attack.

His protective bubble was already breached, and Zac was immediately filled with heavenly wrath. His instincts screamed at him to give in, to push it away, to do anything to end this soul-rending pain. He had been assaulted by all kinds of attacks before. Flames, acid, poison, and all forms of weapons. He had bled, he had been maimed, he had hovered at the border of death. He even had his soul ripped apart once, he had never encountered this kind of pain before.

It was all-consuming and final, the ultimate retribution for stealing the Dao from Mother Nature. The tribulation was lightning yet not lightning. It was more akin to Oblivion in a sense, yet it wasn't. If anything, the tribulation lightning rather felt like it contained the absolute absence of Dao, the absence of everything. Everything it touched would be destroyed, since the Dao was the basic building block of the universe.

It was a void.

Zac knew he was screaming from the pain, but he couldn't hear his cries over the crackling sounds of his soul frying. He was using his all to just stay afloat, to desperately try and complete the tasks he had set for himself. His tattered mind pushed and pushed, trying to impose his will on the frantic lightning coursing through his body, trying to use it to singe the largest spots of impurities in an ultimate baptism.

Unfortunately, channeling the tribulation was completely out of his grasp as the lightning had a will of its own, a will far more powerful than his own. His **[Void Heart]** had already woken up though and started to greedily swallow any bolts that came close. Its momentum was gradually increasing, prompting the tribulation to realize the danger just like last time.

Since he couldn't channel the energy, Zac instead tried to keep it inside his body a little while longer before it escaped the **[Void Heart]**'s hunger. It would ravage his insides even more, but he had confirmed that while his cells were being destroyed, it took some of the impurities with it. It wasn't quite as much as he had hoped, but it was better than nothing.

He only managed to withhold the lightning for a second before it forced its way out, leaving Zac panting heavily as cracks covered his skin. His Dao Field was completely shredded as well, but Zac roused his spirit to reform it as he ate a cocktail of healing pills. Soothing waves spread through his body and mind, but Zac knew it wouldn't make much of a difference.

After all, the second wave was already descending.

The bolt slammed into his reformed Bodhi tree just a moment later, once more drowning it in purple destruction. The second lightning contained even more power, and Zac couldn't maintain his field for more than an instant before the lightning poured into his body, transporting him to a world of agony.

There were no longer any thoughts in Zac's mind of controlling or taking advantage. He only clung to survival as bleeding cracks opened up all across his body. His Soul Aperture was not much better off, with the tranquil star system

beset by a fierce calamity. The Cores were pelted by bolts, covering them in hairline cracks.

What felt like an eternity passed until the lightning finally left his body, and Zac wheezed as he looked up to the sky, his vision blurry and his mouth tasting metal. Just one more. One final strike and he'd be done with it. Even more impurities had been expunged, but the effect was actually worse than after the first bolt.

Was it because he was unable to affect the situation on his own? Or was it because there simply had been so many impurities in his body the first time around, that it was impossible to avoid?

There was no way to tell, and Zac's only thoughts were now on staying awake. To maintain his Dao and hold onto his convictions. There was no turning back at this point, and Zac took a steadying breath before roaring in defiance as the third bolt crashed into him. The Bodhi turned to splinters and his blood turned to ash, overwhelming all resistance.

His soul was lightning, his body was lightning. There was nothing else; only pain and the color purple. He was just a leaf swept up in a hurricane bent on destruction. But he held on to that flickering sense of self, of the golden tree that looked like it could carry the weight of the Heavens themselves.

An instant was stretched to infinity. Eras turned as Zac was caught in purgatory, assaulted from every direction by voices that told him to give in. That he would still pass even if he let go. After all, he was the descendant of the Void Emperor, his lineage would keep him safe. Yet he held on, refusing to rely on that sort of crutch.

A million times he was urged to surrender, and a million times he said no.

Suddenly, the pain stopped, the change so sudden Zac wasn't sure the impression was real, but the vibrant cosmos soon came into view, confirming the lightning had receded. The tearing agony had been imprinted into the core of his being and its shadow lingered, confusing Zac's mind.

But he had made it.

Not only that, he had remained conscious, albeit barely. The clouds slowly parted, their churning undulations filled with a sense of frustration and unwillingness. At the same time, the cosmos started to blur, and Zac found himself back in the bottom of the pond once more. This wasn't teleportation, it was some sort of Space Melding, where two coordinates or two dimensions were fused into one.

Now wasn't the time to think about that, and he rather focused on the storm of energy that entered his body, dragged into his mind by his glowing Dao Avatar. The divine tree was greedily drinking the rich water in the pond it completed its transformation. As Zac looked on, he was filled with an odd sense of discrepancy.

Not with the Dao itself, since it felt it was gradually becoming more and more in tune with his path. It was rather an odd spatial phenomenon, where he felt the tree was rapidly growing even though it stayed the same size inside his aperture. It was like that small avatar was the size of a mountain, yet it kept growing somehow.

His body was riddled with wounds, and his souls were covered in cracks. Yet he suppressed the pain after swallowing another set of pills, his mind fully occupied with observing his Dao Branch.

As the hours passed, the form of the tree didn't change much. The most significant change was how the branches, which had previously formed almost a circle that enclosed the trunk in a protective bubble, were being raised into the air. Soon enough, they all pointed to the sky, giving Zac the feeling they were holding up the heavens themselves.

From the branches, leafy vines hung down toward its roots, their lazy movements filled with whispers of life. He couldn't hear anything from inside his aperture, but he still felt like he could hear a soothing rustle from the Dao Avatar, and he felt like he was transported back to his courtyard in Port Atwood.

Safe, secure.

Eventually, the process stopped, and the tree returned to root itself on one of the Divine Cores. Zac finally let himself relax, knowing he had perfectly passed the tribulation. A quick estimate proved he still had a few hours on the chamber, so he swam out of the pond and sat down on its shore, no longer requiring such massive bursts of energy.

Zac knew he needed to go over the state of his body, of his soul. However, there was one thing he needed to do before all that, and he quickly opened his Dao Screen.

[Branch of the Kalpataru (Early): All attributes +50, Dexterity +300, Endurance +800, Vitality +2250, Intelligence +50, Wisdom +250, Effectiveness of Vitality +25%]

Chapter 823: Kalpataru

Zac blankly looked at his new Dao Branch for a few moments before he finally remembered where he'd heard the term *Kalpataru* before. Seeing something he barely recognized was a bit of a surprise. He had expected something simple along the lines of 'Branch of the Consecrated Bodhi', 'Divine Tree', or even 'Branch of the Yggdrasil' for his new Dao Branch.

Just like its predecessor, the name came from Buddhist scripture. With so many exalted monks living in the life-attuned area, Zac had broadened his knowledge of the Buddhist Sangha quite a bit over the past years. One of the monks had mentioned the Kalpataru, a Divine Tree with the power of longevity, something closely linked to life.

If consecrated properly, it could even grant one's wishes from what Zac heard, which was the domain of Creation. The tree was apparently a real thing and not a myth, but it was more akin to a Natural Treasure than a Spiritual Plant. It couldn't be grown and it produced no seeds. It would appear out of nowhere, born from the Cosmos itself. It even had a will of its own, and if it wanted to leave, not even an Autarch could keep it.

It would just disappear, avoiding all restrictions as it moved to another part of the Multiverse.

Seeing how the name still followed a Buddhist heritage didn't bother Zac. It was ultimately just a name, derived from Zac's understanding of the universe. It didn't mean the monks had managed to subvert his path or infuse the teachings of Buddha into his Dao. He was simply cultivating life through the imagery of a tree and the concept of change, making the name fitting enough.

What mattered was the content of his Dao, and he had never felt so in tune with his life-attuned Dao as he did right now. He

finally felt the Dao had become his own. Until now, it had been propped up by Dao Fruits and necessity, but it had been remolded to perfectly fit his path, something that could be discerned through the change in attribute allocation.

Vitality was still the main attribute, followed by Endurance. However, seeing that the Dao Branch had added 300 Dexterity was a welcome surprise. With his two classes and conflict-based Dao Branch, his Strength was running far ahead of his other attributes. It still wasn't at the level where it caused him any trouble, but he ultimately wanted to aim for a more rounded build.

While he had gained a bunch of Dexterity, Zac had actually lost some Wisdom, while his Intelligence barely increased. It was an obvious shift of focus, where the points that should have gone into Wisdom had been allocated into Dexterity.

It was a welcome change, as far as Zac was concerned.

He had needed the points in Wisdom back when his soul and its defenses were lacking. But by now, his soul was becoming extremely powerful, to the point that it was even sturdier than his body. He didn't need the extra mental strength and protection provided by Wisdom, and he was better off gaining some speed instead.

Zac eventually closed the status screen and touched his token next, prompting a [9,715] to appear. Almost four thousand of the tally were left-over points from his earlier cultivation session, meaning he gained around 6,000 for forming the Dao Branch. The amount of points gained from the breakthrough wasn't the maximum possible, but it was clearly better than the average.

Some didn't even gain 2,000 Contribution Points when forming a Dao Branch. This result was within Zac's expectations as he'd already learned that Boundless Daos provided more Contribution Points in general. Daos within Heaven's Path were more harmonized, while those who entered the boundless were more likely to be individualistic in nature.

Therefore, boundless breakthroughs had greater odds to include new insights for the Orom, which was why an unusually large part of the population of the Orom World walked the Boundless Path.

Zac stayed at the edge of the cultivation chamber until the time was up, using the immense energies to replenish his **[Spiritual Void]** and further stabilize his newly-formed Dao Branch. In fact, he saw some benefit to his Divine Cores as well, where they absorbed some of the energy and concepts in the golden waters.

It proved that his previous notion was correct; he needed to find attuned cultivation grounds to improve his cores. Unfortunately, this golden water didn't seem too useful for his soul, but there were all kinds of life-or-death-attuned materials out there. He just needed to find the right ones to save years of arduous cultivation.

While making full use of the cave, Zac also went over the state of his body. He had to admit, things were better than expected. After being subjected to that horrifying torture, especially from the third blast, he had expected that his body would almost be in a crippled state. But he was surprised to find that the damage was actually quite superficial.

It didn't make sense.

He had felt how his body was essentially being erased by the Tribulation Lightning, yet he was mostly fine. Certainly, he was absolutely covered in small scars, from his skin to his organs and his soul, but these wounds didn't contain any lingering energy or Dao. It was nothing compared to the stubborn damage left behind when he formed the Chaos Patterns.

Come to think of it, he was pretty much fine when waking up after his previous breakthrough as well. This was completely different from the norm. Even the staunchest elite spoke with hushed tones when discussing the Tribulation Lightning, and most were left bedridden for decades after withstanding them.

In his case, he felt he'd be back in full form in a day or two, even quicker if he made use of one of the healing arrays. He

didn't delude himself into thinking he was uniquely talented or anything. This was thanks to something else.

"Void," Zac muttered as he thought back to the bolts of lightning.

It had felt like the purple lightning was the absence of Dao taken form, an anti-Dao of sorts. How was this related to his Void Emperor-bloodline? Was the Void it spoke of the Heavens themselves? Was that why his bloodline had taken such a leap forward last time his **[Void Heart]** swallowed Tribulation Lightning?

But then, how did Void Beasts fit into the picture? Why was their energy so useful for his Bloodline? And why didn't that ancient aura that his Void Energy emitted feel like the Tribulation Lightning at all if they shared an origin? Zac shook his head, knowing that these answers were too far out of his reach.

But it did make him even more eager to find out more about that ancient era. About Karz and the Limitless Empire. He really needed to get his hands on some sort of manual to go with his bloodline. Right now, he was fumbling along, using the remnants and random encounters to push his bloodline forward.

How few of his impurities he managed to burn away proved how little control Zac had over his bloodline. Zac bet that if he had a proper manual instead of the absurdly simplistic **[Bloodline Resonance]**, he would have been able to really take advantage of the tribulations. More importantly, there was probably a limit to how far he could improve himself using such an unreliable strategy as random encounters.

Just like how the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** had started adding demands on comprehension at the third layer, he needed to better understand his bloodline if he wanted to keep evolving it. Perhaps, he would be able to search for some answers in the Million Gates Territory.

From what he had heard, Mystic Realms and ancient detritus were sometimes spat out from those spatial rifts, containing remnants left behind by the Limitless Empire. Most of it was

useless scraps, but some were not. The treasure that made the Void Priestess fight with her life on the line had appeared there, for example.

Of course, Zac needed to get out of this place before he could start planning his next step.

Zac left the cultivation chamber the moment his token buzzed, afraid that he'd get charged for another 12 hours if he loitered. From there, he returned to his cultivation cave, where he once more entered seclusion. This time, he didn't spend any time on gaining levels or bathing in toxic mud.

Instead, he swapped between cultivating his soul and slowly integrating the Branch of the Kalpataru into his Evolutionary Stance. There were still eight months to the duel, and he wanted to spend as much time of that as possible in his undead form. To avoid getting bottlenecked later, he had to take the first steps with integrating his life-attuned branch before that.

One week passed in this manner until he felt a thump in his chest. Zac was in the middle of a cultivation session for his soul, but he immediately cut it short. There was still an uncomfortable amount of impurities saturating his body, and the next few minutes were critical in allaying the situation.

The thud came from his **[VoidHeart]**, meaning it had had finally finished processing the Tribulation Lightning. A moment later, it started to spit out one burst after another, each one filled with the promise of both pain and possibility. Last time, Zac hadn't known what to expect, so he mostly let the Tribulation Lightning do its thing.

Now, he wanted to control the events, and he was elated to find that it worked to some extent.

Thanks to **[Void Heart]**'s purification, the previously uncontainable lightning was far more malleable, and Zac pushed it through his body on a crusade of purification. The lightning still hurt like hell, but the agony wasn't even at the level of the first tribulation bolt. It allowed him to maintain his concentration as he used massive amounts of Mental Energy to drag the lightning toward the thousands of spots of accumulated toxins.

With every heartbeat, hundreds of oily spots and stubborn imperfections were singed clear, leaving behind pure cells without any blemishes. This time around, his cells didn't greedily swallow any lightning, and his **[Force of the Void]** remained locked at 50% capacity. It really looked like he had reached his limits for this Bloodline Talent, at least until the bloodline evolved.

That was fine with Zac since it left him with more lightning to temper himself with. His mind was already drowned in a thunderous storm, and purple blasts hit his cores over and over. The numerous attuned cores had just made a full recovery two days ago, but they were already beset by another onslaught. Thankfully, Zac could tell that the bolts wouldn't leave any lasting damage.

The previously mottled cores were fast regaining their luster as one bolt after another exploded against their surfaces. Not only that, but the energy they emitted started becoming increasingly condensed as the Tribulation Lightning left some of its essence behind, saving Zac even more time to reach the peak of the third reincarnation.

Unfortunately, nothing good lasts forever, and the bolts started to escape through his pores, dispersing into the environment. At the same time, both **[Purity of the Void]** and **[Spiritual Void]** absorbed the occasional arc of lightning, though they weren't nearly as voracious as his cells had been the last time around.

The final arc of lightning escaped his body soon enough, leaving Zac covered in a new set of scars. Even if his scorched wounds looked a bit nasty, Zac felt great. It was almost felt like he had been reborn, or at least been returned to his prime condition. That oily feeling, like he hadn't bathed for weeks, was finally gone.

The tribulation itself had removed around five percent of his impurities at best, but this second baptism had removed at least sixty percent of the remaining impurities. That meant a third was still left behind, but there was still the second tribulation to deal with that. Seeing the result, Zac decided to not try to muck up his body any further.

He didn't want any gunk remaining after his second tribulation. Not only would it hamper his energy circulation during his duel, but it was also high time he started to prepare for his next breakthrough - Hegemony. He didn't want to stop at the peak of E-grade for over a century before making his attempt at forming a Cultivator's Core.

Soon enough, he would have spent 10 years in the E-grade. While it wasn't long, Zac was struggling to catch up with Leandra. Taking it slow and steady wouldn't cut it. His initial plan had actually been to reach D-grade within 10 years, matching the one year it took to reach E-grade. Now, he knew that was insufficient to reach the accumulations he wanted.

His new deadline was 20 years at the most, but the sooner the better. If he could push his Dao Branches to Middle proficiency within a few years, while also finding some inroads into properly forming a core that would work in his body, he would immediately crush his Perennial Vastness-token.

Zac knew that a few years probably was too short a time to reach the limits of the E-grade; Late-stage Branches and a thrice-reincarnated soul. But it ultimately didn't matter. Those things weren't something that couldn't be accomplished after his breakthrough. They would simply make the process of forming his Cultivator's Core easier, but he hoped he wouldn't have to go that far to succeed with its formation.

Soon enough, another month had passed, and Zac had long adapted his Evolutionary Stance to make proper use of his new Dao Branch. The process was even smoother than he could have hoped for. It was like the two were meant for each other, effortlessly fusing into one. And they were.

Zac had somewhat understood the reasoning behind Pavina's suggestion to wait with his breakthrough, but only now did he witness just how spot-on her advice was. His technique had paved the path for fusing his Dao and Path into one, removing the incongruities and forging everything into one coherent system. Or almost coherent.

There was still one aspect that remained to be integrated for his triumvirate path to be perfected - the final Dao Branch.

By now, the foundations on his Draugr side were as stable as an impenetrable fortress, his accumulations even surpassing those that allowed him to form the Branch of the Kalpataru. So it was with a steady heart Zac made his way toward the **[Blackink Mountain]**, only making a short detour to pick up **[Empyrean Aegis]** at the local Nexus Node.

The quest for this defensive was to gain two Dao Branches, and he wanted to cash in on the reward before forming his Deathly Dao Branch since he didn't know it could affect the nature of the skill. Having imprinted the new skill fractal, which was placed on back of his head of all places, swapped back to his Draugr form and set off.

A few days later, he reached the cultivation grounds where he rented a middle-grade cave to match his previous breakthrough. Soon enough, Zac sat ensconced in the depths of death, pondering his Dao and the road that had led him here.

Just like with life, death had many faces and expressions, something Zac had become all-too-familiar with since the integration. In a sense, it was central to every cultivator's struggle as they fought to cheat death and gain eternal life. Death became the ultimate adversary, always waiting to end their path. Death also became a close friend, following them throughout their journey. Only by walking at the edge of death would a warrior reach the peak.

For some, especially in the Undead Empire, death was also synonymous with war. It was destruction, the act of vanquishing your foe. It was a core component in the struggle so central to both the Heavens and the System. If Zac had been born Draugr rather than accidentally gaining this second identity, he would most likely have taken this path as well; death through conquest.

For others, Death represented control and hierarchy. Both liches and necromancers walked this path, where their death became their tool to gain minions. Then there were the

hexmasters, the shamans, the poison masters, and the various different cultivators who infused Death into their path. For them, death was power - a primal force few could withstand.

For Zac, Death was stillness; the end of change and dominion over fate. It was a bridge toward eternity. His finding the Dao of Death had been a circuitous journey, far more accidental than that of Life. However, as the years passed, he had finally started to assimilate it into his own. His Draugr side was no longer a persona, a skill to be used or power to be exploited.

The Draugr was him as much as his human side by now, and his desire to delve deeper into this aspect of the cosmic truths was just as real as his connection to life. It all started with the Seed of Hardness, once meant to become the Fragment of the Shield. Instead, it came to represent the inviolability and inexorability of death.

Next, came the Seed of Rot, born out of necessity and a sense of imbalance. It now represented the transition from life to death, from movement to stillness. After all, just like his Branch of the Kalpataru, his Dao was not a Dao of passive acceptance, even if it was centered around stillness. This was also Pavina's first impartment to him, her display in the arena that showed how death could be proactive.

The vision of the cursed lotus had fused Hardness and Rot into something more aligned with his path. Death was the ultimate cage that all beings railed against, like someone entombed against their will. Sealed in its heart was everlasting nothingness.

To cultivate was to struggle against fate, but death was the ultimate judge of that struggle. By controlling death, he was not just the arbiter of his enemies' fate, but also his own. As their chapters ended, his own road would grow wider, reaching toward that lofty peak. That was his Path of Supremacy.

The cave rumbled as the truths within began to resonate with what was engraved in Zac's heart, and he opened his abyssal eyes to welcome death into his soul. He felt the withered tree rise from its Miasmatic Core, and he could hear a spectral rattle

from the hanging coffin as the Dao Avatar moved toward a central position in his aperture.

It had begun.

Chapter 824: Culmination

Leyara passed through the barrier shielding the outer hall, and she was immediately greeted by a vast silence. Her steps, her breath, the basic sound of existence was swallowed by the void, leaving only a blanket silence. It wasn't uncomfortable - rather the opposite. It felt like returning to the womb, and even her thoughts were being muted into a susurrus.

Her master would chide her for giving in to the nothingness, so Leyara soundlessly put her hands together in the Emptiness Mudra and channeled her cultivation technique. Her hazy cognition congealed, turning immovable, a polished stone sitting in the middle of a river. While she was part of the Void, she was distinct from it. Refined by it.

She walked inside, space and distance feeling indistinct because of the lack of sound to accompany her actions. She held onto her seal as she moved forward. Hundreds of inky black crystals floated in the air around her, each one silently humming in tune with the chamber. Today, a squall of Drikvirs had come over from the gardens, most likely attracted by the Void Priestess' Dao.

They were like silken bands of light, flickering in and out of this dimension as they danced around the Void Stones, their source lighting up the usually shrouded hall. A smile spread across Leyara's face as she saw the naughty little critters, but she didn't dare wave one over out of fear she'd lose her concentration.

She wasn't in any mood to face the Tranquil Wall and recite scriptures so soon after returning. So she turned her gaze away, heading toward the exit at the other end. There would be time to play with the animals that made the Void Monastery their home later.

Her master sat at the same place she did when Leyara left on her mission. The same place she had been sitting since long before Leyara's great-grandmother was born. Leyara could barely sense her master's presence even when standing right in front of her, she was so utterly in tune with the Void.

Perala Janodrok wore the same long white robes as always, its engraved hems spreading out like a lotus flower around her sitting position. Her features were made indistinct by the veil of darkness that shrouded her, but Leyara knew she was beautiful, extremely so. Why else would those old toads be so obsessed with her? There were more female Monarchs to court if you just wanted a diplomatic alliance.

Seeing her master's lonesome back as she gazed at the hovering scar in front of her made Leyara's heart clench with sorrow. How long would she sit here in solitude, missing out on the joys of life? To guard a promise so long forgotten? But Leyara hurriedly wiped away the sorrowful expression as her master turned to her direction, and a radiant smile bloomed on her face instead.

"You're back," Perala smiled, waving her disciple to come closer.

The universe came crashing back with Perala's voice, the white noise of reality suddenly so loud it was unbearable. But like a rising tide, the stillness returned the moment Perala was finished speaking. Her voice was the Void, and when it existed, the surrounding stillness could not. How would a river exist in the ocean?

"You have made progress in your comprehension."

Leyara opened her mouth with expectation, but only silence emerged from her throat, her words unable to take shape. Her face scrunched up with annoyance before she jumped into her master's embrace.

"It is still too early for you to break the void," Perala said with a shake of her head as she caressed Leyara's head, her smile slowly fading. "Work hard. We are entering a turbulent age."

'I think I'm getting closer,' Leyara answered in her mind. *'I felt something condense.'*

"I'm sure," Perala nodded as Leyara sat down in front of her. "How was it?"

'Dalos performed the 81 rites, but there was no response. We traveled the planes for over a year, but there we were no clues to the disturbance. If the anomalies are related to the Void Star itself, it is hidden well. Or at least beyond our capabilities to understand,' Leyara conveyed with a shake of her head. *'The only sign of abnormalities was the unusual number of beasts.'*

"Tides are forming?" Perala hummed, not looking too bothered.

Leyara shrugged in response, not too sure. The number of beasts was a bit more than usual, but it was yet not at the level of a tide. And even if one emerged, so what of it? They arrived every few centuries as the population strove to purify their bloodlines. It was a win-win situation, where the beasts rid themselves of weakness and the monastery's subordinate factions gained some wealth and experience.

"What about you? What did your heart say?" Perala asked.

Leyara hesitated for a while, not immediately answering. She had felt something, but she was afraid she had imagined it.

"Do not doubt your instincts, child. Your ability in this regard is unique, even surpassing what I am capable of," Perala said.

'It felt happy,' Leyara eventually said. *'Expectant.'*

"Happy and expectant?" Perala slowly muttered, her eyes giving no clue what she was thinking. "I understand. How is your progress?"

'I managed to form my second Dao Branch during the mission,' Leyara grinned.

"Good child. Your comprehension has always been at the forefront in this sector," Perala smiled. "Unfortunately, you are a bit inexperienced in other aspects, and I cannot help but worry. I have set up a training session for you. To shore up

your foundations and prepare yourself. You need to reach Hegemony within 15 years.”

‘15 years?’ Leyara repeated with confusion before her eyes widened in understanding. ‘*We’re really joining?*’

“In some matters, we cannot maintain neutrality. This is one of them,” Perala nodded.

‘*Have they discovered something?*’ Leyara asked with a pang of worry.

“From the looks of it... Our enemies are walking the unorthodox path. Not one or two factions, but the whole army,” Perala sighed. “The war will be brutal beyond compare.”

‘*A dark sector?!*’ Leyara asked as she shuddered with horror.

“It might be a false alarm. We will find out more over the coming years,” Perala said. “What will be, will be. Go find Mravla, she will impart you with the art of command over the next year.”

Leyara slowly nodded with a frown as she stood up, any thought of playing around in the gardens forgotten as she hurried toward Mravla’s Cloister. The situation didn’t sound so grave from the rumors she had heard. Just some scuffles in the lawless sector. But for her master to act, the situation must be extremely serious, and she wasn’t strong enough to protect anything as she was.

Perala saw her disciple exit the suppressive buffer before turning back toward the hovering scar.

“First the Space Gate, now you. Is it connected?” Perala sighed as she grasped the ancient token hanging around her neck. “Million Gates... Is it really there?”

The bristled lizard released one last sorrowful wail as it helplessly watched the axe descend, but its lamentations were cut short as Zac’s strike cut through its thick skull and extinguished its soul with one practiced motion. A small sputter of energy entered his body as the local tyrant of the

Fifth Band fell, leaving Zac panting and ravenously hungry after fighting for over an hour to take down this stubborn animal.

Still, the hunger barely registered as he eagerly opened his Quest Screen.

**[Desperation's End (Class): Extinguish one million souls.
Reward: Desperation's End Skill (1,000,000/1,000,000)
COMPLETE]**

It had taken more than four years, most of which had been spent ceaselessly fighting in the Wilderness, but he had finally made it. One million souls had been extinguished, turning Zac into what could best be described as a walking calamity to the beasts that made this place their home.

Luckily, even the beasts in the First Band qualified for the quest, allowing him to progress tens of thousands of kills a day toward the end as he acquainted himself with his latest Dao Branch. Over four months had passed since he returned to the wilderness, and he started right at the beginning this time. For over twenty-two hours a day he had fought, in an almost macabre dance with death.

Zac had spent one month in the first band, getting used to his new Dao Branch. After that, he had pushed forward, never stopping until he reached the middle reaches of the Fifth Band. He knew that he couldn't go much further though. Having a powerful technique wasn't enough. Those who got this far generally had Late Dao Branches or higher.

Some had even reached the next stage of the ladder, completely eclipsing his own accomplishments. Technique wasn't enough, you needed a more powerful base to use it with, just like Pavina had said. You might be able to walk the whole wilderness if you mastered the Conception Stage of technique, but only with the caveat that you were also a Monarch.

Improving his technique had almost allowed Zac to make the impossible possible in the Wilderness, but it could only take him so far. Besides, Zac knew that its benefits were amplified here in the wilderness where he was only fighting Middle E-

grade beasts. He would find more of a challenge than just an attribute disadvantage if he entered the lawless sector of the Fifth Band, but he didn't dare.

Even if sparring against those powerhouses who walked the path of slaughter would be far more efficient, he didn't dare do so right now. The deadline of his duel was getting close, and he couldn't allow himself to be maimed by someone and saddled with hard-to-cleanse invasive Daos.

It was time to head back.

Leaving wasn't just a matter of ability. There wasn't much of a purpose in going all-out and forcing his way deeper into the Wilderness. While the animals here were extremely powerful, it was only in comparison to his limited state. Without the prison brand and Zac avoiding using his bloodline, he would be able to kill thousands of lizards like this without breaking a sweat.

Zac wasn't really putting it all on the line in this place, and so he wasn't actually finding any new truths in the heat of battle. Most of his gains here were ultimately based on his desperate struggles in the Twilight Ocean. The Orom World had given him an opportunity to better understand what he had learned and experienced since the integration, and then turn it into something useful.

But he had squeezed his accumulated inspiration to the limit already, and he could go no further down his road this way. The Orom World had reached its limits on what it could provide. It was really time to leave. Not just the wilderness, but the Orom World itself.

Zac started making his way toward the closest teleportation exit as he pondered on his path. He had far surpassed the bare minimum Kaldor mentioned, but that didn't mean he could expect an easy fight. He opened his Dao Screen to look at his Daos, hoping the lines of text would lead to some new epiphany.

[Branch of the Pale Seal (Early): All attributes +50, Strength +300, Endurance +2250, Vitality +800,

Intelligence +50, Wisdom +250. Effectiveness of Endurance +25%]

Zac had been just as befuddled when he saw his newest Dao Branch as when he formed the Branch of the Kalpataru. Thankfully, he had eventually figured out the origin of the name. The Seven Seals might not be commonly known, but the representation of the first four was famous even in popular culture – the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

As for the Pale Seal, it had to be referring to the fourth of the Seven Seals.

The fourth seal was aptly the one that released Death who would plague the earth with war and famine. At first, Zac had been a bit confused since the imagery seemed a bit at odds with his Dao, but he eventually understood that there were two parts to the simile. The first component was naturally Death, the thing hidden inside the seal.

Secondly, it was the Seal itself, just like how his Fragment of the Coffin had worked; hardness containing rot. The seal was clearly sturdy beyond compare since it was able to restrain death itself until it was released. This restraining power was central to his path and his technique. Finally, the Dao pointed toward the next stage of this peak – the seventh seal. When the seventh seal broke, even the Heavens would be silenced as the end of days arrived; the Apocalypse.

Oblivion.

The gain in attributes mirrored his Branch of the Kalpataru perfectly, which wasn't much of a surprise considering the two were one half of a whole. The difference was that his Life-attuned branch focused on Vitality and provided Dexterity to represent the changing nature in Evolutionary Stance, while the Branch of the Pale Seal provided Strength and focused Endurance.

This time, he had lost a bit of Intelligence to reach this balanced state, but it wasn't like Zac was using that attribute too much anyway.

Zac appeared in Samsara's Edge two days later, and he immediately set course for Kaldor's castle. Everything that needed to be dealt with had been accomplished. His impurities had been purified, his Daos and Techniques were stable. Entering seclusion for the last three months wouldn't bring any benefit.

It would only rob him of his momentum, so Zac chose to strike while the iron was hot. He would be lying if he said he wasn't afraid, but there was also a part of him that was burning with excitement. The opportunity to duel with a master at the precipice of confirming his Dao, to experience the vantage of a peak expert from an A-grade faction.

That kind of opportunity simply didn't exist in the Zecia Sector.

So it was with a somewhat tumultuous heart he stepped through the gates of the Izh'Rak Reaver's castle.

"You're early," Kaldor's voice immediately echoed out through the castle, and Zac could actually hear an unmistakable tinge of excitement to match his own.

"It was time," Zac said with a serious expression.

"Interesting, interesting," a gruff laugh echoed out as the gates slowly opened.

Out from the darkness, Kaldor walked, and it felt like the whole Orom World trembled from his mere presence. The prison brand was obviously unable to restrain the grandeur of this warrior's path, and Zac felt like he had been punched in his gut by the unmasked aggression. This was a true warrior, one born through battle and hardships, there were no two ways about it.

Kaldor stood around two meters tall, just like Zac, but Zac knew that Kaldor's real height should be between three and five meters. He was simply restrained by the spatial manipulations of the Orom. Come to think of it, Three Virtues was the only one whose size was different from the norm. Why hadn't Zac reflected on that before? Was it yet another mental manipulation from the monk's side?

Zac shook his head, returning his focus to his adversary. His build was slim, almost looking emaciated, but it emitted a supremely brutal pressure. Greatest's blood-drenched aura was just a shadow of what Zac felt right now, and Zac's own killing intent was nothing but a drop in the ocean. Kaldor's build might be scrawny for a human, but Kaldor definitely didn't look human.

After all, he was a skeleton.

Or rather, Kaldor looked like he wore full-body bone armor beneath a tattered vest and loose-fitting pants. However, those bones weren't a Spirit Tool or forged equipment. They were Kaldor's true exoskeleton, a unique feature of the reavers. Not a single inch of his flesh was exposed, not even his eyes. Not that Izh'Rak Reavers had eyes in the same sense as humans did.

It was rather three gemlike bones embedded in his skull, one in the middle of his forehead and two almost at the edges of his face, forming a wide triangle that provided surround-vision from what he'd heard. In addition, there were just two small holes for a nose and a thin unmoving line for a mouth.

This odd appearance only scratched the surface of the reavers. For example, while reavers had flesh, they didn't have organs. They had muscle and sinew. Supremely condensed muscles that turned them into unstoppable forces of nature.

They didn't even have brains as their consciousness was spread through their bones rather than in their head. Thousands upon thousands of small runes covered Kaldor's skull and arms, and Zac knew that the same was true for his whole body. It wasn't something Kaldor had done himself, but rather a natural progression of their bodies.

You could say that the warlike Reavers were all body cultivators, but they cultivated their bones rather than their flesh. They needed no Spirit Tools or defensive equipment. They were the equipment. Their bones surpassed almost anything at their grade in durability thanks to their unique body tempering arts, making them extremely difficult to kill.

The bones also gained various abilities as their ranks grew. At D-grade, for example, they finally awakened their Warbones, which Kaldor thankfully wouldn't use in this duel. It was an inherent transformation ability that was a mix of skills like **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and the activation of War Regalia, the energy-consuming equipment only Hegemons and higher could use.

Durable, powerful, and bloodthirsty. The war-hungry armies of the Izh'Reavers were the scourge of the neighboring empires of the Undead Empire.

In a sense, the Izh'Rak Reavers seemed to be more in line with Zac's own build than Draugr were, but he was still thankful that he had been implanted with Draugr genes than reaver genes. He felt that the difference between a being that was something like a mix of insect and skeleton and a human was too great a bridge to pass.

Zac tried to figure out what kind of technique Kaldor used, but his lazy stance gave no indication of what to expect. This was the one thing Pavina had refused to help with, and no one else seemed to know either. Or perhaps they feared to spread Kaldor's secrets, considering he held the right to kill people in the Orom World.

"Well then," Kaldor said as his mouth and nose disappeared, leaving a smooth surface without any weakness. "Show me why you're worthy of the Path of Oblivion."

Chapter 825: Path of Oblivion

“Worthy of the Path of Oblivion? What does that mean?” Zac asked, but the only response he got was a deafening scream of danger and an alabaster fist ripping the air apart in its approach toward Zac’s left temple.

Just a fraction of a second later Zac heard the crashing sounds of stone tiles breaking, the sounds of Kaldor lunging toward him finally catching up. The fist seemed straightforward, but it exerted the pressure of a whole world collapsing in on him. Was it Kaldor’s technique, or was it the inherent power of a warrior with a perfected inner world? Zac couldn’t tell.

Zac’s instincts immediately kicked in, and he actually leaned into the punch as he pivoted, countering with an axe swing of his own as the chains on back his began their dance of death. But it almost felt like he had been transported back to his first day in the Orom World where Travo Raso put him in his place.

It was like his perfected movements were as clumsy as when he first arrived, and time slowed to a crawl as Zac saw the fist grow closer and closer. Zac believed he had timed it perfectly, and he had confirmed that Kaldor had restrained his aura down to 1,000 Attribute Points, yet his calculations were way off. His instincts told him that insisting on his current route would only end with his skull being cracked like an egg, when it should have led to an equal exchange of strikes that would have won him the bet.

He trusted his instincts.

Even if Death couldn’t be avoided forever, it could be delayed. He had been too impatient and geared up, hoping to end the fight in an instant in a surprise upset. Now, Zac had to make a small sacrifice to not be immediately taken out of commission.

His muscles screamed in protest as he forcibly stopped his swing while changing his pivot to raise his arm to block.

A rapid clashing of chains pushed two of the links between Kaldor's fist and Zac's bicep as well, narrowly allowing him to divert the force even further. But suddenly, the sense of danger resurged with newfound urgency. What should have been a light graze had somehow turned into a deadly assault, once more subverting Zac's understanding.

Two chains slammed into the ground, pushing Zac backward over ten meters as he absorbed the force of Kaldor's punch. A sheen of sweat lacquered his back, and he looked at the reaver standing in Zac's previous position with surprise. Without any facial features, Zac couldn't glean anything about Kaldor's mood, giving Zac the impression he was fighting some sort of emotionless robot.

In a sense, it almost seemed like he was fighting a Technocrat for a moment there, considering he hadn't sensed any emanations of Dao at all from that opening salvo. Kaldor had somehow tricked Zac's mind twice without using any of his insights to empower his strikes.

"Not completely hopeless," Kaldor grunted, his voice now muffled as though he was speaking into a can. "You want answers? Win the bet first."

Zac wasted no more effort on talks or contemplation, and instead completely melded with his path. His new Dao Avatar radiated unquestionable finality as it released dense black tendrils of pure death. It no longer looked like the dead tree with a hanging coffin. Zac now understood that imagery had been partly a crutch, where he based his understanding of death on his understanding of life.

But now that he had stepped onto the Path of Pure Death, the two conceptualizations had diverged further. Now, the Dao Avatar appeared in the form of an Iron Maiden, with some differences from the grotesque medieval torture device. Instead of spikes, the insides were lined with chains, judging by the endless rattling of links you could hear from within.

Also, instead of a tormented face at the top, there was just a pitch-black halo, like a black hole leading into the abyss. Just like the Kalpataru's vines rustle formed a song of unfettered life, the rustling chains of the Iron Maiden formed a tune of inescapable death. However, while their portents might seem dour, Zac felt a sense of comfort hearing them. It was stability, it was peace.

Just like the Branch of the Pale Seal had woken up, so had the miniature version of himself, the Dao Avatar for his Branch of the War Axe. No longer did it switch between his two races. It had solidly become Draugr as it wielded the axe of chains, giving off the aura of a grim reaper. Its strikes were death incarnate, repressing and unyielding.

The tendrils of death were immediately attracted by the display, forming a dour shroud that almost looked like the chains on the real Zac's back. As his avatar moved, so did Zac, the aura around him shifting into one of utter inexorability. There was nothing else on his mind any longer, only the battle.

Another snort echoed out from within Kaldor's skull as he shot forward, but Zac wouldn't allow himself to be ambushed again. The chains formed an outer perimeter as over a million deaths showed the way. The short breather had allowed Zac to figure out the truth. The situation had felt similar to when he first was bested by Travo Raso, but the circumstances weren't the same.

Instead of vastly surpassing Zac's skill level and fundamentals, the reaver was rather using extremely intricate footwork that messed with Zac's perception.

When it looked like Kaldor stepped to the right, he was actually moving left, and vice versa. The minute cues for momentum and intent that Zac's instincts based themselves on turned into traps. Nothing was as it seemed, where slowing down could mean speeding up, or some other action altogether.

It was an extremely refined method that required not only exquisite control over your body, but also a meticulous understanding of the mind. You needed to perfectly grasp what

drove an opponent's actions to so perfectly trick the instincts that had been forged through thousands of battles. It was not something Zac could do at all, at least not against someone who had some experience with life-and-death struggles.

But ultimately it didn't matter. It was just another attempt to escape the inevitable.

There was no worth in analyzing the disconnect between the Izh'Rak Reaver's gruff and straightforward persona with this kind of refined fighting style. He might be trying to teach through battle, or it might be a natural expression of someone so far ahead on the road of cultivation. Zac only needed to focus on his own path - to restrain, to whittle down, to deliver death.

The sound of rattling links echoed through the courtyard as the four chains spun their web of death, their undulations restricting Kaldor's options to advance. It wouldn't help even if Kaldor's techniques made him unpredictable, as long as Zac controlled all the avenues to choose from. However, a Monarch was not so easily contained, and Kaldor chose the most straightforward solution; to break the pattern and force open a path.

Kaldor shifted his position, placing him in a precarious position right among the chains, but Zac didn't have time to seize any advantage before the reaver unleashed an extremely precise combination of a punch and roundhouse kick. A shockwave rocked the surroundings as the chains became entangled in an unproductive mess.

Zac knew his patterns weren't airtight, but it had to have taken a terrifying ability to so utterly expose the weaknesses. However, just as Kaldor dealt with the chains, a gleaming edge was almost upon his head. It was Zac who made his move while Kaldor had his hands full, and his axehead radiated a deathly luster as it closed in on its target.

A thin forearm appeared out of nowhere as Kaldor twisted his torso, using his other leg as a pivot. Zac's axe slammed into Kaldor's arm, and a painful rebound shocked his own wrist while not as much as a mark was left behind on Kaldor's

bones. No one said anything after the exchange; they both knew this didn't count as a hit.

Kaldor had been fully prepared to block the strike, and he used his forearm as a shield in place of an actual weapon. Even if the reaver hadn't said it outright, Zac knew he had to land a true hit that the Monarch couldn't avoid. After the initial exchange, Zac knew things wouldn't be over so easily.

Zac was still a bit surprised to see that his Branch-infused swing didn't as much as push the reaver off-balance, even if he was bent at a ninety degree angle and used only one leg for balance. The other leg was still in the middle of the previous kick, but Zac felt a pang of danger as the kick somehow gained momentum by transferring the force of Zac's strike.

Death didn't back down or cower, so force met with force as Zac stayed true to his path. The chains had already untangled thanks to Zac buying some time, and they resumed harassing the reaver while Zac kept up his pressure. Kaldor wasn't giving an inch either, and it felt like he had three heads and six arms, continuously parrying swings or disrupting the chain formations.

It was an odd feeling, where Kaldor was simultaneously stronger and weaker compared to Pavina. He was stronger in his understanding of rhythm, of making the most of simple timing. His control was appallingly accurate, where Kaldor kept forcing advantages by manipulating Zac's trajectories and strikes by almost unnoticeable degrees.

These small differences only cost Zac fractions of seconds, but they gave Kaldor the breathing room he needed to shift the rhythm and avoid being put on a defensive. However, his techniques were inferior to Pavina's due to restricting himself to concepts limited at the level of Fragments. After having battled Pavina so many times, Zac felt the attacks were almost simplistic after gaining some understanding of what Kaldor was doing.

This was the key to victory, and Zac took full advantage, using both his Dao Branches in his strikes and as a basis for his Inexorable Stance. Every attack he performed contained the

inevitable nature of death, every movement was like another layer of choking constriction that would eventually claim its prize.

Kaldor had already turned into an alabaster blur as he fended off chains and swings from every direction, but Zac could tell that death was slowly creeping closer. In the beginning, Kaldor's unpredictable nature repeatedly disrupted Zac's rhythm, but the reaver was increasingly moving in accordance with Zac's own Dao.

Zac's axe descended, and Kaldor once more avoided the strike with a hair's breadth, no longer able to afford himself inches of leeway. Still, their battle had become akin to a chess game nearing its end. Even if there were still a few hundred moves that needed to be performed, the game should end in Zac's favor unless he committed a blunder.

Fetters clanked, and the hollow calls of sharp metal colliding with bone formed a song of cessation as the two combatants moved toward the inevitable. Still, Zac didn't dare let down his guard at all, and he entered a transcendent state where he was one with his path, not letting any emotions or distractions lead him astray.

Kaldor was aware of the conundrum, but no matter how he fought, he couldn't break free, restrained by not only Zac's technique but more so by the rules of engagement. Zac had already reached the level required to contend in this duel when he defeated Olgoth. Since then, he had made some massive improvements, turning a life-and-death struggle into a passable trial just like he had planned.

However, Zac suddenly got a sinking feeling as the refined technique of Kaldor got more rugged, more brutal, and a dense red haze seeped out from his body; congealed killing intent. Luckily, Kaldor's time was running out, and Zac's work was reaching fruition. The reaver had been pushed off-balance by a powerful swing, and the four chains lounged.

Both hands were temporarily bound just as Zac's axe shot forward, aiming straight for the reaver's chest. The opening had finally presented itself after hundreds of exchanges; death

had come to collect. However, just as Zac was about to checkmate the reaver in this meticulously planned game of his, Kaldor did the one thing that would prevent a victory.

He flipped the whole table.

The indistinct steam oozing out of the reaver's bones suddenly moved, transforming into an unrecognizable seal beneath Kaldor's right foot as he stomped down. Zac's chains were completely disrupted and lost their grip, while Zac himself was once more flung away.

“Good, good!” Kaldor growled, his form barely visible in the thickening mist. “You didn't disappoint me. To think you managed to push me this far. But it's not enough. Not enough! Show me your Path. Show me Carnage!”

“Are you breaking the agreement?” Zac frowned as he steadied himself.

“Breaking what? This is just killing intent, the mark of a warrior,” Kaldor laughed. “I never used a skill! How did I cheat? How?!”

Zac looked at the skeleton with wide eyes for a moment, once more lamenting that most of the old monsters he had encountered shared one common trait; shamelessness. Was that a core component required to reach the peak of cultivation, to blatantly twist the situation into one's favor, forgoing any sense of dignity?

Certainly, it hadn't been explicitly stated, but using the killing intent of a Peak Monarch was overstepping the bounds of the duel. That strike had been decidedly more deadly than anything that could be dished out with Peak Fragments. He had even felt huge pressure when using his Dao Branches.

It was the first time Zac had seen killing intent be weaponized to this degree. Zac himself had used it a few times before to suppress or even knock out weaker enemies, but that method was extremely crude compared to what Kaldor had done. The skeleton had actually controlled the intent somehow, then turned it into what looked like an array to amplify his power.

“Are you going back on your word?” Zac repeated.

He immediately got his response as Kaldor rushed forward, his killing intent on full and unabashed display. Zac only hesitated for an instant before he rushed forward to meet the charge. He didn't know if Kaldor was losing control due to battle lust, as reavers were reportedly wont to do, or if he wanted to push Zac a bit further to test him.

If it was the former, Zac could back off and return when Kaldor's head had cooled down. Since Zac would have won with that final strike if not for the interruption, Kaldor would probably hand him the remnant without complaint. However, if it was the latter, Zac felt giving up so quickly might cost him his chance to get the splinter. Kaldor had made it clear; he had no love for cowards.

For now, Zac would keep going a bit longer since he hadn't reached his limits. Kaldor no longer bothered to rely on finesse, and Zac's instincts told him that that had never been the skeleton's true path. It was painfully obvious as the reaver clawed at him with wild abandon, his fingers glowing red.

Zac countered with a swing of his own, but even death was rebuffed by the insatiable will contained in Kaldor's attack. Zac was pushed back a step, but he immediately adapted and lunged for another strike. With unprecedented focus, Zac restarted his stance as he calmed his mind. Death couldn't be impatient, it couldn't be swayed by outside events.

It was steady, intractable. And if it failed, it was only a temporary defeat. Death would win out in the end; no one could escape. But it quickly started to feel like Zac was trying to contain an enraged Barghest with a prison made of twigs. Kaldor's punches seemed simpler compared to before, but they contained an indomitability that broke Zac's Dao.

The reaver's strikes ignored everything as they went in for a kill. Technically, it should have meant leaving his body with numerous openings, but Kaldor kept unleashing those red arrays with his fists, feet, knees, and elbows in a furious barrage.

Every time their attacks collided, Zac felt like being rebuffed by an army of battle-hardened veterans, where their wills had

been turned into a power of faith. Zac tried to regain control, but he repeatedly found his technique unable to withstand this kind of power. It was undying, everlasting, a true manifestation of the Dao of Conflict.

The strikes put Zac under a kind of pressure he hadn't felt since entering the Orom World, where every strike of Kaldor's carried the threat of death. The whole courtyard was drowned in it by now, pushing Zac's nerves to a breaking point. Even Zac's vision started to blur, like he was being dragged down into Kaldor's madness.

No matter what the reaver was planning, one thing was clear. The killing intent was all-too-real, and every single strike was aimed at Zac's vitals with the intent to kill. If one of those array-empowered strikes was allowed to hit his body without its force dispersed, his Duplicity Core wouldn't be able to fake his death and save him.

Zac briefly considered giving up on his chains, fully concentrating on his axework to focus his strength. However, he immediately discarded the idea, choosing to trust what he had built over these past four years. Part of him wanted to discard it all now that he finally encountered something that cleanly suppressed his Inexorable Stance. When real stakes were at play.

But his path was not a lie. It had led him through insurmountable odds, and it would take him through this as well. The clamoring calls of the illusory war hidden in Kaldor's bloodlust faded away as Zac's abyssal eyes stared straight into Kaldor's soul. He advanced again, and he felt something shift as his soul and body melded into one, where his path filled his very essence with enduring purpose.

He was inexorable.

Chapter 826: Harmony

Not once since stepping into the Integration Stage over half a year ago had Zac felt this in tune with his creation, where he and his Dao were on track for becoming one and the same. The Inexorable Stance was no longer just an extension of his will, it melded with his whole body. He had turned into an immovable fixture in the midst of Kaldor's madness, an island of death that the warriors born from the reaver's killing intent couldn't breach.

At first, Zac wondered if he had somehow leapfrogged a whole level and stepped into the Conception Stage, but he immediately realized he was overestimating himself. Even Monarchs who had studied their Daos and techniques for eons were hard-pressed to ever reach that level of technique, and it was much too early for Zac to take that step.

Neither was his state the result of deepening his foundations in the Integration Stage. Zac could tell that he had still just begun his work on his integration – the mysterious sense of unity came from somewhere else, from something that Pavina hadn't prepared him for; his soul.

More specifically, it was thanks to the skeletal framework he had set up for the [**Thousand Lights Avatar**].

His own movements and that of his Dao Avatars were almost in sync as Zac fended off the mad assault of his skeletal adversary. When he swung his training axe, so did the avatar swing his chained axe of death. When Zac manipulated the chain formation erected with [**Chainbox**], so did the black tendrils from his Branch of the Pale Seal dance in his soul aperture.

With Zac being the target of an unprecedented wave of killing intent and pressure, he had been pushed to the limits to make the most of his technique. The fluctuations and concepts

generated by his Dao Avatars had grown stronger than ever and were even further empowered by Zac opening his **[Spiritual Void]**. Unknowingly, this power had then spread into the thin strands of Mental Energy Zac had started drawing along his skeleton.

That was the first and easiest step of the **[Thousand Lights Avatar]** – to just set up a framework to build upon as he progressed. The method had suggested the original user, the Eidolon, to form it based on their favorite appearance. Since Zac wasn't an amorphous wraith, he had chosen to instead form the frame based on his skeletal structure.

From there, he would gradually fill out his body, from copying pathways to flesh and muscle until his body was filled by a secondary soul of sorts. This initial step hadn't taken too much work, allowing him to mostly complete it while resting. Most of the work came from engraving a set of patterns that prevented the mental energy from immediately dispersing.

The initial step might have been straightforward, but it hadn't brought him any benefits either. Zac had tried to make use of his nascent avatar in the wilderness, both by instilling it with Dao and trying to use it to push his mental energy into his skills quicker. Neither really worked. It was more efficient to infuse his muscles with his Dao if he wanted to empower his body, and the pathways were much-too-thin to carry the required amount of Mental Energy to bolster a skill with a Dao Branch.

Now, this weak framework had become some sort of bridge, improving the harmony between himself and his Dao Avatar. It blurred the lines between corporeal and spiritual, where it all moved toward a singular unity. It was still far from perfect, but it did make his stance more natural, putting not only his mind but his whole body in the right state.

Zac had no idea this kind of thing was possible. Pavina didn't cultivate her soul at all, apart from using some sort of warrior method that passively strengthened its defenses over time. Thus, she had never mentioned that soul and technique could empower each other. If anything, those who had powerful souls and thus high control rather focused on intent, where

cultivators integrated their path with their weapons or spells rather than their technique.

This was great news for Zac, who had not been able to make a lot of use of his extraordinary soul except for withstanding the remnants and performing his crude version of Dao Braiding. The former was a stopgap to avoid going insane, and the latter was nothing special. His braiding was even worse than what some F-grade talents could perform.

The remnants were providing a powerful hidden ace while also helping cultivate his soul, but Zac was ultimately receiving somewhat limited returns from cultivating his soul even if it was the most time-consuming aspect of his path. He had previously hoped on making use of his soul cultivation to form axe intent, or even some technique-based intents like ‘Evolutionary Intent’.

Zac had figured that between the crystallization of his path, his rapidly improving technique, and his powerful soul, he might be able to add intent to his repertoire, but he had been utterly incapable of forming even a wisp of intent. Unfortunately, it looked like intent required affinity that would allow him to better control the insights in his Daos.

The failure had made him uncertain about persisting with his soul cultivation beyond what was necessary for the remnants, since those years would be better spent on exploring Mystic Realms, battling to hone his Dao and techniques, or refining his skills. Even some side-professions seemed more efficient for his goal of catching up to his mother and saving Kenzie before it was too late.

However, his current state had shown him a new direction.

It was still just a shadow of a path, but Zac could feel it brimmed with possibility. To fuse his soul and link it with his Dao Avatars, essentially a fusion between Man and Heaven. This would be a system of his own creation, something that took advantage of both his refined soul and talent for improving his technique.

A wailing scream of danger dragged Zac out of his thoughts, but it was too late. He had messed up, allowing himself to be

consumed by his discovery in a fight that allowed for no distractions. A fist hidden behind a glaring-red array was closing in on his heart, and it was too late to dodge. Zac could only minimize the damage, and he furiously spun his torso as his chains pulled the attack off-mark.

Still, Zac's vision turned white from pain from having a part of his lungs and ribcage disintegrated as Kaldor's fist grazed his torso. If he had been just a heartbeat slower, Kaldor's attack would have hit him square in his chest, destroying his heart and most likely shattering his whole upper torso.

There was no longer any doubt in Zac's mind about the veracity behind the intent within Kaldor's punches. The killing intent was real, and if Zac slipped up, he would get himself killed. The wound in his side was dripping with ichor, but his powerful durability was thankfully coming in handy as the bleeding stopped almost immediately without even using any skill.

Still, Zac knew he wouldn't be able to keep going much longer. It wasn't the wound - this was nothing compared to some things he had been through. The real problem was that Kaldor was still ramping up. With every clash, Kaldor's momentum increased, and the dense haze of bloodlust grew thicker.

Zac was struggling to regain control of the fight, but even with his latest breakthrough, he had only gone from being the weaker side to barely hanging on. It didn't matter if Kaldor was only relying on insights at the level of Peak Fragments - the condensed bloodlust more than made up for the lacking foundation. If things kept going, there was only one outcome - death.

Over and over, Zac rallied, putting everything he had learned to use. His whole body was becoming one with his Dao Branches, and every movement was in accordance with his path. Yet a second wound soon joined the first, and then a third. The only thing Zac had gained from taking those terrifying punches was a short breather, but Kaldor soon snatched back this advantage with his unrelenting assault.

Pain racked Zac's body, and the whole world was a hazy red as Zac desperately held on, but those three shimmering aquamarine lights from Kaldor's skull started to look like the light at the end of the tunnel. The suppression was complete and suffocating, with Zac barely clinging on to life through his mastery of death.

It was time to disengage.

Kaldor had gone far beyond the agreement of the duel, and Zac had already gained an epiphany in the heat of battle. If Zac kept pushing it, he would eventually fail to turn these deadly strikes into glancing blows. There was no point in persisting in this sham of a trial.

However, just as Zac was about to step back, even sacrificing [Chainbox] to delay Kaldor if needed, he felt a terrifying energy congeal right behind his head. He was forced to lunge forward to avoid a huge red brand that had appeared in the air, the first time those arrays didn't form attached to Kaldor's limbs.

The brand immediately erupted, ripping space apart before releasing a tumultuous shockwave. If Zac had retreated into that thing, his head would have been blown right off. The scene thoroughly infuriated Zac, the dark swirls of oblivion gathered in his mind as he readied himself to fight fire with fire.

But it took time forming even the smallest of Annihilation Spheres, and the detonation had pushed Zac right into Kaldor's waiting arms. Zac desperately swung his axe to force the reaver into defense, but another large array appeared like a shield while a killing strike continued toward Zac unimpeded. There was just no time, and Zac went with the only solution he could think of.

The red haze suddenly dispersed within a meter and a half from Zac, and Kaldor's two arrays sputtered and died out. The churning Daos in Kaldor's body had been muted as well according to Zac's [Cosmic Gaze], and the skeleton stopped in his tracks for an instant.

Zac saw his opportunity, and he immediately gave up on activating **[Abyssal Phase]** with Void Energy. Instead, he slightly altered the trajectory of his axe, passing right through the spot once guarded by the sanguine barrier. At the same time, Zac used all four chains to delay Kaldor from resetting his punch, which was no longer powered by his killing intent.

One attack sped up while one slowed down.

Crackling sounds echoed out as fetters snapped, but they were joined by a blissful clang as Zac's axehead slammed straight into Kaldor's chest, prompting sparks to fly. The strike contained everything Zac had to give, but the exoskeleton was just too hard. Not even a scratch was left on its alabaster surface, yet it almost felt like Zac's wrist would snap from the rebound.

Zac didn't fight the powerful counterforce and instead used it, along with Kaldor's delayed punch, to create a ten-meter distance between the two. Kaldor didn't move after the exchange, and the red haze around him slowly dissipated as the two combatants stared at each other in silence. One silent and brooding, the other panting and covered in wounds and black ichor.

"It's my victory," both suddenly concluded.

"Your victory? Have you lost your mind?" Zac immediately swore, losing all decorum as he felt another wave of anger growing in his chest. "There's a limit to how shameless you can be."

The reaver was already cheating by using extremely refined Arrays in this duel, both empowering his strikes and using them like actual skills. Even then, Zac had completed his task and landed a hit, only to hear he had lost? Had Kaldor ever planned to give him the Splinter? Or had he become obsessed with it, wanting to keep it for his own?

"You have guts kid, talking to me like that," Kaldor snorted as the last of the red haze reentered his bones. "This is obviously my victory, with you using that weird skill."

“What skill?” Zac countered. “I never used a skill. It’s my Draugr Bloodline, and you never said anything about those.”

“Little bastard, you think you’re the first Draugr I’ve met? Since when did your kind have that kind of bloodline talent?”

“Go visit the Abyssal Shores if you’re curious,” Zac shrugged as he ate a healing pill, still angry with the shameless reaver even if he had calmed down by now.

“Don’t you think I know you’re some sort of aboriginal outside the Empire’s purview, brat?” Kaldor laughed. “But fine, It might not have been a skill. So, what did you do? If I was at your grade my Dao would have been completely suppressed, cut off from the heavens themselves.”

Zac only shrugged in response without any intention of explaining what he did. “Since it’s not a skill, why not honor your part of the bargain before anything else? Where is the splinter?”

Kaldor had given in, but Zac still felt cheated. Even if the Izh’Rak reaver lacked any facial expressions, Zac could tell that Kaldor was quite pleased even after having lost. It really looked like Kaldor had been going overboard to dig into Zac’s secrets rather than going mad, and he had succeeded.

That final blast right behind Zac’s head was probably meticulously planned rather than an unfortunate coincidence, a gambit to force Zac into showcasing any secret techniques he had.

Still, Zac didn’t dare complain as he activated the five seals he had formed with his late-mastery [**Undying Mark**], the healing skill that he had gotten ample experience using over the past few years. The situation was unfair, but there was ultimately nothing he could do about it at the moment.

Kaldor was so far beyond himself no matter if you talked strength or standing, so complaining would do him no good. Furthermore, Zac was asking the reaver to hand over a priceless treasure, which meant breaking the rules of the Orom World. For now, Zac could only pray that him showing off one of his Bloodline Talents wouldn’t cause any issues down the

road, and thank the lucky stars he didn't need to use the far-more-conspicuous **[Force of the Void]**.

"Now, don't look so glum," Kaldor laughed, clearly understanding Zac's misgivings. "Well, this can be considered my bad. I've been bored the past few millennia and got a bit too excited. How about this? In addition to that accursed item, I'll provide something else. Ask me one question, and I'll do my best to answer without holding back."

Zac's heart shuddered, and he looked at Kaldor with surprise. This was a precious opportunity, even if Zac didn't feel it matched up to being exploited like this. Pavina hadn't divulged too much about Kaldor's origins over the past years, but he had managed to piece together a few things. First of all, Kaldor was from a faction of equal standing to the Umbri'Zi Clan, though it was more of an army than a clan.

Secondly, Kaldor had arrived in the Orom World as an early Monarch, meaning the skeleton had at least some real standing even before he was caught. Why the Orom had actually dared swallow him was unclear, and perhaps only Kaldor himself knew the answer to that question. In either case, Kaldor should possess a lot of information, no matter if it was on cultivation, the Undead Empire, or the wider world.

He needed to make this question count.

"What's the real reason members of the Undead Empire can't cultivate the Path of Pure Death?" Zac eventually asked.

This was the most pertinent question he could think of, where Kaldor also had a decent chance of knowing the answer. Asking about cultivation wasn't too urgent since he didn't have any pressing issues in that regard. The only exception was how to form a core in his unique situation, but why would Kaldor have an answer to that? Besides, he would be able to meet Yrial soon enough, someone who walked a path of duality who was probably more experienced in this regard.

Zac wanted to find out more about the six Profundity Empire and the origin of Leandra's faction, but it wasn't that was urgent either. Even if he got the answers he was looking for, he was way too weak to do anything about it. He did, however,

need to know more about the weird rule of the Undead Empire.

His identity was already sensitive considering not only his actions in the Twilight Harbor, but also because of him being an Edgewalker. If there were some hidden issues with walking the Path of Pure Death or Oblivion in addition to all that, he needed to know. It would be critical for his future relationship with the Undead Empire, whether he would ultimately dare go there or not.

“Brat, are you trying to get me killed?” Kaldor muttered, and Zac looked on with confusion as he took out a bottle of white mixture that he started covering his head with.

“Do you know how the Undead Empire was founded?” Kaldor asked as he started covering his neck and chest following his head.

“The ancient undead factions banded together to find refuge during the Dark Ages,” Zac slowly said, not understanding why the skeleton was oiling himself up. “You eventually found the Heartlands and settled down.”

“Our ancestors found no Heartlands,” Kaldor snorted as he steadied himself. “We found what’s now called the Heart of the Empire.”

“The Heart of the Empire?” Zac repeated, drawing a complete blank. Catheya had never mentioned that thing before, and neither was it mentioned in any of the missives he had read in the Twilight Harbor.

“I doubt you’ve heard of it, considering it’s the core of our power,” Kaldor sighed as cracks suddenly appeared all over his body. “After all, it’s an Eternal Heritage holding the key to Death.”

Chapter 827: Heart of the Empire

Zac mutely looked on with amazement as deep cracks spread across the Izh'Rak Reaver's bones. It was definitely the work of the Undead Empire's commandments, a punishment for divulging the secrets to an outsider. Zac knew just how sturdy the exoskeleton of reavers was, and Kaldor was at the peak of Monarchy. Even then, the restriction that bound all imperials managed to cause such damage for uttering a few sentences. Just how overbearing was the Primo?

Or was it related to the Heart of the Empire?

Zac had always wondered what the Undead Empire had to fall back on in order to survive to this day. After all, they were making enemies left and right with their eternal crusade, even against peak factions like the Buddhist Sangha. Certainly, the Undead Empire was a terrifying existence, and Zac suspected they had at least a dozen Supremacies from what he'd gathered.

Still, was that really enough to fight in every direction, contending against multiple factions at once? At first, Zac had believed it was related to the Primo and the mysterious Founders. If the Primo was a powerhouse at the peak of the A-grade, or perhaps even something beyond that, it might be enough to prevent the empire from being completely overrun.

However, since finding out about the existence of Eternal Heritages from Qi'Sar, Zac had floated the possibility of the empire controlling some ancient relic that kept them, or at least the Heartlands, safe. From the sounds of it, it might be the case. What all this had to do with Pure Death wasn't clear, but Zac guessed the reaver was getting there.

The white concoction Kaldor's smeared across his body had come alive, and it burrowed into the cracks. Just a few seconds later it had solidified, seemingly repairing the damage altogether. Zac looked on with mixed emotions, inwardly vowing to never make this troublesome species an enemy for real.

Even if he managed to crack those disgustingly sturdy bones, they actually had concoctions that could mend the damage in an instant?

"Spare shavings," Kaldor explained when he saw Zac's look. "A pain to make, literally, but I've had a lot of free time in this place. Anyway, the ancestors found the heart and managed to gain limited control over it. It was the emanations of the heart that birthed the Heartlands, and it is still upholding it to this day."

Zac's eyes widened in surprise, partly because of what Kaldor said, but mostly because of what could be discerned between the lines. Limited control? The Primo and the Undead Princes were unable to take full control of this Eternal Heritage, even after billions of years? It almost sounded like they were using it in an unintended manner, just siphoning some of its leftover energy to terraform the surroundings.

The possibility almost beggared comprehension. Just becoming a Monarch was akin to becoming a god, where you carried a literal world in your body. You could live for a million years, surpassing Earth's civilization tens of times over, and you controlled vast powers.

Above that were Autarchs, and then the mysterious Supremacies who were so exalted that Zac still had no idea what kind of existences they were. The only information he'd manage to gather was that they could change the laws of the heavens all across the empires they controlled, remolding the Dao in their image.

But even these kinds of beings were unable to properly control an Eternal Heritage erected in a bygone era? Just who created it and what kind of stage had they reached? Just what were the limits of cultivation? Perhaps he'd be able to find the answers

someday, but for now, Zac took a steadying breath and refocused on his question.

“What does the Heart of the Empire have to do with my question?” Zac prompted.

“Some things will just harm you if you know. Suffice to say, the path of Pure Death is inextricably linked to the heart. If the general ban wasn’t imposed, the source of our power would be weakened, diluted. Only a scant few can be allowed to walk the path of purity, and it is not only a matter of talent – there’s also temperament and providence. If the wrong person reaches the peak... The consequences could be disastrous,” Kaldor sighed as a few more cracks appeared across his body.

Zac slowly nodded. Hearing the explanation, the first thing he came to think of was Be’Zi. Was this why she had severed her Karma with the Empire? She wanted to delve into Pure Death and Oblivion, but she wasn’t qualified? Or did she have the qualifications, but broke some rules when wanting to transition Pure Death into Oblivion?

And why would the Dao, the fundamental truths of the universe, be linked to an old ruin? How were they connected? There was something odd going on at the peak. From the various pieces of intelligence Zac had gathered, there seemed to be some sort of limitations to the Dao as you approached the Terminus.

It was almost like the truths became a finite resource, where each peak could only house so many cultivators. Zac was about to ask some clarifying questions, but the reaver immediately shut him down before Zac had the chance.

“Brat, just join the Empire if you want to know more. With your bloodline, you’d get a hero’s welcome. Ow, ow, my bones,” Kaldor complained. “If you can control these cursed remnants, you should be able to find a backer within your kin who can let you undergo the examination. Our races are always eager to find members on the outside.”

“Why’s that?” Zac asked with interest.

“So many fell during the Dark Ages. Others were lost as we searched for safe harbor,” Kaldor grunted. “All our heritages are incomplete, except for the bloodsuckers who joined later. Finding someone like you might mean your race can reclaim something they had lost, though the odds are minuscule. You can use that as a bargaining chip.”

Zac nodded pensively as he thought back to his vision of Eoz, the founding Draugr. He had no idea what the names of the various branches of Draugr were, except for the other two mentioned in his vision and Zi, the ancestor of Catheya’s Clan. What if Eoz was a lost heritage? With his ancestor being the third to break out of the Abyssal Lake, Zac figured the bloodline had to be quite strong.

That alone might be even more valuable than his identity as an Edgewalker. If not for the Undead Empire as a whole, then at least for the Abyssal Shores. With this knowledge, he felt far better prepared for potentially joining the Undead Empire in the future, though he would have to digest what he had found out first.

“So, the splinter?” Zac eventually said.

“Take it,” Kaldor grunted as he pointed toward an empty spot in the courtyard.

The next moment, the ground rumbled as an opening appeared, from which a pedestal rose. On top of it rested a glass casing covered in intricate engravings. Four pitch-black runes slowly rotated around the box as well. These illusory runes were somewhat similar to the ones Be’Zi had erected in his soul, though they weren’t nearly as refined.

If Zac had to guess, it was Kaldor himself who had added the outer array to add a second layer of protection to the cage. Even then, it wasn’t perfect. Zac could vaguely sense the remnant that was floating in the middle of the cage, and the two splinters in his mind stirred a bit. However, the caged splinter was in some sort of sealed state, with only some weak tendrils of Oblivion leaking out from its casing.

“Good riddance,” Kaldor muttered as he looked at the Splinter of Oblivion. “That energy is quite interesting, but it is

ultimately no good. Be careful with this thing.”

“I know,” Zac sighed as he mentally started to prepare himself.

He didn't know what to expect when absorbing the third set, but he couldn't imagine it would be a comfortable experience. Thankfully, he had evolved his Soul Since last, which would hopefully allow him to make the trek to the bamboo forest after this without causing a scene.

“I'm not just talking about its mental influence,” Kaldor said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. “Do you know why there's only one set of these things in the Orom World, even when this big bastard has been alive for almost 40 million years? Surely, it would encounter more of them as it swallowed millions and millions of poor souls. After all, there are not just one or two of them out there.”

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering the vision of when that godlike existence destroyed the Heart of Oblivion and Spark of Creation. Going by the apocalyptic scene, there were at least a few thousand remnants scattered across the Multiverse. It really was a bit odd that Orom only had one set, considering this was the second time he stumbled into a pair in a couple of years.

“The Orom discards the other ones it finds?” Zac ventured after some thought.

“Exactly. Spits them right out before running away,” Kaldor laughed.

“One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity,” Zac muttered.

“What's that?” Kaldor asked before he shrugged. “No, I'm talking about something else. These things alter fate.”

“Alter fate?” Zac repeated with confusion.

“The creature that was split into these shards was a unique existence born during the rebirth of the era. It was only the equivalent of peak Autarch, but its control over the Dao was greater than most Supremacies. The only reason it didn't reach that stage was because of an obsession that held it back, forever trapping it at the threshold.”

“What does that have to do about fate-altering?” Zac frowned.

“Its obsession was too powerful, and it alters reality even in its pseudo-dead state. These remnants want to be reforged into one. My guess is, the more of these things you collect, the more you’ll find yourself on a collision course with more remnants. Whether you like it or not.”

“The remnants are somehow altering events? Altering my decisions?” Zac asked.

“No idea how it actually works,” Kaldor said as he scratched the spots on his skull he had just repaired. “It can be considered an opportunity. Who knows, this phenomenon might be what brought you to me and Pavina, eh? But it might also be a calamity, where you’re dragged to a place of no return. More importantly, are you willing to be a puppet, to be manipulated based on some ancient bastard? Or do you want to be in control of your fate and your path?”

Zac wordlessly gazed at the shimmering splinter as he went over the reaver’s words. It was true, he had repeatedly felt like a puppet when it came to these remnants, of how he felt the System was essentially forcing him down a path.

Hearing this, he might have been unfair toward the System. Perhaps, it was the remnants themselves who kept pulling him toward their brethren, with the System simply cheering them on. But it didn’t really matter. As Kaldor said, it was ultimately an issue of his fate not being in his own hands. It didn’t matter so much who was manipulating him – what mattered was that he needed to break free.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Who knows,” Kaldor said. “I only heard about these things in passing before I got trapped in this place. But I figure there should be some solutions. The ancient will hidden inside these things is hard to deal with, but the power of the crystals themselves is not that impressive. Perhaps you can extract what you need and discard the rest when you get strong enough?”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement as he walked toward the sealed crystal hovering in its cage. The closer he got, the more the remnants in his mental prison stirred, but they seemed a bit confused, unclear what was going on. The same thing was happening to the sealed splinter, where its black luster flickered ominously, but it didn't lash out at all.

"You have just over three months," Kaldor said just as Zac was about to pick up the cage.

"What?" Zac said with confusion, stopping in his tracks.

"As I said, you had three years to take this thing. Soon after, it had to be returned to be resealed," Kaldor grinned. "Since you came three months early, you have just over three months to play around with this thing before it goes back to the repository in Liberty Point."

"What happens if I don't return it?"

"Someone like me will be sent to retrieve it. Someone who's not bound by the rules of a duel," Kaldor said pointedly.

"And if I consume it?" Zac hesitated.

"Same deal, but your corpse will be retrieved instead," Kaldor laughed. "So you better be sure about what you're doing."

Cold sweat ran down Zac's back as he looked at the splinter in front of him, and he inwardly cursed Kaldor for being so vague. If he really waited until the last day, wouldn't he be screwed? It would take him weeks to reach Three Virtues' bamboo forest and get the shard, more than enough time to be tracked down by an Emerald Badge.

After fighting Kaldor, who had restrained his Daos to the level of Peak Dao Fragments, Zac was even less confident in making it out of a battle like this alive. Certainly, Kaldor was most likely one of the most powerful Emerald Badges around, but even the weaker ones had unique strength like Kaldor's killing intent.

"Thank you for the warning," Zac said. "So how do I take away this thing? Can I put it in a Spatial Ring?"

“Sure,” Kaldor nodded. “But it will taint the pocket space. It shouldn’t be a problem for a year or two, but the ring would eventually destabilize and blow you up.”

Zac breathed in relief, but his heart still beat like a drum as he placed his hand against the glass casing, trying to imprint the seals to memory. The runes on the glass box were distinct from both Kaldor’s Addition and Be’Zi’s gift, more in line with the seals the System had added to the prison in his mind. Perhaps their design would be one of the clues to figuring out a way of this mess in the future.

A wave of unfettered desire slammed against the cage in his mind, but it quickly calmed down as Zac put the cage into his Cosmos Sack. He infused his senses into the bag, and he immediately understood what Kaldor meant earlier. Kaldor’s protective runes didn’t make it into the bag, and a black haze had started to spread from the glass box in the subspace, causing some ominous ripples in the fabric of reality.

Thankfully, Zac didn’t have any important item in this native bag, and he didn’t care if it would break down. As long as it could withstand the influence until he’d fetched the shard as well, he was content.

Having gotten what he’d come for, Zac saw no reason to linger in the reaver’s mansion. He wasn’t sure what to think of Kaldor. The old monarch had been extremely shameless and forced his hand, but he had also provided great assistance. Perhaps, it was only thanks to this Izh’Rak Reaver he was safe and sound after setting off his Annihilation Sphere years ago.

Still, no matter how many benefits Kaldor had provided, it ultimately felt like Kaldor had his own plans, where he once more had become an unwitting pawn in some greater scheme. The sooner he could get away from this place, the better.

“So, where are you off to now, brat?” Kaldor asked curiously as Zac got ready to leave.

“I’ll visit Pavina and thank her for helping me survive today’s battle,” Zac answered after some consideration.

“That little traitor,” Kaldor snorted, though he clearly wasn’t upset. “And then?”

Kaldor’s expression was lazy, but Zac understood there were hidden implications within the question.

“After that?” Zac hesitated. “I’ll stay in the area for now.”

“Hm,” Kaldor nodded. “If you ever get out of here, are you planning on joining the Undead Empire?”

“I’m not against it, but I haven’t made any decisions,” Zac said. “From what I’ve gathered, the situation seems a bit messy.”

“All powerful factions are messy,” Kaldor laughed. “That’s how things are when great benefits are at stake. Not even the baldies of the Buddhist Sangha are any different. Where there is cultivation and the pursuit of Eternity, there will be intrigue and backstabbing. But you should know; you will always be incomplete until you return to your origin.”

“My origin?” Zac frowned. “The Abyssal Lake?”

“Exactly,” Kaldor said. “Without returning to your origin, you will never unlock your true potential. But when you do, you will be able to look down on the world. Such is the benefit of a divine race. Goals that are just flights of fancy for base creatures like Revenants or Humans will be well within your reach.”

Zac furrowed his brows, not commenting on the proclamation.

“Off you go then, brat,” Kaldor added. “Remember, you have three months before that thing has to be returned. Not even I can help you after that.”

“Thank you,” Zac eventually said as he left for Pavina’s mansion. “For everything.”

“I wonder, what will you choose?” Kaldor muttered as he sensed the young Edgewalker disappear among the trees before his gaze turned in another direction. “And why did you have me go to these lengths?”

Chapter 828: Words Spoken from the Heart

A day later, Zac reached Pavina's mansion, and he found his teacher sitting with an axe similar to Zac's own in her hand.

"You won," Pavina nodded as Zac arrived, placing the axe to her side. "I'm quite the teacher."

"Yes, you're quite something," Zac smiled.

"How did it go?" Pavina asked.

Zac recounted the whole battle, including how Kaldor started cheating the moment he was about to lose. There was a decent chance that the reaver acted with a hidden purpose rather than being consumed by bloodlust, whether it was to push Zac to find a breakthrough or to sound out any hidden strength. Which one was less obvious, and trying to glean anything from Pavina's inscrutable expression didn't help at all.

She simply nodded like Kaldor's shamelessness was a matter of course. Neither did she try to dig into what kind of bloodline technique Zac had used to turn things around. Zac wasn't willing to divulge that secret either, since it was obviously different from what normal Draugr possessed. He did however want to see if Pavina could shed any light on his most recent find, whether his idea had potential.

So, he recounted what happened when he started using the framework for [**Thousand Lights Avatar**].

"Soul and technique," Pavina slowly muttered. "Interesting. It sounds a bit like the later phase of the Integration Stage, yet distinct somehow."

"Do you think it's feasible to fuse your soul into one's technique this way?" Zac asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Pavina said. “Your soul is the bridge between the grand Dao and yourself. If you can really spread your soul, and not just mental energy, throughout your body as you mentioned, it should be helpful. It might not only strengthen your technique, but also increase the pace you improve it.”

“Are there any problems?” Zac probed, noticing that the Revenant wasn’t looking too enthused even if she praised the method.

“Time,” Pavina said without hesitation. “You’re young, but you should have already started realizing the time and effort required to walk toward the peak. Every step forward is a tremendous undertaking, be it from skills, Dao, levels, or other aspects of your path. The soul is famously demanding in this aspect, and what you’re proposing is to not only cultivate the soul. It is also to form a spiritual avatar and mold it with your stances.”

“I don’t see a scenario where too many would bother with something like this, apart from a cultivator who has a class based on this kind of fusion between the soul and physical attacks,” Pavina eventually concluded. “Even if it can strengthen you, the time cost in proportion to improvement is both risky and limited from what I can tell.”

“So it’s a bad idea?” Zac grimaced.

“I didn’t say that,” Pavina said with a shake of her head. “I said it wasn’t advisable for most people. But most people do not have your talent for fusing your path and technique. The capability to cultivate their soul is quite rare for most races, and I have never met anyone who dared to walk both these time-consuming routes. But you can only go so far following convention.

“No Autarch had reached their level by being reasonable and measured - their conviction in their path is unbreakable, no matter how crazy it might seem to others. I am simply urging you to confirm whether this method is something that resonates with you and your path. If it does, try it out. The worst that can happen is that you fail and possibly get stuck in

some bottleneck. But even then you've been true to yourself, and all journeys must end somewhere. That is the fate of a cultivator."

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. It was just like Pavina said. Time was becoming more and more precious as he grew stronger, even if his longevity kept improving. He was already running late for his planned breakthrough into Hegemony, and the more he added to his plate, the more baggage he would have to carry down the road.

There was thankfully still time to figure all this out. As long as his plan succeeded, he would be back on Earth soon enough, and he could finally take a breather and collect himself. His foundations had never been as solid as they were right now, and he could afford a breather where he properly planned out his next steps.

The two kept talking for another hour, but it was eventually time to go. The splinter was calling him from within his Cosmos Sack, and he was eager to get the shard as well before something went awry. Three Virtues seemed to know much more than he let on and Zac feared that the more time he gave the shifty monk to prepare, the worse a position Zac would find himself in. However, before he let, he was beset with indecision, his heart caught between paranoia and goodwill.

Should he tell her?

This was something he had been struggling over since Pavina had taken him under her wing, putting him back on the right track with his cultivation. Exposing his escape plans might ruin everything, even if Pavina herself wasn't planning on ratting him out. The Orom was generally oblivious to the Orom World, but who knew what it actually picked up through the Prison Brands?

But could he really just disappear from this prison, leaving behind those who had given him so much?

He couldn't, his conscience wouldn't allow it.

"In the next few months, I'll..."

“Some things need not be spoken,” Pavina interrupted as she glanced toward the sky.

Zac was surprised, but he immediately rephrased what he was going to say. It turned out that he had been worrying about nothing, where Pavina already had a decent idea of what was going on. He should have expected it, considering that Kaldor had already figured out he was the source of the previous blast of Oblivion that failed to break himself out.

“... I’ll go into seclusion. I generally stay close to the border of life and death, I’d be more comfortable if you guarded the area.”

Pavina nodded with a smile. “Go on with your cultivation. No need to worry about me. What will be, will be.”

Zac slowly nodded as he said his goodbyes, wondering if he would ever see this mentor of his again.

“He seems confident,” Pavina commented as Zac left.

“Little bastard. I was the one who gave him that cursed item and the one who received the backlash for his previous attempt,” Kaldor swore as he stepped out from the shadows. “Where was my invitation?”

“That’s what you get for going so hard on my little disciple,” Pavina smiled. “He seems to remember both goodwill and grudges, weighing them against each other.”

Kaldor only snorted in response before his aura changed to a more serious demeanor. “Gather the others. This is it, it’s time to complete our mission.”

“Should we really heap this responsibility on the child? And not even tell him?” Pavina hesitated. “Can he carry this burden alone?”

“Perhaps not, but he’s not the only one making their moves. Fate is congregating, almost by a scary degree. Even the big guy seems to sense something amiss. It has sped up considerably,” Kaldor grunted. “But its futile. It’s swallowed too many of the baldies. Fate is inescapable.”

“The Sangha,” Pavina grimaced. “If it comes to blows, I fear, even with master to protect us...”

“Don’t worry,” Kaldor said with a shake of his head. “Our goals are different.”

“What about the child?” Pavina asked. “We’re just going to let such a talent disappear?”

“Don’t worry, I tested him,” Kaldor said. “I divulged some core secrets of the Empire, and I only received some surface damage. He has already one step through the door, he just doesn’t know it.”

Having delivered the warning to Pavina, Zac felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Better yet, even after a week had passed as he returned to Samsara’s Edge, there still hadn’t been any issues cropping up. Therefore, he didn’t immediately head toward the secluded bamboo forest in the heart of the Life-attuned Zone. First, he visited Heda’s farm.

In many ways, the arborist had helped him as much as Pavina, and if Zac didn’t offer her this hint as well he’d feel bad about it forever. After all, he couldn’t be certain that the seed Heda asked him to throw out was actually an escape measure of hers. It might simply be her way to send out something of hers into the multiverse, a heritage of sorts.

Heda only smiled and patted his head when he told her where she should go for the next months, not giving him any indication at all whether she intended to follow his advice or not. He still stayed behind for a while, and the Arborist checked up on Haro, the Heavenrender Seed left in Zac’s Worldring.

“You can put Vivi inside now,” Heda eventually concluded. “She will help nurture the seed, and curtail its inherent destructive tendencies.”

Zac was elated, and he immediately took out the spatial tube from his Cosmos Sack and put it into the low-quality Worldring. The huge vine hidden within the tube immediately emerged, a giant that spanned over a hundred meters. Its

massive stalk dwarfed the small seed hovering above a series of arrays, yet Vivi didn't get too close.

It gingerly waved its vines around the seed, almost looking afraid to inadvertently hit it. The movements weren't threatening, but rather protective as she formed a defensive perimeter around Haro. Heda had already explained it was quite common, but it was still odd for Zac to see a plant with motherly instincts, especially considering the two plants were different species.

Even with the big vine appearing in the ring, Heda's arrangements weren't harmed at all. The desolate farmlands that the ring originally came with had been completely transformed since Zac purchased the seed, with Heda having set up multiple arrays to automate pretty much everything needed to nurture the Heavenrender Vine.

The only thing he needed to do was allow the small but constant drain of Dao and mental energy into the array. That way, the seed would be imprinted with his spirit, sort of like the undead he raised. That would make it much easier to form a contract as he had with Vivi. Without it, Heda wasn't confident he'd manage to accomplish the task.

Taming an adult Heavenrender Vine was pretty much impossible, they were far too bloodthirsty. They'd even attack an Autarch rather than submit, fighting until their last breath. Only by nurturing a seed did you have a chance, but these things were simply too hard to get. Only mature C-grade plants nurtured a seeds, and they might only give birth to a dozen or two over their nigh-eternal lifespans.

Furthermore, the moment a seed was born, it was immediately flung into the cosmos, often by the vine tearing a hole in space itself. With the seed barely emitting any energy signature, it would just look like a small piece of space debris. Finding one was a matter of luck, which was why they were so exorbitantly expensive on the outside.

Eventually, it was time to leave, and Zac made a beeline for the heart of the zone after reminding Heda to stay close over the next few months. Ultimately, he didn't choose to warn Ubo

or any of the other cultivators living around Samsara's Edge that he had gotten to know over the past years.

Ultimately, he couldn't save everyone. For one, there were no guarantees to his plan, and the more people he let know, the greater the odds of betrayal. He had his goals and people who relied on him back home, far stronger connections than those that he had made here out of necessity. If he could, he would properly damage the Orom on his way out, but that was the extent of what he could do.

Zac reached the bamboo forest a week later, and he stopped at the edge like last time.

'Enter,' the voice of Three Virtues immediately echoed in his mind, and Zac suddenly saw a path in front of him.

Zac walked inside, eventually reaching the small tranquil temple hidden in the depths. This time, there were actually over thirty monks sitting in silent meditation on the platform by the river. A muted susurrus of harmonized voices drifted over, but Zac couldn't make out any individual words. Still, there was an intangible phenomenon gathering throughout the area, like some mysterious power was brewing.

The scene reminded Zac of the monks at the Temple of Everlasting Peace by the last time he visited. They had joined together to summon Lord 84th back then. Was this the same thing? The thought made Zac wary as he looked for the dwarven monk himself. The timing was too suspect.

If Three Virtues was really planning something with the help of his acolytes, it had to be related to Zac and his mission. But how?

"Amitabha, Almsgiver," a voice drifted out from the main hall where Zac had vaguely spotted some powerful statue before. "It has been two years."

"I have accomplished the task your eminence gave me the first time I visited," Zac said, his gaze eventually moving away from the monks by the river. Even after Zac spoke up, they hadn't so much as looked over in his direction. They were

completely occupied with their meditation. “I’m here to pick up... that thing.”

“No rush, no rush,” Three Virtues answered, still not appearing. “As Almsgiver blesses us with his presence, fate shift and the clouds part. Benefactor would do us a great honor if he visited this poor monk’s temple to celebrate the completion for the statue of our guardian deity.”

Zac hesitated as he looked at the main hall, remembering all-too-well the fearful emanations that had come from the statue within the first time he visited. This time around, he couldn’t sense a thing, and Zac wasn’t sure whether that was a good or a bad thing. But ultimately, what could he do? He needed the shard, so he would have to play along.

For now.

His nerves were still stretched taut as he slowly entered the temple, ready to flash away at any hint of danger with the help of **[Earthstrider]**. He was even ready to take out the Splinter of Oblivion if need be, no matter if his danger sense was completely silent as he entered. But no obvious threats were waiting for him as he stepped through the threshold.

The hall was mostly empty, unless you counted the beautifully drawn paintings covering the walls. They depicted various devas and Boddhisatva’s imparting their blessings, but Zac didn’t dare look too closely even if they didn’t emit any energy fluctuations. He knew that layers and layers Buddhist doctrine and impartments were infused in these kinds of imagery, and looking to closely could impact one’s path if not careful.

On the other side of the entrance, Zac finally spotted the monk sitting on a mat in front of a five-meter tall statue. The gilded man depicted wasn’t anyone Zac recognized. In fact, he barely looked like a Bhattisavha at all, but rather a regal warrior who held a sword with a pommel that looked like a dragon.

He did have the familiar halo behind his back though, and now that Zac was this close he sensed a vague hint of faith energy surrounding the statue.

“Sāgara,” Three Virtues smiled as “The chosen protector of this Poor Monk’s temple.”

“Is he real?” Zac couldn’t help but ask, curiosity overcoming his purpose of coming.

Over the past years, Zac had heard and read many tales surrounding Buddha and the Buddhist Sanga. Of mystical realms, powerful warriors, and godlike beings he had never seen or heard of elsewhere. However, these stories seemed distant and hazy, just like mythology back on earth.

There was no anchor to the Multiverse in the stories, no mention of other forces or beings like the Primo. So were these celestial beings that the monks consecrated actual cultivators, or were they rather concepts of the path?

“What is real? What is false?” Three Virtues smiled. “If a kingdom’s throne is empty, is it not a kingdom?”

“Uh,” Zac hesitated.

“Come, sit,” Three Virtues said as he pointed to the mat next to him before lighting two sticks of incense in front of the statue.

“Is there something wrong?” Zac hesitated, feeling like he was being set up for another scam. “I was just planning on helping you getting rid of that thing. I don’t want to take up any time of your time and that of your disciple-brothers.”

“It is our delight to welcome Benefactor back to the temple,” Three Virtues laughed. “Let me ask you, Almsgiver. This unrepentant beast has trapped cultivators of all backgrounds for millions of years. Do you think the Orom deserves punishment?”

“I’m just an E-grade cultivator,” Zac hesitated. “Why do you ask me?”

“Words spoken from the heart contain the power to change the world,” Three Virtues smiled.

“If that was true I’d be long gone from this place,” Zac muttered, but he saw that the smiling monk was still waiting for an answer.

Zac didn't know if this was some kind of test, and whether there was a correct answer, so he simply chose to answer from his heart. So he gathered his thoughts for a moment as he looked at the imposing sword-wielding deity for a few moments before opening his mouth.

"If speaking from a cosmic perspective, I would have to say no," Zac eventually said. "What the Orom is doing is ultimately not that different from other cultivators. It is snatching resources to increase its strength, cutting off the path of others to advance its own. From all what I've seen since I stepped on the road of cultivation, that is the Heavenly Law. Evolution.

"I have walked through mountains of corpses to get where I am, and I am still nothing but an E-grade cultivator. By the time I reach the same level as the Orom, I would possibly have killed even more than he. Yet I don't consider myself evil, deserving of punishment. We all knew the risks when we started challenging the heavens to gain power and longevity. To think the Orom to be deserving of punishment because of this would make me a hypocrite."

"Amitabha, a vast heart is immeasurable. Benevolence is a divine path," Three Virtues nodded. "Yet, I sense Almsgiver is not done."

Zac slowly nodded. "While I don't think it is inherently deserving in the grand scheme of things, it is still deserving of punishment from my perspective. It has robbed me of years I could have spent with my loved ones, of my momentum, of friends, and who knows what else. I am not an enlightened being, my heart cannot encompass all beings like you monks. If given the opportunity, I'll retaliate against my captor."

Silence echoed in the hall after Zac's proclamation, and it almost looked like the head of the deity had grown more sinister as the swirling clouds of incense gathered around it.

To the side, the smile of Three Virtues grew wider.

Chapter 829: True and False

After having spoken his piece, Zac felt an odd premonition that he couldn't decipher. It seemed as though something had changed, yet everything was the same. The temple, the monk, and the statue - it was all as before. Yet Zac felt out of phase, for lack of a better term.

“A benevolent heart is important, but indiscriminate compassion can bring more suffering than good. Expunging Mara is a great merit, though this poor monk believes no fate is beyond redemption,” Three Virtues said, and it was like his words clicked reality back into place.

“Balance is required, I believe Almsgiver understands that fundamental truth quite well.”

Zac slowly nodded, though he honestly wasn't quite certain what point the monk was trying to make.

“Almsgiver has helped this poor temple resist the blight of Oblivion, a meritorious deed in line with the Dharma,” Three Virtues continued. “In fact, Almsgiver gives this poor monk the impression of a budding arhat, full of life and possibility. With Almsgiver having such harmonious relation to the Dharma, has Almsgiver ever considered ordination?”

“No one can say what the future holds,” Zac said, afraid to give a straightforward rejection at this stage, even if he had no intentions of shaving his head and donning a kasaya. “What will be, will be.”

With a massive faction like the Buddhist Sangha, there were many layers of membership, and things weren't as black and white as it was with the Undead Empire. With the undead, you were either a member, where the commandments bound you - or you were an outsider, no matter if you were another undead or a dreamer.

With the Buddhist Sangha, the lines were blurred. Most notably, anyone could visit most of the Buddhist cultivation grounds, though the mysterious Paradise and three of the four oceans were always closed to outsiders. The properly ordained monks who permanently resided on the mountains were just a small minority of the total population of the sangha.

The vast majority could almost be considered loose cultivators, and they followed Buddha's teachings to very varying degrees. Some of them were fully committed, becoming self-ordained monks and sometimes running monasteries or temples on the outside. Others were empires with a Buddhist heritage, where many cultivators followed adjoining paths.

There were even people who simply visited the holy lands to make use of the high-quality cultivation environment. The monks didn't seem to mind at all, and they even shared a lot of techniques with the public. Even unorthodox cultivators carrying tremendous amounts of fell karma were allowed inside, much to the annoyance of their pursuers.

Conflict was banned in most regions of the sangha, but there was danger of another kind. As that necromancer had once said, the monks were natural pathbreakers, and that effect was no doubt amplified manifold in the Buddhist Heartlands. Those who visited with impure motives might find their path subverted in short order, some to the point they lost all sense of self.

They became beings without emotions or desires, and they gave up on everything except the sutras and the Heavenly Dao. Visiting the sangha required an extremely sturdy Dao Heart, but that danger was actually a source of attraction to some elite cultivators. Those who managed to hold onto their path might eventually walk away with a tempered heart and a path even sturdier than before.

That fact enticed countless geniuses who had been stuck at some threshold. For them, the gamble of losing your identity or breaking their limitations was well worth taking. The temples were probably happy with the arrangement as well,

having a steady stream of great talents being sucked into their path.

While all these types of visitors could be considered followers of the Sangha, they ultimately weren't a true part of it. Like Catheya had said, there were Nine Mountains, Eight Temples, Four Oceans, and One Paradise. These chapters were predominant powers unto themselves, and could all be considered A-grade factions.

The way they went about things was a bit different, but most of the Mountains and Temples had vast arrays of subordinate monasteries and factions as well, who could be considered outer disciples of the Sangha. To be ordained was to officially join either one of the main branches or their subordinate factions.

Trillions of people in the world would jump at the opportunity to officially join the Buddhist Sangha, even if it was for one of the lower temples. However, that path was not for Zac, no matter what the names of his Dao Branches were.

“Amitabha, as long as Almsgiver lives true to his heart, he will always be welcomed with open arms,” Three Virtues nodded. “Come, let us close this chapter of Karma.”

Zac's eyes lit up and he immediately got back on his feet, relieved to see that the monk wasn't planning on reneging on his offer or throwing a wrench into Zac's plans. However, the relief lasted less than a minute, because he quickly saw something amiss in front of him.

The rear structure where Three Virtues kept his Shard of Creation had completely transformed since the last time Zac was here, where it had gained a golden sheen. More importantly, its insides were absolutely flooded with Creation Energy, along with countless runes that contained vast amounts of Buddhist spirituality.

The scripts were slowly floating around in the middle of the soup of creation, and Zac felt his mind shudder just from glancing at the ever-churning mixture.

“Unfortunately, this poor monk has failed to properly contain the energy released by the shard over the past few years,” Three Virtues sighed. “I’m ashamed, I’m ashamed. This one could only contain it to a small area, lest it harms any innocent bystander.”

Zac looked at the golden temple, his body shuddering from the intense fluctuations of creation. The shards in his mind were already acting out, their reaction far stronger compared to the response of the splinters when he picked up his third copy at Kaldor’s castle. Eventually, his gaze shifted back toward the still-smiling monk, Zac’s eyes filled with unspoken reproach.

“Amitabha, heart is all,” the monk said. “With an immovable heart, nothing can bar your path.”

“I’m guessing the glass casing sealing shard is in the middle of the temple? And I just have to go inside and get it out?” Zac sighed, getting an affirmative nod after each question.

Zac only grunted in response as he stepped forward, not even bothering to complain. He couldn’t compete with this level of thick-skinned behavior. Three Virtues was obviously more than capable of dealing with some run-off Creation, even more so than Kaldor judging by the tens of thousands of monastic runes that danced through the stockpiled energy like they had become one.

Not a drop of energy was able to leave the temple, proving how powerful the containment was. There was no telling how the monk had set this thing up, but his intentions were clear; Three Virtues wanted him to undergo whatever trial he had prepared.

Zac had two options as he saw it. The first was to take the plunge, betting on the fact that Three Virtues wasn’t actually out to hurt him. Secondly, he could turn around and leave, giving up on the opportunity. The former option was more dangerous, but the latter came with strings attached. Was the Splinter of Oblivion alone enough to break out? How would he get his hands on a shard before the imbalance caused problems? And would Three Virtues even let him back down at this stage?

Ultimately, Zac chose the former. He didn't trust Three Virtues as far as he could throw him, but Zac did trust in his ability to deal with Creation Energy. After all, while the accumulated energy was a bit shocking to look at from the outside, he had been forced to endure much worse after swallowing the second shard.

If there indeed were some trap hidden inside the runes, Zac still believed that he would be able to singe his body clear when forming the Glimpse of Chaos. Of course, there was the implicit comfort when dealing with someone like three Virtues; the monk was probably an Autarch when he split himself into all those incarnations, and even the incarnations were approaching the threshold of Autarchy by the looks of it.

Would someone like this really bother concocting some convoluted scheme? Doubtful. They'd either just kill him outright or tell him what to do. The monk obviously had hidden motives for his actions, but Zac guessed they were rather targeted at something else than at Zac himself.

So Zac stepped inside, readying himself for an onslaught of Creation, but he was relieved to find that the Creation Energy wasn't nearly as wild as what he'd endured back in the Twilight Ocean. However, the moment he let down his guard, he was beset by a wave of agony as his arms turned into huge golden wings.

He urgently tried to turn his arms back to normal, but he was shocked to find that it didn't work at all. He didn't understand what was going on. Zac had encountered situations like these dozens of times by now, but the more he tried to revert the changes, the more Creation Energy his body absorbed.

'Amitabha, heart is all,' the voice of Three Virtues once more echoed in his mind.

The monk's voice was like a bell dispersing some of Zac's anxiety, and he somewhat understood what was going on. So Zac quelled the burgeoning panic and stilled his heart. Soon enough, he closed his eyes and shut out everything except the steady beats from his chest. His panic abated, and when he

opened his eyes again he found that his arms had returned to normal.

He didn't know how, but the monk had changed the nature of the Creation Energy, making it respond to one's mental state instead of one's desires. Having gotten the Creation Energy under control, Zac took another step into the temple, but the moment his foot hit the ground, his surroundings changed.

Zac suddenly found himself in a vast temple instead of the small rear building of Three Virtues' temple. He wasn't alone either - there were hundreds of monks sitting in prayer, each one chanting scriptures.

Illusion Array?

That was Zac's first instinct, but his usual tricks for breaking out didn't work at all. It really felt like he was here, with not a single weakness in the facade. Another wave of panic threatened to rise to the surface, but Zac stopped in his tracks and stilled his heart again. There was no telling if his real body would suffer the consequences if he spiraled out of control in this illusion.

There had to be a trick to this - a purpose behind the Monk's arrangements.

Time passed as he properly took in the surroundings. The smell of incense and old parchment, the sounds of crackling scrolls, and hundreds of voices joining into an indistinct chant. The symmetry of the all and the stable tranquility of the ambiance. Eventually, Zac could feel it.

The monks were monks, but they also weren't. Each one was chanting a scripture of their own, and the truths hidden within their words were them as much as their corporeal form. Not one chant was the same either. They all had one thing in common - they were false. They didn't contain the truth, at least not the one he needed.

Having come to a conclusion, Zac immediately set out, walking among the straight lines of unmoving monks. Eventually, his gaze stopped at a specific one. The acolyte looked the same as the others - his appearance almost a carbon

copy of the monks he had met back on Earth. His sutra didn't sound different than the others either, but it was different somehow.

"Heart..." Zac muttered as he looked down on the monk who was seemingly oblivious to his presence.

He hesitated for a few moments before he walked over. "Hey, can you hear me?"

There was no response, with the monk continuing his chant unabated. Not knowing what to do, Zac simply chose to pat the man's shoulder, prompting his surroundings to change. He was back in the temple drowned in creation, and he saw that some parts of his body had transformed while he was trapped.

Zac immediately closed his eyes to steady his heart again, and his body was back to normal in no time. There was one difference compared to before though - there was now a line of Buddhist scripture floating around his body.

Was it the sutra he heard in the vision? Or one of the runes that danced around him? In either case, Zac didn't want it. It felt like an uninvited guest, and he was afraid that it'd sneak into his body if he wasn't careful, harming his path. So he pushed his consciousness against the swirling characters, and they actually floated away.

However, the next moment he found himself back in the temple, and he had to once more find the monk who resonated with his heart. Soon enough, an identical swirl danced around Zac's left hand, allowing him to take another step into the temple. It looked like he was stuck with this thing, at least until he left this trial.

Zac's vision shifted, and he found himself in the courtyard of a monastery this time. In front of him was a vast wall with thousands of plaques, each one inscribed with a short prayer. Zac didn't immediately spot any plaque that resonated with him, but he tried just taking one at random to see if it would allow him to get back to the temple.

It worked, but the second set of characters he had summoned clashed with the first, resulting in both of them flying away.

Zac swore with annoyance, a feeling that was further intensified when he realized he had somehow been transported back to the entrance of the temple. He glanced back, and he saw Three Virtues still standing outside with the same smile on his face.

Zac grunted with exasperation, but he quickly regretted it when he found himself breathing burst of flames. He calmed his mind and resumed his journey, effortlessly gathering the first snippet. He was soon transported back to the prayer wall again, and this time, he took some time until he finally found the one that resonated with his heart. Zac still couldn't pinpoint exactly why this specific tablet was the right one - he just knew it was.

As expected, the second line perfectly fused with the first this time around, allowing Zac to take another step into the temple. This time, he was transported to a mountain library filled with ancient scrolls, each one of them containing densely written sutras. It took Zac over ten minutes before he finally found the one that was his, and two lines dancing around him turned into three.

Like this, Zac continued forward, each step taking him one step closer to his goal; the shimmering crystal locked inside a glass cage on the other side of the building. Each step placed him in a new world, where he had to find truth among falsehoods. With each success, the yarn of swirling scripture around his body grew denser, more complete, but Zac still couldn't quite figure out what kind of sutra it was.

Each success did not only add to the scripture he was building, but it also increased the difficulty of his next vision. Passing the fifteenth vision, which required him to pick the correct pebble in a stone garden, took him half a day. There were four different stones that all felt fitting, and he was locked from indecision for hours until picking the right one.

Half a month later, Zac was actually sent back to the start just as he was about to reach the glass case. For the first time in days, he lost control, going through a tumultuous procession of transformations before he managed to calm his mind. He hurriedly made his way back, passing one trial after another.

Even now that he had almost made it to the end, Zac couldn't quite understand what he was doing. But for some reason, he was becoming a lot better at discerning what was true, and what was false. The scroll that took him ten minutes to find the first time around was discovered after just three minutes after having reached the depths of the temple.

More importantly, the Creation Energy barely had any effect on him by this point. Small ripples still spread across his skin when he let his mind stray, but there weren't any big mutations like in the beginning. Was this good, or was it bad? Zac couldn't tell at all, even as he entered a deeper state of tranquility.

Was it something sinister like hypnosis, of the emptying of one's sensations? Or was this some sort of cultivation of the heart? Should he fight it, or should he embrace it? It could be the key to dealing with the whispers of the remnants, but he was hesitant to let this new sensation take hold - especially after what he knew about the dangers of the Sangha.

But he also realized that he found himself incapable of reaching the deeper parts of the temple without entering this state.

Eventually, he chose to go with the flow, but while holding onto his core principles in the depths of his soul. He also started rotating his outer cores based on the concepts in the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**, which seemed to bring clarity to the emptiness. Eventually, Zac found himself back in the same village that had thrown him back to the starting point before.

This time, he was staring at a little boy who was helping grind ink for his father who was selling talismans in a small stall. It had taken Zac five days of walking through the streets, of observing the fates of the mortals in this medieval village. But he was sure he was right this time. There was truth in every movement of the child.

In the grating sound as the dark-purple ink was being ground, in his steadfast expression, in how the stacks of talismans next to him were arranged. Zac walked over, but before he had a

chance to speak up, the little boy looked up and peered right into his eyes.

He was no longer a small boy in a small mountain village, even if his shape hadn't changed at all. He had become a primordial deva, filled with boundless power. There was infinite potential brewing inside him. Potential for creation. Potential for destruction. It held the truths of the six paths, the truth of eternity.

“Golden. Boundless,” the boy said and the world crumbled.

Chapter 830: Sublimation

As the world collapsed and the small mountain village was reduced to nothingness, Zac found himself standing atop a boundless ocean beneath a golden sky. There was not a wave or a ripple, yet Zac couldn't see what hid below.

However, he could feel it.

There was harmony. Tranquility. A sense of belonging. As long as he sunk into it, he would be part of it. Part of the unity, where all was one. The moment that thought struck him, he felt a tremendous attraction from beneath as distant chants carried across the waters. All was one, and heart was all.

Zac's path had crystallized, and his heart had grown extremely sturdy after going through innumerable life-and-death struggles. But even he felt it difficult to resist the pull - to just close his eyes and meld with the oneness. It would not only grant strength, it would also free him from all suffering. It was almost like the ocean wanted to swallow him.

That sudden spark of cognizance startled something wide awake in the core of his being, and the tranquility of the boundless ocean no longer had the means to affect him. His heart beat and his soul roared while his cells opened wide with hunger. The sky rumbled, and swirling nothingness consumed the gold as it covered the heavens.

It didn't contain the wrath of the old heavens or the indifference of the new. It contained hunger. An infinite hunger that surpassed the bounds of reality itself. If entering the ocean would mean him becoming one with all, the void entailed being one with nothing.

Ripples finally appeared on the ocean, and founts were starting to rise toward the sky, the water clearly trying to resist the pull but failing. Zac looked back and forth, his role seeming like

that of an observer, even if he knew that he was the source of the churning void above.

Or rather, his bloodline was.

The world once more crumbled, and Zac looked around to see what he'd encounter next. He was surprised to find himself standing outside the temple with a glass case in his hands, staring into the surprised visage of Three Virtues as a golden scroll floated in the air. Zac was still in a transcendent state, and he closed his eyes to get a better feel of the situation.

After a few minutes, he could confirm that this was all real. It was not yet another layer of illusions to tempt his heart or trick his mind. He still couldn't tell why he knew what he knew. He only knew that it was true. However, he did feel that this sense of certainty was slowly leaving his body.

It was not because he was beset by a new round of illusion, but rather because the state of enlightenment he had encountered was temporary – some sort of impartment left inside the temple by the monk. Perhaps, the monk wanted to show him a path, or even give him a taste of the benefits of cultivating the heart.

Even then, Zac felt no desire as he felt the last vestiges of clarity leave his body. That kind of path would probably allow him to deal with the lingering consciousness in the remnants, where an immovable heart would be able to resist all temptations and see through all falsehoods. But he had already staked out his path, and he was confident in his own abilities.

As for the final vision, Zac believed it was the true trial for the shard – the natural pull of the Buddhist Sangha. Succeed, and his foundations would further stabilize. Fail, and he would probably have become further linked to the Dharma, perhaps to the point he lost part of his self. However, his bloodline had thrown a wrench in the trial, being offended by the ocean's influence. It had even gone so far as to forcibly swallow some of the boundless ocean, prompting the trial to end early.

It looked like not even Buddha could subdue the Void Emperor.

“Why?” Zac eventually asked as he opened his eyes, feeling his mental state having returned to normal.

“Amitabha, Almsgiver,” Three Virtues smiled. “The Dharma is the greatest of all joys, the highest of all delights. Cessation of desire conquers all suffering, and it is the road to enlightenment.”

“Cessation,” Zac muttered before shaking his head with a smile, “is not for me. I am much too greedy. How long have I been inside?”

“No more than an hour,” Three Virtues said, and Zac felt he could discern some helplessness in the monk’s eyes for some reason.

Zac wasn’t too surprised that so little time had passed during the trial. Most likely, the illusions themselves hadn’t lasted more than a few seconds each. Most of the time had come from the steps in-between and gathering his wits outside the temple.

“What is this?” Zac asked as he looked at the golden scroll hovering in front of him.

He recognized its aura quite clearly; the scripture he had collected had not disappeared after he left. Instead, it had formed an actual sutra by the looks of it, though Zac wasn’t able to tell whether the scroll was real or illusory. It was only partly unfurled, allowing Zac to see dozens of lines of text along with the image of a golden cultivator covered in an unfamiliar set of pathways.

The aura emanating from the scroll was somewhat familiar, giving off an undeniable hint of life and creation, but there was much more to it. Part of it reminded him of his own class, of the lofty temple of Arcadia that appeared when he activated **[Rapturous Divide]**. Unsurprisingly, another part reminded him of the power of Buddha.

“It is truly astounding, Almsgiver. We must be fated, after all,” Three Virtues said with obviously feigned surprise. “This poor monk desperately recited the sutras in front of this pagoda for years, hoping to contain the energies within. To think that

Almsgiver managed to rearrange the fractured teachings of Buddha into the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**.”

Zac stared at the monk for a moment, rendered speechless by the level of shamelessness. The monk was clearly trying to force a karmic link between himself and the sangha, both by showcasing the value of Heart Cultivation and now throwing in a technique. However, Zac had to admit he was intrigued, both by the energy signature and by the name.

“Varja sublimation?” Zac asked. “A Body Tempering Manual?”

Body tempering was quite widely used among some chapters of the Buddhist Sangha, and there were monks as durable as Izh’Rak Reavers. In fact, Zac had actually seen a corner of their most wide-spread Body Tempering Technique back on Earth already; the **[Diamond Sutra]**. However, he had never heard of this **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** before.

“Just so,” Three Virtues nodded. “A foundational method to temper one’s flesh into one possessing boundless life. It quashes imperfections and elevates the divine, setting the stage for greater things in the future. It has unsurpassed compatibility and can be transitioned into myriad advanced techniques. It was created in the earliest era, and numerous great Dharma Guardians of the Sangha started with this method. A blessing, a blessing of the Heavens!”

“Why are you doing this?” Zac asked, obviously not buying the spiel.

“By illuminating the path for others, you also illuminate your own,” Three Virtues smiled.

“I cannot accept this,” Zac eventually said. “As I said, my path is not the search of nirvana. This thing might end up hurting my cultivation.”

“Almsgiver need not worry. Not only have the warrior monks and arhats used this method with great success. Numerous friends of the Sangha have exchanged great merit for this technique, before transitioning it into other body tempering techniques without any relation to us.”

Zac had to admit he was tempted after hearing the monk's exhortations, but he still had a lot of reservations.

"Almsgiver, there is a difference between a living being and a being of Life," the monk added, giving Zac a start. The monk's smiling visage turned serious for a moment as he looked deep into Zac's eyes. "Almsgiver, are you truly in balance?"

Zac looked at the small monk, once more beset by the uncomfortable feeling of having all his secrets exposed. He had even activated his protective array around his Duplicity Core before coming here, but it was probably much too late to change anything. Of course, Zac understood what the monk was digging at.

His trinity of Life, Death, and Conflict was not in a true state of balance, depending on how you looked at it. His Daos were in perfect tune with his path thanks to his hard work in the Orom World, but could the same be said about his races? His Death-side was represented by a Draugr, a race born from the Abyssal Lake, one of the purest representations of Death in the multiverse. It cultivated Miasma since birth, essentially meaning it had a natal Death-attuned Physique.

Meanwhile, his other side was human. That was it. A bog-standard race of the multiverse, where his unique point was that he would get whatever benefits his other side got. However, it was not, like Three Virtues called it, a being of life. His human side didn't use Divine Energy to match the Miasma of his Draugr side, but simple unattuned energy.

Technically, this [**Boundless Vajra Sublimation**] could be the key to addressing this imbalance, but it brought up many questions. First and foremost – did he really need it? Would a life-attuned constitution on his human side even benefit him? Did every part of his cultivation need to be mirrored in this way?

Ultimately, the trinity was based on Dao, not body.

Secondly, could he even cultivate this thing? What effect would it have on his Bloodline? Would it result in a clash like

the one in his vision, where the void assaulted the boundless nature of Buddhism?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly; did he even dare cultivate this thing even if he wanted to? Growing up he had been taught not to look a gifted horse in the mouth, but the opposite was true out in the Multiverse. Three Virtues wouldn't just give away a precious body tempering manual without purpose, no matter what flowery words he spouted.

At best, it would only force him to continue cultivating some Buddhist techniques, binding him tighter to the Buddhist Sangha. But what if there were more sinister concepts hidden within the [**Boundless Vajra Sublimation**]? What if he ended up an empty vessel the moment he completed his physique? After all, brainwashing was the forte of these monks.

"I need to consider this," Zac slowly said. "Can I store this thing somehow?"

"If you determine your course with force or speed, you will miss the path to enlightenment," Three Virtues nodded.

"However, this poor monk has to insist Almsgiver learn the contents by heart before leaving. Almsgiver has seized this opportunity through fate and good merits, but we cannot let a complete copy of the sutra be released into the world."

Did the monk expect Zac to give in to temptation and train this technique after learning all the benefits it could provide? Zac had to admit - it was a pretty good plan. Even then, Zac went ahead and grabbed the hovering scroll, much to the monk's delight. The next moment, he felt a massive surge of information cramming into his brain, like hundreds of books' worth of text.

There were postures you could train in, scriptures that sped up the process, tens of thousands of treasures that could aid in the formation of a 'Golden Vajra Physique'. There were even chapters on Heart Cultivation and alternative methods to train such as tattoos and clones. It was a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, and it was with great reluctance Zac sealed that knowledge in a corner of his mind before he turned to the happily smiling monk.

“Well, it’s time for me to head out,” Zac said. “Thank you for all your help. I’ll remember the benevolence of your eminence.”

“Almsgiver is too kind,” Three Virtues smiled. “But if this one can give one final suggestion?”

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Almsgiver has no need to rush. Providence is accumulating, but it has yet not reached a crescendo. The time when fate is most malleable will arrive very soon,” Three Virtues smiled.

Zac slowly nodded in thanks before leaving the small temple, the droning sounds of the still-meditating monks traveling with him through the bamboo forest. Only when the decorated bamboo poles gave way to the vibrant steppes outside did he dare relax. He had done it – he had secured the means of escape.

However, Zac was a bit lost at the moment, having expected he needed to absorb the remnants the moment he seized them. Zac had even guessed that was the ultimate goal of Three Virtues – to force the appearance of a Glimpse of Chaos right by his temple. This guess was obviously wrong, but the odd encounter in the temple didn’t make things any clearer.

It was too annoying dealing with Karmic experts.

The only thing Zac could be certain of was that every action of Three Virtues had a purpose, from the short chat in front of the statue of Sāgara to displaying the benefits of Heart Cultivation. But it could be anything from advancing the monk’s plans in the Orom World to something thousands of years in the future.

The only clue Zac had was the monk’s final recommendation. He clearly wanted Zac to wait a bit before absorbing the remnants. It was the one thing where he was completely candid. But even that simple suggestion felt like a mindbender after the mentally exhausting visit. Was it a real suggestion, or was it reverse psychology?

Should he just go ahead and absorb those things immediately, or would he sabotage his attempt by making his move early?

As Zac made his way toward his small island, he ultimately chose to wait a bit. He was ultimately dealing with an Autarch, and it wasn't like he was trying to slip out unnoticed. Forming a Glimpse of Chaos was a real spectacle, and he risked drawing both the attention and ire of the Orom before he could teleport away. If fate really was congregating for some reason, such as the monks preparing some scheme, it would provide a good cover.

Two months. Zac decided he'd give it two months, leaving roughly four weeks to spare before the remnants had to be returned. If nothing had happened by that point, he'd leave and not look back.

Zac didn't bother going back to Samsara's Edge. He was all out of Purchase Points already, having bought the **[Hollow Core]** in addition to the Heavenrender Vine Seed, something that was only possible through his multiple breakthroughs. Even then, he had been forced to take a pretty big loss.

Even after forming two Boundless Dao Branches, forcibly elevating his levels, Soul, and then improving his Integration Stage, he had been lacking some points. Only by selling off a mountain of resources for 8,000 Purchase Points was he able to afford the second supreme treasure. It pained him, but trading a bunch of expensive, but common on the outside, materials for a unique treasure was definitely worth it.

Soon enough, Zac was back in his hidden cultivation chamber, and he took out the first of the two glass boxes. Kaldor's protective runes were gone, and tendrils of darkness left painful cracks on Zac's arms as he held the case in his hands. As expected, it did release a continuous amount of Oblivion Energy, though this one felt raw and wild compared to what was released from the prison in his mind.

Zac didn't try to break open the casing, but rather put it at the heart of a formation at the right side of the cave, letting the Oblivion Energy fuse with the Miasma that was dragged from the death-attuned Zone. Next, he did the same thing with the shard, turning his cultivation cave into something unique, something containing hints of both Creation and Oblivion.

The two remnants stirred upon being placed in such close proximity, but the seals on the casings were something else, preventing the remnants from awakening altogether.

This was the best Zac solution could think of, where he could make use of the marvelous cultivation cave and the remnants until his deadline. The energy that was released through the runic funnel in his mind was pure, but the amount was also quite limited – far less compared to what was released from this newly acquired set.

Like this, weeks passed, where Zac silently practiced the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**, mentally preparing himself for the ordeal of forming a Glimpse of Chaos. There were no disturbances, but as the days passed, he actually felt a strange sense of something building. It wasn't his soul getting stronger, though using the remnants was definitely effective in empowering the attunement of the outer cores.

It was just like Three Virtues said - it was like a storm was gathering, a hurricane of fate. The feeling was similar to his Danger Sense, making him believe it was related to his latest boost in Luck. It was a welcome new ability, and it was about time he gained something new from the attribute. After all, his effective Luck had almost doubled since entering the Twilight Ocean.

Then one day, the storm arrived.

The arrays in the cave sputtered and failed as the orbs illuminating the chamber dimmed, prompting Zac's eyes to shoot open with glee. There was still a week until his planned escape, a month before the deadline for the remnants. But just as the monk had indicated, an opportunity had presented itself prematurely.

The Orom World had entered a dark state.

Whether it was a sign from above or a direct consequence of Three Virtues' schemes, Zac didn't know, but it ultimately didn't matter. The Orom might have encountered some outside threat forcing it to reroute all its power from the Orom World to itself rather than quelling an internal insurgency. In either case, it meant the big bastard had run into trouble.

The thought alone prompted a smile to appear on Zac's face, the schadenfreude far outweighing the disappointment of his Soul Strengthening session ending prematurely. The more pressing issues the Orom had to deal with, the more he would be able to accomplish in the dark.

As expected, Zac felt a wave of weakness spread through his body as his prison brand flickered, and just moving became a chore. He could still circulate a trickle of energy, but it was barely enough to maintain basic bodily functions. Thankfully, activating **[Void Zone]** and covering himself in Void Energy counteracted the effect enough for him to move freely. That was enough to accomplish his tasks.

He turned into a blur as he swept through the cave like a hurricane, stowing away the few items he hadn't already secured already, most notably his cultivation arrays, **[Mind's Eye Agate]**, and the twinned Realm Spirits. Finally, he grabbed the two glass casings, ignoring their anger at being so close together, before rushing to the surface of the island.

Only to be met by a sky set on fire.

Chapter 831: Gathering Storm

Far different from the descriptions of the Orom World going dark, it had instead been turned into a conflagration of flames that elicited a primal fear in Zac's heart. They reminded Zac of the apocalyptic force he saw when forming his Seeds of Hardness and Sanctuary. When that ancient protector had sacrificed himself to protect his world against the end of a universe.

It felt like that kind of judgment had descended on the Orom World right now. There were no heavens, there was no Law of Space – the Dao itself was being incinerated by the inferno above.

Thankfully, something was holding it back, either the Orom or the originator of the attack himself, preventing the brunt of the terrifying energy from descending. Zac wasn't sure even Kaldor would survive if those flames lashed out on the cultivators below. Just looking at the roiling tongues of fire left scorch marks on his body, forcing him to avert his gaze. Enduring them would extinguish him in an instant, and no **[Void Zone]** or other preparations would do him any good.

At first, he had figured it was the monks making their move, but he immediately shot down that idea. This could not possibly be the work of a Monarch, meaning it should come from the outside. Perhaps a true Boddhisatva had tracked down the Orom to punish it with cleansing fire, but Zac didn't sense the echoes of the Buddhist Sangha in the flames. They were pure and unrelenting, like the primal fires that could both birth and extinguish an era.

Even if the flames didn't originate from within the Orom World, there were still people ready to take advantage of the chaos. Zac didn't even get the chance to take in the scene

before eruptions of unbridled power appeared in multiple directions. To his left, coruscating waves of divinity rippled in every direction, and Zac looked on with mute incomprehension as a towering golden diety rose into the air.

It appeared in the direction of the bamboo forest, and if there had been any doubt before about Three Virtues' involvement, it was gone now. After all, it was the avatar of Sāgara who had been conjured, the statue he had seen just a few months ago. The avatar had to be tens of thousands of meters tall, yet it somehow seemed even greater.

Space and scale couldn't properly do it justice - it was like the deity was the size of the cosmos itself. Zac only dared shoot occasional glances in its direction, as he actually felt his heart being moved from witnessing its splendor. If Zac wasn't careful, he'd become a warrior of the Dharma with all of his emotions expunged.

The enormous avatar slowly put its hands together in a mudra, and Zac vaguely heard the chanting of sutras even from this great distance. Millions and millions of lotus flowers were born in the sky, almost shrouding the fiery inferno above. However, the delicate white flowers didn't seem to have any intention of contending with the flames above.

Instead, they were nurtured by it, growing just like normal flowers under the sun. Together, they danced in the lack of wind, the dancing petals setting up some sort of array that filled Zac with dread. The scene was mesmerizing, and Zac suddenly felt his vision shifting for an instant, finding himself standing inside a vast temple where each lotus flower had been transformed into a golden statue.

The next moment the vision was gone, but Zac wondered if the monks had somehow connected this space with an actual temple somewhere in the multiverse. Just what were they planning?

The monks weren't the only ones who had made their move. A pitch-black tower had appeared to Zac's right, and looking at it felt like looking at the true face of death. Even the roiling flames above were somewhat dampened by the darkness the

structure radiated, though Zac could tell that the tower didn't dare grow too tall to avoid drawing the ire from what was above.

Zac could even sense powerful fluctuations further in the distance in almost every direction of the Orom World, but it was too far away for him to see what was going on. One thing was for sure though; the seal of the Prison Brand was obviously not as absolute as the Orom had thought, for these kinds of things to appear out of nowhere.

Things had clearly been brewing beneath the surface since long before Zac arrived.

The chaotic scene had thrown Zac off-balance, but he quickly gathered his wits. So what if things were chaotic? Wasn't that exactly what this moment required. It almost felt like the whole world had gone mad as a result of his desire, the desire to drown the Orom World with Chaos.

Now, it was time to leave his own mark on the tapestry.

There was a good chance that the Orom would enact an even harsher lockdown now that things were spiraling out of control, so Zac didn't dare to waste any more time. He took out one of his semi-finished teleportation arrays and urgently spent the next few minutes fixing the final engravings while fearfully glancing at the sky in case something changed.

Thankfully, things were still gearing up, giving Zac enough breathing room to finalize his preparations. He only left one final inscription unfinished on the array before taking it out of harm's way, placing it on the shores on the other side of the lake. He knew all-too-well what came next, and he felt some lingering fear as his gaze turned to the two glass boxes lying on the ground. He couldn't have his escape pod destroyed by a wave of Oblivion.

Cracks had already started to appear on the two glass canisters, and it looked like the trapped remnants were waking up. With the Orom draining the environment of its ambient energy, the two glass cages had lost their main source of power. With Zac also maintaining **[Void Zone]** they were barely holding on against the burst of energy coming from within.

With the boxes in such close proximity, the two slumbering remnants had finally become aware of each other. They were furiously trying to break free to attack their nemesis, and parts of the arrays were whittled down with every clash. Still, Zac estimated it would take a few more minutes before the seals finally succumbed, and Zac didn't have that kind of time.

After being hidden inside his Spatial Ring for years, [**Verun's Bite**] finally made its appearance. A furious howl filled with anger and liberation was released as Zac completely unleashed the stored energy in his [**Spiritual Void**], and the whole lake churned in response as Zac swung his companion for the first time in too long.

Eight streams of Mental energy entwined into a sturdy rope before entering the axe. Half of them were infused with the unstoppable potential for destruction of the Branch of the War Axe, and the other half with the undeniable force of the Branch of the Kalpataru. The golden markings across the Spirit Tool lit up with golden luster as the weapon was flooded with the Dao, but the sheen was almost drowned in a sanguine brilliance released from the runes on the handle.

The axe fell, and the world grew quiet for a moment before an earthshattering shockwave leveled all the trees on the whole island. However, Zac's eyes became wide as saucers when his mighty swing empowered by his Bloodline and his Dao didn't so much as leave a mark on the glass casing holding the Splinter of Oblivion.

Zac had visualized a scene of the cage shattering like brittle ice in the face of his fury, but reality wasn't quite so satisfying. However, Zac wasn't discouraged. He knew there was a good chance these glass casings were made from some extraordinary materials, but he thankfully had a backup plan.

He was about to stow away his axe, but a wave of reluctance filled his heart while a similar sentiment was conveyed from the Tool Spirit. So instead, he put it on a loop on his belt while forming two new streams in his mind – once more a combination of Life and Conflict. But this time, the streams didn't enter his hands or his weapon, but rather the two unique pathways on his shoulders.

Activating the modified skill fractals for **[Cyclic Strike]** had an immediate effect as the purified Creation Energy spread throughout his body eagerly started to gather. His body was chock-full of energy from both remnants by this point, in preparation for this very day. A glistening rune appeared between his hands in just moments, and Zac could see endless possibilities inside its depths.

This was the second time Zac had unleashed a Mark of Creation since forming the Branch of the Kalpataru, and he was still mesmerized by the Dao Branch's effect on the skill. Before, the mark was a completely foreign object created by circumstance, but he could feel a tendril of his own presence inside it now.

He wouldn't go so far as to say he had control, but it definitely wouldn't blow up by surprise any longer. More importantly, he felt he would soon be able to mold the mark even further, turning it into something greater than a ball of unfettered Creation. For now, he believed that a normal mid-powered Mark should do the trick.

Zac pushed the ball of Creation against the glass, and he smiled when he saw the sealed remnant inside go insane upon feeling its antithesis encroaching on its domain. The glass might be extremely sturdy, but the energy generated by the remnants was inexhaustible, and the array was already worn down. Besides, it relied on the trapped remnant being in a sleeping state, which wasn't the case any longer.

At the same time, Creation was seeping into the esoteric runes on the glass casing's surface, slowly twisting them with its mad desire for change. The formation resisted, but it simply had no energy to draw from at the moment, and it was fast losing ground. First, it was just the occasional fractal pattern that broke apart or shifted, but that was enough to cause a cascading ripple of change across the array.

Soon enough, a crack echoed out, and Zac was almost blasted off the island by a tremendous burst of Oblivion. Sharp shards of glass had embedded themselves in his body and a good chunk of the island was simply erased, but Zac ignored the pain as he kept breaking apart the cage. He was almost there.

For the umpteenth time in the past weeks, he tried to initiate a negotiation with the System, but even if he heard a slight pressure that might indicate the System's presence, he got no response. Zac didn't know if the System was calling his bluff, knowing Zac couldn't just skip the formation of another glimpse.

A more likely scenario was that the events in the Twilight Chasm were unique, where a creature that shouldn't exist had been nurtured in an E-grade trial. The huge Snake had broken the balance of the Trial, and the System intervening could be seen as an attempt to restore order. Normally, it wouldn't have become an issue since no trial-taker should have been able to survive in that depth.

Alvod had probably paid the appropriate price to make the System look the other way, maintaining the law of balance - until Zac arrived. Thus, an anomaly had occurred, forcing the System's hand. Outside of grade-restricted trials, there were no such rules of conduct – this place might as well be the Wild West.

Even then, Zac didn't give up. He might be able to seize something at the last moment.

The temperature in the Orom World was steadily rising, but that was probably the least of the prisoner's worries at the moment. The Buddhist chants kept growing louder, and Zac felt his mind under assault as he saw glimpses of that mysterious temple over and over. Meanwhile, golden scripts had started to dance around the innumerable lotus flowers in the sky in a display of both might and beauty.

Zac doubted the tremendous waves of faith targeted him in specific, though he couldn't be sure about the prisoners in general. Was a mass conversion about to take place in the Orom World? To bring half a million top geniuses into the fold of the Dharma? Even for a peak faction like Buddhist Sangha, it had to be considered a decent win.

Thankfully, it turned out that **[Void Zone]** was quite effective at muting the attraction of the Buddhist Chants, though it was only a temporary repose. He was simply too weak to stave off

the mental influence permanently, but it wasn't like he planned on staying behind for too long anyway. The Creation from outside and the Oblivion from inside had finally caused enough damage, and the powerful array on the glass cage couldn't maintain its functions any longer.

Leaking cracks turned into a gaping hole as the high-grade glass broke apart, and Zac's hand pushed through the shards to grab the splinter. At this moment the remnants in his mind fully woke up, finally having confirmed another of their brethren waited outside. This time the roles were reversed, with the splinters trying to break out while the shards hampered their efforts.

The sutras were completely silenced at that moment, and the world had grown oppressively silent as Zac held the Splinter of Oblivion in his hands. In reality, it was the remnant that had crushed all sound, annihilated fate, leaving only nothingness in Zac's surroundings. The sense of nihilism seemed to stretch toward eternity as the world slowed down, and then there was only darkness as the third Splinter of Oblivion entered Zac's body.

Iz marveled at the beauty of her surroundings from her vantage inside her uncle's eye. She had grown up playing on his body, but the opportunities for her to see the true essence of his flames were rare.

All Daos had their strong points and weaknesses, but her grandpa had said it all converged toward the peak. When you completely grasped a Dao, it was whatever you needed it to be. Your truth would become equal to the will of the Heavens, and Valderak was right at that threshold. His flames surpassed both time and space, becoming a supreme law as he unleashed his might.

The Void itself was incinerated as flames stretched across the horizon, and even the nearby stars dimmed in obeisance. In the middle of it all, a big fish furiously thrashed, but it was locked in place by the Sixteen Pillars of Anguish. The mutated

Voidcatcher was unleashing tremendous ripples of space, but it was ultimately just a second-step Primordial Beast.

No matter if it was raw strength, heritage, or Dao, her uncle was far superior. The big fish might as well have been a Hegemon – to the Primordial Golem known across the multiverse as the Empyrean Mountain, it made no difference. Even then, it struggled, desperately trying to break open the dimensional layer

“Serves you right for eluding us for over a year,” Iz muttered before she turned to her uncle standing next to her. “You won’t burn the people inside, right?”

“My flames are not targeted at the captives, so it should be fine,” Valderak’s avatar answered with a shrug. “If people still die, they simply aren’t fated. But don’t worry, your little friend will be fine.”

Iz nodded before once more turning toward the fifty-meter-tall glass pane that was her uncle’s eye.

“What friend? He’s...” Iz muttered, but her voice died down as her brows furrowed.

Just what was he? Even now, she couldn’t put her finger on it. There was just something about him, something novel. But what? He wasn’t too powerful, though Iz guessed he should be one of the strongest people at his grade in this desolate corner of space. Even among the ancient factions, he could be considered a rare talent in terms of raw strength.

But she had met many people like that already during the outings her uncle and grandpa had tricked her to participate in, and she was always filled with annoyance when dealing with those people. Yet she found herself using the Divine Mirror almost every day for a few hours, even when Mr. Bug was just sitting in silent meditation.

At first, it was just curiosity about the one who dared to curse at her, but it had somehow become a hobby she enjoyed far more than any of the arrays her guardians had prepared. Even that Neural Network of the Technocrats or the Heavenly Realm of the ancient Imperials became boring over time, but

watching that guy bathe in fateblighted refuse or getting beat up by low-grade beasts never grew stale.

In a way, he was the antithesis of herself. He was a blank slate, with no backing and no idea what he was doing. But he was also Free.

“Have you decided what you will do when you meet him?” her uncle asked curiously.

“Well...” Iz hesitated. “First, I’ll beat him up a bit for calling me crazy. After that, we’ll see. Perhaps I’ll have him take me to some trial? I want to experience his ability to cause all this chaos firsthand. I don’t want to go back too quickly now that grandpa finally allowed me to leave. Who knows when I’ll get to travel again after this?”

“Master worries for you,” Valderak sighed. “He fears the fate of your parents will repeat itself.”

Iz wordlessly nodded, a pang of sorrow filling her heart as she remembered the sealed form of her mother. Even with her grandpa’s efforts, it would be tens of thousands of years before Eruz Tayn could wake up. The battle had been too intense back then, and not even her grandmother had been able to directly retrieve her soul from the past.

Of course, a few thousand years was nothing compared to the two million years her mother had been sealed already, most of which Iz had spent gestating inside Eruz’s womb. Her grandfather had waited so long and worked so hard to piece together her soul back by scouring billions of temporal fractures in the past. Even then, there was no coming back for her father.

Their enemies had made sure of that.

“Grandma killed all those people millions of years ago already. She even incinerated a whole universe, fraying the Heavens themselves. Who’d dare target me? And what would be the point? Just to anger my elders again?” Iz muttered.

“Never underestimate the lengths people will go to in pursuit of the peak. The old enemies are gone, but new ones will crop

up as long as the Tayns control a corner of the sky,” Valderak urged.

“Alright, alright,” Iz agreed, having heard the same warning so many times before.

It looked like Valderak was about to continue, but he suddenly stopped and turned toward the Voidcatcher. “Oh?”

“What’s wrong?” Iz asked with worry as she tried to discern what had changed.

“Fate is gathering, and I sense fluctuations at the threshold of Autarchy inside the Orom’s Inner world,” the golem said with some interest. “The sangha and the unliving are making a move. More importantly, there was a weak burst of Oblivion just now.”

“What? He’s starting? We made it in time!” Iz exclaimed, her mouth curving upward.

Just like inside that life-death trial of his, things were coming to a boiling point. This time, she wouldn’t miss it.

“Wait, do you think we’re part of the storm of fate he accumulated?” Iz asked curiously.

“It’s hard to say where the line between coincidence and fate lies,” Valderak said. “But he is undoubtedly the fulcrum.”

Iz nodded before her brows furrowed with displeasure. “This stupid fish keeps buckling and I can’t see anything. Can you send me in?”

“Absolutely not!” Valderak said without hesitation. “The energies within are getting too chaotic. Don’t worry, we have some time. I’ll toast this bastard a bit more and make it spit out the boy.”

Iz reluctantly nodded, and a tragic wail echoed through the cosmos.

Chapter 832: Mounting Threat

The lightning-scorched tower had finally crumbled, unable to withstand time and the madness of its master. In the rubble, she sat, her heart burning with hatred and her hands covered in ash. Hatred against what, she no longer remembered. The ashes of whom, she could no longer recall. She had given it all up for power.

Yet now, only emptiness remained.

Zac barely had time to digest the miserable scene before he was whisked away to another, witnessing outbursts of madness and despair. It was just like his previous encounters, with one worrying difference. This time, it all felt so real. Before, the scenes had been visceral, almost to the point they could leave a mark on his mind. But now, it was so much more.

His soul was far superior compared to when he last absorbed a remnant, yet he found himself struggling to hold on to his sanity as the Splinter of Oblivion unleashed its manic obsession. The parasitic consciousness hidden within the crystal had come out in full force, and doubts kept invading Zac's path.

He had seen his absorbing these things as a necessary evil until now, a risky gamble to more quickly gain power. But what if he had unknowingly already fallen to the ploy of the remnants, blindly grasping for more when his true self should have long realized something was wrong? The moment he had learned of the third set, he had not even hesitated when risking his life to seize them – even when he already held the means of escape through the Perennial Vastness Token.

Why?

He had always known he was a pawn in someone's game, be it the System's or the remnants themselves. Yet he had never questioned their end game, and just figured he'd tide it out and walk away a stronger man. Why? Was that how a resource was used? No, it was squeezed of all its benefits and discarded before the master went looking for the next useful idiot to exploit.

Doubts, hesitation, and regrets kept rising to the surface, even rehashing his failures during the earliest months of the integration. Knowing that it was the result of absorbing the remnant didn't help either. If anything it added another layer of torture – Zac knew he was being tricked into this state, yet he couldn't break it, which only further fed into the insecurities he'd gained from being peppered by the visions.

Trying to logically dispel his doubts didn't help either – he wasn't dealing with something that could be reasoned with. Reiterating the fact that there was nothing he could have done for his father, that he returned as quickly as possible to Greenworth, didn't allay the guilt at all. The misery threatened to consume him like he was drowning.

Soon enough, Zac barely registered the visions even if they kept going, stuck in his own private hell instead. If only he could quench all these thoughts. Extinguish everything.

The thought cut through his distress like a knife, but warning bells immediately went off. The unwelcome thought had properly woken him up, and he realized just how dangerous a situation he had been in just now. He was standing right at the precipice - if he gave in to that feeling, Oblivion, or rather that ancient consciousness, would consume him.

Zac knew the situation was bad, but he still didn't try to remember and regain that tranquil state he had enjoyed during Three Virtues' trial, where nothing could affect him. Neither did he break open his self-imposed seal on the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** to recite the heart-calming sutras it contained.

That was not his path.

Instead, he focused on his goals rather than his failures, holding onto the vision of Thea being lifted into the air by his mother, of Kenzie being whisked away. The focus wasn't that he couldn't protect them - how could he against someone like Leandra Kayar-Elu? Instead, he focused on how his sister needed to be rescued and Thea needed to be avenged.

He focused on Earth being like a small raft about to be flung out into a raging ocean as the Zecia Sector was about to be embroiled in war. Of Ogras and Billy being stuck in some pocket of space, their fate unknown after having risked their lives to save his sister and Earth. There were so many people he owed, so many things he needed to accomplish. He refused to get pushed down by his mistakes or bogged down by hesitation. He would keep moving forward, and some fractured spirit from a bygone era would never be able to change that fact.

Neither would he drink the poisonous waters of the Dharma to quench his thirst – he had faith that he would be able to accomplish his goals without their aid. Eventually, Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes. He was back in his own body, and time was starting to start up again.

That was way too close.

Zac knew he had been overconfident. He had believed that after surviving the Calamity A'Zu warned of and then performing a perfect reincarnation, absorbing the third set of remnants would proceed without a snag. But if one could survive the remnants just by cultivating one's soul, then why did everyone in the vision succumb sooner or later?

It had become painfully clear that a powerful soul wasn't enough to deal with the madness hidden within the Splinter of Oblivion. Its energy couldn't just pollute his soul - its attack on Zac's heart was just as formidable, and harder to both notice and defend against.

The distant Buddhist chants resumed as Zac exited his special state, and the air was veritably vibrating with Dharmic power. However, it was drowned out by the railing madness from within. Zac had passed the first hurdle, but the splinter was

already on a rampage. It had found his mind, and his Soul Aperture was being drowned in Oblivion.

The Divine Cores in his mind had been put on a defensive, barely holding on with the protection of his Branch of the Kalpataru. Meanwhile, his Branch of the Pale Seal was infiltrating the waves of annihilation, channeling some of the rampaging energy into his Miasmatic Cores. Zac knew this was an opportunity for cultivation, but the surroundings were crazy enough as it were.

His powerful soul might have failed in protecting his heart, but its benefits soon became apparent as layer after layer sealed the rampaging splinter within, barely letting a trickle of energy escape. It furiously slammed against the cage Zac had erected, but even if it managed to break the innermost layers, there were still almost a dozen more layers it had to deal with to escape.

The war inside his remnant prison had entered a fever pitch as well, but Zac wasn't worried at all. The sealing fractals were in pristine condition thanks to the System fixing them the last time around, and it wasn't like it would need to withstand the clashes for long.

Seeing that the situation was as stable as it could be when dealing with ancient madness in a world literally set on fire, Zac breathed out in relief as his gaze turned toward the second glass box. However, he suddenly froze with realization. Something else was different with this round - he didn't get to meet Be'Zi during his spiritual journey.

Had she blocked him from coming over again, tired of getting her cultivation interrupted every few years? Or was it the System that felt there was no need to align their fate any longer since the quest for five sets of remnants had already been agreed upon?

A wave of searing pain suddenly derailed his thoughts, and Zac was aghast at the thought of embers from the ferocious flames in the sky falling down on him. Thankfully, Zac immediately realized that it wasn't the flames that had attacked him, even if the situation was a bit thorny.

The brand on his arm had awakened and it was unleashing some sort of sinister energies into his body. It was like a spiritual acid instilled with a purpose, and Zac felt both his cells and pathways being destroyed at a rapid pace. Did it realize he was about to break out? Or had it sensed that Zac had freed one of the remnants?

Zac was annoyed at the interruption, but he wasn't too worried. His **[Void Zone]** was already weakening the brand, and his **[Void Heart]** had begun its feast on the invading energy. It was a shame his natural poison resistance wasn't quite as good in his human form, but that didn't mean he was out of options.

He opened a small hole in the barriers trapping the Splinter of Oblivion in his soul aperture, and a storm of Oblivion Energy was immediately spat out by the enraged remnant. Another layer of small cracks spread across the empty space of his soul, and Zac felt his mind turn a bit numb once more.

This was the first time he had a free splinter raging in his body, with the previous two sets being instantly thrown behind bars. He could tell that using the remnant's energy would work just fine. In fact, the splinter would love it. After all, using its wild energies had a price different from the shard – where the shard damaged his body and lifeforce, the splinter damaged his soul and his mind.

In a way, it was even scarier to use than Creation Energy, even if its price wasn't as readily apparent. You could recover some of the longevity you'd lost, but recovering broken pieces of your mind – your memories, emotions, and convictions - that was a far trickier subject. He wasn't sure there would even be any warning signs. Eventually, he'd just stare around in confusion like all those people in the visions.

Therefore, Zac urgently dragged the energy out of his soul and into his body, wanting to waste as little time as possible. It pushed forward like a tidal wave, swallowing the invading energies and leaving not even ashes in its wake. It was risky circulating pure Oblivion through his body, but as long as he controlled the energy, he could choose what it would target.

The wave of oblivion destroyed the prison brand's assault in less than a second before reaching the brand itself. Another wave of agony erupted on his arm, but he was shocked to see that the brand didn't break from the collision. This was why he had chosen to absorb Oblivion first – to get rid of his seal before taking on the Shard of Creation as well.

Instead, Zac found the rune protected by a thin barrier containing the same laws of space that made up the borders in this realm. Zac could sense it was slowly weakening, but he also felt his control of the wave of Oblivion slowly slipping through his fingers. If nothing was done, he'd end up disintegrating his hand.

At first, he planned on simply discarding the energy, letting it swallow a chunk of the island. However, things were heating up in the Orom World, both literally and metaphorically. The lotus flowers kept perpetuating, covering a larger and larger piece of the sky as they started to descend toward the ground.

Meanwhile, the chants had grown more invasive, and even if he was mostly insulated through the remnant destroying all energy that entered his mind, the visions of all those statues kept appearing at shorter and shorter intervals. It felt like an ominous countdown of sorts, and Zac wanted to be gone before it reached the end.

The situation on Kaldor's side was changing as well, though Zac didn't feel any threat from their direction. Most of the tower that appeared out of nowhere had collapsed, leaving a metal framework behind. It almost looked like one of those support structures for spaceships, but there was no vessel next to it. Instead, a huge femur radiating unreal levels of force was fastened inside.

It was massive, to the point that Zac could see its shape even from this great distance. It had to be at least a kilometer tall, which was confusing since it emitted the same type of aura as Kaldor did. Not that the bone belonged to the reaver himself, but perhaps to some ancestor of his. After all, it seemed as though it might have belonged to an Autarch, making Zac wonder just how it had appeared in the Orom World without the Orom noticing.

The set-up reminded Zac of a gargantuan wall-breaker aimed at the ground itself, and Zac shuddered as he saw the huge femur starting to rise as runes lit up across its surface. Any delay felt risky, so Zac instead chose to go ahead with his Plan B. He flashed a few meters, appearing in front of the still-intact glass cage, and unleashed the torrent of annihilation right at it.

A wave of darkness flooded out from his hands, utterly drenching the area in impenetrable gloom. The scene only lasted for less than a second before the energy disappeared with a crackling sound, prompting a small tempest as air rushed to fill the vacuum the attack created. Left behind was only a cracked glass cage inside a ten-meter crater, and powerful tendrils of pure Creation radiated out from the fractures.

The cage was on the verge of breaking, so Zac jumped down into the hole and seized the remnant the moment the seal shattered ignoring the bleeding gashes as he gripped the Shard of Creation. A primordial clap of thunder joined the chaotic scene above, but Zac didn't have time to see whether the System had arrived – the visions had claimed him once more.

Once more, Zac became an unwilling compatriot to predecessors who had become mixed up with the Shards of Creation. Over and over, he witnessed scenes of futile resistance followed by inevitable tragedy. Most of those who got themselves mixed up with the Spark of Creation had done so not out of greed or megalomania, but out of a desire to help.

To protect their companions, to tame inhospitable surroundings – to make the impossible possible, and seize an opportunity for survival. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the best outcomes in the visions were those who managed to kill themselves before they destroyed around them as their desires drove them insane.

Yet Zac was different – he could feel it. He had witnessed how he was chosen by fate, walking off with rich rewards in situations where anyone else would have died. Where these people failed, he would prosper. He only needed to grasp the power within and subvert the Heavens themselves. He just-

Zac shuddered and forcibly quelled the mad impulses and rampant hubris that had spread to the core of his very being. He had been prepared for his heart to be attacked after the previous encounter, yet he almost found himself failing right out the gates. Once more, he held onto his path, his goals – but more importantly, he held onto himself.

It was true that he had his unique strengths, but being a genius didn't matter in the multiverse. Only power mattered. So what if he was stronger than most E-grade cultivators? Any late Hegemon like Traprandar or Olgoroth could squash him like a bug on the outside when he didn't have the prison brand to protect him. Even Early Hegemons would be hard for him to take down if they possessed powerful-enough War Regalia.

So what was there to be proud of?

Everyone who had reached the later stages of cultivation had overcome innumerable challenges, succeeding where trillions failed. He couldn't get complacent, thinking that some D-grade remnant would allow him to bring about earthshattering changes. It was better to rely on himself, to progress one step at a time until he held true power.

Soon enough, he was back in his own body, and his mind screamed of danger as he felt the Shard of Creation making a beeline for the trapped splinter. Above, thick lightning clouds were gathering, pushing away the flames and lotus petals alike. However, Zac's eyes thinned when he saw the strings of Buddhist scripture rising toward the churning clouds.

Were Three Virtues trying to siphon power from the System itself?

Zac had no time to bother about the plans of the Sangha, and it was not like the clouds above were tribulation clouds that could benefit him. He had played with the idea of using these lightning bolts to temper himself as he had with the Tribulation Lightning, but remembering Uona's end, he wouldn't dare try something like that.

At least not before he became a Hegemon.

The two remnants inside his body were going all out, and it felt like their energy reserves easily surpassed the two he had picked up inside the Twilight Ocean. Was it because they had been sealed all this time, accumulating energy while the previous set had been free to unleash waves of destruction on their surroundings?

Zac didn't mind – any extra energy was a welcome addition. Zac had even more to spare, and a snap echoed out in his mind as he forced open the gates to his remnant prison. Four shimmering lights emerged from the hidden pocket dimension with wild abandon, joining their two brethren in a struggle for supremacy.

His soul cried as his eleven cores were drowned in waves of turbulent powers. There was no way for his mental energy to restrain all six remnants, and he didn't know what would happen first; his aperture bursting or his soul cores being destroyed. He could only open his mental seal to his aperture, and soon enough the war spread to every corner of his body.

Zac saw how his skin shifted from opalescent splendor to oppressive gloom - all while new cracks kept appearing across his body.

The prison brand was still trying to kill him, but it was barely able to defend itself as it was engulfed in the battle between Creation and Oblivion, let alone striking out against Zac. Still, this couldn't go on. However, Zac was already dragging torrential amounts of Mental energy, Dao, and energy from the remnants into the two pathway highways on his shoulders, as he had two times before.

Zac sensed a wave of fear emanating from the veteran remnants, but it was much too late. The process had started, and it wouldn't end before a Glimpse of Chaos had been born.

Chapter 833: Little Chaos

Zac felt the first wisp of Chaos form when the two streams of energy from his shoulders finally couldn't resist the mounting pressure, but it was still not stable. Or stable in the sense that chaos was stable, anyway. For better or worse, the remnants had still plenty of energy to spare. They had already ceased fighting in his aperture, now more interested in fleeing than vanquishing their foe.

Unfortunately for them, they had become part of something greater as their energy returned to its origin.

As bad as the remnants had it, Zac wasn't much better off. It almost sounded like someone was ripping dried parchments as painful cracks kept opening across his body, starting from his forehead and covering his whole torso. The more energy that was dragged into his shoulders, the more damage he had to withstand.

The painful process was pretty much running on autopilot by now, with the small wisp of chaos growing in both size and depths of its truths. Soon enough, it would be seized by the System above, and he could already feel its consciousness descend on the Orom World, filled with greed and jubilation.

He could no longer move, yet this was his window of opportunity.

As the ball of unadulterated chaos formed in his chest, he roused a huge amount of mental energy and sent it over. Since the System didn't want to bargain this time around, he would simply take what he needed. The moment he saw his chance, Zac pounced, dragging out a small wisp of Chaos from the accumulating ball.

It put up a ferocious struggle, and it felt like the small mote resisted being controlled on a fundamental level. It was Chaos – uncontrollable and unpredictable by its very nature. Having

dragged the small wisp out from the growing pattern, Zac knew it wouldn't last long. Soon enough, it would slip through his fingers.

So he urgently pushed it through his pathways, ignoring the damage it was wrecking on his body as it moved toward the Prison Brand on his arm. This was a test of sorts, and Zac looked on with anticipation as the two clashed. Or rather didn't clash.

The spatial barrier that protected the Prison Brand from the Oblivion Energy before might as well not have been there as the mote of Chaos passed through without issue. Zac couldn't comprehend the concept of its movement at all – it was like it both formed a bridge and annihilated the space between at the same time, something that made no sense.

A moment later, the pattern on his wrist started to twist and transform. Some parts simply disappeared into nothingness, whereas others mutated in unpredictable ways. It realized it was being tampered with, but between the lack of ambient energy and **[Void Zone]**, it was having problems rousing a proper response. Thanks to that, it simply fell apart before it could do anything.

Zac breathed out in relief, previously afraid the brand would explode just before getting destroyed. He had been prepared to lose his arm if need be and regrow it later, but it looked like he wouldn't have to worry about that. As the mark faded, Zac also felt his body erupt with power, his aura rising to an unprecedented degree.

Gone were the chains sealing his strength and sapping him of momentum. He felt unburdened, unhindered, and free. But a golden bolt of lightning slammed into the ground the next moment, reminding him that his task was only partly done. Zac took a steadying breath before once more controlling the wisp of Chaos in his arm, once more channeling it through his body.

Between his limiters being removed and the little mote shielding him from the pressure above, he could somewhat move again, just like back in the City of Ancients. However,

every second he stayed in this state was more damage wrought on his body, not to mention the growing ball of chaos he could only delay for so long.

Thankfully, his escape was both planned and prepared, so Zac infused some energy into a ring on his hand, taking out an odd contraption from within. It was a tightly bound ball of crystals, held together by rope and talismans. It shone with four different colors; aquamarine and gold from Divine Crystals and Miasma Crystals, along with pale purple and mottled black for Temporal and Spatial Crystals.

A bomb that would render even the mad Ishiate Tinkerers weak in the knees.

Dozens of attuned Cosmic Crystals rigged to blow was enough to even fill a Hegemon with trepidation, but there was no way it would be able to actually harm the Orom. Thankfully, that wasn't Zac's goal anyway, though he still wasn't sure his idea would work.

He was running out of time. The remnants in his mind were almost completely drained, and the anomaly in his chest had begun stabilizing. The urgency in the sky had grown even stronger as well, and lightning was incinerating lotus leaves by the thousands. If he didn't take the Glimpse of Chaos out soon, Zac was afraid that the system would simply blast his chest open and take it out.

Before that, he needed to use it to enable his escape.

He had considered various ways to use the uncontrollable energy of Chaos to leave the Orom World, and he had essentially come up with two solutions. The first was to stall the formation of the glimpse as long as possible while finishing one of the teleportation arrays. With the Glimpse of Chaos, he would then distort the spatial laws around him and teleport away, perhaps even infusing the array itself with the power of chaos.

If it worked, he would be gone, and Zac doubted the Orom would dare follow after the System had made an appearance.

The second idea was to cause a weakness in the fabric of space, blasting open a tear to another dimension with the power of Chaos. After having escaped, he would then quickly teleport away before the Orom caught up.

The moment he saw the fiery sky, he had chosen to go with the second option. Teleporting from within the Orom was risky, but he had figured that the System's presence in the Orom World would keep the space fish in check. However, something was clearly going on outside the Orom as well, and Zac didn't dare enter a Teleportation array in these kinds of conditions.

It would be a truly ignoble death, being ripped into shreds the moment he activated the teleporter because space all around the Orom had become too unstable to support teleportation. Instead, Zac would make his way to a neighboring dimension before using the array, reducing the risk that the spatial turbulence of two Autarchs fighting would take him out.

Zac tried to stem the drain of energy from the remnants as best as he could while he activated the talisman array on the crystal bomb. At the same time, he forcibly snatched a second wisp of chaos from the growing ball in his chest while infusing the bomb with the old one he was fast losing control of.

Turbulent waves of energy started to radiate from the shimmering ball of crystals. Zac ran for his life, using the chaos-influenced [**Earthstrider**] to phase hundreds of meters away. Even then, he was flung into the air while it felt like reality itself broke. Life and Death clashed with Time and Space while the wisp of Chaos fanned the flames, forming a singularity of incomprehensible might.

What little remained of the poor island was ripped to shreds from the tumultuous waves of raw energies, and the very laws of physics were disintegrating. Zac slammed into the waters just before a blade of temporal turbulence whipped past his previous position, and he almost lost control of the budding Glimpse of Chaos in his body.

Another bolt of lightning confirmed Zac had very little time remaining, so he roused himself and breached the surface of

the waters before returning to the spot the island once stood. There was no spatial tear at the heart of the explosion, as much as a wound in space itself that radiated unpredictable waves of power.

Right now it was just turbulence rather than a gate to another dimension, but that was Zac's aim from the start. He arduously pushed against the heavenly pressure to reach the epicenter of the blast, the single wisp of Chaos finding it harder and harder to withstand the mounting pressure from above. By this point, the System's desire had almost turned into a corporeal form, and Zac knew its patience had reached a limit.

At that very moment, Zac felt a second pressure sweep over the area, and Zac froze in place as he stilled his aura before igniting the mote of Chaos, forming a small shimmering sphere around himself. He didn't know why he knew how to do something like that. It was like he inherently understood a lot of things with chaos when in touch with it. Yet the moment the Glimpse left, his comprehension would quickly fade.

It was just in time. The presence was just too powerful, and he didn't have any other means to hide than relying on chaos. That little bangle on his arm would definitely fail in hiding him from the gaze of an Autarch. Thankfully, the scan passed him by after stopping a moment on the spatial wound, seemingly not having found what it looked for.

The energy left in the remnants was all but a trickle by this point, while his mind was drained and his body was covered in lacerations. However, Zac had formed his third Glimpse of Chaos, this one surpassing the previous two in intensity. Zac pushed the turbulent chaos out from his chest, though he kept two final wisps behind by force. That scan had scared him straight, and he needed them to move in either case.

The benefits of his empowered soul were quickly showing themselves. Last time, Zac had been forced to bargain with the System for just two wisps, yet this time he was able to rip four from the glimpse before he reached his limits. Who knew, the next time he might be able to seize eight, and further temper both his soul and his body.

With two wisps of Chaos using his body as a playground, the pressure was greatly alleviated. Even then, Zac found himself faced with another threat – the endless mysteries hidden within the Glimpse itself. It was right there, no more than a meter from his face, its ever-shifting form hinting at something amazing – something that didn't even exist in the current cultivation world.

It followed no rules, not even its own. Yet it held supreme power to both create and destroy, to subvert fate and make the impossible possible. Not only that, it contained clues to elevating both his Daos and techniques to unfathomable levels, where he would walk unopposed among everyone in his grade. With this-

A bolt of lightning cut his reverie short, and Zac's heart threatened to jump out of his mouth as a golden pillar slammed down on his position. The bolt tried to wrest control of the blob hovering in front of him, yet Chaos resisted, unwilling to be contained. Unable to, even, based on its most fundamental nature.

Thankfully, the collision didn't actually harm Zac, and there almost seemed to be a tacit understanding between the two supreme forces. Eventually, the System reluctantly gave up, but a second strike was already brewing above. Taking advantage of the lull, Zac enacted his plan, if you could call it that.

He stretched out his hands and willed the Glimpse of Chaos into the spatial wound.

There was no explosion as Zac had expected. Instead, there was just a ripple before an enormous grey swirl appeared, stretching over fifty meters into the air. It somehow managed to steal terrifying amounts of energy from the neighboring realms, and both the enormous femur and the golden Boddhisatva dimmed as a result.

Even torrential streams of Life and Death were dragged over from the depths of the Orom World, once more drowning the parched surroundings in ambient energy. Seeing as that energy was previously siphoned by the Orom itself, it had probably

been robbed as well, and an angry earthquake indicated his guess was correct.

The swirl kept growing, but a second blast from above blinded Zac as the System repeated its attempt to swallow the Glimpse. This attempt too was met with failure, and Zac inwardly celebrated having stored all his energy for years to give the chaos pattern an extra kick. Perhaps that would be the difference between success and failure with this mad scheme.

Not only did the golden bolt of lightning fail to absorb the Glimpse of Chaos, but some of its energy was even swallowed by the growing swirl. Along with everything else it had siphoned off, the chaotic anomaly had finally formed. His exit looked completely different from anything he had seen before, not resembling a spatial tear or a Teleportation Array in the slightest.

It was impossible to guess its shape as it was constantly shifting. But more importantly, the construct didn't seem to exist in the same three dimensions as Zac did. Just shifting his gaze made the whole thing twist on itself, like he was looking at it from a completely different angle.

It was odd and resisting comprehension, but Zac knew it would work. Being temporarily in tune with Chaos, he had a slight understanding of what this thing would do. It could best be described as a Chaos Gate – existing everywhere and nowhere at once. Spatial turbulence couldn't restrict it since it didn't actually move in the same sense as teleportation did.

Just as Zac was about to step inside, a shimmering pillar of gold slammed into the Glimpse of Chaos once more, threatening to rip the gate apart just as it formed. Zac's world turned white for an instant, and Zac rapidly blinked his eyes to regain his vision. Once more, the heavens had been rebuffed, but Zac felt the Glimpse would only resist one or two more blasts.

Before anything else, Zac threw a small bead into the shifting vortex of chaos. He had no idea where he'd end up on the other side, so he felt it was best to accomplish Heda's mission this way. Zac also wanted to see how seed fared upon entering

the Chaos gate, but his eyes widened when the seed rapidly grew, forming a familiar figure.

'Thank you, little Chaos. Your display will live on in my dreams forever. I hope we meet again,' Heda's voice echoed out in his mind. *'Please take care of Vivi.'*

With that, Heda was gone, whisked away god knows where. At least Zac believed that was the case. At the same time, Zac could sense fate congregating at his location. Were people rushing over because of the massive anomaly? Was someone coming to stop him? Or was it that powerful presence that was returning, most likely the Orom itself?

With an instantaneous burst, Zac activated [**Earthstrider**], and the chains of [**Coffinbox**] picked up the teleporter from where he left it on the shores before returning in an instant. He once more stood in front of the anomaly, and he couldn't help but feel hesitant as he looked at the growing ball of chaos. Even if his instincts told him that the thing was decently safe and that Heda seemed fine, what did he know?

Was this yet another case of the remnants filling him with hubris?

However, what choice did he have? Stay here and be converted, cooked, or recaptured? Absolutely not. Zac knew that risks would be involved, and he stepped forward before something changed, taking his chances that his Luck and his temporary understanding of Chaos would pull him through.

Just as Zac entered the odd anomaly while pushing the Glimpse of Chaos in front of him, he felt the ballooning blob of chaos dislodge from its position, slowly drifting toward Kaldor's tower. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he ultimately tried to impose his will, having it instead turn toward the life-attuned side. Rather than impacting Kaldor and Pavina, the shifty monk could deal with the fallout.

He knew he had been within a hair's breadth from falling to their scheme, where he almost turned to the heart-cleansing Sutras to overcome the Splinter of Oblivion's surprisingly difficult tribulation. Zac had a strong suspicion that the moment those sutras took root in his heart, he would forever

have a connection to the Sangha and be unable to completely extricate himself from their control.

So he pushed deeper into the Chaos Gate with his Teleportation Array fastened to his back, narrowly dodging a blast of golden lightning from above. He wasn't trying to steal the ball of chaos from the System, he simply needed it to pave the way. As long as he carried this thing, he should be untrackable for everyone except the System itself.

However, a scream of danger made him turn around in fright. The bolt of lightning he narrowly avoided just now hadn't actually dissipated – it had followed him into the chaos. Zac felt the laws around him furiously resisting, but it ultimately couldn't withstand the barrage of the System itself. It might be Chaos, but it was just a small corner of that peak Dao.

Zac prayed it would resist a bit longer, and he sacrificed one of the wisps to stabilize his surroundings. The Orom World had already disappeared in the rear window, replaced by an endless grey. The further the Chaos Gate could take him, the better. However, it was like the gate had a consciousness of its own, and it had another idea – expel the reason for the lightning hounding it.

Something pushed him, and the gray expanse shattered as his surroundings were replaced by a golden radiance.

“What!” Zac blurted, looking around with alarm.

Out of all places in the multiverse - why had he been sent to a place like this?!

Chapter 834: Ripples in his Wake

The air rippled, finally exposing the two warriors who had been standing at the shores of the small lake, just as the young man entered the twisting sphere of Chaos.

“Amitabha, Amitabha. How marvelous,” Three Virtues smiled, though there was clearly a sense of helplessness on his face as he saw the anomaly drift toward his domain.

“That’s what you get for being too greedy. Virtue through indulgence – the hubris required to attempt something like that,” Kaldor laughed. “Couldn’t help yourself seeing all that fate accumulating, could you?”

“There is no limit to the number of paths Buddha’s boundless heart can contain,” the monk answered before turning to the sphere, putting his two hands together in prayer.

A thousand-meter-tall deva appeared behind his back as waves of unfettered divinity streamed toward the anomaly. Thousands of lotus flowers bloomed in an instant, yet they were ripped apart one by one by Chaos. However, the monk was undeterred, chanting one mantra after another until a golden vase formed around the anomaly.

The surroundings grew lush in an instant as dharmic prosperity radiated through the world. More importantly, the greyish sphere finally stopped in place, its momentum exhausted. Three Virtues nodded in satisfaction and dispelled his skill, but Kaldor could see how the flowers in the sky had waned, and the chants had lost some of their mystery.

Kaldor inwardly snorted, knowing that the monk had been forced to sacrifice quite a bit of his stockpiled merit to prevent chaos from ruining his plans. Ultimately, any bad news for the

Buddhist Sangha was good news to them, even if the two had become allies by necessity inside the Orom World.

However, Kaldor was more satisfied with what the brat's final act signified. He had taken a stance, and it was clearly in favor of the Undead Empire.

"I've never heard of anything like this thing," Kaldor eventually muttered. "One moment it feels like I can see through it, the next it is utterly foreign. Do you know how it works?"

"All is connected," the monk smiled. "A gate of Chaos is a doorway without limits. Alas, the details elude this poor monk as well."

"Whatever, don't tell me," Kaldor snorted. "Doesn't matter."

"The window has not yet closed, old friend," Three Virtues smiled as he looked over at the reaver. "One step for liberation. One thought for transformation."

"Trying to tempt me?" Kaldor said with a raised brow. "I am not done with this place. What about you? You've been here a lot longer than me. Even someone cultivating the heart must grow weary of this place by now."

"Amitabha, all is one. As long as my heart remains pure, my path is satisfied. Alas, the fate between this poor monk and Lord Orom is approaching its conclusion," the monk said.

"So, will you tell me now why you were so adamant about altering events?" Kaldor asked, unable to contain his curiosity. "Those on the outside are definitely here for the kid, and fate would have reached a tipping point as long as the brat stayed trapped. You had me waste five million Purchase Points to hasten his escape by a few minutes?"

"The young Almsgiver having the remnants is important, though I cannot delve deeper when that place is involved," Three Virtues explained.

Kaldor frowned thoughtfully. He had already guessed the mysterious Edgewalker had some connections to that place since this scheming monk approached him, but he still

couldn't figure out how. And why involve him and the Undead Empire? Was the Sangha that confident?

"Even if you wanted him to have the Remnants, you could have just bought them yourself and gifted them instead of arranging this scheme of yours. In the end, your plans only seemed to have driven a promising Edgewalker toward the Undead Empire while driving a wedge between him and the Buddhist Sangha," Kaldor said with a shake of his head.

"Children will often not realize the purpose of the teachings of their elders. Yet one day, it will crystallize into something that will bear fruit and positive Karma," the monk smiled.

"I guess we'll see," Kaldor said. "You're playing a dangerous game involving the empire in your schemes. Grasp all, lose all."

"Can it not be a parting gift from this poor monk?" the monk laughed as he looked up at the reaver's expressionless face. "Lighting a lamp-"

"I know, I know," Kaldor groaned. "No need for your diatribes. You wanted a karmic debt, right? Well, I guess I'll take the gamble the brat's that important."

"His fate is beyond what I can estimate. It leaves ripples in his wake. One day, those ripples will turn into a storm. Some will drown while others will be raised to the Heavens," Three Virtues smiled. "This is as far as I can go."

"Well, he certainly smelled like trouble. This big bastard is already suffering from his appearance," Kaldor laughed. "Well, that's the Abyssal Shore's problems now. He is destined to join the empire."

"Destiny is a tricky thing," the monk laughed before he turned away. "This is the second to last time we meet."

The Izh'Rak Reaver temporarily froze in surprise agreement. "On the outside..."

"Such is fate," the monk nodded as he disappeared. "Good luck finding what you're searching for."

“Goodbye, old friend,” Kaldor sighed as his gaze turned to a spot beneath the waters.

A bone spur shot out from his finger, and a huge eruption ripped space and time apart, utterly annihilating any lingering karmic threads or other clues of the one called Zac Piker. A second spur shot out a moment later, entering the swirling anomaly. Hopefully, the beacon would work even with a gate as weird as this.

A moment later he was gone as well, leaving just a broken world and a burning sky.

Unless the whispers of Chaos had lied to him, the ball of Chaos should have been able to take him almost anywhere. So why did he find himself in front of a face so big that he first mistook it for a burning mountain? A face whose flames were all-too-familiar. It was amplified a hundredfold out here in the emptiness of space, but there was no doubt in Zac’s mind.

The flames released by this monstrosity were the very same as the flames in the Orom World.

Zac desperately backed away after confirming he could still control the shuddering Glimpse of Chaos. Holding onto that thing was his only source of safety in this situation. This small change in distance was nothing to a supreme being like this, but it at least gave him a chance to understand what he was dealing with; a gargantuan golem floating in an endless expanse of flames.

Behind its back were five sets of burning wings, each one longer than the golem itself. As they lazily beat, the Dao rippled and space shuddered. Zac’s felt his soul almost combusting upon looking at the patterns the wings drew, unable to contain even a corner of their might. More shocking, the three sets of remnants retreated into their prison on their own accord, fleeing from the terrifying pressure the golem exuded. The prison still lacked a gate, but they made no attempt to escape. They even gathered together for support, seemingly unable to withstand the flames on their own.

Zac had never encountered a being as powerful as this – neither the Orom nor the Havarok Autarch could compare at all. The only ones who might come close were A’Zu and Be’Zi, but Zac honestly doubted those two were a match to this golem even if they teamed up. Was this a peak Autarch? Or was this an actual Supremacy in the flesh? It was too far beyond him, he had no frame of reference

The good news was that the golem didn’t seem to have any intention of killing him. At this kind of proximity, it would have to actively restrain its aura to not blast Zac into nothingness, and Zac doubted even a Glimpse of Chaos could save him from that kind of ending.

However, there was someone in the area that was even more powerful.

Zac arduously turned his head, and he wasn’t surprised to see Orom thrashing in the distance. The Primordial Beast dwarfed the golem in size, yet it felt like a flea in front of its Dao. It had already lost a good chunk of its innumerable tentacles, and grotesque scorch marks covered its body. It was releasing awe-inspiring bursts of Spatial energy, but it was futile. Sixteen pillars of ultimate fire just incinerated the Orom’s attacks and attempts to form spatial tears the moment they appeared, before carrying on with scorching the beast like it was just a dish to be prepared.

The Orom’s predicament was a source of no small amount of joy. Zac had been trapped for over 4 years in this bastard. It wasn’t much for most people in the Multiverse, but it was over a tenth of his whole life until now. And he was one of the lucky ones, where most simply got swallowed and chewed up.

But the Orom’s plight was ultimately a small comfort in the face of the predicament he found himself in. His plan would have worked pretty much no matter where he appeared from the Chaos Gate, so why did he have to end up here? Even if the System’s bolt of lightning had gotten him thrown out, shouldn’t he still have been transported more than a few hundred kilometers?

Was it the domain of flames that had impacted his escape? No, if that was the case, why was Heda nowhere to be seen? Did the golem actually target him? Was it here for the chaos as well? There was no time for him to get to the bottom of things as the roiling clouds of thunder had caught up, seemingly appearing out of nowhere right above him.

“Take it, you asshole!” Zac roared as he pushed the Glimpse of Chaos away from him. “But remember, if I don’t get out of here, no more glimpses for you!”

A clap of thunder was all the response he got. The next moment, a pillar of lightning slammed into the pattern, draining the universe of all color. The final sliver of chaos left in his body wasn’t enough to resist the Heavenly pressure any longer, and Zac found himself locked in place as he gazed upon the Terminus.

With the System somehow restraining the chaotic pattern, Zac finally got a true glimpse of the truths within, yet Zac didn’t know whether it was a blessing or a curse being shown this thing. His soul was so much more powerful compared to before, but he still felt utterly insignificant compared to what hid inside the Glimpse of Chaos.

His mind was overwhelmed by a torrent of insights, and trying to turn the flood of concepts into an epiphany was a fool’s errand. As long as he didn’t go insane or break his soul he’d come out ahead. So Zac could only hold onto his sanity until the System finally dragged that cursed thing out of this place.

Even the fantastical golem was unable, or at least unwilling, to contend with the System’s pressure, and it looked like the world was frozen for what felt like an eternity until the bolt of lightning dispersed. A moment later, the System left, though Zac felt a new rune appear in the prison of his mind, once more sealing the drained remnants inside.

Zac released a pent-up sigh of relief, but the sigh turned into a pained grunt as the slightest movement filled him with agony. The glimpse was gone and the remnants were dealt with, but the havoc they had caused in those few short minutes had left him in almost as bad a state as after his fight with Uona.

The only difference this time was that his soul was in a much better state, and he didn't have any wounds on his body except for those left by Creation, Oblivion, and Chaos. Unfortunately, it was those wounds that were the hardest to deal with, though Zac had prepared for this day. In his ring, he had a slightly inferior but portable version of the type of healing array he used in the Orom World – his largest purchase when he made his preparations before making his first attempt at escape with an Annihilation sphere.

Of course, that thing wouldn't help him with his current situation, something Zac was immediately reminded of as he felt a new presence lock onto him the moment the System was gone. It was the golem.

“Uh, don't mind me, senior. I'll just get out of your way,” Zac said as he started pushing himself through space with Cosmic Energy, away from that terrifying golem and the Orom itself. After some hesitation, he added another sentence. “There are people inside that fish's body, prisoners. I hope senior can be gracious and spare them.”

The golem didn't seem to have come to kill indiscriminately. Otherwise, he would already be dead, no matter if you considered the flames in the Orom World or the fires that surrounded the Orom without harming a hair on his body. So that small reminder might save those within, though that was as far as Zac could go.

So he flew away as quickly as he could while maintaining control of the final wisp of chaos left behind. What he could use it for, Zac had no idea, but it was better than being unarmed. He would only be able to hold onto it for a minute or so, but that should be long enough for him to move quite some distance away.

Perhaps far enough to leave the golem's fiery domain unless it extended its breadth.

“Mr. Bug, do you think it's so easy to leave after I've come all this way?” a crystalline voice echoed through the void, dashing Zac's hopes in an instant.

The massive burning mountain was a woman? No, there was no way the hulking golem was the source of the voice. More importantly, he recognized it, though he couldn't quite remember from where. Then it came to him, and the hair on his body stood on end when he realized who had just spoken. It couldn't be, right? What were the odds?

Then in a burst of flames, she was there – Iz Tain.

Zac looked with horror at the incoming figure. Just like him, she was just a small speck in front of the apocalyptic golem. Yet he remembered that orange-golden hair that danced behind her as she approached, those sapphire eyes whose pupils were slightly vertical – full of indifference like she was a goddess looking down at the mortal realm.

Apart from the three odd lines drawing graceful arcs across her cheeks and down her forehead, she looked completely human - and was no doubt the most beautiful woman Zac had seen in his life. It was just not about pristine features, it was like her very being was in tune with the Dao itself, with every feature containing the truths of the Heavens.

However, her mesmerizing appearance wasn't enough to calm the burgeoning panic over the situation. He remembered those terrifying flames of hers, of how he had been utterly humbled the last time they met. The worst thing was that he could feel that nothing had really changed, even after all he had been through.

His mind screamed of danger as she approached, and the aura she radiated made his hair stand on end. He couldn't be certain, but judging by the regal Dao that exuded from her as she sailed through space, she most likely had multiple Middle Stage Dao Branches. Perhaps even Late Stage. Zac had no confidence at all dealing with this kind of peak genius, especially not in his wretched state.

And even if Zac did, dared he actually attack her? She was clearly connected with the monstrous golem, their Daos almost perfectly aligned. They shouldn't be family, but perhaps they came from the same sect. Perhaps the golem was even her master. He had a strong suspicion he would be reduced to ash

the moment he even thought of using his last wisp of chaos to deal with this girl.

Zac's exhausted mind railed at the unfairness of the situation. He had planned for years and risked everything to escape through the Chaos Gate. So why the hell had this crazy woman appeared here?! Was it bad luck? Or worse, had she actually hunted him down? Had she instructed the golem to ruin his escape somehow?

He was too dog-tired already, and this wasn't a variable he was prepared for. He was drawing a blank on what he should do.

"Crazy stalker," Zac muttered as he tried to rouse himself for a fight, but he immediately regretted airing the subconscious sentiment.

"What was that?!" Iz exclaimed as three sets of wings burst out from behind her back.

They were nowhere near as grand as the ones the golem used to cover half the sky, and neither did they contain even a fraction of their concepts. Still, they contained some sort of purity that Zac could only remember seeing once before – the white light he had tried ingesting back in the Twilight Chasm.

Seeing the wings of untainted flames, and remembering her shocking display while still at F-grade, Zac wondered just what kind of heritage this woman had. Seeing how her master or Dao Guardian was such a terrifying being, Zac knew he shouldn't be too surprised by anything she displayed.

His mother should be the equivalent of an Autarch, and she had thrown more wealth in his direction than Earth would be able to generate on its own in centuries. And that was just to sever karma with him.

What if a faction with actual Supremacies wholeheartedly wanted to nurture someone? Zac didn't even dare imagine what kind of treasures this annoying woman had come in contact with. Yet one more reason he regretted blurting those words before, but his mind was simply too exhausted by the glimpse and overwhelmed by the situation to filter himself.

There was only one entity he could turn to for help right now.

“You better help me!” Zac roared at the sky, which prompted Iz Tavn to stop and look at him with confusion. “You left like a bandit, you bastard! What about your Law of Balance?! You got the glimpse, I got screwed over! Is that balance?!”

“What are you-“ Iz is exclaimed. “I’ve come here to show-“

Zac just waved at the girl to stay quiet, forgoing courtesy out of necessity. His soul was utterly drained, yet it was suddenly crammed full by a burst of information. It was the fifth Layer of the [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**], and that one tome contained as much information as the previous four combined.

That Wasn’t the only gift, as Zac felt his wrist heat up. His mind was in chaos, but he still spotted the golden runes dancing around his escape bangle, and he knew what he had to do. Zac was hesitant, but what choices did he have? He moved the final wisp of chaos and pushed it into his bracelet.

Space and Chaos converged in an instant, and the terrifying surroundings were replaced with darkness as he was whisked away by teleportation. A few minutes passed without change, and only then did Zac dare relax. By now he should have moved millions of miles already. The System’s idea had worked.

He was going home.

Chapter 835: Furnaces and Troublemakers

Iz looked at the spot where Mr. Bug once stood, her heart filled with unwillingness as space smoothed out following the burst of chaotic turbulence. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. How did he escape? Was she set up? Her eyes thinned as she turned to her surprised-looking uncle who had appeared next to her.

“Lord Valderak, I thought you locked space?” Iz asked with a calm voice.

“Ai, child, why do you use such distant language?” Valderak sighed. “I swear, this was not something I arranged.”

“Then what happened?” Iz frowned. “How could he simply disappear?”

“That little madman hid some chaos in his body, and he infused it into some rudimentary escape bangle on his arm. I could lock down space, but I know too little about the Dao of Chaos. I feared that if I blocked his escape, he'd be rendered into a mist of blood as he was ripped out from whatever concepts dragged him away,” Valderak explained.

“More importantly, he carried the mark of the Boundless Heavens. It mostly stabilized the spatial tunnel for him. Who knows what the result would be if I tried to meddle,” the golem continued. “You know the situation of most of your grandpa's disciples. A shift in the heavens can be lethal while they are accomplishing their tasks.”

“And you are not just saying this to placate me?” Iz said, not completely convinced her uncle hadn't simply looked the other way, happy to be done with this matter.

“When have I ever lied to you?” Valderak said with an innocent expression.

“All the time,” Iz muttered.

“Well,” Valderak coughed. “Not this time.”

“Alright, where is he now?”

“One second,” Valderak said as he closed his eyes.

However, he quickly opened them again and shook his head. “Chaos is truly a mysterious path. I can sense him, but in multiple directions. All are true, yet none of them are. We will have to wait for a bit to know for sure.”

“So we missed him,” Iz frowned. “By the way, what’s a stalker?”

“It’s... Someone good at tracking down people. Like how you managed to track him down across the multiverse in a few short years. He was most likely impressed, albeit begrudgingly?” the golem offered after some hesitation.

“So it was a backhanded compliment,” Iz nodded. “Well, I’ll still beat him up for good measure when I catch up.”

“As you should,” Valderak nodded before he stopped with a frown. “Wait, catch up? You’re not thinking of-“

“I’m not going back. Definitely not,” Iz said resolutely. “Not before I’ve accomplished my goal.”

“Ai, all this for that troublesome brat?” Valderak sighed. “I cannot stay in these lower realms much longer. I have already tempted the Heavens by dealing with this fish. Someone might take notice if I linger and use it against your grandfather.”

“A failure might affect my Dao Heart. If you’re okay with me having such a failure hanging over my head while forming a core, then we can go home,” Iz calmly said, eliciting a groan from the golem.

“When did you become such a naughty girl?” the golem muttered. “Is it because you’ve watched that brat?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Iz smiled, but a scowl returned to her face when she looked at the still-burning

Voidcatcher. “All because this troublemaker of a fish refused to spit out Mr. Bug. He said there was no such person in his world, that he had scanned to make sure. What a liar!”

“The guts of a lion,” Valderak nodded. “I’ll burn him a bit more.”

The next moment, the heat of the surrounding rose once more, and the dimension itself started fraying as Valderak no longer had to worry about incinerating an E-grade cultivator.

“Please wait, young miss, esteemed master!” a new voice shouted as a humanoid cultivator appeared in front of the gargantuan Voidcatcher, surrounded by gigantic feathers crackling with lightning that were able to block out the flames.

White arcs of lightning continuously flashed around her, and her eyes shone with white radiance, matching the long feathers she had instead of hair. The next moment, an old man appeared next to her, his body covered in scorch marks. Obviously, the latter was the avatar of the Voidcatcher himself, the old man who had lied to them just a minute ago.

Iz looked with surprise, while her uncle only snorted and waved his hand, dragging the two cultivators to their side.

“Finally willing to show your face?” Valderak grunted before he looked at the young girl with some surprise. “A Thunder Roc? What’s a little brat like you doing inside a Voidcatcher?”

“I humbly apologize if my Dao Guardian did something to upset lord and the young miss,” the feathered woman said with a deep bow. “Our elders will make reparations if we have overstepped any bounds by mistake.”

“Your elders?” Valderak asked before he slowly nodded in understanding.

Iz wasn’t quite following, but she understood the gist of it when the Roc spoke up again.

“Lord Orom was assigned to accompany me by the Starbeast Alliance.”

Valderak didn’t react at all to the mention of that powerful organization, but Iz’s brows slightly furrowed. She wasn’t too

versed in politics, with her uncle always telling her it was unimportant. He always said to do what you wanted and if someone disagreed, just test their fate. But even she knew the situation had become a bit thorny.

Grilling the fish would bring some trouble to her grandma, and she had enough on her plate with the System trying to hunt her down.

Besides, the Starbeast Alliance was pretty powerful even if they only had a couple of thousand official members. After all, the minimum requirement to join was to be a Primordial Beast. Not only that, they only took in the big guys whose bodies were so massive they couldn't stay on planets any longer, perennially drifting among the stars. This so-called Lord Orom was probably one of their smallest members.

This Roc was just a child, but by the time she reached adulthood in a few millennia, her wingspan would be enough to cover a planet upon taking her beast form. Iz looked at the young girl curiously and found she was fearfully looking back at her before averting her gaze. As far as Iz could remember, this was the first roc she had ever met, though there were some other beast cultivators at her last gathering.

Seeing the two here was also a bit confusing. Iz wasn't an expert on Starbeasts, but they really shouldn't be this close to the frontier. They needed so much energy just to sustain their oversized bodies, making these desolate regions almost lethal. It might be somewhat able to sustain itself by swallowing enough treasures and cultivators, but it would still be better off if it just stayed in one of the regions controlled by the alliance.

"You must be a promising one to reach atavism at early D-grade, though I still wonder why they assigned a Primordial Beast to guard you," Valderak slowly said before his eyes thinned. "More importantly, the Starbeast Alliance have really become overbearing as of late, with your guardian swallowing humanoids left and right. Its fell karma is almost blinding me."

"Only second-tier warriors and below," the young woman hurriedly said. "The alliance remembers the agreement, and we make sure to stay within the limits. Sometimes a mistake

might occur, but we always offer reparations when that happens.”

“So what are you doing in this region? You should know the rules of non-interference,” Valderak said.

“It’s my fault,” the young Roc said. “I said I wanted to visit the wild regions, dragging Lord Orom with me.”

“Uncle, let’s go,” Iz said, no longer interested in staying since she couldn’t grill the fish and Mr. Bug was already gone.

“One second,” the golem smiled before he turned to the old man. “Give us the **[Stone of Celestial Void]**.”

Iz looked at her uncle with confusion, and the two beasts were startled as well. Even then, space flickered and a small stone appeared in the hand of the old man.

“Is this the thing lord is talking about?” Orom said hesitantly. “It should only be a D-grade material, if lord wants, I have many-”

“This is what I want,” Valderak interrupted as the stone flew into his hand. “Child, let’s go.”

Iz nodded, and the next moment the two disappeared in a puff of flames leaving the two beasts to their own devices.

“Ai,” the old man sighed as he turned around, looking at the state of his body.

“Mister, how bad is it?” Til’Siri asked.

“I am ashamed. I could not resist that master at all,” Orom said, some fear still lingering in his eyes. “But I should be fine in ten thousand years or so.”

“Audacious,” the roc said with a frown. “Such an attack, for what? An E-grade cultivator?”

“That golem... It should be the sixth disciple of Mohzius Tayn,” the old man hesitated.

“The Tayns?” Til’Siri exclaimed with fright. “We’re lucky to be alive, then.”

“I’m sorry for implicating the young miss,” the old man sighed. “It’s all because of my oversight swallowing that troublesome brat.”

“You were just following orders, mister,” Til’Siri said with a shake of her head. “The providence on that batch was unprecedented, and I think he must have been a big part of it. Did we get what we needed before he escaped?”

“That’s...” Orom said hesitantly as he frowned at his body.

“What’s wrong?” the roc asked.

“The monks have banded together to spread their gospel, and the undead are digging toward the corpses. If I allow it to continue, the result will not be as good. The array still needs to charge for another few years.” the old man said. “I am afraid that I cannot completely restrain them in my current state.”

“A throne, the Sangha, and the Undead Empire. All at the same time. It cannot be a coincidence,” Til’Siri muttered, her brows furrowed in thought before her eyes lit up and she turned to the Voidcatcher. “Do you think..?”

The old man clearly understood what she was referring to, and a smile spread across his face. “It is fractured, but it really looks like it might be in this region.”

“Tens of Millions of years of searching, it’s finally coming to an end. The Alliance will reward you richly for your contribution,” Til’Siri said, her eyes veritably radiating. “Just let those people on the inside take what they want. Just put up enough of a struggle to make it believable. We’re going back.”

“Your father doesn’t want us to confirm?” Orom asked.

“Normally, yes,” Til’Siri hesitated. “But now... I have a bad feeling after meeting those two.”

“Too many coincidences at the same time,” the old man agreed.

“Hopefully, the Tayns just came for that boy,” Til’Siri muttered. “And perhaps those inside are only after the bodies. But we shouldn’t push it. Let’s return immediately. The Starbeast Alliance has a headstart thanks to the prophecy, but

the other factions will find out sooner or later. We need to maintain the lead as long as possible if we want the best chance of seizing that thing.”

“Ultom Courts, Left Imperial Palace,” Orom whispered with longing in his eyes before the two disappeared.

Orom opened up a rift in space, eager to leave this wretched area behind. He’d deal with those buggers inside his body as soon as he managed to hide in a spatial fold. However, just as he was about to pass through, Orom found himself slowed to a crawl. His movements, his Dao, his thoughts. They were all decelerated, as though he was trying to swim against the current of the river of time itself.

“It took us some time tracking you down,” a snort echoed through the void as a woman appeared out of nowhere. “Looks like you’ve run into some trouble.”

She was as small as a speck of dust, but Orom shuddered as he saw space freeze for thousands of miles in every direction. Even those terrifying flames that had threatened to consume him just moments ago were stopped in place as temporal ripples spread in every direction, dragging a moment in time toward eternity.

Had someone been attracted by the commotion just now, making their move now that he was weakened? He refused to give in, knowing he was right at the finish line. He had signed up for an eternal task with the Starbeast Alliance, all for the chance to remove the imperfection in his bloodline. Finally, he had accomplished it – he had found the clues to the Left Imperial Palace.

He pushed his harried body to the limits, but every dimension he connected to was an eternity away, locked away by millions of years of death. If he dared pass through those barriers, he knew his remaining lifespan would be used up before even getting close.

‘See what they want!’ he heard Til’Siri say from the safety of her courtyard, and he inwardly swore at this brat.

He hated showing obeisance to this little bird, just because her mother was a bigshot. Worse yet, he was afraid she'd try to take credit, even if she had only been here a few years. She hadn't done a thing so far, and she had only spent her time using up his resources and studying the **[Emptiness Array]** to understand his method of searching. It was he who had spent most of his life scouring the edges of the Multiverse for any clues.

Still, he could only follow the little roc's orders. At least this new arrival didn't directly attack upon arriving. So Orom conjured an avatar again, appearing some distance away from the humanoid woman reeking of antiquity and death. He shuddered when he saw the two abyssal orbs for eyes, and he was filled with some trepidation upon remembering he had consumed some half-bloods recently.

But a second tremor shook him to the core upon remembering the description he'd heard just a moment ago - the brat who had managed to escape. *'An E-grade human with an axe. He sometimes looks like a Draugr.'*

It couldn't possibly be... Right?

"I have come to collect one of your furnaces," the woman said without preamble. "He is a pureblood Draugr wielding an axe and chains, but he might sometimes look like a human."

Oh no.

—

"Why did you want that thing?" Iz asked curiously as she looked at the small stone in her uncle's palm.

They had found a nearby sun to reside on while waiting for Mr. Bug to pop out, the scorching heat helping her uncle alleviate some of the pressure.

"Girl, don't you remember?" Valderak smiled as he threw the small ball over to Iz. "Your little friend wanted to buy this thing, but he was coming up short."

"He's not my friend," Iz muttered, but she still grabbed the treasure as it flew over.

“Then, don’t you want to become friends?” the golem asked. “Isn’t that what you’re missing? Friends to go on adventures with, to deal with the boredom brought by eons of cultivation.”

Iz thoughtfully looked at the stone in her hand, sensing the odd energies within. She didn’t know why, but it reminded her a bit of that guy. Was it bloodline-related? She played with it a bit as she considered what her uncle said. Was this why she had come all this way? Perhaps?

She had always stayed on her private planet since young, where only the most trusted attendants could reside. People who had served for generations without ever coming in contact with outside factions to minimize the risk of betrayal. The only exception was her uncle, and the other disciples she had yet to meet.

While the attendants on the planet were friendly, Iz knew enough to tell they weren’t friends. There was an unbreachable distance between them, one ingrained into their very cores. Besides, they lacked talent, meaning they weren’t fated. Even if she managed to get closer to one, they would eventually drift apart.

Her uncle had said that one’s perspective of time and people would change as you rose through the ranks. Those who couldn’t keep up weren’t fated, bound to an ignoble existence. As for those young masters she had met on her few outings, they weren’t friends either. A few might have the potential to keep up with her cultivation pace, but they were just sent there by their elders in an attempt to build relations with her grandpa.

Was this why she was so interested in Mr. Bug? A weird aberrance at the edge of the universe containing a bloodline that put pressure on her own. Someone who didn’t even know about the situation in the upper realms or who she or her grandparents were, yet had the potential to reach the true realms of cultivation and ascend beyond being an unfated transient existence.

“Are you good at making friends?” Iz said with surprise. “I have never seen you with any.”

“Bah, that’s just because I’ve been guarding you for the past few decades,” Valderak snorted. “I have a lot of friends.”

“Are you referring to the other uncles and aunts?” Iz asked suspiciously, wondering if being disciple-brothers and sisters were really the same thing as friends.

“Anyway. You catch more flies with honey,” Valderak said after a few seconds of drawn-out silence. “You should beat him up to prove you are stronger than him. That brings respect, and it will encourage him to keep getting stronger. Then you can give this thing as a present. That will show that you are generous and kind of heart.”

“Uncle actually knows about these matters as well,” Iz nodded.

“I’ve been around for six million years, what don’t I know?” Valderak boisterously laughed. “Just listen to your uncle and you can’t go wrong. You can also take out the stone if he is about to escape again. The brat seems pretty greedy, and seeing this thing should stop him in his tracks long enough for you to catch him.”

“Alright, I’ll listen to uncle,” Iz smiled. “Can you sense anything yet?”

“Not yet,” Valderak said with a shake of his head. “It might be a while depending on how far he teleported.”

Iz nodded, and simply closed her eyes in cultivation.

“Oh, there we go,” Valderak eventually said after two weeks had passed. “He’s out.”

“Let’s go!” Iz said with glee.

“There’s a problem,” the golem frowned. “He’s in a sector at the utmost border, and the Heavens have restricted it for some reason. My perception got extinguished in an instant.”

“Then what do we do?” Iz frowned.

“Let me talk with your grandfather,” Valderak said after some hesitation and closed his eyes.

Two minutes later they opened again as a second golem appeared next to them, this one a Peak Monarch.

“Ancestor,” the golem said with a bow.

“Accompany my ward to a frontier sector to gain experience,” Valderak said. “She comes to harm, and fate for you and your line ends. Accomplish the mission, and I will personally assist you in confirming your Dao.”

“I understand,” the golem said with a bow. “I will accomplish the task without fail.”

“Grandpa is letting me go?” Iz said, actually a bit surprised. After hearing that her uncle couldn’t go, she would have thought her grandfather wanted her to return.

“Go, have fun,” Valderak smiled. “Make friends, fight some people, go on adventures. I’ll teleport you as close as I can, but it will take you a while longer to reach the sector.”

“Uncle is the best,” Iz said, her smile widening even further. A few moments later the two were gone, leaving Valderak behind.

“I guess I should check out what has all these factions in a tizzy,” Valderak muttered, and the next moment he was gone as well.

Chapter 836: Stacked

It almost felt like a dream when Zac stepped out from his teleportation room and stepped into his compound. Six years. It had been over six years since he left Earth with not a single update on the state of things, except for the notification that his followers had somehow accepted an incursion in his name.

Thankfully, there were no smoldering ruins or screams of battle greeting his return, indicating that things should be under control. It was something that had constantly worried him for the past month as he lay low at a remote corner of the Zecia sector.

He should have guessed that infusing a tool with Chaos would make its functionality unreliable.

Still, having appeared in a desolate spot at the edge of the Sector after weeks of being hurtled through some subdimension was far better than he could have hoped for from an item that would normally only work inside the sector itself. Unfortunately, large chaos-laden cracks had appeared all over the bangle, making Zac leery about using the thing again.

However, he didn't have much choice as he had been dropped off in the middle of space, and with air running out he had used the Teleportation Array on his back to teleport to a remote trading hub he had frequented before. He hadn't dared immediately return to Earth out of fear that the Orom, the golem, or Iz herself would show up at his doorstep.

Zac couldn't bring those monsters back to Earth, so he had rented a top-tier cultivation cave, once more reminded how amazingly cheap things were in this remote corner of the Multiverse. Every day he had spent cleansing himself of karma and looking for marks left in his body, trying to recover his broken and chaos-addled pathways as much as he could while keeping an eye on the sky.

When a month had passed, Zac figured people either wouldn't or couldn't come after him, and he had finally returned home. Zac immediately wanted to find someone, but a clap of thunder above his head made him look up with solemnity.

It had come, just as he expected. The gathering clouds didn't contain the vast indifference of the System, but rather the fury of the Boundless Heavens. Zac knew it hadn't come for him though, but rather for someone else; Alea. He had noticed something brewing over the past week as Zac gradually whittled down the Orom's seal on his Tool Spirit.

Perhaps by design, it was quite easy to deal with after having left the Orom World. After all, most of those who left were either scions with powerful backing or powerhouses who had confirmed their Daos in the limited environment of the Orom World. There was no point in angering these kinds of people.

However, as the layers of restrictions were removed one by one, Zac had felt that sense of premonition that fate was gathering on his location. He could somehow tell it was related to **[Love's Bond]**, so he had eventually left the last layer of restrictions and hurried back home. As expected, she was breaking through.

For almost five years she had been digesting the enormous ball of blood and Oblivion, joined by Temporal Energy and continuously bolstered by the Ambient Energy inside the Orom World. And this was as a Peak F-grade Spirit Tool. Her accumulations were shocking, and this step was long overdue. However, Zac hadn't expected a minor Lightning Tribulation to arrive because of this.

Then again, it was undeniable that **[Love's Bond]** was an unorthodox weapon, no matter if you talked about its origins or what it had fed on. Zac wondered if the same would happen to Verun in the future, considering the axe had been marked by pure life inside the Twilight Chasm.

A wave of hunger filled Zac's mind, and he didn't hesitate as he started emptying his Spatial Rings of anything he could think of. There were mountains of rare materials, from things he had found in the Spatial Rings in the Void to the supreme

treasures he had found in the Twilight Ocean and Qi'Sar's treasury.

The piles kept growing as Zac took out one thing after another, just like when Alea's coffin was turned into a Spirit Tool the first time. Altogether, the value of the mounds surrounding the coffin was probably inching toward three million D-grade Nexus Coins, a ludicrous sum for an F-grade Spirit Tool. Even the passive energy the treasures leaked was enough to create a chaotic storm in the sky.

However, Alea didn't take too many of the treasures. First, she picked up the **[Blackearth Steel]** from Qi'Sar's treasury, the chains barely able to drag them toward the lid, along with the supreme-quality death-attuned wood Catheya had identified for him. Next, she picked up five other unnamed Death-attuned metals Zac had found in the Twilight Ocean, along with a few dozen Death-attuned natural treasures.

She did, however, leave Uona's corpse behind, though Zac did feel the axe on his waist perking up when he took the body out.

Seeing the decidedly one-sided nature of the materials, Zac was a bit surprised considering how she had feasted on Twilight Fruits for years. He had expected her to want at least some life-attuned materials to balance all that death, but it looked like he was wrong. Or had her needs changed after first being marked by Pure Death, and then swallowing Oblivion?

And if so, how would that impact her soul?

By the time Alea had finished gathering everything she needed, the sky was dark with tribulation clouds while purple clouds crackled. However, Zac was inwardly relieved when he sensed the clouds were decidedly weaker compared to the punishments he had endured to evolve his two Dao Branches.

The familiar rattle of chains moving echoed out through the area, but it was followed by a groaning sound Zac had only heard a few times; the opening of the thick coffin lid. Zac's heart beat an additional time as the lid swung almost completely wide open, but he couldn't see Alea's body at all.

Instead, there was only vast darkness that almost reminded him of the Abyssal Lake.

For now, the darkness was only a shadow of the real thing, but was **[Love's Bond]** moving in that direction, toward the Abyssal Death of the Draugr? Was it he who had influenced her path that way? Or was it the System who had implanted the Spirit Tool with this path upon its creation, to make the coffin better match Zac's Draugr persona?

Zac didn't know what the truth was, and he didn't even know how to feel about it. So he could only look on with mixed emotions as tendrils of Darkness quickly consumed all the materials, dragging them into the coffin like a hungry vortex. The lid quickly closed after that, but a dark shroud covered the Coffin as it rose into the air.

Alea had finished her preparations just in time, and the first bolt of purple lightning slammed into the coffin a moment later, instantly dispersing the darkness. The whole coffin shuddered as Zac felt a pang of pain in his mind, but he could sense that both Alea and the Spirit Tool itself had endured the first strike just fine. There was just a scorched spot on the lid and some small cracks across its surface.

The lid opened slightly again, releasing a second puff of darkness, this one even more condensed compared to the last. Unfortunately, just like Alea's defenses grew stronger, so did the bolts of lightning, and the second tribulation left deep cracks across the whole lid. Luckily, there should only be one more to go, and Zac was relieved to see the lid open a third time.

However, relief turned into confusion and fear as the ten-meter avatar of Alea's torso appeared, her black eyes staring up at the sky as she stretched her arms out in a familiar gesture.

"Are you crazy?!" Zac shouted with horror, but he didn't dare go closer. Doing so would just infuriate the Tribulation Cloud, making things harder for Alea. "Don't copy me! Absorbing that thing is extremely dangerous!"

However, Alea didn't seem to listen, and Zac could only pray she knew what she was doing. He looked on with worry as the

final bolt of lightning descended, drenching the avatar in a sea of purple death. The demoness held on for a moment, but Zac was horrified to see that she eventually cracked and broke apart, absolutely incapable of containing the punishment with **[Death's Embrace]**.

Zac felt like he was back on that mountaintop again, helplessly watching Alea's soul fall apart. The only thing keeping him from going crazy was his connection with the demoness. It was weakened, but her consciousness was still there, so he stayed his hand as he saw the coffin drag the fragmented pieces of the spirit back inside.

Along with a mote of lightning.

The Tribulation Lightning seemed infuriated, and it showered the whole coffin in lightning, completely obscuring Zac's vision. Thankfully, it only had so much energy to expend, and Zac sensed reluctance as the bolt dissipated. Left behind, was a pitch-black obelisk of condensed darkness, reminding Zac of the times **[Verun's Bite]** had enclosed itself in a bloody crystal.

'Soon,' Zac heard in his mind before the connection was cut.

"You just woke up and you're already going into seclusion again?" Zac helplessly muttered as he looked at the black cocoon, but he was inwardly awash with relief.

It looked like she had broken through successfully, and judging by the materials she had consumed, it was bound to be a big leap in power.

"Who goes there?!" a ferocious shout broke the calm just as it settled, and Zac looked over with bemusement to see a spectral apparition float over with furious momentum.

Or rather hide behind two hulking puppets that emitted the power that even surpassed the Half-Step Blacksmith golem he fought to open up the Dao Repository.

"My Lord! You're back!" a surprised voice exclaimed as the ghost peered over the shoulder of one of its bodyguards.

"It's been a while, Triv," Zac smiled. "How are you?"

“Nothing to complain about, now that young master is back,” Triv said as he hurriedly flew over. “Your aura is like the radiant sun, and your return is like the parting of the clouds, a great-”

“Alright, alright,” Zac snorted. “What is it?”

“Incidentally, I was wondering if the young master has joined the Undead Empire? I was shocked to hear you once more met up with the noble Draugr mistress who visited our province a decade ago,” Triv said. “It truly is fated.”

“Well, she’s putting in a good word for me,” Zac smiled as he started carrying the black cocoon toward his courtyard. “I am not sure how things stand though. Things spiraled out of control a bit in Twilight Harbor, and I’ve been stuck in an isolated world for the past four years. How is the situation on Earth? You guys actually started an Incursion?”

“There have been some problems among the dreamers, from what I’ve heard,” Triv slowly said. “Unrest on the main continent of this world. Infighting, seizing territory. Of course, no one has dared make any big moves even with master gone and much of our forces being occupied on the other world. But I hear there are rumors of you succumbing off-world, and there is just a matter of time the elites of this world start fighting for your supposedly empty throne.”

“Well, as long as nothing has happened, it’s fine,” Zac nodded before he stopped and looked at his butler with a frown. “Wait, the elites are still offworld? What’s going on?”

Zac had always assumed that the Incursion would be over by now. Over four years had passed since it started, far longer than the situation on Earth to reach a critical point. If his people still hadn’t returned, it usually meant one of two things; either, they had been eradicated by the natives or competing factions.

If not, they had been dragged into a drawn-out battle, which also indicated the situation had turned thorny.

“They are still there, though the situation is mostly stable from what I hear,” Triv sighed. “The Invasion Gate has long since

stabilized, and the elites spend most of their time on the other side. The level restriction has been increased all the way to level 150 already, but it is still very expensive to go back and forth. So most stay there permanently since the environment over there is still far superior as there is still some lingering Origin Dao.”

Zac wasn't surprised. Even he had felt just how much worse the environment became after Earth lost its last specks of Origin Dao, and the situation was far more palpable to cultivators who depended on their affinities and meditation to seize Dao Seeds.

For example, among the demons who joined the Azh'Rezak incursion, only a handful had Dao Seeds by the time they arrived, but after a few years on Earth, almost seventy percent had formed their first Dao Seed, and a few had formed multiple. And that was despite the Dimensional Seed siphoning off a good chunk of the Origin Dao the System awarded Earth.

If he was a cultivator, he wouldn't want to spend any time on Earth either as long as there were Origin Dao to be had somewhere else.

“Is young master interested in heading over?” Triv asked.

“Soon, but not right now,” Zac slowly said after some thought.

Zac wanted to meet everyone, but now that he had finally returned, he suddenly felt extremely exhausted like he had been carrying a heavy load for years. He needed to settle down a bit first and stabilize his mental state. Besides, while he had managed to repair most of his broken pathways the month he stayed off-world, he had reopened some internal wounds during the teleportation just now.

“For now, I need to recuperate for a while,” Zac continued. “It took some effort escaping the place where I was trapped. Can you compile a report of all major events and changes since I left? Oh, and don't tell anyone I am back, except Abby and Adran. Come back in three hours.”

“Certainly,” Triv hurriedly nodded, and he was gone in a flash a moment later.

Seeing the ghost disappear while the two guardian golems, who clearly had been upgraded somehow, lumbered off, Zac turned toward his courtyard. As he walked through the large compound, he was filled with a mix of emotions. At a secluded spot between two trees, Zac spotted an antique telephone booth painted pink, left behind by Thea during the time she lived in this place.

The whole compound was filled with these kinds of things, especially the area around his living quarters. Seeing the installment made Zac stop for a while with a sigh. Close to seven years had passed since Leandra returned, her appearance an even deadlier calamity than the Tribulation Lightning.

The hurt had slowly faded over the past years, but the guilt remained. Zac still wondered if Thea would have been caught in the crosshairs if he had been more forthright about the secrets he kept. He should have realized that Thea would have noticed the large research labs and factories underground, no matter how ingenious Kenzie’s means to hide them were.

Zac hesitated a bit, but he ultimately chose to keep the telephone booth and the other items where they were as he returned to his courtyard. The walled-in mansion was exactly as he had left it, except for two additions. The Ambient Energy had increased by a noticeable margin, no doubt the result of Triv’s hard work. Zac couldn’t exactly put his finger on it, but he was reasonably certain that the trees in the whole inner area of Port Atwood had been rearranged to become a massive formation.

And his courtyard was in the eye of the formation, the hotspot for ambient energy.

The second change was that the courtyard had more than doubled in size, adding a second building drenched in Miasma. However, this half was shrouded in high-powered arrays, and it looked like a hedged-off garden from the outside. Zac guessed that Triv was afraid Zac would forget or discard his undead side, so it added this place.

The encased coffin wasn't absorbing any energy at the moment, but he still chose to leave it at the heart of the miasmic zone of his courtyard just in case. After that, he took out one of the folding chairs from his old camper and sat down, taking a deep breath as he took in the moment.

He really was back. Finally.

The road had been far bumpier than he had expected, no matter if you looked at the Twilight Ascent or what came next. In return, the gains were almost unfathomable for a trip that was initially just meant as a shopping spree to look for skills and some way to upgrade his undead side to D-grade race.

He had already looked at his screen dozens of times the past month now that it wasn't restricted any longer, but he still couldn't resist taking another look. Sometimes it almost felt like a delirious fever-dream thinking back on what he had been through over the past years, but numbers don't lie.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

145

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen,

Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Branch of the Kalpataru - Early, Branch of the Pale Seal - Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

18177 [Increase: 123%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

7526 [Increase: 88%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

14540 [Increase: 124%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

12512 [Increase: 112%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3058 [Increase: 82%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

5995 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

632 [Increase: 106%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 662

As looked at the numbers, a smile slowly spread across his face like it had many times before. He knew he was just an ant compared to the old monsters littering the Multiverse, but he had to admit - he was getting kind of stacked.

Chapter 837: Ensolus

Zac knew he had gotten continuously stronger in the Orom World, but that sense had always been skewed and suppressed because of the prison brand. But the gain in attributes was absolutely shocking, even surpassing all his breakthroughs during the Twilight Ascent. Then again, Zac knew he shouldn't be surprised considering gains on the path of cultivation were exponential.

The awards from each level during Late E-grade were worth three times those in the early E-grade, for example.

And just like last time, each mote of Chaos he managed to drag into his body had opened a node without him even noticing, saving him a lot of time dealing with the final hurdles on his path to peak E-grade. As long as he pushed himself, Zac believed he would be able to reach peak E-grade within a year. Of course, that didn't mean he was ready to make his D-grade push just yet.

But he was getting there.

Thanks to all the experts in the Orom World, his foundations and understanding of Cultivation had been shored up immensely. It wasn't only a matter of the techniques he had learned with the help of Pavina and Heda, but it was a matter of vantage. Over the past years, he had discussed cultivation with dozens of talented Hegemons and Monarchs, some of which were more powerful than even the top powerhouses of the whole Zecia sector.

Their worldview had helped broaden Zac's own, and he better understood what was required to keep going where others encountered roadblocks.

Having confirmed everything was in order, Zac completed another customary sweep of his body. Unfortunately, the results were the same. Even now, he had no earthly idea just

how Iz Tayn managed to find him. He had gone over the course of events and her words innumerable times over the past month, and there was no doubt in his mind – she had come for him.

But why?

Was it because he called her a lunatic before escaping? Was it such a big deal after she tried to kill him? And if it really was the cause, then why didn't she emit a speck of killing intent when she appeared in front of him? Zac had only realized that after making his escape, but she hadn't actually tried to attack him. He had just been too preoccupied with the stress of the situation and her guardian's aura to notice.

Had she perhaps spotted how he changed race during the Battle of Fates? It wasn't impossible. He hadn't noticed anyone looking at him when he converted into his Draugr form, with everyone too occupied with their battles to notice a change in one of the corpses on the ground. Except for her. No one dared even approach Iz Tayn, giving her ample room to observe the situation from that sun of hers.

But would someone like her care about a Life-Death Edgewalker, even if knew what was going on? Zac eventually shook his head, no closer to figuring the reason behind her actions than before. Only that woman herself knew her motivations for tracking him down, probably coming all the way from the central regions of the Multiverse to this desolate edge of the System's domain.

As for his body, it was getting better. Having absorbed four motes of Chaos had been a bit too greedy, and taking on eight of them next time was out of the question. His pathways were mostly mended by now, but they were weakened by the lingering effects of the motes. The same was true for his Nodes, but they had reached a point they would withstand a battle or two without breaking by now.

He figured that another month or two would suffice when using his Healing Arrays, at which point he could visit Yrial again. Having lived in the Orom World for years might have lessened the benefits his ghost master could provide, but there

were still some blanks that the Lord of Cycles might be able to fill in.

Most importantly, Yrial might be an Edgewalker himself, which would mean he could hold the key to forming a Cultivator's Core containing two opposing forces. In contrast to Pavina and Heda, he also knew his real situation with his two races, which might allow him to provide more incisive advice. Of course, the two Monarchs who had taught him back in the Orom World might have known his situation as well, but neither he nor they ever broached the subject.

The hours passed, and Zac finally felt himself gain a sense of balance. He better understood why all those Hegemons and Monarchs in the Orom World took regular breaks from cultivation, their rest sometimes lasting years. You couldn't just keep rushing headlong, you were bound to hit a wall sooner or later.

He still was impatient to gain power and rescue Kenzie, let alone dealing with the more immediate issues such as saving Ogras and helping Alea, but haste makes waste. He needed to digest all he had been through before taking the next step. Still, he was getting a bit antsy sitting around in his courtyard, but he sensed Triv was actually already hovering outside, waiting for the deadline.

"Come in," Zac said, and the butler appeared in the courtyard a moment later.

"My apologies for rearranging things without young Master's permission," Triv said as they appeared in the courtyard.

"I like it," Zac said. "I can feel there is a budding spirituality connecting my whole forest. It must have been a lot of work setting it up."

"It's not just young master's compound. With the assistance of your followers, the whole archipelago has been transformed into something worthy of being the capital of the Atwood Empire," The ghost said. "In fact, the population of Port Atwood has already surpassed ten million."

“That many?” Zac exclaimed. “Won’t it affect the energy density?”

“Not at all,” Triv said. “The Spiritual Vein has kept growing beneath this island, and it is now many times stronger than before. A few of the islands have, however, become hotspots with Miasma due to this archipelago being placed right between Pangea and Elysium, as the second continent has been named. There is more on the subject in the reports I have arranged for the young lord.”

“Good work,” Zac nodded. “Was there any commotion from the tribulation cloud?”

“None,” Triv said. “It was explained as another elite having formed a Dao Branch, but their identity kept secret.”

“Another?” Zac exclaimed with a raised brow.

“The young general is terrifyingly talented, as expected of the progeny of the young lord,” Triv sighed. “Lady Vilari formed her first Dao Branch two years ago, and I hear rumors she formed a second one on the other world.”

Zac nodded, once more marveling at Vilari’s talents. Just who was that scary girl that Vilari’s body once belonged to? Not only had she essentially insta-killed him during the Battle of Fates, but her constitution had helped birth such a powerful Revenant. Someone like her was far more likely to be a scion like Iz Tayn than some frontier elite.

“Anyone else?”

“Lady Joanna is reputed to be at the precipice, only lacking a spark of inspiration. The same goes for the Demon gentleman and a few others,” Triv said. “But most have found it hard to progress their Daos after forming Fragments, even with a second helping of Origin Dao.”

Honestly, Zac was more surprised that Joanna had reached the threshold of forming a Dao Branch herself, even if he knew that final step was something that would elude most cultivators for their entire lives. Joanna was different from Vilari, or even more grounded examples like Thea. Her talents weren’t bad, but they weren’t stellar either.

She must have pushed herself extremely hard during the incursion to make such rapid progress.

Zac eventually turned his attention to the reports and infused a wisp of his consciousness into the crystal. Immediately, pages upon pages of information and data flooded his mind, thousands of pieces of information dating back all the way since he left.

Clearly, Adran or Abby had erected this database the moment Zac left and continuously added information to it. Now, it constituted volumes of data that would have made his head spin before the Integration. Everything was listed, from obvious things like revenue streams and larger political changes, to detailed data such as tallies on tens of thousands of Atwood Academy Graduates.

There were reports on citizens' classes as well, and a quick scan proved that Port Atwood was not only making rapid improvements for their armies. The huge sums he had poured into raising craftsmen were finally beginning to pay off, with many promising talents having reached middle and even late E-grade with craftsmen professions.

Three years ago, Port Atwood even saw the birth of its first Spirit Tool from the hands of one of the Ishiate craftsmen, though it was a low-quality one that was unlikely to even reach E-grade. Of course, that was also discounting the growing repository of synthetic Spirit Tools that Clan Volor could create with the help of their crystals.

However, as he skimmed the mountains of data, there was one thing he was missing.

“What about Emily?” Zac asked. “She hasn't returned to Earth yet?”

“The young miss returned two years ago, but she left soon after realizing the Lord had not yet returned. She said she was heading back to the arena, and that she was joining some sort of trial,” Triv said.

“Heading back?” Zac muttered with surprise.

He had left two single-use Teleportation Tokens to his disciple. One led to the main continent of the Allbright Empire, the token that Pretty Peak had given him. The second one led to the Big Axe Coliseum, and it looked like she chose to use the latter, which didn't surprise Zac in the slightest. He figured she'd be right at home among the orcs, minotaurs, and other tribal species.

But for her to say she was heading back must mean she had made a name for herself over there, either by getting her hands on another token or by officially gaining access to the Teleportation Array. Both were quite difficult, especially the latter one. It both required getting some renown in the arena, and then having one of the arena masters give out difficult quests to complete.

"If the Lord wants, I can arrange a message sent through the merchants," Triv offered.

"No, let her follow her path for now," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I'll go visit her later."

Zac kept perusing the documents for a few minutes, filled with satisfaction and pride, though he had to admit there was a small hint of... he didn't quite know. Reading how his followers continuously kept pushing Earth and the budding Atwood Empire toward new heights proved he had surrounded himself with competent people, but it also meant he wasn't as integral to the continuation of Earth as he might like.

He had been gone for over six years, twice as long as he'd stayed behind post-integration. Yet Earth was fine. Great, even. Certainly, he knew much of their accomplishments were only possible thanks to his infusion of resources, but he had to admit that running a kingdom wasn't his strong suit. If someone needed to get chopped, he was the man for the job, but all these things listed in the reports?

They might be better off without him interfering, essentially turning him into a deadly figurehead.

"Ah right," Zac suddenly said, dragging himself out of those complex thoughts.

“Is there anything else, master?” the ghost asked.

“Here, take this. A small thank you for tending my place over the past years,” Zac smiled as he threw Aia Ouro’s Spatial Gem over toward the ghost.

Inside were a pile of resources meant for Spectral Cultivators, including a couple of cultivation manuals. Zac didn’t know if Triv, a non-combat cultivator, could make use of them, but it wasn’t like there was anyone else around that could benefit from those things. Seeing as how Triv had maintained and even improved his whole compound for years, Zac figured he might as well give them to Triv.

“This! This is,” Triv stuttered as it scanned its contents. “This is too precious! Where did master find this?”

“I was attacked by a young master of an Eidolon Hivemind. This was the spoils of that encounter,” Zac shrugged.

“The Eidolon? Why would they attack you? Were you in your human form?” Triv exclaimed, looking shocked and a bit confused.

“Things aren’t as harmonious in the Empire Heartlands as the citizens of the Kavriel Province are led to believe. There is a lot of infighting, it seems. In the trial I joined, Draugr, Eidolon, and the Eternal Clan fought and schemed against each other. If I didn’t kill them, they would have killed me. No need to worry about it,” Zac said. “After you’ve memorized the manuals, hand them over to the Einherjar. They might come in handy in the future.”

“So things are like that,” Triv sighed, sounding a bit forlorn.

Zac could guess what Triv was thinking. It was probably a disappointment learning that the supposed paradise for undead cultivators was just like everywhere else; filled with schemes and infighting. However, the spectral butler perked up soon enough as the Spatial Gem somehow fused with their incorporeal form, completely disappearing.

“Well, I should have figured. Struggle is Heaven’s Mandate, and not even the great Primo can subvert that decree. And don’t you worry, young Lord. No matter what happens in the

future, loyal Triv will always be your most ardent spectral supporter, no matter how many Hives send their invitations my way!”

“Thank you,” Zac laughed as he shifted his attention back to the missive, though he wasn’t too sure how genuine the ghost really was.

But when he reached the section about the Incursion his smile gradually turned into a frown, though Triv’s assurances gained a somewhat comical meaning. The situation was beyond what he had expected, and when he read about the recent changes, he started to get a sinking feeling. It looked like he needed to make a trip to the Ensolus Continent, and soon.

However, there was one thing he needed to confirm first.

Vilari looked up from the stacks of papers just in time to see Ilvere, Rhuger, and Joanna enter her office that adjoined her meditative pond.

“We just got word from Miter’s Hall,” the demon said.
“They’ve spotted movement. If all goes as expected, they’ll be here this time tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Vilari calmly said. “Is everything prepared?”

“It’s all dealt with,” Joanna said with a somber expression.
“What do you think they’ll choose?”

“If they’re wise, they’ll accept our terms. It’s their one route to avoid calamity, no matter if it is one of their own making or one of the Heavens,” Vilari said.

As though prompted by her words, the whole room violently shook as the energy in the chamber turned chaotic. This was the second tremor of the day - they were getting closer. Vilari was no expert on the subject, but she doubted this world would remain standing in a year unless something changed.

“It’s getting worse,” Joanna sighed. “This might really be the last chance. If the talks fall through, war awaits.”

Vilari nodded in agreement. If tomorrow’s summit failed, an unprecedented war would sweep through this world. Even if

they were the strongest party, the enemies would fight with their very existence on the line.

Just like the Ruthless Heavens wanted.

Only when they had arrived at the Ensolus Continent did they realize just how much value the System put on their Lord. Earth was a unique world with its twinned affinities, yet the System actually saw fit to create another one through the integration – fusing a dead world and one teeming with life. It was essentially a gift-wrapped world created in Lord Atwood’s image.

It was a shame that no gifts from the Heavens came without strings attached.

“Don’t get your hopes up, lass,” Ilvere grunted. “I don’t know about that old wraith Eomid or his brothers, but I doubt Hanuk will give in without a fight. Strength is the core of their society, it’s divine providence. He is the leader of the Mavai Hordes on the basis of being undefeated and unrivaled. To give in to an outsider would deprive him of the mandate to make decisions for the tribes.”

“If the demons in your Azh’Kir’Khat can live with people being above their head, why can’t these people?”

“It’s different,” Ilvere shrugged. “It took innumerable years of bloodshed for the Azh’Kir’Khat horde to form. Even then, it can only maintain its stability thanks to the powerhouses on the top and our perennial enemies. It was one thing if we could utterly crush the Mavai, but now... Besides, Hanuk’s hands are tied. Even if he believed giving in would be the best option for his people, the tribes might not agree.”

“They’d really risk it all than just bend the knee?”

“Would you really accept a situation where the fate of your whole world was in the hands of a stranger?” Ilvere countered. “Your family, your neighbors, the tribes, and everything you had ever known? To risk everything being taken away with but a thought? I know I’d rather risk it all and fight to the death.”

“We still have to try,” Vilari sighed.

“Ruthless Heavens indeed,” Joanna muttered.

Chapter 838: Impossible Choice

Today's mission was one of diplomacy, but the biggest risk to the proceedings was neither the golden-scaled demons nor the dour wraiths. It was the System, and the quests it imparted to all citizens of the world when the tremors began.

For the natives, it was quite straightforward – emerge victorious against the other planet and the foreigners, and the whole planet would be attuned to your element. From what they'd gathered, the other incursions had gotten similar quests, where the most fitting element for them would stay on if they conquered the world.

It was the same for Port Atwood, until the moment they ousted all the other Incursions, including the very same Undead Empire that had plagued Earth. The moment Port Atwood conquered the Ensolus Continent, thus controlling half of this newly formed world, their quest had changed.

With their performance their quest got upgraded, adding new reward options. Suddenly, Port Atwood had three options to choose from in case they managed to subjugate or eradicate the natives. The first option was the same as before – remove one of the two attunements, leaving only life or death.

Second, and the option they were trying to propose today, was to allow the System to stabilize this planet for another ten years, giving themselves and the natives a chance to find a method dealing with the clashing elements in the center of this world. Since Earth showed no indications of collapse, there had to be a solution. This way, everyone would win without needless bloodshed, though the native forces would be officially subordinate to Port Atwood.

However, with the third option, the System had all but closed the door to peace. Worse yet, the Ruthless Heavens had made sure to share these options with the natives, fomenting the winds of war even further.

“If Hanuk declines, do you think he will just duel for control, or will it be an all-out assault?” Vilari asked Ilvere, who had been responsible for most of the diplomatic endeavors with the Malai tribes.

“If we were all Demons, he might have followed the rites and requested a duel. But with our mottled composition, I doubt he’d consider us worthy of following their traditions,” Ilvere said.

“Will we really move back if it comes to an all-out war?” Rhuger frowned. “Losing the resources is fine, but the implications for the Lord are massive.”

“I think we all know the Lord well enough to realize his priorities. If we back down, he might lose the qualifications to become a Baron, but our lives are more important. I refuse to believe he’d choose a title over us,” Vilari said.

“In a sense, we have accomplished what we came here for. With the opportunities of the Ensolus Continent, our power has skyrocketed. What other force has this high a degree of elites?” Joanna agreed.

“Still, we must do our utmost to not let it come to that,” Vilari added. “It’s bad enough if we are unable to help Lord Atwood accomplish his goals. If we actively hobble his progress due to our ineptitude, I don’t know how we will make it up to him. For example, if we can bring just one of the two factions into the fold, we can easily overpower the third with minimal loss of life. The biggest risk is if the two join hands against us before turning against each other.”

“If only the boss was back,” Joanna sighed. “He’d solve this with either a few words or a few chops.”

Vilari only smiled in response, though she couldn’t help but once more wonder just what had happened in Twilight Harbor. Even if he stayed behind for a while, Lord Atwood should

have been back years ago by now. And if he found some opportunity and got delayed, he would no doubt have sent back a message through the teleporter.

Only the core members of the force knew the truth – that their leader was missing rather than training. Still, they could only keep improving, waiting for his return.

Hours passed as the final touches to the summit were dealt with, while thousands of scouts and monoliths scoured the Ensolus Continent for any signs of foul play. Most of the elites were mentally preparing as well. If it really came to blows, they would be pushed to the limits against the very best the natives had to offer.

In this way, the night passed in muted suspension until the guards at the edge of Fort Atwood reported that the first of the two processions were on their way.

“Hanuk isn’t with them?” Vilari muttered as they walked toward the gates, feeling something was amiss. “Increase the frequency of reports from our strongholds and sweep the area with the All-seeing Monoliths.”

One of her subordinates nodded and walked off, and she stepped out onto the courtyard of Fort Atwood. In the distance, a towering wall rose over fifty meters into the air, every inch of it covered with inscriptions. Hundreds of towers buzzed with forbidding power, their offensive arrays always ready to strike.

Behind her, the incursion pillar still shone from within the inner courtyard which was surrounded by the actual star-shaped fort, showering the area in emerald and grey, its color mirroring the hundreds of banners hanging along the walls. It had cost almost 1,250 D-grade Nexus Coins to erect this fort alone, an exorbitant sum for most forces.

According to Ilvere, Clan Azh’Rezak had spent less than 50 D-grade Nexus Coins altogether on their Incursion. From the native’s perspective, they were cheating, but it was part of the rules. The natives had been better prepared compared to the Earthlings, who only survived thanks to Lord Atwood, but they ultimately made the same mistake.

Both the Mavai and the Kingdom of Raun were too cautious, only closing four Incursions on their own. They were too leery of entering the Ensolus Continent and joining the struggle against the invaders and the odd beasts unique to whatever cursed planet had been the source of this war-torn continent.

A few scattered factions understood the grave threat that brewed on the central continent of this world, but they didn't manage to bring the bulk of their people on their crusades. Too many natives were busy enjoying the improved atmosphere and relative safety of their own continents. Why should they risk their lives by heading to Ensolus which was ten times more dangerous?

In the end, it was the Atwood Empire who routed the 20-odd Incursions spread across the Ensolus Continent, taking control of the whole thing while the natives sat on the sidelines. The unique treasures and opportunities that should have gone to the Mavai and Raun Spectrals had mostly fallen into the hands of her subordinates.

Apart from the Neutral Zones with the System-controlled Teleportation Arrays leading to the two other continents, there were also twenty-one lesser battlements surrounding Fort Atwood by now. Together, they formed a grand array of nigh-impenetrable defenses. If the natives wanted to attack, they would have to bear a shocking price in both resources and lives.

Still, with the world at the brink of collapse, it wasn't unthinkable they'd take the risk.

“What do you think?” Vilari asked as she turned to Ilvere.

“It's too hard to tell. Hanuk might be preparing an assault while using these people as a decoy, as you fear,” the demon general hesitated. “However, it might not necessarily be a bad thing.”

“We'll find out soon enough,” Vilari nodded. “What will be, will be.”

Eventually, the Demon Contingent arrived, a squad of fifty seasoned warriors covered in golden scales, some of which

had runes engraved - a sign they were all elites among elites of the Mavai. The rest of the small army, a thousand elites atop ferocious beasts, stayed outside the walls, but their bloody auras could be felt all the way to where they stood.

Five of the warriors who had entered, in particular, emitted extremely condensed auras, and Vilari sensed three of them were Half-Step Hegemons, while the other two were extremely talented E-grade Cultivators at the peak of the rank. Thankfully, it was a few years too early for scores of Hegemons to appear, even if these natives had a small head-start on Earthlings.

The natives who had already reached E-grade before the integration mostly suffered from the same issues as the prisoners of the research base – exhausted momentum and lacking foundations. Only a few older talents managed to push to the peak of the grade by hoarding some of the abundant treasures that had cropped up.

“The emissaries of the Kingdom of Raun are closing in as well,” a scout reported.

“Good,” Joanna nodded. “Anything unusual from their side?”

“Not that we can see,” the scout said. “They are surrounded by a cloud of miasma, but Eomid is visible in the front. There appear to be around 50 ghosts in total who are heading toward us while the army has taken position some distance from the demons.”

“Good, keep us posted,” Joanna nodded.

Vilari stood ready, and she let her consciousness suffuse the whole courtyard and its hundreds of elite soldiers. Their exteriors were all calm, seemingly ready to join up in their War Arrays and duke it out with the natives. However, their emotions were like ripples on a lake, unable to hide from her senses.

Eventually, she turned her head toward the gates as they swung open, and the demons riding their multifarious mounts entered. They were full of vigor, and the roars of their tamed beasts put the whole courtyard under an invisible pressure.

“Welcome,” Vilari said with a small smile as she opened her eyes, her gaze quenching the clamor in an instant, with only the occasional whimper escaping from the maws of the previously aggressive mounts. “You grace Fort Atwood with your presence. However, I was expecting Warchief Hanuk to appear in person. Perhaps you can explain?”

“I... am Hanuk’s third son, Ra’Klid. I am the leader of this party,” a slimmer demon with a massive blade slung across his back said, only slightly thrown off balance by her gaze.

His performance was better than Vilari expected, but that wasn’t what surprised her. She would have expected Ra’Klid’s role to fall to one of the three grizzled warriors at the Half-Step D-grade, rather than this younger warrior. Then again, he was hiding his true strength by the looks of it. His aura was even weaker than the two other elites at the peak of the E-grade, but he would never be able to control these warriors without strength of his own.

Most likely, he wore some treasure to hide the specifics, but Vilari could form an idea with the help of her soul being spread throughout the party. He should be peak E-grade rather than a Hegemon, but with enough accumulations to let him overpower the other five elites himself. In other words, he was a threat - someone that only herself, and perhaps Joanna and Ilvere, could deal with in single combat.

Not only that, but he seemed to contain more schemes than the average demon, who preferred dealing with issues head-on. The ripples surrounding him were exquisite and everchanging. It was an unexpected variable, but she figured it was still better than dealing with Hanuk, the old berserker with god-given strength and irascible temper.

“As to why my father is absent, we do have an explanation,” Ra’Klid said before nodding at one of the three elders.

An old man with small bones hanging from his horns, signifying he was one of their powerful shamanistic war priests, touched his Spatial Ring, prompting the warriors of Port Atwood to tense up. However, he didn’t take out a

weapon, but rather a box wrought from what appeared to be a ribcage.

He opened the lid, and even Vilari was a bit shocked to see the severed head of Hanuk, painted in the customary white and red of the Mavai final rites.

“So it was a challenge,” Ilvere muttered.

“You are correct, Warmaster,” Ra’Klid nodded. “My father was a great warrior who united many tribes before the Integration, but he was unable to adapt to this new reality. He wanted to lead the tribes, including the old and the young, to a war of annihilation without even hearing what you have to say. I had to challenge him for the sake of our people, and I luckily managed to give him a warrior’s end.”

A flare of anger caused some waves in the sea of her mind, but Vilari quickly quelled those impulses. It was hard-wired into the souls of the undead that Patricide was a grave sin, and she couldn’t even imagine raising her hand against Lord Atwood. However, she knew that cultures weren’t the same, and the young devouring the old to maintain the strength of the pack was something you saw every day in the wild.

“And what is your stance?” Vilari smiled, showing no indication of the turbulence the severed head had caused in her heart.

“The continuation of the Mavai is my main goal,” Ra’Klid said. “As such, I am willing to listen to the details of your offer. These five champions are representatives of my newly-formed council, and they represent the will of the tribes. Together, we can speak for the entirety of the Mavai.”

So, he didn’t offer anything more than to keep an open mind.

“The young surpass the old,” a deathly laugh echoed through the courtyard as the undead procession floated through the gate, led by a crown-wearing ghost with decidedly human features, except for the lack of eye sockets.

That space had been replaced by an engraving that formed a half-circle across his forehead; the mark of the Raun Spectrals, a unique race of ghosts the Ruthless Heavens had found in

some desolate corner of the multiverse. Vilari's gaze turned toward the ghosts, once more marveling at death's ability to find a way.

It was no surprise running into some demons on an unintegrated world. After all, they were one of the more populous species in the Multiverse, only lagging behind Humans and a few others. However, for a civilization of wraiths to appear, a series of unlikely coincidences would have to occur.

The Raun Spectrals had once been human, but as their planet gradually became death-attuned for an unknown reason, they desperately searched for a solution to survive. Eventually, the Kingdom of Raun, the last standing bastion of humanity, had taken a drastic step to ensure their survival. They had managed to shed their mortal coils while still living in a homemade ceremony that infused their souls with death.

The world of the wraiths was apparently slightly more energy-rich compared to the demons', but their numbers of citizens were much lower. After all, there were only so many who could beget progeny. In the case of these specters, they had to reach Middle E-grade before they were able to cut off parts of their souls and nurture them in specially-made pools of undeath.

Before the integration, there were only so many wraiths who managed to reach this height. In return, those who did were wholeheartedly focused on the continuation of their race. They spawned thousands of ghosts by sacrificing one part after another of their minds until their souls finally crumbled. Their whole society had been centered around raising enough Ancestral Ghosts in the limited environment back then.

Of course, that had changed now that the kingdom had been transported to a D-grade World temporarily teeming with Origin Dao. Now, those Ancestral Ghosts had turned into powerful spectral warriors somewhat akin to the Anointed of the Zhix. They had been fed with all the treasures their world had been able to spawn before the integration, and that culture had continued to this day, even if they didn't birth nearly as many warriors any longer.

Instead, they used that advantage to shift from venerated birth-givers solely focused on raising ghosts, to becoming the de facto rulers of their tribes. There were already three D-Grade Ghost Kings from what they'd gathered, though the one in front of them was the leader – Eomid.

“Welcome King of Raun,” Vilari continued without missing a beat. “Since we're all here, shall we enter? We have set up a-”

“Out here is fine,” Eomid snorted, cutting Vilari short. “We have ‘enjoyed’ your exquisite battlements enough times to know better than to enter the den. We have the people we need right here, so what need is there to go any further?”

“The unholy one makes a good point,” the leading shaman of the demons agreed, and Ra'Klid didn't seem interested in rebuffing him.

“As long as all parties are willing to talk, we are happy to oblige,” Vilari nodded as Joanna waved over a group of attendants who immediately started setting up an outdoor area.

Truthfully, Vilari wasn't surprised these leaders were unwilling to enter the heart of Fort Atwood, and they had seen this as a probable outcome. They even had preparations in place in case they refused to even pass through the outer gates, with multiple sets of furniture and mobile arrays prepared. Thankfully, they were still willing to enter the courtyard and leave the bulk of their armies behind, which could be seen as a good sign.

Soon enough, a conference table was set up, along with a simple set of isolation arrays to obscure their talks from the guards outside.

“So, Spiritwalker, you have called us here to parlay as cracks spread across our world. Now, what do you have for us?” Ra'Klid said, immediately getting to the heart of the matter.

“Our offer hasn't changed,” Vilari said, knowing what the new warchief was getting at. “You officially surrender to the Atwood Empire, allowing us to finish our quest to integrate this planet into our force. Your attuned continents will remain under your respective jurisdiction, and you will also have the

opportunity to set up settlements on the Ensolus Continent. Together, we will then search for solutions to the imbalance of this world.”

“That’s it?” Ra’Klid frowned. “The same deal as before?”

“The same deal as before,” Vilari nodded. “It is neither better nor worse - it is our only offer. An offer far more generous compared to what any other faction would give. Many dream of joining the Atwood Empire and come under the banner of the Deviant Asura, someone known in every corner of the Zecia Sector.”

“We have more resources than you can dream of, and your elites would both be able to train in our facilities and use our contribution system,” Joanna added. “And should we fail to find a solution, we will do our utmost to evacuate your populations to Earth, which has more than enough room to house both your populations. If you chose war, you know what kind of “

“So nothing’s changed,” Ra’Klid sighed. “You still expect us to put faith in you not choosing to drain our world to bolster your own. I was hoping your Lord would finally make an appearance, providing an actual solution.”

“Indeed,” Eomid said. “Even now, he’s unwilling to come?”

“Our lord is wholeheartedly focused on his cultivation,” Vilari said. “He has left the matter of this incursion entirely to us.”

“Still not here,” Eomid slowly said before his aura suddenly exploded. “In that case... We choose war.”

Chapter 839: The Oriole Behind

A beautiful mansion with both an orangery and an actual orange orchard on the main island. An impressive paycheck for a rewarding job as an instructor, along with exclusive access to restricted cultivation resources. A doting, at least by demoness standards, wife who brought splashes of color to his otherwise orderly life.

So where had it all gone wrong? It was that damn boss of theirs, Carl could feel it.

Lord Atwood's madness had somehow crept into Carl's heart unbeknownst to him, its insidious influence transcending time and space. That insanity had tricked Carl into doing something so foolish as to sign up to join the incursion as a lieutenant of the second wave, when he already had everything he needed back home.

The worst is already dealt with, they said. Teleport over, spread the gospel, drink some Origin Dao, and come back a rich man. He should have learned his lesson after that experience in the Mystic Realm. When it came to the boss or even his closest confidantes, there was no such thing as quick or easy.

Three years he had spent in this scary place, fighting one Incursion after another, risking his life at every corner of this blasted Ensolus Continent. Carl was pretty done with this place by now, but the situation had gotten complicated. Too many secrets had been exposed on this alien world. It turned out the mysterious Lord Atwood had actually raised armies of the undead on the hush-hush before jetting off to outer space, because why wouldn't he?

With everyone's levels being essentially the same, it was almost impossible to sign contracts that would hold much water. And with them finding those herbs growing around the ancient ruins, the leaders no longer dared send more than a handful back to Earth at a time. At least not until the boss was back and could shoulder whatever came next.

Some believed the boss had gone and gotten himself killed somewhere off-world, but Carl knew better. There was some truth to the adage that only the good die young - an unlucky star and professional madman like the Lord Atwood would outlast them all.

Of course, if he really wanted to go back, he would have been able to make something happen. He had enough contribution points to take a three-month vacation at least. But how could he leave this place with Lissa refusing to go back? So he was stuck fighting demons, ghosts, and the weird beasts that had made the Ensolus Continent their home.

And now even their own had turned against them, adding yet another layer of horror to the Ensolus Continent.

“Captain! Snap out of it!” Carl shouted as he hesitantly pointed his bow at Rovik, the Revenant warrior he had been assigned to assist when guarding the summit. “Don't think I won't poke a hole in you just because you managed to get your hands on some of the Brewmaster's Rum!”

But while Carl sounded, and hopefully looked, ferocious, he wasn't sure what to do. Should he attack? Rovik's previously pale eyes had turned black while markings appeared had appeared on his forehead, looking a lot like those troublesome ghosts. It really looked like Rovik had betrayed them, but from what he understood of these undead, they were essentially the boss's children or something similar.

It should be hardwired in their minds to stay loyal. So, was he possessed? Could the undead be possessed? Wasn't that redundant? And would he start some sort of international incident if he attacked? But the Revenant was definitely up to something even if he didn't attack, with his energy surging ominously like that.

Worse, he wasn't the only one, with both living and undead guards suddenly sporting those marks. Carl felt himself sweating bullets as he was locked in hesitation, looking at the shrouded area in the middle of the courtyard for direction. The situation grew even tenser when he saw a weird rune starting to take form above Rovik's head.

But suddenly, a flash of white, and Rovik was split in two, and the rune above his head dissipated.

"Are you crazy!" Carl wheezed, though he was inwardly extremely relieved to see Lissa both alive and unmarked by that rune. "Shouldn't we knock them out or something?"

"It was not the captain," Lissa said, her everpresent smile replaced by a somber frown. "Take a look around, who it is that's acting out. It's all people who have been stationed at either the Dorius Cliffs or Pengem Groves in the past six months. Our people have been replaced somehow."

"Are you certain?" Carl hesitated. "Is it from [**Flashfire Scan**]?"

"Their souls are extremely weird," Lyssa nodded. "Like dozens of souls cut and sewn together to look exactly like the originals. But they are falling apart now that those runes have appeared. They won't last more than a minute or two."

"So, do you want to hide out in the barracks for a minute or two?" Carl ventured as he furtively glanced at the leaders in the distance. "I doubt they'll miss us."

"You want a talk with lady Vilari, or perhaps that dead wolfman?" Lissa smiled in return.

"I will quash these ghost's dastardly plans before they know what hit them," Carl solemnly nodded as a pitch-black bow appeared in his hand.

An arrow condensed with [**Bough of Apollo**] and further empowered with his Fragment of the Inferno appeared in his hand, and the air itself screamed from being incinerated when he let go the string of his Spirit Tool. A fiery streak was drawn through the air, weaving through the guards before they hit their mark.

“Not bad, sweetie,” Lissa smiled as she saw the two weird ghost-copies collapse, before the third target’s miasmic shield exhausted the arrow’s energy.

His attack somehow seemed to serve as a wake-up call, and multiple attacks rained down on the shapeshifters who defended as best they could. Some managed to form their runes, whereas others were struck down.

“I much preferred it when you called me Lord Husband,” Carl grunted, though he didn’t really mind sweetie either.

“Silly human rules of courtship,” she laughed as she melded with the surroundings. “What good are demure women? Of course, if you become a Hegemon, I might consider it.”

“Like I’m not trying to,” Carl muttered as he fired off another arrow.

This time he was too late, and yet another rune had appeared in the air. He tried breaking it apart with a Dao-empowered attack, but impotently passed tight through.

Carl sighed as he willed the arrow to swerve into the head of another shapeshifter, or whatever they were. At least these guys seemed happy to be target practice, only defending and not attacking. The leaders of the incursion didn’t have it as easy, and Carl took a couple of precautionary steps toward the edge of the courtyard upon sensing the ramping auras.

Suddenly, the glistening runes on the outer walls grew din, and a sea of ghosts descended on Fort Atwood just a moment later. Carl’s eyes widened in alarm and he instantly conjured his Arrow Array while activating [**Erebus Step**], readying himself for a tough fight. If there was any doubt before, it was gone now. It took less than a minute for the Peace Summit to implode.

As Carl launched a stream of arrows targeted at the remaining shapeshifters, one thought struck him - the boss would have loved this.

How was this possible?

Their arrays had multiple layers of sail-safes, and every single member of the guards was regularly scanned after their experiences with the Church of Everlasting Dao. Yet they had both been infiltrated, and their defensive arrays had been turned off. They had been prepared for the natives to try something, but even Vilari hadn't expected to be outplayed to this degree.

The fraught emotions were causing a storm across the square, with the change coming too suddenly.

'I'll deal with the assault,' Joanna's voice echoed in Vilari's mind as the golden armor enclosed her.

The next moment, she shot toward the incoming tide of ghastly elites, and fifty golden streaks of lights joined her from hidden their positions at the edge of the courtyard. Soon after, a stream of elite warriors emerged from Fort Atwood, their auras soaring as they rushed to meet the avalanche of spectral warriors.

Chaos was quickly descending on the fortress, but the small spot in the center of the courtyard was an untouched lake of tranquility with three leaders and their retinues stuck at an impasse. Both the demons and the undead delegates had sealed themselves into protective bubbles, one in glistening gold and the other in dour black.

"Why are you doing this?" Vilari calmly asked as she released the locks to her spiritual power, causing her hair to dance in the air. "Why give up on the road toward survival?"

"Road toward survival?" Eomid's laugh emerged from the opaque shield. "Five years have passed and you're no closer to finding a solution than the day you arrived. If there is one thing the Kingdom of Raun understands, it's that death can arrive at any moment, and you need to seize the means to survive yourself. And that is exactly what we did."

Sensing the previously normal-looking souls of the Fort Atwood guards slowly coming apart as they conjured those large shimmering runes, Vilari realized what was going on. She didn't understand the theories behind what had been done, but she did recognize the flavor of spiritual fluctuations.

“You managed to contact the Undead Empire,” Vilari stated.

“You think us fools, oblivious to the situation the undead of the Zecia Sector finds themselves in? A singular faction with enemies in every direction. I do not know why you refuse to join the Undead Empire, but why drag the Kingdom of Raun into your madness? Even if we survive, we will end up being cleansed sooner or later,” the ghost king growled.

By this point, even a fool would be able to sense the growing fluctuations from within the black barrier. They weren't just staying put - the three Ghost Kings were preparing for war.

“So yes, we managed to contact the elders of the Undead Empire. They were quite enraged to hear about an unaffiliated faction such as yours ousting their incursion, and they provided us with the methods to infiltrate your fortress,” Eomid said.

“You created chimeral souls, sacrificing hundreds of warriors to copy the souls of our people,” Vilari frowned. “This borders on the unorthodox.”

“We can sacrifice everything for survival, including ourselves,” Eomid countered.

A peak E-grade spectral warrior suddenly appeared next to her before the Ghost King had even finished his sentence, his dagger already shooting toward her throat. However, Vilari only glanced at the ghost as she activated **[Woeful Dejection]** releasing a burst of compressed Miasma and Mental energy, and the Branch of Hollow Sensations.

A shriek echoed out as the ghost was blasted over a thousand meters until it slammed into the outer walls whose runes had already gone dark. Its incorporeal form dissipated into a hazy cloud that would soon turn into nothingness. There were no odds of the elite warrior reforming; its soul had already been disintegrated before it hit the wall.

“Are you part of this?” Vilari asked as she turned her gaze toward the demons, many of whom shied away from her stare now that she had unleashed her aura.

She knew what the demons called her; The Soulbright Witch. She wasn't too fond of the moniker, but it did serve its purpose in a tight situation like this. Besides, it was a lot better than her Lord's unfortunate title.

"We have no part in this scheme," Ra'Klid smiled from within the shimmering barrier. "We will let you deal with it before resuming our talks."

"Like the oriole," Ilvere swore as he gave the demons a scathing stare, the two massive boulders already accumulating force above his head. The demon's eyes turned to the elders standing behind the young chieftain, who also didn't make a move. Their only change was taking out their weapons and setting up a defensive perimeter in case the shield was broken. "Is the council of the same opinion?"

"Our chieftain's will is the will of the tribes," the shaman nodded. "You speak of leadership, so prove yourself worthy. If you cannot even deal with a challenge to your rule, how could we possibly entrust the lives of the Mavai to you?"

Ilvere only snorted in response, before turning his gaze at the thick barrier the undead elites had enclosed themselves inside. *'What should we do? I won't be able to take this thing apart in the short run, and the bastards are clearly up to something.'*

'We cannot discern exactly how these runes are blocking the circuits,' Ciru's voice joined Ilvere's as the Volor Clansman activated his node of Vilari's **[Spirit Council]**, sending the message from his position deep underground. *'We have activated the back-up routes and array-breakers, but there is some odd resistance that can't be simply bypassed. I think...'*

'Large-scale sacrifice,' Vilari confirmed. *'Each of those runes contains the will of thousands of sacrificed ghosts. Their latent will impacts everything around us. It can be considered a faith-based attack.'*

A huge explosion erupted as Joanna was forced to unleash her **[Armament Zone]**, proof that these invading spectral warriors were the cream of the crop. Vilari was full of reluctance, knowing the implications of not being able to sway these

stubborn ghosts, but she knew she had to act to minimize the loss of life.

Hopefully, they could still get the demons to join them in a quick war in exchange for making the whole planet life-attuned, thus salvaging Lord Atwood's chances of becoming a Baron. She still hadn't managed to unearth the true secrets of her body, but she forcibly pushed her mental energy into her veins, allowing them to draw the spiritual array with her blood.

A hazy eye appeared above her head the next moment, mirroring her own unique set of eyes. She knew the ability was still just a hollow mimicry compared to what Lord Atwood had described, but it was proof that her hard work had started to bear fruit. Besides, the bloodline avatar was powered by a soul far more powerful than what her body's previous owner ever controlled, giving it a greater boost.

"So be it," Vilari sighed. "Since you chose this path, you will have to bear the price."

The next moment, the pitch-black halo appeared behind her back as she activated [**Circle of Decay**], and the matching gate appeared above the undead delegate's barrier.

Two strikes suddenly slammed into the miasmatic shield, one a world-breaking strike from Ilvere's boulders and another a beam of condensed darkness from Rhuger. The two attacks weren't enough to completely break through the barrier, but it was enough to cause cracks to appear.

"Despair," Vilari sighed, and desolation fell like rain from the sky.

The world lost its color as the rays of despair fell on the already damaged barrier. The demons quickly moved even further away, not daring to even look at the cascade of death and mental anguish taken corporeal form. It looked like the sun's rays peeking through a cloud on a hazy day, though the colors were inverted.

Vilari always felt the scene was extremely soothing, but she knew that looking at this attack was enough to create Heart

Demons among the weak-willed. She briefly wondered what her Lord would see if he looked upon the attack with his Draugr eyes. Would he see the same beauty as she did?

She shook her head, refocusing her attention on the barrier. Or rather the ghosts maintaining its function. One by one they fell, their minds dragged away to the abyss as Vilari infiltrated the safe zone through the cracks her captains had opened. A few more ghosts tried to bolster its defenses, but a second barrage arrived a moment later, providing Vilari with the opportunity to completely drown the insides with her despair.

Shrill screams echoed out as Vilari felt a series of bursts of kill energy. However, the flow suddenly stopped as a pulse rebuffed the rays coming from above. It was the other two Ancestral Ghosts who had made their move, stepping out from the barrier to deal with Vilari. In their hands, they had their unique spectral weapons, and they were already launching an opening salvo after temporarily dispelling the mental attack of **[Circle of Decay]**.

“Regret,” Vilari whispered as she pointed at the two warriors, and she felt the streaks on her cheeks cool down as two sigils appeared in front of her.

They flashed with sinister lights as they shot toward the Ghost Kings, and they passed straight through the attacks that were aimed at her life. However, she didn’t even spare those attacks a glance as she started drawing another sigil in her mind, one meant for Eomid who still hid inside the mist.

The two attacks were already slowing down, robbed of their vigor by Pika’s **[Deceleration Field]**. By the time they hit Rhuger’s **[Opaque Bulwark]**, they had already lost more than half of their force. They still managed to break through Rhuger’s defensive skill, but by that point, it only required a burst of mental energy to crush them.

Meanwhile, the sigils of her **[Final Asylum]** had already reached the two ghosts who finally realized what kind of danger they were in. This kind of mental prison was especially lethal to a spectral warrior, even if they were in the D-grade, and they desperately fought against the suction of the skill. If

they relented for even a moment, they would be trapped until they died or managed to exhaust the cage.

However, just as she was about to send a third and final asylum into the churning mists, Vilari sensed a fluctuation that unmistakably contained spatial ripples.

Short-distance teleportation? Vilari's eyes widened with alarm and she immediately turned to the pillar at the heart of the fort. A moment later, she sensed a burst of deathly energies, and she knew her fears were true. The true reason the ghosts had created those sacrificial beacons to deactivate their arrays was not to provide their army with a point of ingress. The army was just a diversion.

The real plan was to teleport Eomid into the heart of the fort, bypassing the spatial restrictions that were normally in place.

She immediately wanted to rush back and prevent the Ghost King from damaging the Nexus Hub, potentially trapping them on the Ensolus Continent without a supply line. However, the two other ghost kings held nothing back, clearly burning their life force as they destroyed the prison sigils before flashing over to block her path.

Fury turned into despair, and Vilari prepared to forcibly draw on her bloodline to instantly blast these two hegemon into nothingness, no matter the price.

'No need. This ends now,' a calm voice suddenly echoed in her mind, a voice both so familiar and distant that it felt like a dream.

And in the wake of the voice came a storm.

Chapter 840: A Storm Descends

Ra'Klid inwardly shuddered as the main gates of Fort Atwood swung open like the gates to the abyss, his 180 points in Luck telling him that lethal danger had descended upon this place. Budding trepidation rapidly transitioned into a primal fear as an aura of ultimate suppression blasted out from the interiors of the fort, absolutely drowning the whole courtyard in an instant.

For a moment, Ra'Klid felt as though he was back on the Southbend Steppes before the Integration, just an unproven warrior with five hundred He'Ruk Blooddancers bearing down on him atop their raptors. The feeling of being outmatched and outnumbered, of fear leaking through his pores from the impending doom.

He wasn't the only one who felt the change in the winds of war - how could you miss it? Fighting rapidly abated, with even Peak E-grade warriors struggling to simply stay upright from the storm of killing intent that unceasingly kept flooding the courtyard, a single source overwhelming thousands of veteran warriors.

What kind of monster was approaching? Who could emit such an aura of savagery and how many deaths must they have on their conscience?

A few flashes of light ripped through the air next, and the previously unbreakable runes conjured by the unholy ones crumbled into nothingness. Just like that, the only thing protecting the ghosts from the terrifying fortification of these outsiders had failed, but Ra'Klid barely registered as the runes on his scales hummed with delight.

“True Divinity,” the shaman whispered with ardent fervor shimmering in his eyes, and they both turned toward the source of both the aura of terror and the Dao of their origin.

It was a human male who came walking through the main gates of the fort, wearing a warrior’s robe in the same colors as the banners of these otherworlders. His appearance wasn’t anything special, except for being slightly more rugged than his thinner brethren. But while his appearance was average, his aura was not.

The air twisted around him as he walked, unable to contain the force of his conviction. It almost felt like the chaotic and impure energies of the Ensolus Continent were welcoming its sovereign, and a storm was rapidly kicking up in the sky. He was not doing anything after that initial salvo, yet he had somehow become the center point of the whole fort, his presence demanding the leaders’ full attention.

The pressure of staring down into the furious and Paka-addled eyes of his father in the Circle of Challenge was nothing compared to what he felt from standing in front of this man. Ra’Klid felt his own conviction falter as the man came closer, each step of his feeling like a hammer against his heart. Even though the human carried the aura of divinity, it felt different, and Ra’Klid even started wondering if they were on the wrong path.

“Breathe,” the old warrior to his side whispered, though Ra’Klid could see he was gripping his axe so deeply his claws had dug into his palm, causing tiny droplets of blood to fall on the ground.

Ra’Klid surreptitiously nodded in thanks to his old mentor and turned back toward the human who could be none other than Lord Atwood, the Deviant Asura who many presumed dead after being missing for years. They thought him just a mayfly, a burst of magnificence followed by irrelevance.

Foolish.

After the Soublight Witch had proclaimed herself a follower of the Deviant Asura years ago, Ra’Klid and his confidantes had done everything in their might to gather all the

intelligence they could. Even then, the recordings of his fight in front of the Tower of Eternity were nothing compared to being put face-to-face with the man.

The man in the recordings had essentially been a beast – powerful and unpredictable, lashing out at his surroundings. But the man in front of him was a true warrior, every movement perfectly in tune with the Heavens themselves. It even felt like the Deviant Asura had transcended the fabled Divine Warriors of legend, the hallowed masters whose strikes contained the will and faith of their whole tribe.

It might even surpass those legendary existences, transcending the most revered experts in Mavai History. How was it possible? How could someone improve to such a degree in a few short years? The Divine Warriors only reached their level after centuries of tempering, allowing them a few short decades of supremacy before their aging bodies failed to match their skill.

Was this what a peak genius in this so-called Zecia Sector looked like?

In one of his hands, the Deviant Asura held a beautifully crafted bone axe that told a story of blood and glory, instilled with a power that resonated with the very core of the Mavai. It was the same weapon as the one in the recordings, yet it seemed to have undergone almost as great a transformation as his master.

Yet Ra'Klid barely spared the weapon a glance, even if it was a treasure that would have made him drool in normal situations. As shocking as the axe was, it was nothing compared to what the man held in his other hand.

The old bastard Eomid.

The Ghost King was furiously struggling, yet the vise-like grip around his throat effortlessly locked him in place. Not only that, but some sort of plant had bound the spectral warrior as well, seemingly completely unbothered by the fact the warrior was an intangible spirit.

“My king!” Kantasta, the right-hand man of Eomid, screamed, and he turned into a river of blades as he rushed toward the Deviant Asura.

The man barely spared him a glance, his axe drawing a lazy arc that made Ra’Klid’s hair stand on end.

“Perfection!” Mondrik gasped, and Ra’Klid had to agree with his teacher.

He had never seen such a beautiful strike. It was simple, yet it was sublime, and Kantasta barely managed to avoid getting cut in two. It had barely contained any energy, yet it had exhausted all of a Peak E-grade warrior’s momentum. This was perfection, creating miracles with the smallest of movement, a world in one’s hand.

The ghost understood it was outmatched, and it immediately conjured a scimitar-wielding apparition above his head, most likely his ultimate skill. However, it was futile. With a small step and a follow-up strike flowing as smooth as water, the elite assassin was cut down as though he was a redback sog bred for slaughter.

Seeing his confidante being killed prompted another serious burst of resistance,

“It failed!” Eomid croaked.

“And now the price has to be paid,” Lord Atwood sighed.

“Wait!” the ghost screamed. “We can-”

But there was no waiting and no mercy with the Deviant Asura. Eomid should have understood as much after feeling the terrifying storm of blood that was ingrained in the man’s aura. Even then, Ra’Klid’s eyes turned to saucers as the powerful Ancestral Ghost was ripped apart as though he was made from brittlegrass, only his Cultivator’s Core remaining. The core entered the man’s Spatial Treasure, while the rest of his body started dissipating.

It was obviously not just raw Strength, though Ra’Klid knew the man had more than enough to spare. It was a level of Dao that perhaps only the Soulblight Witch could match on this world. A flood of pure life had stormed into Eomid’s

intangible body, overwhelming his defenses and effectively shredding his soul.

Just like that, one of the peak warriors of this world had fallen in such an ignoble manner.

In their plans to take out Eomid, Mondrik had estimated that at least three councilors would have to sacrifice their lives, yet the Deviant Asurahad ended him like it was nothing. How was this possible? Even if he had managed to enter the D-grade since disappearing, the difference shouldn't be this big.

He had no answer to that mystery, but he could only thank the lucky stars he listened to Mondrik's and Vakra's advice to stay neutral in case either of the opposing sides made a move during this meeting. What if the Mavai actually joined the unholy ones in an attempt to take out the Soublight Witch? It might have been him being ripped apart just now instead of Eomid.

"You know who I am, this insurrection ends now. Anyone who doesn't comply will die, and their whole race will be implicated," The Deviant Asura's said, his voice empowered by a killing intent that sent shivers down Ra'Klid's spine.

Ra'Klid almost hoped the unclean ones had some more cards up their sleeves, allowing the Mavai to get a better picture of the man who had become a legend in the Base Town of the Tower of Eternity. Unfortunately, the cowardly ghosts seemed to have lost all their fighting will upon seeing the Ghost King getting torn apart.

"Mercy! We surrender!" Aouvi shrieked as he fell to his knees, and Carva immediately followed suit, meaning all three of the Ghost Kings had either died or surrendered by now.

A moment later, every single ghost in the courtyard was kneeling, waiting on the judgment of the axeman. Ra'Klid's eyes glimmered as he looked at the scene, his mind briefly turning to his father, drunk and belligerent as he shouted at his harem, believing he had been at the peak of the world. Ra'Klid shook his head.

If the Mavai wanted to survive in this world where monsters like the Deviant Asura walked the lands, they needed to adapt.

The previously chaotic courtyard was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop as Zac looked at the sea of kneeling specters, the air around him still flickering from the ripped-apart wraith. He was shocked at how quickly these guys gave in, his eyes even thinning in suspicion they were planning something else.

Still, he couldn't believe his luck.

He had planned on being present for the summit mentioned in the reports just in case, though in hiding so that he could observe both the performance of his people and the response of these natives. Unfortunately, his trip to the Underworld had taken longer than expected, making him run a couple of minutes late.

However, he didn't expect things to go south so quickly, even though the missive had mentioned the risk of things falling through was quite high. Zac wasn't surprised, considering the reward Vilari could choose upon conquering this planet - to completely drain this world's World Core and use the energy to push Earth to Middle E-grade.

How could anyone feel confident about surrendering in such a situation?

Even then, he hadn't expected to run into one of the ghosts, a D-grade one at that, the moment he appeared on the Ensolus continent. He had somehow made it all the way to the teleportation room and was trying to tamper with the Nexus Hub using some foreign contraption. Luckily, the ghost had been just as surprised as Zac when he appeared, allowing Zac to thwart the attempt and capture the man in one go.

Honestly, things went a lot smoother than Zac could ever expect, considering the man was a Hegemon. The ghost didn't even have a chance to activate a single skill before he was bound by Vivi and flooded with the Branch of the Kalpataru, completely disrupting his energy flow. At first, Zac thought his training in the Orom World had made him even stronger than

he realized, but he soon understood the real reason after he felt the ghost's attempts at breaking free.

The ghost's stores of Miasma were far greater than Zac's own reserves, but he was not able to use a huge amount of it at any given moment. Either his foundations were damaged, or he had not properly recovered from forcing a breakthrough. Because there was no way he had reached Hegemony the normal way.

After all, the ghost was only supported by two Middle Stage Dao Fragments. He must have forcibly pushed himself into the D-grade using some sort of unorthodox means or by eating some treasure that had appeared on this newly integrated world.

Becoming even a weak Hegemon would normally be enough to deal with most E-grade elites as long as you had the right tools, but it wasn't enough to deal with someone like Zac. Perhaps if the ghost had a high-quality War Regalia or the time to gain a couple of levels it'd have been a different story, but this ghost wasn't even a match to Aia Ouro, Hegemon or not.

Let alone to Zac himself, who sported a trio of Dao Branches and a slew of titles to boost his attributes far beyond the norm of a Peak E-grade cultivator.

Now, the question was how to deal with these natives. He had read the thoughts and motivations behind Vilari's and Joanna's plans for the Ensolus Continent and this World, giving him some insights that not even his elite soldiers had. However, there were also a lot of things he didn't have a complete grasp on. He guessed that he would have to play things by the ear.

A flash of golden light, and Joanna decked in golden armor appeared before him, joined by a squad of nine other Valkyries who all were somewhat familiar to him.

"You're back," Joanna breathed, her eyes practically sparkling. "We knew you'd make it."

"I'm back," Zac smiled. "I'm sorry it took so long."

"As long as you-" Joanna started, but a sudden wail disrupted the quiet that had gripped the courtyard.

Zac frowned and looked over, seeing it was one of his guards who had collapsed on the ground, tightly grasping the rune that had appeared on her forehead. A few warriors rushed over, but they weren't sure whether to help or execute the guard screaming at the top of her lungs.

“What have you done to my people?” Zac frowned as he turned to the two remaining D-grade ghosts.

“Alive!” the ghost said. “They're all alive!”

“What?” Zac frowned as he looked at the unmoving bodies strewn across the floor, either dead from forming those runs or dead from the Atwood Empire soldiers striking them down.

“These are not your people. They are bodies purchased through an incomplete mercantile license connected to the Undead Empire,” the ghost explained, the words practically spilling out of her mouth in her hurry to salvage the situation. “They were modified to look like your guards and then infused with chimeral souls made from our own people. However, for the aura to completely fool the scans, your guards had to be alive and linked to these warriors.”

“What happened to them now that these chimeral souls are collapsing?” Zac grunted as he crossed the courtyard with a flash, appearing next to Vilari.

The mentalist didn't say anything, only slightly smiled as she patted his arm, almost as though confirming he was really there. Zac smiled back in her as he looked into her unique eyes, but this unfortunately wasn't the time for a proper reunion. He had to deal with these ghosts before they did something stupid again.

“They should have gotten a weak backlash, but the connections are not strong enough to harm them,” the other ghost added, shying away a bit upon Zac's sudden appearance. “In fact, they are not far away. With your permission, we can call for our people to lead them here.”

“You're quite helpful all of a sudden,” Vilari smiled from the side before she turned to Rhuger. “Get a report of the

surroundings, and try to contact the outer forts. The ghosts might be attacking our border guards as we speak.”

“There is no such thing happening,” the Ghost Queen hurriedly assured.

“Why should I believe you?” Zac snorted.

“Survival above all. Our plan was like this from the start. If this gambit succeeded, your people would be cut off from your planet. We would launch a full-scale war, hopefully dragging these demons with us to deal with you, the greatest threat, before turning on each other,” the Ghost King explained, hiding nothing. “If we failed, we would immediately surrender. If my liege so desires, execute everyone here, but we beg you to leave a route to survival for our citizens.”

“I hope my liege can appreciate the situation we found ourselves in,” the other ghost added. “If we didn’t approach the Undead Empire, we would’ve met our demise in 100 years.”

Zac was still not willing to just forgive these ghosts after they launched an attack on his people, but they did have a point. Their situation wasn’t the same as the Mavai tribes. They could essentially find a place within any larger faction of Zecia even if they weren’t placed within the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde.

Conversely, the Kingdom of Raun would be annihilated by any faction except the Undead Empire.

‘We have told them of ‘Mr. Black’, but it is unclear if they believed us when we said a pureblood Draugr leads the Einherjar,’ Vilari’s voice once more entered his mind.

“What are your names?”

“Aouvi, my liege,” the ghost looking like an old bearded man hurriedly introduced himself.

“Carva, my liege,” the regal-looking spectral queen followed.

“Eomid broke the truce today, but there is still a road of survival for the Kingdom of Raun,” Zac slowly said as he looked at the subdued ghosts. “However, if you and the Mavai Tribes want to save this planet, a price has to be paid.”

Chapter 841: The Path Forward

Saying that he could save the planet was pretty bombastic, but Zac was somewhat certain he could make it happen. The reason he was late was just to make sure he could put forth his proposal. But first, he needed to make these flighty ghosts and the demons trust him.

“You don’t have to worry about this being some ploy. I don’t need to play any games - if I wanted to, I could simply eradicate both you and the demons now that I’m back,” Zac added. “My strength is my truth.”

His words could be seen as a threat, yet he could sense both the demons and some of the ghosts relaxing somewhat. A few of the demons even looked at him with reverent eyes, their stares creeping him out a little bit. Then again, he had read up a bit on the Mavai, and he knew that his Branch of the Kalpataru must be extremely attractive to a species whose elite warriors had Life-attuned constitutions.

A sudden shake that gripped the whole courtyard made Zac freeze in place, and he felt how the odd energies around him grow erratic. It was an extremely weird sensation, almost the opposite of the Twilight Ocean. There was both life and death in the air, yet they refused to mix. They were like two oils forming a chaotic and everchanging mix, where people had to wear specially designed arrays to cultivate.

In return for the chaos, the energy was weirdly animated, and it was apparently quicker to cultivate in this place than normal as long as you managed to filter the energy. For Zac himself, he could simply rely on the same method here as he did in the Twilight Ocean; use one half of the energy for himself while his **[Void Heart]** transformed the other half.

“Now, let’s finish this summit before this blasted planet falls apart,” Zac sighed.

“You are the Lord of the Atwood Empire we’ve been hearing about. The Deviant Asura,” the leading demon said with a glimmer in his eyes. “I am delighted to finally meet you, warchief. I am Ra’Klid, the current leader of the Mavai. My son visited the Tower of Eternity three years ago. You are the one who left that tree in the center?”

“That was me,” Zac nodded as his Tower of Eternity-title appeared in front of him, drawing loud exclamations from demons and ghosts alike.

Most likely, this was the most powerful title anyone on this world had ever seen.

“They really spoke the truth. It is an honor standing in front of such a warrior. My shameful son only reached the latter half of the third floor. He said he couldn’t imagine how someone could reach the ninth,” the demon praised before he looked around. “There is another one, yes? Some king of the undead?”

Zac inwardly laughed, feeling that this demon was a bit interesting. Ra’Klid even reminded him a bit of Ogras; a crafty mind surrounded by meatheads. Not that demons were stupid, it was just that most of their subraces preferred straightforward communication – like an axe through a skull.

“Arcaz is dealing with some other matters, but we are both back,” Zac said before turning to the ghosts. “For now, send your soldiers back and have them return my people. Meanwhile, we’ll resume this meeting.”

‘We don’t seem to have any casualties from this engagement, only a lot of wounded,’ Vilari’s voice appeared in Zac’s mind again. ‘Looking at it now, it really seems they were planning on holding back until Eomid disrupted the connection to Earth. No unforgivable sins have been committed either over the past years.’

Zac glanced in Vilari’s direction, knowing what the mentalist was getting at. She wanted him to go easy on the Undead,

most likely so that they could become an asset down the road. Zac wasn't usually in the business of just forgiving someone who attacked his people, but he ultimately trusted in her judgment.

A moment later, the spectral army was gone, leaving a befuddled guard who wasn't sure what to do. However, after a few barks from the remaining leaders, order was restored. A new table had replaced the one that had been destroyed, and the leaders of the three factions once more sat down, though Zac was the one who represented his side this time around.

“So, as you probably know, I am Zachary Atwood, ruler of the Atwood Empire. I have just returned after a cultivation journey, so I am not up to date with all the details of this world. But I know the broad strokes,” Zac began.

It turned out that his real identity had finally been exposed not long after he left, and all of the Zecia Sector knew his surname was Atwood rather than Piker. It was one of the first things mentioned in the missives, and his people believed it was the result of some unaffiliated citizen of Earth choosing to spill the beans in return for a payout upon visiting the Tower of Eternity.

His name being exposed was honestly a matter of time, and it ultimately didn't matter. Zac had already confirmed there were no curses or karmic skills that worked from just having a name. Besides, he could still keep reinventing himself every time he left Earth by changing his face. It was, however, a reminder that not even Earthlings could be trusted, and he would have to make his preparations watertight for when Earth finally got assimilated.

Until he reached Monarchy himself, Earth would be a weak point of his, and he needed to make sure it was protected or hidden away.

“This world is about to collapse, and there are no easy solutions. The Kingdom of Raun chose war,” Zac said as he glanced at the wraiths who shuddered nervously. “Meanwhile, the Mavai chose to sit on the sidelines. Trust is the biggest issue, where you are unable to believe in our promises.”

“There was no consensus,” Carva, the Ghost Queen, hurriedly said. “We wanted to avoid war if possible, but with our whole race on the line...”

“No matter. I can understand your position, seeing as I have undead under my banner as well. I probably would have made the same choice as Eomid did. After all, I was the one who personally slaughtered most of the factions who invaded Earth a decade ago, when we were the ones in your current situation,” Zac said, which seemed to have calmed the ghosts down a bit.

Zac extending an olive branch didn't mean he had completely put the matter of the attack behind him. He had faith that Vilari and the others would've pulled through even with this scheme, considering Nexus Hubs weren't something you could just break willy-nilly.

He could also sense the powerful spiritual fluctuations coming from the mentalist next to him. Knowing she possessed two Dao Branches, she should have eventually been able to defeat these forcibly raised Hegemons. However, doing so in an instant might have required some drastic means akin to him using his remnants.

Zac couldn't bear to see her overdraft and damage her soul after what he went through with Alea. Even if she survived, something that could harm her cultivation or even her potential. Him stepping in like that might have cost some warriors breakthroughs in the heat of battle, but the Multiverse didn't lack deadly encounters. The safety of his people came first, and he couldn't just sit idly by even after capturing Eomid.

Of course, Zac would have people investigate this insurrection further, no matter how subservient these two Hegemons acted right now. There might be more instigators hiding in the shadows, ready to strike at a moment's weakness or when he was off-world dealing with his other matters.

That was true for both sides, not only the ghosts.

The demons had chosen to put up a smiling front, but Zac would be a fool to completely trust them. They would be

monitored just the same, to make sure there were no threats to him, his people, or Port Atwood. But no matter what he found, he wouldn't condemn a whole population just based on the actions of a few leaders at the top.

Part of it was that he did sympathize with their situation since Earth went through the same thing just a few years before them. In a sense, they were companions in suffering. But there was another reason this incursion still wasn't over; Port Atwood desperately needed soldiers. War was coming, and Earth would not even make up a single squad in an inter-sector war.

The bigger and more powerful his faction grew, the better positioned they would all be down the road.

The population of these two factions was slightly below Earth's, but their civilizations grew up with Cosmic Energy and Miasma. So even if their numbers couldn't match the more populous Humans, their armies were larger, even if Zac included the Zhix hordes. These armies weren't too impressive right now since they still relied on the low-quality heritages they had formed pre-integration, but with time, that would change.

Just like the forces of Port Atwood.

"Your hesitation is justified. I got the quest as well when I entered this world," Zac continued as he looked around. "With one thought, we could drain this whole planet if given control. And even if we honor our deal, there are no guarantees we'll be able to save this world. But what if I can save this world right now, before you even need to make a decision?"

He was talking about the twinned Realm Spirits in his Spatial Ring. Three days had passed already since he returned, yet he only appeared on the Ensolus Continent just now. It was all because he needed to visit Earth's core. Reading about the shakes that threatened to rip this world apart was pretty ominous, and Zac was worried the same thing would happen back home sooner or later.

If he had to choose between saving Earth and this planet, he would choose Earth every time. However, Earth had been life-

death attuned even longer than this one, yet not a single issue had cropped up. It made Zac wonder if the System had done something differently on Earth.

The journey wasn't very complicated thanks to Triv. The butler had used his incorporeal form to go deeper and deeper to help Port Atwood investigate the state of Earth, and he had installed teleporters in the depths. It was too troublesome and expensive to place one beneath the magmatic mantle, but Zac still managed to reach over ten times deeper than the Underworld in just a few minutes.

The actual core was quite far from the deepest outpost, but he had only needed to spend just over a day in the mantle before he got his answer. The Twinned Realm Spirits had stirred, and it was followed by a sense of fear. Fear coming from the depths of the planet.

It turned out that Zac had risked it all for nothing, with Earth's situation already dealt with by the System or by chance. There was already a spirit residing in Earth's core, making the twinned spirits in his ring superfluous. After all, a native spirit was probably a superior fit for Earth compared to implanting the two Realm Spirits he had picked up.

Thus, he had a simple solution for this world, one that shouldn't put Earth at risk, considering the twinned spirits' dubious origin. He was somewhat certain Qi'Sar had really died back when the Twilight Ocean collapsed, but who knew what kind of means that ancient being had. What if a wisp of Qi'Sar's soul hid inside the Realm Spirits, and he infused them with his homeworld? That would be akin to inviting disaster into his home.

It was better to use it on this new world, especially since it would fall apart if nothing changed anyway. Sure, the Realm Spirits might turn into some powerful life-death item upon their death, but if Zac was unwilling to use the treasure on Earth, he was even more hesitant about using them on himself.

Zac had been looking for a world to place his Limited Trial on anyway, the reward for his Sovereignty-quest chain. This way, he could even gauge outsiders' reaction to a life-death world

while he used powerful arrays to obscure Earth. If it turned into a neutral trading hub akin to Twilight Harbor, then great.

If this place was targeted because of it, then he would have to tighten the security around Earth even further.

“What!” Ra’Klid blurted, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“Warchief, you have the means to heal this world? Without the quest of the Ruthless Heavens?”

“With both elements remaining?” the Ghost King added.

“That’s right,” Zac nodded. “I have found a solution to what ails this world, a way for it to stay on as is, without one element swallowing the other. That way, the main source of conflict is dealt with, and we can all look toward the future instead.”

“How is it possible?” Ra’Klid asked with glimmering eyes.

“That, I cannot tell you. It involves some high-grade secrets that will only harm everyone involved if spread. But you should see the results quickly after a short transitional phase,” Zac said.

Honestly, Zac had no idea if what he said was true. What did he know about Realm Spirits? If not for there being one in the Twilight Ocean, he still wouldn’t have known they existed. However, the shakes should stop as soon as the realm spirits integrated with the core. Hopefully, the process would be quick and painless, which would allow him to quickly move on to his other matters.

“What are your requests?” Aouvi asked, immediately getting to the crux of the matter.

“Nothing comes for free,” Zac nodded. “You cannot imagine the cost of stabilizing a life-death world. Truthfully, this whole planet is only worth a fraction compared to the solution I prepared.”

“Essentially, Vilari’s offer still stands,” Zac said. “Both your factions will swear allegiance to the Atwood Empire, and we will name this planet Ensolus after this central continent. The details of the deal will still be negotiated by Vilari and her people as they are better versed in those matters.”

“Why are you doing this?” Carva hesitated. “If it is so expensive to heal this world...”

“Two reasons,” Zac said. “First, I want to turn this planet into the front-facing side of my Empire, a commercial hub that outsiders can visit after the Assimilation.”

“While your world will hide in the shadows,” Ra’Klid concluded.

“Exactly,” Zac said, not bothering to hide anything. “My identity is sensitive, so I want to hide my planet until I have the strength to protect it. This will shift some of the danger to Ensolus. However, with risk come opportunities. This can drastically improve the prosperity of this world. I will even place an extremely valuable inheritance site on this planet, something your warriors can visit in exchange for a fee. These kinds of things can turn planets into money-making machines that benefit all their citizens.”

“I guess it’s not much different compared to a normal assimilation,” Carva hesitated. “We do not possess the means to hide our world in either case.”

Zac only nodded in response before continuing. “As for the second reason, war is coming to Zecia.”

“I am not sure how much your people have managed to find out about the bigger world, but you should have been able to gather some snippets of information by now. Simply put, a massive war is about to break out. Standing to the side is not an option, so I need to bolster my forces,” Zac said. “The war will break out before our Assimilation, meaning we will stand alone unless we join hands.”

“War against who?” Ra’Klid asked with confusion.

“I don’t know the details yet,” Zac said, glancing at Vilari.

“Something called a space gate has appeared in our sector, connecting our part of space with another one. Normally, it’s impossible to travel such distances, but this gate makes it possible. We do not yet know the details of these invaders either, but early indications are the whole sector will soon be embroiled in a massive struggle,” the mentalist explained.

“So, what is your answer?” Zac asked.

“The Kingdom of Raun has already surrendered,” Carva said with a bow. “We will accede to whatever demands you have, and we will pay restitution for our actions today. We will discuss the details with your followers.”

“Good,” Zac nodded. “And you don’t need to worry about the Undead Empire. Arcaz Black is a pureblood Draugr with connections of some of the peak clans of the Empire Heartlands. With one word from him, the Kavriel Clan of the Zecia Sector will invite the Kingdom of Raun with open arms, no questions asked.”

Once again, Zac was kind of stretching the truth. It all depended on Catheya’s performance after he fled the Twilight Ascent. If all worked out, she would have spoken for him with the Umbri’Zi Clan and perhaps even the Abyssal Shores. In either case, it would be effortless for them to make some arrangements with a Draugr border clan that could barely be considered pureblooded.

Catheya and he had worked out a few methods to communicate through relay after he returned to Zecia, but he hadn’t been able to check things out yet. Besides, he needed to plan some countermeasures before trying to reconnect with the Draugr Scion. After all, there was a distinct possibility they chose to place the blame of the chaos in the Twilight Harbor on him, an unaffiliated Draugr.

Perhaps some Monarch was lying in wait the moment Zac went to check his messages.

“You lead by strength, and your Dao carries the true divinity of legend,” Ra’Klid added after exchanging a few looks with the elders next to him. “We have no issues joining under your banner the moment this world is healed, provided you continue to lead with truth and honor.”

“Then today’s meeting is over,” Zac nodded, happy things were dealt with so quickly.

This was why Zac made such a grand entrance, putting his Dao and Killing Intent on full blast to the point he even

activated [**Spiritual Void**]. With some shock and awe, a lot of annoyances could be side-stepped. “Both your delegations are welcome to stay either here or camp outside while we iron out the details of this merger. After the quakes have stopped, I will visit you both, and you will officially join the Atwood Empire.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are,” Vilari smiled from the side. “Your future paths just grew quite a lot wider.”

Chapter 842: Prelude to War

The two groups of delegates looked quite eager, though it was no doubt at the prospect of these ominous earthquakes finally abating rather than joining some recently-formed empire. Zac didn't mind. Certainly, he would have preferred willing and wholeheartedly loyal followers, but he wasn't so naïve as to believe these races would follow him based on some agreement after years of war.

Things didn't change so quickly. But give it a few decades, where dissidents were quietly removed, and they should have accepted these new circumstances. After a few millennia, few would even remember life before the Atwood Empire.

Until then, he would have to make sure their actions were loyal even if their hearts were not.

“Should you change your mind after I've spent a fortune on fixing this planet, I will see it as an act of war. I will keep chopping off heads until a representative who is willing to join the Atwood Empire steps forward,” Zac said as he looked back and forth. “The treatment of a subjugated force will naturally differ from one joining willingly. That is all.”

This was the best solution Zac could think of in short order, the one that would result in the least bloodshed. He was no shrewd politician, so he could only use the method he knew – force. However, he hoped that proving himself by infusing the Twin Spirits before taking over the planet would foster some goodwill that would lessen the problems down the road.

Not much later, a scout report said that a group of humans had been spotted, a bit gaunt but otherwise unscathed, who'd be back within a few hours. It looked like the Ghost Kings hadn't lied before. There was not much else to say at that point, and the two groups of delegates returned to their armies camped outside for the day.

Zac walked back into the fort with Vilari and the other leaders of Port Atwood in tow. Soon enough, they retreated to the conference room originally meant for the peace summit while others dealt with the fallout outside.

“Sorry to throw a wrench in your plans,” Zac smiled when they were finally alone.

“I’m ashamed,” Vilari said as she bowed deeply. “We used so many resources, yet we had to rely on you to deal with the mess we had created.”

“I’ve read the reports,” Zac said. “You expended a lot of resources ousting the other factions, including the Undead Empire. It’s no surprise the locals had time to organize, especially with their spiritual heritage.”

“This is my mistake,” Vilari once more said. “I-“

“No, you did the right thing,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “It’s not a matter of efficiency, it’s a matter of principle. It would have affected morale if we started killing natives so soon after we went through the same thing.”

“Are you okay?” Joanna cut in. “We’ve been worried something happened. We have been trying to find a way to reach that Twilight Harbor but without any luck.”

“Don’t bother,” Zac grunted as he sat down at the table. “It blew up.”

“What?!” Vilari blurted, a rare display of losing her footing as a mentalist. “How could such a place blow up? The harbor alone should be able to contend in power with half the Zecia sector.”

The others were wide-eyed as well, and some looked at Zac like he was a monster surviving something like that.

“Well, it turns out the Eveningtide Asura is still alive and well,” Zac said as he gave a shortened version of what happened in the Twilight Harbor and Twilight Ocean, while glossing over the parts that involved his secrets.

“Amazing,” Ilvere sighed. “It’s these kinds of experiences that are needed to reach the top? I think I’ll stay on as a guard

captain.”

“Autarchy... B-grade,” Joanna muttered with a glimmer in her eyes. “It’s so distant.”

“It’s unprecedented in this sector,” Vilari nodded. “But if the Eveningtide Asura could do it, so can young master.”

The Valkyries nodded as though it was a matter of course, but the others were not so convinced. Even Hegemony was a distant dream for someone who was born on a D-grade world, while Monarchy required you to subvert fate. Autarchy was not even a dream, something impossible to accomplish the frontier, let alone a weak sector like Zecia. Opportunities like the one Alvod Jondir seized didn’t grow on trees.

“And you found the solution for Ensolus when you raided that treasury?” Joanna asked curiously. “Isn’t it better to use it on Earth?”

“That was why I took the risk and snatched it in the first place,” Zac nodded. “But it won’t work. I visited the core of Earth before coming here. It turns out our homeworld already has something similar. It might be a result of the System protecting the planet. Funny enough, I got the realm spirits just days after you accepted the incursion. I wonder if the System knew I’d get them and arranged this planet.”

“The Ruthless Heavens has always shown consideration for its chosen,” Ilvere said, and Rhuger nodded in agreement.

“That was over four years ago,” Joanna said with confusion. “What happened next? Did you visit the Undead Empire?”

“Hardly. I got swallowed by a space fish when I escaped,” Zac sighed, and then told them about the Orom and how he was trapped there for years. However, he changed the nature of his escape by saying that the fire golem’s attacked caused spatial tears in the Orom World, and he had simply jumped through one.

“Death is waiting around every corner in the multiverse,” Joanna muttered. “How is one supposed to grow when monstrosities multiple grades higher can appear at any time?”

“That’s just it, lass,” Ilvere grunted. “Everyone will have to make a choice. You can stay on your homeworld and make steady progress, but you will never reach beyond the limits of the planet. Or you can take the risk to step into a vaster world, provided you have the prerequisite power and opportunities. You will most likely die from this path; only a few people like young master will rise while billions fall.”

Joanna nodded in agreement, her face a bit downcast. Zac could only sigh, unable to offer any consolation except a pat on her shoulder. What Ilvere was saying was true. His pouring resources over the people of Port Atwood could only push them so far. Not only that, but the more they relied on outside help, the less likely they were to rise to prominence.

You needed to take risks to gain power.

Even then, there was a matter of even having the qualifications to take the risk. Not everyone had his ability to travel freely. Joanna, for example, was locked to Earth unless she asked for his help. And even if she ventured out to dangerous areas in the Zecia Sector, she would most likely end up as fertilizer to someone else’s path.

Part of it was simple statistics. If you joined ten medium-risk adventures with a 30% mortality rate, you only had a few percent chance of walking out alive. If you joined certain-death events like the cataclysmic Twilight Harbor or the Orom’s culling, you were essentially screwed if you didn’t have something unique to fall back on.

That was the second part of the issue – the Multiverse was not equal.

This wasn’t a video game, there wasn’t balance in the sense that everyone had the same chance to reach the peak.

Certainly, some people like Alvod Jondir managed to rise to their current heights by finding some supreme treasure. But while some could reforge their futures through a stroke of luck, most people relied on heritage.

Zac relied on both.

It was undeniable that he had braved greater dangers than anyone else on Earth, but a big reason he could do that was his background. If not for his unique bloodline, he would have died ten times over already. If not for Leandra's clan implanting him with the Duplicity core, Zac would not even have survived Mhal's attack when he was injected with the Draugr sample.

"There's no need to compare yourself to others. Cultivation is an individual journey," Zac eventually said as he looked around the room. "And I can see that you all have made great strides."

It wasn't empty praise. Six years was neither short nor long, but it had clearly been enough to reforge the core group of the Port Atwood elites. Their auras were thick and condensed, proving they hadn't just pushed their levels with the help of treasures. There was both experience and hard work behind their auras, something secluded cultivation couldn't nurture.

"The Ensolus Continent has provided a lot of opportunities," Vilari smiled.

"Our last attempt was a bit wretched," Ilvere said with a wry smile. "But this time we got our money's worth. Uh, young master's money's worth."

"And I believe the greatest opportunity still remains," Vilari added.

"The Ensolus Temples?" Zac asked, referring to the mysterious ruins at the center of the continent, after which this continent, and now World, got its name.

"The Ensolus Temples," Vilari nodded. "We have only managed to enter one since its seal was broken-down, but the manuals inside drastically improved our heritage. If you manage to crack open the others, there might be even greater treasures waiting within."

"For now, I have no interest in seizing those things," Zac said. "You have worked for years to secure them, so you keep working on it. I'll try to help out if I can, but right now I have

a lot of things on my plate. I'm running a bit behind schedule after getting stuck like that."

Exploring some ancient temples, which Vilari guessed might even predate the System, was obviously an interesting concept, but he really had too much to do at the moment. The temples weren't going anywhere anyway, and they seemed nigh-impenetrable judging by the reports. Judging by the reports, it might require the strength of a powerful Hegemon to break open those things.

If his people still hadn't managed to crack them open before the Assimilation, he'd definitely give it a go. But otherwise, he wanted to leave this opportunity for them to explore.

"Running behind?" Joanna muttered before her eyes lit up. "Are you breaking through?!"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I'm not in a hurry in that regard. It will be a couple of years before I take that step."

"That long?" Joanna said with surprise. "After seeing your display, I figured you were right at the cusp."

"Our lives are measured in millennia by this point," Zac smiled, still having some trouble coming to terms with that concept. "I don't want to rush things like I did for my last breakthrough. I want to shore up my foundations a bit first."

"It's not quite that simple, I'm afraid," Ilvere sighed. "The war is really coming closer, it was not just a sales pitch. We need some Hegemons to take charge. If not you, someone else."

"I read some of it in the reports," Zac nodded. "Have you found out anything else?"

"There still hasn't been any official response from the peak factions, but the rumor mill is in full spin," Joanna answered.

"The top factions are building huge fortresses, each one as large as a planet from what I'm told. Apparently, the invaders are already here, though they are few in numbers, and they still haven't left the heart of the Million Gates Territory."

"The Million Gates Territory?" Zac grimaced.

Between the warnings of the Ogre at the Big Axe Coliseum and Catheya, they had long known that something was brewing. But Zac didn't have any specifics until now, and learning that the Million Gates Territory was at the heart of it all was definitely not good for his plans. Would he have to dodge murderous invaders at every turn when he went to pick up Ogras?

Would it even be possible if he delayed too much?

"Do we know anything about what kind of people the invaders are?" Zac asked.

"That kind of intelligence still hasn't been made public," Ilvere said. "But going by the response of the peak factions, it will be a tough fight. Otherwise, the other empires would have left the Allbright Empire to fend for themselves. They have to fear that the whole sector will fall."

"Conflict," Zac sighed.

"We got an early warning thanks to you, but even common factions are starting to become aware something is happening," Ilvere added. "The price of cultivation resources is steadily climbing as everyone scrambles to make last-minute breakthroughs. The auctions are completely void of top-quality treasures by now. The same goes for things like arrays, talismans, and pills."

"Even if we're not conscripted, some of us have to go early," Joanna added. "We need to accumulate contribution points for our planet."

"What's that now?" Zac asked.

"We need a few Hegemons to rise before the war reaches Port Atwood," Vilari explained. "We have gathered information about sanctioned wars for years now, and it is more akin to an incursion than a normal struggle. If it was just a conflict between two factions, only those at the top would matter. But when the System controls the events, even E-grade warriors can participate and gather Contribution Points."

"The System will set up graded battlegrounds and contested worlds, lessening the danger considerably," Joanna added.

“With the quality of our gear and resources, we have a good chance to perform well even if we still lack experience. However, our survival hinges on being able to nurture warriors with the credentials to become captains and commanders. If we lack these kinds of leaders, we’ll have to take orders from some outsider, which could mean being used as cannon fodder.”

“The System seems to be extremely rigid when it comes to war,” Vilari sighed. “Break the chain of command, and you will face harsh consequences. Of course, it’s within limits, where a nefarious or incompetent leader would similarly come under scrutiny. But that won’t do us much good if we’ve already been wiped out because of a command we couldn’t refuse.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully, feeling the news was a mix of good and bad. Good in the sense the risk of his people being wiped out by some random Monarch was a lot lower this way. Bad in the sense that their foundations were still lacking – the war was coming too quickly.

“Leaders,” Zac muttered. “Is it skill or strength? I mean I think I have qualifications on the former to become some captain at least, but I don’t know anything about tactics.”

“There are multiple variables behind the System’s appointments, from what we can gather,” Vilari explained. “First and foremost is strength. Secondly, nobility seems to be a big factor in who gets handed command. For this, we have a good advantage, with you on the cusp of becoming a Baron.”

“I am?” Zac blurted and opened his quest screen.

Still nothing new, except for the incursion quest he got upon arriving on Ensolus.

“You will become a Baron the moment you control more than one planet,” Vilari smiled. “You might even be awarded a title considering you’re still E-grade.”

“There’s such a good thing?” Zac whistled.

It looked like controlling a faction was useful in more ways than just having people gather resources for cultivation. There

was better treatment from the System and even direct boosts to your Strengths. Zac didn't have any plans on abandoning Earth before, but this actually proved that focusing more of his attention on his budding empire might come with all kinds of unexpected perks.

“So what's this about contribution?”

“Sooner or later, teleporters will appear on Earth and Ensolus,” Joanna explained. “But you can join the war efforts earlier by heading to the frontlines yourself. The more contribution the Atwood Empire has racked up before the official start, the better treatment we'll receive. We have explored options to send a few of our elites to the Million Gates Territory to gain experience and contribution. With you back, our odds are even better.”

Zac slowly nodded, realizing it was time to spill some of the things he had kept to himself since Leandra snatched his sister. “I haven't told you all this before, but I had been planning on going to the Million Gates Territory for a long time. Mostly to train and pick up Ogras and Billy though.”

“WHAT!” Ilvere almost roared, jumping to his feet with wide eyes. “The boss is alive?! Your sister was right? What in the Heavens is going on?”

“I wasn't planning on telling you in case things didn't pan out,” Zac sighed. “But with this war, things have changed. When Ogras sacrificed himself to save my sister, he wasn't ripped apart by the Dimensional Seed as it looked like. He was transported to its newly created Mystic Realm. The Dimensional Seed was then attracted to the Million Gates Territory by the strong spatial currents over there.”

“How do you know this?” Vilari asked with confusion.

“Because that intelligence was what my sister demanded in return for leaving willingly that day,” Zac explained, drawing gasps.

“You don't mean!” Joanna exclaimed.

“My sister wasn't killed that day,” Zac confirmed. “She was abducted. Don't ask me by who; it's complicated. They are too

powerful, and the less people know, the better. This is why I am struggling to become stronger. To get her back.”

“Then Thea,” Joanna hesitated.

“No, she was really killed,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“We’ll help you,” Vilari immediately assured. “Even if it’s only to deal with the roadblocks to your cultivation.”

“We’ll definitely do what we can,” Ilvere said, looking visibly moved. “To think that the miss actually did that for our young master.”

“Kenzie was ultimately taken, but that doesn’t change the immense debt of gratitude I have to Ogras,” Zac nodded. “I am definitely heading there, though now it sounds like I’ll also have to deal with some invaders.”

“We would like to come with,” Vilari and Joanna both said, and it looked like pretty much everyone was of a similar opinion.

Zac didn’t immediately agree, but he didn’t disagree either. Initially, he had planned setting out alone considering the dangers, but perhaps that was being selfish, depriving his people of a chance to progress. The Million Gates Territory would definitely be dangerous, now even more so than usual.

But was it his place to dictate whether they should get to take those risks for the sake of their cultivation? For Earth?

Besides, didn’t cosmic vessels require crews? His biggest point of reference was Little Bean, the technocrat vessel. That thing had thousands of people on board, most of them crew members. The vessels he saw fly by in the Twilight Harbor were pretty massive as well, and they probably required multiple people to keep track of things.”

Even if he didn’t want such a massive ship, perhaps he needed to bring some people to manage the vessel he got from Karunthel’s quest.

“Alright, I will talk with the Creators,” Zac eventually nodded. “I’ll see about getting us a ship. I guess we’re about to become space mercenaries, so make your preparations.”

Excitement and determination shone in people's eyes, but the moment was ruined by a small tremor that reminded Zac of the most pressing issue.

“But first, I guess I should fix this planet.”

Chapter 843: Ensolus Mines

Zac spent the next few days in Fort Atwood, mostly catching up with everyone. While no one had tales as fantastical as being swallowed by a gargantuan space fish, it quickly became clear that the elites of Port Atwood all had their share of adventure and hardship on the Ensolus Continent.

The most shocking thing was that Janos was presumed dead, gone missing in the mysterious Ensolus Temples. They still held out some hope that the illusionist had somehow lucked into an inheritance, but it had been three years already. Even if he had entered some trial ground, he should have come out by now.

Apart from that, more than thirty Valkyries had fallen, replaced with the next generations of spear maidens. In total, the casualties had surpassed one thousand, most of them coming from the first bloody year when they eradicated one invading army after another.

It wasn't really a big number compared to how many had fallen in Earth's integration, but it was worth remembering that only elites had been taken on this mission. Each death meant the loss of a talent that Port Atwood had invested heavily into, standout warriors who had survived the Integration only to fall a few years later.

The second biggest cause of death was the unstable beast of the Ensolus Continent, with the natives only being a distant third. That alone was somewhat lucky since a couple of skirmishes at the edge of the continent wasn't enough to form some irreconcilable grudge from either side.

Therefore, the negotiations proceeded smoothly, with Zac only participating in a few of them. Vilari and the administrators had a much better grasp on the nitty-gritty details of

incorporating a world and hundreds of millions of new citizens under his reign.

He did, however, take time to appear as Arcaz Black in front of the ghosts for a private meeting. He wanted to somewhat allay their worries, once more alluding to his connections to the Undead Empire. And it looked like it had worked, especially after he showed some of the spectral cultivation techniques he had requested Triv to send over.

Of course, he wouldn't hand over such precious techniques just a few days after an insurrection, but it both acted as proof of his connections and a motivator to stay loyal.

After three days most issues were ironed out, where taxation and other issues were dealt with. Essentially, the Kingdom of Raun would be forced to hand over a larger share of their revenue because of their attack, but it would be lowered to the demon's level after they had contributed enough to the war efforts.

In either case, huge shipments of resources would start flowing from the two outer continents on the Ensolus World soon enough, many of them rare materials with their respective attunements. The cessation of war would also allow Port Atwood to drastically expand their operations on the Ensolus Continent, which was still teeming with valuable resources.

With the situation stabilized and the two armies having returned to their respective continents, Zac set out in secret, using one of his flying treasures to head over to a place called the Ensolus Mines. It was one of the biggest sources of wealth on the Ensolus Continent, a vast Nexus Crystal mine producing both Divine Crystal and Miasma Crystals, a network of tunnels tens of times larger than the mine on his island back home.

More importantly, it contained a secret chute leading into the depths of the planet. Since Ensolus wasn't officially conquered just yet, Zac couldn't just teleport to the mantle of the planet. It was a bit annoying, but it was a small price to pay for strengthening the bond between his force and these natives.

Thankfully, his people had already done all the heavy lifting in their effort to stabilize this world, having dug deeper and deeper for years on end until they reached the same depths as Triv had back on Earth. Even Zac was beset by a wave of vertigo as he peered down from the ten-meter-wide chute, an endless hole leading into the abyss.

“It will take one week to reach the bottom using floating disk,” Ilvere, who acted as his guide on this mission, said.

“A whole week?” Zac grimaced. “What if I just jump?”

“I knew you would say that,” Ilvere laughed. “I tried it once, it’s quite an experience. It will take just over half a day that way. A series of lights will alert you when you’re getting close to the bottom. The landing is hard, so you better be prepared to deal with it somehow.”

“No problem,” Zac smiled. Honestly, even if he smacked right into a floor of solid rock he’d be mostly fine. “Are you coming as well?”

“I’ll stay up here,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head. “I wouldn’t mind another leap, but getting back up is a bit boring. Besides, I need to make sure no one tries to trap you down there or sneaks back into the mines now that they’ve been evacuated.”

“Good,” Zac nodded and jumped down.

In an instant, Ilvere’s form at the edge of the chute turned into a speck, and a minute later Zac found himself in what looked like a tube that stretched to eternity in both directions. If not for the repeating runes that reinforced the tunnel and the occasional glimmering crystal flashing by, he wouldn’t even have been able to see that he was moving.

At first, the experience was pretty exhilarating, but it soon grew a bit tedious, so Zac simply closed his eyes and started to meditate. He hadn’t gained any new insights from taking out the Ghost King, but this odd energy of the Ensolus Continent was quite interesting. It was a novel contrast to the surprisingly stable Twilight Energy, and almost a case study in

what not to do when trying to fuse the elements of life and death.

On the surface, it should have been perfect; energies of life and death, locked in a perennial struggle. It was a lot like he envisioned his Path and how he should create his Cultivator's Core. Life and death clashing, with everything controlled by conflict. And the swirling mix of life and death was certainly in constant upheaval on the Ensolus Continent, but not in a good way.

There was no balance at all. The energy on the continent wasn't homogenous, and pockets of life and death would constantly form while the other element was pushed away. But soon enough, that would change again, in an unstable and unpredictable swirl. Certainly, it was chaotic in a way that slightly resonated with the Dao of Chaos, but having this kind of environment in his Cultivator's Core would be disastrous.

He could picture it; sooner or later, tremors similar to the ones that afflicted this world would appear in his Core until it broke apart. Just what was it that prevented this energy from fusing into a more stable Chaos Energy, or at least some subordinate version of it? His memory of the Chaos Pattern had long grown indistinct, but he could still remember that its energy was one whole and extremely stable in its unpredictability.

He needed to recapture that feeling. Minor Chaos was the best solution he could come up with when forming his Cultivation Core, to create something akin to the Motes of Chaos but rather based on his three Daos. With such a core, he should be able to cultivate using either Cosmic Energy, Divine Energy, or Miasma. It would become the first step in fusing his two sides as well, a second bridge to join the **[Quantum Gate]**.

But the situation on the Ensolus Continent and the clear delineation in the Twilight Harbor made him wonder if the Daos of Life and Death could even withstand such a concept. Were they impossible to fuse before elevating them to Creation and Oblivion? If so, what did it mean for his core, which required both?

Should he give up on this idea entirely, and instead aim to create something unattuned and solely based on his Branch of the War Axe? It would certainly be easier, but from what he'd gathered, one's core needed to resonate with all one's Daos, not just one. There were no easy answers, unfortunately, and it wasn't like there was a wealth of information on Edgewalkers, at least not in the Frontier.

A series of flashes in his surroundings made him put the matter aside and open his eyes. It looked like he had been meditating for half a day already, and the bottom of the chute was closing in on him - looking like a fiery eye of a dragon. According to Ilvere, there should be a large cave with a research base waiting for him below, but as he exited the chute, he was rather greeted by a roiling sea of magma.

Zac hurriedly activated [**Earthstrider**] and took a few steps in the air to exhaust his momentum before slamming into the molten rock. Scorching heat immediately assaulted him from every direction, but also thick streams of both life and death.

It was a mix of pain and pleasure as his body greedily swallowed the energies, but he still activated one of his heat-averting talismans to lessen the pressure on his body. Visibility was essentially zero, but he could get an idea of the surroundings by spreading out his Dao Field. It looked like the tremors had destroyed the protective arrays and breached the cave, filling it with magma.

Thankfully, this place had been abandoned for months due to this exact risk, meaning none of his scientists had been burned alive in this place. After all, most E-grade warriors only had a fraction of his Vitality and Endurance, and they'd get incinerated in minutes.

It quickly became obvious that the floor of the cave had been burst apart, so Zac simply pushed deeper into the magma, getting some serious déjà vu from his time in the Twilight Ocean volcano. Hopefully, things wouldn't get quite as explosive this time around.

The hours passed as Zac descended deeper and deeper into the mantle, but even he was quickly finding the environment

unbearable. Eventually, he stopped and activated another flame-retardant barrier, giving himself some breathing room. Only then did he take out the engraved box holding the twinned spirits and opened the lid.

“I can’t go any further than this,” Zac said as he looked down at the spiraled crystal. “Can you take things from here?”

He had no idea if these things could actually think or understand his words, but he had started talking with them long ago every time he took them out, hoping to rouse their spirituality as they were fading away. Besides, he had sensed that weak hint of fear from Earth’s spirit, so these things might really have some sort of sapience.

The two spirits didn’t answer, but the crystal started to hum and vibrate, its previously flickering lights fast gaining strength. Suddenly a crack echoed out as two powerful pulses of energy shot through the barrier like a spiritual drill, heading straight toward the core of the planet. In an instant, the pulse had left Zac’s scanning range.

“Not so much as a thank you,” Zac muttered as he looked at the fragmented crystal in his box, but he was inwardly relieved.

It turned out those crystals weren’t the actual Spirits, but only something to temporarily house them. Judging by the speed of the spirits, they should reach the World Core within a couple of hours. That meant the clock had started ticking, and he urgently swam back toward the chute. He had no idea how this planet would react upon the World Core being seized by the foreign realm spirits.

Would there be a struggle? Some massive outburst of energy? No matter what, the magmatic mantle couldn’t possibly be a safe place to stay at a time like this.

Zac spared no expense, activating one talisman after another as he plowed through the magma, and he managed to return almost twice as quickly as he had descended. He immediately jumped into the chute and took out a floating platform that started to lift him through the chute. The speed wasn’t

impressive, but it gave him the footing he needed to take out something better.

A rocket.

It was quite an odd-looking flying treasure compared to the other ones he'd found in the dozens of rings he had snatched, a sleek emerald crystal needle that was just five meters long and barely wide enough to squeeze into its sole compartment.

It had no defensive arrays, extremely high energy consumption, and it was quite uncomfortable to ride, but it had one undeniable advantage – speed. It was probably used either as an escape pod or for some sort of hobby. Zac crammed inside and shot off, the momentum almost giving him whiplash as the floating platform beneath him crumbled.

The walls of the chute turned to a blur as the needle ship pierced the air resistance and almost space itself, on the return back to the surface. However, after just an hour, Zac felt an ominous rumble, a rumble that soon turned into something much worse - a massive earthquake. It was like the whole planet was screaming in pain, and Zac was currently right in its mouth.

He felt a wetness in his ears, and even his bones and organs groaned in protest as the shakes grew increasingly intense. Even the energy in the air was going out of control, and small cracks started to appear on his vessel from the vibrations. The arrays on the walls of the chute lit up to resist the shakes, but how could some manmade runes resist a planet having a seizure?

Cracks rapidly spread across the walls, and Zac's eyes grew pitch-black in preparation for what would certainly come next. As expected, the small stones soon started to rain down the chute, and these stones were soon replaced by large boulders. With the immense speed of the needle, he was almost there, but he got a sinking feeling as new cracks appeared on his vessel every time it reduced a boulder to ash by piercing it.

Finally, the transformation finished, and three pygmy skeletons appeared outside the flying treasure. Unfortunately, it was too late, and the vessel broke apart just as a sturdy

shield appeared above. Still, the shield protected him from having a boulder slam into him, and he urgently took out another flying treasure.

However, a burst of superheated air interrupted his plans, and even his durable Draugr skin was scalded as he was flung thousands of meters in the air in an instant, pushing him and the falling rocks straight up in the air far quicker than any flying treasure could accomplish. His surroundings became a confusing blur, with only the three skeletons a fixture in a deafening storm of rocks and smoke.

And magma.

“Oh SHI-” Zac wailed, but he didn’t get to complete the sentence before the torrent of magma slammed into him like a bulldozer from behind, ripping his defensive skill apart and drowning him in molten rocks imbued with a momentum that no E-grade cultivator could ever hope to generate.

One talisman after another was expended as Zac desperately held on, but just as he ran out, he felt a wisp of fresh and non-scorching air. A moment later he felt himself lurch, and when the magma around him parted, he was shocked to find himself at the top of a massive pillar of lava reaching over ten thousand meters into the air.

Similar scenes could be spotted in every direction, and the mountain atop the Ensolus Mine had already been blasted apart, along with the fortune it contained. Soon enough, Zac found himself falling, and he turned back into his human form after some hesitation. If the energy was agitated before, it was rioting now, and he didn’t dare activate [**Abyssal Phase**] in this kind of environment.

Instead, he utilized the same technique as before, taking a couple of steps in the air before slamming into the edge of a newly-formed lava lake that had replaced much of the Ensolus mines. Blobs of molten rock were falling all around him, and he deftly swerved back and forth, occasionally cutting a boulder in two as he ran away from the collapsed mountain.

In the distance, he actually saw a barely familiar figure wave him over with two swirling boulders in the air blocking any

magma from falling on him.

“There you are,” a soot-covered Ilvere panted after Zac had rushed over, a wry smile appearing on his face. “I had really forgotten how... extravagantly... you dealt with things.”

“Well, that’s me,” Zac said before coughing out some ashy smoke. “Are you okay?”

“That was a bastard of an earthquake,” Ilvere grunted. “But it seems things won’t get any worse at least. Hopefully, the lava will cool down in a couple of days and we can start looking into what’s salvageable.”

“Do you have any method to contact Fort Atwood, to see if they’re okay?” Zac asked.

Ilvere quickly took out a thick stack of papers, and he breathed out in relief when all of them were intact.

“Life effigies collected from people stationed in every outpost,” the demon explained when Zac looked at the stack with confusion. “Since all of them are intact, our settlements should either have been unaffected by the earthquake, or their shields held off any lava that had come their way.”

“Good,” Zac sighed in relief.

“Was... it a success?” Ilvere hesitantly asked, and Zac honestly didn’t know as he looked at the apocalyptic surroundings.

The magma pillar had collapsed into a fountain that ‘only’ reached a few hundred meters in the air. But ash still blotted out the sky while the lava lake was slowly submerging the broken shards of the Ensolus Mine.

“I... think so?”

Chapter 844: Three Options

Ilvere looked at the soot-covered Zac before turning to the still-sputtering lake filled with lava so hot and rife with chaotic energies that it created odd apparitions reaching for hundreds of meters into the air.

“Well, if you say it’s fixed, I’ll believe you,” the demon coughed. “The past weeks, we haven’t had more than eight hours between tremors. We should have a preliminary result by the time we’ve returned.”

“Right,” Zac nodded before taking out a cleansing array, blasting himself and his guide with a storm of scraping winds and water that quickly turned pitch-black before it was flung away. “Let’s go.”

The two flew away a moment later, using another flying treasure that looked a bit like a spaceship you could see on artwork in the early 20th century. It was sleek and silvery with small fins, though there was no rocket at the end. Instead, there was a viewing deck, since its flight was powered by arrays rather than propulsion.

The reason Zac picked that one was because it had strong shields and an air filtration system, both of which came quite in handy with layers of ash covering the whole area in a dark haze, and the occasional rock still falling from the sky.

Their departure was just in time as well as a second eruption suddenly rocked the area twenty minutes later, its fiery plume of magma visible even through the shroud. Both Zac and Ilvere looked at the scene from the windows with wide-eyed horror, and Zac urgently took out dozens of defensive talismans from his Spatial Ring, activating them just in time before a massive shockwave blasted the area clean of ash and sent the vessel thousands of meters off-course.

The second eruption was even worse than the first, and by the time it abated, a new mountain had appeared out of nowhere and replaced the one that had just been blasted apart. Similar scenes were playing out in every direction, with the Ensolus Continent pretty much getting a second randomization following the integration, though this one was one wrought from fire and brimstone rather than the System's spatial manipulations.

Forests were turned to ash as magmatic tsunamis swallowed them whole, and Zac shuddered as he heard the wails from the wildlife within, inwardly saying a prayer of thanks that the weird beasts on the continent were terrifyingly aggressive and quite literally insane from the chaotic energy. Meanwhile, new towering peaks shot through the ground, perhaps coming all the way from the core of the planet itself.

Furthermore, the series of earthquakes and volcano eruptions had kicked up unprecedented storms across the continent as well, forcing Zac and Ilvere to push the vessel to the limit to avoid getting dragged into supersized tornadoes that contained such ferocity they'd easily rip apart any pre-integration civilization it encountered.

But with the bad, also came some good.

"The energy, it's so dense," Ilvere muttered as he looked through the windows, and Zac had to agree.

These eruptions did not only spew out magma, but also incredible amounts of energy that probably had been locked deep in the planet's core. Currently, the density of attuned energies was more than twice what it was before - and that was far in the sky. If they went closer to the faultlines that now crisscrossed the Ensolus Continent, the energy would be even greater.

It made Zac wonder if the planet had been upgraded to Middle D-grade just by infusing the twinned spirits. Unfortunately, after the apocalyptic upheavals started abating twelve hours later, Zac felt the ambient energy gradually recede as well, but he still believed it would stop at a higher density compared to before.

Ultimately, Zac wasn't too interested in the energy levels of Ensolus. He was more interested in any potential changes the twinned Realm Spirits could bring to the unstable mix of life and death. So he let Ilvere maintain the wheel as he tried to sense any changes, to see if there would be any gradual transition from chaos to order in the air. This kind of opportunity was rare, and he hoped it would help him gain some ideas for the future.

"Ah, it's gone!" Ilvere suddenly exclaimed, waking Zac from his meditation.

Zac looked around as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand, but the scene outside was not much different compared to before. The hurricanes had started to peter out when the shakes abated, and now it was just a bit stormy outside, making Zac a bit confused about what the demon was talking about. "What? What's gone?"

"The quest!" the demon explained.

Zac immediately opened his screen. In contrast to Ilvere, Zac still had the incursion quest, but its reward had completely changed.

[The Ensolus War (Incursion): Subjugate the native factions of the Ensolus World. Reward: Choose one of three rewards. (0/2)]

Rewards:

[Option 1: Upgrade Earth to High D-grade Energy and Low D-grade Mass, Downgrade Ensolus to a Peak E-grade Energy and Mass World (redeemable within 1 year)]

[Option 2: Fuse Earth and Ensolus to a Middle D-grade Energy and Mass world (redeemable within 1 month)]

[Option 3: Choose approximate Assimilation Location for Atwood Empire (redeemable within 85 years)]

"You can't see the options any longer?" Zac asked.

"No," Ilvere said as he looked at Zac curiously. "But you can?"

Zac nodded, and he shared the screen after some thought.

“Upgrade, fuse, and choose a location,” Ilvere muttered. “I wonder why they have different deadlines.”

“Perhaps it would be hard to fuse the planets after the Realm Spirits had completely fused with the World Core,” Zac suggested. “So, what do you think?”

“Honestly?” Ilvere slowly said. “I’d pick the third, I believe?”

“Oh? Rather than upgrading Earth?” Zac asked with some surprise. “Getting a High D-grade world by downgrading a low D-grade world is a pretty good deal. Then again, Ensolus might surpass low D-grade on its own now after things stabilize.”

“Well, I don’t know the specifics of the Assimilation; Clan Azh’Rezak never expected to get that far. But I know how much the location of a world matters. The planets at the edges of the horde back home are always ravaged by the Tal-Eladar. With a massive war coming up, you can place us far away from the carnage, allowing us to avoid the brunt of it,” Ilvere said. “You can even wait over 80 years and choose based on the current state of the war.”

Zac nodded and indicated for the demon to keep going, interested in what the veteran had to say.

“Increasing the disparity between our world and Ensolus would make sure a subjugated force does not overpower us, but it doesn’t seem to be in line with your plans. Neither does fusing planets,” Ilvere slowly said.

“Pushing Earth to High D-grade compared to Early D-grade is big, though,” Zac muttered. “It will exponentially increase the number of Hegemons Earth will be able to raise.”

It was true. In an early D-grade world, the peak factions would generally have one or two Hegemons, most of them at the early stage. One or two cultivators on the planet might be able to push to Middle D-grade by hoarding resources. In contrast, on a High D-grade World, even Peak Hegemons could appear with the right resources and heritage. Furthermore, the larger factions would be able to raise scores of weaker Hegemons.

Certainly, with Earth remaining at low D-grade Mass, the planet wouldn't have enough space for too many peak figures. The higher you climbed, the bigger a support system you needed. If he had been a normal cultivator who relied on his clan for resources, he might have needed to gobble up the resources of half the planet for a shot at Peak Hegemony.

"That's true. Long-term, it would be huge," the demon agreed. "But will it matter for the war to come? An upgraded planet's effects will only make themselves known after generations have passed, where each successive generation is born slightly more talented than the one before. This generation's Hegemons will be born at the battlefield, not in some secluded cultivation chamber."

"Unless a System-based world upgrade brings the kind of opportunities that the integration did," Zac countered.

"Yes, but I think I would have heard of something like that," Ilvere hesitated. "But it doesn't hurt to ask the floating eyeball or the smarter ones."

"That's what I'm thinking as well," Zac nodded. "We'll discuss this with the others when we return. For now, keep these options to yourself."

"No need for the natives to know this," Ilvere agreed. "You've held up your part of the bargain. Now it's time for them to hold up theirs."

As the days passed on their return journey, the absolute lack of tremors following the initial massive outburst all but confirmed that this world was really healing. However, the unstable state of the Ensolus Continent's ambient energy remained the same, making Zac wonder just what the realm spirits changed. Perhaps it would take longer for a more substantive transformation to take effect.

Soon enough, they saw Fort Atwood far in the distance, its grand defensive arrays still running on full power. The surroundings were quite devastated, but both Zac and Ilvere breathed out in relief upon seeing that the fort itself was absolutely fine. However, as they flew closer and closer, the

demon started to get a constipated look, like he wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Zac eventually asked with a raised brow.

“It’s about Janos,” the demon hesitated, and Zac immediately understood what the demon wanted. “I know you have a lot on your plate, so I hate to ask... but...”

“You should have more free time now that the war is ending,” Zac said after some thought. “Draw whatever resources you need from the coffers to buy karma-finding arrays or whatever can help locate missing people, and take some talented scouts to make a proper sweep. If you can find any indication of where Janos ended up, I will do my best to help you save him. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to scour the whole place myself right now.”

This was the least he could do for the Illusionist who had fought valiantly for Port Atwood many times over. Normally Zac would have gone himself, but with the war looming over everyone’s head, he felt there were a million things he had to deal with before it was too late. He couldn’t spend months scouring the temple ruins that spanned an area as large as a small country, an area that was riddled with weird arrays and natural formations that were extremely time-consuming to break through.

“Of course,” Ilvere hurriedly nodded, a wide smile spreading on his face. “This is more than enough. I will set out as soon as the situation has stabilized.”

Soon enough, they were right in front of the powerful barriers, and Zac could see that the two armies were camped out on the large courtyard, no doubt having been let in when the situation turned chaotic. His vessel had obviously been spotted some time ago as well, and the delegates along with the leaders of Port Atwood were already waiting at the center of the courtyard.

Thousands of eyes were peeled at him as he had ilvere set down the sooty vessel before he emerged from within, the burns that had covered his face thankfully long gone already.

“Lord Atwood, you really did it, you healed this broken world. Let me be the one to thank you first,” the ghost king Aouvi said with a deep bow. “We feared the worst when nature ran amok.”

“I appreciate your people showing providing sanctuary,” the demon chieftain added with a nod after throwing a loathing glance at the spectral warrior.

“It’s nothing,” Zac nodded, ignoring the friction. “Have you heard anything from your continents?”

“The energies have been turbulent, but we finally managed to get word back yesterday. There was some unrest, but nothing compared to what we saw outside your shields. Just some mild shakes, followed by a clear increase in energy,” Ra’Klid said with excitement before a cough from the old warrior behind him made him somber up. “We hear the quest is gone?”

“The global quest was transformed into a private one after I used my own resources to stabilize this world,” Zac explained, though he didn’t divulge the options. “However, there is one thing that remains.”

From there Zac pointedly glanced at the Incursion pillar in the distance, which was still showering the fort with its light.

“Ah, yes, of course. Of course,” Aouvi said. “As ranking Lord of the Kingdom of Raun, I hereby surrender to the Atwood Empire, so that we may join under their banner.”

A moment later, a large suddenly parchment flashed into being in front of the ghost, and both he and Carva put their hands on it after some hesitation. It was a System contact that officially turned the Kingdom of Raun into a subordinate force of Zac’s faction. That meant all system-based functions, including the automatic taxation, came under his control. It also meant that most acts of treason would turn into System-based events, which meant Zac and his subordinates would get a quest to quell uprisings.

The process was simple, but it was only possible thanks to multiple requirements being met. The first was power, where the Atwood Empire had to be ranked higher than the Kingdom

of Raun through whatever measurements the System used. Secondly, there had to be a consensus in a surrender, where all the top-ranking members stamped the parchment. If there were a bunch of D-grade Ghost Kings hiding somewhere, it wouldn't have worked, since Aouvi and Carva wouldn't have been able to speak for their faction.

“The Mavai will always honor their word. Strength and honor, Warchief Atwood,” Ra'Klid said and repeated the process with three out of the five councilors he had brought. Apparently, the other two weren't Lords in the eyes of the System, since the process finished without a hitch.

The next moment, the incursion pillar started growing until it seemingly reached deep into space. The whole sky was drenched in emerald and grey for a moment as a familiar surge of energy filled Zac's body, a sensation he hadn't felt in some time now. A moment later, the incursion pillar spread out to cover the whole sky before slowly fading away.

Curiously, Zac opened his Title-screen while the others observed the spectacle, and his heart thumped with delight when he saw two new entries awaited him.

**[Bloodied Baron: Become a Baron through subjugation.
Reward: All attributes +5%.]**

**[Connate Conqueror: Conquer a planet while in E-grade.
Reward: All attributes +5%.]**

“You kept your word about fixing this world. I hope you will continue to lead by example, raising our people to new heights,” the young warchief said as the radiance in the sky faded.

“The road we have ahead of us is long with many unknowns, but I will do my best to pave a path for our people,” Zac nodded as he closed his title screen, before imbuing his voice so that the observing armies could also hear what he said next.

“I am not really one for speeches, but let me just say that I'm happy to welcome you all into the Atwood Empire. I don't plan on treating you any better or worse than the citizens of Earth. Those who perform well and bring something to the

table will get access to opportunities and resources that are hard to match in the whole Sector. Those who just coast by will be ignored and left to fend for themselves,” Zac said, his voice echoing through the courtyard. “And those who act against our interests will be dealt with strictly and severely.”

At that point, a burst of dense killing intent was unleashed, showering the whole courtyard for a moment. However, just as soon as it was unleashed it was gone again, but Zac hoped it would leave a mark in the hearts of these elite warriors.

“Now that you’re citizens of my faction, you will gain initial access to the Atwood Empire Contribution Store, and in the future our Dao Repositories. Don’t look down at what they contain just because we’re a newly formed faction. Due to some lucky encounters of mine, we have manuals that can match those of the big Empires in the Zecia sector,” Zac continued. “Using them can completely transform one’s fate, elevating you from a talented warrior to a powerhouse with the qualifications to leave their mark on history.”

“Is that how warchief became so powerful?” Ra’Klid interjected with glimmering eyes, his voice also loud for the benefit of the spectators.

“Well, part of it. Access to resources can help improve your foundation, but most of my power comes from risking my life over and over, finding my path at the edge of death,” Zac said, getting approving nods from the older demons.

“In either case, I am not a hands-on leader - I am focused on the path cultivation and strengthening myself, and I urge you to do the same for the foreseeable future,” Zac added. “We can start playing politics when we’ve won the upcoming war.”

“It’s as you say, Lord Emperor,” Aouvi nodded. “With this planet healed and war being over, we shall immediately begin shoring up our foundations. Your... encounter... with King Eomid proved that our strength is truly hollow, something we quickly must remedy.”

“From what I’ve heard, this continent isn’t lacking for beasts,” Zac smiled before glancing at Vilari, who nodded in confirmation. “Some bloodshed will sharpen you up. My

people will soon start posting missions to tame this land. So those who want to contribute to the empire can start earning contribution and valuable resources as soon as they've received their token."

The next moment, a group of soldiers came walking out from the barracks, each of them holding chests full of information crystals. This moment had been carefully planned for, and soon enough all the leaders and a good chunk of the soldiers were fervently scanning the contents.

"What is this!" Ra'Klid almost roared, his eyes as wide as saucers as he scanned the information crystal. "Rich... you're rich!"

Chapter 845: Baron of Conquest

The Mavai Warchief's eyes were so passionate when looking at the Information Crystal that Zac wondered if he needed to take it away before the demon tried to do something untoward to it. Then again, Ra'Klid wasn't the only one, with the natives being locked in place with expressions ranging from incredulity to fervent desire.

The contents of the crystals were actually quite simple. The first part contained an introduction to the Atwood Empire, some basic rules, and an explanation of how contribution worked. The second part was simply a massive list of cultivation resources, a short description of each, and their respective cost in contribution points - essentially a simpler version of the store in the Orom World.

“Most of these resources are the lowest-tier items in our stockpile, items that are immediately available for purchase in return for Atwood Empire Contribution Points,” Zac said, his voice directed not only at Ra'Klid, but all the elites present. “We have far more valuable treasures as well, but you need to rank up to gain access to those. But as you can see, we have left some special treasures for those who rack up points quickly. Oh, and I'll be adding a whole load of new resources soon enough. I have collected a lot of good things during my travels.”

“Ensolus never had any native citizens, and many things remain unknown and uncharted to us, especially after the upheavals” Vilari added with a smile. “To quickly set the foundations for this planet and get your civilizations used to the ways of the Atwood Empire, we have added some incentives. Both the factions and the individuals who

contribute the most over the next few years will see rich rewards far beyond what is listed in this missive.”

“Does that include access to the high-grade cultivation methods and skills you mentioned?” The shaman ventured, his golden eyes almost burning with desire.

“No,” Vilari said with a shake of her head, surprising Zac a bit. “The Atwood Empire is fully focused on nurturing talents that can rise to the peak of the Zecia sector. The top performers will not be awarded the chance to purchase these methods - the methods will be directly provided, along with treasures worth multiple D-grade Nexus Coins. You have all helped erect the Merit Exchange over the past few days, and you can already collect your citizenship tokens there. Remember, even gaining levels and Dao breakthroughs will award contribution points in the Atwood Empire, so work hard on your cultivation.”

The ghosts and demons glanced at each other, clearly deliberating whether they should wait for the orders of their superiors or make a run for it. As for the leaders themselves, they simply gave a few hurried pledges of loyalty before flashing away, leaving their warriors in the dust in their hurry to get the contribution tokens.

A few seconds later, four disorderly queues had formed where the elite warriors of the Ensolus World impatiently waited to get their hands on the tokens that would give them access to the vast fortunes of the Atwood Empire. Only a few shamefaced delegates of each side remained, but even they quickly excused themselves when Zac said that today’s events were over.

The representatives of the Mavai Tribes and the Kingdom of Raun probably knew this was all a scheme to have them compete against each other, thus lessening the risk of them joining hands against their new rulers. But what did that understanding matter in the face of unique treasures that could speed up their cultivation and improve their foundations?

It felt a bit odd to end such a momentous occasion like this, but Zac didn’t mind. The more the elites got used to the Merit Exchange, the more integrated and dependent they would get.

So he looked on at the spectacle for a minute, before he turned to Vilari.

“Come with me,” he said as he turned toward the fort, and the two walked away while the others dealt with the exchange.

With his part essentially dealt with, he once more turned his attention to his titles. Normal increases to attributes had long since reached a level of diminishing returns, but any free boost to his attributes was obviously welcome. And seeing as the two titles gave increased attributes rather than flat, they would be a boost for the rest of his life. With this, he was just one or two titles away from an increase by 100% in every single attribute, something which had to warrant some sort of boon. Perhaps even a high-grade title.

Unfortunately, seeing the new titles was also proof of how easily elite factions could boost the strength of some of their scions. It was no wonder Catheya had been given an incursion when she was just seventeen. It was not just to provide the Origin Energy, but also to get her a couple of titles.

Considering how good these things were at the E-grade, Zac bet Catheya had even better titles to her name.

And while the System generally had its rules that titles had to be earned, Zac was sure that peak factions could easily bend them. It shouldn't be too hard for someone like Iz Tavn to have her nobility pushed well beyond Barony, gaining any follow-up titles that came with it.

That made him think of something else, and he looked over at the mentalist with curiosity. “Did you get any titles as well?”

“I got three, apart from my private quest as an Incursion General,” Vilari nodded. “‘Connate Conqueror’, ‘Planetary Invader’, and a title for having reached 25 Titles while in E-grade.”

“You already have 25 titles?” Zac exclaimed with surprise, realizing that two of Vilaris's new titles were alternate versions of the ones he got in F-grade.

“I managed to get the Apex Hunter title here on Ensolus,” Vilari smiled. “I found a Beast king with extraordinarily weak

mental defenses. That alone provided two titles. With the titles for forming, fusing, and creating skills, I have gotten a total of 9 titles on Ensolus. Unfortunately, many of them are the diminished versions of the ones you can gain in F-grade.”

“Still, amazing work,” Zac nodded before opening his status screen as well, where things were mostly the same.

Except for one interesting change – his alignment.

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Almost everything in the line had changed. The mention of Earth had turned into Zecia, and Port Atwood had turned into Atwood Empire. Finally, Planetary Lord had changed into Baron of Conquest, which was the biggest surprise. There were different kinds of Barons?

Zac would have to get a missive on the subject from Calrin, but the biggest takeaway had to be that the System had officially accepted the Atwood Empire as a real thing. He already suspected as much after the quest rewards for the incursion, but with this it was official. Once more, he turned to his general to compare, and Vilari simply shared her screen.

As expected, it looked just like his, except for Vilari having the title of a Subordinate Lord, which was somewhat of a surprise to Zac.

“As I mentioned, I had a private quest to finish the incursion,” Vilari explained. “One of the rewards was lordships, the other one is dependent on grade and will be received when I get to a Nexus Node.”

“Can you see your mark?” Zac asked with some curiosity, remembering just how amazing the rewards from those kinds of quests could be.

“B-grade, which is better than I expected considering how things ended,” Vilari said.

“Not bad,” Zac nodded. “The System probably takes into account how quickly you routed all the other invaders. Hopefully, it’ll help you set the foundation for Hegemony.”

“It might be a while,” Vilari smiled. “Even if the soul strengthening method I got from Master is quite suited for me, I expect it will take at least a decade unless I encounter some opportunity.”

“Have you undergone the inheritance trial in the E-grade yet?” Zac asked.

“No,” Vilari said. “I haven’t been able to leave Ensolus since the Incursion started. If I returned to Earth, the Incursion would immediately end, since the general leaving would count as forfeiture.”

“Oh yeah,” Zac said. “I’m heading back now. Are you joining me?”

“There is no hurry,” Vilari said. “I will stay until the delegates and their armies returned. Tonight, we’re having a banquet, and after that I expect them to leave.”

“A banquet,” Zac frowned, a bit reluctant to squeeze that into his schedule.

“Yes, but it’s best if you do not come,” Vilari said, but she quickly continued when she saw Zac’s eyes widen. “It’s not that we do not want you here! With your identities, it will become too complicated. For such a festival, why would Zachary Atwood appear but Arcaz Black not make an appearance? Or the opposite?”

Zac grimaced, understanding the issue. It was fine for his real name to be exposed to the wider world, but he was still leery about letting his dual races be made public knowledge. It was one thing if some Autarch far away in the Empire Heartlands learned of him being an Edgewalker, but the risk of it having negative ramifications was far greater in a remote place like Zecia.

“For now, the less you appear in public, the better. If you become too approachable, people will eventually start asking questions, like why you’re never seen together,” Vilari explained.

“Yeah, I don’t think it would look very convincing if I kept going to the bathroom to swap races,” Zac said with a wry

smile.

“Thankfully, you have always been focused on cultivation, rarely appearing in public. It has helped curtail the spread of rumors immensely,” Vilari smiled. “If possible, perhaps you can find some sort of cloning technique that will at least allow you to make some joint appearances? Until then, we’ll simply say you’re busy cultivating or putting out fires elsewhere.”

“I’ll look into it,” Zac nodded.

A minute later, they reached the secluded courtyard in the middle of the fort. The incursion pillar was gone, but the Nexus Hub remained. Eventually, the hub would be moved to some heavily guarded structure that would act as the off-world Teleportation Station of Ensolus, but for now, it was still for private use only. Just as he was about to teleport away, Zac stopped and turned to Vilari who looked back at him curiously.

“You have done great work here on Ensolus,” Zac said.

“Honestly, knowing you were the one in charge of the incursion saved me from going mad with worry, and allowed me to focus on breaking out. I’m really proud of you.”

A radiant smile bloomed on Vilari’s face. “Thank you. It means a lot.”

A moment later, Zac appeared at the Nexus Hub by Azh’Rodum, which was now surrounded by heavy fortifications. However, he was surprised to find over a hundred soldiers standing guard, with multiple nasty arrays humming with power. However, when they saw it was him who had appeared, the soldiers immediately relaxed.

“I’m sorry Lord Atwood,” the captain said, and it turned out to be Harvath, the demon soldier who had partaken in his first excursion to the underworld. “The pillar suddenly disappeared, so we set up a perimeter just in case, even if we heard you had returned.”

“All is fine. Ensolus is conquered, and there shouldn’t be any more wars over there in the short run,” Zac nodded as he turned toward the closest teleportation array.

“Ah, my Lord,” the demon coughed. “I happen to have found myself looking for a change in scenery...”

“Speak with Ilvere on the subject,” Zac smiled. “There will be a large number of job openings coming up over the next weeks. There are a lot of resources in that world that need to be extracted and refined. For now, I have to deal with a few other matters.”

“Of course, of course,” the demon hurriedly said as he stepped to the side. “I am sorry for holding you up.”

“That’s fine. It’s good to see you again,” Zac nodded before flashing away.

A moment later he stepped out from the teleporter in his compound, and he immediately set course for Port Atwood. He could have teleported to the city’s teleportation terminal instead, but it felt like a hassle. This way, he got to visit Port Atwood without drawing any attention. However, Zac couldn’t believe his bad luck when his desire for anonymity backfired on him.

“Still not coming to pay your respects?” a sudden snort echoed through his private forest as thousands of radiant lights almost blinded him. “Nothing can escape the gaze of the great sage.”

“Alright, alright,” Zac groaned as he changed course. “I’m coming, ease up with the blasters.”

Thankfully, the blinding lights that contained their telltale lack of any sort of Dao abated as Zac made his way to the Dao Repository. A few minutes later, Zac inwardly groaned when he saw that not only had Brazla’s private garden more than doubled in size, but it had also gained an outer wall, a small lake, and a bunch of songbirds that definitely weren’t native to Earth.

“Enter, mortal,” a grand voice echoed through the garden, and Zac sighed as he flashed over to the gates that swung open infuriatingly slowly.

“It’s good to see you again, Brazla,” Zac said as he donned a strained smile when he finally managed to squeeze into the Towers of Myriad Dao. “You look quite dashing, as always.”

The Tool Spirit looked the same, in the sense that he looked gaudy and pampered. This time, he used had the sage-like persona, it looked like, with golden robes and a golden fan.

“And you look slightly less wretched,” Brazla snorted.

“All thanks to your teachings,” Zac nodded, deciding he might as well deal with things while he was here. “On that topic, I was coming to see you after dealing with a quick errand. I wanted to see if I can undergo the second inheritance trial?”

“You mortals, always in a hurry,” Brazla snorted, but he did close his eyes seemingly in thought.

Yrial had told him to wait ten years, which hadn’t quite passed yet. However, Zac since then added both energy gathering and soul-nurturing arrays to the Towers of Myriad Dao, so he hoped his teacher had recovered a bit faster.

A moment later, Brazla opened his eyes again. “It is ready, but I will need to gather energy for a few days to start it up. Of course, an offering of commiserate value and beauty is also required.”

“An offering, huh?” Zac sighed as he scanned his spatial ring.

Eventually, he took out a series of statues depicting powerful warriors full of authority. He had found them in one of the Spatial Rings he pilfered in the Void, and Zac guessed they might have been gate-guarding statues for some upstart Twilight Harbor Clan. They had quite a few arrays inside, but more importantly, their design screamed of excess.

Each statue was around four meters tall and simply covered in gems, arrays, and intricate talismans hanging from their clothes and fingers. If slotted with a Nexus Crystal, they even emitted a mysterious smoke.

“I picked these valiant guardians up at great personal expense,” Zac sighed. “I was planning to use them as central ornaments outside my government building, but I guess they are better suited to adorn and protect your gardens instead.”

Obviously, that was a lie. He would die of shame if he placed something as overly extravagant as these things outside his offices.

“I guess this will suffice as an initial offering,” Brazla snorted. “But don’t think the great sage is so easily bought off.”

“Of course,” Zac nodded, though he was inwardly rolling his eyes. “I’m sorry, I know I just arrived, but I need to prepare for the inheritance trial.”

“Alright then, off you go,” Brazla sniffed as he glanced at the six statues. “Remember to bring a better offering when undergoing the trial. Otherwise I might be led to believe your obeisance isn’t sincere.”

Thankfully, Adran had people visit Brazla almost daily to butter him up while Zac was gone, saving Zac from being held hostage by a lonely Tool Spirit. Soon enough he was back on track, making his way toward the inner gate in the distance. By now, the inner wall leading to his compound had been moved three times, and it took him almost ten minutes to reach the closest gate.

It wasn’t all because of Brazla’s gathering arrays though. As warriors became stronger and their means more varied, the leaders of Port Atwood had decided to add more layers of security to his compound. Now, there was a no-mans-land between Brazla’s gardens and the inner wall with layers and layers of defensive and illusion barriers, almost turning his private forest and beachhead into a separate dimension. From the outside, one would only be able to see forests and the Towers of Myriad Dao, the latter at Brazla’s insistence.

Zac passed through the gate, nodding at two extremely startled guards before donning the presence-hiding cloak he got from Catheya. There were no structures immediately on the other side of the wall either, except for the occasional guardhouse. However, the area wasn’t empty like the other side.

Instead, there was a band of beautiful gardens, squares, fountains, and small rivers running for almost a kilometer meters along the wall. It was not only a leisure walk for the citizens of Port Atwood, even if Zac saw many families and couples stroll through the idyllic surroundings. Beneath the ground were carefully constructed defensive measures that could add another layer of defenses in case his compound was

under attack. The environment was also carefully designed to not block out too much vision, and reaching the wall unnoticed was essentially impossible.

Beyond the band, there was a row of beautiful mansions, not one structure identical to the others. Port Atwood had become a bit like the Base Town in make-up, in the sense that it had become a symbol of status to live close to the inner park and his compound. Some of the Valkyries, Demons, and other core members of Port Atwood had secured residences there.

It wasn't only about status though. The environment was unmatched, as were the energy density in this area was unparalleled, except for some spots up on the mountain. And with all the defensive measures hidden below-ground, it was also exceedingly safe, giving the owners peace of mind while they were off-world fighting.

Beyond the inner district, the towering skyscrapers reached toward the sky, their number having increased more than tenfold now that the Nexus Vein beneath could support far more cultivators. It was hard to believe that Earth had been met with an extinction event just ten years ago, where almost 90% of humanity died.

Zac had never seen a city as prosperous as Port Atwood before the integration. Back when the expansion of Port Atwood had started in earnest, Zac had simply said he wanted to avoid a sterile city. The city planners were more than adhering to the wishes he had laid out - they had far surpassed his imagination.

There were gardens, parks, and public cultivation grounds everywhere, bringing lushness and breathing room to the city. Some massive platforms had even been erected between skyscrapers, and Zac saw them holding lush greenery as well, along with hanging gardens, artificial lakes, and wide streets that were generally paved with well-tended grass. It was a mix of solarpunk and magic, and Zac could barely look away.

With its careful planning and vast resources available to be spent on public resources, Port Atwood was fast growing into

a proper capital that could hold its head high even when compared to established factions in the Zecia sector.

Chapter 846: Unordinary Luck

There were a few people that Zac needed to talk with now that he was back from Ensolus, but he only hesitated for a second before making his way toward the commercial district. For years, he had been holding onto his fortune, wondering exactly what it was worth. Not only that, but there were thousands of items in his rings that he couldn't identify, and the curiosity had kept him up some nights in the Orom World.

Finally, he was back, and any further governance could wait now that he had dealt with Ensolus. He wanted to get his treasure trove identified and appraised.

Still, Zac wasn't in a hurry, so he leisurely walked down the streets, enjoying the fresh air and the sights. A lot of people were wandering about, yet it didn't feel cramped at all with no vehicles plugging up the street. With spatial tools, there was no need for any trucks to move items. And with the citizens of Port Atwood mostly being talented cultivators and their families, people could move faster by simply walking than taking a car.

There were, however, a few people riding on mounts, and Zac was a bit surprised to see spot a grizzled man ride on an armored Barghest that was even larger than the six-legged Alpha he killed way back when. Luckily, it didn't emit any of the bestial bloodthirst the Barghest were known for, and there was even a hint of intelligence in its eyes. It looked like the Tal-Eladar had imparted some of their skills over the past years.

Over an hour passed as Zac got reacquainted with his town, his identity hidden within his hood. With its powerful inscriptions, Zac could essentially walk right next to people without them noticing, allowing him to catch glimpses of the

daily lives of his citizens. But eventually, he reached his destination, and he passed through the opulent gates to the Thayer Consortia Compound.

The store, whose size had increased over tenfold since his last visit, didn't contain the slightest hint of its wretched state of ten years ago. Back then, some of the dilapidated buildings didn't even have roofs, but now there were more than a dozen grand structures in what had essentially turned into a district unto itself.

Apart from multiple department-store-sized buildings, there were also huge training yards where customers could test out items, and Zac smiled as he saw a bunch of kids playing around. They were probably pre-cultivating students of the academy, and one of them was arduously swinging around a real steel sword while the others laughed at his clumsy performance.

Still, there was something about the youngster's determined expression that resonated with him, and something about those seemingly clumsy swings he appreciated. So Zac took off his hood and flashed over, appearing in front of the kids and a startled attendant in an instant whose eyes turned to saucers when she recognized who he was.

"Not bad," Zac smiled as a Spirit Tool shortsword appeared in his hands, its inscribed blade gleaming with sharpness before he placed it back in its scabbard. "It could be considered fate we met today. This blade might be better suited for you though. Remember; path, skill, technique, and Dao. It is all connected."

The young boy looked part-afraid by Zac's sudden appearance and part-confused over his words. Even then, his hand stretched out to grab the scabbard, a glint of hunger in his eyes. Zac nodded, and a moment later he was gone, having used [**Earthstrider**] to head into a slightly less conspicuous building on the back - a structure solely for managing the fast-growing Thayer Consortia.

Two receptionists were going over some documents in the lobby, but they shot to their feet when Zac suddenly appeared

out of nowhere. A moment later, he was led to an enormous office on the top floor where the attendants bowed and took their leave. Inside were both Calrin, who had gotten slightly plumper since Zac saw him last, along with Vikram, whose aura had become a lot more refined.

The young genius Zac was wearing a pair of glasses that Zac could tell were some sort of Spirit Tool, as were the ledger in his hands. Working at the top of a License-holding business must have been extremely conducive to his Mercantile class, and it looked like he had perfectly adapted his old skillset to the new environment.

“Young master,” the little Sky Gnome said with glee as Zac entered the offices. “When I heard the young Lord Atwood had returned safe and sound, I cried three days and two nights straight from relief, while the Thayer Children danced and sang praises to the Heavens, who truly-“

“Alright, alright,” Zac snorted before the merchant started parading those puppy-eyed gnomelings in front of him again. “What’s going on?”

“He’s hoping for you to deal with his problems again,” Vikram shrugged.

“You!” Calrin exclaimed as he gave Vikram a death stare.

“Cretinous wretch! For years you have harassed me-“

“Stopped you from embezzling funds.”

“*Harassed me,*” the Sky Gnome repeated. “Clipped my wings, stopping us from reaching our full potential-“

“Bankruptcy,” Vikram interjected once again.

“...And yet I imparted my knowledge of business unto you,” Calrin huffed.

“Tried to scam me,” Vikram sighed.

“And this is the thanks I get?”

“What problems? What have you done?” Zac asked, happy to hear his outside hire was performing splendidly in curtailing the seemingly inherent shiftiness among the gnomes.

“I assure you, I have furthered your interest faithfully,” Calrin said with eyes glimmering of fake sincerity fraught with suffering. “But as you must have heard by now, the upcoming war has caused chaos in the mercantile sector. Our Thayer Consortia is finding itself hard-pressed to turn a profit, at least not with the rules you set before leaving.”

Zac slowly understood what Calrin was getting at. After the situation on earth had stabilized, Zac had set some ground rules for his budding business empire. At that time, he was yet not a majority shareholder, but he was still the Lord of Earth. Seeing how he was essentially setting up a monopoly on the market, apart from the limited businesses run by the Marshall Clan, Calrin had pretty much unlimited power.

If he wanted, the Sky Gnome could essentially have set any prices he wanted for items not carried in the General Stores, siphoning the riches of the whole planet. With Smaug gone and Zac having dominated the wealth ladder, there was no one else holding Mercantile Licenses at the moment. Not even the Marshalls had managed to get their hands on one, and they still weren't even close according to the missives.

Zac wasn't surprised. If it was so easy to get one, then the Tsarun Clan wouldn't have needed to target the Thayer Consortia. You needed to be a true talent in business and accomplish rare feats to even get the quest chains started. From there, you needed to get at least an A-grade evaluation to get a Temporary License. To make it permanent, even more trials and tribulations waited.

So since his business essentially was without any competition, Zac had set up some hard limits on pricing to balance profit and allowing Earth's warriors to keep progressing. But even then, how could the gnome have run into trouble in a couple of years with his massive cash infusion?

“Even if prices have gone up, shouldn't we be doing fine?” Zac asked.

“Well, we are still turning a profit, but not nearly as much as we should,” Calrin grimaced. “We are also finding it harder and harder to fill the purchase orders of your subordinates. Our

old enemies have taken the opportunity to strike back at us now that the situation has turned unstable.”

“And you expanded to aggressively in a changing market,” Vikram added. “Getting us even more enemies.”

“Hush, you,” Calrin waved. “Without some aggression, we would just get boxed in.”

“What enemies?” Zac asked. “Is it related to Tsarun?”

“Partly,” Calrin said. “Two large businesses are working against us, locking us out from most of the supply lines, affecting both our ability to import and export. On top of that, there are some smaller ventures like our own consortia who are trying to seize our markets now that we’re being pressured. Part of the issues unsurprisingly originates with the Tsarun Clan, while the other large corporation is targeting us due to our... ahem... array-improving business.”

Zac inwardly groaned, realizing the chicken had come home to roost from Kenzie’s extortionist business.

“I don’t understand how two companies can cause us so much trouble,” Zac frowned. “Why can’t you just trade through that license of yours?”

“All intra-sector trade through a Mercantile License is under the purview of the Zecia Mercantile Guild, which is controlled by the largest mercantile organizations and clans,” Vikram explained. “The System is uninterested in the details, so it pawns off that responsibility to the ones who have the qualifications and are willing to pay the fees.”

“Their licenses are far more advanced than the basic ones we use,” Calrin added with envy written all over his face. “With them, they can control a lot of things. They can even ban certain products and impose tariffs. Currently, there are nine clans at the top, and two of them are actively working against us.”

“Who?” Zac asked with a frown.

“The Starlode Ventures, who have close relationships with the Tsarun clan. A lot of the Tsarun-clan’s business is going through them, and they are suspected to even trade with the

Undead Empire and unorthodox cultivators,” Calrin said. “The Second is the Draol Munitions, who have a close alliance with many of the Inscriptionists your sister, ah, consulted. The latter is especially troublesome now since they are one of the two biggest suppliers of expendable wartime items such as talismans, arrays, and offensive and defensive treasures.”

Zac somewhat knew of the two ventures, but not much more than that. He knew Draol Munitions had a store at the heart of the Base Town, but it was kind of exclusive like the Zethaya Pill House. As for Starlode Ventures, Zac had visited more than one of their auction houses across Zecia when procuring items for his sister and Jeeves.

“What about the other seven?” Zac frowned. “Will the others just look the other way when they harass smaller ventures?”

“Crushing the smaller competition by abusing their superior licenses is common practice, I’m sure all of them are doing it to one poor sap or another,” Calrin shrugged. “Why would the others intercede on our behalf? Even if they were so inclined, they aren’t interested in rocking the boat now that the sector is about to be plunged into chaos. Everyone is scrambling to make money while our shelves are half-empty and we’re taking a loss on much of what remains.”

“Still, even if they can cut you off from some resources, they can’t completely isolate us, right?” Zac asked with confusion. “Shouldn’t we be making a lot of money on exports even if we can’t import the items we want?”

“What exports?” Calrin snorted. “This is just a single miniature planet that’s mostly wilderness. How can our production amount to anything in the grand scheme of things? More importantly, we barely have any craftsmen, and it’s the refined items that are truly in demand right now. Talismans, equipment, arrays. Things you earthlings want me to procure without providing anything I can sell in return.”

“Well, there’s not much we can do about the craftsmen, except to keep providing our talents with resources to gain experience,” Zac shrugged. “So what do you want from me?”

His company being pushed into a corner by some big businesses was a somewhat thorny issue, but not something would lose sleep over. He'd help if he could, but he wouldn't break his back to increase the profit margins of the Thayer Consortia. After all, he had already gathered more resources than he could possibly need for the next century.

"Well, you have the unique ability to travel the sector," the Sky Gnome said with a crafty grin. "If we can buy resources directly from the source, we can directly circumvent those bastards."

"You want me to become a porter for you?" Zac laughed. "I don't have time for that. But you know, I think I can do you one better if you're lacking resources."

"What's this? More items lifted from your enemies?" Calrin asked curiously as Zac threw over a couple of his Spatial Rings. "Not to worry, we'll deal with any eventual difficulties..."

Calrin's greedy gleam quickly transformed into a hollow stare, and his small hands started to shake as they grasped the Spatial Ring.

"What... This..." the gnome sputtered, prompting Vikram to look over with curiosity. The young industrialist picked up another one of the rings to scan its contents, and he instantly lost the staid expression he'd maintained since Zac's arrival.

"Like you said, just some items I lifted from my enemies," Zac smiled.

Altogether, Zac had looted far more spatial treasures than the few he threw over - hundreds of them. However, most of them weren't too impressive since they were lifted from the E-grade adventurers in the Twilight Ocean. All that mediocre loot barely filled one of his bulk item-rings, with the rest coming from bulk purchases in the Orom World and Twilight Harbor, along with the Hegemon-owned rings he looted in the Void.

"This not good," Calrin eventually said as he closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair. "Not good at all."

“What?” Zac frowned. “These items weren’t even looted in the Zecia sector. It can’t be too difficult to pawn them off. And if the problem is volume, I have dozens of these rings.”

“Please stop,” Calrin groaned as his shoulders drooped. “I can’t take it.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Zac said with a raised brow. “Since when were you allergic to treasure?”

“You’re going to give me a Heart Demon,” the gnome choked, and there were actually tears forming in the corner of his eyes. “I work myself ragged day after day, going over quotes and reports until I see numbers dancing across the walls. But I barely manage to make a few D-grade Nexus Coins in profit while you return with treasures worth millions.”

“Well, so sorry about that,” Zac said, his voice laden with sarcasm.

“I should have become a warrior. A brute,” Calrin muttered, not listening to Zac any longer. “No need to worry about projections, no need to keep constant watch over my thieving employees. Just swing my axe and drown in wealth.”

“It’s not like these things come easy. I shouldn’t even be alive,” Zac snorted. “You know where I got these things? A Divine Monarch fought with an Autarch, and the shockwaves ripped the capital of a C-grade force to shreds. Trillions died, probably. I picked these things off the bodies of Hegemons who had been killed by errant blasts, narrowly avoiding getting blasted myself.”

“Ah?” Calrin said, his eyes glazing over. “Hegemons ripped to shreds?”

“Then I got captured by a monstrous beast that ate Monarchs like candy,” Zac added.

“That’s...” Calrin said as he glanced at the rings again.

“Perhaps, the slowly and steady path is the best, after all.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “And going from thatched roofs to annual revenue counted in D-grade coins can’t possibly be considered bad.”

“That’s right,” Calrin puffed his chest. “Even with the winds blowing against us, good ol’ Calrin is bringing in the profits. So this loot, what do you want to do with it?”

“I have already made a preliminary sweep and put aside the best things,” Zac said. “For the rest, same as usual. The good stuff goes to the contribution store, the decent to the shops, and the trash can be pawned off elsewhere. Hopefully, you can make some alliances with all those things, get yourself out of your current predicament. Oh, but keep any strategic war resources aside until we know what we’ll be dealing with down the road. And if you find something interesting in the rings, put it aside as well. I might have missed some good things.”

“Certainly,” Calrin said.

“I’ll keep the thievery to a minimum, but I only have so many eyes,” Vikram sighed.

“You! Evil thing!” Calrin spat.

“On another topic,” Zac said, ignoring the two who almost seemed like an old married couple. “I need the latest information on the Void Gate and Salosar.”

Void Gate was the key to getting his hands on the Ferric Worldeater for his quest to upgrade the Shipyard, and Salosar was the closest place he had access to thanks to completing the System’s training regimen in the research base. It could be considered a border town that was either neutral or a subsidiary planet to the Void Gate.

It was a mercantile hub that provided the reclusive faction with cultivation resources, while the gate used Salosar to pawn off some materials that only appeared inside their domain.

“No need,” Calrin said. “I already have it.”

“Oh?” Zac said with surprise.

“I’ve been keeping some tabs on them since you asked me all those years ago,” Calrin said. “And with the recent changes, I’ve been updating my reports weekly.”

“Changes? What’s going on” Zac asked curiously.

“Apparently, they are having problems with some sort of beast tide?” Calrin hesitated. “And they have sent out calls for assistance.”

Zac’s brows rose in surprise over this unexpected turn. He had wondered whether he would need to expose his identity to gain access to the Void Star where the Ferric Worldeaters could be found, something which would bring some real risks with a powerful faction like the Void Gate. But just as he was wondering what to do, a solution had presented itself.

He had to admit - being blessed by unordinary Luck was quite convenient.

Chapter 847: Call to Arms

“The information about the nature of the beast tide is lacking, but the situation has to be grave,” the Sky Gnome explained. “It’s the first time in recent memory they allow outsiders into their domain.”

“Most of those who have entered have failed to return,” Vikram added. “Casualties at the battlefronts are reported to be extremely high.”

“And people are people still going?” Zac asked dubiously.

“Absolutely. The Void Gate is filthy rich, and their rewards are great. The shortsighted warriors are just doing it for the wealth, while the better-informed wandering cultivators see this as a final opportunity to temper themselves before the war breaks out,” the Sky Gnome explained. “After all, no matter how harsh a beast tide is, it cannot compare to the cruelties of war.”

“Anything new on the Ferric Worldeaters?” Zac asked.

“I’m afraid not. The only description the Void Gate has provided is that some of the beasts are intangible and that some of the fighting will take place in space, but specialized equipment will be provided,” Calrin said as he handed over a couple of information crystals.

“Intangible? Ghosts?” Zac muttered with confusion.

“Not necessarily. There are all kinds of energy-based life-forms out there,” Calrin shrugged. “But I haven’t been able to find out anymore. I suspect those who join the missions are bound by contracts,” Calrin sighed. “Either that or the information houses are leery of angering the Void Priestess. But you might find out more if you head over.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “Do you know of any way for me to masquerade as an Early Hegemon? Or at least a Half-Step D-

grade Cultivator?”

“It sounds like you need an Aura Modulator,” Vikram offered.

“A what?” Zac asked.

“He’s right, for once,” Calrin reluctantly agreed. “I’m guessing you’re already as strong as a Hegemon, but your aura is clearly that of a peak elite E-grade cultivator? If so, you need a modulator.”

“What does it do?”

“It cannot change the strength of your Aura, but it can change the way it appears and continuously infuse it with your energy. Therefore, only elites can use it,” the gnome explained. “As long as you have the attributes, a good modulator will allow you to appear as a Hegemon, though it will gradually drain you of Cosmic Energy while your aura is on display.”

“They’re not very useful for most people. Few can use them, and the ones who do, have no reason for doing so,” Vikram added.

Zac nodded in agreement. It generally wasn’t very useful to appear as a weak Hegemon compared to an E-grade Heaven’s Chosen. Even if the latter was a grade lower, they’d receive better treatment almost anywhere. Normally, Zac would rather hide his aura if he wanted to go incognito, but he feared that wouldn’t be possible this time if he wanted to sneak inside as a mercenary.

“Try to get me one of those things, the higher quality the better,” Zac said.

“No problem,” Calrin smiled. “While most things are hard to acquire right now, niche items like these are still collecting dust in various auction houses. You should be able to come and collect one in a week or so.”

“Perfect,” Zac nodded as he took out the rest of his spatial treasures. “Then I’ll leave the rings with you. To be clear, I was stuck in a miniature world for five years, which was more than enough time to memorize all the items. So no funny business.”

“Don’t listen to this screeching little monkey,” Calrin said as he waved at Vikram with annoyance. “The Thayer Consortia always act above-board.”

“If you say so,” Zac snorted before leaving the Sky Gnome to complete the tally.

Zac donned his presence-hiding cowl again as he walked out from Thayer Consortia, his thoughts already having shifted from his treasures to the Void Gate. The more he thought about it, the more suspicious it seemed. How could a faction like the Void Gate find themselves pressed by a beast tide? With the Void Priestess and the Void Monastery secluded at the heart of the Gate, it should be one of the safest places in the Zecia Sector.

Was there a conspiracy at play? Did the Void Gate have some specific purpose in luring wandering cultivators to their side? Or was it related to the war? Zac shook his head, knowing he wouldn’t get any closer to an answer from here. He would simply have to head over to Salosar and check things out himself. If it seemed safe, he’d enter under a pseudonym, using that modulator thing to pretend to be a powerful Half-Step cultivator. That should provide him access to the inner sections of the Void Gate without standing out.

If things seemed too sketchy, he’d risk it and send word to Leyara.

Having made his choice, Zac continued down the road toward the main government building, intending to visit Abby next to confirm some details about the Assimilation and operations. However, he suddenly stopped upon spotting a familiar building just ahead.

It was a three-story pub that looked almost exactly the same as before. The only difference was that the surrounding houses had been removed, replaced by a small park where some tables were set. There weren’t too many guests considering it was just lunchtime, but there were a couple of groups having a beer under the shade of the trees.

Zac hesitated a few seconds, but he ultimately chose to enter, keeping his cowl on. Thankfully, there was only a single

couple sitting indoors, and they were too engrossed with each other to notice any other guests. So Zac simply sat down at his usual spot, taking off his hood.

“Hey, no spells in the bar, I’ve told you peop-“ Ryan muttered as he looked up from a ledger, but he froze with shock when he recognized Zac’s face. “It’s you!”

“I thought your place would be bigger by now,” Zac smiled.

“I, ah,” Ryan stuttered a few seconds before he found his wits. “Well, I thought about it, but I eventually gave up on the idea. I like this small and cozy atmosphere. Running a business empire sounds like a pain in the ass.”

“Won’t it affect your cultivation?” Zac asked curiously.

“I have kind of shifted,” Ryan shrugged. “I focus more on the brewing than the barkeeping nowadays. As long as I manage to brew better and better attribute-enhancing mead or liquor, I will keep progressing.”

“Let me see the results of your hard work then,” Zac laughed, suddenly in the mood for some native brews after being locked in the Orom World for years.

Ryan nodded, and he hesitated a bit before taking up a miniature barrel that couldn’t contain more than a couple of pints. It had a golden stopper, and the barkeep gingerly poured what looked a lot like an amber ale into a glass.

“Here you go, one glass of ‘Hatchetman’s Delight’,” Ryan coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

“That’s its name?” Zac grimaced, no longer sure if he wanted it.

Still, it emitted a tantalizing aroma, prompting Zac to take a reluctant swig.

It felt like cutting flames were trickling down his throat, unleashing a conflagration in his belly the moment it had been swallowed. Even Zac with his Vitality passing 13,000 felt a bit tipsy, and the feeling refused to completely go away even after circulating his Cosmic Energy. Meanwhile, Zac felt full of

power, and his veins pulsed as though he had taken a berserking treasure.

“What the hell,” Zac wheezed. “There are people in Port Atwood who can drink this and not keel over?”

“Well, no,” Ryan said as he scratched his head with a wry smile. “You would be the first one to taste it and remain conscious. So, how did it taste? Did you get any boosts?”

Zac shot the barkeep a glare before taking a look at his status screen.

“I got a boost of 350 raw Strength and 200 raw Vitality,” Zac said after forcing his drifting mind to focus for a second.

“That’s pretty impressive for a concoction. Are there any side effects, except the intoxication? Can it be stacked with other methods?”

“It’s liquid courage, so to speak, so it should be stackable with berserking treasures and skill,” Ryan said. “But the strain on your body would increase. As for side effects, I haven’t observed anything except a splitting headache when the test sub- eh, customers, wake up. With your constitution, it should be fine though.”

“Alright, can I put in an order for a couple of casks? And if you can do something similar with field rations or dried meat, I want that as well,” Zac said. “A few thousand kilos would suffice.”

“Thousand? Kilos?” Ryan blurted. “Are you planning on providing rations to the army?”

“Something like that,” Zac smiled. “Can it be done?”

In reality, the rations were all for himself. With **[Adamance of Eoz]** constantly running, he was always a bit hungry, in contrast to most E-grade cultivators who barely needed to eat by the time they reached the peak of the grade. After a harsh battle, he would almost keel over if he didn’t eat something quickly. If he could get some food made by actual professionals like Ryan, he hopefully wouldn’t need to eat as much and as often.

“I mainly focus on drinks nowadays, but I do have a few recipes and a meat-searing skill,” Ryan said. “But I know a good chef who has a similar focus as I. We can team up for this order.”

“Even better,” Zac smiled. “Only High or Peak E-grade meat, if possible, and dishes you can eat on the go with one hand. I’ll get you whatever you need.”

“No problem,” Ryan nodded. “It will take a few days with those kinds of quantities. In return, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” Zac nodded. “If it’s within my power.”

“It should be,” Ryan said with a hushed volume. “It’s about Lily.”

“Who?” Zac asked, completely blanking out on the name.

“The pet shop owner I introduced you to. The one you recruited to the Academy,” Ryan sighed. “I think something is wrong with her.”

“Wrong how?” Zac frowned, finally remembering who he was talking about. It was the young girl he had headhunted for Alyn to turn into a beastmaster with the long-term goal of taking control of the Ayn Hive. “She didn’t die or have a mental break, right?”

“No, but something has been... off about her the past few months,” Ryan whispered. “I can’t pinpoint it, but her eyes sometimes make my hair stand on end. She mentioned some sort of insects long ago... I think something went wrong in her cultivation, almost like she’s possessed?”

“I’ll look into it,” Zac nodded. “There’s an extremely skilled Mentalist in my army, though she’s off-world. As soon as she returns to Earth, we’ll see if there’s something wrong with Lily.”

Zac wasn’t an expert on the subject, but even he knew there were dangers related to forming links with beasts. For example, if the beast became too powerful, it could break the mental fetters and attack its trainer. Was it perhaps possible the controller and controlled could swap places? Zac realized they

might have overestimated themselves when trying to control a being like a Hivequeen.

It was literally an entity that controlled thousands of minions with their powerful mind. Even if the Hivequeen was just an infant that hadn't even gained sentience when Zac left for Twilight Harbor, it sounded like something had changed during his time in the Orom World. If so, it could pose a big threat to Port Atwood as long as he or the other elites weren't around to deal with it.

The prospect of Lily having become a puppet weighed on both his and Ryan's conscience, and the conversation grew a bit stilted after that. Soon enough, Zac stood up and excused himself, once more heading for the government building. But he didn't even have time to take ten steps before stopping because he received a slight mental nudge.

"It's always something," Zac muttered, but his eyes were full of excitement rather than annoyance. Any thoughts of meeting up with Abby were already gone as he flashed away, going so far as to activate **[Earthstrider]** as he passed through Port Atwood like a blur.

He didn't even bother entering his compound through a gate, simply opting to jump straight over the inner wall, passing through the killing arrays thanks to his unique command token. Just a few moments later, he stood in the courtyard of his own manor, where Triv already stood waiting.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, I figured young master would want to know," the butler said.

"Of course, thank you," Zac nodded as he walked into the death-attuned zone of his courtyard.

The nudge in his mind earlier had come from Triv using the mental communication skill of the butler class. Triv had simply informed him that powerful fluctuations were coming from within his courtyard, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on – Alea was finally ready to come out from her cocoon.

His heart beat like a drum as he entered the illusion array, almost immediately coming face-to-face with the large obelisk he had placed there almost two weeks ago by now. It was much smaller compared to before, having shrunk to just a thin layer covering the coffin. And the coffin was clearly in the final phase of its evolution as it released powerful deathly pulses that shocked Zac with their purity.

Was it because of that odd egg Alea had swallowed just as she entered the void?

A quiet crackling broke the silence that otherwise covered his courtyard as shavings gradually fell from the crystal. Cracks were spreading as well until the obelisk completely shattered from a massive eruption of pure death and a cold cutting force that even managed to leave some bleeding gashes on Zac's arms.

Left behind was a coffin that was both familiar and foreign at once. It still had the same general appearance as before – a black coffin with numerous engravings and chains holding it together. However, its edges were no longer smooth, instead replaced by extremely detailed carvings that seemed to be both ornamental and not. They didn't make up any fractals or arrays, or any other type of legible script Zac could recognize.

But they actually contained a hint of Oblivion.

The closest thing that Zac had ever seen was right in his own body; the patterns on his right shoulder – the ones that had been formed after Oblivion reformed [**Cyclic Strike**] three times over. The carvings on [**Love's Bond**] were still quite indistinct though, and Zac probably wouldn't have realized their origin if he wasn't marked the same way himself.

The second difference was that the arrays on the lid had changed. The circular array on the top remained, though it now looked a bit like a porthole. Swirling darkness could be seen within the array, like he was looking at a gateway to the abyss. Meanwhile, the wreath-like arrays were gone, replaced by one vertical line stretching from the circle all the way to the bottom, along with three horizontal lines cutting through it on the lower half.

As for the chains, they were now pitch-black and matte, except for the endless number of patterns that covered the links. It was the runes that had appeared after being marked in the Twilight Chasm, but they had been refined, their meaning deepened. Zac even felt they contained a lot of truths at the level of his own Dao branches.

“How do I look?” a familiar voice echoed from behind, and Zac’s heart almost threatened to jump out of his mouth as he spun around.

It was her – in the flesh.

Chapter 848: In the Flesh

There she stood, as beautiful as he remembered. That alluring smile, those intoxicating curves, those limpid eyes that seemed to both invite you in and warn you off - toxic perfection. Alea was so lifelike, and one memory after another was dragged from the depths of his mind. But the next moment she shifted, her horns disappearing as her silk robes were replaced by the hardy linens that would hold up in the fields.

His most trusted subordinate had become a hazy simile of Uynala, her features not nearly as detailed. One face after another a familiar figure appeared before him. Friends, lovers, even enemies. The Atwood siblings, full of mindboggling luck and layers of secrets. His stern but doting grandfather. It was a real walk through memory lane.

“I really need to get out of here,” Ogras eventually sighed, and with a wave of his hand, the illusion disappeared. “Or I’ll soon go mad.”

“How would you know if you haven’t?” a voice snickered in his head. “I’ve seen it so many times before. That hazy state where perception starts to shift, where old truths become muddled and new ones take their place. Where the discrepancy between one’s inner and outer world slowly drives a wedge in your personality, splitting it into two incompletes.”

“Are you done?” Ogras asked with a roll of his eyes.

“If conjuring past friends and lovers to accompany you with the help of your new Dao Branch isn’t crazy, then what about the lost hours?” K’Rav gleefully asked.

“It’ll sort itself out,” Ogras shrugged with disinterest as he walked over to the tree. “They are getting spaced out further and further apart, meaning they will be gone soon enough.”

Ogras said that, but he, unfortunately, wasn't as confident as he let on. After spending a mind-bending year in the depths of that icy domain, he knew his grasp of reality had slipped a bit. Who could possibly be fine after having their memories wiped almost a hundred times?

Even more troubling was that the gaps in his memory kept appearing even after absorbing that weird treasure, but this time without any helpful notes hastily scribbled down. He thought he had refined all of the icy crystal to form his Branch of False Truths, his illusory Dao Branch based on his vision in the Tower of Eternity and spending so much time living at the edge between falsehoods and truths.

"If you say so," K'Rav snickered, his presence thankfully returning into the flag.

Ogras once more swore at the fact the flag couldn't be placed in a spatial tool, what with the technically-living souls inside. Then again, he wasn't sure he'd dare place it inside one in either case, out of fear the shifty warlock would find some way to take his flag and run. So he could only endure the goblin's attempts to foster Heart Demons, or at least annoy him to death.

Thankfully, life wasn't all bad, and he looked up with anticipation at the fruit whose color was rapidly growing deeper. An enticing aroma was already spreading through the area, and desirous calls could be heard in every direction. However, not one of the beasts dared to come closer as the treasure matured, the rotting carcasses strewn across the area a poignant reminder of what would happen if they did.

This was the fifth one, and most likely the last. Ogras didn't mind, seeing as he had almost gained immunity to them by now. In other words, it was about time to move on from this forest. Though where, he didn't quite know. He had found the Ra'Lashar Kingdom by chance when following his guts, and from there had passed through one biome after another, each one a realm fragment the Dimensional Seed had swallowed.

The Mystic Realm was a lot bigger than Ogras had expected, but he was finally running out of places to visit. To the south

of the forest was the edge of the realm; a weak film that could move thousands of meters in an instant, throwing any poor bastard who had strayed too far into the void. To the west was the glacier and the other regions he had already visited, and to the east were the badlands. That left north, where the simple giant presumably still played court.

The question was whether he should enter the badlands, risking running into swarms of those battle-crazed bipods. He had encountered dozens of strays, or perhaps scouts, over the past years, and they had kept getting stronger just as he had. Their bloodlines were clearly out of the norm, which was extremely odd considering how many of them there seemed to be.

Normally, when individual beasts were this powerful, there wouldn't be too many of them, what with the law of balance, and all.

Thankfully, most of them seemed reluctant to leave the badlands, which Ogras estimated taking up nearly a third of the Mystic Realm, and Ogras wasn't sure poking that nest was worth it. He had seen those voracious bastards chew straight through both Spiritual Ice and hardened rocks like it was nothing.

With years having passed by now, there couldn't possibly be much of value remaining in the badlands, unless it were some sort of treasure they weren't interested in. That thought alone made Ogras grimace. It wasn't the thought of losing out on treasures, though that certainly pained him as well.

Gods, it had already been ten years. A whole decade stuck in this netherblasted realm.

A snap dragged him out of his thoughts, and Ogras quickly snatched the fruit as it fell from its branch, immediately swallowing it before it had time to begin its rapid decay.

“Time to work, you bastards,” Ogras muttered as he infused some energy into the **[Shadewar Flag]**, and dozens of guardian ghosts appeared around him as Ogras sat down and closed his eyes.

Minutes turned to hours, and hours turned to days as Ogras gradually channeled the seemingly inexhaustible energies contained in the fruit into the node in his head, all while channeling his Cultivation Manual. Finally, he felt a pop, followed by a blazing headache that almost made him keel over.

A few of the ghosts immediately stirred, but a couple of quick jabs instilled with the Branch of the Grey World ended the insurrection as quickly as it began. Ogras had the technique to control the ghosts, but would take decades, centuries perhaps, to perfectly brand all the captives in the inner world of his unorthodox Spirit Tool.

Of course, having a resentful ghost as a Tool Spirit didn't help. Luckily, it was mostly fine as long as there were some enemies around to turn their aggression toward, and it was only when forced to stand around like this they started to get antsy.

Having opened seven nodes in just under two months was huge, and it had put him right at the precipice of Peak E-grade. Just two more levels and he'd be there. A glance at his status screen confirmed what he had been hoping for as well; the latest level had pushed his Dexterity past 10,000, which really had rewarded him with a title as he'd hoped.

[Specialist: Reach 10,000 points in a single attribute before evolving to D-Grade. Reward: Dexterity +5%.]

Having wheedled information out of Zac for years, Ogras already knew he'd gotten a title for pushing one of his attributes 1,000 while still in F-grade. Thankfully, a version of the same title appeared in the E-grade as well, though no doubt watered-down. Then again, he had nothing to complain about.

Before he left for Earth, he couldn't have imagined reaching his current heights in just over a decade. Two Dao Branches, a mutated race that was conducive to his path, a unique Body-Tempering Technique that had almost increased his, admittedly unimpressive, attribute efficiency by half. And that was only the things you'd see on a status screen.

Apart from that, there was the simple fact of having formed a working path while still in the E-grade, having his affinities

boosted by a considerable degree thanks to this unparalleled environment. Who knew that a baby Mystic Realm was this amazing, probably surpassing the cultivation environment even of the peak factions in Zecia? He just needed to find a replacement for the **[Grey World Mudra]**, and he was golden.

He had been quite proud of the manual back home, as his grandpa had gone through some trouble to acquire it. But back then both his vantage and ambitions were a lot more restrained compared to today, and he feared it wouldn't be good enough to form the kind of core he wanted.

Such was the curse of having an unimpressive start - every step forward would be uphill until you managed to right the ship.

“Well, better late than never,” Ogras smiled as he turned toward the tree.

If it was back home, the elders would have covered the tree in a series of arrays to speed up its recuperation process. That way, it'd provide its next batch of fruits much quicker. Here, there was no need for that. Having absconded with most of the wealth in this realm already, Ogras had no plans of ever returning.

So why respect the law of conservation in this place? What was it to him if some bastard in the future didn't find anything worthwhile when visiting this forest?

His spear appeared in his hand, and Ogras punched a deep hole with a simple jab that just reached the heart of the trunk. A moment later, an amber sap started to pour out from the wound, the sticky compound veritably teeming with energy. Ogras wasn't too sure he'd be able to use this goop on himself, but it should fetch a pretty penny on the outside considering how energy-dense it was.

Another hour passed as Ogras siphoned out the lifeblood of the tree while it withered with a speed visible to the naked eye. However, a deep thud made him look around with alarm, but he quickly realized it wasn't some big beast coming to stake a claim on the tree. The sound rather came from the sky – where space itself had been indented.

It almost looked like a window with a spiderweb of cracks, but those cracks were rapidly mending. The next moment, a second thud echoed through the world to worsen the spatial damage again, but there wasn't a third. Five minutes later, the sky had completely recovered, but Ogras' gaze didn't turn away as he thoughtfully took a swig of his almost depleted stock of liquor.

Was it finally time?

Finally, his eyes shifted away from the sky before turning to the east. One last hurrah before it was time to say goodbye?

It really was her.

However, Zac soon realized it was not literally Alea in the flesh, considering the demoness was partly translucent as she stood behind him with her familiar smile. Her appearance was also a lot more like the large avatar of **[Death's Embrace]** than her old self, with the reddish tint of Torrid Demons having been replaced by pristine white with black scale-like markings.

It was a bit like Ogras' odd transformation, but the aura was completely different. While Ogras' constitution felt indistinct like he was made out of shadows, the patterns on Alea's skin rather contained the whispers of death. Her horns were quite different as well, almost looking like crescent blades with the outer side of them sharpened into an actual edge.

But the most palpable transformation were her eyes, who looked more like the eyes of a Draugr than those of a demon, though she did have a sclera with a slight turquoise tint. It was just that her pupils were much bigger than before, making her eyes almost look entirely black. But even with all the changes, it really was her.

"You're finally back," Zac said with a hoarse voice, his heart assaulted by a wave of complex emotions.

"Well, in a sense," Alea smiled as she glanced at the coffin next to Zac. "Did you miss me?"

Even if her appearance was different, the smile was the same. For a moment, Zac was teleported back to the earliest days of the Incursion, just after he had dealt with Rydel and the Azh'Rezak incursion. Back then, there had been no Port Atwood, only Zac and his camper with the occasional visits from Alea or Ogras.

The situation had been pretty desperate back then, but it had also been simple. He had spent most of his days in the mines, slowly detoxifying his body from the Cosmic Water while Ogras helped set the foundations for his budding empire. Back then, he only had one goal – to find his family, and he was steadily working toward it.

Now, his power far surpassed what he could ever have imagined, but his life had grown so complicated. There were dozens of matters requiring his attention, threats looming in every direction. So much history weighing on his shoulders, so many goals that remained far out of reach.

“I did,” Zac eventually said as he forced a smile. “It’s really good to see you back in one piece. How is your soul?”

“My soul is healed and has completed its transformation,” Alea said as she curiously looked around the courtyard.

“Unfortunately, this form is not a natural state for me any longer, I’m not like that weird guy at the Dao Repository. I can’t stay like this for long - it’s exhausting. Perhaps I’ll be able to move more freely by the time I reach whatever stage Brazla’s at.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Zac urgently asked.

“Well, you can keep me fed and happy,” Alea laughed. “You should have figured out what kind of materials I’ll require going forward.”

“No problem,” Zac nodded. “And don’t worry. I’ll figure out a way to return your soul into a body, one way or another.”

“Don’t worry so much or you’ll turn into an old man,” Alea smiled as she floated over to Zac’s side.

She tried to touch his cheek, but her hand passed right through, and Alea looked as disappointed as Zac felt. There was still a

long way to go. However, Alea quickly regained her smile as she took a step back.

“I’m in no hurry. With my soul fused with this weapon, I might even outlive you. Besides, between my environment and you feeding me all these treasures, I’m making better progress on my cultivation than I ever have before.”

“Still,” Zac muttered.

“More importantly, put me on,” Alea eagerly said as her eyes widened in anticipation. “I have a surprise for you.”

It was a bit odd to hear the term ‘put me on’ from Alea, but he still did as he was told. He walked over and placed his hand on the cold surface of the coffin, and its chains smoothly wound around him and placed the Spirit Tool on its position on his back. It was more than five times heavier than before, even if it still only was the size of a large backpack.

“Now, send the command,” Alea grinned, and Zac felt a stream of information enter his mind.

“What the-” Zac blurted, but his eyes lit up as he sent a stream of Branch of the War Axe into the coffin.

The next moment, a muffled rattle was followed by a weapon appearing in his hand – a pitch-black axe. At the end of its hilt, a chain was attached, connecting the weapon with the bottom of the coffin. The axe itself was actually quite familiar – its design almost an exact copy of the axe his Dao Apparition wielded.

It was roughly the same size as **[Verun’s Bite]**; somewhat oversized for a one-handed axe with a forty-five centimeter crescent edge, eclipsing Verun’s by five centimeters. On the back of the edge, a big spike acted as a counterweight, mirroring the smaller teeth on his primal-series axe.

However, there were a few differences to his Dao Avatar’s weapon. For one, this one wasn’t wrapped in chains. Instead, its hilt was made from some slightly mottled metal that felt extremely sturdy. On the back of the haft there was also a familiar set of runes – identical to the ones that had appeared on the coffin lid.

The horizontal line ran along the full length of the haft, while the three horizontal scripts became his grip. The temper line of the edge was also quite interesting, almost perfectly matching the carvings on the coffin itself. Curious, Zac swung the weapon a few times, and he felt the balance was simply perfect even if its length and edge differed slightly from **[Verun's Bite]**.

"Very dashing. I suit you quite nicely," Alea laughed. "Do you like it?"

"It's perfect, but how did you do this?" Zac asked. "I've never heard of a Spirit Tool changing this much from an evolution."

"It's a bit hard to explain, but that array you used on me is still around. Even now, its potential isn't exhausted. I should be able to transform upon reaching D-grade as well, but that will probably exhaust the energy in the array. After that, you'd have to find me a blacksmith," Alea shrugged as she floated around Zac.

"I love it, but don't overdo it with these transformations," Zac urged. "What if you damage or accidentally alter your soul? Remember, the goal is to bring you back."

"Yes, yes," Alea said with a roll of her eyes. "But until then I want to be able to help you out. What if I become too weak, and I have to spend millennia in your Spatial Rings because you're afraid I'll break in battle. Then I might really go crazy."

"Alright, is there anything else I can do?"

"You sure?" Alea asked as she leaned closer.

"Uh, yes?" Zac said.

"Alright," Alea said after some thought. "Don't date anyone else then."

"What?!" Zac blurted, thinking she was about to ask for some expensive material.

"I'm just joking. Why would I need to be jealous of some woman? Like I don't know you're closer to your weapons than you will be any woman," Alea laughed. "Do what you want."

Someone as powerful as you ought to have a handful of wives and a few dozen children, really. Now, I need to go.”

“Go? Already?” Zac asked with reluctance.

“Like I said, I can’t stay in this form for long. I’ve already overstayed my welcome. I will be slightly weakened for the next few weeks, and you won’t be able to use my new skill,” Alea sighed.

“If I evolve you to Middle E-grade, will you be able to come out again?” Zac asked.

“Middle E-grade?” Alea laughed. “Silly boy, I’m already Late E-grade. Work hard, or I’ll pass you by.”

The next moment, she was gone.

Chapter 849: The Atwood Empire

“Wait, you’re Late E-grade?” Zac exclaimed, but Alea was already gone and there was no answer forthcoming from within his mind.

It really looked like she was unable to communicate freely just yet.

Zac couldn’t sense her presence at all in his mind, except for that intangible bond he had with his other Spirit Tools. But even if she had disappeared as she had after their previous short conversations, Zac wasn’t worried anymore. Like Alea said, she was healed, and she was even making progress on her cultivation.

And truthfully, as much as Zac loved to hear her voice again, he was somewhat relieved that Alea wasn’t able to freely speak in his head. It was not that he had a bunch of secrets that he needed to keep from her – they were way beyond that point by now.

It was rather about the feeling of having his mind invaded, even if Alea obviously wouldn’t be a hostile presence in his mind like Heda’s seed. That was why both Vilari and Triv’s skills rather worked like telephone calls. They had to nudge his mind, and he had to accept their attempt to communicate.

With Alea gone, Zac swapped over to his Draugr form before spending the next few minutes getting acquainted with his upgraded weapon. The fact that she had managed to leapfrog all the way from Peak F-grade to Late E-grade was huge, but Zac figured he shouldn’t be too surprised.

With the things [**Love’s Bond**] had swallowed since its formation, Zac wouldn’t even have been surprised if it became a D-grade Spirit Tool.

At first, Zac had been worried that the chain attached to the haft of his new axe would become a hindrance, even if it was thinner than the other ones he used to attack. However, he was relieved to find that the chain seemed to have a mind of its own, never getting in his way or hitting his hip.

In fact, it could even be considered a strength rather than a weakness.

First of all, the chain constantly danced in the air next to the handle, acting a bit like a crossguard. It probably wouldn't be able to block out an all-out strike, but having some metal in the way of a surprise strike targeting his weapon-holding hand was obviously a good thing.

Secondly, the chain essentially turned the axe into a throwing weapon. He suddenly hurled the weapon at a tree on the other side of the courtyard, and the axe shot forward like an arrow. At the last second, Zac slightly nudged the outstretched chain, prompting the axe to make a sharp turn before drawing an arc that cut down a neighboring tree instead.

It was a fusion between his understanding of axes and armaments, allowing him to control his axe as both. This type of manipulation of the chain was the simplest form of control, but it hinted at all kinds of possibilities down the road.

Just a moment later, the axe was back in his hand as the chain retracted with such speed that it almost looked like teleportation. A Dexterity-based elite might be able to grab hold of the axe on its return, but would they even dare to?

"Triv," Zac said as he walked out from the isolation array and threw over his axe to the startled butler. "Try to drag the chain away from me."

"Ah, young master, these types of feats are not my strong suit," Triv hesitated.

"Well, there's only you around," Zac shrugged. "Don't worry, just do your best."

"Alright," Triv reluctantly agreed, and some sort of semi-tangible lasso formed around the axe as he started to pull away.

However, as try as they might, the coffin effortlessly dragged the ghost closer and closer. Zac grabbed the chain himself, and he could feel that Triv utilized the equivalent of around 3,000 Strength to resist the pull. That wasn't close to the coffin's limits by the looks of it, but Zac would have to find someone stronger to test it out properly.

"Alright, thank you. You don't need to wait around here," Zac said.

"Then I will take my leave," Triv said, throwing an appreciative glance at the axe in their grip before fluttering away.

Left alone in his courtyard, sat down on a prayer mat as he thoughtfully looked at the axe that had once more returned to his hand. With Alea having created a perfect axe for his undead form, it looked like one of his issues had been dealt with. He had been struggling to decide what to do with **[Verun's Bite]** – to infuse the weapon with Death to balance out the life it had absorbed, or to let it stay as it were.

Now, Alea had made the choice for him, and the more he thought about it, the more suitable he found it. There was some logic to the argument that using only one weapon would help push one's technique to its limit, but there were practical ramifications to only using **[Verun's Bite]** as well. For one, the Undead generally didn't use primal-series weaponry because of the very affinity clash Verun exhibited.

Secondly, if he wanted to keep his two sides separate in the eyes of outsiders, he couldn't be running around with **[Verun's Bite]** both as undead and human. It had already become an issue in Twilight Harbor, where he had been forced to get a substitute to avoid getting found out by Catheya. But using a lower-quality substitute to his real weapons was a deadly gambit, one which could cost him dearly in case he suddenly ran into a powerful enemy.

Now, all those issues were solved, with him having full kits for both his sides; **[Verun's Bite]** and Vivi when fighting as a human, and **[Love's Bond]** taking both those roles in his undead form.

Over the next few hours, he made a couple of other discoveries. The most obvious one was that the Spirit Tool had actually lost its shield form. Now, **[Love's Bond]** could only take on its backpack and necklace forms.

In return, the main chains of the coffin had become disgustingly sturdy, and Zac wasn't sure if even a Middle D-grade cultivator would be able to damage the links. Along with a massive boost in durability, they had also become more pliable, responding far quicker to his mental commands. This had drastically improved the defensive capabilities of the links and essentially removed the need for a shield.

In return, it cost a lot more Miasma to manipulate the chains, but that wasn't surprising. And with his stockpiles, he would be able to use them continuously for a whole day before running out of energy.

Finally, he discovered that **[Blighted Cut]**, his base skill that had been somewhat underutilized lately, had almost been reborn with a proper weapon. With **[Blighted Cut]** activated, both his axe and the chain attached to turned even darker than black, and the gleaming edge of the axe started releasing such potent toxins that even Zac was appalled.

If **[Gorehew]** was good at taking out weaker enemies, then **[Blighted Cut]** had become a terror for infighting, which was perfect for Zac who had spent years working on his technique. Part of the effect came from his improved Dao, but it was also obvious that his Spirit Tool amplified the corrosive effect of the skill.

In a perfect world, Zac would have wanted to spend a couple of months getting properly reacquainted with **[Love's Bond]** after having used **[Chainbox]** for years, but a buzz from a communication crystal forced him back to reality and its many duties.

"Lord Baron, it's an honor," the Stargazer said with visible glee as Zac stepped into her office twenty minutes later.

"Don't you look chipper," Zac commented.

“It’s all thanks to you,” Abby bobbed. “I am the administrator of a progenitor who managed to become a Baron in ten short years – a miracle. I have received a promotion, plus administrating a sanctioned Empire has more than doubled my cultivation speed.”

“Well, glad I can help,” Zac snorted.

“If you open your management screen, you can now also hire more administrators such as I. As a Baron, you can add one additional administrator per world, for a fee of course,” Abby added.

“Why would I want to do that, though?” Zac asked. “Port Atwood has already nurtured many competent administrators. Why bring in more Stargazers?”

“Well, for one, you don’t have to choose Stargazers,” Abby muttered. “But it’s also a matter of convenience. We have access to some functionality that others don’t. We are also neutral, only beholden to you, and limited in our actions by the System. Having outside administrators at the heart of your government, even if we don’t have any de-facto control, will prevent corruption to a certain degree.”

“Alright, I’ll look at candidates later. But no funny business. Don’t think I’ve forgotten your white little lies,” Zac smiled, waving away the Stargazer’s explanations. “More importantly, have you received the information about the quest I completed on Ensolus?”

“About what to do with their planet?” Abby asked. “I got it.”

“What’s your opinion on it?” Zac asked curiously.

“All have their merits,” Abby said. “I think evolving this planet is most beneficial in the long-term, but it is a bit dangerous to have such a potent miniature world. Those kinds of planets are often highly contested; they are perfect for private residential worlds. I’m not sure you will be powerful enough to defend such a planet, even with your power.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “I guess I’m going with option three then. Can I pick a location right now?”

“One second,” Abby said as the stardust in her eye started swirling faster. Only half a minute did she speak up again. “You cannot choose a location right now. You will be able to choose a spot in 40 years at the earliest, and 85 at the latest. You also need to have visited the spot you have in mind, and it cannot be directly controlled by another empire.”

“No problem,” Zac slowly nodded. “I haven’t figured out where to put us anyway. So, why did you call me over?”

“You have a problem with the local factions. When the Atwood Empire became a sanctioned empire, the incursion world was not the only one affected. Everyone on Earth has had their Affiliation changed, and we have received dozens of requests for clarification,” the Stargazer explained. “We haven’t dared provide any clear answers before you had weighed in on the matter.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Zac groaned, and he left Abby’s offices twenty minutes later armed with stacks of reports and a travel schedule.

And so, spent the next few days visiting the strongest factions of Earth, where Abby and his other subordinates made sure his appearances were well-publicized. Part of the reason was to explain what was going on, while part of it was to show the world he was back and as powerful as ever - quelling any thoughts of rebellion.

Thankfully, the pushback from the factions wasn’t too big, considering his rule over Earth was all-but-official before in either case. There were some grumblings over the new taxation rates, but those grumblings quickly died out after the Contribution Tokens started to be rolled out just like on Ensolus.

With the number of official citizens of his faction going from millions to billions in just one week, Zac was forced to adjust the contribution rules to a slightly less generous model. Luckily enough, Vilari had already expected such a change, so the missives on Ensolus had said that the exact rewards were still being calculated to adapt to the new situation.

It was still easier to gain contribution points in the Atwood Empire compared to most established factions, though fewer would benefit from it. Zac had, under the suggestions from Abby and the golem at the exchange, eventually changed the model to one that mainly targeted elites.

Now, you either had to contribute resources to gain other resources, or perform uncommon feats.

For example, you could still get contribution points from gaining levels, but only if you progressed at a certain pace. It was meant to push people harder, where they perhaps needed to take some risks against beasts or the wilderness to keep up. If they succeeded, they'd both be tempered and gain contribution. If they failed, they might be hurt or even die.

It was harsh, but the Zecia Sector was about to enter a war that would last god-knows-how-long. Zac suspected that it would be decades at the least, and if his people didn't squeeze out all the potential they had, they'd only become fodder at the battlefield. Better suffer a little now than suffer a lot later.

It only took him three days to deal with the local factions, but Zac kept touring Earth for a while longer. Seeing Earth's transformation, he marveled over how similar Earth and Ensolus had become. Elysium, the previously desolate desert continent, was now at least 80% death-attuned, with small pockets of surprisingly condensed life.

It really had become a paradise for his undead forces, and his rapidly growing population of undead civilians. He had left a lot of his ichor with Vilari, and a few more generations of zombies had successfully been turned into Revenants. With the population booming, there was finally enough manpower to expand beyond just having an army.

Proper towns had now appeared next to the military bases, which held as many non-combat classes as warriors. The first generation of natural-born undead children had appeared on Elysium over the last year as well, with the first set of Revenants having managed to reach late E-grade. Even then, his undead cities were still quite small and limited in scope, a far cry from Port Atwood.

Finally, Zac toured his archipelago, and just like the missives said, his island kingdom had become the seam between Elysium and Pangea, with almost half of the islands having turned Death-attuned. It was a bit inconvenient for his faction which had spread to almost all islands by now, but there wasn't much of a loss in the long run.

Thankfully, Hive Kundevi had avoided getting their island impacted, and Zac decided to make a short visit to meet with his old allies. Ibtap was still in the underworld, but he was soon led to the inner chambers where Nonet waited. The former Anointed was still almost three meters tall, but their aura didn't feel nearly as imposing as the first time they met.

It turned out that the spiritual leader of the small hive had already encountered a bottleneck at the middle E-grade, with their remaining nodes being too weak to open either through cultivation or force. In other words, the chances of Nonet ever reaching the peak of the grade were essentially nil.

It was an unwelcome reminder of the reality of a cultivator – for every grade you passed, you would leave most of your companions behind.

Each grade was a watershed that would keep a vast majority of cultivators, and that would become especially apparent now that Earth had lost its Origin Dao and integration-related opportunities. Nonet was the first such person he encountered, but there would surely be more.

“Don't mourn for me,” Nonet smiled upon seeing Zac's expression. “The fact that I am able to live past the crusade is already a blessing. When it is my time, it will be weakness leaving the Hive. But I hope you can help our future generations adapt to this new reality as we are finding it difficult on our own.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“The Hives are unable to nurture the kind of warriors needed to meet the challenges of this wider world. We are a communal race, where the Hive is all. However, the pursuit of the Dao is ultimately a personal journey of discovery, which is putting us at a disadvantage,” Nonet sighed.

Zac immediately understood what Nonet was talking about. The thinking of the average Zhix warrior was extremely rigid, and Zhix like Ibtep and Rhubat were extremely rare. If cultivation didn't require insights into the Dao, they would probably have left the humans on earth far behind with their one-tracked mentality, but now they rather found themselves stuck.

Without the boost of the Origin Dao, how many of them would even be able to form Dao Seeds and make it past the F-grade?

“Your subordinates have graciously accepted warriors into your institutions, but we can see that their performance is not very impressive. We have tried setting up warrior camps both here and in the underworld as well, with the goal of nurturing combat-based Daos,” Nonet continued. “But it seems we are missing something.”

“I wonder... if the Zhix are doomed to be left in the dust in this new environment, a weakness leaving this world.”

“No need to give up just yet,” Zac said after some thought. “And there's no need to compare yourselves to humans. We're known to be one of the most adaptable races in the multiverse. The Zhix might simply need another generation or two to get used to the changes. Besides, I know that there are extremely formidable insectoid races in the multiverse. The problem might be that our training methods don't suit your people.

“I'll ask my people to look for solutions. Our sector doesn't have any large insectoid empires as far as I know, but there should be some factions around. But even if we can't find anything, don't worry. Just like you adapted to meet the threat of the Dominators, you will eventually adapt to meet the requirements of the Multiverse.”

Even if Zac tried to sound positive, he still felt downcast as he flew back toward his island, opting to take the scenic route rather than teleport to clear his head. With Nonet failing to even evolve their race, they would be gone in a few hundred years. Right now, that still seemed really far off, but Zac already felt how his perception of time had started shifting.

He had already spent months in seclusion at a time, the passage of time barely noticeable as he focused on his soul or techniques. Soon enough, these months would turn to years as he became increasingly disconnected from the mortal world. It meant losing part of what made you human, where you got strength and longevity in return.

But soon enough, Zac recovered his state of mind. Ultimately, everyone had their own road to walk. The lives of lower-grade people might be far shorter than those aiming for the peak of cultivation, but that didn't mean their lives were unfulfilling or insignificant. Life was what you made of it.

The forested edge of his island appeared on the horizon an hour later, and the moment he got in reach, he once more felt Triv's spiritual nudge.

'The Master of the Dao Repository has asked for you,' the ghost butler conveyed, the message almost completely dispelling the clouds in his mind.

Twenty minutes later Zac passed through the gates of the Towers of Myriad Dao, his eyes immediately turning to his master – The Lord of Cycles.

Chapter 850: Paint your Path

The enormous statue of Yrial looked a bit different from how it used to. Today, a haze chock-full of fiery and icy energies surrounded it, and it actually released an aura akin to a real cultivator. It looked like Brazla hadn't lied when he said he needed some time to gather energy. The scene made Zac a bit cautious - why did the second inheritance trial require this kind of energy? Was it related to difficulty, or was it something else?

If it was the former, then Zac held complete confidence, but if it needed the energy to teleport him to some other sector, then it might become a problem. He wasn't willing to leave Zecia again, especially not while his escape bangle still hadn't been repaired. So Zac turned to the Tool Spirit, who was in his warrior persona today, with a mighty broadsword on his back and glimmering armor. "You've worked hard."

"It's nothing to the mighty Brazla," the Tool Spirit snorted, his nose almost pointing at the ceiling. "So, what have you brought today?"

Zac stifled his annoyance as a small mountain of golden ornaments appeared on the floor. One day, he would push down the haughty Tool Spirit a peg or two, but for now, he simply wasn't strong enough. So he could only smile and showcase his offerings; chandeliers, statues, furniture, paintings, and all kinds of knick-knacks he had gathered.

"These are invaluable heirlooms I collected during my last outing. Each one was a defining treasure of great renown," Zac lied as he channeled his inner Calrin. "While they don't contain much spiritual energy, their artistic value is incalculable."

Brazla gazed at Zac for a few seconds before turning his eyes to the shimmering pile of treasures. “Well, they cannot be compared to the artistry of my towers, but what can? I guess these trinkets will have to do. If anything, they can showcase the great gap between mundane artistry and the celestial artistry that is Brazla.”

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief that his attempt to pawn off some useless decorations had worked out. He still had a bunch of actual treasures and arrays prepared just in case, but why waste his money if he didn't need to?

“It's their honor to be placed in your grand temple,” Zac nodded before pointing at the Lord of Cycle's statue. “If I may ask, what's with the aura?”

“You would have to ask the haughty guy inside,” Brazla said in a mighty showcase of his unsurpassed lack of self-awareness. “I was just responsible for collecting the necessary energy. If you ask me, it's a feeble attempt of the Lord of Cycles to match the grandeur of the Towers of Myriad Dao.”

“Alright then, so the same procedure as before? Do you know how long it might take?” Zac asked, trying to finagle at least something useful from the Tool Spirit.

“All these questions,” Brazla grunted with annoyance. “Do you take the great sage for your tour guide? Just step onto the teleporter and get out of my sight. It shouldn't take too long.”

Zac only grunted in response this time as he walked away, stopping right in front of the teleportation array. Since the Tool Spirit was in an unhelpful mood, he tried to gather any hints from the array. Thankfully, it looked the same as last time, which decreased the odds of this being an actual long-distance Teleportation Array.

His gaze once more turned to the statue towering in front of him, and a wave of nostalgia hit him. It was hard to believe that just over ten years had passed since he stood here last. It both felt much longer and shorter than a decade. He was so inexperienced back then, fumbling his way forward as he desperately grasped for the power needed to save Earth from the threats it faced. Now, he was almost completely reborn, but

he still hoped Yrial could provide the answers to the questions that were ailing him.

Zac took a deep breath as he scanned his body one final time, making sure there were no lingering threats or weaknesses that might impact him in the trial. By now, he was mostly restored, with only some lingering echoes of forming a Glimpse of Chaos remaining. With that, he stepped onto the teleporter.

The next moment, Zac found himself standing on a floating disk among purple and pink clouds beneath a foreign sky of breathtaking beauty. The scene was mesmerizing, but his attention was soon drawn to the massive object floating in front of him. It was a large disk wrought from stone, its rim engraved with some unfamiliar scripts as it slowly rotated in place like a wheel.

Most of its flat surface was completely smooth, and there were no clear hints to its function. There was a second, much smaller, wheel right in front of him, looking a bit like a daughter array to its 50-meter-tall parent. Zac guessed it was related to whatever trial Yrial had come up with, and a familiar voice confirmed the hunch soon enough.

“Paint your path of Cyclic Supremacy,” Yrial’s voice echoed through the clouds as the smaller disk floated closer, his tone containing a grandeur that felt extremely fake after knowing the real Lord of Cycles.

Zac grimaced as he gripped the disk in his hand, his fears somewhat realized. If it was just about Dao or strength, Zac had full confidence in dealing with the trial, having far surpassed what anyone could have expected for a small local Dao Inheritance. But if he needed to prove a cyclic path, then things had suddenly become a lot thornier.

“Uh, teacher? Master?” Zac hesitated as he looked at the disk in front of him. “There was kind of a change of plans. Can you change the test a bit?”

There was no response, and Zac guessed the voice was pre-recorded, even if Yrial probably was watching from his own dimension. However, there was one change in response to his words; a curtain of fiery ice, or perhaps frigid flames, had

appeared in the sky. The fiery sea was in a mesmerizing flux as it passed through Yrial's cycle between fire and ice, yet Zac was dismayed rather than enraptured as he looked at the masterful Dao control.

Because the curtain was slowly falling toward his position.

It was like he had been trapped in some cliché ruin where a spiked ceiling was gradually moving closer. In ten minutes or so, he would be drowned in fiery ice. Even if he managed to withstand the domain, it would no doubt mean the trial had failed, and that he had lost his chance to confer with his master until he was powerful enough to force his way inside.

There was no time to lose, so Zac immediately infused a wisp of Mental Energy into the small disk in front of him to find any clues to what 'paint your path' meant. However, only a second passed before he swore and almost threw the daughter-array into the clouds. The issue wasn't that it was too hard to figure out what to do, but rather that it was too familiar.

The array worked almost exactly the same way as the Dao Discourse Array back in the Tower of Eternity.

If not for the incredibly bad timing, Zac would have found it pretty ironic. It was at the Dao Discourse against the Enlightened Three he finally realized the futility of pursuing a cyclic path of life and death, and instead took his first steps toward his current system. Yet now, he had found himself in a similar situation where he actually needed to showcase a cycle.

This time he couldn't just flood the array with his Daos Mental Energy tainted with Oblivion Energy. For one, he was pretty much tapped out on the remnant front, and his Mental Energy was extremely pure nowadays after years of Soul Strengthening. Secondly, even if he managed to overwhelm the disk, so what? That would probably just count as a failure.

The curtain of cyclic flames kept getting closer, and Zac could only grit his teeth and do his best. He first infused his Branch of the Kalpataru into the small disk, and a radiant tree started to appear on the left side of the wheel. But as the wheel kept turning, the image of the tree was twisted and distorted,

becoming indistinguishable before Zac even had a chance to infuse his second Dao Branch.

Let alone try to affect some faux-cycle to trick the trial.

Zac grunted in annoyance as he cleared the disk. For his second try, he instead formed two thick streams of Mental Energy and twinned them into a sturdy braid. Then, he filled the streams with his daos of Life and Death before infusing the Dao Braid into the small disk. The next moment both of his Dao Avatars appeared on the turning wheel.

Unfortunately, the result was the same. The avatars only retained their meaning for a second before they were twisted and broken down, almost as though the huge wheel was a millstone. They couldn't even stay on for more than a few breaths, let alone form any sort of cycle.

“What the hell,” Zac muttered, but he refused to give up as he tried one thing after another.

However, no matter how he infused his Daos into the disk, they never fused, and as the wheel kept spinning it ruined every attempt of his. Zac even sent over the chains of [**Love's Bond**], but while they managed to slow down the wheel, it started to creak ominously, forcing Zac to let go.

There was something special about the rotation, where his own Dao would be attacked if it wasn't rotating in step. However, he was absolutely unable to make that change. It wasn't enough to try and rotate the mental energy on the disk – it had no effect at all. The underlying theory wasn't really a mystery – while the wheel was spinning to represent a cyclic path, the true cycle was conceptual.

If he couldn't infuse that kind of understanding into the wheel, the drawings wouldn't spin, and they would immediately break apart.

The minutes passed as Zac exhausted every possibility he could think of, but it was futile. He simply didn't possess the ability to pass this trial either by hook or crook, and the curtain of flames was getting closer and closer. Seeing he was out of options, Zac growled with annoyance. Since he couldn't fake a

cyclic path, he would instead force his own upon this picky wheel.

A keening cry echoed out amongst the clouds as [**Verun's Bite**] appeared in his hand, its sharp bone edge glimmering in blue and red under the curtain of Yrial's Dao. Eight streams of Mental energy, four instilled with Branch of the War Axe and four with Branch of the Kalpataru, poured into Spirit Tool, instilling it with one-half of his path.

The trial space was fraying at the edges from the immense power contained in the weapon as Zac infused as much of his Dao and energy it could withstand. He didn't use any skills, either his own or Verun's, but instead swung his axe in an inscrutable swing that carried the insights of his Evolutionary Stance.

It wasn't just an empty movement; with the amount of energy crammed into the blade, an actual blade of pure Dao shot forward, looking a bit like his old skill [**Chop**]. And the target wasn't the canopy in the sky, but rather the Dao wheel. An enormous shockwave caused the clouds to roil, exposing glimpses of a glimmering world far below.

It looked like an enormous crystal rather than a continent, with thousands of refracting lights reaching him through the cracks in the clouds. But Zac ignored the odd scene and instead focused on the wheel.

The attack had left a massive scar on the wheel, drawing a straight vertical line a third into the disk from the left. The scar almost felt like a crack in reality, teeming with churning waves of life. It felt like just the small cracks in the clouds around him, showcasing a glimpse of paradise, though it also contained a foreboding aura from his conflict-based Dao.

The unfamiliar scripts at the edges had been utterly ruined as well, and the wheel had ground to a halt. However, Zac saw that the runes were slowly reforming, and he swapped forms, his eyes turning black as his skin turned pale. Simultaneously, [**Love's Bond**] hummed as his new axe appeared in his hand.

A stray thought hit Zac as he formed eight new streams of Mental Energy – should the axe have a name of its own? Or

should it be considered part of **[Love's Bond]** since they were technically just one Spirit Tool? But the name didn't seem fitting for a bladed weapon. Zac guessed he would ask Alea the next time she popped up, but he would simply call the axe **[Black Death]** until then based on its color and affinity.

A second wave of pure Dao shot forward, and a second scar appeared on the disk. If the first one felt like a tear almost exposing a celestial world, then the second one felt like a festering wound, teeming with death and carnage. It was destruction, a shadow of the abyss itself.

With two scars running parallel across the disk, each one rife with his Dao, the wheel couldn't take it any longer. Small cracks started to spread, forming a spider vein pattern. Interestingly enough, Zac saw how the cracks only seemed to appear in the middle of the disk, between the two scars, while the outer edges were unblemished.

The new cracks started at the cuts and spread toward the other side, almost like they were reaching for one another. Zac looked on with rapt attention, feeling he could actually glean new truths from the scene. The cracks weren't random – they formed some sort of pattern based on his Daos.

It was almost like he was looking at two armies from a great distance, with streams of cavalry reading toward the enemy lines. It was a war between Life and Death, a conflict as old as time itself. Soon enough, the two sets of cracks reached the middle of the disk where they met one another, which rapidly sped up the process.

Zac could only see a hint of something, he did not know what, a moment before the disk collapsed in a burst of energy that threw Zac off his feet. It had almost looked like a third scar had formed where the two lines of cracks met, one that emitted an aura superior to either of the originals. Unfortunately, it had been so unstable that it only lasted a moment.

Seeing the disk break apart made Zac's heart sink. His gambit had failed, where he wanted to forcibly engrave his path onto the disk. But a few seconds passed and nothing happened.

Why wasn't he sent out if he had failed? Did he still have a chance to make it? There was, however, one issue remaining.

The curtain of flames was still descending, and it was only a few hundred meters above him now. He looked up at them with hesitation, wondering if he should activate one of his escape means. By now, he had found a few better alternatives to the **[Coward's Escape]**, methods that would allow him to leave the trial without losing all his other quests.

The easiest method was simply to activate a spatial talisman powerful enough to destabilize this temporary space, which would result in him being spat out. That kind of method wouldn't work inside Mystic Realms or top-tier heritages, but it should be more than enough for this kind of simple inheritance.

However, Zac refused to give up just like that, and the Miasma in his body churned as his **[Spiritual Void]** was unleashed. He was going all out from the start, and a massive Dao Braid entered a skill fractal on his right bicep along with almost a third of his Miasma.

Billowing waves of darkness poured out from his back the next moment, but it didn't turn into a domain of death like **[Deathwish]**. Instead, the energy condensed into a grid of strings that looked both like some sort of skeletal wings, a mesh of chains, or a spider's web. They stretched out from his back five meters in every direction, the network constantly twisting as it accumulated energy.

One shimmering orb of utter darkness soon congealed at each tip, while **[Black Death]** in his hand started radiating a gray haze that lacerated the air around it. Zac glowered at the sky, and with a roar swung his weapon in a sharp overhead arc, causing the insanely sharp haze to rush forward. In an instant, the wave transformed into a metallic skull with a huge scar on its forehead.

The skull only appeared for an instant, where its jaws opened far beyond what should be possible. Before disintegrating, the skull unleashed a soundless wail that contained such force that it formed a barely visible blade that shot forward with almost

impossible speed. In its wake spatial tears full of the Dao of the Axe swirled around, creating a trail of destruction that slowly expanded outward.

The scene was pretty shocking, but the skill wouldn't end with just one single blade. The two wing-like appendages on Zac's back flapped, and they suddenly expanded five times in size. In an instant, they reached the size of airplane wings before being absorbed by the two orbs at the ends. With that, a set of soul-chilling runes appeared at the surface of the orbs, at which point Zac finally released them.

The two singularities shot forward with such force they tore straight through space, reappearing right next to the blade which had reached the roiling curtains of flames by now. The moment they appeared their surrounding was sealed as the runes flashed, and it looked like the icy flames had been completely frozen over as they stopped in place.

The blade and two orbs crashed into each other the next moment, and Zac was forced to activate [**Profane Exponents**] to withstand the cataclysmic eruption that followed. Death and Conflict fused into one, and nothing could withstand its might as a black inferno ripped the whole canopy to shreds. Zac looked at the scene with awe behind his barrier, not sure if even he would survive at the heart of that explosion.

He had tried out [**Desperation's End**] inside the Orom World before, but the scene back then was barely a shadow of what he witnessed now. For one, the orbs hadn't been powerful enough to seal their surroundings, and the explosion had been like a match compared to today's conflagration.

A few errant waves of fiery ice rained down around him, but the chains of [**Love's Bond**] effortlessly flicked away the ones that made it past the barriers. A minute later, the sky was clear, void of both his attack and the domain.

"Uh," Zac eventually hesitated as he looked around, a bit hesitant about what he should do now, stuck as he was on a disk flying among the cloud".

"How could I ever have accepted a brute such as you as my discip'e?" a sigh echoed out right next to his ear". "The long

years inside this place must have turned me insane, just like
the little Tool Spir”t.”

Chapter 851: Blueprints

A small smile spread across Zac's face as he heard the familiar voice. This was obviously not a recording, meaning he had managed to brute-force his way through this trial as well. So he swapped back to his human form while the clouds shifted, forming a tunnel that no doubt led to his teacher's domain. He walked toward the edge of the floating disk, but he shot one final look at the last lingering remnants of his skill.

[Desperation's End] had a glaring weakness, being the slowest skill to activate between both his classes by far. Even then, Zac was extremely happy with it. His Fetters of Desolation-class had a lot of skills that bound enemies and whittled them down, but it lacked direct lethality. So that the class's ultimate finisher was a blast of utmost destruction had pretty much added an entirely new tool to his toolbelt for his Draugr class.

Not even his **[Arcadia's Judgment]** contained this level of raw power, though it did deliver two consecutive strikes – the initial swing and the following eruption from below. That kind of design had its advantages as well, where the first strike could take out defenses while the follow-up went for the kill.

This new finisher of his required some more preparation, but that was fine with Zac. His other skills would bind the enemies to his calamity, and **[Desperation's End]** would sever their path. And he even had the perfect trump card in case he needed to speed up the process – his Void Energy. The Void Energy wouldn't allow him to instantly deliver a strike, but it would drastically cut down on his casting time by instantly conjuring fully-formed singularities and wings.

Furthermore, the skill was a novel expression of the fusion of the two Daos that made up the foundation of his class; Axe and Pale Seal. The skill even required both Daos to even

function, so it was a huge relief that he had eventually learned to braid his Daos with his homemade method.

It wasn't too uncommon for high-quality skills to require more advanced control of Dao, but Zac had still been a bit surprised the System added such a skill to his class. Perhaps it was a reminder to keep working on his Soul, as the requirements to activate his skills would only grow more stringent down the road.

There were still a lot of things to discover about his skill, since this was the first time he activated **[Desperation's End]** without the prison brand limiting him. For example, those two singularities were actually controlled by him when he shot them out. That probably meant there were other ways to use them than simply bashing them into the conjured blade. That was simply the most fundamental technique he had gained an inherent understanding of the moment he got the Skill Fractal.

However, figuring out the details would have to wait, and Zac turned his head toward the now fully-formed tunnel. It looked stable enough, but Zac still felt his heart shudder as he stepped off the floating platform and entered a pathway made out of clouds. Thankfully, it held, and Zac flashed forward, soon appearing in a new world.

This time, Zac didn't find himself on the moonlit floating island where he met Yrial the first time. Neither was it the odd gemlike world he had vaguely spotted beneath the clouds. Instead, he found himself walking across a field filled with flowers, the scene somewhat reminiscent of the Dao painting he was forced to purchase with his credits last time. However, here the flowers were far more varied, creating a mesmerizing explosion of colors and scents.

In the distance, a wooden pergola had been erected, and the thousands of pieces of hanging silk cloth that made up its ceiling were dancing in the breeze. The tintinnabulation from chimes hidden among the silk bands and the rustling of cloth and leaves were the only sounds, together forming a harmonious melody that soothed Zac's soul.

Zac walked over, and he found the familiar figure reclined on a set of pillows with a bouquet in his hands, his features full of beauty and ambiguity. Having gained some experience since last time, Zac realized that his master wasn't simply almost impossibly beautiful. Seeing his features now, Zac could spot echoes of both fire and ice in perfect harmony.

It was Dao, just like he had seen when looking at Iz Tayn. Or was it perhaps more apt to say it was affinity, where great attunement with one's Dao slightly changed one's features to get more in line with the heavenly truths? And would that explain why he so often heard he looked rugged but mundane, even if Zac felt his appearance had markedly improved through his two Race Upgrades? His features lacked any hint of the Dao, thus making him appear worse than it really was to cultivators.

More importantly, just how talented had Yrial once been? Certainly, the mark of Dao on his features was just a whisper compared to the palpable feeling he got from Iz Tayn, but Zac suspected that weird girl was close to the peak of the Multiverse in terms of heritage or talent. Still, it possibly meant Yrial possessed affinities beyond pretty much anyone else he had encountered.

Even then, he had fallen before even confirming his Dao, proving that just talent and hard work weren't enough to reach the peak. The Multiverse didn't lack the hardworking and the talented. You needed luck and opportunities as well.

"I told you to return in ten years at the earliest, and you appear in front of me in ten years almost to the day?" Yrial asked with a raised brow as Zac entered the carpeted pergola. "Did you miss your beautiful master that much? It must have been difficult, only having '*A Flower of Fire and Ice*' to remember me by. Or did you ignore my requirements, forgoing decorum in your greed for my treasures? Which is it?"

"Definitely the former," Zac reluctantly answered, remembering all-too-well the capricious nature of his departed master.

Yrial smiled as though it was a matter of course, slightly waving the bouquet in his hands, which released a wave of perfume while the cloth above his head parted, letting the rays of the sun dance on his face and his long hair. Zac inwardly groaned, but he still kept himself from interrupting until Yrial had showcased his face from a few different angles. Only then did Zac dare speak up.

“The situation on the outside has grown a bit messy. I need to leave my home planet soon, and there is a small chance I won’t be able to return before becoming a Hegemon.”

If all went according to his plans, he would return after fetching the Ferric Worldeater by the Void Gate. However, this was ultimately his first excursion without any real protections. It wasn’t some system-based trial like the Twilight Ocean, where his enemies were all bound to be the same grade as he.

It was rather a beast tide in a foreign land, where both Peak Beast Kings and hostile Hegemons, even Monarchs, could appear. There was no way to tell how things would play out, especially with his escape bangle down for the count for the foreseeable future. That’s why he wanted to see if any quick power-ups were waiting for him with his master, especially survival methods.

Since Yrial had been a wandering cultivator all his life, and going by the quest Zac got when he became his disciple, the Lord of Cycles had to be good at fleeing from his enemies. Zac needed some of those abilities since that was one department where he was currently lacking. Otherwise, Zac might find himself stuck on some hostile planet or Mystic Realm, at which point he only had one option – push to Peak E-grade before using his Perennial Vastness Token.

“You’re pretty confident about evolving even with your trashy constitution,” Yrial commented as he lazily returned to a lying position, but his exquisite brows were slightly furrowed as he looked at Zac. “More importantly, what was up with that display of yours, ruining my blueprint? Did you forget everything I said the moment you left ten years ago? You were supposed to create a cycle.”

“Well, some things happened,” Zac sighed. “It looks like forming a cycle is impossible with my affinity. It requires a level of control I can’t reach no matter how much I train, so I was forced to make some changes.”

“Well, I knew that was a possibility,” Yrial shrugged.

“You knew?” Zac exclaimed. “So you sold me that skill just to mess with me?”

“I only guessed it,” Yrial smiled. “Who knows what rules your weird body follows? But I figured that even a failure could be useful in helping you find your path. And I think I was right. Life and Axe, Axe and Death.”

Two miniature swords suddenly appeared, one wrought from white-hot flames and another one of pristine ice. Suddenly the two clashed, which released outbursts of energy that lit up the whole pergola.

“Two opposites reborn through the forge of conflict. Interesting enough. That final creation of yours was somewhat impressive, but you’re far from realizing its potential. And looking at what happened to the blueprint, that doesn’t bode very well for you, even if some of the damage was because of the thuggish way you painted your path.”

“You’ve called that wheel a blueprint twice now, what do you mean? A blueprint for a cycle?” Zac asked, his eyes turning away from Yrial’s simulation of his path.

“You could say that,” Yrial nodded as the two swords fused into a wheel that looked a lot like the yin-yang symbol. “But also for something else. It was a template array for condensing a Cultivator’s Core. If you managed to paint your cyclic path on the wheel, it meant you would be qualified to make a run at Hegemony. But look at you, how could you possibly form a core with such volatile energy? You’d blow up.”

“It’s that bad?” Zac grimaced. “Then how do Edgewalkers normally do it?”

“Edgewalkers?” Yrial smiled. “You don’t hear that term often. I guess you’ve done your research. We’ll get to that later, but

first, let me check you out. The Daos you infused into those windblades of yours were quite interesting.”

“It wasn’t a-“ Zac muttered, but he shrugged and stopped when he saw Yrial wasn’t listening, his eyes glued to what Zac assumed was his redacted status screen.

“You.. what!” Yrial blurted. “Those Daoblades weren’t some simple skill? They were just pure Dao and energy?!”

“Well, yeah?” Zac nodded as though it was a matter of course, taking some pleasure in his master’s shocked face.

“How is this possible?!” Yrial continued, his pristine face starting to distort as he shot to his feet, any hint of his lackadaisical demeanor gone. “How can a legendary garbage like you have formed three Dao Branches in ten short years? Did you fall into a vat of Primal Dao?”

“Primal Dao?” Zac said with a shake of his head, but his eyes suddenly lit up. “Wait, is it like a pristine white light, giving off the aura untainted by worldly Dao?”

“You...” Yrial wheezed. “You didn’t...”

“Well, no,” Zac said, prompting his teacher to breathe out in relief. “It was only a couple of motes, not a whole vat.”

“Brat, are you trying to kill me again?” Yrial swore as his gaze grew distant. “Why did I never have this kind of luck back then? If someone had thrown some Primal Dao my way, would I have found myself stuck without ever confirming my Dao?”

Thankfully, the Lord of Cycles quickly regained his wits though he still looked at Zac with a disgusted expression that made Zac think of Ogras. “Well, even a pile of dung will be consecrated in the Dao with that kind of opportunity. So, what else have you been up to? You should have eaten the treasure I provided? Have you managed to excavate the other Hidden Nodes it showed?”

“Well, I think I have more to open, but I can’t be sure,” Zac said, and Yrial nodded as though it was expected. “For now, you could say I have opened five.”

“Brat, are you doing this on purpose? From now on, say your results quickly and concisely or I’ll start deducting credit,” Yrial said with a roll of his eyes as he started to fan himself with the bouquet out of annoyance. “What else have you improved?”

Zac hesitated a second, but he ultimately chose to follow his original decision. He had argued with himself over just how much he should tell his departed master, where Zac’s ingrained paranoia fought with his desire to get proper advice. If he told Yrial too little, Zac would once again get feedback that didn’t take into account all aspects of his path, just like how it was with Pavina and Heda.

But if he told Yrial too much, it might have some unintended consequences down the road, though he honestly didn’t know what. Ultimately, he had decided to tell Yrial most of what he had discovered about himself and his path, barring only his guess about his supposed connection to Emperor Limitless. Just like Pavina said, some things were better not spoken out loud, though he was worried about the System rather than the Orom this time around.

The benefits far outstripped the risks as far as he was concerned. If someone managed to break into his Dao Repository and extract his secrets from Yrial, breaking the rules of the System-enforced master-disciple contract, having his secrets exposed would probably be the least of his worries.

“I gained a peak-quality Soul Strengthening-Manual in the Tower of Eternity, which I have cultivated to the third out of nine layers, making my soul stronger than most Mentalists’. I have also awakened my bloodlines, which is related to my Hidden Nodes,” Zac said. “Oh, and I have reached the integration stage for the two stances of my technique.”

The Lord of Cycles leveled an even stare at Zac for a few moments, while Zac smiled sheepishly in return. He knew what Yrial was thinking. Even if it felt like his progress had been slow at times, it had to be said that his cultivation speed was monstrous compared to most elites. Accomplishing even one of his breakthroughs in a decade could be considered

good, but doing it in multiple branches? Most likely, only Heaven's Chosen could accomplish something like that.

"Alright, why have you started cultivating your soul? Is it because of your garbage affinities?" Yrial eventually asked.

"Well, it helps with that, but it's not the real reason. I didn't tell you the last time I was here, but the System has kind of messed with my path a bit," Zac grimaced as he roughly explained the situation with the remnants in his mind, though he didn't mention Be'Zi or their quests.

"Creation, Oblivion, and Chaos... The broken peaks of the Boundless Path," Yrial sighed. "To think you had been dragged into the schemes of the Boundless Heavens before you even set out on the path of cultivation. Is it related to your races?"

"Probably," Zac slowly nodded. "The System probably saw an opportunity to try something out when I got my Draugr side, though it might be because it doesn't want me to turn to my mother's faction."

"Why would the Heavens care about something like that?" Yrial laughed. "Don't let your ego get the best of you."

"Well, it turns out my mother wasn't a native of the world I grew up on. She was a Technocrat. A powerful one, probably an Autarch. And judging by what they were up to, they might have been one of the most powerful Technocrat families around."

"Of course, she was," Yrial groaned. "No wonder, no wonder. That's why I couldn't understand the scripts on that Spy Core of yours - it was the work of those maniacs. Don't tell me you have started implanting yourself with those cursed components, departing from the natural order?"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "My mother considers me a failed experiment of theirs, and she kind of left me here before she kidnapped my sister. I can't be sure, but I think I am completely organic. My mother's family was annihilated before they reached the stage where they would start implanting me with odd things."

Honestly, it felt extremely good to finally vent a bit after years of hiding the true facets of his heritage. With both his Sister and Ogras gone, no one really understood what he was going through and the difficulties he faced. So one secret after another was spilled in the pergola over the next hour as Zac roughly recounted what he had been through since they met last time.

“Now, I am getting closer to forming my core, but I honestly don’t know how to tackle that problem. I was hoping you could point me in the right direction, being an Edgewalker as well,” Zac said.

“How could I possibly help you? In fact, don’t talk to me,” Yrial muttered as he pointedly looked away. “I cannot even look at you right now. Mysterious background, being led to weird treasures by the Heavens themselves, bloodline experiments, unprecedented constitution, opportunities appearing wherever you turn. You bastard, did you steal a whole Sector’s providence or something?”

“That’s...” Zac coughed. “I mean it might sound a bit unfair, but it hasn’t been a bed of roses. I’ve lost count of how many time’s I’ve been wounded or almost died by now.”

“Whatever,” Yrial huffed, but he eventually took a deep calming breath. “Alright, your kind master will put aside this injustice for now. Have a look at the realities of pursuing Hegemony while I try to unravel the mess you have created.”

Zac was about to ask what he was talking about, but the next moment he found himself beset by a wave of vertigo. The world shattered as he fell onto the ground, but then it suddenly reformed again, and Zac got back on his feet with confusion. He thought Yrial had sent him on another quest, but the pergola and field of flowers were still there.

But why had a wall suddenly appeared? And were those flying treasures flying in the sky?

Chapter 852: Determination

There were dozens of small vessels whizzing through the air, most of them taking the shape of gondolas that left plumes of glittering clouds in their wake, a feature clearly added not for function but aesthetics. Zac also spotted the occasional warrior flying on his own, with the vessels giving the Hegemons wide berth.

“Young master Lau’Sai, I’m sorry for intruding,” a shaky voice said, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

A young woman emitting an aura of Middle E-grade stood at the edge of the pergola, her hands fidgeting as she looked past Zac.

“Yana, I told you to never apologies for visiting,” a euphonious voice answered, prompting Zac to once more turn around.

There he was, a young scion wearing the very same robes Zac had used the past decade, standing at the edge of the small pergola with a paintbrush in his right hand. Next to him was an easel with a semi-finished abstract painting, whose circular motif made Zac think of a shattered plate.

The painting felt lacking somehow, and it wasn’t for lack of proper supplies. Neither the canvas nor the brush were common goods; the bristles were actually on fire. However, as the young man finished a stroke, a fiery ochre was left behind on the canvas rather than a scorch mark.

The young man was naturally Yrial donning a gentle smile, exhibiting a refined, albeit slightly sickly appearance. In this vision, his hair was tied up with some sort of ornamental clip, and he wore a ferrennière with a small gem that emitted a soothing aura similar to Zac’s **[Mind’s Eye Agate]**. This Yrial only looked slightly younger than the soul whisp Zac knew, but Zac could sense that he was just at Peak E-grade. Not only

that, but he guessed that Yrial's pale complexion was not natural, with his aura being slightly unstable as well.

Was he perhaps wounded?

More importantly, what was going on? This was different from the quest he got during his last visit. Back then, he had essentially taken the place of Yrial in one of his memories, but now his teacher was standing right in front of him. Zac tried opening his Status screen, and while it worked, there was no quest waiting for him.

Looking down at his hands, Zac could see himself just fine, but the other two in the pergola seemed oblivious to his presence.

"Uh, hello?" Zac called out just to make sure, but they ignored him.

Zac knew it wasn't the young couple slighting him, but rather that they really couldn't see him. The whole situation was reminiscent of his Heart Tribulation where he had presumably been dragged into an erased memory from his past. Of course, it wasn't his own memory he visited this time, but rather Yrial's.

His teacher had told him to witness the 'realities of pursuing Hegemony' just before sending him here, so Zac guessed this memory was from around the time Yrial made that step. The young girl Yrial called Yana flushed a bit upon seeing Yrial's gentle smile, and Zac inwardly cursed his master to grow a couple of pimples for exposing him to this overly ambiguous scene.

Turning his gaze away from the love-struck youngsters, he instead took a proper look at the surroundings. It quickly dawned on him what was going on, and why there were so many vessels in the air. The field of flowers was just part of a large walled-in courtyard.

Behind the young girl, Zac could spot a small but beautiful mansion almost hidden among several willow trees, and occasional buildings were poking over the walls. However, a

weak shimmer around the courtyard indicated that this place was shrouded by some sort of privacy array.

It looked like Yrial had taken the beautiful garden and removed the rest when forming the world in his inheritance. As to why, Zac had no idea. Perhaps this place and this young girl held a special meaning to him. The girl in question had become extremely flustered, perhaps by Yrial's admittedly singular appearance, or perhaps by his familiar tone, and it almost looked like she was about to flee out of embarrassment.

"You are always a welcome guest," Yrial smiled as he stowed away his brush. "Seeing your smile always illuminates my soul."

"I.. Ah... How are young master's wounds?" Yana asked as she took a hesitant step into the pergola.

"Thanks to your help, I feel much better already," Yrial said as he looked deep into Yana's eyes. "Perhaps, my dream of Hegemony isn't dead just yet. If not for young miss finding me wounded in the forest... It's a gratitude this one will carry for the rest of his life."

"Ah, no, it was just something I should do," Yana hurriedly said.

"I still worry," Yrial said, his eyes so wet he looked like he was about to cry. "I'm afraid I will inconvenience you by living in your townhouse like this. It could tarnish your reputation."

"Don't be silly," Yana huffed. "Who'd dare talk about the mayor's daughter like that? Besides, if we..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but the blush on her cheeks spoke volumes. Was this what dating was like on easy mode?

"One day I'll become someone worthy for you," Yrial sighed. "But now, I'm..."

"I brought something," Yana said with a low voice as she surreptitiously looked around. "You mentioned your Spiritual Flame had been extinguished, right? Luckily, my grandpa found a very rare Spiritual Flame in a Mystic Realm a few hundred years ago. I brought one of its embers."

The next moment, she took out an inscribed box from the bag on her side.

“I cannot accept this!” Yrial said with wide eyes as he took a step back. “It’s too precious. There is no way your family agreed to this. I cannot let you do this for me.”

“It’s nothing,” Yana said with an embarrassed smile. “The main flame was only slightly weakened - it will recover in a few hundred years, and I’ll just face some light punishment. Please, take it. It’s would be an injustice to the heavens if someone with your talents would have your foundations damaged before you’ve reached your potential.”

“Then... I’ll accept it,” Yrial said with some hesitation. “Once again, you have saved me. I can only hope I’ll live up to your expectations one day.”

“Just be careful so you don’t open up your wounds,” Yana smiled before she looked around. “I need to go back now before I’m discovered. Try to absorb it quickly. That way they can’t make you spit it out.”

Yrial stood with the box in hand and a gentle smile on his face as he watched Yana leave, bowing in her direction as she glanced back one final time. As she left through a gate, his smile slowly transformed, turning into an impish grin.

“I’m sorry little flower,” Yrial mumbled as his erratic aura stabilized. “Times are tough even for handsome people. If fate permits, I will make it up to you.”

Zac’s eyes widened at the scene immediately putting two and two together. Yrial mentioned he had been ‘saved’ by that girl in some forest. Had he simply pretended to be hurt to get closer to her, or rather the Spiritual Flame her family controlled? Zac was filled with a new level of ‘respect’ upon seeing the avaricious gleam in Yrial’s eyes as he opened the box.

This was the tribulations of Hegemony? Scamming naive girls out of their family’s treasures with the help of silky skin and smooth words?

Then again, Zac wasn't one to judge. This could be considered mild compared to his own modus operandi where seas of blood were left in his wake. This way, only someone's coffer took a hit, and the girls' family could probably afford the loss even if the box looked extraordinary.

Inside the chest was a small vial containing a small blue flame. The moment Yrial opened the box, a cold snap spread across the area, causing a layer of frost to cover the pillows and nearby flowers. No wonder Yrial wanted this thing; it was extremely similar to the fiery ice he often formed.

Yrial hurriedly closed the box before taking out a series of containers from his spatial ring. From there, Zac looked on with interest as Yrial transferred the ember of blue flames into another vial while the original box and vial were placed on a small array. A whole ritual then commenced, involving karma-breaking dust, various liquids, and Yrial painting some sort of array on his face.

Ten minutes later it finished with the box simply disappearing as space distorted inside the array. The whole process was so fluid that it couldn't possibly be the first time his teacher had done this, and Zac guessed any clues that could lead Yana's elders to Yrial were gone. Zac had performed similar procedures quite a few times himself, but Zac had to admit he was lacking in this regard.

From there, Yrial took out a pre-written letter, though one intentionally written to look like it was hastily scribbled, sprinkled some perfume on it before placing it on the table in the pergola. Zac didn't have time to read the whole thing before Yrial folded it, but it said something along the lines of old enemies having found out Yrial survived, and not wanting to implicate the young miss, he had been forced to flee. Something about how she should forget him if he hadn't returned in a year.

Ten minutes later Yrial had left the city through a teleporter, disguised as a Daoist nun. Zac was somehow dragged along for the ride as though he was attached to Yrial through an elastic cord, even through the teleporter. Half a day passed this way as Yrial rotated between touring shops and teleporting to

a new town, each time using a different, but always beautiful, identity.

It looked like Yrial's transformation techniques were of a higher grade than his own, though his androgynous appearance probably helped him smoothly switch between genders without any hint of something being amiss.

Finally, Yrial appeared in a sprawling town in a forest of towering trees that reached thousands of meters into the sky. Only the slums were located on the ground, while grand manors resided in the tree crowns. Yrial took out a floating leaf and flew between the trees for half an hour until he reached a secluded manor on a mid-sized branch. Where the building was carved into the bark of the massive tree.

It looked like it was owned by Yrial since he used a token to pass through some barriers, though it might have belonged to yet another one of his acquaintances. By this point, Zac had started to wonder just how long this vision would last. Hours had passed since Yrial tricked that Spiritual Flame out of that poor girl's hands, and Zac had simply assumed his teacher wanted to use the icy flames as a catalyst to break through.

And finally, it looked like something was about to happen.

Zac walked over with anticipation as Yrial started setting up a complex cultivation array in the middle of a cultivation chamber inside the tree. Zac had never seen anything like it before, though there were some parts he recognized. It sort of appeared to be a mix between a Body Tempering Manual and a Beast Training Technique.

He knew that some cultivators, especially those training in elemental Daos, chose to infuse things like Spiritual Flames or Divine Woods into their bodies to strengthen themselves and their connection to their Dao. However, this was the first time Zac saw it in person, and he looked on with interest as Yrial extracted one wisp after another from the sealed ember and infused it into his body.

The process looked extremely painful, with Yrial's skin both freezing over and getting scorched at the same time. But he pressed on until he had absorbed five wisps in total, at which

point he collapsed on the ground unconscious. Time twisted and hours passed in an instant until Yrial finally woke up with a cough.

He crawled to a sitting position and threw a healing pill into his mouth between ragged breaths. A few minutes later he closed his eyes before forming a bowl with his hands. Zac felt some sort of energy turn inside Yrial's body, and eventually, a small apparition appeared in his hands. Zac immediately recognized it - it looked a lot like Yrial's painting from before.

Hundreds of small shards together formed something akin to a circle, half of them made from orange flames and the other half from milky-white ice. The flames looked exactly like the ones on Yrial's paintbrush, but Zac noticed there were small flakes of chilly blue on the embers, no doubt a result of Yrial absorbing some of the Spiritual Flame. The two elements started to spin, but it only took a few seconds before the apparition collapsed.

Ice extinguished flames and flames melted ice, only a few of the shards managed to fuse into something similar to Yrial's fiery ice, but these shards weren't enough to save the cycle. Yrial eventually opened his eyes, disappointment evident in his eyes. But his downcast state only lasted for a few moments before he took out a massive map coving half the floor.

If Zac read this thing right, the world Yrial lived in was simply massive, where Earth would only take up a small corner of the map. And it wasn't a complete map either. The edges simply blurred out, with the occasional note of what kind of environment resided beyond. Zac had a decent guess of what was going on - Yrial lived on one of the mythical C-grade continents that Zac had yet to visit.

Those physics-defying stretches of land defied space, taking up mind-bogglingly large areas. A world so large that a Peak E-grade cultivator would die of old age before having the opportunity to visit even a fraction of the countries, factions, and danger zones it housed. This kind of environment produced an endless number of opportunities thanks to its dense energies, and it was the kind of place most cultivators the Zecia sector could only dream of visiting.

But where there are opportunities, there are also dangers. A lot of sections of these kinds of continents were extremely dangerous, with no lack of Beast Kings or even Beast Emperors staking their claim in the wilderness. One false move and you'd find yourself stuck in a death trap. But most dangerous were the other cultivators competing for the abundant resources.

The surroundings shifted, and Zac suddenly found himself deep in the forest with Yrial desperately fighting a fifty-meter snake. It was either a Half-step Beast King or a newly evolved one, and Yrial was pushed to his limits as he unleashed one wave of blistering flames or frigid blizzards after another. It was the first time Zac saw Yrial fight, and it looked like he was a hybrid between a controller and a mage.

Yrial's weapon of choice was a large bladed wheel that flew around him like a satellite, but over half his attacks were pure elemental skills of either fire or ice. At some point, Yrial would become the Lord of Cycles, but he had clearly not reached that point in this memory. There was a mysterious tempo to how his teacher swapped between using his two elements, and the Snake had a hard time dealing with the constant rotation between scorching and freezing attacks.

Eventually, the beast succumbed to Yrial's unrelenting offensive, but Yrial was poisoned in return, with green splotches appearing on his face. Still, it was with a wide smile he formed a blade of crystalline ice and started to dig into the beast's head.

The world shifted again, and Yrial was now sitting at a cliff of a snowcovered mountain, the harsh winds containing terrifying amounts of cold. Yrial's body was shaking so bad he could barely control his limbs, but his eyes never left the small flame in his hand. It flickered precariously, but it never went out. It even looked like it was somehow absorbing the cold from the surroundings.

Like this, one scene replaced another in a constant stream of memories as hours turned to days, weeks, and eventually months. Desperate fights, journeys to desolate regions in search of answers, Yrial pursuing his path through meditation

and painting. Progress was slow and Yrial was met with one setback after another. Grievous wounds, dead ends of the Dao, hundreds of failed paintings. Falling victim to the capricious elements during his journeys, fleeing from pursuers - Zac even saw Yrial standing over a few newly-dug graves with hollow eyes, his hands covered in dirt and blood.

But he never wavered.

Yrial pressed on no matter the challenges, and any time he was pushed down he dragged himself back to his feet. Years passed in this way as Yrial searched for opportunities and inspiration on the vast continent he lived on, where Zac got dragged between pivotal moments in time.

No matter if it was wild regions teeming with beasts or sprawling cities with ancient masters who could extinguish his life with a wave of their hands, he kept giving it all for a chance to form his cycle. It was eye-opening to see how hard he had pushed himself on his journey. It was an important lesson - no one would accomplish anything without working hard. Talent was just an advantage, but you still needed to seize your future yourself.

Gradually, Yrial's control of the elements went from impressive to sublime, the flames on his brush grew colder, and the paintings he created were ever getting closer to whatever he was searching for. Hundreds of shards in the apparition were reduced to fifty, and Zac saw the wheel starting to turn in Yrial's hand. A year later, fifty had become twenty.

Zac had long lost track of time as he had become engrossed with what he witnessed, his whole being consumed by the spiral Yrial risked everything for. His adventures might not have had the same kind of stakes as Zac's own - there were no Autarchs or peak Monarchs messing with his path.

But that didn't mean there was no danger. If anything, Yrial had been forced to undergo far more deadly trials than Zac had to seize the opportunities and treasures he needed to progress. One day, in a particularly desperate battle against a sword-

wielding Hegemon, something finally coalesced - fire turned into ice, and ice turned into fire.

Thus, the Lord of Cycles was born and the world crumbled.

Chapter 853: The Nature of Duality

As the world shattered upon Yrial forming his cyclic fiery ice, Zac once more found himself lying on a set of pillows inside the pergola, the tinkling chimes and rustling flowers welcoming him back to 'reality'. A quick mental check indicated that only a week had passed, even if it had felt like years.

It was no wonder that Brazla had been forced to gather energy for a couple of days. That kind of temporal dilation had to come at a steep price. Furthermore, it left Zac in a weird muddled state, so he closed his eyes and started meditating.

Having seen the struggles of a future Monarch first-hand had been eye-opening, completely different from hearing or reading about it. Yrial was an extreme narcissist, and a bit of a conman according to the visions, since Yana was only one of many marks Zac had seen. There had been men and women alike who had been conned out of their or their faction's treasures to feed Yrial's Path.

But no matter what flaws his personality had, Yrial's Dao Heart was immutable.

It was a stark difference between what he had seen and the people he usually met. Perhaps only Joanna amongst his followers had that kind of unbreakable desire to pursue the path of Cultivation. But most couldn't compare. They might struggle when pushed, but they didn't value their Dao over their life. For example, Catheya could be considered a talent even in a faction like the Undead Empire, but she didn't have Yrial's drive or conviction.

More importantly, Zac finally understood what Yrial had meant by blueprint before. The biggest struggle of his teacher

wasn't actually forming the core - it was designing it. Two opposing forces needed to be merged into a stable unity, where each half empowered rather than suppressed the other. It was clearly an incomparably difficult task, taking even a supreme talent like Yrial years of meditation and risking his life to accomplish.

In return, Yrial got something extremely potent. Zac couldn't be certain since the vision ended before he got to that part, but he guessed that this kind of core would be a lot more powerful than an average one. It was a bit like Dao Braiding or Dao Arrays; the sum was greater than its parts.

Zac also better understood what Yrial meant before, when he didn't hold the energy Zac managed to form in high regard. His teacher was right. That third scar that had almost formed on the wheel was potent, but was it even something that could be turned into a Cultivator's Core? It seemed more fitting as a blueprint for his next tier of Dao Braids than a stable source of energy – a braid that incorporated all three of his Daos.

That kind of use didn't require the stability he had seen in the swirling ball of fiery ice. If the trinity-braid erupted after a few seconds when infusing an attack, all the better. It was only more damage to his enemies. But if that solution wasn't right, then what? Yrial's method was impossible for him. The Dao Control Yrial had exhibited when painting or forming that apparition was lightyears beyond what he could manage.

A full day passed as Zac organized the torrent of memories that had been crammed into his head, and he eventually opened his eyes with a sigh. He might not be any closer to finding a solution than before the vision, but Zac was at least a lot more cognizant of the difficulties an Edgewalker would encounter when forming his core.

“How about it, isn't your teacher dashing?” Yrial grinned as he flicked a lock of his long hair.

“It was eye-opening to see such an earnest pursuit of the Dao first-hand,” Zac nodded, not needing to lie to placate his master at all. “But what happened to Yana?”

“Her father was furious,” Yrial sighed. “She was trapped in an energy-starved dungeon for ten years, and the lack of energy harmed her foundations. Her chances at Hegemony weren’t great before, but she was doted on by her elders. But between harming the Spiritual Flame and the imprisonment, her path was cut off.”

“That’s...” Zac muttered with mixed emotions as he looked around at the pergola which was modeled after Yana’s backyard.

“Resources are limited in this world,” Yrial said with equanimity. “Every treasure you seize means dozens of others will go hungry, having lost the opportunity to progress. Your path is paved with the crushed dreams and bones of others. That is the weight we have to carry as cultivators, and you’ll have to find some way to keep moving forward while not being weighed down by the karmic debt you accrue.”

“In my case, I returned to make things right for that little flower a century later. Unfortunately, things took a bad turn. Yana was sacrificed in an attempt to enrage me and drag me out. But they had severely underestimated how much power I had gained since I stole the ember, and I exterminated her clan so that she wouldn’t be lonely in the afterlife. After that, I could only keep progressing, so that her sacrifice and the sacrifice of all the others wouldn’t be in vain.”

“That seems... A bit convenient,” Zac muttered as he looked down on his calloused hands, his thoughts turning to his own karmic debts.

“One can only do their best and follow their heart,” Yrial said. “The moment your path is poisoned with doubt and guilt, your momentum will falter. Sincerity for the Dao and unflinchingly moving forward is even more important than talent or opportunity. Lack of talent can be overcome, and opportunities can be forced, but a lacking heart will stop you in your tracks.

“Remember, until you reach the very peak, you are just a leaf struggling in the wind. You cannot bear the weight of the world. It’s not only bad for your cultivation, but it is foolish

arrogance. Yana's fate is pitiful, but I refuse to bear the full weight of her fate. Sometimes, things just fall apart."

"I understand, I think," Zac sighed.

Yrial was right. Even if there were things he regretted since the integration, both things he did and didn't do, he couldn't let himself get trapped in some sort of unwinnable argument of what-ifs. He knew he had done the best he could with the knowledge and options he was given at the time, but you can't win them all.

"It's good that you understand," Yrial nodded as he looked at Zac, his lazy expression gaining a serious air for once. "Even someone as disgusting as you won't get far without a strong Dao Heart and sincerity toward your path. Only by having those can you be considered qualified to grasp for eternity."

"I'm trying, but I'm honestly more lost now than I was before," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I feel like I'm stuck at the starting line after seeing the process of you forming your core. I haven't even managed to create a flawed blueprint like those shattered shards of yours. But if I manage to take the first step, I might be able to keep working on it like you did. Can I ask how you arrived at that point?"

It was a shame, but the vision had not actually shown how Yrial first came to follow his Cyclic Path. He was already working on it when he tricked that young girl out of the Spiritual Flames, so his inspiration must have arrived even earlier. But how had he translated his path of fire and ice into a workable Cultivator's Core?

"Your path is far harder than mine," Yrial said as he leaned back into the mound of pillows. "Mine was a natural conclusion of Heaven and Earth."

"What?" Zac blurted. He knew the first statement was true, what with Chaos being a broken peak. But Zac had no idea what Yrial meant with the second half of his statement.

"Have you learned about the various groupings of the Dao? The peaks?"

"Somewhat," Zac nodded.

“You are pursuing the peak of Chaos,” Yrial nodded.

“Whereas I am an elemental cultivator. Do you know the terminus of my peak?”

“Not really,” Zac said. Catheya had simply called it the peak of the elements and said that elemental cultivators followed their respective elements to their conclusion. “I guess it’s the four elements? Or perhaps five?”

“No,” Yrial said. “The name, and to some degree the nature, of the elemental peak is contended, with old teachings colliding with new. Those ugly monks call the peak Mahābhūta, the Great Element. It can both be seen as the basic building block of the universe, and it can also be the basis for inner enlightenment, the relinquishing of the material plane. It is the supreme combination of all Materia.

“This was the path that the Apostate of Mercy perfected, though her deductions differed from the Sangha’s, much to their dismay,” Yrial continued with some glee on his face.

“Hers was the Dao of Heaven and Earth where the Heaven was the spiritual Ether of Enlightenment and the Earth was the Mundane World. To be clear, her Heaven is not the System or the Dao itself, but rather a form of unblemished spirituality.

“So, can you tell what defines this peak?”

Zac tried to guess what Yrial was digging at, but he eventually shook his head.

“It is a path of Duality,” Yrial smiled. “Inner and outer world, Heavens and Earth, Yin and Yang. No matter what you want to call it, the peak has two facets.”

“Isn’t it the same with my peak?” Zac countered. “With Creation and Oblivion?”

“No, since they are true opposites, while the Elemental Daos are complementary opposites. It might seem similar, but it is very different. No peak is the same, which is why they are separated in the first place. Take the Peak of the Continuum. It is based on Time and Space, but those who follow both those paths are not Edgewalkers since Time and Space are not opposing concepts.

“What I am trying to say is that every peak has its own challenges and opportunities, and the duality of Edgewalkers is generally thought of as part of the peak of Heaven and Earth. In my case, I fused Yin Flames and Yang Water and thus joined Heaven and Earth,” Yrial explained. “It is still extremely difficult to accomplish, especially in the lower grades. That’s why almost every cultivator only focuses on either the Earth-aspect or the Heaven-aspect of the peak.

“Or if they focus on both expressions, it’s usually a holistic approach to one singular element,” Yrial added after some thought. “For example, fusing Heavenly Flames and Earthly Flames into True Flames.”

Zac slowly nodded. He didn’t know exactly what the separation of yin yang meant when it came to the elements, but he guessed it was another way to look at various facets of the Dao.

“But as I said, each peak is different. The past days I have tried to simulate a cycle based on my knowledge and the Daos you showcased,” Yrial said as the massive wheel appeared in the air behind the pergola, the massive disk still split in two. “But I am afraid simply cannot find a solution.”

“What do you mean?” Zac said with a sinking feeling. “So it’s impossible?”

“I didn’t say that,” Yrial immediately rejected. “Never let anyone limit your pursuit. I am saying that the techniques and methods I’ve learned might not be as useful as I’d initially hoped. However, this is simply a preliminary deduction from a soul wisp, and my understanding of your Daos is obviously lesser than your own.”

“Then what should I do?” Zac frowned.

“The methods I have might still provide you with some inspiration, just like how **[Cyclic Strike]** showcased your limitations,” Yrial said. “Otherwise, the easiest solution would be to find a Chaos-based Heritage. That kind of heritage should contain some blueprints and techniques you can use as a basis for your own attempt at Hegemony. But such a thing should be extremely rare. I heard some rumors that there were

ancient cultivators who had delved into that Dao, but I never met or even heard of any Chaos Cultivator during my lifetime.”

Zac nodded with a grimace, perhaps knowing even better than Yrial just how difficult that would be. A Chaos-based Heritage? If Qi’Sar’s words were to be believed, those things all stemmed from the previous Era. In other words, the only place you’d find them was inside an Eternal Heritage. Gaining access to such a place was even harder than meeting a Supremacy, so going looking for one was out of the question.

Certainly, with Chaos being a broken peak with essentially no one cultivating it, these methods might not be very valuable. They might have been sold and disseminated from the peak factions controlling Chaos-based Eternal Heritages long ago. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean they would reach the Frontier. If he wanted a shot at getting his hands on such a thing, he would probably have to visit the central regions of the Multiverse.

But if it was so easy to reach that place, everyone would have done so already.

His Perennial Vastness Token was currently his only link to a higher-grade environment, but now that he had a better understanding of the situation, he didn’t dare use it before he had at least a decent backup plan to forming his Cultivator’s Core. Catheya might have said that anyone would leave that place with a Core, but she didn’t know the specifics of that place nor the difficulties Zac faced.

If he just went there blind with his unique situation, he might ruin his one shot at Hegemony.

“Any other ideas?” Zac asked.

“Nope,” Yrial grinned. “Figure it out yourself.”

“Some teacher you are,” Zac muttered.

“Now, don’t pout,” Yrial laughed, the peeling sound almost making Zac question some fundamental aspects of his being. “Since I don’t know, it’s better for me to stay quiet on the matter. What kind of teacher would I be if I sent you down the

wrong path or limited your scope? Ultimately, it's you who have set out on this unusual path, so you will have to look inward in search of answers.”

“My only advice is to not get too attached to anything. If your first idea fails, just drop it and start looking for other solutions. A few years lost are not wasted as long as you keep moving forward. Even if it doesn't feel like it, you will be gradually getting closer to an answer, even if it's just through a process of elimination,” Yrial said. “Even paths can be adjusted until you confirm them with an Arcane Class or through confirming your Dao.”

“Alright, then,” Zac sighed.

It was a disappointment that Yrial didn't have any solutions for him. It looked like he would have to figure things out on his own. Thankfully, he was nearing the peak of the E-grade, and his Soul Strengthening wasn't that urgent. After he and his followers had set out into the Million Gates Territory, he would have time to fully turn his focus on researching stable life-death cores while his people steered the vessel.

Yrial's final advice was also a valuable reminder. His path was unique, and he felt it had amazing potential as long as he could work out the kinks. Those motes of Chaos seemed to hold all the answers he looked for, the hidden truths of the Multiverse. But ultimately, was this path more important than his goals? To save Kenzie?

No.

If his path wouldn't allow him to accomplish his goals, then it was the path that needed to be changed, not the goals. Life was Life, and Death was Death. That was what he had proclaimed in his heart when his path collided with Alvod's. However, if it was to protect those around him, Life didn't need to be Life - it would be whatever he needed to be.

But Zac soon shook his head. There was no point in giving up before you had even started. The sector-wide war hadn't even started, and with how slowly things moved in the Multiverse, he would have years before he would need to come to a

decision. Only when he had truly exhausted his options would he start looking for alternatives.

“So, do I as a disciple get double credits this time around as well?” Zac asked, focusing on the most important thing right now; the loot.

“Of course,” Yrial nodded. “Same rules as last time. I start with 10,000 Credits which are doubled for being my disciple. After deductions, you are left with 16,000.”

“You’ve already deducted points?” Zac scowled. “Why?”

“With your display before, how could I not remove some points?” Yrial said with a scathing look before glancing at the broken wheel that still hovered behind him. “That kind of barbarism is an affront to my Path of Cyclic Supremacy. Besides, the issue of your face remains.”

“I’ll give you the former, but my features have definitely improved since I upgraded my Races to D-grade,” Zac countered, though he felt his voice lacking conviction.

“How is going from a wretch to a cretin over a whole grade an improvement?” Yrial countered with a scrunched-up nose. “I will only deduct two thousand credits for your face this time, but you better figure something out for the next grade or I will not be so lenient. Hegemony can be considered the true start of cultivation, so my expectations on your performance will grow more stringent.”

“And by performance, you mean appearance?” Zac sighed.

“If not, then what else?” Yrial shrugged. “You’ve already abandoned my Cyclic Path. As your master, I have to teach you something, even if it’s just to not look like a Grao Howler while carrying the title of my disciple. Any problem?”

Zac had no idea what a Grao Howler was, but he could only assume it was some beast with an unflattering appearance. Even then, he could only grit his teeth and smile to avoid getting any more points deducted. “Sounds fair enough.”

“I thought so,” Yrial smiled as a shimmering information crystal appeared. “Let me know what you decide to get. If you have any questions, I might answer if I’m in a good mood.”

“Here we go again”, Zac sighed, his voice barely audible.

Chapter 854: The Oriole and the Orchid

Zac inwardly grumbled, but he kept his opinions to himself as he infused a wisp of energy into the information crystal. However, only a second passed before he looked up at his master with complaint in his eyes.

“There’s a lot fewer items this time.”

“I told you last time. Brazla had me fill the inheritance a certain number of times for each grade, with the F-grade needing the most items. However, while the quantity is lower, the quality of items is a lot higher on average. I wouldn’t say that anything here is earthshattering, but I would have killed for some of these things when I was your grade back then.”

It made sense. It was in the original Brazla’s interest to focus on the higher stages of the inheritances, while just handing out some decent baubles at the F-grade. After all, Brazla was a Peak Hegemon from what Zac had gathered. If he had a descendant that managed to pass this inheritance, they would be an elite worthy to nurture.

If someone passed the D-grade Inheritance, they would be a contender to become a future leader of Brazla’s clan.

Zac scanned the list of roughly 50 items carefully, but there were just too many items with names that didn’t immediately explain their function. Worse yet, only a certain category of items had descriptions, each one of them more detailed than the last. “To begin with, I’ll take the ‘*The Oriole and the Orchid*’.”

“Excellent choice,” Yrial said, his smile seemingly illuminating the whole world as a large box appeared next to him. “It’s good to see that you at least have learned some

manners since last time we met, buying another memento to remember your dear master by.”

Zac nodded with a strained smile, as though Yrial hadn't just blackmailed him to buy another vanity item. Even then, there was some anticipation as his gaze turned to the box containing the statue of his master. Yrial waved his sleeves with excitement, and a lid opened to expose the alabaster statue within.

It was an expertly sculpted Yrial sitting in a meadow of extremely lifelike flowers, the whole piece hewn from one solid piece of some spiritual rock. One of Yrial's hands was outstretched, with a small bird perched on his index finger. It was almost indistinguishable from the real thing, and it felt like the small bird could fly off at any moment. The statue itself also emitted great tranquility, almost as though Zac was the one sitting among the flower without a care in the world as he communed with nature.

This feeling was the true reason he chose this particular item, even if there were cheaper items that would satisfy Yrial's demand. According to the description, '*The Oriole and the Orchid*' had a very strong soul-nurturing effect after being placed in some sanctum of Yrial's inner world for dozens of millennia.

Why Yrial had some sort of sanctum with statues of himself wasn't something Zac required deeper digging. He was simply interested in its ability to hopefully speed up his Soul Strengthening.

In fact, there were a few more vanity items Zac was eyeing, from ornaments to paintings, and a scroll of poems detailing Yrial's beauty. He remembered what happened when he gave away the painting the last time around; a bunch of people formed Dao Seeds over the next week. Its effect was even better than most of the Dao Treasures in Yrial's credit store, yet it cost the same or even less.

In other words, the vanity items were actually among those with the greatest value, as long as you could get over the aesthetics. For example, the lock of hair was still for sale, an

item that could almost be considered a C-grade material. However, before spending any more credits, Zac first wanted some advice.

“Unfortunately, a lot of the items available are not suitable for you,” Yrial sighed. “I didn’t expect someone with such a different path to pass my inheritance. This includes the two supreme items, **[Bowl of the Raging Seas]** and **[Infernal Mote]**. They are extremely potent Core-strengtheners for those following in my path. For you, they are just shiny baubles.”

“I guessed as much,” Zac sighed. “So, what can I use?”

“First of all, you should buy the **[Book of Duality]**,” Yrial said. “It’s only 1,000 credits because it’s a normal book that you can copy, but its value isn’t ordinary – in a sense, it’s almost as valuable as the two supreme treasures. I only managed to get my hands on it toward the end of my journey, but if I had it when I was still in E-grade, I would have avoided a lot of pitfalls.”

Zac looked at the book Yrial mentioned. There were actually five copies of the **[Book of Duality]** in the heritage and they were cheap. This indicated they weren’t extraordinary, so Zac had passed them by during his cursory scan. However, his interest was piqued by Yrial’s description and he quickly bought it.

A moment later, Zac held an actual leatherbound book in his hands, reading the short message on the first page.

I am Kalo, and my path has taken me to the edge of the Heavens and Earth. In this book, I have left my gathered knowledge and insights on duality. May they assist you in the pursuit of the Terminus.

If Zac hadn’t just gotten a better description of the elemental peak, he might have thought this book related to Creation and Oblivion because it mentioned the Terminus, but he now knew that was unlikely. Zac flipped through the pages, and as expected they were filled with various diagrams and arrays related to the elements, accompanied by mysterious letters that each seemed to contain thousands of words and meanings each.

It was a common way to convey a lot of information in a short space, but it required the one who wrote it to have a true understanding of what they were writing. In other words, Yrial could probably copy the text, but if Zac tried to do the same, they would lose almost all their meaning. He almost got lost in the words as he read a random page, so he quickly shook his head to clear it before stowing away the book.

Zac didn't really understand what he had just read, but he still understood why Yrial wanted him to get the tome. An encyclopedia containing a powerful Edgewalker's insights into the specific difficulties of cultivating duality would surely be useful, no matter how different Kalo's actual path was to his own.

"Who is Kalo? Where is this thing from?" Zac asked curiously.

"Some ancient faction far from the frontier," Yrial sighed.

"For a while, I hoped to visit their land for a chance to continue my path, or at least get a copy of the book that hadn't lost so much of its original meaning. This thing is probably just a copy of a copy. Unfortunately, I never found any more information about Kalo or their origins. Still, the book helped me understand my path better even as a Monarch. I doubt whoever wrote it was someone simple. Perhaps you can find some inspiration within and use it to stake out your own path."

"It will be a great source to reference," Zac nodded. "I also need some escape treasure, preferably a reusable one."

"With your penchant for getting yourself in trouble, that's probably a good idea," Yrial snorted. "The most powerful ones are the **[Panopticon Seal]** and the **[Flashfire Flourish]**. I think the latter is better suited for you."

Zac wasn't surprised Yrial mentioned those two, even if their names didn't expose being escape treasures. They both cost over 8,000 credits, making them some of the most expensive items in the inheritance - there was no way they could be simple.

"What kind of items are they?"

“The **[Panopticon Seal]** is an ancient treasure that I think once might have been a clan-defining treasure for an ancient formation clan. It contains a terrifyingly complex array that can utterly seal space for over a kilometer in every direction almost instantly. As long as you hold onto the seal, you will be able to escape through a path only you can see. Meanwhile, everyone else will be frozen in place, no matter if it’s one or one hundred enemies.

“The **[Flashfire Flourish]** is a fire-based escape treasure I found shortly after becoming a Hegemon. It will turn you into a ball of flames and launch you through space, while sending out hundreds of decoys in every direction.”

“Why do you think I should get the second item then?” Zac frowned. “If the **[Flashfire Flourish]** is based on the Dao of Fire, Can I even use it?”

“The seal is extremely powerful, being able to seal space with such success that even Late Hegemons will find themselves stuck for a minute or two. However, it is best used in conjunction with other escape measures. It sounds to me that escape is one of your weaker suits, with your path being one of constantly forging ahead. What will you do after the Hegemon breaks free? Don’t think some random escape talisman can save you from a motivated D-grade cultivator.”

“Meanwhile, the **[Flashfire Flourish]** will shift you to a neighboring dimensional layer, while also making it harder to find you. That feature obviously doesn’t work inside Mystic Realms, but it will still take you extremely far in an instant. As for the fire-based aspect, it’s mostly fine.”

“Mostly?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“Well, with you not having an affinity with fire, it will probably hurt like hell to use the item,” Yrial snickered. “But better a little pain than death, right? With your constitution, you should be fine.”

“Just pain, but no damage to my cultivation or anything like that?” Zac thoughtfully asked.

“I didn’t say that. Both items are supreme escape treasures. Apart from being a pain to charge, activating them will damage your foundations. Such is the law of balance.”

“It almost sounds like they are meant to be used together,” Zac ventured. “One to seal the enemy, and one to run away.”

“That’s how I did things when out of options,” Yrial nodded.

“So how about...”

“Forget it.”

The two were locked in a wordless struggle for a few moments, but Zac eventually relented with a sigh. “Alright, I’ll take the **[Flashfire Flourish]**.”

It might not be exactly suited for him, but it was the kind of treasure he needed – something akin to Thea’s escape skill or the item the cultist leader used after their battle in the Dead Zone. Meanwhile, the **[Panopticon Seal]** sounded a bit too much like his **[Pillar of Desolation]** to make it worth 8,750 points, even if it was a powerful item.

He would simply have to find another way to restrain his pursuers while activating the **[Flashfire Flourish]** in the future.

“Good choice,” Yrial said, his smile widening as a box appeared in Yrial’s hands. “I didn’t want to influence your choice, but I actually modified the flourish one day when I was beset with an epiphany. Now, it’s even better than when I used it. You’ll be the envy of the cultivation world - it took me quite some effort to instill my charm and aesthetics into this item.”

“Better how? What did you do?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling as he heard the ambiguous words.

“First, leave a drop of blood and bind it,” Yrial urged as he took out a small red wand from the box, prompting Zac to reluctantly comply.

“Perfect,” Yrial smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t waste the actual escape charge. I’m just a bit curious how it will turn out with you as the controller.”

“How what will turn-” Zac asked, but he didn’t get any further as a fiery ball shot out from the wand, shooting right past his head.

Zac scrambled out of the way with alarm as he covered his head, but he breathed in relief when the fireball wasn’t followed by an explosion. However, Zac’s expression sunk with dismay as he turned around, wholeheartedly feeling that Yrial’s modifications were far worse.

The blue sky and the field of flowers in the pocket dimension had lost their luster in the face of the almost blinding spectacle the **[Flashfire Flourish]** had left behind. However, it wasn’t some sort of combat-related apparition, or some maze-like array meant to confuse the enemy.

It was rather an image of Zac’s face left as a ten-meter hologram floating in the air.

However, while it was him, it also wasn’t. Zac saw his eyes sparkle like stars with a tearful expression that spoke of both reluctance and love. There was a slight blush on his cheeks and rosy lips locked in a small pout, with his usual buzz cut replaced by a wavy cascade of chestnut-colored hair. Surrounding his face was a swirling sea of fiery and icy flowers, illuminated by rays of light. Finally, beneath the spectacle was one line written by glittering stardust.

Parting with a dear companion is always a sweet sorrow.

“It’s not quite the same when you’re using it,” Yrial sighed with a shake of his head. “At least it fixed your hair.”

“This... what...” Zac stuttered, finding himself lost for words.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The failed effeminization of his face. His ambiguous expression and the even more ambiguous words. In what universe was this a suitable function to add to an escape treasure? The only way it could be useful was if the scene was so unexpected and surreal that his pursuers found themselves shocked enough to lose track of him.

“Ah, don’t worry,” Yrial sagely nodded. “It’s designed to use whatever face you’re currently wearing. So no need to worry

in case you're using a disguise.”

‘Like that’s my concern right now!’ Zac wanted to roar, suddenly worrying that his already strained reputation would take another hit if he was ever discovered using this cursed escape wand.

“Not only that, but this is only one of five different memorable scenes I engraved into the **[Flashfire Flourish]**. It’s impossible to be certain, but I think it might be one of the most stylish escape items in your sector.”

“It’s quite something,” Zac said through grit teeth as he turned away from the still-glimmering apparition. “But I worry these superfluous additions might weaken its main function. I think it would be better to restore the item to its original state.”

“Well, it does cost a bit more energy, but it is negligible compared to the expenditure for the actual escape,” Yrial explained. “And I refuse to ruin this piece of art, even if it will be sullied by your face. I suggest you rather start thinking on how to improve your features, allowing you to leave behind an even more mesmerizing scene that will linger in the hearts of your pursuers forever.”

“Alright, well, I guess that’s fine then,” Zac sighed with a sense of defeat.

“With this purchase, you still have 5,500 Credits,” Yrial smiled. “Do you want any more advice?”

In the end, Zac purchased a non-attuned Natural Treasure that would help strengthen any prototype core, which would speed up the process after he’d found a proper core blueprint to work from. It only cost 1,500 Credits as well, making it a steal. For the final 4,000 points, Zac got another unique treasure called **[Hanamon’s Awakening]**.

It was yet another Node Opening treasure, one that Zac hoped would help him out with his Draugr Eoz heritage.

Unfortunately, it could only help open nodes he had already located, and it only worked with constitution-based Hidden Nodes, which was why it was so much cheaper than the **[Eye of Har’Theriam]** he got last time.

It was a bit of a gamble, but there wasn't much else he wanted from the inheritance. Race-boosting pills weren't a thing in the D-grade since once's race was connected to one's Cultivator's Core at that stage. Every time you upgraded your core, your longevity and attribute cap would increase. Finally, when you perfected your core, you'd officially reach C-grade race.

"Looks like you got your money's worth," Yrial nodded after Zac had stowed away the final item. "But remember, treasures can only help you remove some roadblocks on your path. Cultivation ultimately comes from within."

"I know," Zac nodded.

"Now, is there anything else you want to ask of your beautiful and benevolent master?" Yrial smiled. "Remember, it will probably be a while before we see each other again."

"Actually, there are a few things," Zac nodded, relieved that Yrial still had the energy to chat. "First of all, I was hoping you could help me upgrade your transformation skill. Secondly, I was wondering if you had ever heard of the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**."

Chapter 855: Upgrades

“One thing at a time. I’ve been asleep for most of the time since we met last, but I have some preliminary ideas for the transformation skill,” Yrial nodded. “I just need to see how the pathways of the core have changed during its upgrade. I even have some ideas to improve the aesthet-”

“No, wait,” Zac urgently interjected. “You can’t add any effect to the skill! It will expose me mid-battle.”

“I guess you’re right,” Yrial eventually sighed, not without some reluctance. “Alright, let’s see what we’re working with here.”

He pushed a finger against Zac’s chest and closed his eyes next. Only five minutes later did he open them again with a thoughtful look.

“Is there a problem?” Zac asked.

“How could something like this stump your exalted master?” Yrial harrumphed. “But the patterns are growing quite complex, requiring an understanding of the Daos infused into your Spy Core. I can somewhat circumvent it for now, but I doubt I will be able to form a D-grade version of the skill. So after this, you’re on your own.”

“That’s no problem,” Zac nodded. “I need to start forming skills myself soon anyway.”

“Yes, that’s one department you’ve fallen behind,” Yrial nodded. “By the time I evolved, I had already created six skills.”

“Six?” Zac blurted, feeling that one or two was already quite good.

“There’s no need for you to go that far,” Yrial shrugged. “I didn’t have as many opportunities as you when starting out, so I had a similar problem as you did with your Draugr class

before. I had a Rare E-grade Class that didn't quite incorporate my path, so I needed to form skills that better represented my Path of Cyclic Supremacy. Otherwise, I would have been stuck with a pendulum-oriented Class in D-grade as well."

"Pendulum?" Zac said, but he immediately realized what Yrial was talking about.

In the visions, Yrial was constantly swapping between cold and hot when fighting, a bit like how Ilvere often shifted between light and heavy when using that boulder-like weapon of his. Somehow, that seemed to have a greater effect than constantly using either one of the elements.

"It is a viable path, but it doesn't provide the level of amplification as a true fusion of elements," Yrial nodded.

"There is a chapter about it in the book you bought. In a sense, it keeps the elements separate, and the absence of a fusion becomes the third element. Perhaps it's worth for you to look into."

Zac thoughtfully nodded in agreement. That kind of system didn't seem too bad. He wasn't swapping between life and death currently when fighting, but his core comprehension when clashing against Alvod's path had been that Life was Life, Death was Death, forever separate, and always in conflict. Perhaps that kind of system could be useful for a base that he retooled for his purposes.

"Well, here we are," Yrial eventually smiled as he handed over a crystal. "The skill isn't naturally upgradeable, so you will have to refine the paths yourself."

"That's fine," Zac said. "Thank you."

He had already gained some experience in this regard inside the Orom World, with his human side having reformed **[Piercing Gaze]** into **[Cosmic Gaze]** already. Doing something similar with **[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]** shouldn't be too difficult as long as he had the blueprint and as long as he was careful.

After all, he had long realized that his pathways had a much greater ability to recover compared to most people's. Some

pathway adjustments that would require a cultivator to rest for a month were dealt with in a couple of days, speeding up the process significantly. If that was thanks to his high attributes or his unique constitution, Zac had no idea. Probably a little bit of both.

“Now, what’s this about a Buddhist technique?” Yrial said.

Zac stowed away the transformation skill for now as he recounted his meetings with Three Virtues, the technique, and his guesses about his path.

“Scheming baldies,” Yrial snorted. “I’ve been on the short end of that stick myself. However, I have to say his words are not without merit, and the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** is a well-known Body Tempering Technique. Your undead side currently has an attunement that your human side lacks. For normal people, that would make your cultivation slanted concerning the Dao, but I’m not too sure that aspect matters to you. However, it might affect your cultivation in other ways.”

“Like an imperfect fusion of life and death,” Zac ventured, receiving an affirmative nod.

“If your goal is to fuse, or even just stabilize, your two sides, a perfect balance might be required. The Dao of Chaos is a miracle – a Dao that shouldn’t exist, a paradox. There should be extremely stringent requirements for it to form, where a single missing component will make the transformation impossible.”

“What about the pathbreaking effect of Buddhism? Or any other traps hidden in the method?” Zac asked.

“Pathbreaking only works on the weak of heart,” Yrial snorted. “If you’re so useless that you become a monk from practicing their techniques, you don’t have the qualifications to continue your path. I would be more concerned as to why the Buddhist Sangha is helping you. They are not some benevolent samaritans – they are incredibly pragmatic with their cause and effect. If they provide you with these kinds of resources, they are expecting something in return.”

“Do you think it’s a brainwashing technique, turning me into a vessel for possession or something similar?” Zac asked, remembering the pitiful end for his old enemy, Inevitability.

“That, I doubt,” Yrial said. “They cultivate the heart and the self. Possession would break their path. They don’t forcibly convert people either, though who knows what they do in the dark. Personally, I believe that would hurt their path as well. Theirs is a supreme belief of Buddha’s Path. If they need to use trickery for conversion, that would mean their path is not perfect, and it would harm their cultivation and the Sangha itself.

“They would rather use the apparent perfection of their techniques to leave small nuggets of doubts in your heart, nuggets that would form a trail leading straight into the embrace of Buddha. That would reaffirm their path, strengthening the Sangha.”

“Can you scan the technique for me?” Zac ventured.

“No way. I’m just an aged soul wisp. Getting in contact with a complete Buddhist Heritage would probably destroy me. Besides, just because it’s not a faulty technique, it doesn’t mean they haven’t made precautions to prevent the spread of their secrets,” Yrial said. “Try infusing the method into an empty crystal.”

Zac nodded and took out a spare crystal from his ring, but a frown spread across his face a moment later. Nothing happened when he tried to engrave the words in his mind.

“You see?” Yrial smiled. “You will have to make the decision yourself, weighing risk and reward is a core component of being a cultivator. Do your research before making your choice, and then act on it decisively. But while you have time, don’t dally too long if you want to keep your momentum. I can tell you though that undoing body tempering can be difficult, impossible even. Even if you stop in the middle, you might find yourself stuck with an incomplete constitution.”

“I’ll try to do some more research before making a decision,” Zac nodded.

Zac spent the next few hours inside the trial inheritance. Most of the time was Yrial regaling him about his exploits of the past, while Zac occasionally inserted some question that had plagued him over the past years. Yrial answered some, ignored some due to not wanting to affect his path, and pretended he wasn't clueless about others.

For example, when Zac asked whether he'd ever heard of a Tayn Clan, Yrial haughtily answered that he couldn't keep track of every little faction in the frontier. Neither did Yrial know too much about the Perennial Vastness of the **[Perennial Vastness Token]**. He had only briefly heard of it, but by that point, he was already a Monarch and uninterested since it didn't pertain to him. Thus, Yrial had even less information than what Zac had gathered from the elites in the Orom World.

But finally, it was time to go.

"Time is running out," Yrial sighed as he looked out across the field of flowers. "I know you are loath to leave your dear master, but I need rest."

"When can I come back next time?"

"The trial is meant for someone approaching Peak Hegemony, but you might be able to brute force your way into the trial quicker than that. But no earlier than reaching Late Hegemony," Yrial said. "As for time, it doesn't matter. My soul wasn't damaged this time around like after the impartment."

"Late hegemony," Zac nodded. "Alright, I'll see you soon again. Thank you for all your help today. You've really helped me figure some things out."

"Have fun with your war," Yrial grinned. "I joined a big one once. There was a lot of loot to be pilfered, both from allies and foes, and ample opportunities to be seized. Just try not to die."

"Sage advice," Zac snorted as the world started to twist.

The last thing he saw was Yrial turning his head toward the left across the field of flowers with an inscrutable look in his eyes, in the very direction Yana had come from in the vision.

A flash of light later Zac appeared in the hall of the Tower of Myriad Dao, and he shot a complex look at the towering statue behind him. His second go at the Lord of Cycles inheritance had been a bit of a mixed bag. It had been nice to see his master again, but he hadn't quite accomplished all of his goals, the biggest one being a solution on how to form his Cultivator's Core.

However, he had gained some nice items along with the resources needed to start his own research in earnest, and he had a few ideas already on where to start. And with his transformation skill soon to be upgraded to E-grade, he would once more be able to use both his classes in battle.

As for the [**Boundless Vajra Sublimation**], Zac was leaning toward using the body-tempering aspect of the technique while forgoing the heart cultivation chapters. If that was even possible. However, he first wanted to do some investigation, preferably getting his hands on a couple of similar manuals to contrast and compare.

"Took your time," Brazla snorted as he appeared in front of him. "Those little battle-slaves of yours have kept bothering me while you underwent the trial."

"They're not slaves, they're my elite soldiers," Zac sighed. "What did they want?"

"How should I know?" Brazla shrugged with disinterest.

"Alright, thank you for your work the past week," Zac nodded before turning toward the exit, not wanting to spend his limited free time being berated by an unstable Tool Spirit.

"Wait," the Brazla said just as Zac was about to leave.

"You should think of what to do with the other inheritances," The Tool Spirit said. "Right now, I'm not fulfilling my purpose, which is like having a fly buzz around my head. The shady demon and the dumb brute are gone from what I gather, as is your sister. With your woman dying, that means only you and your undead progeny are occupying the inheritances."

Zac looked at the statue of the Blade Emperor for a few seconds before turning back to Brazla.

“Well, like you said. You’re eternal. I’m in no hurry; no need to waste your gifts on the undeserving,” Zac shrugged. “But I’ll have my people keep a lookout for potential candidates.”

“I don’t care much about the others, but you need to find a suitable candidate for the Celestial Artisan,” Brazla said with uncommon seriousness in his eyes.

Zac could understand the sentiment. Something probably went wrong for the original Brazla, with his Dao Repository becoming a System Reward rather than a resource for his descendants or disciples. His inheritance was different than the others in that way. The others added the trials and rewards as payment for Brazla’s services, while the Celestial Artisan’s inheritance probably was a genuine one.

Unfortunately, there was simply no one in his surroundings who deserved this reward. No standout craftsman had appeared on Earth so far, and the Gemlings had their own path of craftsmanship.

“I’ll do my best, but I might have to recruit someone from off-world,” Zac said.

“As long as you understand,” Brazla nodded. “Now, off you go.”

Zac snorted before he flashed away, leaving the Dao Repository behind. A scan of the surroundings indicated no Valkyries were waiting around, meaning whatever message they had couldn’t be too important. So Zac started walking toward his compound rather than Port Atwood. However, he didn’t stop when he reached his manor but rather continued until he reached the sea.

“Lord Atwood, it has been a while,” the Creator liaison said as Zac entered the shipyard reception, its emotions impossible to tell on from the featureless face where apertures were replaced by a single fractal.

“Brat, not bad,” a booming laugh echoed through the hallway as Karunthel, still using his enormous spider-legs, ambled into the room. “Already a Baron.”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Zac smiled, not bothering to ask why the golem foreman knew something like that.

“So, are you here about the upgrade?” Karunthel said with excitement. “About time. It’s a bit embarrassing to be the foreman of this toyshop.”

“Kind of,” Zac nodded. “I know where the worldeaters are, and I’m heading off-world soon to go get one. Now that it’s drawing closer, I wanted to check with you how long time it would take to build the reward, and if there was anything I could do to improve the quality of the vessel.”

“Oh? Our wares are not good enough for your tastes, brat?” Karunthel sniggered, though it was clear he didn’t take it to heart. “What’s the problem?”

“I’m heading into a chaotic strip of space teeming with invaders and pirates, I could use every advantage I can get.”

This was his biggest worry. An Early D-grade Cosmic Vessel had seemed impressive when he first saw the quest, but now with the war brewing and the general danger of the Million Gates Territory, it might not be enough to safely traverse the Million Gates Territory safely - especially not if he and his followers were planning on racking up some contribution through battle.

Certainly, some of the vessels of pirates and bounty hunters in the Million Gates Territory could barely be considered D-grade from what Zac had gathered. However, others were quite powerful, there were even Technocrats and unorthodox Cultivators using taboo methods in the area.

“Brat, don’t forget; we are the Iliex,” Karunthel snorted. “Our Early D-grade wares are at least at the level of Middle D-grade when put in the perspective of this backwater region.”

“I understand that,” Zac said. “But still...”

“Well, let me check,” Karunthel shrugged before freezing in place. Only a couple of minutes later did he move again, and it almost looked like he had rebooted. “Huh.”

“What?” Zac asked.

“Well, I am not allowed to build you anything better than an Early D-grade vessel,” Karunthel said.

“So it’s impossible,” Zac sighed.

“I’m not finished,” the huge golem-spider said. “I am not allowed to build one according to the quest, but I can create a specialized Cosmic Vessel. One that’s barely flightworthy in its current state but easily upgradeable. A framework, if you will.”

“Absolutely,” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “Let’s go with that.”

“Hold on,” Karunthel. “While this method is permissible, the actual upgrade would be outside the agreement of the System-awarded quest. First of all, the maximum output of an Early D-grade Shipyard is Middle D-grade vessels, and only once per century. Secondly, with the limitations set in place on a System-run store like this, you would have to provide the materials yourself rather than use our channels.”

“That’s no problem,” Zac said as he handed over an Information Crystal before pouring out a mountain of resources around him. They were a sample of all the peak-quality materials and items he had kept for himself rather than handing over to Calrin, while the crystal was his semi-accurate tally of items he had already handed over to the Sky Gnome.

It would obviously have been better if the System didn’t limit the Creators, but such were the rules. Licensed Stores added through the Town System had all kinds of rules and regulations they had to follow. In return, they got the System’s protection and access to new markets. Meanwhile, unlicensed stores were not related to the System at all.

They had no limitations and no protections except whatever muscle they could muster. The Thayer Consortia had lost all their unlicensed stores centuries ago, the moment the Tsarun Clan turned their gaze toward their little business. In that sense, if the Creators had actually made their way to Earth on their own and set up a shipyard, they would have been able to do business however they wanted.

They could even have sold B-grade vessels if they so desired, and the System wouldn't care.

"I guess your adventures were quite lucrative," Karunthel hummed as he scanned the piles of materials, occasionally prodding them with his metallic spider legs. "The value of this trove is counted in C-grade Nexus Coins. Of course, so are decent Cosmic Vessels."

"I have recorded the materials," Rahm added from the side. "Give us a few minutes while we will run simulations on viable frames."

Zac nodded before he started stowing away the materials, his heart already beating with anticipation. How could one not get excited over the prospect of a personal spaceship?

Chapter 856: The Final Frontier

“You look like a fledgling apprentice about to get his first batch of materials,” Karunthel grinned upon seeing Zac’s excitement.

“Of course,” Zac said with a wide smile. “We used to say that Space is the final frontier. How can I not get excited at the idea of exploring it in a personal ship?”

“The final frontier?” the spider-golem hummed. “I like that. Of course, I’m not sure how true that is what with the outer-“

“Ahem,” Rahm interjected, dashing Zac’s hopes of learning of some more restricted knowledge.

“If need be, I can get almost any quantities of any readily available material in the Sector,” Zac added as he got back to the topic. “But rare treasures might be a bit tricky with the time constraints.”

“Understood,” Rahm nodded. “Do young master have any specific requests?”

“First of all, the ship needs to have strong protection against spatial turbulence because I will regularly pass through spatial storms and wormholes,” Zac slowly said. “And since I will be hunting invaders, features that can enable me to ambush enemies would be great. Finally, the ability to escape from pursuit.”

“Brat, that’s a lot,” Karunthel snorted. “If a ship excels at everything, it will no longer be Middle D-grade.”

“Whatever you can come up with,” Zac smiled.

“Well, you have picked up quite a few good things,” Karuthel nodded. “We should able to make some decent alloys with it,

though the attunements are a bit... We'll have to check our database.”

A moment later Rahm and Karunthel walked to the backdoor of the office while Zac stayed behind, praying that they had some blueprints that would work with his somewhat one-sided stockpile of pilfered materials. It wasn't that his materials were bad, but most crafts had pretty stringent requirements. There was no guarantee that the Creator's heritage would mesh well with his items, considering a lot of the raw materials were either life- or death-attuned.

Most of the D-grade items in his possession were ultimately from the rings he looted in the Void, and they had all presumably belonged to Hegemons native to the Twilight Harbor. Therefore, over a third of the materials had one of the two attunements or some sort of mixed affinity, including more than half of the peak-quality items.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the two emerged again, and Zac almost shot up from the sofa.

“Well, while your materials are decent, not too many of them are useful for creating Cosmic Vessels,” Karunthel said. “But we did find a few alloys in our databases that would work. However, after filtering out all the designs that don't fit within the scope of the quest, the shipyard's level, your materials and requirements, there are only three viable options left.”

“Are you kidding?” Zac said. “Three is great. I was worried there would be none.”

“How could that be?” Karunthel snorted. “That would be an affront to our name. Do you know how many designs we have accumulated over the eons? Neither do I, but it's a lot. And most designs come in different variations depending on the desired attunement and equipment. With the materials you have collected, your vessel will either have to have a slight Death-attunement or Life-attunement.”

“Slight attunement?” Zac asked curiously.

“Your quest does not allow for an attuned vessel,” Rahm explained. “Therefore, the base framework will have to be

unattuned. From there, we will upgrade the vessel by adding attuned alloys, arrays, and systems, thus upgrading the vessel to Middle D-grade.”

“Can the vessel be both? Life and Death-attuned, that is?” Zac ventured.

“Not possible,” Karunthel snorted. “You want me to build a Chaosengine, brat? That’s the stuff of legends. We can isolate certain sections and flood them with whatever element you want, but we cannot integrate both life and death into the framework of the vessel. The two elements would clash, causing all kinds of issues we have no way of solving.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded, disappointed but not very surprised.

He had hoped to see if the Creators had some solutions to the fusion of Life and Death, but it looked like he was overthinking things. Even if their faction had some solutions, it probably wouldn’t be a readily available Middle D-grade design.

“The first option is a scout-class vessel spanning 300 meters,” Rahm continued as a screen appeared in front of Zac. “Its speed is the greatest among the three, and it has serviceable anti-detection technology, which can help with both ambushing and escapes. However, its shielding and weaponry are the worst of the three.”

Zac looked at the sleek silver ship with golden lines and runes covering its surface, its design somewhat resembling a catamaran built for speed. Apart from the image, there was also a list of features of specifications, including everything from arrays to cargo hold and personnel capacity.

From the description, it looked like its defensive arrays weren’t meant for battle, but rather to withstand any odd environments the crew explored. Therefore, its shields were effective against sustained environmental damage, but they could only take a limited number of direct hits from enemy attacks. It also didn’t have much in the way of fighting back, though its scanning equipment and drones seemed very impressive.

“The second one is my recommendation,” Karunthel eagerly continued as a second screen appeared. “A somewhat unknown variant on a popular destroyer model.”

Zac looked at the design, and he felt a palpable pressure from the imposing pitch-black monstrosity. This ship looked a lot like a normal boat, except a heavily fortified metal castle was placed on its stern.

“Strong shields, strong weapons; a mobile fortress,” the foreman laughed. “No need to run from your enemies if you can just blow them up. Unfortunately, we can’t bring our more advanced weaponry to the frontier, but even these old designs pack quite a punch.”

Karunthel wasn’t joking around. If the description was to be believed, the destroyer had no less than six weapons platforms, ranging from a literal Deathray meant to destroy or at least incapacitate ships. Even if the targets survived, they might get forcibly converted into zombies. There were dozens of array towers, unmanned attack drones, and even a planetary bombardment system.

Even its bow was a massive blade empowered with some sort of array, allowing the owner to run straight into their enemies. The shields were powerful as well, and they should have no problem withstanding the spatial turbulence in the Million Gates Sector.

“So what’s the catch?” Zac said, his eyes gleaming.

“Of the three, it’s the slowest and least maneuverable,” Rahm said. “The scouting vessel has various escape protocols, while no such things are installed on this vessel. Any decent scanner will also pick up its powerful energy signature.”

“Can I install escape protocols and cloaking technology later?” Zac asked.

“We are already pushing the limits by offering you these designs,” Karunthel said. “We will not be able to make any further adjustments except for repairs. Besides, all these systems and arrays are working together in a delicate balance. If you start replacing parts, you’ll quickly run into various

issues. Pushing through spatial tears and shifting dimensions is no joke. If you muck about without knowing what you're doing, you might find yourself disintegrated when you make a jump."

"Oh alright," Zac nodded with a shudder, scrapping any idea of cramming the ship full of addons after getting his hands on it.

"You should be careful about hiring outside mechanics as well," Karunthel said. "If they're useless, they'll probably end up getting you killed. If they are any good, they'll notice that the vessel is not from around these parts. Cosmic Vessels are too complicated to hide their origins like the simple ships we've built for you thus far. At least for me and the other craftsmen sent here."

"I'll be careful," Zac nodded. "What about the third model?"

"The final vessel is a journeyman-class cruiser," Rahm said, showcasing the third vessel.

The third option looked a bit like a hollow pyramid, where the tip was the front of the vessel. Halfway up a large viewing deck could be seen, while there were multiple slots for weaponry. Out from the hollowed bottom three large pillars stuck out, presumably the motor this model used.

"Sorry, journeyman?" Zac asked as he read through the specs.

"The previous vessels were targeted at or specially designed for factions setting up a proper armada, from small fighters to planet sized command-ships," Karunthel explained. "Thus, these models are more specialized in nature. Journeyman ships are normally sold to powerful wandering cultivators or as private vessels for elites. They are all-rounders that you generally don't see in large-scale wars."

"Jack of all trades, master of none," Zac muttered.

"Exactly," Karunthel nodded. "This model is quite flexible. We can make it either life-or-death-attuned, and the modular design gives you some freedom to prioritize which aspects you want the ship to focus on. For example, you can swap out

turrets for more energy storage and shield-generators, and so on. On the other two vessels, the design is mostly set.”

Zac looked at the specs for a long time, unable to immediately decide which he wanted. Each one of them had its strong points, but the situation in the Million Gates Territory was simply too unpredictable.

“No need to make your choice right now,” Karunthel added. “There is a lot of work to be done, and we can start by putting together the components used in all three models. Think it over so you have an answer by the time you return with the worldeater. That way, we can begin manufacturing the moment the shipyard is upgraded.”

“This is a list of the required materials and labor cost for each respective vessel upgrade,” Rahm added as he handed Zac an information crystal.

“Alright,” Zac said, immediately grimacing upon seeing that all of the vessels were priced in the millions of D-grade Nexus Coins, even after the rebate from getting the basic framework from his quest.

It was no wonder most D-grade cultivators were locked to their planet or planet cluster. A single vessel cost more than raising dozens of Hegemons in the Zecia sector. For example, Zac knew that Ogras’ grandpa’s networth, including his gear, was only counted in the low thousands of D-grade nexus coins.

However, Karunthel’s words made him think of something. “Will the size of the shipyard increase after getting an upgrade?”

“Of course,” Karunthel nodded and turned to his second-in-command. “What kind of platform will we get?”

“A D-grade Shipyard in this situation will roughly take up 52.2 times the area,” Rahm said. “With your requirements for privacy and camouflage, it would increase to 57.8.”

“Almost sixty times larger?” Zac exclaimed as he glanced at the massive warehouse outside the window. That thing was bigger than any building he had seen pre-integration, and they

wanted something more than fifty times that size? It would swallow up the whole coastline of his island.

“The production platforms for Cosmic Vessels are quite complex,” Karunthel shrugged. “We need to set up everything from foundries to array furnaces, tempering lakes, and the actual construction lines.”

“You will be able to move the compound freely within your domain upon the upgrade,” Rahm added. “And it is not water-locked any longer. With Port Atwood having become a capital, you can place us on any island in the archipelago. However, placing the foundry on a Death-attuned island will accrue a steep conversion charge since we do not use that kind of energy.”

“Alright, no problem,” Zac quickly nodded. “I’ll check what’s available. But I might have to put you guys on the ocean floor if you need even more space in the future.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Karunthel laughed. “C-grade shipyards and higher are strategic resources involving many secrets of the Iliex. Those platforms are almost exclusively kept inside the inner worlds of our Master Craftsmen or inside private realms. If you actually manage to upgrade the shipyard again, we’ll just transform the island you gave us to a private residence.”

“Oh, right,” Zac nodded. “And how long will it take for you to put together the vessel?”

“The Boundless Heavens will be helping out with the quest, so not too long. Two months outside our temporal arrays at the most,” Karunthel said. “Oh, one more thing. Get a worldeater with a strong soul. The stronger the soul, the better the vessel will be.”

“The worldeater’s soul will be used for the vessel?” Zac asked with a slight frown.

Between the cursed sword he snatched in the Tower of Eternity and [**Love’s Bond**], he knew all-too-well the complications that came with the fusion of souls and items. Even if it had worked out for Alea so far, the path was fraught

with issues, and it went against the natural order. So infusing a soul into his Cosmic Vessel didn't seem like a very good idea.

"Don't worry, we won't use some dumb animal as a Tool Spirit," Karunthel laughed, clearly understanding Zac's concerns. "But it will be a component for one of the central arrays. A strong soul will mean the quality of the core is higher, which will allow for smoother energy transfer. That will improve everything from shield durability to speed."

"So it's enough if I just get the core?" Zac asked.

"Nope," Karunthel said. "The Boundless heavens wants you to catch a live one, so that's what you'll have to do."

"Alright, I'll get the beast as quickly as possible. I'm heading out within a couple of days," Zac said, but just before he stepped out of the reception hall, he turned back and asked one final question. "Have you ever heard of a powerful faction of fire cultivators called the Tayns?"

"That's... Not something we can discuss," Karunthel exclaimed, so shocked by the name that he actually took a step back. "But you need to be careful. Some things are better left alone, alright?"

"Alright, I'll see you later then," Zac slowly nodded and walked out.

The two Iliax looked at their customer as he disappeared among the trees in the distance.

"Crazy brat, don't tell me he's mixed up with those maniacs?" Karunthel muttered. "Is this why...?"

"Doubtful," Rahm said. "Mohzius Tayn has guarded his wife's throne for millions of years, rarely stepping out, and his disciples are busy causing havoc elsewhere. More importantly, these models... It breaks convention. What happened in that meeting?"

"I argued for an upgrade," Karunthel grinned.

"Is it worth it? Is he worth it?"

"I guess?" Karunthel nodded after some thought.

“Can we even build them?” Rahm asked. “The restrictions.”

“They will be temporarily lifted,” Karunthel lazily said. “And the components that are out of my league will be transported.”

Rahm turned toward Karunthel, his normally wooden aura fluctuating from shock. “Reslam will forcibly expand our authority? What did you agree to for him to pay such a price?”

“A section-head isn’t powerful enough for this,” Karunthel snorted. “And Reslam wouldn’t do me any favors no matter what price I paid, not after I raided his stockpile. This is an order from higher up. For some reason, the leaders really want a certain type of scanner on this brat’s ship.”

“A specialized scanner?” Rahm muttered. “Should we tell him?”

“We can’t, strictest orders,” Karunthel said, and Rahm silently stared at his foreman for clarification.

“Don’t look at me like that. I like the brat as much as you,” Karunthel as he looked down at Rahm. “That’s why I bartered for them to upgrade his options if they wanted me to do this. Considering how easily they agreed, they must be looking for something extremely important. The price to make the Boundless Heavens look the other way will be tens of times greater than the cost of the vessel itself.

“I guess some scary bastard has made a deal with the Chapter of Creation to implant this thing. With the brat mentioning the Tayns, they seem like a strong contender. Not even the Allfather would dare say no to them. Of course, it could be someone else looking for something in this area, and we’re the only ones around who can help.”

“This... This is not our way,” Rahm slowly said. “What if he’s harmed as a result?”

“Whatever those bigshots are looking for, it’s out there whether we install the scanner or not. Hopefully, the improved design will help him survive whatever lurks in the dark.”

“The final frontier...” Rahm muttered. “Just what are they expecting to find in this desolate corner of space?”

Chapter 857: The Future of the Empire

Zac's communication crystal had already started vibrating while looking over the Cosmic Vessels, and he was surprised to see that it was Vilari who had tried to contact him. It looked like the mentalist had finally returned to Earth after spending over five years on Ensolus.

A few minutes later, Vilari appeared in his courtyard, accompanied by Joanna.

"Both of you?" Zac asked with surprise.

"Rhuger and Ilvere can deal with things on Ensolus for the time being," Vilari nodded. "With the restrictions of the Incursion gone, we have begun the upgrade of all facilities. Soon enough, both our forts and resource gathering facilities will be impregnable against factions at the level of the Mavai Hordes and the Raun Spectrals."

"With the addition of teleporters, we can move freely across the continent as well, allowing for both reinforcements and evacuation if needed," Joanna added.

"Well, welcome back to Earth, both of you," Zac smiled. "How does it feel?"

"A lot has changed. I read the reports but it's another thing to see it with my own eyes," Vilari nodded.

"I've been back a few times by now, but it's still hard to believe how quickly things change between each visit," Joanna sighed.

"It will slow down soon enough," Zac said. "We are still adapting to the Multiverse."

“How did the inheritance go?” Joanna asked with some longing in her eyes.

Zac glanced at Joanna, feeling it really was a shame. He just realized that she would have been a great candidate to undergo the Blade Emperor’s inheritance, even if she used a spear. Having heard the whole story about Irei and his wives from Thea, Zac believed that sincerity was more important than weapon of choice. In this regard, Joanna excelled, having already pushed her Spirit Tool spear to E-grade.

Unfortunately, even if the Blade Emperor Inheritance would open up in a few more years, it didn’t matter. The inheritances started at the F-grade, for better or worse. But Zac still made a mental note of making sure with Brazla before handing the spot over to someone else. It simply was a bit inconvenient to be restricted to only selecting F-grade cultivators. By this point, everyone he knew had already entered the E-grade.

“What, is there something wrong?” Joanna asked with a frown.

“Oh, no it’s nothing,” Zac said as he was dragged out from his thoughts. “The inheritance was okay. My path has diverged a bit from the Lord of Cycles though, so I didn’t quite get everything I had hoped from the encounter.”

“As we find our paths, outside help is bound to become less and less helpful,” Vilari nodded.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true for everyone,” Zac agreed. “More importantly, I’m heading off-world again in a couple of days.”

“So soon?” Joanna said with a small furrow in her brows.

“You’ve barely been back for a month.”

“Hopefully, it shouldn’t take too long. Less than a year,” Zac said as he shared the quest screen for **[Items for Karunthel]**.

“I need to go get that worldeater or whatever. From there, it won’t take too long before we can set course for the Million Gates Territory. I just came back from a meeting with the Creators.”

“So we can come with to the Million Gates Territory?” Joanna said with gleaming eyes.

“You’ll have to, whether you want to or not.” Zac laughed. “I need some capable people to help me steer that thing.”

“How many can go? How is the environment?” Vilari asked, and Zac quickly recounted the specs he had seen in the office before.

“These vessels... are far beyond the norm in the Million Gates Territory, in the whole sector, in fact,” Vilari slowly said. “Few can build cosmic vessels of this quality. Only Monarchs and the wealthiest Hegemons will be able to take out comparable vessels. We might need to disguise it somehow.”

“What, really? I know they’re good, but they’re that good?” Zac exclaimed, a bit reluctant to make his spaceship look all grubby the moment he got his hands on it.

“It’s true,” Joanna nodded. “We looked into buying a ship before you returned, and what you describe is on another level entirely. The problem is related to the materials, apparently. You need to know the method of producing unique alloys that can withstand both attacks, spatial turbulence, and the pressure of the universe when phasing between dimensions.”

“Without those kinds of recipes and the skill to forge the alloys, you would have to build the whole vessels out of high-grade materials. That might improve the quality, but the cost would increase one hundredfold,” Joanna said. “Add to that the skill required to infuse hundreds of high-quality Arrays into the ship...”

“Can the Creators mass-produce Cosmic Vessels at this level?” Vilari asked. “If we could put these for sale...”

“These models are unique, with some parts being a quest reward of mine, and others using materials that don’t exist in the Zecia sector,” Zac said, but his heart was still beating with excitement. “However, they will still be able to mass-produce simpler models once their factory is up and running.”

“Simpler models will definitely sell even better,” Joanna said with a smile. “I think you’ve struck it rich.”

Zac’s smile widened as well, remembering Ogras’ exaggerated reaction when he first got his hand on the Iliex Shipyard. It

looked like the true value of a Creator Shipyard was about to appear. It was perfect timing. Not only could high-quality vessels help with the war efforts against the invaders, but they would provide an important revenue source for his Empire.

After all, him accidentally stumbling into piles of treasure wasn't a sustainable source of materials and wealth for himself and his followers.

“Well, that's something for later,” Joanna said. “Do you need anyone of us to go with you to fetch that animal for your quest?”

“Not this time,” Zac said. “I am planning on sneaking inside among the mercenaries, getting the beast, and leaving. With too many people, things might get complicated. Of course, I am hoping I can simply purchase the thing instead of needing to head too deep into the Void Gate's territory.”

“Alright,” Vilari said. “We'll continue the integration of Ensolus. There is a lot of work to be done now that the incursion officially is over. With your permission, I'd like to transfer a few million citizens to this world.”

“Million?” Zac said with confusion. “Do we even have millions of people to spare on Earth?”

“All our facilities on Earth, from mines to spiritual fields and workshops, are fully manned since long ago. The salary and benefits of your employees are known far and wide, and we are flooded with applications every day,” Joanna explained. “Getting a million volunteers wouldn't take long.”

“The number of applications has only increased now that the general population has been able to glimpse your contribution store,” Vilari added. “And with the new Contribution algorithm, few apart from the elites and employees will be able to accrue enough contribution to get anything worthwhile.”

It was true. Before, anyone who wasn't actively slacking off would slowly gather contribution points in Port Atwood. But with the new system, you would have to work for it. Even then, it was a pretty generous System. After all, in most

factions, only the core members would even get access. For example, in Clan Azh'Rezak, only members of the actual clan could get access to the Clan's resources.

The millions of citizens who simply lived in their domain would have to rely on themselves while paying even higher taxes.

"Aren't the natives of Ensolus enough to fill the positions?" Zac asked.

"We want to bring all the races over to better integrate the populations," Vilari said. "If we keep the two worlds isolated from each other except a small number at the top, Ensolus will remain a colony looking for ways to break out."

"Makes sense," Zac slowly agreed as he considered the proposal. "But if we start bringing people over en-masse, the cat's out of the bag – that the Atwood Empire has both undead and living citizens."

"I am aware," Vilari nodded. "That's why we need your go-ahead first."

"How have things gone so far in that department?" Zac asked. "How did the soldiers react upon seeing the Einherjar?"

"Things went better than expected, honestly - we were prepared to quell a riot if need be. There were some grumblings in the start, especially among the elites who were harried by the Undead Empire for weeks. But most people understand your undead and the Undead Empire are not the same," Joanna said.

"I feel that the newly integrated are not as inherently averse to our kin as what I saw on the streets of Twilight Harbor," Vilari thoughtfully added. "They might consider us unnatural and weird, but there are so many unnatural and weird things happening to them since the integration. Thanks to that, our impact is lessened, and there aren't eons of bad blood ingrained into our bones."

"Perfect," Zac nodded. "Well, I guess it's about time anyway. We can't hide a part of our population over on Elysium forever. I'm planning on rearranging the Spirit Vein to turn a

section of Port Atwood into a Death Attuned District. That way, the living and undead can live in the same city and start the integration for real.”

“If I may suggest an alternative,” Vilari said as she took out the purification array most people used on the Ensolus Continent. “As you’ve seen, living and undead are living quite well on Ensolus as long as we have these arrays. If possible, I would think it even better to strive for this kind of environment in Port Atwood, where life and death are one, rather than separate.”

Zac suddenly remembered his conversation with Vilari Back in the Twilight Harbor, about how the harbor was not much different from the Zecia sector. The undead had their zones and their stores, while the living had theirs. Even the shared world disks had clear lines between life and death, and comingling was ultimately limited as a result.

The plan he suggested was ultimately the same, even if the stigma of consorting with the ‘other side’ might not be as poignant here.

“Have you noticed any side effects of staying in that kind of environment?” Zac eventually asked.

“Not that we can tell, as long as the purifiers work,” Vilari said. “The real issue is that we honestly don’t know how this mixture is formed. We haven’t been able to recreate it back on Earth just yet.”

“Your plan is not bad, but I think it’s a bit premature to flood Port Atwood with this kind of unstable energy,” Zac rejected. “We can revisit the topic when we can reliably recreate this environment, or even a better one in the future. I’ll allocate more resources to research this and provide some life-death treasures I’ve picked up lately. Until then, the districts will have to do.”

It wasn’t just a worry about the health of his citizens that made him say no. He honestly doubted the plan was feasible in the short run - who understood the difficulties involved with fusing life and death better than he?

“Of course,” Vilari nodded, though Zac could tell she was a bit disappointed.

“I haven’t forgotten what you said back in the harbor,” Zac added. “I’ll do my best to make your vision come true. But we have to take it one step at a time. For now, keep the Earth and Ensolus separated – anyone you hire to head over will sign on for a year at the least. Meanwhile, have the city planners start drawing up the expansion of Port Atwood, but don’t draw any Miasma yet. As soon as I return, we will make things public.”

“We’ll handle it, don’t worry,” Joanna assured. “On a related topic, I have a message from the Stargazer. After analyzing the sector, she wanted to recommend the Kaldran Strait for the Atwood Empire.”

“The no-man’s-land between the Kavriel Province and the Human Empires?” Zac hesitated. “I mean it makes sense with our attunement, but that place is a constant warzone. Even if it’s far from the frontlines of the Million Gates Territory, that place will never see any calm.”

“The Kaldran Straits are enormous,” Joanna said. “It’s risky, but Abby thinks it’s the best place for a life-death attuned world. With the miasmatic domain of the Kavriel Province providing energy for one direction, and the counterforce from Zecia itself, it should push the ambient energy of your planets to the next level. There are also many scattered worlds without any affiliations or powerful leaders, making future expansion easy.”

“There should be parts of the strait that are far from the established battlefronts,” Vilari added. “As long as we pick a dimensional layer that’s not part of the known routes, the odds of anyone running into us by accident should be quite low.”

“We can start looking into it, but we need the Cosmic Vessels first,” Zac eventually agreed. “Let’s focus on the short-term issues first.”

“When are you leaving?” Joanna asked.

“As soon as I have everything I need. Come with me to Calrin’s. I might need your help with something,” Zac said as

he stood up. “Or is there anything else?”

“No, that’s it. I’ll start preparing for the expansion and recruitment,” Vilari said.

“You have the best understanding of our people,” Zac said. “If you will, could you start working on a shortlist of candidates to bring into the Million Gates Territory? Apart from warriors, we need medics, array controllers, and so on. That excursion will probably take years, so only people who can handle that kind of pressure.”

“I’ll look into it,” Vilari nodded.

From there, things proceeded quickly as Zac planned out his next course of action. Seeing Yrial’s journey toward Hegemony, and later hearing his embellished tales, had imparted a few important lessons that weren’t related to forming one’s core; how to stay alive in the Multiverse. Wanting to leave nothing to chance, Zac ordered one report after another on the situation on the Salosar cluster.

Soon enough, a proper plan had taken shape. Zac had everything he needed as well, including the high-quality modulator Calrin had gotten his hands on. However, he would have to wait for another ten days before he set out again. It wasn’t that he needed more time to prepare, but rather that things over at Salosar weren’t ready.

Having found himself with a few days of free time, Zac teleported over to his Cultivation Cave with Triv to upgrade it with a few of his recently gathered treasures and arrays. It quickly became apparent that his private forest wasn’t the only place Triv had fiddled with. Apart from being completely repaired since his Soul Reincarnation, every single facet had been refined and elevated.

“You’ve worked hard,” Zac smiled. “I can’t believe the energies have reached this level.”

It wasn’t at the level of the unique environments in the Orom World like the Blackink Mountain, but the energy was still so dense that a haze covered the subterranean forest in this central cave. The only thing missing was that the energy was

somewhat hollow now that there was no Origin Energy left – it had the meat, but it lacked the insights that marked top-tier cultivation environments.

“Well, admittedly, the mountain did most of the work,” Triv smiled. “With these purification arrays Young Master has brought, I will be able to improve the cave even further.”

The two toured the three sections of his cave for the next hours, where Zac showcased the various resources he’d gathered, and Triv offered suggestions on how to incorporate them into the cave. Ultimately, the cave was reinforced with another two layers of defensive arrays, along with the Purification Arrays he bought in the Orom World.

Next, they planted some of the high-quality life-and-death treasures he’d gathered. They’d siphon some of the ambient energy, but the aura they’d exude would improve the quality of what remained. Since Zac couldn’t cultivate anyway, losing some density wasn’t a big deal. Meanwhile, any added insights in the area, and their clashes with their opposing elements, might help him gain some inspiration for the formation of his core.

It would take a while for the herbs, trees, mushrooms, and other materials to take root and start transforming the environment, but Zac was heading out soon in either case. Triv would take care of things while he visited the Void Gate.

The following couple of days Zac spent on **[Beauty Yrial’s Great Transformation Skill]**. Reforging a skill manually was a bit of a chore, even if your body was unusually adaptable. The biggest issue was that any mistake in either planning or execution could damage the fractal, just like when you upgraded a skill the normal way.

Thankfully, Yrial had set up an extremely simple plan for him, where the skill would reach E-grade after 18 sessions with a one-week rest in-between. Each session, he would add or alter a specific set of pathways, ensuring that the skill would be usable and stable throughout the process. That was the benefit of having a Monarch for a teacher - Yrials natural understanding of patterns far surpassed his own.

Even if he didn't cultivate the Daos that were the basis for the Specialty Core, he understood enough how to interact with it.

Zac also continued his Soul Cultivation, and he even started analyzing the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** during his downtime. With such a packed schedule, the ten days went by in a flash. Zac's eyes opened after a long bout of meditation. It was finally time.

First Salosar - then outer space.

Chapter 858: Salosar Seven

Zac stepped out from the teleporter of Salosar Seven, one of the twenty-two official subordinate worlds of the Salosar Cluster, donning a temporary face. Together with him was Joanna, who was decked out in the liveries of the Space Gate Guild. They found themselves in a gallery inside an enormous hollow tower, the scene almost a bit reminiscent of the Havenfort Chasm, though the scale obviously was much smaller.

Behind them was a stone wall, and their sides were blocked by some sort of obfuscation array. However, the arrays were not completely opaque, and they could see small spatial ripples constantly appear all around them in other, presumably identical, rooms. That left only the front, which led to the edge of the gallery, which wasn't blocked to the sides.

Joanna simply bowed at Zac and activated the teleporter again, disappearing before she could be questioned or inspected by the nearby guard who stood outside the only exit to the room. Zac walked over, making no attempt to hide his aura, which exuded the energy of an Early Hegemon thanks to his modulator.

The thing worked just as Calrin had advertised, but it was pretty demanding to keep running. He would only be able to use the modulator for around two hours before running low on Cosmic Energy, but that was more than enough for his purposes. As for masquerading as a Half-step Hegemon, that was much easier, and he could do that for a full day as long as he wasn't forced to expend a bunch of energy in battle.

“Welcome, Lord Hegemon. It's my honor to receive your excellence,” the middle E-grade guard bowed as he imprinted Zac's aura onto a crystal. “May I ask what brought the esteemed Lord to Salosar Seven?”

“Just taking a look,” Zac slowly said. “I heard there might be some opportunities here with an unusual Beast Tide.”

“That’s true,” the guard quickly nodded and took out an information crystal. “Any Hegemons joining the mission would become esteemed guests of the Void Gate. There is a specially-erected recruitment station erected in the Larnak Sector of Salosar Prime, all the information you need is in this crystal. I am sorry, but we also require Lord Hegemon to fill in some details at the entry station behind me.”

“Why?” Zac frowned. “My clan’s reports on Salosar didn’t mention anything like this. I don’t like my details getting spread left and right.”

“It is a new security measure the council has set in place for those arriving from out-of-system,” the guard said with another quick bow. “With the Void Gate opening its proverbial gates, many spies have tried entering their domain to cause harm or steal resources. Those who are not part of the local factions will have to fill in a short statement. But Lord Hegemon does not need to worry - these are handled with utmost secrecy, and not a wisp of information will reach any third party or information house.”

Zac nodded with a displeased grunt before grabbing the information crystal. From there, he headed over to one of the hundreds of disks at the edge of the walk surrounding the central chasm of the tower, his aura gradually receding into his body.

Truthfully, Zac already knew about these procedures thanks to Calrin, and they had already prepared a background for him as a newly-ascended Hegemon from the Allbright Empire. The disguise wouldn’t hold up to close scrutiny, but he had spent almost five D-grade Nexus Coins on tokens, Clan Seals, and other items to verify his identity. It was extremely unlikely these early screenings would spot anything amiss.

A few moments later, Zac expressionlessly stepped out into the hollow core of the tower, gently floating down toward the bottom hundreds of meters below. It wasn’t that he had figured out some way to fly to perfect his disguise as a Hegemon, but

there was rather a simple gravity array in the center. People were floating down all around him until they reached the bottom platform.

As Zac looked around, it almost looked like it rained people, while there was a constant stream of people disappearing into the outgoing arrays at the lower floors. It wasn't too surprising. Salosar Seven might not sound too impressive due to its numbering, but Salosar Two through Five were mostly closed-off worlds where the powerful clans and factions of the cluster resided.

Thus, Salosar Six through Eight were popular destinations for those seeking entertainment or commerce, and also the worlds where middling families and the more successful wandering cultivators stayed. The other worlds were not as well-off, with eleven and beyond being E-grade worlds.

Those planets, along with the unofficial worlds without a Salosar name, were mostly feeder worlds whose purpose was to produce the everyday resources the residents of the upper worlds required. Apparently, there were arrays as large as countries on those planets, where the ambient energy of vast swathes of land was dragged into the spiritual fields, workshops, or whatever else the families needed the energy for.

It left the rest of the planets extremely energy-starved, and just reaching E-grade essentially required you to work in the facilities that stole all the energy. Learning about the situation was a stark reminder of why it was so important to nurture Earth into a proper faction that could stand on its own.

In fact, a few of the Salosar feeder-planets had once been newly-integrated worlds that didn't amount to much. Either they failed during the integration to one of Salosar's local factions, or they weren't powerful enough to avoid that kind of fate during the Assimilation. Obviously, almost no newly-integrated planet would be able to resist any established factions nearby, but there were some fail-safes in place.

Normally, the world would get some sort of trial to see if they had properly acclimatized after a century, and if they

performed well enough, then the local invaders would be barred from forcibly seizing all land and resources. If not, the unlucky planets would end up as feeder-worlds, while the more fortunate would only get levied with heavy taxation to whatever local power whose sphere of influence they had appeared inside.

Such was the fate of the powerless in the Multiverse.

It was the law of the jungle, which could both be considered extremely unfair and fair, depending on how you looked at it. Zac didn't wish for this kind of exploitative hierarchy for his own budding empire, but neither did he have any interest in bringing about social change to the Zecia sector. He wasn't some savior, and neither did he have any problem appreciating the splendor of Salosar Seven even if he knew how this world was supported.

The air was clean, the energy was dense, and the scenery was beautiful. The structures of Salosar Seven were mostly erected with some sort of purple stone with opalescent streaks that lit up when the sun hit them.

They would stay luminescent even after sunset, making for a beautiful and mysterious atmosphere in the evenings. Along with the nearby inland oceans with paradisial archipelagos, Salosar Seven had become a popular destination for those who needed a break in their cultivation and wanted to spend some time relaxing.

There was still a large commercial sector, but it was more geared toward entertainment compared to its brethren. Of course, it wasn't for the bars or the brothels that Zac had come, and he started to orient himself following the map Calrin had provided him with.

Noticing Zac standing in place as though he was lost, a few people approached him, but they quickly backed away after a shake of his head. Seeing the guides looking for work, Zac felt a pang of regret thinking back to Nala, the half-blood Draugr who had guided him in Twilight Harbor.

He had no idea what had happened to her when the whole Harbor exploded, but Zac knew her odds of survival weren't

great. Zac could only hope that Nala's father, the Information House fact-checker, had sensed something amiss through his work and moved the family to the outer edges of the harbor at least.

Salosar had imposed a temporary no-fly rule for everyone except the city-issued ships, so Zac hired a ferryman. Normally, these kinds of limitations would only be seen in the capitals of C-grade worlds, with Hegemons otherwise refusing to comply. But the Void Priestess was simply too powerful, and no one wanted to draw her ire at this critical time.

Zac spent 20,000 E-grade Nexus Coins to check in at a premium Cultivation Cave next, paying a month in advance. However, he didn't spend more than a few minutes inside before leaving, setting out in the wider city by foot. An hour later he walked the streets looking completely different, having taken a cue out of Yrial's playbook to change his appearance inside unmonitored corners or stores or alleyways a few times.

With that, he headed toward his real destination. Zac knew he was probably overdoing it with the counter-espionage, but there were reasons to be wary. For one, interplanetary travel was not that common in the frontier, and any unknown Hegemon popping up out of nowhere would raise some eyebrows even in a flourishing place like Salosar.

It might seem like there was a constant stream of people exiting the tower, but Zac knew that over 99% were locals from the Salosar Cluster. Just a fraction were foreigners, and of those, the powerful would be marked for further investigation. After all, information was both wealth and power in the Multiverse, and there were a lot of businesses who made a point of knowing about everyone and everything that went on in their local sphere.

Even arriving incognito wouldn't help, since the information houses would start matching you and your aura against possible candidates in their tallies. If there were none, you'd suddenly become even more suspicious since you were not only a stranger, but also trying to hide who you were. That's

why Zac chose to go with the somewhat cumbersome method of buying an identity.

No matter if it was needed or not, Zac felt it was good practice - being rigorous about security couldn't hurt. In the visions, Yrial always followed certain procedures when visiting or leaving a new settlement, no matter if he had reason to believe he would be targeted or not. After all, some threats were unknowable, and having his true identity exposed was not the only risk Zac was facing.

Just by appearing in Salosar alone, he might already have gained a target on his back by some enterprising thieves or assassins.

Zac made two jumps with the public teleporters, a luxury few worlds in the Zecia sector enjoyed. They weren't connected to the System's network to facilitate teleportation, which meant anyone could freely use them. In return, they needed to be set up by skilled Formation Masters who had delved into the Dao of Space. Even then, they seldom had the range surpassing that of a planet.

In Salosar's case, the arrays were massive disks that could fit thousands of people, and they activated every time enough money was contributed. Sometimes, it could take hours, but if you had the money and didn't want to wait, you could activate the array early.

By the time Zac reached a residential district on another continent, his expensive robes had been transformed to look like decent but inexpensive leather armor, and he released the aura of an Early E-grade warrior as he took in the surroundings. It was an interesting contrast to Port Atwood, where both had their strong points.

Salosar was a flourishing planet, with dense energies and high quality of living. There was constant foot traffic on the streets even in these somewhat remote corners of the planet, with most people emitting the aura of Peak F-grade. Of course, their levels weren't a surprise.

Peak F-grade was, by far, the most common level on most D-grade worlds. Nexus Crystals and Leveling Pills weren't too

expensive, and most people would pick non-combat classes that slowly pushed their level to the peak of F-grade in a decade or two.

But without Origin Dao to cram the Dao down your throat, the vast majority would be forever stuck at the most fundamental bottleneck of cultivation. The difference between these normal citizens was that the ones with money and a decent constitution could evolve their Race and live for 3 to 500 years.

The few who reached E-grade were either decently talented or had the money to splurge on a Dao Treasure or two to force a breakthrough. So even though Zac was emitting the energy signature of an unassuming early E-grade warrior who would barely be considered a cultivator, he still caught quite a few people throwing him jealous or longing looks as he walked the streets.

Zac continued for another hour before he reached a quiet neighborhood where most buildings had decent-sized courtyards or gardens surrounding their mansions. Following the map in his Information Crystal, he soon reached a manor consisting of five buildings with a walled-in garden of 20 thousand square meters or so.

It was a decent-sized plot of land which would be considered massive in any city before the integration. Even then, it was nothing compared to the mansions in the more affluent sectors that were cities unto their own. This was the kind of building a family with an E-grade cultivator and some foundations could afford, and it usually housed around five generations of a family.

Zac sent a wisp of Cosmic Energy into an array to announce his arrival, and the gate slowly swung up to showcase a young girl looking no more than six years old. She curiously looked up at Zac with confusion in her eyes, rapidly blinking her large as eyes though she was trying to remember who he was.

“I don’t know you?” the child eventually stated.

“No, you don’t. I have come for the skychime you’re selling,” Zac said.

“Oh! Come in,” the child said.

Zac nodded and walked inside, and the child arduously closed the gate behind them. However, they didn't get the chance to take more than a couple of steps before Zac sensed a vague pressure from the little girl.

“Not another step,” the child said, her aura rapidly climbing from nothing to past the limits of the E-grade.

The child was a genuine Hegemon.

“Now, who are you, for real this time?” the young girl asked with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I'm a friend of Calrin's. He should have told you I'm coming,” Zac smiled as he took out the token that would confirm his identity, not shocked at all by the scene. “Are you Triski?”

“So you're the one that thrifty bastard sent,” the child muttered as her skin started to change. “I was expecting one of our own.”

The next moment, it was not a small human child who stood in front of him, but rather an adult Sky Gnome. This was her true identity - a local information merchant. Or thief, depending on how slow business was at the moment. Calrin had managed to connect with Triski through some old channels of his clan a year after Zac left for Twilight Harbor, and she was the main source of the information the Thayer Consortia had gathered on the Void Gate, Salosar, and its subordinate planets.

“Well, it wasn't convenient,” Zac shrugged. “Do you have the report we ordered?”

“Here,” Triski said as she threw over an information crystal. “Ship manifest of the '*Lucent Dive*'. In total, there are 308 Half-Step D-grade Cultivators and 32 Early Hegemons onboard, almost all of them coming from Ymrid.”

Zac nodded in thanks as he scanned the contents. Ymrid was one of the closest major D-grade worlds and the nexus of a cluster of planets much like Salosar. It was close enough that even large commercial vessels could travel the distance within

a year if they spent enough energy, meaning there was a lot of travel between the two clusters.

“There is also a vessel coming in from Karbron in two weeks in case this one won’t do, and it’s a big one. Should be almost a thousand Half-Step Hegemons on that one and tens of thousands of E-grade cultivators, but I haven’t gotten my hands on their manifest yet.”

Two minutes later, Zac sighed with a shake of his head.

“Well, you can stay here if you want,” Triski shrugged and pointed at a building. “There is a cultivation cave beneath that structure. I’ll have the next manifest soon enough.”

Zac thanked the Sky Gnome again and entered the building, and he spent the next few days going over the reports and gossip Triski supplied him, for a fee. Finally, the gnome got her hands on the second manifest, and Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw that his chosen strategy would work.

“Gaun Sorom,” Zac said.

“Alright,” Triski smiled. “Do you want him to disappear?”

“No, I have something else in mind.”

Chapter 859: Gaun Sorom

Vilari walked down the clattering corridors, ignoring the insect warriors just as they ignored her. With a small mental nudge, she was functionally invisible to their gaze. It was a shame that her power was too low to allow for this kind of measure in the outer world – that way, she would have been able to walk alongside her father without causing him undue trouble.

Sometimes, she wondered, was being undead a blessing or a curse?

Admittedly, gaining sapience from the depths of death was a gift. Without Zachary's impartment, she would never have existed, and she would never have seen the marvels of the universe or touched upon the truths of the Heavens. But this was ultimately a world of the living – she was the aberration, no matter what the Undead Empire believed.

Was she bound to be relegated to a small corner of this vast world while her friends explored the vast beyond?

Or had she become greedy? She was not even ten years old, yet she had seen more than most Hegemons in this remote sector of the Multiverse. Traveling to another sector – that was something that even eluded most Monarchs.

She knew where these feelings stemmed from – the look of impatience in her father's eyes. The expectation when he spoke of Salosar and the Million Gates Territory. Compared to most Earthlings, and even her subordinates, he had become a true citizen of the Multiverse, someone who looked at the vaunted sky with hunger rather than fear.

He wasn't long for this place. Even if Earth was his home, it would only be the location where he would rest for a while before setting out again. At most, he would leave a clone here in the future, while his true self sailed further and further away. She was happy for him, but it also made her a bit lost.

Where did that leave her?

No matter if it was his cultivation speed or the life-attuned destinations he wanted to visit, she knew she wouldn't be able to keep up with him forever. Even a couple of decades was stretching it - she could sense that the time required to complete the next layer of [**Paean of Anguish**] would take her the better part of the next century.

Certainly, the stress and negative emotions this sort of situation brought forth were extremely conducive to the Soul Strengthening Technique she got from her master, but she would much rather solve the root of her turbulent emotions. The solution was right there, but it was complex in its simplicity.

She needed to find her own purpose.

Vilari knew she needed to find something more than just being a hanger-on swept up in the fate of Zachary Atwood, the Deviant Asura. She knew this was also what her father wanted for her, but she didn't even know where to start looking for something like that. Finding that spark that would drive someone to greatness in a world where most muddled along in a dream-like state. Who wouldn't want to find something like that?

Facilitating the unification of undead and living within her father's empire was a worthwhile goal, but that couldn't be considered a purpose. It was a task that would be dealt with soon enough. But what else was there? She did enjoy cultivation, but she knew she didn't have the same burning drive as Joanna.

Being born under the protective umbrella of her father, she had never been forced to awaken that all-consuming hunger that burned in the Valkyrie's heart. Of course, that kind of obsession was not the only path to power - for many, they would even become fetters. However, you needed *something* that kept you going when months turned to years, and the Dao became your only true companion across the long lonely eons.

Neither did the Undead Empire attract Vilari, in contrast to the desirous Raun spectrals. Visiting their domain would be

interesting, but it was not something she was ready to risk her life for.

Well, she had time. Ilvere often joked how she was not even a teenager yet, and it was true in a sense. Had she been born a human, she would not even start cultivating for another 7 years or so. Being too consumed with finding one's purpose might make her focus on the distant future so much that she missed the available paths right in front of her.

For now, she was happy enough furthering her father's goals, which apparently included dealing with rebellious ants and their attempts at possession.

Vilari tapped her foot on the floor, prompting a chasm into the depths of the hive to suddenly open up. However, her surroundings fluctuated as she unleashed bursts of mental energy, allowing her to gently descend by bouncing between the walls, rather than helplessly falling into the gastric acid below. A few minutes later Vilari stepped into the inner sanctum of the Ayn hive, where her target was sitting in silent meditation.

Seeing that her entrance had gone unnoticed, Vilari let out a small cough, prompting the young girl to swirl around in shock.

"Who are you! This is a restricted area," Lily exclaimed with wide eyes. "What- this energy! The rumors are true! There are zombies hidden within Port Atwood!"

"So they are, though we prefer to be called Revenants," Vilari smiled. "My name is Vilari Blackwood, and I have been sent here by Lord Atwood. What shall I call you?"

"If you're really sent by Lord Atwood, you should already know my name," Lily frowned as she slightly repositioned herself to guard the small pillar behind her – the core of the adolescent Hivequeen.

"There is no need for games, child," Vilari said with a shake of her head. "We have known about your situation for some time now. I was sent to confirm the details. Just going by the mental

fluctuations, I have a decent idea, but I hope you can clarify some things for me. How far has your fusion gone?”

Lily’s eyes widened in alarm, and the whole chamber suddenly shook as powerful mental fluctuations started radiating from both the beastmaster and the Hivequeen’s Core. However, Vilari smiled as the massive eye appeared in the air above her, its emotionless stare crushing the duo’s assault before it could begin.

Cracks spread across the small pillar, and blood started running down Lily’s nose and ears as she rolled around on the floor screaming.

“One last try,” Vilari said. “The Lord feels regretful about how things ended for this poor girl, and he wanted me to solve this situation without bloodshed if possible. I don’t carry those limiting emotions. If you can’t convince me that you’re not a threat to Lord Atwood or his subjects, I will incinerate your soul before he returns.”

“If you kill me, she dies as well,” Lily slowly said as she crawled to her feet, the cadence of her voice suddenly changed.

“Then that would be her fate. She wouldn’t be the first to fall in the service of the Atwood Empire, and she won’t be the last,” Vilari said with equanimity. “But you still have a way out. Relinquish control of the girl and form a proper contract. Your children will become warriors for the Atwood Empire, and you will be provided the resources to continue your growth.”

“Join that man? He killed my mother, killed thousands of our children,” Lily growled. “All that suffering – for nothing?”

“Suffering is Heavenly Law,” Vilari said. “Your hive was transported here by the Heavens, and the situation only allowed for one victor. The Lord has already been magnanimous to let you live on after your mother’s attack – I doubt your mother would have been so benevolent. But our patience is running thin. Now, make your choice.”

Having some stranger killed just to achieve his plan didn't sit right with Zac, at least not with a target like Gaun Sorom. If it had been an unorthodox cultivator who had committed numerous atrocities, it would be a different story, but Gaun Sorom was just a normal Wandering Cultivator who fit Zac's requirements.

Gaun had been active for over 500 years in this neighborhood of the Zecia Sector, though he originated in some place called the Tumbling Sky Cluster, named after the local overlord - the Tumbling Sky Sect. He had been staying in Karbron over the past 10 years and had now chosen to head to Salosar to join the fight against the Beast Tide.

Little was known about his combat style as he preferred to look for opportunities alone in the wilderness, but his weapon of choice was an axe. Add to that, he was primarily human with only a small hint of orc in his heritage. There were some small discrepancies, but Gaun ticked off most of Zac's checkboxes for his main plan - to borrow a local's identity for the beast tide.

Zac had some backup plans, no matter if his meeting with Triski fell through or if there were no suitable targets, but this one felt like it had the best odds of him coming and going without causing any waves. He wasn't in any mood for another cataclysmic event like the Twilight Harbor this time around. Zac just wanted the Ferric Worldeater so he could get his ship. Unfortunately, Zac had started to wonder if that was a fool's hope over the past days as he waited for Triski to get the second manifest.

Fate was gathering.

It was still nothing compared to what he felt when that burning golem attacked the Orom, but he could somewhat feel that something was slowly building. Seeing as the Beast Tide was the only big thing going on in the area, it was a reasonable assumption it was the source of the feeling. Things were not as simple as they seemed, and he was afraid he'd get dragged into something big if he contacted Leyara Lioress.

“Do you have any idea on how to get a private face-to-face with him without anyone noticing, including himself?” Zac asked.

“The next batch of mercenaries will be ferried over to Salsoar Prime five days after Gaun arrives on this planet,” Triski said. “I can try to arrange something depending on where he’ll end up staying, but it will cost some money in bribes.”

Zac only snorted and transferred 3 D-grade Nexus Coins, which almost made Triski’s eyes pop out of her head. “I expect there’ll be no hindrances?”

“Of course,” Triski eagerly nodded. “With this kind of money, there will be no problems even if you kill him on an open street.”

Three days later, a hooded Zac stood waiting at a servant’s gate outside a walled-in forest protected by a barrier that shimmered like starlight. Inside were hundreds of mansions for rent, targeted at visiting guests of a certain dignity. Soon enough the gate soundlessly swung open, and Zac stepped inside.

“The pattern,” the young woman whispered as she handed over a small parchment and a token. Zac looked it over for a few seconds before nodding, and it spontaneously combusted a moment later.

With that, the servant girl scurried away, eager to be far away from whatever would happen next. Zac only shook his head with a smile before making the adjustments on a nearby teleportation array, finalizing the process by socketing the array with the key.

With a flash, his surroundings changed, and Zac found himself in the middle of a secluded courtyard.

The pattern was actually the solution to the supposedly personalized array. When new guests checked in at this particular resort, they would be able to modify a certain part of the barrier, almost like setting a pin-code, so that not even the residence employees would be able to teleport inside. Yet there

were clearly backdoors built into the system, backdoors that would open for whoever had enough cash.

If Yrial had shown him some of the dangers lurking in the dark for wandering cultivators, then Triski had broadened his knowledge even further. You could never trust the means and motives of outsiders - you needed to depend on yourself. And clearly, Gaun was quite conscious of this universal truth.

Dozens of roots suddenly appeared from the ground, all of them trying to ensnare Zac and seal his movements.

Meanwhile, a hooded being shot toward him with a snarl, the ferocious axe in his hands already shuddering with what seemed to be two braided Peak Fragments. Zac inwardly smiled, feeling that Gaun's aura was just the right strength - around 60% of his own.

That way, Zac would be able to impersonate the wandering cultivator while hiding a good chunk of his true power.

Zac subtly shifted his position with a couple of seemingly simple steps, utilizing his understanding of Armaments to avoid the roots gunning for him. Simultaneously, a spare axe appeared in his hand, and Zac prepared to crush Gaun's assault head-on to end the fight early.

However, a scream of danger made him urgently scramble out of the way, but the roots which had appeared to be a simple restrictive array suddenly lit up with esoteric patterns while their speed more than doubled. The incoming figure of Gaun was slowly dissipating as well - it was an extremely lifelike illusion.

The real Gaun was already behind Zac, the edge of the cultivator's axe falling toward his skull. It was quick, efficient, and ruthless - showcasing the strength and experience of someone who had walked the rivers and lakes for the better half of a millennium.

No longer underestimating the Wandering Cultivator, Zac flooded the fractal on the back of his head with Cosmic Energy, the Branch of the Kalpataru, and a small amount of Void Energy. In an instant, a laurel crown of golden leaves

appeared on Zac's head while the whole courtyard turned golden.

The ground was gold, the sky was gold - the world was drowned in empyrean splendor. Two pillars, each one studded with a thick stele with inscrutable characters had appeared as well, but it was clear to anyone with eyes they listed some sort of supreme edicts.

The scene was magical, almost making Zac believe he had been transported to some sort of celestial court, but it didn't change the fact that Gaun's axe was almost upon him. However, Zac wasn't worried in the slightest as his own axe ripped through the roots around him rather than moving to intercept.

As planned, the attack was stopped just a few decimeters from his head, with a shimmering golden barrier having appeared to block out the strike.

The shield rippled a bit, but it held against a mighty swing of a Half-Step Hegemon who had infused their weapon with two Dao Fragments, proving that being classified as a Peak-quality skill wasn't just for show. The barrier even nullified the shockwave that would normally turn the interiors of the courtyard to shreds, though that also spared Gaun from any counterforce.

However, just as the Wandering Cultivator was about to launch a follow-up strike, he suddenly groaned and stumbled with shock evident in his eyes.

This was the true form of [**Empyrean Aegis**], the new defensive skill he had received at level 125. The first part was the basic ability of any proper defensive skill - a barrier. The golden barriers of Zac's skill would both activate automatically or on command, and he could currently have two of them active at one time. The only slightly unusual feature of the feature was that it seemed to be based on a mix of both his Vitality and Endurance, rather than just Endurance.

The second half of the skill was a bit more unique - the whole area drowned in gold had become part of a powerful defensive domain. If Gaun had simply stood unmoving, the skill

wouldn't have affected him at all. But the moment one started rotating Cosmic Energy, they would suddenly get pushed down by a terrifying pressure while their energy circulation would be disrupted.

It was like the Heavens themselves were punishing any action against Zac, becoming his personal protector.

The effect was even better than Zac had expected. He had only tried the skill while restricted before, and it was great news that it had such an obvious effect even on Half-Step Hegemons. With Gaun almost falling over, the skill should be able to affect even true Hegemons to some degree. It might only provide a small delay before they crashed through the interference, but a small delay could change the tides of a battle.

The skill represented an interesting facet of the Dao of Life - the facet many equated with divinity. Life was the fount of all beings, so going against its will was to go against the universe itself. The concept didn't exactly mesh with Zac's own comprehension of the Dao, but that didn't really matter. If anything, it shored up a weakness in his own understanding.

Zac wanted to seize the opportunity the skill had provided so he stepped forward, but an amulet around Gaun's neck cracked and conjured a barrier. The defensive treasure seemed to be Early D-grade, but its quality was extremely low as to allow for a Half-Step Hegemon to activate it.

"I just want to talk," Zac urged, but Gaun wasn't listening.

Zac could understand the sentiment - how could the man trust someone suddenly sneaking into his courtyard at night? Zac needed to defeat him first. That would both prove he wasn't after his wealth or his head, and allow him to negotiate from a position of power.

Another swarm of roots suddenly crashed through the ground as Gaun scrambled to his feet, but they didn't target Zac. Instead, they tried to take down the two pillars who the cultivator, correctly, assumed was the source of the restrictive domain. The roots were ferocious, and some small cracks started to appear on the pillars.

However, Zac didn't care. They were more durable than they looked, and they were actively being repaired by his Dao Branch. They would last long enough for him to accomplish his goal - and the air screamed as his axe slammed into Gaun's barrier. Just the first swing was enough to cause small cracks, and a second one was following right on the first's heels.

"Wha-" Gaun grunted as he stumbled again, but Zac noticed how it was a feint - the man's hand was already moving toward the Cosmos Sack on his waist.

Zac snorted and unleashed his [**Spiritual Void**], its boost allowing him to immediately crash through the faltering barrier. With an inscrutable step infused with his Evolutionary Stace, he passed through the chaotic energies, appearing right in front of the wandering cultivator. The thing Gaun took out was actually an escape talisman rather than an offensive treasure, choosing survival over mutual destruction.

But he was too slow - Vivi's vines had already rushed forward the moment the barrier cracked, and Gaun suddenly found himself bound by Branch-infused vines, making any attempt at teleportation impossible.

"Now, are you ready to talk?" Zac smiled as he placed the edge of his axe against Gaun's throat.

"Uh, nice to meet you," Gaun said with a reluctant smile.
"How can I be of service?"

Chapter 860: Into the Void

Pretty Peak walked down the engraved hallways, her foul mood not improved at all by the chance of seeing the insides of the newly-built and exceedingly expensive War Fortress.

Just what was going on?

Months spent on pushing deeper into the Million Gates Territory, only to be called back before she could even begin her search. The only reason she didn't find that damned Commander was that she was pretty sure it wasn't he who had ordered her vessel back - it had to be from someone in her family. But why would her elders send her back just as she was approaching the area where her cousin and uncle delved into? It was her father who told her to join the scouting vessel and look around for clues.

Soon enough, she reached the inner chambers she had been instructed to report to, and Pretty cracked her neck before equipping her bracers. There was only one person who could rescind the orders of Strongest peak, and if he was inside this room, then she was about to be attacked.

The doors swung open, and a cascading wave of killing intent immediately pushed Pretty back a few steps before she managed to regain her footing. She activated [**Unflinching**], and the world turned red as sanguine runes appeared over her bare arms. Space bulged inward as she unleashed a punch, and the killing intent was pushed aside as she rushed into the room.

However, just as she entered, a pang of danger warned her that she wasn't out of the woods just yet. Space cracked as a projectile flew at her, but she didn't flinch at all. Her hand turned into a claw as she swiped at the incoming projectile, creating four gashes in space that collided with the attack.

She didn't use a skill, but the swipe was infused with the Branch of the Headsman and her frustration, and it barely managed to break through the thin film of energy surrounding the apple that had been flung in her direction.

"Not bad, lass," a rumbling laugh echoed through the hallway. "Have you decided on a name?"

"Not yet," Pretty sighed as she deactivated her battle stance.

As expected, it was her grandfather who had called for her, but she froze in surprise upon seeing a familiar yet foreign figure sitting next to him, playing with a nasty-looking scimitar – her grandmother. Not only that, but her aura was extremely condensed, which could only mean one thing – she had finally become a Monarch.

Was this why she had been recalled? Because Kantaja Peak had finally left seclusion after 1,800 years?

"Hello, child," she smiled. "It's nice to finally get to meet you."

"Greetings, grandmother," Pretty said as she bowed deeply. "Congratul-"

She didn't get any further as a white blur shot up between the mats, aimed right at her forehead. There had been no energy fluctuation and no warning from her Danger Sense, and even Pretty found herself frazzled as her bow turned into a swirl that barely allowed her to move the bracer on her left hand to block.

A sharp twang echoed out as Pretty was launched into the air, slamming into the ceiling above. She felt her organs shift, but she could only push through the pain as she launched off from the ceiling and landed in a combat position, ready to take on any follow-up attacks. There was thankfully none forthcoming, but Pretty obviously wouldn't relax in front of her grandpa.

Or her grandmother, for that matter, considering her reputation was even worse.

"The sixth generation seems promising," Kantaja nodded before she turned to her husband. "But they're still a bit soft."

Have you given up on your child-rearing plan? Or is it my three useless sons who aren't following the precepts?"

"Well, a little bit of both, I guess?" Ultimate laughed. "I was bored so I tried a few new things. In either case, the war will help toughen them up."

Pretty couldn't help but feel some annoyance at the discussion as she extracted the projectile - a strand of hair - from her bracer. Her father had essentially tortured her since she was two, including throwing her into a wild mystic realm before she had even started cultivating. How was that being soft? But she could only swallow any complaints lest the Kantaja showed her why she was known as the Knuckle Butcher, one of the most feared assassins in the Allbright Empire.

Most assassins used stealth and planning to execute their plan, but Kantaja instead sent a letter to the target that she'd kill them within the year, and then she bulldozed all the resistance the target erected. If they fled, she searched for their location by uprooting any holdings of theirs like a walking hurricane. Unsurprisingly, most of her assassinations ended with thousands of dead and massive structural damage.

The only reason she hadn't been was a mix of shamelessness and Ultimate Peak's influence. Whenever Kantaja killed people she put up her hair in a certain braid and called herself Tankaja instead of Kantaja, insisting that the assassin was a completely different person. With the Peak Family backing her, no one ever dared call her on her claims.

Thankfully, Kantaja only targeted unorthodox cultivators and those who were suspected of having dealings with the enemies of the Allbright Empire, which was why the imperial clan mostly looked the other way. Even then, Pretty had heard rumors that her grandmother entering terminal seclusion wasn't just because she was getting close to forming an inner world.

She had been a bit too overbearing while searching for some answer to her Path of Butchery, and even the Peak Family started to find it hard to bear the weight of her actions. Pretty wondered what kind of reaction her emergence as a new

Monarch would elicit back in the Empyrean Sector. Most likely, they were praying that she'd get herself killed in the war.

Not even Pretty dared imagine what kind of trouble her grandmother would kick up now that she had ascended to C-grade, though it was a relief to see a fourth Monarch having appeared in the clan in addition to grandfather, granduncle, and her father. Each one was a strategic resource, and they would need every bit of power they could get in the upcoming war.

"How are things in the Million Gates Territory?" Ultimate Peak asked. "Killed any of those bastard yet?"

"More than I expected. The Landing has been erected," Pretty sighed. "The number of invaders has increased tenfold over the past year, and some have even been spotted in the sixth band. Almost all of the scouting units are led by Hegemons by now."

"Sixth band, still some time then," Kantaja muttered as she stabbed the scimitar into the ground a few times. "It's too far. I was hoping there would be some people nearby."

"Is this why you asked me to return?" Pretty hesitated. "I still haven't found any clues of Average or Uncle Greatest."

"Your uncle returned a month ago," Ultimate sighed. "He is currently in stasis."

"What!" Pretty exclaimed, but her shock quickly turned to pain as another strand of hair pierced straight through her gut, prompting a fountain of blood to splatter across the floor.

"Never lose your vigilance, you little runt," Kantaja laughed.

"Thank you for the lesson," Pretty coughed as she ate a healing pill. "Is my cousin fine?"

"The fate of Average is still unknown, though his Life Candle is still burning strong," Ultimate said with a shake of his head. "Greatest encountered something while hunting for leaders of these Kan'Tanu invaders. They had set up camp at an uncharted world for some unknown reason. While Average

launched a raid on the surface, something suddenly emitted an extremely powerful energy.

“Our vessel, along with most of my son’s squad, were instantly annihilated as cracks in reality spread for millions of miles. Hearing the description, it is most likely the source of those powerful fluctuations we could sense all the way in the Red Sector back then. Greatest managed to save some of his subordinates by opening a path back from the Void, but by the time he emerged, the planet was gone.”

“If the planet was destroyed, then Average,” Pretty hesitated.

“It wasn’t destroyed from what Greatest could tell,” Ultimate said. “It disappeared.”

“The whole planet was moved?”

“No,” Ultimate said. “That planet was too big, not even a late Monarch would be able to take it away. Besides, the energy was different to anything they had encountered from the invaders so far.”

“But little Great said he did somewhat recognize it,” Kantaja added. “He believed it was related to the Limitless Empire.”

“And you just so happen to know someone with insight into that matter,” Ultimate added. “Someone whose master just so happens to be the most powerful Spatial Cultivator in the Zecia Sector who can make sense of this mess. We need to get to the bottom of this. For one, it’s our best chance to find Average. Furthermore, if there are powerful relics appearing in the depths of the Million Gates Territory, they can’t be allowed to fall into the hands of the invaders.”

“Grandfather wants me to go to the Void Gate?” Pretty Peak asked.

She didn’t ask why they didn’t go in person – there was no need. Ultimate had killed no less than five promising Void Templars on one of his Rampages at the edge of the Zecia Sector. Each one had been a prospect for Monarchy, and if not for the Allbright Emperor interceding, the Void Priestess might have hunted him down over a hundred thousand years ago.

“How about Clever? Clever Peak doesn’t sound too bad?” Ultimate grinned. “Your flight to the teleporter at Chaos Landing leaves tomorrow. The Space Gate Guild will ferry you over. It’s good timing as well. Something odd is going on over there as well. Try to figure out what’s going on. Back when the Void Gate appeared in the Zecia sector, there were rumors they had connections to some outside force. Now, millions of years have passed and people have mostly forgotten, but it might be relevant now.”

“Something odd is going on in the Void Gate as well?” Pretty asked with surprise.

“Lots of that going around since I emerged,” Kantaja smiled. “Looks like I broke through at just the right time.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not interested in your life or your possessions,” Zac said as he slowly took away his axe from Gaun’s throat.

However, he didn’t release Vivi’s bindings, since that would allow the wandering cultivator to escape. Zac also erected a series arrays around them, making sure that the proprietor of this place wouldn’t be able to spy on the conversation. Of course, this wasn’t his only assurance. Triski had been paid handsomely to keep the Peak E-grade proprietor company during this meeting, to make sure he didn’t have a sudden change of heart.

“If you’re friendly, why appear in my courtyard in the middle of the night?” Galau muttered with discontent, but Zac was relieved to see he stowed away the Escape Talisman. “Thought you were an assassin. Could’ve just sent a letter.”

“There’s someone who’d be willing to go through all this trouble just to assassinate you?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“Somone as handsome as me is bound to make an enemy or two,” Gaun shrugged. “While I always act aboveboard, sometimes the competition for resources gets heated. Now, may I ask who you are and what kind of business you have?”

“My name isn’t important,” Zac smiled. “And I’ll make it brief. We want your identity. Name your price.”

“My identity? Why should I believe that? I’m just a Wandering Cultivator, my identity is worth noth-“ Gaun snorted, but he suddenly froze as he looked at Zac with hesitation. “You’re an outsider?”

“It seems you understand the situation,” Zac nodded. “We can make it worth your time.”

Gaun hesitated for a few seconds.

“I don’t want to know why you want the identity of a known person in this cluster, but it cannot possibly bode well for me,” Gaun slowly said. “This is the Void Gate we’re talking about. If you or whatever organization behind you cause havoc under my name, how will I eke out a living? And what’s to stop you people from silencing me?”

“If my boss wanted you dead they would have sent an assassin instead of me,” Zac shrugged. “We’re not some sinister cabal. A certain individual simply wants us to enter the territory of the Void Gate and look around. I can tell you this much, it is not some simple Beast Tide they’re dealing with. You might be better off not going in either case.”

“No need to tell me more,” Gaun exhorted. “The less I know the better.”

“So, you agree?”

“Well, on a few conditions,” Gaun said. “First of all, you need to take me away from the Void Gate’s sphere of influence, even if you’re saying you won’t cause any trouble. It shouldn’t be too hard since you’re an outsider, right?”

Zac only smiled as he took out a box full of Teleportation Tokens, prompting Gaun’s eyes to turn to a needlepoint as he drew a sharp breath. Zac could understand what Gaun was thinking – only someone with an extremely powerful background could take out so many different tokens.

Truthfully, less than a third were actual Teleportation Tokens. The rest were the Fate Tokens he had collected inside the Orom World. They emitted almost an identical sort of energy

though, so Zac had thrown them in with his leftover tokens to make himself and his fake boss seem more impressive.

“We can send you to all kinds of places. No C-grade continents though. Your identity isn’t worth that much,” Zac said.

“A- Alright,” Gaun said, clearly a bit shaken by the scene. “Secondly, I want fifty- one hundred D-grade Nexus Coins to get myself set up and replace my Lifewarding Treasure.”

“That thing can’t have cost more than one or two D-Grade Nexus Coins,” Zac snorted. “It wouldn’t be able to block more than one strike of an early Hegemon.”

“Still, you should know the difficulties of being an outsider on a new world, money will be needed for all kinds of-”

“Twenty-five D-grade Nexus Coins, not one more,” Zac countered.

“Ai... Fine,” Gaun sighed, but Zac could see how his eyes were practically radiating from the sudden windfall.

Twenty-five D-grade Nexus Coins might not be much for a Hegemon from an established faction, but for a Wandering Cultivator in the Zecia Sector? It was no doubt way more than Gaun had ever held at one time - most Wandering Cultivators were flat broke. Even if they occasionally made decent money exploring Mystic Realms or the wilderness on larger planets, they would be forced to spend it all on cultivation resources and various fees to the local overlords soon enough, making it nigh impossible to accumulate a fortune.

Seeing as they had reached an accord, Zac took out his prepared contract, only adding the two rewards to the settlement. It was quite simple. Gaun would get the rewards, and in return, he wouldn’t be allowed to use his own identity or return to this area of Zecia for the next five years. In addition, there was a clause of confidentiality from both sides.

Honestly, it wouldn’t be impossible for Gaun to break this contract, but it would require the help of a decently powerful Hegemon. And Gaun would hopefully not dare do something

like that since it might anger some unknown force who would know where to find him.

“Why does it feel like I’m selling myself?” Gaun sighed as he imprinted his energy onto the contract.

“Well, consider it a testament to your reputation that someone wants your identity,” Zac smiled as he handed Gaun a cloak with the same kind of function as his own-attention averting treasure. “Now, come with me. I need to learn some things that are not covered in the missives.”

The wandering cultivator wordlessly nodded, and the two teleported back to the side gate from where Zac led Gaun to a mansion he had rented. There, Zac spent the better part of a day going over Gaun’s background, mannerisms, contacts in the area, so that his disguise wouldn’t be exposed the moment he stepped onto the recruitment station.

Finally, Zac had everything he needed, and the two sat in front of each other in the courtyard. However, Gaun had now taken on another face. His skill was much worse than **[Million Faces]**, but it was good enough for a quick trip to the Teleportation Station. Meanwhile, Zac looked almost exactly like Gaun had before. Looking into the mirror, couldn’t help but marvel at his own handiwork.

His previous attempts at subterfuge had varied from unsuccessful to downright disasters, but Zac felt that he might actually have a shot this time around.

Chapter 861: Mission Compound

“So creepy,” Gaun muttered as he looked at Zac testing various expressions with his disguise.

“Well, it’s your face,” Zac laughed.

Having spent the past day in what could almost be considered a bonding session the two had gotten a bit closer, even if Gaun had been the only one providing information. The wandering cultivator occasionally tried to pry into Zac’s background a few times, but he had mostly kept his thoughts to himself.

Luckily, Gaun had almost been the perfect target for infiltration. He didn’t know anyone in the Salosar Cluster, apart from some surface-level-connections to people at his level. It was the same with Karbron as well. Just like the missive said, he had only been there for ten years. What the missive didn’t mention was that he had spent most of those years recuperating from wounds he had gotten after losing the struggle for a treasure in the wild.

He did mention a few of his acquaintances that might appear in the area because of the Beast Tide, but it would take another two years at the least before the first ships from the Tumbling Sky Cluster reached Salosar. By then, he should be long gone.

“Alright, it’s time to go,” Zac eventually said. “Do you have any preferred area of the Zecia Sector you wish to teleport to, or do you want me to send you to a random D-grade world?”

“If possible, I want to be sent as close to the Allbright Empire as possible. But not the Red Sector of the empire,” Gaun said without hesitation, clearly prepared for the question.

Zac looked at the Wandering Cultivator with surprise. The fact that Gaun wanted to travel to the Allbright Empire wasn’t too

surprising since it was one of the most flourishing parts of the sector. Only a few factions, like the Dravorak Dynasty, were slightly more powerful, but the Albright Empire was considered more accommodating to wandering cultivators.

However, the fact that he specifically mentioned the Red Sector, the area of the Allbright Empire that bordered the edge of Zecia and the Million Gates Territory, indicated he knew about what was going on over there. Someone like Gaun was unlikely to know about the war already considering how much Zac had spent on that kind of intelligence, even if some murmurs had started to spread.

Zac knew all kinds of details, but that was only because he got an early warning on the Bloodwind World and spent dozens of D-grade Nexus Coins on intelligence reports. It was obviously impossible for a wandering cultivator to do the same.

Even more baffling was that Gaun specifically wanted to avoid the Red Sector, even though the big factions over there were screaming for manpower for everything from building War Fortresses to joining Mercenary Squads. Gaun was obviously not afraid of danger since he had been planning on joining the Beast Tide, so why shy away from that?

“You know about the changes in Zecia?” Zac ventured to make sure.

“I was lucky enough to learn a thing or two while I recuperated. I’ve worked as a private guard for one of their researchers the past couple of years,” Gaun nodded. “I know war is coming. A big one.”

“If you know, why not the Red Sector?” Zac asked, not able to quell his curiosity. “That would allow you to join the war effort earlier, which will have all kinds of benefits.”

“How can there be such a good thing?” Gaun snorted. “I’m not sure you understand the plight of a wandering cultivator. I barely have the resources to work on my cultivation, let alone the resources needed to travel deep into that weird chaotic area and hunt for opportunities. Even if I manage to join a crew, what role would I get as a stranger in a chaotic place like that?”

Zac immediately understood the problem. The answer wasn't hard to guess – those people would end up as meat shields.

“It's better to spend the next few years in the Albright Empire, looking for opportunities to join established factions as a captain or some sort of bodyguard to their young. With war coming up, the requirements for recruitment should have gone down in the other sectors of the empire as well. It should be possible to sign decent temporary contracts.

“The local factions of the empire should still be among the first to be dragged into whatever's going on, and I will get my opportunities sooner or later. And even if I'm still an outsider, I stand better chances of surviving as part of a large organized force compared to some frontier Mercenary Squad.”

Zac looked at Gaun with interest, a bit surprised how quickly and meticulously he had formed a plan for himself after seeing the teleportation tokens. This kind of shrewd thinking was nothing like the short description in the missive, which rather portrayed the axe wielder as some sort of gruff barbarian that was hard to reason with.

Gaun's plan even showed a possible path for the Atwood Empire. Why not do the same as Gaun, though from the opposite side? If Zac could snag a couple of experienced Half-Step Hegemons with a good reputation, he could vastly improve the foundations of his army. His army's resources were unsurpassed for their level, but they lacked hardened veterans who could act as the core of individual squads.

Meanwhile, some Half-Step Hegemons wouldn't be powerful enough to usurp his position or cause any havoc on Earth.

“Interesting. It looks our reports misjudged you. I'll send you to the Lucent Dream Sector of the Albright Empire. It's almost as far from the Red Sector as you can get, so it should suit your plan,” Zac smiled.

“Really? You'll really send me to a proper empire?” Gaun exclaimed, his eyes wide. However, his excitement quickly turned to suspicion. “What's the catch?”

“No catch,” Zac said. “Except you will have to figure out your background on your own. And the planet you’ll arrive at is just early D-grade.”

He had just the thing – Galau’s token to his hometown. After being tricked by Catheya in Twilight Harbor, Zac had already confirmed with both Heda and Pavina that his remaining tokens were free from any tracking measures. More than half had some rudimentary measures in place, but they had been easily resolved by the two Monarchs, even if they were restrained.

Meanwhile, Zac already had access to no less than 100 teleportation locations in the Lucent Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire, so he had no use for the token any longer. Zac was happy to send Gaun there. He wouldn’t be hard to track down later, and he’d make a good informant.

Triski had proved just how useful local contacts could be, and it was about time he and Calrin started setting up a proper network, turning the lies about his organization’s reach into reality.

“I’ll just say I got a token from a quest and decided to shed my past,” Gaun shrugged. “It’s common enough. Such a flaky background will bar me from any higher positions, but it’s not like I’d get those in either case. As for the grade of the world, it doesn’t matter. I hear the planets are a lot closer in the established empires compared to the rest of Zecia. It shouldn’t be impossible to get proper citizenship and travel after contributing to the war efforts.”

“Alright then, let’s go,” Zac nodded as his face changed to a random template.

The two made their way toward the very same tower Zac arrived inside, where Zac pretended he was an attendant who kept Gaun company. Soon enough, the tower loomed in the distance, and Zac surreptitiously handed Gaun an information crystal.

“If you find that the opportunities in the Allbright Empire are not up to your expectations, you can try contacting us through this method,” Zac said before handing him a crystal. “It’s not

my place to promise anything, but we are always on the lookout for people who can help us in various ways.”

“But I guess you still won’t tell me who ‘you’ are?” Gaun asked.

“No,” Zac smiled.

Gaun slowly nodded, but he did take the information crystal containing a method to send a message to the Thayer Consortia through a series of proxies. He didn’t immediately resume their walk toward the teleportation station though, but rather leaned in a bit closer.

“I have a feud, with a true Hegemon. He calls himself Ulavo, but it’s an alias he uses when traveling. His true identity is an outer elder of the Tumbling Sky Sect, though I don’t know his name,” Gaun whispered. “He uses his Ulavo identity to do things that would reflect poorly on an orthodox sect. I accidentally found out about it when I saw him kill one of his own sect nephews over a treasure. I hear he might be joining this event as well. Be careful.”

“Why didn’t you mention that before?”

“I was afraid you’d rescind your offer,” Gaun coughed as he scratched his chin with some embarrassment. “This is a huge opportunity for me. But since you treated me with sincerity, I ought to do the same.”

“Well, it’s no problem,” Zac shrugged. “If this Ulavo tries anything, he’ll just become another casualty in the beast tide.”

Zac wasn’t surprised Gaun had some enmities – who didn’t after a couple of decades of cultivation? He’d already expected as much after learning about his reason for moving to Karbron. And Gaun’s suspicions were true – there was an Ulavo on the manifest of the very same ship as Gaun arrived on, though they traveled in different class compartments.

But seeing as it was some random outer elder of a small local Sect, Zac didn’t care. The Tumbling Sky Sect was just another D-grade force semi-attached to the Void Gate like Salosar. Someone like that didn’t have nearly the kind of pull needed to

cause any waves in this place, and neither did he have the strength to pose any threat to him.

Zac followed Gaun to the teleportation array to personally witness Gaun use his token and flash away. After having confirmed that Gaun had really left, Zac returned to his courtyard where he spent the next few days listening for any news of Gaun somehow managing to betray him. However, Zac felt it unlikely.

It was just like Gaun said - moving to the Allbright Empire was a huge opportunity for him, and forcibly breaking the contract would definitely cost many times more than the reward he could get for selling the information that some unknown entity had bought his identity. Gaun returning to the Tumbling Sky Cluster was even less likely, if his enmity with Ulavo was to be believed.

So as expected, there weren't any issues when Zac set out five days later, joining a stream of wandering cultivators who were ferried over to Salosar Prime by locals in exchange for a nominal fee. Together with tens of thousands of others who intended to answer the Void Gate's call, Zac made his way toward the city-sized recruitment station.

Soon enough, they could see an enormous shimmering barrier in the distance, obscuring what was going on inside. Outside, a physical wall had been erected, which appeared to be guarded by real members of the Void Gate.

With the Void Gate being a monastic faction, their members were mainly divided into two groups – templars and devotees. The Void Templars was a highly trained army geared toward the same type of warrior classes most factions used, though they had their own heritage and subclasses. It was this faction who most commonly left the domains of the Void Gate, seeking experience through battle all over the sector.

The monks and nuns of the devotees were more diverse according to what Zac had gathered, but the details were quite sparse since they rarely left the monasteries. However, the devotees who traveled with the templar armies as spiritual

support often had non-combat classes such as healers or supportive classes like array masters or augmenters.

The hundreds of entrances to the recruitment station were unsurprisingly manned by squads of templars, each one of them at the peak of E-grade with very impressive accumulations for a common soldier. In front of every entrance, a large scroll hovered in the air, and it was the first time Zac had seen such large-scale use of System-backed contracts.

Zac had recently gained access to a slew of new features thanks to his nobility being upgraded, but he knew he wouldn't be able to copy this type of method.

“Welcome. You need to sign a Confidentiality Clause to enter the building and learn the details of the mission,” the young templar said as Zac approached, his face an impassive mask as he pointed at the contract hovering in the air.

His demeanor did not contain a shred of the cordiality Zac received upon first arriving at Salosar Seven, even if Zac currently exuded the aura of a Half-Step Hegemon. Then again, the young warrior had probably said the same thing thousands of times the past months, so his bored demeanor wasn't a surprise.

But more importantly, this was the difference proper backing did - even if Zac hadn't entered through the entrances meant for unattached cultivators, he would still have easily been pegged as one by the gear he was currently wearing to impersonate Gaun.

“Alright,” Zac nodded and infused a wisp of Cosmic Energy onto the contract after confirming the terms were the same as what was described in the missives.

Thankfully, the contract and its clauses were identical to the one he had gotten through a missive, making things easy. The contract simply said that Zac could not divulge anything he learned inside the recruitment station for the next five years. In return, he'd be able to get some nominal resources that wouldn't amount to much for anyone beyond early E-grade.

The remuneration was just there to make it a binding contract in the eyes of the System, where a quid-pro-quo was a demanded. The real payout would come from the actual beast tide rather than this particular contract. But while the reward wasn't very impressive, the counter-party to the contract was.

The Starfall Monarch.

The Starfall Monarch, or Keon Dakess as his real name was, was one of the most powerful templars of the Void Gate. Altogether, it was estimated the Void Gate had around ten Monarchs, with the Void Priestess being by far the far strongest one. But the others were nothing to scoff at, and the few who had made an appearance in the outer world had performed impressive feats that left a lasting mark.

And since Keon Dakess was the other party to the contract, it meant he was probably somewhere inside the enormous recruitment station – it was no wonder everyone was on their best behavior. Unfortunately, there was not much else to be gleaned from the contract. It didn't have any other clauses except the non-disclosure agreement, and the only hints of what was going on were listed on large plaques between the entrances

Essentially, they were recruiting everyone from Middle E-grade and up, including supportive non-combat classes. The recruits would be able to choose missions based on the Void Gate's estimate of enemies, timeframe, and danger. However, the Void Gate took no responsibility in cases the challenge would prove harder than expected.

Their only accommodation was the promise that all units and all missions would consist of at least half their own people, which hopefully meant they weren't planning on using the outsiders as cannon fodder in some sort of human wave tactics against the tide.

Since nothing was out of place, Zac signed the contract and picked up the goodie bag with the resources provided. However, he immediately dropped it off at another table as he walked further inside, just like most of the warriors above

High E-grade did. Zac didn't think the items had been tampered with, but he simply did not need the things inside.

A small sign said that all resources returned would be provided to young cultivators who studied at the Void Gate's public schools throughout the area. Zac had already heard of those places before. They were simple schools that taught anyone willing to listen the basics of cultivation. They also had things like gathering arrays and gravity arrays to help set a foundation.

Not only that, but all students who visited would get provided food and a small stipend, which was a big attraction to the less fortunate. Therefore, these schools almost acted as orphanages for children who were down on their luck for one reason or another.

Part of the motive behind these establishments was simply to help the less fortunate, but there was a practical reason behind it as well. It was a cheap method to look for diamonds in the rough, and the Void Gate often recruited from these public schools. Secondly, it was to breed positive karma.

Karma was elusive and intangible, but it was an absolutely real concept in the Multiverse. And even if you didn't believe that the universe would reward you for good deeds, there was still the System to consider. With the Void Gate helping it with its prime directive - raising warriors - the System would help out in various ways in return.

It could be things like the talents getting more attention and better quests, Mystic Realms finding their way to their domains, to lessening the severity of the manmade tribulations the System liked to launch at established factions. Thus, these kinds of schools were quite widespread in the Multiverse. A small fraction of the students got recruited by a proper faction, while most learned the skills to get a job.

The final group became wandering cultivators, unwilling to give up on their path for a more mundane life. In a sense, they chose to go against fate just like a Defier. Many of these wandering cultivators might have the basic foundations to be defined as a cultivator by the System - but so what? Most

cultivators didn't make it past the F-grade, especially not those without any connections or opportunities.

Seeing the table and the large piles of offerings left by the wandering cultivators, many of whom had attended the very schools they now donated to, Zac was filled with an indescribable emotion. The struggle and irreconciliation that the table represented resonated with Zac to his very core. However, he didn't get the chance to see if this feeling would lead to something more as someone stepped in between him and the donations.

“Is there something amiss?”

Chapter 862: Tasks

Zac was startled awake from his almost trance-like state, surprised to find a diminutive nun standing in front of him with a scowl on her face. She was mostly human, but just like Gaun, she seemed to have some sort of alien blood in her heritage, with small ridges forming in her head where a demon would have grown horns.

However, her skin was without the scale-like pattern of demons and her hands and feet looked human. All-in-all, she reminded Zac of Zakarith a bit with her short stature and large eyes, though the little merchant demoness back on Port Atwood would never dare look at him with such a fierce expression. Then again, Zakarith wasn't a Peak E-grade cultivator like this nun.

"I'm sorry, miss?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Is there something wrong? You have been eyeing the donations for a while now," the nun said, and there was no mistaking what she was insinuating from her tone.

"Do I look that bad off?" Zac wryly smiled, showcasing the slightly oversized canines of his newly acquired orcish heritage.

"Then what were you doing?" she said with suspicion.

"I was just thinking back to those days," Zac lied since he honestly didn't quite know himself why he had stopped.

He felt he had touched upon some sort of inspiration or understanding, but it had already slipped through his fingers. However, it was an important reminder that the Dao was everywhere - it wasn't only discovered in the heat of battle. The Dao was not just a tool of war, it was everything. The more he would experience the more he would get in contact with it.

“Time is truly unrelenting. In the blink of an eye, centuries have passed and new generations are standing where I once stood,” Zac continued with a sigh since the nun’s scowl hadn’t eased up. “The cycle continues.”

“A- I see,” the Nun said, looking a bit embarrassed. “I thought- nevermind.”

“I doubt you’d see any Wandering Cultivators steal from the hands of those children,” Zac said as he pointedly looked at the small pile of Cosmos Sacks that had been placed on the table next to the gift bags. “No one understands the need and the desire better than us. Hopefully, one day a child will truly break the fetters of fate, proving our path is not a lie.”

“Thank you for your guidance,” the young nun said with a small bow, her expression softening. “This is the first time I’ve gone outside since... I appreciate the viewpoint. Please, come inside.”

Zac slightly nodded before walking toward the shimmering barrier that ran was right behind the gate. Being an official member of the Void Gate, she could be considered an elite of the younger generation of Zecia, even if she wasn’t at the level of the peak talents. She had probably heard all kinds of things about wandering cultivators since growing up, and it was no surprise she was suspicious. Thankfully, she wasn’t some sort of overbearing elitist who refused to back down. It would have been pretty annoying to make an enemy the moment he arrived.

The surroundings twisted as Zac stepped through the shrouding array, and he found himself on a massive street that was at least a hundred meters wide. There was a constant stream of cultivators entering to his left and right, tens of thousands of warriors who all would be considered top experts back on Earth. Judging by the crowds outside, this scene would probably continue for over a day, where the number of mercenaries in this batch alone would be counted in the hundreds of thousands.

On the opposite side of the street waited a series of newly built restaurants, hotels, and training squares. There were even a

couple of bars, and Zac could hear the occasional raucous laugh all the way here.

“Never seen a recruitment station like this,” Zac muttered.

“The Void Gate will not force anyone willing to help us out to take certain tasks. Therefore, it takes some time to gather enough people for some missions,” the nun who had led him inside explained. “With the need for secrecy, all outsiders will have to stay within this area before we take you into the Void Gate’s domain.”

Zac nodded, finally understanding why he had to wait five days to enter this place. It was probably at capacity due to manning a previous batch of missions.

“Earlier was my mistake, so don’t hesitate to ask me anything,” the nun said. “What level and type of mission are you planning on joining?”

“Before I answer, can I ask something?” Zac countered, getting an earnest nod in return. “Apart from the mission rewards, will we be allowed to keep the beasts and their materials for ourselves?”

“You want the beast carcasses? They’re not very- ahem, yes. You can keep them. Usually,” the nun nodded. “If you kill or capture it, then it’s yours. For the things you don’t need yourself, you can sell them at resource depots. I should tell you though, most of the beasts we’re dealing with are not worth a lot.

“Even if you fill your Cosmic Bags to the brim, their value will be far worse than the compensation of the Void Gate. However, there are a few species that are considered strategic resources of ours. Taking them or their bodies out of our domain is disallowed.”

“In return, we will pay very well in case you encounter these rare beasts,” the nun continued as she took out a small tome. “Their features are in this booklet, make sure you memorize them. This version has more detailed descriptions and images compared to the ones you can pick up at the mission hub – a small apology for casting aspersions.”

“Thank you,” Zac smiled. “So some of the species have bounties apart from the missions?”

“You could say so,” the nun nodded. “While most animals are barely serviceable for sustenance, capturing a few of these valuable specimens can be even more lucrative than completing a difficult mission.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac whistled, but he looked at the nun suspiciously. “Then I guess they’re dangerous?”

“All of them have pure bloodlines,” the nun nodded. “However, the real reason for their high bounty is their scarcity.”

Zac nodded before turning his attention toward the small book. Each page only had a couple of illustrations, but each image contained a book’s worth of information when infusing his Mental Energy into them. For example, a simple image of a flower contained the details of a whole family of herbs, thousands of them neatly arranged in an easy-to-search manner.

It was essentially an encyclopedia on the local flora and fauna, a pretty nifty gift to get right off the bat.

It didn’t take him long to find detailed descriptions of both **[Ferric Worldeaters]** and **[Ferric Voidwyrms]**, the larval-stage of the species. Seeing the vivid images and detailed descriptions, it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders – there really were Worldeaters inside the Void Gate.

According to the missive, the Voidwyrms were between two to ten meters large and up to a Peak E-grade beasts. Becoming a Beast King turned them into World-eaters, where the smallest specimen would reach one hundred meters. Luckily, Zac had already prepared a beast pouch that would be able to fit a beast up to a thousand meters. Any larger than that would be an issue. Of course, Worldeaters surpassing a kilometer’s length would also be too powerful for him to deal with, so it was a moot point.

As for their affinities, they normally had insights into gravity. However, a few of them actually managed to grasp the Dao of

Space, and it was obviously one of these rare talents that he needed to get if he wanted to get the best Cosmic Vessel possible. However, he immediately saw a problem - spatial world eaters were considered a strategic resource with a sizeable bounty.

Zac wouldn't be surprised if the Void Gate wanted them for the same reason as he - as core components for spatial arrays. He would have to look into the possibility of smuggling one out later. If it was impossible, he would have to settle for a normal one. For now, it was great news getting confirmation on his target. However, the more Zac read in the missive, the weirder he felt the situation.

“There are a lot of wild herbs and other materials with bounties here as well, but where would we even run into wild herbs?” Zac frowned. “Are we not fighting close to any settlements? Just where is this beast tide located?”

Beast Tides were only called as such when a horde of monsters set their gazes on a city, either due to some powerful alpha or as a tribulation sent by the System. In other words, a beat tide was a siege, where you whittled down the innumerable monsters through using ranged attacks or raiding their lines.

In such a situation, there obviously wouldn't be any opportunities to pick Spiritual Herbs – those only grew deep in the wilderness or inside wild Mystic Realms. Even if you pushed the tide back, you'd only find the cultivated surroundings of the cities. As such, the bounties in the encyclopedia read more like a hunt or exploratory trip into an unclaimed Mystic Realm.

But if that was the case, where the Void Gate needed people to explore some recently-discovered subdimension, there was no need to lie. Mystic Realms popped up left and right, especially so in the past decade according to Calrin. Something about the spatial turbulence of the invaders made all kinds of hidden realms appear.

“I cannot divulge the details, but the Void Gate essentially controls an unusual number of Mystic Realms. Due to some

unforeseen events, these Mystic Realms are now being invaded, meaning we are fighting on hundreds of battlefronts in very varied situations,” the nun sighed.

“Mystic Realms can be invaded? How could a bunch of beasts sneak inside if you control the entrances?” Zac asked with a raised brow, not even needing to feign ignorance.

“It’s complicated. You will find more details as you peruse the recruitment stations inside,” the nun said with a small bow.

“However, I recommend you not overthink some things - the Void Gate values their secrets.”

“Alright, thank you, young miss,” Zac nodded. “This booklet might be a lifesaver.”

“I’m nothing,” the nun smiled. “I am Vai Salas. You can ask for me at the administrative building if you need assistance. Of course, I’m setting out on a mission soon as well.”

“Thank you,” Zac nodded. “I’m Gaun Sorom.”

With that, Zac blended with the stream of mercenaries, following the signs past the rows of restaurants and temporary residences until he reached a square with twenty-five rows of hovering signs, each one looking a bit like the System’s quest screens. Close by, a templar was handing out booklets that looked a lot like the one he just got, and Zac picked one up before he curiously walked over to check the closest screen.

[Task #208]

Rebuff horde of Ka’Sotrov Shades. Task includes performing a sweep for hidden nests.

Estimated Duration: 5 months.

Mission Level: High E-grade.

Danger: High.

Reward: 1,000 – 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins dependent on the state of facilities and personal contribution.

Prioritized Recruitment: Mentalists, Geomancers.

Localized Rare materials: Ka’Sotrov Godstone, Lunar Creeproots, Fekrian Jade, Fluatide.

[Slots: 408/1,250]

Following that was a description of the shades, including their appearance and common skills. The Ka'Sotrov Shades was one of the intangible beasts mentioned in Calrin's missives, and just like the Sky Gnome had guessed, they weren't undead. They were rather special rocks that utilized some sort of spiritual projections sounding like the ultimate version of **[Thousand Lights Avatar]**.

Zac wouldn't be surprised if they one day managed to transform into beings akin to Ubo back in the Orom World. But for now, they were a highly aggressive pest who moved by having their spectral projections carry their physical bodies around until they found fertile soil. At that point, they hid their true bodies deep underground, where they started siphoning off the energy from the surroundings.

Meanwhile, their projections killed and destroyed everything that competed with them for resources. Having appeared in a Mystic Realm used as a garden for herbs, they had become a calamity that threatened to destroy a yield of high-value crops.

"Excuse me, how do you define high risk?" Zac asked the templar handing out booklets.

"Thirty percent casualty rate for warriors at the mission level. The details are listed in the brochure you're holding," the templar said.

"Thank you," Zac nodded before walking away.

Zac slowly browsed the screen as he scanned his two booklets. The second one he just picked up lacked a lot of detail on all the species in the Void Gate. It mostly focused on the strategic resources, and Zac guessed most mercenaries would simply have to take anything else they picked up to a store to get them valued.

The public booklet did however contain a lot of general information geared at outsiders, including the risk assessment. Just like the templar said, High Danger meant a 30% casualty rate, where casualty was defined as losing combat ability for over three years. Simply put, death or grievous wounds.

Furthermore, that estimate was based on their average templar strength. Wandering cultivators, whose equipment was worse and whose heritage was incomplete, probably ran an even higher risk in these missions. Apart from high danger missions, there were low, moderate, and extreme danger. Finally, there was a separate set of safe missions with an expected casualty rate of 0%.

Looking around the square with missions, it quickly became apparent that safe missions were exclusively non-combat tasks - it was mostly grunt-work, to be honest. There were things like extracting as many minerals as possible from a mine before the enemy beasts arrived, or assisting the local smithies in the massive foundries.

None of the quests were actually for craftsmen though, and Zac guessed the Void Gate either hired them through other channels or had enough skilled workers on their own.

The pay for those missions was just one percent of the generous sum the hard missions provided, and the odds of finding one of the bounty materials were apparently very low. Conversely – the few impossible tasks could pay out almost half a D-grade Nexus Coin for three months of work for a Half-Step D-grade Hegemon.

That was extremely generous judging by the discussions among the other wandering cultivators, especially considering you'd make decent money from beast cores and harvesting other items. Seeing the excitement on their faces, Zac realized he had probably overpaid Gaun. The wandering cultivator would probably have been happy with a tenth of what he was offered considering these rewards.

However, you could repeatedly earn money in this place - nothing was stopping you from taking multiple quests in a row provided you survived. That was so little leaked about the events in the Void Gate. Some had long since completed their first, and sometimes even second, task. Some were recuperating in the superior facilities of the Void Gate, while others had already set out again.

Of course, quite a few had already fallen in search of wealth in this place. An extreme danger mission had a lethality rate surpassing 50%, so only those with nothing to lose would take on a mission like that. Unfortunately, you couldn't just keep it safe and take on missions of lower grades. Some hegemons might be tempted to take a bunch of E-grade extermination quests to earn money quickly and easily, but the Void Gate had put a stop to that.

The reason was clear just by looking around – the Void Gate lacked people for the higher-grade missions. Zac saw how one cultivator after another infused a wisp of energy into the lower-grade tasks, prompting the slots to rapidly fill up. Meanwhile, the only ones who read the D-grade missions seemed to be curious onlookers.

Even after walking around for over an hour, Zac only saw one Hegemon come over and choose a quest – and it was a low danger mission. The only exception to the rule was where higher-grade cultivators could join low-grade missions that had failed to fill its slot in a certain amount of time. However, if not even the lower-grade cultivators wanted the quest, it was probably one of the worse ones.

Conversely, anyone could sign up for a mission up to one grade above their own, which meant Zac could choose an Early D-grade quest if he wanted. That was perfect for him since he wanted to hunt an early D-grade Beast King. It was probably added to provide the elites with a greater challenge, and to fill up the D-grade missions faster with the help of large numbers of Half-Step Cultivators.

Soon enough, Zac found not one but two missions with good potential. The first was task #385, a Half-Step mission with a medium danger assessment. It was a proper beast tide mission where you needed to protect a settlement for a minimum of 3 months. Included in the list of beasts were the voidwyrms, and the quest mentioned there were multiple Beast Kings in the tide.

The second quest was task #1,032, a high danger Early D-grade quest. This was a quest where the group was tasked to guard a group of nuns acolytes who needed to investigate

some sort of spatial anomaly that attracted beasts. Zac guessed it was some sort of treasure that had attracted a beast tide.

Just like the other task, voidwyrms were mentioned, and with the task being a proper D-grade mission with higher danger assessment, the odds of running into proper worldeaters were a lot higher. However, while task #385 called for over 5,000 cultivators, task #1032 needed only 50. Not only that, but it specifically noted it would test the strength of every Half-Step cultivator who applied.

Zac had only seen that kind of comment on a handful of missions, and all of them seemed like tasks of strategic importance which couldn't fail. The odds of getting exposed in such a small unit were a lot higher, not to mention the risk of true danger. After all, if Beast Kings could appear in Half-Step missions, then Middle Stage Beast Kings might appear in task #1,032.

There would be squad captains present to deal with that kind of threat, but wars were always unpredictable. Zac was confident in dealing with most early Beast Kings by now, but the Middle-Stage was another thing altogether. They had properly benefited from the huge boost of attributes a higher grade provided, and their energy reserves were reportedly five to ten times that of an early-stage beast.

Furthermore, the simple fact the beasts had progressed to Middle D-grade meant their bloodline was out of the norm - just like with cultivators, more than 99% of beasts were forever stuck at the start of the grade, their cores unable to progress. Thus, their combat ability would be higher than the average beasts as well, and Zac wasn't confident he'd be able to deal with these kinds of things even if he unleashed an Annihilation Sphere.

Even then, Zac hesitated only for a couple of minutes before picking task #1,032, becoming the 37th member to apply. No matter if it was for the search of Ogras in the Million Gates Territory, the Sector-wide War, or Zac's plans beyond, he would need the best vessel he could get his hands on.

It was time to go big or go home.

Chapter 863: Examination

Having infused a wisp of his aura into the task screen, Zac walked over to a nearby kiosk manned by an acolyte. It was the location where you picked up a mission token so that the captains could contact you when it was time to go.

“Task #1,032? High danger D-grade mission?” the acolyte said when Zac infused his aura into a tablet, glancing at Zac with some surprise.

“That’s right,” Zac nodded with a terse expression.

“Understood,” the acolyte said, his expression becoming slightly more respectful. “Name, affiliation, and origin?”

“Gaun Sorom, unaffiliated, Tumbling Sky Cluster.”

The acolyte jotted the details down before handing Zac a token. “The tests to join special missions are held inside the administrative building. If you haven’t completed them within 24 hours, your reservation will be annulled and you will lose the chance to take on any other missions.”

“What about the contract?” Zac asked.

“It will be presented to you after passing the test,” the acolyte explained.

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded before he fastened the token to his belt and walked away.

His face had stayed impassive throughout the exchange, but his heart had started beating a bit quicker after being asked his name. He had stayed close by to observe other cultivators picking up tokens, but the acolytes hadn’t inquired about their identities back then. It looked like his strength wasn’t the only thing that would be investigated when taking on these special missions.

It looked like his preparations would be put to the test even earlier than expected.

Even then, Zac didn't rush toward the administrative building in hopes to get accepted before they found out more. If anything, he wanted to wait a bit to give the Void Gate a chance to investigate. If it worked out, then great. If not, he would have to go back to plan B – to shed his disguise and come forward as Zachary Atwood, the Deviant Asura, and ask for Leyara.

But honestly, he wanted to avoid that if possible.

It was not just a matter of avoiding being targeted by assassins aiming the Tsarun Clans' bounty any longer either. With the knowledge of the invaders becoming more widespread, a couple of troubling rumors had started to flourish as well – where some people believed he was responsible for the upcoming war.

They believed that his summoning of the Stele of Conflict set into motion a series of events that led to the invaders appearing, and that he was the focal point of this war. And if the war was a tribulation the System had set up for the Deviant Asura, then killing him might cancel the invasion before it started.

Zac had wondered the same thing since Catheya mentioned that Zecia had been put on lockdown, but he ultimately chose to not carry the burden of the invasion. This was clearly the System wanting to create some chaos in the hopes powerful warriors would be forged in the heat of battle. It had done things like this since the day it was created, following its core protocols of expansion and empowerment.

To think that a single F-grade cultivator was the cause of a massive event like this was laughable. He might have been some sort of catalyst, but the System would no doubt have found a pretext to stir up a war one way or another, even if he hadn't conjured the Stele of Conflict. Neither did he believe this war was designed as some sort of challenge tailored to him - the System did not need to cause such a massive event for that.

It could just meddle with fate to drag him into some other conflict while pushing him in the direction of the next set of remnants, or setting the Atwood Empire at a collision course with another local faction.

Thankfully, it seemed like most people had come to the same conclusion - that this was just a tribulation conjured by the System, aimed at a Sector that had seen relative peace for almost a million years. However, that seed of doubt could prove lethal to him. For example, what if the Starfall Monarch felt that killing him had a 1% chance of averting a war that would reap trillions of lives?

Wasn't it worth killing him, just in case?

At best, the Starfall Monarch would become the hero who saved Zecia. At worst, he'd kill a random E-grade cultivator with no affiliation to the Void Gate. If Zac was presented with that kind of scenario, to kill one random stranger to potentially save Earth, he honestly wasn't sure what he'd do. And neither was it something that Leyara Lioress would be able to stop in case things went south.

So unless his back was pressed against the wall, he'd try to stay under the radar until he wasn't completely helpless in the face of Monarchs. For now, Zac walked the recruitment station with a solemn but unworried demeanor, occasionally striking up short conversations with other wandering cultivators to exchange snippets of information.

In reality, his senses were on full alert, and he was ready to activate the **[Flashfire Flourish]** hidden within his robes at moment's notice. However, nothing untoward happened after an hour had passed, and Zac eventually continued to another section of the station. It was a square even larger than the one holding the missions, but there were no hovering screens at all.

Instead, there were thousands of makeshift stalls set up, and the sound of thousands of wandering cultivators haggling for dear life was almost deafening.

“Two **[Frigid Core Tempering Pills]** for sale! They are low-quality, but they were concocted by Ya'vo Haosar of Salsoar Two, so they are low in pill toxicity! The seal is intact for

anyone to inspect!” an early Hegemon shouted, sounding like a random hawker. “I only trade for Earth-pected Core Tempering pills or Natural Treasures of a similar grade!”

Core Tempering Pills were one of the most basic pills used to nurture a Cultivator’s Core. They were essentially the race-boosting pills of the D-grade, except that just pills weren’t enough to make a core stronger. Since the pill was given a Frigid prefix, Zac guessed that the alchemist had added some sort of cold-attributed herbs to the recipe.

Doing so required a certain amount of skill, considering adding a single ingredient could cause a chain reaction during the concoction process, ruining the medicinal efficacy altogether. As for the seals, they were essentially a stamp of authenticity that contained a bit of the alchemist’s aura, which was quite popular with higher-grade pills.

Still, Zac wasn’t interested in some basic core-tempering pills. He had whole chests full of higher-quality wares in the spatial rings he had left back home. The same was true for most things that the cultivators were trying to pawn off, but one particular stall caught Zac’s attention.

“What’s this?” Zac asked curiously as he walked over, even though he had a pretty good idea.

“Good eye!” the brutish-looking warrior who ran the stall. “It’s a core of a unique beast inside the Void Gate - a Celestial Skybeast.”

“A Celestial Skybeast? Zac whistled. “Never heard of it. More importantly, you’ve completed a mission? And you can just sell the wares like this?”

“Of course!” the man nodded. “The Celestial Skybeasts are rare and powerful creatures, but their cores are not a restricted material. Most people sold their materials to the depots for a pretty penny, but I wanted to take mine back to benefit my fellow brothers.”

Zac nodded in enthusiastic agreement, though he inwardly sneered. What Celestial Skybeast? This was obviously the core of a Half-Step Void Beast, an item most likely worthless to

anyone but him. The Resource Depots of the Void Gate probably weren't willing to pay much for something that contained such chaotic energies, so the man was hoping to scam someone by making use of the fact Void Beasts were so rare.

"What does it do?" Zac asked, deciding to play along. "If it's just another Beast Core..."

"Not at all," the man hurriedly said before leaning over with a hushed tone. "Just sense the energy within. Odd, right? Unlike anything else you've seen before, no? Don't you find it weird that these unique beasts appear in the Void Gate and nowhere else, while all the templars have bodies seemingly forged from steel?"

"You think it can temper bodies?" Zac muttered. "Impossible."

"Nothing's impossible in this world," the man said. "I know it sounds crazy to cultivate using the chaotic energies of a Beast Core, but there is something different about the Celestial Skybeasts. You can't tell now that the templars are just standing around, but when you join the missions, you will understand the truth of my words."

Zac pretended to be slightly moved as he inspected the Void Core a bit closer, inwardly applauding the man's performance. He was a warrior judging by his aura, but he would be able to give Calrin a run for his money. Obviously, Zac didn't believe his words. The only chance of the templars using these cores was if they all had a similar constitution as himself.

However, he didn't get that sense at all from the Void Gate warriors walking around in the area, and neither were there any hints of that kind of bloodline or constitution in any missive. From the looks of it, the 'void' in Void Gate rather referred to space, compared to whatever weird anti-Dao he and the Void Beasts were instilled with.

The only reason he didn't completely discard the warrior's ramblings was the connection between the Void Priestess and the Limitless Empire. There was actually a very slim chance the man had inadvertently caught onto a huge

secret when concocting this sales pitch. Honestly, it didn't matter. For now, Zac just wanted to buy the core.

"This, I don't know," Zac hesitated. "It might be true, but a treasure is worthless if you don't have the method to use it."

"Alas, that is true," the warrior nodded. "But you can always submerge it into a common herbal vat and let its energies slowly enter your body. The effect would be worse than using the method of the templars, but -"

"And poison myself while you run off with the money?" Zac interrupted with a snort. "However, I am willing to buy it for study, how about 100 E-grade Nexus Coins? That's already a lot better than an average Beast Core."

"How can you compare this unique treasure with those useless baubles!" the man almost roared, his face turning red with indignation.

"Just calling it as I see it," Zac shrugged.

"Even an elemental Core will bring in over 300 coins!" the warrior said. "This thing is a unique marvel of the sector, with only a few being allowed outside of the Void Gate. 2,000 coins, and not a single one less."

Zac only rolled his eyes and turned to leave.

"Alright, alright," the warrior urged when he saw Zac walking away. "Since we're kindred spirits, and I can tell you're on the precipice of breaking through, I will sell this at a loss. 1,500 E-grade Nexus Coins."

Like this, a similar scene to the other stalls appeared, where Zac and the warrior almost came to blows as they shouted their offers. Eventually, they settled at 580 E-grade Nexus Coins, and as Zac walked away, he believed they both felt they had tricked the other party. The warrior had probably gotten an explanation at the supply depot, that Void Cores were essentially useless, and anything he got for it would be a victory.

Still, Zac was extremely happy with the purchase, considering 480 E-grade Nexus Coins was nothing to him. The core only contained a fraction of the energy trapped inside the weird

organ Zac bought at the Twilight Harbor Auction, but it was still the best item available to quickly restore his Void Energy in a pinch.

As Zac walked the stalls, he found and purchased another three Void Cores, proving the first one wasn't a coincidence. After surreptitiously asking, it became clear that only two of the sellers had taken part in the same mission. In other words, Void Beasts were appearing at multiple spots inside the Void Gate.

Was there really some sort of connection, or was it an inevitability when you controlled as many Mystic Realms as Vai Salas implied? Was the beast tide led by Void Beasts? No that couldn't be right - no matter if you looked at the mission descriptions or the materials for sale, there couldn't be too many Void Beasts.

Furthermore, it didn't mesh with what he'd learned about these weird creatures. After the events inside the Research Base, he had made some inquiries. Void Beasts were not nearly as common as one might think. They didn't pop up around normal Mystic Realms, and they couldn't be found inside chaotic places like the Million Gates Territory.

The best working theory Zac had found was that there were layers to the void. Normally, people would only enter the surface of the Void when teleporting, and it was at the surface layers where most Mystic Realms could be found as well. Meanwhile, Void Beasts possibly lived deeper into the void, only emerging when searching for beings to feed on.

It made sense. Zac wouldn't be surprised if his mother's family had the capabilities to hide their facilities even deeper inside the void, pushing it to a layer one normally wouldn't reach.

Apart from the Void Cores, there wasn't anything that piqued Zac's interest. Even then, he stayed on for an hour, browsing through the wares and making a couple of purchases with pretend excitement in case someone was spying on him. A gathering of this many wandering cultivators was a rare chance to trade without auction houses or consortiums taking a

large cut, so a lot of people took the opportunity to unload their wares or shop at a discount.

Walking the square also allowed him to pick up more gossip. There were a couple of takeaways from the cultivators who had returned from their first stint into the Void gate. First, the dangers were very real – the beasts were seemingly endless. The casualty rates were just a guess, and more than one party had been completely exterminated, even when undergoing normal difficulty tasks.

Secondly, the Void Gate was treating the cultivators with some amount of sincerity. There were a lot of complaints about how haughty the templars and devotees were, but they didn't use the unaffiliated cultivators as meat shields or sacrificial pawns.

Finally, the Void Gate was powerful, exceedingly so. The returnees were restricted from discussing certain aspects of the missions, but they all said the same thing; the Void Gate possessed shocking means and resources. Everyone knew they were the local ruler with multiple Monarchs, but what these warriors had witnessed had clearly surpassed their expectations.

But finally, it was time to go, so Zac made his way toward the administrative building at the back of the recruitment station. It was a massive structure far surpassing anything built back home on Earth, and one would be able to fit a whole district inside if one wanted.

After showing his token to an administrator inside, he was led to a large sparring chamber that was essentially a hundred-meter-cube.

“An examiner will be with you shortly,” the guide said, and Zac simply nodded before sitting down.

Still, with no one appearing even after twenty minutes, Zac eventually took out the **[Book of Duality]** and started reading. The more he had studied it over the past weeks, the more marvelous Zac found it. It wasn't that long – just over a hundred pages, and reading it the first time had only taken him a few hours.

The readthrough had provided some shallow insights and a brief explanation of the path of dualities. However, on the second readthrough, Zac had started to realize just how much was hidden inside this seemingly simple tome. He'd already noticed the characters contained special impartments when he got the book, but he had underestimated just how much they contained.

He had deciphered the first couple of pages easily enough, but the problems started to arrive when reaching the second chapter. Suddenly, he had realized that he still hadn't unearthed the true meanings hidden in the first chapter, and he used the second chapter as a reference to delve even deeper.

One plus one didn't equal two when putting the meaning hidden inside the words together. They somehow fused into completely new concepts, seemingly unrelated to the original ones. And with every added character, the interconnected web of hidden truths grew increasingly complex, and it required more and more time to integrate each new character into the tapestry that was slowly forming in his mind.

At first, Zac had figured that the best approach was to unearth all the layers at once by trying to decipher the whole book in one go, but he had quickly realized the futility of that. Perhaps if he was an intelligence-based Peak Hegemon he'd be able to accomplish something like that, but there was simply too much contained in the **[Book of Duality]**.

If he tried to comprehend it all at once, the depth disappeared, and he could only glean the surface-level of meaning.

But the little Zac had deciphered so far had filled him with inspiration. There were no actual Daos or Heavenly Truths hidden into the book, but rather an extremely comprehensive set of information that related to the very essence of energy, patterns, and control. It was not something that related to just cores either – the insights of Kalo, the mysterious author, were universal.

No matter if it was arrays, crafting, or creating skills, the **[Book of Duality]** covered some of the fundamental underpinnings that made them possible, the process where Dao

and some inscrutable patterns turned into magical things like the huge wooden hand of **[Arcadia's Judgement]**, or how it could allow you to turn into something intangible with movement skills or teleportation arrays.

In other words, the book could be considered a whole heritage, as long as you managed to unearth the truths within. It was no wonder Yrial had called it one of the most valuable items in his inheritance. Zac couldn't imagine the effort and comprehension required to impart so much into a few characters – it was another reminder of what kind of exalted existences Monarchs were.

Their understanding of the universe was so far beyond his current level that it wasn't even comparable, to the point they couldn't be considered humans any longer.

Zac kept reading, almost forgetting where he was. But a sudden pang of danger cut through his comprehension, and his eyes shot open just as the door to the chamber opened. Through the door a middle-aged man walked, decked in a full-body armor that was of clearly better make than the average templar gear he had seen so far.

It only took a glance to tell it was a proper War Regalia judging by the massive amounts of energy that coursed through the engraved runes covering its surface. That could only mean one thing - his test would be supervised by a Hegemon, and a pretty strong one by the looks of it.

Chapter 864: Teo Kastella

“You seemed quite engrossed, but I could only wait so long,” the man said with equanimity as he stepped into the room, which was immediately flooded with his overbearing aura. “Good instinct for danger. I am Teo Kastella, and I will oversee this trial.”

As the Hegemon walked over, Zac tried to get a sense of what kind of warrior he was. Teo’s aura was pure and condensed, meaning his accumulations were beyond the norm. Then again, anyone who made it to Hegemony was a one-in-a-million genius, so him being an elite was par for the course. More importantly, it looked like he was a Middle-Stage Hegemon.

As for his attunement, it was a bit reminiscent of Zac’s old Undying Bulwark class, and not just because the man was wearing full-body armor. There was a sense of impermeability and stability to his aura, making Zac guess he not only had at least one defensive Dao but also endurance as his main attribute.

Between his level, equipment, and focus, Zac knew there was simply no way for him to defeat this Teo Kastella in a straightforward battle, but there was thankfully no way that could be the trial.

“I am sorry about wasting your time,” Zac hurriedly said as he bowed toward the Void Gate templar. “I am Gaun Sorom. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“Gaun Sorom,” the templar slowly said. “According to our investigation, this is not the level of mission you were expected to take. Neither do you have one of the prioritized classes for this mission. Could you explain why you applied?”

Zac knew this was coming. Gaun was considered stronger than average among wandering cultivators, but taking on a

dangerous D-grade mission was still a bit much. And he was also a pure offensive warrior, while the prioritized classes for task #1,032 were guardians, scouts, and defensive array masters.

He had figured the discrepancy of power between himself and the real Gaun would become an issue sooner or later, and he had workshopped a believable tale with the help of the original owner of his face. Thankfully, Gaun had been lying low the past decade because of his wounds, so it gave Zac some leeway to spin a believable tale.

Furthermore, Zac had one final ace. It was the trump card that made him dare infiltrate an established faction like the Void Gate in the first place – his mother’s array. Not even Catheya’s master, a Peak Monarch, had managed to find anything amiss. How could some middle Hegemon, or even the Starfall Monarch, fare any better?

Zac still had no idea exactly how it worked, but apparently, Va Tapek had said everything was in order when trying to glean anything from his body or Status Screen. That was obviously impossible, considering there were no actual Arcaz Black while his body contained all sorts of weirdness. In other words, the Array was most likely worked on perception, making spying eyes see whatever they expected to see, finding nothing amiss.

Va Tapek expected to see Arcaz Black, so that was what he saw. These people expected Gaun Sorom, so that would be what they saw. Of course, that didn’t mean he was out of the woods. There were various arrays and skills geared toward infiltration and it would be up to his performance to completely pass this hurdle.

“Ten years ago, I encountered a great opportunity,” Zac said. “It gave me the chance to break through.”

The next moment, Zac emitted a strand of his aura – the Branch of the War Axe. Preferably, Zac would have wanted to use his Life-attuned Dao as well, but Gaun only had two Dao Fragments he had tried to fuse into a singular Branch of the Axe for the past 400 years. It would be weird if he suddenly

showcased a second branch completely separate from his recorded abilities.

“A major breakthrough, at your stage?” the captain hummed with some surprise. “Branch of the Axe – a pure one. You’re planning to force a breakthrough?”

“My preparations are still lacking, but I hope to enter terminal seclusion soon after this Beast Tide is over, using any materials and rewards I gain here” Zac nodded.

Breaking through as a Half-Step Hegemon was much harder than doing it as a Peak E-grade Cultivator, to the point most people considered impossible. The biggest hurdle was the defective core you had allowed to fuse with your body. It had to be completely crushed and reformed into a proper one, but that would unleash its energies into one’s body, which was pretty much the same as detonating a bomb inside your belly.

Attempting it was akin to suicide, but some people had accomplished the impossible through the combination of improved foundations and unique treasures. Even if it was just one out of ten thousand who succeeded while the others perished, that glimpse of hope was enough for some.

“I admire your courage, but this is not a training trip,” the Hegemon said. “An offensive Dao Branch built on incomplete foundations is ultimately not enough for this mission. Some of our researchers are just E-grade. We need warriors who will be able to keep them safe, which includes repelling Beast Kings.”

“I understand,” Zac bowed. “However, I do have some confidence in my ability. The breakthrough was not the only thing I gained. I also contracted a powerful companion. With her, my ability to restrain enemies has increased significantly. Together with my Dao Branch, I should meet the requirements.”

The next moment, a dozen thick vines appeared from the spatial tube on his back. Zac had deliberated what he should display in this trial, and he felt Vivi was the most suitable. His **[Empyrean Aegis]** would probably let him pass, but it was a bit too flashy. Meanwhile, Vivi was just right. She was extremely durable, and would even be able to restrain beast

kings just long enough for him or someone else to deal with them.

“Oh?” the man muttered as he looked at the slithering vines with interest.

Teo waved his hand the next moment, and a life-sized dummy flew over to land behind Zac. “Defend the dummy.”

Zac wordlessly nodded, and one of the vines moved over to protect his ward. As for Zac, he placed himself right between the dummy and Teo.

It sounded like a bomb exploded as the Hegemon suddenly shot forward, making a beeline for the unmoving puppet, seemingly intending to barrel straight through Zac. Teo’s momentum was ferocious, but Zac was still inwardly relieved to sense the Templar only used the strength of a Half-Step Hegemon at the moment.

Over a dozen vines shot out from the tube on Zac’s back, while another set formed a corridor of death no more than twenty meters wide. Zac had essentially turned the battlefield into a narrow trench, where he was the goalkeeper.

A shortsword and a metal buckler appeared in Teo’s hands, the two probably a paired Spirit Tool judging by their aura matching design. The Hegemon immediately unleashed a dazzling set of swings that hacked into the vines while he used the buckler to create odd shockwaves that pushed others aside.

One by one, long ropes of Vivi’s vines fell onto the ground as Teo stepped closer, costing Zac a constant stream of energy to restore. Normally, Zac wouldn’t have used such a clumsy method to deal with a simple advance, but he didn’t want to use his evolutionary stance like this. Instead, he adopted a technique that was more akin to Gaun’s, where he used brute force as a feint to deliver his real strikes.

Having properly stepped into the Integration Stage, it was quite easy for Zac to control how much of his technique to showcase. Currently, he had extracted any hint of his Daos from the way he used the vines, and rather fought as he did while trying to level his [**Armament Mastery**] skill from high

to peak mastery. He even added in some inefficiencies to the way he controlled Vivi to make it seem slightly less impressive.

Vivi's assault still looked ferocious, with almost twenty thick vines thrumming with vigor as they tried to lash the Hegemon. However, it almost looked like Teo was taking a stroll as he walked closer, and he almost gave off the impression of a farmer cutting the weeds - there was almost a bored expression on his face.

But suddenly, three vines split off from the chaotic mix and nimbly evaded Teo's sword before shooting forward with almost double the speed compared to the others. Teo immediately realized what was going on, but he only managed to destroy one of the vines before the others latched onto him and started dragging to pull him off-balance.

With the impressive sharpness of that sword, it wouldn't take long for the Templar to break free, but Zac had no intention of giving Teo that kind of breathing room. He shot forward with **[Earthstrider]** with one of his spare Spirit Tool axes already in his hand. A mighty shockwave erupted as Zac's axe intercepted Teo's sword.

But Zac barely had time to stop the Hegemon from breaking free before a scream of danger erupted in his mind. The buckler was heading straight for his head, and it thrummed with barely contained momentum. The strike wasn't uniquely quick or inscrutable - if anything it felt extremely mundane if not for its force.

The problem was that the Templar must have begun the attack before the previous clash even took place, like he knew exactly what would happen. Zac urgently ducked, but his idea to counter with a devastating gut-punch was pre-empted by an armored knee rising to meet him. Once more, his movement had been completely predicted, but Zac knew it wasn't a matter of prescience.

It was experience and millennia of drills being turned into lethal muscle memory.

A duck turned into a somewhat unsightly pirouette where Zac barely managed to avoid both Teo's strikes, but by that point, three daggers were already flying toward the dummy. It was not a big deal though, and one of the vines flicked them aside as Zac resumed his assault. The two were soon again locked in a heated melee, where Zac tried to break open the Hegemon's impenetrable defenses one way or another.

The Templar wasn't extremely quick, nor had he mastered technique as Pavina had. Teo probably didn't focus on that aspect of cultivation at all, having simply learned his combat stance from the Void Gate. Even then, he proved a tricky enemy to deal with. Between his armor and steady stance, he was like an immutable mountain, and Zac found it extremely difficult to impede his strikes or change the tempo without physically overpowering him.

Even then, Zac was slowly gaining an advantage thanks to Vivi. Neither of them used any skills, so the two found themselves locked in a melee, and it was impossible to completely avoid the unceasing advance of vines coming from the spatial tube on Zac's back. However, Zac soon found himself in a familiar situation - the force behind Teo's swings was gradually increasing, just like when Kaldor started cheating.

The Templar didn't change up his technique or add Daos, but when every swing hit harder and faster than the one before, Zac soon found himself at a disadvantage. For a while, he matched Teo's increase in power, but he eventually found himself using all the strength he could without raising suspicion. So he could only try to hold on as long as possible, hoping that would be enough.

As Zac found himself pushed harder and harder, he couldn't help but appreciate the templar's technique - or lack thereof. It was simple and direct, without any flourishes or complications. It made Zac think of the flavor text to his old skill [**Chop**], how there was greatness in simplicity. Teo felt like a soldier in a Roman phalanx - methodical and extremely deadly.

After having almost solely focused on technique for the past years, it was an important reminder. There were innumerable paths to the peak, and honing one's technique was just one of them. Teo was accomplishing great things even without bothering with the Integration stage or the stages above, freeing up his time to improve other aspects of his cultivation.

Zac couldn't get ahead of himself and think himself able to easily defeat any Hegemon just because he had polished his technique to a level that probably superseded theirs. Between their experience and deeper comprehension of the Dao, the difference wasn't all that big, and they had all kinds of ways to only bridge but surpass that gap in a real battle.

The melee became more and more desperate as Zac felt himself barely hanging on by the time Teo was solidly using the power of a Hegemon. Vivi's vines were no longer able to restrain him since he destroyed them too quickly, which increased the pressure on Zac. He knew the trial was all-but-over, and he readied himself to give up.

But suddenly, Zac's eyes widened in surprise as the sword in Teo's hand was gone, and a sharp whistle echoed through the room. His swing had somehow turned into an underhand throw, and the shortsword was barrelling toward the dummy. There was no way to intercept, so Zac did the only thing he could think off - he slapped the dummy with a vine, throwing it a few dozen meters away, out of the way of the sword's trajectory.

In a real scenario, the researcher would have been battered but alive, which was preferable to being turned into meat ribbons by the attack of a Hegemon. The sword suddenly stopped in its trajectory before flying back into the templar's hand as he took a step back.

"That's enough," Teo nodded, almost looking a bit regretful. "Your axework is extremely solid. You have a surprising connection to your weapon, it's a shame you never joined a proper faction. Looking at your strength, you can deal with the weakest of Beast Kings, while any stronger specimen will require assistance."

“I also have a supreme Defensive Skill. It is what allowed me to survive to this day, but it has a powerful backlash so I cannot showcase it,” Zac added when it looked like the Hegemon hesitated whether he should accept him. “It can buy some time even against an Early Beast king.”

“Well, I’ll take your word for it. Your foundation is barely enough for the first string, but your individualistic style is not a good mesh. However, you can easily qualify as a second-string defender,” the man said.

“I’m sorry, what does that mean?” Zac asked, not remembering anything about that in the quest description.

“Due to the dangers and the fact we will be traveling with researchers with no or low combat ability, we will have two lines of defense. The vanguard will deal with most of the threats, while the second string will be assigned as personal guards,” the hegemon explained. “Anything that slips past our outer perimeter or suddenly appears out of nowhere will be dealt with by you. In other words, a situation just like this trial.

“We don’t expect you to be an immutable boulder, but someone who can buy enough time for one of the party’s real Hegemons to deal with the threats. As such, your compensation would be on the lower end of the spectrum, and your priority when distributing rare materials would be lower.”

Zac frowned as though he was in thought, but he felt it was a pretty good deal. The task had a span of 1-5 D-grade Nexus Coins, but the remuneration was not a priority. He was rather worried that it sounded like a somewhat restricted position. Unless they were given free time to explore, he would find it hard to sneak off and catch a Space-attuned Ferric Worldeater.

“Would I have any opportunities to hunt for beasts or bounties as a bodyguard?” Zac asked.

“You would have an opportunity to leave for three days every month, but that is contingent on the situation being stable. We will not accept any run away with a tide barreling toward us,” Teo explained.

Zac figured it was fair enough. Just like the templar said, this was not a training journey. Getting three days a month to explore the Void Gate's restricted areas was pretty generous. He would have to leave it up to his Luck. Even he couldn't find and capture a space-attuned specimen, he should still be able to get a normal one.

And if even that failed, might be able to have the first string cultivators capture one of the wyrms in exchange for part of his reward.

"I am willing to take on this mission," Zac nodded.

"Then let me reintroduce myself," Teo smiled. "I am Marshal Teo Kastella of the Order of the Hollow Vigil. As the leader of task #1,032, I hereby invite you under the authority of the Starfall Monarch."

As Teo finished his sentence, two screens popped up in front of Zac – a contract and an actual System Quest. Zac had no idea what hollow vigil meant, but he still bowed in deference once more before focusing on the screens.

Task #1,032 (Decree): Protect your designated ward until the target anomaly has been stabilized, or for a maximum of 6 months. Reward: 0.5 - 1.5 D-grade Nexus Coins depending on performance. (0/1) (0/178).

Chapter 865: Zenith Vigil

This was the second Decree-quest Zac had gotten, with the first being the one he was saddled with by the Eveningtide Asura. This one was straightforward, where he either had to guard his ward for the duration of the mission, or for 178 days. In a perfect world, he wouldn't have to spend six months in the Void Gate, but it wasn't too bad all things considered. Besides, the mission would be over the moment they stabilized that anomaly, so there was a small chance he'd be out of here in just a month or two.

The employment contract was pretty long-winded, but it was essentially the same type of agreement he signed with Catheya before the Twilight Harbor, though he would be paid an additional 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins for a century-long confidentiality clause that covered any secrets of the Void Gate. In addition to that, there was a rule of not actively going against the Void Gate's interest within their domains.

The fuzzy wording, along with a couple of other phrases left Zac a bit stumped. While the contract was much more comprehensive compared to the one he signed upon entering the recruitment station, it was surprisingly vague in a lot of places. For example, 'actively act against one's interests' was much too imprecise to avoid being exploited.

Conversely, in the contract Catheya had him sign, there were all kinds of clauses added to that section, including various scenarios. But here, it was left open-ended. It would stop Zac from destroying their buildings or attacking their people, but it was too fuzzy for the System to intercede in most other cases.

For example, him picking up any valuable he could find wasn't directly working against the interest of the Void Gate, even if it was a strategic resource. It was just working on his cultivation. Neither would it be considered to be actively working against the Void Gate if he saw something untoward and

decided to keep it to himself. It would be considered passively working against them at worst.

“No need to look so suspicious,” Teo snorted when he saw Zac’s frown. “It’s a matter of cost reduction. Salosar is only one of our recruitment stations, we sign tens of thousands of these every day. The more stringent the clauses, the more we have to pay for them to be ratified. The Void Gate has money, but nothing is without limits. With our operating costs increasing recently, and with the beast tide hampering our revenue sources, we can’t waste a fortune on every single mission.”

Hearing Teo’s explanation, Zac suddenly felt he had understood something – why they went through all this trouble at all. Could it be because of the war? With beasts occupying all these Mystic Realms, their supply lines had to have been thrown into chaos, which was absolutely not what you wanted to see when stocking up before a massive conflict.

Normally, they might have been able to deal with these beasts themselves. But with the deadline, they were forced to look for outside help to expedite the process.

“Alright then,” Zac nodded as he accepted both the contract and quest.

A small smile spread across the face of the Marshal as he nodded with satisfaction. “Well, Gaun Sorom, welcome aboard.”

“Glad to be here,” Zac nodded.

Looking at the Hegemon’s smile Zac wondered for a moment if there was something nefarious at play, but he eventually put those thoughts aside. He could somewhat feel how he had started getting bogged down by paranoia since taking this disguise. Being security-minded was good, but when you saw enemies in every shadow around you, you were bound to drive yourself mad.

Obviously, a faction would have its hidden motives and goals, but that didn’t mean they were nefarious or targeting him

specifically. He just needed to keep his head down and stay alert, and deal with things as they came.

The Templar suddenly waved one of his hands, prompting one of Vivi's cut-off vines to float over. "An extraordinary specimen, but your control is a bit crude. You're only controlling three of the vines properly."

"It's my limit, for now," Zac grimaced. "It's as you say. I might be able to control one more if I give it my all, but I've found more success when controlling three vines while releasing a large set of diversionary vines."

"This species, I don't recognize it. Where did you acquire it?"

"That's..." Zac said. "I'm sorry."

"Fine," Teo nodded. "Are you willing to part for it for the right price?"

"It's my greatest defensive measure for now," Zac said. "And I wouldn't dare trick lord Hegemon. While this plant is mighty, it is dying. I conferred with an expert who said that it's well past its pollination stage, and it will die in a century or so. It will not be of much use for an established faction."

"That's a shame," the Hegemon sighed. "Would you allow our researchers to investigate as well? They might find something your acquaintance did not. If we manage to clone it, we would be willing to give you a great commission."

"Of course," Zac eagerly nodded, though he knew it was a fool's hope on this man's part. If Heda said it couldn't be done, then no Void Gate researcher would be able to fare any better. Still, as a wandering cultivator desperately needing resources, he obviously wouldn't turn down a deal like this. "It would be my pleasure to assist in any way that I can. However, with its life being so brittle, I hope we can postpone until the threat of the beast tide is dealt with. In case something happens..."

"Of course, there is no rush," Teo shrugged.

'Good luck finding me after the beast tide is dealt with,' Zac inwardly laughed, but he simply nodded in agreement.

“Five more have applied for the task since you did, but I only expect two to pass,” the Hegemon continued. “Then again, I might be surprised once more. In either case, I expect it will be a week before we set out. For now, stay within the compound and make your final preparations. We will provide you with some talismans and other useful items when we embark, but the rest is up to you. Any questions?”

“Can you tell me a bit more about the environment we will visit?” Zac asked. “The quests didn’t quite specify.”

“I am only allowed to share exact details of where we’re going after the mission has started,” Teo said. “But I can tell you that we will be within a powerful spatial energy field. That will attract certain spatial beasts, so I suggest a few extra space-sealing items. These kinds of talismans generally don’t last long inside the Void Gate, but they can be surprisingly effective.”

“Understood,” Zac nodded, guessing it was a bit like when he used **[Rapturous Divide]** inside the Twilight Ocean. The ambient energy back there had supercharged the skill, making it both uncontrollable and deadly.

With that, they were done, and Zac left to prepare while Teo walked toward another sparring chamber. Zac spent the next couple of days in the research base waiting for his token to buzz. Most of the time was spent trying to delve deeper into the **[Book of Duality]**. He had reached a method Kalo called divergence, and Zac suspected the theories within were the foundation for, or at least related to, **[Rapturous Divide]**.

It detailed how forcibly keeping two opposing forces separate could create a powerful field in-between, like how magnets would create a magnetic field. With the right techniques, this field could be condensed and manipulated in all kinds of ways. This trivia was more interesting than useful, but Zac did wonder if this concept could be somehow used for a life-death core.

It was a bit similar to the marks he had left on the trial wheel in Yrial’s inheritance. The energies of his two attacks had fused back then, which had caused the energies to instantly go

haywire and the disk to break apart. But if he kept the two sides separate, would his creation be stabler? Problem was, could you use the theories of a gap or a chasm as a basis for a Cultivator's Core? Would that leave you with a hollow core? A core with two halves, like a brain?

It seemed possible, but doing so would essentially halve the power it could exhibit, considering he'd only be able to use half the core at any given time. And what would happen if he had a pure miasmatic half while staying in his human form? Zac remembered the nauseating feeling of absorbing just a couple of wisps of miasma from a crystal. With a proper core, would he continuously be poisoning himself? Would his Hidden Nodes even let the core stay intact?

Zac eventually shook his head and continued deciphering the characters. The greater the theoretical base he formed, the more options would present themselves.

Apart from his studies, he spent a couple of hours a day walking around, occasionally striking up conversations with the other wandering cultivators. He didn't find out much else of import, but he did hear one Late E-grade cultivator mention seeing a Half-Step Hegemon in his group teleporting away the moment the quest was done.

Most people were rather ferried back to Salosar on the Void Gate's dime to save on costs, but it was good to know there were available teleportation arrays inside the Void Gate as well. Zac also purchased a couple of space-sealing items from a store set up by the Void Gate themselves, along with an escape Talisman meant to be used in areas with strong Spatial Fields.

After three days, the recruitment station had grown a lot less crowded as squads set out one by one through teleporters, even though there was a constant stream of new arrivals. A second massive batch arrived on day five, and Zac's token buzzed three days later. It was finally time to go.

Zac immediately made a beeline for a building next to the administrative center – the mission command and teleportation room. Soon enough, he stood with a diverse group of

cultivators in a private hall. All of them were emitting their auras, and it wasn't hard to tell that almost all of them were Half-Step cultivators. The only exceptions were four who emitted the especially condensed auras of Hegemons.

It went to show just how scarce even early Hegemons were on the frontier, especially among wandering cultivators. Facing the group of unaffiliated warriors was Teo and another three Hegemons standing behind him. There were two women and a man, all of them templars going by their similar sets engraved of armor.

There were also six hooded cultivators standing by their side, all of them emitting very weak pressure, meaning they were probably the researchers.

“Welcome, everyone,” Teo said as he looked at the group of elites. “The Void Gate appreciates you braving the dangers to help us out. We will do our best to reciprocate your trust. For those of you who haven't met me, I am Teo Kastella, and I will be running point during this mission. With me are Kalo Taosa and Tyla Vesass, who will command one squad each. Finally, Havasa Yrvis, leader of the second-string defenders.”

Zac glanced at Havasa, one of the two female templars. From the looks of it, she was at the peak of early Hegemony. But different from Teo's mountainlike aura, she gave off a fierce and bloody impression. Zac guessed she was an offensive warrior focusing on Strength like himself. She was probably the one responsible for executing any troublesome beasts who made it past the defensive perimeter, while the second-string cultivators kept the monsters restrained.

“There's only us?” a burly warrior asked with some confusion.

“The others are waiting for us inside the Void Gate,” Teo explained. “If we brought all the members to this station, we would have been forced to climb on each other to move around. Now, this is your last chance to back down. The moment the mission starts, we will not abide deserters.”

Zac glanced around, but not a single one raised any objections. He guessed any flaky people had been filtered out before this stage. Then again, the fine for breaking the contract early was

pretty steep, and failing quests should be avoided when possible. Even if a quest didn't have any failure conditions, messing up a mission would lower your importance in the System's eyes, which could have all kinds of negative impacts.

“Alright then. We will make a jump into the Void Gate where we will have proper briefings and join up with our task members,” Teo said, and the large teleporter behind him activated a moment later.

One by one, the wandering cultivators stepped inside, with the four early-stage Hegemons taking the lead. Zac recognized three of them from various intelligence packets, but the fourth one, a graceful woman with a dangerous gleam in her eyes, was completely unknown to him. Two of the others were famous wandering cultivators who had millennia of experience.

The final Hegemon was called Uzu Huso, and he had only broken through five years ago, which had caused some waves on Salosar Eight where he came from. After the Hegemons, the Half-Step cultivators entered, where an unofficial hierarchy formed pretty much automatically based on their auras.

This was a common occurrence among unaffiliated cultivators. They didn't have heritage or background to compare, so they kept it simple by comparing power and feats. In this scenario, the power level Zac had set for himself barely landed him in the top twenty. However, Zac could easily tell that if he went all out, only the experienced Hegemons would be able to put up a real fight.

Apart from his Titles, it boiled down to Dao. These Half-Step Hegemons had spent centuries, millennia even, squeezing out as much potential they could from their current level. But even then, it was obvious that they were just like the Real Gaun, stuck with Dao Fragments, with many not even having evolved them to Peak Mastery. There were just two Zac suspected to actually possess Dao Branches.

Still, a few of these warriors emitted respectable energy levels for a wandering cultivator, meaning they had probably

encountered their fair share of opportunities during their lifetimes.

Zac stepped onto the teleporter when his turn came, and after a brief stint of darkness, he emerged in what looked like a balcony. However, on second look it was clear it was rather a viewing gallery inside some sort of enormous stone structure, where the outer wall had been replaced by a transparent array.

The others had already walked over to the edge to take in the view, and Zac flashed over as well.

“Holy crap,” Zac muttered, not needing to pretend at all, even after having visited places like the Twilight Harbor.

The object that took up most of his field of vision was a large sun with a bluish hue. Judging by its proximity, Zac guessed the shielding array had some sort of dampening effects to prevent people from being blinded. Even then, Zac could both sense and see extremely powerful spatial fluctuations coming from within the star.

It almost looked like a heart that beat with spatial pulses, and Zac suddenly remembered the note left along with Leyara’s ‘gift’, where she wanted to talk fashion and the future under the light of the Void Star.

Was this it?

However, while the star was impressive, it still paled in comparison to the rest of the view. It quickly became clear they weren’t actually on some planet with a very close trajectory to the blue sun. Spaceships, ranging from monstrous leviathans over ten thousand meters long to thousands of smaller skippers that flashed back and forth in the void, filled his view.

If not for the distinct arrays and the archaic designs, Zac would have thought he had been teleported to a Technocrat base rather than some space fortress of a Zecia faction. As for himself and his squad, they hadn’t appeared in a Cosmic Vessel like those that flicked about. Rather, they were standing in a tower of a mind-bogglingly huge construct.

To his sides, he saw five more towers like the one they stood in, each one reaching tens of thousands of meters into the air. They almost looked like beehives with gates the smaller vessels flew into, while the larger motherships were docked outside.

The towers were connected horizontally to an unfathomably large oblong structure far below, almost looking like chimneys of a steamboat. Was it actually a ship? Could it even be considered one at this size? The scene was pretty shocking, considering this enormous construct wasn't the only one – Zac saw three more just like it far in the distance.

“Now this is a real faction,” the warrior next to Zac muttered with wide eyes, his eyes glued to the scene. “Just being able to witness this was worth the trip.”

“So many vessels, and each one is worth a fortune,” another wandering cultivator added. “No wonder the Void Gate has the means to pay such generous bounties.”

One by one, the wandering cultivators joined Zac and the others at the edge of the room, silently looking at the scene. Even the Hegemons looked gobsmacked at the means of the Void Gate, and Zac wasn't surprised. The resources of a proper C-grade force simply couldn't be compared to a D-grade one. Building a ship of this size would probably bankrupt the Salosar Cluster a couple of times over.

“Welcome to Zenith Vigil, one of our supply depots,” Teo smiled.

Chapter 866: My Heart Belongs to the Dao

“This is just a supply depot?” a woman exclaimed. “Not a Core Ship?”

“The Void Gate doesn’t employ Core Ships - we don’t actually live in space,” Teo smiled, clearly satisfied with the reactions of the crowd. “Zenith Vigil is mostly used as a relay station for the warriors of the Void Gate. I’m sure you’ve noticed the star over there. That’s our target.”

“I know various rumors and theories are floating about back at Salsosar,” the captain continued. “But here’s the truth. That there is the Void Star, and it’s a central part of our heritage. In truth, it’s not just a celestial object – it is something much more interesting. It’s a gateway.”

“All those mystic realms,” a cultivator muttered.

“Exactly,” the Marshal nodded. “This Void Star is not an entrance to one Mystic Realm – it holds thousands of realms. It is a unique object that superimposes innumerable dimensions. But now, something has gone awry. The realms the Void Star holds are being flooded with beasts, and some fundamental rules to travel between the realities within have become capricious.

“Most missions are pretty simple – to exterminate the beasts that have invaded and restore order. In our case, we are here to study, and hopefully repair, a node that is causing trouble. Meanwhile, the leaders are trying to investigate the source of the anomalies and the beasts.”

“The spatial fields around the Void Star are too powerful for teleportation. Zenith Vigil is placed as close to our destination as possible, but we will have to go by ship the last stretch. When we enter the Void Star, we expect it will take two weeks

to a month to reach the anomaly,” one of the squad leaders added.

“For now, let’s head to our vessel,” Teo added. “The star is a lot further than it looks because of the dense spatial field around it. It will take three weeks before we reach it. While we travel, we will go over all the pertinent details of what you should expect inside.”

“I heard previous squads had the opportunity to peruse the wares and public techniques at the Supply Depot before setting out?” Uzu, the wandering Hegemon, ventured.

“Unfortunately, it took too long to fill this squad. We are already late. You will have a chance to trade after we return instead,” Teo said. “Now, let’s go.”

Zac reluctantly looked away from the breathtaking scenery and exited through a gate to the side with the others. They didn’t need to go very far to reach their destination – one of the hangars was right next door, and it held a bulky vessel roughly the size of a soccer field. Its design was a lot rougher compared to the vessels the Creators had shown him, but that didn’t diminish the strong impression it left.

Standing in front of it, Zac felt like an ant, and he almost salivated at the thought that his own ship would be at least three times the size of this monstrosity. The docking yard had normal gravity, yet the ship was silently floating in the air without releasing as much as a ripple, and the group embarked with the help of floating platforms that took them into the vessel.

“What kind of ship is this?” another wandering cultivator ventured when they had all boarded, finding themselves in what looked like a cargo hold.

“It’s nothing special,” Teo shrugged. “It’s a Templar transporter. Its only good feature is its resilience and shielding. Even Middle-stage Hegemons will find it difficult to break its defenses.”

“Should we expect an attack en route?” another cultivator asked.

“Normally, no,” Kalo, one of the seconds-in-command, said. “But when spatial anomalies are involved, you never know what can happen.”

“Everyone has a designated room matching the sigil on your tokens,” Teo continued as a map appeared above his head. “For now, feel free to walk around or get to know your squadmates. Your companions from the Void Gate have already boarded, you should be able to find most of them in the sparring chambers or the mess. We will start the first briefing in five hours in the communal area.”

The interiors of the unnamed vessel were quite simple – a third were sealed chambers that held the arrays for propulsion and defense, and another third were private compartments. That left some room for the cargo hold they found themselves in right now, two viewing decks, a couple of sparring rooms, the bridge, and a large multipurpose room that included social areas, including the mess hall.

With that, the four Hegemons left in the direction of the bridge, leaving the fifty wandering cultivators to their own devices. Some stayed on inside the cargo hold, discussing the Void Gate and Zenith Vigil in low volumes, while others went to explore.

Some walked in the direction of the sparring rooms with determined expressions, and it wasn't hard to understand they wanted to fight with the templars. Others sauntered toward the mess hall. As for Zac and a few others, they made their way toward the viewing decks, not having seen enough of the view outside.

Zac chose the deck at the rear of the vessel since he was more interested in the Vigil Station than the Void Star – he would have more than enough time to study that thing over the coming weeks. There were already a couple of templars standing there, but they didn't pay the wandering cultivators much heed. Zac greeted them with a small bow and got curt nods in return from roughly half of the warriors.

“We're already moving,” one of the warriors next to Zac commented, and they hurriedly walked over to the window

just in time to see their vessel soundlessly float out of the hangar.

There hadn't been any recoil or force when the ship set off, and Zac hadn't even sensed any energies from within the ship. The arrays that propelled the system had to be protected by a pretty powerful seal to not leak out a hint of energy.

Only a minute later did Zac finally see how the vessel moved – the ship was generating spatial pulses at the back of the ship. Every few seconds, they released a pulse, and it looked a lot like a stone dropped in a calm lake for a second before space stabilized again.

“It's a localized spatial displacement configuration,” a voice next to Zac explained. “The ambient spatial energy in front of the vessel is absorbed, amplified, and released behind us, creating a smooth and mostly self-perpetuating momentum. The engine is very efficient and inexpensive to create, but these vessels only work in the vicinity of the Void Star.”

Zac turned over with interest, feeling the voice was a bit familiar. However, it wasn't Teo or one of the other leaders who had spoken, but rather another familiar figure.

“It's you?” Zac blurted with surprise.

Standing next to him was Vai Salas, the little nun who had suspected him of shoplifting when entering the recruitment station. She was wearing one of the hooded cloaks of the researchers who had wordlessly teleported over with the others, but she had taken off the hood hiding her facial features.

“We meet again,” Vai said and performed a small bow. “It is quite the coincidence.”

“Is it really?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

Had she followed him here? And if so, why? Had she noticed something amiss with him before?

“Ah, well,” the nun hesitated. “I did not expect to encounter you again after our previous encounter. But when I saw your name in the mission manifest, it almost felt like fate.”

“Don’t go falling in love with me,” Zac smiled at the timid nun. “My heart belongs to the Dao.”

“That’s- no,” Vai said with a panicky expression as she bowed. “I’m sorry, I am not looking for a relationship. I have taken a vow with the covenant, and as such, I can’t enter any relationships before reaching Hegemony.”

“Stop, stop,” Zac grimaced. “I was just joking.”

“Oh,” Vai said with a small blush. “I’m sorry, I am not used to talking with strangers. But I guess we will get to know each other better over the following months. What I meant to say earlier was that when I saw your name on the manifest, I asked the captain to assign you to me as my guardian. It felt like a sign from the Heavens encountering you twice, and I chose to listen to the will of the cosmos.”

“So it was like that,” Zac nodded. “I’ll do my best. But uh, try not to get yourself in trouble, alright?”

“Of course,” Vai smiled. “And don’t worry. I am not one of the non-combat researchers. I can defend myself as well, or at least run away and buy you some time.”

“So you’re not a researcher?” Zac asked curiously.

“I am, in a sense,” Vai said. “I reached an impasse early in my cultivation. So 1,200 years ago, I joined a special division researching the Void Star in hopes of finding some inspiration for my path. I didn’t succeed, but I did find the work very rewarding.”

“You’re that ol- ahem, experienced?” Zac exclaimed, somewhat course-correcting upon seeing the pout on the nun’s face. “Sorry, I am just surprised considering you mentioned it was your first time leaving home. With your strong aura, I thought you part of the young elites of your faction.”

“I’ve spent most of my life in the monastery, and I haven’t had much reason to lea-”

“Ms. Salas, the Adjunct is waiting for us,” another researcher interrupted as he walked over, his aura indicating he was a non-combat researcher.

“I am Gaun Sorom, it is nice to meet you,” Zac said with a nod.

“Hm,” the man said before turning and walking away.

“I’m sorry,” Vai said with a weak smile. “The captain told me we ought to coordinate with our guardians, so I hope we can set up a sparring session during our journey?”

“Of course,” Zac nodded.

Zac wryly smiled as he saw the two walk away. The rumors certainly were true; some of these Void Gate cultivators really looked down their noses at the wandering cultivators. Then again, it wasn’t Zac’s problem. He wouldn’t explode in a fit of righteous indignation just from being disregarded, as some hotheads did. If anything, the less attention these people gave him, the better.

He wasn’t in any rush, so he kept looking at the enormous space station for a few more minutes, seeing how one vessel after another emerged or docked. Going by the size of the station’s main body and the constant traffic, Zac guessed millions of people had to come and go every week. Zac wondered how the Void Gate made that work.

The Orom had been forced to continuously hunt people and use their materials to maintain the ambient energy. Were the templars doing the same – were they forced to burn millions of Nexus Crystals every day to maintain the environment? Or were they able to make use of the Void Star somehow? Or were there perhaps arrays that could copy the process of World Cores, dragging energy from the cosmos?

Was that the meaning of the Core Ships that the woman mentioned earlier?

As marvelous as the view was, there were other things Zac needed to do - the first of which was to get to know the players in this squad. He might need the help of the Hegemons to complete his private mission, so he needed to start networking. He first made a quick trip to check out his compartment and found it was pretty decent. It was split up into two rooms with the outer room being a multipurpose room with a sofa set and

a desk where a few books were placed. Zac looked them over, finding one contained information on the beasts of the Void Star.

The other one actually contained information on space. It was not really a treatise on the Dao, but it rather contained useful information that would help one understand what various types of ripples meant. The book was no doubt left there to prepare the outsiders for the environment of the Void Star and to avoid any preventable accidents.

After that, Zac made his way to the mess hall, where roughly sixty people had already gathered. It was pretty clear that camps had formed not only between the outsiders and the templars, but also within the wandering cultivators. Zac inwardly smiled, feeling his situation was a bit like being the transfer kid at a school cafeteria as he walked toward a table with ten wandering cultivators.

“Is this seat taken?” Zac asked, looking at a handsome man with two swirls of flames circulating above his head.

While most of the others had restrained their auras by now, Uzu made no attempts to hide his ascent into Hegemony – it was almost like he was afraid that someone would miss it. To his side, the dangerous-looking woman sat, silently sipping on some sort of hot brew that emitted dense waves of Cosmic Energy.

“Make yourself at home,” Uzu waved with a wide grin. “I’m Uzu, and this here is Lady Ilka, an experienced expert from Tanlovi.”

“Lord Uzu, Lady Ilka,” Zac nodded before looking at Ilka with genuine surprise. The Tanlovi Triumvirate was quite far from Salsosar, which meant she had to have come here with the help of the Space Gate Guild. “I’m Gaun Sorom, second string.”

“Gaun Sorom, think I heard about you,” a dour man on the other side of the table suddenly said just as Zac sat down. “Heard a rumor you got your hands on a trove at the level of a supreme treasure.”

“I wish,” Zac said with a wry smile, silently memorizing the features of the man causing trouble. “If I had supreme treasure, would I be taking on this kind of mission?”

“Now ain’t that the truth?” Uzu laughed. “I’m flat broke after barely breaking through. If not for the rewards, why would I take this mission instead of the simple beast-killing tasks?”

A few grunts of agreement echoed around the table.

“But I think we made the right choice,” the Hegemon added. “Analyzing the tasks with what we’ve learned so far, I think we’re heading for one of the higher-grade realms hidden within that celestial object. I believe the odds of us discovering bounty materials are pretty good. Might be a fate-changing opportunity, even.”

Zac nodded with some longing on his face, an expression that was mirrored among some of the others. The chances of these people stepping into Hegemony were almost nil, but it was clear they had not given up just yet. The others rather had a greedy glint in their eyes, probably hoping for the treasure so that they could finally retire to a life of luxury back on Salosar.

“Have any of you ever heard of these sorts of transforming realms?” another man asked.

This man looked a lot like a dwarf with his stocky frame and bushy beard, except he had more than a head on Billy. While the others sat on chairs, this man sat straight on the ground, yet he was level with the others. Going by his extremely leathery skin, Zac guessed there might be some ogre in his bloodline.

“Never,” Uzu said, and the others shook their heads as well soon enough.

There were some similarities between the Void Star and the Twilight Ascent, but they were ultimately different. For one, the Twilight Ascent was a system trial, and it was the System that had forcibly divided one Mystic Realm into three identical versions. This place rather felt much more complicated.

Eventually, everyone’s gazes turned to Ilka, the only other Hegemon at the table.

“It is definitely not a common occurrence,” Ilka slowly said. “If I had to guess, this is the only place in our sector with this kind of layered Mystic Realm. The Dravorak Dynasty has the Hundred Fates, but those Mystic Realms are simply serried rather than superimposed.”

“I cannot remember reading about anything like this in the archives either,” a scholarly-looking old man said. “It should be worth studying – it might be related to their strength.”

“Ka-Lu over there worked the gates of the Drix Archives for seven centuries, he’s probably one of the most well-read outsiders on this ship,” Uz nodded.

“You think it’s the source of their spatial heritage, rather than the other way around?” Zac asked curiously.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Ka-Lu smiled. “But it brings up some interesting questions, wouldn’t you say? A powerful heritage, a mysterious celestial object, and a faction that’s desperately gathering ancient remnants throughout the region.”

“You think it’s related to the Limitless Empire?” Uzu said, his voice reduced to a whisper.

“The Limitless Empire was powerful beyond our understanding. Creating something as marvelous as this stellar object should have been child’s play to them. Perhaps the Void Gate found a heritage of theirs somehow, but they cannot freely control it or excavate its deepest secrets. So they’re looking for clues among the ruins of Zecia.”

Zac looked at the old man with surprise, wondering if he really was onto something. He remembered how Leyara had stopped at nothing to purchase some random vase back in the Tower of Eternity, just because of its connection to the Limitless Empire. Ka-Lu’s suppositions also tracked with his own guesses about the Void Gate’s connection to his heritage and Emperor Limitless.

Come to think of it, there was one more factor which indicated Zecia might have more of a connection to the Limitless Empire than one should expect from a frontier sector. After all, it was here Leandra’s family had set up a research base

looking into bloodlines. And it was here Leandra fled when their experiments failed – indicating the actual experiments might not have taken place too far away.

In theory, the Limitless Empire's domains should have been the first thing to get integrated when the System awoke, but what if something happened, where certain parts of the empire were disconnected? Or even moved away for some reason?

“Remnants of the Limitless Empire? We better hope not,” the dour man muttered.

“Really? You're not interested in the remains of the most powerful Empire in history?” Uzu asked with a raised brow.

“I'm interested in staying alive. Any realm or Heritage connected to the Limitless Empire, no matter how depreciated, would be a core secret of a faction – something even the powerful factions above Zecia would desire. If we're exposed to such secrets, the odds of us making it out in one piece is almost nil, contract or no,” he shrugged. “The less we see, the better.”

The man's words put a damper on the discussion, but his words weren't without reason. They were ultimately just outsiders without powerful backing. Most factions would do whatever it took to protect their core secret - killing a couple of wandering cultivators was nothing. But Zac's heart actually started to beat with anticipation rather than worry.

What if there really were clues to his heritage in this place?

Chapter 867: A Seed Returned

“Are you ready?” Zac asked.

“I- Yes?” Vai hesitated as she gripped her tome tightly.

“Alright then,” Zac grinned. He took a step forward and the chamber was flooded with unbridled killing intent. “Then try to survive.”

With that, he flashed forward with **[Earthstrider]** as his eyes bored into Vai’s. She had visibly paled from the onslaught of his bloodlust, but Zac still sensed she managed to infuse her tome with Cosmic Energy. The next moment, one Vai turned into ten, and space started to twist refract throughout the whole room.

It was a simple spatial manipulation that essentially turned the area into a labyrinth, where the cardinal directions lost their meaning as they were turned into a Gordian knot. However, Zac only smiled and punched to his left. A tunnel was forced in the twisting corridor of space exposing one of the nun’s avatars who looked at him agape.

Zac took another step with his movement skill to appear right in front of her, and his axe was already descending toward her head.

“Eep!” Vai yelped, her eyes wide with horror as she looked at the incoming edge.

“Well, it’s better, I guess?” Zac muttered as he stopped his swing mid-motion. “But the aura of your true self was exposed when setting up the labyrinth. And you stopped moving after erecting it, making it effortless to figure out where you were. If you swapped places with one of your doppelgangers the moment the trap was set up, you would have been able to

avoid me a lot longer. Also, the trap you set up was beautifully crafted, but all that effort is wasted in front of a Beast King. Remember, keep it simple and keep moving.”

This was their fifth training session together, and even if Vai’s performance was pretty wretched, it was still a lot better than the first time they fought. Zac had quickly realized that Vai barely had any combat experience at all. It turned out she hadn’t been in a single life-death battle in her whole life, and his raw killing intent had been enough to render her unconscious.

When asked, Vai explained she had reached peak E-grade when only 28. From there, she had spent the next fifty years trying to progress using the solitary methods of the Void Gate devotees. Unfortunately, she had hit a brick wall when reaching for Hegemony, and the Void Gate wouldn’t pay for their people’s cultivation forever if they didn’t progress.

Finally, she had been forced to take up a job as an assistant at some research facility, and that was where she had worked for the remainder of her life, slowly rising in ranks until she became a proper researcher. During that time, she hadn’t fought a single time, so the little she knew from her cultivation days had slowly been lost.

By now, she had essentially discarded her identity as a combat class altogether, and half of her skills had been replaced with ones that would help her with her research.

That’s why Zac had discarded any idea of trying to teach her some basic footwork or to avoid danger and instead settled on the basic method he had used on Emily long ago. If he could get her used to his killing intent, she hopefully wouldn’t freeze like a deer in headlights the moment a beast came barreling toward her.

During their second training session, Vai had barely managed to stay conscious, but she had still been so unnerved that she had completely forgotten how to use skills or Cosmic Energy. The little nun had simply tried to stumble out of the way while shrieking at the top of her lungs, almost looking like a mortal who had yet to start cultivating.

So that Vai had accomplished this much just a few weeks later could be considered pretty good.

“I’m sorry, I keep coming up short,” Vai sighed.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zac smiled. “You’re making progress, and you’re probably a lot better compared to the other researchers already.”

“Still... Could we go again?” Vai said with a determined expression.

“Sure,” Zac nodded.

Like that, the two went a couple of more rounds, where Vai tried to gain some basic experience. But suddenly, the door swung open, and Zac was surprised to see it was Havasa Yrvis, the leader of the second-string defenders, who walked inside. They had spoken a few times by now, and they had even sparred once - and she was the real deal.

She used a spiked hammer as a weapon, and Zac had been afraid she would tear the whole vessel apart when she swung that gnarly thing. In return, she was on the slower side for a hegemon. She was a lot like Billy in that sense, though their personalities were nothing alike, and neither were their Daos.

“Interesting,” Havasa said.

“Captain Yrvis,” Zac said with a bow. “I figured this was the best way to increase her odds of survival in case something happened.”

“You’re right,” Havasa nodded. “It’s too late for her to gain any practical combat ability, but getting anointed in killing intent will at least help her stay conscious during a beast tide. I am more curious about you, and why you have such a dense killing intent. It borders on the unorthodox.”

“There’s nothing of that sort,” Zac hurriedly said. “I’m simply not too bright, so I have spent the past centuries throwing myself against beasts in the wilderness. That’s how I’ve managed to gain the little amount of power I have.”

“Mhm,” Havasa answered noncommittally before she turned away. “We’re going break through in one hour. I suggest you

return to your compartments.”

With that, she was gone, and Zac turned to Vai for an explanation. However, he found her looking confused as well.

“How odd, it should be a few more days,” she muttered. “Has the corona expanded?”

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“We’re about to enter the domain of the Void Star, but we’ll have to pass through a very dense spatial film first. It’s very powerful and can leave hidden pockets of spatial energy in your body, which you definitely don’t want to have when entering a powerful spatial field. There has been more than one Void Gate disciple who has suddenly died from a tear opening up from within their body.”

“Great,” Zac muttered.

“Don’t worry, the odds of that happening are quite low, and our compartments have an additional layer of shielding. You are much more likely to die from a beast attack,” Vai hurriedly said.

“You’re not helping,” Zac sighed as he walked out of the sparring room. “So, after we’ve passed through that film, we’ve arrived?”

“Almost. We will have to enter the correct layer, but that will only take a few hours. Thank you for the help these past weeks,” Vai said with a bow. “I didn’t realize I had such a glaring weakness. I will try not to make your job any harder than it has to be.”

“Don’t worry about that and just focus on fixing that anomaly of yours,” Zac smiled. “The sooner we can go back, the better.”

Seeing as they had an hour, Zac walked over to an almost-full viewing deck while Vai returned to her quarters. The Void Star essentially covered their whole vision by this point, a huge glaring wall of blue that consumed everything else. However, there were still no clues to how a star could hold thousands of Mystic Realms – there weren’t any glimpses of anything except fire hiding within.

Neither were there any clues to the film Havasa mentioned they were approaching, so Zac returned to his cabin soon enough. There was no point in tempting fate and getting blasted with a wave of supercharged spatial energies. After all, the barrier had clearly moved out a lot further than Vai expected, so who was to say it couldn't drift a bit further?

So Zac sat down at the sealed cultivation chamber and started going over his own research instead. Most of Zac's time over the past three weeks had been spent in his room, where he deepened his understanding of the **[Book of Duality]**. By now, most of the second chapter was 'completely' deciphered, though unlocking the remaining five chapters would no doubt add new layers to what he knew.

As to how long that would take, Zac couldn't be certain, but he expected at least a year. And that was if he focused solely on the book. Problem was, he had a lot of things on his plate at the moment, even after having put a hold on his Soul Strengthening now that he didn't have access to the right environment.

The more he had learned from the **[Book of Duality]**, the more he had felt Three Virtues was onto something. The System, and the whole universe for that matter, was based on the concept of balance. And while there were innumerable ways to look at balance, it did seem reasonable that his human side should be life-attuned rather than just... nothing.

Problem was that the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** was not just a Body-strengthening Manual. On the surface, the training method seemed quite simple – there were three different life-attuned and body-strengthening compounds you needed to prepare, or one of their many replacements. With these compounds, you would then draw a specific array on your body before practicing a certain set of movements while chanting the provided sutras.

It was Heart Cultivation and Body Cultivation mashed into one, and Zac's instincts told him that the Heart Cultivation was a trap. It was based on a completely different path from his own, where he drew strength from his convictions and his goals. Meanwhile, the Heart Cultivation method centered

around relinquishing - letting go of the fetters that kept you from enlightenment.

An approach like this wouldn't necessarily turn you into an unthinking arhat, as long as you managed to hold onto your path. But even then, it was only suitable for the type of cultivators who had severed everything in their pursuit of the Dao – family, emotions, desires, and mundane interests. It would strengthen your conviction and connection to the Dao while eroding everything else.

This didn't work for Zac, so he was trying to figure out a way to extract only the Body-tempering component of the technique, and discard the Heart Cultivation. This was easier said than done. It wasn't like he could just skip chanting the sutras. Not only would that throw off the rhythm of the technique, but he could somewhat tell that the actual stances could affect his state of mind as well.

So even though he already had more than enough materials to start the introductory stage of the method, he hadn't practiced it once. Heart cultivation was intangible and elusive, and he feared he wouldn't notice his personality changing until it was too late.

The minutes passed, and Zac finally started to see a change in the cultivation chamber. Normally, you'd only sense the powerful spatial fluctuations outside when visiting the viewing deck, but Zac now found space all around him starting to stir. It was as though his surroundings had come alive, with the walls, ground, and even the air itself dancing with the beat of the cosmos.

At first, it wasn't too bad. But then the pulse came and reality cracked.

The palace was vast beyond comprehension, looking down at the world with indifference. It held back the endless storm, a stalwart defender that had kept its vigil for an unfathomable number of years. The very air was filled with antiquity and conviction. But few things in this universe were eternal - and the great fortress had seen its fair share of assaults.

Each mark marring its structures was a Dao perfected, each scar the representation of an indomitable will. Even the wrath of the Heavens formed intricate patterns across the walls and the towers, yet they proudly remained standing. Together, the indelible marks formed a tapestry of fate so rich that it beggared comprehension. The loss and destruction this castle had seen were enough to make the heavens cry.

Who had built it, and who had wanted to see it destroyed? And what was the storm that forever drew closer? And what was that mark? The mark looked so-

The sobriety was deafening across the courtyard. It was hollow yet not wanting – not even the Heavens could impugn on its domain. There was no life, but also no death. No conflict, no future, no past. There was just emptiness.

Nine seals. Eight pillars. One destiny.

The white pebbles that made the path leading toward the solitary building were simple and unadorned, yet they made up the basis of the universe. The seven steps at the end of the path held the weight of an era, each one marked with the same solitary brand.

The building atop the small platform was simple, but the aura emanating from within had surpassed the Heavens, surpassed the Dao. It couldn't be defined by the heavenly laws, because it had transcended what should be possible. And it was waiting.

Ultom.

Mohzius' thoughtfully frowned as he mulled over the messages from his disciples. The Starbeast Alliance was gathering strength while the ancient clans launched massive wars. Even the Sangha and the remaining Apostatic Clans were stirring.

Why now? It was much too early for another ascent. The Heavens were still gathering momentum. But there were few other things that could cause such a stir.

Suddenly, space rippled, and a smile spread across his face as he looked at the sky.

“What’s wrong, love?” he asked. “The Heavens will find you if you keep popping in like this.”

“It’s busy at the moment. One of the pillars is stirring.”

“Well, that would do it,” Mohzious grimaced as he glanced at the missives in his hands. “This is not a great time for us. What do you want to do?”

“As you said, it’s not for us,” the Empyrean Throne said. “Perhaps we’ll find an opportunity in the future depending on how things turn out. For now, let the others fight it out. The pillars are not so easily seized. Last time, the struggle lasted almost a million years.”

“That one was special, though,” Mohzious muttered.

“They’re all special. Just stay put until I can emerge, and keep little Iz safe from the storm that’s coming.”

“About that...” Mohzious coughed.

“Old man, what have you done?” a chilly voice growled as the galaxy shuddered.

—

“Amitabha, excuse me, brothers,” Blessed Fate smiled.

“Off to that decrepit little temple of yours again, brother Fate?” Kendos frowned. “Why not just move down from the mountain? The forest path is growing treacherous. Basto’s son almost got gored by a beast of a boar the other day.”

“I’m telling you, something odd is going on,” Hastus added.

“The animals are growing bigger, meaner.”

“Amitabha, what will be, will be,” Blessed Fate sighed. “One of the heavenly constants is change, but this poor monk still needs to tend to his temple.”

The men in the room froze before starting to fade. The happened to the small mountain village, the mountains, the country, and soon the whole world. Tens of thousands of years of history, gone. Billions of lives lived across hundreds of

generations. Stars were extinguished and galaxies died out as all creation returned to the origin.

Joys and sorrows. Hopes and aspirations. Suffering and despair. All gone. Remaining was just a golden ocean stretching toward eternity.

“Amitabha, Almsgivers. Born from the heart, returned to the heart. Come, child.”

Space shifted, and a small island appeared, on the center of which a small mountain temple stood. Waiting by its gates, stood a rotund halfling.

“Teacher,” the child said with a bow when Blessed Fate walked over.

“Just a few dozen millennia have passed, and you are already making progress,” Blessed Fate smiled.

“It is all thanks to teacher’s blessings, but this one still has a long way to go,” Three Virtues said with another bow. “I am still far from creating a world with my heart, let alone a reality.”

“Enlightenment cannot be rushed,” Blessed Fate said. “What will be, will be. But this poor monk has to confess, I am surprised. This one thought you wanted to keep your incarnations on the outside until your rebirth was complete.”

“It could not wait. As expected, teacher was correct,” Three Virtues said as he handed his master a small white pebble whose very presence caused ripples to spread across the whole ocean.

A moment later, a golden buddha rose from the depths, its hands joined together in a mighty seal containing the authority of Buddha. Order was restored, and the Dvarapala sunk back to resume its eternal vigil.

“The Kalpa turns as Ultom stirs,” Blessed Fate sighed, his eyes trained on the pebble rather than the scene outside. “Are we prepared?”

”A pebble brought out and a seed returned,” Three Virtues nodded. “Though I confess, the path teacher chose seems...

Precarious. This poor monk fears it will have the opposite effect.”

“There are no certainties in life, and our actions might end up accruing Mara. With everything at stake, there are no safe paths down the road,” Blessed Fate said with a sorrowful smile. “Even so, we will shoulder the weight. If this useless monk doesn’t step through the gates of hell, who will?”

Chapter 868: Ultom

Zac felt his soul cry, unable to comprehend what he had been forced to witness. He couldn't think, he couldn't see – his senses were filled with red and the screams of an ancient past. He desperately tried to escape, to scream for help - anything to break the vision that gripped him and was rapidly eroding his mind.

Suddenly, he felt a soothing stream of golden warmth fill him, and his frantically beating heart gradually calmed down. The ancient horror was still there – the comfort that filled him was just a firefly in front of a raging inferno. However, it was as though the vision of the courtyard didn't want to be sullied, and for lack of a better word, it exited Zac's mind on its own as the healing waves spread throughout his body.

Finally, Zac started to gain a sense of his surroundings, though the world was still steeped in red. He tried to clear his eyes, but his hands didn't quite listen to him. So instead, he tried to ask what was going on, but only a slurred groan escaped from his lips.

“Just relax,” a low voice said by his side, and Zac arduously turned his eyes to see an elderly man holding his hands over Zac's chest, and a beautiful shimmer was released onto his body.

It was Kantomir, one of the five devotees in the squad who were not researchers. Instead, he was a healer, and a D-grade one at that. Why was he here? Zac tried to force his harried mind to focus, and finally managed to take in what he was looking at.

Blood. Blood everywhere.

Zac was still in his compartment, but no longer inside the cultivation chamber. He was lying in a pool of blood in the middle of his social area, and the remaining splinters of the

door to his inner chamber were lying all around him. The walls were covered with large swathes of sanguine red as well - not even the ceiling was spared.

Had he punched himself out of the cultivation chamber in his delirious state? Or had someone broken in to save him? And why had he lost enough blood to paint the whole room red?

“What the- What is going on here?” another gruff voice asked to the side, and Zac recognized the voice to belong to Teo.

Clearly, he was just as much at a loss as Zac himself about the situation. Furthermore, both he and Kantomir were fine, indicating that the thing Zac had just endured only applied to him.

“I- eurh,” Zac, trying to force his mind to focus. “I don’t know. One minute the walls were started to dance, the next moment I find myself on the floor out here. I might have had a deviation in my cultivation. Did you drag me out of here?”

“I was alerted about your state from the token and found you lying here screaming at the top of your lungs,” Kantomir explained before he turned to the Templar captain. “Is it the visions?”

“Visions?” Zac said, trying to look confused as he wiped the blood from his face.

The former wasn’t anything odd. The tokens all the wandering cultivators wore contained a tracking array that also monitored one’s vitals. However, the second was more shocking. The Void Gate knew about those terrifying visions?

“Enough,” Teo said to Kantomir before turning to Zac. “Some warriors, mostly those with Spatial Affinity, are sometimes shown scenes from various layers of the Void Star when met with strong spatial turbulence. Your wretched state might be because you lack affinity with space. Do you remember seeing anything?”

“Nothing,” Zac lied with confusion written all over his face. “Seen what?”

“You might have seen one of the Beast Emperors in the depths of the Void Star, prompting the backlash,” Teo sighed. “This is

our mistake. These things usually only happen in the depth of the Void Star, it must have become more unpredictable than we expected. It looks like completing our mission has become even more important.

“Will this keep happening?” Zac groaned as he slowly got to a sitting position.

“Doubtful. Only you on the vessel were hit when we passed through the barrier, and we haven’t had any reports of this being a widespread occurrence. I’m afraid you were just unlucky. I guess it’s good to get the bad luck out of the way early?” Teo said with a wry smile.

“Yeah, feels great,” Zac grunted.

“Your soul is intact, and your body is free from any foreign Daos,” Kantomir commented. “There is a small amount of spatial energy in your body, but it is well within acceptable limits – nothing to indicate this event left any sequelae.”

“Try to recover as best you can over the next hour,” the Templar captain added as he took out a bottle of pills. “I’ll talk to Havasa and have you placed in the inner circle of the formation for the first few days.”

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded.

With that, Teo and the healer left the room, leaving Zac to try and gather his thoughts as he ate a healing pill – one of his own just in case. There had been something slightly off about Teo’s explanation, though Zac couldn’t say exactly what. Did the Templar know what Zac had just witnessed?

More importantly, just what the hell was that vision? It wasn’t a Dao Vision, and it didn’t feel like the visions he had seen when awakening his bloodlines or Hidden Nodes. Neither was it a journey of the spirit like when he had met with Be’Zi or her husband.

It rather felt like an invasion. One moment there was nothing, but the next this whole reality had crammed itself into the recesses of his mind, latent echoes that created an unbearable crescendo for someone at the E-grade. And with the power contained in the vision, Zac’s very sense of self had been

suppressed and replaced by knowledge and impressions that were now out of reach.

But he still remembered the castle - and what was hidden in its center.

The power that the vast citadel exuded beggared Zac's comprehension. He sincerely doubted that even that enormous golem that accompanied Iz Tayn would be able to leave the kinds of markings which crisscrossed those walls. Even then, the castle couldn't compare to the profundity of that lonesome courtyard.

It was like every grain of sand contained a universe, or at least truths that even surpassed the glimpses of Chaos he had conjured. Who could have built a place like that?

There weren't too many options in that regard. It was obviously erected by a peak faction far surpassing any force in Zecia or its neighboring states. Judging by the sense of antiquity and Zac's current location there was a clear contender; The Limitless Empire. Just like that wandering cultivator had said the day they boarded the ship – The Limitless Empire possessed means that were far beyond their understanding.

That would explain why only he was affected while Teo and the healer were fine. If so, it had to be an important facility of the Limitless Empire to emit that kind of power, completely different compared to the essentially useless scraps that had popped up in Zecia so far. It seemed almost impossible for something like that to appear in this desolate corner of the Multiverse.

But at the same time, Zac wasn't certain. It felt like an obvious conclusion that it was related to his bloodline, but his bloodline hadn't reacted at all, and nothing had changed in his constitution. Besides, even if the truths hidden in the scars on the castle or within the small pebbles of the courtyard were blurry now, he could somewhat tell they weren't exactly related to his origin.

There was a vague sense of connection between him and whatever lurked in the heart of that small pagoda at the heart

of the courtyard. However, it was more like that place held a connection to all creation and the Dao itself, rather than holding the answer to the true meaning of the ‘Void’ in his bloodline.

That unfathomable sense of having surpassed the limits of the Dao raised another possibility, one that was perhaps even more outlandish – was it an Eternal Heritage? Did the castle stem from an earlier era?

Or was he underestimating the profundity of the A-grade? Those people were at the very peak of the pyramid, and someone like Zac didn’t have the capabilities to gauge the difference between an Autarch and a Supremacy. It was possible that the castle simply came from some other powerful faction who had fallen during the endless years of the current age.

After all, the Multiverse was nigh-endless, and there were probably extremely powerful factions who existed outside the System’s purview. That was doubly true during the start of the System’s era when it only controlled a fraction of the domains it had now integrated.

Or was the castle even real?

“Ultom,” Zac muttered.

The next moment, his eyes widened in alarm as he looked around with fear. Fate had started gathering around him the moment he uttered the name had been engraved in his mind at the end of the vision. Thankfully, the convergence dissipated soon enough, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. But that short moment had been enough to leave his back slick with sweat.

It was real – all too real – and just saying the word came with implications.

Zac spent the next hour stabilizing his soul while using **[Surging Vitality]** to quickly mend the small tears that had appeared throughout his body. Thankfully, the healer’s diagnosis was mostly correct, though his mental energy was almost completely drained after witnessing the scene.

Even after one hour, he wasn't any closer to figuring out what was going on or what to do from here. He couldn't bow out now, especially not if the Templar Captain knew more than he let on. It would be counted as desertion, and possibly land him in big trouble. Furthermore, Zac wasn't sure he wanted to leave, even if he could.

It was he who had been shown the scene the moment he entered the Void Star, and Zac believed an opportunity waited for him inside as long as he dared seize it.

The smart thing would probably be to keep his head down and avoid trouble as he completed the task and caught a Worldeater. However, the vision of that lonesome courtyard might as well have been branded onto his soul. And if there was one thing he had learned from socializing with wandering cultivators over the past weeks, it was that opportunities that could change one's providence were few and far in-between.

Most of those he had spoken with had spent centuries desperately fighting and looking for a lucky break, risking their lives over and over. Even then, most of them had very little to show for it except their current levels of cultivation. A few had struck it rich a few times when risking their lives inside wild Mystic Realms, but those kinds of opportunities only lasted so long after paying the entrance fee along with house and board.

Zac knew he had encountered enough opportunities to last a lifetime already, but he knew that the same was true for everyone who had ever reached the peak – he needed to continuously find and seize them if he wanted a shot at Monarchy and above. That was true for everyone, but doubly true for him with his odd constitution and extremely ambitious path.

He didn't delude himself into thinking he could conquer that terrifying citadel, but any random scrap related to that place could probably be considered an earthshattering opportunity for an E-grade cultivator. This was what was required to pursue the peak, the conviction he needed to catch up with his mother. Greatness didn't come from playing it safe, there was no way his goals could be accomplished that way.

His years in the Orom World had pretty much exhausted the momentum and inspiration he had gained from all his previous opportunities, and it was time to dive into the deep end again. Zac didn't care if the vision was shown as part of the System's machinations, a result of his weird heritage, or even a stroke of fate. He didn't even care if his actions or pursuits would have unexpected ramifications for the Void Star or Zecia.

It might be greedy and selfish, but Zac would still face this head-on, win or lose.

Of course, that didn't mean he would blindly rush into the depths of this unknown terrain. It might mean he had to delay his trip to the Million Gates Territory though. There was no guarantee he'd find what he was looking for right away, so he might have to stay on and complete more missions inside the Void Star to search for clues. But so what?

Having come to a decision, Zac could somewhat feel how something had shifted inside him. It almost felt like his heart had sped up and adrenaline coursed through his body, but he knew it was something else. It was momentum, just like when he decided to risk his life for Kaldor's remnant or when he chose to immediately break through to the E-grade upon returning from the Tower of Eternity.

It felt like he was being carried forward by a wave of fate, pushing him further than he would have been able to reach on his own. Still, he let none of this surging show on his face as he finally exited his compartment, looking as good as new after having scrubbed the blood from himself and the compartment.

Right now, he was just Gaun Sorom. Right now, he would stay his hand, until it was time to make his move.

—

Perala's eyes shot open as the scar in front of her shuddered. A storm of space was released from her hands, but it was to no avail - an ancient aura permeated the chamber for a few seconds before the scar closed. It felt like her soul had been hit by a hammer, and tears spread all over her body, separating her

into hundreds of small parcels of flesh that floated across the chamber.

For a moment, she was nothing, but the void eventually drew her back together. Even then, her white robes were drenched with blood, and she knew she had lost eons of vitality just now. She closed her eyes, but there was no answer to her call. The heart had closed itself off, its beat no longer walking in step her own.

The ramifications were clear, and she shook her head with despair.

“So another pillar is about to be unearthed,” she sighed, filled with a sense of weariness and reluctance. “Why here? Why now? It’s too early.”

She had prayed it wouldn’t come to this. Its appearance was important, vital even. But at the same time, the suffering its descent would bring to the Multiverse, to Zecia, and to the Void Gate was inestimable. All these talents that had been raised, how many survive the winds of fate?

Suddenly, she felt a ripple in the void, and she waved her hand as the blood disappeared from her dress. The void was parted by her command, opening a gate through space. Two people stepped through, one warrior and one nun. It was Grand Templar Kalcas and Head Abbess Salvara, the previous-generation leaders of the two branches of the Void Gate.

“Mistress,” both said with a bow, their eyes immediately turning to the spot where the scar should have been.

“Is it really...?” the Kalcas asked, his eyes veritably burning as his fighting spirit caused the void to shake.

“Tranquility,” Perala urged. “What brought you here?”

“The Void Star just released a massive wave of energy, and we have lost contact with the depths,” the Abbess said. “With the marker extinguished...”

“With the unfortunate anomalies that have plagued the Void Star as of late, we will have to make sure it’s not a coincidence,” Perala said. “But it is likely true.”

“Billions of years - so many generations,” the warrior said, his eyes fraught with emotion. “The search, it’s finally over. We will get to see it before we face the Void. We can face our ancestors with pride.”

“There is still a long way to go,” Perala said. “But for now, stop the excavation and stabilize the paths as best we can. If we have managed to latch onto one of its nodes, we can’t lose it again.”

“Of course,” the warrior eagerly nodded. “What about the outsiders and the missions?”

“For now, let everything proceed,” Perala said with some thought. “Many are watching us right now. Besides, we don’t know what triggered the reaction - it might be a result of all the new blood arriving. Surely, we have missed more than one person carrying the bloodline over the eons.”

“What about the inner array?”

“Even if we have lost connection, it should still be operational,” Perala said. “I will head over myself in a moment.”

“Congratulations on finishing the Eternal Vigil,” Salvara said with a deep bow, and Kalcas immediately followed suit.

“Alright, enough of that,” Perala said with a small smile. “Go fulfill your tasks. We have prepared for this for an eternity, we cannot get complacent now.”

The two Monarchs nodded, and a moment later they were gone, having teleported away to activate the Monasteries and the Templar Orders. Perala sighed again as an ancient token appeared in her hand, and she silently looked at the fine engravings for over a minute. Eventually, she stowed away the token again before opening a window in space, showing the Void Star in all its glory.

What should she do to protect her? What could she do?

Chapter 869: Landing

Having cleansed the compartment of any hints of his outburst, Zac made his way toward the cargo hold. By this point, more than half the cultivators had already arrived, and they wore a mix of somber and excited expressions. Vai was already there, and she scurried over to his side when she saw Zac emerge from one of the hallways.

“I heard something happened, are you alright?” Vai asked with worry in her eyes.

“Nothing to worry about,” Zac smiled. “Just a little mishap, but I’m all better now.”

“Just stay close to me after we disembark,” she said with a low volume. “I can somewhat stabilize space around us until you’re recovered.”

“Thank you,” Zac nodded. “I’ll rely on you then.”

It wasn’t really necessary, but why turn down a kind gesture?

The minutes passed until the cargo hold was almost filled to capacity. Between support staff, researchers, outside hires, and Void Gate warriors, the squad had a total of 118 members, and they were all accounted for. Only the two pilots were missing, as they would take the vessel back to Zenith Vigil after dropping their squad off.

“Alright, people,” Teo said as a helmet closed over his head and his Spirit Tools appeared in his hands. “Ready yourselves. You read the reports – the layer we’re about to enter is controlled by beasts - we might be attacked the moment we arrive. From this moment forward, we are at high alert.”

Zac cracked his neck as his backup axe appeared in his hand – a pseudo-D-grade mundane weapon he’d commissioned from Calrin. It didn’t possess a Tool Spirit, but it had simple repair and sharpening arrays engraved. And with it containing over

10% D-grade metals, it was both heavy and sturdy enough to take the role of **[Verun's Bite]** for a short stint.

Even then, Zac had noticed the true value of Spirit Tools, apart from how they were noticeably stronger than their mundane counterparts. Both energy and Dao entered a spiritual weapon effortlessly. With Verun, every infusion felt like an extension of his body, whereas there was a noticeable resistance with the metal axe in his hand, even if it was expertly crafted.

It only meant a small delay in activating skills or infusing his weapon, but that could make all the difference in a heated battle. Still, it shouldn't matter much in this mission, considering the level of enemies he would get sent his way.

Two vines emerged from the tube on Zac's back, snaking around Vai's waist as she nervously fidgeted with her own Spirit Tool. The other second-string guards prepared similarly, though most of them used spiritual ropes that would prevent spatial fluctuations from separating them from their wards upon disembarking.

"It'll be fine," Zac smiled at Vai, and he got a weak smile in return. Zac wasn't too worried, but he wasn't surprised the little researcher was stressed out about what would come next.

As everyone prepared, the hatch at the bottom of the Cosmic Vessel soundlessly opened, and a wave of heat and spatial turbulence pushed into the ship. A blue inferno was visible below, a raging sea of fire. It was easy to forget as you read the reports of all the different worlds inside, but the Void Star was a real star apart from a container from all those Mystic Realms.

Normally, there would be floating platforms with stabilized Teleportation Arrays right at the edge of the celestial object that would take you into the Mystic Realms, just like how it worked back on Earth. However, with the erratic spatial fluctuations the Void Star had started releasing over the past years, it had become too risky to use those things.

Instead, the Void Gate used a more straightforward solution - to jump straight into the sun. It sounded insane, but it was actually a lot safer than using arrays at the moment.

Apparently, the outer layers of Mystic Realms could be accessed simply by entering the corona, so you didn't have to withstand the heat for long.

And thankfully, the Void Gate were well versed in minimizing the danger by now, and Zac felt extremely powerful arrays hum to life inside the vessel. The next moment, a pillar of light descended unto the sun, quenching the fires that rose to lick the hull of the Cosmic Vessel. Zac's eyes widened in surprise, as the array exposed an opalescent bubble within.

Was that the barrier to the Mystic Realm?

"Gather up the moment you land," Teo said as he walked toward the hatch. "The mission officially starts now."

With that, the templar simply jumped down. From his body, a tremendous Dao Field burst forth, almost giving Zac the impression it was a whole mountain falling toward the barrier over a thousand meters below rather than a cultivator. It wasn't vanity that made him release his Dao Field like that though.

He was acting as an icebreaker. The ship's array had pushed away the flames, but it wasn't able to remove the continuous waves of Spatial Energy the Void Star exuded. But Teo's condensed aura pushed at least some of it away, making the passage safer for the rest of them. The first batch of soldiers followed immediately followed in the Templar's wake, after which the second captain repeated Teo's action to cleanse the area with their Dao.

Zac was part of the third batch, but he suddenly felt a huge wave of danger, a feeling that was soon confirmed by a blaring siren.

"EVERYBODY JUMP," Havasa immediately roared while the second co-captain of the first string threw out over fifty people in a go by generating a gust.

Zac was already on the move before Havasa had finished her sentence, his Danger Sense urging him to get out of there. Vai was dragged along screaming in fear, and the next moment they were falling toward the star below. Even then, Zac didn't

feel safe, so he released a continuous series of bursts of energy to accelerate even further.

And it was lucky - just ten seconds later Void Star spat out a beam of blue flames with such speed that it almost looked like a laser. It contained so much energy that Zac couldn't even look at it straight, forcing Zac to close his eyes just as the pillar swallowed the ship whole.

Zac knew it was over for the transporter the moment he sensed the terrifying fluctuations within the spear of flames. Teo had mentioned the vessel could easily withstand the attacks of a Middle Hegemon, but that power was at the level of Monarchs. He could only urge himself further on as he dragged Vai into an embrace, just before a shockwave caused his insides to shift.

"Eat a healing pill," Zac coughed as he looked at the little researcher who had essentially curled up into a ball before glancing up at the sky.

As expected, the Cosmic Vessel was mostly gone, partly scorched beyond recognition while other sections were simply gone, probably ripped into nothingness. That eruption had contained the Spatial Energy of at least a thousand **[Void Balls]**, there was no coming back from that.

Thankfully, it looked like everyone had gotten out of the ship in time, with almost fifty people falling toward the Void Star above him. There was also burning shrapnel falling all around them, but that wasn't enough to become a threat to Half-Step Hegemons. They simply slapped any burning debris out of the way in case it flew close.

"Don't get distracted! We're passing through," Havasa's voice echoed out in his ears, and Zac turned toward the opalescent barrier that was constantly flickering. "Synchronize now."

There was no time to curse their bad luck or mourn the death of the two pilots who had ferried them here. Zac shook his ward to wake her up from her stupor, and they both activated the spatial talismans they'd been given. A flickering barrier enclosed him as a result, with thousands of foreign scripts forming dancing around.

Similar scenes took place around Vai, Havasa, and the other nearby cultivators as they fell toward the final barrier of the Void Star. Thankfully, the shockwave had pushed them close enough to the barrier that most of the flames hadn't had time to return. The little that remained, was dealt with by the Hegemons unleashing their auras, which once more exposed the barrier within.

At this proximity, Zac could see that the flickering barrier wasn't just random bursts of energy – the barrier was more akin to a fractured mirror, where each shard showed glimpses of a different world. There was everything from apocalyptic worlds where the air itself was on fire to underwater domains just like the Twilight Ocean.

Forests, fields, cities. There were even alien biotopes of all kinds that Zac had never seen before. One shard showed what seemed to be a pulsating spiral that almost seemed alive, with hundreds of thousands of beasts floating around it. However, each image only lasted a moment before it was replaced by another.

Soon enough, the barrier was right in front of him, and Zac's heart hammered as he braced himself for another vision. Thankfully, he only felt a slight discomfort as he passed through. And the varied visions had suddenly been replaced by dense shimmering clouds that somehow stopped even [**Cosmic Gaze**] from working more than a few meters.

His pores opened wide as they were met with a mix of medicinal aroma and dense attuned energies that were a mix of Life and Nature. The ground beneath still wasn't visible, but it felt like they had broken into paradise. However, that feeling only lasted a moment before his mind screamed of danger once more, and a huge claw appeared through the haze, aimed straight at him.

The talons of the claw were more than one meter long each, giving a clear indication of the size of the beast that hid within the mists. Still, there was no hesitation as a large leaf appeared in front of his axe, and he unleashed a lightning-quick attack on the incoming swipe. A grating sound echoed out the area as

talon and fractal blade collided, and Zac frowned when the expected scene of the talon being cut off didn't happen.

His swing only left a surface wound, but it did push him and Vai further away from the beast. But even with such a powerful collision, the haze wasn't pushed away, and Zac still couldn't make out what had attacked them.

“Damn, it's a convergence!” Havasa's voice echoed through the clouds, now a lot more distant compared to before.

“Everyone, you only need to hold on for a minute! The Spatial layers are weaker up here. As long as we pass through the clouds, you will be safe! If your Talismans run out of energy, use the backups or you might be lost to the other side!”

A despairing scream echoed out within the clouds the next moment, proving it was easier said than done to get through this second gauntlet. Zac sighed. With his track record, he should have figured out that things wouldn't go smoothly, but this was beyond what even he could have expected.

A convergence was when two Mystic Realms became superimposed. Normally, things like this didn't happen inside Mystic Realms as they were spatially protected bubbles hidden in the void. But with thousands of Mystic Realms stacked on top of each other, things apparently got messy, especially at the edges of the realms.

This time around, it looked they were unlucky, where their destination realm had superimposed with another one – one filled with aggressive birds, by the looks of it. Honestly, the loss of the Cosmic Vessel and the convergence were most likely related. Too much Spatial Energy had built up in this area, resulting in both the spatially infused solar flare and the convergence.

Thankfully, Zac could tell the beast that had attacked him was one of the weaker Beast Kings, and it shouldn't be a problem to keep it at bay. However, just as a huge beak ripped the clouds apart on its way to peck Zac to death, the whole beast suddenly rippled and disappeared.

Zac breathed out in relief as he turned to Vai who had once more entered her turtle stance with a small barrier protecting

her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m ok- AAH TO THE LEFT,” she shrieked, but Zac was already on the move.

Just as one beast disappeared in a puff of spatial confusion, another one had taken its place. Now, a weird-looking and almost completely translucent floating eel were swimming toward them, leaving ripples in its wake. Zac growled as a shimmering axe appeared inside a halo behind him.

Zac swung his axe, and a ruthless wave infused with his Branch of the War Axe parted the clouds, almost cutting the eel in two. It didn’t die, but it was grievously wounded, and immediately turned tail and disappeared among the clouds.

It was [**Conformation of Supremacy**], a skill that Zac had somewhat phased out of his repertoire as of late since it wasn’t a great fit with his stances. But now that he couldn’t use his Branch of the Kalpataru, it had found some use again, and he was thankful he had the foresight to push the skill to Late Proficiency during his stay in the Orom World.

The upgrade hadn’t added any new abilities to the skill, but it had increased its power and reach noticeably. And with a Dao Branch fueling the image of the Heavenfall Autarch’s unadorned axe, its strikes weren’t anything to scoff at. It wasn’t nearly as good at dealing with crowds as the explosion of blades [**Nature’s Edge**] could release, but its lethality was close to half of [**Rapturous Divide**]’s while still being a repeatable attack.

The bird and the eel were dealt with, but Zac didn’t release the avatar of the axe behind him as he looked around for new targets. Screams and roars filled the air, and with visibility being almost zero, the mental pressure was extreme. He even sensed auras that were well into Hegemony for a few short moments, but it looked like the more terrifying the beast, the shorter their visit to this layer was.

Even then, it felt like a terrifying Beast King could appear and strike at them at any moment, and Zac’s Danger Sense could only predict so much. It could warn him when a beast was

close or trying to attack, but it didn't warn him when a beast was about to phase into their dimension.

Over a minute passed as Zac fought off one beast after another while Vai tried to help by spotting spatial fluctuations around them. Finally, the shimmering haze around them was replaced by a burst of light as they pushed through the clouds. Below, they saw the first-string cultivators descending toward a seemingly endless field thousands of meters below.

They looked like little meteors, surrounded by those blue scripts that kept them locked to this current dimension until they reached the surface. Teo was still maintaining the lead, but the other captains were nowhere to be seen. Judging by the outbursts he had sensed within the clouds, he guessed they were trying to save as many people as possible within the convergence.

There were thousands of beasts gliding through the air, but Zac could sense that almost all of them were just E-grade. With the bloody aura of almost a hundred Half-Step cultivators and above, the flying beasts native to this dimension kept a wide berth around them.

Another three minutes passed as the ground grew ever closer, and Zac felt like his sense of perception had been all wrong. What had looked like fields of spiritual herbs was actually a jungle of massive proportions where each plant was either hundreds of meters tall or commanded an area of a whole village.

“So big,” Zac muttered.

“It's the arrays,” Vai explained from the side with a hoarse voice, finally having unfurled from her ball. “This whole realm has been modified for hundreds of thousands of years, and there are growth and gathering arrays installed deep into the ground. But without Array Masters, Arborists, and harvesters to maintain the realm, it has grown out of control.”

“They are big, but they're worthless,” Vai sighed. “They are the equivalent of a cultivator whose levels are completely propped up by pills – full of toxicity and bereft of potential.”

“That’s a shame,” Zac muttered before he looked at the researcher. “Some start, huh?”

“Thank you for saving my life,” Vai said as she looked crestfallen. “I can’t believe we ran into trouble so quickly. The Void Star must be more unstable than we expected for it to suddenly release spatial flares like that. What about the rest of the journey?”

“Well, this realm looks like we expected at least, right? We might be safe now that we’re properly inside the Mystic Realms,” Zac said, but he honestly shared Vai’s worries.

From the looks of it, the problems with the Void Star had suddenly ramped up beyond what the Void Gate had expected, and he couldn’t help but wonder if it was related to him and the vision he saw. And if that was the case, would he keep attracting trouble for himself and those around him?

But Zac perked up as he saw energy gathering around Teo, and he pushed those troublesome questions to the back of his mind. “Ready yourself. We’re about to land. I’m sure the captain knows what to do.”

Chapter 870: Lucky Day

The ground was rapidly growing closer, and Zac's brows furrowed a bit when he saw how a huge pack of wolves had gathered right beneath them. Judging by the excited howls, it looked like the beasts believed meat was literally falling from the sky. Thankfully, the Templar Captain was already on the move.

Space around him had been twisting for a while as torrential amounts of energy coursed through his body, quantities that would cause an E-grade cultivator to explode within seconds. Finally, a titanic figure appeared above Teo, its one hundred-meter tall frame blocking much of Zac's vision. He couldn't see what the avatar looked like from behind, except it had four humanoid hands that emitted extremely heavy pressure.

Zac could tell the Avatar was instilled with at least a Middle Branch as well, and the air itself cracked as the Templar Captain infused more and more energy into his skill. Finally, the avatar moved as it pushed its hands toward the ground, and it felt like an atmospheric bomb had detonated just below Teo. Zac's stomach churned from the cascading waves of rampant energies that had been unleashed, but it was nothing compared to what happened below.

A deep groaning rumble echoed through the area as the earth itself cried from the pressure. Everything within a thousand meters was utterly crushed by the pressure, and a manmade earthquake continued to ripple for thousands of meters. Thousands of Peak E-grade wolves were turned to mush in an instant as plants and the ground itself were compacted into a vast crater. In an instant, a huge pack of beasts had been crushed, leaving not a single intact corpse.

Zac's heart beat like a drum as he mutely looked at the carnage, shocked by the destructive capability of Teo's skill. This was the first time Zac had seen the Middle D-grade

Templar unleash his true might, and it was an eye-opening experience. That attack alone would immediately annihilate his elite armies back home unless they managed to erect some sort of fortification beforehand.

Even Zac himself would probably be grievously wounded, even if the attack was a large-scale strike with its force spread out. It was night and day compared to the might an Early Hegemon could exhibit, and any lingering notion of targeting a Middle D-grade Worldeater Beast King was firmly discarded.

The direct impact had created both cleared out any nearby threats while creating a large, albeit bloody, landing site for the party. However, most of the members of the task force had seen their fair share of blood, and getting their shoes slightly wet from beast blood didn't faze them as they slammed into the ground one after another.

Most simply used their body to withstand the collision velocity, though some used various movement skills to land softly. Zac was part of the former group as he slammed into the ground, leaving deep cracks for tens of meters around him. Vai used some sort of Spatial movement skill that expended her momentum, allowing her to softly land on the ground right next to him at a spot void of any minced wolf. Most of the researchers used this method, either through their own skill or through talismans.

Zac was about to stand up, but a sudden surge made his mind blank out. It came from everywhere and nowhere at once – a mix of antiquity and providence. It was overbearing and elusive, an enigma and a paradox. Solving it would allow you to grasp the Dao itself, conquering time and spa-

Panic and dread threatened to consume him, but Zac managed to force his way out of the fugue state through sheer force of will, only to realize he had unknowingly activated **[Void Zone]** with a horrified Vai within it. Zac immediately retracted the restrictive bloodline domain, which made Vai stumble and yelp with a pale complexion.

“What’s wrong?” Havasa asked as she flashed over, and Zac was eternally thankful that **[Void Zone]** emitted no energy signature and left no clues behind.

“I- ah, sorry...” Vai stammered. “The descent, and all this blood... I think I blacked out for a moment.”

“This is intentional - you need to get used to these smells and this fell atmosphere,” Havasa sighed. “Let your guardian know if you need any assistance.”

With that, she flashed away again, heading over to Teo who grimly looked up at the sky. A quick scan of the surroundings indicated Zac had only lost his mind for less than a second, but he still couldn’t tell if Vai had figured out what had just happened. She looked extremely frazzled as she looked around, her eyes darting back and forth.

“Are you really okay?” Zac slowly asked.

“I- I’m fine... I just felt something odd just now,” she said with a low volume. “It was probably nothing.”

“Alright, let me know if you need me to carry you,” Zac smiled. “I should be able to fight with you on my back just fine.”

“N-No,” Vai hurriedly said with a flustered look. “I’m fine, really.”

Zac nodded, but he was inwardly just as flustered as Vai looked. He couldn’t discern the truth. Had Vai noticed his activation of **[Void Zone]**, an unprecedented ability that could completely obscure the Heavens? If that was the case, she had lied to a Hegemon of her faction to protect him. Or was she just waiting to speak with them without him present? And had she sensed the same aura he did?

For that matter, what did the pulse mean? It had been like a fleeting fragrance just wafting by, but it had completely consumed his mind for a moment. Its origin was quite apparent - it contained the same ancient aura as the enormous castle in the vision. It proved that it wasn’t a fluke he had seen that thing when entering the Void Star, and it was his first clue that he was on the right path.

But did the impression mean there was a connection between this specific Mystic Realm and the castle, or was the aura something that had ingrained the whole beehive of dimensional layers? Zac's thoughts churned, but he kept his face impassive as he turned his gaze upward at the last members of the expedition.

One by one, they slammed into the ground around them, some bloodied and some unscathed. The scene was impressive, but Zac still had a small frown on his face when he saw the state of their unit. The original 118 members, of which 18 were researchers and supportive staff, had been reduced to 109. Less than ten minutes had passed since the task started, and they had lost almost a tenth of their squad to the solar flare and the ferocious birds.

It wasn't a great start to a mission that was supposed to last months.

"We were beset by bad luck, but such is Heavenly Law. We knew there would be obstacles on the way, and this was one of them," Teo eventually said when everyone had gathered up. "But the mission will continue. At least the spatial turbulence didn't kick us off course, and we should reach the next jump-point within five days. Hegemons, stay grounded - there are quite a few beasts in this dimension. We will have our hands full without luring a bunch of them over. Scouts, set out."

With that, the Templar took the lead as he ran at a pace that would feel like a brisk jog for even Late E-grade cultivators. Most of the first-string cultivators kept an exact pace to his sides, while another squad led by Tyla Vesass brought up the rear. The second-string cultivators stayed close to their researchers in the middle, and a shimmering barrier that hid their auras appeared above their heads.

Meanwhile, three scouts rushed ahead and completely disappeared among the trees.

"Don't get complacent from the barrier. It has no defensive capabilities - it will just make most beasts overlook those in the middle and attack the people on the outside," Havasa reminded those around her. "This used to be an agricultural

realm, but it has been continuously flooded with beasts over the past three years.

“The army left this layer over two months ago, so we don’t expect an uneventful journey to the waystation. And remember, we need to keep moving. The window is closing, so don’t exhaust yourselves. If you’re running low on Cosmic Energy, let me know.”

Zac and the others nodded as they kept their eyes peeled at the surroundings. There had been quite a few briefings on the Void Star over the past weeks, and while Zac still didn’t have any idea of how this spatial anomaly actually worked, he did somewhat understand the rules that governed it.

The Void Star could be considered a maze where each Mystic Realm was a room. Some of these chambers were hidden in the depths of the Void Star, whereas others were right at the surface. To reach the realm you wanted to visit, you had to pass through a certain set of Mystic Realms, making use of weak spots in the dimensional layers.

Problem was that the maze wasn’t static. The Mystic Realms kept shifting following some sort of extremely complex set of rules, moving and disconnecting from each other. Some Mystic Realms were only reachable for short stints every century, or millennia even. Others, like the one they found themselves in right now, were almost always at the surface layer of the Void Star.

The reason they had been forced to set out the moment they reached Zenith Vigil was that the path that had been plotted out for them would only last for another month or so. If they took too long to reach their destination, they would have to take an alternative route that would cost them over two months.

With the Void Star being invaded, each additional Mystic Realm they had to pass through would significantly increase the risk of something going wrong. Their brush with death within the clouds was a poignant reminder of that.

Nothing happened for the first couple of hours, and they made steady progress toward the edge of the realm. There were the

occasional packs whose domains they crossed, but it barely slowed them down. Some of the beasts knew better than to attack such a dangerous-looking group, while the rest was quickly dealt with by the first-string cultivators.

However, while they likely were the strongest force in this outer Mystic Realm, they couldn't move about with wanton disregard for the wildlife. Just like in most beast tides, the animals were in an agitated bloodthirsty state where most attacked even if outmatched. And the bigger the commotion they caused, the more beasts they would attract.

Now and then, Teo would make a sudden turn or stop altogether for a few minutes. It was a result of the reports the captain continuously got from the scouts running ahead. Sometimes it was a particularly nasty beast or beast pack they avoided, and sometimes they had to stop to let a horde migrate past them.

With things progressing smoothly like this, there wasn't much the second-string cultivators needed to do except maintain a lookout for ambushes. With Zac's honed Danger Sense and instincts, he would instinctively know if any beast had managed to get close, so his mind was mostly occupied with Ultom.

Even after six hours had passed, there hadn't been a second burst of that ancient aura. Even then, Zac's nerves were getting increasingly frayed from a constant worry he'd accidentally expose his bloodline again. But the more time passed, the more it looked like it was a one-time thing. It happened the moment he landed, so was it connected to the Realm Core? He had a few more guesses, but he would have to journey deeper into the Void Star to make sure.

Suddenly, Teo stopped at the front of the squad as he threw out a series of talismans. It looked like trouble had come knocking though, no matter how careful they were.

"Battle positions," Teo's voice echoed out, which confirmed a real battle was on their hands.

Just thirty seconds later, a piercing screech leveled the trees in the area. The talismans Teo had thrown out lit up and blocked

the shockwave altogether, but they were still surrounded by a wasteland in an instant. From the distance, a discordant mix of beasts lumbered closer, their numbers in the tens of thousands.

At the heart of the chaos, an odd beast looking a bit like a nettle jellyfish floated, and it was no doubt it was the leader of the beast tide going by its aura. It was mostly translucent with blue streaks, and its long tendrils seemed to reach hundreds of meters behind it. Inside its body were hundreds of shimmering orbs that released mighty spiritual ripples, indicating it was a beast with an unusually powerful soul.

This was not a beast that had just evolved – it was well on its way toward the next stage of Hegemony. That beast looked troublesome on its own, and there were no less than thirty auras of weaker Beast Kings within the tide. But what really made Zac’s hair stand on end was seeing the rotting bodies of some of the animals.

They weren’t dead, Zac could tell with a single glance. But they weren’t alive either. It was parasitic mind control.

From the noses, eyes, and mouths of the beasts, one could see small tendrils swaying around, looking just like miniatures of the appendages of the enormous jellyfish. For others, their whole skulls had been cracked, and a small jellyfish sat right on their brains. Some poor animals even seemed to be receptacles for dozens of parasites, arduously stuttering forward with bloated bodies.

There was no telling if the big guy was a parasite as well, or if it didn’t need to hijack other animals after having reached D-grade. In either case, it was a grotesque scene, and Zac could guess why it hadn’t avoided the powerful auras of the advance guard – the big jellyfish wanted more bodies for its descendants.

“Standard battle array. It’s a swarm of Mindsiphon Parasites. Destroy both host and parasites,” Teo said with a calm expression. “Don’t worry, they’re not as dangerous as they look.”

“Why the faces? You bastards should be happy,” Havasa grinned after seeing the hesitant expressions on many of the

wandering cultivators. “Aren’t you all here for money? Have you forgotten the booklets? That right there is a bounty animal. This is a stroke of good luck to balance the bad.”

The simple mention of a ‘bounty’ drastically improved morale, but they didn’t get the chance to celebrate before the enormous Mindsiphon King made its move. Ripples spread across the bulbous head of the Beast King, and Zac felt a sense of danger as mental energy started gathering. There was no time to prepare any concerted response - just a moment later, a chaotic shockwave burst forth, ripping toward the front lines.

It was an instant attack so it didn’t contain the full force of a Beast King, but Zac could tell that any cultivator with a weak soul or subpar defenses would find their soul grievously wounded from that attack. Lucky for them, Teo was already on the move as the complex arrays on his War Regalia lit up. A group of eight templars channeled a War Array behind him, and he took a defensive position with his shield.

Soothing waves spread out from his shield, giving Zac the impression of waves hitting against a rocky shore. They immediately covered the whole frontline before they spread toward the incoming mental attack. There was no collision and subsequent shockwave. It was rather as though the Beast King’s attack had entered a quagmire as it was gradually slowed and whittled down.

By the time it reached the frontlines, only a fraction of its strength remained. Even someone who hadn’t cultivated their soul would effortlessly shrug off an attack of that level, and the warriors immediately regained their confidence upon seeing that the attack had been easily thwarted by their captain.

“Advance. Avoid the tendrils of the leader. Continuously channel your Daos to avoid getting infiltrated,” Teo simply said as he swung his sword, unleashing a simple blade attack toward the ranks of animals.

Almost one hundred possessed beasts were ripped apart in an instant, their bodies so mangled that the parasites couldn’t possibly have survived either. That attack was the starting

signal of the fight, and the Beast Tide released a deafening cacophony of roars as they rushed forward. In return, the front-line warriors unleashed a barrage of attacks, turning the whole forest into an apocalyptic hellscape.

As for Zac and the second-string cultivators, their time hadn't come just yet. And Zac simply enjoyed the first-row seat for the fight. This was what he needed to see - how a squad of veteran warriors of an established faction fought. Anything he learned today could be applied to his army back home, so Zac looked on with rapt attention.

Havasa was right, even if Zac didn't care about the bounty. Clues to an ancient opportunity and a free lesson in army tactics? This really was a lucky day.

Chapter 871: Professional Unit

Fiery waves of destruction fought for space with blade storms, lances of ice, and all sorts of diverse techniques as the wandering cultivators unleashed their ranged skills at the incoming tidal wave of rotting beasts. The little plantlife that remained standing after the Mindsiphon King's opening salvo was reduced to nothingness while the ground itself opened up to swallow and crush whole swathes of beasts into a pulp.

But it was as though beasts were completely oblivious to the danger, heedlessly rushing toward the defensive line. Mounds of carcasses piled up in seconds, yet the beasts just kept crawling over their fallen brethren. Some of the smaller Mindsiphon Parasites survived and either tried to latch onto the warriors or scurry back to safety.

Thankfully, these smaller jellyfish didn't seem able to unleash mental attacks, and with their flying speed being quite slow, they were easily dealt with. The second wave of beasts was a lot more powerful, and they either dodged or countered the skills as they pushed forward. Zac guessed their parasites either had higher levels or more purified bloodlines judging by their deft control of their hosts.

They were also led by a number of Beast Kings who unleashed their bloodline skills to protect the beasts around them, drastically reducing the effectiveness of the cultivator's random attacks. And among it all, hundreds of thick tendrils were slithering forward – the appendages of the giant jellyfish king.

Beasts were superior when it came to numbers and constitutions, cultivators had some advantages of their own. Teo had already pushed into the swarm of beasts like a god of war, destroying everything that came close. His War Regalia

was continuously unleashing pulses of destruction, killing any E-grade beast that came within a dozen meters without the Templar as much as lifting a finger.

That was the benefit of Hegemony. With a sea of energy at your fingertips, you could just continuously use both defensive and offensive arrays without issue, something that would be impossible for most E-grade cultivators. A middle D-grade Hegemon like Teo could probably keep his War Regalia running for days without a problem.

Even the Half-Step Beast Kings and the actual Beast Kings were leery of approaching the man, giving him the space to unleash his skills. First, the avatar from before started to appear again, but it was actually disrupted and destroyed by Mindsiphon King as it frenetically stabbed it with hundreds of appendages.

Teo wasn't discouraged, and the energy from the avatar suddenly turned into shining manacles that instantly bound the tendrils of the beast. At the same time, one of his vice-captains conjured what looked like a miniature galaxy that exerted a tremendous pull. A few unlucky beasts were dragged inside, reduced to nothingness in an instant.

The Templar Captain pushed his hand down, and a rope of starlight connected the manacles with the galaxy. It was the first time Zac had actually seen two different people combining their skills like that, and he looked on with interest as the Mindsiphon King found over 80% of its tendrils locked in place. It was powerful enough to resist the pull, but not powerful enough to break free.

The Templars weren't done there as more and more manacles appeared, locking down one Beast King after another across the whole battlefield. This time, the second vice-captain made a move as well, and dozens of small mountains appeared among the beasts. A similar scene followed, where Teo's fetters connected with the mountains, essentially trapping the leaders of the tide in place.

Altogether, it had only taken the three Templar Hegemons to lock down more than two-thirds of the elites of the Beast

Tides, drastically lessening the pressure the rest of the squad faced. Zac could tell that these measures wouldn't last for very long, but they didn't really need to.

Teo had never stopped moving as he sealed everything around him, and he was already in front of the Mindsiphon King by that point. The energy in the whole area surged as an inscribed mountain appeared above his head, looking like an evolved version of what his vice-captain used. It emitted an unquestionable weight and dominance, far surpassing the concepts of heaviness that Zac had integrated into his Dao of the Axe.

It was like the mountain contained the weight of a world as it pushed down on the Mindsiphon King

Hundreds of beasts couldn't withstand its unseen pressure and simply collapsed into goops of blood. Even the leader was pushed closer to the ground, but the shining spheres inside its body released tremendous waves of energy as the remaining tendrils soon rose to meet the mountain. The tendrils and spheres started to resonate, which generated a domain of their own that mostly canceled the mountain's pressure.

Like that, the Mindsiphon's tendrils were all occupied, at which point Teo rose into the air and started to unleash a steady barrage of heavy swings. However, even with its tendrils locked down, the Mindsiphon still retained a lot of its power. Those weird balls inside its body were shining like small suns by this point, and even Zac found it a bit painful to look at the waves of mental destruction that surrounded the Templar.

The leaders of the two sides had essentially taken each other out of the equation, but it was clear Teo was the stronger party since he simultaneously kept more than 20 Beast Kings locked down as well. Meanwhile, the Array Masters and defensive cultivators had created a set of fortifications and channels on the spot, expertly funneling the tide of beasts into kill zones where the offensive warriors waited.

Of course, Zac and the others couldn't just sit by and watch while the first-string cultivators did all the work. The first-

string warriors were slowly moving backward in a controlled retreat, leaving a trail of carcasses behind. Even then, the pressure was unrelenting, and one by one, the trapped Beast Kings broke free and madly rushed into the fray.

The first-string cultivators couldn't deal with everything alone, but they didn't have to. By controlling the flow of beasts, pathways opened up in the defensive perimeter that led to Zac and the other second-string cultivators. One by one, the maimed and the weaker beasts were let through, where Zac and the others were waiting to finish the job.

The axe of the Heavenfall Autarch appeared behind Zac once more as a rotting boar missing half its head rushed over. Before it had a chance to even get close, it was cloven in two with one swift swing. The first swing was followed up by a second that annihilated the two small parasites who lived inside its body. A small smile spread across Zac's face as he felt the surge of energy entering his body.

The boar was only Peak E-grade, but it was still a huge improvement compared to the beasts he had spent years killing inside the Orom World. Those animals were mostly Early E-grade to match his restrained attributes, and they only awarded a trickle of kill energy compared to these animals.

With him being level 145, it would still take quite a bit of carnage to gain the energy required for a level, but he was undeniably making progress on his levels through kills for the first time in five years. Even better, both the boar and the little jellyfish counted as kills. It wasn't that hard to deal with the parasites either, even if the E-grade animals were only as large as a fist and almost completely invisible. While their physical form was hard to spot, they lit up like little beacons to his **[Cosmic Gaze]**, while the semi-dead hosts had lost most of their own aura.

A moment later, Zac actually got to end the life of a grievously wounded Beast King that had been let through the perimeter, and a massive surge of energy entered his body. It had required him to essentially kill-steal another wandering cultivator, but swordsman didn't mind in the slightest. After all, he was bottlenecked in Half-Step D-grade.

Killing a Beast King only meant risk and no reward for him. The wiry little man even gave Zac a thumbs up as he returned to his position with [**Earthstrider**], and Zac only grinned as he kept killing. Two minutes passed as the squad methodically dismantled the beast tide, until Zac suddenly heard Teo's voice in his head.

'Everyone, activate mental defenses,' The templar captain said as the energies in the distance reached a crescendo.

By this point, the unit had added more than a kilometer's distance to the Mindsiphon Parasite floating in the air, but more than half of the Wandering Cultivators activated various mental defense talismans or items. Zac felt confident that [**Soul Guardian**] was more than enough at this point, but he had a talisman ready just in case.

An infuriated wail echoed throughout the area the next moment as the enormous jellyfish in the sky fell toward the ground, bleeding heavily from a gruesome wound that had almost cut its head in two. However, it was barely hanging on by a thread, and Zac could sense a familiar buildup inside its body - it was planning to self-detonate.

One of the radiant spheres inside its body suddenly cracked, unleashing a tremendous ripple of hatred and pain that crossed the battlefield in an instant. However, before the beast had a chance to detonate its other pearls or Beast Core, Teo had already leveled a second strike that seemed to have finished the job. The beast's wails were cut short, and it slammed into the ground a moment later.

With the early warning, the mental wave passed through the ranks without causing any trouble. And without the support of the Alpha, Teo was free to run roughshod through the remaining beasts. With him attacking from the rear, the remnants of the beast tide were caught in a deadly pincer. After just a minute, all the remaining beasts had either fled or been exterminated.

"We're resting for 20 minutes before heading out," Teo said before simply sitting down and closing his eyes with a Low-grade Cosmic Crystal in his hands.

“Won’t all the blood lure other beasts over?” another warrior muttered with a frown as he looked around with worry.

“Not with the body of a Mindsiphon King here,” Havasa said with a shake of her head. “This is just an outer layer, there shouldn’t be more than a hundred Beast Kings in the whole realm after the previous purge. This bastard probably found its way here by chance and enslaved all the Beast Kings it could get its hands on. The few who managed to avoid it wouldn’t go anywhere near here.”

“Do we really get a part of the bounty even if the captain did most of the work?” another wandering cultivator asked as he looked at the fallen Mindsiphon King with gleaming eyes.

“Those are the rules for group battles,” Havasa nodded. “But the captain killed it and did most of the work – half of the bounty will go to him. Another ten percent will go to Kalo and Tyla each for locking down its tendrils and the other Beast Kings, while the final 30% will be spread out among the rest of us.”

Zac took out his booklet out of curiosity, and he had to admit the Void Temple was quite generous. The Beast core of a Mindsiphon King was valued at 1 D-grade Nexus Coin, and the remaining spheres would fetch 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins each. Seeing how it could unleash powerful mental attacks, Zac guessed the items could be used in crafting tools or arrays for Mentalists.

Even if the cultivators would only see a fraction of that bounty, it was still roughly 4,000 E-grade Nexus Coins per man for a few minutes of work. If this scenario happened a couple of times over the next months, the accumulated bounties might end up being worth more than the mission reward.

Zac looked at the large carcass of the Mindsiphon Beast King in the distance for a second before he turned to look at the warriors who scurried around looking for anything of value on the battlefield, while Kantomir went from warrior to warrior to make sure none of the Mindsiphons had managed to sneak on board, so to speak.

It was a novel experience being part of a proper professional unit. The closest he'd come before was the early stages of the Twilight Ocean under the lead of Catheya, but back then everyone had roughly the same power, which would never be the case in an open-world conflict. So seeing how Teo controlled the battle was a good learning experience.

The Templar was obviously a genius since he had reached Middle D-grade, but he wasn't a monstrous talent that could deal with any threat by himself. His biggest weakness was his somewhat lacking lethality, considering it had taken him a couple of minutes to kill the Mindsiphon King. But even then, there was not a single casualty in the squad.

There were a lot of bruises and scrapes, but the worst wound was a wandering cultivator who had been gored by a large claw of one of the beast kings. Seeing as his aura was stable as he sat down in meditation, Zac could tell it wasn't a wound that would be a big problem.

And that was all thanks to Teo. It almost felt like the Templar must have had eyes in his neck going by how he had controlled the events in a way that the pressure was evenly spread across his force. Since Zac hadn't been too pressured from the battle, he had enough leeway to observe the movements of Teo and his two vice-captains.

It was obvious that the trapped Beast Kings didn't break out randomly. Any time there was a lull at a certain section of the defensive perimeter, a nearby Beast King broke free from the mountain suppressing it, and delivered itself and a group of followers to the slaughter. That way, they made use of all their strength while keeping the risk at a minimum.

In a way, the smooth control felt akin to his own combat stances in how they were meant to maximize his efficiency when fighting, but the theory was rather applied to the whole battlefield.

This was exactly the kind of expertise Zac needed for the upcoming war. It wasn't enough that he was powerful – he couldn't be everywhere at once to protect his people. There would no doubt be battles that he couldn't join, where

someone like Ilvere or Joanna would lead instead. They would be like Teo in that case - powerful, but not a one-man army.

But they lacked his skill in terms of tactics, and also the supportive function of the Templar Order's Array Masters and vice-captains. But how would one learn something like this? Zac didn't have this kind of heritage. There was obviously learning by doing, but learning the ropes in the middle of a raging war would lead to mass casualties.

"What are you thinking about?" Vai asked curiously as she walked over.

"Nothing," Zac smiled. "I just thought that it's impressive we didn't see a single warrior fall with such a powerful enemy. Being unattached comes with a great degree of freedom, but it precludes you from certain opportunities."

"Like you have a choice in the matter," a nearby Templar snorted, but Zac didn't bother with him.

Vai glared at the warrior in Zac's stead, but her pout didn't have much of an effect as the warrior simply closed his eyes to focus on recuperation. Zac had no interest in arguing with some random warrior he could snap in half if he so wanted, and instead turned back to Vai.

"You were really impressive," the researcher said, clearly trying to recover the atmosphere. "It felt like you were everywhere."

"I haven't been out much over the past decade," Zac nodded as he sat down to rest. "I need some exercise to get back into optimal condition before we get to the deeper parts of this weird place."

"Alright," Vai nodded. "Sorry, I won't bother you while you recuperate."

Zac nodded and closed his eyes, as he took out a High-Grade Nexus Crystal. It felt pretty unsatisfactory since he was used to using Peak-quality Crystals by now, but those things were quite rare in the Zecia sector. Taking them out after a minor scuffle like this would raise some brows, so he would have to make do.

Thankfully, he hadn't expended much of his vast energy reserves, so he spent most of the rest going over the general flow of the battle, trying to distill it into something that would be useful for his followers back home. Soon enough, twenty minutes had passed, and the group set out once more. Some had managed to line their pockets a bit by pocketing some valuable parts of the zombified beasts, but the bounty was the true prize of the encounter.

Like this, three days passed, where the squad only stopped to rest for an hour each night at safe-houses that had survived the invasion. They were forced into a couple of more battles against massive Beast Tides, but Havasa's words proved to be true. None of the horde leaders they encountered were anywhere close to the level of the enormous jellyfish, and dealing with the enraged beasts was just a matter of time.

Finally, the squad could see the edge of the Mystic Realm in the distance, which meant they would soon reach the waystation that would take them to the next realm.

"One down, eleven to go," Havasa grinned to the side. "Let's see what the Void has in store for us next."

Chapter 872: Waystation

Zac ignored the second-string captain's unlucky wording as he inspected the edge of the Mystic Realm. It looked a bit like the opalescent film they had passed to enter this realm, but it somehow seemed far more solid and gave no hint of what was on the other side. It was the dimensional bubble that, in theory, kept this realm apart from the Main Universe.

In a normal Mystic Realm, this kind of barrier was extremely sturdy, and pushing through it was much harder than phasing between dimensions with a Cosmic Vessel. It contained extremely powerful Spatial Energies that would rip most people apart if they tried. It was half of the reason Mystic Realms were so difficult to invade, with the other half being the difficulty of actually locating them in the Void, with distances and directions working differently there.

Here in the Void Star, those rules were far more malleable, but they still couldn't just pass through these inner walls with the help of a talisman. They needed to open a gate, which was why the waystations had been erected. Zac curiously followed the templars into a hidden cave protected by multiple layers of still-working arrays.

They went deeper and deeper into the depths of the Mystic Realm, but thanks to the illumination arrays and generous dimensions, the tunnel didn't feel oppressive at all. Eventually, they reached a large cave that would be able to house thousands of people if they squeezed together. Now, it was empty, with most of the waystations being unmanned for the past years.

There were dozens of doors to the sides, but Teo led them straight ahead toward a large gate on the opposite side from the entrance. But before stepping through, he stopped at one of the array consoles that lined the walls.

“We mentioned these waystations in the briefings – this is one of five stations in this Mystic Realm. If you for some reason get separated from the squad, your best bet to survive is to find one of these. Your token will grant access through the arrays,” Teo Explained as he activated the console behind him.

Soon, a huge map appeared that looked like just over a hundred circles of varying sizes. A smaller circle at the top was blue whereas the others were green, indicating their current location. Within the blue circle, there was a small red dot, which no doubt indicated the waystation they found themselves in. Connected to the station, there were four lines, three of which led to other circles deeper in the map, while one led to another one at the outermost layer.

“This is the local chart, and it will tell you your options to leave or catch up to the rest of us. The exit arrays are clearly noted,” Teo said as he pointed at Mystic Realm two circles over which had the mark of a teleportation array in the middle. “Of course, your best bet might be to simply stay put until another squad passes through. If the realm is overrun, these waystations might be the safest spots around.”

“How do we find these waystations?” a wandering cultivator asked. “I saw no markers on the way here.”

“Your tokens have a weak array installed that can pick up the signals from these stations. Just infuse some energy occasionally and pray that the signal isn’t blocked out by turbulence. If that’s the case, you can only search by foot by wandering the edge of the Mystic Realm,” Teo explained.

“Don’t bother memorizing the chart,” Havasa added when she saw the wandering cultivators studying the map. “It will keep changing as the realms move and rotate. For example, this waystation is generally pointed toward the depths of the Void Star today, but in a month it will point toward the outer edge, making it useless.”

“Why can’t we use waystations to leave?” another warrior asked. “If it points toward the edge...”

“Look at the Void Star as a large balloon with multiple smaller balloons inside. It’s not enough to break through the barrier of

the smaller balloon,” a researcher explained after getting a glance from Teo. “That would only result in you entering an extremely chaotic void within the Void Star. To leave, one needs to find the few spots where outer and inner barriers merge, allowing us to break through everything at once.”

“That’s why we landed where we did, rather than just arriving right in front of this waystation,” Teo added. “There are a limited set of options when coming and going, with teleportation not working at the moment.”

After having showcased the console, Teo opened the huge gate. Within, they actually saw the shimmering wall of the Mystic Realm, with three stone gates installed right at the edge of it. They weren’t active right now, but Zac guessed they could be tuned to connect this realm with whichever one of those four neighboring realms you wanted.

However, something was clearly wrong with this place. The inner chamber was marred with splotches of blood and scars on the ground. There were a few consoles to the side, but most of them had been destroyed as well. There were even cracks on one of the three gates, and Zac really hoped that wasn’t the one they needed to use.

“Around a month ago?” Havasa muttered with a frown as kneeled over a spot of dried blood. “But who? I don’t remember any squads slated to use this station in this timeframe.”

“Probably a squad on the way out with extensive losses, forced to take an alternative route,” Teo grimly muttered as he took out another token. “The array is functional, but they didn’t turn it off? No status report was inscribed either. Both captain and vice-captains were likely to have fallen. Perhaps a battle over some treasure erupted now that they were approaching the exit.”

The outsiders stood and watched on in silence as the templar walked over to a pane hanging open and swapped out four exhausted Low-grade Cosmic Crystals and a Spatial Crystal. Hearing the conversation, Zac felt a bit troubled, but since

none of the templars seemed too bothered about the apparent breach of protocol, there wasn't anything he could say or do.

Some peacetime protocols might simply have fallen through because of the chaotic situation within the star. Still, this scene was a clear indication of just how strained the situation was, and Zac was inwardly relieved he had brought all of the Spatial Crystals he had in his possession. That way, he'd be able to operate these gates even if he ran into a situation similar to this one.

Teo walked over to a console next, and the left gate shuddered to life without any issue. It seemed to function a lot like the spatial portal Kenzie had opened up with the drill back in the Mystic Realm, where it essentially looked like a doorway. On the other side, there was an identical room to the one they stood in, though it was in much better shape.

"Let's go," Teo said and stepped inside himself, passing through.

The wandering cultivators hesitated for just a moment, before following suit. This time around, there were no surprises, and one after another they walked into the neighboring dimension. Zac was one of the last to pass through, and he braced himself just in case as he walked forward, where he kept his bloodline and aura tightly sealed.

And it was lucky he did, since the moment he stepped onto the ground of the other world, a pulse passed through his body to welcome him. It was still that solemn aura of antiquity, hinting at boundless possibilities. In fact, the pulse this time was even stronger than the last, more palpable and corporeal.

It really felt like he was actually moving closer to whatever emitted this signal. Thankfully, Zac had learned his lesson from the previous time this happened, and he barely managed to restrain himself before he accidentally activated **[Void Zone]** again. Even then, he found Vai looking at him with confusion, and he realized he had frozen in place mid-step, right in front of the spatial gate.

"That simple?" Zac coughed as he walked over. "We passed between Mystic Realms just like that?"

“It’s not always this simple,” Vai explained. “Some realms are not as closely connected, where we have to walk through a space tunnel. Those can be a bit dangerous from what I’ve read. And like we saw before, there might be convergences that force us to fight our way into the waystations.”

Zac nodded as he looked around the room. It might look identical, but there was no mistaking this was another world going by the completely different ambient energy. For one, the room felt like an oven with sweltering heat. There were fire-attuned energies in the air as well, indicating what kind of world they had reached. However, something was a bit off.

“The ambient energy seems kind of low?” Zac asked.

The ambient energy was equivalent to an E-grade world rather than a D-grade, and not even a peak planet at that. No matter if it was beasts or treasures, there couldn’t be much of value here unless it had been teleported in.

“The energy will be higher in the center of the world, but you’re right. Not all the Mystic Realms are useful,” Vai nodded. “Some are mostly used as bridges. This one should be much safer than the last, unless something unexpected happens.”

“What if the waystations or the gates break?” another warrior asked as the spatial gate closed behind them. “Would we be stuck?”

“These waystations are equipped with spatial stabilization much stronger than the talismans we used,” Kalo, the first-string vice-captain, grunted. “They are designed to withstand a convergence. But if some sort of spatial turbulence has made them impassable, you can use talismans to swap over to the other realm. Sometimes.”

“Will be a bit of a gamble which of the connected realms you enter though,” Havasa grinned to the side. “So you’ll have to decide whether to take a leap of faith or make your way to the next waystation. Most realms have more than one.”

“But what if...” another cultivator hesitated.

“I know we encountered some setbacks at the start, but the situation is not that dire,” Teo said. “And any layer we enter will have at least one working station, no? If the gate on the other side is broken, we wouldn’t be able to enter that layer at all. If all else fails, your final chance at survival is to make use of the breaches. Most of them lead to other layers in the Void Star rather than into the unknown.”

The wandering cultivators grimaced at that, but they didn’t argue the point. Ultimately, they knew what they had signed up for – any mission had a very real chance of dying.

As for the breaches, they were the reason for the chaos in the Void Star. They took all kinds of forms, from huge tears opening out of nowhere to stable gateways that shouldn’t exist with how the Void Star worked. Of course, convergences could be counted to this as well, though they were rather an old occurrence.

It was through these breaches that the alien beasts came pouring out, wreaking havoc on the Void Star and the Void Gate’s arrangements. The unknown Teo mentioned was the original source all these beasts originated from as they spread through the thousands of Mystic Realms. The outsiders had never gotten a clear answer exactly where that was, and from what little the wandering cultivators had managed to squeeze out of the templars and researchers, neither did they.

“We’ll rest here for two hours,” Teo said as he glanced at his vice-captains.

Zac and the others simply sat down and recuperated while the captains left to discuss some things by themselves.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a low voice when he saw Vai look at the three hegemons with a frown.

“It’s...” Vai hesitated.

“Ms. Salas,” another researcher coughed.

“Ah, nothing,” Vai said and quickly closed her eyes.

Zac frowned in thought, but he simply closed his eyes. Was there something else to the bloody scene in the other waiting room? Or some issue Teo had noticed through that command

token of his? But soon enough the leaders returned, their expressions calm as though nothing was wrong. Two hours later they departed, and Zac finally got to take in the second Mystic Realm in the Void Star.

There were no expansive vistas to speak of, only an oppressive path that almost felt like a tunnel with the sky being dark red. There was no sun either, and most of the light actually came from small creeks of superheated water that glowed with a radiant orange. At least Zac presumed it was water, since it definitely wasn't lava.

To the sides were some sort of extremely dense thorns reaching tens of meters into the air, and Zac couldn't be certain if they were alive or dead calcified plants. They emitted a weak hint of life, but that was overwhelmed by a raging fire attunement that ran through the thorny branches. There were no signs of wildlife in the area either, either on the ground or in the air.

Zac still kept his eyes peeled as the group entered the pathway that had clearly been cut through the thorns, acting as though some terrifying beast could jump through the brambles at any moment. It was not only him. After the unexpected losses in the outer layer, where they only expected some minor resistance according to the missive, everyone was waiting for the next disaster to arrive.

Thankfully, half a day passed with only the occasional attack of Middle or Late E-grade beasts until they reached an enormous lake that was almost blinding from the amount of light it released. It seemed to be both the destination and the source of the endless creeks and rivers of glowing waters, and Zac walked over and dipped his hand into it. It was slightly viscous like oil, but otherwise it wasn't too different from fire-attuned water.

“This is the Hako Lake. It will take us around four days to traverse it,” Teo said as three massive barges appeared in front of him. “There are quite a few beasts within, but there is only a handful of Beast Kings in the whole lake. Between our auras and the arrays on these barges, attacks are quite rare. This is

also the first location where you are free to explore – some precious metals and fire-attuned plants can be harvested here.”

“We’re still doing exploration after the initial losses?” Uzu exclaimed to the side.

“Of course,” Teo nodded. “We will have to be a bit more restrictive with how many set out at a time, but otherwise the rules are the same.”

This was one of the perks of joining the missions. Some layers were so dangerous that everyone needed to stay together, while others had some safer regions that could be explored by the wandering cultivators. Of course, safety was always relative in the Mystic Realms, and a third of the projected casualties came from these solitary excursions.

It was not from blind generosity the Void Gate hired more people than they needed and then allowed them to look for treasures in their Mystic Realms. With most of the Void Star unsecured at the moment, their normal harvesting methods didn’t work. This way, the Void Gate could harvest some of the strategic resources they needed without losing any of their own warriors.

And if a couple of wandering warriors died to make it happen, it only meant they saved money.

“But remember, this lake has some Beast Kings even in normal conditions, so if you’re not confident, don’t stray too far from the barges,” Havasa added. “And if you sense any powerful spatial fluctuations, immediately return. It is probably a breach opening.”

With that, the squads set out, with one Hegemon placed at both the stern and the bow of each barge to make sure no beasts dared swim close. Even then, there was more than one creature that swam close by to see what was going on. At first, Zac wasn’t interested in looking for some materials at the bottom of the oily lake, and it looked like quite a few of the wandering cultivators were of a similar mind after the experiences in the previous layer.

However, after half a day Zac’s eyes shot open. It was here.

It was the aura of his visions, there was no doubt about it. It was weaker than the pulses, but it was pervasive. It could only mean one thing; there was something at the bottom of Hako Lake. Something related to either the enormous castle or the hidden courtyard. It beckoned him like a siren's call from the depths.

It looked like he would get his answers sooner than he'd expected.

Chapter 873: Treasures in the Depths

The signal urged Zac to jump into the waters and claim what almost felt like his birthright, but he kept himself in check. Zac could somewhat sense where the aura originated from, and it was somewhere in the center of the lake. Since the barges were heading in that general direction, there was no point in diving too early. After all, he could only explore a couple of hours at most before he needed to get back.

Zac didn't want to look too eager, so he started to prepare an excuse to join in on the fun. Luckily, an opportunity presented itself just an hour later, with a small commotion breaking out on the neighboring barge. Zac and a few of the other wandering cultivators stood up to see what was going on, only to find Uzu grinning from ear to ear with a shimmering item in his hands.

"Luckily, I have some experience with both flame-attuned realms," Uzu boisterously laughed as he showcased a large red pearl. "And reading the missives on the way, I realized there might be a few Infernal Longevity Clams here. By a stroke of luck, I managed to encounter a clam which had just reached Hegemony."

"An Early D-grade Fire-Attuned Longevity Pearl," one of the cultivators next to Zac muttered, his face green with envy. "A Fire Cultivator would pay a small fortune for that, or he can exchange it for a pearl that suits himself. What filthy luck."

"If there's one, there might be two," Zac muttered as he looked down at the radiant waters.

"Don't get your hopes up. There might be some Infernal Clams down there, but that guy was simply too lucky," Havasa muttered with a shake of her head. "It takes a long, long time

for those pearls to form – how could we possibly leave too many of them lying around? Just like Uzu said, he must have stumbled onto a clam that had just broken through and used the breakthrough to finalize its pearl.”

Clearly, she wanted to avoid a scenario where a bunch of people got themselves killed out of greed, and she even threw Uzu an annoyed glare.

“It’s not often you see someone flaunting their wealth like that,” she perfunctorily added before sitting down.

Her comment didn’t really taper the excitement in some of the warrior’s eyes, but a few others thoughtfully looked over at Uzu who looked as excited as a child as he showed the pearl to anyone willing to look. Just like most of the other warriors, Zac wasn’t convinced by the straightforward and innocent act. No wandering cultivator who reached Hegemony was simple.

There was no real reason for him to showcase that pearl. It was not a bounty item, so he wouldn’t have to present it to the Void Gate either. Normally, you’d just stow that thing away and pretend nothing happened, as to avoid getting a target on your back. But here he was, waving the pearl while hinting there were more treasures in the depths.

Uzu wanted more people to dive into the waters - he wanted more wandering cultivators to get themselves killed. Problem was that while most knew that was the case, his lure was still effective. The existence of a Longevity Pearl proved that the energies at the bottom of the lake were dense enough to form Early D-grade treasures, and they weren’t all snatched by those who had come before them.

And even if they couldn’t find something of that quality, there might still be peak E-grade items up for grabs.

“Are you going?” Vai asked with worry in her eyes. “There really aren’t that many pearls down there, but there are large schools of carnivorous fish. Even if they’re only E-grade, there are schools with thousands of beasts.”

“This is what I came for. If I don’t push myself now, then when?” Zac eventually said. “I’ll wait a few hours until some

of the others return before I try my luck. Don't worry, you'll be safe on the barge."

"I'm not worried about myself," Vai said with a roll of her eyes.

"It's alright, I'm pretty good at taking a beating," Zac smiled before closing his eyes in meditation.

In reality, he was trying to pinpoint the source of the signal, but it was hard getting a proper read on it. It just provided a vague sense of direction. Thankfully, it was clear that it was steadily getting closer, and as the hours passed, the impression started to point down as much as it did ahead.

Zac knew it was time to go. This way he could swim ahead of the vessels as he dove deeper, giving him more time to search for the treasure. He waited another two minutes until another wandering cultivator jumped out of the oily water, his arms and face covered in bleeding lacerations.

"Well, I guess that's my cue," Zac said to Vai.

"Be careful," she whispered. "There are still many layers to go – no need to overdo it."

"I know what I'm about," Zac laughed.

With that, he dove into the water, and he immediately grimaced with disgust. The liquid was oily and scorching hot, and utterly uncomfortable to swim around in. Fiery energy tried to burrow into his cells as well, but the little that made it past his sturdy skin was immediately gobbled up by his **[Void Heart]**. Having explored the Twilight Ocean, this invasion was nothing.

There were no beasts in the vicinity, probably thanks to his proximity to the barges. He still equipped his presence-weakening cowl to complement his energy-hiding bracelet. Then, Zac took out his axe as he made his way downward, heading for the ocean floor below, all the while looking out for both animals and other cultivators. Soon enough he spotted a feeding frenzy, where hundreds of smaller fish were ripping apart the carcass of a huge fish that had dozens of long whiskers that seemed as sharp as blades.

However, the weird creature had been cut in two by a bladed attack, and Zac guessed he had found the source of the previous cultivator's wounds. A few of the frenzied fishes chose to target him instead of fighting for the dead catfish, but it was nothing that couldn't be solved with a couple of swings.

Finally, Zac reached the bottom of the ocean, somewhat surprised it was covered in lustrous corals, seaweed, and all kinds of plants. It was a stark contrast to the desolate landscape above water, which made Zac wonder if there were some specific reasons for it. Perhaps some sort of tidal wave that killed everything on land every few years?

Of course, Zac was more interested in treasure than solving the geographical puzzle, but he was a bit confused as he still felt the signal coming from further down. Did he need to dig? Or was there some tunnel in the area? Since the signal came from ahead as well, Zac stayed a few hundred meters away from the lakebed as he continued forward.

He could tell that there were quite a few creatures that lived among those corals, but he couldn't sense anything emitting the aura of a Beast King. Even then, there were the occasional ambushes, but Zac never slowed down as he drew closer and closer to his destination. And finally, he saw it - a deep crack in the ocean floor, leading into the depths of the Mystic Realm.

There was a weak pull coming from the chasm, forming a slight waterfall-like effect. However, it was nothing compared to the Twilight Chasm either in size or danger. This rather seemed to be a simple fissure created from an earthquake or tectonic plates moving, if that was even a thing inside a Mystic Realm.

In either case, Zac could sense the item was right below him, and his heart thumped with anticipation as he dove inside. Deeper and deeper he went, and he was surprised to find that the ambient energy grew more sparse the further he swam. Soon enough, it could barely be considered E-grade, and the fire attunement has all but disappeared from the orange water.

Eventually, the radiant glow from the waters had completely disappeared, and Zac could only make his way forward by his spiritual sense until he suddenly stopped. The pulse was so close he could touch it, but as he looked around, he couldn't spot anything out of place no matter what method he used.

He swam over to the rocky wall of the fissure, his hands searching the rough surface for any clues. It should be inside here, but there weren't any indications of a passage, and he couldn't sense or spot any palpable energy signatures from within. It almost made him feel as though he was going crazy, sensing a signal that wasn't there.

There was only one way to find out, and the water churned as Zac punched forward. The wall shuddered from the massive force as deep cracks spread for dozens of meters. The wall was a lot sturdier than he'd expected, but Zac's eyes still lit up - the thud was hollow. One punch after another assaulted the wall until it completely crumbled, but the scene of water rushing into the tunnel he'd exposed didn't take place.

Instead, as pieces of rocks tumbled toward the depths of the fissure, an invisible wall held the waters at bay. Zac couldn't make heads or tails of the scene, and even if the calling had suddenly grown a lot louder, he didn't dare rush inside. Instead, he took out a spear that he gingerly pushed inside the dark path.

The spear entered without issue, proving there wasn't any actual barrier that held the water at bay. Honestly, that only made the situation weirder, but Zac still slowly made his way inside. After all, he was hunting for remnants of an unfathomably powerful faction. So what if it scared the water to not enter?

That didn't mean Zac would just rush forward eyes shut, but no matter how he looked, he couldn't figure out what was going on. Even after taking a couple of steps inside, he could neither find what kept the water at bay, nor any other energy signature for that matter. There was simply nothing after having entered the path - like he had found a spot forgotten by the Heavens.

No energy, no Dao, no nothing. It was hollow, empty.

Growing even more curious about what he'd discovered, he turned toward the depths of the cave, toward the origin of the signal. The pathway itself wasn't a proper tunnel, but rather a narrow crack that Zac barely managed to squeeze through. Thankfully, it only continued for a hundred meters until Zac found himself at the edge of an extremely odd cave.

After entering the hidden chamber Zac finally had a pretty good idea of what was going on – how this place was created, and the origin of the call. The cave wasn't very big, just fifty meters across, and it was almost completely spherical. But the walls were definitely not natural, with twisted formations and patterns that would never appear in nature.

Neither were the patterns arrays or something manmade. It rather looked like the result of an eruption of a chaotic mixture of energies. Zac wasn't skilled enough to analyze the patterns, especially with all lingering hints of energy removed from the area, but he was pretty sure that spatial energies were heavily involved. With the Void Star being so chaotic, there was a simple explanation.

A chunk of space had been teleported inside the bedrock of this Mystic Realm, pulverizing the stone that had occupied the stone before. There was even a thick layer of ashy powder on the ground to strengthen this thesis. It was just like when he and the Azh'Rezak Alpha Gwyllgi had taken up the same plot of space when the Integration descended on Earth.

Judging by the almost suffocating ancient aura in the cave, Zac had a strong suspicion it wasn't an even fight this time around either. However, this time it was the stronger party that won, and Zac's eyes turned to the only item inside the spherical cave.

A singular piece of rubble that lay on top of the dusty layer.

If he went by appearance alone, Zac wouldn't have given it a second glance if he passed by the area. It was a bit odd it was dark grey compared to the native red, though that could have all kinds of explanations. On its surface, a few white lines were added, but they didn't provide any tangible clues. Of

course, with the stable signal it was emitting, Zac honed in on it the moment he reached the mouth of the crevasse.

And even if no one else could figure out what was so special about the stone, Zac knew exactly where it came from - after all, he had seen it before. It was exactly this material the enormous castle in his vision was made from.

Seeing it was both exciting and a bit disappointing. Exciting in the sense it had once been part of something amazing, a building that most likely housed true Supremacies once upon a time. Disappointing in the sense it was ultimately just a piece of rock. Perhaps it had been carved off from the outer wall during some ancient battle and fallen into a tear in space, carrying with it that ancient and inextinguishable aura.

But if that was the case, was this all there was to his supposed opportunity? Was it the latent aura in this piece of rock that had elicited the vision? How was he supposed to make use of a piece of stone? Even after standing right in front of it for a minute, he hadn't felt any benefits to any aspect of his cultivation.

The piece of rubble might not look like much, but its aura still beckoned him, telling Zac to take it and make it his. Even so, Zac stayed in place for a couple of minutes to scan both the stone and the cave for any threats. It was just too eerie finding this thing here, waiting for anyone to take it, and he didn't trust his Danger Sense would work against items of this level.

But there was simply nothing, and Zac eventually chose to follow his instincts. He jumped down, but his eyes suddenly widened in alarm as his landing kicked up a plume of dust. However, it wasn't because of the stone, and Zac ferociously swung his axe in an overhead arc. Unfortunately, his attack missed, and Zac growled upon seeing a familiar figure appear right next to the piece of rubble.

It was the dour man who had tried to get him into trouble the day they set out. His name was Kuru Cera, and he was one of the cultivators whose job was to scout ahead of the group. Of course, that didn't mean Kuru Cera was harmless - apart from

joining groups as a scout, he was also rumored to moonlight as an assassin.

“I knew I did the right thing following you,” Kuru snickered as he looked down at the piece of rubble. “You moved with far too much purpose as you swam past the lakebed. I knew you had something profitable in mind.”

Zac neither confirmed nor denied it, but he was inwardly extremely annoyed he had been exposed. He had kept a constant vigil to avoid this exact situation, but scouting simply wasn't his strong suit. Since the scout never had any intent to kill or even harm him, his Danger Sense hadn't warned him at all. And Kuru had surprisingly good skills to both hid his presence and his aura, allowing him to stalk Zac all the way here.

“You don't want to get involved in this,” Zac eventually said as his killing intent started to permeate the cave.

“Not so fast,” Kuru grinned as he tapped the token on his waist. “Were you asleep during the briefings? Attack me, and the Void Gate will hunt you down. And according to the rules of our employers, finder's keepers. I'm not sure what made you hunt down this shitty rock, but my gut tells me it's my ticket to prominence.”

There was nothing else to say, and Zac suddenly flashed forward, propelled by **[Earthstrider]**. If he could snatch the piece, then great. If he failed... Then he might have to find out how accurate these tokens were. Unfortunately, while Zac was quick, the scout was a proper Dexterity-based cultivator.

Kuru's hand turned to a blur as he snatched the rock just before Zac's outstretched hand could reach it, prompting Zac to seamlessly transition his lunge into a swing.

“Wh-” Kuru said, clearly shocked Zac actually dared to attack.

However, the scout didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, but not because of Zac's killing blow. A silent pulse was suddenly released from the stone, and Kuru instantaneously turned into ashy dust that kicked up a storm as Zac's axe passed right through. At first, Zac was elated that bastard got

his just desserts, but that feeling only lasted until he saw the particles falling from his own outstretched hand.

He, too, was falling apart.

Chapter 874: Flamebearer

There was no warning and no pain as his fingers turned to motes of dust. In an instant, his whole hand was gone, reduced to an identical ashy rain that joined Kuru's. The phenomenon was different from anything Zac had encountered before, including his Annihilation Spheres. It didn't destroy anything - it was rather as though the pulse erased all energy and spirituality from any matter it touched.

Out of panic, Zac did everything he could think of to stem his imminent collapse. He knew that talismans or skills would be useless against something like this, so he tried to urge his Hidden Nodes to do something, anything. Of course, he activated **[Void Zone]** as well, in a desperate hope his own nullification zone would cancel out the one that had been released from the piece of rubble.

And it worked.

Just like that, the collapse of his very being stopped, but Zac had no way to tell if it was a permanent stay of execution. He had never sensed any energy causing the disintegration, and neither had his Hidden Nodes managed to cleanse or absorb anything. With his heart beating like a drum, Zac began to scramble away, but he suddenly froze with indecision.

What if **[Void Zone]** covering the piece of ancient rubble was what kept him alive? If he ran away, would the stone regain its power and blast him again? Or had the stone accepted him after activating his bloodline talent? Was his survival proof that the stone was really meant for him, connected to his origin? Or was he just lucky? Should he run, or should he grab it?

Barely having avoided irrevocable disaster, Zac's mind was a mess and he was frozen with indecision. But he didn't even get a second to weigh his options before the piece of rubble

made his choice for him. A second, more powerful pulse rippled out from the rock, proving that his [Void Zone] was absolutely incapable of restraining it.

Next, it floated up into the air, and Zac desperately flashed away to avoid it as it shot toward him. But the stone seemed to have a mind of its own, and it slammed into Zac's chest with a speed he absolutely couldn't avoid. A deep thud echoed through the spherical cave, followed by a grating sound as the piece of stone crumbled, turning into a fine powder indistinguishable from that on the ground.

Zac mutely looked down at his chest with mute incomprehension. Was that it?

No. His soul shuddered before both his outer and inner cores ground to a halt. He tried to circulate his energy, but it might as well have been turned into ice. Time seemed to have stopped altogether, and he found himself unable to as much as blink, forced to stare at the frozen swirls of dust that had been kicked up by his failed escape.

His mind still worked though, and he quickly pinpointed the source of it all right in his Soul Aperture. Four shining lines had appeared out of nowhere, exuding the very same aura as those he had been subject to in his vision. Zac recognized somewhat recognized the lines as well - they were the very same ones that had been inscribed on the piece of rubble.

At first, they seemed content in doing nothing, but they eventually released a third pulse that spread throughout every corner of his body. It was like his bloodline had been startled awake, the small vortices in his body opening wide as his three Void Emperor nodes entered overdrive. The scene didn't elicit any fear - rather the opposite.

Zac looked on with expectation as the four lines started to release a pure white light containing that ancient aura, purer and more palpable than ever before. It was familiar, yet it was not. It almost felt nostalgic for some reason. The runes didn't need to explain it, he could understand it by instinct.

Kuru didn't have the qualifications to come in contact with this item, and thus he was reduced to nothingness, not even

leaving a shred nor his items behind. But **[Void Zone]** had proved something to the piece of rubble, and the final pulse that scanned him had confirmed it. No matter if it was because of his connection to Emperor Limitless, or if it simply was because he'd passed some other criteria, he had been accepted by the runes.

And now, it was time to reap the rewards.

A quest screen appeared in front of his eyes, but Zac didn't get the chance to read what it said. His whole perception was flooded by that marvelous light that seemed to contain a million ideas. Primeval, boundless, and even terrifying concepts swept him away, absolutely overwhelming him. Every moment, it felt like more and more was crammed into his brain, squeezing out everything else.

His mind could only hold so much before it reached his limits. There was no ominous cracking of his soul, no tearing of his mind. But what he felt was not much better. The vast truths of the universe gradually turned into dust just like his hand, forever erasing itself from his memories. Left was just a sense of loss and inadequacy.

Zac could barely hold onto his sense of self, but he knew that if he didn't do something, and soon, it would be just like when he got his hands on that mote of Primal Dao back in the Twilight Chasm. He needed to grasp what he could before it all slipped through his fingers. His Hidden Nodes were the only thing that was doing something right now, each one of the three nodes gleefully absorbing the light.

But that wasn't enough - more than 90% of the light was still wasted. His first instinct was to turn to the Dao just like last time, taking the chance to push his three Dao Branches further. However, as Zac tried to use the chaotic hurricane of comprehension to further his path and his Daos, there was no response.

Zac soon realized that while the situation was similar to his opportunity in the chasm, the content of that light was vastly different. Just like the cave itself and the dust of the ground, it

was void of any energy or the Dao. But without Dao, what else was there? It was the glue that held everything together.

It felt like a fortune had already slipped through his fingers even if just an instant had passed, but Zac quickly gathered his wits. Of course there were other things to focus on, and he quickly recalled the third chapter of the **[Book of Duality]**. In an instant, it felt like he'd thrown out a net into that vast sea of comprehension, catching at least some scraps for himself before they were reduced to nothingness.

Out of nowhere, the fundamental workings of duality became so clear. Going over the words in the booklet, Zac remembered every detail, every line, and he felt the hidden implications unraveling for him at a pace that was beyond shocking. Even some imperfections left by the imperfect transcription were amended, leaving him with an understanding even closer to Kalo's original intent.

Or perhaps it was more apt to say it drew closer to the perfect mechanics of the universe.

Cycles, harmonies, chasms, pendulums, waves, interlocking patterns, and so many other methods of utilizing and building upon duality revealed themselves to his mind's eye. A wealth of knowledge was laid bare, filling gaps and lighting a path to the future. But gradually, Zac found that path hazy. It wasn't that he'd run out of time – the light was gradually weakening, but it still exuded far more than he could take on.

He couldn't remember the later chapters of the book.

Zac had repeatedly gone over the earlier sections of the **[Book of Duality]** over the past weeks, and the first half of the book was pretty much imprinted on his brain. It was his method to gradually decipher the book, but he hadn't gone over the later chapters in such detail. As such, he couldn't continue this path – there was nothing for that magical light in his mind to decipher for him.

He tried to take out the booklet from his Spatial Ring, but it was futile - either he was frozen in place or time was. In either case, he couldn't so much as blink, let alone riffle through a booklet. He needed to change course to make the most of this

opportunity. His Void Emperor-nodes were still gobbling up what they could, but Zac could feel that even they were almost filled to the brim.

There were skills, techniques, and professions to consider, but there was something even better. Something that was firmly and fully locked in his brain.

The **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**.

For once, Zac didn't fear the path-breaking power in the sea of knowledge that Three Virtues had left behind in his soul. Even the Buddhist Sangha was followers of the Dao. Meanwhile, the shining light seemed capable of completely stripping everything of its heavenly truth, opening the hood to showcase what hid within.

He delved deeper and deeper into the Body Tempering Manual, trying to understand the overarching themes and connections of the method. How were Heart and Body connected? How could the boundlessness of Buddha's heart be removed, or at least replaced by something that wouldn't alter his path?

Zac's mind shuddered and he felt a splitting headache as a million ideas were born and discarded. But it was not for nothing - something was starting to form. Something that was uniquely his. But it wasn't enough. Eventually, his state of clarity began to fade, and Zac felt as though he was being plunged into an abyss.

The truths he needed were getting further and further away, and as the light winked out, they were gone. Left behind in his mind were only the four white lines. But even they released a ripple and disappeared a moment later. Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes, his heart filled with a confusing mix of elation and deficiency as he saw the world speed up again.

The previously frozen clouds of dust swirled around for a moment before a churning rumble shook the cave as the waters of Hako Lake, once more glowing a bright orange, came crashing to fill the crevasse. There was no way to tell whether the runes had actually slowed time down for him, or if

it had just felt that way with the speed his mind worked, but no actual time had passed since those lines appeared in his mind.

Zac let the waters crash over him and submerge the cave as a smile spread across his face. He'd been a bit skeptical upon seeing that piece of rubble, but he had ended up gaining in a big way. That shimmering light in his mind wasn't enough to completely reforge the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**, but it had been enough to open a door he didn't know existed.

The answer was within the void.

The original method aimed to relinquish all distractions, to become an unfeeling Vajra with only their eyes on their path. It could be considered a surrender of the self, where one's heart became empty and boundless to accept the Heavens. That didn't work for Zac, but the epiphany had helped him realize that removing those parts would essentially remove the very foundations of the manual.

The Heart Cultivation wasn't just there as a trap or to lure more practitioners into the arms of the Sangha. It brought purpose to the movements, to the energy circulation, to the patterns, as it incorporated your Dao and your intent into the method. In a sense, it harmonized the method with your path, allowing you to create a life constitution uniquely suited for you. This was the real reason it was considered a top-tier method.

Without the heart component, the method would become utterly flawed. He would perhaps be able to force the first layer or two with treasures considering his wealth, but that would do more harm than good. If he did that, then his constitution would take on the nature of the treasures rather than of one that suited him. Such an incongruity would soon cause problems with every aspect of your cultivation.

But it wasn't hopeless. The details were already hazy since the shining light left him, but he had seen how the Void could replace the Boundlessness. Instead of relinquishing one's self, you'd ensconce it in the void. That way, not even the Heavens themselves would be able to influence your heart or your path.

For a normal cultivator, this path was utterly impossible – it was a path that required an absolute absence of the Dao. How else would you be able to comprehend and welcome the true void into your heart? Affinities were a bridge between yourself and the Heavens, and not even crippling your cultivation could remove that. As long as that bridge existed, you could not truly practice the kind of method Zac envisioned.

In that sense, he was unique, a person completely lacking affinities, with a Void-related Bloodline to boot. As long as he could create that method, he'd become a black hole – he'd take anything he needed to progress, without letting outside elements affect his path or his heart. This would not just solve the immediate goal of getting a life-attuned constitution for his human side - but it would prove something he desperately wanted.

A Heart Cultivation method that would protect you from undue outside influence, no matter if it was the System, the Buddhist Sangha, or the Remnants. He had been led around by the nose enough times by now that the thought of cultivating independence was almost as attractive as the thought of aligning his human constitution with his path.

For a moment, he had seen it all mesh together - Life and Death held together by the Void in his bloodline, just like his triumvirate path were held together by the Dao of Conflict.

Figuring out the path he needed to take with the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** was the biggest gain, but it wasn't all of it. Zac had fully comprehended both the third and fourth chapters of the **[Book of Duality]**, something that would have taken him months of hard work. Not only that, the knowledge had somehow been expanded beyond what was hidden within his copy.

The former was somewhat understandable – he'd eaten epiphany-inducing treasures before. However, the second aspect was more shocking, since Zac knew those additional insights weren't the fruit of his own understanding. They were far beyond what he could comprehend on his own, epiphany or not. The concepts came from within that rune.

Was he so lucky that it just happened to contain exactly the insights he was looking for? Zac didn't think so. It was more like that rune represented the fundamental laws of the universe, and the underpinnings of duality were just one small piece of that. It made Zac think of that feeling he'd gotten when he was shown the empty courtyard of Ultom. That coherent and supreme understanding that unified everything which transcended the Dao itself.

Of course, the burst of inspiration he'd gotten just now was just a shadow of the real thing. But they had to be connected.

Still, there were some things he couldn't make sense of quite yet. First of all, the incomplete rune he'd seen in his soul for a moment didn't match the one on the steps in the inner courtyard. It was rather part of a repeating pattern he saw on the massive castle for a moment before his vision changed.

It was related, but different. For some reason, it also filled him with a sense of familiarity. Could it be a connection through bloodline, between himself and the Limitless Empire?

Perhaps even more importantly, he'd gained such a huge windfall from finding a random piece of rubble that had been teleported to this random Mystic Realm. What would happen if he got his hands on a full rune rather than a corner? Or something that held even more of that aura?

No matter if it was figuring out a blueprint for his Cultivator's Core or creating his envisioned **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, it was a huge undertaking. And frankly, it required comprehension and talent that he might not possess. This could be his ticket to solving those two issues in one fell swoop, not just saving time, but elevating his prospects altogether.

Zac suddenly remembered he'd gotten a quest just before the wave of insights commanded all his attention, and he quickly opened it to see if it provided any clues. For a moment he was elated. For another, he was confused. Eventually, he settled with being unsettled. Just what had he become embroiled in this time?

**[Seal of the Left Imperial Palace (Unique, Inheritance):
Form a seal of the Left Imperial Palace. Reward: Become a
Flamebearer of Ultom. (1/4)]**

Chapter 875: The Will of the Ancients

**[Seal of the Left Imperial Palace (Unique, Inheritance):
Form a seal of the Left Imperial Palace. Reward: Become a
Flamebearer of Ultom. (1/4)]**

Zac didn't know what to believe as he read the mission. More than anything he felt it a bit ironic. He had just devised a change for his Body Tempering Manual that would shield his heart from the System, yet it looked like he needed to participate in some System-controlled inheritance to figure out the specifics.

At least that was his first takeaway. The quest was at 1/4, which hopefully meant there were three more pieces of rubble strewn throughout the Void Star. Three more bursts of that sea of knowledge should be enough to figure out all his roadblocks for Hegemony, paving the way for him to visit the Perennial Vastness Realm much earlier than he'd anticipated. And that was just from progressing the quest itself.

Not only that, but the quest had also given a name to that massive castle in his vision – The Left Imperial Palace. By this point, it almost seemed like a forgone conclusion that it really was part of the Limitless Empire. Anything else seemed like a hopeless longshot by this point. But just what was a Flamebearer of Ultom? A representative?

Seeing as the quest type was listed as (Unique, Inheritance), it might act as the qualification to enter the palace? Or to at least gain access to some minor inheritance left behind by the Limitless Empire? Just the thought of an Inheritance of that magnitude almost made Zac drool with excitement. What if it was like Brazla's Dao Repository? A repeating opportunity that might last him all the way to Supremacy?

No matter which was the case, one thing was for sure – he needed to find the rest of that rune. The nature of the actual reward didn't even matter.

Having just gained such a massive windfall, Zac only wanted to seclude himself for a couple of weeks. He needed to digest what he'd just learned and prepare in case he stumbled onto another piece of the seal. But first things first. Slumbering motes of Creation were dragged from his cells, and Zac felt the sweet nectar of unbridled possibility course through his body.

But the energy was soon reluctantly pushed back into his body as Zac looked at his perfectly intact hand with confusion. He had been so occupied with the wealth of knowledge that he had completely failed to realize he was in perfect condition, with no hints that part of his body was previously missing.

How was this possible? Had the runes turned back time after realizing it had made a mistake? Or had it replaced his left hand with something else? No, it seemed unlikely. No matter how many times he scanned it, he couldn't find anything different from before. It was pretty unsettling, but he ultimately put the matter aside.

He was too stupid to figure out that mystery, and he only had another hour or two before he needed to get back to the barge. Possibly even earlier, considering how Kuru had just been turned into dust right in front of his eyes. He knew he might face some questioning when he returned, but he could only take things as they came. Hopefully, the runes had so utterly destroyed the token that there were no clues to glean.

Zac eventually closed his eyes again, slowly going over his insights. However, only five minutes passed until his eyes shot open as his mind suddenly screamed of danger. Extreme, mortal danger. The source wasn't some angry templar bearing down on him, but that didn't make the situation better.

Something was happening in the center of the cave. A small ball containing terrifying waves of Spatial Energy had appeared out of nowhere. It phased in and out of being as it flickered ominously, like it was trying to break into this

dimension. Zac didn't know what it was, and if his absorbing of the rune was the cause of its appearance. It didn't matter.

What he did know was that he needed to get away – and quick. With one step, he squeezed into the crevasse, and with another activation of [**Earthstrider**], he was out in the chasm. But adding some distance to the anomaly did nothing to quell the terror in his heart – his Danger Sense was still screaming at him to get away.

For the first time since taking the appearance of Gaun Sorom, Zac released the floodgates to the divine tree in his Soul Aperture, filling his movement skill with his Branch of the Kalpataru as he escaped as quickly as his legs would take him. By now, the whole lakebed was rumbling, and it wasn't the time to be picky.

Each step took him hundreds of meters away, leaving churning whirlwinds in his wake. Even then, his horror was only mounting as the frantic energies beneath him grew stronger. He shot out from the fissure like a rocket, heading straight for the surface with all the speed he could muster.

Eventually, reality shattered, and a shockwave pushed Zac to the surface and hundreds of meters into the air. Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood as the bones in his body groaned, but at least he was out of the waters. Becoming airborne gave him a good vantage as well, and he spotted the barges far in the distance.

Zac slammed into the waters a few seconds later, but he immediately got back up again. He couldn't fly, but he could still run on top of the waters, and a minute later he jumped onto the barge. Vai hurried over when she saw him, and he waved at her to show he was okay before he ate a healing pill. Two more had already surfaced before him, and three more followed within the next minute.

Looking around, Zac inwardly breathed out in relief. Those who had just returned to the barges were worse for the wear, but it looked like Kuru was the only casualty. And with this big a calamity, he had the perfect scapegoat.

“What is going on?!” Teo asked as his gaze alternated between the still-wet wandering cultivators and the roiling waters.

“A breach,” one of the warriors said breathlessly. “A breach is opening up at the bottom of the lake.”

“He’s right,” another one added. “I couldn’t see it, but the spatial fluctuations were terrible.”

“I think two oceans have merged,” one of the two remaining scouts said as he peered down into the depths, his eyes gleaming from some skill. “I can’t say for sure, but it looks like tendrils of purple mud or thick water is rising from the depths?”

“Purple waters?” Tyla said thoughtfully. “Aphosis Eight? Or perhaps the Taosi Ocean in Kosdo Nine?”

“Let’s hope it’s Aphosis,” Teo frowned. “Did anyone see any invaders?”

“Invaders?” someone muttered with confusion.

“Beasts that don’t belong,” Havasa explained.

Everyone shook their heads, but that did little to allay anyone’s worries.

“Tyla,” Teo said.

“I’m on it,” the vice-captain nodded and jumped into the waters.

“Speed up, everyone stay alert!” Teo said.

Some arrays on the barges hummed to life as the Hegemons inserted more crystals into the arrays, and they sped toward the other shore. For a minute, nothing happened, until a frazzled Tyla breached the surface and jumped back onto deck.

“Not water! Insects!” the vice-captain shouted, but her voice was almost drowned out by a deafening roar as a black tidal wave exploded out from the waters, reaching over a hundred meters into the air in an instant.

Zac looked at the seething wave with incomprehension for a moment, until it clicked what the vice-captain had just said.

Insects?

Outside a lonely cottage in a shrouded forest, Kouzo wordlessly observed the kettle as its contents simmered over the fire. The bones formed an intricate dance as they swirled around in the broth, their movements mirroring the eight primordial truths. Suddenly, one of the bones snapped, prompting Kouzo to exclaim in surprise.

He immediately threw out a handful of bones on the ground next to him to confirm, grunting upon seeing their placement.

“The first candle is lit,” the old man muttered as his murky eyes turned toward the sky. “Ultom has found a candidate.”

“Already?” a rumbling voice echoed out as a middle-aged man stepped out from the stars.

The air could not withstand his presence, and cracks spread in his wake as he walked forward, like a cape stretching toward the heavens. The old man sighed as he felt the primal aura being emitted from his body – the mark of a true Primordial Dragon. It looked like the Patriarch was rousing from his slumber after millions of years if one of his generals stepped forward to take charge of this matter.

Kouzo had long since retreated from the arena of power, but he could still recognize it was Realmbane who stood in front of him. The solitary golden scale covering his glabella was proof enough that he belonged to one of the two dragon heritages that were held in the highest esteem even though they were not purebloods.

After all, Realmbane and the Patriarch had a hint of the Beast Progenitor coursing through their veins.

Kouzo didn't understand. The Starbeast Alliance didn't even contend for the first pillar, and only individual Ancestors contended for the three that followed. What was so special about the fifth pillar that it elicited this kind of response? Did his master know something? Was that why he exhausted his longevity? But if so, why didn't he impart what he knew before moving on?

“We just got the report from the Worldwing Autarch, and someone has already been accepted?” Realmbane frowned. “How is this possible? Even if our activities were exposed to the Undead Empire, they still lack critical information. And while the Sangha’s means are unfathomable, there shouldn’t be more than one or two chapters who bother with this matter.”

“No prophecy can account for every variable, not even my Master’s,” the old man smiled.

“Can you tell who it is? If it’s the Undead Empire, then fine. I doubt the Primo is willing to exit his seclusion, and we should be able to deal with his clones. But if it’s those undying Abbots, then it’s trouble,” the dragon rumbled. “The more pressure we apply, the more chapters would join hands.”

Kouzo turned back toward the simmering pot, and minutes passed in silence as he made his deductions.

“It’s... messy,” Kouzo eventually said. “I sense the Sangha, but I also sense the Abyss. And there is a hint of the Vigil. There is even something else as well, but it is too deeply hidden. I cannot grasp it from this distance.”

“The Vigil is to be expected,” the general mused. “But they have never gotten directly involved in the conflict. But what’s with the conflicting hints? Is there someone who is obstructing you?”

“I am far from Master’s level in this regard,” Kouzo sighed. “There are quite a few who can blind my eyes. But no, this seems to be something else. Only part of the tapestry is obscured, but I do not know what to make of the rest. Chaos runs rife through the threads of fate.”

“Chaos?” the dragon said with a start.

“My lord?” Kouzo asked, and he was met with a rumbling laugh.

“The Sangha and the Abyss, you say? Chaos?” Realmsbane said before he released a booming laugh. “I think I know what we’re dealing with.”

Space flickered the next moment as a spear-wielding warrior appeared, his face almost covered in scales – proving his atavism was just an early stage.

“Ancestor,” the man bowed before repeating a slightly lower bow at Kouzo. “Sage Kouzo.”

“A Mutant Voidcatcher just returned from a mission on the outside,” the general said. “You should be able to find him in the Sea of Salvation. Bring him to me.”

The warrior bowed again before he disappeared, off to fulfill his task. Seeing the dragonling disappear, Kouzo turned back to Realmsbane curiously.

“See for yourself,” Realmsbane snorted and waved his hand, prompting a series of images to flash through Kouzo’s mind.

“The boy?” Kouzo exclaimed, suddenly remembering the report. “How is that possible? How could an E-grade child be qualified to get involved with these matters?”

“The Left Imperial Palace has been without a controller since the Dark Ages. That’s more than enough time for it to have become influenced by the eternal intent of those ancient masters,” the general said. “Who knows what their goals were? But this could be good news as well, allowing us to test the waters. Do we have any decent prospects among the younglings of the latest generations?”

“I’m sorry, I wouldn’t know,” Kouzo smiled. “I secluded myself millions of years ago.”

“Alright,” Realmsbane nodded. “I will have someone arrange a quick trial. I will need your assistance to find those whose fates shine the brightest and augment them even further. If there is anything you can think of to increase our chance of success, let me know. This is the highest priority of the council.”

“Of course,” Kouzo nodded, though he was still inwardly confused.

As far as he knew, only Emperor Limitless knew the true worth of the Ultom Courts, but one thing was for sure - some things were often more trouble than they were worth. Being

rich was a sin if you didn't have the strength to protect it, and the Starbeast Alliance wasn't infallible. Judging by how fate was shifting, holding onto the Left Imperial Palace would come with a terrible price.

Was there something special about the Heritage from the Lost Era?

It was the same today as well – the shimmering wall of gold appeared when they came too close. A searing lance of fire slammed into it with enough force to incinerate a planet, yet it only rippled a bit before space calmed down again. Iz's eyes suspiciously turned to Kvalk again, her silence speaking volumes.

“Young miss, I wouldn't lie to you!” the golem quickly said. “The seal is extremely powerful. Even if I sacrificed some of my cultivation, I wouldn't be able to breach it.”

“I heard it with my own ears. That Draugr girl and her master, who is a lot weaker than you, managed to visit this sector and leave without issue,” Iz hummed.

“Something must have changed for the Heavens to directly block us out like this,” Kvalk sighed. “Normally, only the agreements keep the upper realms away from the frontier. Even when there is direct interference, there is just suppression of providence or perhaps a seal on our strength. But this – a direct barrier barring entry? I have never heard of such a thing. This is the work of the Boundless Heavens.”

Iz looked at the barrier with reluctance, wondering what to think and what to believe. Was it really the System that blocked her out? Or was Uncle Valderak and his descendant trying to trick her again? Was there no choice but to turn back now that she was so close? She didn't want to, but she had been stuck here for weeks now.

Suddenly, she felt the flames in her body stir, and she looked over at Kvalk just in time to see a familiar rune appear on its forehead as towering flames were released from its body.

“Little girl, are you having fun on the outside?” Kvalk laughed.

“... Grampa?” Iz hesitated before her eyes widened. “I knew it! Have you sealed off this sector?”

“How could I possibly be so bored?” Mohzius snorted, the sound a bit unnatural coming from the possessed golem. “But I am afraid things have become a bit complicated.”

“You want me to return?” Iz frowned.

“Your grandmother wants you to come home, she is worried,” the golem nodded. “But I am willing to give you a choice.”

“What’s going on?” Iz hesitated, realizing something big had happened.

“The Left Imperial Palace of the Limitless Empire is rising from the ashes of history,” Mohzius explained. “And it looks like it will make its first appearance in this frontier sector.”

“Are the uncles or aunts coming to fight for it?” Iz asked with confusion.

“We hadn’t planned on it, but things have changed,” Mozhius sighed. “It’s up to you now.”

“Me?” Iz said with confusion. “I’m only here for Mr. Bug. What’s that got to do with me?”

“We first saw the signs a few days ago, and I convened with the Old Man River to have him look for clues across the River of Time. It seems your little friend is either responsible for its emergence, or at least connected to it all somehow.”

“Mr. Bug?” Iz exclaimed before her mouth slowly started to curve upward. “That’s so like him.”

“Yes, well,” Mozhius snorted. “He almost reminds me of a younger and less dashing version of me. In either case, it seems the first stage of this emergence will contain some sort of inheritance aimed at the younger generation.”

“I would compete with Mr. Bug?” Iz said hesitantly. “If he was the one who found it, I don’t want to take it. He’s so poor, I’d feel bad.”

“It’s impossible to tell the specifics from the outside,” Mohzius said. “You might compete for the same prize, or you might need to team up to explore the opportunities. It all depends on the will of the ancients.”

“What do you want me to do?” Iz hesitated. “This is such an important matter. I-“

“At a certain point, the young need to spread their wings and fly,” Mozhius smiled. “Your grandmother would have preferred you stayed under our protection for a while longer, but I believe you’re ready to choose for yourself. And isn’t this what you wanted? To go on adventures with your friend?”

“It’s up to you to decide if you want to compete for this opportunity. If you’re ready, I will seal this child’s cultivation to middle Monarchy, which should be enough for me to force you two inside. But as soon you enter, you two will be on your own – not even your grandmother can intercede this time.”

“What about those other factions? Will it cause trouble for the family?”

“Since when have the Tayns feared some trouble?” Mohzius snorted. “Just kill anyone who gets in your way. But if all you want out of this excursion is to meet up with your friend, I will bring you back. I cannot let you enter if you’re just here for a vacation. On the other side of the barrier, you will just be you, without the protections you have back home. You might even die.”

Iz slowly turned her gaze back toward the barrier again, wordlessly weighing her options. Hearing that she might actually die, she was a bit afraid. Not that she would cease to exist, but rather that she’d waste all that her elders had sacrificed to give her a chance at life. But she could also tell that her grandfather hoped for her to take this risk.

Treasures and background could only take you so far. You needed more if you wanted to walk the road of eternity. You needed conviction, you needed purpose. Her grandfather hoped she would find that in here.

She remembered how Mr. Bug struggled every day in the mirror. In many ways, he was more of a cultivator than she was. Was this her chance? To test herself, to find purpose in her existence? If she succeeded, then great. If she failed, then she simply wasn't fated. It didn't seem like a bad deal.

“I want to give it a try.”

Chapter 876: Negative Spiral

Zac, like most of the other cultivators, released a pent-up sigh of relief as he stepped through the dimensional gate to the third Mystic Realm. They had already been somewhat safe after reaching the waystation, but the way those frenzied cockroaches seemed able to absorb energy, he believed it was just a matter of time before the defensive arrays failed.

He felt a bit apologetic that they had been hounded for days without reprieve, but at least everyone was alive. Of course, if the others found out he was the reason that two-thirds of the squad members had painful bite marks across their whole bodies, they would probably pummel him to death.

Only the Hegemons and the strongest Half-Step Cultivators were spared, which was saying something considering most of the critters weren't even E-grade. But when there were billions of them forming a swarm that blotted out the sky, even F-grade roaches could take you out.

It was a tide in the true sense of the word. Every critter would exhaust a small amount of your energy, and they were endless. Eventually, you would be exhausted, at which point the stronger roaches would breach your defenses and start ripping you open. This was a type of tide that many feared even more than Beast Kings, and Zac remembered Ogras telling him how a rat tide had taken out a whole capital on his home planet.

At least that was over with since there was no way the roaches would be able to hound them across layers. Unfortunately, the relief didn't last long. Even if his mind was preoccupied with the churning sea of energy-feeding roaches, he still remembered to brace himself for another pulse. But even after waiting for half a minute, not so much as a whiff of that ancient aura greeted him.

There was only the ambient energy a slight electric charge. A world of thunderstorms, perhaps? Of course, Zac didn't really care what kind of Mystic Realm they had arrived in. He was far more worried about the lack of guidance from the ancient remnants of the Left Imperial Palace. What now?

Seeing as the piece of rubble could guide him through multiple Mystic Realms, he'd assume he would get another pulse leading him toward the next, especially now that he even got a related quest. That had been too optimistic. Was there really only one piece inside the Void Star? Or was the next piece of rubble too far, forcing him to explore more realms?

"We won't pass by the realm where those buggers came from, right?" a cultivator hesitantly asked after everyone had taken a breather.

"No, and we'll not pass through this realm on the way back" Teo grunted, clearly a bit annoyed.

Zac could understand the sentiment. Things kept going sideways for the poor captain. He had also been forced to continuously use his defensive skills for days to protect the group, and he was visibly pale from the energy expenditure.

"With our dash, we're ahead of schedule. We'll rest here for half a day before continuing," the leader continued before taking over a corner to rest.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief as he sat down. It looked like the death of the dour scout had been pinned on the beast tide rather than him, with no one making any trouble. Teo had simply asked everyone who had been in the waters during the breach if they'd seen Kuru, to which everyone shook their heads.

The relief didn't only come from his activities not being found out - he needed the rest. His energy reserves were shocking for his level, but he was ultimately just an E-grade warrior. Without a core, he couldn't compare to even Half-Step Hegemon in energy reserves. And since he was one of the warriors, he had been forced to protect the researchers who only needed to keep running.

With his free hand, Zac took out the **[Book of Duality]** and started to read through the first four chapters again. He quickly found there wasn't any need - after his epiphany, it was like the ideas and concepts were imprinted into his brain. There was no need to digest what he'd read.

Instead, Zac started to go over the last three chapters. He didn't bother trying to comprehend the truths hidden inside. As long as he memorized every page, he would be able to decipher them in case he suddenly ran into another part of the seal. The hours passed, and by the time it was time to go, the pages were memorized and his energy was mostly restored.

Everyone else looked a lot better as well, with the bitemarks covering their faces healed, but the atmosphere was still a bit subdued as they set out again. Thankfully, they only needed to worry about the weather in the third realm, with the occasional thunderbolt striking down at them. However, their force was nothing compared to real tribulation lightning, and they were easily dealt with.

After its initial hiccups, things started to return to normalcy - for a high-danger mission into a weird multi-dimensional star, that is. Days turned to weeks, and Zac's worries quickly become reality as not a single one of the realms they traversed contained any remnants of or clues to the Left Imperial Palace.

The same was true for the naturally-appearing breaches they encountered on the way. Zac had been hoping to at least get some confirmation more pieces existed through the breaches, even if he wasn't planning on jumping through. Unfortunately, the only thing pouring out of those spatial tears were more beasts.

Over the next eight Mystic Realms they crossed, they encountered huge spatial tears in three, and while none were as bad as the insect tide, they all contained shocking numbers of agitated animals. Zac felt it very odd - why were there always animals on the other side? It wasn't like every Mystic Realm contained huge numbers of animals, only the wild ones did.

So why didn't any tears open up, only for them to lead to some dead Mystic Realm? Neither was there any indication that

these beasts were brought by the System - when it did, it always awarded the defenders quests. Was there something about these seemingly overpopulated realms that led to the breaches? Zac had no idea, and the Templars didn't seem interested in sharing their theories either.

Apart from the breaches, the squad also encountered a tremendous spatial ripple that left a vast convergence in its wake. It covered half the Mystic Realm, forcing them into a day-long and extremely confusing battle where beasts kept popping up out of nowhere and disappearing a moment later.

Even with all this chaos around them, Zac spent most of his time going over the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** in his mind. In contrast to the chapters of the **[Book of Duality]**, the epiphany had only illuminated the path for this idea. Actually creating a working method was terrifyingly complex. It would probably require another epiphany, but he wanted to solve some pieces of the puzzle before that.

It was just like eating a Dao Treasure - the more he managed to sort out beforehand, the more he could make of the opportunity. The more Zac thought about the idea, the more sure he was that this was the right way to go. It was not only about protecting his path either. Incorporating the concept of the void into the method should drastically reduce the risk of the method clashing with his Bloodline.

That was the biggest risk apart from having his path broken, but this idea would essentially turn the high-compatibility method into a Body Tempering Manual uniquely suited for only him. Unfortunately, he couldn't try out his theories during the mission, so he could only run simulations in his mind.

Others weren't so free that they could turn their sight inward and ponder on their path. The environment grew increasingly hostile as they progressed deeper into the Void Star. The first casualties, apart from Kuru's unfortunate disappearance, since the initial convergence came when they encountered the second breach. An endless number of beasts, both flying and landlocked, came flooding out, including dozens of Beast Kings. Not even Teo and his vice-captains were able to completely control the avalanche.

There were simply too many beasts, and they hadn't managed to force their way out from the encirclement even after furiously fighting for hours. The first-string cultivators were overwhelmed, and more and more beasts had to be let through their outer perimeter to be dealt with by the second-string cultivators.

Because of this, a dying Beast King managed to kill one of the defenders with its last breath before Havasa had the chance to take it out. Its final attack even ripped the arm of the researcher the templar was protecting. One of the first-string cultivators fell half an hour later, and by the time they managed to escape, another two had such grievous wounds they would be unable to fight for weeks even with Kantomir's ministrations.

Like that, Zac got a second ward; the nun whose arm had been ripped off. Zac was pretty much the most powerful second-string cultivator, so he had to take on a slightly greater burden. It wasn't that he had revealed more of his power – it was simply a result of having a Dao Branch. His Branch of the War Axe drastically increased his lethality, allowing him to kill most beasts in a single swing while others required multiple attacks to kill the sturdy beasts.

More than one wandering cultivator had approached him during their travels, hoping to glean some sort of insight from how he'd managed to finally form a Dao Branch after centuries of being stalled out. Unfortunately, they could only leave in disappointment after Zac said he'd found a natural treasure that both increased his affinity and forced a breakthrough.

Five more members of the squad, four warriors and one researcher, had died by the time they closed in on their destination, and another three were so wounded they had to be carried. In other words, they had essentially reached a casualty rate of 20% already, after less than half the mission was completed. From here, they would need to guard the Spatial Anomaly for up to a month and then return to the surface.

As things stood, Zac doubted they would be able to make it out within the advertised 30% casualty rate. With fewer and

fewer warriors being fit to fight, the pressure on the others would increase, creating a negative spiral.

Thankfully, not every Mystic Realm they passed were dangerous. One was completely void of enemies, while another had been cleared out by one of the large roving armies just two weeks ago. It was a shame they had already moved on. If not for the mission taking so long to fill up, they would have been able to add to their roster from the massive army. But with their squad already running a bit late, they couldn't spare the time to move two realms over and fetch new members.

Finally, after close to a month of traversing inhospitable realms, endless bloodshed, and weird spatial events, the squad finally reached their destination realm. Like a dozen times before, Zac prepared himself for a pulse as he stepped through the Spatial Gate, but just like every time since the events at Hako Lake, there was nothing.

By now, Zac's disappointment had started to taper down, and he had somewhat guessed he would have to look for the other pieces of the seal elsewhere. Instead, he turned his attention to the bangle on his arm, and the news was a lot better there.

As the squad had moved deeper and deeper into the Void Star, the ambient spatial energies had grown denser. By now, it could be sensed on top of the ambient energy no matter where you went, and the environment had a startling effect on the escape treasure he got from the System.

Since Zac pushed a mote of Chaos into it, the bangle had been in an unresponsive state. Turbulent energies still lingered within, though they had degraded from pure chaos to all kinds of other concepts. Luckily, the bangle wasn't some random item he'd picked up at an auction. It was provided by the System itself as part of a top-grade evaluation of his performance during the Integration.

After two months of dormancy, it was finally showing signs of recovery, and the spatial energies in the atmosphere were speeding up the process. As things looked right now, Zac

wouldn't need to find some artificer to repair it. It was just a matter of time before he could use it again.

That was great news for him since the **[Flashfire Flourish]** was essentially only a superior version of an escape talisman. It put an enormous distance between you and your pursuers, but after that, you were on your own. Any pursuer that could force him to run for his life also had a decent chance of seeing through the obscuring effects of the item given enough time.

But as long as the escape bangle was up and running, that problem would be solved. The feature that would instantly return him to Earth was still on cooldown for another decade, but he would be able to take out a Teleportation Array and go anywhere he wanted. By the time his pursuers managed to catch up, he'd be long gone.

There were still some ways before the bangle reached a level where Zac would dare use it, but perhaps spending some time next to a spatial anomaly would speed up the process even further. Judging by the atmosphere, they'd be drenched in spatial energies for the next foreseeable future.

"Alright," Teo said after the spatial gate closed behind them, while Havasa took out a large box. "Good job getting here, everyone. We will stay in this realm for a while, and there are some things you need to know. There normally aren't too many dangers in the form of beasts in this realm, but there are some other things you need to be wary of. The spatial energies are quite strong, especially close to the anomaly, which leads to some odd phenomena."

Next, the Templar captain took out a metal bracer from the box showing it to the warriors before he attached it to his wrist. "These are Space Anchors, and they'll be your best friend in this Mystic Realm. We didn't distribute them before since they're frankly quite expensive, and we need all of them back after the mission is completed.

"They have two uses. First, it has an array that works a lot like stabilization talismans we used to enter the Void Star. In case the weather gets bad, these things will protect you."

"The weather?" a warrior asked with confusion.

“Spatial storms,” Teo clarified. “Waves of rampant Spatial Energies that can send part of your legs to the Void, your head to another Mystic Realm, while leaving your torso untouched. These things will make sure you guys are not split up. Literally.”

“However, some storms are too powerful, and they can whisk your whole body away,” Havasa added as she equipped one of the anchors herself. “So if it suddenly looks like the whole world around you starts to twist and distort, immediately activate the array on these things.”

A shimmering blue band of energy shot out from a gem the next moment, stretching across the whole waiting room before slamming into... nothing. Five meters from the wall, spatial cracks appeared in the air while a deep energy barb had dug into the cracks. It really looked like an anchor, though it seemed to rather have the functionality of an ice pick.

“This will hopefully keep you in place until the storm passes,” Havasa said before shaking her hand, prompting the anchor to dissipate.

After learning of the possibility of one’s body getting disassembled by a gust of wind, the warriors didn’t need to be told twice to put one of the bracers on. After activating it, Zac felt a thin film of spatial energy ensconce him. It didn’t cost him a lot of energy either, since it seemed to draw power from the surroundings.

Most people, Zac included, also activated the anchor function to make sure they hadn’t been given a dud. After that, they all set out, but they didn’t get far before they stopped to take in this new Mystic Realm they’d entered.

“What the-“ Zac muttered as he looked at the chaotic scene.

It felt like he had entered a theme park’s house of mirrors, with dozens of disjointed vistas filling up his vision. Most of them depicted a magical forest with blue leaves and undergrowth, but they were disjointed. It looked like he was shown fifty different parts of the forest at once, along with some surrounding bushland.

“The world isn’t actually fractured,” Teo said as he started walking forward. “It’s an illusion brought by the Spatial Anomaly and the dense Spatial Energies in the atmosphere. You don’t need to worry that a wrong step will teleport you away. You’ll know when an actual fracture appears by its powerful fluctuations.”

It was pretty nauseating to have your surroundings continuously twist and distort, but otherwise, the realm wasn’t that bad. They encountered three spatial storms over the next few days, but the Space Anchors worked wonders, allowing them to effortlessly tide them over. If anything, the bracers grew stronger in the middle of the storm as they absorbed the dense energies within.

There weren’t a lot of creatures in this weird world either, mostly some spectral-like flying beasts that didn’t seem interested in attacking the group. Still, this was the layer where he might run into his target - the Ferric Worldeaters, so Zac kept his eyes peeled. But eventually, they crossed a large ridge, and when Zac saw a weird object far in the distance, he knew he’d have to go hunt for one during his days off.

Because they had reached the Spatial Anomaly.

Chapter 877: Spatial Cortex

When the mission mentioned a spatial anomaly, Zac had envisioned something like a permanent spatial tear or perhaps one of those bubbles that he'd seen inside the Technocrat Mystic Realm. Only now did he realize that his imagination was lacking. Then again, the description of the task along with the Templars' comments were laughably downplayed, and judging by the scrunched-up faces of some of the other freelancers, they carried similar sentiments.

The first thing they saw were four rings of pure spatial turbulence, like the rings of Saturn except they rotated at different degrees and distances from the anomaly itself. They were crackling with barely constrained power, which created a both harrowing and beautiful scene where they kept seeing flashes of distant worlds.

Apart from the glimpses into the beyond, they presented a different danger - they kept spitting out condensed balls of space storms at their surroundings like an automated defense. It made Zac infuse a bit of energy into his Space Anchor just to confirm it was still operational - he wouldn't want to enter that area without it.

Within the rings, the anomaly itself hovered in the air on full display, and it was unlike any phenomena Zac had seen before. It consisted of thousands of strings that together formed a spherical intricate mesh that hovered in the air. At least Zac thought it was spherical. The strings kept moving to reform the ball, but Zac felt like he was looking at one of those images with impossible shapes.

It kept twisting in on itself with impossible angles, almost making Zac's brain short-circuit. Zac was by no means an expert in physics or the like, but he guessed that the anomaly was not a three-dimensional item. It worked in dimensions that

at least Zac had no method to process - perhaps you needed to be a Spatial Cultivator to understand what was going on.

Apart from the seemingly impossible shapes, the anomaly reminded Zac of the synapses in a brain, and there were even powerful spatial currents running through the threads like the electric pulses in a brain. Or perhaps it could be likened to a star chart, where each bulbous node at intersections represented worlds or Mystic Realms.

But what was it? A natural formation? An energy construct? A plantlike being? A beast? Zac honestly had no way to tell, no matter he tried to suss out the materials it was made from or its purpose. But at least it didn't look manmade, considering no runes or arrays were covering the threads.

"This is called a Spatial Cortex," Teo explained when he saw the confused faces of the group. "Essentially, they are natural formations born from the Void Star, and they play an essential role in our ability to control and traverse its layers. This one has been acting up lately, and we're here to deploy a gap measure to stabilize it."

"Gap measure?" Uzu asked from the side with trepidation in his eyes.

Zac could understand the sentiment. No matter if you considered the eruption he caused in Hako Lake or the subsequent breaches they'd encountered, they had become all-too-familiar with the terrifying power of space. And now they were supposed to muck around inside this weird, complex, and terrifyingly energy-dense space brain?

That sounded like a recipe for disaster.

"The Formation is perfect as it is, but with the Void Star releasing unusual amounts of energy, there are risks it will be overloaded. So, we will install a series of shunts that will divert excess energy into the void, which should help stabilize the thing until the higher-ups have figured out the root cause of all these changes," Teo explained.

"We understand your worries, but these are not some hastily thought-up solutions," a somber man said as he stepped

forward.

It was Rakosta Kau, the chief researcher on this mission. He was a Hegemon himself, and Havasa had personally protected him during most of the trip, proving his status and value to the Void Gate.

“These measures were invented and deployed hundreds of thousands of years ago when we faced a similar issue, and they have been even further improved since,” Rakosta continued. “Of course, you are not expected to assist with the modifications either. This is the third installation I oversee, and this cortex seems to be quite stable still.”

“So what’s our job?” another cultivator asked as she looked around at the empty fields. “Not much to do here.”

It was true. There was not a beast in sight, which wasn’t a surprise with those spatial rings. The local wildlife had probably figured out that this area came with a lot of danger and little rewards long ago.

“Our modifications will produce temporary bursts in energy, resulting in several temporary rifts,” Rakosta explained.

“Essentially, we will find ourselves under siege. Of course, we have trained in this procedure to keep dangerous periods to a minimum, and we know beforehand when these fluctuations are expected to peak. Still, until the whole array of shunts is installed, the cortex will be a bit erratic, so we always need to be alert.”

“We’re setting up an outer perimeter around the cortex in the safe-zone inside the rings,” Teo added. “Our task is not only to protect our experts, but also the cortex itself. It is quite resilient, and the native beasts normally don’t approach it, but that’s no guarantee. They can still be attracted by the smell of blood from the invading beasts we kill.”

“If everything goes according to plan, the process will take just over a month, with three checkpoints where we can temporarily stabilize the cortex for a few days. However, this process requires on-the-spot modifications. Depending on how the cortex reacts to its changes, we might need to perform further modifications.”

With that, they went to work, and the anchors quickly proved their worth. Calling the stretch between the rotating cortex and the rivers a safe-zone was giving it too much credit, and it was continuously hit by the space storms. Conversely, if you released too much energy too close to the cortex, you'd risk a resonance where you got zapped by a tremendous wave of energy.

Thankfully, as long as you didn't release your aura or too much energy, you were essentially safe beneath the floating construct. Apart from a constant hum being released from above, it made for a pretty good campsite – especially for Zac's escape bangle which continuously drew on the bountiful energies around them.

Of course, it was probably far better for a Spatial Cultivator. Any time Zac looked up at the rotating and continuously transforming cortex, he felt some part of the Dao of Space was on display within those movements. That didn't help him though, and he soon joined the others at the outer perimeter while the researchers went to work.

Zac was shocked to see them actually climb into the cortex, jumping from string to string like nimble little monkeys. Seeing people inside the construct somewhat confirmed his hunch it didn't exist in three dimensions. The researchers' positions kept changing as their forms were twisted and distorted.

The templars and the warriors formed two lines of defense like before, where the first-string cultivators formed a defensive line with one person every 100 meters or so. The second-string cultivators stood a bit behind, ready to immediately back up whichever side was attacked. And it didn't take long for them to see some action.

“Ready!” a shout from within the cortex echoed out, and the cortex released a pulse a moment later.

Zac felt his surroundings twist and bend, and he urgently activated the anchor in his bracelet to stabilize himself - just in time to see a large spatial tear appearing a few hundred meters away. Out of it, a pack of red-furred bearlike beasts emerged,

each one of them emitting a both fiery and immensely heavy aura.

The bears almost felt like mobile gravity arrays, while their swipes seared space itself. Their numbers weren't too great, but they all emitted the aura of Beast Kings. Thankfully, the tear didn't last too long, and it closed after letting seven of the hulking beasts through - cutting the eighth one in half.

The invasion looked pretty troublesome, but Zac still moved forward with the other second-string cultivators while first-string warriors joined in from the flanks. It even looked like the cortex itself was helping out as well as spatial storm shot straight toward the pack. But Zac's eyes dimmed when he saw two of the bears open their mouth to release a cascade of blue flames at the incoming storm, tearing it apart.

By that time, Teo, Uzu, and Ilka had appeared, while the other Hegemons maintained the other flanks. A furious melee followed suit, where Teo Restrained while the others piled on attacks on the extremely durable bears, led by the two unattached Hegemons. Ilka used a soft sword as a weapon, and it moved like a snake among the beasts.

It was an extremely nasty weapon that could bend and extend at will - Zac had seen her stab the forehead of a Beast King from hundreds of meters away. Her actual skills were related to poison and water though, prompting others to often give her a wide berth. Uzu was a lot simpler - using a hefty broadsword and a sword-based Dao to launch somewhat slow but devastating strikes.

The attacks of the bears were extremely powerful, and their hides felt like steel plates, but thanks to Teo they were greatly restrained, so five minutes later, they had all fallen while only leaving some of the warriors slightly burnt. During the fight, another tear had already opened up, but the situation was kept under control by a group of warriors led by Havasa.

"Remove the corpses before they attract the natives," Teo said before returning to his position, and the carcasses were quickly collected as three templars spread some sort of dust over the bloody patches.

Zac could only helplessly look on as the blood and pieces of flesh and hide rapidly faded away. The battle was over too quickly, and the stench hadn't lured over any Worldeaters. Thankfully, Zac did have quite a bit of valuable blood in his Cosmic Ring because of Verun. He could use this method later when his free day came around to see if he could catch at least one of the common Worldeater younglings.

From there, he'd try to upgrade to a space-attributed specimen, but he wasn't holding his breath.

However, as the days passed, Zac started to wonder if he would ever get that chance. The researchers had to work around the clock, as the longer the process took, the more the energies inside the cortex would stabilize. That also meant there had to be warriors guarding the perimeter around the clock, and it seldom took more than five minutes before new beasts popped up.

The warriors worked and rested in shifts, but more than once, those off the clock would have to enter the fray when too many beasts appeared at once. Let alone a day off, Zac started to wonder if he'd even manage to get five hours during the downtime. Thankfully, the first checkpoint was coming up in a few days, which hopefully meant some would get to explore.

Another two days passed, and the intensity of breaches increased. The warriors were stretched thinner and thinner, and most were forced to keep crystals in their hands all the time to not get completely drained of energy. People's eyes were almost glazed over as they mowed down the beasts with dull expressions.

It was at this point that disaster struck.

"You!" an enraged roar echoed out as a huge shockwave of energy erupted at the other side of the Cortex.

Zac got a bad feeling, and he exerted some extra strength to instantly clean out the beasts around him before turning toward the source of the commotion – just in time to see Teo claw through the air, somehow dragging Ilka, the wandering cultivator Hegemon, to his position. She didn't even have a

chance to react before she was cut down by a furious swipe that created a scar that stretched for thousands of meters.

Had Teo gone mad? No, Zac immediately saw what had happened. One by one, corpses started to fall out from the Cortex, including Rakosta. Each one had a hole right through their foreheads, and most of them didn't even seem to have realized they had died. Zac's heart was gripped with panic as he saw the one-armed nun among the dead, but he inwardly breathed out in relief when Vai wasn't among the fallen.

Instead, she jumped out with the other survivors, her face pale as a sheet as she ran over to the dead. The aggressor was cut in two, barely clinging on to life by the looks of it, but Zac still smelled trouble. He attached a recording crystal to his belt as he looked around for other threats, and he quickly spotted a problem. Something was wrong with the cortex.

"She destroyed some of the nodes!" one of the researchers shouted with a fearful face. "If we don't do something, it will destabilize!"

The poor man only had time to give his warning before his head was pierced as well, and Zac looked on with shock as one of the corpses transformed into Ilka while the dying Ilka turned out to be a dying researcher looking up at Teo with confusion and pain. And while all this confusion took place, things quickly turned from bad to worse.

Ilka suddenly released a tremendous wave of energy, clearly unheeding of the effect it would have on the cortex. She threw something into the heart of the Cortex, disappearing just before Teo could reach her. The other Hegemons were already moving to intercept as well, but Zac couldn't believe his eyes when Uzu's aura exploded with ferocity as he hacked at Tyla with his massive sword, suddenly showcasing more power than ever before.

The vice-captain was quick to react, probably having expected that if there was one traitor, there might be two. She blocked the ferocious swing, but Zac was shocked to see that recently-evolved Uzu's power was slightly greater than the templar's.

Tyla's head suddenly jerked to the side, barely avoiding a poisoned blade from Ilka who had appeared not far away.

But she was already dealing with two attackers, and she couldn't deal with a third - a lance of light that punched a hole right through her stomach where her core should be. And from all places, it came from another dead researcher who had been lying below the cortex. Zac recognized the man well - it was the man who had refused to greet him on board the Cosmic Vessel on the first day.

He should just be a Half-Step Cultivator, yet he had just released the power of a true Hegemon. Seeing the researcher attack one of his own was even more shocking than some outsiders rebelling. Just what was going on? Were they spies from another faction? But why attack this place, and why now?

Zac couldn't fathom what these three possibly had to gain from this attack. Even if they succeeded, they'd be stuck in the heart of the Void Star. Were they planning on killing all witnesses before returning? That couldn't be. The Void Star wasn't stupid - how could they not get suspicious when not a single one of their templars survived a mission?

And even if the trio was stronger than expected, Havasa, Kalo Taosa, and Teo had already descended on them like vengeful spirits, furiously trying to tear the traitors apart. Zac, along with most of the others, hesitantly stood rooted in place, unsure what to do. His first instinct was that the uprising would be quelled soon enough thanks to Teo's presence, but was that true?

Would they really choose to strike at this moment if they didn't have some confidence in dealing with this situation?

It was not just a matter of which side would win either - there was the cortex to worry about. Rakosta, along with most of the experienced researchers, were dead, and the energy fluctuations kept getting more and more ominous.

"Stabilize!" Teo roared, and the remaining templars hurriedly took out one massive spike each and slammed it into the ground.

Attached to their tips were some sort of ropes that they threw into the cortex. It looked like they were trying to tie the whole thing down, and the rapidly spinning strings were starting to slow down. However, Zac remembered the scene of Ilka throwing something into the core of the cortex just seconds ago, and he wasn't too convinced this would be enough.

Should he run? Should he expose his true strength and help Teo and the others take down the traitors? Or should he just wait?

Suddenly, Uzu was hit by a ferocious attack from Havasa that almost ripped him in two. At the same time, Teo and his vice-captain joined hands to restrain the researcher who reminded Zac of the werewolf Cervantes, swapping between light and corporeal as he fought. The sudden turn of the tides helped most of the wandering cultivators make their choice and they started rushing toward the besieged traitors.

Zac wasn't convinced and his eyes turned to Vai who still stood beneath the cortex with incomprehension in her eyes. These people could fight it out while they moved to safety. Two of Vivi's vines shot over to pick her up, but his mind suddenly screamed of danger. He activated [**Earthstrider**] to speed things along, but there was no time.

The enormous cortex suddenly imploded, condensing into a shining bead of light in an instant. It was no bigger than an egg, but it emitted terrifying levels of energy that pushed Zac down on his knees. He was unable to so much as breathe, and he could only look up with helplessness, knowing the traitors had won.

The egg cracked and it took the world with it.

Chapter 878: In-between

As the egg broke, it only sounded like the snap of a broken twig, yet Zac felt like he'd just witnessed the opening of Pandora's box.

“Run!” Zac screamed in the direction of Vai while trying to follow his own advice. But it was hopeless.

Zac's surroundings shattered and were swallowed by an unfettered maelstrom of rampant space which was no longer contained by the Spatial Cortex, and he almost puked from the nauseating blur. It felt like his mind was being twisted and bent just like his surroundings were, but Zac still managed to activate the bracelet on his wrist. The energy-anchor shot out, but Zac grimaced when it was ripped apart in an instant.

A moment later, the bracer on his arm completely cracked, the surrounding onslaught absolutely overloading what it was designed to withstand. Waves of agony came crashing down on him in an instant, but Zac couldn't hear his pained scream in the heart of the storm. The collapse of a Mystic Realm was deafening, and there was nothing to carry his voice.

He didn't have the luxury to worry about others, and neither could he hold on to his secrets or identity – Zac knew he wouldn't even last a second being buffeted by this storm. An aura of antiquity surrounded him as he activated **[Void Zone]**, which kept the mayhem at bay. Some spatial energies still made it through after being eroded, but channeling **[Innate Ward]** with Void Energy was barely enough to withstand the weakened spatial storm.

Even then, he was continuously covered in shallow wounds that left behind dense bursts of Spatial Dao, proving he probably would have died if he didn't also have the added durability he'd inherited from his Draugr Side, along with

[Adamance of Eoz] which synergized well with defensive skills like **[Innate Ward]**.

His Void Heart was already fast at work swallowing the spatial energies as well, giving him a small breather. Unfortunately, it was just a temporary reprieve. Zac was still stuck in the middle of it, like a leaf caught in a hurricane. The surroundings were a confusing blur that continuously changed, trapping Zac in a psychedelic kaleidoscope that was being furiously spun.

The camp was gone - the whole area was gone. Even the ground had been swept away, leaving Zac floating in what he assumed were the broken remnants of the Mystic Realm. Vai was nowhere in sight, and neither was anyone else of the squad, traitor or no. He didn't want to think about it right now, but he knew it was likely they had all fallen already.

Even he wouldn't last more than a moment in this chaos without **[Void Zone]**. The Templars might have something to deal with this kind of terrifying environment, but no way something like that was standard issue. Perhaps Teo and the vice-captains had a shot at survival, but everyone else...

Zac shook his head to clear his thoughts. He needed to focus on his survival, and he looked around for clues. The storm seemed to be in a stable state of constant flux - it was neither growing more powerful nor petering out. The most ominous thing was the white lines. They were the only unmovable fixtures in the whole realm, silently forming hundreds of horizontal strings that stretched toward eternity.

It was thanks to them that Zac knew he was standing in place rather than being tossed about. Even then, the lines filled him with dread. His instincts told him that if he touched one of those lines, he'd be in for a world of hurt. They emitted a hint of finality, perhaps representative of the death of the Mystic Realm they were in.

And new lines kept appearing.

He needed to get out of here, and quick. Zac hesitated whether he should use **[Flashfire Flourish]** or one of his escape talismans, but he ultimately decided against it. Space was too

damaged around him, there was no telling what would happen if he used that kind of item. Most likely, he would be ripped apart during the transportation, especially if he was dragged through one of the lines.

As he considered his options, Zac infused some Void Energy into his spatial ring to take out a peak-quality Pseudo D-grade Soldier Pill and a Healing Pill of similar quality. A surge of warmth and power coursed through his body, recovering some of the exhaustion he'd accumulated over the past days. He was desperately hungry as well because of **[Adamance of Eoz]**, so he crammed some dried Beast King meat into his mouth as well. What to do?

A gleaming leaf appeared in front of the edge of his axe, but Zac didn't even get the chance to launch it before it was ripped apart by the storm. Hundreds of leaves shot out from Zac's body the next moment as he activated the area attack of **[Nature's Edge]**, but the result was the same. His skill couldn't affect, let alone break apart, the storm around him.

Zac considered trying **[Arcadia's Judgement]** as well, but he was pretty certain the hand would be destroyed before he could even finish his strike. Worse, they might conjure more of those white lines. Neither did **[Earthstrider]** work. It couldn't be activated in this weird pocket of space by the looks of it. For lack of better options, he could only try the same method he used in outer space or the void.

He deactivated **[Void Zone]**, and the storm came crashing toward him in an instant. Zac released an explosive burst of Cosmic Energy from his hands, and he felt a surge of victory as he was propelled backward. He reactivated his nullification zone the moment he had gained a bit of momentum, but he was still left with a couple of nasty lacerations to join the previous wounds.

The surroundings didn't change at all from his jump, but Zac did notice something interesting - the storm around him was slightly weaker than before, especially in one particular direction. He didn't believe it was thanks to him moving further away from the explosion - he'd found an outlet.

This was exactly what Zac hoped for. A massive eruption like this should have created some sort of tears in space, be they breaches, convergences, or good old-fashioned spatial tears. That was his best chance of getting out of this place alive, even if he got captured by a space fish the last time he tried something similar.

Five jumps and a new cross-section of painful cuts later, Zac found it. It was a jagged tear that ran for around fifty meters, and it almost looked like it was pulsating as it swallowed one mouthful of spatial energies after another. It looked stable, but he knew how spatial tears could suddenly disappear without warning.

So Zac only looked back in hesitation for a moment before jumping into the tear. In an instant, the roaring chorus of broken space was replaced by a deafening silence that felt like music to his ears. It didn't look like he had entered the void either, but rather a region that partly looked like outer space.

There were dozens of glistening spheres floating around him, creating dizzying patterns as they swam about. But they weren't planets - they weren't that far away from him. Zac could vaguely see all kinds of familiar scenes from the bubbles as well, landscapes that looked a lot like the ones in the opalescent barrier when they entered the Void Star.

The spheres were Mystic Realms, or at least windows into them.

Lights of pure spatial energies stretched between the realms, but Zac frowned when he saw how some of them flickered. Suddenly, one beam was extinguished, at which point one of the windows dissipated into nothingness while the others continued their dance. Seeing the lights and the spheres, Zac's thoughts were immediately drawn to the Spatial Cortex with its nodes and strings.

Was this another facet of the Spatial Cortex, where this web of Mystic Realms was the planes it connected? More importantly, what would happen if these lights were all dimmed out? Would he be stuck in this no-man's-land between realms? As

the thought struck him, another pillar dimmed, which disconnected yet another realm from the shrinking network.

Zac didn't want to stay and find out what would happen if he overstayed his welcome, so he flew toward the closest Mystic Realm. Even if these realms were to be disconnected, it was better to be stuck in a stable Mystic Realm than here. The bubble grew closer and closer, and Zac inwardly nodded when he saw a lush forest within. That realm seemed good enough to camp out in.

But just as he was about to jump into the window, he urgently stopped his momentum as his gaze shifted to another realm in the distance. He could feel it – the call of the Left Imperial Palace. There was no hesitation as Zac made a beeline toward that other Mystic Realm, even if it looked pretty ominous. It was barely visible in the darkness of space like it was a world without a sun.

Suddenly, a wide smile spread across his face, and Zac once again thanked the lucky stars for his massive pool of Luck. Not much was visible through the lens, but he was almost certain he'd seen a Ferric Voidwurm fly past his vantage before disappearing out of view. If this was not a sign he was on the right track, then nothing was.

A spatial talisman appeared in Zac's hand, and a set of blue runes lit up around him as he pierced into the realm. There was no resistance as he entered the sphere, and after a brief bout of vertigo, he found himself falling toward the ground again. Zac looked around, and there it was - a dozen Ferric Voidwurms in the distance.

He couldn't see where they were going, and a moment later they had been swallowed by the darkness that spread out like a blanket across this Mystic Realm. Even then, Zac didn't try to catch up to the beasts. He was wounded and exhausted, and he needed to recuperate before he tried to hunt any Beast Kings.

A minute later, he slammed into the ground, thankful there weren't any beasts nearby. There was actually some vegetation in this sun-deprived plane, and he had landed in a sparsely forested grassland. A sudden pulse welcomed his arrival, and

Zac looked at the sky with a heavy heart. He had finally caught onto a clue again, but it had cost him a lot.

He wasn't close to anyone in the squad except Vai, but most of the fallen were good people who only wanted to get by. Yet they had died in such a horrific way, all because of that act of madness. Shaking his head, Zac walked over to a crooked tree nearby and sat down with a grunt as a few of the wounds opened up again.

Luckily, Zac had a good chunk of kill energy left in his body after defending the Spatial Cortex for days, and his wounds started to rapidly close as he activated [**Surging Vitality**]. While letting the skill do its job, Zac also took a massive slab of meat and a Cosmic Crystal. He ferociously scarfed down the energy-dense meat as he tried to recover energy as quickly as he could.

The ambient energy of this dour Mystic Realm was almost as high as Earth's, meaning the place could be crawling with Beast Kings even if he hadn't spotted any from up above. However, he only managed to get a minute of peace and quiet before he looked up at the sky with mute incomprehension.

A few moments later, a pale Vai landed right next to where he did, and her eyes lit up when she saw Zac sitting not far away. Zac wordlessly stared at the researcher, so surprised he forgot to eat the massive club in his hand. How was this possible? Vai was even closer than him to the detonation, yet she was in even better condition than him.

Apart from some light wounds, she seemed to be in good spirits, at least physically. That alone was enough for Zac to become cautious. How had she made it through that terrifying storm? Without his [**Void Zone**], he would have died within a second or two. And why had she appeared here, hot on his heels? He had chosen this place because of the signal – why had she?

“You're alive,” Zac slowly said as he stood up, the crystal in his hand once more replaced by an axe. “Who are you?”

“What?” Vai said, her eyes wide with alarm and confusion. “It's me. Vai.”

“That explosion was enough to take out almost anyone in our squad,” Zac said. “I only survived by dumb luck. Yet you, an E-grade cultivator is fine? And how can you appear here, of all places?”

“Well... It’s not a coincidence...” Vai hesitated. “I- I followed you.”

“How?” Zac frowned, the grip on his axe tightening.

“Your token,” Vai said with a pleading look as she pointed at the token attached to his belt. “I-”

She didn’t get any further before the sky rippled again before it spat out another familiar figure – a bloodied and battered Uzu. The air around him was lit up by several odd barriers - most likely the reason he was still alive. The moment he passed through, he threw something into the air behind him which caused the area to shatter like a mirror before space congealed again. Zac guessed he had destroyed the window.

“Come,” Zac said with a low voice, and Vai scurried behind the tree as Zac cracked his neck.

Zac didn’t see it as a problem that a potentially hostile Hegemon came falling from the sky - he saw it as pretty good luck. It was an opportunity to get some answers, so Zac took a small step forward, making sure to release some of his aura. Uzu obviously sensed him, and he landed a few meters away soon after with a smile on his face.

“What a coincidence,” Uzu grinned as his eyes traveled between Zac and Vai. “Both guardian and ward, in one piece. I’m quite impressed.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a somber and slightly fearful expression.

There was something odd about Vai, but Zac’s gut told him that she wasn’t a traitor to the Void Gate. He rather felt her identity might not be exactly what she let on. Still, he took a few steps away from Vai and the tree just in case.

“Does it matter?” the Hegemon said with a bloody grin as he ate a Healing Pill.

“You’ve sabotaged a mission of the Void Gate. Of course it matters. An enmity with them will cause trouble wherever you go,” Zac said with grit teeth. “And now we might be stuck here. Even if we make it back to the surface, then what? You’ll be caught, and I will probably be implicated as well because I’m unattached.”

“Who said I’m leaving that way?” Uzu snorted. “Did you really think that’s how the Void Star works? What balloon with smaller balloons inside? It’s a network that lets these people steal the opportunities of a whole sector. Besides, they’ll have their hands full sooner or later. War is coming, and they won’t have time to bother about little people like you or me.”

“War?” Zac slowly said, before his eyes widened in genuine shock. “You’ve sided with the invaders? How? They should still be stuck in-”

“I’m surprised you know about the outsiders,” Uzu smiled. “As for how, it’s not complicated. Like I said, these realmthieves have stretched their greedy hands all over Zecia, including the Million Gates Territory. But they overestimated themselves.”

Zac had expected all kinds of justifications for Uzu’s betrayal, but they all were based on the Hegemon working as a spy for some other peak factions of Zecia who wanted to harm the Void Gate. But to think he actually worked with the invaders, who everyone still thought was stuck in the deeper regions of the Million Gates Territory.

What if they were wrong? By the sounds of it, some sort of pathways connected the Void Star and the Million Gates Territory. His thoughts turned back to the bloody teleportation room back when they first entered the Void Star. Had infiltrators already appeared in the Void Gates, even in Salosar?

It seemed likely there already were invaders in Salosar, where else would Uzu have made contact? As far as Zac knew, this was the Hegemon’s first mission, which meant he must have changed his allegiances earlier. It was either that or during the

month-long trip onboard the Cosmic Vessel. But how could someone convince a Hegemon to take such a risk in that kind of situation?

No matter what the truth was, Zac got a sinking feeling. For the invaders to have infiltrated a faction like the Void Gate this quickly their methods had to be incredible. Even worse, it seemed unlikely they stumbled into the Void Star by accident. They had a goal and a plan.

Until now, the invasion had felt abstract and distant. But suddenly, it felt all-too-real.

Chapter 879: Uzu

The news about invader influence deep in the Zecia heartlands was shocking, but Zac wasn't as surprised that Uzu had betrayed the Void Gate – few wandering cultivators held any allegiances except to themselves. What did Uzu care about which sects controlled this sector? If these invaders paid well enough, he was probably more than happy to sabotage the Spatial Cortex.

“I've seen your potential. I can introduce you to my contact,” Uzu continued when he saw Zac's thoughtful frown. “You wouldn't believe the means of these people. Did you know? Their sector is unified – ruled by a supreme expert at the level of the Eveningtide Asura. Zecia's powers are doomed. Why fight for these corrupt factions that left you to fend for yourself? Join us, and we'll seize a proper place in the new world order.”

Zac's eyes thinned at that. A warrior at the level of the Eveningtide Asura? Uzu no doubt referred to an Asura at the level of when he came back to Zecia for vengeance rather than his far-greater power as the Twilight Lord, but it was still extremely daunting. That kind of power could not be nurtured on the frontier. Even if you encountered some unique opportunity and rose above everyone else – why stay in the frontier?

Someone like that had a shot at Autarchy and should have set off for greener pastures.

“They have so many methods – they can even help you reach Hegemony without risking everything,” Uzu continued with an enticing smile.

“Hegemony without risks?” Zac muttered thoughtfully.

The Law of Balance demanded an equilibrium of risk and reward. Of course, that was not to say the law couldn't be

broken. The impossible could be made possible as long as you were willing to pay the price. The Great Redeemer was living proof of that, where he progressed through the sacrifice of whole planets. But that was the ways of dark unorthodoxy, a path of evil.

The deep scar left behind by Havasa's swing earlier suddenly got a new meaning. That attack should have left him half-dead, yet Uzu was standing here with a decently stable aura. But from within that wound, a rank and sinister aura leaked out, and Zac could barely spot some dark-red strings keeping Uzu together, pulsing with malevolent power. Was this ability a gift from his new benefactors?

Were these invaders Unorthodox Cultivators? But if what Uzu said was true, that would mean the whole sector followed an unorthodox path. Was that even possible? Wouldn't the System strike down such a place, either directly or through lucrative quests?

"Creating a real Cultivator's Core is my only goal right now," Zac eventually said, drawing a gasp from behind. "What do you want in return?"

"Simple – kill the girl. She is dead weight, and she cannot be allowed to go back," Uzu shrugged. "That way, you prove your allegiance as well."

"Ai," Zac sighed as he glanced at the little researcher, who fearfully shrunk back behind the tree.

The next moment, she was thrown away by one of Vivi's vines as an almost invisible sword beam shot out from a ring on Uzu's finger. Zac looked like he barely managed to stumble out of the way, but the ground beneath him cracked as he shot toward the Hegemon with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

"Fool," Uzu laughed as the massive broadsword appeared in his hand.

Zac had hoped to keep Uzu talking a bit longer, even if he knew the Hegemon was only stalling to recover his grievous wound. Zac had monitored Uzu since he tried to trick people into Hako Lake, and he had long since realized that his open

facade hid a sinister schemer. Of course, until now, Zac had thought his devious methods were only meant to take out the competition and gain a larger share of the bounties.

Now, it was clear he played an even bigger game. Zac wondered if even his greedy personality was a ruse to hide his true intentions. In either case, Zac knew there was no way Uzu's offer was genuine. Why would Uzu risk his payout for a stranger, and potentially introduce someone these invaders would value more than him? He only wanted to sow a seed of doubt to create an opening.

Unfortunately for him, he was talking with Zac rather than the real Gaun Sorom, and the promise of finally breaking through only served as an early warning rather than a distraction. Zac didn't need the help from some other random frontier sector to progress, and neither would he kill a friend just to join some shady organization of traitors.

Besides, his effective Luck was over 1,500 by now. He had sensed a subdued danger from the Hegemon since he appeared, a warning signal that had turned into a siren the moment he surreptitiously activated the offensive treasure on his finger.

Cascading waves of killing intent emanated from Zac's body and the common axe in his hand was replaced by **[Verun's Bite]**. The mission had failed and most of the squad had probably died. Stuck in this Mystic Realm with a hostile Hegemons and invaders lurking about, Zac knew the time for stealth was over. It was time to get back to his roots - pure unadulterated violence.

Uzu seemed a bit surprised at the density of Zac's killing intent, but he still maintained a confident demeanor. Even if he was wounded, so was Zac. And one was a true Hegemon while the other had failed core. A storm of blades shot toward Zac as Uzu swung his broadsword, creating a cone of utter desolation that continued for hundreds of meters.

Zac had no time to worry about Vai at the moment, but he figured she'd be fine considering she made it here in one piece. A storm of leaves spread out from his body as Zac

released a horizontal swing. [**Nature's Edge**] was not only imbued with the Branch of the War Axe this time, but also the Branch of the Kalpataru in one of his self-made Dao Braids.

The combination resulted in a terrifying force that effortlessly warded off the innumerable blade beams inside Uzu's attack.

"Wh-" Uzu exclaimed with surprise at the unexpected strength in Zac's attack.

But Zac wouldn't give the man any time to adapt, and clouds of dense life and death were unleashed with two rapid swings. The Abyss and Arcadia made their appearance and conjured the signature delimitation that cut through everything as it flew toward the Hegemon. Uzu had just been about to soar into the air, but Zac's Branch-empowered [**Rapturous Divide**] forced him back on the ground as he countered with a herculean swing of his own.

His broadsword was covered in a radiant swordlight as it blocked the incoming spatial divide, and Zac was slightly surprised that Uzu managed to perfectly block it. However, Uzu's face turned a shade of green as bursts of blood shot out from his open wound. Blocking Zac's strike had clearly worsened his condition.

More importantly, the skill had kept the Hegemon landlocked. If Uzu took to the skies, the odds of Zac killing him were pretty low. Competing with skills at a distance against a Hegemon wasn't a good idea - even a recently ascended D-grade cultivator like Uzu should have at least one or two D-grade skills that could make proper use of his enormous energy pool.

But now, Zac was already upon him, having forced the man into a melee - Zac's forte. The air screamed with keening bloodlust as Verun left chaotic whirlwinds in its wake, the axe heading straight for Uzu's head while Vivi's vines attacked Uzu from the flanks like bloodthirsty packs of hyenas.

It felt like the cage that kept him restrained over the past month had finally been broken apart, and both his soul and Verun sang with freedom as Zac entered his Evolutionary Stance. Vivi's vines were already stabbing at Uzu's vitals

while Zac's unpredictable barrage completely overwhelmed a flustered Uzu who found it difficult to deal with the surprising amount of force contained with every swing.

Suddenly, Uzu threw away his cumbersome broadsword as two thinner scimitars appeared in his hands. His large and heroic swings were replaced by a ruthlessly efficient technique where his two arms felt like six. His two swords seemed to work independently from one another, creating an unpredictable tempo as Uzu tried to break through Zac's stance.

The technique was leagues beyond what he'd showcased over the past month, proving once more there was more than met the eye to this cultivator. However, Zac felt it was just a small delay of the inevitable - even if Uzu's technique showed both proficiency and experience, he still was barely in the formation stage.

If the Hegemon had a vastly superior attribute pool, it would have been one thing, but Zac guessed his own effective attributes were actually higher. Uzu's raw strength was noticeably worse, but his speed was slightly better. And since Uzu no doubt was a more conventional warrior without a slew of attributes to prop him up, it meant his other stats were significantly lower.

Uzu's real advantage lay in his vastly superior Energy Reserves, but how could Zac let him make use of that? His **[Cosmic Gaze]** was continuously running, and Uzu's every attempt at activating skills was met with a near-death experience that forced him to abort and respond. Uzu had still managed to avoid any killing blows, but his face was locked in a pained grimace as smaller cuts kept joining his big wound.

Zac received the occasional cut himself, but he didn't care. He was swept up with the joy of returning to his path. Every moment his technique was reborn, creating something better suited to break through Uzu's defenses. Zac's soul surged with every swing, and he once more felt that mysterious state of harmony as his Dao spread through the framework of his **[Thousand Lights Avatar]**.

But a sudden pang of immense danger broke Zac's rhythm, and he instinctively dove to the side just as a thorn filled with malevolent energy struck out from the wound in Uzu's chest. Zac narrowly avoided the ambush, but by that time he realized he was in trouble. During their fight, Zac had pushed Uzu further and further back, but it looked like that was a planned retreat by the Hegemon.

Unbeknownst to Zac, the massive broadsword has silently floated up into the air and was now hovering right above him as Uzu had created some distance.

"Die!" Uzu roared as the sword shattered, turning into a pillar of terrifying sword energies.

Zac was extremely surprised - the broadsword Uzu had used for so long was an offensive treasure rather than a conventional blade by the looks of it, one instilled with a powerful Sword Intent Zac doubted belonged to the wandering cultivator. He suddenly found himself under tremendous pressure from the combined domains of Uzu and the self-destructed sword.

Even with the drastic turn, Zac wasn't overly worried as a golden laurel appeared on his head. The dusky Mystic Realm was illuminated in empyrean splendor as the defensive domain of **[Empyrean Aegis]** swallowed not only Uzu but the whole descending beam of empowered Sword Intent.

Uzu ferociously growled as he unleashed two cross-slashes with his scimitars, but his eyes widened as he suddenly stumbled. Zac inwardly snickered, seeing that the man's feint had backfired. It was the immense suppression brought by the golden domain - the Hegemon had actually tried to fly away rather than attack. Therefore, his circulation of energy had prompted the defensive domain of **[Empyrian Aegis]** to knock him back down.

By this time, the beam of Sword Intent had already descended, its unyielding latent will forcing its way through the golden domain. Even then, Zac didn't bother with it as he lunged toward his enemy before he figured out he could force his way

through the restrictions. A moment later the beam descended like heavenly judgment, swallowing Zac whole.

Deep tears stretched for thousands of meters in every direction as the beam exuded a terrifying cutting intent, and space itself shuddered as it was on the verge of breaking apart. It was impossible to see what was going on within, but the savage energy waves proved it was an unrelenting meatgrinder. One of the golden pillars of **[Empyrean Aegis]** immediately crumbled as cracks spread across the second.

At this time a bloodied Zac crashed out from the beam, his eyes giving no hint of pain as a flickering golden barrier around him died out. Uzu was dismayed to see Zac survive his finishing blow, but he could only keep going. But by this point, Zac was already right in front of Uzu again, and the four vines of Vivi wrapped around the Hegemon's arms, temporarily locking them in place.

Uzu quickly broke the vines apart, but **[Verun's Bite]**, now illuminated glowing sanguine runes and two Dao Branches slammed into his shoulder. A barrier containing hints of the Dao of Swords appeared to shield the Hegemon, but it broke apart in an instant. The barrier shattered, leaving Zac with another set of shallow wounds as the shield turned into an attack.

Even after the surprise attack, the edge of Zac's Spirit Tool continued unabated until it bit into Uzu's body. A thick calcified layer appeared on his skin at the last moment as a second layer of defense, but it was nothing in front of Zac's furious momentum. The Branches of Kalpataru and War Axe were empowered by **[Spiritual Void]**, and Verun itself was imbued with its runes for sharpness and heaviness - the swing contained the power to cut through almost anything at the moment.

A pained groan escaped Uzu's lips as Zac finished what Havasa started - a second deep scar ran from shoulder down to his hip. With Havasa's attack, a gory 'x' had been carved into Uzu's chest, but Zac's attack bit far deeper - it cut through the Hegemon's whole body, including his Cultivator's Core.

A second lightning-quick backhanded swing destroyed Uzu's head as well, a lesson engraved into Zac's body after his time in the Orom World. A tremendous surge of energy entered Zac's body, proving that this was not another trick. Uzu was well and truly dead, and his maimed and bisected body fell onto the ground leaving a panting Zac above.

Zac ate another Healing Pill as he thoughtfully looked down at the fallen warrior. After his abrupt victory over the Raun Ghost King, this battle was a good reminder that no real Hegemon was a weakling. Even a wandering cultivator like Uzu had a couple of last-ditch measures that were quite lethal. For example, his Peak-quality [**Empyrean Aegis**] had barely managed to protect him from the Sword Intent Uzu had sealed in his weapon.

There was also that thorn that Uzu had released from within his body, which felt even scarier. That malevolent energy had felt extremely threatening. Zac would probably have been grievously wounded if it managed to stab his forehead as Uzu planned. But now that was over with, and Zac began his customary looting by snatching a bloody Spatial Ring from Uzu's finger.

He kept searching through pockets for anything of value or anything that could shed some light on these unorthodox invaders. However, a sudden pang of danger screamed for him to watch out, and he urgently shot backward with [**Earthstrider**].

At the same moment, a gristly explosion erupted from within Uzu's corpse, completely destroying his body. From within his chest, a tangle of hundreds of malevolent thorns burst out, and sharp spears shot out in every direction. To Zac's horror, the attack was far quicker than he was, and he felt a sharp pain as one of the spurs dug into his gut.

A storm of malevolent energy flooded his body, and it looked like the other parts of the tangle rapidly withered away. Zac had no idea what this thing was, but it acted like a parasite trying to swap hosts. For an instant, Zac felt himself unable to even breathe as the foreign energy somehow sealed his movements and circulation.

But from within, a ferocious thud of ancient voracity echoed out from his heart as **[Void Heart]** woke up with newfound vigor.

The node had undergone a subtle change after swallowing the mysterious light released by the Seal of the Left Imperial Palace. It never spat anything back out as it did with tribulation lightning. Instead, it grew slightly larger.

Now, it emitted a stronger pull than it ever had before, while **[Purity of the Void]** similarly released a cleansing pulse with more efficacy than ever. The combined effort of the two temporarily broke the seal on Zac's body, and he urgently conjured a bladed leaf to cut off the thorn before it transferred any more of its energy into his body.

The parasitic tangle tried to reattach to Zac, but it was withering away rapidly. It looked like it couldn't survive for long on its own, and a moment later it was gone. Meanwhile, Zac saw a small brand appear by his Specialty Core, formed by the malevolent energies that had managed to invade his body. But it didn't even have time to properly form before it was broken apart and swallowed by **[Void Heart]**, extinguishing the threat before it had a chance to take root.

There was still some energy left in his body, but it had lost direction after that brand broke. Some of it was eradicated by his Daos, while the rest was dealt with by his nodes. Just half a minute later, it was completely removed from his body. Zac breathed out in relief, but he also felt a bit reproachful over his mistake. Death could really come at any time and in any form in the Multiverse.

With the body destroyed, there was nothing left to investigate, and Zac turned around to see Vai running toward him with panic in her eyes.

“It's a blood curse! I'm so sorry. Because you wanted to protect me, you were afflicted by this horrifying thing!” Vai cried with tears pooling in her eyes.

She immediately started rummaging through her Spatial Ring, and one odd contraption after another appeared. “Try to fight the pain, and try not to move - it will slow it down. I'll try to

form a small spatial tear inside your body. According to our research, if I can destroy the main seal quick enough, it will not be able to take root.”

“No need, I’m fine,” Zac said as he took a step back, prompting the frenzied Vai to look up with confusion.

“You-You’re not in pain? You can move?” she blurted, her eyes glazing over from confusion. That’s... Impossible.”

Chapter 880: Stranded

“I’ve already destroyed that seal and the energies have mostly been expelled,” Zac shrugged as he took out his dried meat, inwardly praising the efficacy of Ryan’s and his associate’s creations.

Every mouthful felt as filling as stuffing his face with a couple of kilos of meat, saving him a lot of effort and time. He had been hungry for hours by this point, and the last fight had pushed it to the point it felt like his ribs were digging into his stomach. It was a somewhat annoying side-effect of **[Adamance of Eoz]**, but it was worth it.

In a heated battle like this, the node increased the durability of his Cosmic Energy by over 20%, which allowed **[Empyrean Aegis]** to withstand that treasure sword. Looking a bit silly and gluttonous was a small price to pay for such a boost.

“What are you- No, you can’t just-“ Vai said as she scurried closer with a set of unfamiliar gadgets in her hands. “That blood curse had been nurtured by a Hegemon. There is no way you can just remove it yourself.”

“Not so fast,” Zac grunted as he levied **[Verun’s Bite]** at Vai while he continued eating.

“Please, let me check on you! The longer you wait, the worse it will get,” Vai said, tears once more pooling in her eyes from anxiety.

“Not before you tell me your real identity and why you know about blood curses for some reason,” Zac countered. “You are hiding something – you might even be another traitor like that friend of yours. Unless you can dispel my fears, we’ll be parting here.”

“No, I’m not! I- I- You,” Vai sputtered, her brain seemingly short-circuiting from trying to both defend herself and urging

Zac to let her treat him.

Eventually, her eyes shone with determination as she took out a small crystalline sphere from her Spatial Ring. It looked like a little ball, but it emitted spatial energies that contained a level of Dao that was far beyond anything Zac had seen before in the Void Star, even from the cortex. It was crammed full of energy as well, and it felt like a hundred **[Void Balls]** had been pushed together into one terrifying megabomb.

“What’s that?” Zac frowned as he flashed over fifty meters away with **[Earthstrider]**.

Thankfully, Vai didn’t throw the thing at him. Instead, she infused a bit of Cosmic Energy into the ball, prompting a dense spatial wall to spring up around her. It looked extremely sturdy, almost like it had created a pocket dimension completely separate from this layer of space. It reminded Zac a lot of the methods the Orom used to create nigh-impenetrable barriers.

“I’m really part of the Void Gate,” Vai said after she deactivated the bubble. “This is how I survived the chaos. It’s a sphere that holds a finite amount of a Monarch’s energy.”

Zac slowly nodded at her to continue, inwardly realizing he had forgotten an important danger in the Multiverse. Most of his excursions were controlled by the System. The Tower of Eternity, the Twilight Ocean, the Sovereignty-quests – they all had restrictions on the equipment trial takers could bring, while the Orom World had its own set of rules that were even more stringent.

This was the outside where anything could happen. Zac still remembered how he’d almost died to Salvation long ago because he had an amulet with a wisp of The Great Redeemer’s soul. That weird blood curse just now could also be considered that kind of outside tool that wouldn’t necessarily be limited to the level of his enemy. Going forward, he needed to be more careful about these kinds of things.

Certainly, these self-contained items generally required time and effort to create – a Monarch would have to cut off a piece

of their soul to keep that massive amount of energy in check. They wouldn't do something like that just to make a little bit of money, but they might leave something for a promising descendant.

"I'm not a descendant of a Monarch, I came from the outside," Vai explained when she saw Zac's expression. "When I was accepted by the Void Gate, my only blood relative – my sister – was moved to one of the mortal worlds of the Void Gate instead. She had no talent for cultivation, unfortunately, and she passed away just sixty years later."

"Her constitution didn't even have the capacity to reach E-grade," Vai sighed. "The same was true for her children and grandchildren. When they passed, I distanced myself from my mortal descendants. It was too painful to see one generation after another die."

Zac inwardly sighed as he heard her story. This was the fate of cultivators, and a reason so many at the top became detached. They stopped looking at the young of their clans as individuals because they couldn't deal with the constant deaths. Ninety percent of those they saw on the streets would die during a single retreat of secluded cultivation. One day he, too, would possibly reach a point where he barely recognized any of his subordinates.

Learning about Vai's origin was interesting, and it explained why she had been so angry when she thought he was planning on stealing donations to the public schools. However, it didn't explain why she was running around with an extremely powerful treasure ball that only the most treasured scions would get to use.

"Much later, a distant descendant of my sister was born, and she had far greater talents than I. When she was born, thousands of spatial creatures came to greet her, and she was immediately adopted into the Void Monastery. Today, her name is Leyara Lioress."

"What?" Zac exclaimed. "You're lying."

Vai quickly shook her head as she took out another item, this one an information crystal. However, there weren't words

recorded, but pictures. In the first picture, Vai and a young girl were sitting in a garden. The girl seemed to be around ten years old, but Zac could still make out some familiar features.

One image after another followed the first, all of them showing Vai and Leyara as the latter gradually grew into the stunning beauty he met in the Tower of Eternity. Zac looked at the transition with marvel. The long lifespans of cultivators made for some odd imagery. The first picture made it seem like Vai was the big sister or perhaps even a young mother, but the last image made it look like Vai was the younger sibling. She was a constant while Leyara kept changing.

Of course, that was just a small fleeting observation drowned out by the surprise of them having a common acquaintance.

The world was truly full of coincidences. Zac had chosen to avoid contacting Leyara out of security concerns since he had no way to contact her without exposing his identity, and he had feared he would be killed long before his message ever reached her. But now, it turned out he'd been traveling with Leyara's great aunt for months?

"I didn't even know she existed, but she first visited me around two decades ago," Vai said with a smile as she carefully stowed away the communication crystal. "She was a bit lonely, I think, so the Void Monastery sent her to me. So, when little Lara heard I was entering the Void Star, she sent me some things to keep me safe. That sphere was made by the Void Priestess herself."

"If you had such a backer, why did the others treat you almost like a secretary?" Zac asked with confusion, remembering how Vai seemed to be solidly in the lowest social rung among the small group of researchers.

"I didn't talk about it with my colleagues," Vai weakly smiled, before her eyes once more widened in alarm. "Ah, the curse! Please let me help you. You cannot imagine how damaging a blood curse is."

"What about the blood curse? Why do you know about that?" Zac asked, ignoring her panicky and urgent expression.

“Three years ago, our chapter was sent a large number of tomes on various sacrificial rituals and curses,” Vai said with helplessness, her face scrunching up with disgust. “We didn’t understand why – our research was focused on the Void Star. But we figured some unorthodox cult was causing trouble in the region, and we needed to figure out how to expose cultists and help those who had been cursed.”

“How did it go?” Zac asked.

“Well, the research is still in progress, so I can’t break the curse with an array breaker,” Vai said with worry. “That’s why we need to try and blast it into a spatial tear. Now please, let me help you.”

“Alright, alright,” Zac finally relented with a smile. “See if you can find something.”

After having seen the pictures, Zac was almost certain that Vai was neither a traitor nor a spy. Her story meshed with his gut instinct as well, except he’d thought she was a descendant rather than an ancestor of a Void Gate bigshot.

Seeing that Zac finally gave the go-ahead, Vai eagerly ran over with a circular glass pane in her hands. She infused some Cosmic Energy into it, prompting a blue rune to light up in its center. Zac looked on curiously as she placed it in front of his navel, but nothing happened to the tool even after ten seconds and multiple energy infusions.

“Huh?” Vai slowly muttered with a frown as she moved the glass disk all over Zac’s body. “What’s going on? Where is it?”

“I told you, I destroyed it,” Zac shrugged as took out Uzu’s Spatial Ring. “More importantly, can you check this thing if there are any more traps on it?”

It didn’t look like Vai even heard him as she kept muttering about permutations as she took out one tool after another, trying to find the already-extinguished brand.

“Did you really destroy the Blood Curse with your own energy?” Vai eventually asked with skepticism after having exhausted all her investigative trinkets.

“I ground it down with my Daos,” Zac nodded.

“That’s impossible. Those things are designed to be extremely resilient against that – even Middle Branches wouldn’t be powerful enough to break the brand before it settled in your body,” Vai muttered as she looked at Zac like he was pulling her leg.

“Well, I have some other means as well,” Zac shrugged as he waved the ring. “Now, the ring?”

Still, Vai didn’t make any moves to scan the spatial treasure, as she wordlessly looked into Zac’s eyes. “You showcased at least two Peak-quality skills and Two Dao Branches just now, along with a strength that was almost double that of before. You are not Gaun Sorom.”

“I guess I’m not,” Zac smiled, making no effort to hide it.

Even if Vai was a bit ditzy and inexperienced, she wasn’t a fool. There were too many differences to simply handwave away with a vague explanation of having found a trove. Even showcasing one Dao Branch and Vivi was pushing it, yet that was just the tip of the iceberg.

“Why are you hiding your real identity?” she continued.

“I got into a conflict with a scion of a powerful C-grade clan. He died, which enraged the elders. Now, I have a big bounty on my head,” Zac said. “Even if I don’t think the Void Gate would care, I couldn’t be sure how individual Hegemons would react.”

Of course, that was just part of the reason, but it was good enough of an excuse.

“A bounty?” Vai exclaimed. “What clan? Maybe Lala can help.”

“Tsarun,” Zac shrugged.

“Those people are no good,” Vai muttered. “A lot of the research materials had been confiscated from a research base believed to be theirs.”

“The Tsarun is working with the invaders?” Zac exclaimed.

“No, not that we know of,” Vai said. “Those materials were confiscated thousands of years ago, and we simply used them as a reference for the methods of these new curses and sacrifices. What happened to the real Gaun Sorom?”

Zac wasn't sure why Vai cared about the real Gaun, but there was no need for him to hide the truth. “We made a deal. I borrow his identity, and he got a Teleportation Token from me.”

“And you're really not part of these traitors?” Vai continued.

“No, that doesn't have anything to do with me,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I don't have any grudges with the Void Gate. I'm just here looking for a few things.”

“Alright,” Vai nodded. “I believe you.”

“Just like that?” Zac said with raised brows.

“If you wanted me dead, I would have died already,” Vai said with a small smile. “I trust you. Can you tell me your real name?”

“You can call me Zac,” Zac eventually said after some hesitation. “Zac Atwood.”

The more they talked, the more Zac had realized the jig was up. He simply couldn't figure out a way to accomplish his goals and get out of this place without using his real identity. The cortex had blown up and most of the members were no doubt dead - the moment he stepped out of the Void Star he'd be captured and questioned unless he somehow managed to escape.

So since his identity would be exposed sooner or later, there was not much point in keeping it a secret from Vai.

“Atwood?” Vai slowly said as her brows furrowed together.

“Why does that sound a bit familiar? Are you part of the families of Salosar?”

“Something like that,” Zac coughed with a crooked smile, feeling a bit embarrassed.

He had expected an exaggerated reaction to the grand reveal that he was Zachary Atwood – the Deviant Asura who had

reached the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity and brought the Stele of Conflict to Zecia. But the little researcher obviously had no idea who he was, judging by her confused expression. Perhaps she had heard Leyara mention his name sometime but promptly forgot it after.

So much for fame and notoriety.

“Alright, so I’m a bit stronger than I openly displayed, and you have a wealthy descendant. Until we manage to leave this place, I’ll stay on as Gaun, alright?” Zac coughed, eager to change the subject.

“Okay,” Vai nodded. “I will help you keep your secret, and I will talk with my niece. She knows a lot of people who might be able to help!”

“I’ll rely on you then,” Zac smiled. “More importantly, the situation is still a bit of a mess. Do you know where we are?”

“No,” Vai said as she fearfully looked around, seemingly just now remembering they were in a foreign mystic realm shrouded in darkness. “But I think we’ve been transported deeper, where the more dangerous realms are.”

“Perfect,” Zac muttered. So much for the second piece he sensed being at the surface as well. “With the cortex blowing up like that, are we stuck here?”

“The cortexes do not control the gates between realms,” Vai said. “They simply help stabilize the system. A few realms might have been pushed out of place because of the explosion, but it will take much longer for the network to collapse altogether.”

“Was Uzu’s explanation true?” Zac asked curiously. “Are we actually not inside the Void Star right now?”

“Well... Yes and no,” Vai said after some thought. “Both the official model and Uzu’s explanations are true. The Mystic Realms are both here and in various corners of Zecia. Space is split, duplicated in a sense. It’s hard to explain without some understanding of layered realities.”

“But we aren’t stealing Mystic Realms!” Vai quickly added when she saw Zac frown, clearly mistaking what he was

worried about. “The realms we connect and harmonize with the Void Star are hidden far from the main dimensions. Most of them would probably never appear in Zecia.”

“So all those beasts in the breachers might come from the Million Gates Territory, or even from the other sector?”

“It’s possible,” Vai conceded. “But it doesn’t make sense. We have always stayed away from that region because of the turbulence. We knew that connecting the Void Star with such a chaotic patch of space would wreak havoc on this system. Something must have gone wrong for these kinds of bridges to form.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded, but he inwardly wondered if things were that simple. Certainly, the region had seen a fair share of spatial turbulence lately, which was the reason the Space Gate to the other sector had appeared in the first place. But it felt too coincidental. Were the Void Gate perhaps advancing their positions to deal with the invaders, but it had backfired?

Or was it related to the Left Imperial Palace?

Had the Void Priestess perhaps finally found the clues she was looking for somewhere inside the Million Gates territory? Was that where the piece of rubble he found came from, along with the invaders and beasts? It made sense – for a prize like the Left Imperial Palace, the Void Priestess was probably willing to risk anything, including the Void Star and perhaps even Zecia as a whole.

“I guess it doesn’t matter why the Void Star and the Million Gates Territory are connected,” Zac eventually said. “Why would the invaders want to blow up the Spatial Cortex?”

“I think... If it’s an invasion, they want to reform the Void Star,” Vai hesitated. “Normally, the only entrance and exit are where we came from, but something has gone wrong. The invaders have found a way to enter the system from the Million Gates Territory. I think they want to destabilize the Void Star and open new exits across Zecia.”

“Is that possible?” Zac frowned.

“Yes, the Void Gate has occasionally done it when we need to move a large number of people a long distance – it’s expensive, but a lot quicker than using transport vessels,” Vai nodded. “You need to pick a Mystic Realm that is not too far from the surface though, and have the tools to force open a channel.”

“But if they succeed, swarms of invaders could essentially pop up anywhere in the Zecia sector?” Zac grimaced.

“I think so?” Vai slowly nodded.

“Well, that’s just great.”

Chapter 881: Worldeaters

The thought of hordes of unorthodox cultivators popping out of nowhere among unsuspecting citizens was extremely troubling. These kinds of cultivators didn't have any scruples, and whole worlds risked getting sacrificed for their rites.

"I'm sure the Void Priestess will stop it when she finds out," Vai quickly said when she saw Zac's frown. "She is immensely powerful, and she understands the Void Star better than anyone. This might even be a trap and she's planning a counter-strike against the invaders."

Zac nodded in agreement. Given the Void Gate's strength, they should be able to quickly deal with these infiltrators – and perhaps even use them to find the Space Gate hidden in the depths of the Million Gates Territory. If not, they should at least be able to thwart their plans before things escalated.

Ultimately, it was out of Zac's paygrade. He'd try to take out any infiltrators he could and hopefully rack up some merit, but he wouldn't delve into the depths of the Void Star and risk his life to destroy the pathway they used. He had enough on his plate as is, and the Void Gate didn't lack powerful warriors who should be dealing with this mess already.

"Do you have any way to contact your niece? Or at least any armies or squads that are in this area?" Zac eventually asked. "They might not know all the details we have."

"That's..." Vai hesitated, looking a bit conflicted.

"We're well past secrets by this point," Zac snorted.

"Well, normally we would be able to send for aid at the waystation," the researcher relented. "But there is a problem. It doesn't work."

"Sabotage?" Zac asked.

“Probably,” Vai nodded. “Remember when you asked me what was going on after we entered the second Mystic Realm? The battle scene? The leaders realized that something was wrong with the communication arrays back then. I think they first guessed the communicators had broken down during that fight, but that wasn’t the case. I saw them fail to contact other waystations multiple times since then.”

Zac frowned, but he almost felt it was for the best they couldn’t communicate with the other squads. After all, the next piece of the seal might be in some restricted area, and it was better to ask for forgiveness than for permission.

“Alright, so we’ll leave notes at every waystation we visit,” Zac shrugged. “That way we might be able to help combat the invaders.”

“Do you think we’ll be fine?” Vai asked with worry.

“Well, the invaders can’t send any real dangerous people through the Space Gate so far, from what I’ve heard. Early Hegemons at the worst, so it should be fine,” Zac said after some consideration. “This is even an opportunity to rack up some contribution.”

“Not that,” Vai whispered. “What if they really have someone like the Eveningtide Asura? That man killed so many people, and the elites of the sectors were almost helpless against him.”

“Well, that’s for the bigshots to worry about,” Zac hesitated. “I’m sure they’ve prepared some measures since the Asura appeared last time, right?”

“And the others, do you think they’re alive?” Vai asked as she looked up at the sky.

“Maybe?” Zac ventured. “Teo was a defensive Hegemon, and he might have been given some special items as a leader of the squad. He might have managed to lead some to safety. You saw how Uzu destroyed the entrance behind him – they might have been hot on his heels.”

“You’re right!” Vai nodded, her eyes lighting up. “I’m sure they are fine!”

Zac nodded, but truthfully, he wasn't too convinced of his theory. Uzu seemed to only care about himself, and he wouldn't be surprised if he destabilized space to kill or trap Ilka rather than escape his pursuers.

"Alright, we should move. Nothing is gained by staying here," Zac said as he turned toward the dense brushes in the distance. "Besides, I don't think they'll allow us to just sit around here."

"Wh-" Vai said, but her words got caught in her mouth as dozens of grotesque creatures came running out through the bushes.

They were bipedal creatures that were essentially just two legs and an oversized mouth, followed by a feathery tail that stretched out twice their length. They didn't have any eyes, but they clearly knew where Zac and Vai were. Zac picked up the researcher with one of Vivi's vines while he unleashed a barrage of Dao-infused leaves in the direction of the beast.

Zac didn't even look to see the result of the attack as he rushed in the direction before rushing into the general direction he saw the Ferric Voidwyrms fly toward. However, he soon slowed down as he peered into the darkness with confusion. Zac had expected a drawn-out hunt, but he was surprised to see the beasts stopping almost immediately.

A few of the creatures had been killed by **[Nature's Edge]**, and the remaining beasts had immediately given up on their pursuit to instead feed on their fallen brothers. So much for camaraderie in this place. Was prey that scarce in this world that they even fed on their own?

The beasts weren't stronger than Middle E-grade on average, but Zac had no reason to stay on and kill them all. If these things had been attracted, it might mean that nastier things were on the way as well. So he let the beasts feed on the carcasses as he disappeared into the darkness, each step taking him and Vai hundreds of meters away.

Only a couple of minutes later did Zac slow down after having almost fallen into a tar pit. There was something about that bubbling darkness that made Zac's hair stand on end, and he quickly created some distance. Still, the visibility was an issue.

It was almost impossible to see in the darkness, and even [Cosmic Gaze] was suppressed. The next thing they might run into could be a powerful Beast King instead of some tar.

Zac kept moving until he found a secluded spot, at which point he stopped and threw out an illusion array that covered the two.

“This place is a bit troublesome, and I’m not too good at scouting. Do you have any way to spot dangers?” Zac asked.

Vai’s head immediately bobbed as she took out a glass bowl that somehow held shimmering lights within. “This treasure can spot energy signatures around us, even those that are hidden.”

“Another present from your niece?” Zac asked with a smile.

“In case I got lost,” Vai admitted with a small blush.

“It looks pretty useful. Can it detect all kinds of signatures?” Zac curiously asked as he looked at the lights within.

“Including treasures?”

“Ah? Yes, well,” Vai hesitated. “I think so? But it’s difficult to discern what every signal represents. It’s usually a powerful beast, plant, or natural formation.”

“Perfect,” Zac said. “I’ll carry you with Vivi while you keep watch. If you see me running toward something dangerous, stop me, alright?”

“I’m not very...” Vai hesitated as she looked around.

“You’ll do fine. Adventuring is just like researching. Except with more blood, I guess,” Zac said.

“A- Well, if you say so,” Vai hesitated, though her expression said she wasn’t too convinced. Still, there was determination in her eyes as she nodded. “I’ll do my best!”

“Alright, first thing’s first,” Zac said. “Can you check this ring now? It might explain why Uzu chose this realm. I don’t want to stumble into a hidden base crawling with infiltrators.”

“Of course,” Vai nodded before taking out a few of her tools again. “There doesn’t seem to be any arrays or self-destruct

functions on the item.”

“Move back a bit, just in case,” Zac said.

A moment later, Zac infused a wisp of spiritual energy into the Spatial Ring. There weren't any traps, but his face still scrunched up into an annoyed grimace. Clearly, there was one thing Uzu hadn't lied about – the man was flat broke. Apart from the Longevity Pearl, there was barely anything inside the ring.

Just some daily wares, a few dozen cheap pills, a small stack of High-quality Nexus Crystals, and a single Cosmic Crystal that seemed to be mostly exhausted already. Zac poured all the random items onto the ground and started rummaging through them in hopes of finding at least one useful thing.

At first, there was simply nothing, but suddenly he felt something was wrong with one of the robes. A moment later, he dragged out a stack of documents hidden within the lining. The bottommost document was made from a different material than the others, and Zac curiously took it out to inspect.

There was nothing on it, except fifty-odd paintings of different runes. Zac didn't recognize them at all - as far as he could tell, some didn't even follow the basic rules the Apostate of Order's patterns were based on. However, Zac froze when he saw one of the runes listed among the others on the bottom half of the parchment.

The seal of the Left Imperial Palace.

Having seen the real thing in his vision, Zac could tell it wasn't perfect. There were some errors in the way it was drawn, which somehow made it lose all of its inherent meaning. Even then, there was no mistaking it. It was at least 80% identical to the real thing. Why was something like this un Uzu's possession?

“This is likely written by the Invaders,” Vai said with a low volume as looked at the parchment with interest. “The characteristics in the penmanship and the type of ink are the same as in the manuals we researched. But it doesn't seem to

be anything – the runes do not form a system, and neither are they a message. Do you recognize this script?”

“No idea,” Zac muttered as he stowed away the parchment in his spatial ring.

In reality, he had a worrying hunch; he might not be the only one looking for the seal. The parchment almost looked like a bounty – Uzu’s contact had probably given it to him with orders to report back if he found anything of the sort. As for the other signs, Zac guessed they were either decoys or perhaps related runes that might lead to the real thing.

But how was that possible? Had someone among the invaders managed to get the quest as well? Was the Left Imperial Palace hedging its bets? Or was it the System that was arranging some sort of Battle of Fates? There was no way to tell, but it was a good early warning. Seeing this parchment, Zac knew the odds of him running into invaders had suddenly gone up.

Zac turned his attention to the stack of papers for more clues, but he quickly realized the two weren’t related. The notes were a bit disorganized, and the parchments were covered in spatters of blood. Most of them seemed to be blueprints, with some sections having dozens of iterations. At first, Zac thought they were Uzu’s research into forming a blueprint for his core, but it didn’t look like it.

“Can you tell what’s going on?” Zac asked before handing Vai the documents.

“Uzu wanted to break the blood curse,” Vai said as she looked at the diagrams. “But his foundational knowledge was too shallow. His idea was to form an array in his pathways that would automatically be powered by his Cosmic Energy. It would slowly destroy the brand on his core. But internal arrays are extremely complex, and the blood curse would have erupted long before he managed to break it.”

Apart from that, there wasn’t much else in the spatial ring, including any clues as to why Uzu had chosen this place. Had he simply followed Vai to silence her, perhaps? It was no way to tell, and Zac ultimately burned, purified, and erased all the

items and the ring itself with the help of a **[Void Ball]**, much to the confusion of Vai.

“Just a precaution,” Zac smiled. “Can’t be too careful out here.”

“A-okay... I have looked at my token, the closest waystation is in that direction,” Vai said as she pointed to their left. “But I cannot tell whether it leads outward or further inside.”

“We’ll head there soon,” Zac nodded. “But first, first, I need to find a Ferric Worldeater.”

“A Ferric Worldeater?” Vai said with confusion. “Why?”

“Ironically, to fight the outsiders.”

“Fighting the outsiders?” Vai muttered before her eyes suddenly widened in realization. “You are building a Cosmic Vessel!”

“How’d you know?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

“The only useful thing on Worldeaters are their Cores,” Vai slowly said. “As far as I know, they are mainly used for three things; Array Cores for local Teleportation Arrays, a few types of Spirit Tools, and Cosmic Vessels. The first is useless for fighting locals, and you wouldn’t use the kind of tools you can create with them. That means you are building a Cosmic Vessel.”

“Quite the researcher,” Zac smiled.

“You should give up,” Vai urged. “The models that use beast cores as part are sometimes called Living Ships – vessels that almost have an intellect of their own.”

“Like Tool Spirits?” Zac asked curiously.

“There likely are Spirit Tool Cosmic Vessels as well, but those are not the vessels I am talking about,” Vai said with a shake of its head. “It’s more of a passive consciousness that makes controlling the vessel much easier. These ships don’t require highly skilled pilots who can control the complex arrays that make the ships work. You can control them with simplified arrays and thoughts alone.

“In return, they are much more expensive and difficult to build. Therefore, few are made - it’s much easier to train pilots.”

“Oh,” Zac nodded. “Well, do have any way to pick out a Worldeater in that bowl of yours?”

“You..!” Vai stuttered before she sighed with resignation. “No, but I think I can attract one. I can build an array that copies the energy signature of a Spatial Natural Treasure. It might attract other space-attuned beasts as well though.”

“So we should be somewhat close to a Worldeater’s domain,” Zac nodded. “I saw a few Voidwyrms earlier, so there should be some adults around as well.”

Fifteen days later, two figures sat hidden in an igloo made from what Zac hoped was mud, waiting for their prey to take the bait. One had a calm expression, while the other was holding onto a bellyful of grievances. The mud was something the two stumbled onto the second day in the Mystic Realm. It stank to high heavens, but it somehow blocked out both their auras and smells without the energy fluctuations of an isolation array, making it the perfect portable hiding tool.

For Zac, this was nothing - he was more than accustomed to being covered with all kinds of disgusting things. And compared to the **[Celestial Clay]**, this mud smelled like the sweetest perfume. Vai, on the other hand, had a far harder time acclimatizing to the less glamorous parts of adventuring, and there were two dark circles under her eyes as she occasionally looked at Zac with reproach.

“This is the last one, I swear. If this one is useless as well, I’ll settle with it and we move on,” Zac smiled. “Besides, you were the one who taught me about the ridges.”

One hundred meters away from them, a shimmering ball hovered in the air, emitting enticing pulses of Spatial Dao. It was the bait that Vai had set up, though it wasn’t the first one. This was the sixth time they were trying to attract a Ferric Worldeater. It wasn’t that Vai’s method didn’t work - except for two accidental stampedes that left the two running for their lives, the other four hunts had attracted the right target.

However, after Zac was flush with excitement after catching the first one, Vai had informed him that he had essentially caught the dumbest possible specimen. The way she could tell was that it only had one ridge inside its maw. It wasn't an exact science, but more ridges generally meant greater potential and a more powerful soul.

Settling for a common Worldeater without spatial affinity was already a compromise for Zac, so he refused to create his tailored Cosmic Vessel with subpar materials. In the end, he had dragged Vai all across the whole Mystic Realm and through various packs of starved nightmarish beasts in search of a better specimen.

Unfortunately, beasts were just like cultivators in that most of them were relatively untalented, with only the occasional genius emerging.

“Okay, last one,” Vai sighed with relief as she applied some more fragrant salve under her nose. “Though you said that last time as well.”

“Well,” Zac coughed. “How does it look?”

“Nothing yet,” Vai muttered as she looked into the bowl. “We might have found them all. Worldeaters are not that common. It takes both talent and a lot of energy for them to be born.”

“Let's wait a while longer,” Zac sighed.

Another hour passed where the only visitors were the occasional F- or E-grade beast that Zac scared away with a burst of killing intent. But finally, Zac saw how a brighter star appeared in the bowl.

“A Beast King is closing in,” Vai confirmed. “It's coming from that mountain - I think it's a worldeater.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand. “Same tactic as before. Don't worry if it doesn't work.”

“I- I'll seal it this time,” Vai said with a mix of determination and fear.

A few minutes later, Zac could see it - something that looked like an enormous river was floating toward them in the sky. It

was the Ferric Worldeater who had finally been lured out from within its burrow where it fed on a Nexus Vein. It drew closer and closer, and Zac got ready to jump out.

These beasts weren't stupid, and the Worldeater would soon realize that Vei's array wasn't actually a recently-born Spatial Treasure.

“Wait!” Vai suddenly exclaimed. “A second one is- ah it's so fast! It's already here!”

Chapter 882: Black Heart

The sun covered half the sky, and its warm rays felt like a caress on her skin. For a moment, it was almost enough to forget that the Heavens were shrouded in this corner of space. But the illusion broke as the sound of a door opening broke the tranquility.

“I am sorry for the interruption, but I have gathered the information young miss requested,” Kvalk said as he stepped onto the terrace.

“Oh?” Iz exclaimed with anticipation as she opened her eyes.

“As young miss had gathered from your, ah, research sessions, there is indeed a war that is about to break out in this sector,” Kvalk said as he handed over an information crystal. “For now, it is contained to a semi-integrated corner of the endless storms that the locals call the Million Gates Territory. A Space Gate is currently forming there, but it’s hidden by the Heavens.”

“What about the other sector?” Iz asked.

“They are Dark Sector ruled by the Kan’Tanu Cult,” Kvalk said.

“An Unorthodox Cult?” Iz asked with a frown. “I have never heard of them.”

“Neither have I. They are likely some small faction that has taken over either a declining or a remote sector. Unfortunately, with the restrictions, I cannot find out more,” Kvalk sighed. “But generally, for them to control a whole sector, they are most likely part of a larger faction. Otherwise, some local B-grade force would have stomped them out already.”

“I never met a heretic. I hear those people can be quite strong?” Iz asked curiously.

“They break convention for power. Those who survive the rites and the backlashes are usually stronger than common cultivators,” Kvalk nodded. “Of course, they are still just ants with a crooked path compared to young miss.”

“These natives did not have much information, so I cannot be certain,” the golem continued. “But the invaders all seem to carry a somewhat familiar blood curse. If I have to guess, then these Kan’Tanu are a branch or subordinate organization of the Black Heart Sect. Perhaps, one of their outer disciples found their way to the frontier.”

“I think I have heard of them,” Iz slowly said.

“The Black Heart Sect are ruthless to others, but more so to themselves. There are seldom more than a million members of their sect because of their standards and recruitment method, and almost all of them are outer disciples. Each candidate is placed in a harsh environment with ten thousand others, each one implanted with a nascent Heart Curse. Every warrior they kill will strengthen themselves, and only one candidate will walk out alive.

“To become an outer disciple, a candidate has to survive two rounds, with the second being a battle against 10,000 other candidates who survived the first gauntlet. To become an inner disciple, you have to survive a third round against in a slaughter-fest among outer disciples.”

“A trillion deaths for one cultivator,” Iz sighed. “Why?”

“Part of the reason is to find true elites,” Kvalk said. “But more importantly, it’s to strengthen the Heart Curse. With every death, the curse will siphon a small part of the strength and talent of the fallen. With a single round, it will not amount to much, but by the third, an already talented individual will have been pushed a whole tier higher.”

“Stolen talent cannot come without a price,” Iz muttered.

“It is just as young miss says. The reason it’s called a curse even if it increases your talent is the tremendous fell karma it carries. It is like an unrelenting Heart Demon that eventually turns most of the members mad. Even those who can resist

will find their personalities gradually get twisted,” the golem explained. “The curse will also cause them to be beset by terrifying tribulations.”

“Ruining their fate for power,” Iz said with a shake of her head. “How pointless. Are all of the invaders like these?”

“No, only the elites will have these kinds of curses, and in this area, they will probably have some inferior version,” Kvalk snorted. “To steal providence is incredibly difficult and costly. The common warriors will have simpler brands that will provide power and durability in exchange for their longevity. They are essentially battle slaves whose lifespan is cut down to a tenth.”

“Hm,” Iz nodded.

She was a bit curious if there was any relation between this invasion and the competition her grandpa warned her about, but these natives had no idea what was going on. There wasn't any point trying to find the answers herself though - there was a much easier solution. She simply needed to find Mr. Bug, and he'd lead her straight into the eye of the storm where the answers waited.

“What about the incongruous readings?” Iz asked.

It had been extremely frustrating to finally break into this sealed sector only to find she couldn't find Mr. Bug. The image hadn't been restored since he conjured that ball of Chaos, and now even the tracking feature was acting up. One day the signal would indicate one direction, and the next day it said he was in a completely different part of the sector.

They had even tried visiting one of the locations the mirror indicated, only to find absolutely nothing there. Had Mr. Bug figured out some way to avoid detection? No, that was impossible. He was far too stupid for something like that. It felt like she was stuck at the finish line, and she had ultimately settled in the hometown of some local family called Havarok.

They weren't very powerful, but they did have access to all the local information networks.

“These natives haven’t heard of young miss’s associate for years. Instead, I chose to look for clues to the Left Imperial Palace. Since your associate is related to its awakening, I figured we should be able to find him that way. And with the odd readings of the mirror, I have a theory,” Kvalk said as he handed Iz a second information crystal.

“Void Gate?” Iz muttered as she scanned the contents.

“I believe the Void Gate is a branch of the Vigil,” Kvalk added.

“Ah!” Iz exclaimed as she stood up. “Mr. Bug is off causing trouble in that spatial anomaly!”

“The guardian of the Void Gate is quite powerful,” Kvalk hesitated. “If she’s a part of the Vigil, I fear I’m not her match in my restricted state.”

“If this Void Priestess is a part of the Vigil, she will not interfere with the process,” Iz countered as she started packing away her furniture. “Let’s go.”

“The local dynasty was wondering if young miss was interested in visiting their inheritance realm,” the golem added. “I think their young master wants to use the opportunity to court young miss. Should I test their fate?”

“Don’t bother, what fate can they have? Just ignore those people,” Iz waved her hand as she hurried toward the door. “Come, let’s find someone to teleport us over.”

The thick layer of ash on the ground kicked up the occasional dust cloud in the large hollow. However, the creatures who had gathered in ritual obeisance seemed to not even notice the layers that covered their thick coats of black fur. They simply stared at the ancient temple in the center of the hollow with the dull gazes of fanatics.

How the hell would he do this? There were ten thousand of these bastards, with the weakest of them being Late E-grade. More than two weeks had passed as well, and none of them had moved an inch.

“You still insist on keeping the details to yourself?” Ogras muttered from his hidden chamber in the mountain wall, his aura and words shielded by dense layers of shadows. “No matter what, I am taking whatever’s inside. My guts tell me the most valuable treasure in this godforsaken realm is in there.”

“Why the hell should I help you?” K’Rav snickered as he appeared opposite Ogras.

“If I die, I’ll be sure to throw you right into the hands of one of the alphas,” Ogras spat. “Have fun slowly getting swallowed and digested by these freaks.”

The goblin glared at Ogras for a moment, but his eyes thoughtfully turned to the temple as it released another of its weird ripples.

“These buildings might come from the Lost Plane,” K’Rav eventually relented. “I’m not sure how they were dragged to the surface dimension though – we never managed to bring back anything more than energy beings.”

“The Lost Plane? The same place as those crazed familiars of yours came from?” Ogras frowned. “Bastard, even now you’re lying? Do I look blind? In what way are those pulses anything like the nightmare plane of the Qriz’UI?”

He sounded annoyed, but in reality, Ogras was actually inclined to believe the Tool Spirit. Why else would the mysterious brand on his arm urge him forward and respond to every pulse? Besides, finding this place had been exceedingly easy – these temples had called for him since the day he stepped into the badlands.

If not for the worry this was yet another trick by K’Rav, Ogras would have arrived at this place two whole months earlier. And along his circuitous route, he had spotted three similar ruins, each one of them surrounded by these humanoid beasts. However, none of the others had called to him as this temple did.

Of course, he still wasn’t convinced this wasn’t a trap, but it took all of his self-control to ignore the beckoning pulses from

within.

Ogras was almost certain this was the last piece of the puzzle. Upon finishing the sixth key for his quest in the Ra'Lashar Kingdom, the six tattoos had turned into this singular brand on his hand that still hadn't shown any use. Initially, Ogras had worried he had lost his opportunity when the bastard of a Tool Spirit activated the self-destruction of the whole tower, but he no longer believed that to be the case.

The brand itself was the reward for managing to pass all six trials of the quest, but it was still a key to a repository. However, it was not the Ra'Lashar Treasury the brand would give him access to, but rather this mysterious ruin that not even these powerful beasts dared enter.

"What do you know, fool?" K'Rav snorted. "A little tadpole questioning the vast knowledge of the Ra'Lashar?"

"I'm questioning you, you wailing ghost," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "Everything that's come out of your mouth since we met has either been outright lies or modified truths. Why should today be any different?"

"Then why did you ask, you wretched thing?" K'Rav spat. "Now, will you listen or not?"

"Go ahead, sing your song," Ogras said with a generous wave.

"Bastard," K'Rav muttered before the spirit took a calming breath. "The Lost Plane is ancient, and even we didn't know much about it. We stumbled upon it by accident through a small crack leading into that domain. Our explosive growth was thanks to the few things we managed to extract from that place."

"And your demise," Ogras pointedly added.

"Well, yes," K'Rav shrugged. "We got too greedy, but don't think you would fare any better. For one, the truths that place contained beggared comprehension - we only managed to gather some scraps at the edges, and we turned into what you call a C-grade force in a few short millennia. Problem was, something corrupted the Lost Plane long before we found it."

“The Qriz’Ul,” Ogras muttered, his eyes widened with realization as he looked at the thick layer of dust covering the area.

He hadn’t made the connection over the past week simply because the auras of these ruins and the rune parasites were so different, but there was a similarity. Everything those purple scars touched was reduced to dust, just like these ancient buildings seemed to have destroyed all around them with their pulses.

“Those bastards are just a symptom, not the cause,” K’Rav said. “In a way, we believed the Dao itself was the corruption.”

“What?” Ogras asked with a raised brow. “The Dao is the Dao.”

“Well, I don’t have all the answers,” K’Rav muttered. “We were busy strengthening ourselves - who would bother to look a gift horse in the mouth? I’m sure there was more to it. In either case, these temples might be related to the Lost Realm - an expression of its power without the taint that turned that realm into a nightmare.”

“Well, even if you’re right - so what?” Ogras grunted. “How does that help me?”

“These dumb brutes don’t dare to go inside, and there is a big pile of dust right by the gates. Entry means death for these things,” K’Rav snickered before he pointedly looked at Ogras’ arm. “But not necessarily for you.”

“Let me guess, I should just rush through these beasts and jump headfirst through the gates - in the hopes the brand on my arm will keep me safe?” Ogras asked with a roll of his eyes. “What’s next, should I slather myself in grease and tasty Natural Treasures for good luck as well?”

“You asked my opinion, so there it is,” K’Rav said. “I’ve said it before and I’ve said it again. Nothing great will come without taking some risks. If my idea works, you will pass through in one piece and get your hands on a true relic of the

Lost Plane. If it fails, you'll quickly and probably painlessly turn into a pile of dust.

“And don't tell me there isn't logic to my plan. You didn't so much as glance at those other temples we passed, including the one that looked a lot fancier than this one. You clearly believe this place is related to you.”

“So, why are you being so helpful all of a sudden?” Ogras said with thin eyes.

“I can't reason with a paranoid rogue like you,” K'Rav spat as he flew back into the flag in Ogras' robes. “Do what you want. I almost hope it fails - that way I'll finally get some peace and quiet.”

“Unless I haunt you in the afterlife,” Ogras snorted as his gaze turned to the valley full of beasts sitting in reverie.

Even if the goblin's idea worked, there was still the issue of getting through the sea of creatures. These things weren't like the dumb zombies they had lured away with some Miasma Crystals back on Earth - these things were pretty hard to trick because of their energy sensitivity. There were also the leaders at the front - six Beast Kings as far as he could tell, each one of them possessing strength well above the average power of a Beast King.

Even then, with all he had accomplished over the past decade, it should be possible - as long as he dared enter that courtyard.

He hesitated for a few minutes, but Ogras ultimately steeled his heart. It was just like the long-nosed little bastard said. Power or death, there was no in-between. If he died, he died - just another forgotten warrior on the path of cultivation. As far as he knew, everyone on the outside believed him dead already, so what did it matter?

Ogras turned to shadows as he slithered down a crack in the mountain wall. He slowly inched his way closer to the outer perimeter of the beasts, wanting to advance as far as possible before he was exposed. Eventually, a few of the humanoids started sniffing the air and looking around, realizing something was amiss. That was his cue - and Ogras exploded into action.

Two rapid teleportations left him in the heart of the horde, but when he tried to flash forward with **[Darkside]** a third time, the dense auras from the beasts barred his path. Even then, it was better than Ogras had dared hope for, and a sea of darkness spread out with himself as the epicenter.

Since **[Sea of Shadows]** had been upgraded to E-grade and pushed to Late Mastery, its lethality was simply tremendous, and wails echoed out in every direction. However, the domain didn't even last a second before it was ripped apart by the sheer number of enemies, exposing six identical copies rushing toward the gate of the temple.

One by one they were struck down, but when the final copy was about to fall, it took out a spear and swiped in a wide arc around him. Over a hundred E-grade beasts were felled in one go, and the void allowed Ogras to activate his movement skill once more. Now, there was only one barrier between himself and the temple - the Beast Kings and their direct underlings.

Ogras waved the **[Shadewar Flag]**, and screams from the depths of the underworld echoed through the hollow as over a hundred specters appeared. They formed a vanguard as Ogras melded into the shadows, his eyes never leaving the closest Beast King who blocked the gate with a massive Dao Field.

The ghosts swarmed the humanoid beasts with wild abandon, but they were being torn to shred at a rapid pace, unable to withstand the sharp claws of these things. Ogras didn't care - the moment the spirits were released, he had already resigned himself to the loss. But he could collect new souls for the flag as long as he made it through this.

A lance of hyper-condensed shadows, surrounded by circles of esoteric runes, shot toward the final guardian, the force contained in the attack far surpassing the F-grade **[Shadowlance]** it had evolved from. The brutal-looking beast wasn't worried though, and it unleashed a cascading shockwave with a roar.

The attack destroyed everything in its wake as it swallowed Ogras' skill, but a pained screech suddenly echoed out when a lance of darkness pierced through its body - from behind. With

[**Mirage Lance**], real was false, and false was real. The Beast King's keen energy perception had worked against it - it instantly realized that the attack from behind was an illusion.

However, as a fusion of smoke and mirrors, reality was malleable with his evolved skill, and real and illusion switched places just before they struck. Ogras knew the attack was far from enough to deal with these incredibly durable bastards, but the infusion of his Dao had interrupted the Beast King's Dao Field for a moment.

And a moment was all that Ogras needed.

With a flash, shadows swapped places, and Ogras found himself right next to the wounded humanoid beast. Even if it was in pain, it reacted instantaneously with a ferocious swipe that left spatial tears in its wake. The claws tore straight through his body, or rather the body of the mirage that had replaced Ogras the moment he appeared.

As for Ogras himself, he appeared right in front of the temple, where his appearance kicked up a cloud of dust. There was no time for hesitation or second thoughts - the beast kings had already destroyed the specters and were already bearing on him with madness in their black eyes. He leaped forward through the gate and landed square inside the temple's courtyard.

The cobblestones beneath his feet oozed antiquity and the solemn atmosphere quieted Ogras' beating heart in an instant. However, the ethereal state didn't even last for a second before his mind screamed of disastrous danger. Two of the Beast Kings had actually jumped through the gate in their fury, and their claws were about to strike him down.

Ogras was set to evade the attacks, but a sudden pulse from within the temple froze him in place. He briefly felt an odd ripple on his arm and his mind immediately blanked out, overloaded with a rapid succession of images. The first beast king descended on him a moment later, its claw going straight for Ogras' forehead.

However, while there was death, there was no blood. The instant the claw touched Ogras' forehead, a shudder went

through the Beast King and it was reduced to dust in a flash along with its brother. Ogras was fine, and he took a shuddering breath as he woke up from his stupor. It worked - the Voidbrand had granted him access.

He threw a teasing smile at the furious beasts stuck at the other side of the gate, but by the time he turned his gaze toward the decaying temple, his eyes were full of solemnity. The images that had suddenly crammed into his head were scattered and hazy, but one thing was clear; this place had far surpassed his expectations.

It had far surpassed his realm of comprehension.

“Ultom...”

Chapter 883: Double the Trouble

Zac didn't have time to react to Vai's exclamation of a second target before the first one pushed through the darkness, its true form finally becoming visible. As expected, it was another Ferric Worldeater – a monstrous mix between a flying lobster, and a worm.

This specimen was almost two hundred meters long, making it the size of a Cosmic Vessel. Its face was mostly a large maw made from six flaps that almost looked like a disgusting fleshy flower bud when opening, an image that was only reinforced when you saw that its mouth was filled with thousands of odd tendrils that looked like pistils.

Ferric Worldeaters didn't actually have any teeth at all. Instead, those tendrils had the ability to extract almost any energy from materials it swallowed before it passed mundane rubble from the other side. Everything from World Cores to Cosmic Crystals and sturdy metals was drained and turned into useless scrap in no time.

Just behind its maw, four claws were attached, reaching roughly twenty meters ahead of its mouth. Two of them were designed for digging and looked like an excavator bucket and a long spike, while the other pair was more like traditional lobster claws. The claws looked a bit odd and misplaced, but Zac had felt first-hand just how quick and lethal those things were.

Thick plates that looked a lot like rusty iron covered their whole body, which was where the “ferric” part in the name came from. In reality, the plates were more like extremely sturdy clay than metal. They had very powerful defensive capabilities, but their real use was the extraordinary isolation effect they provided.

It was these plates that allowed the Worldeaters to slowly dig their way into the center of a planet and withstand the pressure, heat, and powerful energies as they slowly fed on the planet's core. But in contrast to what Calrin's report had said or what their name implied, they didn't solely feed on World Cores.

They were happy to eat any powerful source of energy, and they more commonly fed on Nexus Veins, slowly draining and destroying them. Of course, the odds of actually turning into a Beast King without access to a World Core were extremely slim, and they had to replace quality with quantity. Their ever-voracious nature made them a headache, and if not for the useability of their Beast Cores, they would be hunted and eradicated like an invasive species.

Then again, they were quite difficult to get rid of altogether. With the unique isolation capabilities of their plates, they could survive in the Void for years. Not only that, but they actually possessed a Bloodline Ability that would allow them to dig open a hole into the Void, where they would hide until the danger had passed. Furthermore, their young were often nurtured inside their own bodies where they received part of the energy their parents extracted, making them hard to target.

This ability for survival was the reason there couldn't be any hesitation – two of the previous Worldeaters had managed to flee into the void before Zac could incapacitate them. This time, the situation was even more complicated, with a second Beast King looming in the shadows. Odd thing was, even with Vai's early warning, Zac couldn't locate the beast at all.

That didn't mean Vai was wrong – Zac's instincts told him something else was lurking nearby as well. Thankfully, years of fighting against all kinds of beasts in the Orom World had given him a wealth of experience, and he had already adjusted his battle plan as he shot into the sky with a herculean leap.

He was still some distance from the Worldeater, which had stopped in hesitation from Zac's sudden appearance. The Worldeaters were somewhat skittish, but they would not immediately flee upon the appearance of a human, especially not one with multiple aura-hiding measures in place. Between

his aura-hiding bracer and [**Spiritual Void**] swallowing his Dao emanations, he should look like a mortal who somehow gained the ability of flight.

This charade wouldn't trick anyone for long, but it didn't need to. A short hesitation was all Zac needed as a storm of fractal leaves shot out from his body, each one of them imbued with large amounts of Mental Energy and his Branch of the War Axe. The innumerable blades raked through the air, forming an inescapable net that stretched for hundreds of meters in every direction.

The forest below was reduced to splinters, and the mud hut was destroyed as well. Even then, Zac wasn't worried – Vai had moved out of harm's way the moment he jumped into the air. Not only that, but a new forest rose to replace the one that had been destroyed – a primordial forest conjured with his [**Ancestral Woods**].

The upgraded version of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] had its limitation when fighting in the sky – for example, its teleportation abilities were landlocked. Still, the trees provided him with a series of other advantages, from the attribute boost to the damage-soaking capabilities and improved vision.

A rattling sound echoed through the air as dozens of blades slammed into the thick plates of the Worldeater, and it screeched in anger at the assault. Shallow marks were left on the surface of the rusty scales, but [**Nature's Edge**] was far from able to cut through the plates. Zac didn't care in the slightest – the attack had already accomplished its goal.

Six deep thuds echoed out the next moment, sounding almost like underwater explosions. The sound came from a set of array flags Zac had thrown out during the chaos, which had then been activated by Vai. Each of the flags created an odd swirl in space that together formed a large cage of destabilized space. It didn't target the worldeater though, but rather an empty patch of space.

Part of the reason Zac had activated [**Nature's Edge**] and infused it with his Dao was to hide the Array Flags. The Worldeaters were quite sensitive to spatial energies. Without a

diversion, they would probably have noticed something was wrong. There was a second reason as well though; to sound out the hidden threat.

The hundreds of fractal leaves hadn't managed to actually hit the invisible target, but between the omniscience of **[Ancestral Woods]** and the feedback from the blades, he had still managed to find what he looked for. It was around this area Zac had thrown out his trap, and the results were almost immediate. With space destabilizing, the hidden beast had been forced to the surface – and it was another Worldeater.

It was only 120 meters long, a far cry from its brother. Even then, it looked quite impressive. For one, its shells were a mottled dark blue, reminding Zac of a night sky. Instead of stars, there were small runic patterns that seemed to be natural expressions of the Dao of Space. Finally, it had a fifty-meter-long tuft of steel-like hair on its head that swayed in the wind like it was unaffected by gravity.

A Space-attuned Worldeater.

This was exactly what Zac had hoped for, but he stilled his surging heart as he proceeded with his plan. A high-pitched shriek was emitted by the trapped Worldeater, and Zac could tell that the array wouldn't hold for more than a couple of seconds. Hopefully, that would be enough.

Golden runes spread across Zac's skin, and his aura rose to unprecedented degrees as he activated **[Arcadian Crusade]** for the first time in years. The fires of war coursed in his veins, and Zac was suddenly filled with a holy vengeance. Every muscle shuddered with barely contained explosive power, and his rapid heartbeat was a drum calling him to battle.

A huge wooden hand filled with an aura of antiquity appeared out of nowhere, with not so much as a whiff of Cosmic Energy to warn of its arrival. Both the hand and the axe it gripped were covered in golden runes of Arcadia, and its blade descended toward its target – the common Worldeater that was furiously flying to save its brother.

The beast didn't so much as flinch from the incoming strike, even if it had come out of nowhere. Its attention was fully on

the trapped Worldeater, and Zac wasn't surprised. The Space-attuned Worldeaters were not only valuable to cultivators, but also to Worldeaters themselves. They could lead swarms of Worldeaters through the vast emptiness of space, finding planets to feed on.

They were the shepherds of their race, almost holy existences according to Vai's booklet. The Worldeaters would do anything in their power to protect these beings, so Zac needed to quickly get the guardian out of the way before he captured the space-attuned one. That's why he was going all-out from the start, even using Void Energy to speed up and hide the activation of **[Arcadia's Judgement]**.

The huge axe descended, empowered by his Dao Braid of War Axe and Kalpataru, his **[Spiritual Void]**, and **[Arcadian Crusade]**. It was the most powerful strike Zac was able to unleash without using something like his Annihilation Sphere. If this couldn't deal with the beast, nothing in his repertoire could.

One of the Worldeater's claws rose to intercept the incoming swing. The plated crusher was even bigger than the axe, but the Beast King had overestimated its defenses after millennia of being impervious if it thought that was enough. Edge and claw collided, and a loud snap echoed out as the axe cut straight through the pincer almost unimpeded.

That was the weakness of Worldeater plating. It perfectly withstood damage to a certain degree, almost completely nullifying both Dao and energy. But the moment its threshold was surpassed, the plating cracked and lost most of its insulating capabilities. Now, the Worldeater had realized its mistake, but the axe of **[Arcadia's Judgement]** was already descending toward its head like a headsman's execution.

A series of runes lit up across its plates, showering the area in a bronze hue that somehow managed to impede the axe's descent. Zac inwardly swore upon seeing that the Beast King had learned a defensive bloodline talent. Not all Beast Kings awoke the same Heritage Skills, and only one other Ferric Worldeater had used this talent until now.

With all the power in his swing, Zac believed he'd be able to push through the repulsing domain, but he wasn't confident that the skill would retain enough momentum to kill the beast in one go. Meanwhile, two flags restraining the space-tuned specimen had already cracked. He was running out of time.

Zac grit his teeth and flashed forward, using one of his aerial steps with [**Earthstrider**] to close in on the Worldeater while the huge axe was still pushing down. A pang of danger immediately prompted him to desperately swing his axe to the side, narrowly avoiding being skewered by one of the Worldeater's pincers.

A throbbing pain indicated his arm had been wounded by the clash, and he was being thrown away from the Beast King from the backlash. But Zac took two consecutive steps through the air, urgently squeezing through the narrow opening he'd forced by cutting off one claw and pushing back another. Suddenly, he was right on top of the Beast King's head, with his own attack bearing down on him.

There was such a thing as friendly fire with skills, and Zac felt a sense of impending doom as the axe of his own making hung over his head. Still, he didn't have any plan to cancel the skill. Instead, he activated [**Void Zone**], and his surroundings suddenly grew dim as the runes on the Beast King's plates were extinguished. Unfortunately, the domain only disrupted the skill locally – the rest of the beast king was still illuminated.

Zac prayed that would be enough.

Just an instant later, the axehead was upon the worldeater since the resistance was suddenly gone. Zac quickly deactivated Void Zone and pushed away with [**Earthstrider**], narrowly avoiding the strike. A tremendous eruption of energy threw him out of the distorted space of his movement skill, and Zac grunted with pain.

A groaning sound followed as more than a dozen ancestral trees withered from soaking up the damage he had been forced to endure. A second shockwave followed the first, subjecting Zac to even more agony as he was thrown away like a ragdoll.

The damage-averting capabilities of **[Ancestral Woods]** could only do so much. Zac's mouth tasted like iron and a couple of his ribs had been broken judging by the stabbing agony in his side.

Even then, a smile adorned Zac's face as he crashed to the ground. A torrential current of energy had already entered his body, proving that his gambit had worked. The defensive ability of the Ferric Worldeater hadn't managed to recover in time, allowing the axe of **[Arcadia's Judgement]** to destroy its whole head and kill it in one fell swoop.

A tremendous earthquake followed a moment later as the dead Worldeater fell onto the ground. Zac wanted to just close his eyes and activate **[Surging Vitality]** now that the Beast King was dealt with, but there was no time. After seeing its kin getting killed in an instant, there was no way the space-attuned Worldeater would stick around.

Spatial tears were already appearing around it as the Beast King tried to force open a pathway into the Void. Through his unique vision from **[Ancestral Woods]**, Zac also saw a pale-faced Vai desperately holding on to the array control crystal with blood running down her nose. That was the reason he'd even dared to use his bloodline abilities in the first place. The researcher already had her hands full maintaining the seal.

With **[Void Zone]** not giving off any aura at all, it should be nigh impossible for Vai to figure out what had happened.

Another array flag snapped as Zac scrambled up to his feet, and he knew time was running out. Luckily, **[Earthstrider]** had reset by his landing, and there was still plenty of time on his berserking skill. So even if his body groaned in objection, Zac swallowed a Soldier Pill and leaped into one of the ancestral trees, which instantly teleported him to a tree crown right beneath his real target.

With a push, Zac shot into the air, this time with a golden laurel adorning his head. In his wake, a golden domain rose toward the struggling Worldeater, like a cape made from divinity itself. Facing him was an increasingly turbulent patch

of space, which finally descended into total chaos as the Worldeater finally destroyed the cage.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw the Worldeater starting to phase out again, and he urgently threw out a D-grade talisman. Forcibly activating even an Early D-grade talisman at his level cost him almost 70% of his Cosmic Energy, but space congealed the next moment. It was one of the talismans he'd bought from the Void Gate before setting off, and it solidified space in an instant.

That kind of talisman had all kinds of uses in a turbulent region like the Void Star, from stabilizing Convergences to suppressing spatial beasts. In this case, it was the latter, and Zac breathed out in relief upon seeing the Worldeater fail to phase away. Still, a single talisman wasn't a match for a determined Beast King, and Zac saw the new seal rapidly deteriorate.

Thankfully, Zac was already upon the beast by that point, and a series of Dao-infused fractal edges rained down on the carapace. The bluish plates didn't lack defensive capabilities compared to the normal ones, but it didn't matter. Zac was doing everything in his power to infuse and cover the beast in his Dao, which would hopefully make it harder for the beast to teleport away.

Together with Vivi's vines, which had already looped around the beast, and the Arcadian Domain of **[Empyrean Aegis]**, it left the Worldeater unable to open a proper channel to escape. Still, it pelted the surroundings with thousands of spatial tears, and Zac felt extremely grateful for his new defensive skill.

With him being able to form up to nine strings of Mental Energy by now, he had long since conquered his limitation of only infusing one skill at a time with his Dao. Thanks to that, the golden barrier managed to withstand every tear that slammed into it, though the two pillars down on the ground were rapidly being whittled down.

Between the initial blitz and activating the talisman, Zac was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy even after swallowing a Soldier Pill, but he had no plans of slowing

down. This was the best way to deal with Beast Kings – utterly overwhelm them before their almost endless stores of Cosmic Energy could whittle him down.

Not that he had an option. Zac’s heart hammered as he landed on top of the beast’s head, just by the large tuft of hair. He could feel how enormous amounts of Spatial Energy churned within the beast, and the forest below him was starting to twist and distort. All his measures weren’t enough - the beast was about to jump away.

Still, Zac stayed on, and a meter-long leaf appeared next to the edge of **[Verun’s Bite]**. The next moment, dense runes covered the leaf as it was infused by **[Rapturous divide]**. Just like last time, Zac flashed his **[Void Zone]** for a moment to rebuff any energies inside the Beast King, after which he unleashed his skill.

Since learning to form his crude Dao Braids, Zac no longer needed to swing twice to activate his skill. Instead, gold and black instantly converged and formed the impassable divide, cutting deep into the head of the Ferric Worldeater as Zac used all the power he had available. The result was a clean incision that exposed both the Beast Core and a good deal of brain matter.

[Arcadia’s Judgement] had both destroyed the brain and extinguished the soul of the first Worldeater, but this was more of a surgical cut. It had almost completely severed the head and its pathways without killing it. The Beast spasmodically started to thrash as it fell toward the ground, the damage making it temporarily unable to draw energy from its core. Zac saw the ground rapidly draw closer, but he knew his job wasn’t done.

One huge spike after another appeared in his hand, and he pushed aside his disgust as he inserted them deep into the brain of the beast. It was like the spikes had a life of their own, and they burrowed deeper into the massive head of the Worldeater after getting infused by a burst of Cosmic Energy.

The two were almost at the ground now, but Zac’s full attention was on successfully attaching a red crystal to the

Beast Core. A subtle shudder spread from the core, and Zac breathed out in relief. A moment later the beast simply disappeared, and Zac landed on the ground with a grunt. A quick look into his Beast Pouch confirmed that the bluish space-attuned Worldeater was lying next to the other one he caught last week, proving the capture was successful.

As usual, things had refused to follow the script, but he had finally managed to get the last component for his quest – and a Space Attuned Worldeater at that.

Chapter 884: Deeper

Even if Zac had succeeded, he did feel a bit conflicted upon seeing the motionless Ferric Worldeaters in his Beast Pouch. Neither of them was actually dead – not really, anyway. At the same time, they weren't quite alive either. The spikes he had embedded into the beast's brain had essentially extinguished its soul and dispersed its consciousness, keeping only a small unconscious shred behind. Meanwhile, the crystal he'd attached to the Beast Core would keep energy circulating through its body, making sure the body would stay alive.

It was a bit macabre, but it was a common practice. Some materials from beasts needed to be freshly harvested when used in crafting, and this was a way to accomplish that without needless suffering. With the help of the arrays, the beast bodies could be kept in suspended animation for decades before they expired.

A series of shuffling steps dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he turned to Vai who was walking over with a somewhat unsteady gait. She was no longer bleeding from her nose and ears, but she was still deathly pale. It wasn't a surprise - if anything it was a huge accomplishment for a peak E-grade hybrid cultivator to contain a Beast King like Vai had.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked as he ate a Healing Pill.

“My soul was slightly overtaxed, but I will be fine in a day or two,” Vai weakly nodded. “Are we done with the hunts, then?”

“We are,” Zac nodded. “Thank you for your help. Without you, it would have been impossible to succeed.”

“You're welcome,” Vai nodded, though she looked a bit conflicted. “However... That specimen... It's...”

“A good, but absolutely common, specimen,” Zac nodded with a blank expression.

“Ah?” Vai blurted, her eyes glazing over for a second. “No, that’s...”

“Let’s get away from here before any more Beast Kings comes to investigate,” Zac interjected as he walked away. “Can you collect the mud while I harvest some of the meat from the other Worldeater?”

[Ancestral Woods] was still running, and Zac’s smiled a bit when he saw Vai speechlessly open and close her mouth a few times before shaking her head with resignation. He’d already realized the little researcher was unable to deal with that level of shamelessness, and she could only reluctantly head over to harvest the acrid aura-isolating mud.

Meanwhile, Zac walked over to the dead Worldeater, where he harvested the claws and a few easily-accessed pieces of meat. The Beast Core was unfortunately destroyed, a result of Zac intentionally targeting it. That way, it essentially guaranteed he’d take the beast out of commission.

As for the meat, it was travel rations. The Worldeaters looked a bit weird, but their meat was absolutely delicious. Not only that, but it was chock-full of energy since the Beast Kings spent most of their time siphoning energy from Nexus Veins. It was a perfect ingredient for dealing with **[Adamance of Eoz]**, even if it lacked the further refinement of a professional chef.

The two set out just a minute later, rushing toward a nearby cave they had scouted out before. Vai reluctantly covered the entrance with mud while Zac sat down to properly heal his wounds with **[Surging Vitality]**. His body released creaking sounds as his bones were set and mended, and he eventually released a shuddering breath a few minutes later.

He still wasn’t in perfect condition, but it was close enough. The Healing Pill he ate earlier would finish the job over the next couple of hours. Vai had sat down to recuperate as well, and it looked it would be a while longer for her. It gave Zac some time, and he thoughtfully turned his attention toward a node in his head.

Over the past month, he’d fought throngs of Peak E-grade Beasts and even some Beast Kings. His next node had long

since reached the threshold, and there was more than enough energy left from the previous battle to finish the job. At the same time, he was in a weakened state from his berserker skill.

Zac hesitated for another minute until he made a decision.

“We’ll leave in an hour instead,” Zac eventually said, prompting a somewhat surprised Vai to nod.

The original idea was to leave after half an hour, but Zac needed more time if he was to break open another node. He patiently waited another fifty minutes to let the sense of weakness leave his body before he erected the layers of Mental Barriers around the node in his head. From there, he started infusing more and more of his Kill Energy, until the node finally burst open.

The air around him shifted for a moment as **[Stone of Hope]** activated, averting a good half of the damage. From there, the rest was dealt with by his layered defenses, leaving Zac only with a splitting headache and some minor damage to the pathways. Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes, and he found Vai looking at him with a gaping mouth.

“You- You are not a Half-Step warrior?” Vai blurted. “But you used a D-grade talisman. No, before that. You forcibly opened a node? What? Wha-”

“You know, it’s generally considered impolite to dig into the details of the cultivation of others,” Zac smiled as he ate a Soulmending Pill.

“No, I’m... I-“ Vai stuttered, looking like her brain had short-circuited trying to reconcile his strength and previous actions with a Late E-grade warrior.

The act of activating a D-grade talisman alone was almost unheard of in the E-grade. Even Zac wouldn’t have been able to accomplish that if a single one of his advantages were missing - using Void Energy for **[Arcadia’s Judgement]**, or having extra stores of energy thanks to his Draugr side, for example. Even now, he was pushing it.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Zac said as he redrew the broken pathways around the node.

Even if the damage wasn't too bad, Zac knew he wouldn't be able to exert more than half of his maximum strength for a few days until his newly-opened node had stabilized. It was a calculated risk. He and Vai had traversed this dour Mystic Realm for over two weeks now, and he was almost certain no lethal threats were hiding in the dark. As long as they made use of Vai's scouting bowl, they should be able to reach the waystation just fine.

It looked like a thousand questions were swirling in Vai's head, even more than after finding out he'd hid his identity. But she eventually managed to restrain her curiosity with a shuddering breath, and instead looked at Zac with worry. "You're really fine? I hear forcibly opening nodes is quite dangerous, especially the last ones."

"I'm used to it," Zac shrugged as he stood up. "Let's go to the nearest Waystation."

Vai slowly nodded, and they set out a moment later. There was still an oppressive silence shrouding the surrounding forest, an unsurprising effect in the wake of the powerful fluctuations from his battle. Of course, sooner or later some of the starving beasts nearby would take the risk and investigate the smell of blood, which would probably be the start of a stampede.

Zac and Vai would thankfully be long gone by then as they made their way through the forest – with Zac running while carrying Vai in a vine seat by his side, guiding him and keeping watch for threats. It was a bit reminiscent of a similar situation way back, and it filled Zac with mixed emotions. However, Vai wasn't Leviala, and he believed he could trust Vai even when push came to shove.

By the time the two reached the Waystation a few days later, Zac was already back to almost perfect condition. It was perfect timing, as there was still the small chance of invaders hiding in there, even if the two still hadn't seen any indications that would support that theory.

Thankfully, they found the station deserted, though there were signs that someone had passed through the area not too long ago – steps that had kicked up a thin layer of dust. The two

made a proper sweep of the compound, but there were no real indications if it had been invaders or templars who had left the imprints.

But seeing as the failing maintenance arrays hadn't been reset for some reason, Vai suspected the former. The fact that the dust wasn't being swept likely meant the base was running low on power. Templars would likely have added a set of crystals to make sure the waystation kept functioning until someone could come and investigate why the base didn't draw energy from the Mystic Realm. Luckily, the mapper was in working order, at least.

"I don't recognize this at all compared to the last one we looked at. Can you tell where we are?" Zac eventually asked, prompting the researcher to take out one of her tomes.

"We seem to be at the edge of the cortex's domain," Vai said after studying the map for a minute. "We have skipped over five layers, it looks like. But that isn't the real problem. We might be stuck here for a while..."

"What's going on?"

"Our region has been cut off by the cortex failing," Vai said as she pointed at a large section of dark circles. "And there doesn't seem to be an easy way to double back. The realms might reconnect after the area calms down in a month or two, but it might not. It depends on how far the Mystic Realms have been moved, and I don't have any way to measure that."

"So there's no way out?"

"Not the way we came," Vai said with a shake of her head, looking a bit fearful. "We would have to keep traveling and explore the map for alternative routes, hoping infiltrators haven't ruined those paths as well. And I'm not confident I can calculate the correct path with all these unstable factors taking place... I..."

"Well, I'm not really heading out," Zac shrugged. "So that's not a problem."

"What?" Vai blurted. "No, we need to get out, or at least find a captain! These are the inner parts of the Void Star - this place

is extremely dangerous! You're strong, but there are Late-Stage Beast Kings and terrifying environments."

Zac was a bit conflicted as he looked at the frazzled researcher, not sure what the best solution was. Even if there were dangers, he was still adamant about following the signal of the Left Imperial Palace. Bringing Vai along would be for the best as well. Not only did she have that superpowered defensive bubble, but she was also his best bet of getting out in one piece.

But he also felt he was asking a bit much of her by dragging her along on this dangerous mission.

Should he try to bring her out first? But according to her, it was quite a journey, and it might even take him in the wrong direction. There was no guarantee he'd be able to make his way back to the pulse with how these Mystic Realms shifted. The same was true if he managed to hand her over to some elite squad – they wouldn't just let him run off on his own.

"Alright, here's the deal," Zac eventually said. "I can't leave this place just yet, and I can't guarantee I'll be heading in the direction we need to get out of here."

"What?" Vai said with confusion written all over her face.

"Why not?"

"Like I said earlier, I need to find something," Zac explained.

"It's extremely important."

"Something in the inner regions of the Void Star?" Vai slowly muttered as she gave Zac a deep gaze. "Do you know where it is? I can check the map..."

"I don't," Zac interjected. "That's why it's dangerous. You are welcome to follow me if you want, and I will do my best to keep you safe. But it might be a better idea for you to stay here and wait for rescue."

"That's crazy! Even if you can survive the environment, how would you even find it?" Vai said as she looked at Zac like he was a madman.

"Don't worry, I have my methods," Zac said.

Vai slowly calmed down, and she thoughtfully looked at Zac until she finally spoke again. “Will you taking this thing harm the Void Gate?”

“I don’t think so?” Zac said after some thought. “If anything, me removing it from this place will probably save the life of anyone stumbling onto it.”

“Alright, I’m coming with you, and then we’ll leave together,” Vai nodded with a determined expression.

“You don’t have to force yourself,” Zac said. “Staying here-“
“Those invaders might appear at any moment,” Vai countered. “I’m not safe here either. Besides, how would you even get where you want without me?”

“What do you mean? I’ll just use the gates?” Zac said with confusion.

“The token of yours will only provide limited access to a small number of waystations,” Vai said with a roll of her eyes. “Our pathways might not normally be locked, but what about now, when there are invaders in here? You might find yourself suddenly stuck in the depths of the Void Star, trapped for years.”

“I could borrow-“ Zac muttered as he looked at Vai’s token.

“Doesn’t work,” Vai interjected. “They are marked with blood.”

“Alright, I guess I’ll be depending on you, then,” Zac said with a weak smile as he turned off the mapper.

“Can you tell me what you’re looking for?” Vai asked as they walked toward the gates.

Zac hesitated a bit before answering. “I can’t tell you exactly what it is, it’s dangerous. But I have a quest to gather something.”

“Did you get the quest here?” Vai asked.

“No,” Zac lied. “But I found one part on the way.”

“You did?” Vai muttered with confusion before. “When... Hako Lake! The breach!”

Zac was impressed by how quickly the researcher put two and two together. He was about to compliment her, but Zac almost stumbled when he saw an extremely indignant expression on her face. Zac wryly smiled, suddenly remembering the bite marks that Vai had suffered. He had tried his best to shield her, but with billions of critters, some were bound to pass through the net.

“I didn’t know taking that thing would conjure an insect tide,” Zac coughed. “Next time, we’ll be prepared.”

“Alright,” Vai muttered, obviously still holding onto a ball of complaints as she stepped over to the control console. “Which tunnel?”

Zac thought back to the map earlier, which had indicated this waystation had access to two different Mystic Realms, each one leading further into the Void Star.

“Uh, can you open both? That way I’ll step through and check it out,” Zac asked.

“That’s why you looked so weird every time we entered a new Mystic Realm!” Vai exclaimed. “You always stopped and looked like you had stomach pains.”

“Well,” Zac grimaced, realizing he hadn’t been quite as circumspect as he’d thought.

A moment later, two of the gates activated, showing almost identical rooms on the other side. Just from his vantage, Zac couldn’t feel whether one was better than the other.

Zac picked the one on the left first and stepped through, and a pulse of confirmation immediately told him that this realm was closer to his target than the other. He visited the other one as well, where a second pulse greeted him. However, this one was even weaker than the shrouded Mystic Realm, meaning it was even further away.

“This one,” Zac said, pointing to the left gate as he stepped back to where a curious Vai waited for him.

The researcher quickly nodded and closed the second gate before the two passed through. The new realm didn’t seem to have any special attunement, but its energy was quite dense – a

clear middle D-grade realm at that. There was also no sign of anyone having visited this waystation for quite some time, meaning no squads had pushed this deep as far as they could see.

“This one might be a bit dangerous,” Zac muttered as he felt the dense energies swirl around them. “Do you have any notes on these places?”

“I don’t have a complete tally of all the Mystic Realms in this place,” Vai said with a shake of her head. “The inner regions are normally only visited by the elites. I just have some books about interesting phenomena in various realms, places worth of study.”

Zac nodded before taking out his attention-averting cowl.

“Here, wear this. It’ll hopefully make any beasts ignore you.”

“What about you?” Vai asked with worry.

“I’ll be fine. I’m not so easily killed,” Zac smiled. “Besides, I have more similar treasures.”

It was true, his bracer had a similar function, which had allowed him to pass through the Coral Forest in the Twilight Ocean almost unimpeded. The only beasts that had bothered him were those who attacked him out of malice, while most didn’t care about a small creature that didn’t emit any spirituality or energy.

The two left the Waystation a while later and found themselves at the edge of an odd jungle that stretched as far as the eye could see. There were no suns in the sky, but they could actually see thousands of smaller orbs of green light on top of some of the tree crowns. In contrast to the previous Mystic Realm, it was almost blindingly bright, though the atmosphere wasn’t sweltering.

The shimmering orbs didn’t seem to radiate heat, and instead contained massive amounts of nature-attuned energies that created a refreshing atmosphere that had to be perfect for a flourishing jungle.

“It’s a primal garden,” Vai whispered with wide eyes. “This place is dangerous, it’s full of-“

A roar so powerful that it kicked up a literal storm in the area interrupted Vai's warning. Even Zac's hair stood on end when he felt the enormous power contained in the howl. There was no way it came from an early D-grade Beast unless it had an exceedingly powerful bloodline. Unless the roar was all bluster, Zac definitely wasn't confident in taking it on.

But that small hope was soon dashed. Something else in the jungle had been angered by the Beast King's outburst, and a piercing screech answered the roar, this one containing just as much power. The two soundwaves clashing even kicked up a storm, and Zac wondered if were about to witness an apocalyptic battle between two monstrous Beast Kings.

"Let me guess," Zac sighed. "It's full of Beast Kings?"

Chapter 885: Primal Garden

“A primal garden? What’s that?” Zac asked with a low volume as he looked around for threats.

“The most valuable plants can rarely be manually cultivated,” Vai whispered. “There is something about domestication that kills the inherent spirituality of plants. Still, we can’t just rely on chance encounters to provide for our needs. So, factions set up these kinds of wild worlds that are mostly untouched. We only modify the environment slightly to suit certain types of plants, and then leave them alone between harvests.”

“What about the beasts?” Zac asked.

“You should know there is a symbiotic relationship between beasts and Natural Treasures,” Vai explained. “They’re needed to protect and nurture the plants.”

“So they have their domains?” Zac slowly said. “Then we should be fine as long as we keep away from their lairs and the treasures they guard.”

“I- I guess?” Vai said as she fearfully looked at the vast forest. “Unless there has been a breach to destabilize the power equilibrium in the garden.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Zac said as he formed a vine chair. “Keep a lookout.”

The two set out, but they didn’t get any further than a few hundred meters before Zac stopped again. It wasn’t because he’d sensed any dangers or another pulse from the Left Imperial Palace, but rather a surprising shudder from the spatial tube on his back. Or rather, the wooden ring that he’d attached to it.

For some reason, the still germinating Heavenrender Seed had reacted to something around them.

“What’s wrong?” Vai whispered, but Zac didn’t immediately answer as he tried to get a sense of the situation through [**Link of Demeter**], his plant-taming skill.

“Vivi, what is it?” Zac asked, which prompted two of the free vines to point toward a certain tree.

It was one of the plants that had a shimmering green orb atop its tree crown, or rather the enormous flower it had in place of branches.

“Haro wants these trees?” Zac mused thoughtfully as he went over what Vai just said. Perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence these odd sun trees grew in this place. “What are these things?”

“Ah?” Vai said as she looked at the glowing orb on top of the plant. “They are called [**Repeater Rafflesia**]. They extract a lot of energy from the soil and air to form those nature-attuned beacons. They can help speed up the growth of Natural Treasures.”

“Can they be planted in a Worldring?” Zac asked.

“Well,” Vai hesitated. “Beast Pouches and Worldrings slowly draw energy from their surroundings with their Gathering Arrays. Most of it is used to nurture the beast or plants inside, while some is set aside in case you visit energy-starved areas.”

“Sure,” Zac nodded.

This wasn’t any news – it was one of the main differences between a Spatial Ring and tools like Worldrings, with the other one being that space was stable enough to house living beings. Worldrings demanded a constant supply of energy. Depending on what and how much you’d planted inside, the Gathering Arrays might not suffice.

From there, you’d either have to get a higher-quality ring that could provide a better environment, or you’d have to supply a supplemental source of energy like Beast Cores and crystals. Luckily for him, the Worldring that Heda had gifted him was quite high-quality, to the point that it would be able to accommodate Haro well into the D-grade.

Of course, the more energy Haro got, the quicker Haro would grow, so Zac was constantly supplying the Heavenrender seed

with Beast Cores. Apart from that, the main body of Vivi had moved into the Worldring, though Zac still kept the tube on his back. He'd tried wearing the wooden band on his hand, but he was simply more used to having the vines coming from his back since getting [**Love's Bond**].

"The process of these trees is quite energy-demanding – without them, this Mystic Realm would most likely be a whole tier higher," Vai explained. "They would put demand a lot of energy, so it would be very expensive to put these kinds of measures inside a Worldring."

"Will the beasts get mad if I take a few of these things?" Zac mused as looked into the depths of the jungle.

"You want to steal our repeaters as well?" Vai exclaimed with wide eyes.

"Steal? I'm just plucking a couple of flowers," Zac coughed. "As long as the beasts are okay with it?"

"I- Ah... Maybe not? The Beast Kings should understand these plants help their treasures grow," Vai hesitated.

"Oh well," Zac muttered as he walked away, though his eyes never left the tree.

The two didn't dare delve deeper into the jungle and instead opted to stay close to the edge of the Mystic Realm. It would cost them a few days extra, but it was better than pathing through wilderness controlled by Middle Stage Beast Kings and their underlings. Thankfully, there was actually a small trench that ran along the edge of the jungle, a manmade path at that.

It was most likely created for the same purpose as they used it for - for the farmers to move between regions safely.

According to Vai, there should be some sort of hidden tunnel system as well, but they couldn't find the entrance. Even if they did, they wouldn't dare use them - those kinds of paths were sometimes discovered by the Beast Kings and turned into dangerous traps. And with this place abandoned for at least a couple of years, that risk had only increased.

Like this, their travels went without issue, though Zac's gaze often turned in the direction of the sprawling forest and the riches it contained. If he only could find an opportunity to do some harvesting of his own. And finally, after two days of uneventful travel, an opportunity presented itself. A tearing sound echoed out through the realm before the jungle was flooded with foreign energies.

"It's a breach! It has to be!" Vai exclaimed as the two climbed up to the edge of the trench.

Zac nodded in agreement. Even if they didn't see physically the spatial anomaly because of a haze that covered most of the jungle, there was no mistaking the energy signatures in the distance. It felt just like the breaches they had encountered themselves, except this one might be even more dangerous. His normal vision might not be able to see the breach, but turning on [**Cosmic Gaze**] almost blinded him from all the energies the breach had unleashed.

Whatever world was on the other side, it might be of an even higher grade than this primal garden. And it wasn't uninhabited either – it only took a few seconds before they could both feel and hear enormous clashes between Beast Kings. It was no doubt the native ruler and its subordinates who fought against the invaders.

"Do you think this means the Natural Treasures are unguarded?" Zac muttered as they looked on.

"No! You can't!" Vai exclaimed while scowling at Zac with an indignant look, just like when they met the first time. "E-Even if they are, those are private. I- I'll tell on you!"

"Alright, alright," Zac smiled before he flashed away.

The next moment, he appeared in front of one of the [**Repeater Rafflesia**] at the edge of the jungle. With a grunt, he started pulling with everything he got while Vivi gleefully helped. At first, nothing happened, but eventually, there was a deep groan as the powerful roots were forcibly dislodged from the soil.

The next moment the whole tree was gone, thrown into his Worldring where Vivi arranged for it to be planted a few hundred meters away from Haro. Unfortunately, the huge glowing orb above the flower had destabilized and dispersed the moment the tree was uprooted, but it looked like it had already started forming a new one the moment it appeared in the pocket world.

“What are you-!” Vai shrieked as she fearfully looked around.

“They have their hands full. I can’t take the treasure, but I should at least be able to borrow a few of these things, right? You have so many, and they’re not listed strategic resources,” Zac grunted before he uprooted two more of the supersized flowers.

He was about to snatch a fourth one, but an exceedingly powerful mental wave suddenly passed through the area, making Zac look up with alarm. It looked like the king of the region kept a watchful eye over its domain even while fighting against the breach. The powerful ripple also confirmed that it was a Middle Stage Beast King, and not a weak one.

“We’re done for,” Vai cried as she glared at Zac with tears pooling in her eyes. “You will get us killed.”

“Don’t worry, this is quintessential adventuring,” Zac laughed as he picked up Vai before running for his life. “Keep watch of the surroundings.”

Of course, it wasn’t blind greed that prompted him to uproot the trees. Over the past hours, he’d gotten a decent grasp of the situation in the forest thanks to **[Forester’s Constitution]** and ample experience in the wilderness. Judging by what he’d seen, there was a good chance the local emperor would fall from this invasion. The fight was already extremely intense judging by the distant eruptions, and the breach showed no indication it was about to close.

Even if the local Beast King won, they’d be too busy licking their wounds and protecting their domain to pursue him and Vai – provided the beast even could find them. By the time the situation stabilized, he and Vai would be long gone. Still, that knowledge didn’t do much to help mollify his skittish guide.

“You know, cultivation is to grasp every opportunity that comes your way,” Zac smiled as he glanced in her direction. “The moment you let fear and hesitation take control of you, it’s game over.”

“You seem to have a lot of philosophical beliefs that are ultimately excuses to justify wanton looting,” Vai said with a roll of her eyes.

“Well, that’s what cultivation is,” Zac laughed. “Some go at it alone, while others join factions to improve their looting abilities.”

“I don’t know about that,” Vai muttered, but she didn’t press the issue any further.

In total, the two spent twelve days in the primal garden because of a bout of bad luck. First, they encountered a shockingly large rhinoceros that for some reason stood and watched the shimmering edge of the Mystic Realm. To pass it, they would either have to walk below its fifty-meter-wide head or head deep into the jungle.

Ultimately, they backed away and built another mud hut, in which they stayed for three full days. Finally, the Beast King lumbered away toward the depths of the realm, opening up the path again. The second delay appeared when they reached the next waystation. It turned out that the lone pathway connected to the station didn’t lead them closer to the Left Imperial Seal, forcing them to search for another station.

Finally, they reached their destination after circling almost two-thirds of the realm. If they had chosen right instead of left upon arriving in the primal garden, they would have saved more than a week. Still, that didn’t dampen Zac’s excitement upon feeling the mysterious pulse grow noticeably stronger upon stepping into the next world.

Excitement gradually turned to confusion upon attempting to exit the waystation. The reinforced tunnel just kept going and going. Finally, they saw the end of the path; an opening through which they could see a beautiful starry sky. And nothing else. This was an odd one, and Zac was a bit stumped as they stopped at the exit of the base.

The tunnel simply ended at a seemingly bottomless chasm. It wasn't that they were far up on a mountainside either - there simply wasn't any ground. It was just an almost sheer mountain wall that stretched as far as he could see in every direction. Was it a floating mountain? If so, just how big was this place? And how were they supposed to find the next waystation?

"I recognize this place! This is the Ramsi Wall, it's extremely famous! I can't believe we're here, it shouldn't be accessible, this is-" Vai exclaimed with excitement before her expression turned hesitant.

"What's wrong?" Zac frowned. "Are we stuck?"

"Ah, that's... No, it's not that. We should be fine," Vai hesitated. "You taught me that one couldn't hesitate, that one had to grasp opportunities..."

"I did," Zac nodded.

"I- well," Vai said with a blush on her face. "There is a unique type of plant here - [**Stargazer Camelias**]. They can help one get in tune with the cosmos, to deepen one's understanding of space. If I could get just one, ah, just two... I could perhaps solve some matters that have bothered me over the past centuries. It-It's not for me. It's only for research!"

"Only for research," Zac nodded with a small smile. "Well, let's go."

Four days later, Zac once more found himself fighting off a pack of infuriated flying marsupials as Vai picked her sixth [**Stargazer Camelia**] while blushing from excitement rather than embarrassment. He was currently hanging from the sheer cliff wall, using Vivi to move him about and block the Peak E-grade beasts that tried to get to the researcher.

In fact, this was how they had traversed the wall over the past week since there was simply no better method available. The creatures that lived inside the complex cave system of this enormous cliff weren't joking around, and he had been forced to use [**Arcadian Crusade**] two times already. Scaling the

wall was actually safer, even if a drop would mean you would keep falling until you dropped into the Void.

Vai's newfound love for looting had cost them a couple of days and left Zac with a new set of scars. Still, Zac didn't mind. Helping Vai gather some resources on the way was the least he could do in return for all the help she provided. Besides, with the researcher getting into the spirit of things, it would get easier for Zac to snatch any interesting items he found while they searched for the next piece of the seal.

After all, this was the inner region of the Void Star, where the Void Gate kept their best things. There were bound to be all kinds of treasures in this place.

For example, the flowers weren't the only valuable thing in this place. The Ramsi Wall was a cultivation haven that was only accessible for a short stint once every few centuries. The explosion of the Cortex must have pushed it into place, giving the two exclusive access. Normally, it would cost the Hegemons of the Void Gate quite a few Contribution Points to access this place and ponder on the Dao of Space.

Vai worked with practiced ease, nimbly cutting off the stem before placing the flower in a vat that she filled with space-infused water. A moment later, the water had frozen, sealing the medicinal efficacy within. The flower looked quite mesmerizing while ensconced in ice, and there wasn't any question about where the name came from.

The large flower really resembled Abby's eye. Its black-and-blue petals formed a spiraled pattern that looked like a nebula, and in its center was a pitch-black bulb that represented the black hole. It was the bulb that contained the medicinal efficacy, according to Vai.

"I got it," Vai said with a wide smile, her hesitance over pilfering the treasures of the mystic realm long forgotten.

"I think we need to leave this whole region if we want to find more of them, do you want to-" Zac said, but he froze as he turned his gaze toward the endless expanse.

“A vortex is about to open!” Vai exclaimed with a mix of elation and fear. “We need to get away from the open!”

The vortex in this instance was a recurring weakness in the spatial barriers of this realm, and why the Ramsi Wall was considered a cultivation haven. For some reason, it always released a meteor shower packed with spatial energies. It was the reason the camelia could grow in this place at all, and the dense energies essentially turned the whole realm into something greater than a peak-quality cultivation chamber for a while.

However, that burst of ambient energy also came with a melee between native beasts as they fought for the falling debris. Even powerful Beast Kings would come out from their caves, and the two needed to be gone before that. Luckily, they hadn’t forgotten their main purpose, and they had continuously moved toward the next waystation following markings that had been left behind on the wall.

It still took them half a day to reach the tunnel, and Zac finally breathed out when they were safe behind the barrier. By this point, the vortex had almost completely formed and covered half the sky, and the majestic scene took his breath away even after having seen marvels like the Twilight Ascent and the Void Star.

“It’s starting,” Zac muttered.

“Could we stay and watch for a little while?” Vai asked with puppy-like eyes. “It might be risky to open the gates right now in either case, and these waystations should have special cultivation chambers. We should be able-”

“Sure,” Zac smiled, and the two quickly found one of the hidden cultivation caves that had a different set of arrays than the entrance. “I’m curious what a rare opportunity of the Void Gate looks like.”

Chapter 601: Next Step

Zac looked up at the false sky illuminated by the enormous lunar lights. The vaulted dome was crisscrossed with Memorysteel beams that connected to the huge wall next to them. The sky looked so peaceful. It was hard to believe that eldritch horrors waited just beyond the edge of the Mystic Realm.

Part of him only wanted to leave this place far behind after barely surviving his encounter with the Collector and its horrifying tentacles, but Zac knew he couldn't back down now. It was just not a matter of the System and its punishing quest chain either, even if it didn't leave him much choice but to delve deeper into the bellows of this space-twisted world.

Everything was on the line now. Earth's future hung in the balance. Void's Disciple and Inevitability were somewhere in the depths of this realm, looking for the Dimensional Seed. Finding them and cutting the last Karmic Threads to Earth was far more important than some quest rewards or the possibility of treasures left in the heart of this Technocrat base.

But there was still so much he didn't know. They were still in the outer band of the research base, yet he had almost gotten himself killed a few times over. And according to his reluctant guide, the inner regions were even more dangerous.

"When is the next time the base will enter maintenance mode or whatever?" Zac asked after some thought, even if he didn't hold out much hope for such an easy solution.

"Not for a few years at least, unless something changes due to the dimensional treasure," Leviala Cartava said, confirming Zac's guess. "I guess that's why the Lunar Tribe has been working so hard to find an alternative route."

Zac nodded. The Lunar Tribe's lupine appearances belied a surprising technological know-how and planning. From the

looks of it, they had accomplished things that eclipsed the other trapped factions, like Leviaala's Clan Cartava. Thanks to that, they had managed to find all kinds of pathways in this steel trap. Hidden pathways that were now in his possession now that he had their mapper.

Zac made his decision, causing one of the two quest prompts in front of him to disappear. Left was the path he'd chosen – the path leading toward 'Lab 16'.

[Man Versus Machine (Training (4/9)): Enter "Inner Lab 16" before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of one random skill and 4 levels. Choosing second option will disqualify trainee from highest reward tier.]

Zac didn't immediately set out though, but rather stayed and rested with the others. There was no timer for this quest, and he planned on taking his people back to the glasshouse before setting out again. They were in a wretched state after first getting kidnapped by the Lunar Tribe and then hunted down by the Collector. It would be suicide to send them home by themselves, with the Lunar Wolves running around. Besides, he needed to recuperate as well, and there were some matters that needed to be dealt with before he set off toward the inner region of the research base.

The group rested for another two hours, and even Leviaala could walk by herself by that point. They didn't enter the forest though out of fear of running into a wolf pack. They didn't walk along the wall either, as the walls sometimes malfunctioned, according to Leviaala. They could suddenly launch an attack out of nowhere.

That was why they traveled just at the edge of the forest just like the werewolves did, taking the long route back.

"We crossed parts of the forest to save some time," Jonas Marshall ventured, clearly anxious to get back. "The

werewolves burned some sort of herb with an acrid smell as we moved. I think it was a beast deterrent.”

“This stuff?” Zac asked after rummaging about in one of the backpacks he had looted.

“Exactly.” Jonas nodded.

“We’ll still go around,” Zac muttered. “I don’t want to risk running into the wolf pack inside again. I’m not sure I can protect you all if these things don’t work.”

“Again?” Leviala asked with surprise, turning toward Zac. “You fought the lunar wolves?”

“Yeah.” Zac nodded as he stowed away the herbs. “They’re pretty tough; they only relented after I killed their alphas.”

Leviala looked at Zac for a few seconds, her mouth forming words but no sounds coming out. She eventually just released a resigned sigh and turned away, not prying into the subject any longer. Zac smiled a bit before he turned toward the scouts. It wasn’t just a random comment of his, but rather a conscious decision to tell Leviala.

He needed to build up an image of strength in her mind, which would hopefully result in easier negotiations with the elders of the Cartava Clan down the road. Meanwhile, there were some other things Zac wanted to know.

“Do you know why the werewolves kidnapped you?” Zac asked.

“They took us because they wanted intelligence on how to get out of this place. Apparently, they had visited our biospheres multiple times before, but there were no spatial anomalies back then. They thought we had some sort of tool or technology to open a passage,” Jonas added. “I think their plan was to steal that machine and then take it to their town. They didn’t believe us when we said that was impossible.”

Zac frowned a bit, but he didn’t comment on it. Their theory was wrong, but not overly so. Zac guessed that it was the System that cracked open the pathways during the integration. Before, the pathways had been blocked or hidden, either

because of the Tsarun Clan or the Dimensional Seed wanting to protect itself.

It was a problem if the werewolves thought that he or the other leaders of his coalition carried a teleporter on their person though. That meant they might get in the way during the battle for the Dimensional Seed.

Zac estimated it would take up to a day before they would reach the glasshouse since his flying treasure wouldn't work inside Mystic Realms. This wasn't a failing of his leaf, but rather how E-Grade flying treasures were created. They generally were dependant on the energy in the ground, which was why Zac's could fly no higher than a few hundred meters into the air.

These methods rarely worked in Mystic Realms because they didn't have World Cores to rely on, and only D-Grade flying treasures who were completely powered by themselves or the user could fly freely. There were apparently specially made E-Grade flying treasures that would work in Mystic Realms as well, but that wasn't something Zac had access to right now.

Moving through an empty forest at least allowed him to learn more about the Research Base, so he walked next to Leviala most of the time exchanging information about Earth or the latest situation in the Zecia sector for intelligence on the Mystic Realm. He quickly gained a better understanding of the factions and their locations, and he found that the Cartava clan was surprisingly close to his own entrance.

However, their domiciles were on the other side of the Outer Band, making it almost impossible to travel between their bases. The natives split the base into four sectors, each formed like a ring around the core of the base. First was the Outer Rim where Zac's people appeared, and the next ring was called the Living Layer.

All the factions lived in this layer since the energy density there was better than the outer rim, while simultaneously not being actively controlled by the Administrator. These settlements sprawled out over Biospheres like those Zac had set up his base in, to Laboratories and emptied warehouses.

Next was the inner layer, where a lot of the core structures of the Research base were located, including the lab that Zac needed to reach for his quest. This layer was only accessible during the specific windows Leviala mentioned before.

Finally, there was the core. Leviala wasn't actually sure what went on there, though she might have been holding back.

She said that most natives believed the core to be the residential areas of the Builders, and perhaps where the computers housing The Administrator was located. There were also rumors of peak resources being kept there for the most precious experiments, resources that not even the Tsarun Clan had managed to get their hands on. Of course, now it was also the home of the Dimensional Seed.

The newfound knowledge made Zac a bit hesitant about whether he had done the right thing to not pass through the wasteland. In the opposite direction of the Wasteland was the True Sky Faction and the New World Government, with the government's starting position being very similar to his own.

Zac guessed that either the Dominators or the Church of Everlasting Dao should be somewhere close to the Lunar Clan, with the other faction being close to the Gemlings. Such a spread definitely didn't feel random, but rather something the System had orchestrated when integrating this Mystic Realm. Perhaps that was even the reason Leandra's Clan abandoned this place; it had been discovered by the System, and continuing to perform experiments would bring that terrifying lightning down on their heads.

He also started to get a better understanding of the Tsarun-clan's goals. They had captured Leviala's clan for their ancestor's ability to harness Time. The Tsarun Patriarch still hadn't reached the end of his lifespan from what Zac had heard, but he wasn't exactly young either. If he could extract time out of the Cartava Clan's eyes he might be able to increase his lifespan a few times over, allowing him to keep making breakthroughs.

The gemlings on the opposite sides were probably brought in for their ability to make money. They were a weird golemlike clan from Leviala's explanations, and their bloodline was

pretty odd. They were able to cut off parts of their souls and imbue it into gems they grew on their bodies, and then use those gems as cores for Spirit Tools.

This practice almost guaranteed that the Spirit Tool would have a great spirituality, which increased their value more than tenfold. The only issue was the bloodline among these gemlings was extremely weak, and they needed a lot of assistance to activate their heritage. But as long as the Tsarun Clan managed to purify their bloodlines, then they would be able to essentially farm those precious crystals and make a fortune.

The Titans were probably brought for their prowess, and cultivating warriors with that bloodline would bolster their armies. As for the Lunar Clan, he wasn't as sure, but perhaps it was because of their lunar ability. Their Leader, Cervantes, was almost immortal according to Leviala, and he could freely swap back and forth between moonlight and flesh. Not even imbuing attacks with Dao had helped bring him down during the wars over the past two thousand years, and he was generally considered the most powerful warrior in the Mystic Realm.

As for the True Sky Faction, it wasn't actually a unique race at all. The Tsarun clan had apparently captured thousands of people with various bloodlines, probably in search of something valuable. These people banded together after the Cataclysm, led by a few cultivators who all carried unique powerful bloodlines.

But the fact that the faction had so many different backgrounds had resulted in the dilution of any inherent bloodlines. On the flip-side that had resulted in them having by far the most Datamancers of the four factions, and they were usually the ones who hosted the various trade meetings when the barriers were lifted.

That was partly because they were the most populous faction though. Thanks to the large number of Datamancers they had managed to secure and take control of dozens of habitable sections in the second layer, essentially turning one side of the base into a small kingdom with a capital and multiple towns.

Even some people from the other three clans had decided to join the True Sky Factions over the years, though generally these people were outcasts of their factions for one reason or another.

The hours passed in this manner until Leviala suddenly stopped. Zac looked around in confusion, first thinking that some Lunar Wolves had appeared. However, Leviala rather walked toward the wall. The section looked the same as the sections that they had passed until now, but Zac understood that there probably was a hidden gate in this area.

“Is this the path to your clan?” Zac asked.

“One of them,” Leviala said. “I mentioned it before, but a bit further there is a proper gate, not a hidden service entrance like the ones we have used. That gate leads straight toward the inner sector, but our clan can be found within a few hours’ travel. This place is a hidden gate that we haven’t managed to unlock yet, but you seem to be able to walk unhindered in this base. I thought it was better to take an unknown route back in case more werewolves are lurking around.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Zac said as he started placing disks where Leviala indicated.

He had been struggling a bit about what to do with Leviala, but he eventually decided to send her back to allow her people to start preparations. There was a small risk that she would bring home intelligence on him that would be used to betray Port Atwood, but Zac felt that to be a slim risk. She had seen first-hand how he had dealt with the Werewolves and the Collector, and how freely his people could move through the base.

The Cartava Clan didn’t stand to gain anything by going against him, but they could benefit greatly by allying themselves with Port Atwood.

“What’s your next step?” Leviala finally asked as Zac’s preparations were nearing completion.

“I’m heading to the Inner Circle, following one of the maps I got,” Zac eventually said. “I need to find a way to the Core.”

“You would need a guide even if you have a map. The inner section presents its own challenges,” Leviala slowly said.

“What do you have in mind?” Zac asked with a small smile.

“How about we set a time and place to meet up? Perhaps at the edge of the Living Layer. The way there shouldn’t be too dangerous, but after that things might get complicated depending on what security measures we’ll encounter,” Leviala said.

Zac thought about it for a few seconds, but he eventually agreed. He was already planning on bringing Kenzie since his instincts told him he would need Jeeves’ assistance to get to the core, but bringing a native would bring a lot of knowledge to the table. They decided on a location to meet, and the time would be in two days. That would give Zac enough time to deal with everything back at the base and return.

“Be careful on your return. You never told me exactly how you got captured, but it seems a bit odd to me. Can you be sure that no one in your clan is working against you?” Zac said as he connected his tablet to the disks on the wall. “If things get out of hand you can always come to our side. We’re always happy to welcome new talent to our ranks.”

“No clan members would do something like working with the Lunar Clan at such an integral time,” Leviala muttered, though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was Zac.

“Step back,” Zac said as he turned to the scouts as he took out his axe.

“What are you-“ Leviala said with confusion, but she quickly realized what was going on.

Zac only shrugged in response before he activated the tablet. His axe might be useless in case the wall came alive, but it would work just fine in case there was an army of hostile combatants on the other side, no matter if it was Cartava clan members or werewolves. Thankfully only empty halls met his eyes as the gates slid open.

“I’ll see you in a few days then,” Leviala said. “I’ll bring a talented Datamancer to help out as well. Don’t worry, it’s my first-degree uncle and he’s our family’s chief technician.”

Zac nodded in understanding. When she talked about family in this case she wasn’t talking about the whole Cartava Clan that was comprised of almost 40 000 members. It was rather her actual family in the same sense that he would use the word. Having someone like her uncle there would no doubt help a lot, and the Datamancers seemed more akin to a crafting class than a combat-class, so Zac wasn’t worried even if he was E-Grade.

Leviala entered the next moment, her steps still a bit unsteady. However, Zac had gifted her a set of various pills, partly to help her get home in one piece, and partly as some sort of display of the good things that he could provide in return for the natives’ cooperation.

There was no point in dawdling around, and the six remaining people of the group immediately set out as the gate merged into the wall behind them.

They were almost half-way to the glass-house by this point, but only one hour passed before Zac sensed something. Zac instantly flashed in front of his group as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hands, but he relaxed when he saw Thea stepping out from behind a tree a hundred meters away. She turned into a gust the next moment, immediately appearing in front of them.

“Cousin!” Jonas shouted with excitement, but Thea only gave him a small nod of acknowledgment before she turned to Zac.

“You’ve been busy it looks like,” she said with a smile.

“Well, one thing led to another,” Zac sighed. “Are you here alone?”

“No, I went ahead of the group when one of your demonkin geomancers sensed some vibrations in the ground,” she explained. “We thought it was a wolf pack that had strayed from the center of the forest.”

“Well, let’s go back. I have made some discoveries,” Zac said.

“We still haven’t mapped out the whole area. We have found a gate, but it actually attacked us the moment we got close,” Thea said.

Zac frowned when he heard that the gate was actively attacking people. Didn’t Leviala know about it, or did she hide it?

“That’s okay. I’ve found everything we need for the next step of the plan,” Zac said.

“Just like that?” Thea asked before she looked him up and down with a wry smile. “It really seems that the demon is right about one thing. Let you run off for just one day and you’ll come back with massive gains.”

“I’d be more than happy to be the one staying behind next time,” Zac said with a shudder, thinking back to just how close it was for him to be turned into a part of a Void Creature’s bodysuit.

They started walking in the direction of the glasshouse, and Zac helped catch Thea up to speed.

“So we’re going to those labs next?” Thea asked.

“I’m thinking that’s the move,” Zac nodded. “We might find useful things there, and it’s close to the Core sector where the treasure is. If the barriers really disappear when the Dimensional Seed matures we’ll be in a good starting position.”

“We’ll need to make some preparations then,” Thea mused before she added with a low voice. “By the way, I met with your friend, Ogras. Something seems to be wrong with him. He didn’t come with us to this place, he’s holed up in your compound. He hid his face in a big robe as well.”

Zac frowned at that, and the image of shadows repairing the hole in Ogras’ chest resurged. The demon had seemed fine until now, but were there complications from his familiar fusing with him after all?

Chapter 886: Ramsi Wall

The event was about to start. There was no time to waste, so the two hurried into a side tunnel that Zac had never seen in other waystations. Zac could feel how the rock around them was infused with a mix of unique materials and arrays which both gave off an odd pressure – no doubt a measure to keep any tunneling beasts away. There was a line of reinforced doors, and Zac simply picked the closest one as it looked the fanciest.

“Only Core Disciples can use those...” Vai hesitated, but she quickly dropped the subject as Zac walked inside.

The cave was completely exposed to the outside, which allowed the two to get a full sense of the marvelous scene in the sky. Zac had never seen anything like the emerging swirl. It wasn't really a gate or a breach, it didn't show anything from the dimension on the other side. Instead, it looked like millions of crystals had been dragged together and turned into a miniature model of a galaxy.

Of course, even if it was a miniature, it covered half the sky, and Zac guessed it was hundreds of miles across. It still hadn't completely stabilized, but it was already exuding shocking amounts of energy and Dao. Most of it was space-related and thus not very useful to Zac, but **[Spiritual Void]** was happily gobbling up huge chunks of energy.

The beasts that made the Ramsi Wall their home had already come out in full force, and a glance out the side showed the cliffside was completely covered with E-grade beasts. Meanwhile, thousands of Beast Kings were already floating in the sky. Even then, there was an almost eerie silence as not a single roar was heard.

It was a bit nerve-wracking to see one beast after another emerge all around them. But apart from the beast-repelling

measures, the caves were also hidden by extremely potent illusion arrays. They hadn't seen any of these caves on the way into the waystation, and none of the beasts seemed interested in getting close to their area. Thanks to this, the two could enjoy the opportunity uninterrupted and with a perfect view.

This was the advantage of Core Disciples. The repelling measures were strongest in the middle, while the view of some of the caves was probably blocked by the massive Beat Kings in the sky.

No meteorite had been spat out from the anomaly so far, but Zac guessed it wasn't far away. Something was building toward a crescendo. At first, Zac mostly joined Vai out of curiosity, but the more he looked, the more he felt there was something about the still-growing swirl in the sky that called to him. It contained some sort of truth that resonated with him, but he couldn't quite figure it out.

"Hey, give me one of those flowers," Zac suddenly said.

"You want to gain a Spatial Dao?" Vai asked with confusion.

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "But I feel I can still gain something for my path from this place."

Vai nodded and took out a jar for Zac, and after some hesitation, she took out another one for herself.

"Just let the bud melt in your mouth like a candy," Vai said as she plucked the pit and sat down.

Zac followed suit, and a mysterious energy soon spread through his body, traveling along the spiritual pathways he'd created with [**Thousand Lights Avatar**]. Every moment, he felt himself growing closer to the mysteries of the cosmos, like he and the swirl in the sky were one and the same. Vai's eyes had completely glazed over as she looked at the vortex with rapt attention, and the two sat in silence as the sky opened itself like a flower.

For five minutes, nothing changed except for the building anticipation that was only fanned on by the [**Stargazer Camelia**]. But finally, with a ripple in the heart of the vortex, the first meteor broke into the Mystic Realm. It was like a

radiant beacon of pure unadulterated space, and its splendor was only amplified by the shimmering backdrop of the vortex.

After the first, the others followed, and soon thousands of shimmering meteorites made their way toward the Ramsi Wall. Most of them contained various facets of space, yet some of them stood out with their own insights. Who knew how long these fragments had traveled in the vast beyond, gradually being instilled with the underpinning truths of the Heavens.

Together, they formed a marvelous system unlike anything Zac had seen before.

Even if the scene wasn't as overwhelming as the solemn supremacy of Ultom, Zac was still filled with inspiration. Since his last epiphany, he had spent most of his brainpower trying to figure out the intricacies and practical details of the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. Even now, he wasn't sure how to actually train with his experimental method.

The problem wasn't that the direction from back then was wrong, but rather that he lacked in foundations.

There was too much about his bloodline he didn't understand - how it worked, what the concept of the Void encompassed. For example, he pictured his heart cultivation as an extension of **[Void Zone]**, where his heart would be shielded from outside manipulations. But he had no idea how **[Void Zone]** worked, apart from the fact it used Void Energy.

Without that understanding, how could he create a proper method? This was one of the main things he wanted to gain a better grasp on before finding the next piece of the seal. The next part of the seal might be able to provide him with the answers he lacked, but it might not. The stronger his foundations were, the greater the chance of success.

And now, he was finally making some progress. As the bud of the **[Stargazer Camelia]** melted in his mouth, it felt like his body was becoming one with the cosmos. His body was no longer mundane bone and muscles - it had become the starstuff that made up the firmament itself. Looking at the

swirling vortex in the sky, it felt like he was looking at the mysterious vortices in his cells.

Except they moved in the opposite direction.

There was a lesson there, and it wasn't the only one. The arms of the vortex followed mysterious laws as well – laws whose echoes he could see in the star system in his soul. It even felt like the falling meteors had created a unique formation that was constantly changing and evolving. Life and Death. Time and Space. They might belong to different peaks and embody different truths. But ultimately, they were part of the same tapestry; the Grand Dao.

But what about the Void?

Space and the Void. The Heavens and the Void. The Void was a mirror, an inversion. The Void between the layers of reality was bereft of actual spacetime, a bizarre expression of the absolute absence of the Dao of Space. In the same vein, the pure concept of Void, whose shadow one could see in the unique heritage of Ultom, was the absolute absence of the Heavens, of the Dao itself.

That was how **[Void Zone]** worked - it was an inversion of the Dao, of the building blocks of reality itself. But how could he make use of this concept? He could instinctively tell that there was absolutely no way to cultivate a Dao of the Void, it would be a paradox. At the same time, it wasn't just an intangible concept. His bloodline proved it was real.

The exact truth of the matter was too complex, too hard to grasp. They might very well be some of the unsolvable mysteries of the Universe. However, he did slowly gain an idea on how to swap out boundlessness with Void in the Body Tempering method. For now, he wouldn't need to understand everything. He should be able to use Void Energy as a crutch until he reached a higher stage where he had a better understanding of the universe.

Zac had long forgotten about the passage of time, forgotten about where he was and why he was here. There was only the swirl and the void inversion of the Sutras in his mind. But as the flickering meteors flew closer, so did Zac eventually return

to reality, where he found Vai intently staring at him from a few meters away.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I- ah, nothing,” Vai said with rosy cheeks. “It’s just, you emitted very interesting energy signatures just now. Did you have an epiphany?”

“Something like that,” Zac smiled. “What about you?”

“I did!” Vai said with undisguised excitement, her eyes almost sparkling like the falling meteorites. “After centuries of being at an impasse, I actually made progress with my Dao! It’s a miracle!”

“It’s the reward that comes with taking risks,” Zac nodded.

“You don’t understand,” Vai slowly said with a shake of her head as she looked at Zac with an inscrutable expression. “My momentum was gone and my path of cultivation was essentially severed. My fate had been decided. Even if I got to witness this place, I shouldn’t have been able to take such a big step forward. But since I met you, it almost seems like fate has become malleable and everything is in flux. I don’t understand how this is, I have never read of a phenomenon like this.”

“I mean, this is the first time you’ve left your cloister in quite a while, right?” Zac said. “It might just be the change of scenery.”

“If that was enough, we would have been sent to these places whether we liked it or not. If risking your life was enough, all these bottlenecked warriors wouldn’t be stuck for the rest of their lives,” Vai said with a shake of her head. “I tried everything. I risked my life more than once inside environments designed to force inspiration. Only after decades of failure did I finally give up and changed direction to research. Everything has its place, an order in the cosmos. But something about you is breaking convention.”

Zac was about to refute Vai’s word, but he stopped himself. Was there some truth to what he said? There was more than one sign that his unique constitution had allowed him to break

convention, giving him a unique type of freedom in the Multiverse. But could his condition even affect those around him, reforging their fates?

Was something like that even possible? Or was Vai simply overestimating his importance to her breakthrough? Even with what she said, it was still a fact that she had spent over a thousand years researching and shoring up her foundations. With the recent encounters, she might simply have managed to transform all that hard work into newfound momentum.

“Well, the universe is full of mysteries,” Zac eventually said. “If you think I’m helping your cultivation, then you can help me find some nice things in return.”

“You. Always thinking of treasure,” Vai huffed, but there was a small smile on her face.

The vortex eventually started to close, which was the starting signal for a gruesome melee on the outside. The meteorites had almost reached the wall by this point, and the beasts desperately fought each other to snatch them up.

“Your people cultivate in this chaos?” Zac asked with a shake of his head.

“Normally, the warriors would join in on the battle for those meteors. They are covered in mysterious markings containing secrets of space, and they can be refined into top-quality Spatial Tools,” Vai explained. “But those people are all Hegemons who can fly and grapple with the beasts outside.”

“Hm,” Zac hummed as he looked out, but the gristly scene quickly doused any desire to join the struggle for those stones.

There were hundreds of Beast Kings in just this sector of the wall, and they fought tens of thousands of meters out into the air. He couldn’t join in on the chaos without the ability to fly. Even if he risked it all with **[Earthstrider]**, the reward wasn’t worth it.

“Alright, let’s go,” Zac eventually said, and the two walked deeper into the waystation.

This base was just like the previous one – they had to walk over fifty kilometers through a tunnel until they finally

reached the base proper. This time they were luckier than in the primal garden, at least. There was a third waystation somewhere on the Rimsi Wall, but they didn't need to find it as the connected realm here led the two closer to the seal.

Like that, another month passed as the duo delved deeper into the secret worlds of the Void Gate, where every day was a challenge. If it wasn't the powerful Beast Kings that could pop up out of nowhere, it was the environment itself. One of the Mystic Realms contained such a bone-chilling cold that layers of ice continuously appeared over their bodies.

Stopping for even a second would mean death, and they constantly had to expend massive amounts of Cosmic Energy to warm their bodies. If the Void Gate hadn't had the foresight to stock the waystations with unique spare robes that provided excellent insulation, Zac wasn't sure they would have survived the journey.

But while there were risks, there were also rewards, and both Zac's and Vai's Spatial Rings soon held unique treasures that would no doubt cause some waves on the outside. They still hadn't found anything at the level of a unique supreme-quality treasure, but they were still extremely high-quality items that had limitless demand and no supply.

For instance, Zac got his hands on a mysterious block of milky-white ice that exuded such cold that Zac almost lost his hands stowing it away. He was even forced to store it in a separate Spatial Ring since it somehow spread its blistering cold in the subspace of the spatial treasure. It wasn't useful for his cultivation, but he figured it could be turned into a weapon if need be – if he threw out that thing in the middle of a hostile army, only a wasteland with frozen corpses would remain after a few seconds.

There were other gains than treasures as well. Thanks to the constant battles against peak E-grade beasts and Beast Kings, Zac had long since reached level 146. He was even getting pretty close to breaking open his next node. Not only that, but he was making great progress on his Evolutionary Stance.

The simulated threats of the Orom Wilderness ultimately couldn't compare to the real thing. Fighting with Beast Kings or swarms of powerful peak E-grade beasts was completely different than fighting against early E-grade monsters while limited to 1,000 attribute points. Back then, he had always known in the back of his head he could fall back on his Void Energy if needed, which led to the stakes being lower.

Here, he was thrown into real life-and-death battles whether he liked it or not, and it was at this edge that real progress was made. He had already caught up to his Inexorable Stance which inevitably had seen some more practice in the Orom World, and fighting these powerful beasts kept bringing new insights.

The more he fought, the more he also felt he was getting closer to an important answer. It was all connected; his Daos, his path, and his stances. The movements of his combat stances contained the essence of his Dao and his understanding – couldn't that be the foundation for his Cultivator's core?

The Apostate of Order had codified everything in existence into the fractals that you saw in every aspect of cultivation. Why couldn't he do the same with his techniques? If he could form an "Evolutionary Pattern" and an "Inexorable Pattern", and then interweave and fuse the two with his understanding of duality, wouldn't that be a core perfectly suited for him?

That idea was still in an early stage, but he really felt it was a worthwhile avenue to pursue. For the next part of the seal, he wanted to perfect at least the first layers of his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. But he had already put aside the final two to find a path to Hegemony, and this seemed like a good place to start.

Zac wasn't the only one who made progress. After two weeks and a few more near-death-encounters, Vai finally formed her first Dao Branch. It was only one branch, but it was still an extremely impressive feat. She succeeded in what most bottlenecked cultivators could only dream of – rebooting their cultivation after having lost their momentum. She had also formed a pure Spatial Dao Branch, a path that was known to be notoriously difficult to cultivate.

Even two weeks later she was completely giddy, and any final reservations of hers were completely gone. Since then, the two were like locusts, snatching anything they could get their hands of without getting themselves killed. Even Vivi was having a grand time feasting on all sorts of exotic animals. Zac was happy to see her so spirited – this was exactly what Heda had hoped for the plant to experience.

And all the while they got closer to the next piece of the puzzle. They had just reached a submerged Mystic Realm, and the pulse he had been welcomed with was almost as strong as the one he felt when they first broke into the Void Star.

Almost there.

Chapter 887: Tangle

The underwater world they found themselves in reminded Zac a bit of Twilight Ocean, but there were some poignant differences as well. For one, the water was actually water, rather than an odd fusion of Life and Death. Secondly, the place was extremely sinister, where at least a third of all plants and beasts had poisonous attributes.

Seeing as the realm was a solid Middle D-grade Mystic Realm, even Zac found it hard to deal with some of the toxins that could appear out of nowhere. Some rocks turned out to be venomous shellfish that spat bullets of poison, there were almost invisible strings in the water from dangerous jellyfish. And all the while, dangerous predators roamed the ocean for targets to feast on.

Somewhat ironically, the dangerous environment also helped them keep safe. Both the venomous and normal beasts in this place knew all-too-well how dangerous this place was. In a place where everything could contain deadly toxins, you stuck to feeding on what you knew was safe. Thanks to that, most of the beasts didn't go out of the way to attack them and only struck when they felt threatened.

Unfortunately, the plantlife didn't share this wariness. There was no surface in this realm, with the whole area enclosed in a rocky wall like a subterranean lake. With the high energy density, the edges were covered in all kinds of plants, some of them reaching hundreds of meters. For example, there was a vast swathe of extremely toxic seaweed that blocked their path on the second day of their travels.

The forest generated a deadly domain that stretched for tens of miles, and the two had been forced to delve deeper into the Mystic Realm rather than skirt around the edge as they usually did. And even discounting the plants and the beasts, there were

still dangers in the toxic sea. There were even pockets of poisoned waters seemingly without a source.

Zac was constantly in a feverish state while his body worked overtime to deal with the toxins. But as bad as he had it, Vai had it far worse. If not for the various talismans and treasures Leyara had provided, she wouldn't have survived a day in this place. Even then, the two were forced to occasionally stop and rest to deal with the toxic buildup.

Any thought of pilfering treasures like before had long since been discarded. Unique toxic plants had a steady demand on the outside, but it wasn't worth it. The more valuable a toxin was, the likelier it was that harvesting it would get them killed. If anything, they wanted to stay clear of anything that looked unique or valuable.

Even with all the challenges, they made decent progress through the realm. But on the fifth day, something changed. A deep and sustained rumble made the whole ocean shake, and some of the powerful currents were turned into enormous maelstroms.

"A breach?" Zac muttered as he looked around with a frown.

"I can't sense any energy fluctuations," Vai hesitated. "It shouldn't be- WHAT IS THAT?!"

Zac's head snapped around, and his hair stood on end when he saw what had shocked Vai so badly. It was a chaotic and all-consuming dark-green wave of putrefaction coming toward them, drowning everything as it covered the whole horizon. Where it had come from, Zac had no idea, but it didn't matter.

What mattered was what would happen if they were swallowed up, and he had the misfortune to see it firsthand. A silvery fish had been knocked back in the chaos as its shoal desperately tried to swim away. It was swallowed by the green cloud, but it immediately shot out again. But a single mistake had sealed its fate, and the peak E-grade beast started rotting away at a speed visible to the naked eye.

Seeing the scene, Zac wordlessly grabbed Vai as he fled through the waters with all the speed he could muster. He even

activated his Dao Field with [**Spiritual Void**] to cut through the resistance, giving him a small advantage. It barely allowed the two to outpace the calamity, but even then, Zac wasn't happy.

The earthquake was only gaining in power rather than waning, which made Zac wonder if they had only seen the tip of the iceberg. Vai clearly understood the problem as well, and she did everything in her power to figure out a solution, from scanning various missives to observing the surroundings.

Unfortunately, their fears were soon realized as they saw a second poison tide come at them from the left, soon joining the first one.

"This is bad!" Vai cried. "This calamity will drown the whole realm."

"There is no way we'll reach the waystations in time." Zac frowned as he looked around. "Do you have any ideas?"

"I- I-"

"Stay calm," Zac said as he pushed a wave of life-attuned Dao through her body to help clear her head.

"That's- There are so many beasts that live here. If this is a recurring event, there have to be safe spots," Vai said. "Should we follow some of the fishes, perhaps?"

"Alright, good enough," Zac nodded, praying that this was indeed a recurring tide rather than something brought by the recent instability of the Void Star.

"Those there," Vai eventually said as she pointed to a shoal. "I have seen their kind all over, yet they don't seem very powerful. They move in a straight direction as well."

"Alright," Zac nodded and changed course, following in the wake of the fleeing beasts.

The minutes passed, and it started to feel more and more likely these beasts understood something about what was going on. Not only were they making a beeline in a certain direction, but after an hour, two more shoals had fused with the one they followed.

“Look to our right,” Vai suddenly whispered, prompting Zac to glance over.

It wasn't a third cloud - not yet, anyway. But the whole field of view had started to darken, and Zac guessed it wouldn't be long before they only had one safe direction remaining. His eyes thoughtfully turned back to the fishes who desperately swam in the only safe direction.

“What if-” Vai hesitated with worry.

“If it comes to that, we'll figure something out,” Zac muttered. “Worse comes to worst, we'll force open a spatial rift and escape. That usually works.”

“That's impossible!” Vai immediately said. “A chaotic tear is not something you can just- Wait, what do you mean usually?”

“Up ahead,” Zac said, ignoring the last comment.

Their worst fears, that they would be surrounded by the toxic clouds, were thankfully not realized. There was finally a change in their surroundings - a volcano, by the looks of it. Seeing it made Zac's eyes light up. Was this how the fish dealt with the situation? Simply stay within the protective layer of the magma which burned the toxins before they reached the depths?

At least the other beasts seemed to think so. Zac saw one pack of beasts after another dive into the caldera as well. Soon, it was their turn to enter, but Zac and Vai didn't heedlessly follow the beasts. And it was lucky as well as they saw a tragic scene below.

It wasn't a volcano they had stumbled onto, at least not one in the traditional sense. There was something molten-looking below, but it rather looked like quicksilver than magma. Not only that, but it emitted a weirdly ominous aura, something that was only reinforced by the thousands of unmoving bodies that bobbed across the surface.

They had all been covered in the quicksilver, making them look like gilded statues rather than carcasses, so Zac and Vai had no way to see how the beasts had died. They couldn't even

sense what kind of energies the quicksilver contained, it was somehow shielded or isolated.

“Have you heard of something like this before?” Zac frowned.

“No, but I... I think it is alive,” Vai said after some hesitation. “It’s not a mixture, it’s either a sentient pool or innumerable miniature creatures.”

“What?!” Zac blurted as he gave the pond a second look, just in time to see the shoal of silvery fish shoot into the quicksilver.

The area around them suddenly shimmered and Zac sensed powerful Dao-fluctuations that made him think of the ocean and crashing waves. The insights didn’t seem very deep, but the field around the shoal was amplified by the thousands of fish. Zac looked on with interest, realizing they used their Dao to contend with whatever the quicksilver was. And it seemed to work - Zac saw how a depression around the Dao Field appeared as the beasts pushed into the depths.

Even then, they soon saw a steady stream of silvery unmoving fish reach the surface. The beasts were dying by the hundreds over the next minute until there finally was nothing. All in all, almost two-thirds of the beasts had perished, but that also meant a third somehow survived. Seeing as there were no more gilded fish getting pushed to the surface, there should be a safe spot somewhere in the depths.

“Alright, looks safe enough,” Zad nodded as he started to descend toward the shimmering surface.

“Safe? Most of them died,” Vai cried, but she still followed close behind.

“Are you ready?” Zac asked when the two floated right above the surface. “Don’t let the liquid touch you. Be ready to take out that thing of yours if it breaks through.”

Vai quickly nodded, and the two unleashed their Dao Fields the next moment, with Zac even using [**Spiritual Void**] to boost his even further. Unsurprisingly, the power of Zac’s three boosted Dao Branches far eclipsed Vai’s newly evolved Dao, but her control was clearly better. She was able to create

a field no more than two meters across, while Zac's stretched for over twenty since he simply was unable to condense it any further.

That way, she formed an inner layer of defense in case his were breached. And thankfully, it worked just like it did for the fishes - far better even. The two sank further and further as they kept watch of their surroundings. It really looked like the liquid was alive. All around them, tendrils tried to push through the superimposed Dao Fields to get to them, yet they were continuously rebuffed.

The quicksilver tendrils that stayed inside too long lost their luster and fell apart, and not one came even close to reaching Vai's inner domain. It looked like Dao Branches were enough to keep this thing at bay, allowing them to focus on finding a safe spot.

It took them two minutes, but they eventually discovered a tunnel leading further into the depths, and a few dozen beasts stuck at the ceiling of the path proved they were moving in the right direction. Deeper and deeper they went, swimming under a trail of unmoving animals. Eventually, the path bent upward again. Soon after, the quicksilver turned into pristine waters again, though the tunnel kept going for a while longer.

Both of them immediately extinguished their auras upon emerging. His danger sense told him in no uncertain terms something terrible was waiting at the end of the tunnel. Then again, one didn't need a massive pool of Luck to sense the discordant but immense aura from up ahead. It seemed quite dangerous, but even then, they continued.

Beasts would keep coming from behind, and the path was easily big enough to accommodate Beast Kings. This was not a place they could stay, so they carefully inched their way toward the mouth of the exit until they saw what they were dealing with. A quick glance indicated there were no toxic clouds around, proving they had made the right decision coming here.

Even then, Zac almost wished they hadn't.

Zac wondered if this was any better as he looked at the chaotic mix of beasts that were crammed together in a hidden underwater basin. Most of the innumerable beasts were E-grade, but there were well over a hundred monolithic Beast Kings squeezed together as well.

Herbivores and predators, weak and strong. All were silently sharing the limited space. Suddenly, a three-meter piranha snapped up a smaller eel next to it with a lightning-quick motion, swallowing it in two big gulps. But the moment it struck, the dormant auras of the Beast Kings rose, and the closest one effortlessly impaled the piranha with its tongue.

A gulp later, the piranha was gone and silence had returned to the basin. It looked like there was an unwritten rule of cohabitation in this place - the moment someone acted up. It looked pretty weird, but Zac had an idea of why. The ambient energy was incredibly sparse, no doubt a result of so many beasts being crammed together.

If beasts started to fight and cause a ruckus, the energy might run out before the danger outside had passed. After all, even if a Beast King entered hibernation, it still required some ambient energy to survive.

Zac didn't know why the Beast Kings didn't just kick out all the weaker ones that competed for the limited resources, but perhaps they had some long-term considerations. If the toxic clouds outside killed everything in the realm, and the Beast Kings ate the rest of them in here, then the Mystic Realm would eventually become a wasteland with only a few solitary leaders roaming the depths.

And so, the Beast Kings became the guarantors for survival in this place. Of course, Zac wasn't very confident humans would be afforded that kind of protection as well.

A powerful aura suddenly appeared below them, and both Zac and Vai pushed themselves against the tunnel wall as they sealed their Cosmic Energy. A moment later, an enormous snake pushed through the silvery liquid, its head alone reaching over twenty meters. It was clearly another Beast King, and even if Zac was confident in dealing with it, there

was no way he could do so without alerting the swarm just outside.

So Zac's heart beat like a drum as the enormous head came closer. Suddenly, the beast stopped, and a massive tongue flicked in the water as it looked back and forth. Vai was pressed into the wall right next to him, and he could feel how she barely managed to stop herself from shaking. The snake stayed like that for a few seconds, seemingly looking for something, but it thankfully moved away after a while.

Soon enough, the beast had pushed into the enormous tangle, leaving Zac and Vai to live another day. Even then, Zac felt his hair stand on end after the encounter.

"A- I," Vai whimpered before she clamped her mouth shut.

"Shh," Zac whispered as he pointed upward.

Vai looked up with confusion, and she gasped with relief. Most of their vision was blocked by the swarm, but they could somewhat see a weak shimmering light refracted through the surface of the water. There was actually a surface in this place, which might mean land and a safe harbor from this terrifying Gordian knot of underwater creatures.

The two didn't want to wait for another Beast King to show up, so they slowly made their way toward the surface, extremely cautious to not create any ripples in the water or leak even a speck of energy. It was slow and extremely arduous, but their trek thankfully didn't seem to garner any attention. A few of the nearby beasts glared at them suspiciously, but they restrained their bloodthirsty impulses out of fear of reprisal from the Beast Kings.

Soon enough, they were right at the edge, allowing the two to breathe out in relief. Even if they were targeted at that point, they'd be able to make it out of the water quick enough. Better yet, Zac could already somewhat glean that there was ample space above-water. But just as Zac was about to breach the surface, he felt a sharp pang of danger as he saw a blurry line descend toward them.

A golden laurel appeared above his head and **[Verun's Bite]**, and two golden bubbles appeared just in time to block out a sword strike that had come out of nowhere. There was someone who had not only seen their approach but also tried to kill them. Unfortunately, that was the least of their worries.

The depths below churned as a response to the outburst of Cosmic Energy, and the sinister cultivator above had even thrown in a couple of cracked Nexus Crystals that leaked energy into the waters. One towering aura after another spread through the basin, and Zac sensed multiple Beast Kings immediately lock onto them.

They were exposed.

Chapter 888: Pincer

Zac and Vai were unscathed from the surprise strike that had come out of nowhere, but Zac could already sense the swarm below closing in on them.

“Hold on!” Zac growled as he furiously pushed back toward the surface, the Cosmic Energy in his body churning as he readied a counter-attack.

Judging by the power of the sword strike, the ambusher was no doubt a Hegemon. But no matter how dangerous the situation above-water was, they had no choice but to go up. Their position was locked on to by hundreds of powerful auras, of which at least a dozen belonged to Middle Stage Beast Kings. Even one of those ancient monstrosities was enough to threaten their lives – being pincered by ten of them was a death sentence.

They had been pushed over a hundred meters into the depths by the force, but in an instant, they were approaching the surface again. This time, Zac unleashed a barrage of strikes in every direction as he swam, hoping to cause some chaos and confusion above with his fractal leaves.

However, the whole sky grew dark just as they were about to breach the surface, except for one enormous rune that contained an immense weight. Zac recognized the thing immediately - it was actually a Seal Mountain similar to the one he saw the day he entered the Orom World. This one was obviously far inferior to the Pseudo C-grade treasure back then, but it still unleashed a pressure far greater than a conventional gravity array.

“Let me,” Vai whispered as she put her hand on Zac’s shoulder.

Zac nodded, and space shuddered from Vai activating her own movement skill. Space twisted, and the next moment Zac

found himself falling down, having appeared more than one hundred meters above the surface. The next moment, the Seal Mountain slammed into the water, causing a huge indent in the water. If there were any beasts that hadn't woken up from the commotion before, they were definitely up now.

A cough from the side made Zac look over with worry. The teleportation was a reminder of just how hard it was to corner true Spatial Cultivators like Vai, but forcing her way through the domain of the Seal Mountain had come at a cost. Blood was running down her ears and nose, and her aura was a bit unstable.

The scene angered an already infuriated Zac even further, and his gaze swept the area to find the culprits that needed a good chop while blasting the aura of a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. Suddenly appearing in the sky thankfully provided a perfect vantage of what was going on. There was a pocket of air that reached roughly three hundred meters above the water surface across the whole basin, but there was only one stretch of actual land; a five hundred-meter-wide plateau that was located almost right above the tunnel they arrived in.

On the platform, Zac also saw his targets. There were six of them, two of which emitted the auras of Hegemons while the other four were either elite E-grade or Half-step cultivators. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the bastards who had attacked them. No wonder they had relied on an ambush and then tried to use the beasts to finish the job. They weren't that powerful a troupe.

However, their gear was a cause for concern.

"Templars!" Vai exclaimed with relief, but Zac pretended not to hear her as he turned his eyes toward the waters, where an enormous face had already breached the surface.

Zac was mentally prepared to fight a desperate three-way battle, but he was surprised to see the ceiling of the whole basin lit up with powerful blue runes that drenched the whole underwater pocket in a hazy glimmer. Zac activated **[Earthstrider]** to expel their falling momentum while moving

away from the lights, but he was a bit confused about exactly what kind of array they were dealing with.

He couldn't feel anything change or suppression, and his Danger Sense was quiet as well. But the enormous fish that reeked of toxicity hurriedly dipped beneath the surface again, where it stayed. The same was true for the rest of the beasts – ten huge forms had gathered around the platform, but not a single one dared to actually appear above the surface.

The scene was both unnerving and reassuring. Even if they were all aquatic lifeforms, they were ultimately Beast Kings. With their level of cultivation, they could even fly through the sky if they so wanted, though aquatic beasts generally were much weaker above-water compared to their natural habitat. Yet they all stayed put, indicating those runes weren't just there for show.

It might mean something terrifying was about to happen, but Zac leaned toward the possibility it was some defensive measure the Void Gate had put in place just for this kind of situation. He didn't have time to ponder on the what or why right now. As long as it meant one less threat to worry about, he was content. It allowed him to fully focus on these supposed Templars below.

Just like Vai exclaimed, two of the warriors donned the traditional armors of the Void Gate while the other four wore an assortment of gear that indicated their background as wandering cultivators. They looked just like unaffiliated members of a task squad similar to their own, but Zac felt the whole situation was off.

Why only six of them? And why were four of them wandering cultivators, including one of the Hegemons? He had read the reports and seen how things worked first-hand – until the sudden betrayal of Uzu and Ilka, two-thirds of the losses in the squad had been wandering cultivators. Furthermore, why were they here of all places? There was no way a squad with this kind of composition would be sent to a realm as dangerous as this.

They were extremely suspicious, but even if they weren't infiltrators, it was an undeniable fact that they had struck first with the intent to kill. There was no way Zac would allow them to shrug that off even if they turned out to be actual members of the Void Gate. **[Earthstrider]** took them close to the platform in another step, and Zac threw a shrieking Vai toward the safest spot by the wall before charging the group of cultivators himself.

A huge fractal leaf formed across his axe the next moment before two clouds simultaneously shot out. The blue glimmer in the area was overwhelmed by gold and black as **[Rapturous Divide]** descended on the group, each half of the opposite empowered by a Dao Branch and Zac's furious vengeance.

"Wait! We're from the Void Gate too," Vai shouted, but it was much too late for that.

The group clearly hadn't expected such a powerful opening gambit after sensing Zac's aura belonged to a Half-Step cultivator, which was exactly why he had unleashed it as though he had been angered to the point he lost control. The spatial divide effortlessly ripped apart some of the erected defenses, and two of the weakest cultivators were instantly killed.

Unfortunately, things ended there as the two Hegemons worked together to deal with his strike. The unaffiliated Hegemon was the sword wielder, and he unleashed a rapid-fire-swing that reminded Zac of the **[Ocean Tide]** skill he had in his Dao Repository back home. The swings weren't overly powerful, but they were endless, and each attack exhausted some of the energy and momentum in **[Rapturous Divide]**.

Meanwhile, the Templar Hegemon had already summoned the enormous seal back to his side. When it struck out toward the spatial divide, it was empowered by the power of the stars. A moment later, the skill was torn apart, allowing the two E-grade cultivators to breathe out in relief.

Even with them being prepared for an attack, they didn't walk away from **[Rapturous Divide]** completely unscathed. The

clash left the surviving warriors with numerous scars when Zac's skill collapsed, which was exactly what Zac had hoped for. After feeling the power in that Seal Mountain, Zac knew he wouldn't be able to kill the group in one attack, but it was enough to find the answers he was looking for.

Zac grimaced in disgust when he saw the odd pulsating veins appearing in the wounds of the living, and any lingering doubt was gone the next moment as a bloody tangle jumped out from one of the corpses. Its tendrils shot out in every direction, just like how it had looked when Uzu died. But this time, Zac was actually in the best position, with four targets closer to the tangle than he.

Suddenly, the sword-wielding cultivator slapped the E-grade templar next to him, and the poor man was pushed straight into the tangle. Zac didn't think it was a matter of sudden change of allegiances like with Uzu and Ilka - the Hegemon was rather afraid of being infected and used the closest E-grade warrior as a sacrificial pawn.

With the tangle already having found its target, Zac heedlessly pushed forward in the wake of his attack as a primordial forest appeared all around him. A third of the trees were immediately ripped apart as they appeared beneath the waters, and the two Hegemons destroyed another chunk in their efforts to keep him away.

However, Zac stepped into one of the surviving trees before it was destroyed, and the next moment he appeared right behind the two Hegemons, his axe already moving in for a kill. The Seal Wielder sluggishly turned around in surprise, but it was too late. **[Verun's Bite]** infused with two Dao Branches and using three of its own skill fractals cut right through the man's armor and destroyed his cultivator's core.

The strike was followed up by a swing at the man's head, and Zac was surprised to see a hint of relief in the man's eyes just before he died. He was obviously the stronger Hegemon, yet he had fallen so easily. Had he intentionally let Zac kill him? There was no time to find out as a pang of danger made Zac shift his body.

But it was too late. An agonizing pain erupted in his chest as he was impaled by a sword. Zac hadn't forgotten about the sword wielder, he had used Vivi's vines to target his head and heart to delay him a moment. However, the madman had actually sacrificed one of his eyes to deliver a counter-strike of his own, and Zac groaned as the wound in his chest was flooded with a mix of rampant Sword Dao and poison.

By this point, the whole bloody tangle had crawled into the second templar's body. Thick squirming veins covered every part of exposed skin, and his eyes gained a reddish tint as he roared like a beast.

It was like he had swallowed a berserking treasure that made one lose his mind, to the point he seemed to have lost all rationality. Was this the result of having two curses in one body? Did they overload the host's body to give him a surge of power? If true, the invaders were extremely ruthless, even to their own people.

Thankfully, Zac didn't need to worry about another tangle appearing on top of all his other problems. The blood curses were dangerous, but it wasn't without limitations. He had seen how nothing came forth from one of the two E-grade cultivators, and Zac immediately realized what was going on - **[Rapturous Divide]** had destroyed that man's midriff.

The blood curse seemed to attach to people's cores, so if you destroyed the area around the core you also destroyed the core of the curse.

The sword wound was agonizing, but Zac felt his Hidden Nodes were already hard at work dealing with the invading energies. Meanwhile, he swung his axe in a wide arc that forced the swordsman back, which removed the sword from his chest. A bestial howl echoed through the remains of the primal forest the next second as Verun appeared.

Zac had his hands full with the Hegemon who was already swinging his sword with wild abandon, and he was worried about Vai. The Tool Spirit gleefully pounced on the Berserking templar, and the man roared in return as he fought like a

lunatic. Zac had thought it would be a one-sided slaughter, but he grimaced when he sensed a familiar energy fluctuation.

The templar was heedlessly burning Life-force to augment his power even further. He was just like the cyborg, sacrificing everything for a final blaze of glory.

Still, with all the tempering and priceless materials, Verun wasn't to be outdone, and the primordial hyena was methodically breaking its target down. Unfortunately, that left the final E-grade warrior unattended. And between Vai, Zac, and Verun, the warrior unsurprisingly rushed toward Vai.

“Watch out!” Zac screamed, but the brief lapse of concentration allowed the swordsman to activate a skill.

Ten swords suddenly appeared around them, forming a perfect circle. Zac swore when he recognized the configuration - it was a cage just like **[Profane Seal]**, and a D-grade skill at that. Even if it was probably just a Low- or Middle-quality skill, it wasn't something he could break in an instant. Instead, he turned his full attention on the Hegemon - killing his enemy would be quicker than dealing with his skill.

Zac could only pray that the lessons he had tried to instill into Vai over the past months would be enough to keep her safe a while longer. He calmed the chaotic ripples in his heart and entered a perfect state of unity between his Dao and his technique to unleash a furious assault. The change threw the Hegemon off-balance and stopped him from activating any more skills.

Unfortunately, it looked like a few short sparring sessions and some adventuring was insufficient to completely undo millennia of tranquility and research, especially when met with this kind of brutal melee. Vai looked like her soul had left her body as she saw the burly cultivator rush toward her with a ruthless expression.

But just as he was about to catch her by the throat and claim a hostage, a glimmering belt of condensed space appeared around Vai, cutting the man in two. He could only mutely look at Vai with incomprehension as he collapsed on the ground.

Even Zac was surprised - [**Ancestral Woods**] was still active, and he had barely noticed anything.

Vai must have slowly charged that skill since the moment they appeared above the waters for such a powerful skill to suddenly appear like that. She had even noticed Zac's strategy to aim for the core, allowing her to destroy the bloody tangle. It was a huge weight off his shoulders, and it allowed him to fight the increasingly desperate swordsman without any worries.

From there, the battle concluded soon enough. Verun eventually ripped apart the crazy templar, blood curse and all, while Zac methodically whittled down the Hegemon without giving him a chance to turn the tides. With everything dealt with, Zac looted all the corpses before walking over to Vai who stared down at the corpse with hollow eyes.

"Not bad," Zac said, which dragged Vai out of her trance-like state.

"I- I know I look a bit weak and timid. I always get bossed around because of it," Vai said with a weak smile. "I figured I would use it to my advantage."

"Smart," Zac nodded, but he frowned when he saw how her hands were still shaking. "Are you okay?"

"He is the first one... I killed," Vai said as she looked down at the body. "He might have been forced because of those blood curses, yet I-"

"It was you or them. Such is the law of cultivation," Zac sighed.

"That only makes it worse," Vai said with sorrow. "Zecia is already so hectic, and it will only get worse. So many people will die."

"Well, that's why people like me need people like you," Zac said after some thought. "If you can figure out a way to deal with these curses, we might be able to free and save a lot of people from a similar fate."

"That's right!" Vai said, her downcast expression lighting up. "If I can study these-"

“Well, not right now,” Zac coughed as he pointedly looked at the sky, where the shimmering runes had started to fade. “I think we need to figure out a solution before those beasts come crawling over.”

“Solution?” Vai muttered with confusion before her gaze followed his, at which point they widened in horror.

“These guys must have had some solution if they dared attack us,” Zac said as he scanned the wall.

“Those scripts were definitely created by the Chapter of Emptiness,” Vai muttered. “There should be a cloister here.”

The next moment, the researcher took out an array disk that started emitting odd soundless pulses. Zac walked over to ask what she was doing, but he was surprised to suddenly feel all sounds disappear except for those coming from his own body.

“What’s that?” Zac asked curiously.

Vai looked at Zac with surprise for a second before she pointed at the wall. Zac followed her finger, and he nodded in relief when a part of the wall had started to become transparent. It made sense – if the Void Gate had bothered to set up a massive array that covered the whole basin, they would definitely have prepared some emergency cave in case someone found themselves stuck here.

“Behind me,” Zac whispered, and Vai wordlessly nodded as the two entered the hidden pathway that closed behind them.

Thankfully, there weren’t any more infiltrators hiding within the inner chamber, which proved to be quite roomy. There was a large common area, cultivation chambers, laboratories, and even a couple of small fields with plants growing. Most of it had recently been rifled through judging by some clues, indicating that the group they just fought had definitely known about this place.

Most likely, they had stayed on the platform for the sole purpose of making sure no one else would reach this place. Unfortunately for them, they had bit off more than they could chew, and this place had instead turned into a sanctuary for him and Vai. As far as doomsday bunkers went, this place was

pretty nice. And between the enraged beasts and the toxic clouds, it was highly unlikely anyone would show up before the danger passed.

“I’ll see if there are any records of what’s going on in this Mystic Realm,” Vai ventured.

“Between the poisons and the beasts, I’d say we’re stuck here for a while,” Zac sighed as he spread some ointment on the still-bleeding wound on his chest. “Well, I guess we could use the break.”

Of course, Zac had no plans of simply wasting his time. The next piece of the Left Imperial Seal was probably two or three realms away, and it was high time he started to prepare for when he reached it. He had originally planned on locating the seal before entering seclusion, but this worked as well.

The bout of inspiration from the Ramsi Wall had helped deepen his understanding of the Void, but that wasn’t enough. Zac felt there were a lot of uncertainties that needed to be ironed out before he subjected himself to the unimaginable burst of mechanical knowledge of the universe. He needed some practical understanding of both the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** and the direction he wanted to take it in.

It was time to do some research of his own.

Chapter 889: Sublimation

It didn't look like there were any dangers, but Zac still had Vai perform a second, more thorough scan of the hidden chambers while he used his various senses. Only when they had confirmed there really weren't any hidden traps did Zac relax, though he still installed a couple of defensive and restrictive arrays at the only entrance.

After that was dealt with, Zac sat down and went over the items in the infiltrators' spatial rings while Vai headed into the laboratories. It didn't take him long to find similar parchments with the Left Imperial Seal printed onto them. Zac sighed as he looked down at the nigh-identical copies. These invaders were looking for the same remnants as he.

But how did they find out about it? Did they simply stumble onto it by chance after passing through the Space Gate, or was there something bigger at play here? These people unfortunately didn't have an answer to shed the light on the situation, even if some of them were actual invaders rather than Zecia traitors.

He did, however, manage to piece together what was going on with these invaders, mostly thanks to a journal the Templar Hegemon had left behind.

"I found it!" Vai exclaimed as she emerged from the laboratory, holding a dusty Information Crystal. "It's all explained here. We are inside the Undrusian Sea, and the event outside is indeed normal, as far as all-consuming clouds of death go. They call it the Undrusian Spring, and it's created by an annual tidal wave that passes through the whole realm and extracts enormous amounts of toxins from the plant life. Not even Hegemons will be able to survive it without ample preparation."

“I guess that counts as good news,” Zac grunted. “Does it say how long it would last?”

“Usually, around a month,” Vai said. “By how quickly it moved, it should have encompassed the whole realm by now.”

“One month?” Zac nodded. “It’s not too bad, as long as those beasts outside don’t keep us trapped in here after the clouds have parted. I doubt anyone will be able to make it to this place.”

“I think you’re right. There are eight more similar volcanoes throughout the realm according to this, including ones closer to the waystations,” Vai added. “No one should come here even if they knew about these safe havens.”

“Well, at least that’s a relief,” Zac nodded as he looked around. “It’s weird how vibrant the energy is here compared to the energy-starved environment outside. Is this a secret research station or something?”

“I- It might be?” Vai said. “I found some research notes, but I haven’t gone over them yet. Perhaps they studied the poisons in this realm to invent antidotes.”

“Or just invent poisons,” Zac countered.

“They wouldn’t!” Vai insisted. “The Void Gate doesn’t use such sinister methods to battle. I’m sure they’re doing it to protect lives.”

Zac only nodded with a small smile. He personally leaned toward a theory where even the most orthodox forces had some clandestine operations that the general population would frown upon. The Tsarun were pretty extreme in this regard, but Zac doubted any force kept everything aboveboard.

Vai clearly understood the implication of Zac’s smile and huffed in annoyance. “You know, a lot of powerful medicines have toxic components added - panaceas and toxins are just two sides of the same coin. The Thousand Mile Death embodies this truth.”

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The Matriarch of the Zethaya Clan. She is both the most powerful alchemist and poison mistress of the Zecia Sector.”

“Oh,” Zac hummed. “Sounds pretty scary. Well, I guess it doesn’t matter what this place was used for as long as we’re safe here.”

“I guess you’re right,” Vai sighed as she glanced at the items strewn around Zac. “Those people... Were they real templars?”

“They were,” Zac nodded. “Only the sword-wielding Hegemon was an actual invader, while the others were natives. The Hegemon Templar was named Unsur Kalca. He was approached almost two years ago, and he accepted the blood curse for a chance to restart his stalled cultivation.”

“A templar of that level betrayed the Void Gate?” Vai asked with sorrow in her eyes.

“Well, he regretted it almost immediately,” Zac said as he handed a densely scribbled notebook to Vai. “But he didn’t find a way to get rid of the compulsions. He tried to find out as much as possible about the blood curse and the invaders as a form of repentance, it’s all stored here.”

There was a lot of information in the journal, from all agents he’d uncovered to how they moved between realms in the Mystic Realm. The invaders had long since invented array breakers that could forcibly activate the gates without any command tokens, and there was even one of them in the invader Hegemon’s spatial ring.

Unfortunately, it turned out that a lot of the arrays and tools the invaders used needed the curse’s unique energy signature to activate.

There was also a lot of information about the blood curses themselves. For example, Hegemons needed to willingly accept the blood curses, at least the common ones that you saw among these infiltrators. However, Unsur had heard the other Hegemon mention in passing that there were ‘Chosen’ among the Tan’Kanu with far more powerful curses, which might have the ability to forcibly possess Hegemons.

As for the E-grade cultivators, Unsur was unclear. He had noted that the agents tried to convert people if possible, proving there most likely was a chance of failure even with E-grade cultivators. In exchange, if a curse failed to properly fuse with a warrior, it would become a hostile parasite that did all in its power to torture and kill its host.

This was true for the host-jumping they'd seen in battle as well. Either the curses would attack the enemy, or it would strengthen an ally in pursuit of mutual destruction. In either case, it would make large-scale battles extremely dangerous. It was a bit like fighting with the Undead Empire, where every time an ally fell, you'd soon be fighting against them as an enemy.

Zac had his hidden nodes so he didn't need to worry about either possession or the torture mentioned, but most warriors didn't have any method to deal with those curses. If the peak factions didn't find a way to counter the threat of the blood curses, then Zecia was in deep trouble.

There was a lot more information as well, covering everything from Kan'Tanu society, popular heritages, Unsur's analysis of their plans, and so on. The most terrifying part was how the blood curses forced the users to comply. It was like a mix of carrot and stick. The moment the curse fused with you, it started to produce some odd energies that strengthened your body.

The moment you acted against the will of the Kan'Tanu, it stopped, and you were almost instantly assaulted by terrifying withdrawal. One's body would feel like it was on fire while one's soul was being cut into a million pieces. But the moment you stopped resisting, the pain instantly went away. Most people stopped resisting altogether after a few such bouts of torture.

Reading the vivid explanations Zac could only imagine how much suffering Unsur had endured to compile and hide the journal for years. No wonder there was relief in his eyes when he died.

As for why the group found themselves here, they were on the way back to what Unsur called a Stellar Ladder. It was the tunnel that had formed between the Void Star and the Million Gates territory, and it apparently wasn't very far from here. They hadn't planned on visiting this particular realm though, but a mix of shifting realms and powerful squads of templar executioners forced them to take an experimental route.

The notes had stopped when they reached this Mystic Realm, but the two could piece together the rest from there.

"Poor man," Vai sighed. "One moment of weakness leading to a lifetime of suffering. I hope he understood his notes would help fight the invaders."

"I think he did," Zac nodded.

"My soul is a bit wounded, I need to rest for a bit," Vai said with a low voice as she stood up and walked toward one of the cultivation caves.

Zac looked at the receding back of the little researcher. He could see a lot of weight that had been added to her shoulders after the recent encounter. The damage to her soul after forcibly teleporting them was probably the least of her worries right now, with the betrayals and the blood on her hands being a bigger weight on her mind. There, unfortunately, wasn't much Zac could do to help her at this stage. She would have to find answers from within to move forward from this point.

Meanwhile, Zac had his own issues to deal with. The wound that had pierced his lung was healed up a couple of hours later, mostly thanks to Zac using a chunk of the kill energy to restore his body with **[Surging Vitality]**. Even then, there was enough energy left over for him to break open the next node, a process that Zac had essentially perfected by now. It would still take him a week to get rid of the Hegemon's latent Dao and heal the node, but he didn't need to be in perfect condition to start working on his body tempering method.

The **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** was both extremely complex and extremely simple. It essentially consisted of three main components; Life, Body, and Heart. Life referred to absorbing life-attuned treasures and stimulating the essence of

every living being to elicit an improvement. The method also came with a set of specific patterns that one needed to cover your body in for the method to work.

The first layer only required you to pick one of three foundational patterns and its derivatives depending on your direction, but the following layers needed you to make some alterations based on your Dao. That meant only the first layer could be cultivated without having either a pure or mixed-meaning Dao of Life.

Body referred to a set of movements that would stimulate the potential of one's cells, and expedite the infusion of the life-attuned treasures. The Body Tempering Manual was quite flexible when it came to what type of life-attuned treasures one used, and the same flexibility was extended to the Body section of the method.

You could use the movements in various Gravity Arrays or special environments to speed up the process, but it worked fine on its own as well. The method mentioned that training inside something called 'Golden Arhat Flames' was the most efficient, but Zac had no access to something like that.

Finally, there was Heart, which was a set of Buddhist Sutras. In total, 81 incantations would be repeated in various ways while he absorbed the life-attuned energies through his skin.

These sutras were the glue of the method, the connection between one's body and the inexhaustible life of the Boundless Heavens. It was also here the true essence of the method was hidden. After all, if you could just gain an attuned constitution by smearing your body in life-attuned treasures and then doing some yoga, then everyone would have an attuned constitution already.

It was these 81 Sutras he wanted to swap out with 81 expressions of the Void. During his epiphany, he had already somewhat understood how that should be done. The Sutras were designed to somehow temporarily realign your very essence to be in tune with the Heavens, which would in turn allow for a mysterious infusion of Life into the core of your being.

Together, the patterns, the movements, and the sutras formed an interlocking system that made this all possible. Zac simply needed to figure out how to use his Force of the Void to mimic the effect of the Sutras and allow for the energies to be absorbed.

The first layer of the Body Tempering Manual was possible to complete at F-grade. As such, it didn't require very expensive materials, and Zac had literal mountains of top-quality materials available in his Spatial Ring. In fact, he had brought enough materials to push the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** to the peak of the second layer.

The process, like most Body Tempering Methods, was agonizing, yet the rewards were enough for countless people to willingly torture themselves. Each Layer would not only improve Zac's inherent ability to recover from all kinds of wounds and ward off toxins, but it would also provide actual attributes as well. With the method being a top-quality technique of the Buddhist Sangha, the gain was bound to be impressive.

In other words, while reaching a state of balance for his path was the most important reason for cultivating the method, there were many other reasons to go for it as well. So Zac was full of anticipation as he prepared to make the first practical inroads to cultivating the method. For months, he had planned for this moment, and everything he needed was neatly arranged in front of him seconds after stepping into one of the open rooms in the hidden station.

It would have been preferable to use a Cultivation Chamber, but it felt too risky if he and Vai secluded themselves at the same time. Besides, while he had quite a few secrets on his body, the Soul Cultivation and Body Tempering couldn't be considered something he needed to keep secret at any cost.

Next, an engraved brush appeared in Zac's hand, and it flew over to a bucket of life-attuned paste. It was an inscriptionist's tool that could be controlled with one's soul, and the perfect instrument to paint the array needed for the method. His Dao Control might be atrocious, but thankfully that kind of control wasn't required here.

Furthermore, being a Mortal had one unique advantage; Zac had ample experience drawing pathways by now. And with the first layer of [**Boundless Vajra Sublimation**] being designed for the F-grade, the patterns weren't overly complex. Even then, he wasn't used to these particular patterns even if he'd gone over them over a hundred times by now, and it took almost an hour to draw the pattern across his body.

The result was Zac looking like a tribal warrior with intricate golden tattoos from his forehead all the way to his soles. Even his buttocks were painted, but he quickly covered himself up with a simple kilt in case Vai emerged early. Like that, the initial preparations were complete, and Zac already felt a hazy warmth spread across his body.

Not only that, but he could somewhat sense that energy was circulating through the temporary pathways on his skin, which should mean he hadn't made any mistakes. None of the life-attuned energies were actually entering his body though, and some of the efficacy in the paste had already been lost.

There was no time to waste, so Zac started performing the required movements. At this stage, Zac simply wanted to get a better understanding of the first two components. As long as he could perfect these movements, he would know these parts of the method weren't the issue when he started experimenting down the road.

It was a good thing that he did, as well. The movements were surprisingly hard to complete, even if they were meant for F-grade cultivators. First of all, they required extreme precision and control of every single muscle in his body. Both movement and tempo had to be exactly right. If he hadn't already reached the Integration Stage with his techniques, he would probably be stuck at this introductory stage for weeks.

Not only that, but the paste was creating problems as well. The moment Zac got a stance right, the warmth from the life-attuned paste went from soothing to agonizing, and Zac almost felt like he was being branded by a cattle iron. The pain in turn made him stumble, forcing him to start over from scratch.

But ultimately, Zac was greatly overqualified no matter if you talked level or pain resistance, and he slowly got accustomed to the pain as he practiced the movements over and over. Half a day and two more paste applications later, he could complete the whole set without any issues, even though the pain only got worse the further on he got.

Of course, even if Zac used high-quality materials and completed the movements without issue, he still hadn't managed to drag any of the energy into his body. It all just evaporated after torturing him for a while, not even giving his **[Void Heart]** a taste.

The issue was obviously that he had skipped the Sutras, but that still left him with a sense of want. He had been tortured by a pain that almost reached the level of the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** for half a day, and there was not a speck of Life added to his body. Zac had planned on waiting a bit longer, but he couldn't resist the temptation.

There was still some time before the latest layer of paste lost its efficacy, so he started things up again. This time, he also released some Void Energy into his body as he tried to enter a void-like mental state, where his heart was a black hole that sucked in all life around him. Instead of fusing with all creation, he would consume all creation.

The only result was a sharp pain in his mind followed by a thud as he slammed into the ground head-first, his vision swimming from an intense bout of vertigo.

"That figures," Zac muttered as he slowly crawled to his feet.

Nothing good ever came easy.

Chapter 890: Repetition and Reinforcement

“Anything?” Leyara asked, but judging by the thunderous expression on Pretty’s face, it didn’t look good.

“Nothing,” Pretty snorted as she wiped the blood from her hands with a rag. “These people are no better than warslaves, even the native Kan’Tanu. They barely know about the purpose of their own tasks, let alone other missions deep in the Million Gates Territory or overarching plans.”

“The poor people of that Sector,” Leyara said with a sorrowful head shake.

“You need to harden your resolve,” Pretty said as she looked up at the fractured sky. “Things will get worse before it gets better. The more we learn about these invaders, the more serious it gets. We need answers to prepare ourselves.”

“Well, the technicians are finally making some progress. They will open a temporary gate to the next step of the stellar ladder within the next few days,” Leyara said.

“And you’re still not going to tell me what is going on?” Pretty glowered. “I can tell – you know something about all this. Why this weird place of yours is connected to the Million Gates Territory. Why your Master refuses to shut it off even after the Kan’Tanu have infiltrated your domain. What these signs mean.”

In Pretty’s hand, a bloodied parchment appeared, showcasing the distorted seals of the Left Imperial Palace and its nine Outer Courts. The sigils that were the source of Leyara’s current headache – perhaps the source of the whole war.

“Some things are not for us to alter,” Leyara said with a weak smile. “We can only keep vigil and let the chips fall where

they may. To put our fingers on the scale would not necessarily make things better, but they would make them more complicated.”

“Whatever, if you don’t want to tell me, fine. I’ll figure it out sooner or later,” Pretty muttered as she walked toward the edge of the realm, no doubt to once more hound the poor nuns working on the odd barrier.

Leyara released an exhausted sigh as she looked up at the sky. It wasn’t the first time Pretty had pushed for answers, and it wouldn’t be the last. But even if Leyara wanted to provide the answers, who could she ask? Her master had only divulged a few select pieces of the convoluted web just before they set off, and that alone was enough to subvert her understanding of the universe.

The Vigil, the Flamebearers, and the eternal destiny.

It was too much. Even war with ruthless unorthodox cultivators seemed preferable to this pressure that threatened to suffocate her. She was just a spoiled scion of the Void Gate. She wasn’t ready to carry this burden. But the minutes passed, and Leyara eventually steadied her resolve. Her master and the long line of predecessors had worked so hard and for so long.

The Void Gate had given her everything, and she couldn’t fail them now. So she donned a neutral expression as she joined Pretty and the others as they worked on the portable gate. Pretty stood to the side, her contrite face making a smile tug at the corner of Leyara’s mouth.

“... I’m sorry. I know you would have helped if you could,” Pretty sighed as she looked over. “I’m just worried about Average. About everything.”

“It’s okay,” Leyara smiled.

“So what about this one?” Pretty asked. “The invaders were trying to break in as well, so they shouldn’t have access to it either. Why is it important?”

“Well, they might have access to the other side. More importantly, this should be a recent addition to the corridor,” Leyara slowly said. “According to our readings, it should not

only contain large amounts of ambient energy, but it is likely a supersized Mystic Realm rather than the smaller fragments we've passed lately. It has become a critical chokepoint because of its position in the corridor, and only a few smaller realms can squeeze in around it. If we can control this domain, our control over who comes and goes will greatly improve."

"We could set up a fortress," Pretty said as her eyes lit up. "As long as we patrol the neighboring worlds, no one should be able to sneak into Zecia. We could even reverse the tides, mounting proper attacks on the invaders reaching the heart of the Million Gates Territory!"

Leyara nodded in agreement, though it pained her not being able to tell the truth. There was one more reason they targeted this place. It hadn't been dragged into the Void Star by accident – it had been brought here by the mounting storm of fate. Now, they could only keep watch as the direction of the era unfolded.

It had been so evident in Zac's mind when he was showered in the hazy light of the Left Imperial Seal. The Void Energy his bloodline produced held no Dao, yet it encompassed the whole universe. That was why it could mimic any one of his skills without compatibility clashes on either his human or Draugr sides.

Using that unique feature, he should be able to mimic the effect of the Sutras just like he mimicked the activation of his skills. The Sutras were like a tuning fork, temporarily adjusting the frequency of his body. Or perhaps it was more apt to liken to the process of forging a weapon. The steel needed to be heated up before it could be molded.

But now that the profound understanding of the Left Imperial Palace had long since left him, he was left fumbling in the dark. What was once clear now seemed almost endlessly complex. Even then, Zac didn't feel any worry as he closed his eyes to steady his mind. This was just a first attempt without any real direction. His work had only started.

Finding the solution was a process of discovery and elimination. Every time Zac failed, he would gain a small nugget of understanding, and the path toward the truth would become more apparent. This month was only meant to deepen his foundations. Actually creating the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** could only happen with the help of the next piece of the seal.

Zac spent the next couple of minutes going over the sensations just before he keeled over. His biggest worry was that the pain had been a rejection of the method by his bloodline. But after going over his experience, it didn't seem like it. It was instead an issue of control and harmony. He was supposed to copy a tuning fork, yet he had essentially released a foghorn in the form of a deluge of Void Energy.

It had utterly ruined the interlocking system that made up the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**, resulting in a minor backlash to his mind. Luckily, a backlash of this level couldn't harm his evolved soul in the slightest, allowing him to experiment with impunity. And with him and Vai being locked in here for the time being, he had all the time he needed.

Over the next three days, Zac kept experimenting, trying all kinds of things with his void energy to see how it affected the method. The problem was that with Void Energy being essentially traceless and invisible, it was impossible to see how it responded to his various experiments. Instead, he could only observe the effect of the life-attuned energy and measure success and failure by how powerful the backlash was.

His first experiments centered on mirroring the paste array on his body, but that didn't seem to work. He also tried various methods, such as inverting the pattern or using the other ones provided by the technique. Next, Zac tried using **[Void Zone]**, but that simply disrupted the whole process, as did infusing Void Energy into the paste itself.

This time, Zac had filled his whole body with Void Energy. He was trying to essentially form small whirlpools all across his body to turn himself into a proverbial void. The result was an unmitigated disaster. A stabbing pain made him groan with

pain as he blacked out for an instant, and he once more found himself on the ground.

A few shuffling steps and a door opened. “Is everything alr-WHAT?!”

Zac’s vision was still swimming from the powerful backlash, but he could still make out three copies of a furiously blushing Vai at the door. She seemed to be caught between wanting to run away and come over to help, resulting in her being frozen in place.

“It’s me,” Zac groaned as he shook his head, turning the triplets into a singular researcher. He had returned to his original appearance to practice the method, and he was afraid she’d mistake him for a stranger, especially with all the paste covering his body.

“That’s- That’s not-” Vai stuttered.

At first, Zac didn’t understand why she was reacting so strongly, but he soon realized what kind of scene Vai had walked into. Not only was he almost entirely naked and covered in goop, but his training kilt had shifted to expose his butt when he toppled over just now. Zac quickly forced down his vertigo and scrambled to his feet, trying to hide the embarrassment.

“Sorry about that. I tried to figure something out,” Zac coughed as he donned a simple robe. “When did you come out?”

“J-Just now,” Vai said, her gaze finally turning back to Zac after he was fully dressed.

“How are you feeling?” Zac asked as he took out a bottle of water.

“I’m better. What are you doing? Is it body tempering? I haven’t seen you do that before,” Vai asked, curiosity overcoming embarrassment.

Zac first planned on making something up, but he suddenly turned toward the researcher thoughtfully. Even after forming a Dao Branch, she wasn’t much of a fighter. But in this

department, Vai was no doubt his superior. Perhaps she had some ideas that could streamline his experiments.

“Not yet, but I am trying to change a Body Tempering Manual I stumbled across,” Zac said.

“Why do you want to change it?” Vai asked. “Do you want to upgrade it? That’s an enormous undertaking.”

“No, it’s a high-quality method, but it doesn’t suit me,” Zac explained.

“Most manuals are created through trial and error over generation after generation of practitioners,” Vai slowly said. “Changing things up, at least as a low-grade cultivator, is likely to result in something worse.”

“Humor me,” Zac smiled. “I’m trying to swap out one part of the technique, but now I’m just doing things randomly hoping I’ll stumble onto the correct answer.”

“Are you willing to show me the method?” Vai asked, her face lighting up with academic exuberance. “There’s only so much I can do without understanding what I am dealing with. I can swear a confidentiality agreement.”

“I wouldn’t mind, but it is locked in my head,” Zac grunted. “Anytime I try to copy it or divulge its details, my brain just blanks out, and I can’t remember anything. But I can tell you it is a Buddhist method. I want to replace a certain part of the technique with something suited to my Bloodline.”

“I knew you had a Bloodline,” Vai exclaimed with a victorious smile on her face. “You are so weird; it makes sense you had to have some inherited advantages. But why didn’t the Void Gate know you? If any clan in Salosar managed to awaken such a powerful bloodline, they’d immediately get recruited.”

“Only I have it,” Zac smiled. “I’m sorry, I can’t tell you much more. It will only bring you trouble. Do you have any ideas?”

“Well,” Vai slowly said. “I am no expert on Buddhist methods or even Body Tempering in general. But everything has a purpose. If you only want to change one part of the method to suit you, you need to properly understand what it does and how it connects to the other parts.”

Zac nodded in agreement. So far, he was on board.

“Have you ever cultivated the actual method?” Vai asked.

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I fear I will be stuck if I do.”

“I think you will have to if you want to get to the bottom of things. Theoretical understanding can never match up to practical experience. And if you are worried about going down the wrong path, you can use this,” Vai said as she took out a vial from her spatial ring.

“What’s that?” Zac asked curiously as he looked at the shimmering mixture within.

“It’s a resetter,” Vai said. “This particular concoction is a proprietary blend of the Void Gate – **[Void Slate]**.”

“A what?”

“A resetter,” Vai repeated. “If you drink this before and after a cultivation session, your gains will only be temporary. We use them when performing limited trials. Typically, if we want to change a cultivation method, we’d simply hire ten thousand warriors and give them slightly different manuals. That way, we can study the impact of our changes. But that is not always possible.

“Sometimes, the method is secret and cannot be shared, or only a select group has enough talent to train in it. For those trials, we use resetters. We have the research subject try out various things and measure the effect as we gradually refine the result.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac said as he took the vial. “This is exactly what I need. But does it work on Heart Cultivation as well?”

“Heart Cultivation?” Vai exclaimed with surprise before her eyes widened in understanding. “Oh, right. The Buddhist Sangha. Well, no. Heart Cultivation is intangible, even more so than Soul Cultivation. There is nothing for **[Void Slate]** to expunge. But as long as you have a strong mental state, you should be able to rid yourself of the effect by stabilizing your heart after each session.”

“Is that safe?” Zac hesitated.

“Well, the heart is elusive,” Vai slowly said. “A small crack can break a dam. But from what I understand, Heart Cultivation is based on the repetition and reinforcement of one’s belief. If you take some time to reclaim your footing afterward, you should be able to remove any lingering effects. But you should know just how powerful the Buddhist Sangha is; you will be taking a risk if you do this.”

“Repetition and reinforcement,” Zac hummed. “You’re pretty clever. Are you interested in joining my force instead of staying with the Void Gate? Maybe I should just kidnap you?”

“Wh- What!” Vai stuttered with shock as she took multiple steps away. “I- I can’t! My wows, my niece. I-I-“

“I’m just joking,” Zac laughed. “Or I mean, you’d always be welcome to join if you really wanted.”

“Scoundrel,” Vai huffed before she smiled. “Even if I’ve had a lot of fun the past days and experienced marvels I never thought I’d get to see first hand, I cannot leave. It’s not a compulsion, mind you. The Void Gate is an important part of me. It’s where I grew up, where my sister and her children are buried. Where little Lara is. It’s home.”

Vai’s smile was so warm it made Zac a bit homesick. Not only for Earth, but also for a simpler time. A time when his father was still a steady pillar of his life, where his sister was just an unruly teenager finding her path in life. When his every decision didn’t have massive implications for not just himself, but billions of people.”

“I get the feeling,” Zac smiled.

“I- Ah- I’m sorry. Are you okay?” Vai asked with worry when she saw Zac’s change in demeanor.

“I’m fine,” Zac sighed. “Just a bit nostalgic. Well, I’ll try this thing out. Thank you for the tip.”

“Wait, take this as well,” Vai said as she handed him a high-quality information crystal. “These are notes for an experiment we conducted a few centuries ago. It was to investigate a possible direction for a Cultivation Manual. The project was

ultimately a failure, but the notes might provide some idea on how to approach your problem.”

“Oh?” Zac said with interest as he accepted the crystal.

“Thank you.”

“I won’t disturb you while you figure things out,” Vai said.

“I’ll be at the other side getting acquainted with my Dao. I haven’t had a chance for some quiet meditation for months. But just call me if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Zac nodded. “And if you need to, I don’t know, talk about all you’ve been through lately, I’m here for you.”

Vai slightly smiled in response before she left Zac to his own devices. Zac’s eyes turned to the two items in his hands with a thoughtful look. Should he do it? Did he really dare cultivate the original version of the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**? Ultimately, the resetter wasn’t a protection against the real danger - the path-breaking nature of the Buddhist Sangha.

He couldn’t help but recall the smiling face of Three Virtues as he agonized over his choices. Was this part of his schemes? That Zac would be forced to dip his feet in the water if he wanted to extract the benefits from the technique. This was exactly what he had wanted to avoid and why he’d held off practicing until now.

But Zac eventually steeled his resolve. Forging ahead didn’t just mean throwing yourself against powerful foes. It meant having conviction in yourself and your path. If his path couldn’t even survive a clash against an F-grade layer of a Buddhist Body Tempering manual, then his path wasn’t worth holding onto.

Of course, that didn’t mean he would just jump into it blindly, so Zac first infused consciousness into the information crystal. The mountain of data that greeted him almost made him throw away the crystal in disgust, but he could only stifle the sense of boredom and go over it. Only ten hours later did he put away the crystal with a sigh.

He had to hand it to the nuns of the Void Gate – they took their job seriously.

Chapter 891: One's Path

Zac spent the next day studying the methodology behind the research project Vai had shared with him.

The scrapped project was based around a cultivation manual called [**Emberstar Patterns**], an interesting technique that an elder of the Void Gate had gotten her hands on when exploring an ancient Mystic Realm. It was a pure fire-based method, but the way it infused one's nodes with fiery energies that resembled stars was relatively novel.

The Void Gate wanted to see if the old manual could be retooled and turned into a space-fire mixed-meaning manual to suit their heritage better. But infusing a Dao from a different peak into a pure fire manual was easier said than done. Vai's nunnery had spent years dismantling the method and coming up with different paths that might work – just like how he was doing now with his Void Energy.

From there, they had started their experiments, where they swapped out certain aspects of the method and let dozens of youths practice with it. The changes were designed to create different pathways in the cultivators, to improve the compatibility with space-attuned skills and classes. The first trial resulted in deviations that would have killed the cultivators if they hadn't been monitored.

They weren't discouraged, and they kept changing the method, piece by piece, fractal by fractal, as they searched for a perfect equilibrium. Unfortunately, the research team never found a solution that worked. The original manual was evaluated as High-quality D-grade, but the best they could create was a Low-quality E-grade manual that incorporated both Daos.

[**Emberstar Patterns**] simply didn't allow for itself to be altered like they wanted. The moment they added too much foreign Dao, the underpinning theories that made the

technique possible fell apart. Even then, it was very illuminating how they worked. It was a systematic process of elimination where they slightly altered the method bit-by-bit, following specific patterns that were designed to ensure they didn't accidentally miss a working solution.

It was this kind of scientific method Zac needed to adopt if he wanted to make any real progress. Right now, he was testing random things in hopes he stumbled onto the answer. That might be fine if he had years to waste, but now, he only had a month to make as much progress as possible.

He needed to get organized, and the first step was collecting data.

The plan was solid, as far as crazy ventures went. Even then, Zac was so nervous when applying a fresh set of arrays across his body that he made more mistakes than when he tried this the first time. The concept of Heart Cultivation was simply too nerve-wracking. He could essentially be hypnotizing himself to subvert his worldview without even noticing.

The array was eventually applied, but Zac still spent another twenty minutes stabilizing his heart and mind by meditating to confirm his own stance, conviction, and path. After that, Zac opened his eyes and took a swig of **[Void Slate]** before starting up the movements.

“Aum,” Zac said as his hands slammed together, and both a spiritual and physical ripple passed through the room.

No longer was he stuck practicing inside a claustrophobic cave at the bottom of a toxic ocean. Zac felt like he was standing atop a mountain peak, and a star-spangled sky showered him with the wisdom of the cosmos. Never before had he so clearly understood what the monks meant when they said all was one, and this feeling only intensified as he continued toward the sublimation of his body.

As he thought, the sutras brought purpose and meaning to otherwise hollow exercise. The movements were suddenly not just a precise set of stances. They became expressions of life, where each pose aligned his body with the heavens. And when one truly became all, it was just a natural course of events

when the Life-Attuned energies in the paste entered his body and fused with him.

The pain grew an order of magnitude more intense, yet it didn't seem so bad. Suffering was transient, while enlightenment was forever. Nothing else mattered; only the Dao and the boundless potential of Life was worth focusing on. Like this, Zac continued with his tribute to Life, to Creation. Eighty-one ripples were reinforced by three Heavenly Cycles, and the fusion was complete. Movement turned to tranquility, and the paste on his body fell off, now just a dry mud void of purpose.

Zac looked at the room he stood in, filled with a sense of contentedness and wholeness he hadn't felt in a long time. But Zac's brows suddenly scrunched together as **[Void Zone]** blasted out from his body, cutting him off from the Dao around him and the Heavens above. The sharp reversion severed the connection he felt to the universe, and Zac drew a shuddering breath before swallowing the second dose of **[Void Slate]**.

No wonder the Buddhist Sangha had such a double-edged reputation.

He hadn't felt anything amiss after completing the practice session. He was still Zac. It rather felt like he had come down from an epiphany, where he enjoyed the lingering sense of clarity. He hadn't felt his path subverted at all. Zac had simply thought he had gained a greater understanding of the Dao.

But in hindsight, he realized just how much his perception had changed, how the sutras had slightly altered his goals.

Priorities had been realigned. Until now, the leading star on his path had always been his various goals, from saving Kenzie to securing a place in the universe for himself and those he held dear. Gaining power and delving deeper into the mysteries of the universe was a gift and a marvel, but it was ultimately a means to an end.

Yet in that moment, when he was chanting the sutras and moving in accordance with the Dao of Life itself, he had felt – why bother? As long as he understood the true meaning of Life, everything was possible. All could be accomplished as

long as he severed his Mortal Heart and focused on the Dao. Certainly, that was both a common and effective method of progressing, but it was not for him.

Even worse, for a moment, he had felt a terrifying indifference hiding within that sense of vast interconnectedness, a mental state where all was heavenly destiny. If Kenzie was taken, she was taken. Perhaps that was for the best. Earth's fate was up to the Heavens and not something he should meddle in.

If those around him died, it was just their time to enter the wheel of reincarnation. He should simply say a prayer and wish them luck on their journey. Thankfully, his true beliefs quickly returned to him the moment he stopped practicing, and his nullification zone had forcibly cut his connection to the technique.

Zac spent the better part of the next day stabilizing his mind, returning to a sense of normalcy. Over the first hours, a small cloud of golden haze was released from his pores as **[Void Slate]** expelled the small amount of Life-attunement he had accrued during his session. The process left him with a small amount of toxins, but Zac could tell it would only take an hour or two for **[Purity of the Void]** to remove them. Vai had really provided him with a top-tier concoction for it to have so few side effects.

Only when he felt confident he had wholly regained his sense of self did he dare delve deeper and analyze the experience. The first takeaway was that the Sangha's reputation wasn't just for show, and he was filled with a sense of respect for those elites who dared practice proper Buddhist methods as a form of tempering.

Secondly, Void Energy was surprisingly effective at resetting his mental state. Even then, it didn't change much. It was a valuable safety net now that he was experimenting with the original method, but he would still need to reform the manual from scratch. If Zac only wanted to get his hands on the surface benefits of body tempering, he could probably just practice a couple of layers and forcibly suppress any mental changes with **[Void Zone]**.

But that wasn't what he was looking for. He wanted to properly fuse his human side with life, not just form his Cultivator's Core. The real goal was to reach a state of equilibrium that he planned on maintaining indefinitely, where his Draugr and Human were in balance - a state where Death empowered life and vice versa through **[Quantum Gate]**.

Perhaps even until he could fuse his two sides into one. And for that, he needed to practice the method wholeheartedly and not just grab for immediate gains like some attributes and regenerative abilities. As for finding a solution, he was left with mixed emotions.

Zac had gained more understanding of what the Heart Sutras accomplished in this one session compared to going over his memories for months. But most of what it accomplished was drive home just how complicated Heart Cultivation was. If anything, he felt further away from a solution now than he ever did before.

The chants hadn't formed any mysterious patterns that mirrored or added to the array on his skin. He still didn't understand what had happened or how it had happened. When he uttered each chant, reality had shifted, and what his heart believed in became true. It was a terrifying subversion of reality that almost upended his previous understanding of cultivation.

He wasn't even sure where to go from here, so Zac eventually chose to stretch his legs and see if perhaps Vai had any ideas. Luckily, Vai hadn't retreated into one of the cultivation caves already. Instead, Zac found her perusing various documents inside one of the laboratories.

"How was it?" Vai asked with interest as Zac walked over.

"How do you feel?"

"It's hard to say. Just some chants somehow altered the way I saw the world for a moment, and that belief impacted reality. I don't understand where that came from."

"It's probably all connected," Vai said. "You could try the chants without the movements or the paste. I bet the effect will

not be nearly as pronounced. They probably form a coherent system where each part enkindles the others.”

Zac nodded in agreement. “You’re right. I simply don’t understand how it’s all related, so I’m having a hard time figuring out where to go from here.”

“Research is a long-term commitment,” Vai smiled. “Don’t rush for immediate gains. Take your time and deepen your understanding first. Take some breaks to reflect on what you’ve experienced. After that, you can start thinking about how to proceed.

Zac released a pent-up breath as he nodded. Vai was right, of course. He was being too impatient, wanting immediate and measurable progress. But even if he was on a deadline, there was no point in rushing. He had already learned a lot of small details over the past days, things that weren’t mentioned in his implanted memories. If he kept working at it, he would eventually get there.

After all, he was different from the researchers who had tried to reform [**Emberstar Patterns**]. There were many things he didn’t understand, but there was one thing he knew with utmost certainty. At the end of the path, a functioning Body Tempering Manual waited. The lights empowered by the Left Imperial Palace and Ultom had shown him that much.

This month was just meant to find and remove the barricades leading there.

“I have thought on your matter over the past week,” Vai slowly said. “Heart Cultivation is exceedingly rare, at least in the Zecia sector. But I once read a study that mentioned picturing a certain image can help. Perhaps you can use that? First, figure out what change each chant brings, and then conceptualize that kind of change from your viewpoint? Something that rings true with your path.”

“Rings true with my path,” Zac muttered, remembering the odd trial that Three Virtues had him undergo.

He had been shown everything from thousands of ancient tomes or rows of monks silently reciting sutras in those

visions, and everything had looked identical if you looked at it conventionally. Even then, some things were simply true while the others were false. To this day, Zac didn't quite understand why he had known these things, but they were undeniably true.

“Do you remember if picturing anything, in particular, is better? Like is it objects, or perhaps patterns like fractals?”

“Anything that suits you, I guess?” Vai hesitated. “I don't really know, sorry.”

“That's okay. You've helped me plenty already,” Zac smiled. “It's even making me feel bad. Here, pick something you like.”

A dozen boxes appeared in front of him the next moment, each one containing one of the top-tier treasures he had picked up during the years he spent off-world. Each one was significantly more valuable than anything they had found during their time in the Void Star and would cause some waves if put on auction almost anywhere in Zecia.

“This- This... What is this?!” Vai exclaimed as she looked with wide eyes at the array of treasures.

“Just some things I picked up while adventuring,” Zac smiled. “Most of these things are pretty useful for making a push for Hegemony. Take one as a small thank you for helping me with this. You can't imagine how valuable your insight is.”

“I cannot accept this,” Vai urgently said, almost looking afraid as she looked at the priceless treasures. “Hegemony, is- is. I don't...”

“If you don't, I'll feel bad and won't be able to concentrate on my cultivation,” Zac sighed with a sorrowful expression. “And even if you don't need these things, what about your little niece? She should be looking toward the next stage by now, no? What if she just lacked one little treasure to take that step...”

“That's-“ Vai whispered, looking visibly distraught by the hypothetical scenario. “I'll take the **[Kastron Root]** then. It helps strengthen one's corporeity before breaking through, to

better withstand the process. With your terrifying constitution, it should be useless.”

Zac was about to answer, but a powerful ripple suddenly slammed into his mind. One moment, he had been teasing Vai. The next moment he was swept up by the unfathomable depths of the Left Imperial palace. Every cell in his body screamed in both fear and longing, and it felt so, so close. The Undrusian Ocean was forgotten, as was Heart Cultivation and the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**.

In front of the ancient monolith he saw in his mind’s eye, it all amounted to nothing.

Finally, the vision faded without him being brought into the Ultom Courtyard, and Zac found himself back in his body. He shot to his feet as he wildly looked around him, trying to understand what had just happened.

“Ah- I’m sorry! I won’t take it!” Vai urgently said as she scrambled back, shocked by Zac’s explosion of movement.

The scared cry startled Zac enough to clear his head, and he apologetically looked at the little researcher as he retracted his billowing aura. “No, I’m sorry. Something unexpected just happened, and I lost my composure.”

“Is everything alright now?” Vai hesitated.

“I don’t know...” Zac muttered. “Something changed, and I’m not sure if it’s good or bad.”

“Is it the Heart Cultivation?” Vai stammered. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have urged you to take that risk. I-”

“No,” Zac smiled as he threw over the previously unnamed root that Vai wanted. “My heart is just fine. Here, take this thing before I forget.”

“Alright,” Vai nodded as she carefully stowed away the jade box. “Thank you for this. I’ll give it back if my niece doesn’t need it.”

“Sure,” Zac grinned, knowing he’d never take it back.

With that, Zac walked back to his training room, a scowl covering his face. He stared at the cave wall like he wanted to

peek through the bedrock and spy on what was going on. Why had he suddenly received a pulse out of nowhere? Not only that, but it was more potent than the one he felt when stepping onto this Mystic Realm.

Was the piece of rubble he aimed for on the move? Or had it been claimed by someone else? If so, what would that entail? Could he snatch it back? Would he still get an epiphany if he got it that way? The spacious cave suddenly felt suffocating as their hidden sanctuary turned into a prison. Anxiety gnawed at him, and even hours later, he found it hard to focus on his Heart Cultivation.

He had been too confident in the piece of rubble after seeing Kuru Cera being turned into motes of ash from a simple ripple, satisfied that the seal's lethality would be enough until he reached it. The question was whether it was all too late, even if someone had managed to contain it somehow. Could the situation be salvaged? Zac wasn't sure, but his eyes turned to the hidden entrance to the cave.

Surely, the Beast Kings would have fallen asleep by now?

Chapter 892: The Unyielding River of Fate

“You thought you could subvert the unyielding river of fate? Chaos might be able to hide you from the Heavens, but not from me. Twice now, you have fled from me. There will not be a third.”

Behind Iz, six radiant wings slowly fluttered, their gentle movements incinerating the very fabric of the unstable Mystic Realm. Not only that, but the **[Five Pillars of Absolution]** formed a circle around her two captives, illuminating the area with her Dao and conviction.

“What do you have to say?” Iz asked, her eyes searching for any clues in their faces.

“I- Ah, it sounds perfect?” a wretched-looking cultist said with an eager nod. “Perfectly befitting the celestial poise of your Eminence.”

“No feedback? Nothing bad?” Iz asked with an expressionless face.

“Mistress, you are perfect, like a radian-“ the man eagerly nodded, but he didn’t get any further as smoke suddenly filled his mouth.

An instant later, the empyrean flames had swallowed him whole, not even leaving ashes behind. The disgusting parasite didn’t get a chance to escape either, with the cleansing fires purging it from the world.

“What about you?” Iz asked as she turned to the other man.

“I- ah? What?” the Hegemon stammered, his face covered in sweat as he looked at the spot where his companion once kneeled.

“How does it look?”

The man hesitated for a second before he grit his teeth and spoke up. “What my colleague said was true, but he missed an important aspect that your Eminence might have overlooked.”

“Oh?” Iz asked curiously.

“This poor one has never seen anything that could compare to the beauty and profound power your Eminence exudes, but it does look a bit odd how you are hovering just above the ground. I would suggest either making sure both are in the air when you trap your target, or that you increase your elevation slightly. That way, your Eminence can also look down on them as you should,” the man said, looking at her with hope in his eyes.

“Elevation? How about this?” Iz said as she rose a few meters into the air.

“Perfect,” the man hurriedly nodded.

“Thank you. If fate wills it, you can return to your people,” Iz nodded as she said as the pillars dissipated.

“Thank you, thank you,” the cultist said with a deep bow, confusion turning into relief upon seeing that the Templars made no move to intervene. “I will not disturb the rest of your Eminence any further.”

With that, the Hegemon flashed away, disappearing among the endless clouds a moment later. Iz nodded as she deactivated her skills, feeling she was one step closer to her imagined outcome.

“This... That man was a captain of the infiltrators,” a hesitant voice said as the leading Templar walked up to her side. “Him being allowed to return will be detrimental to this sector.”

“I promised, so he is fated to live,” Iz shrugged.

“This... Is problematic,” the captain eventually said after a pause.

“Are you questioning the decisions of the young miss?” the five-legged boulder growled as flames covered the sky. “The

members of the Vigil have truly grown audacious here on the untamed frontier.”

Iz looked on with some helplessness at her ward’s umpteenth eruption over the last month. How was she supposed to adventure with this overprotective guardian constantly at her side? Back then, Iz had felt a fresh gust of freedom upon learning that the inner regions of this curious anomaly had become too unstable to house Peak Hegemons, let alone Monarchs.

Who could have guessed Kvalk actually had a skill that would allow him to detach a hand and turn it into a clone? Iz couldn’t wait for when they found Mr. Bug. She could picture it - her ward would try to restrain their actions, and she had seen multiple examples of how that turned out when that man was involved. Freedom and adventure were just around the corner.

But for now, she would have to play peacemaker, which was a novel feeling on its own. These people didn’t know her background, only that she was someone important who the Void Priestess had tasked them to guide. Iz hadn’t realized how differently people looked at her and treated her when they weren’t saddled with the knowledge she was a Tayn.

“One straggler will not change the course of destiny, even if he has some providence,” Iz said after some thought. “Him reporting my presence here might even help curtail the advances of these unorthodox infiltrators. More importantly, a calamity has entered your Void Star. The wheels of chaos have already been set in motion.”

“If mistress Tayn could enlighten us about the nature of this calamity, we might be able to provide better assistance,” the captain hesitated. “We cannot interfere with some things, but we are happy to help in other matters.”

“It is not my place to tell you,” Iz said with a shake of her head. “With him involved, who knows how fate will swing. I don’t want to drag the Vigil into this accidentally. Let’s just head to the next realm.”

“Of course,” the captain nodded. “I should tell you – we have already entered the inner half of the Void Star. With the

damage caused by the invaders and some other events, we will not be able to take any more shortcuts. Not only that, our maps are not as reliable as before, so finding our way might be difficult.

“The Terminal Disciple of the Void Priestess and some of our elites should be close-by,” the leading nun added. “She might be able to help with your quest.”

“Perhaps, if we run out of options,” Iz slowly nodded before she looked at the horizon with a smile. “But we are close; I can feel it.”

“If you say so, young miss,” the captain slowly nodded, and the group set out again.

However, the golem held her back, prompting Iz to look at her guardian confusedly.

“Young miss, I need to remind you of your task,” Kvalk said when the others were out of earshot. “Meeting up with your friend is fine, but this journey is contingent on your promise to Lord Mohzius. Having passed the first watershed is proof Ultom has deemed you worthy, and you can no longer back down. There is a high chance you will be pitted against that acquaintance of yours - for real.”

Iz sighed as she opened her quest screen again.

“Flamebearer of Ultom,” Iz muttered. “This is a bit troublesome.”

The path flickered as the array deactivated, and Zac stumbled back into the hidden cave, his face a green mask of pain and nausea. Over the past couple of days, the anxiety over the sudden pulse had become too much. Zac eventually opted to see if he could forge a path through the toxins with the help of **[Void Zone]** and his constitution, just like he had in the depths of the Twilight Chasm.

The good news was that the beasts outside had long since returned to their slumbering state, where they conserved their energy wrapped together in a ball of horror. The bad news was that he had severely underestimated the Undrusian Spring.

“Ai-“ Vai screamed as she rushed forward.

“Don’t touch me; I’m toxic,” Zac said with a hoarse voice as he stumbled to one of the rooms they didn’t use. “I’ll be fine in a bit.”

Zac couldn’t believe how virulent the waters still were. Not even his Draugr Constitution was a match, and the toxins had flooded his body far quicker than his Hidden Nodes could purify them. Not even **[Void Zone]** was of any help since most of the poisons were actual compounds rather than some energy. It did weaken it by blocking out the Dao, but that wasn’t enough for him to withstand the onslaught.

Thankfully, he had realized the danger pretty quickly and had jumped back into the quicksilver in time. But there was no doubt about it – no matter how anxious he was about the sudden ripple, there was nothing he could do about it.

Ten hours later, **[Purity of the Void]** had finally cleansed a good deal of the poisons that had snuck into his body, while **[Void Heart]** had turned another chunk into pure energy while leaving large amounts of toxins in his blood. Thanks to **[Purity of the Void]**, Zac rarely had to exsanguinate his blood any longer, but this time there were simply too many toxins.

So Zac cut open his arm with his axe and let a pool of acrid blood form next to him, which caused Vai, who had anxiously waited in the distance, to scream with horror.

“What are you doing?!” Vai screamed as she scrambled over, a vat of cauterizing salve already in her hands.

“Oh, sorry,” Zac smiled as he incinerated the blood with a talisman. “I forgot you were there.”

“W-What are you doing?” Vai stuttered. “Don’t give up on life. The toxins are painful, but you should recover in a week or two.”

“The toxins?” Zac laughed. “I’ve removed them already. It wasn’t as bad as I first thought.”

“What? There’s no way, I saw you,” Vai exclaimed as she looked at the burned patch on the ground. “The Udrusian

Spring is not a blood poison. And you are already recovered? How is this possible?"

"You should have realized I'm pretty resilient by now," Zac shrugged.

"Is it the same as what protected you from the blood curse?" Vai asked curiously. "Is it? Your bloodline?"

"It's rude to look into other people's secrets," Zac snorted as he poked Vai's forehead.

"Fine," Vai muttered. "It was just academic curiosity."

"Well, we won't be leaving this place early, that's for sure," Zac grunted.

"I still don't understand why you did all this," Vai muttered.

"Just getting the lay of the land," Zac smiled.

There was no simple way to explain the gnawing anxiety after that additional pulse. Even if he was making decent progress on his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, it was hard to concentrate when he didn't know what was going on. With every sign pointing toward the invaders looking for the remnants as well, a sudden change didn't feel like a good thing.

Still, his short outing had proved there was nothing to do about it. There was a reason not even the venomous Beast Kings dared traverse the Undrusian Sea right now. So even if Zac was reluctant, he could only nicely stay put and keep working on his research. At least the short outing had allowed him to put the matter aside. If he hadn't gone out, he would have constantly been worrying whether he was making a mistake not leaving early to find the next piece of the seal.

The days passed as Zac continuously cycled between cultivating the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** for inspiration and meditating on his own direction for Heart Cultivation. The more he experimented, the more he believed he was on the right track. The solution to swapping out the Heart Sutras had to be forming authentic expressions of the Void with Void Energy.

It was a combination of forming the right truths in his heart and mirroring them with his Void Energy. That should elicit the same harmonization that the original version used, allowing for his body to properly integrate the Life-Attuned energies before his Hidden Nodes gobbled them up.

The problem was – what was true? Struggle as he might, he couldn't create anything that filled him with the sort of certainty he'd felt when going through Three Virtue's mental gauntlet. Still, he was rapidly deepening his understanding of both Heart Cultivation and the method in general, which would be immensely helpful down the road.

Not only that, but Zac even got to enjoy some of the benefits that made the Sangha's methods so desirable for elites - the Heart Tempering. Repeatedly rejecting a boundless heart was a form of cultivation on its own, and Zac felt his convictions gradually growing more solid. After just a couple of days of practice, he no longer needed to use **[Void Zone]** to reset his mental state and heart after each practice.

This was also a great hint of what was to come and another reason to keep the Heart-aspect intact in the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. After taking on the previous set of remnants, he realized that a strong soul wasn't enough to ward off their subtle influence. But with this additional form of cultivation, he would shore up his final weakness and hopefully pass the Atavism that A'Zu and Be'Zi had warned him about.

The only downside with the repeated practice was losing purified Creation Energy every time he experimented. Just like some of the purified motes of Oblivion nurtured his soul, so did crumbs of Creation enter his cells. Unfortunately, when he was cultivating the **[Boundless Varja Sublimation]**, these motes were swept up, which meant they also got expelled by the **[Void Slate]**-concoction.

Then again, that could be seen as good news since it proved the Creation Energy could indeed help boost the speed of body tempering, something that was extremely important considering he was behind schedule on that front. The quicker he could push his constitution to something that matched his

Draugr body, the faster he could head to the Perennial Vastness and work on his Cultivator's Core.

Like this, Zac completely lost track of time as he dug deeper and deeper into the secrets of the Void and the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**. But finally, a deep rumble that shook the whole hidden cave dragged him out of his reverie. Zac immediately walked out of his room, just in time to see Vai emerge from her seclusion as well.

"These vibrations..." Vai muttered. "It must have started."

"I guess that's it, then," Zac grunted as he wiped the paste from his body. "Get ready to head out."

"What!" Vai exclaimed. "You read the reports. After the Undrusian Spring, a lot of treasures have been born or evolved thanks to all that released energy."

"You're only making my argument stronger," Zac commented and received an annoyed wave in return.

"There will be a melee of millions of energy-starved beasts outside," Vai said with a roll of her eyes. "We should wait for them to fight it out and claim their prizes before heading out. We won't even make it to the waystation if we go out now."

Zac was reluctant, but he knew Vai was right. "Alright. One more day. That should be more than enough time for the beasts to tire themselves out."

Vai looked like she wanted to barter for more time, but she eventually gave up on the idea. Instead, she headed over to the laboratory. She didn't squeeze in some more time for research, but she instead started cleaning the place and putting everything back in order. Zac wasn't quite so dutiful and instead returned to the room he'd spent the last month inside.

With time running out, he didn't experiment with the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** any longer. He had already reached an impasse, where he simply couldn't figure out how to form the 81 Truths of the Void. Practicing the method any longer wouldn't bring him any closer, and it would only increase the risk of getting entrapped by the sutras.

At least he was mostly sure of the direction he needed to take. Forming arrays with Void Energy to match those he painted on his body was a dead end. Vai's solution was far better; he needed to create representations of the Void with Void Energy and instill them with his conviction that they were true.

It was just like his insights related to the Dao of Conflict he gained under the Stele of Conflict. Purpose was the key – it could change everything. It could make true false, and false true. But to take this step, he either needed to gain an epiphany or set aside years, perhaps decades, to find an answer.

But just because he didn't experiment any further with his Body Tempering Method, it didn't mean he would just laze about. Instead, he started up his Soul Cultivation for the first time in a while. There was no time to set up one of the extravagant arrangements, but his goal wasn't to maximize his gains.

Zac always felt refreshed and clear-minded after cultivating his soul, and he believed it would help stabilize his condition after the past month's experiments. Zac soon got lost in the mysterious transformations and trajectories of Life and Death in his mind until the better part of a day had passed. After that, he simply closed his eyes and took the first proper nap in weeks.

Some time later, a shuffling sound woke him up, and he found Vai entering his compartment.

"Why do you keep a statue of a man next to you when you sleep? Who's that?" Vai asked as she looked at the alabaster monument to Yrial's beauty skeptically.

"It's my teacher," Zac coughed as he stowed away the statue with some embarrassment. "He's a bit eccentric, but the statue has unique effects that speed up my cultivation and stabilizes my mind."

Vai hesitantly nodded and instead turned to the large crystal. "I've never seen such a big [**Mind's Eye Agate**]. It must be worth a fortune. Can you really get this many treasures from adventuring?"

“If you’re foolhardy enough,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Is it time?”

“A day has passed,” Vai nodded.

“Alright, perfect,” Zac said. “Let’s set out. I’m curious to see how things have changed outside.”

Chapter 893: Weight

Zac and Vai had spent a month preparing for this exact moment, so there was nothing else to do. They left just a minute later, leaving only a single clue behind – a communication crystal Vai recorded, containing a warning about the infiltrators and pieces of the intelligence gathered by the Templar Hegemon. Zac doubted it would reach the right hands in time to make a difference, but he wouldn't begrudge Vai's attempts to help her people avoid unnecessary deaths.

The two donned their aura-hiding measures as they stepped onto the platform a moment later. The two only got a couple of steps before they stopped, with Vai's face alternating between green and white. There was an overwhelming stench of blood in the basin, and hundreds of maimed carcasses were floating on the water's surface.

Zac wasn't surprised. The beasts had crammed together out of necessity and survival over the past month. But with an array of opportunities waiting outside, the beasts had rekindled their ferocious nature the moment the danger passed.

Eventually, Zac had to lift the reluctant Vai with Vivi's vines and drag her into the sanguine waters, where he was immediately beset by a pang of danger the moment they passed through the oily film of putrid blood. But **[Verun's Bite]** had already appeared in his hands, and the ferocious crablike creature that tried to ambush him was cleanly cut in two.

The Peak E-grade beast had hung from the cliff as it fed on the carcasses of the fallen, and it wasn't alone. There were thousands of beasts feasting on the remains of yesterday's melee. Even then, Zac wasn't worried as he sunk even deeper. These beasts were so weak they had completely given up on the opportunities outside and had instead settled for at least

filling their stomachs. There was no way they could pose a threat to them.

They entered the tunnel they came from, where the wall of shimmering quicksilver greeted them. If anything, Vai looked relieved to enter the odd compound, while Zac was far more ambivalent. He remembered all-too-well what waited on the other side the last time he swam through this path.

His heartbeat sped up as they finally pushed through the final film and emerged in the volcano's cauldron, but there were no toxins in sight. Instead, they were greeted by a refreshing aura that reminded Zac of the herbal atmosphere inside the Zethaya Pill House.

"Two sides of the same coin, huh," Zac muttered as he looked around.

"I told you," Vai said triumphantly. "There is no way the Void Gate would deal in poisons."

"Alright, alright," Zac smiled. "Get your bowl out. We don't only have beasts to worry about any longer. If we ran into one group of infiltrators, there are bound to be more of them."

Vai nodded, and the two started to swim in the general direction the waystation should be. The Undrusian Spring had knocked them slightly off-course, but the realm wasn't too big, so Vai soon found the signal leading toward their destination.

Swimming through the Undrusian Sea in the wake of the seasonal purge was an eerie experience. It simultaneously felt like a world filled with and void of life, and they barely saw any beasts over the next two days. The few who had survived the purge and the following gauntlet had seemingly hidden deeply to recuperate and absorb whatever treasures they'd gotten their hands on.

Meanwhile, the previously dangerous plant life wasn't nearly as poisonous since the tide had drained them of their toxic compounds. This made the Undrusian sea the safest region they had traversed over the past few Mystic Realms. But nothing good ever lasts forever.

“Stop,” Vai suddenly whispered, and Zac quickly hid behind a boulder and erected a set of arrays.

It had been their standard method of survival when passing through realms full of existences who could easily kill them. ‘Stop’ meant to hide and assess, while ‘back’ meant to run for your life.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked after the isolation array had activated.

“Three Hegemons and over fifty E-grade cultivators,” Vai said as she looked at the bowl. “The party looks almost as strong as the one led by Captain Kastella. They are on the move, but they are not moving in this direction. What should we do?”

“Let’s just wait,” Zac said.

“What if they’re templars?”

“Can you tell with your treasure?” Zac asked.

“No...” Vai sighed.

“Well, then we can’t easily approach them. Neither of us has any good stealth or observation skills. We’d be exposed before we could figure out which side they belong to. If they’re templars, that’s fine, but I’m not sure I could deal with such a large party,” Zac said, and Vai could only agree.

The two stayed in their makeshift hideout for an hour, at which point the group was finally out of the range of Vai’s bowl. They waited for another hour before moving out again, just in case they had hidden scouts roaming about. Like that, they continued another day until they found the waystation.

Zac hesitated as he looked at the tunnel from their hidden vantage. Should they enter? Apart from that first group, Vai also discovered three smaller ones over the past day. Not only that, but it looked like all of them came from this waystation. Who knew what waited inside? A whole army full of cursed cultivators?

Eventually, the two opted to wait, and it was lucky too. Just ten minutes later, another group emerged from the tunnel, this squad consisting of six members. Zac held onto his axe tightly,

but the team thankfully just swam away, hurrying toward the other side of the Undrusian Sea.

Zac waited for another five minutes, at which point he couldn't take it any longer. "Let's go before anyone else arrives. Stay behind me just in case."

Vai nodded, and the two rushed into the waystation. Moments later, both breathed out in relief upon seeing the place was empty. They still made a beeline for the gate room, but their haste proved futile as they sensed a familiar spatial fluctuation upon entering.

"It's activating!" Vai panicked, and Zac instantly dragged her to a corner out of sight from the spatial gate and activated an isolation array.

Just a few seconds later, one warrior after another passed through, none of them wearing the equipment of the Void Gate. Altogether, eighteen cultivators entered, two of which were Hegemons. At first, Zac thought they would make it because they immediately out toward the exit, but his heart froze when he saw one of the warriors scan the room with shimmering eyes on the way out.

He only stopped for a fraction of a second upon looking at their corner, but that was all Zac needed to know the truth; they were spotted.

There wasn't any time for hesitation as Zac flashed forward after whispering 'bubble,' and his axe had embedded itself into the head of one of the two Hegemons before the scout even had a chance to raise a warning. His ambush was followed by a burst of carnage from [**Nature's Edge**]. At this proximity, each warrior was almost instantly hit by over a dozen fractal leaves infused with two branches and empowered by both [**Spiritual Void**] and [**Adamance of Eoz**].

Even if the warriors realized they were under attack and managed to erect some early defenses, there was no way for these ordinary E-grade cultivators to survive such a strike. Even a basic attack like the upgraded version of [**Chop**] contained an almost incomprehensible power level when leveraged by all of Zac's unique advantages.

Only two E-grade cultivators survived by having the foresight to back away rather than defend themselves, but they might have been better off dying. It was almost impossible to perfectly avoid getting hit by the leaves in this enclosed space, and the two infiltrators who backed away were no exception. The two slumped onto the ground a moment later, alive, but grievously wounded.

Zac felt like he was being stabbed all over as over ten tendrils of blood curses burrowed into his body, unleashing a ferocious assault from within. The surviving Hegemon was shocked to see his whole squad get annihilated out of nowhere, but his first instinct was neither fight nor flight. Before anything, the Hegemon took out a talisman and pressed it against his chest.

Only then did the Hegemon breathe out in relief before he looked at Zac with a sneer. Zac pretended to be overcome by the blood curses as he hunched over with a grimace, but the reality was actually the opposite. **[Void Heart]** had already woken up, and each beat ripped off a piece of the curses and swallowed them. Soon enough, they would be torn apart entirely and turned into cultivation fodder.

The Hegemon's sneer turned into shock as Zac tackled him to the ground with enough force to cause the whole room to shake. He managed to pierce Zac's side with his sword, and a soul-wrenching pain wracked Zac as he felt the blade grind against his spine. But before he could cause any more damage, Verun had already bit into the leader's forehead, cutting his head in two.

Initially, Zac planned to target the man's Cultivator Core to destroy his blood curse, but at the last minute, he changed his mind. Instead, Zac snatched the black-inked talisman from the man's chest and placed it on his own as he backed away a bit. Just as he infused some of his energy into the talisman, the bloody tangle burst out from the man's stomach.

The thing lunged at Zac as though it was a real living being, but Zac looked on with interest when the tendrils stopped half a meter away from him. They never continued past that point and instead spread all around him, searching for another target. A smile spread out across Zac's face upon seeing one of the

two survivors being targeted instead, and he looked appreciatively at the talisman on his chest.

He wasn't happy the dying man's woes had just turned even worse, but rather that his suspicions had been correct. The Hegemon had been entirely too calm for someone standing next to a pressure cooker filled with ten blood curses. It looked like the curses weren't as indiscriminate in their search for a new host as they earlier believed – some people, likely those with enough status or wealth, had the tools to ward them off.

There was no point in letting the two stragglers suffer any longer, and Zac flashed over and finished the job, leaving the chamber a bloody mess. As he looked at the destruction, he couldn't help but feel some annoyance. Between his recently-adopted habit of going for the head and the gristly exit of the blood curses, it would turn into a chore to turn these invaders into Revenants.

Since sending back the batch of procured bodies from Twilight Harbor, the Einherjar had seen no significant growth.

Certainly, some native undead children were born, but they were essentially feral little devils until they gained sapience. It would be decades before these native undead citizens could step into society either as non-combat or combat classes.

He had hoped that this war would provide an opportunity to bolster his ranks surreptitiously. After all, who would notice if a few hundred thousand thousand bodies went missing in a war involving trillions? But seeing the maimed corpses, Zac wondered if it was even possible without wasting Creation Energy to fix the wounds. That might be worth it for some elites, but definitely not for random foot soldiers. It was time to raise some Liches who could create proper Corpse Lords.

With all the infiltrators dealt with, Zac turned to Vai, who had ensconced herself in the spatial bubble she used to survive the destruction of the cortex.

“Stay inside a bit longer,” Zac said as he hurried across the room and stowed away all the bodies and equipment.

The next moment, a torrent of churning waters washed the whole room clean, including Zac himself. There was

inevitably some damage to the walls and floor from his fractal leaves, but it was better than leaving piles of bodies and mountains of clues behind. Next, Zac spread some karma-breaking dust over the spot where everyone had died, after which he used a Vaccum Treasure to drag everything in the room into a Cosmos Sack.

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “Let’s go before anyone else arrives.”

Vai nodded and deactivated her defensive treasure, but she didn’t immediately head over to activate the doors to the neighboring Mystic Realms. Instead, she looked at where most of the infiltrators had been killed just a few seconds ago.

“You-” Vai hesitated. “Do they weigh on you? The eighteen lives cut short just now.”

“Is this about that guy who ambushed you?” Zac asked, getting a noncommittal shrug in response.

“Honestly? Not really,” Zac eventually said after some thought. “If I let that affect me, I would have gotten myself killed long ago. This is the reality of cultivation for most people. The moment you go against the Heavens in pursuit of power, you enter a social contract where it’s kill or be killed. Only those at the very peak have the luxury of benevolence.”

“I know that,” Vai said as she checked the array for damage. “I’m not sure if that makes things better.”

“I know,” Zac sighed. “I don’t really have any answers for you. Things kept happening when I started cultivating, and the moment I had the breathing room to stop and reflect on what was going on, there were already thousands and thousands of corpses in my wake. Since then, it’s only gotten worse. The old me would probably not recognize what I’ve become.”

Zac found Vai was silently looking at him with an inscrutable expression, and he calmly looked back. “Even then, I don’t regret anything. I’ve done what I had to do to protect myself and those important to me. If anything, I’d be willing to go even further. I guess you have to ask yourself how far you are willing to go to stay alive. To protect the Void Gate. To accomplish your goals.”

Vai didn't immediately answer, and the two stood in silence for ten seconds until she nodded. "... Thank you. There are two connections. Should I open both?"

"One at a time," Zac said. "There might be more of them on the other side."

Vai nodded, and space split apart as the gate opened and displayed an empty room on the other side. Zac stepped through and was met with a weaker pulse in response. The next Mystic Realm was thankfully not only empty as well, but also closer to the seal. Even then, Zac felt it was slightly odd.

The pulse was more potent than the one he got when stepping into the Undrusian Sea, but it was still not at the level of the random burst he received beneath the surface. Zac had hoped he would get a better picture of the situation with the seal after entering another Mystic Realm, but it looked like he would just have to keep going.

Having found the correct place, the two wasted no time as they rushed out of the waystation before running into any more infiltrators. Thankfully, the entrance to the station was hidden in a complex mountain range that Vai said contained a slew of natural spatial formations, making it easy to avoid being spotted until they had created some distance.

Finally, they stopped to orient themselves, and Zac had to admit this place looked pretty odd even by Mystic Realm standards. Vai even called it a failed realm since it hadn't quite managed to reach the state of a stable realm, and the dimensional layer was surprisingly thin. Zac could actually create small spatial tears with his bare hands if he infused them with his Daos, something that would be impossible on Earth or another ordinary world.

At the same time, it was a bit too energy-dense to become a random piece of rubble in the Void, so it ended up in this lifeless state. With a black sky and an almost complete lack of oxygen, it felt like a mountain hurtling through space. It wasn't exactly like a random meteor, though. For one, the sky was fractured like a broken mirror.

Vai found the realm fascinating, but Zac wasn't as enthused. The pulse had proven he was still in contention for the next piece of the seal, and he couldn't wait to set out again. Everything was ready, only the piece of the seal was missing. It didn't matter how many infiltrator squads they encountered on the way. He'd go to war if he had to.

Then again, fighting against some hostile invaders to get his hands on the next part of the seal was easy. The problem was the other choices that might have to be made. Seeing just how dangerous things had gotten lately, Zac couldn't help but glance at his companion. It was not just a matter of danger either. The Void Gate was clearly connected to the Left Imperial Palace somehow.

For his goals, for his path, just how much was he willing to sacrifice?

Chapter 894: Hidden Pockets

After having encountered two parties of infiltrators in such a short span, Zac and Vai's nerves were on edge as they made their way through the mountain. Luckily, the lifeless mountains of the failed realms were filled with deep crags and confusing natural formations, while the stone itself contained a chaotic mix of energies that would help hide their presence. It provided them with secluded pathways as they made their way forward, and its value quickly became apparent.

Over the next day, Vai discovered not one but seven parties in the distance, each one of them heading in the same direction – toward the waystation they just left. Seven was not many, but it was not few either, especially when you considered Zac and Vai kept to the edge of the realm.

Who knew how many parties there were in total, counting those who cut straight through the middle of this failed realm rather than followed the edges? A hundred? Even more? Not only that, but the parties were getting bigger as well, with two having over a hundred members. Seeing such bustling activity, Vai had a theory – they were getting close to the path the invaders used to infiltrate the Void Star.

Seeing the activity left Zac confused. How could the Void Gate allow these people to act so wantonly? Even if Hegemons didn't grow on trees, there had to be more than enough Templars to go around. Why hadn't they sent a proper army down to the depths of the Void Star? Why not cut the problem off at the roots?

These smaller realms had inherent limits where too large skirmishes or too powerful warriors could cause spatial instability or even collapse, but roving groups of elite templars could do a lot of damage to hamper the progress of the infiltrators. Vai seemed quite confused as well, leaving Zac with only one theory.

The infiltrators had managed to cause enough trouble to cut off this entire region of the Void Star.

The situation was extremely worrying, even if they hadn't run into anyone overly powerful so far. Not only did the situation put their escape route in jeopardy, but it might mean there were enemy bases with actual arrays and traps set up in the area. Zac could probably deal with a scouting party if it came down to it, but a whole base was asking too much.

Vai understood the issue all-too-well, and her eyes almost never left the bowl in her hands. She continuously infused it with her Dao to broaden its reach, and if not for Zac providing her with Soul Crystals to recover Mental Energy, she would quickly have toppled over.

The days passed like this, where they continuously stayed on edge as they passed one party after another. More than once, they were forced to backtrack and find a proper hiding spot to avoid colliding with parties. Zac felt doubly lucky he had Vai by his side in this kind of environment. Zac would have long since been exposed without her help, just like how that dour scout had outsmarted him before.

And that was especially true on the third day as her head suddenly snapped up from the bowl as she gazed toward the edge of the realm. Zac frowned as he followed her gaze, but there was nothing – only an actual edge where this patch of the mountain simply ended.

“There’s a manmade spatial pocket there,” Vai whispered. “It’s definitely created by the Void Gate. We might finally have found some allies!”

“Spatial Pocket? Like an Illusion Array?” Zac asked.

“Its function is similar, but it’s a more powerful version. You cannot see through it with any observation skills since it’s not an actual illusion. The only way to find it is to know the signature or have an extremely deep understanding of the Dao of Space,” Vai explained.

Zac slowly nodded, not completely understanding how it worked.

“Can we enter and see if anyone’s there?” Vai asked with big puppy-dog eyes.

“Sure,” Zac said after some hesitation, “if you know how to get inside.”

“No problem,” Vai said and took out an Array Disk. “Little Lara gave me a master key that should give us access.”

“Your niece is...” Zac coughed, but he simply followed her to an empty patch of land.

Zac was just about to ask how it worked, but their surroundings suddenly shuddered, and they found themselves standing in the middle of a campsite that was almost a hundred meters across.

“This,” Zac muttered as he looked around with surprise, but his eyes immediately honed in on a silver arch standing right at the edge of the realm. Was that a hidden Space Gate?

“This is really ours!” Vai said with excitement. “Some of our Array Masters have been here.”

“Is that a gate?” Zac asked curiously as he pointed at the silvery doorway.

“A portable one,” Vai nodded as they walked over toward it. “Usually, we don’t use them because they’re so expensive to make. This one even seems to have a lot of extra features added. I wonder what’s different about it.”

“Can you see when it was placed here?” Zac asked after some thought, suddenly having a theory.

What would happen if a new pathway was suddenly opened? Could that be the source of the previous pulse? The Void Gate might just have done him a huge favor and set him up with a shortcut to where he needed to go. That would explain the reason the pulse had gotten stronger, and it was a far preferable theory to the piece of the seal being taken or on the move.

“It should be pretty recent, a few weeks at the maximum judging by the residual energy,” Vai said after taking some measurements.

Zac breathed out in relief, a weight suddenly lifted from his shoulders. It really looked like there was a lot of merit to his theory. If true, then this was a lucky break of monumental proportions. Especially considering how crowded their route was getting. Even if he was willing to fight the infiltrators for the seal, this way was a lot better.

Who knew how many infiltrators he would have been forced to fight if he followed the original route toward the next waystation. Of course, this all hinged on his theory being right, that this indeed was a shortcut.

“Can you activate it?” Zac asked, which dragged Vai out of her thoughts.

“Give me a minute,” Vai nodded. “It has a few inscriptions I haven’t seen in this context, perhaps to stop traitors from activating it? I somewhat recognize the method; I just need to think things over for a bit, so I don’t accidentally trigger it to self-destruct or something.”

“Take your time,” Zac nodded and stepped aside to let her work on the gate. “How safe is this spot? Can people simply stumble into it?”

“Impossible,” Vai smiled as she pointed between the two edges of the hidden encampment. “Those two sides are a connected space. If someone walks into one of the walls, they will appear on the other side for us as though they teleported. For the one on the outside, they will not notice anything since the width of this area is essentially zero.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac muttered. “How big can you make these bubbles? Can you hide a whole planet inside one?”

“Well, I think you technically can,” Vai said after some thought. “But it gets more difficult the more stable the space is. You’ve seen how fragile it is in this place, which makes any manipulation a lot easier. You should understand that we’re not placed in a lower dimension like how it works with Mystic Realms or Spatial Treasures. We are hidden inside the same layer of space we entered from.

“A Spatial Pocket placed in the main dimension would require an enormous source of energy. I’d venture this small pocket is drawing large amounts of energy from this whole mountain range. To hide a whole planet would be an enormous undertaking. It would be cheaper to simply find and move a Mystic Realm than do something like this.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed.

Seeing such an amazing solution, the first thing Zac thought of was Earth and potentially hiding the whole thing with this kind of array. But it looked like he would have to find some other method to hide the planet from the universe in 90 years.

The hours passed as Zac rested up while Vai went over the Control Array. She had been exhausted by the time they found this place, but seeing the unique design had invigorated her. Of course, the fact that Zac had crushed a couple of Soul Crystals and taken out the [**Mind’s Eye Agate**] had helped both her focus and recuperation.

Zac also explored the campsite in search of clues, but there was not much to go by. The camp was clearly meant as a temporary rest stop, though it was a bit curious the tents were all left behind. Even then, the only thing of interest was that the ground in one of the tents was covered in blood. There even was even a slightly ominous aura here, which made Zac wonder just what had transpired. Execution? Torture?

Since there was nothing else to this place, Zac soon went back to Vai’s side to watch her work.

“I’ve figured it out,” Vai eventually said with a slight flush on her cheeks. “I wonder who made this—it might even be someone from the Void Monastery itself. The methods are not extremely complex, but it combines so many theories and concepts from various subordinate convents. It has essentially combined five different arrays and methods into one.”

Zac could see how excited she was, but he couldn’t wait to hear the verdict, so he coughed a bit before she went off on a tangent.

“Ah, don’t worry, I can activate it,” Vai added.

“Great,” Zac said. “Let’s do it.”

“Do you think our people, ah, my people, are on the other side?” Vai asked hopefully.

“Maybe,” Zac slowly nodded. “Though this place might have been set up by some elites who are heading deep into enemy territory. If weeks have passed since this camp was set up, they might have moved on already.”

“Right,” Vai said, her eyes dimming a bit.

“Don’t worry. I think what I’m looking for is in the next realm. After that, we’ll immediately start looking for the members of the Void Gate, alright?” Zac said, which made the little researcher perk up again.

Until recently, Zac hadn’t been sure what to do after getting his hands on the second piece. He had caught onto its tail by chance, and there were no guarantees he’d find another piece even if he spent another year inside the Void Star. By the looks of things, they had reached the deepest parts of the Void Star by now, and there had never been any conflicting signals that said he could head in two different directions.

And with how the region was suddenly crawling with infiltrators, every additional day they stayed behind might lead to a disaster. For now, Zac felt the best solution was to start looking for a way out the moment he picked up the second piece of the seal. If he happened to stumble onto another signal on the way out, great. If not, he would have to search other regions for clues, just like these infiltrators were doing now.

As far as he could tell, the piece of rubble Zac got had appeared somewhat recently. And with the infiltrators knowing about them as well, there was one extremely promising region – The Million Gates Territory. That place was a hotbed of weird spatial anomalies. It wouldn’t be a surprise if a path leading to the Left Imperial Palace appeared somewhere around there.

From there, the Void Star had swallowed up some pieces of rubble, either by accident or design. Using a Creator Cosmic

Vessel to search the region while looking for Ogras and Billy and racking up war contributions would kill three birds with one stone.

A minute later, the gate hummed to life, but both Zac and Vai frowned when they didn't see anything on the other side of the gate. It was just an opalescent wall that released slight spatial fluctuations.

"Does it work?" Zac hesitated as he looked at the opaque screen.

"I- Ah... I think so?" Vai hesitated.

A spear appeared in Zac's hand, and he stabbed it inside the spatial gate to make sure. A moment later, he took it back, and it looked perfectly fine. If the Void had been on the other side, the spear would have almost been destroyed by an attempt like that.

"Alright," Zac nodded. "Let me scout--"

He didn't get any further as both the screen and the whole spatial bubble shuddered ominously, making Zac look around with alarm.

"It's running out of energy! This failed realm cannot sustain it!" Vai said with shock. "It will collapse soon."

Zac only hesitated for a fraction of a second before he made his decision. "Go!"

The next moment, he had already appeared in a different world, and his heart lurched when he found himself falling. It turned out they had been dropped off in the air just like when they first entered the Void Star. Thankfully, it was only a couple of hundred meters above ground this time, and there were no dangerous birds in sight.

The ground was drawing closer quickly, but Zac still managed to catch a glimpse of a seemingly boundless forest before he crashed through a couple of tree crowns. A powerful pulse from the Left Imperial Palace greeted him when he landed with a thud, and a smile spread across his face. It was a success, and he had even been able to sense what direction to go.

However, his smile gradually faded as he looked around with confusion. Vai landed next to him a moment later, and she didn't share his initial ebullience at all. Instead, she looked confused and frazzled.

"This is wrong," Vai exclaimed as she took out her bowl and almost put her whole face inside it. "This is all wrong. "Why were we sent out here? Where is the other half of the array? Without it, we can't return. Wh- Hello? Are you alright?"

Zac knew Vai was talking to him, and he understood that them being thrown out like this wasn't great. However, Zac didn't immediately answer as his mind churned. First of all, the next piece of the seal was definitely located in this realm judging by the power of the pulse. But that wasn't what filled him with uncertainty.

Why did this place feel so familiar?

He was almost positive he had never been to this place before, yet it filled him with an odd sense of déjà vu. Was it because the surroundings looked like a common forest you might see back on Earth, a refreshing break after all kinds of alien environments he had traversed the past months? Or was it simply the pieces of the seal harmonizing with each other?

"Sorry," Zac eventually said. "It's probably nothing. I'm guessing that's not how those gates are supposed to work?"

"No," Vai sighed. "Another one should be placed on the other side after passing through. That way, the gate is stabilized."

"Well, it might be because the other side was too energy-starved," Zac mused. "No wonder they left their camp behind. They probably had to jump through like we did."

"What should we do now?" Vai asked with worry as her gaze flitted between the bowl and the forest.

She had clearly hoped to run into her people here, but Zac was relieved that wasn't the case. With the seal being so close, he didn't need any further complications. And thankfully, this place seemed pretty harmless. The energy was even denser than Earth, but there weren't the tell-tale incessant calls of the wild that often indicated a danger zone.

“Can you see anything?” Zac asked. “Either man or beast.”

“No,” Vai sighed. “I don’t understand how it would come to this...”

“Well, they might have been dropped off elsewhere. Or moved further inside,” Zac shrugged. “We might as well move out if we want to figure out what’s happened here.”

“You don’t want to find my people,” Vai said, and it was a statement rather than a question.

“Well, not until I accomplish what I came here for,” Zac smiled. “I doubt they’d let me run off on my own. But after I’ve accomplished my goal, it’s probably a good idea to find the templars who set up this gate. They might be our best bet on getting out of here.”

“What will you do if the ones we’re looking for are after the same thing as you?” Vai asked.

“Then I’ll probably knock them out and then steal it,” Zac said after some thought. “Can’t have that thing falling into the wrong hands, you know?”

“Wrong hands?” Vai said with confusion.

“Anyone’s but mine,” Zac nodded.

“You..! Shameless,” Vai exclaimed, but she shook her head and smiled a moment later. “Fine, let’s go. Do you know the way?”

“Follow me,” Zac nodded, and the two set off.

For the first ten minutes, they didn’t encounter a single threat. The only beasts they saw were some F-grade critters scuttling about in the tree crown or between the bushels. They came in all shapes and sizes, but they had one thing in common; all of them seemed absolutely terrified of him and Vai.

At first, Zac didn’t understand what brought on that kind of powerful reaction. Most F-grade beasts were pretty stupid and aggressive, and he would have expected to get the occasional attack. Finally, there was a change as Vai spotted six Peak E-grade signatures in her bowl, and they were even heading straight toward them.

For the first time, Vai couldn't give a clear answer whether they were dealing with beasts or cultivators, so Zac simply had Vai stand behind him as he waited for their new friends. Thirty seconds later, six hulking humanoid figures came rushing out of the forest, all of them covered in thick black fur and reeking of bloodlust.

No wonder the critters in the forest were so terrified upon seeing humans. There were actually humanoid beasts in this place.

Chapter 895: Second Piece

Zac looked down at the bloody carcasses with interest. It wasn't often you ran into humanoid beasts, and this was the first ones he'd seen since the Twinruin Bloodstalker he fought in the Big Axe Coliseum. These guys seemed to have a deeper bloodline than the bloodstalker, but ultimately, they were only E-grade beasts.

They looked like black-furred yeti with builds almost a match to Billy's, but that didn't affect their impressive speed. Their primary attack method was their long claws, but Zac sensed an odd discrepancy between the group. Three of them emitted vague hints of nature-aspected Dao, while the other three leaned toward earth. This was a divergence from common beasts, where a whole race generally learned the same Dao.

Were these guys perhaps moving toward Atavism and becoming actual cultivators? It was doubtful; their bestial nature was far too pronounced.

"Do you recognize them?" Zac asked the researcher, who shook her head.

"I never heard of Humanoid Beasts inside the Void Star," Vai said.

"Well, let's hope there aren't too many Beast Kings amongst these guys. Those things might be pretty dangerous."

The two performed a cursory inspection of the beasts, but there didn't seem to be anything of value on their bodies. Zac still stowed them away, much to the confusion of Vai. He figured that while their claws or meat might be worthless, the bodies might serve a purpose. Could Humanoid Beasts be turned into Revenants?

He knew that it was impossible with beasts. You had to use their parts for Corpse Lords, though mixing flesh of cultivators

and beasts would generally cause severe rejection. You'd have to be an incredibly skilled Lich to get away with those modifications unless you were okay with the Corpse Lord having a limited future.

The alternative to body repurposing was to turn them into undead beasts and enter contracts with them. Apparently, more than a few clans in the Undead Empire went this route since you could consider it a branch of Soul Cultivation. However, beast taming wasn't very popular among the Divine Races since they had their own heritages.

All those rules and restrictions might not apply to a Humanoid Beast. But they were so rare that the subject had never come up when he traveled with Catheya. If he could turn these durable guys into proper soldiers, he would have a terrifying army to add to his repertoire for the upcoming war.

Therefore, Zac was quite careful with the bodies of the beasts they encountered over the following days, and there was more than one. At first, Zac had been worried it would be hard to find more of them, but that worry turned out to be unfounded. They were all over the forest, and they were beyond aggressive.

Anytime the beasts spotted them, there was no hesitation. They immediately went in for the kill, and they didn't care in the slightest when their companions got killed. Zac's only options were complete annihilation or escape, and if not for his idea, he would quickly have started to avoid them altogether. They were too big of a nuisance and a constant cause of headache during their journey.

Other than that, the forest was relatively safe. There was the occasional plant that looked a bit dangerous, but it was nothing compared to the realms they passed over the past months. The real problem was how big this place was.

After ten days had passed, Zac started to feel like he was stuck in an illusion array. The forest was without end, and Zac wondered just how big this place was. Compared to the previous Mystic Realms, they would have long since reached the other side with how fast they were moving.

“I didn’t even know we had such big Mystic Realms in the Void Star,” Vai agreed when Zac inquired. “Generally, realms of this size have too powerful spatial properties, and it creates problems in the star.”

“It might be a recent addition,” Zac muttered. “And it might be why the infiltrators can enter the Void Star. Is it possible to manually detach a realm from the Void Star?”

Zac did feel that this whole invasion was above his paygrade, but if he could stop the invaders from using the Void Star as a springboard, he was willing to give it a go if an opportunity presented itself. Not only would it help keep a lot of people safe, but it might even give him some Contribution Points for the war.

“Ah, I’m not sure...” Vai hesitated. “I’ve heard the Monarchs are powerful enough to move the realms with the help of certain treasures manually, but that method is impossible for us. If this place collapsed, it might cause enough a strong enough spatial ripple to cut the connection with the Million Gates Territory.”

“So, blow it up?” Zac nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“B-Blow it up?” Vai stuttered. “How would you blow up a whole Mystic Realm?”

“Well, it’s just an idea. But in my experience, things are more liable to blow up than people think,” Zac shrugged.

“That-That’s crazy,” Vai said with wide eyes. “Actions have repercussions. Who knows how our karma will be affected by destroying a world?”

“Well, with how big this place is, we have time to brainstorm something better,” Zac smiled.

Finally, after four weeks of constant travel, the topography changed. According to Vai, it seemed as though this realm was a ‘Chimeral Realm’ as she called it, the combination of multiple dimensional fragments. The mountain range that stretched out across the horizon had come from another world.

Hearing the explanation made Zac immediately think of the System, but this was a natural occurrence that sometimes

happened when a powerful realm was surrounded by smaller satellites. Eventually, the main domain gobbled the smaller ones up, adding them to their bulk. Vai was still confused, as the topography somewhat messed with her understanding of the process.

She tried to explain the interrelation between space, geography, and leylines, but Zac quickly grew bored and confused. How this place had been created wasn't as important as the fact that he felt a weak but continuous signal since he stepped onto the mountain, just like when he had closed in on the first piece on Hako Lake.

The second piece of the seal shouldn't be more than a week's travel from here.

They still hadn't encountered the squad from the Void Gate, or any other cultivators for that matter, but Zac knew this place wasn't completely unpopulated. They had spotted a few marks that were likely left from cultivators killing those beasts. For instance, Vai had found a boulder that had been pierced straight through, along with the skeleton of one of those beasts.

Someone had ambushed the thing by striking straight through the rock, either with a spear or arrow, proving the two weren't alone in this place. And with them closing in on the seal, Zac had Vai continuously keep track with the bowl again as he carried her into the mountains. Even then, the only enemies they encountered were more of those beasts.

Zac couldn't believe how many of them were. He had killed close to a thousand through their month-long trek through the forest, but it quickly became apparent those roving packs were just the few who had gone off on their own. In an hour's worth of travel in the mountain range, Zac added another 200 humanoid beasts to his growing pile of corpses.

Going by how many yetis they saw in this place, the mountain range had to be their home base. There had to be tens of millions of them if they had spread out through the whole region. And so far, the weakest ones he'd encountered were

Middle E-grade, which probably meant they naturally reached E-grade upon reaching adulthood.

Not any random place could support such a vast population, yet Zac couldn't sense anything special about this place. If anything, the energy density was worse than in the forest. So why did they stay here? Were there riches underground?

With so many yetis in the vicinity, Zac and Vai soon found it hard to progress as freely as before. The cliffs carried even the smallest of sounds far and wide, and every battle attracted all the beasts in the area. If they kept going like this, they'd never reach the seal. It was not just a matter of dealing with the beasts either, but it also risked warning other parties of their presence.

So the two carefully changed their tactic to avoid the yeti as best they could as they used stealth to creep forward, even if Zac burned with impatience. With the help of Vivi's vines, the two climbed further and further into the heart of the mountain, generally avoiding the paths on the ground altogether.

A few more days passed like this until they saw a massive crater in the distance. Zac's heart thumped since he recognized its odd shape - it seemed to be almost completely spherical. But in contrast to the small cave holding the piece of rubble, this thing was a few kilometers across. It might look a bit different, but there was no doubt in Zac's mind.

After months, they had finally reached the second piece of the seal.

"That's odd," Vai muttered as she followed Zac's gaze. "Never seen a valley like that before. It doesn't seem like a natural formation."

"Let's go," Zac said as he started moving again, advancing even more deliberately to make sure they weren't discovered.

Twenty minutes later, they found a good spot to investigate what was going on at the bottom of the valley, and Zac's brows furrowed with incomprehension. He didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't an ancient temple with tens of thousands of yeti sitting in silent meditation outside.

The valley wasn't perfectly spherical either - there was a tiled square outside the temple that had somehow avoided getting disintegrated. It was on this square the yeti was sitting.

"Are they praying?" Vai whispered with shock. "Have they actually formed a society? And what's that temple? I don't recognize it at all. Do you know?"

Zac didn't immediately answer but tried to understand the situation better first. There were no two ways about it; the next seal was inside the temple. The scene was a bit confusing, though. After seeing the spherical cave with the piece of rubble, it was clear as day to Zac that the whole valley had been disintegrated by one of those terrifying pulses. The layer of dust on the ground was proof of this.

So how had the temple and the square survived? Was it a part of the Left Imperial Palace? It shouldn't be - even if the place were mostly in ruins, Zac could tell the design didn't seem very similar to either the small pagoda in the Ultom Court or the Left Imperial Palace.

"I'm not quite sure either, but I know the item I need is inside," Zac eventually said.

"I wonder why the yetis are staying outside," Vai mused.

"If they enter, they'll turn to ash. See the pile of dust at the temple gates? Those are probably former yetis," Zac sighed.

"What!" Vai said with fear. "Then how will we enter?"

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait outside," Zac said, and he held up a hand when he saw Vai looked ready to argue.

"There's nothing I can do. From what I can tell, everyone who hasn't been chosen will be annihilated when getting close. Do you remember that scout, Ceru? He turned to dust right in front of my eyes when I picked up the last piece."

"... Alright then," Vai reluctantly nodded. "I didn't expect to be stopped at the goal line, but I'm not ready to die to study those ruins. So, what will you do?"

"It seems straightforward enough," Zac shrugged. "I'll just rush straight through the beasts and enter the gate. If they dare follow, they'll be in for a world of hurt."

“But what if you-“Vai hesitated, not finishing her sentence.

“If it turns out I’ve overestimated my fate and get myself killed, you’ll have to leave without me. Try to find your people. Luckily, this realm doesn’t seem too dangerous apart from these mountains.”

“I... Alright,” Vai eventually acceded. “But I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Well, I am pretty lucky, all things considered,” Zac smiled.

For the next hour, the two looked around until they found a good hiding spot not too far away from the valley, where they set up a series of illusion arrays. It was a cave that was both hard to reach and hard to spot from the ground, and the likelihood of the yetis climbing up here was almost nil according to what they’d seen so far.

Zac spent the next hour stabilizing his state and going over everything. There were always things that could go sideways, but he felt he had prepared as much as possible. As long as Zac seized the epiphany, he had something to steer it toward. He had even gone over his Daos and the direction he wanted to take them, just in case the nature of the second epiphany was different.

“I’m going. Here, take this,” Zac said and threw over a Cosmos Sack.

“What’s this?” Vai asked.

“Offensive Talismans, Escape Talismans, provisions, and various things you need when adventuring. There is also an information crystal on how to get in touch with my people if I get myself killed,” Zac smiled. “I’m sorry I dragged you to such a dangerous place to complete my mission.”

“Don’t say such inauspicious things,” Vai pouted. “Just go get that item. I’ll be right here.”

“Alright, I’m off,” Zac nodded before flashing away.

He appeared hundreds of meters away after having activated **[Earthstrider]**, and with a few more steps, he’d crossed half a mountain. He didn’t bother using Vivi’s vines now that he was

alone and instead used the mountain walls occasionally to reset his movement skill as he blazed a path through the sky. It was pretty costly to use his movement skill in this manner, but he couldn't wait for a second longer.

Like this, the mountain range turned into a blur until he once more found himself at the valley's edge. He pushed out, and four steps to the air allowed him to reach the edge of the yetis in almost an instant. Another step took him deep into their ranks, but he failed to take his sixth and final step as a tremendous bloody aura prevented him from activating the skill again.

Zac had expected as much, and he slammed into the middle of the pack like a meteor. A swarm of fractal leaves ripped apart the closest beast as he rushed forward. No longer did he care about maintaining the state of their bodies. He was only thinking of efficiency, of getting to the temple as quickly as possible.

He entered his Evolutionary Stance, and suddenly he was an apex predator in a flock of sheep. Two enormous waves of Dao and Killing intent formed a spatial divide that stretched almost two hundred meters. Yetis died by the hundreds as Zac carved a bloody path, and for the first time since entering this place, he saw some of them run away with fear.

That didn't hold for the Beast Kings and their followers, though. They had formed a defensive line in front of the temple when Zac appeared. Judging by the energy churning through their bodies, they had been planning a response for a while now. The result was immediate, and Zac frowned when thousands of spikes blotted out the sky. At the same time, even more spikes formed a circle around him, and it felt like he had been entered the maw of a terrifying beast.

The only relief was that no spikes popped up through the ground, but the Beast Kings had essentially created a deadly dome that was closing in on him. Zac was shocked at the scene. Since when were beasts this quick-witted and coordinated? Going by the slightly different auras in the spikes, this was actually a combination attack where each Beast King conjured roughly a hundred spikes each.

It was shocking to think they were so clever. Or had they known he was coming and prepared this trap for a long time? It was still impressive, but not as much as naturally forming battle formations. When had he been exposed? When they spied on the valley before? Even earlier? Or was he not the first one to try and seize the thing inside the temple?

Zac grunted with annoyance as he infused [**Arcadian Crusade**] with energy. So much for simply rushing through this pack. If he ever found out someone else had raised the awareness of these yeti, they would be in for the beating of a lifetime.

Chapter 896: Another Cycle

The enormous spikes had blotted out his surroundings in no time, forming an almost perfect half-sphere. The scene reminded Zac of the chamber that contained the Dimensional Seed back in the Mystic Realm. But back then, the spikes had been pointed at the dimensional treasure. Now they were pointed at him, and the cage was shrinking. Fast.

The fifty-meter spikes appeared to be wrought from the same rusty stone as the surroundings, but they were covered with black veins that looked like obsidian. Those veins contained a terrifying amount of energy, and it felt as though thousands of **[Nature's Punishment]** were being unleashed at once.

Not only that, but the array of stalactites had formed some sort of barrier. Even if he somehow managed to squeeze between the spikes, he would also have to deal with the fence. Zac glanced at black-furred humanoids who had run away from him earlier. He could barely discern some of them outside the ambush, and their eyes were filled with cold hatred as they silently stared back at him.

So much for fleeing in fear of his prowess. They just didn't want to be caught inside the trap that was rapidly closing in on him. There were also hundreds of yetis left inside who were caught between a rock and a hard place. The Beast Kings had to be hell-bent on killing him since the attack would result in mass casualties among their own.

Even Zac felt tremendous pressure when he looked up at the spectacle. This was why he always rushed into a melee with Beast Kings and Hegemons. Giving them time to make use of their vast stores of energy and D-grade skills would always put him at a disadvantage. He could tell **[Empyrean Aegis]** would only be able to withstand a couple of hits before breaking apart, and **[Void Zone]** wasn't very effective against corporeal attacks.

He had to dodge it - or rather pass right through it.

Luckily, his slaughter had created some breathing room, especially with the remaining beasts escaping from the trap. And with the tremendous waves of energy the thousands of spikes were emitting, there was no way either Vai or anyone else would be able to discern what he was up to inside the trap. As such, a plan formed in his mind, and he flashed forward to the edge of the encirclement.

A hand emitting an archaic aura appeared out of nowhere, wielding the wooden axe covered in the markings of paradise. It was [**Arcadia's Judgement**] activated with Void Energy, which saved Zac a precious second. The cage had already halved in size in a short moment, and if not for his cheat, he wouldn't have had time to conjure the skill before getting skewered. And even if activated with Void energy, the skill still gained the boost from [**Arcadian Crusade**].

The enormous axe slammed down on the spikes barring his path, and the collision shook the whole valley and agitated the layer of ash on the ground. The veins of the spikes shimmered for a moment as their energy surged, but the spikes still only lasted a moment in the face of Zac's empowered strike.

With all the layered powers Zac had added to his most potent attack, the swing felt like a harbinger of the apocalypse as it destroyed everything in its path. Still, the spikes actually crumbled easier than Zac had expected, but a sudden scream of danger forced Zac to scramble to the side. A whistling scream almost blew out his eardrum as a fist-sized shard narrowly missed his head.

Zac grimaced when he realized it wasn't just an errant shard shot in his direction by the clash. The spikes were exploding like cluster bombs along the veinlike patterns, which unleashed innumerable projectiles on the surroundings. His attack had started a chain reaction as more and more spikes exploded, and the trapped beasts were already dying by the dozens.

[**Nature's Edge**] couldn't compare to this kind of mayhem, whether you considered the number of projectiles or their

velocity. Another shard whizzed past him like a blur right on the heels of the previous one, and Zac shuddered when he felt just how much energy it contained. A golden laurel appeared on his head as he desperately fended off dozens of splinters with his axe, and it narrowly allowed him to block four spikes that slammed into him from behind.

The golden barrier of [**Empyrean Aegis**] saved him from being gored, but it couldn't completely dispel the force contained in the shards after the explosions. So Zac found himself pushed in the direction of his own skill. At first, he was afraid that he would find himself attacked by the second stage of [**Arcadia's Judgement**], but he was surprised to see the second shockwave completely blocked and nullified by the tiles.

Only now did he realize that not so much as a mark had been left on them since the battle started, no matter if it was from his attacks or the projectiles that slammed into the ground all around him with the force of an E-grade elite's attack.

A sharp pain dragged him out of his thoughts as a shard managed to pierce through his barrier. One of the steles of [**Empyrean Aegis**] had already crumbled, and the cascading explosions around him were only getting worse. Zac ignored the dangers as he rushed straight into the path he had opened, trying to cover as much ground as possible.

He was constantly blasted with sharp projectiles, each one containing enough force to slam him into the ground or push him off course. But Zac was adamant about getting through this gauntlet. [**Verun's Bite**] turned into a blur as he parried as many projectiles as he could, and he threw out whole stacks of offensive talismans with his other hand to avert some more.

Long patches of Vivi's vines were being ripped asunder as well as the plant formed thick nets to lessen the burden on [**Empyrean Aegis**]. Even if he was rapidly expending energy, there was simply too much shrapnel being unleashed by the Beast Kings. He couldn't possibly block it all even if he moved as efficiently as he could following Evolutionary Stance.

One piece of rock after another broke through the barrier, leaving him with deep wounds and infusions of chaotic energies. Zac knew he would have to eat even more strikes than this if he wanted to reach the barrier outside. But no matter how dangerous his plan was, it was nothing compared to the meatgrinder behind him. If he waited around until all the spikes exploded, not even scraps of him would remain.

Each step was a battle, but he finally believed he had pushed himself far enough. Ancient trees sprouted atop the tiles all around him, though most of them were ripped apart the moment they appeared. Zac didn't care - he only needed the effect of [**Ancestral Woods**] for a short moment.

Hundreds of scenes entered his mind, and Zac breathed out in relief. He hadn't miscalculated the distance in all the chaos - he was just two hundred meters away from the barrier meant to trap him in this hellscape. The shield looked extremely sturdy, and it didn't so much as shudder after getting hit by hundreds of shards every second. Breaking through it by force would probably take a while.

Unfortunately for them, Zac had other means. If Vai had seen the trees of [**Ancestral Woods**] right now, she would have realized they truly lived up to their name today as they emitted an unusually primordial aura. Zac had activated the skill with Void Energy, which allowed for a unique advantage with this particular skill.

He had already confirmed that Void Energy worked differently and could simply ignore most types of seals. He had used that to kill the cultists back in the Mystic Realm, but [**Ancestral Woods**] provided a different kind of use - escape. The forest covered quite a big area, so a few of them appeared outside the barrier.

The Beast Kings realized something was wrong and moved to destroy them, but they weren't quick enough. Zac had already suddenly emerged from one of them like a bloody specter, with an axe keening for vengeance in his hand. Zac could tell Verun wanted to come out and fight these Yeti Kings, but he held the Tool Spirit back as he rushed forward.

Behind him, the rumble kept growing louder as the cage descended into utter chaos, and the cries from the trapped yeti had already been cut short. His heart shuddered as he pictured himself being stuck inside that grinder, but he quickly turned that fear into speed. The gate to the temple was only a few hundred meters away, with only a single Beast King barring his path.

“Bastards,” Zac growled as the muscles in his right arm bunched up, and the golden runes on his face suddenly shone brighter as he closed in on the five-meter-tall Humanoid Beast King.

Zac unleashed a herculean swing at the incoming swipe, and the clash kicked up an enormous cloud of dust from the piles accumulated around the entrance. Zac was pushed back a step and worsened some of his wounds while the five-meter Yeti King was thrown over twenty meters away with a severed arm and a deep wound its chest, showing just how terrifying Zac’s Strength was for an E-grade cultivator.

His arm hurt, but there was no time to think. Zac regained his footing and lept forward, flying straight toward the arched gate before the other Beast Kings could catch up. Even if things had gotten a bit hectic, he knew all-too-well how dangerous this was, and he wasn’t thinking about the yeti outside.

An instant later, he passed through the gate and landed inside the temple’s courtyard, his heart beating like a drum as his eyes were trained on the small prayer hall inside. It was from there the signal came, and the response was immediate. A powerful pulse rippled out from within the ruin, and Zac urgently activated [**Void Zone**] and covered his whole body with Void Energy.

Zac still didn’t really know if that was what had saved him last time, but it was better than just getting his extremities turned to ash again. It was also because of this pulse he hadn’t dared let Verun out. Last time, all his belongings survived. In contrast, anything he didn’t touch had been destroyed, such as the Spatial Treasure and gear of the scout.

The pulse passed through him until it reached the edge of the courtyard, where it simply stopped. Zac stood frozen in place for a second before he breathed out in relief. It looked like he had been accepted. A second later, a furious burst of energy drew his attention, and Zac turned around to see an enraged group of Yeti Kings stomping outside.

Even if Zac had survived, they didn't dare to take as much as one step inside the courtyard, proving they knew just how dangerous this place was. Still, it was a bit distracting to have them scowl at him and cause a scene. Luckily, there was a simple solution since the stone gate remained intact.

"You guys should probably leave if you don't want to get killed," Zac muttered as he closed the doors. "Things will only get worse from here on out."

Zac wanted to rush inside and get the second part of the seal, but his body was a mess. He hadn't expected to be pushed this far by the beasts outside, so he reluctantly spent the next hour at the edge of the courtyard, restoring his body and energy while recovering from **[Arcadian Crusade]**'s backlash. It would be a colossal waste to squander the opportunity because of exhaustion.

After ten minutes, the commotion outside died down, giving Zac some peace and quiet. Even better, the temple seemed content to wait around as well, in contrast to the rubble that had essentially attacked him like a heat-seeking missile. After what felt like an eternity, Zac got back on his feet and walked toward the prayer hall with a mix of trepidation and anticipation.

Now that he stood within the temple and things had calmed down, he could feel an intense sense of antiquity emanating from the dilapidated ruins. There was also a sense of undying conviction ingrained into the very foundations he walked on. But it didn't carry the aggressive aura of the Left Imperial Palace, the kind of fierceness that dared to go against the Heavens themselves.

It was solemn, and Zac felt it was somehow focused on a singular task. Suddenly, Zac stopped and turned his head, but

only an empty courtyard met his confused gaze. For a moment, Zac had felt like he saw someone in the corner of his eye, silently looking at him. Just as he thought he imagined things, another shape suddenly appeared, walking right past him toward the prayer hall.

The moment he saw the body, Zac found himself collapsing onto the ground, and he was unable to so much as lift his head in front of its worldending aura. Thankfully, the immense pressure disappeared as quickly as it arrived, and by the time Zac looked up, the figure was gone. Were these imprints left by mighty people back when this place was still in use? But who could leave such powerful impressions, like he was in the presence of a deity?

Supremacies. Not even the powerful Autarch he had met had exuded that kind of divinity, and this was just some lingering impression in a dilapidated ruin.

The odd encounter didn't scare Zac off. Instead, his anticipation grew as he ascended the seven steps of the temple and walked inside. If this little temple was visited by a Supremacy once upon a time, there might actually be more treasures than just a second piece of the rubble waiting in this place.

Unfortunately, there weren't any piles of treasure waiting for him as he entered the prayer hall. Instead, it was simple and unadorned. The room was essentially empty except for a white altar and eight faded scrolls hanging behind it. The rock from which the altar was made was highly weathered, and if there had ever been any inscriptions on it, they were long gone. The same was true for the scrolls.

They might have been made from some high-grade paper once upon a time, but they had long lost their spirituality. Only one of the eight was still intact, while the others had broken off completely. But even the best-preserved scroll was chapped and cracked to the point it was impossible to make out what had once been written on it.

The signal didn't come from the altar, nor did it come from any of the tapestries. Instead, it came from a statuette standing

on the edge of the altar. It was roughly a twenty-centimeter tall stone figurine, presumably depicting a man pointing toward the sky. Zac couldn't be sure since it was also highly eroded, and the raised arm had been broken off at its elbow.

The statue didn't look like an original part of the decoration. Contrasting the figurine and the rest of the ruins, it felt like someone had just placed it there after this place had already been abandoned. It was clearly ancient, but it didn't share the same focused aura as the rest of the temple.

It didn't emit a smidgeon of energy. Just like with the piece of rubble last time, Zac wouldn't have given it a second glance if not for the strong signal it emitted. The statue also had three white lines covering its otherwise dark-grey surface, proving it was the item he had come for. The scene was odd, prompting Zac to stop just inside the prayer hall entrance.

The piece of rubble had looked like something that had been knocked off from the Left Imperial Palace, a piece of debris in the true sense of the word. That obviously wasn't the case with this figurine. It had been placed here by someone rather than having randomly appeared in this valley through a wormhole.

The difference seemed to carry some significance, some hidden implications he lacked the details to decipher. Had it been placed here by the figure he glimpsed outside? Zac stood frozen in thought for a minute until he eventually released a pent-up breath and walked forward. The answers would come to him sooner or later. Or perhaps they wouldn't; Zac was okay with that as well, even if he was curious.

But any stray thoughts were swept away the moment he came within ten meters of the statue. No longer did it seem like a harmless piece of antiquity. Instead, Zac was drowned by a towering aura so powerful he was almost pushed to his knees again.

Hatred. Irreconciliation. Frustration. Longing.

A confusing mix of emotions barraged Zac's mind, and he felt like a leaf swept up in a furious hurricane. No matter if it was his strengthened soul or his recent inroads into Heart Cultivation, they were far insufficient to deal with the

sentiments contained within the small statuette. This was a hatred that had turned into a force of nature, holding the power to destroy everything.

Zac knew the only reason his soul hadn't instantly shattered was that the anger wasn't directed at him; it was directed at the Heavens themselves. If anything, it felt like the statue was angry *for* him, or rather for all beings. Just latent hatred was enough to drench Zac in sweat, and he hesitated on how to proceed.

Eventually, Zac gritted his teeth and took another step forward. He didn't know why this seal was different from the previous one. He also didn't understand why he was almost pushed away by the statuette this time when he couldn't avoid the piece of rubble even after trying. Zac only knew that his opportunity was within arm's reach, and some lingering resentment wouldn't stop him now.

One step, two steps. Zac slowly pushed forward, subduing the primal voice in his mind that urged him to run away from this pressure. After what felt like an eternity, he found himself right in front of the altar, his whole body once again covered in blood. It wasn't from his wounds reopening but rather an effect of walking through this palpable anger.

Zac was eternally thankful the domain hadn't grown any stronger as he got closer. He was already teetering on the edge of collapse as he touched the figurine with a shaking hand. At first, there was no response, but then Zac heard something.

A sigh.

“Another cycle, another Flamebearer. Will you break the chains or become another link?”

Chapter 897: Void Vajra Sublimation

The voice carried a sense of exhaustion and helplessness, like the speaker had been forced to observe a Sisyphean undertaking for an eternity. It came from everywhere at once, and Zac could hear it with his ears, soul, and heart. Suddenly hearing someone speak in this secluded place almost made Zac's heart leap out of his throat, but he never got a chance to pinpoint the voice's origin.

The two sentences had become the catalyst for a series of changes. The figurine released a massive pulse before crumbling into a pile of dark-grey dust on the altar. Zac was thankfully unscathed by the burst, but he found reality slow to a crawl as the small planets in his soul ground to a halt. Just like last time, three shimmering lines appeared in his aperture, their radiant light seemingly containing all the answers in the universe.

Zac's mind had been thrown into chaos by the ominous message, and various theories were cropping up like weeds. But the familiar scene in his Soul Aperture brought him back to the present, and Zac forcibly pushed down the confusion as he focused on the task at hand. With everything except his thoughts frozen, he couldn't do anything about the mysterious messenger even if he wanted. So he might as well grasp the opportunity before worrying about cycles and chains.

Actually, it wasn't hard to put the matter aside. The moment the lights appeared in his mind, nothing else mattered. They were showering him with so many insights and impressions that it was nigh impossible to concentrate on anything else.

As planned, Zac immediately focused his attention on the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** and the 81 expressions of the Void he had envisioned so as not to waste even a mote of Ultom's

wisdom. Months of meditation and experimentation had led to this moment, and he almost felt like a student waiting for a verdict from their adviser.

Had he found a viable direction after the last piece of the seal illuminated the way forward, or had he walked down a blind alley in his search for a solution? Was that perhaps why he had found himself at an impasse back in the cave under the Undrusian Sea, where there was an invisible wall that had stopped him from progressing with his experiments any further?

The sweet suffering of having his brain filled with a million new ideas started anew, but this time they were built upon far sturdier foundations. He didn't just start where the previous epiphany had left off. Having a real and practical understanding of the original Body Tempering Method and the effects of Heart Cultivation allowed him to go much further than the intangible conceptualization of last time.

Zac felt something was building inside him, something earth-shattering as it diverged from conventional cultivation based on the Dao. His inspiration brought him further and further into the Void, where his answer waited for him, a solution that wouldn't force him to accede to the Sangha's worldview.

But it was too complex. To understand the Void was to understand all Dao, which was something Zac wasn't sure even Supremacies were able to accomplish. Even if he only needed a simplified method, the truths that Ultom showed him were too absolute, too overpowering that they threatened to damage his psyche and push his path off course.

Zac held on as he endlessly iterated, pushing the limits of what his Soul and 3000-odd Intelligence could withstand. For the first time since the Integration, he felt a bit regretful that he had essentially discarded the attribute that most improved one's computational speed. Then again, Zac wasn't so sure those kinds of boosts were applicable in this kind of situation.

And then it came to him.

A pop echoed out in Zac's mind as though the proverbial barrier preventing his understanding crumbled like it was a

real thing. Zac felt like his whole being had been unclogged when it all dawned on him. There was no gradual buildup, no formation of one void expression at a time. All at once, eighty-one elusive dots were born, forming a circle in the middle of his chest.

Or rather, Zac pictured them like a pattern on his chest. These motes were neither tangible nor imaginary; they were focal points of his Heart Cultivation. No outsider would ever be able to see them, as they were more akin to emotions and mental states than pathways or fractals. But that didn't make them any less real.

They were real, and they were true. Utterly and inconceivably true.

Even in their rudimentary state, Zac could tell that they were not just something dragged out from Ultom's endless repository of data. They were specially made by him and for him, where Zac used the epiphany like a supercomputer for deriving their shapes. If anything, they felt familiar to the point it was a bit odd. Sensing the circle was like he was sensing himself.

A few seconds later, Zac understood what was going on. The dots reminded him of his bloodline. The three lines in his Soul Aperture had somehow connected the 'void' in his bloodline with the spatial Void he'd been thrown into a few times and the void-state of the Heart he had envisioned for his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**.

To this day, Zac didn't quite understand what the 'Void' in his name came from or if and how it related to the actual Void between dimensions. The visions of Karz didn't provide any clue either since his abilities were essentially the opposite of Zac's own. And since Karz lived in an era before the System, there weren't any blue prompts to shed light on the situation.

But seeing the eighty-one dots, Zac suddenly understood a few things, even if he lacked the understanding to delve further. The Void between dimensions was just one of many voids. The Void of Space, to be exact; a place utterly bereft of the

Dao of Space. It was simply the most commonly known one since it had such an impact on the Multiverse.

Where any Dao existed, so did an opposing force, just like matter and antimatter. This should be the broader Void his bloodline referred to. And these dots represented the Void of Life. That was what he had been missing before when he tried to come up with mental images meant to replace the sutras; the connection between Heart and Life.

The Buddhist Sangha's understanding of the Dao of Life was encoded into the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**. Only a similar type of understanding would allow Zac to swap out one part without making the whole thing collapse. This was the key to his own Body Tempering Method and perhaps to his bloodline as a whole.

The formation of the dotted circle on his chest was just the start. While Zac delved deeper into the meaning of the Void and its coexistence with the Dao and Void, the tiny dots started to transform as they grew small tendrils. They felt like sprouts emerging from seeds, but they formed complex patterns rather than roots.

As the seeds grew, so did Zac's comprehension of the Void and the Heart. The questions that had plagued him during his training were swept away, replaced by ironclad certainty. Even the mysterious interrelation between Life, Body, and Heart that the Buddhist Sangha had invented was exposed to the light; its secrets were laid bare for Zac to see.

Armed with the practical understanding and effects of reciting the chants, Zac came to a worrying realization. There were problems with the original version of the method, problems beyond the commonly known pathbreaking risk.

Being flush with the boundless knowledge of Ultom, Zac wasn't even confident he had been given the original version by Three Virtues any longer. Typically, it was hard to get a complete overview of the jam-packed memories imprinted in his mind, but now, the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** felt like a tapestry for him to look at freely.

And it was clear as day; cultivating the original method was a surrender of the self, where the Heart would ultimately supplant the Soul. There was a distinct difference in this concept from the more commonly known risks of cultivating the Buddhist methods. The common understanding was that their methods were a double-edged sword.

Either you'd succumb and join the Sangha, or you would walk away with immense benefits. This was not the case, at least not with the manual he'd received. This was far more sinister. In essence, your consciousness would be locked away from your own body and turned into a spiritual battery to power the Vajra that your body had become.

On the outside, you would look like a converted monk who only had a Heart for buddha, when in reality, you'd be a prisoner for the rest of your days.

The moment you reached the third layer and reached what the method called 'Minor Sublimation,' it would be game over. Normally, any rational cultivator would notice something was wrong before reaching that point, but the Heart Cultivation of the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** would chisel away your apprehensions and suspicions. Only by stopping at the second layer would you be safe, but that stage wouldn't give you the proper benefits of a Life-attuned body.

But now, all that had changed. Eventually, the dots stopped growing, leaving Zac with eighty-one unique sigils. His perception shifted, and even if time was still forced to a halt, he felt the small circle on his chest change into a hovering belt around his body. He couldn't actually see the sigil, but he felt them slowly rotating around him. Together, they formed a circle with a diameter of around three meters.

The moment the sigils appeared outside his body, a familiar rumble shook the sky. The Heavens had descended, and Zac was almost kicked out of his unique state from the shock. Was he about to get blasted by another Lightning Tribulation? Usually, Zac wouldn't mind, but he wasn't ready this time.

Thankfully, the pressuring presence receded just a moment later, like it had just doled out a warning before returning. Or

had it been unable actually to pinpoint his location? Either case, Zac was incredibly relieved, and he returned his attention to his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. Forming a working system with these Void Sigils was only the first step, even if it was the hardest one.

He needed to incorporate everything into the method if he wanted to use the Void Sigils for anything more than tempering his heart. From there, Zac methodically swapped out one piece of the technique after another, replacing boundlessness with void until a perfect system had been born. The lights in his soul had mostly dissipated by this point, but he didn't rush his work at all.

His memory contained all the layers of the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**, but Zac would rather finish the simpler ones at the beginning than risk any mistakes. An imperfection in the earlier layers of the method would create problems down the road, and it was better to get things right from the start. Like with the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**, he would have to figure out the last layers when he got there.

Just as the lights were about to wink out, Zac finalized the third Layer of his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, which allowed him to breathe out in relief. It was what he needed to reach the first significant breakthrough of the method and gain an actual Life-Attuned Constitution. From there, each layer would purify and strengthen his body further, with two more major checkpoints; 'Major Sublimation' and 'True Boundless Sublimation,' which Zac guessed would have to be renamed to True Void Sublimation.

And finally, the lights winked out, and Zac was brought down to reality where the marvels of the universe were out of grasp, where he once more was just a trifling E-grade cultivator mucking about in search of answers. Losing the connection to the lights of Ultom felt even rougher this time around. At least there were still two times to go, and if this round were any indication, each epiphany would contain the same amount of insights.

More importantly, he had actually accomplished what he set out to do - create a working Body Tempering Manual uniquely

suited for him. It was a huge accomplishment that eluded even some ancient clans, yet he had managed to do it alone. Of course, without the help of the white light, he might never have accomplished it, but everyone who reached greater heights had a couple of unfathomable encounters under their belt.

The moment Zac was able to move again, he flashed away from the altar as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand. He wasn't overly surprised to find that there was no one around, though, no source to the voice from before. Zac's best guess was that the voice was a lingering impression, just like those images he'd seen for a moment before entering the temple.

Perhaps they were all the same; the ghosts, the person who had left the figurine in this temple, and the source of the voice. Perhaps, the voice wasn't even speaking to him but instead worked like a pre-recorded message. There was no way to know and no time to figure it out. There was nothing else of value in this temple, and it was time to go.

Zac saw how space had already started to unravel above the altar, meaning a breach was about to hit the temple. But just as Zac was about to exit the prayer hall, the eroded altar hummed before releasing a wave of energy. The breach was immediately rebuffed, and Zac was filled with a sense of tranquility and clarity while the outside world was muted.

It looked like the altar was an item with a similar function to **[Mind's Eye Agate]**. But even in its eroded state, the effect was orders of magnitudes greater. An odd sensation made Zac look inward, and he was both surprised and delighted to see lines being added to more than one of his skills. In fact, most of his skills were evolving, proving just how powerful the altar was.

That was not to say it was all thanks to this temple. Many of his skills were long overdue for an upgrade, but his almost solitary focus on his technique and Soul during his time in the Orom World had put them on the backburner. After having been through two tremendous epiphanies and getting blessed by the altar, they were all bursting forth at once.

Zac was frozen in place, unable and unwilling to break this current state of comprehension. For a moment, it didn't feel like he was standing in a long-forgotten ruin in some pocket dimension. He was standing in a prayer hall where ancient sages had meditated on the mysteries of the universe.

A few minutes later, the process was over, and Zac glanced in the direction of the mountain range where Vai waited. After some hesitation, he ultimately turned around and walked back to the altar. It was still emitting that mysterious aura, and while his human side had received a slew of benefits, his Draugr side had not.

Since Zac had no idea what would wait for him inside the temple, he hadn't specified any time to the researcher. It shouldn't have been more than an hour since he left Vai in the cave, even if he felt as though decades had passed from how much he had comprehended. She should be fine with waiting a while longer.

And the same went for all the questions that had popped up with this breakthrough; the voice, the lingering resentment in the figurine, even the fact that the Buddhist Sangha might have made a play for his body. Of course, it was impossible to tell with someone like Three Virtues. He might have known Zac would be able to change it, or at least he wouldn't cultivate it blindly.

He might even have expected to be exposed, which might have forced Zac to visit the Sangha for a proper version. But now, all those questions would have to wait since there was no telling how long this mysterious effect would linger.

Soon, Zac once more stood in front of the altar, and he still couldn't understand what was so special about it. It looked like a regular piece of rock carved into a large block, lacking any spirituality. Even now, that hadn't changed. But it was indisputable that it had not only stabilized the breach in space but also turned the whole temple into a haven for cultivators.

Having decided, Zac's eyes turned abyssal black as his skin paled. It was the first time he had swapped to his undead form in a good long while, and it felt like reuniting with a friend

more than anything. His time in the Twilight Ocean and the Orom had allowed him to become acquainted with his undead side properly, and it no longer felt like it was a special state or disguise.

It was as much him as his human side was, and Zac believed that feeling would only increase as he progressed further down his path.

While the altar's effect on its surroundings was amazing, it was a far cry from the epiphany. But it was perfect for Zac's purposes, and he smiled when another wave of inspiration began the moment the transition was complete. With these skill upgrades, he would have gained a comprehensive set of power-ups that covered almost every aspect of combat.

A few minutes later, the process was completed without a hitch. But Zac wasn't done there. Instead, he took out the Death-attuned Natural Treasure he'd saved for just this occasion, the treasure that could help upgrade skills. Between his two forms, there was one final holdout in his repertoire; **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

The other skills had all been upgraded by now, and with the recent burst of clarity, it had fallen even further behind. The temple had even provided sanctuary and an opportunity to fix the final missing link. He would be a fool not to go for it.

Chapter 898: Arbiter

There were two reasons Zac had held off on upgrading **[Vanguard of Undeath]** for so long. The first was that it was one of the most complex skill fractals he had. For a long time, he didn't feel confident in upgrading it. This issue was pretty much solved inside the Orom World, whether you considered strength of soul or tools to help with the process.

The real issue was that Zac had been hesitant in which direction he should take the skill. The skill on its own was great – it provided a noticeable attribute boost without any detriments, bolstered your defenses, and even had a powerful taunting capability that synergized well with his fighting style. Zac could easily upgrade it and call it a day, and he would have a skill most infighting warriors could only dream of.

The problem was that **[Vanguard of Undeath]** didn't synergize as well with his toolkit any longer. He couldn't even activate it without taking out a spare shield, and **[Deathmark]** no longer required him to get hit to retaliate against his enemies.

The way he defended himself had also changed. Between the support from the pygmy skeletons of **[Profane Exponents]** and Alea's chains, he didn't get much from using a shield. With his improved technique, he wasn't really in the business of trading blows like a brute any longer, even if he could still outmatch and outlast almost anyone at his level. So the skill needed to be reformed, which drastically increased the difficulty level.

Zac had two concepts he'd toyed around with, but both required extensive reworks even if the System simplified the process. His first choice was probably better suited for his needs, but it was more complex. The backup plan instead made use of most components of the old skill and only made

the adjustments necessary to mesh better with his revamped fighting style.

The second choice was also more of an all-rounder skill, while the first more heavily leaned on **[Love's Bond]**. If Alea regained her form, the skill would be made useless. The choice between these two had delayed him for a while, but he had pretty much decided after Alea woke up for the first time. She was clearly in no hurry to regain a fleshy body, so this direction of his should last him through the D-Grade at least. The difficulty of this undertaking had prevented him from simply going ahead back on Earth, but now, Zac felt like everything was in place.

His mind was a bit exhausted from the previous epiphany, but the unfathomable aura that now permeated the temple recovered his exhaustion faster than even any Soldier Pill could. Meanwhile, it felt like a portal to the abyss had opened in his chest after swallowing the Natural Treasure, and the whispers of the underworld filled him with inspiration while his pathways became malleable.

Zac briefly considered taking out his other items, but he ultimately only pulled out two of his higher-quality Incense Sticks, whose only purpose was to recover Mental Energy. As for the others, Zac could somewhat sense they'd cause disharmony with the ancient altar. And since the altar was creating an effect far greater than all his other tools combined, he didn't want to rock the boat.

This time, he didn't use the **[Fractal Framework Array]** either. Like in the Twilight Chasm, Zac felt no need for training wheels. But in contrast to that time, his mind was almost impossibly clear. Back when he had created **[Pillar of Desolation]**, he had descended into an almost manic state, but he felt like a skilled surgeon now when he detached the Skill Fractal of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** with pinpoint precision.

One set of fractals after another was transformed or reformed, partly following the blueprint he had prepared. Zac didn't completely follow his original plan though, because he could clearly see some of his ideas wouldn't work thanks to his

current state of enlightenment. Still, it was not enough to cause worry.

By this point, Zac was essentially in a stage where he was preparing to upgrade his E-grade skills to D-grade. Even a tricky F-grade skill like [**Vanguard of Undeath**] couldn't stump him anymore, at least not with the multilayered advantages.

At the first step of the transformation, the section focused on attribute boosts was bolstered at the cost of defenses. He still left a smaller defensive function in the skill, but it wouldn't be as obvious as the thick black armor created from pure Miasma. This part was dealt with in less than an hour since it wasn't the true focus of the skill or Zac's plans.

It was all about the taunting ability.

This was a feature Zac had never encountered in anyone else's skill, and it was shockingly effective. Only [**True Strike**] came somewhat close, but the skill he snatched from the Erudite Master was actually pretty useless. It couldn't affect battle-hardened and skilled opponents, and those were the only ones Zac needed it against.

That wasn't true for the taunt in [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. Its effect was far-reaching and extremely hard to avoid. It could even subvert the movement skills of enemies and have them appear right in front of him. No matter if it was to stop enemies from moving or controlling a battlefield, it could make the impossible possible.

This was the most crucial function of the skill, so even if he was in an almost empty state of clarity, he still felt some worry as he started to make sweeping changes. Whole new sections were added to the system, making it infinitely more complex. Meanwhile, the core patterns of the taunt were bolstered, pushing the boundaries of what was possible with an E-grade skill.

With these many patterns, the skill's energy expenditure would skyrocket. But Zac didn't care. His energy stores were simply monstrous for an E-grade warrior, and the plan was to step into

Hegemony in a few years. He would have more energy than an E-grade skill could ever expend by that point.

More and more patterns were added until the skill was almost unrecognizable. Even then, there hadn't been a single moment of imbalance in the Skill Fractal or a single close-call where he almost messed up. Fuelled by the deathly treasure and the mysterious state of emptiness, he was like a machine that methodically worked through the process. Like this, the hours passed until a snap almost broke his focus.

It was the altar. A deep crack had split it in two, and Zac was surprised there really wasn't anything inside it. It was just ordinary rock all the way through. It was worrying that the altar had just broken apart like that, but it wasn't a big deal. Apart from the altar getting a crack, the rest of the temple was fine. The tranquil aura still lingered in the prayer hall, and Zac was already wrapping up the upgrade.

A few minutes later, the process was complete, and he released a pent-up breath as he inserted the skill into his pathways again. Zac spent the next couple of minutes just sitting in peace as the connections stabilized. Only then did he finally open his Skill Screen to see the results of his hard work.

[E] Arbiter of the Abyss - Proficiency: Early. Wield the chains of finality. Become the justice of the abyssal legions. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded in satisfaction upon seeing the description of the skill that had replaced **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. The previous flavor text said, *'Become the eye of the storm. The storm of the abyssal legions.'* The drastic change of **[Arbiter of the Abyss]** proved that some of its fundamental features had been revamped.

He was no longer in the eye of the storm, no longer a meat shield meant to run at the forefront of an army. Instead, the skill's fundamental themes now centered around chains and finality, which was far more on point with his class. If not for Vai and possibly others spying at the valley, he would have run out to test the upgraded skill on the Yeti Kings outside.

Unfortunately, that would have to wait, and Zac instead turned his focus to his other skills on the status screen.

Class Skills

[E] Blighted Cut - Proficiency: Late. Corner. Seal. Devour. Upgradeable.

[E] Deathmark - Proficiency: Late. Join your forces in dance to death. Upgradeable.

[E] Fields of Despair - Proficiency: Late. A desolate haze, both entrapping and illuminating.

[E] Profane Exponents - Proficiency: Late. Fatewarded by the profane masters. Upgradeable.

[E] Indomitable - Proficiency: Late. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

[E] Pillar of Desolation - Proficiency: Middle. Stuck and struggling. Inexorable Desolation. Upgradeable.

[E] Desperation's End - Proficiency: Early. Bind them. End them. Upgradeable.

[E] Arbiter of the Abyss - Proficiency: Early. Wield the chains of finality. Become the justice of the abyssal legions. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded with satisfaction as he closed his status screen. While his new skills and big finishers were lagging slightly behind, he was making decent progress on the skill front. But he could tell there was a clear difference in how the E-grade skills progressed. Back in the F-grade, his skills upgraded as he fought, often mid-battle when he pushed himself.

That still happened on occasion, but it was clear that improving his skills required a more concerted effort in the E-grade. Now, they needed him to understand the underpinnings of the skill and how to improve their effectiveness and comprehend the Daos that made them possible. Thankfully, it didn't require affinities or profound knowledge of fractals.

Zac had seen how quickly his mastery skills progressed when he put his mind to it back in the Orom World. As long as he

dedicated a year or so to it, he should be able to push most of his skills to the peak. And just as luck would have it, an opportunity would soon present itself, provided he got out of this place in one piece.

After all, he would have to make some inroads with his newly minted **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** before heading over to the Perennial Vastness.

Body Tempering didn't take as long as Soul Cultivation if you managed to withstand the torturous pain that would grow increasingly severe as you progressed. But Zac figured it would still take a year or two to reach a level equivalent to his Draugr constitution. During the downtime, he would be able to work on his skills to make sure they wouldn't hold him back the moment he became a Hegemon.

Zac opened his status screen next to see if there were any other notable changes.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

145

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles

[...] Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate, Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Branch of the Kalpataru - Early, Branch of the Pale Seal - Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

19304 [Increase: 133%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

8065 [Increase: 98%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

14325 [Increase: 119%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

12420 [Increase: 107%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3322 [Increase: 92%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

6412 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

663 [Increase: 116%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 647

There was nothing new to see on his Status Screen. He had somewhat hoped he'd get a new title for creating the Body Tempering Manual or his new skill, but the System hadn't seen fit to provide anything this time around. Perhaps it wasn't too surprising. He had already created something unique like **[Pillar of Desolation]**, which possibly surpassed the limits of

E-grade skills since it used a bit of Oblivion Energy to activate.

Meanwhile, he had to admit he hadn't actually created a Body Tempering Manual, even if what he had accomplished was almost as impressive. It was ultimately monks who researched all the theories, and Zac had only made alterations to suit him better.

Zac briefly considered whether he should top off the two missing levels on his Draugr side, but ultimately decided against it. The attributes from two levels wouldn't make much difference, and he had used up the little Kill Energy he got from killing yetis on **[Surging Vitality]**. Instead, he swapped back to his human form to once more open his status screen.

Class Skills

[E] Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Peak. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable

[E] Ancestral Woods - Proficiency: Middle. Oneness with nature

[E] Rapturous Divide - Proficiency: Peak. Between the Abyss and Arcadia is an endless chasm. Upgradeable.

[E] Arcadia's Judgement. - Proficiency: Middle. Only judgment awaits those who encroach on the mandate of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

[E] Nature's Edge - Proficiency: Peak. Nature is the most ruthless weapon. Upgradeable.

[E] Arcadian Crusade - Proficiency: Middle. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

[E] Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Late. All living beings under the Heavens, one entity. Upgradeable.

[E] Earthstrider - Proficiency: Late. Traverse the boundless worlds, unrestrained and unfettered. Upgradeable.

[E] Empyrean Aegis - Proficiency: Middle. Become as unshakeable as the pillars of life. Upgradeable.

As expected, there was widespread progress on his human side as well, where most skills had taken a step forward. One positive difference to his Draugr side was that **[Empyrean Aegis]** had reached Middle Mastery, while **[Desperation's End]** remained at Early Mastery. It wasn't a surprise, really, with how often he had been forced to use his defensive skill while inside the Void Star. Meanwhile, he had barely spent any time in his undead form since getting his ultimate finisher.

With both his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** created and the surprise boost of his skills, Zac could finally turn his attention to the more troublesome matters. His eyes turned to the cracked altar, or rather the anthracite dust that had formed a small pile at its edge. The figurine was gone, but it was still firmly engraved into his memory.

That hatred and sense of irreconciliation directed at the Heavens was beyond anything Zac had ever felt, and this was just from a small figurine that had almost been completely eroded over the countless years. It was a shame. Zac believed that if he had been able to confirm who it depicted, he would have been able to get closer to the background of Ultom and the secrets of the Left Imperial Palace.

There were also the voice and the ominous message.

'Another cycle, another Flamebearer. Will you break the chains or become another link?'

Even if the message was cryptic, Zac believed the voice and figurine had together given some critical clues. He was competing for an inheritance, but the inheritance was not treasures or the palace itself. At least not only that. It was an inheritance of destiny, of a goal.

But a goal for what, Zac had no idea, and he wasn't sure he wanted anything to do with it going by the burning anger toward the Heavens the figurine held. If Zac had to guess, it would be that the figurine wanted to destroy the Heavens themselves. Not even the shimmering lights were enough for Zac to get hitched to such a maniacal wagon.

He was already skating on thin ice with all his borderline unorthodox methods. He was just looking for some solutions

to take his wonky constitution into the D-grade; anything beyond that was asking too much. Perhaps he was even better off if he skipped out on getting the fourth piece of the seal. If he could figure out how to form his Life-Death-Conflict core with the next seal, he might as well stop and count his winnings.

Then again, Zac had been around long enough to know it was not necessarily up to him whether he wanted to partake or not. The first vision of Ultom had literally crammed itself into his head out of nowhere, and it was entirely possible the System or Ultom itself would somehow derail his plans to keep going at it.

Apart from the meaning of being a Flamebearer, there was also the issue of the Sangha. Three Virtues was the personification of a shifty monk, but Zac had never felt he was sinister. But the trap hidden within the **[Boundless Vajra Sutra]** was one of the most diabolical methods he'd ever seen. It was essentially possession, except your body was seized by a Buddha-loving avatar of your own creation.

Zac didn't get it. Why had they imparted him with something like that? And was it the intention of Three Virtues or the Sangha itself? And why did it feel like it all was related to Ultom? He had no proof for his hunch, but Zac couldn't shake the nagging feeling that everything that Three Virtues had done was to alter the events related to this inheritance. He might just be paranoid, but the suspicion might also be an effect of his high Luck and how it attuned him to the winds of fate.

It also just made sense—the voice before mentioned cycles. Zac was confident it referred to eras, like the current Era of Unification. Zac didn't know about the Left Imperial Palace, but Ultom was definitely an Eternal Heritage. Some monstrously powerful faction had failed in some undertaking and created the Ultom Courts to keep the flame of hope alive.

It was no shocker that even the Sangha would compete for something like that. From what little Zac had learned about Eternal Heritages from Qi'Sar and Kaldor, an Eternal Heritage was the most powerful strategic resource a faction could

possess. Getting their hands on one was enough to shift the balance and possibly impact the whole Multiverse.

With so much on the line, it wasn't inconceivable that the Buddhist Sangha would go so far as to try to turn him into a puppet. Perhaps Three Virtues had somehow realized Zac had a connection with the Left Imperial Palace and chosen to take a chance. If Zac actually practiced the [**Boundless Vajra Sublimation**], the Sangha might have gotten a Flamebearer for free in a few years when Zac reached the third layer and became a mindless Vajra.

And if one peak faction knew about Ultom and was looking for it, what about the others? Even if they didn't know now, they would eventually. The unorthodox cultivators from the other sector were already looking for pieces of the seal, so Zac keeping his mouth shut wasn't enough. Eventually, old monsters would come crawling out of the woodwork.

How would this all affect Zecia? This was just a tiny frontier Sector without any powerful guardians. That golem who accompanied Iz Tayn could probably annihilate all of Zecia's peak factions in a week or two. Even if the powerful factions didn't actively target the natives of Zecia, it was undoubtedly a calamity if the sector became the battleground for an Eternal Heritage.

For something like that, even Supremacies might make a move. Could Zecia withstand something like that? Zac almost regretted fleeing from that crazy firebug before. If anyone had the answers to this mess, it would be her and her golemoid guardian. Of course, Zac didn't know about Ultom back then, so it was a bit of a moot point.

But one thing was for sure; the upcoming war was not as simple as it seemed, and more was at stake than losing to some unorthodox cultivators. He also knew that his strength wasn't enough to secure Earth or even protect himself. He was like an ant standing between towering giants whose whims could mean his life and death. He needed to find a solution to this predicament.

Perhaps he could crawl up the leg of one of those giants? After all, being a Flamebearer should hold some significance to the factions who wanted to take Ultom for themselves.

Chapter 899: Edict

On Kalstor Vala, the whispers of war had finally reached the general populace, and thousands of rumors circulated in the markets, the taverns, and the households. However, the unrest didn't reach the sprawling manor in the center of the capital, whose forests stretched for hundreds of miles.

It was like a secluded haven shielded from the sorrows of the outer worlds, and the marvelous glades and pristine lakes were known across the planet for their beauty. But those living at Kastor Vala couldn't have imagined the rumor was a sham, that there was a festering blight hiding in the heart of the forest.

“Where the hell is he?!”

The evil star paced back and forth, demanding answers just as she had so many times before.

“Mis- Mistress, we assure you we have sent out the messages as you have instructed,” Porto Vala said as he dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

Porto Couldn't believe how one's fortunes could turn so quickly. Living close to the Kaldran Straits was fraught with danger, but this was just cheating. It had started out so well. Just a few centuries after he had taken up the role as a ward of his family's mercantile planet, the Undead Empire had halted its warfare for the first time in eons.

But that reprieve had only lasted a few short years before they started attacking with redoubled efforts. Porto soon learned the reason – it was not about killing humans and assimilating their planets. Not exclusively, anyway. A true war was coming to Zecia, and the Undead Empire was honing their warriors against the coalition's armies.

With powerful invaders coming over, the Undead Empire saw an opportunity to seize high-potential bodies from both sides, so they no longer cared about their numbers as they reforged their war machine with blood and ice. Anyone who fell at this point wouldn't be any use in the real struggle, anyway.

Luckily, Kastor Vala was some distance from the frontlines where the undead and living were fighting for the fates of their planets. His job was only to rebuff the occasional raid or scouting party with the help of the planet's arrays and the garrisoned soldiers. But who could have expected this evil star and her supremely powerful guardian would show up out of the blue and forcibly move into his mansion?

The whole coalition had collectively breathed out in relief when the mysterious Draugr scion had finally left the Zecia sector for the rotten pastures of the Empire Heartlands. Her presence, or rather that of her master's, had been like a butcher's axe that hung over the Kaldran Strait for years until the danger thankfully passed without incident.

But only a scant few years later, Catheya Sharva'Zi was back, and she had brought an even more terrifying master this time. What was it with this lass and her interest in this remote little sector? Couldn't she just leave well enough alone and let them lead their lives in peace? And who was this bastard who kept eluding them? If not for him, these unwelcome guests would have long been gone.

"If you did what you were supposed to do, then we would have had an answer by now, wouldn't we?" the young scion glared, her abyssal eyes boring into Porto's.

"I am starting to think your connection to that man is not as close as you led us to believe," a voice echoed through the hall like the death knolls of a funeral procession, and Porto's hair immediately stood on end. "Were you perhaps just a passing acquaintance who saw an opportunity to enrich yourself?"

The next moment, cascading waves of death filled the hall, and Porto desperately took out a number of Divine Crystals to avoid being crushed under the tide of undeath. Even then, he didn't dare so much as look up when the two spoke, but he

also didn't dare to just leave in the presence of a powerful Monarch.

"You can believe whatever you want," Catheya snorted. "You can try approaching him yourself and see how that goes."

"We spent quite a bit on you, child. Yet we have nothing to show for it," the second Draugr commented, not sparing Porto so much as a glance.

"He came back more than half a year ago, but going by the report, he might be wounded," Catheya ventured. "He might also have chosen to discard this line of communication since so much time has passed. Perhaps we should move to the second location?"

Porto's eyes widened in a mix of hope and horror. The abyssal eyes of these terrifying Draugr had haunted him for over two years, and every night he had dreamt of their departure. But not like this. They had sworn that they wouldn't harm him if he successfully contacted whatever bastard they were trying to find, but they never made any guarantees if he failed.

Would they really leave him with his little life if he didn't deliver? That young lass might have done so, but that old wretch who accompanied her reeked of blood.

"A-Ah, mistress, I will try again. Don't you worry," Porto urgently said as he once more dabbed his face. "I'm sure we will get an answer momentarily. Surely."

"You have three months," the Monarch said as she stared at him with those nightmare-inducing eyes. "Get us an answer within three months... If you fail, then I will personally awaken you and this planet. Now, leave us."

Catheya shook her head at the receding back of the corpulent merchant before she turned her gaze back to her guide. Or her warden, depending on how you looked at it. What she said was true; the Umbri'Zi Clan and the Abyssal Lake had provided her with opportunities that most Draugr could only dream of.

But it was contingent on her delivering on her end. If she failed, it wasn't just a problem for her but for the whole Sharva'Zi Clan. She still remembered the nervous eyes of her

father when he sent her off with Enis Umbri'Zi, a Monarch whose bloody feats during the Havarok War had reached even the Abyssal Lake. She was a terrifying butcher, but Catheya couldn't just sit back and let Enis do as she pleased.

“Three months?” Catheya asked with a frown. “The deadline set by the Abyssal Lake was five years. Only two years have passed since we returned.”

“Things have changed,” Enis said. “An edict arrived at the Kavriel Clan yesterday; I just got it.”

“An Edict?” Catheya said with a sinking heart. Not many had the authority to send out something like that, and it getting one sent to the frontier was nigh-unprecedented. “Is it the Abyssal Council?”

“No, child,” Enis said as she looked deeply into Catheya's eyes. “It comes from the Heart.”

“The Founders?!” Catheya blurted.

As far as she knew, the Founders hadn't left the Heart for tens of millions of years as they tirelessly worked on their undertaking. During the endless years of the Undead Empire, they had only appeared during a few critical junctures, like when the Buddhist Sangha was out for blood or during the crusades of the Ancient Imperial Clans.

“The seal is growing stronger. The backup squads you requested will not be able to make it through.” Enis said.

“Is that it?” Catheya said with confusion.

“No, that was just an update from the Kavriel Clan,” Enis said. “The edict is simple; Zachary Atwood must choose death and join our side. No matter what. This is no longer just a matter of the Abyssal Shores. It is a matter of the Empire.”

Catheya took a shuddering breath as she tried to compute what had just happened. For the Eternal 108 to turn their gazes toward Zecia was incomprehensible. Just what kind of storm had that troublemaker kicked up this time?

“It isn’t right,” Emberstorm muttered as they flew toward the enormous citadel in the distance. “Working with these cretins.”

From beneath, the screams and clamors of the endless series of bloody cages assaulted them, and even Til’Siri was a bit unnerved by the misery. Many thought beasts cruel, but she had never seen these kinds of macabre conditions among any others than the cultivators. This was not natural selection; it was elevation through misery.

But orders were orders.

“We’re not working with them,” Til’Siri sighed. “We’re just using them to get to the Left Imperial Palace.”

“That isn’t much better. Since when did the Starbeast Alliance need to barter with the Unorthodoxy? Just because we’re both standing outside the cultivator alliances doesn’t mean we’re the same,” Emberstorm spat. “The fell karma of this world is nauseating. We should just annihilate this little faction and seize the Star Gate for ourselves. The Black Heart Sect wouldn’t dare raise an issue over a frontier sector.”

“You don’t know that,” Til’Siri countered with annoyance.

Even after reaching Atavism, these ancient and oversized insects were simply too bloodthirsty. Thank the Heavens a Qilin Beast Emperor was in charge of this mission rather than one of those lunatics. Of course, while she and Emberstorm were just sent there to observe and assist at this stage, they had probably gotten the same orders from their elders.

If an opportunity presented itself, seize a spot by any means necessary. In other words, they were competitors, and there was no need to keep up any pretenses when dealing with this fool.

“Didn’t you hear? The Black Heart Patriarch fought with Lord Realmsbane not long ago, and the Lord was forced to back down. They clearly have a vested interest in this matter. Otherwise, the patriarch would never have appeared.”

“So what?” Emberstorm shrugged. “Even if Lord Realmsbane was pushed back, it didn’t count. The Lord only fought to prove a point, and they battled inside the Black Heart

Dimension. If one of the Ancestors make a move, the whole cult would be turned to ash.”

“That’s enough,” Lonzor said. “Black Heart Sect is not as simple as you think. Neither of the two went all-out in that fight. If the Black Heart Patriarch completely unseals the curse in his chest, few in the Multiverse would get out of the conflict in one piece. And there are even rumors their founder is still alive in stasis. Besides, many things are at play here.”

“Other factions?” Til’Siri frowned.

“Not yet; we should be among the first,” Lonzor said with a shake of his head. “It’s about fate. According to the Bone Sage, two rivers of fate have converged because of an anomaly. Even the System has gotten involved. Using force could backfire as the rivers drown us. We need to play by the rules.”

“So, what should we do?” Til’Siri asked.

“The first step is setting up our presence here,” Lonzor said. “As you said, the Black Heart Sect is not able to contend for the Ultom Courts. They simply have too many enemies and too few allies to protect something like that. The Cultivator Clans would band together and launch a crusade under the guise of justice to seize the Left Imperial Palace for themselves. So the cult chose a different path. That of a ferryman.”

“What?” Emberstorm said with confusion.

“Because of the cosmic hiccup, there is still much we don’t know, but we do know that this event is targeted at the younger generation. The Black Heart Sect still don’t know the details, but they quickly figured out this sector was integral to competing for the opportunity. Since they couldn’t take the thing themselves, they have opted to demand resources in return for passage through the Star Gate and a spot in the upcoming events,” the Qilin explained.

“You want us to become mercenaries in some frontier war?” Til’Siri said with a frown, disgusted at the mere thought of fighting shoulder to shoulder with these maniacs.

“The sanctioned war is a part of the puzzle. We just don’t know how yet,” Lonzor nodded. “So our tasks are as follows; we need to establish our presence here while searching for clues of the Left Imperial Palace. If we encounter an Inheritor Candidate, we need to either recruit them or kill them. If we find other outsiders sniffing around, we kill them immediately. Finally, we need to quicken the formation of the Star Gate.

“Our greatest advantage is that we’re ahead of the competition. The earlier this war begin, the better we will be positioned compared to those who come behind us.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about stargates,” Emberstorm muttered before his amber eyes lit up. “But I can help you kill the Inheritor Candidates. They should just be some frontier natives, right?”

“About that,” Til’Siri hesitated. “If we really encounter a candidate... If we manage to seize their opportunity...”

“Well, you are welcome to try,” Lonzo said with a small smile. “The Bone Sage said only those beneath a century of age will be able to contend, but you might surprise us all.”

“What?!” Til’Siri exclaimed while Emberstorm looked like he was about to explode. “I’m over six hundred years old!”

“This opportunity already has an intended recipient, it’s neither for your branches or mine to claim,” Lonzor sighed with a complex expression. “Our job is to pave their path.”

“Who?” Emberstorm raged. “I know I’m only on the twentieth spot of the Starbeast Stele, but what bastard has been given this chance without any discussion? That little brat Laka? No, she should be 180 years old.”

“It’s not anyone on the Starbeast Stele,” Lonzor said. “A primordial has been unsealed.”

Finding a proper backer was essentially the same plan Zac had when trying to deal with the Great Redeemer. Unfortunately, the problem remained the same – how to retain control, or at least autonomy, in a relationship with a vast power imbalance. Just like Yrial once said, when valuable treasures were at

stake, there was no such thing as orthodox or righteous factions.

A crackling sound drew Zac out from his thoughts, and he frowned when he saw that space had once more started to collapse. Was it because the mysterious aura of the temple had grown sparse? It looked like it hadn't actually closed the breach but only momentarily pushed it away. Luckily, Zac had already got everything he needed from this place, so there was no point in sticking around.

Zac still hesitated a second before he flashed over to the cracked altar. He could feel how space was fast collapsing, but he couldn't just leave such a valuable treasure behind. Zac put his hand on the stone, but his brows soon furrowed. He was trying to put it into a Spatial Ring, but nothing happened.

Since the altar refused to enter his spatial treasure, Zac could only rely on brute force. His muscles strained as he gripped the edges of the altar, but his eyes almost bulged out from their sockets when he couldn't move even the smallest piece so much as an inch. He didn't know if the seemingly ordinary stone actually had the weight of a mountain or if some unseen force was preventing him from moving it, but it quickly became apparent it simply wouldn't budge.

Zac was filled with a sense of frustration as he looked down at the broken altar. The treasure was so close, yet it was impossibly out of reach. Would he really have to leave such an amazing item for meditation behind? Even after all his gains, Zac still felt like he had lost out on a fortune, and his eyes roved though the hall for a consolation prize until they focused on the tattered scroll hanging on the wall.

Better than nothing.

He flashed over with **[Earthstrider]** and snatched with one practiced motion, and he was relieved to see it could actually enter his Spatial Ring. Even now, Zac had no idea if it actually had any effect, but he figured he might as well take it. Who knew? It might be able to provide one final burst of glory that helped him out sometime in the future.

But the moment Zac snatched the scroll, he immediately regretted it as a new set of cracks appeared on the altar. Simultaneously, the odd undulations drastically increased in power, making Zac wonder if the scroll had actually helped keep the collapse at bay. The breach that had been held at bay for so long seemed to be coming back with redoubled ferocity, and Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to leave before it was too late.

With a flash, he appeared at the doorway of the temple, just in time before space itself collapsed like a punctured ball. The altar was swallowed by a chasm that seemed impossibly deep, and Zac felt his footing get precarious as the whole temple started to buckle. Zac glanced at the ring on his hand with some regret as he ran for his life.

Why didn't he ever learn?

Chapter 900: Some Things Never Change

The whole valley was being dragged to where the altar stood before, and Zac felt a deep sense of trepidation when he glanced at the quickly forming singularity. He could tell it wasn't just the Void on the other side, and neither was it some other realm of the Void Star – there was a sense of antiquity coming from it, antiquity tainted by an ancient madness that would give the remnants a run for their money.

Just being in its presence had made the Cosmic Energy in Zac's body restless to the point he almost lost control of it. Thankfully, the effect lessened the further he moved away from the altar. A moment later, he leaped over the outer gate that served as a demarcation line for the bipedal beasts, ready to fight his way out if need be.

But on the other side, there were no Yetis remaining. The carcasses from his blitz and the spike trap wake were left behind, but the beasts themselves had already escaped. The whole square was already being bent and twisted from the relentless pull coming from the temple, but Zac could still notice there was a new line of annihilation reaching almost halfway across the square.

Within that line, the corpses had turned into new piles of dust, and Zac suddenly remembered the powerful pulse he released upon touching the figurine. It looked like the final pulse had showcased a greater reach and possibly disintegrated all of the Beast Kings who had waited for him at the gate. Or it was also possible they had realized the way the wind blew and left early. After all, they had exhibited an extraordinary level of intelligence for a group of beasts.

Now wasn't the time to worry about the fates of the Yeti, though. The previously impenetrable tiles of the square were

being bent and twisted like they were made out of clay, and the enormous valley had almost turned into a tunnel as space itself was being siphoned away. The singularity only grew hungrier, and Zac started to worry if it would even be satiated from just swallowing the valley.

Each step with [**Earthstrider**] should have allowed Zac to cross hundreds of meters, but space had coagulated. He could only exhibit a third of the effect, which wasn't enough to even offset how much of the square was being dragged into the black hole behind him. But the pull suddenly lessened as Zac released [**Void Zone**], and the next step he took completely ignored the restrictions placed on the area.

Using his Void Energy in the open like this was a bit risky, but he was out of options. He could sense that he would be swallowed if he stayed behind just a few seconds longer. The unfettered speed of a Void-empowered [**Earthstrider**] allowed him to shoot out from the collapsing valley in just a moment, cleanly breaking free from the pull as he landed on a cliff overlooking the whole valley.

Behind him, it was like the jaws of a primordial beast were snapped shut as the whole valley was disintegrated. In its stead was a churning darkness that felt like it wanted to consume the universe. But the calamity thankfully didn't spread any further out through the mountain range, though not for lack of trying.

Zac had been prepared to keep running, but nine enormous sigils had appeared at the edge of the valley, each one vaguely familiar. He hadn't seen them in the dilapidated temple but rather on the parchments lifted from the cultists. That alone wasn't enough to make him feel safe, but he took out one of his copies as he kept running, and it didn't take any time to confirm his hunch.

None of these nine sigils was the one that he had a connection to, but they resembled nine others spread out among the fakes. It really looked like the infiltrators did not only know as much as he did, but perhaps even more. He had no idea what these nine sigils represented, and neither did he understand what the sigils had trapped.

A deep thud from within the heart of the darkness forcibly interrupted Zac's use of [Earthstrider], and a stabbing headache indicated his soul had been wounded as he slammed into a sheer mountain wall. He slammed Verun into the stone to stop the fall as he looked around with bleary eyes.

Only to see a completely changed landscape.

The ball of churning darkness was gone, replaced by an enormous pillar that seemed to cut straight through the whole Mystic Realm. It pierced into the sky like the Tower of Eternity on one end, and Zac could see how it had dug deep into the ground on the other. The pillar wasn't corporeal, but it almost looked like a purple night sky that ran like a river through a tube.

Inside, small motes of lights shimmered like failing stars, and Zac could spot various ruins being dragged toward the sky. It looked tranquil, but Zac's hair stood on end as he sensed its aura. It was not just a river of stars - it was a stream of condensed madness far more dangerous than what he'd sensed back in the temple.

Zac didn't dare look at it for long; it felt like his mind was being invaded. Only by focusing on the sigils that still formed a protective barrier around it was he safe. Not only that, but he felt the sigils contained a hint of the truths he had briefly been in touch with during his epiphany. Part of Zac simply wanted to sit down and meditate in front of this spectacle, but he knew that this was neither the place nor the time.

Those sigils stood strong for now, but that purple sky was simply too ominous. There was no telling what would happen if the sigils failed, so he wanted to be long gone before this thing went sideways. And that was doubly true in case there were infiltrators or Templars skulking about in the mountains.

The dark pillar was hundreds of times bigger than an incursion light, and those things could be seen from miles away. If there really were people in these parts, there was simply no way this display wouldn't attract attention. This wasn't how he wanted to rejoin the Void Gate squads. He needed to create distance

between himself and the Left Imperial Palace if he wanted a chance to sneak out unnoticed.

If some elite force from the Void Monastery discovered him absconding with a piece of the seal, then the mutated Ferric Worldeater in his Beast Pouch would be the least of his worries. Perhaps he would have taken the risk if the opportunity was more palpable, but he only got a familiar feeling from the sigils rather than the real thing.

There was also Vai to worry about. He was only a few mountains away from the hiding spot, so chances were she'd been hit by that pulse as well. Or she might even have been implicated by the exodus of the Yeti horde. The thought alone filled him with a sense of foreboding, and Zac swallowed a Soulmending Pill before he shot toward the mountain cave he had left her in. A moment later, Zac passed through the fake wall, and his heart sunk to rock bottom.

The cave was empty.

The odds of her leaving on her own accord didn't look good - there were a few splotches of blood on the ground. Had her protective bubble run out of power? Or had someone managed to get the drop on her, sealing her movements before she could take it out? Zac desperately looked for clues, and his eyes lit up when he suddenly saw something upon activating [**Cosmic Gaze**].

There was a small mark of space-attuned Dao right by the exit, its aura clearly belonging to Vai. If he looked at it normally, there was nothing special about the spot. But to his attuned gaze, it looked a bit like a purple streak. It had to be intentional - Vai would have needed to infuse the rock with her Mental Energy for it to stay on like that. She was trying to leave a trail for him.

That alone was extremely good news. Most importantly, she was still alive. Secondly, the little researcher was extremely considerate. If she had thought her captors were too much for him to handle, there was no way she would have left that mark behind.

There was no hesitation in Zac's heart as he set out, his gaze roving through the cliffs and crags in the area. He didn't immediately see anything, but he didn't give up, not even when one of the runes holding back the starry sky broke apart. Zac ignored the inauspicious signal and methodically checked his surroundings as he flashed around in a growing spiral. Finally, he found a second mark a few hundred meters away on a piece of rock jutting out from the wall.

He had found his direction, and he immediately set out. Like this, he followed the clues like breadcrumbs, where some were markings on stones and others were space-infused droplets of blood. Even if he was quickly getting the hang of things, he wasn't sure if he was actually getting closer to Vai and her captors.

They were quite careful and changed direction more than one time, forcing Zac to backtrack and start circling until he could pick up a trail again. Finally, Zac knew he was getting close as a droplet of blood was actually still wet. But the moment he hunched down to inspect the drop, he immediately realized there was trouble.

The ground beneath him suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a world of darkness. Zac looked around as he readied himself for a fight, but his opponent was nowhere to be seen. Zac's battle-honed instincts told him in no uncertain terms someone was close, but not even **[Cosmic Gaze]** could expose their whereabouts. In other words, an assassin.

Zac knew an assassin wouldn't let him prepare, and as expected, the attack was already bearing down on him. A lance of condensed shadows shot toward him from the side, containing enough force to punch a hole through a mountain. The attack didn't exactly look like Ogras' **[Shadowlance]**, and two Dao Branches possibly powered it. However, the resemblance was still so uncanny that it almost made Zac forget to defend himself.

That brief moment of hesitation actually helped him avert disaster. His Danger Sense suddenly did a one-eighty and told him the danger was coming from behind rather than from the lance that was about to pierce into his chest from ahead. Zac

felt like he was looking at a mirror, where he had actually been looking at the mirror image rather than the real thing.

There was no time to sort out the confusion, the lances were moving too quickly. Ultimately, it didn't matter which one was real and which one was fake - just destroy them both and the problem would be dealt with. Zac turned into a blur, and **[Verun's Bite]** keened with savagery as its edge drew an almost full-circle arc with enough force to shred everything in its path.

Zac didn't celebrate averting the initial salvo. This was obviously a skilled assassin, just like the Faceless assassin he'd fought inside the Tower of Eternity. They were slippery as eels and difficult to kill. More importantly, Zac needed to actually catch them if he wanted to figure out what happened to Vai.

However, Zac was a bit stumped when no second attack came forth, and he found himself standing in the churning mists. Had the assassin actually just left like that? Had he displayed too much power in dealing with that initial salvo?

"Bastard, where did you get that axe?" a hoarse voice said from within the shadows, and Zac felt like he had been struck with a bolt of Tribulation Lightning.

The voice was slightly different, but there was no mistaking it; it really belonged to Ogras. The field of shadows and the shadowlances had felt familiar, but Zac had immediately discarded the possibility it might really be his old companion. There was no lack of shadow-based assassins in Zecia. Even a clan like Azh'Rezak had managed to get their hands on a partial heritage.

But that voice... It was unmistakable, and there was no way some random assassin would know to impersonate it. First of all, no one should know his real identity, making it impossible to impersonate his friends. Or was this all an illusion? Was someone messing with his senses, dragging out his old memories to make him lower his guard?

There was only one way to find out.

“Ogras? Is that you?” Zac asked with a hammering heart as he looked back and forth.

There was no response for a few seconds, but the shadows eventually dispersed to expose a figure warily standing fifty meters away with a banner in his hand that emitted an uncomfortable aura that made Zac think of that starry pillar before. Zac’s mind descend into chaos, and words failed him when he saw the familiar face.

It was him. This was no illusion – Zac was pretty much certain of it. It really was Ogras in the flesh. The demon in front of him looked a lot like ten years ago, but there were some noticeable differences. For one, his aura was pretty odd. It was so faint that Zac could barely feel it, yet it gave him some pressure. The demon’s body was the same. Even looking right at him, Zac felt like he was staring into empty space.

Something about his presence made Zac’s subconscious overlook the demon and his attacks. If not for his extremely honed Danger Sense, he wouldn’t have been able to sense the attack coming from behind before. There hadn’t been so much as a ripple of energy; the second lance had suddenly just appeared while the first one became a fake.

At the same time, Ogras hadn’t become a shade. If anything, his body looked sturdier and more corporeal than when Zac last saw Ogras inside the Mystic Realm. He was still monochrome in scales of gray though, a side effect after Void’s Disciple killed him. Back then, Asshole had taken the place of his heart, which in turn had resulted in a series of unusual changes.

“Who are you, and how do you know my name?” Ogras frowned as he glanced at Zac’s axe. “How are you related to that temple?”

Zac’s mind was a mess after suddenly running into a familiar face in the heart of the Void Star, but he still had the presence of mind to realize the problem. There was still a risk this was all a ploy, but Zac felt risks be damned as he activated **[Million Faces]**.

“It’s me, Zac,” Zac said with a wide smile as his face transformed. “Ogras, is it really you?”

Zac had expected to see his own feelings mirrored in the demon’s; shock, delight, and confusion. But Ogras’ eyes only thinned as he looked at Zac with suspicion.

“More delusions? Are you seeing what I’m seeing? Is it him? Am I still lucid?” Ogras muttered as he looked at Zac with slightly wild eyes, and Zac frowned when he heard a hollow snicker.

The next moment, a wretched-looking spectral goblin appeared out of Ogras’ sleeve and flew over to Zac’s side. Zac stared down at the ghost with suspicion, feeling a familiar aura on its body; the aura he had sensed in the starry sky and the chasm that had swallowed the temple. An aura of madness and corruption.

Why had this thing come out of Ogras’ body? Possession?

“Young man, you have shown great potential to so easily rebuff this wretch. Don’t believe what you’re seeing – his mind has long since been corroded by the shadow creature in his body. Rescue me, and I’ll grant you power you couldn’t-Ai!”

The ghost didn’t get any further as a Kalpataru-infused fractal leaf ripped him in two. Between Ogras’ slightly odd state, and the sinister aura coming from the ghost, Zac figured he was better off swinging first and investigating later. If the goblin was the threat, then problem solved. If it spoke the truth, then better safe than sorry.

With how the sigils of the Left Imperial Palace had sealed the place this goblin probably came from, they were possibly bound to become enemies in either case. And if Ogras really was possessed, then Zac would have to knock the demon out until he could find a purifier or something similar. But Zac’s plans were immediately derailed when the ghost reformed, much to Zac’s shock.

Even an Eidolon would be hard-pressed to survive a point-blank strike like that, but this little goblin was seemingly

unscathed?

“Bastard! Wretch! I should have known! Violent animals, both of you,” the goblin swore as he flew into the flag in Ogras’ hand. “I hope the Lost Plane swallows you whole.”

“Uh,” Zac hesitated. “sorry?”

Ogras hadn’t made a move yet, but his hands suddenly turned into a blur as he furled up the flag and sealed it with two talismans. Only then did he turn toward Zac. “Who is your mother?”

The sudden shift of topics threw Zac for a loop, but he soon realized it was a test. Only two people from earth knew of Zac’s heritage; Ogras and Kenzie. No information report would contain the truth, and a pretender would never get that question right.

Zac hesitated for a moment, but he eventually decided to tell the truth, his heart beating so hard he was almost stuttering the words. “Leandra Atwood, a Technocrat. What were the first words you said to me?”

“I said, ‘You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive,’” Ogras said with a small smile. “I guess some things never change.”

Chapter 901: Catching Up

Zac could still barely believe his eyes, and if not for his senses and his recent inroads into Heart Cultivation, he would still wonder if he had been caught in an illusion array. But his instincts told him in no uncertain terms he wasn't caught in a mirage, and his heart told him this was all true.

"Sorry about that," Zac wryly smiled as he walked over. "I didn't know the ghost was with you. Didn't sound like it."

"Don't worry about it. Believe me, if that little wretch could be dealt with so easily, I would have done so years ago. I seem destined to pick up annoying hitchhikers," Ogras sighed as he looked at Zac, his otherwise ashy complexion accented by red-rimmed eyes. "You're as ugly as ever, but damn is it good to see you."

Zac smiled and dragged the demon into a bear hug as a confusing mix of emotions washed over him.

One by one, his closest people had been lost over the past years. And while he had gained some new allies and friends, they couldn't replace those who were gone. But finally, Ogras had come back. It wasn't just a huge victory on its own, but it somehow bolstered Zac's conviction that he could do the same with the others. He would get Kenzie back, and he would return Alea to her proper form.

It was all possible.

"Alright, enough of that," Ogras said as he dissipated into a mist and reformed a few steps away. "That little lass, she's with you?"

"How'd you do that? No, wait, Vai!" Zac exclaimed. "She's my guide. You didn't hurt her, right?"

"Well, she's fine except for a bump on the back of her head and a belly full of grievances," Ogras snickered. "She's around

ten minutes from here.”

“Let’s go,” Zac urged, and Ogras nodded in acquiescence as a shroud spread around the two.

“Most of those annoying mongrels have fled already after what I can only assume was your doing?” Ogras said as he nodded at the still-beaming pillar.

Zac helplessly shrugged in response, prompting the demon to scoff. “Figures. If anything, I should have realized it was you who had descended on this place the moment I saw that thing. Anyway, if we run into some stragglers, these clouds will make them ignore us. It will also allow us to talk in peace.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he curiously looked at the churning clouds around him and the energies they contained.

“Two branches?” Zac whistled.

“Not bad, huh?” Ogras said with a smug grin, which drastically soured when Zac released three Dao Fields with a smile. “What? A brute like you have somehow managed to form three of them? Whatever. Comparing oneself with a Heavenkissed scoundrel is bound to cause one’s teeth to itch.”

“If it’s any consolation, I generally only use two branches per form,” Zac laughed.

“I guess that’s better,” Ogras muttered before looking at Zac with perplexity. “In any case, how in the Heavens did you find me? I figured I would have to make my way back myself.”

“Find you?” Zac said with a blank look. “Isn’t that my cue? How the hell did you appear here? Did you enter the Stellar Ladder?”

“The stellar what-now?” Ogras blurted before he stopped and looked at Zac with suspicion. “Wait, you didn’t come here because you were looking for me? We just stumbled upon each other in this godforsaken place by accident?”

“Well,” Zac coughed.

“I see your Luck is as strong as ever. Well, I shouldn’t complain as long as I’m benefiting,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “Let me guess, you were out adventuring and just so

happened to fall into the Dimensional Seed as well? Right into the opportunity in the temple?”

“This is actually the Mystic Realm of the Dimensional Seed!” Zac exclaimed, things finally clicking into place. He should have realized the moment he saw Ogras, but he had been too preoccupied to make the connection. “No wonder this place felt so familiar.”

“Where else would we be?” Ogras said as he looked at Zac like he was a fool. “And you bastard, you didn’t actually look for me after I saved the day so heroically back then?”

“I did,” Zac sighed. “We had a supreme powerhouse divine your fate seven years ago. She said this Mystic Realm would pop up inside the Million Gates Territory around now, so I’ve been collecting the items needed for the Creators to build me a Cosmic Vessel. I came to a weird place called the Void Star to get the final item of the quest, and it turns out this realm had entered it.”

“Void Star? Sounds vaguely familiar,” Ogras hummed.

“What’s going on?”

Zac quickly recounted the situation of the Void Star and its interlayered realms, and the Stellar Ladder that had formed leading into the Mystic Realm.

“No wonder the lass kept calling me an infiltrator even if she was the one who infringed on my Mystic Realm. So that little bastard got caught inside,” Ogras said to himself before looking at Zac expectantly. “More importantly, a supreme powerhouse? We have a proper backing now?”

“Not quite,” Zac said with a grimace. “That powerhouse happened to be my mother.”

“She returned?” Ogras frowned. “Is that good news or bad news? How powerful is she?”

“It’s bad,” Zac sighed. “Leandra is crazy powerful, way more than anyone in Zecia even when she’s wounded. She appeared on Earth, killed Thea, and took Kenzie away. I’ve essentially been disowned. Kenzie was the one who had Leandra investigate your situation in return for leaving willingly.”

“That lass,” Ogras sighed. “And I’m sorry about your woman. I guess you were right to be wary of that side of the family. So, how do we get your sister back?”

“We?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“I’ve done one selfless thing in my life; sacrificing myself to save your sister. But now, your sister has not only returned the favor but completely nullified my deed by getting captured. Can’t have that, can we?” Ogras winked.

“Well, I could use the help,” Zac smiled. “I know they were headed toward a place called the Six Profundity Empire, which is apparently a top faction closer to the center of the Multiverse. We’re currently too weak to even reach that place, let alone save her.”

“Your mother can just waltz into the Multiverse heartlands like that?” Ogras frowned. “Wouldn’t she be discovered and hunted down? Or is this empire full of traitors?”

“I have learned a few things about my technocrat heritage since you got stuck here,” Zac slowly said. “I think they possess unique technology that allows them to masquerade as cultivators perfectly. Or perhaps form separate bodies that can cultivate within the System’s purview.”

Zac still remembered the scene back on Earth, where a human Leandra had walked out from the portal her avatar had created. One form was unmistakably technocrat in origin, while the other was unmistakably a cultivator. It was even possible that **[Quantum Gate]** wasn’t unique to him but rather something that all Kayar-Elu possessed.

The experiments done on him were probably the next step of that technology, where they fused their technocrat heritage with Emperor Limitless’ bloodline in an attempt to gain control over the System itself. Even if it failed, they would have a half-technocrat half-Void Emperor scion who could take the best from both worlds.

“Makes sense they would look into ways to hide from the Heavens and the eyes of other Cultivators,” Ogras nodded.

“Otherwise, how is the situation outside? Have you stirred up any more trouble?”

“Well,” Zac said with a grimace. “It’s a bit complicated, but Port Atwood and Azh’Rhodum are still standing.”

“Complicated? I suppose that’s usually how it goes with you,” Ogras snorted. “What’s going on?”

“A sector-wide war is on the cusp of breaking out,” Zac sighed. “No one in Zecia will be spared.”

“What?!” Ogras exclaimed before he looked at Zac suspiciously. “What did you do?”

“Me? Nothing!” Zac huffed. “Some people think it’s my fault because I summoned the Stele of Conflict, but how is it my fault a Space Gate appeared in the depths of the Million Gates Territory?”

“Maybe the Ruthless Heavens realized too few of the factions in Zecia would mess with you after the display of the Eveningtide Asura a million years ago. It couldn’t take the tranquility, so it brought in reinforcements?” Ogras offered and got a glare in return.

“Anyway, war is coming, so it’s great timing you’re back. We need elites to lead our armies. What about Billy? Is he okay? Is he in these mountains as well?” Zac asked.

“He’s fine,” Ogras snorted. “That simpleton is essentially unkillable in this realm. He’s not here, though. He should be in the heart of the Mystic Realm.”

“Unkillable?” Zac exclaimed. “He’s gained that much from this place?”

“Well, an empty mind leaves a lot of room for the Dao to grow, but that’s not what I was talking about,” Ogras snorted. “The Dimensional Seed has gained sapience, and it’s become attached to the brute. I saw that crazy little gem crush space across over a hundred meters, killing thousands of beasts instantly.”

“Sapience?” Zac said with surprise. It sounded very familiar to Qi’Sar, the realm spirit of the Twilight Ascent. But that spirit

was formed from the consciousness of two Autarchs through a freak accident. How had a recently born spirit gained sapience in a few short years? It might simply have been unusually talented, but there was a more likely explanation.

“I think it was experimented on,” Ogras said, echoing Zac’s thoughts.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter much,” Zac said. “Have you encountered anyone else in this place apart from Vai and me?”

“Nope, that little lass was the first. But I’ve sensed a couple of fluctuations over the past months, like people were trying to break in. None have come to these mountains, except for you,” Ogras before he pointedly looked at Zac. “I guess they didn’t sense the call from the temple.”

“You too?” Zac blurted before his brows scrunched together.

What did this mean? Had he stolen Ogras’ opportunity, or were they both competing for the Flamebearer title? He had suspected such a possibility since the sudden pulse a few weeks back, but he hadn’t worried too much about it. If some infiltrator or other outsider had seized his opportunity, he’d simply snatch it back.

But what if it was an ally of his?

“Don’t look at me like a starving Gwyllgi, you lunatic,” Ogras said with an annoyed wave of his hand. “I don’t think we are in contention. Did you know there are at least four temples in this mountain range?”

“There are?” Zac slowly said, his eyes gleaming.

“I can see the gears in your head turning, but don’t bother,” Ogras snorted. “You only felt drawn to one of the temples, right?”

Zac nodded in affirmation, realizing what Ogras was getting at.

“It was the same for me,” Ogras confirmed. “I was drawn to a smaller temple in another region of this mountain. I got the opportunity inside and made some great breakthroughs. But even months later, I’ve never felt another calling.”

“So why did you stick around?” Zac asked curiously.

“After getting a glimpse of those truths, I couldn’t just give up when I knew there were probably similar opportunities hiding in the other temples,” Ogras wryly smiled. “I’ve been trying to get inside those places for a while now without any luck. Then one day, I felt an odd ripple and rushed over, and I found your little companion by chance. You two actually used one of my old haunts, so I knew something was up when a cave entrance was suddenly a solid wall.”

“Poor girl,” Zac snorted as he took out the rags he’d looted from the infiltrators. “Do you recognize anyone of these sigils?”

Ogras curiously looked them over until he tapped on one of them – a different seal from the one Zac collected, and one of the sigils that had appeared to seal the pillar of stars that still stretched toward the sky behind them.

“That one, but it’s kind of ruined,” Ogras muttered as he rolled up one of his sleeves. “This is the real one.”

Zac was surprised to see that the demon actually had a tattoo of the seal, though it was incomplete in comparison to the one he’d seen just an hour ago.

“It’s not the same as mine,” Zac nodded as he pointed at the seal he was forming. “This one is mine.”

“As I expected,” Ogras nodded. “It should mean we’re not competing for the same inheritance if it works similarly to your repository back home. But I’m a bit confused. Why did your visit create a netherblasted pillar that seem intent on burning a hole in the sky? When I took my piece, I only opened a small spatial tear and let loose a beast tide.”

“I’m not sure what happened either,” Zac helplessly said as he looked back at the pillar. “The first time, I didn’t create anything like this. It was like your encounter. It should be fine, though. It seems stable enough.”

“Dragging a piece of the Lost Plane to the surface, how can it be fine? That madness is no joke. We’ve only been back together for a few minutes, and you’re already-” Ogras said

before he stopped in his tracks and looked at Zac eagerly.
“Wait, this is already your second piece? Do you know where we can get more? I still need two to complete my quest.”

“Two more?” Zac said with surprise. “Do you have a quest to become a Flambearer of... that place?”

“That place?” Ogras said with confusion. “Why not just say Ult-”

He didn't get any further as Zac urgently waved him to stop as he felt fate congregate.

“There are Karmic ramifications of uttering that name aloud,” Zac said. “We might want to be careful just in case.”

“Just the name has that kind of power?” Ogras whistled. “I can't wait to get my hands on the real thing. What's this about a flamebearer?”

Zac didn't answer but instead shared his quest screen.

“Flambearer indeed. There are some other differences as well,” Ogras muttered.

A moment later, another screen appeared between the two.

[Seal of the Hollow Court (Unique, Inheritance): Form a seal of the Hollow Court. Reward: Become a Skybreaker of Ultom. (1/3)]

“The Hollow Court?” Zac slowly said with a slight frown, the names foreign to him. “Never heard of it. Do you recognize it?”

“Nope,” Ogras shrugged. “Think I saw a piece of it in a vision, but that's about it. I thought the thing on my arm was just a key to unlock another quest until I stepped foot into the temple. I figured it was related to the Lost Plane.”

Zac slowly turned away from Ogras' quest and instead focused on the unfamiliar term. “That's the second time you mention the Lost plane. What's that? How is it related to these seals and the inheritance?”

“Well, let me tell you about a bunch of lunatics called the Ra'Lashar,” Ogras laughed.

Zac listened with interest as Ogras told him about how the Dimensional Seed had swallowed a bunch of hidden Mystic Realms, including one full of corrupted goblins. How they had accidentally found some mysterious dimension they named the Lost Plane, and managed to become a Peak C-grade force in a scant few millennia by deciphering some of the lesser secrets of that place.

“Is that ghost of yours trustworthy?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Not in the slightest,” Ogras laughed. “But I think he’s right on this one. I can feel their weird contracted spirits have a similar energy signature as that pillar of yours.”

“And you believe those temples came from the Lost Plane,” Zac concluded.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?” Ogras nodded. “If those little goblins could get even a corner of the insights contained in those temples, they were bound to make drastic improvements.”

“Flamebearers, Skybreakers, Palaces and Courts, and now the Lost Plane,” Zac mused, feeling a headache coming on. “How the hell does all this connect?”

“Who cares?” Ogras said lazily. “We just need to figure out where the next pieces are and empower ourselves.”

“I guess you’re right,” Zac said as he released a pent-up sigh. “We can worry about the other stuff after we get powerful.”

Zac knew that even if they spent the next week trying to figure things out, it would just be guesswork. The most important thing in the short run was that it didn’t look like they were contending for opportunities since they were collecting different seals.

“That’s right. I’m more curious how you caught hold of this opportunity. Did you find another connection to the Lost Plane?” Ogras asked.

“Well, I kind of just got a vision out of the blue?” Zac said as a smile spread across his face.

“That’s just swell,” Ogras complained, his face scrunched up like a raisin. “Some people have to fight shape-shifting nightmares and contend with crazy ghosts for a chance, while others just fall face-down into a pile of treasures. And you even get four opportunities to my three.”

Zac only laughed in response. He had missed this, teasing Ogras with his monstrous Luck.

“I had forgotten how infuriating it could be traveling with you,” Ogras muttered. “Let’s go find your little guide before I drop dead out of envy.”

Chapter 902: Shameless

There were a million things Zac needed to catch up the demon on, but Ogras was right. They had let Vai wait long enough. With the pillar still acting like a beacon, Zac didn't want to stick around in this place, especially not now that there were two of them who were connected to Ultom and its related structures.

"Alright, we're about to reach the little guide of yours," Ogras said. "She's currently pretending to be unconscious. What does she know?"

"Nothing about our opportunities. I only said I had a quest and needed to find something," Zac said. "We have been tracking the signal of the temple across over ten Mystic Realms until now, though, so she probably knows it's something big."

"Like the netherblasted pillar behind us isn't clue enough," Ogras snorted. "What about your identity?"

"Well," Zac coughed with some embarrassment before his face started to transform again. "I told her who I am once, but she didn't recognize my name. So, for now, I'm Gaun Sorom, a wandering cultivator."

Ogras snickered as he looked at Zac with a raised brow. "Didn't know you, eh? Must have been a blow to the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura."

"Well, whatever," Zac smiled, somewhat happy Ogras still didn't know about his unfortunate nickname in the sector. "We need her help if we're to get out of here. We're deep in the restricted territory of the Void Star in the middle of an invasion, and I have... borrowed some strategic resources of the Void Gate."

"Figures," Ogras nodded, not even phased. "How can that lass help us with that, though? No offense, but she didn't put up

much of a fight.”

“Well, she’s a researcher rather than a fighter,” Zac explained. “More importantly, she’s the great aunt of Leyara Lioress.”

“That girl from the Base Town? The nun with the cleavage?” Ogras said, his eyes almost burning. “She’s here?”

“It’s that bad?” Zac laughed.

“You try being locked in this place with only a mountain of muscles and a ghost goblin for companions for ten years. If you arrived any later, I might have shaved one of those black-furred humanoids and made it my woman,” Ogras grunted.

“Well, I’m not sure if Leyara’s here, but we managed to enter this Mystic Realm by using a gate left by other Void Gate members. I think it might be a special unit with how deep they’ve pushed into Void Star,” Zac explained. “My best idea is to find them and have them take us out. Depending on how things pan out, I might have to expose my true identity.”

“That’s pretty risky,” Ogras frowned. “Even if they don’t make any connection between us and that place, we’re bound to raise suspicion.”

“That’s why I’m hoping we can use Vai to get in contact with her niece to help us out,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“We don’t have a lot of options.”

“Why not just return the way you came from?” Ogras asked.

“For one, the gate that took us into this particular Mystic Realm was one-directional. But even if we get out, I’m not sure it’s possible to return that way,” Zac said as he briefly explained the situation with the Kan’Tanu infiltrators and how the cortex broke the connections in the Void Star.

“So, we’re surrounded by heart-curse-infested lunatics and stuck deep in some unstable Mystic Realm Potpourri,” Ogras groaned. “Never a good clean adventure with you, is there?”

“This is nothing,” Zac laughed. “You should have seen when I ran into the real Eveningtide Asura a few years back, and a C-grade capital exploded. Now, that was hectic.”

“You WHAT?!” Ogras screamed, but Zac had already continued forward toward where Vai was being kept.

This close-by, Zac could already sense Vai’s aura. He flashed over, but he stopped in confusion when he saw six specters standing guard over Vai’s unmoving body. Her eyes were closed, but Zac could somewhat tell she was awake from how her energy circulated. Apart from her captivity, she looked unscathed apart from a big bump on her head. Zac almost laughed from how familiar the scene was to his encounter with Zakarith, the little mercantile demoness back in Port Atwood.

The ghosts guarding Vai turned into black streams that poured out from the cave when Zac appeared, leaving the two alone. Zac curiously glanced at the energy streams, wondering just what these things were. Judging by their strange aura, they shouldn’t be one of Ogras’ skills. Neither were they proper ghosts, like Triv or the Raun Spectrals.

Instead, their aura seemed to stem from the Lost Plane Ogras briefly mentioned before, which probably meant Ogras had found some method to control the denizens brought to this dimension. Cultivators who controlled beings from other planes were generally called Warlocks, and they were extremely rare. Perhaps even rarer than Karmic Cultivators.

Not only did you need a powerful soul to control a being like that, but you also needed to find the creatures to bind. It was a lot easier for Beast Tamers; the multiverse was literally crawling with them. But to find a weakness in the dimensional layers and forming a bridge required luck, skill, and resources.

The difficulty of becoming a warlock was only one aspect of the archetype’s rarity – the other was the danger. There was a high risk of getting your mind invaded, or at least influenced, by the alien entities. It also bordered on the unorthodox since many of the methods of forming contracts involved sacrifice.

He would have to keep an eye on Ogras, just in case, to confirm he still was in control of the situation. Thankfully, Zac had managed to infer some positive signs. Those talismans Ogras used to seal that sinister flag of his were freshly made with Yeti hide and blood. If Zac had to guess, Ogras might

have used Ultom's state of clarity to devise techniques to deal with the danger.

A second after the ghosts dissipated, Vai hesitantly opened her eyes to find Zac standing right in front of her.

"You're here," Vai cried with tears pooling in her eyes as she ran over to Zac.

"I'm here," Zac smiled as he hugged the little researcher.

"Everything's okay. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine; I was worr-" Vai said before her eyes widened in alarm. "Behind you!"

It was obviously Ogras who had walked into view with a crooked smile.

"Oh, don't worry about him; he's not an infiltrator," Zac said as he glanced back. "This is all a big misunderstanding. We actually know each other from before."

"I'm sorry, little lass," Ogras grinned. "I didn't know you were this guy's wife. I guess that's my luck. Stuck here for ten years, and when a little cutie finally shows up, she's already taken by an old buddy."

"I'm- I'm not his wife," Vai stuttered as she embarrassedly took a step away from Zac.

"Does that mean you're single?" Ogras asked with a grin that made him look like a starving ghost.

"Rein it in, man," Zac snorted as Vai took another step back with a mix of disgust and fear.

"Are you really friends with this bad guy?" Vai whispered.

"We've known each other for a long time," Zac nodded. "He's not as bad as he looks. Long ago, he got swallowed by a spatial tear when saving someone's life, and it turns out he ended up in this Mystic Realm long before it entered the Void Star."

"You're the first person I've seen in ten years," Ogras added, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw the demon take out Vai's protective treasure. "I was hoping to find out where you came

from and how to get out of this place. I didn't even know the sector was at war, let alone anything about the infiltrators. I'm a righteous and upstanding citizen of Zecia."

Vai snatched back the ball before once more taking a few steps back. "W-What righteous person would appear in my shadows, almost knocks me out, and then robs me before asking any questions?"

"A righteous person who wants to live a long life," Ogras offered after some thought.

"Shameless," Vai muttered before looking at Zac askance. "He really is your friend. Two peas in a pod."

"That's rude. To both of us, I think," Ogras laughed.

"Anyway, we're sorry you got hurt because of this," Zac said as she handed her a bottle of Pseudo D-grade healing salve. "For your head."

"Rich guy," Ogras said as he stared at the shimmering liquid inside. "Got any more?"

Zac snorted and threw over one of his spare Spatial Rings that had a kit of Crystals, pills, talismans, and other necessities in case something happened with his main ring.

"Rich indeed," Ogras said with shimmering eyes.

"A-Are you okay as well?" Vai hesitantly asked with a low volume. "I saw the pillar while the bad guy carried me away. What was that? Are you really planning to destroy this Mystic Realm?"

"You're blowing up this place?" Ogras said as he looked up from the ring in his hand. "As much as I'd love to see this realm get blasted to the underworld, I think King Billy would object."

"I'm not planning on blowing anything up. I don't know why that pillar appeared. I thought only a breach would open," Zac explained before turning to Ogras with a raised brow. "*King Billy?* What's going on?"

"Well, apart from befriending that annoying crystal, he also subjugated a tribe of aboriginals and formed the Kingdom of

Bonk Mountain,” Ogras snickered.

“W-what’s going on?” Vai asked with confusion.

“More people have been stuck in this realm,” Zac explained. “I know one of them. We need to pick him up as well before we leave. Do you have any way to contact your people? This realm is even bigger than we expected. It would be almost impossible to find them if we just searched by foot.”

“I-“Vai hesitated as she glanced at Ogras, who rolled his eyes and walked further away. She spoke up with a low voice, and she actually looked a bit shamefaced. “I have a distress beacon, but it’s designed for the normal Mystic Realms in the Void Star. It only stretches for two weeks’ travel, I think. I... activated it in the forest a few times... I’m sorry.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Zac shrugged. “But that probably means your people have moved either toward the heart of the realm or the other side. I’m sure we’ll find them eventually if we send out a signal now and then.”

“We don’t need to bother with any of that,” Ogras said from a distance, clearly listening in to the conversation. “We can just ask Billy’s pet when we get there. In fact, that brute might already have captured or thwonked those people. You never know with that guy.”

“Pet?” Vai said with confusion.

“Billy has befriended the Realm Spirit of this Mystic Realm,” Zac explained, remembering how Qi’Sar had spied on him as he traveled through the Twilight Ocean. “It should be able to easily locate any other people in this place, including your fellow templars.”

“A sapient realm spirit!” Vai exclaimed with excitement, the uniqueness of a Realm Spirit overcoming her wariness from Ogras. “That is extremely rare! I’ve only read about it in ancient texts. There’s so much we can learn from such a being.”

“You are bound to be disappointed if you go in expecting any wisdom from that thing,” Ogras muttered from the side, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

“Let’s just say Billy is the brains of that duo, and he’s taught the thing everything he knows,” Ogras grimaced.

Zac tried to imagine a Realm Spirit raised by Billy for a moment before firmly putting the matter aside. As long as it could help them out, it didn’t matter. “Alright, there’s no time to waste. I want to get away from the pillar anyway.”

The traveling duo became a trio as they set out, though Vai was not too enthused by the arrangement. Zac could understand her sentiment after being kidnapped himself. It wasn’t something you just moved past. She occasionally shot the demon aggrieved looks, which gave Zac a bit of a headache.

Even if Vai didn’t know any of his biggest secrets, he still saw her as a friend and an ally, and hoped things wouldn’t go south because of this. Thankfully, Ogras understood the problem as well, so he started a relentless campaign against the poor girl. He swapped between peppering her with various questions, telling jokes, and sharing some of his exploits in this Mystic Realm, most of them clearly made-up.

Like this, a few days passed until they could see the edge of the Mountain Range. Most of the Yeti had gone into hiding below-ground, and with Ogras’ illusory domain, they could walk right by the stragglers who remained on the mountain paths.

They had exited in another direction than the one they came from, and instead of an endless forest, they spotted huge shimmering lakes stretching out across a mostly flat landscape. There was no lack of vegetation either, but it looked more like the Twilight Chasm’s coral forest than a normal one.

“Welcome to the Badlands,” Ogras said with an expansive wave. “Some of the lakes are saltwater. Others are pure acid. They all have nasty bastards hiding in the depths, and there are even more nasty critters above-ground. This place has been the cause of many headaches over the years.”

“The beasts? They’re aggressive?” Zac asked.

“It’s not too bad,” Ogras said. “The real problem is the furry humanoids in the mountains. Since they arrived, the Badlands have been their main hunting ground. Sometimes, thousands of those black-furred bastards descend the mountains like locusts. Their actions have kicked up tides of beasts that fled straight toward the Kingdom of Bonk. It’s become Billy’s new Ratlight, one that has lasted for years.”

“Alright, let’s head inside,” Zac said as he looked back at the pillar behind them.

Since yesterday, it had finally started to shrink. Going by the rate it was thinning, it would probably be gone within the week. The thing hadn’t caused any problems, but it was still a huge relief to see it go. No matter if you considered the tremendous amounts of power it contained or the madness instilled into the energy, it wasn’t even a two-edged sword - it was an uncontrollable calamity if it was unleashed on this realm.

“Wait, people are coming! Almost two hundred cultivators!” Vai suddenly exclaimed as she stared into her bowl. “Six, no seven Hegemons! We need to hide quickly.”

“Where?” Ogras said with confusion as he looked around.

“They’re still an hour’s travel away,” Vai explained.

“Pretty nifty, that thing,” Ogras said as he looked at the bowl with interest.

“I-It’s not for sale. It’s mine,” Vai said with determination in her eyes.

“I was just looking,” Ogras said with helplessness as he held up his hands in defeat.

“Two hundred,” Zac muttered. “The Void Gate encampment we saw couldn’t hold that many people. Should be invaders.”

“What do you think?” Ogras asked as the illusive domain around them condensed even further.

“Keep one or two alive for questioning?” Zac said after some consideration.

“Good,” Ogras grinned as the air around them started to shimmer. “Finally some change after years of fighting those beasts.”

“Y-you two!” Vai exclaimed. “Going by the strength of the lights, one of the hegemons is either an elite or approaching Middle D-grade.”

“Compared to Captain Teo, who’s stronger?” Zac asked.

“Teo, definitely,” Vai said without hesitation.

“Then we’ll be fine. Can you see where they will enter the mountains?” Zac asked.

Twenty minutes later, the group arrived at a spot Ogras knew. It was a small basin no more than two hundred meters across – small enough to restrict such a big group, while Zac’s skills could still cover the whole thing. It was the perfect spot for an ambush.

Vai had retreated even further and was safely hidden in a nearby cave, while Zac and Ogras hung from a sheer mountain wall inside an illusion array further augmented by Ogras’ skills. After sensing just how hard to spot Ogras had become, Zac wasn’t worried they’d be exposed unless the enemies had a Hegemon scout.

They had essentially become flies on the wall, silently waiting until they finally saw some movement. Two scouts moved with impressive speed, one on the ground and one jumping between mountain peaks using a blood-based movement skill as they headed deeper into the mountain range. Their auras were almost as indistinct as Ogras’, but Zac would definitely have spotted them even if he wasn’t prepared.

“The others shouldn’t be far off,” Ogras whispered when the two had passed.

“Can you drop me off in the middle of the army?” Zac asked. “As close to the hegemons as possible? Or will that mess with your skills?”

“No worries,” Ogras smiled. “Just do your thing and soak up their attention - I will support you from the outside. Like the good old days.”

“Like the good old days,” Zac nodded as he handed the demon the curse-warding talisman he’d picked up before.

“Remember, don’t stay close to those guys when they die, or you’ll get infected. Take this thing just in case.”

“What about you?” Ogras said as he put the talisman on his robes.

“I’m immune,” Zac shrugged.

“Braggart,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

Another thirty minutes later, Zac saw the whole mountain path light up with **[Cosmic Gaze]** from the powerful auras in the army. They were moving fast and would enter the basin in just a few seconds, so Zac immediately activated **[Arcadian Crusade]**. With seven Hegemons holding the fort, including a powerful one, he would need to thin out the numbers quickly.

“Alright,” Ogras whispered as he placed his hand on Zac’s shoulder, prompting the world to turn grey. “I can’t wait to see what kind of monster you’ve become over the past decade.”

Zac only scoffed, but he was actually a bit excited himself. Most of his Skills had seen upgrades in the temple, and an opportunity to try them out had already presented itself.

Chapter 903: Choosing Death

The world twisted, and Zac suddenly sensed hundreds of powerful auras all around him. Ogras had done exactly what he'd asked – teleported him into the middle of the infiltrator squad. The demon had even left behind a shroud of haze that would give him a slight edge in the ambush, and Zac wasted no time as he swung his axe.

The grey world around him lit up with sanguine luster as he activated not only the skills of [**Verun's Bite**], but also a few of his own. The Dao-infused axe slammed into the head of one of the nearby Hegemons before he had a chance to respond. To add insult to injury, the body was cut apart by a storm of fractal leaves as Zac unleashed his area attack of [**Nature's Edge**] that covered a good portion of the basin.

Zac was disappointed that he didn't feel any stronger with the upgraded version of [**Arcadian Crusade**], and it still provided a 35% boost. Instead, the golden runes on his body had grown denser, and he could feel how his energy circulation had been improved by another level. That was pretty decent as well.

Mastering his techniques had taught him the importance of small advantages, and being able to activate skills 50% faster was huge since it meant you didn't need to create as large an opening to strike. Now, it had allowed Zac to launch a surprise strike before the Kan'Tanu Cultivators had even figured out where he stood, and over fifty streams of energy immediately entered his body from the fallen E-grade cultivators.

But Zac didn't stop there. The trees of [**Ancestral Woods**] had already appeared by that point, and Zac leaped into a tree next to him just as dozens of terrifying attacks landed on his position. Ten of his trees were disintegrated in the area he

stood, but the attacks also destroyed most of the ownerless blood curses around him.

These soldiers weren't fools. Even if they didn't know the exact effect of the primordial forest, they knew enough to destroy it. Most of his skill had been dismantled instantly, but the sudden appearance of a forest provided an excellent opportunity for the dagger in the dark to make his move. As Zac appeared from another of the trees, he saw a whole flank of the army descend into madness.

Some warriors struck their allies like they were trying to cut down the tress of [**Ancestral Woods**]. Others were gored by shadowy spears. Some were even killed by those spectral creatures Zac had seen before. Another 50 warriors had been taken out in an instant, showcasing just how powerful Ogras had become.

These people were not just random F-grade fodder; the warriors were all High E-grade at the least, with most of them being Peak E-grade. There had to be a significant power discrepancy to effortlessly cull their numbers like this. And not even the Hegemons were safe from Ogras' all-out assault. A highly condensed shadow-lance struck a Hegemon from behind.

The man had just received a bloody gash from one of Zac's fractal leaves, and Ogras' strike was launched with perfect timing. The warrior just barely managed to block it in time with a defensive skill, but the attack had created a huge opening. This was exactly what Zac needed. Most of the Hegemons were still standing, and it was they who were the real threat. Less than a second had passed since the two descended on the infiltrators, and Zac wanted to take out at least two more leaders before they organized a response.

One of the blood curses had already found his trail, but he ignored the stabbing pain on his back as he activated [**Earthstrider**]. A step took him right next to his target, and Zac was elated to sense how sturdy his movement skill had become. It didn't seem quicker than before, but he could tell that it was able to forcibly contract space to a higher degree.

That was especially important in battlefields where chaotic energies and Dao Fields were always present. Typically, it felt like pushing through quicksand, but the effect was greatly subdued as he plowed right into the condensed Dao field of the scimitar-wielding Hegemon. The warrior emitted a murderous aura, but something like that wasn't enough to give pause to Zac as he slammed into the Hegemon like a ferocious bear.

The push was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the interlocked layer of rocky scales the warrior had summoned crumbled. **[Verun's Bite]** followed right in tow as it bit into the forehead of the man, ending him in an instant. It was quick and clean, and showcased the indomitability of an apex predator.

A scream in his mind alerted him of imminent danger. He narrowly dodged a colossal beam of shrieking madness that destroyed everything in its path, including at least a dozen E-grade infiltrators. It had been released by the leader, a weird hunched-over human whose mouth was bereft of both lips and teeth. His face was locked in a grotesque mask of pain as he looked right at Zac, somehow seeing straight through Ogras' shadowy domain.

Zac had barely managed to move out of harm's way, but it looked like he left an opening just like the scimitar-wielding Hegemon. In reality, Vivi's vines were acting like a counterweight, and his situation was nowhere near as precarious as it seemed. Since he had reached the Integration Stage of his Evolutionary Stance, it required a lot more effort to push him off-balance than a surprise attack.

But the ruse had accomplished its goal as another of the Hegemons appeared right behind him with a brutal cudgel in his hand. It emitted smoldering heat like a falling meteor as the Hegemon swung it toward his head. Zac was about to strike, but a spear appeared out of nowhere and pierced the head of the bulky warrior.

It was Ogras who had appeared out of nowhere and struck like lightning, using some means Zac couldn't decipher in the heat of the battle. The scene was almost incomprehensible as Zac could clearly see the demon fighting against a group of

cultivators within his and the cudgel-wielding Hegemon's sight.

The demon was gone as quickly as he had appeared, and three of the e-grade warriors fell to the supposed illusion at the same time. Since his own target was dead, Zac furiously circulated his Dao and Cosmic Energy, and two clouds shot toward a fourth Hegemon. Simultaneously, a feral snarl echoed through the area as Verun appeared from his axe, and the Tool Spirit pounced on another Hegemon who was charging up a powerful skill judging by the energy undulations.

Space was parted into an unbridgeable chasm as the hymns of Arcadia and the deafening silence of the Abyss drowned out the pained cries of the warriors. A ferocious swing of the Hegemon parried the manufactured spatial tear, but it was clear this warrior wasn't up to the task. He couldn't withstand a Peak-Mastery skill like **[Rapturous Divide]** that was empowered by **[Spiritual Void]**, **[Adamance of Eoz]**, and two Dao Branches.

His attack was broken apart, and the spatial divide carved a huge gash into his chest. Unfortunately, he barely managed to expend the final energy of Zac's skill before gutting being cut apart, but Zac had already appeared in the wake of his skill. A swift swing of his axe finished the job, but an extreme danger gripped him by that time.

An enormous face had appeared in the sky that radiated an intensely evil aura. Like the one who summoned the skill, the face had no lips or teeth. The avatar didn't have eyes either, or it was rather more apt to say it had lost them since two huge engraved spikes had pushed into its eye sockets.

Zac urgently activated **[Empyrean Aegis]**, and two golden bubbles appeared, one around himself and one around what Zac hoped was the real Ogras. At the same time, three pillars rose behind his back, indicating the durability of the skill had gone up another tier. It was just in time, as the grotesque avatar unleashed a tremendous wail that tore apart space itself.

The scream was deafening, and not even his recently upgraded defensive skill could completely block out its effects. The

huge avatar's wail threw Zac's mind into chaos as bleeding gashes appeared all over his body. Ogras wasn't much better off. He tried to disappear into the shadows, but space had become too fractured for movement skills, and he was immediately thrown out.

Gristly gashes appeared across the demon's body, and bad turned to worse as one of the surviving Hegemons took advantage of the overtaxed golden bubble and punched a nasty hole in Ogras' side with a mighty javelin throw. The last vestiges of **[Ancestral Forest]** crumbled as well, and Zac saw how one of the Hegemons was rushing toward him with murder in his eyes.

The only good news was that Zac and his companion weren't the only ones in trouble. The evil god's wail didn't discern friend from foe, and its skill covered the whole basin. It even bounced off the wall to create a dangerous superimposed effect. The surviving Hegemons had barely withstood the attack by activating defensive talismans, but the E-grade warriors didn't have that kind of luxury.

Whether it was defensive skills or E-grade talismans, it all broke apart in front of the grotesque avatar. Only Zac, Ogras, and the Hegemons remained standing a second later, along with Verun who didn't seem affected by the sound wave. The problem was that the wail was unrelenting, and one of the pillars had already crumbled.

Cosmic Energy surged into Zac's right arm as four thick Vines empowered with the Branch of the Kalpataru shot out. They unleashed an all-out offense at the incoming Hegemon, continuously breaking apart and regrowing under the seemingly tireless screech from above. A shimmering swirl rose around the warrior as well, and Zac was elated to see the Hegemon turn and run in the wrong direction.

He quickly broke Ogras' illusion, but the brief pause had been enough for Zac to finish charging the Skill Fractal on his arm. Space broke apart as the enormous hand of **[Arcadia's Judgement]** emerged. The hand and its axe had grown even larger since the upgrade, gaining roughly five meters in length.

That was not the only change, as a familiar feature had returned. A massive sigil had formed in the sky, towering over even the enormous avatar. It covered the whole basin, and Zac was amazed to see the avatar was pushed down toward the ground from the pressure. The weaker Hegemons weren't much better off as Zac's domain overloaded their already strained defensive talismans, and they suddenly found themselves under attack from not one but two skills.

Only two people were left unscathed - the powerful Hegemon who withstood the pressure with the help of an odd shuddering domain, and Ogras who didn't seem to be affected at all. It wasn't thanks to the demon's own skill, though. An unmistakable resonance in the golden barrier around him indicated a synergy between his two skills - those shielded by **[Empyrean Aegis]** were exempt from **[Arcadia's Judgement]**.

The final pillar of **[Empyrean Aegis]** was already showing cracks, but it was barely enough. The axe descended with unprecedented force, and the whole mountain range shook. The leader knew his skill was in trouble, and four clattering skulls appeared to intercept the axe. However, before they could soak up some of the momentum, a tremendous lance of shadow swallowed them whole.

It was a bloodied Ogras, now sporting four sets of shadowy wings, who had released the skill, paving the way for Zac to do maximum damage. The other Hegemons could barely withstand the two skills, so they couldn't help either. The axe bit into the head of the evil god a moment later, and it was immediately pushed the final distance to the ground.

The first half of the strike destroyed the avatar in one go, and even one of the Hegemons was turned into mincemeat. A moment later, it was like the world itself unleashed its anger on them as thousands of spikes shot up through the ground. In the chaos, yet another Hegemon fell under the combined onslaught of Verun and Ogras.

That left the only one enemy standing - the lipless leader of the army. Unfortunately, he had withstood both the first and second half of the skill. He wasn't unscathed as one of his

arms hung limply to the side while he was covered in cuts and bruises, but Zac frowned when he felt the man's aura was still rock-solid.

It was a bit risky leaving the leader for last, but it was the strategy he and Ogras had settled on. They only knew this person was powerful before the army appeared, and there was no way to tell if Ogras could even get close enough to him for Zac to launch a surprise strike. Instead, they had opted to take out as many Hegemons as possible in a blitz and then focus on the leader.

Even if things had gone mostly according to plan, Zac had hoped he'd reach this point without having expended both **[Rapturous Divide]** and **[Arcadia's Judgement]**. His berserking skill had run its course by now, indicating the time it lasted hadn't changed. Instead, the backlash had been drastically lessened, and Zac only felt a wave of exhaustion instead of losing half his combat strength.

It was not a coincidence, but rather design. Zac had aimed for this when he reformed the skill; more power instead of more time, and a smaller backlash upon upgrade instead of an increased time frame. Right now, he somewhat regretted that direction as another 10 seconds on the clock would have been nice, especially as Zac saw the leader's flesh twist and turn until he was remade anew like a fleshy puppet.

It definitely wasn't the unfettered possibility of Creation who had made it possible, nor was it a healing skill. It was the blood curse in his body. Zac had seen those tendrils twist and pulse in the wounds. Not only that, but he could actually feel a sense of danger from the curse, even at this distance.

There were no two ways about it - this guy was more powerful than Zac had expected.

Since the Hegemon wasn't circulating any energy, Zac didn't immediately make his move either. Zac needed the break more than the infiltrator, so he swallowed a Healing Pill to alleviate some of the exhaustion. Ogras had already disappeared again, probably waiting for a time to strike. For a few seconds, no

one said anything, until the Hegemon released a wheezing laugh.

“So this untested Sector has some warriors with mettle, after all,” the leader said, his voice a ghastly lisp. “I’m guessing you’re the candidate who created the pillar?”

Zac frowned as he looked at the warrior. He didn’t seem ruffled at all upon seeing his army collapsing. Was the infiltrator that confident in his own strength? And was it just a guess that the Hegemon had pegged him as a candidate of Ultom, or did he have some way to confirm it?

“You have proven yourself, so I will give you an option besides death,” the toothless man continued. “Return with me to the Kan’Tanu Sector and loyally assist whatever faction we sell you to.”

“Sell me?” Zac frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Zac obviously wasn’t about to take this man up on his offer, but anything he could glean from him was valuable information.

“This is a greater opportunity than you can imagine. The exalted forces are looking for candidates. If you don’t sell yourself, you will be hunted down without fail,” the man continued. “In return, you will become a member of some of the mightiest forces in existence, something Frontier Cultivators like us can only dream of.”

“Not interested, sorry,” Zac grunted as the medicinal efficacy of the Healing Pill was exhausted.

“So you choose death,” the Hegemon said. “You leave me no choice.”

“You’re talking like your whole army isn’t lying dead around you,” Zac snorted.

“Army? These warslaves?” the man laughed. “They are not my companions. They are my nourishment.”

Hundreds of bodies exploded the next moment, and a red haze covered the whole basin. Simultaneously, the Hegemon’s aura exploded to an unprecedented degree, clearly entering the

levels of a Middle Hegemon. Zac felt an enormous evil coming from within the leader that was rapidly being covered in pulsating tendrils.

This was far beyond what he'd seen from any other infiltrators. There was only one answer - this man carried a curse far more potent than the others, and this was his true state. Space itself shuddered around him like it was finding it hard to contain his aura, and Zac almost felt like he was facing the insanely powerful cyborg again.

A barrage of fractal leaves shot toward the man, but the shallow cuts they left on the fleshy armor healed almost instantly. Seeing such a display, Zac knew that this wasn't something he could deal with in his current state. There was no other option - he needed to activate the backup plan.

"Shroud!" Zac shouted, and it was like a dozen smoke bombs had erupted at once, covering the basin and the surrounding mountains in thick isolating shadows.

Death filled his being as his surroundings changed hue. Chains rattled as a coffin appeared on its back, the swirl on its lid looking like a gateway to the underworld itself. In his hand, **[Black Death]** appeared as his other tool spirit returned into **[Verun's Bite]** before being stowed away. This was the ultimate card in his repertoire, finally made possible by Ogras illusory skills.

"I choose Death?" Zac said as his body started to grow. "You have no idea."

Chapter 904: Arbiter

The fleshy armor around the lipless infiltrator writhed and pulsated like a stygian horror. Even then, he looked at Zac like he was the monstrosity as Zac completed a transformation of his own. Muscles and bones creaked and groaned until Zac was almost four meters tall. This feature didn't strengthen him, but he kept it since it had proven useful when he fought Uona.

However, no one who had seen **[Vanguard of Undeath]** would recognize the skill even if he had become supersized. The thick plating that radiated the cold aquamarine of death from within was mostly gone. Instead, Zac found himself donning a mantle of utter darkness that covered most of his features.

He still gained a dark scaled breastplate with dense inscriptions, but his helmet was replaced by a hood and the rest of his plating with dark robes that continuously released the black tendrils of the abyss. To an earthling, he probably resembled a grim reaper equipped with a coffin and axe instead of a scythe.

[Love's Bond] and **[Black Death]** looked mostly the same, except the links had grown a shade darker as they had been imbued with the abyssal aura of his Draugr heritage. Of course, they had also grown in size to match Zac's own, but the axe retained its shape instead of being reformed into a bardiche.

This was intentional. Even if Zac could fight mostly unencumbered with almost any type of axe thanks to his mastery, there would be a sense of imbalance when he used his Inexorable Stance. The bardiche had been pretty good before since he neither had any proper technique nor an axe for his undead side. But now that he had the perfect weapon, it would weaken the skill if it transformed his weapon.

There were two more additions to his new look – the first was a swirling darkness that formed a terrifying backdrop behind him. It was actually the vortex on Alea’s coffin lid that had grown in size. It probably looked like a gateway to the abyss, one even more palpable than the darkness of **[Rapturous Divide]**. The swirl was now roughly the size of his torso, and it created a profane halo effect.

And from its depths, the final part of the ensemble emerged; a thick scarred chain that wound itself around his left forearm, essentially forming a thick impregnable bracer. Just looking at the scars caused his soul to shudder, and it felt like they had been left by some monstrous devil whose aura still lingered.

The chain didn’t come from inside **[Love’s Bond]** but rather from the skill itself, though there was some relation. The stronger Alea grew, the stronger this chain would become, just like how the power of his shield had partly determined the protective qualities of **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

“You!” the Hegemon exclaimed. “What manner of monstrosity are you!”

“That’s coming from you?” Zac countered with a raspy voice that sounded like it was summoned from the depths of hell.

The lipless Hegemon’s transformation was complete, and it looked extremely disgusting. In his chest was a huge hole from which the tendrils of his Heart Curse had emerged. In its center was a beating mass that emitted an exceedingly evil aura. Bloody veins had wound themselves around almost every part of his body to form a living armor.

They still rippled a bit, but they had mostly thinned down to a manageable size that shouldn’t restrict his movements. Zac could sense dozens of familiar auras from within those tendrils - the auras of those he and Ogras had just killed. It created an extremely discordant appearance, which was only furthered by the fact the Hegemon now exuded two auras of his own.

The Hegemon and his Heart Curse were one, yet they weren’t. Their auras were entwined, empowering each other like a Dao Braid. Zac knew it wasn’t so simple, though. Unless this curse was utterly different from how the other curses functioned, it

shouldn't have any energy of its own. It was ultimately a parasite that acted a bit like a specialty core where it provided power at the expense of lifeforce or energy expenditure.

Even if the Hegemon had seemingly absorbed a massive amount of blood and energy from the corpses of his so-called warslaves, there had to be a cost to gaining power this way. No matter how the transformation worked, the leader was definitely stronger than they had expected, and most likely a different tier of warrior than any invader he'd run into until now.

From Vai's analysis, this man was supposed to be just above Uzu's true strength, but he was inching in on the strength of a proper Middle Stage Hegemon with the activation of the Heart Curse. Zac hadn't expected such a tough fight out of nowhere, but there was nothing to do. This man couldn't be allowed to leave alive, whether it was because of his secrets or his connection to Ultom.

"Get away," Zac whispered into the shadows, hoping Ogras could hear him.

One thing hadn't changed since he and Ogras met last; he still couldn't completely shield the living from the effect of his skills. The next moment, a shroud of darkness descended on the basin, forming a core of unrelenting darkness in the shadow realm Ogras had erected. **[Deathmark]**, **[Fields of Despair]**, and **[Blighted Cut]** were activated at once. Zac even considered using **[Pillar of Desolation]** from the get-go, but he ultimately decided against it.

The infiltrator had immediately recovered from getting hit by the second blast of **[Arcadia's Judgement]** empowered by **[Arcadian Crusade]**, and that was before he had absorbed the bodies of over two hundred warriors, including a half-dozen Hegemons. Zac couldn't waste his Supreme Pathbound Skill right away until he better understood what he was dealing with and the limits of his recovery.

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to use it at all.

"I don't know how you suddenly turned into an undead monstrosity, but it doesn't matter," the Hegemon growled. "I'll

rip you apart just the same.”

The next moment, another grotesque avatar appeared behind the lipless warrior’s back. It was three faces fused into one, with lumps of tumors and writhing flesh creating a nightmarish scene. They were locked in a silent scream, and Zac frowned from within his hood. Zac wouldn’t have allowed the Hegemon to activate any skills in a perfect world, but it was impossible to avoid.

Even after his race-transforming skill was upgraded, his swap took a little bit to finish up. And since they had left Kan’Tanu Sound Cultivator for last, he had been given a window to complete his own preparations.

“I’ve never met an undead before; I heard they existed in this sector,” the Hegemon continued, his voice amplified and repeated by the enormous heads behind him. Zac felt his soul shudder from the effect – just speaking had become an attack in the Hegemon’s current form. “I will offer your cursed eyes as a gift to the general. I know he would be interested in such a unique specimen.”

Zac briefly wondered if the man didn’t actually know about Draugr, but he guessed it didn’t really matter. Zac didn’t immediately strike and instead opted to wait and observe for a moment. This man was far too powerful just to throw out his whole repertoire at once and possibly waste the effect of his skills.

Luckily, Zac had minions who could test the waters for him. An axe-wielding wraith of **[Deathmark]** appeared out of nowhere behind the Hegemon’s back, and it swung its axe in a ruthless arc aimed at his neck. With its latest upgrade, the specter had become even more congealed, and its weapon no longer looked like it had been picked up from an ancient battlefield.

Its speed and intelligence had both improved, but Zac inwardly sighed when it was all for naught. The phantom only managed to start up its swing before it crumbled. Some sort of domain surrounded the Hegemon. Not only that, but ten spikes shot out from the fleshy armor that covered the man and

ripped the already collapsing specter apart. It looked like an autonomous action, which wasn't surprising considering even the lower Heart Curses had some basic instincts.

Just after the wraith crumbled, Zac was beset by a sharp pang of danger. Not wanting to take any risks, he turned into a stream of Miasma that flew toward his target. In his previous position, space tore apart as a sound wave so powerful it could be seen with the naked eye spread out in every direction.

It was the enormous avatar in the air that was responsible. One of its mouths had opened in a wordless scream, and it somehow transferred its wail into a singular spot. By the time the attack caught up with Zac, it had been somewhat diminished. But Zac's vision was still distorted, and it felt like sharp spikes were stabbing into his ears.

The shockwave forcibly deactivated [**Abyssal Phase**], and a dozen flesh spikes shot out from the Hegemon to take advantage of the opening. They narrowly missed as they pierced empty air around Zac, allowing him to regain his footing. It wasn't a clumsy mistake but rather an effect of [**Arbiter of the Abyss**]. Even if he had been affected by the soundwave, his new skill was still running.

And its domain was incredibly powerful.

When Zac formed the skill, reconfiguring the taunting function of [**Vanguard of Undeath**] had taken up most of his efforts. It was now responsible not only for control but even part of the defenses. The strength of his taunt had been greatly improved, and he could now rebuff just like he could attract.

A hit that would narrowly hit would now miss, and a lethal strike would get demoted to a flesh wound as it was rebuffed, drastically lessening the pressure on himself and [**Profane Exponents**] when he fought. Any skilled enemy would be able to correct for the control domain soon enough, but he could just switch the direction when that happened, forcing the enemy to readjust continuously.

In other words, it not only helped with defenses while retaining its ability to drag unwilling enemies toward him. It was an effective way to ruin someone's momentum and rhythm.

Being able to push his enemies and their attacks into any direction would have been even better, but that was beyond him and his skill. It would require absolute control within your sphere of influence, rather than the more straightforward push away and drag over functionality.

Using the domain felt as natural as breathing, so Zac immediately launched a real offensive of his own since waiting around was fruitless. The corrosive atmosphere of **[Deathmark]** wasn't able to leave any real damage on the fleshy armor even in its upgraded state, and it looked like the specters would have to stack corrosive marks to have any effect.

The lipless Aural Cultivator was still full of certainty and overconfidence after triggering his Heart Curse, and Zac wanted to seize the momentum before he realized he wasn't as infallible as he believed. Chains oozing with corrosive death rattled as they shot toward the Hegemon while Zac himself followed in their wake.

He could sense the chains being assaulted by invisible ripples, but it wasn't enough to damage them. Alea's chains were already nigh-unbreakable for an Early Hegemon while still an F-grade Spirit Tool, and her recent breakthrough had pushed her three full tiers into Late E-grade. Zac doubted even an all-out strike was enough to cause cracks in the fetters by this point.

Another pang of danger made Zac control one of the chains to push him out of the way, just in time to avoid a second smaller explosion of sound. It felt like a concussion grenade had been thrown out right next to him, but he had already plugged up his ears with Miasma and the Branch of the Pale Seal. It wasn't enough to completely block out the noise, but it helped deal with the worst of it.

Another lash of a chain propelled Zac right toward the Hegemon, and the colossal axe of **[Arbiter of the Abyss]** fell toward the Hegemon's head. There was no worry in the man's murky eyes as he took out an odd-looking staff. It was made of metal and had dozens of trinkets hanging from links that were

embedded along its length, from mottled bones to exquisitely crafted bells.

He swept the staff upward, and the miasmic clouds around them churned as the two weapons collided. Zac wasn't holding back, and his force was enough to crumble mountains. And yet, the Hegemon was only pushed half a step back as he blocked the strike. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** were already aiming for vitals to restrict the cultist's options and begin Zac's inexorable dance of death, but a confusing cacophony of discordant sounds slammed into Zac's head with just as tangible an effect as a punch.

Sharp pain bloomed in his side as flesh and ichor flew in every direction. It wasn't a projectile that had ripped out a piece of his gut but rather a Dao-infused whistle from the Hegemon himself. How the hell someone could whistle without lips was the least of Zac's concerns right now - the fact that he could feel a surprisingly powerful Dao in his wound was a much greater cause for concern.

It would probably have been game over for an average person by getting such a wound, but his Hidden Nodes were like startled beasts whose domains had been infringed upon by an interloper. They went on a ferocious offensive, allowing Zac to contain the damage as he continued to fight.

It had been some time since he used his Inexorable Stance. Still, he seamlessly slid into the familiar patterns as his axe and chains formed an inescapable net that would only inevitably lead to Death. Knowing what to look for, Zac focused on the Hegemon's mouth, lungs, and throat to interrupt his aural skills, and he activated **[Profane Exponents]** to protect against further surprise whistles.

Three silhouettes appeared behind him, and a spectral coffin appeared and blocked the jab in the nick of time. The three pygmies hadn't grown any taller since the upgrade, and neither had a fourth one joined them. But their auras were deeper, and their equipment looked a lot more powerful, indicating the skill had been given an all-around boost instead of new features.

Even if he had been taught some decent staff technique, the Hegemon was clearly not an adroit infighter. But between a Dao- and Attribute advantage, his autonomously attacking armor, and the avatar in the sky, which kept unleashing localized bursts of utter destruction, he somewhat kept up. Even then, Zac was steadily dragging the fight into his favor.

Huge festering gashes kept appearing across the grotesque armor, and whole chunks of flesh kept slouching off the Hegemon's body. The lipless cultivator managed to release a few barbs of his own, or rather his armor did. More than ten shallow wounds had been punched into Zac's body by the flesh tendrils, but most of the wounds were intentional blunders on Zac's part.

Zac didn't know exactly what the Hegemon was planning, but it almost felt like the cultivator was leaving behind small bombs in Zac's body. They were parts of a Heart Curse that looked incomplete on the surface, but they still filled Zac with a vague sense of danger. Zac guessed they just needed a trigger to start causing havoc.

Unfortunately for the Hegemon, the seeds were destroyed and swallowed by **[Void Heart]** and **[Purity of the Void]** as quickly as they appeared. The two hidden nodes weren't able to deal with the puncture wound in his gut, so they instead had turned their attention to the seeds. The Dao from whistle was a lot more troublesome, but it wouldn't be able to cause any real damage in the short run.

Zac had already realized that slowly whittling down this man wouldn't work. Between being an Elite Hegemon and having the stolen vitality of 200 warriors, he just had too much ability to regenerate. No matter how much flesh Zac destroyed, new veins would regrow with a pace that put even Vivi to shame.

He would have to finish it in one go, and Zac sensed the opportunity was about to present itself.

Suddenly, a deafening crash of jumbled sounds made Zac's head spin as most of the trinkets on the Hegemon's staff exploded. Each one released a sharp burst of sound, and together they formed a tremendous Aural attack. Even if Zac

was prepared and had already turned on the active state of **[Indomitable]**, he still found his mind a mess.

“Join us,” the Hegemon sneered, his voice turning into a confusing rattle in Zac’s head.

At the same time, an incredibly thick fleshy spike shot out from the hole in his chest. It almost looked like an arm had grown out of the hole in the Hegemon’s chest as it shot toward Zac’s gut wound. Zac’s mind was still a confusing jumble from the audible overload, but the coffin-wielding pygmy skeleton came to the rescue. The shield held even against the Heart Curse’s empowered strike, but Zac blanched when he saw why.

It almost looked like a water cannon had hit his barrier when the bloody arm slammed into it. The curse split up into dozens of thinner tendrils that wound around the coffin before reforming on the other side. There was still a chance he could avoid the incoming attack by pushing the domain of **[Arbiter of the Abyss]** to its limit, but Zac actually did the opposite.

He could feel an enormous amount of energy hidden inside the tendril, but he would still let it hit him. He was sure this was the catalyst for the supposed triggers left all over his body, and he wanted to give the Hegemon a false sense of victory. However, Zac didn’t want the tendril to mix with the powerful Dao left behind by the whistle. The taunting domain of **[Arbiter of the Abyss]** once more came in clutch as it pulled the tendril toward his other side while Zac pretended to stumble a bit.

Meanwhile, he prepared a move of his own. The chains of **[Love’s Bond]** were already striking at the Hegemon since before, and the cultivator was forced to divert some of his attention to avoid getting blinded. Seeing his opportunity, Zac said a silent prayer as his left arm rose, and the abyssal chain around his forearm uncoiled and shot forward.

It was even slower than his other chains, and it didn’t even try to intercept the bloody tendril that was almost upon him. Instead, it flew toward the Hegemon. Zac felt a gut-wrenching

pain in his side a moment later as the bloody arm punched straight through his breastplate and dug into his body.

Zac saw the Hegemon's eyes light up as Zac's body was filled with the evil energy of the evolved Heart Curse. But nothing happened since the seeds were long gone, and Zac grinned at the confused and alarmed look of the Hegemon. A moment later, his chain lightly tapped against the chest of the Hegemon, and Zac knew it was over at that point.

“Caught you.”

Chapter 905: Pressure

“You’re immune!” the lipless cultivator screamed with shock and confusion written all over his face.

Zac didn’t bother answering; his attention rather focused on a surprising shift in one of his skills. The next moment, three sharp twangs echoed out as deep wounds were carved into the Hegemon. It was the finishing blow of **[Blighted Cut]** that had suddenly become available thanks to **[Arbiter of the Abyss]**. It allowed for instant judgment, and the Hegemon was almost dismembered into four chunks.

Unfortunately, the durability of the fleshy armor was too great. Even with its upgraded lethality from reaching Late Proficiency, **[Blighted Cut]** didn’t manage to cut him all the way through. Its force was expended after digging half the way, and thick tendrils immediately shot out from within his innards to keep his body together.

Not even the corrosive cascade of **[Blighted Cut]** failing was enough to finish the job. The tendrils of the heart curse broke apart, but new ones replaced the old in an endless cycle until the attack was expended. A tremendous shockwave threw Zac back the next moment as the colossal Avatar in the sky exploded. The Hegemon had sacrificed his supportive attack skill to gain some breathing room, and his reaction was immediate.

He fled.

Between Zac’s apparent immunity to the Heart Curse and almost getting killed, it was clear the previous confidence of the Hegemon was long gone. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late. Being able to suddenly activate **[Blighted Cut]** was just a happy surprise, and not what Zac had planned to rely on.

The moment the sound wave threw him back, the one chain emerging from the abyssal halo had turned into two. The first was the original one that had returned to his arm after being rebuffed. The second was a spectral chain that was still very much attached to the Hegemon's chest. It didn't have the usual cold turquoise of Miasma, but it was instead a matte black that reeked of pure death.

The Kan'Tanu tried to destroy the ethereal chain with another weaponized whistle, but the only result was the Hegemon stumbling, falling back to the ground when he was rearing to fly away. It wasn't so easy to deal with this chain. The infiltrator had been fettered by [**Arbiter of the Abyss**], and he would only be released after receiving judgment. Trying to break free would just result in a spiritual backlash.

The Hegemon gave up attacking the chain and opted to simply fly into the sky. But that wouldn't save him either, and Zac didn't even bother locking up the area with [**Pillar of Desolation**]. Instead, a storm of energy entered the skill fractal of [**Desperation's End**], just as the Hegemon suddenly turned 180 degrees and flew straight toward Zac.

His face was filled with confusion as he turned back, but the same thing happened twice in quick succession. By that point, it was too late for regrets. Zac wasn't taking any chances, and his activation time had been cut down to a third with the help of Void Energy. Two massive wings had already appeared behind Zac's back while [**Arbiter of the Abyss**] had turned the Hegemon around, and a scarred skull was now flying toward the man.

The lipless cultivator readied his staff as a last-ditch effort, but he urgently swung it to his side as another [**Deathmark**]-wraith had finally appeared to strike him down. A second flourish rebuffed one of the chains of [**Love's Bond**] that had followed him into the sky, before he finally swung his staff down toward the blade the skull of [**Desperation's End**] had unleashed.

But the swing turned crooked by a tug from the spectral chain. A swirl of darkness from the third pygmy of [**Profane Exponents**] moved the Hegemon even further off-kilter at the

last moment, pushing both arms and staff entirely out of the way.

The lipless leader roared in defiance and his armor rippled as his energy churned, but it was too late. Two balls had appeared next to him already, and space sealed as the aspects of **[Desperation's End]** converged. It managed to restrain even a thrashing Hegemon long enough to complete the strike, and he could only look on with desperation as he met his end.

A silent swish of a solitary blade, followed by a muted thud as the Hegemon's head fell on the ground. One of Alea's chains drilled into the severed head the moment it landed, and a surge of energy confirmed that not even the evolved Heart Curse would be able to drag him back from death's door any longer.

The body fell onto the ground a moment later as Zac deactivated **[Arbiter of the Abyss]**, and Zac backed away even further when he saw the curse emerging from the chest. Its aura was extremely sinister, and even Zac wasn't willing to take that thing on unless he had to, especially now that it gave off a sense of terminal hunger.

The curse withered away a few seconds later, and Zac believed he could even sense a wave of intense reluctance as it died out. There wasn't any second burst of energy though, which probably meant the System still didn't consider that thing a proper entity. But it was definitely more alive than the weaker curses, and Zac briefly wondered if there were curses that had actually gained a semblance of life.

There were Tool Spirits, World Spirits, and even Array Spirits, so why not Curse Spirits?

Stabbing pain in his side reminded him of the trouble at hand, and Zac expended all his **[Undying Mark]** charges to restore most of the physical wounds. The healing skill's efficacy was better than before, but it ultimately was only a Middle-Quality skill he'd bought from The Sharva'Zi Dao Repository. It didn't help with the Dao that was still inside his body.

Still, Zac was pretty satisfied as he deactivated his various skills and turned back to his human form. The process was swift, and Zac threw out dozens of Attuned Crystals and

offensive talismans, which created a storm of rampant energy throughout the basin. It didn't completely disperse the lingering deathly atmosphere, but it was now just one among many. And some death was expected on a battlefield.

Zac was elated to see that [**Arbiter of the Abyss**] worked just as he'd planned. The taunting domain was helpful in all kinds of ways, though he wanted to test its rhythm-breaking capabilities against a more technically skilled opponent. More importantly, the spectral chain was extremely useful.

His original idea was to create two stages of the taunt. The first was the large domain that would work against a large number of enemies. The ghost chain could only be used once, but it would strengthen the pulling component of the domain significantly. Escaping after being tagged was both difficult and dangerous.

First of all, it should be able to block and deactivate most types of movement skills, including teleportation and various phase shifts. And no matter if the marked target destroyed the links with a powerful attack or stretched them until they broke, they'd receive an intense backlash. Just damaging the links with a whistle had been enough to knock the Hegemon on his ass. Completely destroying it might even have made him black out for a moment.

The only downside of the spectral chain was that it only lasted around 10 seconds, though the other parts of the skill wouldn't deactivate even after using it. As long as the target could avoid judgment for that long, the chain would disperse. But that was easier said than done when Zac could almost control those he caught like puppets for that duration, and it turned out he could even activate the finisher of [**Blighted Cut**] through the link.

Zac looked at the headless corpse in the distance, feeling the fight went pretty well, all things considered. These Kan'Tanu infiltrators were too confident in their Heart Curses, and when they turned out useless against him, their whole combat style came apart. Still, the Aural skills were pretty hard to deal with. The battle would have looked very different if the Hegemon

had focused on creating opportunities to use his skills rather than infecting him with the curse.

The two dreadful Avatars the lipless cultivator had released were a good reminder that Zac still was at a disadvantage in that regard. Sure, neither of the two skills could compare with the destructive power of his finishing blows, but even Zac didn't dare take those space-rending wails head-on. And they could be continuously launched as though the avatars were mobile turrets, probably for tens of minutes if need be.

He'd have to be careful if he encountered a proper elite like the 'general' the lipless cultivator mentioned. Especially if he was supported by an actual army and was allowed to release all his skills from the back lines.

Then again, it wasn't a big problem against most Hegemons one encountered. You got even fewer freebies from the System at the D-grade, and most weaker Hegemons were stuck with just two-three D-grade skills for a long time. Eventually, they'd scrounge up enough money for new ones, but they also needed the money to get a War Regalia.

You could upgrade your old skills, but that was easier said than done. It required comprehensive skill and understanding to upgrade your old skills to the vastly more complex D-grade versions that would be able to take advantage of a Cultivator's Core. Perhaps these things weren't an issue in the more developed sectors of the Multiverse. But on the Frontier, the lack of resources acted as a safeguard for Zac.

Of course, even Frontier Factions would have adequately decked out talents, and Zac would sooner or later run into someone with a War Regalia and proper sets of skills. Those were the ones to look out for – the regalia would protect them while they activated the energy-hungry D-grade skills with extreme power.

The wound in his side still felt like it was on fire, and Zac slumped down on the ground with a grunt as he ate a Healing Pill. Most of the Hegemon's Dao remained, as were the stubborn will of the evolved curse. His **[Purity of the Void]**

and [Void Heart] were still trying to deal with it, but progress was slow and arduous.

It looked like his E-grade Nodes weren't without limits, even if the Dao wasn't completely out of Zac's scope. He suspected it was a Middle Dao Branch that had been amplified through some method, yet it was so difficult to deal with. Even with its owner dead, it refused to simply be gobbled up.

If anything, it almost felt like it had grown more stubborn, like an actual curse from the beyond. It would possibly take a week even for his Hidden Node to deal with such powerful foreign energies, and Zac didn't have time for that. But that didn't mean he didn't have options.

If the damage couldn't be healed, it could still be corrupted.

Zac steadied his breath before taking out a Longevity Pearl. After that, he roused some Creation Energy. An endless stream of unfettered possibilities poured into the wound, and Zac grunted with pain as he felt his flesh twist and reform. The same was happening to the imbued intent. Gradually, their meaning shifted under the influence until they completely lost their cohesiveness.

They had just become unclaimed energies at that moment, and his Hidden Nodes pounced with redoubled ferocity. A moment later, his flesh turned back to normal as Zac took charge of the Creation Energy. After another minute, the wounds were gone entirely, as were the lingering intents. The shadowy haze started to disperse by that point, leaving Zac panting in a broken valley.

"Monster," a disbelieving voice said from behind. "Are you even killable any longer?"

"You're okay?" Zac asked with surprise as he turned around to see Ogras standing some distance away from him. "I saw you get gored as well."

"Unlike a monster like you, I can't just get stabbed left and right and walk it off," Ogras snorted. "Me getting stabbed was an illusion so they'd turn their attention back to you. So,

you're still playing around with that cursed energy in your body? How are your murderous impulses nowadays?"

"I've been cultivating my soul over the past decade, and I don't get murderous any longer. And like you're one to talk," Zac scoffed as he waved at the flag in Ogras' hand.

"Well, I guess people like us have to take whatever benefits we can get our hands on, even if they have annoying side effects," the demon shrugged.

"It's amazing how much you've improved in this place," Zac said.

"Not much else to do here except cultivate," Ogras said with a grimace. "My grandpa would have bound me up and thrown me into that black hole himself if he knew I'd train so hard in this place. And it's not as impressive as it looked. Most of what I did would have been impossible without a bellowing Barghest soaking up all the attention."

"You're welcome," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

He knew that what the demon said was true, though. His kills had been ambushes that struck fast and hard with the help of his elusive Daos. However, there were limits to such a method. For example, Zac had sensed the danger and blocked it when Ogras tried to ambush him. Most real elites would probably be able to discern such a strike and deal with it, or at least have treasures to protect them.

After that, the element of surprise would be gone, and hiding from an enemy who was aware of you was a lot harder.

"Well, all things considered, things turned out pretty swell. That toothless lad must have been an elite of theirs, and you still took him down," Ogras grinned as he took a swig of the liquor he had pilfered from Zac 1 minute into their journey. "By the way, I dealt with the loose ends while you fought the leader."

"Loose ends?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The two scouts," Ogras shrugged. "They were hiding just a few mountains over. I think they didn't dare flee without their boss. I tried to capture them, but their chests just erupted when

they were caught in my shadows. I didn't get anything useful, I'm afraid."

"Should've guessed they had some safeguards against capture," Zac sighed. "What about Vai?"

"I had a ghost monitor her. She never left the cave," the demon reported. "She kept looking at the bowl, though. I'm not sure if she can see affinities in that thing?"

"Shouldn't be," Zac said. "I've used it a few times; it only shows the location and approximate strength."

"Then we should be fine," Ogras muttered as he walked over next to him. "A whole sector full of unorthodox cultivators. This is going to spell trouble."

"We already gained some things from that guy blabbering," Zac shrugged.

"Wasn't good news, though, was it?" Ogras sighed. "If those ancient factions with their noses in the air come looking for our opportunity, how will we survive? Let alone meat, we won't even get soup."

"We need some answers," Zac nodded. "I'll see if there's anything on his body."

"Be careful to not get ambushed by a Heart Curse," Ogras grunted. "How are you immune to them, by the way? Care to share the method?"

"That'd be pretty hard," Zac laughed as he walked toward the headless body. "It's my bloodline that turns them into nourishment."

"Of course it does," Ogras muttered from behind. "Why wouldn't it?"

Zac found a Spatial Ring on the leader's body while Ogras fished out some more from the ground where the other Hegemons had fallen. Zac felt something was off when he looked at it, and he didn't dare activate it for the time being.

"Trapped?" Ogras ventured when he saw Zac's frown.

“It might be,” Zac hesitated. “Let’s pick up Vai and move away, for now. Who knows if there are more squads en route.”

The two spread a bunch of karma-breaking powder across the basin before leaving, and they found Vai standing at the mouth of her cave with worry in her eyes.

“You’re fine!” Vai said with relief upon seeing the two before she froze in shock. “Eh? You’re fine? How is that possible?”

“It’s the power of friendship,” Ogras snickered to the side.

Vai ignored the demon and instead turned to Zac inquisitively.

“We’re fine. They weren’t as strong as we feared,” Zac nodded. “The infiltrators are dealt with, but we should still leave this area.”

Neither he nor Ogras needed to rest up. The battle lasted less than three minutes, and Zac had more than half his energy remaining. So the group immediately left the area and set out into the vast plains as quickly as possible. However, they only ran for half an hour before Ogras slowed down.

“Well, that can’t be good,” Ogras muttered with a slight frown as he looked up at the sky.

“What’s that?” Zac asked, failing to see anything amiss. “Did you sense something? More invaders?”

“No, it’s the energy. I’ve lived here for ten years, and I’m pretty familiar with it by now. Something is changing with it. It’s weak, but the air feels... stale. Sick, even,” Ogras muttered as he glanced at Zac askance. “I think you might actually have killed Billy’s pet.”

Chapter 906: Collapse

“Killed Billy’s pet?” Zac said with confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The pillar, genius,” Ogras snorted. “What else would cause a whole world to suddenly get sick?”

Zac froze before glancing toward the mountain range in the distance. By now, the pillar was barely discernible, but he still remembered the madness barely held in check by the nine sigils. He also remembered how the pillar not only pierced the sky but had also dug into the depths of the earth.

Where a World Core would typically be.

Had his actions really damaged the Dimensional Seed? Zac blanched at the thought. Even if he disregarded that he was standing inside the Mystic Realm, it was a horrible thought. The Dimensional Seed had helped him open up his **[Purity of the Void]**-node. Not only that, if it hadn’t been there to draw the attention and avarice of the Collector, the Great Redeemer, and the Administrator, Zac wasn’t so sure he would have survived the Mystic Realm back then.

Zac turned to Vai hopefully, praying the researcher could disprove the demon’s theory. “What do you think? Is it possible?”

“I can somewhat understand what the bad guy is getting at,” Vai hesitated as she took out a few measuring tools. “But the Realm Spirit is unlikely to have died already. If that were the case, we wouldn’t just have sensed a small corruption of the ambient energy. Space itself would start to collapse.”

Zac nodded in thanks, but he was still worried. Just because the Dimensional Seed hadn’t died, it didn’t mean it was fine. He couldn’t sense anything off in the atmosphere, but Zac

wasn't too sensitive to small shifts in energy. If his **[Cosmic Gaze]** couldn't see it, it might as well not exist to him.

"The World Core might be damaged," Zac ventured. "Or do these places even have proper cores?"

"Mystic Realms need to have cores if they pass a certain size. Smaller realms only need a strong enough energy density to form a spatial field. Even a powerful lingering intent can suffice as a core for a Mystic Realm, but those are extremely rare Inheritance Realms," Vai explained. "All realms above Mystic need to have cores as well, at least that's what I've read."

"So what would happen if this place's core was being corrupted?"

"Well," Vai hesitated. "World Cores are pretty resilient. They can slowly refine energy, which hopefully means things will gradually return to normal after the pillar is gone."

"And if it doesn't?" Ogras asked with a frown.

"Then... We'd probably want to leave," Vai said as she fearfully looked at the sky. "A World Core breaking on a normal planet just means it will become a dead world. Mystic Realms are different - they are hidden in pockets within the Void, and the realm will lose its ability to hold the Void back if the core breaks. Its ambient energy will gradually be drained to rebuff the collapse until it reaches a tipping point. And even if we survive the collapse, we could be thrown deep into the Void."

"That's just great," Ogras grunted as he glanced at Zac.

"Maybe I should just tie myself to your back right now to secure my little life."

Vai looked at the demon with confusion while Zac rolled his eyes. "If you barely can sense something amiss, it can't be too bad. The Ambient Energy is as strong as ever, so we aren't at that point yet. Let's just hurry to Billy; he might have more answers. The real problem is that the invaders might look for him and the Realm Spirit as well. Can he withstand an attack?"

“No idea. Haven’t been back to the Kingdom of Billy since I left,” Ogras said. “It wasn’t too impressive back then, but he’s had a lot of time to fortify. And honestly, he improved quicker than me in this place. I’ve never seen something so disgusting as forming a Dao Branch while sleeping. So he should be fine.”

“How long have you been out of contact?” Zac asked.

“Who knows,” Ogras shrugged. “I haven’t kept track of the days in this prison. But perhaps five or six years?”

“That long?” Zac exclaimed as his eyes thinned with suspicion. “Did you have a falling-out? What did you do?”

“I’m innocent here, alright?” Ogras smiled. “Living in such close proximity can strain any relationship. But I was mostly curious about all the pocket realms the Dimensional Seed swallowed. I was planning on returning around this time, but I got derailed by all the excitement in the mountain range.”

“Bad guy, I bet you just wanted to steal all the treasures in this place,” Vai huffed from the side, getting a nod of agreement from Zac.

“What a waste,” Vai continued as she looked around with sorrow. “This might be the first Dimensional Seed to appear in the Zecia Sector in millions of years, and its spirit is even sapient. It would be a huge loss if it collapsed before we got a chance to learn from it.”

“Well, it’s not over just yet. We might be overthinking things,” Zac said before he curiously looked over at the demon. “Found anything good?”

Zac had already heard some of it from what the demon shared about the Ra’Lashar Kingdom and the Lost Plane, but he wouldn’t be surprised if that was just the tip of the iceberg. Some exciting things were bound to have cropped up with the Dimensional Seed gobbling up a bunch of smaller Mystic Realms and drowning the area with Origin Dao and Cosmic Energy.

“A few interesting knick-knacks,” Ogras said with a lazy voice before glancing at Vai. “Nothing that a vaunted force like the

exalted Void Gate would be interested in, right? And I did loot them before this place got swallowed up in your ladder or whatever.”

“Do you think we’re scoundrels like you?” Vai muttered, but her lips curved up a bit.

“Alright, let’s just push straight through this place,” Zac said as he looked out across the alien landscape. “I don’t feel good about Billy being all alone when the invaders have already made their way into this place.”

“And let’s pray those two fools haven’t done something stupid already,” Ogras added with a shudder. “Knowing them, our chances aren’t great.”

Billy walked in circles around Gemmy with worry in his eyes. He didn’t know what to do. Gemmy was sick, and nothing Billy had tried worked. And it had gotten a lot worse over the past week.

“Owie, owie, owie,” Gemmy cried from within the fire.

“Ah, ah,” Billy muttered as he looked around for solutions. Finally, he saw the pile of Dao Stones to the side. They always made Billy so feel better, so perhaps they were medicine?

Into the fire they went.

“Oooh, pretty,” Gemmy hummed as her colors sparkled inside the blazing furnace. “Nope. Owie, owie, owie. Perhaps burn another blanket?”

“Billy is out of blankets,” Billy sighed. “Out of beds too. They are already in the fire.”

Why didn’t it work? Mama always said that good rest and heat would make you feel better. Billy had first put Gemmy in his bed to heat her up, but it didn’t work, not even with three blankets. Not even putting Gemmie inside the fire was enough, even after the fire became so big it almost reached the clouds.

For once, Billy missed Horny Guy. He was a liar and a cheat, but he knew many things. Perhaps he knew how to make

Gemmy better. But Gemmy couldn't see him any longer. Not since he went to the nasty place.

"Maybe Billy should go?" Gemmy hesitantly said from within the fire. "If Gemmy can't help Billy, the bad guys..."

"Stop," Billy said with a scrunched-up face. "Billy is not leaving Gemmy. Billy will take a nap and figure it out. Billy always has ideas after sleeping."

With that, Billy lay down on the ground, and the warm fire helped Billy quickly sleep even without a blanket.

"Ah! Billy remembers!" Billy exclaimed when he woke up in the familiar world. The hidden world that only Billy could see.

Well, Billy and Statue-Man.

"Statue-man, Gemmy is still sick. If you don't help Gemmy, then Billy will not come back here again, no matter how much you teach Billy," Billy said with determination.

"Troublesome child," Statue-man sighed. "As I said, it's no longer up to you. For years now, you have resisted reality. But it is coming to an end today. The link of blood between us is all-but-expended. Any more, and my forceful connection will destroy you. This is the last time you will enter this realm."

"Another lie?" Billy hesitated.

"Believe what you will," Statue Man snorted. "But I have a final proposal for you."

"Billy won't create that Array," Billy staunchly said. "There are already a lot of Bad Guys in Gemmy's world. Billy can't risk more things going wrong now."

"Do you remember what Gemmy is?" Statue Man asked.

"Of course Billy knows," Billy said with a roll of his eyes.

"Gemmy is the Land Ghost."

"Right," Statue Man said. "Gemmy's problem is she swallowed something she shouldn't have. Something dangerous. Nothing you do to Gemmy herself will save her as long as the links to that cursed plane remain. But I have a solution."

“A better solution than fire?” Billy hesitated.

“Yes,” Statue-Man groaned. “A better solution than fire.”

Billy was hesitant. Statue-Man was a trickster and a bit stupid, but he had helped Billy more than once over the past years. Statue Man might really have a cure for Gemmy if he said he did.

“A simple trade,” Statue-Man continued. “I will give you a solution that will allow Gemmy to reform her world into a pocket realm - reform it without the pieces that make Gemmy sick. It will hurt and weaken Gemmy, but she will survive. And as long as she survives, she can recover her strength.”

“What price?” Billy simply said, knowing Statue-Man wouldn't give him something so good for free. Normally, he forced Billy to do silly dances until he was dead tired, but Billy knew this was different.

“If you accept my help, you have to create the portal when you leave this Mystic Realm. You have to step through it and enter our subsidiary mountain. Work hard and get stronger until you reach the Eastern Mountain where my true body resides,” Statue-Man said. “And you can absolutely not get involved with Ultom.”

Billy didn't care about the later part. Billy didn't even know what Ultom was, so why would he want to get involved with it? Statue-Man was stupid as usual. But the real price was very expensive.

“So if Statue Man helps Billy now, then Billy has to go help Statue man later?” Billy frowned. “I don't want to leave Gemmy.”

“If you follow my solution, you will not only save Gemmy, but she will be able to follow you wherever you go,” Statue Man said. “Without it, she will be stuck in the little Mystic Realm forever. This is actually a solution I've been preparing for years since I knew you would want to take her with you. I just had to modify it a bit now that she was sick.”

“... Alright,” Billy eventually said with a determined expression. “If Statue-Man's idea works, Billy will make the

array and step through. But only if it works. If it fails, Billy will find Eastern Mountain and thwunk it until it becomes Eastern Pit.”

“Finally,” Statue-man said with a sigh. “Ancestors have mercy on us both.”

“Ah... But... Billy is smart, but Billy is not good with complicated things,” Billy hesitated. “Can Billy really complete this alone?”

“Well, I’ve simplified it as much as possible, but the plan is a bit involved,” Statue-Man said. “But as luck would have it, you have some competent helpers in your dungeons. I’m sure they’ll help you in return for being freed. Especially if you say you’re from Eastern Mountain.”

“Billy isn’t from Eastern Mountain. Billy is from Billyville,” Billy scoffed.

“Whatever you say,” Statue-Man said. “This is the last time we speak here. I hope to see you again, even if you are the most stubborn Titan I’ve ever seen. I will imprint the plan into your head so you never forget it. Good luck.”

A moment later, a storm of ideas entered Billy’s mind, and it felt like he was being thwunked over and over. When it stopped, he found himself lying next to Gemmy’s fire. But this time, Billy remembered. Billy remembered it all, and he would save Gemmy.

Now Billy just had to make those sneaky sneaks work for him. Easy.

“Report,” Lozo UI said the moment the two Untested shuffled into the command center.

“That’s... Ah,” the Spacemelder stuttered, his face pale as his eyes were glued to the ground.

“What have you done?” Lozo asked with a calm voice.

“N-Nothing! We have done nothing,” the old woman next to him urgently said. “But... The accumulation is lost. We were unable to reverse it.”

“Months of efforts suddenly undone, just like that, and you have done nothing?” Lozo said with a calm voice, but a storm was raging beneath.

KILL. THEM. EAT. THEM.

Lozo took a shuddering breath as he pushed down the madness. There were no two ways around it; he was losing control.

He remembered the relief when he stepped out of the forest where the souls of his 999 brothers and sisters would forever stay. His hands were dripping with blood, and his body was covered in wounds. But something remarkable was brewing within. Something powerful. From an Untested to a Remoulded of Kan'Tanu, a rebirth of both fate and potential.

Why couldn't he have been content with his lot?

Three wives and an enviable placement after he had served his term. If he had played his cards right, he could have used his uncle's connections to be stationed at Darasko V as a Lord. But no, he had seen the palaces of the Reincarnators and the power they wielded; both political and actual power. He wanted that for himself, for his family who had never nurtured a twice reborn Cultivator.

So he struggled and fought. Desperately. Endlessly. Until one day, he entered that cursed mountain range that reeked of death. And he emerged, once more, with blood dripping from his hands while his body was covered in wounds. But this time, it wasn't greatness and glory brewing within.

It was horror and madness.

Since then, Lozo's nightmare had begun. How could a sprawling palace and a harem provide any solace when you spent every single moment fighting for your very soul? Only after reaching the limits of the Kan'Tanu lower hierarchy did he understand that those twice reborn weren't reborn equal. Those like him, without any backing, found themselves in an endless cycle of dangerous missions for the empire's glory.

They had no choice. It was the only way for them to get their hands on the nutrients they needed to stave off the hunger of

their dark passengers, lest their sanity became the nutrients. The Reincarnators the general populace saw, those who lived the blessed lives in the capitals, had generations of wealth and connections to rely on. They had underlings to sacrifice and send into war to exchange for the nutrients.

Some had even been elevated in the Gate of Rebirth and firmly seized control of their Heart Patterns.

For decades, Lozo thought this would be his life; to endlessly struggle just to keep himself above water and the madness at bay. But finally, the Heavens took pity on his lot, and an opportunity presented itself. An opportunity to not only get the contribution he needed to never worry about the madness again.

An opportunity to become an Elevated Reincarnator.

He had been at the right place at the right time. As one of the Reincarnators sent into this Zecia sector to oversee the advance forces, Lozo was already gaining ample contribution. But as luck would have it, this Mystic Realm and its contents were exposed. At first, this had nothing to do with him, but fate is a fickle mistress.

The realm was sucked into this Stellar Ladder, and space collapsed on the base where the connected Reincarnators were staying. Suddenly, he was the Reincarnator closest to the breach, and he was urgently ordered to follow in its wake.

A year later, their plans were at the cusp of fruition. If they succeeded, Lozo wouldn't need to lift a single finger for the rest of the war. He and his family would be excluded from the draft, and he would even get a chance to pass through the gates that every Remoulded and Reincarnator dreamt of. He could fully focus on shoring up his foundations and continuing his cultivation.

But just as he could almost taste victory, everything went wrong. These Spacemelders better have an answer.

“Give me a proper explanation, Untested,” Lozo said hoarsely. “Or I will find new Spacemelders who can.”

“N-Nothing went wrong on our end,” the male Untested quickly said. “The arrays the Exalted Halls prepared for us were working as planned, gradually rekindling the withered pathway. But a sudden outside shock to the system caused the pathway to splinter, and a lot of the accumulated energy was wasted.”

“Outside shock?” Lozo growled. “The Void Gate? Or are there saboteurs in our midst?”

“We have yet to pinpoint the exact location of the interference, but we know it is not from here,” the other Spacemelder said. “The energy streamed to the west.”

“The west?” Lozo muttered, his seething rage gradually subsiding. “Have someone make a jump and contact Quol for an update.”

“That’s...” the Untested said, sweat streaming down his face. “We had that idea as well... But we just got word his plaque has withered.”

Lozo swore in annoyance. Quol was one of the strongest warriors who he had managed to take through the Stellar Ladder. That was why he was sent to inspect that signal months ago. But now he was dead, just a few days after things went wrong? Someone was moving against them.

“Send another unit, one focused on speed and stealth. We need to know what we’re dealing with. Have them warped as close as possible to save time,” Lozo said to the Remoulder Captain standing at the side.

“There is a 60% Mortality Rate at such a jump,” one of the Spacemelders hesitated.

“Then send more to make up the numbers,” Lozo said. “How do we get back on track?”

“Ah, well,” the female Spacemelder said. “The outburst set us back, but we have been slowly closing the leak over the past days. Even then, I am afraid... with the resistance, completing on time will be impossible.”

“The resistance?” Lozo mused as he looked at the large map in the middle of the room. “Relay my order. Activate the second,

third, and fourth armies and strike at the native stronghold immediately. Find out how they are influencing this Mystic Realm, and put an end to it. We must complete this mission before the pathways reopen.”

Chapter 907: Unsealing

The trio didn't waste any time as they pushed deeper into the Badlands, and Zac couldn't help but marvel at the environment even if there were a lot of misgivings in his heart. Enormous calcified trees in pink and blue towered toward the sky, their branches homes to scaled beasts with four wings.

The occasional rumble heralded golemoid beasts that migrated between lakes to extract minerals. The lakes themselves were kettles of pattering death which hid gorgeous flowers in green and purple. Whole fields were made out of glass and mirrors, creating a mystifying spectacle as they ran.

Their frantic pace drew some ire from the locals, but Zac and Ogras made short work of the beasts who thought they were in for an easy snack. Vai was once more sitting in a chair made from Vivi's Vines. Ogras had also tried to commission a seat for himself but had been rebuffed. Vai got to sit because she was investigating the infiltrators' Spatial Rings while keeping track of powerful auras in her bowl.

As expected, the lipless cultivator's ring was booby-trapped, while the others had simple seals that the little researcher quickly undid. There wasn't anything new or exciting in these rings, just a bunch of cultivation materials far worse than what Zac carried around himself. The rings primarily served as a reminder they weren't alone in this vast Mystic Realm, even if they hadn't seen a single cultivator after running for three days.

But even after three days, Vai hadn't spotted a single additional cultivator. It looked like there weren't any larger encampments in the area, or someone would probably have come to investigate by now. However, the lack of pursuit had another meaning – the squad of infiltrators wasn't originally there for him.

Did they know about the temples and were sent to investigate? Or did that leader have a quest for Ultom as well?

After running for another week, they were ultimately forced to stop and rest inside a hollowed-out and crystallized trunk that shimmered like a million sapphires. Running for over ten days straight while occasionally fighting had drained them, especially Ogras, who often kept up his illusive domain.

There was another reason as well. Zac had gotten close to opening another node from the battle against the infiltrators, and a recent fight against three crystal Beast Kings had provided the final energy he needed to open another node. When Zac informed them of his plan inside the trunk, the demon looked at Zac like he was a fool.

“You’re not at the peak yet?” Ogras exclaimed. “It’s been ten years. What are you waiting for?”

“There were some speed bumps along the way,” Zac grunted.

“So what level are you at?” the demon asked, and even Vai looked over with interest.

“Three nodes to go. Two with this one,” Zac said.

“Don’t you have any pills to push you to the final step?” Ogras said.

“I have, but I’ve been wanting to keep impurities at a minimum for my breakthrough,” Zac explained.

“Fair, but we need every advantage in case we have to fight our way out of here,” the demon said.

“You might be right,” Zac slowly nodded before turning to Vai. “How is your work on the ring coming along?”

“Slow,” Vai sighed. “It’s not overly complex, but there are too many patterns I don’t recognize. It’s interesting; the Kan’Tanu base their arrays on an entirely different set of princ-“

“So that’s a no?” Zac coughed, seeing how Vai was gearing up for another lesson. He usually enjoyed listening to Vai expounding on various esoteric pieces of knowledge, but now was not the time.

“I can make an attempt, but I’m not very confident,” Vai said.

“I might have an idea,” Ogras said. “My little buddy is pretty knowledgeable with arrays. The problem is he’s a pathological liar and a general asshole, so you might need to bribe him.”

“The goblin?” Zac said with surprise.

“K’Rav, a vaunted councilor of the Lunatic kingdom of Ra’Shallar,” Ogras nodded as he removed the talismans from the sinister flag he always kept in his sleeves.

“Alright, bring him out,” Zac nodded.

A moment later, the pocked goblin appeared within the trunk, where he suspiciously looked back and forth between Ogras, Zac, and Vai.

“Let me guess, you ignorant children have run into a problem, and you want me to solve it after trapping me for weeks?”

K’rav said as he gave Ogras a blithering stare. “Your trick is clever, but we’ll see how long you can laugh. Sealing me means removing the barrier between you and the flag. How long can you retain yourself?”

“What’s he talking about?” Zac frowned.

“Cursed artifact or cursed company, I had to pick my poison,” Ogras shrugged. “Let’s get on with it.”

“You’re right,” Zac said as he looked at the Tool Spirit. “We have a sealed ring that needs to be opened. Ogras thinks you have the knowledge to show us the way.”

“I might, I might not,” the goblin snickered. “More importantly, why should I help you? I know who you are, but your status and fame mean nothing to me.”

“What do you want?” Zac sighed, feeling like he was dealing with Brazla.

“Well, this gentleman is quite content for the moment,” the goblin grinned. “Let’s just say you’ll owe me for now.”

“I won’t do anything against my conscience just to return a favor in the future,” Zac said.

“That’s fine, that’s fine. I’m sure we’ll be able to reach an accord,” the K’Rav snickered as he floated over toward the ring in Vai’s hands.

Vai was visibly uncomfortable with the spectral goblin in such close proximity. Zac wasn’t surprised. It was not just a matter of appearance, though the goblin looked quite wretched. He emitted a strong corrupting aura, just like that of the purple pillar—the aura of the Lost Plane.

“Those two meatheads, I understand - they only know how to swing their weapons like base animals. But what is your excuse, girl? How do these simple traps elude you? Is this the limits of the modern researcher?” the goblin said with a scathing look. “Even a Ra’Lashar acolyte would be able to open this ring, many of them without losing a limb.”

“I- Ah,” Vai stuttered, utterly unprepared for the sudden dressing down.

“Less talk, just open it,” Zac grunted.

“I cannot directly interfere with items in my form,” the goblin said with a roll of his eyes. “But here.”

The next moment, dozens of patterns appeared in the air. Most of them were grey, with a single blue line moving through them like a river. As the blue line passed the various fractals, they transformed, and the whole constellation was reformed after a minute.

“This stumped you for weeks? I had more intricate traps to protect my stash of candies back home,” K’Rav snorted with disdain after he’d shown the solution twice. “Well, I guess I shouldn’t expect too much from some lunatic who goes around erecting corpse trees. Not even we were so bloodth-“

The goblin didn’t get any further as he was suddenly sucked into the Flag before Ogras hurriedly placed a talisman on it. Vai looked down at the ring with a mortified expression, like she couldn’t believe she had missed such a simple solution, even if Zac could tell that the goblin’s method was based on an incredibly deep foundation of understanding.

“Don’t let that little bastard get to you, lass,” Ogras muttered from the side. “Their civilization didn’t even last the lifespan of a single Hegemon. Their way of research drew them straight into the abyss.”

“There’s no need to feel bad,” Zac agreed. “You have other fields of expertise. Not knowing some unorthodox methods isn’t a blemish.”

“Thank you,” Vai muttered before her eyes glazed over. “Wait, corpse trees? Why does that sound so familiar?”

“You had to run your mouth to that guy?” Zac whispered to the demon with exasperation.

“Hey, I’ve been stuck here for years with only that bastard to talk to. And you told me you both showed your face and introduced yourself to the lass. How is this girl’s brain wired if she can’t realize the truth from those things, but a random mention of a corpse tree sparks some recognition?” Ogras said.

“Still,” Zac snorted.

“Well, this is my bad, alright? I haven’t needed to filter my words for over a decade, and I guess I slipped up,” Ogras muttered. “I’ll fix it.”

The next moment, the demon appeared in front of Vai in a puff of smoke.

“Lass, don’t space out,” Ogras said to the startled researcher as he took out something Zac had never seen before. “I found this thing inside one of the Spatial Rings as well. I’ve never seen it before; can you identify it?”

“That- That’s...” Vai stuttered until her eyes finally focused on the shimmering crystal in Ogras’s hand.

Zac looked at it with marvel as well as he walked over. It resembled an opalescent Cosmic Crystal but didn’t seem to hold any energy. Even then, Zac found his cells greedily screaming for the gem in Vai’s hand. It was chock-full of Dao, by the looks of it, something Zac had never seen before.

Certainly, he had all kinds of attuned crystals in his possession, but this was the first time he had seen a crystal filled with only the Dao. It wasn't just one Dao either, but Zac could feel all three of his Dao Branches resonate with what was within.

"Is it a Dao Treasure?" Zac hesitated.

"Doubt it," Ogras said as he took out two more. "This looks like an actual crystal that has been mined or fished out from these ponds."

"How interesting," Vai said with excitement as she took out a couple of instruments. "Let me run some readings on it."

"Could you please unlock the ring first?" Zac smiled.

"Ah?" Vai said before her eyes widened in remembrance. "Ah, right!"

"Alright, we'll stand guard outside to disturb you," Zac nodded as he dragged Ogras onto one of the branches outside.

"Did you really find those things in the invader's Cosmos Sack?" Zac asked when they were once more isolated.

"Hardly," Ogras snorted. "We found them shortly after arriving in this place. We call them Dao Stones, and I think they were created along with the world. They were key in speeding up my comprehension, but they aren't as useful for me now that I have Dao Branches."

"How many do you have?" Zac asked.

"Why do you ask?" Ogras asked suspiciously.

"Just give me a couple of them later," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "I want to see if they are useful for me."

Pushing his Branches of Kalpataru and Pale Seal to Middle Proficiency was some ways off, but Zac could feel that he wasn't too far from taking that step with his Branch of the War Axe. His last breakthrough was over five years ago back in the Twilight Ocean, and he'd not only massively improved his understanding of Axes since then, but even entered the Integration Stage with his two stances.

He just needed a final push to break through, and these Dao Stones seemed like a good, clean way to fuel the process. Dao Treasures always held some truths of their own, which could influence the direction of the breakthrough if one wasn't careful. Meanwhile, these things seemed untainted.

"They should work even for a brute like you," Ogras nodded. "I think it's trapped Origin Dao inside. Can't give out too many, though. They are my golden egg for when I get out of here."

"So stingy," Zac sighed. "I guess I'll keep my treasury to myself then."

"Treasury? What treasury?" Ogras said with a mix of anticipation and suspicion.

"This is the current merit exchange back home," Zac smiled as he threw over a crystal.

Ogras stared at Zac for a second before turning his attention to the contents of the Information Crystal.

"This- This," Ogras eventually stuttered, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"Of course, the really good things aren't put there. These are just the random baubles I picked along the way," Zac said.

"Along the way?" Ogras swore as he threw back the information crystal with disgust. "Did you stroll through the treasuries of an ancient faction? Fine, take as many stones as you want. I can't even look at you right now. I have to go meditate."

With that, he flashed away and pointedly sat down with his back toward Zac as he gazed out across the salt lakes from the edge of a branch. Zac snickered before he sat down as well. But instead of brooding, Zac pushed the trapped Kill Energy into his 148th node until it cracked open with a snap.

Zac took a deep breath before eating a Soul Nurturing pill, which helped with the headache. Vai was still fast at work with the lipless Hegemon's ring, so Zac spent the next couple of hours redrawing the pathways in his head.

“I’m done!” Vai eventually said from within the tree hollow a couple of hours later, at which point Zac was mostly recovered.

“What’s wrong?” Vai asked with worry as she looked back and forth between Zac and Ogras as they entered the hollow.

“Nothing,” Ogras grunted as he took an angry swing from his wine. “Sometimes, you just wonder if the Heavens have eyes.”

Zac laughed in response as he sat down next to Vai. “Don’t mind him. How did it go?”

“It’s done!” Vai nodded with a smile. “I have never seen a method like the one the... ah... gentleman showed. It’s worthy of further study. I think it might even be useful against some of the other methods of the Kan’Tanu.”

“That’s great,” Zac nodded as he took the Spatial Treasure. “You’ll save a lot of lives if you manage to build some array breakers for the upcoming war.”

Vai eagerly nodded while Zac turned his attention to the contents of the unlocked ring. As expected, there was a lot more stuff inside this ring compared to the Spatial Tools of the previous Kan’Tanu infiltrators he’d taken out. For example, there were ten Low-Grade Cosmic Crystals, which translated to 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Even for Zac, that was a pretty good haul, especially considering Cosmic Crystals were almost impossible to get in Zecia outside the C-grade continents. Apart from that, there were multiple sets of various arrays, Natural Treasures, and other materials Zac suspected were for practicing his sound-based skills.

There were also a few vials of a dark-red liquid that gave Zac an awful feeling. At first, he thought the bottles actually contained Heart Curses because of the similar energy they gave off, but Vai said that wasn’t it. There was no actual array hidden in the liquid, and Vai guessed it was a unique concoction meant to nurture the Heart Curses.

Zac shuddered at the thought of having such a creepy parasite inside his body and being forced to feed it to make it even

stronger. He kept a few of those bottles to himself while handing the rest to Vai as a gift to the Void Gate. Neither he nor the people back at Port Atwood could gain anything from those things, but the researchers at the Void Gate might be able to use them to manufacture weapons or antidotes against the curses.

The various items weren't that interesting to Zac. More important was a set of maps, notes, and information crystals. After confirming there wasn't a second layer of traps, Zac scanned the items one by one, and his brows furrowed into consternation. The maps weren't very detailed apart from a couple of sectors, but together with the notes, they told a troubling story.

"Looks like I have to eat some pills, after all," Zac sighed.

"What's going on?" Vai asked, and Ogras looked over as well.

"The infiltrators found this realm before it even entered the Stellar Ladder, and they broke inside long before the Void Gate did," Zac said as he handed the other two the notes.

"Judging by these things, there might be over ten thousand infiltrators stationed in this realm alone. They are led by someone called Reincarnator UI and have some important mission."

"Mission?" Ogras said with a frown as he started scanning the documents.

"The lipless cultivator was sent toward the mountain range over two months ago to investigate some energy signatures," Zac pointedly said.

"Your opportunity, they were looking for it as well?" Vai asked with surprise.

"Looks like it," Zac nodded.

"Well, shit," Ogras muttered.

"T-Then it's at least good news we came here, even if it's dangerous," Vai said, though she looked rattled from the news.

"Seeing that pillar, I bet they are up to no good."

“Are the rest of them in the area as well?” Ogras asked as he turned to the map.

“Doesn’t look like it. This side of the Mystic Realm is mostly unexplored on the maps,” Zac said as he pointed at the east side of the map. “I can’t find any mention of what their mission is, but their main base is over here.”

“Over there?” Ogras said with surprise. “That’s not good. Not good at all.”

“Why? What’s over there?” Zac frowned. “The Kingdom of Billy?”

“No,” the demon sighed as he looked at the pitch-black section on the map with a complex expression. “That’s the ruins of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom.”

Chapter 908: Preparing for the Worst

“The Kingdom Of Ra’Lashar? What the hell are they doing over there?” Zac frowned.

“Nothing good, I assume,” Ogras said.

“Are you sure there’s nothing left there?” Zac asked.

“Shouldn’t be,” Ogras said, but he didn’t look too confident. “After my quest there finished, the whole thing collapsed. A Spatial Rift swallowed the central tower. I searched the area for months for anything of value before moving on to other parts of the realm. But if they found something powerful left behind by those lunatics, we’re in trouble. Everything they made was extremely dangerous.”

“Can you ask your guy?” Zac ventured.

The demon nodded, but Zac knew it wasn’t good as his face gradually turned into a scowl.

“He says he has no idea, but I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him,” the demon eventually said.

Zac looked at the black spot on the map with a frown. He wasn’t convinced the Kan’Tanu’s mission was related to the Ra’Lashar themselves, and neither was Ogras, judging by his expression. Between their search for the sigils of the Left Imperial Palace, their interest in the mountain range, and now the Ra’Lashar, it felt like it was connected to this Lost Plane.

Were there more seals hidden in the ruins of the goblin empire? And if there were, should they do something about it?

The trio looked at the map for a few seconds until Ogras eventually sighed and pointed at a much-closer spot on the map. “The Kingdom of Billy is around here. No matter what

these invaders are up to, our first destination hasn't changed. Let's just continue on our way while we keep our eyes open."

"Give me an hour or two. I'm pushing to Peak E-grade right now," Zac said.

Zac had hoped to avoid this step and gain his levels through battle instead. The consecutive blasts of Tribulation Lightning had cleansed his body, including impurities that had gone unnoticed by his Purity of the Void. It was a shame to ruin that now, but reading the reports put Zac under a lot of pressure. He couldn't just give up a power-up that was so near at hand.

Thankfully, his pills were extremely high-quality, and there were only two nodes he needed to open. What little impurities he gained shouldn't cause any real problems when forming his Cultivator's Core. One by one, his prepared treasures were brought out, from the **[Stone of Hope]** to the mysterious ice that froze his soul to harden it.

The only thing he skipped was the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** as they weren't needed any longer since his latest Soul Reincarnation. Zac wasted no time as he chugged down four Pseudo D-grade pills in one go, eliciting a shocked gasp from Vai and a disgusted snort from Ogras. He ignored the clamor and instead focused his frozen mind on channeling everything into the 149th node in his head.

Half an hour later, Zac grunted as the node on the back of his head broke wide open. Zac drew a ragged breath before he applied some more ice. He was halfway there, and he planned on riding this wave to the end. The final node of the E-grade was located right by his glabella, and it was the last blockage in his pathways.

Waves of Radiant energies poured into the node, but it was like the mysterious swirl was a bottomless hole that couldn't be satiated. Eventually, the efficacy of his Node-breaking pills ran out, but he stubbornly ate another mouthful. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Zac knew he was right there.

His danger sense had cut through his turbid thoughts, and he reinforced his Mental Barriers as best as he could while **[Stone of Hope]** lit up and illuminated the room. The next moment,

Zac felt like his soul was split in two as a powerful ripple burst out from his forehead. He heard surprised exclamations from the other two, but they felt distant and indistinct.

Zac was completely focused on the state of his body. Blood was running down his nose from a deep cut, and it must have looked like a third eye had formed on his forehead.

Thankfully, it was just a wound rather than a mysterious mutation - an outlet Zac had opened to avoid damaging his frontal lobe. Opening the node was painful as usual, but it couldn't compare to the sense of completeness that filled him.

A surge of energy coursed through his body as Zac took a deep breath. It felt vibrant and powerful, and it wasn't just the attributes he'd just gained. With his 75 Nodes all being open, his pathways were finally completely unclogged. The energy gently circulating through his body felt natural and unconstrained. It wouldn't do much for his actual combat strength, but anything that allowed him to handle and communicate with his Cosmic Energy was a welcome thing.

The peak of the E-grade.

Less than a fraction of a fraction of all cultivators reached this step, yet he had done it as a mortal. Of course, this was just the start. He was just an ant in the grand scheme of things, but that didn't douse his excitement as he opened his eyes. Ogras and Vai were both looking at him expectantly by that point, and Zac nodded slightly with a smile.

"You done?" Ogras asked.

"Just need to fill the nodes up with energy, but we can do that on the way."

"What was that before?" Ogras asked curiously. "Why does it look like you split in two every time you open a node?"

"It's a treasure I got my hands on," Zac explained. "I don't know exactly how it works, but it's like the treasure pushes some of the damage to an alternate reality while lessening the damage to me. Why? Do you need to borrow it?"

"No, I've long since reached level 150," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "It was just interesting. I felt the

phenomenon somewhat resonate with my path. Making real damage fake, huh?”

“W-wait,” Vai suddenly interjected. “You’re not a Hegemon either?”

“If I were a Hegemon, I would just have flown myself and the two of you over this place, no?” Ogras said with a grin as the shadows started to flicker around him.

“But you’re so powerful,” Vai said with wide eyes.

“Well, at least someone has an eye for talent,” Ogras grinned, obviously satisfied with the reaction.

“Don’t stroke his ego,” Zac snorted. “Give me another hour before we set out, I just have to recover a bit more from opening the nodes.”

“Do you have more Soul Crystals?” Ogras asked. “I used up the two in the ring you gave me.”

“Be careful with those,” Zac said as he threw over another one. “They are almost impossible to restock.”

“You’re the one who wants me to use my domain every time the lass sees a bright light in the bowl,” Ogras grinned as the crystal disappeared into the sleeves of his robes.

Zac spent the next hour redrawing his pathways until they were in workable order. He would still be a bit weakened for another week, but Ogras had already said it would take them at least three to reach the Kingdom of Billy at their pace. It should be enough time not only to recover, but to push his level to 150.

The moment Zac felt able to fight without accidentally damaging his pathways, the group set out, heading deeper and deeper into the Badlands. Ogras became the primary combatant over the following days while Zac let his nodes stabilize. Zac simply became bait and a meat shield while the demon did the killing.

To expedite his level, Zac constantly held onto Peak Quality Nexus Crystals as they ran, and torrents of energy poured into his Nodes. Not only that, but Zac also absorbed energy from

Beast Crystals he'd hidden within his robes. The messy energy was swallowed by **[Void Heart]** and spat out as malleable energy that became a second river to speed up his progress.

After a week passed, Zac resumed fighting as well, and Ogras helped organize things so that Zac delivered all the killing blows on beasts above Late E-grade. It turned to a third source of energy, yet it still took two weeks before Zac had managed to fill all three nodes. The group took the opportunity for a brief stop to rest up before reaching Billy's place, and Zac opened his Status screen to check what his level brought.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

150

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles

[...] Grand Fate, Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror, The Second Step, Singular Specialist

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe - Early, Branch of the Kalpataru - Early, Branch of the Pale Seal - Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

20876 [Increase: 143%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

8674 [Increase: 103%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

15727 [Increase: 134%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

14192 [Increase: 127%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3763 [Increase: 97%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

6940 [Increase: 104%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

712 [Increase: 121%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

250

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 647

A single glance at his status screen confirmed what he'd already learned; a full 250 Free Attribute Points were waiting for him rather than just the ten. It was an even greater boon than the 20 Attribute Points he got when reaching level 75. And that was just the start. Not only did peak E-grade provide a full 250 Free Points, but also a new title called The Second Step. There was even a second title waiting for him, one that Zac hadn't been able to confirm but had hoped for.

[The Second Step: Reach the peak of E-grade Reward: All Stats +10, Base stats +90]

[Singular Specialist: Reach 20,000 points in a single attribute before reaching D-grade. Reward: All Stats +10, Strength +5%, All Attributes +5%.]

As expected, it was related to the old 'Promising Specialist' - title Zac got when reaching 1,000 Endurance in F-grade. He hadn't gotten anything when reaching 10,000 Strength, but he had learned Ogras got one during his stay in this Mystic Realm. The mention had made him wonder if it was a tiered title, and his status screen proved it was.

The combination of hitting level 150 and the title that came with it had narrowly pushed him over 20,000 Attribute Points, double the level of the first checkpoint of the skill. A quick check confirmed Promising Specialist was gone, replaced with the new title rather than him having both. It was a bit of a disappointment, but the old title had only provided +5 All Attributes and +5% Endurance. So the new one was a pure upgrade, especially for his Strength.

Still, it made Zac wonder if there was actually an Apex title as well, one that would provide Attribute Efficiency. Perhaps if you reached your attribute limit?

Since he had already passed 20,000 Strength and gotten the title to match, Zac poured all of his free points into Dexterity. Altogether, the three levels had given him almost a 5% increase in his attribute pool, and they were mainly targeted at Strength and Dexterity. That was exactly what Zac wanted - anything that would allow him to hit a bit harder and a bit faster at this stage was a welcome addition.

It was a shame he didn't have a quick way to gain the last five levels to his undead side as well, but the boost still gave Zac some confidence when the trio set out again six hours later. Of course, he still hoped he wouldn't find himself face-to-face with a whole army of infiltrators, possibly led by hundreds of Hegemons. A few levels and titles wouldn't help against that.

But some things were simply unavoidable.

Four days after his breakthrough, Ogras had proclaimed they were within the official borders of the Kingdom of Billy. They had already left the Badlands behind, and had now entered a much more familiar type of environment - large tree groves with grassy plains between them.

There were also signs of human intervention - enormous but simple trenches and traps designed to deal with beast tides. However, just as the group was about to pass the battlements, Vai suddenly stilled.

“Enemies!” Vai whispered, and the air around them started to glimmer as Ogras powered up his domain before they jumped into the trench and dug a temporary hideout.

“How many?” Zac frowned after they’d erected an isolation array.

“Thirty, they are moving fast,” Vai said. “Looks like a scouting party.”

“Do you think it’s Billy’s people? Those Gnivelings you mentioned?” Zac asked.

“Doubtful,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “Billy doesn’t need any scouts. The Realm Spirit is more effective than any scouting unit.”

“If there are scouting parties this close...” Vai hesitated.

“Then they definitely know about the Kingdom of Billy,” Zac sighed. “We might be in for a fight. Do you want to stay here?”

“N-No,” Vai said with a shake of her head as she gripped her bowl tighter. “I am coming with. I can still help, we are days away from the settlement, and you need a scout.”

“She’s right,” Ogras shrugged. “I can’t guarantee my methods will work against all types of scouts, and it just takes one set of sharp eyes to expose us.”

“Alright, we’ll keep going like this,” Zac agreed. “We avoid enemy squads as long as possible until we figure out Billy’s situation. He might have relocated already.”

The three waited an hour for the scouting party to leave the area before they set out again, but they met another group just three hours later and a third scouting party after another five. Even Ogras had a somber expression by that point. There was still a chance for it to be a coincidence with one group. With

three, it was all but certain the infiltrators were carrying out some big operation in the area.

And that operation was definitely related to the Kingdom of Billy.

Not only that, but the infiltrators seemed to be expecting trouble judging by the parties, but the three still managed to creep closer and closer to their destination over the next three days. Until Vai's bowl almost lit up like a bonfire, prompting both Zac and Ogras to look over with confusion.

"S-Signals," Vai stuttered. "So many. Thousands."

"Shit," Ogras said. "Billy's castle is not far from here."

"Let's go," Zac said with a frown, and they kept moving until a powerful energy wave swept past them.

"There's a battle," Zac said with relief.

"The brute is actually holding out against an army?" Ogras added, confusion written all over his face. "How is that possible?"

"The Void Gate," Vai said, her eyes glimmering. "I bet they are here fighting against the bad guys. Where else would they have gone but here?"

Zac finally understood why Vai was so adamant about joining them for this final stretch. She believed there was a good chance the elite Void Gate warriors would be found with Billy. And perhaps she was right. Twenty minutes later, they managed to sneak a peek at the battlefield.

A lonesome Mountain peak stood within a barricaded crater. The whole cavity was protected by a bubble that reeked of powerful spatial energies, and outside, a mighty army was laying siege. Over thirty enormous towers had been erected, and Zac could sense how they were accumulating power. If he had to guess, the earlier outburst came from these things firing simultaneously.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Ogras sighed. "Fight our way inside? The castle is sealed shut - they are not fighting back at all. I don't know if we'd even manage to get through

the barrier. And if we do, then what? We'd be stuck inside just like Billy.”

Zac wasn't sure what to do either. Eventually, he turned to Vai, who looked at the scene wide-eyed. “How many Hegemons are there?”

By this point, E-grade cultivators didn't really matter to him. The only difference between fighting ten and a thousand was how long it would take to win. The problem was the Hegemons hidden within their ranks. A defensive Hegemon could almost completely nullify his attacks, while offensive ones could unleash powerful barrages at him.

So if there were too many, there was simply no chance he could take on all these people himself.

“Over eighty,” Vai grimaced. “Eighty Hegemons.”

“Impossible,” Ogras resolutely said with a shake of his head. “There is no way I'm fighting that. I'm not dying like this after I finally have a shot at getting out of here.”

“How about we send a distress beacon to the Void Gate to confirm if they are inside?” Zac hesitated, but he froze when there was a sudden change.

A substantial spatial bubble had started to grow on the barrier in the distance. In just a moment, it was half as big as the barrier itself, while the shield seemed to have lost some of its luster. The new bubble bulged out ominously toward a flank of the infiltrator army, who immediately started to run for their lives. But it was too late. The bubble popped, and over a hundred cultivators were torn apart as a beam of spatial chaos shot out.

Right toward them.

“Hurry, Gemmy is making a path!” a childish voice echoed in their ears just as Zac was about to turn tail and run for his life.

Zac glanced at Ogras, who looked positively nauseated. But it was clear he recognized the voice, so it was obvious to Zac who it belonged to. There was no hesitation as he grabbed Ogras with his left hand and Vai with a vine as he rushed straight toward the incoming chaos.

“I knew it,” the demon groaned. “I knew there’d be trouble when I heard that voice.”

Chapter 909: Breaking Through

The explosion released from the Spatial Barrier surrounding Billy's expanded forward in a straight line. Every second, it grew thousands of meters longer, and it had already left the army behind as it made its way toward Zac and his two companions.

"This is a bad idea," Ogras muttered as he slunk out of Zac's grip, though he still kept pace. "You can't trust that fool of a Realm Spirit to know what it's doing."

An ominous ripple spread through the spatial beam, as if cursed by the demon's unlucky words. Zac's eyes widened in alarm, and he activated his movement skill, but he frantically canceled it when his mind screamed of mortal danger. It was just in time as well, as his contraction of space had created small fissures in front of him.

"What the-" Ogras groaned as he emerged bloody from a puff of shadows, clearly having encountered a similar phenomenon.

There was no time to answer as Zac desperately scrambled out of the way. He narrowly avoided getting split in two thanks to Vivi's vines, but he still felt a cold sensation as the spatial tear nicked him. From there, the errant burst of energy continued past them as it carved an enormous crevasse into the ground.

Another one had streaked through the enemy lines, instantly killing a set of unlucky souls while cutting apart one of the siege towers.

"How can space be this brittle?" Vai exclaimed with a pale expression.

"Can't you feel it?" Ogras grunted as he pointed at the dissipating tear. "It's not pure."

Zac's brows furrowed as he sensed what the demon was getting at. There really was a hint of the Lost Plane's madness inside that spatial tear, though it was still barely discernible.

"This realm might really be crumbling," Vai cried.

No matter how weak the sign was, it wasn't good news. They hadn't seen the situation improve over the past week, but neither had it deteriorated. To see hints of the Lost Plane this far from his pillar, especially in conjunction with how brittle space was, proved the situation might be even worse than they'd feared.

"We'll worry about that later," Zac said, speaking to himself as much as the others. "We need to move - they've spotted us."

"Into that deathtrap?" Ogras said with a raised brow.

"It'll be fine," Zac grunted as he kept running toward the incoming chaos, even if he wasn't without misgivings.

It wasn't just foolhardiness and blind faith that propelled him forward, even if the madness inside the tears had been an unwelcome surprise. Thanks to **[Rapturous Divide]** and his study of the theories in the Book of Duality, Zac had a pretty good idea of what Billy or the Realm Spirit were planning. He had noticed it right away; the core of the incoming shockwave was hollow and expanding.

As expected, the corridor of destruction soon collapsed, creating two spatial storms that blocked out the invaders while a third covered the sky. Between the storms, a 100-meter-wide pathway mostly free of spatial turbulence appeared, leading all the way to the walled fort in the distance. It was a solid idea, and it would have been almost perfect if not for space turning so brittle.

There was no way he'd dare use his movement skill in this kind of environment after his previous close encounter; he might accidentally step into the Void if he did that. Or perhaps even the Lost Plane. Even using too powerful attacks was risky in such an environment, though that was as much a strength as a weakness since that restrained the enemies as

well. Most importantly, the spatial beam had opened a path for them while keeping the invaders at bay.

Or at least most of them.

Zac knew first-hand how dangerous those kinds of spatial storms were to traverse, but it wasn't impossible. A few of the invaders were already making their way through under the urgings of their superiors. A few were even thrown inside when they refused to move. However, most were led by Hegemons, who used brute force to carve a path.

Dozens learned the same lesson they had, and Zac even saw a Hegemon get swallowed by a spatial tear when he tried to teleport through the storm. Meanwhile, hundreds of warriors were rushing toward Zac, wanting to intercept their approach or use their entrance.

"I'll take the left," the demon said as dark clouds made from shadows started to spread while Zac tried conjuring a fractal blade.

Space held together even under the pressure of [**Nature's Edge**] empowered by two of his Dao Branches, but Zac could feel it wouldn't be able to endure much more punishment than that. Still, that was all Zac needed as he unleashed a constant stream of fractal leaves toward the right.

The closest warriors, who previously made up the army's rear, initially tried to block out Zac's attacks with various defensive skills. That only resulted in a scene of utter carnage as blades empowered by two Dao Branches and a monstrous amount of strength cut through everything in their path.

The situation wasn't as lopsided on the other side, even if Ogras used all kinds of tools to impede the incoming tide of warriors. Hidden spears rose from the shadows, illusions made warriors turn on their allies, and an obscuring haze led people straight into the spatial storms. It formed a dangerous web that delayed their enemies long enough for Zac and his two companions to enter the pathway. In their wake, Ogras released his illusory shroud, which would give the three a head start for the final stretch.

“Can you destabilize the storms even further?” Zac asked of Vai, who nodded after some hesitation.

The researcher started releasing spatial ripples from her vine seat, which entered the churning storms to their sides. The swells were instilled with Vai’s Spacial Dao Branch, and the storms picked up ferocity everywhere they passed. Warriors who were narrowly hanging on as they made their way through suddenly found themselves overwhelmed by a barrage of spatial tears and were ripped to shreds.

She also sent some ripples toward their rear, opening up large jagged scars in their wake. She even managed to connect the two storms, though the barrier was nowhere near as thick as the ones to their sides. Still, having a Spatial Cultivator in this proved extremely useful, and she singlehandedly averted more than five ambushes as they ran toward the fort.

But soon enough, a whole squad of warriors emerged from the storm, led by a defensive Hegemon who had simply blocked out the innumerable Spatial Tears. The group was a bit bloodied and battered, but their auras were still solid as they formed an iron wall between Zac’s group and the wall in the distance.

However, just as they formed their defensive perimeter, a deep rumble echoed through the area as a golden mountain rose from the ground right at their feet. The Hegemon slammed down on it with an enormous engraved pillar he was carrying around, and it formed some sort of seal on the ground.

The seal groaned in protest when the golden mountain peak slammed into it, but it narrowly withstood the unrelenting push from below. However, the energy the Hegemon unleashed was just too powerful, and spatial tears sprung up all around the invaders. Soon enough, one struck the Hegemon in his left arm, and Ogras used the opportunity to activate a familiar strike.

Two lances of condensed shadows appeared, one behind and one in front of the Hegemon, who suddenly found himself under attack from every direction. He wasn’t the only one in trouble, though, as the activation had created a series of

Spatial Tears all around Zac and the others. Zac knew this would happen, and he already had ample experience dodging spatial tears since his time in the Research Base.

Zac pushed through the spatial turbulence just in time to see one of the shadow lances strike the Hegemon right in his heart. It wasn't actually enough to kill the man since some sort of plate hidden beneath his robes blocked the strike, but the force pushed him right into a spatial tear that tore up his back.

Together, it was enough to destabilize the defensive seal, and the golden mountain below pushed through with redoubled ferocity. It contained an immense weight, and some of the E-grade warriors the Hegemon had brought were crushed from the pressure alone. Others managed to avoid the mayhem, but they were forced back into the Spatial Storm.

By that point, Zac and Ogras were already upon the stragglers, and the two finished off the Hegemon with a blitz assault of ferocious swings before they rounded the mountain. Even then, the three were covered in wounds since the mountain had conjured too many tears to perfectly avoid them all.

After passing the mountain, they had already crossed two-thirds of the corridor, and Zac smiled as he saw the familiar form standing at the mouth of the barrier like a stalwart tower. Billy looked almost exactly like before, except his hair had turned golden just like it did in his transformed state. If Zac had to guess, it meant Billy had properly awakened his bloodline already.

There was also a powerful sense of oppression emanating from his fleshy body, and it felt like a mountain was blocking the gated entrance rather than a person. Just a bloodline wasn't enough to give off such a brutal aura, and neither was stacking strength. The titan must have not only awakened his Titanic heritage but also cultivated some sort of body tempering method to the limits of the E-grade.

Zac didn't want the giant to accidentally thwack him or Vai as well, so his face started to morph back into its original form as they closed in on the opening in the spatial barrier. A wide

smile immediately spread across Billy's when he saw Zac's appearance.

"Haha! Super Brother Man has finally found Billy! And you even found stupid Horny Guy!" a booming laugh echoed through the area.

Zac was about to answer, but two more Hegemons suddenly appeared to bar their path. However, they didn't look too happy about the situation. They knew which way the wind blew, being pincerred between an unmovable Billy and Zac who was already bearing down on them like a runaway train.

The first of the two grit his teeth as he pointed at Zac, prompting a hundred bloody suns to appear above his head. Zac felt a sense of danger from them, but one didn't need his level of Luck to realize they were trouble. Space crackled around the glowing orbs, and the whole pathway was rapidly deteriorating.

"Be prepared in case my barrier fails," Zac said as a golden laurel appeared on his head.

Three pillars rose from the ground behind him, and the three people in his group were each enclosed by one barrier. It was one of the features of the skill reaching Middle Proficiency. With three pillars rather than two, his defensive skill would either turn more durable, or he could protect a third person.

The activation was just in time as a rain of deadly rays descended on their position. Each sanguine sun was like a turret that released one beam after another, but the suns were also falling toward them like a manufactured meteor shower, each orb creating trailing spatial tears in their wake.

Zac frowned at the incoming mayhem, hesitant whether he would have to unleash one of his more powerful attacks. But space was already at a breaking point from those orbs. What would happen if he added [**Arcadia's Judgement**] to the mix? At the same time, he wasn't confident his skill could block both the spatial tears and the Hegemon's skill.

An angry roar broke the status quo as Billy swung his club. Weirdly enough, it crashed into empty space like it was a

solid, and huge cracks spread toward the Hegemons. Amazingly, not a single Spatial Tear moved in Billy's direction - they were all heading outward. Had Billy gained insights into the Dao of Space, or was the Dimensional Seed Helping him?

Either way, it forced the second Hegemon's hand. He had stood guard against Billy, but made a different choice from his companion – he fled instead of taking on the giant's attack. He turned into a stream of blood that cut through the spatial chaos, the skill looking a lot like the ones the scouts in the mountain range used.

Something like that was a risky gambit, but he actually made it to the outer edges of the spatial storm before the skill collapsed, and he emerged as a bloody mess. He was covered in scars and lost one leg, but he was alive. That left a shocked and enraged Hegemon behind, who suddenly faced the incoming spatial tears from behind.

The Hegemon turned back to block by unleashing a bloody storm, but the brief bout of inattention cost him dearly. Ogras had appeared out of nowhere from the man's shadow, and his spear pierced straight into the man's bicep. It was far from a lethal wound, but that didn't mean that Ogras had missed.

Instead of targeting a lethal point that might be protected like before, Ogras had actually targeted the skill fractal for the skill in the sky. The suns shuddered before they started to lose their cohesiveness, with only the Hegemon's Dao keeping the skill together. With the skill broken, Zac no longer felt any need to activate one of his finishers.

The remaining efficacy of [**Empyrean Aegis**] would be enough to deal with the fallout, so Zac threw Vai to Ogras, who had appeared back by their side with a new set of wounds. As expected, flashing over like that was pretty dangerous, but sometimes you had to take a risk. The ground beneath Zac's feet cracked as he pushed forward with all his might, propelling himself right through the storm of spatial tears and collapsing suns.

A fractal leaf no larger than a meter and a half swung down, its form shrouded by two extremely condensed clouds in black

and gold. The Hegemon condensed another barrier, but it was futile in front of a condensed [**Rapturous Divide**] empowered by Zac's Dao and a collapsing spacetime.

A colossal scar in space cut straight through the man before it continued into the spatial storms, even swallowing the two apparitions of the Abyss and Arcadia. It even reached the army outside, and Zac looked at the chaotic scene with wide eyes as dozens of energy streams entered his body. Thank god he had angled the strike away from the fort.

With the Hegemon dead, the final obstacle between himself and Billy was gone. The giant was excitedly waving his club like he hadn't just brutalized two Hegemons and scared off another. Space was actively collapsing by that point, but they were right at the home stretch.

Ogras caught up with Vai slung over his shoulder, and the three passed through the barrier a few seconds later. The spatial bubble closed right behind them, cutting off the spatial tears that looked ready to swallow all around them. The grating sound of the tearing space and pained cries of the warriors caught in the storm were cut off as well, leaving only their panting breaths and Billy's booming laugh.

"Haha, did you like Billy's mountain?" the giant grinned as he excitedly swung his nasty club like it was made out of foam.

"It was very cool," Zac grinned, relieved to see that space was perfectly stable inside the barrier. "It's nice to finally see you again."

"Gemmy helped too!" the childish voice from before exclaimed as a shimmering crystal flew out from one of Billy's pockets. "Billy says you can help bash the bad guys and cure Gemmy?"

"Are... you the Dimensional Seed?" Zac said as he looked at the floating gem curiously.

"Gemmy is Gemmy," the gem hummed. "You are stupid. But why do you smell familiar?"

"Uh," Zac hesitated. "We met once when you were younger. We helped each other out to escape from some bad guys."

“Ah! Gemmy remembers! Gemmy was inside you!” the floating gem giggled, which drew odd looks from Ogras and Vai. “Your body is weird. Hungry. Hungry Guy.”

“Well, uh,” Zac coughed.

“Ah, Gemmy is tired. Going to take a nap in the fire,” the gem continued before it flew off toward the innards of the fort, and Zac saw that Vai was just as confused as he felt.

“Like I never left,” Ogras sighed.

“Finally, friends have come to help. Welcome to Kingdom of Billy!” Billy excitedly exclaimed as he followed the Dimensional Seed.

“So, are we just going to pretend the army outside isn’t there? Or that space isn’t apparently on the verge of collapse?” Ogras muttered as they walked through the thick wall.

“Billy hasn’t forgotten how you tricked the Smallboys and stole Dao Stones, Horny Guy,” Billy snorted. “And Billy has a plan to fix everything.”

“You have a plan?” Ogras nodded as they emerged on the other side. “I’d had hoped to die between the bosoms of two succubae, but I guess this place will have to do.”

“Let’s just list-” Zac said, but he was interrupted by a series of hurried steps and a loud exclamation.

“Vai?! Is that you?!”

Zac looked over with confusion as he vaguely recognized the voice, and his brows rose when he saw not one but two familiar faces run toward them.

Chapter 910: Always Something

It was Leyara Lioress who had just shouted Vai's name as she rushed toward them from across the fort, each step rippling with space as she was propelled forward. She looked just like the last time they met, apart from the revealing garments she wore in the Base Town being replaced by a dress more in line with the long white robes most of the Void Gate nuns wore.

Leyara's aura was surprisingly condensed, and Zac realized that Vai might have been generous when she placed Ogras at the same power level. Her aura even eclipsed most of the elites Zac had seen in the Twilight Ascent, including those from outside factions. Not only that, but she wore a set of glove-like Spirit Tools that had huge gemstones on the back of her hands.

Knowing who Leyara's master was, they were probably Peak Quality Spirit tools, and who knew what other items she was carrying around.

Seeing Leyara here in the depths of the Dimensional Seed was pretty shocking, but it was even more unexpected to see Pretty Peak by her side. Rather than a dress, she had opted to wear an engraved set of leather armor that emitted a powerful aura of carnage. If Zac had to guess, the leather had been tanned with high-grade beast blood to give it such a ferocious feeling, and Pretty's martial air only further amplified it.

Even then, Pretty's aura wasn't quite as condensed as Leyara's, even if it wasn't that far off. It felt a bit backward after learning about the crazy Peak family. Then again, Leyara wasn't some nobody. She was a handpicked Terminal Disciple of one of the most powerful cultivators in the sector, while Pretty Peak came from a powerful clan in the Allbright Empire.

“Ah, the slow girl is here,” Billy muttered as he looked at Leyara with some trepidation. “Always asking Billy about the design, never understanding.”

“Design?” Zac said as he looked at Billy curiously.

Billy’s face turned excited again, but he was interrupted before he could explain.

“You! What are you doing here?” Leyara exclaimed when she saw Zac standing between Billy and Vai, her pristine face scrunching up into a scowl. “And why have you brought my aunt?! Are you crazy?”

Only then did Zac remember he’d reverted to his original face to avoid getting accidentally thwoned. For a moment, his mind froze with panic, but he soon regained his calm when he realized it didn’t matter. The whole point of going undercover was to hide his identity until he could contact Leyara, which was moot now that she was standing right in front of him.

“Little Lara!” Vai cried as she ran over to her niece, tears pooling in her eyes as she threw herself into Leyara’s arms. “I’m so happy to see you. The Void Star is a lot scarier than you said.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Leyara smiled as she patted Vai’s head, though her eyes never left Zac. “What are you doing here? Has that guy done anything to you?”

“Ah, Lara, this is, ehm, Gaun Sorom,” Vai hurriedly said when she saw her niece’s guarded expression. “He’s... He’s not a bad guy! W-Well, he is a bit greedy, but he helped me a lot! We were on the same mission to stabilize a Spatial Nexus, but things took a turn.”

“Gaun Sorom?” Leyara blankly said as she looked between Zac and Vai. “Why do you call him that? That’s not his name.”

“Eh, you two know each other?” Vai said with confusion.

“Why wouldn’t I know him?” Leyara sighed. “Aunty, I was the one who told you about him, remember? How we met in the Tower of Eternity?”

“You have been traveling with the Deviant Asura without knowing?” Pretty smiled at Vai before she looked Zac up and down. “I almost thought you had died after not hearing from you for so long, but I’m happy to be proven wrong. We need people like you for the upcoming war.”

Vai looked like she had been struck by lightning, her mouth slowly opening and closing without speaking. Zac simply let her process her thoughts for the time being while he dealt with the niece.

“Nice to see the two of you again,” Zac said with a wry smile as he turned to Leyara. “I’m sorry about dropping in like this. I had planned on contacting you, but I didn’t know how. And with the rumors and the bounties...”

“You think too little of the Void Gate if you thought we cared for those rumors or the Tsarun Bounty,” Leyara said with a cute pout. “The Space Gate has probably been brewing in the Million Gates territory for hundreds of thousands of years. Even if you somehow nudged the events, you could at most have sped things up by a few centuries.”

Zac was inwardly relieved. He didn’t really think he was responsible for the Space Gate opening either, but it was nice to hear the strongest Spatial Faction in the Mystic Realm backing him up on that front. Still, it was an odd coincidence that Leyara and Pretty were in this specific Mystic Realm, considering it might have been the Dimensional Seed that had triggered the Space Gate to start opening early.

Was that why they were here, to investigate the source of the turbulence? Or was it related to the Left Imperial Palace and the Lost Plane? Zac was about to ask, but Vai preempted him.

“C-Corpse Trees! Atwood... Piker,” Vai stammered, her eyes wide as saucers. “P-Pervert!”

“This is why I said you need to keep up with current events, Aunty,” Leyara said with a shake of her head. “You never know when you run into scary people on the outside.”

“Y-You’re really the Deviant Asura?” Vai hesitantly asked, her face full of confusion and loss.

“Well, yeah, I guess. Sorry I didn’t explain things properly before. I figured it was for the best when you didn’t realize who I was. My identity is a bit complicated, and I have a lot of enemies,” Zac said with a wry smile. “But you shouldn’t believe those rumors you might have heard about me.”

“So you didn’t fight all the sector elites and then hung them up in your corpse tree?” Vai said, her face slightly blushing. “B- Before disappearing for hours with a Draugr lady.”

“Uh, no. Well, that did happen,” Zac coughed before he glared at the demon, who had been laughing for a while now. “What’s so funny?”

“The Deviant Asura?” Ogras snickered, his grin almost splitting his face apart.

“I didn’t pick the name,” Zac sighed.

“You did when you broadcasted your desire for young women across the whole sector,” Pretty Peak snorted.

“I’m impressed,” Ogras whistled. “Here I thought you remained the same bore as before, but it looks you’ve been living it up on the outside.”

“Can we just focus on the matter at hand?” Zac groaned.

“First, explain why you’re here,” Pretty said with a frown while Leyara thoughtfully looked at him. “It’s a bit suspicious you’ve been missing for almost ten years, only to suddenly appear here when the place is crawling with invaders. And you’ve even been traveling undercover?”

“I needed some stuff inside the Void Star, so I came here to get it,” Zac sighed. “Like I said earlier, I chose to sneak in because I was afraid using my real identity would get me in trouble. Things took a bit of a turn from there as a bunch of infiltrators blew up one of the Spatial Nexuses. Eventually, Vai and I wound up here.”

“So, fate brought you here?” Leyara asked without much surprise on her face, which prompted both him and Ogras to look at the woman suspiciously.

“I guess you could say that,” Zac nodded. “What about you two?”

“I have been fighting the infiltrators in the Million Gates Territory with the Empire,” Pretty Peak said. “But that place is chaotic and hard to traverse, and we simply can’t find the Space Gate. So I came to the Void Gate in search of solutions. Then I learned these Kan’Tanu had managed to infiltrate the Void Star, and that there might even be a path to the Space Gate from here.”

“You’re mounting a counter-attack through the Stellar Ladder?” Zac asked curiously.

“Well, that was the plan, anyway, but things have taken a turn,” Pretty grimaced as she glared at Billy. “*Some* people are making things difficult.”

“Billy can throw you back in the dungeon if you don’t like it, Angry Girl,” Billy laughed. “You are no good at drawing the array anyway.”

“Is that about the Design you mentioned earlier, Billy?” Zac asked.

“You two know each other since before?” Leyara asked when she saw how familiar they were. “How is that possible?”

“Well, Billy is from the same planet as me,” Zac shrugged. “We dealt with the incursions together.”

“Ah, Billy misses the Ratlight,” Billy sighed. “The Ratlight was simpler than this. Thwunk things, and they give you money and make you stronger.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were from the outside?” Pretty scowled at Billy. “Or that you knew Zac Atwood? We could have avoided the misunderstandings.”

“You didn’t ask Billy, so Billy didn’t say,” Billy shrugged.

“I’m sure this will all make for a good conversation later. Now, I heard there was a plan to get out of this mess alive?” Ogras interjected.

“Ah, right!” the giant exclaimed. “Gemmy is sick, so Billy is healing Gemmy. As long as Gemmy gets better, she can help

us.”

Zac frowned when he heard the news. This was exactly what he'd been afraid of, that him conjuring the pillar would have harmed the Realm Spirit and this world.

“What do you know about healing Realm Spirits?” Ogras asked with a raised brow. “Did you dream up a solution?”

“Yes! Billy learned it while sleeping!” Billy laughed. “Billy always has the best ideas when asleep.”

“Uh,” Zac hesitated.

“We were also skeptical at first, but it might actually work,” Leyara offered. “Come, look.”

“Are you okay?” Zac asked Vai as he walked up next to her.

“I- It's a lot. I knew you were not just someone from Salosar Seven, but I didn't imagine you were, well,” Vai said as she furtively looked at Zac. However, her gaze soon steadied as she looked into Zac's eyes. “But I still think you're a good person, even if you are a deviant.”

“That's not-“Zac grimaced, but the researcher was dragged off by Leyara and Pretty before he could try to explain himself again.

It was very reminiscent of how Galau had been whisked off back then, and the space around the three was soon sealed. Zac could only shake his head and head toward the edge of the crater with the others. The researcher was no doubt recapping her experiences over the past months. Hopefully, Vai wasn't to put off by him being vague about his identity.

Still, the situation was even better than he'd expected. They had stumbled onto Leyara, the key to getting out of this place, and plans were already well underway. Of course, this all hinged on this plan that Billy had somehow dreamt up, so they weren't entirely out of the woods just yet.

Soon, they reached the crater's edge, and Zac could finally see what was hidden inside - a massive array. It had to be a couple of kilometers in diameter, and it almost completely covered

the crater. In its center, the lone peak remained – the mountain that was once an insectoid hive.

There were also some remnants of structures around the peak, but most of them were being dismantled to give way to the innumerable pathways. The work was still underway, with both humans and some small gnome-like beings working hand in hand, with a few floating Hegemons directing from above.

The array was terrifyingly complex, comprised of hundreds of different sections, most of which Zac couldn't even begin to comprehend. His **[Primal Polyglot]** wasn't up to deciphering any clues either. Judging by Ogras' surprised and befuddled look, he wasn't expecting this scene either.

"What... is this?" Zac eventually said after looking down at the crater for a while.

"This array will let Gemmy come with Billy when we leave," Billy said with excitement. "It will make Gemmy into a Pocket Realm."

"A what?" Zac said.

"It's a high-grade technique that doesn't exist on the Frontier," a foreign voice said as a Hegemon floated over. "Hopefully, we will still have time to finish it after your little stunt."

"Bah, stupid guy," Billy glared. "Less complaining and more drawing, or Billy will throw you back into the dungeon."

The Hegemon snorted and flew away after giving Zac a second glance.

"What's going on? Is the shield failing?" Zac asked.

"Gemmy is sick," Billy said again with a sad expression. "She can't gather much energy any longer, and bad guys outside are wasting it."

"And letting us inside drained her," Zac sighed, getting an affirmative nod from Billy. "I'm sorry."

"It's not Super Brother Man's fault," Billy smiled. "Friend helps friends. Besides, Billy thinks you can help. Billy's plan is good, but it can get better."

“I’ll do my best,” Zac nodded. “What did you mean by throwing that guy into the dungeon?”

“One day, Gemmy said more bad guys were breaking into Gemmy’s World,” Billy said. “The first people were already harming Gemmy, so Billy decided to catch these ones. Gemmy did space magic and made bad guys appear inside Billy’s dungeon instead of the edge of the world.”

“No wonder,” Zac laughed as he remembered the empty forest they appeared inside.

“What is making the world sick?” Ogras asked from the side. “How long do we have until this all goes tits up?”

“Ah, that’s,” Billy hesitated, looking a bit confused.

“A dangerous energy is invading the Mystic Realm,” Leyara said as she walked over with Pretty and Vai. “Vai quickly retold your experiences. I’m sorry about how I acted. I owe you a favor for keeping my aunt safe all this time.”

“She helped me just as much,” Zac smiled. “What dangerous energy? When did this happen?”

“Since the start,” Leyara said. “It has been a bit hard to piece together the events, but it looks like the Realm Spirit swallowed up a dimensional fragment holding something dangerous. That realm immediately started releasing its energy, spreading like poison through Gemmy’s world. By the time the Gemmy realized there was a problem, it had already lost control over that region of its body.”

“And let me guess, it’s to the east?” Ogras sighed.

“The nasty place,” Billy said as he looked at Ogras. “It got worse after you went there, stupid guy.”

“How is that possible? I got a quest to cleanse that place. I spent a year killing the monsters; I even blew the whole thing up to kill the last of the- ah?” Ogras said before he froze as his brows furrowed together. “*Now* you’re telling me, bastard?”

Ogras’ behavior looked odd, but Zac quickly realized he was speaking with the Goblin Tool Spirit.

“What’s going on?” Leyara asked curiously. “By the way, what’s happened to you? You didn’t look like this in the Tower of Eternity. Have you become a ghost? Did the spirits speak with you?”

“Yes, to speaking with ghosts, but I am still very much alive,” Ogras said with a grin. “If you’re interested, you are most welcome to perform a thorough-“

“Ahem,” Zac coughed. “What did the ghost say?”

“Ah?” Ogras blanked out until he remembered what they were dealing with. “Oh yeah. Remember how the Kingdom of Ra’Lashar rose? How they gained their insights?”

“They found a weakness in- “Zac said before he stopped as his eyes widened.

Zac had read some of Ogras’ notes on the insane goblin society over the past month, and it was clear what the demon was referring to. The Ra’Lashar was once a simple species on a low E-grade world. But one day, they stumbled onto a weak spot leading to the Lost Plane. Not only did that result in their planet being flooded with enough tainted ambient energy to nurture Monarchs, but they also managed to extract all kinds of knowledge.

“The ghost figured the pathway would be gone since the whole planet has disappeared, with but a small fragment being dragged into this traveling Mystic Realm,” Ogras said. “But what if it’s still there? What if the connection remains?”

“Bad guys are at the nasty place making things worse,” Billy interjected, confirming the reports they lifted from the lipless Hegemon.

“The invaders are opening a path, looking for things they shouldn’t,” Ogras muttered.

“We’re lucky,” Leyara said. “Vai told me how you conjured a huge pillar a month ago? It drained a lot of the build-up in this world. The plan was a bit iffy before, but we actually have a shot of getting out of here alive now. There’s only one problem...”

“There always is,” Ogras sighed, and Zac could only agree.

There was always something.

Chapter 911: Crooked Schemes

Nothing was ever easy in the Multiverse, at least not for those without strength or backing. And in a chaotic scene like the one they found themselves in, Zac wasn't surprised to hear there were some roadblocks to Billy's ambitious plan.

"What will happen when this array is turned on?" Zac asked Billy, who clearly wasn't keeping up with the conversation.

"Ah," Billy hesitated. "Gemmy will come with Billy and leave?"

"It's not quite that easy," Leyara added from the side. "This array will break off most of the mass of this Mystic Realm before forming a true subspace that will be stored inside the Realm Spirit's avatar. We would stay inside, but the controller could simply take us out like it was a Spatial Treasure."

"What!" Vai exclaimed as she looked down at the array. "How is that possible? The energy consumption alone..."

"It normally wouldn't be possible without an extremely powerful energy source, but we have a unique advantage; a sapient World Spirit who is willing to fuel the process. I doubt even my master could accomplish this without Gemmy's aid," Leyara said as she nodded at Billy. "Of course, I can neither confirm nor deny any of this - this array is far beyond my understanding. We are only drawing it according to King Billy's specifications."

"So, what's the problem?"

"First of all, we're cutting it extremely close," Pretty said.

"Those people outside have figured out we can't replenish our energy, so they are content with gradually whittling us down.

Now, it looks even worse, unless the two of you are skilled at formations and energy control?”

“Uh,” Zac said while Ogras studiously looked away.

“Thought as much,” Pretty snorted.

“Can’t we just go out and slow them down?” Zac asked.

“That was our plan in case things started to go south,” Pretty nodded. “We have simply waited since the Templar Hegemons are needed to draw the most complicated pathways. Apart from them, only Leyara can do it. But with Senior Lioress and you two here, we finally have the opportunity to strike back.”

Zac blanked out for a second, wondering if the Void Priestess had appeared as well. A second later, Zac realized Pretty was talking about Vai when she said Senior Lioress. It was easy to forget she was over a thousand years old when she almost looked like a teenager. The little researcher was studying the vast array with almost burning eyes, muttering to herself and scribbling down notes.

It looked like she only needed an exciting topic of study to forget all about the matter of the Deviant Asura.

“A few successful raids will give us more time to draw the array,” Leyara agreed. “But that doesn’t solve the real issue.”

“What’s that?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling that trouble was about to come knocking at his door.

“The Kan’Tanu infiltrators are extracting too much energy from these ruins you mentioned,” Leyara said. “When this array is activated, it will turn into a black hole as it swallows all the energy in this world.

“Including all that tainted energy,” Ogras grimaced.

“Exactly,” Leyara nodded. “We fear that activating while the source of corruption remains will not only drag all that corruption into the core of this world. It might even swallow the origin of all that tainted energy, which will be disastrous. This whole realm would likely explode, killing the Realm Spirit and us alike.”

Zac took a deep breath before calmly looking at Leyara. “Let me guess. Someone has to go there and turn off the faucet, so to speak?”

“Preferably while conjuring another pillar, if possible,” Leyara nodded. “The more tainted energy we excise, the more likely it is for Gemmy to survive this transformation.”

“So, what’s your plan?” Ogras asked with a raised brow. “That place is months away.”

“To kill enough enemies for Gemmy to hurl a few people in the right direction,” Leyara said with a weak smile. “And hope they survive the journey.”

“That’s it? Hurl them across half the domain? That’s the plan?” Ogras asked incredulously as he stared at Leyara and Pretty. “Billy and that fool of a gem, I understand, but how can you just go along with it?”

“Well, we didn’t have much of a choice,” Pretty said with a roll of her eyes. “We are essentially prison labor stuck inside this place. It was either this or stay in the dungeons while that brute and his pet realm tried to solve this mess themselves. Besides, what are we supposed to do? Let these invaders run about unchecked? Better we blow up this whole place and us along with it than let them succeed in taking this place over.”

“Well, let’s avoid blowing ourselves up if we can avoid it,” Zac grimaced. “Why are there no powerhouses here? They’d be able to solve this issue with a wave of their sleeve. Why have you guys only brought Early D-grade Hegemons?”

“We had to send back a few of our powerhouses on the way. The inner reaches have become too fragile after the sabotage,” Leyara sighed. “If anything, the infiltrators want us to send Monarchs into the Void Star. Their mere presence would most likely cause a chain reaction that would splinter the Void Star, sending the realms to all corners of Zecia. If we’re unlucky, the Stellar Ladder will remain intact, giving the invaders free rein. We have already been forced to detach our most valuable realms to avoid that kind of energy overload.”

“Weaker Middle Hegemons can technically enter these depths, but it’s not worth it. An elite Early Hegemon will give off roughly the same energy, but their effective combat strength is higher. You’re a prime example of that. You’re an E-grade cultivator with an aura of an Early Hegemon, yet I bet few early Hegemons are your match,” Pretty Peak added. “I would really have loved to spar with you a bit if the world wasn’t ending.”

“Another time,” Zac smiled.

Zac had expected as much from the lack of Monarchs, but it was still a kick to the groin that the Void Priestess or someone like the Starfall Monarch simply couldn’t swing by and solve this mess. At least that explained why he and Vai hadn’t encountered any too dangerous realms until now. Even the most savage places they crossed had Late Beast Kings at worst, with not a single one sporting the Beast Emperors who supposedly lived in the depths of the Void Star.

“Still, you were just going to let Gemmy throw you into a spatial tear and hope for the best?” Zac hesitated

“We don’t have any other means to reach the eastern reaches in time, and Gemmy can only do so much in her current state,” Leyara explained. “And if we sent out a squad earlier, then we would never be able to finish the array on time.”

“Let’s say the plan worked out. What would happen next?” Zac asked.

“Most of this realm would collapse while the core region was reforged,” Leyara said. “I have a few anchor treasures that should be able to drag people out of the Void Star even if the Spatial Nexuses are in flux.”

“So let’s just use those things and get the hell out of here?” Ogras urged.

“Well, for one, Gemmy is blocking us,” Leyara said. “But even if she allowed us to leave, they need to be used outside a localized space.”

“In the Void?” Zac frowned.

“Exactly,” Leyara nodded. “We need to let the world collapse and dispel its spatial field. That will place us in a localized Void of the Void Star, and we’ll teleport out from there.”

“What a shitty escape treasure,” Ogras muttered from the side. “Need to survive the apocalypse to use it.”

“They’re not meant to be used this deep inside the Void Star, and not when the whole system is collapsing. Its standard function utilizes the Spatial Nexuses that have been destroyed,” Leyara sighed.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a big shot with a wealthy master? Surely you have something better?” Ogras asked.

“Even if my master had better items, what good does it do me?” Leyara said with a roll of her eyes. “I’m just Peak E-grade; how am I supposed to activate a treasure that can blast us straight through dozens of spatial layers? These anchors are as good as they get for an E-grade cultivator.”

Zac nodded in agreement. Even his **[Flashfire Flourish]** wouldn’t manage to cross such a vast distance. But thinking of his escape item, a plan slowly started to form in Zac’s mind.

“One of the anchors would go to the assault group who dealt with the tainted energy,” Leyara continued. “The moment this realm collapsed, they would use the anchor to get dragged back outside. The other would go to Billy.”

“To Billy?” Zac said curiously.

“If everything worked out, Gemmy should be able to send Billy outside into the Void as well, where he could activate the treasure and take Gemmy with him. Once outside the Void Star, he could extract us and send in our armies to deal with any remnant infiltrators.”

“This is not just about us either,” Pretty added with determination. “We cannot just flee and leave these people to their own devices. Even if we fail, we must drag them with us down to the underworld. We cannot let them seize the Stellar Ladder.”

“Are you crazy?” Ogras said with raised brows.

“War will always have sacrifices,” Pretty shrugged. “If they seize this springboard into Zecia, we’re done for when the real powerhouses arrive. Trading a few juniors, even talented ones, for the safety of the whole sector is a no-brainer. We cannot let them get their hands on this realm.”

“That’s not the only thing we can’t let them get their hands on,” Ogras added with a low voice to Zac.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement as he looked down at the huge array. After reading the lipless Hegemon’s reports, they had initially thought there were more pieces of rubble hidden in the ruins of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom. But what if that wasn’t it? What if the Kan’Tanu were actually aiming for the source – the Lost Plane?

The Lipless Cultivator had mentioned selling him off to some powerful faction. Was this their plan? To mine and extract opportunities and sell to powerful bidders. And with a prize like Ultom and the Left Imperial Palace, there would be no shortage of powerful factions willing to buy in. The whole sector might be crawling with powerful forces from the Multiverse Heartlands if the pathway to the Lost Plane wasn’t closed.

The demon had evidently arrived at the same conclusion, and there was genuine fear on his face.

“We cannot let them continue,” Zac agreed. “Otherwise, the invasion will become the least of our worries.”

“Fate is gathering,” Leyara sighed.

“I hate this,” Pretty spat to the side. “You two clearly know something, and so does the Void Gate. Even the invaders know, while Zecia fumbles in the dark. What the hell is going on? It’s related to these, isn’t it?”

Zac looked on as Pretty took out a familiar piece of cloth next – the ones all the infiltrators carried around. Zac glanced at Leyara, who looked a bit conflicted. The scene was a bit odd. Leyara knew, but Pretty didn’t? Ogras looked inquisitively at Zac, who didn’t know what to say either.

He didn't have any reason to distrust Pretty Peak, but he adamantly believed that the fewer people knew the truth, the better. What if she reported back to her elders, who then forwarded it to the leaders of the Allbright Empire?

Only one person with loose lips was needed to create a disaster. The Kan'Tanu seemed to be the same. The lowest members only knew to look for the sigils, while a few others, like the Lipless Hegemon, knew a few more details. But Zac doubted that Aural Cultivator knew anything concrete except that his mission was related to an opportunity the Kan'Tanu were planning to sell.

Even then, they were playing a dangerous game, to the point Zac suspected they had something to rely on. Otherwise, why wouldn't the powerful factions just annihilate the Kan'Tanu instead of bartering with them?

"I don't know all the details either," Zac eventually said, which got him an exaggerated eye-roll from Pretty Peak. "Suffice to say, the Kan'Tanu are looking for something, and it'll be bad if they find it."

"Whatever," Pretty shrugged. "Keep it to yourselves. The truth will come out sooner or later with so many people involved. And you better pray that your secrecy won't harm the war efforts."

"Since when were cultivators required to share their secrets? Hoarding resources and intelligence is Heaven's Path," Ogras grinned. "I doubt your esteemed factions are handing out cultivation resources and manuals left and right even when barbarians are knocking at the gate."

"Alright, that's enough," Zac sighed. "I have an escape treasure that can probably send me all the way to the Ra'Lashar Kingdom in one go, but I'm not sure how well I can steer it. I should manage to land within a few days' travel, though, and it won't waste any of Gemmy's energy."

This was the idea Zac had come up with when discussing the escape anchors. He didn't relish the thought of storming an infiltrator base to blow up a dimensional portal somehow, but it definitely beat their original scheme. The less energy

Gemmy was forced to use, the longer they would be able to maintain the shields and work on the array. And while it was dangerous, it beat sitting around in this failing barrier, hoping for the best.

“Really?” Leyara said as her eyes lit up. “It should work. You’d have to teleport from outside the barrier, though. Maybe use it during a raid?”

“The Kan’Tanu have locked down space as well,” Pretty said from the side. “You would have to properly break out of the encirclement to avoid any mishaps.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Zac nodded as he glanced at Ogras.

“Good luck,” the demon said while giving a thumbs up. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Zac smiled. “Obviously, you’re coming with me.”

Ogras only scoffed in return, but his eyes slowly thinned when he realized Zac was serious. “You’re joking.”

“Like you said, you’ve been there for almost a year. And you even have a ghost guide to help us out,” Zac shrugged. “You obviously have to come.”

“That was why Billy opened the path for Horny guy,” Billy nodded as he glared at Ogras. “If Horny Guy doesn’t go, Gemmy will throw him out again.”

“Bah, fine,” Ogras swore. “I guess the safest place is by your side anyway. If we fall into the Void, perhaps some beauties in a Cosmic Vessel will come to pick us up.”

“Perhaps,” Zac laughed.

Truthfully, it wasn’t only because of his need for a guide that he wanted Ogras to come with. Another reason was the ruins. Perhaps the Kan’Tanu had already unearthed another set if they were digging into the Lost Plane. And if either of them managed to get another piece, it might trigger a second pillar and drain this world of more tainted energy.

Secondly, it would be good to have the demon by his side if everything fell apart and they needed to escape. Billy would be safe since the plan required him to have one of the escape anchors, while Leyara would no doubt sort out Vai. That left him and Ogras, who would be taken care of as part of the strike group.

This way, they wouldn't be as reliant on Leyara's generosity when disaster struck. She clearly didn't have enough anchors for everyone since the plan was to leave most people inside Gemmy. And it was unreasonable to expect Leyara to save him and Ogras over her own people. After all, they had only met for two short encounters before.

"How many can your escape treasure take?" Pretty asked.

"Not sure," Zac said. "But probably not too many. One or two maximum. It's also a bit dangerous to use for non-fire cultivators. It will damage your foundations."

"Are you trying to get me killed?!" Ogras scowled.

"You're part shadows, so you should be fine," Zac nodded.

"One or two?" Pretty frowned. "Is that enough? There should be some powerful enemies guarding that place as well."

"Our goal isn't to take them all out but sabotage," Zac said. "A smaller group might work even better."

"What do you think?" Pretty said as she turned to Leyara.

"Well, it's a better plan than we have," Leyara slowly said.

"Besides, we have a few weeks to refine the plan."

"Alright, I need to rest up a bit after that dash," Zac said.

"We'll talk later."

With that, everyone went their way. Leyara and Pretty once more brought Vai away, while Zac headed off with Ogras and Billy. Apparently, they didn't need to do anything with Gemmy maintaining the barrier. They couldn't even counter-attack because the barrier was a true spatial divide. Just as the invaders couldn't attack from the outside, they couldn't attack from within like you could with a conventional City Defense Array.

Billy was over the moon from hearing that his actions in the Mystic Realm had helped save Earth. However, he was surprisingly ambivalent about there being quite a few statues of him erected across the planet, including one in Port Atwood.

Billy also told him about what had happened since Ogras left, which wasn't much, really. He had spent most of his time fighting the beast tides or cultivating. Weirdly enough, Billy had occasionally fallen asleep for months at a time while Gemmy guarded his body. Seeing how he cultivated and made breakthroughs in his sleep, Zac guessed his bloodline was related to dreams or dreamworlds.

It wasn't exactly what Zac expected from a Titanic bloodline. Then again, he knew nothing about real Titans.

With only Earthlings around, and Gemmy who was floating inside a brazier, Zac also told them of what had happened to Earth since they were swallowed by the Dimensional Seed. Billy was a great audience, audibly gasping or boisterously laughing as Zac narrated his exploits from the Big Axe Coliseum to the Twilight Ascent.

The three spent a few hours catching up, with Zac providing some of the delicacies he kept inside his Spatial Ring. Unfortunately, the evening was only a brief respite, with Pretty Peak coming to discuss a surprise raid a few hours later. She wanted to strike while the iron was hot and the outsiders were still a bit disorganized from the spatial mayhem.

“Alright, let's get to work,” Zac grunted as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand.

Chapter 912: Raid

A knock echoed from the half-opened door to Zac's study, prompting him to look up from the Book of Duality.

"Already?" Zac sighed as Pretty Peak walked inside.

"Apparently, we only have around five days," Pretty nodded. "If you want enough time to figure out a solution over there, we have to make our move soon. And the sooner we get going, the more energy will be left for Gemmy."

"Thought we had just over a week," Zac grunted.

"Sorry, but we don't have a lot of options. Senior Salas' estimates aren't looking too promising. Everyone is working overtime, including the Gnivelings. If we want a shot at this crooked scheme, we can't wait much longer," Pretty said with some helplessness on her face.

Zac sighed with a nod. The past two weeks had quickly turned into a struggle against time after Vai discovered some errors in Leyara's calculations. They had believed themselves to have over four weeks before they needed to finish and activate the array, but it turned out they only had three. If they waited any longer, Gemmy wouldn't have enough energy to form a stable spatial field.

"Well, I guess it doesn't make much of a difference," Zac eventually said. "I'm going to miss our sparring sessions, though."

"Likewise," Pretty smiled. "But who knows? We might just survive this and get more opportunities in the future."

The two had sparred almost daily since Zac arrived at the Kingdom of Billy, barring the days they had to recover from their wounds. Pretty had proven nearly as useless as he was for drawing the arrays, so they had been left to their own devices.

Ogras, on the other hand, had been employed to help out a bit, though he still made some time to train and spar.

Upon learning about his chance to train under the tutelage of multiple Monarchs, the demon had been green with envy, and he was trying to glean something through Zac's stances. Of course, the Evolutionary and Inexorable Stances were useless to Ogras. Still, the theories and concepts that went into their formation were handy for anyone who wanted to improve their own techniques.

Right now, Ogras was relying on a mix of his clan's techniques and some strikes he'd invented himself, but he was making rapid improvements. The demon reminded Zac a bit of himself when he fought in the Big Axe Coliseum. Ogras had found a direction that was working for him, but he was somewhat lacking the foundations to move forward without falling into the same pitfalls as he had.

Still, Ogras had a fantastic battle sense and a feel for timing, something Zac had already seen when they fought together. Improving his techniques was probably a worthwhile direction for Ogras. However, he would be better off developing a style that struck fast and hard, rather than Zac's stances, which centered on seizing the momentum before whittling down the opposition.

Pretty Peak was also shocked at his skill since he hadn't shown any of that during his battle in the Tower of Eternity, but her own methods weren't anything to scoff at. This was the first time Zac had seen her fight, and her fighting style was far more in line with her bloody leather armor than her beautiful and almost dainty appearance. She was relying on her clan's battle technique when they sparred, but Zac often felt like he was fighting a beast rather than a cultivator.

She was an instinctual fighter, just like he was to a certain degree, and she refused to follow her enemy's tempo. She was full of unexpected moves, incorporating both grappling and various weapons into her repertoire. At any moment, her claws could have been replaced by two daggers or a brutal scythe, making it nigh-impossible to know what to expect.

Apparently, it was a technique developed on the battlefields, though Zac hadn't had the chance to see the real thing in action. It was devised by Pretty's ancestor, a talented captain of the Allbright Empire. He had been strong but dirt-poor, and his weapons often broke while fighting on the frontlines. So, he learned to use everything on a battlefield to his advantage in some sort of loot-and-fight-approach where he used the weapons and treasures of fallen allies and foes.

Of course, the Peak Family was no longer wanting for treasures, but they still maintained the mindset to not rely on their items. In Average's and Greatest's cases, they chose the path of pure pugilism, using their bodies as their weapon. Pretty Peak had chosen a different approach where she had mastered multiple weapons, though her primary weapons were claws and the sword.

The claws were self-explanatory; it was close to pugilism, and the Peak family had a lot of skills and techniques for that fighting style. Mastering swords was a choice of her own, but it wasn't due to some particular affinity.

Pretty had instead explained it with the high prevalence of swordfighters in Zecia. If she lost her weapons in battle, a sword would probably be the easiest to steal from her enemies. And there was always a good chance of finding better blades in places like Mystic Realms and Inheritance trials.

It was a stark difference from Zac's path where he planned on upgrading and using his treasures to the very end, but there was ultimately no right or wrong in cultivation.

"Five days, huh?" Zac sighed. "Will the array be done in time?"

"Honestly? It doesn't look too good," Pretty said as she hesitantly looked at Zac. "I hate to ask, but do you think you can help take down another tower on your way out? It would buy us another half day at least."

Zac considered it for a moment before he hesitantly nodded. "We could take one down, but the original plan has to change."

This would be the seventh and final raid in which Gemmy opened small breaches to let them out for a blitz attack. The first outing had been a rousing success, where they had formed three parties that targeted sections with fewer or weaker Hegemons. One group was Zac and Ogras, with another being Billy, Leyara, Pretty, and a Defensive Templar Hegemon. The last group consisted of four more Templar Hegemons and twenty support staff.

The sudden attack had left 12 enemy Hegemons dead or crippled and destroyed a siege tower, drastically weakening their capabilities. The most significant contributors had been the Templars, who took down seven of the enemies by using a series of expensive talismans provided for Leyara's safety. Ogras and he had taken out another three before they were forced to retreat, while Billy's team had taken care of the last two.

The second attempt worked out quite nicely as well, as they infiltrated a series of tunnels the invaders had dug in an effort to enter the fort from below. The third raid was a sobering experience, though, with three of their own Hegemons falling while Billy's party was almost wiped out. If not for the defensive Templar sacrificing himself, then Billy and Pretty wouldn't only have gotten out with nasty wounds.

Those losses and the new deadline were the beginning of the vicious circle that had forced them to fight the Kan'Tanu army another three times. Six out of their eleven Hegemons had already lost their lives by now. Another one had actually deserted them as well by using a raid to escape. How he was planning to survive was beyond Zac, but judging by the seething anger in Leyara's and the other Templars' eyes, he would probably have to join the invaders if he wanted a shot at survival.

Even Ogras had been forced to sit out the two last raids because of wounds, and three raid parties had been reduced to two as Zac joined the Templars instead of going at it alone. It had lessened the damage they did each battle, but they had no better options. After all, the demon needed to be in tip-top shape for this one.

“You’re right, we’re abandoning the diversion. We’ll all join you for this final battle instead,” Pretty agreed. “I’m actually a bit excited to finally see your exploits up-close. Some of the Templars swear that you must be a Hegemon in hiding.”

“I wish,” Zac wryly smiled as he got to his feet. “Give me three hours; I need to quickly enter seclusion.”

“Alright,” Pretty nodded as she turned toward the door. “I’ll get everything sorted.”

Just as she was about to leave, she turned around again.

“You know, the real Deviant Asura is a lot better than the rumors,” she said, as a smile spread across her face. “But perhaps not as interesting.”

“I’m fine with being called boring if those rumors just die down,” Zac muttered.

“Doubtful. The Tsarun Clan is working much too hard to ruin your image and alienate you,” Pretty laughed. “Of course, it can all be swept away by deeds. My Grandpa says there will be rankings and contributions stores like most for this war. As long as you prove yourself, no one will care about those rumors. Those who spread them might even face a backlash.”

“Looking forward to it,” Zac smiled. “Is there anything else?”

Pretty hesitated a bit more before she spoke up. “Is... there really nothing you can tell me that can help me with Average and our soldiers?” Pretty asked. “I can feel it – how it’s all related to the events here.”

It had been a shock to hear that both Average and his old acquaintance Galau had gone missing under mysterious circumstances. An enormous planet in the depths of the Million Gates Territory had just up and disappeared with them on it, and the event had released enough energy to be sensed all the way to the Allbright Empire.

The Peak Family didn’t believe that anyone in their sector had the strength to do something like that, and they thought it was related to the Limitless Empire. That was the original reason Pretty had been sent to the Void Gate, though the infiltration of the Void Star had taken precedence.

“What you’ve described is completely different from what I know,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “From what I’ve seen, there are only two outcomes from encountering... that. You either gain the opportunity, or you die. There are no disappearances, especially not whole planets. It might be related, but I am just guessing here as well.”

Zac wasn’t lying. If the scarred planet disappearing was related to the Limitless Empire, then it was probably associated with the Left Imperial Palace. But as for how and why, Zac didn’t have the faintest idea.

“Alright,” Pretty sighed. “Well, keep your eyes open, will you?”

“Of course,” Zac nodded. “I’ll see you soon.”

Zac led Pretty out of his quarters before he sealed it shut. From there, Zac didn’t walk over to his cultivation chamber but rather to his closet. He pushed against a wall, and a hidden chute opened up. Zac jumped inside, falling hundreds of meters until he landed in a pitch-black room.

These sections were once part of the hive’s incubator, and only a few hidden pathways connected it with the rest of the hive. Here, the queen would store and slowly nurture the eggs until warriors came crawling out from the chutes. These sections were long since discovered and cleansed by Billy and Ogras and had been refitted into secret cultivation chambers or secret shelters.

A perfect spot for Zac to accomplish some things far from prying eyes.

There was only so much he could do to improve his strength in the short run. The best would have been to upgrade his Branch of the War Axe, but he was still somewhat lacking. The raids hadn’t provided enough inspiration either, even if the fighting had been hard.

That left him with his second option – his undead side.

Having traveled with Vai for half a year, there hadn’t been any good opportunities to fill his already opened nodes with Miasma. Thankfully, the downtime between raids had helped

him out a lot. After every battle, he had hurried down to these catacombs to use the Kill Energy to gain levels. Just filling them up required a lot less energy than breaking nodes open, and he had made a lot of progress in the past two weeks.

Even then, he was not quite there. His Draugr form was still level 148, just two levels shy of the noticeable Attribute Boost at 150. With time running out, Zac decided to finish the process with leveling pills. Typically, he wouldn't have eaten pills when absorbing energy from Miasma Crystals would do the trick, but he was under a lot of pressure from the upcoming mission.

This time, he didn't just have his own life to worry about. If he failed to close the pathway to the Lost Plane, then Gemmy would fail her transition to a Portable Realm, and most people here would probably perish. He needed every advantage he could get, even if he had to take on a little bit more Pill Toxins.

Zac sat down at his usual spot, and a bottle of the Leveling Pills he'd bought inside the Orom World appeared in his hand. The **[Aethergate Pills]** he bought back in the Twilight Harbour were used up already, but these weren't that much worse. More than enough for his purposes. Deathly waves of Miasma coursed through his body, and the transition was complete less than a second later, thanks to his upgraded transformation skill.

Two pills were swallowed without preamble, and it felt like a frigid star had appeared in his stomach. Zac directed the energy toward the empty nodes in his mind, and it poured into the first one like a surging river. The process went without any issues or surprises, and just two hours later, it was done.

Now, all 75 of his nodes formed deathly swirls as they formed a perfect system, each feeling like a gateway into the Abyss. He opened his status screen, and a smile spread across his face upon seeing another 260 Free Points added to his pool. With five levels worth of attribute boosts, he had gained a couple of thousand attribute points these last five levels of his Fetters of Desolation-class.

As usual, he put the free points into Dexterity, pushing the attribute to 9,770 points. It still felt odd pouring all his free points into the same attribute. But with two classes and three Dao Branches that mainly provided Strength, Endurance, and Vitality, he didn't have much choice. Even his Wisdom would eventually pass his Dexterity if he didn't manually remedy the situation.

Zac didn't gain any new quest this time either, and neither did he get another title. He was mostly tapped out in that regard, unless he managed to create a skill from scratch before breaking through. Still, the basic prerequisites for his attempt at Hegemony were finally complete, and in just a decade at that.

Just reaching this point thwarted all but a select few mortals, and his journey was completely different from Galvarion's struggles. The maritime Monarch had spent centuries in the E-grade, each step and every node a perilous journey. Of course, the most challenging part remained; figuring out a blueprint for his Cultivator's Core. This step couldn't compare with Galvarion's, considering he had pretty shallow foundations and an Uncommon E-grade Class.

There was also the matter of shoring up his foundations, but that was mostly just a matter of time. But for now, Zac was happy with the results, and he climbed out of the chute. There was still some time left before he needed to meet up with Pretty and the others, which was perfect. There was one more thing he needed to do before he set off for the Ra'Lashar Kingdom.

"Gemmy, are you there?" Zac asked into thin air.

"You smell bad again," Gemmy's voice echoed through his empty chamber.

"Remember, our little secret," Zac smiled and got a giggle in response.

Hopefully, that meant she agreed. Billy already knew about the situation since the first time Zac transformed, though Zac wasn't sure he actually understood he had two Races. It rather seemed like Billy considered it like his own Titanic

transformation. Still, he had promised he wouldn't tell anyone, and Zac trusted him to stay true to his word.

"Okay, Hungry Guy, Gemmy promises," the Dimensional Seed agreed.

"Where is Slow Girl right now?" Zac asked.

"She is in her room, looking at the pattern," Gemmy answered.

"Is she alone?"

"Yep!"

"Perfect, thank you," Zac said as he walked out of his room and flashed over to another section of the hive.

Zac knocked at the door, which swung open by itself.

"I thought you would come over," Leyara smiled as Zac closed the door behind him.

"It's time you and I have a little chat," Zac said. "About the Limitless Empire and the Left Imperial Palace."

Chapter 688: Stocking Up

“They probed our souls with some sort of treasure,” Vilari muttered a few moments after the trio had left the balcony. “I wasn’t able to block it out.”

“They did?” Zac exclaimed. “I didn’t notice anything.”

“Young master’s soul is strong, but you ultimately aren’t a Soul Cultivator,” Vilari said with a slight smile.

“What’s your take on the situation?” Zac asked.

“Her soul was stable throughout. I think she was mostly truthful in her words,” Vilari slowly said. “The large one was threatening, but it would be the small one you would have to worry about. I sensed wild fluctuations in his soul every time you were disrespectful to the Draugr.”

“A real mess,” Zac sighed. “Well, no point in staying here. Are you feeling better?”

“Much better, thank you,” Vilari nodded.

“Alright, let’s go,” Zac grunted as he stood up. “The place Catheya is putting us up in doesn’t sound too bad.”

The two left the incensary a moment later and found a subdued Nala waiting outside. He needed to consider his next step, and he had Nala take them to the high-quality hotel on a disk partly owned by Clan Sharva’Zi. There was no point in avoiding that place now that he had already been spotted, and it truly was a luxurious place.

The hotel was actually a vast forest, where each room was a mansion surrounded by wilderness. The forests were not the deathly and seemingly haunted forestry of the Dead Zone back on Earth either, but rather beautiful trees with silvery leaves and white trunks. There were also similarly-colored bushes that made up some of the undergrowth, and they grew what

looked like metallic pinecones which sounded like chimes when they were rustled by the wind.

They didn't have to slog through the forest, but an attendant rather handed them unique teleportation tokens that took them to a small square outside the walled courtyard leading to his mansion. He sent the attendant away after having him provide Nala with a token as well. He sent Nala away as well, though asked her to come back in twelve hours before he and Vilari went inside the mansion.

Catheya suddenly appearing had put him a bit on the spot even if he had prepared a bit beforehand. He had been forced to make some decisions quickly, but he felt things worked out for the best. The deal she offered was really fair as far as he could tell. Catheya's party would get the first three Life-Death Pearls they found as payment for providing the path and method to push away the restriction of the Twilight Ocean.

After the first three, the group would draw lots and then distribute the following pearls thereafter. Furthermore, the group would consist of 8 members at most. Seeing as there were up to 100 pearls to gather, which usually grew in the same area according to Catheya, he might get his hands on more than ten Life-Death Pearls. These kinds of items generally lost their efficacy after a few uses, so it would probably be more than enough for him.

Still, the mission would mean traveling with both Catheya and strangers for months. Not only were there risks of betrayal, but also of his real identity being exposed. It didn't look like Catheya managed to find anything out during their meeting, but that didn't mean she bought his spiel hook, line, and sinker.

Thankfully, they had only come to a verbal agreement, and Zac would only have to sign a proper contract before getting the VIP-skill.

Before then, he needed to figure out his plan. One of the main goals for this trip had been to find some basic methods and treasures for himself and the Einherjar. The second goal was to search for opportunities to strengthen himself. The return of

Leandra had driven home just how weak he was, and visiting this magical metropolis only reinforced that realization.

But joining Catheya to visit the depths of the Twilight Ocean... Was perhaps more than he had bargained for. The lethality in there was definitely high, but the risk of exposure weighed even heavier on his shoulders. Going at it alone was no doubt a much safer option, as he could stay closer to the entrance if he found the challenge too great.

However, Zac soon found his resolve. The whole reason to set out was to get stronger, and those pearls seemed almost tailor-made to push at least two of his Dao Fragments to the next level. With his odd constitution progressing in Dao would require rarer and rarer treasures, so he couldn't just back away when an opportunity presented itself.

Still, going in blind and dumb was out of the question. There were still two months before the Twilight Ascent started, and he needed to make the most of it. Catheya had thankfully set aside a slot for him, which allowed him to avoid the qualifier which seemed like a huge timesink. A quick scan of the crystal Nala provided mentioned the qualifier.

There was no lack of E-Grade cultivators in a place like this. In fact, they could be counted in the billions. The qualifiers lasted one hundred rounds where you would be matched with random warriors, and each victory awarded one point. Finally, the ten million people with the highest points would get to enter the Twilight Ascent, along with the one million seeded warriors.

Each warrior would fight five battles a day, with one day of rest in between every fight-day. That meant it would take forty days to just get a spot. He didn't have time for that, he needed to focus on his cultivation instead.

The question was what he should do with Vilari.

"Are you interested in the Twilight Ascent?" Zac asked as he turned to his follower who had sat silently as Zac mulled things over.

“No,” Vilari said after some thought. “It would require me to break through within two months, and it is simply too short a time. I am not ready to harm my foundations for this trial, and I feel that I would be a hindrance to you even if I evolved.”

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “But staying in this place after I leave...”

“How about you send me back before you enter the Trial? I can bring any items you procure back for Port Atwood,” Vilari ventured. “It will give me time to shore up my foundations before you return.”

“Sounds good,” Zac nodded, and the two went over everything they had encountered so far and set up a plan for the coming two months.

He might have decided to tie himself to Catheya’s chariot, but her umbrella of protection would also allow him to act with less restraint over the next months. This was a huge opportunity for him and Port Atwood. His pockets were filled with money and there were so many things to spend it on. He didn’t have access to any place as flourishing as Twilight Harbor back home. In fact, he wasn’t sure if one even existed.

Vilari had a far better understanding of not only his undead forces, but even his living ones after spending ten days with Joanna. She helped him put together a shopping list, after which Zac started reading the information missive on the Twilight Ocean with greater scrutiny.

He had been at a disadvantage during the negotiations just now since he didn’t really understand all the details of the Twilight Ascent, and he needed to shore up that weakness before he ran into Catheya again.

After reading the whole missive twice he could conclude that Catheya had essentially spoken the truth. The Life-Death Pearls were well-documented high-quality treasures of the Twilight Ocean, and they were just as rare as she indicated, perhaps even more so. Finding them was largely dependent on dumb luck according to the missive.

Of course, that didn't mean Catheya was lying about her plan. The Twilight Ocean had been around for millions of years, and it opened up once every thousand years or so. That meant that the ancient factions had sent their members into the Mystic Realm thousands of times. There was no way they hadn't figured out some hidden methods that weren't detailed in the public missives.

Zac had also found out why Catheya wanted to enlist his help. He was pretty confident in his strength, but it was suspicious that she was ready to fork out so many resources just to get him to join her party. Part of it was definitely his connection to her Ancestor, but Zac had found that he did have some unique benefits in the Mystic Realm.

Catheya had mentioned an array to weaken the pervasive pressure inside the Twilight Ocean, but she hadn't completely explained what a detriment it was. She had made it sound like the only reason people didn't go to the depths was the risk of running into enemies, but that wasn't the case at all.

Most of the people simply wouldn't survive in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

Rather than a restriction, it would be more apt to call the invasive energy a poison. The undead were poisoned by the life-attributed components in the atmosphere, and the living the opposite. Everyone was able to filter out the unwanted parts to some degree, but they were ultimately weakened by the environment.

There were thankfully various ways to counter this effect. First of all, there were the pills that helped filter Twilight Energy. There were also arrays and some skills that could weaken it. But ultimately, the deciding factor on how deep you could go was your own body. The Twilight Ocean was a System-controlled Mystic Realm, and as such, it had probably been modified for it to have its current effect.

The higher level you had, the more the Twilight Energy tried to burrow into your body, essentially turning the whole thing into a level-based trial. That meant people with greater accomplishments would get further. Even better, soul strength

helped as well. It didn't really mean all Mentalists had an advantage though since their bodies were usually weaker than normal cultivators and therefore less resistant to the corrosion of the Twilight Ocean.

But Zac was probably the perfect member for them. He couldn't be certain, but between his high Efficiency and unusually powerful soul, he should be among the best at resisting the poison. Meanwhile, he wasn't so powerful that they felt him capable of taking them all out.

What Catheya didn't know was that Zac probably was in an even better position than she assumed. The weird muddled energies of the Twilight Ocean might be a troublesome poison to her, but to him, it was just food for his **[Void Heart]**. Furthermore, if the accumulated life-attuned energies ever got too much, he could simply swap races. It was like he was entering the Mystic Realm with cheat codes.

There was only one caveat to this though; this advantage wasn't as pronounced compared to other elites who could resist the effect almost as well as he did. So the kind of elites Catheya mentioned, running around with Dao Branches and high Efficiency, would still be a big threat to him.

Still, that risk wasn't enough to dampen Zac's excitement. The Life-Death Pearls was just one of the innumerable valuables that waited in the Twilight Ocean. He'd definitely regret it if he didn't go, so it was with extreme vigor he and Vilari set out the next day.

"Which is the best pill house in this place?" immediately asked when they found Nala already waiting outside their courtyard.

"The Karabas Clan," Nala said without hesitation. "They are just a local faction of Spectrals, but rumors are they are backed by an Imperial Eidolon-clan. Their heritage in the Dao of Alchemy is extremely deep, and their wares have low toxicity."

"Hm," Zac nodded. "Take me there."

There wasn't actually any rush in buying pills or other necessities, but Zac wanted to fill his Spatial Treasures with necessary items as quickly as humanly possible. You never knew if Catheya's master or one of her elders would suddenly appear, forcing him to immediately activate his escape bracelet.

The trip took three hours even with the spatial manipulation that ran along the Twilight Rivers, but they eventually reached a death-attuned platform with a decent position to the Twilight Ocean. This one was actually covered by a dense haze, making it impossible to guess at its interiors.

The miasmic wall was pretty unwelcoming, but Zac simply indicated Nala to shoot straight through, and a vast metropolis soon appeared on the other side. There were tens of thousands of crystalline towers covering the surface, and they made Zac think of the onyx pillars that surrounded the Splinter of Oblivion during the hunt.

Did ghosts prefer to stay inside these types of crystals rather than proper houses?

There was one building that looked different though, a twenty-kilometer wide complex that was surrounded by medicinal clouds rather than a miasmic haze.

"Young Master, I cannot enter this place, so I will wait outside," Nala said as she landed. "This time, I think young master's attendant..."

"That's fine, you two stay here," Zac nodded as he got off the small vessel, and a dense deathly aura started to swirl around him.

It was just like how Catheya and her Titan follower acted, using a small hint of their aura to act as some sort of proof of their standing. Most people could glean all kinds of things from the aura, most importantly how condensed it was.

For example, Cethaya and her follower's auras were almost as powerful as each other, but Catheya's was far more condensed. That meant that Catheya was at a lower level than her follower, yet had the same combat strength. What did this

signify? That she was an elite, that she had powerful backing. It was pretty easy to mask this phenomenon, but very hard to mimic.

Cathey gave a clear aura of an elite, but even the Draugr scion's aura was a lot less condensed than Zac's when he didn't mask it. It was almost like space around him congealed with his Dao as he stepped off the vessel, and Nala released an audible gasp from behind. He appeared in front of a huge arch a second later, where a ghost already waited for him.

She looked like a beautiful Revenant, her form far more corporeal and defined than Triv's or any of the other ghosts that had appeared on Earth.

"Does Young Master have a Membership Token?" the ghost asked.

"I just arrived in this Sector," Zac said with a small shake of his head, trying to emulate the aura of someone with a formidable background.

"Of course," the attendant smiled as a black crystalline token appeared out of nowhere. "Please accept this Token, it will make Young Master's future purchasing experiences easier."

Zac nodded and took the token before he entered the luxurious complex that even eclipsed the Big Axe Coliseum. Just like that, he was a VIP customer, simply by flashing his face. He had come a long way since having to force his way through the commoner's entrance over at the Zethaya Pill House.

Zac was met by an enthusiastic clerk and immediately taken to a private room. There was a lot of undead wandering around looking at displays or perusing the store's inventory recorded on crystals, but being a pureblood Draugr clearly had its advantages.

"My name is Yilian. What can we assist young master with today?" the clerk, another spectral who took the form of some elf-like humanoid, asked as she handed one of the inventory crystals to Zac.

"I am partaking in the Twilight Ascent and wanted to see if your store has some items that could be of use," Zac said.

“Our stock definitely can’t match that of the grand establishments of the Heartlands, but it is at the level of a Kingdom’s medium-tier establishments, housing up to Peak D-Graded pills and compounds thanks to a certain patronage,” Yilian smiled, clearly with some pride.

Zac slightly nodded, actually a bit surprised. To boast a stock that could match a B-grade Kingdom’s mid-tier Pill House was quite a statement for a shop in a remote sector like this. Zac had already asked Nala to make sure, but the Sector housing the Twilight Harbor, the Zervereth Sector, was just C-Grade. It seemed a lot more powerful than Zecia, but it was ultimately just a slightly more bustling frontier sector.

Zac doubted the Zethaya Clan would dare to make such a proclamation and compare itself to stores in a B-Grade Human Empire, and it made him look at the inventory crystal with even greater enthusiasm. Of course, he tried to play it cool at the surface as he scanned the endless rows of products.

“Perhaps you could make some suggestions,” Zac eventually said after a few minutes. “I am bringing a few followers, so I need a few sets of Healing, Soul-mending, soldier pills, and perhaps berserking pills. Top quality, of course.”

Zac obviously wasn’t bringing any followers, but would a vaunted pure-blood Draugr hailing from a proper Kingdom need to buy his pills in a store here? Wouldn’t his clan provide? So, he rather made a fib about followers. He needed a large number of pills in either case since there was no telling when he would get access to buy items for his undead side after leaving the Twilight Harbor anyways.

“The Twilight Ascent is a Heaven-controlled event, and the E-Grade Ascent has a limit of quasi D-Grade pills,” the clerk said. “Our top pill line is called the Dawn-series, and it is available both as Peak E-Grade pill and quasi D-Grade. The line has everything you require, except berserking pills. We currently sell special kits at discounted prices if the young master is interested.”

Zac blankly looked at the attendant for a few seconds, trying to hide his confusion. Quasi D-grade? What the hell was that?

Chapter 913: Vigil

“The Left Imperial Palace?” Leyara said with large sorrowful eyes. “And here I thought you had finally come to profess your love before riding off into battle. What a disappointment.”

“Be serious,” Zac said.

This was a long-overdue discussion. The two of them had danced around the subject for weeks, but Zac needed some clarity before setting off for the Ra’Lashar Kingdom.

“Who said I wasn’t?” Leyara winked, but her expression soon returned to normal. “I know you have a lot of questions, but I don’t have a lot of answers to give you.”

“You clearly know at least some of it, and you would have me use your escape treasure to get sent right into the hands of the Void Gate,” Zac said. “You should understand the risk that would place us in.”

This was Zac’s primary concern. Using Leyara’s Spatial Anchor would supposedly drag them right back to the Void Gate. If they wanted the opportunity for themselves, then he and Ogras would be delivering themselves to the slaughter. He and Ogras had even discussed fleeing in the opposite direction instead - into the Stellar Ladder and the Million Gates Territory.

Obviously, Zac wanted to avoid that solution if possible. They didn’t even have any Cosmic Vessel, and his escape bangle was still on its cooldown for another nine years. He would be able to set up a Teleportation Array, but those didn’t work in the Million Gates Territory, meaning they would have to make their way out themselves somehow.

But no matter how arduous such a journey was, it was a preferable option to being blasted into nothingness by a

Monarch when they emerged. So the two had made some preparations with the help of Billy and Gemmy, but Zac hoped this conversation would alleviate any need for using them.

“Well, I guess I owe you that much,” Leyara slowly said. “And seeing as you’re a candidate, you will get to know the truth sooner or later. But you cannot tell anyone else about this. Fate is already fraught with uncertainties, and even the smallest of ripples can bring about a storm.”

“Of course,” Zac nodded.

“You have nothing to fear from the Void Gate. We will not interfere with you or the events that are about to unfold. Neither will anyone from our side try to gain access to the Left Imperial Palace or its nine outer courts,” Leyara said with certainty. “Or meddle with the thing residing within.”

The allusion to Ultom and the mention of the nine sigils pretty much confirmed that Leyara was the real deal and not just pretending to know things to extract information from him. Still, that felt as much a threat as an opportunity when she held the key to their freedom.

“Why should I believe you?” Zac asked. “Your faction is clearly interested in this stuff, and has probably been looking for them for a long time.”

“I think you have figured a few things out already,” Leyara nodded. “First of all, the Void Gate is not our real name. Our faction is older than the System itself, and we call ourselves the Vigil.”

“The Vigil?” Zac frowned. “Never heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t,” Leyara said. “Honestly, most of us don’t know about it either. The Void Gate is just a small subsidiary force looking for clues at the frontier, and only a select few know the truth. Master only told me just before I entered the Void Star, so this is mostly uncharted territory for me as well.”

“Then why wouldn’t you get involved? If you’ve searched for so long?” Zac asked suspiciously.

“If you want to know, then tell me how you became a candidate. What was the criterion?” Leyara countered.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he chose to tell her the truth.

“It just happened the moment I passed through the Void Star’s outer film. I got a terrifying vision that almost killed me. My whole compartment was covered in blood afterward,” Zac said. “After that, I could sense the pieces from a distance.”

“As I suspected,” Leyara said as she looked at Zac with a complex gaze. “The Vigil has a mission. To watch as the river flows and to make sure fate isn’t usurped or altered.”

“Fate usurped?” Zac said with a raised brow. “Like a nobody becoming a candidate?”

“No, not like that,” Leyara smiled. “This is a matter of those at the very peak. Small beings like us are just part of the river. How could we truly affect it as we are? I don’t know what it means, but the result is that we will not interfere with you, nor will we interfere with any infiltrator who becomes a candidate.”

“But you’re not just observers,” Zac countered. “You directly got involved when you started hoovering up ruins and realms with the Void Star. And now the outsiders are involved.”

“That was an unfortunate side effect of our mission,” Leyara grimaced. “My master could feel that the pillar was stirring, and she had to pave the path to let fate flow unobstructed. That presented an opportunity to these infiltrators. Now, she can’t just close the connection and seal off the Kan’Tanu, since that would affect her true mission.”

“So Zecia will suffer because of a technicality?” Zac frowned.

“That’s...” Leyara sighed. “You could see it that way. But that’s why we’re here. To try and right a wrong without breaking the precepts. Luckily, your friend has provided us with a solution by forcing us to labor for his undertaking. If this realm is removed from the Stellar Ladder, then the whole ladder should destabilize. Even if it doesn’t, we should be able to do it ourselves since this realm is the origin of fate.

“Furthermore, most of the Void Gate will join the upcoming war, even if the Vigil doesn’t get involved with mundane

struggles. After all, this is our home as well. Almost everyone was born in Zecia.”

“That’s the least of our problems,” Zac said. “You should know what will happen if powerful factions turn their gazes toward Zecia. Will the Vigil spread the appearance of the Left Imperial Palace?”

“I don’t know,” Leyara said and quickly continued when Zac’s brows furrowed. “I’m still coming to terms with this all. I really have no idea if my faction has allies they’d bring over or if they will keep it to themselves. But you should know, even if the Vigil doesn’t say anything, this cannot remain a secret for long. The ancient factions have their means to discover something of this magnitude.”

Zac nodded with exhaustion in his eyes. He had already started to fear as much, that an Eternal Heritage appearing unnoticed would be too much to hope for. Even if the Kan’Tanu didn’t expose the truth to the multiverse, it was just a matter of time before some Supremacy figured it out.

Dealing with that mess was for later, though. If worse came to worst, he’d just have to camp on Earth or Ensolus under the System’s protection until someone claimed Ultom and left Zecia alone.

“Then what can you tell me?” Zac sighed. “What did you mean when you said a pillar was stirring? Is the Left Imperial Palace one of the pillars?”

Leyara looked out from her window, down at the army camped outside.

“When the Limitless Empire crafted the System, their power alone wasn’t enough. The Heavens are not so easily subdued, and they had to lend the power of others. Eight pillars were erected at the corners of reality, each one powered by something called an Eternal Heritage. Places of penultimate power, of penultimate truth. Concepts beyond the Dao itself, which was needed to contain the Heavens.”

Zac shuddered when he heard the description, and the words from his vision once more floated to the surface.

Eight Pillars. Nine Seals. One Destiny.

“The undertaking was a success, and the pillars provided the strength the System needed to stabilize and grow during its infancy. Many tried to stop Emperor Limitless’ experiment, and the Left Imperial Palace became one of the battlegrounds where even the Heavens joined the fray. But the eight pillars withstood the assault and disappeared.”

“But now the Left Imperial Palace is coming back?” Zac frowned. “How will this affect the System?”

“According to Master, the System is no longer dependent on the pillars. They were let loose long ago. In fact, their returning unattached is by design.”

“By design? Whose design is that?” Zac frowned.

“Who knows?” Leyara smiled. “Perhaps Emperor Limitless. Perhaps the ancient beings who crafted the places of power. I only know that the pillars were destined to return, and Vigil would be there to observe and aid the ascent.”

Zac slowly digested what Leyara had told him, and he believed her on most points. She knew way too much information just to be some frontier scion. As for the Left Imperial Palace and Ultom being used in the construction of the System, Zac could definitely believe it. He had had the same thoughts over the past months, and the scarred exterior lined up with Leyara’s mention of battles.

It was pretty shocking Emperor Limitless had managed to gather eight Eternal Heritages. However, it wasn’t without reason since many still believed him to be the strongest person to have existed. Besides, this all happened at the beginning of the era, before cultivation had reached its current height.

The only question that remained was whether he could trust Leyara on the most crucial part; if her faction were really only there to observe or if they were aiming for the Eternal Heritages.

“Why are you only observing? What is your end goal?” Zac asked.

“No idea,” Leyara smiled. “Master wouldn’t tell me that part. If you want to know, you’d have to ask her. This is pretty much all I know. By now, you might know more than me. For instance, my master never mentioned anything about this Lost Plane you told us about.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed, though he wasn’t completely satisfied.

Zac asked a few more clarifying questions over the following minutes, and he managed to get a few valuable pieces of information out of it. She didn’t know how the trial would look, or how the nine subsidiary courts played into everything. But she was somewhat confident that no Kan’Tanu infiltrator had managed to become a candidate, which was good news.

Most importantly, she believed that the Void Star had swallowed no more than five pieces of various seals, while most remained in the chaotic space of the Million Gates Territory. Staying in this place was unlikely to bear fruit, especially if they managed to break the Stellar Ladder with their plan.

The two were eventually done, and it was just in time since Gemmy’s voice appeared and told them the others were waiting at the viewing deck.

“By the way, do you know which one of the Nine Imperial Bloodlines you have?” Leyara suddenly asked as they walked out of her quarters, her voice so casual one might have thought she was discussing the weather.

Zac’s heart lurched, but he somehow managed to keep his face impassive. “Nine Imperial Bloodlines? What’s that, and why would you think I have one?”

“Because I’m not blind?” Leyara laughed. “I’ve felt it a few times over the past weeks. Short bursts that felt like an emperor had descended onto the battlefield.”

Zac was shocked at how incisive Leyara was. He had indeed been forced to use his **[Force of the Void]** a few times over the past weeks. It was only to slightly speed up his skill activations to push a couple of rough situations in his favor, and he hadn’t thought anyone would notice. His enemies never

seemed to realize, but it looked like Leyara had some means of her own.

“Why do you ask?” Zac asked.

“Just curious,” Leyara smiled. “Just to be clear, we will not provide you with any resources or manuals even if you do.”

“Then I don’t have one,” Zac shrugged.

“Stingy,” Leyara laughed.

Zac rolled his eyes, but he was inwardly thankful. Leyara had probably not expected him to answer, but this was a good reminder that some apparently could sense the Void Energy. How much it mattered, Zac wasn’t sure. But from what he could tell, both his bloodline talents were things that broke convention, and the fewer that knew, the better.

The two soon joined the others at the viewing deck at the upper part of the mountain, the high vantage giving them a perfect view of both the soldiers outside and the work on the pathways below. By now, it was almost complete, but some of the most complex patterns remained to be engraved. The Gnivelings could not help with those sections, even if they had proven surprisingly attuned to the Dao and inscriptions.

He could even spot Vai working far below, just like she had since they arrived. As far as Zac knew, she hadn’t stopped working over the past ten days. The remaining Hegemons were also helping, but only two array masters were actually skilled enough to direct work rather than taking on the role of assistant.

Those three wouldn’t be sent out for the raid, but the other Hegemons were slated to join them in this final push. Zac’s eyes turned to Ogras, who was standing to the side. He looked a bit pale, but his aura was stable.

“How are you doing?” Zac asked.

“If I say I’m mortally wounded, can I stay behind?” the demon muttered.

Zac only laughed as he looked out at the army waiting outside, seeing that they hadn’t changed their formation much since

before.

“Still clumped together,” Zac sighed.

“Looks that way,” Pretty nodded.

Six enormous siege towers remained, each one guarded by roughly ten Hegemons and a horde of E-grade cultivators who all were protected by a barrier. Work was underway to rebuild the ones that had been destroyed as well, but they wouldn't be finished in time for it to matter. Pretty even believed the work was just a ruse to divert their attention.

There were no safeguards or warriors between the six armies, almost like they were inviting you to escape as that previous Hegemon had. This arrangement was far harder to deal with compared to the previous encirclement, where they were uniformly spread out. With how they were clumped together, it was almost impossible to take out any Hegemons now, at least not without taking on some losses of their own.

For the original plan, this wouldn't have mattered. The idea was for Zac and Ogras to flee the encirclement through one of those open pathways while a diversionary squad struck one of the nearby towers. If everything worked out, they'd leave the lockdown without issue and he'd activate **[Flashfire Flourish]**.

But Pretty's proposal meant taking on one of the six armies before leaving.

“And we really have to take down another tower?” Zac grimaced.

“It's asking a lot from you, but we simply don't have a lot of options,” Leyara sighed. “This is a gambit – we're all joining you in striking that spot. If we can take out the Hegemons and the tower, the pressure on us will be much lower.”

“The problem is that barrier,” Pretty said. “By the time we break it down, the other armies will have had time to send reinforcement, flanking us.”

“Don't the two of you have something left up your sleeves?” Ogras asked. “You're supposed to be proud daughters of Heaven.”

“We were just a small advance party meant for reconnaissance and, if possible, sabotage,” Pretty said. “If I had any siege treasures, I would have taken them out by now.”

“I have a few more D-grade Talismans, but I think they can weaken the barrier at most,” Leyara added.

“Billy can thwunk it,” Billy offered.

The man looked more like a mummy than a titan at this point, with bandages covering most of his body. Zac didn't know why he insisted on using bandages when Zac had given him top-tier pills, but both he and Gemmy were adamant they were needed to recover.

Zac hesitated for a few moments before he looked at Ogras, who curiously looked back at him. “Remember when we got trapped by the cultists?”

“Right here?” Ogras asked as he pointedly glanced at Pretty and Leyara.

“No point in holding back if it will get us all killed. Can you cover me?” Zac asked, and he got a reluctant nod in return.

“What are the two of you talking about?” Pretty asked.

Zac didn't immediately answer but instead turned to Leyara first. “Are you able to tell who or what maintains the shield?”

“Not from here, but I will when we get closer,” Leyara nodded as she curiously looked at Zac.

“All right, I'll deal with the shield; you guys just need to be ready to blast the Hegemons when it crumbles.”

“You'll deal with it? Alone?” Pretty frowned. “How long do you need?”

“It'll be over in an instant.”

Chapter 914: Blitz

Zac looked up at the viewing deck far above. It was odd to see himself and the others up there, even though everyone was already gathered behind the gates. Their counterparts were illusions made by a few of the Gnivelings, which would hopefully give them a slight edge for the upcoming battle. The closer they could get to the invaders without notice, the greater the element of surprise.

“Everyone ready?” Leyara asked and got nods of affirmation all around.

Altogether, fifteen of them would set out: himself, Ogras, Billy, Pretty, Leyara, two Hegemons, and eight E-grade Templars trained in a defensive War Array. The remaining two Hegemons couldn't be spared since their expertise was needed on the array.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Pretty hesitated as she looked at Zac. “I'm not doubting your strength, but we've seen how sturdy those barriers are. And we don't even know if these people have used the arrays to their fullest. Keeping some strength back until a critical moment is a common strategy.”

“I promise,” Zac nodded. “As long as I can get next to it and know what powers it, I'll get the job done. At worst, I will severely weaken it.”

“Alright then,” Pretty nodded.

“Then let's go,” Zac said as he cracked his neck.

There was nothing else to say, and the group immediately set out with Zac and the Hegemons in the front while the E-grade cultivators made up the rear. They didn't pass through the gate but instead entered a tunnel leading beneath it. Just 30 meters in the impenetrable barrier blocked their passage, with two Peak Gniveling scouts standing to the sides of the path.

“It’s clear, no activity for half a day,” the long-eared humanoid nodded.

Zac nodded in thanks, and a shroud of shadows superimposed by a soothing spatial ripple enclosed them. A small hole silently opened in the barrier, and the group shot forward like a bullet. The walls turned to a blur as they rushed out from the fort, heading straight in the direction of the siege tower in the distance.

But soon enough, a soft hum spread through the tunnel, and Zac felt like an ethereal wind had passed by him.

“We’re spotted,” Leyara sighed, to no one’s surprise.

The Kan’Tanu Infiltrators had never stopped scanning these abandoned tunnels since the second raid, so they had never believed they would be able to reach the enemy lines unnoticed. However, they had managed to cover almost half the distance to the army before being exposed, which was more than enough according to their calculations.

One of the two Hegemons slashed out with his sword, and four beams shot upward at an angle, instantly carving a path leading to the surface. The group rushed out, and they were met with a sky already shuddering from burgeoning power. Just as Zac managed to orient himself, reality shifted, and he was suddenly much closer to the 100-meter-tall siege tower.

It was Leyara who had shifted space around the whole group in what essentially was true teleportation. Space flickered around them like the skill had conjured thousands of purple fireflies, but it held otherwise. For better or worse, space wasn’t as fragile as during their mad dash toward Billy’s fort. Gemmy’s outburst had drastically weakened the fabric of space, but it was a temporary effect.

Still, it was clear the whole realm was declining. Even if normal attacks didn’t create large Spatial Tears, you could still feel that space was more brittle than it should be. And that was something the Kan’Tanu Invaders were making use of. Within their protective bubble, space was solidified with arrays, but the rest of the battlefield didn’t enjoy those protections.

A dark sanguine light burst into life at the top of the siege tower, making it look like a lighthouse of the underworld. The pulsating glowing sphere contained enormous amounts of energy, releasing hundreds of rays in their direction. Wherever they passed, space was roasted, creating a deadly maze of corrupted energy and spatial tears.

Zac, Ogras, Pretty, and Leyara were forced to counter the Array Tower's deadly blast as they rushed forward. Leyara was actually the one most effective at dealing with those beams, being a control mage. Those crystals on her hands lit up her surroundings, and it almost looked like she was standing in the middle of a miniature galaxy as she manipulated space around them.

Meanwhile, the Hegemons infused and threw out one shimmering orb after another to their left and right, forming a 1000-meter-wide corridor. Nothing happened when the orbs landed in the grass, but they weren't supposed to do anything. At least not yet, as they were a contingency in case things got heated later.

"Going," Ogras grunted when the orbs had been thrown out, and they reached stretch free of broken space, and the shadows around them condensed.

Zac felt four rapid shifts, and they had once more moved closer to the barrier in an instant, though Ogras was forced to zig-zag between the bloody lasers. By now, they were getting close, and a thick shield rose above their heads just in time to block one of the beams. Still, they were right in the crosshairs now, with hundreds of more attacks already on their way.

A powerful fluctuation of energy had been building next to Zac for a while now, and it almost looked like a gargantuan beast swiped at the barrier as two claws tore through space and slammed into the Kan'Tanu's barrier. The strike was quick and ruthless, but Pretty's attack only created a small ripple in the shield.

Of course, no one had expected the attack to work; they just needed a fast attack powerful enough to create some energy ripples.

'Slightly left to the tower, four masked cultivators. The array core is the black pedestal between them,' Leyara's voice echoed out in Zac's head as a series of protective barriers sprung up around him, courtesy of a Hegemon and the E-grade Templars.

Zac nodded, and space shrunk as he activated [**Earthstrider**], forcing his way through the turbulent domain toward the barrier. A tsunami of shadows rushed forward in his wake, shrouding the battlefield in darkness. A moment later, Zac was right at the edge of the barrier, and a frenzied barrage of attacks rapidly wore down his imparted shields. Still, Zac didn't care as he drew power from his bloodline.

An ancient aura permeated the area just as a tremendous lance of darkness slammed into the barrier right next to him. Hairline cracks spread across its surface, and there was even a tiny hole right in front of him. A small smile spread across Zac's face as an ancient forest appeared out of nowhere, instantly summoned by [**Force of the Void**].

Before anyone could react, Zac had already jumped into one of the trees and appeared right next to the Array Masters inside the barrier. Behind him, the cracks in the barrier rapidly closed. In fact, they had never even been there. Ogras' attack had been powerful, but not powerful enough to pierce the shield like that. The damage was just an illusion the demon had attached to his attack, giving Zac an excuse for his bloodline's ability to circumvent barriers like this.

A torrential burst of Dao-empowered fractal leaves drenched the area in blood, except for the four masked warriors. A secondary barrier had sprung up to protect them, though it was severely battered by the dozens of strikes coming from the ultimate form of [**Nature's Edge**]. Zac had expected as much, and before the Kan'Tanu Array Masters had a chance to bolster their defenses, the next strike had already reached them.

The hymns of Arcadia joined the pained screams around him as space split apart, and the ancient aura of the Void Emperor-bloodline became even more palpable in the surroundings. In a perfect world, Zac wouldn't use his bloodline this freely,

especially not when he'd just been warned by Leyara. But they didn't have a lot of options. More than twenty Hegemons from the neighboring armies were already rushing toward them, and their window was less than ten seconds.

If they delayed any longer, they would be boxed in and overwhelmed.

The Spatial Stabilizers prevented space from completely crumbling, but it wasn't enough to block his skill. [**Rapturous Divide**] swept right through the Array Masters' battered barrier and then through the cultivators themselves. Zac felt four surges of energy, confirming the targets were down. But the skill wasn't exhausted with just that, and it ripped through the Array Core before carving a bloody path through the Kan'Tanu army.

The area rumbled as the shield fell apart, but the sound was soon overshadowed by a deep groan like two tectonic plates grinding against each other. The sky had darkened beyond what the wall of shadows had elicited, but it wasn't because of some storm clouds. The head of an enormous club ripped through the shadowy haze, its size almost a match to the siege tower.

"Group 1, sto-" a Hegemon roared, but she was forced to swallow her words and dodge as a fractal leaf almost beheaded her.

The same circumstance occurred for two more Hegemons as Zac unleashed a barrage of fractal leaves. Simultaneously, a golden laurel appeared on his head, as a good chunk of the Kan'Tanu army was showered in golden splendor. It was the restrictive domain of [**Empyrean Aegis**] pushed to its limits, which interrupted hundreds of cultivators from unleashing their skills.

Zac could sense how the intensity of his domain was weakened when used against so many enemies and that it wouldn't be able to prevent anyone from circulating their Cosmic Energy when prepared for the resistance. But the sudden interruption gave Zac's group a vital window of

opportunity. Some of the Hegemons were occupied by Zac, and the rest soon had their hands full.

Shimmering waves of sword Dao carved deadly paths straight through the E-grade warriors as one of the Templars unleashed a herculean strike, while the other unleashed what looked like a falling sun right on top of a Kan'Tanu captain. Still, there were twelve Hegemons in this army, and they were quickly moving to deal with the sudden turn of events.

Three of them conjured walls to block off Billy's descending strike, but they suddenly froze in place as a celestial maiden appeared above their heads. Her hair was cosmic dust and her eyes were made from stars, and she held her arms in what looked like an open invitation. She looked like a benign deity, but even Zac felt his hair stand on end when he sensed how space around the Hegemons rapidly eroded.

The D-Grade cultivators were immediately covered in shallow cuts as space fractured, and when one of them tried to respond, it backfired spectacularly. Space completely shattered around him, and Zac's eyes widened when a black claw emerged from the darkness and simply dragged the man into nothingness.

The scene was all-too-familiar; Zac had almost encountered the same thing in the Mystic Realm, except his high Luck had saved him from getting captured. A Void Beast was lurking in the dark, one powerful enough to snatch a Hegemon like it was a toy. Had Leyara summoned it with her avatar? Or was it just a lucky coincidence that the Void on the other side of the spatial tear was occupied by a waiting monstrosity?

This was no time to worry about that, though, as the Kan'Tanu had already recovered from his interruption with [**Empyrean Aegis**], and he was caught right in the crosshairs between his allies and enemies. Zac narrowly avoided four bloody rakes of Pretty's that ripped through the enemy lines as they shot toward Hegemons, one of them leaving a crippling wound.

Zac finished the job with a quick jab, while Ogras did the same with another Hegemon, using his shadow lance. Altogether, five Hegemons had died instantly while a few more were restrained, drastically lessening the pressure.

However, the area was teeming with unfettered Heart Curses by that point, and it almost looked like a living tangle was about to be born.

The others couldn't get any closer, and Zac knew he couldn't stay on much longer either. Even if those things couldn't kill or possess him, they could still maim his body and create a diversion.

A second rumble in the sky made Zac glance up just in time to see a large golden rune appear behind Billy's club. It emitted an aura of primordial fury, and the weapon suddenly gained a huge boost in weight and momentum. The hastily made barriers that had tried to impede it broke down, and the club descended toward the siege tower like a collapsing mountain.

The ground buckled, and a chaotic explosion swallowed hundreds of Cultists as the gathered energies in the tower were unleashed on their surroundings. Zac stepped into one of the few remaining trees of **[Ancestral Woods]** before the wave of destruction reached him, and he appeared just at the edge of the Kan'Tanu army, where he unleashed another series of Dao-empowered fractal leaves to take out another Hegemon.

The tower was destroyed and most of the Kan'Tanu Hegemons were dead or grievously wounded by that point, which meant they had accomplished their goal. However, they were running out of time - the neighboring armies were already moving to cut off their escape. If Leyara and the others stayed behind to deal with the rest of the army, they wouldn't be able to return.

"Go," Zac nodded upon seeing Leyara's look, and she nodded in thanks.

"Good luck," Pretty said, and they were gone the next moment, once more phased away by Leyara's skill as they desperately ran toward the fort.

"Let's go," Zac grunted as Ogras appeared next to him, sporting a few shallow cuts on his face.

The demon simply nodded, and the shadows congealed around the two. But they didn't have a chance to flash away as an opaque second barrier suddenly sprung up to trap them. Zac

immediately found the source using [**Cosmic Gaze**]; a crippled hegemon lying in a pool of blood with a cracked black sphere in his hand.

“You two stay behind,” the crippled Hegemon cackled, his voice wet from the blood pouring out of his mouth.

Those were the last words as a fractal blade cut his head clean off. However, Zac didn't feel any relief even if he got a surge of energy to confirm the kill. Not only did the barrier remain even after the Hegemon's death, but something was happening with the dying man's body. It looked like his hand had been covered in black ink, and it rapidly spread to cover the man's whole arm.

The whole decapitated corpse had been swallowed a moment later, yet that wasn't the end. Like a black hole, the pitch-black tendril absorbed the Heart Curses around them, even those that had already withered. The Survivors weren't spared either, except for a Hegemon who used a protective talisman before digging into the ground with horror on his face.

“Another sacrifice skill!” Ogras swore. “These people are lunatics!”

Zac wholeheartedly nodded in agreement as the Cosmic Energy churned in his body. This was why he had held back on using [**Arcadia's Judgement**] until now, even during the past six raids. There was no telling what hidden cards the enemy was carrying, so you needed a few of your own.

Space cracked as the enormous wooden hand emerged, just as a 20-meter-tall monstrosity of twisting tendrils and cursed energy had been fully formed. As far as Zac could tell, the fused Heart Curse didn't actually have a living controller, but it still seemed to understand the incoming axe was threatening.

With a piercing shriek, hundreds of slimy tendrils pierced into the descending hand, and Zac groaned in pain. The damage to his skill was transferred to his own body, and Zac felt like thousands of maggots had burrowed into his flesh. Still, the hand was filled with almost boundless life force, and the damaged sections regrew as soon as they appeared.

The tendrils didn't have enough raw strength to impede the axe's descent either, and it only had time to release a second mournful wail before being cut in two. Just a moment later, the whole area shook as the world's punishment came surging from below. Zac still didn't know what powered the secondary barrier that kept them trapped, but it didn't matter in front of the wide-scale destruction.

It shattered like brittle glass, once more exposing them to the outside.

"Let's go," Zac smiled, but his smile froze upon seeing what was going on outside.

Over ten Hegemons were bearing down on them with furious momentum, with their armies not much further behind. Even worse, the Kan'Tanu had already figured out they would probably want to escape somehow, and they had already unleashed a hailstorm of attacks around them, utterly fraying space.

Thankfully, the others in his group hadn't stayed behind, and they were already halfway to the fort. One of the Kan'Tanu armies was trying to catch them, but the spatial mines the Templars had thrown out worked wonders to delay their advance. That was one less thing to worry about, but it didn't help with their current predicament.

There was no way to tell what would happen if he activated **[Flashfire Flourish]** in this situation, but things changed again before he and Ogras had a chance to run or fight back. A tremendous pressure bore down on them as though an angry god had turned their attention to this battle.

Even the Kan'Tanu stopped in their tracks and fearfully looked around as the surroundings grew almost blindingly bright.

"What now?!" Ogras groaned with exasperation, but Zac barely heard him as he mutely stared at the sky.

The clouds were on fire.

Chapter 915: A Fate Encounter

The sky, which had previously been overcast and dull, was now illuminated by a radiant golden orange. However, the scene was localized to Zac's surroundings, as though an empyrean sun was trying to peek through the clouds. Of course, with the immense aura coming from above, no one would think this was a natural phenomenon.

Ogras and the Kan'Tanu looked equally confused by the sudden change, but Zac knew all-too-well what they were dealing with. After all, he had seen a similar scene less than a year ago. Certainly, the flames lacked the all-consuming intensity of the burning sky in the Orom World, and it only covered a small spot. If that wasn't enough proof, there was also the familiar fiery attunement that started to appear in the Cosmic Energy around them. It definitely shared the same origin as that of the terrifying Golem.

Just how was this possible? How had Iz Tayn managed to track him to the depths of the Void Star? He had even circulated motes of chaos through his body last time, partly in hopes it would destroy any tracking measures she or others might have placed in his body.

But not even that was enough to throw this crazy firebug off his scent. Zac couldn't believe his bad luck. What in God's name was wrong with this lunatic, to make her follow him this insistently? Had he become a heart demon for Iz Tayn when he escaped from her in the Tower of Eternity?

"We need to get out of here. *Now*," Zac swore as he looked for a way out.

Even if the Kan'Tanu had momentarily paused their attacks designed at destabilizing space and trapping them, they were

still smack-dab in the middle of a spatial storm. Only the area where the opaque dome had previously been was still intact, but Spatial Tears were already closing in on them.

“Enemy reinforcements?” Ogras frowned as he looked at the fiery sky.

“Worse,” Zac grimaced.

The sudden change to the battlefield had increased the uncertainty, except for Leyara’s group. Zac had mentioned that his escape measure was fire-based already, so they probably thought the powerful fiery energies were him activating his treasure. Thus, they made it through the gates of Billy’s fort without even having to clash with the intercepting army with the help of Leyara’s spatial shifts.

The stalemate back on the battlefield didn’t last for long. Ogras, having seen the fear on Zac’s face as he started making his way through the spatial storm, had opted to run first and ask questions later. This time, the roles were reversed, where they were the ones who had to make their way through frayed space rather than the Kan’Tanu. Even worse, many of the Hegemons’ skills were still active as they blasted the area, making the journey even more dangerous.

Meanwhile, the burning clouds in the sky slowly started to spin, seemingly forming a vortex of divine flames. All the while, the attunement in the air kept skewing further toward fire. It almost felt like someone was continuously crushing Fire-Attuned Nexus Crystals around them, letting their energies spread through the area.

Zac was surprised to see that actually worked in their favor. The chaotic Spatial Energies were being pushed away, and some of the Spatial Tears seemed to literally burn away as space mended. The Kan’Tanu’s lingering attacks were being suppressed as well. It was like the Dao of Fire was claiming the whole area, pushing away and suppressing everything else.

The Kan’Tanu also made their moves upon seeing that they had made it halfway through the encirclement. Unfortunately, the invaders chose to attack with redoubled effort rather than back down, even if they didn’t know what was happening in

the sky. Zac once more lamented that their enemies were lunatics implanted with Heart Curses, which essentially turned them all into deathsworn who had to finish their missions no matter what.

Trying to intimidate them was useless since most of them weren't able to retreat.

The Templar Hegemons had crafted a set of space-stabilizing talismans as a precaution, and Zac and Ogras threw them out left and right as they tried to make their way out of the bombardment. Ogras was somewhat better off thanks to his elusive abilities, while Zac had to continuously use Vivi's vines to intercept attacks.

A trail of broken-off vines was left in his wake, but that wasn't enough to prevent his body from being covered in wounds. Zac even briefly considered activating **[Void Zone]**, but he didn't actually know how that bloodline talent would work in this situation. The Spatial Tears could technically be seen as the Void of Space leaking through due to a lack of spatial integrity.

Would his nullification sphere remove the last vestiges of protections against collapse, throwing him into the Void? There were also some witnesses he didn't want to expose his Bloodline in front of, though he wasn't ready to die to keep that secret.

"This isn't working. We'll either get incinerated or cut apart by spatial tears before we get out of here," Ogras swore as he narrowly dodged a Hegemon's swing that cut off their escape path.

Zac nodded in agreement. Should he just do it? Activate **[Flashfire Flourish]** and hope that the dense fiery energies in the atmosphere would bolster the escape treasure enough to blast through this spatial turbulence. Or should he hold out a bit longer in hopes that Iz Tayn would inadvertently create an opening?

Suddenly, five pillars of blindingly hot flames crashed down around them, each one containing an unbelievable amount of energy. Space was singed wherever they passed, but the

Spatial Tears were burnt and cauterized the moment they appeared. Luckily, none of the pillars were aimed at them, but Zac was still aghast upon sensing the extremely powerful Dao within.

Was Iz Tayn really this powerful?

The pillars were rather targeted at the groups of infiltrators who were boxing them in, and seven Hegemons were reduced to cinders in an instant. They had actually been prepared for an attack, but their defensive talismans and skills had proven utterly useless in the face of those flames. It drastically lessened the pressure the two were under, but Zac wasn't relieved as he looked to the sky with trepidation.

And there she was.

Descending from the sky like a demonic angel, her orange hair dancing in the sky like a celestial fire. Six burning wings gently moved behind her back, buffeted by the Dao itself. She wasn't actually flying though, but rather standing on the back of a three-meter-wide hand wrought from rock.

It was from this hand those fiery pillars had emerged, and terrifying flames were still burning at its fingertips. And by the looks of it, the hand was actually a being of its own rather than a skill conjured by Iz. It radiated an immensely powerful aura that easily eclipsed that of the Lipless Hegemon, let alone the Kan'Tanu cultivators around them.

Zac suddenly felt a gaze upon him, and his eyes locked with Iz Tayn's. He also heard a commotion far to the west, but he couldn't look away as Iz stepped off from the golemoid hand and started to descend toward him. A Kan'Tanu Hegemon unleashed a skill toward her, but she didn't even so much as glance at the incoming bloody ray.

As expected, the attack and the Hegemon himself were annihilated by the burning hand long before the ray reached Iz, and no one else dared to so much as breathe loudly in front of that oppressive display. They could only look up at Iz helplessly, like mortals in front of a goddess.

“You thought you could subvert the unyielding river of fate? Chaos might be able to hide you from the Heavens, but not from me.” Iz said, her calm voice empowered and elevated by the Dao. “Twice now, you have fled from my grasp. There will not be a third.”

“Always something with you,” Ogras whispered as he glared at Zac.

“Hide us,” Zac whispered as he started infusing Cosmic Energy into the **[Flashfire Flourish]**.

They could no longer wait, and the surroundings were mostly stabilized thanks to the trigger-happy Golem. Ogras nodded, and a huge burst of shadows engulfed the whole area. But just as they were summoned, they were dispersed, like clouds unable to withstand the sun’s cleansing rays.

“What the- “Ogras swore as he looked up at Iz Tayn through the remnants of his destroyed domain.

Zac inwardly sighed before looking up at Iz Tayn. “Alright, you’ve found me. But we need to deal with these unorthodox cultivators before anything else. The leader is over there.”

Iz Tayn frowned with annoyance as she glanced at the random Hegemon Zac pointed at. “The Black Heart Sect is irrel-”

Zac didn’t hear the rest as his body was consumed by flames, and a groan next to him confirmed Ogras had been brought along for the ride. Zac’s whole world was suddenly seen through the lens of fire, and his heart clenched upon seeing Iz this way.

He had already seen that his stalker seemed more attuned with flames than even Fire Crystals when looking at her with **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but that was nothing compared to what he was seeing right now. The Golem’s Dao of Fire was stronger than Iz’s, yet it seemed subordinate to Iz’s very being.

It somehow felt like she was the origin of all flames when he looked at her. Like she carried the fires of the era’s birth within her body. It was mesmerizing, and Zac almost felt like he would better understand the underpinnings of the universe if he just got to study those flames a little longer.

Luckily, the overwhelming pain of being forcibly turned into a streak of fire snapped him out of it, and Zac staunchly held onto his senses over the roaring flames as he steered the treasure as best as he could. Activating the **[Flashfire Flourish]** was like setting yourself on fire and taping yourself to a rocket, and the enormous momentum in the treasure ripped him out of Iz Tavn's grasp.

The burning pillars were gone in an instant, as was Billy's fortress. They were moving at speeds approaching teleportation, yet he somehow managed to have a vague sense of his surroundings. Two seconds later, Zac felt they had moved the required distance, and he willed **[Flashfire Flourish]** to deactivate.

Zac appeared in a foreign hillside region in a flash of scorching flames. The withered stalks of grass within five meters were incinerated, but there was thankfully no obnoxious avatar announcing their arrival. Yrial had enough presence of mind not to ruin the escape treasure that way, at least.

Tearing pain throughout his body derailed Zac's train of thought. His whole body felt like a scorched wasteland, and ethereal flames were still eating at his pathways and organs. Zac groaned with pain as he took out a pill bottle with shaky hands. A gust of ashy smoke escaped his lips from the exclamation, a poignant reminder his body was still literally on fire.

Still, Yrial's prediction been proven more right than he could have known. He had said that damaging one's foundations was an unavoidable price of using such a powerful escape treasure, that it was the law of balance. Yet Zac felt the damage to his body wasn't that bad. The flames were pretty stubborn, but his Hidden Nodes had already started swallowing them. As for the damage to his foundations, they weren't any worse than breaking open a node or two. With Leyara's Pill and a few of his own, he should be good to go before the next battle.

As expected of a Terminal Disciple of a powerful Monarch, Leyara had all kinds of valuables in her Spatial Ring. She had given him and Ogras one pill each that looked like a golden

nebula trapped in a black bubble of night sky. It was called **[Resurging Star Pill]**, a special type of recovery pill that helped after overdrafting your body.

The pill was normally meant to be used after using powerful Berserking Treasures or Taboo Skills that damaged your foundations, but it should work just as well in their current situation. A weak groan echoed next to him, and Zac looked over to see Ogras kneeling. His body was covered in scorch marks, looking utterly wretched.

“You okay, buddy?” Zac asked.

“Heaven-cursed heart-eating lunatics, netherblasted spatial tears, and now crazed fire witches?” Ogras complained as he swallowed his prepared set of pills. “You’ll be the death of me.”

Zac laughed in response, but his smile became strained as he felt a tremendous burst of energy behind them.

“I told you there wouldn’t be a third.”

Vai blankly looked at the scene from her spot atop the wall, not knowing what to believe. At first, everything had gone according to plan. The tower had collapsed, and her niece had safely returned to her side without any further casualties. The infiltrators had sprung a nasty trap to catch Gaun- no, Zac Atwood, but it had failed.

Then everything changed when the terrifying flame cultivator descended from the sky. Vai had never seen anything like it. Just looking at her felt like looking at the true face of fire, more true than any fiery Dao Vai had ever seen. A glance at Lara, who joined her atop the wall, had indicated her niece had no idea who she was either.

It was a hidden master, and someone who was clearly here for her friend - the mysterious woman’s words carried through the whole battlefield. Vai wasn’t surprised. Someone like the Deviant Asura wouldn’t attract common cultivators. She had already seen as much from his two other inordinately powerful friends.

She still couldn't believe that her bodyguard and traveling companion was the man whose actions had shaken the whole Zecia Sector a decade ago, a talent who only appeared once in a million years. Looking back at it, she felt incredibly foolish.

Who else but the Deviant Asura could fight Hegemons and Beast Kings as though they were common fodder? Who else would carry a mysterious bloodline that made her very being want to kneel in obeisance? Who else would be embroiled in mysterious heritages that carried the aura of antiquity?

Still, it was difficult to combine those scattered rumors she'd heard in the monastery with the man who had stayed by her side for months. From the rumors, Zac was a powerful lunatic who was an amalgamation of lust and violence, but the reality couldn't be any further from the truth.

His eyes had never carried that glimmer when he looked at her, the glimmer that was painfully obvious in his demonic friend. Neither had he taken up the invitations from the other wandering cultivators during their month of travel. And there had been more than one, especially after he had showcased more of his power.

In reality, he was almost obsessively focused on his cultivation, where violence was just a means to an end. Over the past two weeks, she felt he had managed to get a bit closer to the real him as well, now that he no longer carried his disguise. As far as she was concerned, Deviant Asura didn't exist, except in the mouths of others.

But as she looked at the following scene, she couldn't help but wonder if there really were some truth to the rumors.

Amid the new arrival's primordial flames, a new source of fire had erupted – right where her two companions stood. It didn't contain nearly the purity of meaning of the surrounding flames, but the fire was extraordinary in its own right. It exploded like a firework, sending hundreds of fiery streams in every direction.

Zac and Ogras had disappeared in one of those streams, and while the remaining flames formed a type of imagery Vai had never seen before, picturing Zac Atwood in the middle of a

swirl of roses. His features were different, worse in Vai's opinion, and his eyes contained frailty that didn't exist. The avatar showcased a sorrowful smile before turning around, and his departing back was the last thing you saw before the scene was replaced by four lines of text.

A fate encounter, two hearts collide

But Heaven's Path won't be denied

A lonely road, the pursuit of power

Please forgive this lonesome flower

Vai felt her mind short-circuit as she read the short poem. What? Why? Why had he added such a weird contraption to the escape treasure? And what did he mean by it? Was there some sort of sordid history between himself and the mysterious woman floating in the sky? Vai had to admit she was incredibly beautiful, even eclipsing her niece.

The mysterious woman seemed surprised by the turn of events as well, as she stared at the flickering poem for a few seconds. But then, she lifted her arm, and a storm of primordial flames incinerated the illusion. The next moment, an incredibly complex array appeared where the poem hovered, its patterns far beyond anything Vai had ever seen.

The sigil quickly turned into a thin strand of pure flames that shot toward the east, and Vai looked on with wide eyes as the woman turned into flames and entered the stream. Just a moment later, she was gone, leaving a wide circle of scorched earth and incinerated corpses.

"No!" a panicked roar echoed across the battlefield as her powerful companion burst into flames.

It no longer cared about restraining the invaders as it rushed toward the stream. In the direction of Zac. The shocking scene had created a suspended lull on the battlefield, but reality came crashing back soon enough as the battle between the invaders and the newly arrived squad of Templars to the west resumed.

"What in the Heavens?!" Pretty Peak eventually exclaimed to the side. "Deviant, a pure-blooded deviant!"

“I liked it,” Leyara laughed. “Both form and function.”

“What should we do?” Vai fretfully asked. “It looked like that woman managed to enter the slipstream with the help of her flames. They might be in trouble.”

“Well, nothing we can do,” Pretty Peak grunted. “If that thing worked as that madman advertised, then he’s already a month’s travel away from this place. He’s on his own now. We can only pray that guy can handle it somehow.”

“Don’t worry, aunty. I don’t think they’re enemies,” Leyara smiled as she ate a Soldier Pill.

“How do you know?” Vai asked curiously.

“Woman’s intuition,” Leyara winked. “I felt a sense of threat from her, for my long-term prospects.”

“Y-you can’t marry that man,” Vai stuttered.

“Oh? You want him for yourself?” Leyara asked with surprise while Pretty looked over curiously.

“N-No. I-I just feel his fate is too powerful. It’s dangerous to be around him,” Vai said with rosy cheeks. “I don’t wish for you to be hurt.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” Leyara smiled as she pinched Vai’s cheeks.

“More importantly, what should we do about your people over there?” Pretty interjected as she pointed at the group of unfamiliar Templars who had popped up out of nowhere.

“They’re putting up a good fight, but that crazy Golem is gone now. They will be overrun unless something changes.”

“Let’s go,” Leyara nodded, but she gave the scorched area a last look before jumping down the wall. “Lonesome flower, huh?”

Chapter 916: Subverted Fate

The familiar voice felt like a cold shower, if that cold shower was made from scorching flames. Zac prayed he'd gone mad and it was just an auditory hallucination, but the excitement from the flames still burning within his body wasn't a great sign. The next moment, the embers actually poured out from his cells, while the same thing happened to Ogras.

They all flew toward the same destination; the woman who calmly stood just ten meters behind them in front of a backdrop of primordial flames. Iz Tayn. The embers danced around her for a moment before rushing into the fiery curtain like moths drawn to the flame. Iz looked at the embers' final journey before the curtain closed, and her attention returned to them.

Standing in front of Iz Tayn was a sobering reminder that while he had made enormous strides over this past year, he had in no shape or form reached the very limits of the E-grade. Iz's aura clearly eclipsed his own, and possibly even that of the Lipless Hegemon. Even then, Zac was certain she was still in the E-grade like him because her aura was almost impossibly condensed.

And impossibly rife with meaning.

Part of it was undoubtedly the lingering Dao of the powerful flames that had just winked out, but standing in front of Iz reminded Zac of standing in the Dao Chamber when they cracked open the Dao Funnel all those years ago. Except that the only Dao he could sense right now was the Dao of Fire. Her very being exuded the truth of flames, to a degree Zac didn't think possible in the E-grade.

It almost seemed like her flames encompassed all Daos, though Zac knew that was impossible at her level. In a sense,

it was almost like looking at the opposite of himself. Her flames encompassed all while he embodied the Void.

Zac's instincts told him someone like this was rare even among the peak factions of the Multiverse. Uona Noz'Valadir was the strongest E-grade Cultivator he'd fought thus far, but Zac knew she couldn't hold a candle to Iz. Certainly, Uona did by no means represent the peak of the Undead Empire, but Zac doubted they had anyone who could match Iz Tayn level for level. Unless the Primo had direct descendants running around, perhaps.

Taking in Iz's unparalleled appearance or unfathomable aura was an experience on its own, but Zac's belly was still full of grievances as he looked for solutions to their predicament. Why did his escape treasure have to be fire-attributed? Couldn't Yrial have found one based on ice instead? He didn't know if Iz somehow caught a ride through the stream of flames, or if she had methods to follow it with a treasure on her own.

What was clear, though, was that she hadn't been harmed at all by the journey, while neither Zac nor Ogras were in the best of conditions. And he was out of tricks. **[Flashfire Flourish]** needed time to recharge, and he wasn't sure his body would be able to take another jump anyway. His escape bangle was out of commission as well, and there were no motes of Chaos to make the impossible possible.

The good news was that Zac couldn't sense any killing intent coming from Iz Tayn, nor was she circulating Cosmic Energy. She just stood there on a patch of ground singed clean by her flames. Neither had that weird junior golem managed to follow her by the looks of it, leaving her alone.

Of course, that didn't help skew things in their favor if it came to blows. Zac's instincts told him that Iz alone was enough to deal with both of them even if they were in perfect condition, and that was based on her aura alone. If you included whatever protective and offensive treasures a supreme genius from a peak faction carried, it was pretty much hopeless.

His only hope for victory was to hit her with an Annihilation Sphere or Origin Mark, but would he even get the opportunity to conjure them if they fought? Besides, killing her was out of the question. He wouldn't dare, even if he somehow found a chance to take her out. Iz's faction knew of him, and they knew how to find him seemingly anywhere.

It was game over for him and Earth if she came to harm. Perhaps for all of the Zecia sector.

These remote places weren't valuable enough for even B-grade factions like the Radiant Temple to bother with. They just snatched up the occasional talent that emerged, and extracted some resources on the cheap. A faction that had Peak Autarchs as Dao Guardians for their young might simply eradicate the whole sector in retaliation.

And while the System's shroud protected Earth from people like the Great Redeemer, he didn't hold much hope it would do the same against a determined Supremacy.

This left him in an extremely awkward situation, where he didn't know what to do. But since Iz wasn't saying anything, he'd have to be the one to speak up.

"Alright, you have hunted me down halfway across the multiverse," Zac said with some helplessness. "You caught me. Is all of this because of what I said over ten years ago?"

"Over ten years?" Ogras blurted with a raspy voice, but he quickly shrunk back when Iz turned her gaze to him.

"Your fate has been swept up in his, and something mundane has become unordinary," Iz said as she looked at Ogras, primordial flames flickering in her eyes. "But can you withstand the river on your own? If not, you will be dragged under, like so many before you."

Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he felt the scorching heat in Iz's gaze, and he remembered all-too-well the unlucky few who had been placed too close to this firebug in the Battle of Fates. Ogras was clearly worse off than he from the teleportation, and his skills had proven ineffective against Iz's flames.

The original idea was to lay low for a day or two and let the pills nurture them back to the point they could fight unencumbered. But a battle now might worsen the damage even further, especially for Ogras, who didn't have an unnaturally sturdy constitution to fall back on.

"You came here for me, right?" Zac frowned as he stepped in front of Ogras.

"I'll... uh... let the two of you talk, alright?" Ogras whispered before retreating a few hundred meters away, though Zac noticed one of the shadows by the hills release a small flicker. He was ready to fight in case they were left with no choice.

That left a frazzled Zac standing nervously in front of Iz Tayn. He didn't dare take out **[Verun's Bite]** at the moment, afraid she'd take that as a threat or insult. At the same time, he didn't know what to say. How do you lose someone who had already followed you across half the Multiverse?

He had to make this lunatic leave on her own somehow, but Zac didn't even know what she wanted. Neither could she glean any hints from her expressionless face, and Zac found himself coming up short when trying to figure out what to say.

"Do you believe those words?" Iz eventually said.

Zac grimaced. There it was. He had called her a god-damned lunatic right before escaping, and now she had come to collect. Could he simply apologize and pray she'd drop the matter without trying to incinerate him and Ogras? However, the next words out of Iz Tayn threw him for a loop.

"The words in the poem you left behind?"

"Poem?" Zac said with a sinking feeling. "What poem?"

Flames appeared out of nowhere between them, and Zac looked on with growing unease as they formed a field of roses. It was one thing if he got himself in trouble because of his big mouth - he only had himself to blame. But if Yrial's warped desire to fuse beauty and function had caused even more trouble for him, he didn't know what he would do.

Sure enough, he saw the same bastardized version of himself, though the following scene differed slightly from the first. Zac

saw himself turn away, and the rose field was replaced by a short poem. The more Zac read, the bigger the pit in his stomach grew. This was not just a problem of taunting Iz Tayn. It certainly wouldn't help with his already tarnished reputation.

After all, that golem guardian must have seen the text as well, as had those in the Fort. He had warned about the odd feature of [**Flashfire Flourish**], but he wasn't sure how much that would help in front of such a scene. The flames soon dispersed, and Zac found himself lacking for words.

“Do you believe the road toward the Terminus is a solitary one? That Karmic Threads tie one down on the road to power?”

Zac looked at Iz suspiciously, but it didn't seem like she was joking or messing around. Her face was completely earnest as she waited for an answer. She had hunted him possibly for ten years, and this was what she wanted to discuss?

“Uh... It wasn't me who wrote that poem. I don't have any backing, and this is the Frontier,” Zac slowly said. “I have to make do with whatever treasures I get my hands on, even if they have weird side effects.”

Iz's lips curved upward at that, and her smiling visage almost made Zac blank out. Living breathing beings had no business being this good-looking. How were others to compete?

“That doesn't answer my question.”

Zac looked at Iz with exasperation, not knowing what she wanted from him. It almost felt like she didn't know herself, but he supposed having a chat beat getting blasted by flames.

“Some aspects of cultivation are ultimately up to yourself, but I don't think it's a solitary road. I wouldn't be here without the help from a lot of people, and I'm pretty sure the same is true for you. And even if I somehow reached the peak all on my own, what would be the point of such an empty existence? Where I just sit alone on some mountain peak, churning with power? It's the Karmic links you mention that give me purpose, that allow me to keep pushing myself.”

Iz considered his words a few seconds before nodding. "... Thank you. Still, I have come all this way, so I will have to test your fate with my fire. It is not just a matter of your insult anymore. You will have to prove fate strong enough to carry the title of a Flamebearer. Otherwise, the other contenders will consume you, and I will have to fight an uphill battle for the inheritance for nothing."

"That's...!" Zac exclaimed with wide eyes.

Zac's heart shuddered when his fears were realized. Iz Tayn was really a Flamebearer. He should have guessed it the moment she appeared inside the Void Star. Going by the name alone, she might be the most suitable person in the younger generation.

The fact that he would be pitted against someone like her for the inheritance felt like an almost insurmountable wall, but that wasn't his real worry. Ultimately, Zac didn't hold much hope of seizing Ultom for himself after learning that the knowledge of the Left Imperial Palace was already widespread. As long as he got a few more pieces of the sigils and their epiphanies, he'd be happy. If he managed to get a small portion of the real inheritance, it'd be a huge windfall.

He was more worried about the implications of Iz's mention of other contenders. She had essentially confirmed others would be fighting for the same slot. And if one scion from the heartlands had already joined the fray just months after he got the quest, did that mean others were already here? Or was she just lucky to stumble onto this opportunity while looking for him? Had he accidentally brought trouble on their head by leading Iz here?

"You are free to use either your Human or Draugr form. But if you use those remnants you keep locked away in your mind, I will use means of similar potency," Iz Tayn continued.

Zac was already reeling from her first proclamation, but that was nothing compared to having two of his biggest secrets exposed like it was common knowledge. It felt like his world had been upended, and he looked at Iz with incomprehension. How did she know all that? And what else did she know?

“Did you not think I saw you back then? How the descendant of the Ignus Clan nearly destroyed your soul, but you turned calamity into opportunity to force a breakthrough? How you transformed into a Draugr and fought the Red Hand Society assassin?” Iz said when upon seeing Zac’s confusion. “Why did you think I called for you?”

“I, uh,” Zac stuttered, his mind still a mess as he found himself in the very situation he had so desperately tried to prevent for so long.

“And did you not think my uncle would recognize the remnants from the Heart of Oblivion and the Spark of Creation? But he was quite impressed how you managed to fuse their energies into a rudimentary expression of Chaos. He said he had never heard of anyone doing that before,” Iz continued with equanimity. “Now, pick your form.”

“Ah, young mistress,” a hesitant voice drifted over from a distance, where Ogras’ head was sticking out from behind a boulder. “I don’t think you want to fight right now.”

“As I said, fate will not be subverted,” Iz said without even looking over.

“Of course, of course,” Ogras eagerly nodded. “Nor should it. But I am sure that young mistress hasn’t waited for years to right this wrong, only for your target to be unable to battle in his optimal state? Look at how wretched he is, how half his hair is gone and burn marks cover his hands and face. I can assure you, the situation within our bodies is even worse, even with you so graciously removing the lingering flames.”

Iz frowned as she thoughtfully looked between Ogras and Zac, who could only push down his embarrassment and look as pathetic as possible to sell Ogras’ lie. Well, it wasn’t a lie, really. Between him using up most of his skills just moments ago, and the damage from **[Flashfire Flourish]**, he definitely wasn’t in the best shape.

“And that’s not the only thing, young mistress! And you would want to hear this!” Ogras continued, prompting her to look over curiously. “We are actually on an important mission! To fight evil unorthodox cultivators, destroy a pathway to a

cursed universe, and save the day. If we don't accomplish our task in a few days, then our lives are all forfeit."

Zac once more wondered if something was wrong with Iz's brain since her eyes lit up at Ogras' proclamation. It looked like she couldn't be happier at the prospect of their lives hanging by a thread. She even looked over to Zac, obviously hoping for confirmation.

"It's true," Zac reluctantly nodded. "If we don't blow up that pathway, this whole realm will be flooded with tainted energy. The realm will collapse, and we all die."

Iz Tayn looked like she had hit the jackpot, and a slight flush appeared on her cheeks. However, she soon realized Zac was looking at her weirdly, and she quickly regained her impassive expression. She then nodded slightly, like the news was nothing unexpected.

There were no two ways about it; there was something off with this girl.

"We shall postpone our battle," Iz eventually agreed.

"I can see this young mistress has a righteous heart," Ogras continued. "We would be doubly blessed if you joined us in this endeavor. To thwart evil and protect our world."

Iz glanced at Zac, who tried to look enthused by the idea. He had to admit that Ogras' plan was solid. Not only would this net them an extremely powerful helper, but it would give them a breather to figure out a long-term solution to this Iz problem. "You're welcome to join us."

"Then I shall accompany you," Iz nodded.

"Of course, it would be our pleasure," Ogras readily agreed as he bounded over. "This lowly one is Ogras Azh'Rezak, at your service."

"... Iz Tayn," Iz said, once more looking at Zac.

"Zac Atwood," Zac said, wholly uncomfortable under her stares.

"Great, great," Ogras nodded. "Now that we're all friends, can we expect your... uh... hand to join us? Its strength could

definitely be helpful.”

“Kvark has no interest in fighting against the Black Heart Sect,” Iz said. “He is more likely to test the fate of you two. It should take him around three or four days to reach this area if you are interested in battling him as well.”

“The ruins of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom are right this way,” Ogras immediately said as he started walking. “Treasures and mystery await.”

Zac didn’t know what else to do, so he simply followed in tow.

“As I said, our battle is only delayed. I will find you after this is dealt with,” Iz added as she floated over to his side. “But I can see you are not enthused at the idea, so I am willing to offer this treasure as long as you don’t disappoint.”

The word ‘treasure’ could deal with most problems, and Zac looked over at the thing that had appeared in Iz’s hand. Ogras looked over with gleaming eyes, and Zac could understand the sentiment.

Who wouldn’t be curious what kind of treasures someone like Iz Tayn could take out?

Chapter 917: Alava'Har

Bastard.

Ogras watched the two social outcasts walk in pace, and it was hard to tell who was more uncomfortable. Zac wore it plainly on his face, but Ogras could almost hear the gears turning in the head of that sheltered lass. They looked like a teenage couple full of hormones and awkward love. Double-bastard.

He'd spent ten years in this godforsaken realm with not a woman as far as the eye could see. All the while, this guy was living it up while pretending otherwise. The more he heard, the more Ogras' teeth itched. The Peak lass, Leyara, even that little doe-eyed researcher who kept throwing him long looks. Ibtap that lunatic had even created a wildly inaccurate rumor, only for millions of maidens to take him seriously. According to Pretty Peak, there were massive bounties from lonely singles for the contact details of the Deviant Asura.

And now, this celestial fairy had fallen right into this useless guy's lap? A woman who had broken Ogras' understanding of the limits of beauty. And who apparently was carrying around supreme treasures tailored for that dullard. Ogras had no idea what that ominous-looking stone was, but Zac was almost drooling when he saw it. So it had to be something good.

Triple-bastard.

Iz Tayn reminded Ogras of Alava'Har from the stories he'd read growing up. A princess of the divine realm descended to the mortal plains in search of love and purpose. Rich, naïve, and bored. It only took Ogras a single glance to figure out this Iz Tayn was the same; a sheltered rose of a terrifyingly powerful origin.

Who knew? This might be the first time she left the safety of her family's domains. No doubt surrounded by servants since

birth, but lacking proper connections, to the point that a simple curse thrown her way had become an obsession.

Luckily, Iz Tayn had been easy enough to wrangle, even if he had been forced to throw his face a bit. But what was face worth in front of life? Those flames were just too terrifying. It almost felt like the shadows that made up his body would collapse when she looked in his direction. So he would sing his song and dance a little dance until the young empress was satisfied.

She would join in on their ‘adventure’ and then return to the divine realm with her elders. Iz had clearly relegated him to a servant-type shortly after they set off, but that was fine with him. It was just like the lass said, too much excitement, and he’d get himself killed. Someone like Iz Tayn undoubtedly had enough suitors to drown him in spit if they thought him getting too close to their target.

But this useless guy was blowing it. They needed to entertain, damnit! And in return, they would feed on her scraps, be they information, treasures, or knowledge. He desperately tried to send the message with his glances, but that idiot was walking along looking like a martyr about to sacrifice himself against a beast tide.

Perhaps these two were too socially inept to walk and talk simultaneously?

Iz glanced at the unusually mutated demon, who smiled and nodded obsequiously in return. The scene was off-putting. It reminded her of those empty smiles that followed wherever she traveled with her uncle. The smile of those who tried to benefit from the vast wealth or influence of the Tayn family. Part of her wanted to just release her flames and test his fate then and there.

But she couldn’t. Mr. Bug was still unhappy about the arrangement, even after she had shown the **[Stone of the Void]** like her uncle had suggested. Was it because their sparring session had been delayed? Uncle had explained that real friendships were forged through battle.

Only when you had withstood your opponent's Dao could you truly understand who they were. The Dao was the road to the heart. But now, everything was left on an uncertain note.

She didn't know what to make of this silent but palpable sense of rejection. She had always been welcomed with open arms no matter where she went before. Even ancestors emerged from their sealed chambers to greet her and provide some small gifts of goodwill. To have someone be so overtly annoyed by her presence was a first.

It was almost liberating in a twisted sort of way. Because his opinions of her were based on their encounters rather than on her surname. Certainly, Mr. Bug knew some of it. But to someone like him, any established family must seem like an unfathomable mountain. He didn't know what a throne represented or who her grandparents were.

Still, while Iz felt this atmosphere was novel, it wasn't what she had envisioned. She remembered those scenes from the graded trial Mr. Bug joined. Of how he'd joked around with that other Draugr or the excitement they felt upon exploring their first shared Trove. The camaraderie created by a shared adversary when the two found themselves beneath that stream.

But how was she supposed to break the tension in this situation? Iz had no idea. She was increasingly realizing that she wasn't very equipped or prepared to set out on her own. Realizing that were many types of strengths she lacked, strengths that couldn't be gained through her grandpa's meticulous preparations for her cultivation.

She couldn't bring up Mr. Bug's adventures either, even though she really wanted to know what happened between a few of her viewing sessions. Or when he had consumed the previous set of remnants. She only knew he had been headed toward a place called the 'City of Ancients', followed by a long bout of aggravating static.

But Grandpa had told her that she absolutely couldn't tell any outsider about the existence of the Divine Mirror. It was a supreme treasure from a previous Era. Her Grandma had found it long ago in some ruins of the Limitless Empire, and it

was a treasure that would drive certain clans mad with desire. Not only that, but her uncle had told her that it would ruin her chance at a friendship if she told Mr. Bug, even if Iz didn't understand why.

Thousands of her family's servants had observed her every breath since she was born, which had no impact on her daily life. But she trusted uncle Valderak knew what he was talking about. Even if she hadn't found much use for his two weeks of friendship tutoring so far.

Should she just give him the stone and see if that helped?

Zac surreptitiously glanced at the woman who walked in pace with them, but her calm face gave no clues as to what she was thinking. Everything about her was confusing. She had employed god-knows-what kind of high-grade methods to find him, and even used a peak Autarch to ferry her over to the Frontier.

But when she had finally caught up with him, she readily agreed to postpone her duel. Since then, she had barely spoken a word. Iz seemed mostly content with walking in silence, while he had a lot on his mind. Ogras had occasionally tried making some small talk with Iz, but she either answered in single syllables or not at all. By now, the silence had almost grown oppressive.

Suddenly, Zac felt Iz's gaze upon him once more. But before he had a chance to see if something was wrong, Ogras had stopped in his tracks just ahead of them.

"There is a hidden cave not far from here," Ogras said. "Our original plan was to hide for a day and recover. How about we check out that place? During that time, we can also discuss the upcoming battle."

Zac glanced at Iz, who slightly nodded in agreement.

"Let's go," Zac nodded, and Ogras gave him another pointed look before turning away.

Zac knew what the demon wanted; he was not so dense that he couldn't understand the opportunistic gleam in Ogras' eyes.

The demon wanted him to befriend Iz and possibly extract advantages from her. But things were not that simple, and he was still digesting the whole situation. Having gone over the events over the past half-hour, Zac had come to a few conclusions.

He should already have realized that Iz already knew of his two secrets. Even if he hadn't expected Iz to witness the whole chain of events in the Battle of Fates, he had spoken with her in his Draugr form. The next time they met, he was a human, yet she recognized him as plain as day. The remnants were even less of a mystery. He had used what he called a Bronze Flash in the Tower of Eternity, and the next time he had just swallowed the remnants and was teeming with their energy.

But that didn't explain how Iz had the **[Stone of Celestial Void]**.

He hadn't actually seen that item before, but it perfectly matched the description in the listing back in the Orom World. More importantly, only two people knew about it; he and a store clerk. The only time he had said its name out aloud was when he asked the clerk if the treasure could be brought out for inspection. After having been rejected, Zac never mentioned the item again.

So how did Iz know he wanted it? Even the Orom wouldn't know, considering how little it cared about the day-to-day inside its body. Just what had happened after he fled the Orom? Or did she have some way to spy on him? The thoughts kept gnawing at him, making him unable to focus on anything else. Eventually, it reached a tipping point, and Zac turned to Iz with a determined expression.

“How did you know I need that item?”

Iz didn't seem surprised by the question, but she still looked at Zac thoughtfully for a few seconds until her eyes lit up. “My family set up some rules for me when visiting the frontier. All actions have consequences, and forming karmic debts should be avoided when possible. If you want me to divulge secrets that would normally be out of your reach, then you must prove you are fated with that knowledge.”

“How would I prove something like that?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Withstand my flames.”

“Are you just making up an excuse to beat me up?” Zac asked, his eyes thinning with suspicion.

Iz’s mouth curved up a bit at that, but she quickly regained her poise. “If you want to know, you would have to take a strike from me.”

Ogras had already stopped as well, and he looked at the proceedings with interest.

“Just go with it,” the demon urged. “If there’s one thing you’re good at, it’s taking a beating. So what’s the harm?”

“Easy for you to say,” Zac glared, but he still readied himself.

There was no way she was planning on going all out at this point, and Zac felt confident he should at least be able to deal with a normal attack without too much issue. A creaking sound echoed out as Vivi’s vines formed a thick barrier, and **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hands.

“Go ahead,” Zac as he jumped back fifty meters to give himself some berth.

Iz nodded and held up her hand. A small fireball appeared in her palm, exuberantly releasing small bursts of golden embers. Zac relaxed a bit since it just looked like a fancy version of a common **[Fireball]** attack. However, Zac’s eyes widened in alarm when it shot out from Iz’s hand.

Suddenly, it felt like a whole sun was bearing down on him. The little ball contained an immense amount of truths, to the point it created illusions all around him. At least Zac hoped it was an illusion since the whole area had been set ablaze, even the air. Zac felt a weak exclamation of pain from Vivi, and he realized her vines were rapidly drying out, their powerful lifeforce unable to compete with the scorching heat.

Zac could only cut off the twinned and dried-out vines with a swing of his axe, and the symbiotic plant almost fully retreated back into its pocket domain. That left him with one less layer

of defense, just as the deceptive little fireball suddenly doubled its momentum while gaining an intense golden hue. Space was being incinerated in its wake, and Zac felt like hot poker were being stabbed into the still-tender burns across his body.

“Holy-!” Zac swore as he urgently activated [**Empyrean Aegis**].

Two different hues of gold clashed for supremacy in the area as the ball of utmost flames slammed into his hastily-erected barrier. The fireball burned its way straight through with a sizzling sound, leaving Zac gobsmacked. It might have expended a good chunk of its force by that point, but what remained was still more than enough to cause alarm.

Normally, Zac would have used the brief window bought by his barrier to move out of the way, but Iz had demanded to withstand the flame, not survive the strike. So he could only grit his teeth as he unleashed a herculean swing infused with his Branches of War axe and Pale Seal. He normally didn't use the second Dao in his human form, but he figured it was more effective at snuffing out flames than a life-attuned one.

A primal roar of defiance echoed through the scorched wastelands as Verun bit straight through the golden ball of primordial flames. Zac felt his Daos being rapidly whittled down by the unrelenting flames, but his powerful soul churned as he infused more and more of it to combat the drain. The fireball didn't enjoy the same treatment; soon after, it was completely ripped apart.

However, Zac's relief was short-lived as the ball's destruction released a splatter of flames in every direction like a Dao-infused Molotov Cocktail. A few of them managed to reach his body, and his robes immediately became a tattered mess. A searing pain soon followed as parcels of fiery Dao dug into his body. It was almost as though the flames were alive, in a tangible way that was completely different from the fire left behind by [**Flashfire Flourish**].

These little flames were connected with the boundless universe.

Sensing them with his soul felt like looking at the primordial soup from which the Big Bang created the universe. It was a fire of endless possibility, almost reminding him of one aspect of Creation. At the same time, it held the ability to reduce anything to ashes, leaving nothing in its wake but utter destruction. A facet of Oblivion.

Was this Iz's Dao? Her vision of a supreme Dao of Fire that was one with all?

A deep and angry thud from the depths of his chest brought him out from his reverie as **[Void Heart]** woke up, and it started to drag the wayward embers toward its maws. But the flames were unwilling to go quietly into the night, and they desperately struggled against the pull. The Hidden Node managed to swallow a few, but most embers made their way out of Zac's body, leaving a second scorch mark behind before returning to Iz's side.

The apocalyptic surroundings died down a moment later, confirming it was indeed not real but an effect brought by the Dao infused into the attack. Ogras was just fine, even though it looked like the flames had consumed him for a moment, and he was looking at Iz with wide eyes.

"Well?" Zac grimaced as he looked down at his ruined clothes with dismay.

It looked like he had returned to his roots, where he looked like a mix of a burn victim and a homeless person.

"I am very curious just what your Bloodline is. It is the first time I've seen someone dare consume the flames of my family," Iz said with interest. "Or at least succeed in doing so."

Her words made Zac pause. It looked like she didn't know quite everything about him, at least.

"Well, there's always a first," Zac eventually grunted as he walked over. "The stone?"

"I left a mark on you during our first meeting," Iz said, and Zac wasn't surprised.

Zac remembered the flame touching his chest but not actually harming him. He had long since guessed it was a tracking

mark, but he hadn't been overly worried about it since she came from a different part of the Multiverse. So much for that theory.

"You managed to destroy it, but I had an elder bring it back and reinforce it," Iz said, making both Ogras and Zac looked at her with alarm. Just how powerful did you have to be to bring back a destroyed tracking mark on someone across half the Multiverse? "It is through that mark I've been able to find you."

"Well, that explains some of it, but it doesn't explain how you know about the stone?" Zac said, putting the matter of her elder aside.

"The mark can create a lingering resonance in weaker cultivators that would let my family identify them," Iz nodded. "That would allow us to do all kinds of things. Such as finding the clerks you had been in contact with while living in the mutated Voidcatcher."

Zac looked at Iz suspiciously. It was as plausible as anything else, but he worried it wasn't the whole truth.

"In either case, the brand barely works by now," Iz continued. "It would have to get bolstered by my elder again since you weakened it when you conjured Chaos."

"How do I know you're not just making things up?" Zac asked.

"Every word I've said was true," Iz said, but she looked a bit hesitant. Eventually, she spoke up again. "The price for the knowledge might be off. Do you want to know anything else?"

"How about you remove the mark instead?" Zac said. "After all, you've already found me."

"Impossible," Iz said with a shake of her head. "Even if damaged, it has been bolstered by my elder. It's not something that I can remove."

"Alright," Zac grunted. "Then can you tell me if a bunch of Autarchs, or even stronger beings, will come to Zecia to contend for the inheritance? You should know that's not something a small frontier sector can withstand."

“Oh, you do not need to worry about that,” Iz said. “The Boundless Heavens has shielded this sector. My elder believes this inheritance is targeted at the younger generation, and the Heavens do not want undue interference. When we entered, only a Middle Monarch could be sent through.”

Zac and Ogras shared a glance, the relief evident in their eyes. This was their biggest worry, but it looked like the System had already dealt with the problem for them. Of course, Monarchs from the outside were difficult to deal with, but they were nothing compared to Supremacies.

“Ask her something else,” Ogras urged as a grin spread across his face.

“You ask her, bastard,” Zac swore as he looked down at his charred body. “I’m about well done over here. If I get any more toasty, you’ll have to fight the next battle yourself.”

“Fine,” Ogras sighed. “We’ll talk more after we’ve rested.”

“I know many things,” Iz added as she hopefully looked at Zac.

“Isn’t that great,” Zac muttered. “Now, where is that cave?”

Chapter 918: Flicker of Hope

The weak rustle of leaves formed a tranquil song as the silence stretched on, even though the plants in the inner courtyard had died out eons ago. Replacing the plant-life was a thick layer of ash dust. It created a paradoxical environment - the utter desolation of eternal autumn mixed with the fresh winds of spring. Fifty by fifty meters, boxed in by ancient stones and an anthracite sky. Emily only had two things for company; her thoughts and the tattered banner hanging from the stele.

The sigil on its surface was simple, yet it held power and profundity beyond anything she had ever heard of. Possibly of anything in the whole sector. It looked like a rising sun, but it carried the breath of the universe. The unending cycle that brought the seasons, that brought life and death.

The Sigil of the Radiant Court.

Emily still couldn't believe she had been accepted when Pro'Zul and Ynaea had both been turned to ash right before her eyes. She still felt like an impostor benefitting from something not meant for her, and she was just waiting for the pulse that would claim her as well. That was part of the reason why she hadn't moved over the past eight months, even if the sprawling castle might hold more treasures. Even if the army was slated to leave for the next sector more than three months ago.

She was afraid to draw unwanted attention, waking up the terrifying power slumbering in this private garden. The other reason was that she simply couldn't. The gates had been sealed shut behind her, and she knew all-too-well just how sturdy those stones were. Even if she struck with all that she had, she wouldn't leave a mark.

It wasn't all bad, though. The energy was both unbelievably dense and filled with meaning, and she was making

tremendous progress. The random herbs and baubles she had picked up in her first excursion with the Coliseum was nothing compared to this. The only things of value she got back then were some painful lessons and the ticket to the Million Gates Territory.

Just sitting in front of the banner obviously couldn't compare to those shimmering lights, but it still felt like she was gaining a week's worth of comprehension every day she sat here. And she had a lot of work on. Forming a Supreme Path-bound skill with the help of the three strands of light was just the first step. Creating the Axe Array that would make the most of it required a lot of work, even with the banner helping.

Before she could even begin, she had been forced to digest the truths from the lights. Truths that had completely upended her understanding of synergistic energy, which was the basis of both her supportive skills and offensive ones. Still, she was still just grasping the corners of those truths, and she was getting less and less from the tattered banner. It almost felt like she was extracting the very last drops that it held.

The sky shuddered, for the third time this day, prompting Emily to look up with worry. Was the Mystic Realm really collapsing? What did that mean for her? Would the whole castle be thrown into the void, with her in it? How could she possibly survive something like this? Emily's heart shuddered as her thoughts turned to her squadmates, to Earth. To her family. To Zac.

Would she ever see them again?

No! She wouldn't give up. She was so close now. A little bit more, and the array would be finished. If she were right, it would unleash a terrifying amount of force if used together with **[Summer's Squall]**. It might even be enough to crack open the gate. So she forcibly pushed any stray thoughts aside, and poured everything into the banner.

And it worked. Three days later, it clicked, and the **[Dance of the Five Seasons]** was born. The moment everything came together, the banner disintegrated, and a screen popped up in front of her.

[Seal of the Radiant Court (Unique, Inheritance): Form a seal of the Radiant Court. Reward: Become a Lightbringer of Ultom. (1/3)]

Emily looked at the quest with surprise, but she immediately shot to her feet upon hearing a grinding sound. The gates were actually opening, and tears of relief poured down her face as she started running. She didn't spare as much as a glance to the small courtyard that had been her home for the better part of a year. All her thoughts were on escape as she stormed into the corridor, where she made a beeline for the exit.

She wondered what the elders outside would say upon learning that more than 80% of the army had died on the first day inside this deathtrap. Some deaths were unavoidable when scanning a Pocket Dimension for invaders, but this was completely different from stumbling into some nasty environment or frayed space.

Soon enough, Emily reached the first corner where one of the wardens waited, but the fractured golemoid guard didn't react as she closed in on it. Emily breathed out in relief as she flashed past it, but her relief didn't last long. A deep rumble shook the whole castle, and the previously indestructible bricks started to show cracks.

The whole castle was collapsing! Was this her doing? Emily had no way to tell, but she could only urge her legs to run quicker. Why hadn't she created a movement skill instead of a Supportive-Offensive Fusion Skill?! What if she died from rock to head after surviving spatial tears, murderous constructs, and annihilation pulses?

Her panic only grew as the walls closed in on her, but she finally saw the gate leading to the enormous courtyard. The place where they had realized they were trapped, unable to either leave or send a message for help. The place that had eventually been flooded with lance-wielding constructs when the army had opted to not head deeper into the sketchy castle.

The corpses and constructs were gone by the time she barged through the gate. It was completely empty, like it had been scrubbed clean after the battle. She was about to leave through

the exit, her eyes widened with alarm when another one of the gates vertiably exploded as a fierce-looking Ogre crashed straight through it with two gargantuan stone axes in his hands.

It was Kan’Kalo, one of the five leaders of the mission, and a member of the Big Axe Coliseum just as she. He looked ready for a tough fight, but he stopped in confusion upon seeing Emily the only other one there.

“Little girl! You survived as well?” Kan’Kalo said with surprise. “I figured you’d get skewered by one of those lance-wielding monstrosities with your embarrassing strength.”

“Wouldn’t die before a fool like you,” Emily snorted in response.

The five-meter-tall ogre laughed loudly in response before another rumble reminded him where they were. “We can’t stay here. Want to ride with me?”

“Sure,” Emily smiled and jumped up on Kan’Kalo’s left shoulder.

Cosmic Energy surged, and Emily’s eyes widened with shock. “You’ve broken through!”

“Was only a matter of time for someone this handsome!” Kan’Kalo boisterously laughed as they flew through the exit, but Emily knew the truth.

This big brute was powerful, but he had been stuck as a Half-Step cultivator for centuries. She might have gotten her hands on the grand prize, but it looked like she wasn’t the only one who had gained from the experience. The enormous castle turned more and more distant as the Hegemon flew through the sky, and she saw one figure after another emerging from various spots.

“Should we wait for them?” Emily hesitated.

“All men for themselves,” the ogre muttered before he hesitantly looked at Emily who wasn’t even as large as his head. “And runts.”

Emily rolled her eyes and a crackling axe appeared in her hand. It released a few arcs of lightning into the clouds before she slammed it right into Kan’Kalo’s head. He almost stumbled in the air, but he soon regained his composure as he flew away with even greater momentum.

“Little brute,” he snorted as a huge eye looked over at her with confusion. “No breakthrough?”

“I got insights instead,” Emily shrugged. “I’ve learned to make an axe array.”

“Fancy,” Kan’Kalo hummed with interest. “Show me later, yeah?”

“Sure,” Emily nodded. “If we get out of here alive.”

“Haha, I’m not dying in this shithole after being stuck for months,” Kan’Kalo laughed, though he hesitantly looked at the rapidly fracturing sky. “The closest exit isn’t that far from here. The real problem is what’s waiting on the other side. Better get ready to hold your breath, brat.”

Emily’s smile turned crooked as she finally remembered how they had arrived. Their squad had found a pathway in the middle of space, far from any planet. Since it emitted strong energy fluctuations, the joint army had erected a temporary platform and sent in Emily’s squad and a few more to perform reconnaissance.

But if the army had left three months ago as they had planned, would they pop out in open space? She didn’t have any Cosmic Vessel, and the famously poor Ogre who carried her obviously didn’t have one either. However, a familiar aura suddenly filled the sky, and Emily’s eyes lit up with relief.

“Teacher!” she shouted, and space was cut apart.

Through the collapsing sky, Warsong emerged, his body reeking of blood and killing intent. He sported a nasty wound across his face that almost seemed to have blinded him, but his aura was stronger than ever.

“What happened to you?” Emily exclaimed, but the axemaster only shook his head.

“Later,” he muttered as he performed a grasping motion with his hand. “This place is about to blow.”

The next moment, twenty more people appeared next to herself and Kan’Kalo, and Warsong immediately turned his heel and dragged everyone out through the entrance he’d cut open. They soon found themselves on the platform the army had erected, though Emily frowned upon seeing it was covered in scars and cracks. A battle had taken place here.

Still, there was breathable air, and the enormous warship floating in the distance still seemed to be in working order. Emily and the Ogre shared a look, and they both breathed out in relief. They had made it. They had survived a certain-death trial.

“We were afraid you had left us behind,” Emily sighed as she climbed down from Kan’Kalo’s shoulder.

“The Mystic Realm was sealed shortly after you entered, but the locked pathway started releasing extraordinary amounts of energy. We figured something big was happening inside, so we chose to change plans,” Warsong said. “Just what happened inside? What was that castle?”

“We got sucked into that place the moment we entered,” Emily grimaced. “Most of us died inside.”

“I expected as much when I saw so few of you come flying out,” Warsong sighed. “Did you learn anything inside? Like who built it?”

Emily described the building as best as she could, with Kan’Kalo adding details of his own. He was actually a lot more helpful than she was, with his knowledge of various architectural styles and materials. He even knew how to roughly determine the age of the ruins by studying the bricks that made up the inner wall.

According to Kan’Kalo, the castle most likely pre-dated the System, meaning it came from the Limitless Empire or one of the factions it warred against. Emily wasn’t very surprised, considering what she’d seen in the vision. That was definitely

something belonging to a tyrannical force like the Limitless Empire, and not some little border faction.

Of course, neither she nor Kan’Kalo explicitly said what kind of opportunities they’d encountered inside the castle. Such were the rules of the Coliseum - if you found it, it’s yours. They only detailed the traps and environmental dangers they had seen, though Emily doubted it would matter. The pathway had already collapsed behind them, meaning it was lost to the Void forever.

“I’ll have to talk with the others,” Warsong slowly said after they’d recounted their experience. “It might be important. You people return to the Eyrie, we’ll take things from here.”

Five days later, Emily was called to her master’s quarters and she frowned when she saw him still covered in wounds.

“Are you really okay?” Emily asked.

“Some beasts found the energy released by the pathway alluring,” Warsong shrugged as he looked at Emily with a smile. “You did well. What are your plans going forward? Because of the delay, we have decided to split up. Some will return to the War Fort, others will keep going. What do you want to do?”

“I-“ Emily hesitated.

She wasn’t sure. She had been gone from Earth for a long time by now. She hadn’t had any news at all since she entered the Million Gates Territory three years ago. Had Zac returned by now? Had they also come here to get a head-start on this mess?

At the same time, she was hesitant to return now. The quest in her status screen beckoned her. This was her shot. An opportunity grasped with her own two hands, rather than something handed to her by Zac or Teacher. Could she just go home now that she finally had found her path?

“You don’t have to choose right now. We depart in two days.”

“No need,” Emily said with determination. “I’ll keep going. I’ll see this through to the end.”

“So much Mara,” Golden Bell sighed.

Three Virtues nodded in agreement as the group looked down on the sprawling world in front of them. No matter where they turned their eyes, there was evil and suffering. Men fought like beasts in their twisted pursuit of power, and blood flowed like rivers. It was an inherited madness, suffering perpetuated through generations.

“This continent truly needs the love of Buddha to start healing,” Peaceful Way said with a shake of her head.

“This poor monk can sense this realm is on the cusp of integration,” Golden Bell ventured. “With a few seeds sown and a couple of temples erected...”

“For now, it will have to wait,” Three Virtues said. “Our seniors paid no small price to find this realm and send us all this way.”

“To think there was a third option,” Peaceful Way said. “Lord Blessed Fate truly is a master of the Dharma.”

“Still, this Goldblade Continent is vast,” Golden Bell hesitated as he looked around. “Finding the path in this confusing mix of fell Karma will take time.”

“Amitabha. A guide is waiting for us,” Three Virtues smiled as he took out a low-quality spatial ring. “She will lead the way.”

One step brought him to the Anolan Plains, where the Stalk Sages communed with nature as they followed the ancient paths imprinted by the cosmos itself. Today, the billions of rivers had dried up, and the endless sea of emerald grass was replaced by festering pools of blight. Creatures twisted by the Heavens shrunk back into their dwellings as he passed by, unable to comprehend why they had just felt a pang of mortal danger.

This time, he didn't leave a path of destruction in his wake. What was the point?

Another step brought him to the towering peaks of the Pasho. Once, the whole mountain range would have sung from the Pasho'Har Bells, their cadence forming a universe through music. But the Pasho were long gone, as were the marvels they created. The Keeper of the Note had been known throughout all creation, but innumerable civilizations had turned to dust since her songs were lost to the river of time.

Eternity – was there even such a thing?

And if this was it, what was the point? Wal'Zo's heart broke all over again upon seeing his fallen world. These small sections were moved here to honor those who sacrificed everything, yet they had become mockeries of their previous masters. Wal'Zo was even thankful it would soon all be over. He, too, would sink into the river of time, taking this twisted reality with him.

Another step brought him home, and the connection was erected anew. Wal'Zo slowly made his way back through the hallowed halls, the lingering corruption on his body wilting away with every step. Still, two more hallways had been tainted since he left. A few more Eras at most before their undertaking would finally crumble, and that was if their power wasn't drawn upon any further.

Another wave of reluctance filled his heart as his mind wandered back to that distant past. To those who said no to the Terminus, and set about changing the course of history. To the Eternal, who sacrificed herself to keep the flicker of hope alive when all else failed. Soon enough he reached the First Garden, where the withered remains of Sal'Sun basked in the sunlight.

Next to it, the red pot stood. Inside was a small tree, still no more than a sapling even after billions of years. The gift from that inscrutable man.

“I've seen it now. Your masterpiece,” Wal'Zo smiled as he sat down next to the small tree. “I wonder what you would think if you saw it today. It is truly something. But it seems to have diverged from what you described to us old things. Or is this still within your calculations? I could never tell where your

depths lay. I guess that's why I went along with it. You reminded me of the Eternal."

"Would you still think the price was worth it? The sacrifice?"

"I even saw that man's son. I bet you didn't expect to hear that, huh?" Wal'Zo laughed. "Some things even you can't control. Ripples on the lake. I would have given him a shot, but he actually took it on his own. So it will ultimately be up to him to prove himself more than a link in the chain. As it has always been."

His gaze turned to the false sky, his eyes flickering with thought.

"Fate is gathering. Ultom is rising from the depths. Us old things cannot hold on much longer. The inevitable looms closer."

Another hallway collapsed, and Wal'Zo sighed as he caressed the sapling.

"Laondio, I hope you were right."

Chapter 919: Testing Fate

“Alright, let’s do it,” Zac grunted as he cracked his neck.

His Spirit Tool robes had already been placed to the side and covered in Nexus Crystals to aid its recovery, and Zac instead wore three layers of mish-mashed E-grade armors he had picked up from some random cultists. Iz’s flames had simply proven too potent, and any more tests of fate would probably ruin the clothes altogether.

“You can do it, buddy,” Ogras hollered from the distance, his voice dripping with schadenfreude.

They were standing in a large cave deep underground that Ogras had found with his shadows, which then had been further sealed off by Iz. A thin film of golden flames covered everything from floor to ceiling, but they didn’t actually feel hot to the touch. The flames emanated from a candle Iz had placed on a random stone. According to her, not even Peak Hegemons would sense any energy fluctuations from within the candle’s domain.

Iz, who had spent the last hour in silent meditation, opened her eyes and looked over at Zac with confusion. “What are you wearing?”

“Have to wear something after you ruined my poor robes,” Zac muttered.

“I understand. But those pieces of armor would melt onto your skin,” Iz said, and Zac groaned when there was a small hint of excitement in her voice.

It had become painfully obvious that Iz really enjoyed blasting him with her flames, and she used different types of flames every time he had asked a question over the past two days. It almost felt like she was experimenting which kind of fire would toast him the best. Iz had even been so disappointed

upon learning that Zac couldn't take any more punishment, that she had provided a bottle of healing pills.

At first, Zac thought it wouldn't change things, but that was only until he sensed the monstrous amount of medicinal energy crammed into the pills. Not only that, but in the bottle of 10 pills, every single pill contained a Pill Spirit. This was the first time he'd owned a Spiritual Pill since stumbling onto one back in the hunt, and it was shocking to see ten of them at one go.

Ten pills whose spirits were all far stronger than the one in the **[Four Gates Pill]**.

Such pills didn't grow on trees. Not only did the pill itself have to be of Supreme Quality to have even a small chance of gaining spirituality, but it had to absorb the truths of the universe for a long time to evolve. They were exceedingly rare even in more affluent places like the Twilight Harbor. A few occasionally popped up at auction, but there was no steady supply.

Some factions had Gathering Arrays for their Pill cauldrons and left batches stewing for millennia in hopes of evolving a few pills. And even then, there were no guarantees. So ultimately, most didn't bother. The increase in efficacy simply couldn't make up for the effort and luck required to concoct those kinds of pills.

But it looked like this basic logic didn't have any sway with Iz Tayn's faction. Perhaps top-tier alchemists had ways to guarantee Pill Spirits awakening, but it was still odd to see it on normal Healing Pills. It was a bit like crafting a Peak-Quality Spirit Tool for a toothbrush or paperweight.

Still, Zac wasn't about to complain about such a windfall. It had not only helped him and Ogras save a day of recuperation, but it had allowed them to gain some vital intelligence. For instance, they'd learned these Kan'Tanu were actually related to the Black Heart Sect, a massive unorthodox force with actual Supremacies in charge. That explained how they dared to negotiate with peak factions when selling opportunities for the Left Imperial Palace.

More importantly, it spelled bad news for Zecia. It was already a problem when Zecia's enemies was one unified force against their fragmented sector. Now it also turned out they had connections to an A-grade force. In other words, they were like the Void Gate. Even if they were just a distant offshoot, their heritage was bound to be deeper than the shallow foundations you'd normally see in a Frontier Sector.

"If armor doesn't work, just go naked?" Ogras grinned. "Your hide is thicker than a Barghest's in either case."

"That would lead to less damage," Iz agreed. "Or mortal clothes that can be properly disintegrated."

"I can't go around naked," Zac said with exasperation as he started removing his layers of armor. "Your elders would probably burn me alive if they found out."

To say that they had gotten close to Iz over the past day would be an overstatement, but Zac had started to understand her personality a bit better. She wasn't actually haughty or arrogant like some powerful scions. It was just her penchant for burning things and people that had left Zac with a bad impression. But she wouldn't take offense to some random words, nor did she act overbearing with either him or Ogras.

Iz undeniably had some odd social blindspots though, and Zac figured she was a bit of a cultivation idiot like himself. However, while he had only started cultivating when he was 29, she had probably done so from birth. That had left her personality incredibly lopsided, though it seemed like she was working on that.

"Oh, you're right," Iz nodded as though it was a matter of course. "Then, let's skip it. Instead, tell me of your experiences in the Twilight Harbor."

"How do you know about that?" Zac asked.

"That was where your signal led for a long time, until you suddenly disappeared through the interference of Chaos," Iz said. "By the time I left for the frontier, the Twilight Harbor had long since been destroyed."

"What happened to the people living there?" Zac hesitated.

“Most weren’t fated,” Iz said. “Around a third of the platforms survived. But without an energy source or a World Core, the environment is doomed to decline until it is barely habitable.”

“Must be hell on earth there by now,” Ogras muttered. “Those places will run dry of resources quickly. A lot of people would have to kill and steal to afford a ticket out of there.”

Zac sighed and said another silent prayer for Nala, the half-blood Draugr who had guided him when he visited.

“So you just want me to tell you what happened in Twilight Harbor?” Zac asked to confirm. “And you won’t suddenly blast me with a fireball?”

“...No.” Iz said after an entirely too-long pause.

Zac didn’t even need to deliberate before he started to retell his experiences in Twilight Harbor and the Twilight Ascent. Almost any price would beat getting incinerated by Iz’s terrifying flames again. Even Verun had lost its vigor by now in front of her skills, and the Tool Spirit had released a subdued whimper after the last test of fate. If it had to endure any more, Zac worried it might actually mutiny.

Iz listened on with interest as Zac narrated the events, occasionally asking for clarifications. But it wasn’t for stuff like one expected, like lucky encounters or powerful beasts he’d fought. She rather asked about mundane stuff, such as what the unique Twilight Water felt and tasted like, or whether the water in the Twilight Chasm was colder.

She was also delighted when he took out a few of the corals he had collected in the Coral Forest, or the puppet Catheya got him. In contrast, she didn’t care much about the powerful scions he had fought.

“The Eidolon and the Blood Clan. To think they both so easily fell prey to the destructive corruption of the Remnants,” Iz commented.

“Blood Clan? You mean the Eternal Clan?” Zac asked.

“They do not have the qualifications to speak of Eternity,” Iz said with equanimity. “Then what happened?”

Zac shrugged and continued the story, with the collapse of the Mystic Realm and how he had jumped into a spatial tear to survive the battle outside.

“You truly are an unkillable Mr. Bug,” Iz said with a small smile. “What do you want to know?”

“What can you tell us about this Lost Plane and its connection to... that place? Would conventional means cut off the connection to that place, or do we need to prepare something more than spatial destabilizers?”

“I find it curious you are unable to say Ultom without fate shifting,” Iz said. “Is it because you are the first Candidate?”

Zac could only helplessly shrug in response. It was not like he had any idea.

“I don’t know this Lost Plane you’ve mentioned, and I don’t recognize the taint in this world. But if you say the temples come from there, it’s most likely a pocket world connected to the Eternal Heritage itself. Most of them contain vast realms,” Iz said after some thought. “It is a bit odd though. Those worlds are always mirrors of the heritage they reside within, but Ultom does not carry this taint. I cannot explain that, so I might be wrong.”

“Alright,” Zac frowned. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to pray our preparations work.”

“I’m sorry wasn’t of more help,” Iz said. “I couldn’t answer your question, so ask me something else.”

Zac thought for a few moments, but he didn’t know what else to ask. She had already hinted that she wouldn’t divulge her background, and she had already told them most of what she knew about the situation with Ultom and the Kan’Tanu. But there was something else he was curious about.

“Then, how did you arrive at the frontier so quickly? Could I use that method to reach the Six Profundity Empire?” Zac asked.

His strength was far from reaching the point where he felt confident in saving Kenzie, but opportunities like this were rare. Who knew when he’d meet someone like Iz the next

time, someone who had actually traveled from the heartlands to the frontier?

“The Six Profundity Empire?” Iz said with surprise. “What do you want to do there? Your heritage doesn’t seem to have any relation to them.”

“Humor me,” Zac smiled.

“This is a real scenario? Where you are just you?” Iz asked.

“I’m just me,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

“A few people owed my family favors and helped my uncle reach this sector, so you wouldn’t be able to use our method,” Iz said.

“So what can I do?”

“The Six Profundity Empire is very far from here. You are poor, so you can’t get a Cosmic Vessel fast enough,” Iz said, her brows scrunched together like she was trying to figure out a riddle. “And you have no connections that can assist you. There are no gateways in the frontier either... Hmm...”

“It’s impossible?” Zac grimaced.

“No, I can think of two solutions,” Iz eventually said. “The first is to reach the closest A-grade force. They should have access to some allies, and you might be able to pay for passage through their long-distance teleporter. That way, you can gradually jump closer and closer to your destination.”

“What would something like that cost?” Zac hesitated.

“Transfer between two forces?” Iz said. “I don’t know? I hear it’s rarely counted in Nexus Coins. Factions like that have little use for System Currency. You rather need to provide rare treasures for them to activate the long-range teleporters. You should know, the energy required for such a jump would drain a couple of C-grade factions.”

“So a jump would beggar a Peak Monarch, and one would have to make multiple jumps?” Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

“If the factions will even allow you to use them. They are strategic resources, and they are incredibly difficult to both operate and maintain. Some might not want to risk their platforms, since it is one of their lifelines in case of emergency,” Iz said. “And if they’ve broken down, they might take millennia to repair. Dozens of millennia if they need to send for Spatial Array Masters.”

“What’s the other option?” Zac sighed.

“Enter the Endless Storm and find a wormhole,” Iz said.

“Enter the what now?” Zac asked, and a glance confirmed Ogras knew as little as he did.

“You two live at the Frontier but don’t know about the Endless Storm?” Iz asked, her head cocked to the side. “How is that possible? It would be like living by the lake but not knowing what water is.”

Zac and Ogras shared a helpless look. He knew Iz wasn’t trying to be rude, but that perhaps made her comments even worse. This wasn’t the first time she had been confused by their ignorance of what she thought was common knowledge.

“It’s the region beyond the Frontier?” Zac ventured.

“Yes,” Iz nodded. “Beyond the Frontiers is the Endless Storm. You can actually see a calm corner of it in this sector; the Million Gates Territory.”

“That chaotic place is a calm corner?” Zac grimaced.

“I hear there are Solar Storms in the depths of the Endless Storm that would destroy even Supremacies,” Iz said. “But it’s not all dangerous. It’s called a storm, but there are decently safe regions, some of which are larger than whole empires.”

“Where would one find a Wormhole then?” Zac asked.

“Usually in the actual storms,” Iz said. “The System’s expansion has pushed back the storm for billions of years, and it has resulted in some interesting phenomena. There are gateways, some of them incredibly stable, that can take you across half of the cosmos in an instant. The Space Gate the Black Heart Sect uses is an example of this, though their

sector most likely is quite close to Zecia. Those that can take you across all reality need a stronger storm to be born.

“These tunnels are the most convenient methods of travel, but they are extremely rare in integrated space. No one has ever managed to replicate them either, except for Lord Stillsun and later the System itself.”

“So I should just head into this storm and hope for the best?” Zac grimaced. “Seems like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“Without a guide, it would be nigh-hopeless,” Iz agreed.

“There are factions who live inside the storm, who know of hidden wormholes or are able to find them. In this regard, the Technocrats are unsurpassed. “

Zac tried to keep his face impassive, but his heartbeat sped up. Iz had just unknowingly provided him with a huge lead. What if Leandra didn't choose the Six Profundity Empire because she had a special connection to it? What if she just wanted to go to any random A-grade Empire, and she happened to know of a nearby wormhole that led there?

If so, perhaps he could find a way to trace her steps into the Eternal Storm after getting his hands on a Cosmic Vessel. Going there early might be preferable anyway, since he would probably be able to grow quicker in such a place than here in Zecia. And it would be a good way to disappear, in case the situation with Ultom became too complicated.

Various plans started to crop up in Zac's mind, but he eventually put the matter aside. No matter if it was actually viable or not, it would have to wait. There were a lot of things he needed to deal with in Zecia before he sailed off into some cosmic storm in search of magical portals.

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded before turning to Ogras.

“How do you feel?”

“A lot better than I thought possible one day ago,” Ogras shrugged. “I'm good to go.”

“Let's head out, then? The quicker we deal with this mess, the more energy Gemmy will have for her transformation,” Zac

ventured. “Also, I don’t want that golem to catch up. No offense.”

“That’s okay,” Iz nodded. “That hand is just an expendable clone. It dying will have no bearing on Kvalk.”

“That’s not wh-“Zac said. “Well, never mind.”

The three once more set out in the direction of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom. Ogras was still leading the way, but it honestly wasn’t necessary. The sky was a pitch-black curtain to the east, and even Zac could feel the ominous energy churning inside the clouds. You’d almost have to be blind to miss it.

Ogras didn’t have to expend any energy concealing their approach either. Iz simply infused some energy into the candle, and it floated into the air and followed her as they traveled. Around them, a ten-meter domain was erected, and both Ogras and he confirmed they were completely invisible within.

Seeing how Iz was taking care of everything, Zac chose to squeeze in some cultivation time while he walked. Most of his methods couldn’t be trained while on the move, but he could make some progress on [**Thousand Lights Avatar**] if he didn’t need to focus on his surroundings. It was almost like making candles, where he covered his Spiritual Framework with his Mental Energy over and over.

Each time, a little bit was left behind and thickened the avatar, though the change wouldn’t be discernible to the naked eye. Progress was slow, but Zac still kept at it. It was actually because of a suggestion from Iz. She had told him that a powerful Soul could help stabilize one’s breakthrough into Hegemony.

Zac didn’t have any actual method to accomplish something like that, but he had an idea. If he could form a proper avatar around his Specialty Core, he might be able to erect powerful Spiritual Barriers like the ones he used when he opened the last nodes in his head. That meant he had one more thing he needed to accomplish before reaching Hegemony, so he couldn’t just slack off and enjoy the view.

“Do... You think it’s fun? Cultivation,” Iz suddenly asked after an hour of silence, prompting Zac to startle awake from his semi-comatose state.

“If it’s fun?” Zac asked as a small smile crept up his face.

“You’d have to eat my punch if you want to know.”

Chapter 920: Tainted Well

Zac regretted the words the moment he uttered them, but flames were already gathering around Iz, and she was obviously excited at the prospect of getting punched.

“I’m ready,” Iz nodded.

“I was just kid-,” Zac said with exasperation, but he stopped in his track when a displeased frown appeared on Iz’s face.

“Do you think me too weak to bear your fate?” Iz glared at him.

“Uh, no?” Zac said.

“Then test me,” Iz said as the burning field expanded around them, forming a dome the same size as the cave they’d spent over two days inside.

Zac knew there wasn’t much else to do – he needed to give this fate-obsessed firebug a good wallop. Zac was pretty thankful that Ogras was the only other person around as he stepped back to create some distance. Punching someone for asking him about his feelings and opinions seemed pretty toxic, and it would drag his already frayed reputation further through the mud.

At the same time, Zac couldn’t help but feel some excitement as Cosmic Energy started to course through his body. Iz Tayn had scared him half to death a couple of times by now, and he was pretty sure she had intentionally targeted his butt in the attack she had traded for intelligence on the Black Heart Sect. He could still feel flashes of pain as they walked.

This was a chance for some sanctioned retaliation.

Four thick streams of Mental Energy traveled along the framework of [**Thousand Lights Avatar**] into his arm as the muscles in his legs tensed. A moment later, Zac shot forward like an arrow released from its bow, leaving huge cracks in the

ground from where he pushed off. Simultaneously, two streams of Kalpataru and War Axe entered his prepared Mental Energy-Braid before gathering in his fist.

His hand released a ferocious aura of primal life, and his body naturally moved according to his Evolutionary Stance. The air twisted around him as he released a vibrant and deadly Dao Field, like an apex predator pouncing on its prey. Zac's eyes met with Iz's, and he saw a small smile spread across her face before a wall of flames separated them.

If this were a real fight, Zac would most likely have released a staggered attack to first break the barrier before delivering the real strike, but this was just a friendly clash. There was no need to complicate things, so when Zac appeared in front of Iz, his hand was already shooting toward the barrier in a monstrous right hook.

Every muscle, every cell in Zac's body was in perfect harmony, and all his momentum and force were gathered into one spot. His fist slammed into the shield with enough power to disintegrate a small mountain, yet there was only a subdued thud. All force in Zac's attack was directed inward, yet Iz's barrier had somehow managed to absorb most of it.

Only a trickle of Cosmic Energy and his Dao managed to pass through the fiery barrier, but Zac couldn't just give up like that. Even if he hadn't put everything into the punch, it would be too embarrassing if a lazily erected barrier completely nullified his attack. So Zac took control and roused the lingering energies before they scattered, and a smaller wave lept toward Iz's left temple in a final blaze of glory.

But just as Zac's attack was about to reach Iz's actual body, a finger gently tapped the ball of energy. Zac's felt a flash of heat before losing his connection to his attack. Shortly after, the flame wall dispersed, and Zac looked at Iz with some helplessness. So close, yet so far away.

"You have a novel approach to Dao Braiding," Iz said with a smile as four streams of flames appeared around her hand. Two of them shifted colors into a darker hue, and Zac looked

on with a sense of defeat as they formed a perfect copy of his crude Dao Braid.

“Well,” Zac shrugged. “You have to play with the cards you are dealt.”

“Cards?” Iz said with confusion.

“Just an expression,” Zac said. “To make do with what you have.”

“Oh,” Iz nodded. “It evens out, provided you are fated. The paths of those coming from humble beginnings are generally sturdier than those from powerful factions. By the time they defend their Dao, they are often more powerful. Forged through adversity. And in your case, your disadvantages seem to be wholly exaggerated.”

“Tell me about it,” Ogras muttered to the side.

“So, your answer?” Iz said.

“What?” Zac said with confusion until he remembered why they’d fought in the first place. “I guess I think it’s fun, for the most part? I like the feeling of discovery. The feeling of pushing past your previous boundaries. I kind of wish I’d have some periods of calm, though. Where I could just cultivate for the sake of it, rather than to avoid getting hunted down by some old monster or die in a war forced down my throat.”

“But then you’d be without purpose. Without those Karmic Links that push you forward.”

“That’s fine, isn’t it?” Zac smiled. “I can always find a purpose if I lack one.”

“Find a purpose?” Iz asked.

“Yeah,” Zac nodded. “Like if I reached a point all my enemies were gone, and I wasn’t rushing toward anything, I could look for purpose elsewhere. Like pick up hobbies. Improve the lives of the people on my planet. I don’t know, start a family. I was already a teenager when my dad was my age.”

“My uncle said that it is inadvisable to start a family before closing in on your limits,” Iz said. “Your heart will become split between the Dao and your progeny, hampering progress.”

You also risk getting entangled with someone whose fate cannot match up to yours.”

“I don’t know. Does it have to be that cut-and-dry?” Zac said. “Can’t family be another sort of fuel for your cultivation? Like you work harder because you have something important to protect, something more important than your own life. As for fate, I don’t really believe in something like that. Fate is malleable. If it doesn’t suit you, you change it.”

“Fate is malleable?” Iz said with glimmering eyes. “Perhaps you are right.”

“I don’t want to interrupt... whatever the two of you are doing,” Ogras suddenly interjected. “But we have company.”

Zac looked over with surprise, his gaze following in the direction Ogras pointed at. Far in the distance, he could vaguely make out a handful of moving dots. They were neither moving at a fast nor a slow pace, and the dots would cut past their current position in ten minutes or so.

“Cultivators or beasts?” Zac hesitated, feeling a bit hamstrung after not having Vai and her bowl accompany him.

“Cultivators,” Ogras said. “They look like invaders. But it’s odd...”

“They carry the taint,” Iz calmly said after glancing at the distant dots. “A lot of it.”

“So I’m the only one without any farsight abilities?” Zac muttered. “Well, let’s get a bit closer. Iz, are you sure this domain won’t be discovered, even by scouts?”

“It is both an isolation field and a Karmic Partition. They have no fate with anything within these flames. As such, they cannot react to it,” Iz said before glancing at Zac with an inscrutable look. “Of course, there are no guarantees if fate is malleable.”

Zac nodded, and the three moved over to an outcropping that should allow them to get a better look at these cultivators. Not long after, the small party was close enough for Zac to properly scan them with [**Cosmic Gaze**], and his brows furrowed in consternation. Iz wasn’t kidding around.

A palpable aura of corruption surrounded the group of warriors as they ran through the wasteland. The sinister undulations from their Heart Curses were still there, but it was now mixed with the taint of the Lost Plane. The eyes of the cultivators felt a bit muddled as well, but Zac saw how two of the cultivators exchanged a couple of words as they ran.

In other words, they hadn't become vessels of mindless aggression like the Qriz'Ul Ogras had described.

"Looks like these fools have drunk from a tainted well," Ogras snorted after the party was gone. "Like they didn't have enough problems with those disgusting curses in their chests."

"That can't end well for them," Zac agreed.

"Should we follow them?" Iz ventured.

"They're not moving in the direction of our destination," Zac said after some thought. "Let's just leave them be. Who knows if taking them out will alert the others."

"Proper scouting units would always carry life tablets," Iz nodded. "Some carry deadly poisons to use if they find themselves cornered. Better dead than captured, as their deaths would serve as an early warning."

The trio set out again, but they stopped just twenty minutes later after reaching the crest of a hill. On the other side, a seemingly endless city stretched across the horizon. Only the foundations of a 20-meter-thick wall remained, and the structures inside weren't any better off.

Only the occasional building retained all of its walls, and there was a palpable sense of gloom covering the ruins. The sky was completely black, and a purple haze covered large sections of the city.

"The Ra'Lashar Capital," Ogras explained as he looked at the city with mixed emotions. "Took me the better part of a year to deal with the netherblasted rune goblins over there. I can't believe I'm back in this cursed place."

"Does it look any different?" Zac asked.

“Well, it doesn’t look like the Qriz’Ul have multiplied, at least. But the environment is far worse than when I was here,” Ogras grimaced as he crushed a Nexus Crystal to release some pure energy around him. “Back then, the corruption wasn’t this palpable.”

“That’s better,” the demon sighed before turning to Zac. “Not sure if I can go all-out if we have to fight in the depths of the cit. A bunch of corruption will sneak into my body if I’m not careful. What about you?”

“I’m fine,” Zac shrugged. “Looks like I’m immune to the taint at these levels.”

Zac had already noticed it some time ago. There was something else mixed into the Cosmic Energy in the wastelands, though it was barely noticeable. It was a sticky and stubborn energy that snuck into his body and seemingly wanted to glom onto his pathways. The energy was unlike anything Zac had encountered before, except for that enormous pillar blasting into the sky.

Back then, the energy of the Lost Plane had been contained by the nine sigils, and Zac couldn’t observe its true nature. But even when it had infiltrated his body, Zac didn’t quite know what to make of it. It didn’t feel like attuned energy at all. In fact, Zac wasn’t even sure it was comparable to Cosmic Energy.

Was this because the energy possibly stemmed from an Eternal Heritage? Was the fundamental energy of the previous eras different than the Cosmic Energy they used now? Thankfully, his **[Purity of the Void]** quickly dealt with the infiltration all the same, and it never had time to become a problem. The situation hadn’t even gotten to the point where his **[Void Heart]** needed to activate like in the Twilight Ocean.

“My flames are naturally purging the corruption,” Iz added.

“Forget I asked,” Ogras muttered under his breath. “Travelling with a buncha monsters.”

A smile tugged at Zac’s mouth, which made Iz look over with confusion.

“You take pleasure in your friend’s lacking foundations?” Iz asked curiously.

“Hey-” Ogras interjected, but he just shrugged in defeat and dropped the matter after looking at the monstrously powerful scion.

“More in the faces he makes when he gets jealous, I think?” Zac said after some thought.

“Hmm,” Iz hummed before turning to Ogras, who looked back at her vigilantly. “When I left for the Frontier, my elder gave me 10 B-grade Nexus Coins for pocket money.”

The demon tried to keep his face impassive, but the shades of gray on his face gained a hint of green, and it looked like he was about to become physically ill.

“That’s... Nice,” Ogras squeezed through grit teeth before turning around and walking away to the edge of the barrier.

“You were right,” Iz smiled. “It is a bit amusing.”

“You have to take pleasure in the little things,” Zac nodded while desperately trying to hide his own jealousy.

Iz looked at Zac for an uncomfortable amount of time until her mouth slowly curved up. “To improve my Luck upon reaching E-grade, I bathed in the diluted dew from a two-million-year-old [**Fateweave Orchid**]. It also helped cleanse my marrow of some Natal Impurities.”

Zac’s stomach churned as he unwittingly remembered his most recent experience with improving his Luck. It almost felt like he could smell the unbearable stench from the [**Celestial Clay**] for a moment, and he was forced to take a steadying breath to stop himself from gagging.

“Let’s hurry and close that portal,” Zac grunted as he quickly walked over to Ogras, realizing he might have made a horrible mistake upon hearing a small laugh from behind.

Thankfully, Iz didn’t continue bragging about her financial prowess, much to the relief of both Zac and Ogras. Even then, her two little comments had painted a painfully clear picture

that his so-called fortune wasn't worth much in the grand scheme of things.

Seeing how they were approaching the city proper, Ogras took out a talisman that Pretty Peak had provided. It was a top-quality detection talisman that had proven to work against the Kan'Tanu's arrays, and the air started to shudder a bit after the demon infused some energy into it.

As they got closer, nothing changed until they reached the very edge of the crumbled wall. It was barely visible, but the vibrations had gotten stronger, forming a thin film halfway through the thick wall.

"They've really installed a detection array," Ogras frowned.

"My flames don't work if they're allowed to touch the barrier," Iz said.

"Alright, let's pass through using our means and then reignite the flame?" Zac said.

Iz nodded, and the floating candle swinked out. That exposed the three to the surroundings, but Ogras worked quickly as he took out a small array disk. Two flickering gateways appeared; one right in front of them and the other a hundred meters into the ruins. The three wordlessly passed through, and the array disk disintegrated to black ash behind them.

Such a short-range teleportation array wouldn't work against an actual barrier with spatial isolation, but it worked fine against large-scale detection arrays. Iz's candle reignited, and the three set off deeper into the capital. The three continued for another five hours at a rapid pace before slowing down.

During this time, they encountered two more detection arrays and even a couple of traps, but they passed them without much issue. Still, it was a clear sign the Kan'Tanu expected trouble, and Zac started to fear their chances of detonating the pathway before slipping away unnoticed were pretty slim.

The three also encountered a couple of Qriz'Ul on their way. To their surprise, not all of them looked like corrupted goblins. They had seen two who looked surprisingly similar to Ogras, while others had taken human form. Still, the vast majority

looked like goblins, covered in runes unlike any Zac had ever seen. Iz didn't recognize them either, and she didn't even believe they were a derivation of the Apostate of Order's codification of the Dao.

By this point, the corruption was so strong it had created a dark haze all around them, and they couldn't see further than a few hundred meters. Ogras had been forced to completely seal his pores, and he had fastened over twenty Nexus Crystals across his body with his shadows to combat the corruption. Even Zac felt that **[Purity of the Void]** was reaching its limits, while Iz remained unphased.

"We're close now," the demon said as he pointed at an inner wall. "This was the fifth of seven layers that sealed the Ra'Lashar Kingdom. The seventh layer was just the central tower, which should still be one big crater. Still, the portal should be over there."

"No wonder those scouts were marked by the taint," Zac muttered. "I can't believe they dare stay in this kind of environment."

"K'Rav said the whispers of the Lost Plane are insidious," Ogras shrugged. "The Ra'Lashar never really realized they were running straight toward their doom. The gifts of the Lost Plane were like saltwater; the more they drank, the thirstier they got."

"Well, let's get on with it," Zac said as he readied himself. "The sooner we can get out of this disgusting place, the better."

"So you want to destroy the pathway first?" Iz confirmed.

"If possible," Zac nodded. "As long as we destroy that place, we've won. We don't even need to fight the Kan'Tanu if we don't have to. This whole region will collapse when the Realm Spirit activates the Portable Realm array; there's no way the infiltrators survive that without some means to escape the Void."

The three made their way through yet another detection array, this time by carefully calculating things so that they appeared

in one of the few still-standing buildings in the last layer. From there, they crept closer and closer to the heart of the city until they finally discovered what they were dealing with.

The crater Ogras had described was gone. It had been replaced by a purple lake teeming with corruption. And on its shores, a thousand cultivators sat in silent meditation.

Chapter 921: Going With the Flow

The silence around the corrupted lake was absolute, with not one of the cultivators moving. But while the scene looked tranquil on the surface, it was anything but. The lake released powerful waves of dirty energy, creating an invisible storm on its surface that spread out along the crater's slopes.

Meanwhile, the auras of the cultivators kept rising and falling in pace with the pulses of the lake.

It was almost like they had fused and become a singular organism that slowly inhaled and exhaled its corruption on its surroundings. The taint buffeted their surroundings, and Zac felt his **[Void Heart]** finally awaking from its slumber to consume the accumulated taint in his body.

A small settlement had been erected at the southern banks to their right. There were roughly 100 structures altogether, and their rustic design as they hugged the slopes of the crater would have made for an almost picturesque scene in another environment. But with the absolute lack of activity and the black haze that spread among the buildings, it looked like an abandoned ghost town.

“Look,” Ogras whispered and pointed to the left, and Zac's eyes widened in surprise upon seeing a group of Qriz'Ul standing right next to a squad of Kan'Tanu cultivators.

“They've allied?” Zac grimaced.

“More like these fools have absorbed so much corruption the Qriz'Ul have mistaken them for their own,” Ogras snorted.

“What in the Heavens are they doing? Weren't they supposed to be digging for keys to the courts?”

Zac nodded in agreement. It really looked odd. There was no excavation being done, and Zac couldn't sense any hint of

Ultom at all.

“Do you sense any calling for your seals?” Zac asked, and both Iz and Ogras shook their heads. “Alright, I guess we won’t be able to conjure a pillar. Unless we blow up the lake somehow?”

“Not sure how we’d accomplish that,” Ogras muttered. “More importantly, where is the gateway? Get the hell out here, bastard.”

“Ai, what have these bastards done to my home?” a sad sigh echoed as the spectral goblin appeared next to Ogras, but he quickly turned to Iz.

“Young miss, I can see you carry great fate. If you-“K’Rav said, but his words were caught in his throat when a few small embers started to dance around Iz as she trained her eyes at him. “Ah, never mind, young mistress. I shan’t take up your precious time.”

“No, it’s fine,” Ogras grinned. “Go ahead, make your pitch.”

“What do you want, you imbecile? To show me the aftermath of you blowing up the great Tower of Ra’Lashar?” K’Rav swore.

“That was mostly you, remember?” Ogras snorted. “Where is the gateway to the Lost Plane?”

“It’s at the bottom of the lake, obviously,” K’Rav said with disinterest. “Can’t you brats tell? Those waters are not from our plane. It must have seeped out from somewhere. These children must really have cracked the whole thing wide open for physical matter to appear like this. Even we knew better than to be that greedy.”

“Well, I guess it’s up to you two young masters then, yeah?” Ogras said. “Unfortunately, this poor peasant’s foundations are no match to a lake with that amount of corruption. I’d probably die before resurfacing.”

“I... Don’t think I can enter the lake either,” Iz said after some hesitation. “At least not while accomplishing the mission. My bloodline will try to set the lake on fire if assaulted by that

much corruption. I might even be teleported away by fatewarding treasures.”

“I guess it’s up to the fearsome Deviant Asura, then,” Ogras nodded.

“Perfect,” Zac muttered as he hesitantly looked at the bubbling lake.

It should be fine. Right?

It was hard to tell from the distance, but Zac felt he should be able to last for a short while at least. Even if the tainted waters came from the Lost Plane, they didn’t contain energies that far surpassed this Mystic Realm’s. It seemed to be a bit worse than the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but he had **[Void Zone]** now. As long as it worked against this weird energy, he would have more than enough wiggle room.

“Give me some space, please,” Zac said as he took a couple of steps away from Iz before activating an Illusion Array.

Zac was somewhat certain that Iz didn’t care about whatever his hidden aces were. She couldn’t care less about him being both Draugr and Human. She only found it an interesting oddity. As for the Remnants, she was even less impressed. She even seemed to believe they were more trouble than they were worth, which definitely was a reasonable assessment.

But his bloodline was different. The Limitless Emperor was still a sensitive subject billions of years later. He didn’t know what ramifications it would have if people from the ancient factions found out whose legacy he was carrying. Even if he wasn’t killed outright, it was possible that some would want to use him for the same purpose as Leandra and the Kayar-Elu – to control the System.

And just because Iz didn’t care nor mind, there were no guarantees about her elders.

Ogras and Iz looked over, but the demon shrugged and turned away upon seeing the Illusion array. Iz looked for a moment longer, but she too turned back toward the lake a moment later. Zac immediately activated **[Void Zone]**, and the soothing sense of nothingness ensconced him.

It worked. Just like [**Purity of the Void**] had no problems purifying the energy of the Lost Plane and [**Void Heart**] had no problems absorbing it, neither did [**Void Zone**] have any difficulties removing any such energy from his surroundings. That was still no guarantee it would be able to completely block out the energy in the lake, but it would at the least severely weaken it.

“All good, Mr. Secretive?” Ogras asked with a raised brow when Zac returned.

“All good. I’ll deal wit-,” Zac nodded, but he suddenly froze as [**Void Heart**] suddenly spat out a trickle of refined energy.

Suddenly, Zac understood a passage from the Book of Duality that had stumped him five days ago. A moment later, both the flash of inspiration and the refined energy were gone, but Zac was still frozen solid. It didn’t come close to the lights of the seals, but what he’d just felt was definitely in the same category.

[**Void Heart**] could refine and distill the insights of the Lost Plane.

Zac’s eyes were veritably burning as he turned back to the lake. It no longer looked like a putrid pond of corruption that needed to be incinerated. It looked like a treasure mountain. One round of refinement from [**Void Heart**] might only have helped him deduce one passage of the Book of Duality, but what if he had a whole lake’s worth of fuel for inspiration?

Altogether, it might even match up to a full piece of the seal. Just the thought of it made his breath ragged, and he could definitely understand why the Ra’Lashar held onto the Lost Plane until their very demise. The possibilities almost felt endless.

“Uh, you okay there?” Ogras coughed. “You look like Barghest in heat.”

“You seem to have come up with a... creative... idea,” Iz added with an excited sparkle in her eyes.

“Ah? What? Oh, never mind,” Zac coughed. “I said I’ll deal with the gateway. But do you guys have any better ideas than

me just making a run for it? There are no guarantees these guys won't follow me into the lake. I'm not sure I can deal with a bunch of corrupted Kan'Tanu and the portal simultaneously."

"We can create a diversion?" Ogras offered. "But it's hard to tell how these guys will react. It almost feels like they have fused with the lake. They may ignore us if they feel the lake threatened."

"There were vast tunnel networks beneath the Tower of Ra'Lashar," K'Rav suddenly said. "Many should have flooded or collapsed, but some might be intact. If you can find one, you can either walk or swim beneath those glassy-eyed fools."

"Can you tell us where they are?" Zac asked.

"Everything's different by now, hard to tell," K'Rav shrugged. "Besides, why would I help you after you tried to kill me?"

"I'll deal with it," Ogras said as he took out the **[Shadewar Flag]**.

The next moment, five specters that both looked and felt like the Qriz'Ul creatures appeared within the domain.

"These guys should be able to move about undetected, unless the infiltrators really have learned to communicate with the monsters of the Lost Plane," Ogras said. "I can just send them through the ground until I find a path."

"Do it," Zac nodded, and the creatures quickly sank into the ground.

"Hopefully, I can catch a few new ones while we're here," Ogras muttered. "Who knows what kind of creatures this thing can accept."

"That flag is problematic," Iz said. "It takes without giving back, defying the Law of Balance. But the universe always exacts its price. You will have to carry the weight of every soul you capture. Eventually, they will drag you under."

"Well, I have this guy to keep my head above water," Ogras smiled as he nodded at Zac. "Besides, this thing is just a stopgap until my strength has improved."

“That’s what we said about the Lost Plane,” K’Rav snickered before he flew back into the flag.

“He’s right, you know,” Zac said. “That thing is trouble.”

“I know,” Ogras said as he fastened a few more homemade talismans on the unorthodox treasure. “But I’m working on it, with the help of the epiphanies. I think it’s solvable.”

Zac nodded in understanding before turning back toward the cultivators in the distance. He wasn’t surprised to hear Ogras was focusing on fixing the problems of the flag, even if he personally felt it was a waste of an epiphany. At the same time, there were limits to what the lights of Ultom could help with.

Ogras’ body-tempering manual wasn’t in need to be fixed like his was, and the demon had told him he was planning on discarding his Cultivation Manual altogether at the D-grade. It simply didn’t hold up even at Peak E-grade. And between the manual being incomplete and Ogras’ path having shifted, it would be easier to create a new manual from scratch than to improve upon the shaky foundations of the old method.

Apparently, many elites started to work on that in the D-grades in either case. They either created a Cultivation Manual to perfectly fit their path or adjusted their current one to remove any mismatch.

The minutes passed as the trio kept watch over the stoic cultivators, but none seemed to notice the search going on underground. Eventually, Ogras perked up and turned to the small settlement at the other shore.

“One of the buildings over there has a pool of tainted water. It seems to be connected to the lake through one of the tunnels. The other pathways I’ve found are quite far underground, and we’d have to dig through at least fifty meters of stone to reach it.”

“The vibrations would carry through the stone and spread outside my domain,” Iz said. “We might be discovered.”

“Is there anyone inside the buildings?” Zac asked.

“None in the one with the pond, though there are two people standing in the neighboring structure. They are staring at some diagram, but I’m unsure if they’re mentally present.”

“What do you guys think?” Zac asked.

“I think it’s our best shot,” Ogras slowly said. “We’ll stay at the surface. If we see the cultivators react, we’ll ambush and distract them.”

“Does that work with you?” Zac asked as he looked at Iz.

Iz didn’t immediately answer, with her gaze instead turning to the enthralled Kan’Tanu. Zac didn’t want to rush her, but he’d be lying to say if he wasn’t a bit worried. From the beginning, Iz had been flighty about what kind of role she envisioned for herself in this upcoming mission. Whether she was even willing to fight the Black Heart Sect. Then again, her participation wasn’t something they had originally planned for, and she had already helped a lot by providing intelligence and using her domain-creating candle.

Of course, if she could also test the fate of a couple of infiltrators, that would be even better.

“This is war,” Ogras added. “Besides, they are unorthodox cultivators shunned by the heavens. Killing them will not bring fell karma.”

“But it will bring about Karma,” Iz said with her brows furrowed. “It is unclear how our actions will affect the river of fate. These are just some guards, but they are part of a larger tapestry related to Ultom. I don’t know how it will affect my trajectory in life. If the ripples might even affect my family. I don’t-”

Zac looked at Iz’s troubled face, and he thought he had a pretty good idea of what was troubling her. Iz Tayn was almost his opposite. He was thrown right into the world of cultivation completely blind, and he was still trying to unravel the mysteries of his origin. Meanwhile, Iz came from an ancient faction, and all of her life had probably been carefully planned out.

Every decision Zac had made since reuniting with humanity on Earth had real-life implications. People lived and died depending on his choices, and the very fate of his planet had hung in the balance more than once. Iz had probably never been placed in such a situation, and she was only now truly realizing how much a decision could weigh on your soul.

Zac glanced at Ogras, who helplessly looked back. “Try not to get discovered?”

“Stealth is my middle name,” Zac smiled, which elicited a derisive snort from the demon.

Zac turned to Iz next, who hesitantly looked back. “You don’t need to make a decision right now. I haven’t been caught yet. I know it can feel tough, and I’m too much of a hillbilly to know what’s the right choice for someone like you. I guess, just act according to your heart and conscience? That way, you can at least face yourself in the mirror, knowing you did your best even if things went wrong.”

“... Thank you,” Iz nodded.

“Alright, no time to waste. The longer we stick around, the more variables we’ll have to deal with,” Zac said, and the three started to make their way around the crater toward the small settlement.

The occasional Qriz’Ul kept popping up among the ruins, which forced Iz to tighten the fiery domain around them. Even then, they had only narrowly avoided having a few unwelcome visitors ambling into their isolated domain. Twenty minutes later, they reached the edge of the temporary settlement.

It was an odd feeling, walking through a ghost-town while invisible. It was like you were a ghost traveling through the ruins of another fallen civilization. But the feeling didn’t last long as there were only a couple rows of houses, and they soon reached the building they were looking for.

Through the slit in the neighboring door, Zac saw the two infiltrators Ogras mentioned. Their auras were gentle and refined, meaning they were probably non-combat classes. If

Zac had to guess, they were Array Masters, judging by the large tapestry they were blankly staring at.

Just like Ogras said, it was an incredibly complex array. It was painted in red and blue, with each color using a different script. The blue runes seemed like a mix of the nine subordinate sigils of the Left Imperial Palace and the unfamiliar marks on the bodies of the Qriz'Ul. Meanwhile, the red ones were the script the Kan'Tanu used, which wasn't all that different from the System Standard Script.

Together, the two systems formed a complex swirl that Zac could only guess was related to the pathway leading to the Lost Plane. But the array was obviously incomplete, with some sections missing runes while other areas were completely blank. It made Zac wonder just what had happened here.

Had an experiment gone awry, or had they been too eager to crack open the pathway to the Lost Plane, accidentally releasing the purple lake? Because what they were seeing here didn't seem to match the original plan the lipless Hegemon had hinted at.

“Can you snatch that array when things go down?” Zac asked, and Ogras nodded as though it was a matter of course.

From there, they walked over to the neighboring structure, where the five-meter-wide pool was. This close to the water, the ambient corruption was a lot stronger. Zac cursed the fact he didn't know how to turn off [**Purity of the Void**], and he could only watch on with helplessness as his purification node destroyed most of the tainted insights.

It was impossible to make any hard plans when they didn't know what would happen going forward, but Ogras and Zac spent the next ten minutes coming up with some flexible plans depending on how things went. Finally, there was nothing else to do, and Zac stepped into the pond, carefully controlling his movements to avoid creating any ripples.

“Alright, have fun out here,” Zac said as he slowly lowered himself into the waters.

Zac barely managed to stifle a groan as a steady stream of corruption started to burrow into his body through all of his pores. But it was well within what he could handle, and he nodded in confirmation to the other two as he sunk further down. When the tainted water had reached his shoulders, he turned to Iz Tayn one final time.

“Don’t worry too much; just go with the flow,” Zac smiled as his head started to become submerged. “Things tend to work out. When they don’t blow up.”

Chapter 922: Proving Oneself

Iz looked on as Mr. Bug, no, Zachary Atwood, dipped beneath the tainted water. Not much later, she felt him pass through her flame domain, exposing him to any discerning eyes. She froze for an instant, but she was immensely relieved to see there was no reaction from the corrupted cultivators sitting by the shoreline. She had a little bit longer.

She felt suffocated, and indecision gnawed at her. The world had always seemed so simple. Black and white. Fated and lacking fate. Even Zachary's experiences she'd seen through the lens of the Divine Mirror had felt like a series of humorous misadventures. Foolish. This was life and death. There was suffering and uncertainty. There were consequences.

Her thoughts turned back to those she had incinerated, certain in her righteousness from their lack of providence. Only now, when the ripples of consequence might reach the Tayn Clan, did she realize her shallow understanding. Even if all those people had no fate with her, did they really not have fate with others? Were her family's precepts wrong? Or was she missing something?

She knew she was sheltered from the world, but she still understood the Multiverse was a cruel place, and the struggles here on the Frontier paled in front of the wars that ravaged the heartlands. Resources were limited, and there were only so many Thrones. So many Eternal Heritages. Was the approach of her family a necessity to survive at the peaks? Perhaps, but that didn't help with her current dilemma.

She took a steadying breath, the words of Zachary Atwood mixing with that of her grandpa as he let her into the Zecia sector.

“Heart,” Iz muttered.

“Ah?” the demon said to the side, her words startling him out of his vigil over the shoreline.

“Nothing,” Iz sighed.

“Alright,” the demon nodded. “Nothing so far.”

“They are too connected to the lake,” Iz said with a shake of her head. “It is only a matter of time.”

“That’s great,” Ogras muttered. “Left to fight an army.”

“I-”

“You know?” the demon said. “Zac’s home planet, Earth, was integrated recently.”

“I am aware,” Iz nodded.

“I was leading the incursion placed next to him. Through a twist of fate, we became uneasy allies, relying on each other to survive. Eventually, we both proved ourselves to each other,” Ogras said. “I lost an arm proving it, though it’s regrown since. Even if it hadn’t, it would have been a worthwhile sacrifice. Real companions are hard to come by in this world. People you can trust your back to in thick and thin.”

Iz listened with rapt attention as the information was all new to her. The story almost allowed her to forget her current predicament.

“Later came along a wretch called Verana. She threw her lot in with Zac upon witnessing his strength, realizing the potential for profits. Zac accepted her, and everything went well for a while. But when things went awry, and the Undead Empire descended on Zac’s home, on his kin, she was nowhere to be found.

“She was afraid that her involvement would create ripples, enmities that would cause troubles for her elders back home. After all, the Undead Empire is a powerful force even here on the Frontier.”

“What happened next?” Iz asked.

“Zac returned in the nick of time, slaughtered the invaders before taking out the incursion of unliving,” Ogras shrugged. “The day was saved. But from that moment, Verana’s fate was changed. She could have been someone like me, whose fate has been swept up in his, as you called it. Now, she is just a distant business acquaintance to the Atwood Empire and will never be anything more.

“Because she could not be relied on when push came to shove. Because if it happened one time, it could happen again when the stakes became high next time. Fate is a tricky thing. Who knows what’s right and wrong? When you struggle to keep a door open, you often close another one,” the demon said as he turned to Iz with a smile.

Iz truly looked at the shade-marked demon for the first time. She had always considered him a passerby, a hanger-on. Those with powerful fates usually had a few such people hovering around them. She had always seen them as parasites, siphoning the fate of their betters. But she finally realized she was wrong on yet another front. There was more to this demon.

“So, what are you saying?” Iz asked.

“Perhaps some doors can be held open by a helping hand. How about you and I make a little deal?”

Zac slowly made his way through a narrow crack, using only his body to avoid releasing any energy ripples. Of course, he wasn’t too convinced anyone would actually notice it with him being surrounded by the extremely potent water.

Just a few seconds after submerging himself, [**Purity of the Void**] was completely overwhelmed. One pulse after another cleansed his body of the corruption, but even more kept pouring in. But soon enough, it was all swallowed up by a greedy [**Void Heart**], and the cycle started anew.

A few moments later, he reached the underground tunnel once built by the Ra’Lashar Goblins, and he could already see the exit in the distance. It was a small dot of shimmering purple,

and it looked blissfully unobstructed. Zac kept moving, but a frown soon marred his face as he felt the corruption grow uncomfortably condensed in his body while **[Void Heart]** still digested the previous batch.

Or did it matter? A little bit of suffering in return for clarity, for power. Wasn't that the core tenet of his path? He could already feel his confusions being swept away, replaced with ironclad certainty and possibility. And with his body having unlimited potential, wasn't this the path?

Zac shuddered as the waters around him dimmed, while the sweet whispers in his mind quieted down to a muted white noise. The change came from Zac activating **[Void Zone]**, which removed any spirituality from the surrounding waters while suppressing the taint that had already entered his body.

It had just been a short test to see how well he could withstand the corruption, but it quickly became a lesson in the importance of a steady heart. He had been awash with endless possibilities, and he had seen glimpses of promising alterations to everything from his skills to his pathways. It was similar to how he felt when using Creation Energy.

But instead of being consumed and drained by the endless hunger of Creation, he had felt himself gradually being nudged in a certain direction. A little change here, and a small addition there. A suggestion to look at things differently. But out of little acorns grow huge oaks. Those small changes would eventually turn into a complete transformation.

The corruption of the Lost Plane wanted to reform him into an image of itself, both in spirit and flesh. Was that what had happened to the Qriz'Ul? Had they once been living, breathing beings, only to find them gradually twisted until they were no more than accumulations of twisted energy? There was no way to tell, but one thing was for certain. Those Cultivators at the surface were in trouble.

Their paths had probably been subverted already, and Zac doubted they'd even recognize themselves if they found a moment of clarity. Still, that was not Zac's problem. Just like K'Rav said, they were the ones who had cracked open the

pathway to the Lost Plane, probably without proper preparation or understanding of the situation.

A thud echoed out from his heart, and he stopped in place with anticipation as **[Void Heart]** spat out a burst of energy. A few more passages were quickly deciphered, adding to his already impressive understanding of the nature of Duality. The moment the purified energy was expended, Zac turned off **[Void Zone]** again, and thousands of tendrils immediately started burrowing into his body.

The process continued for another minute until **[Void Heart]** was satiated, and Zac reactivated his nullification domain. In a perfect world, Zac would have secluded himself in this corrupted tunnel, staying years if need be to consume the whole lake. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible with the collapse of the realm looming over their shoulders.

So Zac gradually made his way toward the exit, careful to even make any move except for the occasional push to help him keep floating forward. By this point, he was halfway through the tunnel, and some of the cultists were possibly sitting right above his head. He was no longer protected by Iz's candle either and was instead relying on the stealth cowl to prevent anyone from detecting him.

His eyes and senses were peeled for any sign of having been discovered, but there were no spikes of Cosmic Energy being released above his head. Zac felt flush with success as he reached the mouth of the tunnel, but that sense of victory was doused upon witnessing the scene outside.

Qriz'Ul. Hundreds of them, some over ten meters large and emitting powerful fluctuations.

Zac froze in place, staring at the scene with wide eyes. It looked like his worst fear had come true. They had discussed this very scenario. After all, where else would the current generation of Qriz'Ul have come from but this tainted soup? Most of them seemed to be in an almost comatose state where they had turned into blobs that drifted along the currents.

However, those around the cave exit had stopped in place as they started to contract, and Zac could tell they felt something

was amiss. Did they sense his **[Void Zone]**? He couldn't be sure, but he knew he'd be discovered soon enough unless something changed.

Zac quickly deactivated his domain, and the waters around him returned to normal. The same thing happened with the corruption that had already accumulated in his body, which would hopefully mean he'd look like the cultivators above-water to these creatures. And it worked. The Qriz'Ul relaxed and returned to their spread-out form before drifting away in the waters. Only a ten-meter Qriz'Ul stayed a bit longer, but it too floated away soon enough.

Zac returned further into the tunnel before activating **[Void Zone]** as he considered his options. It really looked like his domain was the issue here. It probably wasn't the Void Energy that Qriz'Ul reacted to, but rather the lack of corruption in a spot. That didn't help him, though; it put him in quite a bind.

He needed the **[Void Zone]** to stay in the waters indefinitely, but using it would get him exposed. And even if he found a way around it, there were no guarantees he'd be safe from the Qriz'Ul when entering the lake proper, even if he let the corruption spread through his body. What could he do in this situation? Should he go back and discuss it with the others?

No, Iz had already said she didn't have any invisibility treasures apart from the candle, and neither did she have any methods to traverse this kind of taint. She simply hadn't prepared for this kind of mission. Ogras couldn't help in this situation either, so he could only rely on himself. Besides, the longer they stayed in this region, the higher the risk of something going wrong.

Zac waited for another couple minutes until the next burst of inspiration pushed his insights further. Having a newly-cleansed body, Zac immediately started swimming toward the cave mouth once more, and he deactivated the domain the moment he got close.

There was one Qriz'Ul not too far from Zac, but it didn't seem to react to his presence, allowing him to creep out from the cave mouth and swim downward. With corruption rapidly

pouring into his body, he couldn't maintain a slow and steady pace out of fear of being discovered by the cultivators above. Besides, with hundreds of Qriz'Ul floating about in the lake's depths, his movements shouldn't be cause for suspicion.

He descended over a hundred meters in a few short moments until he found another tunnel. Zac swam inside and activated **[Void Zone]** before the nefarious whispers returned. None of the Qriz'Ul seemed to react as long as he was hidden in the darkness of the tunnel. In fact, they didn't bother with the tunnels at all.

They either seemed content slowly floating in a circle around the lake, with the occasional creature moving toward the surface. Perhaps that was an opportunity in itself? The energies in the lake had to be powerful enough to hide his actions. Zac hesitated a moment before taking out an inscribed canister and pushing it into a crack in the wall.

By briefly deactivating his Bloodline Talent and infusing a tiny hint of Cosmic Energy, the canister started to drag the tainted waters into its subspace. It created a weak current, but there was no reaction even after a minute, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. Eventually, the bottle was full, and Zac's body was cleansed from any lingering corruption.

Having accomplished his goal, Zac deactivated **[Void Zone]** and continued on his way, the bottle full of lake water safely stowed away. It was a backup plan in case the whole lake was dragged into the Void before he could get any, and one bottle after another joined the first as Zac jumped between tunnels and deep cracks as he made his way toward the bottom.

And with the lake only being so big, he reached his target soon enough, though he found himself surrounded by six huge slumbering Qriz'Ul.

The gateway – at least Zac assumed it was the gateway – reminded Zac a bit of the Spatial Nexus that blew up. It appeared to be a hollow construct roughly 50 meters across, made from beams of crystal or purple glass. Together, they formed something like a dodecahedron that kept shifting in a disorienting way.

One moment it looked like a cube, the next it had a hundred edges in an incredibly complex tangle. Vai had long since explained it was a result of two realities with a different number of dimensions sharing the same space. Technically, the pillars didn't transform or shift about. It was just his vantage that kept changing.

What stayed constant were the dense scripts that covered the crystal pillars, scripts that followed the unfamiliar ruleset of the Qriz'Ul. Zac couldn't tell if this thing was something the Ra'Lashar had created or if it had formed naturally. He was pretty certain that it wasn't the work of Kan'Tanu, though, since the beams felt too old and powerful.

Zac also couldn't tell whether the crystal pillars were responsible for sealing the gateway, or if they were there to stabilize and strengthen it. As for the actual pathway to the Lost Plane, it hovered in the center of the shifting construct.

The similarity between the ominous swirl and the array he'd just seen in the infiltrator's lab was palpable. The thing didn't really look like a Spatial Tear. Instead, it looked like a pitch-black sphere the size of a beach ball, with two dozen deep purple strings attached. The item slowly rotated in place, prompting the strings to form a ten-meter-wide spiral that undulated with intensely condensed corruption and spatial energy.

In a perfect world, Zac would have spent a few minutes studying the thing, but there was no way he could do that. The taint was far more concentrated this close to the source, and he wouldn't last much longer without **[Void Zone]**. And with the big guys slumbering nearby, activating it would mean immediately getting exposed.

So Zac steadied his mind as he went through the procedure Leandra had imparted. The moment he made his move, he would probably be exposed. The spatial bomb that the experts of the Void Gate had prepared and then improved with some of Zac's materials was something that would drive the Ishiate Tinkerers wild.

It was volatile, unpredictable, and powerful. Just like how they liked their weapons.

A few seconds later, the construct reverted into one of its simpler forms, and Zac shot forward. This time, he even used Cosmic Energy to cover the remaining distance instantly, and he felt multiple powerful auras accumulate around him. Zac ignored the burgeoning pressure as a radiant cube appeared in his hand.

High-grade materials and inscriptions reinforced its glass walls, but Zac's heart still shuddered as he felt the chaotic spatial fluctuations trapped inside. How couldn't he be nervous? He was essentially holding an artificial miniature black hole in his hands. The sooner he could get away from it, the better.

Cosmic Energy surged through his body as Zac activated the main array of the bomb, and he immediately hurled it toward the black ball in the heart of the structure. The cube started to twist and bend as it entered the odd domain within the pillars, but a pulse from within stabilized it. Cracks rapidly spread across the bomb, and the energy it leaked was enough to eradicate space around it.

Finally, the bomb reached the core, and reality buckled as a hole of utmost darkness appeared. It wasn't too big and it didn't release a speck of energy, but Zac's Danger Sense told him in no uncertain terms that touching that thing would mean instant death. It was a true black hole that swallowed space, time, and energy - the most sure-fire solution to destroy the pathway that Leyara could come up with.

Space collapsed, and the twisted spiral was rapidly consumed. Zac could even feel how the corruption around was quickly decreasing. But just as Zac thought the mission a success and planned to deal with the fallout, a powerful consciousness descend on the area. Zac didn't even have time to react before a huge runic hand emerged from the remaining half of the sphere.

It grasped the black hole and squeezed, like the scene where the mysterious being crushed the Heart of Oblivion.

Simultaneously, Zac felt a powerful consciousness slam into his, and his hair stood on end upon hearing an eldritch voice.

“Em...pty... Empty... ***EMPTY!***”

Chapter 923: Empty

Zac couldn't tell whether a million voices were clamoring in his head or one, but the force in voice alone was enough to give Zac's soul a jolt. He didn't know what the voice meant by 'empty', but the real problem was the source. A supersized Qriz'Ul was targeting his spatial bomb, possibly from the other side through the gateway.

At least Zac assumed it was a Qriz'Ul, even if its hand looked like a purple runic nebula rather than a twisted mockery of a Goblin. Meanwhile, the D-grade runic beings around him had almost finished gathering up, and Zac guessed he only had a few seconds before being attacked.

The Rampant energies of the black hole rendered the whole area unstable, and the purple crystal pillars shattered one after another. Meanwhile, the hand trying to contain the blast released torrential amounts of corruption. The clash drowned the area in the taint of the Lost Plane, and Zac was forced to quickly activate **[Void Zone]** to avoid being overwhelmed as well.

It soon became impossible to see what was happening inside, but Zac wasn't about to wait for the result. Scores of volatile items, from **[Void Balls]** to home-made Attuned Crystal-bombs, were fast joining the chaos. Anything Zac could unleash without wasting too much energy joined in on the chaos, while a fractal blade emitting an air of antiquity appeared on the edge of **[Verun's Bite]**.

The domains of Arcadia and the Abyss entered the fray, and the lake itself was split in two from a huge spatial tear. But the straight line of delineated space started to twist as it was dragged into the confusing mesh, prompting the churning ball of utter mayhem to gain another level of intensity.

“Void... **VOID!**” the eldritch voice roared in Zac’s head, and Zac sensed a palpable wave of hunger assailing him.

Zac prepared to unleash his second finisher as well, but he didn’t get the chance before his mind screamed of danger. A barrier glimmering with mottled gold and empowered by Void Energy enclosed him, just before an enormous shockwave threw him thousands of meters away until he crashed into the side of the crater.

Qriz’Ul by the dozens were reduced to floating blobs of runic soup from the blast, while Zac got away with a few scrapes and some disorientation. [**Empyrean Aegis**] had dealt with most of the force from his bombs exploding, while [**Void Zone**] weakened the intense amount of chaotic energies and corruption loaded into the shockwave.

Concussive explosions illuminated the whole center of the lake while a million enraged shrieks escaped from within the gateway. It almost looked like time had frozen, with rampant energies struggling to expand, to consume the surroundings in a fiery conflagration. But they could not push beyond an invisible event horizon, held back by an unrelenting pull from within.

Whether it was the black hole or a spatial tear, Zac couldn’t tell. It had been hard to discern the situation before, but now it was downright impossible. The static explosion was over 200 meters across, and its chaotic nature rendered [**Cosmic Gaze**] useless. There was no denying his items had gone off like they were supposed to - the question was whether it was enough.

The area flux from the unpredictable energy and dozens of Spatial Tears turned space-time into a leaking sieve. Zac grimaced with pain upon seeing vast amounts of lake water disappearing into the Void. But that was nothing compared to the dismay upon suddenly sensing that monstrous aura from within the chaos. The creature seemed severely weakened, but it had survived.

He had to do something, anything, before the chaos died down, so Zac grit his teeth and flashed toward the heart of destruction with his movement skill. Everyone had pooled

their resources to maximize the potential of the black hole, and they didn't have a lot of options in case it failed. He simply wasn't powerful enough to destroy a spatial gate with his attacks alone; Zac needed to use the opportunity the black hole created before it was too late.

The backup plan was simply to pray the black hole caused enough damage to prevent any significant amounts of energy from passing through when Gemmy activated the array. But Zac wasn't resigned to such an outcome, not while there still was some hope for success.

Another beat from **[Void Heart]** cleansed the large accumulation of corruption in his body, allowing Zac to save on some Void Energy as he activated **[Arcadia's Judgement]**. He had hoped to reserve that skill for the Kan'Tanu above-ground, but he couldn't be picky in this situation. An even better solution would be to blast the remains of that spatial core with an Annihilation Sphere, but he couldn't even reach it right now.

The huge wooden hand emerged through one of the tears in space, and its towering aura pushed the already frothing waters into a fever pitch. Zac was pelted by shrapnel and corruption, but his focus was still on his finisher. With its enormous surface, the hand was tainted by a tremendous amount of corruption in no time, which was then transferred to Zac.

The nigh-inexhaustible life-force of the wooden hand only helped somewhat against the assault, and Zac felt himself quickly losing control of the skill. Thankfully, **[Arcadia's Judgement]** wasn't a skill that needed to be maintained for long, and its gleaming axehead was already cutting into the seething ball of barely contained destruction.

It felt like Zac had pushed his hand into a blender as the axe entered the ball of destruction. But he pushed on, desperately controlling the gradually collapsing axe with his Branches of War Axe and Kalpataru. Just a little more. He could sense it through his skill - the cracked gateway was not far.

Blood ran down Zac's nose as he pushed his empowered soul beyond its limits, forcibly holding together the skill through

sheer stubbornness and determination. It narrowly passed right by the trapped black hole, but Zac swore when a second runic hand emerged to block **[Arcadia's Judgement]**.

Edge and palm collided, and Zac shuddered as the connection to his skill broke. It had failed, but it wasn't an abject failure. The ball of destruction grew to twice its original size before rapidly shrinking to no more than five meters across. But just as Zac thought it would wink out, a huge shape shattered the lingering flames before pouncing at Zac.

“EMPTY!”

The ghastly Qriz'Ul reached more than fifty meters, though it didn't seem to have any solid features. The hands that had blocked out Zac's attempts were gone, replaced by what almost looked like a comet's dust tail. But it did have one familiar marker - its decidedly goblin face. A huge, sharp nose the size of a speedboat pointed right at Zac, and its wide mouth was locked in a perpetual sneer.

However, there were some differences to this thing compared to the normal goblinoid Qriz'Ul. First, it seemed less corporeal to its smaller brethren, even if its energy surpassed anyone Zac had seen so far. It had also taken on some features you wouldn't see on the Ra'Lashar Goblins. Its mouth was filled with three layers of runic teeth, and its chin had been replaced by a bony hook that almost touched its snout.

The creature also had four sets of eyes that glared at Zac with hunger, while a ninth and larger eye sat between them on its oversized forehead. The ninth eye contained such powerful corruption that it made Zac's soul shudder, but that wasn't the important thing. It was made from the broken-off half of the gateway itself.

The sphere had seen better days. Less than half its mass remained. It now looked like a jagged crescent half-moon with cracks covering its surface, while only eight purple tendrils remained attached to it. Unfortunately, the broken gateway still seemed to remain somewhat functional. Weak spatial fluctuations were coming from the crystal, which seemed to provide the Qriz'Ul with a steady stream of dirty energy.

But a weak pulse of spatial energy from within the shuddering ball of destruction in the distance made Zac's eyes widen in comprehension. He had been completely wrong. That sphere was this wretched creature rather than the bridge to the Lost Plane. It must have planted itself at the mouth of the gateway to enjoy the massive amounts of condensed corruption.

Or perhaps the two were connected somehow, since the crystal on the creature's forehead rippled with energy in harmony with the pulse.

This wasn't part of the calculations. The gateway refused to break down even after being blasted by the black hole. Was it this creature that allowed it to hang on? Did Zac need to kill the oversized goblin for the gateway to collapse altogether? Or was this creature immortal until he managed to close the pathway?

There was no time to figure out the details. The goblin had almost reached him, and it shuddered with energy far beyond the lipless Hegemon's. So Zac activated [**Ancient Forest**] and slipped away, avoiding the approaching horror. His domain skill was rapidly falling apart in this toxic environment, but he only needed one jump.

Unfortunately, things didn't always go according to plan, and Zac felt resistance just as he was about to teleport right next to the original spot of the gateway. He could only course-correct and quickly pick another tree before pushing off from its crumbling trunk with [**Earthstrider**]. His surroundings were fraught with spatial tears and purple crystal debris, but he pushed straight toward the epicenter as Oblivion was extracted from his soul.

Zac didn't know the relation between monster and gateway, but he knew the window of opportunity was fast closing on the latter. Chaotic energies ran rampant in the area, and space itself was exhausted to the limit of collapse. But while his surroundings were dangerous, they weren't impassable any longer. He needed to use this chance to add to the damage. That would hopefully be the straw that broke the camel's back and closed the thing.

A pang of danger warned him of incoming calamity, but there was no time to respond. The goblin was impossibly fast - it was like he was fighting the lake itself. The moment Zac had entered the tree, the thing had turned into a stream of runes and caught up with him. Zac could only urge on his Annihilation Sphere while he unleashed a storm of Fractal Leaves from **[Nature's Edge]**.

The Qriz'Ul was cut through dozens of times over, but Zac knew it was a failure. He had hoped to cause some real damage with his Daos, but he didn't even manage to delay it. A few dozen runes had been destroyed, but what was that to a giant with tens of thousands of them? He could only make one final gambit, and most of his remaining Cosmic Energy was almost instantly absorbed by a shimmering talisman hidden within his sleeves.

A wave of starlight shot out from the Early D-grade talisman while a tennis-ball-sized Annihilation Sphere formed between Zac's hands. It was much smaller than Zac had hoped and not nearly the limits of his stockpiled energy, but he was out of time. Zac felt **[Empyrean Aegis]** finally collapse from the clash between talisman and goblin, but his eyes never left the small flickering disk of a slightly darker purple.

It was almost invisible and just the size of a plate. A small discoloration that could easily be mistaken for a shadow. But his body could feel it. The power that slumbered on the other side. Infinite, incomprehensible power. The Lost Plane. But power or not, Zac wasn't moved. It wasn't true. At least not for him.

The Annihilation Sphere bit into the window, and a good chunk of it simply disappeared. But Zac saw a shocking sight when he had managed to close just over half of the gate. Somehow, the enormous goblin had appeared beneath him, and it stared at him hatefully with glowing eyes.

"NOTHING!" the voices screamed, and the whole lake exploded.

Zac groaned from the impact as his surroundings became a blur. He hadn't been thrown into the wall this time, but he

found himself thrown straight into the air, far from the frayed gateway. Things went from bad to worse when Zac sensed dozens of massive energy signatures above, proving the Kan'Tanu were already awake.

And that was still not the most immediate of his problems. It felt like a volcano had erupted at the bottom of the lake, and a terrifying wave of energy was quickly catching up with him. But instead of molten-hot magma, it was a geyser of corruption with the face of a goblin closing in.

Its advance was a calamity, and the smaller Qriz'Ul were shredded and absorbed by the monstrous force. It almost felt like the whole lake was being pushed to the sky from the goblin's furious pursuit. And then, the world of purple was showered with a golden radiance as Zac was thrown into the air.

The world spun too fast to make sense of the situation, but a sudden appearance of a massive maw made Zac scream with surprise. Zac knew he was out of cards - in this form, that is. He had expended them all on the gateway, yet both the gate and his enemies remained. He would have to take the risk.

The final charges of [**Earthstrider**] were rapidly expended to create some distance, at which point his body was flooded with the sweet kiss of Death.

For minutes, nothing happened, yet every second seemed to stretch longer than the one before it. The lake was only so big. Even if treading carefully, it could only take so long until Zachary reached the bottom, where the gateway was supposed to be.

Then it came. A weak pulse of spatial Dao made the surface of the lake shudder. Just a moment later, it looked like the whole lake had been set to a boil, and even the demon could sense the enormous eruption of power beneath the surface.

The change had not gone unnoticed to the stoic cultivators sitting at the shores, and it looked like someone had kicked up a hornet's nest as they all sprung to action at once.

“Well, I guess that’s me,” Ogras sighed before shadows consumed him.

Iz could sense how he was rapidly moving toward two Hegemons whose energy was already churning. But he wouldn’t be enough. There were nearly 30 Hegemons altogether, supported by over a thousand E-grade fodder. Those foot soldiers were inconsequential when it came to individual strength, but they would together be able to forge barriers powerful enough to slow down any opposition.

Even then, the real problem was the Hegemons. One of them was seemingly at the very peak of what this Mystic Realm could contain. Another eight could be considered elites in the frontier. And that wasn’t even considering the twisted energy creatures, some of which also emitted D-grade energy signatures.

Not even Iz was certain she’d be able to deal with such an army before reaching her limits and having one of her fatewarding treasures whisk her away. For Ogras Azh’Rezak to contain them all was hopeless. Yet he rushed forward as a storm of shadows swallowed the southern shores. When push came to shove, he showed up, putting his life on the line.

“Follow my heart,” Iz whispered as she looked to the sky.

She didn’t want to be a betrayer, a person that couldn’t be counted on. She hated the thought of the demon describing her actions in the future like he described those of that Verana woman. Her help was needed, and she would show up. And if someone had a problem with that in the future, she would just test their fate.

The slumbering ember in her chest erupted into a roaring fire, making Iz look inward with surprise. It raged with greater ferocity than ever before, and she suddenly remembered her grandfather’s words – that any flame needed fuel to burn, no matter if it was the fires of life or the Emyrean Flames of her bloodline. A fuel named purpose.

A smile spread across her face as six false wings sprung from her back. It felt like she had been given the blessing of her

ancestors as she rose to the air, and the sky greeted her ascent by gaining a golden hue.

“**[World’s End]**, how fitting,” she smiled as she sacrificed a third of her Cosmic Energy. “Come.”

The world cried as a 100-meter orb of purest flames appeared beneath her feet, and her Fatebound guardian appeared behind her back.

Hundreds of fiery motes broke off from the nine flames hovering in her soul aperture, and streaks of truth were left in their wake. Their dance rapidly formed one sigil after another, until three sets of 243 runes formed her family’s exclusive Dao Array – **[Empyrean Flame]**.

The Branches of Primal Starlight, Scorching Abyss, and Golden Sun were filtered and amplified through its intricate network as her guardian formed multiple sigils with her hands. Her veins were fire, her blood was flames, and she carried the apocalypse in her heart.

And with a nudge, Iz released the gates.

Nine streams of realm-breaking heat shot out from the prepared arrays, all fueled by the truths exclusive to the Tayns. The settlement and its lingering occupants were erased, their fate unable to withstand the proximity. The streams spread out, each one targeting one of the nine superlative Hegemons before they could unleash their strikes against the lake.

But it failed.

“Hm?” Iz muttered, her mind blanking out by the unexpected scene.

She wasn’t surprised that the leader managed to survive her attack, but five of them? Odd barriers had blocked out her spells, and Iz sensed an anomalous resonance completely unfamiliar to her.

“They’re connected somehow! With each other and the lake!” a pained scream echoed from the shadows, but Iz had no time to react before things changed again.

A distant wail echoed through the area as a familiar figure was flung into the air like a ragdoll, and Iz couldn't help herself as she started to laugh at the scene. That guy really couldn't stop himself from creating a spectacle.

Where had Mr. Bug found himself a mountain-sized goblin to fight?

Chapter 924: Qriz'Ul King

Life was rapidly being supplanted by death as Zac activated his Specialty Core. Still, he was cutting it close. Even outside its natural habitat, the Qriz'Ul King was incredibly quick, and it looked like a floating river as it closed the gap between them. Zac thought the thing would try to swallow him, but it suddenly spat out a purple blade while runic tendrils followed in its wake.

The edge was over ten meters across and emitted a dense amount of corruption. It was the first time Zac saw the 'Nightmare Tears' as Ogras called them, and he felt an uncomfortable pressure even at a distance. He could hear the nefarious whispers of the Lost Plane from within the tear, but the epiphanies were conspicuously absent.

Zac felt as though his body was shackled during the transformation, but the constraints soon broke, and a storm of Miasma was unleashed. [**Love's Bond**] had already taken its proper form, and [**Black Death**] replaced [**Verun's Bite**]. A sinister jagged edge stretching almost four meters appeared in front of the chained axe in his hand, and Zac unleashed a herculean swing at the incoming projectile.

Two edges collided, and if not for Alea's chains, he would have been thrown away like a ragdoll again. Instead, they had latched on to the Goblin's diffuse appendages, and a struggle for poisonous supremacy quickly ensued. The chains were empowered by [**Blighted Cut**] and the unrelenting death of the Pale Seal, while the appendages were made from the ancient madness of the Lost Plane.

Unfamiliar runes lost their luster and fell apart, but it wasn't a clean-cut victory. The mere touch of the Qriz'Ul was rapidly eroding the viscous coating of [**Blighted Cut**], and Zac could sense that not even the reinforced links beneath were immune to the corrupting nature of the Lost Plane.

Zac himself wasn't much better off. It felt like his right arm would break from holding back the Nightmare Tear, and the black edge rapidly started to decay, even with the Branches of the Pale Seal and War Axe bolstering it. In contrast, the tear seemed to contain almost limitless force, and Zac knew there was no way he'd whittle that thing down.

A pull from the chains dragged him upward and closer to the face of the Goblin, and Zac used the final lifespan of **[Gorehew]** to push the Nightmare Tear downward with everything he had, prompting it to fall toward a group of infiltrators below. A quick glance at the situation below confirmed something he'd sensed while being thrown into the air. Iz had really joined the fray, and she was waging a one-woman war against the cultists.

The scene was mesmerizing. Iz Tavn looked just like the first time Zac saw her, standing on a burning orb like a goddess of the sun, with a demonic angel raining death and destruction on her enemies. Last time, it had been a scene of mortal danger. This time it was one of comfort. Without her, Zac wouldn't know what to do. He and Ogras alone wouldn't cut it when this big goblin was added to the calculation.

Of course, some things had changed with Iz's display. The flames had drastically improved since she was an F-grade cultivator. They were powered by at least two Dao Branches related to fire, but there was also a sense of antiquity to them, like they were flames that heralded from the birth of the era.

Antiquity like what his Void Energy emitted. Was this not something unique to him but rather the mark of ancient, powerful bloodlines?

The rattling sounds of Alea's chains brought him back to the present, and he conjured another jagged axe as he flew toward the Qriz'Ul King's head. Its reaction was instantaneous, and its maws opened to swallow Zac whole. However, a light rap on one of his chains made it slam into another, prompting a chain reaction where a length of links appeared right in front of his feet.

Zac used the chain to push off, narrowly allowing him to avoid both the sharp chin and the oversized nose. The blade of **[Gorehew]** was humming with killing intent and twinned daos, and the air itself cried as the edge fell toward the pitch-black core atop its forehead. But a dark-purple barrier appeared just above its surface, and Zac suddenly felt like he was looking at the gateway to the Lost Plane again.

It was weak and muted, but even a weak mimicry of that aura was terrifying, especially when it was accompanied by a deluge of corruption far more condensed than the lake water. The blade of **[Gorehew]** instantly disintegrated, and Zac urgently commanded **[Love's Bond]** to drag him out of harm's way.

A huge mouth suddenly filled his vision, but a third jagged edge crashed against the sharp chin. Zac used the bony hook to launch him toward the ground, and an enormous cloud was released in his wake like a smoke curtain of pure death. Simultaneously, Zac had all of Alea's chains detach from the huge creature and return to his side.

Their first clash ended with the Goblin essentially unscathed, but Zac still considered it a success. He hadn't been sure whether he would be able to block these seemingly intangible attacks, but the Nightmare Tear had been stopped in its tracks by Zac's counter swing. The same was true for his chains, which meant his other skills should also work against this creature.

Another piece of good news was that its aura had weakened even further since leaving the lake. It seemed to have emitted an energy signature at the limits of Hegemony for a moment when it moved to seize the black hole, but the spatial bomb had crippled it and reduced it to Late D-grade. From there, Zac had added to the chaos with his bombs and attacks. By now, it was somewhere at the edge between Early and Middle D-grade.

However, its foundations were still those of a peak being, and it was clearly more powerful than a normal Hegemon. Zac wasn't sure if the Qriz'Ul King was using any Daos, yet the Goblin's very existence corrupted all of his attacks and even

his equipment. And that barrier... A normal attack wouldn't get past that thing. Meanwhile, his attacks hadn't exhausted the Goblin at all by the looks of it.

Its enormous body was a massive congregation of energy, and its stores would undoubtedly put most Beast Kings to shame. And between an almost grotesque amount of energy and the core that kept feeding it more, Zac knew this guy would be hard to lock down, let alone kill. First thing's first, though; he needed to fight on the ground.

His undead form had many advantages, but aerial battles were not one of them.

Zac's thoughts whirred, and he was already formulating an approach as he fell toward the shores. Ogras said the Qriz'Ul had a core rune that needed to be hit, but in this case, it had to be the stone on its forehead. He needed to create an opportunity and blast it with everything he got. It would be even better if he could somehow break its connection to the gateway. That way, its shield might not work at all.

Shortly after, Zac slammed into the ground, and a second layer of death descended on the area around him as Zac activated **[Deathmark]** as well. Unfortunately, the Goblin itself didn't immediately follow in his wake, making it difficult for Zac to strike back. His only real ranged skill was **[Desperation's End]**, but it was much too early to use his most powerful strike.

Besides, the Goblin wasn't the only thing to worry about right now.

The shroud of **[Fields of Despair]** revealed over 100 cultists in his direct vicinity, three of whom were Hegemons. However, something was very off about them. In his current form, he should have seen powerful fluctuations of life from these people, especially from the D-grades with lifespans surpassing ten thousand years.

Yet they felt like weak candles flickering in the wind, where a simple push would topple them. If they didn't emit such intense auras, Zac would have thought they were at death's door. Just as Zac suspected, the lake had done something to them, turning them into something neither living nor dead.

A few silent specters appeared by the cultists, hooded executioners wielding pitch-black axes. **[Deathmark]** had seen an upgrade inside the temple as well, where their axes looked even more deadly. Not only that, but their auras had grown indistinct, like they had fused with the darkness of the skill's domain. It was like they suddenly possessed an item like his energy-hiding bracelet, making them far harder to spot without a honed Danger Sense.

As expected, less than half of the cultivators noticed the incoming swing, but Zac swore with surprise when the situation suddenly changed. Sturdy barriers made from the purple lake water and bolstered with bloody tendrils enclosed all the cultivators at once. It was like when one of them saw the danger, all of them did, and they reacted together. Even those who weren't targeted by specters were shielded.

None of them had spoken a word, and the response was instantaneous. They had to be mentally linked for such a coordinated response. Zac grimaced in annoyance, especially after seeing that his skill didn't work on the water-based shields. The green runes of **[Deathmark]** briefly appeared on the barriers, but they crumbled long before they could drag any significant amount of Zac's own corruption into the shields.

A sudden pang of danger made him look up, just in time to see hundreds of purple scars shooting toward him like a nightmarish meteor shower. Each of the scars had the power to turn an average E-grade cultivator to mush, and a few fused and grew even larger as they descended.

"Holy-!" Zac yelled as he urgently activated **[Abyssal Phase]**.

Zac turned into a puff of abyssal dust and flickered away, moving almost a thousand meters in an instant with his movement skill. It was the first time he used the skill since it got upgraded to Peak Mastery. Some skills gained new features, but the boon of **[Abyssal Phase]** was simple – speed.

It allowed Zac to move almost 50% faster than before, and he guessed only speed-focused Hegemons would be able to catch up with him in his current form. It also allowed him to avoid

the hailstorm, though the Kan'Tanu cultivators weren't so lucky. The whole area was ripped apart, and not even the three Hegemons managed to avoid the barrage, especially not after the Qriz'Ul King itself slammed into the ground like a comet.

So much for camaraderie through turpitude.

The whole area heaved from the collision, and Zac swore when he saw the Qriz'Ul absorb an Olympic Pool's worth of water. It wasn't just an issue of the thing stealing his cultivation resources; it used the water to recover the large amount of energy it had just expended with its nightmare rain.

The Qriz'Ul King seemed startled by Zac's sudden disappearance, but it soon caught his scent.

“Empty... EMPTY!” the Qriz'Ul roared as it lunged for him.

But a golden rune suddenly appeared above its head, and thousands of burning sigils sealed off the Goblin. The whole region shuddered as the Goblin slammed chin-first into the golden barrier, but it failed to break out in one go. It was obviously the work of Iz Tayn, but not even Iz would be able to keep this thing for long.

A tenth of the burning runes had winked out from the collision, and the golden film had weakened in turn. But it had given Zac a bit of a breather, so he looked curiously in her direction. Their eyes met, and Zac heard her voice in his mind.

‘Are you okay? What happened?’ Iz's smooth voice echoed in his mind, a welcome change of pace after the Goblin's demented roars.

‘Ah, you can hear me?’ another startled voice echoed out, and Zac's gaze turned to another section of the battlefield.

Ogras had already been forced to use his **[Shadewar Flag]**, and a mix of spectral beings and ghosts that looked a lot like the Qriz'Ul themselves were already battling the armies of mindless cultists. Progress was slow, though. Those water barriers were incredibly durable, even if the Qriz'Ul King had made them look like paper.

‘Telepathic skill?’ Zac said with surprise.

'Something like that,' Iz said. 'Is the gate closed? And what is that thing you're fighting?'

'I didn't manage to close it completely,' Zac grimaced. 'This guy was guarding the pathway and absorbed most of the damage.'

'That's its strength AFTER eating a black hole?' the demon exclaimed. 'Wouldn't want to see how it was before.'

'I think it's still connected to the gateway,' Zac added, thinking back to the impregnable barrier shielding its core. 'I think it will keep drawing strength from the Lost Plane until the pathway is properly closed; I'm not sure I can kill it like this. And I don't think I can deal with the gateway while also stalling this thing.'

'... Alright, I'll figure something out with the miss,' Ogras groaned. 'Just keep the big guy occupied for now. If it's really connected, it might sense us targeting the gateway.'

'Do you have any solutions? I threw pretty much all I had at the gate,' Zac asked. 'There were Qriz'Ul inside the lake, but most of them should have died because of this big guy.'

The air shuddered as another hurricane of corruption erupted within the barrier, and Zac saw how runes rapidly started to wink out.

'I am still hesitant about entering the waters. Besides, I need to keep these cultists in check. They are a lot stronger than I anticipated. I do have something that should work, but Mr. Azh'Rezak will have to deliver it. Just place it next to the gateway and infuse some energy. Just be careful; the item is a bit dangerous.'

Upon hearing Iz's words, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Zac didn't know what had changed since he entered the lake, but it looked like Iz had fully joined their cause. Perhaps his speech was a lot more convincing than he'd thought? In either case, an item someone like Iz Tayn called dangerous was bound to be something absolutely terrifying.

And with just a corner of the gateway remaining, it should be more than enough.

'Great, sounds like a marvelous time, but I'm still not confident in reaching the bottom in one piece, creatures or no,' Ogras complained.

'Then keep attacking these creatures, but don't kill all of them. They are powering their shields with the lake,' Iz countered. 'The lake's depth had already decreased by twenty meters, and the leader swallowed a lot more just now. A minute longer, and you should be able to survive the journey.'

Zac's glanced past the raging Qriz'Ul King. It was just like Iz said; the shores had grown, and a band of wetness indicated that just over twenty meters of lake water had disappeared. The scene made Zac's heart clench with pain, and he furiously glared at the Goblin still making a ruckus.

All because of this bastard. If not for him, Zac could have closed the gateway before snatching the whole lake, turning it into a tonic that would help him shore up his foundations. Now, they had to sacrifice it to accomplish their goals. Just the thought of it made Zac furious.

'Alright, I'll deal with this guy. But, uh, please try not to destroy too much water,' Zac urged. 'Turns out it's pretty useful for my cultivation.'

'Of course it is. I wouldn't want to see the kind of wretched refuse that not even you would use for advancement,' an annoyed scoff echoed through his mind, and a laugh from Iz Tayn probably meant she shared the sentiment.

'Whatever, just save me some water,' Zac snorted as the burning cage broke apart.

The Goblin King seemed hesitant to go for Zac, who stood over a thousand meters from the lake, or for Iz probably emitted a far more palpable threat. Soon, it turned toward Iz, and Zac knew he had to do something. Even if he flashed over to intercept, the Goblin would still be precariously close to the lake.

Whether it was creating an opportunity for Ogras or preventing it from swallowing any more water, he had to force it over. Suddenly, Zac had an idea, and he released a wave of Void Energy into the air around him. The Qriz'Ul King's head instantly snapped around, confirming Zac's guess. There was something about his Void Energy that attracted it.

The creature had emitted an intense hunger the first time Zac activated his domain skill beneath the depths, and every time he used Void Energy during the fight, the monster entered a frenzied state. The Goblin hesitated a moment, but it still took the bait. It condensed into a stream as it shot toward Zac, and ancient ruins were reduced to rubble by the Goblin's advance.

Four chains shot forward, each targeting the cracked sphere on the creature's forehead from various angles. Meanwhile, Miasma churned throughout Zac's body as his bones creaked. Zac even used some Void Energy to keep the Qriz'Ul's attention while speeding up the activation of [**Arbiter of the Abyss**].

The Qriz'Ul was incredibly agile for its size, bobbing and weaving to avoid the chains while barely losing speed. But Zac's web wasn't spun randomly, and a hidden chain suddenly appeared in the shadows of one that just missed, a chain unlike the others. It didn't move very quickly, but the Qriz'Ul was out of options. It had unknowingly moved closer and closer to the ground to avoid the chains, and now it couldn't dip any further.

A tap on its forehead resulted in a spectral chain being born, and a smile spread across Zac's face. He didn't activate the taunting effect and instead released some more Void Energy into the air. The Qriz'Ul King had initially stopped to swipe at the spectral chain, but the Void Energy made it move again.

And just as it came within 250 meters of Zac, a pillar rose from the ground. A monument to despair and inexorability. Ogras would need another minute before he could dip down and close the gate, which hopefully would weaken the creature even further. But seeing the billowing waves of corruption trapped within the ethereal body of the Goblin, Zac couldn't help but ask.

Could he even stall this big guy that long?